

A close-up portrait of a man with a full, dark beard and mustache, wearing a dark grey ribbed beanie and a dark grey t-shirt. He has light-colored eyes and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His hands are clasped together in front of him, resting on a surface. The background is dark and out of focus.

A
MAFIA
ROMANCE

KNIGHT
FOR A QUEEN

THE INTERNATIONAL MAFIA SERIES

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K. ALEX WALKER

KNIGHT FOR A QUEEN
A MAFIA ROMANCE

THE INTERNATIONAL MAFIA SERIES
BOOK THREE

K. ALEX WALKER

SAGE HILL ROMANCE

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*For Rachel and Tammy and Book Kraves and Xavier. Akia and Hlengiwe and
Kenya and Keta. Nia and Kris and TJ.*

Everyone.

If I've missed you, it's for you too.

With all the love in the world,

- K.

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CHAPTER ONE

Anyssa Brandon looked up from the case notes she realized she'd been staring at, the words echoing in her mind but stopping short of climbing over the fence into comprehension. Her daughter, Jordan, stood in her bedroom doorway, tiny and lovely, with her hair in disarray and her eyes puffed up from sleep.

Jordan didn't appear to have been crying, and unlike Micah, her older brother—older being relative as they were a new-five and an almost-eight—Jordan rarely woke up in the middle of the night. Micah didn't start sleeping through the night until a little over a year ago.

"Did my baby have a bad dream?" She set the book aside and opened her arms, welcoming Jordan onto the bed, but Jordan's brown eyes continued to assess her from the doorway.

"He's looking for you, Mama."

Instinctually, she looked above Jordan's head, waiting for her ex-husband to appear. "Who's looking for me? Your dad?"

It wasn't unusual for Chris to pop in after midnight. Not these days, at least. What a difference a year could make.

"No, not Daddy."

"Then who, honey? Is this a dream?"

"No. He's from your other life."

Jordan had started telling people, including random strangers, about their "other lives" since the night of her fifth birthday. According to her daughter, people's bodies were only shells of who their souls had once been.

"When you die, your body goes away, but the thing inside you, Mama? It's,

like, bright and really shiny and kind of looks like a fuzzy ribbon? That thing, Mama? That always stays the same. We just don't remember. Only some people remember, like me."

"Which other life was this?" Anyssa asked. "Is it the one where I'm a queen whose sister leads an army against foreign invaders?"

Apparently, in that life, they were still mother and daughter. As queen, she helped her princess sister mobilize an army to help fight what Jordan had referred to as "the men in the silver hats" who'd invaded their kingdom. A samurai warrior had fought alongside them, which had caught her off guard because she'd had no idea Jordan knew what a samurai was.

Chris thought their baby girl needed therapy. The way she saw it, Jordan would make an excellent storyteller one day.

Jordan shook her head, her loose, frizzy twists brushing the side of her face. "Not that one, Mama. In this life, you were a bear. Micah and Niko were eagles. Eagle brothers."

"And *who's* looking for me now?"

"A bear. Like us."

"Is it Daddy?"

"No, it's not Daddy. And this bear is special because daddy bears don't take care of cubs. Only mama bears do. But I was hurt. And the men with the guns took you away. So the bear took me someplace safe, and then he left me all tucked away in a cave while Micah and Jordan watched over me."

First, silver-hat invaders, and now there were men with guns. When she got the chance, she would talk to Chris about the kids' movie choices on the days they were with him. Sometimes, he became so engrossed in his work, the world faded away. For all she knew, the kids could be in the living room at his penthouse condo watching movies like *Total Recall* and *Apocalypto* an hour before bedtime while he created a new JavaScript framework.

"So he left?" Anyssa continued to probe.

"Uh, huh. To find you. But he's coming back. He has to."

"And why is that?"

"Because he needs you, Mama."

An unexpected thump struck her chest.

Jordan let out another yawn, her tiny mouth stretching at the corners. "I'm going back to bed now, Mama. Good night. I love you."

"I...I love you too, Jordan."

The words barely left her mouth.

Most people didn't need her. Zaraia loved her, but her sister didn't *need* her. Neither did Shawn, and her clients only needed her because they'd gotten themselves into a legal bind. Micah and Jordan needed her because she was their mother, but the older they became, the less they'd require their crusts cut off or a butterfly kiss before bedtime. So, it felt strange to hear someone "needed" her, even a hypothetical bear from the backwoods of her daughter's wild imagination.

After a few moments had passed, she left the owner's suite and went down the hall to stand in Jordan's bedroom doorway. As she'd done since the day she brought her home from the hospital, she counted each rise and fall of her daughter's stomach. Jordan, already asleep, lay with her arms and legs sprawled wide underneath a blanket half-strewn over her body. Like her father, sleep had never been a problem.

She started to make her way into the bedroom, but arms closed around her from behind, holding her in place. In them, she didn't find the comfort she once did, the embrace evoking no more emotion than tossing on an old T-shirt to paint a wall in the living room.

"I'm not here for that," Chris said, his breath warming the side of her face. "I worked late and wanted to see the kids before I went home."

Once upon a time, she would have given anything for things to return to how they'd once been. For his arms to once again be her sanctuary and his voice the remedy to all the day's ailments.

But there was nothing.

Her ex-husband was holding her, a man she'd once loved enough to give nearly fifteen years of her life, ten of them as his wife, and two beautiful children. Yet, the loneliness that followed her every day, sitting heavy on her shoulders like a rain-drenched coat made of wool, remained.

"You want to stay?" she asked. "We're going down to Spruit for the baby shower tomorrow. Zee's picking the kids up after school, and I'm heading down after my arraignment. You can have breakfast with us. The kids would really like that."

"What about their mother?" He brushed the side of her neck with the tip of his nose. "Would their mother 'like that'?"

"For the kids' sake, sure."

He planted a kiss on her neck and cheek before releasing her. "I would love to, but I'm flying out of the country tomorrow. Haven't even packed yet."

It's why I wanted to see you guys tonight. I'll be gone until next Wednesday."

She faced him. "So, you won't be taking the kids this week."

"Not this week, no."

It wasn't a problem. Having her children with her wasn't ever a problem, but she did wish he'd told her sooner. In these little ways, he managed to retain fragments of control over her choices, her temperament, and her time.

To the rest of the world, she was a viper. A forked-tongued demon serpent sent to make prosecutors pay for sins they hadn't yet committed. To Chris, she'd offered a stripped-bare version of herself, and he'd then ensured she would never do the same for anyone else.

As a child growing up in Mississippi, her mother used to always tell her, "*Nyss, don't you go feeding them stray cats.*"

They'd lived in a rural town, and the cats never bothered them, so there'd been no need to try to drive them from the area. The cats had also helped to keep mice, lizards, and other vermin away from the house during the warmer months.

"Don't you go feeding them cats, Nyss. You feed them once, they come back. We'll never get rid of 'em."

Yet, she'd fed the cats, and one time was all it had taken for them to keep coming around. Then one scratched Zaraia while trying to snatch food right out of Zaraia's hand, and the scratch gave her sister a fever that lasted seven days, leaving them with a hospital bill their mother would have spent over a decade trying to pay off. The bill ended up being written off as charity by the hospital, but their mother had given her a lashing that had made her never again feed stray cats.

Until now.

Six months ago, she accepted this stray back into her life.

Into her bed.

"Wait, what arraignment?" Chris asked. "So you really took that O'Sullivan case? Come on, Nyssa. That's a no-win situation. They're saying he murdered three people."

She'd had no choice but to represent Colm O'Sullivan.

On paper, he was a well-known public figure around the Greater Atlanta area and a former Olympic swimmer, placing gold and silver in the nineties in the men's fifty-meter freestyle and the four-by-one-hundred freestyle. Behind closed doors, he ran one of the largest segments of the Irish crime

family syndicate operating out of the southeast.

“I had him on retainer,” she said.

“You know there are rumors about him, right?” Chris dropped his voice to a whisper as if Colm was secretly listening to their one o’clock in the morning conversation. “Some people say he has mob ties.”

“My job is to defend his right against illegal prosecution, not rumors.”

“What does Shawn think about you representing him?”

“My brother?” She frowned. “He’s not happy with it, but what my homicide detective *younger* brother thinks won’t stop me from doing my job.”

Chris cupped the side of her face, and still, she felt nothing. “Just be careful, okay? If the rumors are true, these guys aren’t anything to play around with.”

She blinked, and his expression changed. His pupils slowly grew, partially obscuring the lighter shade of his irises. Although he’d said he hadn’t come for sex, it usually didn’t take long for him to change his mind.

“Chris, I can’t tonight.”

“I’m keeping a mental tally,” he insisted. “It’s been over a month since we last hooked up.”

“I’m sure you’re not missing out.”

“Is that what you think? That I’m out here sleeping with anyone else but you? Because I’m not.”

It wouldn’t exactly be a far-fetched assumption. He definitely had experience in the area.

“Chris, you have a flight tomorrow.”

Thankfully, he dropped both the argument and his hand from the side of her face. Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and removed a credit card.

“Here. Get something nice for the baby. Tell them it’s from me,” he quickly added when she went to shut him down, “because I already know you don’t *need* my money. You’re the Queen of ATL. Still, take the card. Let me do something for you.”

Initially, she didn’t mind the title.

Now, she wanted it on the other side of the globe.

Once upon a time, the public had lauded her for getting four boys exonerated of a crime they hadn’t committed. Taking Colm’s case didn’t exactly erase that public image, but it had undoubtedly soured it some.

“Just so you know,” she took the card between her index and middle finger, “nothing will get you off my brother-in-law’s hit list.”

Chris rubbed the back of his neck, as good-looking as the day was long. After his affairs went public, it was what a ton of the comments had argued, that she should have expected to be cheated on when her husband looked like a character snatched right out of a Grey’s Anatomy plotline. Both his parents had the same light-brown skin, but he’d gotten the blue-gray eyes from his father.

“I know, I know,” he said. “Still, get the baby something nice. From me.”

She wagged the card. “Okay.”

He didn’t walk away, and from the look in his eyes, she knew what he would say next.

“Nyssa, the affairs didn’t mean anything. This,” he motioned between them, “means everything. You’ve always loved me for me, not what I have. I mean, you were with me when I had nothing to my name.”

Given that he’d grown up wealthy on account of his mixed-race aristocratic Louisiana heritage, she wasn’t sure what period of his life he was referring to as him having nothing to his name. It wasn’t until they met that he’d even heard of Spam when it had been a staple in her house growing up.

Spam and rice.

Spam and blue box mac n’ cheese.

Spam on toast smothered with that just-add-water gravy that came in the red and white packet.

“My head got big,” he continued. “Then the company went public, and we exploded overnight and—”

“Chris.” She grabbed his forearm and gave it a slight squeeze. “It’s okay. You have a flight. Go home and get some rest. The kids will see you when you get back.”

It was an apology she’d heard already.

Several times.

To an extent, she did believe that Chris had convinced himself the affairs hadn’t ultimately damned their relationship because he never fell in love. In all his leaked photos, he’d had on his ring. During the mediation she’d foolishly granted him to try to stave off a divorce, he’d confessed that he’d talked to his “mistresses” about her, Micah, and Jordan.

He’d lied to her.

He never lied to them.

Her feelings mattered.

Theirs didn't.

By his logic, that was love.

Sighing, he kissed her cheek one last time before heading toward the front of the house. She stared at his blazer-covered back, slapping the card against her palm.

If only her daughter was right, and there was someone out there who needed her. Not someone who needed her advice or counsel or for her to put Spiderman Band-aids on their cuts after a fall. Someone who drew contentment from the fact that she was alive, that she existed.

However, unless love walked into a courtroom, her legal practice, or arrived on her doorstep, it would forever continue to evade her.

CHAPTER TWO

“I’m not to spend the next two years awaiting a trial date.” Colm O’Sullivan looked away from the judge and down at Anyssa, his irises like an Irish hillside. “I trust you won’t make a bags of it, yeah? It’s my right to have a speedy trial, is it not, Ms. Brandon?”

In the meeting they’d had right before his arraignment, she’d explained to Colm that the definition of “a speedy trial” wasn’t set in stone. A speedy trial could mean ninety days, six months, a year.

Perhaps longer.

Additionally, the prosecution could have been building a case against him for months, whereas they were at the mercy of the State until she learned all what evidence they had against him. Therefore, a speedy trial put his defense at a disadvantage.

She started to protest, but he sent her a look, and that was all it took to remind her of what he knew. What he had over her. She’d gone to bed with the devil. Now, he bent her over at his will.

“Does the prosecution have any objections to a speedy trial?” she asked, swallowing her irritation in tight gulps.

Attorney Ralphie Barnes shook his head. “No objections, your honor.”

She took in Barnes’ altar boy appearance, pressed navy-blue suit, and mid-nineteenth century haircut. Like him, she’d also been a “rising star” in the prosecutor’s office.

To a top graduate from a highly respected law school, the “rising star” designation meant gold stars and trophies. A couple of years in, she’d learned it had actually meant being assigned cases that dangled on a prayer. Evidently, those now included felonies.

Statistically, the State felt as though it would lose, so it dropped the case on the new blood hungry for notoriety. Should the new kid pull off the win, they swooped in to take the credit.

Rather quickly, she'd learned her talents were being under-used and undervalued, so she'd made a mad dash for the first chair seat at the defense table.

The judge nodded. "And the People on bail?"

"We request remand, your honor," Barnes said. "Three prominent members of the Atlanta community were found violently murdered with the defendant as the prime and only suspect. Colm O'Sullivan is a flight risk and a danger to the community. A man like this should not be walking around with law-abiding, well-meaning folk."

"Didn't realize we were on trial already," Anyssa countered. "If that's the case, would your honor like to hear more about those 'prominent members of the Atlanta community,' one of whom has a prior sexual assault conviction? Of a minor?"

Barnes flicked a hand in her direction. "Calm down, Counselor. No need to get emotional. The victim's not the one on trial here today."

"Neither is Mr. O'Sullivan. This is a *hearing*. Your law school professors should have taught you the difference."

The judge tapped her gavel.

Anyssa faced forward and held in a grin; the same one she gave Micah whenever he did something adorable. In a minute, Barnes would learn who he was dealing with.

"My apologies, Judge Lowry," she offered.

The judge waved her off. "You're fine, Ms. Brandon. Please continue."

As much as she'd fallen out of favor with the District Attorney's office, she knew who still had a soft spot or two for her because of the work she'd done while there. This was only day one for Barnes in *Don't Fuck With Anyssa Brandon 101*. For his sake, she hoped he'd brought something to take notes.

"Judge Lowry, Mr. O'Sullivan doesn't have any prior convictions on his record," she continued, as requested. "He's a notable fixture in the Atlanta community with obligations to various charitable organizations. Mr. O'Sullivan also sits on the board of many of these organizations. One of these is a children's hospital whose annual fundraising event requires his presence and whose guest list includes prominent members of our judicial

system. A guest list of that caliber would certainly notice my client's absence."

Judge Lowry nodded. "I'm aware of the event."

"Now, as for being a flight risk, Mr. O'Sullivan will gladly surrender all his travel documents, including his U.S. and Irish passports. He's also ready to post whatever bond your honor sees fit to ensure his appearance in court."

Barnes frowned. "That makes little to no difference. He's rich. He has access to private jets. However, considering Ms. Brandon's current net worth, it's possible she forgot life for her started as a dirt poor country girl from one of the most impoverished counties in Mississippi."

She graced him with a wide smile. "I have forgotten...considering my current net worth."

He tugged on his blazer, straightening his posture.

"Mr. Barnes, the United States isn't the only country that requires an individual to supply travel documentation upon entry," she went on. "Where, pray tell, will my client fly without proper identification?"

"Ireland," he said. "And Section 14 of the Extradition Act of 1965, of the Irish Statute Book, explicitly prohibits the extradition of an Irish national."

"Unless there is an extradition treaty or arrangement in place, such as the one Ireland has with Australia, Hong Kong...and the United States of America. Remind me where we're located again?"

Barnes' top lip twitched, and she heard the "bitch" without the word having to leave his mouth.

In movies and on television, criminal defense attorneys were generally more often than not portrayed as toeing the line of ethics, sometimes erasing it altogether. Yet, as she'd told Chris, her job was to protect her clients from unlawful prosecution. A defense attorney's job wasn't to prove their client's innocence but to cast doubt on the prosecution's ability to prove her client's guilt, which helped ensure a fair trial as possible. People only despised her until they needed her.

"Remand," Barnes repeated. "Mr. O'Sullivan also has ties to one of the largest sects of the Irish crime family in the southeast."

Anyssa snorted a laugh, eyes closed, her thumb stroking the space between her eyebrows. "Irish crime family? As in the *mafia*? What's next, Counselor? You'll request the case be moved and tried in Gotham?"

Judge Lowry smashed the gavel against the wooden surface in front of her. "Bond is set at one point five million, cash only. The defendant will

surrender his passports. If you step a single toe outside of Atlanta, Mr. O’Sullivan, your bail will be revoked, and I’ll issue a bench warrant for your arrest, even if it’s two o’clock in the morning. Next case.”

The courtroom’s low hum, which Anyssa had drowned out the moment their hearing began, returned—low murmuring, the clinks of shifting handcuffs and leg shackles, doors opening and closing.

Colm looked down at her and released a low whistle. “Jesus, lass. I think I now understand the name, though personally, I would have gone with the correct spelling. *Madame* Serpent sounds all the more menacing. *Ma-damn* serpent sounds like a child in primary school had come up with it.”

Given the emotional maturity of the lawyer who’d coined the name, a child in primary school *had* come up with it. Micah and Niko could have done a better job.

“I’ll see you in my office later, correct?” she asked. “Your request today puts us at a slight disadvantage, so we have to hit the ground running.”

He raised an auburn eyebrow, which had thinned at the edges. The hair on his head was the same color, sprinkled with what seemed like more gray since they met that morning. While not entirely unattractive, Colm was the sort who looked passable because of his ability to afford celebrity-level hair colorists, dermatologists, dentists, and personal stylists.

“We’re not to meet later,” he informed her. “I’ve been put away for almost three days, lass. I’m needing a ride.”

She followed as he was escorted from the courtroom. “A ride?”

“Am I to take you to Belfast to understand me, Ms. Brandon? Aye, a ride. Unless,” his gaze dropped to her breasts, which he couldn’t see in her silk top, but it didn’t appear to matter, “you’re offerin’ more than your legal services. The first time we met, you had a baby in you. Now, you’re no longer a married woman.”

The day she became the unofficial defense attorney for the Irish crime family was the same day the asshole had pointed a gun at Micah’s fourteen-week-old fetus. While she’d known accepting his help would have meant owing a debt she’d be reluctant, at first unwilling, to pay, she hadn’t counted on a 357 Magnum revolver, one like her father used to have, aimed at her firstborn.

“When are you free to meet, then?” she redirected.

“I’m to be busy the next week or so, maybe longer,” he said. “I’ll give you a ring. You’re not to worry about me.”

She wasn't worried about him.

She was worried about herself.

Had this man not had her over a barrel, she would have already been through the courthouse exit doors. In fact, she would have never walked through them, nor would she have accepted the request to lead his defense.

Rather than go with him to post bail, she sent the rest of her legal team. She'd had more than enough of Colm O'Sullivan for one day.

In the end, it worked out perfectly.

She'd leave for Spruit earlier to help Zaraia and Pavel set up for the baby shower. Knowing Zaraia, even at thirty-four weeks pregnant, her sister would be out back, fighting Pavel as he attempted to stop her from adding paper lanterns to the posts on their backyard fence.

"Ms. Brandon, a minute?"

She took a moment to school her features before facing her opposing counsel. "How may I help you, Mr. Barnes?"

Barnes crossed his arms over his chest, his briefcase loosely hanging from his bent fingers. "I just wanted to know much the mafia's charging for high-powered legal services these days."

"You couldn't afford it," she reassured him. It wasn't the poor guy's fault he didn't know he was part of a science experiment on behalf of the State, but it didn't mean she would go easy on him.

He tipped his chin at the courtroom door. "You and O'Sullivan looked mighty cozy in there. Maybe you're not on a monetary retainer."

"Mr. Barnes," she took a few steps closer to him, heels clicking against the hard floor, "you sound like you've never set foot in a Criminal Law and Procedure class. If you want to go far in this profession, leave this kind of behavior to the experts. Children."

"*Ms. Brandon*, I graduated top of my law school class from Boston University," he said with every ounce of bombast she would expect from a guy like this. "I was hounded by prestigious law firms who wanted to give me a junior partner position right out of the gate, but I chose to go the prosecutor's route. I'm good. I'm better than good. Yet, the minute I get the position here, the first thing I hear is your name. It's like they've got you on some throne."

She shrugged. "They call me a queen, but monarchies aren't my thing. I'm a legal professional, so I appreciate a more democratic approach."

"I'm gonna beat you."

“I hope you do.”

She watched his response get stuck in his throat.

“Mr. Barnes, your successors are supposed to be better than you,” she said. “I hope, one day, you do become better than me.”

Some of the irritation left his face.

“But you’ve got a while before that day comes.” She graced him with a little wave, pivoted, and made her way to the exit.

Barnes, for all his accusations and quips, was not using his head. If she *was* working for the mafia, why would she fear *him*? What reason would she have to fear *him*? A defeat in court was nothing compared to death, which Colm had assured her would follow if she failed to avoid a guilty verdict.

Half of her energy would go into the case. The other half would go into a contingency plan. Not only did her life depend on an acquittal, but so did the lives of those she loved. If push came to shove, she would see about fighting fire with fire.

In this case, mafia with mafia.

* * *

By the time she arrived in Spruit, the sun had set. As she walked into Pavel and Zaraia’s home, the smell of food and childish laughter coaxing her through the front door, she was reminded of her childhood. There were days when she’d considered giving up the massive house in Buckhead in favor of something simpler. Something warm and near family and friends whose homes smelled like love.

Jordan, Micah, and Niko yelled her name and dashed toward her in the entryway. She crouched to receive hugs and kisses, followed by stories, all shouted and overlapping, about the most crucial topic of the day: school.

1. Niko wasn’t ready for school to start.
2. Micah was looking forward to the second grade.
3. Jordan couldn’t wait to sniff the inside of her new backpack.

Anyssa slipped off her shoes, lifted Jordan into her arms, and walked further into the room, Micah and Niko flanking her on either side. For how good it smelled, she’d expected to find Zaraia in the kitchen—it had been a

year, and Pavel still cooked like a CIA torture mechanism, so he wasn't allowed anywhere near so much as a spatula.

While she knew how to cook as well as her sister, private chefs prepared most of her and the kids' food these days. A laundry service picked up and dropped off their clothes. Housekeepers came once a week for light cleaning and once a month for deep cleaning. With virtually everything outsourced, she didn't understand how she continued to struggle to find time for anything that didn't revolve around work.

"Niko, where's your mother?" She peered into a glass-covered pot on the stovetop. "Is she sleeping?"

Niko climbed onto a barstool at the kitchen island. "No, Mommy and Papa are in the backyard setting up for the baby's shower. We just came inside to give you a hug."

"Have you guys eaten already?" She'd had a protein bar and water for lunch, so she was several levels past hungry. Plus, her sister had a way of making lighter, more nutritious versions of the food they'd grown up on taste amazing.

With a young son who depended on her and now a baby on the way, Zaraia had turned her focus to wanting to be as healthy for her family as possible.

"Not yet," Niko said. "We were waiting for you. I'll go get them. Come on, Micah and Jordan."

Jordan wiggled in her arms, so she set her on the floor. However, instead of following Niko and Micah through the French doors that led to the backyard, Jordan went to one of the windows at the front of the house and stared out onto the porch.

"Are you okay, honey?" Anyssa asked, opening an upper kitchen cabinet. "Want to help Mama set the table?"

Jordan shook her head. "I can't. I'm waiting for him."

She removed six plates and walked them over to the dining table. "'Him'? Oh, wait, do you mean the bear?"

Jordan didn't respond.

Niko and Micah came bursting through the doors, yelling and play-fighting as though they were enemies in a superhero movie. Zaraia and Pavel entered behind them, her sister wearing a cute orange polka-dot dress that stretched tight over her round belly. Pavel was dressed in his usual, a plain long-sleeved T-shirt he'd paired with gray joggers, his hair brushing his neck.

They made a lovely couple.

An unexpectedly beautiful couple.

Pavel loved her sister the way she'd always hoped for Zaraia to be loved in a marriage. They genuinely enjoyed being around each other and often stayed up to talk for hours or watch shows together after Niko went to bed.

Among other things.

Zaraia wasn't exactly a keeper of secrets.

"Hey, Nyss." Zaraia reached forward to give her a hug and kiss on the cheek. "How'd it go today?"

She stepped ahead of Zaraia, who'd attempted to enter the kitchen to help finish setting the table. "Colm requested a speedy trial against his legal counsel's advice. Other than that, it went pretty well."

Zaraia opened a cabinet to grab drinking glasses, but Pavel reached above her head and grabbed them instead.

"Go ahead and take a seat, sweetheart," he said. "You were complaining, not five minutes ago, that your feet hurt."

"They hurt because my ankles are the size of Niko's thighs." Out of options, Zaraia walked over to the dining table and eased down onto a chair.

Anyssa laughed.

In a way, she missed those days.

"Is everything still all right with Baby Aleks?" she asked.

"Yeah, he's peachy," Zaraia said. "Right on track for his due date in October because he just *had* to have the same birthday month as his brother and his papa."

Anyssa caught a nearly unnoticeable smile on Pavel's face. Without him having to express it outwardly, she knew he was excited. Aleksandr would be the first child who he'd know, from day one, was his. During times like these, it was hard to keep him as public enemy number one—though she'd never tell him that.

"Jordan, baby?" Zaraia called. "What are you looking at?"

"She's waiting," Anyssa said.

"For?"

"A bear."

Pavel's head popped up.

Zaraia frowned. "Say what now? A bear? Oh, wait, is this an 'other life' thing?"

Anyssa removed a pan of butternut squash macaroni and cheese from the

oven, carried it to the table, and set it in the center. “Yep. She said that, in one of our other lives, we were bears. I was her cub, and Niko and Micah were eagle brothers. Men with guns—poachers, I’m assuming—came to take me away, and a male bear took her to safety. Apparently, that’s unusual because male bears don’t care for their cubs in the wild.”

Niko walked over to the table, breathing hard, his forehead sprinkled with sweat from his and Micah’s superhero-villain fight.

“It’s true, Aunt Anyssa,” he said. “Grizzly bears are the worst bear daddies in the wild. Me, Papa, Micah, and Jordan watched it on TV.”

“And she specifically said you were a ‘bear’ in one of your other lives?” Pavel asked.

Anyssa nodded. “Yeah. Why?”

“‘*Medved*’ is ‘bear’ in Russian.”

Niko’s eyes lit up. “That’s true, Papa! Like Medvedev.”

Anyssa looked back and forth between them. “What’s a ‘medvedev’?”

“Uncle P? Auntie Zee?” Jordan waved to get their attention. “There’s a bear on your front porch!”

CHAPTER THREE

“Uncle P? Auntie Zee? There’s a bear on your front porch!”

Gideon Medvedev stood, unfolding his long, cramped limbs after being stuffed inside two airplanes and a bus for the last eighteen hours on his trek from the West Coast. He supposed, hunched over and wearing all black, down to the beanie on his head, he did resemble a massive furry animal.

It was still hard to believe Pavel Volkov lived in this cozy farmhouse. A child’s bicycle was tucked in one corner of the porch, a couple of feet from a wooden *Welcome* sign painted black with bold white letters. Lanterns and flower pots decorated either side of the solid front door.

This wasn’t the house of a killer.

It was a house for a family.

The front door opened. “Who the fuck’s on my front porch?”

He grinned. “I see love hasn’t changed you, Volk. It is I, the prodigal *obshchak*, reporting for duty.”

Pavel walked over and, laughing, wrapped him up in a tight hug. Gideon held in a grimace, Pavel’s embrace placing pressure on the still-sensitive wounds hidden underneath his clothing. Though a few years old, the injuries would likely remain tender for the rest of his life.

Yuri Sokolov, the now-deceased head of the Bratva, had wielded a power drill like a high-powered rifle, tearing openings in his body larger than bullet holes. Had it not been for Dom, Pavel, and Dom’s cousin, Dmitri, he would have bled to death in an abandoned house on the outskirts of Moscow.

“You look good, *bratik*.” Pavel took a step back, one hand on his shoulder. “You’re early. We weren’t expecting you until Sunday.”

“I wanted to be here for the,” he searched his three-year-old English

vocabulary for the unusual phrase, “*baby’s shower*? I had to read up on it. It made no sense to me why you would give a shower to a baby.”

“You should have stayed away.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Since establishing his new identity in the U.S., he’d visited Dom and Eija at their gorgeous home in Panama countless times. To get him out of the country, as well as out of his head, the uber-wealthy Dmitri had invited him on numerous vacations with his girlfriend and their rambunctious twin boys. At the time, it was too risky for Pavel to travel with Niko and vice versa, so this was his first time seeing Pavel and Niko, in person, in far too long.

It was Dom who’d found him at the abandoned house, near death, and he later learned that Dom had colluded with Pavel and Dmitri to smuggle him out of Moscow on Dmitri’s private jet.

On his way to Copenhagen, he coded twice, even with a full medical staff on board. Afraid the third time would be the last, the jet made an emergency stop in Stockholm.

There, he opened his eyes for the first time. A physician had stood over his bed, and from the look on the doctor’s face, especially since doctors were usually trained to be detached and stoic, he’d known the situation was grave.

Muscle tissue - shredded.

Nerve fibers - damaged.

Blood loss - substantial.

Condition - critical.

Prognosis?

Uncertain.

The second time he opened his eyes, a nurse let him know he’d made it “back home” to the States. Dmitri had been there to clarify, informing him he was safe and that, while in the States, he would go by the name Miller. As far as the Bratva was concerned, Medvedev had succumbed to his injuries.

That first year, he had twelve surgeries.

The next, eight.

This year, he’d had six. The only thing he had left was a follow-up with the reconstructive microsurgeon who operated on him in New York. Hopefully, once that was done, he wouldn’t have to see an operating table for a long time.

Niko, screaming his name, burst through the door. Gideon crouched and

opened his arms wide. Niko crashed into him, and he hugged him as tight as his cramped muscles allowed.

Much was revealed during that first year. The first thing he'd learned was that Pavel and Dom hadn't been loyal followers of the Bratva's doctrine as he'd foolishly been. Then he learned that Eija, with Interpol's help and what she'd referred to as "a touch of racism," had infiltrated the Bratva as a spy.

The only revelation that hadn't come as a surprise was that Niko was Pavel's son. There had been whispers around the Sokolov mansion, considering how much Niko started to resemble Pavel as he entered his toddler years. He'd also overheard Yuri telling someone he believed Niko was Pavel's child, and had Dom not existed, he was sure Yuri would have wanted Pavel to take over the helm of the organization.

"It's good to see you, Gideon," Niko said, stepping back just as his father had done. "Did life treat you well in Las Vegas? I looked it up. Las Vegas has an arid climate. Were you thirsty all the time?"

Three years ago, Nikolai Sokolov had barely known any words in English. Now, Nikolai Volkov knew Las Vegas had an "arid" climate. This was no longer the same child he'd left behind in Moscow. Years on the run changed grown men, never mind a boy forced to leave behind the only version of the world he'd known at the age of five.

"Life has treated me well," he reassured the miniature version of Pavel. "And don't worry. I had lots of water to drink."

A woman stepped onto the porch.

And she was a *beauty*.

Pavel had sent him photos of the house, the fence Pavel himself had installed out back, and *dozens* of pictures of his new truck, but never a single one of Zaraia. Yet, had she not been pregnant, that face alone would have told him this was "Mrs. Volk."

"You must be the lovely Zaraia," he greeted.

She nodded. "The one and only."

"You're every bit as lovely as Volk descr—" Pain radiated down his arm. "*Jesus*, Volk. I'm not flirting with your wife."

Pavel relaxed the grip on his shoulder.

Dom and Pavel had accused him of having only two modes—silent protector and quiet seducer. The two never mixed, but when one slept, the other roamed. However, he knew better than to *pretend* to flirt with Zaraia or Eija.

A little girl with light-brown skin and hair braided down her back followed Niko's path, walking right up to him. Her small hand gripped his chin, and she turned his head left and right, examining his face from different angles.

"Let me see your paw," she demanded.

Given the seriousness of her expression, he held in his smile and briefly found himself wondering what kind of father he would make. Pavel, Dom, and Dmitri constantly reminded him that he had plenty of time for those types of decisions, but recent events had set him on an alternate timeline.

"Which one?" he asked.

She frowned. "The...left."

He raised his left hand.

She grabbed it, studied his palm, and then shook her head. "The right."

He raised his right hand.

"Mama!" She released him and raced back to the doorway. "Mama, it's him! It's him! I told you!"

On his right palm was a scar left behind from a neat row of stitches, the wound the least amount of damage he'd sustained from Yuri's brutality.

If he remembered correctly from his conversations with Niko, her name was Jordan. Jordan was Zaraia's niece, and she had a brother. The pair of eyes belonging to a third tiny person watching him from the darkness was more than likely that brother, Micah. Micah was also one of Niko's best friends. The other used to be a classmate of Niko's named Mekhi, but Mekhi moved to New Jersey over the summer because of his father's new job.

Micah and Jordan's mother, Zaraia's older sister, was named Anyssa. Based on Pavel's descriptions, Anyssa Brandon was a cantankerous, disagreeable psychopath who practiced some combination of criminal law and witchcraft.

"Gideon?" Niko called, his eyes round and taffy-colored behind the lenses of his glasses. "How long are you staying with me, Mommy, Papa, and Baby Aleks? A long time? Will you be here when Baby Aleks gets here? Can you help me? I've never been a big brother before, and Papa says you used to be a big brother."

As far as he was concerned, he still was.

He tousled Niko's hair. "I don't know yet. I would love to help, but I also don't want to overstay my wel..."

Jordan's "Mama" emerged from the doorway.

“...come.”

He slowly rose to his feet.

This couldn't be Anyssa. This *could not* be the sister whose law practice Pavel had described as “a coven or something like that.” Of course, with how lovely Zaraia was, it wasn't unexpected that she would have a pretty sister, but Holy Mother of Perun—Zaraia's sister was a work of art.

Warm brown skin.

Short hair still long enough to grip.

Freckled moles on her face and neck.

Lips that looked like they plumped in heavenly ways once bitten.

Dark eyes and a slender figure completed the stunning package, though her frame somehow remained curvy enough to give hands his size somewhere to rest while he was “otherwise occupied.” Attractive women had been all over Las Vegas, and he'd dipped more than his toes in their shallow pools, deep wells, and bottomless lakes.

Yet, attractive was all they'd been.

And he was looking for so much more.

In the Brotherhood, restraint had been necessary; showing attachment meant placing a target on a lover's back, no matter how high or low one's rank in the organization's hierarchy.

Love had been the ultimate weakness, so he'd flirted, fucked, and then feigned not soothing a broken heart when things didn't work out. Then, at night, he'd secretly suffered the ache of loneliness.

Zaraia gestured to him. “Nyss, this is Gideon Medvedev. He's a good friend of Pavel's, and he'll be staying with us until he gets settled in the area. Gideon, this is Anyssa, my sister.”

A soft, silky-looking top was partially tucked inside dress pants that hugged Anyssa's frame down to her ankles. Taking in that frame momentarily brought his attention to her bare feet, her toes tipped with pink polish. Having never been much of a foot guy, nothing about them should have been erotic, but he wasn't exactly thinking of them in his mouth. In his mind's eye, those nails gleamed on feet whose ankles were locked at the base of his spine.

“Honestly, I'm a little surprised,” he said. The words weren't meant to be said out loud, but it was too late to take them back. “Volk gave me a different impression of you.”

She ticked her chin toward Pavel. “What, did he tell you I was a witch or

something?”

Pavel motioned to the house. “There was only one broom in the house until you got here, Anyssa.”

Zaraia sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, holding in a laugh. Annoyance glimmered in Anyssa’s eyes, but her irritation was thinner than a strip of lace. It was clear that Pavel and Anyssa were like brother and sister, all faux animosity and traded barbs, but they would protect each other fiercely if it came down to it—something neither would likely ever admit.

“And your impression now?” she asked. “Do I scream *witch*?”

She didn’t scream “witch.”

However, if he had his way, she’d eventually scream, “Gideon.”

“No.” He shook his head. “You don’t.”

Their gazes held.

Never in his life had attraction hit him this hard when all he really had to go on was that she was pretty. Wildly pretty. Plus, he liked her smile, along with the way she slightly tipped her head to the side as it swept across her face. There was also the fact that she had the respect of someone he held in the highest esteem, regardless of Pavel insisting they had a contentious relationship. Virtually no one had ever met someone Pavel truly didn’t like. If they had, they rarely met them more than once.

“It was nice meeting you, Gideon,” she said. Then she motioned to Niko and Jordan. “Cadet Niko? Cadet Jordan? It’s time for dinner.”

She turned to walk inside the house, but her foot briefly caught on the door’s bottom strip. Even as she hissed in obvious pain, she reassured Zaraia that she was okay. They disappeared inside, Anyssa hopping on one foot and Niko and Jordan singing something about someone named “Bruno” as they followed.

No wonder Pavel never described this woman. He would have limped to Georgia, on crutches and with his sutures oozing blood through white gauze, just to ask her out to dinner.

“Hey, Volk?”

Pavel shook his head. “No.”

“I want her, Volk.”

“Come inside, Gideon.” Pavel headed for the door. “And careful not to trip on your jaw.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Anyssa rose onto her toes to detach a decorative lantern from one of the fence posts in Pavel and Zaraia's backyard. As expected, Zaraia had started setting up for the party despite Pavel telling her, repeatedly, that he and the kids would do it.

However, she smelled rain on the horizon, and the weather app on her phone showed a storm passing through that would carry the rain all through the weekend.

Forty people had RSVP'd to the baby shower, but with the weather looking like they'd have to move the party inside, she prayed either people didn't show or Pavel held it together for at least seventy percent of the four-hour event.

Lightning flashed from somewhere far off. Roughly a minute later, thunder followed. Behind her, she heard the French doors open, and animated children's voices sounded until they closed again.

"Don't come out here to argue with me, Zee," she warned. "It's gonna rain. We might as well plan ahead and set up inside."

Zaraia didn't respond.

Then "Zaraia" drew close enough for her to feel the presence of a large frame that devoured huge chunks of her personal space, regardless of the distance between them.

A spicy, gingery cologne or scented body wash wrapped around her, riding the humid, soup-thick winds. A deep voice followed, one with zero traces of an accent despite her learning, at dinner, that this man had left Russia roughly three years ago with only a few English words under his belt.

"Do you need help?"

Good lord.

Was it possible to climax from a man's voice alone? Then again, she'd nearly climaxed on the spot when she first met the Adonis known as Dominik Sokolov. Now there was another one, this one with clear blue eyes and dark hair, low-cut on his head and fuller on his face, that gleamed with hints of red whenever he stepped inside a beam of light.

"I could use some help, sure." She didn't turn around. If she turned around, without a doubt, she would strip naked and climb him.

"Are you taking them down?"

"Yeah. It's about to rain, so I think they'll have to move the shower inside."

Gideon moved to stand next to her. "Inside? That won't be good. I understand that it's quite a bit of guests. Volk might kill someone."

"If it's Janine Myell, I'll take my chances."

He laughed, and she felt the low, rumbling sound down to the bones in her toes. Toes she should have probably hidden with a pair of socks. Zaraia thought she was being dramatic, but whenever she looked at her fingers and toes, all she saw were stems of turmeric dipped in Hermes nail enamel in the color Rose Tamisè.

"Not a friend of yours, I'm assuming," he said. "What'd she do? Threaten Zaraia?"

She looked up at him. "She knows what she did."

Good...lord.

Chris was six-foot-three and kept himself in good shape, but they appeared to size men differently in Eastern Europe. Gideon was probably the same height as Pavel and Dom, but he managed to be husky and lean at the same time with taut arms, a broad chest, and a flat stomach. She knew her way around a gym, but if she spent two hours working out, he spent five. Waking up in this man's arms had to feel *amazing*.

"It's the way you talk about her," he said, easily detaching a lantern with one massive paw. "You love her a great deal. I can tell. Is it just the two of you?"

"We have a brother. His name's Shawn, but Shawn does his own thing."

"What does Shawn do?"

"He's a homicide detective."

"So," he raised an unexpectedly erotic index finger, "law enforcement, federal law enforcement, and you're an attorney, correct?"

She nodded.

“Hmm.” He looked down at her, pulling her apart like stuffing seeping between a seam with those sapphire eyes of his. “That’s very interesting.”

Needing space to breathe, she left him on lantern duty and went to remove a set of string lights about twenty feet away. As she wrapped the cord around her arm, his last name came back to her.

Medvedev.

Pavel had said that *medved* meant *bear*.

Had he meant bear like Jordan’s dream? Or was it technically a tale? She couldn’t very well call it a premonition. Then again, she shouldn’t have been thinking about it at all. Jordan told stories spun by a creative brain far too advanced for her age. Her daughter didn’t predict futures.

Gideon’s voice carried across the lawn. “So, Anyssa,” he cleared his throat, “how excited are you about the baby?”

She briefly closed her eyes.

Sexual attraction, she could handle, but her body wasn’t reacting as though sexual attraction was the only thing she felt. Her heart pounded hard against her chest wall whenever he spoke, leaving her feeling like a version of herself she’d left behind in small-town Mississippi. He disarmed her, robbing her of her venom, all without having to touch her.

The only thing she knew about Pavel’s friend—she took a covert glance at him—was that he was beautiful. This was neither a handsome nor attractive man. Gideon Medvedev was a gorgeous human being, but her heart needed to chill out. Couldn’t it see the stitches and bandages it still sported? The damage Chris had left behind?

“Anyssa?”

“Um,” she returned to wrapping the lights around her forearm, “I’m extremely excited. I’ve never been an aunt before. That glory has wholly been bestowed upon my sister. I’m also excited to see how she looks holding her baby for the first time.”

He held up the lanterns.

All six fit in one hand.

“Where would you like me to put these?”

“That bin,” she gestured with her chin, “right there.”

He walked over and carefully set the lanterns inside. When he righted himself again, it was with his gaze on hers, the intensity in them dialed to ten.

“What’s next?” he asked. “I can help you with those lights if you’d like.”

“No, I’ve got them.” There was no way she could handle him standing that close to her again. “Do you mind folding up the tables?”

“I don’t mind at all.”

By the time she finished the lights, he had all the tables and chairs folded and lined up against the side of the house. Pavel and Zaraia hadn’t gotten far on account of them doing more debating than decorating, so all she and Gideon had left were the balloons and a set of decorated boxes stacked on top of each other that spelled out the word “BABY.”

“I’ll get the rest,” he said. “I just felt a raindrop.”

“I don’t want to leave you out here by yourself,” she protested, though she probably did need to leave him out there by himself. “I’ll stand on the deck under the covering.”

“You’ll only be watching me.”

“I know.”

The dial turned, taking the intensity several degrees higher.

As promised, she watched him as he moved about, unfazed by the pellets falling from the sky. The raindrops quickly went from sparse to heavy, and he was drenched by the time they had everything squared away to take inside. His gray shirt, darkened to near black, stuck to his skin as he climbed the deck steps to join her. Something inside her wanted to reach up and wipe rainwater from his brow, but she reined it in.

“How did it go from light to heavy so quickly?” he asked. “Is that how it rains on this side of the country?”

She opened her mouth to respond, but then he reached for the back collar of his shirt, pulled, and didn’t stop until he’d pulled the entire thing off over his head.

Her mouth snapped closed.

In the interest of her heart’s safety, among other places on her body, she latched her focus onto his face.

He turned the handle on one of the French doors and reached above her head, pushing it open.

“After you,” he said.

He followed her inside.

She made a beeline for the refuge of the combination guest room, office, and future nursery that was hers for the weekend, but a wet hand curled around her wrist.

“Before you go, Anyssa, can I ask you a question?”

She turned, eyes on his face. “Of course.”

He changed his grip to holding her wrist between his first two fingers and thumb. “Can I give you my number?”

One of the skewed viewpoints she now held that her divorce had left behind was that good-looking men had been created for the sole purpose of destroying trust. As beautiful as he was, Gideon wasn’t built for exclusive relationships. Toss in money, and she was hard-pressed to believe he would settle for one woman when dozens probably fell at his feet the minute he stepped outside.

“Because if the baby comes and Volk or Zaraia can’t call you, I’ll do it,” he clarified. “And I don’t want you to think it’s a scam call.”

She smiled. He’d suppressed his accent, but in little ways, she heard evidence of him being reasonably new to American English.

“Get out of those wet clothes first,” she said. “Then, sure, we can exchange numbers.”

He smiled in return, and for a man who was a former mafia member and also good friends with crazy-ass Pavel Volkov, it was sort of adorable.

He released her and headed for the hallway.

Zaraia appeared beside her.

“Jesus, Zaraia.” She slapped a hand over her heart. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“I called your name like four times,” Zaraia said, “but you were too busy staring at Gideon’s ass.”

“I was not.”

“It’s a nice ass.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“I’m a happily married woman, and I noticed.”

“We packed up outside.” Talking about Gideon’s ass would have her thinking about it, and it was the last thing she wanted on her mind so close to bedtime—at her sister’s house. “I checked, and it looks like it’s going to rain all weekend. Maybe you should cancel.”

Zaraia lazily rubbed her stomach. “Nope. If we don’t do it tomorrow, P will never let this many people in the house again. Plus, this is the only weekend before the baby arrives that Pastor Troy will be out of town.”

She nodded. “Good point.”

“It’ll be okay, right? Plus, Gideon’s here, and Scott’s coming. He and Pavel grab drinks and go shooting from time to time. Maybe it won’t be so

bad.”

“Zee, the man doesn’t like people in his house.”

“Are you...defending him?” Zaraia teased. “And, you know, he asked me about your case. The name Colm O’Sullivan’s familiar to him.”

If anyone would know about the Irish mafia, it was a former member of the Russian mafia. Although Pavel had left his organized crime days behind him, he’d been part of the organization long enough for some of it to remain in his blood.

“Familiar how?”

Zaraia shrugged. “He hasn’t said.”

“I don’t have any information I can share about the case, really,” she partially lied. Confidentiality wasn’t the only reason she had to omit as many details as possible. “But, on a different note, how’s the security firm coming along? That office space in my building is still available and would be perfect for it.”

“Now that Gideon’s in Georgia, I’m sure things will move at warp speed. However, that does bring me to my next piece of information.” Zaraia took both her hands, and she felt her stomach drop. “They’re definitely looking for a space in Atlanta.”

“Uh-huh...”

“But P refuses to be over an hour away from me, Niko, and Aleks every weekday.”

The uneasiness in her stomach disappeared, replaced by excitement.

“So we’re moving to Atlan—”

Her arms were around Zaraia before Zaraia had a chance to finish the sentence. An hour away in Spruit was more than doable, but in the same city? Maybe the same county? It was a Christmas wish come true.

“With Mekhi gone to New York, Niko had zero qualms about moving closer to Micah and Jordan,” Zaraia said, laughing and returning the hug. “He is concerned about starting a new school, though.”

She released Zaraia. “You remember my friend Jonathan, right? The one who did your wedding dress? Well, the real estate agency he uses for his commercial properties also does residential. I can get you their info.”

“They have to lock down an office space first, Nyss.”

She paused.

Zaraia sighed. “Fine. Send me the information, and I’ll discuss it with P later tonight. Actually, we’ll talk about it in the morning, if we’re being

realistic.”

Anyssa faked a grimace.

Zaraia wiggled her eyebrows. “That thing’s like a drug, I swear. Maybe you should go after Gideon. See for yourself. He asked me about you.”

“There’s no guarantee Gideon can put it down like that,” she argued, though her intuition told her just the opposite. “And what did he ask about me?”

A wicked little grin spread across Zaraia’s face. “He thinks you’re *very* pretty.”

“And that’s it?” It was what she said, but with the way two whales and an elephant seal turned over in her stomach, it was like Gideon had told Zaraia she was the woman he’d been searching for on top of high mountains and inside low valleys.

Zaraia’s grin grew wider.

Niko raced over to them and then slid in his socks, using his arms wrapping around his mother as his stopping point. “We’re about to watch movies, and Gideon’s making sandwiches for everybody.”

“Can Gideon cook?” Zaraia asked.

Niko took both their hands and headed for the living room. “Yeah. He used to make me snacks and stuff when I was little.”

“Is Gideon a better cook than your father?” Anyssa goaded.

Niko looked up at her. “Everybody is, Aunt Anyssa. *Everybody* is. There’s no hope for Papa and food, but at least he gets to be the best dad to have ever lived.”

And Niko had gotten him a T-shirt that said exactly that.

CHAPTER FIVE

All forty guests showed up, scattered around the living room chatting, laughing, and scarfing down slices of cake with blue frosting piped between three layers. Gray skies peered between the slits in the blinds, a backdrop to the streams of rainwater leaking down the windowpane.

Anyssa stared as two droplets raced toward the bottom edge of the window, silently cheering on the smaller of the two.

The underdog.

It was the first time since childhood that she regretted not being outside, in the middle of the rain, for a moment not worried about life, bills, or death by an organized crime family.

A chorus of *oohs* and *ahhs* brought her attention back to Zaraia sitting in the middle of the large sectional, Pavel on one side and her on the other. The guests sat in folding chairs facing the sofa in a wide semi-circle. When she wasn't fighting Pavel for who'd get to dote on Zaraia, she and Gideon worked as hosts, party organizers, and servers.

Gideon rolled Chris' gift to the middle of the room. Although she'd already gotten Zaraia and Pavel a stroller, because Chris had so desperately wanted them to have a gift from him, she'd gone to Jonathan, who owned several luxury brand retail stores in Atlanta.

The petty gods had smiled down at her when he wheeled out the eight-thousand-dollar Dior stroller an A-list client ordered but had changed their mind at the last minute. Zaraia and Pavel wouldn't need it, so she'd prearranged to donate it to a women's shelter for an auction fundraiser. The organization would generate a decent profit even if it sold for fifty percent off the retail price.

Someone squealed.

Anyssa rolled her eyes.

Janine Myell bounced in her chair, clapping her hands, silver eyeshadow outlining eyes that would unnerve Dahmer and Gacy's mythical lovechild.

"Zaraia, that's a Dior stroller," Janine gushed. "That particular one, with the bassinet, retails at seventy-seven hundred dollars. I would know."

"It's from Chris," Anyssa informed the room, then she turned to Pavel. "He wanted to make sure I explicitly informed you that it's from him."

Pavel examined the stroller, brows narrowed. "How much was it?"

Janine waved to get his attention—as if she wasn't sitting right in front of them. "Seventy-seven hundred dollars," she reiterated. "Oh, my goodness. Zaraia, you will be the talk of all of Georgia with that stroller."

Zaraia wrinkled her nose. "But what if I don't want to be?"

"I'll take care of it," Anyssa cut in. "I know an organization who'll put it to good use to help their cause."

"I'll buy it," Janine said. "Name your price."

Anyssa shot her a look. "It's not for sale."

"You can't just give that away. It's *Dior*."

"What's a 'Dior'?" Gideon asked.

She started to explain, but then she spotted the actual question from the look in his eyes. They'd known each other less than a full twenty-four hours, but at that moment, she read his face as though he'd been there as long as Niko and Pavel.

She sent him a "*Yes, this is her*" look.

He barely spared Janine a glance before he turned back to her, smiling and staring, his eyes repositioning all her internal organs.

Before she caught fire, she addressed Janine's offer. "It's okay, Janine. I'd feel better donating it to a good cause."

"Name your price." Janine flicked her hand at the shyest member of their Atlanta church group. "Misty, purse."

Misty Whitlock stood.

"Misty, sit," Anyssa ordered.

Misty settled in her chair.

"Anyssa's donating it," Pavel barked. "Next gift. We've been at this for nearly an hour, and I'm ready for all of you to get on up out of my damn house."

Zaraia failed to stifle a laugh. Anyssa squelched hers. One year in, and

Pavel was already starting to sound like her sister.

The room quieted, as if waiting for Zaraia to reassure them Pavel hadn't "meant it," but the only response they received was the sound of the stroller wheels moving over the hardwood floors as Gideon rolled it away.

Niko, Jordan, and Micah, who'd been confined to Niko's room for the last couple of hours, came racing into the living room. Micah appeared to be wielding some sort of lightsaber that sounded like it belonged on a farm, plowing fields of wheat.

Niko had nunchucks.

Her baby girl had...lethal binder clips.

Micah "lobbed" off Niko's arm. Niko pulled his arm into his sleeve and crumbled to the floor. At the last minute, he grabbed Jordan and sputtered for her to avenge him. Jordan kneeled next to his side, stuck an index finger into her mouth, and used her spit to create fake tears on her face.

Anyssa watched them, wondering how they weren't sick around the clock with how much saliva seemed to be part of each game.

Janine clapped her hands at them.

Pavel's gaze snapped in her direction.

"Children, please," Janine hissed, oblivious to her sudden need for a burial plot if she didn't shut her mouth in the next ten seconds. "You're behaving like animals."

"Do not clap at our kids," Pavel warned.

Janine went to clap again.

Anyssa reached forward and grabbed her wrist. "Stop. People have been killed for less." Ignoring the confused look on Janine's face, she walked over to the kids and kneeled at their eye level. "The party's almost over. Think you can hold out a little longer?"

"Why's that lady yelling at us, Mama?" Jordan asked, helping Niko to his feet. "She's mean."

Micah tucked away his imaginary lightsaber. "It's her panties, Jordan."

Anyssa choked on a gasp. "Her *what*?"

"You're always saying that the one lady from your church group, Janine, has her panties in a bunch. That's what it means, right? That they're in her butt, and she needs to pull them out, but she can't because grown-ups don't pick their wedgies when other grown-ups are watching? That's why she's always mad."

Niko and Jordan burst into a fit of giggles. Micah wasn't exactly known

for speaking quietly, so when Anyssa looked up, Janine's blazing gaze was aimed in their direction.

She stood and ushered all three children toward the hallway. "Come on, my pretties, back to the room. You won't have to stay cooped up much longer. I promise."

They groaned and dragged their feet, but she was able to corral them in Niko's room. Inside looked like it had been hit by two tornadoes and a Cat-3 hurricane, so she made a mental note to have them clean it before they left on Sunday. Niko might have been the oldest, but she often caught Micah delegating tasks for Niko and Jordan like a chore overlord.

"Mama?" Micah called. "Can we watch movies again later?"

"With popcorn!" Niko chimed in.

She made a checkmark in the air. "Movies, check. Popcorn, check."

"With caramel!" Micah added. "And candies!"

She made another check mark.

Niko patted his stomach. "And parmesan."

"Caramel, parmesan, candies. Check, check, and check." She turned to Jordan. "What about you, sweetie? Any requests?"

Jordan stared past her, out into the hallway, through the open bedroom door. "Where's Gideon? Is he gone? I didn't see him in the living room."

After wheeling the stroller away, Gideon had retreated to the spare guest bedroom, probably to escape the breathy groans and lust-filled looks he'd endured all morning and afternoon.

At least she kept her interest hidden.

For a group of married, self-proclaimed God-fearing women, they didn't suppress their "appreciation" for Gideon's face and "physique." The only guests not specifically from a church group or function were Scott and Zaraia's friends Erika, Phoebe, and Alicia, Niko's former teacher.

Jordan held out both palms. "Mama, did you see it? Gideon's paw? That's how I know it was him. He hurt his paw when he rescued me."

Micah snorted.

Niko gently gripped Jordan's shoulder. "So it's really Gideon? Then does that mean what I think it means?"

Jordan's eyes lit up. "Yes!"

Anyssa looked from one small face to the other. "Does that mean what?"

"The paw," Jordan explained in a tone that said she should have known what "the paw" meant without needing further context.

She backed up to the doorway. “Yes. The paw. I guess we’ll see. As for Gideon, I think he’s relaxing, so don’t go...*bugging* him.”

Micah made a mosquito noise.

Niko chirped like a cricket.

Her baby girl...barked.

Chuckling to herself, she left the room to head back to the front of the house and ran face-first into a wall. A firm, bumpy wall with muscular arms that made their way around her waist, coming to a rest at her lower back.

“Steady, now.”

That voice.

God, that voice.

That voice did things to her men’s hands hadn’t been able to accomplish.

She leaned back and came face to face with Gideon’s firm, bare chest. It was damp, and steamy heat emanated from his skin, which meant...

She looked down.

A towel circled his midsection.

Tattoos had to be a Bratva thing because Dom and Pavel had plenty of them. Now that she had no choice but to look, she saw that Gideon’s torso was covered in ink. The dimmed lights above them made it difficult to make out all the symbols, but she spotted a cross, a phoenix, and a barcode. *The* barcode, whose meaning Zaraia had revealed as calmly as her sister had told her about Pavel’s latest tattoos: an infinity symbol, a key and lock, and two puzzle pieces whose meaning wasn’t as innocent as it came across.

She and Gideon stood so close, the moisture from his skin dampened her sleeveless top. The guests couldn’t see him this far down the hallway, but the baby shower would have turned into a feeding frenzy if they could.

She raised her head and didn’t look away from his eyes, no matter how much she needed to. Not even on her wedding day had her heart beat like this.

“Sorry about that,” she offered.

He shook his head. “It’s all right.”

Lord, this man was big.

And good looking.

And wet.

She moved her wrist, hand, and finger in what was supposed to be a pointing motion, but they merely looked broken. “Did you take a shower because of all the ladies’ antics out there? They made you feel grimy?”

A smile hooked one side of his mouth. “No.”

“Because I can talk to them if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Would you?”

“Of course.”

“A pitcher of that virgin mimosa spilled all over me,” he explained. “Those ladies? They’re harmless, and I’ve experienced worse.”

“Doesn’t mean you should have to experience that.” She repeated the same pitiful hand motion. “All the ogling and such.”

“I can’t say I’ve noticed.”

“Because you’re used to it?” She went to tuck a fist against her hip but bumped the side of her forearm against his. “I get it. It’s hard for people like us, you know.”

The smile widened. “People like us?”

“Beautiful people.”

“So, you think I’m beautiful?”

“I’m joking, obviously.”

“So you think I’m ugly, then.”

Fire engulfed her face. “No! No, I don’t. Can I start over? Hi, I’m Anyssa. Zaraia’s sister.”

He laughed.

The sound poured like thick golden syrup, and she wanted it in her tea, on her biscuits, and left behind as sticky residue on her naked belly.

“I think we’re past the point of introductions,” he said. “But I panicked a little bit at first. I didn’t know you could tell.”

“Tell what?” she asked.

“That I think you’re beautiful. I’m,” he chewed on the corner of his bottom lip, “usually much better at hiding it, but I find it hard not to, ah, stare...at...you.”

A nervous laugh clawed its way up her trachea. It had been years since she’d last used one, so it was no wonder it emerged from her throat like a Kraken summoned by latent awkwardness.

Some viper she was.

Courtroom Anyssa would make a healthy meal of Gideon-held Anyssa. Or In-Gideon-arms Anyssa. Anyssa-in-Gideon-embrace.

“I’m still holding you,” he pointed out.

She went to step out of his arms, but he tightened his hold and pulled her flush against him.

“That wasn’t an invitation.”

Because Pavel constantly referred to her as a witch, that she was now taking a moment to *conjure* Courtroom Anyssa was a secret she’d take to her grave.

“How old are you, Gideon?” she asked.

“Thirty-four.”

“So, I’ve got five years on you.”

His eyes rolled to the ceiling. “I thought Zaraia was your younger sister?”

“I’m flattered, but five years in the other direction,” she clarified. “So, you and Zee are the same age.”

“I’m assuming you’ve mentioned this for a reason.”

“Yes.” She rose onto her toes, took a discreet whiff of his body wash—the spicy, gingery scent from yesterday—and lowered her voice. “Tell me what you want.”

“And you’ll,” he bent, placing his face close to hers, “give it to me?”

A garbled reply left her mouth. In her mind, she agreed. The man was inches from her face, and she wasn’t on the tips of her toes. Another inch and her mouth could be on his.

“You live in Atlanta, correct?” he asked. “What I want is to come and see you. I want to take you to dinner. Maybe we can tour the city together.”

Had he asked her to sleep with him, she could have easily turned down the offer, no matter how curious she was about his “abilities.” However, him asking to come to see her and take her to dinner was a tight-fisted gut punch.

Every part of her screamed yes.

Every part.

“Glinda,” Pavel called, interrupting their silent stare down. “Zee’s asking for you, and I can’t do this shit anymore without wanting to choke somebody.”

He added something in Russian.

Without breaking eye contact, Gideon slowly, almost regretfully, released her. The intensity between them cooled, and he passed a hand over the top of his head, easing back into his human form after playing the role of hunter for the last several minutes.

“Glinda was the good witch in *The Wizard of Oz*,” she said, headed toward Pavel, emotions untangling from the twisted shape Gideon’s request had braided them into. “You do know that, right, Cujo?”

He squinted. “Who?”

“Cujo? Stephen King?”

“I don’t understand the reference. Must be before my time.”

“Pavel, I’m two years older than you.”

“Well, in dog years—”

“Move.”

She shoved him aside.

Zaraia sat trapped between Janine and the chair arm Janine had, without a doubt, forced her sister to seek refuge against. Phoebe sat on the chair arm, and every so often, Erika reached for “something” between Zaraia and Janine, creating a small gap each time.

Erika and Phoebe were too kind, and Scott had Alicia locked against him as his own island of refuge. Therefore, with Gideon several feet away and behind a closed guest bedroom door, Serpent Anyssa swallowed Timid Anyssa whole.

A two-inch gap separated Zaraia and Janine.

She wedged herself between them.

When Janine didn’t budge, she sat on her lap. Groaning, Janine moved aside, and she claimed the spot next to her sister.

“Please help,” Zaraia whispered.

“What’s wrong?” She rested a hand on Zaraia’s stomach. “Is it Aleksandr?”

“No. I’m tired and overwhelmed and…” Droplets glistened on Zaraia’s eyelashes, which had grown twice as thick during the pregnancy. “And I know it’s nothing to cry about, but—”

“You’re baking a human being from scratch. Cry all you want.”

“Don’t tell Pavel.” Zaraia brought her voice down to a whisper. “I can’t tell if he’s joking or not about baby shower guest multiple homicide.”

Anyssa swatted the air. “I can plead him down to involuntary manslaughter. He’ll do a year, tops.”

“Nyss…”

“Fine, I won’t say anything to him.” She turned to the side, giving Pavel a clear line of sight to Zaraia, and made a show of wiping the tears from Zaraia’s cheeks.

In three steps, he was across the room and crouched in front of them. “What is it, sweetheart?” He reached out as if to touch Zaraia, but instead set his hand on the cushion. “What’s wrong? Is it me again?”

A pang of sympathy struck her in the heart. She’d carried buckets of

resentment toward Chris during her pregnancy with Jordan; with Micah, she'd been too preoccupied with the fear of mafia retaliation for Chris to be a significant issue. Chris, at least, had deserved it.

Regardless of the relationship she had with Pavel, she would never deny that he treated her sister with the love and respect a person like Zaraia more than deserved. Shawn was a ho, but she didn't want him to experience what she'd gone through, either.

"It's them," Zaraia said. "The people."

"They need to go?" He stood. "Everyone, Zee's exhausted. It's time to go."

No one moved.

"Did I stutter? Get your shit and get the fuck out."

Janine gasped.

Anyssa tapped her on the back of the wrist. "Girl, you better..."

Janine hopped up, grabbed her purse, and followed the procession of guests through the front door. Pavel followed, ushering them out without uttering a single word, and in less than five minutes, only the three of them were left in the living room.

"Better?" he asked.

Zaraia nodded. "Yeah. Thank you. It's a stupid reason to cry, I know."

"You won't be able to help that," Anyssa reassured her. "Even after the baby's here, your emotions will take a while to settle. Focus on being you, not the 'right' version of you."

Zaraia smiled. "I'm glad you had kids first."

"Now, go." She clapped her hands at them, mimicking Janine from earlier, eliciting an exaggerated eye roll from them both. "I'll clean up. Volkov, take your wife to the bedroom for some breathing room."

Pavel helped Zaraia to her feet. They started for the owner's suite, but Zaraia looked back at her over her shoulder.

"Thanks, Nyss," she said.

"For what?"

"Being my sister."

Her face warmed. "Whatever. Go relax. I'll let you know when it's less congested out here."

After they disappeared behind the bedroom door, she fetched a trash bag from the pantry and surveyed the mess the guests had left behind.

Though she now had housekeepers and maid service at her disposal, she

never lost what had been instilled in her during her childhood years. This mess was nothing compared to keeping their five-room wooden ranch house clean, eventually on her own after her mother got sick.

Gideon appeared in the hallway opening. He'd traded the towel for a T-shirt and pajama bottoms, an outfit that all but begged her to hug him.

"Hi," he greeted.

She waved. "Hey."

"While you get the trash, I'll fold up the chairs and tables."

"Perfect."

They worked efficiently, moving around each other, only brushing the few times she hadn't made more of an effort to step out of his way. Every so often, she felt the sensation of someone looking at her, but whenever she glanced at him, she found him preoccupied with something else.

"Just so you know," he began, his voice behind her on the far side of the room, "I might have overheard a prison break escape plan about to happen. We'll need provisions."

"Will popcorn and a movie be enough?" she asked.

"We might need drinks."

She bent to pick up a stray piece of gift wrap. When she stood, the warmth of his body surrounded her; he'd reached around her to grab the display table where they'd set the cake.

"Drinks, I can do," she said, the words full of so much air that it wasn't until he replied that she knew he'd heard her.

"Then I'll be on popcorn duty." He put away the display table and returned to the same spot, where she'd yet to move from. "I also hid some of the baby shower candy."

"Are you a sweets guy?"

"Not these days anymore, but I figured the kids would like them."

"So you never treat yourself?"

If sound had a color, his voice would have gone pitch black. "Occasionally, I might enjoy something sweet in my mouth."

Realizing she'd been standing in the same place for far too long, she scanned the room for trash.

A gentle hand on her upper arm urged her to turn around, and she prepared herself for all the man she would have to take in while trying to remain composed.

"You never answered about dinner," he said. "If I'm going to be living

here in Georgia, I think we should get to know each other. Between you and me, I think we'll get along well. I mean, there has to be a reason you're loved by the people I love."

Her lips parted to turn him down. Instead, what came out was, "To be honest, I was thinking the same thing. Pavel trusts you to the point that he's letting you stay with his family. Pavel doesn't even trust the cable company on the phone with Zaraia. He almost caught a charge when they tried to cancel their service."

His tongue slid over his bottom lip, and she'd never wanted to be a bottom lip as badly as she did right then.

"Caught a charge. I'm assuming that means like a criminal charge."

She nodded. "Yeah. Sorry, sometimes I can be a bit of a slang whore."

"Slang...whore?"

"But not like a real whore."

"It's okay if you are. I won't judge you."

"No, I really am a lawyer with—"

"I'm joking, obviously."

She gnawed on the inside of her cheek, and his eyes sparkled like a rare diamond-sapphire hybrid.

"Friday," he said. "If you're free, I'd like to take you out on Friday. Zaraia said your favorite restaurant is Ray's on Peachtree Street. What about seven-thirty? That leaves time for us to do something else after."

"If you'd like, we can do that tour of Atlanta," she offered. "I can be your unofficial tour guide."

"I would love that. So it's a date?"

She tried to swallow, but her throat was either dry, almost closed, or both. "A date?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Uh...um...sure?"

"You sound like you can barely contain your excitement," he teased.

She sputtered out a laugh. "Sorry. That was bad, I know. How about... super! It's a date! I sure can't wait!"

"Now I don't know if I want to go anymore."

She laughed harder. "Let's see you try, then. Make me swoon, Gideon. Make me swoon."

"Challenge accepted." He took one of her hands, looked into her eyes, and already, she'd lost the competition. "Anyssa, sweetheart, I'm looking

forward to spending time with you, one-on-one, on Friday. I was nervous you would say no, but I'm glad you said yes. I've found you attractive since the first moment I saw you, and I knew I couldn't wait to see you again. I can't wait to see you again."

No matter what he saw when he looked at her, she *felt* the color drain from her face. Had she been wearing shoes, she would have been reduced to a puddle in the soles.

"Who won?" he asked.

She cleared her throat. "Obviously, I did."

"Obviously."

Neither one of them moved.

A smile remained on his face, much too soft and delicate for a man this rugged.

"Have you always worn your hair like that?" He raised his hand as if to touch her hair, but then he pulled it back.

"You mean short?" She passed her fingers over the smooth hairs at her nape. "I've been wearing it short for a while. I used to wear it curly, but I've been into the wavy-straight pixie lately. It's very Aiyana Lewis, or so says my hair stylist. Why?"

"It suits you." He took his voice a notch deeper. "Really well."

"Oh. Thanks. Your haircut suits you too."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They stared for several more heartbeats. Then, as if petitioned by the same invisible voice, they stepped apart and finished cleaning up the front room.

CHAPTER SIX

LINA

Are you in Georgia yet?

GIDEON

Just made it.

LINA

Will you at least come see her?

GIDEON

It's not that simple.

Symon's my brother.

LINA

Just see her. I'm not asking you to be her father.

GIDEON

What about the paternity test?

LINA

Why do you keep asking about that?

GIDEON

Lina, come on.

LINA

It should only be important that she's my daughter. Once upon a time, we were best friends. Me, you, and Symon.

GIDEON

And look how that turned out.

Daniela has a 50/50 percent chance of being Symon's daughter.

LINA

I don't want to talk about this.

GIDEON

Ok.

LINA

I'm serious.

GIDEON

I believe you.

LINA

Fine, then. Maybe we'll never know who Daniela's father is.

GIDEON

If that's what you want.

But don't forget it's not about you.

It's about her.

Gideon looked up from his phone screen to find Jordan studying him, her brows narrowed and her nose scrunched. He smiled, sent her a wave with the "paw" that had the scar, and she returned the smile before flopping onto her belly between Micah and Niko.

The kids lay on the floor, on top of at least four blankets, chatting, arguing, and making faces at each other, half-watching an animated cartoon about a magical house.

Or a magical family.

Possibly both.

Paying attention to the storyline wasn't exactly easy when, every few seconds, he found his attention straying to the woman on the opposite end of the living room's large sectional.

"Hey, Gideon?"

His gaze flicked to Niko's. "Yes, Niko?"

"You don't want popcorn?"

"I'll get it for him!" Jordan leaped to her feet. "What kind do you want, Gideon? There's parmesan popcorn, popcorn with M&M's, and caramel

popcorn, my favorite. But I don't like the store kind. Only Mama's and Auntie Zee's kind without the peanuts."

He tapped his chin. "Hmm. Jordan, you seem like a popcorn expert, so which one would you pick for me?"

"Caramel!"

"That settles it, then. I'll have the caramel popcorn."

She dashed off toward the kitchen.

One of the reasons he'd been on the nanny and Nikolai protective detail for the Sokolovs was because he was good with children. Yuri had said it was because he was like a big kid himself, but he'd changed so much in the past few years, he wasn't sure whether that was the case anymore.

"Don't give him too much, okay, Jordan?" Anyssa called after her daughter. "Gideon's not big on sweets."

"Yes, he is, Mama," Jordan said. "He's bigger than everybody except Uncle P."

Gideon, smiling, shook his head.

As part of his ongoing recovery, he ate and trained like a professional athlete who then moonlighted as a model for art students in a sculpting class.

Since his arrival in the U.S., his general practitioner had encouraged him to have some grace with himself, warning him that peak physical health meant nothing without working on the mental damage his injuries had caused. However, to him, that was like asking someone with a fear of snakes to jump headfirst into a cobra pit.

He'd trusted Yuri with his life.

He'd trusted Lina with his brother.

Both had betrayed that trust, blind and foolish as it were, though Yuri's betrayal far outweighed a simple paternity issue.

Jordan climbed down from the step stool she'd used to reach the counter and waved in Pavel's direction. "Uncle P, can I have some help, please?"

"I was wondering when you'd call for me, Princess." Pavel kissed Zaraia on the cheek before rising to his feet. "I thought you were getting so big you didn't need me anymore. My heart was breaking to pieces."

Jordan playfully rolled her eyes.

Last night, after helping Anyssa put away the baby shower items, he and Pavel had stayed up late to catch up. He'd helped himself to another generous portion of dinner—he'd grown up on a farm, yet never had butternut squash taste anything like that—while Pavel filled him in on life in Georgia.

Eventually, and without the best segue, he'd started asking questions about Anyssa. Pavel had warned him to tread lightly when it came to Zaraia's sister. Hurting Anyssa was hurting Zaraia, and if he hurt Zaraia, what Yuri had done would pale in comparison to what *Volk* would do.

What he did learn was that Anyssa had been divorced for three years and separated for five. Her ex-husband, a man named Chris Carmichael, owned a software company successful enough to be an IBM competitor.

After the split, Chris started showing up at places at the same time Anyssa did, without her ever mentioning that she would be there. Once the stalking reached a certain point, Zaraia held a gun to Chris' balls, followed by a threat of pulling the trigger. That threat had led to Chris then stalking Zaraia and, in turn, nearly losing his life.

Should Chris Carmichael choose to return to his past bad behavior, he'd now have two monsters to worry about snatching him from his bed in the middle of the night.

While Anyssa studied Jordan's careful trek across the room, Gideon studied her. The old Gideon would have pursued her, carefully, like a jaguar stalking its prey. That Gideon wouldn't have approached her until first learning every speck of color in her complexion and how many of those moles and freckles created constellations on her skin—sixteen.

Sixteen visible ones, anyhow.

Bratva Gideon would have overanalyzed their suitability based on his career and the two little people she had to consider before taking him seriously. Then, once his assessment was complete, he would have fucked her until she left nail marks on every hard surface at his place, never hers.

Should the Bratva discover her existence and where she lived anyhow, he would have paid to have her safely escorted out of the country, his expression never once betraying how much he wished he didn't have to let her go.

Now, too much had changed.

First, there was the issue with Lina and his brother. Next, he was a former higher-up in the Bratva. Although he hadn't ranked as high as Pavel or Dom, that didn't mean he didn't stand in the middle of a blood river in which he was roughly knee deep. Also, according to Pavel, Anyssa's reaction to Zaraia marrying a former mafia member hadn't exactly been "sane."

Still, she'd agreed to go on a date with one she'd met roughly twenty-four hours ago.

That was progress.

She was looking at him again, which he knew because he'd, apparently, been looking at her for a while. Since yesterday, he'd been staring at her like a horny teen who'd never seen a pretty face before.

"Here you go, Gideon," Jordan said, bowl outstretched. "I hope it's delicious."

He tore his gaze away from Anyssa, looked down, and his heart nearly exploded. Then, before he promised to buy Jordan a castle, a Shetland pony, and Greenland to build her a private amusement park, he took the bowl from her grasp.

Rather than return to her spot between Niko and Micah, she climbed onto the cushion beside him, sat cross-legged, and grinned up at him. No one could ever replace the family Pavel had lost, but Zaraia entering Pavel's life had come with more than her love, and he didn't know a man more deserving.

"Do you remember saving my life?" Jordan asked.

"I saved your life?" He popped a few kernels into his mouth. "Little old me?"

She giggled. "You're not little. You're tall and strong, like Uncle P."

He took note that she didn't say her father. Perhaps he could win her mother over that way, flexing his biceps as he opened jars, pointed at things, and reached top-level shelves.

"I'm stronger than your Uncle P."

Pavel snorted and reclaimed his seat next to Zaraia.

"But how did I save your life?"

Jordan climbed to her feet, faced him, and swiped a braid out of her face. "It was in your other life. One of your other lives. Before you came, I could only see one. Now," she held up a palm, fingers spread wide, "I see five."

A wave of familiarity gripped him.

His grandmother, who he and Symon had affectionately called *Baba*, used to talk about seeing people's other lives, either in their eyes or in her dreams. Their grandfather, *Deda Bodhan*, had thought it was an adorable quirk that added another interesting layer to her personality.

His mother died young, roughly after a year Symon was born. With two children under three, and terrified out of his mind, their father had remarried in less than a year. Their stepmother, though not conventionally evil like the ones in fairy tales, could have had her picture stand in for the definition of "apathy" in the Oxford Dictionary.

Six years later, a cold their father had waited too long to seek treatment for—the farmer’s curse—progressed into the pneumonia that took his life. Less than four months after the funeral, their stepmother sent him and Symon to live with their grandparents. Unbeknownst to her, their father’s life insurance and estate went with them.

After three weeks of fighting to get them back, she gave up, married rich, and moved to Amsterdam.

“Want to hear something really interesting?” Jordan continued. “When I see your other lives, I see Mama’s too.”

“In how many of them?” he asked, glancing at Anyssa.

“All of them.”

“All of them? So, me and your mama are friends in all of our other lives?”

“In one, Mama thought you were dead, so she got married, and a long time passed, and she found out you weren’t dead, and even though you were old, you got married in a church.”

He chewed on a few more kernels. “Can I hear more?”

Jordan stood on his legs, on either side of the popcorn bowl, and gripped his shoulders. Anyssa called after her to get down, but he told her it was okay. Jordan was standing directly on top of one of his more extensive wounds, but she was so light, it barely stung.

“In another one, Mama was a queen, and I was her little girl, and you were a knight, and we had a war.”

He opened his eyes wide. “A war?”

“Uh-huh. A samurai helped us fight the men with the silver hats.”

“A samurai? Did we win?”

“No, we died.”

“Oh. I’m sorry we didn’t win.”

“It’s okay. Want to hear another one?”

“Of course,” he said. “Tell me about the one where I injured my paw. I need to know how I saved your life so I can help your Uncle P keep you, your brother, and Niko safe.”

Micah groaned.

“That used to be his job, Jordan,” Niko said. “Gideon was me and Miss K’s bodyguard. Mikhail was our driver, but he died a long time ago. Papa said he succumbed to his injuries.”

“Look at my baby,” Zaraia said with a broad smile. “That was a huge

word, and you used it so effortlessly.”

“An A-list word,” Pavel added. “Remember what me and your mom told you? That you’ll be able to read that whole two-hundred-page book by yourself this year? You still don’t believe us?”

Niko’s face flushed. “No, Papa. I don’t.”

“What’s a bodyguard?” Jordan asked.

“Somebody who protects you,” Gideon said. “My job was to watch out for danger to keep Miss K and Niko safe. If danger got past me, which it never did, by the way, my job was to use my ‘body’ to ‘guard’ them. To protect them. Is that what I did when I saved your life?”

“Uh-huh. The men with the guns came to take Mama. They were going to hurt me with a gun, and you put your paw in the way.”

This was getting more and more interesting by the minute. Jordan’s tales were far too advanced for her to have come up with using imagination alone. Either she would become a writing prodigy, or she did see these things in a way none understood.

He raised his hand. “This paw?”

“That paw,” she echoed. “That’s how it got hurt.”

“Did the men with the guns take your mama, or did I stop them?”

“They took her because you had to save me. Then you put me someplace safe and gave me food. And then you went looking for Mama.”

He looked over at Anyssa.

Their gazes locked.

“I left you all alone?”

“Nuh-uh. You left me with two eagles.” Jordan gestured to the floor. “Micah and Niko. And you promised me you would come back, and you did, Gideon. You did.”

“Of course I did.” He returned his attention to Jordan. “I always keep my promises.”

“Uncle P too. But Daddy sometimes doesn’t. A lot of times.”

“Jordan,” Micah called, his attention on the TV. “Come back down here with me and Niko.”

She rolled her eyes at the back of her brother’s head.

“Can I make one more promise?” Gideon requested. “Hopefully, nothing bad will ever happen to your mother, and no one will try to take her away again. But, if they do, this time, I won’t let them. I’ll save you *and* your mama.”

Anyssa watched them, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth, and it had gotten to a point where he didn't notice when he'd gone back to looking at her.

"Come down here, Jordan," Micah reiterated.

Jordan folded her arms. "No. I'm staying here with Gideon. I'm his cub."

Gideon choked on a popcorn kernel.

Pavel coughed, clamping a fist over his mouth.

Anyssa scooted to the edge of the cushion. "His *what?* Baby, what did you just say?"

Jordan climbed down off his legs, walked to the other side of the sofa, crawled into her mother's lap, and wrapped her arms around Anyssa's neck.

"Mama, did you forget? I told you...me, and you, and Gideon, we were bears in our other life. Kodiak bears. When the bad men with the guns took you away, Gideon picked me up in his mouth and took me someplace safe. Then he said I would be his cub, and he told me to stay put until he found you."

Anyssa looked over at him, but he shrugged. He had precisely zero responses to offer her. What *could* he say?

"You're not his cub," Micah spat. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. First of all, boy bears don't take care of cubs. I learned that in preschool, Jordan. You're going to kindergarten. You should know that already."

"Micah..." Anyssa said, a warning.

Micah scrambled to his feet, his full brows dipped in the middle. "And a cub means you're something's baby. You're not Gideon's baby. You're Mama's. And Daddy's."

Jordan's face fell. "I can be both."

"No, you can't. You're being stupid."

"I'm not stupid!"

"I didn't say you were stupid. I said you're being stupid, stupid."

Anyssa glared at Micah, and Gideon felt a deep spark of tenderness for the kid. Based on Jordan's comment and Micah's reaction, their father might not be doing enough for them not to feel threatened by any other man's presence. The whole "cub" thing probably didn't help, but he wasn't trying to take their father's place. He was trying to take their mother out to dinner.

If things worked out between him and Anyssa, they would talk about the best way for him to get to know Micah and Jordan better without bulldozing

his way into their lives.

Niko stood and rested a hand on Micah's shoulder. "Micah, if we're her brothers, we're supposed to be nice to Jordan," he said. "Papa always says that if we're mean to the people we love, how will they know who the real mean people are?"

Micah swatted Niko's hand away. "We're not brothers, Niko. We're not even real cousins. Auntie Zee's not your real mom, so just...just leave me alone."

Micah ran off down the hallway.

Pavel eased into a crouch in front of Niko. "You know he didn't mean that, right, Niko? Sometimes, when people get their feelings hurt, they say things they don't mean."

"I hurt Micah's feelings?" Niko asked.

Pavel pulled him in for a hug. "No, you didn't, but sometimes people's feelings get hurt on their own. He didn't mean it. I mean, Zee signed important papers to say she's your mother. She *picked* you."

"Because I love you," Zaraia added.

Niko frowned. "But isn't Baby Aleks your real son, and I'm your son only because you married Papa?"

"Niko, you're my real son," Zaraia reassured him. "Now and forever."

Gideon watched Niko study his arm as if trying to understand. It was something Zaraia and Niko faced every so often, which she'd shared with him this morning while he'd scrambled eggs and she stirred pancake batter from the other side of the house; ever since her first trimester, she'd found the smell of the eggs nauseating.

Some people made comments about her only being a mother "through legal means." Others whispered about her and Niko's different complexions whenever they overheard Niko call her "Mommy" or "Mom."

Personally, he was surprised Spruit continued to exist. By now, he would have expected Pavel to have erased the city from the map.

"So you can be a mommy if you've never had a baby?" Niko asked.

"One hundred percent," Zaraia said. "All you need is a *big*," she opened her arms wide, "bowl of love. Then you sprinkle it on all the little ones you keep in your heart who you care for and who care for you."

"Like how your aunt sprinkles earwigs and cobwebs into glass jars to make potions," Pavel said.

Jordan squealed and burst out laughing, her hands slapped over her

mouth. Anyssa rolled her eyes and attempted to hide a faint smile.

Niko took a step back. "Papa, be nice."

Anyssa firmed her chin. "Thank you, Niko."

"Or she might turn us into mice and eat us."

Jordan screamed and fell all over her mother. Anyssa playfully shoved her aside, stood, and aimed two fingers at Niko's eyes before turning them back toward hers.

"I see you have chosen your side, Nikolai. You better sleep with both eyes open." Then, cackling, she disappeared down the hallway.

Pavel raised a brow. "See what I mean?"

Niko snorted a laugh.

Roughly ten minutes later, she returned with Micah trailing her, less upset and more sullen. He offered Jordan and Niko a mumbling apology and then sat cross-legged on the floor, considerably further away from Niko than he'd initially been.

Gideon tried to catch Anyssa's eye to ask her whether everything was okay, communicating without words as they'd done earlier, but she wouldn't look at him. For the rest of the night, she didn't look at him.

Then, while lying in bed later that night, his phone dinged with a text message.

ANYSSA:

Thank you for asking, but I don't think I'll be able to have dinner with you on Friday.

He tapped the phone screen with his thumb. So she couldn't make dinner. All that meant was that he would have to change their plans.

To lunchtime.

CHAPTER SEVEN

For a man who'd bought a farmhouse in a small city, the more commercial spaces they visited, the more Gideon realized Pavel wasn't a small-city kind of man. Zaraia was the same way, one hand on her stomach and the other tangled with Pavel's as they toured their fourth building of the day.

A form-fitting dress stretched over Zaraia's belly and flared at her hips. Initially, she'd wanted to wear "cute flats" with the dress, but none fit. After a twenty-minute tirade about her weight, swollen ankles, and being pregnant in general, he and Pavel had helped her decide on a pair of Nike slides. He even went so far as to tell her that her manicure looked too beautiful to be covered, hoping to ease a tiny bit of her frustration.

Pavel had the nerve to look semi-normal in a gray suit, black dress shirt, and black tie. He'd gone with a modern gray pinstripe, white shirt, and red tie, and it took everything in him not to burst out laughing at the entire scenario.

They were former Bratva. Former Bratva starting a corporation that centered on private security. Irony wasn't a strong enough word.

Their real estate agent, Jocelyn Maynard, walked alongside Pavel and Zaraia. He remained behind, scanning their surroundings, a habit he didn't know whether he would ever break. He knew Pavel was doing the same, especially with such precious cargo next to him.

"Now, based on the feedback you've given me, I think *this* is the perfect space for you," Jocelyn said. She glanced at him over her shoulder for the fourth time in the last five minutes. "And that includes you, Mr. Quiet."

She was flirting with him.

She'd been flirting with him since the first location.

Jocelyn was a pretty woman with a body that poured into ample curves, further emphasized by a pair of high-waisted pants. Her complexion reminded him of the smooth and sandy brown silt he and Symon used to collect from the creek about a mile from their grandparents' house. She wore her hair in a big, curly fro that seemed to call attention to and take attention away from the red lipstick on her full lips.

He liked women.

Roughly ten to fifteen years ago, it could have been argued that he'd liked them a little too much. However, liking women and being fixated on pussy were two things he'd eventually learned to differentiate between as he'd grown into mature adulthood.

On the one hand, he loved women wrapped in his T-shirts while wearing ankle socks, drinking tea, and pretending that the word "dick" in their book referred to a great white whale. He loved their smell, the way different parts of their bodies fit in his hands, and the feeling of their skin sliding along his early in the morning and the middle of the night.

On the other hand, the older he became, the more he found himself increasingly attracted to a woman's kindness, intellect, and confidence, no matter how subtle. Then, if he uncovered that she possessed any snark or wit, it was over for her. She was fucked, both figuratively and literally. Any woman who could go toe to toe with him ended the day grabbing her toes.

Although he'd never been in love, he believed it waited somewhere, looking for him the same way he looked for it. In his mind, the right woman, no matter the guardrails and prison walls he'd erected, could reach inside and uncover the raw parts he kept hidden—the parts he truly wanted to share but hesitated to reveal.

Logically, it would have made sense to flirt back, considering Anyssa had, in her mind, canceled their date for tomorrow. But there was something about her. Something he wanted to sink his teeth into. Layers he wanted to unravel.

She was strange.

A weird combination of confident and awkward?

Offbeat?

There was something there, some quirk that seemed out of place for someone Zaraia had informed him was dubbed The Queen of ATL due to her legal prowess. Of course, the long weekend and baby shower could have attributed to her weirdness, but even if it hadn't, he liked that she was a little

odd.

“Did you know my sister’s office is also in this building?” Zaraia asked.

The mention of Anyssa intercepted his train of thought.

Zaraia pointed above their heads. “Her office is on the thirteenth floor. The Law Offices of Brandon, Benitez, and Barnes.”

He glanced in the direction of the elevator bay. Only a few floors separated him and Anyssa, which meant they could have lunch together every so often. Admittedly, he was also thinking about Anyssa bent over his desk for an afternoon quickie—or three. If any of the executive offices had attached full bathrooms, he was sold.

“This space used to house a private security firm,” Jocelyn said, arms wide. “Many of the companies in the building used their services, but after the owner died, the family sold the company and moved back to their home country somewhere in the West Indies. So the businesses miss having an elite security firm in the building.”

“Which could mean easy clients, P,” Zaraia suggested. “Unless you don’t think you and Nyss can work in the same building without setting off a nuclear war.”

Pavel leaned down and kissed the top of Zaraia’s head.

Jocelyn glanced over her shoulder.

Gideon flashed her a smile.

With the way her gazes and glances had progressed throughout the morning, had he been interested, he knew he could have taken her to one of the empty offices and fucked her until he drenched that curly mop of hair in their sweat. Unfortunately, she wasn’t the woman he was thinking about hovering over while he moved between her legs, their bodies sleek and slippery.

A woman who’d turned him down.

What the hell was wrong with him?

They entered the building’s central area and were greeted by a large, all-glass conference room. The design scheme was a mix of dark and light wood—posts, beams, doorways—and black metal. The floors were all concrete except for the hardwood behind the information desk. This level would house their primary operations, but they would also take over managing the security desk on the first floor.

The interior was well kept for a building that hadn’t been used in a few years. No wet, moldy smells hung in the air. Dust thicker than carpet didn’t

cling to any surfaces. It was modern without feeling flashy, like the first two spaces, both of which they would have had to spend extra money on to correct significant structural security vulnerabilities anyhow.

Zaraia didn't see the third location, as the building had looked and smelled like it hadn't been touched since it was built over one hundred years ago. Pavel had asked her to wait, though not outside. After grilling the manager of a coffee shop two blocks away about their air purification system, he'd decided it was safe for her to be there.

"This is *nice*, P." Zaraia released Pavel's hand and peered inside a room that could easily be repurposed into a training area for those out in the field with private clients. "And it's got a rustic, modern loft kind of feel. Baby, you would look so sexy running all this."

Pavel smiled. "You're doing a better job selling me than Jocelyn, sweetheart."

Jocelyn raised both hands in surrender. "Look, she's got the ability to offer perks I can't, obviously," she gestured to Zaraia's stomach, "so I appreciate all the assistance I can get. Sell away, Zaraia."

Gideon chuckled to himself, pleasantly surprised at how good Zaraia and Pavel were together, considering how quickly they'd married. His grandparents had been the same way and had remained happily married until their deaths, but they'd also come from a different time.

Jocelyn, heels echoing on the concrete, continued to motion around. "I'd already planned to show you guys this space, but I had to weed out the others first. I had a feel for you two, especially you," her gaze darted his way, "and I'm glad to see my hunch was correct."

"This is definitely the number one location you've shown us," Pavel said. "Any security issues, Gideon?"

"Entrances are solid," Gideon said. "I haven't spotted any hiding areas or issues with setting up lighting. Of course, we'll have to review the office and building layout, but at first glance, no, I don't see any glaring issues with access points or security checkpoints."

Jocelyn continued to watch him, her fingers sliding along her collarbone, and he could practically smell her from where he stood.

Bodies like the ones that seemed to exist on every corner of Atlanta were made for a man his size, and the women attached to those bodies seemed to have a preference for men his size.

Except for one.

Maybe he needed to give more credence to Jordan's stories. At the moment, he couldn't find any otherwise rational explanations for why he couldn't get Anyssa off his mind.

"Do you know anything about cipher locks, Jocelyn?" he asked, momentarily shoving his thoughts of Anyssa as far to the side as he could get them. "Whether they were in use here before?"

There were several feet between them.

Still, he heard Jocelyn swallow.

"I'm, honestly, not certain," she said. "I can find out for you."

"Soundproofing?"

"Um," she swallowed again, "yes, there's spray foam, acoustic panels, sound control doors, and special ceiling tiles. All the materials were recently inspected and are Class A1 non-flammable. I believe there's also mass-loaded vinyl, but I'll need to double-check on that as well."

"So," he took a step toward her, "it's pretty well sound-protected in here."

"Yes, it is. You could make love in one of these offices, and as long as the door's closed, no one would ever know."

His recalcitrant mind drifted back to the thirteenth floor. All it would take was one elevator ride, and he and Anyssa could test that theory. She looked at him like she wanted him. Then again, it could have also been wishful thinking, him seeing what he wanted to see.

"Can we talk numbers now?" Zaraia asked, loudly, stepping into the space between him and Jocelyn.

Gideon held back a grin.

He wasn't sure whether she was gatekeeping for him because he'd expressed interest in Anyssa or if Anyssa had mentioned something about him to her sister. However, if Zaraia could have accessed his thoughts, she would have seen that he thought about her sister every ten seconds, whether or not he was trying to.

"I have another question," Pavel said. "Your agency will also be helping us with residential properties. Do you have any lined up yet?"

Jocelyn nodded. "We do."

"Are any of them over forty minutes away from this location?"

"A fe—"

"Get rid of those. We've got a son who's eight, almost nine, and this baby on the way. I don't want to be an hour away from my family on any given day. Also, if you could find locations that work against the flow of traffic as

much as possible, that would be perfect. No exceptions.”

She nodded again, firmer. “Will do, Paul. Now, about those numbers.”

Pavel and Zaraia walked toward the exit.

Gideon motioned ahead of him. “After you.”

“Let’s walk together,” she suggested.

He obliged her.

Jocelyn was around five-nine, five-ten in what appeared to be four-inch heels. Barefoot, Anyssa was around five-five, placing her and Jocelyn at roughly the same height. Anyssa was lean and firm in some places and soft in others, but she carried most of her weight in her hips, legs, and ass. More than enough for his hands, tongue, and teeth.

“Mr. Miller?”

He glanced down to find Jocelyn staring up at him, her left brow raised. “Yes?”

“You just whispered ‘this is crazy’ under your breath. What’s crazy? Finally finding an office space, I hope.”

How much he thought about Zaraia’s sister—*that* was what was crazy. She’d canceled their date, and not only did he still plan to show up, but Jocelyn was also clearly hinting she’d be open to him spreading her like warm butter on a slice of bread.

And there he was, ignoring it.

Dom had chased Eija all over Moscow. Had Eija left the country, Dom probably would have chased her wherever she ended up. Then, after it became impossible for Dom to hide his obsession with Niko’s new nanny, they’d all had the nerve to tease him about it.

They’d sat in a room, smoking cigars, drinking vodka, and playing Durak—which Dom was notoriously bad at—cracking jokes about never chasing a woman like “the pretty boy.”

Using his very own foolish mouth, he’d told Dom that if a woman didn’t seem interested in him, nothing stopped him from seeking another.

Yet, here he was.

Seeking an uninterested woman.

Mentally preoccupied with an uninterested woman.

“Nothing’s crazy,” he said. “But, for my property, I don’t know if I mentioned I’m looking for land. Can you find land around these parts? Enough for a garden and maybe some chickens?”

She laughed.

When she realized he was serious, she cleared her throat.

“I’m sorry, but you don’t peg me as the farmer type,” she said. “Not with the way you fill out a suit. Are you sure that’s what you’re looking for? We have some high-end luxury condos available.”

“So you can’t find that for me.”

Her eyes opened wide. “No, I can! I can find anything you want, even a girlfriend, not that I’d be interested in doing that. Unless you already have one?”

“Can I ask your opinion about something?” he asked, wanting to altogether avoid discussing that topic with her. “Let’s say a man asked you to have dinner with him. At first, you seem interested in him, and you accept, but then you change your mind. What would make you change your mind?”

“A man or you?” she asked. “Because if it’s any man, I can write you a list. If it’s you, I wouldn’t say no.”

“Say you did.”

“But I wouldn’t.”

He sighed. “Say you did.”

“Fine.” She tapped a long fingernail against her bottom row of teeth. “Maybe if he solves relationship problems with his fists. Or that he’s a womanizer. Or he has a small penis.”

“What if you discover none of those apply to him?”

“Then I’m not saying no.”

“There are no other reasons?”

She groaned. “It’s easier to just ask me out, but whatever. Maybe I’d say no if I’m not over my ex. Or my last relationship ended badly, so I’m scared about putting myself out there again.”

He stopped walking. “Tell me more.”

“As I said, this doesn’t apply to me and you, but if a man like you ever asked me to dinner and I said no, it’ll be because of pain. You are sexy as hell, and you have a great personality, so I’d be worried about falling for you only to get hurt again. However, to be clear, I’m not.”

The fact that Anyssa had agreed to dinner in the first place meant there was something there, even if it was as bare bones as physical attraction.

All he was asking for was one dinner.

One evening.

One chance to get to know each other better.

There was no guarantee it would go past that one dinner. Sure, he’d felt a

flicker of chemistry when they were cleaning the living room together after the baby shower. And, though usually not a man who needed conversation, he'd needed to talk to her when they were alone in the backyard, if only to hear her voice.

"Thanks," he said, walking again.

Jocelyn hurried to remain in step with him. "I won't say no."

"About what?"

"About you asking me to dinner."

"That's good to know," he said. "But, honestly, it was all a hypothetical situation."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Anyssa, elbows propped on her desktop, squeezed her forehead. Her assistant stood on the other side of her desk, staring down at her, waiting for their next move.

“Mr. O’Sullivan called to confirm your meeting at four,” Aurora repeated. “But I don’t have it on the schedule.”

That wasn’t Aurora’s fault.

That was all Colm’s inconsiderate ass.

Aurora was a twenty-four-year-old paralegal hopeful who’d taken the job as her executive assistant, waiting for an opening. She was also Chris’ oldest sister’s daughter, which meant she technically didn’t need a job, but they’d grown close during her and Chris’ marriage.

Chris’ family had sided with her during the separation and divorce, especially after more and more women came out of the woodwork like he’d had a running bet with Tiger Woods.

Surprisingly, his parents liked her since the beginning despite her “poor upbringing” and “questionable genetics.” Then, after she married Chris, they’d confessed to hiring a private investigator to get more information about her background, but not because they thought she was trying to marry into the family solely due to their wealth.

They’d wanted to see Zaraia and Shawn, younger pictures of her parents—something that would explain how she could have grown up in an old house, in a rural county, with parents who’d barely made more than the minimum wage and still turn out with what they’d described as “well above-average attractiveness.”

They even sought younger pictures of her, in high school and early

college, to determine whether she'd had plastic surgery at some point. As her mother-in-law, Elizabeth Lynette Carmichael had put it:

“Usually, like marries like in this world. As you can see, our children are exceptionally good-looking, especially our Christopher. However, my dear, your beauty and intelligence are so profound, Thomas and I have agreed to overlook your poor, backwoods Mississippi upbringing. So don't worry, we'll undo some of those unhealthy genes as well.”

She looked up into brown eyes and skin like toffee candy. “Aurora, go ahead and book a car and clear the rest of my schedule for the evening. Mr. O’Sullivan is a priority client.” A priority client she wanted to give an acid bath to, but a priority nonetheless. “You can leave for the day once you’re done.”

Aurora nodded, but she didn’t move.

Anyssa held in a groan. “What is it? Did he also request that I find a spare kidney in the next three hours?”

“No. You have a visitor, and it’s a man the size of a sequoia.”

Her heart kicked in her chest.

Her foolish, foolish heart.

“Blue eyes?” she asked. *Beautiful* blue eyes. “And kind of attractive?”

Aurora’s eyelids disappeared into their eye sockets. “Kind of? Nyssa, he’s one of the most gorgeous men I’ve ever seen.”

She laughed. “He’s a friend. Send him in.”

Aurora hurried from the office.

She did her best to try to look casual in her desk chair, shifting between crossing one leg over the other and lounging. By the time she found a position—leaning forward, fingers steepled, elbows on the desktop and squinting—she looked up to find Gideon studying her.

Just once, she wanted to have a normal interaction with this man. Skinny and awkward Anyssa had been left behind somewhere in Colfayette, Mississippi. Yet, there she was, one of the top legal minds in the state, staring at one of the sexiest men she’d ever had the pleasure of meeting like she was contemplating her constipation.

He waved. “Hey.”

For a moment, she had the unnatural urge to ask him to leave. To scream at him to leave. The way he made her heart pound and her stomach fold in on itself wasn’t welcomed. This was how hearts got broken. Then, after broken, destroyed.

“Hi,” she said, straightening in the chair. “What brings you by?”

“Would you believe me if I said I wanted to see you?”

“No.”

“Didn’t think so.”

He stood watching her.

She fixed her gaze on his.

“Why do you look at me like that?” he asked.

She blinked. “Like what?”

“All crazy like.”

A flash fire covered her from scalp to soles. Any response her brain had been attempting to formulate was burned away, and she cleared her throat to stave off an embarrassment-induced coughing fit.

“I was actually just heading out for a meeting.”

“The one at four o’clock.” He leaned against the wall next to the door and folded his massive arms over his massive chest. “Your assistant told me about it, but that’s three hours away.”

“It’s in Athens. If there’s no traffic leaving Atlanta, it’ll take me about an hour and a half to get there. There’ll likely be traffic, which puts me at a two-hour drive.”

“Who’s the client?”

“His name’s Colm O’Sullivan.” She stood, banged her knee on the desk, and played it off, blinking back tears. “He’s facing three counts of first-degree murder, so I can’t reschedule.”

His brows narrowed. “O’Sullivan?”

Crap.

Was she right? Did mafia people know each other? Was that the way things worked in their world? First Pavel and now Gideon. That had to mean something.

“Yes,” she said. “Does the name sound familiar?”

“Let me come with you.”

She stepped around her desk, taking her time to avoid ramming her knee into anything else. Jordan and Micah, as toddlers, had more gracefulness than she did right then.

“You can’t. Attorney-client privilege.”

“I don’t have to listen in,” he said. “But you’re not going two hours out of your way to meet Colm O’Sullivan alone.”

“And why’s that?”

“You just said it. He’s...dangerous.”

Colm was dangerous, but he’d been dangerous for years. For him to be indicted for these particular murders meant, though a criminal, this wasn’t his crime. The evidence stacked against him further drove her to that conclusion.

Colm wouldn’t go from squeaky clean to damning evidence overnight. There was also at least one witness, but Barnes had argued that, for their safety, he didn’t want their information revealed.

She’d argued that it violated Colm’s sixth amendment and fourteenth amendment rights; an anonymous witness meant Colm couldn’t face his accuser in a fair, unbiased trial as determined by the U.S. Constitution.

The judge presiding over the case, the eponymous Judge Henry K. Law, let them know he would review the information and get back to them. Unfortunately for her, Judge Law wasn’t a judge she could influence with their positive history. On the flip side, he didn’t have a negative opinion of her as far as she knew.

“I’m coming with you,” Gideon insisted.

She eased onto the edge of her desk. “In what capacity? How do I explain showing up with you in tow?”

“Tell him I’m your husband.”

“He knows I’m divorced,” she countered, mentally pushing back when her thoughts tried to show her what being married to Gideon would be like—in the biblical sense.

“Boyfriend, then.”

“Do you have one that doesn’t imply we’re sleeping together?”

“We wouldn’t be sleeping together yet,” he said. “It’s still early in our relationship.”

It was funny how he thought she wouldn’t put out on their first date. A man like Gideon could take her out at seven and have her twisted like a pretzel by eight fifty-nine.

“Then tell him I’m private security. He might appreciate you hiring someone to remain glued to your side during the trial. It makes him appear all the more powerful.”

She asked the question dangling between them. “Do you know who Colm O’Sullivan is?”

“I do.”

“And what he does?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

He pushed off the wall. “Anyssa, it’s my job to know. Now, how you became tangled with him? That’s something you’ll answer for me later.”

The man was so annoyingly confident. Zaraia had described him as “quiet” and “contemplative,” but he didn’t hold his tongue when they were one-on-one.

She wouldn’t mind holding it for him.

In her mouth.

“You’re too underdressed to be my private security.” She motioned to his plain T-shirt, which hugged his biceps like old friends who hadn’t seen each other since “the war.” A pair of jeans outlined firm thighs, and though muscular, he wasn’t so huge that she wouldn’t be able to wrap her legs around his midsection and use his shoulders for leverage. If this man had a healthy-sized dick, she was in trouble.

“We have an hour,” he said. “I can grab a suit.”

“Yeah, but you’re going to be with me. You won’t be wearing just any suit.” She reached behind her and fumbled for her phone for so long, he walked across the room, picked it up from where it had somehow landed on her chair, and placed it in her hand.

As he stepped off to the side, she eased away from her desk. Their bodies bumped, and he grabbed her to prevent her from stumbling backward. Unlike the hallway, his hands didn’t land on her lower back. This time, one hand wound up with a handful of her ass.

“I’m sorry.” He removed his hands and took two steps back. A slight flush covered his face. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was an accident,” she reassured him, Niagara Falls building between her thighs. “Give me one second.”

ANYSSA

I need a suit in under forty minutes. Based on this body, you won’t have to do much tailoring. Can you accommodate me?

JONATHAN

Of course. Is it the Viking?

ANYSSA

No, it’s not my sister’s husband. And I’m serious. I’m on my way.

JONATHAN

Be on your way, then.

When she looked up, Gideon was looking out the windows behind her, absent-mindedly stroking his palm—the same one she'd basically sat on—with the thumb on his other hand.

She headed for the door. "I got you a suit, but if we're going to make it to Athens on time, we need to leave now."

"Anyssa..."

"The guy who runs the store is a friend. Actually, he's the one who found Zee's wedding dress."

"Anyssa, you're forgetting something, sweetheart."

Numerous times, she'd watched her sister melt whenever Pavel used the term of endearment, but it wasn't until that very moment that she understood why.

She slowly faced Gideon, her bare feet cool on the office floor. He held up her purse and heels, the shoes dangling from his fingertips.

Gideon Medvedev wasn't the first attractive man she'd ever seen, and he definitely wouldn't be the last. However, she couldn't help but believe he was a dying breed, and in order to conserve his species, she needed to give him access to her womb. And the way she would let this man paint her womb with his cu—

"You want to go barefoot?" he asked, a crooked grin on his face. "Or is this your way of requesting that I carry you?"

She hurried over.

He handed her the purse, but as she went to take the shoes, he kneeled, gently cradled her foot, and helped her slide her foot into one studded heel. Then he did the same thing with the other before standing and looking down into her face, the grin still plastered on his.

"Let's go," she repeated, her voice so quiet a mime could shout her. "Hopefully, Colm won't ask why I hired a bodyguard who doesn't carry a gun."

Gideon's presence dwarfed her as he followed her through the door. "Who says I don't have one?"

CHAPTER NINE

Despite how her relationship with Chris had ended up, Anyssa didn't see marrying him as a bad idea. They'd had good times, she'd loved him in an honest and faithful way, and he gave her two amazing children.

Bad ideas weren't something she had often.

Not since she left Mississippi.

However, going with Gideon to be fitted for suits was a bad idea. A terrible idea. The main reason she'd come here was because Jonathan always accommodated her, no matter how last minute.

But holy hell...

Gideon stood barefoot on a pedestal in a private dressing area at the back of the store while Jonathan's assistants took measurements and placed pins. He had on a black suit with a white shirt underneath.

Simple.

Yet, she'd collapsed into the nearest chair.

The top button on the shirt was undone, and less than two inches of his hard chest was visible, but it was an impressive couple of inches.

As one of Jonathan's assistants measured the wide expanse of his chest, the tape measure unfurling and unfurling, the woman made a noise Anyssa felt in her spirit. It was like disbelief, amazement, and desire wrapped in one.

"Sure you don't want something to drink?" Jonathan asked from the seat next to her.

Although he spoke to her, he kept his gaze on Gideon and the assistants, and she knew he was mentally tracking everything they did. She'd helped him learn how to micromanage less, but he was a work in progress, and the success of his brand depended on them being accurate down to the

centimeter.

“I’m technically on the job, so no,” she said.

“I have more than alcohol here, and you look like someone who needs something with ice. Where’d you find him?”

“He’s a friend of the Viking.”

“Say no more. Birds of a feather.” Jonathan wagged his finger from her to Gideon and back. “Are you and him...”

She snorted, and it was so loud, Gideon and all three assistants looked over. She waved to let them know everything was fine.

“Are me and him, what?”

“Seeing each other.”

“No.”

“Sleeping together?”

“Nope.”

“You do know when I say ‘sleeping together,’ I don’t mean next to each other in the same bed,” Jonathan clarified. “I mean on top of each other in the same bed, though I’m inclined to think a man that size would crush you into a fine dust. Might be best to stay on top. Put those legs days to good use.”

She slid him a look. “I’m meeting a client right after this. Gideon’s my private security escort. A guy like this isn’t for a woman like me.”

He extended the same finger in her direction, this time as a warning. “Stop that. You’re stunning, intelligent, and you have a big heart. Your kindness might be hidden behind declarations of ‘I hate this lawyer bitch,’ as told by the state of Georgia, but forget them. The people who love you see it.”

Until the words left his mouth, she didn’t realize how much she’d needed to hear them. There were days, too many of them, where she felt like she’d lost all the “good” in her. Any “softness” she might have retained had to be expunged or hidden deep unless she wanted to be eaten alive in the criminal law profession.

“Jonathan, I’m also older than him *and* a mother of two *and* divorced.”

“And?”

No one understood, but it wasn’t like she went around telling everyone how emotionally decimated the divorce had left her. She’d had kids using bottles and wearing diapers, so there’d been no time to mope or lament over her situation.

From the outside looking in, she supposed it had looked like she’d

handled everything with grace. Like she'd loved Chris, though not enough for anything he could have done to break her, and it was the furthest thing from the truth.

They first met one afternoon during Morehouse's Homecoming Week. She'd been with a group of her sorors from Spelman who'd journeyed to the campus to enjoy the week of festivities.

Chris and his friends had made their way toward them, toting red and white "kanes" and walking with that air of fraternity superiority. She'd stepped off to the side as he approached, and when she moved, he moved with her until they ended up in a shuffling dance that ended with his grip on her shoulders.

Anyssa stared at the light-eyed nupe in front of her. "What are you doing? I was moving out of the way. Aren't you trying to get to Kyra?"

To this day, Kyra McCarron was a level of stunning she'd never encountered again, with smooth dark skin, eyes that naturally looked like she wore mascara and liner, and a personality that was positive without being overbearing. It had come as a surprise to no one when she went on to study Clinical Psychology and now toured the country as a motivational speaker.

"No," the nupe said. "I'm trying to talk to you. What's your name?"

"Anyssa."

"Hi, Anyssa. I'm Chris."

"Hi, Chris," she said. "Why are you trying to talk to me?"

Chris released her and took a step back. "You're serious."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Where are you from?"

"Mississippi."

"You don't sound like you're from Mississippi."

"One second." She cleared her throat into a fist. "Hey thurr, Chris. I'm Uh-nyssa, but my friends, well they right call me Nyssa. My sister and bruvvuh, they done call me Nyss. I'm from a li'l town down thurr in Miss-ssippi. My daddy was a sharecropper and my mama, well, she done good for herself makin' that thurr moonshine."

He stared at her, blinked twice, and then burst out laughing, motioning for his group of friends to head over. They moved on cue, as though they'd waited specifically to see how the exchange between her and Chris would go.

"Fellas, this is Anyssa. Nyssa, these are my boys Big, Xeno, Dab, and Marcus."

She waved. "Hi."

Chris slid an arm around her waist. "Sorry, fellas, but I like this one."

Marcus sucked his teeth. "C'mon, Nash. You're already a pretty boy. You can't be out here taking all the pretty girls, now."

"Not all." Chris tightened his grip. "Just the prettiest one at Spelman."

Groaning, the “fellas” dispersed.

Once they were alone, or as alone as one could be during an outdoor festival, she took a moment to get a good look at the guy who’d “claimed” her as his.

Their eyes met, and they were some of the most beautiful eyes she’d ever seen on a human being. Although she was certainly far from being “the prettiest one at Spelman,” she would bet finding a more attractive student at Morehouse than this guy would be next to impossible.

“Why do they call him Marcus?” she asked.

Chris glanced at his friend, who was standing close to Kyra as if gearing up to talk to her sometime during the next century. “That’s his name.”

“But why is everyone else Big or Xeno or Dab?”

“Xeno is from Nigeria, Big is, well, big, and Dab...wait until you see him put Vaseline on his lips. It’ll click. Marcus just looks like a Marcus. So, we call him Marcus.”

“And you’re Nash?”

“It’s my eyes. It’s from that movie, *Barbershop*. Have you seen it yet?”

She shook her head.

“We’ll go see it together.” He reached for her hand, but she angled it out of reach.

“We are? That’s quite presumptuous of you.”

“I’m good at all types of math,” he asserted. “Like, really good, and I already did the statistics. You’re attracted to me. I’m attracted to you. A girl who looks like you and a man who looks like me? We’re, statistically, going to end up together. We’ll get married and have gorgeous ass kids. Like marries like where I’m from. Plus, what do your parents do, anyhow? My father’s a doctor, and my mother’s a state legislator. Your mother’s probably a, what, an exec at Yahoo or something? And your father...I’m guessing...lawyer?”

“My father’s dead,” she said. “When he was alive, he worked as a cook at a Waffle House close to an hour away from our town.”

“Oh.” His brows softened. “I’m sorry. What does your mother do?”

“She’s a hotel maid.”

He studied her face. “Do you have siblings?”

“A sister and brother. Both younger.”

“Are they beautiful too?”

“Don’t I have to say they are?”

“No, you can be honest with me. I’ll always be honest with you. That’s just the kind of man I am—blunt, honest, and direct, but not in a way that hurts people. Not in a way that would hurt you.”

She eyed him, mirroring the way he looked at her. “Well, in that case, my sister, Zaraia, is gorgeous. A lot of people say we look alike, and that we take after our mother, but I think she’s prettier, hands down. My brother, Shawn...he’s good-looking, but he also looks like a lizard person.”

Chris burst out laughing again, and his laugh drew a smile to her face.

“No biggie,” he said, wiping at the corner of his eye. “We’ll still get married.”

“Sure we will.”

“Oh, you’re definitely wifey, Nyssa, but first, we’ll go see the movie.” He took her hand and placed a kiss on the back, just below her knuckles. “For now, are you hungry?”

“My friends and I were about to go check out the food booths,” she said. “I think one of them has smoked turkey legs.”

He shook his head. “No, ma’am. That isn’t good for you. There’s a stand with Greek food. The guy who runs it grew up there after his parents moved to Athens from Ghana, and something tells me you’ve never had tzatziki. Plus, skinny as you are, you still have more than enough ass for me. L.A. face with an Oakland booty.”

She shoved his shoulder.

“What?” he asked, eyes gleaming with mischief. “Don’t act like it’s not true. Now, come on. I’m trying to feed you.”

She’d loved him.

She’d truly, honestly loved him.

For that feeling to be gone in a blink, after riding that high for more than a decade, was like waking up and finding out part of her liver had been removed. Opening herself up to feelings, no matter how much she ached to experience love again, also opened her up to what followed when a love that once burned brightly was snuffed out.

Jonathan’s voice cut into her thoughts. “So, his name is Gideon. Give me Gideon’s details. Age?”

“Only thirty-four,” she said.

“Why ‘only’? Thirty-four’s right where you need him to be. Is he single?”

“As far as I know.”

“Straight?”

“As far as I know.”

“Kids?”

“He hasn’t mentioned any.”

“And where was Gideon before this?”

She watched as one assistant measured Gideon’s firm, muscular ass more times than was necessary. “Vegas. Before Vegas, he worked with ‘The Viking’ in private security in Moscow. Secret Service-level private security.”

“So what brought him to Georgia, of all places?”

“My best guess? Loneliness.” When the assistant went to measure one more time, she intervened. “We have a meeting to get to, and it’s in Athens. I think the initial measurement you got was accurate.”

The young woman looked up at Gideon, tipping her head all the way back. “I figured, but he’s just so big, I wanted to make sure.”

Gideon smiled down at her.

All three assistants sighed.

While the assistants finished stitching and tucking, she went to the front of the shop with Jonathan and ordered four more suits—light gray, navy blue, tan, and charcoal. If Gideon asked, she’d tell him they were gifts, but he looked too good in them for her not to purchase more.

“You can send the suits straight to Zee’s,” she said, signing for the purchase. “And I’ll let you pick the shirts to go with them. Is he all set with

the suit for today?”

Jonathan’s left brow quirked. “I’m going to send an outfit to your place.”

“Why?”

“Once you go take a look at him, he might need a change of clothes for tomorrow morning. And, in case I’m not clear, he’ll need the suit because you’re going to tear this one off him once you two are alone.”

A feeling snaked in her belly as they returned to the dressing area. A feeling that Jonathan might be more right than wrong.

Still on the pedestal, Gideon looked up when she entered and held out both arms. “What do you think, Anyssa? Do I look like your private security now?”

She scanned him slowly, taking in every detail and praying she looked more professional than lewd. The top button on his shirt remained undone, and she imagined herself licking from the hollow of his throat down to where the shirt opened up. Then she would keep going until she found something to gag on.

“We went with a pair of loafers instead of wingtips,” Jonathan said, walking up behind her. “But I guarantee you’d have the same reaction with low-top leather sneakers, lace-up boots, or a traditional dress shoe. That body was made for Ford, Armani, Hugo, Prada, Brioni...everything. Good luck with that whole ‘he’s not for me’ thing. If that man ends up coming onto you, let’s just say I think he’ll end up coming *on* you.”

“Inside,” she said. Before Jonathan could fire back with a salacious retort, she nudged his side. “Joking, obviously, but yes to the shoes. Add a pair of all the ones you just listed to the order.”

“Colors?”

“I trust you.”

“Would you like to know his shoe size?”

“Nope.” She composed herself, banishing all thoughts of Gideon coming anywhere but with her to the meeting. “Ready, Gideon? The car should be pulling up soon.”

He stepped down from the pedestal. “Ready when you are, your Highness.”

“Please don’t call me that.”

“Why not?”

Because she didn’t make it a habit to carry around extra pairs of panties, and the ones she currently had on were close to being done for.

“You’re a queen around these parts.” He walked ahead of her and held open the glass front door for her to walk through. “What should I call you then? Mrs. Carmichael?”

She grimaced.

He laughed. “Yeah, that would never happen. Like I’d let you go back to him.”

“What are you talking ab...” As realization dawned on her, a pulsing sensation jumped from one of her inner thighs to the other, back and forth, before coming to a rest between them. “I thought Zaraia said you were quiet.”

“Usually.”

“Not with me.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Anyssa’s fine,” she said, desperately needing to derail this line of conversation. “I like it when you call me Anyssa. I like the way my name sounds when you say it.”

The car sat on the curb at the end of the sidewalk, and he opened the door for her to get in before sliding in next to her.

She settled into her seat and removed her iPad to review the notes she’d made for the meeting. It wasn’t until Gideon’s voice boomed throughout the interior cabin that she realized she remembered none of what she’d read.

“You *like* it?”

She looked over at him.

“When I say your name,” he said. “You said you ‘like’ it.”

“Oh. Yeah, I do. It makes me feel comfortable being with you. Around you, I mean.”

A smile stretched across his face. “I like knowing I did something you like. If it happens again, tell me so I can keep doing it over and over...and over again.”

Face warmer than a fireplace poker, she turned away from him and discreetly laid a hand on her roiling stomach.

A few minutes later, she felt his finger on the short, sleek strands of hair behind her ear. “What’s wrong?” she asked, nipples hard, tight, and thankfully not visible to his eyes. “Something in my hair?”

He didn’t respond.

She turned her head to look at him, and he dropped his hand. After the baby shower, he’d asked about her hair. It could have been a thing of his, playing in or with hair.

The way he now drummed his fingers on his thigh didn't necessarily indicate it was hard for him to keep his hands to himself. Likewise, the way she gripped the edge of the seat didn't mean it was hard for her not to climb onto his lap, latch onto his mouth, and lodge his zipper between her legs. The man was so big, it nearly looked like there was a bulge there.

She cocked her head to the side.

Wait a minute...

"Okay to take the freeway?" the driver asked.

She jumped, the back of her head colliding with the window. Gideon cleared his throat and lifted off the seat, tugging on his slacks at the knee.

"Um," she faced forward, scalp throbbing, "yeah. Yes. Get us there as efficiently as you can."

The driver nodded.

Gideon exhaled and looked out the window on his right. She did the same, her head turning toward the window on her left.

CHAPTER TEN

A long pebbled driveway led the car up to a structure that looked like a mix between a ranch and a farmhouse. A decent-sized body of water sat behind it, the surface covered in leaves from the trees surrounding the property. Several yards away from the house, on the other side of a wooden fence, two men wearing rubber boots tended to a pair of horses blacker than midnight.

Two additional men wearing suits and sunglasses stood outside the house's front door on either side. They stood with their hands folded, supposedly to come off as menacing or authoritative, but it looked more like they were protecting their genitals from unknown harm.

The car rolled to a stop.

Gideon stepped out, walked to her side of the vehicle, and waited for the driver to open the door. When the door opened, he took her hand to help her out. It was her first time feeling his fingertips, and she never wanted to let go of his hand.

Thankfully, he let go of her.

The suited men walked down to meet them. One tapped his ear while the other motioned to Gideon.

"Who is this? O'Sullivan didn't ask you to bring a guest. You were supposed to come alone."

"He's part of my protective detail," she explained. "And as *I'm* paying *him* for that service, I don't need O'Sullivan's permission."

The man reached toward his waist, but before he made it to his belt, Gideon was behind him with a gun pressed against his temple. A gun she hadn't seen or felt. A gun she'd honestly assumed he'd been joking about.

"You think your one gun will make a difference?" the man hissed. "I'm

sorry, but do you not know where you are?”

Something flashed in front of her, back and forth, slowing with each pass. When it finally came to a standstill, a red dot sat on the man’s chest, slightly off to the left, right over his heart.

Son of a bitch.

Gideon hadn’t come alone.

But when did he arrange the additional guns? Was it before or after she agreed to let him escort her to Athens? Was that the real reason he’d shown up at her office and not because he’d wanted to see her, as he’d said?

“What makes you think it’s one gun?” Gideon asked. “Keep your hands where I can see them, or I’ll make sure you go to hell with a third eye socket.”

The man let his hands fall, and Gideon tucked away his weapon just as Colm’s voice sounded from off to the side.

“That’s one way to make an entrance.”

Colm had on what she could only describe as traditional equestrian wear—a dark coat, white gloves, and khaki pants that descended into tall boots with spurs at the base.

As he approached them, he handed a helmet and crop to one of the men who’d been tending to the horses earlier. Despite what he claimed, he was obviously worried about the case. Since the last time she’d seen him, he’d lost a few pounds, and she appreciated knowing he was taking the charges somewhat seriously.

“Go ahead, Dougan.” He motioned to the guard. “Remind me at what moment I asked you to speak for me. If the lass wants to bring security, she can bring security. This is not a normal female.” He looked up at Gideon. “And might you introduce yourself?”

Gideon didn’t respond.

“His name’s Miller,” Anyssa said, and she didn’t know why he and Pavel bothered with aliases yet carried on as if they’d never left the life of organized crime.

“Aye, and does Miller not have a tongue?” Colm regarded him with a careful eye. “But I like him for you, Ms. Brandon. Never trust a man who answers too quickly to another. He’s useless to you if he easily submits to me.”

Colm walked up to her and extended an elbow.

She looked up at Gideon.

He nodded, and she hooked her arm through Colm's.

"You done found yourself a snake charmer, Ms. Brandon," Colm said.

They headed inside, and she felt Gideon's every movement without needing to look back. The playful man from before was gone, and though distant, this version of him was neither cold nor dismissive. Instead, it felt like he'd switched modes, going from seductive to calculating.

A model of a zebra greeted them in the entryway. Colm removed his gloves and tossed them on the floor, and a woman wearing a black dress and a white apron scrambled to pick them up. Another, wearing the same outfit, let him know lunch would be done in ten minutes, and Anyssa hoped these weren't women he'd taken on that ride he'd mentioned. If they were, they certainly didn't look like they'd gone willingly.

First, he took them on a tour of the mansion. Shiny marble floors that carried throughout the entire first floor made her squint and squeeze the bridge of her nose. A gold chandelier hung in virtually every room. The living room sofa, along with a couple of chaises, overlooked an indoor pool where naked men and women frolicked. Thankfully, just as the frolicking turned into "licking," they moved on.

She stopped counting rooms when they reached ten.

Colm asked her if she wanted to see the owner's suite and whether she'd be interested in "a little bit of fucking." She glanced at Gideon, hoping to catch his eye for them to exchange a "*Can you believe this jackass?*" look, but his eyes remained fixed on Colm.

As a reflex, she searched Colm's chest for a red dot.

At the end of the tour, they headed outside to an elaborate backyard area that would put the one at her house to shame. A fountain stood in the middle, spouting clear water from the pursed lips of an anatomically correct stallion. The front of the house might have been a ranch farmhouse mix, but out back was all Mediterranean with its stucco exterior, wrought iron window grilles, and patterned stone floor.

Colm directed her to a linen-covered metal table. Gideon remained several feet away, far enough for privacy but close enough for him to keep an eye on her.

Colm turned to give an order to a guard.

Gideon scanned the expansive grounds.

She pulled out her phone, raised it, and snapped a quick photo of him standing next to an olive tree, a pair of blue shutters in the background. Then

she took a moment to stare at it, her heart doing all sorts of leaps and flutters. By the time either man faced her again, the device was tucked deep inside her purse.

Because they rarely conducted business without him, Sean Brogan joined them. Rather than take a seat, Sean stood off to the side, watching her the same way Colm did.

Like Colm, he had auburn hair and green eyes. Also, like Colm, he was made more appealing to the eye because of the way he carried himself—expensive suits, perfect haircuts, and skin so flawless that it looked unnatural. Most people at least had a mole, freckles, sunspots, or a bit of discoloration.

Sean Brogan was to Colm what she assumed Pavel had been to Yuri Sokolov. The difference was, Brogan would take a bullet for Colm, not dedicate his life to riddling him with them one day.

If she wasn't mistaken, she believed they were related somehow and had grown up together, raised by their grandparents. She wasn't sure how it was determined that Colm would lead and Sean would follow, but Sean didn't appear to care as long as he always had a seat at the table.

“So, lass,” Colm began, sitting across from her, “you look quite dashing this afternoon.”

She'd worn a white top, white pants, nude pumps, and a cream-colored blazer. Regardless of what she had going on inside, she usually managed to pull it together on the outside.

“Thank you. Now, let's talk about what the prosecution has.” When work needed to be done, she had little time for pleasantries. “As you know, the recordings from the wiretap, the unidentified witness, and the items they found when they searched the property are what they've retained as evidence.”

“Aye.”

“But you didn't do this.”

He raised a brow.

“What do you take me for, Colm?” she asked. “You don't go all those years without so much as a blip to three counts of murder. You would have been tapped for something more related to the financial sector before a Class A Felony. I'm talking securities fraud, embezzlement...anything else. I'm not saying you're innocent in any regard.”

The corner of his mouth tugged.

“But this isn't your crime.”

One of the black and white-dressed servants set a basket of bread in front of them.

“A sharp tack you are, Ms. Brandon.” Colm ordered a loaf of bread be broken in two and that she be handed the other half, a symbolic gesture if she ever saw one. “Carelessness isn’t one of my weaknesses. Sex? Yes. Italian wine? Yes, again. I have at least one glass of vino every day. But you are correct. This is not my crime.”

She tore a piece from her share of the loaf and waited for him to take a bite before she brought it anywhere near her mouth. “Why me?” she asked. “Out of all the attorneys in the area, why’d you seek me out?”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re plenty good at what you do. But, if I’m to be honest,” he shrugged, “it is my ego. I love a flexible woman, and imagine my surprise when I discovered that even someone as rigid as the infamous Anyssa Brandon can be bent over.”

She looked over at Gideon. He pulled his focus away from the grounds, and with his eyes, he asked if she was okay. If she needed him. With her eyes, she told him that she didn’t. Not yet.

“They were just boys, Colm,” she argued. “Fifteen, fourteen, fourteen, and sixteen. And they were about to go to prison, for the rest of their lives, because of a system created when no one who looked like them had been allowed a seat at the table.”

The boys had been charged with the fatal beating and sexual assault of a teacher at their school. A “witness” put all four of them together roughly ten minutes before the crime. That gave the district attorney’s office probable cause for a warrant for all four boys’ DNA, and traces of all four boys’ semen were allegedly found on the victim.

She’d taken the case pro bono as all four boys were from West End Station, which had a median income of under twenty thousand dollars per year.

None of them had records, and only one had ever been involved with the police; he’d been studying at Buckhead Library when the librarian, unfamiliar with his face, assumed he’d come to the library to do harm. He’d been holding a mountain of textbooks at the time and wearing clothing that had clearly displayed his middle school logo.

Despite the boys’ diverse backgrounds, they’d all had one thing in common—they didn’t want their economically disadvantaged circumstances to be permanent.

They were good students.

Strong students.

Promising students.

When the case came her way, she immediately noticed more holes than a sponge. The witness couldn't keep her story straight. The boys' alibis were solid, but the lead detective had claimed they couldn't be verified when it had taken her all of twenty-four hours. The semen analysis revealed abnormalities, and when she had an independent lab check the DNA results, they'd concluded that the sample had been so degraded, getting a positive match would never hold up in court.

She'd filed motion after motion.

One by one, they were shot down.

She'd presented facts. Hard facts. Yet, no one listened. No one cared. They'd all acted as though, regardless of indisputable evidence, the boys belonged in prison. One prosecutor even made a comment about how they would have ended up there anyhow, so it was best to send them early.

Then Colm found her tucked away at her favorite restaurant one night, in a back corner, reviewing case notes. He'd let her know he'd been following the case, and then he hit her with the bombshell—irrefutable evidence of corruption.

She'd suggested that they take it to the trial judge. If that wasn't enough to toss out the case, or at the very least grant a mistrial, she'd request the judge recuse himself.

Colm had argued that it wouldn't be enough. That, in times like those, she couldn't think with the law. She had to circumvent it the same way it was being manipulated in hopes of convicting four innocent teenagers.

So, she accepted his help.

Three days later, the real culprit, a uniformed police officer who'd been on the force less than a year and already had tons of complaints in his jacket, "committed suicide." The officer left behind a note that included a confession and information only the actual culprit could have known.

The boys' charges were dropped.

The State issued an apology, and several high-ranking court officials, along with the former Chief of Police and a dozen officers, resigned. After that, she was dubbed The Queen of Atlanta.

Every once in a while, the boys checked in with her by email. The fourteen-year-olds had graduated from college earlier that year. The fifteen-

year-old started med school roughly a week ago, and the sixteen-year-old was in law school. Prior to the case, he'd aspired to play professional baseball.

"Colm, you don't need me," she insisted.

He wagged a finger at her. "Needing you doesn't matter, Ms. Brandon. Owning you does."

Brogan huffed.

A team of servers placed several platters in front of them. As they were placed, Colm identified each dish: Greek-style roasted Branzino, Greek-style potatoes, Orzo, Black-eyed peas and spinach, and Greek salad.

She started to serve herself, with zero plans to eat after Colm's last comment, but Colm barked at a server in Gaelic. The server promptly snatched the fork from her hand and began serving her a portion of every dish.

"Tell me about the meeting they have on record," she said, returning to the more important matter at hand. "Who all were in attendance?"

"Business associates," he said. "Pádraig Wheelihan, Caitlin O'Toole, Orrin Behan, and Daniel Hallahan."

"All Irish? So this *was* mafia business."

He grinned. "You entice me when you say 'mafia.' Are you sure I cannot interest you in a few hours of fucking? If you'd like, you can request a second partner. Brogan finds you quite pretty."

She didn't care that Brogan found her pretty. She didn't want him to find her even with a Google search engine. However, had it been Gideon who'd asked, she would have gone home with impressions from the ground and precarious dirt spots on the knee area of her pants.

"Are any of these associates in California?" she asked. "Florida? Maryland? Pennsylvania?"

"Caitlin is in Florida, but she wasn't in Florida when she took the call," he said. "She was in New York."

The information was thin, but she could use it.

"I'm going to get the recording tossed out," she informed him. "However, I'll need more information from Caitlin."

He swallowed a sip of wine. "Christ, Ms. Brandon. The way you talk to me...are you sure you don't want to fuck? Because I very much would like to have a round with you. We can leave Brogan out of it."

Brogan grunted, and the urge to toss something at his head swept over her. If she'd had more time, or cared, she would have tried to stir the pot.

Asked him why he was comfortable being a lackey. He thought he came off as a silent warrior, but all he did was make animal sounds and quiver in the shade of Colm's shadow.

She shook her head. "Hard pass. I'm not interested in sleeping with you or Brogan today, tomorrow, or ever."

"Send your 'Miller' away," Colm insisted.

"No."

"I'm not a man people say no to, Ms. Brandon."

"Well, congratulations. I'm the first."

"You think you anger me with this? It's just the opposite. Keep going. Talk to me like you think I'm beneath you until I put you beneath me. Men like a challenge. I've bent you once. I can bend you again."

She stood. "I came here to work, not waste time. Both this conversation, as well as fucking you and your little prairie dog, are and would be a waste of my time."

He grinned. "There she goes. The snake."

"Yeah, and you hired me."

"You bowed to me."

"For those boys, I would have cut a deal with the devil."

Suddenly, there were more men.

She didn't know exactly where they'd come from, but she, Colm, and Brogan had gone from a wide-open space to a crowd in a heartbeat.

Swallowing her panic, she searched for Gideon, but he was already making his way over.

A guard stepped in front of him.

Gideon raised a hand, clamped it onto the guard's face, shoved him to the ground, and stepped over the guard's defeated body without missing a beat. The remaining guards drew their guns, but he didn't stop or glance at them until he was by her side.

"Are you okay, Anyssa?" he asked, staring at her as though he didn't have a weapon after a weapon readied and aimed directly at him.

Goosebumps covered her skin.

At that moment, she learned that, in many ways, her and Chris' relationship woes going public had left her feeling uncertain regarding personal safety. Before, she'd controlled what the public knew about her. After the scandal, it was like cameras had walked into her house and set up shop in the bathroom while she was on the toilet. Then, with a single "mush"

to the face, Gideon carefully started reconstructing her shield.

“Yes, I’m okay,” she said. “And we’re done. I’m ready to go.”

Colm set his “troops” at ease.

Gideon didn’t appear to care either way.

She told Colm she would follow up with him about Caitlin, all while Gideon pushed on her lower back to steer her to the front of the mansion. His hand remained glued to her until they were back inside the car and halfway down the driveway.

“Gideon,” she grabbed his forearm, breathing hard, “they could have shot you.”

If they had, she wouldn’t have gotten the chance to know him better. Had they shot him, she wouldn’t have had the opportunity to apologize for canceling their dinner, all because she was afraid of how dating again would affect Micah.

“Anyssa, my job isn’t to be worried about them shooting at me,” he said, scanning the grounds as the landscape disappeared behind them. “My job is to make sure that if they are, it’s because I’m taking those bullets for you.”

She almost whimpered.

Protection was the job of a bodyguard. Even the Secret Service took an oath to be the president’s shield in the event of an assassination attempt. However, those words leaving this man’s mouth made her forget about duties, responsibilities, and oaths.

He draped an arm around her and pulled her against his side. She didn’t fight or resist, the day catching up to her, and she anchored herself by wrapping her arms around his midsection.

“I’m sorry it had to come to that,” he said. “All those guns must have been terrifying for you, but we weren’t alone, and I wouldn’t have let anything happen to you.”

Having guns pointed at her, a civilian, was indeed terrifying, but she’d also feared for him. Maybe she didn’t want him as a bodyguard; she didn’t want him taking bullets, even if they were meant for her.

“Do you believe me?” he asked.

“I believe you,” she reassured him.

He looked down at her. “For what it’s worth, I’m happy I left Vegas.”

She lost herself in his eyes. “For what it’s worth, I’m happy you’re here.”

In Georgia.

At her side.

Wrapped in his one-armed embrace.

She wasn't sure whether there was a more mature word for having a crush on someone for adults. Because, if she wasn't mistaken, she was developing one on Gideon Medvedev.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gideon looked down at Anyssa, who'd been staring out the window since they hit the interstate, but there was little interesting about endless roads, metal guardrails, and homogenous treelines.

It felt wrong to call the man-eater sitting next to him adorable, but he couldn't help himself. It intrigued him that she could engage in a verbal clash with the head of the Irish mob, yet she transformed into something less assertive when it was just the two of them.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She didn't look his way. "Not here."

Considering their present company, he let her have the reprieve.

When they made it back to her office, it was almost seven. Traffic reentering Atlanta had been heavy as usual, and the tense silence in the car's interior cabin had only made the minutes stretch further.

As she'd held onto him the entire car ride, he kept her hand tucked inside his as they made their way to the elevators. Surprisingly, she didn't fight him, and he couldn't pinpoint precisely why the duality of her nature intrigued him the way it did.

When unnerved, people often found themselves unable to hide their vulnerable parts. She'd turned down their date, but that didn't mean she wasn't attracted to him. It didn't mean she didn't like him in some capacity outside of the promise of a casual friendship.

Then there were the more carnal parts of him. The parts that wondered which version she'd present to him in bed and whether his touch would elicit a gasp or a moan. She was both the tricked and the trickster, simultaneously biting into the forbidden fruit and encouraging a small taste of sin.

They entered her office.

She released his hand and headed for her desk, but he hooked her around the waist, turned her around, and brought her to within a few inches of his body.

“What are you about to do?”

“Get some work done,” she said.

“It’s Friday. How much of a difference will it make if you do it on Monday? It’s not like the courthouse is open.”

She chewed on the inside of her cheek.

“My point exactly,” he said. “Come on. We’re getting dinner.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“I’m going to need a better counterargument than that. That’s no more convincing than ‘because I said so.’”

Despite her arguing, she didn’t pull away. She even started smoothing the pads of her fingertips along the blazer’s fabric up near his biceps.

Had he expected to like this woman?

Definitely.

He had eyes, and she was gorgeous.

Attraction, he’d anticipated, at the bare minimum. Unfortunately for her, however, she’d messed up by being interesting. Anyssa Brandon had proverbially spat in the face of someone she knew could have her butchered if he was so inclined. Yet, she could now barely look him in the eye.

Colm didn’t scare her.

Not truly.

She might have been afraid of how Colm could harm her and her career by weaponizing whatever information he had over her, but Colm, as a man, didn’t intimidate her in the least.

He did.

There was something about him she feared, but he’d already told her he would never let her get hurt. Unfortunately, it appeared that didn’t fully translate into not being someone who would hurt her himself.

“I can’t do this with you,” she clarified.

“You *can’t* doesn’t mean you don’t *want* to,” he sent right back. “If you want to, we’re going to spend time together. If you don’t, we won’t, but don’t give me that ‘I can’t’ without something of substance to back it up.”

“Why do you want to spend time with me in the first place?”

“Because I’m attracted to you.”

“So? I’m attracted to you, but you don’t see me manhandling you.”

“You would if you could.”

She squeezed her lips together, but he knew he had her when he caught the faintest of smiles.

“So you’re attracted to me,” she prefaced. “I’m not the only pretty face you’ve encountered in Atlanta.”

He shook his head. “No, you’re not. The realtor you set us up with? Jocelyn? She’s cute.”

That had her struggling to get out of his grasp, and he only released her because she nearly bumped his zipper.

Desire permeated from her pores like Chanel No. 5. They wanted each other and were doing a poor job of pretending that wasn’t the case. So, if she came into contact with any part of his cock, she’d be pants off and face down, on her desk, the next second.

“Why are you fighting to get away from me?” he asked, feigning innocence. “You don’t want me. It shouldn’t bother you that I think she’s cute and has a nice body.”

“It doesn’t.”

The blatant lie had him holding back a grin.

“So I should ask her out then?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll have dinner with you.”

“What if I don’t want to now?”

She sent him a look, snatched her phone from her purse, tapped the screen, and then held it to her ear. “Hi Robbie, it’s Anyssa...for two, please...actually, do you have something...yes, near a window. Thank you. Fifteen minutes.”

She ended the call and went to drop her phone into her purse but missed, and he saw the injury before it happened but didn’t get to her in time.

After retrieving the phone, she went to stand and hit her head on the desk’s lip edge, the sound resonating like someone striking a gong. If they started dating and made it to six months, one of his anniversary gifts to her would be a helmet.

“If that’s the same spot you hit in the car, you might need an MRI,” he

teased. “Now, stay still and let me take a look at it.”

There were no visible injuries to her scalp, but he searched until enough time had passed for her embarrassment to wane. Then he took a step back and lifted her chin.

“I have standing reservations at my favorite restaurant,” she said. “They can have a table ready for us in fifteen minutes. Don’t ask the realtor out. Have dinner with me.”

“I’d love to. Now, are you okay?”

“My head’s fine, but my pride could use a bandage.”

“Want me to kiss it and make it better?”

She nodded, faking a pout, so he bent and pressed his lips to her hair before leaning back again.

“Better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll give you a lollipop next time for being such a good girl.”

They were meant to be innocent words. Yet, he vividly saw his cock sliding between her lips, the sensitive tip gracing the back of her throat. Anyssa’s pupils grew larger than quarters, and he didn’t know what image came to mind for her, but he could tell it was just as illicit.

They separated, and he motioned for her to walk ahead of him.

On the way to the elevator, he kept his eyes glued to the back of her head. If he looked down, they would never make it to the restaurant, and he needed to find out what Colm had over her to make sure that when he and Pavel made their move, Colm couldn’t use his leverage to put her in harm’s way.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Okay, Anyssa. Tell me what I want to know.”

Anyssa looked at him, part of her face obscured by the second glass of Pinot Grigio she brought to her lips. He’d ordered water to go with his New York Strip, and she’d barely taken a bite of her seared scallops and risotto, more concerned with how much wine she could fill herself with.

She set the glass on the tabletop. “What do you already know? That way, I’m not giving you extra information.”

“I know that Colm O’Sullivan is the head of one of the largest crime families on this side of the country,” he said. “His particular segment originated in Newry, a small city in Northern Ireland that sits on the River Clanrye, and that’s located about forty miles south of Belfast. Colm’s grandfather, Patrick O’Sullivan, was the originator of the *Tuath Dé* crime family. Tuath comes from the Celtic word for ‘tribe’ while ‘dé’ is derived from the Celtic word for ‘god’ or ‘spiritual being.’ Initially, they left Northern Ireland and settled in Boston, but competition among the different mob factions in the area forced them to relocate further south, where there’d been little to no presence of the Irish mob at the time.”

Their server walked by, wine bottle poised, but he waved them away. Unless she ate more of her food, she’d be cut off from any more alcohol for the rest of the night. Getting drunk wasn’t the answer to what had happened in Athens. She needed an ear and a shoulder, and he had two of each.

She cocked her head to the side. “That’s more than I expected.”

“Anyssa, me and Volk aren’t going into business blind. We know who the major players on this side of the country are. Now, how’d you get tied up with Colm O’Sullivan?”

“Going into business?” she asked. “What does that mean? Are you two establishing your own ethnically diverse mafia or something?”

“We’re a private security firm.”

She took a bite of her food and chewed for nearly as long as he’d lived in the United States.

“He did me a favor,” she said.

“Did you know who he was at the time?”

“Yes and no. I didn’t believe in the mafia back then. I thought all that mess died in the sixties. I’d heard he was connected to a crime family, but I couldn’t find any evidence of it. I still can’t. Not publicly, at least.”

The unease that had been docked his chest dissolved when she took another bite.

“There were these boys,” she began. “All teens, all with promising futures. One of their teachers was sexually assaulted and murdered, and all the evidence pointed the finger at them.”

“Did they do it?” he asked, reaching for his fork.

“Before I got involved, I thought it seemed pretty damning. Then their public defender filed a motion to remove himself from the case. One of the boys’ mothers made a plea on social media, which went viral. That’s how it was brought to my attention. I contacted the family, and they hired me pro bono.”

“Why’d you take the case even though it seemed pretty open and shut?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I wasn’t looking for an acquittal. I was looking to at least get them out of prison at some point. Murder and sexual battery aren’t exactly probation offenses, you know? But then I got the case information, and it quickly became evident that something was wrong.”

The server came back around, again waving the bottle of wine. He shot them a look, and they promised to return with water.

“The witness was grossly unreliable. The kids had alibis. The police confessions, which were taped, were clearly coerced, but the department had a history of picking and choosing the segments they released.”

“Was there DNA?”

“Also unreliable. I mean, I had everything reviewed and confirmed by independent sources. Yet, motion after motion went into the shredder bin. These kids were about to spend the rest of their lives in jail because they ‘looked’ guilty or came from crime-ridden neighborhoods. Two are black, one white, and the last one had recently moved from Cartagena with his

family. All the families were poor with siblings and parents who treated prison like a revolving door.”

“And how did O’Sullivan help?”

She sighed. “The case got huge. I mean, *huge*. You had politicians weighing in on Twitter, actors creating hashtags. Yet, no matter which direction I turned or how much evidence I presented, those boys were going to jail. I love my career because I can prove my arguments. I can back them up. They’re not arguments based on feelings that can easily be refuted. But it wasn’t working, Gideon. The right way, the *just* way, wasn’t working. Enter Colm, who approached me while I was alone going over the case until I got double vision.”

“What’d he offer you?” he asked. “Stronger evidence?”

She took a few more bites, and he patiently waited for her to continue. When he and Pavel first discovered her connection to Colm, they’d had theories about what it could be. They’d guessed Colm might have helped her on a case in some way, but they didn’t imagine it would be the most notorious one of her career. They’d assumed she won using her legal expertise, but no amount of knowledge could defeat corruption unless the knowledge was of the corruption itself.

“Strong evidence and proof that someone else was responsible,” she continued. “But that ‘someone else’ was an officer. With how big the case got, I didn’t trust that the DA’s office wouldn’t bury it. I’m not sure what Colm did, but the officer committed suicide and left a note, along with the evidence that exonerated the boys. We released the evidence, and several people either resigned or lost their jobs.”

Gideon popped the last piece of steak into his mouth and leaned back, studying her. Before he explained what Colm did, he wanted to know something else.

“Do you regret getting O’Sullivan’s help?”

“I—”

“Take that last bite first.”

She shook her head, cleaned her plate, and motioned to it like a game show model presenting the winning prize.

“Short answer, no,” she said. “I don’t regret taking his help because of the boys. Regardless of what I owe him, I would do it all over again. I wasn’t using justice to fight injustice. I had to combat corruption, which required getting down in the mud and wrestling with some pigs. Beating them on their

own turf.”

Her reaction to Pavel being in the Bratva had been the tipping-off point for Pavel’s further investigation into her background. This wasn’t exactly an irrational human being sitting across from him, but rather than have a conversation with Zaraia, she’d *irrationally* kidnapped her sister. That intense of an emotional response often indicated a fear based on familiarity.

“That’s noble,” he said. “I can respect that.”

“Plus, Colm said that if I get the case tossed out before a trial, my debt’s cleared.”

“You know that’s a lie, right?”

She did. Still, he kicked himself for sticking a safety pin in her bubble of hope, no matter how small it had been.

“And the officer didn’t commit suicide,” he added, figuring he might as well tell her everything. “You’d think that O’Sullivan sent one of his enforcers to wrangle the officer into confessing. Then, when the officer refused, they forced him to write the note and kill himself. But, regardless of how we present ourselves on the outside, morals and ethics work differently when you’re part of a criminal organization. I guarantee the officer willingly agreed to turn himself in, but they weren’t there for cooperation. They’d gone for blood.”

“But wouldn’t an autopsy show signs of torture?” she asked. “Because they did an autopsy, and they found injuries consistent with the initial police report of self-harm.”

“O’Sullivan has people in the police department and the medical examiner’s office.”

“Then why not use them to get himself out of this mess?” she argued. “Why go through any of this?”

“Maybe,” Gideon shrugged, “those who got him into this mess aren’t people he can control. Maybe they’re after him for reasons unrelated to the murders. It’s also possible that O’Sullivan’s camp didn’t use obvious means of torture. Only some of the Bratva’s tactics were more on the overtly brutal side. For instance, there’s chemical castration for sleeping with someone’s wife, and I don’t mean pills.”

Her eyes opened so wide, he waited for her eyelashes to touch her eyebrows.

“There’s also force-feeding the person rat poison if they found out you were a snitch,” he went on. “And a system where you’re hung from the neck,

and the box you're standing on falls at random intervals, though not enough to choke you. Most times, the torture of not knowing when the big fall would happen would be enough to drive them crazy."

"And the other tactics?" she asked. "The ones not on the brutal side?"

"They were still brutal, don't get me wrong. They just weren't brute-force brutal. That could mean injecting them with drugs to keep them awake for days, administering a new dose right on the cusp of sleep. Placing them in a room where a gun fires at random intervals, moving like that one old computer game with the ball and the paddles. There's also Volk's favorite—Russian roulette with the revolver pointed at a loved one. The difference is, all the chambers are loaded."

She sucked in a breath, and her hand went to her throat.

"Then there's the bait station."

"Stop." She held out an arm. "I'm not sure I'm ready to hear about that one. I think I'm good on torture techniques for the next decade."

"All I'll say is this," he leaned forward, "you're important to people I call family. That means you're important to me."

"You keep saying that, but Pavel and I—"

"I've never met someone Volk didn't like because they never live long enough for anyone to meet them. Volk isn't playful. Volk isn't kind. Volk isn't thoughtful. The man you see, know, and interact with is that way because he cares about you. Zaraia would be down a sister if he didn't like you."

It had almost come to that, but he wouldn't let her in on that piece of information. Kidnapping Zaraia had practically been the straw that broke the camel's back, but it was also the moment Pavel had come to respect his sister-in-law. Of course, Pavel hadn't said so, but he'd known *the* Volk long enough to read between the lines.

"Are you like that?" she asked. "Unkind, not playful, and not thoughtful?"

"Yes."

"You're kind, playful, and thoughtful to me and my kids."

"Which should tell you everything you need to know about how I see you and your kids."

She reached for her wine glass, saw it was empty, and went for the water instead. Their gazes remained connected as she brought it to her lips, and he was surprised she didn't chip a tooth or somehow shatter it, cutting off her

pinky with a wayward shard.

“Speaking of kids,” she began, “I need to call and check on them. Chris was out of town last week, so they’re with him this weekend.”

She searched through her purse.

“It’s in the truck,” he said. “You left it on the seat.”

“Are you sure Pavel won’t be upset you still have his truck this late?” she asked, rising from her chair. “Zaraia said he’s got over twenty pictures of it on his phone.”

“There are over twenty pictures of it on mine too. He sends them all.”

“I’ll be right back, okay?” She smiled. “Don’t go anywhere. Despite all the torture talk, I’m enjoying myself with you.”

“Now, don’t you regret canceling the first time?” he teased.

“Yes, I do, actually,” she said. “But I’m glad we got another chance. Now, stay right here. I’ll be back.”

He returned the smile. “Of course, your Highness.”

* * *

The restaurant had a dessert menu, but he pulled out his phone and searched for somewhere else where they could find something sweet. Something walkable so they could chat on the way there.

The closest thing he found was a nearby hotel with several dining options. If she was interested, they could share a slice of cake. Since meeting her, he’d relaxed his “no sweets” policy a bit, but he didn’t regret it, and his body didn’t explode as he’d pictured it in his mind. Plus, cake or pie would give him the opportunity to watch a fork slide between her lips.

A clap of thunder roared outside. Seconds later, heavy sheets of rain battered the roof. He turned to look out the window and spotted a ball of clothing on the sidewalk. The ball of clothing looked familiar—cream blazer, white pants, nude pumps.

A man ran up to the distorted form, positioned an umbrella above its head, and squatted beside it. As the man’s head bobbed, no doubt asking the ball of clothing why she was sitting in the middle of the rain, Gideon left the table, found the server, and handed them the credit card. Then he let them know he would be back before heading outside.

“She’s fine,” he called out. “She’s mine.”

The man looked over his shoulder, then up. Whatever he'd planned to say never made it out of his mouth, and he offered an apology and left, looking back until he rounded the corner at the end of the block.

Gideon tried to pull Anyssa to her feet, but she didn't budge.

"I'm stuck," she said, voice muffled.

"Stuck?" He crouched beside her. "Stuck how?"

Then he realized what stuck meant, and there had to be some mythical god of revenge this woman had pissed off at one point. Somehow, she'd gotten one of her arms through a decorative border separating the curb from the street. Usually, she would have been able to pull it free on her own, but she'd gotten it trapped in two places.

"How?" He examined her predicament while sheets of rain drenched their clothing. "Sweetheart, *how* did you accomplish this?"

"A kid on a skateboard," she said. "He was passing by. He said, 'on your left,' which, for some reason, made me move to the left. He swerved. I swerved. I stumbled. And boom."

He wriggled her arm.

She sucked in a breath.

Getting her free would come with some degree of pain, so he distracted her with conversation.

"Are you usually this clumsy?"

"Never," she said, her head bowed and her face hidden. "At least, I haven't been for a long time."

"What's a long time?"

"Colfayette, Mississippi. I left when I was eighteen, and I didn't go back until my mother died."

"Zaraia told me about that. I'm sorry. That must have been difficult for you."

"It was expected if I'm being hon—" She sucked in another breath, followed by a twitch of pain. "If I'm being honest."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know if I can get you out without it hurting."

"Do what you must."

"I'll try to be as gentle as possible," he promised. "Now, tell me more about Mississippi. You were awkward?"

"And shy," she added. "And skinny. I had zero confidence, which didn't help in a high school with one hundred students. Everyone knew each other. Whatever persona you adopted freshman year, unless you had a major change

or glow up, you were that all four years.”

“Glow up?”

“Like...ugly duckling to swan. Or *Pygmalion*.”

“Ah, I understand. Sounds a lot like my secondary school.”

“You’re from a small town too?”

“Technically. I’m from rural Obukhiv.”

“Where’s that?”

“South of Kyiv.”

“Kyiv? You’re from Ukraine?”

“Yes.” The next pull would be painful, so he took a moment before he tugged again. “Why’d you bring up high school? Were you bullied?”

“They had a nickname for me. Clumsy Anyssa.”

“Not the brightest minds of the nation, I gather?”

She laughed. “I guess not—*oh my god*.”

“Shit, are you okay? That one was bad. I felt it.”

“It’s okay.” She raised her head and looked his way. “I’m okay.”

Without stopping to think, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead before returning to his task. The most significant injury in his thigh was starting to scream out in protest, but he wouldn’t get up until they could both stand.

“So you were clumsy,” he said.

“Because I was so anxious. Usually, my clumsiness was the result of either trying to do too much or pretending something didn’t affect me as much as it actually did. For instance, sophomore year, I started noticing boys. I’d get so flustered around them that a few times, I threw up in the middle of a conversation. Junior year, I started wearing heels—huge mistake. Twisted my ankle on the second day of school. I tried out for cheerleading and made the squad, but during our first home game, a runaway basketball hit me in the head and knocked me the fuck out.”

A laugh snuck out.

Right after, he apologized.

“Don’t apologize,” she reassured him. “It’s funny now. Back then, not so much, but I laugh whenever I think about it. Because of that, when I went to Spelman, I was hell-bent on leaving all that behind me. I took public speaking classes, joined a sorority where my sorors taught me how to walk in heels, and started dressing differently. No one at Spelman would have ever guessed I used to be—”

“Clumsy Anyssa,” he finished.

“Exact—*fuck!*”

“You’re out. You’re out. I’ve got you.”

He helped her to her feet.

Although lions and wolves poured from the sky—these pellets were too large to be domesticated animals—she looked up at him. He cupped her face with both hands and used his thumbs to swipe rainwater from her eyebrows.

“Now, I’m a feared criminal defense attorney,” she said. “Around you, though? I revert.”

“Around you,” he traced the arch of one brow, “I can’t find the will to shut up. It’s like I *have* to say something to you. I have to hear your voice.”

“You like my voice?”

“I do.”

“I like yours too. Love it, actually.”

He stared down into her eyes, getting lost for several moments in the way she looked, face soaked and staring up at him like she’d stand in the rain with him for hours.

“Look at you,” he said.

“How bad is it?”

“Cute. So cute.”

They had to look odd, standing in the rain and staring at each other, but he wouldn’t have cared even if they’d had an audience of fifty.

“Cobras aren’t supposed to be cute.”

“Says who?” His thumb dipped to the center of her bottom lip. “You can be beautiful and feared. I mean, look at the Venus flytrap. Its beauty draws its prey.”

“Is that what’s happening?” she asked. “Is your beauty the reason I feel drawn to you?”

“My beauty?”

“Gideon, you’re so damn fine. I’m helplessly attracted to you with that voice, those eyes, the way you joke around with the kids, your b—”

He’d timed the kiss perfectly, bending and catching her with her mouth closed to first feel the pressure of her lips against his.

She slid her hands under his arms until she’d anchored herself using his shoulders. Then she opened her mouth, and every thought he had about being gentle was carried away with a gust of the thick, muggy wind.

The raindrops had chilled her lips, but they warmed almost immediately.

Then they grew hot, and when her tongue flicked against his, he pulled her closer until he crushed her to his body.

He should have warned her.

Mistake, Anyssa, his thoughts screamed at her. Mistake. Don't let this man take you. Don't let this man have you.

But it was too late.

He gripped her hair. Whenever he angled his head to deepen the kiss, she mirrored him with a tilt of her neck. The heavy rain muffled the sounds around them, but he felt when she moaned, felt the air expel from her nostrils and warm the area beneath his.

She started to pull away.

Reluctantly, he let her, nibbling on and licking salty raindrops from her bottom lip. They came apart—for him, in more ways than one—and separated, leaving only a few inches between them.

He stared at her mouth. “Wow.”

“That’s the part you’re not supposed to say out loud,” she said, her voice raspy. “You’re not supposed to say how amazing that was and how much you want to do it again.”

Something caught his eye. For stealing his attention from Anyssa’s face, he wanted to shoot it, but it was their server waving from the restaurant window.

“Head back to the truck.” He dropped a quick peck on her mouth and groaned when she tried to deepen it, knowing he wouldn’t be able to right then. “I’ll finish up inside. Did you want any dessert? I think you deserve something after this.”

“I thought that kiss was my dessert?”

He closed his eyes. “You’re definitely sweet enough.”

And he was confident, now more than ever, that she was sweet in more places than her mouth. Sweet in places he would sample with his. At the end of the day, he wanted this woman to ride his face like a saddle.

“A slice of butter cake might cheer me up,” she suggested. “And are you sure Pavel won’t be upset we got into his truck all wet?”

“How about this?” His eyes popped open, ending a mental reel of Anyssa rolling her hips, his tongue inside her. “I’ll take his wrath for you.”

“I’ve never had someone take his wrath for me.”

“Not even Zaraia?”

“She’s...hypnotized.”

“By what?” He shook his head. “Know what? Don’t tell me. Head to the truck. I’ll be there shortly. Is there somewhere we can dry off in your office?”

“I didn’t drive to work, so I have no need to head back. We can dry off at my place.”

“Are you...sure?” With his eyes, he asked her whether she thought it was a good idea for them to head back to her place after a kiss like that.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m sure.”

He released her. “Okay. I’ll be right back, okay? Don’t go anywhere. At least, don’t go anywhere but the truck.”

“Hurry back.”

“Oh, I will.” He stole one more kiss. “I will.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

His grandfather had often warned him to be careful about judging a person's success based solely on their possessions. They'd lived on a farm in a rural part of Obukhiv, and their house had been more cozy and comfortable than ostentatious.

It had been a detached two-story home, and the one he remembered most, with its compact living room centered around a wood-burning fireplace. Family time had been important to his grandparents, so he and Symon ate dinner with them every night at the dinner table. Then, after dinner, they hung out in the living room, listening to stories or watching television shows.

As children, they'd complained.

While their friends had spent their evenings playing video games on consoles and their computers or getting into trouble vandalizing the Lenin monument in the middle of the city, they'd had to stay inside "with old people." Now, he wished he could go back to those evenings with those "old people."

These days, he wasn't sure what any of it looked like. Though concentrated on the outskirts of Ukraine, the war continued to affect the entire country. It had been a slap to his grandparents' faces, leaving to join the Russian mafia, but Yuri had given them no choice. The ultimatum had been to either send the oldest Medvedev to join the Bratva, tarnishing his grandfather's prideful legacy, or all four of them would be assassinated.

A year after he left for the Bratva, Symon left Obukhiv to attend university in the U.K. Five years later, their grandparents died six months apart. Though he no longer had any family there, Ukraine was and would always be the epicenter of his cultural identity.

However, even though his grandfather had warned him not to determine a person's success based on their possessions, Anyssa's place had to be an outlier.

No wonder they called her a queen.

This place was a palace.

But unlike Colm's place, which had left it feeling cold and impersonal, Anyssa's house had warmth. It had pictures of Micah and Jordan at various life stages hanging on the walls. An action figure hid behind a porcelain lamp base, the Hulk peeking through the base's opening like the home's unofficial guardian.

A blanket lay crumpled on the living room sofa. A pile of mail sat in a basket on a table in the entryway. The ceilings were so high, they made him feel like he was Jordan's height, but the openness didn't detract from its lived-in feel.

Then there was the kitchen.

It was a kitchen he would have a field day in, and it was the room that looked like it was the least used. Pavel and Zaraia had a nice kitchen, but it was obvious that home-cooked meals were regularly prepared there. Anyssa's kitchen looked like one someone would find online and assume it was an actual home when it was instead a model housed in a studio somewhere.

For a split second, he felt intimidated.

Right after, he told himself it was ridiculous to feel that way. They'd shared a kiss in the rain. That didn't mean their future included them moving in together. The fact that he'd thought, even for that split second, about whether it would be selfish to ask her to walk away from all this to live with him, was insane.

He removed his shoes and dress socks in the entryway to avoid wetting the finish on the wide plank wooden floor. Meanwhile, Anyssa kicked off her heels and dropped her purse and work satchel on the entryway table next to the basket.

"So, the guest bath is the third door on the left," she said, pointing to the hallway opening. "There should be towels in there. The housekeepers usually keep towels in there, anyway. Sorry the place is such a mess. They don't come until Monday."

He looked around.

What mess?

“This,” she held up the package she’d grabbed from the front stoop, “is a change of clothes.”

“For who?” he asked.

She tipped the package in his direction. “For you. It’s a long story, but they’ll fit.”

“Are they your ex-husband’s clothes?”

He would rather walk around naked.

“You think Chris’ clothes would be able to fit you?” She snorted. “Not a chance. They’re from Jonathan. It’s...he...it’s a joke. He said he would send an extra outfit to my house in the event you would need it later.”

“And why would I need clothes later? In case we got caught in the rain outside of a restaurant?”

“Exactly. No other reason.” She extended the package toward him. “Feel free to take a shower if you want. There should be washcloths and soap and stuff.”

Before taking it, he stepped out of the entryway.

He wasn’t exactly superstitious, and many of those in his generation and beyond didn’t pay much mind to their parents’ and grandparents’ superstitions. Still, they also tried not to break them, and his grandparents never did anything in doorways or entryways out of apprehension toward bringing bad luck to themselves or their guests.

“Well, I appreciate him thinking ahead,” he said. “You know, about the rain. One would think I would have needed extra clothes because we realized we were very attracted to one another and came back here to fuck each other’s brains out.”

It was one of his favorite American sayings. For obvious reasons.

She took her bottom lip hostage between her teeth. With her top molded to her body, he could see her nipples pushing against the fabric, and there was something about the thought of sucking on them while dampened by salty rainwater.

She closed her eyes. “You’re so good at this.”

“At what?”

“Seduction.”

He reached for her hand, trapped her fingers between his, and pulled her so close, if she exhaled deeply enough, their wet, wrinkled clothes would touch.

“Open your eyes.”

She let a few heartbeats pass before she looked up at him.

“I don’t mean to seduce you,” he whispered.

“Yes, you do.”

“You’re right. Yes, I do.”

Streaked mascara around her eyes made her look like a sexy raccoon. The rain had robbed her hair of nearly all of its sleekness, the strands curling in some parts and wavy in others. It had also turned the whites of her eyes a light shade of red and washed most of the color off her lips.

If he told her, she would make a mad dash for the nearest reflective surface. Because he loved looking at her like this, messy, imperfect, and unguarded, he would keep his mouth shut.

“Did you have fun tonight?” she asked.

“You mean on our date? Yes, I had fun. Did you?”

He waited for her to correct him, to say it wasn’t a date but a casual outing between friends despite him now possessing a mental map of the inside of her mouth. Instead, as he stroked the side of her hand, she ran her index finger along his.

“I did have fun,” she said. “On our date.”

“I’d like to take you out again. Would you like that?”

“I would.”

The superstition was to never hand things over in entryways; he didn’t remember hearing anything about not propping someone up against an entryway wall.

There was nothing about not pulling down her top and alternating between sucking on her lips and her breasts while her nipples pebbled in his mouth. Then, when he had her good and soaked all the way through, he would slide his fingers inside her, stroking and torturing those nipples with bites, licks, and sucks until she came all over his hand, wrist, and down his forearm.

“I have a question,” she said, and he smiled at her attempt to delay the inevitable—that he would kiss her again. “You left Moscow about three years ago, yet you sound like you grew up in America. Certain words or phrases you use tell me English probably wasn’t your first language, but it’s not that often.”

“A speaking coach.” He raised their joined hands to his lips and pressed one kiss, then another, against the back of hers. “It was imperative that I learned how to suppress my accent while also mastering the English

language. While I was in recovery, we'd practice ten to twelve hours a day."

"Recovery from what?"

"Bratva-related injury."

"Is that why you left Moscow?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you okay now?"

He heard the question, but it took his brain a while to catch up to form a response. It was too busy trying to remind him that her lips were not her eyes on one side and attempting to keep his heart at a safe pace on the other.

"Gideon?"

"How am I so into you? I mean, yes, you're a stunning woman, but," he set her palm flat on his chest, "do you feel that?"

She took a breath, held it, and it shook as she exhaled. "Yes."

"You're a little odd, but I love that about you. That you're that way with me. I'm so into you, it's like a mind fuck."

"Is that why your heart's racing?" she asked. "Because you realize that... we are...in agreement with the concept of mutual attrac—"

"Good heavens, woman."

"Because we like each other," she blurted out. "We like being around each other."

"That's a good guess, but I think it's also racing because I want to kiss you again, so fucking bad, and never stop. Yet, I'm hesitating."

"Because you know I'm afraid of men like you."

"There's no other man like me," he asserted, and she rewarded him with an eye roll. "But yes, and I'd like to know why."

"Everything you're saying, I love hearing it," she confessed. "I do. It makes me feel happy and giddy and hopeful."

Raw emotional honesty—precisely what he'd hoped to get from her.

"But it's possible that you're saying these things because they're what I want to hear. And you think I'll sleep with you if you tell me what I want to hear."

He frowned. "That's not what I'm doing."

"Which is exactly how I would expect you to respond to that."

"Do I want to sleep with you? Yes. Am I thinking about taking you back to your room, stripping you naked, and making love to every square inch of your body? Definitely. But I want to go out with you again. I was even thinking about asking you to come with me when I look at houses. Anyssa, I

really do like you. So many things in my life have been challenging these past few years, then I run into you, and it feels like luck. Being around you feels...natural. Special, in a way, because you're yourself with me. A version of yourself I feel like not just anyone gets. Why wouldn't that make my heart beat like this?"

She wanted to trust him; he felt it vibrating from her skin and read it all over her face. However, her reluctance had to be related to her ex-husband. A person didn't go from being married for close to a decade to having this level of doubt and uncertainty about relationships unless something significant had split them apart.

"What caused your divorce?" he asked. "Did your ex-husband cheat? Is that what happened?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"More than once?"

"More than a dozen times. The entire thing went public because one of them was an up-and-coming female actor."

"How'd you shield yourself from the embarrassment?"

"I didn't." She looked away, giving her attention to the front door. "I had to go through it. He got dragged, yes, but so did I."

He tried using context clues to figure out what "dragged" meant but fell short. "What does that mean, dragged?"

"To be publicly humiliated."

"You were too? Why? You didn't cheat."

"But I married a gorgeous man. Some people think men who look like Chris, and who look like," she motioned to him, "you are so highly coveted, it's impossible for them to stay faithful. Thinking that Chris wouldn't stray, especially after his net worth hit nine figures, made me stupid in some people's eyes."

"Some people" likely included her; however, she was the furthest thing from stupid. Trusting someone, especially after vows were exchanged, wasn't foolish. Also, if Chris had remained faithful for many years of their relationship, it was logical that she'd relied on him to remain that way. If not, at least tell her when something had changed.

"Did Chris have all of that money when you first met?"

Hopefully, he and Chris Carmichael wouldn't have to share the same air anytime soon. This was a man who'd stalked Zaraia and now had done so much damage to Anyssa's heart, it was making it difficult for him to have the

first woman he'd genuinely wanted in ages. A woman who wanted him the same way.

"No, I married him because I loved him."

"And not only did he betray you, but he also brought humiliation along for the ride," he finished. "So, believing that I feel the way I say I do is like trusting me, and you don't know if you can do that."

"I *can't* do that," she said. "Not right now. It's not that I don't think you're a gorgeous human being who's fun, funny, and caring enough to distract me from my pain while trying to free me from the evil curb fence."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"But I can't explain the magnitude of what you're asking me to do."

"Anyssa, I'm not like that."

"And I hear you, but—"

"I'll always be honest with you."

An invisible thumb and forefinger, tipped with saliva, outed the flame that had built between them. She gently pulled away from his grasp as though he'd suddenly started channeling electricity, and then she put up a wall even a man his size could only dream about climbing over.

"I'm going to take a shower," she said, walking backward to the hallway. "I'll see you in a bit. I hope the clothes fit."

Then she was gone, leaving him standing there as if he'd spoken the words to release the evil prophesied to bring about the end of the world.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Anyssa tried Zaraia's phone a second time, her other ear pressed against her bedroom door, but the call went to voicemail.

On the other side of the door, she heard Gideon in the kitchen removing plates and utensils from the cabinets. More than anything, she wanted to believe him, but the last good-looking man to make her heart leap out of her chest had then taken a chainsaw to it.

Still, what if he was different?

It was what had gone through her mind as she'd stood staring at herself in the bathroom mirror. Technically, *why didn't he tell me I looked like this* first ran through her mind, but during her shower and as she'd dried and dressed and tossed on a head scarf, she'd wondered whether he might be someone worth trusting.

The way she wanted to know more about where he grew up, how he grew up, his family, his time in the Bratva and his time after—*everything*—grew every minute they spent together.

However, would he wake up ten years from now, look at her, and decide she wasn't enough? Would she have to rely on memories like tonight to remind herself that, once upon a time, she'd been exactly what he wanted?

"Anyssa?" His smooth, deep, sexy-as-sin voice carried through the wood. "I'm going to eat all this cake by myself."

She opened the door and peered out. "Cake?"

"The butter cake."

She joined him in the kitchen but kept the kitchen island between them. With how late it was, the responsible thing would have been to urge him to finish up and head home. Also, Pavel didn't play around when it came to that

truck.

But it wasn't *that* late.

It wasn't even Micah and Jordan's bedtime yet.

"Nah, I'm eating some of that cake," she said.

He cocked his head to the side. "Oh? Make an argument for it, then. Give me your best offer."

"Two forks, one sofa, and cuddling."

"One fork."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Two forks and ten to fifteen minutes of cuddling."

"Thirty to sixty," he countered. "It'll take all of seven minutes for us to polish off this cake. Then there's a series I want to introduce you to, which will take three minutes to set up. So that's ten minutes you're not in my arms. No deal."

For a long time, she'd wished for a man like this. One who didn't balk at the idea of cuddling or could openly admit that he wanted her in ways that didn't solely involve penetration. What she hadn't expected was for her insides to tie themselves into a Gordian knot each time he openly told her what he wanted or how he felt.

"Fine, I'll accept your plea," she conceded. "Thirty to sixty minutes. Sixty if it feels nice, but we'll drop it to thirty if we get too warm being wrapped up in each other."

"If we get too warm, we'll drop the air conditioner," he said.

"What if I go the other way and get too cold?"

"Then I'll hold you closer."

She stared at him.

He didn't buckle under her scrutiny.

"What about mouth action?" she asked, regretting the question immediately.

"Yes."

"Aren't you going to ask me where?"

"No."

"Kissing, I mean," she clarified with a laugh. "I don't know why I didn't just say that. If you get cuddling, I get to kiss you again."

He tapped his chest. "It's like an Olympic track-and-field meet behind my ribcage right now."

"So we're in agreement?"

He nodded. “We are.”

They sat on the sofa, the plate balancing on a pillow between them. He handed her a fork and allowed her the first slice, studying every bit of her cutting a portion and bringing it to her mouth. After lifting up and tugging on his pants, he cut a piece with his left hand and queued up the “series” with his right.

“What is this?” she asked, cutting another piece.

He started the first episode of the first season, set down the remote, and settled into the sofa. “It’s an Eastern European drama. At first, only me and Eija watched it, but she got Dom to start. Dom then got Zaraia hooked, and we finally got Volk locked in.”

“Is this that...what’d Eija say it was called?”

“*Lozh’, kotoruyu my govorim, kogda yedim krasnyye apel’siny.*”

She balanced the fork tines on her bottom lip. “Say what, now?”

“The Lies We Tell While Eating Blood Oranges,” he translated. “In Ukraine, it’s *Brekhnya, yaku my hovorymo, koly yimo chervoni apel’syny.*”

“Gotta tell you, Gideon. Those sound exactly the same.”

He laughed. “The languages have the same origin, so there’s crossover. Plus, a lot of Ukrainians also speak Russian.”

“Wait? The Lies We Tell While Eating Blood Oranges?”

“The blood orange is a metaphor.”

“Dom said it was a ridiculous drama.”

“That he watches like religion.”

She pointed her fork at him. “That’s one.”

He looked over at her, and she saw him sitting across from her, them sharing a plate of dessert, on many more nights just like this one.

“One what?” he asked.

“Of the things you say that make me know you’re new to the language,” she explained. “We’d say that Dom watches the show ‘religiously.’”

“Is it different?”

“Not really. Nuances, really.”

A crashing noise made her turn to the TV. The opening scene showed a car hanging from the edge of a cliff and a woman dangling from the open passenger door. The camera panned to the woman’s legs, which were lined with trickles of blood.

Her jaw dropped. “No...”

Gideon nodded. “Yes.”

A paramedic yelled down to the woman, ignoring the man in the driver's seat slumped against the steering wheel—a man with a bullet wound in the back of his head.

“It’s crowning!” the woman called up to the paramedic. “The baby’s coming!”

“Gideon,” she gripped his forearm, “no...”

Gideon looked over. “And this is only the beginning, sweetheart.”

* * *

By the middle of the first episode, they’d finished the cake, moved the pillow, and she tossed her legs over his while he caressed her calves. By the end of the second episode, they were lying on their sides on the sofa.

A blanket covered their bodies, and she’d given in by dropping the thermostat to remain spooned against him, his fingers tracing her side. Yet, the show was so good, she barely noticed him touching her, but it was harder to ignore whenever his lips connected with the back of her silk-covered head.

“He’s gotta be a spy,” she said, flicking her fingers at the TV. “Is he?”

Gideon laughed, his lips pressed against her. “I’m not telling you.”

“Just this once.”

“Nope.”

She paused the episode and faced him. He held her in place with a hand on her lower back as if expecting her to roll right off the sofa. Given the state of current events, she didn’t blame him for the added security.

His eyes were closed to half-lids, drowsy and seductive, and there was a sleepy smile on his face. But their eye contact only lasted a moment before he was looking at her mouth for the umpteenth time since he showed up at her office.

“He has to be a spy,” she insisted. “There’s no other way he would have been able to get inside that room.”

He squinted one eye. “Well, there is one other way.”

“So he’s not a spy?”

“You are nothing if not persistent.”

The tip of one of his fingers slid under her shirt, cautiously brushing her skin. Then he returned to gazing into her eyes as if trying to determine whether she would lean into his touch or punch him in the eye.

Once more, her thoughts suggested that she try to trust him. To release one finger from the ledge she'd held onto so firmly for the last five years.

It *had* been an entire five years.

Plus, Pavel was particular about the company he kept. As much as she didn't like admitting it, and quite possibly never would out loud, their bad start was her fault. She was the one who went apeshit and kidnapped her sister because of her own mafia woes.

Next, there was Dom, who was naturally charming, funny, charismatic, and an excellent spouse and father.

It made sense that they would regard Gideon as a close friend, something that became easier to understand with each passing minute.

Still, did he have to be so damn beautiful? And how were there three of them? She'd spent all her adult life in Atlanta and had never encountered a friend trifecta quite like this one.

"Am I looking at you all crazy like again?" she asked.

His laugh, though tired, only made her want to be closer to him. "No, not this time. This time, you're just looking at me, and I like you looking at me."

"What was I doing the other times?"

"I don't know. Maybe challenging me? Hiding from me?"

She snuggled closer. "Hiding? That's an interesting theory. What could I be hiding from you?"

"That I'm your type."

"You're not my type, though. Not my usual type."

"So what you're saying is, you find me so good-looking, I created a new type for you?" Rather than pat himself on the back, he tapped the middle of hers. "Go, Gideon."

She ran her fingers over the coarse hairs on his cheek.

His eyes closed.

"You're not afraid Pavel's going to be looking for his car?"

"Terrified."

"Aren't you sleepy?"

"A little bit."

"So, shouldn't you be thinking about heading back?"

"Yep."

"But you're not."

"I'm even less inclined now that you've started touching my face so sweetly."

She laughed. “Sweetly?”

“You don’t think you’re sweet?” He opened his eyes. “I think you are. I think you might have always been, but you had your heart broken.”

“It’s just a heart,” she argued.

“Which makes it worse. That wall you’ve erected?” He tapped the space below her collarbone before returning his hand to her waist. “It protects you. And I have my work cut out for me, but I don’t mind. I’m going to figure out how to undo ten years’ worth of damage in less than one.”

“Fifteen.”

“You were married for fifteen years?”

“Almost ten, but we were together since college.”

“I’m still up for the challenge.”

“Why one year?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It’s the first timeframe that came to mind.”

“This is foreign to me, if I’m being honest,” she said. “Usually, men who are this truthful and open are the ones who can’t be trusted. It’s like they know the blueprint to snake their way in only to cause further damage.”

“Anyssa, if I leave here tonight, you’ll be on my mind before I fall asleep and the first thing I think about when I wake up. I’ll wonder how you slept, what you’re doing, what your schedule’s like so we can go out again. I’ll probably look at some flowers because I’m learning that I turn into a sappy romantic when I’m into someone. But there’s no way I can show you I’m being honest if you don’t risk trusting me a little.”

Tears burned behind her eyelids.

It seemed so easy.

“Wait, what do you mean ‘if’ you leave?” She delicately smacked his shoulder. “You better take that man back his truck.”

“Will you come with me to buy a car? I’ll tell the salesperson you’re my wife and see whether they believe a guy like me could ever seduce a woman like you.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “And yes, *if* I leave. We’re adults. We have chemistry. We could wind up sleeping together.”

She gave him another smack.

No restraints were holding her back except for fear of experiencing the same level of pain or worse. Part of that fear came from how badly she wanted what she’d lost, but if she dove in too soon, she’d spend the relationship searching for clues to steel herself against potential betrayal.

“Give me,” he looked off to the side, “four weeks.”

“Four weeks for what?” she asked. “To make me fall in love with you?”

“To make you fall in *like* with me.”

“But I already like you, Gideon.”

“I know.”

“Wow. The hubris is strong with this one.”

He grinned. “Then four weeks to get you to trust me *just* enough.”

“Just enough for?”

“I want you, Anyssa,” he said, without a blink or a hitch in his voice. “I want you with me, exclusively, as my girlfriend. As mine. So date me for a month. Let me show you what dating Gideon’s like, not ‘Chris’ or ‘usual men.’ All I ask in return is one thing.”

“For me to open up my heart a little?” she asked.

“Yes. This won’t work if you don’t let me in to some degree.”

“Just the tip, then.”

He *tsked*, shaking his head. “Here I am, pouring out my heart to you, and all you’re thinking about is my tip. God, Anyssa. I’m not a piece of meat.”

She burst out laughing.

He smiled, eyes glittering.

Then her laughter died, and his smile disappeared.

They stared at each other, into each other. Her breathing had noticeably picked up in speed, and his chest pitched higher and faster beneath his shirt. In the rain, she’d wanted to kiss him, but she hadn’t expected it. With one kiss out of the way, there was nothing stopping another.

“This is what you asked for,” he said, seconds before his mouth was on hers.

She moaned, mouth opening and holding her breath until she felt the first strike of his tongue. It was hot, hotter than she’d prepared for. Until now, her only experience with his mouth had been a sloppy, perfect kiss in the cold rain.

This, however, was a different kind of sloppy. The kind of sloppy where their lips parted at the same time, and sometimes she was sucking on his, then him on hers. Then they breathed against each other, his fingers flexing and relaxing against her skin, catching their breaths before she plunged her tongue back into his mouth.

She wanted more of him, so she arched her neck as if that was enough to tell him to kiss her there.

Apparently, it was.

He kissed his way to the sensitive skin at the hollow of her throat. Needing to be closer, she tossed a leg over his hip while his fingers played with the hem of her top. She gripped the back of his arm, giving him silent permission.

Grunting, he raised the shirt.

She'd worn a bralette, and after searching for hooks, he realized there were none and dragged a strap down her shoulder, exposing a breast.

"I've been thinking about doing this since we got here," he said, then he bent his head, covered her areola with his mouth, and sucked.

"Gideon..."

The stronger he sucked, the further her back arched.

"Yes, yes, yes, baby..."

She trembled, one hand going to the back of his head to hold him in place until she heard the front door chime, followed by, "*Mama, we brought you cheesecake!*"

"Oh, shit."

She rolled off the couch, onto the floor, and scrambled to her feet while rearranging her clothing. When she looked down, Gideon was holding one of his eyes, and she realized the harshly whispered, "Oh, shit" hadn't come from her mouth. Mississippi Anyssa had struck again. Only she'd escalated to taking victims.

She started to kneel to help him, but Micah, Jordan, and their father appeared in the living room.

Micah, food container in hand, pulled up short when he spotted Gideon, Chris nearly tripping over him. Jordan raced over and hopped onto the sofa, but she caught her daughter before she could wrap her small arms around Gideon. With all that heavy petting, there was no way he wasn't sporting something heavier underneath the blanket.

Gideon sat up, the blanket bunched in his lap and his left eye tearing up. If he'd had an erection, her stabbing him in the eye had probably swiftly gotten rid of it.

"Gideon! You're here!" Jordan tossed up her arms. "Did you have a good day today? Did you see Niko? Did Niko have a good day today?"

Anyssa looked over to find Chris watching her, his right brow arched high. She shook her head, uncertain of what message she was trying to convey. Although she didn't owe him anything, much less an explanation, she didn't want him to revert to his old ways of not seeing the kids to spite

her. They needed him more than she ever would again.

“My day was pretty amazing, Jordan,” Gideon said, dabbing at his eye. “I think Niko’s was too. What about yours?”

“Good. We went to Cheesecake Factory.”

“Oh, man. Did you eat any cheesecake?”

She nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

“Did you eat a lot of cheesecake until your belly was the size of a hot-air balloon?”

Jordan fell back, giggling, and hovered her hands over her stomach. “Even bigger.”

“I’m so jealous.”

“Do you like cheesecake too, Gideon?”

“A long time ago,” he said, voice hushed, “my grandmother would make the most delicious cheesecake for Easter. Me and my brother, Symon, would sneak into the kitchen when she wasn’t looking and steal a piece. Then another. And another.”

Jordan’s eyes opened wide. “Until it was gone?”

“Yes, ma’am. But my grandmother, my Baba, she was used to sneaky kids, so after me and Symon ate all the cake, she’d get another one from a secret hiding place.”

“Did you and Symon get stomachaches?”

“The *worst*. But next Easter, we did it all over again.”

Chris cleared his throat.

Anyssa’s head snapped up from where she’d, apparently, been staring at Gideon with a smile on her face. “Chris, this is Gideon Miller,” she introduced. “He’s a friend of Zee and Pavel’s. Gideon, this is Chris Carmichael. My ex-husband.”

Chris nodded toward Gideon.

Gideon did the same.

“Pavel?” Chris asked.

“It’s his Russian name,” she quickly explained. “Paul’s the American version. Personally, I prefer Pavel.”

Jordan tried to wiggle out of her arms, but she took a seat on the other end of the sofa and held her tighter.

“What happened to your eye, Gideon?” Jordan asked. “Did you hurt it again? You hurt it on a tree branch before. Did a tree branch poke you again?”

“J, let him be,” Chris interjected.

Anyssa reached an arm out toward Micah. “Hi, sweetie. Is that for me?”

Micah watched Gideon the entire walk over, and he didn’t pull his gaze away until he was directly in front of her. “It’s cheesecake. Me, Daddy, and Jordan went to eat, and we wanted to bring something for you before we went back to Daddy’s house.”

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “That’s so thoughtful of you. Thank you.”

“Mama, why is *he* here?”

Chris leaned against a wall, arms folded, obviously also waiting for an answer.

“Gideon went to work with me today. He was my bodyguard for a meeting I went to in Athens, Georgia.”

“Why do you need a bodyguard?” Chris asked. “What’s going on?”

“It was a precaution,” Gideon said.

“Maybe let my wife answer?”

“No problem. I will, as soon as we find her.”

“But nothing was wrong,” Anyssa jumped in. “My client was far. Since Gideon’s so good at being a bodyguard, he went with me.”

“Niko told me that Gideon’s the best at being a bodyguard,” Jordan said.

Instead of sitting next to her, which would have placed him between her and Gideon, Micah perched on the chair arm.

“Niko said Uncle P’s the best,” Micah argued.

“Of course he’s gonna say that, Micah.” Jordan rolled her eyes. “Uncle P is his daddy. You’re not supposed to say somebody is better than your daddy at something.”

Anyssa looked over at Chris again, his face asking her whether she knew if Gideon was better than him at something far less innocent. Although she hadn’t experienced making love to Gideon, what they’d already shared was more passionate than anything she’d shared with Chris, including the nonsexual touches. She never knew someone wiping raindrops from her face could feel so intimate.

“Are you going to keep Mama safe again?” Jordan asked.

Micah rolled his eyes.

Chris angled his head, waiting for a response.

“I will,” Gideon said. “I made you a promise, remember?”

“And you always keep your promises,” Jordan echoed.

Gideon bowed his head.

Anyssa's phone vibrated on the coffee table, and Micah hopped down to grab it for her before returning to his perch.

"Hey, Zee," she greeted.

Zaraia yawned. "I just noticed your missed calls. Sorry, I was busy getting my back blown out."

"Come on, Zaraia."

"Is everything okay?" Zaraia asked, a smile in her voice. "And, by the way, have you seen Gideon? He's not back yet."

"He," she glanced at Gideon, "is with me."

Zaraia's tone changed. "Oooh, is he what you were calling about? Were you getting your back blown out as well? Touché, sis. Where is he now, asleep in the bed next to you?"

"Yes, that's what I was calling you about. No, my back is fine."

Zaraia paused. "But you can't talk about it right now."

"No."

"Let me guess, Chris Cross is there."

She squelched a laugh. "Yes."

"Nyss, don't let that man mess things up for you. Gideon is a sweetheart, and he's honestly into you. He keeps asking about you, trying to find out if you've been talking about him." Pavel's deep voice rumbled in the background. "By the way, tell him that if he doesn't get back with the truck before midnight, P's going to come hunting for him."

"I'll tell him," she promised.

"Okay. Call me later. Love you."

"I love you too, Zee."

She ended the call and turned to Gideon.

"Volk?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Okay." He stood. "I'll call you later about that contract for the four-week trial period."

"You'll take care of me?" she asked. "Four weeks isn't that long."

He dragged his bottom lip between his teeth. "I'll take *very* good care of you."

He collected his things, and she carried Jordan on her hip to see him off. Once the door was shut, Chris told the kids to go play in the playroom while they talked. Then, when he was ready to leave, he would call them.

Already full of enough sweets for the night, she took the cheesecake to the kitchen and placed it inside the refrigerator. Chris barely gave her enough space to close it and take a step back.

“So you’re not going to explain?” he asked.

She leaned against the refrigerator’s cool stainless steel surface. “Explain what?”

“It’s after dark, Nyssa, and from the looks of it, you were in here cuddled up with some man I’ve never seen before. A man my daughter already knows. Do you think you should have some random man around the kids without vetting it with me first?”

“Like the girlfriends you brought around the kids then swore them to secrecy?”

“That’s different. They’re women.”

“Who can be just as dangerous. Plus,” she jabbed her hand in the air, in the general direction of Spruit, “Gideon’s a friend of Pavel’s.”

“Who’s a fucking maniac.”

“You were stalking his wife.”

“I just wanted to talk to her.”

“From the bushes?”

He circled his fingers around her upper arm. “Who was he, Nyssa? Are you seeing him? Are you sleeping with him? Don’t do this to me. Please, don’t do this to me. You know how I feel about you.”

She scoffed. “Do what? Break *your* heart? *Oh, no.* I could *never.*”

“That’s different. I already told you that.”

“Whether it was just sex or not doesn’t matter. You lied to me. You humiliated me.”

“I didn’t intend for things to come out that way.”

“And if they hadn’t? If you weren’t caught, would we still be married while you fucked half of Atlanta? Maybe you would have expanded your horizons and let your dick wander into Florida or Tennessee.”

“I didn’t love them,” he insisted. “I never loved them. But you, Nyssa, I’m in love with.”

“Chris, that doesn’t matter!” She quieted her voice. She’d cringed whenever her parents fought, and she didn’t want to expose her children to the same. “That doesn’t matter. You can’t destroy someone’s trust like that and expect us to go back to having everything hunky-dory like it was when we first got together.”

“The reason I even cheated is because things *weren't* like when we first got together,” he spat. “You changed. We used to have sex all the time. Then it was like you didn't want me.”

She wrestled out of his grip and placed the kitchen island between them. “People grow and change. Love evolves. And maybe I would have had more energy to fuck you if I wasn't parenting our kids, parenting *you*, and running a law firm and a household by my damn self.”

“You could have quit once I started doing well.”

She clasped her hands in front of her face and took several cleansing breaths. “Christopher, you want to talk about me changing? You used to make me feel beautiful. You used to make me feel like a priority. You used to make me feel like your wife. But then, all of a sudden, everything I did annoyed you. *Everything*. I could barely open my mouth without you jumping down my throat.”

At one point, there'd been so much tension in the house that she'd rent a hotel for her and the kids to avoid going home and doing something to piss him off.

He never hit her—it would have been an all-out brawl if he had—but he would leave the room when she entered as if he couldn't believe she'd had the audacity to interrupt his alone time.

Eventually, she'd felt like a single parent, and she'd shamefully spent hours in bed, staring at the ceiling and crying over this SOB, trying to determine when he fell out of love with her.

“Why start sleeping with me again, then?” he asked.

“Because you're the father of my children.” All the fight left her in an instant. “You're my ex-husband. You came here talking about how you felt like you were turning into your father and failing the kids. It just... happened.”

“You're acting like it was one time.”

“You're acting like it was every night.”

He walked to the edge of the kitchen. “Nyssa, I'm not doing this with you tonight. All I know is, I better not come back here and find you cuddled up with a man in my damn house. That's fucking disrespectful, especially since we're still sleeping together.”

It was what he did best—retreat. Disappear when he realized he was losing the argument, but what else did he expect? He'd married a lawyer, and she was fucking good at her job.

“We were sleeping together,” she corrected.

“Oh, so now it’s ‘were’? Just because some big ass European dude gave you attention? Are you sure you didn’t fuck him?”

She could have had he not shown up.

“Look, Chris,” she squeezed her forehead to soothe a headache attempting to come forth, “this is your weekend with the kids. Go have fun with them.”

“I can’t take them right now,” he said, storming toward the front of the house. “I can’t do this whole ‘parenting’ thing right now.”

She followed on his heels. “Being their father isn’t a choice.”

“When they ask me why I left,” he grabbed the door handle, “make sure you tell them it’s because their mother changed. Their mother strung me along, made me think we’d be a family again, but she’s here stuffing pink dick down her throat.”

He dragged the door open, stormed out, and slammed it behind him. She punched the wooden surface and held in a scream. As if his dick wasn’t damn near pink too. And had she had “pink dick” down her throat tonight, she wouldn’t have had the energy to fight with him.

This was what she’d been afraid of, him punishing her and looping the kids into the consequences. Their divorce was an agreement that they would no longer be a couple. Nowhere in all that paperwork did it ever say he would get a pass to stop being a father.

Micah came running to the front. “Did Daddy leave?”

She unhinged her jaw. “Yeah. He...had a work emergency.”

“No, he didn’t. He left because of that guy.”

“Micah—”

“I want things to go back to how they were. And Daddy was here a lot, so I thought it would, but you keep looking at that guy all lovey-dovey and hurting Daddy’s feelings!”

Jordan came dashing into the room. “Micah, why are you yelling?”

“Shut up, Jordan.”

“Don’t tell your sister to shut up,” Anyssa warned. “And I won’t tell you again.”

Jordan rushed over to her and wrapped her arms around her legs.

“Mama, you’re ruining everything!” he all but screamed. “I don’t want Daddy to live in a different house! I don’t want to see him for only a few days! Daddy didn’t even do anything wrong. You stopped loving him, so he

had to go away.”

“I stopped loving him? Who told you that?”

“Whatever.”

“Micah...you are pushing it.”

“Daddy,” he said. “Daddy told me that. Can I go to my room now?”

Exhausted, she let him go.

He ran to his bedroom, and she waited to see whether the door slammed—angry or not, he knew they didn’t slam doors in the house—but all she heard was a low click.

Jordan looked up at her. “Daddy said we can’t be a family anymore because you don’t love him, but if you love him again, we can be a family.”

Anger unfurled inside her. The kids didn’t need to be involved in this, and she was surprised Chris had stooped this low to get them involved. She’d done her best to shelter them from all her and Chris’ bullshit, and there he was, feeding them harmful lies.

She crouched. “What do you think about what Daddy said?”

Jordan’s tiny fingers wiped tears from her eyes, and she hated that her children had seen her cry. This wasn’t the example she wanted to set for either of them. She wanted them to know her as someone who could work a courtroom with confidence, not someone who cried over the slightest inconvenience.

“Because you always love me, Mama,” Jordan said. “Even when I don’t do the best at school, or when I get mad and hit Micah, or when you tell me to pick up my toys and I don’t...you always love me. Even when we do bad stuff, you always love us.”

More tears fell, and she quickly embraced Jordan to hide the brunt of them.

“Thank you, baby.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After tucking Jordan in for the night, Anyssa checked whether Micah wanted her to tuck him in as well, but whenever she tried to talk to him, he turned away.

Resigning herself to trying to smooth the waters in the morning, she told him how much she loved him, kissed his temple, and headed for the bathroom to start her nightly routine.

As she smoothed moisturizer onto her face, Gideon's name popped up on her phone screen.

GIDEON

I made it back to Spruit.

ANYSSA

Before the clock struck 12?

GIDEON

12:14

I don't know what'll happen in the morning.

ANYSSA

I wish we had more time.

GIDEON

If we never see each other again, know that I went down with honor.

ANYSSA

::salutes::

GIDEON

Lol.

Are you okay, by the way?

ANYSSA

Yeah. Don't mind, Chris.

GIDEON

I didn't.

I'll be in the city next week to finish the commercial lease.

I want to see you.

ANYSSA

I want to see you too.

And congratulations! It's happening! Are you excited?

GIDEON

Yeah.

Really excited.

ANYSSA

You're going to do fantastic. Just don't tell Pavel I said that.

For what it's worth, I'm proud of you.

GIDEON

No promises.

And thank you.

It's worth more than you know.

By the way, I didn't get your answer about the four weeks.

Will you let me court you, your Highness?

ANYSSA

Yes. I'll let you court me, Sir Medvedev.

GIDEON

You should feel my heart.

It's going crazy right now.

Can't stop smiling, either.

Jesus, Anyssa.

I want to come back.

ANYSSA

I wish you would stop saying things like that.

GIDEON

Nope.

Just accept it.

ANYSSA

Know the last time I felt like this? It wasn't even with Chris. It was in high school with those high school hormones.

GIDEON

Felt like what?

Tell me.

ANYSSA

My stomach hurts. I can't stop thinking about you. I wish you were here with me right now, so I could kiss you again. And I think I miss you. That's crazy, right? We're in our 30s.

GIDEON

I miss you too, sweetheart.

How is it crazy?

Feelings don't die at 29.

They don't even die at 89.

ANYSSA

Do you know that Porsche racetrack?

GIDEON

I've seen it.

ANYSSA

My heart's doing laps.

Zero to sixty in three seconds.

GIDEON

Be this open with me.

Stay this open with me.

I won't hurt you.

ANYSSA

When you've dated, married, or even know of red-flag men, green flags feel deceptive. Then some men will be everything you need until he "gets" you, and then he changes.

Or he'll chase you for months. Then when he finally gets you in bed, he disappears because he's "conquered" you. To him, you were never a person. Just a challenge to boost his fragile ego.

Then there's Chris, but that's a story for another day.

It's a lot to work through.

GIDEON

I understand.

It'll take time, and I'm not going anywhere.

You're so worth it, Anyssa.

But I won't lie and say I'd be satisfied being your friend.

I'm 100% pursuing you.

You're my girl.

I'll show you why I'm worth being your man.

ANYSSA

The things you say...

Gideon, you terrify me.

GIDEON

I know.

It'll be okay.

I promise.

ANYSSA

You need a car.

If I could, I'd just come to you.

GIDEON

Getting one ASAP.

Come with me?

ANYSSA

I'd love to.

GIDEON

And to look at houses?

ANYSSA

Is it the same realtor?

GIDEON

Jocelyn? Yeah.

ANYSSA

I'll be there.

GIDEON

Lol.

Thank you.

ANYSSA

Gideon, I swear if I end up falling for you, I'm going to eat your
ass.

GIDEON

You're going to what?

ANYSSA

OH MY GOD.

beat your ass

BEAT

B-E-A-T

GIDEON

Uh-huh. Sure.

ANYSSA

I'm going to bed.

You should too.

It might be your last night alive.

GIDEON

You're right.

I should have taken you up on your offer.

ANYSSA
Which offer?

GIDEON
The tip.

ANYSSA
Bye.

GIDEON
What? That's nothing compared to eating ass.

ANYSSA
Why do I feel like you're going to make me pay for that? For a while?

GIDEON
Lol.
Be proud of your kink.
And goodnight, sweetheart.
Don't watch any more episodes without me, okay?

ANYSSA
I won't.
Goodnight, Gideon.



GIDEON
😂

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Anyssa tried not to seem too excited, even as a stunning floral arrangement stared back at her from her desktop. She'd never thought of herself as a flowers kind of girl, though Chris would send her flowers on her birthday, their anniversary, and Mother's Day.

Gideon sent flowers before every date, of which there'd officially been four. Then, he would request that she take them home or bring them with her if they met up somewhere because they had to work late. After the date, he took the flowers with him, and she never knew what he did with them after.

Today, he'd sent what appeared to be sunflowers, though she'd never seen sunflowers in anything but brown and yellow. These were blush pink with a rosier color in the center. Filler flowers were scattered between them, making the bouquet twice as large as it would be without them.

Aurora walked up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. "The rest of us in the office are starting to get jealous, and we're still mad at you for taking Gideon away from us. We were all willing to share him. I was his Sunday night."

Anyssa grinned. "Sorry, not sorry?"

"That's cold." Aurora moved to stand next to her. "By the way, the Viking's here."

She tore her gaze away from the flowers. "Just him or him and Zee?"

"Just him, and he looks less menacing than usual. Sad, if that's possible for him.

"I hope everything's okay. Send him in."

Pavel and Zaraia had closed on a house a couple of weeks ago; they'd somehow found a rural-ish yet progressive community close enough that he

wouldn't have to travel an hour each way to the office. She never knew places with that much land could be found near Atlanta, but Pavel and Zee wanted the land for Niko and Baby Aleks.

Their new house was cottage-style on a quiet street within walking distance of events at the community's center—fresh food markets, local vendors, and live bands. A walking trail edged right up to their backyard, and seeing the house had made her wonder whether her elaborate pool and two inches of green space were truly what was best for Micah and Jordan.

Pavel entered, dressed like the executive he now was in a suit, tie, and vest. He wore his hair loose, and her radar dinged the minute he entered the office.

It was a security company.

A private security firm.

Not organized crime.

There was also the added concern of whether they clandestinely reestablishing a mafia-like entity would trouble her. In any case, it would put a unique spin on the terms "DBA" and "fictitious name."

"What brings you by, Bobak?" she asked.

He raised a blond eyebrow. "You've been reading up on Slavic mythology just to find a name to call me?"

"Bogeyman or demon didn't suffice."

"I've been called a bogeyman before."

She didn't ask why. After Gideon's rundown of torture techniques, it felt easier not to know.

"What brings you by?" She folded her arms and leaned against the front of her desk. "Is my sister okay?"

"If she wasn't, would I be here?"

"Fair point."

"I can't just drop by?"

"No."

"I was on my way to get something to eat, so I stopped in to see if you wanted something."

She narrowed her eyes. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The Fancy Feast or Puppy Chow you're offering for my lunch."

He shook his head. "I would *never*. You think the worst of me."

"I do. Where's Gideon?"

“He’s with Zaraia at the new house. We needed some stuff put together for Aleksandr’s room. I took over his work here so he could go do that today.”

“Why aren’t you?”

“Because my wife says the baby doesn’t like the way I breathe.” He shrugged. “Now, do you want to get something to eat or not? I came all this way.”

“You took an elevator.”

“For *you*, of all people.”

“Get out.”

“It’s a waste trying to command me to do things. Use one of your,” he flicked his fingers, “spells or potions or something.”

It was the end of Zaraia’s pregnancy, which meant her sister was experiencing a mix of hormonal and “over this whole thing” irritation. The focus of that irritation often fell on the mate, but with Pavel having zero experience with the pregnancy process, she wouldn’t be surprised if he felt like Zaraia genuinely despised his presence.

Grumbling, she scooped up her purse without hitting her head, getting trapped between the desk’s wooden legs, or poking out an eye. That alone confirmed what she already knew—Gideon was the cause of all her fumbles. When not in his presence, she remained as confident and self-assured as she’d been since college.

Hopefully, tonight, they would have a lovely date that didn’t include her spilling ice water on his crotch, her stabbing him with her fork and drawing blood, and the worst yet—her being so captivated by his side profile as he read the menu that she ran into a server carrying a hot bowl of soup. They’d both narrowly avoided second-degree burns.

“I’ll eat, but I want to go somewhere,” she said.

Pavel dragged in a breath, lips parting.

“And if you say anything about taking my broom instead, I’m punching you in the throat.”

He stepped to the side and gestured to the door. “I wasn’t going to, but I appreciate the material for later use.”

* * *

At first, they walked in silence.

Then she asked him how the business was going, and things were going much better than they'd projected this early, having already secured clients prior to their ribbon-cutting day. Only family and a few friends participated, and getting Pavel and Gideon to agree to a ribbon-cutting ceremony had been the most challenging part of the entire endeavor.

Finally, she circled back to the real question. "The baby doesn't like the way you breathe?"

"Or chew," he said. "Sometimes, it's the way my hands feel touching her skin. A couple of times, my voice."

It was hard not to feel sorry for him.

Sworn enemy or not.

"I was like that. Sometimes, Chris would walk into the house, and I would have to fight the urge to throw something into the back of his head. Right about when I hit thirty-three weeks, it was a fight not to want to punch him in the face."

Pavel came to an abrupt stop and faced her, which forced her to do the same.

"Did you actually hate him?"

"Not at all, and Zee doesn't hate you. It's part of the process. She loves you. You have to," she looked around, "know that. Wait, where are we?"

A sign caught her eye:

The Doggie Depot!
The One-Stop Shop
For All Your Pupper's Needs!

"Pavel Volkov, you son of a bitch," she said, storming off. "I knew you couldn't be trusted. I can't believe I was trying to console you!"

"You don't even want to go inside and see if we find something you like?" he called after her.

At the first café restaurant she came to, she dipped inside. Pavel had shown up at the end of the lunch rush, which was intentional; he and Gideon didn't surround themselves with people unless necessary. She assumed it was part a personality quirk and part habit. Fewer people meant tighter security, and the head of the Bratva had to have conceivably always had a red dot on the back of his skull.

The hostess seated her at a table next to a window. A few minutes later, Pavel eased into the chair across from her. She glared at him from over the top of her menu, but he kept his gaze on the folded booklet in front of him.

“Have you been here before?” he asked.

She didn’t respond.

The server came to take their orders, and she sipped on a glass of water while he downed an Americano from a mug the size of a shot glass. They didn’t exchange words until her spinach salad and his ham and swiss were brought out.

“So, what’s going on with the O’Sullivan case?” He pulled apart the sandwich and melted cheese dribbled down the side of each half. “I heard the trial is set for three months from now.”

She jabbed at a piece of chicken, effectively turning her fork into a saber. “It’s...going. My hope was to avoid a trial altogether, but it’s not looking that way.”

“Why?”

“Don’t act like Gideon hasn’t told you.”

He took a bite, and nearly half of the sandwich disappeared in that one bite. “Is O’Sullivan still not meeting when you need him to?”

Other clients would have hounded her for them to meet multiple times during the week had they been facing similar charges. O’Sullivan, on the other hand, was more preoccupied with his daily chianti, which didn’t damage his liver quickly enough for her liking.

“It’s his fate, not mine,” she said.

They ate in silence.

Once she was done with her salad, and regretting she hadn’t gotten a ham and swiss for herself, she pushed the plate away. When their server showed up, he took both empty plates, topped off her glass of water, and Pavel swapped out his coffee for a glass of iced tea.

“Are you afraid of O’Sullivan, Anyssa?” he asked, flat-out, catching her off guard. “Honestly.”

“I’m afraid of how the information he has about me can destroy my career,” she admitted. “How worried should I be? What about the kids? Are they in any danger?”

“Gideon runs your security team.”

“Which isn’t as comforting as you think.” She knew he wanted to protect her, but she couldn’t imagine his protecting her leading to his death, possibly

right before her eyes.

“You care about him,” he said.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“So do I. He’s family.”

“I don’t want him to get hurt because of me.”

“I understand that, I do, but people like O’Sullivan are only as powerful as those around them. Some people carry the power with them. Plus, as long as you’re involved, Gideon will be by your side. For some reason, I think he likes you. Maybe he sees something I don’t.”

“Or maybe I ‘put a spell’ on him.”

He barely concealed a smile. “I fucking knew it.”

The hush between them returned. Pavel stared at the condensation on his glass, thumbs creating streaks, and she occupied herself by looking out the window, watching the people walk by on the sidewalk.

“I know Zee doesn’t hate me.”

She turned away from the window. “I shouldn’t be nice to you after your little pet shop stunt.”

“When have you ever been nice to me?” he asked. “On the other hand, I’m probably the kindest person you know. I kill people with kindness.”

“And what kind of gun is ‘kindness’?”

She caught another partially concealed smile, but he ran his tongue over his teeth to wipe it away. Had someone told her a decade ago that she would one day sit across from a savage and not fear him, she would have rolled her eyes into a headache. If they’d proposed that she might even respect him—a little—she would have laughed until the corners of her mouth split.

In her gut, she knew Gideon and Pavel were more sinister than Colm. Had she met them years ago, in all likelihood, she could have avoided this situation altogether.

“Pavel?”

He looked up. “Yes, Satan?”

Swallowing a laugh, she clasped her hands on the table’s hard surface. “I’ll put it this way. My sister loves you so much, it makes me come close to tolerating you. It’s enough to empathize, so I understand that the resentment’s getting to you this way because you want to be there for her and Aleks.”

“So what should I do?”

“Give it time,” she said. “And give her space when she asks for it. Try not to take the brush-off personally. She appreciates all that you do. It’s an

anxious, tiring, yet wonderful time for her.”

He nodded, his head moving in a steady rhythm. “Guess I should thank you.”

“You probably should, but you’d combust, and my sister would beat me to a bloody pulp if I let something happen to you.”

“I can’t say the same.” He pushed his chair away from the table. “I’m her favorite person.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Niko is.”

This time, he couldn’t hide the smile.

On the short walk back to the office building, she recalled what Gideon had told her about Pavel’s genuine hatred. Had they been closer in age, she assumed Shawn would have poked and prodded at her the same way Pavel did. Even back when they’d fought over Zaraia’s safety, she’d respected the strength of his desire to protect her sister, but he didn’t need to know that.

They entered the building through the lobby’s sliding doors, and seeing the uniformed staff at the security desk gave her a sense of overwhelming reassurance. After he checked in with the staff, they headed for the elevators.

“How much has Gideon told you about his injuries?” he asked, following her inside the elevator.

“I know he had a follow-up in New York.” She punched the buttons for their respective floors. “And that’s why he left Moscow. Why? How bad were they?”

“Extensive. He flatlined. Twice.”

A twisting, wrenching sensation spread in her chest and stomach. She couldn’t believe how close she’d come to never meeting him and knowing the airy, giddy happiness he’d brought her these last few weeks. The way she saw it, people like Gideon were supposed to live forever.

“Dom and I risked blowing our covers to save his life,” Pavel added. “Gideon’s the type of person you want to keep around. There’s a reason I trust him the way I do. You can trust him too.”

“Did he tell you to tell me that?” she asked.

“No, but I’m telling you because you need to hear it.”

The doors opened on his floor.

“By the way,” he stood between the doors, preventing them from closing, “Zaraia would have appreciated the advice you gave me today. Considering this is unfamiliar territory for us, and you have experience, your words would have put her at ease.”

She tossed up her hands. “Really, Pavel? You can’t just say ‘thank you, Anyssa’?”

“For what?”

“Get off.”

Pavel, laughing so quietly it sounded like an exhale, entered his and Gideon’s building through a door with their business logo on its glass front.

As the elevator doors closed, she studied the logo, head cocked to the side. Zaraia claimed it was supposed to be an image of a fortified building, but when she looked at it, all she saw was a gold and black illustration of Stonehenge.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gideon glanced at the clock on his phone screen. All he'd given Anyssa were directions and instructions. Usually, he would tell her what he had planned for each date, but he'd wanted to do things a little differently this time.

Their "agreement" had gone better than expected, and as much as he wanted to kill the charade and let her know she was his, that this was real, he didn't want to push her to do something she wasn't ready to. Plus, he hadn't told her about his brother, Silina, and Daniela yet, or how his appointment in New York had gone. A paternity test would have been helpful in figuring out how to share that information, but Silina still wasn't playing ball.

Also, Micah pretty much hated him.

Jordan adored him to the point that he didn't feel he deserved the way she saw him, and as much as she adored him, Micah went in the opposite direction.

Anyssa's car glimmered in the distance, and a nervous spark lit in his midsection as he glanced at the house behind him. He'd settled on this one because the sellers had agreed to a quick closing and because of the amount of land that came with it. Jocelyn had called it a "rare gem" because of all the acreage it sat on, and it was located close enough to the city to avoid making his commute more of a headache than was necessary.

Still, it was a fixer-upper, and Anyssa hadn't seen it yet. While it was perfectly fine and livable in its current state, it wasn't her North Atlanta mansion with the award-winning backyard pool and landscaping.

The car came to a stop in the driveway.

Anyssa stepped out, sunglasses covering her face and her latest bouquet in one hand. They hadn't seen each other in four days with her increasing

workload and his recent travel schedule, so as she walked toward him, he couldn't believe how much he'd missed her.

He and Pavel were hiring more recruits, so at some point, he would no longer have to delegate someone else to be with her while one or both of them were out of town.

He smiled. "You made it."

She looked up at the house, his body partially obscuring her view where he stood at the bottom of the porch steps. "Where am I?"

"*Budynok Medvedyeva*. The house of Medvedev."

"Yours?" she asked. "Why didn't you tell me you found something?"

In a minute, he would answer the question. First, he needed to feel her, needed to wrap his arms around her and lift her feet off the ground and take in her scent.

Establishing a real brotherhood with Pavel, Dom, and Dmitri, surviving his injuries, and now meeting Anyssa all felt like prize winnings after a long and arduous challenge. For a good portion of his life, he'd awaited some unfortunate fate because of how he'd left his family behind, regardless of why he'd done it.

The unfortunate fate had arrived when he'd least expected it. However, everything else that happened since was divine forgiveness.

She tightened her arms around his neck, the side of her face comfortably warm against his. "I've been looking forward to seeing you all day," she said.

The wall wasn't gone, but he'd made significant chips and cracks.

"Did you miss me?" he asked.

She leaned back. "I missed you."

"Show me how much."

He'd known it was coming, yet the flash of desire caught him off guard each time. The second their lips touched, his tongue exploring her mouth while she moaned into his, he wanted more.

He wanted everything.

She eased away, but he cradled the back of her neck and brought her back to him. The flowers fell from her hand onto the ground behind him as she cupped the side of his face, sucking on his tongue and bottom lip.

"I missed you, baby," she said again, breathing hard. "I missed you so much."

"God, I missed you too, sweetheart." Despite it being the last thing he wanted to do, he relinquished her lips, set her on her feet, and took her hand.

“And I didn’t tell you I found something because I wanted it to be a surprise. How about a tour? We have time before we have to get ready.”

“Ready for what, exactly? You’ve been so mum about this date.”

“Mum?”

“Quiet and hush-mouthed,” she explained. “I could barely concentrate on work today, wondering what you had in store.”

“And you’ll find out...right after a tour.”

Everything he showed her came with an explanation of why it wasn’t updated, what he planned to do with it, and for her to try to see it with a renovated eye. She didn’t care, unabashedly exploring each space and adding suggestions to his vision for every room.

Her fingers gingerly brushed the cracked red brick exterior of an outdated fireplace in the family room. “How many bedrooms?”

He started to hesitate but then decided against it.

“Five,” he said.

“Isn’t that a lot for a bachelor?” She looked over at him. “Then again, you are the kind of man who’ll make a good husband one day. Or partner, if marriage isn’t your thing.”

“It is my thing.”

They stared at each other.

He envisioned her underneath him, naked as he moved inside her while she released those same gasps and moans she made when he kissed her. When his blood flow began to pool south, he shook away the image.

“Want to see the owner’s suite?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes.”

The owner’s suite was spacious for a house built over forty years ago. It had an attached bathroom and one of the ugliest fireplaces he’d ever seen. There was also carpet in the bathroom, a design choice he’d yet to understand. It wasn’t as though fungi and bacteria were modern concepts.

Anyssa walked to a window and peered outside. Whatever she saw made her smile, and he pictured her standing there, wearing a robe or one of his shirts and hugging a steaming mug of coffee. To hopefully one day make it a reality, he decided he would move the bed to the wall adjacent to the window.

“It’s peaceful out here,” she said. “You’re going to wake up to a beautiful view.”

He helped himself to an eyeful of her shape, taking his time, enjoying

every single fucking curve. “I certainly hope so,” he said.

The tour ended with them in the basement, the only part of the house finished and upgraded. Currently, it held several gift bags, and Anyssa wasted no time walking over to them. She dropped to her knees, and the way her kneecap echoed when it hit the floor, he had to forcibly stop himself from asking if she was okay to avoid embarrassing her.

“Those are for you,” he needlessly announced. “I hope you like them. Jonathan helped me put it all together. I’m a man of many talents, but dressing my woman isn’t one of them.”

Too busy rifling through the gift paper, she didn’t notice his possessive word choice.

She gasped and pulled a gown from one of the gift bags, the dress so beautiful that Jonathan had shown him at least three others, but all he’d seen was Anyssa wearing this one.

“Gideon, this is beautiful.”

Most gowns made him think of royalty. This one made him think of romantic elegance. Like, the moment she put it on, she’d look like she’d stepped straight out of a fantasy novel.

It was strapless, which was perfect for showing off her sculpted shoulders. According to Jonathan, the fabric was champagne-colored and made of lace, tulle, and netting. It billowed to the floor, light and airy, and the heels matched the dress, satin four-inch pumps with a jewel embellishment.

Tonight, he wouldn’t let her stray an inch from his side. No one else besides him would spend the evening wrapped in a fairy tale, walking next to a beauty wearing a dress befitting a queen.

“I’m going upstairs to change,” he said. “When you’re done, meet me in the entryway.”

She held the dress against her, and he was surprised to find her eyes misted over. Anyssa Brandon might turn into Awkward Anyssa when she was in his presence, but she didn’t turn into Teary-eyed Anyssa. Numerous times, he’d caught her on the cusp, but tears were the one thing she retained control over.

“After the case I told you about, I started getting called the Queen of Atlanta,” she said. “Then Jordan says, in one of my past lives, I was a queen, and you were my knight. But this is the first time I’ve felt...”

She lowered her eyes.

When she looked up again, any evidence of tears was gone. Still, she’d

offered him vulnerability. She'd let him in further. She was learning how to trust him.

"Any chance I can get to make you feel that way, I'm going to take it," he told her. "Any chance."

She crossed the room.

He bent.

Their lips collided, and the sensation reawakened, an unexpected jolt like he hadn't seen the kiss coming but had been waiting a lifetime for it. In each kiss, he found something new, this one bringing a hint of sweetness, like strawberries dusted with a little bit of sugar.

Their entire evening could go to hell, but it wouldn't be fair to her, and he wanted to see what she looked like in that dress.

They separated.

Stared.

Breathed.

Mentally negotiated.

Then, at the same time, they silently agreed to at least try making it to their date.

He went upstairs to change, dawdling because he knew she would take longer to get dressed. Still, he made it downstairs before she did, wearing a Jonathan-approved tux, which would give her a hint as to what he had in store for them.

She emerged from the basement stairwell.

He took a breath, but another one didn't follow. No amount of imagination could have come up with the vision that stood before him.

This was precisely why Pavel didn't tell him about her. Dom could have clued him in, but neither Eija nor Dom had said a word.

Because they knew him.

They knew him well.

They knew how much he would want her, and he would have fucked their entire plan to help him recuperate and assimilate just to have her. When they met was when they were supposed to meet, but if he'd gotten the tiniest scent of this woman prior to that evening on the porch, he would have latched on like a bloodhound, Bratva be damned.

Anyssa was his.

Unquestionably his.

Her past relationship had made trust a risk, but she still took that risk to

stand in front of him, in this moment, looking the way she looked and wreaking all sorts of havoc on his brain, heart, and lungs.

Air filled his chest cavity.

It wasn't enough, but he'd manage.

"How do I look?" She blessed him with a slow spin. "This is the most beautiful gown I've ever seen. And it fits perfectly. Jonathan is a genie."

He reached for her hand, his voice hoarse and his throat scratchy. "Holy heavens, look at you. You're going to turn me into a raging madman."

"I don't care, as long as you're my raging madman." She ran her palm over the lapel of his jacket. "And you look sexy as hell in this tux. Had this been a white dress, I would have believed our date was us secretly getting married."

"Would that be a terrible idea?"

She froze. "Please tell me you didn't."

"It worked for Volk and Zaraia."

"Gideon, did you arrange for us to get married?"

He grinned. "No."

"Thank God." She hugged him around the waist. "Don't scare me like that."

He didn't intend to throw caution to the wind and get married like Pavel and Zaraia, but that didn't mean they weren't dating with a long-term relationship in mind.

Anything could happen.

He could die tomorrow.

It wouldn't have been the most terrible thing in the world for him to die as her husband.

They exited the house to an awaiting limousine. She looked back at him over her shoulder before sliding inside, the corners of her mouth turned down, showing that she was impressed.

In a blink, nighttime had fallen.

A massive Porsche sign shimmered above them as the driver pulled into a line of cars dropping passengers off in front of a glass-front luxury building.

"I got the idea from that text you sent," Gideon said. "About your heart doing laps. They're holding a fundraising event, and Volk and I are on the hunt for more upper-level clientele."

"Are you here to schmooze?" she asked, smiling. "Can I help you?"

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

“Any clients, in particular, you’re scoping out?”

“Three. Diego Galanti, Nicolo Di Lullo, and Erico Pulcini.”

“Those all sound like Italian names.”

“That’s because they are.”

“What are you do—”

He leaned across the seat and dropped a kiss on her lips. Then another. The door opened behind him, and had it remained shut for another minute, he would have scrapped the entire evening and taken her home. It would have set him and Pavel back several weeks, but once he pled his case, he was roughly twenty percent sure Pavel would have seen the logic behind him choosing pussy over profit.

He stepped out, took Anyssa’s hand, and squeezed it as they headed for the main entrance.

The guests standing in line waiting to enter looked impressive with their designer dresses, tuxes, and sparkling jewelry, but they were a monochromatic palette. In that sea of near-identical faces, his lady was a beacon.

“I know some of these people,” she said, scanning the crowd. “That’s the mayor there in the blue dress. At the front of that line, that guy with the white hair? That’s the District Attorney.”

“Will your presence here tonight anger some people?”

She adjusted the top of her dress. “If I’m lucky.”

The line inched forward, and she continued to point out people she knew. Once they went inside, she would see an extremely familiar face, but she didn’t need to know he was already aware O’Sullivan would be attending this event. Likewise, she didn’t need to know that he and Pavel had been watching O’Sullivan’s movements since before he’d gone with her to Athens. The Athens trip had changed his plans to a certain degree, however.

He raised their joined hands and kissed her palm. Testosterone permeated the air, and he’d already spotted two heads glance back in their direction more than once. Both men had smiled as if he was supposed to know them from some other event where they’d rubbed elbows, but before they turned around, their gazes had landed on Anyssa.

The security personnel at the door verified the identity of the couple in front of them. Anyssa peered past them into the venue, where a man wearing a tuxedo played the piano in the middle of the main hall entryway.

“Two for Medvedev,” Gideon said.

One of the security personnel looked up, saw it was him, and ticked his head toward the entry. As they walked inside, Anyssa craned her neck, looking back.

“That was fast.”

“What was fast?”

“How quickly they checked your credentials. Didn’t realize I was dating such a well-connected guy.”

If only she knew how well-connected.

“Hold on, did you say Medvedev or Miller?”

He pressed another kiss on her palm. “This is nice, sweetheart.”

Clear, sparkling balloons covered the ceiling. A couple of Porsches, a 911 Targa 4 GTS and a 911 Turbo Cabriolet, welcomed them into the main event hall.

The piano player faded away.

Given how much wealthy folk loved their orchestras, he was surprised to find classical music pouring into the room via speakers. Currently, the piece that played was Debussy’s “Arabesque No. 1.”

Having grown up on a farm, he wasn’t introduced to the “finer” things in life until he’d reached the final rank he’d held in the Bratva. The last thing he would have expected from a country boy like himself was to develop a love for classical music and fine wines.

“Want to go take a seat?” Anyssa asked.

Then she stopped.

He followed her gaze to Colm O’Sullivan standing in a corner, chatting with a gentleman with white hair and a full stomach pressing against his waistband.

He squeezed her hand. “What’s wrong?”

“Colm O’Sullivan.” She looked up at him. “Did you know he would be here tonight?”

“O’Sullivan?” He frowned and looked across the room, pretending to spot Colm for the first time. “No, I didn’t. With him being out on bail, he can be at events like this?”

“There aren’t many restrictions on his movements as long as he doesn’t leave the country. In Colm’s case, the city.”

She watched Colm a while longer, but Colm didn’t turn their way. However, he knew Colm had seen them. The point was for Colm to see them. At no point did he want the crime boss to forget his face.

“I’m a hypocrite,” she said, turning away. “You, Pavel, and Dom made your money through criminal activity, yet I judge you differently than the way I do Colm.”

“Me and Volk, yes,” he corrected. “Dom made his money hedging his bets in Silicon Valley startups. Honestly, he was trying to get rid of it and ended up doing the opposite.”

“Now you’ve taken that money and ‘cleaned’ it, so to speak.”

“Yes.”

“That’s what criminals do.”

“Anyssa,” he looked down into her face, “I am a criminal, sweetheart.”

“You used to be,” she argued.

“Doing moral things now doesn’t erase the immoral things I did in the past.”

“Would you do those things again?”

“For an organization?” He shrugged. “Maybe. But for the people I care about? I’d kill again in a heartbeat.” Then, before she could respond, he added, “Did you want to go speak with O’Sullivan?”

She wrinkled her nose. “God, no. The little we communicate is already more than enough.”

“They opened the racetrack for viewing in the other room. Care to grab a drink and watch some Porsches take laps?”

“That, I would love.”

They headed to another area of the venue where a smaller crowd had gathered. Some sat in leather chairs and booths, sipping from wine and whiskey glasses. Others stood watching the cars from the wall of glass windowpanes.

He waved two fingers to signal a server and ordered a glass of wine for her. Everyone else nursed some alcoholic beverage, but he chose iced tea for himself.

He took a seat in a leather chair, and Anyssa went to sit next to him, but he redirected her onto his lap. Much to his delight, and satisfaction, she settled into him without hesitation.

“This is very nice,” she said. “Thank you for doing this.”

“You don’t have to thank me for taking you on a date,” he pointed out. “Seeing you in this dress? The pleasure’s all mine.”

“Still, this took a lot of effort. You planned everything down to my outfit. I appreciate it. I really do.”

He kissed the top of her head. She tilted her chin, and he brushed his lips over hers.

“I know you do,” he said, thumb stroking her cheekbone. “But I do have one other thing planned for tonight. Tentatively.”

“Will we have to change?”

“That’s a surprisingly good guess.”

She toyed with his collar. “Change as in getting naked?”

“You want to get naked with me?” He kissed her again, flicking his tongue against hers. “Hmm? Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Gideon. That’s what I want.”

“Okay.”

Their drinks arrived, and they took them over to the windows to watch the sports cars make intricate loops around the driving grounds. A Porsche would have been nice, but he’d wound up getting a truck of his own. Pavel had teased him about how much he was indeed like a copycat little brother, but it wasn’t as though they had many options to choose from at their sizes.

“Ms. Brandon, is that you?”

Colm O’Sullivan.

Right on time.

They faced O’Sullivan as he approached, Colm also dressed in a black tux and white shirt. Sean Brogan walked a couple of paces behind him.

The rest of Colm’s security tried to blend into the room, and Gideon found himself wondering whether he could tell they were Colm’s affiliates from experience or if they were simply that easy to spot. Anyssa’s security detail blended in so seamlessly, she didn’t know she had one.

Anyssa tipped her head. “Hello, Colm.”

“*Bout ye*. I see you have brought your muscle.”

“And it’s good to see you staying out of trouble.”

“We didn’t end on the best note last time. I want to offer my apologies for it.”

She tipped her head. “Apology accepted.”

Colm looked up. “It’s the second time we’ve met, Miller, and you have yet to say a word to me.”

“That’s because I have nothing to say to you,” Gideon said. “Anyssa is my priority.”

“You find me a danger to her?”

“I don’t find you a danger to anyone.”

The response caught Brogan’s attention, but he barely spared the Underboss a glance. No matter how deep a dive they took into any database, all they would find was a history of military service with all sorts of medals and commendations for Gideon Miller.

Naturally, if he didn’t tone it down, they would suspect there was more to the man consistently found at Anyssa’s side. Regardless, he didn’t like O’Sullivan or his lapdog. O’Sullivan reminded him too much of Yuri, and Yuri had escaped his bullet.

Colm wouldn’t.

“Might want to show some respect unless you want to end up in pieces in a river somewhere,” Colm warned. “This isn’t the U.S. military.”

He grinned.

Colm stared at him as if expecting a response, but explorers would sooner find the doorway to hell in Antarctica.

Colm turned back to Anyssa. “How is it you have time to buy new shoes and dresses and attend parties if you’re supposed to be working on my case?”

“Because your case and my life are two different areas,” she snapped. “Colm, you treat these charges like you got caught stealing candy bars from Publix. You’re not cooperating with me and refuse to meet when I need you to. I’m doing the best I can with the information, and effort, I have gotten from you.”

“Ms. Brandon.” Colm’s tone turned on a dial. “Watch the way you talk to me, lass. You never know what it might get you.”

“I would love to see you put a hand on her,” Gideon warned. Then he pointed with his chin. “Four o’clock, guy with the red tie—one of yours. The one with the wingtips—yours. In total, you have six men as part of your protective detail.”

Colm smirked. “Seven.”

“Six.” Finn Scott, who’d been assigned to track Anyssa’s every move, signed his death certificate the moment he accepted the task.

Anyssa looked up at him, and he was grateful that he didn’t spot any fear in her eyes. This woman was already important to the people he loved, and then he’d fucked around and gotten to know her. Anybody who needed to die, would.

“Is that enough talking for you?” he asked. “Come on, Anyssa. I think

they're getting ready to serve dinner. Gentlemen."

They walked off.

Although he was dragging her a little, Anyssa didn't stumble or miss a step. Then, once his irritation cooled enough to return his cadence to a normal pace, she threaded her arm through his.

They found their table, which housed four more guests, and took a seat.

Anyssa scooted her chair closer to his and motioned for him to lean down. "Gideon Medvedev, that was one of the sexiest things I've ever experienced," she whispered. "You've soured me for all other men unless they're as massive and aggressive as you are when it comes to my safety."

He cupped her knee. "What other men?"

"That's not the part I want you to focus on."

"What other men, Anyssa?"

"Are all Slavic men this possessive?"

"In that particular region of the globe, as cold as it can get in some areas, we might be a little more selfish when it comes to warm bodies we've deemed ours."

"I've been wondering," she began, "given the history of tension between Russia and Ukraine, how'd you wind up with the *Russian* mafia?"

"It's a long story," he said. "I'll leave it for telling you in the morning. It'll be a good story to go along with your massage."

"What massage?"

"The one you'll need," he slid his gaze the entire length of her body, "in the morning."

* * *

As they ate, the foundation gave its presentation. A high-end restaurant catered their dinner, the food delicious but the portions made for elementary school-age children. Anyssa didn't move her chair back, so had he been right-handed, their elbows would have collided with every bite.

They made small talk with the other guests at the table, and it was like they were sitting with Anderson Cooper and Andy Cohen, and Michelle and Barack Obama.

One of his assimilation instructors had made him read issues of *People* magazine to become familiar with American pop culture to where he couldn't

look at the cover without getting nauseous. He'd known about the Obamas and Anderson Cooper from having to keep up with American politics before his relocation to the States. Andy Cohen, he'd learned about through Anderson Cooper.

Then there was a Keanu Reeves, whose *John Wick* movies he'd enjoyed. Tom Hanks had kept him hooked on a movie about being stranded on an island. A few additional actors he'd found interesting based on their television shows or movies were Helen Mirren, Denzel Washington, Julie Andrews, and Viola Davis—he would never tell a soul that he bawled at the end of her movie, *The Help*.

Like a baby.

Each instructor had different tastes, which seemed to have been the reason Dmitri hired them. However, no matter which instructor worked with him that day, he always seemed to run into a family with the last name Kardashian. Whenever he assumed he'd learned everything, they would find something new.

There was also a show about housewives, which he didn't understand initially, but it now made sense that he'd moved to Atlanta. American culture was equally as fascinating as it was unusual.

All the guests at the table had children, except for him, so the guests' children, Micah, and Jordan dominated most of the evening conversation.

Their excitement over talking about their kids brought Lina to mind. There was no way she didn't know what Daniela could mean to him. What this paternity test could do.

She'd grown up in the same neighborhood—though, given the sizes of each property, neighborhood was a loose term. She, Symon, him, and her sister, Sofiya, used to all play, and get in trouble, together. They'd remained friends until the night he left for the Bratva, so Lina had known him for more than a decade. Therefore, she didn't need to know precisely what he'd lost to understand what Daniela would mean to him. He hadn't gone through the trouble of reconnecting with his past just for her to deny him the future.

Anyssa yawned.

He kissed her temple. "Tired?"

"Mm-hmm. Maybe we should head back to your place."

Her gaze darted toward Colm's table, and he gripped the edge of her chair and turned her to face him.

"About what you said earlier?" he began. "About being a hypocrite? You

can loathe O'Sullivan and what he does and like me perfectly fine despite me doing the same things. The difference is that I've never threatened you, and I don't see any reason I ever will. I'll never use my money to hurt you or against you. In fact, I'll pamper you with every chance I get."

She cupped his jaw. "You mean despite you 'having done' the same things. Like in the past."

She was correct if she only counted the past as the last hour.

"Don't let him scare you," he added. "If you do, I'll start taking it personally. Like you think I'm bad at my job or something."

"His network—"

"I'm taking it personally."

"Fine." She cradled the other side of his face. "I won't let him scare me. I wish I could snap my fingers and be done with his case, but for now, I'll endure."

He angled his head to kiss her palm. "What would make you be 'done' with his case?"

"Getting all the evidence tossed out, including this mystery witness business." She snorted, laughed. "Colm getting hit by a bus at full speed."

"Rub my beard."

She stroked the coarse hairs along his jawline, laughing harder. "Why?"

"I like it," he said. And he didn't have a magic lamp handy. If she couldn't get the case tossed out, as her genie, he would owe her a wish.

"If I'm being honest, Gideon, I was hoping either you didn't come on to me, or you did, and we ended up being incompatible."

"And why's that?"

She lightly scraped her fingernails underneath his chin. "Because we're good together."

"You're easy to get along with."

"Let Pavel tell it—"

"You did provoke him."

She rolled her eyes.

"Admit it."

"Fine, I provoked him."

"Now that he no longer wants to kill you and you've stopped abducting your sister, look how well you two get along," he pointed out. "You even both hate the same people. Janine Myell. What exactly did she do again?"

"She knows what she did."

Which was what Pavel said whenever he asked.

“Now you were saying we’re good together,” he reminded her, closing his eyes. “And then I think I heard you whisper something about being hopelessly in love with me, but it’s hard to hear over that Liszt in the background.”

“Do you know all these composers?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Didn’t realize I had such a classy boyfriend.”

He opened his eyes. “That word is deadly. Use it carefully.”

“Come on, Gideon. I’m like a puppy when I see you. I like you so much, you throw me off my game. Just ask. Take me out of my misery and ask.”

“Ask what? If you really are hopelessly in love with me?”

“I might never fall in love with you if you don’t stick a pen in that ego.”

He laughed and dragged her chair closer. “Then you’re hoping I ask you to help me schmooze before we leave, right? Now that everyone’s full and compliant?”

She eased away, hands falling from the side of his face. “Yes. Would you like to do that now?”

“Wait, was that your question?”

“Mm-hmm.”

She stood.

He toppled her onto his lap.

“Don’t manhandle me in front of the rich folk,” she playfully hissed. “They’ll think we don’t belong.”

“I’ll manhandle my girlfriend any way I like.”

“What about in any way she likes?”

“You are so nasty.” He flicked the tip of her ear with his tongue. “And I fucking love it. Come on. Let’s go schmooze, *quickly*, so I can take you back to my house and ‘consummate’ this relationship. That’s what you want, right? For me to take you back to my place and put my dick inside you?”

She hopped off his lap and grabbed his hand. “Now you said it was Diego, Niccolo, and who?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It started to rain on the drive back, so the limo driver dropped them off at the edge of the property.

Anyssa slipped off her shoes, hopped out of the limo, and ran barefoot, toes squishing in the mud, for the house. Gideon called after her, slowly closing their distance, but the element of surprise had given her a decent head start.

He caught her before she hit the steps.

And she screamed.

This man had her running in the rain without shoes, giggling and screaming like her hair didn't revert when water hit it, and she didn't have people in her family with names like Edgerrin and Geraldine.

Once inside, he set her down in the entryway, and they stripped down to their underwear, not wanting to track water through the house.

"Don't you dare put those muddy feet on my wood floors," he warned.

"These," she raised a foot, "muddy feet?"

He picked her up and marched until they arrived in the bathroom. Without setting her down, he turned on the shower. After several seconds, he tested the water, stepped into the enclosure, and set her on her feet. She looked down, hypnotized as muddy water swirled around them and snaked down the drain.

"Hey," he called.

She looked up.

He lifted her off her feet.

Then he kissed her, softly, when she was expecting hard and rough because they wanted each other. So fucking badly, they wanted each other.

Yet, he gently plied her mouth with his, and she wrapped her legs around him, holding on, never wanting to let go.

He clasped his hands at the small of her back, and she felt him smile against her mouth. She smiled back, kissing him between every stretch and twitch of her mouth.

He rocked her in his arms.

Their kisses slowed to pecks.

Out of sheer curiosity, she opened her eyes and peeked. His remained closed, his lashes long and his lips swollen. When he cupped the side of her neck, she closed them again, giving into the sensation of his thumb stroking her skin as warm water beat down on her back.

They pulled apart.

He set her down.

Without looking away, they stripped. She reached back, unsnapped her strapless bra, and tossed it over the shower doors. He paused in the middle of taking off his boxer briefs, biting on the inside of his bottom lip as she pulled her panties off over her ankles and tossed them with her bra.

“Jesus, Anyssa.”

She looked down. “Confession? I had a little work done. It was after the Chris fiasco, and I felt unattractive and self-conscious about loose skin after having two kids—”

“One, don’t say that name again when you’re standing naked in front of me,” he warned. “Two, none of that matters. Not a single bit of it matters. Here. Feel.”

He took her hand and brought it to his chest. Raised skin tickled her palm, the scar hidden by the tattoo of the phoenix.

“Now here.”

He brought her hand down to his thigh. The raised skin there was hidden by a tattoo made up of shapes and symbols.

“I don’t care,” he said. “As long it’s your body, to me, you’ll be perfect the way you are. I’m riddled with tears and holes and mounds of scar tissue. Would that make you look at me differently?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Exactly.”

The boxer briefs came down. Though not usually timid when it came to sex, she took her time *looking*. When her eyes finally took him in, she held her breath.

This was a worshipping dick.

A deity dick.

She wanted to touch it, stroke it, kiss it, suck it. This was what hairstylists were made for, fixing the result of her dropping to her knees while he grabbed the back of her head and drilled for oil in her throat.

And it was so hard.

As if needed to verify, she took him in her hand, and he groaned, tossing his head back in response. Turned on by the power she felt in that single organ, she stroked.

The muscles in his thighs jerked, and he covered her hand with his, showing her how he liked to be touched.

“Like that?” she asked, looking up.

He smoothed her brow with his thumb, a mask of pleasure on his face. “Like that, sweetheart.”

Not once in her life could she remember wanting to pleasure a man with her mouth more, and had she been inclined to stop herself, she still would have failed to prevent her knees from bending. To stop her mouth from opening as she directed him inside, taking as much as she could manage.

He cupped her chin, holding her head in place.

She kept her eyes on his, watching him as he watched his cock slip back and forth between her lips.

“Anyssa...” He pumped faster, harder, the corners of her mouth leaking. When she gagged, she quickly composed herself, not wanting to spend too long without feeling the ridges of his firm length slide along her tongue.

With her eyes, she told him to come.

And he did.

Deep in her throat.

“Fuck, Anyssa.”

He remained frozen in place, the jerking motions of his orgasm pulsing against her lips. She had yet to look away from him.

As he pulled out, she protested, but he didn't utter a word as he turned off the shower and dragged her, naked and stumbling, through the house to the bedroom.

He tossed her on the bed.

She bounced once, then twice.

By the second bounce, he'd latched onto her pussy. Before she could catch her breath, he buried his face between her lips, head bobbing as he

massaged her clit with his tongue.

Then he raised his head, his facial hair glistening. “Spread your legs wider.”

She spread them.

“Wider.”

She could do nothing but obey.

And he buried his face between them again, worshipping her clit with firm, tender flicks. With every lick, her right leg shook, and she gave into the sensation, her head falling back.

“Gideon...” Her hips jerked. “Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck...”

Angling his head, he flicked faster, caressing her inner thigh with one massive hand while keeping her legs wide with the other. No longer in control of her body, she twitched and contorted at his mercy.

Then he moaned.

Her body went rigid.

He reached up and rolled her nipple between his thumb and index finger, and she came so hard, she cried out, her hips lifting off the mattress.

He didn’t let up until she spasmed.

“Are you ready for me?” he asked, tearing at a foil wrapper with his teeth. “Tell me now.”

She nodded. “Ye—”

The “s” never made it out of her throat.

He entered her, inch by inch, his cock stretching her body the deeper he went. Once he was fully inside her, she made the decision never to be without this man again.

He pulled out and surged again, stroking out a rhythm as lovely as a bow passing over violin strings. It wasn’t so fast that she couldn’t feel anything, but slow and deep so that she felt it all.

Every ridge, every inch.

The broad crown of his head each time it speared her entrance.

He bent, tucking his hands behind her neck, and kissed her. And Gideon made love to her in a way that made her wonder whether this was the first time she’d ever made love. Sex, she’d had, but the way he held her and tasted her lips, smiling against them as he whispered words in a language she didn’t need to know to understand, was something she’d never experienced.

Now she understood the word ruin.

Claim.

As he sank deep and dragged his cock from her body, over and over, she understood what it meant to be possessed. With each drive of his pelvis, she gave herself over to him.

Their kisses grew harsher.

Their bodies slapped wildly against each other.

She gasped and screamed his name. There might have been a barrier between them, but she still wanted to feel it when he came inside her. She wanted to feel when his body went taut as hers milked him.

“Don’t come on my dick, Anyssa,” he groaned. “If you come on my dick, sweetheart, it’s over for you.”

He bent his head and sucked her nipple.

“Gideon, I’m gonna come on your dick.”

He sucked harder.

“Gideon...Gideon...I’m about to—”

Pleasure flooded her pussy, inside and out, pulsing along her clit. Then he lodged himself as far inside her as he could go and growled her name as he climaxed, trapping her in his embrace.

They remained that way for a long while. He plied her with kisses, and she held onto him as if they could remain joined, in a state of euphoria, for eternity.

Finally, they came apart, and he pushed up on his palms to look down into her face.

“What, baby?” She wiped sweat from his brow. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” he asked.

“All crazy like.”

He smiled. “I’m thinking.”

“About?”

“I’m possessive, Anyssa.”

“Would you hurt me?”

“Never.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Yes.”

After disposing of the condom, he returned to the bed, and she molded herself to him as if trying to crawl into his skin, basking in their shared warmth.

“What if we end up falling in love?” she teased. “Would that make you

even more possessive?”

“I’m not a hero, sweetheart,” he said. “I’ve never been a hero. When it comes to the people I care about, I’m selfish, uncaring, and destructive. So if you find your way into my heart, you’re staying there, and the world better pray no harm comes to you.”

“Gideon, in your heart is where I hope to be. So, if something happens to me, do whatever you must. Then bring me home and wrap me in the safety of your arms. I love the way it feels when you hold me, so this is where I’ll always run back to.”

He drew her further into his body and held her closer. “I’m so happy I left Vegas. So fucking happy.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Good morning, sweetheart.”

Warm lips graced her forehead, followed by those same warm lips pressed against hers.

Anysa opened one eye, then two. Gideon sat at the edge of the bed, freshly showered and dressed like he was heading into the office. She yawned into her pillow, muscles sore in too many places to count.

“Sleep well?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm.” She stretched. “Very well.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

She turned over. The sheets slipped down her body, uncovering her breasts. His gaze fell, and his tongue darted along his bottom lip. To further entice him, she sat up and reached her arms above her head, back bowing.

“You’re going to work?” she asked. “It’s Saturday.”

“For half the day.” He came closer, leaned forward, and kissed a nipple. “There are some things I have to finish up, but I’ll be back to give you that massage I promised. You’ll be here, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Chris has the kids until Monday, so I can laze the day away. At least today. I have to do more prep work for Colm’s motion hearing.”

“Can you do it here?”

“Technically, but I’d have to grab some stuff from the office. And I’ll need my laptop, which is at my house.”

“Tell me what you need, and I’ll bring them.”

“I need a change of clothes too.”

“I disagree.”

He palmed her breast, leaned forward again, and flicked the nipple before taking a long, hard pull. Then another. The next thing she knew, she was on her back, her hands gently holding him behind his head.

“State your case,” she said, between gasps. “Convince me I won’t need a change of clothes.”

“First of all,” he licked, “in the Bible, Adam and Eve—”

She laughed.

“How can I state my case if you won’t let me explain the benefits of nudity?” he argued.

“How about this? I’ll wear one of your T-shirts and toss the clothes I wore here yesterday in the wash.”

“Yes, to the T-shirts and the wash, but I’ll only agree if you forego the panties.”

“For how long?”

“All day.”

“Half the day.”

“Panties are an obstruction to the things I plan to do to you all day,” he said. “No panties for the day, and I’ll do your laundry.”

It felt criminal to be this happy, and usually, fear would sneak its way in. However, it decided not to show up this morning. Instead, it allowed her a moment to enjoy being with a man plucked straight from her dreams.

“We have a deal,” she said. “Now hurry, or you’ll be late. If you’re late to the office, you’ll be late coming home.”

He released her.

She climbed under the covers.

He watched her for a moment before he stood and disappeared inside the bedroom closet. When he reappeared, it was with a blazer tossed over his forearm that he set down at the bottom of the bed to slide a watch over his wrist. Watching him put on the watch was as unexpectedly erotic as that index finger of his—though, after last night, she could understand why his index finger turned her on the way it did.

He reached for the blazer.

“Please put that on in the car,” she pleaded. “I swear, watching you get dressed is like watching porn. If you put on that blazer, I’m not letting you leave.”

Smiling, he walked over, bent, and pressed three kisses onto her lips. “I’ll see you later, sweetheart.”

“Not too much later, I hope,” she said, eyes glued to his ass as he left through the bedroom door. “And have a great half day, baby!”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gideon pressed the doorbell a second time and shoved his hands into his pockets. She should have been home. She was the one who'd told him it was okay to stop by today.

The drive wasn't too bad, and it was late enough in the morning that he'd missed the early morning rush. Silina lived further north, in Marietta, in a home that looked exactly like a house Symon would buy.

Regardless of not speaking to his brother in sixteen years, he'd found ways to check up on him. This traditional style two-story house with the brick front had Symon written all over it.

The door swung open.

On the other side was a face he hadn't seen in ages, but he could make out the girl he'd known all those years ago—Silina Yakovna, the girl with the frizzy blond hair, face full of freckles, and whose canines, the ones right next to her incisors, were peculiarly shorter than the rest of her teeth.

"Gideon. Hi." She stepped to the side. "Come on in. Watch out for the toys."

His feet remained planted.

"Gideon, it'll be okay."

He stepped across the threshold, and she closed the door behind him. It wouldn't be okay, ever again, but he hadn't come all this way to chicken out.

The front door deposited him directly into the family room. A staircase, blocked by a wooden baby gate, was to his left. A cozy kitchen opened up to the living room, and a dining table littered with grocery bags sat in a nook beside it.

He took another step further into the room.

And there it was.

Positioned above the living room sofa, in black and white, was a framed photo of Symon and Silina on their wedding day. A day he'd missed. A day where, had it not been for him leaving his family the way he had, he would have been there as his brother's best man.

Symon, who'd been a career advisor at Georgia State, would have wanted a bachelor party that included a food tour of some sort. Big-breasted strippers wouldn't have interested him in the slightest, but toss meat on a stick, and Symon was first in line.

His throat narrowed.

His vision went from clear to cloudy.

"It's crazy I won't ever get to hear his voice again," he said, his voice weaker than he'd heard it in a long time. "I still don't understand how that works. It's like my brain refuses to grasp the concept. In my mind, as long as I stayed away, he was still alive."

Lina took the space next to him. "Regardless of what happened or what I did, I loved Symon with everything in me."

"Then why did you do it? Was he cheating too?"

She sighed, tapping her fingernails together. "You know you Medvedev men. Loyal to a fault. No, he wasn't cheating, but we'd known each other since childhood. I loved him before I knew what love was. Before my... mistake, Symon was the only man I'd ever made love to, so I got it in my head that I was missing something."

"And were you?"

"That's the worst bit of it. I cheated on my husband, and then he died, and none of it was worth it." She blinked, sending tears down her cheeks. "The night he called me to say he was going to the emergency room, I took the call from a hotel bed. His cold was getting worse, and he was having trouble breathing. So, while my husband died, I was in another man's arms."

She'd already explained the story, but Symon was gone now, and he saw no need to make her feel worse about it than she already did. He'd done things he wasn't proud of, so it would be hypocritical of him to judge her for something neither of them could change.

Did it anger him?

Immensely.

This was his kid brother.

Even in the Bratva, he'd looked out for Symon in ways Symon would

never know, but what difference could Silina have made? Had she been at the hospital that night, it wouldn't have done much to change the outcome. Blaming her was careless, and as much as he wanted somewhere to direct his anger, it wouldn't be at the woman who'd loved Symon when he'd walked out on him.

"Where's Daniela?" he asked, swallowing the worst of his pain.

"Upstairs," she said. "Asleep."

"Can I see her?"

More tears fell.

And, with that, he knew.

Either she'd taken the paternity test, likely way before their last conversation, or she knew he'd take one look at Daniela and figure it out.

The last piece of his family, the one he'd been hoping for, didn't exist. Not that he wouldn't be there for Silina, as she'd been like family to him, but it was different. As much as he didn't want to admit it, it was different.

The night he left Obukhiv, he left three letters behind—one for his grandparents, one for Silina and Sofiya, and the last one for Symon. It wasn't like they didn't know why he'd gone, but that didn't stop the guilt from consuming him in chunks.

Initially, he didn't rank high enough to keep tabs on them. Eventually, however, he rose in the ranks and started making significant money, which allowed him to do so in secret. Not only had he needed to see how they were doing, to make sure they were okay, but the Bratva also had a tendency to eliminate lineages.

Unfortunately, looking at pictures or seeing them on video didn't come close to him being a part of their lives. Images and videos never told him whether they'd resented him for leaving. Neither had told him whether they missed him or loathed the sacrifice he'd made so they could live.

To complicate matters further, one day, he'd learned that Symon had been asking around for any information that might lead to where he was.

The news had brought him some relief, knowing Symon cared enough to try to find him, but his brother didn't have the disposition to go up against a French bulldog, never mind the Bratva. Therefore, he'd done what he had to do.

He had someone inform Symon that he was dead.

Six months later, Symon and Lina moved to the U.S. Not long after that, they got married.

Then Yuri happened.

Battling depression and grief over feeling foolish to have trusted Yuri the way he had, he'd told himself Symon was better off thinking he was dead. That he would rather Symon believe he was dead than show up like he'd just left a battlefield. But then, a little over a year ago, he woke up in the middle of the night with a gripping need to see his brother, afraid he'd never see him again.

So, he asked Dmitri for help locating them.

He'd talked to Lina first, as he'd believed the news about him still being alive would have been too overwhelming to drop on his brother all at once. He'd also been in the middle of getting the remaining tattoos to hide the brunt of the damage, and he was afraid of his brother looking at him and no longer seeing a protector.

However, to shield him, Lina didn't tell him that his brother had died not even two weeks before they first spoke. She said nothing until he told her he was planning to move to Atlanta, permanently, and was ready to make amends.

The news tore open another hole in his body.

One no surgeon's stitch could close.

Then she'd dropped the second bomb about his niece, and as much as he'd wanted to lay into her, had he not acted like a scared child, he could have been at his brother's bedside in Symon's final moments. He could have been in Symon's life way before then.

The only saving grace was that Symon had died never knowing his pending fatherhood would have ended in betrayal.

"I still want to see her," he said.

Silina, after a brief pause, made her way upstairs.

He took a seat on the sofa. While he waited, he checked on Anyssa. What he'd told her wasn't a complete lie. He did plan to stop at her house and the office on his way back to her.

GIDEON

Did you eat?

ANYSSA

Everything in the house.

GIDEON

So I'm coming home to some meat on your bones?

That's how you say it, right?

ANYSSA

Yes.

God, you're so adorable.

GIDEON

Is there enough left for me to have lunch?

ANYSSA

That depends. What were you thinking of having for lunch?

GIDEON

A turkey sandwich.

Or three.

ANYSSA

I'll make them for you.

Do you want anything else? Any veggies? P-i-c-k-l-e-s?

GIDEON

P-u-s-s-y would be nice.

ANYSSA

Fine, but it'll be the same one from last night.

Of course, on a day like this, she would find a way to make him smile without having to know how much he needed it.

GIDEON

I'll manage.

See you soon.

ANYSSA

See you soon.

One thousand kisses.



GIDEON

Am I texting Anyssa Brandon?

ANYSSA

Yes. I'm cringe. I accept it.

GIDEON

You are.

You're also beautiful.

And all mine.

One thousand kisses.



Silina carefully walked down the stairs with the sleeping toddler in her arms, Daniela's head tucked against her neck. When she sat next to him, she switched to cradling Daniela.

This was the final nail.

Daniela looked nothing like Symon and didn't look enough like Silina for it to be a case of her taking after her mother. Silina had implied as much, yet, he'd held onto a wisp of hope.

"When did you find out?" he asked.

"Before her first birthday." She brushed the little girl's blond hair off her forehead. "I think, in a way, I already knew, but seeing those results..." She shook her head. "What you must think of me."

"It doesn't matter what I think of you."

"I kept your brother's death and Daniela's paternity from you, Gideon. Out of shame. I thought only of myself, never of how this would affect you."

"I know."

"You're not upset with me?"

"Fuck, yes, I am, but I don't hate you."

"I wouldn't blame you."

"Life's too short for unnecessary grudges, Lina."

Daniela yawned and stretched her stubby little limbs. Her eyes slowly opened, and when she spotted him sitting near her legs, she panicked until she spotted her mother above her.

He waved. "Hi, little one."

Her eyes returned to him, her brows narrowed.

"It takes her a while to warm up to strangers," Silina said.

"It's okay. I'm used to it. My girlfriend's son...it's safe to say he would bury me alive if he could. But her daughter and I, we're practically best

friends.”

“The boy’s older?” she asked.

He nodded.

“So he can tell that you’re interested in his mother.”

He rubbed suddenly damp palms on his pants. If he planned to lose it in the truck over missing his brother *and* stop at both offices as well as Anyssa’s house on the way back to his, he had to leave—now.

“Sniffed it out the minute I stepped foot onto my friend’s porch,” he said. “And I tried to hide it, but you should see her.”

“Pretty?”

“Gorgeous. Ambitious. Brilliant. High-strung, but she’s been letting her guard down, showing me a side of her that just...does something to me. And you know how you meet someone and wonder what kind of mother they would make? I already get to see her as a mother. If she and I were to have...” He derailed that train of thought. A lottery win would happen before he could give her children, if she wanted more. “She’s the kind of mother her kids can both love and look up to. Aspire to be like.”

Silina eyed him. “Does she know how Medvedev men are? How they love?”

“No, not yet,” he said, scratching the hair on his face. “If everything keeps going as it is, I could see us getting there.”

“You’re worse than your brother. Symon wasn’t dangerous. Love and lethality are not a stable mix.”

He looked off to the side, at the wedding picture. “I loved him, Lina,” he said, voice breaking. “He was my little brother. Yeah, we were only a year apart, and eventually, he grew as big as I am, but he was my kid brother. This world, it’s a fucked up place, you know? How am I the one who’s here when he should be sitting on this couch? I’m the one who should be six feet under.”

She squeezed his wrist. “Gideon, don’t say that.”

“Am I wrong? I turned my back on my family, my community. I’ve done unspeakable things for the Russian mafia.”

“Would your girlfriend agree that you should be the one who died?”

Anyssa would probably slap some sense into him without raising a hand.

“No,” he said. “And I should probably get back before she thinks I’m messing around with another woman.”

He stood.

Lina stood with him.

“Would she really think that?”

“I don’t know, to be honest.”

But he’d rather not take the risk.

She hadn’t yet been exposed to Medvedev dedication, and he didn’t know what it was like to be in love. There was no way to prepare either of them for what it would be like when he fell.

Things were going well between them, but he knew residual distrust from Chris’ infidelity continued to linger. This was a crucial time in getting her to trust him, and he didn’t want to lose what little traction he’d gained so far.

“How about you?” he asked. “Do you need anything? Does Daniela need anything?”

“I already told you that you don’t have to be like a father to her. Her biological father is not a deadbeat.”

“She’s still part of you, and we’re like family.”

They embraced.

“We’re good for now,” she said. “But I’ll let you know. Go see Symon.”

“I will. Bye, little one.”

Daniela raised a tiny hand, waving in response.

* * *

He entered the house to a sight almost as much of a turn-on as if he’d walked in on Anyssa naked with whipped cream dripping in dollops from her nipples.

Anyssa, wearing his shirt, lay on the sofa facing the TV with a blanket half strewn over her body. When she saw him, she smiled, and he walked over to drop a kiss on her lovely mouth. A kiss she dodged to see the TV better.

“Woman, if you don’t let me kiss you...”

“But they’re about to say who Ruslan’s father is.”

“Your point?”

She sent him a paltry air kiss, so he held her head steady and sucked on her bottom lip before prying both lips open with his tongue. He waited for her to engage, unable to resist his advances, but her eyes were glued to the TV.

Then she gasped.

“They’re twins?” She wriggled out of his grasp and shoved him aside,

pushing onto her knees on the sofa. “No, no, no. Let me get this right. Ruslan and Andriy are twins?”

Grumbling, he flopped down next to her.

“But wait, how can Andriy and Ruslan have different fathers?” Her eyes rounded. “Gideon, no. Were they switched at birth? So you’re trying to tell me Anatoly really was shooting blanks. Then that means—”

“Svetlana’s baby? It’s not his.”

She gasped so hard, she coughed, and he loved seeing her like this. Still, she’d denied his love, so he pretended to sulk for a while longer.

“By the way, your sandwich is on the counter,” she said, absentmindedly pointing toward the kitchen.

“I was promised a sandwich and something else.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. We ran out of pussy.”

He hooked her around the waist, toppled her onto his lap, and tried to take his kiss by force. She laugh-screamed, turning her head and pushing at his chest, but she was no match for his determination. When he probed at the seam of her mouth this time, she melted in his arms and welcomed his tongue.

He wrapped his arms around her, their bodies twisting and maneuvering until she was on her back, him hovering above her. He palmed her thighs, hand inching further until his fingers found their treasure.

“Well, well, well. Look what I found. You obviously didn’t look hard enough.”

He pushed the shirt up, exposing her bare flesh, but he didn’t take his time to run his finger along her slit, teasing and tempting her. The minute he had the shirt where he wanted it, he spread her legs and licked.

She nearly flew off the couch.

“God, Anyssa.” He kissed one inner thigh, then the other. “You are so responsive. You don’t know what that does to me.”

Unable to resist any longer, he covered her pussy with his mouth and tongued her clit in firm, slow strokes, gripping her thighs to keep her in place.

If loving the way she tasted, smelled, and the way her pussy felt pressed against his face made him crazy, then the minute he was done, he’d stand for the administration of the straitjacket. Should she try to walk away from him now, for any foolish or unrealistic reason, he wished her luck.

She would need it.

He plunged his tongue inside her.

She gyrated against him, riding his mouth, calling his name and making him want to fuck her so hard they broke the sofa.

While he speared her with his tongue, he massaged her clit in tight circles, and the most glorious sound he'd heard so far was Anyssa Brandon screaming his name, the pitch increasingly louder and breathier, until she came all over his lips.

Dick so hard it lowered his zipper, he waited for her to catch her breath and reached into a nearby side table.

She squeezed and stroked him through the zipper opening, so he dragged the whole thing to the floor and grabbed a condom. He'd stashed them anywhere he'd envisioned fucking her, and on the sofa had been in the top three.

When he entered her, they both moaned. It was an idiotic question to ask when he was almost balls deep inside her, but he asked anyhow.

“Are you sore?”

She nodded. “A little.”

“Want me to stop?”

“Could you even do that?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

“Don't stop, then.” She wrapped her legs around him, her ankles locked at his lower back. “Don't stop.”

He thrust. “Don't stop?”

“Don't stop.”

“Tell me how you want it.”

“Fuck me hard, Gideon.”

So he did.

He fucked her like he hadn't just fucked her last night, and in the middle of the night, and just before sunrise. He fucked her like he would never fuck again.

“Stay tonight,” he said, pelvis slamming against her. “And tomorrow. All weekend, stay with me.”

She moaned.

He thrust.

“Stay-with-me, Anyssa.”

“Yes, Gideon,” she said. “I'll stay.”

“All weekend.”

“All weekend, baby.”

Fuck, he loved when she called him that.

He leaned down to kiss her, and they smiled at the same time before his tongue was in her mouth, her tongue in his. He could fall for this woman. Effortlessly, he could fall for this woman. After everything that had occurred over the last few years, look at where he'd ended up.

With her.

Inside her.

About to come inside her.

She pulled away and stared into his eyes, cradling both sides of his face, and he saw the moment the orgasm took hold. That look had him right there with her, and when she crashed, it was with him as far inside her as she could take him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

He was supposed to meet with Pavel for them to oversee a training, yet he was in his office, sweaty and panting. Anyssa had spent the last several minutes bouncing on his cock, facing away from him, and gripping the edge of his desk.

She'd come down for them to have lunch together. That was supposed to be all that would happen. But she'd worn a fitted skirt, and before he knew it, his hands were underneath it, then her panties were off, and now, here they were.

"I'll see you later, right?" she asked, leaning back against his chest, her breasts partially popped out of her bra. "I know the other guy, Ezra, is escorting me home, but I'll see you after your training, right?"

He kissed the side of her damp neck. "Yes."

"Did you...want to stay after, you think?"

"Stay after with you, Micah, and Jordan?" Hope spun in his chest. "I'd love to. I can make dinner. You said they like quesadillas, right?"

"The cheesier, the better." She tilted her head. "If it's okay with you, I'm not ready to tell them about us yet."

He kissed the other side of her neck. "It's okay with me."

"But I'll tell Chris when he drops the kids off. I hope he doesn't use it as an excuse not to see them."

"Would he?"

"He has before."

"Okay."

She looked back at him over her shoulder. "That was an ominous okay."

"No, it wasn't." He drew a halo above his head. "It was an innocent

okay.”

“Be good.”

“Aren’t I always?”

She stood, facing him. “I wish I didn’t have to go back to work.”

“Me either. I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, baby.”

“Look at you, opening up your heart to me. The minute you leave, I’ll do a cartwheel.”

“I’ll dance around my office,” she said.

He fiddled around in his desk. “Do you really do that?”

“After I see you?” She nodded. “Yeah. Pretty much every time we leave each other.”

“Sit down.”

“Gideon, we can’t.”

“Get on my dick, Anyssa.”

She sat, her warm body hugging his erection.

“Yes, we can.” He thrust up into her. “Say it.”

“Yes, we can.” Her eyes rolled back. “Oh, god. Yes, we can.”

* * *

Combined with afternoon sex-related exhaustion, Pavel was, without a doubt, kicking his ass.

Gideon rolled onto his knees before rising to his feet. “Jesus, Volk. Did I hurt your feelings or something?”

Although their latest “recruits” had come highly vetted, they still put them through vigorous armed security training. Regardless of their proficiency with a gun, they had weapons training. Hand-to-hand combat included everything from close combat techniques with and without melee weapons to crowd control and security checkpoints.

Pavel stretched the muscles in his neck. “Yes.”

“Well, I’m sorry. You want a cookie?”

They grappled again.

Pain spread through him from the injury in his thigh and the one in his chest, but what if he was with Micah, Jordan, Niko, or Zaraia and had a pain episode? What if Anyssa needed him? Would he let a little—well, significant

—throb or ache threaten their safety?

Pavel grabbed him around the neck, but he fell back, bringing them both to the mat. For now, the training room was functional—ample space, floor padding—but a more defined space was in development.

Pavel tightened the hold.

He slapped the mat as tunnel vision set in.

Pavel released, and grateful for the session to be over, he went from the floor to his feet in one hop. Breathing hard and soaked in sweat, he pointed to one of the riveted onlookers posted around the room.

“James, you’re up. Cragen, you’re with him.”

He and Pavel left the training room.

“Your strength’s back up,” Pavel pointed out. “I could tell you started feeling pain there at the end, but it didn’t affect your maneuvers. If you’re going to be responsible for Anyssa, Micah, and Jordan, you need to be at full strength.”

“Worried about your sister-in-law?” he asked.

“My wife is.”

“How’s Zaraia doing?”

“I think she’s over being pregnant.”

“But she’ll be pregnant again soon.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?”

They split up.

Both his and Pavel’s offices had private showers, but there was a facility at the furthest end of their building with more of a gym set up for employees.

As the spray pounded his chest, rinsing the soap from his skin, his mind drifted to Anyssa. Training had wrapped up early, so on the way to her place, he’d pick up the ingredients for their quesadilla dinner.

He wanted to make a good impression, even on Jordan, although he didn’t need it. Jordan had it in her mind that he and Anyssa were “meant to be” in some way, fashion, or form, and he was right there on the same page. Every life they’d lived, they found one another. The idea sounded less far-fetched and more romantic now that they were together.

He turned off the spray and stepped out. After drying off, he tossed on a T-shirt and jeans and returned to his office. But then, a familiar figure walked by his window.

“What the fuck?” He went to the door and yanked it open. “Ezra, what the hell are you doing here?”

Ezra Ronan lowered the cauliflower pizza slice he'd raised to his mouth. "What do you mean, sir?"

"Don't fucking 'sir' me. You're supposed to be taking Anyssa home."

"I was, but then you sent that other guy...what's his name? Trent? Yeah, Trent."

"Who the fuck is 'Trent'?"

"Um—"

"Have you ever seen a Trent around here? We literally make sure you all know each other's faces, for this specific reason, and you let my girlfriend leave with a fucker whose face you've never seen?"

"But I thought you—"

"Know what? I'll let Volk deal with you. If I do, I'll kill you."

If anything happened to Anyssa because of the man's slight, he was a dead man anyway.

Ezra's face paled. "Sir, please, I..."

The rest of Ezra's words died at his back.

While waiting for the elevator, he tried Anyssa's phone, but it rang four times before going to voicemail.

GIDEON

Call me, Anyssa.

I'm on my way to your house.

The elevator doors opened, and he stepped inside, smashing the button for the thirteenth floor. The box barely settled before he stormed out, headed straight for Anyssa's office with her assistant, Aurora, on his heels.

"What time did she leave?" he asked.

"About a half hour ago," Aurora informed him.

"What car picked her up?"

"A black Continental, but I put an Air Tag on her."

He looked down. "One more time?"

"I'm a woman. We get paranoid. She doesn't know, but I put an Air Tag on her. Even if she's not looking at her phone, if it's nearby, you can track

her.”

“Aurora, I owe you. Huge.” He ticked his head. “Let’s go. You track. I’ll drive.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Anyssa chewed on the tips of her fingernails on one hand and annotated her case notes with the other. It was nice to step away from the iPad occasionally and feel the strike of a pen against paper.

Colm had finally furnished the information she needed to move to suppress the wiretapping. The witness testimony remained an issue, but there was no way a self-respecting judge would allow the witness to remain anonymous unless they wanted to set a shitstorm of legal precedents that would eventually backfire. She could see a federal court considering a ruling in favor of anonymity, but if a federal court couldn't bend and mold the Constitution to their liking, Georgia state law certainly couldn't.

After what felt like too long for them to still be driving, she raised her head. Nothing around them looked familiar.

"Excuse me?" She tapped the acrylic partition that separated her from the driver. "Trent, right? Where are we?"

He didn't turn, and a sinking feeling swelled in her stomach. She should have checked with Gideon. Gideon wasn't the one who'd talked to her about Trent, and foolishly, she didn't verify with him first.

She reached for her phone and found a missed call and a text from him. "Hey, Trent," she said, tapping to return the call. "Where the hell are we?"

The driver hit the brake.

She pitched forward, the phone dropping and her forehead smacking into the partition.

Ignoring the throbbing in her forehead, she searched the floor for the phone, but he smashed on the brakes again. The phone slid to the front, and her head smacked again, the shield catching a part of her eye.

Tears sprung.

Her vision blurred.

She pulled on a door handle, but the asshole had engaged the child locks.

The car rolled to a stop, and she looked around, praying her surroundings only looked like he'd parked on train tracks because of her injured eye.

The driver shut off the car, set the parking brake, and then turned around, a grin on his face and a pistol in his hand.

“Today’s the day you die, you cun—”

Blood and brain matter splattered against the see-through divider. The driver’s eyes rolled back in his head, at least what was left of it, as he slumped in the seat.

She tried to scream, but nothing came out. Then a horn sounded in the distance, not quite faint enough for her to convince herself it wasn’t headed directly for her.

“No. No, no, no.”

She tried the door again, ramming her shoulder against it. When that failed, she tried breaking the glass with a shoe heel, but it didn’t leave a crack.

The train’s lights appeared.

Tears dripped from her chin. It was too late. She wouldn’t have time to call everyone. She wouldn’t even have time to call 911. There was no way they would get to her quickly enough.

She searched the floor, reaching under the seat until her fingers landed on her phone, and she didn’t bother searching for Chris’ name. Instead, she dialed his number, the same one since their days at Spelman and Morehouse.

He answered on the first ring. “Hey, Nyssa. We’re on our w—”

“Chris, I’m about to die. Put the kids on the phone.”

“What?”

“Chris,” the lights rounded the corner, “put the kids on the phone. Please.”

“Nyssa? Nyssa, you’re not seri...kids, it’s Mama. It’s on Bluetooth, Nyssa. Please...please tell me you’re not serious.”

“Hi, babies.” She tried to keep the panic out of her voice; she didn’t want them to remember her last words as being laced with fear. “I love you, okay? I love you so much. Micah, please take care of your sister.”

The train had gotten close enough for her to make out the outline of its long, charging body. The driver lay on the horn, but it wouldn’t stop in time.

“Jordan, tell your stories,” she said. “Tell everybody about their other lives. I love you, my angels. Oh, God, Mama loves you so—”

Someone yanked her by the arm, so hard it nearly plucked her shoulder from its socket, out of the car. Seconds later, the train and the car collided, sending glass and metal spraying.

By then, she was on the ground, a larger body beneath hers at first, but then they rolled when the vehicles crashed together, shielding her from the debris.

She looked up into Gideon’s eyes, and it was the first time since meeting him that she saw any semblance of fear on his face.

Finally, she realized how close she’d come to a violent death, and the tears came with uncontrollable force, in screams and cries, shaking the life from her body. He lowered his head and touched the side of his face to hers, and the more she screamed, the tighter he held her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

She had a few sore ribs, a mild head contusion, and the glass had come close to cutting her eyeball. When Gideon brought her in, it was with her screaming and falling in and out of consciousness.

So, they shoved an IV into her arm.

A nurse pumped something into her IV bag that made her feel like she'd taken part in the lunar moon landing. This time, when she woke up, it was to Chris sitting in a chair in her hospital room, biting on his thumbnail, his leg bouncing.

"Chris?"

He hopped up and was at her side in two steps. "The kids are safe," he said. "They're with Zee. Paul and your guy friend, the big one, took them. Said he'd be back."

His eyes misted over, and he pressed his forehead to her stomach, punching the bed twice.

"Nyssa, what the hell?" he said, righting himself again. "When I got that call...*Jesus*. I can barely...my heart...I couldn't do it, Nyssa. I can't live without you."

His hands trembled.

She'd never seen him like this before, and had there been a different way, she wouldn't have called him the way she did.

"I need to..." He looked around, grabbed a chair from against the wall, and took a seat beside the bed. "I need to sit."

"Chris, I'm okay."

"Yeah, *now*." Tears clung to his lashes. "Now, you're okay, but moments ago, I thought I'd never hear your voice again. Never see your face. Jesus, I

can't stop shaking. Nyssa, look," he held her hand, as best as he could, "we're divorced, yeah, but our history's almost twenty years long. Married or not, I will always love you, and I can't believe I've acted like such an asshole. It's like I...no, it's not 'like I,' I *did* take having you around for granted. I thought you'd always be here. It never dawned on me that you might not be one day."

Her tears returned, and she held onto him as tightly as he held her. She gave him the space to talk, primarily because whenever he stopped, she heard metal crunching metal.

"Anyssa, I'm sorry," he said, and the agony in his voice came close to shattering her. "And no, this isn't the same sorry ass 'I'm sorry' I've been giving you since I fucked up our entire relationship. This is an 'I'm sorry I hurt you.' 'I'm sorry I threw away some of the best years of my life because you were part of them.' 'I'm sorry I didn't think about how all my shit would affect our family.' When I...when I heard you say you were about to die, it was like I got the wind knocked out of me. I knew you were trying to put on a brave face for the kids, but I've known you since we were college students without a clue what kind of mark we'd make on this world. What you hid, I heard—the fear, the panic. You were scared and alone, and where was I?"

"With our children," she said, sniffing.

"Whose time we have to split because of me." He punched the bed two more times. "Because of me, we shuttle them from house to house when it could have been us, together, in one place."

"Do you know what happened?" she asked.

"Yeah. The guy told me. Gideon. He was the one who came for you."

With how quickly he'd arrived, he had to have been tracking her. Somehow, he'd known she was in trouble, and without missing a beat, he'd come for her. There'd been nothing guaranteeing he would have gotten to her in time, or that they wouldn't both get hit by the train, but it didn't matter, hadn't mattered.

Then, that look in his eyes...

"Are you and Gideon seeing each other?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"Do the kids know?"

"No. Micah hasn't exactly warmed up to him."

"Can I trust him around our children?"

"Yes," she reassured him. "He was responsible for Niko when Niko was a

little younger. Sometimes, Pavel would be out of the country, and he'd trust Gideon with Niko. If Pavel vouches for him, he's a good guy. If he wasn't, he wouldn't be alive."

"He'd kill him?"

"Figuratively speaking," she lied. "So far, I see no reason to think he's not who he says he is, but I still want to take my time. I don't want to introduce him to them as someone important to me, in my life, and things don't work out."

He took her hand and squeezed. "How does he treat you?"

Why couldn't she stop crying?

Because you nearly just died, her thoughts admonished. *You stared death in the face, and you're wondering why you're crying? Gideon was afraid. What makes you think you wouldn't be?*

"He treats me like a queen," she said.

"After the call disconnected, he called me back to say you two were on your way to the hospital. I got here with the kids a little after you guys did, and he was raining hell down on the emergency room. If they'd taken any longer to see you, I'm sure this hospital would be on fire right now, the other patients be damned."

She was inclined to agree.

"How are you giving me the third degree on him, but you let him take the kids home?" she asked.

"One, your crazy ass brother-in-law was with him, and two, when I told Jordan she might not be able to see you tonight, she asked him to go with her. To keep her and Micah safe."

"Were you offended?"

"Hell no. This dude pulled you from a car seconds before it was crushed by a train. He had no idea he would make it in time, that he wouldn't be crushed with you, *but it didn't matter*. If he'll do that for you, he'll do it for our children."

The sound of metal crunching metal returned. Soreness throbbed in her shoulder where Gideon had dragged her, combined with the pain of the glass piercing the skin on her face and neck. However, that was the extent of it. Gideon had taken the brunt of the fall, and she wondered if he'd decided before or at the last minute whether a possible head injury would have been worse for her than a few tiny lacerations.

"Do you love him?" Chris asked.

She started to shake her head, but then she shrugged. “I don’t know. We’ve only known each other for a little over a month.”

“Think he loves you?”

“I think he did what he’s been trained to do, what I’m paying him to do. Or, at least, I will be, eventually. I’m just now realizing he’s never asked for money.”

“I’m paying for it.”

“What? How?”

“Zaraia called me,” he said. “She called me to tell me you were getting the protective detail and asked if I could do something similar when I had the kids. So, I got in contact with her scary husband. At first, Gideon planned to foot the bill, but I took over.”

Maybe she did love him.

What would be the harm in admitting it, if only to herself? Love had levels. This didn’t have to be love at level ten, but love was definitely on the scale.

“Nyssa, if that man doesn’t love you yet, what’ll happen when he finally does? World Wars Three through Five?” Chris paused, giving her a moment to let the insinuation sink in. “Anyway, I’m paying for it, and I amped up security at my building. I take the mornings and afternoons off now to take Micah and Jordan to school and pick them up. Then I work from home once they’re with me.”

This was all she’d wanted, Chris being more involved. Chris making the children a priority. Chris growing the hell up and not using the children as pawns. Had there been no cheating and no Gideon, they could have had a chance. All she’d needed was a near-death experience.

Unfortunately, she’d been spoiled by amazing dates, outstanding sex, and the comfort of being herself, whether that was clumsy, cringey, or confident.

Holy crap.

She did love him.

Right now, she was hopped up on sedatives, but the sedatives didn’t dull her awe over what he’d done for her, how he’d come for her. How he hunted her down and saved her. How he’d *needed* her.

Chris leaned down and kissed her forehead. “I’m gonna leave the kids at Zaraia’s for now,” he said. “Honestly, I think they’re safer there, and I don’t need them to see their dad crying like a baby, in the fetal position, in the condo hallway.”

She laughed.

“I’m only half-joking.” Smiling, he planted another kiss on her forehead. “I love you, Anyssa Brandon.”

“I love you too...Christopher Cross Carmichael.”

He groaned. “Did you know, if you make enough money, you can get your birth certificate altered? My folks still don’t know I changed it.”

“I always will, though.” She tapped her temple. “You’re the miggity-miggity-miggity-miggity Mack Daddy.”

“Yeah, they gave you the good stuff.” He backed away from the bed. “Get a little more rest, and I’ll stay here until Paul Bunyan returns.”

“Don’t call him that.”

“Dude is huge, Nyssa. I’m a tall guy, and I swear he only has, like, an inch and some change on me, but he’s like Viktor fucking Drago.”

She yawned.

Right before she drifted off, she heard Chris whisper, “I hope this guy gives you the world, Nyssa. And I pray he doesn’t make the same mistakes I did. I love you, but I pray he loves you the right way. The way a once-in-a-lifetime woman like you deserves to be loved.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Gideon leaned against the wall outside Anyssa's hospital room, his head pressed back against the painted surface. Pavel had dealt with Ezra, but from what they could tell, Ezra wasn't working with anyone. So, he was alive. For now. Had it not been for his aunt, he would have been compost.

The voice on the other line returned. "Arrived, sir."

"Move in three," he said. "One in one and two in two. Six in three."

"Everyone else?"

"Kill them."

He ended the call and waited before he entered the hospital room, but it wasn't because Chris was there. It was because, the moment he saw Anyssa, he'd see that look she'd given him.

That pure horror.

He'd never seen that look in the eyes of someone he cared about the way he cared for her, and he couldn't shake it.

While he'd been subjected to Yuri's torture, he'd lived a life where he'd known that one day, he could die in a very similar fashion. Whether he'd expected it to be in-house or from an enemy of the Brotherhood, he'd known it was a possibility.

Anyssa had left work and ended up on railroad tracks. She'd found herself locked in a car while watching a train roar her way, knowing she would die. Knowing that a call to 9-1-1 wouldn't have mattered. Screaming for help wouldn't have mattered. And for her never to experience that feeling again, he would have relived his situation with Yuri ten times over.

Composing himself, he rounded the corner. Chris looked up, slapped his hands on his thighs, and stood.

“How is she?” he asked.

“Drugged up.” Chris forced out a weak laugh. “But good.”

Chris’ eyes were red and swollen, and it was a paradox he’d come across many times in his life; men cheating left, right, and center, yet were still in love with the person they went home to.

It was the idea of wanting something “different,” though only physically, and perhaps it made him a jackass in the eyes of many men to not feel the same way, but he’d never find a fuck to give.

He’d watched his grandparents laugh together, fight and make up, spend hours sharing stories, and look at each other with a spark in their eyes he’d assumed, as a naïve young adult, had belonged to old people and fools.

However, he had fun when he was with Anyssa. He wanted to be around her and do regular, boring things like watch their ridiculous Eastern European dramas over the weekend, go to IKEA with the kids, or sit around the house all day. Then he wanted to take her to more black tie events to see her in gowns that made her skin shimmer as she stood in the middle of the room, underneath chandeliers, while he wondered if she knew how beautiful he found her.

To the rest of the world, she could look like Shrek. Still, he’d find zero fucks, no matter how far and wide he searched. To him, she was the embodiment of the statue of Venus.

Suddenly, Chris coughed as tears sprung from his eyes, but he quickly pulled himself together, clearing his throat.

“You don’t have to do that,” Gideon said, barely holding on himself. The experience of almost losing Anyssa somehow made Symon’s death more salient. All sorts of anarchy spiraled inside him, and his emotions dangled by a slowly unraveling piece of thread.

“Thank you for what you did today for Nyssa,” Chris said.

He waved away the apology. “You would’ve done the same thing if you could.”

“But I couldn’t. I can’t.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

Chris nodded, swiping at his eyes. “Sure. What’s up?”

“Why’d you do it?”

Chris sighed, his chest rising and falling. “I’ve asked myself that question a dozen times and still don’t have a good answer. And the sad thing is, if it had been only one woman, I feel like me and Nyssa could have worked it out.

Of course, it would have taken time, but we could have worked it out.”

Gideon internally shrugged.

Maybe if he'd never shown up.

“I love Anyssa, and that won't ever change,” Chris continued. “You don't spend all those years with someone, have two kids with them, and it just disappears. I could say it's because the other women made me feel special, but Nyssa made me feel like more than a man. She made me feel like she was proud to call me her husband. Those women? They wanted my money. Yeah, they were attracted to me, but ultimately, I never knew whether they wanted me or what I could buy them. Anyssa wanted me. All she wanted was for me to come home, share the responsibility of caring for our kids, and then cuddle with her on the sofa. To make her feel beautiful, wanted, and needed. She wanted me to make her feel the way she put in time and effort to make me feel, and I was too fucking selfish to see that.”

Chris cocked his head to the side, brows sinking into a V. Gideon waited for the epiphany to reveal itself, having already decided what had driven Chris to do what he did, but it looked like the man needed a space to vent.

So, he let him vent.

“I think that's why I cheated,” Chris said. “Because, at the end of the day, I'm selfish.”

Gideon folded his arms. “Possibly.”

“Have you ever—”

“No, but I don't get my ego boosts from conquering women. I'm fine with being proficient in my career, making money, and spending time with my family.” There was also something worthwhile about the journey of finding different ways to love someone, and it was where he preferred to spend his energy.

“No offense taken,” Chris seemed to be unnecessarily reassuring him. “Man to man, are you in love with Anyssa?”

Gideon looked over at her sleeping peacefully. When he saw Ezra walk in front of his office window, he'd realized that Anyssa might be his “one.”

The one.

He'd never felt greater panic, and the idea that he didn't know where she was or whether she was safe would have driven him out of his mind if he hadn't needed a clear head to find her.

The way he felt when he was with her and the things he'd done already to better ensure her safety were like lightbulbs and flashing neon lights.

You-flash-love-flash-her.

Gideon-loves-Anyssa.

“I think I might be,” he said.

“You’d do that for someone you ‘might’ be in love with?” Chris asked.

“Yes. I gave her my promise of protection.” However, had it not been Anyssa, he wouldn’t feel like a tower about to crumble if someone removed one more brick. He would have been able to process the images of her fear and the sounds of her screams, but because it was her, it would take weeks before either grew faint.

“And that protection extends to Micah and Jordan,” he added.

“I appreciate that.” Then Chris chuckled, head shaking. “Although I heard Micah’s on the fence about you.”

“On the fence is putting it mildly.”

“Nah, he doesn’t hate you. If I know my son, he just needs to talk to you, man to man.” Chris extended a hand. “I’ll put in a good word.”

“I appreciate that,” he said. “I’ll take all the help I can get.”

They shook hands.

Chris sent one last parting glance over his shoulder.

Eyes filling again, he sighed and left.

Gideon walked over to the bed. Their first line of business would be ramping up security, and never again would he give the responsibility of Anyssa’s protection over to someone else. His schedule would work around hers, and rather than delegate protective duties, he would hand off his other responsibilities.

A nurse entered the room, one he remembered from his tirade in the emergency wing entrance, and she flashed him a smile.

“Is she really okay?” he asked.

The nurse nodded. “Yes, she’s okay. Are you? Have you calmed down from earlier?”

“Barely.”

Interestingly enough, they didn’t call security, not that it would have mattered. They’d probably seen people like him before, replacing their fear with anger that escalated the more profound the fear became.

“You were a terrifying guy.”

“More like ‘terrified’ guy,” he said.

It wasn’t that he’d never been afraid before in his life. He was a human, and fear could be powerful as an emotion and a weapon. Yet, saying it out

loud wasn't something he often did.

"You guys must have been together a long time."

"How do you figure?"

"You didn't see yourself." She retrieved a pen from her scrubs, squinted at Anyssa's monitors, and scribbled on the heel of her palm. "If someone didn't come to help you, you would have triaged her yourself. Operated, if she'd needed surgery."

"If you had to guess, how long do you think we've been together?"

"About three years. Am I close?"

He ticked his head in her direction. "On the money."

She finished recording Anyssa's vitals and waved as she left. He started to sit in the empty chair at Anyssa's bedside, but first bent to press a kiss on her brow and at the corner of her mouth.

"The driver got off the easiest tonight." He gave her brow another kiss. "Goodnight, sweetheart. Sleep well."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ANYSSA

Hey, are you at the hospital? I was hoping to see you. I need another dose of Medvedev-mouth.

GIDEON

That makes it sound like you're asking for gum disease.

And that I have gum disease.

ANYSSA

I'm so bad at this.

GIDEON

Very bad.

But I'll be back soon.

And Volk said Zaraia's having "pangs."

ANYSSA

What???????????

Baby Aleks is on his way??

I need to get out of this place. Did you talk to her or Pavel? Is she okay? Is she scared?

GIDEON

Talked to her and Volk.

She says she's all right.

She's more worried about you.

ANYSSA

Oh, I'm fine.

Keep me updated? Pretty please?

She sent him a gif of an orange cat, its eyes wide and sorrowful as it gripped a Three Musketeers-looking hat. He could see her making that face, looking up at him, cute as fuck. However, there wasn't much she'd have to beg him for.

GIDEON

Of course.

ANYSSA

Thank you. And I know I'll see you soon, but I miss you anyway, poop.

GIDEON

Poop?

ANYSSA

OH GOD.

NOT AGAIN.

THE UNIVERSE HATES ME.

That was supposed to be *pooh.* Like Winnie the Pooh. Like a play on the *bear last name* thing.

GIDEON

My girlfriend's nickname for me is Poop.

I've officially hit rock bottom.

ANYSSA

The nurse is looking at me weird because I'm laughing so hard. I think they think I snuck more drugs.

What about I miss you...Lovebug?

GIDEON

Lovebug?

I'm listening.

ANYSSA

Fuzzy wuzzy?

GIDEON

And she's headed the other way.

ANYSSA

Lol.

Okay, what about Snuggles?

GIDEON

You have my attention.

ANYSSA

Snugga-bear?

GIDEON

I don't hate it.

I'll accept it for now.

And I miss you too, sweetheart.

One thousand kisses.

ANYSSA

One thousand kisses, baby.

Gideon tucked away the phone and scanned the six chairs in the middle of the warehouse, all in a row, a man tied to each one. He only recognized one of the faces, the blond fucker at one end, so he started on the opposite side. That asshole, he wanted to save for last.

The first man looked up, defiance on his green-tinted face, his hair plastered to his forehead.

“Do you know a Trent?”

The man squeezed his lips together.

“No? Okay.”

He struck a match, tossed it on the man, and moved to the next one. He didn't have time for the entire “I'll never snitch” bullshit. Keeping one's mouth shut was expected in any criminal organization, from mafias to gangs, and he commended anyone who could do it while being burned alive. To his dismay, this guy did eventually scream the minute the flame touched his gasoline-soaked skin; however, at least he'd kept to the code of the Tuath Dé.

“What about you?” he asked the second man.

This one trembled, bubbles forming at the corner of his mouth.

“How about this?” He removed a second match and struck it against the side of the box. “Do you have anything to do with the incident involving Anyssa Brandon?”

The man shook his head.

“No? I believe you.”

He tossed and moved onto the third.

Now, they were all yelling and screaming. Yet, when they were first brought in, they spat in frothy streams and slung curses, promising they would never give up any information or turn their backs on their “people.”

“Trent,” he repeated.

“He’s not one of ours,” the third man said. “I heard about the incident, but we never had a Trent. It’s not an Irish name.”

He struck a match, tossed it, and moved on.

When he came to the fourth man, he asked no questions. Instead, he lit him on fire. The guy had one of “those” faces. The kind that rubbed most people the wrong way.

The fifth one passed out, but the last man raised his chin in defiance. Unlike his brethren, he’d remained in control of his faculties and at least attempted to hide his fear.

What had O’Sullivan called him?

Dougan?

In Athens, *Dougan* had seemingly had a lot to say to Anyssa. If memory served him correctly, *Dougan* had attempted to draw a gun on Anyssa. Yet, the guy was mysteriously quiet now.

Gideon nodded at the doorway. The fifth man was taken away, and Dougan watched until the man’s chair, his limp body flopping, disappeared through the door. Even after the fifth man left, Dougan continued to stare at the door, that chin no longer firm.

This was a mild punishment.

An easy punishment.

“I might know something, but there’s no point in tellin’ you,” Dougan said. “Even if I do, you’ll still kill me. Kill me, then. I have no family. Nothin’ you can use over me.”

Gideon snapped his fingers.

Two men stepped forward. One held Dougan’s head while the other poured gasoline into his mouth until he gagged. Afterward, the two men

withdrew the gas can and returned to their positions along the wall.

Gideon lit a match. “You’re right, you know. I’ll still kill you, so why tell me anything? But what if I didn’t kill you?”

Dougan looked at the bodies next to him, and his face paled. Half of the first man’s face was only exposed muscle and tissue. The second one had half his frame torn through. Fire had eaten away the third man’s pant leg before devouring the skin on his thigh down to the bone, and the fourth had taken a match to the zipper.

Gideon grabbed Dougan’s hair and tugged his head back, lowering the match to Dougan’s lips.

“There...there’s a hit,” Dougan screamed, bottom lip trembling. “I overhead Brogan and O’Sullivan chattin’ about it. I don’t know who’s behind it or who it’s for, but I know it’s not us.”

Gideon outed the match. “And how do you know that?”

“I guess...I guess I don’t.”

“When you heard O’Sullivan and Brogan chatting, did you hear Anyssa Brandon’s name come up in any part of that conversation?”

Dougan nodded. “Yes, but not in the way you might be thinkin’.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Then what way?”

“You know...”

“No, I don’t know, so why don’t you fucking explain it to me?”

“She’s a pretty lass, and she’s got a bit of bite in her. O’Sullivan and Brogan, they were talkin’ about tag-teamin’ her.”

What the fuck was the obsession with these assholes and power over pussy? Regardless of the wealth and notoriety they’d amassed, there was always one, or a group of them, who saw forcing a woman to perform sex acts as confirmation of their prowess.

Anyssa was a prime target because she didn’t back down, even as they’d threatened her. Unfortunately, if they’d made a play for what they were after when she was alone, they would have overpowered her. That they couldn’t match her intellectually would have made them resort to the one area where they could “conquer” her. Gratefully, giant fuckers like him with short fuses existed to step in when her fists wouldn’t be enough.

“It’s hypocrisy, you know,” Dougan continued. “You fightin’ for her and doin’ this to me. Wantin’ her safe, but wantin’ to kill me.”

Gideon frowned. “When it comes to the people I care about, there is no line I won’t cross.”

“You have your information. Do you mean to kill me? Pour gasoline down my throat and light me on fire?”

“No. Why would I do that?”

The two men opened the single door in the room.

Dougan gasped for air.

“See, there’s a reason your chair’s the only one with wheels,” Gideon said, kicking the chair toward the door. “You’re special, Dougan. Did you know that? You pointed a gun at my lady.”

“Please, don’t do this. Whatever you need, I’ll get the information for you.”

They exited the building onto a platform. From where they stood, they could basically see all of Georgia. It was funny the things one could find if they had disposable income and grit.

Gideon kicked the chair to the very edge of the platform, let a wheel tip over the edge, and then dragged it back at the last minute, Dougan screaming at the top of his lungs. Then he left it tipped right at the brim of the landing.

“You’re a lucky guy,” he said. “Out of the people who could be here with you today, you got the nicest one.”

He passed a rope through the back of the chair and walked to the other end of the platform, where he looped it around a column. One of the men joined them outside, a flamethrower in hand.

Dougan looked back and forth between them. “Please. I’ll get you anything you need.”

“Here is rope,” Gideon said, gesturing. “Here is fire. The fire will be pointed at your rope until it burns to nothing. At which point, your chair will tip over the—”

He lodged a bullet between Dougan’s eyebrows.

The chair rolled backward and off the edge, and the man returned inside with the flamethrower he’d had no intention of using.

As if he had time for parlor tricks and shit.

* * *

Gideon kept an eye on the kids as Niko held the front door open at Anyssa’s house. Jordan raced inside, but Micah lagged behind, dragging his feet and tossing looks over his shoulder.

After Anyssa was discharged, he went to Pavel and Zaraia's to get the kids, but with Zaraia's pains increasing in intensity, he offered to take Niko while they headed to the hospital.

It was like a revolving door.

As Anyssa left, Zaraia went in.

Anyssa wanted to go with Zaraia, but he quickly won that argument by reminding her that she had sore ribs, had recently experienced a traumatic event, and Zaraia wouldn't want her to put herself at risk for any further harm.

"Can you hold the door for me, too, Niko?" he asked, needlessly repositioning Anyssa in his grasp.

Could she have walked?

Probably.

"Of course, Gideon. Come on in." Niko waved them in, and Micah walked so slowly that he and Anyssa nearly caught up to him.

He carried Anyssa over the front door threshold and the one that led to the owner's suite before setting her on her bed. She grumbled the entire time, but he knew she loved it when he acted all valiantly, like the knight and queen of their former lives.

The hospital had dismissed her reasonably late in the afternoon, so he'd heard the kids' stomachs grumbling on the drive over. Fast food would have been quick and easy, but he was auditioning for a role. Right now, he had to bring his best.

"I'm gonna get the kids a snack and then toss something together," he said, crouched in front of her. "Do you think you'll be all right to shower and get dressed?"

"Yeah, I—"

"Because I don't mind helping you. It's," he put on the most modest expression he could muster up, "a lot of work, yes, but I'd do that for you, Anyssa. That's just the kind of man I am."

She laughed. "Um, I think I can manage."

"Are you in any pain?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

"Do you need me to grab you anything before I start dinner?"

She stared at him, then smiled. "You know, my first instinct is to be afraid of this. To think you're doing this with an ulterior motive."

"Doing what?"

“Being nice to me.”

“This isn’t being nice to you,” he said. “Jordan and Micah aren’t officially my responsibility, sure, but I’m the only fully operating adult right now.”

“I take offense. You make me sound like a Barbie doll with an arm popped off that a kid forgot in the corner.”

He patted her knee. “Right now, that’s exactly what you are, sweetie. That’s exactly what you are.”

She rolled her eyes.

He grinned.

“We’ll talk later?” she asked. “After the kids go to bed?”

As he stood, he gave her a quick kiss. “Of course. Take your shower, and I’ll finish up out here.”

While she took her shower, he got the kids situated and found a few cartons of yogurt that he dished out as a pre-dinner snack.

Micah took the offer, though with a heavy dose of reluctance and suspicion, and he caught Micah sniffing the container as if it contained a poisonous substance.

Then, although he’d overheard them conspiring by telling Jordan to ask him for cookies because “*you have him wrapped around your little finger, Jordan,*” he gave them the cookies anyhow.

He cooked.

They played.

By the time Anyssa joined them, wearing a soft cami and cotton shorts, he’d made a hefty portion of chicken quesadillas, rice—without cilantro, unless he wanted Micah to hate him forever—and a side of queso the way Anyssa said Micah liked it.

Years of loneliness in Vegas gave him time to perfect a cookbook’s worth of recipes. The food was good, but it was good to his standards. Culinary talent didn’t stop him from worrying that he and Micah might never be on amicable terms. That he would forever be the interloper.

He called everyone to the table.

Micah and Niko raced for their seats while Jordan yelled for them to slow down, although she was running herself, just falling behind.

He and Anyssa let the kids lead the conversation, Jordan and Niko chatting away while Micah inspected his quesadilla.

When Micah took a bite of the packed tortilla, sighed, and leaned back

against his chair, Gideon felt a relief unmatched by any other, except for seeing Dom walk through the doorway of the house in Moscow.

It wasn't everything, but it was something.

Trust could be built on "something."

By the end of dinner, Micah hadn't said a word, but he'd polished off six slices of the quesadilla.

It was late, so Anyssa monitored them as they showered, brushed their teeth, and climbed into bed while he cleaned up. Then she told him she was going to lie down but promised she wouldn't fall asleep. He wasn't looking for anything raunchy, but she wanted to talk, and he wanted to hear how she was coping with everything thus far.

"Gideon?" a small voice called from behind him.

Wearing a pair of navy blue pajamas, Micah stood watching him from the hallway opening.

"Oh, hey, Micah. What's up?"

"Can I show you the pool?"

Micah looked like he weighed no more than sixty pounds. Yet, his first instinct was to think that Micah wanted to lure him outside, push him into the pool when he wasn't looking, and then hold his head underwater.

"Sure."

Micah spun and headed for the back doors.

He followed.

He could admit to being afraid of a kid. Anyssa and the kids were a package deal, and he would be as loyal to them as he planned to be to their mother—if they let him.

Starting with this adorable gatekeeper.

There wasn't much to show, but Micah gave him a rundown of all the parts of the backyard oasis. He'd glimpsed it through the doors, but it was nothing like seeing it up close. It was like he'd stepped out of Georgia and onto a Caribbean island.

In his mind, he saw him replicating this for Anyssa, but then he wondered whether it was selfish to expect her to give up her lush lifestyle to live a pseudo-farm life with him should their relationship continue to head in a, "I'm marrying this woman" direction.

"And that part is the cove," Micah said, finishing his tour. "It's supposed to be a space for Mama to relax, but me and Niko climb on top and jump off."

Gideon laughed. "You sound like me and Symon."

"Who's Symon?"

"My little brother."

"Oh."

Though taller than Niko, the kid was so tiny compared to him. And while there were positive aspects to getting older and gaining more wisdom about the world, he wished Micah, Niko, and Jordan never had to learn how much people often hurt others. Childhood seemed endless through the eyes of a child, but looking back, he saw how fleeting it all had truly been.

"Gideon, are you my mom's boyfriend?"

He choked on a sprinkle of saliva.

"Because you're *always* with her."

He and Anyssa hadn't discussed telling the kids about them. She'd wanted to wait the last time they'd spoken about it.

"I'm..." He swallowed, his throat scratchy. "No, I'm not your mother's boyfriend."

"But you want to be her boyfriend?"

"I won't lie to you. Yeah, I do."

Micah looked up at him. "And you're her bodyguard too?"

"Yes. I'm her bodyguard too."

"Niko said you're really good at being a bodyguard." Micah extended a finger in his direction. "Don't let anything happen to my mom. If you do, I'll never like you."

"I won't let anything happen to her," he promised. "And I do hope we can be friends someday."

"If my mom gets hurt or dies because of you, it'll be never-day."

"You have my word, Micah."

They stood in silence, the bubbling water a source of white noise. Micah had shoved his hands into the pockets of his pajama pants, tapping his toe on the pool's stone surround. Gideon didn't speak, allowing Micah the space to get the courage to say something that was evidently going to be uncomfortable for him.

"Can I tell you a secret, Gideon?"

Gideon placed a palm on his chest. "Yes, and I'll never tell a soul."

"The pool? It's just okay. I like Auntie Zee and Uncle P's house better. The old one and the new one. They have a backyard."

"You like backyards?"

“Yeah. I like running around,” he shrugged, “and stuff. I know a lot of people are impressed by our pool, but it’s just okay to me.”

“What would you like your backyard to look like?”

“It’s stupid.”

“Stupid can be good.”

“And it’s girly.”

“I bet you it’s not.”

Micah sighed, shoulders falling. “I want...a garden.”

Gideon felt his heart warm over. “If that’s girly, then we’re both girly. I want a garden too.”

“Really?”

“Heck, yeah.”

“Not just for flowers, either,” Micah said, growing more animated by the second. “You know how people sell fruits and vegetables at The Farmer’s Market? I want to do that. And I want to give some to people who can’t buy their own, for free, like we do at church. That way, they’ll have something to eat.”

Gideon crouched, shoving aside the soreness in his thigh. “Micah, we might have been best friends in one of our other lives. I want to do the same thing. See, my grandfather was a farmer. He grew a lot of wheat, but we had fruits and vegetables. And chickens.”

Micah’s eyes lit up. “I want chickens too! Maybe a cow, but I don’t know yet. Definitely chickens, though. Daddy said I’m smart, so I can be an engineer like him when I grow up, but I think I might want to be a farmer.”

“You have more than enough time to decide,” Gideon reassured him. “And you’re a lot like your mother, brilliant and determined, so I know you’ll make the right decision when the time comes.”

The tension between them eased noticeably, and an imprint of a smile remained on Micah’s face.

“Can I ask you something, man to man, Micah?”

Micah squared his shoulders, chin firm. “Yes.”

“If part of my job in keeping your mom safe might include moving, would that be a bad thing, you think?”

Micah shook his head. “Not if it’ll keep my mom safe.”

“What if I end up having to move you guys to my house for a little bit?”

“Is your house safer than ours?”

“Right now, yeah.”

Micah, brows narrowed, contemplated the situation, his index finger tapping his chin. “Do you have a backyard?”

“My backyard’s so big, I think I might have accidentally bought three of them.”

“Would I have to share a room with Jordan?”

“Nope. I have more than enough space for you to have your own room,” Gideon said. “But, if I’m being honest, right now, it’s not as nice as your house yet, but I’ve been working on it.”

“Did you buy it that way on purpose, like the people on that TV show my mom watches all the time?” Micah asked.

“Yeah. That way, I can add my own stuff and make it truly mine.”

“Do you have a garden?”

“Yes.”

“Chickens?”

“Not yet, but I could use your help picking some out.”

“You’ll need roosters, too,” Micah said. “I don’t know why you need chickens and a rooster. I think it’s a grown-up thing.”

Gideon laughed. “It is.”

Micah laughed with him for a moment, but then his face turned serious. “Gideon, is my mom in danger?”

He sighed. “I think she might be.”

“Why do you always tell me the truth?”

“Because I know you can handle it.” He stood, bones lengthening and muscles stretching, pinpricks of pain moving through him like fireworks. “You’re a strong kid.”

Micah and Anyssa had the same habit, he realized. When they wanted to smile, but something told them they weren’t supposed to or it wasn’t a good time, they chewed the insides of their mouths to death.

“When do we leave, then?” Micah asked.

“I want to check some things out first, but it won’t be a long time from now.”

Micah nodded. “All right. Then it’s okay.”

They headed for the doors, but Micah gripped one of his fingers, stopping him.

“Can I tell you one more secret, Gideon? And you have to promise not to tell Mama. You can’t tell Mama.”

Gideon eased back down into a crouch. “I promise. Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong. I feel like I kinda have to tell somebody, and I don’t know why, but I want to tell you.”

“I promise I won’t say a word.” Unless he found out it had something to do with someone hurting Micah. He would say words, but the words would be a parting prayer as the offender’s body slipped into the great beyond.

“I’m so scared.” A surge of tears sprung from Micah’s eyes, slipping down his cheeks and dripping from his chin. His nose reddened, his eyes gradually following suit. “My teachers at school said my mom’s work case is really dangerous. Even my dad said so. And I know adults have to sugarcoat things sometimes, but I don’t think my mom was in a car accident. I think somebody...I think somebody tried to hurt her. I don’t get why people keep trying to hurt her. First my dad, and now somebody else. Did she do something? Is she mean to everybody else that’s not in her family?”

Gideon felt his throat shrink to a third of its size. “She didn’t do anything, and she’s not mean. Some people might call her that because she won’t let them walk all over her, but that’s not mean. That’s assertive. Being assertive is a good thing.”

“So why do people keep trying to hurt her?”

“Because...” He hesitated, unsure how to broach the topic without stealing Micah’s innocent view of the world. “Sometimes bad people don’t like to see good people have anything. They don’t like to see them succeed or win or be happy. Sometimes, they even convince the good person they’re the bad one. So, you see, it’s not that the good person’s done anything. Bad people are miserable and lonely, and instead of trying to become better people, they try to make other people miserable too.”

“But you’ll keep her safe?” Micah asked, rubbing at his nose.

“I’ll keep you all safe, Micah.”

More tears fell. “I didn’t...I didn’t like you.”

“I picked up on that.”

“I wanted my mom and dad to be together again.”

“And you thought I was going to get in the way?” Gideon asked.

“I knew you were. Jordan said so. I was hoping she was wrong, but when you showed up at Uncle P’s house the same day she said you would, I realized she was right. That, in all of your other lives, you and my mom love each other.”

A single sentence, and it hit him right in the gut.

He knew it was a child’s tale, but he found himself leaning into it. After

all, he'd ended up here. He'd found Anyssa. All the correct variables had fallen into place.

Yuri could have chosen not to betray him.

Chris could have remained faithful.

Pavel and Dom could have failed to get to him in time.

"What about now?" he asked. "Do you dislike me a little less?"

Micah's head bobbed. "Yeah. Niko's my best friend, and he loves you, so I thought I should try to like you a little. But we had to talk first."

"And I'm happy we did. You are a great person to talk to, Micah, and I'm glad I have someone to garden with now."

"Gideon?" Micah's face twisted, and his mouth tugged with the promise of another round of tears. "Can I have a hug? Is that okay?"

"Of course."

The minute he opened his arms, Micah stepped into them and bawled on his shoulder. It had already been solidified, but this made his promise even more crucial. Nothing would happen to Anyssa or the kids. If anything happened to them on his watch, he didn't deserve their trust or a place in their lives.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

By the time he'd showered, brushed his teeth, changed into a T-shirt and shorts, and finished fixing up the front room, Anyssa had fallen asleep.

He went to the bed, brushed a kiss across her lips, and watched her for a little while she slept. After, he'd head to a guest room. According to what Anyssa had told him, Jordan generally slept through the night, but Micah was prone to waking up. He'd only recently gotten on Micah's good side, and all that hard work would be flushed if Micah walked in on him spooning with his mother.

He started for the door.

"Wait, Gideon." Anyssa yawned. "I'm up."

"No, you're not."

"I am. Your kiss woke me up."

"So you're sleeping beauty now?" He returned to the bed and climbed in next to her. "Technically, you're a beauty who was asleep, so I'll give you that one."

She brought his hand to her lips, kissing the scar on his palm, and it was the most intimate gesture he'd ever experienced. This woman had let him come down her throat, yet that kiss felt more personal. That single, otherwise chaste kiss had left him feeling the most unguarded.

"I feel like you're getting ready to tell me you're in love with me," he joked.

She turned onto her side, tilting her head up slightly on the pillow's silky surface to look at his face. "Want to play twenty-one questions?" she asked. "It's a game where we each ask a series of questions that the other has to answer truthfully. That part's the caveat. No matter the question, it must be

answered truthfully.”

He turned onto his side, mirroring her. “Sounds fairly straightforward. I’m in.”

“Okay, then. I’ll start.” She hooked her fingers with his. “My first question is...how do you feel about everything going on in your home country?”

If that was the first question, he was already looking forward to the rest.

“Honestly, I’ve been trying not to read too much about it,” he said. “In the beginning, it was all I did, hour after hour, but every news article left me in an unhealthy mental space. Now, I pace myself, checking in periodically.” The tipping point had been the Mariupol Hospital airstrike. It had taken weeks before he could sleep through the night and months before the vivid dreams stopped plaguing him. “Everything I read says that Ukraine is taking a stronger position daily, but I know nothing will ever be the same. It will always be home, but it’ll never be like it was.”

“That’s a beautiful answer, babe,” she said, staring at him, smiling, and he would have given anything to know what went through her mind when she looked at him like that.

“Are you ready for another question?”

He nodded.

“Okay, number two. Say, hypothetically, we slip up, and I end up pregnant.”

It wouldn’t happen.

Still, he wouldn’t ruin the game for her.

“But then something happens during the pregnancy, and it comes down to saving me or the baby. Who are you saving?”

“Easy. You,” he said. “It makes no sense to lose you, no matter what the TV shows say, and statistically, you have a better chance of living. Plus, what if that’s God’s way of keeping another serial killer off the planet?”

She laughed. “You do have a point.”

“I like these. Keep going.”

“Okay...when’s your birthday?”

“December fourteenth.”

She raised her head off the pillow. “December fifteenth. Thank God.”

“Why ‘thank God’?”

“Now, I can claim being only five years older than you.” She settled back onto the pillow. “Let’s see. What’s another good one? Oh, here we go. If you

could travel back in time, what period would you choose and why?”

“One, I won’t be asking you that question for obvious reasons,” he began, “and two...back to when we were a queen and knight taking on an army. Now that I’m thinking about it, though, why am I not a king?”

“Maybe I was married to the king, but I fell in love with you, and we had an illicit affair,” she said.

“And we have a love child,” he added.

“Then the king finds out.”

“But before he can execute me, war breaks out, and I must choose between the woman I love and the kingdom I swore to serve.”

“Then...the season ends.” She let the sentence fade, adding a wave of her arm for effect. “By the way, what season are we on of *The Lies We Tell While Eating Blood Oranges*?”

“Four,” he said. “And yes, we did kind of go off the deep end, which happens to be one of my favorite English phrases.”

“What’s another one?”

“One of my teachers taught me what ‘raggedy’ and ‘dusty’ meant, and I’ve been waiting for the day I get to tell someone they look ‘dusty.’”

“Were any of them Black?” she asked.

“A couple of my teachers were. The point was to give me as diverse an ‘education’ as possible. What I didn’t learn via instruction, I learned via TV, film, and everyday interaction.”

“Makes sense.” She gave him a quick scan. “You do have a certain ‘swag’ about you.”

“Another favorite.”

“Okay, fifth question...what’s one thing on your bucket list?”

“What’s a bucket list?”

“It’s a list of things you want to do before you die. Before you ‘kick the bucket,’ so to speak.”

“Oh, sure, I have one of those.” He had an answer ready but pretended to take time to think. “Just one thing? Then I’ll say...get married.”

She buried her face in the pillow. “*Gideon*.”

“What?”

“You’re supposed to say something like...climb Mount Everest.”

“Like fuck I’ll climb Mount Everest. What if that’s the first thing on my bucket list, and then I die? What then, Anyssa?”

She laughed until she gasped, and he gently nudged her face free of the

pillow for her to look at him. When their gazes connected, he felt it over every square inch of his body.

“Number six,” he said.

“Fine, number six. What’s a favorite song of yours?”

“Do classical compositions count?”

“Yes.”

“‘Un Sospiro’ by Franz Liszt. It captivates me from start to finish.”

“Do you play any instruments?”

“No, but if I did, it would be the piano.”

“Yeah, I can see you playing the piano.” She delicately stroked his forefinger with the tip of hers. “You do have sort of...erotic fingers.”

He raised his hand, spreading his fingers wide. “I have *what?*”

“Number ten.”

“No, let’s go back to the erotic fingers.”

“Number ten.” She cleared her throat. “I’m getting serious now. How old were you when you had your first kiss?”

He hesitated.

“Honest answers only.”

“Fine.” He groaned. “Nineteen.”

“Nineteen?”

“Scream a little louder, sweetheart. I think they didn’t hear you in Nashville.”

“But you’re so,” she gestured to him, “sexy.”

“I was lower-level Bratva and more focused on making a name for myself than anything else,” he explained. “One night, I went with an enforcer to collect dues from a small grocery store that paid money to the Bratva for protection. The owner’s twenty-nine-year-old daughter was there. While the enforcer handled business, she started up a conversation with me. Then she told me to come back later.”

“And you assumed it was for sex?”

“Truthfully, I thought it was Bratva-related. So, when I got there, she called me up to her apartment above the store. I still thought nothing of it. Then she opened the door, and there she stood, naked as the day she was born.”

Anyssa pumped her hips. “Then you two did it.”

“I ran. Like hell.”

“What? Why?”

“I’d never been kissed, Anyssa. I knew even less about sex, and a woman that confident scared the shit out of me.”

“But she was your first kiss. That means you went back.”

“I did, and I learned much about how to please a woman. Therein began,” he pointed to himself, “Gideon’s ‘ho’ journey.”

Another favorite word.

She pretended to shove him away from him, but he pulled her close and squeezed her against him until he remembered her sore ribs—sore ribs she didn’t complain about when they should have hurt with how tight he’d held her.

“Don’t be jealous. Am I not all the better for it? You enjoy the things I do to you because I took the time to learn how to do them right.”

“I guess.” She rolled her eyes, gnawing away at the inside of her cheek. “What number are we on?”

“Eleven.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

He shook his head. “No, but honestly, I wasn’t open to it before I met you.”

Her breath caught in her throat, and he hoped his response gave her a clue as to what his twenty-first question would be.

“Wow, that’s...wow.” She cleared her throat. “Um...twelve. Twelve, right? Yeah, twelve. What’s your biggest fear?”

“Giving my all to something—a person, a cause, a venture, an organization—and it then turns out to be the thing that betrays me to where, for a while, I can no longer trust myself.”

“Is that how you got your injuries?”

He’d seen the question coming.

Still, it unnerved him to have to tell her.

“Yes. Yuri Sokolov, the head of the Bratva, was secretly a snitch in his own organization. To keep the heat off his neck a while longer, he had to make it seem like someone else was out to betray the Bratva. I was the lucky scapegoat. Normally, I would go with Eija whenever she left the Sokolov penthouse, but one day, he told me he’d send Pavel. I knew something was wrong because Pavel never left Yuri’s side. Yet, I went anyway. Honestly, what choice did I have? Then I drank a glass of wine and woke up strapped to a chair, Yuri in front of me wielding a power drill.”

Her eyes filled. “After that, how can you trust anyone?”

“Time,” he said. “Trust takes time. Will you wonder, from time to time, if this person will betray you? Of course. I even wonder that with Volk sometimes, but Volk risked getting exposed to save my life. I’d be lying if I said that didn’t help.”

Moisture continued to build in her eyes. “Fifteen. Can you see yourself as a father figure?”

“One hundred percent.”

“Sixteen. Do you want kids?”

“I used to.”

“Change of heart?”

Regardless of when he told her, it wouldn’t be any easier to share, so he sucked in a breath, pumping his chest with the courage to unearth this most vulnerable part of him.

“Lineages are important in organized crime,” he began. “That’s why family is so important. If you want to destroy a person, you eliminate their family and any chance of them making one, erasing their bloodline from existence.”

“And how would one do that?” she asked.

“By driving a drill bit through *your* ‘bits’ and severing your vas deferens. They would also cauterize fallopian tubes.”

She sat up in the bed. “Did Yuri do that to you?”

They’d had an uncanny ability to read one another since they first met. So, instead of nodding, he displayed all the lines and paragraphs of that chapter of his life on his face.

“But how? I’ve seen...” She squeezed her eyelids together. “You came. I’ve seen you come.”

“I can make semen, if that’s what you’re wondering about, but something happened during the trauma, and I stopped producing sperm. Without the vas deferens, I could have still had a procedure done called testicular sperm aspiration, but I don’t...it wouldn’t make a difference. Not for me. It was why I went to New York. To confirm that there’s...that I can’t have kids.”

“Gideon...” She covered her mouth, but it didn’t smother the coughing cry that ripped from her throat. “Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, baby, I’m so sorry.”

He remained motionless, watching her.

“I didn’t...I didn’t know.”

“Anyssa, you couldn’t have known,” he said. “I never shared what happened, and I doubt you could come up with that on your own.”

“But the pain you must have been in.” She wrapped her arms around her middle, hugging herself, consoling herself when he needed to be the one doing that for her. “I swear, I was trying to keep it together when you first started talking about it, but that part? That vindictive, insidious part? How could he? How fucking dare he?”

“He’s dead now.” He motioned with his fingers. “Come here.”

She returned to his arms.

Rather than lie down, they sat back against the headboard, quiet for a long moment, and he would be lying to himself if he said he wasn’t worried that his admission had changed things. Possibly, she’d see him as less of a man. In the beginning, he’d seen himself that way.

“We don’t have to have kids,” she whispered, lifting her head, her beautiful eyes swollen and puffy. “It can be me, you, Jordan, and Micah. And we can get a puppy. Heck, we’ll probably be able to claim Niko and Aleks too.”

“Plus, the baby Zaraia’ll have next year,” he added, his voice unexpectedly wet and hoarse.

“And the one the year after that.”

Although he chuckled, the room blurred in front of him, and his nostrils burned. To think she’d held back her emotions countless times. Times when it would have made sense to release the tiniest droplet of sorrow.

Yet, she’d waited to unmask them.

For him.

She reached up, wiping underneath his eyes with her thumbs. “Steering clear of that topic. I don’t want to depress my Snuggle-bear.”

“*Snugga*-bear,” he corrected. “And I wear that title with honor.”

“With distinction.”

He gave a firm nod of his head, clearing his throat.

“Seventeen,” she continued. “What’s a lesson you learned in your late teens or early twenties that still affects you today?”

“I used to think it was weak to want to have a conversation with a woman,” he said. “To like her for more than what her body could supply me with, but I’m glad I outgrew that bullshit. Women are fucking amazing.”

She leaned against his chest. “Agreed. Eighteen. What was your first impression of me?”

“Gor-fucking-geous.”

“Whatever.”

“I’m being honest. When I looked up and saw you, I knew I had to have you. You can ask Volk. I told him as much.”

“When did you know you were interested in me, then?”

“The hallway. You did some kind of awkward thing with your hand. Then you kept looking at me with those crazy eyes, and all I could think was, ‘I’ve found her. This is the one.’”

She erupted into another fit of laughter, and he appreciated the switch from the tense moments of reflecting on his injuries to the lightheartedness he enjoyed whenever they spent time together.

“Twenty. Do you think we’ll stay together?”

He kissed the top of her head. “I do. And I hope we last for a long time. For us to one day be interviewed by some online newspaper or magazine, or whatever’s around by then, and every time I tell them we’ve been married sixty years, you tap me on my wrist and say, ‘It’s sixty-four years, Medvedev.’”

“Sixty-four?” She looked up into his face. “Do you know how old I’ll be in sixty-four years?”

“We’ll probably have bionic hearts and knees by then. We can make it. With any luck, you’ll live forever.”

“You mean *we’ll* live forever.”

“That was implied. If you’re here, I’ll be right beside you.”

He felt her hold her breath and knew what was coming next, what she wanted to ask. And he needed her to ask because it was important for him to see whether he was on love island by himself or if she was finally ready to join him.

“Twenty-one?” he asked.

She released the breath.

And he saw her chicken out.

“Twenty-one. Had it not been for you showing up at Pavel and Zee’s that day, do you think you would have ever noticed me?”

“Anyssa, according to Jordan, I’ve found you in every lifetime,” he said. “I would have more than noticed you. The minute I laid eyes on you, I wouldn’t have seen anyone else.”

She licked her lips.

Swallowed.

But she remained silent.

“Are you ready for my questions?” he asked, looking from one clear,

dark-brown iris to the other.

She squared her shoulders. "Yes."

"I'll start very basic. What's your favorite color?"

"Gray."

He frowned. "Gray, Anyssa? Whose favorite color is gray?"

"It's nice and understated," she insisted. "It goes with virtually everything. It reminds me of peace and calmness."

"You've become several times more interesting right before my eyes." He kissed the tip of her forehead. "Okay, number two. You're a superhero."

"I like where this is going."

"And in order to save the world, you must sacrifice the life of the one you love. If you don't, thousands will die. What's your choice?"

"One life to save thousands?" She looked off to the side, teeth working her bottom lip. "I'd make the ethical choice. I'd save the thousands."

He stared at her, his expression blank. "You are so not a villain, sweetheart."

"Who would you save, then?"

"You."

"You'd be risking thousands of lives."

"And not a single one of them is yours. However, I'm a villain." He tapped his chest. "At least I now know not to end up in a similar situation."

She groaned. "Number three."

"Number three...what would be your skill in the zombie apocalypse?"

"Turning into a zombie."

An unexpected laugh squeezed his chest, and he alternated between laughing and coughing into his elbow.

"Gideon, if the zombie apocalypse comes, I'm dead," she said. "Immediately."

"What if you're with me?"

"Then I would encourage you to leave me behind unless you want to become a zombie too."

He continued to laugh, picturing her risking her life to run back for one of her expensive heels while a hoard of undead slowly descended on them.

"Four." He cleared his throat. "Is there anything in your life you would change if you had a magic wand?"

She wouldn't say her marriage. Anyssa wasn't the type to say she regretted her marriage because she'd been in love with Chris at one point.

Still, his ego didn't care.

"Not going to therapy with Zaraia sooner," she said. "The relationship we have now, we could have had a long time ago. We sucked at communication and would resort to this passive-aggressive bullshit that got us absolutely nowhere. Therapy brought us closer, which is why people are always surprised when we tell them we have a brother. Shawn looks out for us, but he's not interested in being closer. At least, emotionally."

"Do you think that will change?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. It's up to him."

"Okay. Five."

"Aren't we on six?"

"I let you have some free follow-up questions during your interrogation."

"But I'm so cute, though."

"So am I."

She tipped her head from side to side. "Solid argument. Number five."

"Did you always want to be a mother?"

"God, no. For me, it was career, career, career. I remember looking at Zaraia and thinking, how can you be so sure you want to push a human out of your body? She's always wanted kids."

"Six. What changed?"

"Chris has a fraternity brother named Dab who always wanted to be a father, but things weren't working out the way he hoped. So, he decided to adopt, and it was *hell*. The fact that he was a single man, who did very well for himself, trying to adopt an infant, came across as suspicious. But then, the process finally went through, and we were with him when the baby arrived. Gideon, I bawled my eyes out because of how happy he looked. He comes from a military family and lost his father young, just like his father. He wanted to break that curse, as well as other generational curses. Later that night, after me and Chris went home, we realized we wanted to be parents."

"I guess we both have beautiful answers tonight," he said.

She smiled.

"Seven. If you could be something other than a lawyer, what would you ___"

"World-renowned Pilates instructor."

"You've thought about this."

"Heaviest on the days when my workload is at its most intense."

He gripped her hip. "You'd make a good instructor. You have a killer

body.”

“Even though I’ve had work done?”

“Take the compliment, sweetheart.”

“Thank you, Gideon,” she said, bowing her head. “I appreciate your compliment.”

“Good, because you’re sexy. Now, eight. What did *you* think when you first saw me?”

“‘How does he exist?’ That was the first thing. Then I kept looking at you to see if I’d made a mistake because of how attracted I was to you. And your voice.” Her eyes rolled up into their sockets. “If your voice was a face, I wanted to ride it.”

“How are your ribs?” he asked.

“Still a bit tender.”

“Okay.”

“But I’m sure I can still ride your—”

“No, your ribs are tender. Another time.”

He licked his lips, slowly, and then dragged his bottom lip through his teeth. She narrowed her eyes at him, the corner of her mouth twitching.

“Onto number nine,” he said. “Why did you cancel our first date?”

“Micah. The way he reacted to you. I thought going out with you would hurt him, and I would rather die than hurt my son.”

“Why’d you change your mind?”

“Is this ten?”

He tossed the answer back and forth in his mind. “Sure. This is ten.”

“Because I didn’t turn you down out of not wanting to go out with you. So when you bullied—”

“Gently coerced.”

“—me into going with you, I saw no reason not to, and I had a great time. Plus, I thought you were serious about going out with the realtor if I turned you down.”

“I was.”

“I would have shown up and ruined everything.”

He raised a brow. “All jealous like?”

“I’d walk in there like, ‘I know that’s not *my* man in this restaurant with some side piece. How could you, baby? How could you leave me at home with the kids while you run off with some woman?’”

“And then you’d subsequently trip on a piece of air.”

She sputtered a laugh. Her laugh stole one from him, despite him trying to remain serious.

“My finesse has improved,” she argued.

He tucked two fingers beneath her chin and helped himself to three kisses. “Had you come in there like that, I assume you think I would be angry.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Angry enough to fuck you. That night, you’d belong to me. I’d wrap my fingers around your neck, push your face down to the mattress, and punish you for turning me down when you knew you wanted me in the first place.”

Her eyes grew wide, and she reached behind her, fumbling. “Where’s your phone? Is the realtor’s number still in there? Because I’ll set something up right now.”

He seized her lips again, kissing her lazier, more sloppily, his tongue flicking every silken spot in her mouth. She moaned and brought her hand to the side of her face, but he pulled away before she could scrape her fingers through his beard. They would never finish the game if she started doing that.

“Eleven.” He sucked on his bottom lip, sucking on the taste of her. “What’s one thing on your...wait, what’s it called again? Oh, right. One thing on *your* bucket list.”

“I have never been on a cruise.”

“Want to go on one for our honeymoon?”

“Stop doing that.” She pressed a hand to her stomach. “Number twelve.”

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

The room went so silent, he searched for a sound, any sound, to verify that time hadn’t stood still. The air conditioning unit quietly hummed. A door shut, followed by another, like one of the kids had gotten up to use the bathroom.

“I think I trust you more than I don’t,” she said. “Like...my body reacts when you say stuff like us going on a honeymoon or that you want us to be together for a long time, but I’ve been here before.”

“Thirteen, then. Can you see yourself in those scenarios? On a cruise on our honeymoon? In a long and committed relationship with me?”

“I want to.”

“But fear stops you from accepting it as a possibility.” He nodded. “I understand.”

“You can stop wanting those things one day.”

“So can you.”

“If we stay as good as we are, I highly doubt that.”

“And my answer is the same,” he said. “I was betrayed by someone I trusted with my life. So, I have my own fears about diving headfirst into this only for you to pull away.”

“Then we do, what? Give it time? Prove ourselves to each other?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” She exhaled. “I can do that.”

“Fourteen. Does being unable to have kids change how you see me?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“Fifteen. Does knowing about my injury make me seem weaker to you? Less of a man?”

“The exact opposite. To have endured what you have and survived, you’re the strongest person I know.”

He cleared tightness from his throat. “Sixteen. When was *your* first kiss?”

“I was fifteen,” she said. “I chipped his tooth. Don’t ask.”

“But I have to.”

“Do you, though?”

He thought for a moment. “No, you’re right. I don’t. Seventeen...do you enjoy making love to me?”

“I’d give up nuclear launch codes in exchange for five minutes riding your dick.”

Three questions and a confession were left, but his blood readily flowed south.

“Noted. Eighteen. What’s your favorite position?”

“Any position you put me into. You could,” she grabbed her ankle and brought her leg up as far as it could go, “twist and bend me until my legs make a bow. It’ll be my favorite position.”

“Nineteen. Can I fuck you on my desk at work?”

“You can fuck me on your desk, my desk, on the sidewalk in front of the building, in front of a grand jury. Mount Everest.”

“Damn you, woman. Now I have to go back and change my bucket list.”

She grinned.

Immature Gideon had missed out on so much all because he’d thought pussy and companionship were the same things. As a result, he’d missed out on women like Anyssa Brandon. Thankfully, Immature Gideon died roughly six years ago.

“Twenty. Could you see yourself falling in love with me one day?”

“Yes,” she said with zero hesitation.

“Then twenty-one. When did you find out I was in love with you?”

She blinked, scanned his face, and blinked again, searching for deception. If not deception, uncertainty. Anything that would prove to her that he would take his statement back the minute she accepted it.

“Please don’t be fucking with me.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I really like you. Please don’t be lying to me. I want this to be true. I need this to be real.”

“Anyssa, open your eyes.”

She opened them.

“I’m not lying to you,” he said. “And whenever you feel ready to give me your heart, I’ll be here. Waiting. You already have mine.”

She cradled the back of his head.

The moment her lips touched his, the sparking, explosive sensation snaked through his body.

She climbed him, positioning her legs on either side of his waist, her knees pressing into the headboard. He stuck his hand inside her shorts and underwear and grabbed her ass, her skin soft and full against his palms.

“I want you like this.” She fiddled with his waistband. “Stay just like this.”

She stood on the bed and pulled down her shorts and panties until they reached her knees, leaving behind a slick stream of wetness on her inner thighs. He removed them the rest of the way and lifted off the bed to remove his bottoms, but she stopped him when his waistband was right above mid-thigh. Kneeling again, she lowered her head and swallowed his dick.

She sucked, hard, squeezing with her hands what she couldn’t fit into her mouth. To avoid grabbing her hair and tearing the strands straight from her scalp, he held onto the top of the headboard.

As she sucked, he gripped wood.

She opened her mouth, tongue flicking the sensitive underside of his head, her eyes on his. Then she took him back into her mouth, a jerk of his hips answering each tug of her hollowed cheeks.

“Hold your head steady for me, sweetheart.”

“Hmm?” His dick slipped from her mouth. “Why?”

While she asked the question, she stroked him with her hands.

“Why hold my head steady, Gideon?”

He grunted.

“Oh, you want to fuck my mouth.” She lapped up the moisture that dripped from his tip. “Is that it?”

The veins along his shaft pulsed.

She wrapped her lips around his head and sucked so hard, his soul left his body. With all means of control and restraint gone, he gripped her hair and thrust. Then he pulled out and thrust again.

The corners of her mouth leaked as her lips took him, sliding over and squeezing him. She reached between her legs, but he growled at her not to touch her pussy. Just watching her touch herself would make him—

“Fuck.”

Without warning, preamble, or even the chance to finish his fucking thought, he released down her throat. He came with so much force, it was like he hadn’t had sex in months.

“Take it all, sweetheart,” he groaned.

She planted her hands on his thighs and sucked, licked, and slurped until he was relegated to a panting, huffing, muscular mass lying in an ocean of sweat in the middle of her mattress. Then, inch by inch, his conquered dick slid from her mouth.

“All?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Let me see.”

She opened her mouth.

“Good girl.”

After an orgasm like that, he would need a few minutes to recuperate. Anyssa, on the other hand, went to her chest of drawers, pulled out something small and purple, and returned to lie next to him on the bed.

“Go where I can see you,” he ordered.

She switched positions.

“Spread your legs wider.”

She spread them.

A buzz sounded throughout the room, but when she went to lower the vibrator, he reached out and grabbed her wrist, stopping her.

“I didn’t say to touch yourself with it yet.”

Right in front of him, he watched her pussy get wetter and could only imagine the torture her clit was going through, needing to be pleased.

“Gideon, you’re killing me.”

He leaned forward and dragged his tongue along her slit, licking twice before dipping it between her lips and flicking her clit.

Her body jerked.

“Now lower it,” he commanded.

The purple vibrator touched the top of her clit, and her right leg shook. He grabbed her wrist again to move it away and then sucked right where she’d held it.

“Again.”

She pleased herself, and again he stopped her, this time sucking and licking until she ground her pussy against his lips.

“Can this go inside?” he asked.

The word “Yes” barely left her mouth.

He slipped it inside her. And as he fucked her with it, he licked and lapped at her clit until she came, holding back a scream, rolling and jerking against his mouth.

Then she pushed away.

As if they were done.

He flipped her over, coaxed her head down to the mattress, and entered her still-quivering pussy. Whenever she tried to lift her head, he eased it back down with a grip on her neck until she had no choice but to come on his dick, crying out into the bedsheets. Then, grunting, he came right after, unable to hold out any longer.

* * *

The next morning, after he’d stumbled to the guest bedroom before the kids woke up, an image of a tiny pink baby arrived on his phone, followed by a message.

VOLK

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"Georgia is a one-party state," Barnes argued, his haircut considerably more modern than the last time they'd shared a courtroom space. "The wire-tapping was perfectly legal."

"In Georgia," Anyssa said. "The individuals on that call were business associates of Mr. O'Sullivan. Business associates from all over the country. On the call in question, three were in Georgia, but one was in Florida."

"She was in New York."

"Not on official business, for one, and she used a VPN. So the call went to her office in Florida and was routed to her in New York, where she was visiting a sick family member. Her business is based in Florida, her residence is based in Florida, and Florida is a two-party state. Caitlin O'Toole didn't consent to the recording and didn't know she was being recorded. That makes the wire-tapping inadmissible."

Barnes rolled his eyes. "But New York is a one-party state."

"Mr. Barnes, if someone commits a crime in Georgia and then flees to Texas, does that make their crime null and void? Caitlin O'Toole has a legal expectation of privacy, and how this wire-tapping was carried out violated that reasonable expectation." She faced the judge. "If the recording is allowed in court, we are essentially saying that Georgia state law supersedes that of Florida state law."

Judge Law looked from her to Barnes.

She didn't flinch.

"I'm going to have to rule in favor of the defense," Judge Law said. "The wire-tapping is out."

Barnes licked his lips so hard, she heard it from across the room.

“Your honor, that recording provided probable cause for the search warrant,” she continued. “If it’s inadmissible, so is the search and anything recovered during the search.”

Barnes’ eyes opened wide. “You have got to be kidding me. That’s ninety percent of my case.”

“Then you should have instructed the detectives who obtained the recording on how case law works,” Judge Law said. “The wire-tapping was illegal. Therefore, so was the search. Ms. Brandon, your motion is granted. Everything obtained from the O’Sullivan estate as a result of that warrant is out.”

She held back a smile. Now, all she had to do was get that witness tossed out or revealed.

“I would also like to address the issue of the witness,” she went on.

Barnes waved a hand through the air. “The witness is terrified to come forward because they’re afraid of retaliation from Mr. O’Sullivan.”

“Then their testimony isn’t admissible, either.”

“In the case of the United States v Ramos-Cruz, a district court upheld the right for witnesses to testify under false identification due to fear of intimidation.”

“Ramos-Cruz was a member of MS-13, a *well-known* criminal organization,” she countered. “The Salvadoran government made the petition of anonymity on behalf of the witnesses as they were police officers.”

“Your honor, I can explain more in chambers.”

“Which sounds dangerously like an ex-parte hearing.”

Judge Law tapped his gavel. “Okay, you two. And Alyssa, I’ve heard about you and how you speak to our prosecutors. I won’t have any improper behavior in my courtroom.”

“It’s Anyssa, Judge *Low*,” she said. “And I’ve never shown an ounce of impropriety in—”

“For one, try putting some makeup on your face. You are an officer of the court. Present yourself like one.”

“I am wearing makeup.” *You raggedy piece of shit.* “I don’t see what that has to do with anything, and I present myself just fine.”

“Look at your outfit. How tight it is. That seems proper to you?”

“Say what you mean, your Honor. My ass is distracting you.”

“One more, and I’ll hold you in contempt.” He faced Barnes. “Now, Mr. Barnes. On what specific grounds are you requesting Mr. O’Sullivan’s sixth

amendment rights be violated? He doesn't have any established illegality or affiliation with criminal activity."

"The witness can testify that he does," Barnes said.

She paused.

The witness had proof Colm was into shady business? Did that mean the witness was someone inside his organization?

All this time, she'd assumed it was part of the turf war deal, the Italians trying to get him out of the picture to obtain more territory. She hadn't considered there could be a mole in the Irish Mob, but Pavel had been an informant turned CIA liaison. Dom had gone to work for the CIA for the sole purpose of taking down his father.

"The court will review the witness affidavit," Judge Law announced. "After that, a determination will be made about how to proceed. For now, the witness testimony remains admissible. If there's nothing else," he gave the gavel another tap, "we're done here."

Barnes looked like he was about to make his way over to her, so she collected her things and headed for the exit, instructing her legal team on what they needed to get done before the end of the day.

Gideon waited on a bench in the hallway, wearing a charcoal gray suit, black shirt, and black tie. Everything he had on, down to his feet, was part of the order she'd placed at Jonathan's store, and it made her want to climb him right there in the middle of the courthouse.

He stood. "How'd it go?"

"Mostly good," she said. "The witness is still in."

He frowned. "Really?"

"Yeah."

They headed for the exit.

"Explain to me again what the problem with that is?"

"The confrontation clause and the due process clause in the Constitution. An anonymous witness violates Colm's sixth amendment right not to be able to face his accuser, and I can't effectively cross-examine a specter. In addition, if we're telling a jury Colm is so dangerous that we've allowed the witness to remain anonymous, that's inherently implying a danger bias."

He took her hand. "The way you talk and all that knowledge in your brain? Let's head back. We can stop by your office."

She nodded. "Sure."

"Just so we're clear, we're going to fuck."

“Oh, we’re crystal clear.”

Beautiful weather greeted them outside.

This was a win. The case hadn’t been tossed out, but she’d handed the prosecution a significant blow.

“Do you want to order something to eat for after?” Gideon asked, arms closing around her from behind. “We can get food from Ray’s.”

She turned her head. “I do tend to get ravenous after we—”

Suddenly, she was on her stomach, on the concrete, Gideon’s body covering hers. Cars skidded in the street. People screamed, scattering in every direction. However, not everyone dispersed. Some of them lay motionless on the ground.

Gideon yelled commands into thin air.

Above them, something powerful smashed into the courthouse’s stone exterior, one explosion after another. The entire thing probably took roughly a minute, but by the time Gideon had picked her up and carried her to the lower level, where they’d be protected by the street, it felt like hours had passed.

“Anyssa, were you hit?”

She stared at his mouth.

“Anyssa?”

Stone exploded.

People continued to scream.

Someone rolled over the iron partition and fell onto the ground below, inches from where Gideon crouched, his entire body blocking hers. The person didn’t move, and when she noticed it was Barnes, nausea took root in her stomach.

“Anyssa?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Not hit.”

“Are you sure?”

The explosions stopped.

She looked around, and there were more people, all wearing suits, guns brandished. They’d created a semi-circle around her and Gideon, but it didn’t make sense. They also needed to get down. If not, they would end up like Barnes.

Gideon roughly searched her body, her hair. “I don’t see any blood. Do you feel any pain?”

“N—”

He tore off her blazer, brandished a knife, and tore a line up the middle of her blouse. Then he reached inside the blouse and wrapped his arms around her, his fingers searching along her back.

“I’m going to apply pressure,” he said. “Tell me where it hurts.”

He probed.

When she felt a twinge of pain, she groaned.

“Did that hurt?”

“Only a little.”

“Might be a bruise, but I don’t see or feel any bullet wounds.”

She looked up into his face. “Bullet wounds?”

He slipped the blazer back over her shoulders and fastened every button.

“Come on. A path’s been cleared. Let’s go.”

Thankfully, he carried her.

The people in suits, what appeared to be four men and two women, created a tight circle around them.

“Micah and Jordan,” she said.

“They’re safe. I won’t let anything happen to them.” He kissed her hair.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, either.”

She tucked her face against his neck, her heart racing like she was back at the Porsche Experience center. Except, this time, she was the one doing laps.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Gideon asked about the spot on her back several more times on the ride, but the pain was nowhere near enough to warrant detouring to a hospital. Not before she saw Micah and Jordan.

Now, they were at his house.

There were at least fourteen people, outside of her and Gideon, posted inside and outside the structure. Every five minutes, she asked Gideon about Micah and Jordan, and he reassured her that they were okay. However, until they were in her arms, she wouldn't hear a single word of that reassurance.

Gideon ordered the room to be cleared and sat on the coffee table, facing her on the sofa. A sofa they'd made love on that now had to cradle her like a frightened child.

"Volk has Micah and Jordan," he said.

Knowing Pavel had them took the entire weight off her shoulders. "Explain to me again what just happened?" she asked.

"There was open gunfire in front of the courthouse."

"Any deaths?"

"It's only a preliminary count, but four so far."

"Barnes?"

"Alive but critical."

"Was it Colm?"

"Unlikely."

"Did you..." She looked around the room, searching for everything and nothing. Searching for clarity. "Did you know...because you reacted so quickly...is there something you're not telling me? And how do you know it's not Colm?"

Gideon leaned back, and had Zaraia been there, she would have said it was his way of creating distance. Whatever he was about to say either made him uncomfortable or would be a lie told to provide her some comfort.

“We always prepare for the worst-case scenario,” he explained. “But, to answer your question, no. I didn’t know something would happen, but I always anticipate that something might occur whenever we go out. As for Colm, we’ve got eyes on him.”

“How long have you had ‘eyes on him’?”

“Volk and I aren’t exactly new to Colm O’Sullivan,” he said. “The Bratva used to do business with the Irish Mob. The syndicate can be found all over the country, all over the globe, really, but we work with a powerful figurehead who moved her operations to Utah some years back. According to her, the New England area had gotten too congested, and instead of working together, each clan eventually started grasping at territory in order to rise above the others. Her name’s Clodagh Ronan.”

“Is she more powerful than Colm?”

“Extremely.”

“Are she and Colm enemies?”

“O’Sullivan can’t afford to be enemies with someone like her.”

Everything was beginning to come together. Zaraia had said that Pavel asked about her case because he was familiar with Colm, but this was more than familiar. It almost sounded like they’d been watching his movements, which meant...

“Before I told you, did you know?”

“About your agreement with O’Sullivan?” Gideon rocked his head from side to side. “To an extent. We knew an agreement between the two of you was in place, but we didn’t have the whole picture.”

“So did this,” she circled her wrist, “Clodagh Ronan tip you off that something was going to happen? If not today at the courthouse, eventually?”

“No, that’s not what we learned from her.”

“But, I don’t get it. Why would she tell you anything if you and Pavel aren’t in the Bratva anymore?”

“The power isn’t tied to the name. It’s tied to the person. In terms of power, you have Yuri—”

“Who used to run the organization, right?”

He nodded. “Right. After Yuri, there’s Volk.”

“Not Dom?”

“In terms of control and allegiances?” He shook his head. “No. Dom has Yuri’s DNA, but Volk was Yuri’s closest adviser. Since shit went south, you’d be surprised how many former members have been searching for Volk. Of course, not everyone’s made to lead, but there are those who, despite not being interested in doing so, are born to.”

“Wow.”

Did Zaraia know all this? Did her sister understand the level of authority held by the man she’d married? Something told her the answer was yes, and that Zaraia had known for a while.

Zaraia had rescued Pavel’s child’s life before they meant what they meant to each other now and then gave him another child, along with a bigger family, a home, and love. With all the new information Gideon had shared, it was clear that Zaraia, Niko, and Aleks were the safest people in all of Georgia.

“So what did you learn from Clodagh Ronan?”

Just as Gideon was about to answer, Pavel walked in. Next to him, a yawning Micah rubbed his eyes, and Pavel carried Jordan, asleep, in his arms.

All Gideon had said was, “Volk has them,” and she’d relaxed. Never, in a million years, would she tell him this, but blood couldn’t make Pavel Volkov any more her brother than he already was.

He set Jordan in her arms.

Micah crawled onto the cushion next to her, and for once, he didn’t complain when she hugged him like she was trying to squeeze the last bit from a tube of toothpaste.

They smelled wonderful, like playground dirt, taco lunches, residual detergent stuck in the fabric of their clothes, and the inside of that backpack Jordan had mentioned. They smelled like life, and she loved them so much, she would have burst into tears if she didn’t believe it would have scared Micah.

“Mama’s so glad to see you, Micah. I love you.” She planted a kiss on his forehead and both cheeks. “How was school today?”

Micah didn’t respond, his eyes on Gideon, who’d left the coffee table to give them space. Gideon nodded, and Micah nodded in response.

“Nothing happened at the school,” Pavel said. “But the U.S. Marshals are here. I told them to wait outside. Your brother’s with them, so I assume he had something to do with the response time. They went to your place first,

but we told them where they could find you.”

“Do you want them to come in?” Gideon asked.

She agreed to let them come in.

One of Gideon and Pavel’s *people*, who she decided she would call “The A-Team,” escorted two U.S. Marshals inside. Shawn entered with them, glanced at Pavel, and shook his head—which resulted in a smirk from Pavel—before walking over to take the seat next to Micah.

“Hey, Micah.” He ran his hand over the top of Micah’s head. “How’s it going?”

“Good,” Micah said.

“Glad to hear it, nephew.” He gestured to the Marshals. “Nyss, these are U.S. Marshals Kent Wilmington and Tavaris Hodge. Hodge is frat.”

The two marshals introduced themselves.

Kent spoke first. “Ms. Brandon, there’s no way to sugarcoat this. The scene at the courthouse today was a bloodbath.”

Micah tugged on her sleeve. “Mama, what’s a bloodbath?”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about,” Shawn said.

“Honestly, Micah, it’s scary,” Gideon said. “Something that we need to talk about, but it might be too scary for you to hear about right now.”

Micah looked at Gideon, and Anyssa watched as her son’s expression took on a hint of admiration. Gideon had done something virtually no adult had done in Micah’s life; he’d told him the truth rather than dismissed his question.

“Since it’s a bit scary,” Gideon continued, “want to come check out something I planted out back?”

Micah hopped down off the sofa. “On the way, can I pick out my room?”

“Pick out your what, baby?” Anyssa asked as they walked away. “Did you say pick out your room?”

Micah and Gideon left through the back door.

Once she was sure they were gone, and after placing a mental pin in two questions she needed to ask Gideon, she faced the Marshals.

“I know why you’re here, and I have to tell you, it’s gonna be a hard no.”

The two men exchanged glances.

“I’m not sure you understand,” Kent said. “Usually, we’d step in if you were a federal attorney or were still a state prosecutor. This is a huge favor we’re doing for Shawn. Also, O’Sullivan’s on the federal radar. This little case about the murders and whatnot? It’s a drop in the bucket compared to

what we've been watching him for. You don't want to go up against a man like this."

She adjusted Jordan so that Jordan's head rested on her collarbone. "What are you offering? Witness protection?"

"Yes."

"No, thank you."

"Ms. Brandon—"

"Would it include my kids? My ex-husband? Do I leave with our children, and they don't see their father again until Colm's apprehended?"

"Although we don't have a legal precedent for including your ex-husband on account of your divorce, protection isn't as ostracizing as it once was," Tavaris explained. "There are channels we follow now that allow you occasional communication."

"What's 'occasional'?"

"About once or twice every six months."

She shook her head. "No."

Shawn grabbed her forearm. "Now, wait a damn minute. You're smarter than this, Nyss. Maybe they weren't clear. Colm is a dangerous man. This goes way past the state level."

Colm was a dangerous man, but so were her man and brother-in-law. They were more savage than she'd previously given them credit for, which was saying a lot since she'd *abducted* her sister because of what she'd discovered about Pavel's lethality.

"Are you even listening to me?" Shawn asked.

She met his eyes. "No."

"No, you're not listening, or no, you're not accepting the help?"

"Both."

Kent grated out a sigh. "Ms. Brandon, think about your children. What if something happens to them? I have two kids myself, one the same age as your son."

"Nothing's going to happen to them, so try a different argument," Pavel said. "Fair warning, make sure it's a solid argument, or she'll bury you into the ground."

Both Marshals glanced at him.

She sent him a teasing look, and he rolled his eyes. He knew that, once all this mess was over, she would find a way to make those words torment him perpetually. Perhaps she'd go with a wall decoration of some sort.

“I’m not tucking my tail and running,” she said. “I want those responsible for what happened today to be brought to justice, but I won’t do that under an assumed name while living in some rural county where I won’t be able to use the degree I worked my ass off to achieve. I appreciate Shawn going through the trouble of contacting you, but I won’t run away from what happened today.”

Shawn parted his lips.

“No further discussion.”

She didn’t want protection from the U.S. Marshals, but this wasn’t her denying that she needed protection. Simply put, she wanted The A-Team.

After fruitlessly pleading their case a few more times, both marshals left. Shawn’s leg bounced, and he watched her, his grip tight on his chin.

“Are you,” he clicked his tongue twice and ticked his head in the direction Gideon had left, “that Viktor Drago-looking motherfucker?”

“What does,” she mimicked him, “mean?”

“Come on, Nyss. Are you screwing him? Because you’re acting like Zee did last year when she started climbing Caucasus Mountain, but Zee’s more passive. She’s, at least, more likely to be swayed by white dick than you.”

“My wife is what?” Pavel asked, two steps closer. “Say that one more time for me?”

Anyssa waved a frantic hand. “Shawn, watch your mouth. Plus, you never share who your flavor of the week is, so I don’t have to tell you who I’m sleeping with.”

“I heard you and Chris were still getting it in.”

“From who?”

“Chris. We hoop from time to time.”

“Me and Chris aren’t sleeping together.” Not as of the last few months, anyway, and never again. “And since when does Chris play basketball? Does he play in the suit?”

Shawn swiped a hand down over his mouth, wiping away a grin. “No, but he showed up in one the first time, and we thought he was about to. No lie. And me and him started playing ball not that long ago.”

“Is he good?”

“Chris? Nah, he’s garbage. He’s only there to try to get information on you, but like I told him before, if he’s not good with Zee, there’s no hope for you to take him back.” He took her hand. “But, for real, take the marshals’ protection, even if you are fucking Paul Bunyan.”

“Shawn—”

“Is he from Russia too? So you’re still with him, knowing about the shit they’re doing over there to Ukraine?”

“He’s Ukrainian, first of all,” she said. “There’s more than just Russia over there. And Shawn, you of all people should know that politicians’ interests rarely represent the interests of the People.”

He closed her hand inside both of his. “Take the protection.”

“No.”

“Fine, then. Do you have an alternative?”

“Yes.”

“Are you fucking Paul Bunyan?”

“His name’s Gideon, dickhead, and yes, I am. And the dick is glorious.”

“Ugh.”

“Cata-*clit*-ysmic.”

“Moving on.” He grimaced. “What’s the alternative?”

“Me,” Pavel said. “And Paul Bunyan.”

Shawn laughed and looked from her to Pavel and back. “Oh, then you’re good. You should have led with that. Got me wasting my time with federal officers when the whole fucking Bratva—”

She smacked his shoulder. “Like I told you, we were wrong. Pavel wasn’t Bratva. That whole thing was a huge mixup. He and Gideon own an elite private security firm.”

“Sure.” Shawn raised his hands, made air quotes. “‘Private security.’ Well then, what will this ‘private security’ do for you?”

“We have it under control,” Pavel chimed in. “They’ll all be safe.”

“And what about Chris?”

“Chris won’t ever be safe.”

Anyssa shook her head. “He’s joking, but don’t worry, okay? We’ll be all right.”

He leaned forward, kissed her forehead, and stroked Jordan’s cheek. “You better be. You and Zee’s bigheaded asses are all I’ve got left.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

It didn't matter how often she told Gideon it was "fine." He apologized for everything in his house, probably because hers looked like an HGTV magazine. But she loved his place's cozy charm and the ability for him to put his stamp on it. Once he was done with it, it would be beautiful, but it was beautiful this way all the same.

"Are you settled?"

She turned to find him consuming all the space in the doorway of guest bedroom number two. Jordan and Micah had already gotten set up in their rooms, and they were running around in the backyard with eight pairs of eyes watching their every movement.

"I'm okay," she said.

"Can I come in?"

"It's your house."

"Right now, this is your space."

"Until the kids go to bed. Then, I'm coming to your room."

In four steps, she was in his arms. She held on tight as though she could pour the day's stressors into him. The way he cared for her and kept her safe, she knew he could handle it. This man could handle anything.

"Can I confess something?" he asked. "Today scared the shit out of me."

She inhaled his cologne. "Me too, baby."

"When I didn't feel anything, I thought you got hit."

"Feel anything?"

"Any bullets," he clarified. "I was fine, so I thought that meant I hadn't gotten to you in time."

"You were with me." She kissed his neck and jawline and leaned back to

kiss his lips. “Yes, I was scared, but I can’t imagine how it would be if I wasn’t with you.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Even if I’m not, I will be eventually. Are you okay?”

“This is my job, Anyssa. It doesn’t matter what I have to do. You, Micah, and Jordan will always be my top priority. If you guys need me, I’ll drop everything. If you feel unsafe, I won’t stop until you feel secure again.”

It didn’t matter how much she searched. She couldn’t find anything on his face that pointed to him meaning anything other than precisely what he said.

“Gideon, I...”

“Just say it.” He searched her eyes. “I already know, but I need to hear you say it.”

“Gideon, I...I love you.”

In therapy with Zaraia, she’d learned that sometimes fear could be mistaken for excitement. She’d assumed her racing heart, trembling hands, and jellylike knees were all because she was afraid of what might happen after she told him how she felt. Instead, now that she’d told him, she never wanted to stop telling him.

He looked around. “How peculiar. Nothing collapsed. Other than my heart, nothing exploded. But I might have misunderstood you. Say that one more time for me?”

She grinned. “I love you, Gideon Medvedev.”

He kissed her forehead, and she felt the smile on his lips as they lingered on her skin. Here she was, taking the leap again, but she could admit it didn’t feel the same.

Over the years, she’d matured. She wasn’t the same Anyssa who’d fallen for the gray-eyed boy the same night she met him. Although Chris wasn’t perfect, they’d had great times. Of course, the ending hurt, but considering where she was standing now, her marriage ending only meant that chapter of her life had closed. As long as she was open to it, life continued to bring her more opportunities.

More love.

Greater love.

“*Nyss, givin’ up is failing,*” her mother had told her during the last conversation they’d had. “*As long as you’ve got breath in your body, you try, you hear me? Some people don’t last as long as ten years on this earth, so you owe it to yourself to try. Tomorrow can be the day it all makes sense, but*

you gotta get there first.”

“By the way, what was that little silent agreement between you and Micah earlier?” she asked.

“Me and Micah talked, man to man,” he said. “I let him know that if things got any more intense, I’d have to move you guys in with me. That was just me confirming that this was the moment.”

“Man to man, huh?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As she went to ask him about what he and Pavel had learned from Clodagh, the mob leader in Utah, she heard Zaraia’s voice. And if Zaraia was there, then that meant...

She wriggled out of Gideon’s arms, shoved him aside, and dashed to the front room. Everything else could wait. A baby was in the house—a baby who was also her nephew.

“Hi, Aunt Anyssa,” Niko greeted.

She gave Niko a tight hug and a loud kiss on the cheek. “Hi, baby. How are you do—”

He took off for the backyard.

“Doing,” she finished. “Well, damn.”

“He heard Micah and Jordan out back as we walked up,” Zaraia said. Then Zaraia leaned forward as if expecting a hug and a kiss, but she took the car seat, set it down, and gently unhooked the straps to lift Aleks out.

“Well, hi to you too,” Zaraia said.

“Hey, Zee.” She took Aleks to the sofa, sat, and held him with both hands, setting her elbows on her thighs. “Hi, beautiful boy. How are you today? Did you eat?”

Zaraia took a seat next to her. “I’m still not producing any milk. So I guess my breasts are just for show.”

“There’s nothing wrong with formula, Zee, and being hard on yourself won’t make milk happen.” She nudged Zaraia’s shoulder. “Get Pavel to help. One hard tug and—”

“Let me stop you right there. Plus, it didn’t work.”

Giggling, she nuzzled Aleks’ nose.

They sat silently for a few minutes, the kids’ screams from behind the house coming in waves.

“Nyss, are you sure—”

“I’m okay, Zaraia,” she said. “I swear.”

“I’m glad Gideon was there.”

“Me too.” She looked around. “Where’s my nemesis?”

“Picking up food. He should be here any minute. It’s been a trying day for us all.”

“Can I ask you something? Sister to sister?”

Zaraia leaned back against the sofa cushions. “Sure.”

“The security agency isn’t a cover for something else, is it?”

“Like what?”

“Like the rebirth of the Russian mafia.”

“No. Of course not.”

“The Slavic mafia.”

“It’s really just private protection.”

“Say it was a cover for the mafia,” Anyssa proposed. “Would anything change between you and Pavel?”

“Is he harming innocent people? Selling kids? Exploiting women and children? Intentionally distributing drugs in low-income communities, thereby inhibiting the opportunity for generational wealth?”

“No. He’s purely offering protective services.”

“Then nothing would change,” Zaraia said. “I love my husband, and I trust his judgment. If he says kneecaps need to be broken, there’s probably a good reason.”

They returned to sitting in silence, and she could feel Zaraia watching her and Aleks from over her shoulder. It was amazing to see her sister as a new mother. Raising Niko was one thing, and Niko was the rare type of child that didn’t require a great deal of effort outside of his academic struggles.

However, an infant, while dealing with postpartum hormonal changes, was far more challenging. Babies could test relationships, but watching Zaraia and Pavel had made her realize that relationships often boiled down to a simple tenet: wanting to.

They wanted to be together, so they worked to be together. They wanted a healthy relationship, so they worked to maintain one. They didn’t let hubris get in the way of their goals, and it was always them against the world. It was never *just* Pavel, never *just* Zaraia.

They respected one another, and regardless of her reservations about their relationship, she’d believed them on their wedding day. She’d had faith in their vows. Zaraia was her sister, so she knew Zaraia was the type to do the work. Nevertheless, Pavel’s dedication managed to put Zaraia’s to shame.

“Zee, would you happen to know what a bait station is?” she asked.

Zaraia yawned and raised her legs onto the sofa cushion, tucking them underneath her. “Is it the pest control thing? The box they put outside where the rats go in, eat something, and then they either die or carry the poison back to their nests?”

“And that’s the only version you know of?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Gideon was looking into pest control,” she lied. “I’m helping him.”

“Oh?” Zaraia snaked her neck. “So, do you live here now?”

“No.”

“That man is never letting you leave. You know that, right? They’re possessive.”

Hopefully, she and Gideon *would* end up as that couple in the online article. She could see herself gently swatting him, reminding him how long they’d been part of each other’s lives. If love could last that long, so could trust.

The kids came bursting into the house from the backyard. From what she could decipher, Micah was a ninja defending himself from Niko, a human cyborg. And her baby girl, her sweet, sweet baby girl, was Niko’s mannequin sidekick. The mannequin, at least, had laser vision.

Gideon brought up the rear. Pavel entered through the front door carrying a sleeping baby on his shoulder.

“Look who I found,” he said.

Eija walked in, and the cyborg died.

Immediately.

“Miss K!” Niko raced over to Eija. “Miss K, my brother’s here. And guess what? He looks like me. It’s so awesome. When we get older, people will know we’re real brothers.”

Anyssa’s heart gave a tug. People already gave Niko such a hard time, and all he’d done was love his mother without caring that her skin was darker than his.

Eija crouched to give him a hug. “Niko, I’ve missed you! And I heard you’re onto chapter books, and the one you’re reading now has, what, two-hundred pages? Look at you. Genius. I’m so proud of you.”

Niko’s face flushed. “Papa told you that?”

“He sure did.”

“He’s exaggerating.” He took Eija’s hand. “Come on. I want Aleks to

meet you. He's the coolest baby."

"Is he super chill?" Eija asked.

"*Super* chill."

Dom walked in last, Shiloh asleep in his arms. They didn't have suitcases, which meant Pavel had picked them up from his and Zaraia's house.

"This kid never greets me, and I'm his *uncle*," Dom complained, laughing.

"Hey, Dom," Anyssa called.

He flashed her a smile. "Hey, beautiful."

Eija didn't so much as blink.

At the end of the day, Dom was some unstable combination of *in love* and *obsessed* with Eija. Eija was also the type of sexy and sultry that inspired dreams she'd never share with anyone, even Gideon—he would be all too interested in hearing about those—yet, Eija was equally gone over Dom.

After they fawned over Aleks, they ate. Then all the kids fell asleep, so they stayed up to watch a few episodes of *The Lies We Tell While Eating Blood Oranges*.

Eija took their trash to the kitchen.

Anyssa followed.

"Hey, Eija?"

Eija looked up, then smiled. "Hey, beautiful."

She'd never been a voyeur, or wanted to be, but if she ever received the opportunity to peek into Dom and Eija's bedroom, she would take a peek.

"I have a question," she said.

"Before you ask, Dom told me to give my two cents on Gideon," Eija prefaced. "Looking at you two, I don't think I have to, but he told me to tell you that he and Pavel saved Gideon's life for a reason. That he's one of those people you just...*need* in the world."

Anyssa swallowed a sudden bubble of tears. "Did you have any reservations about Dom?"

"Reservations. Concerns. Doubts. I mean, look at him. Was I really supposed to take all that man, with that face, that body, and that lovely ass personality seriously? Sometimes, I feel like good-looking men were created for the sole purpose of breaking hearts."

Anyssa laughed. "I've said something similar before."

"I thought Dom would wreak havoc on my heart, but I never knew there was a tier above happiness. With him, that's where I live." Eija folded her

arms over her chest. “But I’m babbling. You had a question.”

“I did. It’s about Bratva-related stuff.”

“My specialty. Hit me.”

“Have you ever heard of ‘the bait station’?”

Eija’s brows shot up. “Yeah, definitely. It’s a signature Bratva technique. First, it involves infiltrating a rival’s supply chain. Now, it can be something as simple as tampering with their water delivery to tampering with the food supply of an entire community.”

“Tampering, how?”

“Poisoning, usually, though not poisoning for immediate death. For instance, say a rival has their water delivered. The Bratva would intercept the shipment and add a small amount of some toxic substance. Generally, it’s something untraceable in bloodwork, so the rival thinks they’ve fallen ill. Unfortunately, by the time they understand what’s happening, it’s too late.”

“Could it work in wine?” she asked.

“It has. Countless times. The ‘bait station’ used to keep us on our toes at Interpol. Even when you know what’s happening, it’s hard to trace.”

She recalled Colm’s thinning eyebrows and substantially leaner appearance in Athens.

“Why?” Eija asked.

“It’s something I heard about, and I was afraid to ask Gideon or Pavel because I thought it would be much worse.”

“It’s not the worse thing they do, but it’s one of the more insidious techniques. At first, it seems impersonal because of the distance between the victim and the perpetrator. However, it takes a lot to set up and even more effort to execute. The Bratva would generally use the bait station to take someone out who’s done something they consider egregious. One Bratva cell went full John Snow, the doctor, not the *Game of Thrones* one, and poisoned a city of five-thousand people because their mayor sexually assaulted the sister of their *sovietnik*.”

Which was something she could see Gideon, Pavel, and Dom doing if harm ever came to someone they loved. Pavel, she could see doing much worse if someone hurt Niko or Zaraia. Surprisingly, she could see him using it to avenge her as well.

Perhaps he already had.

“Sweetheart, you’re about to miss whose shadow was underneath Svetlana’s door!” Gideon called.

Eija grabbed her hand and pulled her back to the living room. “Girl, come on. You’ll never guess who it is, either.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

This wasn't trusting him.

A relationship needed to be built on trust, and this wasn't trusting him. This was her being crazy, all because Gideon had gotten a text on his phone from someone named Silina, and then he'd left shortly after, saying he was headed into the office.

Jordan and Micah were at Zee and Pavel's, and with Dom and Eija there, Gideon had felt comfortable reducing the kids' security to five bodyguards. So, she asked to go with him to grab some stuff for a different case she'd been working on—the shooting incident had pushed Colm's trial back considerably—and she'd then told him she would head back with Pavel.

But she didn't head back with Pavel.

After careful maneuvering, she'd managed to elude her detail to follow him to his actual destination, but it wasn't a house or apartment like she'd been expecting. Instead, it looked more like an abandoned factory, and it had taken nearly an hour to get there.

She parked Aurora's car several yards away from the structure and hopped out. There wasn't another building around as far as the eye could see. The outside sported planks of plywood, busted windows, rusted metal pieces, and peeling paint, and her concern shifted to whether Gideon should be entering a place like this health-wise.

Once he was inside the building, she made her approach. Burrs stuck to the legs of her jeans from the high grass, the evenings cooler as they drew nearer to the fall season.

At first, she peered inside.

Spotting nothing, she entered the "building" through the door she'd seen

Gideon walk through.

It was worse inside.

It was difficult to tell whether the place had been stripped bare, eaten alive by vermin, or this was what it had looked like in its heyday. Debris covered the concrete floors. Thick brick columns held up steel beams. Her nose tickled, and she sneezed into her sweater as quietly as she could. What Gideon could need in a place like this, she didn't know, unless his side chicks *literally* enjoyed getting dirty.

She liked when he came wherever he pleased on her body, and when they had sex outside and the rain splashed muddy water all over them. But there was no dick worth tetanus.

A noise sounded—metal scraping stone.

Gideon appeared from behind a heavy door, and she ducked down behind a rusty car that looked like the last time it ran, Jimmy Carter was president. He had a phone to his ear, and though his deep voice echoed throughout the factory, she couldn't make out a word.

Hopefully, the call wasn't related to her going missing. There was no telling what kind of "punishment" he would put on her once he found her, and she would be lying to herself if she said it didn't make her want to hide until nightfall.

She watched as he disappeared behind a different door, and the man looked so damn sexy in suits, it was criminal.

First, she waited to ensure he wouldn't return before running over to the first door he'd gone through. Next, after taking a quick peek over her shoulder, she opened it, the corroded hinges requiring some force, and slipped inside.

The door dropped her into a long hallway, which looked more structurally sound than the rest of the building. It had considerably less litter and waste, but the walls and floor looked ready to crumble. Large openings that used to be windows brought light in from either side, and she checked to make sure the coast was clear before continuing.

Was this what she'd become? A snooper? A stalker? Gideon had given her no reason not to trust him, but he'd never mentioned a Silina before.

Still, that was what men did. She was sure all people did it, but given her history with men, she was showering them with all the blame.

When their church group member, sweet as can be Misty, found out her boyfriend was cheating on her, he'd fallen to his knees, bawling and swearing

she was mistaken. Yet, the other woman had sent video evidence, and the kid turned out to be his. It was like he'd thought the indiscretion would disappear if he cried hard enough. Or that as long as he denied it, it wouldn't be true.

Granted, the man was a walking red flag.

Gideon wasn't.

Yet, for the moment, her insecurities didn't care.

A door at the end of the hallway ominously called to her, daring her to enter. Steeling her resolve, she slowly pushed it open and found herself in a square room with four doors. At this point, she felt like she was in a video game or a dystopian novel, and if she didn't solve the puzzle in time, which would lead her to the correct door, the entire room would go up in flames.

The doors, at least, had small windows.

She randomly picked one, walked over, and rose onto her toes to see through the glass. It was dark, but she made out a man in the middle of the room, tied to a chair, a black cloth bag over his head.

She peered inside a second door.

Empty.

After checking all four doors, two of the rooms had what appeared to be men sitting inside, their heads covered. The other two rooms were vacant.

"Do you think I didn't know you were following me?"

She screamed, stumbled over her feet, and landed on her butt on the ground before Gideon could catch her. Shame made her refuse his help as she stood, dusting off the seat of her jeans.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

She raised an index finger. "It's a funny story act—"

"And I put a protective detail on you. Their job is to ensure they know where you are at all times. You were so busy following me that you didn't notice them following you."

"Well, I thought—"

"Thought what, Anyssa? You could've gotten hurt or worse. Anything could have happened. Yes, I've prepared for emergencies, but what if they lost track of you on the way here?"

She clamped her lips shut.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

She looked down at her hands, which were in desperate need of a manicure. She'd had to resort to acrylic nails because of how badly she chewed on her natural ones, and she'd chewed on her index fingernail while

following Gideon to the point that the tip of her finger was red and tender, the nail bed slightly exposed.

“I thought you were cheating,” she mumbled.

“Speak up, sweetheart.”

Only for this man could she be reduced to a fluffy-tailed bunny when she was supposed to have fangs dripping with toxic venom.

“I thought you were cheating on me,” she repeated, louder. “You got a message. I saw it was from someone named Silina, and you’ve never mentioned a Silina before. I swear I saw a picture of a baby, so naturally, I assumed it was your baby. Then I followed you here because I thought you were fucking another woman, and you two had a kid you never planned on telling me about.”

With a long, rumbling groan, his head fell back.

The knot in his throat bobbed.

It was happening all over again. She’d gone psycho and abducted her sister. Now she’d gone psycho and followed him an hour out of her way, and he would see she wasn’t worth the effort. She couldn’t trust him, so there was no hope for their relationship.

He brought his head forward, removed his phone, unlocked it, and handed it to her.

“Here, sweetheart. Go crazy.”

“But...aren’t you...mad at me?”

“Yes, for putting yourself in a compromising position,” he said. “But I’m not upset with you for thinking I was cheating on you. I never told you about Silina, so what else would it look like I was doing?”

“But I did another crazy thing,” she argued. “Like when I abducted Zaraia without talking to her first.”

“Anyssa, you’ll keep doing crazy things. This is part of the process. If I had something to hide, then maybe, yeah, I’d be pissed at you for reading my messages and following me here. But I have nothing to hide, and how else would I expect you to act after what Chris did?”

Now that he was looking at her, she found that she was reluctant to go through the phone.

“You’re an emotional person,” he continued. “Cobra, viper, mamba or not. You’re not the same person when you’re in the courtroom that you are outside one. When you care, you care down to the core of you. You acted the way you did with Zaraia because you love her and were scared you would

lose her. Now, tell me why you acted like this with me.”

“Because I love you,” she said. “And I’m scared that I could lose you.”

“Sensing a pattern?” He tipped his chin at the phone. “Now, go on. I’m waiting.”

Hands suddenly shaky, she opened his messages. The most recent one was from her, and she smiled when she spotted the hearts around her name at the top of the screen. Hearts and the three droplet water emoji.

“What does the water mea—”

“Nothing. Keep going.”

She opened Silina’s message thread, and the first one was the image she’d seen—an adorable toddler with blond hair and brown eyes wearing a checkered yellow dress and white cardigan.

“Her name’s Daniela,” he said.

She didn’t look up. “Is she yours?”

“That question is how I know Chris did severe damage to your ability to trust, and although we get along now, I still want to kill him for it.” He breathed in and slowly let the air expel from his lungs. “Anyssa, I wasn’t lying when I said I can’t have children. I’ve always wanted a family, so I’ve tried every procedure, test, and surgical intervention. Nothing’s worked. This is...this is just who I am now, and I have to accept that no matter how difficult that might be.”

Shame resonated in his voice.

And she felt like shit.

“Baby, I’m so sorry.” She continued to read, the words blurry and her shameful tears falling onto his phone screen. “Gideon? This message is asking if you’ve gone to see his grave yet. Symon’s dead?”

“Symon died a couple of years ago,” he said. “The little girl’s name’s Daniela. She was supposed to be my niece. Silina’s Symon’s wife.”

“Was it the pandemic?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean she’s ‘supposed’ to be your niece, though?” she asked. “She’s not Symon’s baby?”

“No. Silina had an affair. She grew up down the street from me and Symon, and they started dating in their teens. When I left for the Bratva, she was there for him. They got married and moved to Georgia. By the time I stopped being a fool and tried to reconnect with them both, it was too late.”

“You never told me why you joined the Bratva.”

“Yuri Sokolov,” he said, with so much distaste, she felt the acid on her tongue. “My grandfather was former KGB. When Ukraine gained independence, my grandfather retired and went home to start a farm and reconnect with his lineage. He was a proud Ukrainian, so when, years before, Yuri offered him a position in the Russian government, he turned it down. Yuri retaliated by telling him to send me to the Bratva, the ultimate insult, or our entire family would be killed. I knew my grandfather would sacrifice himself to keep me, Symon, and my grandmother safe, but I went. Yuri wouldn’t have heard him out or accepted any pleas. He would have killed us.”

“*Jesus.*” Thoroughly mortified, she looked up, meeting his eyes. “So, have you gone to see Symon’s grave?”

“Yes, I have. I went not long after the incident on the train tracks. Almost losing you made the pain of losing him worse, so I went to see him.”

She extended his phone toward him.

“You can keep going if you’re not done,” he said.

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m done.”

“Are you sure?”

“Please don’t prolong my misery.”

He took the phone and stuck it inside his blazer. Then he stood staring at her, and she felt like the time she’d gotten called to the principal’s office in middle school for telling her teacher that her wig looked like she’d bought it from the ninety-nine-cent store. Although she’d mumbled it, shyer than a meerkat at the time, Mrs. Jones had heard, and she and her Barbie doll hair wig hadn’t taken it lightly.

“I’m sorry,” she offered. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. You’ve never given me any reason to—”

“Did Chris?” he asked. “Leading up to when you found out he was cheating, were there any obvious clues?”

“No. Our relationship felt strained, but I thought it was his IPO. I didn’t think other women were involved, and certainly not as many as there were.”

“So you were blindsided.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Don’t try to act all innocent now.”

“I can’t help it. I’m so embarrassed.”

He cradled her chin with one hand and traced her right eyebrow with the other. “Do you, at least, trust that I love you?”

She nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Every single time you feel that little fear bubble right here," he brushed the swell of her breast with his fingertip, "you're going to do something crazy. But think about it like this. Say you had to walk across a wide open space. Zaraia tells you there's a bridge there, but it's invisible. Zaraia, who you love and trust. Do you run out onto the bridge?"

"Uh, no." She frowned. "I love my sister, but I'd have to test the waters a few times. Make sure I feel something solid beneath my feet."

"Every single time you test those waters, you feel the bridge. What then?"

"Then, I walk on it."

"Will you run?"

"No, but I'll manage to get across."

"And the next time you encounter the bridge?"

"I understand."

"I know, but let me finish the metaphor."

She smiled. "The next time, I might test it before I step off the ledge, but it won't be as many times as before."

"And, before you know it," he pulled her close, and she wrapped her arms around him, "you'll run across. You'll trust it as a path. Because you can't see it, it'll take some time, but that doesn't mean you'll never believe it's there. My job is to show you that you'll always be able to take me at my word. Your job is to take those small steps."

"The next time a message pops up on your phone, I won't read it," she promised.

"Sweetheart, you'll read it like it's case law, but you won't find deception. Actually, my passcode is 12-14-15. December fourteenth and fifteenth." He kissed her nose. "Does that help?"

"But won't that make you not trust me? Like, you can't leave your stuff around me because you're afraid I'll go through it?"

"Anyssa, you wouldn't do this if our relationship didn't matter to you. Plus, you are not stealthy, sweetheart. I swear...you were slamming doors, your shoes were crunching leaves and all sorts of other loud shit. Sorry, but you might have to get left behind in the zombie apocalypse."

"I was in the zone!"

He grinned. "I love you, Anyssa."

"I love you too."

"What's my name?"

“Gideon.”

“The other one.”

“Oh, Snugga-bear.”

He chuckled. “But we made it through you trying to poke out my eyeball, you forcing me to stand in pouring rain, and you nearly skewering me with a fork. We can make it through this.”

She rolled her eyes. “So dramatic.”

Then he kissed her so long and sweet that she forgot they were standing in the middle of a rundown factory.

“Mmm, wait.” She broke the kiss. “Why are you here? Was this a decoy for me to follow you so you could corner me? Who are the guys in there? Part of the A-Team?”

“The what?”

“Nothing.”

“No, this wasn’t a decoy,” he said. “Do you honestly want to know who the two men are? Because I brought them here to kill them.”

Not a hint of surprise or shock followed his admission. Perhaps she’d been hanging around these mafia types for too long.

“Barnes’ witness was Brogan,” he revealed.

“So my hunch was right,” she said. “During the motion hearing, Barnes said the witness had the inside scoop on Colm’s illegal activities.”

“He was going down with O’Sullivan, so he went behind O’Sullivan’s back, seeking immunity. Part of that immunity agreement was proof that you knew about O’Sullivan’s mob ties and conspired with him. Incriminating you was supposed to be Barnes’ ‘gotcha’ moment.”

Finally, she felt something, like her intestines were trying to wrap themselves around an oddly shaped Christmas present.

“But I realized something when you said the witness was still in as evidence. That meant the hit on you had been in place for a while.”

“Hit? What hit?”

“Oh.” He clicked his tongue. “I forgot to mention that.”

“I had a hit out on me?”

“You *have* a hit out on you, and I’m not sure who requested it yet, but I think it might be related to the case involving the four boys. You made the State look like bumbling idiots, and someone’s not happy that you are, and will always be, better than them.”

Later, she’d bask in the glow of the compliment.

Right now, someone wanted her dead.

“So, who’s that in there?”

He raised a brow. “Take a guess.”

“Colm and Brogan?”

“Yes, and you figuring that out is *such* a fucking turn-on.” He reached down and ran his palm over the curve of her ass. “See, O’Sullivan’s been rubbing Clodagh the wrong way, so she’s been keeping tabs on him for us. Me and Volk had him picked up after the train track incident.”

“So why wait to kill them now?” she asked.

“Because I don’t need them anymore.”

“Gideon,” she searched his eyes, “you’ve got to admit that this sounds very mafia-ish.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Did you use the bait station on Colm?”

He cocked his head to the side. “I’m impressed. Who told you what it was, Dom? Eija?”

“Eija.”

“Yep. O’Sullivan has got about two days left in him.”

“What about Brogan?”

“He annoys me, so I’m just gonna shoot him.” He paused, eyes narrowed. “You didn’t flinch when I said that.”

“What were you expecting? ‘Oh, no, Gideon, spare the lives of these horrible men. Justice needs to be served in a courtroom’? *Fuck* that. I might be a champion of the law, but that only makes you taking them out more salient when ‘the law’ fails to be effective.”

He blessed her with another long, slow, dizzying kiss, released her, and entered the room where Brogan was tied up.

She went to the window and peered inside as he removed the cloth covering Brogan’s head. Brogan grimaced, head rearing back as though gearing up to spit, but Gideon pressed the nozzle to his forehead and pulled.

Brogan slumped.

Gideon didn’t blink.

Then he reemerged, gun in hand and black gloves covering his fingers.

“Did you watch?” he asked.

She should have been turned off.

Disgusted.

She should have wanted nothing more than to turn and run away, leaving

this place far behind. Yet, she'd watched the legal system try to lock away four innocent boys all because it could. That same system was now coming after her, and all she'd done was *her fucking job*.

"I did," she said.

"Are you okay?"

"I am."

It was easier now to understand how the mafia and organized crime came to be. In some ways, the government could be seen as its own crime dominion. Therefore, if the laws the country operated on didn't equally defend "all men," those people were eventually forced to create their own forms of protection.

How often had she seen someone screwed by their public defender because they didn't have money for a private attorney? How many times had she seen two virtually identical crimes, handled by the same judge, result in radically different sentences because one offender was darker than the other? People who'd served the country, and who were then rendered disabled due to that service, were often left with meager checks that didn't keep pace with inflation. And that was if the trauma hadn't left them undone to the point of mental instability, only to be walked past while they slept on benches in front of The White House.

And she was supposed to be worried?

About Colm O'fucking Sullivan?

"You said Colm hasn't got two days left in him, right?" she asked. "What if he annoys me like how Brogan annoyed you?"

Gideon scanned her from head to toe, three times in a matter of seconds, and went to the other door. This time, he stopped in the doorway and motioned with his head for her to walk inside ahead of him.

While he watched, she removed the cloth, dragging it from Colm's head so hard, his neck snapped back. At first, Colm squinted, but then he spotted them standing a few feet away.

"Why am I not surprised?" he said, looking every bit on the verge of death.

Gideon grabbed a pair of gloves from his blazer, handed them to her, and then situated himself behind her.

She slipped on the gloves.

He handed her the gun.

"It's heavier than it looks," she said.

“You’ll get used to the weight.” He cupped her elbows and raised her arms, aiming the nozzle at Colm. “Where do you want the shot to land, sweetheart?”

“Somewhere it won’t kill him right away.”

He lowered her aim.

“When I tell you to, pull the trigger. And you could not look more like my wife than you do at this very moment. So fucking beautiful.” He squeezed her ass and then leaned down to her ear. “Steady, now.”

She held her breath.

“Pull.”

She yanked on the trigger.

Colm jerked and cried out.

“Why did I expect him not to make a noise?” she asked.

“Because you’ve only ever seen him when he’s got people around. Alone, he’s no more dangerous than a newborn.” He raised her arms again. “Where would you like to put this one?”

“Right in the dick.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.” He perfected her aim. “*Fuck*, you look so sexy holding this gun, Anyssa. When we’re done here, we’re going home, and you’re riding my dick.”

Goosebumps rose on her skin. “Yes, sir.”

“Call me ‘sir’ again, and you’ll ride it right now. Pull.”

She pulled.

Colm clenched his teeth, but a scream broke free. “You bit—”

A shot went through his shoulder. Before he could recuperate, she lodged the last shot in his thigh and stared, mesmerized, at the pool of dark blood that formed.

Gideon kissed her cheek and released her elbows. “Let’s go. We need to leave.”

“You don’t have a clean-up crew or something to take care of this?” she asked. “Like Saul in *Breaking Bad*?”

“That’s not why we need to leave.”

He had someone return Aurora’s car.

Rather than stop at a hotel, no matter how much she begged, he forced her to suffer the entire hour-long drive without touching her and forbidding her from touching herself.

They barely made it inside the house before she tugged on his blazer.

When it didn't come off quickly enough, she left him to undress himself and ran to the bedroom, him on her heels as she hopped out of her jeans and panties and pulled her sweater off over her head.

He sat on the bed, and she climbed on top of him, taking his cock inside her with her forehead pressed against his. And she rode him, her hips rolling as he licked and sucked her nipples and kissed her lips, his massive hands caressing the skin on her back.

When she came, it was all over the veiny surface of his shaft. When he came, it was with their bodies tightly fitted together, holding each other as he pulsed inside her, them both covered in sweat.

The next morning, she stood looking out his bedroom window, wearing his too-long T-shirt, the sleeves falling past her wrists as she brought a cup of coffee to her lips. Then, when she turned around, she found him watching her, his head propped up on his fist and a smile on his lovely face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Halloween, and Niko's birthday, came and went. Pavel terrorized the kids, yet again, with a mask that was a too-close replica of the Scarecrow from *Batman Begins*. Therefore, Niko asked him to be something the following year that didn't require a mask, or no one would come to his parties ever again.

Dom and Eija stayed until December, and then they all spent Christmas in Panama at the new "Falcone" residence on the beach.

At the end of January, Pavel and Zaraia announced they were expecting another baby, to no one's surprise.

In February, Micah and Niko joined a co-ed baseball league. Anyssa had encouraged Jordan to join the one for her age division, but Jordan wanted to be a ballerina, primarily because, "I'm gonna rock the socks off that bun, Mama."

So, Jordan joined a ballet troupe.

Today, her troupe had a performance.

And they were running sixteen minutes behind.

Gideon stared at Jordan's mop of curly hair, a brush in hand. Behind her, Chris did the same, holding a jar of gel. Micah came running into the living room, and his jaw dropped when he saw Jordan's un-bunned hair and tights-free legs.

"You guys have been out here forever," he said, tossing up his hands. "You haven't even done the bun yet?"

"Daddy's never done a bun," Chris confessed.

"And I keep my hair cut low for a reason," Gideon added. "Where's Volk? He does ponytails. He should be able to make a bun."

Micah walked over, gently nudged Jordan aside, and took her place in front of Gideon. “Just try.”

“I don’t want her to be embarrassed.”

“I won’t be embarrassed,” Jordan yelled. “Because you and Daddy did my bun, it’ll be perfect.”

Which made it worse. What if she looked back on this day when she was older and saw what a spectacle they’d made of her?

“Which is worse?” Micah asked. “Jordan not having the greatest bun, or my mom walking out here and seeing her like this?”

Gideon nodded. “You’re right. Carmichael, gel her up.”

While Chris globbed, he brushed.

Guilt tore manhole-sized openings in his heart each time he brushed and Jordan’s brows lifted into the heavens. Yet, she didn’t complain. All she did was wiggle, dancing to a song in her head while munching on a stick of string cheese that not even Jesus himself would get her to peel off one by one. It usually drove Micah crazy, but the chaos of the late morning served as a helpful distraction.

When Zaraia and Anyssa made it to the living room, Zaraia holding Aleks while Anyssa carried Jordan’s tutu, they’d gotten Jordan into her tights, shoes, and had made a decent-looking bun.

“Oh, wait. I saw this on YouTube.” Gideon swept the brush in delicate strokes along her hairline. “Baby hairs.”

Admittedly, it disappointed him when no one made a big deal about how fucking amazing the baby hairs looked, but he gave them a pass on account of them being late.

They arrived with just enough time to run Jordan over to her troupe as they lined up along one wall, and then they scrambled to take their seats.

Unsatisfied they couldn’t sit in the same chair, Gideon dragged Anyssa’s seat back until she was close enough for him to wrap his arms around, clasping his hands at her waist. She rested her hands on top of his.

The ballerinas took center stage.

“Where’s Jordan?” He counted each tiny person. There were only nine. That meant someone had fucked something up.

Pavel and Anyssa left the table.

He headed backstage.

Backstage turned out to be a wide-open space with folding tables littered with costumes and cardboard cut-out decorations all covered in glitter. He

searched for any sign that Jordan had been there, and on a wall that led to a corridor, he spotted a stain—a stain from the copious amount of gel he and Chris had slapped into her hair.

He followed the smear to another door that eventually took him behind the venue. Zaraia must have alerted the attendees to the situation because the decibel level inside increased, the noise filtering outside. People murmured, slid chairs across the tiled floors, and called Jordan's name.

Then, he heard a piercing scream.

A child's scream.

He ran toward the sound, repeatedly calling Jordan's name, but he didn't have to call long. She raced toward him, screaming his name with blood all over her clothes.

There wasn't supposed to be blood.

"Thank God you're okay, Princess." He scooped her up, squeezed her tight, and then frantically searched to make sure the blood wasn't coming from her. They hadn't planned for injuries, and they sure as hell hadn't planned for any of the children to get snatched up.

Thankfully, none of the blood was hers.

"Gideon, it's time," Jordan said through tears, ramping up his uneasiness. "Mama needs you. You promised me."

Micah and Niko ran up behind him.

"You can leave her with us," Niko said.

Micah nodded. "Yeah, we'll protect her."

Above their heads, he noticed Zaraia walking toward him. Pavel, behind her, sent him a nod, and he nodded in return.

"Thank you, fellas." He set Jordan on the ground. "Please watch over her."

Micah wrapped his arms around his sister, kissed her temple, and whispered soothing words in her ear that made Jordan sniff and nod.

"We will," Niko promised.

After gracing both boys with a quick head kiss and hair ruffle, he headed for his truck, slipping on a pair of black gloves.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“What’s going on?”

The masked man finished tying Anyssa’s hands behind her as she sat in one of Judge Henry’s Law’s dining chairs in the middle of his opulent Atlanta TV room.

“I said, what’s going on?” Henry repeated, voice rising.

The masked man aimed his pistol, outfitted with a suppressor nozzle, at Henry’s head. “Don’t you think I know how you fuckers operate? First, you find a convict and make a deal under the table to get him out in exchange for doing something you were too much of a pussy to deal with yourself. Then, you’ll turn around and toss me back in.”

Henry held out both hands in front of him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Anyssa looked back and forth between them, an ache increasing on the left side of her body. They’d tried to take her child. What had they expected her to do, let Jordan go? She would gladly take a knife to the aorta if it meant keeping her children safe.

The man removed his mask. “Bring me my money,” Ezra Ronan said. “Do it now, or you’re both getting killed tonight.”

“I don’t know what—”

“I said get me my money.”

Henry scurried from the room.

Ezra, grimacing, lifted his black T-shirt. It wasn’t a small nick, but it wasn’t life-threatening either. After the original guy, who was supposed to keep an eye on the back entrance, was overpowered, it had allowed the original assailant to snatch Jordan.

Ezra, hell-bent on proving himself, stepped in.

A struggle ensued.

Ezra took a blade to the stomach, but to stick to the plan, Ezra took her and left the other guy for Pavel. It wouldn't surprise her if that guy was already on his way to some peat-filled wetland for alligators to make a feast of him.

"They missed the artery," Anyssa whispered.

Ezra touched the long gash and hissed. "Still hurts like hell."

"Would you rather be the other guy?"

Taking a deep breath, no doubt to swallow the pain, Ezra searched the living room until he found the remote and turned on the TV. By the time he found the news channel, Henry had returned.

"How much money to get you both out of here?" Henry attempted to negotiate. "I'm a judge. You can't do this in my house."

"Judge Law, why do all this?" Anyssa asked. "Why go through all this trouble only to pretend you don't know what's going on?"

"Ms. Brandon—"

"Was Barnes part of your little ruse?"

Although he'd survived his injuries, Barnes immediately tendered his resignation and left the state of Georgia.

The news report on the TV caught Henry's eye.

We're on the scene in Marietta where a housekeeper found former detective Frank Spirano and his wife dead in their Cobb County home.

Sources tell us that the couple was more than likely killed last night, and one witness, a neighbor, says she saw a silver Mercedes SUV flee the area shortly after midnight.

If you remember, Frank Spirano was one of the many forced to resign years ago after corruption was uncovered in the APD. That corruption nearly led to the unlawful conviction of four boys in a case the nation hadn't seen since the Central Park Five.

Henry scrambled to his garage door, opened it, and the phone fell from his hands. "Where's my car?"

"Who can account for your whereabouts last night, Judge Law?" Anyssa asked. "Outside of me and Mr. Ronan, here?"

The judge faced them. "What's going on here?"

Good morning from WYKZ-TV, Channel 2 Action news.

I'm here on scene in Fulton County where former Chief of Police Steven Mulrenny was found shot dead in his driveway early this morning by a neighbor walking his dog.

Preliminary reports say he died somewhere between the hours of one and four last night, and witnesses place a silver Mercedes SUV fleeing the area.

Atlanta police are now trying to determine whether the Spirano and Mulrenny homicides are linked.

A figure entered the living room from the back of the house, and Anyssa smiled. This man looked so damn delicious in his dark blue suit, white shirt, and wine-colored tie.

“So, this isn’t the guy you hired,” Gideon said, pointing to Ezra. “That guy, the one who took my stepdaughter, we killed him and made it look like an accident. And by the way, Ezra, that blood better not fucking belong to Anyssa.”

Ezra raised his shirt. “It’s mine.”

“It’s not critical,” Anyssa added. “I checked it out on the way over. I think our boy Ezra, here, is just a bleeder.”

Ezra nodded. “She’s right, you know. I am.”

“Why is my woman still tied up?”

Ezra raced over to undo her loosely fastened ropes, and she realized she wasn’t the only person Gideon affected. Ezra had remained calm, poised, and in control the entire time they were together, but something about Gideon’s authority turned people like them into bumbling airheads.

The ropes fell to the floor, and she stretched her arms above her head, rising from the chair.

“You can go now, Ezra,” Gideon said.

Ezra hurried toward the front door.

“Out through the back, Ezra,” Gideon barked.

After sending her a wave that she returned, Ezra left the house through the back door.

“You also killed the second detective from the boys’ case,” Gideon informed Henry, reaching into his blazer. “As well as his wife. You were spiraling. After conspiring to put those boys in jail, only to lose to the best defense attorney in Atlanta, you started using barbiturates to cope with your

increasing anxiety.”

“I do not use drugs,” Henry argued, voice trembling.

“I’m not telling you what’s happened. I’m telling you what’s going to happen.”

Anyssa picked up where Gideon left off. “You were spiraling into debt. You haven’t made a payment on this house or your lake house up near Lake Michigan in a few months. You’ve spent tens of thousands on escorts. You’ve hit rock bottom.”

“Now, you’re paranoid.” Gideon, gloves on, brandished a revolver. “You think your secret will come out—that you were part of the conspiracy to put the boys in jail. It killed you that you never figured out how they got off, and four kids would have meant a decent sum for you in kickbacks.”

Henry clenched his fists. “None of this is true.”

Anyssa continued. “Then, after your rampage, you sent a hitman to kidnap my daughter. My daughter’s security detail handled the hitman, but you had them take me instead...in your silver Mercedes SUV. Here, you tied me up, but my bodyguard tracked me down.”

Gideon raised the gun, aimed it at Henry, and pulled the trigger.

It clicked.

Henry fell to his knees.

“Do you believe in luck, Judge Law?” Gideon spun the chamber, raised the gun, and again it clicked. “Because if the authorities can make it here before your luck runs out, this story ends with your arrest. If not, it ends with me killing you in defense of my client.”

“Who is terrified.” Anyssa dropped to the floor, cowering for effect. “Because all she’s ever done is practice the law fairly and justly.”

Henry’s lips parted to respond, but then he screamed, raising his arms to shield his head.

Gideon lowered the gun, spun again.

“Please, I’m begging you. Don’t do this.”

Gideon aimed, paused, and pulled.

Another click.

Grunting, he gave the chamber another whirl. “You were saying something, judge?” he said. “Something about sparing your life when you tried to kill my wife? Twice?”

Anyssa chewed on the inside of her cheek. Gideon didn’t appear to realize what he’d called her, and she was not about to correct him.

What a difference a year could make.

As long as it was him, she would do the marriage thing again. And while she did have reservations about what could happen ten years down the road, she thought about them less and less.

What occupied her mind these days was waking up next to him. Finding more ways to love him. Making his favorite foods—pancakes, pancakes, and more pancakes—while she watched as he folded himself into a fetal position in the living room to play the role of a magical bear cursed by an evil... dandelion.

He spun.

The gun clicked.

Henry screamed, his screams growing louder with each rotation, tears and snot streaming down his face. Today would be his final day in *Don't Fuck with Anyssa Brandon 101*, and she hoped, for his sake, he'd learned something.

Six hard knocks thudded on the front door.

"I'm tired of this." Gideon walked over to Henry. "Take this."

Henry, hands shaking, took the gun.

"Put it under your chin," Gideon instructed.

Henry tucked the nozzle beneath his chin, and without prompting, he pulled the trigger. Then he pulled again, crying harder with each tug of his finger.

"Don't forget the last thing," Anyssa said.

Gideon looked down at Henry, head cocked. "And you look dusty... raggedy ass."

Then he walked over to where she'd theatrically collapsed.

"How'd I do?"

She sent him a thumbs up. "Perfect, babe. Perfect."

As he crouched and placed his body over hers, the police stormed in.

"Judge Law, put the gun down," a uniformed officer ordered.

The judge continued to pull the trigger, empty clicks echoing around the room.

"Nyss?" Shawn shoved through the officers, hurried over to her, and dropped to one knee. "Nyss, are you hurt? When I heard you might be over here...are you hurt?"

She shook her head, eyes filled with tears. "No, I'm not hurt. Gideon showed up and...and..."

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Gideon whispered. “It’s over.”

Shawn sighed, kissed the top of her forehead, and squeezed Gideon’s shoulder in thanks as he stood.

Gideon rose, lifting her in his arms, and continued to whisper soothing words in her ear. She nodded, her eyes buried against his shoulder as they left the house. An officer offered to give them a ride home, and they accepted, silent in the backseat the entire way.

It wasn’t until the officer had driven off, after depositing them in front of Zaraia and Pavel’s, that they spoke again.

“Again, baby,” she held up three fingers, her thumb and index finger forming a circle, “that was excellent.”

He took her hand and headed for the stairs. “How do you not use those words in court?”

“I do, just in my head.”

“Raggedy ass. I fucking love it.”

“Later, I’ll teach you about Booboo the Fool.”

“Who’s that?”

“No one knows. We just know he’s not who you want to be.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Anyssa rubbed dirt from her nose with her sleeve and stretched her fingers in the soil-covered gloves. In truth, she was slowing Gideon and Micah down, but they were at least patient with her. They'd sent Niko and Jordan to the back porch where the duo watched, clearly unhappy with the decision.

Eventually, she'd learned that the flowers Gideon took home with him after their dates provided the compost for the flower bed he was cultivating for her. Once it was done, it would run along their exterior bedroom wall, and she couldn't wait to see it.

"Now that you have about three inches of root showing, the avocado pit is ready for soil," Gideon explained.

Micah added, "It's called sprouting, and you're going to put it in a pot with some potting soil. Try not to break the roots."

She nodded. "Got it."

She, in fact, did not get it and soon found herself on the back porch with Niko and Jordan. Then Aleks woke up from his nap, and the four of them watched as Gideon and Micah finished planting, laughing at inside jokes and making them even more jealous.

Afterward, they went inside to wash up.

Niko volunteered to make dinner, which was a frozen pizza and French fries. They'd promised the kids that they could eat whatever they wanted for dinner on Spring Break, and while the kids ate Chinese food, pizza, and burgers, she made a separate dinner for her and Gideon.

Niko had also chosen to spend Spring Break with her and Gideon instead of going to the Caribbean with his parents, and she'd read a story once about a woman who'd gotten pregnant while already pregnant.

With those two, anything was possible.

Later that evening, while the kids played in the living room, she and Aleks hung out in the owner's suite. She hadn't decided what to do with the house in Buckhead, but there would be no prying Micah away from their new backyard and two new fluffy chicks.

Gideon emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, and all she could do was stare. How, in the heavens, was all this man all hers?

Just as he disappeared inside the closet, his phone rang. "Sweetheart, can you grab that for me?" he called.

"Sure." She reached for the phone, noticed that it was a number not listed in his contacts, and raised it to her ear. "Hello, you've reached the phone of Sir Gideon Miller."

The person on the other side, a woman it sounded like, hacked a laugh. "Miller? Is that the name the boy is usin'? Name like that don't fit him."

"Who is this, now?"

"Aye, you're the lass he's marryin', right? The pretty one. Brandon, right? This is yer Auntie Clodagh. It's a pleasure to be meetin' ya."

"Oh, hi. The pleasure's all mine."

"I was tryin' to reach the boy."

Anyssa held in a snicker.

Gideon was a far cry from a "boy."

"Just wanted to know if he'll be needin' any more information from me as I'll be goin' on a retreat. I'll be out of touch for a bit."

She rose from the bed, Aleks tucked on her hip. "One second. I'll ask him."

"Tell him I've got more bastards he and Volk can off like those other three. Hold on...*Baxter, get away from mi gammy toes, ya waster!*"

The woman certainly was animated, and from what she'd heard, a certified freak. She could only hope to be as active when she reached Clodagh's age. As long as she had one good hip, she planned to ride Gideon's dick until they were six feet under.

"Like those other three," Clodagh finished.

She leaned against the closet opening. "Hey, babe?"

All he'd put on was a T-shirt and shorts, but how they hung on his body made her want to bow in worship.

"It's Clodagh. She's going on a," she bent her fingers, "'retreat' and will be out of touch, so she's checking to see if you need anything."

He shook his head. “No, ma’am.”

“He says no,” she said.

“All right, *sham*. I’ll be seein’ ya at the wedding, if not sooner.”

The call ended.

“What’s this wedding Clodagh keeps talking about?” she asked, returning to the bed as he followed.

He fell onto the mattress, on his back, and tucked his hands behind his head. She sat beside him, tucked one leg under her, and released Aleks to do one of his favorite things: climb all over his uncle.

“I’ve been telling everyone we’re getting married,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be tomorrow, next week, or next month, but you, Anyssa Brandon, are the only one for me.”

Her stomach coiled in all sorts of formations. “The things you say to me...”

“What do they do to you?”

“I’ll let you know when the kids are in bed.”

An hour after the kids went to bed, they lay on their backs on the mattress, chests heaving. She had on a cami and was naked from the waist down, one breast exposed and sitting on the neck of the cotton top. He didn’t even get his shorts off before she’d climbed on top of him, and they currently sat awkwardly around his knees.

“Wait a minute.” The conversation with Clodagh came rushing back. “You never told me what information Clodagh Ronan gave you about Colm.”

“You ask me this now when I need a few more minutes to distract you with my tongue?”

“Yes, though that does paint a lovely picture.” She rolled onto her side, facing him. “We’ve killed men together. Just tell me.”

An eternal pause stretched in the silence. Periodically, she glanced down to make sure she still had time. Once he was hard, she got tunnel vision.

“Where he’d be,” he said, finally. “To plant three murders on him.”

She stared at him. Then, as the information sank in, her eyes grew wider and wider.

“*What?*”

“Clodagh wanted O’Sullivan out of the picture.”

“What beef did she have with Colm?”

“He didn’t play ball.”

“And you and Pavel do.”

Since he didn't respond, she fit the remaining pieces together.

"If she helped you take Colm out, then she could be assured that her business in the area isn't threatened," she said. "You and Pavel planted the murders to spook Brogan, and that friction was all you needed. It's like you said, family is important. If there's any dissolution in a crime family, that primes them for a takeover or a complete wipeout. She then handed both Colm and Brogan, on a platter, to you and Pavel."

He frowned, narrowing the thick brows on his gorgeous, faux-confused face. "You're losing me."

"The guys at the Porsche Center," she continued. "They were all Italian. With you rubbing elbows with the Italians and colluding with Clodagh, that ostracized Colm. It was a strategic move to gain territory. Those allegiances have made you and Pavel the most powerful duo in the area. Possibly the southeastern United States."

He didn't comment.

"Gideon, did Colm sanction those hits on me?"

He exhaled, then nodded. "Yes."

"So it wasn't Judge Law, the two detectives, and the former Chief of Police?"

"No."

"Why'd you choose Judge Law as the fall guy?"

"The motion hearing," he said. "He called you 'Alyssa' when he knew that was damn well not your name."

She narrowed her eyes, a smile pulling at her cheek. "Psycho."

"That makes you Mrs. Psycho."

She laughed, shaking her head. "So, did the bait station start before I told you about my agreement with Colm?"

He nodded. "After we started digging and discovered your affiliation with him, Volk said there was no way you would align yourself with O'Sullivan if he didn't have something over you. When he asked Zaraia about it, she said you never mentioned it to her, and it broke her heart to know you'd been placed in a situation like that. And Volk *does not* like a sad Zaraia. I had to suggest the bait station for us to get more information because he'd planned to drive up to Athens and put a bullet in O'Sullivan's brain. Then I met you and wished I'd let him do it."

"What about Colm's 'people'?" she asked. "Did Clodagh take them out too?"

“Some of them.”

“What happened to the rest, Gideon?”

He shrugged.

She crawled on top of him and straddled his waist. “What happened to the rest?”

“I killed them. For you.”

“And for you.”

He shrugged again.

“So, in conclusion, you and Pavel collaborated and conspired, rose in power, and are creating an empire.”

“No.”

“You have people who blindly follow you, like Ezra, Clodagh’s nephew.”

“Not even.”

“And with Colm out of the picture and La Cosa Nostra in your back pocket, you and Pavel dominate the most territory on this side of the country.” She leaned forward, slightly elevated, and placed her face inches from his. “Baby, this has mafia written all over it.”

He rolled his hips, rubbing his slowly hardening cock along her clit.

She continued, breaths lengthening, “Just because it’s not the Bratva, and your ‘soldiers’ all come from diverse backgrounds, that doesn’t make it any less than what it is. They’re still loyal to you and Pavel.”

“See, you keep saying that.” On the last roll, he held her hips steady and slid inside her. “But it’s like I told you, sweetheart. Pavel and I aren’t involved in the mafia. We’re just a security company.”

EPILOGUE

Gideon lay back on the mattress while Aleks crawled and crept all over him. Niko and Micah sat on each side of his body, cross-legged and waiting.

Jordan, wearing a magician's cape and a tiara, waved a hairbrush. "Now, you guys and ghouls, be quiet, *please*. For Jordan's going to tell you a story."

Micah raised an eyebrow. "What's with the ghost theme?"

"Just let her have it," Niko said.

Gideon quietly laughed at the trio, his favorite trio, as Aleks discovered the Tungsten band circling the fourth finger on his left hand. Despite seeing the ring multiple times, Aleks used his abs as a bench and preoccupied himself with examining it further.

"Once upon a time, in a kingdom a long time ago, there was a princess," Jordan began. "But she wasn't just the princess of the kingdom. She was also the kingdom's mathematician."

Gideon, Micah, and Niko all cocked their heads to the side at the same time.

"She was also known as the fairest person in the kingdom, so her father, the Old King, would ask her to advise him when giving out punishments and sentences."

Anysa appeared in the doorway, brows raised. Gideon looked over at her, and they had a silent conversation, wondering when Jordan had learned words like "mathematician" and "advise."

"That's why, when the samurai washed up on the kingdom's shores, although everyone wanted to put him and his people to death, the princess stepped in." Jordan held a hand out in front of her. "'Look,' the princess said.

‘Look at how thin they are. How can they be a threat? Our people are not like his. Let us corral them in the tombs, feed them, and then we will make a decision about their fates when Father returns from his trip.’”

Anyssa’s head reared back.

Gideon opened his eyes wide and mouthed, “*Corral?*”

Anyssa mirrored his expression. “*Tombs?*”

Jordan stuck out a pinky and a thumb. “Little did she know, this samurai was her red thread of fate.”

Anyssa pulled out her phone, and whatever she saw on the screen made her carve out a spot next to him. Then she turned the phone screen toward him.

The Red Thread of Fate, also referred to as the Red Thread of Marriage, and other variants, is an East Asian belief originating from Chinese mythology.

“It’s real,” she whispered. “What is happening right now?”

Jordan released a heavy sigh, head slowly shaking. “It would be the first time the Onoorwonne Empire met Clan Masahi, and even though it ends in tragedy, it wouldn’t be the last.”

“What clan was that, Princess?” Gideon asked, bolting upright so quickly, he had to grab Aleks to avoid tipping him over. There was no way he’d heard her correctly.

“Clan Masahi,” Jordan repeated. “But, when they meet again, it won’t be Clan Masahi. It’ll be Masahiko.”

Thank you for reading!

xoxo,

- K

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don't forget to leave a review!

I'm a creative creature from the Caribbean who likes animals, Star Wars, quirky humor, and any kind of media that deals with people finding love in an otherwise impossible time.

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