



A Dark
Mafia
Romance

MALEVOLENT
KING

MADE OF MAYHEM BOOK ONE

MILA KANE

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A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

MADE OF MAYHEM DUET

BOOK ONE

MILA KANE

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Mila Kane

Also by Mila Kane

WELCOME TO MILA'S WORLD

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inspiration at [Mila Kane](#).

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Welcome to Mila Kane's New York. It's not the city you know,
and here the Kings and Queens of the Underworld reign
supreme.

Along with life or death, love, darkness, and mayhem rules
this corner of the book world. If that's your thing, read on.

If you're not sure, check out [my website](#) for a full list of TWs.

NIKOLAI

The day my father died, I learned two new things.

First, my half-brother, and rival for the title of *pakhan* in the *bratva* I'd dedicated my life to, knew me better than I'd thought.

Second, getting out of the trunk of a car with your hands tied is a bitch, but it's not impossible.

My entire life, I'd been competing with my older brother for survival in the brutal world I'd been born into. A chess game a decade in the making, each moving our pieces across the board, trying to stay alive. Kill or be killed was the only certainty in my life for a long time, and that didn't make for happy families.

The plan that had finally ended my father was too clever and unexpected for him to anticipate. For the first time in my life, my brother had moved a chess piece in a direction I'd never seen coming.

I'd been taken by the De Sanctis family, or rather, handed over. *Fucked over, you mean.* I wriggled my hand, testing the bonds, and chuckled. It was fucking funny. I had to give it to Kirill, he'd blindsided me at the end. Cornered me into a perfect check, but the game wasn't over yet, and I was born to play it. Few people impressed me, and after years, my brother had topped the list. I'd buy him a drink before I killed him.

But this wasn't the time for revenge fantasies. It was the time to figure out how the fuck to escape before Antonio De Sanctis, the don of the outfit, got me locked up and sitting

pretty at his compound or a warehouse somewhere. Being a prisoner to show the might and power of a fading, irrelevant man wasn't how I'd planned to celebrate my father's death.

They'd secured my wrists with zip ties. Maybe Antonio wasn't as stupid as he looked. Zip ties were hard to cut through and not easily picked like metal cuffs. The De Sanctis fuckers had also tied them incredibly tight. Luckily for me, they didn't know my little trick.

They also hadn't checked me carefully for weapons, and it would prove fatal to whoever had the bad luck of opening the trunk.

Breathing steadily, I focused on my body, positioning myself as well as possible, given the limited space. The ache in my right shoulder was a constant companion and a side effect of my trick. I leaned into the pain now, pushing my shoulder away from me and twisting. The agony increased, then a faint pop echoed through my head.

Pain beat at me as I carefully maneuvered my arms under myself inch by agonizing inch until my hands were in front of me. My dislocated shoulder howled at me. I stuffed the pain inside the locked box where I put all the other horrors of my life. Joint laxity wasn't an unusual condition. However, the ability to embrace the pain of a full shoulder dislocation was rare. The problem wasn't the loose joints, it was my fucked-up brain.

I'd learned young that I could do anything to survive.

Next, I reached for my steel-capped and lethal boots. The idiots hadn't even taken them. I'd stomped brains out with these very boots. And that wasn't their only benefit. Press the inner arch just right, and a blade shoots out of the toe.

Cutting the zip tie wasn't pretty, but it was done by the time the car stopped.

I suspected I'd been brought to New Jersey, the De Sanctis seat of power. When taken by a rival family, they liked to get you secluded and into an easily defended place as quickly as possible. To use a truly American phrase, this wasn't my first

rodeo. However, it was the first time my brother had willingly handed me over.

As my hands came free, wrists stinging from multiple slices of the careless knife, my mind lingered over the sight of my father dying.

My mother had been fond of old Russian superstitions. After we were ripped from Moscow by my father and badly transplanted into America, it was all she'd had to hold on to of her homeland. That, and me. Not much. Not enough to stop her from hanging herself from the shower rail in the bathroom of our secluded house on my fifteenth birthday.

One of her favorite phrases proved itself correct last night. "Don't dig a hole for someone else. You might fall in yourself." How right Irina had been. As I'd held her lifeless body that day, the last day of my childhood, I'd planned how and when to dig a hole for my father. Last night, when he'd fallen, I'd fallen right in after him. On the surface, I'd dedicated my entire violent existence to being the heir of the Chernov bratva, a brotherhood of thieves and murderers who conducted their bloody business in New York. Being *pakhan* should have been my life's ambition, my greatest goal. It wasn't. A fact that not a single soul knew. My goal had always been to end Viktor, my mother's killer. *Look at me, Mother, smashing our goal by the ripe old age of twenty-four.* I'd always been an overachiever.

When the car stayed still for more than a minute, I knew it was time. We'd arrived at our destination. I waited for the trunk to open.

Once it did, I was ready. I kicked forward before the guy opening it could see inside properly. The knife in my boot sank into his neck. He froze, staring at me. His look of shock was the last thing he managed, choking on his own blood. If I'd ever had any luck in my life, it had been the devilish kind. Today, it was working its magic again.

I kicked him off and lunged out of the trunk as the second stooge rounded the car. This time, the knife in my boot connected between his legs. As he pitched forward, grabbing

at his bleeding balls, I kicked his head with the steel-capped toe of my other boot. The crack of his neck breaking was a comforting sound. Two down, two to go.

By now, the driver must have had an idea that something was happening. Luckily for me, De Sanctis men seemed slow on the uptake.

I crouched between the two dead men and rifled through their clothes, glancing around. We were in a dimly lit garage. Pocketing a wickedly sharp knife and two guns, I approached the front of the vehicle. The driver was talking to the passenger. It was almost too easy. The problem was that blowing his brains out through the window would be loud, and the building where we were currently fighting to the death housed a lot more De Sanctis men than these four. I had to get out of here quietly, or not at all.

I crept back into the shadows at the back of the car and sacrificed one of the guns. Making sure the safety was on, I tossed it into the far corner of the darkened garage, where it banged off a storage bin.

The two remaining men left the car, pulling their guns, clearly believing I was making for the door. They approached the place the sound had come from, and I moved after them. A bloodthirsty shadow they didn't catch, looming behind them. I took the first from behind by the throat, holding the knife there. His friend whirled at the sound of his grunt and leveled his gun, with a silencer, at both of us. He shot wildly, scared out of his mind. The suppressed shots zipped into his friend, ending him. I clasped him against me as my shield and threw the long knife. It embedded in the shooter's gun shoulder, and he dropped the weapon, crying out like a little lost goat.

I was on him before he realized I'd crossed the distance.

I wrestled him to the ground, and he grunted in pain as I yanked the knife from his shoulder and put it to his neck.

"Where are we?"

"Fuck you," he ground out.

"Tell me, and I'll take mercy on you."

He blinked at me, his furious eyes burning into mine. Pain was something many people could endure, but hope? It was deadly.

“New Jersey, Casa Nera, the De Sanctis compound.”

“And how does one get out of here without attracting attention?”

He wetted his thick lips. “There are woods at the back. They go nearly the entire way to Trenton. You can climb the wall.”

He had barely finished speaking when his eyes bulged, and red frothed from between his lips. He mouthed a word as the slit in his throat sprayed his lifeblood against my neck.

“This *is* my mercy,” I told him, getting up. It was the only type I knew.

I stood in the sudden stillness of the dark garage, death hanging in the air. I waited to see if the struggle had alerted someone, but no one came.

I could get out of here. I was well on my way, but I didn’t know who was outside or what the layout of the compound was.

I needed someone for insurance.

Someone important.

I knew just the one.

SOFIA

“*S*ofia, you’re a lifesaver,” my best friend, Chiara, gushed in my ear.

I climbed out of a cab outside heavy metal gates framing a long stone driveway. “Hm, sure. You owe me. Again. Don’t forget,” I said, a smile forming despite the pain helping my friend hide her secret relationship with my bodyguard was proving to be.

Chiara was the only daughter of a high-up made man in the De Sanctis family.

My famiglia.

Angelo was the stoic bodyguard who’d been watching over me for years. As the only daughter of a don who ruled New Jersey into Philly and even New York, I wasn’t allowed to go anywhere alone. Especially not the trip from art school in New York to my home in New Jersey. The warm and cozy connotations of the word *home* were hardly appropriate for the sprawling compound from which the De Sanctis family reigned from, but it was the only one I’d ever known.

Today, I’d taken a cab home to give my poor, hardworking protector and my best friend some alone time. An act that was against my father’s, my don’s, rules. A rule I’d never broken for myself, but for my best friend? It was worth the risk.

I stood outside the gates, eyeing the black stone plaque mounted on a sandstone wall. It read “Casa Nera,” and was carved in a scrolling cursive. The tension I always felt coming home crowded my shoulders like an invisible noose around

my neck. A leash. I might be the prized and protected daughter of the powerful Antonio De Sanctis, *capo di capi* of New Jersey, but I was as far under my father's thumb as any other family member. A pretty dolly my father trotted out on Sundays to impress his men. At worst, a pure, untouched bargaining chip in a potential future alliance.

Turning a winning smile on like a switch, I pivoted toward the guard post sitting on the left side of the gate.

Luckily, I recognized the man on duty.

"Gino, how are you doing today?" I asked, leaning my body into the gap in his plexiglass partition and batting my eyes at him.

He narrowed his in return. "I know what you're up to, Sofia. It won't work. I have to report it."

"But you don't when you think about it. I'm fine. No one else saw... you don't want Angelo to get in trouble, do you? He was the best man at your wedding."

Most of the De Sanctis men at Casa Nera were as familiar to me as uncles. Made men who'd been around since I was a little girl, tagging along behind her older brother and playing hide-and-seek on the sprawling grounds of the compound. I had thirty men just like Gino, who I called *zio*, but he was one of my favorites.

Gino sighed and looked at the security feeds, checking that no one else had witnessed me arriving home in a cab.

He swallowed hard, cracking his knuckles with nerves. "Fine, but only because your father isn't here, and today is tense as hell, and I don't want either of you getting in trouble."

Relief turned my smile genuine. "Thanks, Gino, I appreciate it. Tell Enza I got the tickets for the special exhibit."

Gino winced. "Great, another art gallery I have to wander around and pretend to be interested in. I don't know how you can study it and stare at it all day. It's just paint on a canvas."

"It's more than that. It's a peek into someone else's head. It's an escape." *The only one I have.* I didn't voice the last out

loud. I couldn't change who I was and who my father was. I couldn't dismantle the walls that surrounded me. Walls upon walls. Stone-made ones and invisible ones. Walls around my heart. Walls around my body. And a hidden wall of fear and duty that sat inside my mind.

"You may not be interested in the art, but you're interested in her. She'll love it and love you for taking her." It was always safer to change the subject to other people. Deflect, move on. Smile and keep going. Don't let anyone see beneath the confident, capable mask I donned every single morning.

Sofia De Sanctis, smart, capable Mafia princess. It wouldn't do to let anyone see the real me. I'd learned long ago that showing weakness only made me a target for predators. Bad men who were drawn to silent dolls.

Gino blew out a breath and smiled. Despite his protests, I knew there was nothing that the man wouldn't do for his wife.

"Well, I guess we'll go. Now, if you want me to stay quiet about your little cab trip, don't linger and get inside. I told you, today's tense."

"Why? What's going on?"

Gino studied the security feeds for a moment longer and then leaned forward, abandoning his watch for a second. He was a sucker for gossip. "We have a new guest at Casa Nera. A Chernov."

The trouble with the rival family had started a few months ago. My father, wanting to edge further and further into New York and get a taste of the money that flowed in its seedy underbelly, had tried to arrange an engagement with one of the most vicious powers in the city—the Chernov Bratva.

Viktor Chernov, the *pakhan*, had two sons, and they couldn't have been more different. Kirill was cold and calculating, while his half-brother, Nikolai, was a raging maniac, or so he liked people to think. My past with the more unpredictable Chernov was complicated.

When my father had proposed the engagement, he'd had Kirill in mind. I hadn't met Kirill until the talks about the

engagement had started. It was an engagement that would never happen. I'd barely given it a thought, yet my father had taken the slight hard. That's when it became clear that his motives were purely financial. I wasn't surprised. I was just an asset to him, something to be invested for a high return.

"I heard a rumor that their boss, Kirill and Nikolai's father, died last night," Gino said.

I reared back, trying to process that information. If it were true that Viktor Chernov was dead, it would shake the entire underworld of New York and its surrounding areas, us included. It also spelled bloodshed, without a doubt. Wars of succession in mob families were utterly vicious.

New York was home to five families, all warring for turf and power. The Chernov *bratva* held a violent reputation no one willingly crossed. Then there was the Navarro clan (a Mexican cartel), the O'Connor family (who were part of the Irish Mafia), a Turkish gang, and a Sicilian family who was losing power daily as the De Sanctis family pushed further into the city.

Viktor Chernov's death meant blood and destruction in our world.

"If that's true, Kirill or Nikolai will be the next *pakhan* of New York," Gino muttered. In a rare display, he crossed himself and pressed a kiss to the golden cross on the chain around his neck. "God help us if it's Nikolai. That man..." He trailed off, unable to find the right words to describe the threat Nikolai Chernov posed to the general population, not to mention the other bosses' peace of mind. "He's a fucking maniac," he finished, still holding his crucifix as if preparing to ward off the Devil.

No one knew better than me how terrifying Nikolai Chernov could be. A small needle of pain dug into my heart when I considered the potential consequences of one of the Chernov brothers becoming Boss. The other would probably die. I didn't know how to feel about that. My experience with Nikolai was the first time I'd learned how dangerous it was when a man who didn't play by the rules locked you in his

sights. My dealings with Nikolai remained inside a bolted box of the past that I never dared to peek in.

Gino's radio chirped and we both jumped with fright.

"Damn, Gino, you freaked me out," I complained as I straightened up and took a steadying breath.

"Well, that's good if it keeps you inside today. Anyway, it shouldn't have anything to do with you. Don't worry."

I nodded to Gino and headed through the pedestrian gate into the compound. Once inside, I walked up the long, winding driveway and crossed the massive lawn, surrounded by buildings on all sides.

None of the buildings filling the compound were as huge or traditional-looking as the original mansion Antonio had built as homes for his top men. Casa Nera. It was as old as you could get in these parts, and the imposing structure never failed to stand out against the backdrop of the woods ringing the compound.

A red-brick façade was adorned with ornate carvings and intricate details that I'd stared at for hours as a child. Some of the figures were downright terrifying: stone faces gnarled with pain, or gargoyle-style figures snarling at passers-by. A wide stone staircase swept up to the front entrance, a heavy oak door with brass fittings. The windows were small, considering the size of the place, with old frames that rattled in the wind. Antonio had wanted as much of the house's history kept intact, which had made it a cold and uncomfortable place to live as a child.

As I neared the house, I noticed how quiet it was. My father did a lot of business in Atlantic City, and often, most of the De Sanctis manpower was with him. My father had the unshakeable confidence in his security and power that could only belong to someone of his age. Since he'd lived so long unchallenged, he thought that would never change. For this reason, the house was often less protected than it could be. They say pride comes before a fall, but I'd yet to see that reality play out with my father. He was proud, arrogant, and elitist, and nothing in our lives had ever proved him wrong.

Now, he had a Chernov in the basement, one of the most dangerous men in the city, no matter which one it was, and he hadn't bothered to allocate extra men to watch the house. I could only suppose that Antonio believed he had the hostage suitably fucked up and, therefore, no longer a threat. There was no point in me thinking about it. My opinion counted for less than the ornamental gravel beneath my heels.

Good girls are seen and not heard, Sofia.

My father's voice was a black poison in my mind.

I was a child when I'd first come across the lowest level, where my father carried out his darkest deeds. You didn't end up being *capo di capi* of one of the East Coast's richest and most violent mafia families without spilling blood. I feared that the grounds of Casa Nera and every flower that grew in its opulent gardens were fertilized by human remains. A Gothic mansion resting on real bones.

I shivered, forcing my mind away from such morbid imaginings as I crunched up the driveway.

The good news was that fewer people were around to wonder why I was walking up the driveway instead of being driven up by Angelo. Chiara better appreciate my effort to ensure she got time alone with my big, burly guardian.

I skirted around the entrance to Casa Nera and headed for the garage. The one person I knew would be home was Carmella, the housekeeper. If I came in from the front door, and not the garage entrance, she'd know something was up. She'd missed her calling as a detective.

I punched the code into the keypad, and entered the garage. It was dark inside, and I fumbled in my pocket for my phone's flashlight. Turning the lights on kick-started a noisy generator and didn't fit with my undercover mission of getting inside without my illicit solo cab ride being discovered. The smell of grease and gas met my nose, oily and addictive. I'd always loved the smell of gas stations, lowering the window in the back when I was a kid, watching my father's driver gassing up the car just to catch any stray fumes, despite my mother fussing that it was bad for me.

Like so many things that felt good, knowing they were bad for you only made it better.

Today, there was another note to the smell-something sharp, like fire and metal.

My flashlight flicked on, and I raised it. The garage was huge, taking up nearly the entire mansion floor. Luxury cars with enough bullet-proofing to protect a president sat under covers, unmoving sleeping beasts. I started through the cavernous space, my boots echoing on the concrete floor. As I reached one of the vehicles, I paused, surprised to see the doors hanging open.

The interior was too dark to make out, but the way the shiny SUV's doors were gaping was an unusual sight. I drew closer cautiously. The trunk was open as well.

Tension notched down my spine, sending gooseflesh rippling out from the point of contact.

Something wasn't right.

Dark red puddles were illuminated as I pointed my phone at the ground.

Blood.

I took another step forward, a scream climbing up my throat, rushing toward my mouth. Carmella would hear and call for help. Carmella was always listening, always on guard.

The scream never left me.

Instead, a hard hand clamped hard over my lips, a rigid body pressed into me from behind, and a steely arm banded across my waist.

I was rigid with shock. No one touched me. Not my one best friend, not my father, no one. No casual arms were slung around my shoulders. No warm embraces, high-fives, or nudges came my way. I was a doll encased in glass. No one had ever dared to break my father's rules and touch me, except one man - the one who haunted my dreams as often as he haunted my nightmares.

My attacker towered over me, clearly male from the boundless strength in his muscled arms. I screamed against his hand, and a low chuckle sounded in my ear as warm breath hit my skin through my hair.

“Sofia,” a deep, growly voice murmured in my ear.

I was completely immobile against him, held first by his strength, and second, my terror.

He rubbed his nose through my hair, and his hard chest expanded deeply, pushing firmly against the back of my head. “Sofia De Sanctis. Have you missed me, *lastochka*?”

Fear beat up my throat, stealing my voice.

The new “guest” at Casa Nera wasn’t Kirill Chernov, the cold, calculating heir to his father’s *bratva*. It was the violent, unpredictable psychopath he called his half-brother. Contender for the throne, and the only man who had ever dared to trespass on my father’s property and touch me.

Nikolai Chernov. In the flesh.



MY SHOCK and terror lasted a few seconds before I jerked out of my frozen state and fought him. He grunted when my elbow connected with his side, and he hauled me around to trap me against the wall.

My phone fell, clattering on the floor, the flashlight still on. The beam of light angled upward as Nikolai pressed my face into the wall, his forearm resting across the back of my neck. He moved his face next to mine, meeting my eyes for the first time. I couldn’t get used to how close he was. My skin hummed at the sensation of being touched by another, even like this. It was as if I’d been slowly turning into a ghost that haunted Casa Nera, and now, Nikolai’s punishing grip had brought me back to life.

“Now, that’s no way to greet me. Don’t forget your manners, Sofia. It’s hardly becoming of a former prom queen,” he said, cruel amusement filling his words.

Prom queen.

The night I'd been crowned prom queen had been the most terrifying night of my life, in more ways than one, and it was all because of this man. Did he know how badly that night had fucked me up? Obviously, a man like Nikolai wouldn't care, but that he brought it up now told me he suspected it mattered to me. Nikolai Chernov didn't just threaten my body, he seeped into my mind, too, like a poison tainting my soul. He liked to fuck with my head as much as he threatened to fuck my body.

His face was bloodied, and he had a black eye swelling. His full lower lip was split and crusted with blood. He caught me staring at his mouth. "I've had quite the morning, waiting here with the bodies of the pathetic guards your father thought were a match for me, waiting for a little lamb to wander through here and help me out."

He smirked, and my anxiety climbed back up my throat and choked me.

"I'm so glad it's you."

His hand loosened slightly from my lips, and I jerked my head quickly enough that he couldn't cover it. "I'm not helping you."

His fingers closed back over my mouth, silencing me.

"Is that right? That's okay. I don't need you to be willing, I just need *you*." He leaned in, his lips tracing over my cheek. "And prom queen, I've got you."

My scream of frustration was smothered by his palm.

He leaned away from me and looked around. "Now, are you going to be a good girl and stay quiet for me, or do I have to gag you?"

I glared at him, my fury fizzling, my eyes burning.

He sighed as if I was a minor inconvenience he'd have to accommodate. "How about this? Keep your mouth shut, or I'll find something to put in it that does the job, and I'll enjoy every second," he said, his manic grin returning.

Slowly, he freed my mouth.

I drew a deep breath, working my lips where they had gone numb under his hard touch. “Try it, and I’ll bite it off,” I whispered. My throat hurt from screaming against his hand gag, and I couldn’t get enough moisture down my gullet to do more than croak.

His dry chuckle set my teeth on edge. He was fiddling with something, and I took the chance to work a scream together.

He was still pushing me ruthlessly against the wall, and my neck was turned so sharply that it was hard to project my voice.

“Sounds like fun, but we don’t have time for that right now,” he said, bringing his hand back to my mouth just as I let out the first note of a piercing cry.

His hand clamped over my lips, too close to release more than a squeak. I tasted dry cotton and protested when he knotted what felt like a leather tie around my head, locking the ball of material he’d shoved in my mouth into place.

He turned me while I was still trying to adjust my mouth and caged me against the wall, knocking the breath from my lungs. Now, his hard body pushed into my front, and there was no escape from his probing stare.

I hadn’t been this close to this man in years. Five years, to be exact. A flush of shame and guilt worked through me as I remembered.

“Now, Sofia, we’re leaving. I applaud your father’s ingenuity in taking me, and I understand it was his price to leave my brother alone. But I don’t intend to pay for *bratva* sins with my blood. I won’t go easy, and you’re going to help me with that. You’re my insurance for getting out of this hellhole, and I don’t need you whole to be effective. I only need you alive. Don’t forget that.”

I shook my head madly and stiffened when Nikolai’s hand came up to my throat, easily circling the slender column. My pulse hammered against his hand. He rubbed his thumb across the pulse point.

He seemed fascinated by the tiny movement. “I don’t want to hurt you, *lastochka*. Don’t make me. You know what I’m capable of,” he whispered. “Come quietly, and everything will be okay.”

A tear welled in my eye. It wasn’t sadness, it was anger. Since that fateful night we’d met, when I was seventeen and he was nineteen, we’d been hurtling toward this very moment.

“We both know it was always going to come down to you and me, Sofia,” Nikolai murmured, seeming to read my thoughts.

I shook my head, another helpless tear of pure fury and fear falling down my cheek. His eyes burned into mine. He raised a tattooed finger to my cheek, tracing the path of salt, wetting his finger in it. Then he brought the fingertip holding my tear to his mouth and licked it.

SOFIA

He tied my hands behind my back, throwing me off balance. I could see the dead guards now, arranged against the car's leather seats. The dead driver even had his hands on the wheel, posed in a sick parody of normalcy. Nikolai had cut this throat by the looks of it. They'd underestimated the youngest Chernov and paid the price. Hadn't I done it, too? I supposed I should feel lucky it had only cost me my sanity. *So far...*

Nikolai searched the dead bodies with one hand and held me in a death grip with the other. I strained against him, waiting for a chance to run.

I studied him in the dim light, from his bloodied face to his unruly dark hair sticking up in all directions. It was mussed in the careless way designers spent hours trying to achieve in magazine spreads. Violent nonchalance was as instinctive to Nikolai as breathing. He wore it so well because that was what he was.

A stone-cold killer. A psychopath born and bred. A monster with no remorse. And now, my captor.

Watch out for weakness, Sofia. Every man has one. The voice of Tinto, my *paranza corta* instructor, filled my head. I'd been studying the art of knife fighting since I was a little kid. I clearly wasn't the best student, as I was about to be taken hostage inside my home. Regardless, Tinto was right. Every man had a weakness, and finding Niko's could help me escape.

I pushed my fear aside and tried to consider him objectively. He had dark rings under his eyes, a sign of pure exhaustion. If Gino was right—and it seemed he was—Viktor Chernov, the *pakhan* of the New York bratva and Niko's father, had died last night. Whatever had gone down after had brought the younger of the two Chernov brothers here, tied up in a trunk in Casa Nera. He probably hadn't slept in over forty-eight hours. I could use that.

Nikolai straightened and tucked a gun into his waistband. He picked up another and pointed it toward me. I jerked away from him and screamed against the gag, pure liquid adrenaline shooting through my veins.

A dark chuckle met my cry.

“Don't worry, you're my insurance, remember?” He hauled me to his front. The cold muzzle of the gun pressed into my temple. He leaned his head against mine, and his chest expanded. “But don't fight me, Sofia. You know it never ends well for you.”

His words scared and pissed me off at the same time. I turned a murderous look on him, twisting to communicate my fury. One of his full lips quirked upward for a moment before he propelled me forward.

Tension made me more alert than ever. Every movement heightened my senses, listening for the slightest sound. If someone could distract Niko, I could use it to my advantage. We reached the door, and he pushed me through first. My eyes burned in the sudden light of the late morning after adapting to the darkness of the garage. I glanced up toward the camera I knew was mounted above the hulking original building, the same feeds that Gino had been checking at the guard post. Gino would see. He would come.

“Let's go,” Nikolai said when I stumbled over my feet.

My boots weren't designed for walking well at the best of times, never mind when staggering about at gunpoint.

Besides the garage of the main house, a small alley ran toward the high wall protecting the property. Beyond it were the

woods and freedom. *Freedom*. How odd was it that my captor's goals aligned with mine? While Nikolai might win his freedom, fighting his way out of the hornet's nest, I knew I was stuck forever. Locked inside the cage of my father's ownership until he signed over the responsibility to another man.

I stumbled again over a larger rock, and Niko tutted in my ear. As he hauled me up, I let my weight drop and kicked at his knee.

Nikolai grunted and grabbed my chin in a bruising grip. The gun pressed harder into my temple. "Don't fuck with me. This isn't the time for games. You aren't showing much regard for your life right now. You should work on your sense of self-worth. Maybe try therapy if you make it through this, and stop pissing me off."

He released my face, and his mocking words brought a bubble of hysteria to my lips. I was being abducted by the Joker, and I was pretty sure no one could stop him. Nikolai Chernov was renowned in our world. He wasn't a man to fuck with. Despite his relatively young age, his reputation was terrifying.

Hauling me up, he forced me on. I trudged toward the wall as slowly as possible. Maybe I could buy time by being as slow as hell. I focused on the wall and fought an internal scream. There had been a storm a few weeks ago, and it had brought down some trees in the woods. One had landed against the wall, giving someone the perfect footholds to scale it from the other side. Niko was right about one thing: my father was arrogant in some ways with security. Sure, he had my virginity guarded around the clock but only assigned four measly guards to escort a dangerous prisoner. He didn't even care that there was a way inside the compound from the woods. I supposed he thought that the mighty De Sanctis family could handle whatever threat came at them. My father had always been a victim of his own hubris.

"Stop right there!" a panicked male voice called.

I felt like crying with gratitude.

Nikolai stopped immediately, yanking me to his chest harder than ever. The gun felt like a brand against my temple.

Gino stood in the narrow gap between the houses. He was holding a gun and pointing it right at us. By his pallor and look of utter terror, I realized he could get hurt trying to save me and still fail.

“Don’t move. I’ve caught you,” he called. Puffing up his chest, he jerked the gun slightly to the side. “Let her go.”

Nikolai chuckled, which only increased the tension.

Gino swore, and his hand trembled on the gun. “I’m not joking. Let her go. I’ve caught you!”

“I don’t think you have. In fact, I think you may have just got yourself in trouble. We were going to slip out nice and quiet, and no one had to get hurt,” Nikolai said and then added, “Well, no one *else* had to get hurt.”

I wondered if he was talking about the dead guards in the garage or my future self.

Gino shook his head bullishly. “I won’t let you take her. Sofia, come here.”

When Nikolai spoke, I could hear his cruel grin.

“I can’t decide if you’re blind or just stupid. Can’t you see my gun? If you take one more step, I’ll put a bullet in Antonio De Sanctis’ daughter’s brain, escape anyway, and leave you alive to explain to your boss why his only daughter died.”

Gino swallowed hard. “As opposed to explaining why I let a psychopath like you take her away, abduct her, to do God knows what to her? No.”

My heart soared at Gino’s resolute tone.

“Brother, God has nothing to do with the things I’m going to do to your little prom queen,” Nikolai growled, his patience seeming to run out. “Drop the gun now, or someone dies. Regardless, I’ll still be leaving here with a fucking spring in my step.”

There was no mistaking his sincerity. He meant it, and both Gino and I knew he was capable of it. In the end, I didn't want Gino to get killed. I didn't want to be the reason he was hurt. I locked eyes with him and subtly shook my head. *Leave it. Get help. I'll be okay until then.*

He stared at me for a long moment before swearing. With a decisive nod, he raised his gun, pointing it at the sky. "Okay, I get it. Let her go, and I'll look the other way and not try to stop you."

Nikolai's satisfaction radiated from him. "You've made a smart decision. What's your name?"

"Gino. I'm Gino, and I just want to help Sofia, that's all. Please, she's a good girl... she has nothing to do with people like you and me," he called, desperate now.

"Toss the gun, Gino, and turn around if you want her to live," Niko called back.

Watching Gino drop his only weapon was terrifying. He was so vulnerable now, and a terrible paranoia struck me. Nikolai was going to kill Gino. Gino was going to die because of me.

A whimper escaped my gag. Niko stared down at me, his magnetic silver eyes locking with mine. A long line of tears streaked from one eye, and I blinked them madly away. I was suddenly more worried about Gino than myself.

Gino had turned his back to us, and his hands visibly shook by his sides.

"What's wrong? You don't want me to hurt Gino?" Nikolai mocked, his beautiful mouth twisting into something ugly as he grinned.

It was bloodthirsty. He was enjoying this, I realized with a jerk.

"What would you do to save him?" he asked, sending ice down my spine. He chuckled when I muttered powerless words against my gag. He tapped the gun against my lips. "That's right. You can't do anything. You can't stop me from doing whatever I want, so listen the fuck up and stop testing my patience, or you'll be next."

With that, he turned and leveled the gun at Gino. The weapon had a silencer fitted. The suppressed sound and the grunt Gino let out was one I knew I'd never forget.

He fell forward and I frantically tried to see where he was hit, but Niko gave me no time to figure it out. I screamed into my gag, and my throat turned raw with pain as I screamed again and again, over and over. Gino had been shot. He'd been shot because of me. I thrashed against Nikolai, feral for a second. He locked an arm around my neck, squeezing until the airflow into my panicked chest lessened.

"Calm the fuck down, or I'll decide you're more of a hindrance than a help as far as insurance goes. You don't want to test me today," he said, while black spots swam in front of my eyes.

He turned me away from the sight of Gino and dragged me toward the wall. I twisted, trying desperately to see if he was still alive, but Niko shoved me forward ruthlessly. He must know that backup would arrive at any minute. I only had to delay him a little longer, and more De Sanctis men would descend. *And more would die?* I tried to push that thought down, but it wouldn't go. No, I couldn't have more blood on my hands. I had to get away from Nikolai myself.

We made it to the wall. Nikolai would need to put the gun away to scale it. This was my chance. He kneeled on the gravel and pulled me onto his shoulders, standing effortlessly and boosting me up the wall. It was scary with my hands tied behind my back, but once on the other side, I had a shot at getting away. A strangled cry left me as he climbed the wall, his tattooed fingers gripping the plentiful handholds on the rough rock and leaving little smears of blood in their wake.

When I neared the top, he leaned forward, sending me sliding off. Terrified, I closed my eyes and fell toward the downed tree on the other side. I had no way to break my fall with my hands bound. I passed the branches with nothing more than a few scratches and kept going. Landing hard on my side, I took a second to get my bearings. Fuck, that hurt, but I'd been lucky enough not to impale myself on any particularly pointed

branches. My first lucky break today. Thoughts of Gino sent fresh tears to my eyes while I staggered to my feet.

“Help! Someone help us!” a voice floated to me from over the wall when I got to my feet.

Niko paused at the top of the wall and glanced back. It was Gino. Relief crashed into me. He wasn't too hurt to be shouting for backup.

Nikolai hesitated. Was he going to shoot him again?

I ran from the fallen tree, and panic sent me crashing through a noisy pile of leaves and crunching twigs. I sensed the moment Niko's attention snapped back to me.

Risking one last glance behind me, I saw him abandon Gino and slip down the fallen tree, landing lithely on the same side of the wall as me. I put my head down and ran as quickly as I could with my hands bound.

My balance was off, and I wasted steps teetering to the side and twisting my body to stay upright. My back ached, and my shoulders throbbed where they were pinned behind me. Cuts burned on my cheek from the branches.

Nikolai's thudding steps suddenly stopped behind me, but I wasn't dumb enough to look back. I kept going. There was little to no chance I could outrun him, but every step I took carried him further from being able to hurt anyone except me.

I would never have pegged myself as the self-sacrificing type in a life-and-death situation. It was a nice thing to find out about myself today, on perhaps the last day of my life.

Maybe then you'll finally be free. The macabre thought whispered through my head when I entered a small clearing shrouded by trees. That was not the fucked-up shit I needed to be thinking right now.

Nikolai's hard body caught me on the right side, knocking the breath from me. His arms wrapped around me, somehow cushioning my fall. My teeth bit hard into my tongue, held awkwardly around the gag, and blood filled my mouth. We rolled, and twigs and rocks scratched me until we finally came to a stop.

He straddled me, his strong legs bracketing my waist. I arched my back to take the pressure off my wrists, but it was futile. I was trussed up and bound for display, and there was nothing I could do about it. My chest heaved from fear and exertion. Nikolai leaned across me, and my heart pounded harder at the sensation of his body against mine. The scent of him invaded my head, woody and masculine. It was the same scent that had haunted my dreams and nightmares in equal measure for years after we'd first met.

"You do like the hard way, don't you, *lastochka*?" he murmured.

He wasn't breathing hard. He seemed like he could make another ten sprints through the woods and not even break a sweat, while I felt like my lungs might combust.

"If you don't stop making my day more difficult, I'll have to teach you a lesson in a way you won't forget, Sofia. Stop testing me."

I let a torrent of obscenities fly against the gag, and Nikolai's mouth quirked again with that slither of amusement.

He tugged the edge of the gag. "If I take this off, and you scream... I'll have to think of a more permanent method for keeping you quiet. I can be imaginative, so don't test me." He pulled the edge of the gag off and plucked the ball of material from my mouth.

"Don't test you?" I demanded, my numb lips slurring my words. "You shot Gino."

"I've shot many people. What's your point?" He sounded bored at my display of emotion.

A streak of tears escaped my eyes, and I tried to blink them away, but it wasn't working. Nikolai followed the salty trail, his striking face impassive.

"Are you going to shoot me, too?"

"Are you going to make me?" he asked softly. "If all I wanted were to shoot you, you'd have been dead when you considered marrying my brother."

“Don’t pretend that hurt your feelings. You don’t have any to hurt,” I whispered, my words like hooked barbs, hoping to get under his skin.

He smiled, but there was nothing warm in it. “That’s where you’re wrong, little swallow in the locked cage. I know you better than you think. I’ve seen inside before you learned how to lie so prettily.”

He reached behind him, and the light glinted off the knife that appeared in his hand. He brought the knife to my cheek. I stilled, barely breathing. He softly trailed it, not cutting, just threatening, down the slope of my neck, to the top button of my shirt. A quick slice beneath the button sent it rolling away.

“Don’t forget who you’re dealing with, prom queen. I still remember how beautiful you were... covered in blood. I long to see it again.”

Prom queen. The title brought that night screaming back to my mind. “It was your blood I was covered in, as I remember,” I forced the words out, despite my urge to cower from his touch. The locked box of our violent, dark past threatened to bust wide open and spill the secrets I needed to keep safe.

“My blood, your blood, it doesn’t matter. No one sees you like I see you, and no one ever will. We’re connected, you and I, and we both know it. I would tell you to stop fighting it, but I find your fear so intoxicating.” He leaned in, pressing his face into the nook of my neck and shoulder. His hot tongue touched my skin, licking a wet, scorching stripe all the way up.

I shivered. My skin felt like it was trying to crawl right off—to get away from the madman above me, or closer, I didn’t know.

I’d long ago given up trying to understand my body’s reaction to this man. My nerves buzzed. Hate, attraction, shock, and relief hummed in undercurrents beneath my skin. I didn’t know which was which. Most of all, I thought how odd it was to feel comforted by the touch of the man threatening to kill you. That’s what happened when you isolated a person so thoroughly they became touch-starved, that even a knife to the throat felt like a caress.

He reached my jaw and trailed kisses along it. I tried to turn my head, and the knife pricked under my jaw.

“Open your eyes,” he instructed deeply.

The knife at my jugular was enough of an incentive. I opened them to find his mercurial gaze taking up my entire vision. Like I was drowning in the gray of him. Those distracting eyes were as beautiful as they were when I was seventeen, smiling at a handsome stranger in a bar, trying my best to appear older than I was. I’d had no idea I’d caught the eye of a predator who would never give up the hunt.

He leaned in and brushed his lips against mine.

“I thought I was just your insurance?” My words came out more of a breathy plea than a question, and I hated myself for it.

“Right, my insurance,” he repeated. His gaze tracked over my face, lingering on all the planes and hollows like he was committing me to memory. “You open your mouth, and I forget.”

“Forget what?”

“That I’m supposed to be escaping.”

I swallowed, casting about for words to navigate the tense and wild feeling I was getting from Nikolai. Like always, he was dangerously unpredictable.

“You could always just take me back if you’ve given up on escaping,” I muttered.

Niko laughed, his intense face transforming. He’d always been beautiful, like a rebellious Romanov prince, with his aristocratic face, a multitude of scars, and ink. His devil-may-care attitude was another draw to him. Well, it had been to the seventeen-year-old me. I’d never met someone so free and uncaring of what others thought. That curiosity had cost me dearly.

“Would you visit me if I let your father tie me up in his kinky little torture chamber?”

“Let’s try it and see,” I offered.

He laughed again. It felt safer to diffuse his dark anger than have it directed at me or an innocent bystander.

“You haven’t changed, Sofia. You’re still as captivating and strong-willed as ever,” he murmured, leaning in and kissing me hard.

With the knife preventing my head from turning, I had no choice but to open to him as his tongue forced its way inside my mouth. “Kissed” is hardly a strong enough term for the way he took my lips, biting and sucking. He wasn’t gentle, and I shivered in his arms as I realized I didn’t want him to be.

When he touched me, I forgot who he was. I forgot *what* he was. A dangerous psychopath. A killer without remorse. Even knowing it didn’t stop my body from warming at his touch. His brutality should scare me. It should make my body numb and cold, but it didn’t. The dark truth I harbored inside was that it had the opposite effect.

His other hand was on my neck, tracing that same pulse point he’d touched in the garage.

He smiled against my lips. “Are you scared or excited, Sofia? Or is it both? It’s okay if it’s both,” he muttered, bending his head to kiss me again just as a sound rang out above our heads.

Bark pinged off Nikolai’s back, and he cursed, rolling away from me.

I twisted to my side, trying to force reality back into my confused, overheated brain.

Shots. Someone was shooting at us. Someone was shooting at him. He was moving away from me in a crouch, his stolen gun gripped in his hand, He peered around a thick trunk and stared into the woods where the shots had come from.

“Stay down. There’s no way that shooter can see shit,” he muttered.

But I was already up. I wasn’t about to miss my opening to run. “I’ll take my chances,” I said as he turned and looked at me.

He nearly got to his feet and chased, but another round of shots echoed through the woods, sending him back behind the tree. “Don’t run from me, Sofia. If you do, you won’t like it when I catch you,” he warned in a low voice, his eyes shrewd and calculating.

The promise of violence in his eyes was the last I saw of him before I turned and ran.

NIKOLAI

The woods were overgrown, and the recent storm had laid plenty of obstacles in the way of seeing who the fuck was shooting. I forced myself to turn from the sight of Sofia running from me. The hunter in me that had only ever hungered after one prey longed to chase her. It counted the steps she took, carrying her further and further from me. *She's getting away*, the monster inside snarled, but I couldn't afford to listen right now.

Someone was trying to put a bullet in my back. I waited. Only the sound of Sofia's retreating footfalls and my muted breathing broke the silence.

I was patient, as all proficient hunters were. I could wait endless amounts of time to track down and capture my prey. I had learned to wait, dedicated to revenge since that day in the bathroom with my mother.

A crack sounded, a careless foot on a dry twig, and I was up, my gun already firing before I could properly make out my target.

The sound of the shots echoed through the woods. A cry of pain reverberated, and I advanced, keeping low in case it was a trick. When I drew level with the shooter, a man in a black suit lay there. Another faceless security lackey who had failed at his job.

I ended him remorselessly, without Sofia there to plead silently with her huge, dark eyes.

I took off again in the direction I'd seen her fleeing. She couldn't have gone that far, trussed up as she was.

My wrists stung where I'd cut the zip ties free, and my shoulder ached from popping it in and out of the socket. Worse, the beating I'd taken putting Viktor into his long-awaited hole last night was wearing on me. Regardless, the thought of Sofia, my little *lastochka*, hiding in the woods lit my blood on fire. I charged after her, tucking the gun into my waistband.

I'd never felt more alive.

I slowed my run when I came to the end of the trail. Coming to a stop, I calmed my ragged breath and listened. I traced the route, looking for signs of her. As a kid, I'd been good at tracking wildlife around my woodland home. The skills came in useful now as I spied the signs of someone veering off the trail. Bent stalks, and the odd imprint in the mud hidden beneath the low bushes, revealed Sofia's route. I followed, my ears pricked for the slightest sound of her.

After a few minutes, I caught it.

The sound of water rushing.

A river.

I emerged from the undergrowth just as she reached the middle of the water. It wasn't a wide river, and it didn't seem too deep, only coming up to Sofia's chest in the middle. She twisted around when my feet splashed in the edge.

"Come back here before you slip and drown," I called to her.

Her eyes were wide. She was terrified, and I was the reason. That made sense. She was smart, and my reputation more than spoke for itself.

"Maybe I'd rather drown than whatever you have in mind for me," she responded.

I waded farther into the water.

"That hurts my feelings, prom queen. I was so looking forward to spending some quality time together." Grim amusement

filled my voice as I gritted my teeth against the shock of freezing water.

“You don’t have feelings, Nikolai,” Sofia accused, watching me warily. “Why are you still chasing me? You’re free, aren’t you? You should get out of here before my father’s men hunt you down.”

“You’re my insurance, remember? I don’t plan on leaving New York, and I’ll need something to make sure your father doesn’t lose his head. Kirill, too, for that matter.”

I needed to get away from De Sanctis and back to the city. Kirill thought he had me in check, but with Sofia as collateral, his cunning deal with the Italians was shot. If he wanted to play dirty, I was more than happy to oblige.

“I’m not your insurance. I’m the anchor that’ll drag you down. Follow the river, and you’ll come to a road. Get away now, before more men come.”

I blew out a harsh sigh. “*Lastochka*, this isn’t how our story ends,” I drawled, taking another step forward. Fuck, it was cold. “It ends when I decide it ends.” I splashed through the water, uncaring of how it soaked through my boots and up my jeans.

“Let me go, goddamn it!” Something in Sofia seemed to snap. She was red-cheeked, and her eyes blazed murder. It was an enthralling sight. “I’m so sick of men telling me where to go and what to do and taking away my choices.” Her harsh words were at odds with the glitter of tears in her dark eyes.

My little prom queen was having a moment. I enjoyed the sight of her filled with churning emotion. It was far better than the cool, aloof mask she’d worn the last few times I’d seen her.

“That sounds like a problem. And the answer is no. If you’re appealing to my better nature, don’t waste your time. I don’t have one.”

She gave a small scream of frustration and then changed tack. “If you keep me with you, you’ll get caught. You think my father hasn’t planned for this very situation?”

Her meaning dawned on me. “It didn’t even occur to me he’d have chipped you. Thanks for the heads-up. I’m doubting you want to be rescued at all.”

Fuck, I was tired and off my game.

My place in the world had slipped overnight, my future had become murky, and I was making mistakes. It was common practice in the bratva to insert a tiny microchip under the skin, so if an important person was taken and held, they could be found. My brother had used it on his now-wife long before she’d had any idea such a thing was possible. But Sofia wasn’t ignorant of the ways of the dark criminal underworld she lived in. She’d have known she was being chipped and agreed to it, or at least not cut it out herself. I had to get rid of it.

Sofia’s beautiful face contorted. If looks could kill, I’d be long gone, but then her eyes widened before she could unleash her wrath on me. She swayed, and I realized her feet were struggling for purchase on the rocks. Her face turned from anger to fear, and she went under.

I dove below the water, lunging across the distance between us and reaching for her kicking legs. I grabbed her foot as she kicked wildly, just beyond my reach. One of her heels connected with my face, hitting me hard in the chin but giving me the chance to grasp her more firmly. I pulled her toward me by her leg and headed for the surface.

She struggled against me the entire way, like the live wire she was. Breaking the surface, I yanked her face up. She coughed and struggled, hacking up a lungful of water. I got my feet under me and dragged her toward the river’s edge.

“That was dumb,” I muttered angrily as I lifted her into my arms, the water tugging at both of us. “Don’t you care at all what happens to you?”

I looked down at her face, so close I could see the droplets caught in her dark eyelashes. She blinked at me, arching her back to take the pressure off her wrists behind her.

“That’s why I had to try to get away,” she whispered.

I lowered her to the ground by the river's edge. "Well, it's a shame you're so bad at it. You're proving to be the most annoying fucking insurance. I should've brought good ol' Gino. Where's the tracker?"

I pulled my stolen blade from my boot, and her gaze fixed on it.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Her expression was mulish, her attention on the knife.

I twirled it between my fingers. A little circus trick, and she looked away.

"So, you want me to search for it, then?" I asked. "I'll tell you the truth. I've been looking for an excuse to touch you. Thank you for giving me one." I carefully placed the knife between my teeth and closed the distance between us.

"You're a pig," she muttered, turning her face away from me.

Her dismissal pricked at me, pissing me off. When I touched her leg, she tried to move away. I shifted my knee across her thighs, pushing her to her front. She went still. I couldn't resist sliding my hand up the back of her thighs. She froze, and her fingers curled into the muddy ground.

My hand headed under her black wrap skirt, clasp my knife tightly. The sound of the blade pulling at the material of her pantyhose was as loud as a siren. "We need to get something straight, prom queen."

For the first time since I'd touched her in the garage, I felt her listen. I let the blade trace a line against her panties, pricking the fabric. Then I replaced it with my palm, settling it threateningly on the mound of her cheek. Fuck, I wanted to cut her pantyhose off and feel the skin of her ass against my palm. I bet it was smooth as cream, and would turn rose pink if I smacked it.

Sofia was completely still. The smells of the river rose around us. There was a tense note in the air. A feeling rising between us I didn't know how to describe.

I squeezed her ass cheek in my palm. "I know you're strong. I know you're loyal to your family. I know you're a good, good

girl. But being difficult right now is dangerous, and I know you're smarter than that."

She jerked as my hand left her ass and worked down her thigh. The way she was lying under me right now put her in the perfect position to rip her pantyhose and sink inside her. I could be nine inches deep before she could even scream. I could press her face into the ground, gag her again, and fill her up with all the cum her little pussy could take before sending her back to her father, naked and dripping. A fitting punishment for Antonio De Sanctis' audacity in taking me.

Instead, I began my search. I checked her hands first, sliding my fingers along the backs and then around her wrists. The skin was smooth and unblemished.

My brother had hidden his microchip in his obsession's hand, right there on the back, and poor Mallory hadn't noticed, but then, she wasn't of our world. Sofia clearly knew about it, and she might have complained if it was somewhere so unsightly.

"You're not making this easy for yourself, Sofia," I muttered, dropping my hands down her legs and squeezing as I went. You couldn't put a chip just anywhere; some places were better than others.

"You mean I'm not making this easy for you," she pointed out. Her face turned against the ground, her dark eyes on me.

I smiled humorlessly. "I don't know what you mean. I'm enjoying every second."

"Fuck you."

I returned a hand to her ass. It was a magnet drawing me to her. Fuck, she had a perfect body. Her round butt was wriggling in the air, and I couldn't help but smack it.

"Language." I tutted, just to piss her off and moved my hand to the other side.

Her black gaze watched me, promising murder. My hand came down hard on the other cheek, tinting her skin pink, visible even through her pantyhose.

"The tracker?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Wrong answer.” I punctuated my words with smacks. “Your skin looks pretty marked red with my handprint.”

“Burn in Hell.” She was panting like she’d been running, more than when she’d been fleeing from me. Interesting.

“Oh, I plan to, but not yet. Maybe I’ll take you with me.” I leaned forward to say the last in her ear. “Where’s the tracker? Don’t pretend you don’t know unless you like me touching your ass.”

I let my hand rest on the globe of her behind. Her cunt was so fucking close, just a few inches, and I could wiggle my fingers inside her. I moved my fingertips up and down the panty-covered cleft.

She jerked as if I’d pinched her. There was that nostril flare again, the dark loathing in her eyes, and that tiny, nearly invisible spark that had always been there when she looked at me. There was something in her eyes that hadn’t been there before I’d smacked her ass. *Curiosity.*

I felt myself growing hard, despite the wet denim pressing into my crotch. Now wasn’t the time for this.

“Dream on, Nikolai,” she said finally, irritation making her lovely jaw tight.

I finished feeling around her ankles, finding nothing. “I don’t dream. I plan.”

Forcing myself to ignore her intriguing reaction to being helpless and spanked, I moved across her, putting my knees on either side of her body. I pulled her wet hair to the side and felt around her shoulders and neck. She was stiff, and her shoulders clamped up to her hairline when I felt around the right side. *Jackpot.*

I leaned in and tutted in her ear. “You shouldn’t make things so fucking obvious. You’d make a terrible spy, or maybe you’re just desperate to stay with me,” I said, my satisfied tone curling around my words as I slid my finger over a tiny hard spot behind her right ear. “So, this is where the owner’s stamp goes. Good to know.”

“You’re still as delusional as you were when I met you,” she accused.

I laughed at that. “You’re only saying that because we’ve not spent much time together lately. I’m much, much worse,” I promised her. “Hold on. This is going to hurt.” I brought the knife to her skin. “One... two—” I made the shallow incision on two before she worked up more fear.

She swore viciously as I flicked out the tracker and smoothed the tiny flap of skin over it.

“You made that so much harder than it needed to be,” I pointed out, resting my hand on her ass. I couldn’t stop touching it. I wanted to devour this woman and always had, but time wasn’t on my side. We had to move.

“Fuck you,” she murmured like it was a mantra to ward off evil.

It had no juice against me, however.

“Maybe later, *lastochka*, if we have time. Don’t worry, though. I won’t tell Daddy dearest you like being tied up and spanked.”

“I hate you,” she sniped at me.

“Then it sucks to be you because you’re stuck with me. Get up. We’re leaving.”



I LOST track of how far we traveled that day. The woods weren’t particularly dense outside Trenton. The De Sanctis compound lay in a dead area, with nothing more than small towns dotted around it. Trenton, to the west, was the biggest civilian area. Despite that, we stayed hidden inside its dense greenery and far from civilization. I’d always been more at home in the forest than in the city.

Night fell as I tugged Sofia through the woods after me. Her hands were tied in front of her now, and I’d placed another gag of soft cotton pulled from the bottom of my t-shirt to prevent

her from screaming if she thought she heard other people walking in the woods.

For the last hour, she'd been quiet.

When it got too dark to move on, I led her down into a shadowed underpass. The road above was larger than anything else we'd come close to so far. Sofia perked up when she saw cars passing far above us. Then she caught my smirk and scowled.

"They say hope dies last," I mocked, tugging her down the small hill into the dip. It stank like gutter water and piss. "Here, we'll sleep here. I'm sure it's not quite up to your standards, but it'll do to get us out of the wind."

I pulled at the sides of her gag. "Scream or complain, and it goes back on," I told her sternly before tugging it down.

"You're a fucking lunatic," she spit at me, immediately ignoring my warning in her anger.

I tutted and brought my thumb to her mouth, sliding it over her puffy lips and bringing the blood back. "Can't say I didn't warn you." I brought the gag back toward her.

"No, stop, don't put it on. I won't speak," she pleaded. Maybe the thought of sitting all night with her mouth stuffed with dry cotton was too much to bear.

I raised my eyebrow at her. "Is that right? You'll behave?"

She nodded.

I tugged on the length of rope leashing her to me. "Say it and make me believe it."

"I'll behave," she said through bared teeth.

"You'll be a good girl for me." I waited expectantly.

"You'll be a good girl for me," she parroted, word for word.

I chuckled. "Try again, and make it good, because I'm not seeing a reason this shouldn't go right back in your smart little mouth."

"I'll be a good girl for you," she murmured.

“Say my name. Tell me you’ll be a good girl for me, and say my name. I like how it sounds in your mouth,” I prompted. Now I was just fucking with her and enjoying every minute.

Blowing out a breath, she met my eyes. “I’ll be a good girl for you, Nikolai. Please let me.”

Desire drop-kicked me in the cock.

“Very nice, *lastochka*. Beautiful.” I brought a hand to her hanging hair and tucked a lock behind her ear. The moonlight glinted off something glass in the distance, tucked between the trees, a good fifty meters from the road.

A small shack. I’d always had the luck of the devil.

“Come on, prom queen. Let’s see if we can find you somewhere a little more private to sleep.”

I RAPPED ON THE DOOR, and we waited. Down on the road, a few cars passed, too far away to see me and my captive standing halfway up the rise to the right of the road. I took my knife in hand and jimmied the lock after another minute of silence.

Sofia was staring at the road below longingly. When the door opened, she frowned at me. “It was open?”

“Of course not.” I stepped into the cabin and searched for a light. “I have the magic touch. Don’t worry, I’ll show you later.”

Sofia let out an adorable huff that she probably thought I couldn’t hear. I tugged her into the room. It seemed like a ranger station or hunting cabin. It was filthy, neglected, and smelled like death. But it beat the underpass. It had a small camping stove, a one-person table, and a sagging single bed in the corner. There was a grate for a fire and a boarded-up window at the back.

I looked around, taking stock, and nodded. “It’ll do. Don’t tell me I never take you anywhere nice.”

The entire place was neglected, from the cobwebs in the corner to the thick layer of dust on the table. “Why don’t you

dust this place off a little?”

“I’m not your maid,” Sofia snapped.

“Okay, Your Highness, why don’t you sit, then?” Not giving her a choice, I lowered her to the single chair at the table, tying the rope to the table leg.

“I’m not a dog either,” she muttered.

I went to the cupboards over the tiny makeshift kitchen and opened them, checking inside. “I’m aware, believe me. I’m well aware of what you are,” I announced, leaning a hip against the counter.

“Which is?”

“A pain in my ass. Is nature calling?”

She stared bloody murder at me.

Chuckling at her reaction, I made my way to the fire. The grate was clean, and there was a stack of dry firewood, old newspapers, and even a box of matches beside it. The thought of a blazing warm fire after the impromptu river swim earlier sounded too delicious to ignore. I got to work setting the fire. Sofia watched me from the table.

“Are you hungry?”

“Do you care?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.”

“I’m fine. There won’t be anything to eat here anyway.”

“Actually, there are unexpired tins of beans in the cupboard and some sardines.”

I thought my little captive would wrinkle her nose at the simple fare, but she merely shrugged.

“Fine.”

After getting the fire going, I took her closer, sitting her in the single comfortable chair in front of the blaze and tying her leash to the heavy wooden table beside it.

Then I headed to the kitchen. There was something comforting about the humble cabin, with the cheery fire burning and the

plain meal I was preparing. I wasn't a man used to luxury. I'd always been taught that it made you weak. But tonight, tired as fuck, with the woman I'd never been able to forget beside me, I felt content for the first time in a long time. It helped that I kept replaying the image of my father dying over and over in my head. I wished I'd filmed it somehow.

"Here," I grunted, handing Sofia her plate.

Her hands were bound in her lap, and she had no trouble picking up the spoon and digging into the beans. They were cold and pretty unappetizing, but she ate without complaint.

I lowered myself to the floor next to the fire, angled so I could see her. I didn't trust her with the spoon enough to turn my attention from her. Besides, I wanted to look at her. Painted in the light from the fire, she stole my breath away. There had never been a woman as beautiful as Sofia De Sanctis. She was the kind of woman men drew portraits of and went to war for.

"My nonna used to love sardines," Sofia said suddenly, jolting me from my inspection.

"She did?"

Sofia nodded. "She grew up in a tiny town on the Amalfi coast. She was poor as dirt, but the community would share food, and the day the boats came in was often a feast. She was the happiest person I ever met."

I couldn't rip my eyes from the way Sofia ate the fish. She was delicate but hearty. I enjoyed the sight of it.

She looked at my plate, where there were only beans. "You don't like them?"

"They're popular fare in Russian prisons. Even the smell turns my stomach."

She stilled. "You've been to prison?"

I nodded. "Like you've been to Macy's, I'll bet. Where did you think I was for the last five years? Or maybe you didn't think of me at all."

Confusion wrinkled her brow, and then it eased as understanding dawned. "I just thought you'd forgotten about

me,” she said finally, ducking her face so I couldn’t see her expression.

“You’re not that lucky, prom queen. I’ll never forget you. You’ll always be the woman who gave me this.” I traced my finger down the thin scar that ran across my face, the one people shied away from looking directly at.

She swallowed as her gaze darted to my face and away. Had she relived that night as often as I had? By the blush on her cheeks, I suspected she had.

“Well, a girl can dream,” she muttered.

“Sure, she can. But that doesn’t change the facts.” I finished my plate of congealed beans and put it down, the warmth from the fire making me drowsy. I rested my head against the wall.

“Which are?” Sofia’s voice felt like it was coming from far away.

“You’re still my prize, and you always will be.”

SOFIA

Age 17

I was in trouble with my father again. Tonight, I'd been cuffed roughly along the cheek for failing to respect his need for quiet after a long workday. As I'd cheerfully spoken to him about my school art project, trailing him into his office, he'd turned and hit me so hard I'd landed on the floor.

My cousin, Silvio, had found me sitting with my back to the door, my hand clamped on my cheekbone.

"What's up, little Sofia?"

I didn't know Silvio well. He was a good ten years older than me, and I wasn't allowed around the made men in the family very often. He crouched to my level and looked at me with something that might have been worry in his eyes.

"Did your father do that?" he asked, his gaze lingering on my rapidly swelling cheek.

I shrugged.

Silvio chuckled. "Old bastard. Doesn't he realize you're not a kid anymore? How old are you now?"

"Nearly eighteen," I muttered.

He whistled and raised an eyebrow at me. "Eighteen? All woman."

I squirmed at his attention on me, and not in a good way. I felt uncomfortable and on display and wished I could be in my room.

Silvio stared at his watch and clicked his tongue. “You know what makes you feel better in this kind of situation? Breaking rules. I’m going to a party. Want to come?”

I blinked at him. I could never go to parties, and besides, I didn’t have any friends who would invite me. It was difficult to make friends when you had bodyguards waiting for you outside school.

“Antonio will never let me,” I protested, wishing I could go anyway.

I wasn’t particularly comfortable with Silvio, but he was my cousin, and the thought of going out to a party with other people was too enticing. Sometimes I felt so lonely, locked in the mausoleum of Casa Nera, I thought I might go insane.

“So, we won’t tell him. We won’t take any bodyguards either. I’ll look after you,” he said and smiled.

It wasn’t a reassuring sight, but the desire to go out and be normal for a night was too strong.

“Okay,” I whispered.

I stood with his help, and Silvio’s shark-like smile followed me out of the room.



WHATEVER I’D EXPECTED, going to party in a real live club in New York City was not it. The place was downtown, and Silvio walked into the flashy building like he owned it. Maybe he did, for all I knew. I avoided eyes in the line as we passed them by and entered the club.

I tugged the hem of my dress down. It felt too short, even if it was perfectly modest. Antonio disapproved of short skirts for his daughter, only for the endless procession of women he brought home, so I had few options to wear. However, I had

customized a tight sheath of a dress by cutting the hem. It rode up my thighs as I followed Silvio closely down a steep staircase to an underground level.

Low music and the hum of conversation reached my ears when we made it down, and I looked around. The dimly lit room was hazy with smoke, and there were poker tables laid out, each filled with men. Some turned and nodded to Silvio when we entered.

Silvio held out a hand, summoning me to his side. “You’ll bring me luck tonight. Get us some drinks. Scotch for me, and get yourself something strong. Put it on my tab,” he instructed, his gaze landing on an empty spot at one table.

Just like that, he shooed me away and walked toward the players, entering the game and leaving me alone.

I turned toward the bar and wobbled my way toward a stool. It wasn’t busy, as servers were circling the tables. I pulled myself up on a bar stool, putting my hands over my legs. Now that I was sitting, the hem of my customized dress was much shorter than I’d liked.

“What can I get you?” asked bartender with so many piercings I couldn’t count them.

“Um, a scotch and an... an old-fashioned.” I’d seen someone drink one on TV, and they sounded sophisticated. I wondered for a second if the bartender was going to ID me, but she didn’t bat an eyelid.

“What scotch?” she asked, pointing to the shelves of amber bottles behind the bar.

“The most expensive one,” I decided and smiled.

The bartender moved away to make my drinks, and I glanced around. So, this was it, an actual bar. It was darker than I’d imagined, and no one was dancing. I supposed that this was Silvio’s kind of bar, and I couldn’t imagine him dancing, so that checked out.

Upstairs had seemed livelier, and I wondered if he’d let me go up there on my own to see if anyone was dancing. Probably not.

My gaze moved toward the staircase that descended from the top level and landed on a man ambling down the stairs.

He looked young, way younger than Silvio, nearer my age. Something about his lithe, barely controlled movements drew my eye. He was a coiled spring at one moment and a lazing jungle cat at others. He wasn't dressed like any of the older men either. Low black jeans hung on his slim hips, shoved into shit-kicking, steel-capped boots. A heavy biker jacket hid the exact proportions of his broad shoulders, and the hood was up on his black hoodie. The only skin I could see easily was the skin on his hands, which were richly decorated with tattoos.

When he reached the bottom, the tension in the room seemed to heighten. I noticed more than one man taking him in. His entrance was far more noticed than Silvio's had been. Maybe it was the energy he was giving off. A restless feeling of suppressed power and anger. Like a bomb that could go off at any second.

"One scotch and an old fashioned." The bartender's voice made me jump, and I turned quickly, embarrassed to be caught staring at the magnetic stranger who'd entered.

"Thanks. Put it on Silvio De Sanctis' tab, okay?" I requested.

The bartender merely raised an eyebrow and nodded. Turning, I grabbed the scotch and headed for Silvio. He was deep in the game already and barely acknowledged me as I put the glass beside him.

Returning to the bar, I froze as broad, leather-clad shoulders sat right where I'd been sitting. I thought about sitting somewhere else, but then I remembered my drink. Weaving my way back toward the stranger, I stopped at the bar beside him and looked for my drink. He had pushed his hoodie down, and I was struck by his dark beauty. He had tanned skin and dark jet-black hair. His stubbled jaw was effortlessly hot, and tattoos climbed his neck.

"What?" His sudden word sent my heart all but jumping to my throat.

He was drinking a cocktail already. I peered at it, recognizing the curl of orange peel in the bottom. He was drinking *my* cocktail.

“Um, I think you have my drink,” I said and then cursed myself. Why not just get another drink? For my first outing to a club, I wasn’t coming off very cool.

“You left it unattended. It’s my drink now,” he drawled.

His deep voice whispered along my skin. It had a hint of a growl to it. I’d once read a steamy romance about a hero with a growly voice, and the author had described it as a bedroom voice. I hadn’t got it then, but I got it now.

“I don’t know what to say to that,” I said stupidly as the silence dragged between us. “Are you going to buy me another?” The question popped out before I could think about it.

He shook his head.

Embarrassment flushed through me. “Why not?”

“Because, *lastochka*, I don’t have enough money,” he said, finally turning to face me.

His eyes were dark gray, the strangest stormy, magnetic sight I’d ever seen. His winged black eyebrows and thick lashes were so much prettier than the rest of him. Too pretty for someone with such a thick aura of violence.

“You don’t?” I squeaked.

He shook his head, raising an eyebrow as if amused, waiting to see what I was going to say about it.

“Okay. Fine. I can buy my own drinks,” I muttered.

His attention was warm on my skin. I slid onto the stool next to him and flagged down the bartender in what I hoped was a cool way.

“What does *lastochka* mean?”

“Little swallow.”

“Like the bird?”

“Yes, like the bird. You look like a little bird who’s flown her cage tonight.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I didn’t hate the nickname, but was it so obvious that it was my first night out?

“I’ll have another old-fashioned,” I said, and then a pang of manners hit me. “Two,” I tacked on lamely.

The bartender moved away, leaving me in awkward silence with the man beside me.

“You drink two of these, and you’ll need to be carried out of here,” he said conversationally.

“The second one is for you. You said you don’t have any money, so…” God, why was talking to a handsome man so hard? Books and movies hadn’t prepared me for it.

I could feel his gaze on the side of my face and steeled myself to glance at him.

His lips were turned up in amusement again. “Two drinks? Are you trying to get me drunk? I warn you, I have a high tolerance for alcohol.”

“No, of course not! I just didn’t want to be rude, but I guess you know nothing about that,” I pointed out, my annoyance with the mysterious man growing as he put me on the back foot. “You stole my drink,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, I did, because you left it unattended in a bar. Anyone could have put something in it. You’re welcome.”

I turned to him fully, and my knees bumped his thigh. I considered his words, and blinked at him. “Huh.”

He grinned at me, suddenly transforming his already handsome face, hitting me with a smile that knocked my breath from my chest. I struggled to breathe as the bartender placed the fresh drinks on the bar and moved away, clearly remembering whose tab I was using.

“Who do you belong to?” the tattooed mystery man wondered, sending me back to reality with a thump.

“Excuse me?”

“Whose are you?” The guy twisted in his chair, looking at the room’s occupants.

“I don’t belong to anyone, thanks very much. I’m here with my cousin, Silvio De Sanctis,” I said primly.

He raised an eyebrow, but I couldn’t read how serious he was.

“Is that right? So, you’re a De Sanctis? What’s your name?”

“What’s yours?” I parried.

He studied me for a moment longer as though genuinely considering whether to tell me. “Nikolai. Nikolai Chernov. Most people call me Niko. And you are?”

“Sofia. Sofia De Sanctis.” Before I could question it, I stuck my hand out to shake his.

He smirked, taking my hand but not shaking it. He wrapped his fingers around mine and squeezed lightly. It felt oddly intimate. His pointer finger slid up my wrist and pressed against my pulse, sending it through the roof. No one touched me. No one except my father, and that was only for dispensing his measures of discipline. A kind touch? I couldn’t even remember the last time.

“Sofia, *vieni qui*,” Silvio called across the room, and the spell was broken.

Niko let go of my hand, and I turned to look at my cousin. He was focused on the game and tense as hell.

“Off you go. Your master is calling you,” Niko said, turning back to the bar.

I felt dismissed and disappointed, as well as stung.

I got up, forced my shoulders back, and held my head high. “He’s not my master, but thanks for the put-down,” I muttered.

“Don’t get upset, *lastochka*. We both have masters, at least for now,” Niko murmured. “Acknowledging that is the first step.”

“The first step to what?”

“Breaking free,” he said, all without looking at me.

He sipped his drink, and I watched him, strangely mesmerized. I'd never met anyone like him before. No one spoke to me like he had. No one had insulted me and challenged me, only to soothe and comfort me all in the same breath. He was like the poison and the cure.

“Sofia!” Silvio snapped,

My feet moved before I could stop myself, and brought me to his side.

“Sit here and bring me luck.”

I sat beside my cousin, wishing I could still be at the bar with the enigmatic man who had seemed completely unbothered by the aura of danger in the air.

As if my thoughts had summoned him, Niko approached the table. He looked right at my cousin, and Silvio straightened.

“Niko. I'm surprised Viktor let you out two nights in a row,” Silvio said.

I stared between them, aware of the rising tension at the table.

“Well, he appreciated the need to set the record straight after last night.” Niko grinned, rocking back on his heels.

Silvio glanced around at the men at the table. “The buy-in is a grand. Got enough left after last night?”

“Only just,” Nikolai said, pulling a wad of cash from his pocket.

“But you said you didn't have any money!” I blurted before I could help it.

Silvio shot me an annoyed glance.

Nikolai merely shrugged. “I lied.”

He pulled up a chair across from me, shrugged his leather jacket off his shoulders, then hauled his black hoodie up and off his head. The movement rucked his black t-shirt up his lithe abdomen, revealing all kinds of muscles I'd only seen in magazines before. The men around the table seemed to tense at the sight. It was a stark contrast to their lazy, thick figures.

He sat, not seeming to realize he had just challenged the masculinity of every man around the table. His arms were just as inked as his hands had promised they'd be. He lit a cigarette, seemingly uncaring about the venue's restrictions, and concentrated on the game.

I watched them play as time ticked past. They were playing poker. Although I wasn't very familiar with the rules, I could tell Silvio was putting in more than he was getting back. A steady pile grew in front of Nikolai. Other men at the table fell away because it was clear where the power here lay. This wasn't how I'd imagined spending my night of freedom, but now that I was here and had met Nikolai, I couldn't imagine moving from the spot.

"You're tapped, De Sanctis. I was going to raise you, but there isn't any point, is there?" Niko said after an hour.

It seemed like he'd cleaned Silvio out. Silvio had been drinking steadily and sweating through his shirt. He cast a glance at me and at the men sitting on either side. He was clearly embarrassed about losing to the youngest player, and Nikolai was doing nothing to reduce the sting of that with his shit-eating smirk.

Silvio looked at me again, his gaze falling to the hem of my skirt. "I wouldn't say that. I have one last thing to raise you, but she'll cost you," he said, leaning back and looking at the gathered men smugly.

Tension formed in the pit of my belly. "Silvio—" I started, nearly a whisper in the tense silence.

"What? Her?" Niko interrupted, jerking his chin toward me. "I'd prefer cash."

Humiliation stained my cheeks at his words. A few men chuckled, while others clearly disagreed.

"She wasn't on the table when I folded," one of the other players said and shifted in his seat. One of Silvio's friends. He leered at me.

His face was far too close to my folded arms and my cleavage pressing against the material of my too tight dress. He couldn't

seem to pull his eyes from the deep valley of my low-cut top, and I felt sick. I looked at my cousin, shifting my body away from his old, lecherous eyes.

“This is hilarious, Silvio, but be serious now,” I hissed at him.

He leaned toward me. “Don’t worry. I won’t lose. I have the winning hand; I just want to flush out anything extra that bratva bastard might be holding on to before I claim my victory. Relax. I said I’d take care of you.”

His words didn’t reassure me in the slightest. He put a hand on my bare knee and squeezed. I looked up to see Niko’s eyes fixed on the movement. I felt horrible, but what was I going to do? Stand and run out of here alone? I couldn’t go home without Silvio. My father would be livid, and I knew what that meant. I never wanted to endure the punishments that came when Antonio De Sanctis was truly angry.

Before I could protest, Nikolai spoke. “*Vladna*, I see you, and I’ll match it.”

I struggled to understand what exactly he meant in poker terms. He pulled something out of his pocket. He set the object on the center of the felt-lined table. It was an expensive-looking watch. Silvio collected them. He often boasted about his latest extravagance. Silvio leaned in and picked it up, seeming pulled to it.

“A Greubel Forsey 2010—one of only ten in existence.” Silvio’s voice was reverent.

“So, is it enough?” Nikolai sounded bored.

They were haggling over my worth against a designer watch. I could only observe, outraged, as Silvio smoothed a thumb over the watch, transfixed.

“How’d you get it? A guy like you couldn’t buy this.”

“That’s right. I’ve more sense than that. Is it enough?”

“It’s enough,” he said.

I shot out of my seat. “Silvio!”

“Sit down now and stop embarrassing me, or I’ll tell Antonio how you begged to be brought out tonight,” Silvio snapped.

Sinking back into my chair, I looked at Nikolai. He was watching me with an unreadable expression.

The game progressed, and the time came for both men to turn over their cards. They did so in silence. I studied them, not knowing exactly what to make of the result, but my gut suspected. It had known the moment Silvio had put me on the table as a bargaining chip.

“*Cazzo*,” Silvio swore, throwing his cards across the table. One of them hit Nikolai’s arm.

“What does it mean?” I asked numbly as Silvio stood.

“It means we are leaving. It’s time to go, Sofia,” Silvio said and grabbed my arm so hard it hurt.

I cried out as he dragged me out of my seat.

“I think you’ll find you have your hands on my property, De Sanctis,” Nikolai said, unfolding himself to his towering height and looking down at Silvio.

Silvio chuckled, but it sounded nervous. “You aren’t serious? She’s Antonio De Sanctis’ daughter. Do you think I’d trade her in poker to a piece-of-shit Moscow peasant like you? Get real, Chernov.”

Something dark and utterly terrifying moved through Nikolai’s eyes. He stayed still as Silvio dragged me toward the door, his hard fingers biting into my arm.

“Think carefully about what you’re about to do,” Nikolai called after him. “You don’t want me as your enemy, De Sanctis.”

“You don’t scare me. Run back to Coney Island and cry to Viktor about it if you’re sad.”

With that, Silvio tugged me so hard that I tumbled to the floor. With a curse, he wrenched me up and pulled me from the room and up the stairs.

I couldn't look back or I'd risk falling again, and it already felt like my arm was coming out of the socket. I could have screamed or protested, shouted at him for hurting me, but I was brought up in this world of powerful men, and I knew what dangers lay that way. At the end of my father's discipline, I'd learned the consequences of making a scene.

Besides, I was glad we were leaving. Whatever Nikolai Chernov wanted with me sent freezing-cold shivers, followed by roiling heat, through me. He might be a similar age to me, but we were decades apart in experience. I had no idea how to handle a man like that. He was terrifying and enthralling, and getting too close would burn me. I could taste the singed flesh already. He'd agreed to win me in a game, for fuck's sake. He was dangerous, and every instinct in my bones was telling me to run away.

NIKOLAI

Now

I fell from dark, disturbing dreams into awareness. My neck ached. I'd fallen asleep sitting up. My body was cold, and the fire was dying gently beside me.

In my dream, I'd seen my father falling down dead, over and over. He had been the tie between my past and my future. He had been my purpose for so long. Now, I was adrift. Kirill was *pakhan*, and I was the spare.

Until I spoke to my brother, I had no place left in New York. It should bother me more than it did. I was a rootless person who'd never known a proper home. The closest I'd come was watching the starry canopy over the woods of the house in rural Pennsylvania before my mother had died. I'd belonged there, in the forest pines and wild dirt—at least for a while.

I stretched my painful neck from side to side, and my gaze flicked to the chair where Sofia had fallen asleep.

It was empty.

Tension roared to life inside me as I sat up and looked around the dark cabin. I'd relocked the door once we were safely inside, something that Sofia might not have realized. Since we didn't have the key, she'd have to pick the lock to open it.

I pushed myself onto my heels and peered into the darkness of the room. A soft shuffle sounded near the door. My clever little cookie was trying to escape. Of course she was. She was as

stubborn as fuck, and it was one of the many things I admired about her. Despite her life as a captive to her powerful father, she never lost her fighting spirit.

I crept toward her. My eyes were well-adjusted to the darkness, and I could make her out now. She was kneeling near the door, no doubt annoyed as hell.

“It’s locked, *lastochka*. You didn’t think I’d leave it open, did you?”

She spun at the sound of my voice. Her hands were untied. How had she managed that? I chalked it up to my benevolence. I’d spared my prom queen’s wrists from harm, and she was paying me back for it.

“Don’t come closer. I’m armed. You better just let me go.” Her voice didn’t shake.

“Open the door yourself, and you can go.” I straightened and leaned a hip against the chair next to me.

She turned back to the door, wiggling something into the keyhole.

I watched her for a moment and tutted. “Your technique is terrible.”

“Ah! Just let me go, you sick fuck! You left me alone, finally, five years ago. Just forget me again,” she snapped.

Those words took me aback. There was so much to unpack that I couldn’t get my head around it. Sofia turned her frustrated face back to the door, wiggling the small piece of metal she’d jammed inside. She cursed, sticking her finger in her mouth. It annoyed me she’d cut herself on such a fruitless endeavor.

“Time to leave it now. You’ve lost. Don’t be a bad sport,” I said.

She shook her head, close to the edge of hysteria. “No, I won’t. I’m not coming back over there to play house with you.”

“Play house? You have quite the dark imagination if you imagine that being leashed to the table is a normal way to eat

dinner. De Sanctis family meals must be more interesting than I thought.”

Sofia let out an annoyed scoff and backed away from me. The sight of her retreating urged me to follow. I might have had a piece of material binding her to me, but she seemed to have the same. An invisible string between us we couldn't cut loose.

“Now, come and lie down. We have a long day tomorrow.” I was aiming for reasonable with my tone. From the way Sofia's chest was rising and falling, I wasn't too successful.

“No. You'll have to make me,” she snapped.

I couldn't tell if she was warning me or pleading. I didn't care. Either way, it turned me on.

My grin flashed across my face. “With pleasure.”

I lunged for her, anticipating how she'd feint the opposite way than she ended up going. My left arm went around her, and my momentum spun us into the kitchen.

The sensation of her body in my hands turned my blood to fire. I wanted her, and fuck, I was tired of being well-behaved. I couldn't forget the curiosity in her eyes when I'd touched her at the river. I ended up pressing her against the counter, one of her hands trapped between us, and the other, I didn't know where.

“That was a lot of buildup for not much fight. You want to go again, prom queen?”

She smiled at me, and I tensed, sure that nothing good could come from her confidence.

Then I felt it. A sharp point pressing into my thigh.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. “If you wanted to get your hand in my pants, there are easier ways.” It was my fault for underestimating Sofia. I was ready to bear the consequences of that. Being touched by her in any capacity was as exciting as hell.

“This is your femoral artery. One puncture, and you'll bleed out in two minutes.” Her voice wasn't nearly as calm as she

thought.

My smile only widened. “We are a vicious little thing, aren’t we? You haven’t changed, *lastochka*. You’re still the only woman I’d let spill my blood.”

She scoffed. “You didn’t *let* me scar your face, and you certainly wouldn’t enjoy me stabbing you here.” She punctuated her point by pushing the sharp end of whatever weapon she’d gotten hold of into my thigh a touch harder.

I raised a lazy eyebrow at her. “You’d be surprised, Sofia, how much I’d enjoy any touch of yours in that vicinity.”

She flushed. I could just make out the way her lips parted in the dim light. She was easy to fluster. My little untouched bird was too used to her pretty protected cage. She’d forgotten what it was like outside of it.

I nudged my hips into her, and my dick brushed her fingers. I was already as hard as nails, and my cock was enjoying our tussle immensely.

“Stop trying to distract me. I could kill you right here and now,” she warned.

“Go on, then. I dare you,” I murmured. “Kill me.”

Her cheeks stained darker with anger or frustration. I’m sure she was feeling plenty of both.

“Don’t tempt me. I could do it,” she ground out.

“No. You couldn’t, and that’s okay. You’re not a killer.”

“Maybe I am. You can be my first victim. Besides, this is self-defense.”

“Right, so it is. If that’s the case, make it a bit more personal,” I said and moved before she could stop me.

I grabbed her hand, shooting it upward in a fast arc, and swept her legs out from beneath her. We landed hard, and Sofia swore as I wrestled my way on top of her. I slotted my hard-on against her center. Her legs parted around my hips, and I brought her hand to my neck. The screwdriver she’d found made an excellent weapon. Now it sat at my jugular. My rigid

body felt hard as hell against Sofia's softness. With her legs parted, the material of her panties pressed up against my denim-covered erection.

Rocking my hips against her, I urged her hand toward my neck, sending the point of the screwdriver deeper. "This is better for your first kill, Sofia. This way, you can look me in the eye and watch the life drain from me, bit by bit."

Her gaze was fixed on the place where the metal point was seconds away from breaking the skin. Her fingers were lax under my grip. She wasn't trying to push the thing through my neck, but she hadn't let go either.

I rotated my hips against her, rubbing the rough knot of my cloth-covered cock up and down her panties, and she shivered in my arms.

"I could do it," she whispered hopelessly.

"Do it, then, *lastochka*. Do it and run back home to Papa Antonio. Lock yourself back in a protected little castle and let him throw away the key."

I bucked against her, and heat worked down my spine. Fuck, dry-humping this woman felt better than anything I'd felt in the last five years. I could come like this, rutting her into the floor like an animal.

She tensed, her body still, and her hand came to life again. She pressed the screwdriver against my neck, and the skin finally broke. She didn't like the truth of her situation being pointed out. Warmth dripped down my neck at the same time as a long track of tears escaped Sofia's eyes.

I stilled. The world shrank down to just us and the fact that she could kill me, and I could let her.

"Don't cry, prom queen. It'd be self-defense, remember?" The sight of her tears was unpleasant. Sofia should be glowering at me, her eyes dancing with fire and defiance.

She was as still as I was. Her gaze was fixed on the blood she'd spilled. Another long line of tears dashed down her cheek. I hated the sight of her crumbling.

Before she could get too upset, she seemed to rally. “I hate you.”

That’s my girl.

She dropped the screwdriver but not her fight. Her empty hand raced toward my cheek, and I ducked my head. I leaned in closer, grinding against her, pressing tighter than ever so there was no space between us.

“So you’ve said. Fight me if you want. I like it better that way. It brings back happy memories,” I muttered, my lips dragging over her neck.

She gave a cry of anger and pounded at my back, wriggling her body against mine in a way that threatened to have me coming in my pants all too quickly. I wrestled her arms down by her sides when she scratched my cheeks, and the movement only rocked us against each other more.

Pleasure sparked through my aching body as I thrust against her. She was still fighting me, her little body tense, but now her legs were hooked over my hips, holding me close. I didn’t even know if she’d realized how her body was pulling me in, inviting me with every futile attempt to smack me.

She went for my hair, and I finally grabbed her hands, pinning them above her head. She thrashed, rubbing her body against mine in a way that tore a groan from me. I could feel sticky pre-cum coating my boxers. I was leaking for her, and I’d bet my life she was wet, too.

I rocked against her, and she arched into the motion, a shaky breath escaping her, followed by the sweetest whisper of a moan. I thought I couldn’t get any more turned on by this woman, and then that moan happened.

I held her hands together with one palm and circled her throat with the other, forcing her to turn her head. I licked my way up the slender stalk of her neck, and she gasped again. Then I bit her earlobe, and she tensed.

“I thought you were fighting for your life?” I muttered in her ear as I rushed headlong toward coming in my pants like a teenager. “I thought I was the bad guy?”

My quiet mocking prompted her to fight me again, but this time it comprised dragging her tits against my chest and raising her hips to my thrusts—a move that destroyed us both if the way her eyes rolled back meant anything. She was about to come.

I could feel her anticipation. I could feel her desperation. She burned beneath me, fighting me but holding me closer at the same time. I turned her face toward mine, gripping her chin hard enough to leave a mark as she fought the simple action damn hard. She didn't want to acknowledge the reality of who she was dry-humping and how much she was enjoying it.

“Eyes on me, prom queen. Or you're not coming,” I warned her.

Anger flew from her gaze. “Fuck you.” Her tone was too breathless. It was a fucking turn-on by itself.

“Soon, but not tonight. Tonight, you're going to cream your panties, wishing I'd pushed them aside and stuffed my cock into you. Tonight, your cunt will grip onto nothing and wish it was me. Then you'll come with my name in your mouth.”

I gripped her jaw and kissed her hard, pushing my tongue along hers as I rotated my hips against her in a frenzy, rubbing her clit with my hard-on. She tensed, a strangled cry leaving her and falling right into my mouth as I held her face to mine and devoured her through the entire peak. Her nails sank into my back through my T-shirt, and her body was rigid with tension. Her face was contorted and tear-stained and so utterly beautiful.

I drew it out, rubbing my hard-on up and down her cunt until she shook and fought me again, too much stimulation to her sensitive little pussy. Then I let myself fall. Three more hard thrusts, and I was coming, too. Jet after jet of hot cum filled my boxers, sticky around the head of my cock. I ground it against Sofia's panties, dragging out every pulse and twitch. I pinned her down, fucking against her like a man possessed until my cock ached from overstimulation.

I collapsed on her, our harsh breaths rasping in the air. After a moment, I moved, making sure not to crush her. She was so

small, despite her fighting words and impressive ability to draw my blood.

Leaning on one elbow, I adjusted myself through my wet jeans, already irritated by the feeling of sticky cum pooling around my crotch. Sofia didn't move. She was wide-eyed, staring at the ceiling, her chest rising and falling quickly. I couldn't resist moving a few strands of her dark hair from her sweaty brow. I still had her hands in one palm, and I took advantage of the moment to slide my hand between her thighs and under her short skirt. I stroked the front of her panties and found them even wetter than I'd imagined.

Raising an eyebrow at her as I slid my finger across the soaking lace between her thighs, I tutted. "What a mess you've made here with your desperate little pussy. So greedy and sublime."

Sofia swallowed and scowled at me. "I still hate you."

"I expect nothing less. Now, let's make sure you can't sneak off again. If you attempt it, I'll pin you in place with my cock, and you can fall asleep on it."

SOFIA

Age 17

“Sofia, are you listening to me?” Renato, my older brother, snapped his fingers in front of my face, pulling my attention to the present. “You’re really out of it lately.”

“I’m fine,” I said, pushing his hand away and blinking out of my daydream.

I stood in the middle of the workout studio in Casa Nera. The studio was buried on the third floor of the central mansion in the De Sanctis family compound, deep in the old Italian heart of New Jersey.

My black workout clothes clung to me and I had a *liccasapuni* in my hand. It was a wooden version of the stiletto knife used for the practice of *paranza corta*, the Sicilian art of knife fighting. An old bodyguard of ours had taught Renato and me since we were children. Twirling the knife adeptly, I forced my attention to my brother. He wasn’t training today. In a jet-black bespoke suit sharp enough to cut, he looked dangerous and powerful. Every day that passed, the aura of boss seemed to seep into Renato, preparing him for the day he’d lead the De Sanctis family.

Maybe I had zoned out again, but in my defense, my life had veered off track since that night, a whole week ago, in the underground gambling den. Since then, a certain tattooed someone had haunted my thoughts every waking second.

“Okay, well, as you know, I’m leaving this afternoon.” Ren was quiet for a long moment as his dark gaze searched my face.

He was my favorite person in the world. Since my mother had died, he’d been my only ally, even if his influence was limited. Every single time Antonio lost his temper with me and Renato stepped between us, Ren bore the harder punishment. Antonio had no patience for compassion, and he didn’t like being defied.

Now, my only protector was leaving.

“Are you going to be okay here?” Ren asked, his tone telling me he knew I might not be.

I shrugged, trying my best to seem more confident than I felt. “Of course. I’ve got school, and soon I’ll be graduating and heading to college. Life is great,” I told him brightly.

He studied me, waiting to see if I’d drop the cheerful act and be honest. I held the smile on my lips until it tasted bitter.

“*Va bene*. I’ll call you every week to check in. If you need me ...” He shoved a hand through his dark hair, knowing that the rest of that sentence was pretty discouraging.

“If I need you, you’ll be in Italy,” I pointed out. “Don’t worry, *fratello mio*. I’m fine. I know how to stay on Papa’s good side, remember? Just worry about keeping up with my knife skills, or I’ll destroy you when you get home,” I teased him, brushing aside my melancholy.

I wasn’t lying. I had a full life—well, as full as Antonio allowed me to have. I was about to finish high school and had been accepted into art school. In my free time, I had a couple of security-approved girlfriends I could see. Life wasn’t terrible, and it could always be worse.

“You can try.” Renato finally smiled back at me.

I soaked up that last affectionate look. It’d be a chilly day in Hell when I got the equivalent from anyone else in my family.

He reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “Take care of yourself, Sofia. When I come home, everything will be

different, don't forget that. When things are bad, don't forget," Ren said, leaning in to press a brotherly kiss to the top of my hair, "Antonio won't be boss forever."

I let out a shuddering breath. He was right. I just needed to hold on until my brother became capo, then I'd have no reason to be afraid in my home.

I nodded, smiling and waving him off until he left me alone in the dimly lit studio.

I turned to my reflection again, looking like a shadow against the white wall.

What would Renato have said if he'd known what had happened last week? He'd have been furious with Silvio for taking me out in public without bodyguards. I had a feeling he'd be even more furious about letting me come into contact with someone from a rival family.

Someone like Nikolai Chernov.

I couldn't get the man out of my head. Like a dark poison that had seeped into my blood, thoughts of Niko bloomed inside me whenever they had a chance. I was curious about him, drawn to his damaged darkness. I'd die if anyone knew the things I thought about when I was alone at night. Nikolai's handsome face and powerful arms haunted my dreams, leaving me a sweaty mess of tangled sheets in the morning. I'd never let anyone know how he had crept into my head, and I knew without a doubt that I needed to stay away from him. Anyone who had grown up like I had, always walking a razor's edge between safety and danger, would sense the trouble a man like Nikolai would bring. The kind of trouble where you were lucky to make it out alive.

That didn't stop the thoughts, though.

I never had been good at staying away from trouble.



AFTER SCHOOL on Wednesdays was one of my Antonio-approved days to hang out with a friend under my bodyguard's

watchful eyes. Today, I trailed after Chiara as she skipped down the impressive stone steps leading from my exclusive girls-only school to the New York sidewalk.

“You want to go shopping?” she asked, turning as she walked to grin at me, snapping gum as she went. “Ask Angelo to drive us.” She nodded over my shoulder at my hulking bodyguard, following right behind us.

“No, that’s not fair to him. Let’s hang out at home.” I was tired. I hadn’t been sleeping well, thanks to the intrusive thoughts of Nikolai Chernov, and studying for final exams was taking up every second.

Chiara sighed dramatically. “Whatever you say, boss.”

I stopped, feeling guilty. Chiara was the daughter of a De Sanctis made man, someone high up and close to my father. It was one reason I was allowed to be friends with her. Was she only friends with me because her father told her to be? Insecurity plagued me as I clutched my bag to my chest.

“Come anyway, whatever we’re doing!” she called, still walking backward. Her frown had melted, and the storm passed.

I swallowed down my doubts and shouldered my bag, suddenly realizing how light it felt.

“Damn.” I stopped to dig inside the backpack. I was always leaving my water bottle in the gym hall, and today was no different. “I forgot my bottle again.” I turned to Angelo. “I’ll run and grab it,” I said, just as Chiara stumbled over a crack in the pavement and screeched loudly.

Taking the opportunity of Angelo being distracted, I turned and hurried back up the stairs. I was used to bodyguards following me everywhere except inside Casa Nera, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t exhausting.

I ran up the stairs, my bag bouncing on my back as I reached the top and strode inside. The hallways were quiet now, with the occasional teacher sitting at their desks as I moved down the hall toward the gym.

I pushed through the swinging doors and started across the polished wooden expanse when I felt it.

Eyes on me.

It was that stone-cold certainty in the pit of your belly that you were no longer alone.

Still walking, I looked over my shoulder, expecting to find other students setting up sports equipment, but the gym was empty. There weren't any teachers tidying up or anyone at all that I could see. Silence echoed through the cavernous room; only the hard strikes of my loafer heels against the floor filled the air.

I halted, my heartbeat ticking upward and my palms dampening. It was a fear reaction. One of prey sensing that a predator had caught their scent. That creeping sensation of being watched by someone you couldn't see. I wished I had my knife right now, tucked comfortably in my palm.

"Hello?" I called before I could stop myself.

Great, Sofia, why not audition for the dumb heroine in a horror flick while you're at it?

I stayed frozen to the spot for a long, painfully slow minute, listening intently. Nothing.

Blowing out an annoyed huff, I turned and started forward again. I wasn't sleeping well and it had me jumping at shadows. Great. Reaching the back wall of the gym, I bent and picked up my metal water bottle and spun around.

I didn't have time to scream before his hand clamped across my lips.

Nikolai Chernov loomed over me. I didn't know how he'd crossed the gym floor so quickly, but there was no denying that he was there. He pressed the length of his hard body against mine, trapping me effortlessly against the wall. One hand was tight over my mouth, and the other grabbed the hand holding the water bottle and pinned it to the wall beside me.

"Hello, *lastochka*, have you missed me?" he drawled.

His faint accent made his speech more attractive and exotic, reminding me of how sheltered and untraveled I was. I swallowed hard against his hand and shook my head as much as I could considering the pressure of his hard grip.

His full lips twisted in a mocking grin. “Liar,” he whispered.

My cheeks burned with guilt, adding to the heat from his hand across my face.

His grin told me he knew exactly what was going on. “I think you’ve thought about me more than once... isn’t that right, Sofia?”

His words were spoken right into my ear, sending tingles of awareness rippling down my spine, chased by the sensation of his hot breath. My chest rose and fell too quickly. He leaned away, keeping his hand over my mouth. His eyes dropped to my body, and a low grunt left him. He took a step back, his gaze hungry as he took in the short plaid skirt of my uniform, knee socks, and tight white shirt. His gaze trailed over me like a caress, and I shivered.

He grinned. “I’ve thought about you, *lastochka*.” He tore his dark, starving eyes off my body. “My runaway prize.”

Prize?

His hand had loosened a fraction on my lips, and I turned my head to get my words out. “I’m not your prize—” I sucked in a breath, forgetting what I was saying as his knee slid between my legs.

He pressed me back into the wall, his face only inches from mine. “Yes, you are, Sofia De Sanctis. I won you, fair and square. You’re mine. You belong to me,” he breathed.

The dark possessiveness in his tone made me shiver for an entirely different reason. It was fear and something far more dangerous. Excitement. I was terrified and turned on, I realized with detached clarity.

Shaking my head, I wet my dry lips. It was a nervous habit, and his eyes fell to my mouth. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. Don’t make me prove it to you here and now, I’m a heavy-handed teacher,” he murmured, leaning his forehead against mine. “You know, I’ve never had someone belong to me before. I’ve never had anything of my own. It’s more distracting than I imagined it would be.”

His hot breath felt like it was melting my skin. He smelled good, but he shouldn’t. The scent of oil, like he’d gotten gas on his hands and not washed them, cigarettes, and something sweet and musky. None of it should be addictive. And yet, I found myself sucking great, panicked lungfuls of him. He was danger and sin. All the things I’d been hidden away from my entire life, and some perverse part of me wanted to tell him to take whatever he wanted. Burn me deep enough to leave a mark, so everyone would see.

But the logical part of my brain that sensed the strength of the predator currently nosing through my hair, breathing me in as much as I was breathing him, screamed at me to run.

I looked up at him. “Nikolai...” I started and jolted as his dark-gray eyes fixed on mine.

“Yes, *lastochka*? Tell me,” he said, matching my husky whisper.

That was as far as I got before my hand was moving. It was my right hand, and though I was missing my knife, I had the metal water bottle. The rounded end smashed into his temple and I twisted away. An explosive curse left him as his body shifted from mine, and I stepped past him.

I ran with all my might. I was fit, worked out, and trained in a deadly sport.

I got halfway across the gym floor before he caught me.

His arms went around my middle, spinning me around before we fell. I landed hard enough to knock the breath from my lungs and was crushed further by his weight.

He straddled me, his thighs hard against my waist. He pinned my wrists above my head so he was face-to-face with me. “That wasn’t very nice, Sofia. I’d expect better manners from a little Mafia princess like you.”

Blood dripped down his temple and splashed onto my cheek. I twisted my head, thrashing at his hold like an animal, my fear taking me over for a second.

A surprised chuckle left Nikolai as he took in my feral movements. “My, my, you aren’t what I expected at all, Sofia. Don’t tell me there’s something wild beneath that good-girl exterior? Something that longs to be let out.”

I stared at him, my arms growing exhausted from fighting against his superior strength. My chest rose and fell harshly as I panted from fear and exhaustion. He watched me with something like fascination. I was bloody, smeared from the steady drip from his chin. My hair was wild, and my skin heated.

“Beautiful,” he muttered, using one hand to hold both of mine and the other to run carefully through the red on my cheek.

“What are you doing?” I demanded at the methodical way he was touching my cheek.

“Making sure you remember who you belong to. I’m sure your little watcher will be along any moment. Angelo, wasn’t it?” Nikolai said conversationally.

It was terrifying that he knew my bodyguard’s name. How long had he been watching me?

“But since it’s not the time to start problems between our families, I’ll be going now.”

Relief filled me.

Nikolai finished with his design on my cheek, and before I could stop him, he slipped his red-stained finger into my mouth. I nearly retched at the metallic tang. I tried to turn away, but he gripped my chin and held my face toward his.

“Don’t be too relieved, Sofia. This is a momentary respite. You belong to me. I won you. I own you... and I’ll collect you when it’s time. Until then, keep dreaming of me, and I’ll do the same.”

He leaned in and pressed his lips to mine before I realized what he intended. My gasp of shock only allowed him entry,

and he wasted no time slipping his tongue into my mouth. His blood mixed between us, and I felt a horrible heat that had nothing to do with fear. His kiss was bold, as darkly delicious as he was.

My first kiss.

I nearly arched into him. I nearly reached for him and pulled him closer, lost in the sensation of his body against mine, my carnal instinct driving me on, regardless of the danger.

“That’s right, Sofia. Don’t lie again that you don’t feel it, too,” he muttered against my lips.

The words were a shock of ice water splashed on my heated skin. What the hell was I doing? If this man didn’t rip me apart when he was done with me, then my father would if he knew what was happening right now.

I sank my teeth into his lip as hard as I could.

He pulled back as more metal filled my mouth. He sat back on his heels, wiping his lip. His chin was red, and I could feel warmth on mine as well. He stared at me, raising an eyebrow. I braced myself, wondering what he’d do in retaliation. I’d cut him deep; I could see yet more red dripping down his chin.

Instead of looking angry, he chuckled. “You’re going to be a wild one, aren’t you? It’s always the quiet ones. Good,” he said after a moment and pushed himself up with long, black, jean-clad legs. He looked down at me with demented fondness. “Save that for next time. We’ve no time for it now.”

“You’re crazy,” I heard myself say as I pedaled back like a beetle that had fallen on its butt.

At that incredulous statement, Nikolai threw his head back and laughed. It was rich and mocking, tempting and depraved at the same time. “Are you just figuring that out?” he asked, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “See you soon, Sofia De Sanctis.”

He turned and strode away as approaching footsteps echoed heavily in the silence that had fallen. I watched Nikolai boost himself effortlessly out of a shoulder-height window, slithering through lithely.

“Miss Sofia?” Angelo’s voice called to me from the door.

I shot painfully to my feet. I turned away from him, hiding my face. If my father found out what had happened, he’d never let me out of the house again.

“I’m coming. I need to run to the bathroom,” I tossed over my shoulder, quickly making for the small bathroom off the gym.

Inside, I turned the light on with trembling fingers and braced myself for my reflection. I flinched when I caught the first glimpse of myself in the mirror.

I looked far wilder than I could have imagined. Blood ran from both corners of my mouth like macabre Halloween makeup. But worse than that was the shape on my cheek.

A red-painted letter on my unblemished skin. A brand of ownership.

N.

You’re mine, Sofia. You belong to me, my prize.

SOFIA

Now

*F*ive hours later, and I felt like I'd never slept. We'd gotten a lift from a lonely old trucker who talked constantly. Nikolai was silent, staring at the road, his arm around me. He'd taken off the restraints but had a gun tucked into my side the whole time. I answered our driver's questions vaguely, and tried not to freak out as the truck carried me further toward New York.

Even scarier was that I'd written my father's number on the dirty cab door when Nikolai hadn't been looking. A dusty scribble on the unwashed surface that I hoped the trucker would see later, and call. A tiny, pitiful cry for help? Or a call for my owner to collect me? I could hear Nikolai's mocking voice in my ear.

After last night, I needed to get away more than ever. The tangled emotion over what had happened in the small hours was sending me crazy. Guilt crowded my head and crawled across my skin whenever I remembered Nikolai rocking against me. I hadn't wanted to get away. I hadn't wanted him to stop. That was the awful, terrifying truth. There was a landslide of want inside me, threatening to break free. He was the only man who had ever threatened to smash the walls I'd built and never cared about the consequences. I had to get away from him before I stopped wanting to.

“WELL, what’s the grand plan now?” I asked Nikolai hours later when we stood in a small, clean motel room.

He moved around, checking the locks on the windows. He looked utterly exhausted. “We get cleaned up. Do you want to shower first, or do you want me to go? Answer quickly before I decide we should save water and do it together.” He turned to me and raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll go first,” I blurted.

Peering into the bathroom, I was disappointed to find there was only one tiny window, which was nothing more than a slit near the ceiling.

“Leave the door open,” Niko called, sitting on a chair and working his boots off.

I paused. “Excuse me?”

“Did I stutter? Leave the fucking door open.”

“But... you’ll see everything,” I said faintly. Maybe I was exhausted, too, because my brain was clearly lagging.

He appraised me in a lazy inspection. “I promise not to look.”

Something simmered in my blood at the heat in his eyes. It wasn’t fear, not by a long shot, and that scared me more than anything.

“Come on, *lastochka*, we don’t have all day.” With that, he stood and stripped off his black t-shirt.

I froze as I took in the multitude of cuts and dark-purple bruises, visible even under all his ink. A slow, dripping wound decorated his side.

“You’re hurt,” I heard myself say. That had better not be sympathy in my damn voice.

“On any given day, just assume I’m bleeding from somewhere.” He sighed and then undid his jeans, pushing them down in one fluid movement.

Holy crap. A glimpse of long leg muscle and rounded, grabbable ass in black boxers seared across my eyes as I turned around quickly and moved behind the door. My heart

pounded, and this time, it had nothing to do with the thought of getting away.

I took my clothes off quickly, leaving my underwear on. Moving to the shower, I pulled the curtain aside and turned on the rusted taps. In the mirror, I saw Nikolai. Sitting in just underwear, he had lit a cigarette and was smoking lazily. I risked a glance over my shoulder and met his eyes.

He was watching me.

I didn't dare look lower to see his nearly naked body, even though I wanted to. I climbed behind the curtain and took my underwear off, washing them under the warm shower and rubbing at them with a little bar of soap.

I showered as quickly as I could, painfully aware of Nikolai outside the door. I wrapped the towel around me and tucked it between my breasts. Stepping out of the tub, I glanced at Nikolai's broad, tattooed back as he sat at the table, fiddling with a dismantled gun. I turned to the mirror. My eyes were wild and huge. I didn't look like myself at all. I looked—I searched for the right word—*excited*.

No, that couldn't be it. It couldn't. If it was, I was as messed up in the head as the psychopath in the next room.

“Beautiful,” Nikolai said quietly, a purr in his voice.

He was leaning in the doorway, naked except for black boxers. I tore my eyes from his sculpted body with effort. I had the motel comb in my hand. It was a flimsy piece of plastic that would break a second into combing my long hair.

Nikolai eyed my tight grip and smirked. “You had a better chance with the screwdriver, prom queen.”

I flushed, embarrassed to be reminded of last night. “Right. What's the point of having a weapon if I don't have the killer instinct? Looks like Antonio was right after all,” I muttered, rambling to deflect but only heading deeper into vulnerable territory.

Nikolai's eyes narrowed at me, and he sauntered into the room. His body was a mess under the ink. He was hurt in multiple places; blood crusted his side, and his wrists were a

gory sight. I tensed when he passed behind me, looking over my shoulder at my reflection.

“You call your father Antonio? Is there no love lost between Daddy Tony and his precious little princess?”

“Why do you care? Want to bond over our daddy issues? Didn’t you kill your father a few days ago?”

Nikolai smirked. “Jealous?” He leaned in and caged me against the counter with an arm on each side, his skin scorching hot against my bare shoulders. “Do you want to be me when you grow up?”

“I think we both saw last night that I could never be.”

“Wrong. Everyone has the killer instinct in the right circumstances. You slipped through my hands, distracted me, and got the upper hand, even if just for a second. Last night, you were impressive in more ways than one,” Nikolai said, threatening to turn the conversation back to the most embarrassing part of the night.

“Yet you’re still breathing.” I couldn’t drag my gaze from his.

In the light around the mirror, his eyes looked nearly silver. The cut in his neck from the screwdriver had opened and left a dried line of blood at some point. I’d done that. Even that turned my stomach.

He pulled my hair back from behind my ear, exposing the place where he’d cut out my father’s microchip. “You’re still bleeding.”

He reached for the first-aid kit on the counter. He had me pinned by his hips against the sink. I couldn’t move, even if I wanted to. I didn’t try. The casual ease in Nikolai’s possessive touch thrilled something dark and twisted inside me.

“Do you want to know why you didn’t act? You won’t like it,” he warned, spreading a pea of antibacterial cream on the tender skin behind my ear.

I held still, not sure what to make of his brutal tenderness. “Why?”

“Because you aren’t afraid for your life with me. Not really.” He snapped the lid back on the cream and pulled a small Band-Aid from the kit.

“You’re crazy. Of course, I am,” I responded, feeling called out and seen. I was, wasn’t I?

Maybe you’re more scared of going home and disappointing Antonio yet again?

Nikolai watched me carefully after he smoothed on the Band-Aid and brought my rapidly drying hair around to lie across my shoulders. “If you were, I’d be dead.”

“You were too strong for me. You could have taken the weapon from me at any time.” I dredged up an argument I hoped held weight. When in doubt, deflect. “Why didn’t you disarm me?”

“I guess I’m not afraid for my life with you either, *lastochka*. I guess I trust you.”

My mouth dropped open in shock and a strange, twisting kind of horror as I knew he was being serious.

“You shouldn’t,” I warned as he stepped back and reached into the shower to turn it back on.

I remembered the message I’d left in the dirt on the truck. My secret note...

Black guilt writhed in my chest, and anger followed.

Time might be running out for Nikolai, and he had no idea. I shouldn’t care. He’d dragged me through the woods, shot people, threatened them. I shouldn’t care at all.

He turned back to me and picked up the bloody rag of rope he’d used to tie my hands earlier. Thankfully, my long sleeves had protected most of my skin from getting too burned by it. He snapped it between his hands.

“Over here, by the shower rail,” he said shortly.

I stared at him. “I thought you trusted me.”

He let out a chuckle. “I trust you not to cut my throat in cold blood. I don’t trust you not to run away. Now, hold your hands

together, and be a good girl, or I'll take you into the shower with me."

Unwillingly, I walked toward him. It was an old showerhead fixed over a rusty tub. A pole ran down one side and around the top, where the ratty shower curtain hung. He tied my hands in front of me and looped them over the pole. Thankfully, my towel didn't budge. I'd rolled it and tucked it into the valley between my breasts as if my life depended on it.

He moved away and turned toward the shower, dropping his boxers in a fluid motion. I got an eyeful of his muscled, golden-skinned ass before blinking my eyes shut.

"What the hell?" I muttered, the shower curtain drawing back with a metallic ring.

As the water splashed, I risked opening my eyes. He was right there, at the other end of the bath. His head was under the running shower, and rivulets of gleaming water slipped down his impressive body. He was turned toward the wall, resting his hands on it, and for one long, uninterrupted moment, I was free to stare.

Then his eyes snapped to mine as he tilted his head toward me.

"Why are you making me watch you shower?" I demanded, but the heat in my voice had disappeared, sliding down inside me to pool between my legs.

I had to be a special kind of insane, because the sight of Nikolai Chernov, dripping wet, with a long, thick hard-on straining up his belly had me squirming and panting like the twenty-two-year-old virgin I was. I had no experience with this kind of thing. I was totally out of my depth.

"How can I keep an eye on you if I can't see you? Besides, I never said you had to watch."

He soaped his hands and washed his body. The white bubbles fizzed against his inked skin, and I couldn't have looked away if someone paid me. He turned back to the wall and washed, keeping me in sight but otherwise ignoring me.

I glanced away and tried to calm my racing heart. After a few seconds, my gaze always drifted back to him. He'd turned for a second, twisting his back toward me, and deep dimples pitted the top of his ass where his back met his hips. He shifted, one hand moving lower across his hard-packed abs and lower still, gripping his balls. His cock was long and thick, with a full mushroom-shaped top. Heavy veins worked up the long column, and it was flushed a reddish-purple like it was angry. His hand moved on the rigid shaft, up and down.

Is he going to jerk himself off right here, with me watching?

Just the thought made me feel faint. I looked away, clearing my throat.

He chuckled, and I blushed even more.

“You can look your fill. Hell, you can touch if you want to...”

“You’re a pig. Do you get off on being watched?” My challenge was just an excuse to look back. My gaze instantly fastened on the hard-packed muscles of his powerful abdomen and the head of his cock, bobbing well past his belly button. That was a good nine inches there. Christ. I needed a bucket of ice water to stick my head in.

“Depends on who’s watching, I suppose. If the watcher is you? Then fuck yes, I get off on it.”

He lowered his soapy hand between his legs, fisting his thick cock and stroking it from root to the round tip. He leaned a shoulder against the tile, his eyes burrowing into me.

I blinked and looked away, my cheeks burning. My breath rushed in and out of my chest like I’d been running. Something hot moved through me as I stood there, the man who’d haunted my dreams and nightmares in equal measure pumping his hand up and down his hard-on.

“Look at me, Sofia. I know you want to.”

“No, I don’t.”

His chuckle only made me blush even more. “Liar,” he murmured and then sighed. “After the day I’ve had, and of course, being around you constantly, I’m going to need to take

the edge off before we sleep. Look away if you don't want to see," he said, a note of amusement in his voice that I didn't trust myself to answer.

Instead, I gave him the finger as best I could with my bound hands and closed my eyes exaggeratedly. My ears strained for sounds, and curiosity roared inside me. I felt offended and turned on. I couldn't deny it. It was just like Nikolai to do whatever the hell he wanted.

He knows you want him, the voice inside my head whispered knowingly.

I ground my teeth and tried to deny it, even though it seemed impossible. A sound cut through the fall of water, a low, masculine groan. It set my blood on fire. Why was this turning me on? I had no idea, and yet, I couldn't deny that the thought of him beating off right there, and all I had to do to see was open my eyes, was twisting me inside out. He grunted, and the sound of wet, rhythmic movements filled the air.

"Fuck," Niko muttered between clenched teeth. He was going to come.

Before I knew it, my eyes were open. He had one arm braced against the tile, and the other working his huge dick with powerful strokes. His hips were bucking into his hand, his long back bent over his task as water poured across the tattoos decorating nearly every inch of his torso.

"That's right, Sofia, eyes on me," Niko grunted as my eyes finally met his.

At the shock of the connection between us, a shiver went through Nikolai, and a stream of obscenities left him as he came hard. His cock jerked, and long ribbons of cum shot over his hand, up his belly, and onto the bath floor.

His eyes never left mine. It was shockingly, crudely intimate, and I couldn't have looked away if the police had stormed in at that very moment and freed me from my captor. The urgency of his look made me feel like he was coming inside me, instead of on the other side of the bath. It almost felt odd not to

feel his hot, thick spend dripping down my leg. The satisfied, intense expression on his face was such a thorough claiming.

“So, I guess you do get off watching?” His voice was amused and sated.

Heat stained my cheeks as I jerked my eyes from the sight of his cum-streaked hand still holding his fat length. Even after coming, it hardly seemed to have softened.

“You’re the only one getting off, Niko.”

“You want to hop in here, then? I’d hate to leave you high and dry.”

I felt angrier at his chuckle.

He was right, I couldn’t hide from him. Somehow, he saw beneath every defense I’d ever been able to hold in front of him.

“I might have watched, but that doesn’t mean it turned me on,” I said, sounding prim and inexperienced even to my own ears.

Now Niko tipped his head back and laughed. “Sofia, you crack me up, sweetheart. I could make a liar out of you right now, slide my hand up under that towel and check that statement for myself, but I won’t. Not unless you beg me to.”

He threw me a wicked smirk and turned away to grab the tiny motel shampoo bottle, leaving me with the glorious sight of his muscled ass to feast my eyes on.

I raised my chin and held my tongue, not trusting myself to speak. Choosing a spot on the tile where black mold was growing tendrils, I deliberately turned away. I stared at it hard, ignoring my curiosity and burning desire to look back at him.



LATER, I lay on one side of the bed, sheets pulled up to my neck, watching Nikolai patch up his various wounds. He’d skipped the small Band-Aids in the kit and gone for the other thing he’d stolen from the gas station. A roll of silver duct tape. He wrapped a thick cut in his shoulder with it, patting it

smooth. I was intrigued by his toughness. It wasn't an act, like a lot of men in my family put on. Silvio, my cousin, was a good example. Nikolai was genuinely tough.

He ignored a dozen cuts that I thought should be treated and only focused on the ones that were bad enough to drip a constant stream of blood. I cringed at the thought of him ripping off the duct tape at a later date.

He'd lit another cigarette in the bathroom, dragging nicotine into his lungs as he patched himself up. I coughed as the smell reached me. The smell wasn't off-putting. I was used to it at home, but tonight, it irritated my lungs.

He raised an eyebrow at me, catching my gaze on him in the mirror.

"Those things will kill you, you know," I muttered.

He let out a bark of a laugh. "So? You should tell me to smoke ten at once in that case."

Right. I'm meant to want this man dead. I *should* want him dead. He'd hauled me all over the woods, held a gun to my back, and threatened to shoot me. He'd shot Gino, poor, innocent, inept Gino.

"Whatever, knock yourself out," I muttered and turned onto my back, careful to keep the sheets high.

I had nothing but my underwear to sleep in. I'd dried it out with the hairdryer. The rest of my clothes needed a lot longer and would probably still be damp tomorrow when I put them back on. I shivered at the thought of tomorrow. What was going to happen? Had my father gotten my message?

"Here, drink this. You must be thirsty," Nikolai said, opening a bottle of mineral water and passing it to me.

I was beyond thirsty. Now that he'd mentioned it, the desire to drink roared to life. I accepted the bottle and took a long swallow and then another. I gulped the cool liquid.

Nikolai appeared on the other side of the bed, finally clean and patched up. It was still early, yet both of us were ready to sleep. A silent agreement. Nikolai's dark-ringed eyes seemed

to grow heavier and heavier as time ticked by, and I needed a break from his wolfish gaze on me. Being around the youngest Chernov was unsettling and always had been. I felt too much; my skin tingled, and my senses were heightened. It was exhausting. Worse still, all the constant touching and glimpses of his hotter-than-hell body, not to mention the scene in the shower, had my skin feverishly hot and my panties damp. I was in a constant state of being turned on and terrified at the same time. I'd die if he found out the former.

I clutched the sheet when Nikolai attempted to pull it back. "I don't have clothes on."

"Not my problem," he pointed out flatly.

"A gentleman would sleep on top of the covers, or better still, on the chair over there." I knew there wasn't a snowball's chance in Hell that Nikolai would do that, but it felt good to point it out. Someone had to remember how crazy all this was. Something rational should send a message to my pathetically curious body that this man was my captor and enemy.

Nikolai laughed heartily and tugged the covers back. "You have a great sense of humor, *lastochka*. I don't know if anyone has ever told you that before."

"They haven't, and I wasn't joking."

Nikolai tutted. "Then no one in your life appreciates good comedy." He dropped his towel.

I twisted my head to stare at the ceiling, heat flooding my cheeks.

"I guess they don't get you like I get you," he said, climbing into the bed beside me.

The mattress dipped, tempting me to roll into him. His warmth filled the cavern under the sheets immediately.

"You don't get me," I protested darkly.

"Sure I do. I'd bet I'm the only one in your life who does," Niko said matter-of-factly. His tone pissed me off.

I turned on my side after checking that he was covered. Crap, just the thought that he was naked and only an arm's reach

from me was doing something to my belly, sending it liquid and warm.

“Okay, then. What do I feel, if you know me so well?”

Nikolai cracked his knuckles, and I stared at the ink on his fingers and the backs of his hands.

“You’re bored and lonely, locked up in that compound of yours, like a princess in a tower,” he said quietly. He turned his head to pin me to the spot with those disturbing gray eyes. “You’re trapped in a cage, a pretty bird for Antonio De Sanctis to trot out and display... my little swallow with clipped wings.”

Sudden unwanted tears burned in my throat. I felt that strange connection to Niko hum to life again as we stared at each other. My desperation to get away had faded somewhat, knowing that I’d set something into motion that would see me saved. Swapping one devil for another. The knowledge that soon everything would be back to normal in my heavily controlled, unadventurous, dull life. A boring march onward toward marriage to a stranger I didn’t love and death at the end of the road. Nothing felt exciting. After the last few days with Niko, I doubted anything would ever feel exciting again.

A little swallow with clipped wings. He had no idea how right he was.

“Wow, so insightful. It doesn’t take a genius to guess that someone with a paranoid, powerful father like mine would be locked away. Tell me something less obvious,” I challenged him.

He was quiet, mulling over his words for a long moment. “You want something to happen to you. You want to be free, but you also want to hide. You’re afraid, not just of never being free... but of the opposite as well. A little bird with clipped wings in the real world won’t go far. A domesticated animal that forgot how to survive in the wild. You long for freedom, but you fear it, too. The cage is inside here.”

His finger tapped my forehead, and I jerked my head away.

Bingo. I hated how well he saw me. “You’re wrong,” I managed to say after a moment. That same emotion burning in my throat. “That’s not me,” I lied. I couldn’t let him know how right he was, even though I was pretty sure he knew. “Maybe it’s you,” I added, trying to rile him.

Nikolai was silent so long I thought he wasn’t going to answer me. “It’s not my wings that are clipped, *lastochka*, it’s my heart that’s defective, and my cage isn’t something I can ever escape. It’s made of bones and buried deep.”

Those words sent that burn of feeling roaring back to life in my throat. I swallowed, trying to shift it. There was something unbearably sad and tragic about Nikolai Chernov, and there always had been. Wasn’t that the very thing that had drawn me so effortlessly to him five years ago? His beauty and his tragedy, his strange personal code of honor and his darkness. I’d seen them all, all the disjointed, misshapen parts that made up this dangerous man.

“Are you going to New York to kill your brother?”

He shifted. “I don’t know. Should I? He’d make a good *pakhan*. Better than me.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Nikolai was the most unpredictable person I’d ever met. Things that motivated the men in my family didn’t motivate him. He didn’t seem interested in money, and by the sounds of it, power wasn’t attractive either. He had plenty in his own right, but the power to command other men was usually a universal fantasy, or so living with my father and cousin had led me to believe. Nikolai wasn’t anything like them while being just as deadly at the same time.

“So, why are we going to New York?”

“Because it’s my move, and New York is the board we play on. Enough questions. We need to sleep.”

I felt him shift, and my lingering thoughts flew from my head. A hot hand came to rest on my stomach, and I tensed.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice a frantic whisper.

He had turned toward me, and now his breath fanned against the side of my face. Awareness tore through my every nerve.

“I can’t let you sleep like this beside me, wait until I’m out and creep away. You know that, Sofia,” he said quietly.

I swallowed a hard knot of tension and dizzying heat. “So, what are you going to do?” I couldn’t get the promise from last night out of my head. *I’ll pin you in place with my cock, and you can fall asleep on it.* My body betrayed me by warming at the thought.

“I could tie your arms above your head to the bedframe, but it’ll be uncomfortable, or I could tie you to me. Your choice.”

I turned to look at him finally and jolted when I realized how close he was. This close, I could see the silver streaks in his gray eyes and the thickness of his dark eyelashes, resting like fans against his golden skin. Really, those eyelashes were completely unfair on a man.

I should try to get away in the night, shouldn’t I? Being tied to him would be more comfortable, but then how would I have a chance?

“I choose the headboard,” I said quickly.

He studied me for a moment longer, and then his full lip quirked upward. “To me it is, then.”

“What? Why? That’s the opposite of what I chose,” I protested as he reached for my hands.

“You might be good at hiding your thoughts around the other people in your life, but not around me. I see you. And yes, in answer to your obvious thought process, it will be harder to get away if you’re tied to me,” he said.

I pushed his hands away, fighting him as he twisted his upper body over me. He locked my hands to my sides, his bare chest pressing against my bra.

He was so huge and heavy and smelled so male. At that moment, my strength left my body. He smelled like the woods, and a hint of smoke, underlaid with a masculine musk that dragged at my senses. I couldn’t put my finger on the scent.

There was nothing like it. It was just him. My belly grew warmer at the lungful I took of him as he pressed against me, holding me down.

“Don’t play with me right now, Sofia, unless you really mean it.” My hands shook at his soft growl.

I didn’t know if I was pushing against his grip or fighting my desire to reach for him. I couldn’t even imagine my father’s face at finding out his perfect, untouched trophy daughter had been fucked by Nikolai Chernov.

His body was hard on mine, and I distantly realized that I could feel his hard-on, bare and wet at the tip, pressing against my thigh. How easy it would be to squirm more against him and let him force his way between my legs. I could even pretend that I didn’t want him to if it made it easier to explain later. He could force my legs apart with his thickly muscled thigh, rip my panties down, and sink inside me. Like he’d been my first kiss five years ago, he could be my first everything.

I swallowed thickly as conflicting thoughts warred in my head.

Nikolai waited, seeming to sense that I was wrestling with my darkness. If there was anyone who understood that, it was him.

“Enough,” he said after a long moment, his voice deeper than ever. “Give me your wrists.”

Just like that, he took the choice off my shoulders. It stung like a rejection. He wrapped the tie around my wrists gently, making it far too loose, and then bound the end around his wrist, pulling it together much tighter.

With my hands bound before me, pressed together in an obscene prayer gesture, he tugged me to my side, and I found myself lying on his shoulder, my hands clasped together on his broad chest. His scent and warmth made me feel things I never let myself feel. His other hand came around my back, and he tugged me closer.

I didn’t know what to say. It felt too intimate, too tender. It felt worse than if he’d forced himself anywhere else, strangely. It

felt caring, and I couldn't cope with that from this brutal, dangerous man. It was more dangerous than any other depraved thing I'd seen him do.

"Don't overthink it, Sofia. Sleep now."

"I can't sleep in new places," I muttered.

Despite my words, my eyes were growing heavier and heavier. I wasn't lying. I had trouble sleeping at the best of times. I took sleeping tablets at home to manage a few hours. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept without them.

"Do you want to hear a bedtime story?" Nikolai said. There was something comforting about his voice.

The gently mocking question should have pissed me off, and it shouldn't have worked, but it did. I was getting more and more sleepy. I should be too scared to sleep. I should work on getting away, but my body was sinking into a warm river, threatening to wash me downstream. I knew this feeling.

"You drugged me? Motherfucker," I muttered.

"I couldn't have you getting away again, prom queen."

I snorted softly, my words unfiltered. "You don't need me, Niko, and we both know it. I'm nothing to you."

He took so long to answer. I jerked awake again when he murmured, "You're wrong, Sofia. You're still my prize, and you always will be."

I felt myself drifting only moments later, my consciousness slipping away, but not before I felt Nikolai lightly press his face against the top of my head and inhale.

Then there was only darkness.

NIKOLAI

After Sofia fell asleep, I lay beside her, exhausted but tense. I needed to sleep. I needed to run. I needed to figure out what the fuck I was going to do.

Return to New York and challenge Kirill for *pakhan*? It wasn't an enticing prospect. Support had already been split between us, and with the way things went down, I was fairly sure that my older brother would have won over any undecided *bratva* men.

Make peace with my only remaining family in the world and work together? I wasn't sure we could manage it. Most of all, I felt no excitement about returning to New York or the *bratva*. Once again, I was a man without a place in this world, something that had dogged me since childhood.

For nearly a decade, killing Viktor had been my mission. My life's work. Now that it was done, I felt adrift. Nothing tethered me to the world anymore. Without my revenge, I wasn't sure who I was.

I reached for a cigarette. The light flared orange in the dying light from the shuttered window. I inhaled the nicotine and felt it hit my bloodstream with comforting predictability. My life had gone to fuck, and here I was, having an existential crisis at twenty-four years old.

Sofia moved, and I wondered for a second if the cigarette smoke had woken her before catching myself. Fucking hell. We weren't a loving couple on vacation. She was my captive,

and I'd drugged her water to get some peace from her constant attempts to run away.

You should let her go if it's so annoying.

I pushed the voice of reason into a little corner of my mind. I should do a lot of things, and figuring out what the fuck I was going to do with my life was the first one.

Sofia moved again, and a groan left her. I stubbed out my cigarette and turned on my side, making sure the tie between us wasn't waking her.

She was ungodly beautiful in the dim light. The kind of beauty that goddesses envied and wreaked havoc on the world to wipe out. All that fire and intelligence and rebellion, wrapped up in a devastating package, locked away from the world by her uncaring father.

What a waste.

She murmured a soft protest in her sleep and snuggled closer to me. I froze. She was having a nightmare. I was all too familiar with those.

She shook her head against the pillow, her graceful brow contorting as she protested against some figure in her nightmare. I wondered if it was me.

The covers had slipped down, her body exposed. She was only in her underwear. I couldn't stop my gaze from running over every exposed inch. Jerking off in the shower had only taken the edge off my desire, and now I was hard again. Hard and aching. Desperate to sink inside Sofia, asleep or not, and fill her up with my cum, making her smell like me. Marking her, so everyone would know she was mine. So she would know, with every single leaking step, that I'd finally come to claim her.

She shivered, and I moved the cover over her, letting my hand brush against her pebbled skin.

"It's okay, prom queen. I'm here. I won't let you get cold."

Her hair was lying in stripes across the pillow, and I didn't try to stop myself from trailing my fingers through it, arranging it

around her head.

“Niko?”

“I can’t believe you’re awake after what I gave you.” It was impressive. I’d have imagined Sofia treated her body like a temple, or at least her father forced her to. It seemed she had more familiarity with pills than I’d imagined. “Do you take sleeping tablets at home, *lastochka*?”

“Hmmm. I can’t sleep without them.” Her words were slurred, but she was clearly conscious. Stuck in a languid, dreamlike, waking state.

I should have given her a higher dose.

Our tied hands were resting on my chest beside her cheek. I couldn’t resist stroking her velvety cheekbone while she was soft and warm and not fighting me for once.

To my surprise, she pushed her face into my open palm, nuzzling like a kitten. Heat stole through me, a wildfire ignited.

Her thigh crept over my leg, pressing close under the covers. Her skin was so smooth it was addictive to the touch. Last night and wrestling around on the floor of the cabin filled my head. I was hard as hell. I wrapped a hand around her thigh and guided it further over me so her knee was nudging my cock, straining up and leaking on my belly.

Sofia rubbed her leg back and forth over me. “You’re so warm,” she muttered, pushing herself closer still. “I’m always so cold. Cold house, cold heart. A cold, dead thing, encased in ice.”

“Was that what your nightmare was about?” I wondered, as I ran my free hand lightly up and down her bare arm.

She nodded against me and let out a breath. “Always, but you’re so warm.”

Suddenly, she pushed herself up on one arm. She seemed out of it and awake all at once. It was interesting to observe. Then she pushed her body over mine, straddling me, and I forgot how to think. She settled her weight on me, her hot pussy

pressed against my bare cock. The lace of her bra scratched my chest as she snuggled her head into my shoulder.

“Warm me up, please,” Sofia muttered. “Make the nightmare go away.”

Slowly, like she was a horse prone to bolting, I wrapped my arms around her, holding her tightly to me. She let out a long hum and then moved against me. Fuck. She was dragging her pussy along me, sleepily searching out my rigid cock. I flexed my hips, sliding my stiff length against her panties. The lace was rough and damp. The edge of pain only made it better. It reminded me that this was real. Sofia gasped as she wriggled her gorgeous little ass against me, slipping and sliding her pussy from the root of my cock to the tip.

“You destroy me, *lastochka*,” I murmured into her hair. The smell of her was all around me, filling my head.

She slid sleepily down my body until her hips lined up perfectly with my dick. Her mound and clit felt hot, even through her panties. She rubbed herself against me, arching her back.

I couldn't take being still one more second. My little prom queen was begging to be fucked, and I wanted nothing more than to oblige her.

I freed my hands from the hug I'd been holding so tightly and slid them down her lower back, landing on her hips. I arched my own, pressing my cock even more firmly between her legs. Sofia moaned throatily, free of the fear of judgment in that floating, perfect place. I wished I could join her there, but I couldn't afford to let my guard down. I never overindulged in alcohol or drugs. Too many people wanted me dead and were just waiting for the right moment.

My hands dropped lower, sliding beneath the elastic of her panties and over the firm globes of her ass, gripping her firmly. Using my handfuls of her ass, I moved her, sliding her more purposefully up and down my dick. Fuck, it felt good. Sofia burrowed her face deeper into my chest, inhaling deeply like she couldn't breathe enough of me in.

Pushing my hips in a rhythm against her, I worked my fingers deeper and deeper into the wet cleft between her legs. At the first brush of my fingers against her slit, she shuddered.

“That’s right, Sofia. You like it when I touch you there?” My voice was thick and strained.

She mumbled an agreement.

“I’m going to need you to speak up,” I chastised softly, pressing a long, thick finger farther inside her. “I’m not sure I can hear what you want.”

“I want you—” she panted, and moved her hips to try to force my finger deeper inside her.

“You want me to what?” I teased, finger-fucking her shallowly.

“I just... want you,” she confessed in a rush.

“Fuck, prom queen, you’ll be the end of me,” I muttered.

I picked up the pace with my hips, rubbing her across my dick until the wetness between her legs had soaked my cock. I needed more. I wanted to own every single part of this woman. I wanted to come deep inside her, day in, day out, until her belly was swollen with the evidence of my possession of her. My finger was still buried inside her pussy, and now, I explored the puckered hole above. Pure pleasure shot through me as she moaned greedily.

Sofia panted, working her hips in hot little circles. “I want to come. Make me come, Nikolai.”

“With pleasure,” I growled and finger-fucked her harder, bouncing her on my cock.

She came with my fingers in both her holes, gripping on to my shoulders like I was a rock in a tumultuous sea. Her pussy spasmed around my finger so hard, even her asshole got tighter. I made plans to fuck it one day.

She stiffened when she’d finished coming. It looked like that little sleeping tablet had completely worn off now. She was leaving the half-asleep place where she could make excuses.

Coming to her senses to find my fingers still inside her had to be a rude wake-up call, even if she'd started it.

“An orgasm so good, it can burn away the chemicals. That's quite the achievement, if I say so myself,” I said, gently pulling my fingers from her.

She slid to the side, throwing her bound hands over her eyes. “Don't speak. This is just a dream.”

“Well, at least you didn't call it a nightmare. I'll take that as a win.”

She let out a long breath and then grimaced, squirming on the bed.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said immediately.

“Tell me, or I'll check for myself.”

She sighed, and it sounded like it went down to her bones. “I'm uncomfortable.”

“Wet?”

She nodded, looking like she wanted the bed to swallow her, then she yawned. Maybe the sleeping tablet hadn't completely worn off. She was still more open to me than usual, and it looked like she was about to fall back asleep.

“It's cold,” she muttered, her hand plucking between her legs.

I brushed her fingers away and smoothed my fingers over the wet material.

“Yes, you are a little damp down there. What a mess you made, coming on my fingers... let's clean that up for you.”

I worked my way down her body, my tongue running up her inner thigh. She blinked down at me, her fingers playing lazily in my hair. She was boneless, unresisting as I lapped at her wet panties for a moment.

“Let's get you nice and clean,” I muttered against her skin, nosing against her wet shorts. Then I licked her tender flesh,

cleaning up the evidence of how hard she'd come, while she slipped back to sleep.

SOFIA

Nothing loosened hand restraints like fingering your captive. It was a hard truth that Nikolai Chernov was about to find out.

I woke before him when the windows were stained with purple dawn and realized my hands were loose enough to slip free. His face in repose was so beautiful. His high cheekbones and firm, stubbled jaw, winged dark eyes, brows that were so expressive by day, and those long eyelashes resting peacefully for once.

I lay for far too long staring at him. Committing to memory the man who had stolen into my heart and thoughts when I was seventeen, and I'd never gotten him out. Part of me tried to reconcile that once I was older and more experienced, married to another even, there'd be no more space for my sick little obsession with Nikolai Chernov. But deep down inside, I knew that wasn't true. His poison was in me. I was fated to live with his presence inside my head until the day I died, whether next week or years from now.

After last night and the epic lapse in judgment and self-control, I knew I had to get out of there before I fell into darkness any further with him. He was as bad for my mental health as my physical health.

Was it embarrassment? Maybe. I certainly had no experience with the white-hot lust that had overwhelmed me last night, and no way to make sense of the feelings that had filled me when Niko had touched me.

It couldn't be normal to feel like that. The man was like a sweet venom—it killed you slowly, and you died in ecstasy, but you still died.

Worse of all, a twisting black guilt sat in my belly. I'd set the wheels in motion for his recapture, and now, after last night, it was a heavy weight. He hadn't forced me or hurt me when he easily could have. There was an honor to him I didn't understand, but a code sat somewhere in his messed-up morals, and he didn't cross it. I respected that.

Maybe I was as fucked in the head as he was. Even more fucked up was the part of me that regretted giving the trucker my father's number. If De Sanctis men busted in here now, they'd save me from my kidnapper, but they'd also take Nikolai back to Casa Nera to answer for his crimes.

After last night, I wasn't sure what to feel.

I carefully detangled my hand from his, my heartbeat so loud I was surprised he couldn't hear it. My wrists were freed before I knew it, and I stared in shock at my hands. A feeling of unreality followed me as I tiptoed out of bed and dressed silently in my damp clothes. I had no idea how long Nikolai had been awake, but it had to have been over two nights in a row. No wonder he was out.

In the end, it was almost too easy to escape him. I felt odd as I twisted the doorknob and silently edged out into the hallway. Something flickered in my chest when I turned to look at the dark shape in the bed. The fragile intimacy of last night was like a bubble floating above me, perfect and short-lived. As I closed the door, the bubble burst.

The click was much louder than I'd have liked.

As soon as I let go of the knob, I hurried down the hall. I headed downstairs toward the reception desk. The same sleepy-looking employee who'd checked us in was sitting at the desk. He blinked at me when I ran toward him.

"I need to use your phone," I said quickly and moved around the desk.

He leaped up, seeming more awake than I'd have guessed. His name tag read Larry. "Miss, no guests behind here. I have to ask you to step out," he exclaimed. Far too loudly.

Panic flooded me. I shushed him and tried to look placating. "Please, I need help. I'm being held captive by that man I came with, and I need to get away."

Larry paled and reached for the phone. "If that's true, I need to call the cops."

"No! No cops," I hissed, moving toward him and trying to stop him from dialing 911. My father didn't take kindly to cops getting involved in his business.

The receptionist held out a hand, stopping me. "Miss! I'm warning you not to come closer. I'm armed, and I'm not afraid to use lethal force if I feel my life is being threatened," he nearly shouted.

Holy crap.

"I have no weapons! I just need help," I protested, twisting to look down the dark hall where I'd come from. This man was making far too much noise.

"If you need help, you'd want me to call the cops. You must be running some kind of hustle, you and your gangster boyfriend," Larry said, and tapped the side of his head with a meaty finger. "I watch *Dateline*. I know all about that stuff."

"Please, believe me," I attempted one last time and then froze. My shoulders inched up to my ears as the man reached below the counter and pulled out a gun. A fucking gun. Really? I had to have the worst luck in the world.

"Put your hands up where I can see them. I'm calling the cops, and you're staying here until they come."

Urgency beat at me, making me wonder if it was worth rushing him and trying to grab his gun. But I could end up shot, and I was less scared of Nikolai than I was of that.

"Please, listen to me. If the man I came with hears you, if he comes here and finds us... he might kill you," I said calmly, trying to project my serenity onto the clerk.

Larry snorted. “You might have noticed that I’m the one with the gun, Miss,” he said dismissively.

“The man I’m with doesn’t need a gun to kill you!” My voice was turning shrill, and I couldn’t help it. “Please, listen to me if you want to live.”

A prickling sensation along the back of my neck announced we were no longer alone.

“You should have listened to her, Larry. That was dumb,” Nikolai’s lazy voice floated over my head.

Larry squinted through the darkness past my shoulder. “You should know that I’m calling the police!”

“Go ahead,” Nikolai said, looking unbothered.

Larry frowned at him and turned his attention to the old landline phone sitting on the desk. The bullet caught him in the shoulder, and he spun a hundred and eighty degrees before falling. I hadn’t chanced trying to take the gun when I’d tiptoed out of the room, seeing as Niko had it under his pillow.

Now, I cursed my cowardice as I made a break for the glass doors.

I reached them and pulled on the handle.

It didn’t budge. I rattled it in disbelief.

Nikolai’s chuckle set my nerves on edge. “I think you need to be buzzed in during the small hours for safety and all that,” he called to me, his voice warm.

I spun around, finally seeing the man I was starting to think I’d never be able to escape.

He sauntered over to the desk and peered down at Larry as I turned back to the doors, looking for something to throw at them.

While Nikolai was distracted with Larry, I spied a black SUV pulling into the lot. There was something vaguely familiar about it. When it stopped, four men in suits got out. Headpieces connected them, and they were all carrying.

An old man jumped out beside them, and I recognized him as the trucker who had given us a ride on the highway. My father's men had arrived. They'd gotten my tip, met with the trucker, and had him bring them to the place where he'd left us. Panic flooded me. Nikolai was about to get caught again, and he'd also find out what I'd done.

The De Sanctis men outside were looking around. Nikolai started toward me, his eyes following my gaze outside. He froze for a moment, his intelligent eyes quickly assessing the situation.

The men in suits started toward the motel. There were only moments before they saw us.

I needed Nikolai to run and leave me behind out of necessity.

"They're coming. You need to go." My voice was surprisingly calm, given how panic was spreading like wildfire inside me. A beat passed between us as I backed toward the staircase.

"If you leave out the back now, you'll get away." My voice sounded calmer than I felt. "Just go. Leave me here," I said, taking in the way Niko's body strained toward mine. It was like we were two magnets desperate to snap together but never allowed to.

His hands curled into hard fists. "Prom queen, this is not how this story ends," he ground out.

I knew if I waited one more moment, drawn into his spell, we'd both be caught. Frantically aware of the approaching men, I spun toward the stairs and sprinted up them.

Nikolai couldn't afford to waste his chance to slip out the back chasing me around the motel. He'd have to give up. I felt sick with anxiety as I ran up the stairs, my breath rasping in harsh pants from my chest. I pounded upwards, away from the commotion in the lobby. There was a noise behind me.

No, it couldn't be. I risked a glance back and stifled a cry of pure frustration.

Nikolai charged like a bull up the stairs behind me.

He wasn't escaping. He was chasing me. My heart fell and flew at the same time.

Clearing one level, I raced toward another short stair and fire exit sign in the darkness at the top. I put my head down and ran with all my might. I might not be super strong, but I was fast.

I burst through the door and into the cool morning air.

The failings of my plan became immediately clear. It wasn't a roof like I'd thought. It was a rickety metal fire escape, and my momentum took me barreling over the edge.

A piercing scream left me as my hands scrabbled to hold on to the cold metal, the weight of my body pulling me down. I was going to fall. It wasn't high enough to kill me unless I was unlucky, but there'd be broken bones. A lot of them.

My hand that gripped the metal rail overhead was slipping, my wrist burning where it was twisted. I tried to find something for my feet to perch on, to take the pressure off my wrists. Another scream left me as I slipped a good five inches. Metal paint and rust flakes embedded in my hand as I held on for dear life. Below me, the screams had brought the De Sanctis men running, but there wasn't an easy way up, seeing as the bottom of the fire escape was completely blocked by a dumpster.

They wouldn't reach me in time. I pictured banging my body off the dumpster edge and landing on the broken glass shining inside it.

Then strong fingers closed around my wrist.

"Hold on," Nikolai said through gritted teeth as he wrapped a reassuring hand around my wrist and held on to me. "Give me your other hand. I'll pull you up."

I stared at him, my fear a living thing on my face. I was fucking terrified of falling.

Nikolai's gray eyes stared steadily into mine, seeing into my very soul. "Sofia, trust me. Hold on to my hand and let me pull you up."

I swallowed my scream as the entire fire escape shook. The combined weight of Nikolai leaning over the rickety structure and my dangling body was going to pull the whole thing off the wall. I swung my arm toward him and missed, nearly wrenching my shoulder out of the socket. Biting back tears, I swung again. This time, Nikolai lunged down, somehow keeping his feet on the ground, and grabbed my other hand. The pain in my arms lessened as my weight was balanced between both arms.

“I’ve got you. I won’t let you go,” Nikolai said calmly, as if we didn’t both know that De Sanctis men were rushing up the stairs at this very moment.

The truth sat between us, unspoken but undeniable.

If he let me go, he could probably still get away, but I’d fall.

He hauled me up, and precious seconds ticked by as I tried to help, but I swung powerlessly as his superior strength hauled me over the edge of the railing.

He pulled me into his arms as the entire metal railing shifted to the side, detaching from the wall. The screech was deafening. We fell hard to the floor.

I clamped my trembling hands over my ears, squeezing my eyes shut, as I lay in a ball.

After a moment, when the world didn’t fall away under me, I realized that he’d done it. Somehow, against all odds, Nikolai had pulled us inside just in time.

I opened my eyes, searching for him, only to find his gray gaze fixed on me and his arms strong around me. I knew in my bones I’d remember the look in his eyes for the rest of my life.

Then he was wrenched away from me. Twisted and pressed to the floor. His gaze stayed on me, his head in my direction, his neck turned sharply, his body prone on the scratchy carpet. At least three De Sanctis men had guns trained on him, and another was tying his hands together at the small of his back with zip ties.

“Got you this time, Chernov. If the boss was going easy on you before, that’s over now.” One of the men chuckled.

I recognized him as one of Silvio’s men.

He dug his knee into Nikolai’s spine and leaned forward.
“Welcome to Hell.”

NIKOLAI

When I was a boy, ripped from my homeland by my all-powerful, uncaring father, my mother and I lived in a cabin in the Pennsylvania woods. “Cabin” was a mild word for the huge, wooden mansion he’d stowed us in. But regardless of the number of empty rooms and modern conveniences, my mother, Irina, had recognized it for what it really was. A cage.

It hadn’t dawned on me that we were Viktor Chernov’s prisoners until I came home from playing in the woods one day and found my mother swinging from the shower rail. She had been fond of telling me, “Niko, it’s better to die than do nothing.”

That day, I learned that sometimes, dying is doing something.

Since then, I’d lived in darkness. It was a hard thing to find out as a child that the only person you loved in the world didn’t mind leaving you. It was a hard thing to accept that you weren’t worth holding on to. In the end—or in my case, from the beginning—I learned that everyone was alone. I guessed I was ahead of most other people, learning it as young as I had.

After she’d died, I roamed the woods. I slept under the bare sky, with only the stars as my companions, until Viktor sent for me to join him in New York. The days of innocence and starry, unspoiled skies were over for me by the age of fifteen. I would never, ever get them back.

THE SMELL of the basement was the first thing that hit me as I slowly rose from a dark lake of unconsciousness. Damp stone and festering rot. A place full of earthy, hidden things, and now, it seemed, my new home. My wrists burned where they'd been tied, and the floor was freezing beneath me.

The previous events rushed back to me. Was it a few hours ago or days? I had no idea. Everything was murky.

One memory rushed back faster than others. The sight of Sofia falling over the fire escape and the terror that had burned through me. I'd felt nothing like it since I'd gotten home from the woods and found my mother's body swinging from the shower rail. The day my childhood had ended.

I jerked against my restraints as a shoe scraped on hard concrete beside me.

I wasn't alone.

"*Bravo*. He's waking up," a deep voice called to the side of me.

"That's quick. He has some resistance to the sedative," another male voice, this one steadier, replied.

I tried to blink my eyes open, and then I felt it. A blindfold was pressed against my eyes, pushing my eyelids shut. A dim light showed around the corners, but it was all I could make out. I was no stranger to being tied up and taken somewhere hellish. I'd made a career out of it.

Clearly, Antonio had learned from his mistake and wasn't taking any chances with me this time.

There was a shuffling noise before me. The two soon-to-be-dead men discussed what was going to happen to me with amused voices. Right. Now I remembered. These were De Sanctis' men, and they had me trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey. I'd no doubt pissed them off with my escape attempt.

A sharp kick connected with my side, and I gritted my teeth.

A chuckle floated to me. "Does that hurt, you bratva swine? Anything you want to ask?"

“Yeah, do either of you guys have a smoke?” My insolent question was met with outraged silence, and then the kicks began again.

When the pair of lackeys tired themselves out, they let out exhilarated laughs, high on the thrill of spilling another man’s blood. A tied-up, defenseless man, at that.

“This is only the beginning. We’ll be back later,” one of them grunted.

I decided to call them Idiot One and Idiot Two.

“When Silvio gets his hands on you, you’ll wish your brother had killed you instead of giving you to us.”

Silvio De Sanctis. The man who’d bet and lost Sofia to me. I’d waited a long time to have an excuse to end the motherfucker. It looked like soon I’d get one.

Idiot One kicked me again, and Idiot Two laughed. I’d skin them alive before I put them out of their misery, I decided, as I fell to the side on the concrete, banging my head sharply. Another kick to the head sent me spinning right back down the rabbit hole into the darkness.



Age 19

SINCE I’D MOVED to Brooklyn to learn about the family business and met my half-brother, I’d never been so distracted. Since Irina had died, I hadn’t felt anything other than anger toward another person in my life. From my brother, Kirill, a fellow student in my father’s bloodstained altar of learning in a salty warehouse in Brighton Beach, to the man himself. I learned quickly that being the loose cannon gave me an edge. People inevitably underestimated me, and I liked that advantage. I didn’t want anyone to see beneath the psychotic clown mask I donned to survive bratva business. Well, I hadn’t before. Until her. Sofia De Sanctis.

She was different. She was a distraction. I should forget her.

Instead, I watched her.

I found myself outside her school again, watching her walking down the stairs in her little schoolgirl uniform, her black hair blowing around her shoulders. Her bodyguard lurched after her. He was lucky he hadn't so much as glanced at her ass as she leaned her petite body into a bulletproof SUV and placed her heavy bookbag into it. If he'd had, he'd have lost his eyes.

Sofia De Sanctis was mine.

It had been two weeks since I'd cornered her in the gym. That had been risky. We could have easily been found there, and Viktor wouldn't take kindly to the Italian mob in New York declaring war on the bratva. Still, I hadn't been able to stop myself. The lure of her was like a fucking siren call. It had only gotten worse now that I'd tasted her. I could still remember the feeling of her skin against mine, her teeth on my lip, her shaking, trembling token resistance.

I was a man possessed, fated to follow her, watching from a distance until I could work out how I was going to take her and how I would keep her.

I tailed them downtown to an expensive shopping area. Sofia and her friend went into a designer store while her useless bodyguard stayed outside the door. I was about to make my move, heading toward the back entrance, when another car arrived. Silvio got out and straightened his suit over his rotund stomach before heading into the store. He left his bodyguards outside as well.

Dark anticipation rolled over me. I'd been waiting to teach that fucker a lesson, and now, my time had come.

I looped around the building, climbing up a service entry and hopping onto the back fire exit of the adjacent building to clear the wall around the back of the store. The fire exit was propped open with a chair. People were fools about security. That much was a universal truth. Like cancer, people thought that random acts of violence were things that only happened to other people, those poor unfortunate people on the news, but never to them. Everyone thought they were invincible until

they met someone who taught them otherwise. I'd been a prolific teacher in my short time on earth.

Slipping in the door, I moved down the stark white hall, a specter in black with murder on his mind.

One of the changing rooms was occupied. As I peered around the corner of the hall, Silvio approached it.

He rapped loudly with his knuckles, like whoever was inside might be hard of hearing. Either that, or he was just that obnoxious.

"Sofia, let me in. We have to talk," he said in a tone that he must have felt was full of authority.

He puffed up his chest, trying to look important. Fucking loser.

"I'm just changing," Sofia's voice floated out of the room.

"It's fine, just let me in," Silvio blustered.

Anger flourished in my veins at his words. The motherfucker.

I could feel her hesitation, but then the door opened. Of course it did. Sofia De Sanctis was a good little girl, except for me, it seemed. Good. I liked that. Thrashing in my arms, she'd shown her real self for a moment, and there wasn't anything obliging or well-behaved about her. I wasn't interested in her act. I wanted the real her, the one she hid away to survive her patriarchal family.

Silvio barged inside and closed the door behind him.

"Have you heard anything from Nikolai Chernov?" Silvio asked his cousin. Their voices were easy to make out.

I waited for her response, mildly curious if she would rat me out for our brief encounter in the gym.

"No, nothing. Why?" she asked after a moment.

I wondered if Silvio could tell that she was lying.

"Good. I didn't know if he'd give up that easily, that's all. He's a psychopath. You need to tell me if you see him around. We can't talk about it at Casa Nera in case someone hears. No one

can know we went out that night and met him,” Silvio said, sounding relieved.

“Okay, I get it,” Sofia said quietly.

Silence fell between them, and I burned with curiosity. What were they doing now?

A bang suddenly sounded in the room, as if something heavy had fallen, and then the sound of a ringing slap.

“Don’t! Silvio, what are you doing?” Sofia cried.

I had to stop myself from pushing in there and cutting his throat right then.

He laughed, a cruel, arrogant sound. “Relax, Sofia. You’re the one standing there wearing next to nothing. You’re asking for a feel.”

“No, I’m not, and I don’t want to be touched by you,” Sofia said.

“Whatever. You hardly have a figure to tempt me. Try putting on a few pounds if you want to attract a real man,” Silvio said and barged from the changing room.

He was flushed, his piggy face excited, and I’d bet he had a pathetic little stump of a chub in his ill-fitting slacks.

He strode out of the store, smoothing his greasy hair back, and Sofia turned the lock of the door.

I withdrew, silent as a shadow. Silvio already had a debt to me, considering how he had dragged Sofia away when I’d won her, but now, he’d just added to his tally.

It was time to collect.

MEN LIKE SILVIO were easy because they were lazy and lived their lives by predictable routines. On a Tuesdays, he went to a warehouse over on Mulberry Street, just like clockwork. He only took a couple of bodyguards with him.

The bodyguards were easily incapacitated. They were as lazy as their boss. I gave Silvio a good twenty minutes to get into it

with his chosen company that night before barging into the room.

Silvio was lying on the bed, the twisted sheets pooling around his flabby middle. The shower was running in the bathroom, and Silvio was smoking what seemed like a postcoital cigarette.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Don’t tell me you’re done already? I thought I’d be interrupting something, but I guess I gave you too much credit. I suppose under five minutes was a safer bet.” I stepped into the room and locked the door behind me.

Silvio’s eyes widened, and he scrambled out of bed. “What are you doing here? My men are outside,” he babbled.

I nodded, giving him a grin that sent him pale. “Yes, they were,” I said conversationally, strolling toward the bathroom. “They aren’t now.”

I knocked gently on the bathroom door.

The shower shut off.

Clearing my throat, I spoke to the woman through the door. “Sweetheart, Silvio needs to have a grown-up talk out here, and I don’t want to be interrupted. I also can’t have you seeing my face, so I’d prefer if you’d stay in there, lock the door, and don’t move until everything is quiet and done out here, okay?”

Silence met my words.

“Don’t be a hero and try to call someone. Believe me, Silvio isn’t worth it. If you understand me, get back in the shower and have a good scrub.”

After a moment, the shower switched back on.

Silvio stared between me and the door and then at his clothes lying behind me on the chair.

I reached for the pile. “Let me guess. Your gun is in here? Not very prepared, are you, Silvio?”

“What do you want, Chernov?”

“I want what I’m owed. Sofia. You bet her. I won her.”

He laughed. “You really think Antonio De Sanctis is going to give his little princess to a thug like you? Forget it.”

“That’s not my problem. I didn’t bet her. You did. Work it out.”

“It’s impossible.”

I blew out a breath and shrugged off my leather jacket. “I thought you might say that, so I planned ahead,” I said, giving him another grin.

He watched me warily. “What are you doing?”

“Taking this off, I don’t like to get it dirty. It’s a bitch to clean.”

I reached into the pocket for something I’d picked up earlier. It had been expensive, not that I’d paid for it.

As my hand was emerged from my pocket, Silvio went bone white.

The meat cleaver shone dully under the ceiling spotlights.

“What the fuck is that for?”

“Well, since I expected you to let me down, I had to decide how to punish you for wasting my time. And I know you tried to touch what is mine, so I figured I could kill two birds with one stone.”

“You’re crazy,” Silvio sputtered, and made a pointless break for the door.

I caught him in an explosive burst of power and slammed him hard into the wall. He groaned and slumped to the floor.

“Now, Silvio, don’t be a child and try to escape your punishment. Be a man. You are, of course, free to explain to Antonio why this has happened to you. But you’ll have to tell him about sneaking his seventeen-year-old daughter out of the house, betting her in a poker game, and letting her catch the eye of a thug like me,” I said, slapping his belly. The obscene sound echoed around the room.

“Now, tell me which hand you touched Sofia with, and be quick about it,” I said as I leaned in to trail the cleaver down

his cheek.

He stared at me, terrified and devoid of fight. Fuck, I'd known he was a coward, but this was even worse than I'd imagined.

He was quiet, shaking his head slightly.

“Tell me now.”

His eyes widened with terror. “Or?”

I was impressed he could form coherent thoughts with how afraid he was.

I grinned down at him, enjoying the taste of his terror. “Or I'll take them both.”

NIKOLAI

Now

The darkness didn't last nearly long enough, and a splitting headache echoed through my skull only minutes after my wannabe torturers left. I pushed myself onto my side, trying to take the pressure off my wrists, but the tie was so tight around the pipe behind it that it was impossible to relieve the pressure completely.

Resting my head against the hard floor, I took a deep breath, cataloging my hurts. I'd patched myself up plenty of times. There was a lot you could do with duct tape when you had to, and I could tell that most of my injuries would feel better in a few days. My shoulder ached where I'd hauled Sofia up one-handed, and the side of my head throbbed dangerously. Those were the only wounds worth worrying about. I closed my eyes, preferring to picture the enjoyable imagery of burning Sofia's childhood home to the ground.

The image of violence always comforted me.

I had been sixteen and a student at my father's school of violence the first time I'd taken a life. It would be a few months before I'd taken another, but that first one stayed with you, or so they said. I wasn't sure I agreed. When slack faces stack one upon another, they all blend together. Another symptom of a cracking mind.

Tonight, like a watercolor canvas with a maddening drip on one side, the colors were all bleeding together. Life, death,

pain, and revenge. Life was an endurance test. A freak show. Something to get through as fast as possible. The only time it paused its sickening grind was around Sofia. A secret power no one in the world had over me. A lure like no other.

My obsession with Sofia was a weakness. Anything important to you was a weakness in my world, and Sofia De Sanctis had always been a precious thing to me. That weakness had landed me here, but I couldn't bring myself to regret it. Chasing my little swallow through the woods, fingering her into submission, and eating her cunt for hours last night was the highlight of my fucking life.

The noise of metal scraping against stone sounded and kicked me back to life, just in time to see the door open of the small stone room I was being held in. Another visitor. I'd never been so popular. A shadowy silhouette appeared in the opening. I squinted through the darkness to see who might visit my torture chamber.

"Nikolai, I trust you are comfortable enough in your new rooms," Antonio De Sanctis' voice boomed across the freezing basement space. "I will have to give you back to Kirill in one piece at some point, although you killed five of my men yesterday." His disapproving tone was cold and clinical.

"I did you a favor. They were dead weight and dangerously incompetent. You're welcome," I managed.

The older man sauntered toward me, giving every appearance of ease as he watched me push myself to sit upright. My head spun, either from hunger or thirst. I didn't know, but I forced my customary smirk.

"Be that as it may, their friends will want their pound of flesh, you understand. I need you alive. Whole or not doesn't matter to me. None of this had to be difficult. All you had to do was play your part, bleed a little, and let the city see that the Chernov bratva didn't think they were above my family. A stain on a reputation is a cancer in our world, you know, eating away at power. Now, though, it'll cost you more than a couple of broken ribs."

“I don’t scare that easily, Antonio. You’ll have to do better if you want a reaction from me,” I told him flatly.

Antonio merely chuckled and cracked his long fingers. He was wiry and tanned, with his hair combed tidily back. His fingers held more than one signet ring that I was sure had left their imprints in some suckers’ faces over the years. He had an elegance that I saw echoed and expanded in his daughter. I didn’t know Renato, the only son and heir to the family, but I’d bet he was like his father.

Antonio De Sanctis looked like he’d be at home in a vineyard in Tuscany, overlooking a million-dollar estate, tasting wine, and bedding gorgeous younger women. He looked like he should live the life of a true Italian gent instead of crouching over a man like me in a stinking, cold basement outside Trenton.

“I heard that about you,” Antonio chuckled. “My men don’t mind teaching the same lesson twice.”

“Good for them,” I said, leaning my head against the wall, my shoulders burning in the backward position they’d been forced into. “So, you’re just here to watch. I wouldn’t have taken you for a voyeur, Antonio.”

My goading tone sent a wider grin to Antonio’s face. “I was just curious. It’s been a while since I’ve been in the thick of it. I have a heart problem, you know, I can’t get too excited. The days of snipping off fingertips and ears are behind me. But that doesn’t mean I don’t miss it,” Antonio said with a disturbing fondness to his tone. “But I don’t have to explain the thrill of the hunt and the sweetness of the catch to you, do I, Nikolai? I’ve heard about you.” He leaned in, his eyes tracking me. “Anyway, how does it feel to be outmaneuvered by your own brother and delivered into my hands by your own family?”

I shrugged. “It’s just business, I suppose. Nothing personal.” I thought about telling him I rarely felt anything at all unless it came to his daughter but decided against it. No need to get my little prom queen in trouble, too.

Antonio nodded and raised an eyebrow. "I'm glad to hear you say that. This, too, is just business. A pound of flesh for the mark of disrespect that the Chernovs smeared against the De Sanctis name. That you Russian pigs could even consider degrading a family so far above you in power and reputation is a testament to how badly this lesson was needed. I'll enjoy teaching it, as well as my men."

His superior tone turned my amusement into annoyance and back to humor. This aristocratic old-school don thought I cared about the class hierarchy of the underworld we both walked in.

Baring my teeth in a semblance of a bloodthirsty grin, I laughed. "Don't forget, Tony, I'm Russian. I don't care if you're the lord of the manor around here or Italian fucking royalty. The only good aristocrat is a dead one. Eat the rich."

I lunged toward him with a speed that sent him stumbling back and snapped my teeth. The sound sent Antonio's eyebrows together. It was funny. He thought I cared about his reputation or what the rest of the underworld thought of me or my bratva?

He didn't enjoy being played with, given the way his face froze with arctic anger that grew colder as my laughter bounced off the walls.

I was still laughing when his heavy foot landed on my side, doubling me over. Heart condition or not, it seemed it was indeed possible to rile Antonio De Sanctis' emotions.

I laughed harder when he pulled me up as far as he could and hit me hard in the mouth, again and again, until my lip split and warm blood showered across my chin.

I couldn't help it. It was really fucking funny.

Antonio watched me like someone would a cockroach they weren't sure how to squish without getting their shoes dirty.

I turned my head and spit a long stream of blood on the floor, using my shoulder to wipe my dripping lip.

"You know, you should be careful with that heart, Tony. Don't get overexcited, or your daughter will be wearing black and

standing at your graveside soon enough.”

Antonio’s eyes narrowed, and the irritation he couldn’t hide flashed over his features at the nickname. Then he schooled himself and smiled. “Don’t worry about Sofia, Nikolai. She’s a loyal daughter. She’ll do what she has to for the family every single time. Of course, without her help, we never would have found you. We weren’t even near the right place.” He leaned down, watching as his words found their mark. “Of course, it’s only right she should do something useful for a change. Daughters are more trouble than they’re worth. The least Sofia can do now is be a good girl and marry whomever I choose next. She’s going to regret not taking your brother. At least he was young.”

I swallowed a mouthful of bile and blood. “Don’t you know? Young just means they live longer. With a husband a girl doesn’t want, the older, the better.” The glib words felt like a lie on my tongue.

Antonio chuckled. “You’re amusing, Chernov. I’ll give you that. Fucking annoying but amusing. Since I’m not a thug like you, you’ll be fed and washed and kept in decent condition here. Let your sentence pass without incident, and you and your brother can go back to trying to kill each other in no time.”

Antonio stood and made for the door. Go back to Kirill and tear up the city to be *pakhan*? The idea was distinctly unappealing. For the first time in a long time—since that day in the bathroom, cradling my mother’s body in my arms—I had no idea what the future held.

I’d lost my place in the world.

My mind shifted to my little prom queen upstairs.

It was time to carve a new one.



WHEN I WOKE AGAIN, the headache had subsided somewhat. Luckily for me, I was used to being hit in the head—a

worrying thought for someone else, no doubt. I had little hope of living past thirty, so it didn't bother me too much.

Heavy footsteps echoed down the corridor, and I pictured the walls beyond this room. How depressing. This was the house Sofia had grown up in? It looked like I wasn't the only one permanently scarred by a terrible childhood. My little bird with the clipped wings and I had more in common than she'd like to think. The door pushed open, and several figures crowded in. I recognized one of them.

I summoned a smirk for my abuser. "Silvio, I was wondering how long it'd take you to come and visit me. I suppose it's hard to find a good reason, seeing as your uncle still doesn't know the truth about what happened to your hand."

Silvio faltered. Time hadn't been kind to the man. He'd run to fat and looked uncomfortably puffy. His life had been too soft, it seemed, since the last time I'd seen him. Comfort made men weak, and Silvio looked the weakest of them all. Just the sight of his empty sleeve pleased me. He'd had it coming.

Silvio watched me in silence, his beady eyes calculating. "Gag him," he said to one of his men, his eyes never leaving mine. "I don't want to hear him talk shit when I break his ass."

My laugh sent his eyebrows into a scowl. "I didn't know you played for both sides. That makes you marginally more interesting. Well, that and being the only one-handed wanker I've ever met."

Silvio went red in the face. "What did you say?" he asked in a tone no doubt meant to be threatening.

"I called you a wanker. Don't you know the term? You should travel more internationally and broaden your horizons," I got out before one of his men fitted a filthy rag around my mouth. I could hardly complain. After I'd gagged Sofia for hours a day on end, I was due.

Silvio let out a laugh. "You know, I've heard the rumors about you. They say you're mad, looney toons, but I never believed it, not till now... either you really aren't afraid of what we're

about to do to you, which would make you mad, or you don't think we can go too far, which just makes you wrong."

I grunted behind the gag, and Silvio tugged it down, eager to hear my fear. He wanted me to cower and beg. It'd be a cold day in Hell when I was scared of Silvio De Sanctis.

"You talk a good game, but can you deliver? If you're going to hurt me, get on with it. All this foreplay is getting tedious," I murmured and then laughed.

Silvio jerked like I'd hit him, and then he nodded to his men. One of them cut my hands loose, and I enjoyed the excruciating feeling of blood seeping back into my digits.

I sagged to the floor for a blissful second before being hauled up.

"You like to talk, Chernov? Let's see how you manage it with no teeth," Silvio said, flexing his solid-looking fist which twinkled with thick gold rings.

That twinkle was the last thing I saw before he connected with my jaw and the lights went out.

SOFIA

“*H*old still, signorina, if you don’t want to become my pincushion,” the seamstress, Anna, muttered through a mouthful of pins. “And breathe in. I thought we discussed losing five pounds?”

Taking a deep breath that sent a hundred pinpricks shooting through my ribcage as it expanded, I pulled myself up as tall as I could and sucked my stomach in like I was doing a crunch. It was practically concave, yet it wasn’t small enough for Anna.

“Better?” Considering I had already lost some weight, thanks to several days running through the wilderness and barely eating, it seemed a cruel jab, but I was used to it.

She mumbled something critical, and my eyes lifted to Angelo, standing at the door. He stared at Anna with a deep frown.

The sound of male voices drifted in from outside.

My father had finally decided to check in with me. I hadn’t seen him since I’d been rescued from Nikolai and we’d returned to the compound. The men had taken an unconscious Nikolai away, and I’d been free to shower and huddle in my bed, feeling all kinds of things I didn’t know how to deal with. Relief to be home was undeniable. I was the idiot prisoner who liked to lock themselves in and felt safer that way. Guilt was another thing that weighed heavily on me. I didn’t know what was happening to Niko in the bowels of the house, but I was the reason he was there.

Because he'd saved me. Because he hadn't let me fall.

The door opened, and Anna turned away, plastering a sycophantic smile on her face. I pulled one pin from the narrow waist of the gown, giving myself a very crucial inch to breathe. I hid the pin in my palm and prepared to meet my father.

He strode into the room like he owned it, which he did. The dressmaker's shop was just one of the small businesses that Antonio owned locally. It wasn't enough for him to run guns and drugs into Atlantic City, Trenton, or Newark. He'd also strong-armed businesses to sign over hefty percentages of ownership in return for protection.

In our tiny town in New Jersey, he owned over seventy-five percent of the businesses and was closing in on more every day. Clearly, Antonio had wished to be born a feudal lord of times past, owning everything as far as the eye could see and forcing peasants to come and pay homage to him in return for allowing them to exist in his domain.

He might be my father, but I had no illusions as to the kind of man he was.

"Sofia, how is it going? Ciao, Anna." He strolled to a velvet viewing couch and looked me over critically.

These monthly visits to Anna's dress shop were always a low point. My father dictated not only where I went and who I was friends with but also how I dressed and looked, down to the smallest details. He was more interested in my diet and weight than I'd ever been. When I was younger, he made me stand on the scale in front of him. As an adult, he relied on Anna to monitor me once a month. Like any thoroughbred animal that aimed to fetch a good price at market, I had to be carefully maintained.

I dug the little pin into my palm. It helped to soothe my black mood and hopeless anger from showing on my face.

"It's going well. I think we were nearly finished," I said, smiling hopefully at Anna.

She flushed, wringing her hands. “Almost, sir. I need to make some adjustments and let the waist out a little.”

Antonio reached for a broadsheet newspaper, so creaseless it looked like it had been ironed. He cocked an eyebrow at me. “Why are Anna’s measurements wrong, Sofia?”

Because she’s a sadist who likes to control my body almost as much as you do.

I forced a shrug. “Water retention?”

My father’s flat stare told me he didn’t appreciate my excuse. “I’ll let Carmella know you’re not to have salt in that case, in anything.”

Great, sounds delicious. I swallowed the hard knot of hate and anger in my throat and simply nodded. In my head, I was brave, a spitfire who talked back to my father and didn’t let him grind me to dust under his heel. In my head, I liked the person I was, but none of it was real. The only person I’d ever been real with, I’d helped to lock away in the basement. Only Nikolai Chernov had heard that internal voice, the man I should be more scared of than my own family. What that meant, I had no fucking clue.

For a second, furious tears threatened to dash down my cheeks, but a quick jab of the pin into the soft skin at the base of my thumb helped to calm my upset. I pushed it further, cupping my hand to catch the drops of blood.

There it was. The calm in the eye of the storm.

“Of course, Father,” I replied dutifully.

“You owe me, Sofia, for the engagement debacle. The stain on your reputation is a stain on mine, and I won’t allow it.”

I dropped my father’s emotionless gaze. Not only was I an asset to be leveraged, but being anything short of perfect was intolerable to Antonio De Sanctis.

“Now, come on, *Zio*, it can hardly be Sofia’s fault that she isn’t to everyone’s tastes,” a loud, arrogant voice called.

A shudder went through me as my cousin drifted into view, followed by my uncle. Silvio was a good ten years older than

me and one of the worst people I'd ever met. I hated him even more than my father. My hatred for Silvio knew no bounds, only growing since the fateful night with Nikolai and the poker game that had changed my life.

Silvio gave me a long, slow look from the tips of my bare toes peeking beneath the hem of the pale dress up to my shoulders. His dark eyes gleamed with want, the kind that made my skin crawl. He wet his thick lips, an unconscious movement, and shifted his belt a fraction.

Only the pin in my hand kept me steady. I fantasized about jumping off the platform and striding to Silvio. I'd slap him for looking me over like I was a piece of meat in a butcher's shop. He'd have no idea the pin was in my hand until it stuck in one of the jelly-like orbs currently focused on my chest.

"Sofia? Don't daydream, it makes you look simple," my father snapped at me, breaking me out of my reverie.

"Sorry, Papa," I muttered. A windup toy lurching back into its pre-programmed routine.

He studied me with reptilian eyes, unblinking and unemotional, then turned his attention to Anna. "For this dress, Sofia will need something pretty underneath, matching, white, something that reflects her purity."

"Underneath?" I repeated lamely as Anna pulled out a notepad and jotted down my father's sickening orders. "Why does it matter what's beneath?"

"Why do you think?" Silvio snickered by the door.

A look from my father shut him up. "That's not for you to worry about. Since you're spoiled goods in the eyes of society, we have to move quickly to fix the situation before you become worthless. I need you to do as you're told and not waste time arguing about it. Don't disappoint me again, *figlia mia*."

The "or else" was unspoken. We both knew what it meant. *Or else I'd disappoint Antonio*. Men had died for less. A muted hysteria bubbled up inside me. He had someone in mind. As soon as I thought it, I knew it was true.

He stared at me expectantly.

I tried to remember how to pretend not to hate him and plastered on my best daughter's smile. "I know, Papa. I won't."

He stared me down for a moment longer, and I met his gaze unflinchingly. Antonio didn't like those who refused to make eye contact with him.

"*Brava*, in that case, get changed. The dress will look fine once you slim down. Now, let's go. We can't be late for Sunday lunch."

He left without another word, and I scrambled to get ready. He'd only wait five minutes for me to get changed. I knew from experience. I caught sight of myself in the mirror. With Antonio's words echoing in my head, I'd never felt more lacking or more scared. He had someone in mind to marry me off to; it was obvious.

Soon, the days on the run with Nikolai would be the last taste of freedom I'd ever have. How fucked up was that? To feel freer in the hands of a captor than my family was a sobering realization. Most of all, for the first time in forever, I hadn't felt lonely, not at all. I didn't know what the hell to make of the disjointed, ill-fitting emotions bumbling around inside me. So I did what I always did: got dressed, plastered a good-girl smile on my face, and hurried to follow my father's commands. Nikolai was right. I was his *lastochka*. A caged bird with clipped wings, too scared to make a bid for freedom.



ON SUNDAYS, the De Sanctis family hosted lunch at Casa Nera.

It was a tradition as old as I was, older perhaps. I could barely remember what it had been like when my mother was alive, but these days, it was my least favorite day of the week.

A host of skilled Italian chefs put on a feast to remember while more still ferried the food and drinks back and forth to the

powerful men at the table. Being invited to Sunday dinner was a significant sign of favor and respect from the boss. A standing invitation was for family only. For that reason, Silvio and his father, Franco, attended every single Sunday and made me even more uncomfortable than I usually was in my childhood home. Since I'd been old enough to fill out a bra, maybe even before, lecherous eyes had followed me around the table as I caved my body inward and prayed to disappear.

Tonight, Silvio's dark eyes followed me around the table. The sight of his self-satisfied gloating only sent my mind downstairs to the basement. Was Nikolai okay? The only good thing about this Sunday dinner was the man sitting at the far end of the table with a small cast on his lower leg. Gino was alive and well. He was heartily tucking into his first Sunday lunch at the boss's table, thanks to his heroism in attempting to stop the escapee. Every time I caught his eye, I couldn't help my grin.

“AND WHERE DO you think you're going? You don't have time for your cousin, is that it?” Silvio's hard hand circled my wrist as I passed out espresso topped with sambuca after dinner. My father thought it important for his only daughter to show her wifely capabilities and obedience.

“Sofia?”

The fingers holding my wrist tightened until I bit down a gasp of pain. The small china cup in my hand rattled in its saucer before spilling across the table in a dark stain.

“*Madonna!*” Silvio spit at me, drawing all eyes to us as he threw a napkin down dramatically on the spoiled tablecloth.

“I'm sorry. I was daydreaming,” I muttered tonelessly.

Silvio smirked, reveling in causing a scene and embarrassing me into speaking to him. “Well, what are you going to do? You spilled coffee on my pants. Clean it up,” he said, his voice dropping toward the last words, for only my ears.

My eyes darted to his. Silvio had none of the good looks of the De Sanctis blood. My father was a trim man, wiry and elegant,

even in his advancing age. His brother, Franco, was the same.

Silvio was only a little taller than me and didn't resemble either of them. His short neck, hairy knuckles, and thick shoulders marked him clearly apart from my brother and me. Since losing his hand, he had only gotten heavier and meaner.

It was understandable. I couldn't imagine being in his position. If Silvio had been a different type of man, his contrasting looks would be a welcome sight, but he was as far from a good man as could be. I had nothing against how Silvio looked, but I had a lot against my cousin coming on to me.

"Well, hurry, it's getting cold," he said to me, sitting back and spreading his heavy thighs on the velvet seat below.

"You must be kidding, right?" I strove for nonchalance in my tone when I really wanted to scream until my throat burned. I wished I could slosh the bottle of liqueur across the drapes and tablecloth and light it all on fire. I'd sit at the head of the table and watch some of the most powerful men in New York scramble away from the flames.

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" Silvio's eyes lost their smarmy glint and turned ugly with aggression. If there was anything a man like Silvio hated, it was being refused something he wanted. He felt entitled to everything and everyone, and apparently, that extended to me.

Anger, white-hot and flameless, roared through me in a well-worn path. I was reaching for the espresso pot before I could help it. The last few days had used up my patience, and worrying about Nikolai was sending my usual good behavior out the window. Without another thought, I tilted the full pot of burning hot coffee into Silvio's lap.

"*Che cazzo!*" He shot up, knocking the coffee pot from my hand so it clattered across the floor.

Conversation in the room petered out as twenty pairs of eyes turned to us.

"Sofia, what's happening?" Antonio called to me from the other end of the table.

Silvio was glaring at me, his hand raised toward me.

“Go ahead. Hit me in front of my father,” I goaded him in a furious mutter.

According to my father’s rules, only he could hit me. Discipline was a father’s duty, and he was well-practiced at dispensing it.

Silvio swore and let his hand drop. “You stupid bitch, if you had any brains at all, you’d be on your knees licking up your mess. Instead, you’re mouthing off like Antonio will never die.”

“If you had any brains at all, you’d be thanking me for spilling coffee and not sambuca and a match.”

My quiet words sent his eyebrows up his shiny forehead. He shook his head, his expression incredulous. “You really think Antonio and Renato can protect you forever?”

“Are you threatening my father, because that sounds like something I should tell him,” I pointed out starkly.

I wouldn’t, of course, Antonio would never take my word over Silvio’s simply because he was a man. Regardless, the words made me feel stronger. Even if the safety I felt under my father’s watch at Casa Nera might be imaginary, I needed it. Even if he was my jailor, he’d let no one else hurt me. Well, until he married me off, and then I’d be my husband’s problem.

Silvio shook his head, blowing out a hard sigh as if the urge to wring my neck was nearly too strong. “I’m threatening *you*. Watch your back,” he tossed over his shoulder at me before striding out of the room, fussing with his wet slacks.

I watched him go and then turned to the burning eyes staring a hole in my face. Antonio sat with his fingers steepled, frowning at me over his fingertips. Conversation had resumed, but his attention didn’t waver.

He summoned me to his side with a jerk of his head. “You look tired. Check on our guest and make sure he eats something. Kirill Chernov is cutting us a nice slice of profit and will continue to do so, but we can’t let his brother die, unfortunately. Take Angelo with you.”

My heart leaped at the same time as nerves crashed against it inside my weak chest. Did I seriously want to see Nikolai? Yes, I did. I wanted to know how he was with my own eyes, crazy as that was. He'd saved my life only hours ago, and nothing could change that. The very fact of it had changed us both. No one had ever sacrificed something for me before. It filled me with an unfamiliar sensation of gratitude and guilt.

I left the room, anticipation brewing in my veins. Would he hate me now that he knew I'd betrayed him? Would he turn his back to me or be furious? For some twisted reason, I felt like I'd prefer his wrath to his dismissal.

I was almost in the kitchen when Silvio caught up to me. Clamping a hard hand on my arm, he dragged me down a small corridor. Angelo waited at the top, his face impassive. My bodyguard was well-versed in the hierarchy in Casa Nera and knew better than to interfere. Silvio and Franco were above my father's rules when it came to me.

"What is it?" I demanded, ripping my arm from Silvio's grip.

Silvio leered at me. There was a note of excitement in his eyes. The man looked like he was on something strong, and for all I knew, he was.

"Did Chernov say anything to you about what happened five years ago?"

I rolled my eyes. "What, the poker game?"

Silvio flinched. "No, *stupida*, the hand."

The mention of Silvio's missing appendage pulled my eyes toward his empty jacket sleeve. A faint feeling of nausea rose in me at the sight. "What would he say? You made a bet, lost, and decided not to keep it. He took your hand in punishment. What else is there to say?"

The memory of what had happened to Silvio's hand turned my stomach. Silvio had never elaborated on the exact events, but I knew it was Nikolai who had cut it off, despite my cousin lying to Antonio. Silvio had no doubt feared telling his capo why he'd gotten into that situation in the first place, so had made up an excuse instead.

I knew it was Nikolai because he'd sent me the severed hand in a gift-wrapped box. He'd placed it inside my locker at school for me to open before class. I'd never forget the sight of the severed hand nestled in pretty pink tissue paper.

Silvio snorted and looked back and forth along the corridor, stepping into me. His eyes turned speculative. "So, what happened between you two?"

I fought to hide my guilty expression. "Nothing."

He raised an eyebrow. "Nothing? You mean to tell me Nikolai fucking Chernov had you alone for days, and nothing happened? You're lying."

"Why would I lie?"

"Because you don't want Antonio to find out you're more damaged goods than he thought you were," Silvio said. He pressed me back one more step, and I shuddered. "Maybe you gave it up to him, or he took it, and you're covering for him."

"If he took anything from me, I wouldn't hide it. I'd let my father kill him. Him and any other man who tried it," I said, my voice barely wavering.

Silvio paused, narrowing his eyes at me. The tension between us swarmed with our shared past, his lust, and my disgust.

Then he smirked. "Well, maybe I should suggest to *Zio* Antonio that he have you checked. I'm sure I could scare up a doctor who does that sort of thing, or I'll volunteer. What do you think, cousin? A little just-the-tip action to prove that you didn't give it up to the punk downstairs."

His hand was still holding my arm, and his thumb stroked upward, and I shivered with anger. My skin felt like it might crawl right off my body.

"Take your goddamn hand off me, or I'll go to my father and tell him everything. All about the poker game, your hand, and the fact that you have a pathetic little hard-on for your own cousin."

My scathing tone sent red crawling up Silvio's face. He stepped back, and I pulled my arm firmly from his grip.

Weakness was a siren call to men like Silvio, and I couldn't afford to show it.

"Now, if you'd care to fuck off, I have something to do for the boss. The man who owns you, remember?" I drew my dignity around me like a cloak. I couldn't let Silvio get to me. He was looking for a reaction, any tiny one would do, and I didn't want to give him any kind of win.

He studied me for a long moment. I knew that look. Silvio might not be an intelligent man, but he was cunning in a way that unnerved me.

"You run along to that business then, but don't forget, you aren't alone with Chernov anymore. If I see even a hint of sympathy for the man who maimed me, I won't hesitate to tell Antonio my suspicions, and that fucker won't leave here alive."

SOFIA

5 years ago

Prom Night

“*I* can’t believe I’m sitting next to a real live prom queen,” Chiara cackled, leaning into me and knocking me to the side.

We were standing at the bar in an exclusive New York hotel, where the all-girls St. Teresa’s School and the all boys Francis Prep were hosting a joint prom.

I’d done it. Graduated high school. The sash felt tight around my chest. I fingered the satin fabric. No one had been more surprised than me to be crowned prom queen, but maybe that was dumb. After all, at St. Teresa’s, your father’s last name was the best indicator of popularity. Like Antonio De Sanctis would care that his daughter had been crowned prom queen. That wouldn’t buy anyone any favors, but then, most kids expected their parents to love them in some capacity. It was an expectation I’d given up long ago.

Antonio had nearly refused to let me attend. In the end, I’d begged to go. Thanks to my idiot cousin, the last traditional experience of high school had nearly been taken away from me. Last week, Silvio had been taken to the hospital when he’d gotten involved in some De Sanctis family business and lost a hand in the process. I’d believed the official line that it had happened thanks to a violent altercation with a rival family in Philadelphia until a few days ago. A special delivery

box had appeared inside my locker at school. A small, shiny, gift-wrapped box.

I'd opened it, stupidly eager to get a surprise present, until the paper peeled back.

Silvio's severed hand had been laid neatly on tissue paper.

Once I recovered from the shock, I'd chucked the box in the trash on a random street corner. If I'd told my father, he would respond to the perceived threat by keeping me locked inside Casa Nera forever, and I didn't want that to happen so close to prom and graduation. It was crazy to keep it a secret, but I couldn't seem to confess to anyone. I knew exactly who was psycho enough to arrange the hand on pink tissue so prettily. The truth was, in the darkest and most twisted part of me, I enjoyed being the center of someone's attention for once in my life.

Chiara pressed a drink into my hand, a sickly-sweet fruit punch provided by the hotel.

I smoothed my dress, making sure that Chiara's drunken exuberance hadn't caused any unsightly bulges. Usually, I wouldn't care, but tonight, I had something special on under my dress. I was all too aware of my garter and the blade pressed against my inner thigh. Yeah, it was crazy to bring a knife to prom, but then it was crazy to attend prom in the first place when there was a verified psychopath hunting you, a butcher who was capable of severing someone's hand.

Maybe Niko wasn't the only crazy one.

Our escorts were kids of other De Sanctis made men. My escort was Luca, an old acquaintance but not someone I knew particularly well. He was the right age and terrified enough of his father to behave, so he met Antonio's requirements.

"Hey, the guys want to go to the after-party, are you in?" Luca appeared beside me, throwing a sloppy arm over my shoulders. I staggered under his weight.

"What about the dance?" I asked dutifully.

I glanced at Angelo, who was standing against a wall covered in twinkle lights, looking like the world's most unimpressed

pillar. The only sign he gave of being awake was the odd blink of his eyes.

“Fuck the dance. I heard the real party is upstairs.” Luca leaned in and whispered in my ear, “Room six-six-six.”

Sure, the dance was dull, but it was a prom. Smoke machine and a cheesy DJ, sweet punch and paper decorations. It was what prom was in the movies, and I didn’t have much normalcy in my life. It looked like I was the only one who felt that way.

Chiara bounced with excitement. “I’m in! Let’s go.”

“What about Angelo?” I wondered as my shadow caught up with us halfway down the shiny, marble hall.

Chiara’s date, Matteo, peeled himself off the wall and joined us, though Chiara didn’t give him a second glance. Her attention was on Angelo.

She turned, walking backward to take in the towering hunk of muscle and stoicism. “He can come with. Maybe a drink or two at the after-party will loosen him up a bit?”

Angelo’s eyes flickered to Chiara’s and away. I swear his neck turned a little red at her outrageous flirting.

“Come on, Sofia, what’s the worst that could happen?” Luca prodded me with an elbow before laying his arm over my shoulders.

Considering he had barely said two words to me all evening, it was a surprise. His breath smelled like vodka, and he was slurring slightly as he leaned on me. We got into the elevator, and Chiara pressed the button for level six before stepping closer to Matteo. He responded by tugging her against his chest and wrapping wandering hands around her middle. Chiara stared at Angelo, a smile playing on her lips.

I concentrated on subtly shifting Luca’s heavy arm from my shoulders without him noticing.

The elevator pinged, and we got out on the sixth floor. A beat of bass vibrated the floor as we walked toward the room at the very end.

“You know, I’ve heard of rooms in this hotel that are reserved for parties, rock stars rent them and shit. They are full of furniture you can break and extra soundproofed,” Luca said as we approached the door.

“Really? Which rock stars?” Chiara asked as she tried the door.

It opened under her knock after a moment, and the music hit up full blast.

“Now, this is a party.” She grinned at me before delving into the crowd.

Luca kept his arm around my shoulders and pushed into the room. The suite was packed with partygoers, and the lights were low. Music blared, and violet slices of neon light flashed over the crowd now and again. Angelo was right at my back; I could feel his tension. We pushed through the crowd, and Luca stopped every few seconds to greet someone he knew from school.

“Whose party is this?” I asked Luca.

He looked at me blankly, unable to hear over the music.

“I said, whose party is this?” I shouted in his ear.

He shrugged, clearly clueless and unconcerned. Turning toward the long bar at one side of the suite, he pulled me with him. I was getting more and more annoyed by his heavy arm. I tried to shrug it off, and luckily managed this time. Finally free of the burden, I trailed behind him, looking for Chiara. She was at the bar, already downing shots. I turned to Angelo, feeling his judgement.

“I guess it *is* prom,” I offered him, and a frown crossed the bodyguard’s face.

I felt bad for putting him in a position where it was hard to protect me, but I could hardly just head home on prom night at eleven p.m., not after I’d risked so much to come. I couldn’t be the broken girl who had only felt excitement about life when I was stalked through the gym and pinned to the floor by a self-professed killer.

Aren't you already?

I rejected that voice. I'd been ignoring it all week. The truth was, what had happened with Nikolai was the most excitement I'd ever had. He had touched me, chased me, kissed me. He'd broken my father's rules without a second thought. It was addictive, the thrill of really living. In my deepest of hearts, I worried that I'd never feel that again.

Angelo sighed and found a nearby wall to loom from, and I tried my best to pay attention to Chiara's rambling conversation. She spied plenty of people she knew from school, and I dutifully followed her around the crowded suite as she ran this way and that to talk to people. She'd always been more social than me and had the kind of freedom I'd only ever been able to dream about. The result of being guarded constantly, a valuable chess piece on my father's board, was that I wasn't exactly sure how to hang out with people my age. I felt awkward and pained as I smiled and tried to join in conversations.

After about an hour, I gave up and went to find a bathroom. Inside, I stared at myself in the glass. Was there something wrong with me? Why wasn't I having fun? Why did I always feel like the odd one out?

Was it just my upbringing that set me apart, or was I destined to never really feel like I belonged anywhere? Not having an answer to the questions that had plagued me my entire life, I washed my hands and left the bathroom, slamming into a body outside the room.

My anxiety spiked as I pushed away from a broad figure, looking up to glimpse Luca's face. *Oh, it was only him.*

"Hey, where have you been? I've been looking for you everywhere," Luca said, pulling me into his body.

"Just partying," I ground out, and hated the way his hands felt hot and sweaty against the silk of my thin dress.

"Let's party together. I got rid of Angelo, he's distracted." Luca hiccupped and grinned.

I craned my neck to look over his shoulder at the packed sitting room but couldn't make out much at all.

"Let's see what's along here."

Slinging an arm over my shoulders again, like the world's most irritating scarf, he pushed me along the corridor toward a turn at the end.

"Is this still the same suite? It's huge," I muttered, looking around as we passed an indoor hot tub and a few bedrooms. The music grew slightly quieter, allowing the headache that was pressing at my temples to lessen a little. "How do you know all this is here?"

There weren't any other partygoers at this end of the suite. The sudden emptiness of the hall was unsettling.

"Some guy told me." Luca raised a finger to his lips. "It's a secret, though, only for the initiated." He laughed.

I stopped our forward momentum with effort. "What guy?"

"The guy who's throwing this awesome party."

"Does he go to school with you?" I asked, nerves gathering in me.

Luca laughed and shook his head. "Fuck, no. Anyway, why do you care about him? Hurry, before someone else comes along here," he complained and pulled me harder.

My heels slipped, and I nearly fell, only just catching my balance. The words to warn Luca or demand that we go back to the party fell from my lips as he tugged me into a dark room and shut the door behind us. The sound of the lock clicking was like a gunshot in the silence.

It was a dimly lit bedroom, and shadows lay in every corner.

I stared around, awareness prickling across my skin.

The feeling of eyes on me.

"Luca, what was the guy's name? The one who threw the party?" I whispered, every hair on my body standing up on end, every instinct in my head screaming at me to run.

“Nicolas? Nicola? I don’t remember,” Luca said, pulling me toward him before pressing me against the wall.

“Nikolai?” I whispered.

“Who cares? Now, come on. Let’s have some fun before your bodyguard finds us,” Luca muttered.

It was the last thing he said before slapping a hand over his neck and cursing. The flash of the needle was nearly too fast to see, but I could guess what had happened as Luca slumped to the floor bonelessly.

Nikolai stood in his place, putting the cap back on the syringe in his hand. He had on a black dress shirt, rolled to the elbows, showcasing his strong inked forearms. Black slacks and dress shoes made up his outfit. He looked like the future leader of a powerful bratva. He was utterly captivating and terrifying all at once.

I stared at him in horror, my thoughts colliding in a jumble. “Did you—” I couldn’t finish the question as I stared down at Luca.

“Kill him? I thought about it. He was planning on bringing you in here and fucking you, whether or not you wanted him to,” Nikolai said, looking impassively down at him.

“And what do you plan?”

Niko looked up and grinned at me. My heart lurched. I hadn’t seen him in weeks, but I’d thought of him nearly constantly. It felt odd to see him in the flesh after imagining so much. He looked even more deadly and alluring than I remembered.

“I want what’s mine, Sofia,” he said softly. Using his boot, he rolled Luca’s inert body away.

“Is he—dead?”

“Depends what was in the syringe, I suppose,” Nikolai said, and tossed it into a corner. “He asked me to stash it in here for him to use on you.”

My disbelief must have radiated off me in waves, because Niko laughed. “Sweet, innocent Sofia, when are you going to understand that the bad guy doesn’t always wear a sign? They

don't always look like me, *lastochka*. You should be more careful who you hang out with."

"So, you're trying to make me think you're not the bad guy? You cut my cousin's fucking hand off for going back on his poker bet!"

Nikolai approached me, with Luca out of the way on the floor, and caged me with his arms. I should run, or scream, or do something, but I was frozen, like a deer in headlights. I couldn't look away from his gray gaze.

"I never said I'm not a bad guy. I wouldn't lie to you like that. And yes, I cut your idiot cousin's hand off, not because of the game, but because he touched my prize. He's lucky I let him live."

My breath caught in my chest. "How do you know Silvio touched me?"

The memory of that day in the changing rooms was seared into my mind. My cousin backing me against a mirror and slipping his hand inside my robe, squeezing my lace-covered breast and then dipping lower before I could smack his hand away. I'd felt dirty for days after.

"I know everything about you, Sofia. I always know everything about that which is mine," Niko said in a deep purr. One of his hands drifted to my neck. He circled the velvet choker with his hand. "Pretty, but it needs a leash on the end."

I tried to knock his hand away, and he caught my wrist with ease, pinning it to the wall beside me.

"What are you going to do to me? Cut parts off if I don't let you do what you want?" I was proud of how strong my voice sounded. It was nothing like the terror inside me.

Niko tutted. "What good owner would cut parts off his own belongings? I'm going to take care of you, *lastochka*. You're mine."

"I don't want you," I whispered back.

His face was so close now, and his body was pressing into mine.

Nikolai's mouth stretched in a brief grin. "I don't care." His hand slid along the sash around my chest. "My sweet little prom queen, with the barbed tongue and knife skills. My prom queen who hates the world and everyone in it. I see you, Sofia."

Then, before I could argue with that outrageous statement, he kissed me.

Kissed would be a generous term for what he did.

He devoured me.

His tongue pushed inside my mouth, and he pressed more firmly against me. One hand wound into my hair and tugged my head ruthlessly to the side, angling it so his tongue could plunge inside the hot cavern of my mouth and stroke mercilessly along mine. He bit my lower lip, sucking on it until heat washed through me. Everything felt heightened. It was like skydiving, where the excitement and fear crashed together to make a new feeling of pure exhilaration. It was like falling, unsure if the parachute on your back would open.

He growled against my lips. "Fuck, you taste perfect, like fucking sunshine and redemption," he muttered, and left my mouth to work his stubbled lips along my jaw.

My skin flushed, and my nerves prickled with pleasure. It sent me dizzy, the terror and want rising in my body. I wanted to push him away, and I wanted to pull him closer. I was a mess, and for the first time in my life, I didn't feel judged for it.

His lips closed around my ear, his hot breath shooting over the skin as his teeth nibbled ruthlessly at the lobe. I arched my back, my body taking over, overruling my head.

This man is dangerous. You need to get away.

All the words I knew to be true seemed to come from a distance. His hand fell to my throat again, squeezing lightly, reminding me I was caught in the trap of a dangerous predator and I shouldn't lose my head. But then it slid down, his palm covering my tit, squeezing it just hard enough to make me bite back a moan.

“Have you ever let another man touch you like this, Sofia?” His deep voice was hypnotic.

That was the only reason I was falling into a trance like this. It had to be.

“Has any other man ever put his unworthy hands on this body?”

“Why?” I gasped as his fingers closed on my nipple and tugged hard.

“Because I’m a list guy. That’s something you’ll come to know about me. It helps to keep me organized. I need to know whose name goes on the list of men I need to kill for daring to touch you.”

I jerked, my eyes flying open. His face was right there, his forehead leaning against mine.

“You really are crazy,” I murmured, cold reality breaking through the fog of virgin want that had clouded my head.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“Did you throw this party on purpose?”

“No, I’m just a huge fan of proms, maybe because I never had my own.” His mocking tone rankled my nerves. He smirked at my expression. “Of course I threw this party for you. Every prom queen needs a party, and it’s only right that I throw it for you.”

A soft snort left my lips. “You’re not my boyfriend.”

Niko’s grin only widened. He laughed, and the sound sent chills down my back.

“Of course I’m not. That’s far too pedestrian a word for what we are. I’m your new owner. You just haven’t realized it yet.”

Those words cleared the fog of lust a little from my head. This was dangerous. This killer had orchestrated this entire event to get me alone, separated from my bodyguard. My father would have a heart attack if he knew.

Both of Nikolai’s hands were on my breasts now, and the insistent tug of his fingers over my nipples had me wanting to

arch my back like a cat and rub against him. But reality had crept in.

“I’m leaving,” I whispered.

Niko chuckled. “No, you’re not.”

“I don’t want you.”

He laughed again. “Yes, you do, and that scares you more than anything.”

The knowing gleam in his eyes made me want to slap him. I hated the way he saw right through me. I wished I could rake his eyes out, and I wanted him to kiss me again at the same time.

“It’s okay to be scared and to like it, too. Doesn’t it make you feel alive?”

Yes, it did. That was the most worrying thing of all.

“I’ll scream,” I whispered.

Something dark and twisted flared in Niko’s eyes. “Do you promise?” He chuckled. “No one is coming, Sofia. It’s just us here. You don’t have to pretend to be a good girl. You don’t have to pretend anything with me. I want you just as you are, the real you... the one you hide,” he said, his eyes boring into mine.

I didn’t know what to say to that. It was too beautiful and too terrifying all at once.

His hands slipped from my breasts and slid downward, fire trailing in its wake. He kissed me again until I was panting against him, my hands clasping his arms, embracing him, fighting him. I didn’t know anymore.

As he reached my hip, I remembered my knife. Indecision tore at me. How could I get it? Did I even want to? *He cut Silvio’s hand off!* reason screamed at me. Since Silvio had touched me and made me feel dirty for weeks, that no longer seemed as terrible as it would have if he were a better person.

His hand moved lower, gathering the silky material of my skirt in a tattooed fist and drawing it slowly upward. I couldn’t

breathe. Everything was too much. The smell of him, a spicy musk of a misty forest, earthy and alive, full of dark and hidden underground things, sharp pine, and fresh air. I inhaled deeply, my head swimming with the stuff.

My thighs trembled as the cool air of the room hit them. Any second now, he'd find my knife. The knowledge sent a spike of alarm through me. If I was going to get away, now was the time.

Niko murmured against my lips, seeming to see inside my head again, like always. "Surrender to me, Sofia. You know you want to."

I trembled on the precipice of reason, knowing that agreeing to his soft, addictive words was suicide. Giving myself to a man like Nikolai would have my father marrying me off to the first buyer at a discount price for used goods. He might even make sure it was someone cruel, just to punish me.

"Fuck Antonio, prom queen. Choose me instead," Nikolai murmured against my skin, seeming to be inside my head.

Was I so easy to read? No, I knew I wasn't. If I was, my father would beat me more regularly, because these days, I could hardly think about him without hatred boiling in my veins. I'd gotten good at hiding my feelings from everyone except this man, it seemed. I didn't know why that was, but it was undeniable. He saw me, all the fucked-up, ugly parts, and he wanted me regardless. The deep loneliness that lived inside me every single day wavered for a second.

"If you're worried about your little knife there, don't be. I'm not," Nikolai said, sliding his hand up my inner thigh.

I jerked against him, my eyes snapping to his. There was desire and amusement in those gray depths. "You knew I was armed?"

"Of course. You're smart, Sofia. It's sexy. Regardless, it won't stop me."

My breath hitched as he caressed along the garter and then rose to my panties. The casual confidence Nikolai had in his own strength was sexy somehow. His cunning and ability to

never be taken by surprise should probably scare me, but it didn't. I must be broken, because right now, it didn't scare me at all.

His fingers met the lace of my panties, and he stroked me through them. My body hummed with pleasure. It was the first time anyone else's hand had touched me there. I clung to his shoulders, trembling like a leaf. This wasn't allowed, it was forbidden. My body was meant for my husband and him alone.

My father's words slipped out of my head and stopped having any kind of meaning as Nikolai's fingers slid under the elastic of my panties and met my skin. I cried out, and Nikolai placed his free hand over my mouth. I was pinned to the door, silenced by his hand, while his other fingers worked up and down my slit.

He rested his forehead against mine; his breath was harsh and just as hurried as mine. "What a tight little cunt you have, prom queen. It feels so soft under my fingers." He pushed a finger inside me and cursed. "Holy fuck, you could kill with that grip."

"I-I..." I trailed off, and lost the ability to speak as he added another finger, and his thumb landed on my clit. It was too good. It was everything I'd imagined feeling when I read smutty romances or watched a sexy movie but had given up feeling for myself.

Nikolai nodded, his lips working along my jaw. "I know, Sofia. It feels good, doesn't it? I'll give you everything you need. Just have patience, prom queen."

My head fell back as he fucked me with his fingers. His hand moved faster, and the sound of my wetness filled the room, crude and startling. My cheeks flamed with embarrassment and pleasure. Nikolai watched me the entire time, his darkly possessive eyes drinking in my expressions.

I came suddenly, without warning. Wetness blossomed between my legs, so much that it soaked the tops of my thighs and Nikolai's hand. I bent over, folding in on myself with waves of sensation, but Nikolai worked me through it,

thrusting his thick fingers inside my pussy until the last pulses of my virgin muscles ebbed.

“That was the most fucking beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Nikolai murmured softly, pulling his hand from my panties and down my thigh, patting the knife as he went.

Humiliation coated my skin. I’d come here ready to defend myself, prepared to put this psycho in his place, and instead, had my first real orgasm in his arms.

He pulled his hand from between my legs and put his fingers to his lips, sucking the wetness off them. I stared, and he smirked. He looked different, like the intimacy of that stolen, illicit moment had affected him as much as me. He seemed younger somehow, less jaded, as he looked at me with something like awe in his eyes.

“Absolute perfection. You taste better than I’d dreamed.” Stepping back from me, he jerked his head to the left. “Get on the bed.”

“I - I can’t! I’m not on the pill.” Logic filtered through my hazy mind. *Was I really doing this?*

Nikolai grinned. “Good.”

Before I had time to think, Niko tensed. I didn’t know what he’d heard; nothing was making its way through the fog in my head, but his entire body, so relaxed against mine, suddenly stiffened.

Then a hard knock sounded at the door, and the handle turned uselessly a few times.

“Sofia?” Angelo’s panicked voice floated through the wood.

Nikolai turned his head, annoyance washing through his handsome features. The other face of the beast. He was a stone-cold killer again. Reason slammed into me like a ten-ton truck.

What the fuck am I doing?

“Forgive me, *lastochka*, I need to get rid of this cockblock once and for all,” he muttered through clenched teeth. He

reached behind him and pulled a gun from the back of his jeans.

“No! You can’t kill Angelo,” I said quickly, panic filling me again.

“I can kill whoever I want,” Niko said, brushing off my hand as I reached for him.

He started toward the door, and I acted on pure instinct. Ripping my skirt upward for a second, I grabbed my knife. *Paranza corta* was the knife art of an assassin. It favored close quarters, and you didn’t have to be a strong man to be good at it. Being small and nimble was preferred.

I darted toward Nikolai, reaching him when he was halfway across the floor. Raising the knife, I aimed for his shoulder first, in a wide, obvious swing that he’d see from the corner of his eye.

He reacted quickly, feinting to the side. I allowed my momentum to carry me in front of him, swinging around at the last minute as he reached to catch me and slashed at his face.

Blood hit my hand and face in a sudden shock of heat. Nikolai went to one knee, still catching me as I stumbled. His hands pulled me close and wrestled the stiletto blade from me, throwing it into a corner.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

I looked up at him, and my stomach lurched sickeningly as I took in the blood running freely down his face. In all the years I’d practiced the art, I’d never hurt a real person. I’d never drawn blood. Sudden, unwanted tears gathered at the corners of my eyes.

Nikolai frowned down at me, his anger fading quickly as he took in the tear running down my cheek.

“*Lastochka*, why are you crying? I’m the one who just got his pretty face sliced open,” he reminded me.

The sounds of Angelo banging on the door had stopped. Maybe he had gone to find someone to let him in.

“I don’t know,” I muttered, unable to stop watching the way the blood seeped from the horrible wound. It was deep and bleeding a lot.

“It’s shock. You’re a good girl, and it feels wrong to hurt people, even a man like me.” His hand threaded through my hair, calming me. “Don’t cry. I don’t deserve your tears,” he said quietly.

My eyes shot to his. We stared at each other for a long, painful moment, and I knew I’d never forget it. Something passed between us that was unbearably honest, silent yet irrevocable. I knew in my gut that I would be forever changed by knowing this man.

Nikolai pulled his eyes from mine to glance at the door. “Since Angelo will be back shortly, and you seem attached to his survival, I’ll go.”

He shifted me carefully to the floor. His blood was splattered liberally across my white dress and sash. I looked like an extra from *Carrie*.

He loomed over me, cupping my face with one hand, his brutal touch gentle for once.

“Goodbye, prom queen. Be a good girl while I’m gone.”

There was something final about his words, and my confused heart clenched in my hollow chest. He made for the door, grabbing a small towel laid out on the vanity as he went and pressing it to his face.

“Are you done with me?” I called out. I didn’t know what the hell prompted me to ask it, never mind care about the answer, but I was a mess. I had no control around this man, no mask to hide behind. He saw it all.

Nikolai paused at the door, his formal black outfit drenched with the blood from his face. I wondered wildly for a moment if he’d dressed up for me, for my prom night? It seemed impossible, but as soon as I thought it, I knew it was true.

He pressed the towel against his face, and his voice was muffled beneath it. “Missing me already?”

I couldn't answer that. I was scared he'd see through my lie if I denied it.

Instead of calling me out, he merely checked his blood-splattered watch and pressed the towel tighter. "I won't be around for a while. My father's sending me to Russia, so you can rest easy."

He's leaving. This is it. The last night of feeling alive.

Nikolai seemed to read the feelings I couldn't say. His gray eyes peered into my soul, and he nodded, satisfied with the wretched, torn emotion he found there.

"When I get back, I'll find you, Sofia De Sanctis. I'll always find you wherever you go. You are still and will always be—my prize." With a wink, he turned on his heel and went to the door. Unlocking it, he slipped out without a backward glance.

I sat in shock on the floor, bloodstained, with Luca's unconscious body lying beside me. His last words played again and again in my head.

"I'll always find you wherever you go."

I had no idea if that was a promise or a threat.

NIKOLAI

Now

I might have slept or simply lost my grip on consciousness. When I woke, I jerked upright before remembering where I was. My wrists cut deeply into the new metal cuffs Silvio and his goons had put on me after they'd finished beating me. The chain was marginally longer, so at least my shoulders weren't pulled as tight.

The pain in my head was unbelievable, and I might have had a few loose teeth; it was hard to tell with my swollen tongue.

A noise came from the hall. So, that was what had woken me. I missed the oblivion immediately. Unless... There was a tentative quality to the expectant air as I waited to see who would take a chunk out of me next. I blinked toward the dark doorway. My eyes had adjusted so well to the dark that the faint light from the sconces on the stone walls in the hall stung for a moment, and I couldn't see. As my eyes adjusted, awareness prickled through me as I made out the diminutive figure. A silhouette I'd recognize in my sleep.

I swallowed the knot that formed in my throat.

Sofia.

The only one who could inflict wounds that wouldn't heal.

Without her help we never would have found you. We weren't even near the right place.

Antonio's words played in my memory. My clever little prom queen. I was proud of her initiative.

She hesitated in the doorway, and I summoned my customary smirk for her, despite the aches and pains from Silvio's beating. "Couldn't stay away, *lastochka*? It's okay. Don't be embarrassed. I've missed you, too."

She snorted softly, a perfectly elegant sound coming from her. Everything Sofia De Sanctis did was beautiful. The woman wasn't of this world, and just the sight of her eased something in me. If I was going to die down here, something I doubted as it would be an affront to the Chernov bratva, at least I'd have looked upon true beauty once more before going.

"Good to know you're taking this seriously," Sofia muttered, coming into the room.

I watched her like a wolf watches the rabbit it wants to devour. She came toward me, a tray in her hands. My stomach growled at the smell of food, and I wondered how long I'd been down here. She crouched in front of me, bending her slender body in half, her dark-eyed gaze sliding over me. A pinch appeared between her brows, and something that looked like worry flickered in her gaze. She set the tray down and pressed a hand against her mouth.

"That bad?" My dry chuckle sent her shoulders down from under her ears. My girl was so tense. "Taking it seriously or not, it won't change anything," I told her, letting my eyes linger on her fine features. "Besides, your father can't kill me. That wasn't the deal. One day, I'll be free, and every single De Sanctis who wronged me will pay for it."

Why exactly I felt the need to comfort her when I was the one beaten and bound escaped me. I'd long since stopped trying to make sense of my fucked-up head.

Sofia studied me. "And I suppose that includes me, too?"

"I don't know. Does it?"

She swallowed and dropped her eyes.

"It's okay, prom queen. I know you helped them find me. I'd expect nothing less. Don't worry, your punishment won't be

like theirs.”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “It won’t?”

“Theirs isn’t personal.”

That statement widened her eyes for a moment. She was good at looking composed. I’d give her that. She couldn’t hide the vein pounding in her neck, however. Her face was a sucker punch to the gut. I wanted to stare at her all day long.

She swallowed, and I wished I could hold her throat in my hand and feel the vital movement against my skin. I wished I could feel her pounding pulse point and know if she was as excited as I was to be in same room. Instead, I simply drank in the sight of her.

She shifted, casting a glance over her shoulder. Her bodyguard stood outside the door, watching us.

“What is it they say about revenge? *La miglior vendetta ‘e il perdono.*”

Sofia’s voice speaking Italian was a thing of beauty. I raised an eyebrow and waited for her to translate.

She swallowed. “The best revenge is to forgive.”

“Do you want my forgiveness, Sofia, as I lie here bleeding?”

She bit her lip, and I watched, helpless to touch her when it was all I wanted.

She opened her mouth to speak, and I thought for one heartbreaking moment she might let down her walls and be honest. She might say she regretted it, and everything I’d endure in this basement would be worth it.

A slight sound from the hall sent her mouth snapping shut, and her shoulders rose under her ears. She seemed to steady herself, and any trace of vulnerability on her face melted away.

She pursed her lips, her eyes hardening. “You should have let me go,” she whispered. “At the motel. It was obvious that you should have left me behind.”

The memory of her sprinting up the stairs and barreling straight over the rusted railing was already a permanent fixture

of my nightmares.

“Then you’d be the one lying bleeding,” I pointed out, anger tinting me at the very thought.

She raised her chin with all the majesty of a queen. “Yes, I would be. If you cared about escaping, you shouldn’t have cared about that. I’m not yours to worry about, Nikolai.”

Despite the kicks I’d taken in the last few hours, that one hurt.

She was watching me, waiting for my reaction, so I gave her a shrug.

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Nothing can happen between us. Nothing real,” she whispered.

She thought she could erase everything that had happened between us? She actually thought I’d let her? Something had shifted in the dark between us, and I would never allow it to be forgotten.

“Correction: every single thing that has ever happened between us was real. I bet they’ve been the most real moments of your overprotected life.” It was always a gamble to reach under Sofia’s good-girl act and let her know how I saw her. I understood her in a way that I was sure no one else could.

Her eyes shot to mine, and I knew I had spoken a truth she couldn’t deny. Then the vulnerability left her eyes, and she tensed as her gaze lingered near the doorway. I wondered what was making her so nervous in her own house.

“I’m not here to chat. I’m here to make sure you don’t starve to death,” she muttered, gripping the tray of food as if it were a life preserver in a stormy sea.

“Come closer, I don’t bite—much,” I goaded her.

The urge to tempt her closer and get hold of her had overtaken my mind, driving out all other thoughts. If only I could pull her close. That mask she was wearing would drop, and she’d let me see her again. The real her. Maybe I’d be lucky enough to catch a hint of her perfume. The ugly smell of captivity and old rot was giving me a headache. One inhale of Sofia’s

feminine perfume, her soft skin and sweet-scented hair, would give me the strength to carry on.

With her teeth sinking into her lower lip, she complied. Despite my less-than-ideal state, the sight of Sofia following my orders still stirred my cock. No amount of pain in my bones could lessen my desire for this woman.

She kneeled beside the tray she'd set down, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

“You still can't reach there, prom queen.”

She sighed and inched forward.

“Will Angelo tattle to your father if you're seen being kind to the bratva scum?” I wanted to know who the bad guy in Sofia's life was, apart from me, of course. What could I say? I got jealous like that.

“No, he wouldn't. He's on my side,” she muttered, that haunted, pinched look in her eyes still not shifting. “My father told me to come and feed you. I think it's his form of further torture.”

“He's good. Seeing you so close, but out of reach, is torture,” I murmured to her as she got closer still.

She looked down at the tray, spearing pieces of cold pasta with the fork.

“Or maybe it's because he told me how you tipped him off to find us.”

She paused, and that beautiful pulse thumped hard under the soft skin of her throat. Her eyes finally met mine, as rich as melted chocolate. They were shining. It was a shock to the system. She was nearly in tears.

“So, do you finally hate me?” she asked, blinking her long dark lashes until they became spiky and wet from her unshed tears.

“Hate you? I'll never hate you. It's impossible. I know who I am to you... and I know you're too smart to forget that. Smart, cunning, and strong. And under it all... kind. You fascinate

me. In case you haven't realized, I'm the villain. I deserve to be caught. Don't forget that."

She was stunned by the confession for a moment, and those tears grew brighter. One dodged her attempt to blink it away and dipped down her cheek. She wiped it away, and I wished it was my hand swiping her cheek.

"You're crazy, you know that? So, you're saying you forgive me?"

"I will always forgive you, Sofia. I'll always understand you. Like I said, we aren't like other people. No one gets you like I do. Fight it all you want, but we both know the truth. You're mine, even inside your own head."

She let out a half-laugh and offered the fork loaded with pasta to my lips. "I'm glad to see my father's captivity hasn't dulled your confidence."

I chewed slowly, my teeth tender on the right side. I hid my wince from her. I didn't want her to feel guiltier than she already did. "Just call me a cockeyed optimist."

She smiled. It was a small thing, but precious. Next, she lifted a bottle of water to my lips. "It's not drugged," she blurted. "In case you're wondering."

"Well, I wasn't before," I muttered. Instead of drinking, I pressed my face against her hand. The shock of her warm skin was heaven.

She jerked as if I'd grabbed her. The electricity leaped between us. It was always there, simmering under the surface, and when we touched, it ignited. The days of her being able to deny that were swiftly passing.

I rubbed my cheek against her wrist. "If you want to comfort me, touch me."

"I can't. I don't know who is watching."

I glanced over her shoulder at her bodyguard. He was staring impassively at the wall in front of him, giving her privacy.

"No, not Angelo," she added.

“Your father? Who are you afraid of? Is it Silvio?”

Her breath caught. *Bingo*.

Frustration filled me. She was a prisoner in this creepy fucking mansion with the man who had been trying to touch her since she was seventeen. A man other than me. If there was any reason to bust out of these restraints and take the fucker down, it was the danger of what he could do to Sofia.

Anger stroked along my nerves. “When I get out of here, he’s finished. Protect yourself in the meantime. You know how. You’re stronger than you realize.”

Sofia fed me more pasta, and the gnawing pain in my empty belly finally shifted. The food gave me the strength to heal faster, and then I could better withstand Silvio’s revenge. I didn’t think Antonio could keep me long, thanks to his ongoing business with Kirill.

“Why is the only person in my life who believes in me the craziest one?” she muttered after a long moment. She looked at the blood spattered down my chest and winced. “You’re a mess, and you only just arrived. You probably shouldn’t have killed so many men on your way out.”

“Yeah, you’re right, but hindsight is twenty-twenty,” I teased her.

Her lips quirked, and it felt like a reward. “I feel obligated to tell you that Gino is alive and well and soaking up the accolades of trying to stop you single-handedly.”

I grinned. “Of course he is.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “You’re telling me you knew he survived?”

“I’m telling you that when I shoot to kill, I don’t miss.” My smile tugged at my painful jaw, and I muttered a curse as it cracked softly.

“Does it hurt?”

“It’s just a tickle. Don’t worry about me. I can take it,” I told her.

“I’m not worried,” she protested quietly, but the look in her eyes betrayed her soft heart. Even after everything she’d been through, living in this house of horrors, she was still so kind, even to me, the villain in her story.

“I guess you regret saving me now, right? You could have let me fall.” There it was, her guilt and worry all rolled into one loaded question.

“No, I couldn’t have, and we both know it, whether you want to admit it or not.”

“Meaning?”

I leaned forward, bringing my face as close to hers as possible, given the reach of my bound arms. “Meaning, Sofia De Sanctis, I will never let you fall, no matter the cost.”

She stared at me, holding her breath as if even the sound of an inhale would break the spell between us.

“Why?” she whispered.

“Because you’re mine, and you always have been.”



I SLEPT FITFULLY. The food in my belly was like a dead weight. My head was blurry, and my brain was unable to focus. Despite all of that, when someone touched me, I reacted. Exploding forward, I kicked my legs out and hit my attacker’s shins, taking them down quickly. Shifting my body, I wrapped my legs around the fallen man’s neck.

I squeezed hard and blinked through the darkness at the man I’d trapped. “Angelo?” It took me a moment to remember Sofia’s bodyguard’s name.

The large guy grunted and tapped my leg. “Let me up. I’m not here to hurt you,” he said in a strained voice.

“You mean you’re not here to try,” I ground out, and debated the wisdom of letting him go. I couldn’t hold him like this forever, so it seemed hearing him out was the better option. If he wasn’t here to hurt me, did that mean Sofia had sent him

for another reason? The hope that sprouted in my chest was a virulent weed, pushing through dried-up, blackened cracks. “Did she send you?”

Angelo shook his head. “Your brother. I’m here because of Kirill.”

That made even less sense. “Kirill?” I repeated, and released Angelo from my legs.

He rolled away, coughing. “Shit, man. That hurt.”

A bitter chuckle left me. “Forgive me if I don’t give a fuck, considering.”

Angelo’s gaze traced over my damaged face, and he flinched. That couldn’t be good.

“What does my brother want? Here to see if they finished me for him?”

Angelo shook his head, peering over his shoulder. “The opposite. He wants you out of here.”

“Why would he send you? Who are you?”

Angelo swallowed. “A man who needs to leave the De Sanctis family soon.”

“Why?”

“Why does it matter?” Angelo countered.

“I don’t trust rats or traitors. I’ll pass on the help, thanks,” I told him flatly.

He crouched near me, looking worried. “You can’t pass. I need this. Your brother said he’d pay me enough to disappear and start a new life somewhere else. Me and someone else.”

His last words caught my interest. “You aren’t trying to make a quick buck off my brother? Who are you doing it for? A kid? A woman?”

Angelo swallowed and nodded shallowly. I considered his words, but I could taste the truth in them. It was one of my less violent talents, being able to sniff out the truth.

“Let me guess, Sofia’s little jailbait friend, the one she went to school with? She’s off-limits to a guy like you?”

Before I’d been sent away to Russia, only a month after I’d first met Sofia, I’d watched her closely. I’d seen her bodyguard’s growing interest in her little sidekick. The rebellious one. Before I could push myself further into Sofia’s life, I’d been sent to Russia by Viktor, and a couple of months after that, I’d started my first prison stay in a prison outside of Moscow. I’d lost four years to that hellhole. It certainly put places like this basement room in New Jersey into perspective.

Angelo nodded. Sharing that little tidbit of vulnerability won me over enough to hear him out.

“Fine, what’s Kirill’s grand plan? I don’t see Antonio or his nephew letting me walk out of here anytime soon.”

Angelo looked around, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a handcuff key. “No, not yet. I need to work out the best time to remove you. I just wanted to make contact and let you know your brother is working on it. He’s thinking of you.”

“Aw, Angelo, how sweet. Maybe you can write for daytime TV specials when you run from the De Sanctis family.”

He grunted and rubbed his neck. “Well, it’s not just warm words. I can take the cuffs off you for a bit if you want.”

“Sure thing, big guy.” I wanted to test out his naivety and desperation.

Angelo undid the cuffs, and I let out a sigh that I felt down to my bones as I stretched my arms. My wrists were a mess, with deep cuts, bruises, plenty of blood, and signs of infection.

“That’s going to leave a mark,” Angelo muttered, staring at my wrists as well.

The dry chuckle felt good in my chest. “You think? Things that hurt should leave a mark so you always remember.”

Angelo swallowed, suddenly looking wary that he’d let me free. “Remember what?”

“Who to kill,” I said flatly. I studied him. “I know what you’re thinking. Now that you’ve freed me, what’s stopping me from taking your gun, shooting you here, and escaping on my own?”

Angelo paled in the dim light from the corridor.

I laughed, slapping a blazingly painful hand on his shoulder and giving him a shake. “Don’t worry, big guy. I’m fucking with you. I’d rather not get shot on my way out. I don’t mind waiting for a few days. I would like to know where exactly in this godforsaken place Sofia’s room is.”

Angelo’s face blanched.

I chuckled at his clear panic. “Come on, Angelo, surely you could have predicted I’d want to know that.”

“Sofia isn’t a bad person,” he started slowly.

“I never said she was, and I’ll kill any man who dares to,” I stated calmly.

Angelo gaped at me, clearly confused.

“Call my brother if you get service down here. I want to speak to him.”

Angelo rushed to comply. The familiar mantle of power and control slipped back over me with ease. It was jarring to be the prisoner and not the jailor. The whole situation was fucked up, yet I was already adjusting. Angelo handed me the phone.

“Well, what did he say?” Kirill’s voice barked out the question over the phone, sounding as grumpy as ever.

“He asked why the fuck you want to help him when you’re the reason he’s here?”

Silence met my glib words.

“So, how’s being boss? Did you get new business cards printed yet?”

“Nikolai.” Kirill’s tone was always the same for me: wary, exasperated. Uncertain.

I could hardly blame him. I'd cultivated his feelings toward me for years. I'd worked hard to be the crazy brother, the Joker, the uncaring killer without a heart. As soon as people thought they knew you, they underestimated you. You became someone they believed they could predict. Sometimes that advantage had been the only thing that had kept me alive.

"Yes, it's me. I'm still alive if that's what you're wondering."

"Did you try to escape? De Sanctis was only keeping you for a week, tops. I cut him in on a fucking great deal with that understanding. Now, he's claiming that you killed his men and demanding longer to deal with the added insult of showing up his security."

I blew out a sigh. "When you say it like that, it sounds bad."

"Niko!"

"What? You expected me to go like a little lamb to the slaughter? You might have won that round, and I admire you for it, but you should know I go down swinging every single time. If you didn't want me to die in here, maybe you shouldn't have given over your own brother."

"What else could I have done? One of us had to become *pakhan*."

"You could have fought me and killed me like a man."

Kirill was silent for a long moment and then cleared his throat. "Maybe I didn't want to. Maybe I didn't want our father to win one more time, pitting us against each other. Maybe I wanted to give him the finger to wherever he's burning right now, like you always did."

An involuntary chuckle left me at that. "Well, shit, *bratan*, when you put it like that, it makes it hard to hate you. Please don't tell me you want to be just like me when you grow up. Molly would divorce you."

"Niko, be serious."

"I'm being serious. I'm spending my time here handcuffed to a pipe, with a couple of cracked ribs and loose teeth. That's pretty fucking serious."

Kirill cursed under his breath. “That was never part of the deal.”

“What can I say? I have a gift for making things worse.”

“Yeah, and it goes hand in hand with your talent for pissing people off. I’m going to speak to Antonio.”

“No. You need to satisfy your part, and I can take it. I don’t want my bratva being ripped apart by the Italians.”

“Your bratva?”

“Fine.” I grinned at the handset. “Ours. Besides, I’ve someone I want to keep my eye on in here.”

“Fuck’s sake, Niko. You’re still as obsessed with Sofia as ever,” Kirill cursed.

“From one obsessive man to another, keep your nose out of my business. I accept your olive branch, *bratan*. When I get out of here, I won’t try to kill you unless you piss me off.”

“That’s generous of you. Don’t leave it too long. Get out and come and see me. Molly’s upset. She’s worried about you. Let’s find a position for you in the brotherhood. I need good men to watch my back.”

I laughed at that, a real, genuine boom of sound. “Only you’d be fucked up enough to trust your rival to watch your back.”

“Yeah, and you’re the only fucked-up rival honorable enough to do it.”

I glanced at Angelo, who was hovering and looking anxiously toward the door.

“We’ll see. I’ve been thinking about retiring. A cabin in the woods or a shack by the sea. I haven’t decided yet.”

“There’s no way you could keep out of trouble long enough to retire. Take care of yourself, and don’t overstay your welcome just to get close to Sofia. She hates you, remember?”

“Yeah, well, so did Molly, and now you’re married. Don’t worry about me, Kirill. Do me a favor,” I added before I hung up.

“What?”

“Bury Viktor in an unmarked grave, somewhere he’d absolutely hate.”

I sensed Kirill’s smile over the phone. “Will do.”

“Good. I’ll be seeing you soon, big brother.”

I hung up and handed the cell back to Angelo.

“Well?” The older man was sweating.

“We have a deal. You’ll get me out when I want out. Kirill will see you paid generously and free to run off wherever you want with the woman you want. But you’ll do what I say when I say it, no questions asked. That’s the deal,” I said.

I could practically see the thoughts chasing through Angelo’s brain. I had him over a barrel since he’d been so very obliging in giving me ammunition against him. Chiara was his greatest weakness and my trump card. Fear for a loved one was the greatest motivator.

“Okay, agreed. But Sofia...” Angelo trailed off. He’d been her bodyguard since before I’d even met my little obsession. Worrying about her had to be second nature to him by now.

“Is my business. Don’t worry your pretty head about Sofia. Leave that to me. Cuff me back up and don’t raise suspicion,” I ordered him.

The cuffs hurt when they went back on, but now it was an invigorating kind of pain. I had Angelo dancing on strings for me, Silvio De Sanctis to kill, and a Mafia princess to win to my side.

I smiled in the darkness. In chaos, I thrived.

SOFIA

*M*y room in Casa Nera sat on the third floor, isolated along a dark hallway. I'd always enjoyed the seclusion of my room. It sat at the end of the building and was round. A turret room for a Mafia princess who had one too many dragons guarding the gates.

I paced inside the darkly furnished room. I had never been allowed to change anything about it as a child, so while other girls were leaning into their rainbow unicorn phases, I was lighting candles on the walls beside dark oil paintings depicting naked bodies writhing in pain or pleasure, it was hard to tell.

A huge four-poster bed dominated the center, and heavy red velvet drapes hung at the corners. I still pulled them at night. The insides held a secret. Once, when I'd been scared in my cavernous, creepy room, my mother had sewed small luminescent stars inside the material, safe from Antonio's judgmental eyes. Once I was in bed, with the curtains pulled, I drifted high among the stars, and my mother's memory stayed there, by my side. It was the only place I felt close to her anymore. In a way, I was glad her memory had faded from the walls of Casa Nera, considering the dark deeds that were contained within and the procession of women my father had paraded through, the last one not much older than me.

I stopped, catching my reflection in the dark carved dressing table along one wall. My face stared back. I looked haunted, and I was, by the man downstairs. It was my luck that instead of being haunted by a ghost, I was haunted by a demon who

was very much alive. Alive and *hurt*. Now I was pacing to fight the impulse I had to creep downstairs and free him. My father would murder me if I did.

Tearing my eyes away from my reflection, I flopped on my bed with Silvio's words going around and around in my head. He was hotheaded and full of vengeance. If I wasn't careful, Nikolai Chernov would never leave this house alive. It shouldn't upset me as much as it did.

I still tingled from the memory of Nikolai's eyes on me in the basement earlier. It had been all I could do not to scream at the first bloodied sight of him. He had cracked jokes and grinned at me, his face a bloody mask. Niko was a man who laughed during torture and held death with a warm embrace. He was also the man who had resigned himself to being tortured to save my life. No one had ever sacrificed like that for me except my brother, but the two couldn't be compared. My father would never hurt his heir too badly, while Nikolai Chernov? He was fair game, and my father was a vicious person.

A soft knock at the door sent me bolting upright, nerves springing to life in my belly. Angelo was off for the night since I was safely back in my room. My father didn't worry about my safety at home or anywhere inside Casa Nera. He had no idea about Silvio and his lecherous intentions.

"Sofia, are you decent?"

I was both relieved and apprehensive at the sound of my father's voice.

"Yes, Papa," I called.

I stood and dutifully smoothed my hair as my father unlocked my door. Yes, that's right, I could lock it with a key, but my father had a copy. There was nowhere to hide from Antonio inside his own house.

He pushed the door open and entered.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, I just came to talk," he said.

Of course, there had to be something the matter, seeing as I could count on one hand the number of times my father had been in my room.

His gaze slowly traveled over me. I could read the disapproval from here. He wandered to a photo on the wall. In it, my mother, Leonora, beamed at the camera, pregnant and joyful, her hand protectively over her swollen belly. Renato had the same one in his room.

“You know, she’d want to see you married by now, Sofia,” Antonio said heavily.

My stomach lurched. What fresh hell was this now? “I’m only twenty-two.”

Antonio shot me a look and my words deserted me. “So was she when she had Renato. Already married and out of her parents’ house. Already benefitting the family.”

I swallowed, knowing he wasn’t looking for a response.

“She understood her duty, even if she failed to be responsible for her children.”

“She hardly meant to get ill,” I pointed out, knowing it was futile, yet unable to listen to him talk disparagingly about my mother.

“She was weak,” Antonio muttered, and cast me a sideways look. “So far, you’re proving to be stronger. You were smart to help catch Nikolai. I was proud of you.”

Something twisted and horrible moved through me. I felt like crying bitter tears for a second. “So, that’s what it takes to make you proud? Dragging a man back here to pull pieces from?” I heard myself ask before I could stop it.

Antonio’s eyes narrowed. “Be careful you don’t show too much compassion for a prisoner. A rival from another family, no less. Compassion is a weakness that must be cut out before it rots the entire *famiglia*. This is why you need to start a family. A woman shouldn’t live too long at home. She needs to make her own way.”

He wandered into the middle of the room, and something about his look sent gooseflesh dimpling across my skin. I knew before he spoke what he was going to say.

“I’ve arranged a match for you. Your fiancé is Vincenzo Moroni, of the Sicilian Moroni family of New York. Even despite the problems, I’ve still secured you a don.” He had the nerve to look proud of himself.

“A fiancé. Just like that?” I wrapped my arms around my cold chest as though it might keep my panic inside. It didn’t work.

“No, not just like that. You should have been already married. I’m merely correcting the mistake you made in not holding on to your first fiancé. The Moroni family is nothing next to the Chernov bratva, but they have men in New York, which is what we need. You are still helping me to establish a presence in the city. So, you can feel useful, after all.”

“I don’t know him.” I didn’t get any further before my father turned on his heel and made a move toward the door.

“That’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Then he was gone.

The sound of the lock turning in the keyhole was like a nail in my coffin.



I LAY in bed and stared at the shining glow-in-the-dark stars floating around me. They were faded now, losing more of their luminescence every day. I knew how they felt. The lid I’d shoved over the dark, writhing panic in my gut was threatening to crack at any moment.

Tears pooled on my pillow, and the wet, salted cotton irritated my skin. My eyes stung, and my nose was stuffy. I’d cut perfect crescents into my palms by clenching my fists. I was furious. I was heartbroken.

Most of all, I was done.

There was no time left for me. No time for Renato to come home and claim leadership of the family. No time to convince my father that he should wait to marry me off, or that I deserved more than a loveless tactical match. That had never been a possibility. I could see that now. Antonio De Sanctis had never cared that much for me, and he had certainly never worried about what I wanted for my life. I had been a fool to daydream about anything different. Soon, I'd be trapped forever, a windup doll without the right to an independent thought or opinion.

Aren't you already one?

I was on my feet before I could question it. I rubbed my stinging cheeks, my breath coming quickly, my chest aching. All my life, I'd done what I was told. All my life I'd been Antonio De Sanctis' dutiful daughter. Nikolai had always been right. I lived in a cage, and I willingly kept myself inside it. I had a master, my father, who cared nothing for me. I was a pawn. A puppet. A coward and a fool.

No more.

I left the room and headed along the hall. It was Angelo's night off, so there was no one to warn me off my wild course of action or feed me unwanted logic and reason. The halls were quiet. It was Sunday night. Most family men were at home on Sunday night. It was easy to work around the guards who remained. I was like a ghost in the halls of my home. I slipped by unchallenged.

Heading down the stairs to the basement, I wasn't surprised to find there weren't any guards assigned to watch the sole prisoner locked in one of Antonio's rooms. He'd had plenty of prisoners down there over the years and had never had a successful escape-well, until Nikolai, that was. But that had been before the youngest Chernov had been locked inside. The way I'd seen him earlier, he'd had no chance of escape.

It was perfect.

I unlocked the deadbolt on the outside of the cell door and pushed inside. The low hallway lights were barely enough to

illuminate the inner recesses of the cell, but I didn't want to turn on the overhead light. I felt freer in the dark.

I took two steps into the room and pushed the door closed behind me. Only a slither of light crept into the room. I waited in the dark for my eyes to adjust.

“Well, this is a surprise, prom queen. Did you get our rooms confused? I'll give you a hint: yours has fewer torture implements.”

I walked toward him on steady legs. I wasn't conflicted. My turmoil had passed.

I could make him out now. He was sitting with his back against the wall, and I knew his hands were tied behind him. He had his legs drawn up, bent at the knee. As I approached, he slid them down.

“*Lastochka*, what's wrong?”

His deep voice slid over my skin, making me burn. No one in my life made me feel like Nikolai did. No one turned me on with just the timber of his voice.

I reached him and sank to my knees. I still couldn't speak. I couldn't find the words. I stretched one leg over him, moving to straddle him and he jerked in the restraints like he wanted to reach for me but couldn't. I settled my weight against him, and he groaned.

“Does it hurt?” My voice sounded throaty and low, nothing like my usual tone.

“Not enough to stop,” Nikolai murmured.

Time seemed to halt when I brought my hands to his face. I cupped his cheeks like he'd cupped mine so many times. “Good.”

It was the last I managed before I leaned in and kissed him. I felt his shock. In all our tussles, I'd never been the instigator. I'd been the one who fell apart in his hands while trying desperately to deny to both of us that I wanted him.

Tonight I was being honest for once in my life.

I pressed my tongue against his lips, and he opened for me with a soft growl, immediately taking charge somehow, despite not having hands to help him.

His tongue slid along mine, hot and wet and slow, like he was savoring my touch. I rocked against him, feeling him already hard and waiting. His hard-on pressed on my pussy, and the thin sleep shorts did nothing to blunt the sensation of his want. I could come like this, rubbing my cunt against his jeans again, but tonight, I wanted more.

My hands fell down his body, and I reached for his jeans. He stilled as I popped them open. I reached inside and felt his rapidly hardening dick. I pulled him free, and he swelled in my hands as I wrapped them around his wide girth. I pumped up and down ineptly. I'd never touched a dick before. I was fascinated by the way it was silky soft and intimidatingly hard at the same time.

"Is this okay?" I asked, my voice a rasp.

"I'd usually say buy a guy dinner first, but seeing as it's you... Spit on it, prom queen," he instructed. "Get it nice and wet so I can pretend it's your cunt."

His filthy words dragged at my senses, turning me on even more. I followed his command and leaned down, spitting on the head of his cock and spreading it down his length with my fists. The sound of my strokes felt deafening in the silent dark.

"Like that?"

"Fuck yeah, just like that."

I pumped him for longer, enjoying exploring his member. I let my fingers move around the crown, down to his balls, and over all the thick veins that sprawled along the thick length. His tip was leaking pre-cum, and I gathered it with my finger to taste it. Nikolai jerked against the cuffs, a low growl leaving his throat.

I let go and stood. He watched me. I could make out his face better now that my eyes had adjusted to the dark. His eyes were endless pits of hunger. I pushed down my sleep shorts

and slid my hand between my legs. I was already wet from touching him. Next, I positioned myself over his lap.

“Are you really about to fuck me, prom queen, while I’m tied up and can’t touch you back?” His voice was strangled with want.

I slowly knelt astride him and touched his dick again, pulling it up and placing it at my entrance. My thigh muscles trembled as I held myself poised over him.

“Yes, I’m going to do exactly that unless you don’t want me to.”

He was silent, staring into my eyes, only inches from his. “And I thought your father had a knack for torture. I guess it runs in the family,” he said finally.

He flexed his hips, sending the tip of his cock inside me. We both groaned at the same time. I sank down a little, inch by inch.

“Stop me now if you don’t want me,” I warned him.

“I couldn’t stop you now if my life depended on it. And for the record, I’ll never not want you.” Nikolai groaned.

It was too much. His surprisingly sweet words, and the feeling of him entering me. The act of rebellion was a turn-on, too. I was taking the decision about my body in my hands, and for once, I didn’t care what happened because of it. I might be about to marry some stranger, but this moment, right here, my first time, was my choice. I was choosing the only man who had ever sacrificed for me. The one man who saw all my fucked-up parts and found them beautiful.

I sank all the way down on him. The pain was a quick, deep twinge that radiated outward. Half the pain was popping my cherry, but the rest was how wide and long Nikolai was. My muscles strained to accommodate him. I cried out and rested my head against his sternum. It was the oddest feeling. Nikolai softly shushed me and rocked his knees, bent behind me. It was soothing and rubbed his cock against places inside me that made the pain go away. Bit by bit, the pain faded, and only heat remained.

“Does it hurt?” He echoed my earlier question.

“Not enough to stop.”

I moved on him in small nudges, exploring the feeling. I grew more adventurous, rising and falling at a faster pace, and Nikolai blew out a harsh breath.

“Touch yourself, Sofia. Play with your clit while you fuck me.”

I brought my hand around my front and touched myself.

Nikolai grinned. “Good girl. Get yourself off while you bounce on my cock and cover me in your cum.”

I gasped as his words unraveled pure heat in my belly. I bucked my hips, growing braver as I rose and slammed down. I circled my hips on him, chasing the orgasm rushing toward me.

“Touch yourself faster, prom queen. You’re going to come.”

“How do you know?” I gasped, arching my back and bouncing wildly on top of him.

“I can fucking *feel* it,” he gritted, and pushed his hips up into me.

Without warning, I came. The world went white, and my body contracted all over. My pussy clamped down on Nikolai, and he groaned as I kept moving on him, my body rising and falling out of pure animal instinct. I wasn’t thinking. I wasn’t trying to do anything. I was simply *feeling*. For a second, I was completely free.

Nikolai pushed into me, his hips still pistoning up while I pulsed around him, senseless in my pleasure.

“Fuck me, Sofia, I’m coming,” he growled.

His hips pushed into me, once, twice, and then stilled. His cock leapt inside me, and warmth filled me as he finished, pushed deep. His cum was hot, warming me from the inside. It felt decadent and dirty as hell, and somehow good, despite that.

His cock surged within me for an entire minute after he'd started to come, his body tight, his teeth clenched. His eyes never closed, though. He watched me throughout. There was so much bridled strength and power in his body at that moment, I didn't think I could have done this with him untied. He was too overwhelming.

"Kiss me," he urged as I slumped forward, my muscles finally relaxing.

I brought my lips to his and lightly placed a kiss there. It was stupidly chaste after what we'd just done, but it felt intimate in a way I wasn't prepared for.

He deepened it, rocking me with his half-hard cock, still buried deep, as his cum slid down my legs and wet my inner thighs. I wondered if there'd be blood, too.

Cold reality spread through me as the haze of urgency dissipated. I pulled back before I wanted to. I could stay there all night, enjoying the feeling of being wanted by someone I wanted back, but it was too dangerous. Dangerous for me, sure. Disappointing my father again was terrifying, but the real danger was for Nikolai. If someone found us together, he'd never leave here. My father would kill him.

I rose on shaky legs, ignoring the sensation of his seed running down my leg and the ache in my pussy. I tucked his wet cock back into his jeans and fastened them again. Before I leaned away, Nikolai wordlessly pressed a kiss to the top of my head. I had taken his roughness, his mocking, and his wicked intentions. His tenderness was something else entirely.

I nearly ran back to my room.

SOFIA

*A*fter taking a long, hot shower the next morning, I headed downstairs to the kitchen. I might have let my inner rebel out last night, but I still didn't have the balls to walk around sticky and smelling like Nikolai's cum.

Just the thought was enough to turn my cheeks permanently red this morning. All the tumbling emotions growing in my chest had finally reached a fever pitch, like a kettle on the stove, boiling too fast and needing to blow.

Last night I'd blown, all right. I couldn't find anything in me that regretted it today. Nope, I was fresh out of guilt and shame, it seemed, which was a new feeling for me.

Carmella was up to her elbows in flour, and the sight was comforting. After my mother had died, she'd been the only maternal figure in my life.

"Ah, there you are. Come and help me. I don't know where everyone is this morning, but Angelo here is a closed book, like always."

My bodyguard sat at the kitchen table, reading the sports pages and catching up on the latest Italian soccer news. He creased it and frowned at her but continued eating. No one came between Angelo and his breakfast. Well, maybe Chiara, but that was not a line of thought I wanted to pursue.

"My father went to Atlantic City today, so probably most of his entourage went with him," I muttered, pouring myself a cup of coffee as soothingly dark and bitter as my soul this morning.

The way the family worked was that De Sanctis men were busy on any given day. There were the ones who were assigned to the compound, such as Gino, and the ones assigned to people, like Angelo. The rest had duties in different places. My father had a few warehouses in Jersey at the shore where he conducted all sorts of unsavory business dealings. Then there was the protection—read intimidation racket—that needed men to do the rounds on a weekly basis. Add in hunting down late payers and moving products, and the De Sanctis men were busy little worker bees.

Not me, though. As my father had so plainly pointed out last night, I had one purpose, and the day was coming that I'd have to fulfill it.

“Well, let's enjoy the quiet while we can,” Carmella said, and crossed herself superstitiously. “Excitement never spells anything good around here.”

“Amen,” Angelo muttered.

“You look different today,” the shrewd older woman commented, watching me from the stove as she kneaded dough.

“I slept well, took a shower...” I evaded.

She narrowed her eyes at me. Distraction was the best course of action when Carmella smelled a secret. My gaze landed on a bruise on Carmella's cheek.

“What happened to your face?”

She shrugged off my question.

“Was it Silvio again?” Only Silvio thought he had the right to knock around the staff at Casa Nera. He was picturing himself as capo one day and thought that Angelo and Carmella should show the same deference that they did to Renato and me.

“You should tell my father, or at least Franco. He should know what his son is.”

“You think Franco is going to reprimand his spoiled son over an old woman like me, a maid? Don't be silly.” She crossed

herself. “Let’s just pray that Antonio stays in good health for a long time.”

I couldn’t stop the soft snort leaving me at her gesture. “You really think God cares about men like my father? He’s hardly going to Heaven.”

Carmella tossed her head. “He protects his family. That has its own type of honor. Would you condemn soldiers to Hell?”

“Antonio and men like him, Silvio, Frank... they aren’t soldiers. They only care about power and more money.”

Carmella turned and fixed me with a look. “And what about your brother? What about Renato?”

I opened my mouth to speak and found no words there. “It’s different. He doesn’t have a choice,” I said slowly, trying to gather a defense. The idea of lumping my brother in with my father was jarring. Another man brushed the edges of my mind. *Nikolai isn’t like them either.* “Not all made men are terrible. Some have their own code, and some never chose this life. It chose them.”

“And maybe Antonio feels the same way about himself. Don’t forget, Sofia, all people, no matter who they are, where they are, or how they live want to do just that. Live. People will make peace with a lot of things to survive.”

“Silvio isn’t beating a prisoner within an inch of his life just to survive. Have you seen the Russian downstairs lately? We aren’t meant to be messing him up too badly. That wasn’t part of the deal. If it was a fair fight, Silvio would cry and beg like a little bitch on his knees to survive,” I muttered darkly, and tossed a green bean into the bowl. I felt Carmella watching me. “What?”

“Be careful, *tesoro*, your partiality is showing,” Carmella said, barely above a whisper.

I stared at her, my cheeks flaming. I felt like I’d been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. The screech of Angelo pushing his chair out made me jump. He left the kitchen with the paper in hand, and silence fell between me and Carmella.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I told her.

“Sure you don’t. And Chiara isn’t sneaking around with a man nearly twice her age,” Carmella muttered, confirming what I’d already known. She could have been a brilliant detective.

Alarm worked through me. “About Chiara...”

Carmella pushed the brimming bowl away and tutted. “It’s not my business. I’m not involved. Only you are my business. You know your mother was my best friend, and when she passed”—she stopped a second to cross herself—“I promised I’d look after you. You don’t think I could have retired to Atlantic City by now and be playing the slots and wearing a velour tracksuit... living the dream?”

I reached out and grabbed her hand, still holding her little paring knife. My heart thumped uncomfortably. I couldn’t even imagine my childhood in Casa Nera without Carmella. She and my brother had been the only source of happiness and family I’d ever felt at home. Nikolai had been right, after all. If my father died tomorrow, it wasn’t mourning that would make me cry at his gravesite, but fear of the future. Fear of worse men than him taking over.

“It won’t be like this forever. When Ren comes home...”

“I know.” Carmella smiled at me. “I know everything will be different, but that day isn’t this one. You need to be careful, Sofia. There’s change in the air, and it’s dangerous.”

“Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself.” I tried a smile, but it felt awkward.

In truth, I was as scared as she was, but not only for myself. I was scared for Carmella and what Silvio and Franco might do if my father died. I was scared for Angelo, the older man who had fallen for an off-limits woman. And most of all, I was scared for the tied-up maniac in the basement.

The memory of last night was foggy and painfully clear at the same time. Not only had I finally done it, lost my virginity, but I’d done it with Nikolai, my family’s sworn enemy. I didn’t regret it. No matter what would happen to me in a terrifyingly unknown future, rushing quickly at me, I would always have last night. A tiny piece of time carved out of my life just for

me, an act of defiance and will so great, I wasn't sure I was capable of it until it was happening.

Last night, for the first time, I stepped outside the control of my masters, and it had felt better than I could have ever dreamed. I was free, for once. Nikolai talked about the cage around his heart, the one that couldn't be broken. I pictured it as his ribs, with bone-like bars, something he was born with. A necessary part of him.

My cage, as he'd known, was inside my mind. A bird with clipped wings wouldn't get far in the wild. To break my wings free, I had to escape the prison of my mind. Niko had brought me closer to that than ever before.

"Sofia?" Carmella's voice broke me from my reverie.

I blinked at her.

She narrowed her eyes and watched me steadily for a long moment before nodding. "*Va bene*, I've delivered my warnings. You're a smart girl. Be careful." She crossed herself again, this time pressing a kiss to the tiny gold cross around her neck.



"WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR NECK?" Chiara asked as we walked around the gardens of Casa Nera.

Technically, we were supposed to be jogging but were walking and gossiping. Maybe because he hadn't had his hands to mark me with, Nikolai had managed to suck a string of hickeys along my collarbone.

"Nothing. An allergic reaction," I muttered, wrapping my arms around my middle. I should have worn a scarf.

She narrowed her eyes at me. She knew something was up, which made sense. Chiara was one of the few people who knew me. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you had hickeys."

My eyes skittered from hers. "What's up with you anyway? I thought everything was roses?"

She was looking dejected as hell, her usually sunny disposition visibly dimmed.

She swallowed, her slim neck bobbing with the motion. I saw the moment she let her worry show and the moment she got it under control. She tossed her head. Her dark caramel-blond hair had always been an envy of mine. She had brown eyes and blond hair and drew eyes wherever she went. That aspect of being so beautiful wasn't enviable. When you lived around so many men, always being watched wasn't fun.

"It was, I mean, it is... with my man." Her pink lips curved at the thought of Angelo. "But my father has decided that I'm becoming a little too much to handle, being twenty-two and unmarried. He's shopping around for a taker," she muttered.

I stilled, fear for my friend filling me.

"And before you ask, no, Angelo's not an option, and it's not an age thing. The guys he's considering are older."

At thirty-five to Chiara's twenty-two, it would be easy to imagine that the age gap was the reason Chiara's father might object to the match, but clearly, that wasn't the case. It was all about position. Angelo, although well-paid and respected in the De Sanctis family, was still just a bodyguard. He didn't command other men or take a hefty cut of any deals. He wouldn't net the biggest gains for Chiara's family.

"How old?" I nearly whispered.

Chiara let out a bark of a laugh. "I don't know if any age is off the table. One guy is sixty, so..." She blew out her breath and cracked her knuckles. It was an old sign of nervousness, and one her father had tried to train out of her. He'd always told her it looked too masculine.

"Renato would stop it." Anger simmered in my belly.

"Yeah, well, Renato isn't boss, is he? Your father won't stop it, and you know it."

Her words stuck in my throat. It was true. We were alone, she and I, and any other De Sanctis girl who was within throwing distance of marriable age. Somehow, despite living where we

did and being as rich as we were, we had the same prospects as women who had lived hundreds of years before us.

“I can commiserate. Antonio has his eye on a new match: Vincenzo Moroni, out of New York.”

Chiara visibly blanched.

“What?”

“Nothing, I’ve just heard about that family. His daughter was a few years above us at school.”

“So, she’s older than us?”

“Yeah. Classy, right? That would make his new fiancée younger than his daughter.”

We walked on in downcast silence.

“Anyway, this is depressing as shit, and this outfit is too cute to cry in,” Chiara muttered, pulling herself together. She chewed her lip for a second and then turned excited eyes to me. “Speaking of arranged marriages... I want to see the Chernov.”

“What?”

Chiara spun on her heel, grinning at me in a way that always meant trouble.

“I want to see the family you nearly married into.”

“But it’s not Kirill Chernov... It’s his brother!” My protests fell on deaf ears.

Chiara turned and took off at a brisk pace toward the house. I followed, my heart racing at the thought of seeing Nikolai.

I’d never told Chiara anything about Niko and me, not even in high school when I’d first met him. I’d been too afraid she’d go to her father and confess it all, and Antonio would respond by reeling in the already short leash I’d lived on. She probably wouldn’t have said a word, but we hadn’t known each other as well then. Now, she was my only girlfriend, save for Carmella, who would probably disagree with that label.

“Chiara, stop. He’s not a zoo animal. We can’t just stare at him,” I hissed at her as she blazed into the house and headed down the stairs at the far end, which led to the basement. I wondered for a second how she even knew where they were.

“Just a peek, and then we’ll go. I want to see if he’s as hot and crazy as people say,” Chiara tossed over her shoulder. “Come on, Sofia. Live a little.”

She had no idea how much I’d lived last night, with the very man she was curious to see, but I held my tongue. I never knew where someone was listening in Casa Nera.

We reached the lowest floor.

“How do you even know about this place?” I wondered as I followed her along the hall. There was only one closed door, so it was pretty obvious where Nikolai was being held.

“I’ve been down here... when looking for privacy, if you know what I mean,” Chiara said and wiggled an eyebrow at me.

“You’re kidding,” I muttered. It was hard to imagine a less romantic place than a literal dungeon.

“Needs must, and besides, we have to take what we can get, while we can get it,” Chiara said with a heavy voice. “You know how hard it was to even break those walls down... never mind worry about how romantic places are.”

I swallowed the rest of my protests. She was right. When we’d graduated high school, Chiara had already fallen hard for my older, stoic bodyguard. She hadn’t known he’d felt the same and had pushed him every single day to get him to notice her. I still remembered the day his control snapped. Luckily, I was able to leave them to it on that occasion, but I knew better than anyone what it was to want someone off-limits. I knew all too well how fragile those secrets could be and how they could all tumble down in death and destruction.

We arrived at Niko’s door, and Chiara slid open the metal grate at the top that allowed the guards to look in without opening it. Antonio had them all fitted after a prisoner had

escaped their bonds and waited to ambush the guards when they opened the doors.

It was dark and still inside.

“Is he sleeping?” Chiara whispered, narrowing her eyes as she gazed into the dimly lit room.

“No, he’s awake,” I muttered. I could feel him watching me, waiting to see what we’d do.

“I can’t see shit,” Chiara grumbled, and reached for the deadbolt and edging open the door.

“Chiara, leave him alone.”

“Why? I’m not going to hurt him or anything,” she muttered.

“Well, that’s good to know.” Niko’s mocking tone floated to us in the dark.

Giving in to my desire to see him, I headed to the wall and flipped on the small bare light bulb that hung in the middle of the room.

He was sitting against the wall with his arms pulled back. His gray eyes met mine immediately, and the warmth in them sent a jolt right through me.

“Hello, *lastochka*. Nice of you to visit,” he murmured.

His eyes ran over me, turning nearly silver as they caught the light. My body heated, and my skin felt tight. I smoothed my sweaty palms down my thighs and tried to get a grip. I was wearing tight yoga pants and a crop top for working out. The look in Niko’s eyes told me he approved of them a lot.

“Wow, so you’re him... the great and terrible Nikolai Chernov.” Chiara folded her arms over her chest, her flair for the dramatic delivering, as always.

“At your service. It’s Nikolai Viktorovich Chernov, if you want to get technical about it, and the great and powerful is my preferred nomenclature.” Niko grinned.

Chiara fanned her face and nodded decisively. “Okay, I get it. He’s worth the hype.”

Niko nodded to her.

I rolled my eyes, feeling on the spot and oddly possessive of Niko's grin.

"You're her, aren't you? Angelo's Chiara?" Nikolai's words sent all the air out the room for a moment.

Chiara tensed, her hand curling into a fist. "How do you know that?" she nearly whispered, turning pale.

Niko smirked. "I know a lot of things."

Chiara frowned and turned to look at me. "How does he know that?"

"It's just a good guess. He does that. Observes things," I told her quickly. Footsteps above reminded me how bad it would be to get caught here. "Look, we have to get upstairs before someone checks down here. Carmella is making lunch. I need to bring him some. You wanted to see him, and now you have."

I took her arm and dragged her toward the door. I pulled it open just as Angelo's enormous frame appeared. He was holding a lunch tray.

His eyes lit up at the sight of Chiara.

"Well, well, if it isn't the sexiest bodyguard on the East Coast."

"Just the East Coast?"

"Kevin Costner lives on the West Coast, so yeah, big guy."

"Costner's too damn old for you," Angelo growled at his girlfriend.

"And you aren't?" Chiara giggled.

I knew this dance, and I wasn't about to sit around and witness the foreplay. I took the tray out of Angelo's hands. "I'll handle this. You two go get a room, preferably one I can't hear you from."

I went back into Nikolai's room with the tray. He was grinning at Angelo and Chiara.

“Young love, it warms the cockles of my cold, dead heart. Just like you do, prom queen.”

I moved to his side, hyperaware of his gaze on the side of my face. After last night, I should probably feel more embarrassed, but I didn't. There was an absence of shame inside me as I picked up the small pieces of sandwich that Carmella had prepared.

“I suppose I should explain about last night.” I reached out and fed him a piece of sandwich.

“If you want to.”

He was watching me steadily, his eyes never leaving me. That look felt like an arm around my shoulder.

“Apparently, I'm going to be engaged again soon. I think I might be already.” The words embarrassed me for some reason. I couldn't meet Nikolai's eyes. I felt weak and useless, like a pathetic little girl who played at being strong but in the end, just shut up and followed her father's orders. I felt unworthy of Niko's praising words. I knew nothing about courage or breaking cages, not compared to him.

“Is that right?” he mused softly.

“The head of the Moroni family in New York. You probably know him.”

Nikolai nodded. “I do. He's old and cruel if you're wondering. Dumb as well.”

I nodded, looking down. Tears threatened to fall, and I fought them back.

I fed Nikolai quickly, and he didn't push me to talk.

“Viktor wanted me to get engaged once. I was twenty, and her name was Tatiana. She lived in Moscow, and her father was one of the biggest human traffickers in Eastern Europe. I forgot all about her until now,” he said, his tone musing.

I risked a glance at him. The thought of him getting engaged bothered me more than it should have. “You didn't want to marry her? Was she beautiful?” I heard myself ask. *What the hell?*

“The answer to both those questions is the same,” he said, and his lip ticked up into a smirk. “No, because she wasn’t you.”

I froze with my hand in mid-air, holding the coffee cup. It shook with some repressed emotion threatening to burst out. Coffee spilt on my hand and Niko’s leg.

“Shit, that’s hot,” I said, and grabbed a napkin to dab at his leg. “What happened?”

“Let’s see,” he said, blowing out a breath. “I’d only been in Russia six months, and I’d met you a couple of months before that. When Viktor mentioned the match, I told him I wasn’t interested. He could have forced me, however, so I made sure he couldn’t.”

“What did you do?”

“I crept into Tatiana’s house at night and killed her father in cold blood. His second-in-command, too. The family had an heir I didn’t know about, a man about my age, off in a Siberian work camp, so I couldn’t get to him. They covered up the murder, but I still went to prison for four years there for some crap they made up. If you think the NYPD is corrupt, they have nothing on Moscow. Last I heard, their entire operation was failing under the new leadership of the son. I can’t say I was sad about that. I don’t know what happened to Tatiana. Honestly, I didn’t care enough to find out. I came back to New York as soon as I was released, just in time to find out about Kirill’s happy engagement news... to you.”

His story stole my breath. I pushed away from his probing gray look. I couldn’t stand it. Every inch of my skin that his gaze touched, throbbed.

I stood and put some distance between us, turning to the side as I folded and unfolded the cover of the tray. “So, you didn’t forget about me.”

I really thought he had. After prom night and the things that had passed between us in the dark, I had expected more from Nikolai. When he’d failed to return for me, I’d known then that his promises and possessive words had been a passing whim for him. I hadn’t been surprised when I thought he’d lost

interest. Why wouldn't he? Who would ever care that much about me?

Nikolai was silent, and I couldn't look at him. I was suddenly scared to see the truth in his eyes. The truth that his interest in me had passed and was only rekindling now as a means to an end. I didn't think I could manage if it was.

There was a soft clinking sound behind me as Nikolai shifted in his handcuffs. I hated to see him in them. I felt like my world had been turned upside down, and I couldn't find which way was up.

"Look at me, Sofia."

I tensed. I couldn't. I knew I'd cry if I did.

"I should go," I started. "I can't stay down here. I'll get you in trouble, worse than you already are."

"You don't have to marry that man," Nikolai called sharply, freezing me on the threshold of the door. "I won't allow it to happen."

I waited to hear what he was going to say.

He waited for me to turn, and when I didn't, he sighed.

"You're not alone, *lastochka*, remember that."

The words sank through me like stones, stopping up the painful, empty places inside me. I nodded, fumbling with the tray, and stepped out. I had to stick my head in a bucket of iced water and try to calm down. My mask of indifference was cracking at the seams, and I couldn't let anyone see.

I wouldn't survive long in Casa Nera without it.

NIKOLAI

I didn't see Sofia for two days. They were the longest two days of my life.

With plenty of time to think, my mind wandered relentlessly over the night she'd come to me. It was the single hottest experience of my life. My clever little prom queen had been a virgin after all this time, and she'd chosen me. To me, that was more of a commitment than vows in church. She hadn't admitted that much, but I'd felt it. I'd also felt her determination and need. All the puzzle pieces that made up the most fascinating woman I'd ever met.

She was scared of her act of rebellion and of the man she'd chosen for it. I wasn't surprised she'd stayed away for a few days. She was worried about her engagement. She shouldn't be. It wasn't going to happen. I'd already decided that when I left here, which would be soon, she was coming with me. She didn't have a choice. Was she on protection? She certainly hadn't seemed worried about it. The thought that my seed could be swimming in her, taking root right at this moment was a fucking turn on. Sofia with a rounded belly, tied to me for life? That was the stuff dreams were made of.

I was alone in the basement, without Silvio's torture sessions to look forward to. I guessed the big guy had worn himself out. Time blended into one long, tedious march. I slept fitfully, dreaming of my mother hanging in the late afternoon and my father's final expression of shock as he'd slumped down dead.

My cracked and weary mind groaned under the weight of the relentless horror of life.

I thought of Kirill, the brother I should hate but didn't. He'd had me sent here, but he'd also sent Angelo to make sure I wasn't too fucked up by it. Even when my *pakhan* brother was brutal, he was fair. I wondered if he was happy with Molly, the woman he'd hunted for seven years. The mother of his child. My brother had always been more normal than me. Less broken. More trustworthy. Lovable. I knew myself, and there wasn't a single person in the world who would think those things of me.

IN WHAT FELT like late afternoon, a noise came from the hall that had me sitting up. Maybe Antonio De Sanctis was onto something with a new torture technique because leaving me alone with my thoughts was masterful. The isolation was hurting more than his beatings.

An older woman came into the room, holding a tray of food. She looked to be in her early sixties, had graying dark hair, and an apron around her comfortable middle. She looked at me with suspicion. "Don't try anything funny, or I can make cleaning up your wound hurt a lot."

"Yes, ma'am," I quipped, unable to argue with the authoritative energy from such a small package.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "And don't get fresh. I've heard everything about you, Nikolai Chernov, and your devilish charms," she said, and eyed me like I might try to seduce her on the spot.

"My devilish charms? My, my, I have to say that makes a nice break from having a reputation as a depraved lunatic."

"Yeah, well, which reputation is more deserving, that's the question? I'm Carmella, the housekeeper here. I'm not a nurse, so don't complain about my doctoring," she said sternly.

I grinned at her. "I wouldn't dare."

Carmella watched me for a moment longer and then nodded briskly. "Sofia, bring the medical kit."

Excitement shot through me at the appearance of a familiar figure in the doorway. This time, there was nothing fake or forced about my grin as I took in the object of my growing obsession.

“Nice of you to visit. If I’d know you were coming, I’d have baked a cake,” I said.

“No jokes!” Carmella scolded, and slapped my wrist like I was a misbehaving schoolboy.

I turned my eyes to her, my amusement at her presence lessening. I wanted Sofia all to myself.

“Hold still, or we’ll leave you to fester. This is infected,” she accused, pointing to my wrist and fixing me with a look like it was my fault. “We’ll clean it. Sofia, bring the iodine.”

“Iodine? That’s old-school, Carmella,” I muttered, watching as she got ready to liberally douse my bound hands with the stinging disinfectant. I’d suffered through the same treatment countless times, but I had a feeling Carmella might make an even rougher nursemaid than I’d been for myself in the past.

I leaned forward, and she worked behind me in the narrow space where the restraints allowed me inches of movement. Sofia hovered at my side, avoiding my eyes. I bore a hole into her blushing cheek, wishing I could get closer.

“I’ve missed your visits, prom queen,” I murmured.

Color bloomed in her cheeks. Her dark eyes were enormous as they darted to Carmella and back to me. My rough nursemaid was humming noisily to herself, giving me an opportunity to murmur to Sofia.

“I was starting to think you’d forgotten about me.”

She snorted softly. Even a snort from Sofia was elegant. She couldn’t help it. It was in her bones. “Like anyone could forget about you. You’re a menace.”

“But a memorable one? I’m going to take that as a compliment. I like the thought of being unforgettable.”

She rolled her eyes, her tension fading slightly as she was tugged into the banter that had always been natural between

us.

“My father is in Atlantic City. He’s coming back next week.”

“So, you’re saying we have the place to ourselves?”

She shook her head, looking exasperated. “Silvio just came back. He’ll be here with his father, Franco. He’s my uncle.”

“Are you close with your uncle?”

She shook her head immediately.

“You don’t like him, do you? He’s not trustworthy,” I guessed from her expression.

“How do you know that?”

“I told you. I know you, Sofia. I get you like no one else does.”

“Sofia, give him some water and food while I bandage his wrists. I have to get some more gauze,” Carmella interrupted, and stood and shuffled toward the door.

Sofia dutifully picked up a water bottle and twisted off the cap. She moved toward me on her knees. “Don’t piss Silvio off more than comes naturally to you. Without my father here, he could go too far,” she warned.

She looked tired and anxious. I didn’t like it.

“Tell me you’re not worried about me.” A pain lanced my dead heart, like a shot of electricity.

“Why not? It’s my fault you got caught. Why shouldn’t I feel bad about it?” she whispered, and her dark eyes met mine.

I stared at her, barely able to believe her words. Her guilt sat heavily in her tone, her worry and heartache peeling away any defenses I’d spent years building. I could safely say no one living in the world cared too much if I lived or died. No one worried for me. The world felt very quiet. For the first time in a very long time, the chaos that swirled inside me was still.

Her eyes bored into mine, and something moved between us at that moment. Something real. Feelings I had long since given up on. I thought for a maddening second that she was leaning

in, like she might kiss me as I sat bound before her. A chaste kiss of an angel for a man destined for Hell. A benediction for a sinner like me. But she pulled back quickly as the sound of Carmella returning reached us.

Sofia grabbed the water bottle, remembering her task. “Here,” she offered, holding the bottle to my lips.

I couldn’t stop staring at her. It was like she had reached into my barren chest with her slender hand and taken my heart in her palm. Sure, I’d had her body, worked my way into her heart and mind, but being on the receiving end of her concern? It put her in a very exclusive club. The only other person to care if I lived or died was my mother, and I hadn’t been able to save her from the demons in her head.

Sofia was frowning at me. “Aren’t you thirsty?”

“Not for water.” My voice came out like gravel.

She picked up a piece of sandwich and held it to my lips. “If you bite me, you won’t get any more food,” she warned.

I grinned. “There’s only one place I want to bite you, and it’s not your fingers,” I reassured her.

I made sure to take the tips of her fingers into my mouth as I took the bite she was holding out for me. I brushed my tongue across her skin. She jerked.

“What? What’s he doing?” Carmella demanded, apparently finishing torturing my hands.

“Nothing, just eating,” Sofia said quickly, and let her finger play at my mouth.

I swirled my tongue around it, wishing it was her clit. A blush flourished on her cheeks. She was sufficiently distracted. She fed me, and I ate every bite.

Carmella bustled around me, cataloging my hurts. She had tutted herself red in the face by the time she finished. When she was done, she narrowed her eyes at me. “You shouldn’t make any more trouble while you’re here, or all my hard work will be undone.”

“For you, Carmella, anything.”

Sofia rolled her eyes and stacked the plate and medical kit on the tray. I wished she'd look at me again. I needed another jolt from her eyes to keep me going. Like a junkie jonesing for a fix, I hungered for the light of her attention for one more second before I was plunged back into darkness.

“What do you think, *lastochka*? Should I be a good little prisoner and escape without further damage?”

Sofia snorted, a motion that looked elegant because it was her. “I doubt you're capable of being that well-behaved.”

I opened my mouth to respond, basking in her attention when an ugly, low voice spoke from the doorway.

“Am I interrupting? What the fuck do you think you're doing?”

Silvio squatted like a toad on the threshold, glaring inside. Tension gathered in my gut from the way he looked at Sofia. There was going to be trouble.



SILVIO TRIED to get a grip on his visible anger. He shoved his hand in his pocket and strolled in, gesturing for the men who shadowed him nearly constantly to stay back. I couldn't imagine how weak you had to be to need a security entourage in your own family compound.

“Why the fuck would you be fixing this fucker up? Don't you understand what we're doing here?” Silvio got close enough to Carmella to loom over her.

She stiffened and dropped her eyes.

“He's a prisoner, not a guest.”

Gone was Carmella's sass of earlier, and now I saw her fear. So did Silvio, and his satisfaction grew.

“He's still a human, and he needs care. Antonio doesn't want him dead,” Carmella said.

Silvio stilled, impotent anger seeming to swell his chest. “Are you arguing with me? That maid is arguing with me,” he repeated incredulously. He tossed the last over his shoulder at his men, who chuckled.

“She’s right, and you know it,” Sofia said, getting up and stepping toward her cousin.

I admired my girl’s fire, but I’d rather my hands were free in case Silvio decided on a pathetic display of strength.

Silvio’s gaze fell on me. “Are you enjoying this, Chernov? Your own brother handed you over to us, and now, the only people who’d bother to protect you are a pathetic old maid and a deluded prude.”

“A prude? Really? That’s the best you can come up with for me?” Sofia’s voice was rising. This was her house, after all, and she loved to fight. She hadn’t a weak bone in her body unless it came to her father—and me, of course.

“What else should I call you?”

Sofia tossed her head and slammed her mask down over her anger. She took Carmella’s hand. “Come on, Carmella. We better get back upstairs.”

Her simple dismissal seemed to short-circuit something in Silvio. He was moving before I could shout a warning.

He didn’t go for Sofia. That wouldn’t be smart. Instead, he went for Carmella. He ripped her out of Sofia’s hands, grabbed her by the head, and pulled her across the floor. The older woman let out a startled cry, and everyone in the room tensed.

I tested the strength of the handcuffs, fury filling me at Silvio’s crass display of feeble strength. I didn’t hit women or hurt them, and I certainly didn’t make ladies old enough to be my mother cry. I decided right then I’d cut off Silvio’s other hand before I killed him.

“Silvio, let the women go. Who cares about them? You’re here for me, aren’t you? I missed you yesterday. Take it from one torturer to another, you need to keep the cuts fresh if you want to inflict the best kind of slow, oozing pain.”

My voice was calm, calculated to piss him off and distract him, and it might have worked if Carmella hadn't sunk her nails into Silvio's wrist. She must have got him good because he roared in pain and shook her.

"Sofia, no!" I hissed when she pushed in, trying to pull Silvio's hand from the housekeeper's hair.

A roar of anger and the thick whack of flesh meeting flesh, and Sofia fell.

Black rage descended over me at the sight of her, crumpled on the floor. Carmella fell beside her, clutching her head, blood on her hands. Her loud sobs filled the basement.

"Now look what you idiot bitches have made me do," Silvio cursed, gathering his calm and fiddling with his lapels. "That's not on me, Sofia. That was your fault. Not that your father is around to do anything about it."

Sofia had her face lowered and her hand hidden beneath her hair. Black fury crawled through my blood as I watched her collect herself. Possession so thick it choked descended.

After a long moment, she moved. Crawling over to Carmella, she wrapped an arm around the older woman's shaking shoulders and rubbed her back reassuringly.

"Get out of here, both of you. Nikolai and I have unfinished business," Silvio said after a minute.

The tension was thick, and his men were quiet. It was one thing to posture and boast, it was another to hit the *capo's* daughter, even if she was your cousin.

Sofia stood, and I finally saw her face. A red hand mark marred one olive cheek, the corner of her mouth was bleeding, and her eye was rapidly blackening. How the hell the fucker had done so much damage with one heavy fist, I had no idea, but it was a certain kind of skill. He was a man practiced in hitting women, and for that reason alone, and no other, I'd skin him slowly before he died.

Sofia's eyes met mine as she helped Carmella toward the door. She looked mournful, like she was sorry she had to leave me there with her animal of a cousin.

I tipped my head to her, a silent nod. *You go*, I told her with that look. *I can take care of myself.*

I watched her until her shadow in the stone hallway beyond the door disappeared.

“It’s not smart to smack the boss’s daughter around, is it? I guess you were first in line when they were handing out shit for brains.”

Silvio chuckled darkly. “I think you worry a little too much about the boss’s daughter. If she continues to be a problem, a prude who can’t attract a man, Antonio might just give her to me.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “You know she’s your cousin, right? I take it you skipped biology at school.”

He didn’t like that. The smart comment earned me a sharp kick to the ribs, sending me slumping to the side. I wheezed out a breath as my muscles cramped all at once.

“You don’t need to worry about my cousin. She’s mine. Maybe I’ll fuck her in here, right in front of you. Would you like that, bratva pig?”

Anger like nothing I’d ever felt before washed through me, burning hot like lava, bubbling in my veins.

I forced the image of Silvio, skinned and roasting over a spit, to the forefront of my mind to hide my reaction to his words. *Soon.*

Silvio reared back as my manic laughter hit the air, his anger spiking at my cheerful mood. “What the fuck are you laughing about?”

“I’m just thinking about what your wasted muscle will taste like. Then again, you have plenty of fat, which should make it more delicious,” I wheezed, and shifted my weight with an effort. His boot had cracked a few ribs.

“Oh, yeah? You want to enlighten the party and tell me what the fuck you’re talking about?”

Gathering my anger, I held it close like a life preserver in a turbulent sea. I dropped my mask of indifferent glee for a

moment and let Silvio see the face of the man who would kill him slowly. “I’m talking about when I skin you, roast you, chop your body up for ease of handling... and eat you.”

My words stilled every man in the room. It wasn’t just the promise they held, it was the stone-cold, lethal certainty that rang in them. Not one of Silvio’s men doubted that I wasn’t lying. Prey knows when it’s outmatched, and Silvio paled, knowing that his death would soon be upon him.

Just to piss him off more, I lunged forward, ribs screaming, muscles protesting, and snapped my teeth at him. “Yum, yum.”

He jerked back like I’d punched him and slipped over his own shiny, pretentious loafers. He flailed without his other hand to hold on to the wall as he tried to get his balance.

When he finally caught himself, cursing and red-cheeked, he turned eyes full of hatred on me. Then he flicked his fingers at his men, needing to make up macho points for that bumbling act of embarrassment.

They descended on me in a fit of kicks and punches. Some inventive soul even employed his lit cigarette. Was it smart to goad him like that when I had no power to stop them? Probably not, but fuck me, it was worth it.



LATER, an endless amount of time later, a sharp voice spoke from the door, and the beating ceased. My body blazed with pain, and I floated there, in that nothing place, untethered from the world.

Words flittered through my consciousness, disjointed and nonsensical.

“...you’ll kill him...”

“...I don’t care...”

“Antonio does, he wants the deals with Chernov...”

“*Fanculo, va bene*, let’s go...”

The voices trailed away, and silence fell.

No, not perfect silence.

Footfalls broke the still air, and a hand turned me over carefully.

“Crap. Nikolai? Can you hear me?” a deep voice asked.

My splintered brain tried to make sense of it. “Angelo, I can’t play with you right now, *bratan*. I’m busy,” I managed, and turned to spit a mouthful of blood on the floor.

“Fuck, you don’t look good. This isn’t good. The deal only works if I get you out of here alive,” Angelo fretted.

“Don’t worry. I’m not dying here. I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, easy to say when you can’t see yourself. I think we should risk it tonight if you can stand. I’ll think of a diversion or something.”

Silvio’s dark promise ran through my head, cutting my mind with spiked barbs.

I shifted and cracked a swollen eyelid open. “You got a smoke for a dying man?”

Angelo blew out a breath and reached into his pocket for one. He lit it for me and put it to my lips. I drew the sweet poison deep into my lungs. Fuck, that was good.

“Everyone’s got to go sometime. It’s better to die than do nothing.” The nicotine racing through my veins helped to steady the shaking in my abused muscles.

“I don’t think that applies here.”

“It always applies,” I muttered, enjoying the smoke. Silvio’s words were playing in a loop in my head. “I can’t leave like this. I need a few days to recover. Then, we make a move.”

I tilted my head to look up at Sofia’s burly bodyguard. “How are you at making bombs?”

SOFIA

*M*y anxious eyes stared back at me from the full-length mirror in the training room. The bruise on my cheek drew my attention every single time.

I'd come to work out in the room where Renato and I had learned our defense skills, hoping that would burn off some of my energy. I should feel tired from barely sleeping, but I didn't. I felt like nitrous was running in my veins instead of blood. Fear and anxiety were keeping me awake around the clock.

A terrible foreboding dogged my thoughts. Something terrible was going to happen. I could feel it. It wasn't just me I was worried about either.

There was something wrong with me, and it was sitting downstairs, chained to a pipe. Nikolai might die down there. Silvio might really kill him. The thought sent anxious tears to my eyes.

In my world, finding a man whose hands were clean was impossible, yet even then, Nikolai's were pretty far from clean. He had never tried to hide who he was from me. He was the most honest man in my life. I had someone on my side, someone in my corner. Someone who didn't care about my father. For the first time in my life, I didn't feel alone.

I ran through my warm-up routine. If being kidnapped by Niko had taught me anything, it was that despite my skills, I was no match for a man's strength, head-to-head. My biggest strength

lay in taking my opponent off guard and being sneaky and quick.

I pushed my body through a quick routine of push-ups and sprints, dropping and sweeping an imaginary leg before rolling and jumping quickly to my feet.

My chest burned as I pushed myself, and my well-used muscles ached. I embraced the pain. It made it real.

My phone rang on the bench against the wall, interrupting my punishing routine. I stopped, gulping down air, and headed for it. It was Renato's ringtone. I hadn't spoken to my brother for weeks, and now I grabbed the handset eagerly.

"Sofia? *Stai bene?*"

"I'm okay. How about you? I was starting to worry you'd died over there. Don't I merit a check-in call now and again?"

Ren chuckled, and the sound was comfortingly familiar. "I'm sorry, *piccolina*. Things have been a little... tense here."

I tucked my phone between my ear and shoulder and grabbed my water bottle. "Tense how?"

"I don't want to bore you. Let's just say the family still loves their vendettas and aren't afraid to drag everyone into it."

"Are you safe? I mean, there's no risk to you?"

Ren blew out a resigned breath. "Only as much as there usually is. You know our lives, Sofia... here today, gone tomorrow. Not everyone makes it to Antonio's age unscathed."

"That's why his motto is kill first, apologize later," I reminded him. Ren chuckled again. "Seriously, don't joke about that. I need you to come back. I need you to be boss sooner rather than later," I said.

"Why? Is Antonio mistreating you?" Ren's voice hardened.

My brother was ten years older than me. Since I had been old enough to merit a beating for getting my dress dirty or making noise during an important meeting, he'd been stepping between my father and me and taking the hit whenever he could. Our father told him his need to protect me was a

weakness, but Renato had never let those insidious words work into his heart. Maybe one day, when the world we lived in had jaded him enough, he'd stop caring so much, but for now, he was still my big brother. A man who'd burn the world down to save me. Oddly, I trusted in Renato to protect me with the same certainty that I trusted in Nikolai. Somehow, in our fraught and chaotic relationship, he'd become someone I felt safer with than my family, even if hurting was all he knew how to do.

"Not more than usual. The broken engagement hasn't made him happy," I muttered.

Ren snorted. "You didn't know Kirill Chernov, barely met him. Why would it annoy him that much?"

"Maybe because we both know it wasn't my happiness he was worried about, but his bottom line. Anyway, he ended up making a deal. Hopefully, once he expands the business further in New York, he'll be less annoyed with me. He has someone else in mind."

Renato was quiet for a long moment. "Once I'm boss, I won't let anyone hurt you, not even your husband."

So my brother knew about the new engagement. That hurt somehow, even though it shouldn't. There was nothing Ren could do short of returning home and killing our father. I couldn't blame him. Patricide wasn't a natural instinct for most. Nikolai might be an exception in that way. He was an exception in many ways.

"Sofia?" My brother's concern only hurt more. He was concerned yet powerless. It was the story of our relationship in a nutshell.

"I'm here. I miss you. Be careful over there, okay? I need you home in one piece."

Renato chuckled, but it sounded bitter. "I'll get home in one piece. You know me, I'm hard to kill. Anyway, I called because I wanted to warn you I'll be out of reach for a while. A few weeks. Nothing's wrong. I'm just busy. Don't worry about me."

“Sure I won’t. And you won’t worry about me, right?” I teased, trying to lighten the mood before we hung up.

“Right.” Renato’s quiet voice threatened to undo my efforts to sound upbeat.

I sank down on the floor of the training room and lay back, staring at the ceiling, as my brother hung up. I tried to imagine what it was like where he was.

The De Sanctis family compound in Italy was just outside Naples. The Campagna region was beautiful, full of rolling hills and dramatic coasts. I visited once when I was very young with my mother. We’d gone to the Amalfi coast and spent the day having a picnic on the rocky outcrop, overlooking a turquoise sea shaded by olive trees.

After that, I’d always wanted to live somewhere quiet, by the sea, where I could hear the waves washing up to my door.

Instead, I was here in Casa Nera, and there was no escape from the life I’d been born into. There was no escape for Renato either, or Nikolai. I remembered Niko’s words that night we’d met so many years ago.

“We both have masters. Admitting that is the first step to breaking free.”

Now, for the first time in my caged life, I considered what it would be like to break the bars and leave my so-called home behind forever. The idea didn’t terrify me like it once had. Could I fly free? Was I too scared to even try? What if I jumped and then found out the hard way that my wings really were clipped?

“Sofia,” a voice called from the door.

I jumped. I’d been so lost in my thoughts I hadn’t heard anyone come in. Carmella stood in the doorway, a headscarf over the patch of hair Silvio had torn out. Her faded brown eyes looked hesitant and sorrowful, setting me immediately on guard.

“What’s happened?”

“It’s your father.” She was wringing her hands. Never a good sign.

“He’s not coming back from AC today?”

Silvio was always emboldened when my father wasn’t in residence, so this was unwelcome news.

Carmella shook her head. “He’s had a heart attack, *tesoro*. He’s in the hospital.”



OUR LADY of the Sacred Heart in downtown Trenton was bursting at the seams with De Sanctis men. The VIP floor looked like the waiting room for a mob casting, and my uncle, Franco, was in charge of it all. I waited outside the room with Angelo to see the patient.

A doctor had already briefed us on his condition: stable but weak. He’d collapsed on his way back from Atlantic City and needed emergency surgery. Now he needed to recover. He’d be here for weeks, which meant that half the might of the De Sanctis family needed to be stationed outside in shifts for the duration. Antonio De Sanctis was a powerful man, and he had plenty of enemies. If word got out that he was a sitting duck in the hospital, his life would be in further danger.

“Sofia, come in,” my uncle called from my father’s room.

Franco stepped back when I approached and let me in. Silvio followed, to my annoyance, and Angelo waited outside.

The sight of Antonio lying in a too-big hospital bed, surrounded by machines and cables, did something strange to me. “Papa.” I approached his side and took his slack hand in mine. He looked so small in that state-of-the-art bed. He’d always loomed so large to me, been so powerful, yet he was just a man, and he’d nearly died.

“*Figlia*, don’t look like you’re attending a funeral. *Cazzo*, I’m not dead yet,” Antonio chastised. He’d read my mind.

I nodded and let go of his hand. He looked tired, and with the surgery so fresh, he'd probably be asleep again soon.

"I need you to stay home for a while. No school, no outings. Just sit tight at home. We need the dust to settle on all this."

"I'll keep an eye on Sofia, *Zio*," Silvio said from his position, lounging against the wall.

Gooseflesh of disgust and warning crept over me. My cousin was really becoming a problem.

Antonio blinked his watery eyes. "*Va bene*. Renato cannot be disturbed by this. He has bigger problems in Italy. No one calls him," he warned, silencing me with a look when I opened my mouth to protest.

"Franco is in charge here, and Silvio is in charge at the compound. This is my decision." He coughed with the effort of speaking and grimaced in pain.

My uncle stepped toward me, nodding. "Whatever you decide, brother. Sofia, go home now. Silvio will take you."

Just like that, I was dismissed. I turned away and stepped quickly to the side when Silvio reached for me.

A muscle in his jaw ticked, and he reached out and grabbed my arm regardless, his fingers pressing hard into my skin. "Don't make a scene, Sofia. You heard the boss. I'm in charge of your ass at home. If you want me to be gentle with it, don't piss me off."

He walked into the corridor and dragged me along. Angelo fell into step beside me, his eyes tight and worried when they caught mine.

Silvio chuckled, holding me close to whisper in my ear, "It looks like the days of hiding behind Daddy are ending. Soon, it'll just be you and me. My father won't stop me from taking what I want. Renato isn't to be disturbed, and he's a fucking ocean away. Oh, and I also made no kind of deal with Kirill Chernov to return his brother alive. This week is looking up."

I pushed him away and strode down the corridor as he dogged my heels. "The doctor said my father is already recovering, so

I wouldn't be making any plans you might regret.”

Silvio smirked. “Yeah, well, it's dangerous in the hospital. Your father has a lot of enemies.”

I stopped and stared at him. “Are you threatening us?”

Silvio shrugged. “I'm not doing anything but pointing out a fact. Don't worry. My father will make an excellent boss when the need arrives.”

I forced a nonchalant laugh. “When? You mean *if*. Besides, in that event, Renato will come home. You'll never be the heir of the De Sanctis family, Silvio, so stop panting after it. It's embarrassing.”

We reached his car, a penis-shaped red shiny sports car, parked illegally at the curb.

“The only embarrassing thing will be how you beg me to go easy on you when your world falls down. Soon, I might have the power to see you married off to old Vincenzo Moroni. Or maybe I'll have you first. Take what you've been dangling in front of me for years and send you off anyway.”

He laughed, and a chill ran down my spine. If I needed a sign that my father was in real danger, Silvio casually threatening to rape me was it. Things in my family had just gotten a lot more dangerous.

“So, Franco's planning a coup? Is that where you're going with this?”

Silvio pushed me into the car, hardly listening to me, and Angelo got in the back. We both watched Silvio round the front of the car.

“Don't push, Sofia. Don't let him know you suspect anything,” my bodyguard said quietly.

I bit my tongue with an effort. He was right, but anger dulled my self-control. I gathered it, piece by piece, reconstructing the unfeeling, aloof mask I'd relied on to survive my family.

Silvio got into the car with a grunt, rocking the entire vehicle. “You heard Antonio. I'm in charge at the house. You won't be attending classes or leaving the compound, not while

your father is in hospital. I can't spare any more men. We'll be stretched thin, dividing manpower between us and him."

"I can't miss school all the time," I pointed out.

Silvio shrugged. "Who cares? You're getting married soon, aren't you? Might as well drop out now."

NIKOLAI

I felt the change in the house's energy immediately. Something was going on. I'd lain in the silence of my basement cell for so long, it was no longer just silence. I could make out footsteps above, doors closing, and muffled conversations. I couldn't make out the words, but the tone was clear. Something stressful was happening in the rest of Casa Nera.

I was recovering slowly with Carmella's help. The older housekeeper had been tending me in a deliberate act of defiance against Silvio that was brave in a way few people were. Her silent, stoic refusal to be cowed, even when her face was bruised and her hair ripped out, showed an enduring kind of strength that I'd only seen in the women in my life.

An unbending spine of steel lay beneath her housecoat and apron.

Finally, I was well enough to move.

Now, in the thick of night, I was outside Sofia's door.

Bending Angelo's arm to free me and get me up here wasn't difficult. He had a weak point to press on, and I knew how to press.

"Stand guard. Knock if someone comes," I told him and took the key he was holding from him. There were only three, apparently, one for Sofia, one for her father, and one for the man Antonio trusted to protect her.

Angelo unlocked the door, looking conflicted. I slapped him on the shoulder.

“I told you not to worry about her anymore. It’s my job now. You worry about yourself and getting me the shit I need.”

Dismissing him, I entered Sofia’s room and shut the door behind me, locking it for good measure.

The room smelled like her, and I sucked great lungfuls of the sweet and spicy scent.

The room was dark, with only light from the row of windows illuminating the bulky furniture. A huge four-poster bed sat in the middle of the room, swathed in curtains. One was tied open, and there was a shape on the white sheets inside.

I approached, appreciating the sight of her relaxed and content for once. I looked as long as I wanted. She was so pristine and beautiful; it made me aware of the contrast between us. She deserved so much better than me, but that wasn’t an option anymore. We had worked too far under each other’s skin. There was no way back.

I moved away and headed for the private bathroom inside her room. My reflection was straight out of a horror movie. I was filthy with old blood, dirt, and grime. I was lucky Antonio was having me taken to the toilet twice a day. The high and mighty De Sanctis don mustn’t like the thought of a grown man shitting in the corner of one of his rooms, dungeon or not.

I turned the shower on and shucked off my dirty clothes. The shower was strong and luxurious. It rained down on my battered body, washing the old, crusted blood down the drain in a swirl of brown. It hurt and healed at the same time. I could have spent hours under there, washing and enjoying being free of the cramped position of the basement. But my attention was tugged at constantly by the woman in the next room.

I got out and wrapped a towel around my hips. I stared critically at my wounds. They weren’t nearly as bad as Silvio thought. Just like everything he did, even when beating a restrained man, he did a piss-poor job, luckily for me.

I couldn’t shave in case Silvio worked out that I’d been tended to more than was allowed. He was as thick as mince, but sometimes, even he worked things out.

Instead, I dried myself off as best I could, ignoring the bruises and the slight cuts that burned on my wrists, and made my way back to the bedroom.

I approached the bed.

Sofia was lying on her side, one hand under the pillow. I'd spent so long in the dark below ground that I was turning into a nocturnal creature, able to see in the dark. Her hair striped the pillow in ribbons, and I reached out and touched the satin strands. My heart felt heavy, the thump of the beat echoing in my bones. I stepped closer, slowly lowering my weight to the mattress, letting it dip and roll Sofia toward me.

Her lips parted, and she sighed, distracting me, just as she moved. It happened in a blur. One second, she was lying as peaceful as a sleeping princess, waiting for the prince's kiss to wake her from her long slumber. The next, she was whipping her hand from beneath the pillow toward me, and the tiny amount of light in the room glinted off a knife.

The blade pressed against my neck before I could think to disarm her.

She kneeled on the bed, her lethal stiletto blade held tightly against my jugular. This time, there was the chance that she'd cut to kill. I didn't know if she could see me in the dark.

I pulled at her arm, throwing her off balance. She fell into me, swearing, as her other hand came up to fight me. I bore her back easily. She was so petite. Despite her moves, which were impressive, she was half asleep, and her reactions were slowed.

We landed on the bed, and she gasped as I wrestled the knife from her. It was just like the first night at the cabin off the highway, except tonight, I would come inside her. We both knew it. This time, she turned somehow, and was lying with her face pressed to the bed, ass wriggling temptingly in front of me.

My hands went to her thin camisole slip and tugged at it. It tore up the back like gossamer wings. She gasped at my brutality, but I was already straddling her thighs. Once she was

pinned down, I turned to the curtains and pulled one back further and reached for the lamp on the nightstand.

I leaned in and spoke in her ear. “Tonight, it’s my turn, prom queen. Fair’s fair. And I want to see you. Every single inch.”

She flushed, twisting her head so her eyes met mine. She wasn’t fighting me now. Not even a little.

“Fuck, you can’t be real,” I muttered. I turned my attention to her body, running a hand over her bare back. She was a work of art.

She arched as my hand landed on the round globes of her ass and pulled them roughly apart. My towel had slipped off in the tussle, and my cock was drooling pre-cum from the tip onto her ass cheeks.

“What are you doing?” she squealed, trying to wriggle away, embarrassed by my perusal.

I landed a reprimanding hand on her behind, the sound shockingly hot as it carried throughout the room. “Hold still, or I’ll give you ten more and make you count them.” I took her rounded cheeks and pulled them apart, kneeling over her thighs now. “I want to look at all the beautiful little holes I have the privilege of owning. I want to see all the places I’m going to leave my mark on you... my prize,” I murmured, draping across her back and kissing her neck.

She’d taken the Band-Aid off from behind her ear where I’d cut the tracker out more than a week ago. Wrapping her hair into a rope, I turned her head to give myself access to the tiny cut. With every kiss to the healing wound, I pressed an apology into her skin.

I moved down her back, kissing and biting at her spine. She was breathing hard, her whole body held effortlessly in place by my strength, and I enjoyed the control she gave me over her. Of course, I could just take it, but her sweet surrender was hotter than anything.

When I reached her ass, I did what I’d been waiting a lifetime to do, and bit her cheeks, sucking the odd love bite into her smooth skin.

“Are you trying to leave a mark?” she wondered, and tensed when I traced a finger down her wet cleft.

“Fuck, yes. I want to tattoo my name, right here,” I muttered, grabbing her full, bubble cheeks.

I spread them wide before leaning in and licking her. She tensed immediately, trying to push me away, but I didn’t allow her that much movement. Using my arms to pin the back of her thighs, I kept her spread before me and hummed against her skin.

“It’s my tongue or my cock, prom queen. You decide. Regardless, this ass is mine, and I’d prefer to break you in slowly.”

She shuddered beneath me but didn’t fight as I leaned in and slid my tongue up the length of her slit, from clit to ass. She had no idea that every single part of her turned me on. She twitched as I used my finger to play with her ass, my tongue fucking into her. I licked and sucked at her until she was a mess before turning her over and diving back into her pussy. I feasted on her clit until she came hard. When she burst in my mouth, I lapped up her juices and then leaned back, giving her time to recover.

Fuck, she made quite the sight, lying naked against the white sheets. Her olive skin and curves, the dark hair on her mound, and the dusky rose of her nipples all called me to consume her.

She leaned on her elbows, creasing her middle in half. Embarrassment blazed in her cheeks at my thorough perusal.

“You are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” My voice was rough.

“The seamstress wanted me to lose five pounds,” she whispered after a moment.

A dismissive snort left me. “Tell me her name. I’ll kill her for you.”

A smile blazed across Sofia’s stunning face, and she shook her head. “Killing people can’t be your go-to method for fixing things.”

“Why not? It’s very effective. I’ll prove it to you when I kill your cousin,” I murmured. My hand fell to my cock, desperate to be touched, as I allowed my gaze to linger on all her curves and hollows.

“Are you really going to kill him?” Sofia asked, her eyes huge.

“Fuck, yes, and anyone else who gets in my way. Now, hold your knees apart for me,” I instructed her.

She flushed again, innocent as a fucking schoolgirl, despite being twenty-two. “Why?” she challenged, because Sofia had never heard a word from my mouth that she hadn’t wanted to argue with.

“Because I’m going to eat you again until you squirt all over this bed, and then I’m going to fuck you. This time, I’m in charge, and I don’t negotiate.”

“I’m on the pill, just so you know... in case you were worried.”

“Do I look like I was worried?” She cracked me up sometimes. She had no idea how long-term my intentions were with her.

She swallowed. “Most guys would be, I guess.”

“In case you haven’t realized, I’m not most guys, and while being on birth control is disappointing, it’s nothing that can’t be remedied in the future.”

My words sank through her. She looked shocked. “Meaning?”

“What do you think? Now, hold your knees apart or I’ll tie you down just how I want you, and I won’t let you loose for hours.”

She bit her lip, fighting a refusal, but pulled her knees up and spread herself wide open for me.

I grinned as I lowered my head again and licked up her center. “Good girl. That wasn’t so hard now, was it?”

“Fuck you, Nikolai,” she muttered, and groaned as I paused over her pussy and spit down on her twitching center, making

her wetter.

“Oh, you are, *lastochka*, and you will be for the rest of the night.” I dove in, lavaging her clit and stretching her with my fingers.

She came when I had three buried inside her pussy and one in her ass, my tongue flicking her clit like a madman. She was loud when she came.

I pressed one last kiss to her twitching pussy and moved up her. “Keep it down. What will poor Angelo think?”

Sofia laughed breathlessly. “Angelo is the one helping you?”

“Your bodyguard is the only one as motivated as me to get the fuck out of this hellhole.”

I kissed her neck, sliding my cock just inside her. The muscles were so tight; it was an effort to part them. She was wet as hell from the tip fucking, and her tight muscles parted a little more with every second.

I lowered a hand to her clit to loosen her up more and another to her throat. I loved the feeling of her pulse pounding against my fingers. Showing me everything she really felt, even while her mouth denied my effect on her. Her heart knew the truth.

“Was the other night your first time, prom queen? Tell me the truth.”

She gasped, arching her back and scratching at my shoulders as I pressed deeper.

“It sounds like you already know,” she replied on an exhale.

“Well, it was hard to tell if it was my blood or yours in the morning,” I muttered, steadily entering her, even though her body seemed to be trying to push me out.

It felt better than anything I’d ever experienced. Knowing she hadn’t been with anyone else soothed the cut inside me caused by her and brother’s engagement.

While I’d been waiting for her, I never dreamed that she had waited for me. Of course, it could just have been Antonio’s measures of control that had stopped her from being with

anyone else, but the dark, possessive part of me didn't care about that. All it cared about was that this woman was mine, and only mine. She had no history to sigh over or remember fondly with other men. I was the only man she'd ever have inside her. Just the thought nearly had me coming when I was only three inches deep.

"You know what this means, Sofia?" I nudged my hips an inch or two, in and out, warming her up and stretching out her untried hole. No wonder she was tight as hell.

She bit her full bottom lip, staring at me with hazy eyes. She looked desperate to be fucked. I promised myself that one day, I'd capture that exact expression and hang the photograph on the wall of a house we lived in together.

"It means that you're mine, and you have been for a long time. I'm all your firsts, and I'll be your lasts. We are only ever for each other."

"That sounds like a proposal, you lunatic," she muttered.

I gently squeezed her neck to encourage her to answer me, resisting her desperate attempts to pull me deeper into her. "It does, doesn't it? Let's make it official."

As I leaned down to swipe her knife from the sheets, my cock pressed deeper into her, and her muscles finally parted for me. I surged in, her tight channel threatening to wring every bit of blood from my length.

Holding the knife, I scored a twisting shallow cut on my palm and reached for Sofia's. I moved quickly before she could be afraid. Her hand was tiny and supple in mine as I carefully cut her. Three neat lines. She cried out, and I rotated my hips, dragging my cock against all the secret places inside her, covering the pain with pleasure. She blinked up at me, her lust clearing to see me pressing our bleeding palms together.

"Marriage vows can't contain all the things we are to each other. There is nothing that can, except this."

Her fingers wound around mine, her expression half want, half horror. I was familiar with such a look. I knew what I was. A

maniac, a monster, a damned man, through and through. Yet, I was her monster, and I always would be.

Tossing the knife aside, I finally lowered myself to her, my hips picking up their relentless pace, and driving into her. A hand to her clit as I leaned on one elbow, still holding her cut hand to mine, pinned by her head, had her moaning and gasping.

I kissed her hard, swallowing her words and little moans of pleasure, my heart filling with things I'd never felt before.

She was holding me to her, panting against me, pressing closer. I wanted to disappear inside her and live for days. I wasn't going to last. It had been too long, and she felt too good. I hadn't been with another woman since I'd met Sofia. I'd lost all interest in anyone but her. That was the way my brand of obsession worked. I'd met her, fallen into a black hole of want, and then gone to jail in Russia.

"Nikolai! You need to get back downstairs." A sudden hiss through the door sent ice cascading down my back. *Fuck.*

Sofia tensed, looking over my shoulder. "Niko—" she started, worry clouding her features.

"Shh, I'm not going anywhere until you come," I told her firmly, rubbing her clit harder so she gasped and wriggled against me.

Knowing I needed to finish up quickly, I rolled her back toward her pillow and pulled out. She protested softly as I laid her on her front.

"Relax. I'd never leave you hanging," I chuckled against her ear as I lay across her back.

My wet dick slipped between her legs and right back into her pussy. She stifled a cry, and her hand flew to her mouth as I fucked her, prone from behind. I snaked a hand around her front, finding her clit and circling it quickly. The angle my dick was entering her hit the front wall of her cunt, and she moaned every single time I sank inside. She was so wet, the sound filled the air, a lewd wet smacking noise I wished I could record and play on a loop, it was so hot.

She was rising quickly now, her hips humping back to meet my hard thrusts. I rubbed viciously over her clit when her core clenched around me. She went rigid, her face buried in the pillows to be quiet, and her pussy tightened so hard that I had no choice but to follow her.

I exploded inside her, coming hard with long, hot ropes that filled her up and dripped out, running down her folds and against my balls where they nestled against her. Her entire pussy pulsed and milked my length. I came for so long that when the feeling ebbed, I wondered wildly how much time had passed. Minutes or hours? I had no real grasp of it. We'd gone somewhere outside of time, and now I was disoriented.

She was boneless when I slid out on a rush of cum. I fought the urge to find something to pop inside her to hold my spend in place, and instead enjoyed the sight of it welling out of her hole and down the tops of her thighs. I stood on shaky legs and pulled the covers over her naked body to her back. I planned to have the rest of my life to keep this woman filled up with my cum.

Her head was turned to the side, and her dark eyes watched me as I crossed the room and pulled my dirty captive clothes on, tucking my spent dick into my jeans. I crossed back to her.

"Niko," Sofia whispered as I crouched near her face.

I smoothed her hair back off her sweaty neck. "Yes, prom queen?"

She wetted her lips, still catching her breath. Her eyes burned into mine. "Don't die," she muttered after a second.

I nodded, giving her my patented smirk, trying to ease her fears. I didn't have to fake the elation I felt. Knowing she was lying there, full of my cum, about to fall back asleep, smelling like me, marked by me... it was more than a man like me could ever expect in this world. It was far more than I'd ever dared to dream.

"Yeah, well, I can't make any promises," I told her with another smirk and kissed her forehead. "Try to not piss anyone off either. I know it just comes naturally to you."

She smirked at my teasing, and her eyes fluttered shut as I made for the door.

I left the room with a merry fucking skip to my step.

SOFIA

The rest of the week dragged by as my father slowly recovered in the hospital. The house was full of Franco's loyal men, while the hospital was filled with my father's faction. Franco held meetings in my father's office every day, and Silvio grew more and more confident. It was obvious they were planning something, and I had no idea what to do. I was locked down in Casa Nera, not even allowed to go to the hospital to visit my father. My uncle told me it was too dangerous.

The house was in chaos. Franco had dismissed a few of the staff for unknown reasons, and now only Carmella held the line against the mess that the rabble of Franco and Silvio's men left.

In every family, there were men inclined more toward one leader or another. While my father had been boss for a long time, there was a day when Franco and Antonio had both been contenders. Franco had never given up hope of one day taking the crown. He seemed to think that day was here.

I waited daily with bated breath to hear that my father had passed. If Franco wanted him dead, it seemed impossible that anyone could stop it, not when he held interim authority. My father had a blind spot for his own family. He didn't know that his son hated him, his daughter wanted him dead, and his brother wanted his power.

Today was Sunday dinner. A full week had passed since my father had told me I was to get engaged again. A week since

I'd crept downstairs and lost my virginity to the dangerous captive in the basement. I had exactly zero regrets about it.

I made my way downstairs, nervously smoothing my dress. It was knee-length, white, and lacy. Chiara would call it "church clothes." I wished she were here.

Franco had held court all morning. He was like a general preparing for war. Nerves coiled in my gut as I entered the dining room and glimpsed a lot of faces in Casa Nera who weren't my father's regular attendees. It felt like Franco was asserting his power by inviting his cronies to lunch this week. His satisfied, benevolent smile followed me around the table. I didn't think my uncle would enjoy handing power back to my father when he got out of the hospital. *If he did.*

The room was noisy. There was a chaotic air, like men celebrating the downfall of Caesar before sizing each other up and fighting for the crown. All this, and my father wasn't even dead yet.

"Sofia, get me a drink." Silvio's voice cut through the haze of my bubbling hysteria.

I poured him a drink, wishing I had something I could spike it with. Cyanide would be ideal, but I'd settle for a laxative.

I passed him a glass of wine.

"I wanted scotch."

My smile nearly slipped as I placed the glass of wine beside Silvio.

"Is that a problem?" His smirk burned my skin, and not in a good way.

"No problem."

I turned back to the bar along one wall. Braying laughter and crude words flew around wildly. The men at dinner were getting drunk, more than they ever dared to when my father was sitting at the head of the table.

"What about you, Sofia? I heard Antonio found a new husband for you?" a loud voice cut through the din.

I turned back to the table, painfully aware of all the eyes trained on me in my bridelike dress. Why had I worn this? “Yes, apparently. But he has to focus on recovering and getting the house in order first.” My gaze raked over Franco in the boss’s seat.

He nodded, an indulgent smile playing on his lips. “Yes, *carina*, he will have to sort out the mess that his illness has caused if he comes home.” He crossed himself piously, praying for the health of his brother while he clearly couldn’t wait to take his place.

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll be home soon. He’s strong. I hope he’ll like what he finds when he gets here.”

I put Silvio’s glass of scotch down a little too forcefully, and the liquid seeped through the Band-Aid on my palm. It burned a little, but not too badly. I liked the reminder of Nikolai’s initial there. It stiffened my spine and helped me to keep my head high.

The men around the table went back to talking while Silvio grabbed my wrist before I could escape to the kitchen. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I eat dinner in the kitchen on Sundays with Carmella.”

“How is the old witch? Recovering?” Silvio’s smirk grated on my nerves. He peered up at my face. “I have to say, it was satisfying seeing the mark of my hand on your face, Sofia. Why have you hidden it?”

The bruise from his hand had faded somewhat. With makeup on, it was unnoticeable.

“You want me to wash my face and tell Franco who did it?”

Silvio’s smile grew strained for a moment, and then he shrugged. “I don’t think he’d care. You might have to adjust your way of thinking quickly if you want to leave here in one piece.”

“No matter what, I’m still Franco’s niece.”

Silvio nodded. “Or you’re the daughter of a failed, overturned don. Quite the different perspective, isn’t it?”



A FEW HOURS LATER, I was able to sneak out of dinner. I left the room as quickly as I could, a drowning feeling in my chest. Silvio was getting too confident. Franco was acting like it was already known that my father wouldn't be coming home. I couldn't call Renato. He was out of reach, just like he'd warned me. Men more loyal to my father were protecting him in the hospital. I was alone.

I headed downstairs and hurried along the hall to Nikolai's cell. I found the door slightly ajar. The urgency mounting in me made me shake. I knew in my belly that Nikolai Chernov needed to get the fuck out of Casa Nera, and now. Shit was about to hit the fan. I could feel it.

I pushed open the door to Nikolai's cell and practically fell inside. Then I pulled up short. Angelo was in there, crouched beside Nikolai. He stood when he saw me.

"Sofia, what's wrong?"

I stared at my big, burly bodyguard for a long moment. "It's okay. I know you're the one who's helping him."

Angelo was quiet for a long moment. A muscle ticked in his powerful jaw before he nodded. "I can't do nothing and let her be taken from me. I won't."

I nodded, my heart strangely too big and too painful at the same time. "You're a good man, Angelo. I hope it works out for you."

"You, too, Miss Sofia."

"Don't call me that. I'm just Sofia these days, and if Franco and Silvio have their way—" I shuddered, unwilling to speak the words aloud.

"What about them?" Nikolai demanded. He beckoned me over; his wrists were untied. "Come here and kiss me hello, prom queen."

He was leaning against the wall, and as I got closer, he reached for me. He kissed me deeply, uncaring that Angelo was watching. It felt thrilling to be touched with such casual possessiveness. I clung to his chest as he pulled back.

“Don’t be scared of Franco and Silvio. You’re stronger than you know.”

How did this man have so much faith in me when I had none in myself? “I’m not. I’m crumbling into pieces. I don’t know what to do.”

I wrapped my arms around myself. I was getting desperate, like there was an elastic band inside me stretching to a breaking point or a clock over our heads ticking down. Something bad was going to happen.

“Yes, you do.” Nikolai’s hands came up and cupped my face. “You know what to do. Leave with me, Sofia. Angelo and I are ready. Tonight, the men are busy getting wrecked upstairs, aren’t they?”

I nodded. The air around the dining room had been reckless and celebratory. “They’re indulging a lot.”

“Good, that suits us fine. We want them to get drunk and fuck off. Your cousin and his father usually visit a whorehouse in town on a Sunday. Angelo told me.”

“They do?”

“They sure do. It looks like Silvio didn’t learn his lesson about how dangerous that was the first time. When they go out and hopefully black out there after getting off, we’re leaving. All three of us, and Carmella, too, if she wants to go.”

I jerked out his touch and stared at him. “You’d take Carmella with us?”

He grinned. Fuck, that wicked look would be the death of me. It was already too valuable to me.

“Hell, yes. She’s braver than the rest of us put together, and if she wants to go, I’ll take her. She deserves a fresh start, just like Angelo.”

“What about me? Don’t I deserve one?”

He laid an arm over my shoulders and pulled me into him, holding me close. His breath feathered across my cheek, and he pressed a kiss to my forehead. “You leaving is non-negotiable. I won’t leave you here with Silvio. You might call me a monster, but I’m the devil you know, and believe it or not, you are the only person in this world who makes me wish I was a better man.”

Nikolai stared at me, unrepentant, even after that confession that rent my heart in two. I couldn’t even begin to process his words. They were too terrifying. Too hopeful and too sad all at once.

He stroked his thumb across the apple of my cheek. “You belong with me, and that’s that, I’m afraid. I’m the man you’ll never get rid of. Tell me you’re coming willingly, but understand that I’ll take you anyway.”

Nikolai’s command was undeniable. How he managed the presence he had at such a young age, I had no idea. I simply flocked to his power. He made me feel safe with just a word.

“If I come with you, then what?” I stared up into his mercurial eyes.

“I don’t know. You’ll just have to trust me. Can you trust me, prom queen?”

I swallowed a knot in my throat. It felt like I was standing on a high cliff, and below was a gray sea. I wouldn’t know what would happen if I jumped, but I couldn’t stay where I was.

He brought a hand to my face, cupping it firmly with that magic touch of his that weakened my knees. Something about this man, right or wrong, fit all the broken parts of me, and made me feel whole, even if just for a second. After a day of terror, just being touched by this man soothed my fears and anxiety.

I took a deep, steadying breath and jumped.

“Okay. I’m coming with you.”

NIKOLAI

For some men who lived on the wrong side of the law, there was a temptation to become addicted to the power. Ending a life was like that. A heady feeling, making you powerful in a way that could be addictive. I can safely say I've only felt like a god two times in my life. When I saw my father, my mother's killer, choke on his own blood and slump down dead, and right now, with the woman I'd been obsessed with for five years, telling me she'd come with me. Captive no more, Sofia De Sanctis was mine by her own personal admission. I didn't just feel like a god at that moment. I was one.

Then the universe, sensing that something unnaturally good had happened to me, swung hard in the other direction.

"Sofia!" Angelo's harsh whisper had only just registered when the squeal of the door, metal against stone, echoed around the room.

"Well, what the fuck do we have here?"

Silvio swayed on the threshold, clearly drunk as hell. His state of inebriation, however, didn't stop his eyes from widening as he took in the scene. Sofia tightly pressed against my chest, and my untied arms wrapped around her.

He lurched into the room, and I moved Sofia behind me. Men entered behind him. Great, he wasn't alone. I flashed a look at Angelo, telling him not to interfere. I needed them to think he was following Sofia around, like always.

Ignoring a million hurts, I got ready to defend Sofia. I wasn't tied up now, and I wouldn't be letting this fucker take a piece from either of us. I'd fought worse odds before than five to one, and better yet, the De Sanctis men were drunk.

Silvio laughed, a sound that sent disgust and unease crawling along my spine. Then he pulled a gun from the back waistband of his slacks and pointed it at me, nearly point-blank range. I fucking hated guns. They evened the playing field far too much. Then Silvio swung it around and pointed it at Sofia, turning my blood to ice.

“Keep it on me, motherfucker. I'm the one planning how to kill you right now,” I said, sidestepping to put myself between Sofia and the end of the gun.

Silvio tutted and nodded to his men. They advanced on Sofia. I growled low in my throat and lunged in front of her.

“Nikolai, don't!”

Her voice stilled my heart. She put a gentle hand on my arm and looked up at me, seeming more like an otherworldly being at that moment than mere flesh and bone. Then she stepped around me and gave herself over to Silvio's men, unresisting.

She wasn't fighting? Why wasn't she fighting? I caught her eye and saw the fear in them. She was scared for me. She was afraid that one wrong move would have Silvio shooting me, like he so desperately wanted.

When she got close to him, Silvio hauled her into his arms and pressed the gun to her temple. Then he had the audacity to smile at me. Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

The house was quiet around us. It seemed the revelers who had gathered on a quiet Sunday afternoon, although their don was laid up in hospital, had dispersed. It was just Silvio and his men, a fact that only sent more tension brewing in my gut.

“Lock him up. I don't want him interrupting us. And don't use the cuffs. He's clearly found a way around them,” Silvio said smugly. His feet were slightly unsteady as he hauled Sofia against him and pressed his face into the side of hers and

inhaled deeply. “Don’t even think about it, Chernov,” he reminded me as my fists clenched with fury.

I wanted to rip the man’s head off.

His men pulled my arms back and bound them behind me. My muscles cramped with tension at being back in the same position they’d been in for too long. Despite the pain, I felt like I was floating somewhere far above it, outside my body. Nothing else mattered but Sofia’s eyes fixed on mine.

“Think this through, Silvio. Antonio De Sanctis could make a full recovery. You think he’d accept his daughter being hurt —”

“He doesn’t need to accept it. He’ll blame you.”

“And Kirill will start a war with your family that you won’t survive,” I pointed out.

Silvio swayed and considered that for a moment before his lip curled. “Who says Antonio wouldn’t kill you himself if he knew you’d fucked his little virgin daughter? How was she? Tight? Did she cry?” Silvio turned his attention to Sofia.

I pulled at the zip ties, testing their strength.

“Why? Is that what it takes to get you hard these days? Or maybe you need the sound to direct you to your dick under all that flab,” I tossed at him.

He tensed, still so very egotistical. “Be careful, Nikolai. You’re not leaving this room again, ever, so you might not want to piss me off if you don’t want it to hurt even more than it already will.” He swore at me and jerked his head to his men. “Wait outside. Seeing as this little bitch is already stretched out, another cock in her loose hole won’t make a difference.”

His words threatened to break the remaining composure I had. It was one thing to kill me. I’d had it coming with this man, but Sofia was another matter. If he raped her, there was no way he’d let her live.

I needed to piss Silvio off so he would make a mistake. I knew exactly how.

I laughed loudly, sending the heat in Silvio's face climbing higher, staining his cheeks.

"Who said I don't want it to hurt?" I goaded him. I kept an eye on the men disappearing out the door. It shut, staying only slightly ajar behind them. "Are you too embarrassed to get naked in front of your men? How pathetic."

Silvio jerked toward me, forgetting Sofia for a moment. My eyes met hers, and a plan flashed between us at that very second.

As soon as anger loosened Silvio's grip, Sofia moved. She wrenched herself from his hold, using her body weight to drop, and sending the gun pointing into the space above her head. She spun, quick as a flash, and kicked Silvio in the knee. He went down with a grunt. She'd gotten the upper hand for a second, and there was nothing I could do about it, tied up like I was.

"Get the gun," I hissed, straining toward them, seriously considering if I could rip my arms off to get closer.

She reached across her cousin, heading for the gun just as the fucker recovered enough to twist aside, sending Sofia falling across him. She recovered faster and jumped up, almost clearing his touch. She paused mid-flight as Silvio dropped the gun and used his remaining hand to grab a hard handful of her long black hair. He wrenched her backward, and her feet slid on the basement stone, her body hitting the floor hard.

"You stupid bitch," Silvio swore at her, and straddled her so that her arms were pinned at her sides.

I couldn't look away, even as I pulled against the pipe. My shoulder popped, but it didn't help me get off the pipe. Pain vibrated down my arm.

I hadn't been able to get out in all the days I'd been here, but I'd never been so motivated.

Silvio banged Sofia's head against the floor and caught her by the throat. His hand tightened on her neck, and she let out a soft cry.

Fuck, no. Every single cell in my body rebelled against the sight of her being hurt.

With a roar that came from the depths of my soul, I bore my entire weight forward and ripped half the pipe off the wall.

It crashed to the floor as I launched myself at Silvio. My hands were still tied behind me, and my right shoulder ached in a way that hinted at dislocation. Without my hands, I had no choice but to hit him with my body.

I flew at him, getting a good head-butt in when I reached him. He slumped to the side, and his foot hit the gun, sending it sliding across the floor toward the door. He rolled away, and Sofia coughed, dragging air back into her lungs. I advanced on Silvio, getting my feet under me with difficulty, given the numbness of my arms, which was quickly spreading across my chest. Breathing hard, I stood over him and kicked him quickly with cold precision. *Kidney, liver, spleen.* The man would piss blood for weeks and think of me.

As I pulled my foot back to deliver another kick, this one to the back of his head, the sound of a gun cocking stilled me. I turned slowly, praying I was about to see Sofia holding the gun.

Of course, that would have taken the kind of luck I'd never had.

Men crowded in the doorway, and Silvio's father, Franco, stood on the threshold, an incredulous and furious expression on his aging face.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he thundered.

His gun was trained on me, and he wasn't nearly as drunk as his son. It was obviously the first time he'd realized that his son had been fucking around with the prisoner in the bowels of Casa Nera, and his niece, too, for that matter.

Sofia stood, her bare skin smudged with dirt and blood. Her white dress was ripped, sagging open at the shoulder, and blood dripped from the corner of her mouth. Franco took her in with horror.

“*Zio*, Silvio brought me down here. He-he threatened me,” she said in a hoarse whisper.

Franco frowned and turned an incredulous look at his son, who was out cold. He jerked his head over his shoulder. “Bring him upstairs,” he instructed his men. “We don’t have time for this. Sofia, tell me what happened.”

No, don’t. That man isn’t on your side, I wanted to shout at her, but there was nothing stopping Franco from shooting me, an escaped prisoner, dead like a dog right here, and then Sofia would be alone.

She swallowed. “He-he strangled me and threatened to...” She broke off, not finding the words to explain to her uncle that his son had threatened to rape and kill her. It was too horrifying.

Franco studied her for a long moment and then nodded. “Your father has taken a turn, Sofia. I have to go to the hospital.”

“He has?” Fear coated Sofia’s words. It sat unspoken between them that Antonio would be furious to hear about this.

Franco nodded, his expression ice-cold. “He shouldn’t be upset right now, and you’re clearly distraught. I don’t know what happened here, but I’ll hear Silvio’s side when he wakes up, then we’ll decide what to do.”

“Silvio’s side? You can see what happened,” Sofia ground out.

I wanted to clamp my hand over her mouth. There was nothing I could do but stand there like a statue before Franco’s gun, knowing both of our fates were being decided at this exact moment. Which way Franco would go would decide if we died today or lived to fight another.

“No, I can see that something happened, and I’ve heard your side, but it’s only that. Your side. I’ll hear my son out. Until then, I think it’s best that you recover somewhere secure. You’re clearly hysterical.”

He turned to his men again. “Bring her.”

Sofia exclaimed softly as she was pulled from the room, casting a last look at me. Men entered and picked up Silvio’s inert body. More men approached me slowly like I was a wild

animal capable of ripping out throats. They were right. At this moment, I was more animal than man. I couldn't stop a snarl from leaving me as they approached.

"Be careful, Chernov. I won't hesitate," Franco said calmly. I believed him. His brother was on death's doorstep, and he'd made no promise to spare me. Even if it opened a rift with the Chernov bratva, it was unlikely he'd care. It would be a chance for him to show off a little power before Renato returned from Italy. Maybe he even hoped to dispute the younger man's claim to being boss.

I swallowed my anger. I had to focus right now. I couldn't get Sofia out of here if I was dead. I'd already dislocated a shoulder, and my hands were so cut up from the zip ties that blood was dripping freely onto the floor. They dragged me backward, swearing about the pipe where it had come loose from the wall and would no longer be effective to keep someone tied up.

"Tie his legs, too. He won't get far." Franco's dismissive words reached me as his men hurried to follow his orders.

In the end, they left me lying on my blazingly painful arms, on my back on the floor, with my ankles tied with zip ties. The freezing floor prickled at my skin even through my filthy T-shirt. I was glad I could still feel something, considering the numbness spreading from my shoulders.

I lay there and listened with all my might to where they might have taken Sofia. Franco had made it sound like she couldn't be trusted back in her room.

I strained my eyes as the sounds of talking and footsteps in the corridor faded. After a moment, I heard it. The soft sound of someone crying.

I rolled onto my side, and pain lit up every single nerve. I wriggled myself toward the sound. Most of the rooms on this hellhole level of Sofia's childhood home had a grate running into a drain at the corner. They had to be connected beneath the floor, because now I could hear the soft sounds of someone in the next room.

Sofia. My little swallow.

“Sofia, *lastochka*, don’t cry,” I groaned into the grate, flopping onto my front over it, foul smells drifting into my face.

After a long moment, her incredulous voice reached me. “Nikolai?”

“It’s me. You’re not alone. I’m here,” I told her in as calm a tone as I could. “I’m here, and I’ve got you.”

“Franco’s going to kill you. I know it,” she said, and a fresh flood of tears seemed to hit her.

“He might plan to, but we’ll be long gone by then. Don’t worry.”

“Really?”

“Really. We’re already gone. One way or another.” I knew in my gut that if Franco killed me, he’d probably kill Sofia, too. She’d seen too much; she was a liability. The only hope was if Antonio De Sanctis died, and Silvio decided he wanted his cousin around to torment and abuse after. But Sofia wouldn’t be able to take that kind of existence for long.

If Angelo didn’t come through, we were both as good as dead. It was a sobering yet strangely comforting thought. Like my mother before me, knowing that there could be an end to the pain and darkness was a relief. One thing I knew for sure, Sofia and I would be together, in this life or the next. Two intertwined souls couldn’t be easily untangled.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Angelo’s panicked whisper reached me as he sneaked into the room. “They’ve gone to the hospital, but they’ve left guards everywhere. Fuck! I don’t think we can risk it right now.” He sagged and ran a hand through his thick hair. He looked stressed as shit.

I knew the feeling.

“Did you find the stuff I needed?”

He swallowed hard. “Yes, but I need to get it. There are still people here, just not Franco’s. Silvio’s inner circle is still hanging around, waiting for him to wake up.”

I blew out a breath. Leaving before Silvio woke would be preferable, but we didn't have a lot of choices.

“Then we wait. Once Silvio is up, I'm sure he'll need to go to the hospital to pay his respects as well, or at the very least get himself seen to. If this goes sideways, whatever happens, your job is to get Sofia out.”

Angelo jerked, his mouth working with a silent protest.

I spoke again before he could. “If I get out of here alive, and she doesn't, I'll kill you myself, Angelo, after I kill your little girlfriend. Do your fucking job and protect her with your life, or I'll make it hurt when I kill you.”

He swallowed hard, otherwise giving no reaction to my vicious words.

“Do you understand the order of importance? Kirill will honor his agreement if you show up with Sofia at his door. I guarantee it.”

“He knows you love her.” Angelo's words were matter-of-fact. “Or he thinks you're obsessed with her. Those are different things.”

“Not to a man like me. Watch Sofia's back, above all. Her freedom is your freedom. Now, we wait and get ready.”

Angelo nodded.

“Is Chiara already out?”

He nodded again.

“Good. Be ready to kill or die to join her.”

My advice only sent more tension through his burly body.

“If you go down fighting to get the girl... then it's a good day to die. Now, do me a favor and pop my motherfucking shoulder back in.”

SOFIA

Once my tears ran out, I sat on the freezing ground and cataloged the hurts I'd taken slowly and methodically. My fear and shock were fading, and cold, hard anger was replacing them.

Franco and his son needed to die. How dare they go against my father's wishes like this? The rage warmed me. I couldn't think too closely about how hurt Niko was. The memory of him ripping the pipe off the wall, and the blood coating his arms, his shoulder hanging oddly, was too much to endure. That he could be comforting me when I only had bruises and a tender spot on my head made me feel things I couldn't deny.

Nope. I was truly done resisting what my heart had known for five years. I cared about him. He might be crazy, and I might be disowned, but none of that mattered anymore. Nothing mattered except surviving another day to get out of here alive.

As I thought of him, I realized he'd been quiet for a long time.

"Nikolai?" I called through the grate. He'd been right here, comforting me the entire time, though he had to be hurt beyond my imagining. The man's tolerance for pain was not of this world.

"Hmm?" His voice sounded dreamlike and far off.

Wasn't it bad to fall asleep when you were losing blood and so injured? What if he didn't wake up? A new anxious sob worked up my throat.

"Will you tell me a story? You offered to once when we were running," I heard myself ask into the darkness. My hands were

bound in front of me with the same zip ties as they'd use on Niko. They hurt if I so much as flexed my wrists wrongly. I couldn't imagine how deep the cut was from pulling the pipe off the wall.

"A story?" Niko mused.

"It's dark in here and cold. I'm so tired, but I'll never be able to sleep," I muttered, feeling wretched. "I'm so scared." The confession slipped from me, whispered guiltily into the darkness.

What right did I have to be scared compared to Nikolai? There was a hell of a high chance Silvio would demand Nikolai's head when he woke up, and it didn't look like Franco planned on stopping him. Add in the fact that my father's health was declining, and the future was looking especially dark for the man in the cell next door. It might be hard for me, too, but somehow, the thought of Niko dying was the one that was torturing me.

"Okay, prom queen. I'll tell you a bedtime story," he said quietly, his voice comfortingly familiar. "Once upon a time, because that's how all the good stories begin, there was a boy. He was a child of the woods, and the trees were his only friend. At night, he lay in the loam and counted the stars."

His addictive murmurs swept a veil of ease over me. I thought of my younger self lying in my bed upstairs with the curtains drawn, staring at the stars stuck on the inside. Maybe I had always been meant to meet this man, since we were two lonely souls with nothing but the stars for company.

"He was a wild thing, and sometimes, he seriously considered walking farther into the woods and never returning to the world of men. In the end, he couldn't, though."

"Why not?"

"Because the boy wasn't as whole as the animals he played with in the forest. He had a cage around his heart... one without a key. He could smile, and laugh, and pretend to be a real boy, but deep inside, he wasn't."

A chill crept through me at the painful melancholy of Nikolai's words.

"There was a hole inside him, inside that locked-up place, where he couldn't reach it."

My eyes closed, and I hugged my knees hard. "You shouldn't tell sad tales as bedtime stories."

"Ah, but this story isn't sad. One day, when the boy became a man, and his heart was blacker than the purest tar, he met a girl. One who once stared at the stars at night and dreamed of being loved, too. It didn't matter how terribly he had lived his pathetic life. When she smiled at him, it felt like the fucking sun had finally risen for the first time in his life. He could feel the light on his face when she looked at him."

I smiled. His words were so sweet and surprising. There were layers upon layers to this complicated man who'd stolen my heart, despite my best efforts to guard it. I wanted to spend my life discovering them, but there was a very real chance I'd never get to.

Weariness weighed me down. I was so tired; I let my eyes close, so I could imagine I was far away from this horrible, cold room filled with memories of other people's pain.

Nikolai's voice continued at a steady drone, but his words slipped from my understanding as I fell into a fitful sleep.



A BANG against the wall behind me sent me flying from restless dreams. I tried to stand, and my tied hands immediately threw me off balance. I tipped to the side, banging my shoulder hard against the floor. My mouth felt stuffy, and it was freezing in the room. I hardly had any clothes on, so my teeth chattered immediately. My brain struggled to remember why I was tied up in the cold.

Nikolai.

The thought of him immediately pushed into my mind as I connected where the noise had come from.

“Nikolai?” I called frantically, pressing my face near the grate.

Was something happening? Carefully, I pushed myself to my feet and swayed. It was impossible to tell what time it was without windows or a watch. I guessed it had been a good few hours, maybe as much as five or six.

“Nikolai!” I called again toward the wall of his cell.

Another bang came from the room, like metal shifting, and the inaudible murmur of voices. Fear like nothing I’d ever felt before threatened to choke me. Who was there? Why wasn’t he answering me? Had he passed out? Whose voices were those?

I saw our entire history at that very moment.

Every single second, from the moment we’d met in the bar and he’d stolen my drink. Somehow teaching me a lesson about leaving drinks unattended at the same time as striking up a conversation. Now that I looked back on it, that had been the defining moment of my life. Everything that had happened since had been shaped by that single meeting. I’d been changed by it in a way I could never undo.

The seed of my curiosity about a dangerous man, who seemed to have limitless potential for violence, but had never hurt me, had been planted in my heart. Prom night, the race through the woods, shared hotel beds, and that terrifying moment hanging from the broken fire escape, with only Nikolai’s hand to tether me to safety, all bled into one.

The stark reality that the man who had starred in every one of those terrifying and precious memories could be lying next door, bleeding to death, or worse, already lifeless, broke something inside me.

All the fears and emotions I kept locked inside me streamed out. My hands found their way into my hair, and I pulled hard, throwing my head back and screaming. The sound echoed around and around the small cell. The sound of human misery at its purest. Terrible, pathetic, hopeless. I was all those things at that moment. I stopped caring who would hear. I didn’t care if Silvio or Franco came.

“Sofia? *Lastoshka?*”

I was interrupted from my blank staring contest with the wall, my throat burning. The door had been unlocked.

Nikolai and Angelo stood in the doorway.

My scream died, and my heart clenched as if Niko had reached into my chest and squeezed it. He was looking me over, checking for hurts, a worried expression tensing his face. He was still confused when I reached him. A sob on my lips, I hurtled myself into his arms. He brought his own up just in time to catch me.

“I thought you were dead. I heard them kill you,” I cried against his neck.

He was still, stunned by my show of overwrought emotion. Slowly, his hands tightened on my back, and he squeezed me carefully.

“I told you I wasn’t leaving you, prom queen. I told you I’d get you out of here, and I always keep my word.”

Angelo cleared his throat, looking nervously down the hall. “I hate to interrupt this, but we need to get out of here before Franco, Silvio, and their men get back from the hospital.”

“Right, are you okay? Have you recovered?” Niko asked, drawing back a little. His gaze fell over my nearly naked body, and he frowned.

“No. I don’t think I’m ever going to recover,” I muttered.

Niko cut my restraints, and gestured to Angelo, and my bodyguard shrugged off his suit jacket. Niko guided my arms through the sleeves. I finally took him in properly. The absolute mess of his arms broke my heart. His wrist looked nearly cut to the bone in places.

“Oh my god, your hands... isn’t it sore?” I asked dumbly and then recalled how I’d thrown myself into his arms, practically forcing him to catch me just minutes before. “I just jumped you.”

He chuckled. “Worth it. If I ever don’t want you to jump me, check for a pulse. I’m probably dead already.”

“Okay, let’s move now. We need to get going,” Angelo said, looking as jumpy as hell.

“What about Chiara?” I asked my bodyguard as we started from the cell.

“She’s outside the compound, already waiting. I just need your brother to come through.” Angelo shot Niko a hard look.

Niko only nodded and took my hand, keeping me close as we hurried silently up the hallway.

“He’ll come through. That’s the thing about Kirill, he’s boringly predictable.”

“Are we just strolling out of here? We’ll get caught,” I whispered frantically as we headed upstairs.

Angelo had his gun pulled and was looking around every corner before moving. It was still light in the house, and the sun shining in the windows made it seem like late morning. I’d slept all night.

“No, not strolling. There’s about to be a lot of commotion, and at that moment, we’ll get the fuck out of here,” Niko reassured me.

“What kind of commotion?”

“The cops. They’re on their way.”

“The cops! That’s your plan? The local police won’t do anything to the De Sanctis family. They are all on my father’s payroll.”

“Give me some credit. I know how to cause a little mayhem. We didn’t call in for help... we called in a bomb threat. That’ll bring them running.” Nikolai grinned. “That’s what you heard me rigging up.”

“A bomb? You made a bomb?”

He took in the panicked look on my face. “Just a small one,” he muttered, tearing a manic laugh from me. “Just a little homemade distraction to see us out the door safely.”

“That’s crazy. What about the other people in the house?”

We were edging down the hall, approaching the kitchen. From there, we could take the door to the garage and disappear into the woods, like Niko had originally, over a week ago.

“Everyone will be fine. I told you, it’s just a little thing, more bang than buck... probably.”

“Don’t worry, Sofia. He made it with household supplies and contained it,” Angelo called to me.

I gave up arguing about it. We needed to get out of here, and there was only one other person I cared about in the entire building.

“We need to warn Carmella,” I said as Angelo pushed into the kitchen.

“Warn Carmella about what?” The housekeeper’s hard voice brought all three of us to a stop.

Turning into the room, I saw the very woman in question. She was standing beside the door, holding a gun. My heart fell as I took her in.

“Sofia, come over here to me,” she said, and held out her other hand. She was eyeing Nikolai like he was the bomb himself, about to go off at any second.

I shook my head. “I can’t. I don’t want to. Carmella. I’m leaving.”

“You can’t leave. You’re Antonio De Sanctis’ daughter. You’re the future of this family. You can’t leave us,” Carmella said, her bottom lip wobbling.

I shook my head again. “I don’t want to stay anymore. I want to be free. Free of Antonio and Silvio and his father. Please, Carmella, just look the other way and let us go.”

“What will I say to your brother when he comes home?” Carmella demanded.

“You don’t need to say anything. I’ll come home then. Ren will fix everything, but until he’s here, it isn’t safe for me to stay.”

“And who is going to keep you safe? Him?” She jerked the gun toward Niko.

I nodded. “I trust him. He’ll keep me safe.”

“*Tesoro*, you’ve fallen for his lies. You told me yourself he’s a silver-tongued devil.”

“He is a devil, I can’t deny it... he’s a devil through and through, but...” I trailed off, unsure how the hell to explain my relationship to Nikolai in a short sentence.

“I’m *her* devil,” Niko said, suddenly stepping in. He walked steadily toward Carmella, not even looking at the gun leveled at his chest. “No matter who comes for her, or what they want to do to her, they’ll have to go through me. I’ll protect her with my life,” he said quietly.

Silence fell as Nikolai and Carmella stared at each other. Tension built, knowing that the cops were on their way and the distraction wouldn’t make a blind bit of difference if we weren’t ready to use the opportunity it presented.

“Go then. Go now, and don’t get caught. I’ll be here, waiting for your brother to come home.”

Carmella’s words sank through me, taking a few moments to register. She was letting us go.

“Be here, but not actually here, as there might be a tiny explosion,” I said, hurrying to her and hugging her hard.

She hugged me back, her gun still gripped in her hand. “Take care of yourself, Sofia, my precious girl,” she muttered into my hair.

“I will,” I reassured her.

“So will I,” Niko murmured beside us, and took my hand again.

Carmella pulled back, wiping under her eyes with a finger. “Go on then. Hurry up, before they get back from the hospital. They are already on their way.”

With fresh alarm beating through me, I followed Nikolai into the garage.

The familiar smells of the grease and motor oil, all the usual things I loved, filled my head. I'd come so far in the days since Nikolai's first escape attempt, when I'd walked in here and right into his waiting arms. Now, we were escaping together, his hand was firm around mine, and I wasn't letting go.

We made it through the garage and to the door on the farthest side.

"Okay, I'm going to open it, and when I do, you take Sofia and run," Angelo said, positioning himself at the side, his gun at the ready.

"Be careful. Chiara will kill me if you get hurt." I knew, without a doubt, my best friend was as vengeful as they came.

"She would, wouldn't she? If I do, tell her... I'd do it all over, just to have the time we did again," he said gruffly, softening my heart.

"Fuck, man, that was touching as hell, but you can tell her yourself," Nikolai prompted, and pulled me close. "Let's do this."

We had no idea if there was someone waiting for us outside. Franco might have expected this, they might have already suspected Angelo. I had no idea.

Nikolai caught my eye, his silver gaze brushing fondly over my features. "Just remember, *lastochka*, it's better to die than do nothing," he told me quietly.

Those words seemed a good fit for him. He was a man who had clearly lived by them and been lucky enough not to die for them so far.

I nodded and straightened my spine. I was Sofia De Sanctis, Mafia princess, knife fighter and Nikolai Chernov's *lastochka*. I wouldn't go down with a whimper.

Angelo watched us, and seeing we were ready, opened the door.

And all hell broke loose.

NIKOLAI

As soon as Angelo stepped out, a bullet caught him in the leg, and he went down. Shots pinged toward the doorway and came from inside the garage at the same time.

Fuck.

I pulled Sofia low and pushed her behind a hulking car.

“Stay here,” I hissed at her, squeezing her hand hard before turning away.

I listened to the soft shuffling sounds of men trying to be quiet as they moved through the dark. Channeling the kid that I used to be, the one who could see in the darkest night, I decided which direction to go for first and sprang.

I slid across a car bumper, and my fist found the first shooter’s nose. I landed hard on his chest, my hands going to his neck before he even understood what had happened.

The soft crunch of his neck snapping soothed the raging beast of anger and fear inside me. All I could think about was getting Sofia out. She could get hurt like this, with bullets flying recklessly. If that happened, I’d burn every single inch of Casa Nera to the ground, with every single fucker who lived here staked to the earth to die in painful agony before letting the flames consume me as well.

Leaving the dead body of the first man, I moved silently on my bare feet toward the next person. I’d gone through the man’s pockets and now had a knife and a gun. The knife was preferred in these dark, close quarters, however, as I’d rather sneak up and attack in the dark than have a shoot-out.

My knife found the neck of the next man, sinking like butter through his worthless flesh and sinew. Hot blood splashed my chest and arm, and I was relieved that the feeling seemed to be returning to my dislocated shoulder. Angelo had done a good job of popping it back in, though, in a few hours, it'd hurt like a bitch again. At this rate, I'd be lucky to be alive to worry about it.

Angelo. *Fuck*. The man better not bleed out, not when he was so close to getting everything he wanted, the future he dreamed of with the woman he loved. I felt like his life was my responsibility as well now, along with Sofia's. Good people who were in this situation because of me.

Another guard fell to my knife, and the garage fell quiet. I headed back toward Sofia.

As I did, my eyes perfectly adjusting to the dim light, a rapid motion ahead pulled my attention. The small door to the garage flung open at the side, the light blinding me for a moment, and then a figure staggered through, dragging another.

Someone had Sofia, and they were taking her outside.

I charged after them.

The one thing that my parents had agreed on in terms of brutal and depressing life lessons was that love was a weakness that could get you killed. It muted your instincts; it dulled your senses and overrode logic. That was never more apparent than today.

As I barreled outside after Sofia, pure terror for her blinding me from everything else, the attack came from the side. Waiting for someone to run blindly through a door was tactics 101, yet I'd fallen for it because I couldn't tear my eyes from the sight of the woman I loved being painfully dragged, her legs scrambling on the ground, her head thrashing in her attacker's hard grip.

Two men waited for me outside the door, and they didn't hold back. One grabbed me around the middle as the other punched me. He was slow and heavy, however, and I was able to get

my legs up and push back off his stomach, head-butting the man behind me and taking us both to the ground. Once I was down, I slashed the tendons of the man still standing, leaving him screaming in pain as I twisted toward the one who'd held me. I jerked his hand up just in time to send his shot wide. The gunshot echoed around the compound, then another swiftly followed. I looked up. My attacker staggered to the side, a new hole in his head. Whipping my head to the other side, I looked for the shooter.

Angelo lay on the ground, his injured leg straight before him and his back propped against the side of the garage. He was white and looked grim as hell, but his shooting hand was steady.

He slowly lowered his weapon and looked at me. "Silvio has Sofia," he panted before groaning and gripping his leg.

Getting to my feet, I grabbed the guns of the fallen men and tucked them into my waistband, looking like a one-man armory. "They never fucking left. They were waiting."

"Keep alert and shoot anyone who comes at you. We're still getting out of here, and you have someone waiting for you," I reminded him.

He nodded, his lips bloodless. "So do you. Get her."

He didn't need to tell me twice. I took off, a gun gripped in one hand and a knife tucked into my other. I skirted around the edge of the garage and peered toward the open space in the middle of the compound.

I spied Silvio immediately.

His men were scattered around. More than I'd hoped there'd be, but few enough to take.

They made for the cars at the edge of the green, protecting Silvio as he dragged Sofia after him. He was probably planning on getting the hell off the property and leaving his men to hunt me down and kill me. Silvio didn't seem the type to take risks.

The men watched out for their boss, and nearly half of them had their backs fully turned.

It was hard to hate the Devil when sometimes I felt like he loaned me his luck.

I stepped out onto the green and took aim. Five shots, five fallen men.

The rest turned and shot in retaliation, but I ducked back against the garage. Chunks of plaster flew off in all directions as they attempted to hit me.

As soon as they came up empty, a lull I'd been expecting, having been keeping a rough count of shots, I re-emerged. I had no problem with ammo. I had three guns to burn through.

I got one immediately, leaving four more. These four weren't as dumb as the rest. Clearly, these were the real deal.

Dodging behind cars and other objects, they avoided my shots. I didn't have time to play with them all day because Silvio had made it to a car. I had to move. I ran toward them, knowing I was about to be attacked by his remaining men. They might be out of ammo, but I knew they could fight.

The car that Silvio had dragged Sofia into started. He'd had a driver waiting. The tires spun on the gravel of the forecourt, and it was moving. I raised my weapon and shot steadily at the tires. I managed to blow one before the first man reached me.

His punch in my exposed right side made my head ring. I staggered to the side, dizzy but rallying. His next punch went wide as I danced away, but his second hit my shoulder, and I nearly vomited on the spot. He ripped the gun from my hand and tossed it away.

"It's just us, Chernov. Let's see what you're made of. Are you really a legend or just a fucked-up psycho?" the man goaded me.

I suddenly recognized his voice. It was Idiot One, from my first day in captivity.

I couldn't help it. I laughed as he squared up to me.

His eyebrows drew together over his short forehead. "What's the joke?"

“You are. I’m just so happy to see you again.” I smirked at him, even as the remaining men surrounded me.

Four to one. It wasn’t anything I hadn’t faced before, but I wasn’t in the best shape. I went to draw one of my fully loaded guns, and someone tackled me from behind. I fell face-first into the gravel with the motherfucker behind me, the gun flying far across the ground.

He clearly hadn’t realized that I had another one, though. As he attempted to get his arm around my neck, I heaved him off long enough to rip the other stolen gun from my waistband and tucked it under my arm.

The shot was so close to me that the heat of it warmed my side. His dead weight fell on me, pinning me down, and I shrugged to buck him off as another man ran in. This one I shot in the leg, before his wild kick took my last gun from me.

Swearing wildly, he tried to reach for the gun at the same time as I did, his hand coming close to my face. I bit it, his blood filling my mouth. He cursed savagely and rolled away, gripping his hand, two fingers exposed to the bone.

I’d learned at a young age that when fighting for your life, there was no such thing as a fair fight. They were all dogfights, no matter what anyone liked to imagine. If you couldn’t get your hands dirty, you didn’t live to see another day.

I crawled for the gun as Idiot One reached me. His kick to my side whited out my vision for a few seconds. I rolled to my side, trying to shake the dizziness behind my eyes as I blinked at him.

He stepped over me and picked up the gun. “So, you are as mad as they say you are. You’re just not as good. Disappointing, Chernov. I’d been expecting more.” He pointed the gun at me.

“Yeah, well, never buy hype. You’ll always be disappointed. When you only get excellent reviews, people doubt the veracity of your claims,” I muttered, sinking my hand into the

tiny gravel and sand topping on the ground of the fancy driveway.

I peered up at the man who thought he was about to kill me. “And I never get any bad ones, so it’s a tough one.”

“Why’s that?” Idiot One asked, seeming to enjoy being in a powerful position for once, and milking it for all it was worth. He was truly worthy of his name.

“Because they’re dead,” I said, looking him in the eye as I threw my handful of sand and grit at his face.

He cursed, jerking the gun away to cover his eyes as I twisted and pulled the knife from the pocket I’d tucked it in. With the first stab, I pinned his foot to the ground. He screamed and fell, his weight pulling the knife free. I clawed my way up his body, using my knife like an ice pick sinking into a mountain. He shot wildly downwards, but I was too close to him, and he couldn’t see well. By the time I reached his face, red, with streaming eyes, I’d pinned his hand to the ground with the knife and taken the gun back.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered as I put it to his temple. “I promised to skin you before killing you. I’m afraid I don’t have time for it. I suppose you’ll be another faceless, feeble stat in my kill count.” With a vicious grin, I pulled the trigger.

When his brains splattered to the ground, relief and a profoundly deep sense of peace filled me.

Sofia was right, after all. I wasn’t normal. There was a darkness inside me that only violence could quench and a beast that demanded sacrifice. Today, for her, I let him free.

Rolling up, I noted the injuries to my body in a detached way. I looked around, making sure everyone was down where I needed them. Idiot One’s wild shots had wasted the rest of the ammo, and I couldn’t afford to spend time looking for another gun.

Silvio was getting away and taking Sofia with him.

I couldn’t waste one more second. Pulling the knife from Idiot One’s hand, I ran down the driveway.

SOFIA

As the car rolled down the road toward the gates, I stared frantically out the window at Nikolai fighting for his life.

“Don’t worry, cousin, those are my best men. They won’t let him get away this time.” Silvio laughed. “Though I am sorry not to kill him myself. Just imagine what my father and yours will think. They’ll call me a hero for stopping the violent criminal supposed to be serving his time here who decided instead to go on a killing spree.”

I turned and stared at Silvio, hatred pouring from me. He’d lowered his gun, and without thinking for my safety, I flew at him. Landing half across him, I tore at his face as he tried to beat me off with one hand. The pistol whipped my cheek, but I didn’t give up. I sank a finger into one of his eyes, and he let out a vicious command to his driver to stop.

As his driver scrambled out of the car, there was an odd, suppressed shake, and suddenly, all the alarms on the property blared.

“What the fuck was that?” Silvio muttered as his driver pulled me out of the car, trying to rip me off his pathetic boss.

I knew exactly what it was. Nikolai’s little homemade bomb finally blowing beneath the ground. It didn’t sound as small as he’d made out.

Silvio followed me out of the car as I spun out of the driver’s arms and staggered back. I was cut and bruised, worried and at the end of my sanity. I had nothing to lose.

“Sofia, you need to calm down, or I’ll shoot you right here and tell your father it was Chernov,” Silvio warned me.

I shook my head, hysteria bubbling up my throat. “No. I won’t. I won’t go quietly with a man like you.”

“A man like me? And yet, you’d let that Moscow gutter rat fuck you? You have some twisted standards.”

“Nikolai is ten times the man you are.”

“If you mean he’s killed ten times the men that I have, I agree. The man is one body short of a serial killer.”

“I don’t care. To me, he’s better than you. He’s better than Antonio and Franco, and all of them. He’s a man in a way you’ll never be.”

Silvio raised his eyebrows at the statement, anger working up his neck to his face. “Now, come on, Sofia. Surely it’s only fair to compare after you’ve had both.” His lip curled with satisfaction as he nodded to his driver. “Hold her.”

The driver jumped me from behind, grabbing my arms before I got away, and then Silvio was on me. He pushed me to the ground and followed, settling his heavy weight on top of me.

“Let both of us fuck you, and then we’ll see who’s more of a man.” Silvio grunted.

His driver held my hands over my head, giving Silvio the chance to work his belt loose with his one hand. I bucked and writhed and screamed, trying to claw my way forward, but it was impossible. I couldn’t take both of them. I couldn’t even reach Silvio with the way the driver was holding my arms.

“Hold still!” Silvio roared in my face, leaning so close his rank spit flicked against my lips. “Hold still, or I’ll cut parts off while I fuck you and leave you here for dead.”

I stilled, not because of the threat, but because I had to be smart. Fighting him like this wasn’t smart. I already knew he was stronger, despite being one-handed. He had help. Silvio went back to his belt as I frantically searched through my options.

Would Nikolai come for me? Was he too hurt to move? Was he dead? The thought threatened to scatter all the others in my head. I couldn't afford to dwell on it. What had he told me, that night at prom, the last time I'd seen him before he'd gone to jail in Russia, and I'd thought he'd forgotten me?

I'll always find you, Sofia. Wherever you go, I will always come for you.

Like my very thoughts and wildest hopes had summoned him, a roar sounded to the left, toward the houses, and a blur of bloodied flesh and dark jeans hit us side-on. Silvio rolled, and the driver let go of my hands as he tried to protect himself from the whirling fury of Nikolai Chernov.

I sat up, casting about for a weapon. Silvio had dropped his gun somewhere, I had no idea where, when he'd been trying to strip. Now he stood slowly, pushing himself to his feet. Genuine fear filled his face as he took in Niko, still unharmed enough to fight.

“What's wrong, cousin? What about your best men?” I asked as I stepped closer.

Nikolai was fighting the driver, the two of them rolling about on the ground, grunting and swearing. Niko was hurt, while the driver was fresh to the fight. It evened the ground between them.

As I walked past Niko, I saw it lying on the ground like a gift. It must have fallen from Niko's pocket. It felt like the universe had conspired to bring it to me, here at this perfect poetic moment.

I dropped and swiped the long, thin knife off the ground and rose into a fighting stance.

Silvio watched me with a sneer. “You think you can take me? I know you and Renato played with knives when you were kids, but, Sofia, you're embarrassing yourself,” he said, but the strain in his voice revealed his fear. Sure, it probably wasn't fear of me. He was afraid of Nikolai and for good reason. Still, that didn't mean Niko was the only threat here.

Silvio dismissed me with a grunt and went looking for his gun. It was only a matter of time until he found it. I wasted no more time holding back and went for him. He grunted as I landed a shallow cut to his arm and danced away from his heavy hand, swiping through the air where I had been standing.

In *paranza corta*, the silent and lethal first blow is the strongest. I didn't know why I hadn't gone for a more vital area, only that my hand was stayed. Maybe it was because I'd never killed anyone before, or I was distracted with worry for Nikolai. I didn't know. All I was painfully aware of was losing the advantage by holding back.

Silvio kept looking for his gun as I attacked from left and right. He was quick to turn whenever I attempted to sink my knife between his ribs. He hit me again, just as the sound of approaching sirens filled the air.

"Great, the fucking cops," Silvio muttered, his eyes glinting with excitement as he looked at Nikolai. He'd just twisted the driver's head like he'd been trying to take it off. The man fell, lifeless, to the ground. "So, what'll it be, Chernov? Death or jail?" Silvio's voice was triumphant.

He raised the gun and pointed it at Nikolai. He'd fucking found it.

Time seemed to stop.

"What do you think, Silvio? I've been to jail before. I didn't care for it. I'm certain American jail is like a Moscow five-star hotel, but still, I need to see the stars at night," Nikolai said.

His neck and half his face gleamed with blood, his or someone else's, I had no idea, but I suspected it was other people's. He'd single-handedly cut a swath through Silvio's best men to get to me.

"So, does that mean you choose death?" Silvio laughed, flushed with victory. "I guess if you're dead, you don't have to worry about all the dirty, depraved things I'm going to do to your little girlfriend here once you're gone. I wish you could have seen it, but if you want to die before the cops arrive, we've no time to waste."

The words and the look in Nikolai's eyes when he met mine calmed the raging storm in my soul. Resolve filled me. Silvio was so wrapped up in his posturing that he'd forgotten I was even there. I'd always been an irritation to my family, well, everyone except my brother. I'd been inconsequential, an asset to be polished and put away. Not a real person, not even once.

Now, I darted behind Silvio, using the same moves that my instructor had taught Ren and me when we were young.

My knife went through his skin far easier than I could have imagined it would. I slashed downward from the back of his ear to his collarbone, the knife hitting the bone with a jarring impact.

Silvio turned to me, his face frozen in a look of comical surprise as blood jetted out of the long slice down his jugular.

His eyes locked on me, disbelieving until the end. His blood was hot as it splashed across my neck. He slumped to the ground, gripping the hole in his skin as if that could stop the frantic fountain of red that was escaping. My eyes were stuck on his dying ones. I could see it, the exact moment the light left them, the soul escaping into the ether. I felt that yawning darkness then that I'd always sensed in Nikolai. A black hole in the fabric of this world into another.

I'd stepped outside the rules. I was on the other side.

"Sofia," Niko's voice broke me from my stupor.

I realized with a shock that I was crying, hot, urgent sobs forcing up my throat, and my hands were shaking too hard to stop. "I-I killed someone," I forced out, feeling dizzy, like I could sleep for a week.

Nikolai approached, wrapping his arms around me. His hand soothed over my back in a comforting circle. "You protected yourself."

"I k-killed someone," I repeated like a skipping record. I couldn't process that simple fact. The darkness beckoned.

"Sofia, it was him or us," Nikolai said, leaning down to cup my face.

The wailing in the background was growing closer, and my overwhelmed brain couldn't process it.

"It's not your fault. None of this is your fault. You were just surviving... you saved us."

I blinked up at him, suddenly realizing that I wasn't alone in that dark place, that space between worlds. Nikolai was there.

I'll always find you, Sofia. Wherever you go, I will always come for you.

"Now, you need to let me save you, *lastochka*," he whispered and pulled me in for a fierce kiss. "Wait for me, prom queen."

"We need to run." I stumbled to the side, my legs unsteady. My world was crashing down, and I was losing grip on which way was up.

"There's no time. We wouldn't make it."

Then he pushed me away from him. I stumbled back as the first cop car came into view. Four cars followed, pulling to quick stops on the winding drive as they took in the scene.

Nikolai was looking at me, his handsome face more devilish than I'd ever seen it, painted red with blood. The reflection of the cop car's lights displayed the perfect hollows of his resolved expression.

Then I saw his hand, and the knife in it. I blinked down at my now-empty fist. When had he taken it?

"Wait for me. I'll come for you," he said again.

A new terror seized me. "Nikolai—no!"

He didn't listen, simply turning toward the flashing lights and holding his hands, bloodstained, still clutching the knife, over his head.

"Put the weapon down and get on your knees!" A cop spoke over a loudspeaker. There had to be at least eight guns trained on him.

Nikolai slowly sank to his knees, right next to Silvio's dead body.

“Miss, are you all right? What happened here?” A female officer approached me, looking concerned.

“This is all wrong. He didn’t kill him, I—” I stumbled as Niko’s head turned toward me.

He shook his head slowly, as if telling me off. A wicked look played over his face. He was the man who laughed in the face of death, prison, and anything else that usually terrified people.

“What happened here, Officer, was a gang fight, and I’m the victor. I was going to take her hostage to get out of here. She doesn’t know what’s going on.” Nikolai laughed. “And this man lying beside me? I killed him.” His smile was unhinged as he shrugged, wiping the blood off his face with a red-stained hand. “I’ve wanted to kill him for five years.”

The cops standing over Niko exchanged looks, and then one moved to cuff him.

“In that case, I’m placing you under arrest.”

EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER

Nikolai

“*Y*ou know, in another life, you could have been a politician or a banker. Something about you just doesn’t look right in jail. Nope, you’re a rich house arrest guy through and through,” I drawled as Kirill arrived at the small, chipped plastic table where I was waiting for him.

He frowned at me. “And you? How does it suit you?”

“In chaos, I thrive.” I grinned and stopped short of reaching out a hand to him. “I’ve missed you, *bratan*.”

“Well, I wish I could stay the same. Instead of enjoying my life with my pregnant wife, I’m still cleaning up your messes.”

“I think what you mean to say is thank you for giving you *pakhan* position in our bratva.”

Kirill raised one dark, elegant eyebrow. “I don’t remember you giving it to me. I remember you dragging my pregnant wife into the fray and putting her in front of Viktor’s gun.”

“Fine, agree to disagree. Did you deliver my letter?”

A storm seemed to chase over Kirill’s face, and tension bit at me.

“What’s wrong?”

He blew out a long breath. “Antonio De Sanctis has recovered, did you hear?”

“No, I don’t get *Organized Crime Daily* in here. So what?”

“So, he’s pissed that his nephew was killed, Sofia was caught up in it, and a whole whack of De Sanctis men died. However, he’s not as annoyed about that as he could be. He found out that Franco, Silvio’s father, was planning on stealing the family out from under him. Franco had a hit out in Renato in Italy. It was unsuccessful, but Antonio found out about it. He put Franco down himself, brought Renato home from Italy, and had him weed out every single man who was loyal to them.”

I was stunned by the news. I’d rarely had much in the way of luck, but this couldn’t be beaten. “So, what does it mean?”

“It means he doesn’t care that you killed Silvio. He’s willing to walk away from this vendetta between Chernov and De Sanctis and put it in the past. No more bloodshed, no retaliation. Only business, from now on.”

I cracked my knuckles as I considered his words, wishing I had my knife to twirl. “That’s fine, except that we’ll soon be family. I’m marrying his daughter when I get out of here, whether he likes it or not.”

Kirill swallowed, a dark look shifting in his eyes. And then I knew that this day was about to go downhill.

“That’s why I’m here. I wanted to tell you in person.”

“Tell me what?” I asked, my voice sounding very far away.

“When Antonio moved to take down his brother, there was a shoot-out. More than one De Sanctis man got caught in the crossfire. It was bloody and difficult, and there were casualties. Those loyal to Antonio were trapped inside the compound, and Franco and his men besieged it from outside.”

“Is she hurt?” I asked immediately. Just the thought of it made me want to bust through the security and run all the way to her side. “Fucking Antonio can’t keep his own daughter safe for four weeks after I leave.”

Kirill was quiet. Too quiet.

I tasted blood. I knew Kirill. I'd come up through the ranks of Chernov men alongside him. I'd seen his first kill. I knew all the microexpressions that his face could make. More blood coated my tongue.

"Well? How bad is she? Is she in the hospital? Which one? You need to put bratva men to watch her. Fucking De Sanctis can't protect shit," I muttered.

Kirill remained silent, and something in his dark eyes struck me hard.

Pity. It was pity.

"Tell me what happened." My voice was dangerous now.

"There were casualties on both sides. It's a fucking mess."

I pushed to my feet, knowing the words he was about to say and not being able to wait there for them.

"Niko," Kirill started and then stopped, his shoulders dropping.

I knew the words he was building up to say, and suddenly, nothing felt real.

"Just say it. Tell me she's dead... I fucking dare you," I ground out. My hands curved into fists so hard that my nails broke my skin and wet my palms. The "S" on my hand felt like it was burning.

Kirill sighed and sat back, meeting my eyes once more.

"I'm sorry, brother, I really am. Franco took her hostage, and she was killed. It was quick if it helps at all. She's gone, Nikolai. Sofia De Sanctis is dead."

[Read on in Runaway Queen](#)

End of Book 1

MILA KANE

I'm obsessed with cats, coffee, and anti-heroes just the right side of insane.

I write dark and dirty romance with the alpha-holes of your most filthy nightmares.

I only write SAFE stories, there is never a place for another woman in my hero's sights, once he's caught the scent of the heroine, and there will always be, no matter how dark and twisted the story might be... a HEA guarantee xx

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