



savage
THRONE

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

MILA KANE

SAVAGE THRONE

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

VICIOUS VENGEANCE DUET

BOOK TWO

MILA KANE

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Mila Kane

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WELCOME TO MILA'S WORLD

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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 milakane.com for a full list of TWs.

MOLLY

“*Just wait for me.*”

Kirill’s last words echoed through my head as Nikolai led me to a waiting car at gunpoint. As we approached the door, my eyes shifted to the heavy traffic passing at the other end of the small alley he’d parked in. Maybe I could make it? I’d rather take my chances getting hit by a car in traffic than willingly leave Kirill again. It was a cold, hard truth that was upsetting to realize. Crazy or not, there was no denying it.

“Don’t even think about it,” Nikolai warned. “I’ve no need to keep you alive, so don’t push me.”

Those words chilled me to the bone, and my momentary hesitation was enough for him to push me into the car. He’d parked behind The Tower, the exclusive building in uptown Manhattan where I’d been imprisoned for a little over a month. Although “imprisoned” might be a stretch, considering I had locked myself inside freely.

Nikolai’s car was hidden behind the huge dumpster that blocked the alley from sight. No one was going to help me here, not even Kirill. The knowledge landed hard on me as I scrambled across the seat, planning to shoot out the other side and run.

Nikolai opened the door before I could manage it, and the black, shiny nose of his pistol poked into my temple. I froze.

“Move,” he instructed me quietly, sitting in the roomy backseat beside me.

“Now.”

When I looked around, I realized this ride was nothing like how the Chernov bratva usually rolled. Their vehicles of choice were bullet-proof, while this was a beat-up minivan. A teddy bear lay on the front seat, chilling me to the bone.

“Whose car is this?”

“A nice family with a little boy called Toby,” Nikolai said, folding his long body into the back beside me.

He looked as deadly as usual.

Kirill—the man I’d loved, lost, and only just found again—looked imposing in his black suits and sharp shirts, with a hint of the tattoos covering his body visible in clothes.

Nikolai, his half-brother, was a different story. He was tall like Kirill but less broad, with a lithe grace that fitted his tightly muscled, tattoo-packed style. He looked like what happened when a rock star met a sideshow, but with a psychopathic edge. He was the kind of guy who drew eyes wherever he went with his tanned skin and magnetic dark eyes. People were drawn to his brutal good looks with no idea that his façade was no act. Underneath the bad boy look was a merciless monster.

“Did you kill them?” I asked numbly.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “I don’t have to kill three people to steal a car; it’s not that difficult.”

“You killed four men upstairs.”

“That’s different. They’re bratva. They’re my men, and I’m the one to decide their fate.” Nikolai said dismissively.

“It’s not different.”

“Agree to disagree,” Nikolai shrugged.

With the quick movements of a rattlesnake, he raised his hand and sank something into my skin—a needle. The lunatic had injected me with

something. I slapped my hand over the throbbing pain as he discarded the needle to the littered floor of the stolen family car.

“Mother fucker,” I gasped as warmth immediately blossomed through my chest.

He tutted loudly. “Now, now. Language, young lady. I thought my brother had taught you better manners when talking to family.”

“You’re not my family,” I snapped as my head fell against the headrest, and my strength ebbed from my body.

“Right. No one wants to be associated with the black sheep,” Nikolai said and clutched at his chest. “That hurts, Princess.”

“Don’t call me that,” I said immediately, and my heart broke in my chest at the thought of Kirill.

“Why not? Because he does? You love that sick fuck, don’t you?” Nikolai asked, his dark, bewitching eyes narrowing with genuine curiosity. “How did he manage that? Considering who he is and what he’s done, how did he make you love and not fear him?” Nikolai looked me up and down, seeming utterly intrigued. “Oh, wait. I know. He lied.”

With a devilish grin, he tossed his head and shoved his gun away now that I was a boneless heap on the cusp of drifting into a chemical sleep. With a sigh, he checked his watch and whistled loudly. “We’re running late. We have to get a move on.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a long, wicked-looking knife. I would have screamed if I could move my mouth, but I whimpered instead.

After the years I’d run and scabbled to survive, all the years I’d looked for Kirill and waited for him, it was all going to end like this? Stabbed to death in the back of a stolen minivan by my lover’s psychotic half-brother?

Nikolai pulled my arm toward him, and I had no way of stopping him as he moved the knife over the back of my hand. I barely felt the pain; the blissful haze of sleep was crowding into my brain. He made an incision and then pressed his fingers into the wound. I stared at the blood welling down my arm and onto the seat from the small, precise cut. That was going to hurt when the

drugs wore off, but if it did, it would mean I was still alive, which would be a pleasant surprise.

Nikolai set the knife down before fishing a roll of masking tape out of his pocket. After tearing a length off, he pressed it over my bleeding skin. I stared in horror at the makeshift bandage. He patted the top with a sickly gentle touch.

His wide mouth pulled in a grin that set my teeth on edge. “There we go. All patched up for now. Sorry if that hurt, but it had to be done.”

My blood looked like a glove on his hand as he held his palm out to me. A tiny black shape sat in the center. The painful reality I found myself in was fading quickly, and my brain couldn’t quite keep up with the implications of that tiny microchip.

The last thing I heard was Nikolai’s voice murmuring as soft as a lullaby. “We can’t have Kirill tracking us down too quickly, can we?”



Molly
Age 17

ON MY SEVENTEENTH BIRTHDAY, my father threw me a formal dinner. I was the only woman there.

I was wearing the party dress he had chosen for me and tried to fold my napkin over my nearly exposed chest.

Father wasn’t happy that I had a friend. *Kirill*. I had stopped going to his house, but I still invited him to mine. Surrounded by staff, there was never any doubt of having enough chaperones. Father accepted it, though he didn’t like it. Maybe he saw in my eyes that finally having a friend was making me less brittle. Less likely to break into a thousand pieces.

But this dinner was his reminder not to get too comfortable. I should never get too comfortable. I should remember that any mercy he showed me was only a stay of execution, not a pardon.

My high school bully, Kaplan Holmes, was there with his father. Tonight, he was another potential owner to look over the wares. Kap kept toasting me with mocking smiles. It sat between us that no matter our power dynamic, if my father decided a merger with Kap's family would be good for business, everything would flip. I'd be given to Kap as a wife and be at the whim of his mercy.

I'd rather marry the fat, balding man speaking to my dad and staring at my barely concealed chest at every opportunity. At least he might die soon.

My phone vibrated in my lap, where I'd hidden it in my chiffon skirt. I knew who it was.

The only person who ever texted me. The only person I cared about.

"Holding up, princess? Engaged yet?"

I could hear Kirill's teasing voice through the words. A warmth filled my chest at his message. He was thinking about me. It gave me the strength to summon a smile for my father when he asked me something.

I lowered my hands to my lap when I could and quickly typed out a reply.

"Not yet, but the evening's young. This is the rager every girl dreams of for her birthday. Even Kap's here."

I went back to pretending I was listening to the people around me, though my mind was firmly on Kirill. I could almost picture him. He'd be in his room with the windows open because it was summer, and he didn't have A.C. He usually went without a shirt when it was hot. He'd be sitting on his bed, under the window, staring at his phone. His hair had gotten longish and flopped over his forehead in a way that made me want to smooth it back.

My phone vibrated again, and I could hardly wait to open the message. He'd sent a picture, and I turned the phone to see it.

I was right. He was sitting on his bed, and his shoulders were bare. He'd pulled a Kylo Ren mask from last Halloween over his face.

"You need me to come get you?"

I stifled a snort of laughter and took a deep drink of water, hiding my smile.

Of course, he couldn't come. Of course, he couldn't stride in here and cut down all the evil men in my life with a laser sword and rescue me from my father. But knowing he would try if I asked him made me feel less alone, even if I already knew I never would. I would take the hurt a hundred times before I allowed my father to turn his attention to Kirill.



Now

I WOKE with a start as hot, urgent vomit pushed up my throat. The dream lingered on the outskirts of my consciousness. No, not a dream. A memory. A memory of Kirill.

“Fuck,” a rough, masculine voice cursed.

The rocking under me stopped, and the door slammed. A headache, like a size thirteen boot, kicked my head sharply as I attempted to sit up. I swayed as sickness pressed up my gullet. The door by my head opened, and I nearly fell out. Rough hands dragged me out the back and dumped me on cold gravel. I vomited onto the ground repeatedly. Fingers pulled my hair back sharply enough to make me cry out. Tears slid down my cheeks as I retched and retched, only bringing up bile for a few painful minutes.

“Done?” a voice called.

Gravel bit into my palms, and I felt dizzy as I struggled to fit the voice into my memories. Nikolai Chernov. Kirill's brother. Fuck. It all came rushing back.

I opened my eyes blearily to near darkness, with only a couple of lights in the distance to punctuate the unrelenting black of the night. My hand throbbed, and I stared at it, blinking at the silver tape wrapped around it as crusted blood flaked off my wrist beneath.

“Where are we?” My voice was a dry croak.

“Here.” A bottle of water appeared beside my face, and I took it, swirling it around my mouth and spitting it onto the ground before it even crossed my

dazed mind that it might be drugged. I let it fall to the floor.

Nikolai tutted above me. “If it was drugged, it’s a little late to care now. Wash your mouth. I don’t like the smell of vomit.”

“Too bad,” I muttered to myself.

“What was that?”

“I said deal with it. I don’t like being cut up or kidnapped at gunpoint, so I guess we’re both having a shitty day.” I finally found the strength to look up at him.

He looked as impeccable and terrifying as usual. He was wearing a black t-shirt rolled at the shoulders, displaying his full sleeves of tattoos and black jeans that hugged his long, lean legs. He grinned as he crouched next to me, his shit-kicking boots far too close to my head for comfort.

Without warning, he grabbed my hair, turned my face toward him, and bent my neck at an uncomfortable angle. “Brave little Mallory. I see why Kirill is so obsessed with you. What a firecracker! However, don’t forget one simple fact about me. When you get smart with that potty mouth”—he leaned in and pressed his forehead hard against mine—“I don’t love you like Kirill, and I won’t hesitate. Understood?”

He dropped my hair, and I rolled onto my back as my weak muscles gave out. Sprawled on my back, I stared up at the night sky. There was an abundance of stars. Way more than I’d ever seen around New York because of its light pollution. Where the hell were we?

“Understood,” I muttered, wishing I hadn’t dropped the water, seeing as my mouth felt like it had been sanded down.

“Get in the car,” Nikolai growled at me. “It smells like fucking nature out here.” He nudged me with his foot.

With a strength I wasn’t sure I could muster, I turned and heaved myself up. Upright now, I could see we were on a deserted country road. Fields rolled away from us in all directions, and in the distance, I could make out the side of a red barn and little else.

“Car. Now.” Nikolai barked.

Fear sent my feet moving. I weaved toward the car as Nikolai leaned on the hood and watched me. I went to the backseat, but he shook his head and pointed to the passenger side. As I sank down in the seat, he loomed out of the darkness at my side and made me jump. He bound my hands with a zip tie and used another to tie them both to the grab handle above the window. As soon as he let go, the sharp plastic tie cut into my skin unless I held them up. When I let the weight of my arms relax, it hurt.

Whistling a jaunty tune, Nikolai fastened my seatbelt and slammed the door hard enough to rock the entire vehicle. He rounded the car and got into the driver’s side.

That was when I realized this wasn’t the same car. “Did you steal another car?”

“It was an upgrade. It’s not easy to throw a guy like Kirill off our tracks; the man is persistent. It’s one of his more admirable qualities.” Nikolai started the car and pulled onto the dark road, accelerating so fast I squeezed my eyes closed in terror.

My hand stung, and I looked up at it, remembering him cutting me. Dread swelled in my belly. I asked the question I was sure I didn’t want to be answered. “What did you take out of my hand?”

Nikolai drummed his fingers on the wheel. “A microchip,” he answered breezily like it was customary to have in your hand.

“What kind of microchip?”

“What kind do you think Kirill would put in your hand? A tracking one, silly girl.”

I stared at the road rushing past us, horror spreading through my veins. All the times Kirill or his men had shown up wherever I was, I’d thought it a weird coincidence. What a fucking idiot.

“A tracker,” I repeated.

“Yeah. He chipped you—like a cat,” Nikolai said, with amusement in his

tone. “Meow for me, Mallory.” His dark chuckle scraped along my nerves.
My stomach turned again, and I closed my eyes.
I’d preferred being passed out.

KIRILL

All traces of Henry Madison were gone by the time I got to the warehouse. Seeing Mallory's father shot dead in front of me last night had broken something inside me.

I'd hunted Mallory down and finally found her after seven years of missing her, hating her, and blaming her for everything that had dragged me into darkness. I could no longer blame her, and I no longer wanted to.

It was time to let the past go.

With Mallory at my side, I could finally do that. Sure, my once bright future as a track star was long behind me, and my hands were too blood-stained to consider living a non-bratva life, but that didn't mean I had to be a threatened heir of my father's empire, battling my brother for the title.

It was time to rid myself of Viktor Chernov, my father and aging *pakhan* of the Chernov bratva, and Nikolai, my lunatic half-brother, once and for all.

Viktor might have lasted longer if he hadn't been so hellbent on pushing me into an arranged marriage with the daughter of a rival family. I had no intention of marrying Sofia De Sanctis, and I was done pretending I was considering it.

"Where is he?" I asked Ivan, my bodyguard. He and his younger brother, Max, were my two closest friends in the brotherhood and the only ones who knew my true intentions toward my father.

"On ice in the basement. I didn't know what you wanted to do with him."

It was no secret that I hated Henry.

From the tender age of seventeen, when I'd first met Mallory and fallen irrevocably in love with her, I'd hated her father. He'd been an abusive piece of human filth, and the world was a better place without him; however, despite that being clear as day, Mallory had never truly hated him. She liked to act tough, but her heart was softer than she wanted anyone to know.

The usual method for getting rid of the bodies killed in the line of bratva work was to dissolve them or staple rocks inside their chests and let them sink to the bottom of the Hudson. Neither were particularly dignified final resting places.

"Bury him. Bury him for Mallory," I told Ivan.

He nodded, accepting my edict without question. While he'd deny it since he valued his life, he had developed a soft spot for my Molly. I'd set his brother, Max, to watch her. My inner circle consisted of Max, his brother, Ivan, and Pyotr; they were the only ones I trusted to protect the most important thing in my life.

Ivan answered a call as I sat in the creaking desk chair in the old office my father used at times, including when he'd blown out my knee at the tender age of nineteen, dooming me to the life he'd dreamed for me.

His entire body went rigid as his face paled. Alarm blew through me as Ivan raised his blue eyes to mine.

"What is it?" I asked, immediately alert.

"It's Max," Ivan said quietly. This morning Max had been on guard at The Tower, as usual. Icy dread crawled through me as I listened. "He's in the hospital. He—they were attacked at the penthouse."

I stood, rounding the desk, my heart hammering in my ears in a terrible, droning roar. "Tell me."

Ivan hesitated. "Max was shot, but he survived. The rest didn't. Mallory—" he trailed off.

I grabbed him, unable to contain my furious worry for one more second.

“Mallory, what?” I growled. My eyes dared him to tell me she was dead.

“She’s gone. He took her.”

“Who?” I already knew who, but I asked anyway, needing confirmation.

“Your brother. Nikolai took her.”

The words sank through my aching heart like stones. I released Ivan, but my hand remained on his shoulder, and I squeezed. He took it for the apology I intended.

Taken wasn’t dead. Relief eased my fury a notch and allowed me to breathe.
Taken wasn’t dead.

My brother had jumped places with my father to the top of the people-to-kill list. When I found him, and I wouldn’t stop until I did, only one of us would walk away.

“Go see Max. He’ll be upset that he failed to protect her. It’s not his fault. Niko . . . I will handle Nikolai when we find him, which we will.”

“You’re going to kill him?”

“He’s touched Molly. He has to die. How he dies and how long his torture lasts will depend on what he’s done to her by the time we get there.”



I WENT to see Viktor as soon as my blood had cooled. He called me into the sitting room of the showy house he’d bought in Brooklyn near Brighton Beach, home of the *bratva*. It was custom-built with columns and two snarling wolves, cast in stone, sitting by the gates. Money couldn’t buy taste; Viktor was proof of that.

Inside the sitting room, the housekeeper, Elisa, poured black tea into long glass cups and added lemon slices to the side. I waited until she moved away to speak.

“I wanted to speak to Nikolai. Is he around?” There was no point in showing my cards to Viktor. I had no idea if Nikolai was acting alone.

“He should be. He’s looking into that new business venture he’s interested in. Trafficking, such a normal word for something so—messy.” Viktor drank some tea and coughed.

Viktor had smoked three packs a day for as long as I’d known him. If I’d ever wanted proof that the man whose blood ran in my veins had made a deal with the devil long ago, it was that he remained robust in his old age.

“He led me to think you were the one interested in that,” I said, trying my best to act calm.

Luckily, the mask of cold indifference I’d honed over the years was easy to slip on. It had been tested in a hundred different ways in the brutal years following high school when I’d been an apprentice in my father’s dark school of violence and bratva life.

“Me?” Viktor jerked a meaty thumb toward himself and shook his head. “I told him we won’t make enough money that way, but he wants to stay busy. I understand him. I was like him once.”

That was why Viktor favored Nikolai for taking over the bratva.

“I’m your son, too,” I reminded him.

He nodded and shrugged. “In blood, yes, but in brains? You are your mother. If she’d stayed with me, maybe all our lives would have been very different.”

I paused, distracted for a moment by Viktor’s willingness to talk about my mother, Fiona. He rarely mentioned her name. After she’d run from him, with me in tow as a child, he’d blown through a procession of lovers. Surprisingly, I only had one half-brother with the number of women Viktor had gone through.

Viktor laughed at my expression. “You aren’t the only one capable of feeling for a woman, Kirill. I imagine I felt about your mother the way you feel about your Mallory.”

Molly’s name on my father’s lips always sent my heart into overdrive. It triggered my flight or fight response, and when it came to protecting Mallory, I’d fight every time.

Viktor watched as my fists curled involuntarily in my lap. “The real question is: do you love her enough to let her go?”

I stared at him, anger lashing inside me like a whip. I didn’t appreciate him comparing my lifelong love for Mallory with the shit show that was my childhood. That Viktor thought he had released my mother because he’d loved her enough to let her have another kind of life filled me with rage. He was recasting history to drive doubt into my mind. He didn’t know how impossible that was.

I’d have Mallory, and no one would keep her from me. I’d die to protect her, and if I failed, I’d die to join her. I wouldn’t live without her. That was one thing I would never allow.

“I’m not going to marry Sofia De Sanctis,” I told Viktor instead of the rant brewing in my head. “Call the deal off.”

“It’s too late for that, son. You’ve met. She isn’t objecting. It is known. Calling off now would cost us not only money but blood. Antonio De Sanctis would want a pound of flesh for embarrassing him, and he’d want it from you.”

“I don’t care. I won’t marry her.” I pushed my tea away and stood.

Viktor clearly had no idea what was going on with Nikolai. So, my insane brother was making a secret play for leadership. He wanted to bend me to his will by taking the one thing in the world I cared about. He wanted to be *pakhan*, and he was tired of waiting. Viktor was unaware that Nikolai was attempting to take the decision out of his hands.

“Kirill, son, don’t be hasty. This will have lasting repercussions. It’s unbecoming an heir of this bratva,” Viktor said heavily. It was the clearest he’d ever been in his warning. Marry Sofia De Sanctis, or forget being boss.

“So be it,” I tossed to him before turning to leave.

I wasn’t planning on waiting for him to announce my brother as his successor. I planned on killing him and taking the title. He and Nikolai could burn in hell for all I cared.

I left the house on 2nd Avenue and went to the car. My men spread around

me, always watchful when we came to Viktor's stronghold. They followed in the car behind as I told my driver to take us to the hospital. Max was my brother more than Nikolai had ever been.

I pulled out my cell and stared at the blinking dot that was Molly's tracker discarded in the alleyway behind The Tower, found in a small pool of blood. Nikolai had cut open her hand to tear it out, and I'd dismember him for it.

What if he told her what you did to her? Maybe she won't want you to rescue her . . .

I ruthlessly silenced the voice of my better self. I was no saint, but Molly knew that. Whatever it was, I could make her understand. We were cut from the same cloth, Mallory Madison and me. Besides, getting her back was the first problem. Getting her to forgive me would come later.

"The question is: do you love her enough to let her go?"

My feelings for Molly weren't mere love; they were obsession and need, a soul-deep connection as necessary to me as air to breathe. If I let Mallory go, I might as well lie down on the earth and die because there wouldn't be anything like life after. It was twisted and unhealthy as fuck, but I couldn't expect anything else at this point.

I was a devil. I couldn't deny it, and now, she probably knew I was a monster who'd had a tracker implanted in her hand and never told her.

But I was *her* monster, and I could never let her go.

MOLLY

When I woke again, the car was stopped. I jerked in my seat and cried out, my hands immediately burning. My wrists had been pulling on the zip tie and were raw. All the blood felt like it had drained out of my arms. I bit down my pained response and looked around me.

Nikolai was nowhere to be seen.

Stillness prickled over me before the urgent need to move and get the hell out of there filled me. We were at a truck stop, and a purple dawn was creeping over the horizon. The inside of the car was all fogged up, and I rubbed my face against the glass to clear it. I jolted as I saw a long, flatbed truck pull into a space not too far away. Nikolai had left me here? He was certainly confident I was out of it. The bottle of water must have been drugged, after all.

I watched as the flatbed driver climbed out and jumped onto the gravel.

I opened my mouth to scream, but only a dry croak came out. Damn it, my mouth was parched and sore from screaming, and I had nothing left to shout with. The trucker was an older man, hardly a match for Nikolai, but I was desperate, and I couldn't see Kirill's crazy brother anywhere. I tried to tap on the glass as the man grew closer, but his eyes were downcast at his cell phone, the white light illuminating his kindly features as he walked toward the rest stop.

I tried to scream again, and it came out as a croak. Growing desperate, I searched for some way to attract attention. I lit upon the suddenly brilliant

idea to get my heels up and bang them down on the horn, but when I tried, the pain in my arms made me cry when it felt like the zip ties were going to cut my hands right off. I could probably manage it, but not in the few seconds I had before this man passed by.

With a fearlessness born of true desperation, I drew back and lunged at the door, smacking the glass with my forehead to produce a dull thump. The man walked on, undisturbed. With a silent roar, I drew back again and lunged forward, hitting my head so hard my skin split and warmth dripped down my forehead. The trucker's step faltered as he looked up from his phone and turned his head to look right at me.

"Help! Help me," I croaked, my eyes staring desperately into his. "Please."

The old man stopped and blinked at me, clearly horrified by what he was seeing. He hesitated a moment before coming toward the car. "Miss, are you hurt? Who did this?" he asked, his voice muted through the glass.

"Please help me. He's coming back," I urged in a rough whisper.

"I'll get help inside," the man said.

I frantically shook my head. *No. No time!*

He must have seen my panic as he stepped toward me. "Well, I can cut you free, but you need to open the door," he called, assessing the situation. "Can you reach the window winder?"

Right, this was an old car, another junker Nikolai had stolen to cover our tracks. It had an old-fashioned turn handle for the window. With an effort of pure will, I wriggled myself up in the seat, the pain in my wrists making me scream in my raw, soundless throat. I crouched on my heels, lifted one foot, and rolled it across the handle. The window nudged open an inch. I did it again, gritting my teeth and trying to keep my weight off my wrists as much as possible.

Finally, the gap was big enough for the man to reach through.

"Okay now, you're nearly out. Let me do that for you," he muttered, reaching in and winding the window down the rest of the way. He leaned into the car to see my wrists before pulling a small pocket knife from his jacket.

“Hot damn, Miss, you’re real cut up,” he said, sounding worried.

“It’s okay. Please, just cut me loose. Don’t worry about it,” I urged him.

Muttering to himself about crazy folks in the world, he started to saw at the zip tie. I cast my eyes desperately around the parking lot as the rising dawn lightened the gloomy shadows with each passing second. Time was running out; I felt it with stone-cold certainty in my belly.

“There we go, Miss,” the man muttered as the last bit of tension loosened from my wrists, and I sagged forward.

I couldn’t even lower my arms quickly. The pain was something else, not to mention they seemed paralyzed in an overhead position.

“We need to call the police,” the man said, backing up.

I put my hands to the window and pulled myself out, hands still raised, landing hard on the ground. “No! No police. I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me. Get in your truck, leave here, and don’t look back.”

“I can’t just leave—”

“He’ll kill you. Please believe me,” I urged the man as he helped me up. “Go! Floor it, and don’t look back,” I begged him before I staggered away.

I looked around, scanning the area. Shadows sat along the edges of the parking lot where a big square building housed the diner and toilet block. A few trucks were filling up at a gas station off to the side. I wasted precious moments agonizing over where to go. The building? Nikolai was undoubtedly inside. The bushes? The first place he’d look. The gas station? I risked him shooting up the place to find me.

That left the trucks. I started toward the lights of the gas pumps and looked back to see that the older man had taken my warning seriously and pulled out. I could have asked him if I could go with him, but I didn’t want to endanger him anymore.

I crept up behind a truck with an open back and peered around the side. I must look a fright. My head was bleeding, and my hands were red, raw, and sheathed in blood. I needed to sneak inside somehow.

I had just found the latch to open the back when a tutting sound sent nerves scrambling through me. I froze, tears springing to my eyes. I stared hard at the dents and scratches on the surface of the metal before my face as I waited.

“Well, Mallory, this isn’t what we talked about, is it?” Nikolai’s voice was an amused drawl.

My rising hope stuttered and died in my chest.

He came closer, taking my arm in his. I struggled and smacked him on the head, biting down a scream at the pain it caused my injured wrists.

“Stop this unless you want me to put a bullet in the head of every single witness here, then get in my car, drive down that truck that just left and end him, too.”

I had no doubt he would do it. Something was broken inside Nikolai that I wasn’t sure had ever been normal in the first place. My eyes fell on a camper van fueling up a few pumps over. A mother walked around with her sleeping baby snug in a baby carrier, humming gently, while the dad pumped gas.

“Okay. I’ll go. I’ll go with you.” My voice was a pained scratch.

“That’s what I thought. Good girl,” Nikolai said, tugging me toward the car.

The window was still rolled down, and there was blood on the window ledge from when I’d crawled out.

Nikolai put me in the passenger seat, then rounded the car. “Thanks to that little stunt, we’ll need to change vehicles again,” he sighed as if my escape attempt was just a minor inconvenience to him. He got in on the other side and turned to me. “Where would you like to be tied this time?”

“Please, not my wrists. It hurts,” I admitted.

Nikolai tilted his head, considering my plea. He reached behind him and emerged with a thick length of rope instead of the zip ties. “This is the best I can do. I suggest not wriggling too much or pissing me off further if you know what’s good for you.”

He made me lean forward and tied my hands at the small of my back.

Thankfully, it didn't pull my shoulders out of place or hurt too much. He guided me back so my arms were securely tucked behind me and fastened my seatbelt. "Safety first, Miss Madison," he quipped, his good humor seemingly restored.

"What happened to you?" I murmured when he reached across me to fasten my seatbelt. "What made you like this?"

"Why? You think something can fix me?" Nikolai asked, meeting my gaze. "I could say it was my past, my fucked-up childhood, my father, Kirill . . . or just bad blood."

"Is it? Is that why?"

He paused before leaning out of the car and shaking his head ruefully. "Plan B isn't going to work if you're hoping to endear yourself to me, Mallory. I don't care about you, my brother, or your fucking star-crossed lovers deal."

"What do you care about?" The words were forced from my lips before I could consider if it was a good idea to push Nikolai like this. Maybe I had a death wish, but I couldn't seem to shut up.

He ignored me as he rounded the car and got into the driver's seat.

"Well?" I pushed. Yep, death wish confirmed.

He started the car and pulled out, spraying gravel in all directions. "Enough questions or I'll gag you. You've been warned."

He turned the radio on. Heavy rock music pounded through the speakers, and I turned my face toward the window. It was smeared with blood, where I'd hit it with my head. I willed my eyes shut and tried not to panic.

Kirill would come for me. If I wasn't sure about anything else in this life, I was sure of that. Kirill would come for me, and God help Nikolai when he did.



I MUST HAVE DRIFTED off again. When I woke, we were moving slowly,

rocking back and forth on a dirt track. I'd lost track of how long we'd been on the move. It could have been one day or three.

My head pounded. I probably had a concussion, and my body ached. I'd been to the bathroom a few times by the side of the road while Nikolai held a gun trained on me, and I'd eaten the odd banana he'd tossed my way. I was no stranger to hunger, though the last few weeks at Kirill's with Olga's cooking had spoiled me.

Olga. The thought of the brisk, taciturn Russian lady made me want to cry. I thanked whatever power was out there watching this shit show that the older woman had been done for the day when Nikolai had come to get me.

An urgent thought pushed its way into my head as I watched the car's headlights, another stolen one, dip over the trees of a densely packed forest pressing in on either side of the road.

"What happened to Max?" I asked, though I was sure I'd never been more dry-mouthed in my life. Max was my bodyguard and one of Kirill's best friends. A Chernov made man who had cared about me, even just a little.

"Shot, like the rest," Nikolai muttered.

I felt sick, my stomach churning, and a hot tear left my eye and dashed down my cheek. "You're a fucking bastard, and I hope you burn in hell one day," I muttered, utterly devastated by yet another loss.

"That fact is undeniable," Nikolai said matter-of-factly, "but I believe in dancing in the flames before the fire takes you. We're here," he grunted, pulling my attention ahead.

There was a vague shape of a house through the dark trees. When did it become night again? As we drew closer, I realized it wasn't just a house. Such a word shouldn't apply to something so big. It was three levels, sitting in a clearing in a dense forest. The architecture was rustic, yet the sheer size hinted that this was a custom build for someone and no mere hunter's cabin.

"Whose place is this?"

"It was my mother's. The woman Viktor met in Russia, dragged over here kicking and screaming, and locked inside this prison to die," Nikolai said, his

dispassionate tone jarring with his words.

I stared wordlessly at him.

He chuckled at my expression. “I suppose Viktor wanted to ensure his next baby mama wouldn’t run away like Kirill’s mother did.” He shut off the car and relaxed back against the seat. “I grew up here until I was twelve when I was taken from her to begin my education.”

I didn’t know what to say. It was too sad and terrible. Instead, I bit my lip and tried not to think about Max and Kirill and all the ways people hurt each other.

“Come on, I’ll give you the grand tour,” Nikolai said, pushing open the door and stepping onto the pine-needled floor. He rounded to my side and opened the door to help me out but didn’t untie my hands. “I’m sorry, I have to take precautions. You’re still a flight risk, Mallory. I’m sure you understand.”

He pushed me ahead of him toward the stairs leading up to the front porch. A man shifted in the darkness, making me stop in fright. There were several men, I realized, as Nikolai urged me up the stairs. Dressed in black, they seemed to blend seamlessly into the darkness.

“My men are here to protect us and to keep you in. They will hurt you should you disobey me,” Nikolai continued.

He caught up to me when I stumbled on the top step and nearly face-planted since my hands were still bound behind my back. Only his strong hand hauling me upward stopped me.

He held me close to him, his head tilted down so his eyes could meet mine. “Don’t run unless you want to be shackled. Run twice, and I’ll rethink if you need both feet. Do you understand?”

“Why would I bother running from here? I have no idea where we are, I’m hurt, and I have nowhere to go but the forest.”

“Yet, I bet if I burrowed into your pretty head right now, I’d see a plan being made. At the very least, I bet you are relying on the belief that Kirill will come for you.”

“Aren’t you? Isn’t that why you’ve brought me here? You know he’ll come for me, and then you can try to kill him out here, alone and isolated.

“I’m flattered you think there is a clear victor between us.”

“I said you’d try to kill him, not that you’d succeed.”

Nikolai narrowed his eyes at me, the tension building for a few heartbeats before he smirked. “What confidence you have in Kirill . . . it’s almost like you don’t know him at all. Putting a tracker under your skin and never telling you about it is the least of the things he’s done to you, Mallory.”

“What else has he done?”

“Terrible, permanent things,” Nikolai teased.

I stiffened, shoving down the hurt about the tracker and refusing to rise to his bait. “Why should I believe anything you say?”

“I thought you’d say that . . . what if I have proof?” Nikolai teased.

I stared at him, my heart in my mouth. “Tell me one thing. Is Kirill engaged?” The question came out of nowhere. I hadn’t thought about the whispered conversation I’d overheard since this ordeal began. But there it was, popping back up at the first opportunity.

Nikolai’s smile made him look cruel and handsome. How could someone so dark look so dashing? “Damn,” he muttered softly. “I hate ruined surprises.”

The look in his eyes confirmed my worst fears. Kirill *was* engaged. A good deal of fight left me, and I was suddenly so tired that I could barely think straight. It was disappointment or a concussion. Time would tell.

“Now, let’s get you inside. There’s much to discuss, Mallory Madison, and I can promise you this — I won’t lie to you.”

He pushed me ahead, and this time, I went.

KIRILL

“*I* want to know where he went as soon as he left the city, which direction, where did he stop. Pyotr, did you get the phone records?”

Pyotr shifted in the doorway, looking grim. “I did, but you won’t like it. It looks like he’s been using a burner. His phone has barely seen any action and is still at his place in the city.”

“Card activity,” I continued, running through my mental checklist. Thanks to the number of secrets I held over influential people, I could utilize as many resources into finding Mallory and Nikolai as a detective.

“Nothing. He’s using cash wherever he is, or he has some fake plastic,” Pyotr murmured.

I slammed my fist down on the table, making the array of old, used coffee cups jump. “He can’t just disappear. Why can’t we trace the car he stole?”

“We can, and we have. It was reported stolen and abandoned at a gas station about a hundred miles north of the city.”

“Well?” I continued, excitement surging in my veins.

“Well . . .?” Pyotr continued.

He was exhausted, and I was too. Ivan and Max were at the hospital, and I didn’t trust anyone else to help me trace Nikolai. I didn’t know who my men were and who were Nikolai’s inside the bratva.

I reminded myself that tired men made mistakes and to go easy on the last of my trusted men. “Were there any reports of other cars stolen from the gas station?”

Pyotr’s brow furrowed. “No, but there was one a few streets over. The only theft that day in that town.”

I reached for a cold cup of coffee and waited for his tired brain to catch up.

“Fuck me.” Pyotr scrubbed a hand over his face and made for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To find out if the second car was abandoned anywhere and what went missing next,” he called back.

I went to drink again, needing the fuel to stay awake.

Olga bustled in and plucked my freezing cup from my hands. “I’ll make you tea.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, I’ll make you tea,” she insisted with a steely hint of resolve I recognized well. It was nearly impossible to win an argument with Olga when she had set her mind on something.

“Fine. Thank you.” I leaned back in my chair, a raw ache in my chest. It had spread like poison across my torso since I discovered Mallory was gone. It was stark, unrelenting terror. I hadn’t felt it since the night I’d had my knee blown out and realized Mallory had left me. She hadn’t waited for me. Now, it seemed such a trivial thing to care about when faced with a future without her.

“She will be okay. If she doesn’t talk too much, he won’t hurt her,” Olga said in a way that was designed to be comforting but was anything but.

“And you think she’s not going to talk too much?” I asked the housekeeper.

She had her hands clasped tightly and was wringing her fingers slowly and methodically. “You’re worried about her? So, she’s gotten under your skin too.”

Olga frowned and tossed her head. “No. Caring for her is my job, and she is . . . endearing,” she finished after casting about for the right word.

“Yes, she is that.”

The older lady shocked me by laying her strong, meaty hand on top of mine. “She will be all right. She’s stronger than she looks and knows you will find her.”

“Do you think she knows that?” It was a question I’d asked myself a hundred times. What was going through Molly’s head? Was she confident in my ability to find her? Was she waiting for me? Worst of all . . . did she blame me for all of it?

“Of course, she knows. You are Kirill Viktorovich Chernov. No one can hide from you for long.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, but I’ll tell you a secret; I’m just an ordinary man.”

Olga wrinkled her nose as if she didn’t care for that humble assessment of the man she had decided was a superhero. “Not exactly ordinary. You are the man who loves her . . . that makes you stronger than any other.”

I didn’t have the words to respond. It was true. I loved Molly, and I always would.

I started to reply when my phone lit up and vibrated across the table. “*Slyshayu*,” I answered immediately. Nikolai might be calling for a ransom. If he told me to come and exchange myself for Mallory, I would do it in a heartbeat.

“Kirill? Kirill Chernov? It’s Sofia De Sanctis.”



I MET Sofia at the same place we had dinner with our fathers. She looked tired as she ordered soup and sank back in her seat. Her make-up was also conspicuously thick.

“What happened?” I asked as I forced down some pasta to fill the gnawing hole in my belly. I’d lost track of when I’d last eaten.

She raised a brow at me in question. I gestured toward her face, and she reddened.

“Nothing. An accident at home,” she muttered. “Besides, that’s not why I wanted to speak to you. I thought you should know my father isn’t happy about the delays in the engagement. I don’t know if you’re still planning to find a way out of this for both of us, but time is short. It might already be too late to do so without consequences.”

“Any consequence that comes down on me, I’ll bear it. Don’t worry about it.”

“It might not be just on you.” She let out a trembling sigh, and the part of me able to feel pity for broken women shuddered. “Antonio sees it as my fault if I cannot attract a husband.”

I thumped my fist on the table so hard that the cutlery jumped. “*Blyat!*” I swore darkly. “What the fuck is it with my father and yours?” I muttered as I tried to soothe my frayed temper. “This is my fault. I waited too long. I was distracted, and I didn’t want to rock the boat before I was ready, and now, everything is fucked.”

“We could go through with it,” Sofia said quietly. “I know you have someone else. It’s okay. I don’t mind. We could go through with it so—” She stopped and collected herself, but not before a tear slipped from her eye and wore a path through her heavy cover-up, revealing the purple bruise around her eye like a tiny stripe.

“So it won’t hurt anymore?” I supplied for her.

She nodded.

I reached out and touched her hand, wrapping my fingers around it. “Sofia, if circumstances were different, I wouldn’t hesitate. But I can’t. I will marry one woman and one woman only, even if I have to kill my father and brother to do it and even if I die immediately after. I’m a man hurtling toward his end with no idea how I’m going to stop before I hit the wall, but I’ve made my peace with that. I’m sorry, I can’t save you. I can’t save myself, either. I have

only one shot at saving someone, and it's her."

Sofia was quiet; her dark eyes fixed on me. Then she smiled, and it was a beautiful, heartbreaking thing. "She's a lucky woman."

"She'd disagree," I countered. "She'd say that meeting me was probably the worst thing that ever happened to her, depending on what my brother has planned."

Sofia frowned, and her gaze turned musing. "Nikolai is a strange bird. He's much smarter than anyone gives him credit for, and he likes to keep it that way." She ate some soup and winced as it touched her lips.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, he's not as unhinged and erratic as you think. It's an act. He's perfectly capable of controlling himself when he wants to. He's not who everyone thinks he is, and that only makes him more dangerous. But I don't think he'd hurt your girl," Sofia said.

I stared hard at her, shocked at this revelation into my half-brother's character I never saw coming.

"He doesn't kill women. Surely you know that." Sofia continued.

I thought furiously through the past, sorting over memories I'd mostly forgotten and didn't care to remember. I'd never killed or hurt a woman, either. I never would. But Nikolai? He had always given the impression that nothing was off the table when it came to bloodshed and mayhem.

"He could have hurt me in return for scarring up his handsome face, but he didn't. He held me when I cried and told me it was okay in case I felt guilty about it." Sofia chuckled reluctantly.

I couldn't wrap my head around this news. It didn't fit with the version of the past that Nikolai himself had delivered. "But that night at dinner—"

"I told you; he keeps up the act. Around you and your father, it's the thickest. You'd never see through, and he doesn't want you to."

"If he's not as terrible as he seems, why didn't you want him when your father asked you about the arranged marriage?"

“I said he wasn’t quite as terrible as he seems, but he’s still terrifying. Clever and dark, malicious and twisted. He doesn’t need to cut women up to be scary,” she told me. “About that. You know, I spoke to Nikolai a few weeks ago. He told me I should reconsider him as the marriage match because you’d never give two fucks about me. When I refused, he told me if I wasn’t careful, he’d take me somewhere my father wouldn’t find me, chain me to the bed for a month, and send me back to New York pregnant, so the matter would be settled.”

“What a charmer,” I muttered dryly. But how could I judge Nikolai when I was fucking Mallory without protection, and she had no idea? Sofia was reminding me I wasn’t as different from my brother as I’d thought, and that made my stomach churn.

“Anyway, he said he’d take me north near the border. He called it his mama’s old place and said no one would find me there because no one knew about it.”

His mother’s old place. A frisson of excitement fizzed through me. Holy fuck. Sofia had just given me a new thread to pull.

I pushed back from the table, and she cringed, giving me pause. “I’m sorry, I have to go. You’ve just helped me more than you realize. I wish I could do something to help you.”

“You can,” Sofia said, standing as well. “Take the blame and make sure Antonio knows it.”

I nodded, barely even considering the repercussions of that simple request. I’d hardly let the blame fall on Sofia, anyway. It wasn’t her fault. There was nothing wrong with her except for one simple fact. She wasn’t Mallory.

Pyotr paid the bill as I strode from the restaurant and out onto the street, already dialing Ivan as I went.

“Yes, boss.”

“What is Nikolai’s mother’s name?”

Ivan was quiet for a moment. “I think it was Irina. Irina Bulgakova, but I have to check.”

“Check now. I think I know where Nikolai’s going.”

MOLLY

The house in the woods was beautiful inside. Beautiful and creepy. It creaked at odd times and was permanently drafty. It was all dark wood and endless shelves of books with spidery Cyrillic writing down the spines. I never thought I'd miss the cold, modern comfort of the Tower, but this place in the woods had achieved it.

Nikolai took me to a room with a four-poster bed draped in thick velvet curtains and locked me in. The whole place smelled faintly like dead roses. I tried the windows first, just to check. They were nailed shut, and I was on the second floor without the porch roof below. It would be a hard drop even if I managed to break the window and get out before someone stopped me.

There were other men here. Chernov bratva thugs with knuckle tattoos and hard expressions. They'd watched as I walked inside on Nikolai's arm. It had been unsettling. I missed Max. The thought of my former bodyguard tugged my wildly oscillating mood back to sadness, and I shuffled onto the bed, fully dressed, and gingerly slid beneath the covers. It was cold as hell. When was the last time someone slept in this room? It was like a relic from a different time.

I shivered under the covers, my mind drifting immediately to Nikolai's words. Kirill had lied to me? Well, that certainly wasn't anything new, but the tracker in my hand had been an unwelcome surprise. The engagement being real? That hurt.

I closed my eyes and forced my tears into the place inside me that took

weakness and made it anger and grit. I hugged the resulting fury deep inside my chest, huddling close for warmth. Somehow, despite my fear, confusion, and heartbreak, the cold fell away, and the quiet of the woods lulled me to sleep.



THE NEXT MORNING, Nikolai strode around the kitchen, barking out orders in Russian at the army of black-clad killers he trusted to watch over us while we slept. I sat at the breakfast table as the men talked and moved around. They were making breakfast. It was a jarring sight.

“Here, it’s my mother’s recipe,” Nikolai said later, placing a plate of huge, soft Russian pancakes before me. My hands were bound behind my back again, and the pancakes were cut into tiny pieces.

“I’m not hungry,” I bit out, my stomach churning. I turned my face away from the sight of the food.

Nikolai sighed and grabbed my fork. He pierced a piece of pancake hard enough to crack the plate. “I said eat, or I’ll make you,” he said in a jovial tone that held enough manic violence to chill my blood.

He pushed the fork into my mouth, and I chewed it. Honey dripped down my chin, and I glared at him.

“Compliment the chef,” he ordered.

“Fuck you,” I muttered, managing to swallow. It wasn’t half bad.

“No, thanks. I don’t do Kirill’s leftovers.” He grinned and pulled out a chair beside me.

I attempted to move further from him, and he tugged my chair harshly across the floor until I couldn’t escape his feeding. What was it with Chernov men trying to feed me up?

“I thought we’d eat, take a little walk, and then you’ll rest,” he said. “We don’t want you looking quite so wrecked when Kirill shows up for you, do we? The last sight he sees before I put a bullet in his brain is how well I’ve

treated his little soulmate.”

“He isn’t dumb. He’s hardly going to charge in here with guns blazing. It’s obviously a trap.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Mallory. Kirill, Viktor, everyone I’ve ever met has underestimated me. Kirill will think that since he worked out the location of this place, he will surprise me. He’s worryingly predictable,” Nikolai said, shoveling another piece of pancake into my mouth.

My stomach lurched, rolling inside me, and I turned my face away as I chewed. “Stop. I think I’m going to be sick.”

Nikolai raised a lazy eyebrow at me. “I thought you’d have a stronger tolerance for sedatives, seeing as my brother had you dosed before you knew he’d found you. I was sure you’d have built up some resistance by now.”

“He what?” I asked, unease worming through me. Fucking Nikolai. Everything he said was a perfectly designed bomb waiting to go off and blow the things I’d thought were real to pieces.

“He had Rafael Navarro drug you after your shifts, so he could come and creep on you while you were passed out.”

As those words sank in, the nausea in my belly erupted, and I turned my head just in time to puke on the floor.

Nikolai’s chair scraped back as he stood. “*Blyat, suka!* Quit throwing up, or I really will kill you.”

I rested my forehead on the table, remembering those mornings when I’d felt groggy and half-dead, wandering around my apartment, paranoid that someone had been in there. I thought it had been Henry. I was so fucking naïve.

“Do you have a problem with vomiting? You need probiotics or something?” Nikolai demanded.

Something inside my miserable chest cracked at his annoyed tone. I started laughing. This situation was so demented and unreal. A confirmed killer was asking if I needed a probiotic to keep food down.

“Look, Mallory, as much as I like a nice descent into madness, keep it together. We’re just starting this thing.”

Nikolai directed his lackeys to clean the floor, and I slumped in my chair to find him putting a glass of cool water to my lips.

“Spit this on me, and I’ll force you to eat the rest of my mama’s pancakes before taping your mouth shut, understood?” he warned.

I nodded, too weary to fight him. I sipped the water.

He watched me, his dark eyes tracking across my features. Putting the glass down, he tucked my hair back even as I turned my face away. “You need to get cleaned up, and after, we’ll talk. There’s no point in turning yourself inside out worrying about Kirill, Mallory. If you knew the things he’d done, the things he is doing to you right now with hundreds of miles between you, you wouldn’t bother getting upset over his impending fate.”

“Why do you hate him so much?”

“I don’t hate him. Not at all. He might know me best in this whole world, but in the end, I’m just a soldier, and orders are orders,” Nikolai said quietly.

I stiffened as cold shivers crept over my skin. “You mean your father asked you to do this?”

“My father ordered me to shoot you in cold blood and leave you in Kirill’s bed,” Nikolai said.

I swallowed hard as my pulse roared in my ears. “So, what are you doing? Why are we here?”

Nikolai turned his eyes away from me to a picture hanging on the wall. It was an oil painting, clearly amateur, but Nikolai looked at it reverently.

“You know, before she died, Irina, my mother, went almost completely mad here alone. The isolation stole her mind, and losing me, of course. Viktor killed her mind long before her body. I’m starting to think he’s doing the same to Kirill and me.”

That revelation stilled me, and a tiny, persistent flicker of hope flourished in my chest. “Why let him? He couldn’t stop you and Kirill together.”

Nikolai sighed, leaning against the wall and crossing his inked arms over his broad chest. He wasn't as huge and intimidating as Kirill, but few were. He came close, though, and there was a supple grace about movements that screamed predator to my hindbrain.

"That was never going to happen from the moment Viktor ordered your death."

"But you didn't do it. You brought me here instead," I urged.

Nikolai grinned, but it looked sad somehow. "Regardless. I know my brother. Bringing you here was tantamount to declaring war against him. Now, go and lie down. You're sick. I can't call a doctor up here, and the last thing I need is to give Kirill a body back."

A man came up behind me and pulled me up, and Nikolai watched as I was led from the room.

"I thought you were going to kill him," I reminded Nikolai over my shoulder.

He was silent, leaving his cryptic words to spin around and around in my head.



NIKOLAI DIDN'T LET me out of my room again until nighttime, and I spent most of the day reading an English book I found in the dresser and sleeping.

He was waiting for me in the library. A roaring fire burned in the ornate hearth, and a dinner of what smelled like tomato soup and a hunk of dry black bread lay on a small table. I fell on it like a starving wolf. Nikolai chuckled as he watched me. He hadn't had my hands bound again since this morning, and I enjoyed the freedom of being able to feed myself.

"Don't eat too fast. You need to keep this down." He took a seat on the opposite side of the fire from me. Two huge leather wingback armchairs were pulled up around it. A toasting fork was perched over one side of the flames and an odd pan with holes in the bottom.

“It’s for chestnuts,” Nikolai said as he followed my gaze.

“You haven’t tied my hands,” I pointed out after a moment. I hated waiting to see if he was going to restrain me again. I liked to manage my expectations.

Nikolai inclined his head. “I decided to see how it goes. I considered the ways to stop you from running and dying of exposure out in the forest, and I’ve landed on the most effective one. Honesty.”

“Honesty?” I repeated, worry clashing with the food filling my belly.

Nikolai’s lip curved in a knowing grin like he held all the cards and knew it, while I had a losing hand. “I like you, Mallory. You don’t strike me as a lovesick fool or a captive, so I figured the only way you stay with my brother is because he’s lying to you.”

“Kirill doesn’t lie to me. I knew about the engagement,” I pointed out, unsure why I was trying to convince Nikolai not to shed light on what he considered Kirill’s lies. I was afraid, I realized immediately. I was scared shitless about the things I didn’t know.

“True. I was surprised by that. I suppose he thought he could still get out of it,” Nikolai mused. “But there are other things. I forgot to give you my condolences on your loss. Your father, Henry.”

Nikolai leaned in and watched me with a wolfish intensity that turned my stomach. His shrewd eyes caught every flicker of emotion in my eyes, from surprise and shock to hurt.

He smiled. “Oops. Did you not hear the news? Your father passed under Kirill’s care only a few nights ago.”

“What night?” I asked numbly.

“Hmm, let’s see. About three nights ago.”

The night of the panic room. The night he’d come to me and held me close, slept beside me, and shown me the tattoo over his heart. My stomach lurched again as the knowledge that Henry was dead crashed against me like a tidal wave. I dropped my spoon and sat back.

Nikolai watched me, his head cocked to the side like an alien studying human

emotions. “No tears for good old dad?”

“We didn’t have a good relationship,” I said woodenly.

The shock was only now fading enough to feel. Henry was dead. My father was dead. For most of my life, he’d been cast in the villain’s role, and it had only gotten worse since the night we’d fled Woodhaven and struggled to survive together. There had been no love lost between us, yet he had been my family. I didn’t know how to feel about his loss, but I knew exactly how I felt about Kirill keeping it from me.

“That’s not all,” Nikolai added, just when the emotional storm inside me died down a fraction. He tapped a paper printout on a small end table next to him, then passed it over to me. “Dr. Petrov is a Chernov man, and he was more than happy to supply the records of your stay in the hospital.”

Fresh pain and anxiety flooded through me. I couldn’t take much more. I already felt sick and dizzy half the time. I reached for the paper with trembling fingers, dropping my eyes and scanning the typed words. It was all medical language, and I could barely make out anything useful in my current state of turmoil. “What does it say?”

“Well, it doesn’t spell it out too clearly, but conclusions can be reached based on your symptoms,” Nikolai said, fiddling with a knife he’d procured from somewhere.

I should be more worried about that knife than the words I typed clearly on the paper.

CURRENT FORM OF BIRTH CONTROL: implant.

*Condition: effective period lapsed based on hormone concentration in blood.
Recommended removal: declined.*

“BUT THEN AGAIN, maybe you have a stomach bug. It could be anything,” Nikolai continued, his dark eyes glinting.

I sat back in a daze. Words failed me. My birth control wasn't effective anymore? And Kirill knew it, judging by the report. He'd fucking known it.

He'd always made a point to finish inside me, sinking deep and staying pressed in as far as he could. He'd even pressed the spend that escaped back inside me. Something shattered inside my heart.

"No tears for me, Princess?" Nikolai mused, using Kirill's nickname for me. I didn't ask him not to. "If Kirill had used me and manipulated me like that, I'd be pretty upset, I guess."

I met his gaze as black fury descended over my vision. My hands curved into hard fists on my knee.

Nikolai chuckled. "Ah, there it is. Welcome to the age of enlightenment, Mallory. You can make your choices now that you know the whole picture. I don't want to tie you up again. I'm done with that, and I don't think your skinny little wrists can take it. Regardless of what you think about me, I don't like to make women bleed. If you're going to run—"

"I won't." My voice came out like the hardest metal. "I'm not going to run. I'm going to wait right here for Kirill."

Nikolai grinned. "Excellent. May the truth set you free." He looked speculative as he tilted his head to the side. "You know, you remind me of Irina, my mother, before a Chernov used her up and spat her out. Maybe Kirill plans to take your child from you when it's old enough and leave you somewhere like this to die alone."

My heart crumbled in my chest as I shook my head. "I won't let that happen."

"Maybe you won't. You have a lot of advantages she didn't. You can speak English for one. Another advantage is . . . you have me." Nikolai's smile was a wicked and terrible thing. "I don't want to see you end up like her, Princess. I'll do my part to stop it, but you have to do the rest."

"I'll do it." My voice was a deathly whisper over the husk of my heart. "No matter what, I'll do it."

KIRILL

*S*rina Bulgakova had owned a house upstate, near the Pennsylvania border. I was on the move with a handpicked team as soon as I had the location.

We'd searched for properties owned by Nikolai, but I had never considered that his mother had a property to her name. Viktor had never married her, so her surname had been a mystery to me. Viktor didn't exactly spoil his women after my mother left him, but I supposed giving him a healthy son had been enough to warrant a house in the woods. I was annoyed at myself for not thinking of it sooner.

Molly had been with Nikolai for four days and five nights. I couldn't let myself become paralyzed with worry over what he'd done to her in that time. If she was alive, everything else could be fixed, no matter what it was. If she wasn't, well, I didn't plan on Nikolai or myself leaving those woods.

I'd already decided I would lie down to die next to Mallory, wherever her body might rest. My brother could rot and be eaten by wild animals for all I cared. It was time to end this rivalry between Viktor Chernov's sons, once and for all.

It took an entire day to travel to the house. When we got close, we suited up and entered the woods. I'd spared no expense in the weapons and my men's protective gear. Unfortunately, we needed more than Pyotr and Ivan, as I had no idea how many men supported Nikolai in his bid to draw me out. That was clearly the plan. He had taken Molly to bring me here and force me to fight in

the arena of his choosing, and here I was, presenting my neck to the chopping block for his knife.

He didn't know how little I had to lose without Mallory. I was the lethal weapon in this situation, depending on how she was. Nikolai didn't realize I had little interest in preserving myself if I couldn't have her back.

I had extra men with me. It turned out that there were more Chernovs than I'd expected who had grown tired of Viktor's leadership. More made men under my command wanted to continue the cleaner, less risky, and more profitable direction in which I'd taken the *bratva*. Those men now weaved through the woods with me. Up ahead, the shine of glass under the moonlight caught my eye.

We had arrived.

Ivan paused beside me. "It's not too late to hang back."

I pulled the small radio out of my belt to test it. Every man had the same equipment so we could warn each other of threats. "Molly's in there. I'm going," I told him flatly.

"If she's still alive," Ivan said quietly. I stared him down until he dropped my burning gaze. "You know it's you he wants."

"And I want him. We end this tonight. There can't be two heirs to the Chernov name. I will face Nikolai."

"And you trust these men with us?" Ivan looked into the dark woods, where the men were swiftly surrounding the property. I couldn't answer that right now. I trusted some of them, others were wild cards, but I didn't have much time, and I needed an overwhelming force.

"I trust them enough," I told him, toggling my radio. "Positions. Let's get this started," I said on my radio.

With their guns drawn, my men moved toward the house as I left Ivan and looped around the back. Inside the house was the muted sound of guns shooting with silencers. I ignored the bloodshed and mayhem, climbed up on the porch's roof, and broke the window nearest the second floor. The glass tinkled softly inside. I balanced precariously on the porch roof and waited for

someone to investigate. A dark head leaned out, and I grabbed the man, using his momentum to toss him out the window. I was already climbing into the room as he landed hard below and moved quickly down the hallway. Molly had to be in one of these rooms. The main bedroom, where Nikolai slept, was on the third floor.

I moved down the dark hall like a lethal shadow, taking out the two men who made themselves targets by leaning over the banister to investigate the muffled sounds downstairs.

Finding keys in one of their pockets, I unlocked the door and slowly pushed it inward.

There was a four-poster bed in the middle of the space. I approached it slowly, my gun still raised. Then the adrenaline of the night lowered a few notches as I smelled it.

Molly's scent.

Molly was in this room. I drew the curtain back with a swift twitch, forgetting to be careful.

"If I'd had a gun, you'd be dead now," she muttered in the stillness that fell when our eyes connected.

She was sitting dead center on the mattress, the sheets pooling at her waist, wearing a huge off-the-shoulder sweater I was sure would smell like my brother. I planned to burn it as soon as I could get her changed. Her long blonde hair was strewn across her shoulders like ribbons, and her blue eyes were huge and tired.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered, half lunging onto the mattress, half pulling her under me.

I wrapped my arms around her and cradled her against my chest, breathing in the smell of her hair, her skin, her whole fucking presence. She was very still, and I pulled back and looked at her. She looked exhausted and pale, and there was a faint bruise on her temple, but she seemed otherwise unharmed.

"Has he hurt you?"

She swallowed, and her eyes dropped mine. “Why does that matter now? Surely, we should be leaving.”

“It matters because it will decide how many holes I poke in his worthless body before he becomes a carcass for the animals to feed on. Has he hurt you?”

She was quiet for a long moment before shaking her head. “Not in any way I didn’t have coming.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It doesn’t matter right now. Are we getting out of here, or what? I’m sure he’s expecting you.”

“We are, Princess. Come on,” I said, helping her off the bed.

She bent and laced on hiking boots. They were sturdy and of good quality, and she sure as shit didn’t have them when she’d been taken. Next, she grabbed a huge winter parka from the chair by the bed, zipped it up, and pulled on a knit hat. I stared at her, perplexed by her clothes.

“They were his mother’s. She was just like me.” Molly's eyes were huge in the darkness. “I mean, the same size,” she said quietly as she turned toward the doorway.

There was an odd distance between us, something I’d never felt from Molly before. She might be traumatized, but my gut told me it was something else. Was she hurt? In shock? Upset with me about the tracker?

I opened my mouth to say something to press her and bust apart the walls she had barricaded herself inside, but a creak in the hall pulled my attention. I stepped in front of Mallory and raised my weapon. I lowered my guard as I heard a soft clicking sound like a chattering bird.

Ivan appeared in the doorway. His eyes fell on Molly, and a big grin of relief wreathed his scarred jaw. “Miss Madison, I’m happy as fuck to see you.”

Molly shocked me by stepping toward him and hugging his side. “I’m so sorry about Max,” she muttered.

Ivan looked at me for permission before sliding an arm around her. He pulled

back, looking touched. “Thank you, *devushka*. It’s kind of you to think of him.”

“As touching as this is, we have to go,” I interrupted.

Ivan scrunched his brow. “Something isn’t right, Kirill. It’s all too easy. I’m afraid Nikolai has expected everything we’ve done so far.”

I slid my hand into Molly’s. “I got what I came for. I don’t care what else happens.” *As long as we get her out of here safely.*

We went back to the window. I knew Nikolai was expecting all this. I could only hope his men were too busy with my men to see us leaving. My hopes were short-lived. Ivan dropped to the ground first, and I lowered Molly into his arms before shimmying down.

As soon as I dropped, bullets flew around us. I dove over Mallory, pushing her down and protecting her with my body. Shouting filled the air, and I twisted to see Nikolai’s men rounding the side of the house, heading right for us.

“Run for the trees. Hide beyond the line, and I’ll find you,” I told Molly as I reloaded my gun and prepared to pepper the incomers with bullets to give her cover.

She stared at me, unmoving. There was a world of words behind her eyes that she wasn’t saying, but I didn’t have time to press her on it.

Don’t die, first. Figure everything else out, second.

“Go, Princess. Go, and keep low,” I urged her as Ivan and I prepared to meet the charge.

I lost track of everything as the smell of gunpowder, and the thud of bodies hitting the ground overtook my brain.

“Kirill,” Ivan said, breaking me from the spell.

I realized, moments later, that it was over before it had begun. Pyotr had Nikolai. He pushed him around the side of the house to the blood-soaked ground where our final stand would take place.

Nikolai grinned at me as he came, his face flecked with blood. “You finally joined us, brother. Mallory and I were starting to get bored waiting for you.”

With two long steps, I seized him and struck him two, three times before pulling back. I grabbed my gun while he sank to his knees, spitting blood on the ground.

“Any last words?” I asked, leveling the gun on his forehead.

He grinned at me, his teeth shiny and red. “I could ask you the same thing. Don’t you have any last questions for me?”

“Just one. Why? Why did you touch her?” The question pushed through my lips.

Bratva was the most violent of the powers in New York, and I wasn’t sure there was a code among killers. But the last unjaded part of me thought there might be a code among brothers. That part had died when Nikolai took Mallory.

“That’s not the right question, Kirill,” Nikolai mocked. He swayed, and I tracked his movements with my gun. “Ask me why I didn’t kill her.”

I couldn’t bring myself to. I knew he had to die to end this succession battle between us, but he’d made it much easier for me to kill him when he took Molly.

“Ask me!” Nikolai roared so loudly that it seemed to shake the surrounding trees. He raised his hand and gripped the barrel of my gun, pressing it against his forehead so there was no chance of missing. “Ask me, and then you can finish this.”

“Why didn’t you kill her?”

“Because, brother, I’m finished carrying out father’s requests like a good little lapdog,” Nikolai said quietly.

I shook my head. “Viktor didn’t know about this.”

“Is that what he told you? And you believed him? After all this time, you still have no idea what he’s capable of, do you? Let me guess. He made you think I was interested in pushing the flesh trade? Me? Even though I’d never hurt a

woman and my own mother—” He broke off, his voice ragged.

Tension and misgivings gathered in my belly like lumps of coal. “You’re lying,” I said, but it didn’t sound right. It didn’t make sense that Nikolai had brought Mallory here only to leave her unharmed and have so few men with him. None of this made sense. “Why would he have you do this?”

“He didn’t, Kirill. Your little princess should have died in your bed with a bullet to the brain, left there for you to understand who was boss of the Chernov family. That’s what he’d have me do.”

Nikolai’s eyes flew over his shoulder, and I followed them. A group had turned the corner—a few of the men I had brought with me from New York. The ones I’d been surprised were on our side in this task.

“Kirill, I have a bad feeling he’s telling the truth,” Ivan muttered behind me, already turning and raising his weapon.

So did I, but I’d been so focused on killing Nikolai for days that it was difficult to switch over in my head. Then I realized the men approaching had their guns trained on me, not my brother.

I turned back to Nikolai as he let go of my gun and got up, no longer worried I’d shoot him since the men I’d brought with me had double-crossed me. If I lived through this, I’d see all of them dead. Two approached, training guns on Ivan and me, and took our weapons.

“So, what now?” I asked, murderously angry and trying hard to get a read on the situation.

“Now, we talk, brother to brother. Come on. It’s cold out here,” he said, turning toward the house.

“Wait. I have to get Mallory,” I called to my brother.

Shooting a dirty look at the man holding a gun on me—a man on my side only ten minutes ago—I stared toward the tree line. I saw Mallory in her oddly prepared outfit and gestured for her to come back to me. I didn’t know what Niko had planned, but it seemed clear he wasn’t going to hurt her.

She stayed where she was. I gestured again, and she took a step back into the

trees. Alarm filled me.

“Nikolai, send someone to get her,” I asked my brother. I couldn’t go anywhere, as every time I moved, the goon behind me poked the gun harder between my shoulders.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Niko said quietly.

I blinked at him. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Molly was backing into the trees; her eyes fixed on mine. I didn’t like her expression at all. It was cold and reserved. It was so unlike her. I couldn’t get a read on it.

“It means she’s leaving you, *bratan*, and you have no choice but to let her go.”

I looked desperately at Molly as she took another step toward the trees, half-turned, ready to run. I got the look now; it clicked inside me.

It was goodbye.

“No,” I growled, starting forward.

The gun at my back cocked, the sound chilling in the quiet night, and my basic survival instincts wouldn’t allow me to move one more step.

She hesitated one second before stepping back and blending into the shadows of the forest.

Gone.



“IF YOU THINK I’m going to sit here and play house drinking tea with you while Molly is out there alone—”

“Running away?” Nikolai supplied when words failed me.

I glared at him. We were sitting by a hearty fire, Ivan on one side, Nikolai across from us, and a row of armed motherfuckers keeping us in place standing behind us. My skin crawled with the need to be out there looking for

her.

“She wouldn’t run away from me. Not again.” I maintained. She wouldn’t. Not after everything we’d been through since I’d found her again. Not after the damage that was done the first time.

“Wouldn’t she? I suppose you need to ask yourself if you’ve done anything to warrant her abandoning you.”

“Such as?” I demanded.

“Such as chipping her. She didn’t like that,” Nikolai continued conversationally.

“It was necessary to keep her safe,” I ground out.

Nikolai smirked. “Yes, it was very effective. How about Henry? You didn’t tell her.”

“I didn’t tell her you—the man holding her—killed her father? I hardly had time. Henry is on you.”

“Hmm, okay. I’ll take the hit for that one. How about Sofia De Sanctis?” Nikolai raised a rakish brow at me.

His words were a blow to the gut. “You know I’m not marrying her.”

“Yes, but no one else knows that. To everyone else, you’re engaged.”

“Thanks for telling her,” I bit out. “I should have shot you dead like a dog when I had the chance.”

“Regrets are for bitches, Kirill. And if you have them, start with yourself. That’s what hurts, doesn’t it?” Nikolai had the audacity to chuckle. “The last thing . . . I didn’t plan on telling her. It was a happy by-product of getting her medical file from Doctor Petrov. I got it for the tracker at first. I had no idea you were sneakily trying to knock her up.” He leaned forward in his chair, his dark eyes sparkling. “Tell me the truth. You enjoyed knowing she could get pregnant by coming inside and filling her up. I’m sure you tried hard to keep her leaking cum whenever you could.”

“Enough,” I said, my voice chilling. Cold dread seized my spine, wondering

what Mallory thought of me.

The worst and most damning part was that it was all true. I had fucked Mallory and wanted to breed her. I wanted her pregnant and tied to me forever. Even more, I wanted a family with her and children who looked like her. A tiny part of goodness in the black world I lived in. I was a selfish bastard, but that wasn't news to me.

Since Henry revealed how Mallory had looked for me and suffered without me, I'd known my revenge was unjustified, but I'd enjoyed keeping her all to myself. My obsession. Molly and I could have discussed everything Nikolai had leveled at me, but once again, Molly had run. The thought of her out there alone in the woods was driving me to distraction.

"Don't worry. She has money, transport, and food. She's better prepared this time than last," Nikolai said, reading my thoughts.

"And I suppose you gave her all that?" I demanded as fresh fury flooded me.

Nikolai shrugged. "Better she has it than not. She was always going to run, Kirill. I thought it better she did it comfortably and not painfully."

"Why the consideration? It isn't like you. Or were you happy to see me suffer?"

"If I wanted to see you suffer, I would have killed her like I was supposed to. None of this needed to happen. And I helped her because"—he turned his head, focusing on an ugly oil painting on the wall—"she reminded me of Irina."

"Your mother?"

Nikolai inclined his head. "This is the house where her body broke in childbirth, her heart broke in loneliness, and finally, her mind. She took her life in the bathroom upstairs."

I didn't know that. When I thought about it, there was a lot I didn't know about Niko and his past.

Nikolai scrubbed a hand across his face and then seemed to collect himself. "We're not here to talk about her or Mallory. We're here to talk about

Viktor.”

“What about fucking Viktor?”

“We need to talk about how to kill him before he kills us. I’ve thought this out, and there’s only one way we can end the motherfucker.”

“How?”

“Together.”

MOLLY

NINE YEARS AGO

The night after I first went to Kirill's house, I came home to find my father waiting for me in his study. My stomach dropped when I saw the door ajar and heard his deep voice as soon as I stepped into the hallway.

"Come here, Mallory."

My mouth filled with the taste of fear. It was metallic, like blood, as though something inside me was constantly bleeding, and when faced with my bully, I was unable to ignore it. I padded barefoot through the dark foyer and into his study.

"Close the door."

Henry Madison sat in his high-backed, leather-bound desk chair and stared at me over the enormous mahogany table between us.

There it was again, that metal taste. For as long as I could remember, family had meant the bite of blood on my tongue and fingers that wouldn't stop shaking. Who needed hell when you already lived with a demon?

"Where have you been?" he asked in a voice I recognized. It was silky and calm. Of all the incarnations of my father, the calm one was the worst.

"I went to a friend's house. A new kid Principal Wood wanted me to show around," I said with equal calm. I resisted the urge to fidget. I needed complete control over my body in front of my father. Anything else was a weakness he'd exploit.

“A boy?” he asked immediately, as I’d known he would.

My father guarded my virtue like it was one of the biggest assets he owned. In my heart, I knew why, though I resisted the thought at every turn.

The men he was in business with liked innocent little girls with no choices. My virginity was the draw he’d use to sell me to the highest bidder when the time came, whether it was into marriage or to seal an important deal.

“Yeah, a boy.” There was no point in making excuses. Father didn’t like it.

He stood, and I fought my flinch. His lips curved in a wintry smile, and he stalked around his desk like a wolf about to devour a rabbit. “What have I told you about boys?”

“They only want one thing,” I responded readily.

He nodded, stopping in front of me. He wasn’t tall, but in my mind, he was a giant. “Exactly. I know you’re not stupid, Mallory. Despite your best attempts to seem so. Don’t pretend not to know how dangerous it is for your reputation to be seen going to a boy’s house. In my world, reputation is everything.”

I nodded. I knew what he wanted, and I’d learned that the sooner I agreed with him, the sooner I could get out of this room.

“Reputation keeps us in the lap of luxury you’ve become so accustomed to,” he continued. Another nod. “Be careful with it. An excellent reputation lost is almost impossible to recover, and there is nothing more important in this life than having people’s respect.”

He wrapped a hand around my ponytail and dragged my head back, exposing my throat. I didn’t dare move. I knew the deal by now. Stay still and be done faster.

“Yes, Father,” I got out.

“Good. I’m glad we understand each other.”



Now

I SHOT awake from a dream of my father. No, not a dream—a memory. That was all he would ever be now.

By dawn, I was on a train heading west.

I'd stayed awake long enough to see the station disappear and the countryside roll in around the tracks before passing out. The freight drive along a dirt track in the woods in an old car was exhausting, and I couldn't stay awake one more second.

When I woke, I was curled in the window seat like a cat with the bag Nikolai had given me under my knees. I'd been dirt poor and desperate most of my adult life. I knew not to fall asleep in public with a bag full of money stowed overhead.

I sat up and rubbed my tired eyes, staring out at the dawn streaking across the horizon with my arms wrapped around my middle and my mind a comfortable blank.

The train chugged along as the landscape beyond the windows lightened, showing small towns and farms set in rolling hills or flats. My mind was churning, and I'd already been to the bathroom two times to vomit. Was it a sickness bug or something else? The possibility of "something else" had frozen me to my seat.

Henry was gone. I felt an odd emptiness at the thought. My apartment was gone, my job behind me, and my mother out of reach. I shuddered, thinking of Mara lying in a bed in one of the best nursing homes on the East Coast. He wouldn't hurt her, would he?

No, he wouldn't. That was the kind of fucked up relationship Kirill and I had. He'd lied to me, kept huge, important things from me, and potentially gotten me pregnant without my knowledge, but . . . I knew he wouldn't hurt Mara. He wouldn't hurt me either if he ever found me, but he would force me to come back to him. If he caught me this time, there wouldn't be a second chance to escape. Kirill was possessive as hell. Add pregnancy into the mix, and I'd be lucky to leave The Tower again in ten years. I didn't know how to feel. I was feeling too much and nothing at all.

“Excuse me, dear. Is this seat taken?” A soft voice jerked me from my maudlin thoughts.

I looked up to see an older man standing beside me, balancing precariously as the train bobbed on the track. I took my coat off the chair next to me and attempted a smile at him. It felt like pasting a smiley face sticker over a mortal wound.

He sat down slowly beside me and let out a long sigh when he relaxed. “Well, now. That’s better. Sorry to interrupt you. I wasn’t sure if this seat was taken.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m alone. All alone,” I repeated.

Tears threatened to push past my eyelids, but I couldn’t cry anymore. I’d already had three long crying jags; another would have people staring. I couldn’t afford to draw attention to myself. I had no idea how Kirill was planning on finding me, but I had to be careful.

Maybe he won’t bother. Remember? You left him a second time after he’d just forgiven you for the first time. Besides, isn’t he getting married?

“Sorry, what?” I asked, suddenly realizing the older man had asked me something. He held out a wrinkled hand, trembling fingers and all, to shake mine. A lump formed in my throat as I quickly swallowed it. “I’m . . . Molly.”

There wasn’t any point in continuing my Lori Wilson identity since Kirill knew it. Wherever I was going, I couldn’t afford to do anything official where I’d need paperwork to work.

“I’m Fred. Nice to meet you, Molly. I like that name. I knew a Molly once. You don’t hear it around so much anymore,” he said, smiling at me. “Where you headed, Molly?”

I chewed my lip. “I haven’t decided yet. I don’t even know where this train stops.”

Fred lowered his brows at me. “You need to know where you’re going, young lady. How you gonna get there if you don’t?”

“I don’t know.” I chuckled, relaxing in his presence. It was good to have a distraction from the pain throbbing in my head.

“My stop is four hours away. Maybe you’ll think about my little town for a visit. It’s pretty as a picture,” he said. “Let me tell you all about it.”

“Okay.” I settled in as Fred told me about Willow Creek, the place he’d lived his entire life. I tried to imagine such a stable existence and not think about the tattooed man with dark, soulful eyes I’d left behind. It was hard.

Despite everything Nikolai had told me, I felt guilty about running. As much as it annoyed me, the guilt ate at me. I was abandoning him all over again, but this time, he deserved it. The knowledge didn’t make the journey any less lonely.

MOLLY

TWO MONTHS LATER

“*M*olly! Remember, you need to sign the training sheet,” a voice called.

I nodded to myself. “On it!”

Today had been health and safety training at the office, and the various injuries that could occur in such a safe work environment had been laugh-worthy for a former Blue Rabbit employee. But this was Willow Creek, and neck and eye strain were the worst workplace hazard Linda in HR could think of.

Willow Creek had turned out to be as idyllic and sweet as Fred had promised. Best of all, the community had taken me in when I’d been broken. It had taken two months to stop waiting for Kirill to storm through the office door and drag me back.

I didn’t know if it was relief or disappointment when I stopped jumping every time the little bell above the door jingled.

I worked at the front desk at an insurance place. I’d finally gotten a job that didn’t involve short shorts, making it the best job I’d ever had.

Fred had let me rent a room from him, though I knew he was going far too easy on me with rent. He felt sorry for me since I spent nearly every morning on my knees in front of the toilet, puking my guts out.

So far, the baby and I were getting along about as well as their father and I did. We had a tumultuous relationship, to put it mildly. But despite my lack

of appetite and weight loss from morning sickness, fatigue and hormones, there were stolen moments late at night when I put my hand on the slight swell of my belly and imagined a little person in there. Half me, half Kirill, the only man I'd ever loved. No matter how the baby had been conceived, it was a product of love, and I couldn't forget that.

I signed the training sheet and left the office for the evening. I finally had a job that stopped when the sun went down, and it felt good to go to bed every night when my body wanted to. I was taking extra classes online to get better at office admin and hanging with Fred, mostly watching old movies or having him thoroughly beat me at chess. It was a quiet, perfect life, but I couldn't escape the loneliness.

When I was desperate to sleep at night, Kirill's ghost always came to me. Dark and possessive, the memories of his touch tormented me, making me ache to have his body pressing mine deep into the mattress.

I wanted to disappear into him. I wanted to miss him less.

My life had taken a drastic turn in the last few months. For the longest time, I'd been thrown from life to life with nothing to hold on to. Now, I had something. Someone. The baby was my tether to reality, making every second of the day frighteningly real. Everything I did, every choice I made, was no longer solely for me. It was for someone else too, which added weight to everything that was a struggle to carry.

Sometimes I woke in the morning sure that leaving Kirill like I had was the most selfish thing I'd ever done. Other times, I was certain that protecting my unborn baby was the most selfless thing I'd ever done.

I left the office and wandered along the pretty Main Street. I worked smack dab in the center of a small parade of shops and saw the same people every day. I waved to Sam, the grocer, as I walked past. He was shutting up shop for the day and heading home to his wife and newborn son. Further along the street, Elsie from No Filter, the local kooky coffee place, gestured to me madly from inside. She made a mean caffeine-free dirty chai, but tonight, I was beat and pulled an apologetic face as I continued.

I usually took the bus back to Fred's from the corner of Maple and Main, and I could see the shape of it approaching from the other direction. I sped up,

power walking New York style, to the bus stop and fished change from my wallet. On the bus, I settled in my usual seat and stared at the warm evening sunshine across Main Street. Willow Creek was a dream-like escape from the problems that had plagued me in New York. Folks were kind, and life was slow and steady. I had a roof over my head and a job I didn't hate.

I could live here forever and never have a reason to complain. That knowledge sat heavily with the unhappiness inside me. The truth was, I missed the city. I missed my friends, the traffic, and the chaos. I missed the energy vibrating on the sidewalk as a million soles walked it day in and out.

Most of all, I missed him.

I missed him with every breath. His presence was all around me, and he was the first thought in my head every morning. Well, second now, after the baby. But thinking about the baby made me think of him, too. I was completely fucked up and dissatisfied with a lovely town and a perfectly safe and orderly life.

I'd never felt more broken and angrier at the world than I did in Willow Creek. The contrast between the perfectly functioning residents and me only worsened my turmoil. Did I belong in a place like this?

No, and you never will. The voice inside my head had changed timbre over the long, lonely nights. *You don't belong anywhere, and neither do I. We only belong together. Nothing else matters.* Kirill's voice had become that inner voice, tormenting me more every day.

Sometimes, I thought I was going mad or my pregnancy hormones were doing a number on my head. The bitter truth was that Kirill had used me, lied to me, and attempted to control my future in a way I could never forgive. It was stunning how many times I had to remind myself of that. Love truly was the greatest weakness.

At Fred's, I stepped inside to the delicious aroma of Italian cooking. Fred's son, Leo, was a great cook and ran the best restaurant in town. The nights when Leo cooked were the highlight of my week. I toed off my boots and hung up my coat. Heading to the kitchen, I veered to the stove and inhaled deeply. Garlic, basil, and sausage enveloped me in a cloud of hot steam, and I groaned.

“You’re not stealing a taste, right?” Leo asked behind me.

I jumped guiltily, turning quickly and shaking my head.

He laughed as he strolled toward me. “I’m kidding. I need a taste tester. You know Fred. He says everything’s good.”

“Oh, right. So you’re looking for a critique?” I unwound my scarf from my neck. Even though it was spring, I was still chilled. Fred was always handing me various knitted items he made as he watched his game show, a tip from his nurse on how to stave off his Parkinson’s symptoms and keep his hands dexterous. He didn’t understand that the cold bothering me lived inside my chest.

“You’re the only person ever to tell me my chicken parm was ‘a touch dry.’ So yeah, I’d love a critique from the most brutal foodie in Willow Creek.”

I laughed, relaxing in Leo’s non-pushy presence. He was older than me by about ten years and came to visit his dad a lot. “Okay, fine. You’re practically forcing me to find fault now to maintain my reputation as a discerning foodie,” I warned him as I took the spoon he was holding.

Instead of passing it over, he put it to my mouth. I stiffened as he waited expectantly for me to open my mouth. I obliged, not wanting to make things awkward, but I was uncomfortable. Not only did it remind me of Kirill, but there was something too vulnerable about it. Too intimate. Leo shifted closer as I tasted the sauce and raised an eyebrow.

“Hmm, damn,” I swore, pulling a face.

His eyebrows jerked up, surprised by my reaction. “It’s bad?” He sounded crushed.

“No, it’s perfect. It’s a shame I’m endangering my cool rep,” I told him.

He threw his head back and laughed. I’d been traumatized by everything that had happened in New York and numbed by taciturn, enigmatic men who were impossible to read. I’d nearly forgotten that ordinary people laughed and joked. Hell, they even smiled occasionally.

“That’s okay. I made it for you, so I’m glad you like it.”

“You did?”

“Yes, I did. I’m still on a mission to figure out your favorite dish,” he said, leaning a hip against the counter as I backed away and went to grab a glass of water. “Why don’t you let me take you out for a meal and make it your favorite cuisine to give me a clue.”

I grinned at him. “You don’t need to go that far. I can just tell you—”

“Maybe I want to,” Leo said, closer than he’d been a second ago.

Worry blossomed in my gut. *No, please don’t.*

I stepped away, putting a firm distance between us to show my boundaries. “No need. I like Indian food. The spicier, the better.”

“Indian? Damn, I think I’ve tried everything except that so far,” Leo sighed, taking the hint to stay back. He folded his arms and leaned back, giving me a contemplative look. “We could still go out for that dinner,” he suggested, but something in his tone hinted he knew it wasn’t going to happen.

“But who will Fred eat with? I couldn’t do that to my buddy,” I said, my tone carefully light.

Leo nodded, dropping my gaze to look down at his boots. “You know, I held off when you first came because you’d obviously been through something bad. I got that. But we’re months into this thing now, Molly, and I’m beginning to think you’re not going to get over whoever sent you here anytime soon.”

I cleared my throat, perilously close to crying for the fifth time today. “I’m not. I don’t know if I ever will, to be honest.”

Leo looked at me, raising his expressive eyebrows again. There was disappointment, surprise, and something else that hurt to see in his eyes. Pity. Leo pitied me.

“Ever? That’s a damn long time, Molly.”

“It is, but it’s not a choice or something I can control. I’m missing a vital piece. I left my heart behind, and I don’t think it’s coming back unless I go back there and get it.”

“Do you think about going back?”

“Only every day. But that’s not possible.” It was good to admit that.

Leo and Fred didn’t know I was pregnant. Thankfully, I shouldn’t be in danger of showing too soon. I was only about eleven weeks. It was still too early to tell if it would last. All the websites I’d read suggested not getting your hopes up before twelve weeks.

Leo cleared his throat, sensing my attention had wandered. “Well, whatever you do, I’m sure you’ll have a home here with Fred whenever you need it.”

“Are you trying to get me out of your hair already?” I teased, trying to change the subject. As always, thoughts of New York threatened to envelop me in a black cloud of anger, resentment, and heartbreak.

“You know I’m not. I just wanted to say that when you’re ready, I’m here,” Leo said finally. He was handsome and kind, with one of those faces that looked ready to smile at any time.

“Don’t wait for me, Leo. You’ll be disappointed,” I heard myself say. He was too a nice guy to lead on. “Even when I’m over it, I think I’m done with dating.”

“So, you expect a marriage proposal or nothing, is that it?” Leo teased me.

His words loosened the tightness in my chest that rose whenever my mind skirted near to Kirill.

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “That’s right. Propose or get lost. Now, shall I set the table?”



I ENGAGED in the most dangerous and stressful part of my week on Sundays. I made a call that walked a fine line between risky but worth it and bat shit insane.

The weather outside was terrible, a wet and windy spring day. I was tired. The morning sickness had only worsened, and I was officially having a

problem keeping food down. Some women improved in later trimesters, and I hoped I'd be one of them.

I wrapped up and headed to a small park in the residential area near Fred's house. I took out my burner phone and called the only number programmed there. It was risky, but it had been two months, and Kirill hadn't appeared to drag me back to New York, so it had to be working.

Princess, why do you think I'd bother? You abandoned me again, and I went ahead and got married. You should see my wife . . . I have no need for you anymore, Molly.

I squashed the mocking inner voice that had taken on Kirill's tone. *Good, I thought venomously in reply. I hope you both suffer endlessly. You deserve each other.*

It was normal to hold full-blown conversations with the voice inside your head, right? I might worry if I had more energy, but I was maxed out on things to worry about.

"The Blue Rabbit, this is Federica," a familiar, soothing voice said.

"Fede," I muttered, my heart torn in two.

Federica had taken every Sunday evening shift for two months so she could answer the phone when I called. I'd tried it once, on the off chance I'd catch her or Theo and lucked out the first time. I'd hoped the line there would be more difficult to monitor if Kirill was trying. The Blue Rabbit got calls from all over, so a random one from nowhere, Pennsylvania, wouldn't be too strange.

"How are you?" Federica dropped her voice, and her familiar tone was as comforting as a warm hug.

"Good. You?"

"Same as always. I went to see her yesterday."

"How is she?" Nerves always coiled in my belly at the question. When would Kirill kick Mara out of Cedar Green nursing home? He would hardly keep her there forever, considering the huge expense. He was loaded, but I

couldn't see him paying his former girlfriend's bills when he was married.

"She's good. Very good. Gladys told me about a new treatment they're trying on her. It's making a difference."

"Really?" I knew the treatment she was talking about. I'd wanted to try it for years but never had enough money to consider it. Was Kirill paying for it?

"Yes," Fede replied. "You should come back and see her, Lori. If the Chernov bratva makes trouble for you, go to the cops."

My head was spinning. She didn't know about the baby. If she did, she wouldn't suggest coming back. It complicated everything.

"He's been here, asking for you."

"Kirill?" It was hard even to say his name.

I looked over my shoulder, suddenly spooked. He loomed so large in my memory, like a superhuman. I almost expected to see him emerging from the shadows of the trees that ringed the park, summoned by the sound of his name.

"Yeah. He sits at the bar and watches Theo and me working."

"He hasn't approached you anywhere else?"

"No, not yet."

"I'm so sorry," I muttered, feeling wretched. I knew what he was doing—trying to force me to contact him to ask him to leave my friends alone. "I don't get why he'd even bother at this point. Why doesn't he go on his honeymoon and get over it?" My anger scorched a path through my chest, leaving heartburn in its wake, a common side effect of my constant nausea.

"Lori, he doesn't look like someone who's going to give up anytime soon. He looks like he's just getting started, and as for marriage, he's not wearing a ring."

"So what? It's probably a health hazard, considering how much blood dirties his hands on a daily basis," I muttered.

"How about I come and see you?"

“No, Fede. The only reason he isn’t pressing you is because he knows I wouldn’t endanger you. It’s a risk I can’t take. Not right now.”

“You don’t sound good, Lori. You sound so . . .” she trailed off, unable to voice the obvious and make it awkward.

“Broken? Angry? Lonely as hell? I’m all of the above, but these calls keep me sane. You keep me sane,” I told her.

“Yeah, me too. I’m sorry all this happened to you.”

“Hey, it’s not like you didn’t warn me a hundred times. How did you have such insight into all this? You have a crystal ball you’re keeping a secret?”

Fede’s laugh was guarded. “I would tell you, but I don’t want to endanger you.” She repeated my earlier words, reminding me that we all had secrets, and it was our right to keep them.

I nodded and tried to focus on something that made me happy. “How’s Theo?”

“You won’t believe it. He’s engaged.”

“What?”

KIRILL

Every morning, I woke the same way. Startling awake in the spare room bed—the same one Molly had last slept in—and sitting up with force. In my nightmares, I heard her calling out my name. I endlessly searched for her through dark hallways, hearing her voice but never finding her. The dream always ended the same. I fell from a broken, hidden staircase and hurtled through the darkness, knowing that Molly wasn't calling for my help but saying goodbye.

Like clockwork, I reached for my phone and checked my emails. I wasn't spending a fortune on private investigators to let them sleep late.

It had been two months.

Something should have shown up by now. In two months, Molly hadn't used her bank account or shown up anywhere that would ping her name in any system. Where the fuck was she? There had to be something.

When the search for her alias turned cold, I'd turned my attention to the known people in her life who mattered to her. Now Henry was dead, there were only three. Her mother, Mara, and her co-workers from The Blue Rabbit. I put my money on Federica.

The woman was full of secrets; her private life was evidence of that, and I was sure she hid Molly's secrets too. The question was how and when to push her to reveal them. I was sure my smart Molly wouldn't directly put her friend in danger, so torturing an exact location from Federica was improbable. Still, it was a thread that needed to be tugged and the only

avenue we had left.

I stilled as I checked an email from a new surveillance team, one highly recommended to me, and my heart tensed in my hollow chest.

I scanned the email twice. Despite the highly illegal and difficult nature of tapping a line belonging to a rival syndicate, my guy had got a tracing program into The Blue Rabbit phone system. I'd already looked at and discarded Theo and Federica's cell phones, as well as Grateful Dawn's. Molly knew better than to call on those.

I called the young hacker immediately as I jumped out of bed. The room was losing its Molly smell, despite my best efforts to stop Olga from laundering the sheets or dirty clothes she'd left behind.

"Tell me," I demanded as soon as the call connected. I strode to the kitchen and set up my coffee as I waited with anticipation.

"Okay, give me a minute. I went to sleep an hour ago," the kid, Rowan, muttered.

"Not my problem," I snapped and waited impatiently.

A yawn came over the line before he started. "Okay, the club line gets a lot of calls, so many that I was starting to think it was a bust until I studied the staff rota more closely."

"And?"

"And there are certain great tip days and certain terrible ones. Sunday night is dead, and the staff doesn't make half as much as they do the other nights. Guess who's worked the Sunday night shift for nearly two months?"

"Federica." I didn't need him to confirm it. This was it. I was getting close enough to taste it.

"Right, so now we've got a time period to look at, which helps. I haven't had eyes in the system long enough to find a pattern, so we can't rule out any calls on that basis. Basically, we have proof that she's in contact with Federica Bucur, probably as recently as last night."

"Which means it's time to talk to the woman herself," I said, anticipation

firing in my veins.

“I thought you’d say that, so I took the liberty of preparing a little extra leverage for that conversation,” Rowan said.

“I already know about her family.”

“But did you know about her dead fiancé?”

“No, I didn’t. Good work.”

“You know my fee doesn’t include a tip, right?”

“This leads me to Mallory, and you can name your price,” I told him and hung up, opening my laptop with my free hand to look at Federica’s information.

I was close. I could taste it. I would get my hands on Mallory again soon, and nothing would stop me. The wreckage I’d left the rest of my life in—from deals needing my attention, the problems with the broken engagement, and the drama with Nikolai and Viktor—had all fallen by the wayside in my need to find Molly. My rage at her running was tempered by the knowledge that I certainly hadn’t helped the situation. I’d punish her, but I’d also punish myself, as was only fair.

Soon, Princess. I’m coming to collect you soon, and we’ll never be apart again.



FEDERICA BUCUR LIVED WITH THEO, and since they were splitting the rent, they stayed in a marginally nicer area than Molly had.

Still, the lock on her apartment was easy enough to pick. I left men outside the building, in the stairwell, and outside the door. I wasn’t taking any chances that she’d smell a trap and run away before I could question her.

Inside the apartment, I wandered through her and Theo’s things, finding it utterly uninspiring. I settled on a creaking kitchen chair to wait for her to return from her morning run.

Max stood inside the door, leaning on a crutch. He had recovered well and wouldn't need the crutch after tomorrow, but I was still worried about him. He'd insisted on coming this morning, and I pretended not to know why.

Max, my most loyal soldier and friend, had a soft spot for Molly's skeptical friend, and he wanted to be here to make sure I didn't lose my head in a bid to get information from her. I wouldn't. I had never tortured a woman for information and certainly wouldn't be starting with Molly's best friend. Thanks to Rowan's information, I had no need for such crude methods.

I heard her coming up the stairs. The second she realized she had company, her steps faltered as she tried to backtrack but found my men standing behind her, forcing her up the stairs.

She entered the room, flushed and wide-eyed. Her gaze landed on Max, and she flinched like she'd seen a ghost.

"Hello, *kotenok*," he murmured to her.

"Aren't you dead?" she asked, her voice filled with awe.

"Not last time I checked, but the day is young," Max quipped, smirking in a way I hadn't seen in two long months.

Federica pulled her shocked gaze from Max and turned to me, her wonder shuttering into dark annoyance. "What do you want?"

"Please, don't pretend not to know." I pointed to the chair opposite me. "Sit. Now."

She complied only when the men behind her pushed her forward. "I'm not telling you anything," she said immediately.

"Sweetheart, don't you know where you're supposed to start? First, you deny knowing why I'm here. Then, I give you evidence that you're in contact with Mallory. You skipped a step."

Federica's brow scrunched. "Who's Mallory?"

"Right. I forgot. Lori Wilson," I corrected. I was a little past worrying about blowing Mallory's alias. "I know you spoke to her last night."

Federica raised her chin and held her tongue.

“I can guess she hasn’t given anything away regarding her location since she isn’t dumb and cares about others’ safety above her own. So, what we’re going to do is simple. Next week, when she calls, you’re going to keep her on the line until my guy says you can hang up. You will not warn her in any way or speak in code.”

“Why would I do that?” Federica’s dark eyes were blazing with anger.

“Because if you don’t, you’ll force my hand. I don’t want you to get hurt, Federica. When Mallory comes home, she’ll need you. I want her to have her friends around her.”

“So, you’re threatening to do what, exactly?” She turned her head to look at Max, an appraising look in her eyes. “Cut off some fingers or pull some teeth? What does torturing compliance look like in the Chernov family?”

“I suppose it looks a lot like it does in the Bucur family,” I delivered with deadly calm.

Rowan’s information had been illuminating. I’d known there was a lot Federica hid from her friends, but not the full extent. “I know who you are, Federica. I know who you, your father, your brother, and most of all, your fiancé are. Or should I say, *was*?”

She paled, her olive skin turning a sickly shade of green. Her elegant hands curled into fists. “It’s not true,” she whispered.

I shrugged. “I don’t care. You don’t need to convince me. Convince the family that you didn’t do it. Start there. If you don’t help me find my future wife so I can cherish and protect her, you leave me with no choice but to pass on your location. Now, before you think about running away as soon as we leave here, you should know that Max here is charged with staying by your side until the phone call. He’ll be your shadow, and don’t think you can get one over on him because he nearly died a few weeks ago. On your best day, you’re no match for him.”

A long tear slipped down Federica’s full cheek and dripped onto the table. “So, Lori was right. You’re a monster.” Her whisper sank through the stillness in my chest like a knife. “I thought maybe you loved her, but now I

see . . . you just want to own her. You're all the same," Federica accused. "Monsters are made, not born . . . right? What the fuck happened to you?"

I swallowed the hot, angry retort sitting in my throat. "Born. Made. Assume I'm both and act accordingly, Miss Bucur. I don't want Molly to lose her friend, but I'll let it happen if it comes to that. Don't test me."

"So, you don't care that I didn't do it, but you'll treat me like I did?"

"I don't care about anything except finding Mallory. It's your choice, Federica. I don't have to tell anyone anything." I stood, ready to leave.

Federica twisted in her chair, staring at me with accusing, wet eyes. "What will you do to her when you find her? Will you hurt her?"

"I'd never hurt her."

"That you think you haven't already shows how fucked up you are," she muttered.

"I've hurt Mallory, and she's hurt me too. It doesn't matter the chunks we take out of each other and the wounds we inflict. In the end, none of that matters. The only thing that matters is that we're together."

MOLLY

The week passed in a soft blur of easy office work, cooking at Fred's, and sleeping for twelve hours a night. I'd never been so tired. It was the pregnancy, but even more than that, it was the sadness. Anger fueled me during the day, but alone in the dark at night, I couldn't hold back the tears. I worried about the baby growing up in such a distressing atmosphere and researched it endlessly, but in the end, I couldn't change my feelings. All I could do was survive them.

I used the internet at the library or a tablet Leo had given Fred for his birthday one year that he didn't know how to operate. I never checked my email. It was too risky. Instead, I researched baby-related things endlessly. Maybe if I were super prepared for every eventuality, it wouldn't matter that the little one growing inside me had a mother with a broken heart and was being hunted by their father.

The thought of getting rid of it never crossed my mind. It wasn't an option. The baby was mine, and the father was the only man I'd ever wanted to have a baby with. The timing might be wrong, but who its parents were wasn't.

I'd got paid on Friday, cash in an envelope. I didn't know what Fred told his buddy who gave me the job, but they'd never asked me to complete the proper paperwork. If I were an average person, it would suck to be off the books and not get medical or anything else, but for who I was? It was perfect. When I'd asked if they were worried about breaking the law for a stranger, the kindly owner had patted my hand and told me that in Willow Creek, they looked after each other.

Today, I was treating Fred and Leo to a takeout Sunday dinner. I'd yet to contribute much to the food bill at Fred's house since he waved me off every time. I had been determined to buy dinner tonight, though, and he had reluctantly agreed. I planned to put the whole potential date night issue to rest with Leo by buying my favorite meal for us to eat together. I hoped the subtext was clear enough. *Don't wait for me.*

On my way to pick up the takeout from a small, family-run Indian place down the street, I stopped in my usual spot to make my Sunday evening call. As always, fear and excitement battled in my chest as I listened to the line ring.

"The Blue Rabbit," Federica answered. She sounded subdued.

"Hey, you. Everything okay?"

She was quiet for a long moment before clearing her throat. "Yeah, you?"

"Okay. Well, good enough. How's Mara this week?"

We fell into our usual update conversation, but even talking about Theo's engagement to Officer Tucker didn't seem to shake Fede's reserve.

"Seriously, what's going on with you?" I demanded after ten minutes of stilted conversation.

"Nothing. I'm the same as always. Still a selfish bitch," Fede muttered, stunning me for a second.

I let out an incredulous laugh. "Hey, don't talk about my friend like that. You're the furthest thing from selfish."

"Maybe you don't know me that well," she muttered.

"Ouch," I complained softly. "What's going on with you? Is it Kirill? Is he making life difficult for you?" Guilt punched me in the gut.

Her laugh was raw. "My life is always difficult. I haven't been totally honest with you or Theo. I'm not from New York. I came here three years ago."

"Okay, cool. That's not a big secret, is it?"

"I came here because I wanted to disappear."

She sounded so strange and upset. I immediately wanted to soothe her turmoil. “Your secrets are yours to keep, Fede. If that’s your real name,” I joked.

“Right. Most people who want to disappear change their names, don’t they? Duh. I’d make a terrible spy,” she muttered. The words were meant to be joking but were edged with something too real.

“Yeah, you clearly need to buy *Being a Spy for Dummies*.” I tried to draw her out of her melancholy.

I glanced at my watch and stiffened. Shit, this whole conversation had lasted way longer than I usually stayed on the line. Granted, my knowledge of phone tapping was reserved to TV shows, but wasn’t it common knowledge that longer calls were more traceable?

“I need to run. I’ll call you next week. If you don’t mind working the Sunday still?” I knew it was a big ask. Every time Fede missed a Saturday night for a Sunday, she missed out on tips. I figured one day, she’d tell me to call a different day, and we’d try to make it work, but she hadn’t so far. Sunday was the only night quiet enough to make sure it was Fede who answered the phone.

“I don’t mind. I’ll do it forever if you need me to. Take care of yourself, Mallory,” was the last she said before hanging up.

I sat and stared at my phone for a few minutes, oddly unsettled by the end of the call.

It wasn’t until I was heading back to Fred’s with a bag full of spicy aromatic takeout that it hit me.

Mallory.

Take care of yourself, Mallory.



“I THINK NOW that the biggest event in Willow Creek is officially over, we can give ourselves a big pat on the back for that dinner service,” Leo’s voice

boomed across the kitchen.

I leaned gratefully against a metal worktop and smiled. Tonight was the first time his restaurant had catered a large-scale wedding. It had been for a couple of local kids turned viral sensations turned millionaires. Leo's had catered their wedding, and the resulting footage they and their guests had filmed would catapult his humble haute cuisine place into the stratosphere. I couldn't have been happier for him—or more uncertain about my future in Willow Creek.

The videos had to be making the rounds on all sorts of viewing platforms, and I'd made every effort to stay out of them. I had no idea if I'd succeeded, but the chances of Kirill seeing me in the background of a random influencer's video were slim to none. He wasn't a social media kind of guy.

The problem with Willow Creek had more to do with Fede calling me by my real name a few days ago. If she knew my name, there was only one place she could have gotten it from. Even to the staff at Grateful Dawn nursing home, I was Lori Wilson, so it must have been one of Kirill's men or Kirill himself. Had she been dropping it like some kind of hidden message? A warning that he'd gotten to her?

Did that mean he'd traced the call? I'd always used a burner, but was that enough? I had no idea. I was outclassed in the realm of devious, illegal behavior next to his power and reach, not to mention his natural ability to be a crazed stalker.

I should leave now and stop dragging my feet. I knew it in my gut. But then I'd lose the only good things in my life. Willow Creek, Fred and Leo, my job. It was no longer just me to worry about. I also had to worry about the baby. It was utterly exhausting.

Tonight, Leo had called in a favor from everyone he knew to make the service seamless at such a big event. I'd agreed to help, even though I'd never been so tired. The kitchen was cleaned, and the staff were in high spirits as they headed to a local bar to celebrate the event's success.

"You coming, Molly?" Tara, one of the other servers, asked as she grabbed her bag.

“Sure, for a little while,” I agreed.

I didn’t want to go, but since the conversation with Federica, I was jumpy when alone. I liked to stick with a group as much as possible.

You think these people will be able to stop me from taking you, Molly?

The unwelcome voice of a ghostly Kirill in my head was goading. I left the kitchen before I could dwell on it too much. A big group stood outside in the courtyard in front of the old brick building. I joined them, feeling safer immediately.

“Everyone good?” someone called from the front before the group moved in the direction of the bar.

Leo’s place sat off Main Street. I glanced back as we went and sighed. The wedding planner had put a little sign in the window to make it clear to guests where the dinner was being held. It was a chalkboard lit with candles that still shone in the darkness. I’d bet a million bucks Leo had forgotten all about it. I was pretty sure he was still inside.

“Hey, you go on. I’ll just be a second,” I said to Tara.

“You want me to wait?” she asked, breaking off her conversation with the guy next to her.

I shook my head. “No, it’s cool. Leo’s still inside. I’ll catch up.”

I turned, speed-walked the ten steps through the courtyard to the kitchen door, and unlocked it with a number pressed into the keypad.

“Leo? You still here?” I called through the empty kitchen.

All the lights were on, so I was sure he was still there, but I couldn’t see any sign of him in the back. I headed toward the front, intending to blow out the candles myself.

A sudden loud pop sent my heart flying into my mouth, and my whole body tensed as I spun around, looking for the source of the sound.

Leo laughed at my panicked expression before sobering as he took me in. He was standing at the door of the walk-in freezer, holding a bottle of vintage

champagne in his hands, and the cork was lying on the counter. “Geez, sorry, Molly. I was having a little toast to celebrate. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s fine. I’ll send you my therapy bill for PTSD,” I joked lamely, trying to calm my pounding heartbeat.

“Deal. I’m happy to cover all the champagne cork-popping-related trauma you have,” he grinned. “Aren’t you going to the bar?”

“I am. I saw those damn candles were still burning out front.”

“Good catch. Can you get them while I pour?”

“Sure, but none for me. I don’t like the stuff,” I said, ducking out of the kitchen and heading to the dining room. The air still smelled like the fancy dessert buffet Leo had set up.

The smell of black cherries and dark chocolate hung in the air, sending my mind hurtling into darkness for a second. It made my heart pound and my skin tight. It was funny how a simple combination of smells could conjure a memory so visceral. If I closed my eyes, I’d swear I was in The Tower, and Kirill was tugging me into his arms, surrounding me with that scent.

Would that smell always trigger a response for me?

I went to the candles and quickly blew them out. The acrid smell of the wick burning filled the air and dispelled the memory. Darkness fell in the room, with only the fire exit light illuminating the darkness.

A car idling outside caught my eye as I turned back to the kitchen. It was black, with the kind of tinted windows I didn’t often see outside of New York. I stared at it, unease climbing my spine like ghostly fingers trailing over every knobble of bone.

Backing away from the window, I stared at the car so hard my eyes started to swim. Without warning, the car pulled away and disappeared down the street, leaving only the whine of a powerful motor in the air as evidence that it had ever been there.

Christ, get a grip, Mallory.

I couldn’t go on like this, jumping at shadows and constantly waiting for the

hammer to fall.

In the kitchen, Leo had poured two glasses. He held one out to me.

“Here, let’s toast to the business,” he sighed happily.

I took the glass, feeling churlish by refusing it. I clinked it against his and put it down as he drank.

“You won’t even drink as a toast?” He laughed. “I’ve never met such a teetotaler.”

“Sorry. I don’t like it.”

“How do you know if you don’t try? This bottle goes for three hundred a pop.”

My smile felt tight. *Fuck’s sake, take a hint.* “It’s wasted on me since I don’t like it.”

“I don’t like to pull rank”—Leo grinned, picked up my glass, and pressed it into my hand—“but I’m going to have to insist.”

“Why do you want me to drink it so badly?” I heard myself ask, the teasing tone in my voice thin. “Did you put something in it?”

He blinked at me. “What?”

“Why can’t you leave it?” I asked, my exasperation showing. I’d had enough tonight. I was anxious, pressed to a fine, brittle point, tired, and fucking fed up with being pushed around by men who thought they had the right to control me.

“Molly—” Leo started, but then stopped as he looked over my shoulder with a frown. “Sorry, we’re closed.”

Nerves prickled down my neck as a familiar voice spoke. “I got that from the closed sign in the window and the locked door.”

Max?

Leo looked confused and slightly worried. He wasn’t nearly worried enough.

I gripped the counter and turned slowly.

Max.

My former bodyguard, or prison warden depending on how I viewed the past, was lounging in the doorway, watching me with a faded grin.

“Mallory. Long time no see, sweetheart.”

I took a step back as my brain desperately tried to catch up.

“You know him?” Leo asked, looking between us.

“I thought he was dead,” I heard myself say hollowly.

Max laughed. “That seems to be going around. Weird. You should know it takes more than a bullet in the back to kill me. Just ask Federica.”

Federica? It all crashed together wildly. They’d leaned on Fede and found me. If Max was here, then so was Kirill.

The smell of black cherries and dark chocolate filled my mind again.

He was here, watching me.

Max tutted at the stunned look on my face. “Don’t blame her. She didn’t have a choice.”

“Did you hurt her?” I demanded, ignoring Leo’s confused looks.

“No, of course not.”

“Did—did *he* hurt her?” I asked, unable to say his name.

Max shook his head. “He doesn’t want to hurt anyone, Mallory.”

A slither of relief flowed through my panic.

“He just wants you,” Max continued. “He’s waiting for you,” He nodded toward the front.

A sob worked its way up my throat.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on here,” Leo blustered, finding his voice.

Max pulled a gun from his belt and aimed it at Leo in one smooth movement.

I stepped in front of him. “No! No one gets hurt.”

Max frowned. “He was being a dick.”

“Max.”

“Fine, but if the boss finds out he was trying to liquor you up, even a guardian angel won’t be able to save him.”

I nodded, knowing he was being honest. If Kirill had witnessed that pushy champagne scene, he would have crippled Leo already if not murdered him. “Sure, only he gets to drug my drinks, right?”

His mouth tightened, and he shrugged. There was no response to that because what could he say?

I turned to Fred’s son, praying he could see the sincerity in my eyes. “Don’t make trouble. Don’t try to leave or do anything this man says not to do. Please believe me. He’ll kill you.”

Leo paled and narrowed his eyes. “What have you gotten me into, Molly?”

That hurt a bit. I shook my head helplessly. “I’m sorry.”

I turned and started toward the doors. Every minute I’d been alone, running and hiding, had led me to a collision course with an inescapable fate.

Max was speaking quietly behind me to Leo. “If you have a healthy appetite for survival, I wouldn’t let him hear you call her Molly.”

I pushed open the swinging doors to the kitchen into the dark dining room. Kirill sat at a table in the center of the space, wreathed in darkness. Smoke curled off him from the glowing orange cigarette in his hand.

Black cherries and dark chocolate.

“Hello, Molly.”

KIRILL

The first sight of Molly in two months shook me on a soul-deep level. Christ, she was lovely. She walked steadily out of the kitchen. I didn't think she'd run this time. She knew she was caught.

"Sit with me."

"Is that a command?" Her voice sounded tired.

"It's a request," I corrected her gently.

All the nights I'd lain awake, longing for her, had me dying to be near her. I wanted to sweep her to me, but I could see how fragile her composure was. She was standing on a knife's edge. One wrong move, and we would both fall. I'd already pulled out the chair next to me, and I waited for her to sit. She stayed bolt upright, her back off the chair, watching me with an anxious yet weary gaze.

"Aren't you going to say something? Threaten to punish me? Lock me up forever?" she demanded after a full minute of silent staring between us.

"Do you want me to?" I stubbed out my cigarette, not wanting the smoky curl of harsh fruit in my mouth but needing something to keep me busy and able to resist the urge to touch her. We were far from alone in this nosy little town. When I got her truly alone, at home, no power on this earth would stop me.

"Well, I'd like you to be in character. It's more honest. You gave me the notebook. Did you read my story so far? Did you read your part?" A spark of anger appeared in her resigned eyes.

Thank fuck. I needed some sign that my Molly was in this subdued stranger.

“I did. Is it our story? I assume it’s a love story.” I had read her notebook, and the words were etched in my memory forever.

“I’d say it’s a tragedy,” she countered.

“Well, art is subjective,” I said dismissively. “You were saying you liked it when I threatened to punish you. Missed me, have you, Princess?” I goaded her softly. Misunderstanding her on purpose would generally piss her off. I had to see how far Molly had retreated from me mentally and how long it was going to take to get her back.

She scoffed. “If that’s what you heard, I can’t help you. No one can. Also, in case you didn’t get far enough into the story I wrote, you’re not the hero. You’re the villain.”

I nodded. I had indeed gotten that far. The words Molly had used to describe my descent into darkness would never be forgotten. Tiny daggers, every single one, which had embedded in my heart, leaving me bleeding and weak.

“At least I’m still a main character,” I quipped, hoping to make her see the tragic amusement of our situation. She loved and hated me, and she would probably never be able to let either emotion fully go. “I hope you have everything you need with you. We’re leaving from here.”

Her hands curled into fists on the table, and she looked down at the woodgrain. I would kill a hundred men to know what was going through her mind at that moment.

“I don’t suppose you’ll let me go if I asked?”

“You already know the answer to that,” I said dismissively. The need to be alone with Molly, without my men posted all around the place, overhearing things they shouldn’t, was overwhelming.

“Is Henry dead?”

Her sudden question caught me off guard. “Yes, but not by my hand.”

She frowned and looked up at me. “Who?”

“Nikolai.”

She let out an incredulous laugh and closed her eyes. Her chest moved up and down with long, calming breaths. Molly wasn't nearly as composed as she was projecting. “And my mother?”

“Safe and sound. I'd never touch her, I told you. Fiona and Mara are innocents—”

“And what am I? Wasn't I an innocent?” she demanded, opening her eyes to spit green fire at me.

I welcomed the burn. Anger wasn't the terrible resigned blankness of moments before. “It doesn't matter. Being mine overrules everything else, and no matter where you go or how well you hide, no matter how you try to deny it, we both know the truth. We have always belonged together, Mallory, and no power in this world can change that.”

“I hate you now, you know? This time, I *really* hate you,” she promised softly.

I found myself nodding. “I know you think that, but it doesn't change anything. I'd still take your hate over your absence every single time. Hate me all you want if it makes you feel better. I don't mind.”

I pushed from the table and stood. Molly hesitated a moment until I put my hand down to hover near hers, still resting on the table. “It's time to go home, Mallory.”

“Won't your wife mind?” she suddenly challenged.

The jealousy in her anger soothed my wounded heart. She still cared. Mallory might bite and kick and fight me all the way back to her pretty little cage, but she was jealous as hell, and I bet she'd missed me a whole lot, too. She and I were the same, and we'd always be each other's exception to everything. There was no line I couldn't cross that Mallory wouldn't forgive me for one day because her soul had found its partner in mine.

“I'm not married, Princess. You should know better by now. There's only one woman in this world I plan to marry, and she ran off before I could explain that to her. I told you I wasn't getting married. You didn't believe

me?”

Her eyes flickered to mine, and a crease of confusion burrowed between her fine, blonde brows. “Nikolai said you were engaged. It made sense, considering all the other lies you’ve told me.”

“What are they? I’ll explain every single one, but not here. Don’t make a fuss and come with me. We can talk about anything you want.”

“And if we do, and I want to leave, will you let me?”

A pang in my gut struck me at that question. “You already know the answer to that.”

My flat tone had her eyes shying away from mine. I wanted to grab her and carry her from here, kicking and screaming, but her fragility bothered me.

She considered my words and nodded slightly, ignoring my outstretched hand to stand on her own. “Yes, I know the answer. It’s better, really. I like you more this way. It’s more honest. Be the monster you are, Kirill. Don’t bother pretending not to be. I’m going to hate you either way.”

Her words dug into my heart. This wasn’t how I’d pictured our reunion, not at all, but it didn’t matter. I’d have all the time in the world to bring her around once we were married. Once we were married, all the talk about the engagement would be behind us, and she would have the official protection of my name. Not even Viktor would mess with my legal wife for fear it would make the Chernovs look weak in front of the other families.

“Hate away, Princess. I’ll love you enough for both of us,” I muttered before jerking my head toward the men waiting outside, ensuring our conversation was private. “Let’s go. You’re done here.”



I DROVE with Mallory beside me in the passenger seat. I didn’t trust myself to keep my hands off her if I was alone in the back with her. The dark roads of the small town and surrounding countryside sped past as I carefully handled the car around each bend. An armored SUV was in front, carrying Max and another behind. Security was a priority. I’d been sleepwalking through the

threat to Molly's safety before, unwilling to truly consider the time had come to face Viktor and the men in the Chernov bratva who didn't want me as *pakhan*. But that time had passed. In all my calculations, I had failed to account for one player in the dangerous game I lived: Molly.

I should hate her for running again. It was the act that sent me down this dark path in the beginning, yet there was no hate left in my heart. Her sudden betrayal had broken something inside me I hadn't known still existed.

"Why here?" I asked after we'd been driving for half an hour in silence.

"Why not?" she muttered.

She was closed in on herself. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her waist as if keeping her together. She was more fragile than I'd ever seen, and it was fucking with my head. She looked exhausted. Dark circles ringed her eyes, and her skin was pale.

"I met a wonderful man on the train, and he took me in," she told me after a second.

It was nothing I didn't already know, but I wanted to draw Molly out of the shell she had retreated into to avoid facing me and reality.

She shot me a quick look. "He's old, so no need to hurt him."

I nodded. Once I'd discovered where Molly was, she'd been watched. Fred, the older gentleman who'd taken her in when she was penniless and desperate, was about to come into a great deal of money, the source of which would remain anonymous. He'd kept Mallory safe for no reason other than being kind. There certainly wasn't enough of that in the world, and it should be rewarded. His son was another matter.

"And the chef?" I prodded.

Molly flushed and looked away. That guilty look confirmed my suspicions. "He's harmless. He asked me out. That's it. When I said no, he didn't push it." Molly turned her head to me and stared a hole into the side of my face. "Some men know how to take no for an answer."

My hands tightened on the wheel as frustration built in my chest. "Tell me

when I've ever pushed myself on you when you've told me no."

"I'm telling you no right now," she said flatly.

"I'm talking about sex," I said, dismissing her complaint.

"And I'm talking about freedom and autonomy. I'm talking about my right to choose who I want to spend my life with," she said, each word a cruel blow.

"And what about my right to choose who I want to spend the rest of my life with, Princess? Doesn't that matter?" I teased to hide how her words gutted me.

She snorted, a perfectly inelegant sound I loved. It sounded much more like my Molly than the stiff, reserved tone she'd addressed me with so far.

"So, you automatically win because you're richer, stronger, and more powerful—and a man. Don't forget that crucial fact." Her words were bitter.

"That's not the reason," I countered, slowing my car at a stop sign on a quiet, dark country road. I turned to her, picking her unresisting hand up off her lap and bringing it to my mouth. I kissed the back softly, and gooseflesh rippled across her skin immediately. "Until eight weeks ago, you wanted me as much as I want you. Don't forget that, Mallory. What's eight weeks after nine years of longing?" It had been nine years since Mallory had walked into my life and nine years since my heart stopped living in my chest and moved permanently to hers.

"I didn't know you then. I'm starting to think I never did," she murmured, tugging her hand away.

I wanted to press her, to pull out all the dark and terrible things I'd done to find and keep her and let the light shine on them. But this wasn't the place.

"Well, now you have all the time in the world to do that."

MOLLY

I woke to the scent of black cherries, dark chocolate, and Kirill's unique smell that had haunted my dreams for two months. I must have passed out in the car, which wasn't surprising, given how exhausted I was.

I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. It took a few moments to realize the view was different from usual. I turned my head and saw the black and white prints Kirill kept in his bedroom.

When I'd been serving my sentence as his willing captive, he'd kept me separate from him at night, only visiting me to fuck, but never to sleep. Apart from that last night together. The one where he finally let me see my name scrolled in tattooed cursive across his heart. The night I'd thought his barriers were finally coming down, only to tumble back to reality a few days later, when Nikolai had let all of Kirill's secrets out to play.

A soft knock on the door made me sit up so fast that I felt dizzy.

"Devushka? Are you awake?"

A lump formed in my throat at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Yes, Olga. You can come in."

She pushed open the door and peered in at me. The sight of the housekeeper who had been my constant companion only eight weeks ago shouldn't have been so comforting. She held a steaming mug of coffee in her hand, prepared the way I liked it. It was at that moment that I knew the taciturn Russian had

missed me. As a rule, Olga disapproved of any morning beverage that wasn't hot black Russian tea with a lemon slice.

She set the cup of coffee, French vanilla with a more than generous helping of creamer in it, on the bedside table and promptly sat beside me. I stared at her, shocked by the out-of-character behavior.

Her faded blue eyes tracked across my features, and her wrinkled hand patted mine. "Welcome home, Mallory."

Tears brimmed, and one dashed down my cheek. I swear, I'd never known it was possible to cry so much before I'd been pregnant.

"Shhh, don't cry. Everything will be well, you'll see." Olga's grip tightened on my hand as if she could press her steely Soviet Union-born strength into my fragile bones. "Drink your coffee, and rest. You look terrible," she said critically, tugging a reluctant laugh from my aching chest. Olga was still Olga.

"Thanks." I took the cup from her when she offered it, and the smell made my stomach revolt. I passed it back, furiously stuffing down the urge to vomit. I shook my head. "I'm not in the mood this morning," I muttered, trying desperately not to let Olga know how sick I felt. She was smart as a whip, and there was no way I'd be able to keep being pregnant from her for long. She saw everything, and she knew my habits. I never missed my coffee, and that alone would tip her off. "I switched to herbal teas while I was away to manage my anxiety."

Her eyes narrowed as she watched me carefully and then set down the cup. "Yes, you had much to be anxious about. Are you okay? Did Nikolai Viktorovich hurt you?"

Thinking of Nikolai pissed me off. That motherfucker had dragged me from a life where I'd finally been happy and blown it apart. It wasn't his fault Kirill had kept so much from me, but Nikolai had killed my father. He'd led me to think Kirill was responsible while lying to me about him being safe and relatively unharmed. Picking at that particular thread only sent me spiraling into self-doubt. There was a chance he'd lied about other things, but one stark truth remained.

I was pregnant.

Kirill had known it was a risk, yet he had continued to come inside me like it was his favorite hobby. He had planned it, and I couldn't forgive him for that.

"Mallory?" Olga pressed.

I realized I'd zoned out on her. "Sorry. Did Nikolai hurt me? Not any more than his brother," I muttered.

I didn't want to talk about Kirill with her. She was his biggest fan and surrogate mother figure. It would hardly be an unbiased conversation.

Olga frowned. "*Devushka*, you don't know how he suffered while you were gone—"

I pulled my hand from hers. "Please, don't start that already. I can't hear it right now. I'm allowed to feel what I feel," I told her sternly, with far more censure than I'd allowed myself before.

She blinked and pulled back. I'd hurt her feelings. I felt terrible about it, but it barely registered on the list of things I felt awful about lately.

I caught a whiff of coffee again, and my stomach lurched. "Sorry—excuse me a minute."

I launched myself out of bed on the other side and scrambled for the bathroom. I shut the door firmly, turned on the tap, and fell to my knees beside the toilet. As always, the morning session was nothing but bile. Still, my retching echoed around the tiled room, and I couldn't stop thinking about Olga hearing it beyond the door.

Fuck. How the hell was I going to hide this? Why was I even bothering?

Oh, right. I couldn't take Kirill finding out about it. Not yet. It was my secret, just for me. Just for a little longer. I didn't want to see his satisfaction at his plans working out. I couldn't take it. I'd knife him in his sleep, especially if we were in the same room.

After a long while, half an hour or more, I dared to open the door. Olga was gone, and in place of the coffee was a cup of peppermint tea. I stared at it,

resigned.

Olga knew, and now it was only a matter of time until Kirill did.



“MORNING, SLEEPYHEAD,” Max called from the kitchen as I dallied in the doorway.

I didn’t want to see Olga again and meet her knowing eyes. However, I was starving, and the desperate need to put food in my empty belly had driven me out of my room.

“She’s not here. She said she had to get things from the grocery store,” Max reassured me, somehow sensing my reluctance to see the brisk housekeeper.

I stepped into the kitchen and took in the familiar sight of my former bodyguard sitting at the kitchen island, some Cyrillic paper in his hand and a cup of black tea at his elbow. He was as dashing as ever with his dark blond good looks and the rakish scar across his eyebrow that made him look vaguely piratical.

I couldn’t get used to the sight of him. His grin transported me to a time before I’d discovered everything I was building with Kirill was based on lies.

“You’re looking well,” I said, perching on the chair opposite him.

“You mean, for a dead man, right?” he joked but almost immediately sobered. “I’m sorry about that day. It’s my fault Nikolai got in here. I failed you and Kirill.”

“Sure, it’s your fault that a demented psycho shot and killed four people in cold blood and nearly killed you, too. He has no blame in the situation.” I gave Max a scornful look. “Please, don’t, Max. Keep the blame where it belongs.”

“Is that what you’re doing? How come the boss is in the doghouse?”

I let out a short laugh. “If you don’t know that, I guess you’re not as close to

Kirill as you think.”

“If you’re talking about the tracker, you should know . . . I have one, too,” he said, turning his hand to show the smooth back and tiny lump next to his thumb.

I blinked at him, shocked. “Are you kidding?”

“No. Both Ivan and I have one. Pyotr too.”

“Don’t tell me Kirill has one,” I said quietly.

“No, he doesn’t. Too many people want him dead to allow that kind of data to be available anywhere. But his inner circle? The people he cares about? They do. That includes you too, Mallory.”

“Don’t tell me I should be flattered,” I snorted.

“No, I won’t tell you how to feel about it, but I do know what it means to Kirill. He’d kill to keep you safe and die for it, too.”

I shoved away the emotions those words stirred in me. Nope. I wasn’t softening toward Satan himself. Not today. “Whatever. It sounds to me like a control freak finally had enough money and influence to chip his friends like pets so he’d know where they were all the time. It’s next-level insane.”

“Yet, if Nikolai hadn’t removed it, we would have found you in hours instead of days.”

“Yes, and I’d never have had the chance to know the truth about Kirill.”

“What truth?” Max sounded baffled.

His tone made me angry. It was as if he thought I shouldn’t have any objection to what I’d discovered like they weren’t complete deal breakers.

I held up my hand, ready to tick off things. “Let’s start with my father being dead. How’s that for one?”

“It had just happened—”

“The tracker can be number two, and the engagement can be number three.” I held up three fingers.

Max tensed at the last, and his eyes slid to the side. Ha! He couldn't meet my gaze on that charge.

“Look, I'm happy you're alive, but we're not friends. You're the man who enables a power-hungry dictator who's taken over my life and wants to command my future. Let's not pretend otherwise.”

Max flinched as if I'd struck him. I couldn't let myself care about that. This conversation should be happening with Kirill, and I was perilously close to sharing too much.

I stood and made to escape the kitchen.

“He's not a power-hungry dictator, Mallory. He's a man who loves you more than he cares about what's normal or acceptable. In our world, he's far from extreme.”

“Yeah, but I wanted nothing to do with your world, and I still don't.”



THE TOWER WAS JUST as I remembered. It was like no time at all had passed. I avoided Olga as best I could and curled up in the library for the day. I found my notebook on a small side table beside the chaise lounge I usually wrote on. I flipped it open, knowing that the last hands on it had been Kirill's. He'd read it, the motherfucker.

I flipped to the last page I'd written on and stilled as I found a black cursive scroll under my last line.

It was Kirill's bold handwriting.

IT'S A LOVE STORY, Molly. One day you'll see that, Princess.

I STARED at the words as emotions I didn't know how to process filled my chest. I was such a mess. I loved him, and I hated him. I wanted to escape

him and run to him at the same time. I was furious about the baby, but I was excited too. My opposing feelings threatened to rip me apart.

Through the whirling maelstrom in my heart, one emotion came through clearer than the rest. Anger. It was my set point and saved me from the things I was afraid and ashamed to feel. It wasn't Nikolai's fault my heart was broken. It was Kirill's. He was the one who had fucked up our love story with his secrets and manipulation. The anger filled me, and the burn soothed my wounds, cauterizing them. There, that was better.

I took comfort in the fury.

KIRILL

I spent the day wrapping up all the loose ends I had been ignoring for the bratva. Everything in my life had paused while I hunted for Mallory, and it was time to get back to business. Anything more, and Viktor would be peering over my shoulder. Nikolai had been keeping him otherwise occupied, and it felt strange as hell to trust my half-brother with anything important, but I had no choice. There was no defeating the mighty patriarch of the bratva, Viktor Chernov, without Nikolai's help.

I had a thick file on Antonio De Sanctis, the father of my arranged bride. He was a sly bastard, and I'd already discovered how he had been planning to screw us over. Armed with that information, I hoped to finish this engagement business without harm to Sofia or me.

I got back to The Tower early, eager to see Molly. My early return would probably only disappoint her, but I couldn't stay away. I was drawn there like a moth to her flame, and even if she burned me with her hot anger, I'd take it. She could burn me to ash, and I'd still welcome her touch.

Inside, Max sat in the kitchen, playing games on his phone and looking bored as hell. Since my number two had been shot, I wanted him to take it easy, but he'd taken it as a personal affront when I'd tried to put a different guard with Molly, so I'd let him keep that position.

"Any movement?"

"She came out of her room for a bit, long enough to rip me a new one, and I haven't seen her the rest of the day," Max said.

“Why don’t you see if Federica wants to come and visit? Molly would like that.”

Max raised an eyebrow. “And if she implores her to call the cops on us for kidnapping?”

“She won’t. Anyway, we have Federica over a barrel, and Molly needs a friend.”

“Yeah, and apparently, I’m not one anymore,” Max grumbled as he stood and stretched.

His leg was still healing, and I knew better than anyone how the stiffness of a bullet wound could linger. Seven years after Viktor had shattered my kneecap and ended my track career in one bloody night, my leg still nagged at me in damp weather. Since then, my body had been riddled with injuries and near-death blows. It was a bloody and scarred testament to the brutal existence of a *bratva* boss.

“Go home and rest. It was a long night last night. It’s my turn to tangle with the little hellcat,” I reminded him as I took off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves.

Anticipation roared in my veins when I thought of seeing Mallory. Last night had been oddly devastating, but tonight, I was prepared. She was hurt, angry, and ready to lash out. That was fine. I could take it. I wanted her rage and her blame. She could take it all out on me as long as she let those emotions burn out.

Max let himself out, and I went looking for Mallory. She wasn’t in the bedroom. *Our* bedroom. I was done sleeping apart. She’d sleep in my arms from now on.

I continued along the hall and pushed open the door to the library. She loved this room. It was her refuge. Sure enough, I found her sitting in a window seat, staring out at the dark city.

I came into the room. The only sign she’d noticed me was a slight tensing of her shoulders. I settled myself in an armchair facing her and waited. I was perfectly content to watch, enjoying that she was here, real, and no longer in my dreams. The agony of not knowing where she’d been for the last two

months was far from healed, but seeing her in her fragile state, all I could think of was how to bring her back to me. Her body might be right here, safely under my watch, but her mind? It was still out there in the world, far from me.

“Are you just going to stare?” she accused after a while.

“I enjoy looking at you.”

She stood. “Whatever. I’m going to bed.”

I followed her, standing as she drew abreast of me. “Okay, let’s go.”

Her eyes flew to mine. “I didn’t mean together. I want my room back.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I can’t allow that.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because I need to be near you to keep you safe, and I’ve missed you.” I reached out to tuck her hair behind her ear. “I think you’ve missed me, too.”

“I’d rather stab myself in the eye than sleep beside you. You’re delusional,” she accused softly, her cheeks turning a pretty pink I was familiar with nowadays. She felt called out. *Good.*

“Am I? So, you didn’t miss my touch, even for a second? You didn’t think about me, alone at night, cold and empty in your bed? Because I thought about you, Mallory. You’ve been my ghost, and you never left my head once.”

“Well, that’s you, not me,” she said resolutely.

I smoothed my finger down the plush apple of her cheek, enjoying the velvet of her skin. “Are you trying to lie to me, Princess? Because I always know when you’re lying.”

“Lucky you. Apparently, I have no idea when you’re lying to me,” she accused, raising her flashing emerald eyes to mine, her anger scorching the air between us.

There she was. Hello, baby.

“If you’ve something to say, Princess, say it. Don’t keep it inside. I can take it.”

“I’m sure you can. You’re so fucked up that you don’t feel guilty about the things you’ve done. Nothing bothers you, does it?”

“Lay your charges on me.” I was eager for her anger. I wanted to push her to burn through her frosty facade.

“Fine, how about your brother cutting my hand open to remove a tracker you put under my skin?”

“A simple safety measure,” I answered smoothly, half-truthfully. Yes, it was to keep Mallory safe, but it had also been to prevent her from pulling a stunt like she had the last two months and disappearing on me.

She narrowed her eyes like she could read every thought in my head, and no doubt she could. No one knew me like she did.

“And Henry? You should have told me that night.”

“I hardly knew Nikolai was about to kidnap you from under my nose, and I wouldn’t have a chance. That night, if you remember, we were otherwise occupied.” I reminded her of how we’d come so close to breaking down each other’s walls.

She flushed, her mind lingering right where I wanted it. “Fine. You deny you’re engaged, and there’s clearly no woman here, so I’ll give you that one, but the other is unforgivable.”

A pit struck my belly. There was no mistaking what she was talking about. “Is it so wrong that I want to have a child with you, Molly? I’ve wanted a family with you since the second day we met.”

“And you thought tricking me into giving you one was acceptable? Since you want it, I must, too, right?” She’d turned and pushed my chest hard to put some distance between us.

I swayed back a step and then returned, pressing my chest against hers. “No, it’s not all right. Nothing that’s happened to me in the last seven years and nothing I’ve done has been acceptable. The lines of acceptable moved so far

beyond normal that I can't see the line anymore. All I know is I want you, and I want a family with you. I want you dependent on me, needing me so much you would never stop loving me. I want a baby with your smile and my name. I want something to live for, Mallory, and I want it all with you." My brutally honest words rang out in the quiet room.

Her eyes widened as she took in every awful, painful thing in my tirade. Then she pushed me again. "It isn't just your decision, asshole!"

Another push and I saw a tear working down her cheek. I let her push me. If it made her feel better, it was worth it. Her hands on me, even in anger, was the best thing I'd felt in two months.

She raised her fist to beat on my chest, and another tear dripped down her face.

This time, I caught her wrist. "Stop, Princess. You'll hurt yourself."

"And that's your domain, right?" she accused, but the tears were coming faster now.

I could count on one hand the number of times I'd seen Molly cry. This time, it ripped my heart wide open. I wrestled her against my chest, wrapping my arms around her shaking body and crushing her to me so she couldn't hit me anymore. She struggled, and when the fight wore her out, she sank into my embrace.

My shirt was wet with her tears when I pulled back. Her face was red, and her skin was raw. Her nose dripped, joining the tears on my shirt, and her eyes were bloodshot. She'd never looked more beautiful, finally surrendering to the torrent of wild, uncontrollable emotion between us.

"Do you want me to apologize? Would you forgive me if I did?" I murmured, smoothing her hair back.

She bit her lip, her chest still heaving with her upset. "Would you, if I asked?"

"I would do anything to make you feel better, but honestly, I wouldn't mean it. Molly, I don't regret a single moment with you. I don't want to lie to you. I wish you were pregnant. I wish I'd had longer to get you that way. That's the

truth.”

She blinked at me, her eyes incredulous and resigned all at once. “You are the devil.” Her voice was rough, as if her tears had covered her silent screams.

“Maybe, but I’m your devil and one you can never give up,” I told her frankly.

She came to life with fight again in my arms. She pushed and struggled as if those words had sent her over an edge. “I can give you up. I tried to. You won’t let me go! I hate you. I *really* hate you!”

She snarled the words at me in such desperate sadness that it fucking hurt. I grabbed her face, holding her still as I growled into her face. “Stop lying to yourself, Molly. You love me, and that’s why you’re so fucking angry.”

She opened her mouth to protest those words, but I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t stand hearing her deny it for one more second. My lips crashed into hers in a collision of desperation, anger, and want. Her skin was salty with tears, and as soon as my lips touched hers, she parted and let me inside. I nudged her toward the wall, and we met the surface hard. She gasped against my lips as she wrapped her arms around my neck and dragged me closer.

I ground against her once I had her just where I wanted her, her core perfectly aligned with the aching hard-on pressing against my pants, desperate to be freed. She moaned into my mouth as I rotated my hips against her in a sinuous circle, her breathing hitching as my lips moved down her neck. One hand landed in her hair, ruthlessly tugging her head back, offering her delicate collarbones up for me to feast on, while the other grabbed her jean-covered ass and hitched her up, spreading her legs around my waist.

“Fuck, Princess. I missed you so goddamn much,” I muttered as I turned toward the thick rug before the fire that burned in the hearth.

Sinking to my knees, holding her weight carefully, I lowered her while kissing her madly. I didn’t want my lips to lose contact with hers for even one moment. My hands went to her jeans, and I ripped them open and tugged them down her legs. I kicked my pants off as my mouth moved down her body, pressing kisses to her sternum, then across her belly, and lower still.

Her panties became a ripped ball of plain cotton, and then I was where I'd dreamed of being every night for eight weeks.

I pressed her legs open, and she let me, raising herself on her elbows to watch as I knelt between her legs and ripped my button-down off. I had no time to play with buttons right now. I needed my naked skin pressed flush against hers. Naked and fully visible in the light from the fire.

I put a hand on her breast, pinching and rolling the nipple before sliding it over her heart. "You can't escape me, Molly. I live here. You won't ever get me out."

She wet her lips; her pupils dilated with want.

"Fight it all you want, but this story was only going to end one way," I continued sliding my hand down her body, over her belly, and past the dips of her slim hips. "Stop fighting it. It only hurts you more."

I moved down and settled between her heavenly thighs, leaning in and smelling that sweet, irresistible scent of Molly's want for me. Then I kissed along her inner thigh. "Tell me you don't want me to touch you, Princess. Tell me no right now, and it stops," I murmured against her skin.

She was silent, and I looked up to see her eyes, emerald shards of glass, fixed on me with a hot look.

"Well?" I urged.

"I should do it to prove you wouldn't even if I asked," she muttered, but her heart wasn't in it.

"But you won't, will you, Molly? In case I listen. And you don't want me to stop. Admit it," I pushed her.

Anger flashed in her eyes, and she put her hand on my head, sinking her fingers through my hair and tugging the dark strands from the root. Holding my head like that, a vulnerable position I'd only ever allow her, she slid her other hand between her legs and through her wet folds. "It's been two months. Maybe I don't need you anymore to get off."

The sight of her touching herself undid me. "Say that again and risk losing

fingers,” I muttered thickly, irrationally jealous of her hand.

She gave me a muted smile. It wasn’t much, but it was more than she’d given me since last night. “Good. I want you to suffer.” Her near whisper was almost lost. “Like me.”

Then her hand on my hair tightened, lowering my head toward her glistening flesh, and my mouth touched her. I bit at her other fingers until she moved them and settled myself in to feast on her. My tongue rubbed up and down her slit, circling her clit until she was moaning. I moved lower to dip inside her until she was rotating her hips against my face.

As soon as she exploded wetly against my tongue, I worked my way up her body. As I lined myself up with her, she touched my face.

“Don’t be too rough,” she asked quietly.

I paused, perplexed by the soft plea.

Then she reached between us and guided me inside. I tensed as I pushed in and found her tighter than I remembered, her walls gripping me in a choking hold. I breathed out harshly and tried to get my need to consume this woman under control and be gentle. It didn’t come naturally to me, however.

She sighed when I was in deep and wrapped her arms around my neck, holding me to her.

I rocked inside her, slowly building to a harder pace, while she clung to me. When I braced myself on my elbow and snaked a hand between us to rub her clit, I saw tears running down her face again. I leaned in and kissed the lines of salt tracking down her cheeks, lapping at her tears, and suddenly, she broke with pleasure beneath me.

She clamped down hard on me when she came, making it nearly impossible not to follow her over that cliff edge. Instead, harnessing self-discipline I didn’t know I had, I pulled from her warmth and leaned over her. My hand lowered to my aching, slick cock, and I moved hard and insistently over it, jerking toward a desperate release. Her eyes lowered to my dick, angry red and wet with her cum, and she licked her lips.

That did it.

I moved over her and put my dick to her lips. She looked up at me, holding all the power despite our position. Then she leaned forward and took me inside her mouth, reducing me to rubble with a strong, sucking motion and her wicked tongue working my leaking tip. She rolled to her side, making it easier for me to slide deeper down her throat.

Holding myself on a corded arm, the side plank from hell, I fucked her mouth as she lay immobile and let me. Her hand came to tug on my balls as they slapped against her cheek. And I pulled her hair back, holding it in my fist as I watched myself disappearing into her willing mouth.

I came quickly, bursting inside that hot cavern in the first orgasm I'd had by another's hand since she'd left me. I'd settled for jerking off in desperate, lonely showers, and at night, with whatever article of her clothing I could find to inhale like a fucking creep.

I came hard, pumping a huge load down her throat, and she swallowed every drop. It wasn't an apology for the birth control implant or trying to get her pregnant, but it was the most I could do. I wouldn't come inside her raw again until she asked me to. It was the most I could offer her. I wouldn't apologize for something I felt no remorse over.

I pulled back as my orgasm faded, and the sensation of her mouth and tongue around me was too sensitive. I left her lips, and she licked up the remaining white residue. Sinking back onto my haunches, I felt debauched and wide open under her frank stare.

She sat up slowly. She was still wearing her t-shirt and her knee socks. She looked as wrecked as I felt. We stared at each other until Molly wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, her cheeks reddening as the spell that had fallen over us gradually faded.

"I'm tired," she muttered, and her voice sounded rougher than ever.

I stood and helped her to her feet. She swayed a moment, but when I went to steady her, she pushed my grasping hands away.

"Good night," she said quietly and turned away, walking bare-assed out of the room.

It looked like I was far from forgiven, but it was a start, and I'd take it.

MOLLY

I was a terrible person. I had to be. There was no alternative because the next morning, I woke up more relaxed than I'd been in two months. Kirill's arms were around me, his heat sinking through me, and the scent of him, the smell of home, filled my nose. I'd turned toward him before I could help myself, lingering in that half-asleep place where there were no lies and resentments between us. It was just him and me and this bed, with early morning sunshine flooding in.

Then he spoke and ruined it. "Princess, I thought you'd rather stab yourself in the eye than sleep with me."

I pushed away from him, annoyed and embarrassed for that minor slip in judgment. Add in last night, and it seemed I was suffering from more than a minor slip.

"Fuck you," I tossed at him.

His strong hands grabbed me around the waist as I went to get up and tossed me back onto the mattress. "With pleasure," he growled in my ear, moving his hard body over me.

He was naked, and his morning wood pressed insistently against my thigh. If I moved a little, he'd nudge inside . . .

No! No morning orgasm for you.

My inner voice had lost Kirill's timbre and taken on a schoolmarm shrillness that was difficult to ignore.

I turned my face away from his devilishly hot mouth as his tongue traced a path toward my ear. “That wasn’t an invitation,” I ground out, trying to ignore how his hands turned my skin to fire as he tugged my shirt down, cupped my tits, and thumbed the nipples.

“It sure felt like one, Princess, and so does this,” he said, delving a hand between my legs before I could clamp them closed.

His blunt fingertips slid through my slick folds, immediately gliding inside me. I gasped out a curse, and my head fell back as his thick finger pressed inside me, shoving all other thoughts from my head.

He leaned up and grinned wickedly at me. “My, my, we are wet this morning, aren’t we, Molly? Do you need a hand with that?”

“No, thanks,” I told him, barely able to stop my hips from rising to meet his lazy finger thrusts. “I’ll wait until you leave and finish myself off.”

A calculating look passed across his dark eyes. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were looking to get tied up and left here until I get back.”

His phone vibrating madly on the bedside table stopped me from having to answer.

He reached out one long arm and grabbed it, answering the call while his finger was still deep inside me. When I tried to pull away, he added a second, stretching me deliciously.

“*Slyshayu*,” Kirill answered, shifting effortlessly into Russian.

He watched me with hungry eyes as he listened to the speaker on the other end of the call, pumping his fingers in and out at the same time. He twisted his hand, pressing those large, rough pads against the spongy spot on the front wall of my pussy. His thumb found my clit, and I knew I’d die if he left me high and dry.

With coming as quickly as possible in mind and my dignity out the window, I moved against him, meeting his thrusts with my hips. My eyes rolled back as the perfect combination of moves left me speechless.

Kirill muttered now and again into the phone, only enough that the speaker

knew he was still there. His eyes never left me. He watched me come undone like it was the most fascinating, beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

I shoved a hand into my mouth to cut off my cry when I came, shame burning through me that the person on the other end of the line might be listening. My thighs clamped hard around his hand, and my entire body pulsed with pleasure. I came so hard my teeth felt like they were rattling in my head as I shook.

When the delirium passed, I floated back to the bed to find Kirill still watching me. "Oh my god, did he hear?"

Kirill grinned. "Of course not. I hung up way before that, Princess. No one but me gets to hear you come."

Ugh, of course, I should expect Kirill to be possessive about the filthiest things. I realized his hand was still inside me and raised an eyebrow.

He took his time pulling free and arranging my sleep shorts so they covered me chastely. He leaned in and pressed a kiss to my lips. "I have to go."

"So soon?" I intoned, relieved to have some time to remember all the terrible things he'd done to me and stop folding like origami at his touch.

"Yes." He stood, naked and erect as hell. His dick was so hard it looked painful as it jutted away from his belly at an angry angle. "Try not to look so happy about it," he growled.

"I can't help it. I'm a terrible liar, remember?" I reminded him cheerfully before turning over and snuggling back down in bed.

I didn't want to sleep anymore, but I was putting off getting up and the inevitable sickness that followed. What would Kirill do if he knew I was suffering so badly from morning sickness? Probably take me to the best hospital in the city and demand they fix it, at gunpoint, if necessary. As always, the thought of him finding out scared me. I burrowed under the covers and listened to him getting dressed.

When he was ready, he came to stand above me. He must have bought my sleeping act because he didn't touch me or do anything to wake me. He loomed over me, and after a long moment where I waited for him to call my

bluff, he turned and left the room.

I waited until all sounds from the hall had stopped before rolling onto my back and staring at the ceiling. *Crap*. I was right back where I started, falling into the sex haze, my anger melting because, despite everything, he was the man I loved. But unlike at the beginning, I was pregnant now. Pregnant with his child.

I put a hand on my belly. I'd soon be over twelve weeks. According to everything I'd read, I should be due an ultrasound about now if I was trying to be any kind of good, responsible mother. Unfortunately, I had little to no hope of getting out of The Tower to get an ultrasound. The thought of sneaking out and Kirill barreling through the door halfway in, eyes blazing, was enough to make me snap my eyes shut again and wish for sleep.

When had life gotten so complicated? About the same time my heart decided it would continue to love Kirill, even if he wasn't the hero in my story like I'd thought, but the villain.



JUST WHEN MY mood threatened to veer into truly depressed and guilt-ridden, Max gave me the biggest and best surprise of my life.

I was sitting in the kitchen with Olga. She hadn't said anything about babies, and my warning look seemed to be enough to stop her from broaching the subject. She had, however, decided it was time to continue my introduction to wifely skills, a subject I hated. But now it had a motherly twist that was making me anxious. This afternoon, she was showing me how to make *kasha* and told me it was a popular food for children. She shrugged at my glare and told me to write the recipe down so I wouldn't forget.

Max waltzed into the kitchen with a grin. "Mallory, you're going to love me," he announced, glancing nervously at the blinking red light of the CCTV camera in the corner. "Not literally, of course."

"Be careful. Big Brother will come and get you, Maxy," I teased him, enjoying his panic.

He collected himself and turned toward the hall. “Come on; she won’t bite you.”

Excitement curled in my belly as I recognized a familiar figure. Federica edged into the kitchen with the kind of caution I would expect from some stranger Max had kidnapped off the street. For all I knew, he’d done precisely that, so I made the first move.

I was up and moving toward her before I could stop myself, pulling her into a hug.

Fede returned my embrace a moment later. “I thought you would hate me by now,” she whispered into my hair.

It was all so messed up; I couldn’t help but laugh. “Is that why you came?” I teased. I didn’t want Fede to be upset. She’d done everything she could, and we both knew it.

“I figured maybe you wanted to throw salt at me or punch me. I deserve it, so here I am.”

She made me laugh again with her expression. “I don’t think Olga would let me waste the salt, and I’ve missed you too much to punch you. I’m so happy to see you.”

“Can we talk alone? Is that—allowed?” she asked, throwing a mutinous look at Max.

“Yes, it’s allowed. I’m making it allowed.” I linked my arm through hers and tugged her toward the library. “Step into my office. No one will disturb us here, will they, *Max*?” I tossed over my shoulder at my bodyguard before ushering Fede into my favorite room. I shut the door behind her and leaned against it. “There’re no cameras in here. Talk freely.” I grinned at her.

She blinked. “There are cameras in the other rooms?”

I shrugged. “Some of them.”

“Doesn’t that drive you crazy knowing that someone is watching?”

“Not someone. I know exactly who’s watching and . . . I’m used to it.” I tried not to flush when I thought about certain scenes Kirill had caught on camera.

Fede nodded, and her eyes took on a faraway look.

I knew exactly where her mind had gone, so I touched her arm, trying to snap her out of it. “Fede, don’t. If he didn’t get to you, it would have been someone else. He was always going to find me. I was fighting the inevitable.”

“Mallory—is that your real name?”

I nodded, awkward as hell that my lies about my past had been exposed.

She took a deep breath to calm herself. “I could still call the cops for you if you wanted.”

“Kirill made it sound like he had something important on you. Don’t test him. It’s not worth it. In the end, it was always going to come down to him and me. The final showdown,” I teased, trying to inject some levity into her solemn mood. “Two men enter, and one man leaves.” *Though in our case, it’ll be three.*

“How can you joke at a time like this?”

“What else is there to do? Cry? Believe me, I’ve done enough of that to last me a lifetime. It didn’t help, and I don’t recommend it.” I sat on the couch before the fire. It was unlit since it was only the afternoon, but being by the neat logs and cleaned-out grate with the scent of pine was calming.

“How can you be so okay with this? If it was me, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to get away,” Fede muttered.

Her judgment stung. “He’s not some stranger who picked me up and brought me here against my will. Well, it was against my will this time, but he’s not a stranger. Until eight weeks ago, I wanted to spend my life with him despite what he is, who he is, and what he’s done.

“That’s crazy. It’s scary.”

“What is?”

“That kind of all-consuming love. A great and terrible love . . . as frightening as it is awe-inspiring.”

I thought about her words. *A great and terrible love.* Yes, I thought those

words could apply to my and Kirill's relationship.

Fede sat next to me, relaxing a little. "So, what was it like? The place you lived?"

"Willow Creek? It was peaceful and idyllic. Everyone knew each other's names and business—except mine. The whole town pitched in when someone needed help. It was a picture-perfect Sunday special experience."

"And?" Fede was watching me carefully and raised a dark eyebrow. "You were bored, weren't you?"

"Bored? Yes. Being happy, safe, and content is boring," I joked. Her knowing smile sparked something inside me. She wasn't wrong, was she? "How about you? What did Kirill do to make you help him?" I was nervous about that question, but that she was here, willing to see me, made me hope it wasn't anything she'd blame me for.

"Dug up my dirt and threatened me with it. It wasn't anything surprising. When you live with secrets, they always come back to bite you," she muttered. "Are you going to leave him again?"

"If I get the chance? I don't know. I guess I won't know until the moment comes. I have a feeling it's futile, but hey, that's never stopped me from doing anything in the past." I sighed, relaxing against the sofa and taking her hand. "I'm so happy to see you. Will you come again?"

"If you want me to. Are you going to come to Theo's wedding?"

"When is it?" Excitement surged through me at the thought.

Fede smiled. "In a few weeks. He doesn't know you're back yet. I didn't know what to tell him."

"Tell him I'd love to come, though I'll probably need a plus one for Max. I can't see Kirill letting me come without him."

"Max?" Fede wrinkled her nose as though his name annoyed her, but a rarely seen pink tinted her cheeks.

None of the bartenders at the Blue Rabbit had been as uncaring of male attention as Fede. She looked through the poor fools who attempted to ask

her out. I'd never seen her blush over a man.

"Yes, Max. Is there something going on between you two?"

"Of course not," Fede immediately scoffed.

She was a good actress, but her denial was too quick. She was hiding something, and I was dying to know what it was.

"He's—I'd never willingly enter into a relationship with someone like him. Bratva, you know?" She said the last apologetically.

I swallowed the lump of shame from her implicit judgment. I got it. Who would choose to live a life on the edge of a knife? No one in their right mind, that was certain.

"Unfortunately, some of us don't have a choice."

KIRILL

Cigarette smoke drifted lazily into the air above my booth. Pravda during the day was depressing as hell, but it was a private place to meet. Nikolai sat opposite me, blowing smoke rings toward the ceiling.

“What did Antonio De Sanctis say when you confronted him with that tidy little file you’ve been making?”

“Not much. He denied it, but I could tell he was panicked.”

“He’ll probably call Renato back from Naples,” Nikolai mused.

Renato De Sanctis was heir to his family’s capo title. Sofia’s elder brother had been away for years in Naples. Antonio believed his son had to learn the ropes of the business in the old-school way, in the original seat of the De Sanctis’ family power.

“Good. Maybe then, level minds can prevail. Men like Viktor and Antonio are relics. Their time is over, and they don’t understand the world we live in anymore. The sooner we can rid them of power, the better for everyone.” I took a long slug of cold water and crunched the ice between my teeth.

Nikolai smirked. “Viktor thinks you’re coping well with the death of your first love. He’s impressed.”

“He doesn’t suspect that you’re lying?”

Nikolai shook his head. “Not for a second. I have an unbeatable hand, brother. Viktor thinks I’m his most devoted killer hound and believes I lack

the capacity to think outside the box he put me in.”

“You’re a good actor.” I was as guilty as my father of underestimating Nikolai.

I spent years thinking the darkness and blood-soaked parts of our work had destroyed his sanity, but I’d discovered he was painfully aware. Aware and two steps ahead. Together, we were a killer combination. Too bad our truce would be over the second Viktor died and a power vacuum opened in the Chernov bratva.

“How’s our little princess doing since you dragged her kicking and screaming back to New York?”

I glowered at him. I was far beyond pretending that Nikolai talking about Molly didn’t piss me off. I’d never forgive him for letting all my secrets out of the bag before I’d had the chance to break them to her gently.

“She’s fine,” I said curtly.

“Give her my best. I think she has a soft spot for me.”

“She knows you killed her father,” I pointed out.

Nikolai pulled a face. “Right. Thanks for that. I suppose I should send flowers or something. Maybe a fruit basket.”

“You’re insane,” I sighed.

Nikolai’s grin was chilling. “Maybe so, but don’t be fooled. Mallory hated her father. She’s as sad about his death as we would be about Viktor’s. The only difference is that Mallory still thinks there are rules about how you’re supposed to feel when something happens. She hasn’t gotten it yet. She doesn’t need to pretend anything anymore. We live outside the rules, and there is perfect freedom in that chaos.”

“How poetic. I’ll be sure to pass that along to Mallory when she gets your fruit basket. Are we done here?” I pushed myself out of the booth and stood.

“One more thing.” He raised his cunning eyes to mine. “I never asked you how you found Irina’s house. It was Sofia De Sanctis, wasn’t it?”

I knew he saw the truth on my face immediately. Keeping things from Niko was practically impossible. “She didn’t realize what she’d let slip if that means anything.”

“It doesn’t, but I’ll take your worry about her into consideration.”

I went to leave, but something stopped me. A worry in the pit of my gut about women like Sofia, Molly, and every other whose father had been a monster behind closed doors. “Do you know how Antonio treats her?”

One of Niko’s hands curled into a fist on the table. “And how would that be?”

“Let’s just say she has more in common with Mallory, and you and I, than I’d ever expected. See you soon, brother.”



I SAT in the back of a town car as Ivan drove me toward The Tower. “Is everything in place?”

“*Da*, but I think someone else should be planning this.” Ivan sounded disgruntled, and it made me smile. It was amusing to have my biggest, burliest bratva brother arranging a wedding, but there we were.

“Olga can help with the food and such. You know it’s small. Don’t worry about it. We’d better worry about getting Molly to stand nicely in front of the minister and say her lines.”

“You’re on your own there, *bratan*.” Ivan laughed. “For what it’s worth, I think it’s better to tell her before. Women like to plan their weddings.”

“Not Molly, and not a wedding to me,” I said with stone-cold certainty.

I might have been able to break through a wall or two last night and get her to admit she’d missed my body and the electric chemistry storming around us when we’d touched. But pledging to be with me until death? That would be a much harder sell. In the end, I didn’t need her to agree. I was going to marry her anyway, and finding an official I had enough dirt on to do the deed would be easy enough. Politicians and clergy always had a fuck ton of skeletons in

the closet.

“Let her choose her dress. I have a sister, so believe me, I know,” Ivan said.

Right. Max and Ivan had a younger sister, Anastasia, who still lived in Russia. “I’ll think about it.”

We pulled up before The Tower, and three bodyguards rushed toward the car to cover me in the short walk between the car and the door. I didn’t know what was going through Viktor’s head, but I didn’t want to bare my neck for his blade. I was too close to getting exactly what I wanted.

Nikolai had told Viktor he’d killed the woman in my apartment and tossed the body. His lie would only last so long now that Molly was back in the city. I hadn’t seen my father in two months, and the next time I did, I planned to be married to Mallory. I’d claim Nikolai had killed a random hook-up and publicly introduce Mallory to Viktor. Once the entire underworld knew she was my wife, it would be difficult for Viktor to attack her openly. It would be seen as a weakness in the Chernov bratva, and Viktor knew how such an act would draw the wolves to the scent of blood.

With Antonio De Sanctis publicly shamed in the network of illicit businesses we operated, he was no longer a factor, and marrying Molly would put the memory of the previous engagement firmly out of people’s minds.

The only element that remained a wild card was Mallory. I’d carry her over my shoulder, kicking and screaming if that’s what it took to force my name on her and with it, a mantle of protection I hoped would keep her safe. It would also paint a target on her back to anyone looking to hurt me. As with everything in my world, it was a delicate balancing act that could protect or kill with one wrong move.

Inside the penthouse, I found Molly in the shower. She’d been through the dressing room I’d had filled for her. I could see the signs of her touch on the items unfolded and looked through. I hoped she liked it. It was another apology of sorts. With every item I put in there, I told her I was sorry for parading her around in next to nothing. I was sorry for treating her like an object. I was sorry I didn’t make her understand that my life was meaningless without her.

I pushed open the door to the master bath and peered through the steam to the huge walk-in shower enclosure. Molly's naked form was visible behind the fogged glass. I stripped my clothes off efficiently and walked toward the shower. She whirled around as soon as I stepped inside.

I thought she'd protest or tell me to leave. Instead, her nostrils flared slightly as she looked me up and down. I braved her inspection as her eyes shied away from her name etched in ink over my heart. They dipped to my tightly packed abs, and lower to where my length was jutting toward her at a hard angle. She held shower gel in her hand, and I reached out and dragged my fingers through it, tugging her closer as I did.

"Allow me." The plea sounded more like a command.

She tensed as I turned her gently, bringing my arms around both sides and rubbing the soap between my palms until it turned into white foam.

"Please." There, at last, was the plea I felt in my soul every time she let me hold her.

She said nothing, and I took her silence for permission. I brought my soapy hands to her chest, one hand lingering around her neck, the other falling to her breast. I cupped her tit and thumbed the nipple, rubbing the sweet-smelling soap into her wet, shiny skin. The feel of her supple breast, wet and soapy in my hand, made me groan.

I dragged her against me, enjoying every inch of her wet skin against mine. Her bare ass pressed against my hard on, and I gently thrust myself up the length of her crack before dropping a soapy hand to myself, lubing it up. I pushed between the tops of her thighs, nestling my hardness along her firm folds, and gently thrust in and out. She shuddered as I angled my hips so the crown of my length rubbed her clit every time. Her tight thighs trembled around me, and I knew I could come like this without even being inside her.

My hands roamed her chest, tweaking her nipples, and dipping to her center as my heavy cock dragged back and forth against her. She was panting, soft breathy sounds that held my name and undid me every time. She arched her back against me, wanting more, and I pushed her forward to brace my arm on the tile to pick up speed. I could slip inside her right now, and she would welcome me, but it felt too good like this. I was hurtling toward my orgasm

and dropped my hand to her clit to rub at her furiously, making sure she followed me over the edge.

She stiffened first, and my name echoed off the shower walls as her thighs tightened, threatening to cut off my blood supply. I followed seconds later, bursting against her skin in ropes of white. I pumped between her thighs a few more times until I was spent and turned her to me. The curls of her mound were dotted with my spend, and it was fucking beautiful. She was still breathing hard when I directed the shower toward us and cleaned her. Rubbing my fingers gently through the scant hair there, and then between her legs, I washed the evidence of me off her and she let me.

She took a trembling sigh, and I could sense her pulling away. The strange, wordless spell that had fallen over us was close to breaking.

I grabbed the soap again and took her hand. Squeezing some onto her palm, I took her hand and placed it on my chest. “Your turn.” My voice sounded hoarse.

She blinked at me, looking younger than ever, vulnerable and utterly gorgeous in the falling water. Her eyes lowered to my chest, and her hand started to move, spreading suds across my skin. She soaped me thoroughly, and I glowed under her touch.

There was one place she wouldn't touch, and it seemed to burn. I grabbed her hand before she turned away and placed it over my heart, against her name written there forever, twin to the word inked on my soul.

Molly's.

She held her palm against it for a moment, her wrist trapped in my grip. We stared at each other, heartbeats counting the still moments. Molly was letting me have her body, but she was keeping her heart from me. I got it. She didn't trust me, and she had every reason, but I wouldn't let her hide from me for too long.

I loosened my grip, and her hand stayed there, pressed against my skin for precious seconds. Then she blinked, and her shoulders tensed. Her hand dropped, and she turned away. It was like being pushed back out into the cold when you'd only just come in beside the fire.

She got out of the shower, wrapped a towel around her, and walked away.

And I let her go.

MOLLY

I stood on the street and turned my face up to the spring sunshine. It was a beautiful day in the city, and I was out for once. I was going to enjoy every moment. Max had stopped the car on a quiet, tree-lined street where cherry blossoms drifted lazily past my face. It reminded me of the time Kirill had taken me shopping for decent clothes to wear in public after visiting Mara in a nursing home outside the city.

How hopeful I'd felt then, when I'd asked him if he was getting married, and he'd denied it. I wished that was the worst thing he'd kept from me.

"Aren't you going to tell me where we're going?" I asked my bodyguard.

Today, he was accompanied by four others. I felt like a celebrity and hated every second as we walked toward a boutique. It wasn't clear if they were there to protect me, or to keep me from bolting.

"Shopping. Come on in. Kirill's on his way," Max said, ushering me toward the shop. Tension clutched my insides at the idea of seeing Kirill. It was always like this lately. I was annoyed, excited, resentful, and faintly embarrassed about the night before. Maybe it was hormones, but it was exhausting to feel so much all the time.

"I don't need any new clothes," I pointed out.

Kirill had surprised me with the clothes. I wondered if the wardrobe upgrade, like him pulling out every time we slept together, was an unspoken apology. It was very Kirill of him to buy me a few nice outfits and dedicate the entire

side of his enormous dressing room to every piece of designer fashion an aspiring mob wife could dream of. Except I wasn't a mob wife. I was the woman he kept locked in the glass goldfish bowl at the top of the city.

Today, I wore dark jeans tucked into knee-high riding boots in a soft, gleaming chestnut color. They were Prada, and I was in love with them. It had been a very long time since I'd had clothes I loved and wanted to wear.

Over the top, I wore a cashmere wrap coat and had tucked my nearly waist-length white-blonde hair into a neat bun. I felt elegant as I followed Max into the upscale boutique. Another first. In my adult life, I had never felt elegant in my second-hand clothes and bargain finds. I'd never had the money to waste on clothes. It was good to face the snooty looking assistants in an enviable outfit. I liked to pretend I was above caring, but it would be a lie.

"Good afternoon. Mrs. Chernov," one of the assistants purred, coming forward with a crocodile-like grin. Bitch smelled money in the air.

"No!" I protested at the same time as a deep voice spoke from the doorway.

"Yes, this is her."

I whirled to see Kirill entering the shop with a coterie of black-suited men flanking him. I wondered what the hell the sales assistants thought of this man who had as much private security around him as a Saudi prince, but they barely batted an eye. He settled himself on a velvet couch in the waiting area, channeling that princely energy, waiting for a show.

A small assistant with a big smile floated toward me with a tray holding two champagne flutes. She offered one to me with a smile. I shook my head, turning away to avoid Kirill's eyes as he also waved her off.

Kirill leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees. "Magda, wasn't it?" He directed his question toward the head sales assistant.

She was an older woman with white hair in a severe bun. She smiled, and it looked oddly girlish on her lined face. "Yes, Mr. Chernov."

"Do you have what we discussed?"

"Yes, of course. I have everything I was able to source at short notice."

Magda lost confidence in her words toward the end of the statement, no doubt questioning the wisdom of telling Kirill Chernov he'd made a difficult request.

"Good. I look forward to seeing what you came up with. Hopefully, the future Mrs. Chernov will like something," he said in a smooth tone that sent a flutter of smiles and batting of lashes through the assembled assistants.

"Mrs. Chernov?" I demanded as soon as Magda had moved away.

Kirill picked up a financial magazine lying on the marble and gold coffee table in front of the long velvet couch and flicked it open. "What else should I call you? I'm finding it difficult to keep up with your aliases these days."

"You shouldn't make it sound like we're getting married," I stated thinly, unsure why our conversation had my heart racing and sweat beading my palms.

"Whatever you want, Princess. Go and get changed. I haven't got all day." His eyes were still fixed on his magazine.

"Why are we here? I have enough clothes, thanks to you and your guilty conscience," I reminded him.

"Strip off, or I'll come back there and help." His tone promised he would do precisely that.

With an irritated sigh, I headed toward the thick curtains separating the changing rooms from the waiting area. I had no desire to encourage another show of his alpha male douchery for the assistants to sigh over. Stepping inside, I saw that this boutique didn't have anything as pedestrian as separate cubicles for women. It was a long space lined with mirrors and clothes racks along the furthest wall. In the center of the polished dark wooden floor was a wide platform.

"If you could take off your clothes, Mrs. Chernov, we will try the first piece," Magda said with a steely determination that told me I wasn't leaving here before she'd earned a nice, fat commission.

"Please, call me Mallory," I muttered. I couldn't keep hearing her saying Mrs. Chernov. It made my belly squirm and, given my recent morning

sickness, that was dangerous around all the designer clothes in the place.

“Of course, you aren’t married yet,” she said with a placating smile.

“I’m not married, period,” I muttered, stripping off my clothes and handing them to a hovering assistant.

Five pairs of eyes turned to me, and my hand instinctively moved to my belly. I didn’t think anyone could tell yet, but I was paranoid about it.

“Of course,” Magda murmured. No doubt she was familiar with difficult clients in this kind of expensive place, and my oddness barely registered.

I blew out a breath and tried not to think of Kirill sitting outside, dark, gorgeous, and completely unhinged. Last night played on repeat in my head. I chewed my lip and tried to push the memory of the hot water and cold tiles from my head. Fuck, if a person could be addictive, it was him. A tailor-made drug designed to drive me insane.

“Mrs. Mallory?” Magda called from behind me.

I turned to see what she’d brought me to try on and froze.

A huge white pile of lace and chiffon lay across her outstretched arms, and another assistant stood behind her holding a long train beaded with pearls.

It was a wedding dress.

A wedding dress.

“There has to be some mistake. That can’t be for me,” I heard myself say from a great distance.

“No mistake. Mr. Chernov wants no expense spared for the dress of your dreams. You’re very lucky. This dress is a personal favor from Moscow designer Alexander Zlavin. He was a New York fashion week favorite this year,” Magda said, totally unconcerned about my impending meltdown.

“No, there’s a mistake,” I repeated, backing up to the curtain leading to the rest of the store and away from the lacy froth of white.

Magda frowned at me as she advanced with the dress. Other assistants circled behind me like animal control about to corner a loose wild cat.

“Mr. Chernov assured me you’re getting married in a couple of days.”

“No! I’m not!” I stopped as my back came up against the curtains.

I thought of all the men outside the changing room, not only Max and the made men watching over us, but Kirill, the devil himself. I wasn’t dressed to make a break for it, but it might be worth the risk.

I felt like I was collapsing in on myself.

I’d been sleepwalking through a dream since I’d returned to New York City. I’d been reassuring myself that at some point, I’d know what to do. I’d understand how to proceed with the pregnancy, with Kirill, with all of it. But the wedding dress was like a huge, ringing slap across the face. Reality was coming for me, and there was no escape. Was I about to marry the man who had abducted me, not once, but twice, knocked me up, chipped and drugged me?

The hysteria in my chest was growing in a hot wave.

“I’ll take it from here,” Kirill said, his deep voice coming from right behind me.

His hard chest pressed against my back, trapping me.

I found my head shaking back and fro, a sudden, unexpected plea bubbling up in my throat. “Please, Magda, was it? You need to call the police right now—”

“Leave us,” Kirill snapped.

The assistants scurried to comply as Kirill pushed further into the changing room. My hand flew toward his face before I could stop it. I slapped him hard enough for my palm to catch fire, but he barely moved. He stared down at me, and I met his anger inch for inch.

“What the fuck is going on?” I demanded.

“I might ask you the same,” he retorted.

“I’m not marrying you,” I stated flatly.

Kirill’s mouth twitched with grim amusement. “We’ll see, Princess.”

“You haven’t even asked me. You don’t care at all about what I want?”

“I care about keeping you safe, so no, in this case, I don’t care. And whether or not you admit it, you were always going to marry me, Molly, and you will eventually forgive me, too. I’m just moving the timeline up.”

“You could have warned me!”

“And have you try to run away again? Tell me that wouldn’t have been your go-to move?”

His words sent my rebuttal flying from my head. Wasn’t that my first instinct? To run? “I don’t have to tell you anything. I don’t want to marry you,” I bit out.

A muscle ticked in his strong, taut jaw, betraying his upset. “You used to want to. You used to love me more than anyone and forgive me anything. What changed?”

“You went behind my back and made decisions for me.”

“What the fuck, Molly? This again? If you haven’t noticed, I’ve not repeated the unforgiveable act of coming inside you since you came back. No matter how much I wanted to, no matter how desperately I longed to—I haven’t. You’re not pregnant, so no harm, no foul, right?”

His words were like ice water across my skin, leaving me gasping for breath in their wake. His eyes, usually dark pits, looked hazel in the artful changing room lighting. His winged brows drew down as I struggled to find a comeback.

“Right, Molly?” he repeated, a frown line creasing his forehead as he smelled my deception in the wind.

Damn my fucking expressive eyes and my complete inability to lie to this man. I turned my face away. “It’s not that simple.”

His hand tugged my chin back, tilting my face toward his. “Why are you so angry, Princess? I fucked up, and I’m trying to make it up to you. There’s no reason for you to still be so angry.”

“There are plenty of reasons,” I snapped, but even I could hear the lie in my

words.

He was right. I'd forgiven him all the rest, but not this. There was only one reason I couldn't let it go, and it was growing inside me—my secret and mine alone. But it looked like a secret that was about to be exposed. My heart raced with fear at the thought of Kirill knowing, but there was something else.

Excitement. Relief. Curiosity. All of them warred in me. I didn't know which would win, and I never got to find out.

Kirill stared at me with such intensity, it was like he was trying to peer inside my head. Then, to my horror, his eyes slid down. I'd forgotten my current state of undress when the puffy piece of wedding attire had sent me over the edge. His eyes dropped to my belly, and he stared.

Fuck.

“Molly—”

I never got to hear Kirill's reaction to realizing I could be pregnant after all. I didn't get to know what his first words would be if he found out we were tied together for life.

The loud popping sound made me jump as the silence in the store outside shattered. After a moment's lull, the screaming began.

Kirill jerked, looking toward the curtains as more bangs punctuated the air with sharp beats. Slowly, I realized what they were. Gunshots. We were being shot at.

Kirill grabbed my arm and spun me away from the curtains and further back into the changing room. He grabbed his gun from a holster I hadn't even noticed. I heard shouts in Russian. Max's voice, perhaps? Then Kirill was turning and pushing me out the other side of the changing room into a white corridor leading to the staff room with a fire exit at the end. Harsh shouts of angry men filled the air, coming toward us.

“Go, Molly. Run and don't look back,” Kirill breathed in my ear as he backed us down the long corridor. He pushed me away from him hard, and I stumbled into the wall.

“What about you?” Fear made my voice a squeak.

“Don’t worry about me, Princess. Just go,” Kirill grunted, training his gun on the place where the men pursuing us would appear.

“Let’s go together,” I urged, gripping his sleeve tightly.

Kirill looked down at me. “You wanted to get away from me. This is your chance, isn’t it?” he reminded me harshly.

There was a commotion around the corner, and a man stepped out. Kirill shot him before he could lift his gun. “Go, Mallory. Now!”

I took a stumbling step away from him, my feet bare on the cold tiles. A scraping sound turned our gazes to the exit door. It swung in from outside and two men entered. I’d never seen them before. They looked nothing like the usual Chernov made man or Kirill’s bodyguards. They wore black gloves and sharp suits.

The world slowed as their guns rose toward us, as did Kirill’s. I heard the bullets leave their weapons at the same time as his. One of the strangers fell, shot by Kirill. The other man swore loudly and fired at us again. Kirill shouldered in front of me, knocking me roughly behind him and putting his big, burly body between me and the speeding bullet with my name on it.

The sound of the bullet hitting him was something I would never forget. It would be forever etched in my mind as the worst thing I’d ever heard. Kirill fell backward, and his momentum took me down too.

I fell beneath him, and it knocked the wind from my lungs. The other man’s footsteps moved toward us. I didn’t want to look up. I didn’t want to see the gun he held being pointed at me.

“Molly,” Kirill grunted, his face against my bare legs.

I touched his cheek as terror unlike anything I’d felt before ran rampant through me and set my blood on fire.

“Here,” Kirill muttered.

I realized he was still holding his gun. I was turned away from the advancing man, and clearly, he didn’t expect much from me. I took the gun as Kirill’s

eyes tracked me; his face splashed red with his blood. So much blood.

I bit back a sob as I put my finger on the trigger and braced myself.

A whisper of a smile passed over Kirill's lips. "Good girl."

I turned and leveled the gun at the man, and without a second thought, pulled the trigger. My aim was wildly off. I'd never fired a gun before, and the recoil nearly sent me sprawling. But he hadn't been expecting it and cursed in Italian. He recovered quickly and swung his weapon at me again.

I pulled the trigger repeatedly, sending bullets ricocheting off the walls around us and making the approaching attacker cringe and duck. I could only pray I didn't hit Kirill or me with my wild shots.

I pulled the trigger again, and a click sounded.

The man smiled mockingly. "Looks like you're out of bullets." He pointed his gun, complete with silencer, at me. "What a shame to kill something so beautiful so quickly. Maybe there's time for a little fun first, *bella?*"

I closed my eyes, turned my face to the wall, and wrapped an arm around my stomach. I wanted to protect the baby growing inside me, but nothing could protect us from a point-blank gunshot.

A pang of sadness hit me so hard it nearly winded me. I wouldn't get to see the baby be born. I would never hold it or see if it had my fair hair or Kirill's dark locks. A furious sob worked up my throat, and I turned completely toward the wall as if it would protect me from the advancing man's gun or dark intentions. I couldn't do anything to protect the baby but give it the protection of my body, as fragile and useless as that was. It was my final act of love.

Something clicked inside me as I recalled the way Kirill had pushed me aside and stepped into the path of the speeding bullet, offering his life in exchange for mine.

A final act of love.

I covered my ears as hot tears dashed down my cheeks and waited. I waited a little more. Slowly, I looked around.

The man had come too close as he'd stalked toward me and my empty clicks. He'd come within the reach of Kirill's long legs.

I could see where Kirill had kicked his legs out from under him and they had wrestled. Red was splashed around the floor like ketchup smeared messily on a plate. It looked like it had been a short fight. Kirill was braced on one arm over the man, the gun lay a few feet away, and Kirill had a knife pressed against the man's neck.

I could *feel* his strength baring down on that point. I could *see* his will to drive the metal home, straight through the trachea of the man who had attacked us and into the tile below. The man was holding him off, but only just. After a second, his strength failed, and the sound of a blade cutting through cartilage filled the air as Kirill rammed the knife home. Then slumped to the side.

"Holy shit," I chanted as I stepped over the pools of blood and stopped beside his head. Crouching, my heart dropped to see his face, paler than ever. His white shirt was soaked dark red. "Kirill?" I breathed, scared he wouldn't answer.

He opened his eyes, and I could have cried. "Get outside and go to the nearest police precinct. Ask for Detective Lewin and say my name. He'll take care of you," Kirill said with an urgency that made my heart pound. "There might be more of them. I don't know what happened out there, or if any Chernov men are left standing. You need to go. Now."

"What about you? You're bleeding." I was stating the obvious, considering the pool of blood spreading in a circle around him.

I opened his shirt and flinched at the blood. There was a wound oozing to the side of his clavicle. A shoulder shot? A punctured lung? Fuck, I didn't know. Wading up his torn shirt, I pressed it on the wound.

"I don't give a fuck about me. I need you to listen. Go now, flag down a cab or something, or go into the shops next door and get them to call the cops. Go now, Molly."

"If I don't call an ambulance for you—if I take the pressure off—you'll die," I whispered, trying not to lose my head and start screaming.

“Better me than you, Princess. Go now,” he urged, and pushed me away.

I pushed to my feet, slipping in the blood on the floor. His blood. Kirill rested his head against the wall and watched me. This was it. Decision time. I knew it down to my bones. I could leave here and let this man bleed out. I could walk free, and he wouldn't be around to follow me. I could make him pay for knocking me up and trying to control my freedom, all of it. He would pay, and I'd be free.

But . . . I'd also be alone. Did I want to live in a world where Kirill was dead? Did I want to live without him?

No. Not now, not ever.

A fresh flood of tears dripped down my cheeks.

“What are you waiting for, Mallory?” Kirill asked. The man hated to be powerless. “You want to watch me die? You hate me that much?” His tone was quieter now, heartbroken, I'd say, on anyone else. On Kirill, it was jaded and resigned as if he'd expected as much.

“I don't hate you. I lied. I don't hate anyone,” I said quietly.

He chuckled, and the sound turned into a wheeze. “That's the difference between us, Princess. I hate everyone.” His eyes flicked up to mine. “Except you.”

I reached picked up his shirt and moved closer to press it against his shoulder. “I have to slow the bleeding,” I muttered, avoiding his eyes only inches away from my face.

“No, you have to run. Save yourself,” he said, trying to push me away again, but for once, his iron-strong arms were weak.

“No!” I pushed back, and then gasped as he grunted in pain. “I'm not leaving you. This time, I'm waiting,” I whispered softly.

Kirill's eyes, which had been drifting closed, snapped open. “What?”

I took a deep breath, knowing I was crossing a line I could never uncross. This was a surrender I couldn't change my mind about. If I stayed, I would marry this man and have his children. I'd live with him until the end of my

days, whether that was a week or fifty years from now. I'd grow old with him, if I had a chance, and watch our children grow and go out into the world. They wouldn't be anything like us. I wouldn't let them be.

"I said I'm not going anywhere. I'm waiting for you. So you better not die."

Kirill's eyes fastened on me, and they looked lighter than ever. For once, I could see the green and gold flecks in the brown. I had the sudden striking insight that I had done that. I had turned a light on inside Kirill. I put my free hand around his and laced our fingers together.

"I'm waiting, Kirill. Don't make me wait too long," I urged him softly as he lost the battle to keep his eyes open.

"Mallory!" A shout sounded from down the hall and relief filled me, overflowing my aching heart.

"Max! We need a doctor. Kirill was shot," I cried out, scrambling upward as Max turned the corner and headed toward us at a sprint with other Chernov men.

"It's on its way," Max reassured me as he drew close. He was a mess. His eye was swelling and turning black, and his jaw was wreathed in bruises.

The sobs I'd been holding back suddenly erupted, and Max caught me as my ebbing strength failed me.

MOLLY

“*I* don’t understand why we can’t stay at the hospital.” I said as I shifted in the plush leather seat of Ivan’s black Range Rover and watched the outskirts of the city flash past.

Behind us, Doctor Petrov and a Chernov approved team of medics sat in a large adapted van. It looked like a rich family had decided to live their best van life, but the inside was kitted out with the very best in mobile medical care.

Kirill was inside, asleep. He hadn’t woken since they removed the bullet from his chest and operated on his lung. I hugged my middle and willed myself not to cry. If I’d thought I was crying often before, it was nothing compared to now.

“Because he’s a sitting duck at a hospital. The police will try to get bugs in his room, pay staff to spy on him, and the other families would do even worse. Antonio De Sanctis might try again. He embarrassed himself trying to cheat us, and now, a failed attempt on Kirill’s life with the pretense of avenging a slight against his spurned daughter.”

“I thought the police were on the bratva payroll?”

“Not all of them. Some of the unpaid ones still like to do the right thing.”

“Spurned daughters. Undercover nurses. Who needs Broadway around here? I had no idea organized criminals were so dramatic,” I muttered, hugging my knees.

Ivan boomed with laughter, making me jump. Max's older brother was a big guy. Bear big. Everything he did was big. He looked huge, laughed large, and talked loudly. He was a lot.

"So, where are we going?"

"A little town outside the city. Woodhaven," Ivan said carelessly.

I froze, turning an incredulous look on him. "*Woodhaven*. As in Kirill's hometown?"

Ivan nodded, and then it seemed to hit him. "Right, it must be your hometown, too."

"Yeah, it was. It was where we met."

"So I guess we're going back to the beginning. It's more poetic than Broadway," Ivan announced, chuckling and turning the radio on. Brash Russian pop filled the car, and I tried to ignore how it pounded in my temples.

Woodhaven. I hadn't been back there in years. Ivan was right, it was the start of everything. The place where Henry had terrorized me in my childhood home, and I'd met Kirill at Blackhall Prep, an elite school. I'd been a loner rich girl, and he'd been the scholarship kid going on to better things.

We entered the town limits, and it was like stepping into the past. The feeling only grew stronger as we took a familiar turn toward the biggest, most ostentatious houses in town.

"This used to be my neighborhood," I muttered, staring out at the familiar streets.

"I think you'll recognize a lot more in just a minute," Ivan muttered before turning into my old street.

My childhood home sat back off the road behind an impressive wall. The new owner had only added to the security. Cameras bristled along the boundary, and a guard post sat at a gate that looked ready to endure an invasion. Ivan pulled up outside, and guards with barely concealed guns flanked the vehicle.

I stared in shock around me as we were waved into the compound. There was no denying the feeling the old place gave, fenced in, and secure as a prison. There was also no denying a simple truth becoming clear to me.

“Kirill bought my old house.”

Ivan nodded. “At auction. After your family disappeared, it languished here until your father was declared missing and stopped paying the mortgage long enough for the bank to step in. It was a good few years, and by the time it went to auction, Kirill was able to buy it.”

“I don’t know whether to be touched or totally freaked out,” I confessed as we pulled to a stop in front of the house on the massive gravel turn circle that looked nearly untouched. I turned to Ivan. “Please don’t tell me my room is untouched or something weird like that.”

Ivan’s loud laugh boomed in the car. “What, are you telling me keeping a shrine to the one who got away isn’t romantic?” Ivan laughed again at my expression. “Don’t worry, I can assure you everything is different. Kirill made it a house for adults, not for kids, though. I should say, he always planned to bring you here.”

We got out of the car into the late afternoon sunlight. Spring was sliding into summer in Woodhaven, and the trees and plants around the entrance to the house were flourishing. Dark ivy crawled over the old stone façade of the grand home, and wisteria dripped its purple veils along one side of an ornate orangery.

The van with Kirill and Doctor Petrov pulled up beside Ivan’s car and another Range Rover. It was black, like all things Chernov bratva. Black by name, black by nature. They had their branding on point.

“*Devushka*, come inside,” a familiar voice called to me from the entrance.

I twisted to see Olga standing in the imposing doorway at the top of the stairs. It was too strange to see the housekeeper anywhere outside The Tower, never mind in my childhood home, a place I’d never thought I’d set foot inside again.

“You should rest,” Olga told me bluntly as I climbed the stairs.

I frowned at her. Ever since the incident at the dress shop, Olga had been hovering. She'd tried to set Doctor Petrov on me for a check-up, and when I'd refused, she'd looked like she was about to march into Kirill's room, full of Chernov men, and Ivan and Max, and tell on me.

"I'm fine," I said to her in a low warning tone.

I was fine. I'd had no bleeding or pain at all, and everything felt normal. What I didn't need was to be pushed around by Olga, even if I knew in my heart I had to come clean and go for all the normal check-ups sooner rather than later. Doing that meant it was all real, and I still wasn't there yet.

"You let me make you something to eat then," Olga huffed before hurrying off to the kitchen. I dawdled, looking around my old house. Ivan was right; Kirill had changed it. The bones remained the same, but the style had changed. It wasn't stark or cold like The Tower, but it wasn't the busy, messy, and cluttered style that I'd grown up in either.

Polished wooden floors and antique furniture filled the inviting space. The corniced ceilings had remained, but now the walls were dressed in modern colors and wallpapers, and none of the faded 1970s flowers I'd grown up with. While Henry had owned the house, he'd never spent money on it. Kirill had. It glowed luxuriously in the afternoon light.

As I wandered around, the medical team brought Kirill in on a rolling bed, and I drifted to his side. Doctor Petrov was speaking to Max in Russian, and the two followed the bed upstairs, with me trailing after them.

They had set up my mother's old room, which made sense. It had been a room stuffed with medical equipment for so long, there was barely anything different for a moment. I walked in, and I was sixteen years old. Then I blinked, and it all changed.

The medical equipment for Kirill was on another level. Beeping heart monitors and oxygen tanks were set up. Row upon row of fresh dressings and bandages were set out, and his huge, top of the line hospital bed sat in the middle of the space. I lingered at the door and watched him. He was so pale against the white sheets that his dark hair was a shock where it rested on the pillow. His eyebrows were long, elegant lines of soot against that pale skin. He looked peaceful. His handsome face, usually so alive with anger, goading,

and dry amusement, now seemed otherworldly in its peacefulness. I hoped that whatever dreams he was having in the long, chemically induced sleep he was in were happy ones.

“Mallory,” Max called to me from his bedside. “The master bedroom is ready for you, and Olga brought your things from the city already.”

“Okay. But can I stay in here with him whenever I want?” I directed the last toward Doctor Petrov, who merely nodded.

“Of course. Stay beside him. He will awake soon and be in pain, but that is expected. My team and I will manage his recovery. It was only a gunshot wound, Miss. Try not to fret.”

“Right, just a gunshot wound. It’s basically a scratch in the bratva world, right? I would hate to know what constitutes something serious for you guys,” I muttered, sitting down on an overstuffed bench seat and leaning against the wooden paneling surrounding the bay window.

I watched the medical team moving around, arranging the room, checking his vitals, all while Kirill lay there, defenseless and peaceful. I eyed the team, thinking how easy it would be for one of them to end him right now. A paid assassin. I shivered and resolved to stay by his side as much as possible. I leaned my head against the wall and let my eyes rest on him.

I’d stayed with him, and the decision I’d taken was a huge weight off my heart. I’d made my peace with him and all his controlling, manipulating ways. Of course, that didn’t mean I’d stand for that kind of thing again, but it was different now.

I knew the worst, and I was here.

From now on, we’d be equals in his world. Instead of fighting the dark inside him and all around him, I’d decided to walk right into it.

There was, however, one last secret between us, and that one was mine.



I ATE DINNER WITH OLGA, Max, and Ivan. Pyotr, the other member of Kirill’s

inner circle, was busy testing the new security system he'd put in place and making sure there were no blind spots in the surveillance. I'd seen the battle-hardened team of men who were manning the video feeds. They looked like recent escapees from Ryker's, and I couldn't imagine anyone thinking it was a good idea to cross them.

We were starting Olga's delicious salmon when a voice interrupted us. Ivan was on his feet before I could blink. One of the new security team lingered in the doorway.

"Forgive the interruption. There's a man at the east gate. It's Nikolai Viktorovich, and he's alone."

Ivan let out a long sigh and looked at Max. I could feel them deliberating silently whether they should let him in.

"Let him in, but take any weapons from him," Max said finally. The security guard disappeared as the news of Nikolai's impending arrival settled over the dinner table.

"It's not so strange for him to visit. Viktor will expect it, at the very least."

"And how are we to know whether he was involved in what happened? I'll never trust him," Ivan said heatedly.

"Because de Sanctis clearly sent the men who attacked us. Antonio would never make an agreement with Nikolai. He hates the Chernov name since Kirill embarrassed him."

"Who's De Sanctis?" I piped up. Silence fell so soundly that it sent suspicion rippling along my nerves. "It's about the engagement, isn't it?" There was no other reason everyone around the table would look so awkward.

"Yes, Sofia De Sanctis was Kirill's proposed fiancée. She didn't want the marriage either, but her father was insistent. To smooth over the broken engagement, Kirill let information slip that Antonio, the De Sanctis capo, had undercut us in a joint venture. His name was dragged through the mud, and he wants payback."

"Why did Kirill embarrass him so much?" I asked weakly, but deep down, I knew.

“Why else?” Olga snapped, clearly losing patience with the conversation. “To appease you and make sure the five families understood the marriage wasn’t taking place.”

“Are you seriously blaming me?” I turned to the housekeeper. Sure, she could be a little rough around the edges, but that was just mean.

She reddened and huffed, then got up from the table and cleared the plates. She pointed at my remaining potatoes. “You are to eat every bite. You need your strength,” she demanded, and her eyes dipped to my belly and back up.

I glared at her, trying to warn her with my eyes not to say another word. She cursed under her breath and bustled away.

“Don’t be too hard on Olga. She was devastated to find out you and Kirill had been attacked. She thinks of you both as her surrogate children,” Ivan said. He was the one best able to handle the prickly housekeeper.

“Christ, I feel for her kids, in that case. You’re telling she’s worse with strangers?” I could barely believe it.

“She has no kids, Mallory. Her life wasn’t exactly conducive to it. She’s fiercely protective of Kirill, and believe it or not, that protectiveness extends to you now.”

I didn’t respond, but it landed hard on my heart. It had been a long time since a parental figure had shown any kind of interest in my well-being. I finished every bite of my dinner, listening to Max and Ivan chatter away, before heading to the kitchen.

Olga was attacking the dishes like they’d personally offended her. I placed my empty plate on the counter beside her.

“A peace offering,” I murmured to her.

She turned to me, looked at the plate, and nodded.

“You know there’s a dishwasher, right? You don’t have to wash everything by hand.”

“The machine doesn’t wash like I do,” Olga muttered, scrubbing hard at a plate.

“I think that’s a pattern; it’s not going to come off,” I murmured, and raised my eyebrows as she removed it. “I stand corrected.”

“Young people think they know everything,” Olga muttered.

I crossed my arms over my chest and settled in for a tirade. To my surprise, she turned the water off and crossed to a cupboard and pulled out a small white bottle.

“If you want to make peace, here, take this.” She placed the bottle in my hand and returned to the sink. The water came back on as I turned the bottle in my hand to see the label.

Folic Acid.

Crap. Well, no need to wonder if Olga knew. I’d been taking it in Willow Creek, but I hadn’t had the chance to get more.

“When did you realize?”

“As soon as I heard you throwing up and not drinking your favorite coffee.”

“Why didn’t you tell Kirill right away? That’s not like you.”

Olga froze, facing away from me, so I couldn’t see her expression. “It’s not my secret to tell.”

That surprised me. “I’d have thought you’d be insisting it was Kirill’s business too, so he had a right to know.”

“He does, but I’m not the one to tell him. You will, won’t you? Soon you won’t be able to hide it. Tell him first.”

“There hasn’t been a great time lately, has there?” I mused.

I knew she was right, and now I’d decided to stay, the urge to let him know had become a burning need, but my hands were tied. I also had no idea how to do it. He’d come so close to figuring it out himself, but with the injury and upheaval, the moments before the attack were forgotten.

Before Olga could reply, a deep, amused voice cut through the air.

“I do hope I’m not interrupting a private conversation.” Nikolai lounged in

the doorway, looking the very picture of tattooed, bad-boy ease. He grinned at me. “Long time no see, Princess.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped.

He put a hand to his chest, his face creasing with concern. “You wound me. We’re going to be family soon,” he goaded, stepping into the room.

Anger filled my chest, like a drip of gasoline combusting with frightening speed.

He sauntered across the room to me. “Don’t you have a hug for you soon-to-be brother-in-law?”

“Yeah, I have something for you,” I said as he drew closer.

There was a knife just beside my hand on the table. I curled it into my palm. As soon as he was within reach, I drew back my hand back, and slashed at his chest. He pivoted quickly, ending up behind me, his hand gripping my knife-wielding hand tightly.

“Now, now, that’s not very sisterly, Mallory,” he said in my ear, squeezing my wrist until I dropped the blade.

Olga watched us with an annoyed expression. “Play somewhere else.”

“Let me go,” I wriggled against Nikolai.

He chuckled in my ear. “Only if you promise not to take another chunk out of me.”

“No deal.”

“Fine. At least promise to do it so ineptly that it’s easy to dodge,” he goaded and pushed me away so I stumbled toward the table.

Steadying myself, I spun around and glared at him. “You’re a bastard.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. I wouldn’t think you’d be so judgmental about kids born out of wedlock considering your . . . *situation*,” he said lazily, his eyes trailing down my body. “Why are you mad at me, Molly? I gave you a chance to start over. Did you forget already?”

“No, I didn’t forget. You also killed my father.”

“At Viktor’s command,” he said flatly as if that exonerated him. Meeting my eyes, he shrugged. “You don’t blame the knife for carrying out its movement, or the gun for delivering the bullet. You blame the one with their finger on the trigger.”

“So, what are you saying? Viktor killed my father, and you hold no blame.”

“I’m just the blade, Mallory. A racing bullet someone else fired. Anyone could be the bullet if the situation was right, even you.”

“You’re the fucking worst,” I muttered, turning away from him.

“That’s a given, Princess.”

“Don’t call me that,” I ground out, annoyed by the familiarity of the words.

Nikolai tilted his head to the side, studying me before chuckling. “Oh, is that how it is? My dear brother is all forgiven? Interesting.”

“I don’t want to talk to you about my relationship.”

“Does that mean I shouldn’t be holding my breath for a wedding invite?”

“Feel free. Hold away and do the world a favor.”

Nikolai laughed and straightened up. “Molly, you kill me. Now, are you going to show me where the wounded warrior is, or do I have to poke around here on my own?”

“Niko,” Ivan called from the doorway. Kirill’s loyal bodyguard looked imposing as hell with his huge arms crossed over his barrel chest. He looked at home in the old-fashioned style of the house, like he was a knight who had returned from pillaging and dueling.

“Oh, great. It’s Ivan the unfriendly giant,” Nikolai said, unintimidated by the older man. He wandered past him into the dining room.

“You don’t have to spend any time with him, Mallory,” Ivan said.

I shook my head. “It’s fine. He needs watching.” I followed the group resolutely up the dark paneled stairs toward Kirill’s room.

Inside smelled of medicines, and the scent of Kirill that always comforted me. It was muted by the antiseptic tang of the various dressings and sterile baths dotted around the place. It was a smell I was used to. My mother had smelled like chemicals for half my life, but it was jarring to find the same cloying scent of near death around Kirill.

Nikolai whistled loudly when he came in. “Damn. I knew it was serious, but it looks like he let a De Sanctis do some target shooting on his chest. It’s unlike him to put himself in that kind of situation.” Nikolai turned his eyes to mine. “I wonder what caused this fuck-up. Love is such a terrible weakness.”

I raised my chin at the same time as my middle finger.

He simply laughed and took the seat beside Kirill, leaning over to peer at him. “He’s so vulnerable right now. It would be so easy,” he mused.

Ivan pulled his gun, and Nikolai laughed again. “Relax, unjolly giant. Kirill and I have a plan in case you’ve forgotten. He needs me alive for it to work, if you care to remember. Besides, I need him too.”

“*Unfortunately.*” The word was a dry rasp and startled everyone in the room.

My eyes snapped to the figure on the bed. Kirill’s eyes were barely open, and one of the monitors was beeping madly beside him.

“Wow, awake just for me, and without true love’s kiss,” Nikolai drawled.

I didn’t hear his mocking ramblings or Max and Ivan shouting for Doctor Petrov. My eyes were locked on the man in the bed, who was staring at me with an unfathomable gaze.

I approached, my heart was beating too loudly in my ears. Surely everyone must be able to hear it? I hesitated beside him, wanting to touch his hand, but oddly afraid. Everything had changed between us in that white hallway on the sea of his sacrifice. When he was up and about again, everything would be different. I didn’t know how to feel about that.

He stared at me, barely blinking. It was as if he was trying to see through me, to tell if I was real or not.

“Move aside, please,” Doctor Petrov said, bustling into the room behind me

and taking my place at the bed. “I need to have a look at him. If everyone could leave us, now.”

There was no arguing with the doctor, so I went along with the rest, leaving the room. I stared at Kirill the entire way. His eyes didn't leave me once.

KIRILL

Eight Years Ago

Black Hall Prep sat on a hill that overlooked the entire town. Fitting, seeing as it was for kids who held the world at their feet. Except for me. I didn't belong there. The public bus didn't go up the hill. No buses did. The kids who went to Black Hall Prep either drove themselves in flashy convertibles or were dropped off by drivers.

Ironically, if my father and mother were still together, I'd be one of those kids in the bulletproof cars. I'd be one of those soulless monsters who stalked the halls of the school and sucked the life out of anyone who crossed them. Being my father's son would be enough to keep bullies away from me. They'd piss themselves if they knew who my father was. My real last name was uttered as rarely as Voldemort's around these parts, and with the same terror.

A loud whistle cut through my brooding thoughts. A town car had pulled up at the curb, and the door was opening. Mallory stuck out a long, boot-clad leg, pulled herself out, and sent the driver off. She looked beautiful with the morning sunshine lighting up her blonde cloud of curls. For six months, she had been the only thing in my life that made me smile. My one distraction. Although, I had to admit she was becoming more than just a distraction. A lot more. She was my friend; the truest one I'd ever had. The only one.

“Wait up, loser,” she said, drawing closer.

I reached out and flicked the arm of her sunglasses. “It’s fall already, didn’t you know, Princess?”

She ducked her head from my touch, and the curtain of her hair slid forward to hide her expression.

“Style is seasonless,” she said, cheerfully enough, but I was learning Molly. I was learning how to read the things she said and everything she didn’t. I recognized that tone. Fury ripped through me, simmering beneath the surface after thinking about my father earlier. We left the sidewalk, and I pulled her across the manicured walking paths winding around the exclusive grounds of the academy. A huge old tree sat some ways off, and I dragged her all the way there, too far from the road to be seen.

She slumped against the tree and crossed her arms over her chest. Lifting her chin, she gave me a defiant look. That was my Molly all over. Blistering defiance and impulsive courage, overlaying a heart as good as gold. I was pretty sure I was the only one who knew the latter.

“What happened?” I asked, my tone hard, not out of anger at her, but the situation.

“I ran into the door,” she said with dry sarcasm.

I ground my teeth so hard I could taste the enamel grinding off.

“Show me,” I said, reaching for her glasses.

She turned her head, refusing me. “Why? Why do you want to see?” Her tone was brittle, hiding her upset.

“I want to bear witness. Someone should know.”

“Everyone in my house knows.”

“Someone who cares should know,” I clarified.

I reached for her sunglasses again, and this time, she let me. I pulled them off carefully and folded them to give my hands something to do instead of smashing into the tree beside us at the sight that met my eyes. One of her

beautiful hazel eyes was wreathed in bruises, and a cut sat high on her cheekbone.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“Thank my lucky stars that oversized sunglasses are still in fashion,” she quipped.

I lost my control. “That fucker,” I cursed as I turned and let my fist fly at a peculiarly face-shaped piece of trunk.

Molly didn’t even flinch. Of course, she didn’t. She was used to violence. The thought made me feel worse than ever.

“I’m sorry,” I said immediately.

The pain blossoming in my hand soothed my anger. It balanced me. I rested my head against the trunk and closed my eyes. It was the powerlessness that destroyed me. I couldn’t protect my mother from the cruelty of life, and I couldn’t protect Mallory, either. I was nothing. No one. I was too young, too ineffectual, too weak. I could only watch. I swallowed a hot knot of devastation and fury inside me and stiffened when Molly reached out to touch my throbbing hand.

“You did that so you could claim sympathy pain, didn’t you?” she joked quietly.

It broke the tension between us. The tension in which all the ways I failed her piled on top of me. I turned my head and rested my cheek against the bark, enjoying the rough touch.

“You think I’ll just let you be the only injured party?” I teased back, but my heart wasn’t in it.

She smiled, nonetheless. What else was there to do?

“Stay at mine tonight,” I urged her.

Her smile dropped away, and she shook her head. “I can’t. When Henry gets like this, it’s best to be at home. If I’m not, it’ll only be worse later.”

“I’ll come over then,” I said immediately.

She laughed and shook her head. Her eyes were shining, as though her tears were held back only by a supreme force of will. “He wouldn’t like that. Don’t worry. I can handle him.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” I bit out.

She shrugged after a moment.

“Do you want me to take care of him for you?” The question left my lips before I could call it back. It was a joke, or it was supposed to be. As soon as the words sat between us, I realized it wasn’t a joke. It was far from one.

Her breath caught in her chest, and her eyes locked on mine. Something passed between us in that look. The total honesty of two kids who’d never felt safe, not even once, until they met each other.

“Not today. Just become an Olympic track star, and I can be your agent and ride your coattails to freedom,” she said.

A laugh escaped me. Mallory could always lighten my mood, no matter how dark. Still, those words lay there, threads of raw electricity in the air. One touch could ignite it.

She turned to look at my hand and tutted. Fishing tissues from her bag, she cleaned my hand. I watched my blood rub onto her fingers.

One day, I would repay every drop of Mallory’s spilled blood. Every moment of pain she’d felt, I’d revisit on that man.

It suddenly struck me that maybe my mother wasn’t the gatekeeper to her only son. Maybe she wasn’t holding the wolf at bay beyond the door where my father and his dangerous world were trying to press in and corrupt me.

Maybe it wasn’t the darkness outside that she was holding her vigil against.

Maybe she was the prison guard.

Maybe she was holding the wolf back from the world.

Maybe the darkness was already inside me.

When I looked at Mallory, I couldn’t deny that darkness was there, lingering deep inside. One day, I would pay everyone back who had hurt her.

Every single one.



Now

I WOKE from dreams that were more memory than fiction and flinched as a headache like a sledgehammer slammed into the side of my head. My throat ached with a thirst unlike anything I'd ever felt. My body was heavy, like there was a leaden blanket covering me from neck to toe, even though I could see there wasn't.

I blinked my eyes, feeling like they were gummed shut with glue. Light filtered in and I could gradually make out a high ceiling with crown molding and an ornate light fitting. I recognized it, but my mind was too muddy to place it.

Shifting my head a fraction, my eyes fell on a window bench seat, where the sunshine was shining over a figure. My heart squeezed hard in my chest, the first body part that felt somewhat normal, as I made out the achingly familiar sight of Molly.

Mallory Madison, here in her mother's room, nine years and two lifetimes later, it felt like. She was writing in the journal I'd given her, biting her lip, her eyes focused on her pen, scrawling across the page with ease. I could have watched her all day.

I took a deep breath, something intense in me relaxing when I was dreaming. Molly was safe from harm. I'd protected her, and Henry could never hurt her again. In my twisted, confusing dreams, I'd seen Molly as a beaten teenager, and Henry falling to the ground again and again, my brother standing over the body, his face an emotionless mask.

I took another deep breath, and the air caught in my parched throat. I coughed, and the motion lit my body up with pain. My right lung burned, and my shoulder felt like it was being stabbed repeatedly with red-hot pokers.

Having experienced the red poker method for myself a few years back, I could place the feeling with perfect confidence.

“Kirill?”

Molly’s soft voice pulled me from the haze of pain, and I blinked at her, seeing her rising from her seat. She crossed to me in four long steps and hovered over me. I couldn’t tear my eyes from her heart-shaped face. Her cloud of white-blonde hair was loose, streaming in ribbons over her shoulders. If there had ever been anything close to an angel to walk the earth, I was sure it was this woman. An angel to my devil.

She reached out and put her hand to my cheek. “Kirill. Do you need anything? I’ll get Doctor Petrov.”

I opened my mouth to tell her I didn’t need anything as long as she was there with me, but another coughing fit took me.

Molly pulled back, alarmed, and then turned away. “I have to get him.”

I tried to call to her to ask her to stay beside me, but she was already gone. By the time I heard her returning, with Doctor Petrov’s low tones accompanying her, I was already slipping back into the warm, dark oblivion.

MOLLY

*M*y life in Woodhaven, in my childhood home turned Kirill's recovery center, became routine. I went for a run around the grounds in the morning, trailed by Ivan, who always raced and beat me in the last few minutes. After I showered, I ate with Olga and Pyotr, usually coming off the night shift of manning the cameras. Then I went to Kirill's room and settled in for the day. I'd read or write or chat to the nurses. Kirill was waking with more frequency now, and the Doctor was reducing his sedatives dose daily.

"Today, weird boy, we're reading chapter three, and it's about to get good, I can tell," I called to him as he lay with his eyes closed on his bed.

Before I went to settle into my comfortable perch, I approached him, seeing his dark hair tumbling across his forehead. He hated that. Usually, he flicked it back, but his hair was longer than ever, like it had been in high school. Rich, dark chocolate waves that softened his often-brutal exterior. Right now, he looked like I'd always imagined he would after high school if his path had been different. I discounted the scars, old bullet wounds, and countless tattoos marking the rest of his battle-hardened body.

I reached over him, pushing his silky fringe back, and then bit down a scream when his hand circled my wrist in a sudden burst of motion I hadn't expected. His eyes slammed open, more alert and brighter than I had seen them in weeks.

"I was wondering when you were going to wander close enough, Princess,"

he murmured, his eyes running over my face like he'd missed me, even though I'd been right here.

I tried to pull back, but his grip tightened. "Be careful. You'll hurt yourself," I warned.

"Stop trying to get away, then." His low murmur set my blood on fire. Damn, I was so far gone for this man. "Let me look at you."

"Fine," I muttered, letting my resistance drop.

He pulled me closer so my hair slid from my shoulder and lay against his face. His lungs expanded, like he was breathing me in, and then he coughed.

"See? Stop trying to inhale me. You have a punctured lung. Doesn't it hurt?"

"It's worth it," he muttered as he let go of my wrist and cupped my face.

I was awkwardly sprawled across him, and I had to be pushing against his chest, but he wasn't protesting.

"Kirill—" I stopped as his thumb rubbed across my lips, sealing my protests inside. "You're hurt."

"I've had worse."

"Seriously?"

"I survived you leaving me twice, didn't I?" His teasing tone tugged at something deep inside me. I relaxed against him. His eyes were studying me like I was a puzzle he needed to figure out, but couldn't. "Molly. You didn't leave me when I told you to." His brows scrunched down and his brow creased as if he couldn't quite accept what that meant. "Why?"

I shrugged. I didn't have the words to explain how leaving him would have felt like leaving my heart and my future behind, so I stayed silent.

"You didn't leave, even though it risked your life to stay," he pushed, trying to get me to respond.

I relented with a sigh. "I didn't know if anyone was coming who would call an ambulance for you or put pressure—"

I stopped as Kirill shook his head. He wasn't buying any of my weak justifications, and honestly, it wasn't surprising. Something too real and honest had passed between us in that hallway when he'd thought he was going to die.

"You stayed because you forgive me," he pressed, his eyes tracking mine with an intensity that was hard to match. "Because you love me."

"You can love someone and hate them at the same time. You told me that," I reminded him.

He wasn't deterred. He'd seen through my brittle façade to the truth. "But you don't hate anyone. You've told me enough times. You love me, and you waited for me." His voice held wonder.

I hadn't heard a tone like that from him in seven years. This wasn't the jaded heir to his father's blood-soaked bratva throne; this was Kirill, my Kirill, the boy who had only ever taken care of me.

"Well, third time's the charm," I muttered, feeling utterly exposed.

He stared a moment longer, and then he chuckled. The rich sound filled up my aching heart.

"Enough of this," I said briskly. "I'm leaning on you and probably popping stitches. You need to rest. Is there anything you need?"

Kirill raked his eyes over me. "All I need is for you to lift that little skirt and sit on my face, Princess. I missed being inside you, and I don't mind starting with my tongue if you're worried about stitches."

I stared at him; my breath stolen by the wicked look in his eyes. I rallied, even though my body screamed at me to do exactly what he'd suggested. "Very funny. I'm talking about medical help."

"So am I," he said. "It's practically a medical emergency that my god damn balls hurt so much from wanting you. Leaving me unsatisfied would probably be a health hazard."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Kirill, at his most charming and roguish, was my personal kryptonite.

I glanced down at his body and turned away; my cheeks turning scarlet as I took in the impressively tented sheet. “Jesus! You’ll put someone’s eye out with that thing when the nurses come. Just so you know, they’re all male, so they won’t be able to help you with it, either.” I smiled sweetly as I teased him and danced backward, out of his reach.

“They could be naked courtesans for all I care. No one is helping me with it except you, Princess. I’m afraid that’s your cross to bear for the rest of your days.”

If that was supposed to sound like an imposition, it had failed spectacularly. I fought the urge to fan my face as I backed toward the door. “I should, er, get someone to come and check on you,” I said, trying to maintain some illusion of cool.

“I thought you were reading to me. Chapter three, wasn’t it?”

“You want me to read to you?”

“I want you to sit your ass down and stay with me all day. That’s what I want.”

Joy and excitement surged in my chest, mingling with the heat he had stoked only seconds ago.

“Okay, I will, but I’m not coming close enough for you to get any inappropriate ideas,” I said primly. I perched on the seat and opened the book, fighting to keep my eyes off him.

“Okay, Molly, that’s fine. But I’m getting stronger every day, and soon, if you won’t come close enough, I’ll come to you instead,” he promised.

His deep murmur sent heat cascading down my spine and made my skin tight. “Well, today is not that day.”

“No,” Kirill agreed easily enough and smirked wickedly. “But soon. Now, are you going to read to me?”

“Sure. Where was I?” I flicked through the pages and found my place, then looked up and froze.

Kirill had pushed the cover off himself, and his hand was fisting his hard-on.

His cock was straining up his belly, red and angry, nearly as brutal looking as the man who was stroking it.

“What are you doing?” I asked lamely. It was shocking to see him lying there, looking hotter than sin, with his huge palms stroking his dick.

“Well, I told you I needed to come, Princess. You want to give me a hand, or read a book?”

I watched as he pumped himself; his arm muscles flexing hypnotically. “This is cheating. You’re supposed to be resting.”

“I’ll rest so much easier once I empty my balls straight down your throat.”

Heat squirmed through me, despite my best efforts to suppress it. “You’ve got a filthy mouth,” I chastised, even as I stood and drifted closer to him, my eyes fixed on the glistening tip of his member.

“Only for you, Molly. I guess you bring it out in me. I’ve never felt as depraved as I do when I think about all the things I want to do to you.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?” I raised an eyebrow at him, taking in the soft flush in his pale cheeks and the way his pulse was beating rapidly in his long, muscled neck.

“Why can’t it be both?”

His arrogant grin stole my heart. Damn this man.

His hips pushed his cock faster through his fist, and his face twinged with pain.

“What is it?”

“My shoulder,” he said, and raised an eyebrow at me. “If you’re planning on participating and not just observing, Princess, this would be a good time. Unless you like watching me jerk my cock and pretending you are sitting on it instead of my fist.”

“Kirill,” I muttered, drifting closer still. When I was close enough for him to reach, his hand caught mine and placed it on his twitching length. “Just a hand job, and only if you don’t move and hurt yourself,” I warned him.

He smiled. “Yes, nurse Molly. Whatever you say.”

I circled him with my hand and moved closer to tug his balls with the other. He groaned as I took over the pace he’d been stroking himself at. His hand tangled in my hair and wrapped around the tumbling length to lock me in place. Even at his most vulnerable, Kirill was in charge.

I got into the rhythm, sliding my hand up and down his long, veined cock. I thumbed the top and spread the leaking precum around the mushroom tip before sliding back down.

“Fuck, Molly. I’ve missed you, Princess. I’ve missed your touch, so fucking much,” he grunted as his hips flexed, his abs tensed, and he fucked into my hands. “Did you miss me?”

His grip tightened on my hair until I answered. “Yes, I missed you, and you know it.”

“Did you think of me alone in bed at night, rubbing your pretty little pussy and coming in those tiny sleep shorts you parade around in?”

I flushed, getting hotter and wetter with every filthy word he said.

“Fuck, you know the number of nights I woke up and thought about it. I’m close to being able to wander down the hall and join you,” he muttered, his eyes falling to my hands stroking him faster and faster. “I’ll slip into your bed, in the house where we were teenagers, and I first fell in love with you. I’ll slide right inside your pretty pink cunt and fuck you while you dream of me.”

“Kirill,” I breathed, shamelessly turned on by the image he’d planted in my head.

“You’ll wake up with me fucking you into the mattress, my hands around your mouth, so you don’t startle and scream, and bring Max crashing in on us, guns blazing,” he said, making me smile. “Fuck, I’m going to come, Princess, and if you don’t want Doctor Petrov to wonder why I’m covered in it, be a good girl and swallow me down.”

His command thrilled me, and I leaned forward, his hand on my hair, directing my mouth toward him. It was debauched and filthy, and I couldn’t

convince myself I didn't love it. I loved every second of his possessive, all-consuming hunger for me.

I closed my lips around the head of him, and he pressed further inside. He was so big, I felt him touch the back of my throat, and I gagged a little. The noise sounded like an alarm in the room, and it undid him.

"You're mine, Mallory, and you always were. You won't deny it again. Mine to fuck, mine to spoil, mine to protect, and mine to keep, as long as you live."

Surging up in two deep thrusts, he came, splashing the back of my throat with his hot spend and filling my mouth with the salty, musky taste of him. It felt like he was marking me with his ownership, and like the freak he was cultivating me to be, I welcomed his debasement.

He watched me with soulful eyes as I pulled off him, and he wiped the corner of my mouth with his thumb. "I love you so much, Molly. If you'd run away, I'd have died in that hallway, not because of the gunshot, but because you left me."

I didn't know what to say to that. It was too romantic, and it was too heart-breaking. "Well, I'm here."

"Yes, you are. Never ask me to let you go again, Molly. It won't happen. That's behind us for good. Do you understand?" His voice was hypnotically deep. I nodded as he rubbed his thumb across my lips, and a shadow of satisfaction passed through his eyes. "Good girl."

A rapid knock on the door sent me straightening up and hauling the covers up to Kirill's chest. He groaned as I accidentally hit him in the solar plexus.

"Shit! Sorry," I muttered, stepping away, my cheeks flaming scarlet as Doctor Petrov and his army of burly nurses came in.

"Ah, Miss Madison. I need to check a few things, if you don't mind?"

"That's fine. I was just leaving." Grabbing my book from the window, I hurried toward the door, feeling like everyone knew what had just happened. I was a grown adult, and Kirill was the boss, but I felt like a shamed schoolgirl as I hightailed it out the door. Maybe it was being back in

Woodhaven, but I couldn't help feeling like a naughty teenager.

"Don't go far, Princess," Kirill called to me as I made it to the dark hall and sagged against the wall, my heart racing and palms sweating.

What was this man doing to me? I couldn't recognize myself, but at the same time, I was finally the person I'd been waiting to be. I hurried toward my room with the taste of Kirill's ownership still coating my mouth.



KIRILL RECOVERED QUICKLY. The look in his eyes told me what I should expect once he was back on his feet. It never failed to thrill me.

I tried to stay out of reach. Dr Petrov had warned me about the risk of infection, or what pushing himself too far when he was still healing could do inside him, and I didn't want to take that risk. Unfortunately, Kirill seemed deaf to all advice that went against what he wanted, which was to corner me somewhere quiet, or hunt me down and have his wicked way.

I had to admit as the days passed and the frustration built; I cared less and less about him getting injured, too. It had been a blip, seeing him so weak and hurt. The real Kirill was burly and strong. Nothing could defeat him, or at least, that was the image of him I had in my head, and it wasn't easy to shake.

Tonight, he was joining us for dinner in the dining room for the first time, and Olga had decided it was a good chance to put my newly found cooking skills to the test. She'd been forcing me to learn more wifely skills at her competent side, and I went along with it to have something to do and to make her happy. Tonight, I'd made a simple chicken casserole for a strange assortment of found family we'd gathered in Woodhaven.

Olga, Max, and Ivan took their seats around the table, and Kirill was already there, having made his way slowly downstairs. His warm look stole my breath when I came in carrying the plates of dinner.

"Here it is, and don't blame me if it's horrible. Olga wouldn't help," I muttered, as I went around placing the plates down and running back to the

kitchen for more before settling myself at the table.

“I’m sure it’ll be delicious, Princess, since you’ve made it.” Kirill picked his fork up first, and I watched nervously as he cut a piece of casserole and put it in his mouth. I couldn’t believe how nervous I was, seeing him eat something I’d made that wasn’t a sandwich.

He chewed slowly, and then nodded. “Delicious, Molly,” he pronounced.

A smile flooded my face, and I was proud of my efforts. Olga patted my hand and gave me a rare smile before digging in. I cut my a piece for myself. I couldn’t help watching the other reactions.

“Very good, Mallory,” Max smiled, after looking quickly at Kirill.

Ivan was also looking at Kirill and gave me a smile as he chewed quickly. “Excellent.” He cut another piece, this time even bigger, and nearly swallowed it whole.

“Hey! Slow down. There’s more in the kitchen. You don’t have to rush.”

The sound of cutlery falling sharply caught my attention. Olga was drinking her glass of water, her fork abandoned on her plate. She put down her glass and let out a sigh. “Have you tried it?”

Right, I should eat too. I cut a piece and took a bite. Salt flooded my tongue and made me shudder. There was a horrible aftertaste of something acidic as well. I immediately spat it into my napkin.

“That’s horrible!” I looked around at everyone else.

Olga was nibbling on the black bread and had pushed her plate aside. Kirill had eaten most of his, as had Max and Ivan.

I stared at them, shocked. “How can you eat it?”

“Because, Princess, you made it, and it’s perfect,” Kirill soothed.

I turned to look at him. “Are you terrorizing everyone to eat this horrible dish?”

He held his hands up. “I haven’t said a word.”

“Like you need to speak to scare people into doing what you want!”

Kirill smirked. “The real question is, why doesn’t it work with you?”

Ivan was the first to start laughing. His big booming chuckle melted the tension at the table. “Mallory, I’m sure you’re good at many things, but cooking isn’t one of them.”

“Yeah, I’d say don’t give up your writing,” Max joined him. “With the wedding approaching, I’m not sure how you two are going to survive married life. Never mind being shot, Mallory will take out the boss with food poisoning.”

“She doesn’t have to cook after they marry,” Olga interjected. “She has me.”

I turned to the older lady, the one who so often called me on my shit and pissed me off.

She avoided my gaze. “I mean, if you want me around once you start your family,” she huffed, looking embarrassed.

“Are you trying to tell me you’re not family, Olga? Because I think it’s a little late for that.” I smiled at her.

“Oh, hush you,” she shushed me, but her lined cheeks had turned pink.

“I want to propose a toast to family,” Max said, standing and raising his glass. Everyone except Kirill had a wine glass full of some old, rare vintage from the well-stocked collection in the cellar below, though I was only pretending to drink mine. “And to never eating Mallory’s food again!”

My jaw dropped, outraged but laughing as there was a resounding cheer to his statement. “You’re all ungrateful. I’ll make you PB&J next time, and see if you complain,” I muttered as I reached for the bread.

Olga levered herself up from the table. “I have borsch in the crock pot.”

Ivan raised his glass again. “*Maladets*, Olga, kitchen queen.”

“Spoiled ingrates,” I muttered, pushing my plate away. I might be offended, but not enough to eat what I’d made to prove a point. I felt Kirill’s eyes on me and turned my face to smile at him.

He reached out slowly with his injured side and wrapped his huge hand around mine. "I'm getting tired, Princess. Can you help me upstairs?" His words were innocent enough, but the look in his eyes was anything but.

A thrill ran through me at the wicked grin he gave me. "Ask Ivan," I teased.

"You can't run from me forever, Molly." His tone was light, but the dark, hungry look in his eyes was anything but.

"Let's speak to Doctor Petrov about it."

Kirill blew out a breath, sitting back. His look turned calculating. I didn't know exactly why I was holding off at this point. He was probably fine, but the memory of his blood dripping to the floor and the sight of his powerless body had lodged somewhere deep inside me and wouldn't seem to shake loose. I was terrified of him getting hurt again, I realized, because I was terrified of losing him all together.

"Oh, Princess, you always have to choose the hard way, don't you?" Kirill said, sending heat and a little alarm skating through me.

"Meaning?"

"You'll see."

KIRILL

*I*n my room after dinner, I waited until the house was quiet. There was an unexpected sense of peace and contentment in Woodhaven. I knew what was coming in our future, and I couldn't quite bring myself to break the little bubble we'd created here.

But that didn't mean I could wait one more moment for Mallory.

She'd done everything she could to dance out my reach, worry etched in her blue eyes. That worry nearly undid me. Molly was mine again, heart and soul. Tonight, I would make sure her body got the message. She'd forgiven me, surrendered to me, and I wasn't going to waste any time making sure she couldn't go anywhere.

I waited until I knew she'd be in the bath. She always took one after dinner, and I always watched her. I wasn't sure if she knew. Molly was certain there were cameras all over the house. It didn't seem to occur to her that my men could be watching her bathe, change, or sleep. My princess had gotten used to being watched and guarded. She knew they wouldn't touch her because I wouldn't allow it. She was growing into her future crown as my queen.

No one but me watched the video feeds to Molly's room. I might be security conscious, but I was also possessive as hell. Turning off the only handheld monitor that held her camera feed, I tucked it into a safe place and headed toward her room.

I'd never taken so long to recover from a bullet wound before, not since my first. The one that had broken my knee into a mess of cartilage and bone

fragments had caused me a lot of trouble. This time, the lung complication had slowed my recovery. There had been no question at any point in my miserable life that I would die to protect Mallory. I'd always known it, but it seemed she hadn't fully realized it until now.

As always, Mallory underestimated the depths of my obsession with her.

I entered her room and left the door slightly ajar. I fully expected Mallory to give me a run for my money, and I looked forward to the chase.

I could hear gentle splashing coming from her bathroom. I set the ropes I'd brought with me on the bed and settled in to wait for my princess to finish her bath.

She appeared not long later, flushed pink, and wrapped in a white towel that swamped her. She approached the bed, not noticing me where I sat behind the door.

She stared at the silken ropes I'd placed on the bed, her brow furrowing. As soon as realization crashed over her and she turned, I was there, crowding her backward. I twisted her easily toward the bed and took her wrists hostage at the small of her back.

"Good evening, Molly. I believe you were expecting me," I breathed in her ear. She smelled like jasmine and lavender from her bath, and the Molly smell that drove me wild.

I reached for a rope and set to work, binding her wrists at her back.

"Kirill—you'll hurt your shoulder," she muttered quietly, but her denial was subdued. She'd been waiting for this as much as I had.

"Don't struggle then," I murmured against her temple, where her hair clung wetly to her moist skin. "Let me do whatever I want with you—if you don't want me to rip my stitches."

I turned her, and she narrowed her eyes as she looked at me. "Very funny."

"Who's joking, Princess? Tonight, I'm going to have you whether you spread those pretty long legs open for me here and now, or I have to chase you through this house."

A flush spread across her cheeks at those words, and a thrill of excitement echoed in my chest. My Molly wanted to play? I'd play all the games she wanted. I'd never tire of playing with her as long as we both knew I'd win in the end, and she'd let me.

“You want to play? I'll give you a ten-second head start.”

Her eyes widened as she realized I was serious. She backed away, her towel barely staying up with effort as she clamped her arms down at the sides. Her hands were still tied at the small of her back. She was just how I wanted her.

“Are you kidding—”

“Ten, nine, eight—”

She turned and bolted. Luckily for her, the door was open enough for her to push with her foot before she disappeared down the darkened hall in a flash of white towel.

Hunger and want so thick that it was hard to see straight curled in my belly and simmered low and hot. I gave her the rest of her promised time and started after her.

As I walked down the hall, I could practically smell her scent mixed with the warm floral of the bath oils cooling on her skin. I stalked in the direction she'd gone. She couldn't open a door with her hands behind her back, which narrowed the places she could have hidden.

I caught her near the library. She had been crouched behind the twist in the stairwell, and I heard her rapid, excited breaths in the silent house.

I chuckled. “Who is this innocent little princess creeping around the castle?”

She shot up and attempted to run past me, but her foot caught in her towel, and tripped her into my chest. The material dropped, and I gripped her naked body as she twisted in my arms, still trying to win. I hauled her into my arms and kissed her hard when she protested. Pressing her back against the wall, I slid my hand down her belly and cupped her mound. She was wet as hell, from the bath or the chase, I didn't know. All I knew was that there would be time for slow seduction later. Right now, I needed to be inside this woman.

When my hands left her to push my soft linen pants down, she surprised me by darting beneath my arm, heading for the stairs. I growled, twisting for her, and gripped the trailing end of the rope tying her wrists. I tugged it, bringing her to her knees on the stairs. Slowly, I wound the long end around my fist, advancing toward her. She knelt on the plush carpet of the stairs, gazing at me over her shoulder with wide eyes.

“I win, Princess,” I muttered as I shrugged off my t-shirt with one arm. I ignored the pinch in my lung and kicked my pants away, straightening up naked in the moonlight streaming in the windows. “Just like you wanted me to.”

She tried to crawl up the stairs, and I was on her, pulling her back against me, and roughly kneeling her legs apart.

“What about the cameras?” she panted as I knelt on the stair behind her and pushed her face down so she was curled in a perfect little ball, her behind in the air waving temptingly in my face.

“No one would dare watch us together,” I told her, knowing it was true.

I pressed her cheeks apart, wishing I had more light so I could see her better; her pretty, empty little holes waiting to be filled by me. Leaning in, I licked a long, hot stripe from her clit to ass and back again. She tasted too clean. I missed her natural scent.

“No more baths. I miss your pussy smell,” I told her firmly as I worked a finger deep inside her.

She gasped, pressing back against me. I pumped into her a few times, only long enough to make sure she was as wet. I pulled my finger free and sucked it, enjoying the familiar musk, and then sheathed the end of my dick with her juices before lining myself up. This wasn't a seduction, this was a claiming, and I wasn't going to waste one more second. She trembled beneath me as I pressed inside without further hesitation. Gripping her bound hands, I jerked her body to mine as I pulled out and slammed back in. She moaned and gasped out a curse.

“Something wrong, Princess?”

“No, it's—it's too good!”

I hummed my approval at the way she took me, her supple body sucking me in and surrounding me as she arched her back and met my furious thrusts with enthusiasm. I fucked her hard, right there on the stairs, the carpet burning into my skin, unnoticed in the bliss of having of Molly, bound and helpless beneath me, crying out my name.

When I felt my release barreling down on me, I pulled out with regret. The baby issue sat between us, unspoken, and now wasn't the time to push it.

Instead, I pressed her down again and spread her cheeks. I slotted my dick right up her cleft, the tip against the soft virgin pucker I promised myself I would soon claim, and came hard against it. Hot cum splashed over her, more than should be physically possible, but given how long I'd watched her wandering around my room, out of reach, desperate for her touch, maybe it was the right amount. It dripped down her twitching pussy, and she arched her back, needing more from me. She turned her face from where it was pressed against the stair.

"Kirill," she said softly.

A warning or an invitation? Between us, it was always a little of both.

I was too caught in that spell of watching my cum drip over her slit to care, my balls finally empty and satisfied for the first time in what felt like an endless week.

I reached out to touch her, knowing she hadn't come yet. I was the uncouth beast who had hunted her down and had my way with her and busted his nut before getting her off. But I planned on making it up to her. It was going to be a long night.

I traced her wet slit, and her skin jumped beneath my touch. Wetting my finger in cum, I slid it inside her, getting off on the idea that we both knew what I wanted. Molly, swollen with my kid, was the highest fantasy I'd ever allowed myself. My dick swelled again at the mere thought.

I pumped my finger into her and twisted my hand so my thumb found her clit. The cum made everything slippery and easy as I fucked her hard with my hand, circling her clit at the same time. Before long, she was pushing back, fucking my hand as much as it was fucking her, and just like that, she came

with a strangled cry. I pushed her through it, wringing every drop of pleasure from her before carefully pulling my hand from her.

She sagged against the stair and put up no resistance when I stood behind her and carefully pulled her into my arms. Carrying her bridal style toward the library, I kicked the door shut behind us and looked up to the camera poised overhead. The red light immediately blinked off. No one would watch us together. Well, no one who wanted to live through the night.

The fire was banked but still warm in this room. I had the staff keep it lit daily for Molly. She liked to write in here, and I wanted her to be comfortable.

I set her on the edge of a leather sofa, and she watched me with bated breath as I stood over her, my hand running through her hair.

“You shouldn’t have lifted me,” she chastised softly.

“You shouldn’t have gotten caught,” I responded, and then smirked. “But you wanted to, didn’t you?”

She swallowed hard, and then nodded, giving me the pleasure of her capitulation.

“Now what do you want?” I asked her thickly. I tilted her chin back, so her face was presented to me like a precious gift.

“I—I want you.” Her soft tone tortured me.

“You want me to what?”

A hot, rosy blush worked down her to her chest. Her pretty tits swayed temptingly, so delicious I couldn’t stop myself from reaching for them.

“Tell me, Molly,” I urged her as I palmed their weight. They were bigger than usual, and the dusky nipple was plumper. I lowered myself to my knees while waiting for her to speak. Leaning in, I caught her nipple between my teeth and sucked on it while my hands went to hers, still bound behind her.

“I want you to fuck me again,” she said quietly, bringing her freed hands around to sink into my hair. She took a deep breath, as though she was working up to something. “I want you to fuck me again and come inside me.”

“Developed a new kink, Princess? Welcome to the club,” I murmured, leaning in to kiss her.

I thrust my tongue into her mouth, satisfied with the idea that the ban on coming inside her had been lifted. Molly had truly forgiven me, whether or not I deserved it. For all I knew, she had gone on birth control in that little podunk town where she’d hidden from me. I didn’t care. For tonight, I was going to fuck her boneless and fill her up with more cum than she could take, so she’d smell like me for a week.

“Lie back, princess. Let me clean you up before I make you messy again.”



WE HEADED BACK to the city at first light. It was time for the game to advance, and for Viktor to find out that Molly was alive and we were married. First, I had to make it official.

“I don’t understand,” Mallory said as she got out of the car beside me. “If your father is trying to kill me, wouldn’t parading me around New York only put a bigger target on my back?”

We were outside the courthouse where the officiant was waiting to finalize our vows. Getting the paperwork pushed through quickly had only taken a phone call.

“We tried to hide you away; it didn’t work. The only other option is to let everyone know that Kirill Chernov has married. After that, any act against you, from my father or anyone else, will be seen as an act of war against the bratva, and we can respond accordingly. Getting married, and getting your face out there, in our world, will make you safe from Viktor. It would be seen as a great weakness for my chosen bride to die, not by my hand, of course,” I added and shot her a smirk at her horrified expression.

“Jesus Christ, I don’t know if I want to be involved in any of this,” she said, looking pale. I pressed a kiss to the back of her hand.

“Too late. This is happening. Make your peace with it, Princess. Now, let’s get inside before someone tries to stop us. I’d hate to get blood on your

dress.”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, it was done. With Olga and Max as witnesses, Molly was finally my wife. We went to the diner next door to eat lunch. It was a fairly rowdy table as some of my more trusted men joined us to eat and toast every five minutes, following Russian tradition. Mallory and I kissed after each toast, and I grew readier to get home and get rid of everyone else so I could have my wife to myself.

“Okay, final toast!” Ivan announced as he stood and picked up Mallory’s champagne glass. He pressed it into her hand. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you aren’t drinking. That’s bad luck after a toast!”

Olga had drunk far more than I’d ever seen her drink. The usually quiet and stoic housekeeper was pouring herself another generous glass, and as she looked blearily at Ivan guiding Molly’s glass to her lips, she stood, her chair scraping roughly over the floor. “*Nyet!*” she shouted, stilling everyone.

I turned to her, shocked, and took in her pink cheeks and bright eyes.

“No alcohol for the mother to be,” she scolded.

Tight shoulders relaxed around the table.

I smiled placatingly at her before turning to Mallory. “She’s going to be on your case about keeping healthy from now on, you know, in case we start a family.”

Molly, who was still staring at Olga.

The older lady shocked us all again as the conversation restarted by slapping the table hard.

“What is it?” Ivan heckled her.

Olga pointed a finger at him. “Alcohol is bad for babies, and that includes alcohol for toasts. I won’t have their first child have problems because of you, Ivan Ivanovich,” she snarled. She tutted loudly at his confused expression. “It’s like you block heads can’t tell when a woman is pregnant.” With that bombshell delivered, she plopped back into her chair, picked up her

glass, and downed it in one. “*Na Zdorovie!*” she toasted merrily.

Slowly, I turned to Molly, looking for a clue in her expression. I needn’t have looked too hard. She blinked at me, her cheeks turning petal pink immediately. Last night and her unexpected request to fuck her raw played in my mind in a new light. A memory of the attack, too vague to pin down, played around the edges of my mind.

“Princess, do you have something to tell me?” I asked, trying desperately to keep the excitement out of my voice.

“Like what?” she asked in an innocent voice.

“Mallory Chernova, tell me now, or I’ll take you home, tie you down, and fuck the truth out of you,” I warned.

Her blush only deepened. “If that’s supposed to convince me *not* to—”

“Are you pregnant?” I cut in, suddenly more desperate to know than to breathe.

Molly took a deep, steadying breath, and then shrugged. “You’ve no one to blame but yourself.”

“Did you know when you ran away from me?” The urgent question pushed past my lips before I could help it.

Her expression confirmed my fear; she didn’t need to confess.

“Kirill—” she started and cut off sharply when I stood.

Everyone watched as I pulled her up and started toward the door, snapping out rapid fire commands to my men and Max.

“Where are we going?” Mallory demanded as we reached the street outside.

I scanned the surrounding street, more paranoid than ever that someone might try to hurt Mallory. She suddenly seemed so vulnerable.

“The hospital. We’ll talk about you keeping it from me, and *running away* from me while pregnant later.”

“Good! Then we can talk about knocking someone up without asking them

first if they even wanted a baby,” Molly came right back at me, fire spitting from her eyes.

“I look forward to it,” I snapped, shielding her body from the street the best I could as I took her toward the car.

“Me too!” Molly exclaimed, getting into the car and glaring at me.

Well, this should be fun.

MOLLY

*K*irill was a buzzing menace of dark energy as he strode into the hospital suite, scattering nurses in his wake. He turned to me as soon as the door slid closed behind us, his men lining the hallway to stand guard.

“Strip, or I’ll help you,” he ground out.

“I’ll wait for the doctor, thanks,” I muttered, crossing my arms and perching on the edge of the bed. I couldn’t believe how bossy he was being about everything now he had caught the slightest whiff of a pregnancy in the air.

I’d known I had to tell him, but faced with his intense energy, my courage was failing. Yes, I was pregnant, and yes, I’d known it even when running away. I’d run away and had planned to keep his own kid from him. It sounded damning without knowing the whole story. I was sure Kirill was going to find it damning, regardless.

He pulled me to my feet and tugged at the small row of pearl buttons on the knee-length white dress I’d worn for the ceremony.

“Stop! You’ll tear it,” I protested.

Kirill glowered at me. “I’ll rip the entire thing right off if you don’t undress.”

“You are being so dramatic right now,” I snapped, turning away to take the dress off. I realized my fingers were shaking as I found a folded exam gown on the edge of the bed and pulled it over my head. I turned and crossed my arms over my chest. “Happy?”

“Not even remotely. Get on the bed,” he said in a tone that warned me not to protest.

I tossed my head and climbed up, knowing it was safer to play along when he was in this kind of dangerous mood.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed someone, speaking rapidly in Russian over the line. He swore as he hung up. “Doctor Petrov is on his way, but apparently golfing is more important than working on a Wednesday afternoon. I don’t trust anyone else, so we’ll wait.”

“Well, we could go home and come back later. I’ve been pregnant for a while. A couple of hours isn’t going to change anything.”

Kirill narrowed his eyes and leaned over me, caging me against the bed until I fell back against the pillow. “Why didn’t you tell me you were pregnant?” His tone told me how hard he found that to believe.

“Honestly? I still thought I might leave you . . . until you got shot, and I realized I couldn’t.”

His jaw clenched so hard, it was like he was trying to grind rocks with his teeth. “In the spirit of starting this marriage with honesty, you should know that answer really pisses me off, Princess.”

“Well, being dragged away from Willow Creek really pissed me off, so I guess we’re even,” I said with mock sweetness.

Kirill chuckled, but there was nothing warm about it. “Oh, sweetheart, we aren’t nearly even. I think that should be rectified right now. Pull your gown up again and let me see your panties,” he said curtly, and then stood expectantly over me.

Feeling a blush creeping through me, along with a whole lot of excitement, I slowly raised the gown up my bare legs until my French lace panties were on display.

He ran a hand up my leg to the panties and skimmed his finger across the front of the material.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m deciding how to punish you for running off while pregnant, and not telling me you were pregnant yourself.”

“I hope you’re also deciding how to punish yourself for all the shitty things you’ve done.”

He tutted. “You forgave me when you stayed, Molly. Now, you’re the only badly behaved one in this marriage.”

“You know that logic is fucked, right?” I asked, my voice trailing off in a gasp as he suddenly pinched my clit.

He turned away as I was about to beg him to do a whole lot more. He fiddled with something on a nearby tray as I lay there awkwardly with the gown hiked up to my waist while he ignored me. I started to lower it, blushing, when he turned.

“Don’t pout, and lose the panties,” Kirill commanded, approaching the bed.

I quickly complied, already excited for his filthy brand of inventive punishment.

He had his shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow, and the white dress shirt from the wedding hugged his broad shoulders and narrowed at his muscled waist in a way that made me more than ready for a little afternoon delight distraction.

My mouth dropped as he raised a hand and finished snapping on a latex glove. His huge hands were gloved, making him look like a dangerously tattooed doctor.

“I didn’t tell you to move, Mrs. Chernova. I’m not done with you.” His tone warned me not to disobey him, and I wasn’t planning to. Kirill as a Dom doctor was really doing it for me.

I sank slowly back to the pillow as Kirill ran his gloved hand up my inner thigh. He parted my folds with his fingers, the latex feeling cool and too smooth, alien almost, as he sank inside me. He inserted two fingers, twisting his hand so his thumb found my clit. His fingers pressed against something inside me that immediately made my back arch and an involuntary cry leave my lips.

“Have you really been keeping a secret that big from me, Molly? Don’t you know?” He pumped his fingers, rubbing against that spongy g-spot. “This cunt is mine. This body is mine. Everything about you is mine.”

I was going to come in record time. I could feel it. I clutched at his gloved hand, needing more, wriggling my hips against his touch as he pulled away.

“Hey!” I protested as he stepped back and reached for something on the tray.

“Did you forget this was a punishment, Princess? Get up and bend over,” he said, in a tone that allowed no refusal.

I slid to the edge of the bed and put my feet on the cold tiles. “What are you going to do?” I asked, oddly breathless.

As commanding as Kirill could be, I trusted him. He wouldn’t hurt me. He’d only destroy me with pleasure. He pushed me to new, frightening heights all the time, and I was addicted to his touch.

“Consummating our marriage and claiming another piece of your virginity for myself,” he said bluntly.

He pulled me around to face the bed and bent me forward at the waist. My gown slid up, exposing my ass. I heard air escaping a bottle, and before I could ask what it was, the container of lube landed beside my head on the bed. His fingers, wet and cold with the jelly, pressed inside my only remaining untested hole.

“Fuck!” I gripped the sheets, my body battling the sudden invasion in a place where he had only previously played with me. I wasn’t ready; it was too soon. A million thoughts flew through my head as he probed me with his lubed up, gloved fingers.

Soon though, my body relaxed to the touch, and the tension melted from me. I couldn’t deny it felt good.

“I knew you would like this from the way your sweet little pussy gets so wet when I touch you here,” he muttered behind me.

I pushed my hips back, needing more than his gentle exploration.

He chuckled, adding a third finger and making me cry out. “Shh, it’s okay,

Princess. I'm stretching you out to take me. Look how well you're doing already. You love this, and I love watching you take it."

He was right. I was wet as hell, and my pussy was empty, clutching away at nothing, while his fingers worked my behind. I worked a hand between my legs, desperate for some friction on my clit. I was trembling on the cusp of something when Kirill chuckled.

"Are you touching yourself, Molly? Without permission? I warned you that was a good way to lose fingers," he said with mock seriousness. "I'm afraid I'll have to add that to your punishment."

He pulled away, his finger leaving me with a soft squelch, and I could have cried out from disappointment. Then I heard his belt buckle clink. Anticipation and a healthy dose of fear filled me at the thought of his huge dick taking me there.

He picked up the lube again, leaning over me to do so. "Keep touching that hungry little cunt, Molly, keep it nice and wet for me."

Then he was there, pressing inside with his full nine inches. I cried out, held onto the bed for dear life, and tried to breathe through the weird sensation of being breached by him.

"Look how perfect you are for me. You fit me so well. Brave, strong Molly, I'll be your first everything, and your last too," he murmured approvingly when he reached his end inside me.

I was pinned helplessly to the bed, filled by him more completely than ever before. My body was pulled between the sting and the pleasure of the unfamiliar sensation. Then, he started to move. He carefully dragged his long dick out of me before sliding back in while I circled my clit. A release was building like none I'd experienced before.

Kirill picked up the pace as my body melted into his touch and my tension fell away, so there was only pleasure. Kirill was close; I could feel it in the bite of his gripping fingers on my hips and the jerky motion in his thrusts. He was waiting for me to join him before he came.

"Come for me, Molly, and let me fill you up so full that Dr. Petrov will wonder what the hell happened when he examines you," Kirill said.

The image he painted of his spend dripping from my behind while I was being examined sent me spiraling over the edge. I came hard, bursting around him. He followed, hauling me close to him and hugging me tightly to his chest as if I was the most precious thing in the world to him. I knew as he kissed my temple, his body pressed against mine and my name on his lips, that I was. I really was and always would be. As fucked up as that was, it was also the undeniable truth.



BY THE TIME the doctor arrived, the fun distraction of my punishment was over, and Kirill was pacing like a black-clad, tattooed demon with a furious expression.

“Why don’t you sit down? You’re making me tired watching you.”

“Then don’t look, Princess,” he muttered.

Someone was still annoyed. Well, it was his own damn fault for being the least trustworthy person in the world. It wasn’t my fault, and I wasn’t taking responsibility.

I raised my chin. My wedding ring felt odd and heavy on my finger. It was a solid white gold band, and he’d also pushed an engagement ring on there big enough to signal my non-single status to the moon and back. I twisted the rock around and around until my skin beneath hurt.

Doctor Petrov entered the room. I could see the hallway outside, bristling with Kirill’s security. I had a bad feeling his safety consciousness was about to reach another level.

“Well?” Kirill snapped at the older man.

Doctor Petrov nodded and turned a tired smile at me. “Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Chernov. You are going to be parents.”

That phrase struck me somewhere in my chest. It sounded exciting and terrifying all at once.

Kirill had frozen, staring at the doctor. “And the health of the baby?”

“Well, as far as we can tell, all is fine, but we can do a scan now and see if we can hear the heart beating,” Dr. Petrov said, snapping on gloves and coming toward me.

“I’ll need to pull the gown up, dear,” he said to me and frowned, looking over his shoulder toward the door. “This isn’t the right one for this exam.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind. Please, let’s just do the scan,” I said, avoiding Kirill’s hot gaze as I yanked up my loose-fitting green and white print gown below my bra.

I was regretting the pretty white lacy wedding day underwear I’d put on this morning. I looked up at the ceiling, my face coloring at the thought of the doctor seeing everything I had downstairs, presented to maximum titivation in the underwear.

A weight slid up my legs and looked down to see Kirill had taken off his suit jacket and draped it across my hips, leaving the doctor plenty of room to move the doppler.

“What are we looking at here?” My husband crossed his arms and looked all business as he watched the black-and-white screen light up near my head.

Petrov moved the scanner through the cold gel. “This is the uterus, and somewhere nestled tightly in here, we might find—”

He cut off as a loud, alien-sounding rhythmic thump filled the room. Shock, awe, and a touch of terror filled me as I stared at the tiny shape on the screen surrounding the pulsing, tiny heart.

“And that’s it; your baby’s heartbeat.”

While I was staring at the screen, Kirill took my hand. He sank down in the chair next to me, his shock forgotten in the face of such wonder.

“Is it—healthy?” I stumbled through the question, unable to tear my eyes from the sight.

“It looks fine. Of course, there are some screenings we should run, and I hope you’re taking your vitamins and minerals.”

“I am. I have been,” I reassured him.

The rest of the scan flew by, and before I knew it, my belly was cleaned up and the doctor had gone. Kirill sat in the chair, one leg resting at the ankle on his other thigh and his fingers steepled as he watched me intently. A flush worked across my cheeks as I held out my arm, and the nurses took blood samples before leaving us alone.

“What is it?” I snapped, my patience growing thin.

“You knew you were pregnant the whole time you were in that shitty little town.”

“Yes. So what?”

“So, you never thought about getting rid of the pregnancy? I’m sure the chef with a crush would have paid for you,” Kirill said flatly.

My mouth dropped open, and I stared at him, stunned by his casual comment. “It’s not the baby’s fault that you tricked me.”

He swallowed deeply. A question worked its way up; I could see it coming, yet it still surprised me.

“Do you want my child, Molly? Have I really trapped you this time?” The question could have been mocking, controlling, or goading now he knew my secret, but it wasn’t. It barely sounded like Kirill at all. That wasn’t true—it sounded like Kirill Lewis, the boy who’d wanted me to have everything I dreamed of in life, not Kirill Chernov, the man who’d decided I’d have him, no matter what.

“You did trap me, but I never thought of getting rid of it,” I admitted. “Love made it, and it’s a tiny piece of us both.”

He swallowed hard at that statement, his brow creasing as he frowned so hard it was like he was trying to crack his own face. “Is that why you stayed when I got shot? Because of the baby?”

There it was, the fear he didn’t know how to work around. That maybe I’d stayed out of fear of a future alone.

I shook my head. “I stayed because I can’t imagine living in a world where you don’t exist. I never want to again. That’s the truth.”

He let out a long sigh as if my words had punctured the balloon of tension inside him, and then he smiled, picking up the ultrasound picture off the table beside him, and took my hand in his. “Molly, we’re having a baby,” he said quietly.

“Yep, weird boy, we are.”

KIRILL

The venue for the dinner was as public as could be. It was also a popular restaurant with the higher ups in the police, most of whom had the kind of secrets they paid me to keep. The amount of security there made it safe enough to introduce Viktor and Mallory for the first time.

If Viktor was taken off-guard by the introduction, he covered it well. “So, this is the infamous Mallory Madison. I’ve heard a lot about you over the years.”

“Likewise,” Molly said, holding out her hand to shake my father’s.

The sight of her small, pale hand in his scarred one made me anxious. He raised her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back, and I fought the urge to step between them.

His piercing eyes fixed on her. “You must be some woman to have ensnared my son so completely.”

Molly smiled politely and tugged her hand away before sitting in the chair I’d pulled out for her. The surrounding tables were full of Chernov men, both Viktor’s and mine. There was a tension in the air, like electricity before a storm. I hated to expose Mallory to it, but I hadn’t been joking about our plan. Having her face known as the newest bride in the Chernov bratva would keep her safe from Viktor for now.

“It’s Mallory Chernova now, Father,” I corrected Viktor, waiting until he’d taken a large mouthful of wine to drop the bomb.

Viktor coughed, and the expensive wine dribbled from his pursed lips. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, ignoring the napkin at his elbow. “Is that right? Well done, son. You’ve surprised me, something few manage. I was surprised to hear we were going to dinner at all, considering I thought Mallory here had been the victim of a brutal home invasion at your apartment.”

“Did you? I never received any condolences from you,” I pointed out idly.

Viktor’s hand tightened into a fist on the table. “You’ve been busy. You probably didn’t notice.”

“Right, that must’ve been what happened. I have other news, Father,” I continued, drinking water. It wouldn’t do to let my guard drop around Viktor. “You’re going to be a grandfather. Congratulations.”

Viktor froze, and his huge shoulders tensed. He turned a considering eye to Mallory, one that made my skin itch. “Is that right? How wonderful.”

Telling Viktor about the baby was a tactical decision. I knew how seriously he took continuing the Chernov family blood line. It should ensure Molly’s safety for the rest of the pregnancy.

Viktor was still looking at Mallory. “Congratulations. A pregnancy, and so young too,” he murmured as his piggish eyes slid down her lithe body. “You must be exceptionally receptive to conceiving to be pregnant so quickly.”

Fighting the urge to reach across the table and punch the older man in the throat for his lecherous gaze, I settled for glaring at him. He didn’t notice. He was too taken with Mallory. *My wife.*

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I’m sure Kirill and I are just a perfect fit,” Molly said sweetly, refusing to be cowed by Viktor’s lewd tone.

Viktor blinked, clearly reassessing his opponent, and then turned to me. “Where was my invite to the wedding?”

“It was a small, intimate affair, I’m afraid. Now that the good news has been covered, let’s talk about De Sanctis.”

The food had arrived, and Mallory began eating as I discussed the Antonio

De Sanctis issue with my father.

“Renato has been called in from Naples. I supposed he’ll arrive any day. The fact that he made an attempt on your life can’t stand. We have to retaliate and do so hard.”

I shook my head. “We’d never get to Renato. Antonio will be on the lookout for an attempt on his son.”

“And eye for an eye never works, haven’t you heard?”

A nonchalant drawl reached me, and I twisted in my seat to see Nikolai approaching.

He had made some effort to dress the part for the Michelin starred restaurant, but his black button-down shirt was open to nearly to his navel, and his tattooed chest was exposed. He had too much ink to nail down one image, and I knew a few of them had been done during his stint in a Russian prison in his early twenties.

“Nikolai, to what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?” Viktor didn’t sound happy to see his preferred son.

Did he suspect Nikolai’s changing alliance? If he did, our plans were fucked.

Nikolai sat and flicked his dark hair back, somehow looking like a young rebel Romanov as he clicked his fingers for the server to pour him wine.

“It sounded like a family dinner. Father, brother, sister-in-law, and the little bean sprout, so I wondered why I wasn’t included. That wasn’t nice, Kirill.” He pointed at me, a shit-eating expression on his face, and turned his eyes to Mallory. “Good evening, Princess.”

Her smile dropped, and she shot him a nasty look.

Before they could argue, I got back to business. “Very well. We’re talking about De Sanctis. What do you propose we do about it?”

“I have offered to take one for the team and marry Sofia,” Nikolai stated.

Viktor dropped his knife loud enough to cut through the surrounding conversation. “If you think we’re going to make nice with those cunts, you

have another think coming. Forget Renato. He's too well protected. Let this end where it started—with Sofia.”

Nerves sprang to life in my gut. *Motherfucker.*

The only sign that Nikolai was tense was the slightest tick of his granite jaw. “Meaning?” he bit out.

“Meaning, you try to kill my kid, and I'll kill yours. We take out Sofia. Retribution is served, and we can move on.”

“You think Antonio won't retaliate for killing his daughter?”

“We have just cause, and he knows it.” Viktor speared a bleeding piece of rare steak and shoveled it into his mouth, ignoring the line of red juice working its way down his meaty chin.

“Forgive me if I'm wrong, but won't killing the sister annoy her brother, too, and create a back and forth?” Mallory sipped her water and calmly looked at Viktor.

Nikolai snapped his fingers and nodded. “Precisely. We don't want to prolong this whole mess Kirill got us into. We want to end it. I say we kill Antonio. The old fucker has it coming, and Renato will probably thank us for it.”

Viktor scowled at his youngest son. “We're not killing the capo of the De Sanctis family. Young people think they can solve everything if only their generation was in charge. Renato is a pup, like you.”

“You asked for my opinion. Here's another—they want Kirill, give him to them. Maybe they'll give him back after they've satisfied their revenge. He's already got a kid on the way, so there's at least one body part they can lop off and he won't miss,” Nikolai said and smirked at me.

Making Viktor think we were at odds as usual was part of our plan.

Mallory seemed to have forgotten that from the scowl she gave him. “You're disgusting,” she muttered.

Nikolai laughed. “Thanks. I try.”

“Enough. Talking about the baby, is everything healthy? Do you know the sex yet? Is it a boy?” Viktor asked, signaling for another refill of his wine.

“We don’t know,” I answered curtly, certain this was going to annoy Mallory—as if having dinner with the man who’d ordered her father killed, and the man who’d carried out that order, wasn’t already pissing her off.

“Find out as soon as you can. If it’s a boy, we need to take extra care of your lovely wife.”

“And if it’s a girl?” Molly interjected, smiling with razor-like sharpness.

“Then we’d better get ready for trouble. All the women in my life have only ever given me trouble,” Viktor said. “I’m sure you’ll be no different.”

“A girl can dream,” Molly muttered under her breath.

I pushed my chair out from the table, and my bodyguards stepped forward immediately. “I think we’re done here. Mallory looks tired. Princess, are you finished?”

Viktor stared at us, his shrewd eyes taking in every tick and micro expression. I hated to put Mallory under his microscope, but there was no avoiding it. If we wanted to take Viktor down, he had to have his guard lowered. Pretending I had no idea that he’d attempted to have Mallory killed was an important, if unpleasant, step.

“Yes. I’m not hungry anymore,” she said, standing and stepping back from the table. Viktor eyed her body. “Don’t see much sign of a baby yet.”

Nikolai chuckled. “My father, the doctor.”

“Be careful, Nikolai. Disappointments should watch their mouths,” he snapped.

Nikolai swallowed hard. I knew the gut reaction he was having. I had it myself in Viktor’s presence. The man was pure evil, a demon who had tortured and abused his sons and tried to turn them into his mirror image. As the prospect of fatherhood bore down on me, I knew I’d kill anyone who treated my child the way Viktor had treated us.

“Let’s go, Princess.”



ONLY ONCE MOLLY was securely back in The Tower with its increased security, did I venture out to Pravda. The music pounded in my bones as soon as I stepped through the doors, a tattoo of the oncoming war beating in my blood. I went directly to my office tucked far beyond the front of the house.

Opening the door, I found my brother had beaten me to my chair.

“Move,” I told Nikolai as I rounded the desk and sat in his vacated seat.

“Did you see your wife home safely?”

“Why?” I asked immediately. I didn’t like Niko asking me about Mallory at all, and he seemed to know it. As a result, he did it constantly.

“She’s a rare and special treasure. I’d take good care of her, that’s all.”

“Watch it when you talk about my wife. You already knew when you gave her money and a car to escape me she was carrying my child, I presume?” I demanded, anger ringing in my tone.

Nikolai merely smiled. “I didn’t even consider it before I knew she was pregnant.”

Letting out an incredulous laugh, I sank back and stared at my brother. “I swear, I never know what the fuck is going to come out of your mouth,” I confessed. “So, you wanted to take my kid from me, as well as the woman I planned to marry?”

“I didn’t want to take anything from you. It wasn’t about you. I know that might be difficult for someone with your size ego to imagine, but I’m being honest.”

“Watch it,” I warned, annoyance lashing in my veins. I stared at my brother, trying to figure out his unpredictable mind.

“I did it for her, and for Irina Bulgakova and Fiona Lewis.” Nikolai dropped my gaze as he spoke our mother’s names. “Mallory should get to choose if she wants their lives, not be forced into one.”

“I’d never treat Mallory like Viktor treated Irina or Fiona.”

“Wouldn’t you? Did you give her a say in her future?”

My anger turned inward, burning my chest with its heat. It was much easier to dismiss Nikolai when he didn’t say things that were so searingly true. “I may not have planned to, but I gave her a choice, in the end, and she chose me. Knowing the entire story between us, she chose me.”

Nikolai smirked, but there was a wistful quality to it that made it oddly compelling. “Then you’re lucky, and I congratulate you on your marriage.”

That statement was the most genuine thing that had passed between us in seven years of knowing each other.

Then Nikolai spoke again and ruined it, as only he could. “Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of her and the baby once I’m *pakhan*.”

“We both know that’s not going to happen,” I ground out. “Anyway, we have Viktor to worry about first. Just make sure he doesn’t suspect your shifting alliances.”

Nikolai stood and shrugged on his heavy leather jacket. “Oh, Kirill, he won’t suspect a thing because my alliances haven’t shifted an inch.”

I watched him as he sauntered toward the door.

He paused with his hand on the handle. “I’m on my side, and only my side. See you soon, *bratan*.”

MOLLY

Cedar Green nursing home was as beautiful as I remembered. It was Sunday visiting hours, and I was heading inside with Federica.

“Lori!” Gladys, my favorite nurse, and my mother’s dedicated caretaker, rushed toward us. “And Federica too. What a lucky day.”

I hugged Gladys, enjoying the older woman’s comforting touch. Even when I’d been a penniless bartender, scraping tips together to pay for my mother’s care, Gladys had been kind and always gone out of her way to look after my mother.

Max trailed behind us as we went to Mara’s room, and Gladys filled us in on her treatment. After an accident when I was thirteen, Mara Madison had suffered a traumatic brain injury. Slowly, over the years, she’d shut down further and retreated somewhere deep inside herself, to where I was never sure if she cared or knew I visited.

Still, looking after my mother was my one constant in life, and entering her room now, the smell of her violet and lavender hand lotion comforted me. It was an expensive brand, and I hadn’t been able to buy it for her since high school.

“That smell.” I noticed it as soon as I walked in.

“Oh, that’s Mr. Chernov’s doing. He sent a list of the things that Mrs. Mara liked, and I make sure to keep them around.”

I picked up the familiar pale purple bottle from the bedside. “Kirill

remembered this?”

“He did.” Gladys turned and nudged Federica. “I’ve been telling Mallory he’s a keeper right from the start. I wouldn’t let him get away, that’s for sure.”

Federica caught my eye, and I suddenly had the urge to laugh.

“Well, I’m sure Kirill has it covered,” Federica murmured as she went to the bookshelf beside the window. “We’ve been reading this.” She pulled out a slim, classic book and turned it to me. “Should I?”

“That would be nice. I need to do down the hall for a second,” I said, edging toward the door. My curiosity was tugging me too hard to stay still. I’d visit with my mother in a few minutes.

Max turned to me, raising an eyebrow at me. “Where are we going?”

“You know where.”

Together, we walked along the hall as I retraced the steps I’d taken a few months ago.

It had been the first time I had any sort of confirmation that the old Kirill might be inside the brutal bratva boss who had taken me from my shitty life and told me he wanted to own me.

I knocked softly on Fiona Lewis’s door and entered when I heard her rasping, low tone. Max stood outside, on guard and watchful, as I went in.

Fiona’s room was as nice as Mara’s, and it touched me that Kirill considered my mother as important as his. Fiona sat in a floral printed armchair in front of the window. She had knitting on her lap, and music played softly in the background. As soon as I stepped in, her eyes fixed on me, dark and warm.

Kirill’s eyes.

“Well, I’ll be. I was wondering when he’d bring you to see me.” Her voice was rough, which made sense considering how deep she was into lung cancer. Countless operations on her lungs and trachea had taken their toll. Still, as she sat there, with the light shining on her from the window, she looked content.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Lewis,” I said, bobbing awkwardly.

She coughed for a second before pointing to the chair near her. “Call me Fiona, and sit down. Rest a minute.”

I sat, perching on the edge of the seat.

She stared at me, her eyes running over every single inch of me. She nodded, as if satisfied. “I knew he’d find you. I always knew it.”

“How was that?”

“Because some people are drawn to each other. No matter where they are or what they’re doing, they will find each other. I used to eat lunch with a Buddhist lady down the hall, Lina. She said the same people show up in every life, every single time. Their souls are bound somehow. I always thought you and my son were like that. A connection bigger than this life alone.”

I stared at her, dumbfounded by that sweeping, romantic statement.

“Lina would be tickled pink to know she was right.”

“Would be?”

“Oh, she died a while back,” Fiona said, waving her hand with the nonchalance of someone who had fully embraced the fact that death could visit anyone at any time.

I blinked at her, thrown by the swerves in the conversation.

Fiona took a deep breath, and her face turned troubled for a second. “I’m glad you came alone. I wanted to speak to you. I know my son’s not what he was. I know he’s . . . damaged.”

“Please, you don’t have to—”

“No, I have to. I never wanted him to live his father’s life, but I failed. It’s my fault, and maybe a little yours, too.”

I flinched at that, but I wasn’t about to argue with Fiona, and besides, she was right. Without me, and his love for me, Kirill would have never gone to his father in the first place.

“But despite his past, despite the thing he’s become in order to survive, he never stopped loving or needing you, Mallory. I guess what I’m saying is no matter what he’s been through, he still loves you.” She met my stare frankly, like she was challenging me to disagree with her.

“Likewise.” I muttered instead.

Her fierce expression melted into a grin, and I could see Kirill in the fine, defined bones of her face. She might be ill and worn down by life, but I could see how striking Fiona had been in her youth, like her son. Her eyes shifted and lighted on my ring.

“It was a small ceremony, more out of necessity than anything else,” I explained.

“If Kirill convinced you of that, you’re as naïve as you were in high school. That boy’s been aiming to marry you since he was seventeen.” She smiled, taking any sting from her words. “He’s not his father, you know. You can trust him if you ever decide to have children. He won’t let them walk in his steps.”

“I know. Neither will I,” I said resolutely.

Fiona must have caught something in my tone because her brows drew together, and her eyes dipped to my belly. I was wearing a close-fitting dress that sheathed my body down to my knees. I thought I was developing a tiny bump, and when Fiona’s eyes lit up, I knew I hadn’t imagined it. A tear formed in the older woman’s eye as I reached forward and took her hand.

“I’m going to be a granny?” She looked at me, a terrible hope in her eyes. She must have taken my silence as confirmation, as her lined face broke into a wreath of smiles. “I need to get knitting.” She fell quiet for a long moment. “I hope it’s a girl, for your sake.”

I forced away the pain and worry those words gave me. Viktor’s greedy, speculative eyes looking at me, and hoping for a boy—another heir to fuck up and torture.

“It doesn’t matter, either way,” I told her firmly. “They won’t be like us.”



AS PART of Kirill's plan to ensure the underworld knew he had married, and his wife wasn't to be touched, we went to the opera.

As I got dressed in a blood red, floor-length dress, he lingered in the dressing room doorway, watching every movement I made until I twisted around.

"Can you zip me up?"

"I'm rethinking leaving here at all," he muttered, approaching like a jaguar stalking prey.

He was in a tux, and I could hardly take my eyes off him. He looked powerful and dangerous, and the sight of him sent a thrill through me. He tugged the zipper up slowly and moved my hair over one shoulder, so he could kiss the other, one hand falling to my neck. He circled it easily with his long fingers, sending my pulse fluttering. I watched our reflection in the mirror.

"Let's skip it."

"I thought it was important."

"That was before I saw you in this dress, Princess. Now, nothing else seems important," he murmured, his fingers tightening on my neck to tilt my head back against his chest. His other hand delved into the modest neckline of the gown. "Besides, I'm not sure it's safe to wear this in public. You'll cause a riot, and I'll be forced to massacre the opera house."

"You'll be fine. I was looking forward to going out," I confessed softly.

Kirill's fingers tightened for a moment, and then he let out a resigned sigh. "Fine, we'll go, but I'm going to fuck you in this dress in the car on the way home."

"Sounds like a deal," I murmured, turning in his arms to smile winningly at him. "It's only for four hours anyway," I teased him.

"*Blyat*, don't make me change my mind. Let's go."

THE MET WAS BUZZING with paparazzi and well-known faces on the opening night of Tosca.

“It’s not the faces you know who are the powerful ones,” Kirill explained as we headed inside, flanked by his security. “The celebrities and socialites are rich, but they aren’t the power behind this city. The ones you want to watch out for are the nobodies who somehow have invites to an event like this. They are far from being nobodies, but only powerful people recognize that.”

“So, what kind of people are we talking about here? Bratva, clearly, since you’re here. Who else?”

“Politicians and bankers, investors who could arm a rebellion or buy a new president for a country. Probably the rest of the New York five.”

I paused with the glass of mineral water Max had handed me, after tasting it himself, halfway to my lips. “What, you mean those stories about the five families of New York are real?”

“It’s a real thing, but the truth is there are a lot more than five criminal syndicates going on in this city. But the five families control the big players, and the majority of wealth.”

“Is this your way of boasting about how rich you are?” I teased him.

He grinned. “How rich we are, Molly.”

“Hmm, I like the sound of that,” I murmured as he pressed a kiss to my forehead and we headed through the beautifully preserved foyer and deeper into the building.

“Kirill Chernov,” a loud, arrogant voice broke through the murmur of the crowd wandering in the direction of the doors.

Kirill tensed, and his expression was one of pure fury for a second before smoothing into something pleasant. A polite mask stretched over angry bones. “Good evening. I should have known you wouldn’t miss this evening,” Kirill said, turning me with him as he spun around.

An older man stood before us. He had graying hair at the temples, a strong roman nose, and intelligent eyes. Next to him was a lovely woman. She was

so young that she had to be his daughter, or so I hoped. She had dark hair and olive skin, with blood-red lips. A siren and she was looking at Kirill with something that made me feel odd.

“Tosca is Sofia’s favorite,” the man said as his identity slipped into place in my mind. Antonio De Sanctis, the man who had nearly killed Kirill and I, and his daughter, Sofia, who had been engaged to Kirill for a short while.

Sofia De Sanctis. Christ, she was lovely. I willed away the jealous lump in my throat. It was petty as hell to be jealous, and uncalled for, considering what Kirill had told me about her. Her eyes met mine, and she smiled. It seemed sad somehow, and not in an envious way.

“And this is your wife?” The boss, Antonio, had an unpleasant way of leering.

Kirill bristled beside me. “Yes, this is her. If you’ll excuse us, we’ll go and get seated now,” he said, clearly not wanting to prolong the awkwardness any longer.

Antonio nodded, and his eyes made my skin crawl with his frank appraisal. His eyes told me he had assessed me and found me lacking.

His daughter flinched when he reached for her arm and my jealousy died. I knew that feeling. I’d had it around my departed father. A fear reflex too deeply ingrained to ignore.

“Are you all right?” Kirill asked as we moved away.

I could feel Antonio’s eyes on my back. “I think he might still want to kill us,” I muttered.

Kirill nodded. “He does.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

He sighed. “I haven’t made up my mind. I don’t think an all-out attack is in our best interests. I can see why Viktor and Nikolai think so . . . they have nothing to lose”—he glanced at me—“unlike me.”

“You said you embarrassed him. Maybe he needs a gesture to save face. You know rich old men who think they have honor and respect. Saving face is the

most important thing to them,” I said, thinking of Henry. My father had lost my mother’s fortune and driven us to be indebted to the bratva to shore up his reputation as the biggest fish in the small town where we’d grown up.

“I think you’re right, but I don’t know what gesture is enough. Money is too impersonal. The rejection of an alliance with his family, bound by blood in marriage, is very personal. He wants a pound of flesh from someone,” Kirill muttered.

A cold chill ran through me at the words. “It can’t be from you. He had his chance.”

Kirill nodded, though I sensed he considered it unfinished business. I had a lot to learn about the world I now navigated at his side, but I would. I had to. I chose this life when I chose him.

Kirill pressed a kiss to the back of my hand. “Enough worrying about Antonio for tonight. Let’s enjoy this romantic opera.”

“The program says it’s a tragedy,” I pointed out, sitting beside him.

Kirill laughed shortly. “So, what’s the difference?”

“A romance has to have a happy ending, obviously.”

Kirill took my hand in his and brought it to his mouth, kissing it, before lightly biting along one of my fingers. He was always putting some body part of mine in his mouth, as if it was only by extreme exertion of self-control he could stop himself from eating me whole.

“So, you want a happy ending, princess? A happily ever after?” His tone was musing, shot through with the worries that seemed to plague him constantly lately with everything going on with his father and brother.

“Of course, doesn’t everyone?”

“Just the hopeful ones, I guess,” Kirill murmured cryptically.

Before I could question him on that non-answer, the lights dimmed, and an expectant hush fell over the audience as the first note hit the air.

KIRILL

The next night, I made my last-ditch attempt to head off the impending confrontation with Antonio De Sanctis. That fucker needed to die, but for now, I didn't like the way he was focused on Mallory as a means to get to me. He needed his pound of flesh, and apparently, he wouldn't accept a substitute.

Killing him outright crossed my mind, but with Renato De Sanctis on his way back from Naples, it wasn't a good idea to kill his father. He would have to retaliate to avenge his family's honor. Of course, there was always the chance that he'd kill Viktor in revenge, which would be really kind of perfect. However, I wasn't a man who left things to chance, and there was too great a chance that he'd attempt to kill me, or worse, Mallory. I'd never had any luck, and I didn't expect that to change anytime soon.

Now, I waited for him to join me for a dinner I'd called to talk. The restaurant was unlikely, a seedy diner on upper 5th street, but it was perfect for our purposes. Antonio entered late, flanked by his killer security guards. Keeping me waiting was a power play, but I didn't mind it overly much. Men like him needed everything they could to show their power. What they lacked in mental fortitude, they tried to make for with posturing.

"Antonio, thank you for coming. I thought it best we talk this out, in person, and stop the hemorrhage at the root."

Antonio smirked. "I believe you are the only one whose spilled blood over this."

I matched his arrogance inch for inch as I grinned back. “Yes, your hemorrhage has been money, hasn’t it? I heard the De Sanctis deals aren’t instilling the previous confidence you used to enjoy.”

His expression shuttered, and all pretense of warmth drained away. “Losing money never killed anyone.”

“Depends on how much. I’m sure your family has some loans you wouldn’t want to default on.”

“Enough of this,” Antonio snapped, his rigid posture collapsing. “Tell me what you want.”

“Are you ready to talk about it, or do you want to waste more time measuring dicks? I can guarantee mine is bigger, De Sanctis,” I tossed at him.

He stared at me a moment longer, then tipped his head back and laughed. “You’re an arrogant fucker, Kirill, but you always amuse, I’ll give you that.”

“I aim to please. Now, what do you need in order to put this whole botched engagement behind us?”

Antonio narrowed his eyes, finally getting down to business. “Shouldn’t I be talking to Viktor about this? Has there been a change in leadership I don’t know about?”

I held his gaze, and the silence between us, until Antonio nodded slightly.

“Very well. I need my accounts and reputation restored, financial and otherwise.”

“Otherwise?” I already expected he wanted me to extend the Chernov olive branch of peace in the form of mutually beneficial deals. If we showed we trusted them to work with us again, the rest would follow.

“Otherwise means you embarrassed my daughter, and no amount of money can change that.”

“What can change that?”

Antonio stared at me for a long time, tapping his lip with his finger. “I heard your new wife is expecting.”

I nodded to confirm the news.

“Then you’ll understand soon if you have a daughter.”

“I won’t treat my daughter how you treat yours. She won’t be an object to me,” I ground out immediately.

Fuck, where was my legendary taciturn aloofness when I needed it? Anything involving the baby was a direct hit to my fury. I hated that Antonio had brought up the baby at all, even if he wasn’t threatening me.

“Not an object, an asset, if you’re lucky. Sofia is a disappointment in that regard. She’s too weak to cope with the life she’s been given. Other daughters are making matches that benefit their entire family, and Sofia is crying over love and happiness. It’s her mother’s fault,” he said, spitting the last and looking murderous.

I had no idea what Sofia’s backstory was with her family, but by the sound of it, it was about as happy as mine. A fucking horror show.

“It’s not her fault. I never intended to marry her,” I told him dispassionately.

“And now everyone knows that. She’s not much, but she’s the only female child I have, and you reduced the value of my asset.” Antonio tossed his head and stared out the greasy window at the dark street beyond. “Instead of bringing a future *bratva pakhan* as a husband into the family, she brought shame.”

“What do you need to make up for the engagement?” I cut in, tired of hearing his vitriol.

“Chernov blood,” he said flatly.

“You’ve had it,” I reminded him.

He shook his head slowly and leaned forward. “No, I haven’t.”

A cold pit of steel formed inside me as I realized exactly what he meant.

He smiled humorlessly. “I’d say you should be careful around your father, Kirill. He doesn’t seem to have taken to your new bride as you’d hoped he would. Viktor has different ideas for the *bratva*’s future than you, and a

collision is coming. But then, it seems you already know that.”

Viktor. Fucking Viktor had sent the men to kill Mallory at the dress shop. It was done easily enough. All he had to do was hire some Italian mercenaries to carry out his dirty work, and he’d known we’d suspect De Sanctis, considering our recent past.

“*Suka blyat,*” I swore viciously, my eyes burning with hatred.

I wanted to drive to Brooklyn and shoot every single fucker protecting Viktor, storm his tasteless townhouse, and kill him painfully. First, I’d shoot out his kneecaps, then string him up and drain him of blood. Death by a thousand cuts. Or maybe I’d hang him by the feet off The Tower and light the rope on fire. Molly and I could watch him burn in front of the kitchen window. So, Viktor had been well aware that Molly was alive after his first attempt when he’d sent Nikolai to kill her.

Nikolai. My half-brother’s name whispered through my mind. Had he known the truth? Was he double crossing me after all? I couldn’t trust the fucker. I never had been able to, and nothing had changed. His mercy only extended to the females in his life. I was fair game, and he wanted to be boss. I shouldn’t forget that.

Just like that, a solution presented itself as clear as day.

Wrestling my anger under control, I turned my attention to Antonio. “You need Chernov blood? How about this?”

Leaning in, I laid out my plan. It would either free me from the noose tightening around my neck or finish me.



I HEADED BACK to The Tower and only relaxed when I was inside and could see Mallory in the library. She was curled up before the fire on her chaise lounge. Her eyes were intent on her book, and her long toffee-colored eyelashes looked like fans on her cheeks as she looked down. I could have stayed there in the doorway and watched her all night, but she must have sensed my presence, as she looked up after a moment.

“You’re back?”

“I’m back.” I wandered in, taking off my jacket and tossing it on the table.

I sat at Mallory’s feet and her dainty little sock-clad feet snuggled into my lap, giving a kick of arousal to my dick, which was already rising at her nearness. Unfortunately, we had to talk, and it couldn’t wait. Instead of picking up her cue, I took one of her feet between my hands and dug my fingers into the sole, massaging it.

“Fuck, that’s amazing,” she groaned, her eyes glazing as she leaned back and enjoyed the foot rub.

“I’ll rub any of your body parts, Princess, whenever and wherever you want.”

“You should know I’m going to take you up on that. You’ll regret it,” she sighed.

“Impossible. You’re doing all the hard work,” I said, my eyes lingering on the soft swell of her belly.

I still couldn’t believe our baby was growing in there, tiny and vulnerable. I felt the most urgent need to protect it and Mallory. When I thought too closely about the threat of Viktor to their safety, it sent me nearly wild with anger and fear. A whole lot of fear.

“I thought you could go on a little trip. Maybe take Federica and Max and go away for a few days.”

“Where to?” Molly asked. She sat up, her eyes alert for some sign of everything I wasn’t telling her.

“Where do you want to go? Europe?”

Molly pulled her feet from my lap, and I knew I couldn’t hide everything from her. She was too sharp, and she knew me too well. I didn’t particularly like hiding things from her, but I didn’t want her worrying about things she couldn’t change.

“Why now? And why aren’t you coming?”

I blew out a breath. “I have to work,” I evaded.

She gave a grim chuckle. “Kirill, don’t bullshit me. You’re not exactly an office drone with twenty days of vacation a month. What’s going on?”

“Rome would be beautiful at this time of year, or Paris. Or why not go the other direction and see the Sakura blossom in Japan?”

“Kirill!”

I took her other foot and continued to rub. “Things with my father aren’t going well. He’s too old to lead the *bratva* anymore, and he knows it. It’s time to change bosses.” I didn’t want to tell her she’d almost been shot under my father’s orders, not Antonio de Sanctis’. I knew how afraid she’d be with that knowledge, and I never wanted her to feel afraid. I wanted to protect from all of that, always.

“And that’s so dangerous you need to send me away?” she asked, clearly seeing the situation for what it was. “Is it Viktor or Nikolai that’s the danger?”

Both.

“I have it in hand, Princess. You don’t need to worry. I don’t want you to. It’s not good for the baby. Just know that everything I’m doing now is for our future. That’s all that matters.”

“Our future?”

“Yes, the future we always planned. You, me, and our own family. Safety, freedom . . . all of it.”

“Why can’t I be with you? I can’t help?”

“Help?” the word nearly strangled me. “Molly, if you’re hurt, none of it matters, don’t you see? There’s no point to any of this if you’re at risk. So, no, you can’t help, and don’t ask me again,” I warned her.

She pulled a face at my authoritative tone. “You can’t tell me what to do anymore, Kirill. I’m your wife, not your prisoner.”

“Princess, I won’t tell you what to do,” I murmured as I abandoned her foot and slid my hands up her leg instead. “I’ll simply have you bound, gagged, and taken away in the night. You’ll wake up on the private jet, halfway to

Paris, all without being told what to do.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” she muttered.

I shifted on the sofa, turning toward her, and pushed her unresisting legs apart to move between them. “You love when I’m an asshole. Don’t push me on this, Molly. You won’t win, and I don’t want to quarrel about silly things.”

“You call having me kidnapped and taken out of the country without my consent a silly quarrel?”

“What else should I call it? There are no choices to be made here. I wasn’t asking you, Princess. I was telling you. When it comes to your safety, I won’t compromise.”

“And your safety?” she pushed as I lowered my face to her inner thigh and kissed along it. “Who is going to worry about that?”

MOLLY

The next morning, I lay in bed until Kirill left before jumping out. If he thought he could tell me what to do and send me away, while he set himself on fire to protect us, he had another think coming.

I dressed quickly and went to the kitchen to find Max there with Olga. They sipped black tea while Olga passed me a peppermint herbal tea. My morning sickness had finally calmed down enough to manage food and drink first thing again.

“Where’s Kirill?” I asked Max, sitting opposite him. It was a sunny day, and the park looked startlingly green, a huge verdant rectangle outlined in gray, sitting squarely in the middle of the city.

“Working. Why?”

“He asked me to take a trip last night.”

Max didn’t react to that statement. “Did he ask? Or did he tell you?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You know all about it, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “Kirill will decide the best thing to do. Why don’t you trust him?”

“So, you think it’s okay for him to send me away? What if he gets hurt?”

“I don’t see how you being here would stop that.”

I stared at Max, a little hurt by his pragmatic words. The rational part of my

brain reminded me he had a point, but my heart bristled with offense.

“Let Kirill Viktorovich decide what’s best,” Olga said predictably. “He knows his business. Don’t interfere.”

“What a surprise that you’re on his side.” My mutinous mutter had no effect on Olga, who merely shrugged.

“You know, he told me this would happen this morning,” Max said.

“Because he knows me so well?” I argued. It was true, though. Kirill did know me. Which meant he knew how much it would annoy me, and how much I was going to fight his high-handed edicts. “And how did he instruct you to manhandle me onto a plane without my consent?” I looked suspiciously at my tea. “This isn’t drugged, is it?”

Max laughed. “Of course not. You’re pregnant. It’d be bad for the baby.”

“You’re all horrible people.”

“True. But I have to give it to the boss. I doubt I know my brother as well as Kirill knows you.”

“If he knows me so well, how did he plan on getting rid of me, since I don’t intend to take a European tour anytime soon?”

My sweet, grating tone rolled off Max’s back. The man was shameless. “I suppose this is an instance where you’ll have to see it to believe it.”

His phone vibrated, and he glanced at it before standing. “Be back in a minute.”

“Don’t tell me you’re having a helicopter land on the roof so you can carry me out of here kicking and screaming, without anyone seeing?” Now I’d said it, it sounded all too realistic for the bratva bred sociopaths in control of my life.

“Oh, Mallory, when will you learn the simplest ways are often the best?” Max chuckled as he left the room.

I looked at Olga as she pressed more toast to me. “What the hell did that mean?”

“Here, eat more. You’ll need your strength,” she muttered.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Need my strength for what?”

She didn’t answer and avoided my eyes. She picked up her teacup and took a large mouthful of black tea.

“She’s through here.” I heard Max’s voice drift to me from the hallway.

I stiffened. I never got visitors here, except Federica, and she hadn’t texted me. A man appeared in the doorway, followed by another. They wore distinctive uniforms. NYPD.

Color drained from my cheeks as I stared at the officers entering the room.

“Mrs. Mallory Chernova? We are here to take you down to the station to answer some questions about Kaplan Holmes’s disappearance.”

Kap Holmes?

Holy fuck.

“Am I in trouble?” I blurted as I stared at the weird image of police officers in a bratva boss’s penthouse. I had to call Kirill. A thousand thoughts flew through my head as I stood up and the officers approached.

“No, Mrs. Chernova, but our investigation revealed you may have been one of the last people to see him alive, and we need to fill in some blanks.” They moved to escort me out of the room.

I turned shocked eyes to Max. My fears suddenly died, transforming into anger, when Max smiled broadly. Fucker.

“Don’t worry, Mallory. I’ll have a lawyer sent downtown to sit with you. I’m sure it’s just routine. You’ll probably only be in there for . . . what’s the maximum, boys?” Max directed toward the officers.

His casual tone revealed that this was no normal procedure. Kirill had claimed to have friends in the NYPD often enough. For fuck’s sake, he’d gotten away with shooting someone in plain sight in my mother’s nursing home only a few months ago.

“Forty-eight hours, max,” the officer said.

“Forty-eight hours? That should be long enough,” Max said simply.

I was utterly speechless as the officers escorted me out of the building into a waiting squad car.

KIRILL HAD me arrested to keep me out of the way. All the stuff about sending me abroad; he clearly hadn't expected me to go quietly, so he'd done something I couldn't fight. I might have applauded his ingenuity if I wasn't quite so spitting mad. More than anger, though, was the fear. This was it. Whatever was going to happen with Viktor and Nikolai, it was happening in the next forty-eight hours, and I wasn't going to be around. I couldn't do anything. I was stuck in police custody.

The squad car pulled out into traffic as one of the officers turned and gave me a comforting smile.

“Don't worry, Mrs. Chernova, you won't be charged with anything, just held for questioning. Once your lawyer comes, he'll explain.”

“Great,” I muttered, folding my arms and staring out at the city. “Can I make a call?”

“Sure,” the officer replied, before turning around.

I called Kirill immediately and listened to the phone ring and ring. He wasn't answering, and I knew why. He didn't want to hear what I had to say about his safety stunt.

My phone chimed in my hand, and I realized I had a voicemail. I held the phone to my ear and listened to it.

“BY NOW, you'll no doubt be angry at me and rethinking your life choices. I know. I'm a bastard, but I'm the bastard who vowed to keep you safe to the end of your days, and I don't mean just at the courthouse. I vowed it nine years ago when I first saw you in Black Hall Prep. My life began and ended with you, Molly, and everything that was worth something to me involved you.”

HANGING UP, I turned and looked out the window as tears pressed against my eyelids. Had I spoken to Kirill for the last time? The tears dripped down my cheeks as we moved further away from the man who held my heart in his hands.



THE OFFICERS, named Peterson and Smith, took me to a station on the Upper East side. It was more comfortable than TV shows led me to think it would be. Inside, I was put in an interrogation room, given a bottle of water, and left to my own devices. They were even kind enough to leave me my phone, which I used to call Kirill relentlessly until my battery died.

Then the lawyer arrived.

His name was Ronan Black, and he seemed utterly terrifying. Tall and built, he looked like one of Kirill's inner circle had put on a bespoke suit and decided to play at being a lawyer. There was something brutal about him lurking beneath his icy blue eyes and golden stubble.

"Your last name is Black? Like Kirill," I muttered, shaking his hand.

"Your husband and I have much in common," he said smoothly.

His sharklike grin got on my nerves. "Does that make you a lying bastard, too?" I shot out, uncaring about how rude I was being at this point.

"Well, I am a mob lawyer, so that's a given," Ronan said smoothly and sat opposite me.

"How long are they going to keep me here?"

"They aren't keeping you here, per se."

"So, I can leave?"

"No."

"So, they are keeping me here," I reiterated.

Ronan smiled, but it was scary rather than comforting. “Kirill wants you here out of his way, where he knows you can’t get hurt. If you want to dispute that, take it up with your husband.”

“I’d love to, but he’s not answering his phone,” I fumed.

Ronan tossed me a dismissive shrug. “Not my problem.” He removed from his briefcase and held up an irritating finger. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll get some work done while we wait for Levin.”

“Who? Why do I know that name?” I thought about it, and after a moment, the answer popped up. “He’s Kirill’s friend, right?”

“Friend is a stretch. He’s a business acquaintance who knows that keeping your husband happy is in his best interests.”

I glared at the lawyer for a moment, taking in his expensive cuff links and watch, and the general aura of danger about him. “Are you Chernov bratva?”

“No, sweetheart, I’m not. I don’t like to limit my client pool to one family, when there are so many criminals needing defending in this city.”

“So, you’re just a scummy lawyer going where the money is without alliance to anyone?”

“Ouch. You sound like my father,” he deadpanned, and shot me a cold look. “I don’t think we need to talk anymore. Don’t give me any trouble, Mrs. Chernova. You won’t like me when I’m irritated.”

“I don’t like you already,” I snapped.

“Likewise, but I’m the man you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy, so be careful.”

Just then, the door opened, and an older man arrived. I took him to be the infamous Detective Levin.

“Ronan O’Connor, I’m surprised to see you here. Mrs. Chernova isn’t being charged with anything,” Levin started.

Ronan smoothly interrupted him. “I go by Black in professional matters, Levin, as you know. Try to remember that. The name O’Connor has no

influence here. Kirill thought it would be nice for his expectant wife to have some company to ensure she is comfortable while she helps the NYPD find its own ass in this case. Really, you can't pin down who killed a senator's son right in the middle of your own city, Levin." Ronan tutted and Levin's face turned red.

I stared between them, feeling like I was going mad. I was pretty sure everyone in the room knew it was Kirill who had killed Kaplan Holmes, something I didn't like to dwell on too much. It was unhinged, yet given the rules Kirill lived by these days, it was expected. Kap had drugged me and meant to hurt me. There was no making amends for that by bratva standards.

"Are you seriously going to keep me here while my husband risks his life—"

"I'm going to keep you here until the threat to you has passed and Kirill says it's safe. As his lawyer, I look after his best interests, and keeping you safe is his number one priority. That's all there is to say on the matter. If you refuse to be quiet about it, perhaps Levin here can find a solitary cell for you for the next forty-eight hours," Ronan said to me with an iron-like tone that warned me not to push any more.

I sank back in my chair, shaking my head. Levin looked nearly apologetic as he sat opposite me.

"I'll ask a few questions to get us started," he said, giving me a weak smile as Ronan settled his powerful body into the chair next to him.

Un-fucking-believable.



I LOST track of time in there. Ronan charged my phone and brought me magazines. I stared at the same issue of *Mother and Baby*; my mind lingering on Kirill. It had to be nighttime by now. Where was he? What was he doing? Was he hurt? Dead? Was he coming to get me?

Ronan got a call a little later, and thankfully, left me to stew in my own juices. He'd left with a warning he'd be back first thing. I stared at the wall and let my mind wander.

I thought about the first time I'd met Kirill in the principal's office in Woodhaven, his neighborhood, and the terrifying people he'd lived next door to without fear. I didn't know who his father was then, but I'd bet anything those guys had known, and that's why they'd steered clear of him. I thought about Henry and my mother, and all the moments we'd run together, and hidden, poor and desperate. I thought about Kirill when he first found me, and the swirling pit of darkness that had been swallowing him whole.

A knock on the door startled me from my thoughts. Officer Peterson popped his head around the door. "Erm, Mrs. Chernova, there's been a mistake. I'm sorry," he said, coming into the room.

"A mistake. You mean, I don't have to stay here?" I was already standing.

Peterson shook his head. "No, you're free to go. It's all cleared up. It was a misunderstanding."

Unease unfurled in my belly as I stared at him. It was night, and he was letting me go. Alone.

"Does Ronan Black know, or Detective Levin?"

Peterson frowned, seeming as confused as I was. "No, I mean, I don't think so, but . . . I don't know. There's someone here to speak to you. Maybe that will shed light on it." He turned away and gestured for me to leave the room. I suddenly felt apprehensive about leaving the secure building bustling with police.

As I followed Peterson to the waiting room, my gut instincts proved to be right. Nikolai sat in one of the chairs and slowly got to his feet when he saw me.

"No, it's okay. I've changed my mind. I want to be held," I said quickly to Peterson, resisting the urge to turn and run.

Nikolai held his hands aloft. "I come in peace, Mallory. I swear. Just hear me out. If you love your husband, then hear me out."

I hesitated. The fucker always knew the right words to twist any situation in his favor.

I stood before him, firmly inside the station.

“Fine, I’ll hear you out right here. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Nikolai smirked. “Let’s see what you think in a minute,” he warned.

He started to speak. His low, urgent tone filled my head, and his words caused a buzzing sound to echo in my ears.

Five minutes later, I left with him.

KIRILL

The message from Nikolai came in late. I'd been expecting it, but it still sent a fresh shower of tension across my nerves. This was it. I sent out a few messages and headed for Brighton beach. It wasn't where we'd agreed to meet, which was the first sign that shit wasn't going as planned, but I'd expected that. I was supposed to be summoned to see Viktor at the Pravda, like I had been a hundred times. If I wasn't looking out for a trap, it would seem like any other night, but Nikolai, acting as an inside man, had let me in on the fact that Viktor felt I needed to be taught a lesson.

I wouldn't be learning any more lessons from my father. Tonight, I would do the teaching—he just didn't know it yet. This sudden change of venue meant Nikolai was playing a deeper game than Viktor or I expected. I'd had men posted all around Pravda, ready to tip the scales in my favor. I wasn't going to Brighton Beach right now; it would be walking into a trap. The game had started, and I couldn't be more relieved that Molly was safely out of it.

The one thing I could bank on with my family was that anything could happen, and never to underestimate them. Still, when the fight for leadership came tonight, I knew who most of the bratva supported. In recent weeks, my men had been feeling out support for me as *pakhan*, and it was strong. Something Viktor had never understood was that even the hardened criminals we boasted in our ranks liked to make money and provide for their families. They liked to live to spend their money, too. Sure, there were a few who liked the grimmer, violent aspects of bratva life more than comfort and security, but those were the old guard. Viktor's men. Nikolai had little support. He'd been too erratic over the years. When it came down to him or

me, I was the clear victor.

Tonight was about removing the head of the snake, and then becoming it, even if I had to kill my half-brother to do it.

I wouldn't allow myself to feel anything about potential fratricide. Nikolai had kidnapped Molly in the past, scared her, treated her roughly, and now, he was no doubt about to double-cross me. He didn't deserve mercy.

LEAVING THE TOWER, I got into a SUV, with another following me, and Ivan pulled us out into traffic. I stared at my phone. Fifty missed calls. Molly was furious, with good reason, but I couldn't let her sit around to be snatched up. She was the only thing that mattered in all this, and I had to know she was safe. Detective Levin had been on my personal payroll for a few years. He held influence at the NYPD, and tonight, he'd make sure Molly was held harmlessly, long enough to ensure any fall out was taken care of. He was also under strict instructions of what to do should I not make it there to get her.

“So, once more into the breach, my friend? Isn't that what the English say?” Ivan rumbled from the driver's seat.

I found a smile for him and his relentless hardness.

I never got to answer, however, as when he pulled across an intersection, a truck plowed into the side of the SUV, and the world went black.



THE SMELL WAS the first thing to hit me. It was mildew, and the salt rotted scent of my nightmares. In my darkest dreams, I was always back here, in the warehouse where Viktor had welcomed me back to the fold with a bullet to the knee. He'd made me a Chernov man, and no longer Kirill Lewis, the rising track star with a bright, shining future.

A persistent drip sounded in the distance, echoing through the room. I heard a muffled groan, scraped my eyelids up, and blinked in the semi-darkness. There was a tripod light set up, like at a construction site. Ivan lay on the

floor with a plastic sheet under him. He was tied up, and terror clutched me until I saw him wriggling. Still alive then, thank fuck. However, if I didn't make it out of here, there was no way Viktor would let Ivan, Max, or Pyotr live. He'd probably take out Olga, and every other Chernov man who respected my leadership.

Voices reached me from far away and I tried to turn. The zip ties on my wrists stopped me. I was bound to a metal chair and stripped to only my pants. The cold, damp air of the shore made my skin prickle. My head pounded. I must have hit it in the crash. I wondered what had happened to the security team behind us.

"Finally awake?" Viktor's voice scraped along my bones.

He strolled past me to lean against the desk set up in the corner. He looked haggard and utterly furious. Lighting a cigarette, he took a deep inhale. His fists were stained red, and the skin of his knuckles was torn.

"What's going on?"

"You tell me, *son*. This is why little boys shouldn't play together. They get ideas above their station," Viktor said roughly, and jerked his head toward the door.

A scraping sound like something being dragged echoed off the walls, and a dark shape slumped to the floor beside me.

It was Nikolai. He rolled onto his back and coughed. He had beaten badly.

"What can I say, *bratan*? We tried," he coughed, giving me a grim, blood-stained smile.

"I know one of you has to replace me, but knowing and letting it happen are two very different things." Viktor waved his cigarette and tilted his head to the side. "I had my money on Nikolai, but after this betrayal, I'm not so sure."

"Geez, break my heart. Does that mean I shouldn't take up acting?" Nikolai muttered from the ground.

I fought the urge to tell him to shut it, or Viktor was going to lose the last of

his patience. “Is that why you’ve always kept us at odds? To avoid us working together? Maybe if you hadn’t been the worst fucking father in the world, that might have worked too.” I spit out a hot mouthful of metal, streaking blood across the floor.

“I don’t know any other way, and now, neither do you. If you survive tonight, and one day have sons, you’ll see. My legacy lives on in you.”

“How cheerful,” Nikolai groaned.

“So, what are you going to do? How do we end this? You still need an heir,” I reminded Viktor. My whole body ached, and not just from the crash. Whatever beating he’d given me while I was unconscious had blunted my senses .

“Sadly true, so here’s what I’m thinking. I could have you gunned down by my men, or end one of you myself, but then, I’d still be making the decision. It’s probably best for you two to do it. Here, in the place where you first met and trained together . . . in the end, let’s see who is the better man.”

His loyal Chernov followers approached, cutting my tied wrists, and leaving me to sag on the chair. Nikolai was stirring, pushing himself up to stand. We stared at each other across the dark space.

Seven years had come to this.

I counted the men in the room, besides Viktor. There were only four. No doubt the most loyal and those with nothing to lose. We could take four. I tried to communicate that to Nikolai with my stare, just as he pitched himself forward and went for me.

We landed hard on the cold floor, grappling. He was hurt, but he didn’t want to die, and he fought like a man possessed. I blocked his punches as best I could, and we rolled on the ground, each trying to get a grip on the other. I had an advantage in that Nikolai was still wearing a shirt, easy to grip and haul around, while I was bare chested, with only my blood-slicked tattooed skin for his hands to slide off.

I lost track of how long we grappled. There were no movements out of bounds for a fight to the death, and we both knew it. I narrowly missed my eyes being gouged out, and losing teeth, while I nearly cracked Nikolai’s

head on the hard ground in a way he wouldn't get up from.

As my strength began to fail me, I found myself in the perfect position. Straddling Nikolai, pinning down his limbs with my legs, I had him. He was too weak to push me off. His breath rushed in and out, and his eyes were pained, staring into mine with silent words. I remembered the first time I'd met this half-brother and how we'd been lost and lonely teens together for a while until the lessons our father had taught us had broken us in different ways. The difference between us was that I'd had Molly to think about. A shining light in the dark. Nikolai had had no-one. His darkness was complete, and he'd lived inside the black hole within him ever since.

A slow clap sounded in the suddenly quiet room.

"*Bravo*, Kirill. It is you, then," Viktor said. He threw something to me, and it landed with a hard, metallic clatter near my leg. A knife. "Finish him and claim your victory."

"I kill Nikolai, and what—I'm boss? Planning on retiring?"

"Maybe. Maybe I'll go home. I've not seen the snow on Zhivopisny bridge in a decade," Viktor murmured.

No. Something protested deeply inside me. *This man didn't get to live.* Not when he'd made monsters of us all.

Viktor's look darkened as he watched me, and he tutted. "Still trying to kill me, son? You should know when you're outclassed. I'm always one step ahead. Pick up the knife, and become the winner first, and then we'll talk."

I looked down at Nikolai, grabbing the knife off the floor. He was too weak to fight back now, and I was fading, too. There was nothing like a fight to the death after a serious car accident and beating to make you aware of your limits.

I brought the knife to his throat and time seemed to stop. I stared into his eyes. He didn't fight me as I pressed it to his jugular.

If you survive tonight, and one day have sons, you'll see. My legacy lives on in you.

Viktor's ominous words pressed down on my tattered heart. I had vowed to kill Viktor *and* his legacy. It had started with Nikolai and me, and it would end with us. Molly's face passed through my mind. What would a man who was worthy of her do?

One day, if I walked out of here, I'd be a father.

Viktor's legacy of pain ended here—with us.

The knife dropped to the floor with a clatter. Nikolai's eyes widened, and he gave a nearly imperceptible nod. I shifted to the side as Viktor brought his fist smashing into his metal desk.

"Finish him Kirill! Stop being weak!" His roar echoed around the warehouse.

I shook my head as I pushed myself up slowly. "I'm not weak and neither is Nikolai. You are, Viktor. You've been afraid of your sons for so long; you don't know any other way."

"You're a fool. You'll both die here if you don't do it."

"No, I don't think we will—you still need an heir," I pointed out.

Viktor stared at me with true hatred and pointed to the floor. "Pick up that knife now and finish this, or I'll make you. You think you don't hate him enough to kill him? Let me tell you how I agreed to meet you tonight." He smiled, and it was utterly terrifying.

He lifted his arm and made a beckoning motion. Footsteps in heels sounded through the echoing space and the world stopped spinning.

She walked past me with her head held high, a man tugging her by the arm. Even though she had to be terrified, she walked like a queen.

Molly. My Molly.

"What do you think now? Still don't want to kill your brother?" Viktor taunted as he pulled Molly to him.

Her hands were tied behind her back, and her long hair was disheveled, but otherwise, she looked unharmed. Viktor turned her to face me, and the blood

drained from my face as my heart stuttered in my chest.

I heard Nikolai getting to his feet beside me. “Maybe you should have killed me when you had the chance,” he grunted, swaying beside me.

I turned to him, and surprisingly, the betrayal broke my heart all over again.

Nikolai dropped his gaze at the blazing accusation in my eyes. “Don’t look at me like that, Kirill. I had no choice. He was on to me; he’d never have met me here with so few guards if I didn’t offer her as a bargaining chip.”

“Enough talking! Both of you have to understand something about women. They aren’t to be trusted, and they are replaceable. I’ve learned that time and again. A warm hole is just that.”

Molly’s serene gaze stayed on me the entire time. She didn’t flinch, even when Viktor put a hand to her neck, pulling her head back.

“Look how she lets me do what I want, Kirill, because I have the power here. That’s what women really want. To be taken by the most powerful man in the room.”

Nikolai’s hand moved at his side, and I noticed he’d picked up the knife, but I couldn’t take my eyes from Mallory.

“Finish this now, Kirill, or I’ll hurt her.” Viktor’s voice sent a black rage descending over my vision. Then he chuckled. “Who knows, if Nikolai wins, now you’ve given him time to recover, maybe I’ll marry her myself and raise your kid.”

It was the last I heard as Nikolai started toward me. He slashed with the knife, and I twisted away. His jabs were clumsy and slow, and I avoided them easily, dancing backward across the bloodstained floor toward a couple of our silent bystanders. That Viktor had only brought four men he truly trusted proved his day had passed. If only he’d accept that.

Nikolai lunged for me, and I sidestepped. He slammed into the man standing against the wall instead, but it only slowed him a moment before he went for me again. I kept out of his reach, while desperately trying to watch Viktor and Mallory. Mallory’s eyes were on my father, and now he’d pulled her back against him. He ran his scarred hands down her front, pawing at her

chest.

“Get the fuck away from her!” The shout left me as Nikolai plowed against me, knocking me off my feet, and into another one of Viktor’s made men. This one pushed us away, but not before he gave a short, gurgling gasp.

I turned to stare as the sharp point of Nikolai’s knife pressed against my throat. I stilled, my heart pounding.

“Look what love has reduced you to, Kirill. Love for your brother, love for your wife . . . it’s been the most destructive force in your life.”

“That title is reserved for you,” I ground out.

“Yet love brought you to my door in the first place,” Viktor reminded me. “Watch what happens to your love now.” He smiled and Nikolai’s knife bit into my skin a little more.

“Just watch, *bratan*, you don’t want to miss the big finish,” Nikolai muttered in my ear.

The sick fuck. He thought I wanted to see Molly violated by my father before he killed me? I went to fight him, to push forward, even if it meant slitting my own throat, but Nikolai’s soft voice interrupted the torrent of reckless violence pushing out from me in a wave.

“It stops with us, Kirill. It stops tonight,” he said in a near whisper.

It was enough to stop me, just for a moment. I watched as Viktor leaned in and grabbed Molly’s head in a rough grip and kissed her. It felt like Nikolai’s knife was cutting into my heart instead of my throat. Viktor moved his lips across Molly’s and for the slightest horrifying moment, it seemed like she was kissing him back. Then he roared with anger as she suddenly lunged in. He pushed her away hard, backhanding her in the process, and she fell to the ground.

Viktor raised his hand to his mouth, touching his tongue with his fingers, and coming away red.

“You trying to take a chunk out of my tongue, you stupid bitch? Kirill should have taught you better. I guess that will fall to me.”

He dabbed his lips, looking like he was chewing his injured tongue, and then he spat on the floor. A look of confusion passed over his blunt features. He brought his hand to his mouth again, and he spat on his palm.

“Did you slip something into my mouth?” His voice was incredulous and subdued.

Molly levered herself slowly to her feet as Nikolai’s hand fell from my throat. He turned, suddenly showing more energy than I’d thought he had left in him. He lunged toward the two remaining made men watching their boss with confused expressions.

One he took down with his knife under the chin, blood spraying across his face. The other raised his gun at Nikolai, but I was already there, my punch taking him off guard as I grabbed his gun and turned it to the wall. The shots rang out in the warehouse, and I got hold of the weapon and turned it to the last remaining man and shot him point blank in the chest. He went down as I whirled to the other two. They were already slumped to the ground. The awkward staggering fight I’d had with Niko earlier suddenly made sense.

Stepping toward one, I saw that his jugular had been cut. I hadn’t even noticed them sliding to the floor, given the sight of Viktor and Mallory. I turned back to Viktor and saw him stagger against his desk. Molly was watching him carefully. Nikolai was watching too.

“Here,” he said, passing me the knife by its blood slicked handle. “You do it. It’s my gift to you, *bratan*, so you might decide not to gut me for bringing her here.”

I turned to look at my brother. There weren’t many people in this world who truly knew me. Molly and Nikolai were the two lonely souls who’d seen my best and worst. There was a quiet intimacy between the remaining people left alive in the room. The intimate nature of deciding to take a life and letting it happen.

I took the knife and approached Viktor. He was wheezing, fading rapidly. He still had his gun, but his hands seemed incapable of reaching for it. I took it and handed it to Molly. She gripped it steadily. Fuck, my princess was strong when she needed to be. I turned back to my father. He had sunk down to the floor now and was shaking slightly as his eyes moved in and out of focus.

“I’d say you have a few minutes, if I’m right about what my wife gave you.” I took the gun and pressed it to his knee. “Just long enough to make it hurt.” I rotated the gun around his kneecap, digging in. “I like joints. They are beautiful things to break. You taught me that.”

The first shot was echoed by Viktor’s bellow of pain.

“That’s for the track scholarship, and the life I would’ve had without you,” I told him darkly, before moving to the next knee.

With the next shot, his cry was less.

“That’s for fucking my brother up beyond recognition, and his mother too,” I said remorselessly. I moved my gun up, aiming for his shoulder this time.

“This is Fiona, who deserved the world.”

Viktor didn’t even react the next time, he simply stared at me. A bag of shattered bone and blood, dead without knowing it.

I moved the gun over his heart. “This one you should have known better. You never should have touched her. The first time you said her name, I knew it would end like this. For Molly,” I whispered, and pulled the trigger.

The shot was deafening in the high-ceilinged room. It seemed to echo endlessly around the walls and around my head at the same time. I sagged back to my knees, and after a minute, Molly plowed into my side. I cradled her against me. Pressing my face into her hair, I kissed her head. My angel had saved me in the end. The smell of blood, piss, and death filled the air, and I pressed my face further against Molly’s hair to comfort myself with her scent.

“Kirill, you’re all right,” she muttered quietly against my arm.

I found my head shaking, and it quickly spread to my arms. “I’m not all right. I’m not all right at all after that.”

“Killing your father?”

“Seeing you here, in danger—” I blew out a breath and tried to get the snarling wolves of fear and madness under control inside me. “I’m not all right.”

A dark chuckle floated to me, and I stiffened.

“Well, here we are. Last men standing,” Nikolai called to me, and the metallic clink of a gun being picked up sent me shooting to my feet. I gained my stance and leveled the gun at him, just as he did the same.

I pushed Molly behind me. “Stay behind me,” I warned her in a tone not made for arguing with.

“Well, *bratan*? We come down to it.”

“We had a truce,” I reminded him, though it was pointless. We’d both known it was going to come to this, hadn’t we? I needed to buy time, though, and getting Nikolai talking would work.

“We did, and we worked so well together, didn’t we?” Nikolai laughed again. “I’m sorry I had to get your little princess involved, but there really was no other way. Sometimes, a job just takes three.”

“He gave me a choice, Kirill. He told me his plan, and I agreed,” Molly piped up.

Of course, she agreed. The woman was braver than the fiercest made man I’d ever met. “We’ll talk about that later. A hundred things could have gone wrong.”

“Yeah, so you could have died a hundred different ways.” Molly’s voice was resolute. “You asked me to wait for you, and I did. I am. But I’m not waiting around for you to get killed without trying to help.”

“You are absolutely infuriating,” I ground out, my eyes never leaving Nikolai. He was watching us with a guarded expression. “Stay out of the way now. I mean it, Molly. Only one of us is leaving here as *pakhan*, and it’s going to be me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Nikolai smirked, but his heart wasn’t in it. He looked subdued; his normal maniacal psychopath energy was missing.

“Kirill, you don’t have to do this. Neither of you do. Work together. Why not?”

“We’d kill each other in a week,” I snapped.

“Well, that’s better than killing each other now, isn’t it?”

“I could never trust him. He brought you here tonight. He doesn’t know what it is to risk the most important thing to you.”

“Hey—I’m starting to feel left out of this conversation,” Nikolai cut in. “I say we both shoot, and settle who’s the best shot once and for all.”

“No! Please don’t. You’re brothers,” Molly cried.

“Don’t get involved, Princess.” I tried to sound reassuring.

I didn’t plan on dying at Nikolai’s hand, but I realized in that second that I wasn’t sure I could kill him. Somehow, in ending Viktor, I’d found the bottom to my darkness.

A sound floated to us from the hall, and my tension relaxed a notch. I swallowed my guilt and lifted my gun, aiming it at the ceiling in a peaceful gesture. Nikolai frowned at me. “I’m not going to kill my brother. You’re right. I don’t think I can come back from that.”

Nikolai’s gun wavered as he stared at me, trying to figure out what the fuck I was thinking.

Then the door to the room opened, and men spilled in. Dressed in black, they cut forbidding, capable figures as they moved through the darkness.

“Gun down, now!” someone shouted at Nikolai as four other armed men surrounded him.

He turned his puzzled face to mine as he slowly lowered his weapon.

Hard, slow footsteps rang through the warehouse, and the men shifted to let an older, distinguished looking man stroll into the space.

Antonio De Sanctis.

“Well, Kirill, it looks like you deliver on your promises after all,” Antonio said. He turned and strolled toward Nikolai and looked him up and down. “This will do fine, along with those deals we discussed.”

“Of course.”

Antonio looked around the room, taking in Viktor's body slumped on the ground, then turned back to me and clapped his hands together. "Congratulations on your ascension, Kirill Chernov, *pakhan*."

"Kirill, what's happening?" Molly asked, gripping my hand, and pressing herself against my side.

"The De Sanctis' need their pound of flesh," I told her. "They'll take it from Nikolai."

Nikolai's eyes were fixed on mine. There was a lot in that look, surprise, a reluctant respect for the move, and betrayal.

"A neat ending to this whole mess," Antonio said.

"You can't do this to your own brother," Molly exclaimed softly.

"He's alive. That's the most I can do for him. There was only ever going to be one of us walking out of here, Mallory. This is mercy," I told her flatly.

Antonio nodded and laughed. "We'll see how Nikolai feels about that mercy once I'm done with him," he said with grim humor. Then he turned to his men and nodded toward the door. "*Andiamo, tutti*."

The group moved toward the door as Ivan groaned from the corner and turned over. The last I saw of my brother was his dark eyes fixed on mine as he was taken away at gunpoint.

A heavy weight settled in my chest, but that was nothing new. If I hadn't taken Nikolai out, he would have challenged me for the title of boss, and I couldn't keep Molly safe if I wasn't the *pakhan*. He wasn't dead, and that was the biggest mercy I could extend to him.

Of course, he could get out of the De Sanctis grip one day, and come after me in revenge, but I didn't think he would. Niko knew when he was beaten, and besides, he'd shown tonight that somewhere beneath the abuse, trauma, and darkness in his soul, he cared about something. He cared about Mallory, and the baby, and maybe he even cared a little about me.

"What the fuck happened?" Ivan groaned from the ground. "Did I miss something important?" He turned his head and looked around the dark room

strewn with bodies.

My rusty, reluctant laugh tore from my chest as I took in the carnage. I laughed as Molly and Ivan stared at me. “Nothing much, brother. But you have been promoted.”

Ivan raised an eyebrow at me. “To what?”

“Bodyguard to the *pakhan*.”

Ivan whistled loudly, and a broad smile split his face. “I like the sound of that. It has a nice ring to it.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” I pulled Molly to me and pressed her close, still unable to believe we were both standing after that nightmare. “And you?”

“And me, what?”

“Queen of the Chernov bratva. How does that sound?”

She let out a long breath, the weight of everything that had happened clearly settling on her conscience. No doubt she was going to bother me about Nikolai, and before long, I’d be sacrificing even more business to Antonio De Sanctis to get him back, but for now, I put him out of my mind.

She looked at my neck, frowning as she took in the blood wreathing it from when Nikolai had held me at knifepoint. “You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine because you’re fine,” I told her, kissing her soundly.

The rest that was coming would be hard work. Taking over my father’s mantle and flushing out any of his supporters who had remained hidden inside would be tricky, but I could do it. Slowly, we’d build the bratva again, stronger, richer, and more powerful than before.

“That being said, don’t think I’m letting it go that you ran away from the safety I arranged for you and agreed to Nikolai’s insane plan. You could have been hurt, Molly. The baby could have been hurt.”

“Well, don’t think I’ve forgotten that you had me arrested to control me,” she accused softly. “We’re even.”

“Oh, Princess,” I breathed, pulling her close and kissing her forehead. “We

aren't even nearly close, but don't worry. I have lots of ideas for how to make us even." I gave her a dark, hungry look that made her flush.

I lowered a hand to Ivan and helped him stand, then put my arm around Molly.

"Now, let's get the fuck out of here and go home."

EPILOGUE

MOLLY

F all in New York was beautiful. I walked over the crunching carpet of leaves blanketing the cemetery where Henry had been laid to rest and headed toward the familiar tombstone. I didn't come here often. Henry had been a bad person, and my life was better without him, but sometimes, on my way to visit Mara and Fiona at Cedar Green nursing home, I stopped here.

Max held an umbrella over my head, and a light misting of rain fell on my thick coat. I crouched over the grave and cleared some leaves from it.

"Do you want your mother buried here one day?" Max asked.

"God, no. I want a cheerful, happy place for her," I said, hoping that day was a long time away.

Even if my mother hadn't spoken to me or acknowledged my presence in over a decade, I still looked forward to bringing the babies to her. I hoped she'd know, somewhere deep inside, that everything we'd been through was over, and I was happy.

I attempted to stand and stalled. "Ugh, can you give me a hand?"

"On it," Max said, taking me under the elbow and pulling me up.

He wasn't the only one in my security entourage these days, but he was the boss, and he enjoyed the privileged position of being my friend as well. He was hauling me up a lot lately as I got heavier.

“The little one weighing you down today?” he asked as he held my arm over the slippery stone and guided us back to the car.

“The little one is always weighing me down lately. Seriously, men have no clue how hard this is,” I muttered.

“If it counts, I have been stabbed and shot on a semi-regular basis.”

“The fact that you can compare proves you’ve no idea,” I teased him.

Ahead, I could see the black SUV we’d come in and another pulling up. Lately, no matter where I went, Kirill found the time to drop in on me. He got out of the car with Ivan standing at his shoulder, and Pyotr at the other.

He was even more imposing these days with a thick scar on his neck on the other side of his fearsome looking tattoo. He was dressed head to toe in black, a six-foot-four demon who looked more at home here with a cemetery behind him than in the city.

He strode toward me, his black coat flapping wide, uncaring of the rain. Max stepped back as Kirill took the umbrella from him, wrapped an arm around my lower back and pulled me flush against him. Well, as flush as he could, considering my swollen belly.

We were having a girl. Suffice it to say, security had increased at The Tower, and Kirill had immediately made plans to move his base of operations from New York to Woodhaven. Soon, we’d move there permanently, and he’d travel to the city as needed. It wasn’t ideal, considering the way the bratva business was booming, but it was what he wanted. He needed a partner, and I’d told him that often enough. I’d made it no secret I thought it should be Nikolai. Lately, I knew he was considering it.

Kirill kissed me hard, his tongue sliding between my lips and across mine before I’d even had a chance to greet him.

“Excuse me, sir. Do I know you?” I teased him as he tucked his arm around mine, and we started toward the car.

If I’d thought the power and aura of danger he wielded before had been impressive, it was nothing compared to the kind of authoritative presence my husband commanded now. When he walked into a room, I’d seen world

famous politicians and public figures stand a bit straighter. Kirill had arrived and was finally carving his own future.

And me? I was right where I'd always wanted to be: by his side.

"I had to come and see you, as I have a gift for you," he murmured.

"A gift? I love gifts," I sighed.

"I know you do, my spoiled little princess," he teased me.

"Hey, if I'm spoiled, it's your fault," I said indignantly as I got into the car, and he held the umbrella over me until I was safely out of the rain.

"You mean, it's my honor," he murmured, getting in beside me. There was a box on the roomy back seat. "There it is, open it."

Nerves squirmed in the pit of my belly as I looked at the brown box. "Is it what I think it is?"

"It is indeed."

I opened the lid and reached inside. The hardback book was weighty in my hands. I pulled it out and smoothed my hand over its glossy cover.

"Ronan assures me he's on top of the contract for this, and the next three books—"

"I don't care about that. I just care that this is my book!" I hugged it to me.

The sharkish, dangerous looking lawyer who had helped to shut me in the police precinct on the night of Viktor's death had turned out to be good friends with Kirill and a frequent guest at dinner. I was slowly getting used to him.

"I wrote a book," I said to him, holding it up and turning it this way and that, still marveling that this was real and not a dream.

"You wrote a book, Princess," Kirill confirmed.

"I wrote a book about us," I continued, still dazed.

Kirill nodded. "I know. I've read it. And you'll note from the cover that it's a

love story.”

“I know. I wrote it, remember?”

“I’m making sure you know I was right after all,” he murmured, pulling me close.

“You’re the absolute worst,” I muttered, grinning from cheek to cheek.

“Tell me something I don’t know. Tell me you love me,” he pressed.

“You already know that,” I said, my cheeks warm as his dark gaze moved over my face like it was the most precious thing in the world to him.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll never tire of hearing it.”

“Hmm, I’ll consider saying it more often, then. However, I do have a question—how did you know I was here? Are you stalking me?”

“Maybe. What are you going to do about it, Princess? Run away?” He leaned in, tucking my hair back and exposing my ear. His lips brushed across my skin, making me shiver. “There’s nowhere you could go that I wouldn’t find you.”

Those dark words warmed me instead of scaring me. If we were ever parted, Kirill would find me. I believed that with all my heart.

“I’ll report you if you’re not careful, weird boy,” I murmured, a challenge in my eyes.

“Do it and see what happens. You will never leave me, and I’ll never let you.” His hand cupped my jaw, tilting my head back, and holding me supplicant.

I let out a sigh and surrendered to his touch. “Promise?”

“I absolutely fucking guarantee it, Princess.”

The End



Join my newsletter for a bonus scene of Molly attending Theo's wedding, and her thrilling journey home, when she's stalked by a familiar menace

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MADE OF MAYHEM DUET - SNEAK PEEK

Sofia

Coming home in a cab was against my father's rules. However, I only got punished for it if he found out. Today, I was taking that risk.

As I neared the house, I noticed the lack of activity in and around the compound. So, they really were getting a new 'guest' settled in Casa Nera, my childhood home, if a prison could be called a home.

It wouldn't be first time that I'd been aware that someone was being held in one of the cells in the basement of the old mansion. When I was a child, I'd first come across the lowest level, where my father carried out his darkest deeds. You didn't end up being *capo dei capi* of one of the richest, and most violent mafia families on the East Coast without spilling blood, and I feared that the ground of Casa Nera, and every flower that grew in its opulent gardens was fertilized by human remains. It was a gothic mansion, resting on real bones. I shivered, forcing my mind away from such morbid imaginings, as I crunched up the gravel.

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

Sighing to myself, as the heels of my designer boots sank into the thin mud

just under the gravel, I marched on, skirting around the entrance to Casa Nera itself and heading for the garage. One person I knew would be home was Carmella, our family chef. If I came in from the front door, and not the garage entrance then she'd know something was up. She'd missed her calling as a detective.

Punching the code into the keypad, I entered the garage. It was dark inside, and I fumbled in my pocket for my phone's torch. The smell of grease and gas met my nose, oily and addictive. There was another note to the smell. Something sharp, like fire and metal.

My torch turned on, and I raised it. The garage was huge, taking up nearly the entire floor of the mansion. Luxury cars and ones with enough bullet-proofing to protect a president sat under covers, unmoving like sleeping beasts.

I started through the cavernous space, my boots echoing on the concrete floor. As I reached one of the cars that we used frequently, I paused, surprised to see that the doors were hanging open.

The interior was too dark to make out, but there was no denying the way the shiny SUV's doors were gaping. As I drew closer cautiously, I noticed that the trunk was open as well.

Tension notched down my spine, like cold, dead fingers tracing a line downward, sending gooseflesh rippling out from the point of contact.

Something wasn't right.

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 my mouth.

Instead, a hard, metallic tasting hand clamped hard over my mouth and a rigid body pressed into me from behind, another arm banding like a steel bar across my waist.

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 firstly by his strength, and secondly, my own terror.

I felt him rub his nose through my hair and his hard chest inhaled deeply, pressing firmly against the back of my head. “Sofia De Sanctis. Have you missed me, *kotenok*?”

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 a man who haunted my nightmares.

Nikolai Chernov. In the flesh.

My shock and terror lasted a few seconds, before I jerked out of my frozen state and started to fight him. He grunted when my elbow connected with his side, and he hauled me around to press me against the wall. My phone fell, clattering on the floor, the torch still on. The beam of light ended up angled upwards, as Nikolai pressed my face into the wall, his forearm resting across the back of my neck. He moved his face to rest beside mine, meeting my eyes for the first time.

“Now, that’s no way to greet me. Don’t forget your manners, Sofia, they’re all that separate us from the beasts,” he said, amusement filling his words.

His face was bloodied, and he already had a black eye swelling. His full lower lip was split and crusted with red. He caught me staring. “I’ve had a long few hours, waiting with the bodies of the pathetic guards your father though were a match for me, waiting for a little lamb to wander through here, and help me out.” He smirked, and made my anxiety climb back up my throat and choke me. “I’m so glad it’s you, *kotenok*.”

His hand had loosened slightly from my lips, and I jerked my head up, just

quickly enough that he couldn't cover it. "I'll never help you," I spat at him.

His fingers clamped back over my mouth, silencing me.

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

Grab Nikolai's story now, starting with **Malevolent King**



MILA KANE



I'm obsessed with cats, coffee, and anti-heroes just the right side of insane.

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