



*Stolen*

**INNOCENCE**

ARIA RAY

*Stolen Innocence*

*A Secret Baby Russian Mafia Romance*

Aria Ray

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## *About the Book*

**Marked for death, her little secret turned him from reaper to keeper.**

As a ruthless enforcer, my orders are clear: go in, eliminate, disappear into the shadows. But when I saw the innocence in that little girl's fearful eyes, stirring echoes of my own past, I couldn't follow through. She was purity amidst the monsters—I took her and vanished.

Soon, I realized why those eyes struck me—her mother is Alissa, a woman burned into my memory from a passionate night five years ago. Ravishing. Vulnerable. Naive. Alissa was never meant for my cutthroat world, so I walked away.

Now, fate brings us back together, each with our secrets. Can I save her daughter and punish the guilty without exposing my ties to the underworld? And is there more between us than memories of that intense night?

# *Prologue*

## *Alissa*

At twenty-two years old I was drinking my first martini ever. I felt proud as I settled in at the little corner table in the bar. My parents would have lost their minds at the prospect of me drinking alcohol, and doing so in a public bar would have been unthinkable.

Ever since leaving home at eighteen, I'd slowly come up with a game plan for my life. Junior college, work, a comparative religions class, therapy, and a series of experiments with different vices—I guess you could call it reverse brainwashing.

My parents' list of what constituted as vice had sounded crazy tame when they'd read it to me when I was ten, and sounded even tamer now that I was using it as a to-do list. Most of my experiments had left me wondering what the big deal was. But I'd been having a lot of fun along the way.

I had watched dozens of R-rated movies, tasted beer, coffee, soda, and all kinds of desserts and junk food, and stayed up after midnight on countless occasions.

I didn't like short skirts too much, as they made me feel too exposed, but I loved baring my arms. Especially in such hot weather. I actually had a tan, and thanks to all the exercise I was getting sorting and making deliveries at my job, I even had some nice muscle definition going. I had clipped my hip-length, ash-blond hair into a pixie cut in another act of wild defiance and donated almost two decades of uncut hair to a wig charity.

The makeup was a sin, too, along with the hint of rose perfume. I couldn't walk well in heels yet, or I would have been wearing those as well. And I couldn't afford luxuries like silk or gold, aside from the odd secondhand scarf or dress. One day, though, I would. I had promised myself a better life than I had ever dreamed of while trapped with my parents.

Working and earning my own money? Sin. Reading fiction? Sin. Dating? All the sin. Not that that had been anything to write home about so far. But I

was still hopeful.

I loved being free. It was hard and scary sometimes, and even after a few years a lot of it was unfamiliar. I stumbled over social rules I didn't know, and my shyness didn't help things. But even though there were mistakes, mishaps, and even acts of malice that hurt so much along the way, I never regretted leaving.

The worst part of my new life had been figuring out how to handle my social life. After spending almost my entire first two decades being told to shun outsiders, I had started out painfully shy and awkward. I had always been worried that I would say or do something the person I was talking to would find offensive simply because I didn't know better. Sometimes I still worried, though I had gotten a lot more confidence along the way. I even had five really good friends I could count on.

Aside from being out at the bar and having a stiff drink, I was also looking to check something else off my sin list, and that had me a little more nervous than I had felt in over six months.

The *big* sin. The one my mother would have really lost her mind over.

Having good sex.

I had slept with all of two guys in my years of freedom, and it had been pretty underwhelming. I was tired of bad lovers. From now on, I would find out if a guy was good in bed before getting into a relationship, and if he wasn't, whether he was willing to learn and do what I liked. I absolutely refused to go through an orgasm-free long-term relationship.

After watching the insanity of my parents' marriage, I was determined to hold my partner to some actual standards. The tired speech my mother had given me at seventeen about 'marital duties', with resentment simmering in her eyes the whole time, had been a warning in itself. I was done with the idea of 'lying back and thinking of Jesus' while some jackass used my body like a sex doll. I just wasn't willing to settle for a man who was selfish and inept in bed.

The problem there was that I didn't yet know what I liked. Nobody had explored that with me. I knew from the books I had read what things sounded



sexy or fun, but I didn't have any idea which ones would actually feel good. I needed a man who liked pleasing women to help me figure all of this out. But I didn't want to burn through a whole relationship just to learn what my body liked.

My martini arrived on a thin cork coaster printed with the bar's logo. I scooped it up and took an experimental sip.

A few seconds later, I set it down with my eyes watering. Holy crap, that was pretty much straight gin.

It tasted herbal, aromatic, slightly citrusy, and like liquid death from all the alcohol. I dabbed at my eyes carefully with my napkin so my mascara wouldn't run. It occurred to me, between this and the beer sampler I had choked down a week ago, that I simply might not be much of a drinker. As I took another swallow of the martini and almost gagged, I just couldn't see how this stuff could appeal to anyone.

By the time I had thoroughly confirmed that the tastiest thing about a martini was the olive, someone in the bar had caught my eye. He had settled into a seat at a table near mine. He was huge and Slavic-looking, with a strong, high cheekbones, a long, straight nose, and deep-set gray eyes. His hair fell to his shoulders in black-brown waves. Wrapped in a light overcoat of some slightly shiny black fabric, his sleek, powerful build caught my attention in a way that made my stomach do a little flip.

He caught me looking right away, his eyes flicking up to meet mine so quickly that it startled me. He smiled, looking amused—I smiled back, feeling incredibly awkward. That seemed to amuse him more. Was he into shy nerds? Only one way to find out.

He was drinking an iced Irish coffee that looked a lot tastier than the waste of money I was slowly choking down. I made a mental note to try that the next time I walked into a bar. I was captivated by his large, long-fingered hands, and by his thin, well-shaped lips. I wondered what he thought of the young woman half his size who kept taking peeks at him.

Just as I was trying to work my way up to walking over and trying to talk to him, he grabbed his drink and stood up. Before I knew what was

happening, he had stepped over to my table and stood across from me, gazing down at me with that same small, amused smile.

“May I sit?” he asked, his voice deep, raspy, and cordial in tone. He had a very slight accent, almost imperceptible.

I nodded, and he pulled out the chair and slid into it, setting his glass down on the coaster in front of him. “Call me Dimitri,” he said mildly. “What should I call you?”

“Alissa.”

He took a swallow of his drink. “Well, Miss Alissa, what brings you out tonight?”

“Looking for company and trying my first cocktail.” I touched my glass for emphasis, but no force on earth could have convinced me to take another mouthful. My stomach felt a little pickled already.

“Your first? Did you just turn twenty-one?”

“No, I just hadn’t ticked it off my list yet.” I winced slightly. “I don’t think martinis are my style, though.”

“Gin is an acquired taste. Not everyone likes juniper. Perhaps something sweet would be more to your taste.”

“Maybe.” I had avoided any sweet drinks so far because I was still getting used to sweets. Many of them were overwhelming to me. Even an ordinary mango had surprised me with its powerful flavor. “I just always thought the martinis made people holding them look more sophisticated, I guess.”

“Ah. But sophistication is in the mind and the manner, not in the glass.” His gaze swept over me, taking in everything from my earrings to my dress to my shoes before settling on my eyes again. “You manage fairly well without the martini glass, little rose.”

My cheeks prickled with warmth, and I covered my smile with my hand shyly.

He lifted an eyebrow. “Do you always hide your mouth when you smile?”

I blinked and lowered my hand a little self-consciously. “I guess it’s a habit. I barely notice it.”

“I see.” He glanced around briefly. “I’m surprised you’re here on your own. Don’t young ladies tend to travel in packs in bars?”

I laughed a little. “Um, I guess so. All my friends were busy tonight, though, and I was bored.” Besides, I didn’t want a bunch of friends running interference. I wasn’t sure all of them would have approved of my plan.

“You’re not concerned for your safety, alone in a bar in this neighborhood?”

“Not really. I know how to defend myself.” Self-defense classes were another item I had knocked off my Sin List, for obvious reasons. This was Chicago, the big city. I couldn’t rely on a man, my family, or God for safety all of the time. I had to know how to take care of myself.

“Good to know.” His eyebrows were climbing his forehead slowly, he didn’t look convinced.

“Yeah,” I joked, forcing a wry little grin, “so you’d better watch your manners, or your ankles are toast.”

He burst out laughing. “Oh, I see! I shall have to keep that in mind, little rose. I would not wish to feel your thorns.”

I smiled and looked down into my glass, a little embarrassed. “Yeah, well, don’t underestimate us tiny girls.”

“I never would. My own mother was quite small.”

I looked him up and down. “Did she marry a giant?”

“No, she married a mill worker. He was rather tall, though.” He chuckled and took a swallow of his drink.

We were still in the small-talk zone. I thought I was doing okay, but my desperate inexperience with flirting was adding to my nerves. Could I actually seal the deal with a guy I didn’t know like normal women did all the time?

Maybe. No way of knowing until I tried. “So, what do you do, anyway?”

He hesitated for just a moment, long enough for me to see his expression shift, and become a touch more guarded. “I’m in private security,” he said smoothly enough. “Yourself?”

I shrugged. “I do deliveries and work some online as well.”

“I see. What do you aim to do?”

“Well, I have a list of things I’ve wanted to do since I was little. As soon as I got away from my parents, I started checking things off. But if you’re talking career, I’m still figuring that out.”

*Free.* If I had to boil down what I wanted to be in one word, that was it. I didn’t want to be smothered by my parents or in some marriage they arranged with a guy twice my age. I didn’t want to be someone’s property. I wanted my own money, my own home, my own ability to choose and control my own life. “Whatever will keep me living independently is fine with me.”

He took a sip of his drink and then looked up at me. “You said ‘got away from’ your parents.”

“I did. Yeah, they were...not fabulous. We’re not in contact.” It had taken the threat of a protection order to stop my father, but I had won myself eighteen months and counting, of peace away from them.

“Ah, I see. It is unfortunate that some people are blessed with a child but do not treat it as a blessing.” His way of constantly watching me unnerved me a little. He seemed to loom, even perched on his chair. But it didn’t seem to be something he could help. He didn’t have a menacing air, and he wasn’t setting off any alarm bells. He was just a touch overwhelming up close.

But that only made me want him more. I wanted to know how those large hands would feel on my skin. I wanted to know what his weight would feel like pressing down on me. I wondered if he used his teeth in bed, and what he would do to me.

“It’s not even that they didn’t care about me. They were that flavor of Jesus freak who thinks a girl just living her life the way most people do is

unforgivable.” I hesitantly took another sip of the martini, but it just never got any better.

“Kindly stop torturing yourself, little rose. I’ll order you something tastier.” He raised a hand to get a server’s attention and ordered me some kind of coffee liqueur mixed with cream over ice. I blushed, though I knew I didn’t really have a reason to.

“Thank you.” I examined the drink as it was set in front of me; it looked more like a dessert than booze.

“So, what else is on your list?”

I smiled shyly at him. “Mostly things like visiting New Orleans, learning to scuba dive, getting a doctorate.”

“In what?” He had a way of watching me while I spoke that made me feel really listened to. A lot of men, my father included, mostly seemed to just wait for me to stop speaking, sometimes even with a bored look on their faces. At first, I had thought I must be terribly boring, and had gotten even shyer. Then I had realized that every guy who did that had later proven himself to be an asshole.

“I’m still figuring out what I’m good enough at to go all the way with,” I admitted. “I don’t even really know what all my interests are yet.”

He blinked, and his intense eyes filled with a mix of confusion, curiosity, and a touch of pity. That last one, I hated.

“I mean, I’ve figured some things out. But I’m playing catch-up on learning about a lot of things.” I was talking quickly now, embarrassed by the pity, wanting to erase it.

“It is good that you have gained the opportunity. What else of the outside world’s pleasures have you yet to sample?”

The way he put words together told me he was foreign, even if he’d mastered English better than I ever had any other language. It made him seem exotic, and even more mysterious.

I got a little desperate from him smoldering at me, and that made me bold.

“Men.”

“Ah.” He nodded, a certain masculine interest in the curve of his smile. “I see. I may be of help in that department.”

My breath caught and my heart pounded in my chest. *Oh boy.* Okay, I could handle this. “I was kind of hoping you’d say that.”

“You know that after tonight, we’ll probably never see each other again,” he warned me gently.

My mouth went dry. That was part of the whole point, but he intrigued me so much I immediately felt a twinge of regret. But there was no backing out now. I didn’t want to miss my chance with him.

My gaze flicked to his left hand almost unconsciously. No ring, and no sign that he normally wore one. That was what would have stopped me, hurting someone else in the process.

“I know,” I said firmly. “I’m not looking for a husband.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “What are you looking for?”

“I want...” This was hard. I steeled myself, wondering why saying such a simple thing was somehow so difficult and embarrassing. “I want to know why so many people will risk so much just to have sex.”

He blinked, then drained the rest of his Irish coffee and set the mug aside. “You have not before?”

Now I was really blushing. “I did. I mean, not much. But so far, I just don’t see what the big deal is.”

Mild horror flickered into his expression. “I see. Well.” His smile returned slowly, almost lazily. “Again, I believe I can be of assistance there.”

I took a deep breath and let it out, then took a swallow of my drink. It tasted like a mix of coffee ice cream and having someone shove a lit match into my sinuses. I choked slightly and set it down carefully, eyes tearing up again.

“Okay,” I sighed. “It’s official. Alcohol and I do not like each other.”

He laughed softly, the intensity in his eyes gentling. But the heat between us didn’t waver. “Perhaps we should skip straight to leaving, then.”

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His car was a dark blue old-model Mercedes with tinted windows, and he drove like he’d lived in Chicago all his life. I sat in the passenger seat, somewhere between dizzy with desire and praying I hadn’t just made a terrible mistake. He hadn’t even touched me yet, and my whole body hummed like he’d been stroking it, my nipples so tight they hurt a little.

He brought me to a hotel room far enough from home I knew I’d have to Uber back to my tiny rental. The desk clerk seemed to know him, they chatted together in Russian before Dimitri took his key card and led me up to the twentieth floor.

Inside, the bed was right next to a broad window that showed the whole glittering skyline. I walked over to admire the view as he turned the air conditioning up.

I heard the rustle of him removing his coat, and shifted my gaze to watch his reflection. He was bending down to lock something in the hotel safe underneath the table, his crisp dress shirt straining just a little across his broad back before he straightened. I bit my lip, struggling to catch my breath again.

He moved up behind me, the heat from his body sinking into me. He leaned down until I felt his warm breath on my neck and then kissed my pulse. His teeth scraped my skin very lightly, and I let out a whimper, caving in to the urge to melt back against him.

Dimitri was now sliding my rose-pink dress off my shoulders as he kept kissing my neck. When the silk slid down off my breasts, my nipples showed through my satin bra in impatient little points. Gasping for air, heart pounding, I started to tremble when he unhooked my bra. He was still completely clothed except for his shoes, which he’d stepped out of by the door.

His large, warm hands cupped my breasts eagerly once the bra fell away, stroking them nimbly while I arched back against him and panted for air. He was huge and solid behind me, holding me effortlessly while his fingertips teased my tight nipples until I squirmed.

When I couldn't stand it anymore, I turned and pressed against him, his kiss stealing my breath. His hands slid down to cup my ass and lift me against him. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, lost in his kiss, already craving his bare body against mine.

He carried me to the bed and laid me down on it, trailing kisses down my neck to my collarbone and down to my breast. He teased my nipple with his lips and tongue before sucking until my breath came in sobs and I was shaking all over.

I dug my nails into the fabric of his shirt. I wanted to touch him, to feel his skin, but his mouth was trailing over to my other breast, and then teasing my other nipple until I thrashed under him. My coordination was gone, my breath was gone, my vision swam. All I could do was feel.

And then he was moving away, and I moaned in disappointment until I saw what he was doing. He stripped impatiently, unbuttoning and shouldering out of his shirt, pulling the tank top under it over his head, revealing pale muscle crisscrossed with black tattoos. In the dim lighting, I couldn't even sort out the images.

When his pants dropped, I did my best not to stare, but it was tough, especially when he rolled the condom on. He looked like I couldn't have fit my hand around him. Dimitri was a big man, and his cock was no exception. I hoped he was careful with it.

He loomed over me, caressing my skin with warm sweeps of his broad, callused hands. I could feel his excitement, hear the shudder in his breath. But he didn't just push in like I was used to, though we were both naked now and the rubber was on.

His mouth joined his hands and trailed over me, making me moan and twist and ache inside in a way I had never felt. His tongue flicked nimbly against my nipple, making my toes curl. Then he lifted me to his mouth and



sucked until it almost hurt. My voice broke in hoarse cries as my fingers tangled in his hair. Then he eased off and started exploring me again.

By the time his fingers parted my folds and his tongue found my clit, I was already so turned on that I found myself begging and digging my nails into his shoulders. My thighs wanted to squeeze together but he held them open, delving in and licking me in slow, delicate strokes that gathered speed and strength.

I'd never felt anything this good. My muscles got tighter and tighter and I shook uncontrollably as he found a fast rhythm and flicked it over my clit until I couldn't catch my breath. I lifted my hips against his face as he feasted on me, hips jolting with every velvety swipe of his tongue. Inside, I felt the most beautiful tension, a mix of bliss and a hunger for even more sensation growing and growing until he had to hold me down with both hands.

It was good, it was amazing, it was unbelievable, it was *too good*, and then suddenly I couldn't think or feel anything else. Ecstasy exploded outward from my clit in waves, and I lost all control, crying out wildly.

I collapsed onto the mattress, everything hazy, body aglow. Only then did he settle over me, his girth sliding easily into my relaxed body. The fire he'd stoked in me rushed through me again, and I felt my flesh tighten around him. I moaned and gasped with every thrust, feeling my muscles tense toward orgasm again. He kept driving me toward it, tireless as a machine, but with his breath starting to come in hoarse little groans. His passion fed mine, then he let out a moan that pushed me over the edge in the same moment.

His deep voice murmured encouragement in my ear as the pleasure made me thrash under him. "Yes, little rose, there you go, yes..." was said with such tenderness that I almost wept.

But then I arched and ground my hips in time with those delicious spasms and he went wild, speeding his movements until we were both trembling and groaning and straining together. In the middle of losing my mind again, I felt his cock jump inside me, and he shouted hoarsely in time with every stroke until the last spasm rolled through us both.

I lay there under him, stunned, wide-eyed with this new revelation of what

my body could do in the hands of a skilled lover. My past lovers had cheated me of more than I had ever realized.

I wanted to stay awake, knowing that morning would come too soon, and after that he would walk out of my life. I didn't want that. I wanted this bed, this room, and this man for far longer than a few hours. But he had exhausted me.

I fell asleep in his arms, understanding now why some women chased certain men, fought over them, and stayed stuck on them when they behaved badly. There was more to it than just ride-or-die love. And now that I had tasted it, I didn't want to go back to selfish, mediocre lovers.

But Dimitri was still leaving. And as I slipped off into sweet dreams, I understood that I would never see him again.

# *Chapter 1*

*Alissa*

*Five Years Later*

**I**t was mid-February when my hero-cop boyfriend of four months, Alan, went stomping out of my life. I stared out the window of my tiny one-bedroomed apartment as he quickly crossed the street, wishing he would lose his footing on the inch-thick ice, and break something going down. I didn't feel at all bad for thinking it.

It was the kind of breakup that had started building almost from the first week we had gotten together. I had been desperate enough to ignore that. Now, looking at him stalking across the street, all I could do was wipe my tears and move on. I never wanted to see him again.

We had met seven months into the investigation of my daughter Michelle's kidnapping. He had been one of a revolving cast of lead investigators on the case, which kept stalling, hitting dead ends, and turning up nothing no matter how much it changed hands. I had nothing in my life but surviving and trying to find my baby.

Alan must have seen me as an easy target, someone bereaved, alone, vulnerable, starved for any scrap of affection, easy to con into bed, into cooking for him, into doing his damn laundry. Raw with the need for my daughter and desperate for company, I'd let him have his way at first. But there was still a line inside me that couldn't be crossed if a man wanted me to keep him around. He had crossed it, so, painful or not, that was that. Out he went.

It had all come to a head thirty minutes ago, when he had shaken me awake for pre-breakfast sex. I had been doing my best to put up with his awkward groping and poking. He wasn't very good in bed, too selfish to even try to learn my body or my wants. Not like my last lover at all.

In fact, he was such a downgrade from Dimitri that it embarrassed me now that I had ever slept with him. Slept with him more than the handful of times it took to figure out he was inept in bed and refused to learn. But he was manipulative, whiny, borderline threatening sometimes, and, eventually, I had always caved in. For the last four months, sex had been a chore.

I had tolerated Alan's idea of sex, knowing anything I asked for would go in one ear and out the other, and comforting myself that his mediocre fucking wouldn't last long. But then he had whispered something in my ear that had gone off like a bomb in my heart, leaving me squirming my way out from under him and groping for my clothes, *Just let Michelle go. I'll give you plenty of beautiful babies to replace her with.*

It wasn't the first time he had tried to tell me that my daughter was gone, that there was no one to find, that I was selfish for tying up police resources looking for a kid who statistics clearly said was likely no longer alive to be rescued. Finally, I had had enough. Everyone has a line, and he had crossed it. I might have been sad, desperate for news about my baby, and craving affection, but loneliness was better than attaching myself to a heartless creep like him.

I should have never let him in. Not into my body, my heart, or my life at all. If I had learned anything in the last year, it was that cops could not be trusted. Nobody with a badge lived up to their office anymore. *Protect and Serve*, was a load of crap.

What did they care if a poor single mom's daughter got snatched from her daycare? Not enough. Nowhere near enough, not even when leaned on, not even when I'd used the internet and the press to seek leads on my own. I'd missed out on a year of her life—would she even remember me? That's what killed me, missing out on those precious early bonding moments. Would she be calling someone else mommy now? Then, there were the other dark thoughts about who took her and why. But I had to stop myself from going there, I only hoped that whoever had my baby was treating her well.

Soon, likely with Alan's input, the investigation would go cold, and I alone would be left searching for Michelle. And what could I do alone?

Nothing.

The idea of giving up on Michelle was unthinkable to me. I knew she was out there somewhere—but alive. She couldn't be otherwise. I couldn't even fit that idea into my head.

But that didn't mean I would get to find her. It didn't mean she would get to be saved. The cops who were supposed to help me do that, didn't want the job. Alan was just rude and cruel enough to have said aloud what they were all probably thinking. In missing persons cases the first forty-eight hours are the most important, the odds of solving a case decrease by fifty percent after that. My baby had been gone for eleven months, the chance of anyone finding her was practically zero. Maybe I should let go, but how can you let go of your child? You can't. You have to believe.

As I put some tea to steep, I sent a text message to my grief support group leader, letting her know what had happened.

Knowing Lorelei, she wouldn't even be up to answer for hours, but I expected her to celebrate once she did so. The whole group had been on me to get rid of Alan, viewing him rightly as an asshole who was abusing me mentally and emotionally. But they didn't understand. The loneliness was like starving, it made me desperate. Alan had exploited it, plain and simple.

I needed someone to commiserate with. Someone who understood what it was like to live through months of a man's selfishness and lousy sex when you could remember how wonderful men could be and how amazing, good sex was. But of my friends and support system, those who worked from home probably weren't awake yet, and those who didn't were probably rushing through breakfast right now.

After showering, I stripped the bed and put on fresh sheets and pillowcases before lying down. I didn't want to lie there smelling his cologne and cigarettes. Never again.

Snuggling under the quilt, I sighed and faced the small north window, which had been iced into a blurry white rectangle by the storm. The bed felt vast without Alan there, the bedding generous enough to lose myself under.

Thank God I was ahead on my work. I worked from home as a CPA, but when I'd looked for somewhere for me and Michelle to live, this apartment

came up. They needed a maintenance manager, which sounded important, but it was mainly someone to sort out any problems in the other apartments. In return I got a generous discount on the rent. However, one of the suppliers was being an ass, and jobs were left unfinished. The building manager had been okay about it, but said if the work didn't get done soon, then they'd have to start charging me full rent. I let my eyes slide closed while I thought about the need to pick up another accounting client if these part delays kept affecting the discount I got on my rent. Otherwise, there would be no making ends meet, on top of everything else.

I fell sleep thinking about money worries, which while not pleasant was much preferable to Alan's parting tantrum or Michelle's aching absence, but still a reminder of my brutal waking life. I welcomed oblivion, or even nightmares, just to get a break.

What I got instead was a memory. One that often worked its way into my dreams, waking me panting and frustrated just as it was getting good.

*My mystery lover, the man who showed me how good sex could be. He's here, and I'm not in my bed anymore. I'm stretched out on his hotel bed instead, misted in sweat, shaking, without a stitch on.*

*He tells me to call him Dimitri. I doubt that's his real name.*

*He knows I've never had an orgasm. Ever since hearing that, he's seemed to take it as a challenge.*

*The lash of his tongue mixes with the hard rhythm of his cock, the feel of my heels digging into his bedclothes, and the blissful look on his face as he thrusts into me. Our voices mixing in delighted cries. His hoarse groan of my name a second before my body takes off, ecstasy erupting through me.*

I gasped awake, pussy still spasming, disoriented and confused, and wondering where he had gone. Then came the realization, disappointment, and a small measure of relief.

My mind had found me a distraction, memories of sex so good that it wiped away all those mediocre memories of Alan's body on mine. Instead, I woke preoccupied with my mystery lover, that man who five years ago had pleased me to exhaustion and then walked away, oblivious to the gift he'd

left me with. A gift that, despite all the hardships it would mean, I had decided to keep.

I'd named her Michelle. And I had cherished her, changed my whole life around for her, worked and saved and struggled and kept on for her. Until the day an unknown woman claiming to be my sister had taken her from her negligent daycare and disappeared.

Michelle, my baby daughter, delicate but tough, soft-hearted like me, an animal lover. Michelle, who loved purple and couldn't understand why she couldn't dye her hair at the ripe old age of three. She'd be five on her next birthday, I'd missed almost a year of her life. I knew she had to be alive, because surely if she was dead then I would know?

Michelle, the missing piece of me.

The part Alan had seen as disposable.

Now, I was alone, missing a man from half a decade ago who still haunted my dreams so deliciously. Wondering where he was, and if he ever thought of me. And if he would have helped me to find my sweet child, whom the police were preparing to let slip into oblivion.

## Chapter 2

### Gregor

“Kill everyone inside. No exceptions. No witnesses. Then burn the place down.”

Vasily’s words echoed in my ears as I sat up in a tree at the bottom of the Ivanov family’s garden. My dark clothing blended with the shadows, I watched their glowing windows and waited for it to grow late enough that they would darken one by one.

It was freezing out. The unexpected ice storm that had paralyzed Chicago had somehow missed Highland Park, but the temperature had still forced me into insulated clothing. At least I didn’t look out of place in a ski mask in this weather.

The garden was very simple, dominated by tall cypresses which formed a privacy screen on each side of the property. Apparently, the Ivanovs really didn’t like nosy neighbors. But it also meant I could work without being seen and would have a bit more time to escape unseen afterward.

I didn’t know what the Ivanovs had done. All I knew was that my pakhan rarely got this angry about anything. When he did, people died. Tonight, those people would be the Ivanovs—a married couple, and two other adults who lived at the property. The husband was a kindergarten teacher, the wife a pediatric nurse. Kind of obvious they were supplementing their income illegally if they could afford Highland Park. The others were both men who sources claimed were grown sons, but one of them may have actually been a hired bodyguard.

The wife was supposedly a pill addict and never left the house, which made the cover story of her being a pediatric nurse a bit pointless. Other than that, I couldn’t dig up any dirt on them. No idea what they could be armed with, or what to expect. But I did know one thing. Vasily did this so rarely, that the Ivanovs must really deserve what they were getting.

I thought back to the last time I had been sent to kill a household. Three



years ago—a group of four brothers who had taken over as counterfeiters for us after the death of their father.

Unfortunately, whereas the father had been brilliant and diligent, his eldest son and his half-brothers cut corners, blabbed to their girlfriends about their work and us, and when one girlfriend left and went to the police, all four of them panicked and turned informant.

Vasily had called me up that evening when his moles within the PD had told him of the brothers' betrayal. He'd wanted them dead, with proof, and the house burned.

I'd done just that. The only survivor of the blaze had been a half-starved black kitten I'd grabbed from one of their rooms. Feodor was now twenty pounds and spent most of his time patrolling my apartment.

Vasily had laughed at me when he'd heard that, along with some of his other men. But the others didn't laugh long. I made most of them a little nervous. Some, more than a little.

I was the boss's red right hand. I did the jobs the rest didn't have the courage to do—or the stomach. When the pakhan had a problem nobody else could solve, he sent me to eliminate that problem.

Off work, I was a pretty easygoing guy. But on a job, I got focused in a way that scared the others. Maybe even the boss, too. It had kept me isolated, save for a few friends and my pets. It also tended to keep me single. Women in the business got scared off by my professional reputation. Women outside the business got scared off when they learned I was in it.

All I had for the last ten years had been brief affairs. Short-lived friends-with-benefits arrangements, low on drama and low on commitment. I never let myself get attached. I had watched one too many women I wanted to keep in my life walk out of it once they had learned the truth about me. Now, I never kept them around long enough for them to learn about it.

*Focus, Gregor. Wait for the right time, get in, kill the inhabitants, rig it to explode, and get out.* Hopefully, they didn't have any big dogs. I hated having to shoot dogs.

My teeth were chattering. I took another swallow from my Thermos of coffee and felt the heat from it sink into me. The family was still awake after midnight when everyone else in this neighborhood had gone to bed hours ago.

*Hurry up before I burn the house around you just to avoid hypothermia.*

I knew I shouldn't make jokes. This situation was deadly serious. I might be able to be workmanlike about it—shut off my feelings, shelve any pity, and do the job—but those were still human beings down there. I wanted to at least grant them a quick death, and it was easier to do that with the element of surprise.

Besides, I had to actually check the house before I burned it down. One of Vasily's shoot-and-burn jobs from years ago had turned out to have a meth lab in the basement right next to a massive fuel tank. I had been forced to improvise a timed device to set it all off without it killing me before I could get out of range. Fortunately, none of their neighbors had been close enough to be in any danger.

Finally, their lights went off.

I slipped and almost fell in my eagerness to get to the house, but caught myself one-handed. Then my gear bag slipped off my shoulder, and I had to catch the strap with my free hand so the whole thing wouldn't hit the ground ten feet below. I swore through my teeth in three languages as I was forced to re-shoulder the bag while hanging there, then jump down.

I landed in a flexed crouch and let out a grunt as the impact rattled every bone and joint. I had to stop and check myself as I straightened, setting the bag down and rolling my shoulders, then flexing my hands. I would be sore in the morning, but everything was working.

I made my way up the yard, keeping my eye out for any security cameras I had missed through my binoculars. Nothing besides the ones I had already noted—two on the corners of the house and the one above the back door. I snuck up on all of them and disabled them with the help of some black spray paint.

Then, a stroke of luck, these morons had left their back door unlocked. I

got out my shotgun and slid it into its back sling, buckled on my ammo belt, and clipped the holster of my silenced pistol onto it.

Time to earn my paycheck.

I slipped into the darkened house and gave my eyes several seconds to adjust before moving on. It was warm, the heater rumbling away as the family wasted a pile of money keeping every corner of the huge house toasty. Vasily was paying them well for something. They lived like they were rich. They had two Teslas registered at this address and no normal cars. I wondered what they told their coworkers when they rolled up in a rich guy's toy.

Discretion was important. My cover employment was security consultant, and a chunk of my pay came through that cover business. The rest of my income, I had to hide. Offshore accounts, investments, and land off in the countryside that I was slowly converting into an off-grid getaway. I lived in a modest apartment, not a suburban mini mansion. I drove a pickup truck.

It wasn't lack of discretion that landed them on Vasily's shitlist, though. That would get them a visit and a warning, maybe a beating if they got obstinate.

I cased the entire ground level carefully, there were no occupants. No pets either. I hesitated at the basement door, noticing that there was a bar lock on the outside.

I unlocked it and found a black, musty space, a concrete box with a well for a sump pump and the usual fuel tank dominating one corner. My flashlight revealed no signs of life, but I saw something strange in the dust on the ground, small footprints, the size of a child's.

A cold finger of wariness slid down my spine. Did they have a kid?

Children were off-limits for me. Vasily knew better than to even ask. I had never hurt a kid, never even scared one if I could at all avoid it. But Vasily was insisting all occupants be executed, no exceptions. I couldn't believe he knew about a child in the home. Vasily and I had an understanding, damn it.

I scowled down at those little footprints. I would have to keep an eye out.

If there was a child, my whole game plan would have to change.

I left the basement and headed upstairs. The house had three levels, including the converted attic. The second level looked to be all bedrooms. I listened at every door before I opened it to check.

The second one I checked had snoring beyond it. When I opened the door, I saw a large shape curled up in bed alone. The silencer thumped softly as I put two bullets into him. The snoring stopped.

Silence behind two more doors, which were empty bedrooms. This house seemed to have a lot of them—and most of them had locks on the outside. Like you might see in a mental ward or a prison.

What the hell was going on here? I was a hard man, but something about all this was giving me the creeps.

I found a bedroom without an outside lock, the glow of a computer screen and the faint scent of marijuana trickled around the edges of the door. I turned the doorknob gently and pushed the door open a crack. A large man with a 9mm pistol on the table next to his laptop was sitting there raptly watching some kind of porn, a joint hanging from his lips. I ignored his fondling with himself under the desk as best I could.

“Yuri, for the third time, no, you can’t have any—” the man grumbled as he looked up. I shot him between the eyes, and he fell out of his chair with a startled look frozen on his face. I stepped inside and shut the door. He was alone. No cameras. The one on his laptop was covered with tape.

Then I noticed what was on the screen. I closed the laptop quickly and turned to the dead man in disgust. “Sick fuck,” I growled, wanting to scrub those images out of my brain. I even put another bullet in him out of sheer outrage.

I didn’t want to think too hard about the fact that a child and a kiddie porn enthusiast might have been living here in the same household. Maybe I would get lucky. Maybe the kid was just a visitor, and, gone now, I was worried over nothing.

I was almost at the master bedroom. The Ivanovs would be there, and I

would have to be quick. I didn't want to give them time to cry out, even with both bodyguards dead.

I checked my weapon before listening at the door. No movement inside, just soft breathing punctuated by slow, rumbling snores. I slipped inside, into a darkness that smelled of sweat, whiskey, and talcum powder.

They were back-to-back, as distant as the mattress would allow. The woman wore a sleep mask, the man had a chestful of dark, wiry hair that clashed with his bald spot. Both of them stank of whiskey. I shot the wife in the head, and, unexpectedly, Mr. Ivanov opened his eyes as I took aim at him.

He stared at me over the barrel, his dark eyes full of drunken confusion. "Why?" he managed after a few seconds.

"You already know," I growled a second before I pulled the trigger.

But I didn't know. From the resignation in his eyes before they went dull, I guessed Ivanov did. But there was nothing in my night's orders about questioning him.

I had to check the rest of the place before I turned it into their funeral pyre. I moved quickly around, grabbing laptops and external hard drives and disabling a few more security cameras as I went.

After the austere basement, I didn't know what to expect as I mounted the narrow staircase to the converted attic. But once I entered the room, I was stunned to see something like a movie set. It wasn't very large, and since it focused on a wide, low bed covered in luxuriant fabrics, I could guess what kind of films were being made.

My eyes narrowed. There was another set of rooms across from the staircase, as with the ones downstairs these had locks on the outsides of the doors, though all were unlocked. I kept my pistol drawn as I opened them one by one.

Three of the windowless bedrooms were empty, of those, one showed signs of a recent occupant. Makeup smears on the tiny vanity. Rumpled bedding. A bodice-ripper romance paperback sat open on the bed, facedown.

The room still smelled of cheap perfume. The trappings left behind, coupled with the locks on the outsides of the doors, told me an adult woman had been in here—maybe staying willingly, maybe trapped. Whoever it was, they weren't a small child. Small children didn't read bodice-rippers and I let out the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

I went to check the last door and froze when I heard movement behind it. Shit. Well, if it was a captive, maybe I could get some answers out of them.

I unlocked the door and opened it. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I gasped.

Inside was a tiny, elfin girl, maybe three or four years of age. Pale, thin, with enormous crystal-blue eyes and ash-blond hair so light it was almost platinum. Her face was very solemn, and fear lurked in her eyes as she looked up at me from her perch on the bed.

Damn it, sometimes I hated being right. "Hey, kid," I managed after a moment.

She waved shyly but didn't speak.

My mind started racing and landed on a conclusion that suddenly made things a lot more complicated. I couldn't kill her, but I wouldn't leave her there to die either. I'd figure out what the heck to do with her once we were safely away.

She was in pink footie pajamas, the kind with a hood. Still not warm enough for her to go outside in. "Have you got a jacket?"

She looked at me quizzically for a moment, then shook her head.

"Okay. Look, we need to go now, there's a fire." I started stripping off my parka without even thinking about it. "Put this on, it's cold."

Even as I wrapped the girl in my parka and scooped her up in my free arm, I knew I was going off script. Against Vasily's orders. But right that moment, as I made my way outside with the girl bundled against me, I knew one thing, Vasily's mistake was not going to be my downfall. Or hers.

She was completely quiet as I carried her outside, I didn't know whether

she was in shock, or if she was used to being ordered around and my heart went out to the poor kid, but at that moment her silence and quiet obedience was good. She hid in the bushes at the bottom of the garden like I told her, and took my hand and walked with me when I returned from setting the explosives. She didn't seem scared at all, only kept looking at me quizzically, as if she was more confused by everything, than worried about her home or the fate of her parents.

If they were her parents. Everyone in that house had been tall and dark-haired, closer to me in looks than the little girl who calmly walked beside me. She was tiny, pale in eyes and hair, and so delicate looking that I worried about holding her hand too tightly.

In fact, she reminded me of someone I once knew. But that had to be a coincidence, didn't it?

I got us on the road just as the first wisps of smoke started rolling off the house's eaves and tumbling into the sky. She looked from me to behind us as the house dwindled in my rearview mirror, but didn't protest, fidget, or even look nervous.

"You don't talk much, do you?" I asked her as I drove. She shook her head, and I sighed. "That's probably for the best."

If Vasily found out about her and called me on it, I could point out that she was too young to act as a witness against us, she didn't talk, and she was just an innocent child. He knew where I stood on such things, and should have expected it.

But her silence still kept her from answering any of the questions that nagged at me as I drove us home, toward the apartment where I hoped to get to work solving the mystery of this child, and why she looked so familiar.

## Chapter 3

### Alissa

I woke up to a flood of messages from my support group. They were all cheering that I'd gotten rid of Alan. But all I could feel was exhaustion.

**Lorelei:** *Hey there. Good to hear you dumped that guy. I couldn't believe some of the things he thought he could say to you.*

That just made me smirk, I texted back.

**Me:** *My mother would have probably put your jaw on the floor. She was a real master of saying audaciously mean crap. Most of it was ironically Jesus-flavored.*

**Lorelei:** *LOL, my aunt is that exact way. Nobody in the family talks to her after the last election. She just went off the deep end with all that stuff.*

**Me:** *I was gone way before that. I don't even want to think about my parents under the influence of the red hat crowd.*

When I got no immediate response, I got myself cleaned up and made a fresh mug of tea. Outside, the ice had gone blinding in the winter sun, icicles dripped from every overhang as it all melted and refroze. A rippled sheet of ice slid off a rooftop across the street as I watched, shattering with a noise that made passersby jump.

Finally, Lorelei got back to me. *I didn't know if I should ask this or not, but if your parents were abusive...is there any chance they could have grabbed your kid?*

I winced, digging the heel of my hand against my temple. *That got brought up pretty early in the investigation. They even got a search warrant for my parents' house. I'd been no-contact for years, and that was how they found out they have a grandchild.*

**Lorelei:** *Ouch. Well, they're lucky they got to find out at all. And the*



*father?*

**Me: *I used a donor.***

A lie, but a necessary one. I didn't know how to tell her about that one-night stand with Dimitri, or how much I wish he'd made any effort to stay in touch.

But he'd warned me from the beginning that he wasn't the kind of man who could make commitments. His job got in the way, he'd claimed. He'd been upfront about this being something casual, temporary, and not repeated.

And yet I'd kept his baby, and I still missed him even though I'd only known him for an evening.

Now, I had to miss them both.

**Lorelie: *Damn. Not much chance the guy went and grabbed her then.***

**Me: *No. They checked all my exes too, just in case. Friends, the landlord, and neighbors. Said it was routine. But they came up with nothing.***

**Lorelei: *I'm sorry. I shouldn't quiz you on this stuff. I just notice how often cops around here seem to overlook the obvious.***

**Me: *It's okay. The truth is I'm starting to think about crowdfunding some help paying for a private investigator.***

**Lorelei: *Hey, that's a good idea. I'd be all in on helping you. I know a lot of people in the group would. George has some crowdfunding experience, just send him a text.***

That made me smile a little. I hated to have to beg for financial aid from strangers, but with the police on the brink of giving up, it looked like my only choice.

**Me: *Okay. I'll text him later today, once I get some work done and figure some things out.***

It might not have been the ideal solution. In a better world, I wouldn't

have to crowdfund my justice. But I had to live and operate in this one. Besides, there had to be more people out there like the ones in my support group. People who would give a damn about a stolen child who still needed to be found.

I made myself a sandwich and took it with me over to my desk. With all the drama today, I would have to cram a lot of work into a few hours. But once that was done, I had a new project to give me some hope.

*Mommy's not giving up, baby. This thing with Alan and the cops is just a setback. I'll find you. I promise.*

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It was so much easier to work now that I had a glimmer of hope and an idea of what to do. I wished I hadn't wasted so much time relying on the system to do its job. But when all of this had happened, I'd still had faith in the police, the legal system, in the possibility of getting justice and getting my baby back alive if I just played by the rules like a good civilian.

Now, almost a year later I wondered how I could have been so naive.

But regrets would only drag me down. I had a plan now, and as soon as I was done with four hours of accounting and another two hours cleaning the laundry room, I could set it in motion.

After talking to George, I started setting up my fundraising site. Writing down the whole history again hurt. How Michelle had been kidnapped. How the search had gone. How the police were giving up. How I couldn't afford to. All I wanted was enough money to cover a private investigator and any associated fees. I just wanted my baby back. I knew doing this was risky, George had warned me that sometimes appeals like this dragged all the crazies out of the woodwork, but after eleven months with no leads I was prepared to filter out the crackpots if it would help me find my daughter.

I checked everything twice, hit submit, and got myself a mug of chamomile tea while I waited for the page to go live. Finally, after a few long minutes, I was satisfied that everything was posted properly, and all my information was correct. Sighing with relief, I closed my laptop and finished my tea. Now all I had to do was promote the page on social media and pray

that it attracted the attention of enough sympathetic people willing to donate.

I was so worn out that just going from my couch to my bed seemed to drain the last of my energy. I didn't bother to change, just kicked off my shoes and crawled under the covers. I didn't care that it was still early, the breakup with Alan and the effort of mentally having to go through all the pain of losing Michelle, setting up that page had taken what resources I had left.

As I drifted off, I found myself once again thinking about Dimitri and our one amazing night together. I wondered where he was and what he was doing. If he was with anyone...and if he ever thought of me.

I knew so precious little about my daughter's father. He had engineered our encounter that way, we were ships passing in the night, no phone numbers exchanged. I had never done anything like that before or since, and though I didn't regret it, I did regret that he had no way of knowing he was a dad.

And I still couldn't help but wonder if he would help me if he was around and knew that our little girl had been stolen.

## Chapter 4

### Gregor

I sweated my way through Vasily's debriefing while, across town in my apartment, a tiny nameless girl slept in my bed with my cat curled up next to her. I hated leaving her alone, but in the circumstances, I had no choice. Thankfully, as my line of work entails some personal danger, I have security cameras all around my home, so I could check in on her regularly and make sure she was safe. Hopefully, she'd still be sleeping by the time I returned. She had demolished her early breakfast, accepted one of my t-shirts, and said not one word. But the way she'd eaten, the way she'd slept, and the exhausted, solemn calmness with which she went along with me told me she'd been through something terrible.

I had no idea what to tell Vasily about her. I was outraged that I had ended up in a situation that, if I had followed orders blindly, would have led to my killing a kid for him. The girl being there had to be some mistake. But somehow, despite that, despite my professionalism and what he expected of me, I said absolutely nothing about her.

He would find out eventually, more likely than not. But at least I had bought some time to come up with a truly innovative excuse. Maybe if I was lucky, he wouldn't even find out until the girl had been relocated somewhere safe.

Vasily went over the photos I had taken before torching the place—four targets, four bodies. Then he looked up at me, his bushy white eyebrows rising toward his hairline. “Any complications?”

“None. Besides the weather, anyway.” I pulled at a loose thread on my sweater, the focus of the movement hopefully hiding any signs I was lying.

“Good.” He checked something on his laptop while I glanced around, trying to figure out what to do with all my nervous energy. I hated lying to my pakhan, but until I knew the girl's story, I wanted to keep her safe from everyone—and that included my boss.

“I found some pretty strange things in that house,” I started, wondering if I could get some of the mystery solved.

“Put it out of your mind.” He didn’t even look up from his work. “There is no time to concern ourselves with things like that. They crossed me, they are dead for it now. I’ll have a new assignment for you soon. We have some more housecleaning to do. Some of our people have forgotten where their loyalties should lie. We must make enough examples that the rest are reminded.”

“I understand.” I didn’t. There was something odd in how quickly he had brushed my questions aside. How vehement he was about getting this done. Like the presence of the child, it didn’t fit.

“Good. Consider yourself on call for the next week.” He opened his desk and pulled out a thick packet of twenties, then another. He eyed me, then sniffed once and added a third. “Make it two.”

“I’ll keep my phone on me,” I promised, taking the cash and tucking it away. But my confusion still gnawed at me as he dismissed me, and I walked away.

Vasily and I had always had a good working relationship. He wasn’t always transparent about why he wanted me to go after this target or another, but if I had specific questions, he would generally answer them. Not this time. And the discrepancy set off little alarm bells in my head.

Leaving my meeting I quickly checked my phone, the little girl was sleeping so that was good. I got burgers on my way home, not wanting to waste time cooking when I had some independent investigating to do. I had stolen every laptop and external hard drive in the Ivanov house and planned to go through them all tonight. Learn who my targets had been, what they were really into, and how the little fairy princess snoozing in my apartment fit into all of it.

When I opened my door, it was quiet aside from my cat trotting up to me meowing at the top of his lungs. “Let me guess, there is perhaps a few centimeters of the bottom of your food bowl showing.”

He trailed me into the kitchen, where I filled in the offensive gap with a

fistful of kibble. He immediately settled in to munch like he was starving despite being built like a muscular sofa cushion.

No signs of stirring from the bedroom. I opened the door and froze when I saw that the bed was empty. *Fuck, where did she go?*

But then I caught sight of a tiny foot sticking out from underneath. I crouched down and found her fast asleep, hiding under the bed.

I smiled at the cuteness of it, but then my smile faded. I had to wonder what had happened to her that she preferred to sleep under a strange bed rather than on top of it.

My mind went back to that photo studio, with its video and still cameras and its big bed. They couldn't have involved her, could they? She was a baby.

The idea made me sick with anger. I didn't kill them slowly enough.

But I had rescued the kid. She was safe now. I could find out where the hell she came from and, hopefully, where she belonged.

I sat on the floor with my back against the bed and waited. After a while, she pulled her leg back in. Several seconds later, a tiny blonde head poked out. She blinked up at me curiously.

"Hi there. I'm back, and I brought burgers," I offered. Was this how one dealt with children? Even my childhood had not really been one, not after my parents died. Children were a bit of an alien species to me.

She considered me for a moment, then clambered out to sit beside me. "You sleep okay?" I asked. "I washed your footie pajamas this morning, they should be dry now."

Another new experience, ordering girls' clothes in her size online, doing my best to sort out everything from sneakers to a warm overcoat. Everything for little girls was candy-colored and looked unforgivably cheap. I tried to make sure that what I got her at least went together, but this was light years from purchasing a suit from my tailor.

We went to the kitchen, and she ate her fries so fast I was surprised she

didn't choke. The burger she worked on more slowly, with determined little chomps while she looked from me to her food and back again.

"You don't talk much, do you, little one?" I sighed. My own burger was still wrapped, set aside while I watched her put away a meal that could have satisfied a large adult. How long since she'd had a good meal? How bad were things for her in that place, besides being trapped?

*Don't think of it now. It's over and done.* I couldn't let myself get wrapped up in the horror too much. I had to find out where this kid belonged.

"So...the people in your house...was that your family?" I asked, sticking to yes or no questions.

She shook her head no.

I set my jaw and nodded grimly. "Did they take you from your family?"

A nod for yes.

Those crystal blue eyes looked so damn familiar. I knew where I had seen eyes just like them before. It had been a one-night stand half a decade ago, but I had never forgotten one moment of it. The girl's coloring, like my past lover's, was so distinctive that it seemed impossible that it was a coincidence, but I knew it had to be.

Alissa was the only past lover I thought of with such fondness that I regretted letting her go. She had learned the pleasures of sex in my arms and what she should expect from her lovers. But as was my policy every time, I had moved on quickly, and had been open about that from the start.

"Do you want me to find your mom and dad for you?"

She nodded enthusiastically, almost poking herself with her shake straw.

"What's your mommy's name?"

She looked puzzled. Then again, at that age would a kid know what their mom's name was, other than mommy? I doubt they did.

"Okay, kid. I'll start looking later tonight. Don't you worry about

anything. I'll take care of you in the meantime."

To my surprise, she leaned her little head against my arm. I froze like a kitten had hopped into my lap, not sure what to do. Finally, I just said, "It's okay, little one. Everything will be all right."

I hoped that turned out to be true. As for the mystery of her parents, I was confident I could track them down. It was part of what I did. Nobody could hide from me, or be hidden, for long. It was part of why Vasily relied on me so very much. And a little girl with such a distinctive look? There had to be something in the newspapers if she'd been taken. Unless her parents had been involved in the underworld and had sold her. God, I hoped that wasn't the case.

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That night, once my little guest had finished her meal, bathed, and changed back into her clean pajamas and gone to sleep, I sat down at my desk with half a dozen laptops taken from the Ivanovs and proceeded to break into them one by one. It wasn't a perfect process. I couldn't get past some of their passwords would need to ask Sergei for help on this, but I kept on, doggedly, until I managed to break into some of the files.

Ten minutes in, I almost wished I hadn't. There were more files of illegal porn on those computers than I had ever seen in my life. Three categories, with crossovers, according to the included catalog file—non-consensual, snuff, and young.

I only watched enough to verify that they were what they said they were. It wasn't easy on me, and I was half drunk before I could finish that part of my investigation.

The only thing I was glad of was that my little guest didn't seem to be in any of it. My guess was that they had still been in the process of grooming her to be one of their actresses. But others had gone through all of it, and God only knew where they, or their bodies, were now.

It pissed me off. It was even more offensive that they ran the whole thing like any other part of our business, including ledgers, asset lists, and information on the current and former occupants of those rooms. Clearly, this



was a side business that grew beyond what they could hide, and Vasily had them killed for it.

I still didn't know what exactly the Ivanovs had been doing for Vasily above board. Probably some more normal camgirl and porn stuff. The man I knew wouldn't stand for any of the rest of it unless it was completely faked.

I doubted anything the Ivanovs did was faked. Among their assets, I discovered files on over two dozen women and girls. Some had been put in front of the camera, while others had washed out in some way. The notes were very telling.

**Name: Carlie O'Brien. Stage Name: Crystal. Age: 17. Hire age: 14 Status: Sent to brothel.**

**Name: Maria Castellanos. Stage Name: Mija. Age: 12. Hire age: 8. Status: Suicide by escape attempt.**

**Name: Michelle Carter. Stage Name: Baby. Age: 4. Hire age: 3. Status: Trainee—Uncooperative, may wash out.**

Michelle Carter. That was the youngest entry, and the details seemed to match my little guest. Out of curiosity, I logged onto my own computer and got online to run some searches on her.

Within seconds I had news articles dating back almost a year ago and a brand-new fundraising campaign on a crowdfunding site. I started going through them, my eyes widening as I took in the full story of the little girl in my guest room.

Michelle Carter had been taken from negligent caretakers at a local daycare eleven months ago by a woman who had claimed to be her mother Alissa's sister.

I sat back hard at the name.

It was no coincidence, this was her daughter. I just fucking rescued my old lover's missing daughter without even realizing it.

I clicked on another article.

*Ms. Carter is suing Little Tykes Daycare for negligence. Chicago PD have reassured us that they are doing everything they can to find little Michelle, but after eight months of looking, they've turned up nothing. The owners of the daycare, Darren and Misty Ivanov—*

“Ivanov!” I looked them up and quickly confirmed that they were brother and sister-in-law to Darren. A family racket involving snatching kids. Over the last ten years, three others had been taken, but the other three disappearances had been pinned on non-custodial parents who had also vanished. Yet each one of those missing kids matched with someone on the Ivanovs’ employee list. The list I’d found only mentioned kids, there was no way of knowing how many other women had been trafficked by those sick fuckers for their movie business.

I frowned. Did Vasily know about Darren’s involvement? If his brother deserved a bullet, he certainly did too. I made a note to bring this to Vasily’s attention. That was one hit I would leap at the chance to complete.

The articles described Alissa as a single mom with no man or family in the picture to help her. She had struggled for almost a year trying to get her daughter back, and the fundraiser was just her latest attempt. I was guessing the police had been useless or worse in helping her out. The Ivanovs had operated under Vasily’s protection, and he had the local police in his pocket.

God. So that meant the Ivanovs used protection offered by my boss to keep poor Alissa from getting her kid back and getting justice. How she must have suffered, she and her kidnapped daughter, who had fought for herself even while tiny and mute with fear. At least now I had the chance to make some of what she’d gone through right.

And I was absolutely going to do that.

As for Vasily, if he found out and didn’t like how I’d handled the situation, he could kiss my ass.

## Chapter 5

### Alissa

**T**wo days after my breakup with Alan, I woke up to eleven emails from him and a message from the fundraising site. The emails were the kind of ridiculousness I had expected—how he would only come back if I agreed to stop looking for Michelle and focus on him, how he missed me, how he thought I was an idiot, how he felt like killing himself, how I was a bitch who needed to learn who was boss, and on, and on, and on.

I scrolled through them, feeling barely a twinge of guilt, anger, or sadness. I was cried out. The loneliness still gnawed at me, but next to our lackluster relationship and the violence he'd done to my heart and my trust, it was bearable.

At least he hadn't landed on my doorstep while in that state. The last thing I needed was for him to turn into a stalker ex. Especially one with cop powers. I wasn't that scared for myself, I was too exhausted. But if I was gone, who would keep the search for Michelle alive? I was catastrophizing and I had to stop it. Alan was an ass, but he was just a regular ass, he'd slither off into the distance and find some other desperate woman to prey on.

I sighed and went to make tea. I stood at the window in my robe and slippers while the fog in my brain slowly lifted and the smell of Earl Grey filled the room.

I kept scrolling through the mess of Alan's post-breakup breakdown on my phone, keeping an eye out for any red flags that should send me to court for a protection order. Fortunately, there was nothing threatening beyond his manipulative threat to end himself, which I knew was bullshit. His ego was too big for him to even consider a world that was not graced with his presence.

I finished scrolling through the last one, pinched the bridge of my nose in exasperation, and retrieved my steeping tea to go sit at my tiny dining table. I remembered the notification from the fundraising site and opened it, trying to focus enough to figure out its contents. I had received a donation. Well, that

was encouraging. I made a mental note to check the site as soon as I was on my laptop.

I went through my morning routine as mechanically as ever, taking my antidepressant and my vitamins, showering, dressing, then watering the plants and making myself eat breakfast. I didn't taste the scrambled eggs, toast, or strawberries. I felt their texture with my tongue and teeth, chewed and swallowed, but it was like taking my pills—nourishment without enjoyment.

Finally, I settled in at my desk and booted up my laptop. I ventured onto the fundraising site to see how much my first donor had given.

I stared. The donation, which had dropped very late last night from an unknown donor, was for twenty-five thousand dollars.

I blinked slowly, rubbed my eyes, looked again. The number didn't change.

I was having trouble breathing suddenly. I struggled to control myself, closing my eyes and focusing, but my heart just kept pounding. That was more than enough for a private investigator.

My vision blurred. I reached up and felt that my cheek was wet.

Who had done this? Some random rich person, moved by my story? Not likely, most rich people didn't have hearts to break. But clearly it had been someone with money to burn and an eye for good causes.

"Whoever you are, thank you," I breathed, the shock still running through me like ice water. At least I felt awake now.

Once my vision cleared and I stopped shaking, I opened up my day's to-do list with a little smile and added 'hire a private investigator' to the top of the list. The depression was lifting a little, hope buoying me. I was one step closer to finding my little girl.

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I got a huge pile of work done, clearing my schedule enough that I could block out time for making phone calls to PIs. Predictably, most of them were

away from their desks, so I left a lot of messages.

When my phone rang, it was from an unknown number that didn't match any of the ones I had left messages at. I hesitated to pick it up, but finally did.

And immediately wished I hadn't.

"You blocked my phone number!" It was half accusation and half whine, Alan, half drunk, from a new number.

"Of course I did," I snapped. "We're through. I don't want to talk to you. You already took a giant crap in my inbox, I don't need another in my ear."

I heard him suck in his breath, but then he said nothing. I guess he was shocked. Our whole relationship, I had never been firm with him. I had been gentle, kind, considerate, and largely soft-spoken. If I got upset, I would weep and plead and struggle to get him to understand.

Not this time. I went on, filling his silence. "You know, I tried very hard to make this work, even though I'm going through the hardest time in my life. My daughter is gone. You cops have completely failed us. I don't have my baby, and I don't have justice. And you decided I should just accept all that, be fine with it, and turn into your submissive little fucking homemaker wife instead. Forget my daughter. My little girl, who I miss every day like I'd miss a goddamn limb. You have it in your head that if I just try hard enough, I'll stop caring about her, forget her, and have your babies instead."

"Yes!" he finally said. "Yes, that's what I wanted, because the kid's dead and you need to accept it. You have to move on, I wanted you to move on with me."

"You have no proof that she's dead and not..." bile crept up my throat at just the thought, "...trafficked. There's been a rash of little girls vanishing in this part of Chicago over the last ten years, no bodies have ever turned up. You dropped the fucking ball on finding my daughter, and then you had the nerve to expect me to forget it. Forget her. You heartless prick." It was like some deep, primal part of me, stomped down deep inside of me for decades and now enraged, had taken control. My skin was hot. I shook, but not from fear. I wanted to end him.

“Whoa! Jesus, Lissie, it’s not that deep. Kidnapping cases are really hard to clear, and when they do end, it’s usually because we found a body. Nobody has ever found any evidence of that woman who claimed to be your sister. We don’t even have security camera footage of her.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe it’s because she doesn’t exist? The Ivanovs could have lied.” God, the whole case had been like this. Half the time it felt like I had to do the police’s work for them. I didn’t have the power to make them do what was right. I couldn’t force them to be good cops, any more than I could force Alan to be a good boyfriend.

“Neither one has any kind of criminal record. Not even parking tickets. Besides, why would they take the risk? We looked into the owners and found nothing to suggest anything untoward was happening.”

“They’ve *lost* three children in their care this way, Alan, open your damn eyes!” When I got myself a private investigator, I vowed the first thing I would have them do was investigate the Ivanovs.

“One child—with the other two, one mother admitted she’d collected her, and the other hadn’t actually been to the daycare that morning.” I glared at the phone angrily, he hadn’t told me this.

“Look,” he continued in a soothing tone, “I told you we’d checked out all the leads. The daycare center owners were cleared, but you know how the papers love a good story. You’ve got to let her go, you have to. She’s gone, sweetie. I’m sorry you got upset at what I said, but it doesn’t change the truth. Now, you want me to come over? Patch things up?”

Post-breakup clarity hit me hard suddenly—or maybe the adrenaline had just finished waking me up. I thought about what he had just said, of things he had been saying. The backhandedness of that apology.

“No,” I said firmly. “I can understand your point of view, and maybe I’ll forgive you someday, but we’re done. We’re not even right for each other.” *Always striving to be the reasonable one*, I chided myself. But my incandescent fury had settled down enough that I remembered to be cautious. The righteousness of my anger didn’t make him any less volatile. “Besides, *you left me*. I’m just agreeing with you.”

I waited, bracing myself for an explosion. I wanted to just hang up, but I knew that if I did, he would be more likely to bring his tirade to me in person.

“Well, of course I left you,” he snapped after a few seconds. “Because you’re a crazy fucking bitch. You’re frigid and you blame me for it—”

I held the phone away from my ear, exasperated and disgusted. His laundry list of how much he thought I sucked went on and on, trying to pick away at my self-esteem, my self-respect, my boundaries, and my belief in my own memory and sanity. Everything in our relationship had actually been my fault, and I was gaslighting him, not the other way around. Two days ago, I had loved him at least a little, and it had hurt unbelievably that he’d left. Now? Everything he said told me more about him, and the way he saw me, women, himself, and the world. And all of it was heavily tainted with both his big ego and a huge load of bullshit.

Finally, he seemed to wear himself out, and I put the phone back to my ear. “So, what now?” he was asking. “You gonna unload some more garbage on me about how I’m a bad cop because I’m not wasting my time on the job looking for your dead brat? Who the fuck do you think you are? There are way more important people in Chicago than you, sweetheart, and it’s time you figured that out.”

That hit home hard, but it only stoked my anger. “Thanks for saying the quiet part out loud,” I said tightly. “I’m sure if I was rich and famous, you cops would have taken this a lot more seriously.”

He scoffed. “It’s the way of the world, honey, get used to it.”

“Fortunately for me, I now have enough money that I don’t have to,” I snapped before I could stop myself.

That stopped him dead. “What?”

“I’ve come into a windfall.” I went back to my laptop and reopened the donation page so I could look at the number. Not that I planned to give it to him.

My eyes widened. There had been more donations. Nine in all, and every last one was more than I had ever expected. Three thousand dollars here.

Fifteen thousand dollars there. The total was rising. It had just passed a total of eighty-five thousand dollars, over six times what I had been asking for.

Alan was saying something, but I didn't hear it. My heart was pounding too hard in my ears.

I could stop working altogether and do nothing but help in the search for my baby. I could wipe out my student loan debt, cover my rent and still have plenty left for the investigation.

“Are you even listening to me? What fucking windfall?”

“You want to explain how you think my finances are your business?” I snapped back. “The point isn't how I got it. The point is what I'm doing with it.”

“Okay. So, what are you gonna do with it?”

“I can afford to hire my own investigators now, and that's what I'm going to do. And when I find my daughter, and I will—”

“Hey, look, I hope you do. And I hope it doesn't break you too bad when you find her body. I'll even send flowers to the funeral.” His tone was completely dismissive.

“Well, that's generous of you,” I replied flatly.

“Look, are we done?” he sounded exaggeratedly bored now.

“You called me, Alan.” *Dumbass*. “I already said we're done. Are you done?”

“I'm still deciding.” He sniffed. “Don't block this number. I'll just use another one if you do.”

“Oh, that's not being a goddamn stalker or anything,” I said.

“I didn't mean it like that,” he said so hastily that I rolled my eyes. “The case—”

“If you actually have an update on my daughter's kidnapping case, you can contact me. But we're done, Alan. And if you try, or even just threaten,



any more stalker shit, I go straight to your superiors. Don't fucking test me. I have nothing left to lose." And thanks to the complete strangers who were now my heroes, I had the power to push back if he tried anything.

"Don't threaten me, bitch. I've got no reason to follow you around like a lost puppy. I already have another date on tap for tonight."

"Then why are you still bothering me?" I demanded.

"God, you're a cunt," he grumbled, sounding like a twelve-year-old edgelord who just got his butt beaten in Call of Duty.

"So, again, why are you still trying to talk to me? Go live your fucking life. Go date women dumb enough to fall for your crap, wife up the dumbest one, have your eight babies or whatever. Just remember to pick someone who has no family, so you don't ever have to actually empathize when they lose a loved one."

"Fuck you!"

"No, thanks."

He hung up.

I flopped back in my chair, letting out a huge sigh. My gut said this wasn't quite over, but my heart was soaring. I had finally and fully stood up to that son of a bitch. And now, thanks to those strangers, I had the power to get someone competent on my daughter's trail.

*I'm going to find you, sweetheart. You're coming home. Soon. And there will be a better life waiting for you when you get here.*

## Chapter 6

### Gregor

“So, what’s the story behind this charity you had us all donate to?” Sergei, my best friend, flashed his set of movie-star choppers at me as he slid into my passenger seat. Half-melting snowflakes clung to his black woolen overcoat. “This girl a friend of yours?”

“Old lover,” I admitted. “A good person, but poor and in a bad situation. I wanted to help her out.” And I knew that my friends and brothers wouldn’t mind helping out. That kind of money was pocket change to us, but it would change everything for Alissa. I knew she didn’t need a PI, but I’m guessing with all the shit she’s gone through over the last year she might want a fresh start once her daughter was returned.

So why hadn’t I marched straight to her door with her kid? What could I tell her—*oh yeah, found your daughter while I was blowing up a pedophile porn ring*. I had to figure out a good cover that wouldn’t implicate me or the organization.

“And the kid? She yours?” He laughed as he wiped his narrow, scarred face with the end of his scarf.

That made me pause for a moment. Could she be? The little girl in my guest room was a bit over four. The timing was right. Michelle looked like a miniature of her mother, but... “Nah, you know my rule, no glove no love. I don’t need complications in my life.” Though as the words came out of my mouth, I had to consider that there may be some truth in it.

I was happy enough right now that the shock of realizing Michelle might be mine felt better than it might have on a worse day. Alissa and I had never been in touch. There would have been no way for her to tell me, so it wasn’t like she’d been keeping it secret. I’d say there was a chance Michelle was someone else’s, but I didn’t get the impression Alissa slept with a lot of men. She might even be single now.

That was a surprisingly pleasant thought. And that was dangerous. If we

actually shared a kid, I had to be in her life permanently to some degree. But if I got too close, Alissa would start learning things about me. Like what I did for a living.

I had stayed out of long-term relationships to avoid that. And to avoid anyone else fleeing me in fear and carrying a piece of my heart with them. I wanted to trust Alissa not to do that, and she certainly would have more incentive than most to stick around. But what kind of normal woman could love a hitman?

Then again, if the last twelve hours have taught me anything, it was that people could surprise you.

Still, I was a little worried about one thing. Eventually, my little fundraiser would catch Vasily's attention, and he would have questions. And I would have to figure out what I would say about it all.

"So, let me get this straight. A year ago, the kid gets snatched from her daycare by someone, the cops don't do shit, she gives up on them and starts a fundraiser to hire her own investigator, you find out about it, and you have us throw in our poker money. What about finding the kid?"

The idea hit me all at once. The way to get Alissa her kid back without tipping her off that I'm involved in organized crime. "I'm going to be the investigator," I said confidently.

And maybe that was the point where I should have stopped and given myself a damned good talking to. I've already disobeyed my pakhan's orders, I'm going to hide a kid I rescued from traffickers who may or may not be mine, pretend to be a PI so I could get close to her mom, and then redeem myself in her eyes by presenting the kid I'd tracked down—and then what? Hope that she'd fall in love with me, and we'd live happily ever fucking after with me hiding my identity and bratva links and hoping the kid wouldn't let slip that she'd been staying in my guest room for a few days?

I mean... what could go wrong?

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Sergei knew a good counterfeiter, and within hours I had an investigator's

license, driver's license, and concealed carry license under the name G. Dimitri Makarov.

I set myself up in an office twelve blocks from her apartment, got a burner phone as my office phone, and had one of our computer guys make sure my business information found its way into the usual directories. It took under an hour to stage the office to look well-used, complete with paper clutter and a coffee machine.

By dawn and the next day, everything was ready. The cover was simple—me, just with a different job.

The next part would be harder, getting back in touch and figuring out how soon was too soon to return little Michelle to her mom without making her suspicious. I wanted them back together now, as I had since I had realized their connection. But there was no way I could explain to her that I already had the girl without blowing my cover and potentially compromising bratva security. That could not happen.

I'd find a way to make this work. I had to. Alissa, her daughter, and my brothers all deserved it.

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Traffic was predictably insane, even this early in the morning, as I made my way back to my apartment to check on Michelle. She slept a lot now that I had coaxed her out from under the bed and gotten her to actually sleep in it. I hoped that meant she felt safe with me. She insisted on the door being ajar, not wanting to be shut in, and she still wasn't talking, but she was eating well, playing with all the toys I'd gotten her, and seemed happy. I still wasn't entirely sure about my great idea—and leaving the kid alone in the apartment didn't sit right with me. But I had the security cameras, and the doors and windows were locked and alarmed. If anyone tried to get in or out, then I'd receive an instant notification. It wasn't ideal, but it was the only way I could think of getting Michelle back to her mom without involving the bratva. Of course, she might have been so happy to get her kid back that she'd not ask questions, but if she didn't the cops certainly would.

Feodor immediately ran up to greet me when I walked through the door,

his surprisingly soft meow broken up into a stutter as he bounded across the hardwood. His yellow-green eyes were dramatically wide, and he kept on berating me in his squeaky little voice as I shut the door, and he plastered his big black bowling-ball body against my ankle.

“What is it now? Were you worried I wouldn’t ever come back and fill your bowl?” I went to do so as soon as I’d hung up my coat and shoulder holsters, leaving my boots by the door. As I set down the bowl of fresh water and went to dig out the bag of kibble, he circled me, making little comments the whole time.

“Yes, I understand,” I grumbled at him quietly. “You’re starving, you’re about to wither away right in front of me if I don’t fill this up right this instant. I get it. Poor neglected kitty.” I scooped his portion into the bowl and his meowing got more desperate. “Oh, the drama. ‘Hurry, Papa, if I don’t get kibble soon, I might be able to see my feet!’”

A giggle from the doorway almost startled me into dropping the bowl. I looked up to see Michelle peeking around its edge at me.

“Well, hello! Did I wake you?”

She shook her head.

“Are you hungry?”

She nodded.

“I’ll make us pancakes. You like pancakes?”

She nodded again, more eagerly.

This little tough-as-nails ray of sunshine could be my daughter. What a crazy thing to think about. But it sure made me even more glad I had gotten her out of that Ivanov hell-house. “All right. I’ll make us Russian pancakes. You’ll like them. They’re big and flat and you put stuff in them.”

She tilted her head slightly, then nodded again, giving a tiny thumbs-up.

“Okay, little one. I’ll get started. You go pick out some clothes to wear.”

She nodded and hurried off, little feet thumping on the floor.

I smiled after her, then became aware of increasingly desperate pawing at my knees. I rolled my eyes and set down the food bowl, then turned to the sink to wash my hands.

Having a little kid in my life was a surprise to me. It didn't disrupt everything, it just changed things. Made me adjust. It wasn't easy, of course, just stowing everything potentially dangerous out of reach had been a bit of a learning curve.

In any other circumstances, I wouldn't have left her alone at all. Maybe if Feodor was a rottweiler and not a purry ball of cuddliness and mild narcissism, but as it was, I felt guilty about it, despite the security cameras. *Just a little while longer*, I thought as I gathered ingredients.

My mother had taught me to make *blinchiki* as soon as I was old enough to be trusted around a hot stove. These days, I could afford better ingredients, and my pans were big and cast iron, not small and battered from decades of use. But the technique was the same.

I had just finished mixing the batter when Michelle came shuffling back out in her stocking feet, surprising me. She had managed to put on her stripy, pink shirt and matching socks, and even her new purple jeans, but she couldn't button the front. She frowned and tugged at the two edges as she approached, trying to sort out the puzzle but not quite getting it yet. She looked up at me in frustration.

"Wow, smart kid. I didn't know you could dress yourself. What are you, four? Not bad." I crouched down and fastened the buttons for her. "There you go, that part is tougher. You'll get it. How about you sit at the table and watch me cook these? Not safe to be too close to the stove."

She nodded and took her seat, watching as I started frying up pancakes. The batter was thin, making nearly crepe-thickness pancakes the size of a dinner plate. I piled them up on the platter, and Michelle's eyes grew wider as the stack continued to rise.

"Ha, yeah, I know, that's a lot of pancakes, right?"

She nodded.

“My mama used to say that if you don’t make at least forty of them, you’re not making a meal, you’re making a snack.”

I finished up and brought the stack over to the table, then grabbed jams, honey, tvorog cheese, and a basket of strawberries. I washed and chopped the berries and put them in a bowl for the table, then grabbed some plates, forks, and spoons.

“Here we go. I’ll make up some different ones for you to try.” I rolled them with different fillings, cut them up into fork-sized bites, and then went to fill my own plate.

It was kind of fun watching her try all the different combinations. She didn’t seem picky, though she liked the ones with tvorog and jam better than the one with peanut butter and I wondered if the Ivanovs had been giving her more Russian foods than American. I got us both glasses of orange juice, which she drained even faster than I did.

I could get used to this. I really could. But there was another piece missing. If only I could find a way to get her to fit.

But I was getting way ahead of myself. I hadn’t even called Alissa yet.

“Hey, kid,” I said as she finished one of the last bites on her plate. She looked up at me curiously. “You remember your mama?”

She blinked at me, and then nodded, her expression gone oddly solemn.

“I’m gonna find her for you, okay?” Though, really, all I had to do at this point was to get the number off her donation site and call it. Depending on what happened then, I could ‘find’ her in the next half hour.

Michelle offered one of her tiny smiles and nodded.

“All right, then. You just hold on a little longer while I figure this out, okay?”

Another nod.

“Okay.”



## *Chapter 7*

### *Alissa*

**B**y the time that I woke up the next morning, my fundraiser had gathered a total of one hundred and five thousand dollars. I had no idea who was making the donations, none of them were people I had ever heard of, though a few had Russian names.

It was incredible. That was more money than I would take home in two years. There would be a tax bite taken out of it, of course, but still, this was life changing.

I was still doing my work around the building—thankfully, the parts had arrived so now I just had to wait for the maintenance operator to fix two sinks and change out an oven in another apartment —while putting in a full day for my accounting clients. It was amazing how much more energy and focus I had without the constant pressure of wondering how I would afford things distracting me.

The only frustration was that I still hadn't found a private investigator. Only a few had answered my calls or returned my messages. Most of the ones I had gotten to talk to had been too busy to pick up a new client, or they were unwilling to take such a case.

One had even confessed, "Look, I feel for you, I do, but investigating a potential kidnapping ring is way above my pay grade. I mostly follow cheating husbands around with my camera."

I wasn't discouraged, but I was a little disgusted with the cowardice. The guy who had made the confession had a deep, rumbling voice like he was the size of a small truck, but face any actual risks? Save any actual lives? That was a cop's job.

But the cops weren't doing their damn jobs. They expected she was dead. They didn't care about the evidence, or the bigger picture, or her life, or my life. We were nothing to them but a nuisance who had refused to go away. Once this was all over, I was definitely going to expose them. I may do it on

my way out of Chicago, but I'd do it.

I was just finishing crossing another investigator's name off my list when my phone rang. I jumped a little and saw another unknown number.

I hesitated. There was a good chance that this was just Alan, sauced up and deciding that being an asshole to me again was a good use of his time. What the hell was with guys who decided they hated a woman and responded by pestering her instead of cutting her out of their lives? Men like that seemed to have the brains of five-year-old pigtail-pullers, acting like annoying, combative little pricks while at the same time desperate for a woman's attention.

I answered the call on the off chance it wasn't him. "Hello?"

"Alissa?"

I froze. That voice. I knew it! I had even dreamed of it recently, murmuring in my ear in the midst of passion. "Dimitri?" I asked breathlessly.

"Ah, good, this is the right number. Yes, it is I. This must come as a surprise."

"That's an understatement," I managed after a moment. I felt lightheaded. What was I going to tell him? How was I going to say it? *Hi, Dimitri, long time no talk. By the way, we have a daughter together. Except she's been missing for almost a year, and the police are being useless.* No, I was definitely going to have to come up with something less blunt. "What's going on? How did you get my number?"

"You posted it on your donation site," he said gently, and I felt a lump form in my throat. *He knows. He knows already that my baby is missing.*

"O-oh." I swallowed hard. "Well, it's good to hear from you. Why are you calling?"

"It's about your daughter," he ventured, and I heard just the tiniest hesitation in his voice. "You see, a friend of mine donated and told me about your site, that you were looking for a PI. I checked it out and realized that it was you. I've already donated, but I was wondering if you've found an

investigator yet.”

That explained the Russian names.

“No, I haven’t,” I said hurriedly. “None of the ones who had time for me wanted to take on a potential rescue mission, especially if the police aren’t involved.”

He scoffed. “The police. Hands tied by budgets, caseloads, politics. I’m not surprised they’re being useless.”

“Why are you asking?” I tried not to hope he was offering help. I hoped anyway.

“Well, I’ve transitioned out of private security. I have a private investigator’s license now, and an office in your area. If you wanted to meet —”

My heart leaped. “Hell yes, I want to meet!” Then I realized how that sounded. “Um, I mean, yes, I’d like to talk about the case with you.” Holy crap, I must have sounded like the thirstiest woman on the planet for a moment there.

He chuckled in that low, sexy way that I remembered, and I shivered and clenched my thighs together. How had he gotten so good at that? Or was he unaware of what he did to me while barely even trying? “Good, good. I think I can be of some help to you. When is a good time for you to come by my office?”

I took a deep, shivery breath to try to calm myself, but my whole body vibrated with pent-up energy suddenly. “Well, depends on where it is. I could come over right away, if you want.”

“The sooner, the better. The police have already wasted enough of your time.” His voice was warm, understanding, but with a fierce undertone of protectiveness. I felt a warm flush run all through me.

He gave me the address and we hung up. I put every scrap of information I had gathered about Michelle’s disappearance and the other missing girls, as well as the Ivanovs, on a thumb drive, and set out right away.

It was late enough in the morning that the last patches of ice had melted back into broad puddles with crackled edges. I avoided them, wary of slipping in my haste to get to my car and get over to Dimitri's office. I couldn't believe my good luck. Not only had he noticed the fundraiser, but he had linked it to me, donated generously, and now he was willing to take the risky job of actually tracking Michelle down. Kind of ironic that I'd end up paying his retainer in his own money. But whatever worked. I was just super glad he was so willing to help me.

The wind was high again, pushing cars around on the slicker parts of the road, making them rock uncomfortably otherwise. I drove carefully in this crazy weather, Alan used to say I drove like an old woman, but he had nearly gotten us into two crashes in four months thanks to aggressive driving and stubbornness.

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Dimitri's office was in an old brick building at the end of a dead-end street lined with dormant maples. The temperature was already dropping again as I slipped inside, under a sky the color of lead. It would snow again soon, somewhere in the back of my head I worried about the drive home. But then I pushed it out of my mind. Today's reunion intrigued me, excited me, and gave me hope.

If Dimitri was as competent on the detective beat as he was in the sack, my daughter was as good as found. I mounted the steps carefully, holding up the hood of my coat with one hand.

The lobby was narrow and high-ceilinged, with airlock doors at either end, keeping the cold and drafts out. My footsteps echoed as I walked along looking for the right door. A directory sent me climbing the stairs to the second floor, which was just as deserted as the first. I wondered about that until I saw a waiting area on the second floor. The quiet made me nervous, but I was probably just imagining things. Besides, I definitely had something akin to stage fright as I walked up to Dimitri's door.

I knocked on the door, and a moment later, heard a heavy footstep beyond. The door opened, and for the first time in almost six years, Dimitri was looming over me again.

He smiled when he saw me. “Alissa. It is good to see you again.” He held out his hands and I clasped them before I even thought about it. “Come in.”

His hands were warm and leathery-smooth and sent their heat into my small, chilly fingers so fast that it stung. He led me through the door into a small office with a leather couch, an aquarium full of guppies, and a desk with two chairs sitting across from one another. “It seems to be getting chilly outside again. May I take your coat?”

I shrugged out of it, sighing a little with relief as the room’s warmth hit my skin. My little apartment was always cold, no matter how well I sealed the windows or placed space heaters. I wanted to move some place better, but in this market, there was nothing else I could afford. Especially with the deal I got for doing repairs around the building.

“Thanks,” I sighed as he hung up my winter coat. If he noticed its threadbare bottom edge, he didn’t comment on it. “And thanks for seeing me on such short notice.”

“Well, the problem certainly seems urgent enough. So. Let’s catch up for a bit, then I’ll dive into the case with you. How have you been?”

“Uh, well, after we parted ways, I had a couple of good years. Michelle was born, I got my CPA license, and I found a place we could live that gave me a break on rent for doing repairs. I even got a job right after getting my license. Things were looking up. Then somebody took Michelle from her daycare in broad daylight. Those idiots who ran it just handed my baby over to this woman who claimed she was my sister without checking or calling me. Michelle wasn’t even the first they’d lost, the bastards!”

My voice broke a little on the last word as he led me to the couch and sat me down. “So you called the police.”

“Yes, I went through all the proper channels, did everything I was supposed to do.” I swallowed hard, struggling to keep my tears in. “But the police never found her. I don’t even think they tried that hard.”

“No, they wouldn’t. Once, maybe, but time and again they seem to prove themselves as more of a hindrance than a help. They’ll come after you for driving too fast, but the brute you’re fleeing from gets a pass from them.”

That just made me think of Alan. “When it comes to some crimes, they often *are* the brutes.” Forty percent of married cops were domestic abusers. God, wish I’d known that before I took up with Alan. “But in my case, they hurt me most by being incompetent, apathetic, and lazy.”

“And so your daughter is still missing.” His smile had gone, expression now dark and thoughtful as he pattered over the electric kettle in the corner, making us tea.

“Yeah. And they’re about to give up the chase. The current lead detective thinks they’re wasting their time because she’s dead somewhere. I think he’s just convinced himself of that to excuse not finding her.”

“That may be,” he replied calmly. “Or he may genuinely believe it. Many kidnapped children do end up dead. However, given the way that she was taken, I suspect she is not.”

He brought me back a mug of steaming black tea. I warmed my hands around it gratefully as he sat down with his own mug and a plate of small cookies.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Most children who are killed in stranger abductions are taken by a pedophile, either opportunistically or as part of a planned hunt for a victim. He will kill the child afterward to prevent his victim from telling anyone what happened. There are also a small number of abductors who are mentally ill in some way, or desperate to be a parent, but they are much more likely to be peaceful, and those deaths are normally an accident. The other reasons children are taken include abduction for ransom, which we can rule out since you’re not wealthy and no communication was made by the kidnappers. Again, not in their best interests to kill the child. Finally, we have traffickers. And those, sadly, can be found in every major city in America, just like serial killers.”

“You think traffickers took her?”

“I’ll really have to have a look at the evidence to make more than educated guesses,” he admitted.

I nodded and dug in my pocket for the thumb drive, which I handed over. “Here you go. This is everything from the investigation that I could get my hands on, plus everything I found on my own.”

He nodded, and got his laptop, setting it on the coffee table in front of us and booting it up. He inserted the thumb drive and started going through the contents. “Wow. I’m guessing most of this information is your work?”

“Yeah. I figured that trying to find out whatever I could, would be a better use of my time than pacing or nagging the cops.” I gave him a sheepish little smile, and he let out that toe-curling chuckle again.

“You’re very dedicated. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” His smile crept back onto his lips as he kept reading. “So the police did not even consider investigating the Ivanovs?”

“They said they’d been cleared, but I don’t know if they did anything beyond basic questioning. It made me crazy. I just couldn’t get them to cooperate no matter what I showed them.” My throat tightened as I remembered all of those helpless, frustrating days.

“I see. Well, I suspect I should start there. Fortunately, I have many contacts locally who should be able to help me get to the bottom of this.”

I tried my tea, strong, tannic, smoky and unsweetened, a big hot cup of wake-up juice. Probably just what I needed, but I immediately wanted to ask for some sugar.

He laughed a little at my expression. “Here, let me get the jam.”

“Jam?”

“It’s a Russian tradition, my babushka used to do it the old way where you put the spoonful of jam in your mouth and suck the tea through, but I like to mix it in instead of honey. Is strawberry all right?”

“I’ve never tried.” But I hesitated only a second. “Um, sure.”

A big dollop of strawberry jam later, the tea was not only sweetened, but had a new note to its flavor, making it taste richer. “Okay, I get why you do this now.” I sipped appreciatively.

He finished stirring some into his own drink and nodded. “Yes, it’s far less boring than sugar.” He continued scrolling through the various files, pausing to eat one of the delicious spicy ginger cookies—*pryaniki*, he said they were called—then frowning thoughtfully now and again.

“Dimitri?”

He looked up. “Hmm?”

“You’re not just telling me that Michelle’s alive to keep me calm, are you?”

He smiled and laid his large hand over my small one, rubbing his thumb over the back in a way that both soothed me and sent a twinge of desire through me.

“No. I genuinely think I can get you your daughter back alive, Alissa. I think it was heartless for the police to tell you to give up hope, no matter what they believe. As soon as I can make it possible, you will have your child.”



## Chapter 8

### Gregor

I felt like an asshole as I drove home later that afternoon. I had gone through every bit of evidence Alissa had gathered and promised I'd get her daughter back. But not for the reasons she thought. And not as fast as she deserved. I had to protect the *bratva*, who were connected to this mess thanks to the Ivanovs, and that meant lying to her. When I'd left my apartment earlier, I had hated myself the moment I'd closed the door once more, keeping Michelle from her mother. I just needed to figure out the story of how I would 'find' her, and then she could go back home where she belonged. Lying never sat comfortably with me.

An honest man who put what was right ahead of his business interests would have told her the whole truth and put her baby in her arms. Instead, here I was pretending to be anything but a mob hitter, while appearing to investigate some of my *pakhan's* own people and then coming home to her missing little girl.

I wish I could at least tell her that Michelle was safe. That she didn't need to worry. Damn it. But my oaths to the organization had to come before my emotions. I wasn't the best of men, but I tried to be an honorable one.

My little rose...Alissa looked good these days, despite her ordeal. She had grown out her hair, but was still wearing rose perfume and that soft pink lipstick. If anything, the years had made her even sexier. Or perhaps I had just forgotten how much of an effect she had on me.

I had spent the entire meeting wanting to be closer to her. Wanting her in my arms, wanting her soft, bare body against mine, wanting to feel her trembling under me again. Wanting to make her beg.

But I was lying to her, and she hadn't gotten her baby back yet. And until she did, and we could put all this behind us, I had no business coaxing Alissa back into my bed.

Michelle was at least doing better. No more hiding when she was startled, no more waking me up screaming from night terrors. She built multicolored castles from her Legos and drew banners to fly from their walls.

So far, she had seemed content to stay in the apartment with her new cat friend and the toys I had gotten her. I hoped she wasn't afraid of the outside world, but right now, I could not afford to check, and risk being seen. I knew I couldn't keep her like this for long. The poor kid had been held captive for a year of her life, she deserved to run and play. She still hadn't spoken. Not one single word. I didn't know if she'd been talking before her kidnapping, but it was likely. Now she was mouse-quiet. Trauma? Self-protection? Some nastily enforced order from her kidnappers? Whatever had stolen her voice, I was going to help her get it back once she was safe with her mother. If I had to pay for a damn speech pathologist, I would. If I had to pay for therapy, fine. I wanted to right this wrong, and not just because a real piece of shit example of my people had done this to her. Nor was it simply because the child could be mine.

It was both those things, and what passed for my sense of honor. Beyond that, it was because this was Alissa's child.

Alissa, the only woman I had never forgotten. The only one I had ever regretted walking away from.

Sometimes, her cries of pleasure would invade my dreams, and I would remember how she'd clung to me and begged for more. I'd been so hot for her that we'd gone through all four rubbers I'd had on me. That hadn't happened since I had been a dumbass kid falling madly in love with every girl who slept with me.

If a baby came out of all of that I wasn't actually all that surprised, I thought as I pulled into the parking garage. I never came so hard with any other woman either. And now she was within reach, and I was going home alone with my balls aching because of principles.

Once mother and child were reunited, I would see if Alissa was involved with anyone, and if not, if she wanted to be. We had been so good together for a night, and now that I'd seen her at her worst, I had lost none of my attraction to her. Instead, I wanted to fix everything for her, and then see to

the business of sweeping her off her feet.

Once everything was all right again, I'd also ask for a DNA test, and we'd take it from there on the potential fatherhood thing. That, I was still wrapping my head around, even though the kid in question was already four and, if perhaps temporarily, in my life.

Could I be her biological father? And if so, was I cut out to be Michelle's dad? And if I got invested in her or Alissa, what would happen if they learned the truth about me and ran?

It might end up that one day, Alissa would find out what I really did for a living. But perhaps before then I could convince her that I was a good man. And a good man for her.

I felt ridiculous. She might have been willing to co-parent with me, but a relationship? What would that even look like? Even if Alissa could somehow accept it, what would we tell Michelle? Could either of them have a normal life if connected to me?

There was risk attached to all of this. Physical risk, I didn't give a damn about. But I really didn't want to limp around secretly nursing a broken heart for however many months it took to heal. Not again. Still, if anyone was worth the risk, it was Alissa and her little ray-of-sunshine kid.

I mulled all of this over as I rode the elevator up, finding that I was looking forward to seeing what the kid had been up to. I was smiling as I turned the corner to head for my front door, only to freeze in place for a second. Sergei was leaning against the wall next to my door, waiting for me.

Sergei only dropped in occasionally, so I hadn't expected this. The timing couldn't have been worse. In a few more days, Michelle would be back to her mother and every trace of her would have been out of my apartment. As it was, if I invited Sergei in for our usual drink and chat when he dropped by, I would have a lot of explaining to do. But if I didn't, I ran the risk of making him suspicious.

*Come on in, Sergei, I'll get the vodka shots set up. Careful not to step on that Lego castle. Or the ball. Or the teddy bear. Or the small child in the corner. Oh, her? Came with the place.*

No, that was definitely not going to work. And I didn't want to face the kind of questions I would get for unexpectedly harboring a little girl in my apartment. I was brewing up some excuse to shoo him away when he saw me and broke into a wide smile.

"Gregor! My friend! I was in the neighborhood with this bottle of pear brandy and said to myself, 'You know who I haven't drunk with in a dog's age? Gregor!' So, I am here." He was already slightly plastered, enough that I didn't like the thought of him driving.

"Oh, hello, Sergei. I didn't know you were back from your errand yet." Sergei was mostly an intelligence man, gathering information for Vasily, but he was also better with computers than any of us, which meant anytime there was a problem with the network at one of our businesses, Sergei and his tools were sent over there to deal with it.

"Yeah, turned out the problem was between the chair and the keyboard again. I have the evening off, and I don't want to spend it sober."

I laughed awkwardly in response, and he picked up on it immediately despite his tipsy look.

"Oh? You're not up for drinking?" His tone became teasing. "Do you have a woman coming over?"

"Nah. Had to walk away from a pretty one, though," I deflected. How much was safe to tell him? He was my best friend, but he was also Vasily's spymaster, and I wasn't ready for this to get back to Vasily yet.

He lifted an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"The lady with the missing daughter." I smiled, fumbling with my keys when I didn't have to. "Met with her today. I think I can get her reunited with her daughter within a few days."

"That fast? Wait, this is the one you're pretending to be a private eye for? The one with the donations?"

"That's her. Alissa." I dropped my keys and grabbed them, then glanced back at him. He was watching me steadily, and I saw suspicion growing in

his eyes.

Damn it. If I didn't let him in, he'd know something was up. Could I trust him with the truth if I put the right spin on my explanation?

I squared my shoulders. I had never been the best liar, which was part of why he had his job and I had mine. "Yeah. Come on in."

I unlocked the door and walked in with him. There was no sign of Michelle, and not only that, all of her toys were cleared away, the TV was off, and the lights were off. The only one who greeted me was the cat, who ran up to inform us both that his bowl was empty.

But what about Michelle? I looked around, suddenly worried. Had someone taken her? No, that made no sense. Was she hiding? I'd not had any alerts that there had been security breaches, so she had to be here somewhere.

"Make yourself at home, glasses are in the cabinet. Should order food?" I was praying he said no, the longer he stuck around, the harder it would be to hide Michelle's presence from him.

"Nah, I ate, can't stay too long. I actually do have a woman coming over!" He let out a laugh and flopped onto my couch.

"Fine. Let me take a piss and I'll be right out."

I stepped into the hall and walked down toward the guest room, which was across from the master bathroom. I ducked into it quickly, closing the door behind me. All of the missing toys had been hastily tossed into the room. I crouched down and saw Michelle peering at me curiously from under the bed.

"You okay, kid?" I checked in a whisper.

She nodded.

I had a thought, Sergei was hardly subtle. "You heard the banging at the door and hid?"

She nodded again.

“All right. Just sit tight for a few minutes until I get rid of my friend.”

Another nod and a thumbs-up.

“It’s going to be okay. I’ll be back soon.”

I washed my hands in the bathroom and got Michelle a cup of water. I kept a smile on, but I was in shock. She was four. She shouldn’t have had the instinct to hide—and hide well. She shouldn’t have had any experience that forced her to think about the details, turning off the lights, hiding her toys, tucking herself away and making no noise. But she had.

The sense of always being safe, of never having to hide, had been stolen from her at such a young age, and the very thought of it made me hate the Ivanovs even more. They had stolen that part of her innocence. If not for sheer dumb luck, they might have stolen much, much more.

I wanted to do more than protect that little girl now. I wanted to avenge her. My daughter or not, she deserved it. So did her mother.

“What’s with that grim look? You get a shit caught crosswise?” Sergei was pouring the brandy into two blown-glass globes from my cabinet when I came back out. “I didn’t even know you had these glasses. What is this, Mexican? Fancy.”

“I picked them because they’re tough.” Mexican glassware was pretty, yes, but it was also thick and heavy and fit my hands. “And they hold more brandy.”

He laughed, taking my faked smile for a real one. “So tell me about this woman and her kid,” he said halfway through our first glass.

“Alissa’s an old lover, like I said. Half a decade ago, little more now. Amazing girl, really sweet. We hit it off, but you know my policy.”

He nodded, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, never more than one weekend with the same girl. I know. But now this one’s back in your life?”

“Yeah, it looks like traffickers grabbed her kid. I’m going to get the two back together.”

“Wait, you’re taking off the clock work for your old lover?”

“Just rescuing her kid. It’s kind of personal.” I fished around for the reason he might grasp the fastest.

“How can it be personal? You had one night with this girl and then moved on.”

I took a deep breath. “Just between you and me? Alissa and I got together a little over five years ago. The kid? Four years and change.”

He blinked at me slowly, then his eyes widened. “Wait. You mean that little girl?”

“She could be mine, yeah.”

He set down his glass, staring at me. “Holy fuck. What a way to learn you might be a dad—someone’s grabbed the kid.”

“Yeah.” And it had been sheer dumb luck that I had been the one to find her. But I was never going to admit that to Sergei.

“So you find the kid, reunite her with Mom, then maybe get something going with Mom?” He waggled his eyebrows and I snorted.

“Maybe. Thing is, I already have a pretty good idea where the kid is, but that’s through our resources. I have to have a good cover story.”

“Oh, don’t want her to find out you’re a mobster, huh?” He scooped up his glass again, smirking.

“It’s not just that. I don’t want her knowing too much about us. I want her to get her kid back, but I don’t want to compromise our security in the process.”

“Vasily would be pretty pissed if you did that. Can’t you just say you have to keep your sources private?” Weirdly, he seemed more sober now, as if he’d just started drinking with me instead of an hour earlier.

“I can do that some, but too much and she’ll catch on that something’s up. The girl’s smart, Sergei, and observant.”

“Sounds like you gotta walk a fine line with that one. You up to it?”

I chuckled and took a swallow from my glass. The stuff went down like sherry. “Always. If she gets too nosy, I’ll just seduce her until she doesn’t know up from down.”

He brayed out a laugh, his long, homely face full of merriment. “That’s the spirit. Yeah. I think you’ve got things under control. So...you tell the boss about any of this?”

I hesitated just a beat too long as he stared at me. “Not yet,” I admitted. “I mean, it’s a long, weird story, and I’m doing all this when he doesn’t need me.”

“He’ll still want to know, especially if you think the kid’s yours. Most especially if you’re using organization resources for this.”

My jaw tightened. I didn’t need a fucking lecture, not when I’d already gotten one from Vasily when I asked about the Ivanovs. “I’m trying to figure out how to approach him about this. Not much of what I’m doing should even be on his radar.”

“You don’t think so?” He sounded amused. “Well, if any of this trafficking stuff crosses over into our territory, all of this becomes the boss’s business.”

“I know,” I sighed. “I’m not going to go and forget that because it’s my kid in danger. However, I’m hoping he’ll be understanding when he knows what’s at stake for me.”

“Maybe. The boss has been acting kind of weird lately about things like that, if you hadn’t noticed.”

I looked up from my glass at him, frowning. “What do you mean, weird?”

“I mean he’s going harder on everything that he ever has before. He wants to expand, he wants to put down every enemy, he wants to discipline every bad employee, all at once, all right now. It’s like he thinks he doesn’t have any time left or something.”

“That’s bizarre, man,” I said. “I noticed he’s been more secretive and



more demanding, but I didn't know about the rest."

"Yeah. Bizarre is the word. I keep hearing bits about it because of my job, but Vasily himself isn't talking."

"Huh. I wonder what's going on," I muttered before taking another drink.

"Guess we'll find out eventually. But I kind of wish he would just tell us," Sergei admitted.

"Probably be a cold day in hell before the boss comes clean about having a problem," I said. If Vasily had a flaw, it was his pride. He never asked for help, and he absolutely hated being questioned.

Sergei and I drank and chatted for a while, before suddenly his phone pinged with a message. He checked it, and looked up with a grin. "Well, got to go. Looks like my date got off early tonight."

"You sure you're all right to drive?" I got up to see him out, not wanting to let him go without at least asking.

He scoffed. "I'm fine. Don't fuss, Papa."

I snorted as I walked him to the door. "It would just suck if the smartest guy in the bratva died from something as stupid as drunk driving."

"No problems there." He seemed very amused that I gave a shit as he left my apartment. I supposed it ran contrary to my terrifying tough guy reputation, just like the fundraiser. Maybe that was why everyone had donated. They had to figure it was way important if the team hardcase was backing it.

No matter what I did, I would have to tell Vasily what was going on. I was covering our asses the best I could, but at the end of the day, it was better he heard about it all from me instead of through the organization's grapevine.

I let out a huge sigh and immediately turned to go check on Michelle. When I got into the room, she hadn't moved yet. "It's all right, kid, he's gone. Come on out and I'll order us some dinner."

She came scooting out and climbed to her feet, looking as calm as if I had

just walked in on her playing. But I knew better now.

“I think I need to ask you some questions. I know you’re not talking right now, so I’ll make them yes or no.”

She nodded and reached for my hand, holding it as we walked back into the living room. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of the pear brandy, but hopped up on the couch gamely enough.

“You like pizza?” I asked, and she nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, me too. Cheese?” Nod. “Anchovies?” She pulled a face and shook her head, and I chuckled.

“You know what anchovies are?” She shook her head and grinned.

“Okay, you like sausages though, pepperoni?” That got another enthusiastic nod.

I ended up ordering us a big pepperoni pizza, knowing I would inhale more than half of it after all the running around I had done today. While we waited, I took a breath, let it out slowly, and asked, “Michelle?”

She looked up at me, that calm expression never leaving her little face. I knew now that it was a mask for all the things she was really feeling. She was too young to truly understand the horrors she had been exposed to, but I was coming to realize that her time with me really was the first time in a long time that she had felt at all safe.

“Who taught you how to hide like that? Putting away your toys and turning off lights and things? Was it one of the other girls?”

Her expression shifted, going from calm to sad and a little scared. She nodded.

“One of the older girls?”

More nodding. She bit her lip, wrapping her arms around herself and peering up at me with that solemn look that hid so much.

I wondered if Michelle had learned to hide like that to keep from being dragged out easily and stuck in front of the cameras. That, plus her being too

young to follow directions, was probably what saved her from ending up as porn for the worst degenerates on the damn planet. But just being captive and close to it, with the threat looming closer every day, with it happening to the girls around her... God, this kid was going to need some serious therapy.

It made me furious. I wondered what had happened to that older girl who had taught Michelle and probably tried to protect her.

When I had found her, she had been their only captive and other than the makeup and discarded novel, there had been no other signs that anyone else had been there. I knew from the notes that a few had been traded to a brothel, but what about the others? Where were they?

*You already know,* said a cold, hard voice deep inside me. *That big backyard with the cypress trees to keep the neighbors from seeing anyone digging in the middle of the damn night. Under all that neatly laid sod there are bones. Bones of children and young women, and of anyone else who tried to help them.*

A small hand was patting my arm and drew me from my thoughts. I realized I was sitting there silently, with horror written across my expression, and Michelle saw. She was patting me like she might a crying puppy, open worry on her little face.

I covered her hand with mine. "It's all right, sweetheart, I'm just thinking of bad grownup things." Including what I wanted to do to anyone living who was involved with hurting those kids. "You want some juice?"

She nodded enthusiastically. On the way out of the room, I grabbed the two glasses of pear brandy and downed the rest of mine in an almost desperate gulp.

Getting this kid back to her mom was just the beginning, I realized as I rinsed the snifters and found a clean glass for juice. After that, they had to recover. At least, thanks to me and the guys, they'd have the money for it.

But there was still a long road ahead. And the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to make sure those two didn't have to walk it alone.

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I sat up on the edge of my sofa and rubbed my eyes, Michelle had gone to bed hours ago and I'd decided to do more research on the Ivanovs. I must have dropped off to sleep at some point. I had no idea how long I was out for the count, or what time it was, but given I'd only had around four or five hours of sleep over the past two days it wasn't surprising.

Today had been a hell of a day, seeing Alissa for the first time in over five years had affected me in a way I didn't know was possible. She was as beautiful as I remembered her, maybe even more. Her hair was longer now, just past shoulder length, but it was the same light, ash-blonde.

So much had happened in those years, for both of us I suppose. I'd gone from being one of the lower-level lieutenants in the bratva, to being Vasily's go to hitman. And Alissa? She was no longer the innocent, sheltered girl I met who was looking to expand her life—the years had been cruel to her, but I could still see that spark of defiance. The fact that she had taken it upon herself to hire a PI to do what the police couldn't, was testimony to her spirit. I felt another twinge of guilt, she hired me in good faith to try and find her daughter. But what would happen if she ever learned that I had already found Michelle and was trying to think of a way to get her back without implicating myself?

I sighed and scrubbed my hand over my face, feeling the stubble rasp against my fingers. What a mess we'd made of everything, and if I'd followed Vasily's orders to the letter? It didn't bear thinking about. The guilt of going against my pakhan and of lying to Alissa was getting to me, I needed to pull myself together. Get Michelle back to her mother, and make sure not a single Ivanov lay standing, and then I could get back to my usual life.

My eyes drifted around my spartan living room, my usual life consisted of the bare minimum—a well-stocked bar, a TV I rarely watched, and a large bed that only I occupied. Sure, I had women, but I didn't like to take them back to my place, I was protective of my territory, my privacy, and I didn't want anyone getting close. That had been my life for the past two decades—but what had changed? I used to enjoy the bachelor lifestyle and knew that being a hitman for the bratva wasn't compatible with domesticity, but was having someone to come home to such a bad thing?

My mind went back to Alissa, the little blonde whirlwind who had never entirely left my mind. After five years of faceless fucking, she was the one I could still remember.

Shaking my head as if to clear those errant thoughts away I stood up and stretched, then turned to take a step toward the kitchen. Suddenly a sharp pain rocketed through my foot, and I jumped back wondering what the hell had happened. Looking down I saw some of the Legos that Michelle had been playing with, and lifting my foot there was a red imprint from the brick I'd stepped on. Laughing to myself I kicked it out of the way, forget minefields and booby traps, these bricks dropped around someone's bed would incapacitate them in seconds. Taking in my room again I noticed the new additions, the half-built castle in the corner, a little painting easel by the window, and the picture books on the coffee table and smiled. It actually looked like someone lived here now, though not for long. She'd be back in her mother's arms as soon as possible.

I needed to take a shower, what with the stakeout of the Ivanovs' home a couple of days ago and falling asleep on the sofa, I had a crick in my neck and my shoulders ached. Food could wait.

Turning and walking down the hallway to my bathroom instead, I realized that since our meeting earlier I still hadn't stopped thinking about Alissa. It wasn't just about getting her daughter back, there was something about her that called to me.

It wasn't that fact that she was mouth droppingly gorgeous with curves for days, there was something about her calm intensity. She reminded me of a swan, all serenity on the surface but underneath the crazy paddling. I hated to think of her going through all this alone. Was she alone? She'd not mentioned a boyfriend. I suddenly felt a flash of jealousy at the thought of her with another man, which was insane because what claim did I have on her body? Her smooth, soft body with that tight little pussy.

*Fuck, if only she was here right now.*

Turning on the bathroom light, I looked at myself in the mirror wondering what she saw. I wasn't bad looking, but right now I looked haunted with dark circles under my eyes, wearing a wrinkled half-untucked shirt. A far cry from

the smooth talker who romanced her five years ago. But if she was here right now, I would show her exactly what I was capable of—and with that thought, I could feel myself hardening.

I stripped out of my clothes and turned on the shower.

My cock was throbbing, and I reached down to give it an absent-minded stroke as I stepped under the hot water.

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the cool tiles, the contrast between the chill of the tiles and the steaming water sent a jolt right down to the pit of my stomach that made my balls tighten as my hand moved faster up and down my cock. I was rock-hard, my fingers gripped my shaft as I pumped.

Fuck, just thinking about that night with Alissa, how her pussy tasted and those noises she made got me harder than I had any right to be. It was almost painful, but in the best possible way.

I closed my eyes, pulling up all the mental images I had of her stored away. If she was standing in front of me in this shower, naked and wet, I wouldn't waste any time. I'd already be on my knees in front of her, spreading her legs and teasing her slick folds with my tongue and fingers. Tasting her juices as I greedily lapped at her.

Her fingers would be in my hair, pulling me closer, I could imagine her moans as I coaxed her higher and higher. Her whole body would start to tremble as I fingered her, her gasps making my cock so hard it would take a miracle to stop me shooting my load all over the shower wall.

My breathing was ragged as my imagination worked in overdrive, I could picture her here with me, remembering her sweet taste. I would lap at the little trails of water that ran down her smooth stomach to her pussy and mingled with her own delicious juices. Then I'd part her lips and dip my tongue in deeper.

Fuck, I wanted her so badly it was painful. I gripped my straining cock in my fist as I imagined running my hands over her curves. Cupping her breasts. Sucking her rose pink nipples and gently pulling them as she moaned my name.

I was still half-lost in the fantasy as I stroked myself faster, now it was her small, soft, delicate hand gripping my cock instead of my own work-roughened palm, I remembered how her fingers couldn't reach all around my thick shaft and she'd ended up using two hands on me, I let out a groan and my hand moved faster, harder, more insistently with each passing moment.

The orgasm building up inside me was going to be explosive, and I couldn't hold back much longer. If she was here, I'd kiss her hard and rough, pinning her to the tiled wall while I thrust my cock, balls deep inside her.

Fuck, I could almost feel the tight, velvety heat of her pussy closing around me and gripping my entire length. I let out a hiss, as my hips thrust forward. My fist pumped my straining cock as I remembered how tight she was, her pussy squeezing my shaft. I couldn't hold back much longer.

I needed to come.

“Oh fuck.” My breath caught as the first hot jet spilled out, hitting the wall. I reached out with my free hand to steady myself as my knees started to give way. My cock was jumping in my fist as another creamy jet spurting out. I knew this orgasm was going to be explosive, but I hadn't expected to be almost knocked off my fucking feet.

I opened my eyes, half expecting Alissa to be here, the fantasy had been so vivid. I glanced down at my cock, it was still hard, and I gave it another couple of vigorous strokes as the last evidence of my arousal disappeared down the drain. Damn. I've stroked one out, on and off over the last five years to thoughts of Alissa, but something had been awakened after seeing her in the flesh once more. I couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to be inside her again. The fantasy alone was so intense, I almost gave myself a heart attack.

As I dried myself off, I decided that the sooner I reunited Michelle with her mother the better. I didn't know why Alissa affected me this way, I thought back to Sergei's teasing words, that Michelle could be my daughter. It was unlikely, but what if it was true? I already felt like I had a connection to this woman, and it was something that I wanted to explore further. But it would have to wait until her daughter was safely back in her arms.

## Chapter 9

### *Alissa*

I got myself a new coat as a treat, deep seafoam wool, warm enough that when I walked out of the store the cold only reached my face. I was spending that morning happy and full of hope for the first time in so long.

It was mostly Dimitri's doing—or Gregor's, rather, now that I had his card. Dimitri was his middle name he used for business. He had given me back all the hope and focus that had drained away while Alan had been wasting my time in a number of ways.

I was still stirred up from seeing Gregor yesterday. When he told me that he was going to make this right, I believed him. I didn't know yet what we would end up being once all of this was over, I knew I had to tell him about Michelle. I wanted so much to tell him that he was a father, but I was scared he wouldn't believe me. I wondered if we could all have a future together, maybe it would just be co-parenting or him sending money. But sitting next to him, with his hand cradling mine, had made me realize that I still wanted him more than I might be able to handle.

Once I got home and checked my messages, I spent a couple of hours cleaning and sprucing up Michelle's room. I had left it exactly as it had been when she had been taken, her favorite purple quilt and matching curtains, stuffies on the bed, her squiggly little drawings proudly posted everywhere. She was coming home. I was sure of it now.

Or did I just want to be sure of it because the man who might be her father was now involved in finding her?

What did I want from Gregor once I had my little girl back? Help supporting her would be great. But he was the one who had ruined me for less skilled lovers. I couldn't smell his aftershave or look into his eyes or feel his touch without remembering our night together. I'd never been straight up horny for anyone before or since, and the urge to try to lock him down was filling my heart.



Besides, he had to be better around Michelle than someone like Alan. After all, it was thanks to him that I felt the need to factor her life and needs into my decisions again.

My phone rang and I checked caller ID, it was Lorelei.

“Hi,” I answered breezily.

“Hey, just checking in. You sound perky, how did things go with that private investigator?”

Lorelei didn't know about Gregor, or the one amazing night we had spent together, or that he was my daughter's father. “Good. He's optimistic and he seems competent. Told me a little more than I wanted to know about Chicago PD and why they are not actively investigating Michelle's case.”

There was a snort of derision from my friend. “Overload? Lack of personnel? Policy?”

“Kind of all of the above. They claim that they find so few kids alive after the first year of the investigation that they eventually call it off in favor of fresher cases unless any new leads turn up. The case remains open, but that's about it.”

“That's shitty. What about the parents?”

“I got it straight out of Alan's mouth that they only really care if the parents are rich, famous or well-connected.”

“Well, I don't think Alan's attitude is that good a rep for everyone in the CPD.” Lorelei spat out.

I agreed, but Alan's opinion and attitude were what determined a lot of things about my daughter's case. “Alan's the lead investigator. Chances are, his coworkers will go along with anything he decides. Though the timescale thing might be departmental policy, it's coming up to a year since she was taken.”

“Ugh, that sucks. I'm so glad you'll be able to afford a private eye now, and that you found a good one.”

“He is a good one.” Or at least a good person, and a confident one too. Something in the way he said things made me believe in him. Not just that he cared, but that he was going to actually get the job done.

I just wished I could think straight around him. No matter how hard I tried, whenever Gregor was around me, part of my brain was stuck in a feverish loop over just how much I wanted him to fuck me again. It was a stupid, primal impulse, like needing to eat or sleep, and despite wanting to focus completely on finding my daughter, I still felt it.

Lorelei’s voice dragged me from my thoughts. “So, have you heard from Alan lately?”

“Not since he picked up his box of stuff. Glad he’s gone. He was getting clingy for a hot second in a way that worried me.”

“What is it with that guy?” Lorelei said, sounding exasperated. “He was the one who called it off right? He’s not starting to hassle you, is he? Are you going to need a protection order or something?”

“Probably not. I’m guessing he was just pissed I couldn’t focus all my energy on him and had a man tantrum. You know how some guys are?”

“You are a saint to put up with all this crap. But the thing about saints is, a lot were martyrs first. I’m so glad you got out,” Lorelei responded.

That made me smile for real. “So am I.”

After a quick catch up about what was going on in her life, we ended the call with a promise to meet up for coffee next week.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket with a sigh. I had a pile of work to do, which was lucky because I needed the distraction. It wasn’t just the whole Alan thing, it was restraining myself from making a fool of myself with Gregor.

I went down to check the mail and came back up with a handful, most of which looked like junk. Then I found a letter from Chicago PD. Just the sight of it made me go cold. I braced myself and opened it, my belly fluttering with sudden tension. I knew what it probably was, but that didn’t make the truth

easier to face.

It was the official case suspension notice. They were stopping all work on looking for my daughter due to lack of leads. What a joke. I was a complete amateur and knew there was more information out there that the cops weren't following up on. Gregor was out chasing it down right now.

Fucking cops. I bet they would still be on the job if I was rich. Hell, Alan might have kept at it if I had kept sleeping with him. Corrupt and useless, all of them.

But Gregor wasn't. He couldn't be. I had to trust that I didn't need the police anymore. That my mystery lover had it all in hand.

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I had finished all of my work and was making dinner when my phone rang. I wiped off my hands and checked the screen. It was Gregor. I smiled and answered the call.

"I want you to know that I'm looking into the Ivanovs today. They don't seem to have any criminal ties that I have been able to discover, but they do have a lot of family in the area. With so many missing kids, I'm surprised no one looked into them before."

"I thought they might be connected, or rich enough to pay a big bribe to the cops," I admitted as I tucked the phone between my shoulder and ear and gathered a bun and condiments. "That was the only thing I could think of. It's such an obvious lead, but they just missed it."

"Never assume malice, when incompetence is far more possible. That and apathy. Cops in Chicago rarely have clean hands or unlined pockets. Those who keep it by the book don't last very long. There are reasons I've always worked in the private sector, and never become a cop."

"Had you thought about going to the police academy?"

"Once, a long time ago. I was young then, didn't know how the world actually worked. But we're living in reality, not in some movie where law enforcement are heroes." I heard him take a deep breath, then he said, "I'm

waiting on about fifty phone calls and it doesn't matter if I'm in my office when I get them. Do you want me to come over, talk about all of this in person?"

My stomach did a little flip, and I had to take a few breaths before I could answer. I looked around my meager two-room apartment, suddenly embarrassed by its smallness, its poverty. But I had nothing to be ashamed of. If Gregor was the type to judge me for not having much money right now, I would know not to hope for anything long term with him.

"Yeah, sure. Come on over. Have you eaten? I'm just about to grill a hamburger for myself, I can make you one too?"

"Thanks, I just ate so don't worry about me."

"Okay," I gave him the address, unable to remember if I had given it before. "Just dial up when you get here."

As soon as he hung up, I turned and hastily assembled my dinner and ate it as quickly as possible. Then I rushed around picking up clutter, doing my few dirty dishes, running a comb through my hair, and checking my makeup. I couldn't help the size of my apartment, but I wanted to be presentable.

It took him about twenty minutes from ending the call to knocking on my door—impressive in Chicago traffic. I checked the camera feed to make sure it was Gregor. He was imposing in a heavy overcoat and boots, both in black. He looked like he was a bodyguard for a Russian attaché, not a private investigator with a modest office. I felt a little weak in the knees as I let him in.

He glanced around as he stepped inside, the apartment seemed almost smaller with his giant form taking up space here. I took his coat and hung it up over my new one while he stood looking around. He didn't frown, or comment, or give me a pitying look, only smiled and reached out for my hands in his usual greeting.

"How are you holding up?" he asked me kindly, and I smiled.

"Glad to see you. I just wish the circumstances were better," I said with a little embarrassed laugh.

He nodded, smile fading slightly as he stared thoughtfully at me. “As do I. But we will rectify the problem and get you your daughter back.” He moved to the small couch at my invitation and settled onto it. “I don’t suppose you have any hard liquor? The end of my nose is still frozen from the wind.”

I smiled and went to retrieve the single bottle of scotch that I had, a gift from a friend from last Christmas. I had squirreled it away like a treasure, not wanting to refuse or regift it but knowing I wasn’t about to drink even a drop of it. Alcohol was still about as pleasant as cough syrup to me, and I doubted that would ever get better.

He chuckled when I only brought one glass. “Still not a drinker?”

“Never got the hang of it. I’ve wondered if I have some kind of sensitivity to it or something, but it may just be that I can’t stand the taste.” I smiled awkwardly. “I guess it doesn’t help that I was either pregnant, breastfeeding, or raising a small kid for most of that time.”

Something flickered in his eyes. Uncertainty? Concern? Did he suspect Michelle was his?

I had to clear the air about this. I would have owed him that even if he hadn’t just put himself out there for me financially and in terms of work and personal risk. That meant that now I *really* needed to let him know the truth.

“You look like you have something to tell me,” he said quietly as I poured his drink. “I’m assuming it’s not about someone gifting you a bottle of Laphroaig.”

“Accountants tend to have well-off clients. Some of them are cheap as hell, some are generous.” I patted the bottle that I couldn’t enjoy. “I keep it for guests.” My chipper tone faltered and died, and I sighed. “Yeah,” I admitted finally. “I do, but I’m not sure how you’re going to take it.”

He smiled at me, the gentleness of his expression appearing a little strange on his craggily handsome face. “Don’t worry about it. I’m not some pig. Even if you pissed me off, I don’t hurt women.”

I wondered if that was a lie or a generalization. I didn’t like the odds of any woman stupid enough to physically attack him or anyone he cared about.

“No, it’s just...I feel like telling you this now might put extra pressure on you when it comes to finding Michelle, and that’s probably a bad idea.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Did you find something new out?”

“No, just something I’ve never really known what to do about. Mostly because I didn’t have any way of reaching you.” My smile probably looked very awkward. “Not that I’m complaining. I know what we agreed to. It’s just—”

“Sit down next to me,” he urged, and I did. His hand settled on my shoulder, and I felt it all through me. “What is it you’re trying to tell me?”

“Look, I don’t have a DNA test to prove it to you, but Michelle is yours.” I sagged slightly, the effort of pushing out those words leaving me emotionally raw. I looked up at him, worried as I wondered what I would see in his eyes.

He stayed calm, and it didn’t feel like the stiff-shouldered fake calm that Alan and my father both used to fill up the room with. It didn’t scare me. I relaxed a tiny bit as he said, “Go on.”

“There was no one after you. Not for a long time, not until after she was born. I swear to God, you’ve pretty much ruined me for mediocre men,” I said nervously. “I just couldn’t bring myself to sleep with anyone for years. It was like I could tell a guy would be selfish in the sack, and I was so turned off that I kept walking away.”

He took a mouthful of his scotch, savoring it for a few seconds before downing it. “Well, I’m very flattered to hear I raised the bar for you.”

Then he winked and I had to cover my mouth with my hand to keep from giggling like an idiot. He dazzled me. I didn’t think it was just the sex either. It was just something about him.

“Well, you did. Which means that by the time I dated anyone for any length of time, Michelle had long since been born.” I had trouble meeting his eyes. “It was...unexpected. I know we used condoms, but Michelle showed up anyway. And now that we’re back in contact, you deserve to know. If you want to do a DNA test, I’ll understand.”

“No. I will eventually when we get her back, but I believe you.” He licked his lips, looking down thoughtfully. I watched the tip of his tongue move and had to squeeze my legs together. “Yet another reason to get her back to you as soon as possible.”

I took a steadying breath. “Once that happens...what then?”

He hesitated. I could tell there was more he wanted to tell me about his feelings, but I didn’t blame him for holding back. We didn’t really know each other well, as much as I wanted to.

“Whatever happens, you and our daughter will be taken care of. As for you and I...you should know that before now, I avoided any long-term relationships.”

“I’m not trying to put any pressure on you,” I said quickly, my heart sinking. I didn’t want him just sticking with me because I was his baby’s mother. I wasn’t trying to trap him. I wanted him to want to be with me.

“No, the pressure is a matter of circumstances and my ethics. You are not manipulating me to put me where you want me—we have a child together, and I’m assuming you chose to keep her thinking we would never meet again.”

“I always expected to take sole responsibility for her,” I agreed. “I’m not the sort of woman who—”

“No, of course not. Besides, I’m very difficult to manipulate. I’m man enough to step up and look after my own child, and the one raising her.” A flick of his eyebrow. “You’re not wishing to use the courts, are you?”

“The only thing that would get me near a courthouse right now would be the chance to sue the Chicago PD for leaving me waiting a year while they screwed up. You and I can work things out once you get her home. I just... look, I do really like you, and I think you’re the hottest man I’ve ever met. And I’d love to have something long term with you, but you just said—”

He chuckled. “This is a lot.”

“Yeah. But my point is, Michelle shouldn’t have to wait on having two

parents in her life until you and I figure out if there's an us."

"I completely agree. Once I bring her back to you, I'll introduce myself. We'll take it from there. Not just the co-parenting, but figuring out you and me."

I saw his eyes hood, and the gleam in them, and it made me catch my breath. I wasn't the only one who wanted to take this conversation to the screened-off bed in the corner. He might have been a commitment-phobe and our relationship was in limbo, but my body was too stupid to figure that out.

"Okay." My voice was shaky. "Well, that went better than expected."

"We're both adults," he replied mildly, but that spark never left his eyes. And when he drank from his glass again, he took those two fingers of sipping scotch in one rough gulp, downing it with a grimace.

I watched him, suddenly worried and self-conscious. Had I pushed too far, suggesting even the possibility that there could be an 'us' beyond looking after Michelle together?

He sighed. "The scotch is good, and the company better, but I must go." When he stood, I stood with him.

"I've said something wrong, haven't I?" I asked before I could stop myself. I hated myself for sounding so weak.

He turned with shocking quickness for a man his size, and gently caught hold of my chin, leaning down to kiss me, a long, fierce, breath-stealing, thought-destroying kiss that warmed me to my toes. His hand was in my hair pulling me close and I could feel the length of his cock pressing against me, as his body crashed into mine.

"It's not that at all," he said as he pulled back.

I stared at him, speechless and dizzy from the kiss.

He smiled. "It's that if I stay any longer, I'm going to spend the entire night fucking you. And I don't deserve any space in your bed until I find our daughter."



*Our daughter.*

He left, and I watched him go mutely, and it felt like he took my heart with him.

# Chapter 10

## Gregor

I was seething as I drove back to my apartment. The temperature was continuing to drop, my breath steaming in the air until the heater kicked on properly, but I couldn't feel it. My whole body was burning with a mix of emotions I never thought I would feel.

The sexual frustration was only a small part of it. Getting the confirmation that Michelle was mine had broken a dam inside of me that I hadn't known existed, and out of it had poured a kind of primal anger. I was always outraged and disgusted when someone hurt a kid. But somehow, learning that the kid in question was mine had me so stirred up that I almost made my way to that daycare in search of the Ivanovs right then and there.

I wanted to put a bullet in every single person responsible for that kiddie porn trafficking ring. I wanted to erase every last fucking one of them from the Earth in a way that served as a warning to every pedophile, snuff porn producer, and atrocity-addicted sack of shit.

It wasn't just ideals fueling me now. Every man who wasn't a total waste of skin hated child rapists and traffickers. The fact that this was now personal, that this was *my* child, had thrown gasoline on my fire.

It didn't help that my child had been kidnapped, endangered, tormented, kept captive, and forced to witness atrocities until she couldn't even fucking speak, by a family who up until very recently had been under bratva protection. They had done this under our knife, with our money. And if I had followed Vasily's orders...

Thank God I had always had a stronger code of ethics than some of the men around me. Otherwise, I might have been like some of them, even Vasily maybe, and left my own kid to burn.

Just thinking about it made me want to punch Vasily in the teeth, but I

couldn't entirely blame him for what the Ivanovs had gotten away with. He should have checked where his money was going, but Vasily had dozens of such operations under his control. His attention was split a hundred ways just running things. He didn't know what kind of porn the Ivanovs had been making there. He couldn't have.

But Vasily, my brothers, and I, we were still culpable. For not only had one of our people taken Michelle, but we were also the reason why Alissa had to wait so long to get her daughter back.

The Chicago PD wasn't incompetent by nature. Underfunded, undertrained, undermanned, all of that was certain. But their failure to find Michelle wasn't on them. It was on us.

Vasily and our organization had a lot of pull with CPD. We had deals, treaties, agreements with the police brass and the mayor's office. When some idealistic rookie screwup went against all of that in search of a justice that mostly existed in his head, it threw off the balance of things. Added a lot of tension and drama to what would otherwise be business as usual.

I hated that. Vasily had made it clear that he hated that. And I knew that I couldn't let Alissa take on that role in search of her daughter. Her ideals were admirable, her courage was admirable, but the evidence she had gathered and given to me, had warned me that she was way too close to throwing a spotlight on a bratva-connected operation. If she hadn't let me take this on for her, if she didn't trust me...

I was as likely to murder the mother of my child and leave my child bereft as I was to lop off one of my own limbs. But Vasily would have ordered it if she had come to know too much and was not under our control.

So I had to make sure that she only found out as much as I allowed her, and that Vasily knew my personal matters would not interfere with my duties. Other men had married and had children, the old days of having no family were long gone.

But right now, I had to ask Vasily two favors at once, and I hated it. One was to let me keep Alissa in hand and make sure that both her safety and the organization's were maintained. And the other I had decided in a flash of

pure outrage the moment Alissa had told me Michelle was mine. The Ivanovs running the porn operation were dead and gone, and had deserved it. But their cousins who ran the daycare were still in business. Still alive.

My eyes narrowed as I drove. I had never asked permission to kill anyone before. I had always killed whoever Vasily pointed me at.

But I wanted the Ivanovs dead. Every last one of them who had been involved in this. I wanted to watch the light fade out of their eyes and know their evil had been erased from the world and that they would endanger no more children.

I had saved my little girl. I was going to reunite her with her mom and support them. But my child, my blood, deserved more than a rescue, safety, and a good life.

She deserved vindication.

And I was going to give it to her.

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“What’s got you working this late, Gregor?” Vasily was in his smoking jacket, a silk antique from the Frank Sinatra days. Burgundy paisley edged in black velvet. He smelled of five-hundred-dollar cigars.

“It’s as much personal as it is business, or I could have waited. But I need to tell you something about the situation with the Ivanovs.”

He lifted an eyebrow as he handed me a brandy. “I thought I told you to put that matter out of your mind.”

“I am not in a situation where that is possible, sir.” My tone was tight. I took the drink and sniffed it, frowning slightly. It smelled of pears.

“What do you mean?” he asked as we settled into overstuffed chairs in his study. The fire crackled in the tiled fireplace between us, bathing our legs in its warmth.

“Without bringing up too many distasteful details, the Ivanovs’ racket has not been completely dismantled, and I want permission to do so.”

“Oh. I see. That’s...interesting. Please go on.”

His eyes never left my face. It was like being under a spotlight.

“The family you had me eliminate during that sweep and clear had a supplier. Probably several, but this one is notable. They use a daycare as a front. One of the cousins runs it with his wife. They have *lost* three children, all of which I was able to trace. One of them—”

“Oh, yes, that girl and her little fundraiser to try to find her daughter. You intercepted her, yes, kept her from sticking her nose too far into our affairs?”

“That is correct,” I said, wondering how he knew. Wondering if Sergei was discussing my life and loyalty with him over that same damn pear brandy. “She will not be looking further. I will be doing all of the investigation.”

“Well handled, but answer me this. What does that have to do with the Ivanovs? Did they take her child?”

I took a deep breath, prepared to give my pakhan the whole, unvarnished truth out of loyalty. But then something, some instinct I couldn’t place, made me hold back. “Yes. They did. That is why I could not let the Ivanov matter lie.”

“Why take it so personally?” He swirled his brandy in his glass as he stared at me.

“Her child is also my child.”

The swirling stopped. He sat back, blinking a few times, and set down his glass. “This woman was your lover. You’re certain the child is yours?”

“Until I find her, a DNA test cannot be conducted, but I am certain and have enough information to be confident about it. The woman had no reason to lie to me.”

I couldn’t entirely tell in the firelight, but he looked paler than I was used to seeing. I wondered if he was feeling well. “I see. And you want the blood of the ones who put their hands on your child.”

“They’re not going to stop trafficking just because they can’t sell to their relatives anymore. They are still doing it in your territory, against—”

“Yes. I’m aware of their transgressions, I don’t need them brought up again. You are correct in the need to remove both the Ivanov cousin and his wife. If this suits your need for revenge as well, so be it. I’ll pay you the same either way. As for the child. Where do you plan to look for her? You must be aware that she is likely either dead or out of the area.” He sounded nervous. Or was that my imagination?

“I plan to look for her at any property owned by the Ivanov family. I will ask Sergei to assist me if I get stuck, with your permission.” I was buying myself time, covering my own ass. Why wasn’t I all right with letting Vasily know I had already rescued the girl? Why had I hidden that fact from Sergei as well? This was the first time I had kept anything from the organization, but maybe it was that this time it was *personal*.

“Fine, fine. Hopefully, you’re able to find the girl, get her back to her mother, and stop all this extra drama. In the meantime, the Ivanovs are yours. I will let Sergei know that you may ask for his assistance.”

“Thank you, sir.” My heart was beating fast. For decades now, I had been completely loyal, with no doubts. But now doubts were creeping in, and I couldn’t stop them.

“You want my advice? Seduce the girl. Distract her.” His thumbnail rattled briefly against his glass as he reached for it, and I saw the shake in his hands. “Put another baby in her belly if you need to. Whether you get the kid back or not, we can’t afford to have some would-be martyr snooping around. You know that.”

I nodded. “Of course.” His callous words stung, but had no strength with the tremor in them. He almost sounded scared.

“Gregor...” he ventured. “When you did the sweep and clear at the Ivanov home, did you...find anyone besides the four on the list?”

Again, that damned instinct. “Just those four. There were a lot of rooms that were clearly meant for captives, but every last one of them was empty.”

He looked almost confused for a moment, and then relieved. “Good. Captives can be tricky to deal with. Is the child old enough to talk?”

“She’s four. Once I rescue her...here’s hoping she doesn’t remember any of it when she’s older.” I didn’t like the taste of the brandy. It had been pleasant last night with Sergei, but it paled next to this afternoon’s Laphroaig. Or maybe that was just the kiss that had followed it.

“Of course. Poor little thing. You can clearly tell why I wanted the Ivanovs dead.”

“Absolutely.” I saluted him with my glass and forced a swallow. “I’ll just finish the job and see what I can find out about my daughter.”

He almost choked on his brandy, but caught himself, swallowing hard. “Best of luck,” he said in his usual mild tone. But there was a fear in his eyes that I didn’t understand.

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After my detour, I was a little calmer, but my head was full of questions, suspicions, and the need to get home to my daughter.

I hated leaving her alone, the thought of leaving my daughter unprotected sickened me. But what choice did I have? If I had used a sitter or a daycare, there would be witnesses to my suddenly having a child in my care. That would have gotten straight back to Vasily. And I was certain that would be a bad idea. Thank God nothing had happened yet. But I was suddenly wondering how long I could keep this up, security cameras and alerts were all well and good, but that traumatized little girl needed human company.

But I couldn’t stay home and still do my job. I knew what I had to do, I just didn’t know how I was going to explain it to Alissa or Vasily, if it got back to him. Which always seemed to happen. But my honor, my conscience, and the knowledge that this was my child wouldn’t let me do any less.

Not even if it went against the bratva. Which had allowed Alissa to be hurt so deeply, to go through so much.

I would deal with Vasily, his strange reactions tonight, and what I was

going to tell him later on, once this was all over. Right now, my duty was to my daughter and her mother.

What was I going to tell Alissa? I felt that stab of guilt again, wishing I could be completely honest instead of building a collage for her out of chunks of truth pasted together with bullshit. In an ideal world, I would have. But we had to live in this one. I also worried about what Michelle would tell her mother, my little girl was too scared to speak, but she clearly understood everything. What if she told Alissa she'd been staying at mine for a few days? Would she understand the passing of time? Maybe I could just tell her it was a night or a few hours. *Fuck*. I had always prided myself on being calm in any situation, but I seemed to be fighting a losing battle here. The sooner Michelle was returned to her mother the better.

I took the stairs two at a time to my door to burn off some energy, I didn't want to burst in and scare my daughter. I had always tried to be quieter with her, calmer, gentler, because she was a kid, and I was a foreboding-looking giant. Now, though, it seemed even more important.

I unlocked the door and went in, closing it carefully and looking around. Michelle looked up from her coloring. She seemed contented, and everything was as I'd left it. Until I noticed broken glass glittering in a pool of water on the kitchen tiles.

"Uh-oh." I hurried over. She had clearly dropped her glass while trying to get more water, my heart was racing at the thought of what could have happened. My broom lay against the counter nearby. She knew what she should do but not how to do it.

I went to check on her. "Michelle?" I squatted next to her. She was calm, even smiling a little to see me now, and there were no signs of cuts on her. "I saw you dropped a glass. Are you hurt?"

She shook her head.

Holy shit. Okay. I was definitely making the right decision getting her back to her mom tonight. The relief felt like someone had just released a band across my chest. "Okay, sweetheart. Now, you listen to Da—" I had almost said Daddy. Shit. She wasn't ready for that. I wasn't ready for it either,



clearly. “Listen to me carefully, all right?”

She nodded, staring intently at me.

“If you drop something and it breaks, don’t try to clean it up yourself. Don’t touch it. Get me or your mom. Okay?”

She perked up at the mention of her mother. But then went back to her thoughtful look, and nodded.

“Okay, good. Glass is sharp when it breaks. It can cut you really easily.” At least she was wearing her shoes. “Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Good girl.”

I wanted to hug her, tell her I was her dad and I was sorry I wasn’t very good at it. But that was a stupid idea. I didn’t have the right, and it was way too early to do anything like that.

But it was past time to do something else that everyone needed.

She saw the conflict on my face and started patting me again.

I caught her hand and gave her a squeeze. “I’m okay. I’m just trying to figure out how much to tell your mom once we see her.”

That hopeful look again. She might have remembered things that had made her voice go silent, but she also remembered her mom. “Do you think you can speak to her if I call her on the phone?” I asked. I didn’t know what would do the trick, but I had to start trying.

She thought about it. But then she pressed her lips together, and her chin started trembling. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head violently, looking like she was about to start crying.

I put my hands on her little bird shoulders. “It’s okay,” I told her. “It’s okay, if you can’t yet, that’s fine. I know she just really wants to see you and know you’re safe.” I should have done this two days ago. But now I absolutely had to, and it was almost a relief. The choice was out of my hands.

I just hoped I was doing the right thing for everyone. It felt that way, but this situation was so strange and new to me that I couldn't tell. I had already made one mistake with Michelle. I would not permit myself another.

“All right, sweetheart. I'm gonna call your mama now. I'm going to try to get her here tonight.”

Her eyes brightened again, and she nodded, then watched as I fished out my phone. I was way tenser than I ever got staring down a gun barrel as I called Alissa.

She answered on the second ring. “Gregor, hi. It's late. Did you...have news?” The tentative hope in her voice hurt to hear.

“I do. I'd like you to come over to my apartment. As soon as possible. Can you make it?”

I heard her breathing pick up. “Do you have her?”

I hesitated.

“Gregor, do you have her?”

“Yes. She's alive, she's physically fine, she's clean, she has clothes, and she's got food in her tummy.”

She broke down in the middle of the list, and it took more effort than expected to keep talking, to keep reassuring her that Michelle was all right and waiting for her.

“This place is a lot more secure than yours. I—”

“Yes, yes, yes, I'll be right over.” She was breathless, voice shaky, sounding like she might collapse with sheer relief.

“Are you safe to drive?”

“No, I can't stop shaking, I'll Uber over. It shouldn't take long.” I heard the faint rattles and clicks that said she was messing with her phone. “What's the address?”

I gave it. Then she said, “I want to talk to her.”

A chill ran through me. “I can put her on the phone, but you should know...she hasn’t said a word since I rescued her.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. There’s not a mark on her physically, but she isn’t speaking.”

Next to me, Michelle squirmed. She could tell we were talking about her. She looked up at me unhappily and her chin trembled again. “No, sweetheart, it’s not your fault,” I said to her hastily. She gulped and sniffled.

“Put her on the phone,” Alissa said in a firmer voice.

I nodded and put the phone to Michelle’s ear. “It’s your mama, sweetie.” With my free hand I hunted blindly in the side table drawer for my tissue box.

I heard Alissa’s voice go into Michelle’s ear, and suddenly Michelle’s face was crumpling, and next thing I knew both her eyes and her nose were going. Poor kid. I helped her mop up as best I could while her mother talked to her.

“It’s me, sweetie,” I heard Alissa say. “I’m coming to get you, okay?”

Both of them were sniffing. Alissa’s voice kept breaking. My throat was tight as I kept my hand on Michelle’s shoulder, and the phone to her little ear.

They stayed on the phone until Alissa’s Uber got there, and when she was on her way and had hung up, I kept my hand on Michelle’s shoulder. She looked up at me, and patted my arm, then leaned against me suddenly. I put my arm around her tentatively, marveling at how tiny and delicate she was.

How could anyone think to harm her? I couldn’t imagine being the sort of damned deviant who looked at that tiny face and saw something to use and destroy. I couldn’t understand what was missing from the souls of people like that.

I was a stone-cold killer. I had too many notches on my gun barrel to count. But what the Ivanovs had done was another layer of evil below mine...deep below.

They destroyed lives. I only ended them. As I would end the rest of the

Ivanovs, soon enough, as punishment for what they had done.

# Chapter 11

## Alissa

**H**e found her. He had her. She was back. My heart felt like it was going to pound its way out of my chest as I Ubered across town to Gregor's place.

The Uber was one of those blocky former cop cars that I saw on the streets sometimes, with their heavy frames and narrow back seats. I struggled to find a comfortable position while the driver chattered about the ice storm. All I could see of him was a spray of gray shoulder-length locs and a slice of black-and-gray beard.

“Five car pileup that started right next to me. Saw it in my rearview. Ice storms are crazy, man.” His accent was Jamaican, just thick enough to make his words a little musical.

I wiped my eyes. I refused to start sobbing in front of this friendly man. He wouldn't know that my tears were for the best reason possible. I was getting my daughter back.

He chattered on over the music for an entire ride, lonely perhaps, happy to have an audience for his tales of driving in the big city. I did my best to be polite, but my mind, my attention, raced far ahead of the car, to the apartment across town where my baby was waiting for me.

I hadn't asked yet how he'd found her, or where. I hadn't asked who took her. All of that was secondary to knowing that she was safe, that she was protected, and that I would soon have her in my arms again.

When we reached Gregor's building, I was surprised by its quiet elegance, it had clean, modern lines, lots of light, mostly concrete, steel, and glass. Each one of the apartments took up half the floor, with a hallway bisecting them. I got out, tipped the driver, and nearly slipped on a patch of black ice hurrying down the walkway.

*Careful, I told myself. Don't break your damn neck just steps away from seeing your baby again.*

I called up, and Gregor buzzed me in. I took the elevator, and it took ten million years to arrive. On the short ride up, I paced the few steps back and forth while my nerves hummed inside me until I shook.

Gregor's door was steel, like the others. I knocked on it hastily, wary of the empty hallway.

Gregor opened the door. He smiled with relief to see me. "She's in here—" he started, but a pink and purple blur had already rounded the corner and pushed past him to rush my legs. I stood frozen for a split second as my daughter's scent, lost for a year but never forgotten, filled my nostrils again.

She hugged me tight, her face buried against my thigh. I scooped her up into my arms and she clung, hiding against my neck, shivering the whole time. And it was like Gregor had said, not one word came out of her. But right now, I barely cared as I hugged her and sobbed and leaned against the entry wall as Gregor closed it behind me.

She was home.

Gregor got us over to the couch so I could sit down, my knees were shaking and my whole body was trembling. I worried that any moment I would open my eyes in my own bed and find it a dream, my baby still missing. But—here she was, hugging me back and making little whimpers into my neck that sounded like she didn't know whether to cry or be happy.

"My baby," I mumbled into her hair. "Oh God, thank you, thank you."

It felt like I'd been waiting to exhale for the past eleven months. The police had been useless. I had no family support. Even my boyfriend had crapped out on doing anything decent to help me.

Nobody had been in my corner except for Lorelei and the gang...and this man. This amazing man, who I barely knew but who had already treated me better than almost anyone in my life.

I held my child and felt the wet spot from my daughter's tears spreading

on my blouse, knowing I was a mess and just not caring. Not right now.

Finally, I pulled myself together enough that I could raise my head and look around. Gregor was hovering nearby, and had set a box of tissues on the coffee table in front of me. I fumbled for one and met his gaze as I was wiping my cheeks.

“Thank you,” I told him softly.

“I’m glad to have done it,” he replied, looking at my daughter and me fondly. “Wish I could have done it sooner.”

“I have a million questions,” I said quietly.

He nodded, going into the kitchen. “I’ll put the kettle on. I’ll answer whatever I can.” He came back and sat down on the couch next to us, near, but not too close.

I kept stroking Michelle’s hair as she calmed down. She didn’t seem hurt, she didn’t have any scars I could see. She was too thin, but energetic and her color was good. But I still had no idea what they might have done to her.

“I’ll have to take her to get checked out by a doctor.” Thank God I had kept her on my insurance.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.” Gregor looked uncomfortable, and I could guess why. They would have to do STI tests on my baby girl. Because the world was what it was. The whole idea tore at me, but I had to be strong and face facts. Her health was way more important than anything else.

Michelle not speaking, not even saying “Mommy,” jarred against my relief, making it imperfect and tinged with a new fear.

“So she hasn’t said anything this whole time?”

“Not a word. For a while I thought maybe she just didn’t talk, but I’m guessing she—”

“It’s trauma,” I said flatly. “She was never a really big talker, but the more scared she gets, the quieter she gets. Now she’s silent.” A few of my tears dropped into her hair. I smoothed them away with my fingertips. “I’ll have to

find her a specialist. At least thanks to you and a bunch of other people, I can afford to get her good care.”

I had to look on the bright side, had to hope that Michelle could heal from this like she might a broken limb. That time, patience, and effort would be enough. That it was true what they said, kids really did bounce back faster no matter what the trouble was. That they hadn’t actually done anything besides kidnap her and force her to stay with them.

But I knew that was unlikely. And that thought made me want to kill. It made me want to take the people who had done this and throw them into an industrial furnace. It made me want to rend and tear them like an angry tigress. It made me want to destroy them, make them scared, make them beg, make them suffer like they had done to us, and then erase them from the Earth.

“Who had her?” I asked, but I suspected I already knew the answer. Otherwise, he could never have found Michelle so quickly.

“A cousin of the Ivanovs,” Gregor said quietly. “They have probably had her this whole time.”

I mouthed several curses over my little girl’s head. “I knew it. Why didn’t those idiot cops ever check them out properly?”

“That’s a question I suspect everyone will be asking before this is over. Internal affairs, the public, the press...that kind of negative attention is only natural when cops screw up this badly.”

“Believe me, I’ll be glad to see it.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “How did you get them to give her up?”

He looked me in the eyes, a touch of worry in his expression, and then sighed and shrugged. “At gunpoint.”

I should have guessed, but his confirming it still felt like a splash of cold water. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but when you’re dealing with this kind of people, sometimes you have to be nasty. The police weren’t cooperating, and I didn’t



want to give them a chance to shuffle her somewhere else. I didn't have a warrant, but I had a ten-millimeter pistol pressed into the back of Mr. Ivanov's neck, and that seemed to work just as well."

"What are we going to tell the police about that part when they follow up?"

"I'll handle it." He looked at me searchingly. "You're not freaked out that I took her that way?"

I thought about it. "No. If I did, I'd be a hypocrite."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've been sitting here thinking about all the things I want to do to them for what they did to my baby girl." Michelle shifted in my arms, snuggling her face into my shoulder, and I petted her soothingly. "A blast furnace came to mind."

His eyebrows went up. "Damn. Okay. Well, I sure can't say I blame you. You'd just be burning trash, after all."

"Yeah." I wondered if that innocent, freshly free young woman from years ago would be shocked at how things had turned out for us. The child, given and returned to us by the same man. The evil in the world and the injustice in our justice system. I wondered if the me of those days would have seen the future ahead of her and run screaming back to her parents, crazy pseudo-Christian cultists or not.

I was glad that I had stayed strong, stayed free, and now I had my daughter back.

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We ate slices of a huge pepperoni and cheese pizza that Gregor had ordered. I was amazed at her appetite and that she ate it so playfully and normally—stretching the cheese, picking off the pepperoni slices to eat separately, leaving the outer crusts. For once I had no urge to coax her to eat up the crusts, she could eat her pizza any damn way she wanted.

It was both the best thing I had ever tasted and also completely tasteless at

points, most of my focus and energy was on watching my daughter.

Afterward, Michelle was full and sleepy. I carried her to bed in the guest room, where I saw some toys.

Gregor had bought her Legos. She had made one of her castles with it, and he had cut out the crayon banners she had drawn. Even as I tucked her in, I was left with more questions. But also a growing warmth toward Gregor, who had clearly tried his best to look after her and keep her entertained after rescuing her.

But why had he waited this long to call? She must have been here for several hours at least for him to have gotten her toys. For her to be clean and dressed and have color in her face and an appetite.

Once she was snoozing away in bed, I left the door ajar so I could check on her easily and went back to Gregor. “Why didn’t you contact me as soon as you had her?”

“There’s a possibility that the Ivanovs are connected. If so, there was a good chance that their people will be looking for me, and for Michelle. I had to wait until things had cooled down before calling you, and I couldn’t be seen on the street with her, so we couldn’t come to you.”

I blinked at him, puzzled. “Connected?”

“Organized crime, sweetheart.” He smiled ruefully.

“Oh.” *Oh God.* “I see. So it was for safety.” He was right, though. Nothing would have kept me from rushing over to hug my baby once I knew, and if his house had been watched for a while, they would have seen me. Maybe done something. The idea made my blood run cold. “Why did they want her, Gregor?”

His expression went grim. “The place they kept her, had evidence of women and girls that had been trafficked and forced into porn. Their own records said that they hadn’t been able to get Michelle to take instructions well enough for them to do it to her. But, clearly, she had to watch and hear about a lot of bad things.”

Nausea crept up the back of my throat. They had been grooming my daughter for kiddie porn. Maybe she hadn't gone in front of any cameras or been molested yet, but that had been their intention.

It was too much to take after everything else. I had done my best to brace myself for the worst, and I knew it could have ended a whole lot worse indeed. But my chest hurt as I tried to process it. "This has been happening all this time. Three kids vanished, and the cops did nothing."

"That won't last," he reassured me. "Not because of the police—you are right not to trust them—but because even criminal organizations do not want such people around. I had to use some contacts in the underworld who are now aware of what the Ivanovs are doing."

The avalanche of helpless rage inside of me rumbled to a stop. "Will they do something?" Would that be possible? Did some authority out there, some powerful figure, actually give a damn about kids, despite being outlaws?

"Yeah, sweetheart, that's the whole reason I got word out. If the Ivanovs are backed by underworld money, getting them behind bars will be impossible. So instead, we let news about them reach the ears of the right people..."

"And those right people kill them." It felt like all the air had been pulled out of my lungs as I thought about it. What kind of world was I living in where the cops were cowards and lazy assholes and you had to go to crime families to get justice? "Won't their backers protect them?"

"Word on the street is their backers had no idea they had this sick little side gig. It was supposed to be a typical underground fetish porn studio, all above board with nothing illegal going on and instead..." He spread his hands slightly.

I took a tiny swallow of tea to try to get the taste of bile out of my mouth. "I guess I'm surprised."

"Don't be. Even in a maximum-security prison full of the most hardened killers you could possibly imagine, nobody likes a creep who messes with children. If it gets out that that is what a man has been jailed for, he will have no mercy from his fellow inmates no matter how hard he tries. When he gets

out, the underworld will be closed to him. Every knife turned against him. Once a child molester or kiddie porn producer's name gets out, he can expect to be caught and questioned to see who else is in on these things with him. Active pedophiles tend to seek out their own kind for support, protection, and to do business with. Once their contacts have been wrung out of them, they tend to disappear.”

“And you think the Ivanovs are in for that.” I rubbed my eyes, setting my mug back down. The nausea and rage were fading away, and there was a strange sort of resolve in their place. Someone was going to actually do something. Someone was putting a stop to the Ivanovs' filth and disappearing them from the face of the Earth in the process.

Had I wanted a media circus to descend on the Ivanovs, humiliating and exposing them to the world? Had I wanted the police to drag them from their homes on national television? Had I wanted to see them picked apart by judges and experts and the court of public opinion on the way to lifetimes behind bars? Sure. But as I searched my heart, and the year of frustrated rage stuffed down into its deepest corners, I had to just go ahead and admit it.

“I'm okay with that. I'm okay with a really scary, painful interrogation followed by death for all of them. And after everything the cops have done to kill my faith in them, I'm okay with criminals doing the job.”

He smiled, and there was something wistful in it, and I caught myself wondering how in the hell he had ended up with ties to the local underworld himself. “I know it must seem strange to you, but I have lived with that reality for a long time. When people cannot get justice from the police or the courts, nor take it in their own hands, they go to those who work beyond the law. It is one of the reasons that everything from local street gangs to the Cosa Nostra exist.”

Then his curiosity seemed to get the better of him, and he asked, “What would make it better for you? The way this went, I mean. The way it will go for the Ivanovs.”

“I mean, it's not like either of us can do anything about it either way.” I didn't want to think about that. And yet the thought rose in my head anyway: “I...”

“Go on, Alissa,” he said gently. “It’s all right. I won’t judge you.”

I swallowed and met his gaze slowly. “I think I’d want to question them myself. Maybe even kill them myself.” I drew a shivery breath. “But I can’t think about that. I want to hurt them so badly that when I think about it, I can’t even breathe. But I don’t know how to let me be that person and still be the safe and loving mommy my baby deserves. She’s back, and they’ll be punished. That should be enough for me. I need to focus on being whatever Michelle needs now.”

“I understand,” he said softly, moving closer to me on the couch. I was suddenly very aware of his nearness, close enough that even though he didn’t touch me yet, I could feel the heat radiating off his big, solid body like a furnace.

“I want you to know that if I could have gotten your daughter back to you the moment I found her while ensuring that both you and she would be safe, I would have,” he said quietly. It wasn’t quite an apology, but it was completely sincere.

I nodded. “You don’t seem like the kind of guy who does things recklessly. Though I’m guessing having to deal with underworld guys and criminals a lot isn’t exactly safe.”

He chuckled dryly, a far cry from his usual deep, sexy laugh. “No. It is not safe. But getting jobs like finding Michelle does require risk. I did not get where I am by playing it safe, Alissa. It is one of the reasons I keep people at arm’s length.”

“Is that why you didn’t want to exchange phone numbers before?” I asked him softly.

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation. “I don’t want a girlfriend who waits up worried, or takes off because the risks and shadier bits of my job are too much for her.”

“Oh,” I said softly. “And it was that way when you were in private security, too?”

He looked guilty for some reason. “Both have required me to mix with

some unsavory people. Mostly the idle rich, but not all.”

I thought about that, about Gregor isolating himself his whole life from anything long lasting or meaningful with a woman. I wanted to change that. I wanted to be the one he finally settled down with. Just the two of us and our baby.

But could I do that? Could I even handle trying, with the return of my daughter and her recovery taking up my life right now?

I gazed at him and said, “You know, my life is already pretty chaotic. I’ve already seen the dark side of things and had to deal with it.”

Did I sound too needy? I just couldn’t tell. But I didn’t want to hide my feelings anymore either. Even if they led to us going our separate ways because what I wanted wasn’t what he wanted.

He smiled, shocking me. “You’re one of the bravest people I’ve ever met, going through all of this almost completely alone, and with no real resources either. I feel like punching those damn cops in the teeth for failing you like this. Instead, I’m glad I was able to flex on them.”

I took a deep breath and let it out. “I don’t feel brave. Right now, I’m still wondering how to handle the cops and the press. They’re both going to have questions.”

“I need you to leave my name out of it,” he said firmly. “They don’t need to know who I am.”

I swallowed, thinking of all the pressure I was going to be under. “So what do I tell them, then? You know they won’t be satisfied by a refusal.”

“No, I’m guessing they won’t be. But I have a suggestion for getting the cops to back off.”

“And what’s that?” I struggled with my sudden irritation, not wanting to go off at him because I was under all this stress. I knew he didn’t mean to add to it.

“Tell the police that their choice is to either leave well enough alone, or you’ll end up telling every news service in town about their negligence. After

all, I did in two days what they couldn't in a year."

Just his saying that made me want to check on Michelle again. "That brushes really close to blackmail," I protested softly, but he just snorted.

"Blackmail? I suppose, except that they genuinely deserve it. But at this point, any attempt they make at covering their asses—which is the only reason they would come talk to you in the first place—will only end up making them look worse. They can try threatening you, but you haven't broken the law, and if the press does its job, you'll soon have the whole city's support."

That whole concept astonished me just as much as the idea that criminals might help me, or the first moment I saw my donation amounts creeping up into the six figures. It was so strange, thinking about having influence over others. A touch of celebrity, a bit of power, and from what? Being the mother who never gave up on her baby? Who did what any mother should do?

"I get what you're saying. Chances are they'll send Alan again. He's the one who was handling the case when they sent me that letter."

"Which letter?"

"That they were suspending the investigation. Lack of evidence."

"I see." He scowled. "That's your ex?"

"Yeah, that jackass. He probably loved watching the brass send me that letter."

He downed the rest of his mug of tea. "Probably. He sounds like human trash."

"Human trash with enough of a veneer of respectability that he fooled me for a while." But now I was free of him, and I didn't feel like cursing myself because of his wrong actions and bad motives.

"I see. Well, then you shouldn't feel bad at all about threatening to expose his incompetence."

"I guess I shouldn't." I laughed weakly and he chuckled along with me.

“Good, good. You must be willing to play the game with these people. They will play chicken with you, see how much they have to do to intimidate you. But because you have done nothing wrong, and they have, there will be no teeth to their threats.”

I hesitated. “If you’re sure.” I felt cold inside. I wanted him to hold me. He stayed near, but he didn’t even touch me. “I just wish...”

“Wish everyone would mind their own business so we can focus on helping our—your child recover?”

I heard the slip and lifted an eyebrow slightly. He was still getting used to the idea of being a father. I could hardly blame him for it.

“Yeah. Yeah, that exactly. I shouldn’t even have to think about anything else right now but her...and you. But that’s just not how things work.”

“You’ll figure it out,” he reassured, going to freshen our tea. “I’ll help you.”

“I don’t know what I would have done without you on this,” I told him when he returned.

“Glad I was able to help. I just wish I’d known sooner what was going on.” I saw the regret in his eyes, and wondered how it was for him—to discover he was hired to rescue his own child, to know he was a father suddenly, four years later. And under these circumstances.

“The Ivanovs...did they give any excuse for what they did to her? To us?”

For a moment, something flashed in his eyes, something so dark and terrible that I flinched. Only then did I realize that in his own way, he was as angry over this as I was.

“No. I didn’t give him a chance to speak. I didn’t have to question him, I’d already hacked his computer. I have all his contacts, everyone he was working with. With but one exception it’s all family, and the exception was the one who’s connected. It’s not a lot of people. Or, fortunately, a lot of kids.”

“If their old bosses end up killing them for what they were up to, I won’t



shed a tear,” I said with sudden vehemence.

“Oh, they won’t live, my dear,” he said smoothly, sending a faint chill up my back. “I promise you, the streets have their own justice. And it is harsher than the legal system, and longer in its reach.”

I didn’t know what worried me more, that he was so sure of that, or that I felt better for hearing it.

## Chapter 12

### Gregor

The heat between Alissa and I could have warmed the winter night by itself, but I couldn't respond to it. She was exhausted, overwrought, full of questions, and worried.

Yet what she had said, what she had asked was clear. She agreed with what I was doing more than I'd expected, but that agreement itself scared her. She didn't like having a dark side. She didn't like understanding what it was like to be satisfied by an enemy's humiliation, their death.

I left her curled around her—*our*—daughter in my guestroom, sleeping so deeply that a shout might not have woken her up. My whole body wanted to join her in that bed, curl around her in turn, and keep her safe. But I knew my desires went beyond that, and she was in no shape. So, I left her and our child locked behind layers of security and went out to do my duty.

It was time for the remaining Ivanovs to pay the piper.

I got into my car, and was about to turn the key in the ignition, when Sergei called me.

“Hey,” he said, a hushed urgency in his voice. “How is it going over there?”

“I reunited Alissa with her daughter and told her as little as possible. They're resting someplace safe now. What have you got for me about the Ivanovs?”

“Save that for a minute. That Alissa, she's got a one-bedroom in Little Village, right?”

I stopped dead, hand still on the key. Christ, Vasily's been having him keep tabs on me. I should have guessed that, especially since I had a personal stake in the matter. If my judgment slipped, the organization had to be

protected.

It still felt invasive, though at least Sergei was good enough to inform me. “Yes, yes, she does.”

“Well, there’s a guy surveilling her place. Big, black hoodie, nondescript rental car. Probably armed.”

“Fuck. Any idea who he is?” My first guess was one of the Ivanovs looking to grab Michelle back, or shoot me for taking her. But would they know? The police had found some charred remains, but the investigation into the explosion was ongoing, and they hadn’t released the number of victims.

“No idea, but whoever he is, he’s agitated and paranoid. I figured you would want to know before you sent her home with her kid. I’m running the plates now to see where he rented it. Once I crack their CCTV, I can get his face and an ID for you.”

“Good. You thought right, and thank you. Are you there now?”

“Not for much longer. Vasily wants me across town.”

That didn’t sound right, not for the first time this evening I wondered if my pakhan was losing his touch. “Even though you just told him there’s a prowler watching the same place you are?”

“Eh, I figured you love this girl, you don’t need any help ripping a guy threatening her into stew-sized chunks.” His tone sounded almost artificially light. I knew he was dubious about the unexpected order too. But duty was duty.

“Thank you for telling me.” By which I meant cluing me in that he was being sent to watch me, and Alissa, as much as letting me know about the prowler. “You think it’s one of the remaining Ivanovs? Or someone they hired?”

“Definitely not a professional. He might have the skills, but he’s unbalanced. Agitated. Not in control. That’s one of the reasons I noticed him so fast.”

“And he’s definitely after Alissa?”

“I caught him putting a tracker on her car.”

Thank God she was safe at my place with this lunatic around. “I’ll deal with this. Go see what Vasily wants across town.”

We hung up and I started my car, a scowl deepening on my face. It seemed like the Ivanovs didn’t know when to quit. Well, if they were so eager to die of their stupidity, I would oblige them.

I parked a block away from Alissa’s apartment and walked over, keeping my eye out for Sergei’s prowler. I caught sight of him pacing back and forth in front of the driveway to her building’s underground parking lot before he stepped back into its shadowed maw. Sergei was right. He didn’t act like a pro. He acted like a serial killer working himself up to find a new victim.

I moved up on the garage entrance from the side, concealing myself behind a snow-covered bush next to it. I could hear the man muttering to himself from my hiding place as he came back out to pace some more.

“Bitch. Block my calls. Threaten to tell my boss. Who the fuck does she think she is?”

I frowned. Could this stalker have nothing to do with the Ivanovs? He sounded like a rejected lover. I watched him, timing things carefully. When he turned in his pacing to walk to the other side of the garage entrance, I emerged and slipped quickly up behind him, pressing the muzzle of my pistol into his back.

“Don’t move,” I growled. He froze. “What’s your business here?” I demanded.

“I...I...I...my girlfriend ghosted me for no reason, damn it! Now she’s disappeared.”

*Oh, for fuck’s sake.* “I see. You must be Miss Alissa’s stalker ex.”

“I’m not stalking her, I—”

“Shut up.” I patted him down with my free hand, finding his pistol, a zipped sandwich bag full of chloroform rags, handcuffs, heavy duty zip ties, and condoms.

“Oh lovely, a little rape kit for your night’s entertainment. Aren’t you a cop, you piece of shit?”

He stiffened, but stayed where he was, wary of the gun. “What? Who... who the fuck are you?”

“Her bodyguard. Got a tip someone was stalking her place. Didn’t expect to run into a dirty cop, but here we are.” I stepped back, keeping my gun on him, and pulled out my phone with my free hand. “Look at me, you piece of shit.”

I got some choice snaps of him crouching in the driveway of Alissa’s apartment building, with the address plate in frame, along with his face and the items at his feet. The gun, I kept.

“Now, here’s what we’re gonna do. You are going to fuck off home. You are never to contact or do anything to interfere with or harm Alissa. Otherwise, I send these pictures of you and your rape kit to your boss, your mother, and the press.”

“Look,” he said, pasting on a smile, trying to be man-to-man reasonable as I snapped more pictures. “My girlfriend’s just dramatic, okay? I would never hurt her.”

“What’s the chloroform for, then?”

He started to splutter. “It’s not what you think—”

“I don’t have time for this.” I grabbed him by the collar and shoved the pistol under his chin. “You came here planning to kidnap, rape, and probably murder a woman who dumped you weeks ago. I’m no fool. I deal with shitty domestic abuser cops all the fucking time. I know when one of you scumbags is handing me a line of bullshit to justify putting an innocent woman through hell. I would probably be doing the world a favor if I pulled the trigger on you right fucking now.”

“You wouldn’t dare. I’m a cop.”

“Not tonight, you’re not.” My pistol had an exposed hammer, I thumbed it back for emphasis and he started sweating in the cold. “Tonight, you’re

human garbage out to do unspeakable fucking things to someone who doesn't deserve it."

"Why do you even care? Who the hell are you?"

I was so angry that I could barely think straight. Who was this filthy, murderous cop really? How dare he think he could turn Alissa, *my* Alissa, into a statistic. I wanted to put a bullet through his head. I wanted to seal his feet in concrete and leave him at the bottom of the nearest lake. I wanted to punish him, make an example of him that would scare dirty cops for generations.

"I work for her," I replied, deciding to keep with the lie. "She suspected she was being stalked, so she hired security. Glad she did—you're every inch the psycho she expected you to be."

"Fuck," he breathed, sounding plenty scared now. "O-okay. Okay. I get the message. Leave her alone. I'll just do that from now on, okay? I'm leaving."

"It's not that simple." My tone was cold. "You show up at your ex's home with a rape kit, probably planning to murder her after, you can't just walk away after and expect us all to forget about it."

"You'll be way deeper in the shit than me if you pull that trigger," he warned me. "Cop killers don't get off easy around here. And what else can you fucking do, call 9-1-1?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of taking footage from the building security cameras and her dashcams, putting them together in a nice little timeline of you stalking her, and send it to the press while identifying you."

That seemed to scare him even more than the gun. He went sheet-white, and his eyes widened further. His lips trembled. "You wouldn't. You can't. I...I'll do anything."

I just stared at him. "You really can't take being exposed, can you? You fail at being a cop, you fail at being a boyfriend, and your response is stalking, harassment, rape, and God knows what else. But you know that's wrong, because you're shaking in your fucking boots at the prospect of

people finding out you do that shit. You're not just a sicko, you're a coward."

"L-look, what is it going to take to get you off my back? You want money? You can have it! All of it!" He was trembling so hard that I expected him to piss himself. Some men could dish out threats, but just couldn't handle taking them.

It was taking all my self-control not to pull the trigger on this piece of shit. "I don't want your fucking money. I make more than you'll ever see in your life, and I manage to do it without hurting any innocents."

His nose was running, his eyes brimming with tears. "What do you *want*?" he sobbed.

"I want to blow your fucking brains all over the sidewalk for trying this," I growled, and immediately smelled his bladder letting go. "But that doesn't matter, fortunately for you. What matters is what's best for Alissa—something you never took into account. And I don't think she wants your death on her conscience. So, here's what we're going to do. You are going to go home, grab your shit, and be over the state line before dawn. Never return. If you do return, or do anything else to cause problems for Alissa, I will release the tapes. Then I will come after you. If that happens, pray the internal affairs men find you first."

He nodded frantically and scrambled away from me, almost falling over in the process. I stood there like a statue, still pointing my gun at him. He kept backing away, bumped into his car, and edged around it, fumbling for his keys.

I didn't relax until he had driven away. I didn't know if I had made the right call in sparing him. But besides what it would have done to Alissa, that sick coward had been right about cop killers. Just not in the way he thought.

Killing a cop would have broken the agreements that kept the bratva and the cops from all-out war. That kept the bribes flowing, the cops looking the other way, and our men mostly out of prison. If I made a mess like that, we would all end up paying for it.

I spent half an hour cleaning up after Alissa's stalker, getting copies of security footage and making sure he hadn't actually broken into her place. I

took the tracker off her car and dismantled it, just in case he drank enough courage to try anything else.

I'd have to warn Alissa. I hated the whole idea. The last thing I wanted to do was to bring her even more bad news. But at least I could bring it alongside the promise that I would never let that prick anywhere near her.



## Chapter 13

### Alissa

I woke up in an unfamiliar bed to the miracle of Michelle in my arms. She was sleeping like a rock, like she hadn't slept at all while we were apart. I nearly felt the same way, like before this moment, I had been waiting to relax, sleep, breathe, think, fully live again. But here she was now, with me, where she belonged.

I lay still, not wanting to disturb Michelle, and listened for Gregor. The apartment was warm despite the snowstorm tapping the windows, and still dark aside from the white glow spilling in through the glass. It was so nice to wake up on a winter morning without feeling any drafts.

I heard the rising gurgle of a coffee machine break the stillness, and then a faint yawn. The smell of brewing dark roast started filling the air, and I smiled, relaxing. He was definitely home.

It stunned me how much he had done for the both of us in such a short time. We barely knew each other, but he had already returned my daughter, protected us both, and helped make sure I would have the money to get us to a better environment and care for my daughter. He was providing us with safety even now, at risk to himself. Though, I noticed, he didn't seem too worried as he pattered around his kitchen.

Then again, he was tough as nails, and I was a marshmallow. The last year had battered me into a desperate mess, and he had given me back my hope. My support group had tried to shore me up, but they hadn't put themselves at risk to retrieve my child. No one but he had done it, and thus, only he had succeeded.

The whole time we had been back together, he had barely made a move on me. I had seen the heat in his eyes, felt it growing between us. I had craved him the whole time—I had never stopped craving him—but my screaming need for my daughter had all but drowned that out.

Now, with her safe in my arms, all I wanted—besides revenge against her

kidnappers—was him. The desire to feel his body on mine again, to feel his arms around me and his cock inside me rang through me with such strength that I blushed. It lingered, refusing to fade and let me drop back off to sleep. My body's demands were so urgent that after a while, all I could do was gently slip out of bed, make sure my daughter was properly tucked in, and wrap myself in my borrowed robe. Then I made my way outside, leaving the door unlatched. Michelle didn't like being shut into rooms alone anymore.

Gregor straightened the moment I walked into the kitchen, he was stirring sugar into coffee that smelled strong enough a spoon would stand up in it. He looked back and saw me and smiled. "Good morning. Do you want a cup?"

I swallowed. My body was humming like an electric current was running through it. Never in my life had I gotten up the nerve to just ask a man for sex. Even our first time together, he had coaxed it out of me. Now, still a little overwhelmed from last night, I felt my nerves failing me.

"Sure, thanks. What time is it?" I looked out the one uncovered window and noticed the swirling snow had a faint yellowish light behind it. Early-morning light filtered by cloud and storm.

"Seven thirty. Sorry I got in so late." He poured me coffee into one of his giant, heavy crockery mugs. I had to take it with both hands. "There was some trouble."

That woke me up a little, I felt a shiver of my old worries run through me, clashing with the heat between my thighs. "What happened?"

He hesitated. "I'm not sure this is a conversation to have before our first cup of coffee."

He had a point, but my worries had flickered back to life. "Okay." I took a sip of mine, it stung my lips a little, but tasted amazing. "This is good. Surprised you didn't make tea this morning."

He saw my face and winced, but played along for the moment. *Normalcy*. "Need the caffeine jolt when my sleep's been inadequate." A few more sips, and then he sighed, feeling me watching him. "It's worrying you more to wait on hearing it, isn't it?" he finally asked.

I nodded. “I’m sorry. I think I’m just wired that way. Or maybe all this being kept in the dark by the cops has fucked with my patience.”

“All right. I will try to remember that.” He set his mug down. “Someone was staking out your house. But unless I’m making a big oversight, I don’t think he has anything to do with the people who took your daughter.”

My heart was beating fast. “Who, then? Who else would possibly want to stalk me?”

“Your ex.”

I stared at him. “Alan?”

“That’s the one. No idea how long he’s been doing it, but last night he was especially active. Put a tracker on your car and then tried to get into the building.”

All the air felt like it had been sucked out of the room. *Alan, you creepy, unbalanced, corrupt son of a bitch.* “You caught him at it?”

“I did. So did the security cameras and, I presume, your dash cam.”

“What happened? What did you say to each other?” I struggled to process this. “I just can’t believe this. He was always a selfish ass, but I didn’t expect him to go full stalker when he knew I could retaliate.”

“Ah, yes, about that.” He offered a small, apologetic smile. “I don’t think he aimed to give you the chance to retaliate.”

The truth sank into me like sharp icicles. “How bad was it?”

“Are you absolutely sure that you—?”

“Gregor,” I prodded, bracing myself for his answer.

He sighed and scratched his temple uncomfortably, his smile dying. “Rape kit and weapons bad.”

“Jesus.” Lorelei had warned me about this. When a boyfriend was abusive or had those tendencies, they would get ten times worse when you left. I had sensed something bad in him, endured his heartless words and behaviors, and

had done everything I could to let him think that breaking up was his idea. But here we were anyway, because he would rewrite history in his own head just to be able to blame me for everything.

But then Gregor had given him a talking-to. Had he listened to another man when he would never have listened to me? I had another thought, Gregor didn't seem the kind of man who would settle for a conversation, after hearing how he rescued Michelle I knew what he was capable of, yet for some reason it didn't scare me. "How did you handle it?"

"Told him to get the fuck out of town and never bother you again, or I'd release the videos and records of his stalking and threatening you to the media, and then I'd come looking for him."

That last threat caught my attention in a strange way, reminding me again of the heat deep in my body that even my worst fears couldn't extinguish. Seeing the cold anger in his eyes when he talked of Alan, thinking of him hurting Alan while he protected me, didn't just make me feel safe. It was also fuel for the fire.

But I still had practical things to worry about. I fumbled for my mug, got another mouthful of coffee down. "God, I have to move out of that place. Go somewhere he doesn't know."

"You can stay here as long as you need to," he reassured me instantly. "We'll just need to grab your stuff."

I huffed my way into silence, everything I had been thinking of saying evaporating on my tongue. Here he was again, rushing to protect me. He had been a bodyguard before, but I had hired him as an investigator.

I wanted to ask him why he gave so much of a damn when he didn't have to. Why the money, why the effort, why the anger on my behalf, why the rescues. But then I realized maybe this was just how he was. Not every man out there was a prick like Alan or my father. But my experience with them had started leading me to expect the worst.

Gregor gave a damn, and he acted on it. It wasn't conditional. He didn't seem to care how much effort it took for him to act on his feelings. How much risk was involved. He just went and got it done. For us. For me.

I had to have him.

The thought was immediate, primal, and overwhelming. I set my mug down again, then stepped up to him, took the mug out of his hands, and set it aside too. He blinked down at me, surprised.

“Thank you for dealing with him. But I don’t want to talk about Alan anymore, not unless he’s dumb enough to pop back up.” I stepped forward again and ran my hands up his chest, feeling the hardness of his muscles under my palm.

His eyes widened a little, startled, then hooded with pleasure. “What do you want to talk about?” he murmured, hands drifting to my shoulders.

“I don’t want to talk,” I said softly, slipping into the circle of his arms. I had to go up onto my toes to kiss him. I put five years of pent-up hunger into it, and he responded, catching me in his arms and kissing back hungrily.

For a moment, all the years between our last kiss and this one dissolved, and I was that enthralled young near-virgin again. I melted in his arms as our tongues entwined, lips hungry and searching, stunned by my first kiss in years that had real passion in it. I was back in his arms, finally, and right then, nothing would have made me pull away. The combination of relief, want, and need spiraled through me and all I could think about was having him inside me.

Gregor carried me to his bed, I held in my moans until he’d shut the bedroom door behind us. We’d both been starved for each other. I learned soon enough that it wasn’t just me—not the way he destroyed his shirt getting out of it, broke the zipper on his pants, panted like he was running as he watched me impatiently pull off my clothes. I was already aching for him. Then he was naked standing in front of me and my breath caught. The man was a work of art, literally and figuratively. From the elaborate tattoos to his tight, hard, muscled frame. My eyes drifted downwards to his cock, and I couldn’t hold in the gasp that escaped my lips.

He looked up at me and slowly licked his lips, “Like what you see?”

I nodded as I shifted up his bed, “I forgot how big you were,”

“If I remember correctly, we fit together perfectly,” he said while slowly stroking his shaft. A bead of precum slipped out and he rubbed it in with his thumb.

I yearned for him, the man who had revealed the depths of what it was like to be properly loved, to feel the ecstasy igniting every nerve ending within me. The pulsating ache between my thighs spoke of an urgent need. As he ascended onto the bed, his approach deliberate, his mouth claimed mine in a commanding kiss, and the unmistakable pressure of his arousal pressed against my stomach.

I shifted beneath his weight, his deliberate touch sending shivers through me as he caressed my clit.

"My little rose is as tempting as ever," he growled, his lips trailing down my neck, leaving a teasing path with his tongue. I moaned in response.

"I fantasized about this," he confessed, fixing me with a lustful gaze, his dark eyes betraying his desires. Lowering his head, he hovered just above my nipple, his breath teasing it into a tight bud. Electric shocks fired through me as he took my nipple in his mouth and sucked, pulling the exquisitely tender flesh into his mouth greedily, his other hand cupping my other breast.

“I’ve been thinking about you too,” I whispered.

He lifted his mouth from me, and I was fighting the urge to scream at him to suck harder, to fuck me. To fill me completely. That night with him had been a rare moment of surrender, the only time I had truly lost control with a man. It remained etched in my memory, a vivid recollection of pleasure and ecstasy the only time I ever orgasmed, other than when I touched myself while thinking of him inside me.

"And what was my little rose thinking about? Did she want me to do this?" His mouth returned to my nipple, his tongue swirling around the taut peak, teasing me to new heights. "Or perhaps this," his voice, thick with lust, resonated as I felt the weight of his arousal pressing against my thigh. Anticipation hung in the air, and I held my breath as his tongue slowly trailed down my stomach, pausing just at the top of my slit.

"Mmm," I managed to utter, parting my legs in an unspoken invitation.

"In your thoughts, how did it feel when I did this?" His tongue glided down my slit and back up again, capturing my clit between his lips, sucking gently as his hands cupped my ass.

The explicit sensations elicited a primal response. "Oh fuck, fuck," I moaned, unable to contain the intense pleasure.

A dark chuckle escaped him as his fingers parted me, and his tongue delved in. Shudders wracked my body, and I couldn't help but moan in response to the divine torture he expertly inflicted. The ache for him was undeniable, and in the midst of my trembling and gasping, I couldn't hold back the desperate plea, "Need you," I gasped, the words escaping in a breathless whisper.

In response, his tongue expertly lapped at my clit, and I felt a satisfying fullness as he slipped in a finger.

"Fuck, you're so wet," he remarked, drawing his finger out and deliberately sucking it. "And you taste how I remembered, so good."

As he slid his finger back inside me, I squirmed and bucked my hips, teetering on the brink of release, yearning for his cock. Adding another finger, he began a deliberate rhythm, stroking me, while his lips rediscovered my clit.

"Come for me, Alissa. Let go, I want to feel your tight pussy clenching around my fingers, and then I'm going to make you come on my cock."

I moaned and shuddered, my plea desperate, "Need your cock, I want you in me."

"Patience, *milaya*. I want to see you lose control, let go." His fingers delved deeper, entwining and twisting, while he gently sucked my swollen clit. That was the catalyst; suddenly, my body convulsed, and I unraveled in a moaning crescendo. His expert fingers and lips coaxed out an orgasm that felt endless.

After what seemed like an eternity, I lay there, gasping for breath. My

eyes flickered open to find Gregor sitting back on his heels, a satisfied expression on his face. His rigid cock strained, and instead of feeling spent after my explosive orgasm, my clit throbbed in response as he leisurely stroked himself, his gaze fixed on me. The instinct to part my legs in invitation tugged at me, but then a desire took hold—I wanted to ride him, to witness him lose control beneath me.

“Ready for the main course,” he said while rolling on a rubber.

“Maybe this is the entrée?” I responded. After the stress and strain of the past year I was ready to let go of everything, of the anger, the loss, the grief, the worry, the frustration, and just live in the moment. This delicious, never-ending moment knowing my world was complete.

Gregor gave a deep laugh, “I’ll let my little rose choose the menu then. Where do you want me?”

“Lie down,” I said boldly. “I want to ride you.”

“Another of your little daydreams, *milaya*?” he teased.

Maybe,” I responded as I playfully pushed him back toward the pillows. Riding his cock had been a recurring fantasy of mine.

Feeling courageous, I straddled him, bringing the tip of his straining cock to rub against my swollen clit, impatient for him to fill me, but relishing the tease.

He moaned, “Fuck, that feels good already.”

Circling my hips, I maintained contact with his cockhead, deliberately not going any further. I wanted to see how long it would take for him to beg for more. Amidst the throbbing of my clit and the coating of his shaft with my wetness, it was uncertain who would last the longest in this delicious torture.

Pausing for a moment, his hips bucked. Smirking, I lifted myself slightly, maintaining contact.

“Fuck,” Gregor gasped.

I leaned forward so my breasts fell in his face and his lips captured my



nipple, tugging and pulling. Arching my back, I angled myself so his cock was notched against my entrance and moved so the tip slipped in. I gasped in shock, I'd forgotten just how big he was.

Gregor's breathing was ragged, and I could feel his cock twitch. Both of us were on the edge. I needed him in me, needed that fullness.

Leaning back again I slowly sank down over him, easing his cock in, inch by inch. He trembled and arched under me, a hoarse groan escaping his lips as I tried to fit all of his cock into me. I looked down to see what he saw, and the sight was so erotic—his magnificent cock, drenched in my wetness as it slowly disappeared into my pussy.

“So tight,” he hissed. “So good, my little rose feels so good. Look at you, you're perfect.”

Any self-consciousness I had about being on show went as I leaned back allowing him a better view.

I bucked experimentally, going slowly at first, already breathless from the feeling of him inside. I gasped and suddenly he was all inside me, my thighs were trembling with the sensation of fullness as I slowly started moving. His hands had settled onto my hips, fingertips digging into my flesh just a little with every move of my body. Once I had gotten accustomed to his size, my movements quickened, rising up and down his shaft, almost pulling off him and then taking him to the hilt.

We thrust together eagerly, impatiently, going faster, while my aching pussy tightened around him more and more. I whimpered and moaned as I felt years of tension build up in my body, stoked further with each roll of his hips under me, each hoarse pant, each soft gasp of my name.

Every thrust felt better than the last, each movement causing my swollen clit to be tugged. I fought to keep my voice down as his hands roamed over my body and settled on my breasts, thumbs sliding back and forth over my nipples as I ground against him.

I was going to scream. I couldn't stop it, couldn't hold it back. It was building in my throat as ecstasy built in my body. I tried to bring my hands up to muffle it, but they were clutching at Gregor's shoulders as I moved

against him wildly. I tried to warn Gregor, but all that came out were sobs of pleasure. And I couldn't stop.

Just as my climax hit like a train, Gregor lunged up suddenly and kissed me fiercely. My back arched and I writhed against him wildly, and a heartbeat later, my world shattered into bliss. Between the waves of ecstasy, I heard Gregor's orgasmic groans, and felt his cock jump and shudder inside me.

We collapsed onto his bed together, breathless, feeling the aftershocks rock through us as I lay trembling on his chest. I had a million things I wanted to say to him right then, but I didn't even have the strength to move. Maybe dessert would have to wait until later. I drifted off before I could speak.

## Chapter 14

### Gregor

I woke later in the morning to discover the streets clogged with snow and the city practically shut down. The storm had grown more powerful as we had napped, and now there was at least two feet on the ground. As I toweled off and dressed after my shower, I looked out the window and saw deep ruts in the snow on the street. The plows hadn't come around yet.

We were stuck. We couldn't get out, and no one could get in at us either. Of course, that also meant my trip out to the Ivanovs' place would have to wait. But that business was best done at night anyway. Right now, all I wanted was to stay in with Alissa and our little girl anyway.

Contentment was a strange variety of happiness, one I had never felt before. Maybe a little bit after sex or a good meal, but right now, I felt far more than that. Having them here, staying with them, made me feel like all was right with the world.

I checked on Alissa and Michelle before going out to have more coffee and check my phone. Both of them were so asleep that I probably would have had to shake them awake. I didn't. They both needed lots of rest after all that they had been through.

I could really get used to this, I thought as I sipped my coffee.

But despite that, I was worried. I knew the longer I tried to make something permanent with Alissa, the more likely she was to learn about my occupation.

And once that happened, I had no idea if she would stay. I prayed she would since I knew I was already attached. It was too late to pull away, even if I could have mustered the will to. It had gone too far. Now, the parting would wound us all.

But this was worth the risk. They were worth it. And if I could stare down a gun barrel on a regular basis, I could deal with the prospect of that pain, and

tell the whole truth.

Later. Right now, I just wanted to savor what I had before it might be gone.

I was halfway through my coffee when I heard tiny footsteps hesitating into the room. I looked over my shoulder and saw Michelle, mostly dressed but awkwardly carrying her purple sneakers, making her way toward me. She yawned widely as she approached.

“Need some help with your shoes, kiddo?” I asked, setting my coffee aside and crouching in front of her.

She nodded at me solemnly, and I helped her into her shoes. I tied each one slowly, showing her each step. “It takes time and practice, especially making the bow. Do you understand?” She nodded, and I straightened and helped her back up. “Good. We’ll practice more later, I promise. Are you hungry?”

She nodded.

“Want more pancakes?”

Her face brightened and she nodded harder, smiling a little.

By the time I had the pancake batter together, Michelle was at the table nursing a glass of apple juice, and I heard my shower running. By the time I was halfway through piling up pancakes on the serving plate, a dressed, primed, but sleepy-looking Alissa shuffled out to join us. Her yawn was as wide as our daughter’s.

“Good morning,” she murmured, giving each of us a kiss on the cheek before sitting beside her daughter. She peered at the big, thin pancakes curiously. “Crepes?”

“Russian pancakes. They get rolled around fillings too, though. How did you sleep?” I flipped another pancake, revealing its pale golden-brown underside.

“Good.” She hesitated a moment, but then smiled. “We should talk later.”

“Later” was code for “when we’re not in front of Michelle.” I nodded. “Of course.”

I knew instantly what it was about. But I kept my cool through making and eating breakfast, keeping my smile on for Michelle, knowing the last thing she needed was to have her traumas discussed in front of her.

Once she was enthralled by cartoons and a fresh tub of Legos, Alissa and I retreated to my study. It was just a converted second guest room, nothing cool like Vasily’s, but it had a nice leather couch. “What is it?” I asked her gently.

“Last night...” she started, and I blinked, caught by surprise. “I hope I didn’t shock you.”

I let out a soft laugh and reached out to cup her elfin little chin gently. “No. Relieved, really. It saved me from making the first move now that I’ve kept my promise to bring Michelle back to you.”

She looked relieved, but it only lasted a few moments. “But...” Her gaze slid away from mine awkwardly, then shyly drifted back. “You said you weren’t looking for anything long term.”

I heard the vulnerability in her tone and paused to choose my words carefully, knowing they would weigh heavily on her. “If you’re right about Michelle, we’re tied together anyway. I’m new at committing. New at sticking around. And there are things you don’t know about me that you probably should.” Not that I was looking forward to that discussion. “But I would like to try.”

I saw the happiness in her eyes at that, and prayed the truth wouldn’t end up snuffing it out.

She hugged me, and I held her, thinking about sneaking off to the master bedroom again, but knowing, especially after the broken glass incident, that I had to keep an ear out for Michelle.

“Is it going to be okay doing remote work from here?” she asked once I let her go.

“Of course. I’ll help you get set up. And if you need me to pick anything up from your home, let me know. I’ll need your key, though.” I didn’t, but I did need her permission.

“I’ll come up with a list.” She smiled at me, but then it faded. “I also have to make appointments for a doctor and therapist to look over Michelle. She doesn’t have any scars or anything but this not talking...”

I sighed and nodded. “I understand. Let me accompany you to the appointments for your safety. I will stay outside if you want.”

She licked her lips. “You have a right to be there if you want to.”

Her quiet sincerity poked me right in the heart. Now that I had said I wanted to try with her, she was all in. *Please stay that way*, I caught myself thinking, but simply smiled and nodded. “Just let me know when.”

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It took until nightfall before we were dug out again. The plows were grinding their way through the streets while we ate a hearty beef stew, and kept it up well after we put Michelle to bed.

We had spent the day together, and I had loved it. It had been cozy, something about the closeness reminded me of happier childhood days. We had talked for hours about everything from favorite movies to her work as a CPA to her need to at least know the remaining Ivanovs had been brought to justice.

I had promised to let Alissa know as soon as I found out, but I felt strange about it. If we stayed together, I couldn’t keep lying to her. I would never be able to tell her much about the organization, but she deserved to know as much as I could afford. She would find out something was up eventually. Women always did, and I was no idiot. Better for her to hear it early on, from me.

Now, though, she had drifted off in front of the movie we’d been watching, and I got up to go back to my study, phone in hand. The cat trailed in after me and I shut the door.

Two messages from Sergei. I called him back. “Sorry, didn’t have privacy before. What is it?”

“Need to talk to you. Face to face.” He sounded tired and uncomfortable. “And I need to warn you.” His voice was a little slurry. He had been drinking, and not a little. It shocked me, Sergei was normally sharp as a tack even after we’d had shots together.

“Warn me about what?”

“Vasily’s having me look into you. What you’re doing. The mother and child you’re sheltering. I don’t think he knows that’s your ex-lover and probably your kid. But he’s pissed you’ve been keeping things from him. If I were you...” he took a swallow of something, “...I would head this off. Go to him first, and quickly, and tell him everything.”

“You’re a good friend, Sergei. I know I owe him an explanation. I was focusing on keeping them safe and paying the Ivanovs a visit.”

“Table that second one for now,” Sergei suggested so firmly that he sounded sober for a moment. “Trust me, you need to see him first.”

I took a steadying breath, slow and deep. “Understood.”

“He needs to know that’s your daughter. Otherwise, he won’t understand as much. He’s been acting so strange the last few years,” he muttered, almost under his breath. “Now, most of what he does is cover his own ass and watch his own men.”

“Do you have any idea what’s going on with him?”

“I know his family stopped talking to him a couple of years back, but that’s all.”

I let out a low whistle. “All of them? He never said a thing.”

“Pride,” he said. Vasily had a lot of it. “No idea why his sons walked out of his life, but ever since then he’s been acting like he expects a betrayal from any side.”

“Huh. Well, he won’t get a betrayal from me. He’d have to do the

betraying first before I even considered it.”

“Same here. But I admit, he’s not doing himself any favors by scrutinizing all of us while letting fringe players like the Ivanovs go unmonitored.” He coughed. “Probably shouldn’t have said that.”

“I heard nothing.” I sighed, not wanting to leave Alissa and Michelle but knowing I had to. “Where should we meet?”

“I—damn, that’s Vasily on the other line. Hold on.”

I held on, frowning. What was Vasily up to? Why had his sons abandoned him? And why was he calling Sergei on what was clearly a night off?

Things were changing within the organization, and with Vasily, and aside from Sergei and I, nobody seemed to have noticed. It was subtle, this shift, and the truth behind it was hidden from me. It bothered the shit out of me. And bothered me more,

When Sergei came back on the line, he sounded like he had sobered a little, and I wondered what Vasily had told him. “I’m sorry. I have to get some coffee into me and get over to the mansion. He won’t wait.” He sounded tense. Where had coolly cheerful, detached Sergei gone?

“I understand. Afterward?”

“I don’t know how long he’ll want me for.” A pause. “Gregor...call him tonight.”

“I will,” I promised, and he hung up before I could say anything further.

I gave it twenty minutes. When I called Vasily, I got his voicemail. I left a message. “It’s Gregor. I have more information on the Ivanov matter and need to speak to you in person. Just let me know when.”

I hung up, hoping that would be enough. I knew better than to ignore Sergei’s warnings, especially when Vasily had suddenly started changing from the man I had known and served for so long.



## Chapter 15

### Alissa

**I**n the morning I cooked us spinach and cheese omelets and hash browns, along with a packet of small, spicy sausages that Michelle didn't like. Then Gregor drove us to the child psychologist I had found.

I held Michelle's hand the whole way, nervous about the appointment, nervous about this new thing with Gregor, and struggling with what I would have to do after Michelle's appointments. Phone calls, texts, and emails that had to get done. Announcements that needed to be made.

It was time for me to face the world again and update everyone on the fact that after all this time, Michelle had finally been found. I wasn't ready for it. I wished I could just stay hidden in the safety and warmth of Gregor's apartment and not face the world, or the endless questions from others, or the risk of being somewhere my maniac of an ex could find me.

I was still relying on Gregor, and he was stepping up in every way he possibly could. When he disappointed me, it was minor. When he said the wrong thing, it was a small accident—like when he talked about my 'cute little butt' in front of Michelle. Being around him made me feel safe and made me feel like Michelle was safer as well.

It was too soon to see if things would really work, but I was starting to pray that it would. I couldn't deal with having another man in my life make it worse instead of better. Especially if he did the same to Michelle. But for now, he was as good as gold, and it gave me hope.

"So this doctor..." Gregor started.

"Amanda Mason. She's a therapist with a specialty in childhood trauma. She's probably going to refer us to a speech therapist as well." I tried to keep my voice calm and not let my worries show. Michelle leaned on my shoulder, drowsy from her full tummy.

"I hope they can do something for her."

“Me too,” he said gently, though he kept his focus on the road. It was a mess out there. The roads were icy and slushy, early morning sunlight glaring off the puddles, and wind pushed at the car like a gigantic hand, making it rock and skid slightly despite it being built like a tank. The feeling did nothing good for my nerves.

I was scared. Scared for my baby, scared of what I would learn, scared of what would happen when news of Michelle’s return broke. Both Michelle and Gregor could tell. Michelle kept looking up at me and silently patting my hand. Gregor glanced back at me every time traffic stopped, concern in his eyes.

“I should be ecstatic right now,” I murmured as Gregor fought traffic and the wind. “Michelle’s back. But all I keep thinking about is how the cops are going to respond when I embarrass them.”

Gregor was silent for a bit. He took the highway for a few miles to get above the gridlock. “Don’t you worry about the police, sweetheart. Yes, they’re corrupt and your ex is crazy. But they fucked up big time when it came to finding Michelle. That’s objectively true. You don’t even have to say anything about it for it to be true. You won’t embarrass them. They’re embarrassing themselves.”

I glanced at my daughter who was sleeping peacefully now, her head resting against my shoulder as if she couldn’t bear to break contact. “Do you think that they were prevented from making the arrest?” I asked tentatively. “You said the Ivanovs are protected by someone powerful.”

“*Were* protected,” he corrected gently. “It doesn’t so much work like that, from what my contacts have told me. It’s more like the police get paid off, agree to look the other way.”

“Oh God, that’s even worse. I might have forgiven their fuckups if their families were being threatened or something.”

“No, you don’t threaten the police like that. If you threaten a cop’s family, you end up with angry badges from all over the state showing up. You threaten them with their own dirty secrets, or you bribe them and then blackmail them for taking a bribe. It always has to involve their doing

something wrong for it to stick.”

“I see.” How did he know all of this? Who did he used to be a bodyguard for? I was reminded again of just how little I knew about him. We had shared a lot of stories, his childhood in Yekaterinburg emigrating from Russia to the States to stay with distant family, his military training, working his way up from poverty. He wasn’t being secretive or anything like that, but there were still big gaps in what I knew about him. And apparently some of that had involved hanging out with criminals enough to learn some of their ways.

As we parked in the psych clinic’s lot, I wondered if I should be worried. My gut told me not to be, but maybe I was too biased to judge correctly. Would a shady background be a dealbreaker for me?

My heart said no. Because despite that, Gregor had gone out of his way to be good as gold to us. How could a man who treated us that well be a bad person? He was like the anti-Alan. He had shady connections but was a good man. Alan had a squeaky-clean reputation and a hero-cop image, but he was a horrifying piece of shit.

“I’m not worried about embarrassing the police because I don’t think they deserve it. They do. In fact, a little public humiliation might motivate them to clean house.” I shivered slightly as he slid into a parking place and stopped. Michelle shifted against me and woke with a start, her blue eyes momentarily filled with panic then she seemed to relax again. *What had my poor, innocent daughter been through?* I only hoped that the therapist would be able to undo the damage, and it wasn’t too late.

“What is it, then?” Gregor asked, pulling me back to the present.

“I’m worried about what they’ll do to me,” I admitted, voice low, like I was confessing a dirty secret.

“Well, that’s sure understandable with the sh—with what Alan pulled.” He gave a slightly worried glance at Michelle as he struggled to control his swearing.

That was adorable enough to make me smile despite it all. I helped Michelle out of her car seat and lifted her over the puddle of ice beside the car door. “Oof, you’ve gotten so big!”

She giggled a little. That was promising. Wasn't it?

“Yeah, well, hearing he was trying to get into my apartment and putting trackers on my car has wrecked any faith I had left in the cops. I don't trust that they won't turn out to be bad guys.”

I took Michelle's hand, and we picked our way around the ice patches to the clinic's front door. My stomach started fluttering as we walked into the waiting room, which was all bright primary colors and molded plastic chairs. Gregor stayed standing so he wouldn't destroy any of them. I went up to the blond wooden counter and forced a smile at the receptionist, who had big, liquid brown eyes and a grandmotherly sweetness to her expression. “Hi, I'm here with Michelle for Dr. Mason's nine o'clock.”

Michelle peeked over the edge of the counter solemnly.

The receptionist beamed at her. “Well, hi there, sweetie.” She looked up at me. “I'll let her know. It will be about ten minutes.”

Twenty minutes of reading to Michelle and schooling myself on patience later, we were called back into a pretty little study that reminded me a bit of Gregor's office. Plenty of books, a large couch, overstuffed chairs, a desk in the corner. Gregor didn't have a stand table or cupboards full of toys, though.

Dr. Amanda Mason was a tiny woman with a lined oval face, small green eyes, and a heavy wine velvet suit with a long skirt and embroidery. Her voice carried a thick Germanic accent, and her smile was like the sun coming up.

“Well, hello there. Come in, come in, make yourselves comfortable.” She gestured to the couch. We sat, the two of us flanking Michelle.

Michelle looked at this new person with solemn curiosity. She had been fairly calm on the ride over. Now, she looked between the three of us, as if trying to decide what to make of this situation.

“So,” the doctor said, looking at Gregor and me. “Why have you brought Michelle to me today?”

“Where to begin,” I sighed.

She smiled indulgently. “Take your time.”

I told her the whole story. The kidnapping, what I knew of her kidnappers, the police being useless, Gregor stepping in, Michelle’s return, and her absent voice. I had barely started before the doctor’s smile had died and she was rapidly keying things into her laptop. By the end of it, she looked downright concerned.

“Are you in therapy yourself?” she asked.

“I’ve been a member of a support group for over a year now,” I said.

“Good. It is important to care for yourself enough while you are caring for your daughter. If you are distressed, she will pick up on it. Besides, if you are in a good place, you will have more resources to look after her.” More typing. “That said, what you and your family have been through is incredible. This will probably reach the press, which will mean a whole new pressure on you and yours. Especially Michelle.”

Gregor spoke up for the first time. “I intend to be very strict when it comes to press access. If the situation becomes uncomfortable for either Michelle or Alissa, I will step in.”

“That’s good to hear, and I’m glad you’re involved,” the doctor said as I sat there stunned. Here went Gregor, surprising me again with how much he actually gave a damn. How rare had that been in my life that it kept shocking me?

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Believe me, I’m grateful. I’ve been handling this all on my own, just because we’d fallen out of touch, and now... When Gregor showed up, my luck and Michelle’s finally turned.”

Gregor hid a smile.

The doctor didn’t hide hers. “Well,” she said. “A positive home life is the absolute best thing you can give your daughter to get her talking again. Clearly, she’s been traumatized. She saw something, or had someone say something to her, that silenced her. But now that she’s home safe, she should recover. It is just a matter of time, patience, and work. That said, I think having her work with a speech therapist is very important. I have one I work

with who specializes in young children. Emailing you now.” My phone vibrated in my pocket. “Now, as for our work, it is very difficult for your daughter to express herself without words, so we will try to use other methods to communicate. Art, for example. As she learns to write, she can use that as even more of a bridge to speaking again. Baby steps.”

“Baby steps,” I confirmed. “So, where do we start?”

“Get her started on her letters and give her plenty of opportunities to draw. Eventually, I will ask her to draw some of her experiences.” She looked at Michelle. “Would you like to draw while we grownups talk?”

She nodded, and the doctor guided her to a big clipboard and a set of crayons. Michelle immediately went to work, a sliver of tongue caught between her lips as she concentrated.

We then figured out a game plan for her appointments and progress. The doctor seemed as concerned with shoring us up as she was bonding with my daughter. It put me at ease, as did her optimism about Michelle, but I still worried about what was going to happen once the news was out. If Michelle ended up being chased around by nosy reporters and officious cops, she might withdraw even further. I didn’t even know how I was going to handle such uncomfortable and unwanted fame myself.

At least Gregor was around, and willing to put himself between us and not only danger, but harassment. What in the world would I have done without him?

I would have done a lot worse, that was certain. And Michelle might never have been found.

Michelle finished her drawing and brought it to me proudly. I stared at it. I passed it to the doctor, and she to Gregor, who paled a shade or two but stayed stoic as he looked at what our daughter had depicted.

It was him. I could tell from his enormous leather coat, the crayon-squiggle wavy dark hair, and the two splashes of silver wax for eyes. He was with a little girl who was probably her, with yellow hair and pink pajamas. He held her hand with a hand that looked big and soft as a baseball glove.

In his other hand was a gun. Just a silver L, but anyone could have told right away what it was. The hand that held it was dark, claw like. Behind them was a burning house.

That strange fear I'd felt before intensified inside me. I looked over at Gregor, and he couldn't look at me.

What was going on?

## Chapter 16

### Gregor

The ride back was too quiet. The matter of Michelle's drawing hung between us, unspoken. I knew why, and so I kept quiet about it until we were home and Michelle had eaten her lunch and gone down for an afternoon nap.

Once that happened, Alissa sat down next to me on the couch, hands folded in her lap. She didn't look at me for several seconds, and I felt cold reality running a finger down my spine. She already suspected something. I should just tell her. Pull off the band aid.

But I couldn't. She was depending on me for her safety, and that of her child. If I scared her away now, she would end up in a perilous situation again. I hadn't seen any sign of her ex since our confrontation, but I knew his fear of me might still be overcome by his obsession.

"So..." she started, and I turned and forced myself to look at her. "Do you want to tell me what really happened the night you rescued Michelle?"

"As I told you, I rescued her at gunpoint. It was a very tense scene, and, apparently, I made an impression on Michelle."

"She seems to think you're a hero. So do I. But I also think you're holding back on what happened." She looked me right in the eye as I wished she was a touch less observant.

"Look, if I've skimmed on the details, it's because they're ugly and some of my sources do not want to be named. I did everything I could not to expose Michelle to anything violent, but it's pretty clear she figured out something about how I got them to let her go."

"And the burning house?"

All the words caught in my throat. How the hell was I going to explain that? "I...might have lost my temper when I found out what they were doing to kids."



She stared at me. I waited, bracing myself. “Jesus,” she breathed finally. At least she was still talking to me, and not freaking out. “I’m guessing you got Michelle cleared out of there first?”

“Absolutely. Found her a hiding place outside after I bundled her up properly.”

“I...holy crap. Um, sorry, I just don’t know very many people who have burned a house down.”

“It wasn’t a house, it was more like a prison. A place of torture. I didn’t want to leave them with the ability to just take the whole thing up again as soon as they got their hands on more kids.”

She nodded, chewing her lip. I felt a tiny, tentative scrap of relief. “I guess I can’t blame you, but aren’t you worried about getting in trouble?”

“Not really. What are they going to do, go to the police and complain that their kiddie porn studio got burned down?” I was thankful that the story had dropped off the front pages of the newspapers, to be replaced instead by news of ice storms and the associated chaos. Alissa was probably too caught up in the tragedy of her own life, to pay much heed to the headlines of ‘Deadly explosion rocks quiet Highland Park neighborhood’. Fuck, I hated having to lie to her about what I do, but it’s the only way.

She let out a high laugh that sounded a little nervous. “I guess not.”

“Exactly.” I smiled at her, and she smiled tentatively back.

“Well, I mean, as long as nothing from it comes back to bite us.”

“It won’t,” I promised, even knowing that might be premature. “You’re not freaked out and planning to bail on me, are you?”

She hesitated, and then shook her head. “I don’t think I would ever have the nerve to burn a place down, or rescue someone by holding their captors at gunpoint. But, thinking about it, I’m glad you did.”

I sighed in relief. “Good. I don’t want you thinking I run around doing things like that for fun or anything. I do it...” I trailed off, suddenly forced to search for the right words. *I do it because my boss orders it. I do it because*

*the organization needs it. I do it because someone betrayed us, or is our enemy. "I have only done things like that because it was required of me."*

"Required?" I didn't like the look on her face.

*"As in, I either didn't have a choice or knew I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't. Like burning that kiddie porn studio down." After murdering everyone inside who was an adult.*

I couldn't feel bad about that, but I didn't want to upset Alissa any more than I already had either.

"I get it," she said finally, though the note of doubt in her voice told me she didn't. "They deserved at least that, and with the police doing nothing, there was nobody around to hit back at those people but you."

"Yes. Hence the picture."

She went quiet for a nerve-wrackingly long time, her eyes fixed on the backs of her hands. But then, finally, she looked back up at me. "Okay. Just don't make a habit of arson and all that, okay? It'd get really hard for me to explain to our daughter."

I laughed gently, a bit shocked by the joke. But she had a good point. "Of course not. I promise."

But deep down, I knew I wasn't off the hook. One day, I would have to tell her much more if she wanted to stay with me. And though she was braver and more open-minded than I'd expected, I didn't know if she could handle it when she found out that killing for the *bratva* was my job.

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Vasily still hadn't answered my message, and he hadn't called me in to give out more work. It struck me as strange—there were often long spans of time between jobs due to the nature of my work, but he had been talking about a crackdown. Yet now he wasn't answering my calls, and neither was Sergei.

Troubled, I left my phone on and put it on vibrate before leaving that night. Alissa was sound asleep in my bed with Feodor curled next to her, and

Michelle was sound asleep in hers. They were safe. And I had a job to do, though it wasn't a paying one, and it wasn't for Vasily. It was for Alissa. It was for Michelle. It was for every vulnerable kid in this city.

The drive to the Ivanovs' daycare barely took me fifteen minutes. It was a small property with two bungalows crammed onto it, the front one converted into the daycare facility. Tall, overgrown trees lined the property on three sides, which was secured by the kind of tall iron gate that one found at a cemetery. It looked completely out of place in front of a daycare.

Of course, it was securely locked and topped with spikes. I considered it as I drove past, then turned onto a side street and parked. The tall trees, the tall fence—on the surface it might look like they took the safety of their preschoolers seriously, but now I knew what they were capable of, these were more for the purpose of privacy and security for whatever hellish acts they decided to commit. But they had outsmarted themselves.

I free climbed one of the tall trees, climbed out onto a sturdy limb overhanging the property, and used a length of rope to lower myself to the grass. I looked around quickly, looking for cameras, watchdogs, anything that might actually threaten me. Nothing. Both houses were dark and silent.

Breaking into the daycare was ridiculously easy. I used a credit card to pop the latch. There was no deadbolt, I supposed that they thought the spiked gate was deterrent enough for anyone who wanted to break in. I slipped inside into the darkness, casing the place for people, information, evidence. I knew what they had been up to, but I had a nagging feeling there was more to the story than what I had been told or had found on those confiscated laptops.

I found two more laptops that went into my bag, along with two hefty rolls of twenty-dollar bills I fished out of one of the desks. No cameras. Apparently, they were a lot less security conscious than they appeared on the surface—or they didn't want footage of what they themselves were doing.

It took me less than half an hour to clear the first building. That left the back house, where I was almost certain I would find the swine who had done this to Michelle.

Or, at least, some of them. Once this was done and the Ivanovs were ready

for their graves, I had to make sure that this nightmare truly was over. No stragglers, no unpunished scumbags. But this time, I had to let them live a few minutes while I got all the information out of them that I could.

There was nobody in the yard and grounds, no cameras covering it. It astonished me. The place I had rescued Michelle from had been full of security. Here, there was none. It didn't make any sense. In fact, as I started creeping around the second house's perimeter, I noticed spots where the cameras had been removed recently. Why the hell would they cut down on their own security? What were they so eager to avoid getting filmed that they would remove the cameras?

I didn't like this. I didn't get scared, but the hairs on the back of my neck were starting to prickle. There was a car sitting in the driveway, so someone was clearly home. But as I approached the driveway side of the house, I noticed something odd. The car was completely glazed with ice.

I frowned and approached it, eye out for a dashcam. The whole thing gleamed, the ice was an inch thick in spots, and had turned into a curtain of icicles along its bottom edges. Even the tires were iced over and flat on the bottoms, like they were frozen to the ground. That car had gone through the last snowstorm and successive thaws undisturbed, as if it hadn't been used in days.

The whole thing felt off, but I still didn't understand why. My instincts were prickling at me, telling me I should keep my gun handy and my wits about me. But I couldn't locate the danger.

I tried checking through the windows of the house. It was pitch-black inside, and heavy curtains hid most of the interior. I pulled out my night vision binoculars and checked again. The place looked empty. But when I checked the bedroom windows, I saw two human-sized shapes under the covers. They were home.

I should have been reassured by that, but as I peered at those shapes under the blankets, my hackles were still up. Something wasn't right, the binoculars worked by thermal imaging, and the heat signature was far weaker than you'd expect. Not knowing what else to do, I drew my pistol and headed around to the back door, expecting it to have a weaker lock.

It had a window in it, and I peered through the shades on it while I tried the credit card trick. This latch was stronger, so I pulled out my glass cutter instead.

The cutter had a suction cup that I stuck to the glass, and a blade on a string to make a circle around it. I cut a hole a little bigger than my forearm and pulled the glass back out, then grabbed my night vision binoculars again to check inside.

As I put my face near the hole, a rush of cold, stinking air alerted me. It smelled like chemicals and rotting bodies. It was the smell they added to natural gas so you could tell if there was a gas leak. Every single one of the burner knobs on the stove across from me was turned on, without a hint of flame.

As I realized this, I noticed a faint light on the table. I turned my sights on it and took a shocked step backwards when I saw what it was.

A wire led from it to the door. *Booby trap*, my brain said, registering the bundle of plastic explosive and detonator on the table.

But all that gas didn't even need a detonator. All it needed was a spark, which could happen any second.

I ran straight to the side fence and out, moving as fast as I could to get the other house between me and the rigged one. My mind was yammering that they knew I was coming, they set me up, someone warned them, and then my brain was swept clear by a deep boom and the sound of shattering glass.

A wave of hot air hit me from behind, lifting me off my feet and sending me flying toward the front gate. Chunks of the car sailed past me on my left, some of them on fire. Pieces of house were landing on the lawn all around me as I hit the icy ground and slid belly-down across it. My body was half numb from the impact. My chest hurt when I breathed—probably a fractured rib or two.

I pushed myself up gingerly and turned to see the front house with the daycare on fire and the one behind it obliterated. Parts of the lawn were burning, and some of the ice had melted instantly into puddles that now steamed and even bubbled in spots. A mushroom of smoke and ash was

dissipating over the second house's wreckage, and the roar of its blaze stung my explosion-damaged ears.

Some motherfucker had just tried to blow me up. The Ivanovs were either dead in that room, or those were decoys and they'd already skipped town.

A chunk of chimney had sailed over my head and slammed into the front gate, knocking it completely off its hinges. I hurried out, thinking only of warning Vasily, Sergei...*Alissa*.

But as I reached my car, checking under it and under the hood for tampering first, something else popped into my head again. Who the hell knew I was coming? Who sold me out?

There were only two people who had the knowledge and opportunity to do this, and thinking of either of them made me sick. For the only men to know that I was coming after the Ivanovs here were the same two I wanted to warn.

I didn't call either of them. My head was spinning, so I followed my gut. And my gut said keep silent and get the hell home to those I cared about.

Who might also be the next on my enemy's kill list.

## Chapter 17

### Alissa

I surfaced from deep dreams of lying in Gregor's arms to discover that he was gone, the apartment dark. The cat was sleeping on Gregor's pillow and lifted its head to blink at me as my phone kept buzzing.

I didn't recognize the number. I hesitated, but finally connected the call, in case it was something urgent and Gregor had had to call on an unfamiliar phone. "Who is this?"

"Hi, baby."

I immediately felt like throwing up. It was Alan again.

For a moment I considered hanging up, but I was angry now. Having Gregor at my side, and getting Michelle back, had made me braver.

"I'm not your baby, you sick piece of shit. My investigator told me everything. Stalking my house with a rape kit? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I-I didn't do any of that," he stammered. This damn lunatic never seemed to know how to take it when I stopped being nice. "Your guy lied to you."

"Bullshit." Tears brimmed in my eyes, but my voice was only shaking from one emotion, rage. "You want to kidnap, rape, and kill me. You got caught in the act and warned out of town. And instead, your dumb, crazy ass is harassing me again. I swear to God, if you show up again, *I will shoot you myself.*" I might have to borrow a gun to do it, but I sure as hell would.

"Jesus! Would you listen to yourself?" he complained, like I was the nutcase in this situation. "I would never do anything to hurt you."

"Another lie. Just give it up, damn it!" I hung up.

He called over and over until I picked up again.

"What the hell do you think this is going to accomplish, Alan? It's not like

I'll ever go back to you after what you've done!"

"I know, I know, we broke up and you're salty and want to make me work for a reconciliation." His tone was so condescending it was all I could do not to scream at him.

"No, I'm saying you fucked things up so badly, and continue to fuck up, and because of that I am never going back to you. Ever. You don't act like a cop or a good man, you act like the fucking criminals you're supposed to put away. I'm sure you took a goddamn bribe from the Ivanovs to keep from actually doing what was needed to find and rescue my baby. You know how I know that? Because you took almost a year pretending to look and then gave up. Then, a goddamn private investigator was able to find her in *two fucking days*."

He was breathing heavily now, like he was running a race. Adrenaline. "You're lying."

"She's sleeping thirty feet away from me. No thanks to you. All thanks goes to the man who actually did the job. So stop deluding yourself into thinking we will ever be an item again. You may not be scared of legal consequences, but I can still expose you."

There was a long silence. *Hang up*, I begged silently. *Give up. Leave us alone. You've done enough damage.*

But Alan wasn't done yet. Instead, he started laughing. It was a low, dry, rattling sound, strangely ugly. It frightened and enraged me all at once. I was about to hang up again when he said, "You could try to ruin my reputation. You could do that. I doubt anyone would believe you, because you're just some single mom and I'm a decorated cop."

"Not for long," I cut in. But he just plowed on.

"Let me tell you a little something. First off, yeah. The kidnapers are mob connected, and that makes them off limits to us or anyone outside of their organization. But your investigator? The one who supposedly got your kid back? He's on the same fucking payroll as the guys who took her."

Everything screeched to a halt inside of me.



He chuckled mockingly at my silence. “You had no idea, did you? No idea at all. Well, here’s the truth. Gregor Dimitri Makarov is a hitter for the fucking Russian mob. That’s how he was able to get your kid back. He’s more connected than the Ivanovs. He’s a goddamn made man, or whatever those fucking Russians call it.”

“This is bullshit. You’re making all of this up because you don’t even begin to measure up to him. This is all a lie you’re telling to try to mess with my head. But I know better than to trust you now! Did you forget that?” Keeping my voice low took every ounce of my self-control.

“Oh, come on, think about it. Use your little girly brain for once in your life.” His voice was dripping with disdain. “How could anyone have possibly found where they were keeping your kid in just a few days if they weren’t connected?”

“How the hell do you even know all this?” I demanded.

He laughed. “After our confrontation, I looked the guy up on the system at work. We’ve never gotten enough on him to bring him in, but he’s connected to over a dozen murders and disappearances throughout the city. And that’s just in the last ten years.”

I was cold. I had to clench my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering. How could he be talking about Gregor? The man who had saved my daughter? The man who had saved me? The only man I wanted and the source of my safety. How could this be true? How?

“Nothing to say?” he mocked.

I drew in a breath as quietly as I could, afraid of sobbing. “This can’t be true. You’re just...” I trailed off, and he chuckled nastily. He could tell he’d gotten to me. But mocking me more was a mistake. I suddenly found my anger again. “What the hell is the point of telling me this?”

“Just wanting to protect you from him. I mean, apparently, you’ve got an idea that this guy’s some kind of hero. But he didn’t threaten me with internal affairs or a lawsuit when he ran into me outside your house that night. No. He straight up threatened my life.”

“Only because you were threatening mine.”

“Hey.” He tried to sound condescending again but there was a touch of wheedling in it. “You really need to stop trying to make me sound like the bad guy here. All I did was try and get you back.”

“With a knife and chloroform?”

He plowed on again, pretending he didn’t hear me. “This guy’s an actual killer. He’s dangerous, he’s a criminal, and he’s a million times worse than me. So if you’re about to go to the press and make this guy into a hero, you should know you’re playing right into the mob’s hands. And endangering yourself and that stupid fucking kid of yours in the process.”

Hearing him talk about my daughter was like a splash of cold water to the face.

“I don’t have time for this,” I snapped, but he just chuckled again. “Gregor’s already proven himself to be a better man than you. I can’t imagine for a moment that he’s actually a mobster.”

But then again, it had taken me four months to realize that Alan was a bad cop and a shitty boyfriend. And how *had* Gregor succeeded so fast in finding Michelle?

“Yeah, you can be stupid and not believe me. Go into denial about your new bodyguard. Or is he your lover?” His tone was a sharp whipcrack of anger.

“So that’s what this is really about,” I breathed in a moment of terrible clarity. Alan had already gone full stalker on me. Of course he was now jealous of any man who got anywhere near me. “You’re jealous of a guy I’ve known for a couple of weeks.”

“Did you fuck him?” he demanded suddenly.

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Did you fuck him?” His scream stung my ears and I jumped.

But then I got ahold of myself and got even more pissed. “Yeah, I fucked

him. And my neighbor, and the mailman, and my three in-town clients since we broke up. I'm just one giant whoring machine. I'm so damn horny I can barely resist spreading my legs for everyone on the planet who isn't you."

"Fuck you," he muttered, his rage losing steam almost immediately.

"No, thank you."

He hung up, and I sagged with relief. But it was short-lived. The doubts he had planted in my head weren't going away. And whenever Gregor got back from his weird past-midnight activities, he and I had to talk.

I wasn't looking forward to it.

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It was almost dawn by the time I heard a key in the lock and the beeps of the security system being turned off. I stiffened in my seat on the couch, my stomach jumping around. I hadn't been able to sleep in his absence. I hadn't been able to do anything besides sit and wait and fear what would happen when Gregor finally got home.

And now he was home, and my heart started beating so fast it made me dizzy. *Please let Alan be wrong. Please let there be another explanation.*

But then I heard pained grunts as he rustled out of his coat. The safe he kept in his coat closet clicked open, then shut again after a few moments. I started trembling, my eyes blurring with the tears I was barely keeping back.

When he walked into view, my eyes widened and I stood up from the couch, suddenly distracted by a sight I hadn't expected. Gregor looked battered and bruised, with smudges and cuts on his face. He smelled faintly of smoke. His lip was cut and slightly swollen, and his eyes had a tired, desperate look that scared me as much in its own way as Alan's words had.

When he saw me standing there, a mix of relief, shame, and worry flicked across his craggy face. "Alissa," he muttered, and crossed the room quickly, folding me into an embrace.

Of course it was all a lie. It had to be. I hugged him back tightly, hands slipping around his ribcage under his suit jacket. But then, unexpectedly, my

fingers found a strap across his back.

I followed it with my fingers as we drew apart again, and they caught briefly on an empty holster. I froze. The safe in the closet. It was a gun safe.

He was a private investigator. It wasn't that strange that he would carry a concealed weapon. But as I looked up into his exhausted face, I was still worried. "What happened?" I asked softly. "You were gone when I woke up."

"I'm sorry. I was following up on the Ivanovs. And something happened. Something that has me thinking I should get you and Michelle out of town for a while."

"What? Why?" *Not without you*, I wanted to say, because after everything, even hearing Alan's claims, Gregor had become my safe space. And he was still Michelle's father.

"It'll be on the news anyway, so I may as well tell you. Someone rigged the house behind the daycare to explode, they'd turned on the gas and set up a trigger linked to the door. I tried to slip in to find more information on the Ivanovs after I'd checked out the daycare center and set off a goddamn trap." He collapsed onto the couch, his weight shaking the whole thing slightly. I settled next to him tentatively, worry and suspicion mixing inside me.

"They...blew up the house?"

"Yeah. Which means one of my contacts betrayed me. The Ivanovs knew I was coming, and they decided they'd rather do that than face me." He saw my expression and looked away. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to worry you. But I can't risk having these bastards cause you even more harm."

"Gregor..." I hesitated, but I had to make a stand. "I don't want you taking any more risks like this. I hired you to find my baby, not punish those responsible. I know we can't rely on the cops, but there are other ways of getting the Ivanovs. We can sue the hell out of them. We can go to the press —"

"No." His tone was flat. "Doing any of that would make you a target. There's more to this than I thought. One of my sources has ratted me out, and

that means—”

“Gregor,” I said quietly. “Look, I’ll go into hiding out of town if you think it’s the right call. But what about you? I don’t want you to be in danger.”

He smiled tightly. “That’s very sweet, Alissa, but danger is a large part of my job. It has been since I was a very young man. I promise that I can handle myself.”

“This isn’t about your competence or your courage,” I mumbled, knowing I was getting off track but desperate for him to understand. “You just came home after nearly being blown up. Of course I’m gonna worry.”

His smile softened a little, but then faded. “Look, Alissa, some of my contacts are part of the local Russian mob, all right? They’re the last people I would have expected to betray me, but here we are. If they’ve turned on me, I absolutely have to keep you away from them. They’re too dangerous.”

I stared at him. I wanted to just love him and be grateful. I wanted to spend another wonderful, comforting night in his arms and make us both feel better. But Alan’s mocking words kept echoing in my head. “Gregor?”

I felt him tense slightly beside me. “What is it?”

“Why do you have Russian mobsters as contacts?”

He went very quiet. I sat waiting, bracing myself, every second that ticked by making my heart beat harder.

“It’s a long story. Why do you ask?”

I stared at him for a few seconds, watching the discomfort deepen on his face. “Alan called while you were gone.”

His face fell. “Jesus. He’s still harassing you?”

“He’s trying. He keeps changing phone numbers. I try not to pick up if I don’t know the number, but you were out, and I thought it might have been you. And he—”

His eyes flashed. “Did he threaten you?”

“Not this time. He said...” I rubbed my face, suddenly very nervous and ashamed that I had even talked to Alan again, let alone listened to him. Why had I ever taken him seriously?

Except too much of what he had said made sense for me to ignore it all.

“After you confronted him at my place, he looked you up on the police computers.” I swallowed, then met his gaze, seeing the growing trouble and resignation in them. “He said you’re part of the Russian mob. That you’re a *hitter*.” The word sounded really weird coming from me.

He let out a low sigh. Had his face paled, or had he looked this haggard coming in? I didn’t understand his resigned expression, or the sadness in his eyes.

“I was hoping this wouldn’t happen. I guess that was stupid of me.” He muttered something under his breath in Russian that I didn’t catch. “I should have told you from the beginning, but I didn’t want to scare you away.”

I was trembling, but I stood my ground, staring into his eyes. “I want the *whole truth*, Gregor.”

“Alan told you part of the truth, but not all of it,” he said in a rush. It felt like being slapped in the heart, but I nodded, and he went on. “I was taken in by the mob when I was a young boy. I have always lived that life. It is why I don’t get involved with women long term. It’s why I never expected to have a child, or anything like a normal life. The Ivanovs were handling what was supposed to be a normal porn operation for my boss. Instead, he must have found out what they were doing, because he sent me to the house where they had their studio to kill everyone present and burn the place down.”

I felt sick as I stared at him. Desperation flickered into his gaze as he stared back.

“But as I was going through the place to try to figure out what the hell they had been up to, I stumbled on Michelle. Just this scared little girl caught in the middle of all of this. I had no fucking idea who she was or what was going on, but I don’t hurt kids or leave them in danger. I got her the hell out of there, hid it from my boss, and went looking for her parents.”

I blinked. “You mean you had her this whole time and didn’t tell me?”

“That’s only half right. Yes, I should have told you sooner. But telling you sooner might have endangered both of you. There’s more going on here than even I know and—”

“I can’t take this.” I jumped up, buzzing with adrenaline, walking in a tight circle with my hands in my air. “You’re a mobster? You kill for a living? You had my daughter for days and lied about it?”

“Alissa—”

“No,” I snapped, stepping back as he reached for me. “I trusted you. I trusted you with my daughter. How could you do this? How could you be with me and make love to me and promise us safety when your own people are way more of a danger than Alan ever dreamed of being?”

“I will keep my word to you,” he snapped back. “I won’t let anyone hurt you or Michelle. My feelings for you are real. My actions are real. My integrity is real. And I’ve never wished I was someone else, a better man, someone whose job doesn’t scare you, than I do around you and Michelle. But I am what I am.”

I gulped, tears starting to roll down my face. It embarrassed me, shamed me, but the tears wouldn’t stop. “How did you think this was going to turn out?”

“I had no idea. I was worried you’d run when you needed me most. That no explanation would ever be good enough. In this circumstance, with who had Michelle, with what it took to get her back, only someone in my position could have rescued her. I was hoping you would understand.”

I pressed my lips together to keep the sobs in, but my chest hitched painfully with them. He was a criminal. A killer. The love of my life, the father of my child, was a goddamn assassin.

And yet, he had treated us like gold.

“Gregor...this is a lot...” My voice was low and strained.

“I know. I know. I am sorry. I’m not going to apologize for what I am or

what I do, but you deserve better than how I've handled telling you. How I've handled all of it." He seemed to be bracing himself for something. Maybe for me grabbing Michelle and running. But where could I go? How could I keep people like Alan and the Ivanovs off me without this big, tough, badass *mobster* around to keep us safe?

Torn, I stared at him helplessly. But before I could say or do anything further, we were both startled by the sound of a key in the lock.

Gregor stood up in shock, but it was too late. The door opened, the alarm started beeping, and half a dozen men with guns poured in through the door.



## Chapter 18

### Gregor

“Sergei, what the hell are you doing?” I demanded as we were bundled into the back of one of the retrieval vans. I had been searched, my hands shackled, and there were still four guns trained on us.

Beside me, Michelle was curled in a trembling ball around our daughter, whose face was buried in her neck. Seeing her like that filled me with more rage than I had ever known.

“You had better fucking explain yourself right now.”

He turned a grim, resigned expression on me. “I’m following orders, Gregor. The boss thinks you’re plotting against him. And these two know too much.”

“Plotting against him? That’s insane, I’m the one who nearly got blown up earlier!”

He frowned. “Look. I told you to get in to see him and sort this out.”

“I tried. He wouldn’t even respond to my calls. Has he gone completely paranoid?”

But then it hit me. Vasily set up that bomb. He and the others in the organization were the only ones who knew. It was all done under his orders. He tried to fucking kill me!

The shocked look on my face made him pause. He ordered the others to their cars and stepped forward as they reluctantly withdrew. “What’s this about a bomb?”

I told him. He looked shocked, but hid it quickly.

“I have not been plotting anything against Vasily. But there’s definitely

something going on here. You made a goddamn key to my apartment, Sergei. You were spying on me. And somehow you've fucked up and misinterpreted everything. You want an innocent woman and a kid to pay for your mistakes? Or is Vasily finally losing his mind? You know I've always been loyal."

Doubt entered Sergei's eyes, giving me hope. But he just shook his head. "It's my job to make sure you get picked up and brought to the boss. I don't have any say in his decisions."

"Even if they're the wrong decisions?" I demanded. Beside me, Alissa sobbed quietly. I couldn't even put my arms around her with those fucking shackles on. "Someone in our organization was working with the Ivanovs. Take a look at the laptops up in my apartment, I took them from the daycare center. You're better at all that. Maybe you can crack the passwords I couldn't. Whoever it is, there has to be something there that exposes them."

He hesitated, but then he nodded and stepped back. Before I could say anything else, he slammed the van doors shut and shouted to whoever was driving. The engine roared to life, and we were moving.

I put my hand on Michelle's back. She didn't pull away. As we rode in darkness, my mind raced.

I had sworn myself to Vasily. Kept secrets for him. Killed for him. I had given him my whole life. And in return, that mad old man had betrayed me. Even convinced the others that I was the traitor. Why?

And what the Hell was I going to do about it?

*Kill Vasily.*

The thought hit me hard, in part because it felt so natural. But Vasily had allowed the situation that had led to Michelle's kidnapping and suffering, and every other kid the Ivanovs had taken. Vasily had apparently set me up to die. Hell, Vasily had also given me orders that could have led to the death of my own child if I had followed them blindly. Whatever else was true about Vasily, he was no longer the man I'd sworn my oath to, if he ever had been.

*Kill whoever you have to in order to save your woman and your daughter.*

My fists clenched. I could get out of the damn manacles. I might even be able to get my hands on a gun, since I was still the best fighter and killer that Vasily had. Maybe I could even handle it all before anyone could do a thing to Alissa or Michelle.

But was I prepared to kill my way through the only family I had ever known?

I squeezed my eyes shut. *Focus*. I would try talking first. At least that way I would get a better idea of what kind of insane bullshit I was dealing with. And maybe if I got Vasily to talk enough, the others would see that he'd gone crazy.

"It's okay," I told Alissa and Michelle softly. "It's okay. I will not let them hurt you. I'll get us out of this, or I'll die trying."

Alissa uncurled a little, peeking at me through her hair. Her eyes were full of tears, and I hated seeing it. "How?"

"I have decades of loyal service. I'll try reason first. If that doesn't work, I'll do what I have to. The only thing I need you to worry about is keeping Michelle safe while I get us out of this. Okay?"

Michelle turned her head to peer up at me as well. Then Alissa set her jaw, seeming to come to a decision.

"Okay. But you do it, okay? If you want me to believe in you forever, don't fail us now."

I nodded and leaned down to kiss both their foreheads. "I swear it."

But saying and doing were two different things, and we both knew it.

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Vasily's mansion was lit up completely in the predawn darkness, like he was having a damned party. Sergei was not among the men who got us out and led us at gunpoint up to the front door. Hopefully, I had gotten through to him, and he was finding whatever information it would take to settle our crazy boss's paranoia down and make him listen to reason.

I kept my back straight and my expression cold. The men around us knew what I could do, I could see the fear in their eyes as they kept us covered. I could see doubt there, too, when they looked at Michelle. What were a mother and small child doing here as captives? This was far off from normal with our crew. We had honor. We certainly had limits.

But where had Vasily's honor gone?

He was waiting in his dining room, at the head of the table, with all his lieutenants there and many others. Sergei's habitual seat sat empty, and mine beside it.

Vasily looked like he had aged ten years since the last time I had seen him. His flesh had shrunk to his bones, the lines in his face were deeper, and his complexion was the color of rotting milk except for three spots of high pink, his cheeks and the end of his nose. I wondered how much he had drunk to make himself look like a deranged clown.

His mouth was a nearly lipless gash in his face now, barely hiding something like a grimace. His eyes had a wildness to them that I had never seen. He looked scared. Like he was the one being dragged before me instead of the other way around.

I decided to capitalize on it, staring down at him in disdain as they pulled me over to him. Alissa and Michelle were brought up beside me. I stepped in front of them protectively. "What the hell is this about, Vasily?" I demanded.

"Watch your mouth with me," he said peevishly, but there was no strength behind it. "You've already betrayed me, don't make it worse."

"Explain how I betrayed you," I replied steadily, "because this is all news to me."

His face darkened and his jowls started shaking with anger. "I told you to leave no one alive at the Ivanov place. No one! There were meant to be no witnesses!"

We both looked at Michelle, who hid her face against her mother.

I stared at him. "You actually meant for me to murder a child for you? Just

because she was there? She's too young to be a witness, she can't even speak, and you still expected me to shoot her down. Despite knowing that I never hurt kids."

The crowd at the table shifted uncomfortably. Many eyes were on Michelle now.

"My word is law!" Vasily yelled, reddening further. "You disobeyed! And then you hid it from me!"

"Yes!" I shouted back, fingers probing the manacles they had locked me into. "Yes, because you must have lost your goddamned mind to demand such a thing! And it's a good thing I didn't, because she's not just an innocent child—she is *my* daughter."

More rustling. Chairs squeaked against the marble floor. Men muttered to each other in Russian and English. And all the color drained out of Vasily's face again.

"She is a witness. I gave you the order."

"And if I'd gone through with it? Killed my own kid for you? You think anyone here owes you that?"

"It's just a child. You can make another! The organization is more important—"

Hearing those words come out of his mouth sent so much rage through me that I almost rushed him, guns aimed at me or not. I fought for control, wondering when the man I had once admired had turned into this selfish goblin.

"Don't bring my brothers into this. The organization has never been in the habit of murdering innocent kids who are no possible threat to us. Not under you, not before you, not ever. None of us would put up with that!"

More muttering. Nods around the table. Even a brotherhood of thieves had its limits.

Vasily looked around, nervousness growing on his corpselike face. "I am still pakhan here!" he snapped.

“Then explain yourself. To all of us,” I demanded while I unfastened one of my cufflinks and bent the toggle. Their search had been sloppy, they had looked for concealed weapons, but they had either missed the vest under my shirt or didn’t care, and they had left my suitcoat on. And with Alissa tucked behind me, no one could see what I was doing.

“Explain why the Ivanovs were able to start and operate a kiddie, snuff, and torture porn studio right under your nose for so long without your noticing. Explain why you wanted a young child dead. Explain why you warned the Ivanovs that I was hitting their other house and helped them set a goddamned bomb to take me out!”

He was going from pale to purple. I wondered if he was going to keel over with all the shifts in his blood pressure. But of course, that was probably too much to hope for.

“I don’t owe you or anyone else an explanation. I rule here!” he spluttered, and I felt my rage boiling in my belly.

Mikhail, one of his lieutenants, spoke up quietly. “It seems strange that you will not explain, pakhan. Especially when you have had no problems explaining yourself in the past.”

“Most especially when a child and one of your most loyal men are both involved,” Piotr agreed, scratching his grizzled jaw. He had been with Vasily even longer than I.

Vasily’s mouth worked as his eyes darted around. “I don’t owe any of you \_\_\_”

“Yes, you do,” said Sergei as he stepped inside. His voice was utterly devoid of emotion for the first time ever. “Especially since I have evidence that the Ivanovs were kidnapping kids and making porn of them with your blessing.”

Everyone turned to stare at Vasily in horror.

## Chapter 19

### Alissa

I had started out numb with terror. Desperate to find a way out of a situation I had never asked for and neither one of us deserved. And, of course, raging silently against Gregor for getting us into this mess, even unintentionally.

But he had sworn he would get us out of it. And now he had put himself bodily between us and the men with guns, and his awful, awful boss. And now, slowly, he was standing up to the bastard, and winning over the crowd.

They weren't at all what I had expected from mobsters. They weren't okay with Michelle and I being dragged in here. They winced and muttered with each other when child porn was brought up. And when the man who had let them into Gregor's apartment showed up and spoke up immediately, they responded by looking between Sergei and their boss with expressions of shock.

"That's nonsense!"

Sergei's eyes flashed as he stalked up to stand beside Gregor, holding up a thumb drive. "I have a copy of your email correspondences on the subject. Including who you had the porn made for."

Panic flooded Vasily's expression and he lunged up, one hand under his jacket as he clawed for the thumb drive with the other. "Give me that! Give me—"

"They kept records of everything," Sergei growled, sounding sick with disgust. "You didn't want them taken out because they were filming child porn. You wanted them taken out because they tried to blackmail you."

Vasily was still trying to get at the thumb drive. He pulled out his pistol and pointed it at Sergei. "Give that to me now!"

"It's too late," Sergei replied flatly, staring him down. "I already forwarded what I found to every single brother. You are *finished*, Vasily. No

one will accept your leadership after this.”

I glanced down to where Gregor was still picking the lock on his manacles. They were almost off. One side finally clicked open and he slipped his wrist free, then latched both sides onto one wrist. The clicking of metal was hidden under Vasily’s shouting.

“This is mutiny!” Vasily screeched. He pointed the gun at Gregor, at Sergei, then waved it around at the others, who were checking their phones and starting to respond to what they found. “You owe me obedience.”

Then it hit me what Vasily had been blackmailed with. What had made Sergei so disgusted, and the old man so afraid. I was so furious and disgusted myself that I found my voice. “They found out that they were making those films for *you*, didn’t they?”

He screamed and pointed his pistol at me.

Gregor moved like lightning. He grabbed the slide and yanked the pistol out of his boss’s bony fingers entirely. His other fist slammed straight into Vasily’s face.

He fell back into his chair with blood streaming from his nose and his eyes wide with shock. “Kill him...he’s loose...*kill him!*” he gurgled.

Nobody around us fired. I realized after a second that there weren’t any guns trained on us anymore. The gunmen were checking their phones too.

“You’re a pedophile,” Gregor spat as Vasily hid his face with trembling hands. “That’s why you’re willing to kill kids to hide the truth. That’s why you tried to kill me. Because you were that scared that I would find out from *my daughter*.”

Gregor grabbed Vasily by the collar, lifting him off his feet as his eyes rolled in terror. I wondered if he was considering blowing his brains over the table right then and there, and covered Michelle’s eyes just in case. But no shot came.

Gregor handed the pistol to Sergei instead and loomed over Vasily, who looked ready to shit himself. “Well, you were right to be scared, but not just



because of me. Did you really think we would take finding out what you are, and what you've been doing, any better than your family did? I'm assuming that's why they kicked you out of their lives. What did you do, start chasing your grandkids?"

"Someone shut him up," Vasily sobbed. "Shoot him, shoot him!"

Nobody moved.

"Put him downstairs in the cage until we figure out what to do with him," Gregor said, sounding exhausted. I knew I would feel just the same as soon as the adrenaline wore off.

I at the old man who had caused so much misery just so he could get his perverse nut and saw he was blubbing silently. Fear? Self-pity? It didn't matter. He was powerless now,

"It's okay, baby," I told Michelle, stroking her hair. "Nobody's going to let the bad man hurt us."

She relaxed a little in my arms. Meanwhile, Gregor stood like a bulwark between us and the ruined former leader, who had no more words for any of it. Two of the men who had captured us walked over grimly to escort him away.

Only when the door closed behind them did Gregor turn to us, folding both of us into a firm hug that seemed to squeeze all the chill from my bones. "It's over," he told us. "You're safe."

And I believed him.

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It took another hour to sort everything out and then get us back home. It was unreal to hear those big, scary men apologize to me for this terrible misunderstanding. I wondered how much of it was genuine embarrassment and how much was fear that Gregor would kick the ever-loving crap out of them if they were less than contrite. But maybe that didn't matter. Maybe what was most important was that they did, and that Gregor had kept his word in keeping us safe.

The biggest apology had come from Sergei, who turned out to be Gregor's best buddy and seemed to feel genuinely guilty. He seemed horrified that he had been Vasily's intelligence man and yet somehow had never caught on to what was happening until it had been almost too late.

I had been as gracious as I could manage, but I was worn out from terror and drama, and Michelle was even more so. She fell asleep in my arms during the ride back to Gregor's.

"Are you doing all right?" he asked me quietly as he drove.

"Ask me once we've gotten some sleep," I said honestly. "Right now, I'm holding it together and awake, but that's about it." I checked Michelle again. She seemed to be all right, but it scared me that she had taken all of this so well. It implied that what she'd dealt with when taken from me had been that much worse.

*One crisis at a time*, I told myself firmly, trying to ignore how heavy my eyelids were getting.

Cold air slapped me in the face and a snowflake landed on my cheek. My eyes fluttered open. Gregor was carrying me from his car to the elevator with Michelle in my arms. The wind was howling past the mouth of the garage, spitting flakes in at us from the white-out swirl outside.

I woke up again when he shifted me to balance our weight on one of his thighs. I heard his key in the lock, and then his door opening, and the cat yelling for food and attention.

We were home. Odd to think of his place as home, but right now it still felt like the safe haven he had taken us into. Finding out what he was, and the kind of things he'd done, didn't change that. The relief was real.

So were my feelings for him. But even as I felt him settling us on the bed and taking off my shoes, I wondered if I could cope with this, especially long term. And even if I could, what would it do to Michelle to have a mobster for a dad?

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I woke up warm but a little uncomfortable thanks to sleeping in my clothes. Michelle was still snuggled in my arms, and Gregor was breathing softly against my neck with one arm thrown over us. His cat, meanwhile, was wedged between my head and the headboard, purring like a motor.

This was cozy as hell and very comforting, but it also meant I couldn't really go anywhere without scooting down to the bottom of the bed like an awkward snake. But staying in the same position for a long time had made me stiff, and after a while of just lying there trying to enjoy the warm stillness, I gave up and made the effort.

After wiggling down to the bottom of the bed, I sat up and then stood, feeling shaky but all right. I turned and looked back at the bed, only Feodor the cat seemed to have woken up from my movements. He stretched and yawned, then hopped off the bed to follow me out.

Showering with a worried cat checking regularly to see if I was drowning was an interesting experience. Normally, he was distracted by Gregor or Michelle. But now I had a furry little face pressed against the pebbled glass as I washed my hair, and the occasional worried meow to keep me company.

I got out and dressed, then made a cup of tea, filling the cat's bowl as I waited for the water to boil. I stirred strawberry jam into it without even thinking about it, and went to sit down on the couch.

I had decisions to make. Decisions that would affect all our lives.

I thought, and sipped, and petted the cat, who ended up sprawled across my lap after his meal. My mind felt split in two, each half arguing with its counterpart.

My heart wanted Gregor, even after everything. My body certainly did. But my mind was full of last night's memories, and all that I had learned.

He treated us like gold. But he worked for the Russian mob.

He risked his life to protect us. But he lied to me about how he rescued Michelle.

He was everything I could want in a man. And he was Michelle's father.

But he had an incredibly dangerous job. He could die, he could be arrested, and he killed people.

I was halfway through my tea when I heard the bedroom door open and saw Gregor heading for the bathroom with a fresh set of clothes on his arm. I set up another cup of tea to steep and tried to ignore the nervous flutter in my stomach.

He eventually came back out with wet hair and reddened wrists from the manacles. Blinking sleepily, he walked into the living room, giving me a smile as he smelled the tea steeping. “Thanks, I could use a cup.”

We sat together in silence for a while as the caffeine slowly kicked in, the cat sprawled between us so he could get pets from us both. When our hands made contact over the little guy’s furry back, Gregor caught my hand gently and enfolded it in his own.

“How are you doing?” he asked softly.

I looked at him and saw loving concern, and beyond it, that same quiet resignation. Like he was bracing himself for bad news.

“I’m ambivalent,” I admitted. “Last night was really scary. Finding out you lied about Michelle really hurt. But you saved her. You protected us both. And I love you.”

There, it was said.

He closed his eyes, an almost pained look on his face. It took him a few moments before he spoke. “Ever since we met again and I found out about Michelle, I’ve been bracing myself for you to take her and run. I’m still wondering if you will. Not even sure I could blame you, after everything.”

“I don’t want to,” I said tentatively. “But I’m worried about Michelle’s safety and my own. I mean...” I sighed. Why was this so hard?

“I understand.” He hesitated and then met my gaze. “I love you. But I love you enough to let you go, even let Michelle go, if you need it. I don’t want you living scared. Not of me, not for me, not in general.”

I squeezed my eyes shut against tears. Was I tough enough to do this?

Either choice required more strength than I was sure I could muster.

“You saved my daughter even before you knew she was mine because it was the right thing. You stood up to your boss for us. You didn’t let him decide our fates. You even got everyone else standing up for us too. But I also know that life with you would never actually be normal.”

“It would be as normal as I can make it,” he said softly, thumb stroking along the back of my hand.

I swallowed hard. The heat between us was as intense as ever; another siren’s call urging me to stay.

“If it was just me, I would take the risk and not even think about it,” I admitted. “I’m a grownup. I’d think it was worth the risk, hands down.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “But?”

“Michelle.” I licked my lips, trying to keep my voice even. “I have to put her first, and I am trying to figure out what would be best for her.”

“It’s too bad we can’t just ask her.”

I nodded. “We could eventually, though.” Hopefully. If she ever spoke again.

“Figuring out what to tell her and when would be tough,” he commented. “She’s very observant, and after last night, she’s going to know something odd is up with me.”

I winced. It was way too late to put that genie back in its bottle. But realizing that helped some. “I just...how do I know something like last night won’t happen to us again?”

“You don’t,” he admitted. “I wish I could promise you that there will never be problems. That there will never be rivals, never be dirty cops or even, potentially, another member of the organization going over the edge. I wish I could say that. But I can’t predict the future. All I can do is promise to do everything I can to protect you and Michelle, no matter what happens.”

“I believe you.” But was it enough? My hesitation turned into a longer

silence as I struggled with what else to say. When I looked up at Gregor, he was looking over into the hallway.

There was Michelle, in her pajamas, hair mussed, blinking sleepily. She stared first at me and then at Gregor, brows drawn together.

*Crap.* “Hi, sweetie. Did we wake you up? I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and went for her sketchpad and crayons, then plopped herself between us, next to the cat. We watched as she drew at a furious pace, sometimes looking up at us, as if she was checking if we were watching.

“Does she get bit by the art bug like this a lot?” Gregor asked curiously.

I shook my head. She had always liked to draw and build, but this had an urgency to it that I wasn’t used to seeing. “Let’s give her a minute.”

She worked hard on whatever it was she was drawing, tip of her tongue caught between her lips and a determined look on her face. Finally, with a little sigh, she looked between us and held it up.

Three figures, one in a long, dark coat, one with sun-yellow hair, one in between the two and crayon blonde as well. They held hands and were smiling.

Gregor and I looked at the drawing, and then at each other. He smiled a little. “Well...I think she’s given her opinion on the matter after all.”

Michelle looked up at me firmly, her chin trembling just a little.

“Are you sure?” I asked her gently.

She gave me a tiny smile and nodded.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and looked back up at Gregor. “Okay,” I said. “Then let’s try this.”

## Chapter 20

### Gregor

**I**t wasn't easy on Alissa to announce that her daughter was home safe. I knew why, and I stood by her all through the process. For her, I would do no less.

In the end, the press was all over the story like kids on a pile of candy. A feel-good story that also involved a police scandal? Not one of the major channels, feeds, or papers could resist that. Which was how I ended up backstage at a morning show interview, watching my woman and my girl under the hot lights being questioned by a perfectly coiffed talking head who spoke to her like they were old friends.

“So, you went almost a year waiting for the police to find your daughter, and instead they just...closed the case?”

“Suspended it,” Alissa said quietly as she cuddled Michelle on her lap. They wore matching rose-pink dresses and looked cute as hell. “I have the letter here.” She picked it up from the table and handed it over. The interviewer handed it off to an assistant so an image of it could be shown on TV. “But yes. They were less than helpful.” She offered a pained smile.

“And where did Michelle turn out to be?”

“She was in the home of one of the cousins of the people who owned the daycare. They had handed her off to them. That was why there was no security camera footage of the supposed kidnapping. But the police refused to investigate the Ivanovs even though my lawyer said I had a good case against them for negligence.” Alissa's fingers knotted together nervously.

“And why do you think that was?”

“You would really have to ask the police why they failed us, ma'am,” Alissa said softly, but firmly. “I couldn't tell you. All that I know is I hired a private investigator right after I got this letter and started a fundraiser to cover

paying him. I got far more support and results from doing that than I ever got from the police.”

“And once you hired a private investigator, how long did it take to find your daughter?”

“Two days.”

“Two days,” the woman repeated, brown eyes full of solemn concern. “Eleven months...and two days. That’s quite a contrast.”

“Yes, it is,” Alissa said, wiping a tear.

“How do you feel about how the case was treated by the police?”

Alissa’s gaze lowered. “I don’t think I’ll ever trust them again.”

“That’s completely understandable, under the circumstances. Have they said anything to you about this? Has there been an apology?”

“No, not at all. In fact, I’ve gotten some threats.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “From the *police*?”

“From one officer in particular. There’s an ongoing internal affairs investigation, so I can’t name names. But he took it personally that I haven’t been quiet about how badly the police mishandled finding my baby.”

“My God.” She turned a shocked look to the camera. It was all theatrics, but I loved it anyway. It was going to drive Alan and the others completely up the wall. But they wouldn’t actually retaliate against Alissa. Not with me around.

They wouldn’t dare.

“So how is Michelle doing after all of this? You said she doesn’t talk.”

“Not much yet. She’s seeing a therapist and a speech specialist, and things are progressing. But it’s only been a week since we got her back, so it’s probably going to be a while before we really see results.”

“What happened to the Ivanovs?”



“It seems like karma got them,” Alissa replied, glancing my way for a split second. “There was a gas explosion at their house behind the daycare. It was in the news. They were home at the time.”

That part was not true. It was the story she and I had come up with to cover for the Ivanovs’ disappearance. Sergei had already found where Vasily had the remaining two holed up. I would be paying them a visit soon enough.

“Karma indeed. And what about you? How are you doing?”

This time, Alissa’s smile was stronger, and she made eye contact with me. “Better.” She looked back at her interviewer, bouncing Michelle on her knee while she giggled. “We’re both much better.”

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We stopped at a burger place and were waiting for our order to be brought out when Alissa’s phone rang. She looked at it and frowned, then handed it over to me. Another unknown number. That only meant one thing.

I scowled as I connected the call.

“You absolute bitch!” Alan again, his voice breaking with emotion as he immediately went into full tantrum mode. “How dare you! How fucking dare you make me—us—look bad!”

“You did that to yourself,” I replied flatly.

He went dead silent, then demanded, “Who is this? Where is Alissa?”

“This is Gregor Makarov.” My voice deepened with menace. “And I told you what would happen if you caused her any more trouble. So...see you soon.”

He hung up and I handed back the phone, chuckling. “I don’t think he will be bothering you again.” Some men were such thickheaded dolts that they only listened to other men...and even then, sometimes, they had to be reminded.

She smiled gratefully. “Thanks, Gregor.” Her voice lowered. “I hope he crapped himself.”

Michelle giggled beside me, and Alissa let out an embarrassed laugh. At least if Michelle decided she'd picked up a new word, she might be inspired to start talking again sooner. And 'crap' was still pretty tame.

Part of me wanted to find Alan and take care of him myself. One less piece of trash on the streets, one less source of stress for my Alissa. But he was under the eye of the police now, thanks to the IA investigation. If he vanished suddenly, people would notice. Some men in my line of work were that blatant, but I wasn't. Especially if there was any chance that the fallout would land on Alissa.

He might be stupid enough to keep calling. But now, at least, Alissa knew I was ready to run interference whenever she needed it.

We were most of the way through our meal when it was my phone's turn to buzz in my pocket. I checked it, it was Sergei. "I should take this," I told Alissa, who nodded, looking concerned.

I connected the call as I walked out. "Give me a second." I went to my car and shut myself inside. "All right, go on."

"Vasily is dead," Sergei said solemnly.

I froze for a moment as my mind processed this. "What happened?"

"They found him ten minutes ago when Ivan was bringing his lunch. He'd hung himself with his shoelaces. He was already stiff when Ivan checked him."

"My God." It felt like a punch in the gut. First, he had turned out to be a monster who had misled us all, and now he had offered himself to avoid whatever consequences we would have decided on. "That damned coward."

"Yeah." Sergei didn't seem to know what more to say about it either. "Maybe you should come down. The men are asking for you."

"Asking for me? That's new."

"So's the situation. How long will it take you?"

"Half an hour. I'm finishing up lunch with my girls."

That perked him up. “How are they doing after everything?”

“Less nightmares, more smiles. Both of them.”

He chuckled a little weakly. “That’s good news. Has she spoken yet?”

“Not yet,” I said, remembering the picture she’d drawn. “But she makes what she wants known just fine.”

“Good. I’ll see you in half an hour, then.”

I hung up and went back inside to finish my meal.

Alissa gave me a worried look. “Did something happen?”

“Just some things I have to take care of after I drop you at home. I’ll talk to you about it later.” I gave a pointed look at her and glanced at Michelle, and she nodded. Some things were not to be talked about in front of our child. She had lost enough innocence already.

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The return to Vasily’s house was strange, almost dreamlike. Last time I had been dragged there with my loved ones. Now, I drove myself, alone, and walked in the front door to a silent crowd of men. They parted for me along the hall until I reached Vasily’s office, where Sergei stood beside the desk. Vasily’s curled body lay there, hidden under a sheet.

“Hanged himself.” I lifted the sheet. The laces were still around his neck, dug into bloated flesh. His face was slightly twisted, eyelids at half-mast. I sniffed in disgust and dropped the sheet again.

“That’s what the guys on shift said,” Sergei said, almost too casually.

“Good enough.” It wasn’t, but I didn’t care. There wasn’t a man among us who wouldn’t have been tempted to do the same, and there wasn’t one whom I would have blamed for it.

“What do we do with the body?” Ivan asked. A rustle went through the crowd.

Why were they asking me? I shrugged it off and decided to step up. “Have

the cleaners burn him. Scatter the ashes.”

Heads nodded in agreement all around.

“We’ll have to go through his computer and his records. We need to find out what else he was up to.”

Sergei winced. “I’m almost afraid to think of what we might find.”

“I’m not looking forward to this either.” I sighed. “But it has to be done. There could be more victims. More children, still captive. And I’m sure none of us want that going on and associated with us.”

Sergei set his jaw. “No. Of course not. I’ll get to breaking in as soon as this thing is gone.” He barely glanced at the body.

“Good. I’ll help you handle it.” I wasn’t looking forward to it, but I wasn’t going to let him face Vasily’s crimes alone.

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It was almost dark by the time I got home, and the snow was falling again. I came through the door to smell soup cooking and heard a children’s movie playing. I put away my coat and holstered my gun, then poked my head into the living room. Feodor and Michelle were curled up together sleeping, while her mother dozed next to them. I checked the kitchen, she had used the crock pot. I turned it down and went to look down at her.

She stirred awake and smiled up at me. “Hey, you’re home. Dinner soon.”

That weird, desolate hole Vasily’s betrayal and death had left inside me faded when I looked at her. Finally, I nodded. “Think I’ll have dessert first, though.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Dessert?”

I smiled slowly, then scooped her up and carried her to what was now our bedroom, careful to close the door behind us. She let out a startled giggle as I set her down and started peeling off my clothes.

There was no comfort like the comfort of her arms, like the sweetness of

her body. Vasily faded away in seconds when I entered her, leaving me alone with my love. As we moved as one, slowly thrusting toward climax, my troubles fell away, until my only worry was keeping us quiet enough not to wake our daughter.

She moaned into my mouth as her pussy fluttered around me, contractions caressing my length in ways I couldn't resist. My mind whited out with pleasure as I bit back my groans, and then we collapsed to the bed together.

We all had darkness in our pasts, but as I lay there with Alissa nestled against my chest, my mind did not turn toward the past, but the future. An uncertain future, but bright with promise.

# *Epilogue*

*Alissa*

## *Eight Months Later*

“**M**ommy, watch, watch! You’re not watching!” Michelle’s little voice rose above the sound of waves and the plunk of steel drums down the beach.

I looked up from my perch on a nearby boulder, peering at the shimmering outline of my daughter against the pale sand.

She was crouched froglike on the sand where it was damp from the lapping waves, her bright purple bathing suit, shorts, and crocs almost glowing against a deepening tan. She had her father’s skin, thank God. Crouched beside her, he had gone bronze after the first week, while I was barely the color of weak tea after dealing with an unexpected sunburn on the cruise over. I spent a lot of time slathered in sunscreen, in the shade of an umbrella, taking the tropical sunlight in the tiny doses I could handle.

Michelle had learned how to make bucket towers, and now her bright orange bucket was upended, full of sand, sitting on the ocean-smoothed beach while she worked her little fingers under its rim. She lifted it carefully, revealing a perfect upside-down mold of the bucket.

“Yay! It didn’t break this time! See?”

“I saw.” I flashed her a smile. “Good job, sweetheart. I’ll have your banners ready for you soon.” I went back to coloring them in. I had learned to draw a little, in part to decorate her castles of Legos or sand, which were getting more ambitious with every week that went by.

Gregor laughed. “You’ll need more—we’re doing four towers on this baby.”

Michelle cheered, and he smiled that lopsided, just a touch awkward smile

that I loved seeing on his face. It was the smile of a tough guy who loved his family.

The last eight months had seen more changes in my life than I had ever experienced. I was married. I was on a long honeymoon with my daughter and new husband. And my daughter was recovered enough to speak normally again.

Michelle had gone through a transition over four months, first only speaking to us, then speaking to people we introduced to her, then letting in fellow kids, and finally, a few months ago, she was chattering normally again to everyone who would listen.

It hadn't been an easy road. Michelle and I had spent a lot of time in therapy, both for trauma and for Michelle's speech issues. She had occasional nightmares, but the therapist reassured us it was normal, kind of like her brain starting to reset itself, and drawing and talking about it in a safe calm space would help her process the experience.

We had learned that no one had physically harmed her, and the older girls and women had protected her, but she'd seen things that no one ever should. The first time Gregor and I had an argument—nothing really serious at all—she had hid under the bed which all but broke my heart, she also did it at first when strangers arrived. But now it happened less and less, just like the nightmares and sometimes I'd find her reading a book under the bed with Feodor curled up beside her, so I guess as well as being a safe space, it was also becoming her happy place.

The police reopened investigations into several child abductions in the region after a search of the Ivanov property turned up the bones of a dozen girls. Dogged by the press for their mishandling of Michelle's disappearance, they were desperate for a win, and I left them to it.

Alan, lead investigator on more than one of those cases, ended up with parents to inform and a million uncomfortable questions to answer. The press was showing him no mercy. His superiors had him on notice. And the IA investigation ground on.

He'd called me twice to whine about his situation, claiming that I was

helping a criminal organization humiliate him and the police. I reminded him that he had taken Vasily's bribes just like every other cop involved, and that he had tried to get me to give up on my baby when he'd known damn well that she was probably alive. I shouldn't have had to go to anyone besides the police to get my little girl back, but Alan had been willing to let kids suffer and die in order to make some side money. What he was experiencing now were the consequences of his own choices. Alan, unable to take responsibility or even handle the truth, had hung up swearing both times.

He had tried to call a third time, but I had given it to Gregor to answer again. Alan had hung up immediately and thus far, had never bothered us again.

After Vasily's death, Gregor had taken over his organization, with his friend Sergei as his right hand. Since then, Gregor had been cleaning house throughout the city, digging out every shady side operation of Vasily's that had lined his pockets while children, women, and the organization's reputation died. He didn't give me too many details, but just from the hours he had put in before our getaway, I knew he had a huge mess to clean up.

Gregor still didn't want to talk about the Vasily situation. I couldn't really blame him. The man had been his mentor since his teens, and had done a lot to shape Gregor into the man he was today. But he had also lied, broken the trust of Gregor and the rest of his men, and caused atrocities to line his pockets and satisfy his perverse 'needs'.

Chances were, nobody in his organization wanted to talk about Vasily anymore. I remembered what Gregor had told me about other criminals and what they did to people who hurt children. To them, Vasily's death, and the shunning of his name, were justice.

Never in my life would I have believed that I would end up married to the leader of a citywide criminal organization. If wearing makeup and heels was a sin in the eyes of my parents, I knew my choice of partner would have made them detonate with outrage. But the further I got from my childhood, the more I realized that many of the things they had seen as sinful rebellion turned out to be some of the best things in my life.

I watched my husband and daughter together, he was showing her how to



make crenelations and windows on one of her new sand towers. Both of them were smiling, laughing, enjoying a day I wished would never end.

My parents would never have believed that anything good could have come from a one-night stand, especially one that ended in a pregnancy. But what did my parents know? They didn't even know how to love their own daughter, or their granddaughter either. The things they had said to me once the police had contacted them had made that very clear.

It was their loss and leaving them behind was my gain. Just like leaving behind Alan, another obsessive stickler to law and order who interpreted those terms in the worst way possible.

Good riddance.

I was finishing up coloring in the last of the banners when Gregor's phone rang. His head shot up and our eyes met, I reached over, ignoring a stab of disappointment, and answered the call. "This is Gregor's phone, his wife's speaking."

"Hello, my dear!" It was Sergei. He sounded cheerful instead of grave, which was a good sign. "My apologies for interrupting. How is the Caribbean?"

I couldn't help but smile. Sergei was eccentric and a touch secretive, but I could see why he was Gregor's best friend. Besides, Michelle adored him. "Beautiful, but the sun's trying to kill me. What's up?"

"I have to get a couple of answers from your man. Nothing awful, I promise, just finance stuff. Our bankers won't wait."

"Sure, sure, give me a few seconds." I hopped off the rock and padded over to Gregor, smiling apologetically. "It's Sergei. He needs final say on some financial decisions, says it can't wait."

Gregor put on a fake-stern face and took the phone. "This had better be an emergency. I'll have you know that I was having a serious consultation with my favorite architect." Whatever Sergei said in return made most of the scowl slip off his face immediately. "Yeah, yeah, I'll send photos of the latest castle when it's done. Now seriously, what do you need?"

I grabbed my umbrella and sat down on the sand nearby to watch Michelle while Gregor was busy on the phone. She labored carefully at the bucket tower, tip of her tongue caught between her teeth in concentration as she added details. I smiled and went back to coloring in her banners.

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We were sitting on the veranda sipping cocktails and listening to the waves break on the shore. Michelle was in bed, and it was just me and Gregor.

“Happy anniversary, my little rose,” he said as he lifted his glass to toast us.

I raised my cocktail glass in response, but gave him a confused look. We’ve barely been married for a month.

Catching my expression he added, “Today is six years since we first met. Well yesterday was, but I’m sure you forgive me for the oversight, we were traveling.”

Of course I forgave him, it had actually slipped my mind too, but in that moment I was transported back to the dark bar where I had first laid eyes on my strong protector.

I ran my finger down his cheek as I gazed into his storm-grey eyes. I saw a glint in his expression as he smiled lazily at me.

“I spent all these years running from closeness because I thought it wasn’t compatible with my lifestyle, but you have shown me that if anything, having someone to live for makes me a stronger and more powerful man.”

I looked into his eyes, my man was now pakhan, equally feared and respected across the whole city. I didn’t know all that he was involved in, I doubt I even knew a quarter—and truth be told, I didn’t want to know. It was enough to understand that whatever he did, he would never willingly put me or Michelle in danger, and he had put an end to all of Vasily’s trafficking operations. There were those who were no doubt displeased with this change in business, and for that reason we were not alone on our romantic getaway, and in the neighboring beachside cottage three of his lieutenants were also

enjoying the pleasures of the Caribbean. But given the secluded nature of our hideout, and the discreteness of Dima, Kolya, and Roman, we were for all intents and purposes alone as a family.

“I love you Gregor,” I said simply. I shivered in the cool night breeze and felt my nipples tighten in the chill air. *Or was it the thought of what would come later?*

The smirk that flickered across Gregor’s face told me that he’d noticed, he knocked back the last of his drink and stretched his hand out to me.

“We are here to enjoy ourselves my dear, now I intend on enjoying every inch of my wife’s luscious body.

I was already wet thinking about it, after eight months together I had wondered if the thrill of sex with Gregor would wear off, surely you can get too much of a good thing? Nope... absolutely not true—and if anything, as we learned and explored one another’s bodies the pleasure had only intensified.

I took his hand and let him lead me to the bedroom, the beachside cottage had a bank of floor to ceiling windows that opened onto the veranda. The guards were posted at the perimeter and behind, so we were safe from danger or prying eyes. I could see the bulge in Gregor’s board shorts as they hung low on his hips. His abdomen was a sculpted work of art, and I never got enough of looking at his body, from the intricate tattoos that covered his arms, torso, and back, to his frankly magnificent cock. Though before I got a glimpse of that, there was something I needed to say to him, and I wasn’t sure how he would take it.

“Michelle is five now,” I started.

He nodded thoughtfully.

“Don’t you think she’s at a good age to have a little brother or sister? She’s recovering well from her ordeal and maybe now would be the perfect time?” I’d been thinking about it for a while, but had put it on the back burner as Michelle was our sole priority and I didn’t want to do anything that might hurt her new-found stability. But she’d actually said something the other day that got me thinking, a friend of hers at kindergarten had just gotten a new

brother and she'd asked if she could have one too.

"Well, we won't be needing these then," Gregor grinned and threw the pack of condoms he'd been holding into the trashcan.

I guessed he was on board.

He crossed the room in two steps and before I knew what was happening his lips were pressing against mine and I could feel his rock-hard cock against me. My mouth opened in response as our tongues entwined. We were kissing frenziedly as we pulled one another's clothing off, soon my loose beach kaftan and his boardshorts were on the floor and he scooped me into his arms as if I weighed nothing and carried me to the bed.

The next thing I knew I was sprawled on the mattress naked as he kneeled over me. His cock long, thick, and rigid. My mouth was practically watering, wondering what he was going to feel like inside me, skin on skin and I arched my back in anticipation.

"My little rose is impatient for me," he chuckled.

"Mmm" was all I could say, as I parted my legs, desperate to be filled by him.

"Not so fast. First, I'm going to make you come, and I'm going to do it over and over again until you beg me to stop."

With that he trailed kisses down my neck to my breasts, his tongue flicked my nipple, teasing it into a hard peak before his lips captured me and he sucked hard, pulling my nipple deep. My toes curled with pleasure, and I could feel the wetness between my thighs in response.

Moaning, I squirmed on the bed.

He lifted his head and his eyes met mine, "I love seeing how you come alive for me. You like to feel me doing that?"

I nodded, still squirming.

He moved his lips to my other breast and repeated the action, his tongue flicking and circling me as he teased my nipple.

“Fuck,” was all that escaped my lips.

There was a dark, masculine laugh, “Soon, my little rose. You want to feel this, yes?” He shifted his hips, so his cockhead rubbed against my slit, but almost as soon as the movement happened, he shifted away leaving me begging for more.

His lips left my breasts, and he started trailing more kisses down my stomach until he reached my slit, then I felt him pause and inhale and groan. “So good, you are always so good.”

With that his tongue found my clit and he started gently sucking it. My pussy was so wet, and I didn’t know how much longer I could hold out. “I’m gonna come if you keep on doing that,” I gasped.

“So come for me, come on my lips. I told you, this is only the beginning, we have all night.”

With that, his mouth went back to me, his tongue lapping and circling, flicking my clit as his fingers parted my lips. I felt his tongue dive into my wetness and shuddered.

“Good, that’s it. Let go.”

His hot breath against my wet pussy sent a shiver through me and once more his lips were all over me. Sucking my clit, he pushed a finger inside me.

“Fuck, Alissa, you’re so wet,” he groaned. “Wet and tight and perfect.”

His finger started working me and I could feel my pussy clenching with need.

“Does my little rose want more?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said breathlessly.

He added a second finger, the sensation making me buck against him, riding his hand as he brought me to the brink of orgasm.

“Come for me, *lyubimaya*,” he said, his voice low and rough with lust. “Come for me.”

“Gregor,” I whimpered. “I’m so close.”

He increased the pressure on my clit, flicking it with his tongue as he pumped his fingers in and out of me, and I exploded.

“Fuck,” I cried out, my body shuddering as waves of pleasure washed over me.

When I finally stopped shaking, he lifted his head and looked up at me, his eyes smoldering.

“You’re so beautiful when you come,” he murmured, his voice thick with desire. “So beautiful.”

He kissed his way up my body, pausing to slowly lick my nipples, circling them with his tongue. They were sensitive, and each velvety touch sent shivers down my spine.

“I love you, Alissa,” he says, cupping my breasts in his large hands. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Gregor,” my voice was barely above a whisper.

His mouth captured mine again and his kiss was hungry and demanding, his tongue sliding against mine as his hands roamed over my body.

I could feel his cock, rock hard and throbbing against my thigh, and I reached down to stroke it. The soft skin contrasting with hardness within, I couldn’t get my whole hand around his girth, and the way he filled me was beyond compare.

“Fuck,” he growled, thrusting into my hand.

“I want you inside me. I want to feel your cock, all of you with nothing between us,” I moaned, wrapping my legs around his waist. “I need you.”

“You have me,” he murmured as he shifted his hips.

I gasped as the thick head of his cock slid down my slit. My wetness coating his shaft. I needed this man more than I needed air to breath. I had been right all along, he had totally ruined me for others.

My legs opened in response to his gentle nudging, and he sank into me, inch by inch, filling me up and stretching me open.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “You feel so good.”

I rocked my hips, urging him deeper, and he slipped into me until his cock was buried to the hilt.

“You’re so tight,” he moaned.

“I love how you fill me,” I gasped, and I lifted my ass wanting to feel him as deep as possible.

“My perfect rose.”

“Take me,” I whispered, looking up at him through half-closed eyes. “I want to feel you come inside me.”

“Fuck.” He gripped my hips as he started to move, thrusting in and out of me, his pace increasing with every stroke.

“Harder,” I begged.

He fucked me harder, slamming into me, his hips bucked against me as he pounded his cock deep.

I clung to him, digging my nails into his back.

He groaned, his voice hoarse with lust. “So hot and wet for me.”

I didn’t want him to stop, I didn’t want this moment to ever end. The sensation was beyond anything I had experienced. My pussy tightened around his shaft as he thrust deeper. I could feel another orgasm building inside me, coiled tight and hot and ready to burst.

“Oh,” I cried out.

“Are you ready to come for me again?” he ground into me harder, each thrust punctuating his words.

“Yes,” I gasped. “Oh God, yes.”

His cock pounded me, his rhythm becoming erratic as he got closer to his orgasm. “Come for me, Alissa,” he moaned.

I shattered, screaming his name as I came, my pussy spasming around his cock, milking him.

He gave a roar and his whole body tensed as he came.

I clung to him breathlessly, his cock pulsing deep inside, filling my pussy with his seed.

We stayed like that for a while, his weight pressing me down into the bed, his breath hot on my neck.

When he finally shifted, he pulled me close, wrapping me so tightly in his arms it was almost impossible to tell whose heart I could feel beating in my chest. “I love you, Alissa,” he said, his breathing still ragged, as he kissed my temple.

“I love you too, Gregor,” I murmured.

I snuggled closer to him and laid my head on his chest, as he stroked my hair. I couldn't imagine being happier than I was in this moment. I was safe and protected and lying in the arms of my daughter's father, as she lay sleeping peacefully in the room next door. My mother once told me that the big city was full of danger, evil, cruelty, and corruption. And that was true. But what she didn't tell me is that the city is also full of good people who fight back against the tide, and that those good people, like the evil ones, don't always look like what you expect.

Like a heartless cop who let me and my daughter suffer for the sake of bribe money.

Like the criminal, the killer, who had risked everything he had to bring my baby back and keep us safe.

**THE END**

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## *About the Author*

Aria Ray writes suspenseful, hot, and intense romance stories featuring powerful alpha-men and witty heroines, full of sacrifice, love, and happily-ever-afters.

Like the heroines of her novels, Aria has always had a crush on sinfully sexy bad boys – dark, controlling, irresistible, but tender and loving.

When she is not writing or daydreaming about new stories, she loves to spend time with her own gang of alpha males – a husband and twin boys.

But the real mob boss of the family is Don Corleone – the cat.

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