

*The*  
PAYBACK

MILA SIN  
MANUELA ROUGET

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*To everyone who has fantasies about the fictional Bratva leader and his  
bodyguard at the same time*

*I see you*

*I am you*

*Enjoy*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is written in British English, as the characters are European and have learned British English, despite the story taking place in the US.

Content includes but is not limited to: torture, murder, graphic sex, frustration at infertility, human trafficking (not of main characters), self-inflicted religious punishment, and lactation kink.

You do not need to have read [The Cleanup](#) and [The Meetup](#) to enjoy this book as it is a standalone, but it is recommended because, well, Olivia is a badass.

Also important to note: Few of our partners are built like book boyfriends and should be treated accordingly. Should you reenact these scenes, you or your partner may acquire shoulder or back injuries (trust me). Experiment with caution.

# CHAPTER ONE

---

Eleanor

I ALWAYS THOUGHT MY DAD WOULD WALK ME DOWN THE AISLE ON MY wedding day. I also thought I'd marry for love—but today, I'm marrying for something better.

Revenge.

The heavy and ornate wooden doors in front of me swing open, and I study the impressive tile at my feet leading into the church. I'm standing in the hall of Saint Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral on Manhattan's Upper East Side, and I'm about to get married to the leader of the New York Bratva.

*Fun times, right?*

“Ready?” Agent Kim quietly asks from beside me. He's my stand-in father today, and I feel better walking into this with another trained agent at my side.

“Let's get on with it,” I mutter, keeping my eyes fixed on the floor and adopting my persona for the foreseeable future. I can't get lost in my head when I'm undercover, so I push out every thought that contradicts who I'm supposed to be.

I'm no longer Interpol agent Eleanor Cameron. No longer responsible for the things and people waiting for me at home. No longer the same good girl who obeys every rule and follows protocol like it's my drug.

I am Elsa Lee. The shy and demure virgin bride who's being used as a pawn to broker a truce between the Bratva and the Emerald Sabres. The beloved cousin of Peter Lee, one of the highest-ranking members in the Sabres organisation and an Interpol asset.

As the wedding march begins, I repeat the details in my head and take my first steps as Elsa.

To make my undercover personality even more confusing, my name's about to change again to Mrs Dimitri Aslanov, wife to the local *pakhan*, controlling the tri-state area's Bratva.

*Pakhan* means “boss,” and there are thirty in America alone, each controlling various sections of the country and the members that live within their territories. They usually control four criminal cells through an intermediary called a “brigadier,” who does the dirty work.

The brigadier—in this case, Sergei Aslanov, Dimitri's uncle—is used to enforce his rule in their respective territories.

I take a deep breath and slowly exhale, letting the last of my nerves melt away. It's showtime.

*I am Elsa. I am Elsa. I am Elsa.*

Agent Kim and I pass over the threshold, and I feel the weight of expectant eyes on me as we begin the long march up the middle of the church.

As we walk, I peek at the spectators of this unholy union from under my lashes. On the left, eight other agents are in attendance, pathetically filling out my side of the church and posing as my "family."

Really, they're backup.

Understandably, there's a lower turnout for my side of the church. The Emerald Sabres are based in London, and the Bratva members on the other side of the aisle know first-hand that taking time off from running a city is hard, so they had no problem accepting my bullshit excuse as valid reasoning.

Business needs handling, no matter whose wedding is taking place.

On my right, I can make out most of the heavy hitters in this Bratva chapter. But Sergei Aslanov steals my attention because, after Dimitri, he's the next most influential player. He's sitting in the first seat in the front row as the closest living relative to the groom—a spot typically reserved for the groom's father, but Danil Aslanov left the land of the living eighteen months ago.

A handful of other members I've seen in the files are in attendance, including money launderers, enforcers, and the managers from the legitimate businesses used to clean the money from the illegal ones. Those "managers" are here, too.

More than the men, I feel the eyes of the wives and girlfriends on me, assessing me as I join their ranks. There are no kids at this event; a rule Dimitri passed down to the attendees, ensuring no innocent lives were taken if this went belly-up.

The heavy and musty smell of incense that hangs in the air pulls me back to the here and now. There would be time to rifle through mental files later; I was here to solidify my place in the organisation.

This is dangerous; there's no reason to sugarcoat it. The thrill of it skitters down my spine, and I'm exhilarated thinking about what the next few months may bring. This isn't my first undercover stint, but this isn't like the others. It's personal.

I slowly lift my chin to get a better look around the church.

There are no flowers, only gold-framed iconography painted between the columns and up on the ceiling. As I lift my head to follow an odd-looking saint, I note the chandelier above. It's not opulent, but a giant visage of Jesus looks down at us from its anchor point.

I hide my shiver.

What would Jesus think about people marrying for subterfuge?

The priest shifts behind the podium at the front of the church, but it's not him I focus on.

Dimitri stands to the right at the end of the aisle, facing me.

His features come to me in pieces.

His hair is slicked back, a gentleman's cut making the part seem more dramatic. The dirty-blond locks look darker in the dim church lighting than in photos I'd studied in his file.

Piercing ice-blue eyes ensnare mine, fringed by long sooty lashes. They look almost inviting until you see the hard edge lurking within. I suck in a small gasp as his gaze takes me in, trailing down my body, and then snaps back to my face.

At the centre of his face is a proud nose, slightly crooked at the bridge, denoting a break at some point that was never set correctly. His lips press together, making it hard to discern the shape. But his photos show the bottom is fuller than the top.

Dimitri's jaw tightens ever so slightly—something I would have missed if I hadn't been trained to read body language.

Agent Kim and I make our way towards this man, and I can feel the tension in the air, noticeable only in the subtle stillness around us.

He's impossible to take in all at once. He's too well-crafted, too dangerous, too . . . much.

This is the type of man I've avoided all my life. The type with custom-tailored suits that cost more than my car payment, illegal activity that would leave even John Gotti impressed, and that massive ego that says *I can have anything I want, any time I want it*. Unfortunately, none of these negative traits takes away from his raw magnetism.

I swallow roughly, pushing down the lust that takes up residence in my bones as our eyes lock. That slight rise of heat doesn't matter right now, even if I haven't felt a spark like that in way too long.

I've read every file Interpol has access to on this man. They included

everything from the deals he's brokered to the women he's fucked.

But he's arresting when looking at him in person rather than through the safety of a file.

He blinks slowly, just once, as if he has all the time in the world. A cold sweat breaks out down my back, which I've never experienced outside of a life-or-death situation—specifically when looking down the barrel of a gun.

I let a flash of unease show on my face, playing into the role I've been assigned and letting some of my true feelings shine through.

Every step feels like an eternity as I keep my pace measured and the slip of the material sways across my skin. This wedding might be fake, but my love for this gown is genuine. The gorgeous back is the focal point—all lace with a trail of buttons that runs from the top of my spine to the top of my ass. The skirt is thin and flowing, just two silky pieces of material that are easy to move in if needed. To show off the lace detail of the back, my long dark hair is curled and twisted into a loose chignon at the nape of my neck.

When we finally reach the front, Agent Kim leans in and kisses my cheek through the veil, as any father giving away their daughter would. Then takes both my hands and, with a nod to Dimitri, gently places them in his.

An unexpected zing passes through me as his rough, callused hands envelop mine. He doesn't say a word, smile, or even blink as we prepare to twine our lives together legally. And why would he?

This is an arrangement just as much for him as it is for me—a means to an end.

Dimitri guides me to my place opposite him with a firm hand, and the priest behind the podium welcomes the guests before opening his tome. As he reads from scripture, he highlights the values of marriage and what God says we are expected to achieve together. He's sure to include the part about being fruitful.

My IUD and I beg to differ.

I keep my gaze on our linked hands, portraying the timid and submissive bride the spectators expect, letting my confidence bleed away. It's hard enough being a woman in this world. Add to that a field that is still primarily male, and I've had to exude confidence I haven't always felt during a job.

Reverting to a timid woman feels like a betrayal of who I've fought mercilessly to become. But it is the ideal character for my role.

The ceremony, being Russian Orthodox, is a traditional mass with a wedding thrown in. As the priest drones on and on, the congregation stands

and sings periodically, then sits and listens some more. I'm impatient to get this part over with, but I keep the mask of patience affixed to my face.

Throughout it all, I feel myself being weighed, measured, and found wanting by Dimitri's guests. The weight of their stares and judgement is so heavy, it's like an additional layer of material on my body.

I don't fake the small gasp that leaves my parted lips as Dimitri holds me captive with his penetrating gaze. Enthralling in hue, I lose myself momentarily as I stare into his eyes, unable to break contact first.

The priest doesn't ask if there are any objections to our union. When you're Dimitri Aslanov, people know not to question you, clergy or otherwise.

We sail past that little tradition and move on to the rings—simple gold bands—and just as the priest says, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," a door at the back of the church opens and snicks shut again. I turn my head in that direction, on high alert. I'm infiltrating enemy territory, and my reactive instincts kick in at the sound.

"You may kiss the bride," the priest continues after the sound fades.

Dimitri turns my face towards his and lifts my veil with sure fingers. Without the barrier between us, it's like looking at him in 4K HD. My vision is clear, and everything stands out in sharp relief.

My new husband grips my chin and then takes my lips in a fierce kiss. Time seems to stand still for a moment. Then, he steps nearer, causing me to crane my neck because even in heels, I'm five inches shorter than him.

He wraps his free hand around my waist, hauling me closer still and giving our audience a show.

His tongue teases my bottom lip, and the taste of mint and the scent of his cologne overwhelm me. He strokes into my mouth as my lips caress his, and my hands land on his rigid arms.

When was the last time I was kissed like this? Like I was the centre of someone's universe, even if only for a moment?

My body reacts instinctively, and I part my lips to let him in more fully. But as I do, he ends the kiss.

Keeping a hand on my waist, he steps back and unconsciously, my body leans forward, wanting so much more.

This is not how it was supposed to go.

Applause sounds from both sides of the aisle as we part. Dimitri slides his hand down my arm, gripping my hand in his, and turns us towards the

congregation.

My eyes are immediately drawn to the back of the church and the figure sitting in the last pew.

*Nik.*

He stands with the rest of the attendees as Dimitri and I start down the aisle, heading for the exit.

Dark hair, a five o'clock shadow, and dark-as-night eyes are the only things I see as my vision tunnels. My steps falter, but Dimitri keeps a grip on my hand, and he also focuses on my former partner from Interpol.

Who knew I would find the father of my child in the middle of a Bratva wedding?

Me. That's who.

And soon, he'll learn that payback is a bitch.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

Eleanor - Two months ago

MY DAUGHTER, BELLA, SITS ON MY HIP, WEARING A LITTLE LIFE JACKET AND watching wide-eyed as Rory steers the boat. We're headed to Ekuverikan Island—the little hideaway Olivia bought and outfitted as an impenetrable safe house.

“Did Via tell you about everything we've put into place since you called last month?” he asks.

“Like what?” I ask warily. “She was talking about building a massive ball pit on the island's west side, but I hoped one of you would rein her in at some point.”

My best friend has more money than she knows how to spend, but not for lack of trying. Hell, just a few months ago, she'd sent stripper grams to my home every day for a week singing a dirty version of “Sugar” by Maroon 5, my favourite band from our school days. Though these days, I'm ashamed of the frontman too much to keep listening.

Rory laughs, a love-sick grin brightening his bearded face as he fiddles with something on his phone. “Just wait.”

I roll my eyes, already dreading how spoilt Bella will be after her time here. Olivia's known for her eccentricity, and nothing is off-limits for her goddaughter.

My boss thinks it'll be three to six months, and I'm hoping the job is on the shorter end of that spectrum. Being away from Bella will be difficult, and the faster it's over, the happier I'll be.

The island is in view, and the spire of a pink-and-purple castle emerges from the canopy in the centre.

“Whoa,” I breathe. “Are you serious?”

We burst into laughter because, of course, he is.

“Oh, yeah. Princess Bella deserves her own castle, so naturally, Olivia spent an exorbitant amount of money on something I'm ninety per cent sure is more for her than Bella. In fact, I doubt we'll be able to get the two of them out of there once they start.”

Rory sighs in equal parts exasperation and awe at Olivia's ways. “But I promise you can trust us with her, and we'll send updates often. I've already got a burner ready for you to take so we can keep you updated on everything.”

Leaving Bella here and walking away from her might be one of the hardest things I'll ever do. For nine months, seven of which I knew about, Bella was my constant. My ride-along passenger. Then, we had almost an entire year together, just her and me.

Eleanor and Bellatrix against the world.

My parents would occasionally babysit, but I tried not to rely on them too much. That's not to say they aren't good at it, but I'm a single mum, and I firmly believe my kid is my responsibility alone.

Handing her over to my best friend, no matter how much I trust her, leaves a sick feeling in my gut.

Rory manoeuvres the boat closer to the dock, and Viraj's face lights up as he ties the ropes, ignoring me and focusing on Bella. In a shocking twist, V has been the one with the ticking biological clock lately. After all his hemming and hawing about them getting together, he was the first to bring up cementing their bond in new ways.

Once he was in, he was *all* in.

"Is that my Bella girl?" he shouts.

Bella kicks her legs and waves her arms in response to V's exuberance. Even though they've only spent time together over video chat since the last time we all got together, she is resolute that he is her favourite uncle and adores him.

"V! V! V!" she cries.

Viraj attaches the gangplank to the boat. I say boat, but it's a damn yacht named *Floatable I* because Olivia sank *Unsinkable II*—*I know, you can't make this shit up*—and bought Max a new one as an apology.

Before my feet are even on terra firma, Bella is out of my arms and being spun in a circle. V is rambling nonsense, telling her how beautiful and intelligent she is and how many dicks she's going to kick because he's going to teach her how to do that while she's here. Never mind, she barely reaches his knees when standing at full height.

*Lovely*. Not that I'm opposed. I've done it a fair few times in my line of work. "Not cool, Uncle V," I scold with a finger wag. He just smirks and turns his attention back to Bella. Their dynamic always makes me chuckle, and I hope Bella grows close with all of her uncles, not just Viraj.

The four of us cross the sand, and Viraj finally focuses on me. "Hey, Ellie. Ollie's on her way down."

"You're never gonna stop calling us Ellie and Ollie, are you?"

“Why would I? It’s hilarious. Plus, it makes her cheeks go all pink, and you know I can’t resist that.” He grins.

“Smooth fool. Don’t make me drag the chair out again,” Olivia calls as she emerges from the treeline. *What does a chair have to do with anything?*

My best friend races towards me, kicking up sand in her wake, and tackles me to the ground. “God, I’ve missed you,” she says, kissing me square on the lips.

“Little Thief,” Zach drawls from behind her in his signature measured tone. “We talked about this. No more adding people to your harem.”

I roll my eyes. While I’m happy Olivia has found her little harem, I’m not about that life. I’d just be happy with one man I could lean on sometimes. As if my life as a single mum and overworked agent would even allow time for that.

“She’s already in my harem. In fact, she was here first, so fuck off.”

“Language,” Viraj scolds. He has one of Bella’s ears pressed to his chest and his hand covering the other. “Ollie, she’s like a sponge at this age! She’s gonna pick up all of your bad language.”

*Yeah, and talking about kicking people in the dick qualifies as good language?*

“My bad language,” she says with mock indignation. “You have the filthiest mouth I’ve ever heard, V-Card.”

“Not true,” says Max from behind Zach. “Pretty sure that one goes to Zach here.”

Olivia gets a dopey grin on her face, and I pretend to vomit, which, of course, makes her laugh like a loon. Love will do that to a person. Not that I’d know. There have been too many late nights at the office to allow for any decent dating time. But maybe one day?

“Come on.” She hops up and extends her hand to me. “Let’s go to the house. You can tell us everything we need to know.” I take her hand, and as she helps me up, she asks, “How long do we have you here?”

“My flight home is in three days. I can help ensure Bella gets over the jetlag and settles in okay with you guys. Thanks again for your help.”

Olivia grumbles, “The last time you asked me for help, I had to steal a diamond off a Russian.”

“Technically,” I say, “Max did the heavy lifting on that one.”

“Shut up. He’ll hear you. The last thing we need is that man’s ego getting any bigger.”

I chuckle because Max, the posh and proper Londoner, nephew of a lord, does *not* need an ego boost. Unfortunately, I found out that he's rocking a monster cock, and he's already got enough swagger to have a limp.

I shove that mental image out of my head and clear my throat to prepare for the rundown I need to give Olivia. I couldn't give her many details when I called her last month, nor can I now. But she needs to know the gravity of the situation for her protection—and Bella's.

"So, where are you going?" Olivia asks. "Can I come? Are we travelling? Do we get to wear costumes? Is there espionage?" Her voice ratchets up with excitement after every question. She's gripping my arms, and her nails dig into my soft bits. "It's been weeks since I did a job."

Of course, my bestie wants to go on a mission with me. "I mean, yeah, it's espionage. And no, you can't come. You agreed to watch my child, remember?" I point to said child, just in case she's forgotten.

She looks like I stole her lucky pen but recovers when V hands Bella to her.

Olivia holds her arms out like Bella's a ticking bomb, and my sweet girl kicks her feet excitedly.

"She won't bite you," I tell my best friend, then think better of it. "Actually, she might. She's been in a teething thing, but we're at the tail end of it."

Olivia slowly brings Bella closer, giving her the stink-eye and still holding her oddly, but it's better than it was ten seconds ago.

"Anyway," I say with a bit of hesitation. She needs to know this next part, and as much as I hate bringing my responsibilities to her doorstep, I would do the same for her if our roles were reversed. "This is the safest place for her. The people I'll be dealing with are dangerous, and I'm afraid if it goes sideways, they'll come looking for her."

"Say no more," Olivia responds. "We're covered on that front, and no one is getting to my goddaughter. Not unless they're willing to go through all of us."

I smooth one of Bella's dark locks behind her ear as she smooshes Olivia's face between two chubby palms and giggles.

"When does the job start again?" Olivia asks.

"In six weeks. But I'll be working doubles until it starts, getting briefed, and working with the team to ensure everything is ready. I don't know how long this might last, but I don't expect it to be over six months."

“I closed our intake form on the app, so we’re committed to this. Plus, we have Zach in case of an emergency. He knows what he’s doing.”

Yeah, sure, Zach is a paediatrician, but he’s also a psychopath—sociopath?—I never did grasp criminal psych. I don’t ask much about Olivia and the guys’ work, but I don’t think Zach’s just patching up boo-boos and handing out lollipops.

I look over at my sweet child, conceived from a one-night stand and a parting gift from a partner who betrayed not just Interpol but also me. Even just thinking about Nikita Lenkov—or, as I once knew him, Nicolas Stephenson—gets me all riled up again.

But as I look at Bella’s face—half mine, half his, my eyes, his nose, somehow a combination of our lips, my top, his bottom—some anger melts away.

“Can you tell us anything about your mission?”

“Mission makes it sound very double-oh-seven. I approve,” I say. “But let’s call it an assignment. I can’t say much, but I’ll be in New York.”

“Why isn’t the CIA, NSA, FBI, or any of those other acronym clusterfucks handling this, then?”

“It’s a joint effort, but because the crimes that link it involve Interpol, and there’s a bunch of jurisdiction bullshit, it’s spiralled into a collaboration. I’ll have a counterpart from one of the US branches since it’s on their soil.”

When the files came across my desk, I jumped at the chance to go undercover for this. It’s been a red-tape nightmare since I have a child. But thankfully, after organising her care in case the worst happens and legalising all the documentation, I was given the all-clear—especially since I came up with the cover story requiring an Asian woman with a British accent, familiar with organised crime. More than that, it was necessary because *Nik* is part of that chapter, hiding in plain sight.

And while I might not know where exactly he lands in the hierarchy, I do know that I want revenge—both for stealing a diamond encrypted with sensitive information for the head of the Bratva and for betraying me in the worst way possible.

I also need to prove myself after he made me look like an incompetent asshole.

Thankfully, I contracted Olivia to get it back, but still, the brass are not too pleased with me.

When I get back to HQ, all that’s left to do is go over everything a

hundred times, see the therapist to ensure I'm ready for the role, study the setup and briefs, and account for every scenario. While I'm gutted about leaving Bella here, I know it's for the best. Because even if I wasn't the one going undercover, there is always a chance for blowback, and I want her safe and cared for no matter what happens.

After all, when Dimitri Aslanov, Bratva boss and *pakhan* of the New York chapter, approaches your agency and offers to turn on his entire organisation, we sit up and listen.

# CHAPTER THREE

---

Dimitri - Present

NIKITA SHOWING UP AT MY WEDDING TO THE INTERPOL AGENT WAS unexpected. He had a job that should have kept him busy for months. Long enough for me to get things settled at home before his involvement.

Instead, he's back mere weeks after leaving, which will throw an uncomfortable wrench into the plans. But it's too late to change anything now.

My new bride sits at the head table with her fake mother—their heads bowed together as they whisper to one another. She looks more nervous than when she walked down the aisle a couple of hours ago. The only moment she broke her role was during our kiss, and fuck, do I want her to break it again.

I rub my lower lip in thought as I look out over the lake from the dark corner I've moved to. The Loeb Boathouse in Central Park is lit with candles as our guests sit on the veranda, eating whatever menu the chef put together on short notice.

It took three calls and one big cheque to open the place again for the night, especially after the City of New York deemed it short on operational costs and closed it months ago.

“Your father would have liked this,” Nik says from beside me as he approaches.

I incline my head. He's right, but he's not here to enjoy it, so what does it matter? He was an impossible man to please unless I was doing exactly what he laid out for me and somehow did it beyond his demanding expectations.

Truthfully, I'd given up on pleasing my father long before he was murdered by one of our own eighteen months ago.

Not that anyone but the killer knows he died with a knife to the heart and an ice pick to the temple. Overkill, I know, but it's the exact method Nik uses when he's on a job. He's always said it leaves nothing to chance.

I'd been prepared to forgive him and move past what tore us apart ten years ago when he returned from his stint with Interpol as a plant. But then, a few days later, my father was murdered, and I was left utterly alone with an old friend returned and the most probable suspect.

Having found my father's body, I had two choices. I could out the murder or fabricate everything, hoping to catch the assailant with proof because the motivations for it to be Nik do not line up even though it wouldn't be the first

time Nik murdered someone I was close to.

Everyone thinks he passed peacefully in his sleep because that was the story I'd told and paid off the morgue to write in the reports. All this time, I've lain in wait, anticipating a slip-up—or, sometimes, trying to force one.

“Why are you here?” I ask Nik, never taking my eyes off the lake's calm surface. A torrent of emotion swirls under my skin, but my face is impassive as I feel Nik's probing stare on my face.

“Wrapped it up early. The Italians won't be a problem anymore.”

“You know the consequences of a job half-done.” I finally turn towards him when I hear his Zippo lighter flick open. He lights his cigarette instead of meeting my eyes and leans forward, resting his inked forearms on the metal railing.

“Hmm.”

Nik can read me like a book; he always could. I keep my frustration from showing at his mere presence. And right now, more than just my life depends on keeping that fucking book shut.

“Interesting choice of bride.” His voice stops me in my tracks as I turn to leave. “Where'd you find her?”

On my father's orders, Nik was a plant at Interpol for ten years, which they still don't know to the best of our knowledge. They just think he stole a diamond and high-tailed it out of there.

We'd been best friends since my parents adopted him. He was recently orphaned in France, and our parents had been friends before they relocated. He moved in with us in Moscow, and we all emigrated to the US soon after.

My father ordered him to Interpol after he finished school, but at that point, we'd grown so distant, it didn't feel like I'd lost anything. As loathe as I am to admit it, Nik was the best pick for Interpol because of his language skills and ability to keep his shit locked down.

In recent years, I'd come to understand why he did what he did and was prepared to extend the olive branch when he came home from Interpol. But then my father's death happened, throwing those plans out with the rubbish.

Nik's job with the Italians was meant to be extended because he would have studied the few agents they have that do undercover work. I can't have him fucking this all up; too much is riding on this. I only contacted Interpol instead of another agency because I knew we no longer had a plant there.

My freedom and a chance to walk away for good hang in the balance, especially with what I learned earlier this week. My brigadier has become a

little big for his britches and is importing something we haven't discussed. Never mind my father was the one to start the operation. But now, Sergei is continuing it, and I need to shut it down.

"Alliance marriage," I say, my teeth clenched. His face is impassive, and he sucks on that cigarette like it's the air he needs to live. If he knows where I really found her, he isn't letting on.

"With whom?"

I look down my nose at him; an act only made possible because he's still leaning over the railing. He's got an inch on me when we're at full height. "You forget yourself, Nikita. You answer to me."

Nik hums that noncommittal noise again as he takes a drag of his cigarette, the skull on the back of his tattooed hand illuminated by the glowing cherry at the end as it flares to life.

"Yes, *Pakhan*," he says, using my honorific. He turns towards the lake again and stares off into the distance. It doesn't escape my notice that he's taken up a spot shrouded in darkness, like usual—keeping himself out of sight and away from anyone's attention.

There was a time I'd trusted him more than anyone; he was a brother to me in every sense of the word. But those days are long gone, and some things are better left buried under the wreckage of our circumstances.

I cross the veranda, approaching the head table and my new wife.

"Elsa," I greet as I pull my chair out and lower myself into it.

"Ellie, please," she says quietly like she's said it a million times before. Good actress for an Interpol agent. She has a whole backstory, but I didn't know that included a nickname preference. Not that I'll use it.

I don't even know her real name. When arranging all of this, I was given zero details of the woman playing my new bride, other than a general description, so I didn't risk exposing her.

"What's Nikita doing here?" she murmurs, shielding her lips with her champagne glass.

"You know him?" I ask, not feeling the same compunction to hide my words.

Her words are a mere whisper compared to the clinking of glasses and utensils on plates. "He was my partner."

I do a double-take at those words. *Fuck*.

"Come on." I rise and wait beside her chair for her to do the same. This requires a shift in our plan; one that might mean I need to kill my former best

friend. Then again, maybe it will be revenge for my father's death. I just wish I had more proof.

Elsa pauses, gently folds her napkin, and places it on the table. She rises to her feet and only comes up to my chest, even with heels. But what she lacks in height, she makes up for in appearance. Strong yet feminine shoulders, small breasts that would fit perfectly in my hands, and a slim waist that meets a subtle curve at her hips.

A clinking of glasses rings out as we stand side by side. "Kiss! Kiss!" the cheers say, a mix of English and Russian.

Elsa dips her head as if embarrassed by all the attention, slipping into her role again. I doubt much embarrasses the woman she actually is, but she plays her part well, and I forget she's someone else entirely.

It will draw far more attention if I don't kiss her after all our guests called for it on such a joyous occasion. So I cradle her face in my palm, my fingertips sinking into the chignon at the base of her neck, and tilt her face towards mine.

Her lips part as her obsidian eyes meet mine, the pulse under her chin hammering. A slow smirk spreads on my lips, and I lower my face to hers.

After the lightest brush of our lips, it's over. No need to invite temptation into our lives when this is merely a way out. Especially not after that kiss in the church, where I nearly lost control and forgot about our charade. But I can't help but note the sweetness of her strawberry and champagne taste as it lingers on my lips.

My uncle and right-hand man, Sergei, booms, "If I may have your attention!"

The guests turn away from us and towards him. Elsa relaxes while I'm still touching her chin as they shift their attention. I release her and slip my hand into my pocket as I pick up my glass and give my uncle the attention he requests.

Sergei lifts his champagne flute into the air, and his wife, Oksana, does the same beside him. "To my nephew, Dimitri, and his new bride, Elsa. May your wedding night be fruitful, as an heir is the surest way to prosperity." I note those brave enough to cheer Sergei on. The twins, Aleksandr and Ivan Golubev, are the rowdiest, and I vow to put them on some kind of cleanup detail for the next three weeks.

Sergei had argued I was too young to take the *pakhan* role. Not enough experience, still too young, no heir, and so on. I laughed in his face and

hatched my plan.

I knew how to do this job. My father had taught me all my life. But with Sergei so intent on an heir and continuing the Aslanov line, I saw a way. He and my Aunt Oksana had only girls, and carrying on our surname had become his fixation.

Getting Interpol involved came later, but I started dropping hints I was ready to marry. I've squired women all around New York, bored to tears, until one day, after beginning the set-up with Interpol, I gave him the number for Peter Lee and told him I wanted an alliance with the Emerald Sabres and would do anything to make it happen.

Sergei had tried to fill the role as an intermediary until he deemed I was ready, but I squashed that notion. My uncle was sorely mistaken if he thought there was even one day in my life that my father had let me just *be* instead of training me for my future. He'd always wanted my father's seat, so I took the role and guarded it with my life when he died because I don't trust Sergei, especially after learning about his most recent ventures.

"And may our families work together to broaden both our reaches."

The man who walked Elsa down the aisle dips his head as if saying he would ensure that never came to pass. In this dynamic, I am the catch, and Elsa is the price for peace and the bargaining chip allowing the Emerald Sabres onto the East Coast.

The roles are clear and defined—structured in such a way to help make her feel like nothing among my people. After all, who pays attention to a fly on the wall when a tiger prowls the room? Her only job here is to gather the evidence and help me get the fuck out of this life.

"To Mr and Mrs Dimitri Aslanov! To the happy couple!" Sergei says, and the rest of the attendees repeat the cheer.

"To us," I murmur, meeting Elsa's eyes as I clink my glass with hers.

# CHAPTER FOUR

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Eleanor

WITH THE WEDDING AND RECEPTION FINISHED, DIMITRI AND I STROLL through the line of clapping guests and head for the fancy black town car idling just outside the entrance to the boathouse. As we pass the end of the line, I spy Nik off to the side, cigarette in hand, as he leans against the trunk of a nearby tree. He's watching with intensity as Dimitri guides me into the car.

All night, he stayed far enough away that even if I threw a knife, I couldn't be sure it would hit him. It might be worth a try, though.

Sergei tried to bully Dimitri into taking us on a honeymoon, but my husband wasn't having it, citing business as the reason to stick close to home. The compromise was an agreement to host a party soon. Whether we would still be married by the time that indeterminate date rolled around was anyone's guess.

One very tense ride later, wherein I can't bring up Nik's arrival because Dimitri didn't raise the divider between the driver and us, we pull up in front of the Rose Hill building—a new construction that Dimitri moved into four months ago, according to his files.

I marvel at the façade as the car rolls to a stop. It mixes modern and art déco with burnished gold-and-black slabs covered in chevron patterns on each street-level column. It's gorgeous. And frankly, there are worse places I could be forced to stay in for the foreseeable future. My belongings should already be upstairs waiting for me, and there's one thing I'm desperate to get my hands on.

The driver hustles out, rounds the car, and opens Dimitri's door. Immediately, the sounds of New York reach my ears: cars honking, people conversing as they pass by, and the hiss of espresso machines from across the street. I hadn't realised how silent the ride had been until all of that came crashing in.

"Home sweet home," Dimitri says, his voice low and calm. His accent is American, but there's a hint of his homeland underneath. A slight variant to his Hs and clipped endings to certain words. Not that I know which ones. We've spoken a grand total of maybe ten sentences to each other.

I roll my eyes. This may be his home, but it certainly isn't mine. A house cannot be built on secrets and plots of revenge.

Once on the pavement, Dimitri extends a hand back to me, and I slide along the seat. This is it. I made it through the wedding and played my role well enough that no one opened fire at the reception.

Now that I'm part of the Bratva, it's up to me to gather evidence from within, using Dimitri as a walking tripod for the cameras.

Mask in place, I take my new husband's hand. His warmth engulfs my palm, and he steadies me as I step onto the pavement. I hunch my shoulders and step hesitantly towards Dimitri. My role remains fixed in my mind: new bride, dutiful wife, pawn.

The driver is still watching, and I don't want to be exposed this close to the penthouse. Dimitri and Nik are the only two who know my true identity, or at least that I'm not who I'm pretending to be. And Nik is probably hightailing it out of here by now. It doesn't matter, though.

I pointed him out to the agent standing in as my mother at the wedding, and she just so happened to press a small tracking device to his lighter when she asked to borrow it for her own cigarette.

I knew Nik was part of this Bratva chapter after seeing him in one of the photos buried in Dimitri's files. It was just his hand, but a scar on the back of it is distinct enough to positively identify him.

The tracker is in case he decides to run for it. He must know Interpol is looking for him.

While I wish I could have done something at the reception, I know the job is bigger than my own personal vendetta. The tracker will have to suffice, and I'll keep tabs on him while I'm here.

"Will you need me again tonight, *Pakhan*?" the driver asks.

"No, Alexei. Have a good night," Dimitri replies, his face impassive and cold.

Alexei's gaze travels down my face and lands on my cleavage. I would have missed it if I hadn't been watching, but as we've established, my whole job here is to watch.

In a move so practised, I'd be surprised if Dimitri couldn't do it in his sleep, he has the driver's arm behind his back in a tight hold and smashes his face against the window, rattling the glass in its frame.

"Never look at my wife like that," Dimitri seethes.

Violence doesn't scare me as it once did, but I'm not Eleanor right now, and I need to act the part. I rear back after a second's hesitation. I gasp and cover my mouth with my hand, stepping away as if I fear what I'm

witnessing.

Alexei nods against the glass, smearing the blood dripping from his nose all over the reflective surface. “Yes, *Pakhan*. My apologies.”

“Never again,” Dimitri growls. He tilts his head in my direction as he catches Alexei’s eye. “Apologise to Elsa.”

Alexei mumbles his apology, and Dimitri shoves him harder against the car until he speaks up. The reaction is brutal for a mere look, but this is how Dimitri runs his organisation. I have to bite my tongue to stop from telling him to lay off.

After whispering wrathful words of warning into his ear, he lets the driver up. Alexei scurries back around to the other side of the car and hops in, peeling off with tense shoulders and a scowl on his face.

I cock a brow at Dimitri, letting some of my true self shine through the façade, and he just keeps that infuriating impassive face.

Dimitri guides me into the lobby, past the man on duty at the desk, across the sandstone tile, and to a bank of lifts. He presses a button on his phone, and the doors for the first one slide open.

There’s no music, just oppressive silence as we stand in the mirrored box. There are only four buttons to push: Parking, Lobby, Recreation, and Penthouse B.

I open my mouth to say something to Dimitri about Nik now that we’re alone, but he cuts a glance at me, making me suck the words back in. He lifts a brow towards the corner, where I see a camera.

He doesn’t trust whoever has access to the footage.

“Life is brutal, wife. If you do not claim what is yours, someone will steal it from you,” he says. He turns towards me, wrapping his hand around my throat and walking me backwards until my body presses against the cold, mirrored walls. His icy eyes are hooded as they bore into mine. “And you *are* mine.”

My hands lock around his forearm, and my thighs clamp together as he asserts his claim over me. A breath escapes my lips, filling the chasm between us. It’s a show for the camera, but I feel it as if it were real.

He lowers his face until he’s a centimetre away.

“Nod that you understand,” he whispers, tightening his grip on my throat and letting his bottom lip touch mine.

Shakily, I dip my head.

“Good wife.” He closes the distance and uses his hold to pin me in place

and seals his lips against mine. Even with the raw carnality of our kiss, I feel the restraint in his shoulders when I grip him there.

No one has ever kissed me like this, taken possession of my mouth like they would die without it, and I never want it to end. His tongue traces my bottom lip, and I open for him.

A ding sounds from the lift, and just as quickly as he grabbed me, he rips his lips away and releases my throat. I take three deep breaths, and while my brain implodes, he steps out of the lift like this is a regular occurrence.

“Come.”

*Fuck, if he kisses me like that again, I just might.*

I stumble from the lift into a tastefully appointed foyer with bamboo flooring, pristine white walls, and black-and-gold side tables. Everything follows the same theme: black, white, and gold, but there are the smallest pops of colour in the artwork on the walls. I follow Dimitri as he turns right into a spacious living room.

“Your place is amazing,” I say, my first honest words since before the wedding.

He looks around as if noticing it for the first time. “The designer did a decent job. I just moved in a few months ago.”

Dimitri fixes himself a drink from a bar cart and gracefully sinks onto the couch. I continue wandering under his watchful eye. An open office area and a tucked-away bathroom are on the far right. I know this from the blueprints in the files, but walking through the home is far different from looking at a floor plan on a page.

Just like how seeing Dimitri in person for the first time was different from seeing his photo.

I stroll past Dimitri and towards the other side of the apartment as he types out a message on his phone. There’s a massive kitchen with a white marble island and a simple black table with two chairs. Facing east, a terrace spans the entire wall of the apartment, promising al fresco dining opportunities. I can’t help but admire the skyline beyond the floor-to-ceiling glass windows, so breathtaking and famous it’s impossible for me not to be amazed.

I know from my notes that when I go upstairs, I’ll find one primary suite occupying most of the top floor and a smaller bedroom with an ensuite on the north side for me. There’s also a half-sized balcony on the second floor because . . . well, why the fuck not?

Turning back to Dimitri, he's holding his half-full tumbler and lazily swirling the glass between two fingers. The scent is terrible, but he sips it without wrinkling his nose.

I join him on the opposite side of the L-shaped couch. "So, what now?"

"Now we have a drink and go to bed." Dimitri's phone rings like a doorbell, and he looks down at the notification. Tension radiates from him as he looks at the screen and presses a button. "Or not. You have approximately fifteen seconds to get upstairs if you don't want to see Nik," he warns.

My brows raise. This is unexpected; his coming here has rendered my tracker useless tonight.

"He was supposed to be handling a job for me and finished early."

Standing, I smooth my hands down my ivory dress. If there's a chance we can use Nik, we need to take it, and I can't let emotion impede that. Nor can I let Dimitri try to protect my former partner. I don't trust my new husband, and Nik has just provided the perfect test for Dimitri's loyalty to the plan.

I head towards the staircase beside the foyer and climb the stairs, my hand trailing along the matte-black railing. When I reach the landing, I turn and look over my shoulder. "Don't blow this, Dimitri. There's a reason you sent him away when we worked out the timing. Now is not the time for sentimentality."

Dimitri just inclines his head, and a ding sounds from the foyer, signalling the lift's arrival.

I gather the satin skirt of my dress and hustle up the rest of the stairs, keeping my heels from clattering on the wood below my feet. As soon as I reach the top, I crouch down to listen to their conversation from above.

The sound of boots on tile echoes across the floor as Nik enters the apartment. From here, I can only see his shoes and black trousers, and even though we were partners for a year, I'd swear even his walk differs from back then.

"Fancy a drink?" Nik asks as he enters the living room.

I fight an exasperated sigh.

*The balls on this guy, offering a drink to Dimitri in his own home.*

Nik's accent is similar to Dimitri's but having grown up in France before moving to Russia and then the US, it adds a layer to the cadence.

"What are you doing in my apartment on my wedding night? You aren't my bodyguard anymore." Dimitri sighs as if this is not the first time Nik has shown up unannounced, and I can imagine him already holding up his half-

gone drink in a gesture of refusal for more alcohol.

There's a momentary pause. "Was I interrupting something?"

Silence from Dimitri is all that greets the question for a few seconds. "Say what you need to say and get the fuck out."

Nik's low chuckle reaches my ears—the same one he often gave when we were assigned something menial or below our pay grade, but we did it anyway because that's what good agents do.

"Where's your wife?" he asks. The word *wife* comes out like an insult.

"Upstairs."

"On the balcony, then," Nik says, and his footsteps grow fainter as he moves towards the outdoor space. *Was he always this bossy, and I just missed it?*

There's the soft click of a door opening, and I yank off my heels, throw open the door to the master suite, and race across the space. I fly past the matching fireplace above the one downstairs and toss my shoes onto an armchair. I reach the doors, and carefully, so fucking carefully, I open one.

I pause, waiting a few seconds before making my way outside. Fear grips me because while I might be a badass, heights and I have never been best friends.

The terrace above is just a little narrower than the one below, and it weirdly helps with the height thing, knowing if I go over, I'll land one floor down. Still not ideal, but the brain is a weird thing.

As I peer over the edge, I see Nik gripping the railing in a chokehold grip as he looks at the street below. Apparently, some people have no fear of heights.

Dimitri follows him out, and I retreat just in time as Nik's eyes flit to the second floor. I crouch behind the low wall and listen while my palms sweat at the height and my skin breaks out in goosebumps with the wind chill.

"I'm back on duty. Sergei's orders," Nik says as I stare at a slight imperfection on the floor before me. Dimitri curses, but Nik continues. "Tell me about . . . Elsa, is it?"

*Why isn't he telling Dimitri he knows me from Interpol?*

I swear, I feel Dimitri shrug from here. "Elsa, yes. She's a tool to use. I don't need to know anything about her other than that. It's opening us up to more opportunities with the Sabres."

"And an heir," Nik says quietly, almost as if the wind snatched the words from his mouth and carried them away.

Dimitri's dry laugh reaches me. "What, are you in league with Sergei? But who knows? We'll see what happens tonight."

Memories of Dimitri's kiss assault my senses, and I clench my fists at the mental image of him over me, his dominating touch on me, and his restrained composure cracking.

Then, unbidden, that night with Nik plays right beside it. Clothes ripped off, a lamp crashing to the ground, the reckless abandon of it all comes hurtling back in a millisecond, and it's enough to make spots dance in my vision.

This is a job, but fuck me. I haven't had sex since I got pregnant with Bella, and the idea sounds better and better with every whispered promise in my mind. But the last time I mixed business and pleasure, I got much more than I'd bargained for.

"Just be careful," Nik says, returning my attention to the present. "Wouldn't want you to think it was a mistake in the morning."

*Is that what he thought the morning after?* Fuck. I shake myself out of the spiral threatening to drown me and carefully return inside as they move on to a deal Nik brokered with the Italians.

Now that he's done with the Italians, I can't use the tip to build the case. The information needs to be fresh; the evidence gathered first-hand, and unless Dimitri stuck a camera on Nik without him knowing—doubtful—it's useless.

I close the door behind me and turn around, leaning against the glass and surveying the suite.

One would almost expect a leader with more money than he can spend in a lifetime to be in a penthouse triple this size, but this place feels like it's been built for one person—or a couple—to be master of their domain.

I head towards the sleeping area to the right, finding the area dim, with only warm-yellow bulbs in the lamps giving off a somewhat comforting light. The walls are dark grey, and the duvet on the bed is a deep navy with crisp white sheets below.

Two nightstands bracket the bed, neither decorated with personal items. A walk-in closet makes up one wall of the sleeping area, providing privacy from the entry door. I wander in, finding a second door at the opposite end of the room. I walk towards it and peek my head in. There are rows upon rows of women's dresses, tags still attached to all of them.

I flip the tag closest to me, noting the gorgeous green dress is my size

costs almost as much as my monthly salary. Shocked at the figure, I let the tag fall from my fingers and withdraw my hand. I cross the room and examine the clothing from a safe distance. All of it is my size. And none of it, I'm sure, was paid for by Interpol.

Retreating to the primary space and trying to avoid doing the mental maths of how much money went into this ruse, I veer towards the other side of the suite. A massive bathroom and tastefully appointed space greet me. All white marble with gold hardware, and the view. My Lord, the view. I can look out over the New York skyline from the bathtub and watch from the heavens.

I exit the suite and turn towards the second door to head into the guest room. I try the handle but meet resistance as I turn it. Locked.

*No.*

On the landing, I pause and listen to the rumble of male voices downstairs. They're busy with whatever they're discussing, giving me a few more minutes to accept I'm sharing the suite with Dimitri instead of having my own room as I'd thought.

I head back into the *shared* suite and look for my bag the agency promised would be in the apartment when I arrived. After a few minutes of searching, I find it haphazardly tossed into a corner of the closet, buried beneath a stack of the softest scarves I've ever touched.

Rifling through the contents, I note it's all disorganised and conclude that Dimitri must have gone through this at some point. He doesn't seem the type to leave it all up to his security.

I grab my burner phone from the bag's depths and check in with Agent Kim, my handler, that all is well by sending a coded message.

**Me:** *Please make sure Omma is comfortable at the hotel.*

**Unknown:** *Will do. Let me know if I need to check on anyone else.*

With the proper response and the assurance of support, I delete the exchange and carry the phone out of the closet with the charger. Nik and Dimitri are still talking downstairs, and one shouts at the other in Russian. I don't understand it fluently, but I know enough to discern that someone just called someone else a pussy.

I enter the bedroom and stare down at the king-sized mattress. Which side does Dimitri sleep on?

Neither pillow is indented, and the bed is expertly made, not giving me any clues. I pull open the drawer to the nightstand on one side, finding a

historical nonfiction book with a bookmark stuffed between the pages. I cross the room and check the other nightstand, finding nothing but condoms.

Well, this is a toss-up.

I take the condom side because a book feels more personal.

I pull a second burner phone from the discreet strap on my thigh, and its reassuring weight all night has kept me feeling at least a little connected to my girl, even if she's thousands of miles away.

Turning around, I check that I'm still alone and fire up the mobile as I sit on the bed, my ass sinking into it and appreciating the quality mattress. If Dimitri were to be murdered on the other side of this thing, I doubt I'd even feel the jostling of the struggle.

*O: All good here*

*O: She doesn't like peas. Noted. But she's eating her other veg.*

*O: How long does the biting thing last?*

*O: Ignore that last message. Zach answered it for me after he bandaged his arm.*

*O: This is like the longest we haven't spoken, and I hate it*

*O: Sending the cutest video in existence*

The thumbnail under the text is a still of Bella's smiling face as she hovers mid-air. I click play on the video and watch as my angel bounces up and down in the massive princess castle with Max jumping beside her, controlling his jumps so he doesn't launch her too high.

A throat clears from over my shoulder, and I spin to face Dimitri, who's sitting on the bed behind me. *Stupid fucking memory foam mattress.*

*"You have a child."*

# CHAPTER FIVE

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Dimitri

I WATCH THE SCREEN FROM OVER ELSA'S SHOULDER AS A CHILD JUMPS UP AND down on a pink-and-purple-inflatable monstrosity while a man heedfully jumps next to her. Her father, no doubt.

After arguing with Nik, I came upstairs and found Elsa sitting on the bed, her head bent over her phone. Her scent reaches me, and despite the yelling downstairs and the time that's passed since our kiss in the lift, my cock stirs at her mere presence. I clear my throat, more to tell my cock to stand down than to alert Elsa of my arrival, but it only works partially. My dick grows harder under my trousers despite the fact she's probably with someone else and has a child.

Her head whips around, almost clocking me in the nose. Her eyes are wide, and her lips parted in a gasp.

"You have a child."

My gaze drops to those lips again, and I swallow roughly. Why does the idea of her already being committed to another man bother me this much?

"I . . ." she starts. "No. It's a friend's kid."

Elsa darkens the phone screen and shoves the device into the bedside drawer.

"Lies."

She swallows. "It's not a lie."

"How old is she?" I ask instead of arguing. I spent the wedding and reception studying Elsa's face. The same cheekbones, eye shape, and bottom lip—this is Elsa's daughter. Perhaps her other features were from the man jumping in the video, but his face was cut off. That slope of the nose is familiar, though.

"She's one."

The thought of her round with my child instead of the other man's sends a bolt of lust through me despite the impossibility of it all. The mental reminder of the circumstances makes my fists clench. I need to know one thing, but I hear footsteps on the stairs and form a plan to assure both me and *him*.

Elsa's still facing me on the bed, so I take her by the throat, guiding her backwards until her head hits the pillow. Her eyes flare as I move over her, and her pulse quickens under my fingertips.

“Are you married?” I grit out before Nik can get close enough to hear. Her breathing is short and quick, and the tip of her tongue touches her bottom lip. I hear the faint click of the door to the suite as Nik enters.

“Only to you.”

Careful footsteps enter the suite.

“Are you involved with anyone else?” The thought—the mere idea of it—is driving me wild with jealousy.

“No.”

“And you are mine.”

“For now,” she answers in a gasp as my hold turns claiming.

I ease the pressure, and my eyes dip to her lips. “We have company.”

Turning my head and feeling Elsa follow my gaze, I find Nik leaning against the wall. “Satisfied?”

“For now,” he echoes. After a long look at Elsa in my grip, he turns and exits the room. He was supposed to be away, and now he’s here, in my home, in his bedroom next door, while I put the pieces together to walk away for good.

Elsa reaches up and pinches a nerve between my shoulder and neck. I fight the urge to let go, and my grip remains tight, even as pain lances through me.

“What the fuck?” she whispers.

“Nik lives here.”

The string of swear words that leaves Elsa’s lips would make a nun blush, but it just makes me smile. “I need to teach you some Russian. We have better curses.”

“What do you mean he *lives* here?”

I don’t answer; I just let the silence hang between us.

“You have *got* to be kidding me. How is this going to—”

I muffle her words with a hand over her mouth.

“Shh, Sabre. He’ll hear you.”

She blinks twice, and I remove my hand.

Her voice is low as she asks, “He can hear everything?”

I nod. There’s no carpet in this penthouse aside from the rugs in front of the fire, and more than once, I’ve heard Nik from his own room.

“Fuck.”

“Precisely.”

While I never intended to fuck the agent they sent as my bride, I’m

certainly not opposed—to keep the ruse up, of course. Because while Nik might know Elsa is an Interpol agent, he doesn't know *I* know that. It's just as plausible she was a plant for the Sabres as he was for the Bratva.

Besides, it's just sex. And the last thing we want is for Nik to share his doubts about our union with my uncle. The circumstances leave few options.

Elsa somehow looks down her nose at me from below. Impressive, I'll admit. "We have to sell this. He knows me."

"I know." I drop my head to the crook of her neck and inhale deeply. Cherry blossoms and something spicy. Her pulse picks up against my lips as I trail kisses down her neck. "Moan for me, Sabre."

Her breathy little moan isn't enough.

"Louder," I command, skating one hand down her side and settling it at the dip of her waist.

I nip at the juncture of her neck and shoulder, soothing the hurt with a swipe of my tongue. Her groan floats through the air, louder and carrying through the space.

"Better."

Her ivory silk-and-lace wedding dress is still on, and the cool fabric against her fevered skin makes me itch to rip it off her. To taste and explore, mapping every peak and valley with my tongue.

I pull away, leaving her gasping on the bed below me. "Stand up."

She swings her legs off the bed and stands at the side, following my orders so well. I twirl a finger in the air, telling her to turn around.

When her back is to me, I take her slim waist in my hands and pull her closer to me, feeling the material sliding over her skin. She shivers, and goosebumps break out over her arms.

The line of buttons along her spine looks like a test of patience, which I usually have an abundance of, but not tonight. I pull the switchblade from my pocket and tug the lace away from her body.

I flick open the knife and slice the dress from nape to ass, splitting the garment in half.

Elsa gasps and grips the front of the dress, holding it to her body. I stab the knife into the wood of the nightstand and move just behind her, running my fingers along her exposed spine. "Don't hide from me, wife."

"Dimitri," she whispers, lust dripping from her voice.

"Shh," I breathe into her ear. "This is nothing. This is two colleagues passing the time."

She stiffens under my touch at my words, and I run my hands to her shoulders, taking the material between my fingertips and dragging it down her arms. Elsa slips her arms from the top, and the dress slithers over her hips, pooling on the floor at our feet.

I dip my head to her neck again, looking over her shoulder. She's not wearing a bra, and her pert breasts are on display, their tawny nipples straining towards the window on the wall opposite us.

She lowers her arms, giving me an unobstructed view as she looks into the reflective glass. I follow her gaze, seeing a woman in nothing but white lace panties as my spectre dwarfs her slight frame. My hands glide from her ribs to her hips, and I want to mark them with my fingerprints, holding onto her so tightly evidence of my every touch is branded onto her skin.

"What are we doing?" she asks our reflection.

"Selling it," I answer. "Undress me."

# CHAPTER SIX

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Eleanor

DIMITRI'S BREATH SKIRTS OVER MY NECK, MY FEVERISH SKIN GETTING warmer by the second.

I drop my arms, staring at the woman reflected at me in the dark window. Running my gaze up and down my body, my lace panties are stark white against my skin. The shadow behind me runs his hands from my ribs to my hips, not as narrow as they once were, but they give me an hourglass shape I've come to love.

"What are we doing?" I ask, feeling Dimitri's eyes on mine through the window's reflection.

"Selling it. Undress me."

As a man of few words, his power and confidence ring through the simple command. He expects to be obeyed, and I'm helpless to resist. I turn towards him, his hands never leaving my hips, just sliding along my skin with those rough calluses and evoking a shiver.

Dimitri bends closer, running his nose along my temple as he breathes me in. The top two buttons of his white shirt are unbuttoned, and I study the tan skin there, keeping my eyes on his chest, knowing I'll come undone if I look into those ice-blue depths again.

"Now, wife."

I raise my shaky hands to the next button and thread it through the hole, exposing more of my new husband.

Making quick work of the following few buttons, I pull the material out of his suit trousers. Once the garment's hanging open, exposing a defined chest and the bumps and ridges of his abdomen, he offers me his wrists. Silver cufflinks fasten the shirt sleeves in place, and I carefully remove them.

After taking them from my fingers, he slides the shirt down his broad shoulders and lets it crumple on the bed behind him.

"Look at me," Dimitri commands.

So fucking slowly, I drag my gaze up his body, noting a few scars along the way. With a fingertip, I trace the puckered skin over his ribs, and Dimitri freezes under my touch.

"What happened here?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head, and I find the courage to look up at him. His eyes have gone distant, as if looking into the past.

“Lies.” I echo the word he used when I tried to explain away Bella.

His lips hook into a smile.

“A secret for a secret, then?” he offers.

He knows I won’t take him up on it. Proving him right, I’m the one to shake my head this time. Bella is too important to risk.

The pang in my heart resonates throughout my entire body. I miss my girl so damn much. But I’m doing this for her—for her future and safety. If Nik finds out he has a daughter, he will bring her into this life, and that’s the last thing I want.

Dimitri cradles my jaw, and he runs his thumb along my bottom lip, pulling it from my teeth where I’d been unknowingly biting it.

The air between us is charged, so full of electricity and chemistry. And just when I think I can’t take his penetrating gaze for another second, he lowers his head. He gives me ample time to pull away—to withdraw and put distance between us.

But I do none of those things.

His lips brush against mine so unrushed it feels like time stands still. He’s taunting me, baiting me to rise to the challenge, and I don’t disappoint. Seeking more, I press forward, mirroring his hands by putting mine on his waist and dragging him closer as I deepen the kiss.

Reaching between us, I undo the button on his trousers, then move to the zipper, letting my fingertips trail over the hardness beneath. He shivers as my touch skates over his straining cock.

He breaks the kiss, resting his forehead against mine and looking between us, watching me undress him like it’s the most erotic show he’s ever seen.

“Take my cock out, Sabre.”

Never in my life have I wanted something so much.

Fucking my asset was not in the brief Interpol gave me. Neither was *not* fucking my asset, to be fair. They merely said to do whatever it took to keep my cover. I thought we’d just cohabit. But with Nik living here, things have taken a dramatic turn because we have to put on a show at home, too, making this more complicated than I’d initially thought. This was supposed to be my safe place, but now, it’s become another stage upon which to act.

Though, this feels like less of an act than before. I want this. I want Dimitri, and having Nik hear another man fuck me is a small dose of petty payback I am eager to dole out.

I push the material over Dimitri’s hips, and it falls to the floor. He’s

hardly kicked the material off his legs before his boxer briefs are next to go. His shoes were discarded elsewhere before he joined me in bed, and soon, he's finally revealed. I can't help but lick my lips as I let my gaze trail down his body.

I've never believed in a unicorn cock before, though Nik's came damned close. Thick and veiny with a broad head, Dimitri's dick is one to write home about.

Dimitri's hands tighten on my hips, breaking me out of my stare-off with the unicorn of all dicks. Gripping the lace, the only material left to hide my most intimate parts from my husband, he tears them from my body, leaving me bare.

A thump from outside the suite cuts through my brain's white noise.

*Nik.*

While my body demands that we do this for us, the distant thought of *this is for show* clangs somewhere in the back of my mind.

While I was playing the virgin bride today, we both know that's not the truth. Not as I willingly drop to my knees, ready to take that beautiful cock however I can.

Dimitri's breath is coming faster now, and I peer up at him. "Take it, Sabre. Take me in your mouth and make me come."

I wrap my hand around his hot, hard-as-steel cock and give it an experimental pump, and his hips move with me, thrusting into my grip.

Following my hand, I lick his shaft from base to tip, letting my tongue play along that sensitive skin under the head.

"Good girl, Elsa," he growls, not bothering to keep his voice down.

He's enunciating for Nik's benefit, and it has me feeling all kinds of giddy. I'm so far in this headspace that I *want* Nik to hear us. I want him to know I'm on my knees for his boss, and I've got his cock in my mouth.

Payback's a bitch. And apparently, so am I.

Salty and masculine, Dimitri's taste floods my senses. All I see in front of me is trimmed hair and flexing abdominals as I wrap my lips fully around him and take him deeper.

Dimitri's hands thread through my hair, catching on the pins holding together my updo. With a growl, he plucks them from their places, tossing them somewhere behind me. The *plink, plink* staccato of the bobby pins and Dimitri's harsh breathing further heighten this full-sensory experience.

I flick my tongue against his head, tracing that slit and savouring the pre-

cum as I use my mouth to drive him further to the edge.

Once the last pin is freed from my hair, Dimitri gathers my locks in a ponytail and uses it to guide my head. “Open for me, Sabre, and hold still. I’m gonna fuck this perfect mouth.”

I comply, laying my tongue flat as desire wells inside me.

The slide of his cock along my tongue sends my eyes fluttering shut. He guides himself further into my mouth, holding my head steady and only withdrawing when he reaches the back of my throat, causing me to gag.

“I said open.” The bite of his words permeates the lust fog, and I comply. When he presses forward again, I fight the urge to gag as tears form in my eyes and run down my face.

“That’s it,” he encourages. I swallow around him as he slips into my throat. “So pretty. That’s a good wife.”

His thrusts become more insistent, giving me milliseconds to catch my next breath before he plunges into me again. His grip on my hair turns brutal as he uses me to chase his pleasure. Pre-cum slides across my tongue again and sends my desire spiralling.

I slip my fingers towards my pussy and find myself soaked. Dragging the wetness to my clit, I rub circles around that magical bundle of nerves, hunting for my release as Dimitri chases his. There’s too much pleasure to let it all be one-sided.

While I might be the one on my knees, knowing I can bring him to the edge—this powerful man who commands every particle of the air with his mere presence—makes my body shudder in anticipation of our combined release.

I moan around his cock when he grows thicker, stretching my lips wide and hollowing my cheeks.

“That’s right, Sabre. Fuck your fingers. Get yourself off while you take my cock.”

Tears still slide down my face, dripping from my chin and landing on my spread thighs. I spear my fingers into my pussy, finding my G-spot and pressing against it as my thumb strums my clit. I’m aching for the sweet release I feel building.

Dimitri groans low and long as his hips thrust forward, holding them there as my lips meet his pelvis. I swallow around him, feeling him pulse along my tongue.

“Good girl, good girl,” he chants. “That’s a good fucking wife.” His voice

turns breathless as he comes, and the power of it triggers my own. I ride out my orgasm, my hips rocking, the heel of my hand putting pressure on my clit as arousal coats my fingers.

I swallow every rope of his cum as it jets down my throat, constricting around his length. His hands smooth my hair away from my face as he finishes, pulling away until he slips from my lips.

He grips me under my arms and hauls me to stand. In one smooth move, he picks me up, flips me upside down, and pulls me close.

I shriek as I'm pressed against him, chest-to-belly, staring straight at his still-hard cock. Wrapping my arms around his waist so I don't crash head-first into the ground, I panic until his mouth covers my still-pulsing pussy.

He licks long and hard, flicking his tongue through my arousal as all my blood rushes to my head.

Though it's pointless, I rest my thighs on his broad shoulders, anchoring myself to him. He's got me in a secure grip, his hands bound around the small of my waist and keeping my body pressed to his.

Holy fucking acrobatics. What is this?

He's loud and messy as his tongue runs over my pussy, dipping into my channel, and I cry out when he flicks at my clit. A shudder rocks through me, the sensation too much after the orgasm I gave myself seconds ago. My gasps and moans drown the sounds out, my body refusing to acknowledge anything other than this man's mouth on me as he expertly licks and sucks, bringing me to the edge again.

He runs that devious tongue over my clit, again and again, not letting up until I'm a shaking and trembling mess in his arms. But I can't get there upside down. It feels like I'm on the cusp, but my orgasm is just out of reach, and I'm scrambling to find it.

Before I know what's happening, Dimitri grabs my hips, lifts me away from him, and falls backwards onto the bed. I splay my arms out to catch myself, and in moments, the blood rushes down my body, and I explode.

I scream his name as I come, losing all sense of who I am, who I'm supposed to be, and what the fuck I'm doing here.

All I know and feel are the unending waves of exquisite torture washing over me and the lapping of his tongue against me. He draws out my pleasure until my voice goes hoarse, losing all sound as my lips form a soundless *O*.

His tongue slows, and his hands run over my ass, spreading me for his perusal. My immediate reaction is to clench, but with a playful swat to my

ass in reprimand, he grips me harder and licks one long stripe up my centre, ending with a twirl around my asshole.

“Good wife,” he murmurs before biting my ass cheek.

I roll off of him, landing on my back and facing the opposite direction. Catching my breath, I mutter, “That was . . .” I don’t know how to finish the sentence, but *incredible* doesn’t seem like enough.

“It was,” he confirms. I can feel his cocksure smirk from here, even if I can’t see it. “We should go to bed.”

“What?” The word flies out of my mouth before I can think better. His words have jarred me from my stupor, and I struggle to leverage myself onto my elbows.

He chuckles darkly, his voice bleeding into the surrounding darkness.

I sputter. Not that I *wanted* to have sex with the man, but I mean, now I do. After seeing what that mouth do, I want to see what the rest of him can do.

But no. He’s right. We can’t. We *shouldn’t*.

He turns his head, kisses my thigh, and rolls off the bed, walking naked to the bathroom. I watch his back and ass flex with every step, more scars littering the expanse of skin there. The need to compare scars and stories arises within me. But that’s what Nik and I used to do on stakeouts when we worked together, and I’ve learned my lesson. No talking about scars. Real or metaphorical.

Dimitri steps into the bathroom, and without a look back at me, he closes the door behind him.

Feeling bereft for some unknown reason, I pad to the closet to find clothes to sleep in. Standing at the dresser in the centre, I pull open a drawer and stare at the sea of lace. I try to find the least sexy set, but come up empty, so I shut the drawer and grab one of Dimitri’s dress shirts from his closet, finally feeling more covered up.

I head to the bathroom, remove my make-up, and wash up after the day’s events. Finally feeling a bit more level-headed and a lot more hygienic, I realise I’m exhausted.

When I reach the bed, Dimitri’s already settled under the duvet on his side, book in hand, turning the page ever so slowly as he reads. He peeks at me over the top of the book and then returns his attention to the page.

*Asshole.*

I climb in on my side, face the window, close my eyes, and pray for sleep

to take me quickly as I spin the simple gold wedding band on my finger.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

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Nikita

MY TROUSERS ARE HALFWAY OFF WHEN A MOAN REVERBERATES DOWN THE hall towards my miniature sanctuary. I know that moan. I've heard that moan with that same desire dripping from it.

Ellie.

Kicking my trousers to one corner of my bedroom, I stride for the door in nothing but my boxer briefs.

There it is again. That groan of passion, but this time, there's an accompaniment. Dimitri's moans of satisfaction seep through the crack under his door and find me as I step onto the landing between our rooms. Eyeing the barrier, I know nothing will stop me from peeking.

I know it's wrong; it's considered creepy. The thing is, I don't fucking care.

The handle turns smoothly, and I push the door inward. Soft gasps reach me along with the words, "Good girl, good girl. That's a good fucking wife."

Dimitri's roar barrels through the space, and I keep myself tucked behind the wall. As soon as I turn this corner, I won't be able to lie to myself anymore. I won't be able to avoid seeing what I already know is true. My boss is fucking someone I've already fucked. And her moans are real, just as real as they were that night so long ago, and my memory of them hasn't done them justice.

I've kept Ellie buried in the memories of the past, only letting thoughts of her surface when I dream. Looking backwards is a good way to fuck up the present.

Seeing her standing at the front of the church today was gutting—my former partner beside my current boss.

Something's up, and I need to get to the bottom of it before we all end up dead or arrested.

There's a breathless squeal from the other side of the wall. My vision blurs hearing Ellie in distress, and my feet move before I put thought into the action. I round the corner, and when my vision clears, I see Dimitri standing stark naked on the opposite side of the bed, legs wide and braced as Ellie's thighs bracket his head in some kind of standing sixty-nine configuration.

She moans low and long as Dimitri feasts on her, his head blocking my view from parts of my former partner that I know just as intimately. Part of

me hoped they were only faking all the sounds, but from what I see, that's not the case. He's feral as he licks and sucks at her, sliding his head left and right like he's trying to coat his entire face in her arousal. I can't keep watching this.

With them occupied, I force myself to slink back into the shadows and out of their room. It feels as if I have cinder blocks attached to my feet, weighing me down and slowing my retreat. The delayed pace gives me a few more seconds of self-inflicted torture to listen. A *thump* of bodies hits the bed, and Ellie falls apart in Dimitri's arms.

As she screams out her release, I softly close the door to Dimitri's room. Sitting at the top of the stairs, I close my eyes and rub my hands over my face.

What the fuck is Ellie doing here? The last time I saw her, she was lying face down on a hotel bed, stark naked, her pale skin luminescent in the moonlight as I dressed and snuck out to do the Big Boss's bidding.

And I don't mean Dimitri.

Natasha Volkov—my second cousin and current leader of the Bratva.

After she killed her husband, she took control using the diamond I stole for her, expertly imploding my career and letting me return home. Considering Bratva literally translates to a version of "brotherhood," there has never been a female leader for our organisation, but fuck, she's a good leader.

Ellie was the only obstacle keeping me from getting that diamond. We were on a stakeout, and once our target went home, we swapped out with another set of agents. It was the only night the grab could take place.

I'd nicked the security pass from one of the vault workers, waiting until she reached her car at HQ before making my move. All it took were a few flirty comments before running my hand along her arm, and I was able to swipe her security pass with a mere touch and some sleight of hand.

The night guards had grown used to seeing me at all hours, especially in the few weeks prior, because I'd made my presence known every time I arrived and left. Chatting and talking about shit I didn't care about, like football matches and their kids' piano recitals.

But the only night it could work, Ellie and I were stuck across the street from our target for a surveillance job. We were off duty, staying in a hotel room while another team was on stakeout duty in a workers' van.

We'd shared rooms in the past during assignments, so I knew Ellie was a

heavy sleeper but was slow to pass out after working. I also knew she never drank from open containers, so drugging her wouldn't work as a way to knock her out and get back to HQ. My only option was to feed into the chemistry we'd let simmer since we became partners.

Restraining myself was a challenge that I fought tooth and nail. I couldn't fuck her how I wanted to—how I'd craved to since we'd met—wringing every ounce of pleasure from our bodies until we were a spent heap of sweat and cum on the hotel mattress.

She was too good. Too pure. Too careful and reserved. All things that didn't exactly scream she was someone who liked it rough and dirty in bed.

No, I had to be cautious. Caring. Loving.

Once we'd gone three rounds, she fell asleep, and I dragged my tired bones out of bed and through the hotel's back entrance.

And now, here she is in Dimitri's home and bed.

Is she actually the cousin of Peter Lee from the Emerald Sabres? Or is she an undercover agent?

Either way, she's not the sweet, blushing bride she portrays. Interpol has been investigating the Sabres for years, but during my time working for the agency, they couldn't get close enough to infiltrate.

She could have been a plant the same way I was. But the odds of running into her here, of all places, are too much of a coincidence.

No. If Ellie's here, Interpol has fooled Dimitri into letting a spy into his nest.

I could run. It would be the smart thing to do if the agency were on our doorstep. But here, in our world, I have the upper hand. I don't want to kill Ellie; she's a good agent and one of those rare, genuinely good people, but I will do what I need to keep breathing and stay out of prison.

Yanking myself out of my thoughts, I rise from my seat on the steps and turn towards my door.

I'll deal with her tomorrow when she's not coming on Dimitri's tongue. I've spent the last two weeks brokering peace with the Italians through a series of threats and bribes, and it took far less time than I'd expected. Sergei was pleased with my work, and I thought Dimitri would be too. But instead, I've been met with hostility and anger and my quick work. I shaved off months by negotiating fairly instead of giving them the runaround to save a few bucks.

It isn't as if the Bratva lacks funding.

I strip off my boxers and slide into my bed. After being locked up for weeks, the room feels stale, but it's easily fixed with a cracked window. Closing my eyes, I pray for sleep, but it doesn't overtake me. Instead, images of Ellie and Dimitri assault my mind.

My silky black sheets slide over my body, the chilly material creating a buzz of sensation over my fevered skin. I stretch my leg out, hunting for a cool spot at the foot of my bed, and the pull of the movement makes the sheet slip over my inconveniently hard cock.

Fuck.

I do it again, searching for the torture of it—the whisper of touch without the friction I desperately need.

Growling, I whip the sheet off me and sit on the edge of my bed. Tension sits heavy on my shoulders, the muscles in my arms bunching and relaxing as I grip the mattress on either side.

The only light streams through the large windows on the north side of my room; New York lights up the room with a glow I've experienced nowhere else in the world. Even in Lyon, where Interpol's HQ is located, I lived just outside the city centre, and it felt like being swallowed by night, comparatively.

But here, the bright lights in the city that never sleeps don't offer the same reprieve from my sins. The things we've *all* done in the name of love and duty would be enough to petrify even the most experienced therapist. There's a reason many Bratva members don't make it to old age.

A sheen of sweat breaks out over my chest as my mind descends into a whirlpool of turmoil.

I rise on tense legs and stride to my bathroom with one thing cutting through the clutter of my mind. *Ellie*.

Turning the handle on the shower, I wait for steam to fog the room before stepping under the spray. The water is boiling, and it washes away my sins the way it does every time. Baptism by pain. The only way to survive.

I grip my hard cock, squeezing the base and delaying my gratification in atonement.

Bowing my head, I let the water sluice over my shoulders, dripping over my tattoos and fisted hands. My hair washes forward, obscuring my view of the white tile and causing me to close my eyes in the benediction of the baptism.

Flashes of Ellie's legs around Dimitri's head come to me, mixing with

memories I have of her from that night so long ago. The guilt of betrayal still eats at me, and I'm left feeling only remorse.

I wanted more of her; I wanted everything from her.

I play it out again, drawing on that night the same way I have every time I've taken my cock in my hand since, even when I promised myself I wouldn't. Then again, I've never had the best impulse control.

In my mind, we reach the hotel, and I claim her tender lips with mine in a fit of possession. It's my name on her lips as she gasps, not Dimitri's like it'd been minutes ago.

The images blend and combine into something new. Something forbidden.

I feast on her—ass up, chest down as I eat her pussy like a man starved. I grip her hips, yanking her onto my face and leaving bruises in my wake. Rough, the way I'd wanted to be that night, but instead, I'd restrained myself.

Then, just as she's about to come, I leave her quaking around nothing, edging her until she begs for my cock. Dimitri appears on the edge of my vision, his fingers curling, beckoning Ellie to come to him, to use him the way she wants.

Shaking my head, I banish Dimitri from the image, focusing instead on Ellie alone. I slide my hand along my cock, my grip punishing and brutal. Rubbing my thumb against the slit and flicking the new hardware, I shiver, wondering what Ellie would think of my new piercing.

I stroke hard and fast as I imagine sinking into her from behind, gripping her hair at the base of her neck and fucking her into the mattress.

My lips part with a groan, and my fist tightens around my cock.

She'd fight me. She'd struggle against me and whimper at my touch, soaking my cock in her arousal. She would love being my prey as much as I loved being her hunter.

My balls tighten as the vision plays out in my head.

Ellie, who always plays by the rules, who never goes off book, falling apart around my cock in a spectacular display of submission, is what wet dreams are made of.

A tingle starts at the base of my spine, and my hips buck, thrusting into my fist. I brace one hand on the shower wall, and when I imagine Ellie's pussy squeezing my cock in a brutal grip, I roar my release as I paint the tile with ropes of cum.

I rest my head against my splayed hand on the wall and watch as my seed

drips towards the floor, washing down the drain, along with my sins.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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Dimitri

ELSA IS STILL SLEEPING WHEN MY EYES SNAP OPEN.

The light streaming through the window says it's far later than my standard 7:00 a.m. wake-up. I stretch, careful not to disturb the sleeping beauty beside me.

Last night was unexpected. With Nik showing up and resuming his position as my live-in bodyguard, there wasn't another option. It's better to keep him close, despite him knowing Elsa. And as my first suspect in my father's death, I don't want him weaselling his way out of his comeuppance. And he's digging himself a bigger hole by not telling me he knows her from Interpol. The evidence is not looking good for Nikita Lenkov.

Thinking of my new wife, I lick my lips, remembering her taste.

More than anything right now, I want to take her in my arms and fuck her until she's a trembling mess. But all at once, the complications come tearing through my mind. There's too much at stake to let emotion and sex cloud my thinking.

I'd expected her to balk or shy away when I cut the dress off her body like it was a grave offence. But instead, she'd fallen to her knees and worshipped my cock as she got herself off.

Before I can convince myself that fucking wouldn't be much more complicated than what we'd done last night, I force myself to get out of bed. I shouldn't have stayed up so late after she went to bed, but I needed an outlet.

I notice a droplet of crimson on my forearm and try to wipe it away on my duvet, but it's dried already.

There are some things Elsa doesn't need to know.

Shielding my arm as she stirs on the other side of the bed, wearing one of my shirts and looking sleep-rumpled and satisfied, I murmur, "It's still early. Go back to sleep, Sabre."

She snuggles more deeply into the covers and sighs, sending a tendril of hair fluttering around her face. I like thinking of her as my sword, *my sabre*, the weapon I will use to cut myself out of this life.

There are things to attend to before she wakes up, so I get moving. If I fuck her, I don't think I'll ever be able to stop, and I need control. *Especially* right now.

Showered, shaved, and dressed, I exit the suite and head down the stairs. I

smell coffee, and the sounds of the machine create a morning ambience that simply can't be replicated.

Nik is sitting at the kitchen island, hunched over a coffee cup, tendrils of steam rising around his head, and a cigarette tucked behind his ear.

"Morning, D," he says without looking up. "Have a good night?"

"You'd know if you'd stayed longer," I retort. "I saw you last night. My wife's thighs framed your reflection in the window so nicely."

Nik grunts. "I thought you were murdering her. Had to make sure you didn't fuck up the new floors."

"If a satisfied woman sounds the same as murder screams to you, then you're doing it wrong."

"Or so, so right." He smirks and raises the coffee cup to his lips.

I pour myself a cup and turn, facing Nik from the other side of the island. My phone dings with a notification, and Nik smirks as my glare slides away. It's the lift, and before I can even pull the device from my pocket, Nik clicks his phone where it sits on the counter.

"Sergei is here," he comments, and I hear the telltale sound of him accepting the request from the app.

"It's barely nine," I gripe. "What if we were still fucking?"

"Oh, D, you know I don't see you like that, man," he says, deliberately misinterpreting my words.

"Fuck off."

I take a deep drink from my mug and close my eyes as the bitter taste washes over my tongue, regretting that it's washing away the essence of Elsa.

The doors slide open, and my uncle's voice comes from the foyer. "Did you put an heir in her belly yet?"

Now I'm closing my eyes for another reason.

The idea sounds crass coming from Sergei, but didn't I imagine the same thing last night as I fucked my new wife? I shove the thought out of my head, refusing to acknowledge that our goals are, for once, aligned—no matter how impossible and off-limits they are.

Frustration simmers in my veins at the thought, and I tighten my hold on the mug. The handle snaps under my punishing grip, cutting my palm as it splinters. I send the whole thing crashing into the sink, splashing the clean countertop. It looks remarkably similar to the mess I'd made last night after Elsa went to sleep.

Nik chuckles at my misfortune just as Sergei strides into the kitchen.

“So, where is she?” Sergei asks.

“Still sleeping,” Nik answers for me as I wipe up the spill and run water over my hand, biting back my hiss as the icy water touches the gash on my palm.

Sergei makes a satisfied grunt, and his hands rest on his narrow hips. “Kept her up late, huh?” he teases.

I roll my eyes and press the towel against the cut as it continues bleeding. “It’s business.”

“There’s no reason not to mix business with pleasure, nephew. She is a trade, but she’s also your wife. Besides, the sooner you two produce a child, the stronger the alliance will be.”

“Oh, they mixed business and pleasure last night, all right,” Nik says around a chortle, covering for me for some unknown reason.

Silence descends, and I throw the towel at him, momentarily feeling like we’re still teenagers being assholes to the adults in the room.

He deflects it effortlessly, sending the fabric fluttering to the floor—*stupid government training*.

“Um, hi,” a soft voice comes from the kitchen entryway. My eyes snap up from the towel to my bride. She’s still sleepy-eyed, swallowed by my white button-up shirt and bare from the hem to her pretty pink toes. Elsa crosses one foot over the other and laces her fingers together in front of her.

“Good morning, Elsa,” I say.

She peeks up at me, her long sooty lashes framing her almond-shaped eyes most alluringly before looking around at the other two in the room. “Morning, everyone.”

Sergei and Nik greet Elsa, and I beckon her closer with a crook of my finger. Nik reacts oddly with a grimace, but I ignore him. I only have eyes for her right now.

I pull a mug from the cupboard as she gets closer. “Coffee?”

“Please.”

When she’s next to me, I tug her into my arms the way I wanted to earlier and take her lips with mine, all too aware of the eyes on us. I pull away and look down at her when she sighs.

“Morning.”

The cutest fucking giggle leaves her lips, and she shyly smiles at me. “Morning.”

Is this her, or is this the character she’s playing? It drives me mad not

knowing for sure, but what strikes me most is that I *want* to know.

Nik's cup lands on the counter a little too hard, making Elsa jump. Either she is a fantastic actress, or she really is this nervous. Resting a palm on her lower back, I turn to the machine and pour her coffee.

She busies herself with fixing it how she likes, and I turn towards Sergei and Nik. They've been watching the exchange with vastly different expressions. Nik looks furious, like he might cross the marble island and wring my neck, while Sergei looks so fucking smug and satisfied that he "arranged" this match.

"What happened to your hand?" she asks, taking my injured palm between her soft hands and turning it side to side to inspect the cut. "Where's your first aid kit?"

"Under the sink," Nik replies when the silence stretches a little too long. I'm too consumed with the feel of her soft skin against mine, rough with calluses and scars.

She grabs the kit, pulls out an alcohol swab, and dabs at the cut, never once showing discomfort at the blood still seeping from the wound. She mutters about stitches and sighs in frustration when I shake my head *no*.

"Fine, but don't let this get infected, or you'll lose the use of it for longer than you'd probably like."

"Need my hands in working order, do you?" I tease.

She keeps her attention on my hand, but a faint smile lifts her lips. She puts some ointment on the cut and places a series of butterfly bandages to keep it shut. Then, in a complete show of overkill, she wraps it with some gauze and tape, leaving me with minimal usage.

When it's all done, she lays a soft kiss on top of the bandage, and somehow, it feels better already.

"I made a good choice for you," Sergei says as he watches the exchange.

*Right.* Because my uncle was in contact with Peter Lee, Elsa's "cousin," to negotiate the whole thing. Too bad Peter is an Interpol asset like me, and he was reading off a script with an agent by his side in case he said something stupid.

Elsa dips her head and puts a few feet of distance between us. Understandable as a new bride in a new place among unfamiliar people, but unacceptable to me.

"An excellent choice, Uncle," I say, trying not to grit my teeth as I get the words out. Marriage was never in the cards for me—not while I lived this life

—but here we are.

Sergei nods, sliding his eyes towards Nik. “We need to talk.”

Nik moves to stand, but I halt him with a single gesture. “Anything you two have to discuss, you can discuss here.”

“I’m sure Elsa isn’t interested in the details of our work,” Nik counters, and I sense the argument brewing within him.

She straightens and looks him dead in the eye. “You’re right; I’m not. I’ll just go get ready for the day.” She turns to me, finding me closer than I’d been seconds ago, my body gravitating towards hers without thought. “What are we doing today?”

Stroking a hand from the crown of her head down through the mussed tendrils of her hair, I say, “I have meetings most of today, so unfortunately, nothing together until later.”

I grin lasciviously for our audience. “But I prefer white lace, so bear that in mind.”

Her cheeks go pink, and Sergei clears his throat. “I arranged high tea for you and my daughter at the Ritz today at four o’clock. It would be good to meet the other women.”

Elsa thanks Sergei and excuses herself from the kitchen. As she walks away, my gaze follows her, admiring the sway of her hips under my shirt. When I catch Nik watching as intently as I am, I smack my palm on the countertop, reopening the freshly dressed wound. The blood begins anew, but I care less about that than I do about bringing Nik’s attention back to me and off my wife.

“Where are we on the latest shipments?”

“Coming in next week. All accounted for and fetching a pretty penny,” Sergei says.

“And the NYPD?”

Nik fields this one. “All paid off, and the twins are working on getting more under our thumb. They found enough blackmail material on three to convert a few more.”

Ivan and Aleksandr Golubev work for me directly, and I’ve had them keeping tabs on Sergei as they do his bidding, reporting everything to me. Our opposition calls them the twin Russian tanks because of their large stature and ability to make anyone quake in their boots. But for huge motherfuckers, they’re surprisingly sneaky.

As the next in line for *pakhan*, Sergei is my number one threat.

No matter how many assassination attempts there have been in the last few years by cartels, the Irish mob, the Italian Mafia, or hell, even the US government, he is both my biggest asset and greatest rival.

When Nik rejoined the ranks after his time at Interpol, his natural fit was as my live-in bodyguard. All the other significant roles had been taken, so it made sense. But when Sergei suggested it, I rejected the idea.

Nik and Sergei are close; it was just another way for him to keep tabs on me while acting in the organisation's best interest. Maybe Sergei knows he put my father's murderer under my roof, and his plan for me involves the same end.

"Very well, then," I say. "Let's get down to business."

# CHAPTER NINE

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Eleanor

I SCURRY UPSTAIRS WHEN THE MEN WRAP UP THEIR MORNING CHAT, THE burner phone tucked into my bra and recording their entire conversation. Still, nothing of use other than the mention of a shipment and dirty cops.

Heavy footfalls sound as the men push through the kitchen doors, and I race through the door to the main suite. The lift dings downstairs, the way it did when Sergei arrived, and I staged my “morning after wake-up” and made my appearance.

Shaking out my limbs, I let the tension seep out from that hidden place within and somehow relax as it settles on my shoulders. It scares me how easy it is to lose myself in Elsa.

A phone dings from somewhere in the bedroom, and I wander through the suite to find it. On my nightstand, I find a brand-new iPhone with a sticky note that doesn't belong to me.

1-2-3-4

I lift it, and the screen glows and unlocks when I type in the simple code. There's a message waiting, and I click it open.

**Husband:** *Tea at the Ritz at 4. Don't forget. A car will be waiting for you downstairs at 3:30. The driver will NOT be Alexei. And change the lock code to something you'll remember.*

I try not to be impressed at his consideration that I might be uncomfortable around his driver, but I fail. Quickly hopping into the settings, I change the password to Olivia's birthday before returning to the message.

**Me:** *What's the name of the woman I'm meeting? I don't want to look like an asshole on the first day.*

Sergei has two daughters, and I don't want to assume anything. His response comes immediately, terse in delivery but informative.

**Husband:** *Anastasia. Aleksandr Golubev's wife and Sergei's daughter.*

**Me:** *Got it.*

I head into the closet and strip out of the shirt I've been wearing all night. Looking at the drawers in the centre of my walk-in space, I open the lingerie drawer I found last night. Making a snap decision, I dress and take a picture in the full-length mirror.

The photo hovers above his newest text. My phone blocks my face, but my body is fully displayed in racy white lace lingerie. The bralette sits low,

just above my straining nipples, and the panties are barely more than a scrap of lace.

**Husband:** *Be careful you don't start things you can't finish, dear wife.*

**Me:** *I never start things I don't intend to finish.*

**Husband:** *Don't say I didn't warn you. I have to go. Be good.*

A smile curls my lips as I imagine him sneaking peeks at the photo all day. His abruptness last night after we came on each other's tongues threw me for a loop. But maybe it was a good thing to stop before it escalated.

And making his life easier just doesn't seem like something I would do, so slutty picture it is. Belatedly, I realise this isn't the best move for my cover if anyone else sees it, but with the way Dimitri keeps himself so separated from everyone else, I doubt others get glimpses of his phone.

For so goddamn long, I'd lost this part of myself. I love my daughter, and the thought of not having her just doesn't compute. And motherhood is incredible, but postpartum blues had me feeling like a ball of crap for months.

Add to that the rigours of breastfeeding and feeling like a feeding trough for almost an entire year, and the thought of being sexy feels so foreign. Until last night, the only people who had seen my nipples since Bella's conception were Bella and the lactation consultant.

But the way Dimitri looked at me last night, the way he touched, licked, and played with me so thoroughly, I don't know if I can ever go that long without satisfaction again. It awoke something in me, and I'm not ready to give it up, even if it was just a performance to keep Nik off our backs.

Feeling desirable again is heady, and I want it to last, so I'm going to milk this for all it's worth, and maybe while I'm busy gathering information, I'll remember a bit of who I was before Bella.

The rest of the day passes by in a blur of snooping, wandering around the apartment, eating a simple sandwich for lunch, and fussing over what to wear to tea with Anastasia.

I know a bit about her from the gathered intel, but there are only so many things a few pieces of paper can tell me.

I settle on a simple Tom Ford off-the-shoulder emerald-green dress. The hem falls to mid-calf, and I've paired it with black strappy heels and a matching clutch. I feel poised, polished, and as ready as I can be.

My phone has an app for the lift, so I summon it and head downstairs.

The doorman greets me with a "Good afternoon, Mrs Aslanov," and I look behind me like an idiot and recover with a bashful smile, citing

newlywed forgetfulness of my new name.

The new driver never makes eye contact, just looks at a spot fixed over my left shoulder as he holds the door open for me, and I know then that Dimitri's warning has been heard far and wide among his employees. He drives me to the Ritz Carlton as the scenery blurs by. When we arrive and the valet opens the door, I step out, gawking at the façade.

A thought occurs to me. How am I going to pay for this? Or since Sergei invited me, is he paying? Or Anastasia?

"Ma'am?" the valet asks, shaking me out of my musings. Dimitri hasn't let me fumble so far today, and I have to trust he has this covered as well.

"Thank you," I say, stepping away from the car and into the opulent hotel. My heels click along the marble flooring, and the concierge points me in the right direction.

Stopping at the podium, I say I'm meeting Anastasia Golubev for tea, and the maître d' leads me through the room. Every table is decorated with flowers and delicate sandwiches as patrons eat and chat. A string quartet plays on a raised stage in the corner, their gentle music lending the whole place an elegant feel.

He winds his way through the tables and leads me towards one in the centre of the room. Usually, I prefer a table along the perimeter where no one can sneak up on me, and I don't feel so on display, but that isn't my life anymore.

"Hello, Elsa," Anastasia greets from her tufted armchair.

I slide into my seat and place my clutch on the table. "Hi, Anastasia. Thank you for meeting with me today."

I don't know if this was her idea or her father's, but either way, I'm grateful to get out of the apartment for a bit.

"Not at all. We women have to stick together. Though, you'd think my father would know me better than to assume *tea* is the right choice. We're not sixty, after all."

She laughs, and I relax. Though, being British, tea is life.

"Not yet anyway, though my knee has started clicking every time I stand up, so it's probably right around the corner," I say.

"Tell me about it," she commiserates. "When I put my arm behind the headrest in the car to reverse, I get stuck about twenty per cent of the time. Damned nerves."

Her dark eyes are alight with humour as we laugh, and I pick up the menu

to compose myself.

“So, how is it being married to Dimitri? And moving to New York?”

Well, she gets to the point, doesn't she? I peek over my menu, feeling put on the spot, but I know how this goes. I won't get anything from her without divulging first.

“It's only been twenty-four hours, so I can't say one way or the other yet. But living here is going to be fun, I think. I couldn't stop staring out the window on the way over. I want to explore everything.”

“If Dimitri hasn't made an impression in twenty-four hours, I'm worried.” Anastasia flicks a lock of stick-straight, platinum-blond hair over her shoulder and rakes her pointy nails through the ends of it. “It's understandable that all the change is jarring. But at least you come from a family like ours; you'll quickly get the hang of things.”

“Anything I should know upfront?” I ask, lowering my menu and letting a bit of vulnerability bleed into my tone.

“Yeah, the men think shit like this is all we enjoy.”

I cringe. *Even Dimitri?*

“What, all shopping and tea parties and keeping house? That's what I live for,” I deadpan.

Anastasia lets out an undignified snort and puts her hand on top of mine, squeezing it. “I think I'm going to like you just fine, Elsa.”

“You want to get out of here?” I ask, looking around the prim and proper room. It dramatically contrasts with the wild streak you'd have to be blind not to see in Anastasia. “This isn't my scene either.”

“God, yes. Bless you.” Anastasia stands, grabbing her purse and straightening her blue dress. “I know a great bar down the street. Let's go. But pretend we're going to the bathroom first, okay?”

I nod, and when Ana waves off a burly man standing along the edge of the room, I realise why. We're ditching her bodyguard, and I suspect mine is my driver, who's with the town car as far as I know. But maybe he's here? I keep my head down, hoping my bonding moment with Anastasia won't be interrupted, and we hustle towards the toilets.

We turn left and duck into the hallway before sprinting back out again and following the hallway in the other direction towards the lobby.

I join her in the escape out of one of the most famous hotels in the world, and we hoof it to a nearby dive bar. She walks quickly, and while I'm ensuring she doesn't lead me down a dark alley to stab me, I take a second to

continue the perusal of my new city.

We arrive at a solid black door surrounded by simple bricks. Ana grins at me before pushing through the entrance, and I follow close behind. As soon as it shuts behind us, the last of the tension fades away.

This is more like it.

Anastasia saunters over to the bar and sits on a stool that looks one loose screw away from collapsing to the ground. “Two vodkas,” she says to the bartender as I slide onto the seat next to her.

We’re entirely overdressed, which just makes this whole thing funnier.

“Much better,” I say when the bartender slides the drinks along the bar. “To us.”

I hold my drink up, and she taps her glass against mine with a “Cheers!” We knock back the drinks in one go, and she smirks when I look at her. “Yeah, you’ll fit in just fine here.”

She signals for another round and spins on her stool. “So, what do you want to know?”

“Everything is probably too much to cover in one day, right?” I say with a laugh. Anastasia nods but smiles. “I guess I’d like to know about the other women.”

It seems to be the right question because Anastasia smiles at me. “There are the usual wives in the organisation. The climbers and the meek ones, but most of us are middle of the road. Like you, most of our marriages were arranged, and we’re making the best of it because it is a good life most of the time. We just know not to ask too many questions.”

“Climbers?” I ask, snagging on the word from her explanation.

“You know, the ones who push their husbands to catch the boss’s ear—the ones who complain that their darling husband should be higher on the totem pole. I swear, sometimes they’re worse than the men. They don’t get invited to tea very often.”

I make a mental note to dig at that subtly later. In the meantime, I shift the topic to keep the conversation flowing.

“So you’re married to Aleksandr, right? Dimitri said the name, but I don’t know anyone yet, and honestly, I don’t expect to. He seems . . . guarded.”

Anastasia chuckles behind the lip of her glass. “Oh, you could say that. He’s always been a quiet one, even when we were younger. His family moved here just after mine did, and his dad, my uncle Danil, was the old *pakhan*.”

I feign like this is new information. Dimitri and his family lived in Russia until the end of the Cold War and moved to New York soon after. Danil Aslanov was tapped to take on the head role almost immediately when they arrived, a position awarded by the former leader of the Bratva in Moscow.

“When did Dimitri take over?” Something else I already know.

“About a year and a half ago. Uncle Danil died in his sleep, and Dimitri stepped in to lead as the heir. Things were turbulent for the first six months, but according to my husband, Dimitri is a good boss, if a little secretive and quiet. To me, he’s always seemed above it all.”

“I can see that. He’s a man of few words,” I agree.

“But enough about us. Tell me about you.”

I chuckle and take a sip. “Well, as you can tell from my accent, I’m from London—first generation, if that matters. And while I’m unsure what exactly my family has traded me for, I’m glad to be in New York.”

“That’s a whole lot of nothing, Elsa.” Anastasia levels me with a curious look. “What is it you want out of life? Because now, you might actually get it.”

What an odd concept. That my life as a respectable citizen and hard worker might not afford me the same opportunities as an organised crime wife would.

I pause, flipping through the file of Elsa Aslanov née Lee in my head. “Mostly, I just want to be comfortable and safe. There hasn’t been much of that in my life, you know? I don’t want to be worried about my family and their business. If my position here can help, I’ll do my part.”

Anastasia nods solemnly. “I understand that.”

“Is it the same for you?” I cover my mouth with my fingertips in mock horror. “I’m so sorry if that’s prying. Please ignore that question. I’ve just never talked about this type of thing with anyone, and my thoughts ran away from me.”

Anastasia waves me off. “It is, and it isn’t—prying, that is. But I don’t mind. My relationship wasn’t my choice, but I’m not mad about it. Aleksandr and I make it work, and sometimes I have to kick his ass into listening, but over the years, we’ve found what works for us.”

“How long have you been married?”

“Four years this August.”

“Wow. Any tips?” I ask, draining the last of my second glass. I have to stop, or I’ll have a sloppy evening.

“To butcher Roosevelt’s quote: Walk softly and use sex as a weapon.”

I throw my head back with a laugh. “That is brilliant. And noted.”

Composing myself, I look at Anastasia as she chuckles alongside me.

“Thank you for this. Can we meet up again? You’ve made a new city seem less unfamiliar.”

“I’d love to. Lord knows we all need someone to lean on in this life.”

I pull my gifted phone out of my clutch and see a string of texts waiting for me.

**Husband:** *Why did you leave the Ritz?*

**Husband:** *Where the fuck are you going?*

**Husband:** *We will have a chat about this when you get home.*

# CHAPTER TEN

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Eleanor

I TELL ANASTASIA I HAVE TO GET HOME AND PAY THE TAB FROM MY PHONE. Because, of course, Dimitri linked a credit card to the damned thing.

He's asking for trouble between the device being a key to his home and housing this much financial power. What if someone swipes it?

Anastasia and I leave the bar, finding my driver and her bodyguard arguing on the pavement. They level us with glares, and Anastasia smiles at me as she leaves with her guard, him whispering frantically to her in Russian while my driver—and I'm presuming my bodyguard—stares at me from his position beside the car, the door open and waiting for me. All too soon, the city whizzes by, and I'm in the lift on my way back up to the penthouse with the switched-off camera in my clutch.

The doors slide open with their usual chime, and I take a hesitant step inside. Dimitri's messages are playing on a loop in my head, and I don't know if I should be excited or nervous. I didn't bother responding on the way home, feeling like each message I began to type sounded childish when I reread it.

The glow of the city lights the apartment, and every step I take across the polished floors sounds ominous. I stop short when I see Dimitri sitting on the couch in the same spot he took up last night, a glass of amber-brown liquid dangling between two fingers.

I approach slowly, and Dimitri tears his gaze from the skyline and looks at me. "You left."

"You're tracking me."

He side-steps that accusation like a pro and continues. "And went to a dive bar."

"To gather intel."

"At a *dive bar!*" he roars, his sudden volume shocking me. "Where anyone could have grabbed you."

Anger spears through me. "What? You think I haven't been trained for that? That I've just been sitting on my ass, waiting to be a pretty, shiny trophy wife?"

"Keep your voice down," he orders in a clipped tone.

*Hypocrite.*

It makes me want to wring his beautiful neck. Nik must be here

somewhere. Fucking hell, we can't even argue like a normal married couple.

"I was fine," I say in a softer voice. "And Anastasia and I had a good talk."

"Good, but you have to realise the target on your back. The driver I assigned to you is a guard. And when you ditch him, you're vulnerable."

I nod, understanding that this is more than just protecting his wife. He's protecting his future. And the briefs did mention the dangers this role presented. But connecting with Anastasia was more critical, and garnering some trust on day two was an opportunity I couldn't miss.

"Noted. But maybe next time, remember that I am trained." I roll my eyes and head towards the kitchen to get some water. Why does vodka always make me thirsty?

Before I can make it four steps, Dimitri's glass clinks on a hard surface, and his arm bands around my middle. His hard body presses against me from behind.

"You cannot do that again."

I scoff, fighting off the warmth pooling low in my belly. "I could tell you I won't, but I'd be lying."

His arm tightens around me, and his fingers thread into my hair, baring my neck to him. He presses a kiss at the pulse point, and my eyes close as the warmth spreads through me.

"And I'll punish you for it every time," he whispers against my skin. "For putting what's *mine* in danger."

I've never *been* anyone's and don't intend to be. Aside from Olivia's best friend and now Bella's mum, I am my own. And it's high time this asshole learns it doesn't make me his just because we're married.

There's a muffled sound in the kitchen, and my eyes slide to the closed double doors. Since my arrival last night, they've been thrown wide, creating an open and inviting space in the penthouse, but right now, I know what I find behind those doors will change everything.

My intuition adds a healthy dose of fear, and I freeze.

"What's going on in there?" I ask quietly.

Dimitri's reply is quiet against my neck, his lips never losing contact with my fevered skin. "Retribution."

The sound comes again, and Dimitri nudges me forward. I shakily put one foot in front of the other, the man never allowing distance between us as my steps eat up the distance between us and the door.

I pause with my hand on the bar to slide the divider open. Dimitri's palm lands on my fingers, and he puts pressure around my clammy digits and slides it open for us.

A man I don't know is strapped to a chair at the breakfast nook, his hands yanked behind his back and black cords crisscrossed around his chest and legs. His face is bloody and broken, teeth littering the floor at his feet, and rivulets of blood stream from his hairline down his face from a deep gash.

A movement to my left draws my attention, and Nik is standing at the counter with a butcher's knife in his hand. He waves it in my direction. "Oh, hello."

It's one thing to know violence happens—to think of it as some arbitrary and undefined thing in the world. It's entirely different when you witness it happening at the kitchen table. My vision blackens at the edges, and I fight off the nausea roiling in my stomach.

"What the fuck?" I ask, letting some of my authentic self bleed into the façade.

"This, dear wife, is what happens to those who threaten what's mine," Dimitri says, putting a scant few inches between us and moving to stand at my side.

Nik takes a step forward, and I keep my composure—aside from a twitch in my hand, which he notices. "This dick followed you and Ana to the bar. Igor grabbed him before he made it in the door."

"Who's Igor?" I ask.

"Your driver," Dimitri answers. "He needs a bonus for this. See that he gets it, Nik."

My former partner inclines his head, then takes a few steps closer to the man strapped to the chair.

"How did he get from there to here?" I ask, focusing on the logistics instead of the fact that someone was out to grab me.

"I picked him up and brought him home," Nik says, waving the knife again.

The man groans, his head sagging over his chest. Nik cocks a fist and lets it fly, connecting with the man's jaw and sending an arc of blood and a few more teeth flying.

"Tell me who sent you," Nik says. His tone is bored, as if he's already asked this question a few times and is tired of waiting for the answer.

At this moment, with his knuckles bloodied and hair mussed, he is all

power, all dominance, and nothing like the partner I once knew. It's like looking through a cracked and broken mirror, seeing some resemblance but not recognising the face staring back at you.

The bound man spits a glob of fluids onto the floor, marring the gorgeous tile with even more violence than it's been painted with already. "Fuck you," he rasps, the words sounding misshapen as they pass through his damaged mouth.

"Not today," Nik says with a smirk. He switches the knife to his left hand, walks around the once-ivory chair, and uses his right to fist the man's hair, pulling his head back and allowing me a full view of his mottled face.

The veins in Nik's forearms bulge with the strain, and the man yelps at the rough treatment. "Any last words? Perhaps an apology for the lady?"

Dimitri doesn't make a move, just stands beside me; the tension coming off him is so potent, it's like it's vibrating through my very soul.

"She would have cried so beautifully," the man garbles out.

He's poetic; I'll give him that. But so, so wrong.

Finding my footing, I take three steps forward and crouch so I'm a foot away from his face and level with his swollen eyes. "See, that's where you're wrong. I would have made *you* cry."

I peek up at Nik from beneath my lashes, noting a flare of desire on his face and a wicked grin that belongs to the devil himself. He knows I've been trained to deal with criminals and murderers, so it shouldn't surprise him I've got some backbone, no matter what name I'm using today.

Before I can register the movement, the knife slices at the man's hairline, separating the skin and scalp from the bone. The man's neck is carved open with a second slide of the blade. Blood sprays down the front of my dress, the vibrant green colour turning dark as the splatter lands.

Dimitri growls at Nik. "Couldn't have waited until she backed up?"

Nik shrugs. "It was getting tedious."

"He said nothing useful," I argue, standing and taking the kitchen towel Dimitri hands me. It won't do a damned thing for the dress, but at least I can wipe the blood off my face and neck.

"He didn't need to, and he wasn't going to share any details." Dimitri sighs. "But we know he worked for the Irish."

"How?" I ask, taken aback by the surety in his tone.

"Nik, if you please." Dimitri waves a hand at the man's torso.

Nik uses the bloodied blade to slice through the man's soaked jacket and

cuts through the material of his T-shirt. He drags the flat side of the blade against the pale skin to scrape away some of the blood. Over his heart is a Celtic knot twisted into a cross.

“Why do people tattoo themselves with their organisations?” I ponder aloud. “Such a stupid way to identify yourself.”

Nik hums his agreement and meets my eyes. “Much better to have no allegiance tattoos. I prefer art to brands.”

With that, he crosses the kitchen, tosses the knife into the sink, and strides out, leaving Dimitri and me with a body.

“I’m going out!” he calls from deeper inside the apartment.

I knew I would fear what was behind these doors, but it’s not Nik that scared me. It’s the fact that I’m *not* scared. The display turns me on, and I’m not even sorry I didn’t record this for future evidence to incarcerate my former lover.

“Now, wife,” Dimitri says from behind me, putting his hands on my hips and pulling me flush against his body again. “Your punishment.”

I sink against the heat of his body, letting his touch ignite the spark that Nik created.

“Strip. Show me what you wore for me today,” he commands, sucking all the air out of the room with his mere presence and the seduction in his tone.

“Oh, no, thank you,” I say indifferently. “Besides, it’s not white anymore.” I gesture at the blood soaking through the dress and seeping into the lace underneath.

His hands trail up my sides, and a shiver rocks through me. I’m so fucking turned on, and something about that at this moment feels so, so wrong. There’s a dead man not four feet away from us, and the only thing I feel is the wetness gathering on the scrap of stained lace covering my pussy.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Dimitri

“DO NOT TEST ME, ELSA,” I BREATHE AGAINST THE SHELL OF HER EAR AS I pull her tighter against me.

She struggles to get away, but my hands on her hips prevent her from gaining more than a centimetre.

“Dimitri, let me go,” she says as she twists her body, grinding her sweet ass against me.

She’s a trained agent. If she wanted to get away, she could. This is a game for both of us; she loves it as much as I do.

“Now, now, wife.” I keep her bound to me with one arm around her stomach. Finding the zipper of the dress at her nape, I’m tempted to take the knife from the sink, bloodied and filthy as it is, and cut this dress too.

I’m a traditionalist at heart, but I want to feel her body shiver under my touch right now, not a blade.

I pull back an inch and take the metal tab between two fingers, bringing it down to the end of the track at the top of her ass. I pull too hard and shred the material at the base of the zipper, the sound splitting through the silence. The only other noise is the faint, steadily slowing drip of blood from the Irishman. That will stop soon enough.

Trailing a finger down her spine, I stop when I reach her bra and pull on the material, letting it snap against her flesh—Elsa’s breath stutters when it strikes. Goosebumps rise along her back and arms while the skin under the band blooms pink.

Elsa’s fingernails cut bloody crescents into my forearm as she grips me, panting like she’s just run a four-minute mile.

“Please,” she begs.

“What are you begging for, Elsa? For me to stop or give you more?” I ask.

“I-I—”

I wait patiently, refusing to help her put her thoughts into words. I’m not giving her the out she’s looking for. It takes courage to admit what you want, especially when it’s something you shouldn’t. She can own up to how she feels about this or suffer in silence.

“I don’t know,” she whispers after the seconds stretch endlessly. Disappointment fills me that she doesn’t vocalise her wants as I do. But with

how she's grinding against me, it's clear she's only playing at being timid.

I'm eager to peel back the layers and get to know the real her. I'm irrationally selfish in wanting to know everything about her when it's just us—when she doesn't have to pretend.

"Lies. Your body gives you away," I say against her ear, biting the lobe with my front teeth. "I think you know exactly what you want."

Inhaling deeply, I catch her cherry blossom scent, letting her perfume tickle my nose. She gasps as I run my nose along the column of her neck, never getting enough of her.

If she won't tell me what she wants, we can discuss what she learned from Anastasia. Apparently, I have the patience of a saint and the desire to torture myself like the devil.

"What did you and Ana talk about?" I ask.

Her head rears back, almost bashing into my nose as she's startled by the abrupt subject change. I trace a fingertip along her jaw, tilting her head towards me, and it works to focus her attention as effectively as a hand around her throat has in the past.

"What was so important that you disobeyed orders and put yourself—*what's mine*—at risk?"

She struggles again. "I. Am. Not. Yours," she grits out, enunciating each word slowly and clearly, as if I'm too stupid to understand. It's not *me* who doesn't get it. It's not even her that doesn't get it. She *gets* it; she just won't admit it yet.

"But in this life, you are. What did you talk about?" I repeat.

She sighs, rolling her eyes and shoving against me. "Neither of us was comfortable in the tearoom, so she agreed when I suggested we bail. She took me to a bar a few blocks away, and the change in locale put her at ease. I learned nothing new, but it made her begin to trust me because we connected over the folly of men. As the daughter of your uncle and the wife of one of your guards, she knows everything happening around her."

My eyebrows raise in surprise, and she scoffs as if I'm being obtuse.

I yank the top of her dress over her shoulders, baring her lace-covered breasts. She moves to cover herself, and I trap her arms against her body, earning a frustrated growl. *There she is.*

She continues. "That's the problem with too many organisations, both mine and yours. You think the women don't know enough. That we aren't trained in our own way as young girls before any of you can even string your

thoughts together as young boys. We've been told and encouraged from birth that we were to be seen and not heard. That we were 'bossy' when we brought up our ideas instead of 'ambitious,' as the boys were called. What the fuck do you think happens when we're forced to make ourselves small and stick to the shadows? We collect information, hoard blackmail, and notice patterns. All things we can use when the time is right. And Anastasia doesn't strike me as the type to sit pretty and shut up for long."

She looks over her shoulder, making eye contact with me and letting me see the fire spark and burn in her obsidian eyes.

"You are not the type to sit pretty and shut up," I say, stroking my fingers along her jaw again, and she tilts into my touch, chasing my warmth. "And I like that." She seethes, but I go on before she rejects me out of spite. "What's your next move?"

"Befriend her, of course." I feel her exasperation, and I spin her so we're chest to chest and walk her backwards until she's wedged between the counter and my body. Two rigid and unforgiving forces pressing in on either side, trapping her and keeping her where she belongs. "Did you just roll your eyes at me again?" I ask softly.

"No," she says with a smirk, knowing that's exactly what she did. *Again.*

I level her with a look, never moving my gaze from hers. Everything inside of me screams to look down at her partially uncovered body—to trace the splatters of blood on her chest where it seeped through her dress and mark her as mine. But I resist the pull. Patience.

Our magnetism is lethal, and I refuse to be its victim. Not yet, and not alone. Not until she's done fighting this chemistry between us and finally with me every step of the way.

"Yes," she admits with a groan, correcting her earlier answer. Finding her boldness, she hisses, "And I'm not sorry for it."

Instead of feeling defied, I'm invigorated by the challenge. She's an enigma, constantly holding onto her persona as Elsa and burying whoever she truly is underneath, even when we're alone. What name she uses doesn't matter. My soul calls to hers.

The corners of my lips curl into a sinister grin. "Not yet, you're not."

A shiver racks her petite body, and I feel the vibration down to the base of my cock, which thickens every second I spend pressed against her. Her chest is moving up and down with the force of her pants, and she's not subtle as she rubs her thighs together, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

In a flash, I spin her and push between her shoulder blades until she's face down on my countertop.

"You like the sound of that, don't you?" I muse aloud, stroking a hand down her back and gripping her ass. "You're imagining the many ways I can punish you for your reckless behaviour, and it's making you wet."

She starts to deny it—clinging to the role she's supposed to play—but before she can lie to us, I swiftly snake my hand between her skin and the dress, making my way to where we both know she wants me to go. I dip my hand into her panties and slide my palm past her clit, spearing a finger into her pussy. The sound as I withdraw and pump into her again is obscene.

Elsa's hands turn to fists as she pounds them on the marble. Using the pad of my thumb, I flick her clit back and forth and watch as she succumbs to the sensations assaulting her body. I'm rewarded when she spreads her legs as wide as the dress allows, silently asking for more.

Adding a second finger, I curl them inside her, inciting a moan to tumble from her lips.

"You won't do that again," I say against the back of her neck, biting and then soothing the hurt with a swipe of my tongue. Sucking at the skin until it bruises, I wait for an answer that doesn't come.

Fine. Neither will she.

I slide out of her sweet pussy in one smooth move and lift my thumb away from her clit. Hovering a hairsbreadth away, I pause, denying her my touch.

She groans in frustration and lifts her head as I admire the marks I've left and watch as they colour her pale skin.

"Dimitri," she gasps, her need clear in her voice. "What the fuck are you doing?"

I smile against a beautiful mark I've just left on her skin before my tongue darts out and licks it. "Punishing you."

Without warning, I push three fingers into her, spreading and crooking them to find that sensitive spot again. I stroke it, and she grinds down on my hand, seeking more of the friction I can provide.

She's so fucking responsive I have to stop before I'm ready to, or I'll push her over the edge. And what kind of punishment would it be if she got everything she wanted?

As I withdraw again, she whines, a hoarse sound coming from the back of her throat. Tears leak from her eyes and drip onto the counter below. She

reaches a hand back and beats at me with a fist of frustration.

“That all you got, Sabre?” I goad her.

She pauses for a second and, quick as lightning, strikes an expert shot to my spleen. A grunt of pain slips past my lips, but it doesn't hinder me as I slide into her again.

“Dimitri! Fuck me!” Not a request this time. An order. A crack in the façade she's wrapped around herself to keep in character.

“There you are, Sabre.” Something about that fracture has me wanting more of her. All the cracks, all the little fissures, as they decimate the carefully constructed walls. I want to demolish them and fuck her on the rubble.

I rub at that spot inside her, my thumb circling her clit. She rocks her hips into my hand, grinding without shame or reservation as she seeks release.

“Are you going to take off again?” I ask one last time.

I feel the fight in her body—the need to assert she is her own woman and doesn't take orders from me.

I stop moving, letting my fingers rest in and on her, lingering on her most sensitive parts and not giving her the friction and stimulation she needs. I pull away from her marked skin, licking my lips and wanting the taste of her sweet cunt on my tongue.

Finally, I feel the moment a new rift forms in her walls. “Yes, I will. But I'll text you when it happens.”

It's not the answer I want, but it's good enough. “Deal.”

I hike her dress up around her thighs, shoving and ripping at the tight material. She helps me from the other side, yanking the material up to her waist until she's wearing it like a goddamned belt.

I widen her legs as I undo my trousers, take out my throbbing and aching cock, and palm it, anticipating her slick pussy milking me and drawing out my pleasure.

“Dimitri, please,” she begs.

“Shh, Sabre. Patience.”

She bends further over the counter and lifts her ass into the perfect position. I step closer, trailing light fingertips up the backs of her thighs and along the globes of her perfect peachy ass.

I tear her lace panties off, shove the scraps into my pocket, and run the head of my cock through her drenched folds, coating myself in her arousal before pausing at her entrance.

“This is going to be hard and fast, Sabre.”

“Good.”

I plunge into her, and she shouts, her pussy clenching around my cock as I hold still for a second, savouring the feel of her wrapped around me. I grip her hips, withdraw slowly, and drive back into her.

“*Fuuuck*, Sabre.”

Her panting grows stronger as she begs, “More, Dimitri!”

“As you wish, my Sabre.”

Her begging spurs me on, and I revel in the control she’s given over. It’s hard-won, but *I* won it. *I* made that crack in her walls, and I will wedge myself in there so fucking hard, she’ll never be able to cut me out.

The need to bend this woman to my will is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.

She’s it for me.

She’s the elusive *one* we’ve all heard stories about, believing them to be fairy tales and nothing more. But as she reaches for me, pulling me closer and looking at me over her shoulders with that lust-drunk look and challenge on her face, I know the universe sent her to me for a reason.

A sheen of sweat breaks out on my brow at the realisation, the room suddenly feeling too warm, as if the air is pressing into my skin from all sides through my suit, choking the breath from my lungs.

Elsa’s pussy tightens around me, making my balls draw up and my cock throb within her. My heartbeat doubles like galloping hoofbeats on a track as I chase my release. Her dark hair fans around her on the countertop, and she moves her hands to the lip of the marble, her grip white-knuckled where she holds on as I take her from behind.

“You want to come for me, my Sabre?” I ask through gritted teeth, holding onto the last of my sanity and fighting the orgasm as it coils at the base of my spine. “You want me to get you off?”

She’s sobbing against the counter, a mix of pain and pleasure, frustration and satisfaction. All of it amalgamates into a human-shaped ball of need as she cries, “Yes!”

“Too bad.”

I thrust into her one last time, roaring as I send myself over the edge, releasing deep inside her as she pants below me. Her pussy grips me, refusing to let me go and encouraging me to make her come, but with a foggy head and an iron will, I withdraw from her greedy cunt.

As I pull out, my seed slips from between her lips, and I marvel at the sight of it. I catch some on two fingers and shove it back inside her where it belongs.

“You asshole!” she curses, following it up with a pound of her fist on the counter beside her.

I tuck myself back into my trousers and do up the zipper and button. “Good girls get to come. Bad girls get to ride their fingers.”

Turning on my heel, I walk away, sparing one last glance at the woman who could bring everything down around me, especially with how she looks right now, filled to the brim with my seed dripping between her thighs. She moves to get up, and I twist my head away from her and throw open the kitchen doors.

I need to get the cleaning crew in here, and I wonder if Nik thought to call them.

“Do you not wear condoms, asshole?” she shouts after me.

*I always wear a condom. But not with her. Never with her.*

# CHAPTER TWELVE

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Eleanor

I WONDER IF INTERPOL WOULD FIRE ME FOR KILLING AN ASSET.

I mean, probably, but maybe not? I sure hope not because I'm quickly losing my sanity, and I'm afraid I might find out the answer to that little question soon.

It's been a goddamned week since that fucking punishment in the kitchen, and I'm still livid. And turned on as fuck. But mostly livid. Dimitri had better be thanking his lucky fucking stars he's not here today because my mood has taken a decidedly horrible turn, and I certainly wasn't sunshine and fucking roses before.

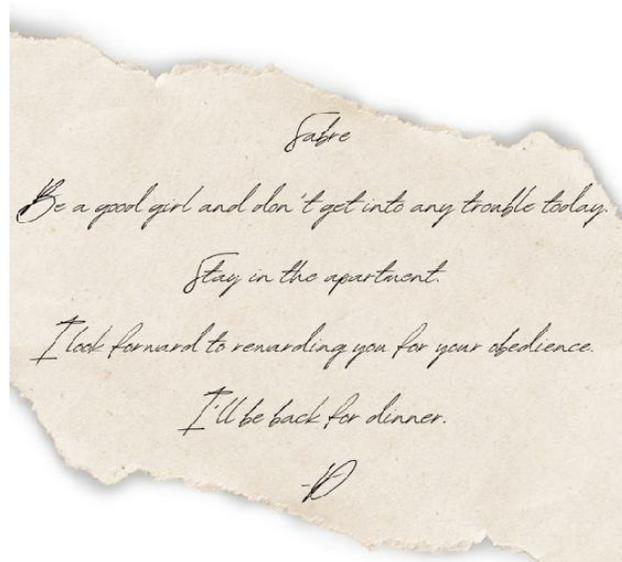
In fact, with every passing hour, I've just riled myself up more and more. But this morning, when I saw Dimitri's note on his pillow, I imagined plunging a knife through it and affixing it to my husband's chest.

I'm a murderly, horny, frustrated mess, and I'm at my wit's end as I pace the length of the bed in the suite. This apartment has everything. But you know what it doesn't have? Sex toys.

Or at least none that I can find.

The showerhead worked in a pinch after I used my fingers so vigorously that they cramped. But could anything truly replace that little rose-shaped clit sucker? The short answer is no. The long answer is that I'm still searching for a stand-in while the one I ordered from Amazon is en route, and it will be a frigid day in hell when I turn to Dimitri to scratch that itch. Not with the way he left me last time.

I uncrinkle the note in my palm and look it over again, feeding that anger roaring in my belly because if I can't have a decent orgasm, at least I can imagine all the fun ways to make my husband pay.



I crumple the heavy—and probably expensive—paper and ball it in my fist again. Then, like the mature woman I am, I chuck it at his pillow, imagining it's his face.

Other than to sleep or when he hands over the cameras after wearing them all day for evidence collection, Dimitri and I have stayed clear of each other for the last week.

He's had meetings every day, and while I knew his job was demanding, I didn't expect it to be *this* demanding. He always meets with managers of bars, nightclubs, and restaurants in the mornings, then deals with some of the illegal portions of the job in the afternoons.

My asshole of a husband has already collected footage of an arms deal, identifying everyone on camera and getting the shipment details on film. He's also worked with a few of the men Sergei manages as the brigadier regarding territory issues—again, on camera.

After switching them off in the car, he brings home the cameras, and I review the footage, sending it off to Agent Kim, my handler, fellow agent, and the stand-in father from my wedding.

I wish I had more to do. But I'm still too new, and the people of Dimitri's organisation would find it odd that I just started attending meetings. So here I am—wandering and aimless. Instead of fussing over it, I've been distracting myself by settling into the apartment and putting my things where they need to go. The other day, I was stashing weapons around the house and found a

couple of Dimitri's guns in my favourite hiding spots.

The man has good Glocks; I'll give him that.

Thinking of my stupid husband has renewed anger bubbling in my belly. I hate myself for succumbing to the passion he stirs in me. For not only letting him fuck me but for demanding it. It's not fair that my body has betrayed me, and I've had a long, hard talk with my cunt, telling it to clam the fuck up and stop drooling for that man.

Before I got here, I'd been briefed repeatedly that I couldn't let emotion impede the job I was here to do. In fact, it was something my boss had highlighted more than a few times—not that I'd ever given him reason to doubt my emotional separation between work and my private life.

The only time they crossed over, Nik betrayed Interpol and me in one fell swoop. But my boss doesn't know I was fucked and left sated on a hotel mattress while my partner stole a diamond.

My boss brought up the emotion thing because it's not an uncommon theme for someone undercover to blur those lines until the two stark sides of black and white mesh into something in between; something grey and dangerous.

The scary thing is that I can feel it happening in real-time, no matter how much I try to fight it.

Dimitri is different than I expected.

Sure, he's the boss of an illegal syndicate, and he's scary as fuck sometimes, but it's the intensity he holds back from everyone else yet unleashes with me that intrigues me the most.

Our wedding was a subdued affair, and Dimitri barely spoke to anyone at the event before ushering us out of there after cutting the cake.

But he doesn't hold that intensity back from me. Instead of being distant, he finds every opportunity to sit closer. Instead of keeping his hands to himself, he often brushes his fingertips along the top of my back or down my arm before settling that same hand possessively on my hip.

Sometimes, I even catch him simply watching me. His eyes on my skin feel like a brand—like he owns me. And every fucking time that sensation slides over me, my skin turns electric and all my nerves stand on end. Like having his eyes on me alone is enough to charge me up, setting my entire being alight.

And if all that isn't enough, Nik adds to the torrent of sensation and pure loathing Dimitri pulls from me by staring at the two of us with heat

simmering in his dark eyes. He makes absolutely no effort to hide the unmistakable looks of desire and scepticism.

In a moment of quiet whispers last night, I asked Dimitri if Nik had said anything yet. He just clicked his tongue and shook his head.

Either Nik thinks I'm an Interpol plant in the same way he was, or he thinks Interpol is here for Dimitri and isn't warning him.

Which leaves me toeing both lines without knowing which version he believes. I have to overcommit to my role as Dimitri's wife, and while the part of my brain that is here to do my job and prove I'm a damn good agent is recoiling at the idea, my coochie is waving her hands in the air in celebration.

Thankfully, today, the apartment is quiet and devoid of Bratva members.

There's a shipment that the two of them had to deal with, and Dimitri's wearing the standard equipment to record it for our case while I wonder what exactly this shipment is. He was cagey about the contents, but it brings in a hefty sum for their organisation, therefore nothing can go wrong to prevent them from receiving it.

While they're gone, I snoop like any good spy and finish setting up several listening devices in Dimitri's office space. The room is inviting, even with all the dark colours, hardwoods, and stiff chairs on the opposite side of his desk. I sit in Dimitri's chair, lean back, and cross my feet at the ankle as I prop them up on his desk. It's not as if he's here to punish me, and my petty act of defiance brings a smile to my face.

I look around the office, wondering what Dimitri sees when he sits in his little—and quite fucking comfortable—seat of power. The opposite floor-to-ceiling windows provide a panoramic view of the New York skyline, and the desk is bare of personal effects. In fact, aside from the paintings hanging on the walls, the whole apartment feels like a model home.

Whoever chose the paintings matched them perfectly with the rest of the home. Most of them are done in dark colours and have a distinctive hopelessness. They're chaotic in their strokes and smudges, and most of them have a black hole at the centre, painted so dark it feels like looking into an abyss.

I swivel in the chair and look towards the walls on either side of the space. The wallpaper is dark with cracks of lighter colour coming through, like marble on the walls, and two paintings that make me feel like someone has reached into my soul and splashed my darkest secrets on the canvases. It's abstract, but the emotion is there—the anguish.

Filled with nervous energy and unable to stop fidgeting, I decide I can't sit here any longer. I get up and walk around the desk, heading to the door at the back of the office space. There's a hallway and a bathroom here, but as I pass the more potent of the two paintings, a glint of metal flashes in my periphery, and instinctively, I duck and roll.

When no gunshot goes off, I peek up and see the painting is slightly skewed. That's when I notice, just to the left of the frame, there's a sliver of metal reflecting in the overhead lighting.

Feeling stupid but grateful there were no witnesses, I cautiously stand and make my way over. I slide the painting along the wall until it's hanging at a precarious angle. *Come on, Ellie!* What spy doesn't check for safes behind stupid paintings? That's like espionage 101!

There's a small rectangle of brass, maybe two-by-two inches, with a little button in the middle like a doorbell.

Peering over my shoulder into the silent apartment, I check the coast is *still* clear and touch the protrusion. I press down, and nothing happens. I try wiggling it, twisting it, then pressing it inward repeatedly like a semipro Bop It player.

After it does nothing but cause my index finger to cramp up again—*thanks, Dimitri, you asshole*—I go to the kitchen and make myself lunch, mulling over what it could be. Some kind of panic button, probably.

When no one comes busting through the foyer with guns drawn in response to my button pushing, I settle more into my seat at the kitchen table. I avoid the spot where the Irishman bled out the other day. Dimitri's cleaning crew did a remarkable job. There isn't even a speck of blood left anywhere, and I'm confident the table and chairs have all been replaced, but I have no idea when.

I take my burner phone from my pocket and call Olivia. The line rings three times before she answers.

"How are you, bitch?" Olivia shouts.

I laugh and spear a piece of fruit from my bowl, prop up my phone on the vase in the centre of the table, and switch it to speaker.

"I'm fine," I say too loudly, convincing my cut-up strawberries more than her.

"Yeah, that's not your 'I'm fine' voice. That's your 'I've done something and don't know how to feel about it' voice," she deadpans. "Are you alone?"

I roll my eyes. "You think I'd call you if I weren't? Sorry it's been a

while. How's my girl?"

Despite my best efforts to keep Bella off my mind while I focus on the job, my mind runs to her in those quiet moments.

"She's good. We can video chat. She's still awake."

"Yes," I plead, clicking the camera icon on my screen. Olivia's face fills the space, and she has a coy grin on her lips.

"Oh, girl, I know that look," she says with a chuckle. "You got fucked. Also, sweet digs." She waves her hand at the apartment behind me.

There's no point in lying to Olivia. The woman knows more than she really should about every topic under the sun. And considering we've known each other since we were sixteen, there's not much I can do to hide my face or my sins from her. "Would you keep your voice down? I don't need my daughter learning that word from you."

"Which word? Fucked? Oh, she already heard Max use it. And she's kind of been saying it on repeat for the last three days." I groan and drop my face into my hands.

I peek through my fingers at the propped-up phone. "But Bella's okay?" I ask.

I see Olivia's ceiling as she walks across her house, searching for my girl after hollering for Roark, who seems to be on kid duty this evening. "Yes, yes, she's fine. She's eating her food, biting Zach, and her walk is steadier."

The phone jumbles, and a blur of colour washes over the screen until I'm looking at my sweet angel's little face.

"Hi, baby," I coo.

"Mama! Mama! Mama!" she shouts, her little face twisting into a gummy smile, her cheeks poofing and brightening my entire world. "Fuck!"

I smother my laugh, hiding the reaction she wants and keeping myself from encouraging her more than the five adults on the island are likely doing.

"Oh, baby, I miss you so much," I say, fighting to keep the tears of longing from my eyes. She doesn't need to see me cry or think anything is wrong. I just beam at her, studying every inch of her sweet face, rosy cheeks, and the wisps of dark hair coming free from her little space buns on top of her head.

I miss her smell, her snuggles, and her hugs. I miss having her in my arms, smashing my face between her pudgy little palms and planting open-mouthed kisses all over my face because she doesn't know how to make a proper kissy face yet.

She's babbling nonsense, as all one-year-olds do, but suddenly, she says, "Mama! Zebra!"

My brow wrinkles in confusion.

"Olivia?" I say a little more loudly. "Please tell me you didn't . . .?"

Roark's bearded face fills the phone. "That was actually all me," he admits.

"I don't even know what to say to that, Roark. You're the reasonable one. Can you just buy zebras? And also, and perhaps more importantly, *why*?"

His cheeks go pink under his scruff—so bright I see it through the phone.

"We were reading a story, and there was a zebra in it, and she seemed to like it. She didn't really take to me during our early days, so I did what any responsible uncle would do and abused Olivia's money to buy her love," Roark explains.

"My girl will be so spoilt when I pick her up. You know that's not coming to Lyon with us, right?" I shake my head and breathe a deep sigh.

"We know. We have the zebra set up in a stable right next to John Henry," Olivia says. It takes a moment, but I remember John Henry is Max's prized horse, which they also transported to the island when they moved in. "He needed a new friend, anyway."

Bella is in the background shrieking about "mama" and "zebra" and "fuck," and I know they're just going to have a grand old time putting her down for bed tonight, which should be right around now. As if on cue, Olivia takes the phone back.

"She's already been fed and bathed, she's in her pyjamas, and it's Roark's night to put her to bed."

"God, it's great you can split up the time like that," I admit, thinking about how nice it would have been to have a partner during those late nights, the nonsleeping nights, the sick nights, the fun nights, and just a night when you needed some time off, even just to sit in the closet and rock back and forth for fifteen minutes before dusting your hands off and taking care of business.

"You'll have that one day," Olivia says. "You just have to find the right person for you. Speaking of, will you *ever* let me hunt down Bella's father?"

The only thing Olivia knows about my time with Bella's father is that he was there the night she was conceived, and I had no way of contacting him again. I didn't even tell her it was my former partner. After the third time she asked, I begged her to respect my choice, and she mostly let it go.

Technically, I didn't lie. I just . . . omitted a lot of information.

Nik had disappeared off the face of the earth by the time I realised I was pregnant, and when I got word of where he was and who he worked for, the last thing I wanted was for him to know about Bella.

But lying to Olivia always weighs on me. I can't tell her everything about my work, and she can't tell me everything about hers—plausible deniability and all that—and we have those boundaries in place for respect, not withholding. The last thing we want is to be used against each other, so the less we know, the better.

But this? This was something I could have told her from the start. I could have told her that Bella's father was my partner. I could have told her that this mission involved his organisation, and while I wasn't sure if he would be here, I have plans to bring him in, and we're now living under the same goddamn roof.

"Not now. Maybe someday," I answer when I realise I've been staring off into the distance.

Olivia shrugs. "Knowing you and your excellent judge of character—" she motions to herself as proof of said judgement "—if he could have been there for your daughter, I'm sure he would have been."

The emotion of it all overwhelms me again.

Olivia shoves the phone in front of Bella's face as a distraction. I say goodnight and make kissy faces at the camera until Bella slobbers all over the device. Roark takes her away to put her to sleep, and I finally let the first tears slip free.

When Olivia turns back towards the screen, her face morphs into sympathy. "Tell me what's going on."

I take in a shattering breath. "Have you ever . . . I don't know, taken a job too far?" I ask her, putting my toes right up to the line of things we don't talk about.

"You fucked your asset," she says with confidence.

"I couldn't help it," I admit. "He—I don't know what it is about him. He's hard and awful. And so fucking *intense*."

"But did you have fun?" Olivia asks, cutting through all the bullshit and finding her way to the heart of the matter.

"Fun?" I ask. "Yes . . .?" The word comes out slowly, and it's more of a question than an answer, but it's the best I can give.

Do I love the way Dimitri handles me, directing us when I can't even

attempt to say the alphabet in order because I'm so lost in the feeling of his hands on me? His cock driving me wild? His eyes devouring every inch of my body, setting my skin alight with passion as he rakes his gaze down my body, his eagerness for me evident in his eyes?

Fuck. Yes, I do.

An insistent throbbing starts up in my clit again, just thinking about his touch. I ignore it as best as I can, but it's been a week since I've had an orgasm that wasn't by my own fingers or the fucking showerhead upstairs, and nothing compares to the real thing anymore.

Not when that real thing is Dimitri Motherfucker Aslanov, armed with his magic fingers and a pussy pounding cock I just can't get enough of.

And his tongue. Oh, fuck, the things he can do with his tongue.

"And your emotions?" Olivia asks, distracting me from my inner musings. But not enough that my clit has stopped having its own heartbeat.

"Not as tightly under lock and key as I'd hoped," I say.

"So...?" Olivia says, pausing and staring at me through the screen. "Is he a good guy or a bad guy? Or somewhere in between, like me? And could you see him with you in the future? Or you can ignore all that and just have some fun, which is what I would do. You're there for a while. Why not get your rocks off? If you kick him to the kerb, no harm, no foul. Or, if you want to go the opposite way, consider letting him around Bella when this is all over. Do you see that happening? Trusting him with your tiny and adorable heart as it walks around outside of your body?"

"I'm not looking for forever," I say. "I gave up on that idea a long time ago. I just met the man, and my overeager head has run off with the plot, which is unacceptable."

The thought of Dimitri around my daughter gives me chills. Not because I think he would ever harm her, but because I like the idea a little too much. He's protective and loyal to his own morals. Could you imagine him as a girl dad, doting on and indulging her like Rory does?

"But," I bite out, reluctant to admit out loud that something is between us. "I could handle a for-now situation if it doesn't impede our work."

"Okay, then. Take it day by day. Enjoy yourself and get the fucking job done. You are Eleanor Carmichael—badass bitch, agent of chaos, and my best friend. You think I would pick just anyone for that role?" She laughs, and I follow suit.

"Fine, fine. I'll turn off the overthinking and just try to see where the day

takes me. *Carpe diem*, and all that shit, right?”

“Too fuckin’ right. Carpe the diem outta that *diiiiick*,” she calls down the line, and I promptly hang up on her.

Olivia has unmatched innuendo capabilities, and I know she’s just getting started. I have a few more bugs to plant around the apartment anyway. Namely, in Nik’s room, if I can ever finish picking the damned lock.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Dimitri

NIK IS SILENT AS WE RIDE THE LIFT TO THE PENTHOUSE. HIS SHOULDERS ARE tense, and his fists are balled at his sides. He's been on edge since coming home from his dealings with the Italians. And most of that is because of Elsa's presence.

*Elsa.*

Fuck, I don't even know her real name.

Nik does, though.

As her former partner, he knows things about her I don't. *Yet.*

I have plans to find out everything, but one thing I know for sure is the way her body reacts to mine is explosive. Her wit and defiance fuel my deep-seated need to bend her to my will and take her like a man starved. And I've never been a man starved of anything. Except for maybe freedom, but that's in the works.

Knowing I have to hand over the body cam later, I cringe in my expensive suit. Wrapping myself in luxury like armour only does so much. It doesn't stop my disgust at myself and the things I sometimes do in the name of the Bratva.

The lift dings as it reaches the foyer, and I stride forward as the doors slide open. The need to lose myself and remember there are things worth living for somewhere out there in this great fuck of a world crawls along my skin. Couple that with my insane jealousy that Nik knows my wife better than I do and has spent more time with her than I have, and there's this primal rage growing in the pit of my stomach.

She is *mine*. Not his. Elsa and Dimitri Aslanov. And I want to remind both of us repeatedly until I'm branded on her body and she on mine.

"Elsa!" I call out, my voice ringing through the home as it echoes off the marble tile and stark walls. Now that I'm home, it's like an electric current takes up residence in my skin, only sated when I'm near her.

"In here!" she answers.

I pass the staircase and enter the living room, where my wife is sprawled across the couch in yoga pants and a soft long-sleeved shirt. Comfortable. Relaxed. Unguarded. She's holding a magazine between her fingers and pauses midpage flip when she catches my expression. The neckline of her shirt dips low, showing off an expanse of skin and a collarbone I want to

trace with my tongue. My cock hardens, and my mind has one thing running through it. *Claim.*

“Nik, clear out,” I order over my shoulder.

He crosses his arms over his chest in defiance and plants his feet shoulder-width apart like he’s preparing for battle.

“We need to talk,” he says, reminding me of the conversation we’d started in the car and never finished.

It’s been a long fucking day, and I don’t have the wherewithal to argue, so instead, I glare. “Later. I’m warning you. If you don’t want to watch me fuck my wife on this couch, you’d better move your ass.”

Instead of turning towards the stairs, he heads to the bar cart, pours himself a healthy glass of vodka, and drops into the club chair across from Elsa. “I’ll wait.”

She looks from me to him and back again. Her eyes are wide, and her shoulders inch higher towards her ears with tension. Then, her mouth tips into a slight grin.

“Suit yourself,” I say, stripping out of my jacket and draping it carefully over the other chair so the small camera I subtly switched off in the car doesn’t dislodge from the breast pocket.

“Dimitri, no, we can’t . . .” The words are what’s expected from Elsa as she plays her part, but my girl’s thighs are rubbing together, and she has a hungry look in her gaze as she trails my body.

“Put the magazine down, Elsa.”

She closes it, smoothing a hand along the cover and places it on the coffee table between the seating furniture.

With sure movements, I remove my cufflinks, put them in the pocket of my trousers, and start working on the buttons of my shirt.

“Did everything go well today?” she asks, her voice unsure.

“Everything went according to plan,” Nik answers before swallowing his drink in one go.

“Why does that sound bad?” she asks, turning her attention to him.

I reach out with two fingertips on her jaw and turn her face back towards me. Having her eyes on Nik when I’m already dealing with the fact he knows more about her than I do irks the fuck out of me. Her eyelids close, so I tap her jaw. “Look at me.”

Nik shifts in his chair, leaning forward as if he’s going to do something stupid like try to stop me, but I shoot him a warning glare as Elsa’s eyes

flutter open.

“Good wife,” I coo. “It’s nothing you need to be concerned about right now. Are you okay with Nik being here?”

“Yes,” she says, glancing at him for a moment before bringing her eyes back to me.

Good. The only thing I want her focused on right now is me and my cock as I lose myself in the abyss that only Elsa can provide. She mouths the words “*Carpe diem*” with a genuine smirk, and I lose my breath for a second.

To see a flash of her authentic self in this moment has my cock hardening to the point of pain. Fuck, how I’ve replayed the moment I sank into her pussy the other night over and over again—her undercover mask slipping away and her true self shining through. The kitchen now gives me a hard-on every time I walk in and spy the stretch of counter I fucked her against.

She hasn’t been happy with me since then, probably because I denied her an orgasm. But she had to learn her actions have consequences, and I can’t have my underlings thinking I don’t have a handle on my wife. She *cannot* do that again. Ditching her driver and guard, wandering the streets of New York unaccompanied, and distracting me from fucking meetings when my phone alerts me that she’s on the move. Too many things hang in the balance for me to track her whereabouts and ensure she always follows orders.

She’s here to gather intel, fine. But she will do it on my terms.

“Shall I just continue to sit here and look pretty, then?” she asks, her voice taking on a prim and proper tone. “I am your wife. I hoped to be somewhat in the loop.”

“I’d much rather you were on your knees,” I volley back, flicking the button of my trousers open while ignoring her demands for more access to information. That will come with time as everyone gets used to me having a wife.

“With Nik here?” she asks, looking up at me instead of Nik, who’s getting comfortable for the show. She’s still putting on a show for Nik, but for me, her eyes shine with her genuine self.

I curl my lips into a grin and wait for her to make her move. Elsa chews on her bottom lip as if she’s unsure, but I recognize the fire in her eyes. She doesn’t need to look at Nik to know he’s watching her. Her chest is slightly angled towards him, and I see the strain in her neck as she fights the urge to turn and gauge the look on his face.

Elsa slides off the couch and onto the floor, before folding her hands

together, and placing them on her lap—making a pretty picture of submissive obedience. She tilts her head downward, her curtain of hair shielding her face from Nik. But from my vantage point, I can just make out the sly grin on her face.

Giving into my body's magnetic pull towards hers, I step closer. Looking down at her like this, I know there is nothing in this world that could stop me now. Not even having my former best friend and current body guard as an audience. If Nik wants to watch me take pleasure from Elsa's body while giving her even more, so fucking be it.

“Look at me, Sabre,” I coax. She tilts her head up, her gaze perusing my body. “You want my cock on those pretty lips? Sliding down your throat until you choke?”

“Yes, Dimitri,” she answers softly. Her voice has taken on a new tone, one of desperation. It’s different from what it was in the kitchen, and I know it’s because of our audience.

“Take it out, then, wife.” I step closer, and she raises her hands to my waistband. Sliding my trousers past my ass and hips, she shoves them down my thighs as she leans closer, nuzzling my tented briefs before inhaling deeply, pulling my essence into her. “Mmm, my greedy girl.”

She hums her agreement and places an open-mouthed kiss on the fabric covering my pulsing cock. Slipping her fingers into the waistband, she lifts the elastic up and over my straining dick, and they go the way of my trousers, bunching at my knees.

“So perfect,” she murmurs, taking me into her hand and leisurely pumping me from base to tip. The way she looks at it is reverent, desperate, and hungry. It causes me to thicken in her grasp, and she gives another hum of appreciation.

I thrust into her hand, my tip bumping her lips before I swat her hands away, fist myself, and paint her lips with my pre-cum by tracing my cock over her pretty mouth. She chases me with her tongue, moaning at the taste I leave behind.

“Open your mouth, Sabre.”

Her lips part, and she obeys, sticking her tongue out and scooting closer on her knees. I tune the world out as I press forward, my cock sliding along her wet and warm tongue, the heat of her mouth enveloping me and making me groan out obscenities.

“Fuck, you have the best mouth, wife. Now suck.”

Like she was waiting for permission, her lips wrap around me, and her cheeks hollow, pressing around me on all sides as I hit the back of her throat. She gags but doesn't stop—doesn't let up the pressure around me as I turn her into a teary-eyed, choking, drooling mess.

Inch after inch disappears between her swollen, plump lips. Holding myself steady as she swallows around me, the tip of my dick slips further down, letting the euphoria of her throat work around me, milking me as she reflexively takes me.

She doesn't tap out, doesn't yank herself off me, simply holds there, trusting me to know when she's had enough. The heady feeling of the trust she's placing in me sinks into my bones, settling in right where it should be, finding its home amidst my demons, self-loathing, and hatred—a flicker of light among the darkness.

Then Elsa surprises me yet again. Her left hand slips down the front of her stretch pants and finds its way to her clit. She moans around me, and I withdraw, giving her a second to breathe before pressing forward again. I'm mesmerised as her hand moves below the black fabric of her leggings, strumming her little bundle because this gets her off just as much as it does me.

There's a shift of a body on leather, and I tear my gaze away from Elsa and look over at Nik, who has his hand over his tented trousers, pressing down as if it will stave off the erection and impending orgasm my girl is eliciting from him without even looking in his direction.

His eyes are on Elsa's hand—how it moves, how she shows no shame in taking what she wants, even as she's giving me the world.

Fisting her hair and holding her exactly where I want her, I thrust into her mouth, fucking her face as she takes it noisily and enthusiastically. Her chest, neck, and cheeks are flushed. There's a sheen of sweat along her brow, and her lungs are sucking in air only when I allow it.

I'm so fucking close, but I want us to come together.

*"Fuuuck, my Sabre. Give it to me. Come all over your fingers and take me down your throat."* I glance over to Nik again, and he's given up all pretence of shoving his erection down. He's gripping himself through his clothes. The slow glide of the material over his cock must be fucking torturous. He knows I wouldn't tolerate more than that from him, not after what I did to Alexei.

I return my eyes to Elsa as she works herself over, panting through her

nose and constricting her throat around me as tears drip down her cheeks and from her chin.

“Such pretty tears, wife,” I praise. She blinks up at me, her eyes wide and imploring.

After a few more thrusts, she moans around my cock, shuddering below me. The vibrations work through my spine, my balls pulling up tight and aching until I erupt in her mouth, coating her throat as she takes everything I have to give.

I’m still hard as fuck, but I pull away, letting her take her first deep breath since we arrived at the apartment. “Good girl. Now give me those fingers.”

She hesitates for a second.

“Now,” I command.

Elsa lifts her arm, her fingers shining with her arousal. I take her wrist in a forceful grip and stretch her hand to my mouth, sucking her two fingers, wiping away every trace of her arousal and claiming it.

It belongs to me.

She belongs to me.

Every piece of her. Every sigh, every breath, every moan. They are mine and mine alone.

Nik shifts in his seat. He’s glaring at the two of us; his brows furrowed in anger and death in his eyes.

“If that’s all?” he asks, not expecting an answer as he stands from his chair and saunters to the bar cart.

He keeps his hips shifted away from us, but not enough for me to miss the evidence of his orgasm seeping through the material.

Elsa’s eyes track him as he moves towards the office, rounding the corner and disappearing. When her gaze connects with mine, I know we’re far from done for the evening.

She and I? We’re only just getting started.

But first I have to finish that fucking conversation with Nik.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Eleanor

WE'RE AT A RESTAURANT DOWNTOWN THAT, BY THE LOOKS OF IT, REQUIRES at least a three-month lead time on a reservation for the average person. Sergei, however, arranged this yesterday, and with it being one of the Bratva's various holdings, I'd bet there's always a table on standby for the higher-ranking members.

Dimitri didn't give me the details, aside from Sergei's wife, Oksana, wants to get to know me and welcome me to the family. So here we are, appeasing Dimitri's aunt and uncle with a fancy dinner.

When the driver opens the door, Nik steps out of the town car, and his powerful thighs shift under his trousers. He stands to his full height, flips his jacket out, and rebuttons it with sure fingers. I swear, it's almost better than forearm porn.

He checks his watch and turns towards the car.

Dimitri leans closer to me from the opposite side. "Keep looking at him like that, and I'll get jealous. You don't want that, wife. Trust me."

I repress my shiver and look at Nik's tattooed hand, taking it and sliding out of the car.

Ducking back down and looking into the car's interior, I crook my lips into a smile. "There, there, husband. You're the only one I'm fucking these days."

At my use of his title, his eyes flare wide and a smirk appears. "'Husband' sounds good coming from your lips."

Before I can shrug it off, he leans up and takes my lips in a fierce kiss, biting down on the bottom one and drawing a bead of blood from the inside. I tear myself away and let Nik guide me away from the open door while sucking on the minor wound, praying all the while that it doesn't swell.

Nik scoffs at our display, but there's a slight flush rising on his cheeks, and he's not as unaffected as he'd have us believe.

Winking at him, I move to the side and give Dimitri space to get out. He unfolds himself from the seat, stepping onto the pavement and clapping Nik on the shoulder. "You should take tonight off and find someone to sink your cock into. Maybe it'll help with that mood of yours."

Nik grumbles, but the idea of Nik fucking someone else has a surge of jealousy rising in my already queasy stomach. I squash it and keep my eyes

impassive as I look at them side by side. One tattooed from his fingers to his neck, the other clean cut. Anger in Nik's eyes and coldness in Dimitri's—like two sides of the same fucked-up coin.

And then there's me, feeling things for both of them and wanting to put that coin in my pocket and guard it against anyone else who may come sniffing around.

Dimitri takes my hand, and we follow Nik into the restaurant. Without pausing at the hostess stand, we cross the dimly lit space and reach a table at the back, where Sergei is speaking with Aleksandr while Anastasia and an older, regal woman sit on either side of the men.

At our approach, their conversation ceases, and the men rise to their feet. "Pakhan," they greet. With minuscule head tilts, they acknowledge my presence. *How nice of them.*

Dimitri exchanges greetings with them as I subtly take in the restaurant. Low lighting and candles decorate the space, dark paint coats the walls, and the rich hardwood floors absorb the rest of the light.

"Hey, Elsa," Anastasia greets, all but pulling me into the chair beside her. Dimitri is there before my ass hits the seat, gripping my arm and guiding me gracefully into the spot. He pushes my chair in with a practised air before sending Anastasia a reproachful look.

"Cousin, don't maim my new wife," he scolds teasingly.

"She is not a doll, *cousin*," she jests back. "I'm sure she can handle sitting in a chair all by herself. Surely it's not a new thing for her?"

Nik snorts from the other side of Dimitri, and like mirror images, the two of them pull out their chairs, unbutton their jackets, and take their seats at the same time.

Anastasia leans closer to me. "Eerie, isn't it?" she asks, following my line of sight.

"A little bit," I whisper back.

"They've been like that since they were kids." Her eye roll is dramatic but playful.

"Elsa, this is my wife, Oksana," Sergei says, his attention focused on me.

"It's very nice to meet you," I say demurely. I only know what was passed on to me from Interpol records about Oksana. She married Sergei when she was young, is a former beauty pageant winner and etiquette school enthusiast, volunteers at various nonprofits, and sits on the board for no less than three charities.

She has perfectly coiffed blonde hair, sharp pointed nails, and an outfit that screams luxury. The diamonds around her neck and dripping from her ears are probably worth more than I make in a year, and I can't help but feel intimidated by the woman. She fixes her icy-blue eyes on me, and her lips tip up in a small smile.

"Very nice to meet you as well, Elsa," she says, her accent not as pronounced as her husband's. "Welcome to the family. I hope you don't mind my husband arranging this. I wanted to get to know you, and you looked so overwhelmed at the wedding."

I dip my head in gratitude. "I was. Thank you for being patient with me."

"Nonsense, dear. Anything for family."

Dimitri nods to his aunt. "How is the renovation coming along?" he asks, taking some of the attention off me and sitting back as Oksana launches into details.

She's coordinating the renovation of their townhouse—her third time redoing it in five years—as Sergei smirks around his whisky glass. I take the opportunity to assess him as he pays attention to his wife. He looks at her the way one does an indulgent child. His meaty hand is draped over the back of her chair, and she leans into him. But she keeps her torso angled away from him, her hips twisted in the other direction, and her back away from the backrest where his arm is positioned.

Oksana turns towards me when she finishes telling us about the marble she's having imported from God knows where. "What about Dimitri's apartment, Elsa? Would you like the number for my contractor? He does outstanding work, and you can remodel his penthouse how you like."

"My apartment is fine, *Teta*," Dimitri sighs.

"Your apartment is probably a bachelor pad—not that I've seen it yet, but I can only imagine," she counters. "No woman wants to live somewhere they haven't had a hand in creating. It is only a house then, not a home."

The conversation is halted when the servers appear, carrying long dishes with silver domed tops. I help to move things from the centre of the table so they can land safely, and Dimitri puts his hand on my arm, stopping me. "Leave it," he whispers when a server takes over the job.

Oksana is looking at me curiously. *Right*. Organised crime princesses don't help the help. *Because they're assholes*.

I waited tables during university, and it's my instinct to help when I see someone overladen with dishes, trying their best not to spill it all down

someone's front as they balance the heavy platters. But I'm yanked out of my memories by Dimitri's warm, callused palm on my knee. I knew I should have worn a longer dress.

Dimitri grips harder as I shift in my seat and try to dislodge his hand. Turning to him, I find him looking straight ahead, so I take advantage of the moment and study his face in profile. His high cheekbones and perfectly coiffed dark blonde hair make the slight bump on the bridge of his nose seem less of an imperfection and more like an intentional feature a sculptor carved on a masterpiece. It only makes him look more regal and fierce, adding to the careful perfection he presents to the world. It's a façade, and I want to rip that mask off and see who he is under all of that—and not just when our clothes are off.

*Dangerous territory, Ellie*, I scold myself.

Movement just past his decidedly flawless face catches my attention. I'm caught off guard when Nik leans forward with his eyes fixed on me. He quirks a brow as servers' arms block us from the other side of the table. He flicks the tip of his nose with his thumb like he's got a slight itch. The same way he used to when he was my partner. It was our signal to check in with one another—if we needed the other to intervene.

I subtly shake my head, and he leans back in his chair again.

The servers remove the domes from the platters and wish us a good meal before disappearing. The scent of dinner hits my nose, transforming my stomach from peckish to ravenous. Pierogies, racks of lamb, and cuts of meat roasted to perfection rest on beds of rice, small pasta, and an array of vegetables so colourful they look like a mosaic.

Dimitri picks up the serving utensils and turns to me. "What will it be, Elsa?" he asks.

I choose things randomly, and Dimitri fills my plate and places it in front of me. "Enjoy."

Aleksandr and Sergei plate food for their wives before the men descend on what's left in the serving trays. By the time their selections are made, the platters at the centre are nearly empty and everyone digs in.

Dimitri's hand returns to my leg as he eats, tracing the hem of my dress, and with every swipe across my tense thigh, he drags it higher.

His pinky brushes the material of my panties, and I realise I've been unknowingly spreading my legs for him under the tablecloth. He drags the tip of his finger across my clit, causing me to gasp.

“So,” Sergei says around a swallow of his wine, “Elsa, how is married life treating you?”

I place my fork on the side of my plate and clear my throat. “Very well, thank you. Dimitri is a wonderful husband.”

Said husband hooks his finger under the lace of my panties, his skin warming my already heated clit as he strums it, never using the pressure I need, just teasing me while everyone’s attention is on me. It’s a fight to keep the blush from rising and effectively giving away what Dimitri’s doing to me.

Ana, clearly not worried about her safety, snorts behind her hand at my comment. Aleksandr shoots her a warning glance. The giant has been quiet most of the night, only speaking when spoken to, and this is the most animation I’ve seen from him. His and his brother’s file say they’re called the “tanks.” So far, he’s shown as much emotion as the war vehicle.

“That’s good,” Sergei says. “Keeping your wife happy is no simple task, nephew. But it sounds like you’re off to a good start.”

Dimitri doesn’t answer, just returns his attention to his meal and slips his finger into my wet pussy, not moving it, just letting it rest there as if to remind me what he owns.

Oksana peppers me with questions throughout the meal. Nothing too personal, but they’re frequent enough that it’s taking forever to finish my meal as I have to keep pausing to answer her. What’s worse is, Dimitri’s hand is still taking up residence between my thighs and he chooses the most inopportune times to begin stroking me, bringing me right to the edge and then backing off. I’m fucking shaking from the waist down. To the point I’m honestly surprised the silverware on the table in front of me hasn’t started rattling. I’ve been reduced to a needy, dripping mess, and Dimitri loves it.

Oksana invites me for tea next week, and Anastasia bumps my knee with hers when I miss the invite the first time because I’m so focused on my husband’s hand. It causes a shift in Dimitri’s fingers and my teeth to grind together. A smile quirks my lips as I graciously accept, insisting Ana come with us. If I have to go to tea with her mother, she’s coming with me.

With the meal finished, Dimitri withdraws his hand, leaving me feeling empty and wanting. He meticulously folds his napkin and places it beside his plate.

Dimitri looks at me, lifts his fingers to his lips, and sticks them into his mouth as if to suck off some errant sauce from his meal. But my pussy was certainly not on the menu tonight, despite his stealing a taste. An appreciative

hum leaves his lips as he pulls them away. Smirking, he turns to the server and simply says, “Delicious.”

The man accepts the praise none the wiser, while I hide my rapidly heating face behind a curtain of hair.

Before the server can begin listing dessert options, Dimitri stands. “We need to be off, Uncle. Thank you for inviting us.”

Offering me his hand—the one that was just licked clean—Dimitri tugs me up from my seat, the rest of the men following suit, standing as I do, as is customary in old school, proper etiquette.

Nik goes first, guiding us through the restaurant, and as a group, we exit the restaurant and wait off to the side of the entrance for the drivers to pull up.

The night is warm enough not to need a jumper, and after the feverish experience in the restaurant, I welcome the cool air as it settles on my skin.

The men chat as Anastasia—who insists I now call her Ana—her mom, and I stand just off to the side of their huddle. Dimitri’s hand rests on the small of my back, keeping us within touching distance even as we are in two different circles, and when I try to step away to join the other women, he grips the back of my dress, keeping me in place. I resign myself to my fate, staying within arm’s reach.

Nik says something, pulls out his phone, and turns it around to show Dimitri, Aleksandr, and Sergei. Dimitri leans in to get a better look and in doing so, his hand momentarily slips from my back.

All at once, a series of events rush by in a millisecond.

There’s a squeal of tyres from the street as a black van speeds up and then screeches to a halt in front of the restaurant. Dimitri reaches for me, and the sliding door to the van slams open, the neon lights of the nearby billboards glinting off the muzzles of two guns.

Everything speeds up and slows down all at once.

Nik takes Dimitri’s and Sergei’s arms, blocking them both with his body and shoving them towards the valet stand. The gunmen from the van open fire, and I throw Ana towards Aleksandr, who scoops her into his arms and ducks and rolls away. But Oksana is too far from everyone, having lit her cigarette downwind.

Despite my heels, I lunge for her, tackling her to the ground as a bullet whizzes over my head, right where Oksana’s head was an instant ago, and a second clips my upper arm. An agonising burn races through me, but I focus

on the woman I'm trying to save on the dirty pavement as she screams.

I roll with her, gritting my teeth against the pain and tucking us behind a car as the van revs and peels away from the restaurant, leaving screaming passersby around us. I assess Oksana, finding her shaken but thankfully unharmed.

Dimitri launches himself past Nik, headed right for me, his face a mask of rage and anger as he reaches me and pulls me into his arms.

He's not hurt. He's fine. Both of them are. I look over his shoulder and find Nik dusting off his suit jacket and frowning at a spot on the sleeve.

I hear nothing but the buzz of my adrenaline high, even as Dimitri shakes me in his arms and shouts at me. He pulls his hand away from my arm, blood coating those same fingers he used in me earlier.

"What the fuck were you thinking?!" he roars at me.

I just blink up at him. Oksana is sobbing behind me as Sergei helps her up. Ana shivers behind a stoic and pissed-off Aleksandr as he looks down the street towards where the van disappeared.

I've been in firefights before. Hell, I'm trained for this. But *Elsa* isn't, and she has an audience right now.

Letting tears flood my eyes, I cry in earnest, already repeating the licence plate in my head so I don't forget it. Dimitri gathers me into his embrace, and the cars come around the corner with the none-the-wiser drivers behind the wheels of the three vehicles.

Nik checks me over with his dark eyes, his jaw ticking when he sees my bleeding arm. He flicks his nose again, and I shake my head once more.

People come pouring out of the restaurant behind us, looking for trouble instead of staying far away. Dimitri throws a handful of bills at the valet stand, probably enough to cover the damage to the restaurant's façade. He ushers me into the car, Nik following Dimitri in and slamming the door behind him.

"What the fuck, Ellie?" Nik barks as the driver pulls away.

I round on him, wiping the tears from my cheeks and levelling a glare at him with a haughty scoff.

"Shut up, Nik."

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Nikita

ON MY ORDERS, IGOR, OUR DRIVER, SPEEDS TO THE PENTHOUSE.

Ellie is clutching her arm as blood seeps through her clenched fingers.

“You need a hospital,” Dimitri curses under his breath.

“Not a chance. I’ll be fine. Just give me your tie.”

He slips the material off, and she grabs it, fastening it around her upper arm and holding the tail ends out to Dimitri. The man is shaking. He couldn’t tie his shoes right now if you offered him a million bucks.

“Give me that.” I shove his hands out of the way and roughly tie the tourniquet in place. “I’ve got a kit at home. Just keep pressure on it.”

Beside me, Dimitri is a ball of rage and retribution, ready to launch himself at the next threat.

Once we reach our building, we stumble from the car, race through the lobby, and silently ride the lift to the penthouse. As soon as the doors are open, I wrap my hand around Ellie’s good arm and start dragging her inside, her feet scrabbling for purchase as I set off at my pace.

“Dimitri, call the twins and get them en route. The licence plate was BKM-4445.”

“4446,” Ellie corrects through gritted teeth.

I swing her around and stare down at her face. “You’re sure?”

She shrugs. “Yes, but I doubt they’ll have kept the plates on for long, so what does it matter? It was a black Mercedes Sprinter. Have someone get the traffic cam footage. You guys can do that, right?”

I nod and lift my gaze to Dimitri. He’s vibrating with rage, and any hand he puts on Ellie right now will not help her and might hurt her further. “Fucking do it, D. I got this. Cool your jets and take it out on someone who deserves it.”

He shakes his hands at his side, and the tension vibrates in his shoulders.

I look down at Ellie. “Go up to my room. I’ll be there in a second.”

“It’s locked, asshole.”

“Been trying to get in?” I ask with a raised brow.

“It is my home now, isn’t it? I didn’t know the guest room was off-limits.”

I take my phone out of my pocket and, with a few clicks, I disengage the lock and wave a hand up the stairs when the audible click rings down the

staircase. “All yours. Try not to go snooping through my underwear drawer,” I tease, knowing that’s exactly what she’ll do when she gets in there. She’s always been the curious type.

Ellie huffs and walks up the stairs.

“This is not over,” Dimitri says from the opposite side of the foyer. “You cannot come between my wife and me.”

“Look, man. You’re a triggered mess. I don’t know what set you off or what it threw you back to in that head of yours, but you’re tense and all over the fucking place. If you touch her right now, you *will* hurt her. It’s not a question of might. It will happen; I guarantee it.”

“Someone fucking shot at my wife!” he bellows.

“No, asshole, they shot at you. You’re okay, but she’s got a graze, and you’re losing your shit. Get it together and get the twins on this before that car gets farther away. Sergei and Oksana took Ana home. I’ll bet Aleksandr has already called Ivan, which means the tanks are rolling all over NYC, combing the streets looking for those fuckers. Give them direction.”

“They weren’t shooting at me.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re the *pakhan*. Of course they were shooting at you. Now GO!” I bellow back at him. There would be time later to find out who was shooting at who, but Ellie’s blood loss is my priority right now.

Dimitri stomps off, and I take the stairs two at a time to my room. I push through the door and don’t see Ellie. Cracking the door to the ensuite, I find her stripped down to her underwear, the tie’s tail gripped between her teeth as she tightens the material around her arm until I can stitch it.

My first instinct is to rush to her—to touch her and make sure she’s okay. But something about the anger in her eyes makes me pause.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I demand, catching her by the shoulders to steady her when she lists to one side, clutching at the wound. Her arm is coated in red, and she’s got a slight glossy quality in her eyes.

Ellie grinds her teeth, her gaze flashing with anger. “I was thinking I didn’t want to watch anyone die today,” she mutters, wincing as she squeezes her arm tighter.

I can’t help but feel a pang of sympathy for her as I gently pry her fingers away from the wound. As I wet a hand towel and start wiping away the sticky blood from the cut, I notice how close we are, how her body is pressed against mine.

“Thanks,” she mutters, pulling away from me. “I can take it from here.”

I don't want to let her go, so I step closer. "Why did you put yourself in the way?" I ask, my eyes searching hers. She's mad at me for snapping at her, but fuck, I need to know.

Ellie hesitates for a moment but then speaks. "You had Dimitri handled, but Oksana was alone and off to the side. She was unprotected, and I acted on instinct. Besides, what better way to ingratiate myself into the family than to save Sergei's wife?"

With my fingers still on her skin, my mind races as I process her words. She put herself in harm's way to gain *approval*?! I'm about to press for more details when I hear a voice behind me.

"Nik, what the hell are you doing?" Dimitri seethes. It's clear he's been watching us from the shadows, and the jealousy in his eyes is unmistakable when our gazes collide.

I feel the tension in the air as Dimitri approaches us, his eyes locked on Ellie. "How bad is it?" he demands.

Ellie doesn't flinch under his gaze. "I'm fine, honestly. Nik was just getting the antiseptic ready to flush the wound. It's nothing I haven't dealt with before," she says, her eyes flickering back to me. "Life of an organised crime princess, you know."

*And an Interpol agent. Does Dimitri truly not know who he let into his home?*

Dimitri's eyes narrow as he looks between us, his hand twitching towards his gun. I have to defuse the situation before it gets out of hand.

"I don't know if I have enough in here. D, check your bathroom kit for a bottle like this," I say, pulling the antiseptic from under my sink.

Dimitri looks from Ellie to the bottle in my hand. He nods, and his concern for Ellie's well-being wins out over his need to assert whatever caveman alpha bullshit he feels like he has to display. As he disappears into the shadow of my bedroom, I turn back to Ellie, my heart racing.

"You're playing with fire," I warn her.

Ellie just smiles, a dangerous glint in her eyes. "Isn't that what we're both good at?"

She hops onto the countertop and sits beside the sink. In a heartbeat, she holds her arm over the basin and steals the bottle of antiseptic from my grip, dumping it over the wound before I can react. Her face contorts in pain as she hisses, then curses colourfully in French.

She breathes through the sting, and I'm transported to that evening a

week ago when she sucked Dimitri's cock right in front of me, breathing in and out through her nose as he filled her mouth.

I have never been more turned on, more frustrated, or more wrathful than I was at that moment as she got herself and my boss off right in front of me. And only once did she slide her gaze to me as I sat in that club chair torturing myself while watching the woman, who I'm pretty sure is the love of my life, perform her wifely duties for my former best friend. What a clusterfuck.

"Got it," Dimitri says, stepping back into the bathroom.

I take the bottle from him and hold Ellie's arm in my grip so she can't shy away from the second pouring. "What did the twins say?" I ask D, distracting him as much as myself from having to hurt Ellie.

"They're on it. The plates were ditched, but they're following the van out of the city and across the bridge. They're making a break for the north, where the traffic cams will be less frequent."

"Good. Check on Sergei, Oksana, and Ana," I say. "I have to stitch this, and I don't think you'll want to hear what your wife will say about it."

She grits her teeth as the burn takes root in her arm, and a sweat breaks out on her brow. "Go, Dimitri. I'll be fine and will find you after."

Dimitri leans in, takes Ellie's lips in a fierce kiss like a man possessed, and whispers something in her ear. It's too low to hear, but the words send a shiver through my patient. He leaves as quickly as he arrived, and I level Ellie with a glare.

"What are you doing here, Ellie?"

"Being stitched up so I can return to my husband, Nik." She bats her eyelashes at me, and I grip her arm tighter. She runs her gaze over the open buttons of my shirt, lifting a finger to trace the ink hidden below. "When did you get all the tattoos, anyway?"

"They're new." I shrug, then unpack my stitch kit. I started getting them when I returned from Interpol, covering my body the way I wanted and couldn't before—etching a lifetime of tattoo ideas in mere months. "This is going to hurt. You want anything for the pain?"

"Just fucking do it," she says, the impatience in her tone grating on my nerves.

"Why the rush? As your doctor, I'd prescribe six to sixteen weeks of no vigorous physical activity. Sex is off the table, Ellie."

She throws her head back and laughs in my face. "Jealous, Nik?"

"Extremely."

Her laugh dies, and I focus on her wound instead of looking at her face. It's not overly terrible; stitching the skin together will take only a few minutes.

I work silently as she watches me, studying my face and boring holes into my cheek with her laser-sharp gaze.

"You didn't have tattoos that night," she whispers, the first admittance that she even fucking remembers me at all.

None of my tattoos are overly distinctive, but together, they tell my story. It wraps around my body and trails down my arms to the first knuckles of my fingers. It was painful, but it was nothing compared to the pain I've had in my life, so I sat still and let the needles drag over my skin.

"You're done," I say, skipping the mention of our past. I knot the last stitch, cut the thread, and tape some gauze over it. Ellie slides off the counter in her lilac lace bra and panties. Her body brushes against mine as I refuse to give her space. I tilt her chin upward, and she looks into my eyes.

"Thank you," she murmurs, going up on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. But I move my face, and her lips connect with mine for a mere millisecond before she pulls away and raises shaky fingertips to her lips.

I sigh, then swipe my tongue along my lip, chasing her taste.

"Go, Ellie. But know this: I will figure out why you're here. And whatever you're planning won't work."

She shakes her head and leaves the room, giving my bedroom a once-over before softly closing the door behind her.

*Stupid move, Nikita.*

I let my fist fly, punching the mirror in front of me, and shards fall into the sink, my blood dripping on top of them as the crack in the glass spiderwebs.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

Dimitri

I TWIRL THE TUMBLER BETWEEN MY FINGERS, WATCHING AS THE LIQUOR sloshes up the sides, flirting with the edge. I'm not in the mood for a drink, but it's necessary.

Nik is right. I am in no state to be treating Elsa's wounds right now. My heart lodged in my chest when I caught sight of her, and the only thing I could picture was my father's corpse the morning I walked in and found him dead in his bed, blood pooled and cooling under his stiff body—his eyes forever open in fear and shock.

But instead of his body, I saw Elsa's. Lifeless and forever extinguished, and my mind reacted.

All that blood set me off. All of it pulled me down, down, down into a dark place I no longer wished to be. A place I'm sure I'll end up if I don't find my way out of this life sooner rather than later.

This is all my fault. The assassination attempt was bound to happen after taking Elsa as my wife. There have been too many attempts on my life in the past, and while she might know about the risks, this one was too close for comfort.

There will always be danger for anyone I'm close to. And this time, it wasn't me that got hurt, but Elsa. My wife. My new obsession and the one thing I'm holding onto to maintain my sanity.

I still need to show her the footage from the warehouse. There's a good chance that as soon as she sees what's on there, every last vestige of that elusive thing we call hope will fly out the window and be lost in the tempest of my sins.

I conveniently left the camera and the audio device in my suit jacket and hung it back up in my closet, swearing to myself I would find the courage to give it to her later. But the things on there . . .

My head hangs heavy, staring into my glass and wishing it would bring me the answers I seek. This is going to go poorly. But I need to show her. I need to show her all of me, and I need to know all of her. Not just the pleasure she brings. Not the fire she stokes in my belly, waking me up from a life I've become so numb to.

The door to the suite closes, and her bare feet pad across the floor, growing louder as she draws nearer.

“Dimitri?” she softly calls as she walks deeper into our shared space.

Even responding and urging her closer to me feels like an offence, so I stay quiet, but she finds me anyway.

Stepping onto the terrace behind me, she stops feet away, hugging the doorframe. I feel her looking down at me as I sit on one of the chairs.

After a second, she steps closer. Her fingertips trail along my shoulder and reach my neck before she grips my jaw and tilts my face. I rip away from her hand, and in a flash, she’s the one grabbing my throat. “Look at me, husband.”

Her words catch me off guard, and I turn towards her.

“I am fine. You are fine. Everyone is okay. We will find out what the fuck happened, you hear me?”

I shake my head. “They’re long gone.”

“You have more resources at your disposal now. I’ve already sent a text. We’ll find them.” Right. Because where the Bratva resources might fail, she’s got the backing of multiple government agencies to do her bidding. They’ll converge if she sends them an assassination attempt with a description of the vehicle and a direction.

“Now, what’s really bothering you?” she asks, never letting me look away from her as her grip remains on my throat.

Instead of answering with my words, I put my glass down on the small table beside my chair and gingerly wrap my arms around her body. She steps closer, standing between my spread thighs and moving her hand from my throat to the back of my head. Elsa plays with the short strands there, her nails gentle as she rakes through my hair.

I blow out a deep breath. “You got hurt.”

She shakes me off, takes a step back, and levels a glare at me, letting more of her genuine self shine through. That performance she put on after the shooting was impressive, to say the least. The tears slipped from her eyes so easily I began to question if any of her was real.

Maybe it’s all been a mask, even those glimpses I thought she’d given me.

“I’m fine,” she enunciates. “Stop pouting.”

I scoff but carefully rearrange my mouth into less of a grimace. I pull her carefully onto me, keeping her injured arm against my body so she doesn’t jostle it and I don’t accidentally brush it as I rub her opposite arm. The temperature has plummeted in the last hour, or maybe the adrenaline is

wearing off.

“I don’t pout.”

“You do. And it oddly works on you. You don’t need any other weapons in your arsenal.”

I shift my hips, letting her feel me press against her. “It works, does it?”

She smacks me on the chest. “Why did you spiral tonight?” she asks quietly.

Roughly exhaling, I shake my head. With every blink, the images come swarming back in, playing behind my eyelids like a horror film, and I fucking hate those.

“Come on, Dimitri. You’ve got to give me something other than orgasms.”

I smirk, the first smile I’ve given since this all happened. “But you love those.”

“I do, and I’m still pissed about the kitchen and will seek my retribution soon enough. Maybe it’s your turn to be punished. See how you like it.”

I laugh, imagining Elsa putting me on my knees and in my place. I don’t see it happening, but it’s fun to pretend.

“I’m shaking in my boots, Sabre. Do your worst.”

She sees right through my redirection. “Ah, ah. Spill it. No mics, no cameras, just me and you figuring out how to keep you from losing your shit in case it happens when I need your cooperation.”

“My dad,” I whisper.

“He died about a year and a half ago, right?”

“Yeah, right when Nik got home,” I say, giving her more context. “He didn’t pass in his sleep the way everyone thinks. I paid the coroner more than his fair share to doctor the records, so your agency wouldn’t know it either. He was murdered.”

Elsa looks contemplative as she mulls over my words. “Do you think Nik . . .?”

I shrug—the timeline and method match.

“Why did it trigger you? Was it the blood? It wasn’t an issue with the Irishman.” She waves in the general direction of the kitchen, and I shake my head.

“I don’t know. It was the fact I know you’re a parent. I thought of your daughter growing up without a mom like I did. Does she have her father?” I ask, regretting the words as they leave my mouth.

It's none of my fucking business. Elsa said she was mine for now, but that doesn't mean she won't return to her child's father when this is all over. But I don't want to let her go; I just want a piece of her. I want to keep her with me. To provide a safe and stable home for her and her daughter. Hell, if I could, I'd pump Elsa full of my cum until we added to our family. Because even though I've never met her child, I consider her mine to protect and mine to love. Even if it's impossible.

Everyone in the Bratva insists sons are the goal but watching Elsa and her strength hiding under the surface . . . the idea takes hold. I run a hand over her stomach, imagining it round with our child. I think I'd like a daughter.

"She does not," Elsa answers my earlier question about her daughter's father. And instead of making me feel relieved she is free and unattached, it makes me rage inside. How could someone abandon them? "But she is safe with her godparents. If anything happens to me, there is no one on this planet I trust more."

"Good," I choke out. "That's good."

She looks towards the apartment's interior, and I study her face in the moonlight. "Tell me your name."

She smiles softly. "Ellie. Everyone calls me Ellie."

"I don't want to call you what everyone else calls you." *I don't want to call you what Nik calls you.*

She studies my face, and after many moments of silence, she must decide I need this more than she needs to protect it. She swallows, her throat bobbing with the reflex.

"Eleanor."

I close my eyes as it washes over me. "Eleanor," I whisper, skating my lips along her bare skin, careful not to irritate her wound. "My Eleanor."

"Dimitri, truly, you can't slip up." She pinches the bridge of her nose. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you. No, I *definitely* shouldn't have told you."

"Then why did you?" I ask, begging for her to admit to this—that this isn't all one-sided.

She searches my eyes when I pull away, and her hand rests on my jaw, stroking the stubble growing along my chin. "I can't seem to help myself with you, and that's a shit position to be in."

"And Nik?" I ask. Her jaw snaps shut so quickly her teeth click together. "I'm not imagining the spark there, am I?"

She shakes her head, focusing on the liquor on the table like I did earlier.

“I’m not exactly the sharing type, Eleanor.”

“Yeah, that much is obvious with all of your *mine, mine, mine* talk,” she deadpans. “You didn’t seem opposed when he watched us in the living room.”

Her cheeks flush red, and she raises her good hand to one of them, touching the pinkened skin. My cock twitches under her, and she spins her head towards me when she feels it under her thigh.

“I didn’t say I was against a little exhibitionism. Just that I don’t share.” I shrug.

“It’s funny how you think you have a say in this,” she counters.

“You want Nik?” I ask incredulously.

“Maybe. Maybe not. But either way, it’s not your call to make.”

“Bullshit. It is when you’re wearing my ring and signing my surname.”

She chuckles. “We can always go back to the way it should have been. Without touch. Without intimacy. And you know as well as I do that I’ll give that surname right back when this is all over.”

She’s bluffing.

I study her face—the determined set of her jaw, the relaxed brow, and the set of her shoulders.

She’s not fucking bluffing.

She’d give me up. It would be easy for her to cut me from her skin and discard me with the rubbish.

A woman who is okay with being alone is a powerful woman. And I have a feeling if I don’t play my cards right while she’s here, she’ll walk away when this is all over, leaving Nik and me in the dust.

“Come on,” I say, nudging her from my lap. “Let’s go to bed before you do something you might regret.”

She rolls her eyes but gets up. “I’m serious, Dimitri. Do not push me on these things. You do not own me, no matter whose surname I’m using. I will continue to play the part when needed, but when it’s the two of us, you will treat me with respect.”

Like a queen commanding her subjects, she looks down at me; the moon haloing her head and casting an ethereal glow around her.

With an infinitesimal nod, I agree, unable to deny her anything—but orgasms apparently, and we both know the time is coming when neither of us will hold back any longer. The whispered promise of that distant future grips my soul and takes root.

I take her offered hand and let her pull me up from the chair, my drink forgotten as she leads me to our bed.

She thinks she's won this round, and maybe she's ahead, but I'll win this war if it's the last fucking thing I do. Because while this life will end as I step away from it, I need to start thinking about my afterlife. My rebirth.

And more than anything, I want Eleanor in that heaven I'm chasing.

She strips out of her underthings and climbs into her side of the bed. I get naked on my side and slip under the covers with her. I take my book as she looks at her phone, scrolling through a few videos of her daughter that someone sent her. She doesn't hide her from me the way she did the first night here now that I know about her.

"How is she doing?" I ask.

Eleanor smiles wistfully at the phone. "Good. She's biting one of her godfathers relentlessly, but she's teething. It should be better in about a week."

"One of her godfathers? How many does she have?"

"Four," Eleanor answers without a thought. "And they'd all die for her. She's safe," she reassures me when I prop myself up on my elbows.

"That's a relief," I say, genuinely meaning it. Because if someone is coming after me the way they did with my father, the last thing I want is any blowback on Eleanor or that sweetheart on her phone.

"What's her name?" I ask, hoping for one more truth tonight.

"Bellatrix," she answers with a smile. She turns her head in my direction, rolling it along the pillow and snuggling in deeper. Around a yawn, she asks, "Are you ever going to give me back the equipment from the other day?"

The warehouse. The secret footage that will send all of this careening off a cliff.

"Tomorrow, my Sabre. Let us face the darkness together tomorrow."

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

Eleanor

DIMITRI, THE USUALLY UNAFFECTED AND STOIC MAN, SITS NEXT TO ME, AND there's the slightest lifting of his heel as if he's willing his knee not to bounce up and down as he sits in his desk chair.

"Jesus, Dimitri, how bad is the footage?" I ask. And to think, we'd woken up this morning wrapped around each other, lazing in the streaming sunshine. I'd half forgotten I was working as he murmured my name—my *real* name—and treated me to a massage, always heedful of the bullet graze on my arm. It was a picture-perfect morning, and I wanted it to last.

Slowly, he turns his head towards me, and his gaze bores into mine, not letting go for a second as he goes from profile view to full-frontal, assaulting me with his icy eyes—*not that full-frontal*. I have *got* to stop thinking about his cock.

His vulnerability last night was unexpected, and I dreamt about it all night. That brief moment of letting his guard down and showing me who he was underneath was just that . . . a fleeting glimpse of someone he wishes he could be but isn't. And he might never be. Not yet, anyway. I've never known someone so wrapped up in presenting themselves a certain way that they thoroughly hide who they are.

Nik left for the gym downstairs hours ago, so there's no need to put on a show. Yet, even now, as we sit alone in his office, he's wearing a suit and a white button-up shirt.

The collar is undone so I can peek at the delicious strip of skin leading to his chest. The slightest expanse of skin and my body reacts, like he's teasing a present right under my nose. I'm winning the gold medal for restraint by not leaning over and tasting every inch of his exposed body with my tongue. This must be what the Victorians felt when they glimpsed someone's ankle.

"Yes. It is that bad," Dimitri answers, reminding me of what we were discussing before I got a teensy bit distracted.

With a few clicks of his mouse, he opens the footage and audio from the shipment day he's been so cagey about.

He fast-forwards through the drive to the warehouse on the docks, letting it return to normal speed as the town car slows to a stop. He never turns towards Nik, but I know those tattooed hands on the monitor's edge. I stared at them, studying them in minute detail, when he was bandaging my arm,

wondering when and why he got them.

A sense of dread settles low in my belly, and I lean forward on the chair I dragged over, letting my elbows rest on the big desk before me and wincing at the pain as the movement tugs on the stitches of my upper arm. It isn't until Dimitri reaches over and plucks my bottom lip from between my teeth that I realise I've been gnawing on it. He swipes it, pulling away a smear of blood on the pad of his thumb.

I try not to notice as he lifts the digit to his lips and sucks the red off. Okay, that's a lie. I notice the fuck out of it, but I know what he's doing. He's trying to lighten the mood. Or, at the very least, turn it sexual.

"We don't have to watch this," he murmurs. "You can just get it to whoever you need to, and we can go upstairs. Your arm needs rebandaging anyway, right?"

It does not. But something that wasn't there before enters his voice. Dimitri Aslanov is nervous, and instead of scaring me the way it probably should, I flick my eyes over to him and pin him to his chair with my gaze.

"We're watching this, then I'm handing it over, and we can rebandage."

He sits back, his knee still trying to bounce under the desk, but he's holding onto his restraint with an iron grip.

The camera in his pocket puts our view at chest level as he enters the warehouse, and as he approaches two men, they turn, and I see Sergei and a man I don't know. They nod at Dimitri, and Sergei seems surprised his nephew showed up.

"Dimitri," Sergei says in greeting. "What brings you out today?"

I can just imagine the look on Dimitri's face. It's probably the same one he's wearing now as he sits beside me, his chin resting on his fingertips. Haughty, arrogant, as if this isn't worth his time.

"Who are you?" Dimitri asks the second man.

"Boris, sir," he answers, a dip of his head showing respect.

"Any problems on the way over?"

"No, *Pakhan*. We lost five, but that's fewer than usual."

Lost five of *what*?

"It is unacceptable," Dimitri spits back, not bothering to smother the anger in his tone. It sends a shiver down my spine, and I grip my forearms tighter where they're crossed in front of me, the pain rooting me to the spot.

"Dimitri, Dimitri," Sergei says, raising his hands in supplication. "We built this into the pricing model. It is not uncommon."

“Common does not mean acceptable,” my husband answers.

Nik steps up beside Dimitri. His body shifts further into view on the edge of the screen. Without thinking about it, I lean to the side as if that will help me see more of my former partner. But of course, the camera doesn't move with me.

“Well?” Nik asks. “Let's see the cargo.”

As the men approach the shipping containers, Nik flicks his cigarette onto the floor and stomps on it with a boot. Has he always been a smoker? He never smoked when we worked together, but he might have had the habit in his off hours. It's not as if we saw each other outside of work except for a few after-hours beers and that one night.

They walk through the warehouse, stepping in questionable puddles, and I'm immensely glad I'm not living this out and smelling the disgusting odours that must permeate the warehouse. Boris leads the way until they reach two large shipping containers.

Boris produces a key from his pocket and slides it into the padlock on the first container. He shifts the bar and gives it a firm yank. There's a scrape of metal, a grinding of pieces that don't slide together easily—as if the universe is telling anyone who dares open it that we won't like what we find inside. He keeps the door open, and Sergei stands with his hands crossed over his chest, a self-satisfied and smug grin on his face as the container's contents become clear.

Desperate pleas and cries reach my ears through the computer's speakers as the twenty women and girls housed within skitter away from the men at the entrance.

Bile churns in my stomach, and I slap my hands over my mouth as my eyes fill. They burn with unshed tears, but I am strong enough to witness their suffering if they are strong enough to endure this.

Dimitri speaks beside me, pausing the video and making me flinch. His voice is low and full of self-loathing. One girl's face is frozen in horror as she spreads her arms wide to block the view of the girls behind her. “My father started this. And I didn't know about it until just before the wedding.”

Turning towards him, I see his right hand fisted in his hair as the second drums out a beat on his leg.

“This wasn't in the briefings,” I whisper. None of this was. If it had been, we'd have put a plan in place and pretended to be buyers until we could shut it down at the source. Pertinent questions swirl in my mind, the most

prominent being *Where are these girls now?*

“By the time I found out, the plan for you was already in place. Everything would have been delayed if I’d sent word about this.”

He’s right, of course. An operation of this magnitude would have required more planning and coordination. I’m not equipped to deal with this on my own. I need resources and a team, and more fucking information. I will kill him if he lets these girls go to their fates.

“Play the fucking video, Dimitri,” I say in a low voice, daring him to show me how little he did to help them.

“Eleanor,” he breathes, touching my arm and using my real name as if that will soften whatever is coming. I turn away from him, focusing on the screen again. *If they can live it, I can watch it*, I repeat like a chant in my mind. I have to. Because not one of the men standing in front of the container is helping them, and this is the absolute least I can do in a situation beyond my control.

“Play. The. Fucking. Video,” I repeat.

He reaches out and clicks play and the girl in front’s face morphs before my eyes, going from angry to resigned, even as she shields the girls behind her.

A few of them cry in earnest when they see the four men standing there, like the horsemen of the apocalypse, ready to rain down hell on their lives.

“How many?” Dimitri asks Sergei.

“There were forty-five,” Boris cuts in. “So forty now.”

Jesus Christ. Human trafficking is one of the worst things in the world, and on this scale, it’s sickening beyond belief. I’ve never personally seen an operation with this many transported at once.

“And the girls that didn’t make it?” Dimitri asks.

“Sunk somewhere in the Atlantic,” Boris says.

They’re from abroad, then. Their fair hair and Slavic features lead me to believe they’re Russian. Stealing from their own populace . . . my nausea returns. If I know one thing about Natasha Volkov, the leader of the Bratva, it’s that she wouldn’t let this stand.

Dimitri shifts towards his uncle, getting his whole body in the camera shot. “Market price?”

Sergei shifts on his feet. “Twenty million total.”

“Buyers are lined up?” Dimitri asks coolly, as if this isn’t affecting him the way it is me.

“For most of them, and for two weeks now. The coffers are bursting, nephew,” Sergei says, moving closer and clapping Dimitri on the shoulder like they’re old buddies. “I’m glad you’re finally taking an interest in the real money-making business here. And if you’d like, you can take one, and we’ll ship the others. We didn’t list all of them and have some room to play.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Dimitri replies. “After all, you remind me nearly daily that I need to have an heir. One would think you wouldn’t want me distracted from that.”

Sergei laughs darkly. “Fair enough. But you should enjoy your position *and* your new wife. I have this handled, just like I always have. Your father trusted me with it.”

“I want to see the list of buyers,” Nik says quietly from beside Dimitri. Sergei inclines his head in acknowledgement. “To double-check where our money is coming from.”

Dimitri turns to leave but then turns back. A sick sense of dread settles low in my belly before he speaks. And when he does, I fight the urge to vomit.

“You know what? I will take one,” he says.

A grin unfurls on Sergei’s lips. “What’s your flavour, nephew?” He waves his arm towards the container in invitation, and without bothering to inspect the “merchandise,” Dimitri strides towards the exit.

“The youngest.”

I reach for the wastebasket under the desk and yank it to me, retching into it.

His hand lands on my back, and I flinch under his touch.

“She is safe. They all are,” Dimitri says once I stop emptying the meagre contents of my stomach into the bin. “I had to play along to keep Sergei from figuring it all out.”

I shake my head. “None of them are safe. The trauma, losing their families, being ripped away from everything they know and sent God knows where . . . None of it is okay.”

“I know, Sabre. I know. But I’m doing my best with limited time and knowledge of it. It was the best I could come up with at a moment’s notice.”

“Where are they now?” I ask, not sure if he’s even going to tell me.

Sitting more upright, I examine his face, hunting for the truth I hope is on it.

“I was every single buyer, and as soon as we were back in the car, I

checked the listing and purchased the rest, so none were left behind. All paid for from different offshore accounts under anonymous names, all untraceable.”

I scoff. “You just had twenty million dollars lying around?”

He shrugs. “They’re being cared for and kept far away from my uncle. The one who defended the rest agreed to work with us and get the others on board. As soon as your agents speak with them, I promised they would be returned home. Unless their families sold them, that is. In that case, we need a place for them.”

My mind spins, thinking over the logistics of all of this as the chime on Dimitri’s phone rings. The lift is on the move up here. We can’t be directly involved in getting them home, not with Nik as our constant shadow, but I will get the word to my contact here in New York, and they can arrange how to handle this shitstorm that just blew in.

I whisper as the lift doors slide open and announce Nik’s arrival. “I will handle this. But I need you to distract Nik so I can make a shit tonne of calls. Give me all the details of where they’re staying and suggestions on how we can safely move them.”

Dimitri nods, clicking out of the video player and ejecting the drive the footage is stored on. He slides it into my hand and drops to his knees in front of my chair, yanking my legs apart just in time for Nik to round the corner and see the surprise on my face as he watches my husband’s head buried near my clit.

His dark eyes cloud over as I smirk at him, enjoying these brief moments of petty revenge. He huffs and takes a cigarette from behind his ear, heading towards the terrace, his shoulders tense and biceps flexing as he curls and releases his fists.

I try not to watch the flex of his body as he crosses the space and slides open the door, but with Dimitri’s hot breath against my skin and the visual eye candy, my pussy gives an insistent throb.

I’m in so much fucking trouble.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

Eleanor

“YES, THEY’RE SAFE AT THE ADDRESS I SENT THROUGH. YOU CAN GO FOR A pickup. Dimitri says they’ve been treated for any injuries or illnesses, and there’s one more to pick up, but she’s en route.”

Agent Kim sighs. “What the fuck is he thinking, just springing this on us?”

“He said he didn’t find out until recently, and by the time he did, it would have delayed our arrival as we worked out the details.”

Agent Kim chuckles. “He’s got balls, this one, and he’s not wrong.”

“So, can we help?” I ask, daring to hope the agencies don’t drag their feet on this one. It may be happening on US soil, but if the girls came from abroad, that ropes in a lot of other jurisdictional bullshit.

Agent Kim types furiously on the other end of the phone, smothering the receiver while he shouts at someone else to get another agent on the line.

His boss clicks on, and I repeat everything I’ve already said. He assures me they’ll be in to pick up the girls before the end of the day. According to Dimitri, the girls are being sheltered, fed, and treated for injury and malnutrition, tended to only by women, so they feel no more uncomfortable than they need to. Not that their scars will stitch together any time soon after what they’ve endured.

My other phone rings while I’m on the call, and Dimitri’s name scrolls across the top. I click the side button to ignore it, and he continues calling despite sending him to voicemail.

“I have to go. Let me know how it goes,” I plead.

Agent Kim assures me he will, and he and his boss start talking logistics before I even hang up. Scooping up the buzzing phone as Dimitri continues to demon dial me, I click the green button and lift it to my ear. “What?!”

“Get downstairs. NOW!” His voice roars down the line, and I jump up from my spot in my closet and tear through the suite, picking up a gun from the vanity and stuffing it into the band of my leggings. Good way to get your ass shot off, but fuck protocol. I’m not leaving here unarmed with Dimitri’s panicked voice ringing in my ears, and these leggings don’t have goddamned pockets.

I take the stairs two at a time, still in my trainers from the gym, and press the button for the lift, even as shooting pains run up and down my arm. I grit

my teeth and try to keep it still. Stupid bullet graze. Still on the call, Dimitri curses up a storm and tells his driver to go faster.

“What’s going on?” I ask Dimitri while I wait for the fucking lift to deign me with its presence. He and Nik were the last to use it, so the damn thing is down in the lobby.

“Where are you?”

“Waiting for your slow as fuck lift!”

It arrives, and I throw myself inside, smashing my thumb into the lobby button.

“The little girl slipped away. We’re picking you up to come with us. I doubt she would willingly come with us after everything she’s been through, so you’re our only shot.” My stomach bottoms out as the lift descends, adding to the swooping feeling.

“How are we going to find her?” I press the button a few more times to speed things up. Fuck knows how, but it feels like it does.

As soon as the doors slide open, I tear across the tile, ignoring the shouts of concern from the guy at the desk, and throw myself outside. A black town car comes to a skidding stop right in the middle of the street, not bothering to pull up to the pavement. The door opens, and Dimitri is waving me in as cars lean on the horn, a few colourful curses going up from the surrounding drivers.

I sprint to the car, sliding in and yanking the door shut behind me.

“GO!” Dimitri roars, looking at his phone as he barks instructions at the driver.

“She has a tracker, D. We’ll find her.” Nik’s words break through the panic lacing my brain. They don’t sound happy, though—as if he thinks Dimitri requested the girl for his own pleasure, and I’m along for the ride.

“And you think I want to find her in some pervert’s basement? I’d rather get hold of her before that happens,” Dimitri barks back.

“You put a tracker on the girl?” I ask, eyes wild.

“All of them have trackers for security. She was transported separately from the others and slipped her guard.”

He must have moved her separately to keep his involvement with the others disconnected. He must be kicking himself right about now. My brain stalls on something he just said. The others have trackers. I didn’t tell Agent Kim that. How the fuck didn’t I know? Why didn’t I ask?

Dimitri guesses my internal questions and leans closer to me. “They’re

removed as soon as they arrive at the centre.”

Nik is vibrating on the seat beside Dimitri, the tension thick enough to cleave with an axe. “I can’t believe you requested a girl. That’s sick, D. And you”—he rounds on me—“you know he requested a child? And you don’t have a problem with that?”

“Shut the fuck up, Nikita,” Dimitri barks. “You have a problem with what’s going on? There’s the door.”

He wisely shuts up as he looks at the scenery flying by. We’re moving at speed now that we’re headed out of Manhattan, and that fall would hurt.

Not that I’d be opposed. The bastard has it coming. I eye the door and wonder if I can shove him out of it. Adrenaline spikes within me, and I know part of the imagery in my head is because of that. The rest is out of pure spite for fucking me and betraying my trust.

“She’s stopped moving,” Dimitri says with a mix of relief and fear, then lists off an address for his driver.

We fly across a bridge as we make our way to Brooklyn. “Where is she?” I ask, slipping into work mode. I need all the information before we just show up and scare this poor child half to death.

“Looks like it’s a junkyard,” Dimitri answers, clicking a few things on his phone and showing a Google Maps overhead view of the area. It’s not a massive lot, which gives me hope we’ll be able to find her before someone else does.

When we arrive, the driver hits the brakes, and I fling open the door, spilling from the back seat with Dimitri and Nik on my heels.

“What’s her name?” I ask, whipping around and finding the guys striding to the office and almost tearing the door off the hinges.

“Anya,” Nik calls over his shoulder as Dimitri shouts at someone within.

I tear into the lot, passing heaps of junk and calling out her name. She’s Russian and probably doesn’t know any English yet.

“Anya! *Gde ty?*” I call. “Where are you, sweetheart?” I keep the panic from bleeding into my voice and continue looking for her.

Dimitri catches up to me after he veered off to the right, checking along the chain-link fence surrounding us as Nik scours the other side of the lot.

After peering into what must be the fiftieth car and finding nothing, Nik shouts from the other side. “Over here!”

I race towards his voice, Dimitri keeping pace just behind me until I slip through a narrow passage he can’t get his body through. He growls in

frustration and takes off in another direction to find his way to Nik.

Nik is looking up at a pile of cars, his gaze aimed at the window of the third one in the stack. There's blood on the window frame, and he's speaking to the girl hiding inside, her hair just visible over the edge of the window frame. "*Vse v poryadke, malen'kaya l'vitsa. Ya ne prichinyu tebe vreda.*"

I only catch snippets of Nik's words, but he's telling her he won't hurt her, something I doubt she trusts. A blonde head peeks over the window, and her eyes go from Nik to me. Tears well and spill down her cheeks.

"Hi. I'm Ellie." I place my hand on my chest in introduction. I talk to her like I would want someone to speak to Bella if she ever found herself lost in a strange place, not knowing the language or location. "We'll get you home to your mama and papa."

I don't move closer, letting her see I don't intend to threaten or harm her, and when Nik shifts his stance, she ducks into the car again. "Nik, walk away."

He looks from where Anya was poking out to me, then back again. "Okay, I'll be behind the blue car at your six."

I nod that I've heard him, and when he walks away, Anya pokes her head out again, watching him go. Dimitri is on the other side of the car pile, out of sight from Anya, with poking his head around to observe but not getting in the way.

"Anya, I want to take you home," I say. "*Dom.*" *Home.*

She nods quickly, her lower lip wobbling as tears spill.

I keep my feet planted but lift my arms to her, inviting her to join me. "Take home?" she asks quietly in simple English. She seems about seven, and her English is not great, but so long as we understand each other, I couldn't care less.

A gentle smile spreads across my face, and I nod. "Yes, sweetheart. We will help get you home."

She briefly studies my face before nodding and shimmying her little body from the broken mess of the car she was hiding in. "Help?" she asks as she hangs from the window frame, her hand bloodied where she must have scraped it on one of these tetanus-riddled rust buckets.

I step closer and carefully take her around the waist, pulling her into my arms. She spins and wraps her too-skinny arms around my neck, hugging me close. My injured arm hurts like a motherfucker as I cradle her, but it doesn't matter. I'd do anything to help this little one feel safe.

She grips tighter when Dimitri's voice drifts closer. "We should get her out of here. I paid the guy on duty to look the other way, but it won't last long."

Anya whimpers in my arms, no doubt fearing the man's proximity.

I run a gentle hand down her back, and she settles further into my arms. "It's okay. Neither of them will hurt you, Anya. It's okay. Shhh, baby."

It feels like the most natural thing in the world to hold her in my arms and calm her. She might be older than Bella, but motherhood knows no bounds, and right now, I am the only woman she can depend on until I get her home to her mother.

"Sabre, let's go."

Dimitri leads me and Anya, still slung around my neck like a sloth on a tree, towards the car where the driver is idling, blocking the entrance to the junkyard. Nik is standing by the passenger door and climbs in as the driver does the same while Dimitri, Anya, and I slide into the back seat.

"Where are we taking her?" Nik asks, turning in his seat to look back at us.

I keep stroking Anya's back and throw him a *you must be stupid* look. "Home."

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

Nikita

ELLIE COMFORTS THE GIRL AS WE CROSS BACK INTO THE CITY AND HEAD towards the penthouse. Not once have her hands stilled, and she never lets her words rise above a whisper, using a soothing cadence that has me relaxed in the passenger seat.

I still can't believe Dimitri singled out the youngest child there. What kind of monster did his father turn him into while I was away at Interpol? The last I'd seen them together, they'd hated one another. Dimitri for being forced into a life he didn't want. And his father for having a son who wasn't eager to take up the reins.

Dimitri's phone rings in his pocket, yanking me out of the lull Ellie's voice had put me in.

"Yes?" he answers, pausing before blowing out a breath of exasperation. "Fuck. No. NO! Don't you dare, you fucking imbecile. He's mine. Just stay there. I'm on my way." He hangs up and turns towards Ellie.

"I have to go take care of something. I'll be back soon. Can you two handle this?" He looks from me to Ellie, then down at Anya before sticking his tongue out at her and breaking some of the tension his phone call brought on. I do a double-take at the look because it's so out of character for the Dimitri I know. Though, do I truly know him at all anymore?

Hoping against all hope that he's sending this poor girl back to where she came from, I turn my gaze towards Anya when she responds with a tiny giggle and tucks herself further into Ellie's body.

This calming demeanour must be recent, and seeing how she's changed and what I've missed irks me. She's so natural at comforting a child, and it's not something I've ever seen from her. Hell, we had a case we were working on about six months before I stole the diamond, and when the child clung to her, she kept sending me looks of unease and trying to peel their fingers off her.

"I'm coming with you. You need a guard," I say, looking at Dimitri. Where he goes, I go. I vowed it to Sergei when I was assigned to the post, and I don't like breaking my promises. I'm still paying for the last time I did.

Dimitri ignores my statement and looks at Igor in the driver's seat. "Igor, you good with pulling double duty and acting as my bodyguard today?"

"Yes, *Pakhan*."

“There. Done.”

The town car rolls to a stop, and I exit, opening the back door for Ellie and Anya to emerge. Anya still hasn't let go, clinging to Ellie like a koala. She steps towards the lobby door, and I poke my head in and ask Dimitri, “What's going on?”

His fists ball at his sides as he answers, “Caught us a rat. Make sure she's okay.” He nods at Ellie and Anya as they linger on the pavement. With that, he yanks the door out of my hand and shuts it, Igor speeding away down the street as fast as New York traffic will allow.

Which *she* was he talking about?

I follow Ellie inside, using my phone to access the lift, and we head upstairs, Ellie still murmuring in Anya's ear.

The little girl peeks over at me, and I try to smile reassuringly but must fail because she whimpers and buries her head into Ellie's neck again.

“What are you doing?” Ellie reprimands in a hushed tone as the lift climbs towards the penthouse.

“Smiling.”

“Well, stop it. You're freaking her out.”

“By smiling?”

“It must be all the lies caught between your teeth.”

I can't help it. I bark out a laugh, startling all three of us with its volume. Ellie snorts, and soon, Anya is laughing with us, not knowing the context but feeling some of the unease dissipate.

We arrive, and Ellie brings Anya into the kitchen and sets her on the countertop. When she tries to pull away, Anya refuses to let go. I sigh, wash my hands, and gather the first aid equipment from under the sink, putting it right next to them so Anya can see what I'm opening and that none of it will hurt her.

“Anya,” Ellie says, pulling her face away and looking the girl in the eyes. “This is Nik.” She puts her hand on my chest, and my heart beats double time. Her eyes slide from where her hand is touching me up to my eyes, and hers widen when she sees the emotion I'm restraining within.

“He is a good man.” The *I think* is left off from the sentence, but I hear it rattle through my head as if she said it aloud. I've never been a “good” man.

“*Ya vytru tvoyu ruku, no l'vitsa ne plachet ot boli. Ona rychit,*” I say in Russian. *I will clean your hand, but a lioness does not cry in pain. She roars.*

Without thought, I called her “little lioness” in the junkyard, and the

name is oddly fitting. All that blonde hair frames her face, giving her a feral look, and the words she muttered when she thought I couldn't hear her below her junkyard hideout make her brave in my eyes. A trait she will undoubtedly grow into one day.

She nods, clenching her jaw as she watches my face for signs of a lie.

Ellie's hand is still on my chest, and I step away, letting it fall into the chasm between us as I wet a washcloth to clean the cut on Anya's hand.

I work quickly and methodically, picking out the debris in the wound across her palm. Not all that different from the one Dimitri has recently healed from. Anya keeps her little face impassive, finding that inner strength we all possess and can call on when needed.

Only small grunts escape her lips, and when the first one comes out meek, she adjusts her tone and snarls adorably instead. Thankfully, she doesn't need stitches, so when the wound is cleaned, I wrap it in gauze and peek up at her brilliant blue eyes.

*“Molodets, malen'kaya l'vitsa. Ty dozhivesh' do togo chtoby rychit yeshche odin den'.”*

*Well done, little lioness. You will live to roar another day.*

She smiles at that and looks back at Ellie. “Thank you,” Anya says, her accent thick but the words clear.

I move away, washing my hands and putting the kit back in the cupboard. Instead of standing there without knowing what to do, I dig through the pantry, finding the supplies I hid from Dimitri.

Untwisting the bag, I pull out two slices of Wonder Bread—something I sorely missed when living in Lyon. It may be shit and full of chemicals and not at all comparable to the incredible bread France offers, but it's my guilty pleasure. I slather one slice with crunchy peanut butter and the other with strawberry jam from the depths of the fridge.

Childhood in a sandwich. Well, the American half of my adolescence. And it's one of Dimitri's weaknesses as well. If he found my stash, I'd be cleaned out in minutes.

But sharing my hoard with Anya doesn't bother me.

I put it on a plate and hold it out for Anya. She looks at Ellie, and after she nods, Anya grabs it like her life depends on it. Ellie leads Anya to the living room to sit on the couch. She's already inhaling the food and moaning at the unfamiliar taste before I busy myself making more.

Ellie returns to the kitchen and sits beside me, resting her hand on the one

I'm using to spread the peanut butter on the second sandwich I'm putting together.

"Hey," she says softly. "Thank you."

I turn my head, her gaze already on my face tracing the tattoos that snake from behind my ear down to the collar of my shirt.

"No problem." I focus on the sandwich-making instead of her closeness and the pull she has on me.

Her hand still rests on mine, and she grips it harder as I spread the jam. "Look at me, Nik."

Letting out a breath, I tilt my head towards her, not entirely, because I've barely looked at her full in the face since she got here. Every time I do, I'm thrown back to that night. The night that wasn't supposed to mean anything but did.

*It still does, no matter how much I shove it down.*

"Let go of me, Ellie."

"No."

"Yes," I hiss.

"Why?"

"Because you're married. Because what we had is in the past." *Lie.*

More words spill from my lips because I want to hurt her as badly as I hurt inside. I want her splayed out and cut open from navel to neck like I am. "I used you. And yet here you are, following me to New York, hoping for what? Another ride on my dick?"

Her face morphs to shock as my words land, but I'm far from done. "It was nothing, Ellie. If you need a cock that badly, hop on your husband's."

Her mouth curls into something confident as the final words land. "Is that what this is, then? Jealousy is causing you to lash out?"

"Cut the bullshit, *Elsa*," I say, using her new name. Or is it her old name? Fuck knows what the truth is anymore.

"Just as I suspected . . . jealousy."

I scoff, but she cuts it off.

"Oh, Nik. I don't need either of your cocks that badly. I fuck who I want when I want. It's never been a problem for me in the past, and it's certainly not one now. All that's changed these past few years are my tastes. Who knew I liked to be choked? Who knew I wanted to be fucked into the mattress so hard I see stars as my orgasm barrels through me?" She lets out a little laugh, like discovering this side of herself is just as intriguing to her as it is to

me. My knuckles must be white with how hard I'm gripping the knife and envisioning jamming it into Dimitri's chest so she'll turn to me for the fucking she's looking for. "It's not my fault you couldn't deliver that night."

"Bullshit," I seethe. Looking over my shoulder, I see Anya entirely engrossed in her sandwich and almost done with the first. I walk over, place a second on her plate, and return to the kitchen, looking to fight someone—anyone—after seeing how terrified Anya was when we found her.

Instead of putting my supplies away, I cage Ellie against the counter. One arm on either side of her body, I press closer, and her breath stutters. "I left you sated and thoroughly fucked. It's not my fault you give off these good girl vibes. If I'd fucked you the way I wanted, I'd have sent you screaming for the hills. I couldn't have that when so many other things were happening that night."

"Yeah?" she asks, licking her lower lip as we go toe to toe. "How would you have fucked me?"

I step closer, wedging a thigh between her legs and letting her feel my arousal pressed against her hip. She peeks down and drags her eyes up my body until she reaches my lips and stops there.

"Without restraint."

I meet those dark, fathomless eyes, and I watch as the fantasy I have in mind somehow flashes across hers. I pick up a lock of her hair and rub it between two fingers, then take a bigger piece and wind it around my fist. Using my grip on her, I tilt her head back and step closer, running my nose along the column of her throat. "You follow the rules too much, Ellie. I would break those rules with you. Bend them until they snap under our writhing bodies. I saw how you looked at me when we were partners. You were subtle, but not subtle enough. You wanted to bite off more than you could chew, Ellie. And now I want to give it to you until you choke on it."

She squirms under me, her body rocking on my thigh as her skin flushes with a pinkish hue. "That's right, baby. Ride me and get yourself there. You have to fucking earn it."

Ellie groans low in her throat, and I dip my head to that sensitive spot behind her ear which drove her wild that night we were together.

"I'm not fucking you," she says, steel in her tone. The way it was when she recited our agency's rules or the protocols I was so fond of bending.

"Never said you were. Why are you here?" I ask, changing tactics and using distraction as my weapon of choice.

“In my home?” she counters breathlessly.

“In *my* home. Dimitri’s home. It’s not yours, no matter how often you work that magic pussy on his cock.”

“Careful, Nik. Green is not your colour.”

I smirk against her skin, thrusting against her and drawing a rattling breath from her lungs. “What do I have to be jealous of? You’re riding my thigh right now, not his. You can’t keep your eyes off me when I’m around. I know because I’m always watching you, Ellie.”

“And I’m the one getting off. Pretty sure I’m the one winning in this scenario. Why *are* you watching me?”

No matter how hard I fight it, I can’t stop the following words from spilling. “Because we’re not done, Ellie. We’re like a pair of books someone ripped the last pages out of. Neither of us got the conclusion we wanted, and now you’re here. We can write that new ending.”

She shudders against me, throwing her head back, and my hand in her hair stops her from smashing it against a cabinet. I cradle it with my big palm and lick a stripe up her neck as she convulses in my arms. “That’s right, baby. Fucking let go and let me in.”

My words do something to her, like a bucket of ice water thrown on us. She shoves against my chest, pushing me away from her, and I come away with strands of her hair still tangled between my fingers. “Get the fuck off of me.”

She smoothes her clothes, still looking rumpled and wrinkled despite her best efforts.

“I will *never* let you in, Nikita Lenkov. And do you know why?” Ellie doesn’t pause, her words coming fierce and harsh. “Because you use people for your own gain. Because being burned once was more than enough for me. And most importantly, you. Do. Not. Deserve. Me.”

There’s something final about her words, and the beast in my chest raises its head in consideration, watching as it stalks from within. She’s fucking delusional. Hot and cold and unsure of what she wants. Something about my words flipped everything on its head just in fucking time. Luckily, or unluckily, my phone chimes to signal the lift and Dimitri’s arrival.

Ellie and I don’t move for a second; our gazes are still tangled together as we glare at one another, neither willing to back down. This is a dangerous game the two of us are playing, especially with her husband just seconds away from finding her still riding my thigh and my hands penning her in

against the counter. Endless seconds tick by, and we're pulled out of our intense standoff when Anya yelps. The lift doors slide open, and Ellie rushes past me to assure the little lioness that everything is okay.

I tilt my head back, staring up at the ceiling as I slow my breathing and will my cock to stand down. What the fuck was all of that? How does she twist me up so much, changing me into someone I don't fucking recognise anymore? I'm no longer the Nicholas Stephenson she once knew, nor am I the Nikita Lenkov I was supposed to be now. I'm no one, crushed between two identities and left in the dust.

I count to ten, and when I hear Dimitri's shoes on the hard floor, I lower my head and turn to him.

"All good?" I ask.

Dimitri runs his hand through his dark-blond hair like when we were kids. "Fuck no. We have a problem, and you have a choice to make. Stay or go. But if you stay, you're all in, Nik. I mean it. No double-agent bullshit anymore where you report my shit to Sergei."

I look past him at Ellie, who shields Anya from something in the foyer and directs her attention to the terrace. Without needing a moment to think about it, I know my answer. I let her get away once and refuse to do it again.

"I'm in."

# CHAPTER TWENTY

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Eleanor

THE SOUND OF THE LIFT DOORS OPENING PULLS ME OUT OF THIS BIZARRE standoff with Nik. My body has betrayed me yet again, but as soon as that little *ding* rings through the penthouse, my mind jumps back in the driver's seat, and I tear myself away from Nik's dark gaze.

He has no reservations about Dimitri finding me pressed against him with my panties soaked in evidence of my release. But I do.

Maybe he doesn't know Dimitri as well as I've come to know the man in the last week. Maybe he just doesn't fucking care. But the last thing I want today is more bloodshed. We just survived a drive-by shooting. Fuck, how long ago was that? It feels like mere minutes ago and an eternity, all at the same time.

With hurried footsteps, I leave the kitchen, feeling Nik's disappointment behind me. He can act as pissed as he wants. He's the one who threw that night in my face a few minutes ago. I wonder if he would be as flippant if he knew of the result from that night.

And I'm not talking about the diamond.

I turn towards the foyer as I head for Anya on the couch, and what I see has me doing a double-take.

Dimitri is hauling a bloodied and beaten body from the lift, leaving a smear along the tile as he hauls the unconscious man into our home.

"Anya, look outside!" I call, pointing towards the massive windows. She can't quite see the body from her vantage point, but she will if Dimitri drags the man much farther.

The little girl follows my instructions, and I whisper-shout to Dimitri, "What the fuck?"

He lifts his head, and nothing about the man staring back at me is recognisable. His blond hair is dirty and dishevelled, his suit shredded across the chest, and one sleeve hanging precariously by a few threads.

But worse than that, his face is devoid of all emotion. Like every thought has been sucked out and replaced with one thing.

Vengeance.

Dimitri drops the unconscious and broken man's arms, turns towards the kitchen, and walks in with purposeful strides. His shoes click across the floor, and I keep Anya facing the windows with an arm around her. Everything

with Nik is forgotten as I hear their conversation through the open doors.

“All good?” Nik asks.

“Fuck no. We have a problem, and you have a choice to make. Stay or go. But if you stay, you’re all in, Nik. I mean it. No double-agent bullshit anymore where you report my shit to Sergei.”

Nik peers over Dimitri’s shoulder at me, and even though I should focus on making sure Anya is shielded, I can’t help how my eyes bore into his, waiting to see if he has any redeemability left within him.

“I’m in.”

The words resound around me, and part of me is relieved. The other part is terrified as fuck, because how easy is it to say the words and not follow through? Nik knows that better than anyone.

Dimitri turns to me, charging through the kitchen, and stops short when he looks from me to Anya, as if only now remembering she’s here. “Sabre. Call who you need to but get her out of here. Now.”

I nod and gently pull Anya up from the couch. Catching her attention, I mime closing my eyes, and she copies without question. I lead her up the stairs and thank the heavens that she keeps her eyes shut as we pass the crime scene of a foyer. “Move him somewhere else. Anywhere else. And clean this up so I can get her out of here.”

Dimitri agrees, and with his hands under the man’s armpits and Nik carrying the feet, they move the guy to the office area and out of sight.

It takes but a few minutes to get Agent Kim on the phone and tell him I have the additional pickup for him I’d mentioned that morning. I insist he brings a female agent who speaks Russian, if possible, and he says they’ve got a few and will be in the parking garage soon.

As we wait upstairs for their arrival, Anya huddles close to me, peeking up to look around the closet I’ve come to think of as my office.

When the message arrives, I lead her downstairs, through the now spotless foyer, and into the lift. I press the button for the parking garage instead of the lobby, and when the doors slide open, we meet the nondescript blue car and two agents.

The woman I pass her to is calm and reassuring. With a kiss on the cheek, Anya says goodbye, and I promise her in my best broken Russian that she will be safe. In mere hours, she will be reunited with the other girls who were transported, and the agencies can start getting the girls back home.

Once Anya and the agents drive away, I dash back to the lift and haul ass

upstairs. When Anya and I were leaving, it was quiet in the penthouse, but when I return, that's no longer the case.

A garbled scream reaches my ears, followed by a loud *thwack!*

I round the staircase and head past the living room towards the study. I see nothing at first, but the painting with the hidden brass button behind it is out of place again. "Dimitri?" I call. "Nik?"

Nik pokes his head out of the hallway leading to the bathroom. "In here, but you don't have to watch this."

"Fuck that," I counter, taking steps towards him without pause.

"Be sure, Ellie. This isn't for the faint of heart."

I shoulder past him, and where there was a solid wall is now an entryway leading to blackness beyond. What in the Batman secret lair is this?

Cautiously, I step inside, and right in the centre, a single light shines on a man tied to a chair. The rest of the room is shrouded in darkness. Based on where this is situated, the space can't be massive, but without being able to see the walls, it feels endless.

The man's head droops between his shoulders as Dimitri stands over him, a blade in hand. *Not dead, then.*

"You have a torture chamber?" I ask. "Why am I surprised?"

Dimitri turns, and the look on his face will haunt me for the rest of my life. Unconsciously, I spin the simple gold band on my ring finger, a habit I've started when I feel anxious or stressed.

He's enraged, with red streaking his cheeks from exertion and blood. His ordinarily pale-blue eyes, which I always thought were chilling, are something else entirely. At this moment, I realise they usually burn like the centre of the hottest flame.

*Now they're truly freezing, like being lost in the depths of a frigid winter, with no chance of survival. One dangerous enough to paralyse me where I stand.*

"This is who shot you."

Nik moves beside me, taking up a spot against the wall and kicking one foot up behind him for support. He crosses his arms over his chest, content to watch as Dimitri doles out justice.

"Who is this?" I ask, thankful my voice doesn't betray the tremor running through me. It's not the grotesque scene before me that has my body on high alert and ready to flee. It's the man holding the knife.

"Alexei."

I do a double-take, looking at the driver who brought Dimitri and me to the penthouse on our wedding night. I haven't seen him since then, figuring he had just been reassigned. Igor has been my driver on every outing since that night.

"The driver?" I ask incredulously.

"Hard to drive with no hands," Dimitri says, his tone even and calm. His face bleeds indifference, and somehow, it makes everything worse. He stares down at the man in the chair, and in a flash, he has one of Alexei's hands in his, dragging over a rolling cart with his foot. He slams the hand on the table, holding it by the palm as he lifts the knife.

Screams echo around the dark chamber as the knife hits bone, and Dimitri begins to saw.

I turn my gaze, unable to watch the emotionless Dimitri, usually so full of simmering passion, turn into this lifeless, empty shell of a man solely focused on bloodshed.

A thud sounds as the scent of burning flesh reaches my nose, and I gag. I look down, finding Alexei's hand at my feet.

"Who sent you to kill me?" Dimitri asks. It doesn't sound like it's the first time, but Alexei is only blubbering and crying. Tears stream down his cheeks, mingling with the saliva and blood pouring from his mouth. The man is red-faced and shaking, cradling his stump with his intact hand.

Despite the heat of the room, Alexei shivers and shakes his head. "I don't know!" he wails. "It was anonymous. Please, *Pakhan*, don't kill me. Don't do this. I can find out who it was!"

He pleads for everything under the sun, but Dimitri ignores it all, keeping his voice quiet so Alexei has to stop wailing to hear his interrogator. "How did they contact you?"

Alexei is sucking in deep breaths, keeping his arm against his bloodied chest. "It was a call. I got a call a few weeks ago."

"Man or woman?" Dimitri asks before Alexei has even finished speaking.

"A man. Women don't use that kind of language."

I roll my eyes. Alexei obviously hasn't got to know many women.

"Good, Alexei. Thank you," Dimitri coos.

Alexei relaxes into the chair. But Dimitri isn't done. "Which phone did they call you on?"

"My personal phone," he answers. "It was in my pocket."

Dimitri wanders out of the light and returns with a beaten and cracked

iPhone. “Passcode?” he asks.

“1-2-3-4.”

Nik scoffs beside me. “Idiot.”

I can’t help but remember it as the same passcode Dimitri set on my new phone before I could reprogram it. My mind is reeling, grabbing onto random facts and tidbits as I watch the display before me.

Dimitri unlocks and scrolls through the phone, never lifting his eyes to Alexei. “What was the assignment, and what were you promised?”

“Both of you,” Alexei mutters, letting his head hang. “And they promised money.” Alexei hangs his head, not even offering to share with the class what he wanted the money for. He just wanted it.

My husband moves closer, dragging his fingers along Alexei’s jaw like he does to me, coaxing the man to look up at him. I know that touch. It could light the world on fire if wielded with passion, but now, it would leave frost in its wake.

“Put your other hand on the cart, Alexei,” Dimitri says, rolling the chopping block to Alexei’s other side.

“No, *Pakhan*, please! No!”

“Do it.”

With a shaking hand, Alexei complies as if his obedience now will earn him his life. My stomach churns at the display, and I half turn towards Nik. His eyes are riveted on Dimitri, never once blinking as I see the blade lift in my periphery and hear the *thud* as it lands and the screams begin anew.

Still no emotion from Dimitri. Still no assurances that the man I’ve started to get to know is even in there. There’s just . . . nothingness.

Curling inward on myself, I manage to mutter a string of syllables that make little sense. I can’t do this. I can’t stand here and watch a man be hacked to pieces. Nothing about this is okay. *Nothing*.

I should use this as evidence of Dimitri’s crimes. He may have looped Interpol in and invited me into his literal home, but this man is a monster.

A clammy sweat breaks out over my entire body, and a hesitant arm comes around my shoulders. Nik pulls me closer, tucking my head against his neck, and I focus on breathing.

*In and out.*

*In and out.*

*In and out.*

His woodsy scent, coupled with a whiff of smoke, assaults my senses and

smothers the burning flesh scent as it rises from where Dimitri is working, cauterising the wounds so he can continue dragging this out.

That realisation has me crumpling like a paper bag.

“Get me out of here,” I beg. I can’t watch this. Looking weak is the least of my concerns right now, and the indifferent look in Dimitri’s eyes as he raised that blade will haunt my dreams tonight and likely the foreseeable future.

Nik pauses for a second, and I feel his head tilt, rustling my hair at the top of my head when he nods at something Dimitri and he silently communicate.

“Come on, Ellie.”

He steers me out of the room just as the screaming begins anew.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

Nikita

ELLIE IS WRAPPED AROUND ME, FAR DIFFERENT FROM HOW SHE WAS IN THE kitchen earlier, but I'm soaking in every moment, regardless.

"Shh," I murmur against her forehead. "It'll be fine. You're okay."

I close the panel behind me, hiding the room from view and blocking the sounds from travelling through the apartment. Ellie shakes in my arms; her chattering teeth become the soundtrack as we cross the office, her legs barely holding her up as we move.

Impatient with her slow and unsteady gait, I scoop her up, and her arms wind their way around my neck as she presses her face into my chest.

She's going into shock, and it's everything I can do to keep moving. Alexei, someone who came up in the Bratva the same way Dimitri and I did, sold his soul for a slice of cash and put Dimitri and Ellie at risk. I want to rip his head from his body for his betrayal, but I know Dimitri will do it for both of us. I fight my instincts to return and exact my own punishment on the man.

I gingerly carry Ellie upstairs, curious why this, of all things, pushes her over the edge. She's seen worse in our old job. Hell, we've witnessed horrible things in the name of evidence, and she's not reacted like this. Is it because it's Dimitri wielding the knife this time?

Pausing at the landing, I look from my door to their suite, and when I step towards the space she shares with Dimitri, she lets go of my neck and puts her clammy palms on my cheeks. "Not there. Please, not there."

Her voice is nothing more than a hoarse whisper, and the sound cracks something inside of me. I unlock my door and carry her inside, the darkness of the space envelopes me and creeps over the thoughts of violence as I enter my sanctuary.

I stride over to the bed, holding Ellie in my arms. Something about her brings a wave of calm over me, and the raring need to help Dimitri washes away. Inhaling deeply, I let her scent comfort me.

"Nik?" she whispers.

"Yeah, Ellie?"

"Is it always this bad?"

I cock my head at her question. "Is *what* always this bad?"

"This life? The violence in it . . ." She shakes her head as the words die on her lips.

Honestly, this has been a pretty tame week, but I don't think that answer would bring her much comfort. "Sometimes," I say, dodging the truth.

"I . . . We . . ." Her words tumble out without thought, and she gathers herself before trying again. "He looked nothing like the man I've come to know."

"Is that what scared you? Dimitri?"

She hums and redirects. "Are you okay?"

I tilt my head to look down at her. "Why wouldn't I be?"

This a dangerous question when I feel like a live wire is flailing around in my chest.

After the kitchen, the night in my bathroom where I stitched her arm, and the bloodbath happening downstairs, she could be referring to anything. The longing I feel for her in my chest is the loudest, but I doubt, with recent events, that's what she's talking about. My confessional in the kitchen should be long forgotten by now.

She chooses not to answer, instead seeking comfort against my body and metaphorically clawing her way into my chest. Her arms wrap around me like she's using me as an anchor as she works out her feelings from the past few hours. Anya, the kitchen, torture, Dimitri . . .

Or she could be thinking about none of those things, and instead, I'm projecting.

I run a soothing hand down her spine. Up and down. Up and down.

My eyes have adjusted to the dim lighting, and I open the blackout curtains to let the lights of New York better illuminate the woman in my arms. Minutes later, she lifts her head from my chest and peers at me.

Then, her lids drift closed, and she lays her head on my shoulder again. She's close enough to feel the stutter of her breathing along my jaw. "Tell me about Alexei. Did he say anything before I got there?"

I huff, and she touches my chest, calming the anger. "The twins followed the van, using someone we paid off for the traffic cam footage. There are a couple of safe houses upstate, and the assholes who shot at us were dumb enough to use one. Alexei's idea."

Ellie chuckles, but it's a hollow sound, and the vibration works its way under my skin.

"The others weren't part of our organisation, and they have been dealt with. Alexei recruited them when the offer came."

I want to wring that motherfucker's neck for involving men who didn't

know the wrath they would incur by joining him, but the twins handled it. No one—and I mean *no one*—involves non-Bratva members in Bratva business.

And an assassination attempt on our *pakhan* and his wife is most definitely Bratva business.

“Will Alexei die?” she murmurs. “Will Dimitri kill him?”

“After he gets as much information as he can.” I pause for a moment, noting the fear on Ellie’s face. “Does that bother you? That someone who tried to take your life would die at your husband’s hand?”

“No,” she confesses almost shamefully. “An eye for an eye is a concept as old as time. It’s what most legal systems are based upon.”

Leave it to Ellie to root it all back to procedural justice—rules and regulations, law and order, even in our lawless land.

I palm the back of her head and keep her face angled towards mine, unbelieving that I’m about to defend Dimitri’s actions to the woman I love. But then again, I never thought that woman would be his wife.

“No man worth having would let a wrong against his wife go unpunished.”

Ellie is silent as she gnaws on her lower lip in contemplation. I lift my hand, and she flinches, but I do not stop as I reach for her face, pulling that lip from between her teeth.

“What about a man who betrays his partner?” she whispers.

Having been shrouded in darkness and self-flagellation for so long, contemplative of my actions, and self-reprimanding, I need an outlet. I need someone else to exact retribution for my deception, no matter why I did it. I feel ashamed for breaking my oath and for betraying my partner. It’s been a long time coming, and I shiver with realisation as the words fall from my lips. “He should pay.”

“Pay how?” She blinks up at me.

I let my shoulders fall as I drown in her dark depths. “It’s up to you. How would you punish me?”

Never mind that it was my job that Dimitri’s father, Danil, had handpicked me for. They didn’t adopt me to be part of the family when I was barely nine, no matter how hard Dimitri’s mother, Katarina, tried. They brought me in because having another loyal member at their beck and call was the right move.

It afforded me a move to America when they immigrated, but it didn’t guarantee me a life of my own. I will forever be indebted to the Aslanov

family for not letting me go to an orphanage when my parents died. Doing what they required was easier than breathing.

Ellie closes her eyes, her body tense in my arms.

“Do you regret it?” The words are so low I would have missed them if I wasn’t tuned in to every hitch of her breath, every inhale and shaky exhale, and every bite of her lip.

“Which part?”

“Any of it? All of it?” Her eyes open, and there’s more swimming behind her glassy orbs than I would have thought possible.

We’d been partners for a while, the chemistry between us slow to start but deep in its reach. Not once have I regretted our night together, only wishing I could have been who I truly am, not the watered-down, PG version I had been pretending to be for nearly ten years.

“Some of it,” I answer.

“At least there’s that.” Her hiccuped chuckle is self-deprecating. “I hate you for what you did.”

“I know.” It’s the only solace I can give her. I also hate myself for the pain I caused, abandoning her like that. She looks at a tear in her leggings, picking at the rip as a tear spills and lands beside her finger.

I tilt her face upward and look into her eyes, not once blinking as I say, “I do not regret our time together. Not those long months we worked together, nor our night together. I did what I was ordered to do—what I was employed to do. My loyalties were and are with the Aslanov family. The only thing I regret is hurting you.”

She huffs out a disbelieving breath, and my grip tightens. “You don’t know the life I’ve lived, Ellie. I wish I had a clear definition of black and white, but that’s not the case. I live in the greys.”

“Do you know how much trouble I was in when you stole that diamond?” she asks.

I rub my thumb along her jaw. “I can only imagine. But I left you out of it as much as I could. I knew it was a risk, but I had to take it.”

The urge to lean in and kiss the anger from her lips swells within me, but she leans away, putting distance between us. The gap grows wider, and instead of letting her go, I pull her closer to me, closing the chasm and claiming her lips with mine.

She shoves me away, batting at my chest. “Let me go, Nik.”

“No,” I growl, my lips touching hers with the movement—the distance

between us is only a hairsbreadth, but it's still too much.

"Yes," she hisses back. "You can't do this. You can't just take whatever you want, leaving me to pick up the pieces. It's not fair to me, and I don't fucking want it."

I pull back, the hurt in her voice stabbing me in the chest with every word. She's right. She deserves better, and I am no saint. I was selfish that night. I used our connection as a distraction and exploited it.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" she shouts, surprising me with the vehemence in her tone.

"For hurting you. I will not apologise for the rest of it because if we're talking about the diamond, I needed to do it. And if we're talking about *us*, about finally giving in even though we'd fought the chemistry for the entirety of our partnership, then you'll be waiting a long time for an apology. Because I am not sorry for our night."

"Fuck you," she spits. Her voice breaks, and before I can give her what she wants and walk away, she's kissing me like her life depends on it.

Her tongue strokes against my lips, invading my mouth as I groan and clutch her closer. She dips in, teasing me, tasting me, making me want to crush her in my grip just to keep her closer—absorb her until she's a part of me and can never break free.

"Why are you here, Ellie?" I rasp out when she pulls away to breathe. "Haunting me like a spectre I can't escape? Tormenting me with every look, every touch, every time you fucking walk past me? Why?"

Ellie flinches in my arms, and I realise I've been gripping her too tightly. Angry at myself, at Danil, at Natasha, at the world. Everything I've kept boxed up comes spilling to the surface, overflowing until I'm drowning in my past.

"What do you mean, *why*? I'm Dimitri's wife," she counters, avoiding the question and raising my blood pressure. My heartbeat thrums in my ears, and my muscles coil with tension.

My heart pounds in my chest, unrelenting and irregular as the pain of that fact wraps around the useless muscle. And they are legally married, I checked.

I shift her off my lap, and she scrambles to get her feet under her. Heat rises in my body, lighting me up from the inside out. She knows that's not the honest answer, and I won't suffer lies. "Go, then."

“Wh-What?”

“GET OUT!” I roar.

Her face contorts, and pain lances through me. “You know what? For a minute, I thought my partner wasn’t a total lie. That somewhere inside of you, his shadow still existed. But I was wrong, I guess. *Again*. Why don’t you go help your boss torture Alexei like the good little soldier you are?”

She slaps me, my cheek stinging, but it’s nothing compared to the pain I feel when that first tear falls because of me. Because of my stupid mouth and the lies I’ve spun around myself so tightly they wrap around me like a cocoon.

She bolts out of the room, leaving nothing more than the lingering scent of her perfume as I fall to my knees. What the fuck is happening to me?

My door closes with a soft snick, which feels much louder than a slam. She enters the suite next door, and I’m left alone with my misery again.

Tearing my shirt from my body, I ball it up and throw it into a corner as regret and anguish flood me, lighting my every nerve on fire. Sliding my hand under my mattress, I grab the flogger I keep there and grip the leather handle in my fist until it creaks under the strain. I lied. I stole. I coveted what wasn’t mine. And I tempted a married woman into breaking her vows.

The least I can do is pay for my sins in the only way I know how.

As I flick my wrist, the tails of the leather snap against my back.  
“One . . .”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

---

Eleanor

DIMITRI DIDN'T COME TO BED LAST NIGHT—LIKE HE HASN'T SINCE THE Alexei thing a few weeks ago. He's been holed up in his little secret lair murder room, and honestly, I think it's for the best.

The morning light streams through the windows, doing nothing to improve my mood. I was awake until four, working out in the gym downstairs again and working out the moral dilemmas in my head.

I understand why it had to happen. Letting an attempt on our lives go unpunished would only invite more attempts. Showing weakness isn't an option for Dimitri in his position.

And as far as Nik, well . . . he's been in his room every night or shadowing Dimitri as they attend to the various businesses. While Dimitri films everything, I've been here, combing through footage and sending it to Agent Kim.

The shining light in the past seventy-two hours is that most of the girls have been returned to their families who have been searching for them. Only three were sold by their guardians, and those girls have been rehomed and given something better than returning to a shit home-life.

It pains me to think someone would reach such a level of desperation that they're willing to sell their children to make ends meet. I know I'm privileged, and nothing reinforces that point harder than hearing when someone isn't.

I flip over on the bed and bury my face in my pillow just as Nik's door opens and closes. He's still watching me like a hawk in the apartment, silent as he holds onto his secrets while I do the same.

We coexist in this fucked-up universe revolving around Dimitri.

Like a zombie, I haul myself out of bed and head to the closet to check my agency phone. Agent Kim confirmed via text that the footage I sent over yesterday after Dimitri dropped the SD card in my hand is valid, and they're setting up agents in that nightclub as staff. It's one of the places the Bratva uses to launder the money from arms dealings.

Yup, arms dealings. Because there isn't enough of a gun issue in this country already.

I shower and dress in soft leggings and an oversized sweater, dragging fuzzy socks over my feet. Everything in this home feels so fucking cold and

impersonal. I want to be wrapped in comfort when I come face to face with the two men who live here. Besides, aside from some sightseeing with Igor, my driver and guard, it's not like I go anywhere. Might as well be cosy.

As I descend the stairs, indistinct murmurs come from the kitchen. Taking a deep breath, I push my shoulders back and straighten my spine.

When I step into the kitchen, Dimitri's head snaps up. He doesn't say a thing; he just watches me with his unnerving gaze as I move towards the coffee machine. The same way he has every morning since I put distance between us.

My entire body is aware of his presence when I'm in his proximity. He takes a single step towards me, and I flinch away.

"Let me," he murmurs, taking a mug from the cabinet and making me coffee. There's concern in his gaze, and though I try to ignore it, a hint of it slithers through the cracks in my walls.

Nik is leaning against the island—his eyes fixed on me as Dimitri takes my cup and adds sugar and milk. He hasn't tried to talk to me since that night. Not intentionally, at least. Once, he asked me to pass the salt. It was a riveting dinner between the three of us, and halfway through, I took my plate out to the terrace and ate there instead of sitting in the uncomfortable silence, even though heights terrify me.

Panic-inducing altitudes were better than suffocating inside.

"Thank you," I whisper, taking the offering from Dimitri and moving off to the other side of the kitchen. The three of us are in a standoff, yet again, none of us willing to speak first.

I take a sip of the coffee and find it not quite right. But fuck knows I won't break the silence to criticise his barista skills, so I lift it to my lips again, fighting the instinct to wrinkle my nose.

Nik strides forward and takes the mug from my hands, some of the liquid sloshing over the lip. He peers inside and turns towards the fridge. He adds another splash of milk and hands it back to me before turning on his heel and walking out of the room.

Dimitri's gaze follows him as he leaves us to work out our shit on our own.

When he turns towards me, I avert my gaze. I can't face looking into those dead eyes again. Not if he looks the way he did that night. I've avoided eye contact since, and I know it's bothering him. But I can't bring myself to do it.

Taking a sip, I can't help the *Aaah* that follows the gulp.

Dimitri scowls in my periphery, and I take a step away again.

"He knows how you take your coffee," he murmurs.

"He was my partner for a long time."

"Eleanor, look at me."

"I can't." I shake my head, keeping my eyes downcast. The anger in my voice is palpable, but I don't even know if I'm angry at him or myself for being so affected. For letting things with Dimitri go so far. I did exactly what they warned me not to do. I let him get to me, and now my emotions are tangled in the mess.

It's not impairing my ability to do my job, combing through the footage and forwarding it along to Agent Kim, but it's impairing *me*.

Dimitri sighs in frustration. "Fine. Then listen? It's been weeks, and we need to move past this. *I* need us to move past this so we can keep working."

I nod. Right. Keep working. That's why I'm here.

"Alexei put an expiration date on his life when he agreed to that deal. I will not apologise for handling a threat, Eleanor. He came after both of us and injured you."

"Did you find out who hired him?" I ask.

Please, for the love of fuck, don't let it have been Nik. I turn my head towards the doors he slipped through, and Dimitri answers the unasked question.

"It wasn't Nik. He's not responsible for the drive-by attempt, but I think I know who is." He pauses, taking a deep breath. "Sergei. It makes sense," he says when I try to scoff. "He's next up if I die, and though I'd always thought him comfortable as brigadier, he might be grasping for more."

My head turns in his direction, but I keep my eyes locked on his freshly shaven jaw, still avoiding those icy depths. "But the shooter would have hit his wife if I hadn't got her out of the way," I argue. "Would he do that?"

"That's the only part that makes no sense. Oksana has been his wife for thirty years. She's always toed the line and supported him in everything. I don't see that being the case."

I'm already shaking my head, but Dimitri moves on. "There is a way to make this work to our advantage."

"How?"

"Sergei has been asking me how he can thank you for saving Oksana. He wants to buy you something to show his gratitude. I keep telling him it is

unnecessary.”

“And his pride and sense of owing you something aren’t letting it rest?” I guess.

“Yes, it—Would you fucking look at me, Sabre?” Dimitri snaps.

“I am.”

He growls low in his chest. He steps closer, and I wince when his hand meets my face, gently cupping my jaw. “My eyes.”

I inch my gaze up to his nose, catching on a small scar under his eye, but I can’t bring myself to look higher.

“You’re afraid of me.” His thumb strokes my neck as his hand rests there, never forcing me to meet his gaze with the brute force I’ve become used to.

He’s letting me decide instead of taking what he wants, and that modicum of respect has me finally meeting his eyes.

He looks nothing like the man I met at the altar in the cathedral. Instead of the indifference I’d been afraid of, there’s concern. The dark circles under his eyes and the puffy skin below speak to restless nights and discomfort.

“There you are,” he murmurs, his lips barely moving as our gazes tangle.

“I’m not afraid,” I say. “I’m disgusted. Appalled. Repulsed. Conflicted,” I admit, glad Nik left us in the kitchen because he would have a field day with *by-the-book Ellie* having an inkling of agreement with the actions of an organised crime boss.

“It is better you learn now, wife, that I am not a soft man. I won’t bend to your will or shield you from the world, whatever it may throw at us. I will hit back twice as hard when something or someone comes for us. It is you and me, my Sabre. You and me.”

“And Nik?” I ask. Dimitri blinks—the only sign that my question surprises him. “I heard you two that day. He said he’s all in. What does that mean? Is he going to know about the . . . arrangement?” I point my finger between the two of us, trying to encompass everything with a mere gesture.

Dimitri shakes his head. “He isn’t privy to that, and I doubt Interpol would offer him the same deal they’re offering me.” I nod in agreement because Nik has much to answer for if my agency ever gets hold of him. “But he must decide where his loyalty lies—with my uncle or me. And that night was a step in the right direction. I have the footage from that night while you were with the girl, and he could be considered an accomplice.”

“Would he side with Sergei?”

Dimitri tilts his head one way, then the other, as if he’s weighing the

options and cracking his neck all at once. “It is up in the air. He has sided with Sergei and my father against me before.”

“When?” I dare to ask.

“Before he left for Interpol.”

These two have so many secrets and grudges between them; I’m surprised there’s a square inch left in the apartment that isn’t consumed by their past. This past hurt that Nik could have killed Dimitri’s father, the loyalty he shows Sergei, Nik and me having history. It’s no wonder suspicion is the daily mood in the penthouse.

An idea takes shape in my head, and the wheels turn at an unprecedented speed. A way to discover Sergei’s intentions while finding out where Nik’s loyalties lie once and for all. “Call Sergei. I know what I want.”

Dimitri rears back with surprise. “What?”

“Better yet, go to your office and wait for me there. I know what I want and how to play this.”

“Do you want to let me in on your little plan?” His gaze turns feral, his hand resting against the column of my throat.

“It’s better if you don’t know. That way your reactions are genuine.” I hold my hand out. “Give me your phone.”

Dimitri plucks it out of his pocket, unlocks it, finds Sergei’s contact information, and hands it over.

I click the button to call him and put the phone up to my ear, waiting for him to answer. Dimitri barely breathes as the call rings, growing tenser with each passing second. I point my finger towards his office, and with a menacing look, he leaves the kitchen, giving me the space I need.

“*Pakhan*,” Sergei greets.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Sergei. It’s Elsa.”

“Elsa! Good to hear from you. I assume Dimitri finally passed on my message?”

I chuckle softly, as if flattered by his attention.

“He did, so I took his phone to call you while he’s working downstairs. And I’m flattered, but it was just instinct—and one my scraped knees are still paying for. Remind me to learn how to fall gracefully on the pavement in the future.” A manufactured chuckle slips past my lips, Sergei indulging me with one of his own. “I only did what one does for family—blood or not. I was just calling to say that you don’t need to repay me for anything.”

“Nonsense, Elsa. It is most assuredly necessary. Now please, tell me what

I can do to show my gratitude. There must be something.”

“I . . . Well . . .” I pause as if thinking about it, but my answer is already perched on the tip of my tongue. “The only thing I can think of is needing some help. An introduction, if you will, to the family business. Dimitri buys me everything I could need, so there’s no need for material objects. But the one thing he can’t give is time. By the time we see each other at the end of the day, he’s too tired. I just want to be the best wife I can for him, and I am unsure how to do that aside from . . . well, you know.” I let the innuendo linger, and Sergei hums with understanding.

“I was hoping you might give me a few hours of your time so I can learn what I need to and be a better wife for my husband. I know a little about how the organisation works, but it’s all so overwhelming, Sergei.”

I sigh with frustration as if I’ve been trying to learn, but Dimitri is not affording me the opportunity. “Please, Sergei. I know you’re a busy man too, and it’s entirely too much of me to ask of someone in your position, but I want to surprise Dimitri.”

He’s been silent since I started talking, but when I finish, I hear a cheerful tone in his voice. “That is a wonderful thing to want to do for your husband, Elsa, but—”

“Please don’t say no,” I say, letting my voice warble with unshed tears and emotion. “I’ve been traded into a life I know nothing about. My father says I can trust you, and honestly, Dimitri scares me. I don’t want to incur his anger.”

Dead air hovers over the line, and I cross my fingers at my side. After endless beats of silence, Sergei answers, “Say no more, dear. I’ll make time for us to meet, with your husband’s consent, of course. Perhaps I can take you to lunch.”

“Thank you, Sergei.”

“You’re welcome, Elsa. Now, take the phone to Dimitri, and we’ll work out the details.”

“Thank you, Sergei. Thank you for helping me.” I turn my voice into a breathless whisper with an affectionate tone. I cover the bottom of the phone for a few seconds and cross the apartment to the office, where I find Dimitri glowering at my approach.

“Dimitri?” I ask, loud enough for Sergei to hear me on the other end. “Sergei is on the phone.”

He takes the phone from my grip, and in a few short sentences, I have a

lunch date with Sergei in a week, wherein I will do my very best to make him slip up.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---

Eleanor

FOUR DAYS LATER, I'M STILL AVOIDING THE MEN IN MY TEMPORARY HOME like the goddamned plague.

Dimitri is still trying to make eye contact with me. Nik is stalking the halls like Atlas with the world on his shoulders. And I am crawling out of my skin, just trying to keep the peace and stay out of their way.

So much so that today, I said fuck it and ordered Igor to bring the car around via a text. I walked through Central Park this morning while Nik and Dimitri met with one of the cells under Dimitri's reign upstate.

Igor stalked behind me like a ghost the whole time. After encouraging him to walk by my side and his refusal for the tenth time, I gave up and told him I wanted to return to the penthouse.

So now, here I am, beating the shit out of a heavy bag in the gym for the twelfth time in as many days. My arms feel like noodles, but if I'm not entirely ripped by the end of this assignment, I'll be shocked. Working out to relieve frustrations and exhaust myself to the point of passing out has become my full-time hobby.

The bass thumps through the room, and the mirrored walls make me feel like I have company when I am so utterly alone.

*Jab, cross, kick. Don't think about Dimitri.*

*Jab, cross, kick. Don't think about Nik.*

*Jab, cross, kick. Don't think about anything.*

I let my fists fly, trying to knock the stuffing out of the bag. The chain rattles above, and my knuckles feel the sting of anger as I become relentless.

Dimitri murdered a man the other night in our home—Dimitri's home. *Not* ours. Nik killed the Irishman before that. I feel like I'm spinning because, as much as I deny it, I have feelings for both men. Confusing, conflicting, frustrating feelings I think I should be ashamed of, but for the life of me, I can't muster up the energy for self-loathing.

All I feel is confusion.

Besides all of that, I'm constantly stuck in this apartment building, just compiling and sending videos—basically, doing jack shit.

Striking at the bag, I let out my frustrations.

I miss my kid. I miss my home. I miss Olivia. I miss my nonconflicted headspace.

The walls are closing in around me.

Logically, I know agents go through this when they're undercover. There's an adjustment period, and I was even warned about this phase, but none of it matters when I've never been very good at sitting still and waiting for things to happen.

Hence the call to Sergei. *That* is something I can make happen.

Tears well in my eyes, blurring my vision, but I am relentless in my attacks. A sob chokes me as I ponder the lines I've crossed upstairs. With Dimitri *and* with Nik. Because, evidently, once was not enough to learn.

Deep in my heart, I know I will keep Dimitri's involvement in Alexei's murder to myself. Nor will I tell Interpol or the other connected agencies about Nik killing the Irishman in the kitchen.

As often as I tell myself I am a good agent, my actions show otherwise.

I yell as I land a series of one-two punches on the bag. Sweat drips down my back as angry tears stain my face. The salty sting is welcomed at this point, so I don't force myself to stop—to bottle it all up the way I usually would.

I feel like punishing myself; this is the only way I can think of doing it.

A vortex of emotions swirls in my mind—shame, regret, indignation, and, last but not least, disgust.

What kind of agent am I if I let these things go?

*A terrible one*, my mind whispers.

I wrap my arms around the punching bag and let my body sink against it, my knees weak and muscles tired. Closing my eyes, I breathe as I gather my thoughts.

I have to choose: Go all in or all out because straddling the line isn't working.

"Feel better?" a voice asks from my left.

I look up, shoving some of my loosened hair from my forehead, and my eyes connect with Nik. He's sitting casually on a weight bench, like he's been there for hours.

"No. What are you doing here, Nik?" I ask, wiping under my nose with the back of my wrist. My hands are taped, and there's blood on my knuckles.

I startle at the discovery, and everything inside me comes crashing down: adrenaline, anger, and morality break against the rocks like a wave. At least the bullet graze on my arm is feeling better. There's just some mottled skin and the angry pink scar to contend with now.

As he goes to move from his weight bench, I throw an arm out, stopping him from coming any closer.

“Don’t,” I push out between gritted teeth.

“You’re hurt. Let me see. Let me fucking help you.”

“No, not you,” I answer. We may have had a moment in Nik’s room wherein he was calm, kind, and possibly honest for once.

But I don’t want that right now. I don’t want comfort. I don’t want to feel coddled. I want someone to take their anger out on me the way I deserve for crossing lines and blurring everything into an emotional mess.

And Nik? He’s too wrapped up in everything to be the person I need for that right now.

“Suit yourself, but don’t get blood on the mats,” he says, shocking me as he settles back against the bench and heeds my earlier reply by keeping his distance.

My laugh starts low and builds in my chest until I’m doubled over, gasping for air and clutching my side. “*Don’t get blood on the mats,*” I repeat incredulously. “Oh, that is rich, considering you painted half the kitchen in blood a few weeks ago.”

He lets out his dark laugh then, and I hear the flick of a lighter before looking over at him.

“You’re seriously going to smoke in the gym?” I ask.

He pulls the lighter away and takes an inhale of the cigarette. He tips his head back and lets the smoke out, directing it at the ceiling as it streams from his lips. “Well, you don’t want to talk to me, and I can think of other uses for my mouth, but I doubt you’d be open to that right now.”

“Oral fixation much?” I tease, and for a second, it feels like we’re partners again, back on a stakeout and teasing each other to pass the time.

He must feel it, too, because he stands and crosses the space between us, making my hair stand on end. “What do you need right now, Ellie?”

“Nothing. I don’t need anything,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and only minutely wincing at the pain.

“Bullshit. You know what you need,” he argues. “You’re frustrated, angry, pissed, and confused. In a life you’re not ready for. You feel helpless and out of place. And you’re on edge.” With every descriptor, he ticks a finger on his hand. He leans down, searching my eyes for the truth.

I wince when he hits the nail on the head, and I hate that he knows things about me before I put proper names to the emotions. “You don’t know what

you're talking about."

"That's bullshit, and you know it. I know that if there were a coffee shop in the building, you'd be ordering a quad and then drowning it in sugar and milk because you hate the taste of coffee. Or you'd be in the gym, working your body out until you worked it out in your head."

He gestures around the space, indicating I'm doing exactly what I used to do when we were partners.

"Shut up, Nik. You can't use our past to make me feel better now. That's not how this works."

"Why the fuck not?" he asks, his voice dropping into a low cadence. "Who could possibly know you better?"

"Dimitri." The name slips from my lips, even knowing I'm wrong. But despite everything, all the surrounding chaos, I am here for a job. I have a role to play.

He scoffs and takes a drag of his cigarette, blowing out the smoke and pinning me with his gaze.

"He doesn't even know how you take your coffee. You choke it down because you're afraid to say something. He doesn't know that you're terrified of heights. You tense up whenever you flee onto the terrace. He doesn't know you always go sock-shoe-sock-shoe like a heathen. He doesn't know you bottle things up until you snap, and it drives me fucking insane." Nik continues. "There are many things he doesn't know about you, Ellie. But I do. I know what you need."

He drops his cigarette on the floor and stomps it out with his boot before it can singe the mats.

*Sure, that's fine, but a little blood is a no-no.*

I put my hands on my hips, squaring off but keeping my stance loose. My heart is beating erratically in my chest, and my body is on high alert. He looks like a predator stalking his prey, and I repress the shiver of want and need flowing through me.

"Oh yeah, and what is it I need? You think you know me so well, Nik? You know nothing."

He raises a brow as he inches closer and runs his fingers through the longer hair on top of his head, shoving it out of the way as his eyes pin me in place.

"You need to fight or fuck. Or both."

I try to scoff, but it gets caught in my throat with nerves.

“That’s right, baby. You’re keyed up, and beating on the heavy bag isn’t cutting it.” He’s a few feet away now and pivots, taking a fight stance and putting his hands up like he’s readying to box. “Hit me.”

The idea is tempting as hell, but it feels ridiculous.

“Hit me, Ellie.”

“No.”

“Fucking hit me,” he growls.

“No!”

“What? You think you’re going to hurt me?” He laughs, raising my hackles. His doubt in me flames my blood, and I want to smack that smirk off his face. He notices, because of course he does, and grips the back of his black T-shirt, dragging it up and over his head in a one-handed move.

His torso mesmerises me, inch by glorious inch. The ink across his stomach and up his chest draws my eye, and the geometric pattern between the more prominent pieces fills the gaps.

“Eyes up, baby,” he teases. My gaze snaps to his, and even though I’m staring at his face, I can’t help but notice as his muscles bunch and flex across his chest and shoulders.

“The ink suits you,” I admit begrudgingly.

He smirks and swats at my hand, knocking it to the side. “What are you afraid of?” he asks, shifting on the balls of his feet.

“You’re infuriating.”

He grins. “I know. But you love it. Now, let’s go.”

Before I can take a swing, he’s advancing. He’s light on his feet and throws a jab that I block with my forearm.

“Nik, stop.”

“Not a chance, baby. Come on. Give me what you got. I always was the better fighter between the two of us. I honestly can’t remember the last time you bested me in the ring.” He throws a cross, and I shift my weight to my back foot, ducking under his arm as it disturbs the air above my head.

“Don’t be a—”

I pop up, then duck low again, punching his abdomen, aiming for the anchor inked on his side. He blocks and advances again as I keep my defences up. I fake left and lunge forward with my right, landing a hit on his ribs. He barely makes a sound when I connect, and I use my momentum to land two more in quick succession.

Sweat drips down my forehead from my earlier abuse of the heavy bag

and begins anew as Nik and I trade hits. He'll take the shot if I use my arm to wipe it away, so I let the salt sting my eyes.

He throws a few more punches, landing one on my good arm, and now I'll have matching injuries.

I spin away, using the open space in the middle of the gym to get myself into a better position. Nik anticipates every step, and his inked knuckles head towards my face as I duck from a vicious jab. He would have pulled the punch, but I relish the exertion, fighting like my life depends on it.

*Block. Jab. Shift. Uppercut.*

While he's extended, his fist heading towards me, I twist and land a kick to his side. This time, he lets out a little *oof* as I connect.

We step into the centre of the gym, our hands raised in anticipation as we gravitate towards one another. I can feel Nik's breath on my face as we dance around, sizing up one another. He's quick, whereas I'm agile. We throw jabs and hooks, each trying to gain the upper hand as my heartbeat hammers in my chest.

I always appreciated Nik when we were partners because he never went easy on me in the gym. He didn't treat me like I was lesser just because I was a woman. Half the moves I've used today were at his instruction years ago—and they're damn good.

As the sweat beads along my body, Nik steps towards me when I'm on the back foot and can't pull away fast enough. His hand circles my waist, pulling me closer so we're mere inches apart. The heat of his body warms mine as he yanks me even closer. My movements become more frenzied as I try to break away.

He hauls me against him until we're chest to chest, my feet dangling in the air, and he takes five steps forward. Nik pushes me against the wall, pinning me with his body. His breath tickles my neck as he whispers in my ear.

"You're not fighting anymore," he says, his voice low and seductive.

My heart races as his hand slides down to my thigh, pulling my leg up and around his waist. His hardness presses against me as he grinds his hips against mine, his lips finding mine in a fierce and passionate kiss.

I get lost in the heat of the moment. I forget about the boxing, about life, this fucked-up situation we're in, the betrayal, our daughter. As we pull apart, our lust-drunk eyes meeting, I know this is just the beginning of something wild and dangerous.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

---

Eleanor

NIK'S HANDS RUN UP MY SIDES, HIS FINGERS DIGGING INTO MY FLESH AS HE fiercely kisses me.

Instead of reciprocating, I shove at his chest, but he doesn't back away. He doesn't give me an inch. And I know why. It's because my body follows his. Even as I struggle against him, my breasts are pressed to his chest, my leg still hooked around his hip, and my hips grind against his.

My head and body are at war, and I don't know which one I want to win.

He begins to pull away as my fists beat at his pecs, but I wrap my hands around his neck, keeping him close.

He groans, pressing harder against me and trapping my hands between us. Passion and lust erupt in my body, taking my adrenaline high from earlier and rocketing it into the stratosphere.

Nik's lips tease mine, and I moan into his mouth, my nails digging into the skin of his nape.

His lips leave mine, and I throw my head back, a moan leaving my lips as he trails ardent kisses down my neck and collarbone. I arch my back, offering myself to him, as he explores my body with his hands and mouth. Rough hands rest on my sides, his thumbs sliding under my sports bra and stroking the tender skin on the curve of my breast. The drag of it causes me to arch further, begging for his touch everywhere.

He nibbles on my earlobe, sending shivers down my spine, before moving his lips to the top of my breasts.

"I thought we were fighting," I say breathlessly.

"Fighting or fucking . . . is there really a difference?" I hear the smile in his voice, but it's immediately forgotten as he nips at my neck, the sharpness of the sting tugging on something low in my core.

I grip his hair, dragging his face back up to mine, searching his eyes for answers he's unwilling to give. His pupils are blown so wide it's impossible to see where they end and the irises begin. I lean forward and take his bottom lip between my teeth, tugging it and dragging him back under the waves of lust and want with me.

Nik's hands come between us, and he grips the top of my sports bra and uses his other hand to slide the zipper down between my breasts. With a rough yank, the material separates, and he shoves the straps over my

shoulders and down my arms, his rough fingertips following it.

He dips low, taking my left nipple into his mouth. Nik sucks and bites gently, sending a jolt of pleasure through my body. I whimper, my hips bucking and searching for friction as he moves to my other breast, giving it the same treatment.

My nipples don't look like they used to, not after nursing Bella for so long. But if he notices, he doesn't say a damned thing. Pressure builds as he covers one tight and aching bud with his fingers, then seals his mouth around the other and flicks it with his sinful tongue before he sucks hard.

I shove at his head when I feel that prickling sensation that used to happen when Bella nursed. It's been months, but the way he envelops my nipple and pulls it to the back of his mouth is triggering something in me.

Panicking, I look down, and sure enough, his left hand has droplets on it. I grab that hand, wiping away the evidence with the tape wrapped around my knuckles and palm, and pray it was just on one side. There's not much since I haven't breastfed in months, but I just experienced letdown.

A few seconds later, Nik releases my other breast, licking his lips and groaning as he trails kisses across my breasts. He says nothing. He just grins at me when his deft fingers reach the waistband of my bike shorts, that devastating smile undoing the last of my reasoning about why this is a terrible idea.

"Tell me to stop now, Ellie," he begs, resting his forehead against my bare shoulder. He inhales deeply, his nose nudging the pulse hammering in my neck.

I can't find the words. They don't exist anymore, and I don't want to recreate them.

Sliding my fingers from his hair to my shorts, I tug them down. He takes over peeling them and my white cotton panties down my thighs. When they get caught on the rubber soles of my shoes, he hastily removes them so I'm left standing in my socks while he's still dressed from the waist down.

"Ellie," he groans, stepping back and letting his eyes devour my body. Thankfully, Bella didn't leave me with stretch marks, but I feel his eyes trace my wider hips and larger breasts. It feels taboo to be standing here in nothing but ankle socks while he's still clothed—a power imbalance given flesh.

"Nik," I beg.

For what? I don't know, but I need it *now*.

His eyes lock onto mine as he reaches between us, his fingers sliding into

my wetness. I gasp at the roughness, at the wildness coursing through my veins with his every touch. My head falls forward, my forehead resting against his as he strokes me, his fingers curling and rubbing my most sensitive spot.

Our breath mingles as he fingers me, rubbing inside me at that deliciously sensitive spot and causing my need for more to coil tighter in my stomach.

My fingers dig into his broad shoulders, my body trembling with pleasure as he plays me like a fine-tuned instrument. I look between us, only seeing the ink as it trails in loops and whorls over his body.

But I feel something there on his toned shoulders. There are welts on the back side, thin ridges I can't see without breaking the intensity between us to examine them better.

A familiar heat is building inside me, and I know I'm close to the edge. Nik's fingers, his heat, and his kisses all have me in a chokehold as I close my eyes and ride his hand wantonly.

"Please, Nik," I pant, my voice barely a whisper.

He grins wickedly, pulling his fingers from me and standing to his full height. He raises his hand, licking my arousal off and groaning as his eyes slide shut.

When they open again, there is no more of the anger he's been harbouring. It's all lust, and I realise then that I want this man to ruin me.

He undoes his black trousers, shoving them down so they're bunched around his thighs.

My eyes rove over his body, snagging on a new detail. "You're pierced?"

His lips curl in wicked delight as he takes himself in his hand, stroking from base to tip, the balls of the jewellery shifting with each pass. "Seems obvious," he says drolly.

"But yo-you weren't . . ." I stutter, unable to take my eyes off the rhythmic stroking and the metal through the tip of his dick.

"It's been a while since you've seen my cock, Ellie." He smirks. "It's a Prince Albert. Does that bother you?"

I lick my lips, nerves lighting up my body. I've never been with someone who has . . . accessories. "No, just, uh, taking it all in."

"Oh, you'll be taking it all in." That damned laugh echoes around me, and before I know what I'm doing, my hand has replaced his as I slide along his cock. He's hard as stone, and I flick the end of the piercing with my thumb.

He groans low in his throat. "Just like that, baby."

Desperate to hear that sound again, I repeat the motion, feeling more confident now that I know my exploration doesn't hurt him.

"Enough," he grits out. "If you keep that up, I'll come all over you before I get inside that sweet pussy."

He knocks my hand away and grips my hips, lifting me. I wrap my legs around his waist, his hard length pressed against me as he carries me to the extra mats piled up in the corner. With one swipe of his arm, he sends a few cascading from their carefully stacked piles into a mess on the floor.

He lays me down, his body hovering over mine, as he positions himself at my entrance. I arch my back, wanting him inside me—to experience what that piercing feels like, because damn if the man didn't take his already incredible cock and make it into a unicorn dick—and he pushes forward, sliding in a scant inch and pauses, torturing me with his patience and making me squirm beneath him.

"Tell me no, Ellie. Last chance."

I shake my head. Against all reason, against all sense, there is nothing I want more right now than Nik filling me, driving into me, pushing me to the edge and then careening over it together.

What we had that night wasn't a fluke. He said that he wanted to fuck me as *him* that night, not the man he was pretending to be. Never in my life did I think I would beg for someone to hurt me, to ravage me the way Nik has alluded to, but here we are.

"Fuck me, Nik. Fuck me the way you've been dying to, but I swear to Christ"—I grip him by his hair and stare into his eyes as I deliver my threat—"if you do not make me come, I will cut your cock off and throw it in the Hudson."

His body bends, his back bowing as he lowers his head to my breast. The cool air of the gym whispers across my overheated flesh, and the trail of his tongue along my skin rages like an inferno.

Nik rises, hovering over me with muscular arms as he slides his cock through my folds, coating himself, and every pass over my clit makes me shiver below him. The metal is a novel experience, but that little nub at the end of the jewellery is driving me fucking wild. He looks like a dark god poised above me, ready to ravage his sacrifice in the name of devotion.

He tilts his hips, sliding into my wet heat again, giving me more than the inch he offered earlier. In one swift move, he shifts his arm, hooking my leg in the crook of his elbow and spreading me open for him.

With one almighty thrust, he slides all the way home, bottoming out and filling me completely. We gasp at the sensation, our eyes locked in a heated gaze as he moves. I grip his shoulders, digging my nails into his skin as he pounds into me with wild abandon.

My body trembles with each thrust, my pleasure mounting with each passing second. Shifting again, Nik cants his hips, and the drag of the jewellery inside of me is the oddest sensation, but it doesn't deter me. If anything, it feels like that jewellery is touching something new. Something undiscovered.

“Fuck, Ellie. Fuck, fuck . . .” He grinds his teeth together, and with the position we're in, he feels impossibly large. His back bows again, and his tongue swirls around my nipple before he takes most of my breast into his mouth and presses his teeth against the skin.

My neck arches at the sensation—the pain and the pleasure of it all—and my eyes squeeze shut. My thighs are shaking, and my breath leaves me in grunts as he pounds into me, grinding against my clit with every few thrusts and making me feel fucking wild. The leg looped over his arm feels untethered, as if I cannot control it, and my toes twitch in my little ankle socks.

My breast tingles, and I feel it again. That familiar prickling and the release of letdown.

Nik groans again as he swallows, the vibration sinking into my chest and settling deep in my core. “Ellie, what—?” I grip his hair before he can finish his question and drag him back to my breast.

If he stops now, I'll die. There's no way around it.

He sucks greedily, and while my supply has all but dried up, between the attention to my tits, the drag of his cock through my slick channel, and the pounding need for release in any and all ways roars through me, he pulls what little I have left.

Nik's mouth contracts around me, his swallows becoming rougher and rougher. He shifts to the other breast, licking at the milk pooled in the valley of my breasts and the streaks it left behind as it spilt from me. His hips piston into me as he rolls my nipple between his teeth, and I teeter on the brink.

With a fierce cry, I let go, my orgasm ripping through me like a tidal wave. I lose all sense of myself as something stirs deep within me, and a force unlike anything I've ever known clenches in my pussy, and I feel a new release. One suspiciously like I've just . . .

Nik moans, his mouth turning feral and his thrusts becoming uncoordinated.

“Fuck yes, Ellie. Squirt all over me.”

Oh, thank Christ, I didn't pee on him.

Nik stiffens above me, his release rocketing through him as he throws his head back with a roar.

I collapse backwards, my body going boneless as he rides out the last of his orgasm, my pussy spasming around him and demanding everything he has to give. He slides down my body, his tongue lapping up our combined release as he groans against my pussy.

I thread my fingers through his hair, stroking softly as I come down. When he's done, Nik rests his head on my still-spasming belly—his shoulders wedged between my thighs as I pant under him.

As we lay there, catching our breath, I can't help but spiral. Nik knows. He has to. He drank from me, tasting me. But he doesn't say a thing, just runs his fingertips along my side from ribs to hip, basking in our afterglow.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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Nikita

I RAKE MY FINGERS THROUGH MY HAIR AS I LEAVE MY BEDROOM. A SATIED and exhausted Ellie snores so loudly I hear it from the landing. The last thing I would do is fuck her and then put her in Dimitri's bed. That would be insanity.

The lock sounds behind me, and I smirk to myself. Good. That should keep her busy while I hit Dimitri with the third degree.

I lope down the stairs, a spring in my step because an above-par fucking session will do that to you. Grabbing the end of the handrail, I swing around it like Mary fucking Poppins and head towards Dimitri's office.

Ellie's been keeping secrets, and it's time to find out if Dimitri knows about them. It's not like she's going to spill the beans.

The man sits in the same spot I left him in earlier, a foam ball between his hands. He's leaning back, tossing the ball at the ceiling and catching it repeatedly. I lean against the wall and wonder if I can tip him out of his chair once and for all with a swift kick. The bastard needs to be taken down a peg, and holding onto a ten-year grudge for following orders is irking the shit out of me.

"If you're going to stare at me, you had better not be jacking off at the same time," Dimitri says, the exasperation clear in his tone.

I fumble with my belt buckle, and Dimitri sits ramrod straight at the sound. He catches the teasing grin on my face and throws the ball at me. It smacks me on the forehead and falls into my waiting hands. How the fuck did he do that? These stupid balls are impossible to throw straight.

"Don't be a dick," I say. "Remember, I'm all in now. Be nice, or I'll switch teams."

He points an accusing finger at me. "That's fickle, and you know it. What's going on?" Dimitri fixes his askew tie and leans forward, elbows on his desk.

I cross the space and sit in the chair opposite him, resting my arms along the armrests and slouching. "You asked if I was all in. I am. But the question is, are you?"

He raises a brow. "In what way?"

"Ellie." His brow furrows at my use of her nickname like it always does. He doesn't like that I'm overly familiar with her, and I doubt he'll love

hearing I just fucked his new wife, his ring still on her finger. But part of me wants to hold on to that information for a more opportune time if this new partnership goes sideways. Yep, we're all one big happy family. All in.

But more importantly, and somewhat concernedly, I feel like a smug dick, walking on a cloud. And it was . . . different. For all my talk about fucking her without restraint, letting go and indulging, what we shared in the gym downstairs was surprisingly *sweet*.

Sure, I pounded that pussy like it was mine and mine alone, but there was something unique. And it all started when I tasted sweetness on my tongue.

I wasn't sure of it at first, but when the flavour burst on my tongue, I thought I'd imagined it. Instead of bringing it up, I kept my mouth shut. The last thing I wanted was for things to end.

But then, down on the mats, as I fucked her so hard I saw stars, I latched on. Sucking her nipple to the back of my mouth, and, as she came all over my cock, there it was again. A burst of sweetness, but more of it this time.

I wanted to drink from her, take everything she had to give. Her cum, her milk, her sighs, groans, moans, and touches.

I don't know *what* it stirred in me, but there was a gentleness as I swiped my tongue through our releases, her hands carded through my hair, caressing me. Simultaneously, a vice wrapped around my chest, terrifying in its comfort.

"Earth to Nik!" Dimitri calls.

I shake my head. "Sorry, what?"

"I asked what the hell you mean by that. She's been keeping her distance since Alexei, but that's to be expected."

"Maybe she's not used to seeing people tortured." *But we've had the training to deal with it*, and for some reason, I'm keeping my mouth shut about it.

"She didn't bat an eye when you killed the O'Connor in the kitchen. In fact, she was wet as hell." I tilt my head to hide the expressions as they flit across my face. The realisation smacks me upside the head. I turned her on and left her with Dimitri to reap the rewards.

"Why was it different?" Dimitri mutters under his breath.

I still don't know why Ellie is here, and while I planned to interrogate her in the gym, all of that fell by the wayside when I saw her beating the fuck out of the bag, searching for an outlet she couldn't find elsewhere.

"Do you know her secrets?" I ask, unable to keep sitting on this

information.

He regards me with a curious gaze, and it takes everything in me not to blurt out she's an agent. Either Dimitri doesn't know, or he does, and no matter the situation, I'll still be an untrustworthy bastard for not telling him from the outset.

Instead of confirming or denying anything, he kicks his feet atop his desk. "I know she adopted this pose when we were out, making herself at home on my desk like she owned the place." He runs a hand over his chin. "I know what she tastes like and how to make her sob with pleasure." He lifts a brow. "And I know her history. What more is there to know?"

*Her history.*

"The question is, why didn't *you* tell me?" he asks.

"That she's an Emerald Sabre mail-order bride Sergei brokered for you? I knew about as much as you did when that was happening."

He levels me with a severe look. "A time is coming, Nik, when your loyalty will be tested. I know my uncle holds a special place in your life, having been your contact when you were away. But I am warning you now, if you feel even an iota for Ellie—for your past—you will get your shit in line and get on the right side of this. This is the only warning I'll give you."

The pieces all click together. He brought her here. Dimitri is an asset and plans to take down this chapter. Fuck, what if he signed on for more than that? Promising them my cousin and the reach she has?

"It's happening, then? Call it off! Do you have no loyalty? How was she even sent here with who's waiting for her at home?" That's the closest I'll get to revealing she has a child if he doesn't know it yet.

"I didn't know that until she was here, and it's none of my business. And anyway, it's too late to stop it, especially since we learned about the girls coming over in containers." Before I can ask about it, he continues, laying out his cards. "The girls are being returned safely. They should have never been taken. And my loyalty died a long time ago, Nik. You know that. You were part of it."

Memories wash over me; his father screaming at the two of us, the fear gripping me as a man I admired—who took me into his home—threatened to kick his own son out and turn me out onto the streets with nothing more than the clothes on my back. All because we had fucked up, and our friendship meant letting things slide. Danil would have cut me off from the only family I had left. The devastation on Dimitri's face when his father handed down

orders, expecting them to be obeyed without question, was impossible to watch. So I took those orders and did it myself, driving a wedge between us for the rest of our lives.

“How did they even turn you?” I spit out.

“I went to them.”

The words land like a heavy stone in my gut. They didn’t even have anything on Dimitri, yet he sided with *them*. He brought them into our home, lining up all his little chess pieces and preparing to knock the rest of us down.

“You can’t be surprised, Nik. My reasons were different at the start, but now? Now I won’t let it go. You saw the shipping container. Natasha didn’t sanction this. If she catches wind of it, she’ll kill us all, and I don’t want needless bloodshed.”

“Then shut it down yourself,” I counter.

“You don’t think I’ve tried? Who do you think the shipment of girls went to? I learned about this before the wedding and purchased all the cargo since. This is bigger than Sergei, and I’ve been following the crumbs, but I can’t get to it all. Not without alerting the twins or Sergei himself.”

“The twins are your spies,” I remind him.

He just lifts a brow and shakes his head. “Not anymore.” He drops his feet back down and rests his elbows on the desk. “The question is, why didn’t you do anything about this? You’re close to Sergei. You had to know about this, and you, above everyone, should know the pain of being ripped away from everything you know.”

“My situation was not the same as these girls,” I counter.

“Wasn’t it?” He raises a brow. “Loss of your parents, suddenly shipped off to Russia, leaving France and everything you know behind. Abuse at the hands of your new ‘family’?”

Memories of my first year with the Aslanov family crash over me like waves breaking on the rocks, pelting me with everything I’ve kept buried. Since finding Anya in the junkyard, those memories have been floating near the surface, just deep enough not to hinder my daily life, but every night, I wake up drenched in sweat, unable to calm my racing heart.

“I found out six months ago. Sergei waited to bring me in on it until he was sure I had let go of the ethics Interpol had drilled into me.” I rake my fingers through my hair, itching for a cigarette to occupy my mouth instead of this conversation. Taking my lighter out, I flick it open and shut with my left hand as the right clutches the chair’s armrest. “I have some information,

but not enough to do anything with it.”

“And your thoughts on the girls being shipped here like chattel? Sold off to the highest bidder and used until they’re dead?” Dimitri asks.

“I fucking hate it. They don’t deserve that.” I drop my voice to a whisper. “No one does. But what can we do, realistically?”

“Imagine if it was Ellie’s child who was taken . . . what would you do then?”

Without thinking, the words fall from my lips. “Everything.”

“And that’s how most of the parents of those girls feel. How can we not do something if we have the means?”

“Most of the parents?” I ask.

“Some were sold by their families.”

Red-hot rage rises within me. “Who?”

“Calm the fuck down. We’re gathering names for the agency to handle. I can’t have you flying off to Russia to go on a killing spree.” Dimitri adjusts his cufflinks in a move so commonplace I know he’ll only leave them alone once they’re parallel to the hem. “So, I put it to you again. Are you in?”

“I’m in,” I say.

“That means turning on Sergei. Are you prepared to do that?”

I open my mouth to respond, but Dimitri holds a hand up, those ice-blue eyes boring into mine. “Think about it, Nikita. We’ve had our differences, but I see more in you than the lackey who does what he’s been told. You spent long enough away from the family and have your own code of ethics. What it comes down to is this: Can you live this life? Working with Sergei and continuing this cycle of stepping on the innocent to line our pockets? If that is the case, then, by all means, get the fuck out of my house.” He flicks his fingers, as if dismissing me.

“I’m in—all in. But if you think I need time to cement that, you’re fucked in the head. Ask me again in two days, a week, a month, and my answer will be the same.”

Dimitri nods and steeples his fingers under his chin. “Good. Tell me about Eleanor.”

The abrupt subject change makes me chuckle. “She’s something, isn’t she?” I ask.

He bares his teeth at me, and his hand dips towards his hip, where he keeps his gun.

Probably not the ideal time to tell him she and I fucked less than an hour

ago. Not while he's armed, at least.

"How real is your marriage?" I ask.

His lips curl up into a grin, and I know he's imagining fucking her again. "As real as it gets."

"For now," I say, recalling her response that first night in the penthouse when Dimitri asked her if she was his. "Well, this was enlightening. I'm heading out for a smoke. If Ellie's here, she's gathering evidence. What's the plan for that, and how can I help? It's too soon to bring her to the big meetings and shit, but she can start chipping away at the lower rungs."

"She'll find her way in. You'll accompany her to lunch with Sergei as an extra set of eyes. And you'll be wearing a camera for additional evidence of any wrongdoing. Watch them. Watch her. You know she has a life to get back to after this."

A life . . . right. A *child*. She was dating someone back when we were partners for a while—Conrad? Conan? Something like that. I wonder if she ended up getting back with that dickwad. Is the child his? Is she married to him too?

Although, I guess the last one is less concerning because she's married to Dimitri, which didn't stop us. The punishment will be brutal, but God forgive me; I want to do it again.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Eleanor

NIK LEADS THE WAY INTO FILET, THE BRATVA-OWNED RESTAURANT SERGEI chose for our lunch. He's accompanying me today instead of Igor, and as he leads the way into the restaurant, his movements are stilted and less fluid than usual, as if he's got an injury he's trying to hide.

It's been nearly a month since I watched my husband torture one of his men, then Nik dropped bomb after bomb onto an already tenuous situation, and my morals were called into question—oh yeah, and about a week since Nik and I fucked in the gym and I woke up trapped in his room until he unlocked the damned door.

I was waiting near the locked door when I heard his footsteps on the stairs. As the mechanism disengaged, I barrelled through it, landing a hit to that anchor tattoo I was aiming for earlier when we'd been sparring, and I blew past him into the suite, shutting it in his face and not speaking to him since.

Fucker thinks he can just lock me away when he's done with me. He deserved the shot to the spleen.

I've had a shit month, and it's only getting worse because the last thing I want to do is playact in front of Sergei to dig for information, but this is a prime opportunity to get a few answers.

"We're meeting someone," Nik says, breezing by the hostess stand and leading the way towards the back of the restaurant. I send her an apologetic look, and she just rolls her eyes. I would, too, if someone was that dismissive of me when I was just doing my job.

I watch Nik's back as he moves through the tables, and when he stops and shifts to the side, I see Sergei sitting at a four-top table, a glass of red wine in his hand.

"Nik. Elsa, so good to see you," he greets, standing from his chair.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Sergei," I say, adopting that demure façade I wore at the wedding. I haven't needed to shield myself at home, especially since I'm avoiding the two men who live there, but out here in their world? It's necessary.

Nik pulls out a chair, and I slide into it without a thank you. And it bothers the hell out of me to intentionally be rude.

But in front of Sergei, I need to appear a certain way. Uncaring, entitled, a

tool for the Bratva to use for their “alliance” with the Emerald Sabres.

Nik’s eyes flash with surprise at my cold façade, but he recovers quickly. He reaches for the seat beside me, but Sergei stops him with his hand on the backrest. “I think it’s best if Elsa and I chat privately, Nik.”

Nik doesn’t move but looks from Sergei to me, his brows raised and waiting for direction.

*Please*, I mouth.

Glare activated, Nik leaves our table and sits nearby with a good view of the entire restaurant, waving off a server as he approaches.

Sergei sits and clasps his hands in front of him. “So, how can I help you, Elsa?”

I shift uncomfortably, looking over my shoulder at Nik, who still has his eyes locked on us. Sending him a smile that probably looks more like a grimace, I try to convey that I’ve got this.

“Speak freely, dear. Nikita cannot hear from there.”

He can’t, but I’ve got my camera linked up and recording everything. I keep that mask of “shy new bride” affixed to my face, letting it flood my system with slight fidgets and glances. I need to sell this, so I put myself in the mindset, letting *Elsa* wash over Eleanor.

“I just . . . I’m so far in over my head,” I admit, letting that annoying tremor enter my voice again. “Things were different back home; wives stood by their husbands in everything. I know there’s an adjustment period, and we’ve only been married a short while, but I can’t help but feel I’m being pushed aside.”

“How are things done in the Emerald Sabres?” Sergei asks, cocking his head to the side and picking up the wine bottle. I refuse the pour he’s offering and twist my fingers together in front of me, letting him see my nerves.

“Mum and Dad do everything together. They talk about everything, and she supports him at home even if she doesn’t go with him for work. It is the same for all the wives. They play a more active role, knowing what they’re getting involved in. After all, how can a husband come home to a supportive wife if she doesn’t know what she’s supporting?”

I let the silence build as Sergei considers the question. He swirls the wine in his glass and raises it to his nose, savouring the bouquet before taking a careful sip.

“You wish to be more involved, then?”

It’s not common for wives to do the dirty work and climb the rungs of the

Bratva's ladder, so I redirect. "More than anything, I wish to understand. I know I'm new"—I say with a self-deprecating chuckle—"but I am not stupid or useless, Sergei. I want to be the best wife to please Dimitri and the rest of the Bratva."

Sergei assesses me shrewdly, and I keep my eyes locked on him. Turning my lips into a frown, I let the lower one wobble.

After what feels like an age, he nods and says, "You are pleasing to us, little Elsa. That you are here, hoping to learn what a good Bratva wife does, is a testament to that."

"Perhaps I should have asked Oksana or Ana to lunch. This was a stupid idea, Sergei. I'm sorry to have wasted your time." I place my napkin on the table, but before I can stand, Sergei stops me with a hand on mine. "Sit, Elsa. This is neither a waste of my time nor a fool's errand."

Settling back into my seat, I study Sergei's face.

"You are untested, that is to be sure. And you are not one of us." I frown, but Sergei just chuckles. "And that is a good thing, Elsa. You are a breath of fresh air in a stagnant room. And you're right. There is much to learn, and we haven't afforded you the opportunity. Some things will not be shared with you for our—and your—protection, you understand? But if there are smaller matters I can counsel you on, you only need to ask."

Sergei's hand still rests on mine, and I fight the urge to shake it off and wipe away any trace of him on my napkin. He's too touchy for my taste, but reprimanding him right now will do nothing to give me the answers I seek.

"What can I do? I cannot sit idly by, wasting my time away in the apartment, staring at the four walls. I'll go mad. There must be something beneficial I can do for the organisation."

"Don't fret, Elsa. It's still early days, and Dimitri will allow you to contribute, eventually. But for now, you are a princess in her tower. You must be protected at all costs because you are Dimitri's future. You and your heir will provide our people's security for a future untainted by succession questions."

I rest my free hand on my stomach, pretending that the future he speaks of is a possibility.

"But what if something happens to Dimitri before our child is ready to lead?"

"Then someone else would step up in the interim."

"Well, surely it would be you," I counter, raising a brow. "After all,

Dimitri says that you're the most experienced. You've been the brigadier for how long now?"

He chuckles. "Longer than I care to admit. And yes, should there be no heir or clear line of succession, the role of *pakhan* would fall to me."

The theory about Sergei being the one behind the attack makes sense. After all, how many men are content in the station they currently hold? How many are grasping for the next rung on the ladder, no matter who they step on?

The waiter delivers our food—a wedge salad for me and a steak for Sergei. Damn, his plate looks good. I swallow the saliva pooling on my tongue and stare down at my rabbit food with a shielded grimace. Not that it's terrible or unappealing, but with the hours I've been putting in at the gym out of pure frustration, I want a substantial meal.

Alone again, Sergei continues. "Well, you've only been married a short while. It's impossible to say whether an heir is growing in your belly, but I assume you're performing your wifely duties."

"Of course. My parents were clear I was to do as Dimitri asked, and I know my role. I just . . . I'm inexperienced, which I understand is a prerequisite for any bride. But . . ." I put my fingertips to my cheeks, pretending to hide a blush I don't have because Lord knows I haven't been a virgin since I was twenty. "I've looked online and checked if I can do anything to help guarantee that our relationship will result in pregnancy, but without medical and infertility testing, there's no way to tell."

"Elsa, this is highly inappropriate to discuss with me," Sergei says, raising a brow and checking over my shoulder at where Nik is seated. I feel his gaze on the back of my neck but ignore it, not letting those flickers of emotion play across my face.

"Please." I reach across the table and take Sergei's hand with my own, clutching his thick fingers to show my desperation. "What else can I do? I know it's inappropriate. I know I shouldn't be coming to you for this kind of advice. But I don't know who else to talk to. The only thing they taught us in school is preventative measures—condoms and birth control. But where do you seek advice when you want the opposite? Oh, sure, I found mummy blogs full of home remedies and putting your stock in the stars or prayer. Which, fine, I can do that too, but there has to be a more surefire way."

Sergei reaches across the table and places his other hand on top of mine, sandwiching them between his. "Elsa, you're a beautiful girl," he says, a bit

more than kindness entering his voice. I peek at him from under my lashes and notice his gaze has travelled down my body. “The best way to ensure it happens is to use that to your advantage. Lie with him as often as possible. Make yourself available to him anytime, day or night, even when he takes a break for lunch.”

My thoughts wander to Nik in the kitchen after he made peanut butter and jam sandwiches for Anya. And then again when Dimitri laid me out on his counter that first time we fucked and left me so close to the edge without relief.

That kitchen is dangerous.

“Your relationship is still new,” he says. “Sometimes, these things take time. We’ll discuss other options if nothing happens within the next few months. But for now, Dimitri knows the importance as well as you do.”

“What other options are there?” I wonder aloud as I focus on my food again, inviting him to take the bait. Sergei is still holding one of my hands, and his thumb brushes the back of mine in a decidedly sensual gesture. My breath catches, and I look up.

He grips my hand harder. “We will not talk of this now, but it’s something to remember in the future. If there is one, the problem may not be with you but with Dimitri. And should that be the case, there are ways around it. Ways to ensure an heir he never needs to know is not his by blood. But without an heir, you will become useless. I would hate to see what happens if that time comes.”

Sergei nods his confirmation of my suspicions while noting my discomfort. He’s talking about fucking someone else to help ensure I get pregnant.

“But who?” I ask, hoping for words, not just gestures.

“Nik is an option. Is he not?” Sergei asks, letting his gaze drift over my shoulder to focus on the man at the other table. “He looks to you for orders instead of blindly following my own.”

“He is disgusting. Not to mention Dimitri’s trusted bodyguard,” I say. “Besides, they look so different.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Sergei muses. “But Dimitri is the spitting image of my brother and me when we were younger. Though, with your genes, it would disguise any parentage.”

I let my mouth fall open in shock. “Bu-but what about your wife?” I whisper-shout. I know they were somewhat distant at the dinner we’d had

with them, but surely Sergei would expect me to put up an argument about Oksana.

Sergei chuckles dryly. “Oksana knows better than most the things we do for duty—for the family. And it’s not as if I haven’t turned a blind eye to her misdeeds. At least this would be in the name of the Bratva instead of carnal lust.”

Sergei releases my hand, and I look over my shoulder at Nik taking in the conversation from afar. Surely he can’t have heard any of the words, but his eyes are focused on the hand Sergei had been holding.

There’s a simmering rage on Nik’s face. His brow is scrunched, and his hand is gripping the fork like he wants to stab it in someone’s eye—hopefully Sergei’s and not mine.

The older man moves closer to me, sliding into the chair Nik tried to use earlier.

“Come now, Elsa,” Sergei says, returning my attention to him. “This is Oksana’s favourite salad, and she recommended it when I told her I was taking you to lunch. I’ll need to report on whether you liked it. Dig in.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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Nikita

I WATCH FROM A DISTANCE AS SERGEI LEANS TOWARDS ELLIE AND WHISPERS something in her ear. My heart rate increases as I strain to hear their conversation, leaning so far out of my seat that I get up and move closer while they're distracted. He pulls away, and Ellie's fist clenches at her side. His voice continues, not as quiet as it was a moment ago. What I hear shocks me to my core.

"I'll give you what Dimitri won't," Sergei says with a lecherous grin. "I'll lie with you and give you a child. Dimitri will never know."

My blood boils as I step forward, ready to confront Sergei. But Ellie speaks up before I can wrap my hands around his throat.

"But that's treason. Or do you call it that in the Bratva? That's how we refer to it back home."

"Don't be coy, Elsa. It's for the good of the family."

"Have you ever done anything like this before?" she asks, batting her lashes at him as her cheeks go pink. *Fuck me; she's a good actress.* Her fingers dance across Sergei's sleeve, trailing back and forth and creating contact between them. "It's so risky," she breathes, acting like this turns her on.

Fuck, maybe it does.

"What Dimitri doesn't know won't hurt him."

Elsa shivers at Sergei's words, drawing his attention to her low-cut neckline. It's modest by modern standards but put that little plunge on someone you can't have, and it's downright indecent.

"What else doesn't he know?" she asks.

"Elsa, I can't give you all my secrets so early in our friendship," Sergei chides with a smirk.

I step back and turn towards my table, keeping my ear to the conversation but not hovering behind them anymore.

"Oh, Sergei. This is all just . . . It's too crazy. What if we get caught? Dimitri doesn't seem like the type to take things lying down. He'll kill us, and he'll have every right."

"He'll never find out. I know he has eyes on me, but I have eyes on him too. And his loyal men are mine now."

I feel the tightness in my shoulders as my muscles slowly contract. The

twins and I have been watching Dimitri for Sergei, but my alliances have shifted with Ellie's involvement and Interpol's imminent crackdown. Because Aleksandr is married to Ana, the twins' allegiance is ironclad.

I've always been loyal to the Aslanov family, but I need to look out for myself this time. I didn't spend a decade undercover at Danil's command just to lose my freedom two years later.

"The twins?" Ellie asks. "Dimitri said they were there to help you."

"Help?" Sergei scoffs. "More like spy. He thinks I don't know they report everything I do to him, but it's okay, little dove. They're family now." He pats her hand in reassurance, and she leans towards him.

"Either way, it would be risky, Sergei. I can't put you in danger. I am truly grateful for your kind offer and promise to consider it. You said you would be the next *pakhan* if something happened to Dimitri. Even speaking about it carries too much risk. For both of us."

Good girl, Ellie. Playing the self-preservation card.

My phone rings from my pocket. It's the first timer we set up for the meeting. There are three others, depending on when we want to make an excuse to get out of here.

I pretend to answer a call, lifting my voice to be heard over the din of the restaurant. "Yes? Okay, we're on our way."

Turning towards their table, I approach Sergei and Ellie. "Forgive me, Sergei. But I need to get Elsa back. She has an engagement to prepare for."

"What engagement?" Sergei asks, clearly feeling out of the loop.

"I'm not sure, sir, but Dimitri says we have to go now. An engagement of some kind they're due at; I'll let you know." It's the oldest trick in the book. Create intrigue, leave it a mystery, and make it so Sergei wants to pepper Ellie with more questions later, keeping that line of communication open.

She dabs the napkin on the corners of her lips and takes my hand as I help her out of her chair. Sergei stands as well, reaching out for a hug from Ellie. "Think about what I said," he whispers.

"I will," she says on the withdrawal, gripping his hands like a lifeline. "Goodbye, Sergei. Thank you for your time."

"Thank you," he says. "You saved Oksana, and we are both so grateful. If you need anything at all, call me."

"I will," she repeats.

Ushering her in front of me, I turn back to Sergei, continuing to play the role of his informant. "I'll let you know what's going on."

“See that you do. Dimitri should not plan things without letting us know.”

“Agreed,” I confirm. After nodding a farewell, I follow Ellie, calling Igor on my way so he can bring the car around.

We stand on the pavement outside the restaurant, saying nothing and sharing an uncomfortable silence for a few minutes until the town car rolls up in front of us.

I open the door, and Ellie slides in first. She greets Igor, and I slam the door after me once I’m in my seat. My blood is boiling at Sergei being so close to Ellie and offering things he shouldn’t be offering. It’s all the better for him to dig his own grave, but that doesn’t mean I enjoyed hearing it.

“Igor, back to the penthouse.”

He nods as I press the button for the divider, waiting impatiently for it to rise. As soon as it’s up, I lunge for Ellie, gripping her hair in my fist and her hip in my palm. “Disgusting, huh?” I ask, recalling what she’d said when Sergei offered me up as her studhorse.

Ellie squirms below me, fumbling for the hidden camera in the jewelled pin on her dress. She clicks it off and turns her head towards me. “I had to say something.”

I dip down, putting my lips on her throat, nipping at the skin with my teeth, and stroking it with my tongue.

“And ‘disgusting’ is the first thing you thought of? Not life-changing? Not so good you passed out after? Not *yes, please, more, Nik!*” I raise my voice into a falsetto, perfectly mimicking what Ellie sounded like as she came all over my cock in the gym.

She huffs and tries to shove me away, but I just tighten my grip. “Oh no, you don’t. Not now. Not after everything.”

“Leave it alone, Nik. You don’t know what’s going on.”

“Don’t I?” I raise a brow as I pull back, staring at her.

“Do you?” She bites her bottom lip, her eyes looking downward.

“I know you’re here for work. You need to collect evidence, and Sergei is the best way. I also know you’re not as single as you once were.”

She gasps, and instead of letting her respond, I capture her lips with mine, tongues clashing, teeth bumping, and lips bruising. I don’t care that she’s moved on from me, our night, and our partnership. I haven’t, and with our chemistry, I don’t believe she’s fully moved on, either.

Wanting more of her than I’m entitled to, I slip my hand up her skirt and press my fingers between her thighs, finding the lace there wet with desire.

She groans into my mouth, and I capture the sounds. I know I'll be repeating it in my head all night long.

Her nails rake down my back, and I hiss at the pain—more than I usually would because it's not just her nails that have scored my flesh.

"Nik, what's wrong?" she asks, pushing at me again, and I let her go this time. I arch my back and then roll my shoulders to pull the material of my shirt away from the welts and cuts underneath.

"Nothing. You're right. I shouldn't have done that."

She reaches out for me, obviously knowing I'm in actual pain, but it's not pain I don't deserve. I flinch away, and her hands close, then open again.

"What happened? Did . . . Did Dimitri do something to you?" she grits out. The anger in her voice catches me off guard.

"No."

"Don't you lie to me, Nikita Lenkov. Not now. Not again. What the fuck happened?"

Instead of answering, I turn away from her, facing the window on my side of the car. "Nothing. Just let it go."

She sits upright beside me as I watch the scenery go by. Millions of people in New York and my boss had to go and marry the girl I haven't been able to get out of my head. I hate him for marrying her and making this whole situation happen. For making me feel this guilt. For making me sin.

I feel Ellie staring at me, and I cease all movement, willing to let the fabric dry to the cuts on my back if it means the questions end.

But, of course, that's not how it goes. Quick as lightning, Ellie grips the bottom of my shirt and yanks it up to midback. She lets out a whimper when she sees the raised lines scoring my back in the daylight, the tinted windows not doing enough to block the afternoon sun from shining directly onto the penance woven into my skin.

"Oh, Nik," she breathes, not touching me, but I feel the warmth of her hand hovering above the welts, cuts, and tattoos on my back. "What is this?"

"Which part?" I ask.

"All . . . All of it?"

Exhaling through my nose, I blindly extract the shirt from her grip and lower it back down. "The tattoos have been there since I got back, as you know. The rest is . . . indemnification."

"Indemni—Nik, are you self-harming?" Her voice breaks, and it breaks my heart right along with it.

“Not self-harming. It’s penance, Ellie. Compensation for the things I choose to do, despite knowing better.”

She studies my face as I turn to her, letting her see the truth in my eyes. Hers brim with tears as things click into place.

“These are fresh, Nik. Both new and slightly older.”

“They are.”

“So you regretted the gym. You harmed yourself for fucking me. Nik, that’s . . . wow.”

She doesn’t know the half of it. She doesn’t know how I agonised over it. Over and over again, day and night. Unending in my prayer and my use of the flogger, the morning sun crested the horizon before I was satisfied I had exacted all the payment I could from my flesh.

I keep my eyes downcast, but she pulls me closer, not letting my back touch the seat as she lays me down and puts my head in her lap.

Stroking my hair, she runs her fingers through it repeatedly, not saying a word, not uttering the command that I stop what I do to myself. She simply holds me, unfailing in her constancy to be there for others, even when she isn’t there for herself.

We get closer to the penthouse, and she helps me sit back up, guiding me with a soft hand until I’m upright again.

“I won’t pretend to understand, Nik. But the next time you need to do this, I want you to come to me.”

“Ellie—”

“No. Whether or not you like it, you are in my life, and it sounds like we’re essentially partners again. Or a trifecta or whatever if you count Dimitri. So, as your partner, I am asking you to come to me. Can you do that?”

Reluctantly, I nod. I can go to Ellie, but that doesn’t mean I won’t go to my room right after and whip myself bloody again.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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Dimitri

WHILE NIK AND ELEANOR ARE WITH SERGEI, I'M PACING BACK AND FORTH IN the living room. Things here have been tense, and that's the exact opposite of what I want in my home. This is the only place I have to escape the tedium of this life. The place I can drop my façade and just *be*. Well, as much as one can when their live-in bodyguard had been reporting to Sergei until recently.

It went against my every instinct to send her with Nik. If he is still working with my uncle, this is a chance to prove that, and Eleanor knows it. I'd briefed her before lunch, telling her to watch for signs of anything unusual. It's easy to believe Nik's words, especially when promised with such intensity, but seeing them interact might shed some more light on the subject.

Still, my skin crawls at the distance. She is mine, and I'm not there to protect her. My suspicions about Sergei and the fact that she's meeting with him unsettle me. But Eleanor insisted I sit this one out. She claims she can get more from him without me present.

She's probably right, but that doesn't mean I have to like it.

Nik will watch out for her. He has to, and I have Igor driving them today for an added layer of security. Thinking back on it now, threatening Nik's life before they left might have been unnecessary.

I can't help but notice that something in him has settled recently. Where he'd been tense at Eleanor's sudden appearance in our lives, it seems like a corner was turned last week. The frustrating thing is I don't know *what* corner exactly, though I can guess.

As I rake my hands through my hair, I stride towards my office. I need to get this nervous energy out; there's only one solution when I feel like this.

Sliding the painting on the wall over, I find the biometric button and press it with my thumb. There's a whisper of sound as the hidden doorway between the bathroom and my office slides open, and instantly, I feel calmer.

I round the corner, step through the panel, and flick on all the lights. Alexei's remnants have been removed, and I spent the rest of that night washing the last of the evidence down the drain in the centre of the space.

Then, of course, I've spent every night down here or on the couch. Eleanor hasn't exactly asked me back to bed, and I refuse to push her on this. I know she feels something for me, and steamrolling my way back into her

good graces will only lead to disappointment when this happens again.

No. She needs to choose to let me in. To accept all of me. And if she happens to miss me beside her as much as I miss being there, then all the better. At least in the last few days, she's started making eye contact again. The baby steps are infuriating, but I am a patient man. I can outlast being outside her walls; she will crumble eventually, and I'll catch her.

No matter how hard she tries, our chemistry is too great to ignore.

Looking around the room, one would think I'd feel remorse for the actions that caused this rift, but all I feel is pride at a job well done. Eleanor sent the phone to a contact to get more information from it, so until that happens, I can take satisfaction in knowing the offenders have been punished. We just need to know who put out the hit on us. It could be anyone from the other organised crime syndicates, and the list of suspects is too long to make a dent in.

I walk to the north wall in my studio, pick up a new canvas, and set it onto the easel I've dragged out of the corner. I slide a stool over and wheel the cart with my paints and brushes to the centre of the room.

*Deep breath in, stress out.*

I repeat my ritual four times, closing my eyes and grounding myself in the present as I open the supplies I need. The scent of paint thinner reaches me, sending a tendril of creative energy through me, and when I'm calm, I open my eyes, staring at the white surface in front of me, bare and open to possibility.

There are a million things to paint, and not enough days in this lifetime to create them all. My eyes trace the canvas as my brain fills the space with a conjured image—still blurry on the edges, but the focal point is vivid.

With a pencil, I block out sections as the image clarifies in my mind and in front of me. It takes a little while, but when I step back, I cock my head to the side and survey what I've done—what my brain has been screaming at me to let out, like it's been locked up and has now been released, seeing the sun for the first time.

The figure in the middle is clearly Eleanor, her wedding dress on, facing away from the observer with New York at her feet. But hands are reaching for her. Four, in fact.

I know whose hands those are. And as reluctant as I am to admit it, I need to paint this. It will prevent me from working on anything else if I don't. This obsessive need to work on the piece will take over my mind, and I cannot

focus until it's done. Shoving it aside has never worked for me.

Hundreds of completed canvases lean against the opposite wall—some of which are my pride and joy, while others are horrible. Those are the ones I've struggled to complete, while another piece demanded all my attention, but I fought against the need to paint it.

I am single-minded in every aspect of my life—even my hobby.

The paintings dotting my apartment remind me of who I am and why I'm fighting to end this life of servitude to an organisation I don't believe in. They portray the hopelessness I feel when I think about my life, the responsibility that has been mine since my father became *pakhan* and the weight of being the heir was placed on my shoulders.

I dip my brush into some paint and begin my work. I turn on a playlist on my phone, and my hands fly across the canvas. For all the control I have in my life, I cannot employ the same tactics when I create. There's a fervour to my work. A rush. A need to pour everything out of me in violent strokes and disorderly manoeuvres. My phone dings, but without thought, I cancel whatever alert it is and continue.

Brush strokes, finger smudges, anger, frustration, and passion all blur on the canvas as the framework of the painting takes shape. I lose myself in the careful execution of some parts, and the chaotic, frenetic energy overtakes others.

My phone chimes with the app for the lift, and I put my brush down as I step back from my work.

I won't sleep tonight. I know that already and sigh deeply, resigning myself to yet another sleepless night. Using a rag, I wipe away the paint on my hands and use the utility sink in my private room to wash away the stains.

A swirl of colour circles the drain, taking some of my tension with it.

Tossing the rag into a corner, I slip through the panel, close it, and enter my office, where I straighten the painting over the access pad. The lift chimes with its arrival, and Eleanor and Nik's voices are muted as they step into the penthouse.

Their heads are bent together, Nik whispering to Eleanor as they walk across the foyer. A bolt of jealousy courses through me at the sight of them. Why do they look so fucking comfortable together?

"So?" I ask, causing Eleanor to snap her head towards where I lean against the bannister.

Her eyes trail down my body, and I pray I haven't missed a paint splatter.

I'm not ready to share this with her, and I don't know if I ever will be. My work feels like that last piece of me that hasn't been put in a file or aired for all the Bratva to see.

"You're casual today," she comments, waving her hand at me. I look down at my jeans and dark-blue Henley instead of my usual suit.

There's a spot of black paint near my knee, but it's so minuscule I doubt she notices. I make a mental note to keep a spare set of clothes in the studio in case this happens again. The timer on my phone rang ages ago, but I was so wrapped up in continuing that I silenced it and kept going.

"Working from home. So?" I repeat, my patience growing thinner the longer the two stand hip to hip. I want distance between them. I want Eleanor to look at me with anything other than the revulsion she's made clear since I took care of Alexei.

"Your uncle is an asshole," Eleanor says, "but I don't think he's the one who ordered the hit."

My brows raise. "What makes you say that?"

"He's bound and determined that I give you an heir—so much so that he offered to be the one to impregnate me and keep the secret. Why would he be pushing for that so hard only to kill you? It makes little sense to offer that only to want you dead at the same time. Unless he plans to kill you and claim the baby as his."

"He offered to *what*?" I grit out between clenched teeth. *I'll kill him myself.*

Nik steps forward and puts a hand against my chest, stopping me from advancing. Without notice, I pushed off the railing and stalked closer to Eleanor.

"Breathe," he says.

I swat his hand away. "Back the fuck up. There's nothing left to explain. He dies."

"No." He moves his head, blocking Eleanor from me, which only enrages me further. Who is he to keep my wife from me? "Why is your first reaction murder?"

"Why isn't it yours?" I roar.

"Nik," Eleanor says softly, her fingers resting on his shoulder. He melts into her soft touch, letting her direct him out of the way and controlling him like a puppet master. When she sees my face, a small smile graces her lips. "He offered. That doesn't mean I'll accept, Dimitri. Nik is right. Breathe. It

might give us leverage if we need it.”

“Sergei had no right to say that shit to you. To offer that. I’ll kill him.”

I move towards the lift behind them, ready to take off with no plan, intent on gutting my uncle, when a heavy and unexpected weight drops onto my back.

Eleanor’s forearm comes around my throat as she clings to me like a koala and puts me in a chokehold. “Just stop for a second! Jesus, Dimitri. Stop!”

I’m still headed to the lift, but her arm tightens around my neck, and blackness creeps in on the edges of my vision. Still, I trudge forward, putting one heavy foot in front of the other.

Eleanor becomes a dead weight, pulling tighter on my neck until I can’t breathe, and my head goes light.

“Dimitri, please. Stop.” Her words trickle into my slowing brain, and the anguish in her voice causes me to falter and slow my steps. “There you go.”

Her arm relaxes a fraction, and I gulp in air, my thoughts coming into sharper focus. Then, I do what any sane—or insane—man would do and lunge for the lift.

Nik’s leg comes out of nowhere, tripping me up with a swift kick to my knee, knocking it out from under me, and I go down like a tree, Eleanor clinging to my back the whole time.

With a shriek and a curse, we tumble down, and I break our fall with my hands, the sharp slap of skin on marble resounding through the room.

“Fuck,” I groan as I twist to the side so Eleanor can move off me.

But she doesn’t.

I twist my head to look over my shoulder at her, and she glares at me. “You deserved that,” she mutters. She pinches my right ear, twisting my head more fully towards her. I’m helpless to fight back.

“Oh, I did, did I?”

“You sure as fuck did,” Nik chimes in from above us. His boots come into view, scuffed and full of bloody history against the pristine white tile. “You need to take a second and fucking listen, man. Today’s meeting was a good thing, and if you would stop for a goddamned minute so we can discuss it, you’d know that.”

A growl works its way from my chest, and Eleanor, bold little thing that she is, slaps my back like I’m choking.

Fuck’s sake.

“Will you sit the hell down and listen?” she asks, feeling emboldened now that it’s two against one. It’s like Nik is lending her his courage—or stupidity, depending on who you ask—and she’s getting her footing.

“Fine,” I say tersely.

Slowly, she releases her arm around my throat. “Nik, guard the lift. I don’t trust him not to make a break for it again.”

“On it.”

He moves towards the doors, plants his feet shoulder-width apart, and crosses his arms over his chest. I roll my eyes because, Jesus, he doesn’t need to put on the whole show of his biceps flexing and his shoulders bulging with anticipatory adrenaline.

Eleanor slides off of me, her tits dragging along my back as she moves. She’s been cold and distant for weeks, with minimal touching, rare eye contact, lacklustre conversation, and general avoidance. I close my eyes and relish the touch of her against me now that I’m not fighting for air.

It feels like the universe gifted me an opportunity with Eleanor, and I fucked it all up in record time. Something I’ll have to remedy soon because while this wasn’t either of our intentions, it’s very fucking clear to me we belong together.

I stand, glancing at Eleanor as she blatantly checks out Nik as he stands guard over the lift. Is that what’s stopping her? *Nik?*

“Come on, wife.”

I drop my shoulder and pick her up in a fireman’s carry as she squeals. Striding across the apartment and weaving through the living room’s furniture, I manoeuvre her until she has her thighs around my hips, and I sit on the couch with her on my lap.

“Tell me all about how another man wants to fuck what’s mine.” I stroke my fingers through her hair, tucking the front bits behind her ears and trailing my fingertips down her jaw to her chin. Her eyes are fixed on my throat instead of mine, like they have been since Alexei. I can’t take it anymore.

“Look at me,” I command.

She winces at my bark and lifts her eyes until I stare into those fathomless pools. I grip her hips, willing her to just rip the Band-Aid off. How bad was it? What did my uncle subject her to?

“Sergei was quite formal at lunch. It started with me asking how best to support you as my husband.” Eleanor gulps around the word. “Then, it devolved into my ‘wifely duties’ and how I should always make myself

available to you. Finally, he moved on to the talk of an heir to secure the line.”

I nod as I consider her words. “I think you’re right that Sergei didn’t set up the hit. Not with Oksana being there and possibly a target, not to mention you. As much as he irks me, he adores her too much to put her at risk like that. There’s every likelihood it was the Italians or the Irish. But this doesn’t bode well for him. Offering to father a child would secure *his* line, especially since he and Oksana had only daughters, and the rules are clear, no matter how much Natasha is trying to change that.”

“I thought he adored her. Why would he then offer the affair?”

I cock my head. “To some, love and sex do not always go hand in hand.”

Nik sits on the couch beside Eleanor and me, his arrival drawing my wife’s attention. He usually sits in the armchair opposite us. This is too familiar for my taste, and I grind my teeth again.

“We need to find out who took shots at you,” Nik says. “I’ve got my ear to the ground in his camp, but there’s been nothing about a drive-by on that end. The phone was a burner, and there was no cash transfer before the hit. Idiot fucking Alexei didn’t even require half up front.” Nik rolls his eyes and flicks at some dirt under his fingernail with his tattooed fingers.

Hopefully, Eleanor’s contacts can do more work on the phone, but it’s feeling more and more like a dead end at this point.

“This is tied to Dad’s death,” I say. The last thing holding me back from trusting Nik is the “coincidence” of his arrival and my father’s death. They occurred within days of each other, and without confirmation or denial, I’m working blind. It’s time to test Nik.

Eleanor’s hands grip my shoulders a little tighter at the mention of my father.

“How does a heart attack tie in with a drive-by?” Nik asks, resting his head against the couch’s backrest, lolling it to one side and regarding me. He looks exhausted, no doubt punishing himself for the things he does for work.

Knowing about his tendency to self-flagellate since we were kids has been challenging, especially since nothing I ever said made him stop. It was like beating my head against a wall that would hit back if I pushed too hard.

“Dad didn’t die from a heart attack.”

That gets his attention. Quietly, Nik asks, “How did he die?”

Eleanor tenses on my lap, her thighs squeezing me like her fingers on my shoulders. It makes me feel cocooned and held as I disclose the secret I’ve

been carrying for so long.

“He was murdered in his bed. Two days after you came home.” Never mind, I’d kept his death a secret for nearly a week to figure out who the murderer was and work from behind the scenes.

“Two—Fuck, Dimitri!” Nik stands up and paces next to the couch. “And because of the timing, you think I killed him?! Is that why you didn’t tell me you were teaming up with Interpol? Is that why you’ve been so goddamned distant and ornery with me, sending me all over the city for trade deals and negotiations? Oh, Christ. Am I supposed to go down for his murder when the arrests are made?”

His voice echoes around the room, his reaction seeming genuine, if not a little over the top. His composure has flown out the window, and Eleanor watches him pace and rake his hands through his hair.

“Why are you freaking out?” she asks.

Nik pulls on his strands and stops his incessant pacing, glaring at both of us. “Because I’d been away for ten fucking years and came home to a grand welcome for a job well done. Only then to lose the last remaining parental figure in my life, and now, the man I considered my fucking brother thinks I murdered him.”

“It was an ice pick to the temple and a knife to the heart, Nik,” I say.

The colour leeches from his face when I mention his usual method of killing. “I swear to God I didn’t do it, Dimitri. And you know I don’t make that promise lightly. I knew how much you didn’t want this role. Since we were teenagers and your dad took the role of *pakhan*, you’d been pushing back against it. I would never thrust that on you when you didn’t want it.”

I nod. He’s known me for most of my life and was the only one I told I didn’t want the job.

“I don’t think it was Sergei,” I admit. “He and my dad were close, and while Sergei does things I don’t approve of, like shipping girls over, he’s never made a play for *pakhan* other than telling me I wasn’t ready when Dad died.”

“If not Nik or Sergei, then who?” Eleanor asks, finding her voice.

She shifts on my lap, drawing my attention to where her skirt is dangerously high and her seam lines up with my cock. I want to rock into her, grind against her and find that sweet release only she can provide, but not now. Not when so much is up in the air and revelations are happening left and right. I want to throw her down and remind her who she belongs to. Who

owns her pussy. And it's all the more infuriating when her eyes leave mine, and she returns her gaze to my jaw.

I grip her hips harder, stopping her from squirming on me even more. I might be a horrible man, but unless she enthusiastically consents to the depraved and filthy things I want to do to her, I'm stopping the temptation before it starts.

"That's a good fucking question," I say, tilting my head back and shifting my hips just a fraction. Because while I am a patient man, I am no saint. Pulling back, I put distance between us and curse myself for giving in, even if only for a moment.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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Eleanor

IF YOU'VE EVER WONDERED HOW LONG IT TAKES FOR A WOMAN TO SURVIVE IN an apartment with two men she's fucked while undercover and pretending to be a Bratva bride, the answer is a paltry two months.

I'm going out of my goddamn mind. Nik and Dimitri are still walking on eggshells around each other after my husband revealed his dad's cause of death. Nik is pissed Dimitri would ever consider him a suspect; Dimitri is pissed that Nik keeps looking at me like he wants to fuck me; I keep looking at both of them like I want to fuck them, but I'm quick to avert my eyes when they turn in my direction.

Clearly, I've got my priorities in the right place.

The tension is at an all-time high, made more so because Dimitri doesn't know what Nik and I got up to in the gym. I feel the weight of the secrets wrapping around my throat like a noose, and it's becoming too much to bear. I told Dimitri he didn't make choices for me, and my business is indeed *my business*, so why is it eating away at me?

Neither dictates a thing in my life despite them hovering in the periphery of my brain like annoying ghosts. The only thing I need them for is evidence, and I'm up to my eyeballs in footage to comb through.

They've both been wearing cameras and filming meetings and other dealings the Bratva are involved in, forming a tentative truce to collect evidence.

Due to all the nonsense and a desperate need to see anything other than the four walls of my closet-turned-office, when my phone rang yesterday and Oksana asked me to tea—because, of course, that was her suggestion—I was eager to accept. Especially when she told me Ana and a few other wives would accompany us.

I would have declined if it had been just the two of us. The fear that she knew of Sergei's proposition was real. I was half afraid she would spike my tea or something before stabbing me with a knife—the proper one, most certainly, because from what I've read and noted at our dinner a few weeks ago, she's indeed a stickler for etiquette.

So here I am again, walking into the Ritz, desperate to get some separation from the apartment and the men I share it with. But alas, it's never that easy.

Nik walks me to the tearoom with a measured distance between us at all times, greets the women gathered, pulls out my chair for me, and leaves us to it. He sits at a table nearby to watch over me with a few other burly men, who I assume are the other bodyguards.

Doubtful there will be anything to guard against. All I see is some weak tea and gossiping ladies. How riveting for them.

“Elsa, so good to have you join us,” Oksana greets once I’m settled in my tufted seat.

“Thank you for inviting me. I feel like I haven’t been outside in days.”

A couple of the other women at the table titter, and I realise how that sounded. Ana is less subtle as she slaps her thigh and cackles. “Ooh, is Dimitri keeping you busy?”

Not at all, but they don’t need to know that.

“New home, new husband, lots to figure out,” I say, dancing around the subject. I turn my attention to the three other women gathered and smile. “Apologies. I don’t think we’ve met yet. I’m Elsa.”

The dark-haired beauty in the middle with a pearl necklace—*not that kind*—nods demurely. “It’s very nice to meet you, Elsa. I am Sasha, and these are my daughters, Maria and Valentina.”

Her smile is tight as the women on either side of her say hello. I greet them in return and settle back against the chair. Oksana looks pleased with my decorum and lifts a dainty teacup to her lips. She takes a sip and sets it back down without even a clink of the china. It’s unnerving how precise she is in both her speech and movements.

“Welcome to the wives’ club. We get together on the second Wednesday of every month, come rain or shine, and wish to include you in our tradition. I hope you’ll forgive us for not extending the invitation last month, but we wanted to give you some time to settle in after the wedding.” Oksana studies me from across the table, her gaze unnerving as she analyses my slightly harried appearance. It’s been a weird day, and the wind tunnels created by the New York streets are not helping my hair situation. “You’re one of us now, and after your heroic actions, I’m honoured you’ve agreed to join us. The life of a Bratva wife is hard, and it is good to have others in your corner who understand. My husband said you asked how to be there for Dimitri at your lunch. Well, we are a font of knowledge and at your disposal.”

My shoulders relax, and I look into the eyes of each of the women gathered. “Thank you,” I breathe out. “It’s been so overwhelming, and I feel I

don't do enough."

"We've all been there," Sasha says. "Some of us grew up in this life, like Oksana, Anastasia, and my daughters. But I married in, and I understand the adjustment well, *rodnaya*."

Her calling me "dear" like that feels condescending, but I fake a smile and nod in thanks.

Ana reaches her hand to my leg and pats it quickly. "We're here to help you like our husbands help Dimitri. Let us."

I smile at her, already feeling regret that her husband will probably be caught up in the Interpol sweep when this undercover stint is up. But there's no room for emotions or sentimentality right now. My priority needs to be earning the trust of these women.

"Any help would be incredible. Thank you so much," I blather like an idiot. If only I could roll my eyes at myself without them seeing. I hate acting weak in front of them, but a strong woman rarely garners friends easily. And when someone feels they know more than someone else, it ingratiates the uninformed to the all-knowing. That much is clear from the research I've been doing.

I take a sip from my delicate cup, not hiding my look of surprise that the tea I thought was weak is, in fact, flavourful and quite pleasing.

Oksana catches my expression and chuckles. "Oh, *rodnaya*, you don't think we'd let them get away with anything less than the best, did you? Sometimes what looks meek and unassuming is instead a force to be reckoned with."

*We're not talking about tea anymore.*

I smile, playing stupid. "I guess not. But damn, this is good." Cringing at my slip of a curse word, Oksana chuckles more heartily. "No need to mind your language with us. Sometimes, I think we're more crude than our men."

Then, in a move so surprising I jump in my seat, Oksana tilts her head back and shouts, "Fuck!" at the top of her lungs.

Heads swivel in our direction as the regal—and vulgar—woman returns to her tea, not giving a shit who's staring at us. When the waitress eyes us, I worry she's about to kick us out. But instead of coming over and complaining about ruining the serene ambience, a small smile curls her lips, and she returns to serving a nearby table.

"Relax, Elsa. We've spent more money here than some countries' GDPs. They won't do a thing. This place is ours, and the sooner you learn to wield

your power, the better.”

Ana hides her smile behind a cucumber sandwich, chuckling at her mother’s antics like this isn’t the first time she’s shouted an obscenity at high tea.

“She’s right, you know,” Sasha says, capturing my attention as she speaks. “We aren’t trophy wives who sit at home and do nothing. There are charities we sit on the boards of and politicians we speak with. Though, usually, it’s their wives who listen to us and steer their husbands in the right direction. Life can be full of many wonderful things if you only find your path and carve out a piece for yourself.”

I nod. “That makes sense. Back home, wives are supportive of their husbands and often involved in the work. Dimitri hasn’t given me much to do since our wedding, and I fear I’ll get left behind.”

“You’re still new,” Valentina says, breaking her silence. “It’ll take time, but now you have us. We are here to support each other and help where we can.”

“Too right, sister,” Maria chimes in. “The question is, what is it you want to do?”

Ana lists options, sensing my sudden fear of being put on the spot. “You can join any of us with our charities, or if you’re more interested in entrepreneurial endeavours, tonnes of businesses under the Bratva umbrella could use new management, in my opinion. But perhaps a good way to start all that is to host that event Dimitri agreed to. I guess my dad tried to insist you two take a honeymoon, but Dimitri was too busy with work, and this was the compromise.”

“A brilliant idea, Ana. We were just speaking about that the other day, and I’d completely forgotten,” Oksana says, rolling right over the answer that was forming on my tongue. “We should host a reception gala where you can have your pick of causes to get involved in. There can also be a charity auction where you can highlight causes you care about. No one would miss an event hosted by Mrs Dimitri Aslanov, especially since the wedding and reception guest list was so short.”

It’s a dig at our small nuptials, but with the entire guest list on my side being agents, it made sense to keep the event small and manageable.

I raise my eyebrows at Oksana’s summary. Dimitri is well known and has padded many politicians’ and notable figures’ pockets, but insinuating it would be a must-attend event?

That gives me reason to believe these people would show up if invited. And what better way to have the raid than to gather all the pieces into one location?

A sensation skitters down my spine, and I know, without looking, that Nik is boring holes into my back from his spot at a nearby table with the other bodyguards. The sensation, while becoming familiar, unlike anything I've ever experienced before I arrived in New York, the way my body is aware of his proximity when he's looking at me . . . Well, I have experienced it, but with Dimitri. Hence why the two of them have been driving me mad recently and my desperate acceptance of this invitation to tea. I just didn't know one of those probing stares would come with me and stare the whole time.

*I miss Igor. He never stares.*

"Oh," I say with surprise. "But I've never hosted, let alone planned, an event like that. I wouldn't know where to even start putting things together."

Oksana reaches across the table and pats my hand. "Don't worry. That's what you have us for. We can pull this all together in months if not weeks. And since Dimitri has hosted nothing since stepping into the role of *pakhan*, you can bet people will clamber out of the woodwork for an invitation."

I gulp. Months? Weeks? This just got a lot more complicated.

"Anastasia, please. Stop rattling your spoon against your cup. Stir the way I taught you," Oksana snipes at her daughter.

The spoon stills, Ana's gaze bouncing between her mother and me. Hell, I'd be distracted, too. Watching this woman steer a conversation in the direction she wants with nothing more than quiet and cultured words is an art form.

"Then again," she continues, "if you'd rather have your name whispered across tea tables and set society on edge, we can simply forgo the event."

She feigns a shrug, but she already knows my answer. After she just set this up and knocked it out of the park, she knows there's no way I can say no. She just offers the option as a courtesy.

"No," I say enthusiastically, throwing eagerness into my voice. "This sounds like a good way to find my footing better. Dimitri can't be my sole reason for living here in New York. I need more than that, or I'll go mad."

Oksana and Sasha nod, twin smiles curling their lips as they study me from across the table. Sasha returns to the small pastry on her dish, but Oksana's steady stare remains. The others fade into the background as she

assesses me, her eyes roving from my sleek hair to my shoulders and stomach. “There will be more to your life if you and Dimitri conceive.”

“Until then, I’ll take your excellent advice and carve out a little piece just for me. You’re right, Oksana. I have no purpose here unless I make it myself.”

“Good.” She claps her hands together and then turns to Sasha, and they murmur about venues, flowers, and tablecloths. It sounds like they’re planning something more lavish than a wedding, but you do it right when you plan a Bratva gala.

Ana mimes lifting a bottle of booze to her lips and getting drunk. Valentina, Maria, and I all chuckle at her antics.

“Elsa, dear. Are you free next week so we can get together and plan exactly what you’d like for the event?” Oksana looks at me expectantly, and I wonder why she even bothered asking. This is a woman used to getting what she wants without a fuss.

“Sure,” I say with a shrug. “You now know the pathetic truth that I have absolutely nothing going on other than waiting for Dimitri to finish work every evening. I am yours to command.”

I’ve only met the woman twice, but from what I can tell, she enjoys feeling like she’s in charge of it all. It doesn’t hurt to stroke her ego and give her free rein to keep her happy and chattering.

She accepts my answer and turns to Ana. “You girls may go if you want to get out of here. We’ve got this handled.”

Ana whoops, covers it poorly with a cough when her mother glares, and stands from her chair. Maria and Valentina do the same. All three expectant gazes fall on me. “Oh, me too?”

Maria rolls her eyes and turns to the table of bodyguards behind me. “We’re taking off. You can stay or go.”

One man grumbles, and Nik stands, walking over to pull my chair out for me. I thank Oksana and Sasha as they begin work on a surprise gala and take a few steps away with Nik dutifully at my side.

“Where are we going?” he asks quietly once we’ve gained some distance. The other girls follow behind with their guards.

“The bar,” I answer.

He groans. “Again? Remember what happened last time?”

*Dead Irishmen in the kitchen.*

“Yeah, I do. But this time, you’re coming with us. Right?”

He searches my face as he navigates us through the tearoom and towards the lobby. “Never knew a bit of blood to bother you,” he says.

It’s not the blood that bothered me. Not one bit. But I certainly can’t tell him the strength of his corded forearms as he gripped the knife turned me on, how his excessive display of power and carnality worked me up into a frenzy. Then, Dimitri delivered the punishment he’d promised as he bent me over the kitchen island and fucked me raw, not letting me orgasm but leaving me worked up for fucking days afterwards.

“It didn’t.”

“Liar,” he leans in and whispers, causing a shiver to skitter down my spine. “It bothered you in the best of ways, and I’m only pissed it was Dimitri that reaped the benefits and not me.”

I pull away, looking up at his face as the other women and their respective bodyguards trail after us. “Fine. It got me hot. Is that what you want to hear? That it turned me on beyond measure. Watching as you exacted vengeance on my behalf like some Neanderthal? That I wanted to sink to my knees and have you fuck my face until tears streamed down my cheeks and my arousal streamed down my thighs? That even while Dimitri was fucking me in the kitchen, you crossed my mind? Does that make you feel better, Nik?”

I level my stare at him, waiting for him to flinch or reprimand me somehow. But he doesn’t move, aside from one drawn-out gulp, in which his throat bobs.

I don’t know why I feel the need to push his buttons, but after so much tension in the house with little relief, all I want to do is push one of them far enough that we speak about something—*anything*—even if it’s how they make me wet and needy for them.

We push through the hotel doors, heading onto the noisy street and walking towards the bar before he answers my question.

“It makes me feel immeasurably better. Because every time I’ve stroked my cock since Lyon, you’re the face I picture. Your body, your wit, your perfect fucking tits that I want to drink from again . . .”

I gasp at his blatant confession and the truth ringing in his words.

I hate that he knows. But he doesn’t know everything. He needs to pay for what he’s done, and while I’ve let myself enjoy his body, I need to remember that he hasn’t had his punishment yet.

“I want it all, and even if you can’t give me that now, Ellie, one day you

will. I waited ten fucking years to get out of Interpol and start my life. This will be a mere minute compared to that.”

I peer over my shoulder and check that the others are far enough behind us on the street as we walk to the bar. Nik seems to know the way since we're in the lead. And I realise it's the first time I've been on the streets of New York and not taken in a single sight.

Nik's voice startles me out of my realisation. “Dimitri may have you now, but I have you too. And either he'll need to let you go, or he'll need to learn to share. Because I'm not going anywhere.”

“I am my own. No one *has* me, you jerk,” I counter, the words feeling like bitter ash on my tongue.

“You are *ours*. Whether or not you like it. Now,” Nik says as he yanks open the door to the dive bar and peeks inside, “go sit at the corner booth with the girls. The boys and I will get your drinks and keep watch.”

Ana catches up with us then, her arm looping through mine as she leads us towards the booth Nik pointed out. When I cock a brow at her, she just shrugs. “They always make us sit in the corner when they're with us. It's the most protected position in this place.”

“Oh. Has Nik been here before?” I ask, wondering how he knows which booth to pick. Then I remember we're both agents. Or he's a *former* agent, I guess, and this is second nature to him.

“No, not that I know of. Since Nik's been back, he's always with Dimitri or off doing negotiations and treaties. However, I can't complain about the eye candy on this little excursion,” Maria murmurs conspiratorially as she takes my other arm and guides me to the booth. She wiggles her fingers at her guard, and a hint of colour rises on his pale cheeks.

Apparently, I'm not the only one whose bodyguard is looking for more.

# CHAPTER THIRTY

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Nikita

I'VE NEVER SEEN ELLIE DRUNK.

Tipsy, sure. Slightly buzzed, absolutely. But drunk? No, strait-laced Ellie would never.

As time passed in the bar, she seemed to sober up, but then, Ana, Valentina, and Maria ordered a few for the road, and now . . .

“I like your nipples,” Ellie says, dragging her hand across my chest as Igor drives us back to the penthouse. “They’re just perfectly placed.”

She sighs and scrapes her nails across said nipples.

I’m glad she paced herself while they were drinking earlier, but no one could have seen those four shots coming all at once at the end. Maxim, Maria’s bodyguard, just rolled his eyes as if this was a regular occurrence for the women.

A laugh escapes me at her wistful tone, and I realise I’ve had little reason to smile over the past few years. It’s a foreign feeling now.

After Dimitri admitted he thought I’d murdered his father, it felt like I would never smile again. I know we’ve had our differences over the years—growing up together during our formative years will do that. But our big divide stems from an adolescent grudge neither of us got over.

I took the orders he wouldn’t, but when Danil took me in, saving me from a fate I’d rather not contemplate, I had to do it. I owed him too much to say no, and he was right. Dimitri and I had fucked up, and someone needed to make it right. Taking responsibility for my actions had been so ingrained at that point that there was no other option. I needed to right the wrong.

Stupid me for thinking time and distance would heal that wound while I was at Interpol. But when I returned, things only got worse. And I know a lot of that is because of Dimitri’s suspicions I’d killed his father.

Once, Dimitri and I had trusted each other implicitly. We were a team—each other’s ports in the storm. Now we’re like strangers who happen to share a roof, with Ellie.

“I like your nipples, too,” I say, returning my thoughts to the present. My voice is lower than it should be, filled with more than just a simple response. The divider between Igor and us is up because Ellie jammed her finger against the button when she clambered into the car.

And so far, Ellie and I have been keeping our distance—with good

reason. While she's here and undercover, impropriety would only cast doubt on her.

A thought occurs to me. "How drunk are you?"

"Not overly drunk. A little buzzy, for sure, but not *drunk* drunk."

It's not as sober as I'd like, and I certainly won't be sticking my dick in her as much as my body wants it. But as she runs her fingers down my chest, it's clear I'm not the only one fighting off temptation.

Fuck, I haven't stopped thinking about her—about her taste and her moans—since I fucked her in the gym. Even before that, if I'm being candid with myself.

Though, the more time that passes between then and now, I question if it was fucking or something else. Something dangerously close to seduction—to making love.

And that's the only thing keeping me from honouring Dimitri's claim on Ellie.

She was mine first.

She sticks her chest out, her taut nipples pushing against the soft fabric of her dress as if to show them off.

*Fuck me.*

Disregarding the consequences, I yank her hips towards me, laying her out across the back seat as I kneel between her spread thighs, only narrowly avoiding banging my head against the car's roof. My mouth descends, ravenous for this woman and the temptation she embodies.

"Oh, Nik. Fu-uck, yesss," she hisses as I suck her nipple through her dress. She arches her back, carding her fingers through my hair, and holds me to her breast.

Messy and uncaring of the wet spots I'll leave behind, I thoroughly ravage her right breast. When I'm done, I want to see the wet material cling to her tits. To watch as every inhale pushes her nipples against the material, knowing I did that to her.

I take my time, press her tits together, and lick the valley they create. Her skin is sweet and salty; the scent of her perfume drives me crazy with every inhale. I switch to the other breast as she moans loudly. Too loudly.

I cover her mouth with my hand so Igor doesn't hear what's happening in the back of the car. "Shh, Ellie. Save those moans for when we're alone."

She nods under my hand, then twists her head to the side. Two of my fingers slip into her mouth, and she curls her tongue around them, wrapping

her lips around them and sucking enthusiastically. My dick throbs behind my zipper.

With my free hand, I pull her dress lower until her breasts pop out, a bead of moisture on each peak. I suck one of her nipples into my mouth, close my lips around her breast, and take a deep pull as the other hand massages her opposite tit.

“Nik, fuck!” She moans again as sweetness bursts on my tongue and sprays from her other nipple.

I groan as the taste floods my mouth, and Ellie writhes beneath me, her hips lifting and searching for friction. As tempting as it is, I can’t fuck her in the back of the car. Not if she’s buzzed, even if she is enthusiastically consenting. I give a few more pulls and switch to the other breast, finding more of her milk waiting for me.

“Give me more, Ellie. Give me everything,” I say against her skin, flicking the tip of her nipple with my tongue and closing my lips around her.

What the fuck is this urge in me, and when did it start? I’ve never done anything like this before, but there’s something so fucking sensual about it—comforting, almost, as she cradles my head against her and traces my jaw with her thumb. Her hand moves down to my throat, and when I swallow, she sighs.

“That’s so sexy, Nik.”

I look up, finding her dark eyes on me. The softness in her gaze eases my rough edges as I tremble in the cradle of her arms and thighs. She softly smiles, and a piece of my heart cracks at the simple gesture. The welcoming embrace, the soft, contented sighs . . . She rends me into nothing. Nothing but hers.

After pulling up from her chest, I lean forward and kiss her. Tentative at first, unsure if this is all one-sided or if I’ve imagined the whole thing. As her tongue slips against mine and her hips grind against me with just as much desperation, that dangerous thing called hope takes flight.

The car slows, and I look up to see the building. “Time to go, baby.”

I run my thumb along her lower lip, tugging at the kiss-swollen flesh and stealing a last kiss.

I help her sit up and put her dress back to rights, taking a moment to admire the wet fabric clinging to her tits, just like I wanted—a secret just for me. I slip out of my jacket and pull it around her shoulders.

“What is it about this car?” she mutters aloud. She’s right. Any time the

two of us are in here alone, it's like all the air gets sucked out, and suddenly, all I can feel is the passion and tension brewing between us.

She shakes her head as her face morphs into a scowl. Reality has come crashing back in. Disappointment fills me, and it takes everything in me to keep it from showing on my face.

I open the door when the car stops and offer my hand to help her from the vehicle. She resolutely ignores it and pushes through the doors to the lobby. The lift ride to the penthouse is agonisingly slow, and when we arrive, I hear Dimitri on the phone in his office. He's talking about a shipment delivery, so I know Sergei's on the other end.

I can't believe our chapter has been involved in human trafficking. Actually, I can believe it; I'm just disgusted.

I'm okay with a lot in my line of work—see the recent murders—but this doesn't sit well with me.

I've reviewed the former buyer lists Dimitri got from Sergei and have been paying the men visits. Most are local, and the ones that aren't are easily lured here by the promise of new merchandise.

A smile curls my lips when I think of the plans I've been putting in place for the sick fucks coming next week. It's easy enough to slip out when Ellie goes to bed, and Dimitri hides in his studio. It's not as if either of them is ever looking for me.

I send Ellie straight upstairs to change, and she accepts my suggestion without protest. She's still a little unsteady but waves me off when I try to help her. "I'm gonna go shower. Then I'm coming back down to eat a sandwich. I'm raiding your supplies, by the way. Got any peanut butter left?"

*Only about four jars.* "Yeah. I'll pull out the stash. But don't tell D where you got it."

"Why not?" She cants her head in confusion.

"Because as posh as he pretends to be, he likes nothing more than a peanut butter and banana sandwich. If he finds my stuff, he'll finish it, and it's *mine*." The last word comes out like a growl, and Ellie's pupils widen. Suddenly, I wonder if it's peanut butter we're talking about.

"No, Sergei. That is unacceptable. Push it back a few weeks until your ducks are in a row. No, I don't care how my father did things. Without buyers lined up, you're risking too much, and I will not have this falling on my head!" Dimitri shouts.

Ellie's head swivels towards the office, and I shoo her upstairs. With one

last look, she turns tail and clambers upstairs as Dimitri's voice gets closer. He's pacing across the living room, headed for the kitchen, still seething.

"Good. Do whatever you must, but do not put those girls on a ship until we've got confirmation from buyers. The last thing we want is excess supply driving prices down. Supply and demand, Sergei. It's a basic tenet of business. Good!" He hangs up the phone, and I follow him into the kitchen.

"Pleasant talk with Uncle Sergei?" I ask, teasing him while he rakes his fingers through his blond hair.

"The man is short-sighted."

"Nearsighted is the medical term."

Dimitri glares at me for my joke, and I put my hands up in surrender.

"How was tea?" he asks, poorly hiding his smirk. No one wants to be on babysitting duty, sipping plant water from dainty cups and eating doll-sized sandwiches. They somehow left me more hungry than when Ellie and I arrived.

"Oksana yelled *Fuck!* at the top of her lungs in a display of power, and they're planning a gala for you and Ellie as some kind of wedding reception thing to introduce her to society and more of our members."

Dimitri does a double-take. "That's . . . Actually, as annoying as it will probably be, that's brilliant. A good reason to have everyone under one roof and to have her present for the deals that always occur there. No one comes to these things for entertainment or charity. It's all about the business that can take place between the cocktails and hors d'oeuvres."

I tap my nose that he nailed it right on the head. "Oksana seemed pretty hell-bent on making it happen. She and Sasha were already deciding some details, and Ana, Maria, Valentina, and Ellie were dismissed. We went to the bar she and Ana had snuck off to the last time."

"I know; My phone notified me. No trouble this time?"

"Nah, just a few drinks. They're all fine."

"Good." Dimitri nods as he scrolls through his phone, his attention on business again. "The Irish are looking for O'Connor."

He swipes away a message and starts typing a reply.

"Good thing they won't find him," I answer, knowing precisely what happened to the man who dared try to snatch Ellie out from under us.

"That they won't."

While D is immersed in his work, keeping the underlings in line, working on new deals with other organisations, and generally being a surly bastard, I

carefully pull my supplies for sandwiches from the back of the cupboard and start putting one together for Ellie.

Dimitri finally looks up when I place it in front of Ellie's usual stool at the kitchen island. "Where did you get that?"

If I look hard enough, I can see the drool forming.

"Don't even think about it, man. You have to earn a sandwich. Or at least walk your ass to the store and buy the supplies."

"But you have enough for at least four more sandwiches," he argues, pointing at the mess behind me. "How did Eleanor earn it?"

"She bought me a drink at the bar."

"With my credit card, no doubt," he gripes, as if that earns him one.

I shrug, and he sighs, moving around the island and heading for the fridge. He opens the door, and while I'm wiping my hands of the excess peanut butter, he springs into action.

My reflexes are fast, and I defend when he feints left but then dives right, throwing out an arm bar. He hits like a fucking battering ram, but I lean back, the arm glancing over my chest and face, and I throw a jab, landing a hit on his spleen.

He wheezes, trying to drag air in, and I bark a laugh.

In all the shuffling, we've moved farther from the supplies, and I'm guarding the path to sweet, nutty deliciousness. "Come on, old man. Is that all you got?" I put my fists up and get into a fighting stance.

"You're one to talk. You're older than me." Dimitri smiles and mirrors me, his left hand out front, opening and curling in a *come and get it* motion.

"Dude, you're still doing that? The Matrix is from the nineteen hundreds. It's time to move on."

"Fuck, that makes me feel old, but that movie is gold. Don't deny it."

"I'm not, but you need some new moves," I tease as I throw a jab. He deflects it with a forearm, and his hands come up around his head in proper boxing form. Dimitri and I were taught all forms of fighting when we were growing up together, but there's one thing he's never been good at.

Fighting dirty.

The man has too many morals, and when push comes to shove, there's no guarantee your opponent won't throw every trick in the book at you.

Honour, he calls it. I call it loss.

Dimitri throws a hit, landing it on my shoulder. While he's extended, I dip low with my weaker hand and get him in the solar plexus. My arm hurts

like a motherfucker now, and I know the bruise will be ugly as shit, but that's the cost of giving an inch to gain a mile.

Dimitri shakes it off, and I advance, pushing him back to the open space beside the kitchen table. We square off, our feet making easy work of circling one another, looking for an in. We haven't sparred since we were teenagers, but it's hard to adapt to something new once you've developed your style. He always leads with his left. His feet are quick, but he's slow to kick.

"Just give me a fucking sandwich," he says. "I don't want to hurt you over some peanut butter."

"Why don't you have your own peanut butter?" I ask. "It's like five bucks a jar."

"I'm on a diet."

I roll my eyes. "Then why do you want it now?"

He throws another hit, and I block it, pushing forward as he retreats a step. "Because temptation is a cruel mistress," he says with a laugh.

"Tell you what, D. You get me to submit, and you can have a sandwich."

Do I need to make him fight for his sandwich? No. But do I want to? Hell yes.

"Deal."

He shifts right, his hips leading the movement. I anticipate it, so I intercept with a cross. It glances off his arm and lands on his cheek. His visual cues are too obvious.

Three hits later, he's staggering in his fancy-ass loafers. So, I decide to take it easy on him until he gives in. Can't bruise the boss's face, right?

"What are you guys doing?" Ellie asks from the doorway. I see her in my peripherals and refuse to turn towards her.

"Proving a point," I say. "Dimitri here wants a sandwich, and I said no. But he tried to take it, anyway. Consent, man."

Dimitri growls. "You know I don't joke about that."

"Fair enough. But my comment stands. You tried to take what doesn't belong to you."

Dimitri's eyes quickly flick from me to Ellie, widening slightly. "What are you wearing?" he asks.

I'm so fucking tempted to turn around, but it could be a ploy to distract me, so I keep my eyes firmly fixed on Dimitri. I try to shift our positions to catch a glance at Ellie without losing focus on D, but he's not letting me move an inch.

“Why? Is it too revealing?” she asks.

*No. Fuck no. Focus, man.*

Dimitri surprises me then, rushing me and taking me down like a linebacker. My ass slams against the kitchen island, my back bows, and he pushes me down. Nothing was coordinated about his tackle; it was all limbs and chaos. But it was effective as hell.

I brace against the marble and shove at his shoulders. While my legs are unsteady, he sweeps his foot under my own, tilting me sideways. He flips me easily, pulling my arms back into an uncomfortable position, and shoves my head against the unforgiving surface.

My eyes find Ellie as she sits on the stool and picks up the sandwich I left for her. She smiles around a mouth full of bread and does a finger wave. She’s wearing a high-necked T-shirt, so Dimitri’s distraction tactic was just that.

“This is fantastic. Thank you, Nik.” Her words are garbled, lending an additional air of humour to the whole situation.

“I aim to please,” I tease back. “I’ll accept your gratitude once I’m done with this, ’kay?”

She snickers, and Dimitri presses harder against the back of my neck. My vision gets fuzzy, and my shoulders hurt like a motherfucker as he stretches my arms to their limits behind me.

“Submit,” he seethes.

“Not a chance.” I kick out behind me, and he traps my legs with his own and puts more pressure on me from behind.

“Your choice” are the last words I hear before everything goes black.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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Eleanor

DIMITRI AND I TUCK INTO OUR SANDWICHES AS NIK SLEEPS IT OFF ON THE floor.

“The gala is a good idea. I thought we’d sidestepped it with the wedding being months ago, but there’s merit to the idea,” Dimitri says after sitting at the counter beside me. He puts a second sandwich on my plate, this one with cut-up bananas and peanut butter. He picks up his sandwich and takes a bite, groaning around it. “That’s fucking delicious.”

I laugh at the out-of-character moment. “That good, huh?”

He groans again, nods, and takes another massive bite. At this rate, he’ll finish the damn thing in four bites.

“My mother used to make them for me when I was a kid.”

I let that little nugget of truth settle between us. There’s not much information about Dimitri’s mum, Katarina, but plenty about his dad. His mum passed from cancer when he was sixteen, and the frown on his face makes me wonder if he’s still feeling the profound effect of her loss.

“What was she like?” I ask quietly.

Dimitri sighs, finishes his chewing, and clears his throat. His knee bounces under the countertop, and the brief flash of humanity endears him to me. He may scare me with his business methods, but here, in this kitchen, eating his peanut butter and banana sandwich, he’s gentle—nervous, even.

“She was quiet. Calm. Believed in a God with a plan, though I can’t seem to understand it. She was the antithesis of my dad. Their marriage was a business deal between two families, but she tried her best to make it work.” His eyes are unfocused as he walks down memory lane. “She endured a lot, and I hate that so much of that was for me, and then eventually, Nik. She was our shield.”

“Your dad was . . .”

“Abusive, yes—though he wouldn’t call it that. He’d say he had a ‘firm hand,’ which is the same thing. He ran the household like a military operation, demanding our best behaviour and manners. Mum thought it was because his role was so chaotic, and when he took up the post of *pakhan*, it worsened.” He rakes a hand through his hair, and his leg bounces. “Now that I’m in this position, I hate that I can see where he was coming from. Not that his methods are excusable, but . . . I don’t know how to explain it. The job is

hard. Keeping people in line and on track is like three full-time jobs crammed into one.”

I venture a guess as to his meaning. There is no universe in which I can imagine striking or wounding Bella with either my hands or words, so I try to see it from another perspective. “So you think his need for an orderly and well-mannered home came from needing something in his life to work smoothly when the job was so erratic?”

He nods. “Yes, but there are better ways. Having your wife and child live in fear is not the only way to accomplish that.”

I reach out, resting a hand on his forearm. He flinches under my touch, obviously lost to the memories of other hands on him. I squeeze gently, and the bunched muscles of his arm relax. “You’re already doing better by recognising that, Dimitri.”

He shakes his head. “I have no social life, and I’m throwing the organisation to the wolves, Eleanor. Not because I can’t hack it but because of the wrongdoings that keep happening. This is no way to live, and too many innocents have been affected by our actions—people who never signed up for this life and bystanders who get caught in the crosshairs. I’m not a saint by any stretch. I will be judged and found wanting when my time comes. No God in this world or the next will condone my behaviour and actions, but if I can stop another young man from being brought up in this, then all of this will count for something.”

My heart breaks for this man. He’s conflicted about right and wrong, unable to see the good in himself. I’ve been quick to condemn him for so many things, but hearing it all laid out like this gives me food for thought.

“If it matters, I think you’re doing the good and right thing, Dimitri. I may not say it often, but the footage you’ve collected has gone a long way in building a case, and we’re on our way to making a genuine change. Not the type that affects those closest to us, but you’re putting the good of many above the prosperity of a few. God may not recognise it, but I do.”

His voice is low as he answers, “I’m doing this for selfish reasons.”

I tilt my head to the side, waiting for him to explain.

“This role never sat well with me. I’m too emotional.”

That doesn’t sound like the Dimitri I’ve come to know. I raise my eyebrows. “Emotional?”

He chuckles darkly, like it’s a secret he refuses to share. “I hide it well, do I not? And as cocky as it sounds, I deserve better. I deserve a choice.

Perhaps the most perplexing thing of all is you. *You* deserve better, Eleanor.” He leans closer, tracing my jaw with his thumb. “And I can’t let you go—not even when this is over. You invade every thought. Every decision. Every waking moment, I’m haunted by you. I lie beside you at night, keeping my distance because I feel your fear, but my soul yearns to twine with yours. To cleave my way in and stitch myself inside so you can never be free of me the way I can never be free of you.”

His icy eyes hold mine captive; the burning twin flames of his passion are captivating. He’s rarely slept in our bed since Alexei, but sometimes, I wake in the middle of the night and smell his cologne, as if he was near for a second before leaving me again. I thought I’d dreamt it, but maybe he’s been as helpless to stay away as I’ve felt.

I feel myself leaning in, caught up in the moment and his words. It’s not logical. It’s downright dangerous. But I’m ensnared—caught on the lure like a fish on a line. There is no walking away from this.

This damaged and broken man doesn’t wish to hurt anyone but will hurt hundreds to ensure the safety of thousands.

Nik groans from the floor as he wakes up, breaking the moment between us. Dimitri closes his eyes, removes his hand from my face, and returns to his sandwich.

When Nik sits up and sees us eating our sandwiches, he rolls his eyes.

“Good morning, Nikita. Nice of you to rejoin us,” Dimitri says with a smirk, all traces of our conversation wiped away.

“Good moves, old man.”

“You’re older than me,” Dimitri says like it’s not the first time Nik has needed reminding.

“Only in age.”

I laugh and a bit of sandwich escapes my mouth. Horrified, I look down, then back up, finding both men eyeing me. Heat suffuses my cheeks, and I wipe the evidence off the countertop with a shrug. Sometimes I spit or trip or, God forbid, fart. If they can’t handle that, this is doomed from the start. Flowery words mean nothing if there is no acceptance of someone’s complete self.

The way I’m learning to accept Dimitri for his complete self.

“I’ll be upstairs. Enjoy your sandwiches,” Nik says, shoving off the floor and heading out of the kitchen.

“Is he okay?” I ask.

Dimitri shrugs. “Probably.”

In silence, I polish off my food a few minutes later and head upstairs to find Nik. He took care of me after I took a bullet to the arm. The least I can do is check on him. Passing out isn't fun to wake up from. The disorientation is unsettling, and the hold Dimitri had him in had to be painful.

I pause on the landing, and Nik's door is cracked. A discarded piece of fabric is stuck near the jamb, stopping it from closing completely. Leaning close to the crack, I listen in.

There's silence, a whistle of something cutting through the air, and a thud. A hiss comes right after. The sounds repeat in the same order—silence, whistle, thud, hiss.

Silence, whistle, thud, hiss.

Silence, whistle, thud, hiss.

A grunt of pain escapes the next one, and I shove the door open. If Nik's shoulder is dislocated, he might need help resetting it.

But when I open the door, this time, the hiss comes from me.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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Nikita

DIMITRI CONFESSING HIS FEELINGS TO ELLIE WAS UNSETTLING, TO SAY THE LEAST. But it was expected, if I'm honest. He follows her movements with his eyes, constantly checks his phone for her location if Igor is driving her around, and the subtle shifting of his body towards her is becoming more apparent.

I lay there on the kitchen floor, not moving while he got shit off his chest. And each confession was like a stab wound to my heart, the fragile organ taking hit after hit.

I know they've been distant since that night in Dimitri's studio with Alexei—tense and uncomfortable. Leaving them to work their shit out was perhaps the wrong approach.

Since digging into Ellie's appearance in our lives, I've discovered their marriage is legitimate. They are legally married and have consummated their union. Doubtful that Interpol and the other connected agencies would try to forge or skip documentation easily obtainable by interested parties. All it takes is a request for information or a quick hack job, and they'd find the marriage licence filed appropriately.

Something sick twists in my stomach when I think of the lines I've crossed over the past few weeks.

I groan and get up when there's a lull in their conversation. Now that Dimitri has all but confessed his love for Ellie, I need to flee.

Dimitri and I exchange words, but they barely register. I'm desperate to get out of here. To find my safe space and atone. I feel like shit for tempting Ellie away from her marital bed and deceiving her for so long.

I try to laugh things off, but that sick feeling remains. Ellie is a kind and patient woman—the woman Dimitri needs. They paint a pretty picture together, side by side, on the barstools, and they belong together, whether they know it.

Ellie laughs, and some of her sandwich shoots out of her mouth. She blushes, shrugs, and cleans it up, her eyes pinging between Dimitri and me. Fuck, she's sweet, sexy, and far too good for either of us.

They need more time to talk things out. I need to *not* be here as they patch things up and I'm left in the dust.

Reality sets in, and I'd like to lick my second-choice wounds privately.

“I’ll be upstairs. Enjoy your sandwiches,” I say, brushing off my ass despite knowing the floor is pristine as fuck, and storm up the stairs.

By the time I reach my room, I’ve worked myself up into a torrent of self-loathing and self-pity. Ellie is married, and I was sucking on her tits in the car like she was mine. Like she belonged to me.

She’s broken the sanctity of marriage, and instead of turning her away, discouraging her and pushing her back to her husband, I’m dragging her down to hell with me. I shove the door open and fall to my knees in the middle of the space.

In a frenzy, I reach under my bed and take out the flogger, gripping the handle so tightly my knuckles turn white and the leather creaks under my palm. I take a deep breath, tilt my head down, and begin a prayer for Ellie’s salvation instead of my own.

She deserves it. I don’t.

Tension fills my body with every line of prayer and pitiful breath. As I finish the first round of prayer, I lift the flogger and the tails cut through the air, landing on my back. The pain isn’t immediate. That comes a second later, drawing out the exquisite and blissful torture.

I beg God again, lifting my torture device to the other side, letting it fly through the air and land on the opposite shoulder. My skin is hypersensitive after the first two hits, all the blood rushing to the surface and giving the sensation of pins and needles.

I count ten strokes, and the pain intensifies as hit after hit land in the same spots, abusing the already sore flesh.

Tears stream down my cheeks, but I grit my teeth, not letting myself stop.

“Nik!” Before my next hit can land, Ellie is in front of me, pulling the flogger from my grip. We end up in a tug of war as she tries to wrestle it from me. I’m not done, though, and stopping midway is unacceptable.

Doesn’t she know I’m doing this for her?

“Nik! Stop it!” She yanks at the flogger, the tails flying wildly between us as we try to tear it from one another. She lets go, and I fly backwards, landing on my inflamed back.

The pain is immediate and feels like fire racing up my spine. She clambers over me, pinning me with her hips and shoving her hands against my forearms.

“Get off of me, Ellie!”

“No! Not until you stop this. You said you would come to me! You said

you wouldn't do this. What the fuck, Nik?!"

"I'm doing this for *YOU!*" I shout, the tears of pain turning into ones of hopelessness. Isn't that the same thing, after all?

She rears back. "For me? What the hell? No, you're doing this for yourself. The same way you do everything." Ellie cuts herself off, but there's more on her tongue she wants to let fly.

I want her words to flay me the same way the flogger does. I deserve nothing less than the worst she can throw at me. Lost in my inner turmoil, I crave my destruction more than my next breath.

"Get it out, Ellie. You've been dancing around it for ages now. Tell me. Hit me."

She shakes her head, biting into her lower lip, and her eyes are glassy with unshed tears. I hurt her badly when I left Interpol. She got into trouble because of me, and now I'm hurting her again. I can't stop, and the sick part of me whispers that I don't want to.

Because the only way to not hurt her is to stay away from her, and I can't do that.

"Say it. Say all of it because I won't give you this opportunity again. Say it all now, and let's bury it."

She continues to deny me, her eyes boring into mine with years of resentment and anger brimming.

"You always were too scared to rock the boat. Perfect little Eleanor Carmichael: Perfect agent, the dutiful daughter, sucks up to the bosses, always does her paperwork early and files it correctly . . ."

"You're an asshole!" she shouts. "And you took years of trust we had built and threw it all away in one fucking night. Do you know how hard it is for me to trust people? I could count the total of people I trusted on two fingers, Nikita! You were one of those fingers, and you fucked me as a distraction!" Her chest heaves as she gets it all out. "You fucked me, you left me, and then you left France. Do you know how hard I looked for you? I was sure you couldn't have done it. I defended you!"

Her eyes fly wide as if she didn't intend to say all that. And maybe she didn't. The surprise on her face makes me think she didn't even know how much she held inside her. She takes a deep, shuddering breath. "Do you know what it took for me to come here? To face you again? The girl you slept with, betrayed, then fucking abandoned?"

"I wanted to murder you, Nik. I wanted payback." Ellie's shoulders are

shaking with rage as she pins me down.

“I’ve paid for it every day since I left. Every moment. Every lash of the flogger. All of it has been for many reasons, but the main one is betraying you.”

Her gaze softens a fraction, and I continue. “I had to do it,” I breathe. “It had nothing to do with you and everything to do with this life.”

She snorts with disdain, but I plough on. “You were never meant to be part of it.”

She flinches.

“I’d wanted you for months. So much so that I couldn’t even think around you. We were inevitable, and my biggest regret is that it happened the way it did. We were always meant to be, Ellie. The push and the pull was real. Our chemistry was and is real. But *I* was not. It wouldn’t have been fair to you if I’d let those feelings develop and evolve. You would have fallen in love with a lie. *This is who I am.*” I pull against her hands and try to encompass my room, the flogger, this life, with the strained gesture.

“This would have been better than the nothingness!” Ellie raises a hand and lands a shot to my side. She rages, landing blow after blow on my abdomen, causing me to shift on the floor below and sending more pain radiating through me. But none of it compares to the pain on her face. Knowing I caused that eats me alive from the inside out until I’m nothing but a pile of remorse and regret under her vengeful fists.

The blows to my body slow, and I reach up, wrapping my arms around her. She trembles in my grip; her body racked with shivers as the adrenaline high fades.

“Shhh,” I coo, my breath feathering the hair behind her ear.

Her body is heavy on mine, going deadweight with exhaustion.

“Look at me,” I say, encouraging her to turn her face towards mine. Her cheek rests on my chest, and I look down at the angel in my arms. Her eyes land on the flogger as it lies forgotten beside my head.

“Why do you do this to yourself?” she asks.

I sigh. I might as well get it all out on the table. It’s not as if I can hide this from her any longer. “I was raised in a Catholic family. Before my parents died, we were regular attendees at church, involved in every aspect, and my family was devout. After they died, I lost my faith. Why would God take them from me? How could he be so cruel as to snatch up two of his most pious members, leaving me behind?”

Thinking back to the hours and days after my parents passed, I was in a fog. I went through the motions, unable to think more than a minute ahead of the one I was currently suffering through. Then, Dimitri's family adopted me, moving me from France to Russia and letting me grieve. I thought they were a gift from God, swooping in and giving me hope.

"Once the anger and disbelief faded, I attended church again with Dimitri's mum. She never pushed but extended me an invitation every Sunday. One day, I went with her. The priest's sermon that day included I Corinthians 9:27, where St Paul writes, 'I chastise my body.' Something clicked. I researched Roman Catholicism instead of Russian Orthodox; the more I read, the more interested I became.

"My parents were no longer there to punish me for my wrongdoings. The Aslanovs were more concerned with the end of the Cold War and focused on keeping the family in good with the Bratva. I was adrift, and when I stole a candy bar from the corner shop, instead of punishment, I was patted on the back for learning the 'family business.'"

Ellie's staring at my face, her eyes wide and unblinking. "What did you do?"

I chuckle at my adolescent ingenuity. "I unplugged the fan from my room and used the cord to whip my back in the early dawn."

"Oh, Nik," Ellie whispers, bringing her fingertips to her lips.

"It worked, though. With every strike, I felt freedom. Every cut, every welt was like releasing my sins into the universe and giving them to God. Atoning for my misdeeds."

My chest expands, and I let loose a deep exhale, feeling some of the heavy weight leaving my soul. I've never told anyone how it started or why. Dimitri doesn't even know the whole story, especially since the lack of parental punishment led me down this path. I didn't want to sow discord between him and his parents when I was younger. I was just so grateful they took me in and then, later, well . . . later, I wasn't around.

The one time we talked about it, we were seventeen, and he saw the marks on my back and asked if his parents had done that to me. I just shook my head and said it was a religious thing. Correct, but also wildly incorrect. The church has shunned self-flagellation since the Renaissance. I begged him to drop it and not tell anyone, and I trusted he would honour my request.

"Nik," Ellie calls softly, returning my attention to the here and now. "I won't tell you what you're doing is wrong. Deep down, I think you know

that, and if you want to stop, it has to come from you. But can I ask a question?”

I nod, tucking some hair behind her ear.

“Why were you doing this tonight?”

“Because of what we did in the car. And in the gym. And what I imagine doing to you every time we share the same air. You’re married, Ellie. And as much as you’re mine, you’re his more.”

She tilts her head to the side, and I drag a hand over my face.

“You’re *married*, Ellie,” I repeat. “I know you’ll say it’s just for the assignment. But you have a legal and binding document. You were wed in a church before witnesses and God. Fuck, I was one of those witnesses. I know the sanctity of marriage, and I’ve led you from that path—encouraged you in adultery. I don’t think I can stop, Ellie. My soul screams at me from someplace deep inside me to rip you away from him and keep you as mine.”

Ellie straightens her back, hovering over me and staring down at me like a queen commanding her most loyal knight.

“I appreciate the sentiment, Nik. I do.” She holds up a hand when I try to interrupt. I press my lips together and nod for her to continue. “But you and God do not get a say in my life and what I do with my body. I will tell you the same thing I told Dimitri. I am his . . . for now. This was never meant to be something that developed into the physical. There were never supposed to be feelings. But there are.”

There it is. The stark truth. She’s gone and fallen in love with him, and here I am, the loyal knight at their beck and call. Good enough to be called into battle but not enough for more.

“And I have complicated and unresolved feelings for you, too.” My breath catches as she continues. “I wish I could bury those feelings with our past. Dig a hole so deep they never have a hope of resurfacing. But riding through all of that is the betrayal I felt when I woke up alone in that hotel room to nearly a hundred missed calls from our boss.

“It is vexing to feel so many things for you, Nik. But more than anything, I want us all to feel free. However that looks. Together or apart. For a minute, a day, a week, or a month. When was the last time you felt free?”

I think back. *Not since my parents were alive.*

“It’s been a very long time.”

“Then that’s what we work towards. Together we can find a way out of this. After that, we’ll see what happens, but I’m making no promises to either

of you.”

She hesitates, then presses a chaste kiss to my lips and picks up the flogger. Twisting it in her hands, she examines it and then slowly hands it back to me.

“I won’t judge you for using this—for giving yourself a method of reprimand when you were denied it for so long. But do this with caution, Nik, because I want you to imagine every strike on your back landing on mine.”

I wince as she studies my face.

“That feeling that just rushed through you? That is what I will feel inside every time you chastise your body. Ensure that *you* earn those marks and don’t do them on my behalf. I am at peace with my life.”

I search her eyes for evidence of a falsehood, but she is resolved. She is indeed at peace with her choices, and maybe it’s time for me to work on being at peace with mine.

“I’ll try,” I answer, not committing.

“That’s all I can ask. And if you need someone to punish you, I can think of more creative ways.” Her lips curl up in a grin, and she rakes her hands down my chest, her touch lighting me up for a different reason now.

Discarding the flogger, I pull her down, crashing my lips against hers and losing myself in her touch. Her grace.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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Eleanor

THE WEEKS FLY BY AT A RECORD PACE. DIMITRI AND NIK HAVE BEEN WEARING body cams when they can, recording meetings, and gathering evidence while I'm in literal hell with Oksana planning a gala.

Things have settled a bit between the three of us, even though Dimitri is in the dark about Nik and me. But what are we supposed to do? Just sit down to dinner one night and go, *Oh, by the way, we fucked. Two-ish years ago and then again recently?* Yeah, I don't think so. Dimitri doesn't seem like the type to be cool with that.

But Dimitri has returned to our bedroom and sleeps beside me every night instead of on the couch or in his office. There's still distance between us, but in the cover of night, our fingers touch, our legs brush, and having him near me makes me feel settled.

"Elsa, honestly! Where is your head this morning?" Oksana asks, staring at me from across the table, a spread of fabric swatches in the space between us.

"I'm sorry. I'm distracted today."

"That much is obvious. Come on, out with it." She waves her hand in a *let me have it* gesture, and I shrug in response.

"I just didn't have enough coffee this morning. I'll be fine. Sorry, what was the question?"

She gives me a sceptical look and raises a delicate brow. "You forget, I raised a daughter worse at hiding things than you are. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing. Really. I'm just tired. Dimitri got in late last night, and I shouldn't have stayed up waiting for him." That much is true. He and Nik were at a meeting working out a deal with a new supplier for guns—strapped with cameras, of course—and I couldn't fall asleep until they came home. I'm opting not to read into that too much at the moment.

"Fine." Oksana looks down at the swatches on the table and waves a hand over them. "Which one would you prefer for the tablecloths?"

"Oh, um . . . This one." I pick one at random, a steel grey that reminds me of the rings around Dimitri's eyes. Okay, so not so random after all.

"A good choice." Oksana carefully chooses a few other colours and fans them beneath the grey. "And the accent hue?"

I can't help myself as I take the satin black, the colour and shine

reminding me of the flogger in Nik's room, and hold it out to her. "This one."

She nods, pulling a second accent colour of stark white, also with a sheen, and the three colours reflect the light above us, bright and shiny with a bit of drama. Quite perfect for the three of us, if I say so myself.

Oksana points at the white, explaining her choice. "We can't have this looking like a funeral, dear. For most attendees, this will be a wedding reception for you."

"What else needs deciding?" I ask. Now that I'm here, the daunting nature of planning a gala doesn't seem so bad. I can look at colour swatches and make simple choices.

"The music? Any preference? Usually, it would be a live band, but you have some say in the music if you have any inclinations."

"Strings, I think. Nothing with vocals, as that can distract. But maybe instead of the classics, we can see if they can do more modern music. Just instrumental?" My favourite Spotify playlist is Pop Goes Classical, which I can easily tune out to focus on work. This gala is not just a party; I want to be focused, not distracted by the band in the corner.

"That sounds doable. I'll check with our contacts for a suitable quartet."

She crosses something off her paper list and pulls a tablet out of her purse. I peek at the screen and find another much longer list waiting for us.

We spend the next hour and a half going over every detail she's already amassed, including potential guests, food, invitations, flowers, whether to have a red carpet and invite the press, suggested gowns I wear, and centrepieces.

When my eyes have glazed over and my brain has turned to mush, I desperately and discreetly type a text under the table.

I thought this would be simple, like the colour swatches at the start of our luncheon, but as time passes, I realise she was just warming me up with the elementary questions. I feel like a discombobulated mess, like a cartoon character who got knocked out. But instead of birds floating above my head in a halo, it's napkins, invitations, and stemware.

My phone rings ten seconds later, startling me so badly I nearly fumble it. I excuse myself with an apologetic gesture and answer the phone.

"You need a rescue?" his deep voice asks, chuckling at the end. "Oksana got her claws in you, and you're desperate for a release?"

"Good afternoon, darling. I'm just out with—" I pretend as if he's cut me off. "Oh? Right now?" I widen my eyes and grimace at Oksana, mouthing a

contrite *sorry*.

“Oh, you little minx. You’re quite the actress. I wonder if you can control that adorable little blush when I tell you how badly I want to fuck you. I woke up in our bed alone, hard and aching for you, Eleanor. Your scent still lingered on the sheets and the pillow, and do you know what I did, dear wife?”

I absentmindedly nod, like Dimitri is telling me important things and not how he wants to fuck me, while Oksana stares at me.

“Tell me, please,” I say, keeping my voice demure and polite as Oksana would expect as she listens to my half of the conversation.

“I fisted my cock with your half of the sheet, rolled my face onto your pillow to inhale your scent as I fucked my fist, all the while imagining it was your sweet, dripping cunt.”

I choke on air and reach for my water glass to clear my throat. I take a quick sip as he chuckles down the line.

“Well, that sounds like a serious issue indeed. I’ll be home straight away.”

“Tick tock, dear wife. Hurry home, or I’ll be forced to think of more creative endeavours for us to get up to.”

A shiver works its way down my spine. We’ve not been intimate in ages, but we’ve been working up to that again. And I can’t deny how much my body wants him. Even if we don’t have sex, just hearing how much he wants me makes me go gooey. The shiver turns to goosebumps with anticipation.

Couple that with the confessions from the kitchen and the little bits of himself he’s shown over the past few weeks, and I know it’s only a matter of time before we reconcile completely. And the weirdest thing is, it doesn’t feel weird. It feels right.

“On my way.”

I hang up and smile regretfully at Oksana, who waves me off. “I can keep going without you. We’ll catch up later in the week for more details.”

*More?* Good God, how could there be more?

“That sounds lovely. Thank you so much for organising this, Oksana. I truly appreciate it and would be lost without you.”

She tilts her head, studying me. “If I may suggest something?” I nod at her request. “Do try not to make yourself too available. I know he is your husband and the *pakhan*, but, my dear, you are also your own person with goals, hopes, and ambitions. How will he respect that if you are constantly at

his beck and call?”

I pause and sit back in my seat. “That is nearly the opposite of all the guidance I’ve received so far.”

*Especially from her husband.*

Reading my mind, she chuckles and says, “That is likely Sergei’s advice to you, but that is because I keep the man wanting more. He wants me around at all times because I am not. It is far too easy to fall into a life dictated by men, Elsa. I don’t know about you, but trusting my fate to someone else makes little sense. Does it make sense to you?”

Instantly, I’m reminded of that moment during high tea when she mentioned that though the tea looked weak and unassuming, it was far more than that. She was proved right when I tasted it, and now, it feels like this moment also has meaning—a grain of truth for me to pick out and use to my advantage.

“Not at all,” I answer truthfully. “It is still early days in our marriage, relatively speaking.”

“Exactly. Start how you wish to continue, or your husband will make a fuss that you’re ‘changing.’” She rolls her eyes, looking so out of character I can hardly believe what I’m seeing. “The last thing we need is the *pakhan*’s wife used as a doormat. So, take your power, dear, and join the rest of us as we steer our men in the directions needed.”

Igor, the driver, appears at the table before I can delve into that statement. “Ma’am, we’re ready. I’ve been instructed to get you home as soon as possible.”

Oksana is waiting for me to grasp this newfound power. “We will go in half an hour and no sooner, Igor.”

“But ma’am—”

“But nothing. Unless you want to drag me from this restaurant kicking and screaming, you and my husband will wait until my business is done.” Oksana’s stern mouth curls into a soft smile.

Igor steps back, already lifting his phone to his ear.

“Well done, Elsa. Perhaps there is hope for you yet,” Oksana says, lifting her flute of champagne in salute. I clink mine with hers, sipping the so-far untouched alcohol.

I dip my head at her compliment. “Is it normal to feel my heartbeat in my toes after that?” I ask, hoping for a bit of camaraderie and light-heartedness.

“It will get easier with time, and more importantly, demands on your time

will become less and less from your husband. The great tragedy in this world is that the patriarchy has been so established for so long. It makes for difficulties in upsetting it.”

“Is that the goal, then? To upend the patriarchy?”

“Nothing so sinister as that, dear girl. After all, the leader of our entire organisation is a woman. Things are well on their way to a better balance.” Oksana returns her attention to her tablet, even as my phone buzzes incessantly on the table with Dimitri’s name flashing across the screen. I turn it over and give Oksana all of my attention. It seems to endear me to her, and she clearly knows more about the Bratva than she lets on.

“What does the leader think of installing more women in positions of power?” I ask. “I’ve heard Dimitri and Nik mention her. Natasha, right?”

“That’s correct. She is Nik’s cousin on his father’s side and was married to the former leader. Nik’s assistance in gathering information led to her holding all the cards, and there was a power shift when her husband died. Instead of passing it to another male, Natasha took power. All of that is because of Nikita’s work. So when he finished his assignment, he was given the choice of where to go, a rarity among lower ranked members.”

“And he chose New York?” I ask. “And to be a bodyguard?”

I don’t mean for it to sound disparaging, but Nik is an intelligent man with motivation and drive. He could be a brigadier or, at the very least, run a chapter.

“The thing to understand about Nikita is that he’s already lost so much of his family. He could have joined Natasha in Russia and taken up a post in her territory. But here, he had Dimitri, Danil, and my husband and I, whom he’s known since he was a young teenager. Waste of an opportunity to carve out his own life, if you ask me, but he returned after his work abroad and has been loyal since. As for his position, well, there wasn’t much available, so we assigned him as Dimitri’s bodyguard.”

This makes sense. As Nik mentioned, there were no other roles to fill when he returned home, and replacing someone would sow discord. Instead, he was brought on to shadow Dimitri and learn how the Bratva had changed while he was undercover.

I use up every minute of that half hour. When Oksana finally puts her tablet away, I slump back in my seat and smile gratefully at her. “Thank you again for helping with this.”

“Think nothing of it. I enjoy this. It’s like playing chess and laying the

board. How the event goes will be up to you and the moves you make. Use the gala wisely and make connections independent of your husband. I wish someone had told me the same when I married Sergei.”

I smile with understanding. “It isn’t easy navigating a world I don’t know, but you’ve made it so much better.” I rest my hand on hers, giving it a squeeze of gratitude.

Igor approaches the table, his steps hesitant. “Please, Mrs Aslanov. It is time to go.”

“Thank you for your patience, Igor.” I stand from my seat, and when I offer to pay for our meal, Oksana waves me off.

“Go on, Elsa. Remember to start how you wish to continue.”

Her words play on repeat in my head as I exit the restaurant, follow Igor to the car parked down the street, and return to the apartment where Dimitri is waiting.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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Eleanor

“WELCOME HOME, ELEANOR,” DIMITRI SAYS FROM THE LIVING ROOM AS I step off the lift.

I don't know what to expect after my texted plea for an escape and then making Igor wait to drive me home. It feels wishy-washy and indecisive, kind of like the way I've felt since arriving here and meeting Dimitri and reuniting with Nik.

After rounding the armchair, I stop in front of my husband. He's in suit pants and a white button-up, his daily uniform, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a tumbler of the odd-smelling liquor balanced on his knee. “Took you a while.”

I shrug. “Oksana had some advice for me that you might be interested in.” His brows raise, and he waits for me to elaborate.

“The exact opposite of the advice Sergei gave me to be at your beck and call.” I move to sit in the armchair across from him, and a growl works its way from his throat. He pats his knee—the one not acting as a table for his glass. The icy fire in his eyes beckons me, and my foot takes an involuntary step closer.

“Crawl,” he says, pointing down at the floor between us.

My mouth parts as I gauge if he's serious. His face remains impassive.

“You can't be serious.”

“Oh, I'm deadly serious, wife. I told you I'd be thinking of things for us to do. This is at the top of my list. I want to watch your hips sway as you make your way to me on hands and knees, your perfect ass up in the air.”

A shiver works its way through me because fuck, the image he paints is oddly sexy.

If I walk, it's only a few steps to him—less than five or six. Surely, crawling won't take long, and with the embers he's just stoked into flickering flames, I want him on his knees for me too. Could I turn this into some kind of tit-for-tat situation?

I slowly lower to my knees, steadying myself with the chair's armrest. A satisfied groan leaves Dimitri's mouth as he looks down at me. My hands meet the rug next, and I take an experimental crawl forward. One hand, one knee. The rug's fibres bite into my skin, and I know they'll be red and itchy by the time I get to him.

Dimitri's gaze is hungry, his eyes never leaving mine, a king atop his sofa throne. "Take your time, Eleanor. This is a view I'm enjoying."

"Good, because this won't happen again. So memorise it before it's lost forever. Next time, *you* crawl."

He smirks, and it causes my core to heat and warmth to pool in my belly. I knew we were heading back towards reconnection, but I wanted more than this.

My tits sway as I move my left hand, and I exaggerate the movement of my hips. Dimitri smirks at me, and when I finally reach the space between his spread thighs, he runs his fingers through my loose hair and grips it at the base of my skull, tilting my head to the left.

"Hello, wife," he says, smiling down at me. His hands gentle in my hair, and he caresses my scalp, causing me to close my eyes briefly to relish in the touch after going so long without. "What delayed you?"

A humming inside me amplifies with his words and the happiness in his eyes. I'm not the only one who's been missing our connection.

"Oksana."

He cocks a brow. "Even when she knew I was expecting you? My aunt is growing bold. Was this part of her advice to you? What else did she say?"

"That it is up to the women to manoeuvre the men of your organisation."

"Hmm, is that what you think too?" He taps his finger against his chin in contemplation.

I shake my head but stop as I consider it. "Yes, and no."

"Pray tell, Eleanor."

"Balance, Dimitri. Everything needs balance. You wouldn't expect the right hand not to know what the left is doing. Why shouldn't it be the same in a partnership or a marriage?"

His icy-blue eyes search mine. "And what would you have me do differently as my partner?" His lips curl around the last word, and a pang of longing rocks through me as I have a stark realisation. *I want to be his partner. And not just on the surface.*

"But I'm not your partner. I barely know you, honestly. And you barely know me aside from my job and what I taste like." I smirk as that hungry look intensifies.

"You want to know me? Beyond what we already share?"

I nod, his hand still threaded through my hair, making my movements jerky and uncoordinated. He's given me glimpses over the past few weeks,

and every single one makes me crave more. We've been married for a few months now, our relationship beginning as a marriage of convenience and duty. But as time passes, I grow increasingly attracted to Dimitri. He's dangerous, brooding, and mysterious, but beneath that hard exterior lies a man I'm desperate to know.

"Fine." He stands and guides me up with a gentle hand.

He lets go and heads towards his office area. I trot behind him, unsure where we're going or what he'll show me. He lifts the painting on the wall and presses that little bronze button I fiddled with months ago, and there's a soft sound.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I can't help but feel a growing sense of anticipation.

"Follow me." He rounds the corner and leads me towards the room where he tortured Alexei. The inside is dark, and I can barely see more than a few inches before me. The soft-yellow lights from his office do nothing to penetrate the space before me.

"What is this, Dimitri? Is this where you kill me for being half an hour late?"

His deep chuckle skitters across the room, and I fold my arms over my chest. The lights flick on, and I blink against the sudden brightness.

When things come into focus, I gasp at the sight before me, taking my first deep breath since he told me to crawl to him. It's unlike anything I've ever seen before. Canvases and paintings are stacked against the walls, and the air is thick with his secrets. I'm about to uncover another layer of Dimitri, and he's willingly showing me—*inviting me*—into his sanctuary.

"What is all of this?" I ask, unable to take my eyes off the hundreds of canvases before me.

"This is my studio," he replies, his voice low and filled with a hint of something I can't quite place. "It's where I spend my time when I'm not working or with you."

I can't help but feel a sense of awe and amazement at the artwork before me. This is something he's never shown to anyone. Though Nik knows of this room, so maybe my assumption is wrong.

The pain and anguish in the work are evident, and when I finally tear my gaze from the canvases lining the walls in haphazard piles, I meet his eyes. They're complex and unflinching as he watches me take in bits of his soul expressed only through his brushwork. It's as if he's waiting for me to judge

him based on this. But it does the exact opposite. That little puddle of feeling Dimitri has evoked within me has grown into a well. Endlessly deep and dark, without hope of ever crawling out of it.

I move closer to the easel in the centre of the room. It's turned the other way, and I see Dimitri flinch out of the corner of my eye as I round the room's centrepiece. I take a deep breath, unsure of what awaits me, as I let my eyes trace the painting. This one makes him feel unsure of himself, and I want to know why.

The colours are dark, almost black, but with tinted hues shining from within, and they seem to swirl together in a chaotic mess in the background. But as I take in the work, I can see the outline of a figure not yet completed in the centre of the painting—a figure that looks strangely familiar wearing a dress I loved.

"Dimitri, is this me?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He steps up behind me, his breath hot against my ear. "Yes, dear wife. It is."

From the bottom edge of the canvas, four hands are reaching for my likeness, as if crawling out of the depths of hell, the straining evident in the muscles and sinew Dimitri has expertly painted.

My heart races as he wraps his arms around me, his body pressed against mine. His breath warms my neck, and I know he can feel the effect he's having on me.

"Dimitri, this is incredible," I say, my voice filled with awe and admiration. "I had no idea you were an artist."

He pulls away from me, stepping back to survey his work. "It's something I've always kept to myself," he says. "It adds no value to my life and my role."

"It sounds like you're quoting someone," I murmur, unable to move my gaze from the tempest before me.

"My father." He shrugs. "There is a time and place for everything, Eleanor. But in this life, in my current position, there is no time or place for joy. Not yet, anyway."

I've been here for months, and having only experienced his true self twice is disheartening. There's a vulnerability in his voice, a sense of raw emotion I've only ever heard when we were in the kitchen and he told me about his mother. At this moment, I realise just how much we've been missing in our marriage.

We've been so focused on our roles in the undercover operation, our roles as husband and wife when we are around others, that we've forgotten to truly connect on a deeper level, even when all signs pointed that this was where we were always headed. I can't deny that fact anymore, even when I've been batting away thoughts of it for months now.

As I study the painting before me, the tension grows. It's as though the artwork reflects the passion that's been building between us, a passion that's been hidden for far too long.

"And the hands?" I ask quietly, not wanting to break the spell we're under.

"Mine and Nik's." There is no accusation in his tone. No reprimand. Just facts. "I see how he looks at you. He breathes in sync with you when you're in the same room. His eyes track your every movement, and there is a history between you I cannot compete with. You have known each other for years, or at least some version of each other. You may be mine, Eleanor. But you're his too."

I turn to face Dimitri, my heart pounding in my chest. "Dimitri, I . . ." I don't know how to respond. So instead, I change direction. "I had no idea you felt this way about me," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. It's been clear he sees me as someone he's attracted to, but this all speaks to something deeper, something we've both been avoiding.

He steps forward, his hand reaching out to caress my cheek. "Eleanor, I've been hiding my feelings for far too long. I've been raised to do that—conditioned to, even. It isn't easy to undo the lessons drilled into me since my birth," he says. "I want you, and I need you. But more than that, neither of us deserves you. But maybe between us, Nik and I could try. I'll only ask one thing of you. Do not give up on him. Please. He's lost so much in his life, and I have caused his most recent pain with my suspicions, which I will remedy. The fact of the matter is, he needs you more than I do. So if it comes down to it, I want you to pick him."

He doesn't give me a chance to respond; instead, he gives in to the passion building between us. Our bodies entwine, our lips meeting in a fiery embrace that leaves me breathless. His emotion, always hiding beneath the surface, is pulled from his chest and laid bare for me to witness in this room. His admission is the spark that ignites, consuming me whole as our tongues tangle and our teeth clash.

As we pull away from each other, I know this is just the beginning of

something more resounding and meaningful than anything we've experienced. Something that Nik should and *will* be part of if I have anything to say about it. Because while I wanted my payback and revenge, it's clear my former partner has been punishing himself since the betrayal. And he's been doing a far more thorough job than I ever could.

Maybe that vengeful streak isn't in me. Or maybe I've changed somewhere along the way. And somehow, I'm okay with that, knowing he regrets his actions. He's regretted hurting me for longer than I've wanted him to feel the sting of retribution.

After all, he knew what he was going to do that night. He knew, leading up to that night in the hotel room, he was about to betray me. And it was not as effortless for him as I'd assumed.

Dimitri's love for Nik, despite their falling out—that I'm still in the dark about—and the suspicions about Danil's murder outshine all of that. His begging for me to pick Nik and not give up on him speaks volumes about Dimitri's loyalty to those he deems worthy.

And Nik is worthy, in his eyes.

I retake Dimitri's lips, letting emotion pour through our connection. My gratitude for who this man is and everything he could stand for in the future, for showing me his true self, his studio, and the depth of his feelings for me.

Our bodies move together in perfect harmony, and something deeper takes root and grows between us. It's the raw vulnerability that's been missing in our marriage and can only be found through trust.

I know Dimitri is more than just a dangerous Bratva leader. He's a complex and multi-faceted man with emotions and passions that run deeper than anyone could ever imagine, and it's never been more palpable than in this moment as he presses into me, shattering my every wall and defence, letting me crumble around him.

I feel the weight of the past few months lifting off my shoulders as we give in to our desires, and he lifts me onto a table against the wall. This is not fucking. This isn't the sex I expect from a man like Dimitri.

This is a claiming—a hope for a future. Making love with my husband as he makes room in our life for me to explore things with Nik. Dimitri's eyes connect with mine, our foreheads pressed together as he unsheathes himself and slides my panties down my thighs. He steps forward, notching his head at my entrance, and slides home.

He rocks into me, thoroughly ravaging my body and never breaking eye

contact as we move together; my hands fisted in his hair and his on my hips.

Pace slowing, Dimitri whispers to me about his paintings between kisses and thrusts, explaining the emotions he poured into each piece. He tells me about his frustration with the world, anger at the injustices he's been subjected to and doled out, and longing for something more.

This feels like more than just our bodies twining together. It is a meeting of the minds, making it all the better.

“You are my light, Eleanor. The one thing that makes sense in a world that seems so dark and twisted.”

His hands are loving and gentle as he rocks into me, our breaths mingling between us as he grinds against me, setting me off as his fingers find my clit, giving me the release I desperately need. It feels like it goes on forever, and instead of closing my eyes at the sensation, I stare directly into his as he follows me over the edge.

My heart bursts with emotion. I've never felt this connected to anyone before, and the thought terrifies me and makes me feel like I'm flying.

And as we finally collapse in each other's arms, our bodies spent and our emotions raw, I know this is just the beginning of our journey together. A journey that will be filled with passion, danger, and darkness but also with love, trust, and vulnerability.

Dimitri pulls a padded blanket from a heap in the corner and lays it on the floor. He guides me down, and it smells like his cologne. This is where he was sleeping when I needed space. It's not horribly uncomfortable as he wraps his arms around me, cushioning my head with his pec.

As we drift off to sleep, our bodies entwined, I can't help but feel a sense of peace and contentment. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. And I know that, together, Dimitri and I, and hopefully Nik, can conquer anything that comes our way.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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Nikita

I RETURN TO THE APARTMENT FROM MY AFTERNOON DEALING WITH THE TWINS, pissed I haven't been able to crack their façade. It wasn't too long ago that the three of us were working for Sergei and Dimitri, but with my alliances shifting, keeping my cards close to the vest hasn't been the easiest of tasks.

Ivan and Aleksandr are firmly in camp Sergei, and it's time for Dimitri to know the truth. I suspected it months ago, but the evidence has become more apparent as time passes. Perhaps Aleksandr feels that he must align with Ana's father. And, of course, Ivan, being the dutiful twin that he is, followed his brother's lead.

Today, for instance, should have been a simple exchange of information: logistics and the usual boring shit about the schedule. But with me tracking Sergei on my own, there have been things the twins haven't brought in our weekly meetings that definitely should have been mentioned.

Like the fact that Sergei did indeed order the ship to set sail with his newest cargo aboard. I got that information from Maxim, the bodyguard currently assigned to the Petrov family, though as of late, I've only seen him with the wife, Maria.

Making this move is risky on Sergei's part. Especially since Dimitri told him to wait to bring the girls over until they had buyers for all the cargo. Either Sergei is trying to cut Dimitri out, or he's grown tired of Dimitri fucking with his planning.

The lift doors open, and I step into the foyer, not hearing a peep from either Dimitri or Ellie.

I know they haven't left because the security system would have notified me. Poking my head into the living room and kitchen, I don't find them. And I sure as fuck am not wandering upstairs to check their room. The last thing I want to see in my fucked-up mental state is him pounding into her from behind and that lust-drunk expression on her face, courtesy of another man.

Hoping against all hope that they are sitting quietly across from each other at Dimitri's desk, I round the corner to the office.

Empty.

Then I hear a giggle.

The hidden door to Dimitri's studio is open, and murmured voices come from within before Dimitri steps out, leading a freshly fucked Ellie behind

him.

“How did it go?” Dimitri asks.

Steeling my shoulders, I turn and sit at his desk, waving a hand for him to join me. “You might want to sit down for this.”

“Oh, shit,” Ellie mutters. “That bad?”

I nod.

Dimitri gracefully sits in his chair, and Ellie takes up the second one beside me. “Ivan and Aleksandr aren’t reporting everything Sergei is doing, which we knew, but this time, it’s worse than before. I had some suspicions, so I contacted someone else for confirmation.”

“He didn’t . . .” Dimitri says, folding his hands together and interlocking his fingers.

“He did.”

Ellie’s gaze bounces between the two of us. “He did what?”

“He ordered the next shipment be brought over before he had the buyers lined up. He lowered the price for a quick sale on the site since they’re already en route. We were blocking traffic to the website to keep them in Russia until we could get a team there to get them home, but Sergei was faster.”

“So there are more girls on a ship headed here?” Ellie exclaims. “Why didn’t you tell me? We could have put an agency team on the ground in Russia or at least worked with local police to sort it out!”

Dimitri drums his fingers on the desk with impatience. “It wouldn’t have worked. Within those borders, trust is limited, especially with cargo like that. We don’t have the contacts we once did, and Sergei has already paid local law enforcement to look the other way or be conveniently busy if anything is called in from the docks. We checked.”

“But now that they’re at sea?” she asks quietly. Oh shit. I know that tone. That’s the *I’m about to lose my shit if you don’t have a backup plan right now* tone. Believe me; I’ve been on the receiving end of this tone a few times.

Dimitri and I don’t answer. They left days ago, and I only just found out. There isn’t much to do when they’re God knows where in the Atlantic. It’s why I tore out of the apartment at dawn to find answers instead of catching up on the sleep I’m sorely lacking.

They shouldn’t have gone yet. We were so close to getting them out of the dockyard. We just needed a safe place to stash them before we could get them home.

“We don’t know where they are exactly. Their departure date is a little murky, so we can’t pinpoint them,” I say.

Ellie clenches her fists on the armrests beside me. “These are people’s children! You need a better plan than ‘wait and see when they arrive!’”

“Eleanor, there’s not much we can do right now. Interpol cannot track down a random ship in the ocean without proper departure times. They’d be taking a shot in the dark and possibly unload the cargo if word got to them of ships being boarded.” Dimitri’s words fall on deaf ears.

She shoots him a withering glare. “No. Last time, they lost five of those girls at sea. I’m not risking it, Dimitri. Give me the name of their origin port, and I assume they’re headed here, right? Any stops?” She looks at me, and I shake my head. Grabbing the back of an envelope and a pen from the desk, I jot down the name of the port and their estimated departure date.

Ellie storms off, determination echoing with every stride.

“Where are you going?” I call out.

Her shoulders inch towards her ears, but she doesn’t answer me. She just rounds the corner and stomps up the stairs.

“Can’t say I blame her,” Dimitri says, rubbing a hand over his face. “We fucked this up.”

“Hey, we didn’t know Sergei would go rogue and send the ship early. We did everything we could to get those girls out, but without having a team to extract them and keep them safe somewhere, attempting it would throw them all to the wolves. Even now, if she gets an Interpol team on it, coordinating with other agencies will take time. The girls will arrive before a team can find them. And worse, the men might have orders to kill the cargo before making a break for it.”

“She’s going to find that out as soon as she makes that call,” Dimitri says distractedly. He wakes up his computer and starts typing, probably filling in the remaining buyer spots to ensure none of the girls are sold to sickos, even with the blocker rerouting traffic from the dark web. “The best thing to do is get ready to intercept the ship as it arrives. But she’s only thinking about her daughter right now.”

*Daughter.* Ellie has a daughter. I know she has a child, but I never knew the gender.

How old is she? Whose is she? And how the fuck did Ellie get assigned to an undercover operation when she has a kid? That goes against about a thousand policies to keep families from losing a parent for the sake of work.

“You’re right,” I comment. “This has to be hitting close to home for her. But her daughter is nowhere close to the age of those girls,” I venture with an educated guess because surely, if Ellie’s child were older, I would know after being her partner for so long. Her reaction to kids when we worked together was nothing short of inexperienced. Her child must be an infant. Who’s taking care of her?

“She’s only one and a half or so now, but it’s easy to imagine your child grown and in a situation like this, especially after our encounter with Anya. She clung to Ellie like a surrogate mother, which must have brought up a lot of feelings.”

One and a half.

*One and a half.*

One and a half plus nine months, give or take a few weeks, equals . . . oh, fuck.

The world spins around me as I sit stock-still, gripping the armchair for any semblance of stability as the mental maths adds up in a way I had never thought possible. This is why Ellie looked for me after I betrayed her and Interpol, why she wasn’t surprised to see me here. Why she shuts down when I talk about that night and my regrets. I told her I regretted the repercussions of that night. Does she think I meant her—*our*—daughter?

All of this, yet she didn’t tell me about her. Instead, we fucked, we fought, we shared goddamned sandwiches and not once did she mention our kid. And it’s not as if I can blame her.

We used protection. The idea of Ellie getting pregnant was nothing more than a whisper in the wind as I ripped open the condom packets. Gone in an instant.

She’s been alone in this. We fucked in that hotel room, and I abandoned her with the consequences of that night.

And now, all I’ve done was suck on her tits and drink from her like the sick and twisted bastard I am instead of questioning *why* I could do those things.

“Nik?” Dimitri calls as my eyes struggle to focus on any one thing. Instead, they stare at my twisted hands as they wring the material of my shirt, and my knees bounce in front of me. “NIK!”

The world fades to blackness as everything tilts, and I go down hard.

I come around—for the second time in recent memory—to Ellie and Dimitri having a conversation above me. Fucking hell, I have to stop passing

out.

Everything comes rushing back in from before, and I sit bolt upright. Ellie is there in a flash, her hand on my upper back, supporting me as I sway, even while sitting on my ass. I scuttle away from her, turning and pushing myself against the desk.

“Don’t,” I plead.

“Nik, what the hell happened?” she asks. “One minute, I’m making a call, and the next, Dimitri is shouting your name and panicking like you’re dying.”

I look up at the man in question with worry etched on his brow. It’s a look I haven’t seen on him since we were younger. Since returning from Interpol, I’ve been kept at arm’s length. It hurts too much to dwell on it right now, not when more questions need answering, as much as I want to mend these fences with him and begin anew.

“I know,” I whisper, looking from Dimitri to Ellie. My voice broken and cracked with emotion. “About *her*.”

Ellie’s eyes widen as she drops to her knees before me. Her dark orbs search my face, but I know there’s no emotion, just a stone-cold façade. I press my back further against the desk, trying to distance us but failing. She opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off.

“Dimitri, could you give us a second?”

He looks between me and his wife—Christ, his *wife!* who I share a child with—and shakes his head.

“I’m not leaving you two like this. Nik, you passed out and went down hard. You might be injured.”

“Physically, I’m fine. But I need a second with Ellie.”

The mother of my child—Christ, how weird is that to say—looks up at her husband.

“Please. Give us a few minutes. I’ll find you when we’re done speaking.”

I can tell he wants to refuse her, but when she blinks up at him, it’s not with pleading and begging. It’s an order.

He kisses the crown of her head, murmurs something in her ear I can’t hear over the rush of blood in mine, and moves through the penthouse for the stairs.

“How?” Ellie asks, getting down to it before we can dwell on the emotional bomb between us. She’s right. Focus on the facts—the logistics.

“Dimitri. I figured you had a child because of your milk, but I didn’t think—How did—We used protection,” I finally say, settling on the last

thought in my mind. It doesn't matter to me how our child came to be, but it's the only thing I can form in a complete sentence.

"We did, but sometimes that fails." Her voice is calm, like she made peace with this long ago. And maybe she has. After all, she's been the one to grow the child, birth her, and care for her until she showed up here.

"And you never thought to . . ." I'm unsure how to broach the topic.

"Absolutely not. I wanted her from the moment I found out I was pregnant. Okay, that's a lie," she says with a laugh, but I fail to find anything funny about that statement. "I wanted her as soon as I picked my jaw up off the floor and stopped panicking."

A deep breath escapes my lips, the quiver of my bottom one betraying the emotion I'm trying to keep locked up. "And she's mine?"

Ellie's face changes from one of concern to one of fierce protective instinct. "No. She is *mine*."

"I know," I answer. "I only meant . . ."

"I know what you meant, but the answer is no, Nik. While you are in this life, part of the Bratva, there is not one shred of you present in her. I will die before I let her get dragged into this. And as her biological father, you should agree."

She's right. Of course, she is. Being born into a Bratva family ensures you follow this life for the rest of your days. After everything I've seen done in the brotherhood's name, I don't want that for her. A strange feeling effuses my chest, making me feel joyful and panicked, unsure and yet more confident than ever.

I clutch at my chest, trying to find where this feeling comes from, but it's useless.

"I don't deserve it, not after everything, but can I ask you some questions?"

Ellie eyes me warily but nods. "I can't promise to answer everything, but I can give you something."

"What's her name?"

She smiles. "Bellatrix, but I call her Bella."

"Bellatrix," I repeat, awe and wonder in my tone. "Is it a family name?"

She chuckles. "No. But back in my school days, this cat hung around the student yard—"

"You named our daughter after a cat?"

"Hey! You weren't there!" she counters. "And her hair was dark like the

cat's fur, but her eyes, Nik. They were so assessing of everything she saw. She studied my face, taking in every detail. Which I know doesn't make sense since their vision sucks at first. Anyway, I'd never felt so seen before. So right. It seemed to suit her, so I went with my gut."

I wish I'd been there. To witness the birth of my child, the miracle of her existence, and watching her discover the world for the very first time . . . these are experiences I will never get another chance at. And I need to make my peace with that. My actions caused me to miss out on the start of her life, but I'll be damned if I'm not at least there for her in some way.

My mind is whirling about how to best care for her and Ellie when the woman in question snaps her fingers in my face. "You good in there?"

I refocus on her and smile. "Yeah, I'm good. Could I maybe see her?" Ellie starts to argue, but I hold my hand up. "I meant a picture. I understand your boundaries and that I am not a part of her life. It is your right to decide that as her parent. I haven't earned the right yet."

She eyes me like I'm messing with her, but truer words have never left my lips. "Maybe. Are you sure you're okay? You're still pale and shaky."

Chuckling, I run my hands through my hair, trying to at least put something back to rights. "It took me a second to wrap my head around it, but I'm perfect. Where is she now?"

Ellie shakes her head. "No way am I telling you that."

I nod. "Okay, fair. But just tell me she's safe. That she's being taken care of while you're here. Who's looking after her?"

"Funny you should ask," she says, chuckling. "You know that diamond you stole?"

I wince and bob my head.

"Well, the people who got it back are protecting her while I'm here."

*Got—Wait a fucking second.*

"What do you mean, *got it back*?!" I ask, my voice rising with every word. "That diamond and the information on it is the only thing keeping Natasha in power."

Ellie winces. "Sometimes, I forget you're not up to date."

"Christ Almighty," I say, putting the sign of the cross on my body. "So how . . .? Oh, fuck. She's holding onto power with the threat of the information, isn't she?"

Ellie shrugs. "That's not my assignment anymore, so I don't know the details. But the diamond is back where it belongs."

“You left our daughter in the hands of *thieves?!?*” I roar.

“More or less.” She levels me with a look and waves her hand at my chest. “Would you rather she be here, neck deep in the Bratva? Glass houses, asshole. Besides, who better to watch her than them? They’re secure, in an untraceable location, so even if you decide to get hotheaded and go after her, you’ll never find her. And they’ll likely kill you before you know they’re onto you.”

“Christ, Ellie! I won’t steal our child away in the dead of night.”

That she thinks I would sends a dagger through my already shredded heart.

“Good. So let’s wrap this up, and if you decide to return to the right path at some point, we can discuss the future. But I warn you, Nikita, that conversation is in the distant, distant future. *Distant.*”

I smile. But at least it’s in the future. Whereas before, it wasn’t even in the realm of possibility.

I have a daughter.

*Bella.*

I have a family.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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Dimitri

DISMISSED, LIKE THIS ISN'T MY HOUSE. LIKE ELEANOR ISN'T MY WIFE, AND Nik isn't my closest friend—which is sad because we're about as close as strangers at this point.

The day started so well, too. I got a meeting on camera last night with an arms dealer, then I slept surrounded by Eleanor's scent—her soft body wrapped around me because, in her sleep, she can't stay away—a bit of teasing over the phone, light degradation, and showing her my studio.

God, I'd never felt so stripped bare as her eyes roved over the works I'd left scattered around the room's edges. But she was perfection personified as she assessed, not critiquing, even though the painting on the south wall could use fine-tuning now that I've gotten some distance from it.

We spent the rest of the afternoon getting wrapped up in each other and then all that shit downstairs started. Clearly, I said something to send Nik into a fit. Was it a fit?

Eleanor's soft knock on our bedroom door pulls me out of my mental replay. I scowl. Why is she knocking on our door? It's *our* door. Since I've shown her all of me, one would think she would feel welcome in our shared space, not hesitant.

"Come in," I call from the seating area. I started the fire when I got up here, only to have something to do when I was dismissed—something we'll certainly be discussing later. But I saw the desperation in both their eyes. They needed that moment. And as loath as I am to admit it, they need each other as much as I need them. Not in the same way, but the three of us call to one another in a way I've never experienced before.

Nik is my brother in every way that counts. Sure, we've drifted, but what siblings haven't? Eleanor feels like family, too. But differently—a way I'm afraid to want but too weak to resist.

Eleanor steps into the room, poking her head in before pushing the door wider.

Without a word, she takes the other chair, and Nik follows her. My brows raise, the only expression I can't get control of when they appear together, solemn and sombre.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

Eleanor nods. "There's something we need to discuss. As a team."

Nik swings his gaze from me to Eleanor. “Is that what we are? A team?”

My wife smacks his chest with the back of her hand. “Don’t be an asshole.”

He shrugs and offers the other armchair in the sitting room of our suite to Eleanor, who shakes her head. She stands between us, her gaze landing on my lap when my fingers twitch on my thigh. I want her with me; of course, I do, but she seems unsure.

She plops down on the floor, crossing her legs in front of her like a preschooler.

“So, are either of you going to explain what the hell just happened downstairs?” I ask, starting us off. “Evidently, I said something that instigated all of this, and I’d like to know what it was.”

Eleanor takes a deep breath, steadying her shoulders and looking between Nik and me, her gaze lasting longer on me. Not that I’m counting.

“You know I have a child—”

“That you lied about,” I remind her.

“God, why are you both assholes today?” she mutters.

In a rare show of synchronicity, Nik and I turn to each other, grins on our faces.

Mine says: *We’re always assholes. Not just today.*

His says: *Just assholes? Surely we can do better.*

“Anyway, it’s um . . .” Eleanor tries again and then murmurs something unintelligible under her breath.

“What was that?” I ask, leaning down to catch her eyes as she stares at the coffee table between us all.

“She said the child is mine,” Nik says.

My head whips towards him. “Yours?”

Nik nods, still looking a little pale from his fainting spell downstairs. Eleanor confirms with a nod.

“Are you sure?” I ask, the shock at it all rocketing through me. It’s the wrong question to ask. She scowls, and the anger boils over within her.

“Are you calling me a liar, Dimitri? Or a whore? One that doesn’t know who she fucked and created a child with? Which of those questions would you like to go with?”

*Abort mission. Fucking abort mission!*

“No, I just—” I backtrack, trying to get things back in hand.

“Because let me tell you something, you jerk—”

“Woah, woah. Eleanor. I wasn’t implying any of that! I just—It’s a lot to take in.”

“Hence the passing out downstairs,” Nik comments from beside us. “Imagine hearing you have a child like that.”

*Why does that not scare me the way it would have six months ago?*

“So you two have fucked.” My succinct summary is not met with appreciation.

“No, it was an immaculate conception,” Nik deadpans. *Religious idiot.*

“There’s more,” Eleanor says quietly, pulling my attention from Nik. “We reconnected since I’ve been here—which I think you already know.”

I nod. “I do.”

Nik glances sharply from Eleanor to me. “You do?”

“You’re not as subtle as you should be as a former agent. Or maybe I still know you well enough to notice the little things.” I shrug. “You’re better when she’s here.”

He agrees with my assessment. “I am.”

“And Eleanor, your feelings for Nik?” I ask, staring at my wife sitting on the floor opposite us and rounding out this little triangle of confusion.

“They exist.”

“And for me?” I ask, hoping I’m not about to be left out in the cold when this family unites.

“They exist.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief. “So, where does all of that leave us?”

“Us?” Nik asks.

“Yeah, there’s no way in fuck I’m walking away from my wife. We might have started as work, but I refuse to walk away, and I’m not letting her walk away, either. And I can appreciate that she wants more. Things that I can’t give her, that maybe you can.”

“Like what?” Nik asks, his fingers clenching the armrests, knuckles going white with tension.

“Like more children.”

The room goes utterly silent as my words land between us. The vasectomy I had when I was twenty was necessary. Still, the ensuing infection and severity of it led my doctor to remind me time and time again that a reversal would unlikely be successful. Especially since so many years have passed.

“Dimitri,” Eleanor breathes. I shake my head that I don’t want to talk

about it yet, and she respects my wishes. “What are you suggesting with all of this?”

“Exactly what Nik so poorly joked about earlier. A team.”

Nik exhales harshly. “You want to what? Share Ellie? Live together after all this is done, hoping we don’t piss each other off enough that we pull out the blades?”

“Precisely. If that is what you want.” I look at Eleanor again.

She fumbles over a few words, nothing forming a complete thought as she jumps from response to response, never letting one fully form before she’s on to the next.

“You don’t have to answer right now. But I’m in this, Eleanor. Whatever it looks like. Think about it. Both of you.”

I stand and head towards the door, giving them time to talk again. If this has any hope of working, I need to bend a little. I may be the *pakhan*, but that stops as soon as we discuss a relationship. I refuse to be the man my father was.

Two peanut butter and banana sandwiches later—*yeah, I found Nik’s stash*—I wander back upstairs. Neither came down, and the apartment feels empty without their voices around me.

Nik’s door is closed, and I hear him on the phone, likely dealing with the restaurant I asked him to check in on earlier today. I step into the suite and find it empty. But as I pass the door to the closet, I hear murmured words from within. It’s open just a crack, and when I widen it and pass from my side to Eleanor’s, I see her sitting cross-legged on the floor, cooing into her phone.

I lean to one side, trying to see the screen without thinking about it. I just act.

A high-pitched squeal comes from the phone, and there’s a flash of hands.

“What are you making ‘gimme’ hands at, baby?” Eleanor asks. The hands go again, and my wife peeks over her shoulder, finding me standing there, leaning against the doorframe as I watch her with her daughter.

“Please don’t,” I beg as her thumb hovers over the red button to end the call. She looks at me curiously, her dark eyes roving over my face.

Whatever she sees makes her sigh and pat the floor beside her. “Come on, then. You can’t just stand back there; you’ll steal all her attention. And if you leave, she’ll cry.”

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I cross the small space and fold my body until I sit beside her. Meeting someone's child is an enormous step. One I don't think I deserve yet. "You're sure?" I ask.

"Not entirely, but you're the one who wants out of this life—who risked a lot to come to Interpol and get these things in motion. While I don't entirely trust you, you're trying to do the right thing, whatever the reason, and that earns you an inch. Don't fuck it up."

She turns towards the screen, leaving me speechless.

"Dimitri, this is Bella," Eleanor says. "Baby, say hi."

"Fuck!" Bella cheers at the phone, showing off her tiny front teeth. They have the same gap that Nik used to have when he was a kid, and the more I look at Bella on the screen, the more I see him in her features.

"Dammit, Ellie, we just got her to stop saying that!" a woman calls from the phone.

"I know! Sorry, my bad. I haven't had to watch my language here, and it slipped."

"Who is that?" I ask as Bella makes kissy faces at the phone again.

"Bella's godmother."

"Who will *NOT* show you her face in case this goes sideways. The less information you have, the better."

"That's a good idea," Eleanor says beside me.

Grumbling, I mutter, "So much for that inch."

"Hi, Bella," I say, softening my usual tone. "You look just like your mama and papa."

"Hold the fucking phone!" the godmother shouts.

Eleanor groans beside me, covering her face with her hands. Bella sees it and yells, "PEEKABOO!" at the top of her lungs, deafening us all. I don't know much about kids, but Bella is about a year and a half old if I've got my maths right. She's smart and has more words than I expected her to. Or maybe this is normal? Fuck, I need to do some Googling.

"It seems like I've stepped into something else I shouldn't have today," I murmur.

"It's the same fucking thing," Eleanor says, her words distorted as she still has her face covered. "Just a different audience."

"Stop cussing in front of our girl!" Godmother shouts again. I don't point out that she cussed earlier as well. "What do you mean, she looks like her *papa*?"

“Well,” Eleanor begins, “now that he knows, I feel like it’s okay that I tell you. You remember my former partner?”

“The asshole who stole the diamond and almost got you fired from work because somehow that was *your* fault?”

“Yep. Well, um, he’s Bella’s father.”

“Biological father,” Godmother retorts.

Bella smooshes her face against the camera, babbling incessantly as Eleanor and the mystery woman hold their tense silence.

I understand their hesitation. As the leader of a Bratva chapter, I’m not exactly the type of person you’d want around children, nor the type to share secrets with. But I’m also Eleanor’s husband and want to be a part of Bella’s life, even if she’s not mine.

I take a deep breath and try to calm my nerves. Bella looks from her mother to me, her eyes zeroing in on my face, and my heart skips a beat. She’s so tiny, so fragile looking. But she’s also beautiful, with Nik’s nose, rosy-pink cheeks, and dark hair like Eleanor’s.

“Hey, princess,” I say softly, waving at her through the screen. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Eleanor observes me, but Bella doesn’t care. She’s too busy gazing at me with those big innocent eyes. I can’t help but smile at her, and she returns it, sending a tendril of warmth through my chest.

I don’t know what to say to her, so I just talk. “You know your mum is a queen? That makes you a princess, little love. One day, we’re going to get you a big castle to play in,” I say, trying to make conversation.

I realise she’s probably too young to understand what I’m saying. But that doesn’t stop me from feeling a rush of love for her.

“Bounce!” Bella says, and I can’t quite figure out how that corresponds to castles.

Godmother groans. “We’ll bounce in your princess castle later, honey. It’s V’s turn with you.”

“V! V! V!” Bella cheers, obviously liking where this conversation is headed.

“You already have a castle?” I ask, racking my brain for other things I can give this sweet girl.

Godmother clears her throat, breaking the moment. “So, Dimitri Aslanov, *Pakhan* of the New York Bratva, are you keeping my girl safe?” she asks, her tone suspicious.

Eleanor chuckles at the surprise on my face. “Cool it with the interrogation, girl. And how do you know him? Have you met? Have you worked together?” My wife looks like she’s having some kind of internal panic, and without knowing who I’m speaking with, there’s no way to answer her questions.

“We have not,” Godmother says. “But I make it a point to know certain players. Dimitri’s sudden ascension didn’t go unnoticed. Hey, did you ever figure out who murdered your father?”

My breathing stalls. There’s only one way she knows. “You!?”

“Oh, God, no. I was lying topless on a beach; I have photos if you need the evidence.”

“You are not sending random strangers topless photos, Little Thief,” a man says off-camera.

“My tits, my choice.”

A growl sounds from the other side, and there’s an *oof* sound. “Okay, fine,” the woman chokes out.

“She didn’t kill your father. But how do you know about that?” Eleanor asks cheerfully, keeping Bella unaware of the tension brewing. It sounds unhinged.

“If you look hard enough and crack through enough files, you can uncover any truth. The autopsy files were scrubbed from the hard drive in the morgue, but it has a cloud sync I accessed from the doctor’s phone before I wiped that away, too. You’re welcome.”

Clearing my throat, I shake my head. “No, I don’t know who killed him. But I’d like to find out before Eleanor’s assignment here ends. I don’t think that will be possible after it all comes tumbling down.”

“Of course not. Natasha would love nothing more than to bury the person responsible for shutting down an entire chapter of her organisation.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course you know Natasha.”

She chuckles. “We’ve met. But I side with Ellie here. If she’s there because you’re turning, there’s hope for you yet. But hear me, and hear me well, Aslanov. If you harm one hair on her head or Bella’s, should you ever be deemed worthy enough to be in her presence, I will yank your toenails from your body and shove them into your eyes, jagged side first.”

“That’s . . . visual,” Eleanor says.

“But true,” the man says again.

She’s still unsure if I can be trusted, and I don’t blame her. I’d probably

feel the same way if I were in her shoes.

All the while, Bella has been staring at the two of us, and even though we're discussing the murder of my father and ripping pieces from my body and shoving them into other parts of my body, I can't help but stare at her angelic little face.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your time together. I just wanted to check on Eleanor," I say sincerely. "But I'm glad to have met Bella."

I want to be a part of her life, even if she's not mine, and step one is proving myself to Eleanor and the man I hope to be one day. I want to be someone worthy of this angel's time and upbringing.

Seeing a combination of Eleanor and Nik on Bella's little face, a strange feeling settles over me. It's one of jealousy mixed with happiness.

Nik and Eleanor have a history, and I know they share a bond I'll never have with her. But seeing Bella just makes me long for different circumstances.

Having a vasectomy at twenty was a decision I didn't take lightly. And back then, alone with my father and fulfilling my duties as the heir apparent with no means out of the organisation, I promised myself I would never allow my child into this world and this life.

I turn away from Eleanor, lost in thought. Maybe one day, when we're out of this, and it's safe, I can meet her in person. Maybe then, we can talk about the future in terms greater than hours and days.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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Eleanor

ANA, VALENTINA, MARIA, AND I STEP ONTO THE LIFT WITH OUR RESPECTIVE bodyguards, making for a tight squeeze. Nik does *not* look amused at the night's turn of events. Still, when Oksana finished going over the details for the gala, she sent us "younglings" off again, and Ana quickly suggested karaoke at one of the Bratva's legitimate holdings. The others were quick to agree, and I was definitely on board.

In the three weeks since we discussed Bella, removing the secret hovering between the three of us, home life has been good. It's all work and sex, business and hedonism, but sometimes you just need a night out with the girls . . . and our bodyguards.

The doors slide shut, and we ride up to the twelfth floor. As soon as the doors slide open again, we're met with a hostess, black velvet curtains, and horrific singing.

"Welcome to Groove." The hostess surveys our party and straightens immediately. "Would you like the family table?"

Ana chuckles. "Maybe later. Is there space at the bar?"

"That's where I was planning to be, anyway." Valentina shrugs.

The hostess looks down at her podium, and a glow from the monitors is reflected on her face. "Certainly. Right this way."

She leads us through the black curtains into a cavernous space with tables and enthusiastic patrons. There's a massive horseshoe-shaped bar in the centre and open barstools on the left side.

Someone is up on the stage, poorly singing Chumbawamba, and I think of Olivia. She would love this place. Like *love* love. Note to self: Never bring her. My ears would not survive it.

Ana takes a stool in the middle, and I opt for the one farthest from the stage. No way in hell is that happening. I'm happy to listen and sing with a drink in my hand while quietly passing judgement.

There aren't spaces for the bodyguards to sit at the bar, but they hover behind us until we get settled, then Nik and Maxim sit at a table behind us while the other two fan out.

"Good evening, ladies. What can I get for you?" an attractive bartender says from the other side.

He winks at Maria, and she giggles, not bothering to cover her blush or

pretend she's not about to flirt right back with him.

"That depends, handsome. What's on the menu?"

"Oh my God, Maria," Valentina says. "Keep it in your pants for at least an hour."

The bartender just chuckles. "You know, I'm here to serve," he says seductively, running his eyes over Maria's décolletage, never tearing his gaze away from her, even as Ana shouts our order out to him from beside me.

"Champagne all around," she says.

With one last look at Maria, he turns around and busies himself with filling four glasses for us.

I turn to Ana. "What are we celebrating?" I ask.

"Oh, honey, we're always celebrating. We are women out on the town spending our husbands' money without a care in the goddamn world. We're celebrating life."

Four glasses appear on the bar, and we raise them together, toasting to a night with the girls.

We listen to rendition after rendition of hits from the last three decades. Some are pretty good, and some are quite terrible.

The champagne has been refilled twice already, and Maria is leaning over the bar flirting with the bartender again, whose name I learned is Steve. Not the name I was expecting for the tattooed, long-haired bartender, but it is what it is.

"Elsa, you should go sing a song," Ana says, encouraging me with a hand on my arm. "We should sing a song from *Frozen*!!"

*Ana and Elsa. How did I not notice that before?*

She's jostling me out of my chair, but I dig in my heels because absolutely not. "You truly, truly do not want that. I promise you that unless you want to clear out this bar, I should stay very far away from that stage. There are many things I can do, but singing is not one of them. I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket with a lid on it."

She cackles, clutching her side when she can't control herself.

*Yeah, the bubbly has gone into full effect now.*

"Fine, then we're going to sing," Valentina declares loudly, grabbing Maria's hand and dragging her towards the stage.

Steve's eyes are still on Maria, and hers are on him, even as Valentina yanks her in the opposite direction.

Ana and I laugh and turn our attention towards the stage where the others

have disappeared. I carefully cross one leg over the other. A feeling of heat flickers on my bare leg, and an awareness tingles down to my very soul. Without moving my head, I let my eyes slide to the left and look towards Nik.

He looks different without the usual cigarette tucked behind his ear, but it's a welcomed change. As soon as he found out about Bella, he quit the habit, tossing every pack in the garbage and not touching one since. When I asked him about it, he shrugged and said, "I have something to live for now."

From his seat at the table directly behind us, the man in question studies me. His gaze is ravenous as it traces my bare leg, running from my stiletto heel up my calf, around the curve of my knee, towards my thighs. I shift in my seat, tilting slightly towards him and spreading my legs a fraction.

This side of the bar is not exactly hidden, but it is darker than the rest of the space, and the patrons are all looking up at the stage, lending me a modicum of privacy to tease Nik.

His eyes snap up to mine, and the shadow of a smile unfurls on his lips.

*Oh, yes. Nik likes a show.*

Maxim is watching Maria as she and Valentina flip through the songbook by the stage. And with Nik's proximity and the way he's positioned in his chair, it wouldn't take much for him to reach over and slide his fingers up my leg and between my thighs.

Fuck, how I want that right now. I want his hands on me. His lips devouring me. I want him unrestrained and unhurried as he explores every inch of my body.

Ana's attention is on the stage, oblivious to Nik and his hungry gaze. He shifts his chair so he's closer, a mere half a foot away now. And then, he reaches out, crossing the small distance. I settle my weight on my right hip, keeping my left leg crossed over the right and pulling my thigh higher, giving him access to the space between my thighs and what he wants most.

The song ends just as Nik's fingertips brush my panties. My tongue darts between my lips, which have suddenly gone dry. And just as fast as his touch landed, it leaves, and my hips attempt to chase him.

"Oh, they're up!" Ana cheers, gripping my arm and turning back towards me.

Nik's hands are carefully in his lap, covering the semi you'd have to be blind to miss.

The music changes to something upbeat and exciting, and it isn't until

Maria belts out the first bars of the song that I realise it's "You're the One That I Want" from *Grease*.

Ana sings along, bouncing around on her barstool, and Steve's eyes are locked on the stage as Maria does the same. Except with the cut of her top, Maria's tits bounce around with her, but with a half-second delay, making it somewhat hilarious if you don't want to fuck her.

I cheer and whoop and holler along with the rest of the crowd as they put on a show worth remembering. They've got a shimmy shake where they lean into each other and lean away in synchronisation. Then they do some weird foot thing where they kick, withdraw, and kick again. I don't know what it's called; I think I saw it on TikTok last year. But this is something that they've done before, and they are damn good at it.

One song leads into two, which leads into three. The crowd cheers for Maria and Valentina to continue their act. I don't think they checked with the other karaoke singers in line. They just stay on stage and do song after song.

It's during the third song that Ana turns to me. "So, how are things going at home?" Ana asks.

"Pretty good. I took your mum's advice and stopped making myself as available to Dimitri, and it's made him try harder," I admit.

Ana picks up her glass and clinks it against mine. "Damn straight. That was the best advice she's ever given me. Whenever Aleksandr is out on the road or doing things for work, I pick random hours when I won't text or answer his calls. It makes him appreciate the times that I do answer.

"Which sounds pretty shitty when you think about it, that they don't care about something unless it's taken away from them. But you have to remember how the men were raised in this life. They learn early on that they have to work hard for their keep and that work is never within the home."

She takes a sip of her drink before continuing, her eyes on me. "The traditional way was to shower the sons with praise and affection to craft them into the perfect little soldiers and us the perfect little wives, but times have changed," Ana says, her face going serious and her tone dropping. "All it takes now is a bit of . . . manipulation, let's say. Not outright, of course, but little nudges here and there, encouraging them to do what's best for their immediate family and not just the Bratva."

"You mean like how I've withheld sex unless Dimitri is home by dinnertime? I just happen not to be in the mood on those particular nights, and I reward him as soon as he gets home on time," I say, chuckling when

Ana's jaw drops.

"Look at you go! You're well on your way to being one of us. I remember doing that when we first got married, and that man has rarely come home late since. It's good to reinforce that behaviour positively. It's not as if we can divorce," Ana says.

"Is that something you've thought about?" I ask.

Ana exhales roughly just as Maria hits a high note, and Steve claps from the other side of the bar, showing his unwavering support for his target for the night.

I check and find Nik conversing with Maxim, giving Ana and me privacy to discuss marriages. I appreciate it and see that Ana notices too.

"I can't lie. The start was rough for Aleksandr and me. I had known him growing up, of course, like we all know each other in this community. But, honestly, his brother and I always got along better."

"You mean his twin?" I ask.

"Yeah, but he was already promised to somebody else. So even though we were best friends growing up, that's all it will ever be. Aleksandr and I worked out our differences, and we were a little wary when we were matched, but it's been good for us and our family," Ana explains.

I nod. "Your family is great. Your mum is so supportive, and she's been eager to help me get used to this life in a way that makes me miss my own mother. It's difficult stepping into this."

"I heard you met with my dad," Ana says with a small smile. "How did that go?"

I fight the cringe that wants to spread across my face and instead drop my gaze to the bar and shake my head. "It was enlightening."

"Oh, I'll bet. How so?" she asks.

"He had very different advice from your mum."

Ana just laughs. "Oh, yeah, of course, he does. He was the original experiment when my mom assembled the wives' network. Because of her, the rest of us have at least some semblance of control in our marriages. He's very old school. We all know he's not the most ambitious man in the world. His concern is basically just making sure Dimitri's job is well-handled. And I think he oversteps sometimes because he had more of an active role with Dimitri's father than he has now. Uncle Danil was a hard man, but he was less prone to keeping himself apart than Dimitri is."

"Like what?" I ask, curious about Sergei and Danil's dynamic.

“Dad basically handled everything that Danil didn’t want to. As the brigadier, he took on more than his fair share because Danil bullied him into it. But, honestly, Dad never wanted to be responsible for so much, so I think he’s been pretty on board with Dimitri’s way. In fact, I’m pretty sure my mom was the one pushing him to do more and more—new avenues for revenue, new ideas, and better opportunities . . . Mom is the queen of putting things into place while my dad carries out her orders. Hell, I’d say she makes a better brigadier than he does. They’re always talking about business over the dinner table, or at least they were when I was younger. Now that I’m married and moved out, who knows? It could be different.”

An idea starts to take shape in my brain, but before I fully grasp it, it flits back out again. I’ve got my camera on and will review this conversation later to see if it can spark something again.

“And do you think Oksana would step into your dad’s role if given the chance?”

Ana rests her chin on her fingers and her elbow on the bar. “I’m not sure. I think she enjoys seeing her ideas come to fruition without having to do the work. Then again, who doesn’t? She delegates, and my dad does, so long as it aligns with the best interests of the Bratva. And now that Natasha is leading us and has successfully done so for the last two years, maybe there’s an opportunity for women to advance as well. Makes little sense for her to have grabbed the reins and not bring the rest of us up with her.”

“And what about you?” I ask. “In this hypothetical world where women are finally seen as on par with men, could you see yourself having a role?”

Ana waves her hand off as if dismissing the question, but I press. “No, seriously. You’re smart, and you’re well-connected. How you and your husband have worked together to find something that suits both of you speaks to many outstanding qualities. And I’m not talking about compromise. I’m talking about finding the good in people and fostering that.”

Ana shrugs. “What’s the point in dwelling on hypotheticals? Until there’s an actual change, that’s all it will ever be.”

Valentina and Maria come flouncing back to the bar, giving high-fives along the way and accepting accolades from the audience. Steve saunters up, eyes locked on Maria.

“I’m off at one. Any chance I can buy you a drink then?”

Valentina rolls her eyes, but Maria nods eagerly. “That’d be perfect.”

My brows rise that she would flirt so openly in front of her bodyguard

when I know for a fact that she's married, but I seem to be the only one surprised at this. Maxim is staring at her with heat in his gaze, his eyes shifting to Steve and assessing him.

Ana leans in, whispering in my ear, "Her bodyguard likes to watch, and her husband is on a job for the next six months in Moscow. Can't expect a girl to sit at home and just wait, can you?"

I look at Nik. *I guess not.*

# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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Eleanor

AFTER MY FOURTH REWATCH OF THE NIGHT OUT WITH ANA, VALENTINA, AND Maria, I'm ready to pull out my hair. And if I have to listen to their rendition of "You're the One That I Want" one more time, I will throw this laptop over the balcony.

Like she can sense my brewing anger, the phone beside me in the closet pings with a text from Olivia.

"Perfect!"

I snatch it up, finding a quick message about how everything is still fine, everyone is still alive, and Bella is not only the princess of her bouncy castle but the whole damn house.

I smother a laugh and press the call button.

"Hey, girl. Hey!" she cheers into the phone. "Isn't it like five a.m. for you?"

"Yes, it is, and it sucks. But that's life, I guess. Reviewing things and going through things fifty million times, all because one fucking neuron fired and then it went dead. So, I'm trying to resuscitate it." Rambling is my forte when I'm frustrated, so I clamp my lips together and try to stem the flow.

"Do you want to talk it out?" she asks, being the godsend she is and knowing my methods just as well as I do. After all, she was my roommate back in boarding school and listened to me ramble nonstop back then, too. "Roark has Bella, and he's currently covered in make-up. Oh, and his beard has glitter in it. It's glorious and weirdly sexy. I'll send a picture later. Honestly, I don't think he's letting her go anytime soon. They've bonded, or at least Rory has glommed on like a parasite. I think Bella had her first eye roll the other day when he kept scooping her off the floor to hold her."

I need that picture. Stat, because imagining the bearded and tattooed Viking-looking man with pink glitter is the stuff of legends.

As for the rest, well . . . talking it out might be beneficial. I tried with Agent Kim, and he was not as convinced in my ability to sniff out odd behaviour at a dinner or karaoke night.

"I can't give full details. But we can talk in hypotheticals."

"Deal," she says. "Lay it on me. Start from the very beginning, and let's walk through it."

I love this woman, and that she never makes me feel weird about my gut

instincts. She just supports me, and honestly, women aggressively supporting other women is what this world needs.

I take a deep breath and begin. “Hypothetically . . . Moves are happening without Dimitri’s consent or order—things he never signed off on and can’t let slide. Girls are being trafficked over in containers, Olivia.”

Thank fuck Dimitri was able to buy out the newest shipment, and together, we facilitated their handover to the American agencies after passing them through a safe house.

As frustrating as it was, Dimitri and Nik were right. There was no way to safely intercept them midjourney without risking them. So this time, at least, the agents had a heads-up they were coming.

Then, I tell Olivia about the Irishman trying to snatch me at the dive bar with Ana, the shooting, the weird conversation with Sergei, then Oksana, and finally, last night’s conversation at the karaoke bar. Not giving names or connections but offering what-ifs and possibilities as I work through the last few months.

“So, what do you think?” I ask when I finally finish the convoluted, twisted tale that even I can’t keep track of.

There’s silence from Olivia, but I hear the click-click of her pen as she spins it in her hand, and it taps against her nails.

“I don’t trust any of them. By the by, how much do we trust your baby daddy? Nikita Lenkov would be my number one suspect for Danil Aslanov’s murder. You know his signature murder method is the ice pick, right?”

“I do, unfortunately. Nothing like knowing half of your daughter’s origin story comes from an ice-pick-wielding Bratva member who has some deep religious and emotional trauma but fucks like he has everything to prove.”

Olivia snorts.

“But no, it wasn’t Nik. However, I think it was staged to look like it was him. I mean, they grew up together, right? So they spent an insane amount of time together when they were younger and then Nik went off to college and Interpol, and finally, when he comes home, Danil dies, the timing of it doing nothing but sowing discord and distrust between them.

“Even if Nik didn’t do it, Dimitri knows *somebody* did. And by doing it in Nik’s style, Dimitri’s only option would be to either have Nik killed or kill him by his own hand. Unfortunately for whoever thought to put these two head-to-head, Dimitri isn’t a man who acts without thinking things through.”

Olivia laughs. “A Bratva leader with restraint? That’s good, at least. Then

the actual killer would have got away with it since the blame would have been on Nik, and he'd be dead and unable to claim his innocence."

"I honestly don't know if Dimitri would have got the drop on Nik. Trust me when I say these two are evenly matched. Although, there was a brawl in the kitchen a couple of weeks ago, and Nik passed out after a well-executed chokehold."

"Why were they fighting? Were they sweaty or oiled up? Was it sexual?"

I choke on a laugh, then tuck the idea away for later—they might indulge me. "It had something to do with peanut butter sandwiches. Which Dimitri and I ate while Nik slept it off."

"Peanut butter is disgusting."

"Oh, the best part is that it wasn't just peanut butter. It was peanut butter with bananas."

Olivia pauses. "I don't think we can be friends anymore. I'm keeping your child as my own; you'll have to wander around aimlessly, living with your choices. I can't help you anymore. The deal is done."

I smother my laugh with my hand to keep it down. Dimitri was still in bed when I slipped out of my closet hidey hole about two hours ago to pee. I mean, understandable since it was three o'clock. But there was work to be done, and in my head, I'm cursing him and his blissful sleep while I recount everything repeatedly. I'm not bitter. *I'm not*. Just kidding. It's 5:00 a.m., and I'm bitter as fuck.

"Anyway, back to the topic at hand," Olivia says, all business. "Since Dimitri covered up the murder, only he and the murderer know Danil was killed and didn't die in his sleep the way the morgue wrote it on the death certificate."

It tracks, so I nod. Olivia continues. "So, not even Natasha knows that Dimitri's father died by murder. This means someone within the New York chapter didn't want Nik and Dimitri reunited and on good terms, and they did it behind Natasha's back. I think the big question here is, why not? Why go through all the trouble of killing someone to cause a rift? And what have they done since it didn't work? Clearly, they're always together anyway."

I hum as I reflect on a conversation from my first few days here. "Sergei assigned Nik as Dimitri's bodyguard."

"Okay, following that line of thought, didn't you just say that Ana confirmed Oksana gives Sergei direction . . . for lack of a better word?"

"Yes," I say hesitantly. "But then that doesn't line up with the drive-by

when someone took a shot at Oksana. She wouldn't organise her own shooting, would she? These aren't even likely connected."

"Just indulge me. And no, that part doesn't quite make sense either. Tell me when and where it happened, and I'll have Rory pull up security footage from the surrounding area after Bella lets him wash his face off. We'll pull angles and see what we can find. You said that they brought in Alexei and took care of his accomplices, but maybe we'll get a hit on them. We're still working on the phone, but Rory is making progress between princess makeovers."

"Thanks, Ollie. This feels like a fucking disaster. And, to put the cherry on top, we have this gala thing soon where I'm supposed to meet everyone who's anyone in the city, forming those connections that Oksana is so insistent on."

"When is that?" she asks.

"God, I don't even know anymore. Is it Tuesday? A week and a half? I have to get a fucking dress."

"The last time we talked, you sat in a closet stuffed with clothes. Will none of those fancy-ass dresses work for you, Queen Ellie?" She puts on a posh, sarcastic accent, making it all the better.

I snort. "Okay, yeah, fine. There's probably something in here. I just want to complain for a second and not listen to logic. I miss my kid. I miss you. Hell, I even miss my quiet desk at work."

"Yeah, but you're having sex on every surface of that penthouse, aren't you? Makes up for it a bit, don't you think?"

"What makes you say that?" I ask, deflecting like a pro.

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps it's that you let a Bratva leader meet your daughter and the fact you reunited with said daughter's father."

*I did not, in fact, deflect like a pro.*

"Bitch, if you are not getting Eiffel Towered, I will declare you no longer my best friend."

"What the fuck is an Eiffel Tower?" I ask, too curious to let it go.

"It's where one guy fucks your face and the other fucks you from behind, like a spit roast, but at the end, they high-five."

I drop my face into my free hand, groaning and laughing simultaneously. Somehow, the visual is just perfect. "No Eiffel Towers, no spit roasts. No —oh God, what was that term that one author used on TikTok?— Tupperware parties! You know, where she's airtight? That doesn't quite work

here since I only have two guys. I can't live up to your four."

"Shut up, Ellie. That's what toys are for. You know that. Stick a plug in your ass, do the Eiffel Tower and call it a Tupperware party under the tower. If you do it outside, there's probably some other name. I need to Google that; it probably has some kind of 'picnic' term in there."

I dissolve into laughter, becoming delirious from the early hour and the incessant video rewatching. However, talking with Olivia always brings me back to myself when I get overwhelmed.

"I miss you," I say. "I wish you were here. Not involved in all of this idiocy, but God, I'm gonna hug you so hard when I get back."

"And I will wait with open arms," she says. "Now, send me the details of the gala. I'm going to get you some help with that."

"No, Olivia, I can't involve anyone else," I say firmly. "I've apprised the agencies of what's happening, and they'll be at the party. With so many people congregating, they can't afford not to make a move. The evidence I've gathered with the help of Dimitri and Nik is speeding things up. Hell, the collection of the girls from the containers is enough to take down most of the key players, but we want to ensure that we get everyone involved in this, with evidence."

Come to think of Nik, I'm not even sure he's home now. He went to handle another one of the former buyers, not that I'm telling the agency that. Anyone who buys girls to use at their pleasure deserves whatever justice Nik doles out.

"First of all," Olivia says with no small measure of offence, "when I send you an assist, you should know by now that *you* will not see them unless they want you to see them. The Bratva members will not see them. Your agents will not see them. While everyone is focused on the big bad fishies they're about to catch, no one will look out for you. And I intend to have an unbiased party standing by to get you out if things go to shit because, I swear to God, if you die on this assignment and leave me, I will find you, and I will bring you back, and it will not. Be. Pleasant," she grits out the last words, overrenunciating each one.

"I swear I'll be fine, and on your head be it if an agent picks up whoever you send to help me. I can't guarantee that they'll be safe. If they're at the party, they're fair game."

"Deal. It'll be fine. Don't worry. Now crawl your ass back into bed, ride your husband's dick, and get some shuteye. It's late or early, depending on

your optimism,” she says, then hangs up the phone.

I look down as it returns to my home screen. Why isn't all of this lining up? It would be stupid to hope for something easy for once, but that's not how life goes.

I send a follow-up text to Olivia listing the name of the restaurant and the time and date of the drive-by to the best of my recollection. It might not be the exact minute, but she'll find it—it's not like she could miss the action if she hacks the cameras. I mean, there were quite a few bullets. I power down the phone, stick it in my bag, and head towards the bedroom.

I crawl into bed, and Dimitri reaches out, wraps me in his arms, and pulls me closer. I snuggle my face against his chest, and he exhales, settling against his pillow, and murmurs, “Love you, Eleanor.”

I stop breathing, only slightly lifting my head to look at him. He's still asleep, and he seems so relaxed. Instead of the constant furrow on his brow, it's smooth. He looks younger, like the weight of the world isn't on his shoulders.

He slipped out of bed a few nights this past week when he was restless, and when he came back, he was carrying the faint whiff of paint. He returns with a renewed sense of calm, wrapping me up like he does tonight, and always falls into a deep sleep.

I've slept in Nik's bed a couple of nights, talking late into the morning when he's not out dealing with those sick assholes who bought the girls. We've fucked, made love, and just held each other, each of those nights becoming my new favourite with him, no matter what we do.

Turning my face towards Dimitri, I kiss his pec before I lay my head on it again, listening to his heartbeat through his ribs. Tendrils of affection and love unfurl in my chest, and while I won't say the words to him while he's passed out, I feel them. I feel them in my soul—for both of them.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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Dimitri

ELEANOR FLOPS DOWN ON THE COUCH BESIDE ME, A GROAN ON HER LIPS AND tension stacked on her shoulders.

She's been with Oksana for the last three days to prepare for the gala, and when she's not there, she's here, researching the guest list and comparing notes with me, Nik, and the agents she's in contact with. She looks exhausted and unhappy, and it puts me on edge.

I reach over to her, placing my hand on her nape and using my thumb to massage the side. "That's it, my Sabre. Relax."

She moans, dropping her head forward and letting me tend to her the best way I know how right now.

As she exhales, her shoulders sag, and I move her so she's facing away from me. I run both hands over her back, working out the knots bunched there.

"That feels so damn good," she breathes when I work out a particularly reluctant spot.

"Are you okay? We can cancel this whole thing. I know I haven't been much help."

"Don't say that," she chastises. "You went over the entire guest list with me twice, explaining their ties to the organisation and giving me more information than Interpol. *Then*, when I was panicking about a dress, you made me describe my ideal one, and you had it made! Who does that?"

She throws her hands in the air, and I laugh.

"Uh, practical men?"

Eleanor peeks over her shoulder at me. "Not true. That was above and beyond, and you know it. And thank you. Again."

"Hey, if my girl wants a dress to hide the holsters and the cameras, that's exactly what she'll get." I gently squeeze her shoulders, and she sinks into my touch, leaning against my chest as we take in the New York skyline.

"How are you doing?" Eleanor mumbles, the exhaustion finally beginning to pull her under. She keeps fighting the need to rest. She's barely slept lately, and despite doing everything I can to encourage her to get some decent shuteye—short of wrapping her in a blanket burrito and sitting on her to keep her down.

Suppressing a chuckle at the image of a wrapped up and pinned down

Eleanor, I answer, “I’m fine, my Sabre. I made my peace with what’s coming a long time ago. There’s no avoiding it now, and, frankly, I’m ready to move on.”

“Mmm. What are you gonna do after?” Her words are slow and stilted as she nods off. Finally.

“Go wherever you go.” We might not have any logistics planned, but I think a lovely holiday in the middle of nowhere is a good start. There will be time to put it all together once this is over. And I’ve ensured we never want for anything with some careful and untraceable banking.

I kiss the top of her head and cradle her in my arms, pulling my left foot onto the couch to make a barrier so she doesn’t roll off. I gently rest my hand on her stomach, curling my body around her, and let my eyes drift shut.

I wake when my body is jostled, and the comforting weight on top of me shifts. Before my eyes fully open, I have my gun pulled from my holster and pointed in front of me.

Nik lets go of Eleanor’s arm and raises his hands in supplication.

“Easy,” he says in a whisper. “I’m just gonna move her upstairs to bed. The two of you don’t look comfortable here, and she was about to roll off.”

I look down, and sure enough, my leg has fallen off the cushion. I pull back the hammer of my gun, the click sounding through the darkening room.

“I was very comfortable,” I say, keeping the gun pointed at him, my still-drowsy brain making silent promises that Nik is only pulling her from my arms if I’m dead first. Eleanor doesn’t move during the entire standoff; she just continues softly snoring against me.

“Put the gun away, old man. You know my piece is fancier than yours.”

I raise a brow but keep the gun level. “Big talk for someone with a target on them.”

He chuckles, and Eleanor stirs. I throw him a glare. Great. She was finally sleeping, and we ruined it. I uncock the revolver, put the safety back on, and stuff the whole thing under my couch cushion.

“Nik?” she mumbles. “Why are you staring at me?”

“You two fell asleep, and your snoring was so loud I couldn’t hear myself think.”

For a beat, Eleanor is silent, a blush rising on her cheeks.

“Nik,” I growl in warning.

“I don’t snore.” She’s so confident in her retort. But honestly, she does snore. Loudly sometimes, but fuck knows I won’t be the one to confirm that.

Thankfully, Nik takes that bullet for himself.

“Uh, yeah, you do. Remember that time we were staking out that fugitive just outside of London? What was his name again?”

“McAvoy?”

Nik snaps and points at Eleanor. “That’s the one. Anyway, we were holed up in the car, taking shifts watching his building. He left at one point but heard your snores from *across the street*, and we had to chase him all the way down the road!”

“I coughed. I didn’t snore.”

“Repetitively? And for an hour?” Nik deadpans.

Eleanor roots around between the cushions and pulls out her own gun. I laugh a deep belly chuckle that has Nik throwing his hands in the air and walking away while muttering, “Great, two of them.”

“What did he mean by that?” Eleanor asks when Nik steps into the kitchen.

Carefully, I pull my hand out from under the cushion with my revolver in my grasp.

She chuckles. “You threatened him too?”

“He tried to take you away.” It might not logically be a good reason, especially since he was just going to move her upstairs, but it’s a good enough reason for me.

“What time is it, anyway?” She looks outside, and we’re in that in-between time where the sun is down, but night hasn’t entirely fallen yet. I put the gun away correctly and pick up my phone to check. “Seven.”

She groans. “Come on. I have a few more questions about logistics, and we’ve been asleep for like three hours.”

Eleanor stretches when she stands, the hem of her T-shirt riding past the top of her leggings and her pert ass right in my face. I hustle, standing up and scooping her into my arms. She yells at the sudden weightlessness, and I toss her over my shoulder as I head for the stairs.

“Where are we going? Dimitri! Nik!”

He pokes his head out of the kitchen, sees what’s happening, sighs, and turns around.

He’s in love with Eleanor just as much as I am; that much is clear. The question is, does she love us too? Either of us?

He’s the father of her child, a bond I’ll likely never share with her, and the martyr in me wants to step aside. Let them reconcile and build the family

Nik's been missing since his parents died. But the bigger part of me believes in doing what's right. And now, what's driving me is what's right *for me*.

And Eleanor is right for me.

I take the stairs, ignoring the little jabs she lands on me. I swat her ass on the landing before continuing and pushing through our bedroom door.

With an almighty heave, I fling her over my shoulder. She lands on the bed with an *oomph*, bouncing with the impact. Before she can move, I throw myself on top of her, her thighs widening and allowing me to crawl up her body.

Eleanor's breath catches in her throat; her eyes half-lidded with desire. "Dimitri," she breathes, the word a question and a plea all in one.

"Do you want him?" I ask, nipping the skin of her collarbone before dragging my lips up her neck. She doesn't answer straight away, so I repeat myself. "Do you?"

"In what way?"

"To have. To fuck. To marry. To own—the way you own me. Eleanor, my Sabre, I am yours, but with that comes the responsibility to ensure your happiness. If it's Nik you want . . . If you think Nik will make you happy, I will walk away." The words are painful to admit, and just seconds ago, I argued with myself that she was right for me, but I can't help the guilt I feel when I think about how much Nik adores this woman.

I pull away, not wanting to influence her choice with my touch. "You are mine, but more than that, I am *yours*. It is a selfish man who puts the desires of his wife aside in pursuit of his own, and I am not that man, Eleanor. So, tell me before I go mad with wondering."

Her soft hands land on my cheeks, cupping my jaw and tilting my face upward. "I, ah, hell. I want both of you. And not just for now." Those words echo the first time we were in this bed together, her saying she was mine *for now*.

"Both of us?" I ask, cocking my brow.

She nods. "Like you said when we talked about Bella."

"Not just for now, as in?"

"As in, we take it day by day and see where we end up, just like anyone who dates. Dimitri, nothing is guaranteed in this life; you know that more than most. But somehow, when I looked into your eyes on our wedding day, I knew you were the man for me. It rocked me to my very core. Your silent strength, your steadfast determination. All of it calls to me in a way I can't

explain. But Nik—”

“There it is.”

“You asked; I’m answering.” She runs her thumb over my bottom lip and keeps her eyes on mine, never wavering. “I can’t deny there’s more between Nik and me. There always will be, and not because of Bella.”

I nod. She’s spent the night with him a few times, and while I’ve hated having her away from me, I knew if I tried to keep her in my bed always, she would resent me.

“If that’s what you want, that’s what you’ll have. Assuming Nik agrees, but I doubt an atom in that man’s body could refuse you. And we will not just *date*. After all of this ends, we need to have a plan—a destination—and it should be one we agree on together.”

She looks contemplative, and I see the moment she decides. “Deal. But you’re not mad at me? Or think I’m selfish for wanting my cake and eating it, too?”

“So long as I get to be the one to eat you, I don’t care, Eleanor. For so long, I’ve been lost. Uncaring, unmoved by anything. I’d forgotten who I was until I picked up a paintbrush again, and even now, half the time, it’s just an outlet for my anger. But with you, this deep sense of calm overwhelms me. You’re more than capable of handling yourself, and Christ knows I’ll likely be the last person you listen to on so many things, but the challenge doesn’t just excite me. It gives me a reason to keep fighting when all I want to do half the time is lie down and die, letting the rest of the wolves fight it out when I’m gone.”

“Don’t, Dimitri. Don’t you dare say that. Close this chapter and move on. Find what you want out of life when it’s not dictated by someone else. I will welcome you with open arms and a safe place to land if that’s me. But if it’s someone else—*somewhere* else—I want you to take that risk and jump. You’re going to fly, husband dearest, and I can’t wait to watch you soar, whether from nearby or afar.”

Wrapping my arms around her, I keep her close, not giving an inch. “I want you with me. I have been overtaken, Eleanor. Body and soul, I am yours, and it will be a cold day in hell when I stop loving you.”

She doesn’t look surprised by my admission. If anything, the tension she’s been carrying for the last few days seems to melt away. And just like when I suggested we find a destination together, I see the moment she decides.

“I love you, too, Dimitri.”

At her words, I push closer, laying on her and finding my purpose for life in the space between our bodies. As I take her lips with mine, I groan into her mouth when she meets me with the same fervour I can't keep at bay.

We're a torrent of shredded clothes and flailing limbs as we free ourselves and clash like two thunderclouds intent on drowning the world.

I grip her neck, pulling her close as our lips war. Her tongue strokes mine, darting in and withdrawing before she takes my bottom lip between her teeth and grips it tight. She pulls back, and the bite into my flesh has me seeing stars. The pain and the pleasure, her scent, the feel of her soft skin on mine, her hands soothing and bruising all at once.

I want this woman more than I want my next breath. And the glory of it all is that she wants me, too.

She pushes me off the bed until I'm standing at the edge, and she follows me over, dropping to her knees and taking my cock in her small hands. Her tongue teases my head, sliding down my length until she's licking the seam of my balls, making me rock onto my toes.

I hiss, and my Sabre chuckles, the vibration rocketing through me. She sucks one into her mouth, teasing and humming around the sensitive skin. She switches to the other, then licks up my painfully hard dick again, swirling around the head before swallowing me down.

I hold her hair back, fisting it and keeping her steady as I rock my hips. She gags, her throat constricting around me like a vice.

Her cheeks hollow, pressing around me from all sides as I slide along her tongue, and she does this wave motion with it that makes me see stars. I slide a little too deep, and in retaliation, her teeth slide along my cock when she withdraws.

“Fu-uck me,” I groan. “Again.”

She obliges, and there's a sting as her mouth slides away. I look down, finding two perfect red welts from her front teeth along the top of my cock. She pops off of me and looks up in concern.

My hand wraps around her slender throat, and using my grip, I tilt her head back and smile. She grins, and there's a tinge of blood staining her teeth.

“Swallow it.” My voice sounds like gravel over concrete, but I have no finesse left, not after that.

Her tongue slides over her teeth, and she makes a show of the process,

her throat working under my palm. I'm part of her for now and forever, and while it might not be the way Nik is, I'm in her now. Her throat bobs under my hand, and her breathing comes in short pants.

"You're mine, dear wife. All fucking mine. You know I love you?"

She nods, eyes wide and nostrils flaring, and I smirk. "Good, because I'm about to fuck you like I hate you."

A squeal escapes her as I lift her and throw her back onto the bed. She laughs wildly and scoots back, curling her finger and beckoning me closer.

Before she can get too far, I grip her ankle and pull her back down to the foot of the bed, spreading her legs wide and licking a path from her ankle up to her pretty pink pussy.

I groan as my tongue feathers from taint to clit, my hands lifting her ass until her weight rests on her shoulder blades. She locks her ankles around my neck, her knees near my shoulders. Burying my face in her sweetness, I lick and devour my wife until she's trembling.

"Dimitri!" she cries as she comes all over my face, her hands shoving at my head to ease my attention, but fuck that. I keep licking, sucking, and biting until she's whimpering and twisting to get away, but it's not enough.

Her eyes slam shut, and her back bows. I slide two fingers through her arousal and shove them deep inside. She cries out at the intrusion, rocking her hips against my face and hunting for more pleasure as her cries turn to moans.

I tear my mouth away, unlocking her legs from around me and pushing her hips down into the mattress. As my fingers keep pumping into her, I raise my other hand and land a slap straight on her clit.

She screams, the sound going silent as her eyes fly open and find me staring down at her. Through it all, my fingers keep stroking her G-spot, never stopping, never missing.

Her pussy pulses around my fingers, one orgasm rolling right into the next as I take what's mine. Her voice is hoarse as she moans, her breath hitching again in a new way as she throws her head back and her walls clamp down on my fingers again. This time, she squirts all over my hand on the withdrawal, soaking the comforter and the sheets below us as she unravels.

"That's it, baby. Ride my hand. Show me how badly you want my cock."

Her body spasms as she comes, her stomach quivering, her chest flushed, and her nipples peaked.

I'm not giving her a break. Not a chance in hell. I grab her legs, flipping

her over and hauling her ass up. Delivering a spank to one cheek, I finally let myself go. I fist my cock, line it up, and slam home.

*Home.*

This is where I belong. This is where I'm wanted. Needed. Where I want to be.

Eleanor pushes back against me, her hips grinding into me and meeting me thrust for thrust.

“Spank me again, Dimitri. Do it!”

I land a palm on her unmarked cheek, and she moans. I turn towards the window, watching her reflection and her perfect tits swaying beneath her as she uses her hands to rock back. Fuck, we look good together.

I press her lower back, holding her down as my wet cock slides in and out of her. Her asshole tightens every time I slide in, and the temptation is too great. I hover over it, spread her cheeks wider and spit, watching the wetness land over her hole. I rub circles over her entrance with my thumb, working the saliva around the area, and slowly, I press my thumb inside.

“Di-Dimitri, I'm going to come. Come with me. Please, fu-uck, please. Give it to me.”

“You want my cum?”

She nods, making a sound of affirmation as she mewls below me.

“I'm gonna fill you so good, baby. Gonna watch it drip from your cunt and shove it all back in where it belongs. You're mine, Eleanor, and good wives take everything their husbands give them.”

I reach for her again, pulling her upward until her back is to my chest, both on our knees in the centre of our bed as I fuck her into ecstasy. I move my hand to her clit, toying with it and rubbing tight circles around her bud. When her pussy flutters around me again, I shove my cock deep inside her and slap her clit again.

She cries out as she comes, trembling in my arms and gripping my arm as an anchor. My release barrels through me, stealing my breath and the last of my doubts and insecurities.

I gently guide her torso down again, leaving her ass in the air as I pull out. She whimpers as my cock slips free, and I sit back on my heels and keep a hand on her hip.

A few seconds later, with a pulse of aftershock, some of my cum leaks from her cunt, and true to my word, I gather it with my fingers and push it back inside her.

Her moan is feral when I brush her G-spot, and she tries to squirm away. I stop her by tightening my grip and repeating the process when more slips free.

I may not be able to get her pregnant, but fuck, do I want to.

# CHAPTER FORTY

---

Eleanor

TWO DAYS BEFORE THE GALA, I'M READY TO PULL MY HAIR OUT AGAIN. Jesus. When will this end? Instead of reviewing everything for the millionth time, we're off to the opera with Sergei and Oksana.

Dimitri smooths his hands over my shoulders and sends a shiver down my spine. He leans in close, kissing the juncture of my neck and shoulder.

"You look ravishing," he says, taking a deep inhale of my perfume. "And you smell even better. We should just cancel and stay home."

"We can't cancel," I say, a bit of longing in my voice because, honestly, that sounds fantastic.

"What if I sweeten the deal?" His fingertips trail up and down my arms.

I hum, pretending to give the offer real consideration. "What did you have in mind?"

"I could strip you out of this dress, tear it from your body thread by thread." His fingers land on the zipper at my side, tugging it down just an inch. "Then I can slip these heels off of you, leaving you in just your lingerie—touching you, licking every inch of your skin until you're a trembling mess in my arms."

*Lord, this man.*

"After that, when you beg me to take you, I'd pick you up, wrap your thighs around my waist, and carry you to bed, where I'd tuck you in, hand you a book, and beg that you just relax for a minute."

I turn in his arms and swat his chest.

"What?" he asks playfully. "Did you think I was gonna fuck you? You fell asleep for nearly twenty-four hours the last time we did that. That alone tells me you're working too hard. Can't have that."

"Let's go!" Nik calls from the entryway of our suite. "The car's already downstairs! We're going to be late."

Dimitri drops his head to my shoulder and groans against me.

"If you'd offered me sex, maybe I would have changed my mind," I tease.

He chuckles, his warm, minty breath enveloping my senses. Since he declared his love, Dimitri has been more open. More playful. It's both fascinating and strange to see, but I love getting to know the new side of my husband he's kept shielded for so long.

My shield. The same way I'm his Sabre.

I wish we could stay in and continue getting to know one another, but we must go to this opera thing. It's not my first choice, but Oksana said we needed a night out before the big gala.

As if we don't have forty million things to worry about. No, no. Instead, we have to leave the comfort of our little bubble and put on our facades for a few hours.

"Come on," I say, taking Dimitri's hand in mine, dragging him out of the closet, and finding Nik in our entryway. He looks incredible in the tux he's wearing. He forgoes the bow tie, but it's impeccably tailored, the same way that Dimitri's is, and they both look incredible.

I'm wearing a red dress that dips low on my chest, hugs my hips, and falls gracefully to the floor with a slit up my thigh. I feel badass.

I snapped a picture earlier as soon as I put it on and sent it to Olivia, who replied with two eggplant emojis, one of those sweating faces, and a bunch of water droplets.

A girl could hope.

Nik lets out a low, appreciative whistle, and his eyes trace down my body and back up again. "Damn, Ellie, you clean up good."

"I could say the same about you," I reply.

"Must we go to this?" Dimitri grumbles from behind me, his hand still linked with mine.

"It's not like we have much choice," I say. "Oksana demanded we attend. There's no other choice when she does so much of the gala work. It felt like the least I could do to keep her happy and off my back. I have a role to play, remember?"

"Fine, let's watch people sing unintelligible words and pretend we understand what the hell they're saying."

His reaction surprises me. Dimitri always seems like the cultured type who cares about things like opera and politics. And, basically, anything you see on CNN.

Nik must interpret the look on my face because he laughs and says, "Don't let this asshole fool you. He's worse than a ten-year-old. All he wants to do is read books about some old war that doesn't matter anymore, sit in front of the TV with his hand down his trousers, and watch The Great British Bake Off."

I snort a laugh. "I can't picture it."

Nik leans close and whispers loudly, “That’s because he’s been hiding who he is from you. Stick with him long enough, and you’ll see his true colours.” Dimitri’s fist comes flying from behind, and he punches Nik in the shoulder.

“Asshole,” Dimitri grumbles, still holding my hand. He drags me down the stairs. “Let’s go. The sooner we go, the sooner we can come back here, and I can flop in front of the TV and put my hand on my dick.”

Nik just laughs as he leisurely follows us. “You are aware that there’s already a start and ending time to this, and our arrival won’t influence that.”

We take the lift down, Dimitri scowling the whole way, and Igor is waiting at the kerb with the town car.

Once we’re on our way, Dimitri turns to me. “So, remember . . .?” he says.

“Yes, yes,” I say. “We’re happily married. I’m at your beck and call. However, sometimes it frustrates you when I make little power moves. But all it does is wrap you further around my finger.”

We had a team meeting this afternoon and determined that pretending to take both Sergei’s and Oksana’s advice would be good. That way, the stories will line up when they compare notes after the opera about what a good little wife I’ve been.

This is a work trip, but I might as well try to enjoy it. As I said, the theatre isn’t my cup of tea, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the hard work the singers, actors, stagehands, and directors have all put into the production.

We spend the rest of the ride reviewing things to look out for tonight and how to play things off should anything arise. And all the while, each one keeps a hand on my thigh, pinning me between them, making me feel surrounded, supported, and safe. It doesn’t take long until we’re pulling up to the theatre, and Igor is rushing around the car to open the door.

I gape as I look out the window. There’s a red carpet, and bulbs flash as photographers get photos of the arrivals.

Before I can ask, Dimitri slides out and offers a hand, helping me out gracefully. Standing, I tilt my head and murmur, “What the hell is this? Why is there press here?” My husband laughs, tucking my hand into the crook of his elbow and leading me forward. “Smile, dear wife. It’s opening night, after all.”

*If I knew this was waiting, I might have taken up Dimitri’s earlier offer*

*and stayed home.*

Dimitri does his best to rush us through the press line, stopping us to pose for a few pictures and then rushing off again. It could be worse, and he does his best to get us past the line quickly. Nik follows behind us, holding up a hand and insisting that we're done with photos.

It's easy to forget that Dimitri is a big deal in this city. According to the papers, he's the CEO of a conglomerate, which is profitable in its own right. Still, laundering money for illegal activities rivals their legitimate income, padding the accounts and making him a big deal.

Dimitri shows the doorman the tickets Oksana couriered over, and we're admitted inside, where it's not much better. There's a crowd milling in the lobby, everyone with a glass of something and canapes on little plates as they chat, their voices rising and blending until it's all white noise.

"There you are!" Sergei damn near bellows from a few feet away.

He crosses the distance with a broad grin and a resplendent Oksana beside him. She's in a conservative dress, but that doesn't mean it's not exactly suited to her. The gown is simple, with a high neck and long sleeves, but the fabric is a pearl white that shimmers with every step. She looks like Helen Mirren if she were a faerie queen.

"*Pakhan*, Elsa, Nik," she greets demurely. "So nice to see you. Thank you for accepting my invitation."

This is not the same woman I had tea with and have spent hours planning this gala with. *This* is the woman she is when she's with her husband, not leading a bunch of wives in how to be more than just wives—who they expect her to be.

Oksana and I stand dutifully beside our husbands. Nik hovers just beyond, and it looks like Sergei and Oksana have their own bodyguard as well, just behind them. It's too loud to carry on a conversation, but thankfully, the lights flicker after just a few minutes, and we're called towards our seats.

Oksana slips her arm through mine and says, "We're this way. We have a private box."

I smile gratefully and walk beside her. Sergei leads the way, handing tickets over to an usher who turns on his heel and leads us up a set of stairs and towards the private boxes.

It's beautifully appointed inside the box, and there are two rows of chairs set up, four chairs per row. Oksana leads me front and centre and sits to my

right. Dimitri takes the chair on my left, and Sergei completes our front row.

After checking the door and ensuring we're safe—from who, I don't know—but I doubt there will be an assassination attempt at the opera, Nik and the bodyguard stand silent beside the opening.

There are some canapes from the lobby, champagne flutes, and a bottle of bubbly.

Dimitri leans close to me. "You hungry or thirsty?"

"I got it," Nik says from the side, handing over a small plate with a couple of snacks and a glass of champagne. "Oksana, is there anything I can get for you?" he asks.

"Well, well, Nikita," she appraises. "That's very kind of you. I'll have a glass of champagne, please."

Nik pours the glass and returns, handing it over with a flourish.

Oksana accepts it with a smile. "You always were a charmer," she says. "You know Maria Petrov's sister is available. Might be a good match."

Sergei chuckles, his hand resting on his belly. "That girl would drive Nik mad," he counters.

"She's not a girl. She is a woman now," Oksana says, rolling her eyes.

"She's barely past her eighteenth birthday," Sergei argues.

"Legally, she may be an adult, but she is not ready, nor is she suitable for a man like Nikita," Dimitri butts in. "Leave him be. When he is ready and wants to marry, we will come to you for your matchmaking advice. Until then, he is my bodyguard and shall remain so. I can't have him distracted by a wife at home."

"Fair point, well made," Sergei says, looking down the row of us and pinning his wife with a gaze I would hate to be on the receiving end of.

Nik just shrugs, and Oksana looks adequately chastised, but as she turns towards the stage, a slight smile lingers on her lips.

Instantly, I get it. She's just put it on their radars that it might be time for Nik to settle down. And, of course, like any good tactician, she threw out a horrible choice first. Because then, when she throws out her real choice, they'll have no option but to sit up and pay attention.

Between now and then, Sergei will think about Nik settling down and which family he'll marry into. Too bad for them, we plan to be long gone by then.

But Oksana is a shark swimming with eels. Her manipulation is subtle, like creeping vines. I can see why she runs the wives' club.

Oksana turns towards me with a slight smile on her lips. I tip my head at her, acknowledging I've understood the point she's just made.

"Well done," she murmurs. "You're learning quickly."

Dimitri and Sergei talk about work, and of course, everyone on our team has cameras and mics, so I'll be able to review this later and send it to the other agents. At the same time, I focus on Oksana as she chatters on about the opera we're about to see.

"Elsa, would you mind coming with me to the ladies' room to powder our noses?" Oksana asks after a few minutes. "I'd hate to miss a moment of the performance."

I nod, and she stands gracefully from her chair. Dimitri takes my glass, and I follow suit. Sergei, Dimitri, Nik, and the other bodyguard stand with us in a show of chivalry.

"We'll be back in just a minute. The bathroom is right across the hall," Oksana says. Her guard takes a step to come with us, but she says, "Please, Pavel, don't bother. It's quite literally four steps away."

Nik looks from Oksana to me, and I give him a smile and a nod. Pavel follows Oksana's orders without second-guessing, and I don't miss the look she gives Nik.

We leave the box, cross the hall, and enter the private bathroom for the nearby boxes.

"You have Nik well trained," she says when she reaches the vanity, checking her face for imperfections that don't exist.

"Well trained?" I ask.

"Oh, yes. I saw how he checked with you first. He may be Dimitri's bodyguard, but he is yours as well. And that cringe you gave when I suggested he marry that horrible girl was one I wasn't quite expecting, but good for you, my dear."

"I-I . . ." I don't know how to navigate this.

"But it's not just Nik you have wrapped around your finger. Dimitri, of course . . ." She pauses. "But discussing pregnancy with my husband and propositioning him to father the child . . . Elsa, dear, that will only lead to ruination."

Fear skitters down my spine, and Oksana shows no emotion as she sets up her blackmail perfectly. She's gently patting her nose, checking her mascara, and pulling lipstick from her purse.

"I didn't—"

“It doesn’t matter what you did or did not initiate. I was recently informed of your conversation. It seems the waiter was having second thoughts about sharing the information, but now that I have it and have spent the past couple of months getting to know you, I see the snake you are. Or better yet, the one you could be if you were only aligned with the right people. And let me assure you, Dimitri is not the right person to put your faith in.”

She runs a finger under her lip, fixing her lipstick, and continues, “Seeing that I now have witnesses willing to come forward and share your disgusting conversation with Sergei, you are in a precarious position. Your husband would not be happy to hear about your offers in an effort to keep your position.”

I have no words, just a choked sound as she lays out the dominoes and threatens to knock them down.

“So, here’s what is going to happen,” she says. “I have a task for you at the gala. And should you not complete it . . . Well, it would be a pity for me to tell your husband that you tried to seduce mine to secure your place at his side, passing off a child as his own. Dimitri is not a man to be trifled with, and while he may worship the ground you walk on right now, if he gets even a hint of impropriety—of you using your sexuality to manipulate his bodyguard and his uncle—he will kill you. You wouldn’t be the first lover killed on his behalf.”

“The first? What are you talking about?” I ask, feeling frazzled. Even though Dimitri knows of these supposed threats, the last bit confuses me.

“Why, the reason they fell out in the first place, of course. When he was younger, Dimitri’s girlfriend tried to pull the same tactic. She started with Dimitri and tried to work her way up the chain, sniffing around Danil’s office and making eyes at Sergei. Dimitri’s father ordered her killed. And, well, Dimitri was sentimental. Nik was not. He murdered that girl.”

“Wait, what?” I ask, meeting Oksana’s gaze in the mirror as she stares back at me. This wasn’t in the files, and I haven’t heard it from either Nik or Dimitri. Something this big should have at least been mentioned.

She hums in a poor mimicry of sympathy. “Quite tragic. Dimitri was dating the girl for a couple of months, and after a while, it became clear that it wasn’t him she was interested in despite the boy being head over heels. Dimitri’s father sent the order down, telling him to get rid of her. You see, he’d caught her rifling through things in their home when Dimitri brought her

there. He knew better and shouldn't have, but it was too late then. Dimitri refused to follow through, but Nik stepped up and followed orders like a good little soldier. But now, with you rocking the boat and swaying his allegiance to you, you've created quite the conundrum."

She examines her nails and then turns on the water to wash her hands. "I understand your position, you know. You are not the only one married off as a business transaction. I know that fate far too well, and I've worked hard to make it suitable. But you find yourself uniquely positioned to have loyalty around you—however you've garnered it. But keeping this secret will cost you."

Her eyes haven't left mine since she started speaking about their horrific past, the thing that turned Dimitri and Nik against one another so long ago. There's been mention of a falling out, but I didn't know the details, leaving them to work it out amongst themselves.

"We find ourselves at an impasse," Oksana comments. She dries her hands with one of the folded towels beside the basin and turns towards me. "The question is, do you have what it takes to use that loyalty to your advantage? To keep Nik on your side and play your cards right? There is an opportunity here, Elsa. One that would not be knocking on your door if you had remained with the Emerald Sabres. You have a chance to build a life for yourself you could only dream of, and if you wanted, you could bring Nikita along with you."

She steps towards the door, and I follow her like a magnet. "The alternative is that I tell Dimitri about your . . . liaisons with Nik and Sergei. I don't doubt he would kill you upon hearing the news. After all, it would exchange one dead girlfriend for another. This time, the anguish of blame would fall on Nik's shoulders."

"What do you need me to do?" I croak. "I'll do anything."

Her smile is unlike any I've seen before. It unfurls, stretching her stained lips into a power-hungry slash across her face. With that, she pulls open the door to the restroom and leads me back to the private box; me following her like a puppy across the hall. We take our seats, and when I look at her inquisitively, she pats my folded hands and says, "Tomorrow."

# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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Nikita

ELLIE AND OKSANA RETURN FROM THE BATHROOM AS IF NOTHING IS WRONG. Meanwhile, my head is spinning. It's easy to pair a listening device with a camera.

When they started chatting in the bathroom, I nearly dropped the glass of champagne I was holding out for Sergei as his wife manipulated Ellie.

I knew I shouldn't have looked for her orders when she left the private box. It seems that simple gesture clued in Oksana that Ellie's mandates were just as important to me as Dimitri's. Then, the old bitch discussed *my* past without knowing all the facts, no doubt colouring Ellie's opinion of me even further. Jesus, she'll never let me meet Bella, and I don't blame her.

We watch the opera silently, and I'm locked in my inner turmoil through every act. I can't even venture a guess what the performance is about. Finally, at the end, we clap politely, and as a group, we return to the lobby.

Dimitri picks up on the mood and says our goodbyes to Sergei and Oksana, explaining that he has business to attend to. I text Igor to pick us up out front, and we slip away, avoiding the opening night after-party with the performers.

Ellie rounds on us once we're back in the car with the divider raised between us and Igor.

"Tell me about your old girlfriend," she demands of Dimitri. Her shoulders are shaking now that we're finally out of Oksana's presence, and she can let the façade fall.

He tenses beside her, his gaze dropping to the hands he's laced together in his lap. "I don't see how that's relevant."

"It's *relevant* because Oksana brought it up in the bathroom in alarming detail. Not to mention, it was nowhere in the files we received at Interpol, so I was flying blind! I should *never* fly blind! Not when my life and identity are at risk. I can't afford to slip up, Dimitri. So spill it. That way, maybe, if it comes up again, I won't stand there gaping like a fish out of water."

*Fuck, here we go*, I think to myself. *The one topic Dimitri and I have avoided for nearly half our lives.*

We've been living with a tentative truce; both Dimitri and I focused on Ellie. I'm the father of her child, and Dimitri is her husband. The three of us are connected, and I don't know what that means for the future. But now,

with Ellie tossing a truth bomb from the past in the middle of all this, we're going to implode before we figure out what we're all doing together.

"She was trying to steal family secrets," Dimitri says flatly. "My father caught her rifling through things in his office on his security camera. When he got home, he pulled Nik and me aside and ordered me to kill her for trespassing."

"Why was Nik roped into it?" she asks.

"Because I knew she was at the house with D. She was supposed to stay in his room, but when he fell asleep, she slipped out and went snooping," I admit with a groan.

"My father said she had violated our sacred and protected space." Dimitri rubs a hand over his chin, rubbing at the five o'clock shadow on his jaw. "Not only did my father despise me for not being the son he wanted, I think he genuinely hated happiness and the distraction Julia posed. But it was the right thing to do, and I was too young to see that. She was a distant cousin of a rival family in the Italian Mafia, but I was naïve and thought myself in love. I couldn't do it, but Nik followed the orders." Dimitri looks past Ellie and into my eyes. "And you did the right thing. She used me and our relationship to gather information for her family."

A cough gets lodged in my throat. "You hated me for what I did."

"Yes, but it's been years. And back then, being seventeen and without the perspective I needed, it seemed like you were putting the Bratva ahead of me. And I considered you my brother in every way that counted."

"Why didn't you tell me that when I got back? Or, hell, you could have contacted me when I was with Interpol!"

Anger at the years spent living outside the warmth of Dimitri's friendship for following orders has chipped away at me—leaving that nerve raw and exposed. I've let no one else get close because of it. I ruined my most important relationship, and letting anyone else get that close again was impossible.

"It didn't feel right to have the conversation over the phone while you were away. And when you got back, honestly, I was trying to find the best way to do it. As if ten years apart hadn't given me enough time to plan the conversation in my head. But then my father died the same way she did."

"So, what now?" Ellie asks, looking between us with sympathy in her gaze. "Oksana threatened to use my connection with you, Nik, to rat me out to Dimitri, who already knows what goes on between us."

“Obviously,” Dimitri answers.

She turns towards D as she continues her explanation, fiddling with her gold wedding band. “And you also know that Sergei propositioned me. That was the other part of her threat. She says she wants me to do something at the gala. If I don’t comply, she’ll out me to you, and you’ll kill me as revenge for Nik killing your old girlfriend.”

“Well, that’s certainly not happening,” Dimitri retorts, resting his hand on Ellie’s thigh. The move doesn’t fill me with jealousy the way it has when I’ve seen their touches around the penthouse in the past few months.

She has someone else in her corner now, which means more to me than anything. This is the mother of my child, and I want her safe.

“We’ll work together,” I say, pushing the words past the lump in my throat and taking Ellie’s hand gently. “We’ve got two days left.”

Ellie turns towards Dimitri. “She spoke like she wanted you gone. With how she pushes Sergei, I think she’s been priming him to take your place, especially since there is no heir.”

“Not for lack of trying,” Dimitri teases. “Wait.”

I close my eyes and let the recent thoughts and actions come to mind, each one pinging around until things start to line up. Not perfectly, but something sticks out.

Snapping my fingers together, I cry an “Aha!” startling Dimitri and Ellie. “That’s why Sergei talked about having a child with you. He and Oksana only have girls, and the way things are structured now, they can’t take over. Ana would be amazing, and even though cousin Natasha is the head honcho, that trickle-down is slow and takes time. What if Sergei propositioned her to have that foothold if Dimitri dies?”

“Dimitri is not dying,” the man himself says. “Not unless I’m buried between Eleanor’s thighs and too stubborn to come up for air.”

She shoves at his shoulder and gives an ick face that morphs into one of curiosity. Ellie shakes it off and rebuttals. “I wouldn’t let that man touch me with a ten-foot pole. His offer was DOA before it left his mouth, but I see merit in your theory. But Oksana . . . She’s too involved in this not to be—”

Ellie pauses, then says, “Holy fuck. She’ll wait till I’ve delivered Sergei’s child and then she’ll kill us all—her husband included. She’ll be the interim leader until whatever male bun in the oven she’s hoping for comes of age. That’s it. Oksana wants the power.”

It’s a farfetched theory, but the more holes I try to poke in it, the more

frustrated I become. It makes sense, and based on the conversation I overheard, Oksana has been lining up pieces for a long time now.

Silence settles over the car as Igor drives us back to the penthouse, each of us thinking through the implications of what we've uncovered tonight and how that merges with recent events.

We arrive a few short minutes later and enter the lobby. Dimitri waves his keycard for the lift, but I press the call button on the opposite wall for another lift.

"Where are you going?" Ellie asks. "It's already eleven."

"I have something to take care of before the gala. If our lives are hanging in the balance, I want to wrap up unfinished business so I don't come back and haunt your asses."

"Don't even joke like that, Nik." She swats my shoulder with her small purse, and I take the hit with a laugh.

"Nah, I'm kidding. I've had this in the works for weeks and need to take care of it." I meet Dimitri's eyes over Ellie's head, and what I see there gives me pause. Concern laces his gaze, but there's also confidence mixed in. He's been so guarded around me since I returned from Interpol, and maybe airing our shit out in the car was the last thing holding him back.

"Be careful," he says quietly. "In and out, then get back here."

"Yes, sir." I give him a mock salute and take the lift opposite theirs to the parking garage.

The lift doors open, and I walk to our parking area. I snag a black helmet off the shelf and shove it over my head. My go-bag is in the cupboard just below, so I throw the straps over my shoulder, tighten the slack on the backpack, and climb on my motorcycle.

I fly out of the parking garage and onto the streets of New York. The roads are still busy, but not so much that I can't slip between taxis and cars, weaving in and out of traffic. I head towards the bridge and make my way into Brooklyn. Manhattan is too expensive to justify a sex den.

Mr Richard Holden is the next name on my list. I've worked through the remaining buyers I didn't compile for Ellie to send to the agencies as they quietly cleaned up the mess Sergei made.

I saved ten for myself—the ones who sought the youngest girls from this god-awful enterprise. Since Ellie told me about Bella, the kills have become messier than usual, more violent, and more primal. More personal.

It's no wonder Ellie reacted as she did when she found out about the girls.

Now that I know we have our own, it's brought up a lot of new feelings I need to confront. More than anything, it makes me want to know who's watching after my daughter and that she's safe.

But Ellie wouldn't trust her with just anyone, and I've been biting my tongue whenever the question comes to mind.

It's clear Ellie wasn't ready to tell me about Bella, but Dimitri's slip forced her hand. The last thing I want to do is push her and have her keep her away from me—which she has every right to do, even though I'm her father. I haven't been her *actual* father, just the sperm donor. But I want so much more.

I park my bike down the street and unfold my body, standing to my full height on the pavement. I count down the addresses as I walk closer to Holden's place.

The lights are off in the townhouse except for a yellow light coming from the top floor. I pull up my phone and check the security cameras I installed last week when no one was here. Holden didn't even spring for a home security system; that's how cheap this man is. And yet he's spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on girls, not to mention the other six homes he's got sprinkled around the country.

The place isn't in great shape, but it blends in with the neighbourhood well enough.

After checking that the street is relatively clear, I jimmy the lock and enter the same way I did last time. The cameras show Holden is in his bed, and he's not alone. I turn off the cameras remotely and fire off a text to my contact for a pickup.

Skipping the creaky third and sixth steps of the staircase, I silently make my way up. The hallway light is on, the same one I saw from the street, and I reach the door to his bedroom. The house is quiet, and there's sparse furniture here; clearly, it's not a house meant to be lived in permanently.

I twist the knob and carefully push it open, holding a finger to my lips as it swings open because the girl in his bed is still wide awake. Holden's heavy body is to the side, but his arm keeps her in place. The girl's eyes swing towards me when she sees my movement from the corner of the room. The dead look in her eyes when they connect with mine will haunt me for months.

From my pocket, I pull a piece of paper I'd stuffed in there and hold it up. In Russian, it says, *I'm here to get you out. Stay quiet and wait in the kitchen. Help is coming to take you home.*

Her eyes slowly move from me to the arm on her stomach. She doesn't think she can get out from under him. I hold up a hand, palm facing her, telling her to wait.

I remove a coil of rope from the backpack and quickly cut off a tendril from the end. I put the knife away and hold up the rope, showing the girl it's not a weapon.

I cross the room to Holden's side of the bed and carefully tickle the shell of his ear with the frayed cord. He stirs but doesn't move his hand. The girl's eyes are wide with fear, her blue irises nearly gone with how dilated her pupils are. She catches on quickly, and her breathing halts as I reach forward with the cord again.

This time, Holden picks up his hand from around the girl and swats at his ear. It's all she needs to slip out of the bed and bolt to the other side of the room. She stands by the door, and I urge her to wait for me downstairs. I hear her little footsteps and hope she listens and doesn't try to leave through the door.

Then again, I relocked it, and Holden secured it with a key, not just a flip lock. If I were him, I'd have hidden that key. It's not as if she can go through the windows; there are bars on all of them. I tuck the rope piece into my breast pocket and carefully cross back to my backpack to pull out the tools I'll need for tonight.

Holden's phone is on the nightstand, so I pick it up and slip it into my pocket before shouting, "Wakey, wakey! Eggs and bakey!"

Holden's eyes fly open. He looks around in panic before settling on my face, and the maniacal grin stretched across it.

"What? Who are you!?" He panics, shouting until I clamp a hand over his mouth.

I shush him and press the knife against his throat.

"The other girls. Where are they?" I demand.

"What?" he mumbles under my palm.

"The ones that you bought and then later sold after you were done with them. Or when they got too old for you." I push the blade harder, a drop of blood slipping over the side and onto the pillowcase. I remove my hand so he can answer my question.

"I don't have them anymore," he stammers.

"Obviously," I deadpan. "Who did you sell them to?"

"I don't know. My, uh, colleagues handle that," he stumbles over what

word to call the underlings that do his bidding.

“You see,” I say, twirling the ice pick in my hand, ensuring he sees the pointed edge of it. “I already know who you sold them to. I’m just giving you the option to make your death a little less painful. Truth and honesty are virtues and should be rewarded, even though God will most certainly find your qualities lacking.”

“And what about you? Coming into someone’s bedroom and torturing them in the dead of night?” The momentary bravery has me cracking a smile.

“Oh, I already know where I’m going and made peace with that long ago. But if I can leave this world a little less fucked up than when I entered it, I’ll consider it God’s work.”

He sees that I’m telling the truth because his tone changes, and he gives me a list of names I already had, ones I already planned to pass on to Ellie and her other agents.

“Good boy,” I say, patting his cheek with the flat of my blade. His hand sneaks out, and he reaches for the space where the phone used to be.

“You won’t find any help there,” I say. “Anything else you want to confess before you meet your maker?”

He shakes his head, flinching away when he feels the cold steel against his skin again. “Please don’t kill me,” he begs, tears flooding his eyes. “I have a child. I have a wife. They’ll be lost without me.”

I tilt my head to the side, looking down at him. “From my observations, they’ll be better off without you. Tell me, how would you feel if somebody bought your daughter, raped her, and sold her off to the next asshole to do the same thing?”

His tears come in earnest now, and he knows he’s about to die. He might as well get this off his chest.

“I couldn’t help myself.” He tries justifying his actions, but there is no justification for what he’s done. There is no reason for having a rotating contingency of girls. Buying them, using them, and then selling them. Using that money to buy another—an endless cycle that he refuses to break on his own.

So, I’ll break it for him.

“If there’s any justice in the afterlife, I hope everything you’ve done to those girls is done to you tenfold.”

I drown out his blubbering sounds with a prayer, asking for forgiveness for what I’m about to do. I don’t make kills without knowing the

consequences; in this case, the ends justify the means. Because while this man is evil and deserves to rot in the pits of hell, sending him there is a sin that I will shoulder for the rest of my life.

With my hand tight on the ice pick handle, I swing it back and jam it into the man's temples as I slice my knife along his throat.

The light in his eyes dies, and the blood pools under him on the bed.

"Amen," I breathe.

I look down at my suit, noting that the blood is everywhere, and quickly strip, bundling it and throwing it into the plastic bag inside my backpack.

I pull out a fresh pair of jeans and a T-shirt. It'll be cold on the ride home, but it's better than blood spray everywhere. I'll toss the clothes into the fireplace when I get home.

Taking one last look back at Holden, I smile. "Sweet dreams, motherfucker." I head downstairs to find the girl and hand her off to one of Dimitri's contacts, who will hold her at the safe house until Ellie can get an agent sent down there.

They don't need to know that I'm involved. Interpol would have a field day if they knew one of their agents had gone rogue like this, even though I was never really theirs.

# CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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Eleanor

AFTER HANGING UP THE PHONE WITH OKSANA, I HEAD DOWNSTAIRS. NIK AND Dimitri are sprawled on the living room furniture, staring at the roaring fireplace. It's a rare moment of peace in the house. There are no meetings to run off to, no one to bodyguard, and as they stare into the flames, not saying a word but content in their silence together, my heart skips a beat.

They've spent the day talking, working on getting over what happened so long ago and the ocean of distrust between them while I dealt with the other agents and Oksana.

Staring at them, I can't help but ponder the love I feel for both men in wholly different and completely consuming ways.

There was no hint of a lie when I told Dimitri I wanted both of them. And I will forever thank Olivia for putting that idea in my head. Because for so long, we're taught that we're meant to end up with one person. Isn't that what Disney teaches us from the moment we're old enough to watch films?

But honestly, after having Bella, I found a peace in myself I hadn't had before.

I'm a dedicated agent, a mother, and a best friend to a slightly unhinged thief. I am a woman who is content to be on her own but happy to welcome someone who wants to stand by her side—or *someones*, I should say.

The feeling that rushes over me is all-consuming and unending. My trust issues aside, have these two not shown that they are trustworthy in their own way? Dimitri reaching out to put an end to the Bratva chapter is a prime example.

Dimitri hasn't said much about what he wants to do after all of this, other than being adamant that he goes where I go. Perhaps he could simply *be* for a while, letting some of the weight on his shoulders melt away until he is light as a feather. He could paint, live, and travel—see the world and experience everything he's never been able to.

Then there's Nik, who followed his orders so thoroughly that he lived a lie for over a decade, only leaving when his job was done. It pains me every time I think of the lashes on his back, of him punishing himself for his actions. There's a steadfastness to Nik that doesn't exist in many other men.

Last night, he got home and found me waiting for him on the couch at 2:00 a.m. I couldn't sleep knowing he was out doing a job and no one would

know if he came home.

Dimitri had complete faith in Nik, and when his yawns grew, I sent him upstairs, telling him I would stay up and wait. He tried to lure me to bed, but I was too restless and concerned to contemplate sleeping.

Nik arrived home, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans—but still wearing his dress shoes for some reason—kissed me on the forehead and brought me upstairs.

I slept in Nik's bed last night, and while that room holds memories of his pain and mine, it was easy to relax as he held me. His head was on my chest, my arms around his shoulders, holding him as he prayed. But the important thing is, he didn't punish himself for whatever he'd done that night, and I did the only thing I could. I told him I was there to listen should he ever need it.

In that moment, between waking and sleeping, I realised I had forgiven Nik.

Sure, I'd considered it before, noting how thoroughly he had punished himself. I knew nothing I did now would even register.

And last night, the last of my anger washed away—taking my need for payback with it.

The man in question turns his head towards the staircase and finds me lingering on the bottom steps, staring at the two of them. "What are you thinking about so hard, Ellie?" he asks, concern knitted across his brows. His dark hair rests on his forehead, some of it covering his eye.

My throat's a little choked up just thinking about how much they mean to me. He curls his finger, beckoning me closer.

"Love," I say as I step forward. "The forms that it takes and how we show it. And how it comes barrelling into your life most unexpectedly."

Nik looks over at Dimitri, clearly not knowing where I'm going with all of this. Knowing Nik, he probably assumes I've got a head injury and have confused the two of them. I wish he could see what I see in him—what he's allowed me to see over the past few months when he drops his guard.

"Not him," I say. "Well, not just him."

Dimitri smiles, letting me get it out and giving me the floor to tell Nik how I feel. Surprisingly, he doesn't interject or command my attention as usual. But after Nik and Dimitri hashed out their past in the car, a sense of camaraderie has sprung up between them.

Nik's head whips back around in my direction, his eyes wide and vulnerable. A small smile grazes his lips but turns into a frown.

“Don’t,” I warn.

I know he’s taking it all in and rejecting it because he doesn’t think he deserves me or our daughter. If I’m being honest, maybe he doesn’t. I’ve had girlfriends and colleagues who left their husbands for less, taking the children with them.

But Nik? Nik deserves to be loved for who he is. The broken and the whole pieces, even if they don’t quite fit together anymore, I want to be the glue that holds it all together. I want to embrace who he is, jagged edges and all—to soothe the hurts, ease his pain, and take some of his burdens onto my shoulders.

Because isn’t that what you do for someone you love? Aren’t those the feelings that grow deep in your chest—their roots digging deep and taking hold, never letting go?

“Ellie?” he breathes.

“I love you, Nikita Lenkov. All of you. The good, the angry, the anguished, the jokester, and every part in between.”

Then I turn towards Dimitri. Even though we’ve exchanged the words, it’s vital that they are equal in this moment because they are equal in my heart. And I will not start this all off with an imbalance between us.

As Oksana says, *Start how you wish to continue.*

“I love you, too, Dimitri Aslanov. You, my dear, were wholly unexpected. And from what I’d read about you before we met, I was pretty sure I would hate you from the first moment. But your determination and your need to see things righted, your constancy . . . You’re a man I am proud to have at my side.”

They never waver, keeping their eyes on me as mine ping between them. “I’m proud to have *both* of you at my side. I know it’s quick and unethical, and unorthodox. But I want you both. Now, today, and in the future. I don’t know how that’s going to look. I don’t know how we’ll work anything out, especially when the two of you have a grudge you’re in the middle of getting yourselves over. But that’s what I want.” Shrugging, I fold my hands in front of me, feeling like I can breathe easier now that it’s all out in the open. “I’m playing this all by ear, and for the first time in my life, I don’t have a goddamned plan, and that scares the crap out of me. I think that’s something we’ll have to discover together. That is . . . if you’re both in?”

Dimitri stands, discarding his empty glass on the table. He reaches for me and cups my face with his hands. It’s so contradictory to the first real touch

he gave me in the lift on our first night, where he gripped my throat and held me at his mercy.

At this moment, he is at *my* mercy; he touches me with *my* consent and with such reverence that my heart is bursting—too full to contain everything I feel.

“I love you, too, Eleanor. I will stand at your side and love you and your daughter as if she were my own.” He rubs his thumb gently along my cheek, and I lean into his touch, smiling.

Dimitri and I both turn towards Nik. He’s still sitting in his chair, perched on the edge as if ready to get up but still holding himself back. His eyes search my face; his bottom lip is clutched between his teeth. The internal struggle playing behind his eyes makes me want to walk over, grab him, and drag him over here with us. But this is a choice he needs to make on his own. With bated breath, I wait.

One second.

Two seconds.

They stretch on endlessly as our future hangs in the balance. His hands tense on his knees, his knuckles bone white.

Slowly, he stands, keeping his eyes downcast as he approaches us. He stops a torturous foot away. And in that distance between us, I feel our history—the betrayal, hurt, anger, and pain.

“I forgive you,” I whisper. “I forgive you for what you did in the name of your family—for lying low and keeping yourself safe until I could find you again. You’ve punished yourself enough for the both of us.”

Slowly, his head rises, and I see his answer in his eyes. He closes the distance between us and falls to his knees, his hands coming to my hips and holding me close.

Dimitri lets me go so I can focus on Nik, taking a step to the side and looking down at his best friend as he kneels at my feet.

“I don’t deserve you, Ellie,” he says. “But if I can live in the shadow of your grace and earn my place at your side, I will gladly take it. I might be an undeserving bastard, but I’m *your* undeserving bastard. You’re the mother of my child, and I will never have enough words or actions to show you how much that means to me.”

He leans forward and kisses my belly like a partner when he finds out about a pregnancy—a moment we never got together. He rests his forehead above my navel, and I run my fingers through his hair.

“I love you, Ellie,” he says. “I’ve loved you for years as a friend and more. From afar and up close. Through every mission, assignment, late-night ramen-fest, and stakeout wherein you snored the whole time.”

His head tilts back, and he looks into my eyes. “I have only ever been on my knees for God, and usually, he doesn’t answer. Can you say something?”

A laugh slips free, and my shoulders shake. He was always great at breaking the tension when the situation needed levity. I’m glad to see that carried over from my old partner to the new. “If you’re on your knees, there are other things you can do,” I suggest.

His smile turns feral, and he tilts his head forward, his nose at the apex of my thighs, where he breathes me in and groans.

“Please, Nik,” I beg, digging my fingers into his hair and pulling him where I want him.

His teeth nip at the fabric of my leggings as I widen my stance, and he grazes my clit, causing me to cry out and clutch Dimitri’s shoulder for balance.

“I think she needs us, brother,” Dimitri says, surprising both of us with his term of endearment for Nik. “Together.”

I nod, sliding my tongue along my bottom lip. My mouth has gone dry, and my skin feels like every nerve is on end.

Dimitri scoops me into his arms and takes off as I watch over his shoulder. Nik shoots up to his feet and chases after us, my laughter echoing as we climb the stairs.

My husband pushes through the doors to the suite and turns left, depositing me on the bed with none of his usual finesse.

The door softly closes, and Nik rounds the corner as Dimitri stares down at me. I press my thighs together as their hungry gazes rake over me.

“Well?” I ask, feeling bolder by the second. “Are you two just going to stand there?”

Nik steps forward, but Dimitri stops him with a hand on his chest, never breaking eye contact with me. “Wait. Eleanor, strip.”

My hands tremble with anticipation as I grip my T-shirt at the hem and drag it over my head. My breasts press against the utilitarian bra I bought at Target a few weeks ago. Dimitri had the closet stocked with the best of the best, but heaven knows sometimes a girl just wants comfort over sexy.

He growls when he sees it, and I almost fear the moment he sees what I’ve got under my leggings. Lacy panties, they are not.

“The rest of it,” he says.

I slide the waistband of the leggings down, lifting my hips to get it over my ass. When the material is down around my knees, he peels it the rest of the way off and flings the garment in the corner.

“What the hell is that?” he asks.

Nik smirks. “That, *brother*,” he says, mimicking what Dimitri called him downstairs, “is a woman comfortable in her own home. Her guard is down, and while it may just be packaging to you, it represents how she feels here at home. With us.”

Dimitri assesses me, his gaze roving over the decidedly unsexy white cotton panties and simple bra. Small wrinkles appear next to his eyes as he smiles his full and rare grin. “Is that true?”

I shrug. I never thought about it that way, but lately, I’ve felt less of a need to prove myself to the two of them and more myself than I have since before I had Bella.

“Yes,” I murmur.

“Good.” Dimitri’s eyes devour me, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he had a truckload of cotton bras and panties delivered.

Imagining the truck backing into the parking garage and dumping it all into the lift, I smile. Nik looks at me with a lifted brow, and I can already see Dimitri’s wheels turning on how to make it happen.

Pulling their attention back, I say, “Your turn.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

---

Eleanor

NIK AND DIMITRI ARE QUICK TO FOLLOW MY ORDERS.

My husband drags his hands down the buttons of his pristine white dress shirt, flicking them open as he goes. He rips the garment from his shoulders, throwing it behind him near my long-lost leggings.

Nik does the same, tearing his T-shirt over his head with one hand, unbuckling his belt, and stripping everything off in record time. He stands proudly, his cock jutting towards me and that bit of metal glinting in the low light.

It must snag Dimitri's attention because he turns towards Nik, staring at the other man's dick, and raises his brows. "When did you get that?"

Nik smirks. "Told you my piece was fancier than yours."

Dimitri rolls his eyes, and Nik answers the original question. "About a year ago. I was getting my chest inked and figured I might as well do something else while I was there. I mean, I was already spending so much money. What was another hundred?"

"The money wasn't my concern," Dimitri deadpans. A curious look overtakes his face, his brow scrunching and his lips turning downward. "Did you have to be hard for them to pierce it?"

"Boys?" I interrupt. I have a feeling they could go all night, and not in the way I want.

Eerily in their synchronicity, they turn towards me. There are such contrasts—night and day, the sun and the moon, light and dark. But they both look at me the same way.

Hungry.

Loving.

Reverent.

Dimitri cracks first, diving onto the bed between my spread thighs and running his tongue up my centre as he grips my legs and hold them open.

"Fuck," he groans between swipes of his sinful tongue.

"Nik, please, I need you, too." I moan as I close my eyes and tip my head back.

The bed dips to my right, and his fingers trail up my tense stomach towards my tits. He flips one of the cups down with deft fingers and rolls my nipple, causing me to cry out and arch my back.

I feel him staring down at me, so I open my eyes, connecting with his intense gaze.

He feathers a kiss on my jaw and says, “I want to be the one to carry your burdens. Let them rest on my shoulders, let everything rest on my shoulders, and I will do everything within my power to not let you down. Either of you.” His words are pained, heartfelt, and so earnest it brings a bubble of emotion to the surface.

“Nik,” I breathe, unable to form more than just his name on my lips.

He returns his attention to me, my nipple bare and aching for his touch. This time, he doesn’t stop. He doesn’t relent, doesn’t waver. I feel the prickling sensation just as Dimitri slides two fingers inside me. He curls them upward, and Nik sucks harder.

The letdown comes faster than it has before. I feel the milk leave me, and he swallows around my breast as the other soaks the bra. He takes everything I can offer, switching back and forth, doing deep pulls from either nipple, groaning every time he gets a mouthful.

“*Fuck!*” I groan just as Dimitri finds that sensitive spot inside me and curls his fingers. He drags out the pleasure as his tongue traces circles around my clit.

This orgasm feels so different from the rest. All of them have been amazing since walking into this apartment, but being with them together is wholly transcendent. I lose myself in the waves as they crash over me, leaving me a shaking mess and desperate for so much more. To return the pleasure to these men, completing our circle of affection and love.

As I shiver, still spasming from the pleasure, they crawl up either side of my body. Nik on my right, and Dimitri on my left, their fingers tracing patterns on my skin and guiding me down from my high with gentle touches.

“More,” I beg, “I need more.”

I feel as if I’ve been blown apart and then cobbled back together, merely held together by some tape and a prayer. But I can’t stop this insatiable need inside of me that demands everything they have to give. For isn’t that what I’m giving them? Everything I am and everything I hope to be.

I expect the same in return.

Nik and Dimitri look across my body at each other, brows moving and jaws ticking in a silent conversation. This isn’t the first time they’ve done it; I doubt it’ll be the last. One day, I hope to be part of that silent communication that takes years to hone.

Without a word, Dimitri lies on his back and grabs me by the hips, planting one knee on either side of him. I slide my wet pussy along his length, his crown bumping my clit and making me shiver with every pass.

Nik shifts and finds his way between Dimitri's legs just behind me. With a hand on my back, he pushes me forward so my ass stays up in the air, but my tits are pressed against the rigid panes of Dimitri's chest.

The pierced tip of Nik's dick slides between Dimitri and me. He tilts his hips and presses me further against my husband, notching his head at my entrance. After he stretches me open, he pulls back just an inch, then slides home, tunnelling into me—making me feel whole and then empty every time he withdraws.

The thought of taking them both overwhelms my senses, and my mind screams at me to make it happen. Dimitri cups my cheeks and kisses me passionately.

"That's a good wife," he says between languorous kisses. "How does he feel inside of you? Stretching you open and fucking you on top of me?"

I moan at the seductive tone of his voice. "He feels so good," I say, choking back another guttural groan to get the words out.

"You like when my best friend fucks you, don't you?" *Dirty talking husband has arrived.* "You like us sharing you?"

Nik chuckles darkly behind me, his thrusts increasing in tempo, his hips slapping against my ass as he ruts into me from behind.

"God, yes!" I cry. "Fuck me, Nik. Fuck me harder. Please, please!"

Nik grips my hips and pistons in and out of me. The wet sound of us coming together is so raw and makes me feel so vulnerable, knowing it's coming from me—an echo that will live in my mind for weeks.

Evidence of my arousal spreads between us as the debauchery of it washes over me.

"Stop," Dimitri says from under me. "She's too close."

My stomach is coiled in knots. Everything is tense as my orgasm readies itself to break free. Nik pulls out of me, leaving me whimpering against Dimitri.

"No!" I cry. "I want more. I want all of it. Why would you stop?"

Dimitri soothes me with a hand on my cheek, and I lean into his warm touch, even as I try to work my hips back onto Nik.

"Nik," Dimitri says, gritting his teeth as my pussy slides along his length. "There's lube in the nightstand. Stretch our girl."

A delicious shiver racks my body, and Dimitri holds me steady with his hands on my upper arms.

“You like the sound of that, don’t you, princess?”

I flash him a warning glare. “I am no one’s princess.”

Dimitri smiles. “That’s right. You’re our queen, and tonight we’re gonna fuck you just the way you want.”

Nik rifles through the nightstand, grabs the lube, and pops the top. His fingers push between my ass cheeks, finding my hole and rubbing a wet circle around it.

I clench—the reaction entirely instinctual.

“Breathe, baby,” Nik says from behind me. “Let me in, one finger at a time. I’ll go slow.”

I do as he says, letting my stuttering breath fan over Dimitri’s face as he holds my gaze.

Nik pushes past my barrier, and his finger goes knuckle-deep, and *fuck me*. It feels good. A slight burn, a slight stretch. It would feel intrusive if I wasn’t so fucking turned on and desperate for any touch they give me.

He works his finger in and out of me, and I squirm on Dimitri, who encourages me through soft words, gentle touches, and praising kisses. Nik shifts his finger, working in and out, then slightly side to side, making space for a second finger, which he slides in when my body is ready.

Goosebumps break out over my skin, and Nik keeps a hand on my hip, helping me work myself on his fingers. In moments, I’m ready for the third finger, or his cock, or a toy, or something.

The urgency I feel building within me can’t be stopped.

“Nik! Fuck me. Fuck me, Daddy,” the words tumble from my lips unbidden and nonsensical, but they feel . . . right.

Nik pulls his fingers out and lands a slap on my ass. I moan, and my back arches, lifting my hips away from Dimitri’s cock. His hands are still around my upper arms, holding me steady.

There’s shifting between us, and when I look down, I see tattooed knuckles wrapped around my husband’s dick, angling it up so I can take him within me. The sight of Nik’s hand on another man’s cock sends a spiral of lust bolting through me. It feels forbidden and taboo, and while I know there’s nothing romantic between them, that they trust each other again enough to do this fills me with love.

I sink onto Dimitri, savouring the stretch after the attention was on my ass

instead of my cunt. His cock is thick and hard as it slides against every centimetre of my channel.

I feel myself fluttering around him, unable to control the spasms. I rock my hips, fucking him and chasing my orgasm. Lust has soaked into every fibre of my being, and my body demands a release.

“Eleanor,” he says, warning in his tone.

“I can’t help it,” I say. “You feel too good.”

He shifts his hips, and I hold myself above him, steadying myself on my knees as he slams into me from below.

His thrusts are measured and controlled, somehow still hanging on to sanity amidst all this happening around us. Meanwhile, I feel like I’m on a roller coaster, just holding on for dear life as these two make every fantasy I never knew I had come true.

Again, I feel myself spiralling, my need coiling tight and low in my belly. And again, infuriatingly, Dimitri stops.

The sound that leaves me is unintelligible, and both of them soothe me with their hands and praises, but I hear the strain in their voices.

“Please don’t make me beg.” I fist the sheets beside Dimitri’s head, grappling for anything to make me feel in control.

Nik folds himself over my body, landing a kiss between my shoulder blades. “Never,” he vows. He pulls away, and his cock nudges at my entrance, my ass clenching again. “Breathe out for me and bear down. Come on, Ellie, you can do it,” he encourages.

I follow his instructions, and Dimitri fights to stay seated within me as I push to allow Nik in. He moans as he slides in, inch by glorious inch. Nik withdraws and pushes forward again, my body accepting more of him. My two unicorn cocks are fully seated, and I feel so blissed out and delirious with lust that I’m surprised I’m still conscious.

My breath whooshes out with every thrust forward, and when he’s fully in, they pause with their hips pressed against me, giving me time to adjust. *I swear to fuck, if these two high-five at the end of this, I’m gonna kill Olivia and then them. No Eiffel Tower today. Maybe tomorrow.*

As soon as the thought enters my head, it flies right back out again because Nik starts to move.

Dimitri moans beneath me, his breath expelling in a rasp. “Fuck, Nik, I can feel you.”

Nik just chuckles behind me, anchoring his hands on my hips. “Like the

piercing, do you?”

He shifts his hips, and the new angle makes Dimitri and me groan.

“Yes, Nik!” I cry, my muscles going tense. My orgasm is just there, hovering out of reach. Dimitri moves his hips in tempo with Nik’s thrusts.

As one withdraws, the other pushes in, creating a continuous feeling of fullness. A push and pull as they work me over together, their hands on my body, their breath on my neck, and their attention on me, making me feel like the sexiest woman alive. One would have to be to bring both men to their knees, their devotion and worship unending.

“Now, Eleanor!” Dimitri orders, slipping his hand between us and pinching my clit between two fingers as he fucks into me from below.

Nik’s hand reaches for my throat, pulling me against his chest as he pounds me from behind. Dimitri takes advantage of the movement and lands a slap on my clit.

I scream as I come undone between them, my cum soaking Dimitri and the sheets below us. It feels like no other orgasm I’ve ever had—deeper somehow. The fullness, the emotional connection, the finality of it all washes over me as we swear ourselves to one another the only way we know how—the only way we can.

Nik buries himself inside me and comes in my ass, groaning loudly against my ear as he bites the lobe. The sting of pain makes me shiver as shockwaves pulse in my body.

Dimitri is still grinding into me from below as Nik finishes, his hips working as he holds my waist with his big palms.

“Good wife. You gonna give me one more?” he asks, his voice hoarse as he holds onto his control.

“I can’t,” I admit. My body feels spent and undone, boneless as I pant above Dimitri, feeling the flickers of a new orgasm building, but they’re merely an echo of the earlier one.

And I will no longer settle for anything less than the complete devastation these two can wring from my body.

Dimitri nods and slides his hands up my ribs until he’s holding my breasts as they bounce. Three thrusts later, he comes with a groan, pinching my nipples and arching his back beneath me. I rake my fingers down his chest as he fills me with his cum.

He pulls me towards him, laying me on top of him as Nik carefully slips out of me. “Back in a second,” he says, padding across the suite towards the

bathroom.

A few minutes later, he returns, finding Dimitri between my legs, shoving his cum back inside me with careful fingers. I'm sore as hell, and I'll be unsteady in my heels for the gala, but that was so fucking worth it.

"Breeding kink, huh?" Nik asks as he joins me on the bed, lying at my side and watching Dimitri.

"Never had that before. Not until Eleanor."

A question bubbles up in me, and I know it's not my business—or maybe it is now that we've said we want a future together.

"Can I ask—?" I don't know how to form the words sensitively. I don't want to offend him, especially if it's a touchy subject.

"I had a vasectomy when I was twenty." His words are low and regretful. "I always knew I didn't want to bring a child into this life, and there would always be people looking to take advantage of my position. One girl tried faking a pregnancy when I was nineteen. She was lying but wanted me for what I could provide. I removed that option to claw one's way into my life. No child deserves this."

My heart breaks for this man. Now that he's getting out, he could have any future he wants, a child included, if that's his wish, but it's not in the cards.

"After the surgery, there was an infection. The doctor warned me reversal would likely not be successful, especially if I waited." Dimitri gives a shrug and a sad smile while I do the maths. It's been eight years.

"And it's been too long?" I ask, unsure if I even want more kids, but I feel for Dimitri. That was a monumental decision he made when he was younger, and to have the reversal option ripped away because of things beyond his control breaks my heart.

"Did they freeze any sperm?" Nik asks.

Dimitri nods. "The lab that was housing it caught fire about four years ago. They lost half their storage." A single tear tracks down his cheek, the loss hitting anew. He buries his face against my stomach.

"Dimitri . . ." Nik says, resting a hand on Dimitri's shaking shoulder. "There's still hope, though, right? There has to be. Besides, can't they just . . . extract from your balls?"

I shudder at the same moment Dimitri does. That doesn't sound pleasant, but Nik is offering hope right now, and Dimitri needs to hear it.

"Possibly." He doesn't offer more than that, and I wonder how serious

that infection was to have him doubting everything modern medicine has come up with since his procedure.

My eyes overflow as I wrap my legs around Dimitri, pulling him close and comforting him the only way I know how. He hugs me tight, his other hand landing on Nik's as we grieve the loss of what could never be together as a unit.

Nik is the first to fall asleep, his hand still on Dimitri as he snores softly in my ear.

"Are you okay?" I ask my husband.

He snuggles against me. His voice is hoarse and yet still determined.  
"Yes."

"We'll all be okay, Dimitri. You have us."

"You're both more than I could have ever asked for."

"I was going to say the same thing," I reply.

# CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

---

Eleanor

“YOU READY FOR THIS?” DIMITRI ASKS, RUNNING A HAND ALONG MY BARE arm.

“Ready,” I confirm. My voice is determined and unwavering, reminding me of how prepared I felt before those church doors opened and I tied my life to the man beside me. Little did I know he would turn my entire world upside down.

As I put my necklace on, I meet my husband’s gaze in the mirror. Despite wearing the same tux, he looks even more dashing than he did at the opera. Tonight, his hair is carefully styled back, gel holding the longer locks in place on top, and his face is cleanly shaven, showing off that perfect jawline. He smells incredible, and all I want to do is wrap myself up in his arms and forget about the rest of the night, but that’s simply impossible.

Hundreds of guests are downstairs, each of whom I know by name and photo. With the information Dimitri shared over the last week, many of these people were going away for a long time tonight.

My phone dings from inside my purse, and Dimitri picks up the clutch, handing it to me with a kiss on my temple. “You’re gonna be brilliant tonight.”

A small smile plays on his lips as he assesses my outfit, giving me an appreciative once-over. It’s a dark, gunmetal-grey dress with boning and a thin Kevlar layer under the bodice. It’s ruched on one side; the fabric gathered expertly to mask the bulkiness. The strapless sweetheart neckline accentuates my curves, and the shape narrows at my waist. A slit runs from the bottom up to my thigh on my left leg, and my right holds the holster with a gun tucked in, which I can access because Dimitri insisted the dress have false-bottom pockets.

*Pockets! On a gown! I love this man.*

The beading over the ruching carefully hides two cameras and a small microphone. Dimitri went all out, getting me a dress I feel truly beautiful in, but more importantly, I feel safe in.

I take out my phone and read the message. My eyes snap back up to Dimitri.

“What is it?” he asks.

“My friend pulled the footage from the restaurant the night of the drive-

by,” I say, clearing my throat and processing simultaneously. “She and her team analysed it, and it looks like the shot barrelling towards Oksana was meant for me, but one guy bumped the other, sending it wide.”

“We knew they were aiming for us,” Dimitri says.

“Right, but we didn’t know who hired them. Her team checked Alexei’s phone, and the number that called was a burner phone. But there’s information within a burner’s number and SIM that helps narrow down where it was purchased. And if you can access the company’s manufacturing information, you can track the production and the assignment of a phone number to a SIM. From there, it looks like they backtracked on security footage of the shop.” I turn the phone to him, and there’s Oksana at the register, paying for a burner phone with cash.

Nik strides into the room through the adjoining door. “The bags are packed. You guys ready?”

Dimitri turns towards Nik and relays the information we just learned.

“I’ll kill her,” he says.

“Not tonight, you won’t,” Dimitri says, stopping him with a hand on his shoulder. “There are too many witnesses downstairs. And besides, you know she deserves a long time locked up in a cell to think about what she’s done. I think that feeling of powerlessness would be a worse punishment than a simple death for my dear auntie.”

My other phone pings, and I know that’s Oksana ordering us downstairs. We’re supposed to “make an arrival,” whatever that means.

Together, with one man flanking either side of me, we leave our holding room and head towards the grand staircase.

The sound of the guests reaches us as we draw closer to the top of the staircase on the second floor. Dimitri and Nik each take one of my hands and give them an encouraging squeeze. Before we reach the balcony above the atrium, a figure steps out of the shadows across the landing.

His piercing eyes meet mine, and Zach smiles in a way that would have me running for the hills if I hadn’t been expecting him and he wasn’t on my team. Olivia sent one of her boyfriends to watch over me today, and I’ve never been more grateful.

“Who is that?” Nik asks beside me, his voice low and menacing.

“Our guardian angel,” I answer. I dip my head at Zach with gratitude, and he melts into the shadows again.

“Angel? Baby, he looks more like the devil,” Nik says, a visible shiver

running through him. “Gives me the fuckin’ creeps.”

“Be grateful he’s on our side. He’s not someone you want to cross. In any other circumstance, I’d agree with you that he’s the devil. Oh, and he’s Bella’s paediatrician.”

“The devil is Bella’s paediatrician?” he rasps, looking at the spot where Zach disappeared.

I just nod, then take a step forward, Dimitri still holding my hand, and we make our way to the centre of the balcony, looking down at the sea of guests congregated there.

Nik hangs back, waiting to follow us down like the good bodyguard he is, keeping himself out of the spotlight. Below, a few people notice our arrival, and there’s a clink of utensils against glasses. Dimitri puts on a face I’ve rarely seen from him. I stand demurely at his side, like the perfect little wife I’m supposed to be. And not the one who’s also fucking his best friend.

Eventually, the room quiets and Dimitri raises his voice and hand in greeting. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us tonight. We’re honoured to call you our friends and have you here to celebrate with us. And thank you for your patience and understanding of our small wedding ceremony. My dear wife, Elsa, and I wanted one with immediate family, and we’re so grateful that you could be with us tonight to help celebrate our union.”

He lifts my hand with his and kisses the back of my knuckles, making the guests cheer below us at our show of adoration.

“Thank you to the lovely Oksana Aslanov, my dear aunt, who helped Elsa plan this beautiful soiree. As you might have noticed on your invitations, in lieu of gifts, we ask that you consider donating to the charities we’ve selected that hold a deep and sincere place in our hearts. You’ll find the information in the dining room during dinner and dancing. All of them are worthy causes focusing on children and refugees, causes that many of you know are dear to my heart—*our* hearts,” he corrects with a laugh as if I’ve reminded him of that multiple times.

“For now,” he says, raising his voice and projecting it through the atrium, “eat, drink, dance, and be merry. After all, this is a party.”

The crowd cheers politely, of course, because this is high society. A few people tap on their glasses, shouting, “Kiss, Kiss, Kiss!”

Dimitri looks over at me, a sparkle in his eyes.

“What do you think, dear wife? Shall we put on a show for them?” His

words remind me of the private show we had last night—him, Nik, and me.

He cups the back of my head, careful not to jostle the chignon holding my hair in place. He tilts me in one of those old-movie moves and kisses me with so much passion I'm shocked my panties don't disintegrate. His tongue teases my lips but goes no further, keeping it somewhat PG for the crowd below.

The cheers increase and then Dimitri rights me again. I smooth a hand over my dress as the other touches my flushed chest. He takes my hand and escorts me down the stairs as the guests watch or break into conversation.

Oksana and Sergei meet us at the foot of the staircase, the first in a long receiving line, ready to congratulate us on our nuptials.

"You could have avoided all this if you'd just gone on the honeymoon as I suggested," Sergei teases.

Dimitri laughs good-naturedly. "And deprive Oksana and Elsa of planning this beautiful gala? I wouldn't dream of it."

I swat his chest and feel Nik at my back, having followed us downstairs.

There are so many people and faces surrounding us it's hard to keep track of who's who—even though I've gone over the attendees' pictures and information a hundred times in the last twenty-four hours. Oksana pulls me in for a hug, distracting me from the overwhelming amount of guests, and pats my back as she whispers in my ear, "Do not forget your role tonight, Elsa. The future is within our grasp, and it is up to us to snatch it."

Oksana releases me, air-kissing me on my cheek before greeting Dimitri. After being reminded of my role tonight, I step to my left, and Nik moves to the right, leaving Dimitri alone in the centre.

"Congratulations to the two of you again," she says. "Elsa is a strong and well-suited woman."

Dimitri looks at me with a secret smile, only noticeable by the tip of his jaw. "That she is," he says. "She's constantly keeping me on my toes. We should mingle and greet our guests. Thank you again for helping to put all of this together. We appreciate it."

"It's been my pleasure. Do enjoy yourselves. I hear the food is divine," she says, stepping back, looping her arm through her husband's, and letting him lead her off.

I feel Nik off to the side, his presence a comforting balm on my frayed nerves. He keeps his distance through the line of people stopping before us and wishing blessings on our new marriage. They descend in earnest as the

agents dressed as servers move through the space with their trays, stopping to gather tidbits of conversation on their own cameras and microphones.

After what seems like a thousand conversations, we extricate ourselves from a particularly smarmy politician who wants to bend Dimitri's ear about funding. Dimitri gets us out of it by asking him to lay out the terms quickly, and he'll think about them and get back to him on Monday.

The politician does just that, cap in hand, asking for money to back his campaign and illegally bury his opponent in the upcoming elections. That little nugget will go nicely with the rest of the evidence compiled.

"Dimitri, how lovely to see you." A blonde woman who looks more elegant than everyone else here put together steps forward, placing her hand on my husband's forearm.

Natasha Volkov, current head of the Bratva. She resides in Moscow, runs the brotherhood with an iron fist, and apparently lies about what information and leverage she has since the diamond is safely back in Interpol's hands, thanks to Olivia and her guys. Of course, I know who she is, but we've never met in person.

"Natasha," he says, dipping his head respectfully in welcome. "I didn't know we were expecting you."

"You think I would miss an opportunity to come to New York and celebrate the happy marriage of one of my leaders? Don't be daft." She chuckles, the sound almost melodic, as it rises and falls with intonation.

"Forgive me," Dimitri says, shaking his head like he's lost all sense. "Natasha Volkov, this is my wife, Elsa. Elsa, meet Natasha, my boss."

I dip my head and take her hand when she offers it, shaking it gently. "I've heard so much about you."

"Not too much, I hope," she says, her blue eyes swivelling from me to Dimitri, who lets out a low chuckle.

"Not much at all, other than your impressive rise," he answers, and I back him up.

"It's true. It's fascinating how you rose to your position. Dimitri has only mentioned that and how well you lead."

She leans in, whispering, "Well, it's nice to hear that some of my changes have been well received. That hasn't exactly been the case back home. You know how it is with tradition overruling progress. The Sabres are similar in that regard."

"Too right. And I'm sorry to hear things have not been as smooth at

home.”

She hums thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s time for a change of scenery, then.”

There’s a small thud from upstairs, and I fight the urge to look towards the balcony where Dimitri and I made our entrance. I already know what that was and who’s responsible. I shrug it off and keep my focus on Natasha.

She nods at one man standing behind her, tilting her head towards the staircase. The big man trudges up, and the other moves directly behind Natasha. The rest of the guests give her a wide berth and observe without making direct eye contact. Her reputation precedes her, and I already know this is not someone I want to get on the wrong side of. But it’s too late for that, most likely.

“Nik!” she squeals, reaching past Dimitri and me and throwing her arms around her cousin. “It’s so good to see you!” She then switches to Russian, rapid-firing sentences and questions at him so quickly there’s no end in sight. He laughs as he deflects most of them with well-practised ease.

Dimitri leans close and whispers in my ear, “Did you know she was coming?”

“I had no idea,” I say honestly. “I didn’t even know Oksana invited her.”

Natasha is pulled into conversation with various people, and we use the opportunity to slip away now that attention has shifted to her.

Dinner is announced, and the musicians quiet down the instrumental music. I’d hardly noticed it earlier, and now, it’s soft and melodic, fading into the background until it’s suitable background noise.

On cue, the double doors open, and people are ushered into the dining area from the atrium. Dimitri exchanges a few handshakes as we enter the dining space, and I accept the congratulations with polite nods of gratitude.

The room, which was in shambles yesterday when I saw it, is now perfectly arranged. Round tables, pristine porcelain plates, and more utensils than necessary are dressed in the colours I chose at that lunch so long ago.

Servers stand at the room’s perimeter with wine bottles and champagne, ready to pour once everyone has taken their seats.

Dimitri and I head to the table at the front of the room as the couple of the hour. We have to put on a show for them, and we do. Dimitri gracefully takes my hand and leads me to the chair, pulling it out and only pushing it in again once my ass hovers above it.

He sits beside me, and with a wave of his hand, the servers offer drinks to everyone gathered.

It looks like everyone Oksana sent invitations to accepted. She was right. No one wanted to miss the first significant appearance Dimitri made since stepping into his role, and based on the conversations I caught during our mingling, they've been waiting for him to step out.

Too many commented that they'd been trying to contact him for months. And now that I know why he's been avoiding this role and his responsibilities, I'm proud of him for putting things off and keeping himself out of the illegal dealings as much as possible.

The musicians continue their soft playing, keeping the ambience calm. The servers have their work cut out for them, even more so because they're all agents and waiting on people is not high on their list of skills.

Nik sits on my other side, not quite front and centre like Dimitri and me, but not far away. As our bodyguard, it is not unusual he is close to us, and honestly, it makes me feel better having him within reach.

We work our way through the dinner menu, me pushing aside more food than I'm consuming because my attention is on the people around us and my husband at my side. He eats with his usual gusto, skipping most of the chicken because he hates white meat. Nik, on the other hand, has no such reservations, and by the time the dessert plate arrives, I can't possibly look at another morsel while the two of them continue to eat.

How? I'm convinced men have second stomachs because, without one of those, it's impossible.

Once Dimitri finishes his dessert wine, he gently folds his napkin and places it on his empty plate as he stands.

"Will you dance with me, wife?" he asks, that silky voice curling around my honorific.

I nod and smile, letting him pull me up from the chair. He spins me out with a flourish, then pulls me in close again, trapping me against his chest. The musicians begin their instrumental version of "Battlefield" by SVRCINA, and Dimitri begins to move. When Oksana agreed to my request for the musicians, I called them once they'd been booked and told them this was our song.

Meeting each other on the battlefield is suitable for the two of us. In my mind, the lyrics about being each other's sword, shield, and camouflage play softly.

Dimitri gracefully leads me in the dance, a simple step he guides me through, never letting his eyes stray from mine.

I look over his shoulder, meeting the eyes of our guests as they watch us under the chandelier. As we take another turn, I look towards the head table and see Nik.

He's slightly hunched over, his hand bound around his stomach, and when Dimitri turns us around the floor and I face Nik again, I see the sheen of sweat on his brow.

Fuck. Oksana made her move, and it wasn't the one we were expecting. That was why we had Zach stalking the party.

My hand tightens on Dimitri's back, the feel of the Kevlar below bumping softly under my finger pads. "We need to be done," I whisper. "And you need to act sick."

His smile starts to fall, and he holds me tighter. "What's happening?"

"Poison. Do you feel it?" I ask. Checking in with myself, I assess but feel nothing amiss. I'd been pushing my food all over my plate instead of eating. Nik stands from the table, gripping the back of the chair.

"I thought that was just the spices," he says, concern lacing his voice.

The song ends, and Dimitri gracefully invites others to join us on the dancefloor with a wave of his hand. He's not known to be particularly social, so Dimitri drags me away towards Nik once enough couples are on the hardwood dance floor.

"I thought you said Oksana was planning a sniper," Nik says as he clutches his stomach.

"She was!" I whisper-shout. "Come on." I grab him by the arm and lead the three of us along the table. As I look out into the crowd, I lock eyes with Oksana. She raises her glass and tips it in my direction.

# CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

---

Eleanor

“FUCKING BITCH,” I SEETHE AS WE APPROACH THE SWINGING DOORS OF THE kitchen. “Dimitri, you’re okay?”

“Yes, but I was prepared for this.”

Before I can ask him about that, the server closest to the door catches my eye, and I stop in front of him. Agent Carey is the lead on this operation and Agent Kim’s boss. “She struck. Shut it down. We’re taking the bus.”

He nods, murmurs something into the mic on his sleeve, and we rush through the kitchen and out the back door.

The specialised ambulance the FBI was kind enough to loan us sits in the alleyway. Zach emerges from the door behind us, his lip bloodied and his jacket torn on the lapel.

“Get in,” he says, yanking open the back door to the ambulance. “Eleanor, you’re driving,” he barks. I pass through the narrow channel between the work area and the front seats.

“Hey! You can’t just take it! My boss is going to kill me!” the driver shouts. I don’t have time for this shit, so I let a punch fly, disorienting him and allowing me to reach past him and open the door. I feel bad for the punch, but there’s no other way to do this. Nik needs help, and I’m not risking it by putting his life into another agent’s hands.

“Sorry. Life or death.” I shove him out the side and clamber into the seat. The driver lands with a thud on the asphalt, and Zach gets the doors shut at the back.

“Hit it!” he yells. Zach starts rummaging through the supplies in the back as Dimitri groans. He doesn’t find much because this was never meant to be a working ambulance—just a getaway car.

“Not you too!” I cry, speeding out of the alley and heading towards the nearest hospital.

“It’s fine. I’ll be fine.” He grunts, but his eyes are still alert, and he’s only mildly sweating as opposed to Nik, who’s clutching his stomach and groaning.

“What did you mean you’ve been preparing for this?” I ask, desperately looking for the switch to start the sirens so we can cut through some of this traffic.

Dimitri chuckles. “I’m the leader of this chapter. You think I haven’t

been ingesting small doses of the most common poisons for years? Please, Eleanor. Haven't you ever wondered why I'm never tipsy after the scotch every evening? It's half poison."

"That's reckless," Zach comments. "You never know how those things are going to interact together."

"Better than dying like these guys," Dimitri says, pointing at the body bags stacked in the back of the ambulance. Nik was kind enough to get "the bags packed" before we entered the party.

These are three Irish mob members who tried to grab me over the last two days. Playing bait was not my idea of a good time, but we needed bodies to prove Dimitri and I had died. We grabbed a third to get Nik out, but Interpol isn't interested in him for anything other than a trial for his theft, so we took matters into our own hands.

With Zach joining us, he will have to be the one to get Nik to safety while Interpol and the affiliated agencies debrief Dimitri and me. We have a plan in place to reconnect, but that may need shifting under the current circumstances.

"We've got a tail. The asshole didn't stay down when I grabbed him upstairs," Zach mutters as he thinks aloud. I smash my hand into the buttons and knobs near the wheel, the sirens still not cooperating.

Then, the sound of a call ringing out on speakerphone sounds from the back, and Rory's voice comes through the phone. "I see you. Keep going straight. There's about to be a clusterfuck of New York traffic."

"Hey, Rory!" I call in greeting.

"Hey, Ellie! Long time no talk. How you doing?"

"Focus," Nik grits out. "My insides feel like they're trying to climb out."

"Right, sorry, man. I'm Roark," the man says in his Irish brogue. "Hold tight and hang a right onto Park Ave. It'll take you towards Mount Sinai."

I do as he instructs, flipping on the sirens when I finally find the fucking button hiding in plain sight.

"The asshole behind you in the black Escalade? Can you see him, Ellie?" Roark asks over the phone.

I check the side mirrors, and sure enough, the man is tailing us, a second bodyguard in the passenger seat loading a gun. They easily follow behind us as our ambulance wee-woos down the street.

"Unfortunately," I say. "Who is that?"

Zach answers this one. "He was lining up a shot at the top of the staircase

when you guys talked to all the guests.”

“The assassin? But there was no shot.”

“Obviously,” Zach deadpans. “He was aiming for you first, Eleanor. And Little Thief would punish me if something happened to you. I had to do what I had to do, and you were too busy playing the newly married couple for me to interrupt. It would have drawn too much attention. Take it up with her if you’re mad about it.”

That gives me pause. “Fucking Oksana, going back on her word from the first moment. Thanks for the assist, Zach, but what do we do now?”

“I need some supplies to treat him, but as soon as we open these doors, idiots one and two will kill us all. Roark, want to play red light, green light?” Zach asks.

“Way ahead of you,” Roark answers. The lights in front of us all turn red, but people are still pulling to the sides of the road to give us a place to squeeze through. “Ellie, turn off your sirens. At the next intersection, make a left, then gun it.”

I do as he says, side-swiping a blue Ford Taurus when it doesn’t move fast enough. The Escalade follows, adding another scrape along the blue paint. *Oops*.

“Turn now!” Roark calls, and the lights above the intersection suddenly switch—the change allowing cars to follow behind us, putting space between the Escalade and us.

We follow traffic, Roark creating such a jam, it will take NYC Metro at least an hour to untangle. “Ellie, you got the specialised bus, didn’t you?”

“Yep! The FBI loaned it to us with the promise that we don’t ruin their pretty toy. They have it for extractions, and the paint on the outside is basically one big sticker they can change out as needed.” *Fucking cool if you ask me*.

Nik groans behind me, and as much fun as I’ve been having playing some fucked-up version of Grand Theft Auto, I need to focus on him.

“Nik, you okay?”

He groans again, vomiting up everything he’s eaten and drank this evening. Zach holds a bowl under his face, catching the worst of it.

“Almost there. Keep going and get it out. You need an IV and some labs done, but we’ll get to that stage. Emptying your stomach is the first step, but we’re just about out of time for that. Make it quick.”

“Agreed,” Rory says over the phone. “Ellie, I’ve got an idea, but it’ll

require some coordination. How's your depth perception?"

"Good, I think."

"Zach, you still got the extra toys Olivia put in your backpack?"

The man rolls his eyes. "Of course."

"Ellie, roll to a stop over an access hole on East 97th Street. They were working on that street in front of the cathedral an hour ago. Those covers will be easier to lift. Dimitri, you still with us, bud?"

"Yes, and don't call me *bud*," my husband answers, keeping a hand on Nik's shoulder and staring out the windshield as we make our way down the roads.

"Deal. Make sure you guys get out of there, and I'll call you whatever you want, Bratva Bro," he says, chuckling at his joke. "Gotta keep my girl happy, and Ellie alive is priority number one."

The traffic lights are in our favour as we pass under the street signs, finally coming up on 97th. I crank the wheel, turn left and rocket along the street. There are still a few cars between us and the black SUV, but traffic in front of us is at a standstill, and I hit the brakes, coming to a stop right over a manhole cover.

"Now, Zach, there should be a hatch beside the gurney. Got it?" Rory says.

"Got it!" Dimitri calls, springing into action as Zach grabs a new container for Nik. Dimitri yanks on the false bottom with all his might. "Fuck! Eleanor, go forward about a foot. We're too far away."

I ease off the brake until Dimitri tells me to stop, my front bumper kissing the car ahead of us, getting a horn and a finger in return. I wave and smile, then duck in the back.

The floor of the ambulance is now gone, the sliding false bottom nestled along the ambulance's undercarriage. Below is the dirty street and a circular cover leading to safety.

It's crowded as fuck back here, but soon, there will be four fewer people. We yank the body bags into the centre of the bus. We were supposed to hand these off at the hospital, but now? I don't know what to do.

Zach rushes us, handing Dimitri a tool to lift the sewer cover and slide it over so we can climb down.

After some arguing in which Dimitri pins me with a withering glare, I go first, Nik following me, then Dimitri. The handrails are grimy, and climbing them in heels is frustrating as hell. But it's better than putting bare feet on the

metal rungs.

“Where’s Zach?” I ask when we’re in the cavernous space below the street. It’s small, dark, and not somewhere I wish to be for long. It reeks but is not as bad as I would have imagined. Or maybe this adrenaline high is blocking out some of my senses.

Nik sways on his feet, his pallor turning a worrying shade of green. I shove him over, bending him at the waist so he can vomit off to the side. Surely he must be almost out by now?

He looks worse for wear, but if Zach says he’ll be fine, then he’ll be fine. I trust him with my daughter, so I trust him with Nik. We just need to get him to a place where he can get treatment, whatever that entails. Fuck if I know.

This all feels like a nineties spy movie, but shit, that’s partly why I wanted this job in the first place.

Dimitri points upwards, answering my question, then dusts off his jacket. Like that’s going to help the filth we’ll accrue down here. There’s a scraping sound and hurried steps down the ladder. Zach leaps the last few feet and yanks us to the side as a group.

The floor is worse down here than expected, but my attention is pulled from that when there’s an unexpected boom from above.

“What was that?” I ask frantically.

“Olivia’s toys. She sends her regards.”

“You blew up the ambulance, didn’t you?” I ask. Zach looks . . . well, not remorseful—he doesn’t seem to have that emotion. “That was a loaner! They made me promise not to ruin it!”

“You already scratched it,” Dimitri points out unhelpfully.

“You shush,” I say before turning back to Zach. “Why? Why did you kaboom it?”

“The guards will need to see bodies. They were too close not to open the bags and discover it’s not you, so charring them was the best option.”

“What about the other people? The surrounding cars?”

He shrugs. “It should have been relatively contained. I took the bodies out of the bags, so the idiots following us would have to touch the remains. Do you know how long it takes to get the charred flesh stink out of clothing?”

Dimitri eyes Zach like he’s seeing him for the first time, and he nods. “It’s a bitch, that’s for sure.”

Christ Almighty, this *cannot* be what they bond over.

Zach studies Dimitri for a second and nods. Fuck, that was their bonding

moment. “Now, you do what you need to do. I’ve got the tattooed one. He needs fluids and a full workup. I’ve got some contacts here that owe me. Meet you in paradise?” he asks.

“His name is Nik,” I say.

Zach rolls his eyes. “Eleanor, focus.”

“Yeah, fine. Text me the details, and we’ll be there after we deal with all of this,” I say, waving my hand above us to encapsulate the red-tape clusterfuck Zach has just sunk me in.

Nik looks even worse now that we’re safe, and he slumps over, grabbing Dimitri’s arm on his way down.

His face has turned a sickly white, and he’s shivering while sweating profusely.

“Nik!” I cry, dropping to my knees with him and touching his face. His skin is clammy, and he’s shivering.

“He won’t kill me, right?” Nik asks, looking from me to Zach and back again after he swallows a few times.

I nod. “He’s a doctor, truly.”

“Paediatrician. You’re a bit out of my usual age range,” Zach supplies. “But it’s mostly the same.”

“Ellie,” Nik says quietly. “If I don’t make it, because fuck, it feels like I’m dying, tell Bella—”

“Nope! I’m stopping you right there. Tell her yourself.”

“Just . . . Listen, would you?” He sighs. “I am a fuckup, but she is perfect. She results from hearts wanting what they couldn’t have but daring to reach out and take it anyway. I love her, Ellie. And I love you. And Dimitri will be a good father to her.”

I turn, looking at my husband, finding his jaw slack and his eyes boring a hole into Nik’s skull from the side.

“He’ll be firm but indulge her every whim. I can feel it. So, no matter what, love the bastard. Let him help protect you and our girl.”

“Nik,” I sob. “Stop. You’re going to be fine.”

“Not if we hang around here much longer,” Zach says as he pulls up a new contact on his phone and announces he’ll be there in five minutes.

“Come on.” Zach hauls Nik up by the arm and then turns towards me. “Get your shit done and get to the island. Little Thief misses you.”

I nod and watch as Zach slings Nik’s arm around his shoulders and hauls him down the tunnel, following a map Roark sent him.

Pulling my agency phone from my bustier, I open the contacts.

“Where are you?” Agent Kim barks. “I’m looking at a fucking ambulance on fire and a traffic system blinking out the beat to ‘Thriller!’”

With tears of relief in my eyes, I answer. “I’m under the ambulance, in the sewer with Dimitri. Did you guys wrap up the gala? Don’t forget to grab the two following the ambulance in the Escalade!”

“We got them as they pulled the bodies from the back of the bus, which we need to discuss. As for the gala, it’s underway. Hold tight; let me get the map and send you where to go for a pickup. You did good, Agent Carmichael.”

“It’s Agent Aslanov now,” Dimitri says from beside me, obviously hearing every word of the conversation. He touches the ring on my finger as if reminding himself of our union.

“And Nikita Lenkov?” Agent Kim asks. “He was with you, and at least six agents here are demanding he’s delivered to their doorsteps for questioning.”

“Dead,” I answer. “He was still in the ambulance. Oksana poisoned him, and he died en route.”

“Shame. We’re right outside the cathedral where this all started. It would have been nice to wrap this up where it began.”

I look at Dimitri, and he nods, confirming our location.

“We’ll await your directions. Let me know,” I say into the phone and hang up.

I bury my head against Dimitri’s chest, the Kevlar making it uncomfortable, but it’s where I want to be. “He’ll be okay, right?”

“That depends. Will Zach kill him for being a pain in the ass?”

I nod.

“Then it’s up in the air.”

I snort a laugh, grateful for the levity. “What about you? I know you said you’ve been having small doses of things for years, but do you feel okay?”

“A little nauseated, but I’ll survive.”

A text dings on my phone, and it’s directions from Agent Kim. “There’s an opening under the cathedral,” I read out.

“Then let’s go. Maybe we can renew our vows while we’re in there,” Dimitri teases.

I let out a small laugh and let him pull me in the direction Agent Kim suggested.

We've got a long few days ahead of us with debriefs. The last thing I want to do is go over all the information collected again, but it will get us one step closer to reuniting.

I just hope Nik is okay and waiting for us at the end.

# CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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Nikita

THREE DAYS OF EXPELLING *EVERYTHING* IN SOME DOCTOR'S OFFICE IN NEW YORK, a private flight—wherein I sat next to the world's worst conversationalist—and nearly a week on an island in a concrete room with a tiny window with “a view” has me ready to pull my damned hair out.

The view is the dilapidated wall of the opposite building, and the only thing I can see is a penis graffitied onto the façade. All I can think about at this point is that it's missing a vein along the shaft. *That's* how bored I am.

I don't know who the fuck this Zach guy thinks he is, but I haven't seen him in two days, and my food rations are running out. At this point, I'm almost desperate to see his nonemotional ugly mug, so long as he brings me a decent meal.

Even if, I'll readily admit, he scares the shit out of me.

All of his answers are nonverbal or one-worded. I don't even know where the fuck I am. I just know the door is bolted shut. The place smells like piss because my only company is my bucket in the corner, and I need to see Ellie. Now.

I lie back on my cot in the farthest corner from the commode and close my eyes. He'll be back soon, right? It's not like he would help us only to leave me stranded here.

The metal on the door grinds as someone opens it, and I blink sleep from my eyes. I bolt upright in my shitty bed and grab my threadbare blanket. Better than no weapon, right? The door swings inward, and Ellie's head is suddenly poking through. “Nik!” she cries, her body going limp.

“Oh, thank fuck!” I hop up and cross the room. The loaner athletic shorts sag on my body, and the T-shirt gives off a foul odour when I lift my arms to grab my girl to keep her steady.

“Our flight was delayed; we got here as fast as we could,” she says, pinching her nose. “Where's Zach?”

I lift my arms and spin around. “You tell me. Last I saw him, he handed me a sleeve of crackers and a two-gallon water jug and told me to make it last. That was two days ago. That guy needs to work on his bedside manner.”

“You're alive, aren't you?” Dimitri says as he pushes into the room. He wrinkles his nose but keeps his mouth shut about the stench.

“Please tell me we're getting out of here,” I beg.

“Your chariot awaits,” Dimitri replies, waving his hand towards the open door.

I whoop and crush my lips to Ellie’s, sparing her from a full kiss until I can brush my fucking teeth. It feels like something died in there, all fuzzy and weirdly dry and extra wet at the same time. I love her too much to subject her to that.

“Wait. How did it go?” I ask, referring to the debriefing and everything Ellie and Dimitri have dealt with since the fallout.

“We’ll tell you on the boat. Come on. We’ve got a girl waiting for us,” Ellie says.

Stopping dead in my tracks, I pause with one foot over the threshold of my prison-cell-slash-healing room. “I can’t meet her like this. I’m disgusting.”

The last thing I want is my daughter recoiling from me when I finally get to see her. What if she hates me at first sight? Or should that be at first smell?

“You can shower on the boat,” Ellie promises. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Feeling much better, just . . . ripe.” I wrinkle my nose, and Ellie smirks. Yeah, she definitely noticed.

The weirdest feeling settles over me. I feel free, finally out of Interpol and the Bratva. But it’s overwhelming. Like there’s an open chasm below me, and I have no footholds. Ellie chuckles, and I smile. She is my lifeline—her and Bella and Dimitri.

The three of them are my reason for being, and even if we don’t have a solid plan for our future yet, we know we want our lives twined together. I’ll figure out my life with them, and the abyss will fade into something else. A concrete plan, hopefully, and I’ll put one foot in front of the other, knowing they have my back if I stumble.

With renewed energy, I follow them out of the room, letting them lead me down a long hallway and two flights of stairs. We emerge into the afternoon sun, my skin warming after the damp and dark room I’ve been sitting in.

I will kill that Zach fucker if I ever get near him again.

Dimitri flags down a taxi, and we pile in. The driver, Ellie, and Dimitri all lean away and open their windows when my scent becomes too overpowering.

Yup, I’m going to kill him dead.

We reach the docks, and there’s a yacht called *Floatable I* bobbing just

ahead of us. Who picks these names?

Ellie leads the way onto the boat, the crew standing at attention and welcoming us aboard. I duck below deck, hunting for a shower and clean clothes.

Fresh as a daisy and feeling a million times better after washing, I make my way to the top deck, finding Ellie and Dimitri sitting on two loungers.

“How long until we’re there?” I ask.

“About twenty minutes,” Ellie responds, flipping her sunglasses onto her head so she can assess me. “You look much better now, and I like the scruff.”

I run a hand over my jaw, feeling the growth there. The bathroom had a razor, but I figured I’d let it grow. I’ve never had a beard before, so maybe it’s time.

“I feel better.” I drop into one of the other chairs and grin at her. “There were no weapons downstairs aside from a disposable razor, and Zach took my pieces when we were at the doctor’s office in New York. Got any guns to share?”

Ellie rolls her eyes. “No, we flew commercial, so we couldn’t bring ours. Besides, we’re seeing friends with the best security system I’ve ever heard of. We don’t need to roll up armed to the teeth.”

There’s never an excuse to be unarmed, but if there are no guns, then there are no guns. Nothing to do at the moment but move on. “So tell me everything.”

Dimitri sighs beside me. “I thought running that Bratva chapter was tedious. This was worse.”

I chuckle because I remember the meetings I was subjected to when I was employed there, and I’m glad I wasn’t brought in to sit through them. Getting the highlights will be more than enough. Add in all the other agencies Interpol was working with, and it must have been a shitshow.

“We reviewed a bunch of the evidence gathered, confirming and signing statements we were there. Your death has been confirmed, by the way,” Ellie says. “The bodies from the ambulance were burned beyond recognition, and pulling all their teeth out before stuffing them in the bags was a good call. Though there were some questions about where all the teeth went.”

“Not something I want to repeat,” I say. *Slippery fuckers, no matter which pliers I used.*

“Anyway, they arrested most of the guests, surrounding the place and locking it down until everyone could be taken in and processed. A few

avoided charges because they were just dates to the event, but we got a lot of the big players, along with most of the members of your chapter.”

Ellie looks relieved as she relays the most critical points.

“And Natasha?” I ask. I don’t know what I want her answer to be. It’s safe to say I have mixed feelings about Natasha’s arrest. She’s my cousin and was put through hell until she became the head of the Bratva. It’s not a stretch to say she’s done some horrible things while rising to her position. Murdering her husband is the first in a long line of misdeeds, but she’s my last blood relative on my father’s side.

“She slipped away,” Ellie says, her eyes tracking the emotion on my face. “You seem relieved.”

I shrug. “Can’t help feeling what I feel.”

Dimitri chimes in. “Oksana murdered my father.”

I whip my head in his direction. “What?!”

He nods. “She tried to put it all on Sergei in a plea deal, and while he was supposed to be home that night with no alibi, his mistress had a video of them fucking all night.”

“Jesus fuck, that’s disgusting. Who would film that?” I say, my stomach roiling worse than when I was poisoned.

“Someone who was holding it over his head for blackmail. Sergei had a copy of the video, and they brought in the mistress to confirm. But the kicker is Oksana said Sergei told her how he did it. Which was false, of course, but no one else knew the murder method, so from there, it was easy to pin her in her lie, according to the agents handling her.”

“So she’s going down for his murder?” I ask, hope in my voice.

“For sure. And even though the lawyers will try to drag this out, it won’t go far. The government has seized all their assets since they’re criminal earnings. Hard to retain a lawyer without the cash.”

I crow with laughter at their predicament but then my face falls.

“Are you okay?” I ask Dimitri. I know his dad’s death has weighed on him, especially since he wasn’t sure who killed him.

“Yeah, I’m just glad I finally have answers.”

“Why did she make it look like I did it?” I wonder aloud.

Ellie fields this one. “She knew of your old friendship with Dimitri, and when you returned unexpectedly, she panicked. You’d last seen each other ten years prior, and her sexual relationship with Dimitri’s father—yes, there was one of those—led to them talking about the two of you. Dimitri’s dad

believed that united, you would be an unstoppable force. So, Oksana planted that doubt in Dimitri's head by killing Danil the way you would and stopping that reunion from happening as soon as she could."

She sighs before continuing. "Anyway, she killed Danil to make sure Dimitri was isolated. It was a surprise when Dimitri didn't kill you outright, and she knew she was running out of time before the two of you worked things out. Hence the drive-by."

It feels like a soap opera, and I'm only sorry I wasn't on the other side of the glass, watching as this all unfolded.

"Sergei didn't know about her moves. He only knew she wanted him as *pakhan*, but he wasn't interested. He played along with her whims to keep her happy, but she had him by the balls and kept him in the dark about a lot."

"So, who hasn't been arrested?" I ask, needing a moment to process all of that. My life was fucked, and my best friend was betrayed to keep us from working out our shit, all to put a man into power who didn't want it.

"Ana and Valentina, but their husbands were swept up in the raid. We have nothing concrete on them, but evidence might come to light with Oksana singing like a canary to lessen her sentencing. Her bodyguard flipped on her pretty quickly, especially about the assassination set up at the gala. His loyalty isn't what Oksana thought it was."

The New York chapter is in shambles, and while it will invite other organisations to fill the gap, the Bratva is done there, at least for a while.

An island comes into view, the dark foliage starting just past a strip of sand. A pink spire juts from the centre of the small land mass.

"Oh, we're almost there," Ellie says, pointing at the island.

"Where is *there*?" I ask, standing to get a better view as we approach.

"Ekuverikan Island," she answers. "Friendship Island or something like that. Now I get to introduce you to my best friend and her boyfriends, our daughter's godparents."

"Boyfriends? Plural?" Dimitri asks.

Ellie nods. "Yeah, we should thank her for laying the groundwork, so it was less of a crazy idea when it came up between us."

"How many boyfriends does she have?" I ask.

"There's Max, Viraj, Roark, and Zach, of course."

*Fucking Zach. Good. Time for some payback.*

# CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

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Nikita

AS SOON AS MY FOOT TOUCHES THE SAND, I KNOW SOMETHING IS WRONG. THE island is too quiet. Tropical birds chirp playfully, but there's a stillness in the air, like time has stopped somehow.

Dimitri and I exchange a look. Instinctively, we step forward, shielding Ellie with our larger bodies. She doesn't protest, which tells me all I need to know. She senses the danger, too.

My blood turns to ice in my veins as I think about Bella. Until a few months ago, I'd never thought about kids. The only woman I'd ever truly loved hated me, with good reason, and just thinking of replacing her made me want to hurl. Nearly a year and a half of anguish for my behaviour and burying every memory of her deep in my mind. Until she showed up, marrying my best friend in a Russian Orthodox Cathedral and stealing my breath away when her eyes met mine at the back of the church.

I wasn't sure how to feel when it was revealed that I was already a father. Immediate panic, followed by a rush of love that took root so deeply in my chest that I knew I would never be the same. My only saving grace was working with Ellie and Dimitri before I knew about Bella. My motivations couldn't be questioned. And as pissed as I am that I've missed so much of her life, I know if I'd known about her, I would have done anything to be there. But the sad fact is, I didn't know. I couldn't, being hidden away as I was.

This past week, thinking about Bella made me queasy—well, more queasy after the poison fallout. What do you even say to the daughter you abandoned without meaning to? Do I just roll with it and hope she's too young to remember that I wasn't there for the first almost two years of her life?

We cross the beach, ducking behind trees, and I internally curse Ellie for not stocking the yacht with guns. What the fuck was she thinking? No place is impenetrable, and friends sometimes betray you. If Zach is involved, I'm confident that's what's happening. I hate that fucker.

We reach a house tucked between the trees. It sprawls across the island's centre, comprised of dark wooden beams, dark floors, and enormous glass windows. It feels as if the occupants live directly in the small forest of the island.

The massive window on the side of the house is open, but there's no one

in sight. If this place has as many security systems as Ellie said, surely its inhabitants have been alerted to our arrival. The silence can only mean two things.

Either they're not here.

Or they're dead.

And I don't even want to consider the fate of my daughter. She might be hurt, taken, or worse. I'm ready to tear apart the responsible parties. They will die slowly and painfully, every single one of them.

A look to my left tells me Dimitri shares my homicidal thoughts. Let's hope his fighting style involves dirty fighting and beatdowns to the death.

If our daughter is not here, we will get her back.

If she is dead, we will make them pay.

We've been mafia bosses, agents, and enforcers for most of our lives. At least our skills will be helpful in something after leaving the Bratva.

I enter the house first, not sparing a glance at the luxury surrounding me. Ellie follows, crouched low and taking careful steps over the threshold, tapping my right arm twice, signalling she's watching the right. Dimitri brings up the rear, watching our left, and I keep my eyes front and centre. A formation we've never discussed, but our old roles slip into place between Ellie and me; the comfort of it brings a sense of reassurance during this unknown.

I pass the couch, glancing down and finding a puddle of red.

The pool of blood is smeared in the hallway beside the TV. Holding up a hand, I halt the others and point to it. Ellie's gasp is nearly silent as she takes in the sight.

We pause where we are, Ellie going to the right to investigate the couch area, and Dimitri veers left to check the kitchen. I watch from my front position as Dimitri swipes a finger along the counter, coming away with more blood. The dark crimson is stark against his pale skin.

Rage and anger, unlike anything I've ever known, overtake me, and I shove it down. Acting irrationally right now won't solve anything. I can't go charging down the hallway unarmed and without backup.

Ellie rushes towards the entertainment centre and reaches above the television. She carefully pulls down a box shaped like a fat panda and puts it on the coffee table, flipping the lid. Inside are five guns, and Ellie hands them over, two for me and her, one for Dimitri. I'm grateful she knows where her friend stashes the weapons. And part of me recognises they're tucked far out

of Bella's reach.

After checking the room, we continue, following the hallway towards the bedrooms.

I carefully turn the handles, one by one, finding empty room after empty room. We're left with two blood stains and five empty bedrooms. We're missing a few people.

We shift positions, Ellie going first and challenging every instinct within my body to keep her between us. But she knows this house better than us and will be faster in leading us through it.

She opens another door, and a set of stairs leads downward. Skipping the light, she carefully steps, one foot after another, until we're in the basement.

We clear the room and find we're alone in what looks to be a medical facility more akin to Dr Frankenstein's workshop than any doctor's office I've been to.

"What the fuck is happening?" I ask in an angry whisper. "I thought you said this place was secure!"

"It is! Don't you fucking yell at me, Nikita Lenkov! I'm as fucking panicked as you are."

"Enough," Dimitri cuts in. "This helps no one. There have to be other places on the island. Let's just find Bella and your friends. They're not in the house."

Ellie stands still, shaking from head to toe as she thinks, muttering nonsense about a princess castle, before she finally whispers, "The stables."

"Good job, Sabre. Let's go." Dimitri takes the lead back up the stairs, and we double-check all the rooms. One holds a mesh crib for Bella, and it takes everything inside of me to walk away instead of falling to my knees in front of it.

We follow a path through the thick trees, listening intently and watching through the darkness of the shadows, hoping for a glimpse of the attackers.

The wooden structure comes into view as we keep going, and we slide the doors open after circling it and listening against the wooden structure.

As we tug the doors open, sliding them on their rollers, red laser lights land on each of our chests. Panic overwhelms me.

Sniper team.

I follow the laser trajectory aimed at Ellie's chest, tug her behind me swiftly, and fire off a shot into the shadows where the line originates.

The gun in my hand shoots a stream of glitter.

Confused, I look down at the sprinkles raining from the gun's tip. Laughter rings out from within the darkness of the stables.

"What the fuck?" I growl.

"*Olivia!*?" Ellie shouts. "What the fuck?!"

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" shouts a cheerful baby voice. "Mama!"

A blonde woman dressed in black tactical gear steps forward, holding the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Bella turns towards me, and I fall to my knees, emotion overwhelming me at finding her safe and unharmed.

"MAMA!" Bella shouts again.

Olivia puts her down, and Bella runs on her tiptoes to Ellie, who kneels beside me and pulls the girl in for a bone-crushing hug, but she loves it.

"Mama squish!" she says, squishing her mama right back.

"Oh, baby, I've missed you so much!" Tears fall from Ellie's eyes, and when she cracks her lids and sees me watching them, she pulls back and gently turns Bella's head towards me. "Bella, that's Dada."

"Dada," she tests the word loudly, making us laugh at her volume. For someone so tiny, the girl has some pipes on her. How on earth did they keep her quiet while we circled the stables?

"Hi, baby," I say, choking out the greeting.

"Go say hi," Ellie encourages.

I'm vaguely aware of more figures emerging from the darkness, but I only have eyes for my girls. Bella takes a few steps towards me, her doe eyes wide and curious.

She's within touching distance, but I keep my hands to myself. I don't want to scare her off, so I wait until she makes the first move. It's like the world's longest chess game, waiting with bated breath until she lifts her arm.

"Dada," she says, touching my stubbled cheek.

Her hand is warm, and she squeezes the flesh of my cheek in her tiny hand. "That's right, baby. I'm your dada."

"Dada!" she declares. Then she moves forward and grips both cheeks between her hands, kissing my nose.

Tears drip from my eyes, and Bella looks at me with concern. "No cry."

"Oh, honey. These are happy tears. You are so beautiful." I smile, my lips quivering, probably making it look more like a grimace than anything else. "I bet you're super smart, too, aren't you? Hopefully, you got your smarts from your mama. She's brilliant and so good."

"So, you must be the father," a man says from beside Olivia. He's dressed

in the preppiest fucking clothes I've ever seen. He looks like he could have captained the yacht that brought us here.

"Can I pick you up, baby?" I ask Bella. She lifts her arms and repeats *UP!* four times until I sling her into my arms and settle her on my hip. I turn towards the man, finally looking at the others in the stable and a curious horse peeking over the divider of the stables. Then . . . a zebra. What the hell?

"I'm Nik. Which of you is responsible for giving us all heart attacks?" I ask, letting the threat rip free but keeping my voice cheerful for the girl in my arms.

"That would be me," Olivia answers. She shrugs. "Had to make sure you were dedicated."

"Dedicated?" Dimitri seethes from Ellie's other side. He's been quiet until now, letting me meet my daughter with as much privacy as the situation allowed. But he's still got the gun held up, pointed at the bearded and long-haired guy across from him.

"You can put that down," the man says, his Irish accent reminding me of something. "It only shoots glitter."

"Yeah, but did you see the glitter? It's dick-shaped!" Olivia laughs.

This girl is unhinged.

Ellie seethes, then in two steps, she crosses the line of demarcation between our two groups and punches Olivia in the stomach.

Olivia lets out an "Oof" and doubles over.

"That was a horrible thing to do!" Ellie shrieks. "Do you have any idea how fast my heart is racing?! I should kill you!"

Olivia recovers her breathing and slowly stands back to her full height. She throws her arms around Ellie. "I missed you, too."

"I hate you, but my God, I missed you so much!" Ellie is a mix of tears, anger, and laughter, and it's still undecided which one will be the most prominent emotion.

"I love you, too," Olivia says. She pulls Ellie closer, and they whisper-shout at each other as the guys stare at me, Bella, and Dimitri.

Zach gives me a nod of recognition, and Dimitri steps closer to me.

"Can I meet her?" he whispers.

I turn my body so Bella can look towards him with me. "Bella, this is your *papa*," I say, giving him the Russian title. He's as invested in this unconventional relationship as Ellie and me, and I meant what I said down in the sewer. I want him to protect Ellie and Bella with me. He'll be as big a

part of her life as I am.

She looks from his face to mine. “Papa. Dada. Pa-da!” she shrieks, combining the words.

We chuckle, and she reaches for Dimitri. He checks with me first and then I let him take her from my arms. “Hi, pretty girl,” he coos, his face softening into something I’ve never seen before. He sticks out his tongue like he did with Anya after we found her in the junkyard.

She giggles in his arms and mimics his face.

“Papa,” she says, testing the word again.

The smile on Dimitri’s face makes him look about ten years younger. More like the carefree boy he used to be when we were young and had stars in our eyes before life crushed us under its merciless boot.

“Guys,” Ellie says, pulling our attention away from Bella, whom we’ve been staring at for the last few minutes. “These are Bella’s godparents.” She points out each of them as she goes down the line. The long-haired Irishman is Roark; the yacht captain is Max; the woman is Olivia; the quiet, seething one is Viraj; and finally, Bella’s scary-ass paediatrician, whom we already know, is Zach.

I focus on the angry guy beside Olivia. “Did we do something wrong?” I ask.

“No, he’s just salty that he’s losing his best girl,” Olivia says with an eye roll.

Viraj crosses his arms over his chest. “Rory became her favourite and stole her away from me. Fucking brownnoser.”

Roark laughs from the other end of the line. “I didn’t brownnose!”

“You bought her a zebra, Rory! How am I supposed to compete with that?”

Olivia chuckles and pats Viraj’s shoulder. “You’ll think of something. Come on, let’s go back to the house. I wanna hear all about their adventures, and I’m starving.”

Ellie crosses the divide again and plucks Bella out of Dimitri’s arms. “Bellatrix, are you charming your daddies?” Our girls embrace, and Ellie tweaks Bella’s little space buns on top of her head.

“Is that your kink, then?” Olivia asks aloud, and Ellie just smirks.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Our girl just smirks and turns, heading towards the house along the path we used earlier.

Following her, I make faces at Bella as she looks over Ellie’s shoulder.

Her gaze pings between me and Dimitri. The others follow behind us, and I distinctly hear one of them say, “Daddy? I could get behind that.”

There’s a thud and a harsh exhale, and I’m pretty sure Olivia just socked whoever said that in the gut.

“Wait, did she name her kid after that god-awful cat from school?” Zach asks in a disgusted tone.

Olivia laughs. “Took you long enough to put that together, Zach. I’m worried about you in your old age.”

“Oh, Little Thief, keep teasing me and see what happens.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

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Eleanor

BELLA CLINGS TO NIK THROUGH OUR MEAL, THE MAN NEVER PUTTING HER down or listening when I offer the chair between us. Bella is delighted sitting on his knee and letting him feed her by hand whenever she bats her pretty eyelashes at him.

What surprises me more than anything is Dimitri joining in, taking turns with Nik to pop little morsels of food in Bella's mouth. My child just tips her head back, opens her mouth, and waits to be fed like the tiny princess she is.

"So you're off work for a while," Olivia says, her tone falsely curious. She's clearly up to something.

"Yeah, I have the usual time off after an undercover job, and I asked for a sabbatical to spend time with Bella after being away for so long."

"Bella or . . ." Olivia says, swinging her eyes over at the men beside me, wholly ignoring the conversation in favour of our daughter. *Our* daughter, because as much as she's mine and Nik's, she's Dimitri's too.

The three of them hold my heart, and I don't want it back.

I shrug at Olivia's question, grinning around a bite of the rice bowl Rory put together for each of us. "What are you guys up to?"

Viraj tears his eyes away from my guys and Bella, whom he's been staring at longingly for the last ten minutes. "No sharing until we have leverage."

"We have leverage. Oi! Nik, Dimitri! I will bury you if you tell anyone we live here and what we do. I have enough evidence to put you both away forever, and if that isn't enough of a warning, I have guns that shoot more than penis glitter."

I tense as Olivia's words land, but my anxiety disappears when Nik speaks. "Our child's godparents are safe from any misdeeds on our side. We owe you for so much, but protecting and watching over Bella while Ellie made her way into our lives is more than enough. Bury us if you need to. We'd welcome it if it keeps them safe."

Zach nods. "Worst case, I'll kill you outright."

Dimitri and Nik nod respectfully, the latter looking more fearful than the former.

"Fine," Olivia says. "We've been on a much-needed break with Bella, but it's time to return to work. There's a queue of jobs on the app, and we've

been sorting through it to see what we'd like to do next. Fuck, is it tedious."

Olivia and the guys use their connections to do . . . less than reputable work. Max is connected to the upper crust, Rory is a hacker with too much skill *not* to go rogue, Viraj loves the adrenaline, and Zach patches people up when they get hurt on these outings. And Olivia . . . well, she's a thief and one of the best I've ever heard of. Though I didn't know the full scope of her operation until I roped her into helping me recover the diamond Natasha is still pretending she has.

"Anything tickle your fancy?" I ask, knowing she's probably got a list fifteen-deep of jobs she wants to take on.

"I'm just wrapping up the most important one, then I'll put the fun ones in a hat and draw like that."

"I thought you were taking time off?" Nik asks.

"Different job," Max answers. "This one is more . . . productive in nature."

I look at Olivia and then down at her flat stomach. She reaches across the table and punches me in the arm. "Not that kind of productive."

Raising my hands in surrender, I laugh. "Can't blame me for wanting Bella to have a cousin."

"We have something to show you tomorrow. You'll stay with us tonight since you have nowhere to be right away."

"Uh, Ollie," I say. "I kind of planned on us staying here for a little while to decompress. I know I didn't ask, but when have you ever been able to say no to me? Especially since it was my idea that brought your harem all together." I wink, and she smirks.

"Oh no, I'm kicking you out tomorrow, but it'll be good, I promise."

With that, she moves on, not sharing details of the jobs she's looking at—I am still an Interpol agent, after all—but giving us enough to pique my interest.

How cool would it be to do what Ollie does? It might not be strictly legal, but she doesn't take on violent cases, just hack and grabs, a bit of undercover work, and a whole lot of excitement.

Bella nods off in Nik's arms, and Max leads us to the room the four of us are sharing. It's got Bella's stuff along the side and a big ass bed, large enough to fit all three of us without touching. I refuse to let an inch of space between us now that we're all together the way we're supposed to be.

Nik uses the bathroom and then Dimitri goes next. I change Bella's nappy

and wipe her face with a warm washcloth before singing a soft lullaby and putting her in the pack-and-play beside the bed. Once the washroom is free, I head inside and catch a look at myself in the mirror.

The woman smiling back at me is a far cry from how I looked even six months ago. I'm still me. Still a mother, still Ollie's best friend, and still an agent, but right now, I look like so much more. I look *happy*.

And it's not because of the men waiting for me in the bed, silent as mice, because Nik spoke when we got into the room, and Bella stirred as if she was going to wake up.

It's because I feel like I've finally got closure on the Nik chapter from before. He's a different man than he was when we were partners. He's himself, which is more than I could have asked for.

His concern is for Bella and me, and his reunion with Dimitri without secrets and grudges between them has sparked something in him I've never seen before. He's lighter, somehow. And while I know he will carry some of his tendencies into this new life, I can only be there for him how I would want him to support me when I struggle.

Dimitri, as I've thought before, was completely unexpected, but his constancy is something I need in my life. Where Nik is a wildfire, Dimitri is a controlled blaze. He is methodical in his life, unending in his loyalty, and believes in doing the right thing.

Together, the three of us make sense. We balance each other in a way I've never experienced before, and I never want to give them up. But I will hold true to my original intentions. If they wish to start their lives elsewhere, I won't begrudge them leaving. For so long they've been shackled to their responsibilities and roles.

It would stifle anyone, but add in the life-threatening pressure, and the last thing I want is for them to feel unfairly tied to me.

I finish my routine, using Ollie's incredible skin care products, and open the bathroom door. Nik and Dimitri are having one of their silent conversations with their eyebrows, and as I watch, I understand them.

Nik: *Isn't Bella perfect?*

Dimitri: *So perfect. You're going to be a great dad.*

Nik: *So are you. Stop holding back.*

Dimitri: *I'm not holding back.*

Nik: *Fucking liar. She's yours, too. We're in this together—me, you, Ellie, and Bella.*

Dimitri: *So sentimental in your old age.*

Nik shoves Dimitri's shoulder, and I step forward, drawing their attention with my addition to the conversation. *You are both mine, and I am yours. Bella is ours. Stop arguing in front of the baby, and be nice.*

They smile at me, their expressions full of joy.

Dimitri curls a finger and beckons me to them. I climb onto the foot of the bed and crawl towards them. The looks they exchange are easy to decipher as they watch me sway my hips and exaggerate my movements. Yes, we'll play with that in the future because as much as I fought against it when Dimitri ordered me to crawl in the penthouse's living room, I can't deny that it turned me on, too.

I love having their attention on me and being the one to bring them to their knees.

"Shh," I say, putting a finger to my lips. Tonight we sleep, holding onto one another and reassuring ourselves that we've made it out.

Me, Nik, and Dimitri—or should I say, Devon, as Interpol renamed him in exchange for his cooperation. Though, fuck knows, I will never call him Devon. He is and will always be my Dimitri.

Bella lets out a little snore, and Nik sighs next to me. "Great. Two of them."

I cover my mouth with my hand, stifling the laughter within me.

# CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

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Eleanor

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU’RE KICKING US OFF YOUR PRIVATE ISLAND! IT’S NOT like you’re expecting anyone else!” I shout over the wind as the yacht motors away from the island.

“Shut up and say thank you!” she yells back.

“Thank you for watching Bella!” I call.

“Not for that! For that!” she points at an island in the distance, and I roll my eyes. I wouldn’t put it past Olivia to drop us on a random island and putter away on Max’s fancy-ass yacht, cackling all the way home as she marooned us.

“What is that?” I ask warily, preparing myself for anything because this is Olivia, and her version of normal is not everyone else’s.

“Your new home.” She grins widely, her face stretching and her excitement palpable.

“What?”

She shakes her head and looks forward, shielding her eyes from the morning sun.

Dimitri and Nik are below deck with Bella and the other guys. They complained I hogged my girl all morning, but it’s not like I could resist. She’s my child, and I missed the hell out of her. Apparently, we needed the full contingency for our little outing today.

We reach a wooden dock that looks brand new. There’s a dark roof poking out from the trees, along with a pathway leading through the sand and towards the foliage masking the house.

“Olivia?” I ask. “What did you do?”

Casually, she replies, “I bought you an island. Now we can be next-door neighbours. The house was finished about three months ago, and we’ve been slowly bringing over furniture and clearing out your apartment in Lyon, so all of your shit is here. It took forever, but we can blame the government regime change in the country for that. They put an embargo on certain imported products, and it took a while to get the fridge stocked with your favourites.”

Olivia keeps talking about the house at the island’s centre, but my brain has stalled completely.

“*YOU WHAT!?*” I shriek. “My house? My job? What am I going to do when I go back to work?”

“You’re not,” she replies like it’s obvious.

My eyes bug out so hard they almost fall out of my head.

“Oh, come on. You can’t tell me you’re looking forward to riding a desk for the next six months with a partner you don’t know when you can come to work for me instead.”

“I’m not a thief! No offence, I think it’s cool what you do, but I can’t do that. I have a child to look after!”

My voice is shrill and shrieky, but I can’t help it. It’s not like there’s anyone on this little spit of land to bother with my volume.

“I don’t need you to steal shit. I need you to manage us. You love organisation and keeping things in order. So, organise the incoming requests and background check the people who hire us and-or the jobs they hire us for. Keep us in line so we can focus on the job and not all the background shit that takes ages because we procrastinate. Keep *us* in order.”

“I- I . . .” There are no words. I *do* love the research part of the job.

“Pay is evenly split between whoever works the job. Even percentages across the board, I have health and dental in your onboarding plan for you and Bella. The guys can work with us or not. Dimitri has enough money to live a thousand lives and never run out.”

“His assets were forfeited in the deal,” I counter.

“Nice try,” she says. “Not the offshore accounts he put in your name right after you got married. There’s plenty to live off of. The question is, do you want to do that here with us?”

I look back at Dimitri, who follows closely behind us, his eyes wide and jaw hanging. He and Nik are getting the run down from Max about the island we now fucking own as Bella sits comfortably in his arms.

My husband nods that Olivia is right, and he’s set aside enough money that we’ll never have to worry, but he knows that’s not who I am. “It’s up to you, my Sabre. What do you want to do? You don’t have to decide today, but you can think about it while we’re on holiday.”

Nik shrugs. “Sounds like a good time to me. But we need to go over where and how Bella will go to school and how we’ll parent her. That’s my priority.”

*Did you hear that? That was the sound of my ovaries exploding.*

“I’ll think about it,” I tell Olivia as we step through the tree line, already knowing my answer. We’re met with a sprawling one-story white house with white cladding . . . or is it shiplap? I haven’t watched enough of those home

reno shows to know which. There are expansive windows, blue shutters, and a big red door.

“Welcome home,” Olivia says, gesturing to the home. “I know it’s different from ours, but you don’t strike me as the dark woods and dark floors type.”

She puts her thumb on the top of the door handle, and a beep sounds. She turns the handle, letting us in through the biometric scanner door into a vast, open-plan room with high ceilings. Everything is bright and cheerful. Even the trees around the house are culled back a bit so the sunlight streams through the windows. It’s very unlike Olivia’s place, which essentially has trees *inside* the living room.

My eyes can’t seem to take everything in, even as I spin in place and try to absorb every detail. “Olivia, this is . . .”

“I know, isn’t it? Told you she’d love it,” she says over her shoulder at her guys.

“No one argued that point with you, Via,” Rory says.

“I know! I was hoping for make-up sex, but none of you would fight with me.”

Collectively, Max, Rory, Viraj, and Zach roll their eyes.

Bella squirms in Dimitri’s arms and wants down. He puts her gently on her feet, and she tears across the living room and towards the back of the house. I follow her, my longer stride keeping up with her little one.

She stops in front of a door with a unicorn and points. “Bella!” she cheers, trying to reach for the handle. She’s clearly spent some time here already and knows which room is hers.

Inside, it’s an explosion of colour and plushies. Literally, hundreds of them piled against one wall, forming a cheerleading pyramid of chaos. Bella runs and dives into the animal tower, emerging with a massive smile.

“I’m in,” I say, turning to find Olivia behind me.

“Perfect. You start in a month. Until then, I want you to relax on the beach, play with Bella, and bone those two men so much they think their cocks are broken.”

I laugh. “Deal.”

Bella’s room has security cameras, and Olivia hands me a monitor so Bella can keep playing while we find the guys in the living room. They’re sprawled on the couches, all with beers in their hands, feet kicked up on the coffee table, getting to know one another. I’m not oblivious to the glare Nik

keeps shooting at Zach.

“Boys, roll out! Their holiday starts today, and we’ll let them . . . *experience* the island by themselves for the next few days, at the very least.” Olivia waggles her brows, and the guys get the gist real quick.

Lightning quick, they down their beers, put them in the recycling bin, and slip through the door, one by one, until it’s just Nik, Dimitri, and me in the living room. I check the monitor and find Bella passed out amidst her plushies. She dragged approximately ten of them onto the mattress on the floor—safe from falling and bumping her head; thank you, Zach—and her mouth is open. I click the volume up, and her snore comes through the speakers.

I smile, but looking up from the monitor, I find Nik and Dimitri standing before me with hungry gazes.

“Where is our room, Ellie?” Nik asks.

“I don’t know. Olivia didn’t show me.”

“You better find it quickly, wife,” Dimitri says as he takes a step forward, his icy-blue eyes boring into mine, the threat of pleasure stark on his face.

Turning on my heel, I take off in the opposite direction, feeling a little bratty and a lot brave. I fly through the front door, watching the monitor as I run, ensuring I don’t lose signal as I race through the trees.

Footsteps follow behind me, the three of us crashing through the foliage, and my laugh escapes, wild and free, as the men I love hunt me down.

A hand wraps around my middle, the tattoos alerting me to my capturer.

“Tut, tut, baby. This definitely isn’t our room, but either way, I’ve got you now.” He spins me, pressing my back against one of the palm trees. The bark feels odd against my skin, but I forget the sensation when his lips take mine, threading a hand through his long hair.

A warm body presses to my right, Dimitri’s lips finding a spot on my neck and causing me to arch my back against the tree, pressing my hips towards Nik.

“Yes!” I cry, grinding against Nik and pressing my ass against Dimitri when he spins us so he can cover me.

“Get on your knees, wife. I want to see how you suck him with that metal in his cock.”

“Hold this,” I say, shoving the monitor at him so he can keep an eye on Bella while I bring Nik to the edge. I drop to my knees, undo Nik’s trousers, and pull his cock out. Licking from base to pierced tip, I let myself go,

sucking him exactly like I want to. Enthusiastic, feral, noisily.

“Oh, fuck, baby! Yes, right there. Take my cock,” Nik groans, his dark eyes connecting with mine as he slides into my mouth and down my throat.

Dimitri’s hand fists my hair, moving my head the way he wants and making me choke on Nik’s cock.

“That’s it, Eleanor. That’s a good wife. *Our* wife.” The words send a thrill through me, just as potent as the first time he said it, but more than that, it feels like the three of us are connected.

Dimitri drops to his knees behind me, peeling my leggings down and pausing.

“These fucking cotton panties are going to be the death of me, wife,” he says before ripping them down my thighs and leaving them around my knees. “Nik, get on your knees.”

I let go of Nik’s cock with a wet pop, and he sinks to his knees in front of me. I hold myself up with one hand while the other wraps around his hard length, teasing the tip with my thumb.

Dimitri buries his face in my cunt from behind, licking and sucking on my lips before tunnelling his tongue into my channel. I cry out at the sensation, and he lands a smack on my ass.

“You want both of us, don’t you, baby?” Nik asks, his voice husky and passion filled.

“Yes, please. Fill me. Fuck me. Make me yours!” I cry as Dimitri lines his bare cock up with my pussy and presses inside. My arousal is so heightened that he slides halfway in on the first go.

Holding onto my hips, he pulls back and slams home. I slide my lips around Nik’s impossibly hard cock again, playing with the taut skin just under the head and driving him as wild as Dimitri is driving me.

Every forward thrust has Nik sinking deeper down my throat. They work together, timing their movements, so I’m sliding between them, bringing us all to the edge of ecstasy.

My tits sway under me, and the tropical breeze floats across my ass, my skin growing damp with sweat and humidity. The call of the birds in the trees is the soundtrack to our culmination as Nik swells in my mouth, his cum pouring into me. Dimitri grunts and finds my clit with his fingers. He barely touches me, and I detonate between them, feeling so loved, whole, and needed as they find their release within me, free to be who they are, scars and all.

Dimitri pounds into me twice more, his controlled movements growing erratic. He groans out his release as he grips my hips *hard*, filling my cunt with his cum, murmuring sweet words as he comes down from his high.

Then, I hear it.

They high-five above my back just as Bella lets out a cry.

Our girl is awake, and my guys just did the Eiffel Tower.

What a life we've chosen for ourselves.

# EPILOGUE

Eleanor

“AH, SHIT,” I CURSE A LITTLE TOO LOUDLY. I LOOK UP FROM MY LAPTOP AND see that, thankfully, Bella didn’t hear me. She’s in the middle of the living room, sitting on the plush rug and building a little city out of her blocks.

Her focus is entirely on the mini city, and I turn back towards the screen, assured she won’t pick up yet *another* curse word.

I pick up my phone and call Olivia. It rings twice before she answers. “Hey, best bitch!”

“We have *got* to work on your greetings.” I sigh, scanning the information again. “We got a new request.”

“Okay . . . we get a lot of job requests, but you never call about those. What’s special about this one?”

“It’s an old face with a big problem.”

“Spill it, Ellie. You’re edging me harder than when Viraj and I were on the ski lift.”

I shudder. “Gross. There are children at ski resorts.”

“*ELLIE!* Focus!”

“It’s Natasha.”

There’s silence on the line, and I grip the edge of the desk, waiting while her brain explodes like mine did a few seconds ago.

It’s been a year of living on our little paradise island, working with Olivia and spending time with Dimitri and Nik as we figure out who we are outside our old roles. I don’t think I’ve ever heard Olivia this quiet for this long in all our years of friendship.

I pull the phone away, checking that the call hasn’t dropped. “You still there?”

She clears her throat. “Yeah. Uh, this is gonna be a shitshow, but let’s check it out together tomorrow when I’m back and go over everything.”

I won’t say no if Olivia wants in on the background and intel gathering. Usually, I pick over the information the clients send, verify it’s valid and up to date, and use an old contact at Interpol to prod for information gently. It’s a lot of work, and while I love doing it because I can work around Bella’s schedule and spend time with her while also working, sometimes it can be a little lonely.

“Okay. For now, what do I do?”

“Pretend it’s a pregnancy test you’re avoiding and shove it in the drawer for a couple of days. It will still be there when you’re ready to look.”

“Har, har,” I say. I should never have called her in a blind panic about possibly being pregnant and not checking the result. “The bathroom secret remains a secret. Pretend it’s in hiding, and we’re covering its ass. Like witness protection or something.”

Olivia snorts. “Fine. But seriously, I’m intrigued by Natasha. She may have been a former target, but I like her.” I swear I hear Olivia’s shrug over the phone. “I always said we could be friends if we weren’t working on opposite sides.”

“You’re delusional. What could you possibly have in common with the leader of the Bratva?”

“We’re both boss bitches. You are, too, so don’t even think about leaving yourself out of this. We rose in a world geared towards the patriarchy and carved out our own lives, free from restriction and the need to conform to what’s expected of us.”

She makes a good point. Leaving Interpol has been a mix of emotions for me, but it became easier once I learned how and what Olivia and her guys really do. I’d always imagined the worst. Murder, mayhem, upheaval . . . you know, the criminal trifecta. But they’re judicious in what jobs they take, never allowing innocents to get caught in the crossfire. And one of their specialities is restoring the power to where it belongs after being wrongfully taken or manipulated.

I can get behind a cause like that.

“Maybe,” I say, conceding that she might have a point that we’re all similar in some regard. “But she’ll likely want our heads once she learns what we did to her. Let’s just pretend it doesn’t exist.”

Olivia laughs. “That pregnancy test isn’t going anywhere.”

Leave it to Ollie to cut through the bullshit and see through my carefully constructed delusions. “I know.”

“You need to know. *They* need to know.”

“Bossy pants. Go finish what you’re working on, and I promise I’ll check the drawer. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Olivia hangs up, and I look over at Bella. My sweet angel is now shouting, “Escape!” as her little fingers push a toy car through the buildings of her city, and her little lips mimic gunfire.

Yeah, we're *those* parents with *that* kid.

"Bella, baby, you want to bake some cupcakes with me?"

She abandons her war zone and climbs into my lap at the table. "Cupcakes!" She smooshes my cheeks and plants a kiss on my nose. "Where's Dada? Papa?" she asks, looking for her fathers.

"Dada is away and working. Papa is in his studio. Want to go get him?" I ask.

Bella's face lights up, and she squirms out of my lap, her little legs taking her down the hall before I hear the door to the studio crash open.

"Hey, princess," Dimitri says. "Where's Mama?"

"In the kitchen!"

There's a squeal of delight and then Dimitri emerges from the hall with an upside-down Bella in his arms. She's giggling and turning red, surveying the world from her new vantage point.

He strides over to the couch, flops Bella down carefully, and approaches me. Leaning over me, his arm braced on the repurposed wooden table, he dips low, taking my lips in a somewhat chaste kiss. "Mmm. Hi. I missed you."

"You've only been painting for an hour," I say between kisses.

"Entirely too long to be away from you. I don't know how Nik does it."

"He needs the excitement of working. And you need the calm of not working." I shrug.

It's true. Nik has joined forces with Olivia and her guys, acting as an extra layer of protection and watching her back. Dimitri, on the other hand, has thrown himself into painting. When he's not with me or Bella, he's in his studio, and his work has been exquisite. He's piqued the interest of a few galleries that want to showcase some of his work, but he says he's not ready.

He's just happy running an Instagram account and selling the one-of-a-kind pieces that don't feature us. Those paintings hang in our house, never meant to be seen by the public. Especially the one above our bed, where I'm stretched between them. My body is partially displayed as Nik's head covers one breast, Dimitri the other, and their hands cover my pussy.

For now, Bella doesn't know what she's looking at, but we should move that one somewhere else before she figures it out.

"His loss," Dimitri says, retaking my lips until Bella regains her footing and pushes her way between us.

"Mama! Papa! I want cupcakes, please." Her eyes are wide and round as

she begs us to get on with it.

I laugh. “Okay, baby. Let’s get baking.”

Our girl is demanding and insistent, pulling me from the chair with her weak arms and pushing me from behind until I’m standing in the kitchen. Dimitri stays where he is, looking me over.

“Barefoot, in the kitchen, but we’re missing something from this equation.”

*And pregnant.*

His eyes trace my body, and my uterus gives a flip. About six months ago, I had my IUD taken out, and Dimitri met with a specialist for a vasectomy reversal. He underwent the procedure and has been insatiable since they gave him the all-clear. I swear, he’s been doing his very best to get me knocked up. Now that we’ve found our footing in our little slice of paradise, we had the baby talk. He was warned it might not be effective, and the statistics were low, but that didn’t deter him from trying his best to prove the doctors wrong.

The doctor warned him it might not work or that it might take time for anything to happen. Yet here I stand with a pregnancy test in a drawer and a sexy former Bratva leader with super sperm. He’s gazing at me, eating me up as he imagines a possible future.

I laugh it off the way I have every time he’s said something similar over the past half a year. But this time, there’s a strain in my voice that’s clear to both of us.

“Eleanor,” he says, a warning clear in his tone.

“Yes, husband dearest?”

“What are you hiding?”

“Nothing.”

Bella chirps up, proving once and for all that she is a tiny sponge and no conversation is safe from her little ears. “Mama has a secret in the bathroom!”

*Little snitch. You’d last three seconds in the Bratva.*

Dimitri quirks a brow at me and turns on his heel, heading down the hall.

“No! Stop!” I cry out, giving chase with Bella hot on my heels.

Dimitri does no such thing, continuing and turning into our bedroom. The duvet is still crumpled at the bottom of the bed, and the lube is haphazardly on the floor from last night’s adventures. Yeah, we’re not *always* trying to get pregnant unless our health education teachers were very wrong about how it

happens.

I kick it away as I pass it, scurrying after Dimitri and into the bathroom.

Dimitri is standing there, feet shoulder-width apart and his hands raised like he's warding off dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*.

"Where is the secret, princess?"

Bella just shrugs.

He rounds on me. "Eleanor?"

"What secret?" I choke out. I'm a horrible liar around Dimitri and Nik, and they know it. His brow raises as he looks at me without blinking.

His eyes travel down my body, landing on my stomach. "Are you?"

"I don't know," I whisper. "And I don't want to know until Nik is home."

Dimitri tenses, blowing out a breath, and then a beaming smile stretches his face. He relaxes his stance and pulls me into his arms. "Okay, my Sabre. We'll wait."

"Stop smiling like that. We don't know anything yet."

"It's a smile full of hope, wife. The day I lose that is the day I die."

Bella shuffles around, pulling a spare doll out from under the cabinets because she literally hides them everywhere. It's like how Dimitri, Nik, and I hid weapons all over the New York penthouse. Nowadays, they're up high and locked in little safes, so Bella can't get to them, but the similarity is eerie.

But Bella's dolls are not just dolls. Oh, no. They're her own Frankenstein creations. She disassembles other dolls and swaps out limbs and heads, making tiny monsters. And they're getting creepier with time.

She pads between us on her bare feet and lifts her hands so Dimitri will pick her up. She's never on the floor long when Dimitri is around, and the man can't resist picking her up for a cuddle whenever she asks. Or when she doesn't ask. Or when she's squirming away.

Basically, the big bad Bratva leader is a snuggle slut.

He has so much love to give, and it warms my heart that he not only showers me with it but fully embraces Bella as his own, loving her just as much as he loves me.

She is his sun, and I am his moon.

"What's this?" he asks, reaching for whatever she's got in her grasp. I see a white stick with a blue cap, and a sense of panic and longing washes over me. My hand flies out, and I knock the pregnancy test away.

Comically, they turn towards me with the same confused look—proving that despite not having a blood relation, they are a father-daughter duo in

every way that counts.

“I haven’t looked at the result.”

“That’s it?” Dimitri asks, following the trajectory of the test. The same longing I feel is prominent on his face. I want to know. He wants to know. We ALL want to know, but *nooooo*. Nik is still away, and it’s not right for two-thirds of us to be in the loop while the other is left out. “I don’t think it’s meant to just sit there after being . . . used. I mean, you peed on it, right?”

“Pee pee goes in the potty!” Bella cheers, reciting the words we’ve told her a thousand times as she went through potty training.

“That’s right, baby,” I assure her, then turn to Dimitri. “I did but then I panicked. It was like I was body snatched! I knew I should have waited to take the test until Nik was home. But then they were delayed and then, out of nowhere, there was a test in my hand. And then suddenly, I realised what I was doing, capped the damn thing, and stuffed it in the drawer.”

Dimitri laughs. “Pretty sure you’ll need to do another one of those to be sure later. Besides, whatever result was on there might be gone now.”

“It’s not an etch-a-sketch!” I argue.

Dimitri rolls his eyes and takes Bella out of the bathroom, muttering about ordering a box of tests to be sure and not getting his hopes up.

Blindly, I reach under the cabinet, finding another doll and the test. With my eyes closed, I feel around until I grab the drawer, yank it open, drop the test in, and slam it shut.

Tomorrow. I can wait one measly day. I’ve already waited for two. What’s one more?

I’m standing on the dock as Dimitri holds my hand and has Bella perched on his hip the next day. I’m proud to say that despite my determination yesterday to leave the test alone, Dimitri only had to stop me from going into the bathroom four times.

I call that impeccable self-control.

The boat draws closer, the powerful motor pushing it towards home.

Nik is in the captain’s chair, his hair dishevelled from the wind, and his dark aviators blocking the bright sunshine. He manoeuvres and docks the boat, slipping the rope around the posts and hopping out, landing on the dock with a loud thud and a beaming smile.

“Dada!” Bella shrieks, wriggling out of Dimitri’s arms. She’s so big now, and it won’t be long until she never wants to be held, but while we can, we’re taking every opportunity she’ll allow us.

She runs along the dock, and Nik drops to his knees, throwing his arms around her when she slams into his chest.

His head ducks between her slim shoulder and neck as he grips her tight. “Hi, baby,” he coos. “I missed you so much.”

“Presents?” she asks sweetly, her little voice sugary sweet as she pulls back from Nik.

“Always, little one. Let me say hi to Mama and Papa and then I’ll get you your present.”

“It had better not be something dangerous again,” Dimitri says as he secures the ropes to the pier while Nik hoists Bella onto his hip. There are proper names for those ropes, and they’ve told me about a hundred times. But honestly, I literally couldn’t care less about the boats and their nautical terminology.

I’m already organising a criminal team, the same for a throuple relationship, raising a child, and possibly cooking another one in the oven. There is literally no more room in my brain for something like boat ropes.

“Nah, it’s for her collection.” I roll my eyes, and Nik lands a smack on my ass in retaliation when he gets closer, whispering in my ear, “You want to do that again, baby?”

“You keep getting her these creepy dolls from everywhere. They’re taking over the house, and when I turn a corner, there’s always one staring at me! Those things scare me half to death every single time.”

Nik looks down at Bella. “Are you scaring Mama on purpose, my sweet girl?”

She looks from Nik to me, then back to Nik again. Leaning close to his ear, she loudly whispers, “Yes.”

“Good girl,” he praises. Turning towards me, he lifts my chin with his free hand and kisses me so sweetly it’s like the old and tortured Nik no longer exists.

“Mmm. I’ve missed you, too,” I say, licking my lip when he pulls away, chasing his taste with my tongue.

“Stop kissing,” Bella complains loudly.

We all laugh, and with an arm around my waist, Nik leads us back to the house, Dimitri falling in line with us.

Once we’re inside and Bella takes the new doll from Nik’s bag, she rockets off for her room. She’ll likely play with it for the next hour before tucking it away somewhere to scare the daylights out of me.

“Now?” Dimitri asks.

I shake my head with exasperation. Nik’s been home for approximately two minutes, and already, my Bratva boss’s knee is bouncing as he sits on the couch.

“Now what?” Nik asks, looking from Dimitri to me.

“Now I pee on a stick.”

“WHAT?!” Nik jumps up, crossing the living room and pulling me into his arms. “Really?”

He pulls back, his dark eyes searching mine for a hint of a lie. I nod, and his eyes fill with emotion.

“I’m not sure yet. But I’ll go now. Someone keep an eye on Bella while I go handle business.”

“Fuck that,” Dimitri says, Nik echoing the sentiment. “We’re not missing a moment of this.”

Knowing there’s no dissuading the two of them when they put their mind to something, I shrug and head down the hallway. They follow, almost stepping on my heel and giving me a flat tyre in their haste.

“Bella?” I remind them.

Nik pulls his phone out and clicks on the app to check on her in her room. “She’s good. She’s decapitated the doll already. I hope she switches the head with the orc doll I got her a few months ago. That’d be fun.”

“You’re sick,” I throw over my shoulder as we reach the bathroom. “Are you two seriously going to watch all of this?”

They cross their arms over their chests, painting such a pretty picture. I sigh, pull a new test from the drawer and do the deed.

“Now what?” Nik asks as I cap it and place it on the counter.

“Now we wait. Three minutes,” I read off the back of the packaging to be ultra sure. Dimitri bought those fancy and expensive tests that tell you approximate weeks pregnant, but I pull out one of the cheap ones as a backup. I don’t trust the technology. With the second test done, I put it on a toilet paper square and finish up.

We stand there, no one moving or blinking as the seconds tick by. The liquid creeps along the test strip on the cheap test, passing the control line and driving us all crazy as we watch.

“Is that the line?” Nik asks, bending so close that the test is an inch from his eyeball.

“Just wait, man. Jesus, patience has never been your virtue,” Dimitri

gripes.

“No, but I make up for it in other ways.” Nik stands from his crouch and shoots a wink at me.

He’s not wrong.

But then, I see it—the faintest hint of a line on the cheap test. The expensive one still has that infuriating loading bar on the little window.

Nik’s eyes are wide as he stares at the simple test. “I don’t know if I’m willing that line into existence or if my eyes are playing tricks on me.”

Dimitri says nothing; he waits the appropriate three minutes, and when the electronic test’s window changes, he falls to his knees.

“Two to three weeks,” he mutters, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me closer.

Earlier this month, Nik was on a job with Olivia for the better part of two weeks. I didn’t know when I ovulated, and I’d been with both of them before and after Nik got home, but the timing on the little window means the bun in the oven is half Dimitri.

He lifts my shirt, exposing my still-flat belly. “Hi, baby,” he coos, his voice breaking and his hands trembling as he puts one just below my navel.

Nik is smiling down at Dimitri, nothing but love shining in his eyes. They reconciled long ago, and their relationship is stronger than ever as we learn to navigate our new lives together as a group.

He claps a hand on Dimitri’s shoulder and pulls me in for a kiss, wiping the tears of joy from my face with his callused thumbs.

“A family of five,” he says with awe and wonder in his tone.

Dimitri’s shoulders shake as he holds me, his snuffle so uncharacteristic that I reach for him and pull him to his feet.

“Are you okay?” I ask, staring into his ice-blue eyes, so full of emotion and excitement that I know I’ll never get the image of them out of my head for as long as I live.

His smile wavers as he holds back some of the emotion threatening to break free. “I’m so good, my Sabre. *Thank you.*” He kisses me, punctuating his sentences with pecks all over my face. “Thank you for helping me. For loving me. Thank you for being ours and bringing us together. Thank you for our life.”

He wraps his arms around me, hugging me tightly and resting his face in the crook of my neck, whispering more words of love.

Nik keeps a hand on my back, rubbing small circles until he suddenly

freezes.

Curiously, I look at him, and his face has morphed from joy to fear.

“What is it?” I ask. Dimitri hears my concern and looks over at Nik.

“I just . . . what do we do? I can start the boat and get us to a doctor. Who’s going to watch Bella? We need to get the bedroom ready. Oh fuck, what if they’re lactose intolerant? How do you feed a child allergic to milk?” His voice raises in pitch as he continues talking. “And Bella! What if she thinks we’ll love the new baby more than her? We need to work on her sharing! Oh God, and do you have a birth plan?”

I can’t stop the laugh as it bubbles up.

“Nik, honey. Take a deep breath.”

He does as I say, the sound stuttering through his panicked body.

“Now let it out and listen. I will make an appointment to go to the doctor next week for extra confirmation. Olivia and the guys will watch Bella if needed, you know that. At least one of them always stays behind when they go on jobs. There is a specialised formula in case of a dairy issue. She will love her new sibling. And we can teach her to share in the next eight-ish months. My birth plan is the same as when I had Bella, but this time, insisting the two of you be in the room with me.”

Nik steadily exhales as I finish answering his questions, and he looks remorseful.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here the first time. There’s so much, and you did it all alone. I’ll never be able to get that time back, but I promise I—” Dimitri clears his throat loudly, levelling Nik with a gaze. “We will be here for all of it.”

“I know. If you weren’t, I’d put Olivia on your asses to drag you back here and handcuff you to the delivery bed.”

“Unnecessary,” Dimitri says. “We’re in this, and we’re excited.” He punches Nik’s shoulder. “Right?”

Nik shakes out of his momentary panic and nods, his eyes on my stomach. “So in this.”

“Good,” I say, cocking my head to the side. My phone is ringing in the kitchen, and it’s Olivia’s ringtone. “I gotta get that. We got a request while you were away, and I think you’ll both want to know about it.”

They look at me curiously but follow me to the kitchen. Nik gives a little cheer when he sees Bella has completely mutilated her doll and stuck random leftover body parts on it.

“Hey, what’s up?” I answer when I put the call on speakerphone. “You’re with all of us, and these two just learned they’re going to be dads again.”

“WOOO!” Olivia cheers. “Do they know about the drawer?”

Dimitri laughs, but Nik isn’t in the loop yet. “We’ll discuss it later,” I tell him. “Anyway, what’s going on?”

“If you’re done celebrating, let’s discuss the Natasha thing. I pulled up the request, and it’s a doozy.”

“Natasha?!” Nik and Dimitri say together.

*Oops.* “Yeah, did I not mention?”

“No, you most certainly did not,” Dimitri says, the promise of punishment twinkling in his eye. Oh, how I love his punishment.

“I think we should take it,” Olivia says, insouciant as all fuck, like she’s discussing the weather.

“I agree,” I say, earning glares from the guys. Dimitri reaches for me, and Nik cuts me off as I try to hide behind him.

“Okay, let’s go over it all next week. I just got home and need to hump someone.”

I sigh. “Good lord, woman, you’re insatiable. No wonder you have four of them.”

She laughs and hangs up. Nik and Dimitri press me between them. “Am I in trouble?” I ask sweetly, knowing exactly how this is going to go.

I will end up between them, our child growing in my womb as our daughter mutilates dolls in her room without a care in the world. The earth will continue to turn under our feet, and our love will keep us firmly planted on the island we call home.

Because there’s nothing better in my life than the love of my men, family, and friends—just one island over.

THE END

## AFTERWORD

Dear reader, thank you for spending your precious time on *The Payback*. I appreciate every single one of you who turns the pages and lives these characters lives for a short while.

This book was a a joy to plan, plot, and write, and I hope that came across as we watched these beautiful humans, so broken and yet so hopeful, find their ways to one another.

There are plans for Natasha's story in the future, so please make sure you're in my reader group on Facebook: [Mila's Sin-Sations](#) for any news when the date gets closer!

Ooh, I can't wait for that one...

In the meantime, if you want a smutty little novella about the night Bella was conceived, let me know in my Facebook group! It's always good to know if readers want more!

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To my amazing family: you, you, and me. Always.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mila is a coffee addict, a bookworm, and an all around awkward woman with absolutely zero chill. She lives vicariously through book characters so she doesn't end up in prison. Her fan club is led by her husband, Mr. Sin, and the ever-charming Toddler Sin. When she's not imagining murder scenarios for her books, Mila teaches English as a second language and lives in a quaint town on the Croatian coast.

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