

Embraced

The Life of Anna, Part 3



Marissa Honeycutt

The Life of Anna, Part 3: Embraced

By Marissa Honeycutt

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All portrayals of sexual acts are between adults (aka, over the age of 18).

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*****Warning*****

This book is for grownups. This book is not for people who are easily offended, get nightmares easily, or have difficulty reading books about tough subjects. I do not glorify bad things, but bad things do happen to my poor characters. This is not your typical love story. My heroine does not fall in love and live happily ever after... at least not like the typical heroine. There is a happily ever after, but it is a long, painful journey to that end.

This is not a stand-alone novel. The series must be read in order.

Anna's story is told in five, novel-length books. There is a subculture within our own world that you've only heard whispers of. The conspiracy theorists wish they knew Anna's story. What the conspiracy theorists think they know is only disinformation, put out there to keep them from the real story.

This book will likely offend you. This book might make you cry; it might make you throw up. It is a dark book. As my friend, Heidi, said, "It's dark. It gets darker. It gets even darker, and then it gets even darker. And then, just when you think it can't get any darker, it does."

But, don't worry. I take you to the deep end gradually. ;)

There are many sexual situations in this series of books. People die. People get hurt. Things aren't always truly the way they appear. The antagonist isn't just a bad guy; he's EVIL. My heroine's worldview is skewed; things that may appall you are perfectly normal to her.

Any violence in this book is non-gratuitous and crucial to the plot and character development. Do not read this if you are under the age of consent in your country. Do not get angry if the subject or actual book upsets you. If you're reading this, you've been warned.

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Chapter One

“It’s kinda early,” Ben commented as he and Anna rode the Sapphire’s elevator up to their floor together. “Do you want to come to my place for a bit? We could watch a movie or something.”

“Sure,” Anna said, glancing over at him. She’d had a wonderful dinner date with her neighbor last night, ending with a simple, tender kiss goodnight at her door. Today the young lawyer had followed up with lunch and a sweet Sunday afternoon walk on the beach. Ben was fun and incredibly smart, and he had a way about him that put her at ease, even after a long, rough evening at the Manor with Devin. He had also managed to help her forget, for a while, the reason she had gone to the Manor early last week.

Ben grinned and they walked down the hallway to his apartment. He unlocked the door and they walked into an apartment with a similar feel to Anna’s, but with a different setup. Their living room was in the center of the apartment with the bedrooms on either side. The TV was on and Ben’s roommate, Matt, sat on the couch drinking a beer. Anna didn’t notice Greg at first, but when she did, she stiffened. The man hired by Alex to *babysit* her was slouched in a chair, looking cool as a cucumber.

“Hey, I thought you’d have Jenna over,” Ben said, pulling Anna further into the room.

“She had something to do with her dad,” Matt answered with a shrug. Anna’s best friend Jenna had hooked up with Matt after their double date last Thursday.

Anna smiled at Matt but gave Greg a dirty look. *Dirty, stinking liar*. He had pretended to be her friend, when all the while he was being paid to watch over Alex’s *property*.

Greg looked up at her, nodded slightly, and then stood. "I should get going. I've got some stuff to do before I hit the sack."

Anna frowned in confusion. Why was he leaving? She thought he was supposed to keep an eye on her. Was this a trick? Or was it Alex's way of saying he no longer cared enough to even protect his property?

"Are you sure?" Matt asked, looking surprised. "The movie's not over."

Greg gave Anna an understanding smile. "Nah. I gotta go. I'll see ya later. Thanks for the beer."

Anna watched as Greg left, then sighed in relief.

"Hey, how was your, what, second date?" Matt asked.

Ben smiled at Anna. "Second or third? Does dinner on Thursday count as a date?"

Anna giggled. "I don't know. Does it?"

Ben looked thoughtful. "I think it does. Because then I could do this." He cupped her cheek and pressed his lips to hers, caressing them and giving Anna goose bumps up and down her arms. She kissed him back and lost herself in his touch.

When he pulled away, Anna looked at him shyly. "Are you not allowed to kiss me like that until our third date?"

Ben chuckled. "Nope. It's too forward."

Anna giggled. "Then I think I'll consider it our third date as well."

"Always the gentleman." Matt chuckled and stood up. "I'll finish in my room. Nice seeing you, Anna."

"Nice seeing you, Matt."

Ben and Anna sat on the couch and talked for a bit. She loved hearing him talk about his family; so different from her own. She avoided telling him much about her life after her parents died. She didn't want to tell him

what she was, but worried about being dishonest. Maybe she should ask Jenna for advice.

“Why don't you like talking about your guardian?” Ben asked after Anna had deflected a third question about Jack.

Anna flushed. “He...wasn't, er isn't, very nice.”

Ben chuckled. “Well, maybe he's one of *those kind* of lawyers. A lot of lawyers aren't nice. Especially when they get to the top of the mountain.”

“Does that mean you won't be nice when you get successful?” Anna didn't think that was possible.

“I hope not. I try really hard to be a nice guy.”

She smiled. “I think you succeed.”

He grinned. “Thanks.”

They looked at each other for a moment, then Anna blushed and looked away.

“Did he hurt you? Your guardian, I mean?”

Anna looked back at him, alarmed. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Gut feeling. When you said he wasn't nice and didn't like talking about him, it kinda made sense.”

Anna studied Ben's eyes for a long moment. How much could she tell him? Would he still like her if he found out what she really was? Tears came unbidden to her eyes. She felt like she was deceiving him by not telling him, but fear kept her mouth shut. She really liked him and it would devastate her if he didn't want to see her anymore.

“Hey,” he said in a soft voice, and pulled her close. “Hey, it's okay. I would never judge you for something someone did to you, Anna.” He stroked her hair and kissed her head. “He did hurt you, didn't he?”

Anna nodded.

“I’m so sorry, Anna,” he whispered and hugged her close. “Men like that...oh, they make me so angry.” He kissed the top of her head. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean...I want you to know that if you ever want to talk about it, I’ll listen. And I wouldn’t ever think badly of you.”

Anna looked up into his eyes and smiled. “You’re a really nice guy, you know that?”

He smiled tenderly. “I try.”

She stroked his cheek with her thumb, then leaned up and kissed him. He slid his hand around the back of her head and deepened the kiss, his tongue slipping in between her lips, making her moan softly. They kissed for a long time, then Ben pulled away suddenly, panting.

“Anna....” He searched her eyes. “Do...do you want to stay the night?”

Anna nodded. “Yes,” she whispered. “Very much so.”

He nodded and stood, pulling her to her feet. He kissed her again, then took her into his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Chapter Two

Anna slept soundly in Ben's arms. She awoke to him stroking her hair back from her face. The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes was his smile.

"Good morning, beautiful," he said with a tender smile.

"Good morning," she replied, smiling back. It had been a wonderful night. Anna was pretty sure he didn't know anything about the Brotherhood because he didn't make any comments about her rings or jewelry. At his age, if his father was a Brother, he would be aware of the organization. She knew he wasn't because he had no piercings of his own.

Anna glanced out the window. The sun was just rising. "What time is it?"

"Six. I have to get to the office early today, unfortunately. If I had known what a wonderful night I was going to have, I wouldn't have scheduled such an early morning meeting." He leaned down to kiss her. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She smiled. "I understand."

"What time do you finish dancing?"

Anna thought for a minute. "I don't know exactly. This is my first day with the Company. Probably around five, though."

"You dance all day? Wow."

"I don't have to be there until ten. And it's not like I'm dancing nonstop. I have breaks." She giggled.

Ben rolled his eyes. "I figured that." He grinned down at her. "I'll be home around six. Do you want to have dinner here with me?"

Anna nodded eagerly.

He leaned down and kissed her neck. “Then maybe dessert here in my room?”

Anna nodded and giggled. “Sounds wonderful. What will we have?”

“Mmm. How about you?”

Anna giggled again. “Only if I get you, too.”

“Hon, you can have me any time you want.” He rolled on top of her. “You have an amazing mouth.” He kissed her. “And body.” He kissed her again. “And everything else.”

Anna felt him hard against her thigh and pressed up against him, which made him groan. He captured her lips with his. “I suppose I could be a little late,” he murmured against her lips.

Anna arrived at the studio early, hoping to find Jenna. She saw Aaron parking as she walked out of the garage.

“Hey, Anna!” he said, jogging up to her and giving her a big hug. “How was your trip?”

“DC was interesting. I got to see a lot of interesting things, so I guess it was good.” She grinned at him and hugged him again. “I’ve missed you.”

He buried his face in her neck. “I’ve missed you too.”

Anna closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. He always smelled so good.

“Hey, you’re with the Company now. You wanna go out to dinner after rehearsal?”

Anna knew what he was asking and she bit her lip. She was pretty sure that she and Ben were more than just dating at this point. “I...I can’t. I have plans.”

Aaron looked surprised. “With who?”

“Um, a guy in my building. His name is Ben.”

Aaron stiffened and pulled away. “Oh.” He looked up at the roof with a pained look in his eyes.

“Aaron...please don't...”

“No, it's okay, Anna. I just thought...well, I thought I'd have at least a chance to ask you out before some other guy did.” He glanced back down at her. “Is it...um...have you gone out with him before?”

Anna blushed and nodded. “We went out a few times over the weekend.” She winced. “I'm sorry, Aaron.”

“It's okay.” Aaron shook his head and sighed. “C'mon. Let's go.”

Anna felt awful. Maybe she shouldn't have gone out with Ben. But it's not like she had been looking for someone. It just...happened. She glanced at Aaron as they walked together to the studio. His face was inscrutable, but she could sense his hurt.

Aaron opened the door for Anna then disappeared into the crowd of students and professional dancers. She blinked tears away as she looked around for Jenna.

“Jenna!” Anna called when she saw her across the room.

They made their way towards one another. “Hey, how was your date?” Jenna asked.

Anna blushed. “Good.”

“Really good, by the looks of that blush.”

She told Jenna what had happened over the weekend and Jenna squealed. “I'm so happy for you. He seems like a really nice guy.”

“Yeah. I hurt Aaron, though. He's upset because he didn't get a chance to ask me out.”

“I know he'd been looking forward to it.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

Jenna shrugged. “I don't know. I guess I forgot.”

Anna frowned, something telling her there might be more than just a lapse of memory going on there.

“Wanna do lunch?” Jenna asked.

Anna nodded.

“Okay, meet you at break.”

Anna headed to the main studio where the soloists and principals had class together. Travis saw her walk in and walked over quickly to hug her.

“Hey, partner,” he said. “Ready to be a professional dancer?”

Anna grinned. “Yeah. I think I am.”

Time flew by. Anna spent the days in rehearsals and the evenings with Ben. The more time she spent with him, the more she realized she was in danger of falling in love again. She debated the wisdom of it, but Devin didn't seem to mind and she took that as his approval.

Summer ended and fall began, and life continued to progress in a positive direction. A few months into their relationship, Ben took Anna to a very nice restaurant and told her that he loved her over dinner. She could honestly answer him with her own profession of love.

She felt guilty about hiding her “other life” and, as laid back as Ben was, it was getting more and more difficult. Especially when he wanted to take her out of town one weekend and she couldn't go because she had to spend time with her “family friend.”

He wasn't happy about the family friend, and Anna suspected that he didn't totally buy into it, but he didn't press her. Too much.

Devin continued to take Anna “visiting” to various political leaders, going to Sacramento a few times as well. She was apparently becoming a favorite of the Governor's, and Devin took every opportunity to let her

spend time with him. Devin frequently asked her to plant suggestions in the Governor's mind. She once heard him refer to her ability to reel in a shark on a trout hook, but she didn't really know what that meant.

Greg maintained his distance from her, much to her relief, but every time she saw him, she was reminded that Alex hadn't called. Her anger at Alex continued as a low-level burn inside her.

There were more than a few nights when Ben almost caught the men going to her apartment, but she avoided most of the problem by staying at his place. Ben didn't seem to mind. There seemed to be fewer men than there used to be, which Anna certainly didn't mind, and to her profound relief she didn't see Zach at all.

Then, out of the blue, Alex called in the middle of November, telling her he wanted her to come visit after Nutcracker was over and spend the New Year in Germany with him. He didn't ask her; he *told* her she was coming. She hated him for that. He had implied that he was so different from Devin, yet he gave her no choice in the matter. She wanted to spend New Year's Eve with Ben, not the Master she was beginning to despise, but she didn't have any choice. As if her consent was optional, she told Alex she would be there.

By the time Thanksgiving came around, she was completely head-over-heels in love with Ben and wanted to spend as much time with him as possible. When she asked Devin for permission to go to Seattle to meet Ben's family, she knew she had aroused Devin's anger, but was happily shocked when he said yes.

Ben's family was every bit as wonderful as he had made them out to be, and they seemed to really like her. His parents and sisters were very welcoming and instantly put her at ease. It was her first family Thanksgiving since her parents died. Jack never made a big deal out of

holidays, and there had been absolutely no trace of celebration after she turned sixteen.

As opening night approached, Anna felt sick with worry about the weekend. Kurt and Wilhelm were coming into town and she needed to spend time with them. But Ben still knew nothing of her other life. How would she explain that she couldn't see him after opening night because she had to be with her Master's family?

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Chapter Three

On the Wednesday before opening night, Anna got a call from Ben. “Hey, love,” Ben said in an excited voice. “Are you in the middle of something?”

“Just hanging out waiting for the first act to finish. Why? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything is more than okay. We won!”

“Oh, Ben!” Anna exclaimed, beaming. “Oh, I’m so happy for you! You’ve been working so hard on that case!”

“Thanks, love.”

“We should celebrate,” Anna said, dropping her voice seductively, though she couldn’t hold back a happy grin for the man she loved.

“Yes, definitely. But first, the team is going out for drinks at Massey’s. When do you think you’ll be done rehearsing?”

“This is our last run through for the day. Should be done in about an hour.”

“Wonderful. Do you want to meet me there? You can meet my team.”

“I’d love to.”

“You know where it is?”

“Right around the corner from your office, right?”

“Yep.”

“All right. I’ll text you when I leave.”

“Sounds good. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Anna grinned and hung up.

“What’s up?” Travis asked, seeing her grin. “Boyfriend troubles?”

Anna giggled. “Hardly.” Travis always asked her that. He jokingly said it was because he wanted to be the first to know if they broke up so he could ask her out. But she knew Travis was happy for her. “He won his case. His team is going out to celebrate and he wanted me to come along.”

“That’s great.”

Anna nodded and tied the ribbons on her pointe shoes. “It is. I’m so happy for him.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’re so much in love, it’s revolting sometimes.” Travis rolled his eyes at her.

Anna sent Ben a text as she started her car. It would only take a few minutes to get to the bar. Maybe tonight she would tell Ben the truth. No, tonight she *had* to tell him the truth. There wasn’t any more time to put it off.

She hadn’t wanted to worry him during his case, even though she hated lying to him about so many things. She loved him and wanted to be truthful with him in all things. He always said that he’d love her, no matter what.

But would he still love her if he knew she was a sex slave?

She pulled up in front of the sports bar ten minutes later. There were no spots in front, so she circled the block until she found a spot. When she walked in, Ben rushed over.

“I was getting worried,” he said, kissing her.

“I couldn’t find a spot. Sorry.”

Ben grinned. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

She liked that he worried about her. He wanted to protect her from her guardian, even though Ben didn’t know who her guardian was. When she was occasionally late, he always worried that Jack had gotten ahold of her.

“Well, c’mon. Let me show you off.”

Anna grinned as he pulled her towards a large group of tables in the back of the room. It was crowded with many men and women in professional attire laughing and drinking.

Someone caught her eye and she stopped dead in her tracks. No, it couldn’t be. *Please no*. But when he turned around, there was no denying it. Jack was standing with a beer in his hand, laughing with the group of people Ben was leading her towards.

“Anna, love. What’s wrong?”

Anna couldn’t say anything. Her mouth wouldn’t work. Jack turned and saw her. He grinned wickedly and walked slowly towards them.

“Anna?” Ben turned her to face him. “Anna, you’re so pale. What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Ben. I’m so sorry.” She looked up at him with tears in her eyes, knowing Ben would find out the truth tonight whether she wanted him to or not. Jack wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to humiliate her.

“What are you apologizing for? Why are you pale?” He brushed her hair out of her face. “Love, please. Talk to me.”

Anna glanced at Jack, who was only a few feet away. What could she do?

“Ben, I need to tell you something—” she began, but Jack interrupted her.

“Ben!” Jack said, patting him on the shoulder. “Is this the girl you’ve been moon-eyed over for the last few months?” Jack grinned at Ben.

Ben put his arm around Anna’s shoulder. “Yes, it is. Anna, this is my boss, Jack Koslov. Jack, this is my girlfriend—”

“Anna. Oh, yes. I know who she is.”

Ben looked confused. “You do?”

Jack cupped her chin. “You didn’t tell him about me, Baby? I’m hurt.”

Anna tried to shake her head free but he held on too tightly.

“Let her go, Jack,” Ben said with warning in his voice. He pulled Anna away from him. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Jack looked at Anna with amusement. “Do you want to tell him, or shall I?”

Anna looked up at Ben, who watched her with concerned eyes. “He... he’s my guardian, Ben,” she said softly.

Ben turned his gaze to Jack and narrowed his eyes. “This is the man who abused you?” His hand curled up in a fist and before Anna realized what was happening, Ben took a swing at Jack and hit him in the jaw. “You fucking bastard.”

Jack grabbed his jaw and looked between Anna and Ben, then burst out laughing. “Oh, Baby. He doesn’t know, does he?”

Fury lit Ben’s eyes. “What the fuck are you talking about?” he asked through clenched teeth.

Anna was vaguely aware that the room had become silent, but was so afraid of what Jack was going to say, she didn’t really think about it. She looked up at Ben. “I...there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Anna, you don’t need to defend yourself against what he did to you. We’ve talked about this.”

She shook her head. “No, there’s more.” Tears filled her eyes. “I....” She looked around. “Can we sit down over there?” She pointed to an empty table away from his coworkers. She didn’t think Devin would like it if everyone in the restaurant heard what she was going to tell him. Ben nodded and they went over and sat down.

Anna rubbed her hands together and stared at the table top. Ben reached across the table and put his hands on hers.

“Tell me, love,” he said in a gentle voice. “Tell me anything you feel you need to.”

Anna bit her lip. Where did she begin? She looked around to see that Jack had disappeared. Tears stung her eyes as she tried to figure out what to say.

“Anna, I love you. Anything you need to tell me. I’ll listen. And we’ll work it out. I’ve always promised that. You know that, right?”

Anna looked up at him. Such love shone from his eyes it made her heart ache so badly she wanted to reach in and throw it out of her body. Would he still feel the same way after he found out what she was? “I don’t know where to begin,” she whispered.

Ben smiled tenderly. “The beginning. I’ve always found that a good place to start.” He squeezed her hands encouragingly.

“Do you know who Devin Andersen is?” she asked.

“Of course. Everyone knows who he is.” Ben smiled. “What does that have to do with you? Do you know him?”

Anna nodded. “I’ve known him all my life. He and Jack are very good friends.” She proceeded to haltingly tell Ben about what Devin and Jack did to her and how she was raised. Ben’s face registered more and more shock as she talked. “On my twentieth birthday, Jack took me to...a place that belongs to Devin and handed me over to him.” She was reluctant to go on. This is where things got worse.

“What do you mean, Jack handed you over to him?”

“Devin...owns me. I belong to him.”

Ben laughed uncertainly. “Anna, you can’t *belong* to anyone. No one can *own* you.”

Anna shook her head. “Devin makes his own rules, Ben. He owns me.” She pointed to her necklace. “He gave me this to warn men that he owns

me. If I don't wear it...I get hurt." The memory of the jewelry store incident rushed into her mind.

"Anna, he can't—"

"Oh, but he does, Ben." Jack's voice dripped venom as he sat down next to Anna and put his arm around her shoulder. Anna leaned away and Ben narrowed his eyes at Jack.

"Get out of here, Jack," he growled. "This has nothing to do with you."

"Doesn't it?" he asked in a mocking voice, then leaned into Anna and spoke in a stage whisper. "Did you tell him how often I get to fuck you? Does he know what you do on Friday nights? All those men you fuck all night long? Did you tell him you're Devin's mistress?"

Tears spilled over onto Anna's cheeks as Jack spoke. She didn't want to look at Ben. She didn't want to see the disgust on his face.

Ben growled. "Jack, haven't you done enough to her? Why are you saying those things?"

"Because they're true," Jack answered simply. "Tell him, Anna," he leaned in and kissed Anna's ear. "Tell him how you knelt between my legs on Friday and sucked me off so good I almost screamed." Jack looked at Ben. "Please tell me you've experienced one of her incredible blowjobs. Don't they make you want to scream?"

Anna dared to peek up and look at Ben. His face was distorted with rage and disgust, just like in her worst nightmares.

He looked at her with tear-filled eyes. "Anna, tell me what he said isn't true. Tell me he's lying." He trembled and Anna could see his jaw clenching and unclenching as he stared at her with such intensity she wanted to look away.

But this might be the last time she got to see him. He wouldn't want her after this, after he knew the truth about her. And she couldn't lie anymore. It

was over and she knew it.

Her chest ached as she shook her head. "It's true, Ben," she whispered, shoulders slumping. "Jack isn't lying."

"You told me that you were spending time with a family friend on Fridays."

"Devin is a family friend. I told you I've known him my whole life."

"She just spends time with him and a hundred of his friends. And she fucks most of them."

Anna winced and closed her eyes.

"Get out of here, Jack," Ben growled. "This has nothing to do with you."

Jack chuckled and stood. "Enjoy your evening. I think I'll call Devin. He'll get a kick out of this." He walked away laughing.

"I'm so sorry, Ben," she whispered, glancing up at him. He looked so angry and he was staring off into the distance.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" He shook his head and met her eyes, his own eyes hard. "You go off on Friday nights and fuck other men?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered again.

"You've been doing it the whole time we've been together?" he asked in a strained voice.

"I have to, Ben. Devin...punishes me if I disobey him."

"Punishes you? How?" His voice was cold.

"He...hurts me...however he wants to."

"You're trying to tell me that if you don't have sex with him, he punishes you?"

Anna nodded. "I'm his slave, Ben. I have to do as he tells me." Her voice cracked as she spoke.

Ben gave her a disgusted look. “Anna, this is a free country. Slavery is illegal. You don’t have to do anything like that if you don’t want to.”

“You don’t understand, Ben. Devin...he owns...he controls everything....”

He snorted. “That sounds like a really bad excuse, Anna. You must like it or you wouldn’t go to him.” He stood. “I can’t believe you’ve lied to me this whole time.” He looked past her and shook his head. “I can’t be with someone who lies and cheats. You do realize you’ve been cheating on me? Or were you cheating on Devin?” His eyes grew cold. “You were never mine to have, were you? If you *belong* to Devin, as you say, then you were never....” He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “I can’t believe I was deceived by you. I should have known you were too good to be true. Is this how you get your kicks? Making men fall in love with you?”

“Ben, please,” she implored. “I do love you. With all my—”

He put his hands up. “Save it.”

He sighed and looked down at her with a pained expression for a long minute, then reached out and stroked her cheek. She leaned into his hand, hoping he had changed his mind and would forgive her.

“Ben, please,” she implored. “I wish I didn’t have to...have this other life. I’d give anything to be yours and yours alone.” She took his hands in hers. “Please believe me.”

His eyes softened and hope rose inside her. “I don’t know, Anna,” he said after a long moment of silence. “I...I need time to think about all this. I’ll call you later.” He turned and walked away without another word.

She watched him walk away and tried to blink away the tears, but there were too many. She watched the door after he walked out, hoping he’d come back in, but after a few minutes, she realized he wouldn’t be coming back.

Her shoulders slumped and she slowly picked up her purse and walked out of the bar. She made her way to her car and got in, and burst into tears. Her forehead pressed into the steering wheel and she sobbed for an eternity. This fresh pain in her heart hurt all the worse after so many weeks of love and pleasure. How could her heart forget that love always came around to pain?

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Chapter Four

Anna tried to clear her head long enough to figure out what to do next. Her phone rang and she dug for it eagerly in her purse, thinking it was Ben. But it wasn't Ben's picture; it was Kurt's. She sighed. That was the last thing she needed right now. But she had her duties. Her duties that had just ruined her relationship with Ben. At least Kurt knew who she was.

"Hello, Kurt," she said in a cracked voice.

"*Engel!* Are you all right?" Kurt's voice instantly filled with concern.

"I..." She started to tell him she was fine, but burst into tears before she could.

"Engel, where are you?"

She tried to speak, but couldn't get any words out.

"Anna, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"I..." She sniffed. "I'm okay. Just...sad."

"You sound more than sad, Engel. Where are...oh, never mind. Anna, stay where you are. I will come get you." He ended the call and Anna tossed her phone on the seat next to her.

Somewhere in her mind, she wondered how Kurt would find her without her telling him where she was, but right now she just didn't care. She rested her head on the steering wheel again and stared at her knees.

Her mind drifted to the past few wonderful months with Ben as she waited for Kurt to arrive. A knock on the window made her jump and she looked up to see Kurt peering into her car with a concerned look on his face. She opened the door and he gathered her into his arms, and she promptly burst into tears again.

He murmured something in German and helped her around to the passenger side of the car. He put her in and fastened her seatbelt, then

squeezed himself into the driver's side and drove away.

"Where are we going?" she asked in a broken whisper.

"The hotel," he said in his thickly accented voice. He put his hand on her knee. "I am worried about you, *Engel*. You are very pale. Are you sick?"

Anna shook her head. "No," she whispered.

She stared blankly out the window as Kurt drove through the city. A few minutes later, Kurt pulled up in front of the Ritz Carlton, the white palace not far from her apartment.

A valet opened her door and Kurt hurried around to help her out of the car. He took her hand and led her into the hotel, to the elevators, and up to a hotel suite.

"Anna! What happened?" Wilhelm hurried over to her and hugged her to him.

Anna closed her eyes, feeling safer than she had in a long time. She realized that Kurt and Wilhelm, especially, always had that effect on her. *And Alex*, a quiet voice added, but she shushed it before it took hold. She adored both Wilhelm and Kurt and their presence was a balm to her broken heart. Wilhelm led her over to the couch and sat her down with his arm around her. Kurt sat next to her and caressed her legs.

"Anna, *Liebling*, tell me what happened," Wilhelm urged in a gentle voice.

She started crying again as she told them about her relationship with Ben and then the events earlier in the evening. When she finished, they sat quietly together, Anna's head on Wilhelm's chest. He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head.

"I am sure he will call you soon, Anna," Kurt said in a soothing voice. "No one could give you up so easily. Not if he truly loves you."

“How could he forgive me for something like that? I cheated on him.”

“Anna, being forced to have sex with another man is hardly cheating,” Wilhelm said. “You did not choose your life.”

She shook her head. “He was so angry and disgusted with me.”

“Anna, what Devin makes you do makes me angry and disgusted,” Wilhelm said. “It does not mean I feel that way about you.”

She didn’t respond. Ben didn’t know anything about the Brotherhood, or Council, as Devin was calling it now.

“*Liebling*, do you want to stay with us tonight?” Wilhelm asked.

Anna nodded. She didn’t want to go back to her lonely apartment. Too many memories of Ben there.

“Kurt, please call Jim and have him bring some things of Anna’s over so she does not have to go get them.”

Anna frowned. “Who’s Jim?” she asked as Kurt left the room.

“Greg’s replacement while he is out of town.” Wilhelm answered.

“Greg’s out of town?” She hardly saw him, which was fine with her. She didn’t know that there was someone else there while he was gone.

“*Ja*. Alex was called out of town about a week ago. Otherwise, he would have been here with us. Greg went with him.”

Anna remembered the last time Alex went out of town. It was the beginning of the end between the two of them. That’s when he came back and announced that he was going back to Germany. She didn’t want to think about Alex right now.

“Anna, is there anything special you need from your apartment?” Kurt asked from across the room.

She glanced at Wilhelm. “Do you want me to stay the weekend like we had originally planned?”

“If you would like, *Liebling*. I always love having you with us.” His blue eyes reflected his words. So much like Alex...

Anna turned and told Kurt what she needed, including her dress for opening night. “It’s dark pink chiffon that goes lighter at the bottom and changes to purple.”

Kurt made a face that made Anna giggle and repeated what she said to the person on the other end of the call.

Anna leaned back against Wilhelm. “Why did you get here so late? I thought you said you would be here earlier today.”

“We got a late start. Issues with the jet, but everything is fine now. We have had that one for many years. It is time for a new one.”

“I guess it was good that you were late.” She sighed. “At least Ben knows the truth about me now.”

“I cannot imagine him not understanding, *Liebling*. But, it is not easy, knowing that the woman you love is being forced to do things that she does not want to do. Does he know about Alex?”

Anna shook her head. “I didn’t even get a chance to explain all that. Jack interrupted before I could.” She shook her head. “Maybe it’s for the best and it should just end now.” But she didn’t want it to end. She loved Ben. She missed him. As much as she adored Wilhelm and Kurt, she loved Ben and would give anything to be with him.

“Anna, if things...do work out with you two, please do not feel obligated to be with Kurt and I. We want you to be happy.”

She hugged Wilhelm. “Thank you, Wilhelm.”

Wilhelm ordered up dinner a while later and they ate. The two men did their best to cheer Anna up, but it didn’t work very well. She was quiet and miserable the whole evening. But she did her best to not cry, though Wilhelm told her to cry if she needed to.

“Anna, as much as I desire you, I am not going to make you sleep with me,” Kurt said as the movie they were watching ended.

“But....”

“Anna, I want to make love to you, but only if you want to. And I do not think you really want that right now, do you?”

Anna bit her lip and shook her head slowly.

“It’s all right, *Engel*. Really.” He chuckled. “I think it might be better if you sleep with Vati though. I do not know if I could control myself if you were in my bed.”

“Kurt...,” she protested.

“Anna, I do not want to hurt you. I do not want to do something unconsciously and make you regret it in the morning. Vati has far more self-control than I do.”

“That comes from self-discipline, Kurt,” Wilhelm laughed.

In the end, Anna went to sleep in Wilhelm’s room, where he simply held her all night. Anna appreciated his big body wrapped around her, giving her unconditional comfort.

Thursday rehearsals were long. Jenna told Anna that she’d seen Ben last night and that he’d been miserable. Jenna had tried to fill in the gaps for him, answering questions as best as she could.

“I think he’ll forgive you, Anna. He loves you a lot and misses you. It’s just a lot to process. I told him how Devin is and it’s not your fault. I even told him what Devin did to me so he would understand the type of person Devin is.”

Anna was hopeful after she talked with Jenna. If she had seen him and talked to him, then maybe he really would forgive Anna.

She kept her phone near her at all times in case Ben tried to call, but her phone remained silent.

When she returned to the hotel that evening, she still hadn't heard from him.

“Anna, you must give him time,” Kurt said, squeezing her hand. “It is a lot to process.”

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Chapter Five

Friday came at last. Anna not only had opening night jitters, but nerves from waiting to see if Ben would call. Would he miss her first ever professional performance in the Nutcracker?

Midday, she checked her phone to find a message from Ben.

“Hey, Anna,” he said. “I’m ready to talk now. I’ll be at the performance tonight and we can talk at the after party, okay? I’ll see you then.”

There was no “I love you” and his voice sounded strained. She couldn’t gather any clues from his message, even after listening to it several times. He was going to end it, she was certain. But then, why would he come to the performance and the party if he was going to end it?

All afternoon she was on pins and needles, anticipating what would happen that night. One minute she was excited and ecstatic, the next she was despondent and in tears.

She tried to focus as she got ready that evening, putting on her stage makeup, fixing her hair, and donning her skimpy gold and green costume. The ritual helped calm her ragged nerves.

A dozen pink roses were sent to her dressing room without a card. She knew they were from Alex and ignored them.

As they waited in the wings for their cue to enter the second act, Travis hugged her and told her everything would be all right. “If he doesn’t forgive you, I’ll go beat him until he does,” Travis whispered in the darkness of the wings.

Anna smiled. “Thanks, Travis.”

She heard their cue and they moved into position. When their music began, she stepped out on stage with Travis behind her, and, like magic, the world fell away until only the dance remained.

After the show reality came crashing back, and Anna rushed to her dressing room to get ready for the party. She smiled as she got ready, knowing she would see Ben soon. She had concluded that the only reason he would be coming tonight was that he still wanted to be with her. Coming to a performance to break things off just didn't make any sense. Jenna and Travis both agreed.

She listened for a knock at the door while she dressed, hoping Ben would come to her backstage. When she was ready, she decided to text him and let him know she would see him at the party and headed over in her own car.

She didn't see Ben when she arrived, but saw Wilhelm and Kurt. She made her way over to say hello.

"You were *wunderbar, Liebling*," Wilhelm said, kissing her cheek.

"Ja, you were," Kurt agreed.

"Thank you," she said with a smile. She told them about Ben's message.

"Well, then, don't just stand here. Go find him." Kurt said.

She turned to go and saw Devin standing behind her. "Hello, Anna. Wonderful performance tonight." He kissed her cheek. "I'm glad I allowed you to continue dancing."

Anna smiled nervously. "Thank you, Devin." She looked around as she spoke, but still no sign of Ben.

"Looking for someone?" Devin asked. If she hadn't been so preoccupied, the strange tone in his voice might have given her pause.

Anna looked up at him, caught off guard by his inquiry

"Anna, go find Jenna like you said you wanted to," Kurt said. "You can find me later."

Anna smiled gratefully at him. “Yes, Kurt. If you’ll excuse me,” she said to both Devin and Wilhelm.

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Chapter Six

Devin watched as Anna walked quickly away, eyes scanning the room for her boyfriend. She didn't know that he wasn't here; that he wasn't coming. But Devin knew. He would take care of her distraction once and for all by the end of the weekend. He had warned her about her duties and she chose not to listen. She would certainly listen more carefully after this weekend. Of that, Devin was certain.

"Jenna, Matt, have you seen Ben?" Anna asked anxiously as she approached the couple.

They both shook their heads. "He said he was coming," Matt said. "We sat next to each other at the theater."

Anna looked around, fear gripping her heart. Had he changed his mind? She blinked away tears.

Jenna put her hand on her arm. "He'll be here, Anna. Don't worry. Maybe he had car trouble."

Anna's eyes didn't stop moving the rest of the night. She searched constantly for Ben, but he never came. When people began leaving, hopelessness seized her heart.

Matt looked at her helplessly. "I don't know what happened. He was coming, I swear."

She saw Wilhelm walking towards her and ran to him. "He didn't come," she sobbed into his tuxedo jacket. Wilhelm hugged her close.

"Who are you?" she heard Matt ask.

"I am Wilhelm Kunze Herzog von Hesse. I am...ah, Anna's guardian, you might say."

“Guardian? Then why didn’t you protect—”

“Matt, please,” Jenna interrupted, and Anna knew Jenna had told Matt about her life, too. “Wilhelm is a good man. He does what he can for Anna.”

“*Danke*, Jenna. And you are?”

“Matt Bolling. I’m Ben’s roommate.”

“Ah. Yes. Do you know where Ben is? You can see that Anna is quite upset.”

Matt shook his head. “No. It’s weird. He said he’d be here. I can’t imagine what happened. I called him a couple of times, but he didn’t answer.” He sighed. “Maybe he just needed more time to himself.”

Wilhelm hugged Anna closer. “I am truly sorry, *Liebling*.”

“I’m sure he’ll call you, Anna,” Matt said, putting his hand on her arm. “When I see him. I’ll hit him for you, okay?”

Anna gave a half-hearted laugh. “Okay.”

“*Kommen Sie*, Anna. Let us return to the hotel.”

Anna waved to her friends and let Wilhelm lead her out of the ballroom. “Where’s Kurt?”

“He...found a new friend,” Wilhelm answered, shaking his head slightly.

Anna was glad for Kurt. She hated the idea of him sleeping alone because of her.

Wilhelm took her back to the hotel, helped her undress and tucked her into bed. Then he turned out the lights and crawled in next to her, pulling her close.

“Wilhelm, do you want me to...?”

“*Nein*, Anna. You needn’t worry about me. I am fine. It is you that I am worried about.” He kissed her cheek. “I put your phone next to the bed. If

he calls, you will hear.”

“Thank you, Wilhelm,” she said softly.

Wilhelm lay in the dark room, holding the precious girl against him. He could feel desire stirring inside him, but that was not what she needed right now. She needed a friend and father, something Devin had denied her. Wilhelm was more of a man than that. He would give Anna what she needed instead of demanding what he wanted.

Devin had acted suspiciously at the party. Wilhelm knew Devin to be hard-hearted, but the way he spoke to Anna made Wilhelm suspect Devin knew more than he let on. Wilhelm certainly would never underestimate Devin again. The Chairman would surely do anything to get his way.

Poor Anna. She was just caught in the middle of all this. It wasn't right. She deserved some happiness.

But at the same time, the idea of Ben breaking up with her was of some comfort to Wilhelm, even though it broke his heart to see Anna suffering.

He was sure Ben loved her. Wilhelm had asked around about the young lawyer while Anna was gone and had only heard good things about him. But Ben could never give Anna everything she needed. She needed protecting. She needed someone who could face Devin and win.

Devin would eat Ben alive.

She needed Alex, but for some reason unknown to himself, she was furious with him. He had asked her about coming out for the New Year and had never seen such a look on her face as when she said she didn't want to go. He was a little hurt until he realized that her anger was directed toward Alex and not himself.

Alex hadn't meant to hurt Anna, but it was a good thing he'd left. Wilhelm was very proud of the effort Alex exerted to learn the old ways. There was much more to learn to be able to defeat Devin, but they had discovered a way for Alex to protect Anna in the meantime. That would be taken care of when she came to visit in a few weeks.

If Ben broke up with her, it would be for the best. For all of them. If he didn't...well, they'd have to deal with it some other way. Perhaps Wilhelm could talk to him before he went back to Germany. He could explain to Ben what had to happen. If he truly loved her, he would want what was best for her. He just hoped Anna would cooperate.

Anna slept fitfully. She had nightmares about Ben. That he wouldn't speak to her. That they tried to be together and they couldn't. That he was dead. In the morning she apologized to Wilhelm for tossing and turning all night, and he was very understanding.

Anna headed to the theater after breakfast. She sought out Jenna as soon as she put her bag in her dressing room.

"Ben didn't come home last night," Jenna told her as she paused mid-stretch at the barre. "Matt said he's done that before. When he's upset about something, he'll just go for a drive and not tell anyone. Then he'll come back and everything will be fine."

"Then why did he tell me he'd be at the party? I don't understand."

"I don't know, Anna. But I'm sure everything will be okay."

The day dragged on. There was no call from Ben. No text. No nothing.

Anna found that dancing in the two performances that day provided the only relief from the ache in her heart; a few, precious minutes of distraction in an otherwise dark day. Her heart twisted and her stomach churned the

rest of the time. She couldn't have said whether she danced well or not, and even her friend's assurances did nothing to cheer her.

She felt terrible about being poor company for Wilhelm, and apologized again and again. "I can go home if you want, Wilhelm. You could find more...pleasant company...if I did."

"Nonsense, Anna," Wilhelm said in response, squeezing her hand. "You are not going anywhere. I want to make sure you are all right."

Wilhelm once again held her all night as she tossed and turned.

Sunday dawned and still Anna hadn't heard from Ben. She felt so hopeless she could hardly get out of bed.

"Anna, do not give up hope," Wilhelm said. "He will call."

Anna drove to the theater and mechanically went through the motions of warming up and getting ready.

She came alive when she danced, and only when she danced. Aside from that, she stared at her phone while sitting in her dressing room.

Chapter Seven

After the last curtain call of the evening, Anna trudged back to her dressing room. She contemplated calling Wilhelm to let him know she was going to go for a drive; she needed some air.

“Hello, Anna.”

Anna jumped when she stepped into the room and saw Ian sitting on her couch.

“Ian? What are you doing here?”

His eyes were hard. Had she done something wrong?

“Devin wants to see you. Tonight.”

Anna took in a shaky breath. What had she done to earn a punishment?
“I need to tell Wilhelm—”

“It’s been taken care of.”

She studied Ian closely. He was acting strange; cold and distant. “Ian, what’s wrong?”

“Please, Anna,” he pleaded softly, breaking through the ice for just a split second. Then he was hard again. “Get ready as quickly as you can.”

Anna moved quickly. She didn’t want to anger Devin more if he truly was angry with her. As she dressed, she wracked her brain, trying to figure out what she’d done. When she was ready, Ian led her out the back of the theater to a waiting Town Car. He opened the back door for her and then got in the driver’s seat and drove away.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“The Manor.”

“Am I to be punished?”

Ian didn’t answer at first. “No,” he said after a few moments of silence.

Something about his manner disturbed her. “Ian. Please. Tell me what’s wrong.” She leaned forward and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Anna, don’t. Just...please be quiet and we’ll be there soon.”

That didn’t help any. Ian’s strange behavior just made her more anxious.

She stared out the window and watched the scenery fly past her. What had she done to anger Devin? Nothing came to mind. He had left her alone for the most part the last month or so. She usually knew what Devin was angry about, but this time she honestly didn’t know.

After what seemed like forever, Ian pulled into the drive to the Manor and a few minutes later, they stopped in front of the huge building.

“Leave your bag,” Ian said stiffly as he opened her door. “Someone will attend to it later.”

Anna followed him silently into the dimly lit entryway. She removed her shoes and expected Ian to lead her up the stairs to her room or Devin’s. Instead, he led her down a hallway she’d never seen, through a paneled wooden door and into a room that looked like a large living room. The red-carpeted floor was springy and a lit fireplace graced the far wall. Computer monitors lined one sidewall with a long desk below it. The room was shadowed except in the center where Devin sat in a tall chair, his chin resting on steepled fingers.

Anna looked up at Ian.

“Go greet him properly,” he whispered.

Anna felt odd as she walked towards Devin wearing jeans and a sweater. She’d never gone anywhere in the Manor wearing street clothes. She nervously stopped a few feet in front of Devin, dropped to her knees and bowed before him.

“Good evening, Mistress,” Devin said in a gentle tone. “You may sit up. I hope you don’t mind my needing you tonight.”

“Whatever would please you, Master,” she said quietly, bringing herself to a sitting position.

“Come, Baby. Suck my cock and then we have some things to discuss.”

Anna immediately moved toward Devin and untied his black linen pants. She took his cock into her mouth and began sucking and licking him as best as she could.

He laced his fingers through her hair. “Good girl,” he murmured. “I love how you always suck my cock so well. So enthusiastically.”

Anna closed her eyes to keep the tears from falling. She wanted Ben so badly, she could almost feel him near her. She missed him terribly. Where on earth could he be?

Devin came in her mouth with a low moan and Anna licked him clean, then returned to her knees and awaited his next instruction.

She stared at the floor between his feet as she felt him staring at her. “You don’t seem happy, Baby. What’s wrong?”

She swallowed. She didn’t want to tell him what was wrong, but she had no choice. He had asked. “I miss...someone.”

“Your boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Anna, you’ve been very distracted with him lately. I don’t like it.” Devin said.

“I’ve tried to perform my duties as always, Master.”

“You’re not as enthusiastic about pleasing the men I bring to you. And you’re never home, so if someone wants you, they can’t find you.”

“If they call I always meet them.”

“That’s not the point, Anna,” Devin snarled. “The point is that pleasing me is to be your primary objective. Not pleasing a boyfriend. And you

spend so much time with him, I'm beginning to feel as if you'd rather be with him than me."

Anna didn't respond; Devin had hit on the truth. What could she say in response?

"Would you rather be with him than me?" Devin asked in a cold voice.

Anna didn't answer right away. She couldn't lie. But if she told the truth, he would be very angry. He would probably punish her. "I-I want to please you, Master."

"That's not what I asked, Anna."

Anna swallowed and looked up at him. "Yes," she whispered.

"Yes, what?"

Anna closed her eyes and winced. "Yes, I'd rather be with him than you."

Devin's eyes flashed with rage and he slapped her across the face. "You little bitch! You leave me with no choice."

Anna fell to her hip and held her cheek. Devin stood and pulled her up by her hair to stand with him. He turned her around to face away from him and there was movement in the shadows across the room. A moment later, Ben stepped into the light with Ian behind him. He was unkempt and in a wrinkled dark suit. He looked like he hadn't slept and there were bruises on his cheeks.

"Ben!" she cried out and tried to go to him, but Devin held her back. She struggled against him, but couldn't free herself.

"Anna," Ben whispered, reaching for her.

"He didn't abandon you, Anna. He's been here since Friday night. He's been watching all sorts of videos. Watching you please man after man after man. And he just got to watch you suck my cock live."

Tears fell down her cheeks as she stared at Ben. “Please, Devin,” she sobbed, struggling against him. “Let me go.”

“Anna, I will not allow anyone to come between us. You’re too valuable to me to allow that to happen. So if you really mean that you’d rather be with him than me...,” Devin nodded and Ian stepped right behind Ben and put his hand on Ben’s shoulder. “...then I have no choice but to eliminate the distraction once and for all.”

Time slowed as Anna and Ben stared at each other. Anna saw Ian lift his hand. He was holding something. A syringe.

“NO!” Anna screamed as Ian jammed the syringe into Ben’s neck. “NO!” Anna wrenched herself free from Devin and ran to Ben, catching him as he began to fall to the ground. “Ben! No, please!” She lowered him to the ground as his eyes filled with pain.

His body convulsed and he stared at her intently.

“No, Ben. Oh, God. Please, no.” She brushed his hair back and kissed him, cradling his cheek. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Anna,” he whispered. She could barely hear him. “...love...you...” His voice trailed off and his eyes fluttered closed as his body gave one last shudder and then relaxed.

“Ben?” she whispered, desperation filling her heart. “Ben, please wake up.” He had to be sleeping. Yes. Ian wouldn’t have killed him. She looked up at Ian who stood over her, face impassive.

Anna’s stomach felt like a stone as the truth settled into her heart: Ian had killed the man she loved. Anna looked back down at Ben’s handsome face, tears filling her eyes. She collapsed onto Ben’s chest and sobbed, crying out his name and clinging to him. “Nooooo!” she wailed. “Ben, come back to me. Please. I need you.”

She heard a soft thump on the floor next to her and looked up through tear-filled eyes to see a square jewelry box lying on its side next to her. She stared at it.

“You might be interested to know what was in his pocket when we took him.” Devin’s cold voice drifted down from above.

With shaking hands, Anna reached for the gray box and opened it. Inside was a diamond solitaire ring; an engagement ring. She stared at it for a long moment and then something snapped inside her. She clenched her jaw and grasped the box tightly in her hand. An unfamiliar sensation bubbled up inside her and she began to shake.

She kissed Ben’s still-warm lips and stood, almost calmly in contrast to the boiling heat inside her. She put the ring box in her pocket and her eyes flicked up, first looking at Ian and then Devin.

Without realizing what she was doing, Anna lunged at Devin, kicking and hitting him wherever she could make contact. She got a couple of good hits in before Ian pulled her off and held her back against his chest. A shriek escaped from her throat as she struggled against Ian, hate lending her strength she didn’t know she had.

“I hate you!” she screeched at Devin, her voice cracking with emotion. “I hate you and I’ll never forgive you for this.”

Devin calmly dabbed at his mouth and arched a brow as he looked at the blood on his finger. His hair was mussed and his lip was bleeding. “I don’t need your forgiveness, Anna. I need your obedience. Which I will have,” he added with a dark voice. He smiled and looked at Ian. “Take her to my room, then get rid of the body. Mr. Durham here is going to have had an accident off the bridge.” He gave a mock gasp and then grinned wickedly. “The same bridge your parents died on. Fitting, don’t you think?”

Anna struggled again to get free. “You fucking bastard,” she screamed. “I hate you!”

Devin shrugged. “Take her, Ian.”

She fought against Ian as he tried to lead her out of the room. When she wouldn’t cooperate, he simply picked her up and put her over his shoulder. She stared at Ben’s body as she was carried out of the room.

Anna kicked and screamed the whole way to Devin’s room. Her screams echoed through the Manor and more than one door opened and heads appeared, looking to see what was going on.

When Ian arrived at Devin’s room, he closed the door and put Anna down on her feet. She glared at him, chest heaving and hands balled into fists.

“Anna, please don’t—” he began.

Anna reached up and slapped him across the face. He didn’t even wince. “Don’t you dare, Ian.” Her eyes narrowed. “I thought you were my friend,” she spat.

“Anna, I told you before. I have to obey Devin as you do. I couldn’t not do it.”

“I hate you!” she screamed. “I never want to see you again.”

“That’s not going to happen,” he said in a stern voice.

She lunged at him, but he grabbed her hands and held them over her head before she could hit him. She kicked at him, but he didn’t flinch when she made contact with his shins. He calmly held her away from him, allowing her rage to work itself out. Finally, she collapsed in exhaustion, dangling from his hold. Ian picked her up and carried her to the bed, gently placing her on the dark green bedspread.

“I’m sorry, Anna. I am truly sorry,” he said in a soft voice, brushing her hair out of her face with a gentle hand. “But you know Devin as well as I

do. Could you have done any different?” He gave her a sad look before walking away, closing the door firmly behind him.

Anna stared at the wall across the room as tears fell silently down her cheeks. A painful void took the place of her heart in her chest as she thought about what had just happened. But Ben had forgiven her, which brought a weak smile to her face. She rolled to her side, curled up into a ball and pulled the jewelry box out of her pocket. She hugged it to her chest. He had planned to ask her to marry him. *He still loved her!*

The thought was both exhilarating and heartbreaking.

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Chapter Eight

Devin opened the door to his bedroom a few minutes later and walked inside. Anna lay on the bed facing away from him. Her earlier rage had been an interesting sight. And somewhat painful. He touched his slightly swollen lip, smiling at the memory of Anna's outburst.

"Feeling better?" he asked, stopping next to her. He petted her hair and Anna smacked his hand away.

"Don't touch me," she growled.

Devin chuckled. "I haven't seen this side of you, Anna. It's intriguing."

She flipped over and started to kick him, but he grabbed her ankle before it made contact and he held it tight. "Don't you dare," he growled. He twisted her leg until she whimpered. "I will break your leg and you will not finish your performances."

Anna glared at him and he stared back at her. She trembled for a long moment, then went limp.

"Good decision, Baby." He stepped away. "Why don't you undress for me?"

"No."

Devin unzipped her jeans and pulled them roughly off, and did the same with her sweater and underwear. Then he undressed and got on the bed to lie on top of her. She lay unmoving on her back, staring at the ceiling, as he kissed her neck and played with her breasts. "Come now, Anna. You're still alive. You should enjoy that fact."

Anna turned her head to the side. Devin bent down and bit her neck, making her cry out loudly. "Ah, you are alive. I was beginning to wonder."

She didn't respond and continued to stare at the wall.

Devin frowned and pushed her legs apart. If he guessed correctly, she wouldn't have had sex since before she and Ben broke up, which was Wednesday. Oh, she would be tight and very enjoyable. He positioned himself against her slit then rammed himself inside her channel, relishing in her squeal and hot tightness. She was wet in spite of herself.

"C'mon Anna," he whispered seductively as he moved inside of her the way he knew she liked. "I can tell it's been a while. You needed a cock badly, didn't you?"

Anna closed her eyes tightly, but her lips parted. She didn't want to enjoy it, but she couldn't stop her body from responding.

"God, you feel good," he moaned as he thrust in and out. Her pussy felt incredible.

He felt her clench around him and knew her body was winning over her mind. Good. He continued moving, listening to her reluctant moans and watching her fight against desire. She squirmed beneath him. She was close. Should he give her release?

"You may not come, Anna. I forbid it."

She groaned and her face scrunched up in pain. He smiled and thrust hard as he climaxed against her clenching muscles. He pulled out and watched her tremble. Not letting her come was cruel, but she had hit him and deserved it.

Devin grinned and dressed as he watched her continue to struggle against her own body. "I will know it if you give yourself release," he reminded her, just in case she thought she could test that rule, too.

He left the room and went to find Ian.

Anna couldn't stop shaking. She hadn't had sex in five days and was feeling it. Devin had gotten her so close and then denied her. The only good thing about the situation was that the ache for release was currently stronger than her aching heart.

She thrashed on the bed and didn't hear Devin return a few minutes later. When she felt herself being tied to the bed, she opened her eyes and saw Ian and Devin working around her.

"What are you doing?" she asked in a raspy voice, almost past the point of caring that her questions might test Devin's patience.

"Preparing you."

"For what?"

Devin grinned. "Oh, I don't want to ruin the surprise."

Anna watched him in fright as he tightened the bindings and then produced a syringe.

"Don't worry. This is very different stuff than we gave your darling Ben." He grinned as he poked through her skin and released what felt like fire into her veins. It spread quickly and soon she was screaming in pain. Everywhere hurt, but especially in her lower abdomen.

"What are you doing to me?" she gasped, tears in her eyes.

"Making you even more useful to me."

The fire in her body continued for what felt like hours. She struggled and thrashed, praying for relief, but none came.

Suddenly a bright light filled the room, and Kaveh appeared in front of her.

Devin turned and greeted him. "She's almost ready."

Kaveh turned his golden eyes to hers. "Good. I've been looking forward to this." He looked back at Devin. "You've been with her already?"

Devin nodded.

“Good.” Kaveh walked to Anna’s side and began caressing her, turning the fire into arousal. Her skin was sensitive and his touch felt incredible. She moaned as he caressed her breasts, rolling her nipples into hardened peaks.

He leaned down and kissed the bottom curve of her breasts, then flicked his tongue over her sensitive nipples. “You are beautiful, Daughter,” he murmured against her breasts. He stood and undressed, his long, hard cock made Anna’s pussy clench with desire. She licked her lips as she stared at him.

Kaveh chuckled. “You want a taste, Daughter?”

Anna nodded, wide eyed.

Kaveh made a motion with his hands and Anna felt her bindings loosen. The leather cuffs were still in place, but the ropes were gone.

She scrambled onto her knees on the bed as Kaveh lay next to her and eagerly took his cock into her mouth. There was no way she was getting it all into her mouth, but took in as much as she could. His pre-cum was sweet and he throbbed against her tongue. Kaveh pressed his fingers against her pussy as she sucked on his cock.

He groaned as she tugged on his balls. “Gentle, Daughter. They are full for you.”

Anna didn’t understand what he meant by that, but was gentle nonetheless. They were heavy and filled her with even more desire for him. She leaned down and sucked a testicle gently into her mouth, causing him to groan.

She felt him prodding at her pussy, pulling in a painful but erotic manner. He pinched her clit, making her jump and then moan. He probed at her hips and belly and then back at her pussy.

Abruptly, he turned her around and flipped her onto her stomach, spreading her legs with his knee and pressing his cock against her wet entrance. “It may hurt, Daughter, but there is no other way.”

Anna was about to ask what would hurt when he pressed himself forward and entered her, causing her to gasp and writhe beneath him. She moaned as he continued to press forward. She felt him at her cervix and winced. He moved around in a circular motion and continued moving forward.

She groaned in pain tried to pull away, but he held her shoulders and pushed against her. She felt something give way and her stomach cramped and she whimpered. “No,” she groaned. “Please. It hurts.”

“That’s because I’ve entered your womb, Daughter. It’s where I need to be.”

She tried to move away again, wiggling as best she could, but he held her hands behind her back, holding her in place. Her whimpers and groans grew louder as her stomach continued to cramp and the pain increased.

“Just relax and it won’t hurt as much,” the Immortal said in a mild voice. He moved gently, pressing his hips against her. She felt the pressure against her clit and upper channel and moaned. “That’s it. Feel the pleasure. Concentrate on that.” He continued to move, but only slightly as if he didn’t want to lose his position inside her.

Anna cried out as her pussy began to spasm around him and then she stiffened suddenly. The orgasm had been such a slow build, it didn’t register in her mind until she was in the middle of it. It consumed her whole body and she arched her back and screamed. He pumped his hips against hers and she felt him throb inside her. He let out a roar and rammed himself into her body, even deeper than he had been.

Her eyes closed and she felt like she was floating into his body. She could feel his seed pouring into her body. Her pussy convulsed around him, milking him until she had received every drop from his body, then, exhausted, a deep blackness consumed her.

Devin watched eagerly as Kaveh examined Anna. “Did it work? Is she pregnant?”

Kaveh gave him an exasperated look. “It doesn’t happen immediately. It can take up to a day to conceive. She’ll wake when it’s done.”

“But she will conceive?”

“There is a very good chance. Nothing is guaranteed, but if you made the serum correctly, she should.”

“Of course I made it correctly,” Devin scoffed. “I’m not an idiot.”

Kaveh glared at him. “I may allow you to appear to control me in public, but you would do well to remember that I could crush you in one of your measly little heartbeats.”

Devin clenched his jaw, but kept silent. He didn’t like being dependent on Kaveh, but he had no other choice. He couldn’t do this without the Immortal’s help.

A knock sounded at the door and Ian entered. He glanced at Kaveh then at Devin. “It’s your wife, Devin. She’s in labor.”

Devin raised his brow. He’d had Sandy here for the last week, waiting for her to go into labor and it had finally happened. Now the real fun of fucking with her mind could begin.

“I’ll go check on Sandy. Ian, come get me if I’m not back before Anna wakes.”

Ian nodded and Devin left the room.

Anna slowly opened her eyes. The room was quiet, but it wasn't her room. Where was she?

Devin's room. At the Manor. She sat up and looked around. Ian sat in a nearby chair, snoring softly. Memories of the previous evening came rushing back like a tidal wave. *Ben!* Tears burned her eyes as pain filled her heart again.

She looked around for her jeans and saw them on the floor. She picked them up and sat back on the bed, pulling the ring box out of the pocket. She didn't open it, but held it tightly in her hands and stared at it.

"I'm sorry, Anna. I really am."

Anna looked up and saw Ian watching her. "What do you care?" she asked coldly.

Ian grimaced. "I'll let Devin know you're awake." He stood and walked stiffly out of the room.

Anna continued to stare at the ring box, only dimly aware when Devin walked back into the room with someone else entering behind him.

"Anna, Baby. I'm glad you're awake. I was getting worried." Devin walked to her and embraced her. She pulled away and glowered at him. "All right. Kaveh wants to take a look at you and then Ian will take you back to your car."

"Please lie down, Daughter."

Kaveh stood on the other side of the bed and Anna did as he asked. He put his hand on her head and then stomach. Anna vaguely remembered having sex with him the previous night, but not much else.

Kaveh looked at Devin. "It is done."

Devin smiled broadly. "Excellent." He glanced at Anna. "You can go now."

Anna glared at Devin as she dressed. She was curious as to what Kaveh said was “done,” but didn’t want to give Devin the pleasure of knowing her curiosity. He watched her with an amused expression on his face.

“I’m ready,” she said when she was done, crossing her arms over her chest.

Devin stood. “Good. I’ll take you downstairs to the car.”

She followed Devin through the Manor and out the front door. “I’ll come see you this week since I can’t have you on Fridays while you are performing.”

Anna didn’t reply. She just looked at him with as much hatred as she could muster.

“Hatred isn’t very becoming, Anna. You won’t catch another lover with that expression on your face.”

“I don’t want another lover, you asshole,” she spat. “I want Ben.”

“Oh, sweetheart. Ben’s body has been dredged from the Bay. I’m sure his family is on their way down here as we speak.” He took a step closer and pulled her hair so that her face tipped up to his. “You would do well to remember your place, Anna,” he snarled. “I can make your life a living hell. Remember that.”

“You already have.” She twisted out of his grasp and got into the back of the car, refusing to look at him as Ian drove away.

Chapter Nine

It was a silent drive back to the theater garage. When they arrived, Anna didn't wait for Ian to open the door, but got out on her own without saying a word. She walked to her car, got in and started it without looking back.

Where to go? She needed to tell Matt what happened. She glanced at the clock as she drove out of the garage. Almost three. She wished she had stayed asleep. Sleep was peaceful. Sleep didn't hurt.

She parked her car and then headed up to her apartment. When she got off the elevator on her floor she hesitated. Glancing down at Ben's apartment door made the tears start again. Anguish consumed her, making her heart burn, and her legs buckled beneath her. She slid down the wall next to the elevator, sobbing uncontrollably. She needed to get to her apartment, but she couldn't move. All she could do was sob.

She didn't know how long she sat there, but unexpectedly, she felt strong arms around her shoulders.

"Kommen Sie, Liebling." Wilhelm helped her to her feet and guided her down the hallway, but not to her apartment. To Ben and Matt's.

"No! No! I don't want to go there," she wailed, digging her heels into the carpeted floor and struggling against his grip, but he held her tight.

"Anna, Ben's family is here. They want to see you." Wilhelm pushed the door open and gently pulled her into the apartment.

"Anna!" Ben's family embraced her the moment she walked into the living room.

Ben's mom, Katherine, hugged her tightly. "We were so worried about you. That you had been in the car with Ben. But Wilhelm said you were okay. I don't know how he knew, but I'm so thankful he was right."

Anna couldn't look at anyone. It was her fault that Ben was dead. She shouldn't be here. She didn't deserve to be here.

"I...I can't be here." She turned and fled to her apartment at the opposite end of the hallway. Once she was inside, she closed the door behind her and fell to the ground, sobbing again.

"Anna." *Wilhelm*. Dear Wilhelm. He knelt next to her. "*Liebling*. How did you know?"

"How did I know what?" she sniffed.

"How did you know he was dead?"

Anna looked up into Wilhelm's face, shame filling her. "It's my fault," she whispered. "He killed him because of me. I was so selfish and he killed him."

"Who killed who?" Wilhelm stared at her for a moment. "Ben?"

Anna nodded. "Devin. He killed him. Right in front of me." She stared at the ground. "It's my fault," she said in a broken voice, squeezing her eyes shut in despair. "It's all my fault."

"Anna, it is not your fault. Devin is...does bad things, but those things are not your fault."

She shook her head. "If I hadn't wanted to be with Ben, Devin would have let him go. He asked me and I told him. He called Ben a distraction. But I couldn't lie. I told him the truth. And he killed him."

"Anna, the police found his body in his car early this morning. In the Bay. Are you sure you didn't just imagine it?"

Anna shook her head absently. "He said he'd put him off the Golden Gate Bridge. The same bridge my parents died under."

Wilhelm muttered something in German. "Oh, Anna." He pulled her into his arms and rocked her gently. "Shh, it will be all right, *Liebling*. It is not your fault."

“He was going to ask me to marry him,” she whispered after she’d calmed down a bit. She pulled the ring box out of her pocket.

Wilhelm took the box from her and opened it. “Very pretty,” he said with a gentle smile, hugging her close.

“Where’d you get that?”

Both Wilhelm and Anna looked up to see Matt standing in the doorway with an accusatory look on his face.

Anna stared at Matt. “He had it with him when he died.”

Matt frowned. “I know. He showed it to me at the theater. The question is, how did you get it?”

Anna’s mouth moved but there were no words. She didn’t know how to respond to Matt’s accusation.

“Matt, it is not what you think,” Wilhelm said. “And apparently what happened to Ben is not what we were told either.”

“What are you talking about?”

Wilhelm stared at the young man for a long considering moment. “Matt, if I tell you, you cannot tell anyone. Especially not his family. They would be in danger.”

Matt walked in and closed the door. “Tell me.”

Wilhelm gave him a brief history of Anna’s relationship with Devin—reinforcing what Jenna had told him—and then what Anna had told Wilhelm.

“Devin threw it on the ground next to him after he was...,” Anna said softly. “He said it had been in Ben’s pocket when they took him.”

“Oh, God,” Matt said, sitting hard on the floor next to them. “We should call the police.”

Anna laughed bitterly. “Devin controls the police. There’s nothing we can do.” She leaned against Wilhelm. “Nothing.”

“Matt, would you please take Anna back to your apartment. I need to make a phone call.”

“Wilhelm....” Anna clung to him.

“Anna, I need to call Alex and tell him what happened.”

“Is he home?”

Wilhelm nodded. “He got home yesterday.”

A cold chill ran through Anna’s body, but she nodded and allowed Matt to help her to her feet. If Alex really cared, *he* would be here, not his father.

Anger at Alex mixed with her anger at Devin and Ian and the world.

Wilhelm watched as Matt helped Anna back to his apartment and then phoned Alex.

“Vati?” came Alex’s groggy voice over the line.

“Alex, wake up.” Wilhelm spoke in German. “I need to speak with you.”

There was a pause. “What happened? Is Anna okay?” His voice had cleared.

“Devin killed Anna’s boyfriend. Right in front of her, as far as I can tell.”

“My God!”

Wilhelm repeated to Alex what Anna had told him.

“That fucking bastard,” Alex growled when Wilhelm had finished.

“My exact sentiments. How are the plans progressing?”

“Slowly. I have to be careful if we’re going to keep it a secret.”

“Will it be done by the time Anna gets there?”

“It will. I will make sure of that.”

“Good. You might want to send Seth out to help Greg get Anna to Frankfurt. She is extremely unwilling to go.”

Alex chuckled. “Who knew she could be so strong willed?”

Wilhelm chuckled as well. “It would be good for her to learn some stubbornness. But Alex, I don’t know what Ben’s death will do to her. She is extremely distressed and blaming herself. She’s...different than she was. Devin has been ruthless with her emotions. You’re going to have to be very, very careful with her. You must have your temper under control at all times or you will deeply wound her.”

Alex sighed. “I know, Vati. As soon as she gets here, I will put out word that we are unavailable. I don't want to do it beforehand or it might tip off Devin.”

“Do you think she might be more willing if she flew commercial? It might be less threatening to her.”

“Maybe. But I hate the idea of her on a commercial jet.”

“Alex, don’t be a snob. Lufthansa does an excellent job in their first class.”

“I know, but...I don’t want her getting hurt.”

“That’s why you’re sending bodyguards with her. So she’s watched and kept safe. Greg would never allow anything to happen to her.”

“Neither would any of my men. Seth, especially.” Alex paused. “I think I will send him out. Just don't tell Anna.”

“I won’t, believe me. Every time I have mentioned it, she becomes hostile.”

Alex sighed. “Poor Anna.” He paused. “Vati, I don’t like the idea of Anna living alone. Do you think you could convince her to have Jenna move in with her?”

“I agree. I’ll speak to her about it.”

“Good. Keep my name out of it and it might go better. I don’t want to command her and make her resent me anymore than she already does.”

“I will. All right. I will let you get back to sleep. I know you need it, but I thought you might want to know.”

“Thank you for calling me, Vati. I always want to know if something happens to her.”

“I know, son. Good night.”

Wilhelm put his phone in his pocket and headed back to Matt’s apartment. He hoped that Alex’s plan would work. The poor girl couldn’t take much more before she completely lost her mental faculties.

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Chapter Ten

Anna sat on the floor in the corner listening to Ben's family talk about him and make funeral plans. Tears were intermixed with occasional laughter. His sisters, Marcia and Ruth, huddled next to their parents, Dave and Katherine. Matt and Jenna sat together on a chair near the window.

Wilhelm sat in a chair near Anna. He had tried to get Anna to sit on a chair, but she refused. If she had to be here, she wanted to hide in the corner.

The family had decided on Friday morning for the funeral. Anna knew she had a matinee early Friday afternoon, but would ask Isaak if he would let her miss class that morning.

Would it be inappropriate to continue dancing? She couldn't imagine not dancing, though. Even now, especially now, she felt a need to go somewhere alone and dance. Dancing kept her sane. It was the only thing that had done so through all the years of abuse.

Anna felt the ring box in her pocket. She should give his family the ring, but they would be suspicious if they knew she had it. How could she explain how she got it? She wasn't supposed to have seen him. She glanced at Matt and then Wilhelm. What should she do with it?

"It doesn't make any sense, Mom," Marcia said in a broken voice. "How could he have disappeared on Friday and not...been found until this morning?"

"You know how your brother is, Marcia," Dave said gently. "Maybe he just needed some time alone."

Anna flushed in embarrassment. Did they know about her? Had Ben told them? She was thankful that she was hidden in the corner and that no

one could see her. She didn't belong here. She should leave. Leave his family to grieve without her tainted presence.

She stood quickly, and the room spun. Wilhelm grabbed her before she could fall. "Anna, are you all right? Have you eaten today?"

Anna shook her head. She wasn't interested in food right now.

"I think I will take her back to her apartment and have her rest," Wilhelm said. "*Kommen Sie, Liebling.*" He put his arm around her shoulders. "I will make sure she is all right. Let me know if there is anything you need."

"Thank you, Wilhelm," Dave said. "I appreciate your concern."

"Anna means a great deal to myself and my family. Anything that concerns her concerns me."

Anna glanced at Matt. "Matt, can I talk to you for a minute?" she asked.

He nodded and followed her to the door.

"Here," she said, handing him the ring box. "I...I don't know what to do with it."

"Anna, you should keep it. He'd want you to have it."

Anna shook her head. "How would I explain why I had it?" she asked, tears forming in her eyes again. "I'm not supposed to have seen him." Her voice squeaked as she spoke.

Matt nodded. "I'll put it with his things. I'm sure his mom will give it to you when she finds it."

"I don't deserve it."

Matt put his hands on her shoulders. "Anna, Ben didn't care about what you'd been forced to do. He loved you and wanted to marry you. He was gonna ask you at the party. That's why his family was down here already."

Anna closed her eyes. Ben had said he loved her before he died.

“I will take care of her, Matt,” Wilhelm said. “I think she needs some sleep. She did not sleep well all weekend.”

Matt looked at him strangely but didn't say anything and nodded. “I'll keep you updated.”

“*Danke.*”

Anna let Wilhelm help her back to her apartment. Her legs shook as she walked. Wilhelm ordered her some dinner and watched her carefully as she ate.

“Do you want to dance tomorrow, Anna?” he asked, sitting next to her on the couch after she'd finished. “Or shall I call Isaak and let him know that you need some time off?”

“Dancing is the only time I'm free,” she said quietly. “A few minutes of solace.”

Wilhelm touched her cheek as he looked at her closely. Then he nodded. “I understand. Then you need to make sure you sleep well tonight. You look exhausted.”

Anna leaned against Wilhelm. “I hit Devin,” she said without emotion.

Wilhelm stiffened. “You what?”

“I told him that I hated him and I got a couple of hits in before Ian pulled me off him.”

Wilhelm chuckled. “I bet he was surprised.”

Anna shrugged. “He didn't seem to care. I hit Ian, too.”

Wilhelm petted her hair and kissed the top of her head. “You are full of surprises, *Liebling.*” He paused. “Anna, with all that has happened...I do not know if it is wise for you to live by yourself.”

“Why?”

“Because if something were to happen...I worry about you. Would you consider having Jenna stay with you? At least until the end of the year?”

Anna thought about it. Jenna probably wouldn't mind. She'd be closer to Matt, even though she stayed with him most nights anyways. It would be nice to have someone to come home with. The apartment felt so big right now. Big and empty.

She nodded. “Yes. That would be okay.”

Wilhelm smiled and kissed her temple. “*Gut*. Go get ready for bed and I will go talk to her.”

“Okay.” Wilhelm left and Anna went into her bedroom. She heard a faint ringing and looked around until she found her phone in the bottom of her bag.

She saw it was Aaron calling.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Anna, how are you doing?” he asked in a gentle voice.

“I've been better. You...heard what happened?”

“Yeah. Jenna called me. I'm so sorry, Anna. I know you really cared about him.”

“It wasn't an accident, Aaron. Devin killed him.”

The line was silent for a minute. “How do you know?”

“Because I was there. He did it in front of me.”

“Oh, God, Anna! Oh, God. I'm so sorry. Please tell me you're not alone.”

“Wilhelm is here. Well, I mean he just went to talk to Jenna, but he'll be back in a few minutes.”

“Good. Anna, hon, if you need anything, please call me.” His voice was so tender it brought tears to her eyes. Maybe if she hadn't dated Ben and been dating Aaron....

No, if she'd been dating Aaron, he would be dead instead of Ben. Devin didn't care who it was, he just didn't want her loyalties divided. He wouldn't have hesitated to kill Aaron any more than he'd hesitated to kill Ben. Either way, her affections would have gotten someone killed. She needed to keep her emotions under control from now on. Devin would surely get rid of anyone she cared about too much,

"Thanks, Aaron. I appreciate it." She sighed. "I need to go. I'll see you tomorrow."

"You're coming tomorrow? Anna, Isaak would understand. You should stay home."

"No. I need...sanity. Dancing gives me that."

He was quiet for a minute. "I guess that makes sense."

"Does Travis know?"

"Yeah. I called him and told him. I'll let him know you'll be there tomorrow."

"Thanks, Aaron."

"Try and get some rest."

"Thanks. Bye."

"Bye, Anna."

Anna tossed her phone onto the bed and went into the bathroom to shower. When she finished, she went back into her bedroom and found Wilhelm was sitting on her bed.

He looked up and smiled at her. "Jenna said she would happily move in here."

Anna smiled as she sat down next to Wilhelm. "I thought she might."

Wilhelm smiled and pulled her close. "I think, if circumstances were different, she would have been bouncing off the walls."

She laughed softly. "I think you're right." She buried her face in his neck and inhaled. He smelled good.

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Chapter Eleven

Wilhelm hugged Anna tightly to him. She was so small and vulnerable and it pained him to know she was hurting so badly. He wished there was something he could do to take away her pain, but only time would do that. He rubbed her back and kissed her cheek.

He'd come into town hoping to be with Anna at least a few times, but when she told them about Ben, he realized he couldn't do that to her. He had a right to her. He was technically her Master, and he desired her, absolutely. But he also cared about her as a person. She needed a friend and father, not a lover. And certainly not now.

He had been tempted to go to the Manor and use one of the girls there, but didn't want Devin thinking Anna wasn't doing her "duties" by attending to him sexually. He was almost fifty years old. He could control himself for a few days.

But when Anna buried her face in his neck and then pressed her hips against him, his body responded. He heard her breath quicken and felt her press against him more. He knew she was becoming aroused. She moved in that certain way and he swore he could smell her arousal.

He mustered all his strength and pushed her gently away. "Anna, no. We cannot do this. You are grieving. I will not take advantage of you."

She looked at him with her sad green eyes. "Please, Wilhelm," she whispered, tears forming in her eyes. "It's all I know. It's the only thing that will take away the pain." She swallowed and a tear rolled down her cheek. "Devin made me this way."

Wilhelm sighed and wiped her tear away with his thumb. He knew that the first thing Devin had done to her after her parents were buried was arouse her and bring her to orgasm. Wilhelm was sure that it had been a

relief. Sex was everything to her; Devin and Jack had ensured that. Sex brought physical pain and pleasure. Emotional pain and relief. How she felt cared for and how she felt used. It was her emotional language.

Wilhelm searched her eyes. She was hurting; more than she had in a long time. Devin had been truly evil in what he had done to her and Ben. He couldn't understand how Devin could do such a thing to such a sweet girl.

She really did want to please those around her. Devin was breaking her. But why? She wasn't a rebellious person. At least not until this happened.

If someone had told him a week ago that Anna had hit someone, especially Devin, he would have laughed and told them they were insane. But Anna had freely admitted to attacking Devin. Surely Devin realized what he was doing to her.

It didn't make any sense. Devin was treading on dangerous ground. An Elder-Mistress out of control was a dangerous thing. Especially to her Master. She could turn on him and destroy him.

Wilhelm had to admit that last thought was rather appealing. But she would likely take it out on Alex as well, and Alex meant only good for her. Her fury towards Alex and her rebellion against his wishes was not a good sign, but Alex would have to deal with that when she got to Germany. Relieving her current pain would help, as long as Devin didn't do anything else to upset her.

Wilhelm looked back at Anna and cupped her cheek. Maybe his love would help soften her again. He leaned forward and kissed her gently. His cock throbbed at the light touch and he slid his hand around the back of her head to deepen the kiss. He probed at her lips with his tongue and she opened her mouth to him. He groaned as he explored her mouth with his

tongue. His tongue danced around hers, tasting and teasing her. It was everything he'd imagined it would be and more.

Her hands moved into his hair as she kissed him back with desperation. He tugged at her robe and it came loose, falling slowly to the floor. He ran his hands gently all over her soft skin as he kissed her mouth. Her nipples were hard as he caressed her firm, youthful breasts. He moved to kiss her neck and she sighed as he bit her neck gently.

He slid his hands down to her backside and kneaded her firm ass cheeks, moving his fingers lower and tracing the cleft of her ass down until he found the hot, wet slit of her pussy. She moaned and arched her back as he dipped his fingers inside her. So tight. So wet.

“Oh, Wilhelm,” she whispered as he slowly thrust his fingers in and out of her.

His pants felt tight and very uncomfortable. When she caressed him over the fabric he groaned in pain and pleasure. He rarely went this long without sex and was eager to bury himself deep inside her. But he would be patient and not hurry her. He would give her what comfort he could.

Anna moaned against Wilhelm's neck as he pushed his fingers deep inside her. God, it felt so good. This is what she needed. This is what would take the pain away. Sex had made her feel better when her parents died; it would help this time, too. It had to. She didn't know how else she would be able to cope.

He spread her outer lips apart and flicked her clit with his fingers, and the pain in her heart settled into a dull ache. She reached for his shirt, quickly unbuttoned it and pushed it off his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. She kissed his shoulder then neck as she undid his belt and pants. He

was so hard his cock practically exploded out of his pants and throbbed against her hand.

He gritted his teeth and breathed heavily as she stroked his length. It was a beautiful cock. So long and thick. She could feel herself almost dripping at the thought of him inside her. She refused to acknowledge that he reminded her of Alex.

He picked her up and laid her on the bed. He kicked his pants off, then lay next to her on the bed, caressing her body and making her moan. His cock brushed against her hip.

“Please, Wilhelm. I need you.”

“Anna, I don’t want to rush you.”

“I need you, Wilhelm,” she begged. “I need you inside me.”

He looked at her tenderly as he positioned himself on top of her. She opened her legs for him and felt him rubbing against her slit. He pressed forward slowly and she closed her eyes, feeling him fill her so completely. His piercings rubbed against the top of her channel and made her shiver with pleasure. More and more he filled her until he hit her cervix and made her hiss in pain.

“Anna, are you all right?” he asked in a husky voice.

She nodded. “Just...hurts if you go in too far.”

Wilhelm frowned, confused. Why would it hurt her? Alex had told him that she had enjoyed and even begged for Alex to push in as far as he could. Something was wrong, Wilhelm could feel it. She felt...different, but couldn’t pinpoint what it was. Maybe it was just the stress of the last few days.

“I’m sorry, Wilhelm.”

He smiled tenderly at her and kissed her. “Don’t apologize. Women’s bodies do strange things sometimes.” He masked his concern and moved gently inside trying to erase the pain he’d caused her.

She closed her eyes as the pleasure enveloped her. He would have to be careful with her. She needed the pleasure, not the pain.

Anna sighed as Wilhelm thrust gently inside her. She wanted more, but it hurt. She’d never hurt like this before and it troubled her...for a minute, and then Wilhelm’s movements made her forget.

They moved together in rhythm and soon Anna felt her climax approaching. She wrapped her legs around Wilhelm’s hips and tightened herself around him until her world exploded in bright colors. She heard Wilhelm groan and stiffen as he came. He pressed in a little too much, making her hurt, but she didn’t want to tell him. She knew he didn’t mean to. She knew the last thing on earth Wilhelm would want to do was hurt her.

He rolled off a moment later and held her close. She felt safe. Cared for. Loved. She closed her eyes and let herself relax in his care, quickly falling into pain-dulled sleep.

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Chapter Twelve

Anna heard a phone ring and opened her eyes.

“Do not worry, Anna,” Wilhelm said softly. “It is my phone.” He got out of bed and picked up his phone out of his pants. “*Hallo...*” He spoke in German and his face quickly changed from confused to concerned. He sat on the bed next to her and held her hand as he spoke.

Anna glanced at the clock. It was three in the morning. She had fallen asleep when the sun was still in the sky, yet she still felt sleepy. She watched Wilhelm’s face as he continued to talk, then he ended the call and stared at the floor.

“Gretchen is in labor,” he said. “The baby is not due for another month.”

“Is that bad?”

Wilhelm looked at her in surprise, then with incredible tenderness. “*Ja*. With all the complications she has had....” He sighed. “Ilsa and Alex took her to the hospital. Kurt needs to get home.”

“You need to go too, don’t you?” she asked in a soft voice, trying to ignore the sudden return of pain in her heart.

Wilhelm didn’t say anything at first. “I will stay if you need me, Anna. I do not want to leave you alone.”

Anna pushed aside her own hurt, sat up and caressed his cheek. “You’ve been so good to me, Wilhelm. But you should be with your family.” Anna had come to realize how important parents were to their children over the last few months. Ben had been very close to his dad. Even Travis talked to his dad at least once a week. Families needed to be together in bad times.

“Anna, you are family, too.”

She shook her head. “I’m your slave, Wilhelm.”

He frowned. "I have never thought of you that way, Anna," he said in a firm voice. "None of us have."

Anna didn't say anything. She was pretty sure Alex thought of her that way. She gave him a small smile. "I have Jenna and Matt and Aaron. I'll be okay. Kurt needs you and if you stay here, you're too far away if something bad happens." She squeezed his hand. "You need to go home."

"Anna, I do not want you to feel that I have abandoned you."

She looked at him for a long moment. "You wouldn't abandon me, Wilhelm."

"Then why do you think that of Alex?" he asked softly.

She was quiet for several minutes trying to come up with an answer. "Because he acted like he loved me."

"He does love you, Anna. I know this to be a fact."

"You're mistaken. He hardly talked to me at all when he was in town the last time. And he supported Devin's decision about me not going to New York. He—"

"Anna, being in New York without Alex or Devin would be dangerous," Wilhelm interrupted. "Alex was right."

"Being here with Devin isn't that safe either," she retorted.

Wilhelm sighed. "I know."

They were quiet for a few minutes.

"You should get dressed, Wilhelm. I'm sure Kurt wants to be going soon."

"Anna, I will stay if you need me."

She shook her head. "I'll be okay. Really."

Wilhelm stood reluctantly and began dressing. When he was finished, he sat back down next to Anna. "Call me. Anytime, if you need me, all right? And I will see you in a few weeks."

Anna frowned. "I don't want to go to Germany."

"Not even to see myself and Kurt?" he smiled at her, eyes twinkling.

"You'll be with your wives. I like it better when you visit me here."

"Alex wants you to come, Anna. You need to obey him."

Anna narrowed her eyes at him, then realized what he had said. She was a slave and he knew it. She felt the chastisement and looked at her hands.

"Yes, Wilhelm."

"Anna, I didn't mean..." Wilhelm looked at her changed posture and realized his mistake. He had just treated her as a slave when he promised her he hadn't thought of her like that. And he didn't think of her like that...did he? He cursed at himself silently.

"I am sorry, Anna," he said quietly, pulling her into his lap. "I should not have said that."

She sat stiffly in his arms. "It's all right, Wilhelm."

Wilhelm sighed. "Anna, I-" The phone interrupted him. He looked at his phone and saw it was Kurt. "Hello, Kurt," he answered in German.

"Are you here yet? I called and spoke to the pilot. They'll be ready by the time we get there."

Wilhelm could hear the anxiety in son's voice. "I'll be leaving in a few minutes."

"Is Anna all right?"

"Not really."

"Gretchen always has terrible timing."

"She does, but you do need to be there for her. For the sake of your son. I'll be there soon."

Wilhelm put his phone back in his pocket and looked at Anna.

Anna held herself still in Wilhelm's arms, waiting for him to hang up.

He hugged her to him after he put his phone away. "Anna, do you want me to stay?"

She shook her head. "You should go." He didn't need to stay for a slave. He needed to attend to his family. She crawled off his lap and stood next to the bed, staring at the floor. "I'll be okay. Really."

"Jenna said she would bring her things over tomorrow. Or I suppose that is today?"

Anna glanced up and saw a small smile on his face. She nodded.

Wilhelm stood. "Call me, Anna. Promise me you will if you need anything."

"I will."

She put her robe on and walked him to the door. He kissed her soundly, hugged her tightly, and then left. She watched him walk down the hallway and then get into the elevator, waving at her before he did.

Anna closed the door and went back to her bed. She stared at the ceiling and pushed away the pain in her heart from Wilhelm's leaving. She tried to push away the pain of Ben's death, as well, but couldn't. The pain lingered and tears rolled silently down her cheeks.

"Oh, Ben...", she whispered to the empty room.

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Chapter Thirteen

“Anna.”

Anna groaned at her interrupted sleep. She opened her eyes to see Jenna standing over her.

“What?” she asked, irritated.

“We need to get going if you’re going to the theater this morning.”

Anna glanced at her clock. It was eight-thirty. She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

“You can stay here, Anna. Isaak will understand if you’re not up for performing.”

“No, I’m fine,” she snapped. “Just give me a minute.”

“Okay.” Jenna looked at her with concern in her eyes. “I’ll wait for you out in the other room.”

Anna sighed and stood. She dressed quickly and went out into the living room.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said, holding her keys and dance bag. “I’ll drive.”

“Don’t you want to eat?” Jenna asked cautiously.

“I’m not hungry.”

The two girls walked down to the garage and got into Anna’s car. Tears started to fill her eyes. *No*, she told herself, *I won’t cry*. She was tired of being weak. Weakness is what got her hurt and she was tired of getting hurt. She would be strong and not let anyone get to her. If she didn’t care about anyone then there would be no weakness to exploit.

“Where’s Wilhelm?” Jenna asked. “I thought he would have stayed with you in the apartment last night.”

“He went home. Kurt’s wife went into labor and they had to leave.”

“Oh.”

Anna drove to the theater garage and parked, all without speaking.

“I’ll get my things this afternoon and take them to your place, if that’s all right,” Jenna said as they walked across the street to the theater.

Anna shrugged. “Sure.”

“Anna, if you don't want me to move in with you, just say so.”

She shook her head. “No. Wilhelm thought it would be a good idea. I should do as he says.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Anna didn’t respond. She walked with her jaw clenched and her chin held high. She would not show weakness. She would not care; about anyone or anything.

They walked onto the stage where classes were held on performance days. Several dancers ran up to Anna, including Travis and Aaron, to ask how she was doing. She barked that she was fine and pushed them out of the way to get to her position at the *barre*.

Aaron stared in shock after Anna snapped at him. He’d never seen her so cold and distant. Her eyes were hard and her jaw was clenched. He and Travis stared at each other as she brushed past them to get to her place. They’d expected Anna to run to them for comfort, not glare at them for showing concern.

“This isn’t good,” Travis said in a quiet voice.

“That fucking bastard,” Aaron muttered.

“Who? Anna?” Travis asked.

Aaron shook his head. “Devin.”

Aaron had told Travis what Anna had told him. Devin was destroying her. He hoped Alex would finish whatever he felt he needed to soon and

return. Something was seriously wrong with Anna and only Alex would be able to fix it. Of this he was certain.

“She wasn’t this cold yesterday when I called. She was crying.”

Aaron heard people muttering about her coldness and wondering why she was here instead of home grieving.

“You guys, give her a break,” Aaron said to the dancers around him. “This isn’t her. This is the most recent in a series of tragedies in her life. She’s coping the only way she knows how.”

“By being a bitch?” Lucy, his dance partner, asked coldly.

“She’s not trying to be a bitch. It’s not like her at all. She’s...hurting. Really bad. I mean, c’mon her boyfriend just died. Give her a break.”

Lucy looked over at Anna, who was staring at the ground and blinking rapidly. Her tears sparkled in the stage lights. “She’s trying not to cry,” Lucy remarked softly.

“You have no idea the life she’s had, Lucy. She’s only twenty. Please,” Aaron implored. “Don’t judge her. Just be a friend. No matter how she is.”

He could see Lucy’s eyes watering in sympathy as she nodded. “Okay.”

Lucy walked over to Anna and hugged her. Anna reacted coldly, but Lucy squeezed her hand and spoke gently to her

Aaron looked around for Jenna and found her watching Anna with concern in her eyes.

He walked over. “How’s she doing?”

“She snapped at me this morning.” Jenna gave him a wry smile. “Wilhelm asked me to move in with her and keep an eye on her.”

“Are you gonna?”

She nodded. “Wilhelm’s right. She shouldn’t be alone.”

“How’s Matt doing?”

“He’s...okay. Do you...Anna told him something that was rather disturbing.”

Aaron hadn’t talked to Jenna since Sunday’s performance except for a few texts to ask about Anna’s whereabouts. “That Ben wasn’t killed in a car accident?”

Jenna’s eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“Anna told me when I called yesterday.”

“No wonder she’s so fucked up.”

Aaron looked across the stage to see Isaak speaking quietly to Anna. She nodded and then burst out into tears. Isaak hugged her to him. Her show of emotion would hopefully make the other dancers realize she wasn’t a cold-hearted bitch. The last thing she needed was the cold shoulder from the people she interacted with everyday.

“She had the ring,” Jenna said quietly. “Matt said she had it with her then gave it to him. I hope his family lets her keep it.”

“I thought they liked her.”

“They do. A lot, from what I can tell. They were excited that Ben was going to ask her. But she’s feeling guilty and avoiding them.”

“It’s not her fault.”

“I know. But I’m sure Devin is quite content to let her think it was her fault.”

“Yeah.” Aaron continued to watch Anna cry on Isaak’s shoulder. Isaak was like a father to her. It was good. She needed platonic men in her life.

“Do you need help getting your things to her place?” he asked, turning back to Jenna.

She grinned. “I could certainly use a bigger vehicle than my Miata. I hate to ask Matt. His family is supposed to be arriving today and I don’t want to take him away from them.”

“I’ll follow you back to your place and help you out after rehearsal,” Aaron said with a slight shake of the head. Her little car wouldn’t hold more than a suitcase. It was as bad as Anna’s. *Girls and their little cars*.

Isaak clapped his hands and Aaron hurried to his place. Anna looked more sad than angry now. He took that as a good sign.

Isaak told Anna he wanted her and Travis to run through their dance, to prove to Isaak that she’d be able to handle dancing tonight. She managed to clear her mind before stepping out onto the stage.

She was prepared to get lost in the dance, as usual, but this time something clicked in her head a few steps in and she felt something she hadn’t felt before. She felt the sensuality in the music, the sweet, pain-relieving sensation, and let it take over. She danced the choreographed steps, but she used her eyes and slight changes in her body, and suddenly she realized she was seducing everyone who watched her. They were mesmerized. She saw Travis’ eyes widen at her soft gaze and felt him react as he held her and danced with her.

None of the steps changed, just the feeling behind it.

The dance ended with Anna bent over Travis’ knee, backwards, with her arm over her head and Travis bending over to her stomach. A foggy silence filled the theater.

Anna’s chest rose and fell in the silence and she became frightened that she had upset someone. She hadn’t meant to do it. It just happened.

“Holy shit, you two.” Isaak walked up to them with wide eyes and his mouth slightly ajar.

Travis stirred and helped Anna to her feet. Anna looked at Isaak nervously as he looked between the two of them with dilated eyes. She

could tell that he was doing his best to tamp down his desire.

He stared at them for a moment more and then cleared his throat. “I don’t think I’ve seen that dance interpreted quite that way before.”

“I’m sorry, Isaak,” Anna said softly. “I didn’t mean to.”

Isaak shook his head. “It’s all right, Anna. It was beautiful. The, uh, reaction was unexpected, but you danced beautifully.” Isaak’s cheeks reddened slightly, which made Anna blush. “Really, Anna. It’s okay.” He smiled at her. “If you two dance like that tonight...you’ll be the talk of the town. Now, go home and rest.”

Anna nodded and went to her bag, avoiding the looks of the other dancers who had stayed to watch.

Travis knelt down next to her to gather his things. “Do you know how hard it is to dance with a hard-on, Anna?” he whispered.

She turned to apologize and saw him grinning at her. “I’m so sorry, Travis. I don’t know what happened.”

“The magic of an Elder-Mistress.” He shrugged and grinned. “I don’t mind...too much. But it does make me really horny.”

Anna shrugged. “I could probably help you out with that,” she said without thinking about it. And then she did think about it and the distraction sounded nice.

He looked at her, shocked. “Anna....”

“Sex helps me feel better.”

He stared at her. “Anna, you’re grieving. I don’t want you to regret anything.”

Tears filled her eyes. “If Devin came to my place tonight he wouldn’t care if I were grieving or not. He’d have sex with me anyways. And I think you’d be a bit nicer than him.”

“Does he suck in the sack?”

Anna grimaced. “Not if he doesn’t want to.”

Isaak walked up at that moment. “Anna, has the family decided when the funeral will be?”

Anna nodded. “They were going to try for Friday.”

Isaak nodded thoughtfully. “You should go. If you want to dance in the matinee, just promise me you’ll have a good warm up on your own.”

“I do want to dance, Isaak,” she said, tears in her eyes. “Do you think that’s okay?”

He nodded. “I know you and I know your reasons, Anna. You don’t have to justify yourself to me. If anyone says anything, I will defend your decision.”

She gave him a small smile and hugged him. “Thanks.”

“Go rest. I’ll see you tonight.”

Chapter Fourteen

Anna collapsed on her bed upon returning to her apartment after rehearsal. Dancing had helped her feel better. At least for a while. Jenna and Aaron were getting Jenna's things from her dad's house and would be here soon.

Anna had gone home to rest, but rest eluded her. She lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling. The relief that she had felt while dancing trickled out of her body like a leaking pipe, only to be replaced by the pain of Ben's loss. She turned on her side and sobbed until she fell asleep.

Voices in the hallway woke her later. It was Jenna and Aaron. Matt, too. She rolled off her bed and walked out of her room. Jenna sat in the midst of dozens of boxes while Aaron and Matt leaned against the wall, talking.

They smiled at her when she walked in.

"How are you doing, Matt?" she asked with a weak smile.

He shrugged. "Okay. My parents are here. Katherine and Ben's sisters are working on packing up Ben's things. They wanted to see you if you woke up in time."

Anna bit her lip. She didn't want to go back down to that apartment, but she didn't want to be rude either. She nodded and reluctantly made her way to Ben's apartment.

She knocked on the door and a moment later, Katherine opened it. Her eyes were red and puffy. She smiled and hugged Anna, pulling her into the apartment.

"Hey, sweetheart. How ya doing?"

"Okay," Anna answered. "Depends on the moment."

Katherine nodded. "I understand. I found something I wanted to give you." She took Anna's hand and led her to Ben's bedroom.

Anna froze at the entrance. She didn't want to go in. Didn't want to see his things being packed up into boxes.

Katherine pulled her inside and she saw Marcia and Ruth packing up his clothes. All his suits. He had looked so handsome in them. Tears welled in Anna's eyes.

"Here," Katherine said, handing her the ring box.

Anna stared at it as if it was a snake.

"He was going to ask you to marry him," Katherine said in a cracked voice. "At the party. That's why we were here." She opened Anna's hand and put the box in her hand. "He would want you to have it. I know he would."

Anna slowly opened the box to see the diamond ring she'd seen while crying over his body. It was a beautiful round diamond solitaire that sparkled in the light.

"The police detective called this morning," Katherine said and then swallowed. "She said that...." Anna saw the tears in Katherine's eyes as she cleared her throat. "His car had apparently gotten caught in something under the bridge. He'd been there since Friday night."

Anna closed her eyes at the horrible image. She knew it wasn't true, but the picture was gruesome nonetheless. She looked at Katherine again and felt the burden of guilt in her chest once more. "I'm so sorry, Katherine," she whispered.

"Anna, it's not your fault. Accidents happen. You can't blame yourself."

Yes, I can! Anna shouted to herself. *It's my fault your son is dead! If I hadn't loved him....* Anna fell to the floor with a sob and couldn't stop the wracking sounds. *It's all my fault.*

Katherine put her arms around Anna and held her while she cried. Katherine's shoulders shook as if she were crying as well. Anna's heart

burned with guilt, knowing she was the one to blame for this wonderful family's grief.

"It's not your fault, honey," Katherine repeated, petting her hair. "It's not your fault." She held Anna until her tears subsided.

"I can't keep this, Katherine. It's...he didn't give it to me." She tried to hand the box back to Katherine.

"He would have," Katherine protested pushing her hand gently away. "If...he would have, Anna. He would have wanted you to have it. I know he would." She smiled. "You can wear it if you'd like. You were more than just a girlfriend to him. He died having found the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. I would have been proud to have you as a daughter-in-law."

Anna looked at her and shook her head. "No," she whispered. Not once she knew the truth about her.

Katherine took her hands. "Anna, Ben told me...a little bit about your argument."

Anna looked at her wide-eyed and tried to pull away, but Katherine shook her head.

"He had forgiven you, Anna. He knew your heart. He knew it wasn't what you wanted. He loved you. He even knew he might have to wait a while for you two to be able to marry, but he was willing to wait."

Anna stared at her. "You know what I am?" she whispered.

Katherine stroked her hair and nodded. "I know you are a beautiful young woman who was abused and made to do things that you didn't want to do. I know you still have to do some of those things. And I know that you loved my son, and that my son loved you." She opened her arms and Anna crawled toward her and the two women hugged. "I will always refer to you as his fiancé, Anna. Even though he didn't get to ask you."

After a few minutes, she pulled back and looked at Anna. “Honey, I don’t expect you to never fall in love again. I don’t want you mourning him for the rest of your life. You are young and beautiful and will make another mother-in-law very happy someday.” She brushed Anna’s hair back from her face. “I don’t want you to feel guilty if you fall in love with another man. Ben would want you to be happy. Our family would never begrudge you love and happiness.” Anna tried to look away, but Katherine cupped her chin gently. “Anna, do you understand me?”

Anna gazed into the other woman’s eyes; so much like Ben’s. Anna nodded, but swore to herself that she would never fall in love again. Devin would resent and kill them, too. No more distractions. Ever.

“What time is the funeral?” Anna asked, trying to change the subject.

“Ten o’clock on Friday morning. We’d like you to sit with us, if you’re willing. As part of the family.”

Anna nodded and gave her a weak smile. “I’d like that.”

“Good.” Katherine’s voice cracked. “Now, you should probably go rest for your performance tonight.”

Anna looked at her with the question in her eyes. “Is it wrong for me to dance?”

Katherine smiled sadly and shook her head. “We all mourn in different ways. Matt said you were a very talented dancer and that Ben was enthralled with you.”

“It helps the pain go away,” Anna whispered. “If only for a few minutes.”

“Then you should dance,” she said gently. “I don’t think badly of you for doing so.”

Anna nodded. “Did you...I mean, would you like to come while you’re in town? I’m sure I could ask Isaak to see if there’s some tickets available.”

Katherine smiled. “That would be nice. To see what Ben saw on his last night.”

“I’ll speak with Isaak tonight.”

“Don’t feel bad if you can’t. But I would like to see it. Perhaps a few minutes of pain relief for the rest of us?”

Anna smiled sadly and turned and walked away.

When she got back to her bedroom, she closed the door and looked at the ring sitting in its gray velvet. She took it out and put it on her left finger. It fit perfectly. It was so much simpler than the ring Devin had given her. Anna loved it, because it was from Ben. She would wear it. In honor of Ben. And perhaps to spite Devin. Right now she didn’t care what Devin thought and ignored the warning bells that went off in her head at that dangerous frame of mind.

Chapter Fifteen

Anna and Jenna went back to the theater early that afternoon to get ready. Anna sat on the floor of her dressing room and worked her pointe shoes until they were soft enough to dance in. She sewed the ribbons on and put them on to test them. When she was done, she tossed them aside and lay down on the floor with her feet on the couch, staring at the ceiling and playing with her engagement ring.

A knock made her jump.

“Anna?” It was Travis.

“Come in,” she said without emotion.

Travis entered and closed the door behind him. “Hey, how ya doing?” he asked in a gentle voice.

Anna glanced at him. “I’ve had better days.”

“I can imagine.”

Anna laughed bitterly. “I can actually say that now...I’ve had better days.” She sighed. “I think it was easier when I wasn’t able to say that.”

“It’ll will get better again, Anna.” Travis sat on the couch and rubbed her legs. “It seems like it will never be good again, but life will get better again.”

Anna snorted. “Right. You don’t have to deal with Devin.”

“That’s true...but there will be other guys to fall in love with.”

Anna shook her head. “No. There can’t be. Devin would just kill them too.”

“Why do you say that?”

Anna looked down at her feet. “Devin killed Ben because he was a distraction. Because I admitted that I’d rather be with him than Devin.

Devin won't allow distractions." She sighed. "The whole point of falling in love is because you want to be with them. I can't do that again."

"I'm sorry, Anna. I really am. What Devin did...it's unforgivable."

They were quiet for a few minutes. Anna was lost in her thoughts of Ben. The pain was unbearable and she wanted to carve her heart out with a knife. Tears began to roll down her cheeks and Travis sat down next to her and hugged her to his chest. The stream of tears became a torrent and Travis rocked her and kissed her head.

"Can half-Immortals die?" she asked in a cracked voice. Maybe death would take away the ache in her heart.

Travis was quiet for a moment. "I don't know," he said finally. "I know Immortals can't. I don't know about you." He pulled away and cupped her chin. "I would be very sad if you died, Anna. And so would a lot of other people."

She frowned and then leaned her head back on his chest. "After Ben was...gone, Devin had me taken up to his room and he had sex with me. He made me feel when I didn't want to feel. And then he wouldn't give me release. Then he tied me to his bed and...he gave me a shot. My body felt like it was on fire." She looked at Travis with tears in her eyes. "Then Kaveh came and had sex with me."

"Who's Kaveh?"

"An Immortal. Devin said he was...doing something to me, but I don't know what. He never told me what he did to me."

"He had an Immortal have sex with you? Why?"

Anna shook her head. "I don't know. He did it at the Gathering too. When I was out of town. I had forgotten about him fucking me."

"Devin's such a fucking bastard. He probably was just messing with your head."

“Maybe. But he seemed to be...I don’t know. Expectant of something? Kaveh said ‘It is done’. But what was done?”

“I think with Devin, sometimes it’s better just not to ask.”

“Have you interacted with him much?”

He shook his head. “No. But my dad has obviously. He says it’s best if Devin just doesn’t know who you are.”

“Does he know who *you* are?”

“Yeah, but to him I’m just ‘Brandon’s bastard son’, which is fine with me.”

“Well, you might have progressed to ‘Anna’s dance partner.’”

“Great.” He rolled his eyes, and then smiled at her. “I suppose there are worse things to be.” He glanced at his watch and stood. “We need to get ready. It’s going to be starting soon.”

“Travis?”

“Yeah?”

“This afternoon...did it make you uncomfortable?”

“Dancing with you while you seduced the entire audience?” He chuckled.

Anna winced and nodded. “I didn’t mean to.”

“It was one of the sexiest things I’ve ever experienced. ’Course, if you do it again, I can’t guarantee I won’t drag you back in here and fuck you against the wall.”

The thought was appealing. “If you want.” It might be a welcome distraction.

After Travis left, Anna immersed herself in the ritual of preparing for the performance. She pulled her hair into a high ponytail and carefully tied

the green chiffon ribbon around the base. She took pains to arrange her costume as though for a photo shoot, not a live performance. The gold sequined bikini halter-top was low cut, tight enough that it stayed in place, yet showed the cleavage of her solid C-cup breasts nicely. The low-hung green chiffon pants—slits on the side, revealing green panties—were gathered at the ankles with gold cuffs. A green velvet belt with gold embroidery sat low on her hips, and the coins attached around it tinkled when she walked.

After she put her makeup on, she pinned a golden circlet in her hair and went out to warm-up backstage. The backstage was busy between acts and somewhat noisy. Aaron and Lucy warmed up along the back wall. Anna saw Travis in the corner talking with a couple of the dancers from the Waltz of the Flowers. Travis gave a bright smile to one of the girls and she blushed. Anna felt certain he didn't sleep alone most nights. Being raised in the Manor gave him a certain advantage over other men when it came to flirting. He knew exactly how women ticked and how to get them to do pretty much anything he wanted.

Travis saw her and grinned. He said something to the girls, and then walked over to greet her. "Damn, you look sexy. Thank God for dance belts."

Anna smiled. Dance belts kept guys where they needed to be and prevented injury while jumping halfway across the stage. She noticed his costume was a bit higher on his hips than it had been the last time they'd performed. Anna looked at him curiously.

"Preparing for arousal," he whispered with a grin. "Don't want to be popping out to say hi in the middle of the show. I think Isaak would be upset if the show turned R-rated."

Anna giggled and then shook her head. “Oh, I shouldn’t be laughing,” she said with a pained expression and sighed.

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Chapter Sixteen

The second act music began and the backstage quieted. Anna and Travis did some pirouettes and lifts to get ready and then moved into position shortly before their cue.

“Make me want you, Anna,” Travis whispered in a seductive voice as the Spanish dancers took their bows. “Make me want you and I will make you feel incredible when we’re done.”

Anna glanced back at him, surprised, but shivered at the dark, seductive look in his eyes. She felt a thrill run through her body and the pain in her heart disappeared. Their music started and she stepped on stage into the bright lights.

She moved with grace and sensuality, flirting, seducing, as Travis chased after her for the first part of the dance. Twirling and teasing until he caught her up in the air above his head. He lowered her to the ground, her body sliding down against his, lips almost touching as her toe touched the stage. She bent backwards as his fingers trailed down to her hips and he walked around her, turning her as she stood *en pointe*. She straightened, his hand on the back of her head, eyes locked until she spun around again to escape into an arabesque. But he held her hand firmly in his grasp and he pulled her back to him. She submitted to his desire and they danced, spinning, lifting, seducing, until she lay back on his bent knee, surrendered and submitted to his will.

The music stopped, echoing through the silent theater. Anna’s chest heaved as her mind cleared. The auditorium was silent.

Oh, God, had they been terrible? She didn’t even remember dancing. She only felt desire for Travis coursing through her veins.

Suddenly, the room erupted in applause and shouts. Anna lifted her head and stared, stunned, at Travis, who grinned at her. He helped her to her feet and they took their bows. First, to the audience, then to the Nutcracker Prince and Clara, and then to the audience again. They glided off stage and the applause continued.

Isaak stood there with a big grin on his face. “Great job, you two. I think you need to go out for another bow.”

Anna shook her head. “No...I can’t....” But Travis pushed her out and followed close behind.

She curtsied low, humbled by the experience and overwhelmed by the noise. They glided off stage again, the applause subsided, and the ballet continued.

She looked at Travis, shaking and with wide eyes. The pain was threatening to return. Sex. Sex would make her feel better. Anything to keep the pain at bay.

Travis’ brows rose as she looked at him. She gave him a pleading look and he nodded.

“C’mon,” Travis said, dragging her backstage and into his dressing room.

He closed the door and pushed her against it, kissing her passionately. “God, you are the sexiest woman I’ve ever met,” he murmured against her lips, then crushed his mouth against hers again.

Desire ran rampant through Anna’s body, pushing the pain away, and she kissed him back, running her hands up and down his bare chest, damp beneath his gold vest. She pushed it off his shoulders and he reached behind and unclasped her top. He caressed her breasts and she moaned softly. She reached down and caressed his cock over his pants. He was hard. And long and thick. Just like his dad. She groaned and rubbed him harder.

“I need you,” she groaned. “I don’t know how these things work,” she said, trying to pull at his costume.

“I’ll do it. This time.” He grinned and pulled at her belt and pushed her pants down off her hips. He knelt before her and buried his tongue in her pussy.

She shoved the gold turban off his head and tangled her hands in his hair as he lapped at her and sucked on her clit. “Oh, Travis,” she moaned.

He unbuttoned the cuffs of her pants and pulled them off, tossing them on the growing pile of green and gold. He tugged at his pants and pulled them off along with his dance belt, then picked Anna up and laid her on the couch. He positioned himself between her legs and she glanced down at his throbbing cock.

“Yes, please,” she begged.

He leaned down and thrust into her with one long thrust, making her moan and grasp his shoulders.

“Oh, God, Travis!” she cried.

“Shhh,” he said, then covered her mouth with his, thrusting his tongue in and out of her mouth as he did the same with his cock. She met his thrusts with enthusiasm and soon they both spiraled up into the stars and cried out against each other’s mouths.

Travis rested on his elbows with his head on her shoulder as they both gasped for breath. “Holy shit, Anna. You’re fucking incredible.”

Anna smiled. “So are you.” She moved her hips against him and clenched her muscles, making him shudder.

“Fuck,” he said softly, then lifted his head and looked down at her with a smile. “Can we do that again sometime?”

She nodded. “Yes. Definitely.” She was feeling good. Pain-free.

He grinned and stood. "I'm not one to fuck and run, but I know we don't have long before the finale, and it would be *really* embarrassing if we missed that."

They stood to get their costumes. Anna looked down and realized she still had her pointe shoes on.

"That is definitely a first," she said, wiggling her feet. "I've never had sex while wearing my pointe shoes."

Travis chuckled. "Kinda sexy, if you ask me."

They dressed quickly and fixed their makeup, then sat on the couch for a few minutes. Travis put his arm around her and she rested her head against his chest. They could hear the music through an overhead speaker and knew they still had a few minutes before they had to be backstage.

"Do you want to stay at my place tonight?" he asked softly.

The offer tempted her. More opportunity to dull the pain. "I'd love to, Travis. I really would. But Jenna moved in with me and I gave her a ride. And Ben's family is in town. If I came home tomorrow morning...they might not like it. I don't want to disrespect them."

Travis nodded. "I understand. Maybe some other time."

Anna turned to look at him. "I'd love to stay in your arms all night long, Travis," she said softly. She caressed his cheek. "Really. Maybe next week when they're gone."

"I'd like that. Or I could stay at your place too. I don't mind. Whatever you'd be more comfortable with. I live with two of my brothers, but they won't bother us." He grinned. "Unless you want them to." He looked toward the ceiling as they heard the last song of the Sugar Plum *pas de deux* began. "We should go."

He stood and dragged her to her feet. She had gotten so relaxed she didn't want to move, but did anyways, not wanting to miss the finale. They

glanced in the mirror one last time to make sure they didn't look like they'd just fucked on the dressing room couch, then walked calmly out to the backstage area.

Aaron came off stage for a few moments and glanced at the two of them with a raised brow, then shook his head and moved back into position for his next cue.

Travis stood next to Anna with his hand on her hip, stroking the skin above her pants and making her heart pound.

"Travis..." she whispered. "Your hand is...very enticing."

He rubbed his thumb in a circle. "You like it?" he murmured near her ear.

Anna shivered and nodded. The pain disappeared at his touch.

The music for the finale started and they moved into their position, waiting for their cue. They did their short dance and were applauded loudly. Clara was sent back to her home. They waited for the end of the music and then it was time for their bows. When they walked back out onto the stage, the applause rose to almost deafening levels and Anna saw with shock that much of the audience stood for them. They had received a standing ovation!

Anna gaped at Travis, who grinned at her. She curtsied again, then they moved back into their line and waited with smiles on their face for the rest of the cast to take their bows.

The curtain closed and the stage erupted into excited chatter. Aaron walked up to Anna and Travis with a grin. "I don't think the Arabian dance has ever garnered so much attention before." Aaron hugged Anna. "It was spectacular," he said to her. "And incredibly arousing," he added in a whisper in her ear. "I know I shouldn't be thinking about you that way right now...but I can't help it."

Anna stared wide-eyed at Aaron, who grinned sheepishly at her.

Isaak came up to them. “Excellent job, you two.”

“Thanks, Isaak,” Anna said. She asked him about tickets for Ben’s family.

“Absolutely, Anna. Just let me know what night.”

She nodded. The remembrance of Ben’s family subdued her mood abruptly. Tears filled her eyes and her face scrunched up as tried not to cry.

“C’mon, Anna,” Travis said. “I’ll take her back to her dressing room,” he told Isaak.

Anna managed to keep herself under control until she stepped into her dressing room and then she collapsed onto the floor and sobbed. Travis sat behind her and held her while she cried.

Jenna knocked on the door a few minutes later and came inside.

“Oh, Anna,” she said, sitting on the other side of her.

Chapter Seventeen

Being held and hugged by her two friends comforted Anna and her tears eventually subsided.

“Thank you,” she sniffed.

She heard a faint ringing from her bag. It sounded like Devin’s ring. Her eyes hardened and her sadness was replaced with anger as she crawled to her bag and pressed the answer button.

“What?” she snapped.

“That’s no way to answer your phone, Anna,” Devin said with a tinge of warning in his voice.

“What do you want Devin?” she asked coldly. Anna saw the shocked expressions on Travis and Jenna’s faces.

“I heard that you did an excellent job tonight,” he said. “That it was quite mesmerizing.”

“So? Are you going to punish me for it?”

“Anna, I’m warning you. Change your attitude.” His voice was low and threatening. Part of her didn’t care. The other part of her was terrified.

Anna trembled and clenched her jaw. She was so angry at him she wanted to hit him. But she shouldn’t anger him. His anger was dangerous. She inhaled deeply. “Who told you?” she asked in a calmer voice.

“I know everything you do, Anna. I hope Travis doesn’t become another distraction.”

Anna looked at Travis, fear for him filling her heart. “Please don’t hurt him, Devin.”

Devin chuckled. “Is he becoming one already?”

Terror rose in Anna’s heart. “No, Devin. He’s just a friend. Please don’t —”

“I won’t. As long as you behave properly.”

Anna slumped against the couch. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to do as you always have. Obey me and be happy about it.”

“I can’t be happy about it, Devin,” she whimpered. “You wounded me.”

“You wounded yourself Anna,” he spat. “Don’t blame me for your distractions. I only removed it for you.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks. “Please don’t hurt my friends.”

Devin laughed cruelly. “You have vulnerabilities now, Anna. Don’t you see how dangerous that is?”

“I thought you wanted me to go out and have a life.”

“I don’t know how good of a decision that was, Anna. You don’t seem to be able to handle it.” He paused. “Will Jenna interfere if someone comes over to your apartment and you start screaming?”

Anna blinked. “I’ll tell her not to,” she assured him.

“Maybe we should test that tonight. Go home and I’ll be there in forty-five minutes.” He hung up without another word.

She looked at Jenna. “We have to go,” she said as she scrambled out of her costume.

“Anna what’s going on?” Travis asked.

“Devin’s coming over. I have to get home.” She looked at Jenna. “Are you ready?”

“Let me go get my stuff.” Jenna left the room.

“Travis you should go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Anna, let me help you,” he said, looking hurt.

“Please,” she implored in a whisper. “Just go.”

He frowned and turned to go.

“Travis?” she said.

“Yeah, Anna?” He turned back around.

Anna hesitated. "Be careful."

"Did he threaten me?"

Anna nodded.

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "You too." He gave her a sad smile and then left.

Anna dressed in her street clothes and impatiently waited for Jenna in the hallway. "C'mon," Anna said when she came around the corner. "Let's go."

They walked quickly to Anna's car.

"Jenna...when you're there...," Anna began. "I...maybe you should stay with Matt tonight."

"Why?"

Anna gripped the steering wheel tightly as she drove to their building. "Because Devin's angry at me...and I don't want you to hear what he does to me."

"Anna, I can handle it. I want to be there for you when he leaves."

"If he leaves. Sometimes he stays all night." Anna sighed. "He's testing to see what you do if you...hear me screaming. You have to stay away. You can't interfere. And whatever you do, do not tell Greg. I don't want to have anything to do with him."

"Anna, he's a nice guy."

"He has something to do with Alex, and I don't want anything to do with Alex."

Jenna gave her a strange look. "Why?"

"Because I hate him. And he hates me. I hope he stays in Germany forever." Anna was feeling it more now than ever. Alex certainly didn't care about her. He hadn't even called after Ben died.

“I highly doubt he hates you, Anna. He wants you to go see him in Germany.”

Anna snorted. “He probably just wants to make me miserable. Besides, I’m not going.”

“You’re not going? How are you going to manage that?”

“He’s certainly not going to bother to come out here and get me. I’ll just ‘accidentally’ miss the flight and then I can stay here.”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “He’s not an idiot, Anna. He’ll make sure you get on that plane.”

“Fat chance,” Anna growled. “I won’t pack. I won’t open the door.”

“I think you should go. It will be good for you to get away.” Jenna smiled. “Don’t think of it as going to see Alex. Think of it as...getting away from Devin for two weeks.”

Anna opened her mouth, but her smart remark stuck in her throat. Getting away from Devin for two weeks? That was appealing. “I suppose I could think of it that way,” she said slowly. “But I’m not going to talk to Alex. I’ll sit in my room and lock the door.” She snorted. “Or maybe he’ll just stick me in the Manor and leave me there. He says his dad’s Manor is nicer than Devin’s. That the girls are happy there and stuff.”

Anna pulled into her parking spot a few minutes later. She was exhausted. This emotional roller coaster she’d been on for the last week was taking its toll.

They walked up to their apartment in silence and Anna unlocked the door. “Please, Jenna,” she pleaded as they walked in. “Don’t stay. I don’t want you to hear me.”

Jenna frowned. “Then put your phone by your bed and text me when he leaves so I can come check on you.”

“I can't guarantee you I'll be conscious.”

Jenna's frown deepened. "Then I'm staying." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm here because you need someone to be here with you, Anna. You need someone to watch over you."

"I'll be fine. Devin won't do anything to permanently hurt me."

"That's not very comforting."

Anna sighed. "I have to go shower. Do whatever you want." She turned and walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

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Chapter Eighteen

Once inside her room, Anna started trembling. Devin was right. She had vulnerabilities now. Her friends were targets. Any time she angered Devin, he might go after them instead of her. It would be better if she stayed away from them. But how?

She contemplated avoiding people as she sat on her bed and waited for Devin to come. She didn't know if Jenna was still here and hoped she wasn't.

The knock at the apartment door startled her out of her thoughts. She jumped up and quickly walked to the door to answer it. Both Devin and Ian stood in the doorway. She stared at them, trembling and clenching her fists at the same time.

“You gonna stand there all night, Baby?” Devin asked with a seductive smile.

Anna blinked in confusion. He didn't sound angry. She stepped back to let them inside.

Devin looked around. “Is Jenna here?”

“I don't know,” Anna whispered, fear and loathing fighting inside of her at the sight of the two men.

Devin wandered out into the living room. “Hello, Jenna,” she heard him say. “And you must be her boyfriend Matt.”

Anna didn't hear the response either of them gave but Devin laughed. “Anna's been sharing stories, has she?” He looked back at Anna, who backed away into Ian.

She looked up and scurried away from him, too. Ian opened his mouth to speak, eyes soft, but she turned away and stared at the floor.

Devin walked back to her and pulled her close. “Can’t we kiss and make up, Baby?” he murmured, then kissed her in just that way that made her knees weak.

Her mind rebelled but her body obeyed. His lips caressed hers and he ran his hands up and down her back. He pushed her into her bedroom and onto her bed where he untied her robe and began kissing her breasts, making her sigh and gasp. Ian came up behind and began kissing her neck and teasing her pussy. Anna moaned in response to the stimulation. Her body took over and she gave herself over to the pleasure. At least it would dull the pain.

Devin did everything he knew to excite Anna. To make her mind give up and her body respond. He kissed and licked and sucked all her sensitive places and Ian did the same.

As angry as he was with her, he couldn’t punish her physically and risk hurting the baby. At least, not punish her in the way she deserved. Her body would protect the baby, but if he couldn’t enjoy punishing her fully, why bother? He would just stick with fucking with her mind until the spring. It was easy enough to do. Making her enjoy herself at the hands of the two men who killed the man she loved. Devin couldn’t imagine a bigger mindfuck than that.

Terrorize her then be nice. Make her body respond to him and Ian. Scare her. Isolate her. That was Devin’s plan. She would be so fucked up in a few weeks she would do anything for him.

Damn her having to go to Germany, though. He would have to work hard to get her so fucked up that even Alex couldn’t get through. Then Alex

would get tired of her attitude and send her home to him. He'd see she wasn't worth it. Hopefully. If not, Devin would find another way.

Devin knelt down before Anna and slipped his tongue inside her sweet wetness. She moaned and grasped at his hair. He knew every single spot of her pussy that made her moan. Ian knelt behind her and rimmed her ass. She cried out and gasped as the two men mercilessly pleased her.

The two men's tongues occasionally touched, but Devin didn't mind. He and Ian had fucked enough times, it hardly registered. To be honest, he kind of liked it. He liked the taste of Anna on Ian's tongue and by Ian's reaction, the other man felt the same way.

A few minutes later both men were working her pussy. Ian worked her slit and Devin worked her clit. She wiggled and cried out, but they held her tightly and wouldn't let her move. Not until she came, which happened a minute later. She screamed and pulled Devin's hair as she came. Her juices flowed down into their mouths and their tongues fought for the taste.

"Please....," she whimpered as Devin sucked on her clit.

She was swollen and her clit stood erect and hard. Ian moved back to her ass and began stretching her with his fingers. She would have both of them tonight. He didn't want it to hurt though. He wanted her screaming in pleasure for hours so that she would be sobbing in the morning, knowing she'd betrayed the man she loved with her body.

Her inner thighs were wet and her pussy dripping. He could feel it on his chin as he sucked harder. Suddenly she screamed again and tried to twist away from his mouth, but he wouldn't let her. She came hard and he lapped up her sweetness. It was dripping down her thighs and he drew his tongue up from her knees up to the swollen lips. Her knees shook and her hands knotted in his hair.

She groaned as Ian moved another finger inside her. She needed to be stretched good for her to take them both. Devin was almost as big as Ian now and it would be a tight fit. His cock throbbed against his jeans thinking about ramming his cock into her. The swelling should have gone down by now. She didn't seem to have had any problems with Travis earlier in the evening.

She panted and struggled to stay upright. Devin made eye contact with Ian and they laid her on the bed. After they undressed, each took a breast and sucked on the nipple, causing her to cry out. Devin continued to circle her clit with his hand and brought her to her third orgasm quickly.

He nodded to Ian again and Ian rolled on top of Anna and slowly pushed his way between her legs to lubricate his cock. She'd never had him in the ass with lubrication and was in for a pleasant surprise.

"You feel incredible," Ian groaned as he thrust into her. His cock was slick and shimmered in the bedroom light. He truly was an impressive sight.

Anna's eyes were closed and she met his thrusts with soft moans and mewls. Devin leaned down and kissed her and she snaked her hand around his neck and held him tightly.

When Ian pulled out she whimpered loudly and pleaded with her eyes. Ian chuckled. "Patience, hon." He lay down on his back and pulled her on top of him, facing away.

"No, no, please Ian," she begged. "Please don't hurt me."

"I won't, hon. I stretched you out and I'm lubed. It shouldn't hurt." He held her by her hips and she winced as he positioned himself at her asshole.

She whimpered as he pressed her down.

"Relax, Anna. If you tighten it will hurt. I don't want it to hurt."

Anna took a breath and her body relaxed. Devin moved to watch her face as Ian pushed her down onto him. Her eyes got wide and her mouth

opened as he slid smoothly into her ass.

She sighed as she sat down on Ian's hips. The ecstasy was evident on her face.

Ian pulled her back to lie down and he thrust in and out a few times, making her moan loudly.

"Oh, Ian. Oh, God, yes!" she cried as he thrust in hard. She reached back and put her arms around Ian's neck as he thrust up into her.

Devin stroked his cock as he watched. When he saw she was ready, he moved between her legs and pressed his cock inside her. He could feel Ian's girth and the fit was tight. But she moaned and writhed in between them as he pressed himself all the way in.

"Devin....," she sighed, opening her eyes and looking at him lustfully.

"Hey, Baby," he said softly, and kissed her deeply as he and Ian began to move.

They would last for hours and would fuck her until she was exhausted. Anna's eyes opened in surprise as another orgasm hit her. She arched back and screamed as they pumped themselves into her body, making it last for a long time. She felt incredible. She was made for this.

Anna screamed out her umpteenth orgasm. Ian and Devin had fucked her every way she could imagine. Together. Separate. Devin fucked her ass and Ian ate her pussy, then they switched after she came. They moved back and forth between her ass and pussy, pain and pleasure, pain and pleasure. She couldn't remember a night full of more pleasure without some sort of drug. Of course, Devin knew her body. Knew just where to kiss or touch to make her come and come hard.

They were all sweating and panting, and still they continued pulling orgasms from her body. Her throat was sore from crying out so much. Her pussy felt raw, and yet another orgasm built inside her as she rode Devin with his hands on her hips, directing her movements.

She screamed again and ground her hips into his. She saw Devin glance at Ian and then Ian was behind her, pushing his huge cock into her ass.

She moaned as he filled her. The feeling of the two men inside her was overwhelming. They rammed themselves inside her with perfect rhythm and she heard Devin groan. Would he finally come? She was surprised at how long he'd lasted.

Another orgasm built and Anna screamed. She heard Devin and Ian shout out as they emptied themselves into her body.

She collapsed onto Devin's chest and he ran his hands over her hair. Ian kissed her shoulder before pulling himself out and rolling onto his back. Her bed was only a queen and it was a tight fit with the three of them. Devin lifted her off and rolled to his side, pulling her close. Ian scooted close and put his hand on her hip.

“Go to sleep, Baby,” Devin whispered. “You did well.”

Anna gave them a tired smile and fell asleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Anna woke with a start. The sun was up and she was alone in her bed, but evidence of the previous night's sexual adventures was evident in the twisted sheets and the smell of Devin on her pillow. She looked around; their clothes were gone. They must have left.

Grief hit her square in the face and Anna curled up under the covers and sobbed. She had betrayed the memory of her love by having sex with the men who killed him.

It felt as if her body would explode with grief. She didn't deserve even Ben's memory. She was weak. How could she have enjoyed last night so much? A little voice inside her told her that she couldn't help it, that she'd been trained that way. But she didn't believe it. If she'd really loved Ben she would have resisted...somehow.

Disgust made her stomach churn. She had no self-control.

"Anna?" Jenna knocked on the door and Anna heard her door open.

Anna pushed the covers away from her face, sat up and looked at her best friend with mournful eyes.

Jenna leaned against the wall. "It sure didn't sound like he hurt you last night." Her eyes were narrowed and accusatory.

Anna looked down at her hands, shame making her body tingle and her stomach churn. "He didn't," she said softly. "He...." She sighed. "I'm a terrible person."

Jenna came and sat next to Anna on her bed. "Anna," Jenna said, putting her hand on Anna's. "If I didn't know how you had been raised I would have been disgusted. But I know what Devin did to you. Anna, he's fucking with your head."

Anna eyes filled with tears as she looked despondently at her friend. “No, I’m weak.”

Jenna shook her head. “I heard him say it as they were leaving. He’s trying to fuck with your head. I don’t know why.”

“I don’t know why he didn’t just hurt me. He likes to do that.” She buried her face in her hands. “I’m so ashamed. Did Matt hear?”

Jenna winced. “Yeah. He was pissed at you until I gave him more of your background. He doesn’t totally get it, but he doesn’t think you were trampling on Ben’s memory.”

Anna didn’t say anything. What could she say?

She glanced at her clock. “I need to get ready.” They needed to leave in twenty minutes.

Anna went through the day in a daze. She preferred the numbness to the emotional roller coaster. She did her best to keep any interactions short. She had a five minute conversation with Katherine in the afternoon about attending a performance. They decided on Thursday evening. The family would head home Friday evening, taking Ben’s body to bury him in Seattle. Anna wouldn’t go. She mumbled something about not seeing Ben in the ground, then just ended the call. Anyone else just got a nod or a head shake.

Anna only came out of her daze when she danced and then went right back into numbness. She didn’t speak to anyone, even Travis, who simply sat with her and held her hand.

Thursday passed in a similar manner. When she returned to the theater for the performance, she stayed in her dressing room except when she was needed on stage.

Ben's family came backstage after the performance was over. They said she danced beautifully and that Ben would have been proud. She didn't say much but was polite. Katherine hugged her hard before they left and told her that Matt would drive her to Ben's memorial service in the morning.

Anna spent most of that night staring out her window at the lights of the city. She couldn't even feel tired.

The numbness at least felt safe.

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Chapter Twenty

Anna sat on her bed in her black dress, staring at the floor as she waited for Matt to arrive. She could hear Jenna moving around in the living room, but Anna didn't feel like moving. She would have to once Matt arrived, but until then, she could be alone.

She twisted the ring on her finger. It was the only jewelry she wore aside from Alex's bracelet and Devin's necklace. She didn't feel worthy to wear it, but Katherine had mentioned that she liked it and Anna didn't want to disappoint her.

Matt knocked a few minutes later. Jenna answered the door and when Anna walked out into the hallway she saw Greg was there as well.

"What are you doing here?" she spat, her anger rising to the surface.

Greg looked at her sympathetically. "He was my friend too, Anna. I told Matt I'd drive you guys."

She narrowed her eyes at him, then picked up her purse and swept past him.

"Why don't you like Greg?" Jenna whispered as they walked together to the elevator. "You've been hostile to him for months."

"Because he's my babysitter from Alex. I don't want anything to do with Alex, but still *he's* here."

"You like Wilhelm," Jenna pointed out. "And Kurt."

Anna ground her teeth. "It's different."

"How?"

"It just is," Anna snapped.

Jenna put her hands up in surrender. "All right. It's different."

Anna sat in the front seat of Greg's black Avalanche, staring blankly out the front window. She refused to respond when he tried to engage her in casual conversation. He seemed amused with her, which riled her to no end.

"We'll leave for Frankfurt right after the last show on the twenty-eighth," Greg said, switching tactics.

Anna crossed her arms and huffed. "I'm not going."

Greg laughed. "What do you mean you're not going?"

She glared at him. "You heard me. I'm not going."

"And you think you get to make this decision?"

"I'll make a fuss at the airport and security will arrest me."

"We're taking the family's new jet. There won't be security to alert."

Anna huffed again. "I'm still not going. I don't want to see him."

"See who?" Matt asked. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not going," Anna snapped.

"Germany," Greg answered. "Frankfurt to be exact. To see...a friend. And someone who can help Anna."

Anna snorted. "Like he wants to help me."

Greg sighed. "He does Anna. He doesn't hate you. I don't know where you came up with that idea."

"Maybe because he left. Because he didn't even bother to call me when Ben died. Because..." Anna didn't finish her sentence. So many things.

"You're rather rebellious for someone in your situation," Greg commented dryly.

"I don't care anymore."

She turned her head and stared out the window. She wouldn't go to Germany and that was that. Yes, it would be nice to see Wilhelm and Kurt, but to see them with their wives would be uncomfortable. She adored

Wilhelm and it would be hard to be around him and not be able to curl up next to him anytime she wanted to.

She supposed because Greg said “we,” that he was coming with her. Sigh. Twelve hours being stuck with him. Maybe she could get away...not go home after the performance. She could go to Travis’ house, maybe. Then Greg wouldn’t be able to find her. He would have to tell Alex that he’d failed. The thought brought a smile to her lips.

“You need to make sure you get some warm clothes. They have snow in the winter.”

Anna kept staring out the window. She didn’t need warm clothes because she wasn’t going.

Greg sighed. “Jenna, can you take her shopping and make sure she has a warm coat and other things you need for snow? Alex says they’re expecting a cold winter.”

“Sure,” Jenna said.

“And she needs a formal dress, too.”

“For what?” Anna asked, curiosity getting the best of her.

Greg looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “For New Year’s.”

Anna grunted and turned away again. “I’m still not going.”

They stopped at a light and Greg grabbed her chin and turned her to face him. “Alex has ordered me to take you to Germany, and I never fail to follow his orders,” he said in a low voice. “You *will* be going if I have to drag you kicking and screaming onto that plane.”

Anna narrowed her eyes. “He ordered you? Are you his slave too?”

“What?” Matt exclaimed

“Don’t worry about it, Matt,” Jenna said softly.

Anna continued to glare at Greg until the light changed and he released her chin and went back to driving. He didn’t speak again, which suited her

just fine.

He pulled into a parking lot about ten minutes later. Just as he did so, it began to rain and Anna sighed. It fit her mood, she supposed. Greg offered her an umbrella before she got out, but she whipped her head around and got out of the vehicle, getting drenched in the process.

She started walking towards the entrance quickly and suddenly the rain stopped falling on her. She looked up and saw Greg walking next to her with the umbrella over her head.

“I don’t need your help,” she snarled and stepped sideways back into the rain.

“Anna, you’re being ridiculous,” he said, stepping closer.

“I don’t care.” She stepped away again.

He grabbed her arm and held her firmly next to him, making her walk in step with him. “Do you want to get sick?”

“I don’t get sick,” she snapped. “I’ve never been sick.”

Greg sighed. “I didn’t know you were so difficult.”

“Then don’t bother with me.”

“It’s my job.”

“Fire your boss.”

“I respect Alex more than anyone else in the world. I will bother with you because he cares about you.” He studied her for a moment and then his face softened. “And I know you’re going through a very difficult time right now,” he added in a softer voice.

Tears filled her eyes unexpectedly and she looked down at the ground. She stopped fighting and let him lead her inside.

When they got inside Anna looked around and saw the place was very full. “Oh, God,” she said, backing into Greg as she spotted Jack across the room. She hadn’t seen him since the night she and Ben had fought.

“It’s okay, Anna,” Greg said softly. “It’s part of the reason I’m here. I’ll keep him away from you.”

Jack looked up and grinned wickedly at Anna as he walked towards her. Greg grabbed her hand and pulled her behind him.

“Who are you?” Jack asked in a cold voice.

“I am here to keep Anna safe.”

“You think I would hurt her?” Jack asked innocently.

“Yes, I do. I have no reason to think otherwise.”

There was a pause. “Ah, you must be one of Alex’s dogs.”

“Better Alex’s dog than Devin’s prince.”

“Why you fucking son-of-a-bitch....” Jack growled.

“You needn’t involve my mother. She’s actually quite a nice woman.”

Anna peeked around Greg to see Jack’s face darken with anger as he glared at Greg.

“You can’t deny me my right to see Anna.”

“I can do whatever the hell I want to. I’m here on Alex’s behalf. You’re here on your own. At least I assume so.”

“Anna!” a voice called across the room. Katherine walked towards her with her arms open.

She smiled timidly at the woman she had grown very fond of since they’d met. Anna went to Katherine and hugged her.

“Oh, honey. You’re all wet. You poor thing.” Katherine looked behind Anna. “Hello, Jack. I’m so glad you were able to come.”

“Hello, Katherine. I’m so sorry for your loss.” Jack spoke to her with a timbre of respect she’d never heard from him.

“Thank you, Jack. Have you met Ben’s fiancé, Anna?”

Anna turned to face her guardian.

“Anna, this is Ben’s direct boss, Jack Koslov. Ben worked under him since he graduated college.” Katherine smiled warmly at Jack. “Didn’t he intern under you as well?”

Jack smiled. “Yes, he did.” He glanced at Anna. “Fiancé?” he raised his eyebrow in subtle mockery.

Anna looked down at the ground. How could Jack deceive so many people? Obviously, Ben hadn’t told his mother everything. She glanced at Greg who was watching Jack like a hawk.

“Greg, I’m so glad you could come as well. Thank you for bringing Anna and Matt.”

“My pleasure, Katherine,” Greg said with a gracious smile.

Katherine took Anna’s hand and led her around the building, introducing her as Ben’s fiancé. Every time she said that, Anna wanted to cry. She saw Aaron and Travis in the crowd and introduced Katherine to them. By the time she sat next to Katherine and Dave in the front row of the church, the tears were spilling over onto her cheeks. She stared at the picture of Ben displayed at the front of the room. His handsome smile and bright eyes made her heart ache so unbearably.

Oh, it was so much easier to be angry. Sadness felt so out of control. Anger seemed easier. But it was harder to maintain. Her tears always came anyways.

Many people went to the front to talk about Ben. Several aunts and uncles spoke of his childhood. His colleagues spoke highly of him. His dad broke down and couldn’t finish. It was heart wrenching to watch.

The whole time they were speaking, the voice in Anna’s head kept up the mantra: *It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault. All these people are miserable because of me. It’s all my fault.*

The only time she didn't have tears rolling down her cheeks was when Jack got up to speak. She stared at him with all the hatred she could muster. Surely he had something to do with Ben's death.

When it was over, she walked with the family out to the foyer.

"Anna," Katherine said in a quiet voice. "Do you know Jack? You looked like you were going to be sick while he was talking."

Anna looked at Katherine, debating whether she should tell her the truth. Slowly she nodded. "He's my guardian."

Katherine looked at her for a long moment. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Anna looked away. "We don't...get along very well."

"I'm sorry to hear that." She looked sympathetic. "Ben always spoke highly of him. Did he know?"

Anna shook her head. "Not until...the night we fought. I didn't know they knew each other."

Katherine looked thoughtful. "Didn't you say he raised you after your parents died?"

"Yes."

Katherine looked across the room at Jack, standing amongst a group of men. She narrowed her eyes. "He abused you, didn't he?"

"How...?"

"Ben said you'd been abused as a child. It could only be him."

Anna took both of Katherine's hands. "Katherine, please. Don't let him know you know."

"Why? A child abuser should go to jail."

"He won't. Trust me. Don't confront him. Just...let it go. Otherwise...." Anna swallowed. "I don't want anything to happen to you." She stared intently into Katherine's eyes, willing her to understand.

Slowly, Katherine nodded. “All right, Anna.”
Anna sighed in relief.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Anna went directly into her dressing room when she got to the theater later that day. She lay down on the couch in the dark and cried. She couldn't stop.

There was a knock on the door and it opened when she didn't respond. Anna squinted as the light from the hallway spilled in and she saw Aaron standing in the doorway. When he saw her, he went to her quickly and hugged her.

"Why are you crying?" he asked quietly.

She shrugged.

"I guess that was a stupid question, huh? I'm sorry, Anna." He closed the door and turned on the light, then went back to the couch and pulled her into his lap. He rocked her as she cried.

Another knock a bit later turned out to be Travis. "Hey, Anna," he said, sitting down on the couch next to them. He squeezed her hand while she cried.

"Are you okay?" Travis asked when her tears had subsided a while later.

She nodded. She felt better after her cry.

"You've been through a lot, Anna. It's okay to be upset." Travis squeezed her hand. "If I'm making it hard to manage your emotions, tell me. We don't have to keep...uh," he glanced at Aaron.

"Keep what?" Aaron asked with a raised brow.

Anna sat up and looked at Aaron. "He helps me feel better."

"How?"

"Sex," she answered simply and then winced, waiting for his reaction.

Anna saw a myriad of emotions in Aaron's eyes. "Are you guys dating?" he asked softly.

Anna's eyes widened. "What?" She shook her head adamantly. "No. No, I can't...I won't date anyone...ever again." She twisted the ring on her finger. *Never again.*

Both guys looked at her strangely. "That's kinda extreme, don't ya think?" Travis asked.

Anna shook her head slowly. "I can't get too attached to anyone. Or Devin will...." She trailed off. "I have to focus on what Devin wants, not what I want. Otherwise, people get hurt."

Silence filled the room. Anna knew Aaron still loved her. She loved him, too. But she could never date him again, or Devin would kill him, too.

Her eyes filled with tears. "Can you guys leave? I need some time to myself." She stood up and stared at the ground, twisting her fingers around each other.

They both nodded and stood.

"Anna, if you need anything....," Aaron said, putting his hands on her shoulders. "You know I still...care about you, right?"

Anna nodded and gave him a sad smile. "I know."

Travis kissed her on the cheek and then they both left.

Anna lay back down on the couch and cried. When would the pain go away? She didn't remember the pain from her parents' death. Anytime she got sad, Jack or Devin distracted her. Maybe if she kept distracting herself, this pain would go away, too.

She stood a few minutes later and went across the hall to see if Travis was there. He opened the door and looked at her with a concerned expression.

"Distract me?" she asked in a soft voice, blinking away tears.

Travis peeked his head out, looked around the empty hallway, then pulled her inside.

Later, Anna warmed up and tried to psych herself up for the afternoon show. She met Travis backstage during intermission and they went through a few steps together. When he ran his finger across her belly along the front edge of her pants, she shivered and felt heat shoot through her veins.

“There’s the expression I was looking for,” he whispered. “I was afraid you wouldn’t seduce me this afternoon.”

She gave him a small smile. Numbness gave way to desire. Desire felt better than anything. Desire took the pain away. This she had been taught by both Devin and Jack.

After their dance, Travis pushed Anna up against the cool brick wall in his dressing room and buried his cock deep inside her. One calf rested on his shoulder while the toes of the other foot barely touched the floor, and she clung to his damp shoulders as they moved together.

“Harder, Travis,” she moaned. “Harder.”

He rammed himself against her, capturing her mouth with his to muffle their moans and cries.

She gave a muffled screech against his mouth as she came and she felt his cock throb inside her. He groaned against her cries, and then rested his head against the cool wall behind her.

“Are we going to do this every time?” she asked, gasping for breath.

Travis chuckled. “I’m game if you are.”

Anna smiled. “I can actually say this is a new experience for me. That doesn’t happen very often.”

“Happy to oblige.” He shivered as he pulled out and brought her leg down to the ground. “We’ll be having a lot of sex if we do it every time.”

Anna bit his nipple. “Is that a bad thing?”

He groaned. “Not at all.” He lifted her chin with his finger. “Although I do have this fantasy about getting you in my shower and taking you from behind.”

“Sounds fun.”

A glint appeared in his eye and he turned her around so that her body was pressed against the cool bricks. He held her hands above her head and slid his other hand down her back and to the cleft of her ass. He went lower and caressed the tight ring of muscle. “I want to take you here,” he murmured against her shoulder.

Anna moaned and nodded. “Yes, please.”

He dipped his finger into her pussy and then pressed against her ass. “You want it?” he whispered.

Anna nodded. “Yes,” she moaned. She sighed as his finger breached the entrance. “Oh, Travis....”

“Come home with me tonight,” he whispered urgently, releasing her hands and reaching forward to caress her breast and finger fuck her ass.

She moaned and nodded.

“Good.” He removed his finger and stepped away. “We need to wash up and get dressed.”

As they were getting dressed, an alarming thought came to mind. “Travis, will you get into trouble for sleeping with me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, because I’m an Elder-Mistress...Devin said only certain men were allowed to touch me.”

He shrugged. “My dad said it’s fine. I asked. I’m kinda part slave and part normal person.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” He looked her up and down.
“Ready?”

She glanced in the mirror and adjusted her hair, then nodded.

They made their way backstage and waited for their cue for the finale.

Anna took a nap between performances on the couch in her dressing room. She woke up feeling much more refreshed than she had this morning. She washed her face and went out to get some dinner, then returned and got ready for the evening performance.

When they finished their dance, Anna expected Travis to drag her back to his dressing room as usual, but he smiled at her and took her to the green room and sat down.

She sat down next to him. “Why aren’t we going to your dressing room?”

He grinned. “Because I want to save it for when we get to my house.”

Anna groaned. Her pussy was throbbing. “You’re mean,” she pouted.

Travis laughed. “Hardly. I told you it was hard dancing with a hard-on. I have to do it again in a little while.”

She gave him a seductive smile. “Then why don’t you let me take care of it for you?”

“Tempting. But I don’t want to have to get dressed afterwards.” He leaned in towards her ear. “I plan on fucking you until we both fall asleep tonight. I want to keep my brothers awake with your screaming.”

An eternity later, Travis pulled into the driveway of a cute little three-story house in Haight Ashbury.

“It’s cute,” Anna said. Travis grimaced.

“My dad got a good deal on it,” he explained.

His brothers, Cody and Lane, were watching TV when they walked in. They grinned as Travis brought her inside.

“Lane, Cody, this is Anna. Anna, my brothers, Lane and Cody.”

Though she could tell they were brothers, their coloring was very different. Lane had red hair and freckles and was shorter than Travis’ six foot one frame. Cody looked as if he spent a healthy amount of time outside, with blond hair and brown eyes.

Without any further ado, Travis took Anna directly into the bathroom and turned the water on in the shower. As it was warming up, he pulled her close and kissed her, pulling her shirt off as he did so. They undressed each other and then got into the shower.

Anna saw a bottle of body wash and poured some onto a washcloth. She then rubbed the cloth all over Travis, making him groan as her hands explored his body. When she was done, he did the same to her, rubbing her all over. She was panting by the time he was done. They rinsed off under the running water and then Travis gently pushed her against the wall with her front pressed against the warm tiles.

He kissed her neck and ran his hands over her breasts and belly, then dipped his finger into her throbbing pussy several times before moving back to her ass.

She moaned as he moved his finger in and out of her ass, stretching and caressing the muscle until she relaxed. When she was ready, he held her arms over her head with one hand and pushed his cock against her ass as he held her hip.

She winced as he pressed forward, expecting it to hurt, but as he moved in, she sighed. It didn’t hurt at all. His chest pressed against her back as he

filled her to the hilt.

“Travis...,” she moaned.

He held her firmly as he began moving in and out. His finger found her clit and he began rubbing the erect nub.

She moaned again as she felt herself on the brink.

“You feel so incredible, Anna,” he whispered in a hoarse voice. “I could do this with you all night.”

“Mmm,” Anna moaned. “Oh, God. I’m going to come!” she exclaimed.

“Come for me, sweetheart. Come hard for me.”

Heat exploded from his caresses and she rose up on her toes as she cried out loudly, bucking her hips against him. She heard him curse and he pressed in deeper as he came as well.

He leaned against her for a moment, then he pulled out of her and they enjoyed more cleansing, relaxing, and caresses before he turned off the water. They dried off and fell onto his bed, which was little more than a mattress on the floor, covered in wrinkled blankets. But the mattress was very comfortable and she snuggled close to him.

“Mmm, I like this better than the dressing room,” Travis said as he pulled Anna against him.

She smiled. “I like not having to rush out to dance right away.”

“I agree.” He turned her over onto her side and pressed his front to her back. He nipped at her neck. “Too bad we can’t play hooky tomorrow.”

“I think people might notice if we’re not there.”

“Yeah. And that photographer’s supposed to be there tomorrow too.”

Anna turned back to him. “Photographer?”

Travis chuckled. “Weren’t you paying attention when Isaak talked to us tonight?”

She shook her head.

“Dance Magazine. They’re coming to photograph the matinee tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“You really are out of it when you’re not dancing, aren’t you?”

Anna sighed. “I’m sorry. I just...it’s easier to stay numb.”

Travis pulled her close. “I know. I had a hard time when my mom died. It’s much more pleasant to have sex than feel the hurt. I get it. Probably more than anyone else around here.”

“Your mom died?”

Travis grimaced. “Well, she was eliminated when I was sixteen. I just say ‘died’ because I can’t explain what elimination means to outsiders.”

Anna heart ached for Travis’ pain. She cradled his cheek. “I’m so sorry, Travis.”

He shrugged. “It was a long time ago. I knew it would happen and my dad gave me a chance to say goodbye.”

Anna bit her lip. “How does elimination happen?”

Travis gave her a wry smile. “He just gives them a shot. Lethal injection, I guess. And she died peacefully. Dad let me be there because I asked. We held her hand and she smiled at me as she died.” He grimaced again. “I was her only son. She was in her late thirties. They normally don’t last that long, but she kept having healthy babies. And my dad cared about her.”

He was quiet for a few minutes. “Her last pregnancy was really tough and she almost died giving birth. Dad said that they talked about it and came to the decision together.” He glanced at Anna. “She’d given him seventeen healthy girls. And me.” He smiled.

“Were they all his daughters?”

Travis shook his head. “Nah. He rarely parented any of the babies. He would choose different brothers to mate with her. Same as all the breeders. The Elders are very good at getting what they want out of the girls born in the Manor.”

“So how did you end up being a dancer?” Anna asked, changing the subject. She didn’t want to think about parents right now.

“Dad has the girls all learn some sort of dance. So they’re more graceful and stuff. I think it also helps them feel better about themselves. I snuck into the ballet classes when I was younger because my mom liked to go to them, except when she was at the end of a pregnancy. When Dad saw I had talent, he had me start taking lessons outside the Manor and eventually I ended up here.”

“Your dad seems...like a really nice guy.” So much nicer than Devin. “I liked him when I met him in DC.”

“He is.”

Anna snuggled close and he wrapped his arm around her. She yawned.

“Tired?”

“Yeah. I hardly slept the last week.”

Travis pulled her closer. “I can imagine,” he said softly. “Go to sleep. You need your rest.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

As Anna locked her apartment door Friday morning, Greg came out of his apartment. It was after Christmas and they were supposed to leave for Germany on Sunday, and Anna had been avoiding him like the plague.

“Are you packed?” he asked her, leaning casually against the doorframe.

“I think you know the answer to that,” she said in an even voice without looking at him.

“So you’ve been a good girl and bought everything you needed and are packed and ready to go?” he asked in a mocking voice.

“No,” Jenna interjected. “She wouldn’t let me take her shopping.”

Jenna had tried to get Anna to go shopping with her on their Mondays off, but Anna refused. She still planned to refuse the trip to Germany. Travis reluctantly agreed to let her stay with him so that Greg couldn’t find her. He worried about betraying Alex, but he also understood that Anna felt hurt by Alex. Whenever he’d tried to encourage her to give Alex a chance, she grew hostile.

Anna glared at Jenna then looked coolly at Greg. “I told you. I’m not going.”

“Why are you being so difficult, Anna?”

Anna jumped at the unexpected voice and looked towards Greg’s apartment. Seth stood in the doorway, smiling at her with his hands on his hips.

“Seth!” Anna exclaimed and started to go to him, then stopped herself. He worked for Alex, too. Going to him would be conceding to Alex’s wishes. She stood, looking at him and fighting with herself. She wanted to go to him, but didn’t at the same time.

“Ouch,” Seth said softly, his brown eyes sad, his tone wistful. “What happened to you, Anna?”

“Life,” she answered bitterly.

Seth pushed past Greg and pulled Anna into his arms. “C’mon, sweetie. What have I ever done to deserve your anger?”

She allowed him to hold her and she slowly relaxed into his embrace. She knew and trusted Seth. And she adored him.

“Why don’t you want to go to Germany?” Seth asked softly, petting her hair.

Anna shrugged. Seth’s warm embrace made her doubt her resolution to stay away from Alex. Would Seth work for someone who was as awful as she had been thinking Alex was? It was possible, but unlikely. But with how she had been treating Alex.... Oh, he would be so angry with her. Would he punish her?

“Alex will be so angry with me,” she mumbled into Seth’s shirt. “I’ve been so disrespectful to him.”

“No, Anna,” Seth said in a soothing voice. “He will be thrilled to have you with him.”

She looked up at him. “But I’ve been so rude. And disobedient. I haven’t gotten anything that I was told to get for the trip.” She swallowed nervously. “He got angry with me at Christmas.”

Alex had called her on Christmas Eve, but she wouldn’t answer the phone. He ended up calling Aaron and had him give her the phone. She had given him a spectacular ice-queen treatment, and he had told her to grow up and behave. She’d hung up on him, and then in retrospective terror at her audacity, she’d cowered in a corner for an hour afterwards, afraid he would somehow reach across the ocean to punish her.

Seth stroked her cheek. “And he was furious with himself the rest of the day. As was Wilhelm,” he added with a chuckle. “Anna, he’s been running himself ragged to get everything perfect for your arrival. He was exhausted and, frankly, hurt at your hostility.”

“Hurt?”

She had a hard time imagining Alex being hurt by anything; especially by a little girl like herself. But Alex was human, she supposed. He’d been nervous the first time he asked her to dinner. And he’d been so kind to her before...before he abandoned her. She buried her face in Seth’s shirt.

But why hadn’t he called her when all the horrible things happened? Why had he been so cold when he came out for the student performance? If he cared about her, as he claimed, why hadn’t he come back? Why had he left her alone with Devin? Why didn’t he call when Ben was killed?

Did any of her questions really matter? Anna bit her lip.

The bottom line was that she was Alex’s slave. Even Wilhelm had pointed out that she needed to obey him. She was being disobedient and deserved to be punished. Maybe he would do it quickly and then leave her in the Manor. At least she’d be away from Devin.

“I’m not packed,” she said, resigning herself to leaving. “I don’t have any warm clothes to take.”

Seth cupped her chin. “Tell you what. If you promise not to make poor Greg here drag you kicking and screaming onto the plane, I will find someone to get you what you need.”

“Really?” Her eyes glimmered with hope and shame.

“Yes,” he smiled, tapping her nose affectionately. “Now go before Jenna has a heart attack.”

Anna looked over to see Jenna watching her anxiously and tapping her foot. “Sorry, Jenna.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Anna no longer felt angry about going to Germany. Despite everyone's assurances, she was petrified that he would punish her for her disobedience on Christmas Eve. Her stomach churned at the thought of his anger. It never failed to strike unreasoning terror into her heart.

Anna went home between shows the next afternoon. Her body ached and she wanted to sleep and cry at the same time. She didn't really have an especially good reason for wanting to cry. Aside from the normal stuff going on in her life, she'd even been able to sleep better this last week.

Seth was in her apartment with a petite blonde woman when Anna arrived home. The woman was putting clothing into Anna's suitcase.

"Anna, this is Kaitlyn. Kaitlyn, this is Anna. Kaitlyn's been shopping non-stop since I called her yesterday."

"Hello," Anna said softly.

Kaitlyn greeted her with a cheerful smile. "Hello, Anna. How are you doing?"

Anna shrugged. "Okay."

"Anna, are you getting stubborn again?" Seth teased.

She bit her lip, not wanting Seth to tell Alex she'd been stubborn. "No, I'm just so tired. If I didn't know any better, I'd think I was getting sick. Jenna got the flu just before Nutcracker started and I feel like she said she felt."

Kaitlyn laughed. "It's not unheard of to get sick. Especially this time of year."

"I've never been sick."

"Never?" Kaitlyn looked at her in amazement.

"Never. I don't think I can get sick."

Seth looked at her curiously. “Maybe you’re more human than you thought.”

“Maybe. I don’t know anything about...that kind of stuff, though.” She glanced at a portable rack that Kaitlyn had apparently brought in. Hanging on the end was a beautiful pale green chiffon dress with appliqué roses on the full skirt and hips.

“Oh, how beautiful...,” Anna said softly, walking over to it. “This is for me?”

“For New Year’s Eve,” Seth said.

Anna reached out to touch the soft fabric. “It’s one of the most beautiful dresses I’ve ever seen.”

“I was lucky they had one in your size,” Kaitlyn said. “I saw it and thought it would be perfect. Do you want to try it on?”

Anna nodded, grinning suddenly.

“Go ahead. It’s your dress.”

Anna giggled as she took it into the bathroom. She pulled her clothes off quickly and stepped into the dress. She reached behind but couldn’t zip it up. “Kaitlyn?”

Kaitlyn smiled when she saw her. “Beautiful. I had them check the measurements so we’d know if they would need to make adjustments once you got to Germany, but it was perfect for you.” She took the zipper and began zipping it, and then frowned. Anna felt it too. It was tight. Too tight. “That doesn’t make any sense,” Kaitlyn said softly. “I saw them measure it. This is from a very reputable store.”

Anna looked at herself in the mirror. Had she gained weight? The top of her costume had felt a little tight yesterday and this morning, but she hadn’t thought much about it.

“Can you suck in your stomach?”

Anna inhaled and sucked in as far as she could and Kaitlyn got the zipper up over her waist, but it was tight again at her breasts.

“I don’t understand,” Kaitlyn frowned. “Anna, I am so sorry. I don’t know what happened.”

“What’s wrong?” Seth poked his head into the bathroom.

“It’s too tight,” Anna said, looking up at him with frightened eyes. “I must have gained some weight.” Would Alex be angry at her for getting fat?

Kaitlyn unzipped the dress. “There is material here to let it out a bit. Or I can take it back and see if they have a bigger size. They must have measured wrong. That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Anna gasped for breath. “I can’t wear it like that. It hurts.” She put her clothes back on and went to sit on the bed. She was gaining weight. But how? Whenever she thought about eating, she started to feel sick. She’d hardly been eating.

“Let me call the store,” Kaitlyn said, pulling out her phone and walking into the other room.

“Am I getting fat?” Anna asked Seth.

Seth laughed. “I don’t think that’s possible Anna.” He looked at her. “If anything, you look thinner than before I left. Have you been eating?”

Anna shook her head. “Nothing sounds good.”

He frowned. “You need to eat. Especially dancing as you are.”

“I’ll try. I’ve been so nervous and angry, my appetite is just messed up.”

Kaitlyn returned a few minutes later. “They have one in a size larger. Do you want me to get it?”

Anna looked at the dress wistfully. “It’s so pretty.”

“Anna, women’s clothing is not consistent and things happen. Maybe they accidentally grabbed the wrong dress to wrap or something.” She

patted Anna's knee. "Don't worry about it. Our bodies are weird sometimes, too. I can't fit into half of my clothes when I'm PMS-ing."

Anna smiled at the encouragement, though she'd never had PMS. She began to feel sick again and lay down on her bed as Kaitlyn showed her the clothes she had bought. All warm stuff. Fur lined. Wool. Stuff Anna never worried about in San Francisco.

When Anna went back to the theater that evening, she was exhausted. She got some dinner on the way, but couldn't bring herself to eat it.

"Travis, am I getting fat?" she asked after he dragged her into his dressing room.

He undid her top. "No way. Why?" He sucked a nipple into his mouth and Anna moaned.

"I tried on a dress that should have fit today but didn't."

Travis stepped back and studied her. "I dunno. You look kinda... different, but definitely not fat." He grinned. "Your breasts seem bigger though." He stepped forward and caressed them. "I like it."

"They're really bigger?"

He picked her up and sat on the couch with her on his lap. He took a nipple into his mouth and sucked on it.

"Yes," he murmured. "And I like it. Very, very much. I'm going to miss you when you leave."

Anna leaned forward and hugged him. "I'm going to miss you, too."

Anna went home anticipating sleeping alone for the first time in a long time. She was crawling into bed when the door unlocked and opened.

Thinking it was Jenna, she poked her head out. But it wasn't Jenna. It was Devin.

“Devin?” she asked, surprised.

“It's your last night home, Baby. I wanted to come see you.”

She smiled nervously at him. “O-okay.” She had lost her anger at Devin for killing Ben. It had been replaced with fear. Fear of what he would do to someone else she cared about, what he threatened to do whenever she started to get angry.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Anna's body ached the morning after Devin's visit. Cruel lovemaking was the only way to describe it. He didn't hurt her in any specific way that she could remember, she just knew that it hurt.

She took a long hot shower and felt a little better. Maybe she really was getting sick. She certainly felt strange. Pain usually came from sex, not from within her own body.

Anna tried not to think about her departure as she went about her day. Her nerves were raw and she snapped a few times at Travis. Thankfully, he was understanding and distracted her as best he could. He was very talented at distracting her.

When they took their final bows, Anna felt herself close to tears. She was leaving the country for the first time in her life. Alex would certainly be angry at her. Why wouldn't he be? She had been so rude and disrespectful.

Seth was waiting for her in her dressing room. He had joked about wanting to make sure that she didn't chicken out on him, but with the way she was feeling, if he hadn't been there, she might have run away.

"I've brought you your things so you can shower," Seth said, pointing to a bag.

"Shower? I thought I was going to clean up once we were on the plane."

"There was a delay with the jet being finished so we're flying commercial. Didn't Greg tell you?"

Anna shook her head.

Seth laughed. "Well, maybe he did and you just weren't listening."

She made a face at him and began to get ready. Kaitlyn had bought her a travel skirt suit, which was a little tight, but manageable. She had to be

gaining weight; Kaitlyn couldn't have bought this in the wrong size too. Even her bras were tight. She was overfilling the cups.

It was another thing that Alex would probably be angry about when he saw her.

She walked out of the bathroom and looked nervously at Seth, who was lounging on the couch and playing with his phone.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded, unable to trust that her voice wouldn't betray her fear. Maybe if she behaved herself, Seth would tell Alex she'd been good and it might diffuse his anger a little.

They made their way through the back of the theater and out to where the limo waited for them. "Two whole weeks?" she asked as they stepped inside.

"Two whole weeks," Seth confirmed. "I think you'll enjoy yourself more than you think you will."

"Is Alex going to put me in the Manor?"

Seth laughed. "Why would he do that?"

Anna shrugged and turned back to look out the window.

"We'll be at the airport in about twenty minutes," Greg told her. He'd been waiting in the limo.

Anna's head drooped, and by the time they pulled up to the main terminal, she was almost asleep. The airport was busy, even though it was after ten o'clock. They walked up to the first class counter and Greg handed the lady a handful of documents.

"Lufthansa flies straight through to Frankfurt so you'll be able to get a good night's sleep on the flight," Seth said. "We'll be there Monday night."

"Monday?"

Seth smiled. "It's an eleven hour flight and there's a nine hour time difference. But we'll gain the day back when we come home."

"You're bringing me home, too?"

Seth didn't say anything for a minute. He looked hesitant. "Yes," he said after a moment.

Anna frowned in confusion as Seth turned to Greg and spoke in German. Greg shook his head and responded in German, then shrugged.

The lady behind the counter smiled broadly at the two handsome men as she handed the documents back to Greg. "Have a wonderful trip."

"Here." Greg handed Anna a small blue book with an eagle on the front.

"What's this?" Anna asked, looking at the book.

"Your passport. You'll need it when we go through security."

"Passport? I don't have a passport." Anna opened the book and sure enough, there was her picture along with the necessary personal information.

"You do now," Seth grinned. "Alex took care of it."

Anna looked back at the book. She thought it was hard to get a passport.

"Let's go," Seth said.

Greg spoke quietly with a man in a security uniform and then accompanied the three travelers to the security line. The man led them right to the front of the first class security line that she'd gone through with Devin. The man murmured something about diplomatic service to the TSA agent standing there.

"Anna, take your shoes off and your jacket and put them in the bin with your carry-on," Seth instructed as he did the same thing. When he took his suit jacket off, Anna saw he had a holster with a gun.

"You carry a gun?" she whispered. She glanced at Greg, who was showing the TSA agent some sort of badge and removing his holster from

his shoulders.

“Always, Anna,” Seth said.

Anna could hear people talking behind her about them. Her cheeks burned as she took off her jacket and shoes and put them in a bin as Seth had told her. “I thought you couldn’t carry weapons on planes.”

“Most people can’t. We can.” Seth grinned.

“Why?”

“Alex is considered a diplomat. We work for him. We can do lots of things that other people can’t.”

“But I’m not a diplomat.”

Seth smiled at her, but didn’t say anything.

The TSA agent finished examining Greg’s document and Greg walked through the metal detector and it beeped. Another agent used a wand on him. He said something to the agent and lifted his pant leg slightly.

“Miss?”

Anna looked back to the first agent who was motioning for her to step forward.

“Identification?”

She nervously handed him her passport. He looked at it and gave her a friendly smile. “Thank you,” he said, handing it back to her. “Go on through.”

She stepped through. Nothing happened, which she took for a good thing. She put her shoes and jacket on as Seth went through the same motions that Greg had. Greg stood nearby and when she glanced at him, he smiled at her. She watched Seth talk to the agent and then he was able to get dressed.

“Ready?” Seth asked, straightening his tie.

She nodded silently. She hadn't known they carried guns. It was kind of intimidating. Ian didn't carry a gun. Why would they need to? Especially around her. She was nobody special. At least outside the Brotherhood.

Seth put his arm around her as they walked. "Anna, we have guns to protect you. There's nothing to worry about."

"Why would you need a gun to protect me?"

Seth shrugged. "Countless reasons. It's always better to be prepared."

"You carry them when you're with Alex too?"

"Yup."

"Why doesn't Wilhelm have bodyguards?"

"He does when he needs one."

"But Alex needs one all the time?"

Seth grimaced. "Anna, it's better if you ask Alex these questions."

Anna pulled away and looked at the ground as they walked. Sometimes she thought it would be better if she just didn't think up so many questions.

They went to the First Class lounge. It was nicer than the one she had gone into with Devin. They walked to an area with comfortable looking leather chairs and Anna curled up in one of them.

"It'll be about a half hour and then we'll be able to board," Greg said, settling into the chair across from her.

"Do you want something to eat, Anna?" Seth asked, setting her bag next to her. "You can put your passport away now."

Anna put her passport in the outer pocket of her carry-on bag. She shook her head. "I'm not really hungry." Her stomach was churning and the thought of food made her want to throw up.

"Did you eat dinner?"

Anna shook her head. "I wasn't hungry."

Seth sighed and stood up. He looked at Greg. "I'm going to go get her something to eat. You want something?"

"Coke?"

When Seth left, she looked at Greg. "I'm sorry I've been so difficult, Greg."

He looked surprised, and then his face softened into an affectionate smile. "It's all right, Anna. I know things have been tough for you lately. I'm sorry I wasn't more sympathetic."

Seth returned a few minutes later with a sandwich for Anna. She eyed it warily. Not because it didn't look good, but because her stomach felt so queasy. She glanced at Seth and then took a bite for his sake. The taste somehow calmed her stomach and she finished it quickly. Seth watched her with an amused expression on his face.

They boarded the plane a half hour later and walked up a staircase to the first class section. The area was configured with one seat next to each of the windows and two in the middle. Anna sat in the first window seat, Seth sat across the aisle and Greg sat behind her. After she was situated, she curled her legs under her and stared out the window, blinking to try and stay awake.

The flight attendant came by and offered her a drink while they waited to depart. "I'll be happy to turn down your bed as soon as we're in the air," she said with a pleasantly accented voice.

"That would be great," Anna responded. "Thanks."

Anna stood and looked around as people settled in. The flight attendants took coats and brought drinks.

"Anna, why don't you sit down?" Seth suggested gently. "You can stand while the plane is in the air."

“If I sit I’ll fall asleep,” she answered, then looked at him, wondering if he thought she was being stubborn. “Is it okay if I stand?” she asked humbly.

Seth nodded, concern in his eyes.

It seemed like forever before the fasten seatbelt light came on. Anna was feeling sick to her stomach again. She was nervous about flying and nervous about the trip.

“Are you all right?” The flight attendant asked. Her name tag read, “Inga.”

“My stomach’s a little upset,” she admitted.

“Have you flown before?”

“Only once.”

Inga smiled. “Let me see if I can find something to settle your stomach. I will be right back.”

She returned a few minutes later with a glass of water and a package of Alka-Seltzer. She also had some peppermints. “This should help. Peppermint is also good for nausea.”

Anna smiled gratefully at her. “Thank you,” she said.

“We will be leaving shortly.” She pointed to a white bag in the pocket next to her. “If you need to vomit, use that.”

Anna hoped she wouldn’t need it. She had only thrown up a few times in her life and it had never been pleasant. As the plane backed away from the terminal she dumped the tablets into the water and watched them dissolve. She was so tired, the bubbles floating to the surface mesmerized her.

Through the overhead speakers came the muffled voice of the pilot, speaking first in German, then in English. They would be arriving in

Frankfurt at eight twenty-seven Monday night. Anna's stomach lurched as the plane moved. She took a drink of the fizzy water and grimaced.

"It will help your stomach, Anna," Seth said, giving her a sympathetic look. "Just drink it fast."

Anna nodded, took a deep breath and downed the drink in several big gulps. Seth was right. By the time the plane rose into the air, she wasn't feeling nauseous anymore. She still felt nervous, but didn't think she'd need that little white bag any time soon.

Once they were airborne, the flight attendants set to work adjusting people's seats so they could sleep. Inga came over to Anna's seat and Anna stood while her seat was changed into a bed.

"Are you feeling better?" Inga asked as she placed the pillow and duvet on Anna's seat-turned-bed.

"Yes, thank you. The drink helped immensely."

Inga smiled. "Good. If you need another one, just ask."

Anna snuggled into her "bed" and closed her eyes. She was asleep within seconds.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Alex tapped his foot impatiently as the limo sped along the highway towards Frankfurt.

“Alex, tapping your foot will not make the car go any faster,” his father said, looking amused.

“I can’t help it, Vati. I’m nervous.”

Vati chuckled. “I’ve not seen you nervous like this in a very long time.”

“What if she’s still angry with me? What if she takes one look at me and gets back on the plane?”

Vati outright laughed this time. “I don't think that’s legal, son.”

Alex gave him an exasperated look. “You know what I mean, Vati.”

“Didn’t Seth say that she wasn’t angry anymore? His presence seemed to soften her up a little. I’m sure it’s still working. And if she is still angry, then you’ll just have to work harder to win her over.”

“You’ve never had a problem winning a woman over, Alex,” his mother said with a smile.

“Anna’s never been angry before,” Alex said, leaning his head back and looking at the roof. “You said yourself that she was different, Vati. But how different? What if she never forgives me for leaving her?”

“I think you’re being a bit melodramatic, Alex,” Mutti said. “If she didn’t care about you, she wouldn’t be angry. People don’t get angry at people they don't care about.”

Alex sighed and ran his hands through his hair. Greg had commented on the change in Anna from Seth being there. Alex knew that Anna adored Seth, and Alex was glad that he had sent him to attend to her. Especially now that she had stopped resisting the travel.

And the three of them were safely on the plane and would be arriving within the hour. Alex's heart pounded in his chest as he anticipated seeing Anna again for the first time since August. This time he would be able to tell her everything.

Anna's eyes shot open and she grabbed her stomach. She reached around for the bag that Inga had pointed to the night before and barely got it open before the contents of her stomach lurched up into her mouth. Seth jumped out of his seat and was next to her in an instant. He pushed the call button and helped Anna hold the bag as she coughed and threw up again.

Inga saw what was going on and brought Anna some cool towels to wipe her face after she was finished. The bag was taken away and Seth held her while he wiped her face and neck and hands.

"You okay?" Seth asked gently.

Anna nodded. "I feel much better," she said with a weak smile. She glanced up at Seth. "I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

Seth shook his head. "I've been up for a while. We'll be landing soon and I was contemplating waking you anyways. I guess your stomach did it for me."

"Is she okay?" Greg asked from behind.

"Yeah," Seth said, without looking at him.

Anna felt shaky, but she felt better rested than she had in weeks. It amazed her how well she had slept on an airplane.

"There are toothbrushes in the bathroom if you would like to brush your teeth," Inga said softly.

Anna looked up and gave her a grateful smile. "Yeah. I think that would be good."

Seth helped her to her feet and made sure she made it to the bathroom. When Anna emerged fifteen minutes later, she felt human again. She had even put on some makeup that had been in a little kit she'd received after boarding the plane.

Seth looked up and smiled when he saw her. "There's my pretty girl. You look much better."

Anna blushed. "I feel much better." She walked back to her seat, which had been brought back to the seated position.

"Would you like something to eat?" Inga asked after Anna sat down.

Anna nodded. "Yes, please. I'm hungry." For the first time in a long while.

Alex jumped as his phone buzzed in his pocket. It was a text from Greg. He hurriedly pushed the screen to read the message.

Anna's sick. She threw up, but seems okay now.

Alex frowned at his phone. "Vati, can half-Immortals get sick?" He looked at his father.

Vati looked thoughtful for a moment. "Not that I'm aware. Unless they're away from their home for too long. Why?"

"Seth told me that Anna hadn't been feeling well and not eating. I just got a text from Greg saying that she got sick on the plane. I didn't think they got sick either."

Vati frowned. "That *is* odd. She's only been gone for less than a day and she's coming to you. She shouldn't be vulnerable. But she's been under an enormous amount of stress lately. Maybe the human part of her is succumbing to the stress. I can have Heinrich come take a look at her if

she's still not feeling well tomorrow." Heinrich was Alex's uncle and a doctor.

"All right." Alex stared out into the dark night. Poor Anna. Being sick was no fun. He hoped that she would let him comfort her.

After Anna ate, she felt better. The plane began to descend and she gripped her armrests. Seth reached over and patted her hand, but she didn't relax until they were on the ground and moving at a much slower pace. When the plane came to a stop, she looked out the window.

"Where's the terminal?" she asked Seth.

Seth looked out the window. "Looks like we're deplaning out here. There aren't that many gates at this airport. Don't worry. We'll take a nice van to the terminal. I think it's actually faster to do it this way."

The moment Anna stepped out into the open air, she shrieked. "Omigod! It's so cold!" She hugged her coat around her and hunched over.

Seth chuckled. "Thirty seconds Anna, then we'll be in a nice warm van."

Greg climbed into the van first and Anna followed him to the back and sat next to him. Seth sat on the other side of her. When all the seats were full, the van drove off towards the large, lit building that Anna supposed was the terminal.

Anna's nausea returned as she realized she was minutes away from seeing Alex. She swallowed several times and tried to breathe deeply.

Alex paced as his parents watched him. He knew they found him amusing tonight, but he didn't care. The flight had arrived and now it was

just a matter of the travelers getting through Customs.

He ignored the women who tried to get his attention. He and his family were well known here; women practically threw themselves at him. A few years ago, he loved it. Now it just irritated him. He only wanted one woman and she was finally in the same building he was.

Tony stood nearby, his posture that of an intimidating watcher, but Alex could see the amusement in his eyes.

“I’m glad I’m so entertaining tonight,” he commented dryly to Tony and his parents.

“Oh, Alex, I think it’s adorable,” his mother said with a smile.

Alex rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Alex.”

Alex turned to see Tony nodding toward the opening across the walkway.

Greg and Seth stood there looking around, with Anna in between them. She looked so small and delicate in between their large frames. A man in an airport uniform waited behind them with a trolley full of luggage. Anna’s mostly, he assumed. Matching blue luggage.

Greg and Seth saw him at the same time and nodded. Seth bent down to say something to Anna. She looked across to where Alex stood and her eyes widened. Alex’s shoulders slumped as she stepped behind Seth to hide.

“Give her a minute, Alex,” Vati said softly, coming to his side. “She’s frightened, not angry. Be gentle.”

Seth put his arm around Anna’s shoulders, and the three of them made their way through the crowd to where Alex and his family waited.

Alex greeted Greg and Seth and stood as patiently as he could, trying to decide the best way to approach Anna. He could see her clearly now. She was thinner than she’d been in August. Her face was pale beneath her

lightly applied makeup. She fidgeted, twisting her fingers together, and stared at the ground.

Vati approached her first. “Hello, Anna,” he said in a soft voice.

Anna looked up at him and smiled. “Hello, Wilhelm,” she said quietly.

He opened his arms and Anna hugged him willingly.

Alex’s heart tightened in his chest.

“How was your flight?” Vati asked, holding her head to his chest. Alex glanced at his mother, who was studying Anna.

“I slept almost the whole way over. So I guess that’s a good thing.”

Vati chuckled and released her. “Anna, I would like to introduce you to my wife, Ilsa. Ilsa, this is Anna.”

Alex’s mother gave Anna a warm, friendly smile. Mutti was a tall, elegant woman with dark blonde hair and dove-gray eyes. She wore a simple black skirt, a red sweater, and knee-high black leather boots.

“Anna, it is wonderful to meet you at last,” she said in heavily accented English. “I have heard so many wonderful things about you.”

Anna gave her a timid smile. “Hello,” she said in a voice he could hardly hear.

Alex’s heart pounded as he stepped forward. “Hello, Schatzi,” he said in as gentle a voice as he could. He hoped his use of the endearment would help her not be frightened.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Anna turned to face Alex. Her breath caught in her throat as she looked up into his handsome face. Once again, she'd managed to forget how tall and broad he was. His hair looked like he'd just gotten it cut. She looked at his lips and remembered what it was like to kiss them. Firm, yet soft. They were upturned in a nervous smile. What could he possibly be nervous about?

He had called her *Schatzi*. His treasure. She searched his cobalt-blue eyes, but saw no trace of anger in them. Why wasn't he angry with her for the way she had treated him? He had gotten angry with her the last time he'd called. Wouldn't he punish her for her behavior?

"I'm sorry, Alex," she said, and bowed her head in submission.

He stepped forward and she winced in anticipation of some sort of punishment. He cupped her chin and lifted her face to his again.

"For what?" he asked softly.

"For being disrespectful and disobedient. I'm ready for my punishment." Tears filled her eyes, but she was determined to be brave.

He grimaced and released her chin. But instead of hitting her, he took her hand and led her to a nearby bench.

"Lift up your hair."

Anna did as he asked, confused. He reached behind her neck. His fingers tickled her neck as he moved them, and a moment later he moved his hands away. He had removed her necklace.

Her chin trembled and she bit her lip and tried not to cry. He *was* angry with her. She glanced at Wilhelm, who was watching impassively. She looked back at Alex with tears in her eyes.

He took off the bracelet he'd given her as well. He handed the jewelry to Tony who put it in a plastic box, which he then slid into his pocket.

Anna's heart twisted in her chest and her nausea returned. He had removed her protection! He was leaving her vulnerable to anyone who wanted to hurt her. She looked down at her hands and tried to swallow over the lump in her throat.

"Anna, as long as you are here, I don't want you to think of yourself as my slave," Alex said in a quiet voice. "I want you to think of yourself simply as 'Anna.'"

Anna looked at him, confused. He didn't want her here as his slave? "Then why did you bring me here?"

His eyes grew sorrowful. "Because I missed you and I wanted to see you." He smiled. "And I want you to see where I grew up."

"You missed me?" She blinked in confusion.

"Terribly." He took her hand and held it in his.

Gazing into his eyes reminded her of the last night they had spent together. And then he left her. Her fear gave way to deep sorrow.

"Why did you leave me?" she whispered, desperation filling her eyes with tears.

Alex pulled her close. "Oh, *mein Schatzi*. I regretted every day that I had to leave you." He cupped her cheek. "But I had to do so. I had to learn how to be strong enough to fight for you." Anna could see tears in his eyes that mirrored her own. He stroked her cheeks with his thumbs, wiping away the tears that fell.

"You *are* strong," she insisted.

"Not in the way I needed to be." He sighed. "Anna...I know I hurt you by leaving," he said in a hushed voice. "But when I stayed...Devin made me hurt you that night. He drugged me and made me hurt you. I couldn't let

him do that to us again.” His eyes grew brighter. “But I can fight for you now, *Schatzi*. I haven’t learned everything I need to know, but I’ve learned a lot.” He spoke urgently. “I can keep Devin from hurting you.”

“How? He’s so powerful. Much more so than he was before.”

“What do you mean, Anna?” Wilhelm asked.

She looked up at Wilhelm. “They did something at the August Gathering. They call him the Chairman now.”

Wilhelm’s face paled. “Are you sure?”

Anna nodded.

Wilhelm looked around. “I think we need to get going.”

“Did I say something wrong?” Anna asked nervously.

Wilhelm smiled kindly. “*Nein*, Anna. Not at all. It is not a good idea to speak of these kinds of things out in public. We will talk about it later.” He turned to Ilsa and put his arm around her. Anna winced at the affectionate look he gave his wife.

“I won’t leave you again, Anna,” Alex said in a low voice.

She looked back at him and he looked at her with such intensity she wanted to look away, but she couldn’t drag her eyes away from his.

She swallowed nervously and then concentrated so she could read him. He meant it. And he meant it differently than just as a Master. He meant it...as a lover? But...he’d been so cold to her when he’d visited. And he’d not contacted her when bad things happened. How could the emotions that she was sensing from him be so strong?

“Why were you so cold to me?” she asked softly.

His eyes darkened. “I had to, Anna. I had to let Devin think I didn’t care about you. As I had to when we first met. My leaving made Devin think I was done with you and he let me alone.” His brows twitched. “I don’t have to do that anymore, *Schatzi*. I won’t ever do it again.”

She could sense his sincerity, and his determination was overwhelming. He would protect her at *any* cost. He loved her.

The spark that had been kindled the first night they had spent together burst into flame again in her heart. Sitting here next to him for the first time in months was like coming home. She was connected to him unlike anyone else. Even Devin. Especially Devin. And Devin couldn't take him away. Alex wasn't vulnerable to Devin like other men were. He was the one person Devin couldn't hurt.

Anna nodded slowly. "Yes, Alex," she said softly. She reached up and cradled his cheek with her hand.

His eyes widened slightly and they filled with such emotion it filled her heart with joy. He slid his hand behind her head and leaned down to brush his lips against hers.

"*Mein Anna,*" he murmured before crushing his lips against hers in a passionate kiss. He held her tightly and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

She had come home. Kissing Alex was more than just their lips meeting. Her soul reached out for his when they touched. The hurts and fears of the past few months melted away as he held her close, sheltering her from the world. He could protect her and he would protect her. Of this she was certain.

A little while later, Anna snuggled against Alex in the limo as it weaved its way north through the streets of Frankfurt. Seth, Tony and Greg were relaxing towards the front of the limo and Anna and Alex sat near the back seat where his parents were. Alex pointed out various buildings, but it was

hard to see them in the dark. There was a light sprinkling of snow across the city that sparkled in the lights.

“Are you warm enough, *Schatzi*?”

“Next to you, yes.” She snuggled closer.

“*Mutti*, can we keep the house cool while she’s here?” Alex asked with a laugh.

“It will probably be cool enough from her point of view, Alex,” Ilsa answered, shaking her head in amusement.

“How far away is your house?”

Alex chuckled. “About twenty more minutes from here.”

The number of lights became fewer as they drove on and eventually there were hardly any lights at all. The moonlight made the snow sparkle like diamonds. She saw the shadows of mountains up ahead and the limo drove upwards on a winding road through a dense forest. They drove by a lake and up above it in the distance she saw sparkling lights.

“That is the *Gutshaus*.” Alex said, pointing to the lights.

From this distance it looked large, but Anna had no way of knowing how enormous it was until they were on the long driveway that led up to it.

“Oh!” she exclaimed in awe. It was huge. She felt foolish for calling it a house. It was a castle.

It was four stories high and unbelievably wide, with peaked roofs and multiple chimneys that glinted in the moonlight. Lights shone from dozens of windows. A *porte-cochère* protected the huge arched entryway that was easily three times as tall as a normal home’s entryway. When the limo pulled up to the front, the massive wooden doors opened and a thin, gray-haired man stood at attention as they exited the vehicle.

Anna shivered in the cold as she walked quickly to the door holding Alex’s hand.

“Lukas, this is Anna Perkins, our guest from America,” Wilhelm said by way of an introduction. “Anna, this is Lukas. He makes sure the *haus* is running like it should.”

Lukas’ bright, ice blue eyes sparkled warmly as he smiled at her. “*Guten Abend, Fraulein.*”

“Hello, Lukas,” she said shyly.

They walked into an enormous entrance hall with a series of marble arches around three sides. In the middle of the room an immense wooden table sat on top of a large woven rug. Massive polished beams atop the arches supported the timbers of the ceiling. To the left a stone staircase with polished wood and wrought iron banisters curved up to the second floor. As they moved further inside, Anna saw a room at a right angle to the hall, beyond the stair. Despite the wall tapestries and antique-looking furniture, the atmosphere was similar to the sitting room at Alex’s home in San Francisco, only four (six, eight, ten?) times the size. Straight ahead one of the arches housed an impressive glass and wood-beam door that closed off whatever lay beyond it. To the right, several arches opened up into some sort of open room.

“Wow,” Anna said softly, trying to take everything in. She had never seen anything so amazing. Alex stood next to her, holding her hand and smiling down on her.

She heard a squeal and footsteps coming from the stairway, and then an excited female voice speaking very fast in German. Alex laughed as a tall blonde, a little older than Anna, bounded down the stairs and ran right to him.

“Anna, this is my little sister, Greta. Greta, this is Anna.”

“Oh, Anna. I am so excited to meet you!” Greta said in a sweet voice with a heavy accent. She hugged Anna hard and then pulled back to look at

her. "Alex has been like a madman these last few weeks. I am so glad you are finally here."

Greta had a bright smile and laughing blue eyes the same color as Alex's. She was quite a few inches taller than Anna and her hair was long and straight and fashionably tousled. She was beautiful.

"Where are Liesl and Kurt and Gretchen?" Wilhelm asked.

Greta rolled her eyes. "Upstairs. Gretchen did not want to come downstairs."

Alex rolled his eyes as well, which made Greta laugh.

"*Komm, gehen wir,*" Greta said with a mischievous glint in her eyes that reminded Anna of Kurt. "Let us go make Gretchen miserable."

"Greta, that is not nice," Ilsa said from across the room.

Alex laughed. "In a few minutes, Greta. I want to show Anna something first."

Greta stuck out her lip and pouted prettily.

"Just a few minutes, Greta. I promise. I haven't seen Anna in months."

"Oh, all right. I have been looking forward to this for days." She cheerfully bounded away and disappeared up the stairs with Wilhelm and Ilsa.

"What has she been looking forward to?" Anna asked.

Alex sighed. "She loves tormenting Gretchen. Mostly because it's easy to do."

Anna didn't understand.

"Gretchen...." He sighed. "Gretchen has had a thing for me in the past. When I came home she was delighted, but when I spoke of you she got very jealous."

"Isn't she Kurt's wife?"

“*Ja*, which is even worse, because Kurt spoke highly of you too. If she’s rude to you, I apologize in advance. She can be...difficult. But I don’t want you to feel unwelcome, Anna.” He turned to her and looked at her with a firm expression. “You have just as much a right to be here as she does. Don’t let her intimidate you.”

Anna nodded slowly. “I’ll try,” she said with a timid smile.

“*Komm mit mir*. I want to show you the garden.”

“Garden?”

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Alex smiled and pulled Anna through the archways that led to the open room. Once inside, she felt transported to the outdoors. The room was warm and filled with all types of plants. Colorful flowers filled the room with delicious scents. There was even a small rose garden that bloomed in the corner. All in the midst of the German winter.

“Oh, Alex, it’s beautiful.”

Alex pointed up. “The ceiling is glass, but it’s covered in snow right now.”

Anna could imagine how beautiful the garden would look with daylight streaming through the glass panes.

Alex led her to a wooden bench in a small alcove, and they sat down next to each other. “Anna, I know when we were in California, you asked me some questions that I couldn’t answer. I will answer your questions now, and anything else you ask me. I won’t hold anything back.”

Anna tilted her head, curious. “Why?”

“Because I want you to trust me. I know when I didn’t answer you, I hurt you.” He took her hand. “I don’t want to hide anything from you anymore.”

She knew he was talking about when he went out of town. Did she want to know what he did? Was it something bad?

“You asked me what I was doing and where I was going when I went on my business trip. To understand what I did, I need to tell you a little about myself and my history.” Alex took a deep breath. “I’ve always had a fascination with the military. I suppose all boys go through that, but I was obsessed. I read everything I could about the subject. I became an expert in all things military. When I was thirteen, I told Vati that I wanted to go into

the army. He...said no, very loudly.” Alex chuckled and Anna smiled. “Then he told me that I had more important things to do than be in the army, which I thought strange because he’d always spoken very highly of the military. He took me to the Manor for the first time later that day and told me about being an Elder and the importance of it. At thirteen, I didn’t fully understand it, but I do now.”

Alex stared off into some distant memory. “But I didn’t give up on my dream. I kept learning about the military, practiced shooting, and anything else I could do to prove that I could be a good soldier. My friend Jean Luc is the son of the French Ambassador, and one of his bodyguards was retired from the French army. I spent every moment I could with him, learning everything I could.

“Just before I graduated from secondary school, I took Gaidon, my mentor, with me and spoke to Vati again, telling him I wanted to be a soldier. Gaidon backed me, telling Vati that I was very talented and that I should be given a chance.” Alex smiled. “To make a long story short, I had the opportunity to prove to my father that I had talent and I did so. An Elder-Son is not normally allowed to participate in the mundane aspects of managing the world, but Vati convinced the Brotherhood that not allowing me to use my talent would be a waste. They agreed and I trained with the American military to become a sniper.”

He turned and looked at Anna with a nervous look on his face. “I am an expert sniper, Anna. Seth, Tony, Greg. They’re all my men. There are others, which you’ll meet later, though you’ve already met Sebastian. When the Brotherhood needs someone...taken care of, they call me. Or one of the other teams. But mine is the best.” He didn’t look arrogant when he said that. “We do other things too: sabotage, recon, surveillance. Sometimes we

even go in and rescue hostages. We work with various governments on occasion as well.”

Anna stared at him. “So, when you went out of town, you were...killing someone?”

Alex nodded solemnly. “*Ja.*”

Anna didn’t know what to say. She had a hard time reconciling the Alex she knew with a cold-blooded killer.

Unexpectedly, a faint memory played back in her head. The night of the bonding ritual. Devin and Alex were arguing. Alex admitted to killing an Elder and he had threatened Devin. Something about the conversation made Anna feel safe with Alex. He had stood up to Devin, and Anna didn’t even know what Devin was capable of back then. But Alex did. And he saved her.

“That’s what the black means on my ring.”

“What?” Anna had barely heard him speak.

“The black stones on my ring. You asked about that when I gave you your bracelet. The black means that I’m a Brotherhood assassin.”

Anna nodded. “Do you do it often?”

“Sometimes. And sometimes we won’t be called out for months.” He frowned. “I never told Mina that part about me.”

“Who’s Mina?”

Alex cocked his head and then gave her a soft smile. “My first wife. She died a few years before I moved to San Francisco.”

“Oh.” She remembered Kurt telling her that Alex had been married and had a child.

“I kept a lot of things from her. I was not a good husband.” He looked at her. “I’ve matured. At least I hope I have. I think I would do a much better job now.”

“A better job of being a husband?”

Alex nodded.

Anna looked down at her hands as dread filled her heart. “Are you thinking about getting married again?” she asked slowly. Is that why he came back here? To find a proper wife? But then why did he bring Anna to Germany if he was going to get married? She hoped he didn’t want her to meet his fiancé. The thought made her nauseous again.

“*Ja*, Anna. I am.”

“Oh.” She bent her head lower so he wouldn’t see her tears. She didn’t want to cry, but couldn’t stop herself. Why did her heart feel like it had a knife digging into it? There was no good reason for her to be upset about Alex marrying. He was an Elder-Son. He needed to be married; it was required. Just like Tommy would get married soon. And she, as an Elder-Mistress, would attend to their sexual needs as she always had.

She should be content with her life.

Tears dripped down her nose and fell onto her skirt. She tried to hide the spots on the fabric, but Alex took her hand.

“Why are you crying, *Schatzi*?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I’ve been an emotional mess lately. I’m sorry.”

“Your emotions are understandable, Anna. You’ve been through a lot.”

“Do you...I mean,” Anna stumbled through her tears. “Have you found the girl you want to marry?”

“*Ja*. I have.”

The knife twisted in her heart and she flinched at the pain. If she hadn’t been so miserable, she would be angry at herself. Why did the thought of Alex marrying hurt so bad? So they had two beautiful nights together. So what? She’d had beautiful nights with Kurt, too. They certainly didn’t want

to marry her. Besides, Devin would never allow Anna to marry. That much was certain.

But Alex was a wonderful man. He deserved to be happy. She hoped the woman was worthy of him. “Is she nice?”

“*Ja*. The sweetest girl I ever met. And the prettiest. I just don’t know if she would want to marry me.”

Anna laughed remorsefully and looked up at him. “Why would any woman not want to marry you?”

“She’s very, very special. And I hurt her very badly in the past. I don’t know if she would forgive me.”

“Oh.”

Why couldn’t she be the one Alex loved? Why did she have to be an Elder-Mistress? The severity of her life hit hard suddenly and she burst out into tears.

“I’m sorry, Alex.”

She stood and ran to the other side of the garden and into the entryway. She looked around and saw a padded bench through the opposite archway. She ran to it and sobbed, hugging her arms around her body.

Life was vicious.

She wished that Alex had just left her alone; that he’d never saved her from Devin’s plans. Then she wouldn’t be have been plagued by the excruciating agony of hope. Aaron. Nate. Tommy. Ben. She never would have known them. Never known the misery of heartbreak. She would have lived out her life blissfully unaware of happiness and love in her room at the Manor.

Quick footsteps echoed through the entry way and Alex approached her.

“Anna, why are you crying? Did I hurt you?”

“I’m sorry, Alex. I must still be tired. That’s why I’m crying.” She tried to smile as she glanced up at him through tear-filled eyes. “I’m glad you found someone who you want to marry. I hope you’ll be very happy with her.” She paused. “Do you love her?” she asked in a whisper, and then wondered why she asked. She didn’t want to know!

Alex sat next to her and brushed her hair away from her face. “With all of my heart,” he said softly.

“She’s very lucky,” Anna said in a broken voice.

“*Nein*. I am the lucky one.”

“Then why are you here with me, Alex?” she asked in desperation. His presence was maddening. “Why aren’t you with her?”

Alex’s eyes widened for a moment and then he laughed gently. “Anna.” He cupped her chin and made her look at him. “I already am with her.”

Anna tried to look around, but he held her chin.

“It’s you, *Schatzi*. You are the woman I want to marry. You are the woman I love.”

Anna stared at him dumbfounded. “Me? You want to marry me? Why?”

“Because I love you, Anna.” Alex scooted off the bench and dropped to his knee. “I know I hurt you by leaving you. And by keeping my distance. But it was the only way I knew to keep you safe until I could learn how to protect you better. If I hadn’t failed you when you were younger... Things would have been so different. But I will make it up to you, Anna. I promise.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring. “Anna, I love you with all of my heart. Will you please do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Anna couldn’t think straight. The whole situation seemed unreal. Alex wanted to marry her? He loved her? It was too good to be true. At least it seemed too good to be true. She searched his eyes and then opened her

heart to read him once more. The love that radiated from him stole her breath away.

Alex was the one person in the world that Devin couldn't take away from her. Alex knew exactly who she was and still loved her. There was no barrier between them like there always would be with other men. He was her Master. Like Devin was. But Alex loved her. Anna felt safe with him. He could stand up to Devin. He could protect her.

Anna looked into Alex's hopeful blue eyes. "You really love me?" she whispered, afraid she'd misread him.

"*Ja*, Anna. I love you. With everything that I am. I have for a very long time. I just couldn't tell you for fear of what Devin would do to you."

"Will he let me marry you?" Fear rose in Anna's heart at the thought.

"He doesn't have a choice." The determination in Alex's eyes was almost frightening. But Anna understood that it was determination to protect her, not to hurt her. "But it's up to you, Anna. I won't force you. I want you to marry me because you want to. Not because you feel obligated to."

Alex could easily make her do what he wanted her to do. But he'd never done that. He'd always given her choices. Devin made her do things she didn't want to do.

"Yes, Alex," she said, her heart filling with joy. "I will marry you."

His eyes lit up, unlike anything she'd ever seen. Her heart overflowed with happiness, knowing it was her answer that had made him so happy.

He pulled her down off the bench and hugged her tightly to his chest, then pulled back slightly and cradled her cheeks with both hands. "You have made me the happiest man, Anna." He crushed his lips to hers, bruising them, but she didn't care. She clung to his neck and kissed him back with abandon.

He pulled back a while later and took her left hand. “In Germany, we don’t normally give engagement rings, but I couldn’t bring myself to ask an American girl to marry me without a ring. When we went back to San Francisco, my friends would kick my ass.”

Anna giggled softly as he put the ring on her finger. It was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. The center diamond was large and round and perfect. And huge. On either side were three smaller round diamonds, descending in size slightly as they moved away from the center stone.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, smiling shyly at him. Anna wrapped her arms around his neck. “You have made me so happy, Alex.”

“That is my goal. I always want to make you happy, *Schatzi*.” Abruptly his expression changed and he looked at her nervously again. “Anna, are you...okay with what I told you about myself?”

Anna nodded slowly. “You have accepted me for who I am. How can I not accept you for who you are?”

“I won’t do it forever, Anna. Once I am Elder, I will be forced to retire. But I promise you, I will always protect you. Being my wife will keep you safer than you ever have been before. Men will think twice before hurting you.” He stroked her cheek with his hand. “I never want you to be hurt again, *Schatzi*.”

“But Devin will try, won’t he?”

Alex nodded reluctantly. “I’m afraid so. But he will be severely limited in what he can do with you after we are married. I will have the advantage over him and he will have to respect my decisions regarding you.” He smiled.

Anna gaped at him. “Really?”

“*Ja*, Anna. I came home to Germany to learn what I could to protect you from Devin and to minimize or get rid of the control he has on you.”

“Is it possible? I mean, for him not to control me?”

“I believe it is, Anna.” He stroked her hair gently. “I have more research to do, but I believe that you can be free of him someday.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Would I be free from you?”

Alex blinked. “Do you want to be?”

The thought of being disconnected from Alex pained her heart. “No,” she whispered.

He smiled tenderly. “*Gut*. I want you to be free, Anna. But I don’t want to leave your side. Ever. Our marriage will bond us for life. There is no separation, except in death.” He stroked her hair. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you,” he said softly.

“I’d like that,” she whispered.

“Me too.” He was quiet for a few minutes as he continued to stroke her hair.

Anna would have been perfectly content to stay there all night with him.

“Anna, Devin will not want us to marry. If he finds out about our engagement, he will try to stop us.”

Anna looked up at him, concerned. “What can we do?”

He turned her to face him. “Marry me tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Isn’t there planning and...stuff that needs to be done?” Anna didn’t know much about weddings, but any event had to be planned.

Alex chuckled. “I have been working on it since I found out the best way to protect you was to marry you. For some stupid reason, it is very difficult to get married here. But we must be married here in Germany. And it must be approved in the *Schloss* by the Elders and consummated there.

Everything is ready.” He looked at her tenderly. “I just needed you to accept me.”

Anna grew concerned. “Are you marrying me just so you can protect me?” Did he feel an obligation to marry her?

“*Nein, Anna. Nein.* Not at all. I wanted to marry you before I found out about the added protections.” His cheeks turned pink. “I had planned on returning from Germany and courting you. Now, if you are willing, we’ll return as husband and wife.” He took her hands. “Anna, even if we waited to be married six months from now, our actual wedding ceremony would not be any different. In Germany, the only way to marry is in a civil ceremony in a government official’s office. Then later there are parties and sometimes a church wedding. It’s very different from in America. But we can have a reception when we get home to San Francisco. And...well, my family usually has a New Year’s Eve party here, and my parents and I thought it could be our reception here. Most of the people who would be at the reception will be at the party on Wednesday anyways.”

Alex looked so earnest. Anna could tell he was trying to make her happy. She would have been happy with just marrying him, and he was talking about parties. She supposed that most people had parties to celebrate weddings, though she had never been to one.

She squeezed his hands. “Alex, it’s more than I ever dreamed would happen. I never thought I would marry, especially after what...Devin did. He warned me if I had any more distractions, that he would eliminate them. I swore I’d never date anyone again.” She smiled tenderly. “But he can’t eliminate you, can he?”

“*Nein, Anna.* He cannot. He would only be hurting himself and you if he did so.”

Tears filled Anna's eyes again, but this time they were tears of joy. "Then let's get married tomorrow."

Alex grinned. "I will hardly be able to sleep tonight." He hugged her again and then stood and helped her to her feet. "*Kommen Sie*. Let me introduce you to my family."

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Alex held Anna's hand as they walked up the spiral staircase. She hid behind him slightly as he led her into a long sitting room where his very large family was gathered. She hadn't realized there would be so many of them. Wilhelm and Ilsa sat near the fireplace in large, comfortable looking leather chairs, each with a book in hand. They smiled as Anna and Alex walked in the room

Greta had been lounging on a couch and jumped up when they walked in. "Did you ask her?"

"*Ja*, Greta. I asked." Alex laughed. "Can I introduce her to Liesl and Gretchen before I make the announcement?"

Greta shook her head and said something in German.

Alex rolled his eyes. "English, please. Greta. Anna doesn't understand German." He gave his sister a charming smile. "Would you please go get Sebastian and the others?"

Greta stuck her tongue out at her eldest brother and then bounded out of the room without saying another word.

Alex walked over to a group of couches where Kurt sat with two women in their early twenties. One had dark blond hair and blue eyes, and looked very much like Ilsa though without the friendly smile. The other woman had medium brown hair and brown eyes and looked very tired and grumpy. Anna guessed this was Gretchen.

"Anna, this is my sister, Liesl." He indicated the blonde. "And Kurt's wife, Gretchen." He indicated the brunette.

"Hello, Anna," Liesl said politely, standing and shaking Anna's hand. She wasn't overly warm, but at least she wasn't radiating outright hostility at her like Gretchen.

Gretchen didn't stand, but nodded sharply and said hello.

"Anna!" Kurt said enthusiastically, standing quickly and walking over to her. He kissed her cheek and looked her over with a concerned look on his face. "*Engel*, you look pale. Have you been ill?"

"That's hardly a way to greet a woman, Kurt," Ilsa admonished.

"I am sorry, Anna," Kurt apologized. "I did not mean to imply anything. You look as beautiful as ever."

"It's okay, Kurt. I haven't been feeling very well lately. There's been a lot going on."

Kurt gave her a sympathetic look. "I remember. I am so sorry I had to take Vati away from you."

Gretchen murmured something to Liesl in German.

"There's nothing to apologize for Kurt. You needed to get home. How is the baby?"

Kurt smiled broadly, his face lighting up. "*Wunderbar*. He is sleeping, thankfully, right now."

Gretchen said something to him in German, making Anna wonder if she spoke English.

Kurt turned to her and responded sharply. "Don't be rude, Gretchen. You speak English as well as the rest of us."

Anna had never heard such a sharp tone come from Kurt and was a little startled. She could almost see the hostility between them that Alex had spoken of.

"How was your flight over, Anna?" Kurt asked. "It is unfortunate that the new jet was not ready for you to take."

Anna smiled. "It was good, as far as I can tell. I slept the whole time."

Everyone except Gretchen laughed.

“That is the way to travel,” Wilhelm said, walking across the room to join them.

Ilsa came and stood next to Wilhelm. “Will there be a need for champagne, Alex?” she asked with a smile.

Alex pulled Anna in front of him and put his arms around her waist. “*Ja*,” he grinned.

Ilsa motioned across the room. Anna looked and saw a woman wearing a black dress and white apron. When Ilsa motioned to her, she curtsied and disappeared through a door behind her.

A moment later, Anna heard the commotion of footsteps coming up the stairs. Anna looked to see Seth, Tony, Greg and several other men behind him. Seth beamed at her.

“Anna, these are my friends. You know Seth, Tony, Greg...and Sebastian, of course.”

Anna nodded and the Immortal bowed his head slightly and smiled at her.

“The ones you haven’t met are Jesse, Michael and Jason.”

Each man nodded as Alex introduced them. They were all tall and muscular, as would be expected from the military-type men Anna assumed they were. Jesse looked like he was of some Hispanic or Caribbean heritage and his head was shaved bald. Michael was slightly shorter with short brown hair and gray eyes. Jason had red hair, light green eyes and freckles.

“Erich will be here tomorrow with my aunt and uncle. He’s my cousin. Well, our cousin.”

All the men looked at her like they were happy to meet her. She felt no hostility or ill will in them.

“Well, now that everyone is here, I can make the announcement,” Alex said loudly, giving Anna an affectionate look. “I asked Anna to marry me

and she said yes.”

There was excited chatter and applause. Anna was instantly surrounded by people giving her hugs and kisses.

Ilsa hugged her tightly. “I am so pleased to welcome you into our family, Anna.”

A champagne glass appeared in her hand and Anna looked at Alex. “I’m not old enough to drink,” she protested.

Alex laughed. “Anna, the drinking age here is sixteen. And you’re in a private home, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh.” Anna blushed.

“*Zum Wohl!*” Alex exclaimed, raising his glass. He glanced down at Anna with a grin. “It means ‘cheers,’ like a toast.”

“*Zum Wohl!*” everyone else responded, raising their glasses in the air and then drinking.

Anna took a sip of the bubbly drink. She wasn’t sure what she expected, but it tasted sweeter than she’d thought it would. The only time she’d had alcohol before was with Devin. But she liked this better.

Alex hugged her to him and she leaned her head on his chest. Laughter and talking filled the room.

“Alex, you should show Anna to her room, and then we need to leave,” Wilhelm said quietly, stepping close.

“Where are you going?” Anna asked, suddenly afraid. She hadn’t even finished her champagne and he was leaving?

Alex kissed her head. “I have to go to the Schloss tonight to prepare for tomorrow.” He smiled and stroked her cheek. “Don’t worry, Anna. Sebastian will stay with you. His room is right next to yours.”

Alex took her hand and led her up to the third floor and down a hallway, past several doors and around a corner to a door at the end of a short

hallway.

“I hope you like it, Anna. It’s only for the one night.”

Alex opened the door to a beautiful room, decorated in cream and pale green. The dark wood floor had several large rugs covering it, and the cream-colored walls made the room feel bright and cheery. Directly across from the door was a large window covered in heavy pale green and cream brocade curtains.

“You’ll have a beautiful view in the morning,” Alex said.

“It’s beautiful, Alex,” Anna said, turning to him with a smile.

“I want to show you something before I leave.”

Alex took her hand and led her back out into the hallway to a small staircase a few feet away.

“Where are we going?” Anna asked as she walked down the stairs in front of him. They walked down two flights and through a narrow door that opened into a large, dark paneled room.

“Oh!” she exclaimed as her eyes adjusted to the dim light and she saw the rows and rows of books.

“This is our library. I thought you might like to see it.”

An enormous fireplace took up a large portion of one wall in the two-story room. Two wrought iron staircases led to the upper balcony. Red velvet and dark wood furniture made up several cozy reading areas.

Anna walked over to a table with a chair next to it. She ran her fingers along the smooth surface, remembering her vision. “This is where you were when I saw you in August, isn’t it?”

“*Ja*. I spent a lot of time in that chair the last few months.” He smiled. “And ever since I saw you, I would find myself staring at the spot you had been standing. Wishing you would come again.”

Alex leaned against the table, pulled Anna to stand in front of him, and hugged her close. "I am so glad you are here, *Schatzi*," he said quietly, kissing her head.

"Me too." Anna wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned her head against his hard chest. His heartbeat was soothing.

All too soon, Alex sighed. "I should take you back to your room so you can rest. It will be a long day tomorrow."

"A good day, I hope."

"I am sure it will be, *Schatzi*. We are getting married. No day will ever be better than tomorrow." He kissed her hand, then stood and led her back upstairs to her room.

Sebastian was waiting in the hallway. "Your father is looking for you."

Alex frowned at the look of disapproval on his friend's face. "I was showing Anna the library."

Anna smiled up at Alex with a sparkle in her eye. She looked so happy and it thrilled him to know that he was the one who had made her feel that way.

Alex took her small hand in his and walked her to the bedroom door. "If you need anything, you may ask Sebastian or there is a button on the nightstand you can press. Brigitte will be attending to you, and she will come and get you what you need." He took both her hands in his. "Anna, please do not call anyone at home until after we're married. If you do, Devin is likely to hear about it and...it wouldn't be good. Do you understand?"

Anna nodded solemnly. "I won't call anyone, Alex. I promise."

“Brigitte will bring your breakfast in the morning and help you get ready. I believe my mother has many dresses for you to choose from to wear tomorrow. She’s been enjoying the secret wedding planning.”

“Okay. I hope I can sleep.” She yawned and then quickly covered her mouth, her cheeks turning slightly pink. “I’m still tired, though, so I might be able to.”

“The remote to the television should be on the nightstand. Your bags should be in the closet. Call Brigitte if you need anything.”

“You’re going to be at the Manor all night?”

Alex nodded. It wouldn’t be a very pleasant night for him. “I’ll be back in the morning and we’ll go into town together with my family.” He leaned down and kissed her soft lips. He looked forward to kissing her every day for the rest of his life. “I love you, *Schatzi*.”

“I love you too, Alex,” she said as her cheeks turned an even more endearing shade of pink.

Alex stared at her for a long moment. She hadn’t said it when they had been downstairs. “You...love me, too?” It was more than he’d expected. He had hoped that she would eventually grow to love him, but hadn’t expected it so soon.

“Is that okay?” Her eyes filled with apprehension.

“Anna, it is the best thing I have ever heard or known.” He kissed her again, his heart soaring in his chest. “I will see you in the morning.”

Anna nodded and walked into her room, closing the door behind her.

Alex sighed in contentment. She was here at last. Safe and sound in his family home. She would be safe here. The hard part would be getting into the city undetected. But that’s why his men were here, and others that he trusted implicitly. He turned and walked back to Sebastian.

“Is the guard set?” he asked in German.

“Yes. Up on the roof and foot patrols outside. I also sent a few out to the main road.”

“Do you think he suspects anything?” Alex’s biggest fear was Devin finding out and stopping the wedding. If Devin knew, Alex was certain that he would do anything to stop it. Devin’s control over Anna would be minimized once she and Alex were married.

“I honestly don’t know, Alex. Her anger and hostility at coming was a good thing, though. She begged Devin not to make her go, so he may assume that she’s still feeling that way.” Sebastian frowned. “Your kiss at the airport wasn’t the wisest of moves, though.”

“I couldn’t help it,” Alex smiled in spite of himself. “You try not kissing her,” he chuckled.

“I’m trying to keep my mind in a fatherly disposition,” Sebastian said wryly. “It is difficult. She’s very desirable.”

Alex looked back at the closed door. “She is. Perhaps it’s a good thing that I’ll be at the Schloss tonight.”

Sebastian laughed. “There are multiple reasons why a groom spends the night at the Manor before his wedding. Temptation is one of them.”

“Gretchen hasn’t been opening her mouth, has she? Or Liesl?”

“Surprisingly, they’ve been rather cooperative. Even Gretchen. Liesl may listen to Gretchen about certain things, but she’s still your sister and loves you. Gretchen’s barely left the house since the baby was born and she hasn’t said anything on any calls that I know of. She’s jealous and bitter, but she’s behaving.”

“Good.”

“You need to go to your father. I will take care of Anna.”

Alex looked longingly at the door Anna had disappeared through minutes before.

Sebastian laughed and pushed Alex away. “Go. Your father is in the sitting room waiting for you.”

Alex turned and made his way back down to the sitting room. His father stared out the window into the dark night. Greta and his mother were nowhere to be seen.

Gretchen sat on the couch nursing Otto. She gave him a sweet smile as he walked by. “She’s very young, Alex. How old is she?”

“Twenty.”

“Eight years is quite an age difference.”

“Anna is more mature than most thirty-year-olds,” Kurt said.

“And you would know?” Gretchen snapped.

Kurt gave her a wicked smile. “Do you really want me to answer that question, wife?”

Liesl narrowed her eyes at Kurt. “You’re mean, Kurt.”

“I was just offering her a choice,” Kurt said innocently.

“Why is the house guarded so carefully, Alex?” Gretchen asked in a way that made Alex suspicious. “Are you afraid someone will come and steal that girl away from you?”

Alex narrowed his eyes at Gretchen. “If anything happens to Anna overnight, I will find out who is responsible and tear them apart, limb from limb,” he growled.

Gretchen’s eyes widened. “I’ve never heard you speak in such a way.” Her tone was light and she laughed, but he could see the fright in her eyes.

“I will do anything to keep Anna safe and happy. You would do well to keep that in mind, Gretchen.”

“Alex, that’s enough,” his father said softly, walking up next to him. “You needn’t pick a fight out of your stress.”

Alex took a deep breath.

“It’s almost over,” Vati said calmly. “She will be safe in less than twelve hours.”

Alex nodded to himself. “Yes, Vati. I know.”

“Are you ready?”

Alex nodded and followed his father out of the room.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Alex walked into the Schloss less than an hour later. He was thankful that he was marrying the right way this time, but was apprehensive about the marriage piercings. Whoever came up with the idea that it was a good thing to stick a bunch of metal balls under the skin of a guy's cock was insane. He wondered if it really made a difference. Logically, he supposed it would, but he still didn't like the idea.

He sighed. But he was too old not to have them. An Elder-Son was supposed to be married in his early twenties. His father refusing to let him have them when he married Mina had been humiliating, but Alex understood now. Poor Mina. He should have never married her. She deserved better than he'd been able to give her. They had never connected on the level that he connected with Anna.

He didn't know why he'd felt a connection to Anna until a few months ago when Vati had told him about the conversation he'd had with Anna's father before he "died."

Trevor had gone against every Immortal and Brotherhood rule to come to Wilhelm with a desperate plea to help his eleven-year-old daughter. Trevor had feared that the Elder of the city he lived in, which they now knew was San Francisco, would try and take Anna away from him. He had asked Wilhelm for permission to tie his daughter's heart to Alex's.

"I give my daughter to your son, Elder," Trevor had said as he stood over Alex's sleeping form. "Their hearts are tied, though not yet bound. He will know her when he sees her. I cannot offer more information than this. If you know too much, the others will grow suspicious and she will be in even more danger." He closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them

again. “I must go. Use discretion when telling your son what I have told you.”

Alex and Anna were meant to be together. Her father had given her to Alex, and Alex had failed them both. He was determined to be everything Anna wanted and needed. He would not fail her again.

“Vati, why are we going down here?” Alex asked as they walked down the steps into the *Dirne*’s living area. He had no desire to be with anyone except Anna.

“You must choose which women will help you tonight.”

“Help me?”

“To arouse you.”

“Vati, I don’t want to have sex with anyone other than Anna.”

Vati smiled. “I appreciate that, Alex. I’m glad. Don’t worry. You’re not having sex. You cannot climax. The *Dirne*’s job is to arouse you. To...make you ready for Anna tomorrow.”

Alex looked at him warily. “I’m going to be teased all night?”

“Not all night. And, you need to be as aroused as you possibly can be before you are pierced.”

Alex groaned. “Will I be able to have sex tomorrow?”

Vati laughed. “Alex, this has been done for hundreds of years and I’m not aware of any man not being able to consummate his marriage the next day.” He put his hand on Alex’s shoulder. “I had the same thoughts when I went through this. It will be all right, I promise. Now, choose.”

Alex looked around the room at women who looked at him with seductive smiles. “Is it better to choose ones who remind me of Anna, or who are the exact opposite?”

“Choose someone who you are attracted to. It will go better.”

Alex sighed and continued looking around. He only wanted Anna. But the more attracted he was to the girl, the faster it would go...hopefully. He finally settled on a blonde named Lea, and a brunette named Emily. They had a sweetness about them that reminded him of his beloved. He had briefly considered a redhead, but it reminded him too much of Kirsty.

The Dirne followed behind Vati and Alex to his bedroom upstairs. Vati gave the girls instructions, to arouse him, but not allow him to orgasm, and then he left, saying he would be back later.

Lea began to unbutton his shirt while Emily kissed him. They ooh-ed and ahh-ed as they undressed him, then removed their short dresses.

Their breasts were round and full, their pussies bare. Lea knelt between his legs and took his cock into her pink mouth, sucking and stroking him and making him groan. Emily moved back up to his mouth and kissed him, stroking his chest.

Alex kissed her back, reaching for her breasts and caressing the firm globes. Emily moaned as he pulled on her nipples and then took one into his mouth. His fingers trailed down to her pussy and he slid his finger inside her wet folds. She gasped as he began thrusting in and out of her.

Lea pulled on his balls and then sucked one into her mouth. "Oh, God...." he groaned.

She stroked him as she sucked and he could feel himself throbbing. He knew he couldn't come, but he wanted release. It had been a while since he'd had sex. He had been so busy it hadn't really crossed his mind all that much. When he needed release, he came to the Schloss and had one of the girls give him a blowjob. But having his fingers inside a woman's body made him realize how much he'd missed it.

He scooted to lay down and picked up Emily, bringing her pussy to his mouth. He lost himself in her taste, his tongue delving deeper and deeper,

her pussy blossoming like a flower around him. She wiggled and moaned above him.

Lea continued to suck on his cock and he reached down and petted her hair.

Emily's thighs clenched. "Oh, my lord. Please may I come?"

"Yes," was all he said before he sucked hard on her clit. She screamed and arched her back, her juices dripping into his mouth. He lapped at them eagerly. When she had calmed down, he released her, and she moved to his cock. He pulled at Lea's hair and she traded places with Emily.

Alex finger fucked her as he played with her breast and kissed her. Emily took him in deeper than Lea had and he groaned as she took him down her throat.

"Yes, oh, yes," he groaned against Lea's mouth. He felt like he was going to explode. When he was on the cusp, Emily backed off and squeezed the base of his cock, not allowing him to climax.

He looked down and glared at her. "What are you doing?"

Her eyes grew large. "I'm sorry, my lord. Master said you weren't allowed to finish."

Alex's head fell back on the pillow as he cursed at himself. He'd forgotten why he was here. He'd forgotten Anna. Guilt spread through his chest like fire.

"Please, my lord. Did I do something to upset you?" Emily asked in a nervous tone.

"No, you didn't. I forgot myself. You are doing very well. Continue." He moved Lea above his mouth and ate her until she came, screaming and writhing above him.

When she had finished, he told them both to work his cock. He closed his eyes and thought about Anna. When he was denied his orgasm, he

gritted his teeth and reminded himself that this was for her.

Anna sat in her room, unsure what she should do. She was tired, but too nervous to sleep. She went into the closet and found her pajamas folded neatly on top of a small dresser, with a pair of slippers on the floor. After she changed clothes, she walked over to one of the windows and pulled aside the curtain to look outside.

The ground was white and sparkled in the full moonlight. A long flat yard stretched out in front of the house, covered in sparkling snow. A dark line, which she thought was the road, made a rectangular border around the snowy ground. Anna hoped that Alex would take her out to explore tomorrow. Or maybe the next day.

A firm knock sounded at her door.

“Come in,” she called.

The door opened and Sebastian walked in. “Hello, Anna. How are you doing?”

She gave him a shy smile. “Okay. Trying to not think about tomorrow.”

Sebastian smiled. “I hope that’s because you’re excited and not dreading it.”

“Oh! Of course I’m not dreading it. Who would dread their wedding day?”

Sebastian shrugged. “You’d be surprised.” He walked over and pulled Anna gently away from the window, closing the curtain. “It’s better to stay away from the windows. Just for tonight. After you’re married, you’ll be safe. Until then, it’s better if you stay out of sight.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I’m certain Alex will take you out to explore soon. The grounds are beautiful, even in the winter.”

“They look like they are.” She looked wistfully at the curtain then turned and walked to her bed and sat down. She glanced up at Sebastian. “Did you want me to please you, Sebastian?”

He smiled kindly. “That’s not why I came in here, Anna. I wanted to talk to you.”

Anna blushed. “Oh.”

“I will take you to Alex and the Elders. Your wedding at the government office is the legal part of getting married. But what bonds you, what gives Alex the ability to protect you, is what happens at the *Schloss*. As an Elder-Mistress, you need to be given to Alex. By an Immortal. It would ideally be your father, but he can’t be here. So he asked me to stand in for him.”

“Will I ever see my father again?”

“Yes. But not on Earth.”

“Oh.”

“Getting married for an Elder-Son is a big deal. It shows that the Son is able to be responsible for more than himself. There are things that the Son does in preparation for taking a wife. That’s why Alex is at the Manor tonight. The only time a wife, or bride rather, goes to the Manor is on their wedding day. You, being an Elder-Mistress, of course will be there more than just those times.”

Anna felt ashamed that she couldn’t be a better wife for Alex. A normal wife.

“Anna, your circumstances are different than anything that has been seen in a long time. And none of them are your fault. You needn’t feel ashamed. The Elders have approved your marriage, with no reservations.”

“Elders have to approve marriages?” It sounded so old fashioned.

“Yes. There are high standards for the potential brides. It used to be that it was required for them to be virgins. Nowadays, it’s nearly impossible to find a woman who is a virgin, and accommodations have been made accordingly. But they still must be respectable members of society, not having a poor reputation. They must be strong, but willing to submit to the will of their husbands. Of course, the man has to be strong enough to stand up to their wife when needed as well. Men these days are so weak. It’s sad.”

“Sebastian, I am so far from a virgin it’s not even funny.”

“Anna, that’s not your fault. The Elders know what happened to you. They also know that Alex is whom you are meant to be with. They wholeheartedly approve your marriage. But, there are a few things we need to do tonight to prepare you.”

“Like what?”

He held out his hand. “Come with me.”

Anna looked down. “I’m in my pajamas.”

Sebastian chuckled. “It doesn’t matter. Take my hand. You’ll be appropriately dressed when you arrive.”

Anna looked at his hand nervously. “Does Alex know I’m leaving?”

“I told him I would have you prepared for him. He trusts me.”

Anna searched his eyes, but they revealed nothing except sincerity. She reached for his hand and he grasped it tightly.

“Close your eyes and hold tight.”

Alex groaned loudly as he was denied an orgasm for the umpteenth time. Lea squeezed him so he wouldn’t finish and it was painful. He grasped the headboard and squeezed, needing release so badly, but knowing he couldn’t have it. They’d been at it for at least an hour and a half. His

cock was harder than it had ever been before. His balls felt like they were the size of grapefruits.

When the girls moved, he could see their pink pussies, wet and swollen from the orgasms he'd given them. Somehow watching them come gave him a sense of release. He could see both of them now and wanted so badly to bury his cock deep inside one of them. He reached out and ran his fingers through the silken folds of Emily's pussy. She squealed and giggled when he pinched her clit.

The door opened abruptly and Vati walked in. Alex was both relieved and embarrassed at the same time. Not that his father hadn't seen him naked before, even as an adult. And when he was twenty, he had gotten his initial piercing, which came after he showed his submission to his father....

God, he did not need to be thinking about any kind of sex right now. His cock was engorged and painful and he was willing to do almost anything to make it stop hurting.

Wilhelm looked at him and nodded. "Girls, you may go."

They looked disappointed, but obeyed and left the room. After they did, six other men walked into the room. The German Elders. They were dressed in white tunics and pants, as was his father. Alex was beyond caring who saw him at this point.

"Stand, Alex," Vati commanded.

Alex stood, his bobbing cock throbbing with every movement. He groaned, but stood tall as the Elders examined him.

Vati stood in front of him and snapped a leather ring around the base of his cock.

Alex felt sweat break out on his forehead and he groaned. He clenched his hands, tightening the muscles in his arms as the blood pounded through his body. He looked down and could have sworn that his cock was bigger

than he'd ever seen it before. Oh, just a few strokes and he could have relief.

But no, for Anna he would keep himself under control. He was a strong man. This was nothing compared to the years of abuse she'd been through. He could do this. For her.

"Alexander Johannes Kunze Herzog von Hesse, you desire to be married tomorrow," Vati said in a solemn voice. "Is this true?"

"Yes, it is true," Alex answered, his voice strained.

"Marriage is not something to be entered into lightly. Although in our society and world, marriage is a throwaway relationship, as an Elder, it is a sacred commitment. A permanent bond that cannot be dissolved by either party. Once you take this step and make this commitment, there is no changing it. Do you accept this?"

"Yes."

His cock was throbbing even more now. The ring prevented his erection from dying. In fact, he could have sworn that it was getting even larger. God, it hurt!

"You are a strong man, Alex. I am proud to call you my son." Vati's eyes gleamed with emotion as he looked his son in the eye. He was one of the few people in the world who could do so without looking up. "You have worked very hard, forsaking many things, to prepare for this day."

Alex couldn't prevent the emotion from showing. He knew his father loved him. But hearing him say, in front of the Elders, that he was proud to have him as his son, meant the world to him. Especially in light of how he'd failed his father in the past.

"Thank you, Vati," he said humbly.

Vati gave him a small smile. "Marrying an Elder-Mistress is not an easy path. She has duties to the Brotherhood as well as you do. Unfortunately,

there is also another Master to be taken into consideration. A Master who does not value her as much as you do. He will do whatever he can to destroy your relationship. Are you prepared for this?”

“Yes, I am.”

“We, as your Elders, will support you in any way we can. We support your marriage and believe that *your* relationship with Anna is the proper one. We believe that you are the one person who can protect her, and ultimately free her. We will hold you accountable for her welfare, and charge you to do everything in your power to ensure her safety, and ensure that she thrives under your care. We are still your Elders and you are still a Son. You must submit to our authority in your life and with your bride. Do you accept this condition?”

“Yes, I do.” Alex hoped this didn’t mean what he thought it would mean.

“Are you willing to show your submission and demonstrate how far you are willing to go to protect your future wife?”

“I am,” he said, trying very hard not to show his hesitation. Not that he was unwilling to show submission. He was just already hurting and didn’t need more stimulation to make his cock throb any harder.

There were men that he was attracted to and would fuck occasionally. He enjoyed a cock in his ass when he was in the mood. But he was so far beyond arousal that he didn’t know how much more he could take.

“Kneel on the floor at the end of the bed, Alex,” Vati said. “Put your hands on the footboard and prepare to show your submission.”

Fuck.

Edwin Reisig knelt behind him a moment later. “Your erection and your release is for your bride tomorrow,” he said quietly as he put his hand on

Alex's shoulder. "Allowing yourself release tonight would be very selfish and make us doubt you are ready for marriage."

Alex tried to relax his ass as much as he could as the Elder pressed his cock against him. Sweat beaded on his brow and he pressed in.

"We will press you further than you think you can go tonight, Alex. You must take us all."

Alex closed his eyes and thought of Anna as Edwin began moving. He groaned and strained against his release. He would be strong for Anna.

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Chapter Thirty

Anna opened her eyes and blinked in the bright light. She was on...a beach? With warm white sand between her toes and crystal clear waters just a few feet away. A few palm trees swayed in the wind, under which patches of soft-looking grass grew. Down the beach stood some sort of white, three-sided pavilion.

She looked down to see herself wearing a flowing, white dress. Sebastian still held her hand and wore a white silk tunic and silk pants that flapped in the breeze. The tunic had gold and silver embroidery around the sleeves and neckline. His clothes reminded her of what the men wore at the informal Gatherings, but of a higher quality.

“Where are we?” she asked, looking around in awe.

It was the most beautiful sight she’d ever seen. Something about the place seemed familiar and made her feel comfortable, although she was certain she’d never been there before.

“We just call it ‘The Beaches.’ It’s where we Immortals live.”

Anna’s heart pounded with fear. Would Kaveh be here?

“No, Anna. Kaveh is not here. I wouldn’t have brought you if he were.” He squeezed her hand and smiled at her. “You’re safe.”

He led her towards the pavilion where three men sat on large pillows, talking. They looked up as Sebastian and Anna approached. One stood quickly and walked toward them. He was tall and blond, like the rest of them, but there was something familiar...

“Daddy?” Anna exclaimed, her heart pounding. She looked at Sebastian, who nodded and released her hand.

“Anna, sweetheart!” Trevor ran to her and embraced her with the love that only a father could give.

“Daddy,” she sobbed, burying her face in his chest. “Oh, Daddy. I miss you.”

“I missed you too, sweetheart. Oh so much!” He kissed her head and pressed her head to his chest. She could hear his heart pounding against her ear.

When she stopped crying, he pulled her away so he could look at her. His eyes were red. “Oh, Anna. You’ve grown into such a beautiful woman. I’m so sorry for everything that happened.” Tears filled his eyes. “I never wanted anything to happen to you,” he whispered. “I tried to do everything I could...But I couldn’t...and then you disappeared...Oh, Anna, I’m so sorry.”

He pulled her close again.

“Trevor, we don’t have much time,” Sebastian said softly. “What we’re doing wouldn’t be approved of by many.”

Trevor nodded and led Anna to the Pavilion. “Anna, this is Brenton and Gavin. They are other Immortals that watch over Germany.”

“Hello,” Anna said softly. She clung to her father as he brought her to stand in front of the other men.

“Anna, I need to give you to the German Immortals. Kaveh and the others claimed you in the US. But you must belong to the Germans as well for the marriage to be valid. And we don’t have much time. No one can know until after your marriage to Alex is complete.”

Trevor stood her up and turned her to face Sebastian, Brenton and Gavin. “My brothers. This is my daughter. Flesh of my flesh. Born of love between her mother and I.” Trevor’s voice broke as he spoke. “I offer her in my free will to you. Will you take her and care for her in my stead?”

“We will.” The three Immortals said in unison.

Trevor stood and kissed her head. He cupped her cheek. “Anna, I must leave you in their care. You can trust them. You can trust Alex and the German Elders as well. They will help you.” He gave her a sad smile. “I love you, sweetheart.”

Tears spilled over onto her cheeks. “I love you too, Daddy,” she whispered. He stepped away, gave her a sad smile and then vanished from her sight.

She looked around. “Where’d he go?”

“He couldn’t stay long Anna. Just long enough to offer you to us.” Sebastian took her hand and pulled her close. “You must be ours so we can give you to the Elders and Alex.”

“How does that happen?” Anna asked nervously.

Sebastian cupped her cheek. “How do all bondings happen?” He leaned forward and kissed her. “We won’t hurt you, Anna,” he murmured.

Sebastian and the other Immortals stood and began chanting. Their voices swirled around Anna and she felt dizzy. They circled around her and Anna closed her eyes and fell to her knees. They knelt around her and her dress was raised over her head. Then their hands were on her body. Her breasts were caressed, her pussy explored with long fingers. Her ass cheeks were caressed and spread apart. Sebastian kissed her again as a finger delved into her ass. Her clit was caressed. Her nipples sucked on.

Ecstasy. Anna was teased, touched, kissed, and sucked. She felt like she was floating in a cloud of sex. It felt like hours passed as she lay with her legs open, her pussy repeatedly filled by the Immortals. They didn’t seem to have to recover like mortal men did. Climax after climax. Mouthful after mouthful of cum. They were all big and satisfying. And she learned about them all. She knew them. She was theirs. She belonged to them. More climaxes, more ecstasy. She flew on a cloud of pleasure and didn’t come

down to earth. When she couldn't take it anymore, she gave one last scream of ecstasy and gave into the silken darkness.

Alex grunted and groaned loudly in frustration and pain and pleasure. His teeth dug into the leather covered stick that his father had offered him and his body was slick with sweat. Over and over again his ass was filled with huge cocks. They pressed against that sweet spot inside of him and he groaned. His head rested against the headboard. His arm muscles cramped from the strain. How many more? How many had he taken?

He was stretched open more than he'd ever been stretched before. His cock was dark purple and engorged. Bigger than he'd ever imagined possible. Was this safe? God, he needed relief. *Oh, God, Anna!* This was all for her.

The man behind him grunted as he came and pulled out. Alex braced himself for another, but no one came.

There was a hand on his shoulder. "You're done, Alex. Breathe." It was his father.

Tears filled Alex's eyes. He could take a lot of pain and discomfort. This was by far one of the worst situations he'd ever been in. He would call it comparable to what Devin had done to him in the dungeon. He rested his head on the footboard of the bed and breathed heavily.

"Turn around Alex," Vati said. "Stay on your knees."

Alex turned around and straightened his back. He was a man, not a boy. He would not slump and show weakness.

His arms were abruptly grabbed and stretched out to his side. One man on each side of him held his arms out and another put his arms around his

shoulders and held him still. Another grabbed his hair in a fist, keeping his head up. Vati knelt in front of him.

Alex clenched his jaw again. One of the Elders put the leather stick in front of his mouth and Alex opened his jaw to receive it. At least he wouldn't break his teeth or bite his tongue.

He looked into his father's eyes. They were intense, without a flicker of emotion.

Alex took a deep breath and calmed his pounding heart. He knew what was coming next. He closed his eyes and thought of Anna again. His breathing slowed and he relaxed.

Vati reached out and removed the cock ring. If Alex hadn't been held so firmly by the other men, he would have fallen forward. The throbbing intensified and he grunted against the stick.

Another Elder handed Vati a gun-like object. The piercing gun.

Alex felt his father's hand on his cock. He couldn't look down and watch. It was probably better that way.

He heard a click and felt something like molten hot metal pierce through the top of his cock.

"Argh!" His muffled shout echoed in the silent room.

Without warning there was another click and another shot of metal. His eyes watered and he struggled against the men holding him, but he was too exhausted to put up much of a fight.

Vati fiddled with the piercings and then nodded and the men released Alex. Alex slumped over and put his hand on the floor to steady himself. A few minutes later, he heard the door open and close. He looked up to see that the room was empty except for himself and Vati.

"Am I done?" Alex asked in a weary voice.

Vati smiled. “Yes, son. I am very proud of you. Not many men would make it through what you went through. That is one of the toughest tests we can put a Son through. But I knew you could do it.”

Alex gave him a tired smile. “I kept thinking about Anna, and how she was raised. This was nothing compared to what she went through.

“Good, Alex,” Vati said, softly. “You’re putting thoughts of Anna in front of your own. You will be a good husband.”

Alex beamed at the praise from his father.

A woman entered the room carrying a steaming mug on a tray.

“Drink this, Alex. It will help you sleep. When you wake in the morning, you will not be in pain, though you will be uncomfortable until you consummate.”

“Will my cock calm down?”

Vati laughed. “Yes. But you will be of similar size when you consummate.”

“Then I’m glad Anna is not a virgin. I would hurt her.”

Vati shook his head. “She will be as a virgin, Alex. You will have to show extreme self-control with her.”

“What? How is that possible, and why?” Alex didn’t like the idea of hurting Anna on their wedding day.

“Because an Elder’s bride is supposed to be a virgin. And it is another test to see if you will treat your wife properly.”

“How are you going to make her a virgin?”

“Only a virgin physically. We can't undo what Devin made her. Sebastian and the Immortals will take care of that.”

Vati stood and helped Alex to his feet and to the bed. “Drink and sleep. Tomorrow will be busy.”

“I don’t want to hurt Anna,” Alex protested.

“I know, Alex,” Vati gave him a sympathetic look. “But sometimes we have to hurt the ones we love, as you have learned these last months. We do it as gently as possible.”

Vati left the room. Alex drank the sweet drink and drifted off into a deep sleep.

Anna felt a hand brush her forehead.

“Anna, wake up.”

Anna’s eyes slowly opened and she found herself in a very feminine bedroom. It reminded her of her room at Devin’s Manor. The walls were covered in painted bouquets of flowers. The canopy above her looked like peach silk, and the bed was incredibly comfortable.

Sebastian sat next to her on the bed.

She sat up. “Where are we?”

“In the *Schloss*. There is something we must do here, and then I will take you back to the *Gutshaus*.”

“What do we have to do?”

“I have to give you to the Elders.”

“Elders. Multiples?”

“Generally, an Elder-Mistress belongs to a country with one particular Elder, who is her direct Master.”

“Oh.” Devin did things so differently.

Sebastian stood and held out a white silk robe. “Here. Put this on.”

Anna stood and let him help her with the robe.

He led her through the *Schloss* to a pair of wooden double doors. He knocked once. There was a response from the other side and he opened the doors.

They walked into a large chamber. The floor was covered in thick red carpet except around the edges where the wood showed. Seven throne-like chairs sat in a large semi-circle in front of what looked like a large white furry rug.

The men who sat in the chairs were dressed in the white robes of the Elders. Brenton and Gavin stood near the door and walked ahead of Sebastian and Anna. They were dressed as they had been at The Beaches, as was Sebastian.

“I will be speaking in German, but I am only telling them that I have brought you to them,” Sebastian whispered. “When I tell you, bow to them as you would to Devin. They are all Elders. Treat them with respect. If they speak to you, address them as *Mein Herr*.”

“Okay.”

Brenton and Gavin stepped to the side and Sebastian went to stand in front of the Elders with Anna at his side. Anna stood as submissively as she could with her head bowed. Sebastian spoke for a long time in German. The Elders would ask a question or make a comment and Sebastian would respond.

At one point, Sebastian moved behind Anna and removed her robe, making her stand naked in front of the men. For the first time in her life, she felt self-conscious about being naked in front of men. She was getting fat and was afraid of displeasing them. She unconsciously moved to cover herself, but Sebastian held her arms down.

She blinked away the tears as the Elders looked at her. She looked down and could see that her breasts were indeed bigger and her waist wasn't as small as it had been. She was ashamed, but tried as hard as she could not to cry. She didn't know what she'd been eating that had caused this, but she

would need to be careful from now on. Men didn't like fat women; Devin and Jack made that very clear.

"Anna," Sebastian whispered. "Greet them."

Anna was relieved to be able to move. She took a step forward and bowed low. Sebastian said something in German and the Elders responded in one voice.

"You may sit up, Mistress," a German voice said. It sounded like Wilhelm.

She sat up, but stayed looking at the ground.

"My lords," Wilhelm said in English, kneeling in front of Anna. "You have given us a precious gift in your Daughter. We will care for her to the best of our ability." He brushed her hair back from her face and cupped her chin, lifting her face to his.

She nervously looked into his eyes, hoping she hadn't displeased him, but he didn't seem upset. He seemed concerned.

"Will you accept me as your Master, Mistress?" Wilhelm asked.

Anna frowned in confusion. Would she not be marrying Alex tomorrow? Was Wilhelm taking her from him?

Wilhelm smiled, seeming to understand her confusion. "I have a son who is worthy of you and if you are willing, would have you for his wife. He will be a good husband to you."

Anna smiled in relief and nodded. "Yes, *Mein Herr*," she said softly. "I will gladly accept you as my Master."

Wilhelm said something in German and then led her over to a door that opened up into a small room with a bed. "Anna, we will each come and be with you. Then you will belong to us all. Normally this does not happen all in one night, but we made an exception because of your unique circumstance." He sighed and lay her down on the bed. "I wish I had time

to make love to you properly. I am sorry.” He leaned down and kissed her.
“There will be other opportunities to make it up to you.”

Anna smiled affectionately at Wilhelm. “It’s okay.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Alex awoke as the sun peeked through the windows, surprised he'd slept so well. Whatever was in that mug had certainly worked. He felt uncomfortably engorged, but his cock was mostly flaccid. It would have been embarrassing walking around with an erection all morning. Not to mention extremely painful.

He pushed the covers aside and sat up and looked down at himself. The marriage piercings were in place. He'd had his double ring since he was twenty and hardly thought about it anymore. These new ones felt strange, but he supposed he would get used to them as he had the first one. He hoped Anna would like them.

He stood and stretched, then went to look out the window.

The sun was rising on his wedding day. The day he would become Anna's husband. Part of him was scared to death. He didn't want to cause Anna any more pain, physically or emotionally. He wanted to be a good husband to her. But what if he inadvertently hurt her? What if he lost his temper in front of her? She would be terrorized.

As soon as they were married, he would put the word out that he and his team were unavailable for a few months. It would give him and Anna time to get used to each other. They could settle into their new life and new house.

Alex grinned to himself. He couldn't wait to take Anna to the new home he'd bought her. It was a palatial residence in the Presidio Heights neighborhood of San Francisco. He'd found it when he was out in August and Kurt had signed the paperwork for him when he was there in December. When Alex took her home, he would take her straight there and

carry her over the threshold like a proper husband. They could have a wedding reception there and celebrate with their friends.

As much as Alex loved Germany, he missed his friends in San Francisco. It would be difficult to move home when it became necessary. He hoped everything would be settled with Anna before that happened. He couldn't bear to leave her behind. But as long as she was tied to Devin, San Francisco was her home and he couldn't take her away.

That was his next course of learning: to find out how to free Anna from Devin once and for all.

Alex hummed to himself as he dressed and went to his father's room at the Schloss. He wanted to get home and get ready for the wedding. He couldn't wait to have Anna as his wife.

Anna's eye snapped open and she grabbed her stomach.

"Not again," she moaned and ran into the bathroom, just making it to the toilet before losing what little was left in her stomach.

She rested her head on the cool porcelain of the nearby tub while she regained her breath. A soft knock sounded at the bedroom door.

"Come in," she called weakly.

She heard a door open and the sound of something being set down on a table. "*Fraulein?*"

"I'm in the bathroom."

A girl a few years older than herself walked in. She wore a black dress with a white apron over it. Her brown hair was neatly tucked back into a bun and her bright smile faded when she saw Anna on the floor.

"Oh, *Fraulein*," she said earnestly. "Are you all right?" She went to the sink and wet a washcloth and pressed it to Anna's forehead and cheeks.

“Are you ill?”

Anna shrugged weakly. “I don’t know. I’ve never been sick before. I’m feeling better now.”

The girl helped her to her feet. “Let me help you back to your bed.”

When Anna was settled back under the covers, the girl spoke again. “I am Brigitte. I will be attending to you while you are here.”

“Hi, Brigitte,” Anna said softly

“I have brought you breakfast. Would you like to try to eat?”

Anna looked over at the tray on the table and nodded. She was hungry and it smelled good.

Brigitte brought the tray and positioned it on legs over Anna’s lap. “Is there anything else you need?”

Anna shook her head. “No, thank you. It looks wonderful.”

Brigitte curtsied. “I will let *der Herzogin* know you are up and that you are not feeling well. I will return in a few minutes.”

Anna dove into her food. As she ate, she began to feel better and even allowed herself to get excited about the day.

She had almost finished eating by the time Ilsa and Brigitte returned. Ilsa immediately went to Anna and felt her forehead. “You do not seem to have a fever,” she said in her accented voice. She looked at her closely. “Alex said that you were ill on the plane as well.”

Anna nodded. “But I felt better after I threw up.”

“Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Ilsa sat down on the bed and studied her closely. “Is there anything else going on?” she asked softly, taking her hand.

“When is there not something going on?” Anna gave her a wry smile.

Ilsa laughed gently. “I meant physically.”

“Oh.” Anna smiled, embarrassed. “I’ve been tired, but I also haven’t been sleeping well. Ever since....” Anna swallowed and looked down at her hand.

“Ever since what, *Liebe*?”

“Since Ben died,” she whispered and started crying.

She shouldn’t be crying. It was her wedding day. It wasn’t that Anna didn’t want to marry Alex. She did. But her heart ached for Ben. For his life that had been taken because of her.

Ilsa scooted up and held Anna as she cried.

“I’m sorry. I just...I’ve been crying so much lately,” Anna said between sobs. “I feel like such a mess.”

“Oh, Anna. It is all right. It has only been a few weeks since he died, correct?”

Anna nodded.

“Grief does not go away overnight. It might never go away. But it will soften. With time.” Ilsa stroked her hair as she spoke. “It will get easier.”

When Anna’s tears subsided, Ilsa smiled at her. “Would you like to see the dresses I picked out for you? You can choose any of them to wear today.”

Anna sniffed and nodded. “Wedding dresses?”

“Not the elaborate styles that most American brides think of; that would not be practical for a German civil wedding. I understand you have a beautiful dress for New Year’s Eve, though.”

Anna smiled brightly. “Oh, it’s so beautiful.” Her face fell. “But I don’t know if Kaitlyn was able to find one that fit. The one she picked out originally was too small.” Anna burst into tears again. “I’ve gained weight. I don’t fit into any of my clothes anymore.” She looked up at Ilsa. “Will Alex be upset?”

“Anna, if you have gained weight, you were too thin to begin with. You are very thin. Alex said he thought you had lost weight.”

Anna stared at her. “How is that possible? I don’t understand.”

Ilsa was thoughtful for a moment. “Sometimes it just happens, Anna. Women’s bodies have minds of their own sometimes.” She stood. “Let me go get the dresses and you can pick one out. I am sure we’ll find something you like.”

“Wilhelm? Are you in there?”

Wilhelm looked up at the sound of his wife’s voice in the hall. She sounded distressed. “I’m here, *Mausi*. What’s wrong?” He stood and walked around his desk to meet her. He had just returned home a few minutes ago.

Ilsa walked into his study and closed the door behind her. “I think Anna might be pregnant.”

“What? That’s not possible, Ilsa.” He didn’t want to discount his wife’s instincts. They were normally right on. But the likelihood of Anna being pregnant was next to zero.

“She was ill this morning. She was ill yesterday on the plane. She said she’s been emotional, tired and not sleeping.”

“Ilsa, she’s been under a lot of stress lately—”

“She says none of her clothes fit her anymore, but Alex said she looked like she had gotten thinner.”

Wilhelm thought for a moment. Anna had looked different last night. Her breasts were fuller for one thing and she just looked...different. He’d had a lot on his mind last night and it hadn’t completely registered. But now that Ilsa brought it up.... But, how? There were ways for her to get pregnant,

but they tended to be mystical in nature, though there were physical things that could be done. Perhaps she'd had a particularly intense night with Ben. Intense emotions had been known to make it happen. She had loved Ben, Wilhelm didn't doubt that.

"Wilhelm?"

Ilsa's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "I'm sorry, Ilsa. Yes, I suppose you could be right. I know your instincts are usually correct." Wilhelm sighed. "Don't say anything to her. If she is, I highly doubt she knows it. It would never occur to her. I don't want to upset her."

"You still want her to marry Alex if she's pregnant with another man's child?"

"If it was anyone else except her, I would handle things much differently. But Anna is different. And she is meant to be with Alex. Of this I am sure."

Ilsa frowned. "His first child will not be his. That's not fair to anyone involved."

"Ilsa, I appreciate your concern. But this wedding must take place. Alex will handle it. He loves her."

Ilsa sighed. "I know. But what will people say?"

"No one has to know. She can't be very far along. A baby could easily be conceived today, at least in other people's minds."

"Should we tell Alex?"

Wilhelm thought for a minute. "Not until after the wedding. Let them have this happy day before life intrudes. Waiting a few days won't hurt anything."

"All right. If you think that is what's best." Ilsa set her mouth in a straight line.

Wilhelm could sense that she wasn't happy about his decision, but wouldn't contradict him. "Ilsa, please. It's not Anna's fault. She's been told her whole life that she will never have children. She needs our support and our love."

Ilsa looked at him closely. "You love her, don't you?" she asked quietly.

Wilhelm hesitated. He loved Ilsa with all his heart. He had since he was sixteen years old. She was the best possible wife a man could imagine. And he never lied to her. They were always completely honest with each other, even if it hurt. It was what kept their marriage strong. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

"Yes, Ilsa. I do. But she will be Alex's wife. I would never, ever replace you for another woman." He walked over to her and pulled her close. "I love you, Ilsa. I have always loved you. My desire for you is as strong as it was when we were first married."

Ilsa leaned her head against his chest. "I know, Wilhelm. I suppose it's only fair. You've not fallen in love with anyone else our whole marriage. I suppose I can't say the same thing."

Wilhelm had decided when he became Elder that he would give Ilsa the decision to have a lover if she wanted one. It wasn't fair for him to be surrounded by young women and her to be at home alone in a cold bed.

They had gone to school together with the son of the French Ambassador. Maurice had fallen in love with Ilsa when Wilhelm had, in secondary school, but Ilsa had chosen Wilhelm, and Maurice married a woman from France. Maurice's wife had died a few years before Wilhelm became Elder and Ilsa had chosen him for her lover. He knew she loved both of them. Wilhelm was thankful she'd found a lover who cared for her as much as he did. Ilsa was loyal and discreet. If plans changed and

Wilhelm was to be home when he was supposed to have been gone, she told Maurice that she couldn't see him that night.

Wilhelm had never found another woman that he loved like he loved his wife. Yes, he participated in the Brotherhood activities, and there were girls that he had cared about and took care of. But he hadn't loved any of them.

Until Anna. Anna was special. Ilsa would see that as she spent time with her. At least he hoped so. Ilsa wasn't a jealous woman, and he hoped that his feelings for Anna wouldn't sour the potential relationship between her and Anna.

"Please, Ilsa. She needs a mother figure. She is so lonely and lost."

Ilsa smiled up at him. "I know. She is very sweet. I can see why you love her. And Alex too." She reached up to kiss him. "I love you. I will not say anything until you decide they should know."

"Thank you, Mausi." He kissed her again, then stroked her cheek. "I love you too."

Ilsa gave him a last smile and then turned and left the room.

Wilhelm leaned against his desk, thinking about what Ilsa had said. If she was right, this could be a good thing for Anna. He believed that Alex would do the right thing and hoped he wouldn't be disproved.

Anna paced in her room while she waited for Ilsa to return. Ilsa hadn't looked pleased when she left. Had Anna done something to displease her? She didn't want to upset Alex's mother. She was more used to being around women now that she had been out of the Manor for a while. Katherine had embraced her and had kept in touch after the funeral. But sometimes, they still intimidated her.

She was staring out the window when someone knocked on the door before opening it. Ilsa walked in followed by Brigitte pushing a rack of white dresses.

“Oh, my!” Anna exclaimed, looking at the rack. There were so many of them.

“I selected a wide variety of dresses since I did not know what style you liked.” She turned to the other girl. “Brigitte, would you please pull them out so that she can take a look at them.” She turned back to Anna. “You can try on as many as you would like. We have plenty of time.”

After trying on several dresses that she liked, and getting discouraged that some she liked didn’t fit, she finally decided on a tea-length lace A-line dress. Brigitte put Anna’s hair up in a loose up-do and put white flowers in her hair.

Ilsa had gone away to get ready and returned as Brigitte was buttoning up her dress. “You look beautiful, Anna.” She laughed softly. “Alex is pacing downstairs like a caged lion. I have never seen him so excited.”

Anna blushed. In a few minutes she would be going downstairs to see Alex. Her groom and future husband. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach and her nausea returned.

“Anna, are you all right?” Ilsa asked with concern in her voice.

“I...I don’t feel well.”

Ilsa said something in German to Brigitte, who rushed out of the room, and then led Anna into the bathroom. She wet a washcloth and put it on the back of her neck.

“My mother used to do this to me when I was ill. Breathe deeply, *Liebe.*”

Brigitte returned a few minutes later with a fizzy drink like Anna had on the plane. Anna drank it quickly and her nausea disappeared a few minutes

later.

“Thank you,” she said weakly. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me lately.”

Ilsa gave her a warm smile. “It is quite all right, Anna. Things happen.” She led Anna back out to the bedroom and sat her on the chaise next to the fireplace. “I have something for you.”

Ilsa handed her a necklace. “I wore this on my wedding day. Alexander’s grandmother wore it on her wedding day. It goes back many generations.” She smiled fondly. “Wilhelm and I would be proud if you wore it on your wedding day.”

Tears fill Anna’s eyes as she looked at it. The pendant was a cluster of diamonds in the shape of a flower with a pearl hanging from it. “Thank you, Ilsa. It’s so beautiful. I would be honored to wear it.”

Ilsa smiled and helped her put it on. She gave her matching earrings and a bracelet as well.

Ilsa looked her up and down. “Beautiful. Are you ready?”

Anna nodded nervously as she stepped into her shoes. Brigitte handed her a white satin purse and then Anna followed Ilsa out into the hallway.

Alex paced in the large entry hall. He’d been up for several hours and was dying to see Anna. His leather shoes tapped out a steady rhythm as he walked the length of the room over and over again. He straightened his tie for the hundredth time and turned to stare at the staircase, willing Anna to appear.

Now that the hour was upon him, he also began to worry that he had overlooked some important detail, and that something would happen to prevent their marriage.

“Alex you’re going to wear out the marble,” Kurt joked as he reclined on a bench in the hallway. Alex had asked him to be his witness at the ceremony.

Seth, Tony, Greg and Sebastian stood nearby. They would go in the vehicle with them. Michael, Jesse and Jason were already in town, keeping an eye on the *Standesamt*, where he and Anna would be married.

Alex had pulled every string in the book to get this wedding to take place so quickly after Anna arrived in the country. There were benefits to being an Elder-Son. A few requirements were bent, but for the most part everything had been done in the proper fashion, just hurried. It had been tricky to get Anna’s signatures on some documents without her knowing, but Isaak had been helpful with that. He hoped Anna would forgive him for his deceit, but if Devin had found out...Alex shuddered to think of what might have happened.

Alex heard footsteps on the stairs and wheeled around to see his sisters and Gretchen coming down. Gretchen had Otto wrapped in so many blankets he looked like a blue bear.

Alex sighed, disappointed, and walked over to the table where a single, perfect pink rose lay that he would give to Anna. Whenever she saw pink roses, he wanted her to think of him.

“Don’t I feel like a valued sister,” Greta teased, walking up to Alex and hugging him. She looked very pretty in her blue silk dress and he told her so. She beamed at him.

“Vati, where is she?” he groaned. His physical discomfort was escalating his impatience.

“I heard that she got sick,” Gretchen smirked.

Alex’s concern rose and he looked at his father.

“All right, Alex. I will go check on her. I’m sure she’s fine.” Wilhelm patted his shoulder and made his way to the stairs. He was just a few steps up when he smiled. “There they are.”

Alex picked up the rose and made his way to the staircase as Anna, holding the railing very tightly, came around the curved section and into view. His heart pounded so hard, it wouldn’t have surprised him if his entire family could hear it.

He couldn’t have imagined a more beautiful picture. Her hair softly curled around her face. Her cream lace dress accented her figure perfectly. It was just low enough to show a bit of cleavage, but not immodestly. Her legs were encased in silk stockings and he could see the calf muscles flexing as she stepped down the stairs. She had fantastic legs. Hell, she had fantastic everything.

Her face, although pale, glowed with happiness and her eyes sparkled as her eyes met his. It humbled him to think that he was the cause of that sparkle and glow.

He must have been staring, because she stopped and looked away, her cheeks turning pink.

“Schatzi...,” he breathed.

His precious treasure. Here. Before him. Dressed for their wedding. He felt a little lightheaded and realized he’d been holding his breath. He took two steps to stand before her and swept her up in his arms. She weighed practically nothing and he spun her around and kissed her cheek.

“Oh, Alex, don’t spin her around!” his mother exclaimed. “She’ll get sick again.”

Alex cradled her cheek and gazed into her bright green eyes. “Were you sick this morning again, Anna?”

She looked apologetic as she nodded. "I'm so sorry, Alex. I don't know what's wrong."

He studied her face. Why would she be getting sick? Had he done something? He stepped back and looked her over. His eyes caught at her breasts. Were they larger than they'd been when he last saw her? Yes. They definitely were. She glowed. She was sick. She had said she'd barely eaten though.

Oh, God! It couldn't be, could it?

Anna searched his eyes. "Did I displease you, Alex?"

He saw her starting to pull away and cursed himself.

"No, no, Anna. I'm just concerned about you." He gave her a gentle smile and kissed her gently on the lips. "You are the most beautiful vision I've ever seen." His voice cracked slightly at his words.

She blushed again and looked away. He loved how shy she was. A normal woman could have been cold and arrogant because of her beauty. But not Anna. She was an angel. It made sense that Kurt called her Angel. It fit her.

"Here," he said softly, handing her the rose. "This is for you."

Her eyes lit up at the sight. She put it to her nose and inhaled deeply, closing her eyes and smiling. "Thank you, Alex. It's beautiful."

"It's nothing compared to you."

"Don't we get to say hello to the bride, Alex?" Kurt asked, stepping next to him. "Hello, Engel. You look beautiful." He kissed her cheek and hugged her.

Alex saw Anna nervously glance behind him to where he knew Gretchen stood, but she smiled warmly at Kurt.

"Thank you, Kurt," she said in a soft voice.

Alex shook his head to himself. Gretchen was already hostile to Anna; Kurt didn't need to give Gretchen more reasons. He heard Gretchen murmur something about one man being enough and Liesl giggled. Alex bit his tongue. The rest of the family greeted Anna warmly, except Gretchen.

Seth approached with a white fur coat that Alex had bought for Anna.

"Anna, this is for you," Alex said, holding it open for her. "It should keep you warm."

Once again her eyes lit up. "It looks so soft," she said, reaching out to touch it. She smiled when she did and stepped closer and let him help her into it. "Ooh!" She giggled. "Can I wear this all the time?"

Everyone laughed affectionately. He heard Gretchen make another comment and he whipped around and glared at her. She smirked back.

"Alex, let it go," his father said softly in German. "Don't upset Anna."

Alex looked back and saw the fright in Anna's eyes. Guilt filled his veins and he sighed. He took her hand and kissed it. "I'm not angry at you, Schatzi."

She gave him a timid smile.

He looked at his father who nodded, then looked back at Anna. "Shall we go get married?" he asked.

Anna nodded, her eyes sparkling again.

He put on his wool coat and then took her hand and led her out the front door. Tony and Greg got into an SUV parked behind the limo that the family, Seth and Sebastian piled into. A few minutes later, the car pulled away from the house and they were on their way to Frankfurt to get married.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Anna watched the buildings pass by as they drove through the city streets. She felt excited and scared all at the same time. The idea of marrying Alex seemed like a dream. But a very good dream. She held Alex's hand tightly.

Something occurred to her. "Alex, don't we need wedding rings?" she asked quietly.

Alex grinned down at her. "In Germany, we wear our wedding rings on the right hand."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out two gold rings with birds and leaves on the outside, as well as the words *Myn Genyst*. He handed her the larger of the two rings.

"These were my grandparent's wedding rings. *Myn Genyst* means 'my heart'. I thought we could use these rings for the ceremony and wear them on our right hand and then go pick out rings together for our left hands afterwards. How does that sound?"

Anna stared at the ring. It was old fashioned and beautiful. She felt honored that he wanted her to wear a family ring. "That sounds wonderful Alex," she said quietly. "But if you don't want to wear two wedding rings, we don't have to."

Alex shook his head. "We live in America for now. I don't want anyone to doubt that we are married. In America, if I didn't have a ring on my left hand, I would feel like I was being disrespectful. I want every woman who sees me to know that I am very happily married."

Anna giggled. She could see his point and was grateful for it. "Thank you, Alex."

He leaned over and whispered in her ear. “Of course, that goes for you too. I don’t want men thinking that you’re available either.”

Anna leaned against his shoulder and fiddled with the ring he had handed her. It was so big! It went with the rest of him, she supposed.

“What are you thinking about that turns your cheeks so prettily pink?” he asked quietly.

She glanced up at him and gave him a shy smile. “I was noticing how big your ring was and I...” she whispered, then blushed “... extrapolated from there.”

Alex threw his head back and laughed. “Oh, Anna. I love you!”

The thought of the size of his cock made her nervous. When Sebastian had taken her back to her room after finishing at the Manor, he had told her that he needed to make her physically a virgin again.

She had begged him not to, but he said it had to be done. That even though it was rare naturally these days, the Son’s wife needed to be as a virgin. But Sebastian has assured her that it wouldn’t be like the cream that Devin gave her. She would stretch as she had the first time and she wouldn’t stay unnaturally tight. That had relieved some of her fears, but not all. It had hurt enough her first time with Devin. She couldn’t imagine being a virgin with Alex.

The car slowed down and stopped near what looked like an enormous cobblestone courtyard. People milled around a huge fountain in the center of the courtyard in light coats, making Anna wonder how they weren’t freezing.

As she climbed out of the limo, Anna saw that all of Alex’s men were nearby. The men followed the family as they made their way to a line of tall

buildings nearby. She squinted in the bright sunlight and looked up at the tallest, steepled building that they walked towards. It was so pretty and looked very “German” to her.

Anna clung to Alex’s hand as they walked through a set of glass doors set in a stone archway. Alex walked up to a lady behind a reception desk and spoke to her briefly in German. She looked at him and the rest of the family standing behind and her eyes widened. She nodded enthusiastically, picked up the phone and spoke urgently.

“Alex, is everything okay?” Anna whispered.

Alex smiled. “*Ja, Schatzi.* We’re not on the official schedule today. Everything has been done off the record.” He gave her an almost embarrassed look. “My family tends to be in the spotlight socially here. That no one knew I was engaged is rather shocking. Of course,” he said, pulling her close and kissing the back of her hand. “It only happened yesterday.” He gazed into her eyes and stroked her cheek. “Soon you will be my wife,” he said in a hushed tone.

The lady spoke to Alex again and motioned towards a set of glass doors that led to the interior of the building.

Alex grinned at Anna. “Let’s get married.” He opened the door and she walked through.

They climbed up a long marble staircase, brightly lit from the sunshine that streamed through the wall of windows. Wilhelm walked next to Alex, speaking quietly in German.

When they arrived at the top of the stairs, a man in a dark suit and tie greeted them respectfully, first shaking Wilhelm’s hand and then Alex’s.

“Soeren, this is *mein Verlobten*, Anna,” Alex introduced. “Anna, this is Soeren Stutterheim. He will be marrying us today.”

“Hello,” Anna said with a shaky voice. Nerves flew through Anna’s body making her nauseous again. Her hand flew to her mouth and she swallowed several times, trying to rid her mouth of the increase of saliva that indicated she was going to vomit again.

“Anna, are you okay?”

Anna’s eyes watered and she shook her head.

Alex spoke quickly in German, then picked Anna up and carried her to a door with a silhouette of a woman on it. He opened the door slightly and called inside. No one responded, and he carried her through the doorway and put her down in the largest stall. She fell to her knees and emptied her stomach into the toilet. Several times.

Alex held her hair out of her face and rubbed her back until she was done.

She heard Ilsa behind her. “Give this to her, Alex.”

Alex handed her a wet cloth and she wiped her mouth.

“I’m sorry, Alex,” she said with tears in her eyes as she slumped to the floor. “I can’t keep anything in my stomach.”

Alex pulled her into his lap and flushed the toilet. “Anna, it’s all right. You can’t help what your body does.”

Greta came in a moment later with a glass of clear soda and Anna sipped it slowly. Alex and his mother spoke softly in German and she felt his heart rate increase as they talked.

She looked up at him. “Alex, did something happen?”

He shook his head. “*Nein*, Anna. Why?”

“Your heart is pounding in your chest and it wasn’t a minute ago.” She put her hand under his black suit jacket and over his heart. “What’s wrong?” she searched his eyes. “Did Devin find out about the wedding?”

“*Nein, Schatzi.* Everything is fine.” He gave her a gentle smile. “Finish your drink and then we’ll go get married.”

She leaned her head on his chest and tried to drink the soda as quickly as possible. She knew something was wrong; she could sense it. But she didn’t have the energy to ask again.

When she finished drinking, she held up the glass. “Done.”

He helped her to her feet and then stood. “Are you feeling better?” he asked, smoothing her hair.

Anna nodded.

Alex left the bathroom. Ilsa helped her fix her makeup and dress and then they went back into the hallway. She handed Anna a peppermint candy.

Alex was speaking to his father and looked up when they walked out.

“Everything all right?” Wilhelm asked, giving her an affectionate smile.

Anna nodded, and then blushed as she felt everyone staring at her. She stared at the ground, embarrassed. What was she doing with these sophisticated people? She felt terribly out of place...like a street urchin trying to be a princess. They were very nice, and part of her felt comfortable with them. But the other part of her wanted to run away. She had no idea where to run to, but wanted to just the same.

Alex said something in German and she saw the family walk through a wooden door. Alex took her hand and led her to a bench by the window. He helped her out of her coat and put it beside him on the bench.

She stared at the floor. Was he going to tell her this was a mistake? That they shouldn’t get married? That she had embarrassed him in front of his family? Is that what he and his mother had been talking about?

“I’m sorry I embarrassed you, Alex,” she said softly, tears filling her eyes.

“Anna, you didn’t embarrass me. I’m worried about you. I don’t like seeing you sick.”

“Do you still want to marry me?” she asked with a tremulous voice.

Alex cupped Anna’s cheek and kissed her. “Anna, whatever gave you the idea that I didn’t want to marry you?” he asked in a soft voice. “Nothing has changed that. I love you and want you to be my wife. I just want to make sure your stomach is all right.”

His mother had the same suspicions that he’d had before they left the *Gutshaus*. She suspected Anna was pregnant as well. He wanted to ask Anna about it, but he had a strong feeling that she had no idea. Why would she?

He didn’t want to upset Anna by bringing up the subject. He wanted her to be happy and not worry about it for a while longer, as he suspected she would become upset and nervous when she found out. He pushed the thoughts aside for now. He needed to sort out his own feelings about it, too, and it would be better if he were settled with the idea before he broached the subject with Anna. She would need his confidence about it.

She nodded. “It’s okay. I feel better now. I guess maybe it’s just nerves.”

“I’m sure that has something to do with it,” he affirmed. “Come. Let’s go get married.”

Within half an hour, Anna looked up into her new husband’s eyes. They were married. He gave her a tender look and then captured her lips with his. She could feel his love enveloping her entire body and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Soeren said something in German and Alex nodded. They stood and faced his family, and Soeren said something else and everyone clapped.

“What did he say?” she whispered.

“He introduced us as the new Duke and Duchess of Hesse.”

She looked up at him, bewildered. “Duchess?”

Alex smiled. “*Ja, Schatzi*. You are a Duchess now. Here, they should call you *Herzogin*.”

She had a title? Her mind struggled to grasp the idea, but before she could, they were surrounded by Alex’s family. Hugs and kisses and congratulations were received from everyone. Gretchen’s was terse.

“She is still vulnerable, Alex,” she heard Wilhelm say to Alex quietly as they walked outside. “We need to go.”

Alex nodded. “We have some rings to find and then we will be home later,” Alex said to his family.

They said goodbye and then he and Anna got into the SUV with Wilhelm while the rest of the family got back in the limo. Sebastian and Seth rode in the back of the SUV.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Greg drove through the city streets until they were on the northern outskirts. He pulled onto a narrow road and drove for quite a while.

Anna felt her purse vibrate and opened it. Her phone was ringing. She looked at the screen.

“Alex,” she exclaimed. “Devin is calling me.”

She had to answer it. Devin would punish her if she didn’t. She was about to push the screen when Alex took the phone from her hands.

“*Nein*, Anna,” he said sharply. “You cannot answer his call right now.”

Tears came to her eyes. “But he’ll punish me if I don’t answer.”

“I am your Master too, Anna, and your husband. My authority over you outweighs Devin’s.” His voice was clipped and stern.

Anna felt like he had just slapped her in the face. She swallowed and turned to stare outside the SUV to gain control of her tears. Would he change, now that they were married? Would he become mean, like Devin and Jack had after her birthday?

She heard Alex sigh. “I’m sorry I snapped, Anna,” he said in a soft voice, reaching for her hand. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s fine, Alex,” she said softly. “I’m sorry I contradicted you.”

“Anna, he was probably tracking your phone and got suspicious. You can’t speak to him until after we finish at the Manor. Then my authority will be set and his will be lessened.” He pulled her back against him. “I want you to be safe. You’re still vulnerable until the Elders confirm our marriage.” He kissed her cheek and held her close. “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings, *Schatzi*,” he whispered.

Anna tried to relax and told herself she was just being overly emotional. Alex wasn’t Devin; Alex was warm and loving, from the inside. It wasn’t a

façade like Devin wore.

He stroked her hand and kissed her head. “I love you, Anna.”

She looked up at him and smiled, the pain in her heart easing. “I love you too, Alex.”

His eyes darkened and he cupped the back of her head, pulling her to him and pressing his lips to hers. She felt his arousal through his hungry kiss. It took her breath away.

He pulled away as Greg pulled up in front of a three-story house with peaked roofs like Alex’s home. A wide staircase led up to the arched entryway. Seth and Sebastian got out first and looked around, then motioned for Alex and Anna to follow.

Anna’s phone rang again as they were walking towards the stairs. Alex was carrying it and he frowned at the screen. “Why does he keep calling?”

“Is it Devin?” Anna asked nervously.

Alex nodded. He pressed the button on the side of the phone and it turned off.

Devin was going to be so angry at her for ignoring his calls.

Alex looked around and put his hand on Anna’s back. “Hurry, Anna,” he said softly, pushing her gently up the stairs.

As they were walking inside, Anna heard a shout behind her. She turned and saw three tall men coming up the stairs. One of them looked like Kaveh.

She stopped. “Alex!” she exclaimed.

Alex grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back. He shouted something and someone else grabbed her and pulled her through the doors. The door closed with her inside and Alex outside.

“Alex!” she screamed, fighting against whoever was holding her. “Let me go!”

“Anna, you are safe in here.” It was Wilhelm. “If you go outside, you will be in danger.”

“But what about Alex?”

“They won’t hurt him, *Liebling*. He’ll be safe.” Wilhelm led her to a nearby couch and sat her down, holding her hand.

Anna stared at the door, wondering what was going on outside.

Alex turned to face the Immortals after Anna was safely inside. “Stop. You have no authority here.”

The tallest one glared at him. “She is ours. You cannot have her.”

“She’s already mine. We were married in town less than an hour ago.”

The Immortal scoffed. “That doesn’t matter. She is mine.”

Sebastian stepped next to Alex. “Her father gave her to me and I gave her to the German Elders. Your claims are invalid, Kaveh.”

“Her father?” Kaveh narrowed his eyes. “How is that possible?”

“I took her to see him,” Sebastian said matter-of-factly. “My claim to her is more legitimate. You cannot deny that.”

Kaveh turned to Alex. “You dare try to marry an Elder-Mistress?”

“We are married. We will be confirmed shortly. There is nothing your Master can do to stop it now.”

“He is not my Master,” Kaveh growled. “I am no one’s servant.”

Alex smirked. “That’s not what I heard.”

Kaveh reached for Alex, but Sebastian snaked out his hand and grabbed Kaveh’s arm. “Don’t touch him. He is under my protection.”

Kaveh growled again. “You would dare cross Devin?”

Alex raised his chin. “I would and I have. You tell him that by the end of the morning, he will have lost his hold on Anna. She is mine now and

there's nothing he can do about it. He will treat her with the respect that she deserves." He cocked his brow. "Or else," he growled.

Kaveh looked between Alex and Sebastian. "This isn't over, human. Devin will not stand for it."

"He doesn't have a choice," Sebastian retorted.

Kaveh clenched his jaw and turned to the Immortals behind him. A moment later they were gone.

Alex breathed a sigh of relief. "I suppose this saves the phone call later," he said, switching to German and shaking his head. "How did he find out?"

Sebastian frowned. "I don't know. There's nothing we did that would have tipped him off."

"But there's nothing he can do about it now, right?" Alex glanced at his friend.

"No. Not right now. He can at the final ritual, but that's years away. By then it will be harder because your bond with Anna will be incredibly strong and very difficult to break."

"I've never been so thankful for the rule about foreign Immortals coming into the Schloss."

"And that's why the protection is put in place. Otherwise, there would be no safe place."

"I'm sure Anna is worried."

Alex turned and walked through the door. A white blur rushed towards him and held him tightly. His precious Anna.

"Alex," she sobbed into his coat. "I was so scared."

He petted her hair and held her tightly. "It's all right now, Anna," he said softly in English. "They were just trying to intimidate us. But there's nothing Devin can do now."

“What do you mean it’s too late?” Devin shouted at Kaveh. “How is that possible?”

He picked up a paperweight on his desk and threw it across the room, hitting a potted plant. The pot shattered, spilling dirt all over the floor.

“Watch your tone, human.” Kaveh said with narrow eyes. “We arrived when she was almost to the door. Alex shoved her inside. I think your source was too slow in her information.”

“Fuck!” Devin shouted. Alex had outsmarted him. Oh, he would pay for this. Devin would make sure of it. “How do I get rid of him?”

“You can’t, Devin. If you kill him, you will kill her.”

“There has to be a way,” he growled. “I will find a way and get rid of him. She is mine! I made her who she is!”

Devin sat back in his chair. There had to be a way to get rid of Alex. There just had to be. Fuck! Fuck! *Fuck!* Devin had never been so enraged. Everything he had worked for was crumbling around his ears. It had to be fixed. He would not accept failure. Failure was not an option.

His heart pounded in his ears and his blood boiled. He looked around for something to ease his rage. Something to throw, something to break.

He stood and stalked out of his study at the Manor and down to where the girls were. It was after midnight, but there would still be some up. He needed someone sweet. Someone who would scream loudly and beg him to stop. He stopped at the doorway of the main room where the girls stayed. No. Not an experienced one. He needed one of the younger ones.

He turned and went to another part of the house where the younger girls were. He walked into the large room where they slept and turned on the light. The girls in here ranged in age from six to twelve. There was groaning when he turned the light on, but when they saw who it was, they quickly slipped to their knees.

“Look at me. All of you.”

They all nervously looked at him. He searched the room with his eyes and settled on a tiny girl in the middle with green eyes. Like Anna.

“You!” he said, pointing to her. “Come.”

She quickly stood and ran over to him. Devin searched the room for two more, then turned out the light and left the room. “Come with me,” he growled and walked to the larger dungeon where the girls were trained.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Sebastian took Anna up to the room she'd awakened in the previous night.

"Anna, I wanted to talk to you before you go down to the Elder's Chambers. About being an Elder-Mistress."

Anna looked at him confused. "What do you mean?" She knew what it meant to be an Elder-Mistress. She did what Devin told her to do. She helped manipulate people and change their thinking so that they wanted to do what Devin wanted them to do.

"Anna, the way Devin has treated you is revolting. Elder-Mistresses are to be respected. They are not slaves. Yes, they have Masters, but that is because they are given to the Elders for a purpose. Elders are married and cannot take second wives. There are occasions when a Son is given a half-Immortal for a wife. Then her husband is her Master. This would have been your case if Devin hadn't taken you. This is what Alex is working to undo."

"I'm not a slave?" Had Devin lied to her? Hope rose in her chest.

"Unfortunately, yes, Anna. You are a slave. Devin made you that way." He sighed. "I don't know if you could function properly if you weren't. He fucked with your head too much when you were growing up."

"Oh." She stared at her hands, hopes dashed.

"You are not to be raped. You are not to be harmed. Yes, your sexuality is helpful and can be used to gain an edge for the Elder. But Devin should not send you into harm's way." Sebastian paused and Anna looked up. The anger had turned his blue eyes slightly golden around the edges. "He should warn those men to treat you respectfully. And if they don't, they should be punished."

Anna didn't know what to say. She couldn't imagine Devin cooperating with Alex.

Sebastian took a slow breath and looked at her, his eyes returning to their normal crystalline blue, though they were still intense. "From now on Alex will make sure that Devin treats you with respect. When you go in to greet the Elders this morning, you will walk in with your head held high. Not arrogantly, but gracefully. You need to respect the Elders and defer to them. Bowing to them when you greet them is proper. But you don't need to grovel in front of them."

Anna gaped at Sebastian. What he said sounded so foreign.

"Do you understand what I've told you, Anna?"

"I don't think Devin will like it."

"It doesn't matter whether he likes it or not." The fire in his eyes blazed briefly once more. "Alex is your husband and Devin must respect that."

Anna looked at him doubtfully, but said nothing.

"Trust me, Anna," Sebastian said, taking her hand. "And trust Alex. He'll keep you safe. Life will be very different from now on."

Anna knew that Sebastian spoke the truth, but she still had a hard time believing him. She gave him a timid smile. "I'll try."

"Good. Now, I will go get Jutta and she will help you get ready. I'll be back to get you in a little while."

He left the room, and a few minutes later a young woman with dark hair and eyes came in. "*Guten Morgen, Mätresse,*" she said with a smile and a curtsy.

"Good morning," Anna replied in English. She hoped Jutta spoke English.

"I am Jutta." She pronounced it 'yootah.' "*Der Herzog* asked me to attend to your needs while you are here. It is my honor to do so." She

curtsied again.

Her manners and smile were different than the girls at Devin's Manor. Maggie was very sweet and Anna adored her, but she always had an aura of fear about her. All the girls at Devin's Manor did. Anna didn't sense that in Jutta. She seemed genuinely happy.

"Thank you, Jutta," Anna said, hoping she had pronounced her name correctly.

"I will prepare you for the ceremony and then put you back together to go home with *Herzog Alex*."

Jutta had Anna sit at a dressing table and pulled Anna's hair out of the up-do, brushing it until it shone and fell in soft waves around her face.

When she was satisfied with Anna's hair, she went to a wardrobe and pulled out a white dress. Anna looked in the mirror as Jutta laced up the back. It was very silky and light. The cap sleeves were lacy and the bodice was a low cut "V." The back was open down to the small of her back, with open laces below her shoulder blades. It was long and brushed the floor. Jutta gave her white slippers to wear.

Jutta said something with a smile in German and then told Anna that Sebastian would be back shortly to get her.

Alex paced around the Elder's Chamber in his white robe. He was disturbed by Kaveh's appearance. How could Devin have known about the wedding so quickly? Had he missed something? But he was a good planner. He knew how to make a mission go smoothly and was certain he hadn't missed anything. So what had happened to tip Devin off?

None of his men would have said anything. They would never have betrayed him. The only others that knew about the wedding were Soeren

and his family. But even his family hadn't known the wedding was going to occur so quickly until this morning. Except his parents, of course. But they wouldn't have said anything either. How had Devin known?

"Alex, we will figure it out," Vati said, walking up to him and putting his hand on his shoulder. "The important thing is that you are here and Anna is here. Devin cannot stop the ceremony. She is safe."

Alex sighed. "I know, Vati. But I don't like loose ends."

"Seth and the others are working on it now. Right now you have other things to think about. Like your beautiful bride." Vati's eyes betrayed his affection for his new daughter-in-law.

Alex's mouth turned up into a smile at the thought of Anna as his bride. Sweet Anna. His bride and wife. This was truly the best day of his life. Vati was right. He shouldn't be worrying about Devin right now. He needed to think about Anna and help her have a wonderful wedding day.

After they finished at the Manor, they would go into town and pick out left hand wedding rings and then go back to the *Gutshaus*. His extended family would be there by then. He hadn't seen them in quite some time and was looking forward to visiting with them.

There was a loud knock on the door and Alex looked up. The moment had finally arrived: Anna was here.

The Elders took their places, standing in a semi-circle. They all wore their white ceremonial robes. Alex stood in the middle next to his father.

At the side of the room, a fireplace housed a snapping fire. A bed in front of it was made up of fur rugs and soft blankets. That was where he and Anna would consummate their marriage. He had managed to keep his mind off sex for most of the morning, but it was finally catching up with him and his cock was beginning to throb at the thought of being with Anna again.

The door opened and Anna and Sebastian entered. She looked nervous and started to look at the ground, but Sebastian said something to her and she looked up and smiled at Alex. Sebastian must have spoken with her about how an Elder-Mistress was expected to behave. Seeing her walk confidently into the room warmed his heart. He hated seeing her act like a slave. Even though she was one, she didn't need to act like it. Not anymore.

Her hair fell around her face in soft waves. She wore a long white gown that showed off her newly ample cleavage very nicely. His cock twitched at the thought of taking her dress off and kissing those beautiful, full breasts.

Her eyes sparkled as she looked at him and he couldn't help but grin at her. She was so graceful and poised when she wasn't afraid. He would do everything he could to make sure she wasn't afraid ever again. It would be difficult, he knew, but well worth it.

She stopped a few feet in front of him and went to her knees to bow. Alex saw the diamond of her engagement ring sparkling in the light and smiled. He loved that the jewelry she wore was from him and only him. Except for Devin's piercings, but Alex didn't want to think about those right now. She would have his piercings again soon as well.

Anna stared at the red carpet below her nose. How long would she stay in this position? Devin would keep her like that for as long as he could.

She heard speaking above her, but it was in German and she didn't know what they were saying. Sebastian touched her back and she sat up and then stood. He took her hand and put it into Alex's outstretched hand. She looked up at Alex as they touched and was overwhelmed by the love she saw in his eyes.

Wilhelm said something in German, and Alex took both of Anna's hands as he turned to face her. He pulled her hands slightly and Anna turned to face him as well. Another Elder spoke for a few minutes and Alex nodded. Yet another one did the same thing and Alex nodded again. Alex then spoke to Anna in German. It sounded like it might be a vow, but Anna had no way of knowing. She really needed to learn German.

"Anna." Wilhelm spoke in English. "Alex has vowed to love and cherish you, to protect you from harm and to utilize your gifts in a manner that is both respectful and acceptable to you. Do you accept him wholeheartedly as your husband and Master?"

Anna looked up into Alex's eyes and nodded. "I do."

Alex grinned.

"Anna, please kneel at your husband's feet," Wilhelm said and Anna did so.

The other Elders who hadn't spoken yet all spoke, one after the other, with Alex responding in between, and then Wilhelm spoke again.

"Stand, Anna, and receive the gift your husband offers you."

Anna stood and Alex showed her a necklace like the one that Devin had given her as her mark, but the outside ring was made of black diamonds instead of white. She smiled at him, not knowing if she was allowed to speak.

"This will tell those in *die Bruderschaft* that you are my wife. And if they hurt you, I will kill them." Alex's eyes were full of determination at the last words. He fastened the necklace around her neck.

"Anna, receive the mark of our family, binding you to us as long as you live," Wilhelm said solemnly. He held a gold bracelet and fastened it around Anna's wrist. It was a signet bracelet. The signet was Alex's, but larger.

Wilhelm gave her an affectionate smile, then backed up to stand in line with the other Elders.

“We, as *Ältestenrat* of Deutschland, do confirm the marriage between *Älteste-Sohn* Alexander Johannes Kunze Herzog von Hesse and *Älteremätresse* Anna Lee Perkins. You are now bound by the laws of Deutschland and the laws of *die Bruderschaft*. You are bound for life, and nothing except death can destroy your union. Alex, you may take possession of your wife.”

Anna expected Alex to kiss her, but instead he led her over to the pile of furs and blankets in front of a lit fireplace. She looked up at him. They were going to have sex here?

Alex knelt down and pulled some of the blankets back, then pulled Anna down to kneel beside him. He looked at her with such love in his eyes, her own filled with tears.

He stroked her cheek with his thumb. “I love you, Anna. My bride and my wife. Bound together by love and commitment.”

He slowly brought his lips to hers, slanting his mouth against hers. His lips were gentle, but she could feel the hunger in his kiss.

She hesitantly slid her hands up his chest over the soft linen of his robe. Was she allowed to touch him? He didn't stop her. She could feel his chest and shoulder muscles rippling under her touch.

She pressed her lips harder against his and he groaned.

“O, *mein Schatzi*,” he murmured against her lips.

His hands slid down her back to loosen the ties of her dress and then pulled it up over her head and tossed it aside.

Anna looked up into his eyes nervously. Would he think her fat? He looked down at her breasts and she saw a smile tugging at his lips. He

looked back up at her eyes and kissed her again, placing his hand on her back and laying her down gently on the soft furs.

“Alex?” she whispered, looking around the room.

“*Schatzi*, we must consummate our marriage before we leave,” he said gently as he lay above her, resting his weight on his elbows and nuzzling her nose with his. “To make you mine.”

“Oh,” she said shyly. Where did this shyness come from?

He kissed her again, his lips caressing hers, then gently probed until she parted her lips for his tongue. His tongue stroked hers until she moaned. She felt her body awaken as it only did for Alex. Her breasts ached for his touch, her pussy swelled and dampened in preparation of accepting him into her body. He teased her mouth, thrusting his tongue in and out. She writhed beneath him, wanting his cock inside of her. She pressed her hips against his, feeling his erection and making him groan, almost as if he were in pain, rather than out of passion.

She looked up at him in surprise. “Are you in pain?”

Alex looked at her sheepishly. “A little. They...last night was rather uncomfortable. I was teased and tormented, but not allowed any release. I’m afraid I might hurt you, Anna, and that is the last thing I want to do. I want to take this slowly.”

Anna shook her head. “Alex, if you’re uncomfortable, then let’s go faster. I want you. More than anyone else I’ve ever desired. I don’t want you to be in pain.” She smiled. “Besides, we’ll have lots of time to take things slowly later, right?”

She wanted nothing more than to make him happy. She was safe now. The least she could do was relieve his suffering.

He kissed her deeply. “I don’t want to go in until you’re ready. I’m...uh...larger than normal.”

Anna's eyes widened. "Is that possible?" Alex was plenty big for her already. It was hard to imagine him being any bigger.

"Apparently," he murmured, kissing her cheek. "But I think you've grown as well." He kissed her erect nipples and looked up at her.

She opened her mouth but didn't know what to say.

He smiled tenderly. "I don't mind, *Schatzi*. Not at all. I like them." He took her left nipple into his mouth and sucked hard.

Anna moaned loudly and arched her back to press her breast against his tongue. It felt so good and almost hurt at the same time. Her breasts were tender, but his mouth was incredible.

"This is my breast," he murmured, kissing it all over. "This is my breast, too," he said, kissing her right breast all over. This was the breast with Devin's piercing, but Alex taking possession of it felt so right. He kissed down to her belly button. "This is my belly button." He twirled his tongue inside, eliciting another moan from Anna.

He sat up suddenly on his heels and fiddled at his shoulder and waist and then pulled his robe off, revealing his perfectly sculpted chest. Anna bit back a moan at the sight. He was so incredibly beautiful. His skin glowed bronze in the firelight, and his chest and abdominal muscles flexed as he put his robe on the floor next to him.

Anna eyes trailed down from his chest down to his six-pack-abs and...oh, my! He really was bigger. Anna sat up and tentatively reached out and caressed his cock gently with her hand. He was harder than she'd ever felt any man be before and the veins were very visible.

She traced his new piercings. "Do they hurt?" she asked in a whisper, looking up. His eyes were closed and his lips were parted as his chest rose and fell with shallow breaths.

"Not really. My whole cock is aching."

She leaned forward to kiss the tip of his cock, then lay back down. “Make love to me, Alex,” she implored softly.

He looked down, his handsome face a mixture of shadows and bronze with the firelight to the side of him. He smiled and she could see a chiseled dimple in his left cheek she’d never noticed before. His hair fell across his forehead as he leaned down and kissed her, spreading her legs apart with his knee.

He looked at her as he positioned himself at her entrance. “Anna,” he said in a strained voice. “Stop me when it hurts. I will go as slowly as you need me to go.”

Anna nodded, suddenly nervous. She had forgotten, until now, about her new “virginity” and realized that with Alex as engorged as he was, this was going to hurt. A lot.

He pressed forward slightly, making Anna gasp, and then rested his weight on his forearms on either side of Anna’s head. He nuzzled her lips with his as he pressed forward. Anna grasped the back of his arms and closed her eyes, trying to diminish the pain.

He eased in so slowly, but it did nothing to help Anna from feeling like she was being torn apart. If she didn’t know how much Alex loved her, she would have begged him to stop. Tears filled her eyes and she dug her fingernails into his arms as he moved. She bit her lip to keep from crying out, and tasted blood.

“*Schatzi*,” Alex said softly. He stopped moving. “Anna, look at me.”

Anna turned her tear-filled eyes to his. His eyes were so tender and full of remorse. He hated hurting her as much as she hated the pain.

“Breath, *Schatzi*.”

Anna took in a shaky breath and tried to relax.

“Concentrate on breathing, Anna.”

Anna nodded and Alex began to move again. She closed her eyes, but the tears leaked out the corners anyways. Alex bent to kiss the tears away and whisper words of encouragement as he continued to move forward. Her fingernails dug into his triceps.

“You’re so brave, *Schatzi*,” he whispered. “I’m so proud of you.”

She jumped as he hit her barrier. Oh, it really was a complete virginity thing, wasn’t it?

Alex stopped moving. “Try to relax, Anna. I’ll wait a moment until you’re ready.”

Anna was trying very hard to be brave for Alex. She knew he needed release badly, but he was being so patient with her. Sex was often painful in her life, but nothing like this. The only time it had been like this was at the bonding ritual, but there had been no stretching then. Sebastian said she would stretch this time and it would feel good once she had. She hoped he was right because right now it hurt so bad she wanted to cry.

She took a deep breath and was pleasantly surprised to find her body adjusting to Alex’s girth. She took another deep breath and then nodded to Alex.

“*Schatzi*, this will be very painful. I’m so sorry I have to do this.” His eyes were wet as he spoke.

She gave him a brave smile, but didn’t speak for fear of starting to cry.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded.

He closed his eyes and pulled back slightly, then thrust forward, pushing through the membrane. Anna stiffened and cried out loudly, tears pouring down her cheeks at the pain. Alex wrapped his arms around her and kissed her cheek.

He didn't move an inch, instead he held her trembling body whispered in her ear. When the pain subsided she felt herself relaxing.

"I'm so sorry, *Schatzi*. I hate that I hurt you." He cradled her cheeks and wiped her tears away. "But you are mine now. I have taken your body as you have given it to me. We are now truly husband and wife." He kissed her lips gently. "Nothing can separate us now."

He kissed her more urgently and began moving slowly inside her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as his piercing rubbed against the top of her channel. She was so full and the metal balls stimulated her.

Alex mumbled something in German and moaned. Anna's head spun at the sensations filling her body and cried out suddenly in pleasure as she came. Fireworks erupted behind her eyes and her body exploded. Alex held her tightly and groaned as he came, releasing all his pent up tension into her body.

She closed her eyes and felt their bodies merge into one. Their souls touched, exchanging parts of themselves that would remain forever within the other person. They truly had joined together and would never be separate persons again.

Alex gasped for breath. He was careful to keep his weight off Anna, but he shook so badly it was a difficult feat. Anna's arms were locked around his neck and she trembled beneath him.

He nuzzled her neck. "I love you, *Schatzi*," he whispered. He sighed in relief. She was safe. She was his. Devin was not yet defeated, but had lost a significant portion of his control over her. And there was nothing Devin could do about it.

His climax had been intense. He could almost feel his seed filling her. He wished with all his heart that they would have had the opportunity to conceive when they consummated, but she was already pregnant; he would have to wait. If it was Ben's child, and there was little chance it would be anyone else's, she would be happy. He would be happy for her.

He wished their first child could have been his, but maybe this would be best for Anna. Something to make up for Ben's death. Alex would, of course, raise it as his own. He would never let the child suspect that he wasn't his. Alex needed to start thinking of the baby as his, or Anna would suspect he wasn't happy about it and be hurt.

There was one last thing they needed to do before they could leave. Her piercings. He'd never before considered how difficult a wedding day could be on a Son's wife. He needed to make sure that he and Anna had some quiet time together before they went back to San Francisco.

Anna stirred beneath him. He looked down and into her bright eyes. She looked happy. He kissed her and then slowly pulled out of her, causing both of them to groan.

He lay on his side and traced her breasts with his finger. "How are you feeling, Schatzi?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"Okay," she answered in a shaky voice. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, much better."

Now that he had come, he could feel the discomfort of his new piercings. But Anna seemed to like them. Once the pain had subsided, she climaxed quickly, which pleased him. He had been concerned that she might not be able to. But then again, she had been trained to come under any circumstance.

"Alex, have you taken possession of your wife?"

Alex jumped at the sound of his father's voice. He'd forgotten there were other people in the room. Anna had jumped as well, making him think she'd forgotten, too.

"Yes, my lord," he answered, smiling at Anna and then looking up at his father. "I have taken possession of my wife. Our union is sealed."

"May we examine the evidence?"

Alex found it amusing that the Elders needed to see her virgin blood on the furs beneath her. As if her cries and screams of passion weren't proof enough. He sat up and moved Anna's legs apart to display the pink stain on the white fur.

Her pussy was wet and swollen. Alex could feel his desire for her rising again. He shook his head to clear it. She'd been through enough. He could control himself until tonight. Then he would make her come over and over again until she was completely satiated. He loved the idea of sleeping with her in his bed. For the rest of his life.

Vati nodded his approval and then handed him the piercing gun.

Alex looked apologetically to Anna. "Anna, I need to re-pierce you."

Anna closed her eyes and nodded.

Vati sat on the floor next to her and held her hand. She opened her eyes and looked at him in surprise. He kissed her forehead and said something quietly to her. She nodded and then looked at Alex, giving him a brave smile. Alex's chest swelled with pride for his brave wife.

He leaned down and kissed her swollen pussy and then positioned the piercer and did the two piercings as quickly as possible. He saw the strain in Anna's face, but she didn't cry out. She clung to Vati's hands, her knuckles white.

He tossed the gun aside and pulled her into his arms, rocking her and kissing her head. A few minutes later, he felt her relax and looked down to

see her sleeping. Alex smiled affectionately, then looked up at his father.

“She’s asleep.”

Vati chuckled. “Good. We’ll let her rest for a bit. It will help her feel better sooner.” He reached out for her. “Let me hold her and you can dress, then take her to your room.”

Alex handed Anna to his father and reached for his robe. “How long can we let her sleep?”

“An hour, maybe. I’ll have a light lunch prepared and you can eat here, then we’ll go back into town to go ring shopping. I’ll call your mother and let her know we’ll be later than expected.”

Alex finished fastening his robe and took Anna into his arms. “All right. I think she expected that anyway.”

Vati chuckled again. “Your mother is a very smart woman.”

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Anna heard her name spoken and her eyes flew open. She lay in a dark bedroom and the voice she heard sounded familiar. Who was it?

“Anna, are you awake?”

“Alex,” she sighed, smiling and looking behind her.

“Hello, *Schatzi*. How are you feeling?”

Alex sat on the edge of the bed, dressed in his white dress shirt and pants. His collar was unbuttoned, giving her a glimpse of his firm upper chest.

“Good.” She grinned. “No, very good. I mean,” she frowned, “We are married still, right?”

Alex laughed. “Oh, *Ja, mein Ehefrau*. We are most definitely married.”

“Then I am very good.” She reached for his hand and intertwined her fingers with his. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy.”

She felt...confident. Fears that had been her constant companion since her parents died seemed to have disappeared. She didn’t even feel afraid when she thought of Devin. That was most definitely unusual.

“That makes me very happy, *Schatzi*. I always want to make you happy.”

“Do you...I mean, is it okay to be happy with you...even though Ben....” She felt like she shouldn’t be happy. Her heart still ached when she thought of Ben, but it was not as painful as it had been. And she really was happy she had married Alex. She loved him. She felt...like the world was right. For the first time since her parents died.

“Anna, Ben was very good for you. From everything that I heard about him, he was a good man and loved you very much. But Devin would never

have allowed you two to marry.” He stroked her hair. “You know that, don’t you?”

Anna nodded slowly. Yes, she knew that. “I just wish that Devin had...I don’t know, made me break up with him instead of killing him.” Tears stung her eyes. “Why did he kill him?”

Alex sighed and pulled her close. “I don’t know, Anna. Devin does things that I don’t understand. I wish I could have prevented his death. It was a cruel thing to do.”

“Alex, it’s not that I’m not happy we’re married. You know that, don’t you?”

Alex kissed her head. “*Ja*, Anna. I know. You feel guilty?”

Anna nodded.

“I understand, Anna. But Ben would be glad that you are safe. And I’m sure he would want you to be happy. The pain will ease, I promise. I hope I can be of help.”

She pulled away and cradled his cheek. “You already have,” she whispered and kissed him.

Alex groaned, then pulled her away gently. “If we’re not careful, we will end up naked again.”

Anna giggled. “Would that be a bad thing?”

“*Nein*, except that we need to find our other wedding rings. And my extended family has come into town as well. I am eager for you to meet them.”

“You have more family?” she asked, astonished.

He nodded. “My uncles and aunts and cousins.”

There was a knock on the door and Jutta entered carrying a tray. She said something that sounded like a greeting in German. Anna smiled at the way she looked at Alex. A mixture of admiration and lust.

“*Herzogin*, when you are finished eating, I will return and help you dress.”

“Thank you, Jutta,” Anna said.

Alex stood and brought the tray over to the bed, putting it between them when he sat on the end of the bed. “Eat.”

“Yes, Master,” Anna said with a sparkle in her eyes.

Alex grimaced until he looked into her eyes. “You’re teasing me?”

She paused and bit her lip. “Is that okay?”

Alex grinned. “It is perfectly okay. I want you to be comfortable with me. I’ve told you that. Tease me. Argue with me. Yell at me, though only in private please. I want to help you find yourself Anna. To be who you are meant to be. To be the person that was stolen from you.”

“I think I’m the luckiest girl in the world,” she said softly, gazing across the bed at her new husband.

Alex looked uncomfortable. “*Nein*, Anna. It is I who am lucky. All your pain could have been prevented if I hadn’t been so arrogant.” He looked at her with determined eyes. “I will not fail you again, *mein süße Frau*.”

“I know, Alex.” She gave him an adoring smile. “I feel safe and without fear for the first time since my parents died. I know you will protect me.” She smiled shyly and looked into his eyes. “I’m not afraid of Devin anymore.”

“You’re not?” Alex’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Is that okay?”

“*Ja*, Anna. Of course. I’m thrilled.” He gave her a half smile. “Though it does overwhelm me a bit that you trust me so much. But in a good way,” he added quickly. He held a strawberry by the stem and held it out to her. “Eat. I have more diamonds to buy you.”

Anna grinned at him and leaned forward to take a bite of the juicy fruit.

“Do you like this one?”

“Anna, I want you to pick it out. I want it to be from you.”

“But I don't know what you like.”

“I will like anything you pick out.”

Anna stuck out her lower lip. “You are very stubborn.”

Vati laughed. “You are just learning this, *Liebling*?”

Anna narrowed her eyes. “You could have warned me.”

“Would it have mattered?” Vati asked, still laughing.

“No.” Anna wrapped her arms around Alex's waist and rested her head on his chest. She sighed. “I like that our German rings match. I want our American rings to match too.”

“Schatzi, American rings are different. Men's and women's rings are very different. If you want, I will show you which one I picked out for you. Will that help?”

“Yes.” She grinned up at him.

Alex was finding Anna almost as stubborn as himself, though in a different manner. She wanted to please him, which he loved. But he wanted the ring she picked out for him to be from her, not just something he liked.

He turned to the shopkeeper, Jakob. “Will you please get my wife's ring so she can see it?” he asked in German.

Jakob nodded and disappeared into the back of the store, returning a few minutes later with a small box, which he presented to Alex.

“Thank you.”

Alex opened the box and handed it to his precious wife. Her eyes widened at the sight of the band of round diamonds. He had special ordered it so that each diamond was of the highest quality and sparkled like her engagement ring. The main diamond of the engagement ring was just over

one and a half karats and considered as perfect a diamond as could be found. Colorless, flawless, and perfectly cut. Anything larger wouldn't have been as high of quality.

“Oh, Alex,” she said breathlessly. “It’s beautiful.”

“Just like you,” he said, kissing the top of her head. She was so small next to him, it was the easiest place to kiss her frequently. Plus her hair was like silk and smelled delicious. Vanilla and raspberries. “So, is that enough to help you pick something out?” he teased gently.

Her eyes were wide as she looked up at him. “I just want to make sure you like it.”

“Anna, I told you. Anything you pick out I will love, because it is from you.”

Anna did a circuit of the men’s wedding rings again. This wasn’t a large store, but it had very good quality jewelry. And the owner could be trusted.

“What about that one?” She pointed to a thick platinum band with round diamonds inlaid around the entire band.

Jakob took it out of the case and handed it to Alex. It was heavy and well made. It would also compliment her ring very nicely.

“I like it,” Alex said, smiling at Anna. She had good taste.

“Really? You’re not just saying that?” Her eyes were eager as she looked at him.

“Yes, Anna. I like it. I like it a lot.”

She grinned and her eyes sparkled. “I thought it was like a guy’s version of mine.”

He cupped her cheek. “I thought the same thing.” He kissed her and then looked at Jakob. “How long would it take to come in my size?” he asked in German.

“A week, I think. Or I could adjust this one. I would need to add a diamond or two. I have some good ones in the back. I could have that done tomorrow.”

Alex nodded. “Yes, do that. I would also like the inside engraved.”

Jakob handed him a piece of paper and Alex wrote three words on it. “Anna” and “San Francisco.”

Alex looked at Anna. “You like this one? You want me to have it as my wedding ring?”

Anna nodded enthusiastically.

Alex nodded at Jakob, who wrote down some information on a sales slip. “I have your information from your other rings. Would you like to take hers with you today?”

“No. I’ll leave it here and pick it up tomorrow.” He glanced at Anna, realizing it would be unlikely that they would leave their bedroom tomorrow. “Or have someone pick it up.”

“Very good, Herzog.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Anna smoothed her dress nervously as they drove up the driveway to Alex's family *Gutshaus*. It was even more impressive in the daytime. The stone walls, yellowed with age, looked majestic. A dozen chimneys stuck out of the roof, and the warmth they radiated revealed copper roofing otherwise hidden under the snow. Stone carvings framed the windows, completing the overall grandeur of the building.

She shifted in her seat. Her new piercings were beginning to ache.

The SUV pulled up to the front door where Lukas awaited them. Tony opened the vehicle door and Alex got out, then turned to help Anna out of the car. Alex swept Anna off her feet, kissed her and then carried her inside.

"What was that for?" Anna asked, giggling as he put her on her feet.

"A groom always carries his bride over the threshold. It's bad luck not too."

"Alex, the rest of the family is eager to meet your bride." Wilhelm said, heading for the stairs.

Anna eyed the stairs with apprehension. Walking was rather uncomfortable at the moment. Alex noticed, swept her up into his arms again and walked quickly up the stairs behind his father.

The sitting room was even more crowded than it had been the night before. It seemed full of Alex and Wilhelm clones with a scattering of women and children. When Alex put Anna down, there were German exclamations throughout the room. Anna saw Gretchen sitting on the couch and her expression was one of surprise, as if she hadn't expected to see Anna. Anna thought it strange, but the thought was put out of her mind as Alex began introducing her to his extended family.

Wilhelm had three brothers younger than himself, Friedrich, Albrecht and Heinrich, and Ilsa had two sisters, Lore and Hanne, who was married to Heinrich. Alex rattled off the names quickly and Anna got lost. She smiled as they nodded at her, but she couldn't for the life of her remember all their names.

It was a huge family and Anna was glad Alex stayed by her side. They were all very nice and friendly, but it was very overwhelming. Most of them spoke English, though some better than others. Apparently, English was required in German education.

Alex guided Anna to a couch and they talked with various members of his family. A while later she saw Seth motion to Alex and he excused himself, kissing Anna and saying he'd be back shortly.

Anna sat quietly and stared at her hands. She might not be afraid of Devin anymore, but she was still shy.

At some point, Gretchen came and sat near her along with Liesl and a couple of the cousins. Anna looked at them with apprehension.

"Don't you speak any German, Anna?" Gretchen asked in a pleasant tone, which immediately put Anna on guard, though she wasn't sure why.

Anna smiled apologetically. "I only know a few words."

"You came here to marry Alex and you didn't bother to learn any of his language? That's rather rude, don't you think?" Gretchen looked around at the other girls, who nodded in agreement.

"I didn't come here to marry Alex. I had no idea..." Anna looked around desperately for Alex, but he was nowhere to be seen. "I didn't even want to come. Alex sent for me."

"He *sent* for you?" Liesl said in an amazed voice. "What does that mean?"

“I...” Anna didn’t know how to answer and blushed. She didn’t think she should say that she was Alex’s slave and had to obey him. She shrugged and looked at her hands. “He wanted me to come see him.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to come see Alex?” a cousin asked, amazed. Anna didn’t remember her name. “I thought all women in America were in love with him.”

“So why did you marry him?” Gretchen asked. “There are lots of women who would love to be in your shoes. Alex never lacked for female companionship.”

The way Gretchen said that made Anna uncomfortable. Alex had said that Gretchen had a thing for him. She obviously still did. Did Alex ever have feelings for Gretchen?

“He loves me,” Anna said softly.

Gretchen looked her up and down. “You’re so young. What could he possibly see in you?”

Tears stung Anna’s eyes. She tried to remind herself that Alex loved her, but without him by her side it was easy to doubt. After all, she wasn’t sophisticated like his family. She didn’t speak German. She was a sex slave.

“I can’t believe he married an American,” Gretchen mumbled to Liesl, though loud enough for Anna to hear. “I can’t believe your father allowed it. At least Mina was German, even though he didn’t like her, though I can’t imagine why. She was so sweet. Heidi would have been four now.” Gretchen turned back to Anna. “When do you want to start having children?”

Anna stared at her for a long moment, her mind wildly trying to figure out what to do. She had to escape. “Excuse me,” she said quietly and got up and walked away. Gretchen said something in German and the other girls laughed. Were they laughing at her?

She headed for the stairs and hesitated. She didn't know where Alex was. She didn't even know where his bedroom was. The only place she knew was the garden, so she went downstairs and sat in a corner chair, hoping she'd be hidden from anyone who came down.

Gretchen's words brought all of Anna's doubts back into the forefront of her mind. Anna would never give Alex any children. But it was obviously expected. All of the Kunze women had children if they were married. Even Mina had given Alex a daughter.

Oh, why did Alex marry her? He said he loved her. But he also talked about needing to protect her. Did he marry her out of an obligation? Because his father said he needed to? Or because he felt like he needed to?

She heard male voices echoing in the entryway and leaned forward slightly to peer through the plants. Alex, Seth, Tony, Greg and Sebastian walked into the entrance hall from the opposite side of the house.

She saw Gretchen walk down the stairs and approach Alex. They spoke in German. Alex nodded to the other men and they disappeared up the stairs, leaving Alex and Gretchen behind.

Anna could tell Gretchen was flirting with Alex by the tone of her voice and the way she looked at him. Alex frowned at her and responded in short tones. Gretchen then said something and Alex laughed, not derisively but as if in delight. Gretchen looked thrilled and said something else to which Alex smiled.

Gretchen took a step forward and put her hand on Alex's chest and Anna looked away. She didn't want to see Alex with another woman. Anna knew it would happen eventually, but she really didn't want to see it. Especially today of all days.

Anna leaned back on the seat and curled her legs beneath her, staring up at the blue sky visible through the glass ceiling. The warmth of the sunny

day had melted enough snow to clear the glass, but the early evening shadows had already started to frost the edges.

Just like her day, she thought forlornly.

Alex walked up the stairs next to Gretchen, his mind busy. Seth had determined that Devin had received some sort of tip that he and Anna had gotten married, but they hadn't yet figured out who had been the mole. He couldn't imagine who would have betrayed him like that.

Gretchen was still chatting about what Derek and Sophie had been doing while Alex and Anna had been at the Schloss. As much as Gretchen annoyed him, he did love his nieces and nephews and enjoyed the stories she told about them. They almost always made him laugh.

He arrived at the top of the stairs and looked around the sitting room for Anna. "Do you know where Anna is?"

Gretchen looked around. "No, maybe she went to her room?"

Alex frowned. He could imagine Anna needed somewhere quiet, but didn't like the idea of her wandering around the house alone. He turned away from the crowded sitting area and went up to the third floor to look for Anna, vaguely aware of Gretchen following him. His body ached for Anna and wondered if they could sneak away before dinner for some alone time.

He began to walk down the hallway to the room that Anna had slept in the previous night when Gretchen grabbed his hand. "Alex, why on earth did you marry that silly little girl?"

"Excuse me?" Alex asked, irritated at Gretchen's tone.

Gretchen stepped forward and put her hands on his chest. For the second time in a matter of minutes, Alex removed her hands from him but she

grabbed the lapels of his jacket and kissed him on the mouth.

Alex pushed her away, harder than he'd meant to, but it had the desired effect. She looked at him, amazed, and his eyes hardened as he glared at her. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Oh, Alex, don't look at me like that," she said. "You never minded before."

"That was quite a while ago, Gretchen. I haven't approached you since I got home."

Gretchen had hinted many times since he'd been home that she wanted to pick up on things where they left off when Alex came to visit a year ago. They'd had a brief affair, mostly because Alex didn't have anything better to do and he was still angry about Mina's death. Kurt didn't care what Gretchen did and it saved Alex from having to go into town for a conquest for the evening.

"And she's the reason why?" Gretchen rolled her eyes. "She said that she didn't come here to marry you. That she didn't even want to come."

Alex's eyes narrowed. "How did you get on that topic of conversation with her?"

Gretchen looked innocent. "We were just chatting."

"Did you say something to upset her?" he asked in a low voice. He wouldn't put it past Gretchen to try and upset Anna, and Anna was easily upset. Especially now that she was pregnant.

Gretchen maintained her innocent look. "I don't know. We talked about speaking German and I asked when you two were going to have children."

"You what?" Alex clenched his jaw. "Why would you ask something like that?"

"Alex, your family always has lots of kids. I figured you'd want to start sooner rather than later."

Alex took a deep breath to keep from exploding at Gretchen. She had no idea that it would be a sensitive area for Anna. Maybe Gretchen was just trying to have a nice conversation. “Anna has been told her whole life she can’t have children, Gretchen. It’s a bit of a touchy subject with her.”

Gretchen laughed. “Her whole life? God, Alex, she’s only twenty.” Her brow raised and she looked at him closely. “How much fucking could she possibly have done?”

She was baiting him. She knew something. More than she was supposed to. “What do you know about her, Gretchen?”

“How would I know anything about her? I just met her yesterday.”

Alex glared at her. “Then why are you so hostile to her?”

It was Gretchen’s turn to glare. “Maybe because it’s obvious that my husband is completely in love with her. And Wilhelm too. Every man she comes in contact with looks at her that way. She’s a fucking whore.”

“That’s my wife you’re talking about, Gretchen. It’s not her fault that men look at her, desire her. And your jealousy is very unbecoming.”

“So you don’t mind that your *wife* has fucked both your brother and your father?”

“The only reason you never fucked my father is because he rejected you. I know you tried.”

Gretchen gasped. “How dare you!”

“Do you deny it? Kurt isn’t good enough for you. You want me or my father for our titles. You think by sleeping with us somehow you’ll gain some sort of privilege of rank? It doesn’t work like that.”

“Better the mistress of an heir than the wife of a second son,” she spat.

“You better consider where you are and who you are talking to,” Alex warned. “Kurt loved you. That’s why he married you. Did you marry him in

order to get to me? Or my father? If Mina hadn't died, nothing would have ever happened between us."

"But it did, Alex. A lot happened between us."

Alex didn't like the look on her face. "It was sex, Gretchen. I've never had feelings for you."

"Perhaps not. But I'm quite certain you would have feelings for your son." A triumphant smile spread across her face. "Especially since you married a barren woman."

Dread spread through Alex's chest. "What are you talking about? I have no son."

"You do, Alex. Otto is your son."

Alex felt like he'd been doused with ice water and then hit in the chest. She couldn't possibly be telling the truth. "You're lying."

Gretchen shook her head. "I lied about the due date. Otto wasn't early, he was right on time. Kurt and I hadn't had sex in months when I got pregnant. I'd only been with you. Of course, after I found out, I made sure Kurt and I were together again." She stepped close and took his hand. "Maybe I'm not such a bad thing, Alex. After all, I gave you a son."

Alex was about to explode when a movement caught his eye at the far end of the hallway. He turned to look and saw a flash of white. *Anna!*

Without another word to Gretchen, Alex ran down the hallway toward the room where Anna had stayed the previous night.

"Anna!" he called.

When he got to the end she was nowhere in sight. He held his breath and listened. He heard footsteps on the stairs and hurried around the corner to the top of the staircase. He looked down and saw another flash of white.

"Anna!"

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Anna hurried down the stairs back to the library. She had seen the intimate moments between Gretchen and Alex and didn't need to see anymore.

Alex had the right to do whatever he wanted, she told herself, trying to not cry. She just didn't want to see it. But what if Alex wanted her to see it?

She stopped at the bottom of the staircase. Alex was her husband. She shouldn't be running away from him. Devin would be furious if Anna had run away from him. Surely Alex wouldn't like it either.

A moment later, Alex came up behind her and with gentle hands turned her to face him. "Anna...", he began and then stopped himself. "I was looking for you."

Anna searched his eyes. He wasn't telling her the truth. "I was in the garden, and then went through the library to go upstairs. I..." She swallowed. "I'm sorry, Alex. I saw you and Gretchen and I...I ran away. I shouldn't have done that." She looked down at her hands.

Alex sighed. He was troubled, she could sense it. He pulled her to him and held her against his chest, smoothing her hair.

Anna didn't resist, but didn't relax into his arms either. "Alex, if you want to be with Gretchen, don't concern yourself with me. I—"

"*Nein*, Anna," he growled. "I have no desire to be with Gretchen."

"But you've been with her before." It wasn't a question. She could see it in Gretchen's body language.

"I won't deny it, Anna. It didn't mean anything. She was convenient." He spoke absently. "It was a year ago."

"You didn't when you came back here?"

"*Nein*. Anna, the last woman I had sex with was you."

“It was only a few hours ago.”

Alex sighed. “I meant before we got married. While I was here, if I needed release, I would go to the Schloss for a blowjob, but I haven’t had sex with anyone else since I left San Francisco.”

Anna looked up at him. “You haven’t?”

He cradled her cheek. “I haven’t wanted anyone else.”

Guilt spread through Anna’s heart. “I have,” she admitted sadly.

“*Schatzi*, you were angry with me. I know you dated Ben. I know you had to do things for Devin. I would never hold anything like that against you. But once I met you...I just never desired anyone else.”

Anna searched his eyes. He was being truthful, but there was something wrong. She could feel the discomfort in his heart. Almost as keenly as she felt pain in her own heart.

“What’s wrong?” she asked softly, reaching up to stroke his cheek. It was rough with the beginnings of a five o’clock shadow.

Alex pressed his lips together. “*Kommen Sie*,” he said, taking her hand and leading her into the library. They sat on a bench next to a window and Alex seemed to be fumbling for something to do with his hands. “Anna....” He inhaled deeply. “Gretchen...told me something rather upsetting.” He looked at her with sad eyes. “I don’t want to ruin our wedding day, Anna. But I can’t hide trouble from you.” He smiled sadly at her. “You can read me too well.”

“Is it what was bothering you at the sht...,” she tried to remember the German name, but had to give up, “the place we got married?”

He shook his head. “*Nein*,” he said softly, then sighed deeply. “Anna, I don’t suppose you’d be willing to wait until tomorrow to talk about it?”

Anna swallowed. “Whatever you would like, Alex,” she said softly, lowering her eyes. She would be obedient and quiet.

“Anna, I don’t want your day to be ruined,” he said taking her hand in his. “I want you to have a good wedding day.”

“Yes, Alex,” she whispered.

Why should today be any different from any other day? Maybe it would just be better if she didn’t know at all. It was very distressing for Alex; it must be very bad. Her fingers felt raw and she rubbed the backs of them.

They sat silently for a few minutes. Alex put his arm around Anna and hugged her to him. She stared at the floor and wondered what would happen next.

“Alex? Oh, there you are. Where have you been?” Greta walked through the double doors of the library, cheerful as ever. It was a stark contrast to the somber mood of the library. “*Mutti* wanted to know where you were. It’s time for dinner.”

Alex glanced at Anna and smiled at her. She gave him a nervous smile and stood when he did. He took her hand and led her out of the library, down through a long formal sitting room, past the garden, and into the biggest room she’d ever seen. Anna stopped short in the arched entryway, amazed.

Along the walls, columns three stories high and topped with statues of people supported a vaulted wooden ceiling. Three enormous crystal chandeliers hung from the heights, bathing the room in light. Arched windows high on the walls between the columns let in the last traces of evening sun. An enormous white marble fireplace took up most of the wall at one end of the room, so large that a dozen people could easily stand inside.

In the middle of the room sat the largest table Anna had ever seen. There were enough seats for Alex’s entire family, children included. Despite Anna’s discomfort with Alex in the library, she clung to his hand as he

guided her to a seat to the left of the head of the table, where Wilhelm sat. Alex sat between herself and Wilhelm. Kurt and Gretchen sat across from them.

Gretchen gave her a strange smile as she sat directly across from Anna. She held Otto in her lap, kissed the baby's head and glanced pointedly at Alex, who was talking to his father. Gretchen looked back at Anna with a haughty look and a wicked smile.

A wave of nausea hit Anna as she somehow understood what Gretchen was doing. No! It couldn't be true. Alex would have told her if he'd fathered a son with Gretchen.

Wait. Would he have? Was it any of her business? No wonder Gretchen was so proud. She had given Alex something that Anna would never be able to give him. Maybe this was what he didn't want to tell her. How would Alex be willing to go back to the US if his son was here? Was this the real reason he came back in the first place? She thought he'd been telling the truth about why he came back and that he didn't want Gretchen, but maybe she'd read him wrong.

The look that Anna had seen on Alex's face when he looked at Gretchen in the hallway haunted her. It was full of emotion; the same way he often looked at Anna.

Anna looked down into her lap and swallowed, willing her stomach to get under control. She didn't want to embarrass Alex or make him regret marrying her even more. Surely he couldn't be happy about marrying her if Gretchen had his child. But it would be difficult with her married to his brother. *Did* Alex have feelings for Gretchen?

Anna looked up to see Alex staring at Otto. There was a longing in his eyes that stabbed at Anna's heart. Of course he wanted children. He needed children. He was the oldest son. He had to have a son to pass his title to.

Wilhelm watched Anna and Alex carefully. Something was wrong, but he couldn't figure out what. They had been so happy when they'd returned home earlier in the afternoon. What had happened in between then and now? Alex kept looking at Anna with concern. Had Alex told her she was pregnant?

Anna sat quietly with her eyes downcast. She was so pale. Wilhelm sighed. She was acting like a slave again. What had happened to make her feel inferior again? Was she ashamed of her pregnancy?

He glanced at his son and noticed him staring across the table at Gretchen. His eyes narrowed. If Alex started things up with Gretchen again, he was going to have a serious talk with him after dinner.

No...he wasn't staring at Gretchen, he was staring at...Otto? Was he mourning that Anna was having a child that wasn't his? Is that why they were having problems already? Wilhelm knew Alex wanted children. He missed his little girl. But there would be chances for other children after they'd rid Anna of Devin's control. They'd talked about it many times. He thought Alex had come to terms with it. Maybe they needed to discuss it again.

Alex stared at his soup, his appetite gone. Anna had withdrawn from him. Though she was sitting right next to him, she was as far away as she had been while in San Francisco. She wasn't cold. That wasn't in her nature. She was just...submissive. She would be quiet and obedient to him, but nothing more. The warmth and joy were gone.

But would it have been better had he told her about Otto in the library? He supposed there was no good time to tell his new bride that he'd fathered

a son with his brother's wife.

Did Kurt know? Alex doubted it. Gretchen wouldn't have told Kurt until she knew how Alex took the news. Poor Kurt. He really had loved her when they married. Now? Now Alex knew more than he'd wanted to know about Gretchen.

What a mess.

Anna remained silent throughout the dinner, unless spoken to, and then she kept her answers soft and short. She kept her eyes downcast and ate all the food that was set before her. He hoped she wouldn't be sick from eating so much.

She trembled when Alex put his hand on hers or put his arm around her shoulders. Why was she afraid of him?

Dinner was one of the longest he could remember. He intentionally had not looked at Gretchen the entire meal. He didn't want her thinking that he approved of the news or that he wanted anything to do with her.

When the meal finally ended, Alex and Anna were given leave to go be alone and he eagerly led her out of the room and up to the third floor where his chambers were.

As he walked across the sitting room towards the double doors where his bedroom was, he began to doubt himself. He had been looking forward to tonight. To carrying her into his bedroom and slowly making love to her. Now, as she walked silently, slightly behind him, he didn't know what to do.

He walked up the few steps that led to the doors and hesitated. He sighed and decided to do what he had planned. He opened the door, turned, swept her off her feet, and carried her inside.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Anna looked around at the massive, rectangular room. The ceiling, twice as high as a normal room, was paneled in dark wood. Three diamond paned windows alternated with three square paned, each rising from about five feet above the floor to just below the ceiling. The wooden floors were covered in several places by red oriental rugs placed about the room. Along the left wall, matching bookshelves flanked a dark wood writing desk. Across the room, two wingback chairs sat on an oriental rug in front of a massive marble fireplace.

At the far end of the room a huge, intricately carved wooden canopy bed sat on a huge red oriental rug, framed by deep red curtains with gold tassels. A coat of arms carved into the headboard presented two crowned, double-tailed lions holding a shield with a crown on it. The shield had another crowned, double-tailed lion on it holding a sword. The whole thing was surrounded by an open tasseled curtain with a crown on top of that.

Anna had been here before, but in the dark. The night she first saw Alex. And now she was here again. As his wife. But it wasn't the joyous moment she'd been expecting all day. No, she felt nauseous and tired. She wanted to sleep and make everything just go away.

But she was sure Alex had expectations.

She turned to him. "How may I please you, my lord?" It came out her mouth without her thinking about it.

She saw his jaw clench and knew she'd upset him.

"I-I'm sorry, Alex," she said quickly. The last thing she wanted to do was upset him. "I wasn't thinking."

Alex looked down at his precious wife. He hadn't meant to get angry at her words. He was angry at himself for making her feel the way she was feeling, not at her.

Alex took a deep breath and took her hand to guide her to the bench at the foot of his bed. "*Schatzi*," he said in a soft voice. "I kept what Gretchen told me from you so that it wouldn't ruin your day, but I can see that not telling you has probably made things worse." He took another deep breath. "Anna, Gretchen told me that..." He hesitated. How best to tell her? "Otto is my son and not Kurt's."

She looked up at him with her big green eyes. "I know."

"I... You know? Did you hear us talking?"

Anna shook her head. "Well, yes, I heard you, but I didn't understand you. But I know he's your son."

Alex didn't know what to say and was quiet for a long minute, trying to understand. "How did you know?" he asked softly

"The way Gretchen acted at the table. She told me with her actions."

Alex carefully counted to ten to keep himself from jumping up to find Gretchen and strangle her. How dare that woman! He had half a mind to kick her out of the house right then and there.

But she had his son.

Tears filled Anna's eyes. "I'm happy for you, Alex," she said softly. "At least you'll have a child, even if it isn't from me."

"Anna...I knew when I asked you to marry me that you were told you could never have children." He carefully constructed his thoughts before speaking, because when he married her, he knew she could have children. He wanted to be truthful. "Anna, Otto will never be my heir, despite what Gretchen thinks. He is illegitimate and not eligible."

She nodded absently and stared at the ground. “Are you...happy about Otto? That you have a son?”

“Honestly, Anna. I don’t know how I feel about it. I’m furious at Gretchen right now. If you’re sensing any anger from me, Schatzi, please believe me, it has nothing to do with you, except that I’m furious at her for upsetting you.”

She didn’t say anything. He wondered if this would be a good time to tell her she was going to have a baby. Maybe it would lessen the sting of Gretchen’s actions.

He took her hand. “Anna....”

She looked up at him, worry in her eyes. “Yes, Alex?”

He gave her a tender smile. “Schatzi, about you not being able to have children...it’s not true. Under the right circumstances, you can get pregnant.”

She looked at him doubtfully. “Are you just trying to make me feel better?”

He shook his head emphatically. “No, Anna. I’m not. I know it’s not true.”

“How?” she whispered. She didn’t believe him, he could tell.

He cradled her cheek. “Because I believe you are pregnant right now.”

Her eyes grew big as she stared at him, then filled with tears. “Why would you tease me about that, Alex?” She stood to walk away, but he held her hand.

“I’m not teasing, Schatzi. My mother is convinced that you are. You’ve been nauseous, tired....” He grinned. “Your breasts are definitely fuller than they were the last time I saw you.”

Anna blushed. “I can’t fit into my bras.” She sat down and looked at him. “Are you sure?”

“My mother has known with each of Gretchen’s pregnancies. And a couple of cousins as well. She has excellent instincts.”

Her eyes sparkled for a minute and then grew sad again. “But it’s obviously not yours.”

He stroked her cheek. “I don’t care, Anna. I will raise it as my own...if you want me to.” He paused. “Do you...well, I thought it might be Ben’s baby. What do you think?”

Her face fell. “It could be any number of men’s, Alex. It could be Devin’s for all I know.”

He shook his head. “Anna, for you to trigger your body into conceiving there must be a deep emotional connection. I would assume that would have only occurred with Ben, am I right?”

Anna nodded in answer to Alex’s question. “Yes,” she whispered. “He’s the only one I’ve been emotionally connected to for a long time. Until you.”

A tear rolled down her cheek and she put her hand on her stomach. Was it really possible that she was carrying Ben’s child? The thought overwhelmed her with joy and trepidation at the same time. Would Alex really want to raise this baby as his own?

“*Schatzi*, please don't doubt me. I love you. I am thrilled that you are pregnant. It gives me hope that we will have children together.”

She loved the idea of giving Alex children. She looked up at him and smiled, even though tears ran down her cheeks. “Ben’s mom would be thrilled.” Would he let her tell Katherine?

He put his hand on hers. “I’m sure she would be.” He pulled her close and kissed her head. “You don’t need to be upset about Gretchen, *Schatzi*. We will have our own children. Together.”

Joy suddenly overcame her and she flung her arms around Alex's neck. "I'm really going to have a baby?"

Alex laughed. "*Ja, mein Frau.* You are going to have *ein Baby.* *Nein,* we are going to have *ein Baby.*" He kissed her firmly on the mouth. "Perhaps we should go practice making them so when it's my turn we are ready," he murmured against her lips.

Anna couldn't help but burst into laughter. She felt so light. So good. She knew now why she'd been sick and tired. She wasn't getting fat. She was having a baby! And now she wanted nothing more than for Alex to pick her up and take her to bed with him.

"I agree."

Alex laughed in delight and picked her up and carried her to their bed.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Anna woke with a grin on her face and snuggled closer to Alex. The room was cold, but he was very warm. He had once again proven what an incredible lover he was. She didn't know how many orgasms she'd had, but they had each been incredible. And Alex...! Oh, my, she couldn't believe that he fit inside her, but he made her feel so good, once her body had adjusted to his size. They'd made love at least four times last night, each time better than the last.

He promised he'd go back to normal and Anna was somewhat relieved. She didn't want him to have to go so slow every time they made love. She remembered how hard he had fucked her that one night and wanted him hard like that again...once she was satiated with the gentleness.

"What are you grinning at?" Alex asked in a raspy morning voice.

"You." She traced around his nipple and he shivered. She leaned forward and bit it, making him groan. "Are you feeling better?"

"Mmm," he mumbled. "Mostly." He rolled over on top of her and nuzzled her neck. His cock pressed against her inner thigh.

She rolled her hips forward and pressed up against him. He moved forward, stopping at her entrance. She moaned and wiggled beneath him.

"Please, Alex," she moaned. "I need you again."

He chuckled and moved forward into her body, making both of them sigh.

Two hours later, Alex and Anna were in the shower. He had washed her body all over and she was returning the favor. She ran her hands over his

hard buttocks and he moaned softly. Kneeling next to him, she moved her hand down and reached between his legs to caress his balls.

He hissed and leaned his hand against the wall for support. She had such talented hands. He felt himself growing hard again. God, they'd made love so many times since last night, and he still could get hard? Even he was impressed with his stamina. Maybe that's what the teasing at the Schloss was really for.

Her fingers explored backwards and brushed against his asshole. It was tender from the previous night, but it felt good at the same time. Aside from the Elders it had been a while since he'd had sex with a guy.

Oh, he didn't need to be thinking about that while his sweet little wife caressed him. He loved her. He liked women. A lot. If anything he was selectively bi. And by selectively, he meant that there were only a handful of men he would ever consider being with.

"I'm sorry, Alex. Did I hurt you?"

He opened his eyes and saw her looking up at him. He glanced at his erect cock and smiled. "Not at all, Schatzi. It...felt good."

Her eyes widened. "It did?"

Had he frightened her? "Does that bother you?"

She smiled up at him and brushed the ring of muscle again. His eyes closed and he groaned as she caressed him there. Most women were apprehensive about their own asses, let alone a man's. But what Anna was doing felt so incredible. And she did it willingly. He was the luckiest man!

He inhaled sharply when she pressed a finger against him.

"Oh, yes, Schatzi," he breathed as she pressed inside him.

He stepped his legs further apart and hung his head as she finger fucked him and stroked his cock. He moaned when she slipped another of her slender fingers inside. He didn't want to consider the possibility that she'd

done this before, but she probably had. There was probably very little she hadn't been forced to do. The thought saddened him and gripped his heart with guilt. He always felt guilty when he thought about her abuse. If only he hadn't been so stupid, then maybe-

“Do you want me to stop?” she asked quietly, her hands stilling.

His eyes flew open to see her uncertain eyes. “*Nein, Schatzi.* Unless you want to.” He smiled at her. “It feels very good.”

He saw a spark of curiosity in her eyes before she looked away. He wondered what that was about, until she started moving again and forgot everything except her touch.

Anna wondered if Alex was one of the guys Travis had hinted about that “swung both ways.” Most men didn't like their asses caressed unless they did. But he was so manly. She couldn't imagine him submitting himself to any man or going out and flirting with men.

But he was clearly enjoying what she was doing to him. Heck, she was enjoying what she was doing to him. She liked hearing him moan under her touch. She moved in front of him to take him into her mouth while she moved her fingers inside him. He let out a low guttural moan when she took him down her throat and mumbled something in German.

She glanced up and saw him watching her with dark, hooded eyes. They gazed at each other as she moved her mouth up and down on him and she could have sworn he grew even larger.

Suddenly, he grabbed her under her arms and pulled her to her feet and then up against the wall. He held her up under her knees and pressed her back against the warm tile. His eyes were dark with passion and he slanted

his mouth against her, bruising her lips. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he thrust into her.

She cried out in pleasure as he slammed into her over and over again. “Oh, Alex. Yes, please! Harder!”

He obliged, ramming into her so deeply she half expected to feel him in her throat. He was so thick and hard and long. “Yes!” she yelled.

Suddenly he stopped, his cock buried deep inside her. She looked up into his face. His eyes were consumed with passion and he gazed at her as if he wanted to eat her up. She stared back at him with wide eyes.

“I love you, Anna,” he whispered hoarsely, leaning his head against hers.

“I love you, Alex,” she whispered back.

He began moving again, slower this time, but more intense. She closed her eyes as he pressed himself in so deeply she could hardly stand it. It wasn't painful, but so intense that she felt her entire body respond and shiver.

He began murmuring in German and she felt dizzy. She felt him inside every corner of her body, every part of her soul. And she could feel every part of his body and soul at the same time. If she could have opened her eyes, it wouldn't have surprised her to find herself inside his body. They were no longer two separate people. They were one body and soul.

She had no idea how long they stayed like that, but she would have been content to stay like that forever. She felt a tingling then an intense orgasm roared through her body. She leaned her head back and screamed out Alex's name. She heard Alex shout out and felt their bodies separate once more.

She breathed heavily and leaned her head on his shoulder. His chest rose and fell with his breath. He gently released her legs and she wrapped her arms around his waist, unwilling to stop touching him.

He petted her hair and held her close. Their bodies were slick from the water and steam. Alex leaned back and pressed a button and the water stopped.

“Shall we go find some breakfast? Or lunch as the case may be.”

Anna giggled. “I am a little hungry.”

He reached down and stroked her belly. “It would not be good for the little one to miss meals.”

Warmth spread through her body as she remembered that she was pregnant. She put her hand on his and grinned up at him. His eyes brimmed with emotion as he leaned down and kissed her.

“*Kommen Sie*, let’s get you some food.”

They dried off and dressed then wandered downstairs to the sitting room where his mother was sitting and reading.

“*Guten Morgen*,” Ilsa said with a warm smile.

Alex walked over to his mother and kissed her cheek. “*Guten Morgen, Mutti*,” he said with a big grin. “Is lunch almost ready?”

Ilsa nodded and looked at Anna. “How are you feeling, Anna?”

Anna smiled shyly. “Good.” She gazed up at Alex with adoration. “Very good.”

Alex pulled her close and she rested her head on his chest. “I told her, *Mutti*,” he said quietly.

Ilsa beamed. “I thought so. She’s glowing even more than she was yesterday.”

Anna buried her face in Alex’s soft black sweater.

“You should go tell your father. He was worried about you two last night.”

“*Ja*. We worked everything out.” He glanced at Anna. “At least I think we did.”

Anna nodded. She'd forgotten about the Gretchen issue, but right now she didn't care about Gretchen. She was head over heels in love with Alex and knew he felt the same way. Gretchen was a non-issue.

"*Schatzi*, I need to tell Vati about Gretchen. Do you want to be in there with me when I do or would you rather stay out here?"

Anna looked up at her husband. "I don't want to leave you."

Alex grinned. "I don't want to leave you either."

He took her hand and led her away to the end of the sitting area where a door stood partially open.

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Chapter Forty

Alex's stomach was a little nervous as he walked to his father's study. He wasn't sure how Vati would react to the news. The good thing about Anna's presence is that Vati would be less likely to yell. Not that he was afraid of his father. He just wasn't in the mood to fight this morning. The morning had been incredible so far and he didn't want to ruin it. But the Gretchen situation needed to be dealt with. Especially her attitude towards Anna.

He knocked on the door.

"Come in."

He pushed open the door and allowed Anna in first. She stopped mid-step and looked around at the oval-shaped room, eyes wide. "I've been here before..." she said softly. She glanced back at Alex. "I saw you yelling at each other here."

Alex arched his brow. "You did?"

Anna nodded. "You were very loud."

Alex didn't recall seeing Anna in his father's office at any time and wondered which fight she saw. There had been many. Had there been other times she'd seen him and he hadn't known?

Wilhelm sat behind his large wooden desk, typing something into his computer. He smiled when he saw them. "Good Morning."

"Good Morning, Vati."

Wilhelm looked between the two of them. "Everything okay with you two?" he asked in English.

Alex nodded and saw Anna blush. Vati looked at Alex and smiled.

"Vati...there's something I need to tell you."

Vati's brow raised. "Oh?"

Alex motioned to the nearby sitting area and sat down on the couch with Anna next to him. Vati sat in a leather chair opposite them.

“What do you need to tell me?”

Alex recounted his conversation he’d had with Gretchen in the hallway. Anna sat quietly and listened.

When he finished, Vati sat quietly with his fingers tented in front of his mouth. Alex could tell he was contemplating what he had told him.

“How do you feel about it, Alex? About Otto?”

Alex sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know. I can’t hold it against Otto, it’s not his fault. I’m furious at Gretchen, for so many reasons.”

Vati nodded. “Her attitude needs to be dealt with. Does Kurt know?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if she told him or not.”

Vati glanced at Anna. “How do you feel about it, Anna?”

Anna’s eyes widened. Alex suspected she didn’t think she would be part of the conversation. “I-I don’t know either. I don’t understand why she doesn’t like me.”

“She’s jealous, *Liebling*. That’s probably why she decided your wedding day was the appropriate day to confess to Alex. I honestly don’t know what she thought she would gain by doing that.” Vati sighed. “I don’t understand that woman. But, she’s Kurt’s wife. He has to deal with her.” He turned to Alex. “Alex, regardless of what you decide with Otto, he would never be your legitimate heir. For one, I wouldn’t want to give that to Gretchen. And you are married now and will have children of your own.” He glanced at Anna and smiled when she blushed. “You don’t have to acknowledge him, Alex. There is little chance that anyone would suspect he isn’t Kurt’s son and socially, I don’t believe it needs to be dealt with.”

Alex ran his fingers through his hair. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to acknowledge Otto as his son, but it would be easier on everyone if he

didn't. Otto would grow up thinking Kurt was his father, and things would be much simpler on the little boy. He had no doubt that, even if Kurt decided to divorce Gretchen, Vati would make sure that all the children were taken care of.

"I suppose the next thing to do would be—" A knock on the door interrupted Vati's words. "Come in," he called in German.

The door opened and Seth poked his head in. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we got some new intel on the source of the information leaked to Devin."

Alex glanced at Anna and then his father. He was reluctant to make Anna leave, but would the information frighten her? She stared at Seth with wide eyes.

"Come in, Seth," Vati said.

Seth walked in and closed the door behind him. He glanced at Anna then Alex. "Your mom said you two were up. We found out a little bit ago, but I didn't want to bother you..." He smiled sheepishly.

"It's all right, Seth," Alex said. "I appreciate it. As long as the source doesn't know you know."

Seth shook his head. "I don't even think she's aware of what she did."

"She?" Alex repeated. He couldn't even begin to guess who he was talking about.

Seth looked at Alex apologetically. "I'm sorry, Alex. But all the intel points to Gretchen being the informant."

"What!" Alex and Vati both shouted at the same time.

Alex counted to ten again to keep his temper under control. The last thing Anna needed was for him and his father to lose control. He could feel his pulse rising and suppressed the urge to go find Gretchen and beat the shit out of her. And he never hit women. But she had betrayed his family and almost gotten Anna hurt. She had crossed the line.

He thought back to the previous day. He thought he'd seen a look of surprise on Gretchen's face when they walked in yesterday afternoon, but didn't think anything of it. God, she really wanted to get rid of Anna that badly?

"What do you mean you don't think she knew what she was doing?" Vati asked. He took deliberate breaths and clenched his jaw when he'd finished speaking. Alex would be surprised if Gretchen was still here tonight.

Alex noticed Anna trembling and pulled her close.

"We think she was approached by someone who just asked to be kept informed of Anna's actions. I don't think she was trying to be especially malicious."

"No more than normal," Alex grumbled.

Seth chuckled. "True."

"Seth, would you please go get both Kurt and Gretchen and bring them here?" Wilhelm asked in an even tone.

Seth nodded and left the room.

Vati stood and walked to the window behind his desk.

Alex watched his father, amazed. He looked so calm, but Alex was certain that his father was as angry as he was. Vati loved Anna too.

Wilhelm concentrated on his breathing, clenching and unclenching his fists behind his back as he stared out the window. It was snowing lightly and he watched the snowflakes drift lazily in front of him.

Only for Anna's sake was he able to calm his heartbeat down to somewhat normal levels. He knew Gretchen; he knew how she was, but this

was going too far. He wasn't totally convinced she didn't know what she was doing.

He counted fifty snowflakes and then walked to the door and opened it. "Mausi?" he called to his wife. "Would you please join us in here?"

Ilsa looked startled. He rarely asked her to come to his study, though she was always welcome. He loved it when she sat in the room with him, but he knew she loved the light of the sitting room better.

"Wilhelm, what's wrong?" she asked coming near. Seth returned with Gretchen and Kurt and they all gathered in his study.

Seth turned to leave. "Seth, please stay," Wilhelm said. If Gretchen tried to run, Seth would prevent it. He also had the first hand information that might be useful.

Ilsa sat next to Alex and Anna on the couch. Gretchen and Kurt sat in the chairs across from the couch. Wilhelm sat in the chair at the end and looked at Gretchen over tented fingers. She at least had the decency to look nervous.

"I understand there is some news you would like to share, Gretchen?" Wilhelm said in a calm voice. He spoke in English so that Anna wouldn't feel left out. He had spent the last thirty years taming his temper. The same temper Alex shared. For the sake of their wives, he would keep it under control.

Gretchen paled and glanced at Alex, who glared at her. She looked back at Wilhelm. "W-what do you mean?"

Kurt frowned and looked at Wilhelm. "Vati, what is going on?"

Wilhelm's continued to look at Gretchen. "Ask your wife." He cocked his brow. "Something regarding Otto?"

Gretchen's eyes narrowed and she turned to Alex. "You told him?"

Wilhelm could see Alex's jaw tighten and the veins in his neck bulge as he struggled against his natural inclinations. His eyes flashed and his hand clenched into a fist. Wilhelm could empathize how difficult it was to keep calm in this situation and was very proud of Alex.

"Yes. I told him." Alex spoke between clenched teeth. "You obviously weren't trying to keep it a secret anymore, since you hinted as much to my wife."

"I did you a favor, Alex. You said she couldn't have kids. Now you have a son."

Kurt sat up and stared at Gretchen. "What the hell are you talking about, Gretchen?"

Gretchen looked at Kurt arrogantly. "Alex is Otto's father."

Kurt's face turned pale, then green. "What?"

Wilhelm felt bad for Kurt. As poor a husband as he was, he was a very good father and adored his children. Gretchen...he sighed. He didn't know what to do with her.

"You heard me," Gretchen snapped.

Kurt and Gretchen launched into an argument in German.

Poor Anna's eyes were wide and frightened. Ilsa stared in shock. Alex glared at Gretchen. Seth looked amused and Wilhelm smiled. At least one person found the humor in the situation.

"Enough!" Wilhelm shouted, his voice echoing against the paneled walls. Both Kurt and Gretchen stopped mid-word. "Gretchen, what made you think it was appropriate to share this news with Alex on his wedding day?" He was careful to keep his voice low.

Gretchen looked flustered. "I...I thought he needed to know."

"Alex has been back since July. Otto was born in November. You couldn't have chosen another, more appropriate time?"

“I didn’t know he was getting married so quickly.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Gretchen didn’t answer.

“Perhaps you thought maybe Anna would be out of the picture and he would run to you? Especially since you had a son by him?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, feigning innocence.

Wilhelm raised his brow. “Really? You weren’t feeding information about Anna’s activities to anyone?”

Gretchen’s eyes widened. “How...?”

“There’s very little I don’t know, Gretchen. I have many contacts.” Wilhelm wouldn’t reveal Alex’s extracurricular activities. Especially to her. “Do you know who it was that you were speaking to?”

“He told me he was a friend of Anna’s and wanted to know what she was doing,” Gretchen mumbled.

“Is that all?”

She shook her head. “He said he would take her back to America.”

“Why you little—” Alex began.

“Alex,” Wilhelm interrupted, looking sternly at his son. Alex took a breath and relaxed...somewhat. Wilhelm turned back to Gretchen. “Let me tell you about that man who would have taken Anna back home. He is one of the cruelest men I have ever met. He had Anna raised in a home where she was regularly beaten and raped. He turned her into a sex slave at the age of sixteen. If she had been taken back to America, she would have been locked up and punished for daring to think about marrying Alex. He likely would have tortured her until she passed out, and then revived her and tortured her again. And repeated the process until she no longer responded.”

Gretchen’s face turned green and her eyes were as wide as he’d ever seen them.

“Do you know why I know this Gretchen?”

She shook her head.

“Because he’s done it to her before. Anna has gone through things you could not even imagine. Her marriage to Alex will prevent that from occurring in the future.” Wilhelm paused, keeping his eyes locked on Gretchen’s. “And you wanted to send her home?”

Gretchen’s mouth moved, but she didn’t speak right away. She looked at Anna. “I-I had no idea, Anna,” she said in a whisper. “I feel terrible.”

Wilhelm could tell Anna didn’t know what to do or say. Her face was pale and she stared at her hands. Her first instinct was to sweetly forgive, but he could tell she was very hurt. As horrible as things had been in her life, she really didn’t understand how people could do things like what Gretchen had done. It would never have occurred to her that someone would do what Gretchen had done, and that made Gretchen’s actions even worse.

Wilhelm could feel his temper rising again.

Alex leaned over and whispered to Anna. She nodded in response. “Vati, I’m sorry, but Anna needs to eat. She hasn’t eaten since dinner last night.”

“Oh, *Liebling*, I’m so sorry. Yes, Alex, take her down for lunch. I’ll speak with you later.”

Alex helped Anna to her feet and led her out of the room.

“Is Anna all right?” Kurt asked in German, watching the door close.

Wilhelm smiled. “Yes. She’s pregnant.”

Kurt’s eyes widened. “But I thought...”

“There are ways, Son.”

“I thought she couldn’t have kids,” Gretchen said with narrow eyes. “That’s what Alex said.”

“No, I believe Alex told you she was told her whole life she couldn’t have children,” Wilhelm said. “Being told something doesn’t make it true.”

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Chapter Forty-One

Alex helped Anna downstairs to the dining room. Greta sat at the table with Albrecht and Viktoria. They lived outside of Dusseldorf and were staying at the *Gutshaus* through the New Year. The rest of Alex's family lived in the Frankfurt area. Anna felt relieved that there weren't many people there. She was a bit overwhelmed and just wanted to sit and eat.

The look of horror on Gretchen's face stuck with Anna. Gretchen really had no idea what she was doing. Anna wavered between sadness, hurt and anger as she thought about the conversation. What would Wilhelm and Kurt do with Gretchen?

A plate of fish and vegetables appeared in front of her and she ate quietly. Conversation flowed around her, mostly in English. Alex leaned over and kissed her frequently, which she liked.

After lunch they went back up to the bedroom and Anna took a nap. Alex said that they would be up very late tonight and that she should rest. She was more than happy to do so.

Early evening, Alex woke her so she could get ready for the New Year's Eve Party. She and Alex took a shower together and Alex held her against the wall and made love to her again.

She was still flushed from lovemaking when Brigitte came in to help her get ready. Brigitte styled her hair in a loose up-do with curls hanging loose around her face. As she pushed the final pins into place, Alex walked out of the dressing room looking so handsome Anna could hardly speak.

He wore an elegant black tailcoat and trousers with a white waistcoat and bow tie. A wide blue sash under his coat ran from his right shoulder to his left hip and a neck badge hung from a blue ribbon under his bow tie. The neck badge had the family crest on a four-armed star.

“Oh, my,” Anna murmured, staring at her husband. “You look...wow, Alex.”

He stood with his arms held out from his side, presenting himself to her. “You approve?”

Anna nodded enthusiastically. “The more time I spend with you, the more I understand the gossip about you.”

“Gossip?” He raised his brow over his sparkling eyes.

“How women melted at your feet and such. I thought I understood before....” She blinked several times. “Wow,” she breathed.

Alex chuckled. “Now you know how I feel every time I look at you.”

Anna blushed. “Alex!”

“Anna, you are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” He leaned down and kissed her. “I can’t wait to show you off tonight.” He straightened and beamed down at her. “Finish getting ready. I’ll be back in a little bit. I have to go get something.”

She watched him as he strode out of the room. A shiver ran down her spine. “I can’t believe I’m married to him,” she said softly as Brigitte smoothed her hair.

Brigitte smiled. “Many women will be green with envy tonight. I think many men as well for the *Herzog*.”

Anna smiled shyly. Brigitte applied her makeup and then took her into the dressing room, walking through the massive closet.

She looked at her dress hanging in the corner. “I hope it fits.”

Brigitte helped her into a white silk corset and stockings, and arranged the dress for Anna to step into. Anna held her breath as Brigitte zipped up the dress and sighed in relief when it fit. “I guess Kaitlyn found the bigger size. I’m so glad.”

“It is a beautiful dress, *Herzogin*.”

Anna stared at herself in the mirror. She hardly recognized herself. Her cheeks were pink, her hair stylish. She looked all grown up and could hardly believe it. She was a grown up married woman who was going to have a baby. Was it possible to really be this happy? Tears of joy sprang to her eyes.

Alex appeared behind her in the mirror with a huge grin on his face. “You look *wunderschön, Schatzi*.” He leaned down and kissed the side of her neck and she sighed. “Absolutely beautiful.”

He turned and placed several velvet-covered boxes on the table behind her.

“What are these?” she asked hesitantly.

Alex grinned. “Some things I picked out for you to wear.”

Anna looked down at her dress. “I have my dress already.”

He chuckled. “Accessories. Fit for a *Herzogin*.”

He opened a flat box to reveal a necklace of diamond flowers.

“Oh, Alex...,” she whispered.

He took off her other necklace and handed it to Brigitte, then fastened the new necklace around her. “No one will know you are anything but my beautiful wife tonight, Anna. You have no obligation but to have fun and enjoy yourself.”

Anna felt herself tearing up again. “Just your wife,” she repeated softly. What a wonderful thought.

He opened a smaller box and handed her the matching earrings and put a matching bracelet on her empty wrist. She still wore her signet bracelet on her other arm. Ilsa wore one as well, Alex had told her.

He opened another box with a three-inch wide blue ribbon similar to what he was wearing. The same badge hung at the end.

“What’s this?” Anna asked as he placed it over her head from her right shoulder to her left hip.

“Mark of rank,” he answered, watching Brigitte pin it into place. “And finally, the most important piece.” He grinned and opened a very large box to reveal a beautiful diamond tiara.

It had seven large pear shaped diamonds spaced around the semi-circle, with other pear and round shaped diamonds that seemed to magically hover beneath.

“It’s beautiful, Alex,” she said breathlessly, looking up at him. “I really get to wear this?”

Alex nodded. “*Ja. Mutti* helped me pick it out. It’s one of her favorites.”

Brigitte took it from Alex and pinned it into Anna’s hair.

Anna looked in the mirror again when Brigitte was done. Now she really didn’t recognize herself. She turned and flung herself into Alex’s arms. “I feel like Cinderella.”

Alex cradled her cheek and kissed her. “I love you, *Schatzi*.”

“I love you, Alex.”

The adult members of the family, as well as Alex’s men, ate dinner in the dining room together dressed in their formal wear. Albrecht and his family were there as were Liesl and her fiancé, an Irishman named Patrick. Kurt was unusually quiet during dinner and Anna wondered what happened with Gretchen.

Anna thought it was such an elegant dinner. The men were all dressed in tails, white vests and bow ties. The women in beautiful, fashionable gowns. Wilhelm and Ilsa both wore blue ribbons like Alex and Anna wore. Ilsa,

Liesl and Greta all wore tiaras, though Liesl and Greta's were smaller than the ones that Ilsa and Anna wore.

After dinner, Wilhelm pulled Alex and Anna aside.

"Gretchen is not attending tonight, which I'm sure you deduced," Wilhelm said in a soft voice. "I've left it up to Kurt whether or not she will stay. She is his wife, after all, and you'll be returning to San Francisco soon. I have no concern about Gretchen speaking to Devin's lackey again. She was truly horrified at how you were raised, Anna. Her father wasn't exactly the nicest man when she was growing up."

"I don't want her anywhere near Anna until we leave, Vati," Alex said.

Wilhelm nodded. "That's understandable. I don't think she'll desire to be very social. I wasn't very kind to her after you left."

When it was time, they made their way out to the entrance hall to begin greeting guests. Alex and Anna stood in the receiving line with his parents, and Anna was introduced to German society as Alex's wife.

It amazed her that Alex knew all these people, even after being out of the country for years. But everyone knew Alex and wanted to meet his new bride. Many were surprised that she was American.

When they were finally able to make it into the great hall, Alex led her out to the dance floor and they waltzed around the room. Anna giggled and grinned the entire time.

"I had no idea you could dance like this, Alex," she said as he spun her around.

Alex's eyes sparkled. "Every proper German knows how to waltz," he laughed. "You look beautiful. I may have a hard time keeping you in my sights, tonight. I can see many men who want to dance with you."

Anna bit her lip nervously.

“Anna, they won’t hurt you. You are my wife and nothing else. Remember?”

Her face brightened and her heart grew light again. “I forgot.”

He grinned at her. “There’s that beautiful smile. My men are keeping an eye on you, *Schatzi*. But the people in this room respect my family. No harm will come to you.”

Alex was right. Anna danced every dance and met so many nice people. She had a wonderful time. Part of her kept wondering what would happen to ruin the evening, but nothing did. It was the best night of her life.

At midnight, Alex was by her side and gave Anna her first ever New Year’s kiss. They danced again and then she was swept away by more charming men. She got glimpses of Alex dancing and having a good time as well. He kept bodily distance between himself and the women he danced with, but with Anna he held her close and kissed her frequently.

The party went very late. Anna was so tired by the end that Alex carried her upstairs, helped her undress and put her into bed. She snuggled close to him and slept.

Chapter Forty-Two

Too soon it was time to return to San Francisco. Anna had loved being in Germany, surrounded by a loving family. They arrived home mid Thursday morning. Alex wanted to give Anna a few days to adjust back to the time zone before dancing again on Monday.

Anna looked out the window as they drove through the city. It looked like.... “Are we going to Aaron’s house?”

Alex grinned. “*Nein, Schatzi.*”

“Where are we going?” She was tired and wanted to go home.

“Home.”

Anna frowned. “I’m pretty sure this isn’t the way to your house.”

Alex pulled her close. “It is the way to *our* house, *Schatzi.*”

She looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I sold my house. I wanted to start fresh with you. So I bought us a house in a nicer neighborhood.”

Pacific Heights was a very nice neighborhood. “You bought a new house?”

Alex nodded. “Is that all right? A house that is only ours. No past memories. A place to make memories together.” He stroked her stomach. “And raise our baby.”

Anna smiled and leaned against his chest. “I think it’s wonderful.”

They had spoken to Heinrich, Alex’s uncle who was a doctor, about the baby. He had examined her and said everything looked great. She would be able to dance for several more months, though whether or not she would be able to perform was up to Isaak. Alex felt confident she’d be able to dance *La Bayadere* in February, though much beyond that might be difficult.

The idea of not dancing for a while didn't bother Anna as much as she thought it might. She felt like a new person, being Alex's wife. She had nothing to fear from Devin anymore. Alex would never hurt her. She didn't need to dance to keep herself sane. She could dance just because she enjoyed it.

Anna sighed, content and happy.

They were near Presidio when the limo pulled into a neighborhood with a circular road. It parked in front of a white house with arched windows lining the bottom floor and square windows on the upper floor. The cobblestone walkway that lead to the door was lined with flowers. Steps led to the front door, which had an arch made of some sort of vine.

"Oh, Alex!" Anna said, stepping out of the limo, hand in his. He swept her up off her feet and carried her towards the door.

Frau Gersten opened the door with a smile and greeted them warmly. "*Guten Morgen, Herzog. Guten Morgen, Herzogin.*"

Anna gasped as he carried her into the entryway. White marble floors stretched out before them, welcoming them deeper into the house, past the marble columns on either side of the door. Two additional columns stood on either side of the wide staircase leading to the upper floor. Off to the right she could see a large dining room, and to the left what looked like a formal living room.

"When did you buy it?" Anna asked, turning her head, trying to see everything at once.

"I was looking around when I was here in August and found this place," he answered. "I had Kurt sign the papers when he was here in November. I couldn't risk anyone knowing I was buying, so Kurt 'bought' it and then had it transferred into our names after we were married."

"It's wonderful," she sighed.

Alex took her hand and gave her the tour. The main floor consisted of a large living room, a library, a great room, a dining room and a kitchen with a breakfast area. The top floor had a huge master suite and three additional bedrooms, including a small one next to the master that Alex said would be a perfect nursery.

The basement level had a movie theater, a gym, a suite for Frau Gersten, two bedrooms for Seth and Tony, and a three-car garage.

Both Anna's and Alex's cars were parked in the garage, along with the SUV. Anna's things had been moved from her apartment to the house. Jenna, Anna was happy to learn, had moved in with Matt while they were gone.

Later that evening, Alex and Anna were cuddled up on the couch in the library when the doorbell rang. They looked at each other, surprised. They had decided not to let anyone know they were back in town until the next day so they could have time together alone.

Frau Gersten's footsteps echoed in the entryway and they could hear her open the door. A few minutes later she appeared in the doorway. "Devin Andersen to see you, *Herzog*."

Anna's stomach lurched and she raised her hand to her mouth. She stared at Alex with wide eyes.

"Do you remember where the bathroom is?"

Anna nodded and ran out of the room. She ran behind the stairs and to the powder room, closing the door behind her.

After she'd thrown up, she rested her head on the wall for a few minutes before standing. She cleaned her mouth out with water from the sink.

Why was Devin here? What did he want? Did he want her already? She wanted to spend her first evening home with Alex, not Devin.

She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she didn't need to worry. Alex would never let Devin take her away from him.

"I don't need to be afraid of him," she whispered to herself as she stood. "I'm not afraid of him."

She opened the door and walked calmly back into the living room where she heard Alex and Devin talking.

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Chapter Forty-Three

Devin sat casually in the entryway while he waited for the newlyweds to receive him. Under his calm demeanor, however, his blood boiled. He hadn't lost his temper this frequently since he was a teenager. The last week and a half had been very trying and he had lost it several times. Several girls at the Manor were dead because of it, but that was no matter. He had plenty of others and could get new ones if he needed to.

Every free moment available had been spent researching a way to get rid of Alex. Damn fucking Alex. He ruined everything Devin had been so carefully putting into place. But Devin was confident he would find a way to eliminate him and get Anna back under his control. He needed her to solidify his power and position and would do whatever it took to make sure that happened.

He heard light, but fast, footsteps and saw Anna dart across the room and into another room. Her hand was over her mouth and Devin wondered if she was ill. Poor Anna. Pregnancy sickness was no fun. He wondered if she knew by now that she was pregnant. He hoped so. Otherwise she would be thinking she had caught a very nasty flu bug.

Alex walked towards him through a wide entryway. He glanced in the direction where Anna had disappeared with a worried look on his face, then looked back at Devin and hardened his eyes. His chin was raised and he walked tall. *Confident, cocky bastard*. Devin would get Anna back and Alex would not be able to do anything about it.

Devin stood and extended his hand. "Good evening, Alex," he said with a smile.

They shook hands. "Good evening, Devin," Alex said cordially. "What brings you to our home?"

Devin gritted his teeth at his use of “our home.” “I wanted to be sure that Anna got home safely.”

“She is home safely. She’ll join us in a few minutes.” Alex motioned through the entryway he’d just come through. “Won’t you come in?”

Devin stood and followed Alex into a richly appointed living room with a marble fireplace at one end. Alex motioned to a chair across from a long couch and then sat down on the couch. He leaned back and crossed his ankles with his arm along the back of the couch.

He’s trying to tell me he’s not intimidated by me.

Devin sat across from him with his ankle crossed over his knee and arms resting lightly on the arms of the chair.

The woman who had answered the door walked into the room. “*Herzog*, would you like something to drink?”

Alex looked at Devin. “Would you like something?”

“Scotch on the rocks?”

Alex nodded and looked at the woman. “Bring Anna some clear soda and I’ll have a brandy.”

The woman curtsied slightly and left the room.

“I take it you heard the news?” Alex asked, amusement evident in his eyes.

Devin swallowed his irritation and forced a smile. “Yes, I did. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I am very happy. I believe Anna is as well.”

“She is quite the catch. I didn’t know you felt so strongly about her. Marriage is...quite the commitment.”

“It is. I’ve been in love with her since the first time I saw her here. Of course, I’ve thought about her often throughout the years.”

Devin kept his face impassive. “Over the years?”

The woman returned with a tray of drinks. She handed Devin a short round glass with ice and an amber liquid inside it. He took a sip and sighed. Alex certainly knew his liquors, Devin had to give him credit for that.

Alex took a sip of his brandy and held the glass loosely in his right hand. "Oh, yes. I first saw her when she was...oh, I believe sixteen? I'm sure you know about that."

Devin's jaw clenched. "I didn't realize you had seen her."

"It was quite startling, seeing a teenage girl appear in my bedroom. She has a way of sticking in a man's mind."

"Yes, she does."

The amused look on Alex's face was beginning to piss Devin off. "So tell me, is that why you wanted Anna to visit you? So you could manipulate her into marrying you?"

"I wouldn't call it manipulation. We connected before I left, although I hurt her terribly by remaining distant afterwards. But yes, it was my intention the whole time to bring her to Germany and marry her."

Devin didn't respond. He did everything in his power to keep his anger under control. Alex was different now. He was confident against Devin's position. This was bad. This was very bad. Alex had Anna's heart and he knew it.

Devin felt Anna before he saw her. He turned and saw the beautiful girl that he knew, but she was changed as well. She looked peaceful and content. She looked at him without fear and gave him a shy smile.

"Hello, Devin," she said softly walking towards him.

Devin's heart pounded in his chest as he stared at her. What the fuck was going on? He was responding to her like other men responded to her. He could feel himself losing himself in her eyes. He tore his eyes away and

shook his head. No! He had to stay in control. He would not allow himself to be manipulated by her.

But he couldn't deny that he now understood the power of a truly content Elder-Mistress. *Fuck!*

He watched as she walked to Alex, gazing at him with total love and devotion in her eyes. Alex looked at her the same way. They had connected. They had bonded. More than just the ceremony at the Manor. Their souls had merged. *Fuck!*

She settled onto the couch under Alex's arm with her legs curled up beneath her. She reached for her soda and then leaned her head against his chest. Alex kissed the top of her head and whispered in her ear. She looked up at him and nodded. Her eyes sparkled as she looked at him.

Devin grimaced and took a big gulp of his scotch. *Fuck.*

Alex found Devin's discomfort amusing. Devin wasn't used to being challenged or not getting everything he wanted. He saw the way Devin looked at Anna when she walked into the room. Anna was no longer the fearful slave that had left San Francisco less than two weeks ago. The time away from Devin and with himself had transformed her into a confident young woman that was more beautiful than ever. He knew Devin saw it too.

Devin watched her walk over to the couch like a teenage boy would have done. Alex sighed silently. Anna was safe now. And would remain so.

"So, Devin, what can I do for you?" Alex asked casually.

Devin dragged his eyes away from Anna and gave Alex a cold look. "As I said before, I wanted to make sure Anna got home safe and sound."

Alex smiled. "You can see that she did. Very safe," he couldn't resist adding.

Devin's eyes narrowed. "We need to discuss her...duties and obligations in light of her new...position."

The subject didn't surprise Alex. It was a necessary conversation, similar to the one they had after the bonding ritual. However, this time Alex held the upper hand. "Yes, I suppose that is true."

"I want her at the Friday night Gatherings," Devin said.

Alex appreciated him getting straight to the point. The sooner they were done, the sooner he could take Anna upstairs and make love to her. "If you have her there, you will treat her with dignity and respect. You will not hurt her or allow anyone else to hurt her."

Devin glared at him, but Alex knew he had no choice in the matter. "Fine."

"If she sits at your feet, you will give her something comfortable to sit on, not on the hard floor."

Devin's brow raised in amusement.

"Elder-Mistresses are not slaves," Alex continued. "They are not inferior. You will treat her in such a way that the men know to respect her as well." And as her pregnancy progressed, she would be very uncomfortable on the ground. Alex wondered if Devin knew she was pregnant.

"I won't give her a chair."

"A large cushion would suffice."

"Fine. I still have social obligations that I need her for."

Alex knew this would be a difficult issue. "I'm sure there are...discreet places you could take her for a dinner meeting where her reputation would not come into question."

Devin didn't respond at first. "There are. But what about social gatherings? I do much work there as well."

Alex smiled. “Then I suppose you should make sure that I am on the invitation list. You will not take her out as your date. As her husband, I will not allow it.”

Devin glared at him and set his jaw. “You’re trying to take away her usefulness to me.”

“I’m trying to make sure she’s treated respectfully. I don’t want her coming home battered and bruised.”

Devin huffed. “Fine. I will make sure you are on the list. It shouldn’t be difficult. You’re a respected member of society.”

Alex grinned. “Thank you.”

“She still has to obey me,” Devin added.

“Yes, but I can prevent her obedience to certain things that I won’t allow. I won’t allow you to command her to do something that will hurt her.” Alex leaned forward. “And you best keep Zach and his kind away from her.”

“Zach hasn’t seen her in months.”

“Good. I just wanted to remind you.” Alex relaxed back into the couch.

“I want her for twenty-four hours for the Gatherings. Friday afternoon to Saturday afternoon.”

Alex hesitated. That was a long time for her to be away. But Devin was still her Master, even if it was severely diminished. “All right.”

“And I will fuck her.”

Alex’s jaw clenched. The thought of Anna being with Devin made his stomach churn.

“Feel free to come to the gatherings and utilize my girls.”

He felt Anna stiffen next to him. “Thank you for the offer, but I am quite content to wait for Anna to come home.”

Devin chuckled. “Monogamy? Really? I didn’t think you had it in you. It’s difficult as an Elder to do that.”

“I’m not an Elder yet.”

Devin smiled. “No, you’re not.”

Alex sighed impatiently. “Is there anything else?”

Devin took another drink of his scotch. “No. Those are the basics I wanted to discuss.” He put his glass down and stood. “I would like her tomorrow night if you don't mind. It has been quite a while since she’s been to the Manor. With performances and all.”

Devin was right. To deny him would be wrong. “All right. What time do you want her there?” Alex stood and began walking him to the door.

“Four-thirty is fine.”

“I will drop her off at four-thirty tomorrow and pick her up at four-thirty on Saturday.”

They shook hands and Devin looked back at Anna, who had followed them out into the entryway. He gave her a smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Baby.”

Alex opened the door and Devin left.

Anna rushed into his arms. “I really have to go see him tomorrow?” she asked, her voice betraying a heartbreaking sadness.

“I’m afraid so, *Schatzi*.” He petted her hair and held her tightly.

Devin got into his car and slammed the door. *Damn fucking Alex!* Anna had changed. She was completely in love with Alex and there was nothing Devin could do about it. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

There was only one solution. He had to get rid of Alex. There had to be a way. There just had to be.

Instead of going home, he headed out to the Manor. He needed to do more research and talk to a few people.

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Chapter Forty-Four

“I don't want to go, Alex,” Anna whispered as Alex stopped his car in front of the Manor.

Alex reached over and took her hand. “I know, *Schatzi*,” he kissed the back of her hand. “But he won't hurt you. He wouldn't dare.”

Anna nodded. She had heard the conversation between him and Devin. “I don't need to be afraid,” she said softly.

“That's right. You don't need to be afraid.” Alex cupped her chin and kissed her deeply. “I love you, Anna. With everything I am.”

“I love you too, Alex. I can't wait until tomorrow.”

He gave her an adoring smile. “Me too.”

She looked out and saw Ian walking towards the car. She sighed and turned back to Alex. She tried to give him a brave smile. “Have fun with Aaron tonight. Tell him I said hi.”

“I will. Perhaps if you're up to it, we can have a few people over on Sunday evening.”

Anna nodded. “I'd like that. I'd really like to see Jenna.”

“Let's see how you feel tomorrow.”

Ian stood by the car and waited.

“I should go,” Anna whispered. She leaned over and kissed Alex and then opened the car door. “Good evening, my lord,” she greeted Ian softly.

“Good evening, Mistress.” Ian said gently.

“Anna, remember. You are not inferior,” Alex said, leaning so he could see her. “I love you.”

She turned and gave him an adoring smile. “I love you, too.” She picked up her bag and closed the door. Ian took her bag and she followed him up

the steps to the door. She glanced back and waved at Alex, and then walked through the door, which Ian closed behind her.

Anna took a deep breath and looked around. She half expected that the Manor had changed since she had, but no, it was the same as it had always been. The aura of fear threatened to consume her, but she was determined not to let it. She slipped her shoes off automatically and put them to the side.

“Devin would like to see you in the Hall,” Ian said, leading her in the direction of the Hall instead of her room.

“The Hall? Why?” Anna walked slightly behind Ian, but kept her head up. *I am not inferior.*

Ian shrugged and glanced back at her with a smile. “You look good, Anna,” he said softly, his eyes sad.

Anna swallowed and looked away. Could she forgive him for killing Ben? She was very happily married to Alex. Ian only did what he was told to do. He didn’t have a choice.

Ian stopped at the door to the Hall and opened it. She glanced up at him and gave him a timid smile as she walked by. He smiled back with relief in his eyes.

She walked into the Hall and was surprised to see the room filled with naked women. Devin was sitting on his throne. She picked her way through the crowd to the platform, where she kneeled and bowed to him.

“I didn’t know if you would be willing to greet me in such a way, Mistress,” Devin said sarcastically. “Alex doesn’t think it beneath you?”

Anna sat up and looked at him. “You are still an Elder, my lord,” she said softly. “I greet you as I should.”

Devin looked at her in surprise, and then nodded. "I approve." He stood. "Come," he said, holding out his hand to her. She stood and he turned her to face the women sitting on their heels in front of the platform. "I want you to pick out a pet."

"A pet? I don't understand." These were women, not animals.

"I want you to pick out a girl that can be your...well, pet is the best way I can describe it. Someone you can train."

"For what?"

"For whatever you want them to be trained to do. I may ask you to train them for something, too." He put his hands on her shoulders and leaned into her ear. "Choose someone you will be able to manipulate to do your will," he whispered.

Anna's eyes closed as a wave of dizziness overcame her.

Devin held Anna around her waist until she was steady on her feet again. She smelled good. It had been so long since he had been with her, his cock stirred at having her in his arms. He slid his hands up and cupped her breasts over her t-shirt. They were larger than they had been before she left. He squeezed them and she moaned. And beautifully firm and full. Maybe he should impregnate her more often. He liked the feel of her heavy breasts in his hands.

He kissed her neck and her eyes opened, slightly glazed. She was under his control. It was limited control. He had the constraints that Alex had put in place, but he could do this.

"Go, Baby. Choose the girl I need."

Anna stepped forward and looked around. She stopped in front of several girls and looked them over. She caressed breasts and looked them in

the eye. She spent considerable time gazing into the eyes of a redhead named Jamie. Devin had thought she might be the one and was pleased to think Anna might feel the same way.

His cock twitched when Anna leaned forward and kissed Jamie on the mouth, caressing her breasts at the same time. Jamie had very nice breasts, full with long pink nipples that Anna tugged on. Devin could hear the girl moan from his place on the platform.

Anna stood and took Jamie's hand to lead her to Devin. The girl dropped to her knees in front of Devin.

"This is the one?" he asked Anna.

She nodded. "Yes, my lord."

He dismissed the other girls and had Jamie stand while he sat in his chair. There were a few bruises on her hips and arms, but they would go away. He cupped her breasts and then opened her pussy lips to tweak her clit. She jumped and gasped when he did it and was pleased to feel moisture when he pressed his finger inside her. She was pleasantly tight and responsive to his thrusts.

"Yes, she will do," he said aloud. "Well, Jamie, how would you like to be our special girl?"

Jamie's blue eyes lit up. "Yes, my lord. I would like that."

"You will be exclusively with myself or Anna. You will have a nice room to live in all by yourself. You will not be visited by other men and you won't come to the gatherings anymore, unless Anna wants you there as a pet."

"Yes, my lord."

Devin motioned to a man standing along the wall. "Take Jamie to the room I prepared for her. Get her anything she wants."

The man bowed and led Jamie away.

Anna stood by watching. “What will happen to her?”

Devin smiled and reached for her hand. “She is going to stay in a room similar to yours. We will play with her and make her ours. In a few months she will be willing to do anything for us.” He pulled Anna into his lap and kissed her.

She was hesitant to kiss him back but after a few moments relaxed into his embrace. He caressed her breasts and she moaned softly. “I’ve missed you, Baby,” he said huskily.

Anna felt her head clear as she watched Devin talking to Jamie. She didn’t know why she had chosen the girl. She just knew she was the one.

When Devin pulled Anna into his lap, she was reluctant at first, but as he gently kissed her, her hesitancy disappeared. He was her Master. She wanted to please him. He caressed her breasts gently and she felt herself becoming aroused.

“Your breasts are fuller than they were before,” Devin commented.

She looked at him nervously. He would be angry with her if he knew she was pregnant. But she couldn’t hide it from him. He would figure it out soon enough. “Devin...,” she began reluctantly. “I...I’m pregnant.”

Devin’s brow raised slightly, but he didn’t appear angry. She bit her lip, waiting for his response.

“Do you know who the father is?” he asked.

Anna shook her head. “Alex thinks it must be Ben’s,” she admitted softly. “Something about an intense emotional connection.”

Devin nodded solemnly. “It’s difficult to know in situations like yours. Does Alex approve of the baby?”

Anna smiled shyly and nodded. "He's excited." She put her hand on her stomach. "He said he'd raise it as his own."

"Well, Baby, if he's happy then I'm happy," Devin said after a pause.

"You're not angry?"

"Why would I be angry?"

"You said that pregnancy ruins a woman's body."

"It can. But you are Alex's wife now. I can't really say much about it."

Anna looked at him doubtfully. "I thought you would be furious," she whispered.

Devin kissed her. "How can I be angry when your breasts look like this?" he asked with a smile as he caressed her.

She closed her eyes and sighed. Devin knew exactly how to caress her breasts in a way that felt so good.

He stopped and Anna opened her eyes in surprise.

"You need to go get ready. I'll be more than happy to play with them some more tonight. I'll be gentle with you Anna. I promise."

"You...won't use your spikes or anything?"

He shook his head. "I won't. I don't want anything to happen to your baby."

Anna smiled at him thankfully and then stood. "Thank you, De...my lord."

She hurried to the back of the room where Ian waited for her.

Maggie and Sarah came into Anna's room later and got her ready for the evening as they did every other time. She hadn't been here in almost two months and as they asked questions about her trip, she realized that she'd missed them.

When it was time, Ian came to her room to take her down to the Hall. His eyes widened when he saw Anna's breasts spilling over her dress.

Anna giggled, which made Ian laugh.

"Too bad you're married now, Anna. I'd be at your apartment tomorrow night."

She smiled as he led her down to the Hall. When he opened the door, she walked in with her head held high, but was careful not to appear arrogant, as Sebastian had told her. Devin smiled from his place on the platform as she walked towards him. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the men watching her. She liked that they stared at her, wanting her.

When she arrived in front of Devin, she bowed and waited for him to tell her she could get up. He did so and he pulled her into his lap.

"God, Anna, you are so sexy in that dress," he groaned, pulling the front of her dress down and taking a nipple into his mouth. She untied his pants and stroked his hard cock, making him groan even more. He picked her up by her hips and lowered her down onto his cock.

"Oh, Devin," she moaned softly, leaning her head on his shoulder. His piercings felt so good inside her.

She rode him hard and shortly they both came, pressing their mouths together as they did.

Anna looked into his eyes after. "Master..." she sighed.

Devin smiled. "Yes, Baby," he said, letting her rest her head on his shoulder.

As the Gathering proceeded, Anna was pleased to find it unlike what she was used to. Devin treated her respectfully, and only had her please a few of the men. She sat with them and flirted and cajoled, but they were all nice. It was odd, especially when Jack was the same way. Devin didn't have her do anything with Jack.

When the Gathering was over, Devin took her back to his room and made love to her and she slept peacefully in his arms.

They woke mid-morning and went to visit Jamie. Devin wanted Jamie and Anna to please one another while he watched, and they spent the rest of the morning and afternoon with her. He made love to both girls several times, and in between had the girls play with each other.

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Chapter Forty-Five

When it was time for Anna to leave Saturday afternoon, she dressed and met Alex downstairs in front of the Manor.

As soon as she saw him, it felt like her head cleared and she ran into his arms. He put her in the car and drove away. As soon as he was out of sight of the Manor, Anna burst into tears.

“Anna!” Alex exclaimed, pulling the car over and leaning over to gather her into his arms. “*Schatzi*, what’s wrong? Did Devin hurt you?”

She shook her head and sniffed. “No,” she whispered. “No, not at all.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

Anna wiped the tears from her eyes and stared at her hands. “I...,” she burst into tears again. “I enjoyed it,” she sobbed.

Alex got out of the car and Anna’s heart dropped into her stomach. *He’s angry.*

He opened the car door and pulled her out, hugging her to his chest. He stroked her hair and spoke soothingly to her. “*Schatzi*, it’s all right. Shh. It’s okay, Anna. Everything is okay.”

She shook her head. “I shouldn’t have enjoyed it,” she said through her tears.

“Anna.” He tipped her head up with his hand. “Anna, despite what I would like, he is still your Master. You have an innate desire to please him. You are still connected to him, even though it is weakened. I would never hold anything you do at Gatherings against you. It’s...how you’re programmed.”

She looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. “Really?”

He wiped her tears away. “*Ja*. It won't always be this way.” He held her close. “I love you, Anna.”

“I love you, Alex.”

The two of them spent a quiet evening at home together. Alex lay in bed, holding Anna close. He had been so relieved that nothing bad had happened while with Devin; he had kept his word. Alex had to admit he'd had his doubts. He was worried until he saw her.

“What did you and Aaron do last night?” Anna asked with a yawn as they lay naked in their bed after lovemaking. She had showered, they had eaten dinner and then gone up to their room and made love. Several times.

“Drank. We went to the bar with Seth and Tony and I lamented about how you weren't with me.” Alex chuckled. “I woke up with a headache.” A very bad headache. “Aaron was pissed that I didn't tell him before that I was going to marry you, but when I told him why, he forgave me.”

“Is he upset?”

“No. Well, maybe a little jealous. He still cares a great deal for you, Anna.” Aaron was still in love with her and Alex couldn't blame him. Aaron had also said that he was a little jealous of Anna.

Aaron and Alex had become friends shortly after Alex moved to San Francisco. One night they got drunk and woke up the next morning, having fucked several times in Alex's bed. Alex wasn't opposed to being with men, but he generally kept it within his team. He wasn't attracted to men in general, but out in the field, once the battle was over, sometime the need for release was very strong.

Over the years, their friendship had grown stronger and they slept together many times. Neither of them wanted any more than a friendship. They both liked women. But when the mood struck, they enjoyed one another's company. Seth and Tony would join in sometimes too.

Now that he and Anna were married, Alex wondered if he should tell her about his...varied sexual tastes. Being bisexual was expected amongst the Elders and Brothers as well. Alex had never ventured outside of his team before Aaron.

“Alex? Are you all right?” Anna stroked his cheek.

He took her hand and kissed the palm. “Yes,” he said absently.

Anna sat up on her elbow with worry in her eyes. “Did something happen last night? Did you get a call to go out?”

Alex shook his head. “No, Anna. I’ve put out the word that we’re taking a break. I shouldn’t receive any calls in the near future.”

Anna smiled at him. “I’m glad. I don’t want you to leave me.”

“I don’t want to leave you either.” He chewed his lip, debating whether or not to tell her what Aaron said while they were drinking.

After quite a few drinks, the topic of sex came up. Aaron had mentioned that if Anna was ever interested in a threesome, he would love to be a part of it. Seth and Tony had laughed and said they should make it a five-some. Alex had to admit, at least at the time, that the idea of being with Anna and the three other men was a turn on.

It wouldn’t be a bad thing for Anna to have a lover. His mother had one for when Vati traveled or was at the Schloss for long periods of time.

He turned onto his side and kissed her neck, trailing his hand down her back to her ass. He caressed her hole and she moaned softly.

“Do you like anal, Schatzi?”

She opened her eyes in surprise. “I...as long as it doesn’t hurt.” She studied him for a minute. “Do you?”

Alex looked at her intently and nodded. “I do.” He meant it in both ways, but didn’t assume that she would understand it.

He dipped his fingers into her pussy and then returned to running his fingers around her hole until she relaxed the muscles. When she did, he pressed a finger inside her. He knew she'd had anal many times before. Men were rather fond of raping women in the ass. The screams were rather magnificent. When he lost control, it was his favorite thing to do. But he didn't want to hurt Anna. Not in the least.

Her eyes closed and her lips parted as he gently thrust his finger in and out. Her breathing was shallow and caught in her throat a few times.

Suddenly her eyes flew open. "Alex?"

He stopped his movements. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head and then bit her lip. "It feels good," she admitted with a smile. "I like it." She bit her lip again. "Do you...." She cleared her throat and looked into his eyes and then looked away. "Do you like men?" she asked in a whisper.

Alex's jaw dropped. Had she been reading his mind?

Her eyes got wide and filled with tears. "I'm sorry, Alex," she said in a frightened tone. "I shouldn't have asked."

Alex blinked. "I'm not angry, Anna. Just...surprised. Why do you ask?"

Her cheeks turned pink. "When we were in the shower...in Germany...when I was...um, doing what you're doing to me...you seemed to like it. A lot."

It was the conversation opening that Alex was looking for, and now he was hesitant to pursue it. Especially with his finger up her ass. He slowly removed it and she whimpered.

"I have in the past," he admitted slowly.

"Are you gay?" she whispered, almost fearfully.

He gave her a gentle smile. "No. I like women quite a lot. I love *you*." He brushed her hair away from her face. "Does that bother you?"

She shook her head. “No,” she whispered. “When was the last time you were with a man?”

“Before I started dating Kirsty.” He and Aaron had shared Kirsty a few times, but never did anything with each other. Kirsty wouldn’t have allowed the attention being taken away from her.

“Do I know him?”

He nodded slowly. “Aaron.”

Anna gasped and her eyes got very wide. “Aaron? I didn’t think....” She was quiet for a long minute. “I had no idea.”

“It’s not like we advertised it, Schatzi. And we weren’t dating or anything. It was just sex. Even as open as the city is, I don’t go around bragging about fucking guys. Besides, there are only a handful of guys that I’ve ever been attracted to.”

“Really?” He could see the relief in her eyes.

He nodded.

“You don’t regret marrying me?”

“Anna, why would I regret marrying you? I love you. I care deeply for Aaron. He is my best friend. But I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

She snuggled close to him. “I’m glad.” She slid her hand down to his hip. “I liked what we did in the shower.”

“Did you? I enjoyed it too.” He slid his hand to her buttocks and caressed them. He felt his cock stirring again and heard Anna giggle.

She reached between them and stroked his hardening cock. “You have very impressive stamina.”

He rolled onto his back and pulled her onto his chest. “It’s all you, Schatzi. I don’t recall being this active since I was a teenager.”

She giggled again and sat up, bringing his cock up and stroking him. “I like it.”

Watching her hands on him made him even harder. He rolled her over onto her back and buried his cock deep inside her. “Me too.”

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Chapter Forty-Six

The next morning, Anna called Jenna and invited her and Matt over for dinner. Jenna wanted to go but said that Matt was upset about Anna getting married so quickly after Ben's death and didn't want to see her. Jenna said that she would see her in the morning.

Anna sat in the great room and stared at her phone with tears in her eyes.

"Anna, are you okay?" Alex asked, sitting next to her on the couch.

"Matt's angry at me for getting married," she said softly.

Alex put his arm around her. "I'm sorry, *Schatzi*," he said, kissing her hair. "He'll understand eventually. He knew Ben a long time, from what I understand. If things had been different, I would have come back to San Francisco and we would have dated a while before I asked you to marry me. But I couldn't wait while there was a way to get you safe."

Anna nodded and buried her face in his shirt. "I hope so." She sighed. "Will the dancers think of me the same way tomorrow?"

"*Schatzi*, we did what needed to be done. I won't apologize for what I did. If they have a problem with it, then tell them to speak to me about it." Alex's voice was firm.

"Aaron's not mad, though, right?"

"*Nein*. He's happy for us. He'll make sure no one bothers you."

Anna sighed. She had been looking forward to dancing again tomorrow.

"Do you want me to drive you in and pick you up?"

Anna looked up at him. "I'd love you to, but I don't want to be a bother."

Alex smiled. "You're never a bother. Besides, I should speak to Isaak about getting back on the board and we should let him know about the

baby.”

Anna smiled. Thinking about the baby always made her happy. Even when it made her sick. Last night she'd told Alex about letting Devin know about the pregnancy. Alex had been pleasantly surprised that Devin had not gotten upset.

Aaron came over in the early evening. He greeted them both with hugs. “I’m so happy for you, hon,” he said as he hugged Anna. He leaned back and looked into her face. “You’re glowing.”

Anna smiled shyly and glanced at Alex. “Did you tell him?”

“Tell me what?” Aaron asked.

Alex shook his head. “I thought you might want to tell him.”

She shook her head and blushed.

Alex walked over and put his arm around Anna’s waist. “She’s pregnant.”

Aaron’s eyes widened. “Holy shit, you move fast.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “It’s not mine, you idiot.” He grinned. “I’m good, but I’m not that good.”

Aaron laughed, then stopped. “Wait, I thought you couldn’t get pregnant.”

“There are ways, Aaron. We’re pretty sure it’s Ben’s.”

Aaron raised one brow and looked her up and down again. “That would explain a lot.”

Anna frowned in confusion.

Aaron grinned. “Your body was changing before you left. Travis and I...uh, talked about it...” He drifted off and glanced at Alex sheepishly and shrugged.

“You were talking about my wife’s body?” Alex asked with a glint in his eye.

Aaron’s cheeks turned pink. “It was before you married. She hated you at the time. And you terrorized her on Christmas Eve. We were trying to cheer her up.”

“‘We’?” Alex asked, cocking his brow and glanced at Anna. Anna bit her lip and glanced at Aaron. Alex pulled Anna into his arms. “You didn’t tell me about that last night.” He kissed Anna again and ran his hands down to her ass. “Intriguing...,” he murmured.

Aaron sighed. “You want me to leave you honeymooners alone?”

Anna turned in Alex’s arms to face Aaron. “Of course not, Aaron,” she said, giving him an affectionate smile.

Aaron stayed after dinner and they watched a movie downstairs. She liked having Aaron with them. She hadn’t spent time with him as often as she’d have liked in the last few months. When Anna and Ben had been dating, she mostly hung out with Jenna and Matt.

She couldn’t help but keep glancing at Aaron during dinner and the movie. She couldn’t imagine him and Alex having sex. Yes, many male ballet dancers were gay, but she could usually tell. Aaron always seemed...not gay. He flirted with women as much as any guy.

But Alex said they weren’t gay. Alex was the most masculine guy she’d ever met. And Alex definitely liked women.

Anna had no doubt that Alex loved her with everything he was. She was able to read Alex better than any man she’d ever known and he seemed to be able to read her now, too. The only emotions she got from Alex were affection for his friend. But she could feel his love for her very strongly.

She snuggled closer to Alex, and he kissed her head and held her tightly.

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Chapter Forty-Seven

Alex woke with Anna curled against his side. She shivered in her sleep, so he turned onto his side to pull her closer and pulled the covers up over her shoulders. He loved how she fit right against him. They were a perfect match. He could imagine waking like this every day for the rest of his life and it thrilled him. God, he loved this woman. And she was his.

Alex had doubted that Devin would keep his word and that he would try to hurt Anna in some way. But no, Anna had come back to him Saturday afternoon safely. Part of him was glad that she had been upset that she enjoyed herself. No, he didn't want her to be upset with herself or feel guilty, but Alex was relieved that, no matter what Devin might be able to do inside the Schloss, when she emerged, she would be her normal, loving self and still be in love with him. He had been worried that being with Devin would put distance between them. But Anna had barely left his side the rest of the weekend. Even in her sleep, she was right next to him.

He chuckled to himself. He wasn't used to sharing his bed yet, though he loved doing it. He just needed to be careful when he moved. Anna naturally just stayed right next to him all night. He knew he would get used to it eventually.

He was relieved that Anna hadn't felt awkward around Aaron last night. He saw her watching Aaron, but she still looked at him with affection. She still cared about him. Alex knew Aaron still cared about her as well, which was good. If anything ever happened to him, he knew Aaron would step in and make sure she was okay.

It was a morbid thought, but one he had to consider. Even though he wasn't going out on missions right now, eventually he would have to return. And when he went out, there was, unfortunately, always the possibility he

wouldn't return. Of course, his family would make sure she was taken care of as well. But Aaron was here in San Francisco; his family was in Germany. Aaron was much closer.

Alex pushed the thoughts aside. He didn't want morbid thoughts in his head right now. They hadn't even been married two weeks yet. He wouldn't go out for at least six months. That was as much time Vati had said he'd be able to get away with. As long as he was home when the baby was born. He wouldn't miss that for the world.

He glanced at the clock. He had just enough time to make love to her before she had to get up and get ready for class. He kissed her neck and brought his hand up to cup her breast. She moaned softly and turned to face him.

His heart filled with love as she opened her sleepy eyes and smiled at him. "Hi," she said softly.

He stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. "Hello, Schatzi." He leaned forward and kissed her, letting her feel his desire for her. She ran her hands up his side and around his back, pressing her soft body to his. Her hips pressed against his erection and he groaned. He cupped her ass and she hooked her ankle around his hips, opening her pussy for him to delve his fingers into.

He pushed her onto her back and positioned himself at her entrance. She looked up at him with desire-filled eyes.

"Please," she whispered.

He needed no further encouragement. He sank himself into her hot, silken folds and groaned softly.

"I love you, Anna."

She gazed up at him with love in her eyes. "I love you, Alex."

Anna held Alex's hand tightly as they made their way to the studio. She was nervous about seeing everyone again. They knew that she had gone to Germany, but most of them thought that she hadn't wanted to go. Now she was coming back, married to a man they all knew. The girls would be thrilled to see Alex, but how would they feel about her being his wife?

Alex squeezed her hand. "Everything will be all right, *Schatzi*," he said softly as he opened the door to the studio for her. She walked inside with Alex right behind her and people stopped to look at them.

"Anna!"

She looked to the back of the room where she saw Travis making his way to her. She grinned and hurried to him to hug him.

"Well, don't you look happy! What happened?" He looked at her with affection.

Alex strode up behind her. "Hello, Travis," he said, extending his hand.

"Alex!" Travis exclaimed with a grin, shaking Alex's hand. "When did you get back in town? Are you staying?"

Alex put his arm around Anna's waist. "We got back into town Thursday morning and yes, I'm staying."

"We?" Travis repeated with raised eyebrows.

Alex held Anna's left hand up, displaying the many sparkling diamonds she wore on her ring finger.

"Holy shit! You guys got married?"

A commotion ensued as they were surrounded by well-wishers. Anna was thankful that Alex stayed next to her and fielded the questions. Everyone was shocked and surprised at their announcement. It was no wonder. There had been no hint as to any affection between either of them. Alex explained that he'd been in love with Anna for months and wanted everything to be a surprise for her.

Many of the girls ooh-ed and ah-ed over her rings. A few that Anna hadn't ever really gotten along with hung back and stared at her. But for the most part, everyone was happy.

Anna managed to find Jenna and she gave her a big hug. "I'm so happy for you, Anna," she said. "I told Matt the reasons behind it. He'll get over it. He just needs to get used to the idea."

Anna blinked back tears and nodded. "I hope so. I never wanted to hurt anyone."

Jenna smiled. "I know. I understand why you guys did it the way you did." She hugged Anna again. "I'm glad you're safe."

"Anna," Alex called from across the room. He motioned to the stairs.

She looked back at Jenna. "We need to go talk to Isaak. I'll see you later." She hurried over to where Alex was waiting and they went up the stairs to Isaak's office.

Isaak looked at them with a big grin on his face. "I'm so happy for you two. And I'm very happy that Devin has lost his hold on you."

"Not completely," Alex corrected. "But it's much weaker than it had been."

"Any weakening is good in my book," Isaak grinned. "So, what's your married name now, Anna? I know Alex's full name is a mouthful."

Anna glanced at Alex and grinned. "Anna Kunze Herzogin von Hesse," she said slowly. "Right?" She grinned at Alex.

Alex smiled at her. "*Ja.*"

Isaak laughed. "That is a mouthful."

"Isaak, there is another matter we wanted to let you know about," Alex said slowly. "Anna's pregnant."

Isaak was speechless and stared at her.

“I’m sorry, Isaak,” Anna said quickly. “I didn’t know-”

“Oh, Anna, there’s nothing to apologize for,” Isaak interrupted. “It’s fine. Can’t say I’m not disappointed that I’ll be losing my best dancer so soon. But I’d rather you be happy and safe and not dancing, than dancing for me and still under Devin’s thumb.”

“Thank you, Isaak,” Anna said with a smile.

“How far along are you?”

“About six weeks, I think.”

“Are you okay to dance *Bayadere*?”

Anna nodded. “Alex’s uncle, who is a doctor, said I’d definitely be okay through February. I don’t know how fast I’ll start expanding and how comfortable you’d be with me dancing once I start showing more.”

“I appreciate that, Anna. I don’t want you hurting yourself because your balance is off. Let’s see how you are after *La Bayadere* is over. I’ll keep you cast and rehearsing as you are in *Jewels* and we’ll see how things progress. And of course, you’re welcome to dance with us as long as you are comfortable.”

“Thank you, Isaak,” Alex said. “I appreciate your openness.”

Isaak smiled. “Anya danced practically until you were born, Anna. She stopped performing at about five months, but each pregnancy is different. Just take it easy and don’t push yourself.”

Anna warmed at the thought of her mother dancing with Anna inside her. Her baby would have the same experience.

Anna had never been happier. Every day she fell more and more in love with Alex. He seemed determined to make up for the years of love she had

missed. He was gentle with her and found it easy to keep his temper under control at all times around her. Alex kept a very close eye on his bride, watching for any signs that Devin was being inappropriate with her.

Anna excelled in her rehearsals as Gamzatti, and she claimed that being in love with Alex was the reason. Even Isaak was amazed at her abilities. She adored dancing with Aaron; they became best friends as they spent so much time together dancing. This was fine with Alex.

Devin continued to behave himself around Anna, though it was increasingly frustrating to him. He didn't like playing second fiddle to Alex and didn't like the strength of his influence on her. He searched everywhere for a way to get rid of him. He and Anna spent Saturdays playing with their new toy, Jamie, who basked in their attention, and at the end of the month Devin decided it was time for their "play time" to increase in intensity. He made sure Anna didn't know that they were training Jamie for a purpose. For Jamie to become so infatuated with them that she would do anything for them. Even kill herself.

Alex and Anna kept the news of the baby quiet, though it was hard to keep her changing body a secret in the Company. It was a generally known secret that Anna was pregnant, but they respected her and Alex enough not to talk about it.

La Bayadere opened February twentieth and rehearsals intensified. When she had to stay late, Alex would come and watch rehearsals. He couldn't bear to be away from her more than was necessary, but didn't want to disturb her dancing. Anna liked having him there. She told him that he helped her dance better.

Alex, Aaron and Anna spent a lot of time together. Alex and Aaron would go out on Friday nights and then Aaron would come over for dinner on Saturday nights.

Gatherings were still calm for Anna. She was rarely used sexually, and when she was, the men never hurt her. Devin made sure she was treated carefully. With Jamie, however, he was getting rougher. They began introducing Jamie to erotic pain about halfway through the month. Anna and Devin would pinch and bite her and she would respond in ecstasy. Devin told Anna that he was proud of her.

Devin told Alex that he wanted a few hours a week with Anna once performances began. They agreed that Sunday after performances, she would meet Devin at the Manor and go home around two Monday afternoon.

Opening night was a dream for Anna. Alex sat with his parents and Kurt in the audience and she danced, as Alex said, like an angel. Alex, of course, sent her pink roses before the performance. She received rave reviews for her performance and was in heaven.

Kurt had allowed Gretchen to stay in the house for the sake of the children, but she had her own room and he considered himself single. As long as she lived at the *Gutshaus*, she was not allowed to date, but he was. If she wanted to date, then she needed to leave. And the children would stay with Kurt. She stayed.

Chapter Forty-Eight

After Sunday night's performance on opening weekend, Anna drove out to the Manor to see Devin in accordance with the arrangement that Alex and Devin had made. It was late, but Ian still met her at her car and escorted her inside. Their friendship had returned somewhat to normal.

"He's waiting for you with Jamie," Ian said as he led Anna to her room. He waited for her to change into her robe and then took her down the hall to Jamie's room.

When she opened the door, she saw Devin and Jamie on her bed. Jamie was naked, as usual, and sitting between Devin's feet sucking on his cock. As she and Devin made eye contact, her feelings settled into what had become the norm. Jamie was a conduit between herself and Devin. He could hurt her and Anna could feel and enjoy Jamie's pain. Anna was teaching Jamie to give her pain to Devin.

She wasn't jealous of Devin's attentions to Jamie. Anna knew her place with Devin and she didn't feel threatened by a mere mortal girl.

"Ah, Anna," Devin said, holding out his hand to her. "Greet your mistress, Jamie."

Jamie released Devin's cock and bowed to Anna. "Good evening, Mistress," she said softly.

Anna reached down and petted her hair and then walked to Devin. "Good evening, my lord," she said. She glanced at his cock and felt herself becoming aroused. Oh, the things that cock could do to her.

Devin smiled warmly at Anna. "Good evening, Baby."

He pulled her close and kissed her. Jamie watched with rapt attention as Devin lavished attention on Anna. He turned her to lie on the bed and thrust his cock inside her.

Anna moaned as Devin fucked her hard and fast. Within a few minutes, she was crying out his name as she came and Devin groaned out his release. He pulled out and Jamie immediately crawled onto the bed to lick Devin's cock clean and then licked his cum out of Anna's pussy, making Anna climax again.

"Good girl," she whispered, petting Jamie's head.

"Jamie has been doing very well, don't you think?" Devin said in a seductive voice.

Anna nodded in agreement. "I do."

"I think it's time for the next level of eroticism," Devin said caressing Jamie's breasts.

As Anna drove home the next afternoon, Jamie's screams still echoed in her ears. At the time, Anna had enjoyed what she was doing, but began to feel sick at what she'd done. Devin had forbidden her from telling Alex what went on, saying it wasn't any of his business. Granted, some of Jamie's screams had been due to massive orgasms while they were teaching her. She had begged them to keep going, but Devin said she had to wait until next week. Maybe it seemed worse than it had actually been.

Yes, that must be it.

But for now, Anna just wanted to get home and crawl into Alex's arms.
Home.

Devin had also mentioned to Anna about the Spring Gathering. He had said that Alex was welcome to attend, but that she would have to stay with Devin most of the time. This was where he really needed her, Devin said.

Anna didn't know how she felt about Alex coming. Yes, she wanted him there with her, but she hated the idea of him seeing her with Devin. But the

thought of a whole four-day weekend away from Alex was unbearable.

Anna pulled into the garage of their house. By the time she had reached for her bag and stepped out, Alex was at her side.

He pulled her into his arms. "I heard the garage door," he murmured against her hair. "I missed you."

Anna sighed and wrapped her arms around him. "I missed you, too."

"Did you shower there?" he asked after a while.

Anna nodded.

"*Gut*," he said and picked her up and carried her upstairs to their bedroom and made love to her. They stayed in bed the rest of the afternoon, talking and making love.

The rest of the performances went exceedingly well. Alex was at the theater a lot, mostly just to keep Anna company. She loved looking offstage to see her biggest fan watching, and that he could hold her between scenes. She felt like she was on top of the world.

Alex and Anna discussed the Spring Gathering and Alex decided he would come. He would stay in the background, but he felt like he needed to be there for her. When Alex told Devin he would be attending, Devin sounded pleased. That made Alex suspicious, but if anything happened to Anna, he would be there. If *Devin* tried anything, he would be there.

Anna had the first week of the month off, and she and Alex flew to British Columbia and had a mini vacation before she started dancing again. Her pregnancy was showing, but she was still hopeful that she'd be able to dance in *Jewels* before she had to stop performing. Alex encouraged her to

consider dancing again after the baby was a few months old. She didn't have to perform, but Alex knew how much she loved dancing. He wouldn't push her and told her he would support her in whatever decision she made.

Devin wasn't happy that she wouldn't be back on Friday night for the Gathering, but Alex told him that he hadn't been able to have her while she'd been performing either and he'd have to deal with it.

By Sunday morning, Anna was much rejuvenated by her time with Alex. It had been such a peaceful week together.

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Chapter Forty-Nine

Thursday morning, Alex threw his phone across the room at the fireplace as he let out a frustrated shout. He was thankful Anna wasn't there. He'd have time to calm down before she returned home. He'd even resorted to begging, but it hadn't done any good. He'd received a call. It had to be his team. He had to go.

What made things worse was that it had to be done over the next weekend; the weekend of the Gathering. Alex was initially suspicious of the timing, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized it had nothing to do with Devin. The target was in Russia. He knew the Elder that had requested it. It was just an important job.

An important job with the worst timing he could imagine. But he couldn't say no. That was part of the deal. You could put word out that you weren't available, but if an Elder called, you went.

Alex stared out the window for a long time, trying to find a way out of his predicament. Anna would be heartbroken. And perhaps a little frightened, considering what had happened the last time he'd returned home from a mission.

He and his team would stop in Frankfurt when the mission was over. It would take an extra day or two to get home, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about being compromised by Devin. They could relieve their stress there and then be home the next day. Vati could call Anna when he arrived home and let her know he was safe. Her mind would be eased and her body safe from him. Especially now that she was pregnant. He wanted to be sure he was completely in his right mind before he came anywhere near her.

Aaron. Aaron could watch out for her here at home. And Travis. Alex was sure he could convince Travis to go to the Gathering to keep an eye on

her. Travis was the only one who would be able to go on his behalf.

Alex glanced at the shattered phone on the floor next to the fireplace. These phones were very durable, but they weren't meant to be thrown against marble fireplaces. He sighed and stood. He retrieved the pile of plastic and electrical components and made his way downstairs to the theater where Seth and Tony were playing video games.

"I need a new phone," Alex said, walking down the steps.

The men looked at him with surprised expressions. Seth raised his eyebrow at the pile that Alex dumped on the wooden coffee table in front of him. "What happened?"

"I threw it against the fireplace." Alex collapsed onto the couch and ran his fingers through his hair. "I got a call."

"I thought you put out word we weren't available," Tony said.

"I did. It's Vitaly. You know how he is." The Russian Elder was rather particular when it came to getting things done.

"It's still cold in Russia," Tony grumbled.

Alex let out a chuckle. "Yes. It is." He sighed. "How am I going to tell Anna?"

The other men cursed.

"She's not going to take it very well," Seth said quietly.

"I know. It also means we can't be at the Gathering next weekend."

"I think I'd rather be in Russia than listen to Devin all weekend," said Tony.

"No kidding," Alex mumbled. "But I feel like I'm abandoning Anna to him by leaving."

"You don't think...," Seth began.

"No. I don't think Devin had anything to do with it."

Alex played with his wedding band. The one Anna had picked out for him. It had her name and the city they lived in engraved inside. He hadn't told her, but the reason he did that was for identification purposes. If something happened to him and there was no other way to identify him, her name and the city would give whoever found them enough information to locate her and tell her...

Alex shook his head. No, he wouldn't think about that. He was coming home. To her. To their baby. She needed him. And he needed her.

Anna's stomach churned as she drove into the garage. Something was not right with Alex. She didn't know how she knew, she just did. Alex's car was in the garage, as was the SUV. They were all home.

She grabbed her bag and hurried inside. Alex was in the great room with a computer on his lap. That was unusual.

"Alex?" she asked softly.

He jumped when she spoke. He put the computer on the table in front of him and hurried to her, wrapping his arms around her.

She felt the desperation in his embrace. It worried her. "Alex, what's wrong?"

He didn't say anything, but led her back to the couch. The computer screen showed a map of Russia.

She looked into her husband's beautiful eyes. They looked worried and sad. She reached up and stroked his cheek. "What's wrong?" she whispered. A million things ran through her head as to what could be the matter.

Alex swallowed. "I got a call. For a mission."

Anna's heart fell to her stomach. "What?" she whispered. "I thought you said you wouldn't get any for a few months."

“*Schatzi*, I can put word out, but they don't have to listen.”

She was afraid to ask details, but needed to know. “When do you leave?”

“Wednesday.”

“You’re not going to be at the Gathering.”

Alex shook his head sadly. “I won’t make it, *Schatzi*. I’m so sorry,” he whispered. He grasped her hand and held it tight as he gazed into her eyes.

Tears ran down her cheeks. “When will you be back?”

“I’m hoping to be back the following Tuesday. But I can’t promise that. These things can...take time.”

Anna nodded, unable to speak over the lump in her throat. A week. A week without her beloved husband.

Alex gathered her in his arms and they sat holding each other for a long time.

“The house will be a bit crowded until we leave,” he said softly a while later.

“The others are here?”

“Not yet. Greg and Jason should be here soon. Erich will be here tomorrow with Sebastian. Jesse and Michael, too.”

“Okay,” she sniffed.

“I’ll keep my evenings free so we have time together. I’ll try and get the work done during the day while you’re gone.”

Anna nodded, feeling miserable.

“You can call Vati anytime you need to. I’ll speak to Aaron and let him know to keep you company. If you want, he can stay here with you. Or Jenna.”

“I don’t want anyone except you,” Anna said softly.

“I know, *Schatzi*. But I’d feel better if someone was here with you.”

“Whatever you’d like, Alex. I can’t really think right now.” Her mind felt like a jumbled mess of goo and she couldn’t think straight.

Alex held her tightly until dinner was ready. She didn’t eat much, even though Alex encouraged her. When he mentioned the baby, she gave in and tried to eat.

Greg and Jason arrived later that evening. Alex got them settled in and then he took Anna to bed and held her until she fell asleep.

To Anna’s misery, the week went too quickly. Devin insisted on her attending the Friday Gathering. They spent time with Jamie on Saturday morning.

Devin said he was very pleased with how Jamie had been trained. She would do anything for them now. Anything. And she would get immense pleasure from it. Devin handed Jamie a wire brush and told her to fuck herself with it. She did it eagerly and bled profusely as she cried out in pleasure.

Sunday night, after they made love, Anna lay in Alex’s arms. Suddenly, an unexpected, overwhelming feeling of dread came over her that brought tears to her eyes. She turned over and looked intently into Alex’s face.

“I don't want you to go.”

Alex gave her an understanding look. “*Schatzi*, I know. I don't want to go either. But I have to.”

She shook her head. “No,” she said softly. “I have a really bad feeling about it.” Tears came to her eyes. “Please don't leave me.”

Tears welled up in Alex's eyes. "*Schatzi*...I...I can't not go. I can get into a tremendous amount of trouble if I don't."

Her eyes widened. "You'd get punished?"

Alex nodded. "A disobedient assassin is of no use to the Brotherhood."

"You mean they'd..." She didn't want to finish the sentence.

"I would definitely not be here next week if I don't go."

She swallowed and tried to push away the sickening feeling in her stomach. "I need you, Alex," she whispered. "I need you to come home to me."

"I need to come home to you too, Anna." He wrapped a lock of her hair around his fingers. "I won't abandon you."

She clung desperately to him as she fell asleep, and her sleep was troubled with dreams of Alex being taken from her.

Aaron kept a very close eye on Anna Monday and Tuesday during rehearsals. She was distracted when she danced and anytime there was a lull in the dancing, she just stood silently and stared at the ground. More than once, he had to get her attention to begin the dance.

Aaron was thankful Isaak was sympathetic and let it slide. He knew Alex was leaving in the morning and she was having a hard time coping. Some of the other dancers mumbled behind her back, but Aaron was firm in defending her. They had no idea what she was going through.

Aaron followed her home Tuesday after class. He was going to stay the night at their house so that she was not alone when Alex left early the next morning. He had promised Alex he would watch out for her, and Aaron would keep his promise, no matter what.

Anna stayed quiet all afternoon and evening, holding Alex's hand and not leaving his side for a moment. Her eyes were full of fear and Aaron's heart went out to her.

Alex hadn't told him what he was doing, but he knew that he did special things for the Brotherhood. He'd never wanted to know more. But from Anna's reaction to his leaving, it didn't seem very safe. A simple business trip would make Anna miss him terribly, but she seemed fearful that he wouldn't return.

Alex had told him that he was to comfort Anna in any way he could. If she needed someone to make love to her, then he wanted Aaron to be the one to do it.

Aaron didn't know if he could handle being that intimate with Anna again, knowing Alex would be returning and he would once again be separated from her. But he loved Anna and would do as Alex asked. She obviously couldn't drink her way out of misery. Sex would help. It had helped her cope with Ben's death.

Alex especially told him to be aware of Anna when she returned on Monday. She would return sometime Monday afternoon, and Alex wanted to make sure someone was here when she got home. Aaron had spoken to Isaak and took that day off so he could be at the house when she arrived home.

Aaron felt out of place at dinner. All of the guys gathered around the table were big guys, like Alex and Seth and Tony. He had met Erich and Greg, but none of the other guys. They all looked like they were in the military. Anna's fears began to make sense if they were doing some sort of military operation. He'd never suspected Alex was involved in something like that, but now that he thought about it, it made sense.

Chapter Fifty

Alex lay in the darkness trying to sleep. He needed to sleep, but couldn't. Anna had cried herself to sleep an hour earlier after a long lovemaking session.

He had spent an incredible amount of time making love to her. He wanted to memorize every part of her to take with him. He wanted to leave her with happy memories to keep with her while he was gone. He wanted her to know she was loved.

He had wracked his brain to death this last week, trying to figure out a way to get out of his mission, but there was no out. He had to go. He had to leave Anna behind. He kept telling himself it was only a week, but it didn't soothe the ache in his heart every time he looked into her sad eyes.

She was trying so hard to be brave for him, which made him feel even worse. Fuck, there was nothing that would take away his guilt for leaving. Maybe it was time to retire. But retirement wasn't easy. Not until his father died, and he was in no hurry to say goodbye to Vati. Alex wasn't ready to be an Elder yet.

“Alex.”

Alex jumped at the whisper. Seth stood over him. He looked at his watch. It was three-thirty. “Fuck, why didn't you wake me earlier?” They were supposed to wake him at two-thirty so they could pack up the SUVs.

“Relax, Alex. We loaded up already. We wanted to let you sleep and have more time with Anna.”

Alex relaxed and his heart warmed. “Thanks, Seth.”

“Take your time getting up. Everything's ready. All you need to do is take care of Anna.”

Gratitude filled him as Seth left the room. He had such a great team of men.

He looked at Anna sleeping peacefully next to him. Her face was fuller than it was when they married. He ran his hand over her expanding belly and was overcome with emotion. His eyes filled with tears as he thought about their future together.

She was happy and healthy and safe. The baby was healthy. He couldn't ask for anything else. The baby would be born at the end of the summer, near his birthday in August. He couldn't wait to hold the tiny bundle in his arms.

He debated if he should dress first and then wake her or wake her before he got up. He didn't want to leave her presence any sooner than he had to. He leaned over to kiss her and whispered her name.

Anna slowly opened her eyes in the darkness. It took her a moment to remember why Alex was waking her this early in the morning. When she remembered, sadness enveloped her heart.

"You have to get up?" she whispered.

Alex nodded. "The SUVs are packed though. The guys took care of it already."

Anna smiled as her heart warmed. "They're good guys."

"Ja, they are." He leaned over and kissed her. "I need to get dressed."

"Can I come?"

Alex chuckled. "Of course."

Anna followed Alex into the dressing room and closet area. She dressed in a t-shirt and sweats while Alex dressed in black BDU pants and t-shirt and boots.

“You look very sexy in that,” she said.

“Do I?” He grinned and turned so she could see all sides of him.

“Oh, yes,” she giggled.

He walked up and put his arms around her. “Oh, *Schatzi*, I’m going to miss you terribly.”

“Me too,” she whispered. She tried to ignore the dread in her heart as he held her.

They walked downstairs to where the guys were hanging out in the great room. She looked at each of them, knowing and caring for each one of them.

Aaron sat on the edge of one of the couches near Seth. He looked up when she and Alex entered the room and gave her a smile. She was thankful he was here and that she wouldn’t be left in an empty house.

Frau Gersten had laid out drinks and breakfast pastries, which were being eaten. She, of course, would still be here, but Anna didn’t have much of a relationship with her. She was always very polite and respectful, but not especially warm.

Alex held her close as he ate and chatted quietly with Sebastian and Erich. Anna leaned her head on his chest, but didn’t eat. She wasn’t hungry. She just wanted to be with Alex.

Alex ran his hands over her belly. He did that a lot. She loved that he had embraced the baby whole-heartedly.

The dread in her heart continued to grow as time passed and too soon it was time for them to leave. She walked with Alex to the entryway, hugged each of the men, and then returned to Alex.

“I love you, Anna,” Alex said holding her tight against his chest. “I will be with you in your heart while I am gone.” He cradled her cheek and looked her in the eye. “I will return to you, *Schatzi*.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she nodded. “You better,” she said in a cracked whisper.

He smiled as tears filled his eyes. “You’ve made me the happiest man, Anna. I am so proud to be your husband.”

Anna’s smile wavered with her tears. “I love you so much.”

Alex kissed her hard and held her so tight she could hardly breathe.

He pulled slowly away, his lips lingering on hers. She took his hands and kissed both his rings.

“*Ich liebe dich,*” she said in halting German. She hoped she hadn’t butchered the words.

“Oh, Anna,” he said in a broken voice. “I love you, too. So much.” His eyes showed how thrilled he was at her attempt at his native language. He sighed and looked into her face for a long moment. “I must go.”

Anna nodded, trying not to cry more than she already was. She walked with Alex to the door. The other guys had already gone outside.

Alex hugged her one last time and then stepped away. “I will see you soon, *mein Schatzi.*”

Anna gave him a brave smile and a small nod. He gave her one last loving look and then walked outside, closing the door behind him.

She stepped to the window and watched as he got into the front seat of the first SUV. He looked back and waved at her. She waved back and the vehicles disappeared around the curved road a moment later.

She stood there for a moment, staring out the window at the empty spots on the street. Aaron came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

A sob escaped her throat and she fell to her knees. Aaron knelt behind her and hugged her as she cried. When the tears had subsided enough for her to be able to walk, he took her up to her bedroom and held her until she fell asleep.

Aaron once again watched Anna closely during class. She was quiet, but seemed determined to dance as well as she could. She was more focused today than she had been yesterday. Maybe staying busy would help her not miss Alex so much.

Most of the other dancers were extra nice to her. They liked Anna. She was sweet and kind.

Travis, Jenna and Aaron took her out to lunch. She was quiet, but not overly upset. Aaron admired her composure.

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Chapter Fifty-One

Anna ate her lunch for the sake of the baby. She wasn't hungry in the least. But the baby needed food. So she ate.

Her heart ached for Alex. He'd been gone less than twelve hours and it hurt so badly, knowing that he wouldn't be there when she got home tonight. Their home. The beautiful home that Alex had bought her.

Aaron had offered to stay with her tonight and she accepted. Her dreams had been troubled lately and she was afraid of sleeping alone. She had terrible dreams of things happening to Alex. What scared her most was that her dreams were sometimes real and the thought of anything happening to Alex terrified her. What would she do if something happened...?

No. It didn't do any good for her to worry about that. He would come home to her. He promised. She rested in his promise.

Her phone ringing interrupted her thoughts. It was Devin's ring.

"Hello, Devin."

"Hello, Baby. How are you doing?"

"Okay."

"Did Alex leave?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry he was called away, Anna. I can imagine how difficult it is for you."

"Thank you, Devin," she said in a quiet voice, trying not to cry.

"I am having dinner with the Elders at the hotel tomorrow night. I need you to be there. We'll drive up to Santa Rosa Friday morning."

"Okay," Anna said meekly. "What time do you want me at the hotel?"

"Five."

She would have to leave rehearsal early. “All right. May I change at the hotel after rehearsal?”

“Of course. I’ll be at the hotel around two. Tommy and Tyler are in town as well.”

“All right,” she said softly. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She put the phone down on the table next to her and looked up at her friends with a small smile. Tommy’s presence would certainly help her feel better.

Anna rode the bus up to the hotel after leaving rehearsal early. Isaak hadn’t been happy about it, but knew better than to question Devin. She’d ridden to the studio with Aaron that morning.

She fiddled with her wedding rings as she waited for her stop. She’d left her engagement ring at home, thinking maybe Devin wouldn’t mind just the wedding bands. She hoped he wouldn’t make her take them off. She felt connected to Alex with them on.

The bus stopped in front of the hotel and she wheeled her small suitcase into the hotel lobby and to the elevators. Devin had texted her the hotel room number and she went straight up to the suite.

She knocked on the door and Devin answered a few moments later. He greeted her with a deep kiss and led her inside.

Tom Pendleton sat on the couch, sipping a drink. He smiled when he saw her and stood to greet her. “Hello, Anna. How are you?”

“Good, thank you,” she replied. “You?”

“Much better now that you’re here.”

Anna giggled, which made him grin. “Tommy will be happy to see you.”

Anna blushed. "I'm looking forward to seeing him as well."

"Anna," Devin said. "Why don't you shower and get ready for dinner?"

"Excuse me," she said to Tom, and turned and followed Devin into the bedroom.

"You have something sexy to wear tonight?" Devin asked as he showed her the bathroom.

Anna nodded and pulled out a purple empire waist dress that was short and low cut. It hid her belly without making her look too pregnant.

"Good. Hurry and get ready. Dinner is at six-thirty."

Anna showered quickly, styled her hair and did her makeup in record time. She smiled, remembering how long it used to take her to get ready.

"Anna!" Tommy exclaimed as she walked back out to the living room, jumping up and walking quickly to her. He embraced her tightly and kissed her passionately.

Anna gazed shyly into his excited blue eyes. "Hi, Tommy."

"God, you look incredible, Anna." He glanced down at her cleavage. "Really incredible."

Anna blushed. "Thank you."

"Did Devin make you get a boob job?" he asked quietly.

"I...uh." Devin had apparently not told him she was pregnant. She glanced at Devin, who smiled and nodded. She looked back at Tommy. "No. I'm...pregnant."

Tommy's jaw dropped open. "How...? But I thought..."

Anna shrugged. "I've been told it happens sometimes."

She looked past Tommy to Devin, who was watching them. Something in his eyes made her nervous and she quickly looked back at Tommy. She wondered if she should mention that she got married as well, but decided she should ask Devin first.

“Hey, Anna.” Tyler walked up and grinned at her.

“Hello, Tyler,” she said nervously. When he had been home at Christmas, he had roughed her up and she was a little afraid of him now.

He looked boldly at her breasts and grinned. “Fuck, you do look good, Anna.” He reached out and trailed his finger along the edge of her dress. “Very nice.”

She swallowed and gave him a timid smile.

Devin walked up and took her hand. “Time for dinner.”

The Elders and their Sons met downstairs in the restaurant. They ate their long, succulent meal in a private room. More than one of the younger men came up to Anna and caressed her breasts. But they weren't hurting her, so she really couldn't protest that much. If at all. She just had gotten used to being treated a certain way and was uncomfortable with men other than Devin or Alex touching her.

After dinner, Devin took her back to their room.

“Undress, Anna,” he commanded.

Anna did as she was told and then stood in front of Devin. He looked her over. He ran his hands over her breasts and belly and smiled. “Beautiful,” he murmured. “Undress me.”

Anna unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders, then removed the rest of his clothing. She couldn't help the twinge of sadness, wishing she were with Alex instead of Devin.

She saw a flash of anger in Devin's eyes and he grabbed her wrists, holding them tightly.

She winced. “Ow,” she whimpered. “Devin you're hurting me.”

He pulled her forward onto the bed and turned her on her back. He held her hands above her head and leaned over her. "Alex is not here. I am." His eyes were black and cold. "Don't let your attention stray again."

Anna tugged her arms to try and free herself, but he held her firmly in his grip.

"Yes, Devin," she whispered, blinking away tears. Would he hurt her? He wasn't supposed to, but didn't think it was a good idea to remind him.

He leaned down and kissed her neck and caressed her breasts with one hand. He held her hands with the other one. She whimpered as he twisted her nipple.

"You've gone soft, Anna," he murmured against her breast. He nudged her legs apart and thrust inside her with one swift movement.

"Aack!" she cried out as he forced his way into her body. "Please, Devin. That hurts."

He gave her a wicked grin and thrust hard while holding her hands. She wiggled, trying to get away from the pain. She hadn't been hurt in a long time and she wasn't used to it anymore.

She struggled against his grip and tried to get her knee in between their bodies. "No, Devin. Please don't." She was afraid he would hurt the baby. The thought made her indignant and her eyes flashed with anger. "No! I am an Elder-Mistress," she said in a commanding tone. "You are to treat me with respect."

Devin narrowed his eyes and slapped her across the face. "Don't you dare take an arrogant tone with me, bitch."

She cried out when he hit her and couldn't stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks. She used all her strength to fight against him, using her legs especially. She managed to get her knee up and pushed him off enough

that she could scramble off the bed, but he caught her before she got more than a step away.

She screamed as he pulled her back in bed by her hair and pushed her face down onto the bed. He held down her upper body and she felt him press his cock between her ass cheeks.

“No!” she screamed, but he pressed forward and ripped into her ass. It had been months since she’d had anal and it felt like her first time all over again.

He grabbed her hair and pushed her face into the mattress. She couldn’t breathe and felt herself getting dizzy and she stopped struggling. He pulled her head up and she gasped for air.

“Don’t you dare say no to me,” he said between clenched teeth. He kept his body weight on her, but released her head.

She sobbed as he rammed himself into her ass repeatedly until he came.

He pulled out and stood. “Get some sleep. We leave early in the morning.” He put his pants on and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Anna trembled as she scooted underneath the covers and curled up into a ball. How could he treat her like that? Didn’t he know that Alex would be furious?

Alex! She cried out silently. Her heart broke with missing her loving husband, but despite the pain in her body she fell asleep, crying for Alex.

She stood in a large room. It looked like a study, with bookshelves all around her. Several men in black knelt on the floor with their heads bowed and their arms behind their backs. Three men stood above them, looking menacing and holding large machine guns.

A tall man with dark hair sprinkled with gray entered the room. He had a neatly trimmed beard and blue eyes. He stood for a moment, looking at the men, then pointed to one of the kneeling men. Another man walked behind the kneeling man and pulled him to his feet and then pushed him forward. The man's face was badly bruised, but his blue eyes were defiant and he stood tall in front of the bearded man. She felt she should know him. Felt...something. But her mind refused to identify him. As if some barrier—time, distance?—separated her from the knowledge of who he was.

The bearded man spoke in an unknown language. The blue-eyed man glared at the bearded man and spoke in the same language. The blue-eyed man was angry and spat in the bearded man's face.

The man who had pushed the blue-eyed man forward put his hand on the blue-eyed man's shoulder and forced him to his knees. It was a struggle and only after the blue-eyed man had been kicked in the legs and knees several times did he fall to his knees, panting heavily. His hair was pulled to bring his face up to look at the bearded man, but his eyes were still defiant. His eyes narrowed and he spoke in a threatening tone. The bearded man laughed and the blue-eyed man struggled to stand and lunged at the man. The third man hit the blue-eyed man in the head with the butt of his gun and he slumped to the floor.

The room faded from sight.

Chapter Fifty-Two

“Time to wake up, Anna,” Devin said softly. He nuzzled the back of her neck and Anna opened her eyes, the threads of the enigmatic dream leaving her confused.

“Yes, Devin,” she said automatically. She sat up without looking at him. “How long do I have to get ready?” she rubbed her eyes, willing her headache to go away. She felt sad. She hadn’t been sad in a long time. She didn’t like it.

Devin slid his arm around her waist and kissed her shoulder. “About an hour.”

“Yes, Devin,” she whispered. She didn’t move until he let go of her and then went to the bathroom to get ready.

She didn’t speak at breakfast except to answer questions that Devin asked her. She ate, but only for the baby’s sake.

As they were leaving the hotel room, Devin grasped her upper arm. He lifted her head with his finger and gave her a gentle smile.

“I’m sorry I got angry last night, Anna. I...” He sighed. “This is an important weekend and I’ve been under a lot of stress.” He petted her hair. “I shouldn’t have hurt you the way I did.”

Anna blinked in surprise. He was apologizing? That didn’t happen often, if at all. She gave him a small smile. “It’s okay, Devin,” she said softly.

He kissed her gently on the mouth and when he pulled away she was breathless. He certainly knew how to kiss.

Devin took her hand and led her downstairs to a waiting limo, similar to the one they used in Washington DC. Memories of what happened on the

way to that Gathering made Anna shudder as she got inside and saw some of the Elder-Sons.

Tommy smiled warmly at her when he saw her and she smiled back.

The rest of the Elders and their sons arrived shortly thereafter, and the limo pulled away from the curb, heading north out of San Francisco.

Devin spoke with the other Elders and kept his arm around Anna. Relief flooded her body as time passed and Devin kept her by his side. She wouldn't have minded spending time with Tommy, but she didn't dare ask Devin to do so. She didn't want to anger him again.

Anna stared out the window and played with her wedding rings absentmindedly. She daydreamed about being with Alex again. *Only a few more days and he'll be home.*

They arrived mid-morning to a heavily wooded and hilly area. Several long lodges lined the road leading up to a gigantic grassy field, similar to the one from the Summer Gathering, only there was no lake. Just trees. A giant, polished-stone eagle sat in the middle of the far side of the field. Large pavilions lined the other three sides of the field. There were more here than at the last Gathering.

They got out and Devin took her to the largest pavilion, set up close to the eagle. Maggie and Ian were there waiting for them.

"Any problems?" Devin asked Ian as they arrived.

"No, sir. The girls are here and getting ready. No one else has arrived yet."

"Good." Devin turned to Anna. "Remove your jewelry. All of it."

Anna stared at Devin dumbfounded. "But Dev-"

His hard eyes stopped her mid word. “You are not Alex’s wife here. You are my Mistress. I don't want there to be confusion. Take. It. Off.”

Anna sat down on a cushion and removed her bracelet, her necklace and her rings. Maggie handed her a silk bag and told her she would put it with her clothing after she changed.

“Thank you, Maggie,” Anna said softly. She put the jewelry in the bag and handed it back to Maggie. She felt naked and vulnerable.

Devin stepped behind her and fastened a necklace around her neck like the one she wore before she was married. “Maggie, get her changed and then bring her back.”

“Yes, Master,” Maggie said and took Anna’s hand and led her back through the woods to a large wooden lodge.

Anna could hear giggling and chatting as she approached. The women greeted her in unison and she smiled nervously and said hello. Her confidence in being an Elder-Mistress had been shattered last night with Devin’s rape. Maybe in Germany she could be treated respectfully, but not here.

Maggie took her to a small room and got her ready with oils and perfumes, and then dressed her in a knee length white dress. It was sheer as usual, but with an empire waist to hide her belly. The top barely contained her breasts.

Devin was in their pavilion lounging on one of the chaises when Anna returned. Kaveh and the two other Immortals were there as well. She glanced at them nervously, wondering why they were there.

Devin smiled. “Good, you’re back.” He stood and took her to the bed in the second room of the pavilion. “Lie down.”

Kaveh had followed them and stood over her like a giant bronze statue.

She glanced at Devin and then lay back on the bed on her back. Were they going to have sex with her?

Devin took hold of her hands and held them while Kaveh sat on the bed and lifted her dress up to put his hands on her belly.

“What are you doing?” she asked in a shaking voice.

“Checking the baby,” he said, closing his eyes and concentrating.

“Why?” A sickening feeling came over Anna as she watched Kaveh smile as he ran his hands over her skin.

“Because I have to make sure it’s ready.” He opened his golden eyes and looked at her steadily.

“Ready? Ready for what?”

A grin spread over Kaveh’s face and he looked at Devin. “You didn’t tell her?”

Anna looked between the two men. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

“It was more fun to let her think what she wanted to think.” Devin chuckled.

Frightened tears came to her eyes. “Devin, what are you talking about?”

Devin looked at her with such cold eyes it chilled her to the bone. “Your baby. I gave it to you. It’s not Ben’s baby. It’s Kaveh’s. He impregnated you so I could have it tonight. I need a...sacrifice.”

Anna’s eyes widened in horror as he spoke. Her baby! Hers and Alex’s baby. No, it couldn’t be true. She shook her head and tried to get up. “No, this is my baby. Mine and Alex’s.”

They both laughed and held her down on the bed. “No, Anna. You are carrying it for me. An Immortal baby is very powerful. Exactly what I need to...solidify my position in the Brotherhood.” Devin grinned wickedly. “And I am going to take it from you. Tonight. You can’t stop me.”

“No!” Anna screamed, and fought as hard as she could to get up. But the two men were much stronger than her.

Devin held her hands down and Kaveh held her ankles with one of his huge hands and pulled out his enormous cock out with his other. “Just some last minute...infusion, shall we say?” Kaveh said and opened her legs. He held her knees against her chest so she couldn’t kick and pressed himself inside her body.

Her stomach churned as he pushed further and further inside. She screamed as he went especially deep. “You don’t like me in your womb, Anna?” Kaveh asked sarcastically. “I’m hurt.”

Every thrust sent pain shooting through her body. They held her so tight that she couldn’t do anything but lay there and take it. She sobbed and begged him to stop, but he ignored her. He moaned and enjoyed himself while she cried.

He gave one last thrust as he emptied himself into her womb and groaned.

When he pulled out, she whimpered and rolled to her side when they released her, holding her stomach in pain. Her face was wet from her tears and her heart ached so badly she thought she would die.

Alex wouldn’t have allowed this to happen. Why did he have to get called away this weekend? He would be enraged when he got home and found out what Devin had done.

No, she couldn’t let Devin take the baby. It was their baby. But it wasn’t. It was Devin’s baby.

But what if Devin was lying? Why did he want the baby? How would he take it? Would he take it like he took her? Is that what he meant?

Oh, she couldn’t think straight. She was hurting so badly. Maybe a nap would help clear her head. She closed her eyes and tried to think about

Alex. Her beloved Alex.

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Chapter Fifty-Three

Anna awoke to a cool breeze on her face. She looked up and saw people in the distance, but the pavilion was empty.

Run.

She had to escape. She couldn't let Devin take her baby. No. She would run. Alex would find her.

She looked around and sat up slowly. Her shoes were nowhere in sight, but that couldn't stop her. She had to flee. The road wasn't far and there were shops there. She could call Aaron or Wilhelm. They would help her.

Slowly she stood and backed away to the curtained back of the pavilion. She felt around for an opening and slipped through it. Looking around, she saw a faint path leading into the woods. She crept silently along the path, keeping a watch for any movements. She saw nothing but trees and kept going, quicker this time. Rocks cut her feet, but she couldn't stop; she had to escape.

She heard a sound and stopped and crouched down. Holding her breath, she looked around and saw a man close by. He looked vaguely familiar, but didn't know his name. By his dress, she guessed him to be from Devin's Manor. She kept low in the bushes and crept away.

She stopped a few minutes later to look back and he was gone. Anna sighed in relief and straightened, but continued walking as quickly as she could. The rocks and twigs cut into her feet, but she couldn't think about that now. She walked for several more minutes and then the path stopped.

"No!" she exclaimed softly.

She looked around, but saw no signs of the path. As she contemplated what to do next, she heard a shout behind her. She turned and saw the man from earlier walking toward her. Instinct kicked in and she ran as fast as she

could through the trees. By the sound of his crashing footsteps, he was not far behind, and she searched desperately for a hiding spot. She couldn't outrun him. She had to hide. She looked up at the trees as she ran, but she wouldn't be able to climb fast enough.

Suddenly the ground before her disappeared and she skidded down an embankment into a creek. A very cold creek. She heard the man shout and she looked up to see a shadow across the creek behind some vines.

A hiding place?

She scrambled through the freezing water and found a narrow pathway to what turned out to be a shallow cave. The vines weren't vines, but blackberry bushes. She ignored the thorns and pushed through the thick leaves, disappearing into the shadow just as the man appeared at the top of the opposite embankment. She could see him through the limbs of the bush, but he didn't seem to be able to see her. She sighed silently in relief.

Two more men appeared behind him and they looked around.

"I saw her go down," the first man said. "She had to have gone this way."

They made their way down the embankment and stood by the creek.

"She couldn't have gotten far. She's barefoot."

They split up, taking the opposite directions on the banks of the creek, and the first man crossed the creek and climbed up the other side, passing very close to where she was hiding. She held her breath until his footsteps disappeared.

Anna sighed in relief. She was safe...for now. She leaned forward and rested her head in her hands. She hurt, inside and out. Her feet were bruised and cut, and the scrapes from the thorns started to sting. She shivered with cold and fear; she was still wet from falling into the creek.

How long would she have to wait? She realized she hadn't planned this well. Or at all. She just ran. She should have looked around for her shoes at least. Then she wouldn't be at such a disadvantage.

Anna didn't hear anything for a long while and decided to try to make it further away from the Gathering. She had to get away.

As she crept out of her hiding spot, she heard men shouting. She gasped and flung herself back into her cave just as the men came into view. Devin stopped at the top of the hill. She could see the fury in his face, even from this distance. He looked around for a few minutes, and his eyes locked on her hiding spot. She could feel him looking at her through the cover of the bushes.

"Anna, it was very foolish of you to run away," he said in a calm voice, making his way down the embankment. "I will always find you. I am still bonded to you. I can feel you."

She clasped her hand over her mouth to keep from whimpering. Her eyes widened as he walked right to her hiding spot. She scooted back as far as she could, but it wasn't far enough.

"Get rid of these bushes," he said, turning back to the men.

Several men came forward and pulled at the vines. They cursed as the thorns bit into their hands, but picked up branches to pull the vines aside.

Anna huddled in the darkness as her protection slowly disappeared. When the vines were gone, and she could be seen, Devin stood at the opening of the cave, frowning down at her.

"Very foolish, Anna."

He grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. She cried out in pain as he pulled her out of the cave and made her stand in the ankle deep freezing water.

"You look like shit. Clean yourself up."

Anna shivered and looked at him. “Here?”

“Yes.” His eyes narrowed and blackened.

She bent down with trembling legs and splashed the icy water on her arms and legs.

“Faster,” Devin growled, then pushed her forward so that she fell onto her hands and knees in the water.

She shrieked and stood quickly, trying to escape the cold of the water, but Devin grabbed her hair and pulled her back. He pulled her forward several feet to where the water was deeper and dunked her under the water. She squealed and gasped as the cold enveloped her body. He pulled her out for a moment before wrapping her hair even tighter around his fist. Once more, he forced her down, pushing her face under water. She gasped for air as he yanked her up.

“Devin, pl—” she gasped and Devin pushed her back under again. He held her under and she fought him. He pulled her out of the water just as she felt the blackness overtake her.

He dragged her to the bank and shoved her down onto the rocks and mud. Her hands sank into the mud as she coughed up water. Her wet hair was plastered against her face and body. She trembled from cold and terror.

“Get up,” he snarled, pulling her up by her hair.

Her legs shook so badly, she fell back down. Devin pulled her up again with a growl and pulled her forward by her hair. She struggled to her feet and then he dragged her back up the embankment.

“Walk.”

She wrapped her arms around her shaking body and limped slowly through the trees back to the field. He pushed her when she didn't go as fast as he liked.

Anna was still soaking when they arrived back at the pavilion. Devin took her into the bedroom and pulled out a pair of leather cuffs.

“Since I can’t trust you to stay where you need to be...” He put the cuffs on her wrists and attached them to one of the support poles. “I will make sure you stay in place.” When he was satisfied that she was secure, he instructed Ian to keep watch. “Don’t give her anything. No blanket or food.”

Anna leaned her head against the pole and tears rolled down her cheeks. She was back where she began, but now was cold, wet and bruised. She curled up in a ball around the pole as best she could and closed her eyes. She told herself she’d been in worse situations, but those had merely been worse physically. The pain in her heart was what she couldn’t bear. She dug her nails into the palms of her hands.

Alex! she cried out in her heart. *Alex please! I need you.*

The thought of him warmed her heart and she clung desperately to the knowledge that she would see him in a few days. A few days and all would be right with the world. She could survive a few more days. Then Alex would make Devin pay for what he’d done. There was no doubt of that.

She focused her thoughts on Alex’s return as she fell into exhausted sleep.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Anna felt her cuffs loosen and she was picked up and put on the bed. Had Devin's anger subsided? She opened her eyes and found her looking into the golden eyes of Kaveh.

"I heard you tried to run away, Daughter. That was not a good idea."

Anna grimaced as he stretched out her cold, stiff legs. He pulled her dress off and put the blanket on her.

"I'll be back in a little bit when you're warm. Your cold body isn't something I want to fuck. I prefer warm flesh."

She watched him walk away and then lay down and stared out at the evening sky. *Just a few more days.*

When he returned a while later, the sun had set and men had begun gathering in front of the Eagle. She saw many of the politicians she'd seen at the last Gathering.

Braziers were set up in various places throughout the field. For warmth, Anna guessed. The evening was rather cool.

Kaveh closed the side of the pavilion and pulled her blanket off. He sat next to her and stroked her hip. "Much better." He looked at her sternly. "Don't scream or I will hit you."

Anna's eyes widened and she nodded as he turned her over and brought her hips up. "I like fucking from behind. I can get so much deeper."

Anna shivered as she felt him invading her body. Oh, God, he was right. She groaned and buried her face in the pillow to muffle her cries.

This couldn't be good for the baby, she thought. Her stomach cramped as Kaveh's cock penetrated deep into her body.

He let out a low groan as she tightened around him. Tears flowed down her cheeks from the pain. He thrust hard and she bit the pillow to keep from

screaming. It felt like he would never finish, but she felt him throb inside her and moan, and then pulled out of her. She held the pillow to her chest and rolled to her side in a ball. Her stomach still cramped.

He reached around her and put his hand on her belly and looked satisfied. "Ian will bring you up when it's time," he said, standing and dressing in a white silk tunic and pants.

Anna winced in pain as she looked up at him.

"Don't worry. It won't hurt for very much longer." He gave her a stern look. "Don't run away. I will find you if you do. And it won't be pretty if you make me go chasing after you."

Anna nodded and he strode away.

Maggie came into the pavilion a while later and helped her clean up. She brushed her hair and washed her face. She cleaned up Anna's cuts and then dressed her in another white dress, similar to the one she wore earlier, but there was a slit up the side on this one.

When Maggie said that Anna was presentable, Anna went to the other part of the pavilion to watch what was going on.

She could hear Devin speaking, but from where she was sitting the words sounded garbled. A smoky haze hung over the gathering and the men sat on the grass with their attention locked on Devin. They smiled and nodded when he paused and a few times they applauded. The Elders, wearing their white robes, sat behind Devin on their thrones.

Anna could see the dark-skinned senator that had hurt her in Washington DC. He was sitting front and center in the crowd with an older, white-haired man next to him. Anna remembered something about an election. Was he president now?

Anna could see Jamie sitting to the side of the platform with her normal pleasant, vacant look. The girls from the Manors were naked and sitting along the edge of the men. Everyone seemed to have a slightly glazed look in their eyes.

“What’s with the smoke?” she whispered to Maggie.

“Some sort of airborne drug. It relaxes the men and helps them have a good time. It also helps them with their sex drive.”

“Oh.”

Anna could make out words now and then. Economics. Depression. Socialism. At the end of his speech, the men cheered and applauded loudly.

Kaveh went up on stage and talked about how much the country would achieve with Devin leading the way. “Of course, with any great work like this, there always must be a sacrifice.”

Ian appeared next to Anna and motioned for her to get up. He walked her to the side of the platform where Devin was waiting. She saw Jamie on the platform, standing quietly near a table.

Ian took her arm and guided her onto the platform. Devin saw her standing nearby and gave her a wicked smile.

“Ian....” Anna began.

“Quiet,” he hissed.

Anna bit her lip.

Devin went over to Jamie. “Jamie, my love,” he cradled her cheek and she gazed up at him with adoring eyes. “You are willing to do anything for me, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Master,” she replied.

Devin smiled. “Then free yourself from the bonds of slavery.” He motioned to a pole on the side of the platform and then walked her over. He

had her stand next to the pole and then attached chains to her nipple rings, belly ring and pussy ring. “Tear the rings from your body.”

Anna’s mouth opened in shock and she gasped as Jamie began backing away from the pole, her rings pulling away from her body. The chains were short enough that she could push herself away with the pole, which she did once the chains were taut.

Anna could hear her moaning, almost in pleasure. The men below watched with hungry eyes. Jamie stepped back and her pussy lip stretched and then the ring was ripped from her body. She cried out in ecstasy and the men cheered. Next came her belly ring and the men cheered again. Blood ran down her leg and belly as she stepped further back. Her breasts extended straight out and, with a final scream, her nipple rings came loose. The men shouted in approval. Anna could see some of them stroking themselves and it made her feel sick.

Jamie stood panting and Devin went to her and kissed her forehead. He raised his hand and the men quieted.

“I am no longer your Master, darling. Will you still do anything for me?”

“Yes. I will.”

“What will you do for me?”

“Whatever you want me to do.” She looked up at him with adoring eyes. Blood dripped from her breasts now as well.

Devin motioned to a table at the back of the stage. Several knives and other sharp objects lay on it. “Hurt yourself,” Devin said in a low voice.

Jamie walked to the table and looked at it. She selected one of the knives and turned back to Devin and looked at him.

Devin smiled. “Will you cut off your nipples for me?”

Jamie beamed at him and looked down at her breasts. She pulled at one bloody nipple and swiped the knife under it. Her breast fell back into place and her nipple stayed. The men cheered. Devin motioned for her to throw it in a stone brazier in front of him. She did the same with the other nipple and tossed it into the fire.

Anna looked at the ground, trying not to throw up. Maybe it was good that Devin hadn't fed her all day, although she was beginning to get dizzy from not eating.

Devin looked out at the men. "What else shall she do for me?" he asked with a grin.

Shouts came from the crowd and Devin laughed. He sat Jamie on the table with her feet next to her thighs, exposing her pussy to the men. "Won't you carve off your pussy for me? But leave the clit."

Jamie beamed again and Anna was thankful that she couldn't see exactly what the girl was doing. But the men could and cheered and shouted encouragement. Anna saw her hand Devin pieces of skin, which he threw into the fire.

Bile rose in Anna's throat and she slipped to her knees. Her legs wouldn't support her anymore and she stared at the ground. She and Devin had spent time with this girl. Why was he making her do these terrible things?

A few minutes later, she heard Jamie moaning and looked up to see Devin behind her with his hands between her legs. Jamie was leaning against him and moving in such a way that he had to be rubbing her clit to make her come. Jamie screamed a minute later. One of her massive orgasm screams. Anna knew them well. It happened when pain and pleasure mixed.

Anna saw a knife flash in the light. Devin moved the knife upwards and Jamie grunted.

“Thank you for your clit, darling.” Devin threw something into the fire. He looked at the men. “Shall she do more?”

The men cheered again. Why were they so bloodthirsty?

Devin handed Jamie the knife again and she proceeded to slice off one breast and then the other. Devin put them both in the fire as well.

He helped Jamie lie down on the table with her legs spread. Anna caught a glimpse of a bloodied hole between her legs before she looked away again.

“Shall I fuck you darling?”

“Please,” Jamie moaned.

“What shall I fuck you with?”

She didn’t answer and Anna looked up. Jamie was pointing to something on the table.

“This?” Devin picked up a long piece of metal. It had four sides and a sharp point. It began about two inches around and at the other end was about six inches around before tapering down into a handle. It was about three feet long.

“No,” Anna whispered. He was going to kill her.

Jamie nodded and beamed at Devin. “Please. Please fuck me with that.”

Devin smiled slightly and held up the strange sword for the men to see. They shouted and cheered. Devin ran his finger along one razor sharp edge and lifted it up to show the crowd, a line of blood seeping from a cut. The men cheered harder.

Anna saw him position it at the entrance to Jamie’s bloody pussy and press it inside her. She cried out in pain, but begged for more. Anna watched in horrified fascination as Devin slowly fucked her with it. First just a few inches and then more. Jamie begged for more and more and Devin, with each thrust, went deeper and deeper into her body. Blood

dripped into a bowl on the ground. Jamie let out an ecstatic scream as Devin pressed in at least a foot of the metal pole. More blood dripped down.

Jamie continued to beg. It had to be in her stomach now and she was still begging.

“More!” she cried, moving her hips as if she was fucking a man.

Devin’s eyes were wide with excitement as he pushed half of the pole inside her. Jamie coughed and blood came out of her mouth. Still she begged for more.

“Will you give yourself to me completely Jamie?”

“Yes!” she cried out.

Devin pulled back and drove the whole thing into Jamie’s body. She gave one last horrifying scream and then was still. Three feet of sharp metal shoved into her body through her pussy. The area was silent for a moment and then cheers erupted from the seated men. Devin turned the pole a few times and then pulled it out. Blood flowed freely into the bowl, splattering onto the bottom of his white robe.

He sank to his knees and lapped at the blood coming from her body, and then motioned to Ian who dragged Anna to her feet. She resisted and Ian picked her up and placed her in front of Jamie’s body. Devin grabbed her hair.

“Drink her lifeblood. After all, you helped me get her to this point.”

Anna shook her head and Devin forced Anna’s head down.

“Lick,” he commanded.

Anna extended her tongue and took a tiny lick.

“More,” Devin growled.

She dragged her tongue along the bloody flesh and then Devin released her.

Ian took her back to the side of the platform where she sank to her knees, tears rolling down her cheeks. Poor Jamie.

“Let all who want to be bound to me, come and taste her lifeblood,” Devin announced.

Devin picked up the full bowl as the president made his way up to the platform and men lined up behind him. Devin took the bowl and handed it to each of the Elders to drink, and then the Sons.

Anna couldn't watch anymore and stared at the floor, trying to think of anything except where she was. But the taste of blood lingered in her mouth and nothing else would come to mind.

Eventually the men took their seats once more and Devin stepped to the center of the stage.

“A willing sacrifice is sweet. But an unwilling sacrifice is even sweeter.” Devin nodded to Ian, who pulled Anna to her feet.

She pulled away from Ian as he dragged her to a second table and sat her on it. Concerned murmurs from the men filled the area.

“Oh, I'm not going to kill her,” Devin said with a smile. “She's too valuable.”

The men laughed.

Anna trembled as Devin walked towards her. She shook her head and tried to back away, but Ian held her in place. Kaveh, Val and Sohrab, the Immortals, walked to her side and Ian released her. Anna made to escape, but the Immortals grabbed her and held her on the table. Val held her arms, Sohrab held her hips. Kaveh stood next to Devin.

Devin lifted her dress and stroked her belly. “Behold this little bump. Inside her belly is an Immortal baby. This is the sacrifice I seek.”

Anna screamed. “No!”

She lashed out at Devin, kicking and screaming. Kaveh had to come and stand on the other side of her to hold her down so she couldn't move anymore.

She stared at Devin and pleaded with him with her eyes. "Please, Devin," she begged. "Don't do this."

His eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. "How dare you address me by my name, slave," he growled.

Anna's lips parted in surprise. She hadn't even realized she'd done it. "I'm sorry, Master," she whimpered.

"The child's purpose is to be a sacrifice to me, Mistress. You cannot stop it."

Devin nodded to Kaveh and Sohrab and they opened her legs. She kicked furtively as they tightened their grip on her limbs. Val pushed her elbows behind her back, making her sit up slightly.

Devin reached toward her and she screamed and fought, but to no avail.

"No!" she begged as Devin began working his hand inside her.

She whimpered as she felt his hand move further in. She looked up at the sky and screamed Alex's name as Devin increased the pain and pressure.

Devin pulled his hand out and Anna wailed as she saw the bloody mass in Devin's hand. He held it up for all to see, and then dropped it into a bowl on the brazier. It sputtered and he watched it for a few minutes before picking up the bowl and bringing it to his mouth.

Anna gagged and one of the Immortals put his hand on her head. The urge to vomit disappeared, but the nausea remained.

Devin turned to her with the bowl in hand and an evil grin on his face. Her eyes widened as someone grabbed her hair from behind and her jaw was forced open.

She shook her head and tried to scream, but Devin tipped the bowl to her mouth and a hot liquid poured in. A large hand covered her mouth to prevent her from spitting it out.

“Swallow, Daughter, and I will release you.”

She shook her head and watched in horror as Devin tipped the bowl to his mouth again.

His eyes narrowed. “Swallow, Mistress.”

It was a command. As his bound slave, she could not disobey. She swallowed and nearly threw up.

Devin returned to Anna and knelt between her legs to lap up the rest of what he desired from her body.

Anna slumped back onto the table and sobbed. “Alex,” she whispered, grief consuming her.

When Devin finished, the Immortals released her. She went limp; her fight was gone. Tears ran silently down the side of her face and into her hair

“Heal her,” Devin said to Kaveh. “She needs to be punished.”

Kaveh walked over to Anna and began the work of restoring her body to its pre-pregnancy state.

Devin smiled in satisfaction. “And now, gentlemen,” he said to the men in the grass. “Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Men started grabbing at the surrounding girls and their squeals and screams echoed against the grunts of the men. It was a massive orgy, made violent by the drugs in the air.

Devin came to stand by Anna. She looked up at him, defeated. He yanked her up onto her feet and turned her around so her chest rested on the table. He rammed his cock into her pussy and fucked her hard.

Anna stared at the table and let Devin do as he pleased. She didn't feel anything. When Devin was done, he removed her necklace and shoved her

out into the mass of men.

Throughout the night she was raped and beaten and she didn't make a sound. Shortly before dawn, the last man left her and she passed out where she lay in the grass, thankful for the darkness that consumed her.

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Chapter Fifty-Five

A gentle hand brushed Anna's cheek and she felt a cool cloth on her forehead. Her eyes fluttered open to see Tommy and Travis looking down at her with concern in their eyes. She had been moved from where she'd passed out earlier. The bed was soft and the blanket warm. The white silk of the pavilion fluttered in the breeze.

"Travis?" she rasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Alex asked me to come and keep an eye on you," he said and then grimaced. "I can't believe what Devin did to you."

Anna blinked slowly and looked at Tommy and gave him a weak smile.

"You didn't tell me you got married," he said softly, petting her hair.

"I didn't know if Devin wanted me to tell people."

"Travis says he's a good guy."

Anna nodded. "The best."

Tommy smiled sadly. "Then I guess I can't complain too much." He took her hand and kissed the back of it, then intertwined his fingers with hers.

Anna moved her hand to her stomach without thinking about it. It was flat again and her waist was small. Tears seeped out of the corner of her eyes as she remembered the baby was gone.

"It wasn't Ben's," she whispered, looking at Travis. "Devin said he had Kaveh get me pregnant so he could..." Her voice trailed off into silence. She couldn't say the words. All the daydreams of her and Alex raising the baby together were crushed.

"I'm so sorry, Anna. I know how happy it made you." Travis leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

“I’m going to get her something to eat,” Tommy said, standing. “Ian said she didn’t eat yesterday.”

Travis nodded and Tommy walked out between the curtains. Travis lay down next to Anna and held her while she cried.

“Alex will take care of him,” Travis said softly. “You know he will.”

Anna nodded. *Alex*. Her one glimmer of hope.

Tommy returned a while later with a plate of chicken and vegetables. Devin was with him.

“Travis?” Devin exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m allowed to come to these things,” Travis answered, sitting up and glaring at Devin.

Devin raised his brow. “Did your father not teach you respect?” he said in a threatening tone.

Travis clenched his jaw, but didn’t say anything.

Devin’s gaze turned to Anna. “I’m glad you’re awake,” he said curtly. “Eat and then come back to the pavilion. I need you.”

“Yes, Master,” she whispered.

He turned on his heel and left the pavilion. Tommy handed her the plate and exchanged looks with Travis.

Anna stared at the plate. She had no appetite.

“Anna, you need to eat,” Tommy said gently. “You don’t want to waste away before your husband comes home, do you?”

She gave him a grateful smile and began to eat. She would eat for Alex. She could do anything for Alex.

When Anna had finished eating, she thanked Travis and Tommy and walked back to the pavilion. Her dress was filthy, but at least she was

clothed.

Devin sat with Oscar, Tom and Connor on the chaises. Each had a girl between his legs sucking on their cocks.

“Go get cleaned up and return,” Devin instructed. “Maggie is waiting for you in the dorm.”

“Yes, Master,” she said quietly, and left to find the path to the girl’s dorm.

On the way there, she saw a small field where women were lying. As she got closer, she realized that they weren’t just lying there. They were dead. Their bodies were bruised and bloody. About twenty of them. Anna hurried to the dorm, trying to forget the image of the dead bodies.

Maggie greeted her somberly when she arrived, took her into a room and drew a hot bath. The water soothed her aching body, but did nothing for her heart and mind. A numbness began to take hold, pushing away the pain of Devin taking her baby. The knowledge that it wasn’t the baby she’d thought it was did little to soothe the ache in her heart.

She missed Alex terribly. *Only a few more days.* She could make it a few more days. Then Alex would sweep her up in his arms and hold her and kiss her and tell her that everything would be all right. She rubbed her fingers where her rings had been. If only she could rub away the pain in her heart.

When she was cleaned and dressed, she returned to Devin. She did her best to walk tall and gracefully, as Alex had told her to do. She was an Elder-Mistress. She was worthy of respect.

It was difficult to feel respected when she was being raped. Devin had taken her to the lodge. The president wanted her. He wanted to hurt her and

Devin approved. She spent the afternoon in his room and he brutalized her. He used a stun gun, though not as thoroughly as he had before. He fisted her pussy and made her scream. He pinched her nipples with clamps so hard they bled. He dropped hot wax onto her clit and burned it.

She couldn't walk by the time he was done with her and Kaveh had to heal her so that she could participate in the hunt. The advice that Ian had given her last August came back to mind as the hunt began. *Find a place to hide and stay there until the sun comes up.* The girls were being herded out into the woods as the evening speeches ended. Anna looked around desperately for a hiding place. After about twenty minutes, she found a clump of bushes and hid just as she heard the men approaching.

She began to hear screams a short time later. Girls and men ran past her spot. One man had brought a whip and caught one of the girls around the ankle as she ran and she fell hard on the ground. Some of the men were nice, but most weren't.

She saw horrible things as she hid. A few feet away from her a man pinned a girl down while another man shoved big rocks into her pussy. Another man chained a girl to a tree and raped her in the ass as her body scraped against the bark.

The girl with rocks in her didn't move after they had finished with her. They walked away laughing. Anna watched her to see if she was still alive. The girl moaned and reached for herself to try and pull the rocks out, but fell back, unable to reach.

Anna watched with tears in her eyes as the girl struggled against the pain. Anna couldn't just sit and watch. She had to do something. It was quiet around her and she snuck out from the bushes and crept over to the girl.

“Hey,” she whispered. “Let me help.”

The girl looked at her with wide eyes. “You’re the Mistress,” she whispered.

Anna nodded. “Can I help you?”

The girl grimaced. “It won't do any good,” she said with tears in her eyes. “I’m all torn up inside. I’m not gonna make it.” She sounded so defeated it broke Anna’s heart.

“No,” Anna said suddenly. She could help. She was an Immortal. She could heal. She didn’t know how she knew this, but she was sure of it. “No. I’ll help you.”

She gently reached into the girl’s body and pulled the blood-covered rocks out. When Anna had removed all of them, she put her hand on the girl’s belly and closed her eyes and concentrated. Warmth flowed from her body and into the girl.

The girl gasped and her eyes widened. “I feel better,” she exclaimed softly. “Why...?”

Anna smiled. “Because I could. Who do you belong to?”

“My Master is Brandon.”

Anna was relieved that at least she had a nice Master. “See those bushes over there?” she pointed to her hiding place.

The girl nodded.

“Go hide in there. No one will find you.” Anna heard the men behind her. “Go. Hurry.” She helped the girl to her feet and she scrambled away and disappeared into the bushes.

Anna looked around. She saw the flashlights of the men. She had lost her hiding spot. She ran in the opposite direction.

The moon was full but the trees were thick. More than once she tripped on something and fell to the ground. A beam of light found her and she

froze, but when the shouts reached her she ran again. But she couldn't run fast enough in the dark without shoes. She fell and was caught.

The light shined in her face. "Isn't that the Mistress?" one man asked.

"I think it is," said another man.

"Nice," said the first man and she was grabbed and thrown to the ground. She fought back, but the men were too powerful for her. Her legs were spread and her pussy filled shortly after.

That was only the beginning. As soon as they finished with her, another man caught her. This night turned out to be as miserable as the previous night. By dawn, she could hardly move and fell asleep under a tree.

The room was long and narrow. The walls were paneled in wood and the floor was carpeted in green.

She stood in the entryway. A narrow door stood closed to her left. In front of her, with its side along the short wall was a twin bed. A credenza sat along the long wall across from her with a tall, but narrow, window at the far end. At the opposite end of the room was a fireplace with a wing chair next to it. Opposite the window was a bookcase filled with books.

The room was empty.

Waiting for someone.

Anna sat up before she opened her eyes. The room. Something about the room haunted her. She shook her head and opened her eyes. Her head hurt. So did the rest of her body.

She stood on shaky legs and looked around. In the distance, she saw naked women walking towards her. There were also several women laying

in strange positions on the ground. She looked away, not wanting to think about what might have happened to them. The tree in front of her had a sign with an arrow pointing to her right. Was that the way back to the field? Since other women were coming towards her, she guessed it to be so and began walking in that direction.

The sun was high and warm on her chilled skin, but it did nothing for her emotions. She was grateful for the numbness in her heart; she didn't want to feel the pain of the loss of her baby.

Within half an hour she walked out of the trees and onto the grassy field. Ian approached her as she walked across the field.

“Devin wants you to clean up and see him in the pavilion.”

Anna nodded. “Yes, my lord,” she said quietly. He walked with her to the pathway to the dorm and then left her.

She cleaned up in the dorm and then made her way to the pavilion to greet Devin. He had meetings all day and Anna spent the day giving blowjobs and being fucked.

Anna spent the night with Devin in the pavilion—more brutal sex—and the next morning they drove back to San Francisco.

Chapter Fifty-Six

As Devin drove her home, the numbness in her heart started to disappear. Anna blinked back tears as she stared out the window. How would she tell Alex the baby was gone? Was there something she could have done to prevent it? Should she have fought harder? Could she have fought harder? Maybe if she had run farther away....

Anna dug her fingernails into her hands to keep from losing it in Devin's car. He pulled up in front of her house, and she took her suitcase and ran from the car without saying anything to Devin.

She opened the door to the house, walked inside, closed the door, and collapsed onto the marble floor with a scream and a sob.

Aaron heard the door close and a scream a second later. He ran from the great room to see Anna curled up in a ball next to the door, sobbing hysterically. He ran over and skidded on his knees to gather her into his arms. What had that fucker Devin done to her?

He wasn't even sure she knew he was there, but he held her and rocked her, hoping she would calm down enough to tell him what happened. But she didn't calm down. She kicked her feet and slammed her fists into the floor. Every once in a while she would scream an unearthly scream that gave him chills. God, what had happened to her?

Frau Gersten came in looking concerned. He looked at her helplessly. She pointed upstairs and he nodded.

"Anna, I'm taking you up to your room," he said in a quiet voice.

He carefully picked her up and carried her up to her bedroom. Frau Gersten pulled the covers back and Aaron lay her down gently on the bed,

then lay behind her, holding her as she continued to sob.

Suddenly she stopped crying. She took a deep breath and then was still. Aaron leaned over to make sure she was still breathing. Her eyes were closed and her body relaxed. She'd fallen asleep.

Aaron sighed in relief. He held her for a minute longer and then untangled himself from her. He needed his phone. Travis had been there. He might know what had happened.

Fifteen minutes later, after talking to Travis, Aaron dropped into a chair near Anna's bed.

No wonder she'd been hysterical when she got home. He glanced over at her sleeping form, thankful she'd managed to fall asleep and get relief from her pain.

Aaron wanted to find Devin and strangle him with his bare hands. How dare he hurt Anna like that! Alex had said that he and Devin had come to an understanding as to how Anna was to be treated. Did Devin think that just because Alex was out of town he could get away with something like that? What kind of sick son of a bitch tore a baby from a woman's womb?

God, he needed to call Wilhelm. Alex said if something happened to call his dad. Well, this was definitely something. He searched his contacts for Wilhelm's number and dialed. He hoped it wasn't too late in Germany, but didn't think Wilhelm would care once he found out what happened.

Wilhelm jumped slightly as his phone vibrated in his pocket. He'd been absorbed in a political document and had lost track of time. He pulled the phone out and looked at the screen. Why would Aaron be calling him?

"Hello, Aaron," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Is everything all right?"

Wilhelm listened in escalating horror as Aaron told him what had happened over the weekend.

He walked quickly out into the sitting room where Ilsa sat, rocking Otto to sleep. The baby had colic and Ilsa was very good at calming him down. Wilhelm paused for a moment, taken back twenty-eight years to when Ilsa had held Alex in the same way.

Ilsa looked up at him and saw the concern in his eyes.

“Thank you for calling me and letting me know, Aaron.”

“Sir, I hate to ask. But...I think Anna might need you here. With Alex out of town....”

“Yes. I think you’re right.” Wilhelm thought for a moment. “I will be there as soon as I can. Keep her calm if you can. If she’s willing to dance tomorrow, take her. You know how dancing helps her.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll call you when I land.” They said goodbye and Wilhelm looked sadly at his wife.

“What’s wrong, Wilhelm?” Ilsa asked with concerned eyes.

“It’s Anna. She’s....” He sighed, not even wanting to say the words. “Devin took the baby. It wasn’t Ben’s. Devin did it all for some disgusting purpose.” Wilhelm ran his hand through his hair. “I think I need to go to her. At least until Alex gets home.”

Ilsa nodded. “Yes. She needs you.”

“Will you be all right if I go?”

Ilsa smiled. “Of course. I have Kurt and Liesl and Greta. Anna doesn’t have anyone.”

Such a wonderful, understanding wife he had. “She has friends now.”

“But she needs you, Wilhelm. I’m sure of it. You’re the closest thing to Alex she’ll have. You can be strong for her, especially if Alex is delayed.

I'm sure she's clinging to the hope that Alex will be home tomorrow..." Ilse trailed off.

They hadn't heard from Alex, and Wilhelm could safely assume that his son wouldn't be home tomorrow. This wasn't unusual and didn't warrant concern, but Anna wouldn't take it well. Not now.

"You go pack. I'll go put Otto down and be in shortly."

Wilhelm kissed his wife and hurried to his bedroom, calling the pilot on the way. He wanted to leave as soon as the jet could be readied.

Aaron kept watch over Anna all afternoon. She finally woke in the early evening. Her eyes were red and puffy and so sad that he wanted to cry for her.

He sat next to her on the bed. He could see faint bruises on her cheeks and arms, which made him sick.

"Hey, Anna," he said softly, stroking her cheek.

She looked up at him with such sad eyes. "The baby..." she rasped.

Aaron nodded his head. "I know, hon. I talked to Travis."

Tears welled up in her eyes and her lower lip trembled. "I'm such a fool," she whispered.

"No, Anna. You're not." He leaned down and hugged her. "Devin is evil. But Alex will take care of him."

Anna wrapped her arms around his neck and nodded. "Alex," she whispered.

"He's supposed to be home tomorrow, right?" he said, trying to cheer her. If anything would cheer her, the thought of Alex coming home would do it.

He was glad to see a small smile on her face and a slight glimmer of hope in her eyes as she nodded.

“He’ll make everything right,” she said in a determined voice.

“Yes. He will.” He brushed her hair out of her face. “Why don’t you take a shower and I’ll tell Frau Gersten that you’ll have some dinner?” He hoped she would agree. He had a feeling she hadn’t eaten much.

She nodded and sat up. There was a bit of color in her face now. Thank God for Alex. Without him...Aaron hated to think what Anna would do without him.

An hour later, Aaron and Anna sat in the kitchen eating dinner.

“Wilhelm will be here sometime tonight,” Aaron told her.

“Wilhelm? Why is he coming?”

“To be here for you.”

Anna nodded, appearing to think about it. Another small smile appeared on her face.

Aaron knew she and Wilhelm were close and was thankful he was coming. He tried to deny the twinge of jealousy that ran through him. But Anna’s needs came first. She needed someone who could stand up for her, and there was little Aaron could do other than hold her and tell her everything would be okay.

He studied her as she ate. She looked as if she’d never been pregnant. Her adorable belly was gone, replaced with that sexy stomach she had before she’d gotten pregnant. Her breasts were back to normal as well. Aaron liked her pregnant breasts. They were full and very nice to peek at when he danced with her. She had scolded him teasingly about his gaze

many times. Not that her normal breasts were too small or unpleasant. Quite the contrary. They were very enjoyable. Still....

Stop the inappropriate thoughts, Aaron. This is not the time to be thinking about Anna's beautiful body.

"Will you come to class tomorrow?" Aaron asked, getting his mind off the sordid topic.

Anna nodded. "It will help me feel better." She gave him a sad smile. "I guess I don't have to worry about not being able to dance in *Jewels* now, huh?"

Aaron nodded. "I was really looking forward to dancing with you."

"And I, you. I love dancing with you, Aaron."

Aaron beamed at her. Stephanie, his Sugar Plum Fairy, hadn't been very happy about stepping aside for Anna, but no one could deny her talent. The critics were looking forward to the opening of *Jewels* and more displays of Anna's dancing. She was the youngest female principal in the history of the SFBC.

They watched a movie in the bedroom after dinner until Anna fell asleep in his arms. Aaron debated if he should stay with her or not. He decided to. At least until Wilhelm came.

The alarm went off and Anna didn't want to wake up. She was held in a cocoon of big strong arms. Her mind registered Alex before she remembered he wasn't home yet. Besides, Wilhelm wasn't quite as muscular as Alex, though his limbs were as long.

But Alex would be home today, she told herself. Anna smiled at the thought. She needed Alex. She needed his assurance that everything would

be all right. *Soon*. In the meantime, dancing would help soothe her soul. And Wilhelm's presence as well.

She stretched her arms and legs and sat up. Wilhelm was still asleep, which made Anna smile. Alex always woke up the second Anna was up, if he wasn't already awake. One of the many things she loved about him.

Anna scooted out from under the covers and glanced back at Wilhelm as she walked to the bathroom to get ready.

When she emerged a while later, Wilhelm was sitting up in bed and looking at his phone.

"Have you heard from Alex?" she asked. Anna had already checked her phone several times.

"*Nein*, not yet." Wilhelm looked up with sympathetic eyes. "Anna, it's very possible he won't be home today. Things can take longer than expected sometimes and he can't communicate that to us."

Anna managed to smile and nod. "I know," she whispered. But her heart fell. She needed Alex home. Today. She needed his arms around her. She turned around, pretending to be busy with her dance bag, trying to control her tears.

Wilhelm came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Anna, don't be afraid. He'll be home. He always comes home."

She squeezed a point shoe in her hand and blinked several times. "Okay." She turned to look up at Wilhelm. "I should go eat breakfast."

Wilhelm kissed her forehead. "Don't worry. Dance wonderfully today. He'll be home as soon as he can. I know he will."

At every break, Anna checked her phone, but the screen remained unchanged.

He's okay. It's just taking longer than he thought it would.

She knew he was in Russia and it would take a while to get home as well. She just had to be patient.

When rehearsal was over, there still had been no word from Alex. Since Wilhelm had arrived, Aaron had gone back to his house, but told Anna to call him if she needed anything. Her house was only a few minutes from Aaron's. She liked being that close to him.

The next few days, Anna didn't go anywhere without her phone. She kept it by the barre during class and slept next to it at night. When Saturday came around, fear began to grow in Anna's heart. Wilhelm tried his best to calm her nerves, but she knew even he was getting nervous.

She sat in the on the couch in the living room and stared out the window, willing the two black SUVs to come driving around the corner. Devin had allowed her to stay home from the Gathering Friday night, though Anna suspected Wilhelm had something to do with it. Devin didn't sound very happy when he phoned her Thursday afternoon to tell her.

"Anna, let's go do something. Out of the house." Wilhelm came and sat next to her.

Anna shook her head. "I want to be here when he gets here."

"*Liebling*, he'll call when he gets to Frankfurt. Remember, he's stopping there on the way home. We'll have plenty of time to get home before he arrives."

Wilhelm's words were reasonable; Alex wouldn't just show up at the house without calling first. And he wouldn't arrive in Frankfurt without calling her.

For Anna's sake, Wilhelm kept himself calm, but his stomach churned every time he thought about his son. Alex was very good at what he did. He planned his missions down to the tiniest detail and was rarely off on his timing. Maybe a day or two, but he'd never been off this much. Four days late was too long. Wilhelm began to worry.

If he got a minute away from Anna, he would call Vitaly in St. Petersburg. He and Wilhelm had a friendly relationship and if anything had happened, Vitaly would know. Especially since it was Vitaly who had called Alex. He'd at least know if the objective had been accomplished.

Wilhelm took Anna to a movie and they walked around Fisherman's Wharf and had dinner. She remained quiet and worried. His heart went out to her. She needed Alex home, safe and sound. He didn't want to think about what would happen if Alex didn't come home.

But Alex always came home. He and his team were the best of any of the special ops teams the Brotherhood had.

Anna tossed and turned as she lay in bed with Wilhelm watching TV. She'd been trying to hold out for Alex to come home for sex, but her body physically hurt from lack of sex at this point. Alex had told her that if she needed comfort or release, that she could sleep with Aaron. But what about Wilhelm?

But Wilhelm was her father-in-law. Was that taboo now? She had come to understand that having sex with her guardian was very socially unacceptable, aside from the whole abuse thing. Surely her father-in-law would be in the same category. But he was also an Elder.

"Anna, are you all right?" Wilhelm asked as she fidgeted in the bed. He lay his hand on hers.

Anna stopped moving. “I...yeah,” she said lamely. She didn’t want to offend him. She liked having him hold her when she slept. It comforted her. She didn’t want him to think badly of her.

He cupped her chin and turned her face to his. “What’s wrong?”

She gazed into his blue eyes and fought herself from leaning in to kiss him.

His eyes searched hers and then darkened when he saw the desire in her eyes. “*Liebling...*,” he whispered. “Do you need touch?” He stroked her cheek with his finger and she leaned into his hand.

She bit her lip and nodded hesitantly. “I’m sorry Wilhelm. I...I can call Aaron. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

He slid his hand around the back of her head and pressed his lips to hers, his tongue demanding entry between her lips. When they parted, his tongue stroked hers and she moaned and pressed her body to his. His hands tangled in her hair and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

He rolled her onto her back and lay gently on top of her, kissing her passionately and flexing his hips against her thigh. She could feel him, long and hard, against her leg. His lips moved down her jaw and to her neck, where he sucked gently on the skin. She pressed her head into the pillow and sighed as his tongue moved down her neck and to her collarbone. He pulled the straps of her tank top off her shoulders and kissed them, then moved down to the tops of her breasts. Her nipples grew taut and she arched her back, wanting him to take them into his mouth.

He pulled her tank top up over her head and tossed it on the floor. He looked down at her breasts and trailed his fingers around the bottom curve and up to her nipple.

“Wilhelm,” she sighed. “Please....”

His tongue trailed around her nipple before taking her breast into his mouth, using suction and his tongue to make her wiggle and moan beneath him. She cried out as he tugged on the ring before moving to the other breast and giving it the same attention.

She tugged on his t-shirt and pulled it off. His chest hair brushed against her stomach, making her giggle.

He glanced up at her with an affectionate smile. “Making love to you is a pleasure I would never turn down.”

She gazed into his loving eyes. “But you’re Alex’s father.”

He shrugged. “Do you desire me less because of that?”

Anna shook her head.

He bent down and kissed her nipple. “My feelings for you haven’t changed. I just keep them hidden so I don’t make you uncomfortable.” He gave her a tender smile. “I never, ever want to come between you and Alex. But I am happy to step in if you need me.” He chuckled and Anna giggled. “Besides, I am technically still your Master as well.”

He kissed down her stomach and then pulled off her sweatpants. He kissed her pubic bone and then licked her clit gently, making her hips flex towards him. He chuckled again and looked up into her eyes as his tongue circled her clit.

Anna’s eyes fluttered closed as Wilhelm lavished attention on her neglected pussy.

“Oh, Wilhelm,” she sighed as he spread her open and pressed his tongue against her slit. She tangled her hands into his hair, pushing his mouth into her swollen folds. He lapped and sucked on the sensitive skin.

“Oh! Oh, yes!” she cried out as sweet release radiated up and out of her body. Wilhelm held her hips down and sucked on her clit as she screamed out her orgasm.

She panted and gazed at Wilhelm as he stood to remove his pants. She licked her lips when she saw his cock, long and hard, jutting out from his hips, and sat up quickly to take him into her mouth.

He murmured in German as he held her head gently. Oh, she loved his cock! She licked him from the base up and sucked on the tip, licking the pre-cum from his slit. She hummed in delight as she took him in as far as she could, making him groan.

He pulled himself out of her mouth and she whimpered. He chuckled and lay her down and positioned himself between her legs. His lips captured hers and he slowly entered her body.

She sighed in ecstasy. He was such a gentle lover. So different than everything she'd been through the previous weekend. She matched his rhythm as he thrust slowly in and out of her body. God, he felt good! Exactly what she needed. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her as he loved her.

Their movements increased as one and they exploded together. Her legs held him inside and didn't relax until they had both returned to earth. He rolled over onto his back, bringing her with him and she rested her head on his chest.

He stroked her hair as she listened to his heartbeat slow, and fell asleep to its soothing rhythm.

Anna's eyes snapped open as a familiar body slipped into bed behind her. "Alex?" she exclaimed, turning around.

"*Nein, Liebling.* I'm sorry. It's Wilhelm."

"Wilhelm!" She flung her arms around his neck and he held her close. He was the next best thing with Alex out of town. She savored his familiar

presence and buried her face in his shoulder. “I’m so glad you’re here,” she murmured.

“Always, *Liebling*. I will always be here for you.” He kissed her cheek and rubbed her back.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven

Wilhelm didn't get a chance to call Vitaly until Monday morning when Anna went to class. He had stayed positive for her sake, but he was very worried. Vitaly told him that he had heard from Alex when they arrived, but hadn't heard from him since. The target was difficult to find and that could be why it was taking so long. Wilhelm thanked him and ended the call, then sat back on the couch in the living room, tapping the edge of his phone on his lip.

What to do now? Calling Alex could put him in danger and likely wouldn't do any good even if he tried. They kept their phones off except for emergencies to keep from being traced.

His phone rang a few minutes later. Wilhelm growled when he saw it was Devin. What the hell did he want? "Yes, Devin. What can I do for you?"

"Where are you?" Devin asked cautiously. "Is Anna with you?"

"No, Anna is at class. I am at my son's house. Why do you ask?"

There was a pause. "I need to speak with you. In person."

Wilhelm sighed. He didn't want to deal with Devin right now. His nerves were on edge as it was. Devin's presence would only agitate them more.

"Please, Wilhelm."

Devin's tone concerned him. "You are welcome to come over if you would like," Wilhelm said in an even tone. He didn't like Devin one iota, but Devin sounded...worried.

"I'll be there shortly."

Anna glanced down at her phone for the umpteenth time this morning. She was sure she would hear from Alex today. She had to. Her last shreds of sanity were quickly unraveling.

It was the end of class. The dancers moved into the center for *révérence*. She began the slow steps to cool down and stretch before break. As she turned in *arabesque* and returned to face the side of the room, a movement near the door caught her attention.

She looked up to see Wilhelm in the doorway looking very pale. Devin stood behind him with a concerned expression on his face. Her leg dropped and she stared. The entire class froze and the pianist stopped playing.

Wilhelm held his hand out. "Anna..." he said softly.

As if in a trance, she walked to where Wilhelm and Devin stood. Wilhelm put his arm around her shoulders and led her out into the hallway.

"Anna..." Wilhelm began in a broken voice. "There has been...news of Alex."

"Is he hurt?" she asked in a tiny voice.

Wilhelm's eyes filled with tears as he shook his head. "He is..." Wilhelm cleared his throat. "He is...gone, Anna. Devin received...a letter and..." Wilhelm pulled something out of his pocket. A small silver colored circle.

Anna held out her hand and Wilhelm put Alex's wedding ring in her palm.

"Some villagers found...their bodies outside St. Petersburg," Devin said slowly. "The letter arrived this morning. I am so sorry, Anna."

Anna looked back and forth between the two men. They couldn't be serious. No. Alex couldn't be gone. But he would never take off his ring. He said the only way it would ever be removed is if he were...dead.

Anna shook her head and backed away. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “No,” she whispered. “He can’t. He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t do that to me.” Her voice rose with each thought.

“*Liebling*.” Wilhelm stepped to her and pulled her close.

“No,” she repeated emphatically.

And then she screamed.

The scream chilled Aaron to the bone and echoed through the building. He ran out of the studio to see Anna collapsed on the floor with Wilhelm hunched over her. Her wails made him shiver. The entire class followed behind him and heads poked out from the other studios.

“Anna!” he exclaimed and ran over to her and Wilhelm.

“What...?” His words caught in his throat as he looked at Wilhelm’s wet, pale face. “Alex...?” he whispered.

Wilhelm pressed his lips together and nodded. “He is gone, Aaron,” Wilhelm said in a cracked voice and buried his face in Anna’s neck.

Aaron sank to his knees and stared at Anna. There had to be some sort of mistake. He looked up at Devin, who looked solemn.

But Alex was so...full of life. He couldn’t be dead. What the hell had he been doing that got him killed? Questions ran through his head even as the tears began to run down his cheeks. His best friend was gone.

He glanced back up at Devin. “What about Seth? And Tony? And the others?”

Devin turned his gaze on Aaron and shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry.”

Aaron stared at the floor and shook his head in disbelief. How could this be possible? How could his best friend be gone? He leaned over and put his forehead on Anna’s trembling back.

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Chapter Fifty-Eight

Wilhelm stared at the ground as he sat in the chair next to Anna's bed. His son. His oldest son was gone. And his nephew as well. And Alex's men. He knew them all. The ache in his heart was unbearable. The bond between Anna and Alex only prevented Devin from being involved with Alex's death; it didn't mean he couldn't be killed on a mission or any other countless ways people died every day.

If only Sebastian could return to tell him what happened...but that was unlikely. Mission deaths were not uncommon. There was no compelling reason for the Immortal to risk returning to share the story. Alex's job was dangerous. Two years ago, another Brotherhood assassin had been killed during a mission. It was just part of the job.

Alex was the best...but even the most talented still get killed sometimes. Devin had said he'd tried to get more information on what happened, but no one seemed to have heard anything. It wasn't unreasonable for that to happen. Alex and the others were good at their jobs. No one would have known they were there.

Wilhelm was torn, even as his heart was aching unlike he'd ever felt. He wanted to go home to his family, but he couldn't leave Anna here. It had been twenty-four hours since he'd told her and she hadn't spoken or moved voluntarily since. He'd taken her home and given her a bath and tucked her into bed. She just lay there with her eyes open, staring out into space.

Leaving her here would make her vulnerable. Devin had been kind and sympathetic, but Wilhelm didn't trust him to put Anna's needs above his own desires. There was no love lost between Alex and Devin, and Devin was probably glad about Alex. Wilhelm hated to think what would happen to Anna when he left.

No, he couldn't leave Anna here. Who knew what Devin would do? And now that Alex was...well, Alex's "ownership" of Anna had passed to Wilhelm. It wasn't as strong as Alex's, but at least Wilhelm was an Elder. He could match Devin's authority, if not override it.

Wilhelm watched with concern as Anna stared out the window of the plane, grasping Alex's wedding ring where it hung from a chain around her neck. She'd refused to let go of it when he'd given her a bath, so he found a chain so it wouldn't continue to cut into her palm from grasping it so tightly.

They were on their way back to Germany. Wilhelm had made the decision to take Anna home with him and told Devin to fuck off when he protested. Wilhelm wouldn't abandon Anna when she needed him most. It would be difficult having both Ilsa and Anna dependent on him, but he would manage. Maurice was with Ilsa now, as were the children. Ilsa was surrounded by loved ones and was a strong woman. The strongest woman he knew.

Anna...Anna had strength in her, but it had been so badly beaten down that she didn't know it was there. But she would survive. Maybe he should encourage Kurt to look after her. With Alex gone, Kurt would have to take his place in the Brotherhood. It wouldn't be inappropriate for Kurt to take his brother's wife, after he divorced Gretchen, which Wilhelm would now encourage. He didn't want Gretchen anywhere near the Brotherhood. Even if Anna wasn't interested in Kurt, Gretchen was not a good wife for an Elder. It hadn't mattered before....

Anna's position in the family would not change. If she had been pregnant with Alex's son, he would have inherited and become Elder after

Kurt. Wilhelm had an option to provide Anna with children, if she wanted. Maybe it would help her in her grief.... But now was not the time to ask. She wasn't functioning enough to make that sort of decision. She was barely functioning at all. He had to command her to eat and drink.

A memorial service would be held on Sunday for Alex and his men. Wilhelm had told Aaron and Isaak that he would fly over anyone who wanted to come. Many of the dancers had indicated their interest. That was good. Anna would be surrounded by her friends. But he couldn't leave her vulnerable in San Francisco. Not until she was able to take care of herself.

Lili, the stewardess, walked quietly up to where Wilhelm sat. "Herzog, lunch is ready."

"Thank you, Lili. We'll be there shortly."

She curtsied and walked away.

Wilhelm put his hand on Anna's arm. He'd learned quickly that he had to physically get her attention before talking to her. She was so lost in her own little world, she heard nothing going on around her. If the plane fell from the sky, he doubted she would notice.

"Liebling?" he said softly.

She blinked, but didn't turn to him.

"Let's go eat." He took her hand and she followed him meekly to the dining room.

When their plates were set before them, Wilhelm touched Anna's hand. "Anna. Eat."

She blinked and picked up her fork. He hated commanding her, but it was the only way to get her to take care of herself. She was unable to do anything on her own. Losing a baby or husband was terrible enough, but losing both within two weeks had pushed her over the edge.

She ate half of her food and Wilhelm was satisfied. It was more than she'd eaten this morning.

The jet landed several hours later in a rainy Frankfurt. It taxied to the hangar and he saw the limo waiting for them. When the jet door opened, Lili handed him an umbrella and he took Anna's elbow to lead her down the stairs. The door to the limo opened and a distraught Ilsa got out and ran to him.

"Wilhelm!" she exclaimed, burying her face in his shoulder.

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

Anna felt the cold rain on her head and looked up. It was only for a second and then another umbrella sheltered her. It took her a moment to focus on the face in front of her. For a split second, she thought it was Alex, but no. It was Kurt.

She looked to her side and saw Wilhelm and Ilsa embracing and weeping together. Another reminder that she was alone. Wilhelm had a family to comfort. Why did he bring her back here? She could have been left alone in San Francisco. She wanted to be alone. She didn't want to be around people.

"Hello, Anna," Kurt said softly.

She looked up at him, but didn't say anything. She didn't smile. She looked back at the ground.

"Kurt, bring Anna to the car," Wilhelm said, guiding Ilsa back to the limo.

"*Kommen Sie, Engel,*" Kurt said gently, and put his arm on her back to lead her to the limo. He let her in first and then closed the umbrella and handed it to the driver.

"Anna," Ilsa said, reaching for her hand.

Anna stared at the floor and didn't say anything, but didn't pull away from Ilsa. She liked Ilsa. Ilsa had given birth to the man Anna loved.

Memories of her last morning with Alex threatened to surface, but Anna pushed them away. She didn't want to cry, she didn't want to think. She didn't want to feel. Her numbness was her cocoon.

She vaguely felt the limo begin to drive away.

Kurt, Wilhelm and Ilsa talked around her, but Anna didn't listen. Instead, she stared out the window.

Too soon, they were driving up the familiar drive to Alex's family home. A huge lump filled her throat as the memories threatened to overwhelm her. Her eyes burned with tears that she didn't want to release. Her hands shook as she grasped Alex's ring hanging from her neck. Why had Wilhelm brought her back here?

They walked into the entryway a few minutes later. Wilhelm was instantly engulfed in the embraces of his daughters. Anna stood to one side and stared at the floor.

Ilsa came up to her. "I've had Alex's room readied for you. If you'd like to freshen up, we'll have dinner soon."

Anna nodded absently and walked to the stairs. Greta grabbed her and hugged her before she made it there.

"Oh, Anna," Greta said, hugging her tightly. "Please, Anna. If you need to talk or anything, come find me?"

Anna nodded absently again and walked up the two flights of stairs to her bedroom. She walked through the door and stared at the bed where she and Alex had made love. The bed where she had first seen Alex years ago.

She couldn't sleep there.

She walked to the closet, picked out one of Alex's sweaters and put it on, then curled up on the rug next to the fire crackling in the fireplace. Bathed in its warmth, she instantly fell into the oblivion of sleep.

Wilhelm went to get Anna for dinner. He knocked on the door and walked in, knowing she wouldn't answer. His heart stopped when he saw the empty bed. Where had she gone?

He looked around the room and saw her curled in a ball next to the fireplace, wearing one of Alex's sweaters.

Maybe putting her in this room hadn't been a good idea, but he didn't want her to think that because Alex was dead her position in the family had changed.

He sighed. He felt helpless to comfort her. Her grief went beyond anything he could fully comprehend.

His heart was a constant source of pain since he found out about Alex and the others. He loved his son so much, and he had been so proud of the man he'd turned into. Wilhelm couldn't deny that there had been moments when he'd doubted, but Alex had pulled through his immaturity to become a wonderful man.

Wilhelm blinked back the tears that threatened to fall. He needed to be strong for his family. There were things to be done and if Wilhelm lost it, his family would too. No, he needed to stay in control. For their sake.

Alex had made Anna so happy and vice versa. Watching the two of them together was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Anna in love was a beautiful sight. She had changed from the scared, beaten down girl he'd first seen in the Hall of Devin's Manor into a beautiful confident woman who knew her place in the world. Her dancing had been entrancing when he'd watched *La Bayadere*. It had been beauty in motion.

And now....

Her life was just one tragedy after another. How much more could she take?

"Anna?" he said softly. She didn't lift her head and he walked over to kneel next to her. He brushed her hair back from her face. "Anna. It's time for dinner."

She got up without speaking. Her hair was a mess and she wore jeans with Alex's sweater hanging down past her knees.

Wilhelm took her into the bathroom and brushed her hair, and then went into the closet to find something for her to wear. He returned with a long sweater dress and helped her into it. He stroked her cheek and found her skin cold, so he went back to the closet and returned with a sweater and slippers, put them on her and then led her downstairs to dinner.

Dinner was subdued. Even Derek and Sofie were quiet. They knew their Uncle Alex wasn't coming home anymore.

Gretchen sat quietly, feeding Otto some sort of mush. She had calmed down dramatically the last few months, which had surprised Wilhelm quite a bit. He needed to speak to Kurt about her, though. Well, he needed to speak to Kurt about many things.

Anna sat next to Wilhelm in Alex's place and stared at Otto. Wilhelm had forgotten about the whole fiasco from their wedding day. Perhaps it wasn't wise to have him at the table.

Maurice sat at the other end of the table, next to Ilsa. Wilhelm had invited him to stay so that Wilhelm could tend to Anna and Ilsa wouldn't feel neglected. Ilsa and Maurice spoke softly together. A twinge of jealousy twisted his stomach. Maurice clearly adored Ilsa and Ilsa was very fond of him. Wilhelm was glad Maurice was here for her, but he couldn't deny the tiny bit of jealousy.

Ilsa and Wilhelm had talked before he arrived home and they had both decided that making sure Anna was okay needed to be Wilhelm's priority. Ilsa would be all right. She was surrounded by loving family. Anna needed someone she could count on and the most logical person was Wilhelm, especially since he was her Master now.

Maybe Wilhelm should take Anna to his bed tonight. He'd gotten used to sleeping with her and rather enjoyed it. He didn't want her sleeping alone and for some reason didn't like the idea of Kurt sleeping with her. At least not until he was accepted into the Brotherhood.

Yes. He would keep Anna with him. Maybe with his attention she would feel comfortable enough to start talking again. It worried him that she wouldn't speak.

"Anna, would you feel more comfortable staying with me in my room?" Wilhelm asked her after dinner.

She had gone with him to his study so he could finish a few things before bed. He'd said he needed to get in touch with the world Elders. There was a special Gathering when Elders or Sons died.

Anna looked at him with questioning eyes. What would Ilsa do?

"Ilsa is staying with Maurice. I realize that you might not be comfortable staying in the other room."

The idea of staying in Alex's bed alone was heart wrenching. Being with Wilhelm was some comfort. She gave him a tiny smile and nodded.

He sighed. "I'm glad, Anna. I...I like having you with me." He looked down at his desk for a moment. "Do you want to stay here while I send out the email or do you want to go to bed?"

Anna thought for a minute. Sleep was a relief. She wished she could sleep all the time. "I think I'd like to go to bed," she whispered.

Wilhelm looked at her in surprise and then nodded. "*Kommen Sie,*" he said, walking around to where she sat. "I'll get you settled in and then come back."

Later, Anna lay in the dark, alone in Wilhelm's bed. She was thankful for the warm blankets because the room was cold. It was strange, lying in Ilsa's spot. But Ilsa had come and told her personally that she was all right with her being here. Anna didn't want Ilsa angry at her.

Anna had fallen asleep briefly, but the strange room made strange sounds.

The door opened and she sat up. Wilhelm walked inside and closed the door.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said softly.

"I was awake," she said.

He walked into the bathroom and returned a few minutes later in his pajamas. He got into the bed and Anna curled up next to him, resting her hand on his chest and her knee on his thigh.

A wave of desire swept through her body. Sex. Sex would help her feel better. But would Wilhelm think poorly of her if she touched him?

She moved her fingers lightly on his chest over his shirt. When she ran her fingers over his nipple he inhaled sharply and grabbed her hand.

"Wilhelm...", she whispered, almost pleading. She opened her mouth several times before coming up with something to say. "Please..."

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her palm, then turned onto his side. His lips captured hers and he pulled her close.

In desperation and despair, they shared their grief and found comfort in one another's arms.

The room.

Moonlight poured through the window, spilling its silver light over the empty chair. The rest of the room was shrouded in darkness.

Whose room was it? Why was she here?

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Chapter Sixty

“Holy shit,” Aaron mumbled under his breath as the Mercedes van drove up to Alex’s family home. He’d known Alex came from a wealthy family, but it never quite hit home. Until now. The other dancers around him were having similar reactions.

Alex never came across as arrogantly wealthy. He could be arrogant about his looks or his abilities with women, but he never made a big deal about his family. The castle-like structure at the end of the drive bewildered Aaron. Somehow the jet they rode in to get here didn’t quite have the same effect, although maybe it should have.

“Did you know about this?” Aaron asked Isaak, who sat next to him.

Isaak shook his head. “I had an inkling, but the reality is far more impressive.”

The van pulled up to the front of the house and a gray-haired man opened the door. Wilhelm stepped out a moment later, dignified as ever, but with grief evident in his face. When the door to the van opened, everyone stood and made their way into the house. Wilhelm greeted each dancer by name and thanked them for coming.

“Aaron,” Wilhelm said simply and they exchanged sad looks and handshakes.

“Thank you for bringing us over, Wilhelm,” Aaron said sincerely. “It means a lot to us.”

“Of course, Aaron. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

While Aaron waited for Wilhelm to greet the other dancers he looked around. Man, was this place impressive! Kurt, Ilsa and Alex’s sisters came around a corner looking somber, but there was no sign of Anna.

Aaron walked up to Kurt and they shook hands in greeting. Kurt looked more sober than Aaron had ever seen him. He stood taller and had an aura of seriousness that hadn't been there before.

"Hello, Aaron, I'm glad you could come," Kurt said. "Have you met my sisters, Liesl and Greta?"

"I think I did once a while ago." Aaron exchanged greetings with the two girls. They were both very pretty and looked like Alex and Kurt.

Jenna walked up to the group and greeted Kurt and introduced Matt.

"Where's Anna?" Aaron asked Kurt quietly.

Kurt's expression fell even more. "In the library. She spends all her time in there. But I'm sure she'll be glad to see you. Let's get you to your rooms and then I'll take you to see her."

Anna stared out the window as usual. Wilhelm had said that once the dancers arrived, she needed to stay in Alex's room. If she stayed with Wilhelm, her reputation would suffer and that he couldn't do that to her. The other dancers wouldn't understand the relationship that Anna and Wilhelm had. It was fine with her. Sex wasn't helping her feel better. Nothing stopped the ache in her heart.

Suicide was once again tempting, but she had a feeling it wouldn't work since she was half-Immortal. There was no relief. Nothing to take the pain away. Just an empty future of heartache.

Something brushed her shoulder and she jumped and looked up to see Aaron standing above her.

"Hey Anna," he said softly.

She turned back to the window and hugged her knees to her chest. Aaron sat on the other end of the bench.

“Kurt says you’re in here most of the time.”

Anywhere else hurts too much.

“Do you want to go for a walk outside?”

Anna looked back at him. A walk didn’t sound too bad. She shrugged her shoulders.

“That’s as positive a response as you’ll get,” said a German-accented voice from behind her. *Kurt.*

Kurt had been very attentive to her since she arrived. Gretchen had disappeared after that first night. She heard Derek and Sofie sometimes, but she didn’t hear any baby’s cries. Where was Otto?

“*Kommen Sie, Anna,*” Kurt said, taking her hand to pull her to her feet. He put a heavy sweater over her shoulders, and then he and Aaron walked her out the door to the terrace.

The fresh air felt good on her face. It was cold and crisp. Kurt and Aaron walked on either side of her and talked. Anna zoned out, but kept walking with them.

It felt good to walk, but she had no desire to talk.

They walked around the gardens for about an hour. Aaron listened as Kurt told him about the discussion he’d had with Wilhelm about taking Alex’s place.

“I will be brought into the Brotherhood at the Gathering tonight,” Kurt said. “Then I must start learning everything that Alex has spent the last fifteen years learning.”

“You don’t sound especially excited about it,” Aaron commented. Not that he could really blame him.

“It is my duty now to step into Alex’s place. Someone must take over after Vati.” He glanced down at Anna. “And be able to watch over Anna as well. Vati will not leave her vulnerable to Devin.”

Anna didn’t respond to her name, which worried Aaron. “Has she started talking again?”

Kurt grimaced. “A little. Vati said she talked to him a few times, but I haven’t heard her. She does not hear you unless you get her attention first, either.” He stopped and put his hand on her shoulder. “Anna?”

Anna blinked and looked up at Kurt.

“Are you warm enough?”

She didn’t respond for a moment and then gave a slight nod and went back to staring out into nothing.

Kurt glanced at Aaron and shrugged. “That is all I can get out of her. Vati said they made love and she responded to him. But the next morning was like this again.”

Aaron frowned at the idea of Wilhelm being with Anna. “Why did he do that to her?”

“Do what?”

“Have sex?”

Kurt sighed. “He is her Master now. She initiated it, not Vati.”

“That’s wrong on so many levels,” Aaron snapped. “Your dad shouldn’t be fucking his son’s wife.”

Kurt looked at him sadly. “Perhaps for most people.” He motioned to Anna. “What else would you propose? You know what Devin did to her. You know how she responded to Ben’s death.”

Aaron sighed. “I don’t know. She’s just—”

“She is just really fucked up, Aaron. We’re doing the best we can with her. I don’t know what to do. Vati doesn’t know what to do. She has shut

down.” Kurt took a deep breath. “Vati is afraid she might not recover. That this was a breaking point that she can’t come back from.”

“That’s nice of you to give up on her.”

“Again...what do you propose, Aaron? She is here. With us. We love on her as best we can, but she just spaces out. She has no idea what is going on around her and does not care. The only way she comes back to life is through sex. But even that is just temporary. She is always worse in the mornings.”

“Maybe because your dad fucked her,” Aaron snapped loudly.

They both looked down at Anna. She didn’t move. She hadn’t moved since they’d stopped walking.

“Vati says that she is talking to someone in her sleep. And when she wakes up, her eyes are wild and then she just breaks down and cries. The rest of the day she is like this.”

“Is it like her dreams before?”

“She does not remember them once she is awake. We have no idea what they are about.”

They started walking again. They went forward a few steps and Kurt went back to guide Anna forward.

Aaron had to admit Kurt had changed. He was very attentive to Anna. When her sweater slipped even the slightest bit, he immediately fixed it. A leaf blew into her hair and Kurt plucked it out. Aaron felt jealousy twist his heart as he watched Kurt with her.

“Where’s Gretchen?” Aaron asked.

“Gone. Back to Berlin to her mother. I will be filing for divorce.”

Aaron couldn’t hide his shock. Was it because of Anna? “Why?”

“She is not a fit wife for an Elder. Did Alex tell you about Otto?”

“Your son that was born in November?”

Kurt nodded. "Except that he is not my son. He is Alex's."

Aaron stopped dead in his tracks. Alex hadn't told him any of that.

"She got pregnant and lied about who the father was. She also admitted...well, several disgusting matters, and also decided that the appropriate day to announce her transgressions was Anna and Alex's wedding day. We have had problems for years, but this crossed the line. Vati gave me permission to seek a divorce. Otto will be well taken care of, but in Berlin. Not here."

"Wow," was all Aaron could say. "Do you... I mean, with Anna, does your dad want you and her to...be together?"

"He mentioned it, but we would never force her into a marriage. It would be a logical match, but she needs to recover first." Kurt tucked a piece of hair that had blown across her face behind her ear.

Yes, she needed to recover. She had become a shell of her former person. Her face was pale and her eyes were lifeless. It pained Aaron's heart to see her like this. Especially after being with her the last few months when she was so full of life and joy.

Kurt's phone buzzed. "Excuse me." He turned away and spoke in German.

Aaron pulled Anna into his arms and hugged her close. "I'm so sorry, Anna," he said quietly. She leaned her head against his chest and closed her eyes.

Kurt cursed and turned back. "Devin is here."

"Devin? Why?" Why on earth would he be here? To take Anna home? Aaron knew that as much as he wanted Anna back in San Francisco, she was much safer here. Far away from Devin.

"He is an Elder. He has a right to be at the service. Most of the world Elders will be there. And tonight as well." Kurt shuddered. "He gives me

the creeps.”

Aaron chuckled darkly. “He makes me want to become a murderer.”

Kurt’s smile was grim. “I know the feeling.”

They led Anna back to the house and into the salon where Devin waited.

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Chapter Sixty-One

Devin looked up as Anna was brought into the room, flanked by Kurt and Aaron. They both gave him suspicious looks and appeared very defensive of the young woman who stood between them. He sighed inwardly. He was going to have to be careful while he was here. Anna was commanding a great deal of attention, and Devin would have to be on his best behavior to get her back home.

“Hello, Anna,” he said, standing and walking to her.

She didn’t respond and he frowned.

“You have to touch her to get her attention,” Kurt explained and knelt beside her. He put his hand on her shoulder. “Anna. Devin is here.”

She turned her head and it took a moment for her eyes to focus on Kurt. She blinked several times and then looked at Devin. Her face remained impassive.

Devin looked at Kurt. “May I have some time with her?”

Kurt narrowed his eyes. “What are you going to do?”

Impudent son of a bitch! “I just want to talk to her.”

“Good luck with that,” Kurt said, but gently pushed Anna forward. “She only speaks to my father.”

Devin took her hand and led her to the couch. “Maybe I can help,” he said, looking at Anna. He glanced back at the two men who still stood in the doorway and gave them an impatient look.

They both frowned, but turned and walked out of the room.

“Anna,” Devin said.

She looked at him with blank eyes.

Devin sighed. This wasn’t good. She wasn’t even responding to him. She had completely shut down. Well, now he knew her limits.

He trailed his fingers across her forehead and down her temple to her cheekbone. Her eyes closed momentarily and then opened again, this time they were full of grief. Tears welled up and spilled over onto her cheeks.

She began to sob and he put his arms around her. She wouldn't shut down again. At least not for a while. Her feelings would stay raw until her brain couldn't take it anymore and she shut down again. But by then she would be home.

He handed her a tissue and she blotted her eyes, though the tears kept spilling.

"Why did you do that?" she asked quietly. "I liked not feeling anything."

"It's not healthy to shut down like that, Anna."

"It hurts!" She rubbed her chest.

"I know, Baby. But avoiding the pain will just prolong it."

"I don't want to feel!"

"But if you don't feel, you won't feel anything good either."

"What could possibly feel good?" she spat.

Devin smiled and reached forward to touch her breast. She sucked in a breath and held it while he caressed her in the way he knew she liked. "Does that feel good?" he whispered.

Her eyes closed and her lips parted as she nodded.

"There are good things to feel, even when you're hurting Anna. If you shut down, you won't feel like this again." He slid his hand under her sweater and caressed her breast over her thin cotton bra. Her nipple was taut and he squeezed it, making her gasp.

She moaned softly and then whimpered when he withdrew his hand. She opened her eyes and looked at him. "Please don't stop," she begged.

Devin smiled gently. “Baby, as much as I’d like to, I can’t fuck you here on the couch in Wilhelm’s house.”

She looked around as if she didn’t realize where she was. “Oh.”

“When you come home, I promise I will make you feel really, really good.” He cupped her chin and kissed her on the mouth.

“I don’t know when I’m coming home.”

“Anna, he can’t keep you here if you don’t want to be here. I’m leaving Monday morning. I can get you a ticket to come with me if you’d like, but it’s up to you. If you’d rather stay here....” He shrugged. He couldn’t force her to leave. He could only make it miserable to stay.

She shook her head. “I can’t leave Wilhelm.”

“Baby, Wilhelm has a family to take care of.” He stroked her cheek.

Anna looked confused and then sad.

“I should go. I know I’m not exactly welcome here, but I wanted to check on you.”

Anna looked up at him with sad eyes. “You’re leaving me?”

“Only because I have to, Baby. I’ll see you tonight at the Manor, or whatever the fuck they call it here.”

“*Schloss*,” Anna said quietly.

Devin rolled his eyes and stood.

Anna stared at her hands as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Devin reached into his pocket and handed Anna a tiny plastic bag. “Here. If things get too...painful, take this. It will help.”

Anna held up the bag and looked at the small white pill. “What is it?”

“Something to help you feel better. It’s only a half dose. You shouldn’t take it without someone being around, but I don’t think Wilhelm would approve. Only take it if you need it.” And she would need it. He was sure of

it. He kissed her on the top of her head. “Don’t take it before the Gathering.”

Anna nodded and put the bag in her pocket.

Having accomplished what he came to do, Devin found his way out of the house and drove back to his hotel, confident that Anna would be returning to San Francisco with him on Monday.

Anna sat for a moment in the salon and then stood to find Wilhelm. The pain in her chest was so agonizing, she thought she would die. She missed Alex so much she could hardly breathe.

She went to Wilhelm’s study and knocked on the door.

“*Herein.*”

She opened the door and found Wilhelm and Kurt inside.

She looked at both of them for a moment. “What time do we need to leave?”

They both stared at her.

“Em,” Wilhelm said slowly. “In about an hour, I think.”

“I’ll be in my room, if that’s all right?”

Wilhelm nodded. “I’ll come get you when it’s time.”

She nodded and closed the door and went up to Alex’s room. As soon as the door opened, the pain in her heart increased to incredible levels. The memories flooded into her brain and overwhelmed her.

She huddled in the corner by the door and wept.

“Is it me, or did she look coherent?” Kurt asked, staring at the closed door.

Wilhelm also stared at the door, concerned and relieved at the same time. “Yes, she did.”

“That’s good, right?” Kurt said, looking hopeful.

Wilhelm shook his head. “I don’t know. I’m glad she’s...alert, but I wonder what Devin did.” He sighed. “I don’t trust that man. He’s going to try to manipulate Anna to go back to San Francisco, I just know it.”

“But she can’t stay here for long, can she? I mean, if Alex were here it’d be different...”

It was true. Elder Mistresses were linked to their birthplaces. If Anna stayed here for an extended period of time, she would start to get sick. She had to be in her hometown or with her Master. Only Alex could have kept her here without hurting her. Wilhelm didn’t have enough power to override her need for Devin and San Francisco.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Anna sat at Wilhelm's feet in the *Schloss's* Great Hall. There were almost as many white robes as there were blue and green. Elders, Deacons and Brothers from around the world had come to say goodbye to Alex and his men.

The pain of listening to so many people talk about Alex made Anna want to scream. Wilhelm had done something to her so she couldn't speak, which was probably a good thing. Otherwise, she would be screaming. As it was, she sat on the pillow and the tears streamed down her face.

The *Schloss Dirne* were there, as well as the other Elder-Mistresses. She could sense them, though she couldn't see them.

Men in green robes walked up an aisle carrying black robes, save one who carried a white robe. Alex's robe. Wilhelm stood and took the robe from the man and then, one after the other, the robes were placed in a large brazier to burn. Alex's was last. She stared at the fire as it consumed the fabric.

Goodbye my husband. My Master. My love.

Kurt was brought forward and Wilhelm declared him his Elder-Son. He received his double ring piercing and demonstrated his submission to his father.

When the ceremony was over, the gathering became more like a normal gathering. Wilhelm told her that he hoped the men would respect her grief and not approach, but if they did, she would have to attend to them. She was the first Elder-Mistress to be married in a long time, so the men might not think about the fact that Anna would be grieving. Apparently, half-Immortals were not prone to much emotion. Little affected them.

She saw the other Mistresses flirting and attending to the Elders. They were all beautiful and graceful, and Anna could hardly take her eyes off them. If only she were more like them, maybe she wouldn't be hurting so badly.

Wilhelm saw Devin talking with Vitaly in the back of the room. Something about the two of them together didn't sit right with him, though Wilhelm couldn't pinpoint a reason. He would have to keep an eye on them.

He patted Anna's head. He wished there was something he could do to comfort her.

A tall, blond young man was watching Anna from a few feet away. He looked like he wanted to go to her, but couldn't make up his mind. Wilhelm frowned. Fathers didn't teach respect these days. He figured if Anna would be approached, it would probably be one of the Sons.

The young man seemed to make up his mind and nervously approached the platform where Wilhelm sat. He looked at Wilhelm and gave him a timid smile.

"Excuse me, my lord. Could I please speak to Ann-I mean, the Mistress?"

Anna's head lifted suddenly and she looked at the young man.

"Who are you?" he asked sternly.

"My name is Tommy Pendleton. I-My father is Tom Pendleton, of New York."

Tommy shifted from foot to foot, which amused Wilhelm. He didn't seem like the typical cocky Elder-Son. And Anna seemed to know him.

Wilhelm nodded, and Tommy stepped forward and knelt in front of Anna.

“Hey, Anna,” he said softly.

Anna looked at him for a long moment. “Good evening, my lord,” she answered formally. Wilhelm had given back her ability to speak after the rituals were completed.

Tommy frowned. “I hate it when you call me that.”

“It’s proper,” she whispered.

He reached out his hand to stroke Anna’s cheek. The tenderness in his eyes made Wilhelm relax. This young man cared deeply for Anna. He wouldn’t hurt her.

“I’m so sorry about...everything, Anna,” he said softly.

“Thank you, my lord. You are very kind.”

Tommy looked hurt. Anna was being very formal while Tommy was trying to be kind. Was she afraid of Wilhelm scolding her?

Kurt came to sit next to his father. “My ass hurts,” he said in German.

Wilhelm chuckled. “I’m sorry, son. But that is how it’s done.”

“Even Alex?”

“Of course. Did he tell you what happened the night before his wedding?”

Kurt shook his head.

Wilhelm told him how all the German Elders had taken Alex in the ass while not letting him orgasm.

“Men can really come from that?” Kurt seemed bewildered.

“You’ve never been with a man?” Wilhelm was surprised. He was fairly certain Kurt had done every sexual act there was.

“Only to share a woman. I’ve never been attracted to men, Vati.”

“Yes, men can come from that. Quite nicely, actually.”

Kurt gave his father a startled look. “I think I’ll stick to women.” He noticed Tommy talking to Anna. “Who’s that?” he asked with a touch of

defensiveness.

“Tommy Pendleton, of New York.”

“He likes her.”

“I believe you are right.”

Kurt frowned.

“Kurt, you may pursue her now, if you’d like. But you need to be gentle and patient with her. And if you ever treat her like you treated Gretchen, I’ll tan your hide.”

“I wouldn’t do that, Vati.”

“Good.”

Kurt watched Tommy and Anna for a while. Tommy was trying to make Anna feel better, but she remained cool and aloof. Tommy looked up at Wilhelm and Wilhelm gave him an understanding smile.

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I’ll let you be alone, Anna. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tommy got up and walked away. Wilhelm’s heart went out to him.

“Perhaps you should go to her tonight. When we go home.”

“We’re not staying?”

Wilhelm shook his head. “I’m not in the mood. I want to go home.”

Anna lay huddled on the floor in front of the fireplace. She couldn’t sleep. She stared into the dying flames and thought of Alex. If she could rip her heart out of her chest she would. Nothing took away the pain.

Suddenly she remembered the pill that Devin had given her. He said it would help her feel better. She jumped up and ran to the bathroom where she had put it in a drawer. She stared at it for a moment and then filled a cup with water and swallowed the pill.

She returned to the fireplace and sat down in the chair. How long would it take? What would it feel like?

After a while, she felt herself relaxing. The ache in her heart dulled. It still hurt, but it was much better than it had been. She might actually be able to get a decent night's sleep. She glanced at the big bed. It didn't look so lonely now.

She was crawling in under the covers when she heard a sound coming from the bathroom. Her heart pounded as she saw a shadow emerge and walk towards her.

"Alex?" she whispered. Was it his ghost?

"*Nein, Engel,*" came the voice from the shadow.

Kurt walked up to the edge of the bed and caressed her cheek. "I wanted to check and see how you were doing."

She gazed up into his eyes and put her hand on his. She moved up onto her knees and pressed her lips to his.

"Anna," he groaned and pushed her back onto the bed, kissing her and wrapping his arms around her. "*Oh, mein Engel.*"

His kisses felt so good. His touch was incredible.

"Make love to me, Kurt," she whispered. And he did.

She didn't dream that night.

Chapter Sixty-Three

“Good morning, Anna,” Kurt whispered. He held her tightly against his chest, her back to his front, and kissed the back of her head.

Anna was awake, but she didn't know if Kurt knew that. The ache in her heart was back. Kurt's voice was too much like Alex's. His embrace was too much like Alex's. She lay in the bed that she and Alex had shared together in his family's home. Everything reminded her of Alex and she didn't want to remember him. It hurt too much.

The pill had worked. She'd felt better, just like Devin had said she would. But now she felt as bad as she did before. She could deal with the pain of life as a dull ache. It was the stabbing pain in the heart that she couldn't deal with. And that's what she'd woken up with.

Maybe she could ask Devin if he had more at the service this morning. She could make it through the day if she had another one of those pills.

Kurt's hand slid down to her breast and cupped it gently. That felt good, too. Sex was enough of a distraction as well. Sex and those little white pills. Yeah, she could do that. She pressed her breast into his hand.

“Yes, Kurt,” she whispered and pressed her ass back against his erection.

He kissed her neck and then turned her onto her back and kissed her breast. “Such a beautiful sight in the morning,” he murmured.

Once Kurt had left to get ready for the service, Anna hit bottom again. There was nothing to distract her with him gone. She dressed in a black dress and heels and then went downstairs to the dining room for breakfast. The other dancers greeted her with warm smiles and hugs. She hadn't seen

many of them yet. It was nice that they had come, but it didn't make her feel any better.

She looked at the food and realized she wasn't hungry. She sighed and walked to the window and looked outside. It was raining again. She leaned her head against the cool glass and closed her eyes.

"*Guten Morgen, Anna.*" Wilhelm came and stood next to her. "How are you feeling?"

Anna sighed. "I don't like feeling. It hurts."

"I can understand that *Liebling*. Sometimes it seems easier to be numb."

Anna nodded.

"But I am glad you're talking again. I was worried about you."

Anna managed a small smile. "I didn't mean to worry you."

She looked up at him and then closed her eyes. Looking at him was looking at Alex. She adored Wilhelm, but being with him was painful. Being here was painful.

"Devin offered to take me home tomorrow," she said without thinking.

"He did?" Wilhelm asked, his voice shaking slightly. "Anna, you are welcome to stay here as long as you would like. You are part of our family. Alex's death hasn't changed that."

"I know," she whispered.

"I would rather you stay for a little while. I...I do not want you going home alone."

Being alone sounded rather nice. Nothing to trigger memories, maybe? But Wilhelm was right. If she went home, she'd be in that big empty house full of memories of Alex. And Seth and Tony as well. Which would be worse? Here at least she had people who loved her.

"I don't know what to do," she admitted softly.

“I will not force you to stay, Anna. But I do ask you to consider it. I love you. My family is your family and they love you. Maybe just...stay until the initial pain is gone.”

“But what about dancing?” she asked. Dancing had always helped before. Maybe that’s what she needed.

Wilhelm paused. “I forgot about that. You are close to another performance, correct?”

She nodded. “Two weeks.” But she had missed many rehearsals. Would Isaak let her perform? It was to be her debut as principal. With Aaron.

The decisions to be made were starting to overwhelm her. She squeezed her eyes shut. She didn’t want to think about anything.

People began arriving a little while later. Wilhelm’s brothers arrived first. Friedrich and Klara looked as distraught as Wilhelm and Ilsa.

Of course. *Erich*. How could she have forgotten? Her grief over Alex had overshadowed the realization that there were other men that died that day. But all Anna could think about was Alex.

She stood in the entryway with the rest of the family. She met Seth’s mother and sister, and Tony’s parents, and the other men’s families too. The Elders came as well.

The power those men radiated was overwhelming, and with so many of them in the room, it was suffocating. They were very polite to Anna. She was introduced to several women that she knew instinctively were Elder-Mistresses. They seemed very nice, but...ethereal. They didn’t seem to understand why Anna was so upset.

She didn’t even fit in among her “own kind.” What a depressing thought. She felt like she didn’t fit any anywhere.

“Anna,” Devin said, walking up and kissing her cheek. “How are you doing?”

She looked at the three men who walked over with him. Father, son and grandson? The older man, probably in his seventies, had gray hair and a gray beard. The younger man was in his early fifties and had black hair sprinkled with silver and a black beard. The youngest man was a few years older than Anna with thick black wavy hair and was clean shaven.

“I’m all right,” she answered softly. She wanted to ask Devin about the pills, but wanted to wait until he was alone.

“Anna, this is Vitaly from St. Petersburg, his son, Vlad, and his grandson Peter.”

Anna looked at Vitaly with hard eyes. He was the reason Alex was gone. She knew she needed to be respectful, but wanted to slap him in his face. Her hands curled into fists and she trembled as she fought within herself.

“Anna!” Devin said sharply, but quietly.

“Hello,” she managed to squeak out.

“I am sorry for your loss, Anna,” Vitaly said in a thick Russian accent. “I had no idea that Alex had so recently married or I wouldn’t have contacted him.”

Anna pressed her lips together to keep from being rude. Tears stung her eyes and her jaw trembled. “Excuse me,” she said, and turned and walked away.

She walked to a window and tried to get control of herself. She’d never been so angry before. Devin would be angry, but Anna was beyond caring.

But if he was angry at her, he wouldn’t give her any more pills. She needed those pills if she was going to make it through the next couple of weeks.

She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. She needed to calm down and be contrite to pacify Devin. When she was sufficiently calm, she returned humbly to Devin.

“I’m sorry I was rude, Devin,” she said softly.

Devin gave her a sympathetic smile. “It’s all right, Anna. I know you’re going through a lot right now. I shouldn’t have introduced you to them. I didn’t think how it would make you feel.”

Wilhelm came up to the two of them. “Anna, the service will begin in a few minutes. We need to go inside.” He put his arm around Anna’s shoulders and guided her into the crowded hall.

It was filled with chairs, and most of the chairs were occupied. There were several hundred people in the room. Wilhelm led Anna to the front row and sat her between Ilsa and Kurt. Kurt took her hand in his and squeezed gently.

A priest of some sort came to the front and began speaking in German. Kurt interpreted for her, but she didn’t pay any attention. She couldn’t concentrate on anything above the pain in her heart.

Many people got up and spoke about Alex and the other men. They were held in high esteem by all present, Alex especially. Friedrich spoke about Alex and Erich as children. Isaak spoke about how much Alex loved the ballet and supported it, and loved a certain ballerina. More than one person talked about how happy Alex was being married to Anna. How he had become a better man because of her. Aaron spoke about his friendship and how much Alex had changed Anna and vice versa.

Anna stared at the floor the entire time with tears streaming down her cheeks. She clutched Alex’s wedding ring in one hand and held Kurt’s hand with the other.

By the time Wilhelm got up to give the closing remarks, Anna's heart felt like it had been through a meat grinder several times. She wanted to run away and drown herself in a bath of cold water, just so she could numb her brain and heart. God, would this pain ever end?

Wilhelm spoke fondly of the men and then thanked everyone for coming. He sat down again in his chair and the priest dismissed everyone, saying there would be refreshments in the back.

Kurt kissed her temple. "Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

Anna shook her head. "I need to find Devin." She needed those pills before she lost it.

"Devin? Why?" Kurt looked suspicious.

"I just do." She stood and looked around the room. He stood in the back of the room talking with Tom. Tommy and Tyler were with them as well. She didn't want to see Tommy. He was...too nice. But her desire for relief outweighed anything else and she hurried to the back of the room.

Devin looked at her kindly. "You okay?"

Anna shook her head and gave him a desperate look. "Can I speak to you for a moment?"

Devin nodded and they walked to the side of the room. "What can I help you with, Baby?"

Anna chewed her lip for a moment. "Do you...have any more of...what you gave me yesterday?"

Devin shook his head. "No, not with me. I have one back at my hotel room, but that's it. It's difficult to travel with those things."

Anna's shoulders slumped and she hung her head. There would be no relief from her pain.

"Is it that bad, Anna?"

She looked back up at him and nodded. “I can’t stand it, Devin. I took it last night and felt so much better. But this morning, I felt terrible again. And all this...” She motioned around the room. “I can’t...deal with it. It hurts!”

“I don’t think Wilhelm would approve of you taking drugs to help you feel better.”

Anna thought for a moment. She loved Wilhelm. But being here was too painful. Devin had something to make her feel better. Devin didn’t look like Alex or remind her of Alex.

“Anna, if you come home with me, I have plenty at home and you can have as much as you want. I have...other things that might help as well.”

The thought was too tempting. She was too desperate to get rid of the pain. She made her decision. “I’ll come home with you.”

Devin smiled, trying to keep himself from looking too satisfied. Anna had done precisely as he knew she would. She didn’t know how to deal with emotional pain. That’s how he made her. He would take her back to the hotel room, fuck her like crazy and promise her a pill when they got on the plane home tomorrow. He really did have a plethora of drugs to offer her. As long as she was coherent when he needed her to be, he didn’t care what she did the rest of the time.

“I’m so glad, Baby,” he said hugging her. “I’ve missed you.”

“I don’t want to go to my house,” she said with a desperate look. “I can’t go home.”

Devin nodded sympathetically. “Why don’t you stay at the Manor for a few days and then we can discuss getting you a new apartment?” If she wanted one. She might be perfectly content to stay at the Manor. Though it was nice to have her in town. Hmm. He would have to think about that.

Anna nodded, relief already showing in her eyes.

“When do you want to leave?” Devin asked carefully. He didn’t want to press her.

“When can we?” she asked.

“My car is out front, but do you want to leave Wilhelm so quickly?” Devin was pleasantly surprised for her to be willing to go so soon. He didn’t want to stay any longer than he had to. The place annoyed him.

Anna nodded. “He’s too much like Alex,” she whispered.

“You need to say good-bye.”

She nodded and went to find Wilhelm. Devin watched as she spoke to him, tears streaming down her face. Wilhelm looked up at him with narrow eyes and then back at Anna. He cradled her cheek and shook his head, speaking rapidly. But Anna shook her head and backed away. She said something else to him and then walked quickly back to Devin and hugged him.

Wilhelm gave Devin a pleading look. Devin smiled triumphantly at him and guided Anna out toward the entryway. “I’ll have your things brought to the hotel,” he said as they walked outside.

He motioned to Tom, who nodded. They had driven out here together with their sons. Anna would have plenty of sex to distract her until they got on the plane in the morning. He just had to warn Tyler to be nice until they were back in the country. Devin wouldn’t risk Anna running away or she might never return to him. Well, at least voluntarily. He preferred her coming to him willingly. It was much easier that way.

Anna sat between Tyler and Tommy on the drive back into Frankfurt. She felt guilty for leaving like she did, but the longer she stayed, the more

painful it got. She didn't even say good-bye to Kurt or Aaron. Or even Ilsa. She ran. But soon she would feel better. Devin promised.

They arrived at a luxury hotel in Frankfurt and Devin took her up to his room. They walked in and after Devin closed the door, he stood behind Anna and kissed her neck.

"I've missed you Baby," he whispered in her ear, running his hands down her chest to her breasts. "Let me make you feel better."

"Please," Anna whispered and Devin took her into the bedroom.

Had she made a mistake by leaving the *Gutshaus*? Should she not have left Wilhelm? Shouldn't she at least have said goodbye to the rest of the family?

Devin was out in the living room, making arrangements for Anna to return home with him. After the rush of sex was gone, she felt as miserable as ever. Added to that was the guilt of leaving people who cared about her. Maybe she shouldn't have left with Devin. Maybe she should have stayed.

She rolled onto her back and looked up at the ceiling. She just wanted the pain to be gone.

Devin came in a few minutes later with a bellboy following him. Anna sat up in bed and held the covers over her breasts. The bellboy grinned at her.

"Anna, your suitcases are here."

The bellboy put her things in the closet, gave her one last look and then left.

"Get dressed. We'll have lunch in a bit."

"Devin?" Anna asked in a quiet voice. "Do you have that pill?"

He smiled at her. "I only have one. Do you want it now or do you want it for the flight home?"

Anna gave him a distraught look. "Only one? Can I have half now and half tomorrow?" A half made her feel good yesterday.

"It is half. It's the other half of what I already gave you."

Anna looked at her hands. "But you have more at home?"

Devin smiled tenderly at her. "I have anything you could possibly need back at the Manor." He sat next to her and smoothed her hair. "I'd rather you wait until tomorrow to take it. I'm sure Tommy would be more than happy to help you feel better."

Anna searched his eyes. She didn't want to wait, but didn't want to upset Devin either. Otherwise he might not give it to her at all. She nodded reluctantly.

"Good girl. Now go shower and get dressed."

Tommy and Tyler both helped her feel better for the rest of the afternoon. After lunch, she went to their room and they spent the rest of the day naked in one of the beds. Tyler was surprisingly gentle with her, though he still liked it a little rough. But she found she didn't mind too much. Tommy was loving as always.

She cleaned up for dinner and then Devin kept her with him for the rest of the night. Tom was there for part of the time as well.

She hadn't had sex so many times in one day in a very long time. But Devin was right. It kept the pain at bay, and she was grateful for that.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Their flight left at 8:30 the next morning, so they had to get up early. Devin told Anna to dress nicely since they were flying first class. She put on her travel suit and presented herself to Devin.

He pulled her onto his lap and ran his hands up her thighs. He grazed her pussy lips and slipped under her panties to slip his fingers inside her body.

“Open your mouth,” he said.

She did and he put the pill on her tongue and handed her a glass of water.

She swallowed and rested her head on his shoulder as he circled her clit gently. By the time she screamed out her orgasm, the pill had kicked in and she was feeling euphoric. It felt even better this time. She even smiled a bit.

They were flying home with Tom and Tommy. There was a layover in New York, and they would part ways at that point. Tyler would leave with the Pendletons so he could get back to school.

Tyler and Tommy were ecstatic about this particular flight. Apparently Singapore Airlines was *the* airline for first class. They arrived at the airport and, after checking in, they went to the first class lounge to wait for their flight.

Anna was content. She wasn't feeling much of anything and was quite happy about that. Soon, Germany would be far behind her, and she had no intention of coming back. Ever. She didn't want to be reminded of anything having to do with Alex. He was gone. Nothing would bring him back. She just needed to deal with that and move on with her life.

Once on board the plane, Anna curled up to watch a movie. Devin sat across the aisle from her. There were only eight seats in first class and they took up most of them. The other three were occupied by two men and a woman.

After she'd eaten breakfast, Tyler walked over and sat on the footrest in her seat area.

"I'm glad you're coming home, Anna. I was worried I wouldn't get to see you this summer." He ran his hand up her leg and under her skirt.

Anna looked around nervously. "Tyler...", she said, trying to push his hand away.

Tyler grabbed her hand and held her wrist so tightly she thought he would bruise it. "Don't you dare push my hand away," he said between clenched teeth.

"Ow, Tyler," Anna whimpered. "You're hurting me." She tried to twist her arm to get away, but he was much stronger than she was.

He took her hand and placed it between his legs, making her rub his cock. "Mmm. That feels good."

"Tyler, please. There are other people here." Anna looked up to see the woman glaring at them.

Tyler laughed and leaned forward to kiss her, then pulled her to her feet. "True. C'mon." He pulled her to the front of the plane and into the spacious bathroom.

He grabbed hold of her hair and pushed her chest down onto the vanity with one hand and lifted her skirt with the other hand. He pulled her panties down and then she felt his cock at the entrance of her pussy. She yelped as he thrust forward suddenly and tried to brace herself on the edge of the sink.

Tyler fucked her hard. His hands fisted her hair to keep her in place. His hips slammed into her ass and he grunted as he rammed himself into her

over and over again. He stiffened and groaned as he came, then released her hair so suddenly she fell to the ground.

He looked down at her and grinned as he zipped up his pants. “It feels even better doing it on a plane.”

He opened the door and stalked out, leaving Anna on the floor. She climbed shakily to her feet, found a comb to fix her hair, and then stumbled back to her seat.

The woman walked quickly over to her. “Are you all right? Did he hurt you?” She spoke with an accent Anna couldn’t place, but the concern in her voice was evident.

“She’s fine,” Devin answered for Anna.

The woman whirled around. “How would you know?” she asked in an accusatory tone.

Devin’s eyes narrowed. “Because I’m her...guardian. And I know her better than she knows herself.”

“I’m quite certain that young man just raped her in the bathroom, and you think she’s fine?”

“That young man is my son. And yes, she’s fine.” Devin stood and looked the woman intently in the eye. He didn’t blink, but seemed to be conveying some sort of message to the woman.

Anna watched in horrified fascination as the woman’s manner calmed and softened. Her indignant attitude was replaced with one of acceptance.

“I must have been mistaken,” she said softly, and returned to her seat.

Anna looked at Devin in awe. “What did you do to her?”

Devin sat down and smiled. “I made her realize that she was wrong and I was right.”

Anna glanced back at the woman, who had put earphones on and was watching TV. How did Devin make her just walk away like that? It was a

little frightening.

By the time the plane landed in New York, Tyler had raped her two more times, she'd had sex with both Devin and Tom, and the two other men that were in first class had also used Anna, with Devin's blessing. Tommy had laid down with her and was more subtle about them being together. The woman had minded her own business the entire time.

She was also beginning to crash from the pill wearing off. She and Devin had a few hours before their next flight and waited in the first class lounge after saying goodbye to Tom, Tyler and Tommy.

Tom had invited Devin and Anna to stay a few days, but Devin declined, and Anna was grateful. She wanted to get home. To the pills Devin promised her. Then everything would be all right.

She huddled in a leather recliner in the lounge while Devin relaxed before their flight. Sleep eluded her and she was jumpy.

"Anna, do you want me to get you a sleeping pill? They sell them in the shops here."

"Will it help?" she asked with a shaky voice.

"It might. It will let you sleep for the flight home."

Anna nodded. Anything to stop the pain.

Devin wouldn't let her take the sleeping pill until they boarded the plane. She was miserable until then. Worse than before, it seemed, though Devin assured her it was just perspective.

Chapter Sixty-Five

When they landed in San Francisco that evening, Devin had a difficult time waking Anna. He dumped a double espresso down her throat at the airport and it jolted her enough to make it back to the Manor. She was a jittery mess when they arrived at the Manor, but she wasn't pining after Alex, which she considered a good thing.

Devin took her up to her room and showed her the cabinet full of various drugs in her bathroom. Anna's eyes widened at the bottled relief in front of her.

"Ian will answer any questions you have and keep an eye on you," Devin said. "Don't take more at one time than what's written on the bottle or I won't let you have anymore."

Anna nodded, still staring in awe at the various bottles and boxes. *Relief!*

Devin pulled out one bottle and handed it to her. "This is what I gave you in Germany. Try the various types and see what you like. If you like something in particular, let Ian know and we can get you more. All right?"

Anna nodded and looked at the bottle in her hand. "What's the fastest?"

Devin chuckled. "This." He pointed out a plastic box with some sort of herb in it. "Or this." He pointed to a box of white powder. "But I want Ian here when you try these so he can show you how to use them. Otherwise, you can get really fucked up." He pointed to the bottle. "Take a couple of these and Ian will show you this other stuff in the morning, all right?"

Anna frowned, but nodded.

"If you don't listen to me, I won't let you have any of it."

Anna nodded meekly. She didn't want that to happen.

“Good girl,” Devin said, kissing her on the forehead. “I’ll see you on Friday.” He led her back out to the bedroom and poured her a glass of water.

He left the room and Anna looked at the bottle. Three at once? Oh, thank God!

She dumped three pills into her hand and swallowed them at once, then lay back on her bed. How long would it take to kick in? What would it feel like? If half a pill made her feel good, how good would three feel?

“How’s she doing?”

Ian looked at Devin with an inscrutable expression. “She’s good. Happy even. Well, at least blissfully ignorant of what’s going on around her.”

“You don’t approve of my decision?” Devin raised his brow at his friend.

Ian’s face remained neutral. “She’s yours to do with as you like. I’m concerned when the drugs stop working.”

“There’s always more to be had.”

The two men made their way to Anna’s bedroom in the Manor. By all reports, Anna had been happy and carefree all week. Only Ian seemed concerned.

“Did you show her how to smoke?”

That got a smile out of the big man. “Yeah. She likes that. We go outside and sit on the grass and get high. Then she jumps my bones and fucks me like crazy.”

Devin laughed. “See, it’s not all that bad. Gives you an excuse to get high too.”

“She’s not as much fun on the other stuff.”

“Well, you can’t have everything. Is she eating?”

“Yeah. Mostly. Not as much as I think she should, but she is eating.”

“Good. I don’t want her losing weight. She’s skinny enough as it is.”

They arrived at her door and Devin opened it.

Anna was lying naked on her bed, staring up at the ceiling with a blank expression on her face. The TV was on, but the volume was low.

“I told her she couldn’t use the heavy stuff on Fridays. I think she must have taken something really heavy last night, because she hasn’t moved all day.”

Devin sighed. He needed her coherent on Fridays. “Go get an adrenaline shot from the doc.”

Ian nodded and Devin walked to Anna’s bed. He trailed his fingers across her breasts. Goose bumps appeared and a lopsided smile appeared on her face. She could still feel. That was good. His fingers trailed down her flat belly to her clit. He rubbed across the nub with his thumb and she moaned softly. He could feel the rush of moisture as he continued to caress her.

She moaned and clenched her hands as he pressed a finger inside her now wet slit. It felt good against his finger. She clenched against him and moved her hips to get him to deepen his penetration.

Ian returned a few minutes later with a syringe.

“Has she asked about dancing?”

Ian shook his head. “I asked her about it yesterday and she didn’t seem interested in anything except feeling good.”

Devin smiled. “Good.”

He put the syringe in her arm and pushed the liquid into her veins. A moment later she screamed and sat up, looking around with wild eyes.

“Wha....what happened?” she asked

“It’s Friday, Baby. Time to get ready for the Gathering. You may have a half pill to get through the night.”

Anna turned her grateful eyes on Devin. “Thank you, Master,” she said softly.

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About Marissa Honeycutt

Marissa's story of Anna began with a dream about being kidnapped with Adam Savage from the *Mythbusters* (Yes, really). Over the next year and a half, it morphed into the story you just read. She has several other stories in progress, one of which is based on her kidnapped dream.

When she's not writing or editing, Marissa is taking care of two young boys, training to be an astronaut, running her household, wrestling with gorillas, playing around on Facebook, promoting whirled peas, and busting her tush for her accounting degree. She enjoys chocolate, air conditioning in the desert's summer heat, really good strawberry margaritas, sleeping, and shopping.

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Reader's discussion & support group for Part 1:

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Reader's discussion & support group for Part 2:

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Deleted scenes coming soon to Marissa's blog:

<http://marissahoneycutt.wordpress.com/>

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