

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark tuxedo jacket, a white dress shirt, and a dark bow tie, is looking out of a window. His right hand is raised to his chin, with a ring on his finger. The background shows a city skyline at night with illuminated buildings.

TEARS OF *Betrayal*

USA Today Bestselling Author

MICHELLE HEARD

TEARS OF
Betrayal

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Dedication

Uncle Luca,
Your larger-than-life presence will be missed.
You won't be forgotten.
1952 - 2021

Songlist

Click here - [*Spotify*](#)

I Ran – Hidden Citizens

Every Ending Is a Chance – Claire Wyndham

Dark Things – ADONA

Shots Fired – Hidden Citizens, Laney Jones

World on Fire – Les Friction

Another One Bites The Dust – Hidden Citizens, Jaxdon Gamble

Rise p – J2, Keely Bumford

Aint No Mountain High Enough – Joshep Willian Morgan, Shadow Royale

Holding Out For a Hero- Golden Limbs, Cover Sauce

Died In Your Arms – Hidden Citizens

Destiny – Generdyn, Krigare

Heaven Help Me – RAIN

In The Air Tonight – Natalie Taylor

Synopsis

My father is the head of the Bratva, but being born out of wedlock, I've never been a part of that world.
Until a hit is taken out on me.
I'm kidnapped in the dead of night, and waking up, I come face to face with
Demitri Vetrov.

Dangerous and heartless, Demitri is the most feared man in the world. I've heard whispers of what he's capable of.

I'm thrown into a nightmare where I don't know who I can trust, and fear for my life is my only constant companion.

I'm forced to be at Demitri's mercy, I'm just not sure he has any. It also doesn't help that he's disarmingly attractive.

Tall, dark, and deadly.

Knowing this, he uses it against me like a weapon, breaking down my walls faster than I can put them up.

There's a war coming, and I'm right in the middle of it.
The only question is, will Demitri be the one to save me or kill me?

TEARS OF BETRAYAL

Mafia / Organized Crime / Suspense Romance
COMPLETE STANDALONE.

Family Tree

Demitri Vetrov



Custodian & Personal Protection to Alexei Koslov.

Father: Viktor Vetrov (Deceased)

Uncle: Michail Vetrov

Brother: Damien Vetrov

Best Friend: Alexei Koslov

Ariana Robinson



Makeup Artist.

Father: Sergei Ivanov – (Head of Bratva)

Half-Brother: Yuri Ivanov

Mother: Beth Robinson

Chapter 1

DEMITRI

Demitri; 31. Ariana; 23

Staying two steps behind Alexei, I'm on high alert for any sudden movements from the guards as we enter Jakub Kaminski's compound in Poland.

I've been a custodian to Alexei for seven years, and our relationship has gradually changed from protector and assassin to business partners and best friends.

I was trained to protect Alexei Koslov, an elite assassin, which makes me the best protector in the world. While Alexei carries out a job, it's up to me to keep him alive. Together we've become an unstoppable force.

He is my life's purpose. The one who owns my loyalty.

Where Alexei is charismatic, I'm quiet.

He's in the spotlight, and I'm his shadow.

Over the years, Alexei has branched off into the shipping of illegal goods, and lately, we've only been taking out high-value targets.

"Ready?" Alexei mutters under his breath.

"Yes." My eyes move from one guard to the next as we're taken down a hallway. Alexei is assassinating Kaminski as a favor to the Bratva. We've arranged a meeting with Kaminski under false pretenses of purchasing weapons from him.

Getting in is easy. Getting out will be a bloodbath.

The tiles gleam under our feet, the walls of the compound white, with plants and art pieces breaking the sterile atmosphere. It's in total contrast to

what happens on the grounds. Kaminski is also a sex trafficker, and one would expect the floors and walls to be covered in all the blood he's spilled.

Reaching the door that leads to the room Kaminski is waiting in, a guard holds up his hand and orders, "No weapons. Leave them here."

Alexei lets out an amused burst of laughter. The guard moves to search Alexei, but with a shake of my head, the guard pauses.

"Don't touch him," I warn, my tone filled with the promise of death.

"Let them in," Kaminski calls from inside the room.

Frustration flashes over the guard's face, not happy that we'll remain armed.

I stay behind Alexei as we walk into what seems to be a dining room. The weapons Alexei asked for are spread out on the table, which is big enough to seat twenty-four people.

There are only two men in the room with Kaminski. Three in the hallway. Five stationed out front, and I'm guessing five to ten at the back of the house.

The compound easily holds between thirty and fifty men.

Like I said, a bloodbath waits for us.

Alexei begins to talk business with Kaminski, and I watch as the two guards relax. That's Alexei's specialty. He makes you think you're safe instead of seconds away from dying.

I'm four steps away from the one guard, seven from the second.

"How's business?" Alexei asks.

Three.

"Good, but I lost a shipment," Kaminski answers, his eyes narrowing. "You wouldn't know anything about it?"

Yuri Ivanov was responsible for the shipment of weapons being 'lost.' That's when he asked Alexei to take out Kaminski. Yuri wants to expand

because he'll take over from his father soon as the head of the Bratva, and I suppose he wants to show his worth.

Two.

Alexei lets out a chuckle, shaking his head.

One.

I move at the same time as Alexei. My elbow meets the first guard's nose, slamming the bone into his brain while I turn, and using his body as a shield, I take out the other guard with the first one's semi-automatic. I drop the dead guard, and pulling both my guns from behind my back, I turn toward the doorway as the first man comes running in.

Opening fire, I take them out one after the other while staying near Alexei, who has a gun to Kaminski's head. It only takes seconds for me to dispose of the nearest guards.

"For you, I thought I'd make an up-close and personal appearance," Alexei chuckles darkly. "For the Bratva." He pulls the trigger before Kaminski can bite out a threat or plead for his life. After the body slips from his hold, Alexei buries two more bullets in Kaminski. I spare the head of the Polish Mafia one glance, watching as his eyes turn glassy as his soul leaves his body.

"Stay behind me," I instruct Alexei. Not that I have to. After all the years of working together, we're completely in sync with each other.

We begin to move, stalking out of the room and down the hallway. A guard comes running around the corner, and as his lips part to let out a shout, I pull the trigger of my Heckler & Koch. The bullet hits him between the eyes, making him drop on the spot.

When I started as Alexei's protector, I used to keep count of how many people I killed, but I stopped when I reached two hundred. Now everything

in me is quiet as chaos erupts around us. There's no thundering heartbeat. No quickening breaths. No sweat beading on my forehead.

I hear commotion explode around the compound, boots on the ground, orders being shouted, weapons being readied. When we turn the corner leading to the front door, instinct takes over, and I start firing one bullet after the other.

Heads snap back, feet stumble, and knees hit the floor – death bleeds on the tiles, splattering against the white walls – revealing the true horror this compound holds.

When we step out into the sunlight, Alexei moves next to me, and while he takes over shooting, I quickly reload my Heckler & Koch.

Alexei begins to move, and with my steps matching his, I keep taking out the threats as we head toward our jeep.

“You'd think the men would be better trained,” Alexei says, disappointment coating his words as he buries a bullet in another guard.

I let out a sigh because even I expected more action, but this is like taking candy from a kid. Extremely anti-climatic. With my heartbeat steady, I take out the last man, then grumble, “Let's get out of here.”

Alexei slides behind the steering wheel, so I'll have my hands free should we encounter any problems. Once I'm sitting in the passenger's side, he says, “This job is starting to get boring.” He gives me a chuckle. “I'm blaming you for killing everyone too quickly.”

Shaking my head, my eyes scan for any sign of a threat as Alexei steers the jeep off the compound's grounds. “You wanted the best protection.”

“I also wanted action. Heart pounding, cock hardening exhilaration,” Alexei says, the corner of his mouth lifting.

Raising an eyebrow at him, I mutter, “I can always take a vacation.”

I have no idea what I'd do with a vacation. The concept is foreign to me.

This time a burst of laughter explodes from my best friend's lips. "Not a chance of that ever happening."

Alexei's phone vibrates, and taking it from his pocket, he hands it to me so he can keep his attention on the shitty dirt road we're on.

"A text from Carson," I say as I open the message.

Carson: She looks like an innocent. Check it out.

I quickly type a reply on behalf of Alexei. **On it.**

Opening the other message, my eyes scan over the information Alexei's younger brother forwarded to us.

Contract: Ariana Robinson

Business: Illegitimate heir – Ivanov.

Time: 2 Weeks

Location: Seattle, USA.

Fee: \$15 000 000.00

"Carson wants us to check out a contract that's been ordered on Ariana Robinson. Do you know her?" I ask, not recognizing the name.

"Seriously?" Alexei asks, his eyebrows lifting with surprise. "Read the contract to me."

I relay the information to him, and then he shakes his head. "Fuck. She's Sergei's daughter from an affair he had."

"Someone's trying to take out the head of the Bratva's daughter? I didn't know Yuri had a half-sister." Then frowning, I continue, "I shouldn't be surprised anymore, but how the fuck do you know everything?"

Alexei gives me an arrogant grin. "Because I'm God." Then his expression turns serious again. "Once we're airborne, I'll try to get in touch

with Sergei. Find out what Ariana's address is and if anyone has accepted the contract."

"Why? I thought you were all-knowing," I taunt him.

ARIANA

Turning off my camera, I let out a tired sigh. Creating makeup tutorials is exhausting, but I need to push through and get the videos out there if I want to broaden my following on social media.

I upload the video onto TikTok and Instagram, then put my phone in my bag. Checking the time on my watch, a pleased smile forms around my lips.

Eleven O'clock. Perfect.

I have a list of things to get done today before I can stop by the nursing home where my mother is. She has Alzheimer's Disease, and when it first started, I was able to take care of her. But since she's forgotten who I am and where I live, I had to place her in the nursing home for her safety. I now visit her every Saturday afternoon.

At least I don't have to worry about the monthly payment for the nursing home. The money my father sends from Russia every month covers it. I had to sell our house and move into a smaller apartment, so my own income would be sufficient for my personal needs because I still haven't told my father about my mother's deteriorating health. He hasn't been well, and I don't have the heart to make my problem his.

I could always reach out to Yuri, my half-brother, but we've never actually been close growing up, and it would just feel awkward.

Besides, it's not like I'm struggling. I like the smaller apartment. It's easy to keep clean, and I don't feel as lonely as I did in the bigger house.

Making sure I have everything I need, I leave my apartment and make my way to where my scooter is parked. I strap on my helmet and climb onto my scooter. Starting the engine, I carefully move onto the road, and soon I'm zipping from one place to the next.

There's a smile on my face as I stop at my favorite Starbucks to grab a vanilla latte. I love my independence and being able to do what I want whenever I want. My life is exactly the way I like it, uncomplicated. I don't have any close friends, but I have many acquaintances I can hang out with whenever I feel like a night out on the town.

Besides my mom and dad's deteriorating health, I have no other problems.

I'm happy.

Walking into the Starbucks, I head over to the counter.

"Hey, hon," Jessie, the barista, says, grinning at me.

"Hi." I glance around at the other patrons. "You're not as busy as I expected."

"You just missed the rush. The usual?" she asks.

"Please." I smile at her before I look at the selection of food on display. "Let me have a chocolate chip cookie as well." I take the right amount of cash from my wallet and hand it to her.

"Your order is coming right up." While Jessie prepares my beverage, she asks, "How's work?"

"Good," I reply. "I got to do a bridal party's makeup this week which was awesome."

"Oh, great. That must've been fun."

“It was.” Mostly I’m glad they didn’t complain about the fee I charged. I’ve just increased my prices and was worried it would make it more challenging to get work.

Jessie hands me my latte and cookie. “We should hang out sometime.”

“Sure, I’ll give you a call,” I reply. I take my order and head to the first open table I see. Sitting down, I enjoy my beverage while nibbling on the cookie. I go over the list of things I had to do, and I only have one stop left before I can go to the nursing home.

I check my social media accounts and emails as I swallow down the last sip of my latte. Just as I get up, a man enters Starbucks.

Holy mother.

I can’t stop myself from staring at him as he heads to the counter. Tilting my head, I take a moment to admire him from behind because he’s nothing short of perfect. Movie star good looks with a muscled body that’s... just perfect.

Now that’s what I call tall, dark, and handsome. Sigh.

I take a deep breath and grant myself one last look before I shrug my bag onto my back and head outside.

I’ll definitely be picturing him as my book boyfriend in the romance I’m currently reading.

Climbing onto my scooter, I take care of the last errand and drive toward the nursing home. I park in my usual spot and leave the helmet with my scooter before going inside.

When I see Ashley, a smile instantly forms on my face. She’s been fantastic with taking care of my mom.

“How is she today?” I ask.

Ashley shakes her head. “Not too good. She’s stuck in the past and determined to get ready for a date with Sergei.”

Nodding, I reach out a hand and give Ashley's arm a squeeze. "Take a break while I visit with her."

"Thanks, sweetie. Good luck!"

As I make my way to my mom's room, I brace myself because it's still hard when she doesn't recognize me.

I stop in the doorway, and my eyes find her where she's sitting in front of her dressing table, pulling a brush through her blonde hair. My mom has always been a beautiful woman.

She glances over her shoulder and then frowns at me. "Can I help you?"

I force a smile to my lips, doing my best to ignore the bite of sadness. "I heard you have a date and wanted to help you with your makeup."

"Really?" she asks, her mouth curving up at the sides. "That's nice of you to offer."

Stepping inside the room, I go stand next to her. "So, who's the lucky man?" I ask for what must be the thousandth time over the past couple of years.

A smitten look softens Mom's features. "He's in Seattle for business. A handsome Russian."

"Yeah? How did you meet?" I ask as I help Mom turn on the chair, so she's facing me.

"We were on the ferry at the same time and just started talking," she grins dreamily.

Arranging the makeup supplies I leave in her room, I begin with dabbing primer onto her skin.

My parents had an affair while my dad was here on a business trip. It only lasted a month before he had to return home. Mom never got over Dad, and he couldn't leave his wife because their marriage was an alliance of sorts. I'm well aware my father is a criminal – the head of the Bratva, to

be exact – but I have nothing to do with that world. I’ve overheard some of the conversations Dad’s had whenever he visited me. The names of the men I heard him talking to stuck in my memory, though. Mostly Russian. The Aulov, Nicollaj, and Petrov families are all part of the Bratva. Alexei Koslov and Demitri Vetrov work closely with my father. I once heard Dad mention they’re the best killers in the world.

The memory alone sends a shiver down my spine.

But they all belong to a life I know nothing about. To me, Dad’s just my dad. Since his heart problems got worse, he hasn’t been able to travel, and we now call each other once a month.

While I listen to Mom telling me how in love she is, I take my time doing her makeup. Even though she’s forgotten me, I still treasure these moments I get to spend with her.

When I’m done, she smiles at her reflection. “Oh wow, Sergei’s going to fall for me all over again. You did such an amazing job. Thank you.”

“Would you like to have tea with me?” I ask, then quickly add, “While you wait for your date to arrive.”

“That would be nice. Let’s go sit out in the garden.”

I spend two hours with Mom before she starts to grow agitated because Dad’s late.

Ashley has to step in to keep Mom calm, and knowing our visit is over, I watch as Ashley leads Mom back to her room.

“See you next Saturday, Mom,” I whisper before I head to where my scooter is parked.

I let out a sad sigh as I put on my helmet. Soon both my parents will be gone. I wish I could have more time with them.

Chapter 2

DEMITRI

After I get back from Seattle, Alexei and I settle in our state-of-the-art security room and begin to search for everything we can find on Ariana Robinson.

I spent the morning following her around and relay the information to Alexei, “The girl seems to lead a normal life. Nothing interesting. I didn’t see anyone else watching her.”

“Not yet,” Alexei murmurs. “The contract was just accepted. Check her digital footprint and see if there’s anything that will help us.”

I start to check Ariana’s social media accounts and scroll through her posts on Instagram. Most of them of her posing in different places in the city and putting on makeup. Which she really doesn’t need.

“How the fuck did Sergei manage to have a daughter who looks like this?” I ask as I stare at a close-up shot of Ariana’s face.

Alexei leans closer to me and looks at the picture. “You should see Beth, the girl’s mom. If Sergei’s marriage to Olga wasn’t arranged, he would’ve divorced her for Beth.”

I glance at Alexei. “Seriously, how do you know all these things?”

Alexei just shrugs as he relaxes back into his own chair, his eyes focusing on the screen that shows incoming and closed contracts for assassinations. “People like talking when they’re drunk. Sergei told me everything.” Alexei turns his gaze back to me for a moment. “And I mean everything about his affair with Beth Robinson. The man had it bad for her.

Yuri might be the oldest and next in line, but when Sergei spoke of Ariana, you could see the love he has for his daughter.”

When I keep scrolling through the Instagram account, I finally come across a photo of Ariana and Beth. “Oh...” I mutter, “I see what you mean. She’s the spitting image of her mother.”

“Yep.” Alexei’s phone begins to ring, and while he takes the call, I go to Ariana’s TikTok account.

I watch a random video of Ariana showing how to put on makeup. She makes a mistake and burst out laughing... and all I can do is stare.

Christ, she’s even more beautiful when she’s smiling.

Soon I realize it’s a blooper video, and Ariana is laughing through most of it. When the video ends, I watch it again.

When Alexei ends his call, he gives me a what-the-fuck look. “You plan on watching that all day long?”

I quickly exit the video and shake my head. “Just trying to get a feel for the girl.”

“Yeah...” he lets out a chuckle, “right.”

“Don’t start,” I mutter as I check the address we found for her. She lives in the city. From what we’ve learned, she moved into the apartment a year ago.

“Beth is in a nursing home,” Alexei says, a frown forming on his forehead. “Alzheimer’s.” He shakes his head. “What a pity.”

Leaning back in my chair, I look at my friend. “Why only take a contract out on Ariana and not Beth as well?”

Alexei keeps quiet for a moment, then he says, “Beth isn’t a threat.”

“How’s Ariana a threat? The girl doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the Bratva.”

Alexei lets out a chuckle. “Doesn’t mean shit. She can be used to form a strong alliance.”

“True. She’s twenty-three. Maybe Sergei is already busy arranging the marriage,” I muse.

“Sergei’s got one foot in the grave already,” Alexei mutters. “Last I heard, he won’t be around for much longer.”

“Will Yuri take over?” I ask.

“No. There will be a vote.”

“Oh, fun,” I mumble, not looking forward to that shitshow.

Alexei stares at the screens, drawing his bottom lip between his teeth as his mind starts to work. A frown settles on his forehead, then he says, “Either someone wants to take out Sergei’s entire family or...”

When he’s quiet for a while, I ask, “Or?”

“Yuri took out the contract to get rid of the other heir, so he’ll be the only one to inherit when Sergei dies.”

“Won’t be the first time,” I say. “What are we going to do if Yuri’s the one who took out the hit?”

We’ve been working with Yuri for almost ten years. He might not be the head of the Bratva, but he runs all of Sergei’s businesses.

Alexei turns his face to me. “We need to talk with Sergei.”

“When do you want to leave for Moscow?”

Alexei shakes his head. “If Yuri took out the hit, he’ll be suspicious if we suddenly met with Sergei. Yuri knows we don’t kill innocent people and go after the person who ordered the kill. I already rejected the contract, so he’ll be on guard around us.” Alexei lets out a sigh. “I’ll have to think of another way to contact Sergei.” Lifting his arm, he places his hand on my shoulder. “In the meantime, you should go back to Seattle and watch the girl.”

“And you?” I ask.

“I’ll be here trying to figure out what the hell is going on.”

Taking a deep breath, I glance back at the screen showing a photo of Ariana. At least it will be an easy job watching her.

ARIANA

I dial my dad’s number hoping I’ll get to talk to him. The line connects, and it just rings before going to his voicemail.

“Hi, Dad. I just wanted to check in on you. Give me a call when you get the message. I hope you’re feeling better. Love you.”

Letting out a sigh, I end the call and open my messaging app to send my brother a text.

Ariana: Hi, I hope you’re doing okay. I tried to call Dad, but he didn’t answer. How is he?

It shows the text is delivered, and knowing Yuri probably won’t answer soon, I grab my kindle and settle on the couch.

I’m reading a romance by one of my favorite authors. She always makes me laugh with the hilarious scenes she writes.

The book’s about a girl who keeps running into a man and fights with him every time. He ends up being her boss.

I begin to read where it’s the girl’s first day on the job, and she’s about to learn the pain in her ass is her boss. Soon I’m cracking up as I get lost in their world.

After reading for three hours, I put down my kindle so I can go for my walk.

The weather is growing colder with winter just around the corner, so I grab my coat for the ride to where I usually park my scooter near the entrance to the forest.

The ride is only fifteen minutes, and there are two other cars in the parking area. I check my backpack to make sure I have my phone, a bottle of water, and my sandwich, then walk toward the trail that leads to a picnic area overlooking the ocean.

Birds chirp in the treetops, and dead leaves crunch under my sneakers. I love this trail because it's quiet, and I get to forget about my worries for a little while.

The hike takes me forty minutes, but there are two couples by the picnic area, so I head down to the stretch of beach. The ocean is calm today, and sitting down on a rock, I take the water and sandwich from my backpack.

Instead of forgetting my worries, they're the first thing I think of as I stare out into the distance.

With Mom in the nursing home and Dad sick, I feel more alone than I ever have. Yes, I still have Yuri, but we hardly talk to each other.

Mom was never close with her side of the family, so I don't know any of them.

Right now, it's just me, and it's a scary place to be at twenty-three. I have no support system in place. I have no one to call if I get into trouble.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I pull my phone from the bag and check if Dad or Yuri have responded, but there's nothing.

Holding the phone in my hand, I glance around me and notice a man walking toward the other end of the beach. I watch him for a while, then turn my gaze back to the ocean.

Chapter 3

DEMITRI

I've been watching Ariana Robinson the past two days while Alexei's finding out who's coming after her.

I knew the girl was beautiful, but she's breathtaking up close. With white-blond hair, hazel eyes that draw you in, and a body that can make any man hard in a split second, the girl is nothing short of a vision.

But she's oblivious to her surroundings. Twice I've been close enough to snap her neck, and she didn't notice. She's an easy target.

I'm bored as fuck sitting in an unmarked car across the street from Ariana's apartment building.

My phone starts to ring, and seeing Alexei's name flashing on the screen, I answer, "Give me some good news."

"Yuri ordered the contract," Alexei mutters, anger darkening his words. My friend might be the best assassin in the world, but he lives by a code – he'll never kill an innocent person, especially not a woman.

Surprise flickers through me. "Are you sure?"

"I heard it directly from him. I'm still trying to find out who'll be coming after Ariana. With Sergei on his deathbed, Yuri wants Ariana out of the way so she can't claim any of the inheritance."

That fucking sucks.

"What do you want to do?" I ask him.

"Sergei's still the head of the Bratva. Protect his daughter. Lucian with be in Russia soon, and then we'll take it from there."

“Yeah, Yuri won’t be suspicious if the head of the Italian Mafia pays his respects to the head of the Bratva.” As I process everything I just learned, I say, “You’re aware if I take out Yuri’s hitman, it will start a war.”

“Our loyalty belongs to Sergei. I’ll deal with Yuri if it comes to that,” Alexei mutters.

My eyes scan up and down the street. “She’s an easy target in Seattle. It’s next to impossible keeping her safe while making sure she doesn’t see me.”

“Hmm...” Alexei is quiet as he thinks, then he says, “Take her to the island.”

I let out a burst of laughter. “Do you seriously think the girl’s just going to let me take her to an island?”

Alexei purchased an island on the Canadian side of Lake Superior. He had it rigged out with everything we might need if we ever needed to disappear.

“Of course not,” he chuckles.

“You want me to kidnap and babysit Sergei’s daughter?” I ask, not liking the idea one bit.

“Hey, think of it as a vacation,” Alexei taunts me.

“Fuck no.”

“It will be a week at the most. I’ll owe you a favor,” Alexei tries to sweeten the deal.

“You know I’m not a people person. One screech from the girl, and I’m fucking gagging her,” I warn him.

“Do what you have to, just keep her alive. Oh, and make sure she doesn’t know where the island is.”

I shake my head, not happy with how things are turning out. “What about you? Who’s going to watch your back?”

“I have Tristan, Nikhil, and Sacha. Besides, I won’t be leaving LA for a while,” Alexei reassures me. Tristan is his other business partner, and I trained Nikhil and Sacha myself, so it does offer me some peace of mind.

“Do you really want to do this?” I ask.

“It’s the only way. Just keep the girl safe until we hear what Sergei wants.”

“Okay.”

“And send me updates of what’s happening on your side. If you go silent, I’m going to come looking for you,” Alexei warns.

“Will do.” I glance up at the building again. “I’m taking her tonight. I’ll be in touch.”

“Good luck.”

“Have a drink for me,” I joke.

“Already having one,” Alexei chuckles.

We end the call, and I take a deep breath while shaking my head.

Fuck.

My mind starts to work, putting a plan in place. I have nothing on me to drug the girl with. No sane human will willingly go with a man they don’t know, so I’m expecting her to put up one hell of a fight.

Once I have her unconscious, I’ll have a couple of seconds to restrain her and get her into the car. Without any of her neighbors seeing. Fucking fun.

Shoving the car door open, a scowl darkens my features as I climb out.

Just get it over with, Dimitri.

I slam the door shut and stalk across the road toward the apartment building’s entrance. My guard is up, knowing Yuri’s hitman can strike at any moment. The person will probably scout the neighborhood before

planning how to take the hit. Most assassins prefer a long-distance shot, so they have a head start in getting away from the crime scene.

And they'll all recognize me.

Walking into the foyer, I check for security cameras and take it as a win when there are none. I avoid the elevator and head up the stairs to the second floor.

It's almost two am so pretending to be a new neighbor sure as shit won't work. When I reach Ariana's door, I pull two pins from my wallet and quickly pick the lock.

It's one of the many skills I've learned over the years, and within a couple of seconds, the lock clicks open. I let out a breath of relief when there's no security chain to struggle with and softly push the door open. I step inside the dark apartment and gently shut the door. My eyes scan over the small living room and kitchen and then settle on the partially open door, which I assume leads to the bedroom.

I notice the curtains are closed, so at least I don't have to worry about a hitman taking a shot while I'm kidnapping the fucking girl.

Never in my life did I think I'd be doing something like this.

My steps are silent as I move to the bedroom, and placing my hand on the door, I push it open. It creaks, and I pause to listen for any movement. When there's none, I slip inside the bedroom, and my eyes instantly find Ariana where she's lying on her stomach, her arms and legs sprawled over the mattress. Her breaths are soft, and I move fast. Placing a knee next to her hip, I straddle her lower back in a second. My left hand slaps over her mouth as she jerks awake, and wrapping my right arm around her neck, I use just enough force to cut off her air supply.

Ariana's body bucks against my hold, and she lets out muffled screams. She grabs hold of my right arm, her nails biting into the sleeve of my shirt.

The girl has a healthy set of lungs on her, and it takes longer than I'd like before she finally loses consciousness.

I keep my hold on her for ten seconds longer to make sure she's not faking it and then let go of her. Knowing I only have a minute at the most, I rush to the wall and switch on the light, and then I go to her closet to look for anything I can use to restrain her.

I grab a scarf from the closet and gag Ariana before using a belt to tie her ankles and another for her wrists. She's only wearing a t-shirt and leggings, but I don't have time to dress her in something warmer.

Picking her up off the bed, I carry her to the living room and set her down on the couch. I move the coffee table to the side and then roll her up in the rug.

Hoisting the rug over my shoulder, I head out of the apartment, and shutting the door behind me, I rush to the stairway. For the first time in a long time, I actually break out a sweat from a job as I carry Ariana down the stairs. I only have seconds left before she'll regain consciousness.

Luckily it's quiet, leaving the apartment building, and I don't have to worry about any witnesses. When I get to the unmarked car and open the trunk, I feel movement coming from Ariana.

Fuck, that's cutting it close.

Setting the rug down on the road, I open it just as Ariana lets out a groan. Her lashes begin to flutter as I pick her up and place her in the trunk, and then her eyes lock on me for a moment before I slam the trunk shut.

Grabbing the rug, I shove it onto the back seat. Ariana's muffled cries and feet kicking at the car's interior metal are audible in the silent night, and I hurry to slide behind the steering wheel.

I shoot Alexei a quick text that I have the girl, then starting the engine, I steer the car toward the airfield where our private jet is waiting.

ARIANA

Before I can make sense of what's happening, my eyes lock on the man I saw at Starbucks, and then he slams the trunk shut on me.

It takes a couple of seconds for my mind to catch up, and then horror and panic rocket through me. My heart goes from a drowsy beat to hammering against my ribs like a caged bird. My mouth instantly turns dry as prickles of fear rush over my skin.

And then I scream. The sound is sharp and petrified even though he gagged me.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.

My mind races, unable to stop for a second to gather my bearings. I begin to kick against the inside of the trunk, and when I try to move my hands, I realize they're tied behind my back.

No.

Crap, this is bad.

I hear the engine start, and when the car pulls away from the curb, I let out more terrified screams.

When my throat is raw, I manage to stop screaming, and my body instantly resorts to crying.

It takes a while for me to get control over the shock and to calm myself down so I can process what's happening.

I remember waking up to someone jumping on me, and then I was choked.

I thought I was being killed. The fear was surreal and traumatizing, and just remembering it sends a wave of shivers through my body.

But I'm not dead.

Oh, God.

I'm being kidnapped.

My mind freezes again, unable to accept something like this is happening to me.

Why?

Who?

What does he want with me?

I can only think this is because of who my father is. That's the only reason someone would take me.

Right?

Right. That has to be it.

Because nothing else will make sense.

Crap.

I suck in a deep breath of air, trying to remain as calm as I can.

I've already lost track of where I am, but still, I try to focus on every turn the car makes.

I have no idea how long we drive for, and the moment the car stops, my heart speeds up so fast I'm afraid I'll pass out from the instant rush of adrenaline flooding my body.

I listen, but all I can hear are my frantic breaths and pounding heart.

Then the trunk opens, and I begin to thrash. My voice is muffled as I cry, "Let me go!"

The man reaches for me, and without any effort, he grabs hold of my waist and yanks me out of the car. I'm tossed over his shoulder, but I manage to struggle enough to free myself from his hold.

I fall to the ground with a painful thud, the gravel from whatever road we're on scrapping at my left elbow and hip.

"Blyad'," he mutters.

That's Russian for fuck. It's one of the few words I know.

Oh, God. He's Russian.

I let out a panicked sound as I try to sit up, but with my hands tied behind my back, I'm unable to.

The man grabs hold of my shoulders and tugs me into a sitting position, and then I come face to face with my kidnapper.

Two things hit me square in the gut – he's still the most attractive man I've ever laid eyes on, and he looks like he's ready to snap my neck in half.

"Please don't kill me," I beg, my words clear enough for him to understand. I begin to shake my head, my desperation to get out of this horrific situation making it hard to think.

The man lets out a sigh as if he's irritated by me. "I'm not going to kill you." And then his hold on me tightens, and I'm jerked into the air and thrown over his shoulder again.

I let out a scream hoping someone will hear me and come to my rescue.

The man starts to walk, this time keeping a tight hold of my hips. My eyes dart feverishly around us, and when I notice the hangers and planes, I begin to wiggle in earnest. I slam my knees against his chest, but it's rock hard and doesn't seem to faze him at all.

"No. Stop. Wait," I try to get the words out around the fabric. "Let's talk. Wait!"

He takes the steps up to a plane's entrance, and I let out a panicked scream.

"Stop. Please, stop," I beg, my emotions and senses a chaotic mess of absolute terror.

I'm placed in a seat and then strapped in. My eyes lock on the man's, and all I can do is tremble in fear.

He reaches for my face, and I flinch, but the seat keeps me from moving back. Then he pulls the gag out of my mouth and says, "I'm not going to hurt you, Ariana. I'm saving your life. A hit's been taken out on you. Until we can talk to your father, I'm taking you to a safe place. So stop fighting me and relax."

What the actual hell?

My dry lips part, and for a moment, I stare at the man as if he's grown horns and a tail.

Finally, I manage to gasp, "What?" Then, I start to blink like I'm malfunctioning. "You're lying. I'm not a part of that world."

This guy has another thing coming if he thinks I'll believe a single word he says.

"Who are you?" I demand, wanting to know his name. When Dad sends Yuri to save me, I want to be able to tell my brother who kidnapped me.

The man checks my seat belt, tightening it a little more, then as he lifts his head and our eyes meet again, he says, "Demitri."

His irises are dark brown and intense as hell, sending another wave of fear rippling through me.

"Demitri who?" I ask, my voice quivering.

I only know of one man named Demitri, and this guy can't be him.

Please, don't let it be him.

I hold my breath until he adds, "Vetrov."

My entire world comes to a screeching halt.

Unspeakable fear and a sense of hopelessness drown the light from my existence as I stare at the most dangerous man in the world.

God.

Demitri Vetrov. Personal protector of the best assassin.

Assassin.

I'm as good as dead.

God.

Demitri crouches in front of me, his eyes narrowing on my face. "Breathe, Ariana," he orders with steel in his voice.

I suck in a painful breath and then begin to shake my head. "I have nothing to do with my father and brother. I'm just a normal twenty-three-year-old girl. I was raised by my mother," I ramble, hoping I can somehow convince this killer he has the wrong person. I gasp for another breath of air, my body trembling so hard it's starting to ache.

Some kind of realization dawns on his face, then he asks, "You know who I am?"

Oh crap.

I shake my head hard. "No. No. Definitely not." He'll probably kill me right now if he finds out I know exactly who he is.

Demitri gets up and walks to the door. With dwindling hope, I watch as he closes the door and then heads to a cabinet. He pulls out a first aid bag, but when he removes a syringe from it, I start to struggle with all my strength.

As Demitri comes toward me with the syringe, I begin to plead again, "Please, don't do this. Just let me go. I won't tell anyone what happened."

His hand darts out, and his fingers wrap tightly around the left side of my neck to keep me in place. "This will make you sleep. I'm doing you a favor."

The prick is sharp, and I let out a cry, tears escaping my eyes.

Crap.

No.

Shit.

“Shh...” Instead of the sound being comforting, it’s threatening and dark. I feel his thumb brush over my jaw. “You’re going to be okay.”

Everything dims, and no matter how hard I fight against whatever he injected me with, I can’t keep from drifting off.

Chapter 4

DEMITRI

After placing Ariana on the seat of the speed boat, I wrap a blanket around her. I spare the unconscious girl a glance, then start the engine and steer us toward the island.

The sun is beginning to rise as the boat glides through the dark blue water.

Unlike Alexei, I'm usually not affected by a woman's tears. He's the one with the soft spot for the female species.

But Ariana's fear and tears stirred something in me I haven't felt before.

Annoyance?

No.

Pity?

Definitely not.

I shake my head to clear my mind of the unwelcome thoughts, my eyes scanning over the water for any signs of the border patrol. I think of everything I'll have to do once we reach the island.

I'll check in with Alexei, and I have to call my younger brother, Damien, so he'll know I'll be out of reach for a while.

With the setup we had installed on the island, I'll be able to help Alexei keep track of the underground chatter.

It takes a couple of hours before I steer us into the natural harbor, where I dock the boat.

We'll be able to lie low for as long as it takes. The island has a windmill, providing water from a pond, and an underwater electric cable

supplies all the power we'll need.

I look over to the mansion Alexei had built. My friend has a fondness for luxury. The double-story house has five bedrooms on the upper level, and the ground floor consists of the living room, kitchen, gym, entertainment room, and dining room. The basement has been converted into an armory and security room. A deck surrounds the house with a hot tub out back. Half of the island's surface consists of rocks and a helipad, and the other half is covered with pine trees.

Even though you can see the mainland, we're secluded enough.

Slipping my arms beneath Ariana, I lift her body to my chest and step off the boat. Reaching the front door, I key in the code, and then it swings open. As I walk into the entrance, lights begin to flicker on from the movement.

I take Ariana to one of the guest rooms, and after laying her down on the bed, I remove the blanket and untie her wrists and ankles.

My eyes drift over her, and reaching for her neck, I brush the blond strands of hair away and frown at the red marks I left on her pale skin. Again it strikes me that she looks nothing like Sergei and Yuri.

I take in her feminine features, the bow of her eyebrows, the straight line of her nose, and her full lips. High cheekbones add to her stunning beauty.

She's easily half my size, and as my gaze drifts over her slender arms and torso, red abrasions on her arm remind me of the fall.

Walking out of the bedroom, I head to the room that's rigged with our medical supplies. I grab some antiseptic wipes and balm, then go back to Ariana. Sitting down on the side of the bed, I take hold of her arm and gently wipe the dirt from the wound. I dab on the balm then lower her arm back to the bed. Checking the rest of her body, I find more abrasions

peeking from beneath the waistband of her leggings. Tugging the fabric slightly down her hip, I quickly clean the scrapes.

My eyes drift over her body again, and I can't ignore the swells of her breasts that are clearly visible under the thin fabric of her shirt.

She's just another woman.

I use the other half of the bedding to cover her, then leave the room. I pull the door shut behind me as I take my phone from my pocket. All our devices are encrypted, even though it would be stupid for someone to try and hack or trace us. Rather safe than having to deal with an unwelcome problem.

I dial Alexei's number.

"Talk to me," he answers.

"We're safe."

"How did it go?" he asks.

I let out a huff. "That favor you owe me? It's going to be fucking big," I mutter as I walk to the security room.

Alexei lets out a burst of laughter, clearly entertained by me. "Come on. One little woman. How hard can it be?"

"That *little woman* has a healthy set of lungs on her." I turn on the systems. "Did you found out anything new?"

"No. Not yet."

"It's not too late for me to take the girl back to her apartment. Are you sure you want to go up against Yuri?"

Alexei lets out a chuckle. "What? And deprive you of your vacation. What kind of friend would I be then?"

"Fuck you," I mutter. Still, the corner of my mouth lifts because it's impossible to get angry with Alexei.

"You know I love you, but you're not my type," he jokes.

“Thank God,” I chuckle.

Getting back to the problem, Alexei says, “We’ll hear what Sergei wants.”

“And if he wants her dead?” I ask.

“We’ll deal with that when it happens. Relax and enjoy the break.”

“What fucking break? I’m stuck with a girl who’s freaking out.”

“She’ll calm down. Give her time to adjust,” Alexei says.

I let out a dissatisfied huff. “One day, I’ll cash in the favor, and it won’t be something you like, and you better do it.”

Alexei begins to laugh. “I look forward to the challenge.”

“I’m going to leave my phone in the security room so she can’t call for help. I’ll check it three times a day.”

“Okay. Try to relax while you’re there.”

“Not gonna happen,” I chuckle. “Watch your back.”

“I will.”

After we end the call, I dial Damien’s number. My brother got married a couple of years ago and lives on a private island near Finland. I don’t see him as much as I’d like to, but we keep in touch.

“Hey, how are you?” he answers.

“Good. Just wanted to let you know I’m disappearing for a while. If you need something, call Alexei.”

“Why won’t you be with Alexei?” Damien asks, concern instantly creeping into his voice. He knows I’m always by Alexei’s side.

“I’m guarding an innocent. If anyone, and I mean anyone, calls you to ask where I am, just say you haven’t heard from me in a while. Watch your back.”

“Okay, but let me know if you need back up.”

Hearing how worried my brother is, I say, “I’ll be fine. I’m laying low in a safe house. Only Alexei knows where it is.”

“Good. Call me as soon as you can.”

“I will.”

Ending the conversation, I set the phone down on the desk and glance over all the monitors before heading to the bedroom I’ll be using. After taking a quick shower, I dress in a black pair of cargo pants and a white t-shirt.

I stop by Ariana’s room to check on her, and seeing she’s still unconscious, I go downstairs to the kitchen.

I start a pot of coffee before I look through the cupboards to take stock of what food we have. I’ll have to go to the mainland for the necessities and make a mental list of everything we’ll need.

When the pot is full, I pour myself a cup, and while sipping on the hot liquid, my thoughts turn to Ariana.

Christ, she’s going to be a handful. Not that I can blame her. The chances of her believing anything I say are next to nothing.

I shake my head, not looking forward to when she wakes up.

She’s probably going to scream.

And try to run.

I wasn’t joking when I said I’ll gag her if she screams. I’m only here to make sure she stays alive and couldn’t give a fuck whether she’s comfortable.

I let out a sigh, and finishing my coffee, I rinse the cup out and set it down on the rack to dry.

Christ, Alexei owes me for this.

ARIANA

Coming to, my mind's a foggy mess. I pry my eyes open, and once they adjust to the light streaming in from the windows, I glance around at the foreign furniture.

Where the hell am I?

Memories of the kidnapping flood back, and my body begins to tremble as fear grips my insides.

I push myself into a sitting position, taking in the elegant dressing table, the closets, the high back chair in the corner, and the big bed I'm on.

Demitri untied me, and I glance over my t-shirt and leggings before looking at my left arm. Noticing the scrapes from the fall have been cleaned, a frown forms on my forehead.

Climbing to my feet, I walk to the window and look out over the pine trees, and in the distance, there's only water. A lake?

Turning around, I slowly move to the door, and when I try the knob, I'm surprised when it opens.

I peek out into the hallway, and not seeing anyone, I cautiously leave the room. Reaching the stairs, my heart is hammering in my chest. I inch my way down, my eyes taking in the luxurious interior of the house. Everything reeks of money, but it does nothing to keep the fear from licking at my insides.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I quickly take in the spacious living room. As my eyes turn to the kitchen, it's only to find Demitri leaning back against a counter with his arms crossed over his chest. He just watches me.

Demitri Vetrov.

Again the realization shocks me to my core.

My eyes dart around until they land on the front door. Before I can take a step, Dimitri says, “You can try to run, but you won’t get anywhere. We’re on an island.”

Another wave of shock crashes over me, and my eyes snap back to him.

“You can’t swim to the mainland either.” He sounds bored, his demeanor casual.

My tongue darts out to wet my lips, and I swallow hard on the fear before I ask, “Why did you take me?”

“I already told you,” he mutters. “There’s a hit out on you. You’re here for your own safety. Once we’ve made contact with your father, we’ll do what he wants.”

The last time I spoke to my dad, he sounded really weak, and the call only lasted two minutes before he was breathless. “What if he can’t take the call? My dad’s sick.”

“An associate is on his way to meet with your father. You just need to sit tight.”

I lick my lips again, my hand still clutching the railing. “So, if my dad tells you to let me go, you will?”

Dimitri only nods.

Yeah, right.

I cautiously move toward the front door, my eyes darting between Dimitri and my escape.

“You’re free to move around the property, but if you give me any shit, I’ll lock you in the bedroom,” he warns me.

I expect him to lunge at me at any moment, but instead, he just watches me. As I get close to the front door, it starts to swing open. Instead of feeling hopeful that I’ll manage to escape, I begin to feel claustrophobic.

I’m on an island?

Surrounded by water?

My breathing begins to speed up as I step outside, and when I only see more water beyond the rocky shore, it feels like I'm a second away from losing my mind.

Spotting a boat, I dart forward and run as fast as I can. My bare feet slap against the rocks, and I ignore the discomfort of the uneven surface digging into my soles. I scramble onto the boat but quickly realize there are no keys.

Of course. Like Demitri would leave them in the boat.

Glancing around me, it starts to sink in, hopelessly and terrifyingly – I've been taken, and there's nowhere for me to go.

A gasp explodes from my dry lips as I wrap my arms around myself. Trembles begin to wrack my body, and panic claws at my heart.

Dad will tell them to let me go.

Yuri will find me if they don't.

People will notice I'm missing.

But not for a while.

God.

My breaths speed up as my panic grows.

I've been kidnapped by Demitri Vetrov.

I overheard Dad talk about him and Alexei Koslov. They wiped out half of the Albanian Mafia, killing close to a hundred men in one day. It was a bloodbath.

'The devil and his hellhound will pave the way for the Bratva to take over new territories.'

Dad's words shudder through me, and my eyes snap back to the house.

What do they want?

A ransom?

To use me as collateral, so my dad will do what they want?

Maybe they're planning some kind of coop to overthrow my dad and brother so Alexei and Demitri can take over the Bratva?

Probably the latter, which means I'll also be killed. That's how it works in their world, right? Take out the whole family?

I slump down on the seat of the boat, hopelessness threatening to overwhelm me.

As the sun moves across the sky, I can't bring myself to move. I stare blankly ahead of me as I process the past twelve hours.

Eventually, a weird calm settles over me.

It's up to me to save myself.

But how?

I'm no match against Demitri.

I'll have to try to catch him off guard, but not before I find the keys for the boat.

Sucking in a deep breath of air, I slowly turn my eyes toward the house.

The only thing I know for sure is that I won't go down without a fight.

Chapter 5

DEMITRI

Giving Ariana time to process everything, I leave the front door open so she can come back inside when she's ready and begin to make mac and cheese.

I have no idea what I'm going to do to keep myself busy while we're here. Workouts. Checking the underground chatter. Chopping wood because the nights are cold out on the lake with winter right around the corner.

That's it.

Fuck, I might just die of boredom before this is all over.

As I plate the food and grab two bottles of water from the fridge, I hear Ariana come inside. Instantly the atmosphere changes, her fear tensing the air.

Picking up my plate, a fork, and the water, I head to the living room and take a seat on one of the couches. "Come eat," I tell Ariana before I bring a bite to my mouth.

Minutes pass with only silence behind me, but I can feel her eyes burning on the back of my head. Finally, I hear her pick up the plate, and a couple of seconds later, she comes to take a seat on the other couch.

I keep my eyes on my food, highly aware of every movement she makes. I won't be surprised if she tries to attack me with the fork.

When I'm done eating, I place the plate on the coffee table, and taking a sip of water, my gaze settles on Ariana.

Her eyes keep darting to me, her body tense. Again I take in the unique hazel color of her eyes, giving the impression of liquid gold bleeding into the green ring around the irises.

She only eats a quarter of the food and finishes most of the water, then she gives me an apprehensive look. I raise an eyebrow at her, and it has her asking, “What about my mom?”

“What about her?”

“There’s no reason for you to go after her. She’s in a nursing home. She has Alzheimer’s.”

Even though I know it’s a waste of time because Ariana won’t believe anything I say, I try to reassure her. “We’ll be notified if a hit is taken out on her. She should be safe for the time being.”

“Usually, if people like you try to take down a member of the Bratva, you eliminate the whole family,” she says, her voice trembling.

Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my thighs. “If *people like me* come after you, you’d be dead already. You wouldn’t see it coming. The fact that you’re sitting here should be enough to give you peace of mind.”

“Peace of mind,” she scoffs and then lets out a bitter chuckle while shaking her head. “You break into my apartment. Choke the living shit out of me. Kidnap me, and now you’re keeping me on some island...” She lets out a huff. “Yeah, peace of mind is the last thing I have right now.” A frown forms on her forehead, then she says, “I saw you on Saturday. At the Starbucks. How long were you watching me?”

“It’s good to hear you’re not totally clueless of your surroundings.” I lean back against the couch. “Two days. The contract for you came through three days ago.”

“Why would someone take out a contract on my life?” she asks, her eyes filled with doubt.

Wanting to give her time to adjust to her circumstances before dropping another bomb on her, I answer, “You being Sergei’s daughter is enough of a reason.”

“Will you let me call my dad?”

I shake my head. “Wait for my associate to make contact with him. It’s safer that way.”

Ariana shakes her head, and getting up, she carries the plate to the kitchen.

I reach for my own plate and rise to my feet. Ariana stands by the island in the middle of the kitchen, her eyes following me.

I set the plate down on the counter, then say, “If you try to attack me with that fork, it’s going to end with me tying your ass to the bed.”

Ariana darts forward, and as she lifts her arm, my right hand darts out, and I grab hold of her wrist. Twisting her hand, I force her to let go of the fork as I spin her until her back slams against my chest. She lets out a frustrated cry as I wrap my left arm around her waist. Lifting her off her feet, I stalk toward the stairs.

“Let go of me,” she hisses, thrashing in my hold.

Her soft scent drifts up to me, and feeling her petite body struggling in my arms makes my own body take notice of her. I shove the unwelcome burst of desire down faster than it rose.

“You won’t get away with this! My dad and brother will find me.”

I let out an annoyed sigh as I carry her up the stairs, avoiding the back of her head as she tries to headbutt me. Walking into her bedroom, I let go of her with a hard shove, and it sends her sprawling over the bed.

She begins to push herself up off the mattress, but I grab hold of her hips and whirl her onto her back. Placing my knee on the bed, I straddle her while grabbing hold of her wrists.

“Let go of me,” she screeches, fighting me like a wildcat to free herself.

I lift her hands to the wrought iron bed frame and reach for one of the belts I left in the room when I untied her earlier.

“NoNoNoNoNo,” she begins to chant, her face tightening with panic.

Wrapping the soft leather around her wrists, I tie her to the bed frame, then bracing my hands on either side of her head, I glare down at her. “Stop!”

Her body instantly stills, and she stares at me with wide eyes.

Christ, she’s breathtaking.

“The last thing I want to do is babysit your ass. I’ll keep you tied to this bed if I have to. It doesn’t matter to me whether you’re comfortable or not. I just have to keep you alive,” I bite the words out past the attraction and irritation whirling in my chest.

Her lips are parted, breaths exploding over them, and the sight only turns me on more.

“Do you understand, Ariana,” I demand.

She quickly nods.

Pushing away from her, I stalk out of the room and yank the door shut behind me.

“Worst job of my fucking life,” I mutter as I head to the security room while trying to ignore the way she made me feel.

ARIANA

My heart is racing a mile a minute as I stare at the closed door.

Crap, he’s strong. I put everything I had into fighting him.

Tilting my head back, I look at the belt and try to yank my hands free, but when the leather bites into my skin, I slump against the mattress and glance at the door again.

I'm not even going to try and lie to myself – Demitri terrifies the hell out of me.

When he was on top of me with that dark glare, only one word came to mind. *Hellhound*. It looked like he wanted to tear me to pieces. I was a second away from having my life flash before my eyes.

Eventually, my racing heart starts to calm down, and I try to wiggle my hands free, but after a while, I give up and let out a miserable sigh.

I try to listen for movement in the house, but there's only silence.

With nothing else to do, my thoughts turn to the past day and how quickly my life changed from happy and carefree to terrified and tied to a bed.

I have no idea how I'm going to escape. I have an appointment to do a lady's makeup, but she'll probably just think I canceled on her.

I'm not close with any of my neighbors, so none of them will notice I'm missing.

Last year, when I had the flu, I skipped three weeks because I didn't want to give it to my mom, and the nursing home staff didn't contact me at all.

Crap.

This is so bad.

I'll probably be dead for days, if not weeks, before I'm reported missing.

The suffocating hopelessness returns in full force, making me choke up.

Time crawls, and when the room grows dark, I start to squirm. I need the restroom, but I don't want to call for Demitri.

Every couple of minutes, I try to shift my lower body to ease the pressure on my bladder. When there's no sign of Demitri, and it's clear he

has zero intention of untying me tonight, worry has me yanking against the belt.

As my desperation grows, I yank harder, ignoring the bite of the leather against my skin.

Crap.

I let out a panicked whimper and squeeze my eyes shut, trying to focus on anything else but my aching bladder. It feels like it's going to burst.

With every passing minute, the pressure in my abdomen builds.

Giving up, I yell, "Demitri! I need the restroom!"

I watch the door with hopeful eyes, and when there's no sign of him, I call for him again.

It feels like an hour passes with my yells going unanswered. A drop escapes, and I let out a panicked squeak.

NoNoNoNoNo.

Pinching my eyes shut, debilitating humiliation creeps over me, and then I lose the battle. The luke warmth spreading beneath me crushes me, and a degraded sob escapes.

Turning my face into the crook of my arm, I try to hide from myself, unable to deal with what just happened.

I lose track of time, not moving a single muscle as the wet spot beneath me grows colder and colder.

Suddenly the door to the room opens, and I instantly tense up while shame crawls through every ounce of my being.

When the light is turned on, I press my face harder against my arm, keeping my eyes tightly shut.

A moment later, Demitri unties my hands, and the second I'm free, I dart off the bed and, keeping my eyes on the floor, I run into the bathroom. I

slam the door shut, and with a trembling body, I dart into the shower, clothes and all.

I refuse to think of what happened.

At least, I try not to.

Opening the faucets, I strip out of my clothes while the cold water rains down on me. I kick the soaked fabric to the corner of the shower, and shivering, I reach for the body wash.

When the water starts to grow warm, a humiliated sob flutters up my throat, but I swallow hard to keep it from escaping.

I keep washing, trying to remove the most degrading thing that's ever happened to me from my body.

By the time my skin is red and tender, steam fills every inch of the bathroom. I turn off the faucets, and grabbing a towel, I wrap it around me and then sit down on the closed toilet.

Tears sting my eyes, and unable to keep them back any longer, they slowly begin to fall.

The only clothes I had, are lying in a soaked heap in the shower.

I wet the bed like a toddler.

I've been ripped away from the safety of my apartment and dropped into a nightmare.

Everything becomes too much, and my emotions spiral into a devastating mess.

I can't deal with any of this. It's too much.

A knock on the door has me jerking, and I turn my face away, pressing my lips together to keep the sobs from escaping. A shameful blush creeps up my neck when I hear the door opening.

"There are clothes in the bag," Demitri says, and then I hear the door shut again.

I suck in a quivering breath and glance at the bag he left for me. Then, getting up, I go look inside. I pull out a t-shirt and sweatpants. Unfortunately, there's no underwear, so I quickly put on the clothes, just thankful to have something to wear.

Using a towel, I squeeze the excess water from my hair. Only then do I look through the cabinet. It has everything I'll need, and taking a new toothbrush, I open the packaging and quickly brush my teeth.

Not ready to face that bed again, I sit back down on the closed toilet and stare blankly at the tiles.

I don't know for how long I hide in the bathroom until Demitri knocks on the door again. This time he doesn't come in but just says, "Come eat, Ariana."

I shoot a scowl at the door.

I hope he chokes on his dinner.

Chapter 6

DEMITRI

Fuck.

Feeling like shit, I leave Ariana's food on the dressing table and pull the door shut behind me.

When I went to the mainland to get supplies, it didn't even cross my mind that she would need the restroom.

I've felt glimpses of pity in the past. For Winter, Damien's wife, when she lost her family. For Hailey, Alexei's younger brother's girlfriend, after the Polish beat her to within an inch of her life.

But I've never felt what I'm experiencing now.

I'm not sure what it is, but it's not just pity.

Slumping down on the couch, I stare at the state-of-the-art entertainment system across from me.

What am I going to do with Ariana? At the rate things are going, we're going to drive each other insane long before Alexei gets word from Sergei.

I don't get along with people, because most of them annoy the fuck out of me.

I'm the worst possible person to babysit Ariana, and it doesn't help that I'm attracted to her.

Fuck my life.

I let out a sigh, and lifting a hand to my face, I rub tiredly over my eyes.

I've changed the mattress and bedding in her room, and she has food, so I don't have to worry about her tonight. But what the hell do we do tomorrow?

She has questions I can't answer.

This isn't going to get better. If Sergei wants us to protect his daughter, it means war with Yuri. If Sergei wants her dead, it means war with the Bratva because Alexei won't kill her.

I hear Ariana's cautious footsteps as she comes down the stairs, and I rise to my feet. She glares in my direction and carries the untouched plate of food to the kitchen. "Asshole," she mumbles under her breath.

It's not in my nature to apologize, and I'm not about to start now, but still, the words burn on the tip of my tongue.

I watch as she moves to the sink and opens the faucet. When she begins to wash the dishes, I say, "There's a dishwasher."

"Don't talk to me," she snaps.

That's my queue to leave.

I go to the security room and enter the code for the door. Taking a seat behind the monitors, I can see every room in the house from the cameras we installed.

I glance at the screen showing the underground chatter, but after a couple of seconds, I turn up the sound for the camera in the kitchen.

'...can go to hell,' I hear Ariana mumble angrily. She shakes her head, letting out an offended chuckle but then it turns to a sob. I watch as she takes deep breaths, and then the dishes suffer as she grabs one after the other. *'Freaking, asshole.'*

When she dries her hands, red swelling around her wrists catches my eye.

Fuck.

Getting up, I leave the security room and go get the first aid kit. When I come down the stairs, I hear Ariana grumble, "How the hell does this TV work?"

When I sit down next to her, she freezes, but then the scowl returns to her face. “Leave me alone.”

I take the remote from her hand and switch on the TV. “What do you want to watch?”

“Netflix.”

I go into Netflix then hand her the remote. Taking hold of her free arm, my eyes sweep over the broken skin.

Ariana yanks away from me. “Don’t touch me.”

“Watch TV and let me do my job,” I mutter as I grab hold of her arm again. I set her hand down on my thigh, and opening the first aid kit, I remove antiseptic wipes and clean her wrist before putting balm on.

I can’t help but notice how delicate her bone structure is, and my hand is easily twice the size of hers.

I need to be gentler with her.

When Ariana sits frozen, my eyes lift to her face, and I’m met with a wide-eyed bewildered expression.

“I thought you didn’t care if I’m comfortable or not,” she throws my words from earlier back at me. “Feeling guilty must be a new experience for someone like you.”

I shove her hand off my thigh and mutter, “Other wrist.”

She places her left hand on my thigh, then says, “I hope the guilt eats away at your conscience.” She takes a breath then adds, “Which I doubt you have.”

As I dab the balm onto her wrist, I mutter, “You did this to yourself. I warned you what would happen if you attack me.”

She yanks her arm out of my hold and then shoves at my shoulder as she darts to her feet. “You’re such a jackass! None of this is my fault. You

kidnapped me. You tied me to the bed. You just left me there. It's all on you, jerk."

Closing the first aid kit, I get up and walk away. "Don't expect an apology from me. It will never happen." I stop by the stairs and glare back at her. "Just do as I say, and you'll get through this in one piece."

"And if I don't do as you say?" she asks, lifting her chin in defiance.

"Then you'll end up dead."

I watch as my words hit her, the fear pouring back into her eyes as she stares at me, and I instantly regret what I just said.

There's no doubt on her face that she thinks I'll actually kill her. Not for the first time, I get the feeling Ariana knows who I am, and it has me asking, "Did your father tell you about me?"

She shakes her head, pressing her lips tightly together.

"But you know who I am. How?"

Ariana shakes her head again, and when I give her a look of warning, her shoulders slump. "I overheard some of my dad's calls. He mentioned you and a man named Alexei."

"What did he say?" I demand.

"Just that you're the best... assassins."

My eyes lock with Ariana's. "I'm not an assassin."

"What are you then?"

"I'm a custodian to an assassin."

"Custodian?" she asks, confusion flashing over her features.

"A protector."

A couple of seconds pass, and then she lets out an incredulous chuckle. "Right, then I'm the head of the Bratva."

The corner of my mouth lifts. "Then we're all fucked."

Ariana scowls at me again. “Ugh.” She drops down on the couch and mutters, “I don’t know why I even bother talking to you.”

ARIANA

What a jerk.

As I scroll through Netflix, anger simmers in my chest like a volcano ready to explode.

Needing a good distraction, I decide to watch *V Wars* again because Ian Somerhalder always makes me forget about everything.

I press play on the first episode and curl up on the couch, but I can’t get into the show.

I’ve been freaking kidnapped.

The realization of the predicament I find myself in keeps hitting me over the head. I keep alternating between feeling intense fear and talking myself off the ledge.

Maybe Demitri is telling the truth, and he won’t kill me.

Maybe it’s not as bad as it seems.

I wrap my arms tightly around my waist, glancing around the room.

I need to find a way to escape. Maybe if I act calm, Demitri will let down his guard.

I let out a sigh because he knew I was going to attack him with the fork before I even made a move.

What the hell am I going to do?

Things only worsen when Demitri comes back into the living room and sits down on the other couch.

My gaze keeps flicking between the TV screen and Dimitri until it finally stops on the man that's the sole reason for my unhappiness.

It's weird seeing him do something as mundane as watching TV, and the longer I stare, the more aware I become of how attractive he is.

Over the past day, I forgot all about his appearance. For a moment, it's hard to believe someone who looks like him is capable of killing people... has killed before.

He has a mixture of model-worthy looks and something rugged, disturbing the flawlessness just enough to make my ovaries swoon.

But then there's his crappy personality, and it makes a scowl form on my face.

Still a jerk, even if he's a hot one.

Dimitri's eyes snap to mine, and I quickly look back to the TV.

When even Ian is unable to hold my attention, I let out a miserable sigh and slant my gaze back to Dimitri.

"How long will we stay here?" I ask.

Dimitri turns his attention to me. "Just a week."

Hoping he'll answer more of my questions, I ask, "Where's Alexei?"

"He's trying to find the assassin that's coming after you."

My eyebrows arch up. "What will he do when he finds the person?"

There's no emotion on Dimitri's face as he replies, "Kill him."

Confusion slithers through me. "Why would he do that?"

"The Koslovs don't condone the killing of innocent women." His eyes drift over my face. "Even if they're annoying."

Ugh. Jerk.

A couple of seconds later, my teeth tug at my bottom lip before I whisper, "And the Vetrovs?"

Demitri stares at me for a moment before saying, “Only if the woman is a threat to Alexei.”

Which I’m not.

Hopefully.

“You can relax, Ariana. Until we hear from your father, I’m just here to make sure you stay alive.”

Yeah, right.

“What if you don’t hear from my father?”

Again he stares at me. “We’ll deal with that problem when it happens.”

I doubt Demitri will just let me go back to my life. My teeth tug at my bottom lip again as the apprehension trickles through my insides.

I lower my eyes to my wrists as dreadful thoughts begin to mull in my head.

Will I ever be able to return to my life, or is it gone forever?

It’s only been a day, and I’ve been choked, tossed around like a ragdoll, drugged, tied up, and left to relieve myself on a bed. What does that mean for tomorrow?

Right now, I only have a couple of bruises and have been humiliated.

But tomorrow... a bruise might become a broken bone.

Lost in my misery, I brush a finger over my left wrist.

Suddenly Demitri says, “We’re stuck here for a while. Just follow my rules, and you’ll be fine.”

Lifting my eyes, I meet his unwavering gaze. “What are the rules?”

“Don’t fight me.”

My eyes narrow on him. “Like hell. There’s no way I’m just going to let you throw me around and tie me up.”

“None of that will happen if you do what I say.”

I let out a disgruntled huff, and my anger from earlier returns, dimming the fear. “Do you get off on hurting and humiliating me?”

Demitri rises to his feet, and when he walks to where I’m sitting, every muscle in my body tenses. I move to get up, but before I can make a run for it, he’s right in front of me. He tilts his head, his eyes hard on me. “Yes, Ariana. It makes me hard as fucking steel to tie you to a bed while you screech until it feels like my ears are going to bleed.”

The image of Demitri being turned on while holding me down flashes through my mind, and it sends an unexpected wave of desire rushing through my body.

Oh, hell no. Don’t even go there.

Somehow I manage to stand my ground in front of him, giving him a glare until he walks away. My eyes burn into his back as he heads toward the stairs leading to what I assume is the basement. It’s the second time I see him go down there, and in the spur of the moment, I follow after him.

Peeking down the short stairway, I watch as Demitri keys in a code and, shoving a heavy metal door open, he disappears inside the room.

What’s in there?

Probably the keys for the boat and a phone. Everything I need to escape.

I need to find out what the code for that door is.

Chapter 7

DEMITRI

Another fucking regret.

The girl gets under my skin, but still, that's no reason for saying what I did. She's scared, and I probably made it worse.

The last thing I want her worrying about is me forcing myself on her. That will never happen.

Letting out a sigh, I sit and stare at the monitors. I find Ariana where she's opening the fridge and taking a bottle of water from it.

She just wanted some kind of reassurance that I won't hurt her. Why the fuck didn't I give her that?

I watch as she sits down on the couch again, curling against the armrest. *'Come on, Ian, distract me from the asshole,'* she says as she begins to watch the show again.

Day one was an epic fuck up, and I have no idea how we're going to get through the rest of the week.

Picking up my phone, I shoot Alexei a message.

Demitri: Please tell me Lucian's in Russia already.

A couple of minutes pass before the reply comes through.

Alexei: He's heading to Russia tomorrow.

Demitri: Change places with me. You babysit the girl, and I'll look for the assassin.

Alexei: Nope.

I let out a sigh.

Demitri: Have someone keep an eye on Ariana's mother. She's worried they'll go after her.

Alexei: I'll send Nikhil.

Demitri: Thanks.

Demitri: What the fuck am I supposed to do while I'm stuck here?

Alexei: Work on your people skills.

Demitri: You know I only vowed to protect you from other people, right?

Alexei: Oooh, I'm trembling.

Demitri: Fucker.

Setting the phone back down on the desk, I glance at the monitor for the living room.

Fuck this, I'm not hiding in the security room. Getting up, I stalk to the kitchen and make a cup of coffee for myself.

"Alexei's sending someone to watch your mother," I offer the information to Ariana in the hopes it will make her relax. When she doesn't say anything, I ask, "Did you hear me?"

"Yes, but I'm sure as shit not going to thank you," she mumbles.

Taking a deep breath, I pick up the cup and go sit on the couch.

She gives an irritated look. "Do you even watch TV when you're not busy murdering people?"

Keeping my eyes on the screen, I clench my teeth until I'm sure nothing aggressive will leave my mouth. "I don't watch TV, but there's not much to do on the island."

"Well, go find something. You make me uncomfortable."

My eyes snap to Ariana. "For someone who believes I'm going to kill her, you have zero survival instincts. Annoying your abductor isn't the wisest thing to do."

Her eyes narrow on me. “I plan on going out with a fight. If I can annoy you to death, it’s a bonus.”

Letting out a chuckle, the corner of my mouth lifts. “Like you tried and failed to fight me earlier?”

“Screw you,” she mutters, turning her gaze back to the TV while a red blush creeps up her neck and over her cheeks.

I hate that she’s humiliated, and again it’s on the tip of my tongue to apologize for leaving her tied to the bed, but I bite the words back.

We continue to watch the show, which turns out to be about vampires. Every couple of minutes, I feel Ariana’s eyes on me, and before I can think it through, I ask, “Like what you see, *Malysyka*?”

“Ugh,” she grunts. “In your dreams.”

I let out another chuckle.

“What did you call me in Russian?”

“It’s similar to little girl.”

She huffs, and then we manage to watch an entire episode before Ariana talks again. “What’s in the basement?”

“None of your business.”

Another minute passes. “For someone who keeps telling me this whole nightmare is for my safety, you sure aren’t going out of your way to put me at ease.”

Taking a deep breath, I slowly let it out before I turn my gaze to her. “For someone who’s getting my protection for free, you sure are ungrateful.”

Something sparks in Ariana’s eyes, and then she crosses her legs and gives me a curious look.

Aww fuck. Here comes the questions.

“How much do you charge?”

“You can’t afford me,” I mutter.

“Tell me anyway.”

I let out a silent burst of laughter. “I’m not going to discuss my finances with you.”

“Okay, how much would you ask to protect me for a week?”

A frown begins to form on my forehead. “Where are you going with this?”

“I just figured if I pay you, maybe you’d be less of an ass.”

Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my thighs and stare the girl down. “This is me being nice.”

She pulls a disgruntled face. “Then I’d hate to see you upset.”

A smile tugs at my mouth. “Then don’t piss me off.”

She shoots me a glare and turns her attention back to the TV. It only takes a couple of minutes before the dejected expression returns to her face.

Fuck, Demitri. Just give the girl some kind of reassurance.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Ariana,” I finally say the words she’s been needing to hear.

“How can I believe anything you say?” she counters and holds up one of her bruised wrists. I stare at Ariana until she starts to squirm, looking uncomfortable. Then she mutters, “Also doesn’t help when you give me that look of death.”

Needing to set things straight, I say, “I understand you’re scared. I’m only keeping you safe out of respect to the head of the Bratva, which means I’m getting nothing from it. Just like you, I don’t want to be here.”

I let the words sink in, then add, “If you attack me, I’m going to restrain you. I won’t hurt you, and I sure as fuck have no interest in touching you. You’re just a job, Ariana.”

A weird look flashes across her face, and then she turns her attention back to the TV, doing her best to ignore me, which suits me just fine.

ARIANA

I didn't get much sleep last night, with Demitri sitting on the other couch, watching me like a guard dog. I kept dozing off only to jerk awake with fright.

I only stayed on the couch because I didn't have the strength to face that bedroom.

I feel off-balance, my emotions constantly jumping from being terrified to feeling embarrassed with what happened last night to anger.

After making myself some coffee, I decide to explore my prison in the hopes of finding a way to escape. Opening the sliding doors, I step out onto the deck and slowly make my way down the steps. I wait to see if Demitri is going to come after me, but when there's no sign of him, I head in the direction of the trees.

Even though I'm living a nightmare, I can't ignore the beauty around me. The air is fresh, and birds chirp from the treetops, and it has a calming effect on me. I find the highest boulder from where I can see the mainland, and the sight gives me a sinking feeling.

I'll never be able to swim that distance.

I glance over the lake, hoping to see someone out on their boat, but there's no one.

Letting out a sigh, my thoughts turn back to yesterday. I don't understand the flash of disappointment I felt when Demitri said I was just a

job.

It's because it will be easier for him to kill you if he doesn't see you as a human being... an innocent woman.

I need to change the way he sees me. If I can't escape, then maybe I can make him care enough that he won't be able to kill me.

It feels like an impossible task.

He had no problem tossing me around and tying me up, so the chances of making him see me as a woman are probably next to nothing.

Glancing over my shoulder, I stare back at the impressive mansion.

God, I'm at Demitri's mercy, and I'm not sure he has any.

My thoughts keep alternating between the fear gnawing at my insides and my will to survive... to fight until the very end.

I can't just sit and tremble with fear.

I have to try.

Walking back to the house, I look through every room except for the one I was held in. I don't find anything that might help me escape. I'm walking through an entertainment room, sparing the bar a glance. Coming to another door, I peek inside, and then my eyebrows shoot up into my hairline.

Oh. My. God.

Demitri's busy doing sit-ups, his lower half resting on a bench while his upper half moves without any effort on his part. There's zero strain on his muscles, which tells me the man is much stronger than I thought.

Crap, I can't even manage ten regular sit-ups.

Even doing a workout, there's a wave of danger emanating from him, and I can't deny how freaking hot he looks.

My eyes practically devour every inch of his golden skin, glistening with sweat while his six... no... eight pack tightens and contracts with

every sit-up.

Holy hotness.

Suddenly Demitri sits up, and reaching for a towel, he wipes behind his neck as he rises to his feet. My eyes glide greedily over his abs, and then there's one hell of a spark of attraction when I see the curved muscles of his hips that lead to sweatpants... and a bulge.

My mouth grows dry, and my skin warms as my abdomen clenches from the sight. My gaze roams up his body again and then locks on his eyes.

Instantly a blush creeps up my face from being caught red-handed blatantly staring at him. I dart away from the door and walk through the entertainment room as quickly as I can while suppressing the urge to slap myself.

Stupid, Ariana! Freaking drooling over your captor. Seriously? This isn't some captive romance.

Feeling a little mortified that Demitri caught me staring, I drop down on the couch and switch on the TV. My eyes are glued to the screen while I strain to listen for any movement from the gym's direction.

I dare a glance to my right just as Demitri comes into the living room and almost sprain my neck to snap my eyes back to the TV.

Luckily he doesn't say anything, and I wait a couple of seconds before I dare another glance, just in time to see him head up the stairs.

Still shirtless. The muscles of his back rolling beneath his skin.

Damn.

I shake my head hard and force my eyes back to the show I'm watching.

Stop, Ariana. Yes, he's hot as hell. Emphasis on 'hell.'

I take a deep breath, doing my best to ignore the overwhelming attraction I feel toward Demitri.

He's dangerous and deadly and from another world. He kidnapped me, humiliated me, and hurt me.

Don't forget that. Ever.

Chapter 8

DEMITRI

After showering, I change into a pair of cargo pants and a t-shirt, then sit down on the corner of the bed.

Catching Ariana, watching me with curiosity and desire on her face, is the last thing I expected. She obviously feels the attraction between us, and I'm starting to think it's something I can use to my advantage. If I play on her emotions, then maybe she'll stop being so damn worried that I'll kill her. It might make her forget her fear, and she'll stop fighting me every fucking chance she gets.

A weird sensation skitters through me. *Guilt*. I'm not one to play games, and using a woman is not something I'm comfortable with doing.

But still, it might solve the problem and make things easier while we're both stuck here.

Or just more complicated.

Fuck.

Processing the new development, I get up and head downstairs. As I walk into the kitchen, Ariana's standing on her toes, and stretching her body, she tries to reach a box of cereal. I come up behind her, and the second she becomes aware of me, she spins around. Her hands come up in a defensive move, her palms slamming against my chest. I ignore her reaction and take the box of Fruit Loops from the cupboard. As I set it down on the counter, I lower my eyes back to Ariana. She's watching me with wide eyes, her cheeks quickly growing pink.

For a moment, we don't move, and with fascination, I watch as the blush deepens on her skin.

Yeah, she's definitely attracted to me.

Her hands slide down my chest to my abs, and her touch makes my cock stir, but then realization flashes over her features, and she yanks back, pressing herself against the counter.

"Move," she hisses, glancing to the side to avoid making eye contact with me.

Having her cornered is one hell of a turn-on. It's like this woman calls to every predatory part inside me. She makes me want to hunt. To chase her until she's so weak she can't fight back anymore. It's fucking exhilarating.

The corner of my mouth lifts as I take a step backward.

Ariana shoots me a glare and begins to walk away, but then she stops and coming back, she reaches past me, grabs the box of cereal, and starts to make breakfast for herself.

I prepare a cup of coffee for myself and sipping on the warm liquid, I lean back against the counter, watching Ariana eat.

"Stop staring at me," she mumbles around a mouthful of Fruit Loops.

I tilt my head, the corner of my mouth lifting again.

She lets out a huff and scowls at me while she swallows the bite, then she says, "Just because you're hot, it doesn't mean anything. You have a shitty personality." She begins to scoop up another bite, then adds, "Oh, let's not forget you kidnapped, hurt, and degraded me, so don't get any funny ideas. Being an asshole is not an attractive quality for me."

Ariana takes another bite of her cereal, and when my smirk grows, her glare darkens.

She's working hard to keep her defenses up. I wonder what it would take to break down her walls.

Deciding to test the waters, I set down my cup and slowly move closer to her. She tenses, a guarded expression tightening her features.

When I'm only a couple of inches from her, she puts the spoon down in the bowl and gives me a look of warning. "Stop it."

"What?" I murmur, dropping my voice low on purpose.

Her cheeks instantly flush, and even though she tries to harden her glare, her breaths speeding up tells me she's affected by me. I'm just not sure if it's fear, desire, or both.

When only an inch separates us, our eyes lock. Ariana swallows hard, and then she presses her palm against my abs, trying to shove me as she takes a step back.

"Stop whatever you're doing. It makes me uncomfortable," she says with a slight tremble in her voice.

"Does it?" I ask, tilting my head. "You didn't look uncomfortable when you were practically eye-fucking me in the gym."

The deepest shade of red seeps into her cheeks, making it look like she just ran ten miles. Because of her fair skin, she'll never be able to hide her emotions.

The next second, her finger jabs at my chest, and she actually takes a step toward me as she snaps, "Don't flatter yourself. I'm not interested in you at all."

Grabbing hold of her hand, I yank her right against me. Our bodies instantly melt together as Ariana lets out a startled gasp. Her eyes dart up to mine, her lips parted as her breaths rush over them. And fuck, it only makes her more beautiful.

Anticipation zaps between us, and I feel as a tremble ripples through her. The attraction grows at the speed of light, making me turn rock hard.

I've never had this happen with a woman before, and it makes me really look at Ariana. She's much younger than me, but that doesn't matter. Even though she's afraid of me, she still fights back.

My eyes drift over her face, her chin held high and her hazel eyes alive with a feistiness that demands my respect.

And it all grabs my attention like nothing has before in my life.

Leaning down until my mouth brushes against the shell of her ear, I take a deep breath of her. Her scent makes my muscles tense as if they're getting ready to pounce. "Yeah? You sure about that?" I whisper, my voice low and predatory.

As I pull back an inch, I see confusion flash over Ariana's features. She yanks her hand free from my hold, and darting around me, she flees up the stairs. I hear a door slam on the second floor.

Letting out a chuckle, my lips curve up.

Well, that's interesting.

ARIANA

Holy crap, that was intense.

Running to the room that's nothing short of a chamber of torture, I slam the door shut behind me, and then stare at it with a pounding heart.

My stomach is still spinning like crazy, and my skin is alive with tingles.

Having Demetri's body pressed hard against mine had my emotions all over the place. I felt everything but fear, which is a huge worry for me.

Because I should fear him.

I should hate him for stealing me away from my life.

But instead, I melted against him. All I could see was his square jaw, full lips, and sharp eyes. His sinful face was so close to mine, I felt his breath on my skin. His lips brushed over my jaw, making my abdomen clench with need.

Just thinking about it makes another rush of tingles zap through me.

I shake my head hard and close my eyes as I try to focus on my breathing.

And his body. God, his body... sigh.

Hard against my soft. Demitri is the opposite of me in every way, and my body loved the feeling of his way too much.

Fine, so I'm physically attracted to the jerk. It doesn't change anything.

Opening my eyes, I glare at the bed and noticing Demitri changed the covers makes the shame of what happened when he left me tied to it ripple through me.

Arrogant asshole.

Jerk.

Jackass.

Ugh, the man is insufferable, and don't you forget that, Ariana!

Walking into the bathroom, I pick up the bag of clothes Demitri gave me yesterday and check what else is in it. I find two pairs of sweatpants and two t-shirts. Leaving one set of clothes on the corner of the bed, I take a clean pair and go shower. After I'm done brushing my teeth and hair, I grab the dirty clothes and shove them into the bag.

Leaving the bedroom, I head to the laundry room I saw next to the kitchen. I dump the clothes into the washing machine and then glance down at the t-shirt I'm wearing. It's white, and the fabric doesn't do much to hide

the outlines of my breasts, seeing as I'm not wearing a bra. There's also a chill in the air, and I hate getting cold.

A scowl forms on my face.

Screw this.

I storm out of the laundry room and back up the stairs. Searching through the other rooms, I find one with men's clothes in the closets. I help myself to four black t-shirts and a couple of sweaters, then grin.

I'm just about to pull one of the shirts on when I hear Demitri say, "That's Alexei's."

Turning to face him, I mutter, "So? Does it look like I care?"

Demitri comes at me and taking the clothes from me, he throws them on the bed, then he grabs my hand and drags me out of the room. He pulls the door shut behind him, saying, "You don't want to get on Alexei's bad side. Don't go into his bedroom."

I give Demitri a glare, not caring what Alexei will think.

I try to pull my hand free from Demitri's, but instead of letting go, he tightens his hold on me and drags me to another bedroom. We come to a stop in another closet.

"You can wear anything in here."

I glance over the clothes, then ask, "Is this your room?"

"Yes."

The idea of wearing Demitri's clothes sends another unwelcome wave of tingles rushing through me. Only then does something niggle at the back of my mind, and my eyes snap up to Demitri's. "Are there cameras in the house?"

"Of course," he replies, and then he takes a couple of shirts from his closet and shoves them against my chest.

Taking hold of them, I reach past him and help myself to three of his sweaters. Then rushing out of the closet, I glance over the pristine room, which looks impersonal.

I go to the chamber of torture and gather the few things I have, then take them to another guest room.

Demitri watches me, and when I place the clothes in the closet, he leans his shoulder against the doorjamb and crosses his arms over his chest. I hate when he stands like that because it gives me a perfect view of the veins snaking beneath his skin and his defined muscles.

“Are there cameras in the bathrooms?” I ask, my stomach clenching with nerves from knowing he can see anything I do. It’s also unnerving being this close to him after the altercation in the kitchen.

“No, only the bedrooms and downstairs.”

“So if I sleep here, you can watch me like the creep you are?” I snap, not happy about having almost zero privacy and the unsettling attraction I feel for this man.

“I only go to the security room three times a day, so you don’t have to worry about me watching you,” he informs me.

My eyebrow lifts as I turn to face him. “What do you call what you’re doing right now?”

He lets out a chuckle, his lips curving into a way too hot grin. “Entertainment.”

I hate it when heat creeps up my neck and mutter, “Screw you.”

“Only if you beg,” Demitri taunts me.

Rushing to the doorway, I shove at him until he steps back, and then I slam the door shut in his face. Turning the key, I lock it and only then do I realize this room actually has a key.

Yassss! Ariana for the win.

Chapter 9

DEMITRI

Opening the security door, I'm well aware of Ariana watching from the top of the stairs. My body blocks the keypad, so there's no way she'll see the code.

I go inside and check my phone for missed calls and messages. Not seeing anything, I glance over the monitors and seeing Ariana creep toward the security door, the corner of my mouth lifts.

I walk to the door, and when I open it, she jumps back and then begins to look all flustered before she darts back up the stairs like a scared rabbit.

I get way too much enjoyment from the moment, and pulling the door shut behind me, I follow after Ariana.

I find her standing in front of the sliding doors, her breaths still coming fast from being startled while she tries to act casual.

You're a dick, Demitri.

Wanting to gain some ground with the girl so she'll relax around me, and because she can't protect herself to save her life, I say, "Seeing as we have nothing to do, want me to show you a couple of ways to defend yourself?"

Ariana turns her face to me with a what-the-hell expression. "You're willing to show me how to kick your butt?"

I let out a chuckle. "Trust me, no matter how much I teach you, that will never happen."

"Why? Because you're this big bad man, and I'm a woman?"

"No," I reply, moving closer to her. "Because I'm the best."

“Ugh, turn down the arrogance a notch,” she mutters, but then she adds, “Fine, it’s not like I have anything better to do.”

Heading toward the gym, I grumble, “You make it impossible to be nice to you.”

“Yeah, kidnap me and then expect me to thank you for it.”

I walk over to an open space with a mat for sparring and turn to face Ariana.

She gives me a barely tolerant look. “So, what do we do?”

“I assume you’ve never been in a fight?”

She lets out a chuckle and shakes her head. “Normal person, remember?”

“Okay,” I take a deep breath and let it out. Moving closer to Ariana, she keeps her eyes on me. “I’m going to show you how to get out of a chokehold.”

She pulls a disgruntled face. “I kind of have PTSD from the last time your arm was around my neck. Let’s skip that one. Rather show me how to hit someone.”

I stare at Ariana, wondering just how much I traumatized her.

Probably a fuck ton.

“We’re doing the chokehold. It will help you deal with shit knowing you can get out of it in the future.”

“Will I get to choke you?” she asks, giving me a glare.

I let out a soft chuckle. “You can try.” As I move behind her, Ariana tenses and watches me from over her shoulder. “Relax. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Forgive me for not believing a word you say,” she scoffs.

I move in closer and slowly bring my arm around her front. Her hands instantly dart up, and she grabs hold of my forearm. Spinning around, her

breaths come fast, and her features tighten with panic.

“No.” She shakes her head hard. “Whatever you’re trying to do, it’s not going to work.”

“I’m not trying anything, Ariana.”

She takes a couple of steps backward and glances at the doorway. “This act... a friendly training session,” her eyes come back to me, “I won’t fall for it. You’re the kidnapper, and I’m the hostage. So don’t make this something it’s not.”

I let out a deep sigh. “You’re overreacting, and it’s really starting to annoy me. If I left you in Seattle, you’d be dead by now.”

“Says you!” Ariana begins to walk away from me, but then she stops and swings back. “Do you actually expect me to believe the shit coming out of your mouth? Do I look that gullible?”

“Believe what you want,” I mutter. “Fact is you’re a Bratva princess, and people want you dead. The sooner you accept that, the longer you’ll manage to stay alive.”

“I have nothing to do with that world!” she shrieks, her cheeks flaming with anger.

I close the distance between us, and with a dark glare, I hold her gaze. “Stop lying to yourself, Ariana. You might have been able to stay out of the Bratva until now, but you’re as much a part of it as I am.”

Done with this conversation, I shove past her and head back to the security room.

ARIANA

Since the fall out in the gym yesterday, I've been doing my best to avoid Demitri, which is near impossible, seeing as I'm stuck on a damn island with him.

Feeling restless and caged, I open the sliding door and step out onto the deck.

This is the weirdest kidnapping ever.

Fine, so far, I've been lucky, and Demitri hasn't tortured me. Actually, he's done nothing but feed me.

And he tried to show you how to protect yourself.

As if. He was probably trying to pull some kind of move so I would let my guard down.

Hearing wood splintering, I frown at the direction the sound is coming from and begin to walk toward it. Rounding the corner of the house, my mouth drops open, and my eyebrows slowly lift.

Demitri swings an ax down on a piece of wood, and it splits right down the middle. His biceps strain against the sleeves of the white t-shirt he's wearing.

Sigh, jerk or no jerk, he sure is something to look at.

I watch as he chops piece after piece of wood, and it makes me forget about my predicament.

Taking hold of the bottom half of his shirt, he pulls the fabric up and wipes it over his face, giving me a view of his drool-worthy abs.

Take it off.

As if he can hear my thoughts, he grabs hold of the fabric at the back of his neck and then yanks the shirt off in one go.

Oh, yeah. That's more like it.

He continues to chop wood, and watching his muscles ripple while they shine with the drops of sweat beading on his skin is damn close to porn.

Demitri slams the ax down on the wood, and it splinters, and then he takes a step back and slowly lifting his head, I watch as he sucks in a breath of air.

And then our eyes collide, and I can't make myself move even if I wanted to.

Seriously. It's not right for one man to be so hot.

Dropping the ax to the grass, Demirti begins to walk in my direction.

My heart starts beating like crazy, and there's a voice telling me to run, but my feet are glued to the spot.

He stops right in front of me, and seeing his glistening chest up close is almost dizzying. Then he lifts his hand to my face, and his thumb brushes over my bottom lip.

I let out a breath, my senses overwhelmed and my survival instinct missing in action.

"Don't say I didn't do anything nice for you," Demitri taunts me.

"Huh?" Finally, I manage to move back a step.

He jabs a thumb over his shoulder. "The show. It was all for you, *Malyshka*, and by the expression on your face, it looked like you appreciated every second of it. You're welcome."

Letting out an amused chuckle, he walks back to the pile of wood.

"Jackass," I call out, and then I dart back around the corner of the house and make a run for the sliding doors.

You have to stop drooling over the guy.

He's bad, not some prince charming.

I let out a snort.

Ha, hell will probably freeze over the day Demitri is charming.

Walking back into the house, I mutter, "If I get out of this alive, I better get my head examined."

Chapter 10

DEMITRI

We've been on the island for a week, and last I spoke with Alexei, he was no closer to finding out who the assassin is that's coming after Ariana.

Lucian's in Russia, but he has to keep up pretenses and meet with Yuri and the other members of the Bratva before he can visit Sergei.

Hopefully, we'll learn something of value soon because things have been growing tenser between Ariana and me. Every time we're in the same room, the atmosphere becomes explosive, and it doesn't help that she looks fucking sexy in my shirts.

Ariana's been keeping herself busy by watching one show after the other and obsessively cleaning the house. When I told her she doesn't need to clean, she just gave me a glare and said it's either that or she'll go crazy from boredom.

My phone vibrates, and I quickly pick it up.

Alexei: Found the assassin. Jet Tao. He's still in Seattle. I'm going after him.

A wave of worry crashes over me, and I shoot to my feet.

Demitri: Fuck no. Not without me.

Alexei: I'll be fine.

Demitri: You know what it will mean if you get hurt or worse.

It will bring dishonor to the Vetrov name.

Alexei: Chill. Nikhil and Sacha will be with me.

A sense of helplessness I've never felt before bleeds through me.

Demitri: Don't go. Wait until I can be there to watch your back.

A couple of seconds later, Alexei's name flashes on the screen, and I answer the call, snapping, "You do not go after Tao until I'm back with you."

Alexei takes a deep breath. "I know this is frustrating for you, and it's your job to watch my back, but we both knew this time would come. Nikhil and Sacha are good. You trained them."

"We both knew this time would come? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You can't guard me every day for the rest of our lives."

My free hand fists at my side. "I swore my loyalty to you."

"And I'll always be grateful for that, but at some point, you need to think of yourself, Demitri. You mean more to me than my own brother, and I'd never keep you from living your own life. This separation with you watching the girl made me realize how much of your time I've been taking up."

My heartbeat increases with every word he says, and feeling frustrated as fuck, I shove a hand through my hair. "I'm only going to say this once. My loyalty belongs to you, Alexei. That's the end of this discussion. You will stand down until I can join you, or I'm leaving Ariana alone on the island to meet you in Seattle."

Alexei's quiet for a moment, then he finally relents, "Fine. I'll have Nikhil track Tao until you can join me."

I take a deep breath of relief. "Don't you ever fucking say shit like that again."

"I'm sorry, brother. I just don't want you to look back one day and realize you had no life at all because of me."

"I have a life. One I'm perfectly happy with." Sitting back down in the chair by the monitors, I say, "Let's do a panic test."

Alexei, our brothers, and their wives wear tags around our necks that I can activate to track them in case one of them needs help.

A moment later, the alarm comes through on my phone, and it shows me Alexei's at Koslov & Hayes, which is the business he runs with his friend Tristan.

"Got it."

"Yeah, yeah. You just wanted to make sure I'm not already in Seattle," Alexei calls me out.

"Do you fucking blame me? Guarding you is like trying to protect a kid that's on a sugar rush."

My words draw a chuckle from my friend. "How are things there?"

"We haven't killed each other... yet," I mutter.

Alexei chuckles again. "Is she so much of a handful?"

"You have no idea. Never before has a woman gotten me this worked up before. Everything she does and says hits a fucking nerve."

"Hmm..."

A scowl forms on my face. "Don't even go there." Alexei has a habit of playing matchmaker for everyone. He was the one who arranged the marriage between my brother, Damien and Winter. "This is just a job."

"If you say so." I hear the teasing tone in Alexei's voice, and it makes my scowl deepen. "I have another call coming through. I'll talk to you later."

"Later," I mutter, and then I set the phone down on the desk.

Still upset that Alexei even considered going on a job without me there to watch his back, I get up from the chair and stalk out of the security room.

When I walk into the living room, Ariana glances at me, looks back at the TV, and then her gaze snaps back to my face. Her eyes widen, apprehension tightening her features.

“W-what’s that look for?” she stammers.

Frowning at her, I ask, “Did I miss something?”

Confusion flutters over her face. “Ah... you... for a second there, it looked like you were going to kill me.”

Letting out a sigh, I head to the kitchen and grab a bottle of water from the fridge. I drink half of it before I turn around to face Ariana again.

She’s still watching me, her body tense and ready to run should I try anything.

“Relax.” For what feels like the hundredth time, I add, “I’m not going to kill you.”

“Kinda hard to believe. You know...” she waves a hand between us, “with you being my kidnapper and all.”

Taking a deep breath, I decide to change the subject. “What are you watching?”

“Vampire Diaries,” she answers, her eyes still locked on me.

I walk to a couch, and only when I sit down does she begin to relax a little.

ARIANA

I’m watching Demitri like a hawk and not letting my guard down.

When he came up from the security room, he looked like hell and brimstone, ready to rip my heart out with his bare hands. The poor organ in my chest is still beating a mile a minute.

A moment later, my curiosity gets the better of me. “Why do you look so upset?”

Demitri slants his eyes in my direction. “None of your business.”

At his brisk answer, my eyebrows pop up, and I keep staring at him until he relents with a sigh. “Because I’m stuck babysitting your ass instead of doing my actual job.”

I shouldn’t care if he’s unhappy about it, but still, I go on the defense. “Don’t take it out on me. It’s not my fault.”

Demitri narrows his eyes at me, and it sends my heart speeding again. “Now is not the time to look for shit with me.”

“Like there’s ever a good time,” I mutter. I turn my attention back to the TV, but I can’t focus on the show to save my life.

My gaze snaps back to Demitri, and then I let him have a piece of my mind. “You kidnapped me. My social media accounts are going to hell, and all my hard work is down the drain. I’ve missed the appointments I had, which means zero income for me. You ruined my life. I was happy, and you just barged in and snatched me from it. Let’s not forget I know absolutely nothing about you, and you’ll probably end up killing me. This is no *vacation* for me. Every freaking minute I’m wondering when it will be my last. So I honestly don’t give a shit whether you’re unhappy *babysitting my ass*.” With a huff, I turn my eyes back to the TV.

There’s a moment’s silence following my rant, and even though I’m fearing for my life, I can’t keep the other emotions under control. Everything from apprehension to anger to attraction for the damn man keeps whirling in my chest.

Demitri takes a deep breath, then he demands, “Look at me.”

A frown forms on my forehead, and with an annoyed huff, I meet his eyes.

He leans forward, resting his forearms on his thighs, and it sends another wave of awareness through me because he looks sinfully hot right

now.

“Have I done anything to intentionally hurt you?”

A glare forms on my face. “You choked me, and you tied me up and left me on that damn bed.”

“I’ve already explained why that happened,” he snaps at me, his features tightening. The dark look on his face makes my body tense up, and I’m ready to make a run for it the second he moves.

“We’ve been stuck here a week, and I haven’t slapped you around. I haven’t kept you tied to that bed, and trust me, there were a couple of times I wanted nothing more. You get to move around freely. Let’s not forget all of this is to keep you alive. In my opinion, that’s not the definition of captivity.”

Our eyes are locked, and with every passing second, the atmosphere grows tenser between us.

“Says the kidnapper.”

“Jet Tao,” Demitri bites the words out.

I shake my head with a shrug of my shoulder. “Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“It’s the name of your assassin. Jet Tao.”

Goosebumps spread over my skin, and my lips part as the news sinks in.

Ignoring my reaction, Demitri continues, “He’s not the best, but he’s good. The contract on your life is for fifteen million dollars.”

Oh. My. God.

A tremble begins to spread through my body, and my mouth grows dry.

I have no reason to believe a word Demitri says, but for some reason, I know he’s telling me the truth.

There’s really a hit on my life. Someone wants me dead.

For the first time, it sinks in, and the realization makes my entire world wobble off balance.

My eyes are glued to Demitri's, and my voice is hoarse with fear as I ask, "What stops you from killing me and taking the millions for yourself?"

Time stretches between us, and it only makes my body tremble harder.

"Honor," Demitri finally answers. "The Vetrovs live by a code of honor. We don't hurt the innocent."

I want to believe him, but how can I?

Since Demitri took me, I've been one hundred percent certain he's the enemy.

But... what if I'm wrong?

What if he really saved me?

What if Demitri's all that stands between me and the man who wants to kill me?

Demitri watches my reaction closely, then he says, "I'm not your enemy."

Having no idea who I can trust, helplessness washes over me again. With shaky legs, I get up from the couch and walk to the stairs.

I need time to process everything. I need to figure out what's the truth and what's a lie.

I go to my room and, crawling into bed, I pull the covers over my head.

I've never been this confused before. There are too many emotions, unanswered questions, and doubts, and it all leaves me feeling lost and impossibly alone.

Chapter 11

DEMITRI

I've felt more regret and compassion during the past week than in my entire life combined.

All because of Ariana Robinson.

Staring at the monitor that shows her room, I watch as she sleeps.

If I'm honest with myself, I'll admit the woman's gotten under my skin. Everything about her makes me feel something. Attraction. Compassion... Protectiveness.

Protectiveness.

That's something I've never felt toward a woman before.

My eyes drift over Ariana's sleeping form as my thoughts turn to this evening's conversation. She didn't take the news of Tao coming after her well. Then again, I have to remind myself she's not from my world.

It's going to destroy her when she finds out her own brother ordered the hit.

The thought has my hands fisting, and it only increases the protectiveness I feel toward her.

Ariana makes a restless sound and kicks the covers off her. Her breathing speeds up, and then she begins to toss and turn.

She's probably having a nightmare.

About me killing her.

Getting up from the chair, I leave the security room and head to Ariana's bedroom.

Just as I open the door, she mumbles fearfully, "No.No.No!"

I walk to the side of the bed, and leaning over Ariana, I shake her shoulder. “Ariana. Wake up.”

One of her hands flies out, connecting with my chest. I take in the terror etched into her face while strands of her hair stick to her clammy skin.

“Ariana, wake up,” I try again, shaking her a little harder.

A breath explodes over her lips as she shoots up, and I move back just in time, so she doesn’t slam into me. Her eyes open wide, and they only focus on me for a second before she scrambles away from me.

“You had a nightmare,” I say.

Ariana’s off the bed, and she doesn’t stop until her back slams into the wall.

The expression on her face grinds at me, and where it only annoyed me when I kidnapped her, it now upsets the fuck out of me.

I don’t want her looking at me with fear.

Before I can think things through, I move around the bed. Ariana makes a strangled noise when I get close to her, pushing her body hard against the wall as if she’s trying to escape through it.

Lifting my hands, I frame her face and say, “It was just a nightmare. You’re safe.”

Her eyes are feverish as they flit over my face. I watch as everything from terror to hopelessness flashes over her features.

“Shh... it’s okay,” I say, hoping to calm her down. Leaning into her, I lock eyes with her. “It was just a nightmare.”

She takes a couple of deep breaths, her expression wary, and then she whispers, “You-you stabbed me.”

I shake my head and gently brush the wild strands of her hair out of her face. “It was just a nightmare. You’re safe.”

For a moment, she just stares at me, and slowly the atmosphere begins to change from her terror tainting the air to something intimate growing between us.

Suddenly the trembling in her body begins to increase, and then she gives me a desperate look.

And my iron-clad self-control slips.

I tug her against my chest and engulf her in a tight hug. “I’d never hurt you. You’re safe with me.”

To my surprise, Ariana wraps her arms around my waist. Her breaths warm my shirt as she gasps, “I want to believe you so badly.”

“We’ll hear from your father soon,” I try to offer her some reassurance.

“What if you don’t hear from him?” she asks, her hold on me tightening.

For the first time, I make a promise, not out of loyalty but because I want to. “I’ll still keep you safe until the problem’s been dealt with.”

Lowering my head, my mouth skims over her temple. Slowly Ariana lifts her head, and when our eyes lock, the most intense attraction I’ve ever felt tightens every muscle in my body.

“I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

I watch as her doubt and desperation change into something akin to hope, and for once, Ariana doesn’t look at me like I’m her enemy.

Hope softens her eyes until I’m a second away from slamming my mouth against hers, but luckily my self-control wins, and I quickly pull back. The last thing I want to do is fuck up the meager ground I’ve managed to gain with her.

I walk to the door when all I want to do is rip off her clothes and make her forget about the nightmare.

“Come downstairs. I’ll make coffee,” I mutter before I step out of the bedroom.

Heading to the kitchen, I shake my head at myself. I always wondered how my brother fell so quickly for Winter. Now I’m starting to understand. I’ve watched Ariana for a week, and I’m already becoming possessive of her.

Another week like this, and I’ll be fucked.

I begin to prepare two cups of coffee while I try to figure out if this is just normal attraction I’m feeling for Ariana or more.

I’m pouring creamer into the cups when I hear her come down the stairs. When I carry the cups to the living room, she sits down on the couch she’s claimed for herself.

ARIANA

Demitri hands me a cup of steaming coffee, and then instead of going to sit on the other couch, he drops down beside me.

With my emotions intensified by the remnants of the nightmare, I can’t focus on anything long enough to make sense of things.

It was the weirdest dream I’ve ever had. It started out with the insanely intense attraction between Demitri and me. Things got steamy, then he pulled out a knife, and with an evil grin, he started to stab me.

Shivers rush over my skin, making my body tremble hard.

Suddenly Demitri gets up, and I instinctively flinch away from him. He heads back up the stairs and, a minute later, returns with a blanket.

I keep my eyes lowered as he places the blanket over my lower half. The sudden kindness only messes more with my emotions.

Demitri switches on the TV and then presses play on where I last left off with Vampire Diaries. His demeanor is relaxed as he sips on his coffee, which reminds me of my own beverage. I take a sip and swallow hard on the liquid.

The nightmare keeps flitting through my mind, and I end up staring at the coffee table, trying to process the chaotic mess it left in my chest.

“Want to talk about it?” Demitri asks, his tone soft instead of the usual briskness.

I shake my head, and unable to force the coffee down, I place the cup on the table.

Residual panic still tightens my chest, and I pull the blanket up to beneath my chin, then curl up against the armrest.

It was just a nightmare.

But for how long? It can become my reality at any moment.

I was starting to forget who Demitri is. A killer.

And someone wants me dead because of my father.

Is this what my life will be like if I manage to survive Demitri? Will it be one hit after the other until I can't escape and end up dead?

A wretched sob builds in my chest, and I focus hard to keep it down.

Was I living a lie thinking I could live a separate life from my father's?

I never asked questions. I never had any interest in what my father did for a living. I was just happy whenever I got to talk to him or see him. To me, he was just Dad.

My voice sounds empty when I ask, “Has anyone ever escaped the Bratva?”

Taking a deep breath, Demitri sets his cup down next to mine, and then he pauses the episode that's been playing on the TV.

Leaning back against the couch, he answers, "The Bratva isn't coming after you."

"Who is it? Who ordered the hit on me?"

When Demitri keeps quiet, I turn my head to look at him. Our eyes lock, and then he shakes his head.

"You don't know, or you're not going to tell me?" I ask.

His eyes search mine for something, then he says, "I'm not going to tell you. Not yet."

"Why?"

As Demitri looks at me, I realize this is the most human he's looked since we met. There's no warning shining from his eyes. There's no annoyance or anger.

Instead, there's compassion and something else... something that actually has a calming effect on me.

"You're dealing with enough shit. One thing at a time."

The longer I stare into Demitri's eyes, the more it feels like a cocoon is wrapping around me. One where my old life and my daunting reality can't find me. Softly, I murmur, "I thought you didn't care."

"I'm not the monster you think I am."

Needing to get to know Demitri better, I say, "Then tell me something about you other than that you're a killer."

Demitri breaks eye contact with me, turning his face toward the sliding doors and the dark night beyond the glass.

Silence stretches between us until I'm left thinking he's not going to give me anything, then only does he finally answer me, "I was born in

Russia. I spent my entire life training to become a custodian. I swore to protect Alexei with my last breath, and it's a vow I'll never break."

He's loyal.

"So all you do is work?"

"You could say that," he answers, then taking a deep breath, he turns his gaze back to me.

With this being the first normal conversation we're having, I slowly begin to relax a little. "Don't you want more from life?"

Demitri shakes his head. "Like?"

"You know..." I shrug, "normal stuff. A family of your own?"

"I have a family," he mutters.

"I mean... a wife and kids," I explain myself better.

Demitri lets out a soft chuckle. "Unless it's arranged to solidify an alliance, I won't get married."

"Because of the promise you made to Alexei?"

Demitri just nods.

For the first time, I feel a flicker of compassion for my captor. "Doesn't it get lonely?"

He shakes his head. "There's no time in my world for loneliness."

I lower my eyes to the open space of couch between us. "Can you tell me about the Bratva?" When Demitri says nothing, I lift my gaze back to his. "I want to know what the world is like that I've been dragged into."

"It's no place for someone like you," he says, his jaw clenching slightly.

"I don't have much of a choice," I mutter.

"You do," he says, then his voice drops low as he adds, "I'll make sure of it."

Still not able to trust Demitri, the words don't offer me much hope or comfort.

The only sure thing in my life right now is that I'm in danger, and it's starting to grind my spirit to dust.

Chapter 12

DEMITRI

Ariana finally fell asleep on the couch, and during the early morning hours, she woke me when she snuggled against my side.

I haven't moved a muscle since, just processing the fact that in her sleep, she gravitated toward me.

And it feels good.

It feels right.

Glancing down at Ariana's sleeping face, her cheek pressed against my chest, I allow the emotions she makes me feel to spread through me.

I never thought this would happen to me. But then this little stick of dynamite was thrown into my life, and the explosion she's causing is changing everything I thought I knew about myself.

I've always been strict and unmovable. I always had complete control over myself and my surroundings.

Until Ariana.

My thoughts turn to the questions she asked about the Bratva.

Slowly I lift my right hand, and I touch her silky hair.

As feisty as she is, she won't survive a day on her own.

Ariana rubs her cheek against my chest, and it sends a burst of warmth through me. She lets out a soft groan as she starts to wake up, and I drop my hand to my thigh.

I watch as her eyes flutter open, and sleepily she tries to make sense of the position she finds herself in. A second later, her eyes widen, and she

jerks away from me. Her gaze snaps up to mine, and then the blush I'm really starting to like creeps up her neck.

"No more nightmares?" I ask.

She shakes her head and then gets up and quickly walks toward the stairs.

I rise to my feet, and stretching my body, I head to the security room. Unlocking my phone, I see a message.

Alexei: Lucian will be in touch soon. Keep your phone on you.

Demitri: Will do.

Tucking the device into the pocket of my cargo pants, I glance at the monitors. The camera in Ariana's room shows her sitting on the edge of her bed, her hands covering her face.

I turn up the volume and hear her mutter, *'Seriously? You freaking slept on the man. You need therapy.'*

The corner of my mouth lifts as I leave the security room to get some exercise in before taking a shower. Going to my bedroom, I change into a pair of sweatpants, and grabbing my phone and a towel, I head back out.

As I come down the stairs, I hear Ariana in the kitchen. She glances over her shoulder, and for a moment, her eyes widen on my bare chest, but then she mutters, "I've seen the shirts in your closet. Wear one."

"And deprive you of a chance to see all of this?" With a smirk, I wave over my chest and abs. "I told you I'm not a monster."

"Ugh," she snorts and then focuses way too hard on the cup of coffee she's making.

I let out an amused chuckle as I walk to the gym. Setting the phone and towel down on a bench, I begin with pull-ups.

Halfway through my workout, I feel Ariana's eyes on me, and without glancing behind me, I ask, "Enjoying the view?"

Letting go of the bar, I drop to my feet and look to where she's leaning against the doorjamb with her arms crossed over her chest.

Before she can say anything, my phone begins to ring. Ariana immediately pushes away from the doorjamb, her eyes following me as I move to the bench to pick up the device. Seeing Lucian's name flashing on my screen, I answer, "Give me good news."

"Hold for Sergei."

It takes a moment before labored breaths come over the line. "Get my... daughter. Put me... on... speaker," Sergei says weakly.

I do as he orders, then say, "You're on speaker. Ariana's here with me."

Ariana comes to stand right next to me, her eyes locked on the device in my hand.

"Demitri... protect... her... please. No... matter... what it... takes."

Meaning if it comes to choosing between Yuri and Ariana, Yuri must die.

"I will," I assure him.

Sergei takes a couple of seconds, then he continues, "Ari...ana."

"Dad, are you okay?" she asks, concern tensing her voice.

"Trust... Demitri." His breaths grow more labored. "Only... Alexei... and... Demitri. No... one... else."

"Dad?" She moves even closer to me and takes hold of my arm as if she's scared I'll rip the phone away from her.

"I'm... sorry," he gasps.

There's silence, and then Lucian's voice comes over the line. "Sergei's unconscious again."

I turn off the speaker, and pulling Ariana's hand away from my arm, I put the device to my ear. "How are things there?"

"Fucking tense. Everyone's waiting for Sergei to die. I'm leaving Russia today. I'm not sticking around for the aftermath."

“I understand.” Ariana watches me closely. “Thank you for doing this for us.”

I end the call, and then my eyes lock with Ariana’s. When she says nothing, I lift an eyebrow at her.

She quickly crosses her arms over her chest. “I’m not apologizing just because you were telling the truth. How was I supposed to know you’re not some deranged man kidnapping me for a ransom?”

The corner of my mouth begins to lift.

“And my dad telling me I can trust you doesn’t make you any less of a jerk.”

She’s probably throwing up her defenses because she hasn’t processed the fact that she can trust me.

“Hmm,” the sound comes from deep in my throat. “Whatever you have to tell yourself to sleep at night, *Malyshka*. Fact is, I saved your life.”

Ariana lets out a huff and begins to walk to the doorway, then she suddenly pauses, and without looking at me, she mutters, “I guess I owe you a thank you... so... ah... thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Letting out a chuckle, I pick up the phone again and dial Alexei’s number.

He answers immediately, “Did you hear from Sergei?”

“Yes. We have to protect Ariana no matter what it takes.”

“Okay.” Alexei lets out a sigh. “I’ll talk to Yuri, but he won’t back down.”

“Lucian says things are tense there.”

“I have a couple of things to wrap up this side, then I’ll join you on the island so we can put a plan in place.”

“Okay. Watch your back.”

Ending the call, I lock eyes with Ariana where she's watching me from the doorway. "Alexei's coming."

ARIANA

Staring at Demitri, it takes all my strength to keep calm. Knowing it's only a matter of time before my dad dies is more than I can handle after everything that's happened the past week.

That's probably the last time I got to talk to my dad.

At least I still have Yuri, but it doesn't lessen my heartache. I'm not ready to lose my father.

The thought makes me realize how I've been living in denial, hoping he'll get better.

"Ariana," Demitri says as he walks toward me.

I blink a couple of times. "Uh-huh?"

"I said Alexei will be joining us soon."

I nod to show him that I heard and then turn and walk back to the kitchen.

Dad said I must only trust Alexei and Demitri.

A frown begins to form on my forehead because Dad didn't mention Yuri. Then again, it's probably because he knows I trust my brother.

"What happens now?" I ask as I begin to prepare a bowl of Fruit Loops for myself.

"Alexei and I will take care of everything."

Turning my face to Demitri, our eyes lock. "Can I really trust you?"

He stares at me long and hard, and his voice is filled with steel as he says, "You can trust me."

"Good," I whisper, and then suddenly, I'm overwhelmed with relief, and I quickly glance away from Dimitri.

God, things would've been so much easier if I had known that from the beginning. Still, it means Dimitri really saved me from the assassin coming after me.

"I guess I owe you for saving my butt," I mutter reluctantly because he still hurt and tied me to the damn bed on the first day.

Dimitri doesn't make this easy for me as he lets out a sigh. "And Christ, did you make it hard. You definitely owe me."

It sounds like his words carry a double meaning, and it makes my eyes snap to his. "What?"

A sinfully hot grin spreads over his face. "I'll let you know when I'm ready to collect."

Making a disgruntled face, I grab a spoon and plop it in the bowl of cereal. "I don't like the sound of that."

After shoveling my breakfast down, I go to my bathroom so I can wash my face and brush my teeth. After I'm done with my morning routine, I look at my reflection in the mirror.

God, I look like shit.

I head to my closet, and taking one of Dimitri's sweaters from it because it's starting to get cold with winter just around the corner, I pull the fabric over my head. His scent envelops me, and it makes my ovaries do backflips.

Taking hold of the neck of the sweater, I bring the fabric to my nose and take a deep breath.

Do I trust him because Dad said I could, or was I already starting to trust him on my own?

I guess I'll never know.

I keep inhaling Demitri's scent like a damn addict while my thoughts turn to the intense attraction I feel toward him. I have no idea how long I'll have to stay with him, and every day it gets harder to keep up the walls between us. It also doesn't help shit that the man knows he's hot as hell.

Letting out a sigh, I leave my bedroom and go back downstairs. I find Demitri out on the deck where he's staring at the lake. He must've taken a shower because his black hair is damp, and he's wearing cargo pants and a black t-shirt that only accentuates his divinely muscled body.

Sigh.

Coming to a stop next to him, I glance over the beautiful view, then ask, "How long have you known my dad?"

"All my life," Demitri murmurs, not taking his eyes off the water in the distance. "My father was his custodian."

My eyebrows lift, and my gaze snaps up to Demitri's. "Was?"

"He died taking a bullet for Sergei."

My mouth drops open, and for a moment, I can only stare at Demitri. Finally, I manage to whisper, "I'm sorry."

He just shrugs. "It's the way we live."

Then the realization hits hard – Demitri is protecting me the way his father protected mine.

"I don't want you to die for me," I blurt out.

"I won't," he assures me. Glancing down at me, he adds, "I'll only die for Alexei."

The words make me frown at him. "What kind of relationship do you have with him?"

Demitri goes back to staring at the lake. “He’s the most important person in my life.”

“Do you love him?” I ask.

He nods. “More than my own brother.”

“I always wondered what it would be like to be close to someone like that,” I admit.

“You don’t have any friends?”

“No, only acquaintances.” I let out a hollow chuckle. “It’ll take a while before anyone notices I’m missing.”

“You sure you want to tell your abductor something like that?” he suddenly teases me.

Realizing he’s trying to steer the conversation away from the serious topic we’re on, I shrug, “Yeah, you’re right. My kidnapper is a total asshole, so don’t tell him what I said.”

Chapter 13

DEMITRI

When I glance at Ariana, she's staring blankly at the coffee table, the show on the TV forgotten. She's been putting on one hell of a brave act since yesterday's call with Sergei, but right now, the worry is written all over her face.

My phone begins to ring, and pulling it out of my pocket, I see Yuri's name on the screen.

Fuck. Here we go.

Answering, I mutter, "Hold on." I rise to my feet, I go to the security room so Ariana won't overhear the call.

When the door shuts behind me, I bring the device to my ear. "Yeah?"

"My father passed away early this morning," Yuri says, his voice devoid of any emotion.

It's going to hurt Ariana so much.

"Sorry to hear that. The Bratva lost a great man."

"Where are you?" he asks.

"Working."

There's a moment's silence, then Yuri lets out a sigh. "I know you have Ariana." I keep quiet, and it has him continuing. "Bring her to me."

"Sergei ordered me to protect her."

"My father is dead," Yuri snaps. "I'm head of the Bratva. You take my orders now."

"You're not head of the Bratva... yet, and I only take orders from Alexei," I reply calmly to his outburst.

“Are you really going to start a war for a girl you know nothing about?”

“If there’s a war, it won’t be because I started it.”

“Vetrov,” Yuri growls. “Don’t fuck with me.”

“Alexei will be in touch,” I mutter, and then I hang up.

I send Alexei a message that Yuri called and he knows we have Ariana, and then I leave the security room.

As soon as I walk into the living room, Ariana glances at me.

Fuck. This is going to suck.

When I sit down beside her, her eyes lock with mine, and she must see the news on my face before I can say anything.

Grief settles over her like a dark cloud. With a quivering voice, she asks, “My dad’s gone, isn’t he?”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I offer her my condolences.

She begins to get up, but I grab hold of her hand and tug her back down. She leans forward and turns her face away from me.

“Your father was a great man, *Malyshka*,” I murmur softly, and then I link my fingers with hers, trying to give her some of my strength.

Ariana nods, and taking a quivering breath, she whispers, “Thanks.”

We sit in silence for a long moment, and then Ariana pulls her hand from mine, and getting up, she walks out onto the deck. I rise to my feet and follow after her as she makes her way toward the stretch of boulders on the side of the island.

Reaching the very top, I stop a couple of steps behind her. She wraps her arms around her waist, and then her shoulders shudder under the weight of her grief.

“He was just Dad to me,” she whispers, and I move closer so I can hear her better. “He wasn’t the head of the Bratva or a criminal. He was just my dad.”

Her sorrow creates a fire in my soul, and when she lets out a soft sob, it wakes a part of me that's been dormant for so long I've forgotten it was there.

She takes a couple of deep breaths then turns to face me. "Can I have the phone? I need to call my brother."

Fuck.

Thinking up a quick lie, I shake my head and say, "It's not safe right now. We can't give away where we are."

Instantly a frown forms on Ariana's face. "But we spoke to my dad yesterday, and you call Alexei."

Christ.

"Things are tense in Russia," I try another angle.

"What does that have to do with me talking to my brother? God, Demitri, you're being impossible." Her voice begins to climb, and emotions flash over her face, reddening her cheeks, "Our father just died!"

Things are going to shit fast, but there's no way I can let her talk to Yuri. Learning of the betrayal will kill her. She needs time to process losing her father.

I shake my head again. "I can't let you talk to him. Just wait a bit longer."

Anger tightens her features as she stares me down. "Just because my father asked you to protect me, it doesn't make you God over my life. Give me the phone," she demands, holding her hand out to me.

Keeping my voice calm, I reply, "This is me protecting you."

"Oh my God. I can't win with you," she cries, her chin beginning to quiver from all the emotions that must be overwhelming her.

When I take a step closer to her, she glares at me. "Don't you dare touch me right now. I don't want your pity. I want to talk to my brother."

I shake my head again, hating that I can't make her understand without telling her the truth. I reach a hand out to her, but Ariana takes a step backward, and then she lets out a startled shriek as a piece of the boulder gives way beneath her.

Just reacting, I dive after Ariana, and I grab hold of her arm right before we slam into the icy water of the lake.

ARIANA

The breath is slammed from my body as the water engulfs me. Demitri's grip on my arm tightens, and then I'm yanked toward him.

Not opening my eyes, I instinctively grab for him, and when I feel his shoulders, I quickly wrap my arms around his neck. A current pushes and jerks at our bodies, but a second later, our heads break through the water, and I gasp for air.

As the cold sweeps through my body, I begin to shiver uncontrollably, and my teeth start to clatter.

"Hold on tight," Demitri orders, and keeping one strong arm around my waist, he begins to swim toward the shore. The waves shove against us, but it doesn't deter Demitri from getting us back to land. I have no idea how he does it because I'm so frozen, I'm finding it hard just to breathe.

When it's shallow enough for Demitri to stand, his arm becomes a steel band around me, keeping me pinned to his body. It's just as well because I don't think I can move a muscle. The moment Demitri steps out of the water, his other arm slips beneath my knees, and then he carries me up the stretch of sand toward a stairway carved out of the rocks.

God, what is this man made of? Is he even human?

I can't control the shivers wracking my body, and my breaths come out loud and choppy.

Demitri heads straight for the house and carries me all the way to his bathroom. He sets me down in the shower, and all I can do I lean against him as he opens the faucets.

The cold water feels warm on my skin, but it only makes me shiver more.

There's nothing I can do as Demitri begins to pull the sweater off me. He keeps going until I'm butt naked, and then he strips out of his own clothes.

My eyes widen as inch after inch of his body is revealed to me, and for a moment, my mind short-circuits, and I even forget about the cold.

Holy crap. Every solid inch of him is perfect.

Grabbing hold of my arm, he yanks me right against his naked skin. Somehow he's still warm, and I practically melt against him.

His arms wrap tightly around me, and he begins to rub a hand up and down my back.

I stand shivering in his arms until I can finally manage to whisper, "Sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," he replies instantly, his tone brusque and strained.

The shower begins to fog up around us, and the cold slowly seeps from my body. And then I start to feel more than just the warmth of Demitri's body.

His muscles are solid steel against every soft inch of me.

The intense attraction that's been driving me insane comes back with the force of a nuclear bomb.

Demitri keeps brushing his hand up and down my back, and it sends a tsunami of tingles rippling through me.

“Better?” he murmurs, his voice now hoarse.

“Uh-huh,” I manage to mumble, overwhelmed by the fact that I’m naked with Demitri. My eyebrows knit together when I feel his cock starting to grow hard against my abdomen.

Oh. My. God. He feels huge.

Still, I can’t make myself move.

Demitri’s hand stills between my shoulder blades, and then he pulls back enough to look at my face.

A blush creeps up my neck as our eyes lock. A tense moment stretches between us, and I expect him to pull away from me, but then a predatory look tightens his features. My ovaries self-destruct from how hot he looks right now with the water trickling down his face.

Demitri moves like a force, shoving me back against the tiles, and then his mouth crashes down on mine. My mind and body are overwhelmed, and it takes me a moment to realize what’s happening.

And then my mind says fuck it all, and my body takes over. When I part my lips and Demitri’s tongue drives into my mouth, all reasoning vanishes into thin air. There’s only the heat between us that’s quickly turning into a blazing inferno.

I reach up and run my hands over his shoulders and neck as I kiss him back with every overwhelming and destructive emotion I feel. I pour the last week’s fear and uncertainty into it. But above all, I admit to myself that I want this. Even if it’s just once.

Even if it’s crazy and wrong.

I give in to my desire as my palms move down Demitri’s chest, and I get to relish the feel of every hard inch of him.

The kiss quickly spirals out of control until it's a wild tug of teeth and plunging of tongues. The taste of him clouds my mind, and it's so good, I let out a moan.

Demitri's hands burn a hot path down to my butt, and then his fingers dig into my skin, and I'm lifted against his body.

He pins me to the tiles, and I wrap my legs around him. Another moan escapes from me when his hard length meets the junction between my thighs.

Oh, God.

Yes.

My fingers find the wet strands of his hair as he kisses me like I've never been kissed before. It's filled with power and dominance, demanding I submit to him.

It's out of this world hot.

Demitri's hands move up the sides of my waist, and his lower half keeps me pinned to the wall as he breaks the kiss. His palms cover my breasts hard and possessively, and then his eyes lock with mine again.

Caught up in the raw passion between us, I don't feel any embarrassment as we stare at each other.

Demitri pinches one of my nipples, and it draws a gasp from me as my abdomen clenches with the need for more. When I rub myself against his hard length, the corner of his mouth lifts. His voice is low and demanding as he asks, "Do you want me to fuck you, *Malyshka*?"

I don't have to think about the answer and quickly nod. My reaction makes a dangerously hot smirk form on his face, and then he thrusts hard against my clit.

It makes a burst of air explode over my lips, and I dig my nails into the back of his neck.

Slowly he begins to rub his cock against my sensitive bundle of nerves, his eyes as dark as a million sinful nights.

Feeling him between my legs makes wave after wave filled with tingles and need crash over me.

Suddenly he stops, and I let out a frustrated groan which makes him give me a domineering smile. “How badly do you want my cock?”

Oh, God. He’s a filthy talker, and it does things to me I didn’t expect.

I freaking like it.

I move my one hand down to his chest and then lower until I reach his abs. Stroking the skin there, I gather all my courage. Like a damn hussy, I purr, “So... so... badly.”

Heat flares in Demitri’s dark gaze, and then he thrusts hard against my clit again. I let out a satisfied moan which rewards me with another hard thrust.

Demitri moves his hands back to my butt, and then his mouth skims over my jaw. Sliding one of his hands further down, he begins to circle my entrance with a finger. Having him touch me so intimately sends mind-clouding pleasure through me. He keeps teasing me until my abdomen is nothing more than a tight ball, and my hips are swiveling, begging for more.

“Beg me,” he demands, his voice strained as if it’s taking all his self-control to hold back.

I turn my face to his and tug at his bottom lip with my teeth before I breathlessly give him what he wants. “Please fuck me, Demitri.”

Like a wild beast, he loses all control. There’s no time for me to brace myself as he positions himself at my entrance, and with a powerful and painful thrust, he fills me. I grab hold of his shoulders as a cry explodes from me, and it mixes with the satisfied groan rippling from his chest.

His mouth claims mine in a brutal kiss, and then he begins to move, hard and fast. His pace is relentless, but after a couple of thrusts, pleasure makes the pain fade.

Unable to gain control over anything, it feels like I'm being devoured. My senses are inundated by the forceful way Demitri kisses and fucks me.

His muscles tense and roll with every thrust, his well-endowed cock stroking me into oblivion. Caught in a haze of pleasure, cries and moans keep spilling over my lips. I've never been so loud before, and there's no way for me to stop the sounds.

My body begins to tremble out of control, and I slap a hand against the tiles, looking for something to grab hold of. My fingers find the showerhead and clamp tightly around it as I'm repeatedly shoved back by Demitri pounding into me.

"Oh, God," I whimper against his mouth. When the pleasure builds to breaking point, I cry, "Demitri!" My voice is strained, and then my body tenses.

"Eyes on me," he demands, and I barely have enough brainpower left to do as he asks, but the moment I focus on his dark brown irises, it makes a level of intimacy weave around us that I feel in my soul.

My body strains for release, my hips meeting every one of his thrusts. His cock fills every inch of me, stroking me hard.

"Please..." I beg when it becomes too much.

"Come, *Malyshka*," he orders possessively as if he already owns my body.

In this moment, he does because I unravel at the speed of light.

I can't tear my eyes away from his as I begin to convulse, and then ecstasy seizes every part of me. It's overpowering, and I can't think. I can't move. I can't breathe.

I can only feel as the orgasm rips through me.

“Christ,” Demitri hisses through clenched teeth. “You’re so fucking tight around me.” His body begins to jerk, and he pushes deeper inside me, sending more paralyzing waves of ecstasy through me.

When Demitri’s orgasm hits and I feel him swell inside me, sobs of pleasure begin to spiral over my lips, and just when I’m sure I’m about to blackout from the intensity, he slows his pace and allows me to come down from the orgasm.

Desperately I gasp to fill my lungs with air, spasms rippling through my body from the echo of pleasure that was just wrung from me.

Our eyes lock, and then Demitri pulls out of me and the moment between us shatters.

Activity returns to my brain, and then the realization of what I just did settles awkwardly between us.

It makes everything worse when the first words to leave my mouth are, “Damn, you have the stamina of a horse. For a moment there, I thought you were trying to break me in half.”

But it was good. So, so, so damn good.

The best sex I’ve ever had.

As if Demitri can read my thoughts, a smirk lifts the corner of his mouth.

Unable to hold his gaze, I lower my eyes, and then my eyebrows shoot up. “Da-yumn, no wonder. You’re hung like a horse as well.”

Demitri lets out a smug chuckle.

...And now would be a good time for the ground to open beneath my feet.

Chapter 14

DEMITRI

It happened so fast, I didn't have time to look at Ariana's body. As her cheeks flush a deeper red, I take a step back and slowly let my eyes drift over every exposed inch of her.

I drink in the sight of her soft skin that I felt rubbing against me a moment ago. Her breasts are just the perfect size for her body, and a toned stomach leads the way down to the valley between her legs.

So fucking beautiful.

Christ, she was a tight fit. I felt every stroke deep in my balls.

Ariana grabs the body wash and then turns her back to me, which only makes a wide smile spread over my face.

"Fuck, you have a sexy ass," I say, the imprints of my hands still on her skin from holding her up.

"Ah... thanks," she mumbles, clearly awkward now that the moment has passed.

Did I plan on fucking her? *Not today.*

Do I regret it? *Hell fucking no.*

Yes, the timing sucks, but when she looked at me with those big hazel eyes of hers, there was no way I could stop myself.

Ariana washes the suds from her body, and then she opens the shower door, grabs a towel, and darts out of the bathroom.

I let out a chuckle as I reach for the body wash. Looking down, my cock is still semi-erect. If she had stayed, I'd have her back up against that wall in a matter of seconds.

Even though the orgasm was one of the best I've ever had, I'm not satisfied.

I want more.

I want to tie Ariana to the bed and fuck her until she weeps for her release.

I want her coming on my face.

I want to thrust into that mouth of hers until she chokes on me.

I want to claim her over and over until there's no doubt between us that she's mine.

Mine?

My movements slow, and I search through my thoughts and emotions.

Yes, I'm attracted to her.

Yes, I loved every second of fucking her.

But mine?

I turn off the water, and stepping out of the shower, I grab a towel and dry myself. After I'm dressed in my usual cargo pants and a t-shirt, I sit down on the corner of the bed.

Do I feel protective of her?

Yes.

Would I be okay with another man touching her?

There's a burst of possessiveness and anger in my chest that makes the answer clear as day.

Fuck. No. I'll kill whoever lays a hand on her.

Okay, chill. Ariana has a lot to deal with right now.

I'm going to have to take it down a notch, or at least try to. Overwhelming her might just send her running.

Who am I kidding, she's already running.

Slowly the corner of my mouth begins to lift because the chase is going to be exhilarating, and I'm going to enjoy every second of it.

Rising to my feet, I leave my bedroom. The door to Ariana's room is shut, and it only makes my smile grow wider.

I head straight for the security room and check the monitor for Ariana's room.

She's pacing near the closet, only wearing one of my shirts.

Fuck she looks sexy in my clothes.

'What did I do?' She stops walking and then covers her face with her hands, and letting out a groan she repeats, 'What did I do?' Suddenly she drops her hands and stomps her feet while letting out another frustrated groan. 'You begged him to fuck you.' She pulls a self-pitying face. 'How am I going to look him in the eyes?'

Slumping down on the bed, I hear her mutter, 'Girl, you can be damn glad you have an IUD.'

Fuck, I didn't even think of a condom.

Then again, I wasn't thinking at all. There was only the need to be inside Ariana.

'He probably thinks you're a hussy now. It doesn't matter that he's only the second guy you've ever slept with.' She lets out a long sigh, but then she lifts her head and smiles. *'And the first to make me orgasm... damn, it was so good.'*

Hearing how inexperienced she is, I feel a twinge of guilt for not being gentler with her, but then she says, 'Hot damn,' she falls back on the bed and lets out a happy shriek, 'Demitri blew my mind.' She darts back up and goes to the closet to put on a pair of sweatpants. 'Screw it. That was the best sex of my life, and I'm going to own it.'

When she leaves the bedroom, I sit down on the chair and take a deep breath. My eyes follow Ariana from monitor to monitor.

The way she moves is mesmerizing, and everything about her calls to me.

It's only been a week.

Still, can you let her go when the time comes?

My eyes narrow on the screen as I begin to shake my head.

No.

I've seen her at her worst. She's pissed me off to no end. We've fought. Still, none of that did anything to stop me from being attracted to her.

If anything, it only made me want her more.

ARIANA

I keep alternating between feeling awkward and grinning like an idiot until guilt creeps in and douses all the other emotions.

Dad's dead.

Standing in the kitchen while I wait for the coffee pot, I close my eyes as the sharp sting of grief floods back.

"My dad died, and I have sex with Demitri? What kind of person does that make me?" I whisper to myself.

"It makes you human," Demitri suddenly answers, and my eyes fly open. "You've had a lot of shit to deal with, Ariana. Don't be so hard on yourself."

Says the man who just fucked me sideways to Sunday.

I quickly turn my back to Demitri and focus on the dark brown liquid filling the coffee pot.

Deep breaths.

Demitri places his hands on my shoulders, and I keep dead still as his chest presses into my back. When I feel his breath skimming over my ear, it makes goosebumps spread over my skin.

“Do you regret it?” he asks, his voice so low I feel it vibrating through me.

I shake my head and answer honestly, “The timing just sucked.”

Demitri forces me to turn around, and when our eyes lock, it hits me once again. I just had sex with the hottest man I’ve ever laid eyes on.

And I loved it.

My stomach tightens with nerves, and then I ask, “Do you regret it?”

His irises turn dark, and the predatory look returns, making me weak in the knees. “I only regret that I don’t have you tied to a bed right now so I can fuck you until I own every one of your cries and moans.”

Ahhh....

There’s a flush of heat in my abdomen, and my stomach explodes into a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

Demitri leans down and presses a tender kiss to my lips. As he pulls back, my eyes search his face as I try to figure out what’s happening between us.

His mouth tugs into a grin. “Take all the time you need. I’ll do my thing, and you do yours.”

“What do you mean by you’ll do your thing?”

He gives me a look that promises nothing good for me. “I’m going to chase, and you’re probably going to run.”

Dear, God.

He leans into me again, and my eyes flutter shut from how amazing it feels when his mouth brushes along my jaw. “But I get that you’re not in a good place. I won’t force anything on you.” He pulls back, and when I open my eyes, he continues, “You’re safe with me.”

Emotions whirl in my chest, and then a new one joins the chaos. Affection.

“Before you start chasing and I start running,” I say, forcing a smile to my lips, “can I...” I hesitate for a moment, but because it’s the one thing I need most, I push through, “will you just hold me for a minute.”

Demitri doesn’t hesitate and tugs me against his chest. His arms wrap tightly around me, and then I feel his breaths warming the top of my head.

Slowly, I turn my cheek, and then I listen to his steady heartbeat.

I shove all my fear, my confusion, and my uncertain feelings for Demitri aside and let the sorrow pour back into my heart.

For one minute, I allow myself to be weak.

I close my eyes, and grabbing hold of his sides, I fist the fabric of his shirt.

Flashes of my past begin to bombard me.

Me running to Dad and him catching me.

Dad giving me a proud smile.

Dad hugging me whenever we had to say goodbye.

I’m only twenty-three, and I’ve lost my father, and my mother has no memory of me. I have no other family besides Yuri.

I’m practically alone.

I feel alone.

And lost.

Before the tears come, I pull away from Demitri, but he takes one look at my face then yanks me back to him. It’s all it takes for my walls to

crumble to dust at my feet.

Just like my life has.

Chapter 15

ARIANA

The past two days, I've mostly been living in the memories I have of my father.

The peacefulness of the island has helped, and Demitri hasn't pushed anything. Instead, he's been a silent force, always close by.

It's as if he knows exactly what I need without me having to say a word.

It's weird but in a good way.

But today, it's hard getting out of bed. When the sorrow sweeps through me again, I pull the covers over my head.

I was wrong. In hindsight, I knew this was coming. I knew I'd lose Dad, I just didn't want to face it.

And now he's gone.

I need to find out when the funeral will be.

The thought pushes me to throw the covers back. Climbing out of bed, I go through my morning routine and then go look for Demitri.

I find him in the kitchen, where he's leaning back against the counter, sipping on a cup of coffee.

"Morning," I say, my voice sounding like I've lived a hundred years.

"Morning." I feel his eyes on me as I pour myself a cup of coffee.

He clears his throat, but before he can say anything, I jump in. "Can you find out when my dad's funeral will be?"

Slowly, I glance at Demitri, and I see the answer on his face before he says, "It's tomorrow, but the whole Bratva will be there... as well as the person who wants you dead."

Lowering my eyes, there's a weird mixture of anger and grief swirling in my heart. It's unfair. But I also knew I probably wouldn't attend Dad's funeral with me living in the States and him being in Russia. I don't have the money to travel.

Still, it's unfair.

Nodding, I take a sip of my coffee.

Demitri reaches for me, and taking hold of my chin, he forces me to look at him. His eyes search mine, then he asks, "How are you holding up?"

I just shrug because it's not like things are going to get any better. "I'm okay," I lie. I finish my coffee and rinse the cup out. Wanting to go for my morning walk, I head toward the sliding door, but as I pass the stairs, movement from the second floor catches my eye.

I glance up, and then my feet come to a sudden stop. My mouth dries instantly, and my heart stutters before it begins to beat like crazy.

A man, who I assume is Alexei, slowly comes down the stairs, his movements casual. He has white-blond hair like me and black eyes. Same build as Demitri... but... the danger coming off him in waves hits me so hard, I freeze like a deer before a freight train.

Oh shit.

His eyes lock with mine, and then it feels like I'm being hunted, and it makes my entire body tense until I start to tremble.

Fingers wrap around the back of my neck, and instinctively I move closer to Demitri. His thumb brushes against my skin as if he's trying to set me at ease.

The man comes to a stop in front of me, and then his eyes slowly move from me to Demitri and back again.

"Alexei Koslov," he murmurs, his voice filled with the promise of death. And then he smiles, and I can't stop myself from taking a step back.

Demitri's hand on my neck is all that keeps me from running to find a place I can hide, because Alexei's smile makes him look even more dangerous. Like a cat that's playing with a poor mouse before biting the head off.

Alexei's eyes sweep over me, and then he turns his attention to Demitri, and I can finally take a full breath.

Holy shit.

Alexei tilts his head, and then he grins at Demitri. "She's in one piece. I'm impressed."

What the hell? Did he expect to find me in pieces?

Frowning, I glance between the two men.

Demitri lets out a chuckle. "It was touch and go the first couple of days."

Alexei turns his attention back to me, and I tense up again. "My condolences. I had a lot of respect for your father."

I can barely manage a nod.

For a moment, Alexei just stares at me, then he says, "Relax, little one. I'm the nice one."

Nervously, my tongue darts out to wet my dry lips, then I ask, "You're the nice one?"

Alexei gestures to Demitri. "Between the two of us, Demitri's the dangerous one. If you can survive him, you can survive anything."

My eyes dart up to Demitri, and then his thumb brushes against the side of my neck again. "Don't worry. We're on your side, remember?"

I really needed the reminder because I forgot that crucial fact for a moment.

"Demitri," Alexei says. "Security room."

Alexei walks toward the stairs leading down to the basement as Demitri steps closer to me. He presses a kiss to the side of my head. "Don't worry

about Alexei. He won't hurt you."

I nod and then watch as Demitri follows Alexei. Once the men are out of sight, my legs actually feel weak. I walk to the couch, and plopping down, I take deep breaths.

Crap, that was intense.

Alexei's the nice one?

Seriously?

I doubt that.

I glance to where the men disappeared and bite my bottom lip.

Will I get out of this alive?

I'm not going to lie, coming face to face with Alexei Koslov was intimidating as hell... and scary.

Thinking back to that first day, I have to admit I was just as terrified of Demitri. Obviously, it changed during the last couple of days. It did a one-eighty turn because I'm not scared of Demitri anymore. Not in the fear-for-my-life kind of way.

Nope, now I'm more afraid of how I feel around him.

Slumping back against the couch, I let out a groan.

I'm starting to feel bipolar. All these emotions are giving me freaking whiplash.

DEMITRI

As soon as I shut the security door behind us, Alexei begins to chuckle, amusement all over his face.

"Don't," I mutter, giving him a look of warning.

He arrived at the crack of dawn, and finally, the tension in my chest eased. I'm back in control of his safety, and it makes my world feel balanced again.

"Don't what?" Alexei asks as he glances over the monitors.

"You know what."

We sit down, and then Alexei stares at the screen showing the living room. "How's she doing?"

I look at Ariana where she's sitting on the couch, her body tense as if she's ready to bolt up at any second.

"As well as can be expected."

"What does she know?"

"Everything except that Yuri's the one who ordered the contract," I answer.

"What's her relationship with Yuri like?" Alexei asks as he turns his gaze to me.

"She's mentioned him a couple of times and wanted to call him after Sergei died. She has no idea he's behind the hit."

"Can she handle the news?" he asks, and letting out a sigh, he adds, "The last thing we need is a hysterical woman."

I shake my head. "Ariana doesn't get hysterical." Taking a deep breath, I ask, "How do you want to handle Yuri?"

"I'm hoping for quick and discreetly, but I doubt it's going to turn out like that," Alexei mutters. He takes a moment to think. "Yuri won't back down. He thinks he has all the power, and it will make him blind to the fact that he's on the losing side of this war."

"Meaning?"

Alexei gestures to the screen showing Ariana. "She's the one with the power."

I seriously doubt that.

Before I can give my opinion, Alexei continues, “Right before he died, Sergei changed his will. Lucian signed as a witness.” He turns his gaze to me. “Ariana gets everything. Yuri is going to lose his shit when he finds out.”

I stare at Alexei as the news sinks in, then I say, “Ariana can’t run the businesses.” Protectiveness surges through my chest.

“How do you know?”

I turn my gaze back to Ariana. “There’s no reality in which Ariana will be able to kill someone. She won’t be able to control Sergei’s men. They’ll eat her alive.”

“Still, she’s expected to take over,” Alexei mutters, his eyes locked on me. “Unless she puts someone in charge that she trusts.”

I shake my head. “She has no one.”

“You sure about that?” Alexei asks, his eyes sharpening on me.

A dark frown settles on my forehead. “You better not be thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

Alexei just shrugs.

Wanting to stop the direction this conversation is heading in, I rise to my feet. “I’m going to make breakfast.”

Alexei immediately darts to his feet. “Good, I starved the past week.”

Shaking my head, I let out a chuckle as we leave the security room.

When we walk into the kitchen, Ariana quickly gets up from the couch. Alexei changes direction and heads toward her. Keeping one eye on them, I open the fridge and grab the eggs and bacon.

Alexei’s eyes drift slowly over Ariana’s body, and it makes my eyebrow rise. I stop moving, watching as Ariana begins to fidget, unable to meet Alexei’s gaze.

Alexei reaches a hand out and brushes his fingers over her shoulder. “You’re wearing Demitri’s shirts?”

“Ahh... I didn’t exactly have time to pack for my kidnapping.”

Alexei lets out a burst of laughter. “We’ll stop by your place when we go to Seattle.”

“We’re going to Seattle?” I ask.

Alexei’s eyes snap to me. “Tao.”

“Right.”

“Why will we only be stopping by my place?” Ariana asks. Her eyes dart between Alexei and me. “When will I get to return to my life?”

“Sit,” Alexei says, gesturing at the couches.

“I’d rather stand.” Ariana lifts her chin, and it makes a smile tug at my mouth.

Alexei nods, then he locks eyes with her. “After the stop in Seattle, we’re going to Russia.”

“But...” Apprehension flickers over her features, “The person who wants me dead is there.”

“And we need to take care of that problem. We can’t leave you here.” Alexei takes a step closer to her, and it makes my muscles tense. “This is your war, Ariana.”

“I didn’t ask for it,” she snaps at him, her fear from earlier gone.

Yep, piss off my girl, and she goes into fighting mode.

I cross my arms over my chest and lean back against the counter, the breakfast now forgotten.

Alexei frowns at me. “You said she knew everything.”

“She does.” I wave a hand at Ariana. “I didn’t say she wanted any part of it.”

Alexei turns his attention back to Ariana. “Your father was the head of the Bratva.”

“I know that, but it has nothing to do with me. I was raised by my mother.”

Alexei takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “You’re an heir, Ariana. What will you do with your father’s businesses?”

Ariana frowns, confusion flashing over her features. “Yuri will take over the businesses. I don’t understand what it has to do with me.”

Pushing away from the counter, I walk towards them. “She’s not ready, Alexei.”

He locks eyes with me. “We don’t have the luxury of time. Either you tell her, or I will.”

“Tell me what?” When I get close to them, Ariana gives me a worried look.

Lifting my hand, I wrap my fingers around the side of her neck, hoping my touch will offer her some strength.

“Tell me what?” Ariana asks again, her eyes vulnerable as she stares up at me as if I’m all that stands between her and the hell that’s being unleashed on her.

It makes my protectiveness toward her increase ten-fold.

It makes me want to kill anyone who’s a threat to her.

It makes me want to keep her on this island where life can’t touch her.

It makes me want to keep her.

To make her mine in every possible way.

It hits fucking hard, the emotion raging through me until it’s right up there with my loyalty to Alexei.

I force myself to focus on the problem at hand and shove my increasing feelings for Ariana down.

“Come,” I say, and lowering my hand to hers, I link our fingers and pull her to the couch. She’s really going to need to sit for this conversation.

Alexei walks to the sliding doors, and shoving his hands into the pockets of his black cargo pants, he stares outside.

When I take a seat with Ariana next to me, I keep hold of her hand. Locking eyes with her, I say, “This is going to be hard to hear.”

She straightens her shoulders as if she’s bracing herself. “Tell me.”

“The person who took out the contract on you is Yuri.” I watch Ariana closely, expecting heartache or anger, but instead, she just stares at me.

Chapter 16

ARIANA

I thought I was ready for whatever Demitri was going to say, but I'm not.

It takes a solid minute for the words to make sense, and then a wave of goosebumps spread from the top of my head to my feet. It's slow, and even my tongue goes numb. My skin prickles, and my insides tense horribly.

Yuri?

My brother?

No, that can't be right.

It feels like I'm stuck on repeat. Goosebumps. Numbing tongue. Prickling skin. Questions. Denial.

Repeat.

Breathe.

Repeat.

"Ariana?" Demitri leans closer to me, concern etched on his face. "Did you hear me?"

No.

I'm not sure.

What?

I manage to shake my head.

"Yuri ordered the contract." Demitri pulls his hand from mine, and my fingers flex, instantly missing his touch, but then he brings both his hands to the sides of my neck.

"But..." Again I shake my head, not able to make sense of what Demitri's saying, "...What?"

Leaning closer, his eyes bore into mine. “Take a deep breath.”

I do as he says.

Again my tongue goes numb, and the awful prickles rush over my skin. I begin to feel lightheaded and take another deep breath.

No, that can't be right.

“Yuri wouldn't. He's my brother,” I say, my voice filled with a world of doubt.

Demitri's expression softens, but his eyes remain guarded. “You're a threat to him. He has no intention of sharing the inheritance with you.”

“But... I haven't even thought of the inheritance. Our dad just died.”

Nothing makes sense anymore. I'm bombarded with confusion until I don't know my right from my left.

“I know,” Demitri says, his tone gentle.

“Are you sure? Can I talk to him? There must be some huge misunderstanding.” The words rush from me.

Alexei turns away from the sliding doors and comes to take a seat on the other couch. I watch as he pulls his phone from his pocket, and then he says, “You sure you want to call Yuri?”

Quickly I nod. I need to talk to my brother.

“That's not a good idea,” Demitri says.

I pull away from his hands. “I need to talk to him.”

Demitri lets out an unhappy sigh and turns his attention to Alexei.

I watch as Alexei dials a number, and then he puts the phone on speaker, and I hear it ringing.

“Alexei,” Yuri answers within seconds.

I shift to the edge of the couch and lean forward.

“Yuri,” Alexei mutters, his tone biting and nothing like when he talks to me.

“Have you come to your senses?” Yuri asks.

“I was just about to ask you the same thing,” Alexei replies with a dark chuckle that sends another wave of shivers rushing through me.

Yuri lets out a sigh. “Because of our past history, I’m willing to give you seventy-two hours to bring her to me.”

“I’ll bring her,” Alexei says. His eyes snap to mine. “But not so you can kill her.”

“Do you really think now’s the time to play games with me?” Yuri threatens.

“Come on, you know how much I love them,” Alexei taunts him.

And then something deep in my chest breaks. “Yuri?” My voice sounds foreign.

“Ariana?” my brother asks.

“What’s...” I shake my head as the confusion in me begins to morph into raw pain. “You want me dead?”

“There isn’t space for the both of us,” Yuri says, his voice calm as if we’re talking about the weather and not my death.

“I never wanted to be a part of any of it!” I shriek, startling myself with the outburst.

Yuri lets out an annoyed sigh. “I don’t have time for this shit. Alexei, bring her to me, or I’ll be forced to retaliate. You have seventy-two hours.”

Yuri hangs up, and in the silence that follows, my breaths slowly begin to speed up.

The realization sinks in so hard that I can’t move a muscle.

My own brother wants me dead.

The betrayal is unlike anything I’ve ever felt.

I knew my dad would die, so it didn’t hit that hard.

I had time to adjust to Mom's Alzheimer's, and when she forgot who I am, the blow wasn't as devastating.

But this... this betrayal from the last family member I had left is crippling. With zero mercy, it shreds through my faith in humanity. It flays me to the bone.

My chest closes up from the destruction whirling around me, slowly creeping closer until it's all there is.

That something that broke earlier? I physically feel it shatter to pieces.

Placing a hand on my stomach, I press hard as the pain increases.

Betrayal.

In the blink of an eye, it changes who I am. It obscures the girl I used to be.

I lost the last person I had.

Demitri grabs hold of my shoulder and yanks me to his chest, and the moment his arms wrap around me, I come undone. I break into an unrecognizable mess.

"Shh... I've got you," he says, and it's only then I hear my own strangled breaths. I feel my heart pounding against my ribs, desperate to escape this twisted reality that's become my life.

"I can't," I gasp.

I can't deal with this.

Demitri pulls me onto his lap, and his arms become steel bands around me, his chest solid, his presence unwavering.

"You can," he says, his tone firm. "You're strong, Ariana."

My body instinctively turns to Demitri's, and I wrap my arms around his neck, hanging on for dear life. Burying my face in his neck, sobs tear through me, and my chest convulses painfully.

Demitri presses kisses against my hair, his voice an anchor that keeps me from drowning as he murmurs, “I’ve got you, *Malyshka*. You’re not alone in this.” Another kiss, and his arms clamp tightly around me. “You have me.”

Three words.

It gives me enough strength to fight the turbulent mess within me. After a while, I manage to calm down enough to stop crying and pulling slightly back, I use my shirt to wipe the tears from my face.

Lifting my feverish eyes to Demitri’s, I stare at him, searching for something solid, something I can trust.

I replay everything he’s said to me and how my dad told me I must only trust Alexei and Demitri.

Now I understand why Dad didn’t mention Yuri.

Demitri kidnapped me to save my life. I thought he would kill me, but instead, he’s protecting me. While my whole world crumbles around me, he’s the one holding me.

I’ve never felt as vulnerable as I do at this moment. My entire fate is in Demitri’s hands.

And just like all the other times, he reads my mind and says, “You’re safe with me, *Malyshka*. I’m not your enemy.”

I let out a sputtering sob and quickly breathe the urge to cry away, and then I squeeze the words out, “Thank God.”

Plastering myself against him, I wrap my arms around his neck again. “Are you really the best?”

There’s no hesitation when he answers, “Yes.”

“Are you really the dangerous one between you and Alexei?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” I choke on the word. A couple of seconds pass, then I whimper, “I don’t know what to do.”

Demitri brushes a hand up and down my back. “We’ll take care of everything.”

I feel a hand on my shoulder, then Alexei says, “Drink this, little one.”

Pulling back, I take a glass of water from him.

“Just down it,” he says.

I do as he says, but instead of water cooling my throat, alcohol burns its way down to my stomach, and I begin to cough. I move off Demitri, focusing on breathing through the heat, then choke, “What... the hell... was that?”

“Vodka. It will help you calm down,” Alexei says.

Through watering eyes, I watch as Alexei crouches down in front of me. There’s a deadly look on his face when he says, “Take a day or two to process everything. As much as I want to leave you here, I can’t. You won’t be safe. You’re coming with us, and I understand it won’t be easy but try to prepare yourself.”

“For what?” I breathe, apprehension slithering through me.

“War.” It almost looks like there’s pity for me in Alexei’s eyes. “You’re going to see people die.”

God, how do I prepare myself for something like that?

Demitri places his arm around my shoulders, then says, “That’s enough.”

Alexei nods, and rising to his feet, he takes a deep breath as he stares down at me. “You’ll be okay, little one.” He walks to the kitchen, and as if my life didn’t just implode, says, “Are you going to make breakfast before I drop dead from hunger?”

Demitri gets up, and taking hold of my hand, he helps me to my feet. When he tugs me toward the kitchen, I pull my hand free. “I... I’m going to my room.”

He turns to look at me, and after a second, he nods. Leaning in, he presses a kiss on my forehead. “I’ll check on you once breakfast is ready.”

“Okay.” Heading to the stairs, my mind is blank, and a deadly stillness has settled over my heart.

I go into my room and close the door behind me, then make my way to the bathroom. Stopping by the shower, I place my hand on the glass door and stare blankly at the tub.

Yuri wants me dead.

There’s no explosion of emotions, and my tears have dried up.

My happy past seems like an impossibly distant dream, and in its place, an unrecognizable future where nothing is familiar.

Chapter 17

DEMITRI

When night settles over the island, I make a fire in the living room fireplace, then stand back and watch as the flames grow stronger.

Alexei nudges my arm, and when I glance at him, he holds a tumbler out to me.

I take the drink and swallow a sip of vodka down.

“Is there anything you want to tell me?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“You sure?”

Letting out a sigh, I meet my friend’s eyes. “I’m sure. I’ll talk when I’m ready.”

“Okay.” Alexei downs half his drink. “Is it going to be a problem?”

In other words, will Ariana affect my ability to protect Alexei? I shake my head. “I can protect both of you.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

A frown forms on my forehead which has Alexei explaining, “What will you do when Ariana wants to return to her life once all the shit’s been taken care of?”

The fucker is trying to corner me.

Giving him a look of indifference, I mutter, “Then I’ll let her return to her life. She’s not our prisoner.”

“Hmmm.”

“Stop,” I grumble.

Alexei shrugs. “Just saying. Ariana’s fucking beautiful and the heir to one of the biggest established weapon smuggling empires. She’s a catch.”

I turn to Alexei and take a threatening step toward him before I catch myself. Possessiveness blinds me, making my heart beat faster and my muscles tense. It’s fucking intense, and it takes a moment before I can breathe through it.

Alexei’s eyes are locked on me, all the amusement gone from his face. “There it is,” he murmurs. “The sooner you admit you care about the girl, the better. Do it before you rip some poor guy’s head off.”

I down the drink and set the tumbler down on the coffee table. “I’ll deal with it when I’m ready,” I say. I head to the stairs. “Sleep well.”

“You too.”

I feel Alexei’s eyes on me as I take the stairs to the second floor, and when I reach Ariana’s room, my pace automatically slows. Wanting to check on her, I knock. When there’s no answer, I go inside and shutting the door behind me, I look to where she’s lying on top of the covers.

With the moonlight shining in from the windows, I can see her clearly. Slowly I move closer to the bed, and then I stare down at Ariana.

She turns onto her back, and opening her eyes, she just looks up at me. Seeing the vulnerability on her face stabs at my heart again, and I make a gesture for her to move up.

I kick off my shoes and pull my shirt over my head. When I lift the covers, she climbs beneath them, and lying down beside Ariana on my back, I position her against my side. I wrap my arm around her shoulders and place my other hand on the side of her head, pressing her cheek to my chest.

We lie in silence, and after a minute or so, Ariana drapes her arm over my abs and lets out a deep breath.

Earlier, when she broke and cried in my arms, it felt like someone took a bat to my heart. I might not be ready to admit it out loud, but this woman has an effect on me like no other. There's no reason or rhyme.

I want Ariana.

End of story.

My mind fills with worry for her. Not about her safety because I'll take care of her. But there's no way Ariana will be able to be a part of the Bratva.

"I won't be able to return to my old life, will I?" she whispers, her voice hoarse from all the shit that's been thrown at her.

Moving my hand to her chin, I nudge her face up so she'll look at me. "We'll figure things out."

"I don't want my father's businesses."

"You can put someone in charge to manage everything on your behalf."

"Who? The only person I know is trying to kill me." Her voice cracks over the words.

It's on the tip of my tongue to say Alexei will be willing to do it, but I can't get the words out. After a long moment, I say, "Me."

Ariana sucks in a breath of air, her features tightening as an emotion I haven't seen before flashes over her face. "Really? You'll even help me with that?"

My fingers brush up her jawline, reveling in the feel of her soft skin. "I'll take care of everything."

Hope flickers in her eyes, and the longer she stares at me, the more intimate the moment becomes.

Moving my hand behind her neck, I slowly pull her face to mine until her breaths warm my lips. "You feel that, *Malyshka*?"

Her eyes search mine, and then she nods.

I worry she only feels the attraction because I'm protecting her. Before I can voice the concern, she closes the distance between us, and her lips softly brush against mine.

Ariana pulls back to see my reaction, and when our eyes meet again, the intensity between us rockets.

Lifting my head, I nip at her lips before trailing kisses over her jaw. Her breaths instantly speed up, and her hand slides from my abs to my chest. I take a deep breath of her scent, and it's fucking intoxicating.

My fingers tighten around her neck, and then our mouths crash together, and I plunge my tongue into her heat.

This time I focus on how she tastes and the velvety feel of her tongue as it strokes against mine. She lets out a moan, and it sends a bolt of electricity straight to my cock.

For a moment, the kiss spirals out of control, and I push her onto her back. Framing her face, I hold her in place as my tongue fucks her, my teeth biting her lips until they're hot and swollen against mine.

Ariana moans into my mouth, the sound almost sending me over the edge, but I manage to keep control over the burning desire to fuck her until she's only focused on me.

Not tonight. I can't fuck Ariana while she's in shock from her brother's betrayal. Taking her right after she learned of her father's passing was bad enough.

The next time I bury myself deep inside her, it will be because she wants me and not because she's looking for an escape.

I slow the kiss down until we're just gasping for air, and when I lift my head, I brush my thumbs over the curves of her cheeks.

Once Ariana has control over her breathing, she gives me an unsure look. "What's happening between us?"

I shake my head. “Let’s not label it and just see where it goes.”

Especially once she returns to her everyday life. Then only will we see if what she feels is real or whether this is all because of our forced proximity.

ARIANA

I wake up alone and even more confused. I swear, it feels like I’m stuck on a rollercoaster ride from hell.

I go through my morning routine on automatic pilot, unable to focus on anything long enough to try and make sense of it.

Last night when Demitri kissed me, I had a moment’s relief. It was so primal and intense I couldn’t think of anything but how he tasted and felt. He dominated every part of me, and I wouldn’t have stopped him if he took things further.

Stopping by my bedroom door, I just stare at it for a moment.

With my life going to hell at the speed of light, this thing... the attraction I feel for Demitri... it’s become the only good thing I have right now.

The horror swirling around me amplifies the safety I feel when he holds me.

It’s as if all my emotions have been set to full blast.

I take a couple of deep breaths, trying to regain some control, but it’s useless.

My shoulders slump as I open the door. I make my way to the kitchen, and the second my eyes land on Demitri, where he’s standing by the stove,

it feels like I can take an actual breath.

Alexei glances at me from where he's sitting by the island. "Morning."

"Morning," I whisper, still not sure what to make of Alexei.

I prepare a cup of coffee, and just like yesterday morning, Demitri takes hold of my chin and forces me to look up at him. His eyes search mine, then he asks, "How are you holding up?"

I shrug, and this time I'm unable to lie and say I'm okay.

His thumb brushes over my skin, and then he gives me a quick hug before he moves back to the stove.

Taking my cup of coffee, I sit down on the opposite side of the island, so the slab of marble is between Alexei and me.

I feel him staring at me and taking a sip of my beverage, I swallow hard on the warm liquid.

Even though I don't have the strength and all I want to do is slink down to the floor, I force my eyes up to meet Alexei's.

"So you grew up in Seattle?" he asks.

I just nod, wrapping both my hands around the mug.

"Tell me about yourself," he orders.

I shrug. "I'm just a normal twenty-three-year-old."

Alexei shakes his head. "Tell me."

I lower my eyes to the mug. "Up until my life went to hell, I was a make-up artist who's struggling to get my business off the ground. I only have acquaintances, and I visit my mom every Saturday."

"So you're a loner?" Alexei asks.

"You could say so," I mutter.

"Boyfriends?"

A frown begins to form on my forehead. Lifting my eyes, I meet Alexei's intimidating gaze. "Why are you asking me all these questions?"

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Just making small talk.”

Raising an eyebrow at him, I throw his order back at him, “Tell me about yourself.”

His mouth lifts into a smirk. “You’re traumatized enough without me adding to it.”

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

Alexei rises to his feet, and then it’s as if he flips a switch. His demeanor morphs from predatory to relaxed as he saunters closer to me. When he gives me an actual friendly smile, there’s even a freaking twinkle in his eye.

My frown deepens as I try to figure out what he’s up to.

He takes the seat next to me, and resting his elbows on the marble top, he gives me a look that can be mistaken as interest.

Then he lifts his hand, and bringing it to my face, he gently tucks some hair behind my ear.

“So?” he asks, leaning closer to me, “Are you single?”

What. The. Hell?

I begin to blink, having no idea how to handle this situation.

The next second, Demitri grabs hold of my hips, and I gasp as I’m lifted and moved to another chair, and then he sits down between Alexei and me. Demitri assumes the same position as Alexei and then warns him with a bite to his voice, “Don’t go there.”

Alexei leans back, letting out an amused chuckle. “Christ, you make it so easy to fuck with you.”

My eyes dart between the two men. “I’m lost right now.”

“Ignore him,” Demitri snaps at me, and then he gets up again. He places a plate with eggs and bacon down in front of me. “You better eat everything.”

I glare up at Demitri. “Yes, Sir.”

Alexei bursts out laughing, and the sudden sound startles me.

“God, I’m going to love every second of this.” He grins as his eyes flit between Demitri and me.

“Every second of what?” I ask, directing my glare at him.

He shakes his head, and when Demitri hands him his plate, he immediately digs in.

I stare at Alexei as he wolfs the food down until Demitri sits down again. When I give Demitri a what’s-going-on look, he reaches for my hand and gives it a squeeze. “Eat, *Malyshka*.”

Letting out a sigh, I pick up a strip of bacon and nibble on it.

My life has become the freaking twilight zone.

Chapter 18

DEMITRI

“No,” Ariana snaps, glaring at me.

Alexei crosses his arms over his chest, a huge-ass smile on his face as he watches us.

“You only have to wear it until we get on the plane,” I explain.

She points at the blindfold in my hand. “I swear if you try to put that on me, we’re probably going to have a repeat of the first day we met.”

“Think of it as foreplay with Demitri,” Alexei suddenly says.

Both Ariana and I stare at Alexei.

“Seriously, shut up,” I warn him. I turn my attention back to Ariana. “You can’t know where the island is.”

Ariana narrows her eyes on me, and then she takes a threatening step toward me. “Just so there’s no misunderstanding between us, you want me to trust you with my life, but I can’t know where this freaking island is?”

Fuck. Valid point.

“Slam. Dunk,” Alexei mutters.

Alexei is getting way too much pleasure from this. Shooting him a glare, I throw the blindfold at him. “This is your island. You want her blindfolded, do it yourself.”

He lowers his arms and walks to Ariana. She immediately stiffens, her body tensing. Instead of blindfolding her, Alexei tilts his head and locks eyes with her. “If you tell anyone where this island is –”

“Yeah-yeah,” Ariana interrupts him. “You’ll slice and dice me like yesterday’s salad and drown me in the lake.” She turns away from Alexei

and shoots me an angry glare, and then walks to the front door, grumbling, “I’m so over this shit. I swear to God I’m going to end up killing one of them before this is all over. Blindfold me. Ha. Little too late for that, jerks. I know I’m somewhere on Lake Superior.”

Her grumbling fades away as she leaves the house, and then Alexei shakes his head at me. He places his hand on my shoulder. “I fucking love her. If you don’t marry her, I will.”

Taking a deep breath, I glance up at the ceiling and pray for strength, so I don’t punch my best friend. “Why the fuck do you keep pushing this?” Locking eyes with Alexei, I shake my head.

“In three days, we’ll kill her brother, probably in front of her. We’ll meet with the Bratva, and we’ll have to have a solid plan in place.” Alexei takes a step closer to me, his expression dead serious. “Ariana will never be able to return to her old life. They’ll keep coming after her.”

“You think I haven’t thought of that?” I ask, letting out a burst of incredulous laughter. “She’ll have enough money to get a custodian of her own.”

Alexei takes a step back and, wiping his thumb over his bottom lip, he stares at me. “Is that really what you want, Demitri?” He shakes his head. “No one knows you better than I do. I see the way you look at her. You’re a fucking hard man, yet you hover around her, ready to rip my head off for just looking at her.” Concern settles on his face. “You call her *Malyshka*.”

“So what? You call every woman you meet ‘little one’.”

A chuckle escapes him. “Yeah, but I don’t call them ‘baby’.” He steps right up to me. “You’ve never given a single fuck for a woman. You’ve fallen fucking hard and fast for Ariana. Why are you fighting it?”

“I’m not,” I bite the words out. Alexei just stares at me until I admit, “This isn’t about me. Over the past ten days, Ariana was kidnapped, lost her

father, and learned her brother wants her dead. She's barely holding on as is. Yes, I can take her and force her to marry me." I shake my head. "I won't do that to Ariana, so don't even mention it to her."

"So you're just going to get her a custodian and wash your hands of her?" Alexei still keeps fucking pushing.

"I'm going to give her time until she comes to me out of her own free will." I lean closer to Alexei, and my voice rumbles low, "We don't force women, remember?"

He holds my gaze and then finally nods. "I just want the best for you, brother."

"I know," I say, and I let out a tired breath. I place my hand on Alexei's shoulder. "I appreciate you wanting to make this happen for me, but like you said yesterday, the control is in Ariana's hands. I won't take her freedom. It's all she has left. Once the dust has settled, I'll tell her how I feel."

This time there's no amusement on Alexei's face when he asks, "How do you feel?"

I take a deep breath. "Everything about her drives me insane. I just... want her. It's fucking exhilarating chasing her."

Just then, there's movement by the front door, and Ariana slowly comes back into the house. Her eyes dart between Alexei and me. The awkward expression on her face tells me she overheard some if not all of the conversation.

"How much did you hear?" I ask.

She shrugs and begins to fidget. "Ahhh... not much." She gives me an apologetic smile, but then it fades, and a blush creeps up her neck. "Okay fine, I heard from where Alexei asked if that's what you really want."

So basically everything.

Ariana moves closer to us, and then she locks eyes with me. I can see she's struggling not to look away as she tries to joke, "At least I now have one thing less to wonder about."

"But it's made you uncomfortable," I state, which has the blush on her cheeks deepening.

She quickly shakes her head then looks at Alexei. "Can I have a moment alone with Demitri?"

He gives her a wide smile. "Of course, gorgeous."

"Fuck," I grumble at him as he heads in the direction of the security room.

When we're alone, I turn my gaze to Ariana, and I have to wait a couple of seconds before she looks up at me.

Her tongue darts out, wetting her lips, and it's sexy as fuck.

"None of it was news to you," I say when she stays quiet for too long.

A nervous smile tugs around Ariana's mouth. "Yeah, but hearing you say all of that kind of put it in a different perspective." She lowers her eyes to her feet. "Look, it's been really rough, and I'll admit I'm attracted to you." She takes a deep breath and then looks up at me again.

"You don't have to say anything," I give her an out.

She shakes her head. "It's not that I'm not falling for you, it's just..." her shoulders slump, and the fear returns to her eyes, "I need to get to know you better. I need to see who you really are. You're the best at what you do, but I don't know what that entails. I also want to know what makes you smile and what makes you angry."

"Makes sense," I murmur. Lifting my hand to Ariana's face, I let the pads of my fingers trail from her temple to her jaw, and then I take hold of her chin. "You can ask me anything at any time."

She nods. "Okay."

I lean down, and with my lips brushing against hers, I say, “But in the meantime, I’m still going to chase you.”

She chuckles, and I feel the sound come from her. “Wouldn’t want to rob you of all that exhilaration.”

I press my mouth to hers, and then I take a deep breath as I wrap my other arm around her lower back, pulling her against my body.

Ariana’s hands frame my jaw, and unlike the times before, the kiss is slow and deep.

“I fucking missed my calling,” Alexei suddenly says. “Master fucking matchmaker.”

Pulling back from Ariana, I mutter, “Fine, you’re the best. Let’s drop the subject now.”

“Get your asses on the boat,” Alexei says as he grabs one of the bags I left by the front door earlier. “We’re behind schedule.”

ARIANA

The flight back to Seattle is a whole different experience than when Demitri kidnapped me.

No blindfold. No being tied up. No drugs.

The private jet is more luxurious than anything I’ve ever been in. The hottest part? Demitri is the pilot.

The man can fly planes. I’m not going to lie, that made my stomach flutter.

I also have time to think because Alexei’s busy on his phone.

My grief took a back seat to the betrayal. I suppose it hurts so much because it came from the last person I expected it would be. It's still hard to believe Yuri wants me dead.

All of this is hard to believe.

And then there's Demitri. We went from abductor and captive to having sex to being in some kind of relationship at warp speed.

I feel like I should question my sanity. Who has scorching hot sex with her kidnapper and then begins to fall for him?

Me. That's who.

Also, why am I so damn calm while we're heading back to Seattle so the guys can kill an assassin?

Yep, I've lost my mind. Pretty sure of it.

"What's bothering you?" Alexei suddenly asks.

I shake my head quickly, but after a couple of seconds, I let out a sigh and admit, "I feel like I should be panicking, or at the very least be upset that you're going to kill someone."

"You're not?" he asks, lifting an eyebrow at me.

"No. That's weird, right?"

Alexei lets out a chuckle. "There might be hope for you yet, little one." He shifts in his chair, and leaning his elbow on the armrest, he swipes over his bottom lip with his thumb.

It would really be hot if Demitri did that.

"There's no reason for you to feel bad about killing someone who wants to kill you. It's called self-defense."

Oh... true.

My teeth tug at my bottom lip, then I ask, "You're an assassin, right?"

"Amongst other things," he replies.

"Have you killed a lot of people?"

“I’ve lost count.”

Like I wasn’t scared of him enough.

I’m surprised that he’s actually answering my questions, so I keep going before my luck runs out. “But never an innocent person?”

Alexei nods. “I’m not a cold-hearted murderer, Ariana. Those I’ve killed deserved worse than death.”

I nod because I can understand and even accept that.

“How many people has Demitri killed?”

Alexei stares at me for a moment before he answers, “A hell of a lot more than me.”

Ohhh...kay.

“All bad?”

Alexei nods again.

Swallowing hard, I ask a question I’m not sure I want the answer to, “If I tried to hurt you... Not that I would, but if I tried... Demitri would kill me, right?”

This time Alexei thinks long and hard, then he murmurs, “I’m not sure.” He takes a deep breath then pins me with a look of warning that immediately makes my heartbeat speed up and my muscles tense. “Listen very carefully to me, Ariana.”

I swallow hard and then nod.

“I would burn this fucking world down for Demitri. He’s more than just my brother. Every day that man puts his life on the line to protect me, and trust me, that’s no easy job. There’s no one I love more. If you hurt him, I’ll make an exception to the only rule I live by.”

My mouth is dry as I ask, “What rule?”

“Not killing women.”

My breathing speeds up, and my voice quivers as I ask, “So I have no choice, I just have to keep him happy? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, that would piss off Demitri,” Alexei chuckles as if he didn’t just threaten me. “If you agree to a relationship with him, it’s for life. There’s no leaving him.”

“Oh... ahh... that’s good to know,” I mutter. Now I’ll think twice before getting into a relationship with Demitri.

“But as long as you’re loyal to Demitri, you’ll have my protection.”

I nod, then glance out of the window. After a while, I say, “He feels the same way about you.”

“I know.”

Not much later, Demitri’s voice sounds up over a speaker. “We’re landing soon.”

“Buckle up,” Alexei orders while strapping his seatbelt over his lap.

I do the same, and a couple of minutes later, Demitri lands the plane smoothly. When he comes into the cabin, I get up from the seat and watch as he opens a cabinet, and then he pulls three guns from it.

My eyebrows shoot up, and I can only stare as he hands Alexei a rifle and one of the guns.

Demitri tucks a gun behind his back, and keeping the other one in his hand, he opens the door and glances outside. “Nikhil’s waiting. Let’s make this quick.” His eyes land on me, and when he sees the shock on my face, he slowly looks down at the gun in his hand then back at me. “You okay?”

“Ahh... yeah.”

“Stay close to Alexei,” he says.

“Why not you?” I ask as I glance between them.

“It’s easier for me to protect you both if you’re close to each other,” Demitri explains.

Alexei grabs one of the bags they brought from the island and grins at me. “You’re with me, little one.”

Taking a deep breath, I let it out, and then I move closer to Alexei.

This isn’t weird at all.

Demitri leaves the plane first, and then he calls out, “Clear.”

When Alexei starts to walk, I move, and as we come down the stairs, Demitri’s glancing around the area, looking like a badass bodyguard.

I have to move faster to keep up with Alexei as we walk toward a black SUV.

I feel Demitri behind us, and glancing over my shoulder, my mouth dries for a second time today when I see the deadly expression on his face. His demeanor is tense, ready to explode into action at the first sign of danger.

Holy freaking hotness.

The man, who I assume is Nikhil, nods at Alexei and Demitri, not even glancing my way.

Alexei opens the back door and gestures for me to get in. Once I’m inside the cab, Nikhil gets in next to me, where Alexei slides behind the steering wheel, and Demitri takes the passenger seat.

I give Nikhil an unsure smile. “Hi.”

He just nods at me.

As Alexei starts the engine, he asks, “Is Tao still at the motel?”

“Yes. He’s been laying low, probably trying to find the girl.”

“Ariana, how do you feel about being bait?” Alexei asks casually.

Do I even have to answer that? “I don’t like the idea at all.”

“Thought as much,” Alexei chuckles. “We’ll spend the night at Ariana’s place. Nikhil, you’ll guard her while Demitri and I take care of Tao.”

“Yes, boss,” Nikhil answers without hesitation.

God, it just feels like I'm being pulled deeper down the rabbit hole.

Chapter 19

DEMITRI

When we walk into Ariana's apartment, she glances around, then frowning, asks, "Where's my rug?"

"I wrapped you in it and left it in the car that night," I explain as I walk to the coffee table and move it into its original position.

"You owe me a rug," Ariana mutters, and then she heads to her bedroom.

Alexei opens the fridge and, a second later, slams it shut, then he looks around the small space with a frown. "Ariana!"

Opening the bedroom door, she peeks out. "You don't have to yell. What?"

Alexei waves a hand over the room. "Why do you live in such a small place? Your fridge is empty."

Ariana gives Alexei a look of warning. "Don't diss my apartment. You can always go to a hotel. No one's forcing you to stay here."

Alexei lets out a huff. "That's not what I meant. You're Sergei's daughter. Didn't he send you money?"

"Oh." She takes a step forward and leans her shoulder against the doorjamb. "He does... ahh... did... I used it for my mom's nursing home." Then her teeth tug at her bottom lip. "Which I suppose is going to be a problem now that my dad passed away." With a look of concern, she heads back into the bedroom.

Alexei glances around the living room, and kitchen then mutters, "I'd fucking shit myself if my daughter lived like this."

I take in the sparse furnishings, which I didn't notice the night I came for Ariana, and I have to agree, it looks like she's barely getting by.

Walking to the bedroom, I nudge the door open and step inside. Ariana's just finishing making the bed, and her gaze snaps to me, then she tries to joke, "Wow, look at us coming full circle. You're not going to choke me, are you?"

I shut the door, so we'll have privacy and then lean back against it. Crossing my arms over my chest, I say, "I'll take care of the nursing home fee."

Ariana's spine straightens, and she immediately starts to shake her head. "I'll call them tomorrow. I'm sure they'll give me a grace period until this mess has been taken care of, and I can start working again."

Pushing away from the door, I move forward and only stop when I'm right in front of Ariana, and she's forced to tilt her head back to look at me. I lift my hand and wrap my fingers around her throat, and then leaning down, I say, "I will take care of the nursing home. Don't argue with me."

Defiance sparks in her eyes, and her mouth sets in a stubborn line. "I'm not going to have you pay my expenses. We're not a couple, Demitri."

My cock hardens from her feistiness, and I want nothing more than to throw her on the bed and fuck her until she understands she belongs to me.

I'm still going to give her the time she needs, but I also have to make something absolutely clear. The corner of my mouth lifts slowly until I'm smirking at her.

My voice is low with warning for her not to argue as I say, "*Malyshka*, you're mine. The time I'm giving you is so you can get used to the idea. But make no mistake, you're mine, and I will take care of your life, your body, and your fucking expenses."

Her eyes widen at my words, and I don't miss the flash of heat.

Ariana fucking loves it when I dominate her. Just as much as I do.

Still, she argues. “I didn’t agree to being in a relationship with you. We said we’d see where this goes.”

I lower my head and slowly brush my nose along her jaw and over her cheek. I feel her pulse quicken beneath my fingertips, and her breaths come faster.

“Feel that, *Malyshka*?” She swallows hard, and then her lips part. I lock eyes with her. “I can strip you naked, and you wouldn’t stop me.” Her chin lifts a little, her lashes lowering over her eyes that are burning with desire for me. “I can bury my face in your pussy, and all you’ll be able to do is scream my name as I make you come.”

Ariana pushes her body against mine, and grabbing hold of my shoulders, she lifts herself and slams her mouth to mine. She tears into me, my girl wild and needy for me.

I only give her enough to make her moan, and then I break the kiss, and tightening my grip around her neck, I hold her eyes captive. “You. Are. Mine. I fucking saved your life, and it now belongs to me. Do you understand?”

Breathless, she stares at me until she’s able to say, “I can’t commit to anything. Alexei will kill me if I hurt you, and right now, I’m not sure what I feel.”

The fucker had the talk with her.

“I admit there’s an insane attraction between us, but it hasn’t even been two weeks, Demitri.” Her eyes fill with steel as she holds her own in front of me. “I’m not yours until I love you, and that’s going to take more time.”

My muscles tense, and it takes every bit of strength I have to not force her to submit.

Give her time, Demitri. Back down.

Still, I keep my tight hold on her throat, then say, “The best I can do is to not force a marriage between us. But I will take care of you, and you won’t fight me on it.”

A frown darkens her beautiful features. “Who said anything about a marriage?”

“People like us marry to strengthen alliances. You need the protection and someone to run your father’s businesses. I could easily use it to force you to bend to my will.”

She gives me a glare. “Then why don’t you force me?”

My eyes drift over her face, and I brush my thumb over her soft skin. “Because I want your free will.” Lowering my head, my teeth tug at her bottom lip. “I don’t want to break you. Your feistiness is one hell of a turn-on.”

My tongue darts out, swiping over her lips. “I want your fire.” I plunge inside her mouth, stroking her tongue hard before I pull a little back again. Watching her, I move my other hand to the waistband of her sweatpants, and slipping beneath the fabric, I push my fingers down until I feel the heat of her pussy and how fucking soaked she is for me. I drive a finger inside her to coat my skin with her essence and then rub it over her clit.

Her chest begins to heave as her breaths come faster and her cheeks flush.

I only have to play with her clit for a couple of seconds before her hips begin to move, and she starts grinding herself against my hand.

“Come, *Malyshka*,” I order.

Her arms dart up, and wrapping them tightly around my neck, her mouth slams against mine as her body begins to convulse, and then I taste her orgasm and drink her moans and whimpers.

When she comes down from the pleasure I allowed her to have, I pull my hand from her sweatpants and bringing my fingers to her mouth, I coat her lips and then suck her taste off them.

Christ.

The taste of her is like an adrenaline shot to my system, my cock straining against my zipper to get to her.

But this isn't about pleasure. It's a show of control.

Taking hold of her arms, I pull them from my neck and take a step away from her.

"Your body already belongs to me. Soon I'll have your heart. Then your soul."

Ariana places a hand over her stomach, just taking deep breaths as she stares at me.

"But first, I need to take care of Tao. Don't leave the apartment. Nikhil will stay with you. You'll be safe."

Leaving Ariana in her room, I go back to the living room and say, "Let's go, Alexei." I glance at Nikhil. "Nothing happens to Ariana. Protect her with your last breath."

"Yes, boss," Nikhil replies while he rises from the couch he was sitting on.

Alexei follows me out the front door, and then only does he ask, "Everything okay?"

"Of course," I mutter, resisting the urge to bring my fingers to my nose so I can inhale Ariana's scent.

ARIANA

I barely make it to the bed, and slumping down on the edge of the mattress, I try to gather my bearings that were just steam-rolled by Demitri.

All I can do is breathe through the searing desire still burning inside me. The orgasm was unexpected and mind-blowing, but not enough to satisfy my need for Demitri.

Girl, I don't think therapy is going to help anymore.

I know I should be angry, but instead, I'm so freaking turned on by how dominant he is.

Yep, I'm a lost cause.

The way he looked at me, all possessive, his features cut out of granite. *Swoon.*

The part of me that's still sane says I should be terrified and try to escape while I still can.

But I don't want to.

It's pathetic, I know, but all I want to do is hand the pieces of my life over to Demitri and let him take control.

Letting out a sigh, I rise to my feet, and hoping to get some of my old self back, I walk to the bathroom so I can take a bath in my own tub.

I try not to think that Demitri and Alexei are out there killing a man because of me. Instead, I take my time washing my hair and giving myself a facial. I even pluck and tint my eyebrows. Anything to keep busy.

Next, I open my closet, and figuring I'll have to pack a bag for Russia, I pull a small suitcase from the top shelf and set it down on the bed.

I pack enough clothes for a couple of days, and setting the bag down by the door, I then change out of my bathrobe into a pair of faded, black skinny jeans, a light gray t-shirt, and my favorite ankle boots. I tie my hair in a

high ponytail so it will be out of my face, and then I look at my reflection in the mirror.

This is as ready as I'll ever be for war.

It's getting late, and opening my bedroom door, I walk to the kitchen. I glance at Nikhil, where he's sitting on the couch, his eyes locked on me.

"Want some coffee?" I offer.

He nods. "Please."

While I'm preparing two cups, I ask, "Do you think Demitri and Alexei will be much longer?"

"It depends," is all he answers.

I bring Nikhil his coffee and then go back to the kitchen to sip on my own beverage.

Not able to fight my thoughts off any longer, they stream back. The grief of losing my father. The hurt and worry because of Yuri's betrayal. The uncertainty and intensity when it comes to Demitri. It all floods through me like a tsunami.

I have no idea what waits for me in Russia. Up until now, I was still able to distance myself from most of it, but since we left the island, it's becoming more real by the minute.

Part of me wants to say fuck it all, crawl under my bed and hide there until Demitri has taken care of all my problems.

But there's a bigger part of me that wants to face off with my brother. I want to look Yuri in the eyes and show him I'm not that easy to dispose of. I want to unleash my anger and hurt on him.

I want to purge myself of all these damn emotions.

I want to stand strong before my enemies so they won't come after me again.

I just wish I knew how to do that.

Chapter 20

DEMITRI

Alexei and I scope the motel and surrounding area, and then we sit in the car and wait for things to quiet down.

My thoughts are inundated with what happened between Ariana and me. While we were on the island, I didn't have to worry about losing her. I was relaxed.

But now things have changed. Being back in work mode, it's impossible to hold myself back, and I'm fucking over-possessive of her. Now that it's all in the open between Ariana and me, I don't regret it.

She's mine.

I know this for sure now.

And she fucking loves it.

It's time for Ariana to see who I really am and not the watered-down version she got to know on the island.

And I have a feeling it's going to drive her fucking wild.

"What are you thinking?" Alexei asks while he stares at the motel through a pair of night-vision binoculars.

"I claimed Ariana," I admit to him, finally ready to talk about it now that I've sorted through my own emotions.

He lets out a chuckle. "How did she take it?"

"She's doing her best to resist it," I say, my mouth lifting into a smirk.

"Why the change? This morning you wanted to rip my head off for bringing it up," Alexei asks, glancing at me.

I meet his eyes. “I didn’t have to worry on the island. It was like a safety bubble where I could actually relax. Out here, we both know it’s a cut-throat game. It’s time for me to get back into work mode.”

Alexei places a hand on my shoulder. “Thank fuck. For a while, I was worried you’re so fucking pussy whipped you’d never be able to function normally again.”

I let out a burst of laughter. “Fuck off.” I glance around the area, and seeing it’s quiet, I say, “Let’s get this done.”

We both check our Heckler & Kochs and screw on the silencers, then opening the doors, we get out, and I fall into step beside Alexei. My eyes keep scanning over our surroundings, and when we reach the room where Tao is, I kick the door in, and holding my arms in a locked position in front of me, I move into the room.

Tao lunges to the side while taking a shot at us. I avoid his line of fire, and then Alexei fires off a shot, hitting Tao in the leg.

There’s a trickle of excitement in my chest from being back at work.

“Fuck,” Tao snaps as he limps toward the restroom.

“Dude, come on,” Alexei calls out. “Don’t make us run after you.”

“You declined the contract,” Tao calls out.

“Yeah, and you should’ve checked that the girl is an innocent,” Alexei says as I go after Tao. I kick in the bathroom door and then fire two shots, both hitting Tao in the chest.

“No hard feelings, though,” Alexei calls out, his tone filled with amusement.

I walk closer to Tao, where he’s gasping for air, and then plant a bullet in his head. “It’s done,” I let Alexei know while I stare at the body with great satisfaction.

One threat less to my woman.

Alexei comes to take a photo of Tao then grins at me. “A gift for Yuri.”
“Let’s get out of here.”

When we get back to the SUV, Alexei sends off a text to Yuri, and then he starts the engine.

I take Alexei’s phone and watch as Yuri opens the message, and then I press dial on his number.

“Just remember you started this war, Koslov,” Yuri bites out as he answers.

“No,” I growl. “You should’ve canceled the contract while you still had a chance.”

“Vetrov,” Yuri hisses.

“Ariana’s not just under my protection. She is mine in every fucking way. I’m coming for you, and I’m bringing my brothers.”

There’s a moment’s pause as the news hits Yuri.

“Dem —”

I cut the call, and then Alexei mutters, “Brothers? Have you told Carson and Damien?”

“I’m phoning them now.”

A wide smile spreads over Alexei’s face. “Fuck, this is going to be so much fun.”

I let out a burst of laughter. It’s good seeing the excitement back on his face.

I call Alexei’s brother first.

“Everything okay?” Carson answers because it’s the middle of the night by him.

“Yeah, it’s Demetri. I need a favor.”

“Sure, what’s up?” I hear Carson move, probably to leave the bedroom, so he doesn’t disturb his girlfriend, Hailey.

“I’m going to war with Yuri Ivanov.”

“Where do you want to meet?”

“Damien’s place. We’ll be there tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there,” Carson replies without hesitation.

“Thank you.”

When I end the call, I immediately phone Damien.

“Hey, you okay?” Damien answers.

“Yes. I’m coming to you. Carson will meet us at your place tomorrow. I’m going after Yuri Ivanov, and I need your help.”

“Okay, but why?”

“I’ll explain tomorrow.”

We end the call, and then Alexei says, “Ahh, the thrill of the hunt. There’s nothing like it.”

“Yeah? Wait until you meet the woman that’s meant for you.”

ARIANA

When the front door opens and Demitri and Alexei come in, my eyes flit over Demitri to check if he’s okay. I’ve been standing in the kitchen for most of the night, unable to think of sleep while they were out there.

Alexei claps his hands together. “All done.”

All done. The assassin is dead.

I expect to feel guilt and horror, but instead, the tension in my chest lessens a bit.

I glance between Demitri and Alexei, then say, “Thank you.” And I mean it from the bottom of my heart.

Demitri's eyes drift over me, and then the predatory expression I really love way too much tightens his features. "Fuck, you look beautiful," he murmurs as he moves toward me.

I glance down at my outfit. "Thought I'd wear something more appropriate for war."

When his hands frame my face, I smell a burnt and metallic scent. Demitri leans down, pressing a soft kiss to my lips, and then he whispers, "You're welcome."

When he pulls back, our eyes lock, and my stomach flutters while my abdomen clenches.

This man just killed someone for me.

The thought is overwhelming, and it sends my heart racing.

The realization that I have someone as powerful as Demitri on my side finally sinks in, and for the first time, I start to believe I can actually get through this. I can face Yuri.

I can survive whatever lies ahead.

"Christ, *Malyshka*," Demitri growls. "The way you look at me will be my end."

"How do I look at you?" I whisper, my voice breathless.

"Like I'm your whole fucking world."

My heart hammers hard in my chest.

Is he?

It's too soon.

Pulling free from his hands, I nervously wet my lips and go to my room. I slip on my black leather jacket, and then pulling up my luggage's handle, I press my other hand to my fluttering stomach and take a deep breath.

One thing at a time, Ariana. Once you get through this alive, you can figure out what you feel for Demitri.

Pulling my luggage behind me, I walk back into the living room just in time to see Dimitri checking the clip of his gun. He shoves it back in and then tucks the weapon away behind his back. Lifting his eyes to me, he asks, "Ready?"

"Uh-huh," I mumble.

"A couple of things," Dimitri says. "Whenever we're moving around, stay close to Alexei. You never leave his side no matter what happens."

"Okay," I breathe.

"If all hell breaks loose, don't call for me."

What the hell?

Frowning, I ask, "Why?"

"It will break my attention."

"And then we're all a little fucked," Alexei adds. "Basically, Ariana, while Dimitri is working, don't distract him."

Understanding, I nod. "Got it. Stick to Alexei's side and keep quiet while all hell breaks loose. Anything else?"

Dimitri turns his attention to Nikhil. "Give me your tag. When you get back to LA, get a new one for yourself."

Nikhil removes a chain from his neck and hands it to Dimitri, who comes to put it over my head. I glance down at the unmarked silver tag.

Dimitri flips it over. "See this button?"

"Yes."

"It's a panic button. If you press it, all of us will get the alarm. It also has a tracker in it so we can find you."

Glancing up at Dimitri, I frown. "You don't wear one?"

He holds up his left arm and gestures at his wristwatch. "Mine's in here."

"Cool."

I look down at the tag and then tuck it beneath my shirt's collar. "Is that all?"

"For now," Dimitri says and then walks toward the front door. "Let's go."

Once we step out of my apartment, I lock the door and then move to Alexei's side. Dimitri takes the lead with Nikhil behind us, and I have to admit, right now, I feel a little badass.

Chapter 21

DEMITRI

After landing on Damien and Winter's island that's a hell of a lot bigger than Alexei's, we step off the plane.

A smile spreads over my brother's face as I walk toward him, and then we engulf each other in a tight hug.

"Fuck, it's been too long," I murmur, glad to see him again.

Pulling back, I hold Damien at arm's length and look him over. "You look good."

"Life's been good," Damien replies, still smiling wide.

We turn to where Carson and Alexei are hugging, and then I step forward to embrace Carson, while Alexei does the same with Damien.

When we've all greeted each other, I hold my hand out to Ariana, where she's been standing to the side. She darts forward and quickly links her fingers with mine while giving me a nervous look.

I squeeze her hand and tug her right to my side, then turn back to my brother and Carson. "This is Ariana Robinson."

Carson's one eyebrow lifts, obviously recognizing her name.

I gesture at Damien. "My brother, Damien."

"Hi," Ariana smiles at him, but Damien's a little caught off guard that I'm holding her hand, so he just stares at her.

I gesture at Carson. "Alexei's younger brother, Carson. He's the one that got the contract on you and forwarded it to us."

This time there's a genuine smile on Ariana's face as she looks at Carson. "Thanks for not killing me."

Carson begins to chuckle. "You're welcome."

Damien places his hand on my shoulder, then gives me a pointed look.

I glance back at Ariana and feel a burst of pride to have her by my side. "She's mine."

Ariana shoots me a disgruntled look, then turns her attention to Damien. "What your brother is trying and failing to say is we're seeing where this goes."

Damien tries not to laugh but then fails. "Now I understand."

Meaning he gets why I've chosen Ariana after never being in a relationship before.

Flaming red hair catches my eye as Winter walks toward us, carrying my nephew.

I let go of Ariana's hand, and moving to my sister-in-law, I lean down and kiss both her cheeks before taking my nephew from her. "Nikolai, look how you've grown. Soon you'll be taller than me."

I hear Damien introducing Winter to Ariana, and knowing my woman is safe, I focus all my attention on Nikolai, who doesn't recognize me because I haven't been around much.

"I'm your father's brother, remember? *Dyadya* Demitri."

The little boy that's the spitting image of Damien and me gives me a shy smile and mumbles, "Hello."

When Damien joins us, Nikolai instantly holds his arms out to his father, and I hand him over.

"He's gotten big," I mention to Damien. Glancing behind us, I notice how Ariana sticks to Alexei's side and gesture for her to come while saying, "We're safe here, so I expect you next to me."

"Oh, how am I supposed to know that," she mutters. "You can't make up the rules as we go."

After she takes my hand, we all head inside the house, where we're greeted by Cillian, who's a father figure to Winter.

Alexei heads to the dining room, and we all follow. Once everyone is seated around the large table, Damien asks, "Why are we going after Yuri?"

I get right to the point. "Ariana is Sergei's daughter from an affair. Yuri wants her dead so she can't have any claim to the inheritance. Lucian spoke to Sergei on our behalf, and Sergei asked us to keep her safe at all costs. He also changed his last will, so Ariana's the only heir."

Carson lifts an eyebrow. "And Yuri won't back down?"

Alexei shakes his head. "He's under the impression he's already head of the Bratva."

"And the other members of the Bratva?" Damien asks. "Seimon, Andrei, and Lev? Who are they standing behind?"

Alexei takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "We won't know until the meeting where everyone will vote."

"If they back Yuri, we'll be going up against four powerful families," Carson states the obvious.

"Against the four of us," I say.

"Five," Winter interjects, and then Damien's wife, who's the Blood Princess and head of the largest diamond smuggling empire, gives me a look of warning. "I'm going with."

My eyes dart to Damien, and he gives me a nod, showing he's okay with it. Winter was trained by Cillian, and I've seen for myself how good she is, so I'm not worried that she won't be able to hold her own.

"Are you going to ask Lucian to help?" Carson asks.

I shake my head. "This is a family affair. He's already helped enough."

"Family affair?" Ariana asks, her big hazel eyes locked on me.

"You're one of us now, and we look after our own," Alexei says.

I see how Alexei's statement hits her. Ariana's eyes dart over the table, and then she swallows hard and lowers her gaze. Placing my hand on her thigh, I give her a squeeze, then I turn my attention back to the matter at hand.

"We'll leave for Russia tomorrow."

"How's this going to play out?" Damien asks. "Are we attacking first or waiting for them to come to us?"

Alexei shakes his head. "We'll attend the Bratva meeting and take it from there. If there's going to be a show of power, I want it to happen at the meeting."

"Why?" Carson asks, his eyes locked on his brother.

"Because they'll either kneel to me as the new head of the Bratva or die," Alexei says, his tone unyielding.

I'm glad to hear Alexei's made a decision.

Alexei gestures at Ariana and me. "Demitri will take over Sergei's business, and as always, he'll be my right hand."

Damien's eyes snap to me. "You're getting married?"

Ariana makes a choking sound, and then she begins to laugh nervously. "No.No.No. We've only known each other two weeks."

Damien shrugs. "So?"

His marriage to Winter was arranged two weeks after they met, so my brother probably expects the same of Ariana and me.

"Ariana was raised differently than us," I explain.

"Like Hailey?" Carson asks. His girlfriend isn't from our world, as well.

"Yes."

"So, are you just going to manage the business for Ariana?" Damien asks.

"For the time being."

The corner of his mouth lifts when he reads between the lines.
Ariana will marry me.

ARIANA

When we got here, I had to suppress the urge to run back to the plane and hide. I'm still getting used to Alexei, and meeting Damien and Carson, who look just like their brothers, was intimidating as hell.

And then there's Winter. Now that's one woman I won't be looking for trouble with. She moves like a jungle cat, her demeanor matching that of her husband's.

Well, girl, you're in the thick of it now.

As soon as the meeting was over, I sneaked out of the house. Demitri will probably scold me for leaving his side, but he said we're safe here.

I walk toward a lining of trees, just needing a little time away from everyone. I'm used to being alone, and I haven't had much of that since Alexei came to get us from the island.

My thoughts turn to what Alexei said, that I'm a part of their family now.

Am I really?

They're all cut-throat killers... and then there's me.

I hear leaves crunching behind me, and glancing over my shoulder, I see Winter coming toward me.

"Hey, I hope you don't mind me exploring?"

"Not at all." She falls into step next to me and gestures to her right.
"Come this way. It leads to the shore."

I walk with her, and I'm surprised when she doesn't say anything. Reaching the shore, we sit down, and then a smile tugs at my mouth as we stare at the Finnish town in the distance.

After a while, Winter turns her gaze to me, and I'm surprised when she gives me a comforting smile. "It's a lot to deal with, right?"

I nod and suck in a deep breath. "Honestly, I don't know if I'm coming or going."

"I've been there. You might not see it now, but you're in good hands. The men will take care of everything."

"They've already done so much for me," I admit. "Even though Demitri kidnapped me and scared the living hell out of me, I know I can trust him."

Winter lets out a chuckle. "He kidnapped you?" A smile filled with curiosity forms around her mouth. "This I have to hear."

She doesn't look as threatening anymore, and I relax next to her. Needing to talk to someone, I relay everything that's happened, leaving out the part where I slept with Demitri.

"Talk about being overwhelmed." Lifting her hand, she pats my back, and then she tells me how she met Damien.

I'm so engrossed in the story that everything around us fades away.

"When did you know you loved him?" I ask.

Winter thinks back to the past, then murmurs, "The Vetrovs are the best, and they're not afraid of anything, but the moment Damien looked at me and I saw the fear of losing me in his eyes, I knew."

"But you married him before you loved him, right?" I ask, enjoying getting to know Winter.

She nods. "Alexei arranged our marriage as an alliance."

"How did you feel about it?"

Winter shrugs. “I always knew I’d marry to form an alliance. I was lucky with Damien because I was already attracted to him.”

A smile pulls at my lips. “You never regretted it?”

She shakes her head. “Damien was the last gift my father gave me, and I love him with everything I am. He’s my rock.”

Curious about Winter, I ask, “Why did you say you’re coming with us to Russia? You don’t know me.”

Her eyes lock on mine. “I’ll always have my husband’s back, and I owe Alexei and Demitri. They helped me eliminate my enemies.”

“So...” I wet my lips, “Are you like them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Dangerous?” I explain myself better.

Winter climbs to her feet and holds out her hand to me. After she helps me up, she says, “I think it’s time for a quick training session. I’m a firm believer that a woman should be able to protect herself.”

I really like the sound of that and feel a burst of excitement. “Really? You’ll show me a couple of things?”

“How much sleep do you need?” she asks, a serious expression falling over her face.

“Four hours or I’m a zombie.”

She glances at my outfit. “First, we need to get you the right clothes. Come.”

I follow Winter back to the house and to a bedroom where she gives me a similar outfit to the one she’s wearing. Black cargo pants and a black shirt that’s super tight-fitting. It turns out we’re the same size, and I grin as I look at my reflection. Now I really feel badass.

“Boots,” she says as she drops them next to me. “I suggest you get a couple of these outfits when you have the chance to shop. It’s best for

fighting.”

“Okay,” I nod as I sit down and pull on the boots.

When I stand up, Winter gives me a look of approval, and then she leads me to a barn beside the house. It’s set up as a gym, and there’s even a shooting range.

Winter leads me to the shooting range then takes a gun from behind her back that I didn’t even notice.

Am I getting used to seeing weapons already?

She takes off the safety then takes a stance, saying, “You’re going to spread your legs a little and lock your elbows in so your arms take the recoil of the gun.”

I mimic her, and then she moves in next to me, handing me the weapon. The metal feels foreign and dangerous against my palm, and my heart begins to beat faster.

“Take aim,” she instructs.

I do as she says and make sure to lock in my elbows.

“When you’re ready, pull the trigger.”

This will be the first time I’m firing a weapon, and there’s a weird exhilaration pulsing through my veins.

I take a deep breath, and when I exhale, I squeeze the trigger. The bang isn’t as loud as I expected, and the weapon jerks in my hands, but I have no idea where the bullet went.

I grin at Winter. “That’s so cool.”

Chapter 22

ARIANA

Suddenly arms wrap around me, and my head swivels. I relax when I see it's Demitri. Placing his hands beneath my forearms, he nudges my hands up. "Higher. You want to hit the chest or head. Don't try and look down the barrel at the target. You have to get a feel for where you want the bullet to go."

"Like throwing darts?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Okay." I take another deep breath and fire the gun to see where the bullet goes and when it clips the bottom of the target, I adjust my hands higher and then fire another shot. When the bullet tears through the chest of the target, a wide smile spreads over my face.

"You're a natural," Winter comments. "I'm going to check on Nikolai while you keep practicing."

Demitri moves to my side and crosses his arms over his chest. There's a pensive expression on his face as he watches me fire shot after the shot until the target is riddled with holes.

"I thought it would be harder," I mention when the clip is empty.

"It will be hard," he states as he uncrosses his arms and moves closer to me. He takes the gun from my hand, and then pulling his own weapon from behind his back, he hands it to me. "Aim the gun at me."

"What? No," I gasp.

"The safety is on. Aim it at me," he orders, and then he takes a couple of steps back.

I swallow hard, and lifting my arms, I train the barrel on Demitri's chest. Instantly my hands begin to tremble, and my breathing begins to speed up.

I don't like this at all.

"Killing another human being is hard, Ariana. That first shot changes you forever." Demitri sets Winter's gun down on a shelf near us, and then he moves so fast, I don't even have time to let out a startled shriek. He rips the gun from my hands, and then he's behind me, his arm tightly around my throat. Right by my ear, he says, "Holding onto your weapon in a fight is the most important thing."

"I wasn't expecting the attack." I glance to the side, and my cheek brushes against his mouth. "Do it again."

Demitri lets go of me and hands the gun back to me as comes to stand in front of me.

My body is tense, and I watch him closely. This time when he moves, I yank my arms back, but he still grabs the gun from me, and then he sweeps my feet from under me. I land hard on my backside, letting out a huff of air.

There's a sinking feeling in my stomach that I'll never be able to protect myself.

Demitri holds his hand out to me and helps me back to my feet, then he says, "Don't get discouraged. I've been doing this all my life."

I hear movement behind me, and glancing over my shoulder, I see everyone coming in.

I guess the training session is over.

Winter gestures to a large sparring mat. "Come. We'll show you how it's done."

As Winter steps onto the mat, she winks at Damien. "Take it easy on me, babe."

He lets out a chuckle, shaking his head as he begins to slowly move around her. My eyes are glued to them. I expect Damien to attack first, but Winter explodes into action. Lunging at her husband, she slams her body into his side, and grabbing hold of his shoulder, she freaking climbs his back like a tree. She quickly wraps her thighs around his neck, and then she flips him off his feet.

Holy crap.

My mouth drops open, and I can only stare.

Demitri moves forward, and my eyes widen. “Come, little brother. I miss a good fight.”

Winter comes to stand next to me, and then I have a running commentary.

This time they don’t waste time, and Damien instantly attacks Demitri, his body lifting off the mat as his leg shoots out to hit Demitri on the side of the head. But Demitri grabs hold of Damien’s ankle, and yanking hard, he sends his brother flying.

Damien’s instantly on his feet with a flip I can only dream of doing. Then they explode into action, and I can’t keep up with who hits who.

“Watch Damien. He’s on defense,” Winter says. “See how he mirrors every move from Demitri?”

“They’re moving too fast.”

Winter places her arm around my shoulder, then points to the men. “Look at their feet. See, it looks like a dance?”

“Yeah,” I murmur.

“That’s important. You have to anticipate your opponent's steps.”

Shaking my head, I admit, “I’ll never be able to fight like that.”

“With enough training, you will,” Winter assures me.

Just then, Damien takes a swing at Demitri, hitting him hard on the jaw. Demitri doesn't even flinch and just grins at his brother.

Nope, in no reality will I be able to take a hit like that and keep standing.

DEMITRI

After the impromptu sparring session, which turned out to be fun, Damien begins making a fire so we can grill some steaks.

By the sounds of things, Winter's planning on giving Ariana more training after we've had our early dinner.

I walk to where the women are talking, and wrapping my arm around Ariana's shoulders, I say, "I'm stealing her for a moment."

"Sure," Winter smiles at me, then heads to where Nikolai stands next to Damien, watching his father make the fire. I tug Ariana away from our friends and family and steer her toward the forest.

Once we're walking between the trees, I glance down at her and ask, "How are you holding up?"

She grins up at me. "I'm actually having fun. I really like Winter."

"That's good," I murmur. "And how are you coping with all the shit that's been thrown at you?"

Ariana shrugs and crosses her arms over her chest in a defensive move. I don't think she realizes that her guard just went up, not to keep me out, but because she's probably scared of what's coming.

I tighten my hold around her shoulders and press a kiss to her temple. "You're going to be okay."

She nods then glances up at me. "I know."

When we reach the shoreline, the sun is starting to set on the horizon. I sit down on the sand, and when Ariana's seated next to me, I rest my forearms on my knees and look at her. There's more color in her cheeks from all the excitement of the day, and she seems relaxed.

Then the corner of her mouth trembles, and she takes a deep breath. "How do you do it?"

"What?" I whisper, lifting my hand and brushing a strand of hair that's come loose from her ponytail away from her jaw.

"How do you live a life where it's kill or be killed all the time?" Ariana's eyes leave the water, turning to me.

"It's second nature to me."

"How old were you when you killed for the first time?" she asks, her gaze glued to my face.

"Sixteen," I answer. "Our father took both Damien and me for our first kills."

Ariana shakes her head lightly. "And you were okay with it?"

I shrug. "Like I said, it's the way I was raised."

"How old are you now?" she asks, and I'm taking it as a very good sign that she's trying to get to know me better.

"Thirty-one."

Her eyes widen. "Wow, that's eight years older than me. I don't know how I feel about that."

"Why?" I ask, narrowing my eyes on her.

"That's a big age gap, Demitri. The guys I've dated were my age."

There's a burst of anger in my chest, and I grumble, "The guys you've dated?"

"Ah... yeah."

“How many?” I demand.

A slight frown forms on her forehead. “Three.”

Then I remember she’s only slept with one other guy, and it makes my anger rocket through my chest.

“You’re upset?” Ariana asks, her eyes searching my face as she tries to read my mood.

“Of course I’m fucking upset. No man wants to know how many men his woman has been with,” I practically bark. “It’s enough to send me on a killing spree.”

Her eyes grow huge, and she turns her body to face me while she quickly explains, “It was nothing. The longest relationship I had was three months. They didn’t mean anything.”

I pin her with my eyes. “You cared enough to give one of those men your virginity.”

Ariana smiles awkwardly. “It was more an experiment on my part. I just wanted to know what doing the deed was like.”

“And?”

She pulls a disgruntled face, and shaking her head, she looks back to the lake. “Nothing memorable.”

It makes me feel a hell of a lot better hearing the fucker didn’t measure up to her expectations.

“And you?” Ariana asks. Her teeth tug nervously at her bottom lip, then she continues, “How many girlfriends have you had?”

I shrug. “None.”

“Huh?” Her eyes snap back to me. “That’s impossible.” When I just shrug again, she gasps, “So what? You just have one-night-stands?”

“Something like that,” I answer with a chuckle at her shocked reaction.

Confusion washes over Ariana's features. "But... then why are you so insistent on a relationship between us?"

I lift my hand and wrap my fingers around the back of her neck. Leaning toward her, I answer honestly, "Because you're the first woman I've ever wanted."

"Why me?" she breathes, the atmosphere between us beginning to fill with tension.

I brush my thumb against her soft skin and stare deep into her eyes. "Because I worry about you. Before we met, I never cared about a woman. With Winter, I felt some pity when she lost her family. With Haley, I was more upset that a woman got beaten. But I never actually cared what happened to them."

I shift my hand to her chin and brush my thumb over her lips. "You're the only woman who's made me feel a fuck-ton of emotions. Everything from anger to possessiveness."

"It's only been two weeks, Demitri," she whispers, but her eyes are soft on me.

"So?" I shrug.

"How can you fall so fast?"

"If I didn't fall hard and fast, we wouldn't be sitting here, *Malyshka*. It's all or nothing with me."

Ariana tilts her head, her gaze searching mine. "Are you scared of failing or..." she takes a breath then continues, "losing me?"

The thought of Ariana dying sends an overwhelming surge of wrath through me. My muscles instinctively tense as if the threat is nearby. "Losing you is not an option."

"Why? You don't owe me anything. You can walk away right now."

My heart beats hard in my chest, and I stare at Ariana, realizing she's become just as important as Alexei to me.

If I lose Alexei, it will cripple me. I'd be lost without my best friend because up until now, he's been my sole purpose for living.

If I lose Ariana, I will fucking lose my mind. I can't even think it.

"You've become as important as Alexei is to me," I finally admit. "I won't lose either of you."

Ariana moves onto her knees next to me, and placing her hands on my jaw, she leans into me and presses her mouth tenderly to mine. When she pulls back, her eyes are filled with emotion. "Thank you for kidnapping me."

I let out a burst of laughter. "That's the last thing I ever expected you to say."

Chapter 23

ARIANA

After dinner, Winter made me empty clip after clip on the targets and showed me how to knee a man. We trained until after midnight, and as we head back into the house, we hear the men talking in the living room.

I actually feel comfortable handling a gun, but I know it's not the same as shooting at a living person.

When we walk into the living room, Demitri climbs to his feet, then says, "Let's get some sleep. We have a busy couple of days ahead of us."

He walks to me and, taking my hand, pulls me back out of the living room. I follow him up the stairs and into a guest bedroom where our bags are already waiting near the bed.

"We're sharing a room?" I ask.

"Of course," Demitri mutters as he lets go of my hand and shuts the door behind us. "Come, let's shower." He walks to the bathroom, tugging his shirt over his head.

Ah... what?

"You sure?" I call after him, standing rooted to the spot by the door.

Demitri glances back at me. "You're tired. I'm tired. We're just going to shower."

There's a stab of disappointment as I walk to the bathroom, not missing the chance to see Demitri naked again.

My eyes are glued to him as he undoes his belt, his fingers strong. Watching him strip out of his clothes is hot as hell, and I almost forget to get undressed. When we're both butt-naked, there's no urge to cover

myself, which is kind of weird. I'm not self-conscious, but I'm usually not comfortable being naked in front of someone.

It's probably because I'm too busy staring at Demitri's abs.

Sigh, what a sight.

My eyes drift lower to the muscles curving down his hips like an arrow straight to his cock. I tilt my head as I take in his length as it rests against his thigh.

We're just showering. We're just showering. We're just showering.

Demitri turns on the faucets, and when the water starts warming up, he steps under the spray, leaving enough space for me. I join him under the water, my eyes roving over every spectacular inch of him as I blindly reach for the body wash. I have no idea what I'm doing, but somehow I manage to wash my body as I watch Demitri's hands glide over his gleaming skin.

Lower.

Move your hand lower.

Demitri's fingers skim the stretch of skin above his cock, and I hold my breath.

Lower.

Incredible heat spreads through my body, and my abdomen clenches hard as his fingers wrap around his cock. A breath explodes over my lips, and then they start to come faster as he strokes himself.

"Are you done washing yourself?" Demitri asks in a low grumble, ripping my eyes to his face. "Or should I go on with the show?"

A flush spreads up my chest and neck, setting my face on fire. "Ahh... I'm done... washing," I ramble and dart out of the shower. Grabbing a towel, I wrap it around my body and make a run for the bedroom. I quickly dig panties, a shirt, and a pair of leggings out of my bag and pull the clothes on.

Moving to the side of the bed, I yank the covers back and climb beneath them. Taking a deep breath, I try to act as if I'm not turned on.

Demitri comes out of the bathroom wearing a smug smirk and nothing else but the gun in his right hand. I quickly glance away and listen as he moves around the room.

He sets his gun down on the bedside table next to me and then leans over me and picks me up. Moving me to the other side of the bed, he says, "I always lie closest to the door."

"Okay," I breathe as I fix the covers that got rumped from the movement.

I glance at Demitri as he switches off the light, and then he comes to climb into bed next to me.

Crap, I'm not going to close a damn eye tonight.

Slowly my sight adjusts to the darkness, and I dare a glance at Demitri. He's lying on his back with his hands tucked behind his head, looking like he doesn't have a care in the world.

Taking an audible breath, he moves one arm from beneath his head and holds it open. "Come here."

Turning onto my side, I scoot closer until I'm right against him. He wraps his arms around my shoulders, then presses a kiss on my hair. "Sleep, *Malyshka*. We only have three hours before we leave for Russia."

Letting out a sigh, I snuggle against him, resting my hand on his chest. Too soon, my fears creep back into my mind. I feel safer having a group of trained people willing to fight for me.

But...

My heart shrinks into a small lump at the thought that I lost my dad, and my brother wants me dead.

I feel Demitri's breaths skim over the top of my head, then he murmurs, "Want to talk about it?"

I wrap my arm around his waist and press myself against him. "What Yuri did hurts so much more than losing my dad. It's hard to believe."

"It's because you trusted him. Betrayal can only come from someone close to you."

"What am I going to do, Demitri?" I tilt my head back and stare up at him. "I know you said you'll take care of everything, but how will I ever return to my normal life?"

He shifts onto his side, so we're lying face to face, and then his hand gently brushes over my hair. "When everything is over, you can either stay with me, or if you need more time, I'll arrange a custodian to protect you."

"Where do you live?" I ask because it never crossed my mind that Demitri would go home.

"LA."

I want to just close my eyes and jump into Demitri's arms, but owing it to myself, I say, "I'd appreciate it if you can arrange a custodian for me. I need time on my own to make sure what I feel for you is real and not just because of everything that's happening."

Demitri doesn't say anything and just tightens his hold on me.

I don't fall asleep, my mind too busy racing from one problem to the next.

DEMITRI

After landing the plane at a private airfield, we take the armored cars Alexei arranged and head to my family's compound.

I haven't been back here since I left for my training after I turned twenty-one.

Christ, has it been that long?

My Uncle Michail, who's also our accountant in LA, arranged for a caretaker to live on the property after Damien left for his training.

Alexei brings the SUV to a stop in the courtyard, and then we all get out. We came in three cars because we emptied Damien's armory of all the weapons we'll need.

Winter and Ariana gravitate toward each other while the men offload everything from the SUVs.

When Alexei makes a call for a meeting to be held with all the members of the Bratva, I turn to Ariana and Winter. "Winter, can you give us a moment?"

"Sure."

Ariana moves closer to me, giving me a questioning look.

Placing my hand on her shoulder, I say, "Before we meet with Yuri and the Bratva, I thought you'd like to visit your father's grave."

Her eyes widen, and then sorrow ripples over her face. Her voice is somber when she answers, "Yeah, I'd like that."

I pull her against my chest and hug her while Alexei finishes on the phone. When he tucks the device in his pocket, I let go of Ariana and say, "It will just be the three of us." Locking eyes with her, I add, "Alexei will stay by your side. I'm afraid we can't give you privacy when you say goodbye."

Ariana nods. "I understand."

As we leave the house, I tell Damien we're heading out. The drive to the cemetery is quiet, and my attention is focused on our surroundings. I won't be surprised if Yuri has someone watching Sergei's grave.

It's still early morning when Alexei steers the SUV through the entrance to the cemetery, and everything's quiet. We stop as close as possible to the gravesite, and then Alexei says, "Let's do this."

I climb out of the SUV and scan the area as I pull my gun from behind my back. My finger rests on the trigger, ready at the first sign of danger.

Alexei places his hand on Ariana's lower back and leads her to her father's grave.

My breathing slows as I look for anything that seems out of place. My senses sharpen until I feel the cold morning air prickles over my body. I know exactly where Alexei and Ariana are standing without having to look and move toward them while my eyes comb over the gravestones and trees.

Something glints in the sharp sunlight, and I shout, "Down!" My right arm shoots up, and I pull the trigger. A second later, a bullet flies past my shoulder in the direction where Alexei and Ariana were standing. I hear it slam into a gravestone, and then I wait, my eyes locked on the spot where the shot came from.

"More will come," Alexei mutters.

"Stay down," I order. Just then, there's movement, and I get ready. It only takes a split-second, but the moment the guy peeks from behind his hiding place, I fire off three shots. One hits his left eye and the other two an inch higher. I hold my left fist up for Alexei to see, checking the area before I open my hand.

"Run, Ariana!" Alexei snaps, and then I hear them move.

Walking backward, I keep an eye out in case the scout wasn't alone, and only when I'm close to the SUV do I turn around and hurry to the passenger

side. I climb inside, then bark, “Quickly.”

“Yeah-yeah,” Alexei taunts me. “I know the drill.”

As Alexei makes a U-turn, I glance over my shoulder at Ariana. “You okay, *Malyshka*?”

Her face is pale, but she nods quickly.

I turn my attention back to the narrow road, and as we approach the exit, I say, “Lean forward.” Alexei does as I ask, and I pull his gun from behind his back. He settles against the seat again and doesn’t slow the SUV down as he takes the turn onto the road running parallel to the cemetery.

We’re met with bullets spraying the right side of the SUV, and then Alexei floors the gas.

Resting the one gun on my lap, I take out my phone and dial Damien’s number.

When he answers, I say, “We’re going to come in hot. Get ready. Twenty minutes out.”

“Ten,” Alexei mutters. “I’ll make it in ten.”

“You heard that?” I ask Damien.

“Got it. We’ll be ready.”

Chapter 24

ARIANA

It's one thing knowing Yuri wants me dead, but it's a whole different ball game actually being shot at.

My heart hasn't stopped thundering in my chest since Dimitri fired the first shot. A bullet hit my dad's gravestone right where I was standing.

So close.

There's a metallic taste on my tongue, my skin tingling like I just touched a live wire.

Another wave of bullets spray the SUV, and I slap my hand over my mouth to keep from letting out a shriek.

Don't make a noise. Don't distract Dimitri.

My eyes are glued to him as he looks over his shoulder at whoever's shooting at us. Then his eyes flick to me, and he says, "We have to stop and take care of the problem. Stay in the car until one of us comes to get you."

I lower my hand to my racing heart. "Okay."

"You're doing good, *Malyshka*."

I can only nod, and then I glance out the back window at the sedan and something that looks like a smaller version of a truck that's behind us.

"Ready, brother?" Alexei asks as we turn up the road that leads to the compound.

Dimitri lets out a chuckle. "Always."

Damien and Carson have parked the other two SUVs on either side of the road, leaving enough space for Alexei to speed through.

Alexei turns the steering wheel sharp while yanking up the handbrake, and it makes the SUV spin.

God. Hello, motion sickness.

The tires screech and Demitri throws open his door, stepping out of the vehicle before we've even stopped.

I swear my ovaries combust from how hot and badass it looks, and then we come to a jarring halt.

Winter runs toward us, and when Alexei climbs out, she tosses him a machine gun, and then they open fire on the two approaching vehicles.

This time the blasts are loud, and I cover my ears as I watch bullets fly.

Holy. Shit.

I manage to blink and breathe, but that's all.

A voice in the back of my mind tells me I should be horrified, but all I feel is worry for Demitri and my new friends. I don't want any of them getting hurt.

While the war begins, one realization sinks deep.

There's some of my father in me, after all.

Up until now, I was worried about not getting to return to my old life. But now that I'm finally in Russia and people are shooting at me, people are dying right before my eyes, I'm calm.

I feel a rush of anger, and it feeds my will to live.

I'm going to fight for the legacy my father left behind. I'm going to fight Yuri.

My eyes lock on Demitri, and seeing the power rolling off him in waves, makes me lift my chin and lower my hands from my ears.

Maybe this is my destiny.

Maybe these people fighting to protect me were meant to become my new family. Because, God, no one has ever fought so hard for me.

I'm overcome with affection for each of them as they put their own lives on the line for me.

When the final shot is fired, the other two vehicles are shot up, and blood and bodies litter the ground.

Demitri comes to open the back door, and I hurry to get out. Throwing my arms around his neck, my breaths race over my lips.

I hear Alexei make a call as Demitri's one arm wraps like a steel band around my lower back. "You okay?" he asks, his tone calm.

I nod, and pulling back, I press a kiss to his jaw and then his mouth. Not caring who sees, I kiss Demitri with every pounding heartbeat. He breaks the kiss, and lifting his head, his eyes search over my face before locking with mine.

Whatever he sees in my gaze makes the corner of his mouth lift in a sexy smirk.

"Clean-up crew will be here soon," Alexei says, and it makes me take a step back from Demitri. Alexei might still scare me, but I walk to him and give him a hug.

He lets out a chuckle, and when I let go of him, he asks, "What's that for?"

Glancing up, I give him a grateful smile. "Thank you."

Lifting his hand to the side of my head, he brushes his palm over my hair. "You're welcome, little one."

"Are we staying or going?" Damien asks.

When I turn toward Damien and Carson, Demitri mutters, "You better not think of hugging them."

Everyone chuckles at Demitri's possessive tone.

"We're going," he mutters, and taking hold of my hand, he pulls me back to the SUV.

When we get back to the compound, Dimitri waits for the others to get out of the vehicles, then he says, “They probably know where we are. We’ll have to keep watch. Who’s taking the first shift?”

“I will,” Carson says. I watch as he pulls a rifle from his SUV, and then he walks toward the house and climbs up the side to the roof without much effort.

It feels like I’m surrounded by my own small army of superheroes.

Everyone seems calm while my heart’s still beating a mile a minute. Glancing at Dimitri, I ask, “Is it always like this?”

A slight frown forms on his forehead. “Like what?”

“Action-packed.”

“You get used to it,” Winter answers on behalf of Dimitri. “After doing this a while, the excitement fades.”

Yeah, I don’t think that will happen to me.

“Let’s drink,” Alexei says as he turns to the house.

“It’s not even nine in the morning,” I remind him.

He lets out a chuckle. “It’s night somewhere.”

I give Alexei a worried look, and then Dimitri explains, “It’s his way of celebrating.”

“Celebrating what?” I ask as we follow after Alexei.

“Not dying.”

Hell, I can’t argue with that.

DEMITRI

Ariana's handling everything so much better than I expected. She just keeps getting stronger the more they come at her.

It's a sight to behold. Like a Phoenix rising from the ashes.

We're all sitting at the dining table after having something to eat, and while the others talk, I stare at Ariana. She listens to what they say and asks questions when she doesn't understand anything.

Right now, Alexei is telling her that Ilia, Sergei's attorney, is coming to meet with her. "The weapons smuggling business won't be mentioned, of course."

"Right." Ariana lets out a chuckle. "Probably wouldn't be wise." She gives Alexei a questioning look. "Is there someone who can tell us about it? How do I take over?"

Alexei gestures at me. "Demitri and I will handle that part. We know who your father dealt with."

Ariana glances at me, and then she crosses her arms over her chest. "So, how much do you charge for your services, Mr. Vetrov?"

Remembering the conversation we had on the island about the same thing, I let out a burst of laughter, shaking my head.

"He's fucking expensive," Alexei comments, then he grins at me.

"Come on," Ariana insists. "If you're going to run the business for me, I need to know how much your fee will be."

"Ten million to get you settled," Alexei answers.

"Wait? What?" Ariana gasps, her eyes snapping to him. "I didn't hear you right." She places a hand over her heart, then asks, "Ten million? You're kidding?"

Alexei shakes his head. "I never joke when it comes to money."

Ariana glances between Alexei and me, and worry tightens her features. "Where the hell do you think I'm going to get ten million? I barely make

fifteen hundred a month. On a good month, I make two thousand.”

Her worry begins to change to panic, and it makes a dark frown form on my forehead. Placing my arm on the back of her chair, I lean closer to her. “Shh... deep breaths.”

She does as I say, then I explain, “The fee will come out of the business.”

She shakes her head hard. “It’s impossible that my father’s business makes that much.”

I move my hand to the back of her neck and slowly brush my thumb over her skin, and the touch makes her relax a little. “I’m assuming your father never discussed his finances with you?”

“No,” Ariana answers, her eyes locked on mine. “He just sends ten thousand every month, which I use for my mom’s nursing home.”

Christ, she’d go fucking hungry as long as her mom’s taken care of. If Sergei loved her so much, why didn’t he take better care of her?

“I’m getting her a drink. She’s going to need it,” Alexei says as he gets up.

The others also leave the table, giving us privacy.

Placing my other hand on her cheek, I explain, “Your father was a wealthy man. You’ll never have to worry about money again.”

Before Ariana can reply, Alexei comes back with the tumbler of vodka and Ilia, who must’ve just arrived.

I rise to my feet and shake the man’s hand, and after the introductions are over, Ilia gets right to business. He begins to read the long list of assets. Mainly Properties scattered over the world, and then he moves onto the investments in Switzerland and the main bank account.

“The total sum of movable cash comes to one-hundred-and-fifty-three million euros.”

Ariana grabs hold of my thigh, and her face pales dangerously. “I think I’m going to pass out.”

Alexei gets up and comes to hold the tumbler to her lips, helping her to drink the alcohol. She trembles lightly while we give her a moment to process the news. I pull Ariana to my chest and hold her for a minute.

When she’s feeling calmer, she pulls back and then starts to shake her head. “I can’t even begin to comprehend that amount. What? How?”

“My uncle is an accountant. He can help you manage your finances,” I say.

“There’s also a request from Sergei,” Ilia carries on, obviously needing to get this over so he can leave.

Ariana waves a hand in the air, slumping back against her chair. “Hit me.”

“Sergei approved an arranged marriage between Ariana and Alexei Koslov, with the clause that Mr. Koslov gets thirty percent of the profits the first ten years of their marriage and then sixty percent thereafter.”

A burst of laughter explodes from Ariana, and she has to wrap her arm around her waist. Alexei chuckles at her reaction. When Ariana reigns in her laughter, she shakes her head. “Yeah, no offense, Alexei, but that’s never going to happen.”

I roll my shoulders to get rid of the tension of just hearing Ariana, Alexei, and marriage in the same sentence.

“None taken,” he says. Then his eyes move to me before he looks at Ilia. “Same terms with an arranged marriage between Ariana and Demitri?”

“Uh...” Ariana begins to frown, all the laughter gone now.

“I’m sure Sergei would’ve agreed,” Ilia answers.

“Hold up,” Ariana leans forward. “Stop making plans as if I don’t have a say in this.”

Alexei turns his attention to Ariana, giving her a patient look. “Feel free to join in the discussion at any point.”

“Why the hell are we even talking about arranged marriage?” she snaps. “With the money I’m inheriting, I’ll be financially fine, and I can still give Demitri a percentage of the profits so he’ll run the business for me.” She gives Alexei a pointed look. “And I’m not going to discuss all of this in front of you.”

Oh. Fuck.

“I need to go,” Ilia says, rising to his feet. We shake his hand and watch as he rushes from the room.

It takes all my self-control to sit back and let this play out. Alexei is the one that makes the deals.

Alexei turns his chair to face Ariana, and he leans forward, his facial expression dead fucking serious. “Demitri is *my* custodian. You’re aware of that, right?”

Ariana nods, her eyes locked on Alexei.

“He’s also my business partner.”

“Okay.”

He leans closer still, and Ariana stiffens. “Every fucking decision comes through me. Do you understand, Ariana?”

“Loud and clear,” she bites out, and then she rises to her feet. She glances from me to Alexei, then asks, “How much for your protection until the problem with Yuri is taken care of?”

“Ten million,” Alexei answers.

Ariana nods and begins to walk away, but then she stops and turns back to us. “I think the bond between the two of you is amazing.” She focuses her attention on Alexei. “I’m not going to compete with you, because let’s face it, there’s no reality where I’ll win.” She takes a step closer to him, and

her features become hard with anger, “But don’t you ever try to intimidate or control me again. Last time I checked, I wasn’t fucking you.” Then her eyes snap to me, and I see the disappointment and hurt. “Shame on you for letting him talk to me like that.”

With the dignity of a Bratva princess, Ariana swings around and walks out of the room, and then Alexei leans back in his chair, a wide fucking smile on his face.

I tilt my head at him. “What the fuck was that?”

“That’s me creating a queen worthy of you, brother. If she can hold her own in front of me, she’ll be able to destroy whatever enemies come her way.” Alexei gets up and lets out a sigh, “Let’s face it, this is Ariana’s life now, and the sooner she embraces it, the better.”

I get up and shake my head at Alexei. “You were too hard on her.”

Alexei lets out a chuckle. “Yeah, I don’t think so. Did you see how she laid into us?” His expression grows serious again. “It’s your first instinct to protect, Demitri. Don’t clip her wings in the process.”

Chapter 25

ARIANA

I'm shaking inside as I shut the bedroom door behind me.

Holy shit, I can't believe I just said that to Alexei.

I shake out my hands that won't stop trembling and begin to pace up and down. I wish life would stop giving me whiplash. Just for one freaking day.

After the attack, I was certain about a relationship with Demitri, and now... now I'm sure things will never work between us. Alexei will always be Demitri's first priority.

Demitri made that clear when he just sat there while I was practically face to face with death.

The door opens, and I swing around. Demitri comes in, and shuts it behind him, and then we instantly fall into a stare-off.

Finally, he says, "This is how things are done in our world."

Seriously?

I pin him with my angriest glare. "Don't come at me with that crap." Lifting my chin, I bite out, "I'm Sergei Ivanov's daughter and heir." I take a step closer to him, squaring my shoulders. "My father's blood runs in my veins." I move even closer. "You and Alexei will treat me with the same respect you gave my father."

A freaking smile tugs at the corner of his mouth.

"Don't you dare smile," I warn him, quickly losing my shit. "I'm serious."

"I can see that," Demitri murmurs, his smile growing.

And it's the last straw that breaks the camel's back. All my anger, my fear, my pain – it hits me so hard I stagger back, and a sob bursts from me. I tighten my fists, fighting with the last of my strength to keep from crumbling to the floor.

Demitri grabs hold of my arm and yanks me to his chest, but I'm too upset with him. I shove against him, sobbing, "Don't touch me."

Of course, he doesn't listen and wraps his arms tightly around me. Letting out a frustrated scream, I strain against his hold. Like a bomb detonating, the shrapnel of my life rains down on me.

Demitri holds me as I fall apart from the unbearable weight on my shoulders.

I hate every tear as they burn like acid over my cheeks.

He moves his hands to the sides of my face, and with his thumbs, he brushes the tears away. "Don't cry, *Malyshka*." His strong arms engulf me again, and he presses kisses to my temple. "Christ, my heart can't handle this."

It takes a while before I'm able to calm down. Fisting Demitri's shirt, I breathe through the last sobs fluttering from my chest. My mind starts to work again, and I address the elephant between us.

I pull back, and Demitri moves his hands to my arms, rubbing his palms up and down my biceps.

I take another deep breath, and then I lift my eyes to his. "I get that the bond between the two of you is unbreakable, but I'm not going to fight Alexei for you."

Demitri shifts a hand to the side of my neck and tilts his head. "Alexei's not fighting you. This isn't about who's most important in my life."

I lift an eyebrow at him. "Could've fooled me. He practically pissed a circle around you."

“That’s not what he was doing,” he argues, then he explains, “Alexei was testing your strength, and you fucking held your own in front of him. Do you know how rare that is?”

“A test?” I mutter.

Demitri nods. “You’re taking over a powerful business, and Alexei’s preparing you for it. He doesn’t just do that for anyone. He’s grooming you, Ariana.” His features soften as he steps closer to me. “But, Alexei is the head of this family, and after the meeting, he’ll be the head of the Bratva. We all live by his rules.”

Hello, whiplash, my old friend.

“You represent the Ivanov name which means, just like all the other members, you’ll have to decide if you’re going to vote for Alexei or go against him.”

A shiver ripples down my spine, but I’m starting to understand what Demitri’s saying. Wanting clarity on what it would mean for a relationship between Demitri and me, I ask, “So if Alexei says jump, I ask how high? If he says we’re getting married, I have no choice in the matter?”

“Marry who? Alexei?” Demitri asks, his tone turning dark.

“Yes.”

“Fuck no.” Demitri takes a calming breath, then explains, “Alexei only has a say when it comes to business. Who you marry and how you live your life is your decision.”

“What happens the day Alexei and I have a fight... about...” I roll my eyes as I try to think of something, “ah... what we’re having for dinner?”

Demitri frowns at me. “What are you asking? Whose side will I choose?”

“Yes. Will you let us argue, or will you take Alexei’s side with everything?”

Understanding flashes over Demitri's features. "Alexei will never do anything to intentionally hurt you, so I'll never be in that position. I kept quiet because Alexei was talking business with you. If he got aggressive with you because you wanted chicken and he wanted steak, I'd step in." He leans a little down. "You're both important in different ways. This isn't a competition."

I nod, and still standing by what I said earlier, I demand, "I'm new to this world. Can you tell Alexei to tone it down a little? Having him give me the glare of death while he barks out orders doesn't fly with me."

Demitri frames my face again and presses a kiss to my forehead. "*Malyshka*, I'm not going to do that. Alexei was smiling like a proud fucking father after you told him to go to hell. He wants to make you stronger. He means well. Instead of seeing him as a threat, think of him as your teacher."

I let out a tired sigh. "I understand now, but the training session was unexpected. A head's up would've been nice."

I'm pulled back into a hug. "Are we good, or is there anything else you want to talk about?"

I shake my head and then rest my cheek against his chest. "Nothing else."

"So we're good?" he asks again.

I'm not sure.

There's a part of me that wants to run for the hills.

Instead of telling Demitri the truth, I whisper, "We're good."

DEMITRI

The way Ariana looked at me after the shootout is gone, and the hesitation is back. It feels like I'm taking one step forward and two steps back with her.

When we come down the stairs, Alexei's standing by the front door, staring outside. He glances over his shoulder, and seeing Ariana, he turns around and walks toward her. "Let's talk."

We head into the living room, and I stand to the side while they both sit down.

Alexei leans forward, and resting his forearms on his thighs, he presses the tips of his fingers together, and then he locks eyes with Ariana. She's tense as fuck, her features tight.

Ariana's the first to talk. "Demitri already explained everything to me."

"I don't want to talk about business," Alexei says.

"Then what?" she asks.

"Us." He gestures between the two of them. "You and me." Leaning back, Alexei rests one arm on the back of the couch. "As I've said before, I'll only get involved if you hurt Demitri. What I mean by that is if you betray him." His fingers flex, and he tilts his head. "But you and me, we're not at war for him. If I give you advice or try to steer you in the right direction, and you attack me for it, it places Demitri in an impossible situation."

"I wasn't the one who attacked first," Ariana says, her defenses going up at the speed of fucking light.

Alexei shakes his head. "Ariana, if I attacked, you wouldn't be breathing right now. I totally understand you're still getting to know us, so I'm going to spell it out for you."

She crosses her legs and lifts her chin.

I quickly jump into the conversation, explaining, “What Alexei’s trying to say is you each play an important but different role in my life. When it comes to business, as the head, he makes the decisions, but he’s not going to get involved in our relationship.”

Alexei brings a hand to his face, and rubbing his jaw, he says, “I don’t waste time with people who mean nothing to me, and I’ve never explained myself to anyone before. If you and Demitri become an item, you’ll be the most important woman in my life, next to my own wife, should I ever take one. That means, right now, you’re the most powerful woman in the fucking world. For you to do that position justice, I will train you because whatever you do is a reflection on me.”

He gives her a moment for the words to sink in, then continues, “I can count on my fingers how many allies I have. The rest of the fucking world is my enemy. To survive, I’ve become the most feared man. Everything I do is a strategic move to ensure I remain at the top of the food chain.” He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, “But I get that you don’t know me, and with time that will be rectified. I’ll learn what triggers your temper, and you’ll do the same with me, just like you and Demitri are getting to know each other.”

There’s a moment’s silence between them, then Ariana asks, “Can I be honest with you without you ripping my head off?”

Alexei nods. “Of course.”

“You made me feel threatened. Like you said, I’m just starting to learn how everything works, so can you take it down a notch? If you give any random person on the street the look you gave me, they’d be scared shitless.”

Ariana looks down at her hands, and then her shoulders slump. I move toward her, but Alexei shakes his head as he gets up, wanting to be the one

to comfort her.

Knowing this is a bonding moment for them, I pause and watch as he sits down next to her, placing his arm around her shoulders.

Pressing a kiss to the side of Ariana's head, he says, "I'll take it down a notch on one condition."

Ariana glances up at him. "What?"

"You work on becoming stronger. Never be afraid to stand up for yourself. Never back down in the face of danger. The harder the blows come, the more you have to fight back."

"I will." Ariana glances down, and when she brings her eyes back to Alexei's, there's a vulnerable expression that rips at my heart. "I really want to be friends with you."

Alexei gives her a playful look which is rare as fuck. "Think of me as an older brother."

Ariana's chin begins to quiver. "The last one I had is trying to kill me."

Alexei pulls her into a hug and then murmurs, "As long as you're loyal to me, I'll never betray you like that." He rubs a hand over her back, then asks, "So there are no more misunderstandings?"

Ariana pulls back, and the corner of her mouth lifts. "No, we're good." She scrunches her nose then says, "I'll even vote for you at the meeting."

He lets out a chuckle. "You better."

Moving to the other couch, I drop down on it, letting out a sigh. "The two of you are going to make me old." I lie down, then look at Ariana, "Come to me." She gets up and lies down beside me, and I wrap my arms around her.

"The meeting is at seven tonight," Alexei says as he gets up. "I'm going to relieve Carson."

When Alexei walks out of the living room, I bring a hand to Ariana's chin and force her to look up at me. "Better?"

"Much."

I stare into her eyes, and when they turn soft like they did after the shootout, the knot in my chest loosens. I move my hand up and trail my fingers over her temple and cheek.

"You understand that you and Alexei are both important to me, right? He'll never hurt you, but let's say the impossible happens, and Alexei does try to hurt you, I'll protect you. Even from him. But you have to understand it works both ways. If you try to hurt him, I'll be forced to stop you."

"I understand." She gives me a smile. "You're not picking a favorite. I get that."

I press a kiss to her lips, then the corner of my mouth lifts. "Still glad I kidnapped you?"

Ariana nods, then lays her cheek down on my shoulder. "I'll get the hang of it soon."

Chapter 26

ARIANA

While the others check the weapons, I take a quick shower. My stomach is tight with nerves, and by the time I wrap a towel around my body, my legs feel weak with stress.

This will be my first Bratva meeting, and I'll come face to face with Yuri.

God. That's if I don't die from hyperventilating.

Closing my eyes, I focus on slowing my breaths, but it doesn't help that it feels like my heart is being crushed in a forceful grip.

Demitri comes into the bathroom, and his eyes scan over the towel I'm clutching. "You okay?"

I take a deep breath and nod. "Just really nervous."

He moves closer to me and softly trails his fingers over my shoulder and up my neck. Leaning forward, he brushes his nose along my jaw, and I hear him taking a deep breath.

Goosebumps spread over my body, and having him touch me instantly eases my nerves.

His mouth skims over mine, then he murmurs, "Want a distraction?"

I nod fast, leaning in to try and kiss him, but instead, Demitri places an arm behind my back and another beneath my knees, lifting me to his chest.

He carries me to the bed and then drops me on the mattress, my head in the middle of the bed. Standing back, he takes hold of his shirt and pulls it over his head, ordering, "Towel off and open your legs wide."

Yes, Sir.

I do as he says while I watch him unzip his pants and step out of them. When Demitri is naked, I drink in the sight of him, my worry now a distant memory in the back of my mind.

Then he moves around the bed, and I tilt my head back as he comes to kneel behind me, his cock almost touching my hair.

Ah...okay?

There's a hot smirk on his face as he stares down at me, and then his eyes move over my body. He leans forward, pressing a kiss between my breasts, and then his hands join in, and my eyes drift closed from how good it feels. As he moves down to my abdomen, the head of his cock brushes over my forehead. I tilt my head back again, and opening my mouth, my tongue darts out to circle the swollen head.

"Christ," Demitri hisses against my skin. "Suck my cock into your mouth," he orders. I can only take a quarter of him, but feeling the velvety skin against my tongue and tasting him sends a flush of heat between my legs. "Yes, *Malyshka*, just like that," he praises me.

I'm so focused on sucking his cock I let out a muffled shriek when his mouth attacks my clit.

Demitri has no mercy as he sucks and bites at my sensitive flesh. I repay the favor by wrapping my hand around his base and stroking him while I suck as hard as I can.

It becomes a battle of who can make the other one orgasm first. I'm going to lose, but I give it my all.

My moans vibrate against his hard length, and his thrusts begin to speed up, the head of his cock flirting with my throat while his tongue dives into my entrance, swiveling and stroking me into another universe.

My hips buck up, and I shamelessly rub myself against his mouth.

When Demitri's mouth clamps down on my clit, and he enters me with two fingers, my body tenses, and right as I begin to convulse, he thrusts hard and fast, bypassing my gag reflex until I feel him deep in my throat.

He lets out primal grunts as he prolongs my orgasm by sucking my clit and fingering me, and then my throat has to work to swallow as he comes.

"That's right, *Malyshka*." His words vibrate against my pussy. "Take every last drop." And then he laps at me, doing the same.

I begin to run really low on air, struggling to focus on everything and breathing through my nose. Right before I'm in danger of blacking out, Demirti pulls out of my throat as if he knew exactly how much time he had.

He moves back as I suck in desperate breaths of air, and then his mouth slams down on mine, and I taste myself on his tongue.

His palms settle hard on my breasts, and he massages them while he kisses the living hell out of me.

When he finally pulls back and stares down at me, he asks, "Feeling better?"

I'm lying on the bed like a limp noodle, my legs spread wide and my body tingling with the aftershocks of pleasure. "Huh?"

"How're the nerves?"

"What nerves?" I ask, still trying to catch my breath.

Demitri lets out a chuckle and presses a quick kiss to my lips, and then he whispers, "Your throat is just as tight as your pussy."

God.

As if I didn't just come apart at the seams, my abdomen tightens, and I clench my legs together with need.

I watch as Demitri climbs off the bed and walks to the bathroom, and then I stare up at the ceiling, reliving what just happened between us.

That was freaking hot.

I grin like an idiot until my thoughts wander to the talk between Alexei and me. I appreciate Alexei explaining things to me, and I know it's an adjustment period for all of us. But I'm unsure if a relationship between Demitri and me can work in the long run.

I totally get that Alexei has a say in all the business decisions and that my personal life is still my own. I also understand they're super close, but... I just don't want to be a third wheel to their bromance.

Letting out a sigh, I know for things to work between Demitri and me, I'll first have to learn to get along with Alexei. I wasn't lying when I said I'd like to be friends.

I'm just worried Alexei will never actually accept me because he's overprotective of Demitri.

I guess only time will tell.

DEMITRI

When we're ready to leave, we all gather in the courtyard, waiting for Alexei.

He comes out of the house, dressed in a three-piece black suit that fits him like a second skin. Smirking, he says, "Dressed to *kill*."

I let out a chuckle, then walk toward one of the SUVs. "Come on, let's do this."

I open the back door for Ariana, who looks absolutely stunning in black pants and a red silk top. She's wearing heels and a black coat to complete her Bratva princess look.

Before she climbs inside, I hold a Heckler and Koch out to her. She stares at the gun for a moment, and then her slender fingers wrap around it.

“Remember to take off the safety before shooting and don’t aim at one of us.”

She lets out a chuckle and rolls her eyes at me. “I know.” Then she smiles down at the gun before bringing her eyes back to mine. “Thank you. I feel safer having it.”

I wait for her to climb into the back, then shut the door.

When we’re all ready, Alexei starts the engine and steers the vehicle through the gates, with Damien, Carson, and Winter following behind us.

I should be thinking of the meeting, but I’m worried about Ariana and whether she’ll be able to fit into our way of life. It was easy for Winter because she was born into the Irish Mafia and Damien became her custodian instead of Carson’s.

But with Ariana, it’s different. She has to share me with Alexei, and I’m not sure she’s willing to do that.

My thoughts are inundated with the worry over where things will go between Ariana and me, and Alexei picks up on my tension because he asks, “You okay?”

“Yes.” I nod and scan my eyes over our surroundings.

As we pull up to the warehouse where the meeting will be held, I’m not hundred percent focused. I glance over the area where other armored vehicles are already parked.

Everyone will be heavily armed tonight.

Get your head back in the game, Demitri.

I take a deep breath to ground myself, and as Alexei parks the SUV, I say, “Ariana, stay with Alexei at all times. No matter what happens.”

“Okay.”

I'm on high alert as I push the door open and get out of the vehicle. My eyes meet Damien's, and we nod at each other. Tonight it's up to the two of us to keep our group alive.

Winter stays near Carson while Ariana sticks to Alexei's side. I take the lead while Damien brings up the rear as we walk into the warehouse.

Four groups wait for us, and when I see Ilia standing to the side of Yuri, my eyes narrow. Sergei's right-hand man already chose a side.

So that's why he couldn't leave fast enough earlier.

"Aww... did we keep you waiting?" Alexei taunts them. "My apologies."

"Glad to see you brought her," Yuri mutters as he takes a step forward, not even looking at Ariana.

"Coward," Ariana says, her tone icy. "We're blood. I would've let you have everything."

Yuri ignores her and keeps his eyes on Alexei. "This misunderstanding can be cleared out of the way, just hand her over."

"What misunderstanding?" Alexei asks. "Ariana is the heir to everything Sergei owned. This is business, Yuri. I'll help her take over everything for a fee. You have nothing to offer me." Alexei lets out a threatening chuckle. "You're just in the way of me becoming the head of the Bratva."

A murmur spreads through the other men, and Andrei Nicollaj, the oldest member, takes a step forward. "What makes you think you're the best option for the position? By right, if not an Ivanov, I should take over as head of the Bratva."

"No one's stopping you from trying, Andrei," Alexei taunts him. "Let me give you a friendly warning, you either kneel or die. I'll make it quick out of respect."

Andrei's face darkens with anger, but before he can say anything, Yuri orders, "Let's settle the minor inconvenience of the girl, and then we can vote."

Lifting my hand, I rub the barrel of my gun against my temple, then say, "The *girl*, Ariana, belongs to me. You have to come through me to get to her."

Yuri's eyes snap to me. "An arranged marriage?"

Slowly, I shake my head. "No, I don't have to force her."

"Love?" Yuri lets out a burst of amused laughter. "How the mighty has fallen." He shrugs. "So be it."

Ilia's hand flies up, and in a split second, everything registers. Ariana moves in front of Alexei to cover him. I lunge to the side to shield them both with my body as I pull the trigger.

Gunfire erupts in the warehouse, and a line gets drawn in the sand on who's taking which side. I take out Ilia with a shot to the head while pulling my other gun from behind my back. Taking aim at Yuri with my Heckler and Koch, I use my Glock to fire a shot at one of his men, and then as Yuri ducks to avoid a bullet, I pull the trigger, hitting him in the throat. I keep firing, emptying my clip on him as he sinks to the concrete floor.

I'm so focused on watching Yuri drown in his own blood that one of his men gets off two shots. I lunge in front of Alexei and Ariana and then stagger back from the bullets slamming into my chest and stomach. Ignoring the pain, I take out the man with a shot between the eyes.

As the life begins to seep from my body, I fight with every last bit of strength I have to take down the threats to Ariana and Alexei.

For a moment, there's only chaos until Damien and Carson fire the last shots, and then there's a hiss in the air, the scent of gunpowder hanging thick around us.

I manage to glance over the dead bodies of the fallen Bratva, making sure they stay down while a scorching pain begins to numb my body.

Semion Aulov and Lev Petrov stood with us. Together with Alexei, Damien, and Carson, a new era for the Bratva will be born.

Knowing the immediate threat has been dealt with, it feels like I'm moving in slow motion as I turn to check on Ariana and Alexei. My feet feel numb, my legs growing weaker as the adrenaline fades and the blood flows from my wounds.

I take in that the two people I love more than anything are unharmed, and then my eyes move to find Damien.

"Everyone okay?" Alexei asks as he glances at the group.

My eyes lock on my brother, and I see he's not hurt.

Thank God. They're all okay.

Damien instantly explodes into a run toward me, shouting, "No!"

Alexei's head turns to me, and then he darts forward to catch me as I sink to my knees. "Demitri! Christ!"

When Alexei's eyes lock on mine, I see fear on his face.

He's never shown fear before.

He presses a hand over the bullet wound to my chest, "Hold on, brother."

My eyes stay locked with his.

Two bullets. One for Alexei and one for Ariana. I did what I was always meant to do. I protected them with my life.

"Carson, take Ariana," Alexei shouts, and as I cough and my vision blurs, Alexei wraps his arms around me, pulling me back to my feet. "Hold on. Please." Hearing him beg makes me try.

Fuck, I try with everything left in me.

My blurring sight falls on Ariana, where she's staring at me. She's frozen in shock, barely blinking, raw anguish etched into her beautiful features, and I wish I had the strength to comfort her.

You'll be okay, Malyshka. Alexei will watch over you on my behalf.

With Alexei on my right and Damien on my left, the world fades to black.

Chapter 27

ARIANA

My ears ring. The sound is deafening.

My eyes are locked on Demitri, the blood darkening his shirt.

I can't register it.

I'm surrounded by death, my brother lying dead nearby, blood forming pools on the cold floor.

I can't...

Demitri.

An arm wraps around me, and I'm forced to move, my burning gaze following Alexei and Damien, supporting Demitri, as they run out of the warehouse.

Like a magnet, I'm pulled forward, hurrying to catch up with them. Someone yanks me away, and I struggle against the hold.

I hear my voice, but it sounds distant as if I'm no longer a part of my own body. "I'm going with Demitri!" When the person forces me further away, I scream, "Alexei!"

"Let her come to me," Alexei shouts, and I'm freed from the strong hold. I dart forward, running toward Alexei, where he's placing Demitri in the back seat of the SUV. When I reach them, Alexei looks at me. "Get in." I do as he says, moving onto my knees next to Demitri. Alexei leans past me, and taking my hands, he presses them to Demitri's chest and stomach. "Keep pressure on the wounds."

I nod frantically as I use whatever strength I can dig up to stop the bleeding.

Alexei climbs behind the steering wheel while Damien takes the passenger side, already making a call to wherever we're taking Dimitri.

The tires screech as Alexei reverses, and then the SUV darts forward, and I fight to keep my hands pressed to Dimitri's wounds. His head rolls to the side, falling against my bicep.

Turning my head, I press my mouth to his hair.

God.

My body begins to shake as flashes rip through me. Ilia aiming at Alexei and me. I just reacted, knowing how important Alexei is to Dimitri. I don't know who took the first shot.

Alexei shoved me down to his feet, and then... then... the blasts echoed loudly.

I looked for Dimitri and saw him shoot at Yuri.

I watched as this man, who I only met three weeks ago, killed my brother. I felt nothing. There was no relief. No satisfaction.

Alexei yanked me up and behind him, and then the gunfight died down as quickly as it started.

I gasp as I remember Dimitri turning around and seeing the blood. His face was already too pale.

My body shudders, and closing my eyes, it feels like my soul is being ripped from my body.

"Please," I whimper. "Don't leave me."

I begin to pepper kisses to Dimitri's clammy forehead, my lungs desperately trying to function when all I want to do is shut down.

I survived my mom getting Alzheimer's and forgetting me.

I survived my dad dying.

I survived my brother wanting me dead.

I won't survive losing Dimitri.

Please.

Not you. I can lose everything but you.

Alexei brings the SUV to a jarring stop outside a dilapidated house, and I have to move quickly to get out of the way so he and Damien can pull Dimitri from the car.

I hear another vehicle and see Carson and Winter stop next to us, and then I run after Alexei and Damien as they carry Dimitri into the house.

A middle-aged man who looks more like a butcher than a doctor shows them to a room where an elderly woman and man wait. Alexei and Damien place Dimitri on a slab of steel, and then Damien pushes me away from the doorway.

My mind is crystal clear, and I even notice the dustmotes hanging in the air.

Alexei comes out of the room and pulls the door shut behind him, and then he stares at the blood on his hands.

“They’ll... they’ll save him, right?” I ask, not recognizing my voice.

Slowly Alexei lifts his eyes to mine, and there’s no sign of the deadly assassin. He can only nod at me, but the fear on his face gives me a different answer.

Unlike the times before when I got terrible news, I’m unable to break down. It’s as if I’m suspended in time, and the only way I can move forward is with Dimitri by my side.

“How the fuck did he get shot?” Damien snaps angrily. “It’s fucking impossible!”

Alexei turns, and as he walks down the narrow hallway, he mutters, “Dimitri was distracted.”

Like a moth following a flame, hoping it will lead her to the sun, I follow after Alexei.

'Demitri was distracted.'

We walk into a bathroom, and I hover near Alexei as he washes the blood off his hands. Then he turns to me, and taking hold of my wrist, he pulls me to the sink and cleans my hands, as well.

The water turns bright red, then pink, and then clear.

'Demitri was distracted.'

Because I fought with Alexei earlier?

Because I was there?

Because he was worried for my safety?

Guilt eats a hole in my soul, and it begins to spread like cancer.

Demitri was distracted because of me.

Hours have passed where I sit like a frozen statue next to Alexei.

Damien's pacing a hole in the floor while Winter and Carson keep watch.

When Alexei gets up, my body mimics his, and I rise to my feet. Pins and needles spread through my legs, but they move, following Alexei down the hallway until we stop outside the room where Demitri is being operated on.

Alexei turns to me, and when our eyes meet, the raw agony between us becomes explosive, and then he grabs hold of my shoulder and yanks me against him. His arms clamp around me.

I hug Alexei back, knowing he's the other half of Demitri's heart.

There's no comfort, though. Only Demitri can give me that. But there is compassion because if it feels like my world just ended, it must be so much harder for Alexei.

When the door opens, Alexei yanks back and turns his attention to the doctor.

They speak in Russian, and then Alexei takes my hand, and we get to go into the room.

The moment my eyes land on Demitri, where he's hooked up to machines, silent tears begin to spiral over my cheeks.

Alexei moves to Demitri's side and presses a kiss to his forehead. "You better pull through, brother. I can't do any of this without you."

My tears flow faster as I take in the two bandages on Demitri's torso. The blood on the floor. The used materials.

"What did the doctor say?" I somehow manage to ask.

"We have to wait and see," Alexei answers, his eyes not leaving Demitri.

I step closer and tentatively reach for Demitri's hand. His skin is surprisingly warm as I wrap my fingers around his palm.

The doctor and elderly couple come back with fans, and they position them around Demitri. They say something to Alexei, then the old woman begins to rub Demitri down with a sponge.

"They need to bring down his temperature," Alexei explains.

Damien moves to the old woman and saying something, he takes the sponge from her and continues to wipe his brother down. I stare at the younger version of Demitri, and seeing him healthy makes the cancer eat away faster at my soul.

My eyes lower back to Demitri's face, his complexion drained of color. I don't know for how long I stand and stare at him. I'm not sure if I'm still silently crying or not.

It's as if my will to live is gone.

Alexei places his hands on my shoulders, and I'm forced down into a chair next to the steel slab Demitri's lying on. Then Alexei takes a seat next to me, and pressing a hand to the side of my head, he forces me to lean on his shoulder.

My eyes don't leave Demitri, who's become unspeakably important to me in such a short amount of time.

Not because he kept me safe, but because I fell harder than he did. I just managed to hide it.

When I saw him at the Starbucks, there was an instant attraction. Even though we fought like cats and dogs the first couple of days we were on the island, my attraction for him became affection.

Every time he was gentle with me, placing his hand on my neck, kissing my hair or forehead, checking if I was okay – I fell harder.

Demitri was right when he said we shouldn't label what's between us. There's no name for it, and every day the feelings just grow deeper. So deep it's impossible to just call it love.

You can love someone and not trust them.

You can love someone and not feel like you'll die if they don't touch you.

You can love and survive if you lose them.

Closing my burning eyes, I lean more into Alexei. He places an arm around my shoulders and then presses a kiss to the top of my head, and I can almost imagine it's Demitri, but then I open my eyes again and see him lying so still it looks unnatural.

Panic flares through me, shining a bright light on the fact that Demitri might not make it. It slams the air out my lungs, and I gasp as the most unbearable emotion I've ever felt flays me to the bone.

The realization that Demitri isn't a god but a mortal and that he might die kills the last of my innocence. Coming face to face with death leaves me feeling powerless.

Please. Not Demitri.

I'll do anything.

This man walked into my life, and he changed me forever. I can't live without him.

God, I'll give anything to swap places with him.

Take me instead.

Chapter 28

ARIANA

The sun has come up and set again, and even though the doctor said Demitri's out of the woods, it doesn't feel that way.

Alexei's just as quiet as me. I haven't left his side. When he gets up, I do the same and follow him like a lost puppy.

I think he needs me just as much as I need him. Every couple of minutes, he reaches out to touch my shoulder or back.

Winter brings a plate of sandwiches, and I shake my head, turning my gaze back to Demitri's too still body.

"We don't want to, but we have to," Alexei murmurs as he holds a sandwich out to me. "Eat, little one. You need your strength for when Demitri wakes up."

Not if, but when.

Reluctantly, I take the food from Alexei, and we both chew and swallow it down as if it's mud.

When we're done forcing the food down, I lean my head against Alexei's shoulder again, and he rests his cheek against my hair.

"He's going to be okay, right?" I ask for the hundredth time.

"Yes," Alexei answers patiently.

During the past day, things changed between Alexei and me. We've moved from being contenders for Demitri's attention to being friends, bound by the love of a man who was willing to die for us.

It's late at night when Demitri begins to stir, and Alexei, Damien, and I dart to our feet, surrounding him.

Alexei places his hand next to Dimitri's head and leans over him.
"Dimitri?"

It takes another minute before Dimitri opens his eyes, and the sight of his dark irises knocks the breath from me with relief.

"Hey..." Alexei murmurs, pure relief on his face. "Can you hear me?"

"I was shot... not deaf," Dimitri grumbles, strain on his features as he begins to move, trying to sit up.

"No, stay down," Alexei orders.

Dimitri shakes his head, to which Alexei says, "It's my turn to guard you."

"You're too expensive," Dimitri manages to joke, the corner of his mouth even lifting.

And it all comes crashing down on me. Now that I've seen he's going to pull through, I crumble like a house of cards. Covering my mouth with a trembling hand, I spin around and flee out of the room. I make it to the toilet just in time as my body begins to convulse, the bitter tension and shock of the past twenty-four hours being expelled from my body.

A moment later, Alexei crouches next to me, and I want to tell him to go back to Dimitri, but I'm in no condition to talk.

When my body stops convulsing, Alexei uses a facecloth he found somewhere and ran under cold water to wipe over my face, and then he presses my head to his chest.

Sitting on a filthy floor, with Alexei comforting me, was the last thing I ever saw coming. In his darkest hour, he's there for me like he'd be there for Dimitri.

I finally manage to say, "Go back to Dimitri."

"He's asleep again." Alexei rises to his feet, pulling me up as well. Tilting his head, he locks eyes with me. "Dimitri's the strongest man I

know. He'll be fine. Okay?"

I'm pulled back to his chest, and he hugs me. I nod, even though it doesn't feel like anything will be fine ever again.

Demitri and Alexei fit each other perfectly, and because of me, Demitri got shot.

If I weren't here, they'd still be the perfect team, instead of Demitri almost dying.

No matter how much I love Demitri, it won't change the fact that I'm the one who doesn't belong in his life. I'm a risk, and I can't stand the idea of Demitri dying because of me.

I pull back from Alexei, and he waits for me to rinse out my mouth. With a bitter taste in the back of my throat, I follow him to the room Demitri's in.

Alexei takes a seat while I move closer to Demitri, wrapping my fingers around his palm that's cool now. His fingers instantly flex, and then his eyes drift open, and they lock on me.

He manages a weak smile, and I have to fight hard to not start sobbing.

"Kiss me," he whispers.

I shake my head and swallow hard. Instead, I lean down and press a kiss above the bandage to his chest. He smells like antiseptic, where I'm the one that smells like death.

Pulling back, I force a smile around my lips, and brushing my fingers down the side of his face, I soak in the feel of him.

"Just get better, okay." I keep touching him, unable to pull back.

"I'm already better," he says, his voice calm compared to the storm raging in me.

The man is seriously made of steel because he turns his eyes to Alexei and asks, "When can we leave?"

“Tomorrow, we’ll go back to the compound. You need to get stronger before we make the flight back to LA.”

I have a couple of days, probably a week at most, with Demitri, and then I’ll have to return to my own life.

The thought clears my mind of all the heartbreak and worry and forces me to focus only on Demitri. On now. On the precious time, I’ve been given to say goodbye.

DEMITRI

I’m not going to lie, it’s a fucking struggle getting back to the compound, and by the time I lie down on the bed, my body’s covered in sweat and burning with pain.

Alexei tucks me in like I’m a damn kid while Ariana runs to get water and painkillers for me.

“You holding up okay?” Alexei asks, his voice tight with worry.

“Stop this shit. I’m fine,” I grumble.

Alexei sits down on the side of the bed and then just stares at me. “You gave me one hell of a scare. What went wrong?”

“The guy got a lucky shot,” I try to play it down.

He shakes his head. “Don’t lie to me.”

I try to take a deep breath, but the pain in my chest stops me, and I wince. “I was focused on taking Yuri down.”

Ariana comes rushing back into the room, and Alexei gets up so she can help me take the meds. Then she’s up again to get a cool, wet cloth from the

bathroom. While she wipes the sweat from my face, I try to catch her eyes, but she avoids making eye contact.

My body's too weak to stay awake, and with Ariana's scent wrapped around me, I drift off.

Every time I wake up, Alexei and Ariana are by my side, and then I'm dragged back to sleep.

It's early morning when I finally wake up enough to make sense of my surroundings. Alexei's asleep where he's sitting on a chair with his feet resting on the side of the bed. Turning my head to the left, I find Ariana staring at me, curled up on the far side of the mattress.

"Hey," I murmur.

She pushes herself up, and scooting closer to me, she places her hand on my forehead, then asks, "How do you feel? Do you need anything?"

It feels as if every drop of moisture is gone from my mouth, and I whisper, "Water."

I watch as she picks up a glass from the bedside table, and then she pushes her hand beneath my head and helps me so I can take a couple of sips.

Fuck, this is frustrating. I've never been helpless before, and it makes my temper spike.

"Alexei," I snap, and he startles awake. "Help me sit up."

He darts up, and placing his hands beneath my armpits, he gently pulls me up. Ariana positions pillows behind me, and then he settles me against them.

And I fucking hate it.

Christ.

Anger flares hot through me.

Alexei places his hand on my shoulder. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head.

I'm the one who takes care of them. It's not supposed to be the other way around.

Pissed off that I'm useless to Alexei and Ariana, I push my body hard and try to get up.

Alexei grabs hold of my right shoulder. "Why are you angry? Calm your ass down and relax."

It takes more energy than I have to smack Alexei's hand away, and then I glare at him. "I'm not staying in this fucking bed."

When I try to move again, Ariana takes hold of my left arm to hold me back, and my head turns to her as I bite out, "Let go of me."

There's a flash of hurt on her face, and then she moves closer and pushes me back down.

It makes a frustrated growl ripple from my chest.

Ariana places her hands on my jaw and leaning over me, her face is right by mine. "Shh..." She presses a kiss to my mouth. "Calm down. Please." She kisses me again, and it douses the anger, making the fire die down to a smolder. "Don't push yourself like this." Another kiss, and then she brushes her nose over my cheek to my ear. "I've got you, baby. Let me look after you."

Lifting an arm, I take hold of her wrist. "Stay next to me."

"I'm right here, baby." Ariana lies down against my side, careful not to jar my body, and places her palm against my jaw again.

She continues to whisper to me until I'm dragged away by sleep once more.

Chapter 29

ARIANA

I only managed to keep Demitri in bed another day, and then he wouldn't have any of it no matter what I said.

Holy crap, he's a difficult patient.

Demitri's moodiness has made me forget about my own problems because if I turn my back, he's forcing himself to walk around.

I just get back from using the restroom when I catch Demitri on his feet again. "Oh my God. Sit your ass down!"

He shoots me a deadly glare as he moves back to the couch.

"Don't give me that look. It doesn't work on me anymore," I say as I move closer, and lifting his shirt, I check the bandages. This morning one came loose because his stubborn ass wouldn't listen to me. "If you don't stop getting up, I'm going to have Alexei tie your ass down to this chair."

Just then, Alexei comes into the living room with two plates of food. He must've heard my threat because he chuckles. "Say the word, and it's done."

"You're taking her side?" Demitri mutters. "The sooner I'm back on my feet, the sooner these goddamn wounds will heal."

"Not if your stitches rip loose," I snap at him as I take the two plates of food from Alexei.

"Need me to hold him down while you feed him?" Alexei asks me.

I scowl at Demitri. "Do I?"

"Just give me the damn plate," he grumbles. "Fucking ridiculous."

Alexei chuckles again, then looks at me. "I have a meeting to attend, then I'll take over watching him while you get some rest."

"What?" Dimitri growls, setting the plate of food aside and pushing himself back to his feet. "You're not going anywhere without me."

Luckily Damien comes into the living room, saying, "Carson and I are going with Alexei. Sit your ass down."

Dimitri hesitates, then sinks down on the couch again, sweat beading on his forehead from all the unnecessary strain he's placing on his body.

Alexei pats Dimitri's shoulder. "Eat your food. I'll be back in an hour."

Clearly unhappy, Dimitri watches as Alexei leaves the room with Damien.

Picking up his plate of food, I sit down next to him and scoop some mash and gravy onto the fork. When I lift the utensil to his mouth, he gives me a dark look. "I can feed myself."

Stubborn jerk.

I hand him his food then watch as he takes a bite.

"Are you always this grumpy when you're sick?" I ask as I grab my own plate of food.

"I've never been sick."

I stare at Dimitri, realizing he's probably never had anyone take care of him. He's the one taking care of everyone, and now he doesn't know what to do with himself.

"Baby," I say, and when he turns his head to me, I lift my hand and place it on his jaw, "You've done so much for me. Please, let me do this one thing for you. It makes me feel needed."

He takes hold of my forearm and presses a kiss to the inside of my wrist, and then he nods.

"So no more biting my head off and giving me glares."

He nods again as he scoops more food onto his fork.

I reach for the remote and turn on the TV. It's all in Russian, though, and I hand Demitri the remote. "Find us something to watch, and then you can translate it for me."

Demitri scrolls through the programs, and then he stops on a show as it starts.

We finish eating, and I set our plates on the coffee table, and then I take hold of Demitri's hand and listen as he translates. Soon I'm clutching his hand because it turns out we're watching a zombie movie, but they're not the real threat. Instead, the army is killing people left, right, and center. I'm loving the suspense.

Hoping to make Demitri feel better, I shriek and bury my face against his shoulder every time a gruesome part comes on, even though *The Walking Dead* is one of my all-time favorite shows.

During one scene, I actually get a chuckle from him, and I feel pleased that I've succeeded in my mission.

"How are you scared of this, but you watch that vampire show?"

I grin up at Demitri. "The vampires are hot."

I get another chuckle from him before he continues to translate what the actors are saying.

Before the show is over, Alexei comes back, and I feel Demitri relax next to me.

"Did everything go okay?" he asks Alexei, who takes a seat on the other couch.

I switch off the TV as Alexei answers, "Yes. Semion and Lev will take over Andrei's business, so they're happy. I told them you'll be taking Sergei's business on behalf of Ariana."

"So it's official?" Demitri asks. "You're head of the Bratva?"

“I am.”

The two men stare at each other and feeling like I’m intruding on a private moment between them, I pick up the plates and take them to the kitchen.

The moment I’m alone, my thoughts turn to my problems. When we get back to the States, I’ll have to leave Dimitri, and just thinking about it breaks my heart.

Right now, I can still hide from it, but too soon, I’ll have to face the horrible truth that my being with him places him at risk.

I won’t survive it if Dimitri dies because of me.

I’d rather leave him and know he’s alive.

I’ll love him from a safe distance.

DEMITRI

The trip back to LA was exhausting, and having someone else fly the plane only increased my frustration.

I’m used to doing everything myself, and letting other people take care of me is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life.

As we walk into my and Alexei’s house, Ariana glances around at the luxurious furnishings and expensive art.

“Wow, this is your home?”

“Yes.”

Sacha, who works alongside Nikhil as our backup security, walks toward us. After we’ve greeted each other, he heads to the security room with Alexei.

“Let me show you our room,” I say, placing my hand on Ariana’s lower back. I take her to the left wing, where my bedroom is, and when we step inside, we put our bags down by the foot of the bed.

Ariana will move in here with me. But I’m putting off that talk because I can feel something’s bothering her.

Ariana glances around then says, “I didn’t expect your home to look like this.”

“Like what?”

She shrugs. “Like a home. I was expecting a bachelor pad with weapons decorating the walls.”

Chuckling, I say, “The weapons are in the armory.”

“Right.” She smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. She’s been tense ever since we left Russia.

It’s been two weeks since I got shot, and my strength is returning faster by the day. Ariana’s been the perfect nurse, taking care of all my needs. But her smiles are too wide. The happy tone she injects into her voice is fake. She’s putting on one hell of a show, and I’m trying to figure out why.

I watch as Ariana walks to the window, staring out over the backyard.

I move to her side, and lifting my hand, I brush strands of hair out of her face, then ask, “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

She pretends to give me a what-are-you-talking-about look, then says, “Nothing’s wrong.”

I keep staring at her, and after a minute or so, she mutters, “You’re staring.”

“I am,” I murmur.

“Do you want to show me the rest of the house?” she asks, trying to divert my attention. I catch her arm before she can try to walk away.

“No.” My eyes don’t leave her face. “I want you to be honest with me.”

She shrugs. "I am. Nothing's wrong."

Taking hold of her shoulders, I turn her, so she's facing me, then I tilt my head to meet her eyes. "Talk to me."

She shakes her head, and I see the crack in the walls she's slammed up around herself when the corners of her mouth tense.

I move my hand to her chin and force her to make eye contact with me. Slowly more cracks appear, and then her chin quivers. She swallows hard, pulling her face out of my hold. Looking out the window, she says, "It's just been a really long six weeks."

I keep staring, and it has her finally admitting, "It's been hard, Demetri. You getting shot was an eye-opener." She begins to lightly shake her head, the mask falling from her face, and the pain she's been hiding from me is now clearly etched into her features. "It made everything real. I think I was living in this bubble where I thought nothing can hurt me as long as you're there. I never thought you could die."

I brush my hand over her hair as she takes a deep breath, and then she continues, "I thought I could be a part of your world, but I can't."

My muscles tighten, and it sends a wave of pain through my chest that has nothing to do with the healing wounds. Bringing my other hand to her face, I take a step closer to her, my eyes locked on hers.

Ariana swallows hard, and her voice trembles as she says, "A relationship between us can never work, Demetri. Our worlds are too far apart." Her eyes begin to tear up. "I'd appreciate it if you manage the business for me. I'll leave all the decisions to you."

Her mouth is saying one thing while her eyes are telling me it's killing her to lie to me.

"Don't lie to me, *Malyshka*."

Ariana pulls back and puts some space between us. “I’m not.” Waving a hand between us, she continues, “If I got into a relationship with you, I would have to change my entire life. You don’t have to change a thing.”

I feel the first trickle of panic as it begins to sink in – Ariana might really want to leave.

Lifting my hand to my jaw, I brush my thumb over my bottom lip before I move closer to her again. I stare deep into her eyes, searching for the real reason why she’s doing this.

“If you really want to leave, you’re going to have to give me the truth. I see right through your lies.”

She waves around the room, her features tightening. “I can’t live like this. I’m selfish. I want all the attention, and Alexei will always be too important to you.”

This time the words rip right through my heart.

Chapter 30

ARIANA

Demitri closes the distance between us with two quick strides, and then his hands frame my face, and he leans into me.

I see the hurt in his eyes, and it shreds at my already broken heart.

God, this is so hard. Give me the strength to do what's right for him.

"Don't do this, *Malyshka*. I thought you and Alexei were getting along."

We are. We bonded a hell of a lot when Demitri got shot. That night we sat next to Demitri, fearing for the worst, it changed things between Alexei and me. Since then, he's treated me like a little sister and not like I'm a threat to Demitri. Even though I am.

"It's not that I don't get along with Alexei. I just don't want to share the man I'm supposed to be in a relationship with."

If he doesn't fall for this lie, I don't know what I'll do.

Demitri shakes his head, his eyes intense on me. "Stop, Ariana. You're not a selfish person. Why are you really doing this?"

I close my eyes, unable to feel his breath on my face and look at him, without breaking down and begging him to never let me go.

Pulling back again, I force the words out, "You don't know me as well as you think you do. I stuck it out with you because Yuri was trying to kill me. I really appreciate all you've done, but it's all over now. There's no reason for me to be here."

Still, Demitri doesn't believe me, and he gives me a look of warning. "Stop this shit."

“It’s not shit,” I cry, my emotions bubbling over. Sticking as close to the truth as possible without telling Demitri the real reason, I scream, “I’m scared! You terrify me.”

His features soften instantly, and once again, he closes the distance between us and wraps his arms tightly around me. He presses a kiss to the side of my head. “I’d never hurt you. You have to know that after everything we’ve been through.”

“You live this insane life where you’re being shot at and killing people.” In a moment of weakness, I press closer to him, just wanting to stay in his arms. “You’re intense, and it overwhelms me. I can’t think straight long enough to figure out how I feel about you. It’s too much. All the time.”

It’s not. I love every minute with you. I’d give anything for a chance to stay with you, but not at the expense of your life.

I shut my eyes as I tell my biggest lie, “I don’t even know if what I feel for you is real or just a bad case of Stockholm syndrome.”

Demitri’s arms tighten around me, and then he presses another kiss to my temple before he pulls back to meet my eyes. “Then take some time to figure that out.”

“I can’t do that here. I want to go home.” It will be easier to break things off with him over the phone.

Demitri’s eyes bore into mine, and then he finally nods. “On one condition.”

“What?” I whisper.

“Nikhil guards you.”

Knowing I might be attacked because I inherited everything from my father, and his enemies might come after me, I nod. “Okay.”

Demitri gives me a pleading look. “I’ll give you the time you need, but I’m not giving up on us.”

“It’s only been six weeks,” I say, my voice straining from the tears I’m fighting to hold back.

He shakes his head lightly, his eyes filled with emotion. “It doesn’t change the fact that I love you.”

Oh, God.

My heart.

I just want to run into his arms and tell him I love him too. Instead, I stand rooted to the spot and fist my hands at my sides.

Be strong, Ariana.

For Dimitri.

You can fall apart once you’re back in Seattle.

My voice is hoarse when I say, “You’re an incredible man, Dimitri. I’ll always be thankful for everything you did for me.”

He nods, and then I walk to get my luggage, and standing with my back to him, I say, “I’d like to go home now.”

It’s getting impossibly hard to keep up this act.

DEMITRI

The pain I suffered from the gunshot wounds is nothing compared to what I’m feeling as I drive Ariana to the private airfield where the jet is being readied to take her back to Seattle.

Give her the time she needs. She’s been through a fuck-ton of shit and just needs to process it all.

All I want to do is take her back to the house and lock her in my fucking bedroom. But I can’t do that. I can’t force Ariana to stay.

I'm not sure what Ariana feels for me, I can only hope it's strong enough to make her realize we belong together.

The ache in my chest grows as the silence between us stretches, and by the time I pull the SUV up to the private jet, it's hard to breathe.

I throw the door open, and getting out, I walk around the front of the vehicle and open the passenger door. Ariana doesn't look at me as she gets out, and it guts me further.

Christ, give me strength to let her go.

I take a deep breath as I shut the door and then walk toward the plane. Reaching the steps to the entrance of the jet, Ariana stops and turns to face me. She swallows hard and then lifts her eyes to mine.

My pain reflects in her hazel eyes, and unable to stop myself, I move forward and frame her face. Crushing my mouth to hers, I kiss her with every ounce of love I feel for her. I pour myself into her, praying this won't be the last time I get to taste her.

My body begins to tremble when she kisses me back with the same intensity.

God, it feels like you love me, Malyshka. How can you kiss me like this and not know what you feel for me?

Ariana breaks the kiss, and I press my forehead to hers. "I love you so fucking much. Don't ever forget that."

Her face is torn with emotion as she pulls away from me, and then she climbs the steps and hurries into the cabin of the jet.

I somehow manage to take a couple of steps backward, and too soon, the plane begins to move.

It tears my heart from my body to watch the jet pick up speed until it lifts off the ground.

I take a shuddering breath, and then my sight blurs. I blink quickly so I can see the jet until it fades into the sky.

My legs give way, and I sink to my knees. As the distance grows between the only woman I'll ever love and me, I manage to press the panic button on my watch because I don't have the strength to get up again.

What do I do if Ariana doesn't come back? How do I live without her?

I can't.

I can't imagine not ever getting to hold her again. Not kissing her. Not having her glare at me. Not hearing her moans of pleasure.

Christ.

I press a hand to my chest, the pain unbearable.

I hear tires screech, and a couple of seconds later, Alexei crouches in front of me. "What are you doing here?"

Lifting my eyes to my friend's, I say, "Ariana left."

"What?" Shock ripples over Alexei's face, and he glances around the airfield, then back at me. "Why?"

I gasp through the relentless ache. "She's not sure how she feels about me. She wanted to go home."

Alexei's arms wrap around me, and I break down.

For the first time in my life, I fall to pieces.

"We'll figure things out," Alexei says as he pulls me to my feet.

I shake my head. "What if she doesn't love me? I can't force her."

Alexei grabs my shoulders hard and locks eyes with me. "Ariana loves you. I saw it clear as day when you got shot. That woman loves you, Demitri."

"Why would she leave then?"

"That's what we have to figure out." Alexei keeps an arm around my shoulder and shouts at Sacha, who came with him, "Take the other SUV

back to the house.”

If Alexei is right, and he’s seldom wrong, then why would Ariana leave?

I climb into the passenger's side of Alexei’s SUV, and when he slides in behind the steering wheel, I say, “I don’t know where to start.”

My ability to focus has been shot to shit. Ariana turned my world upside down, and without her near me, it’s hard to think.

“You’re going to pack a bag and go after her. You’re going to watch her and find out why she ran,” Alexei answers.

“I said I’d give her time.”

“You can give her time and still watch her,” he mutters. “Fuck, I’m never loving a woman if it’s going to mess with my head the way it’s messing with yours.”

Chapter 31

ARIANA

Sitting down, I strap the seat belt over my lap, and then I wrap my arms around myself as the first sob tears through me.

God, it hurts too much.

The plane begins to move, and I let out a cry, covering my mouth to smother the sound. My body shudders hard, and my chest tightens painfully as the heartache engulfs me.

I love you, Demitri.

You'll never know how much.

You saved me in so many ways.

You showed me a world where loyalty does exist.

You taught me what real love is.

The cries come violently, making my chest ache until it's hard to breathe. My face feels feverish, the tears doing nothing to cool my skin.

Save more lives.

Continue to be the incredible man you are.

Live for me. Live a long life kicking ass with Alexei.

I'll never forget you. Not for a day. Not for a second.

As I double over from the unbearable pain, I flee to the memories I have of Demitri, hoping to get some comfort from them.

The way he walks. Every step filled with power.

The way he looks at me, seeing right into my soul.

His touch when his fingers brush over my skin.

Malyshka.

When he just lunged after me into the lake.

How his naked body felt against mine.

Demitri.

With the memory of his arms wrapping tightly around me, I struggle to breathe past the excruciating ache grinding my heart to dust.

How do I move on after being loved by the most extraordinary man to walk the face of this planet?

No kiss will ever compare to his. No arms will give me the safety I felt with him.

Demitri took a bullet for you, Ariana. He was prepared to die for you. You find a way to go on. For him.

This is the only way you can keep him safe.

As the plane touches down in Seattle, and I step out into the sunlight, everything looks too bright.

Nikhil's waiting by an SUV for me, and as I walk toward him, I wipe my cheeks and then lift my chin high.

"Hi, Ariana," he says when I reach the car. "Demitri said I'll be guarding you indefinitely."

Indefinitely.

Forever.

Demitri knows I'm not going back to him.

He already knew when he kissed me goodbye, and still, he let me go.

I nod and climb into the passenger seat, keeping my head lowered, so Nikhil doesn't see my heartache.

If Demitri loves you enough to let you go, you can do it as well.

"Home?" Nikhil asks after climbing in behind the steering wheel.

I nod again. "Home."

I instantly think of the island.

As Nikhil drives me to my apartment, I stare out of the window at the familiar streets and buildings, and they all seem so foreign now.

This isn't home anymore.

I'm exhausted by the time Nikhil stops the SUV in front of my apartment building. He also gets out and walks with me. Stepping into my place, Nikhil searches through the rooms, and then he says, "You still have the tag, right?"

I nod, and pulling it from beneath my shirt, I show him.

"Press the panic button if anything happens. I'll be in the car right outside the building. If you have any plans, notify me." He takes his phone from his pocket and then says, "Give me your phone."

I gesture to my bedroom. It's in there where I left it on charge the night Demitri took me. Walking to the room, I pick up the device from my bedside table. When I unlock the screen and check the messages, they're all spam.

No one noticed I was gone.

I walk back to the living room and hand Nikhil the phone. He programs his number into the device and then calls his own phone to get my number.

"Text me your plans every day, so I can look at the routes to take."

"What if I want to do something unexpectedly?"

"Then you call me. Whenever you're ready to go out, let me know, and I'll collect you from the door."

"Okay." As Nikhil walks to the front door, I ask, "If you're watching me all the time, when will you sleep?"

"Sacha will join me soon. Don't worry."

I watch as he pulls the door shut and then turn to look at the place I used to call home. Now it just feels empty.

Walking to the bedroom, I crawl onto the bed and slump down on top of the covers, and then I cry for the love I had to give up.

There are no words to describe what I'm feeling. It's like cancer is ravaging every happy feeling I've ever had.

Demitri became my life, and without him, it will be near impossible to simply exist.

DEMITRI

Two days after Ariana left, I step off the jet. Alexei sat with me until I was calm enough to start thinking clearly.

I still don't know why she left, but it's definitely not because she doesn't know how she feels about me. The day she left, I believed her because it made sense that staying with me would be hard for any normal person. I don't live an easy life.

But then I got to thinking of how well Ariana handled everything during our time together. I remember the way she looked at me before I got shot – like I was her life.

When I woke up, that's when she was different. So either the shootout and me getting hurt scared the living shit out of her, or there's something I'm missing.

Nikhil meets me with a frown. "I thought Sacha was coming."

"He's staying with Alexei. Give me an update."

"She hasn't left the apartment since I dropped her off."

I instantly frown. Knowing there's no food at her place, I ask, "Did she have food delivered?"

“No.”

My worry grows as I stop by the passenger door of the SUV. “Did you check on her?”

“Yes. She replies to the messages.”

“But you haven’t actually seen her?” I ask, anger shimmering through in my voice.

“No. You said not to smother her. I figured she wanted to be alone.”

Taking a calming breath, I climb into the car. When Nikhil pulls away from the landing strip, I say, “You’ll take the day shift, and I’ll take the night shift.”

“Okay. Where to?”

“Ariana’s place,” I mutter as I open the bag I brought along. I take out a couple of surveillance cameras. “You’ll check on her and plant these so I can see what’s going on in that apartment.”

“Okay.” Nikhil drives us through the city, and as we stop across the road from Ariana’s building, I breathe a little easier, knowing how close I am to her.

“Don’t let her see you plant the cameras,” I remind him, even though I don’t have to.

“Okay.” Nikhil gets out of the car, and I watch as he crosses the road and disappears inside the apartment building.

Pulling the laptop out, I open it and bring up the screen that shows me the cameras. All three remain static, and then finally, one comes on, and I get a view of the living room, front door, and kitchen.

A couple of minutes later, the second one comes online, showing me Ariana’s bedroom from the closet’s angle.

Ariana’s got the covers pulled over her head, and when I see Nikhil’s lips moving, I turn up the volume.

'Have you eaten?' I hear him ask.

'Mhh... I'm fine. Leave,' Ariana mumbles, sounding tired as fuck.

Nikhil leaves the bedroom, and I watch as he opens the kitchen cupboards and fridge, then he glances at the camera in the living room and shakes his head. When he leaves the apartment, I watch the entrance until he comes out of the building.

I glance back at the screen, showing Ariana not moving from the bed, and let out a sigh.

What are you doing, Malyshka?

Nikhil gets in behind the steering wheel. "I only planted two cameras."

I nod. "I've got a good view. Let's go get her food."

We drive to the nearest Walmart, and walking through the isles, Nikhil mutters, "Never thought I'd go shopping with you. This is weird."

I let out a chuckle. "Shut up and grab three boxes of mac and cheese."

I get things that will be easy for her to prepare and fruit and then head back to the apartment. "Make sure she eats something," I order as I open the laptop.

"Okay."

As Nikhil heads inside with the bags of food, I check the camera feeds. The bedroom shows Ariana lying on her back, her feet propped up against the bed's headboard. She just stares up at the ceiling. Suddenly she begins to jerk and throws an arm over her face as she cries.

My heart constricts, and the muscles in my body tense as I watch her fall apart.

Why, Malyshka?

Taking my phone from my pocket, I open the messenger app. I haven't reached out to her since she left but can't hold back any longer.

Demitri: How are you doing?

I send the text, then watch the camera feed.

With no energy, Ariana reaches for her phone, and then the light of the screen illuminates her face.

Christ.

She looks worn out, and there are red blotches around her eyes from all the crying. She opens the message, and then another sob sputters from her. Pressing the phone to her chest, she curls into a fetal position as she loses it again.

Nikhil walks into the apartment, and it makes Ariana pull the covers over her head again. He packs all the food away and then grabs a fork, taking a bowl of mixed fruit to the bedroom.

'You need to eat. Come, sit up,' he says.

'Just leave it in the kitchen. I'll eat it later,' Ariana mumbles, her voice quivering and hoarse.

'Now, Ariana. I'll force-feed you if I have to,' Nikhil warns her.

Ariana throws the covers back, and sitting up, she holds her hand out and takes the fruit. She shoves the food down, then glares at Nikhil. *'Happy? Now leave!'*

'There's food in the kitchen. I'll check daily whether you're eating,' he gives her another warning, and then he leaves.

Ariana sits still until Nikhil is out of the apartment, and then she falls back on the bed, and unlocking her phone, she stares at it.

She begins to type, and every couple of seconds, she pauses as she begins to cry. Watching her struggle is fucking hard, and I don't look away from the screen as Nikhil gets back into the car.

It takes her almost ten minutes before she sends the text.

Ariana: I'm good. Getting back into my old routine. Busy making a makeup tutorial and plan on visiting my mom later. How are you?

I shake my head as I type out a reply.

Demitri: Back at work. Are you making any progress with figuring out how you feel about me?

I send the message and watch as she reads it immediately. Again she breaks down, pressing her face into the covers, and then I hear her voice, muffled but clear enough to make out the words. ‘God, I can’t. This is too hard.’

She turns onto her back and takes a couple of deep breaths, using the back of her hand to wipe the tears from her face. Staring at the screen, she whispers, *‘I love you so much. I wish I had the chance to tell you that.’*

My breathing slows as her words sink in.

I fucking knew it.

She types out a message, and when it comes through, I stare at the lie.

Ariana: Yeah, I’ve been thinking a lot. Being away from you has definitely given me the clarity I needed. It was all a spur-of-the-moment thing for me. Can we keep our relationship professional? Only contact me for business.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, then respond to her request.

Demitri: You do your thing, and I’ll do mine.

Keep running, Malyshka. I’m right behind you.

Chapter 32

ARIANA

It's been a week since I've last heard from Demitri. The heartache grows with every passing day, and I miss him so much it's hard to do anything.

If it weren't for Nikhil checking on me every day, I'd probably just lie in bed until I died because there's nothing to get up for.

But the fear that Nikhil might be giving Demitri updates about me makes me drag my exhausted body out of bed. Feeling completely drained, I shower and get myself ready enough so that I don't look like a zombie.

Dressed in a pair of jeans, a long sleeve shirt, and a sweater, I pick up my phone and text Nikhil.

Ariana: I want to visit my mom.

He responds immediately.

Nikhil: I'm coming.

I tuck my phone in my pocket and walk to the kitchen. I take a bottle of water from the fridge and swallow a couple of sips.

The front door opens, and I glance at Nikhil. "Did you make an extra key for yourself?"

"Yes." There's no apology in his tone.

I just nod and follow him out of the apartment. As I climb into the passenger side of the SUV, my heart skips a beat when I smell Demitri's woody aftershave. I take a deep breath, getting more of the scent, and it rips through my insides.

When Nikhil slides behind the steering wheel, I ask, "Do you smell that?"

He takes a breath, then frowns at me. “What?”

“Demitri.”

Nikhil shakes his head, seemingly relaxed as he starts the engine. Driving us to the nursing home, he says, “I’m going to have to escort you inside, but I’ll keep a respectful distance.”

“Okay.” I take another deep breath, but the smell is gone, and it makes my heart sink like a rock to the pit of my stomach.

When we get to the nursing home, Nikhil checks the area and then says, “If you see anyone that looks out of place, let me know.”

I nod and shove the door open. Walking through the entrance, I head to the reception, so I can make arrangements for the month’s payment I missed. It will take a while before I have access to the money my dad left me, and I’m hoping they’re willing to wait.

The receptionist smiles at me, and then I ask, “Can I speak with someone in the finance department?”

“Sure, take a seat while you wait.” I walk to the windows and stare out at the parking area.

A guy from the finance department comes up to me, and I notice Nikhil taking a step closer. I wave my hand for him to back down and follow the guy into an office.

After we take a seat at a desk, I say, “I’ve been out of town for my father’s funeral. I missed last month’s payment but will be able to settle the amount I’m behind soon. I’m hoping you can give me some time.”

“Who’s the patient?” he asks.

“Beth Robinson.”

The guy checks on the system, then he shakes his head, and my heart just sinks further.

“The account is up to date,” he says.

Frowning, I lean forward. "It is?"

"Actually, it's been paid in advance for the next six months."

"What?" I give him a confused look. "Are you on the right account?"

"Yes." He checks again, then turns the screen so I can see. My eyes dart over my mom's information and then the transaction section, where it shows a payment of seventy thousand to the account.

"Can you see who made the payment?"

The guy looks, then says, "It only shows Beth Robinson in the reference section. To find out more, I'll have to contact the bank."

Did Demitri pay the account?

Probably.

My heart begins to race as I get up from the chair. "Ah... thank you."

"You're welcome. Have a nice day."

I nod, mumbling, "You too." Leaving the office, I walk to the residence section. I stop by the nurses' station and force a smile around my lips when I see Ashley.

"Hey."

She gives me a look of surprise. "Hey, hon. We haven't seen you in a while." Her eyes sweep over me, then she frowns. "Were you sick?"

"Yeah." I gesture down the hallway. "How's my mom?"

"She had a bad spell a couple of weeks back where she couldn't remember who she was. We've adjusted her medication to keep her calm."

I nod, then ask, "Do you think it's okay if I visit her?"

"Yes, just pretend to be one of the staff."

I walk down the hallway and reaching my mom's room, I pause in the doorway and stare at her where's she's sitting in a chair in front of the window.

Hey, Mom. Sorry I haven't been around.

I walk inside, and stopping next to her chair, I crouch down. She doesn't look at me, and I force my voice to sound lighthearted. "Hi."

Mom just keeps staring out the window. I reach a hand out and softly place it on her knee, but I don't get a reaction from her.

Staring at the shell of my mother, I realize this might be my future. Just like her, I met the love of my life, and I had to let him go. At least she had me, but I don't even have a child to keep the memory of Demitri alive.

Is this what her heartache did to her? She couldn't go on without my dad and slowly just died on the inside?

Sitting down by her feet, I rest my cheek against her leg. "I met the most amazing man, Mom." My shoulders begin to jerk. "I had to let him go, and it's killing me."

Suddenly I feel my mom's hand brush over my hair and my eyes dart up to her. She looks down at me with sympathy, her own eyes tearing up.

"I miss him so much," I admit to her, the moment overwhelming me.

She nods, brushing her palm over my hair again.

"I miss you too," I whimper on a sob.

A tear spirals over her face, and then she goes back to staring out the window.

Unable to reign in the tears, I get up and press a kiss on her forehead. "I love you." Rushing out of the room, I dart past Nikhil and head to the SUV.

Nikhil's right behind me, and opening the passenger door, he asks, "Everything okay?"

I nod, wiping at my cheeks. "Yeah, it's just hard to see her like that."

To see what will become of me without Demitri.

DEMITRI

In the past two weeks, Ariana only left her apartment once, and it was to visit her mom. Nikhil said it didn't go well and that her mom keeps getting worse.

Ariana moves from the bed to the couch, and all she does is stare. She only eats once a day when Nikhil checks in on her.

Watching her fade before my eyes is pushing me to my limit. I've given her the time she asked for, and I regret it every day.

I'm planning on fucking kidnapping her again, and this time I have everything ready. I don't know why I'm waiting.

Tell me to come to you, Malyshka.

It's the middle of the night, and Ariana's sitting in the living room. She lifts her head and glances around the room. Her eyes drift shut, and she shakes her head. 'I can't do this anymore. How am I supposed to live without him?' She shoots up, and grabbing hold of the coffee table, she shoves it to the side. 'I can't...' her breathing catches in her throat, and then it bursts over her lips as she begins to tear the apartment apart.

My heart cracks in two, and shoving the car door open, I get out and run across the street. I take the stairs two at a time, and using the key I had made for myself, I unlock the door and dart inside.

I come up behind Ariana and wrap my arms around her to keep her from destroying anything else. Heartbreaking sobs tear from her as she sinks back against me, not even putting up a fight. I crouch down with her, and taking hold of her face, I turn her to me. There's no recognition in her eyes that looks feverish, as if she's lost her mind.

Pulling the injection out of my pocket, I use my teeth to remove the cap, and then I inject her with a sedative. I put the cap back on and pocket the

empty syringe. Pushing my arms beneath her back and knees, I lift her to my chest as I rise to my feet.

Walking to the front door, I press a kiss to her clammy forehead and whisper, “Shh, Malyshka. Sleep. I’ve got you.”

I shut the front door behind me and carry her down to the SUV. After laying her down on the back seat and slipping behind the steering wheel, I pull out my phone and dial Alexei’s number.

He answers within seconds. “Everything okay?”

“I’m taking Ariana back to the island. Tell Nikhil.”

“Okay. So you’re working things out?”

“We will,” I mutter, and then I end the call.

Come hell or high water, we will. This madness ends now.

I drive to the private airfield and carry Ariana onto the plane. After getting her settled in a seat, I strap her in and press another kiss on her forehead. I take a deep breath of her soft scent and then close the door before settling behind the controls.

I feel calm during the flight and boat ride to the island. I take Ariana to my bedroom and then set up an IV to get some nutrition into her body.

Standing back, I stare down at her, and then the anger begins to bubble in my chest.

Why the fuck did you do this?

As my anger for her keeps increasing, I stalk to my closet and change into a pair of sweatpants before heading to the gym so I can punch something.

I lay into a punching bag, pushing my body to the max as I try to calm down.

We will fucking stay on this island until Ariana comes to her senses.

There’s no more running.

No more chasing.

She will never leave my fucking side again.

I slow down, and taking a step back, I catch my breath.

I said I wouldn't force her, but fuck that. Ariana no longer has a choice.

Going back to the bedroom, I take a shower and then bring a chair up from the entertainment room. Placing it next to the bed, I sit down and watch Ariana sleep.

When the IV runs dry, I take it out and check Ariana's vitals. Her blood pressure is normal, and there's color in her cheeks.

Sitting back down, I let out a sigh, and then I wait for the sedative to wear off.

When you wake up, it's you and me, Malyshka.

No more lies.

Chapter 33

ARIANA

Coming to, it feels like I've been run over by a freight train. I let out a groan, and turning onto my side, the bed smells like a mixture of fresh laundry and Demitri. I push my face into the pillow and take a deep breath.

I don't want to wake up.

Then the silence gets through to me. There's no buzz of city life. Just absolute silence.

Maybe I finally died. A girl can hope.

Slowly my mind clears, and then I remember someone grabbing hold of me. I shoot up, my eyes flying open and darting over my surroundings.

My body jerks when I see Demitri sitting on a chair next to the bed, his eyes dark on me. He looks freaking angry.

For a moment, I can only stare at him, drinking in every inch of him.

"Ariana," he growls, his features carved from granite.

"Uhm... hi." I glance around the room again and recognize it. "We're at the island?"

Slowly Demitri nods, and his voice is cold as ice as he says, "I kidnapped you. Again."

"Oh." My tongue darts out, and I wet my lips. "Why?"

Demitri leans forward, the movement predatory. "You didn't take care of what belongs to me."

"Huh?"

I push the covers back, but then he snaps, "Don't fucking move. I swear I'll tie you to the damn bed."

My eyebrows shoot up. When I open my mouth, he shakes his head to silence me. “I’ve been watching you, so don’t even try to lie to me. Why the fuck did you leave?”

I open my mouth again, but then Demitri says, “Lie to me, and I promise, I will put you over my knee and spank the insanity out of you.”

My eyebrow pops up again.

“Why did you leave?” he demands.

“I... I... wasn’t –”

“Don’t dare say you weren’t sure of your feelings for me. I heard you say you love me. Try again. This time the truth.”

My shoulders slump, and I rub a hand over my eyes. I have no more strength to fight Demitri. I swallow hard, my mouth dry. “You almost got killed because you were distracted. If I weren’t there, you wouldn’t have gotten shot.”

Demitri slumps back in the chair, and placing his thumb beneath his chin, he presses his knuckles against his mouth.

He stares at me until I begin to fidget with the covers, and then he stares some more.

Finally, he nods. “I was distracted watching Yuri drown in his own blood, and I was worried about you and Alexei not getting along. But it didn’t happen because you were there. If anything, I’m alive right now because of you.”

I lower my eyes to the fabric I’m clutching in my hands. “We can’t be together. Not if it will cost your life.”

Silence stretches between us, then Demitri says, “All my life, I knew I’d die for Alexei, but there wasn’t anyone to live for. Until you.”

His words rip at my heart, and I squeeze my eyes shut. “I won’t be the reason you die.”

“Ariana.” He waits until I look at him. “Without you, everyone dies. I can’t do my job without you next to me.”

God.

“But...but,” I gasp, unable to think of something to say.

Demitri gets up and comes to sit on the bed. Placing a hand against my cheek, he leans in. “I made a mistake. It won’t happen again.”

“You can’t know that,” I cry.

“Trust me,” he says, leaning closer to me. “I know myself. It will never happen again.” He gives me a reassuring look. “Also, we should’ve worn bulletproof vests. It was just a stupid mistake on my part.”

I stare at him and then whisper, “Promise me you’ll always wear a bulletproof vest.”

“I promise.” He moves his hands, brushing his thumbs over the dark circles beneath my eyes. “How do you feel?”

Better now that you’re here.

“Hungry and dirty,” I answer, the corner of my mouth lifting.

“Shower while I fix you something to eat.”

We move off the bed, and then I think to ask, “Did you at least pack me a bag of clothes, or did you just fling me over your shoulder again?”

He lets out a dark-sounding chuckle. “Part of your punishment. I want you naked.”

My lips part, and I watch as he walks out of the room.

Punishment?

My stomach flutters at the thought, and then it hits that Demitri came back to me. He never gave up on us.

Even though we still have a lot to talk about, it feels as if my heart is beating for the first time in two weeks.

I walk to the bathroom, and turning on the faucets, I strip out of my leggings and shirt. I step under the spray and take my time washing my body and hair.

Demitri came for me. Once again, when I needed him the most.

I think back to our conversation and how he said he's alive because of me, and it's like a soothing balm to my bruised heart.

Stepping out of the shower, I dry my body and squeeze the excess water out of my hair. Grabbing Demitri's toothbrush, I quickly brush my teeth, and then I walk to his closet and take one of his shirts from it. I pull the fabric over my head and then leave the room.

When I walk into the kitchen, there's a plate with a slice of toast with cream cheese and a cup of coffee. Next to it is a note.

Eat and then go to your room.

Frowning, I glance over my shoulder, but there's no sign of Demitri.

I take a couple of sips of the coffee, and then picking up the slice of toast, I take a bite as I walk to the entertainment room. I don't find Demitri there or in the gym and finish my breakfast as I make my way back to the kitchen. I rinse the toast down with the rest of my coffee and wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I head up the stairs.

Maybe he's in the security room?

I'm just about to pass the room I stayed in, but stop and open the door. Stepping inside, I see Demitri leaning against the wall.

"Close the door," he murmurs as he pushes away from the wall.

I shut the door, and then Demitri locks it and pockets the key. "No more running."

“Ah... we’re on an island,” I remind him. There’s nowhere for me to run to.

He leans into me, and taking hold of the shirt, he pulls the fabric over my head, then says, “I told you I want you naked.”

I begin to frown, then let out a squeak as Demitri yanks me up and throws me over his shoulder. He tosses me on the bed and then grabs hold of my wrists and forces my arms above my head.

“What the hell are you doing?” I sputter, more surprised than anything else, as he uses a belt to tie my hands to the wrought iron bed frame.

When he’s sure I can’t get my hands free, he moves down to straddle my hips, and placing his hands on either side of my head, he gives me a predatory look that makes my abdomen clench.

“Ready for your punishment?” he asks.

“Why am I being punished?”

He tilts his head. “You lied to me.”

I glare at him. “Seriously? So you’re going to leave me tied to the bed butt naked?”

Demitri shakes his head as he climbs off me, and then my eyes widen as he pulls his shirt over his head.

“You’re going to wish I left you tied to that bed.”

Meaning?

It can’t be bad if it involves us naked on the bed.

Right?

When he steps out of his cargo pants, my eyes greedily sweep over his muscled body. I take in the scars left by the bullets, and then Demitri moves to the foot of the bed.

I lift an eyebrow at him. “Not to rain on your parade, but this is the furthest thing from punishment.”

He lets out a dark chuckle, the corner of his mouth lifting, and then placing a knee on the bed, he grabs hold of my hips, and in one fluid motion, I'm turned onto my stomach.

Ah...

And then there's a hard smack against my bottom, and I let out a startled shriek.

Holy shit, he's going to spank me?

Demitri takes hold of my ankles and spreads my legs open, and then his palm meets the other cheek of my butt, leaving them both stinging.

I'm not sure how I feel about this.

Then he brushes a finger over my opening and lets out a low growl. "Wet already."

I begin to glance over my shoulder when he spanks me again, and this time my abdomen clenches hard, and a moan slips over my lips.

My mind tells me I should be offended and demand he stops, but my body flushes with heat, and it leaves me a little confused.

Demitri leans over my back and presses a kiss to my shoulder, and then I feel his hand between my legs again as his finger rubs around my entrance. "You're loving this punishment way too much, *Malyshka*."

Malyshka.

God, I missed hearing him call me that.

I push my butt into the air, trying to get him to give me more, but instead, he pulls away from me.

He lets out a chuckle. "I'm not going to let you come."

What?

"Not until we've talked about everything without you lying to me."

I can work with that.

He places his hand on my left ass cheek and begins to rub my heated skin. "Tell me again why you left."

I take a deep breath and rest my cheek on the pillow. "Because I distracted you, and you almost died."

The sound of Demitri's hand connecting with my butt is loud, and then it stings like hell, and it draws a cry from me. Just as anger explodes in my chest, he pushes a finger inside me, and the intensity of how good it feels douses my temper instantly.

Hello, whiplash, my old friend.

As Demitri fingers me, he leans over me again until his mouth is by my ear. "It wasn't your fault."

I turn my head more and meet his eyes. I don't know what he sees on my face, but it makes him pull back, and then he spanks me again.

Desire spreads through my body like a destructive force, and my breath explodes over my lips.

"Say it," he demands.

"What?" I gasp, my ass literally on fire.

"That it wasn't your fault I got shot." He's back to massaging my tender skin, and it makes me feel emotional.

When I take too long to say the words, he spanks the other cheek damn hard, and I smother the cry against the pillow.

Tears sneak out of my eyes, and my emotions are all over the place when Demitri begins to rub my clit. My hips instantly buck against his hand, begging for more friction.

God, I'm insane. There's no doubt anymore.

Pleasure begins to tighten my muscles, and I moan from how good it feels, and then he freaking stops.

“I swear, the second I’m back in Seattle, I’m freaking running,” I threaten him.

Demitri lets out a chuckle. “I’ve got news for you, *Malyshka*. You’re not going back to Seattle.”

“What?” I gasp.

He slaps my clit, and my brain short circuits.

Holy. Shit.

“Say it,” he demands.

“Ah... what was I supposed to say again?” My voice is breathless, my body trembling from the conflicting things he’s making me feel.

“It’s not your fault I got shot,” he reminds me as his finger dips inside me again.

Uhm.

I lick my lips and barely have enough brain activity to say, “It wasn’t my fault you got shot.”

Demitri pulls his finger out of me and then presses a kiss to my left butt cheek.

“Now,” he murmurs, his voice low and deep, “tell me how you feel about me.”

“Right now, I’m torn between angry and fucked up,” I mutter.

He spanks me again, and I grind my teeth to keep the cry back, then snap, “Scratch that. I’m going with anger.”

And then he freaking chuckles. “Now you know how I feel.”

Chapter 34

DEMITRI

“You’re angry?” Ariana asks. “Why? I left you to keep you safe. You should be thanking me!”

Placing both my hands on her crimson ass, I massage her skin before moving up her back until my fingers wrap around her neck. I lean down to her ear. “I told you this body belonged to me, and you fucking starved yourself.”

Turning her head, she scowls at me. “Forgive me for not thinking of food while I was freaking dying of a broken heart.”

I move back again and slap her pussy, and then she fucking moans.

I grab hold of her hips and turn her onto her back, and placing my hands on either side of her head, I glare down at her. “Because you tried to run from me.”

“Because I wanted to keep you safe,” Ariana bites out.

I lean a little down until we’re face to face. “Let’s get one thing straight right now. I’m the protector.”

Annoyed, she rolls her eyes at me. “Sorry for caring whether you live or die.”

Grabbing hold of her jaw, I lean even closer. “Oh, *Malyshka*, you can care, but don’t fucking try to do my job.”

The anger drains from her face, and a hurt look takes its place. “So I’m just supposed to sit and worry?”

“No.” I stare deep into her eyes. “You’re supposed to trust me.”

“I do,” she whispers.

“Do you? Really?” I take a deep breath, and it’s filled with her natural scent.

Her eyes begin to shimmer. “I do trust you.”

I frame her face with my hands. “How do you feel about me?”

Emotion floods her features, and then she finally fucking admits, “I love you.”

I close the distance between us and press a soft kiss to her lips, then ask, “Why was it so hard to say?”

“Because I knew once I told you how I felt you’d never let me go.”

I shake my head. “That’s where you’re wrong, *Malyshka*. The day I told you you’re mine, I meant it. There’s nowhere on this planet you can run to where I won’t find you.”

“Promise?” she whispers. “Promise you’ll never let me go?”

“I swear it to you.” I press a hand to the scar on my chest. “I’d take a million bullets for you. Don’t let one get between us.”

“Two. You were shot twice,” Ariana mutters as if I didn’t fucking know that.

“The other bullet belongs to Alexei.”

Her eyes fill with the love she feels for me, and she yanks against the belt, keeping her tied to the bed. “God, untie me so I can hug you.”

I let out a chuckle and shake my head. “I’m not done punishing you.”

Her eyes widen. “You already spanked the shit out of me!”

“That, *Malyshka*, was me only getting started.”

I crush my mouth to hers, and the instant my tongue dives into her mouth, a moan rumbles from my chest.

I get to taste her again. My addiction.

My life.

I fucking devour her mouth, claiming her all over again. I brand her lips with my teeth until they're swollen, and only then do I break the kiss and move down to her neck. I find her pulse and suck hard on her soft skin until I've marked her.

Mine.

I move down to her breasts, taking my time with each one until she's breathless, only able to moan.

Mine.

I lick my way down to her pussy and then blow a breath out over her clit. Ariana's ass lifts off the bed, and she lets out a frustrated whimper.

I place my hands on her thighs, then say, "If you can't take any more, all you have to say is 'Yes'."

"To what?" she breathes.

"You'll know soon enough." I blow another breath of air over her clit, and then my tongue darts into her. I begin to torture her, waiting for her to get close to orgasming and then stopping.

Ariana lets out a frustrated growl. "You can be so glad I'm tied to this freaking bed. I swear I'd slap you."

I chuckle against her clit, and then I push myself up. Fisting my cock, I thrust into my hand, and Ariana's eyes instantly flare with heat from the sight.

"God, Demitri," she breathes, turned on by watching me stroke myself.

"You want my cock, Malyshka?"

She nods desperately.

I shift closer to her pussy, so the head of my cock brushes over her opening, and then I continue to stroke myself. Ariana writhes on the bed, then groans, "This is torture. Fuck me already."

“You’re not ready to say yes yet,” I tell her with a smug smile, enjoying her desperation for my cock way too much.

I brush the head over her clit and entrance and then push an inch inside her. Her pussy tries to suck me further, and I pull back. “So greedy for more.”

“Demitri, please,” she begs.

I continue stroking myself as I push my other hand beneath her ass, massaging her skin that’s still hot from the spanking I gave her.

Her thighs strain with need, and her hips swivel, searching for relief.

I glance down at her pussy as I push the head of my cock inside her again, watching as she stretches around my girth.

“So fucking perfect,” I hiss, and then I slam into her, ripping a cry from her.

Ariana’s inner walls clamp around me like a vice as I pull all the way out again, and then she lets out a whimper.

Her eyes are feverish with need, and I crawl up her body until I’m staring down at her. “Will you move in with me?”

A sob burst over her lips, and she nods quickly. “Yes.” I slam inside her pussy again, and she cries, “Yes.”

Keeping my eyes locked with Ariana’s, I fuck her with all my strength, owning every inch of pussy.

Her body strains beneath mine, her legs clamping around my ass until it looks like she’s in pain. Only then do I say, “Come, Ariana.”

With a sob of relief, her body begins to convulse, and I feel how hard the orgasm hits her as her inner walls grip my cock, and then she fucking milks my release from me.

Her screams and moans spill over her lips until I own each one of them. I let out a rumbling moan as I fight my way past her tight grip, pounding

into her until I've spilled the last drop.

Collapsing on top of Ariana, there's only the sound of our rushed breaths as our bodies jerk from the last embers of pleasure rippling through us.

When my strength finally returns, I push myself up and press a kiss to her lips. Then locking eyes with Ariana, I say, "Never run from me again. It will be the end of me."

She nods, emotion washing over her face.

"I love you. So fucking much."

Her chin quivers. "I love you too."

Staring down at her beautiful face, I say, "Thank you for giving me a reason to live."

She swallows hard and takes a breath. Her voice is hoarse as she whispers, "Thank you for kidnapping me. Again."

ARIANA

Demitri unties my hands, and then he frames my face and kisses me deeply. His lips worship mine, his tongue caressing mine, and it's more intense than any other kiss he's given me.

I feel it all the way to my toes. My stomach explodes as if a beehive has been disturbed. My heart slams against my ribs, trying to get his heart.

I'm still on a freaking high from him fucking my brains out when Demitri slowly begins to thrust into me again. But this time, it feels overwhelmingly intimate.

I'm overcome with emotion as he makes love to me.

He breaks the kiss, and with his breaths rushing over my lips, he stares deep into my eyes as he continues the slow and deep pace of filling me with his cock.

My hands brush over his back, and I relish in the feel of his skin beneath my touch.

It feels like our love for each other is joining to become a powerful force nothing will be able to penetrate.

“Thank you for giving me a reason to live, too,” I whisper as a happy tear spirals into my hairline.

We find our releases together, our bodies moving in sync with each other.

I move my hands to his neck as I gasp for air. My eyes are imprisoned by his. “Why me?”

He brushes his fingers through my hair, his eyes drifting over my face. “Because in a world of monsters and death, you’re an angel with the feistiness and courage of a goddess.” He presses a tender kiss to my mouth, then continues, “You’re selfless. Christ, Ariana, you’re so fucking selfless it humbles me.” I close my eyes and suck in a trembling breath. “Look at me, Malyshka.” I open my eyes again, and then he murmurs, “I see everything I never thought I needed in your eyes. A future. Children.”

I swallow hard, then ask, “You want children?”

“Only with you.”

Demitri doesn’t pull out of me as we talk, and somehow it’s even more intimate than making love to him.

He keeps brushing his fingers through my hair, his eyes loving every inch of my face.

“Will you be okay with living in the same house as Alexei?”

I nod. "I understand you have to protect him and how close you are with him. I really don't have a problem with Alexei. Besides, the mansion is huge."

The corner of his mouth lifts in a relieved smile. "I'm happy to hear that."

I brush my fingers along his jaw, then ask, "Were you really angry with me?"

He nods.

"So whenever I piss you off, you'll spank me?"

He nods again.

"And then fuck me senseless?"

Another nod as a sexy smile tugs at his mouth.

"So, what makes you angry?" I tease.

He lets out a chuckle. "If you want me to spank you, all you have to do is ask."

Grinning at him, I say, "Deal."

Demitri pushes himself up and pulls out of me. I pout at him. "I really like the feel of you on top of me."

"Come on," he says with a smile, taking hold of my hand and tugging me off the bed. He takes me to the shower, and while we wash each other's bodies, we talk about our likes and dislikes.

The conversation turns to us living together as we dry off and walk to his room to get dressed. I take one of his shirts and pull it on while he steps into a pair of sweatpants.

When we go downstairs, Demitri takes two bottles of water from the fridge and hands me one. He takes a sip and then sets his bottle down on the counter, and leaning back, he crosses his arms over his chest.

His eyes meet mine as a sense of wonder spreads through me.

Demitri is mine.

Tilting his head, he asks, “What’s that look for?”

“I just realized you’re mine,” I answer. “Demitri Vetrov. The hellhound. The custodian to Alexei Koslov.” I move closer to him, and lifting my hand to his jaw, I continue, “My rock. My savior. My life.” I shake my head. “It’s hard to believe how far we’ve come and that I’m the lucky woman who gets you.”

Demitri takes hold of my forearm and presses a kiss to the inside of my wrist, and then he wraps his arms around me and pulls me to stand between his legs. I lean against him, the feel of his warm chest against my cheek bringing a content smile to my face.

“You can’t tell anyone who I am.”

I tilt my head back to look up at him. “I don’t know anyone I can tell.”

“Really?” A sad expression makes him look like a fallen angel. “No one?”

I shrug. “I could tell my mom, but it wouldn’t mean a thing to her.”

Demitri takes hold of my jaw and presses a kiss to my mouth. “So you’re all mine?”

“Yep.”

A smile spread over his face. “Say it.”

“I’m all yours.”

Chapter 35

DEMITRI

Ariana and I spent a week on the island, getting to know each other more in-depth before stopping in Seattle to get her clothes.

I told her I'd get Nikhil to pack up the rest of her things and bring her belongings to LA.

When we get back to LA, and I'm driving us to the place I share with Alexei, Ariana asks, "Did you pay the money to my mom's nursing home?"

I nod. "I told you I'd take care of it."

"Thank you." She places her hand on my thigh. "I'll pay you back as soon as I have access to my inheritance."

I shake my head. "No, you won't. We'll invest your money."

"And what? Let you pay for everything?"

I nod. "Yes."

"It's over a hundred million. Paying you back won't make a dent in it. We can live off the rest, and there will still be enough to look after our grandchildren."

Taking hold of her hand, I bring it to my mouth and press a kiss to her skin. "Malyshka, I'm paying for everything. Use your inheritance to start a makeup business."

She stares at me as I pull up the driveway, and when I turn the engine off, she says, "Let me pay for everything, please. Think of it as payment for keeping my butt safe for the rest of my life."

I let out a chuckle and press a kiss to her mouth. "It's so cute that you think you can afford me."

Shock flashes over her face. “What do you mean? Even with a hundred million, I still can’t afford you?” Her eyes widen. “How much does Alexei pay you?”

“Your inheritance will be able to buy my protection for a year.” I give her a smile. “You get a lifetime of protection for free because I love you.”

“Holy shit. That’s insane.”

I cup her cheek. “Leave the finances to me. Use your inheritance to do something you love.” Worry flashes over her face, and it has me asking, “What?”

“I have no idea what I love. I just did what I had to so I could pay my expenses.”

Pulling her into a hug, I press a kiss to her temple. “Don’t worry about it. You have all the time in the world to figure out what you’d like to do.” I move back and lock eyes with her. “Okay? There’s no rush.”

“Okay.”

We climb out of the car, and when we walk into the house, it’s to find Alexei waiting in the foyer with his arms crossed over his chest.

He gives Ariana a dark look, then slowly walks closer to her. “Do you have any idea how worried I was?”

“Ah... sorry,” she pulls a cute face.

Alexei opens his arm. “Come here.”

I watch as they hug, then Alexei says, “It’s good to have you back. Don’t ever give me a heart attack like that again.”

“I won’t.” Ariana pulls back and grins up at him, and patting his chest, teases him, “Who knew I could make the head of the Bratva sweat?”

Taking hold of Ariana’s hand, I pull her away from Alexei and to my side, which only makes Alexei grin at me.

“She’s moving in,” I tell him. “With me.”

“Like you even had to add the last part,” Alexei taunts me.

“How many people live in this house?” Ariana asks.

“Four. Alexei, me, Sacha, and Nikhil. And now you.”

“I’m not cooking,” she blurts out, making Alexei laugh.

“I do the cooking,” I tell her. “That way, I know no one’s going to be poisoned.” Not wanting her to worry, I place my hand on the back of her neck and say, “The left wing is ours, so you’ll have all the privacy you need while being safe.”

She gives me a happy smile which makes me feel better.

Nudging her forward, I say, “Come on, let’s get you settled, and then I’ll show you the rest of the mansion.” To Alexei, I say, “Can you get Sacha to bring in Ariana’s luggage?”

“Sure.” He watches us with a smile, then calls out to Ariana, “It’s good having you here, little one.”

I take Ariana to our suite, and heading to the walk-in closet, I begin to move my things over to the right side.

Ariana begins to help me then asks, “Do you wear any other color but white and black?”

“No, you’re all the color I need.”

“Aww...” She drops the shirt she was holding and lunges at me, slamming a hot kiss to my mouth.

ARIANA

It’s been three months since I moved in with Demitri, and it still feels surreal.

I get to fall asleep in his arms.

My life has done a total one-eighty. I'm now surrounded by people who care about me.

The other day there was a spider in the bathroom, and I screamed. Seconds later, I was staring wide-eyed at four armed men while clutching a towel around my body.

Not my proudest moment. Demitri wasn't happy, either.

Now I can laugh about it. Demitri still growls when I bring it up.

I let out a chuckle at the memory and then get back to work. I took one of the guest rooms in our wing and converted it to an office for me.

My inheritance came through, and after thinking long and hard, I decided to help people like my mom. If I had died, there wouldn't have been anyone to look after her. After doing some research, I found out there are many elderly people who can't afford the care they need.

So that's what I'm doing. I'm starting a charity for them.

Demitri's hand falls on my shoulder, and he presses a kiss to the top of my head. "How's work coming along?"

He pulls a chair closer and sits down next to me, glancing at my laptop's screen.

"Baby steps," I say as I let out a deep breath. "I'm starting in Seattle, and then I'll slowly move onto the next city."

Demitri nods a look of pride on his face. "That's a good plan." He gets up and presses another kiss to my hair. "Don't forget our date."

"I won't." I watch as my man leaves the office to get back to his own work, and then I focus on my project.

Two hours before the date, I close my laptop and go to our bedroom. Demitri said I must pack a bag for the date. We're probably going to Seattle for the weekend.

After packing enough clothes for two days, I shower quickly and then do my makeup. I put on a dress like Demitri ordered, sans any panties, and a new pair of black heels. When I'm ready, I pull a brush through my hair again.

I've just set the brush down when Demitri comes up behind me, wrapping a blindfold over my eyes.

"Hey."

"Shh..."

He helps me into a coat, and then taking hold of my hands, he pulls them behind my back and restrains me with something soft.

"What's going on?"

"No questions," his voice rumbles close to my ear, sending a wave of goosebumps over my skin.

Grabbing hold of me, Demitri throws me over his shoulder and stalks out of the bedroom.

I let out a burst of laughter. "What are you doing? Put me down."

"I'm kidnapping you. Either you keep still, or I'm sedating you," he snaps, pretending to be all badass.

"Oooh... I like where this is going," I purr while hanging upside down. "Would've liked the view of your ass better than being blindfolded."

A minute later, Demitri places me down on a seat, and then he straps me in. I hear the door close, and soon the driver's door opens, and the car moves under Demitri's weight, and he starts the engine.

"Do you do this often?" I ask when he drives us somewhere. Then the thought hits, and even though I can't see him, I turn my head to him. "Please tell me I'm the only woman you've kidnapped."

He lets out a chuckle. "That sounds a lot like jealousy."

“Of course!” I snap. “The last thing I want is some woman drooling over my man and imagining all the hot ways you can take her while she’s your prisoner.”

“*Malyshka*, you’re the only woman who’s turned on by being kidnapped.”

“Only if the kidnapper is you,” I mumble, letting out a huff.

When we stop wherever our destination is, I’m thrown over Demitri’s shoulder again and then dropped on another seat and strapped in again.

A smile spreads over my face. “We’re going to the island?”

“You’re very talkative for a kidnapped victim,” he mutters, and then he takes a seat next to me.

“Wait, now I’m confused. If you’re not flying the plane... are we even on a plane?” Then the engines start, and I turn my head in Demitri’s direction. “Okay, we’re on a plane. Can you take off the blindfold now?”

“No.”

“Damn, you’re taking this roleplaying thing to a whole different level.”

Once we’re airborne, I hear Demitri move again, and it feels like he’s standing in front of me.

“So now that I have you all to myself,” he says, and then I feel his hands on my knees. He pushes my legs open, and when his breath hits my clit, I understand why he wanted me to wear a dress with no underwear.

“Ohh...kay,” I moan, scooting down, so he has better access.

Best flight ever.

I’m starting to feel sleepy by the time Demitri sets me down on my feet, once a-freaking-gain, and then he finally unties my hands and takes off the blindfold.

I blink a couple of times then look around me, seeing that we are on the island. Giving Dimitri an annoyed look, I mutter, “Seriously? Why the blindfold and restrains?”

“I could’ve gagged you but thought that would really piss you off.” Taking hold of my shoulders, he says, “I wanted to reenact our first time.” Then he turns me to face the coffee table, and I see a Starbucks beverage and cookie.

My heart melts.

We take a seat on the couch, and when I pick up the beverage, it feels empty. Frowning, I take off the lid and then stare at the tiny box inside.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

My breathing begins to speed up, and as I take the box out of the cup, Dimitri moves off the couch and onto one knee.

Oh, God.

Emotion wells in my chest as I meet his eyes.

“We both know I suck at the romance shit.”

I let out a burst of nervous laughter and shake my head. He can never suck at anything.

Dimitri’s expression softens, and then he takes the box from my hand and opens it. I lower my eyes to the ring, and my hand flies up to cover my mouth as I stare at the huge princess-cut diamond.

“Ariana, I can’t promise we won’t fight, but I promise to always fight for you. I can’t promise that life won’t try to hurt you again, but I promise to protect you from every blow. I’ll kidnap you a thousand times if it means I get to keep you.”

I struggle to blink the tears back, and then Dimitri says, “*Malyshka*, will you marry me?”

Nodding like crazy, I dart forward and throw my arms around his neck. He rises to his feet, his arms wrapping tightly around me.

“I’ll say yes a thousand times if it means I get to keep you,” I manage to reply before being overwhelmed by tears of happiness.

Demitri pulls back and then slides the diamond onto my ring finger. Then he frames my face and kisses the living hell out of me in true Demitri style.

When he breaks the kiss, I place my hand against his jaw, and looking up into his eyes, I say, “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Things were rough for a while, but I would go through it all again for you. Only for you. No one else would’ve been able to keep me standing the way you did.”

Framing my face with his hands, Demitri’s eyes drift lovingly over my features. “There’s no one I love more than you.”

Epilogue

DEMITRI

Four years later...

“Just look at that cock,” I say proudly, pointing at my newborn son’s penis. “He takes after me.”

Alexei frowns as he stares down at Viktor, who we named after my father. “Brother, you are aware it’s not even an inch long?”

“Of course, it’s going to fucking grow,” I mutter. “But it’s a good start.”

“I swear to God. I asked you to change his diaper, not leave him lying naked,” Ariana snaps at us.

“It’s good for him to get fresh air on his ass,” I argue. The next minute Viktor goes off like a fucking sprinkler system, spraying both Alexei and me.

We both stand frozen, and then Ariana cracks up laughing.

Slowly Alexei turns to face me, a disgruntled look on his face. “So much for protecting me.”

I let out a burst of incredulous laughter. “Against a newborn? You’re shitting me, right?”

Ariana laughs harder, sitting down in the rocking chair. “God, best... ever.”

Alexei glances down at the wet stripe on his chest, then shakes his head. “He’s got good aim.”

“Yes, he got all your vital organs,” I agree.

Ariana gets up from the chair and, pushing us both out of the way, she begins to put a fresh diaper on Viktor, then picking him up, she cradles him.

Once again, the sight of her holding our son robs me of my breath.

Alexei walks out of the room to change his shirt.

Ariana smiles down at Viktor, and there's so much love on her face it looks like she's going to burst from being unable to contain it all.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper, in total awe of my wife.

Her eyes dart up to mine. "I haven't washed my hair in two weeks. I've worn the same sweatpants for three days now, and I'm sleep-deprived."

"Still, you've never been more beautiful to me." I move in next to her and press a kiss to her temple, and then I stare at the life we created together.

"Half of me and half of you," she murmurs. "How did we make something so amazing?"

"Once he's asleep, I can show you," I tease her.

She lets out a chuckle and then rolls her eyes at me. "You're not getting any until I've at least had a chance to shower."

I take Viktor from Ariana, then grin at her. "Go shower."

With a smile, she leaves the room, and then I look down at our son. I stare into his eyes, and again there's a shift in my chest.

I'm a father.

I lean down and press a kiss to his forehead. Taking a deep breath of his scent, I close my eyes. Love overwhelms me for this tiny human being that changed my life as much as his mother did.

When I lift my head, it's to see Ariana standing in the doorway, watching us.

"You're so handsome," she murmurs.

"Yeah? With a wet shirt and the beard I'm growing because I haven't shaved in two weeks?"

"Still, you've never been more handsome to me."

The End.

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