



His to Ruin

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: Her innocence is mine to protect. She's mine to ruin.

After I put my ring on her finger and told her she was mine, Olivia Volante tried to storm out, but when I pinned her to the wall and spanked her I didn't just find her wearing no panties.

I found her soaking wet.

Because her body isn't giving her any more choice about belonging to me than I did.

That's why my virgin bride is bucking and writhing and coming hard for me as I ravage her amidst the remnants of the wedding dress I just cut off.

And why I made her my wife in the first place.

Publisher's Note: His to Ruin is a stand-alone romance which is the fifth book of the Reluctant Vows series. It includes spankings and rough, intense sexual scenes. If such material offends you, please don't read this book.

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CHAPTER 1

Piotr

“This asshole has nothing more to tell us,” Leo Volante sneers as he wipes his bloody hands on a towel.

A feral grin spreads across his younger brother Matteo’s face. “Maybe not, but why stop the fun now?”

“Because it’s three a.m. and I need some sleep.”

“Sleep?” Matteo laughs mockingly. “You’re getting old, like Antonio.”

Their brother, who is head of their family, left us over an hour ago. Three years older than me at thirty-one, Antonio Volante is far from past his prime.

“Fuck you!” Leo’s response holds no malice.

Matteo sucks in air over his teeth. “I don’t know,fratello, you sound tired.”

“I’m tired of your shit,littlebrother.”

Leo takes every opportunity to remind his younger brothers of the hierarchy within their family. It’s not done viciously. If anything, he’s at his most amiable when he spars with them. He’s their superior, but he’s also their older brother and he’d do anything to protect them. I admire that.

Working with Matteo and Leo tonight has been illuminating. As we tortured the man who's currently chained to the wall behind us for information, they moved around each other in a well-rehearsed dance. They communicated without words, each seeming to know instinctively what the other was thinking. Their closeness makes them a force to be reckoned with, a fact I hadn't fully appreciated until now.

As an only child, raised by my uncle rather than my deadbeat father, I've never experienced a fraternal bond like theirs. I guess the closest I've ever come to it is with my oldest friend, Sev Baranov. I trust him more than anyone else, but even then I'm not sure I'd die for him.

"What do you think, Reznov?" Matteo asks me.

Pulled from my thoughts, I shrug. "It's your women who were hurt tonight."

Grigori Balogh, the lowlife we've been questioning for the past two hours, might not have been directly involved in the plot to abduct Emilia Volante tonight, but he helped the men who intended to harm her. The pretty new bride of Alessandro, the third brother in the notorious mafia family, was almost taken tonight.

The Volantes' younger sister, Olivia, was hurt during the botched kidnapping and her brothers have taken their rage out on our Hungarian captive. Though I hate to see innocent women getting hurt, I don't feel as strongly as Leo and Matteo do about what happened. I have no investment in the welfare of these women. Emilia is another man's wife and Olivia may be a stunning beauty, but she's too vain to interest me.

I've had dealings with Balogh before, but I only came along for the ride because the attempt to snatch Emilia happened at a hotel owned by the Reznov Bratva. By sheer luck, I was the one who prevented the lovely Mrs. Volante from being taken. I shot the asshole who was trying to drag her out through the service entrance.

“Exactly.” Matteo’s eyes glisten with something dark, a primal urge to obliterate his enemy. “It was our women, and he hasn’t even begun to pay for what happened to Livvy and Emilia.”

The viciousness in his tone surprises me. While I had no doubts about Leo’s ruthlessness, Matteo possesses an effortless charm that masks his savage streak. I wondered if it even existed. The moment we got Grigori Balogh back to this dank little room at one of my warehouses, I saw why Matteo’s name inspires fear.

A spluttering sound from across the room draws my attention. It seems our prisoner, who passed out a half hour ago, is awake once more.

“Piotr,” he croaks as if he has the right to use my name.

“What?”

“I have something for you.” Pain thickens his accent.

“Oh, yeah?” Though I can’t imagine what this bottom feeder would have for me, I move across the small cell so I can hear him better. “What is it?”

“For your ears only.”

His voice is weak, but his eyes convey determination to make me listen to him. I lean a little closer, unafraid he’ll lash out. Even if he wasn’t chained to the wall like a dog and hovering inches from death, he couldn’t overpower me.

“Tell me, then.”

His gaze flickers over my shoulder to where Leo and Matteo are watching from the other side of the room. “Get rid of them first.”

I shake my head. “This is their show, not mine.”

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“You’ll want this.” He’s insistent. I must admit, I’m intrigued to find out what he wishes to tell me. I meant what I said, though. We may be using my warehouse for this, but the Volantes are in charge of what happens here. It’s their right to punish those who threaten their women. If the roles were reversed, I’d insist on the same. Not that I have a woman to avenge.

Turning my back on Balogh to emphasize just how insignificant a threat he poses to me, I approach the Volante brothers.

“You think he might have something useful for you?” Leo asks.

I shrug. “I can’t imagine what, but he seems certain he does.”

Matteo rolls his head from one side to the other, stretching the muscles in his neck. A cracking sound confirms he’s tense. He hasn’t worked out all of his aggression yet.

“But it’s your call,” I tell them.

Leo scratches the back of his head. “If he’s got something you can use, you should hear him out.”

“What the fuck, Leo?” Matteo is more hotheaded than I thought. He really wants to end Balogh.

“We owe Piotr for helping us tonight,” Leo reasons. “If he hadn’t found the girls...”

A shudder ripples across Leo’s broad shoulders. Despite his reputation for

callousness, he obviously cares for the women in his life. He stares pointedly at Matteo until the younger man exhales sharply.

“Yeah, okay, we do owe you.” Matteo pulls me into a hug that has my spine stiffening. These Italians are demonstrative with their feelings. It’s unsettling. “If he’s playing you, make sure he suffers.”

It’s not like I’d do anything else. “Of course.”

As the Volante brothers leave, I turn to look at the shell of a man I’m now alone with. If I’m honest, I think he’s suffered enough. He was only a bit player in the plot to kidnap Emilia. I may dish out violence regularly, but I like to think I’m fair about it. The punishment should fit the crime. I’d have chopped off his fingers and left it at that.

“Okay, Grigori, I’m listening. Persuade me you have something worth sparing your miserable life for.”

“There are photos,” he wheezes.

That’s not what I expected. “Photos of what?”

“The Volante bitch.”

“Emilia?”

He shakes his head, then sucks in a shuddering breath. “No, the princess.”

“Olivia?”

“Igen.” He slips into his native language.

“What sort of photos?”

The leer on his bruised and battered face is answer enough.

“You have these in your possession?” I ask.

He nods weakly. “Joey Gallo left them in my safekeeping.”

“Gallo?” I spit the name. The man is total scum. Or should I say, he was. Gallo disappeared a few months ago and rumor has it Leo Volante took him out. “Why did he have photos of Olivia?”

Balogh coughs violently, blood and saliva spitting from his mouth. “I don’t know. He didn’t give me his life story. He just asked me to hide them.”

That sounds about right. Balogh is a man who’ll do anything for anyone as long as the price is right, but you’d have to be mad to share more with him than necessary.

“Okay, so where are these photos?”

“Let me out of here. I’ll take you to them.”

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“What makes you think I want these photos enough to let you out?”

“Trust me.” He draws in a pained breath. “They’re pure gold. Antonio Volante’s looking for them. He would do anything to stop them from getting out.”

Hmm. Now I am intrigued. When he said there were photos, I thought Balogh meant they depicted something racy that would cause the Volantes embarrassment, but now I wonder if they’re more damning. If that’s the case, they might provide useful leverage in the future. The Volantes are allies of ours. We’ve been doing business with them for a long time and my uncle has a particular fondness for Antonio’s mother, Ava. Things are good between us. But you never know when a touch of blackmail may be required to keep the relationship working to our benefit.

“Okay, Balogh, here is the deal. You tell me where the photos are and I’ll go get them. If they’re worth something to me, I’ll let you walk out of here.” I look at his broken body, littered with wounds that are enough to injure, but not kill. “Well, crawl maybe.”

His low whine tells me the offer isn’t what he hoped for.

“It’s the best you’ll get from me, Balogh,” I warn.

He weighs this for a moment before accepting he’s out of options. “There’s a safe in my office at the club. It’s behind the painting. Code is 29-09-51.”

Committing that to memory, I turn and leave without another word. I have no desire to spend any more time than I have to with this mudak. One of my uncle’s brigadiers,

a man who'll be invaluable to me when I take over the organization, is standing outside the door.

“Keep an eye on things here, Josef.” Now that I know where the photos are, I could simply kill Balogh, but I made a deal and I don't break my word lightly. “Don't let him die before I return.”

“Sure, Piotr.”

I pass a few of my men who gathered here when news got around that the Volantes and I brought a prisoner here. They no doubt hoped for a piece of the action, but Leo and Matteo deprived them of their opportunity to get their hands dirty. Something I'll say for the brothers is that they don't shy away from doing what has to be done.

I nod in greeting to several men, but don't stop to talk as I head out to the Mercedes S-class where Yuri has been waiting for me. The man has the patience of a saint, never once grumbling about the amount of the time he spends sitting behind the wheel while I take care of business. According to my uncle, he passes the time reading sappy romantic novels. It's an unusual hobby for a Bratva soldier, but I won't judge him for it. He's dependable and brave when called to action. That's all I require from my men.

“Head for Zita's,” I tell him as I get into the back of the car.

The drive should only take fifteen minutes, so I use the time to change into a clean shirt. Getting bloodstains on my clothes is an occupational hazard, so I always keep fresh clothing in the car. I'm surprised I got so much on me since I barely participated in Balogh's torture, but I guess blood gets everywhere.

Settling into my seat, I get my phone out and search for Olivia Volante's social media accounts. I've never taken much interest in her. She's kind of vapid, one of those

socialites who cares about nothing but spending her family's money and being seen in the right places. I imagine she's one of those influencer types, always looking for an opportunity to show off the lavish lifestyle she didn't lift a finger to earn.

When I find her profile, I see exactly what I expected to. There are dozens of posts, detailing her clothing purchases, her favorite restaurants, and the cosmetics she uses. Seriously? Who gives a fuck about which eyeliner she loves?

I'm about to write her off as a desperate attention-seeker when I spot the date on her last post. It's from over a year ago. I check her other accounts and discover there's nothing more up to date on any of them. Strange. The hundreds of likes and comments she got suggest she was popular. What made this social butterfly retreat into her cocoon? Perhaps these photographs will tell me.

"We're here, boss." Yuri pulls the car up outside the shithole where Balogh bases his operation.

I don't wait for my driver to come and open the door for me. I get out and head straight into the club. It's like stepping into the land that taste forgot. Everything in here is purple, from the velvet-clad seats to the lilac tint of the lighting.

Nobody dares challenge me as I make my way through to Balogh's office at the back. The door hasn't been locked since we dragged the asshole out of here earlier. I go inside and find the painting. Disgust churns my stomach. It's a portrait of an older woman reclining on a chaise longue. Wearing a thin robe that conceals nothing of her body, she stares out from the picture.

I'd bet good money the subject of the painting is Balogh's mother. The sick fuck named this strip club after her. The combination he gave me for the safe is probably her birthday. Balogh has some twisted fascination with the woman who brought his sorry ass into the world. He deserves a bullet to the brain just for that.

Pulling the painting off the wall, I toss it aside and find the safe. It's got a keypad rather than a dial, so I enter the combination and it clicks open. Inside, there's a pile of cash, a hundred grand, give or take. I'll let the girls who work here split it between them, a small bonus for putting up with their slimy asshole boss.

The bundles of cash are sitting on top of a brown envelope. I remove it from the safe and empty the contents onto Balogh's desk. There's a USB and an older model cellphone.

The phone is dead, so I stick it in my pocket for my tech guys to look at later. I go to Balogh's laptop, which is sitting on his desk. When asked for a password, I enter the same numbers that opened the safe. It works. Balogh's an idiot. If I wanted to, I could probably access every part of his miserable life with that passcode.

I insert the USB into the port and open the only folder on it. There are dozens of image files. As I open them, one by one, my rage builds. The first is of Olivia Volante, sitting naked at the edge of a bed in a starkly furnished room. Behind her are pale orange walls and a stripped pine nightstand. It's a cheap hotel room, I think. A beautiful girl like her is out of place amid such squalor.

The next photo is of her lying on the back of the bed, legs spread wide, putting her clean-shaven pussy on display. Apprehension is clear in the way she sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, but there's a gleam of hope in her eye. Whoever is taking the photos, she wants them to like her.

I open another picture to find Olivia on her knees, head bowed. It might be an image of willing submission, but the slump of her shoulders suggests defeat. That's much less attractive. The next photo shows her with a man's short, fat cock in her mouth. Her eyes glisten with tears. There are several like this, each more degrading than the last. When I get to the last photo, I find Olivia sitting back on her heels. Her lips are twisted in uncertainty and her cheeks are damp with tears. Regret clings to her.

Slamming the laptop shut, I decide two things. The first is that Grigori Balogh will not live until morning. He may not have taken these pictures, but it doesn't matter. Just having them in his possession is enough to sign his death warrant.

The second decision I make is that I will never use these images to blackmail the Volantes. My motivation isn't altruistic. For reasons I can't explain, Olivia has become more interesting to me. I don't want anyone else to see her like this. I want to wreck the perfect mafia princess persona she presents to the world and rebuild her as my queen. Whatever it takes, Olivia Volante will be mine.

CHAPTER 2

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Six months later...

Olivia

Everything always ends up being my fault. If there was an earthquake tomorrow, I swear the men in my family would claim it was because I slammed a door. The only one who ever sticks up for me is my brother, Matteo. We've always been close, but I fear that's about to change. As I wait for him to return to our cousin's Tuscan villa, where he's been living for several weeks now, anxiety grips me. He's going to blame me for his wife leaving, and I can't deny it is partly my fault.

After holding my tongue as Matteo pressured his oldest friend, Giulia Costanza, into marrying him, I couldn't sit back and do nothing when she asked for help to get home to New York. She was already upset with Matteo for insisting she had to marry him to ensure her safety when their hastily arranged wedding turned into a bloodbath. Several men stormed into the church and started shooting. I've no idea who they were since nobody tells me anything. I'm not supposed to concern myself with the family business, even when it has a direct impact on me.

What's expected of me is to keep my mouth shut and do as I'm told. When my oldest brother, Antonio, banished me to Italy for dragging his wife into a mess I'd gotten myself in, I didn't put up a fight. I flew to Italy with Matteo to stay at our cousin's villa. Then I had to move on again when my brother decided it wasn't safe for me to stay with him, probably because of the men who ended up attacking his wedding. I was sent to stay with my autocratic cousin Damiano instead. Then Piotr Reznov showed up.

Since he arrived in Italy, he's visited me at Damiano's house several times, making no secret of his desire to marry me. I don't know where his sudden interest comes from. He barely acknowledged my existence before and now he's talking about marriage. I told him exactly where he can shove his proposal, but I suspect he won't take no for an answer, especially now that I owe him a favor. He agreed to help Giulia to fly home provided I paid the price. I doubt he'll want cash, but I can't worry about that now. The prospect of breaking the news of Giulia's departure to my brother terrifies me. He's loved her for years, but only just admitted that to himself and to her. He will not be happy she's gone.

"Stop fidgeting," Piotr commands in a typically icy tone. He insisted on accompanying me to the villa to wait for Matteo.

Blinking, I look up at him. I hadn't even realized I was twisting the gold bracelet around on my wrist until he spoke. I've been too nervous being under his intense scrutiny. Despite myself, I obey the asshole Russian mobster, immediately dropping my hand to my lap.

"And cover yourself when you're in company."

What the hell is the arrogant prick talking about? I glance down to see what he means and realize my skirt has crept up to expose my thighs. It's not exactly full-frontal nudity, and it's not as if I have an audience. The only other man in the room is my cousin, Lorenzo, who's sitting in the big leather chair by the window. He's paying absolutely no attention to me. His head is tilted back and his eyes are shut. It's only the way he constantly touches his injured forehead and winces that lets me know he's not asleep.

"Okay, sir, whatever you say." I tug my skirt down.

"And cut the attitude." Piotr narrows his eyes disapprovingly. "You're not a child."

And yet he's speaking to me as if I'm one. Folding my arms across my chest, I throw my hardest glare at him. "Where the hell do you get off telling me what to do?"

"Olivia!" Lorenzo warns.

It's the first he's spoken to me since he arrived back at the villa ten minutes after Piotr and I got here. He's grumpy because he's in pain. A bullet grazed his forehead, carving out a nasty gash. Being a typical macho mobster, he let a doctor stitch up the wound, but refused to take something for the pain. He'd rather suffer than appear weak. Fucking idiot! He should be in bed, but I'm not going to tell him that. The man hates to be told what to do.

"Lorenzo." My tone is petulant, but that can't be helped. Piotr Reznov rubs me the wrong way. "He can't talk to me like that."

My cousin sighs dramatically. "Just behave."

I should have known he'd be on Piotr's side. My Italian cousins are extremely cozy with the Reznov Bratva. Lorenzo wouldn't want me to cause any friction. It's not just that, though. Most of the men in my family consider me a gigantic pain in the ass. To them, I'm a pampered brat with no worth other than the alliance my marriage will make some day. Like Antonio, my oldest brother, Lorenzo seems to think if Piotr wants me, I should be bursting with gratitude.

Rising from my seat, I go to the cabinet in the corner of the room and unscrew the cap from a whisky bottle. I don't know one brand from another, but my cousins only stock the expensive stuff.

"You sure you should drink that?" Piotr asks.

Does he disapprove of women drinking hard liquor? Perhaps he's concerned because

I'd be underage if we were back home. I'll assume it's sexism, since I doubt he gives a shit about the law.

"Why not? I've had a shock."

When those men burst into the church and started shooting, it's a miracle I didn't piss myself. Piotr shoved me to the floor, behind a stone pillar. He wasn't supposed to be at my brother's impromptu wedding, but at that moment I was glad he'd invited himself along. If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't have got out of the line of fire fast enough.

"Then make some sweet tea," Lorenzo suggests. "And get a fucking grip. It's not like you've never seen violence before."

I glare at the back of my cousin's head. I may have witnessed brutal acts before but, unlike him, I'm not immune to their effects.

"What violence have you seen?" Piotr asks.

Is he for real? It's only a few months since he killed a man right in front of me. Slamming down the bottle of whisky, I storm out of the room and head for the kitchen. I'm not a fan of tea, sweet or otherwise, but I love coffee. Perhaps a caffeine hit is what I need to deal with the assholes I'm surrounded by.

As I place a cup beneath the dispenser and program the coffee machine to make me a double espresso, footsteps pad across the floor behind me. I spin around to find Piotr standing on the other side of the kitchen island.

"What violence have you seen?" He repeats the question I didn't answer.

"I got hit in the face with a tray and then saw you shoot the man who was trying to

kidnap Emilia.”

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Hopefully that will refresh his memory, because I don't want to go into any more detail about that horrific night.

“What else?”

“Isn't that enough?” It's surely worse than most people will see in a lifetime.

Piotr shrugs. “It was a regrettable incident, but hardly a massacre.” Does he really believe that it's no big deal? I guess to a man like him, the death of a single person isn't worth worrying about. “What other violence have you witnessed?”

Oh, my god! Does he want a laundry list of every time I saw one of my brothers hit someone?

“Why do you want to know?”

“Call it curiosity.”

I don't understand why he's pursuing this line of conversation, but I decide to indulge him and share one of my worst memories.

“When I was eight, some men tried to kidnap me outside my dance class. One of them threw acid in my bodyguard's face. He was badly injured, but he still fought them off. He saved me.”

Poor Jimmy was horrifically scarred. It would have been worse if my dance instructor hadn't acted quickly, pouring water on his face to flush the acid. After Jimmy

endured several surgeries, my father offered to set him up with a comfortable retirement, but he insisted on coming back to work. He's protected me for most of my life, and talking about what happened makes me realize how much I miss him.

"He's still your bodyguard, isn't he?"

"Yes." At least, I think he is. My asshole brother probably persuaded him to retire while I'm stuck here.

"Why didn't he come to Italy with you?"

I can't prevent an unladylike snort from escaping me. "Antonio wasn't going to allow me to have the one person who makes me feel safe around."

"Matteo and your cousins don't make you feel safe?"

"They do." I mean, if someone tried to hurt me, they'd do everything in their power to protect me. "It's just that Jimmy is, well, he's..."

"A father figure?" Piotr is more perceptive than I imagined. "Your hero?"

"Yeah. If I'd listened to him, I wouldn't..."

Piotr tilts his head to one side as I bite my tongue. "Wouldn't what?"

"Be in this mess," I admit.

If I'd listened to Jimmy, I'd never have dated Dario Maroni behind my brothers' backs. Jimmy warned me he was trouble, but I thought the sun shone out of his perfectly toned ass. I mean, who wouldn't fall for the tall, dark, handsome star of their high school football team if he flashed his killer smile at them?

I shouldn't have guilted Jimmy into keeping the relationship secret. If my brothers had known I had a boyfriend, they'd have kept a closer eye on me. I'd never have been able to slip out of the house to go meet him. I wouldn't have ended up at a seedy hotel, letting the man I thought I loved take photos of me in increasingly degrading poses.

Trusting Jimmy's instincts about Dario would have saved me a lot of trouble. My supposed boyfriend was working for Joey Gallo, a longtime enemy of my family. Dario passed the photos to him and he threatened to post them online if I didn't spy on my brothers for him. If I'd been thinking clearly, I'd have gone to Jimmy and told him what happened. I didn't. Instead, I went to Antonio's wife, Isabella, and asked her to help me.

That's when the situation became even messier. She let Joey Gallo and his cousin Vito into their home, thinking they just wanted to talk to Antonio in exchange for the photos. There was an altercation that ended with my brother being shot and the Gallos disappearing. Thinking she betrayed him, Antonio exiled Isabella.

When I finally gathered the courage to tell Antonio his wife was only trying to help me when she let his enemies into their home, he was furious. He sent me here to Italy to reflect on what he considers my many flaws. I know he's searching for the photos, but I pray he never finds them. If he sees how low I sank that night, he'll wash his hands of me once and for all.

"What mess?" Piotr's question pulls me from my thoughts. "Why did your brother send you here, Olivia?"

"Oh, you know, family issues." Before he can ask me anything else, I return to the coffee machine and grab my cup of freshly brewed espresso. As I turn back to face Piotr, I remember my manners and gesture toward the cup with my free hand. "Would you like one?"

“No, I never touch the stuff.”

My eyes widen. “What sort of psycho doesn’t drink coffee?”

If he’s offended by the question, he doesn’t show it. He doesn’t display much emotion. “This one.”

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“Well, would you like tea? Hot chocolate? Milk?”

He dismisses each option with a shake of his head.

“What do you drink, then?”

“I drink tea at breakfast. The rest of the time, I prefer water and vodka.” The ghost of a smile touches his lips. “But never together.”

I can’t help smiling. “My father had a Scottish friend who said it was a crime to put water in whisky.”

“A real man doesn’t need to water down his liquor.” His tone is more playful than I’ve ever heard it, and I swear he winks at me. Is Piotr Reznov flirting? It’s hard to tell. So far, he’s been pragmatic in his approach to persuading me to marry him telling me why it would be good business for us to tie the knot. Just what every girl wants to hear.

Before I can come up with a response to keep this flirtation going, the front door shuts and I hear my brother bellowing for Giulia. Shit.

“That’s Matteo,” I say needlessly.

Gulping down the scalding coffee faster than I should, I slam the cup down on the countertop by the sink and hurry through to the living room before Lorenzo can break the news of Giulia’s departure to my brother in his usual flippant manner. Matteo is going to require careful handling.

“Where’s Giulia?” my brother demands the moment I walk into the room.

He and Damiano, who must have arrived with him, look rough. My cousin’s arm is in a sling and Matteo’s knuckles are split. Both men have blood splatters on their clothes. It seems they’ve been busy dealing with their enemies.

“Where is my wife, Livvy?”

Piotr subtly steps forward to insert himself between me and my brother. It isn’t necessary. Matteo might yell, but he won’t hurt me. I appreciate the gesture all the same. I never expected Piotr to be gallant.

“Your wife is on my plane, headed for New York.” Piotr’s tone holds its usual lethal calm.

“What?” Matteo sounds so angry it makes me shudder.

“She wanted to go home, Matteo.” My voice is a good two octaves higher than usual. “I asked Piotr for help.”

“You did what?” Matteo’s expression turns murderous. “You helped my wife to leave me?”

“Giulia isn’t leaving you.” I try to smooth things over. “She just needed some space.”

“She’s quite safe,” Piotr says. “My people will deliver Miss Costanza to her father.”

“Mrs. Volante was safe here.”

“She didn’t seem to think so.” Piotr’s tone is measured, but there’s a hint of provocation in it.

“You fucking...!” Matteo doesn’t finish the insult. He lunges for Piotr, who shoves me aside, once again getting me out of harm’s way. Before my brother can land a blow on the Russian, something that would be bad for our alliance with the Reznovs, Damiano pulls him back. With impressive strength, considering he has one arm out of action, my cousin pulls Matteo from the room.

“Well, that was fun,” Lorenzo drawls. He’s remained seated this entire time, but I’m sure he would have intervened if Damiano needed him.

“Asshole!” I snap. “That was horrible. Poor Matteo.”

“Oh, it’s poor Matteo now?” Lorenzo arches an eyebrow as he mimics my voice. “You weren’t so concerned for him when you were helping his bride to flee from their wedding night. I thought you didn’t even like the girl.”

“She’s not all bad.” I have been kind of mean to Giulia in the past, my attitude driven by jealousy over her long friendship with Matteo. “And she was really upset about what happened.”

“You don’t think being with the man who loves her would have helped her get over it?”

Shit. When he puts it like that, I’m less sure I did the right thing. The doubt burrows deeper into my mind when the front door slams shut and Damiano returns to the room alone.

“Where is he?” I ask.

“He’s going after Giulia.” Damiano crosses the room and pours himself a large Scotch before turning to face us. “What the fuck were you thinking, Piotr? You should never get between a man and his wife.”

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“I was thinking Antonio wants his brother back in the States and if his wife was there he’d follow.”

Damiano laughs mirthlessly. “You’re so full of shit. You didn’t do it to please Antonio.”

“No,” Piotr admits. “I did it as a favor to Olivia.”

“A favor in return for what?” Lorenzo knows everything men like Piotr do is transactional.

“Dinner.”

That surprises me. “Dinner?”

“Tomorrow night,” he confirms. “I’ll let you know where and when.”

He addresses that to Damiano, not me. There’s no point expressing my outrage at the patriarchal nonsense of deferring to one of my male relatives because nobody here will listen. In their medieval minds, an unmarried woman is the responsibility of the head of her family. As Antonio isn’t here, that’s Damiano.

“Fine.” I can’t be sure, but I think I see a flicker of disappointment on Piotr’s face. I don’t think he liked my easy agreement. Perhaps he wanted some resistance so he could bark orders at me once more. “Dinner tomorrow.”

I’m sure he’s going to want a lot more than dinner in exchange for helping Giulia, but

I'll deal with further demands when he makes them. For now, I just want to go back to Damiano's house in the city, slip into a warm bath, and try to put this horrible day behind me.

CHAPTER 3

Piotr

If I were any other patron, the wait staff would have asked me to vacate my table by now. It's been a half hour since I first sat down in my favorite spot at the back of the restaurant and Olivia still hasn't arrived. The servers, sensibly, haven't pressured me to place an order. They've brought me a complimentary bottle of Beluga Gold Line, an acceptable vodka, and some olives to graze on, but haven't pestered me beyond that.

They know me well at Gianetta's. I come here whenever I'm in Florence. Lorenzo Volante introduced me to the place when he was trying to add it to his property portfolio. The pretty young owner, Lucia Lazaro, refused to sell. The restaurant is her inheritance from her grandmother and I suspect she would rather die than hand it over to a Volante.

It won't come to that. Lorenzo has employed none of his usual strong-arm tactics to force her out. He respected her decision. I think he's impressed by Lucia's backbone. I certainly admire her integrity. It's one of the reasons I choose to dine here. I also enjoy the bistecca alla fiorentina, which is the best I've ever eaten.

I glance at the time on my cellphone, which is sitting on the white cloth-covered table in front of me. Most men would give up on their date after this long of a wait, but I know the lovely Olivia will show. She's just indulging in one of her little rebellions. I've watched her closely since she first got on my radar. I've seen how she operates.

With five brothers keeping her in check when she's home in New York and her cousins doing the same here in Italy, she pushes back in whatever small ways she can. Usually, she makes her displeasure known by wearing clothes her family will disapprove of. She picks dresses that are sinfully short or that show too much cleavage. At other times, she'll protest by adopting the persona of an ice princess and refusing to engage with the people around her. I've seen her snub billionaires and film stars just to show her brothers she's pissed. I swear she'd thumb her nose at the Pope if she thought it would send a message to Antonio.

It all stems from boredom, of course. A woman like Olivia wasn't made to be a mere accessory. She's not some ornament to be brought out to dazzle friends and rivals alike. I've seen her academic transcripts. She has a GPA of 4.0 that she may never put to good use. That must be frustrating.

The Volante brothers don't know what to do with her most of the time. I'm guessing that's why Antonio sent her away. He'd run out of options for keeping her in line. It's not a problem I'll face. Once Olivia is my wife, there are many ways I can deal with her if she misbehaves. She may enjoy some of my punishments. Others won't be so pleasant.

I might not wait until my ring is on her finger to teach her a lesson. Her lateness shows a lack of respect that can't go unpunished. While I might forgive a couple of minutes, she's pushed it too far. I'm a busy man. I have better things to do with my time than hang around like some loser, hoping my date will turn up.

As I'm contemplating whether to spank her ass or make her crawl on hands and knees to beg for forgiveness, an awed hush falls over the room. I don't need to look up to know that Olivia has caused the lull in conversation. Though she often slips into a room quietly, determined to go unnoticed, when she wants to make an entrance, she commands everyone's attention.

She strides into the room with her shoulders back and head held high. Tall and slender, she wouldn't look out of place on a high fashion runway. Brunette hair tumbles over her shoulder in loose waves. A red dress clings to her curves. It plunges low to reveal the swell of her breasts, and falls to mid-thigh to reveal long, toned legs. Her lips are painted in an arresting crimson shade that complements her dress.

It's armor, I realize as she waves off the hostess's attempt to greet her and heads straight for me. Olivia has come here to do battle. She looks like a warrior, but when she reaches me a crack forms in the façade. Her lip wobbles just once, and fear glistens in her eye.

As I rise to greet her, she stiffens. Before I can step around the table to pull out the chair for her, she denies me the chance to be a gentleman and drops onto the seat. Regaining her composure, she glares at me in challenge. Good. I don't want a woman who cowers in my presence. Olivia will be my queen in public, ruling by my side. Behind closed doors, she'll be my wanton whore, begging desperately for my cock. I'll ruin her for any other man.

"Olivia." I retake my seat. "You're late."

"Sorry about that." Her tone drips with insincerity. "Wardrobe issues."

That, I believe. Damiano probably gave her a hard time about what she was going to wear tonight. If this is the dress he approved, I can't imagine what the others looked like. My friend expects the women in his family to display modesty, as do I. There's little of that on display, but Olivia will soon learn. My wife will not expose herself to other men's gazes.

"Damiano didn't accompany you?" I had expected him to bring her to me and make threats about ensuring her virtue remained intact. He needn't worry about that. I don't intend to fuck Olivia until she's legally mine.

“He dropped me off outside.” Olivia’s tone drips with practiced disdain. “I told him not to bother walking me in.”

I respect that. Olivia could have tried to use her cousin as a shield, but she didn’t need anyone to hold her hand. She’s scared of me. I can see it in her eyes, but she doesn’t let fear rule her. In fact, she channels it into a fierceness most men would cower from.

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“Are you hungry?” I ask solicitously. This is supposed to be a date, after all. The aim is to make a pleasurable experience where we get to know each other a little. There are so many things I wish to learn from the woman opposite me.

“I am, yes.”

Raising my hand, I call the server over. Angelina is a young woman who’s waited on me before. She’s studying at the Università di Firenze. I make it my business to learn something about everyone I encounter. Information is power, after all, and even the most insignificant fact about a person can prove useful at some point. If I recall, Angelina is taking art history. I guess she wants to make a career out of persuading rich idiots to part with their cash for abstract blobs of color.

“Mr. Reznov.” Angelina bobs her head respectfully and waits for me to speak.

“We’ll take the bistecca alla fiorentina with whatever accompaniments Ms. Lazaro recommends.” Normally, I wouldn’t put my food choices in someone else’s hands, but Lucia never gets it wrong. “And can you recommend some wine for my companion?”

“I’ll take the Tenuta San Vuido Sassicaia, the 2021,” Olivia says. “And bring the bottle.”

Angelina looks at me for confirmation and I nod. Let the Italian princess drink whatever she wants. It will lower her inhibitions and allow me to find out more about her.

“You didn’t argue about the food, but wanted to choose the wine,” I note as Angelina walks off.

“I know more about wine than you do.” There’s no point in arguing since she’s right. As a man who never touches the stuff, I have no clue what’s good. “And the steak is always amazing here.”

“You’ve been before?” I ask.

“A few times. Lorenzo brings me here whenever he wants to torment the owner.”

“He’s still interested in her, then?”

“Yes, until she spreads her legs for him. Then he’ll forget all about her.”

“You have a low opinion of your cousin.”

“I have a low opinion of men.”

Considering the pictures of her I now possess, I’m not surprised by the bitterness dripping from her words.

“You speak from experience?” I doubt she’ll confide in me about the man who took those photographs, but I ask anyway.

Olivia purses her lips. “I have five asshole brothers, countless asshole cousins, and one asshole...” She waves her hand in my direction as she decides what to label me. “Suitor.”

“Just one? I’m glad to hear I don’t have any competition.” Not that it would matter if I did. Anyone who stands between me and my chosen bride will end up in an

unmarked grave.

“I didn’t say you were my only suitor. I said you were the only asshole suitor.”

“Ah, I see. You’ve got prospective husbands lined up around the block, do you?”

Olivia’s face falls. “I’m sure they would be if it wasn’t for my brothers.” She snorts in irritation. “I’m surprised they don’t just slap a chastity belt on me and be done with it.”

The thought of Olivia in a chastity belt, waiting for me to unlock it on our wedding night, turns me on more than it should. Perhaps I could have her wear one beneath her gown.

Before I can get any deeper into that fantasy, Angelina returns to the table with the wine. She dribbles a little into Olivia’s wineglass and waits for her to taste it. At Olivia’s nod of approval, she pours a more generous measure. I help myself to another vodka. As I lift it to my lips, I watch Olivia draining her glass, gulping the expensive wine down like it’s water. She sets the glass down and refills it.

“Do you have a drinking problem, Olivia?” The information I’ve gathered on her over the last few months suggests that’s not the case, but I want to see how she reacts.

“No, Piotr. I have a Russian-who-won’t-leave-me-alone problem.” She glares at me. “Why are we here?”

“For dinner.” As if on cue, Angelina appears with a large platter of medium rare steak and places it on the table along with a jug of rich-looking sauce. Another server, an older man I don’t recognize, sets down a dish of braised artichokes and some rosemary potatoes, then walks away.

“Would you like me to serve?” Angelina asks.

I shake my head. “We’ll manage, thank you.”

“As you wish, Mr. Reznov.”

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Angelina leaves us and I give Olivia an expectant look. “Well?”

“Well, what?” She frowns as I point to the food in front of us. Her mouth drops open. “You expect me to serve you?”

“In many ways, malyshka, but you can start by serving dinner.”

Olivia’s jaw clenches. I fully expect her to throw something at me, perhaps a glass of wine. I’d welcome an outburst as an excuse to drag her over my knee and thrash her ass. Sadly, she doesn’t take the bait. Instead, she smiles sweetly, rises from her chair, and gives me an incredible view of her breasts as she places three slices of meat, a spoonful of potatoes, and some artichoke on my plate. Then she sits back in her seat and crosses her arms over her chest, quietly fuming as I unfurl my napkin and drape it over my lap.

“Haven’t you forgotten something?” I ask as I slice off a piece of steak.

“What? Did you want me to chew it for you?”

“Less of the attitude,” I warn her, though I actually get a buzz out of her speaking to me in that insolent tone. I point my fork at her plate. “You didn’t take any for yourself.”

“Oh.” She was so busy being pissed at me, she didn’t even realize she hadn’t given herself any food. She takes two slices of the steak and some artichoke, but leaves the potatoes.

“Don’t tell me you’re on a low-carb kick?” If anything, Olivia could stand to gain a few pounds, not that I’d ever dictate what she eats.

“No. I could never give up bread or pasta. I just don’t like potatoes.”

It’s a little thing, but I guess I learned something new about her. The tension eases as Olivia takes a bite of her steak and moans in appreciation.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” I cut off a generous piece and pop it in my mouth.

“Divine,” Olivia agrees.

As we eat, Olivia slowly relaxes and conversation flows more easily between us. It’s mainly me asking her about her food and travel preferences, safe topics, and her answering. She does occasionally show some interest in my life, so that’s something.

Though she made me wait for her, it’s been worth it. I’ve seen a less guarded version of Olivia that I like. It’s not essential for me to enjoy spending time with my bride outside of the bedroom, but I would prefer not to want to strangle my wife every second of the day. Sure, Olivia will push my buttons now and then, but, on balance, I think she’ll make a suitable wife.

As she swallows her last bite of artichoke and sets her knife and fork down on her plate, I decide the time is right to remind her of what I want. Taking the red velvet box from my jacket pocket, I slide it across the table.

“What’s this?” Olivia asks suspiciously.

“Open it and see.”

She picks up the box and opens it warily, as if she expects a bomb to go off. The five-

carat Asscher cut diamond ring wasn't the most expensive in the exclusive store I bought it from, but the moment I saw it I pictured it on Olivia's finger. Most women would be thrilled to receive such a gift, but the expression on Olivia's face is one of pure horror.

"What is this?" Her words come out in a breathless rush. "Piotr?"

I reach across the table and take her hand as she drops the box onto the table. "It's your engagement ring, malyskha."

It won't be a long engagement. I intend to speak to Antonio tonight to arrange for the ceremony to take place in New York a week from now.

"No." Olivia shakes her head. Snatching her hand away from mine, she flings her chair back violently as she jumps up.

"You knew this was coming," I tell her as she stares down at me, those deep blue eyes filled with panic. "You knew I wanted you."

"Yes, but I need..."

Not bothering to tell me she needs time or whatever bullshit she was going to come out with, Olivia whirls around and runs from the restaurant. I've got to admit, it's impressive how fast she moves in those heels.

I take a roll of cash from my pocket and throw down enough money to cover the bill, plus a generous tip. Grabbing the jewelry box she discarded, I follow Olivia outside. She's heading toward a dark blue SUV I recognize as Damiano's. He may not have accompanied her into the restaurant, but he obviously hung around to ensure she got home safely. I should be insulted by that, but I like that Olivia's family looks out for her.

Marching up behind the feisty brunette, I grab her arm and steer her back toward the building we just exited.

“Let go!” she screeches.

“Not a chance, malyskha.”

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Behind us, a car door slams.

“Reznov!” Damiano shouts.

“Starne fuori,” I reply, letting him know this is not his business.

“Don’t push it,” Damiano warns, but he doesn’t follow as I drag a struggling Olivia around to the side of the building and slam her back against the rough stone wall.

“What’s the matter with you?” I demand. “You know this is happening. Your brother supports me in this.”

She doesn’t deny it. I know Antonio has made his feelings on the subject clear to her. When I first told him I wanted his sister, he insisted he wouldn’t force her into anything, but lately he’s grown impatient. He wants our alliance to be as strong as possible and his mother’s impending marriage to my uncle won’t be enough, not when I assume the mantle of Pakhan.

Olivia draws in a shuddering breath. “I can’t do this. I need more time.”

“Time?” I scoff at the pathetic excuse. It’s what people always want, as if it will miraculously solve all their problems. More time to think. More time to pay. More time to live. It’s the one thing I’ve never been prepared to give. “I’ve wasted enough time on this charade already.”

“Charade?”

“Being nice. I came and told you my intentions. I allowed you to stamp your feet and throw me out of your cousin’s house.” She’d been magnificent that day as she yelled at me to leave Damiano’s home. “I sent flowers, cards. When you needed a favor, I granted it. I’ve taken you to dinner, showed an interest in more than your pretty face and your tight little cunt. But still you resist.”

“You bastard.” Olivia’s eyes glisten with tears. Did she really think I would continue to court her with sweet gestures, to wear her down until she accepted me?

“My patience is at an end, Olivia. You will marry me in New York, one week from today.”

Several emotions play out across her face. There’s shock, fear, anger. She closes her eyes and breathes in deeply, drawing on her inner strength. Her eyes pop open and she tosses back her silky mane of chestnut hair. I can’t wait to wrap it around my fist as I fuck her from behind.

“Or what?” she demands.

There’s defiance in her gaze and something infinitely more intriguing. Desire. I see it now. She wants me, but can’t admit it to me or herself. She needs me to force the issue. I guess she’s standing on her pride.

Spinning her around, I push her face toward the wall. She instinctively throws her hands out to brace herself. I hold her in place with a firm hand between her shoulders and yank her dress up to reveal her bare ass.

“No panties?” If I’d known she was walking about like this, I’d have pulled her out of the restaurant and thrashed her ass earlier.

“It’s a tight dress.” If she thinks that’s an adequate response, she’s mistaken. She

glances over her shoulder at me. “What the fuck are you doing?”

I don’t answer. Well, not with words. Drawing my arm back, I smack her ass hard. She squeals and tries to break free from my grasp.

“Keep still,” I warn her, “or I’ll take my belt off.”

The threat is enough to make her stop struggling. She’s lucky I’m in a generous mood tonight, because the thought of lashing that peachy skin until it’s red raw is getting me hard.

Olivia stands there, taking it like a good girl as I spank her ass five more times. She gasps and hisses, dancing up onto her toes, but she doesn’t try to get away. Her flesh heats beneath my palm and the blood courses faster through my veins. I don’t know when I last felt such a rush. My erection throbs and I wonder who’s suffering more—Olivia or me?

I deliver another blow to her toned buttocks and Olivia moans. It’s not the sound of a woman in pain.

“Piotr.” My name is a desperate plea on her lips.

I doubt she even knows what she wants, but as she pushes her hips back toward me, I slip my hand between her legs.

“You’re drenched.” I withdraw my fingers and hold them up for her to see. “Does being spanked turn you on, malyskha?”

“You turn me on.” Her eyes widen. She didn’t mean to admit it.

Triumph surges through me. Even if she spoke accidentally, she deserves a reward

for her honesty. Wrapping my arm around her waist, I pull her back against me. I slide my right hand down to the apex of her thighs and tease her clit with my middle finger.

Olivia is beautifully responsive. Her head drops to my shoulder and her lips part as she moans ecstatically. Sliding two fingers into her tight channel, I continue to stroke her clit with my thumb. Her pussy clenches and her hips buck as I fuck her with my fingers. She cries out as she comes. The sound is music to my ears.

Her body goes limp and I hold her for a moment, feeling the rapid beat of her heart as she steadies herself. She stands up straight, pulling away from me, and I feel the loss of her warm body against mine. Drawing her skirt back down over her thighs, she whirls around and slaps my face, hard enough to sting.

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“How dare you!” She jabs a finger at my chest. “I am not some whore you can feel up in a parking lot.”

Her indignation amuses me. Curving my hand around the back of her head, I drag her closer. “Oh, but you are a whore, Olivia. You’re my whore, and soon you’ll learn exactly what that means.”

Taking hold of her arm, I lead her back across the parking lot to where Damiano is standing by his car. He looks tense as he scans Olivia’s body. If he was any other man, I’d gouge his eyes out for daring to examine her like that. Satisfied she’s in one piece, he nods to me, then turns and gets back behind the wheel of his car.

Olivia reaches for the handle of the back door, but I put my hand over hers, preventing her from opening it. I lean in close, and she shudders.

“One week, Olivia. You’ll stand with me and say your vows like you mean them or I’ll tear your life to pieces. By the time I’m finished with you, there won’t be anything left for the vultures to pick over. Understand?”

“I understand,” she hisses.

Loving her fire, I don’t retaliate when she elbows me in the ribs and shoves me out of her way. No other woman would dare to treat me that way. Nor would any man, for that matter.

Olivia gets into the car and Damiano drives away. I allow myself a smile. Making this woman mine is going to be even more fun than I thought.

CHAPTER 4

Olivia

This week is going by too quickly. I haven't come to terms with the idea of becoming Mrs. Piotr Reznov. I can't imagine what my life will be like. Piotr spends a lot of time in Europe. Will he expect me to travel with him or will he tuck me away in some apartment on the Upper East Side and leave me to my own devices?

I have no clue what he wants from a wife. He hasn't spoken to me since he shoved me into Damiano's car four nights ago and I sure as hell don't intend to call him up and ask. My cousin gave me Piotr's number, but I won't use it. As old-fashioned as it sounds, I expect him to be the one to chase after me.

Though there's nothing romantic about our union, I still want the wedding to be special. After all, the chances of me ever marrying again are slim. Divorce just doesn't happen in our world, and Piotr's too careful to ever get taken out by one of his enemies. The only person who's likely to get close enough to slit his throat is me, and I don't have the stomach for that. I'll just have to suck it up and make the best of a bad situation.

After I had dinner with the Russian asshole in Florence, Antonio ordered me to get my ass home. Damiano and Lorenzo came with me. Their brother, Gabriele, won't be coming for the wedding, but that's no surprise. He's locked himself away in his mansion in Rome and refuses to see anyone. He conducts what business he can remotely and delegates the rest to his brothers.

Thankfully, my overbearing cousins are staying at The Vicente, my sister-in-law Emilia's hotel. Having them underfoot in my family home would be more than I could bear right now. It's bad enough that my brothers keep dropping in to make sure I'm behaving myself. Well, three of my brothers. Matteo hasn't spoken to me since

my return to the States, but his silence sends a clear message. He doesn't care if I want to marry Reznov or not. Even if I told him Piotr spanked me, he wouldn't give a shit.

As I recall how I felt when Piotr's palm hit my bare butt cheeks, a shiver runs down my spine. I shouldn't have liked it when he did that, but it stirred something deep inside me, that primal desire I already knew existed. I want a man like Piotr to dominate me in the bedroom, to bend me to his will. He'll open my eyes to a world of pleasure. I thought I'd found a man who could do that once before, but he turned out to be a creep. Piotr won't disappoint me sexually, but I'm afraid he'll carry his need for control into every aspect of our lives. That I can't allow.

"Livvy." My sister-in-law's voice breaks into my thoughts. "We're here."

"Oh." I was so distracted I didn't notice we'd pulled up at the bridal boutique.

Emilia studies me closely, her brow furrowed in concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, of course."

As Dante Parisi, Antonio's right-hand man and my shadow for the day, opens the door, I hop out onto the sidewalk and wait for Emilia to follow. With so little time to organize a wedding, the only way to get everything done is to divide and conquer. My mother has gone up to Connecticut to get our Westport mansion ready. It's where I wanted to hold the wedding. Piotr and I will exchange vows in the library with sixty carefully selected guests to witness the formalities.

Then a party for our extended family, friends, and business associates will be held in a marquee on the lawn. The most important members of the Volante and Reznov organizations will be there. After missing out on Alessandro's, Leo's, and Matteo's weddings, it's essential that Antonio's men are included in mine. It's important to

foster a sense of unity. Many felt snubbed when my brothers robbed them of the opportunity to witness their marriages.

My brother Leo and his wife Vinnie have also gone to Connecticut. Leo will oversee security arrangements and Vinnie's taking care of the catering. Her best friend, Beniamino, is an incredible chef, so he'll do the actual cooking.

My other sister-in-law, Isabella, is dealing with the flowers, cake, photographer, and anything else she can think of. I believe she's roped Giulia in to help, but I haven't spoken to Matteo's wife since I returned either.

With everyone else occupied, Emilia volunteered to help me find a dress. I'm glad to have her with me. Of all my brothers' wives, she's the one I like best. She's closest to my age and is possibly the sweetest person on Earth. Life has thrown a lot of shit at her in the past year, but she never complains. She's the walking embodiment of the idea of counting your blessings, focusing on all she's built and not what she's lost. It's why I've asked her to be a bridesmaid, along with my cousin Alessia, who'll be joining us any minute when she's done with her early morning class at NYU.

"This is exciting," Emilia says as we walk past Dante into the boutique. "Alessandro chose my dress for me, so I didn't get the chance to go shopping."

"I know." My brother may be a controlling asshole, but I can't fault his taste. He chose the perfect dress for Emilia before he even met her. He openly admits now that he was smitten with the pretty Italian from the moment he first saw a photo of her. Their marriage resulted from an arrangement between her grandfather and our family. Poor Emilia knew nothing about it, or her family's mafia ties, until Alessandro swept into her life. "Do you regret not picking your own dress?"

Emilia shakes her head and smiles fondly. "No. He chose exactly what I'd have picked."

She has a dreamy look in her eyes, and I can't help wondering if I'll ever get like that over Piotr. It would be nice to think we could grow to love each other, but I won't hold my breath.

"Miss Volante?" An older, gray-haired woman rushes to greet us. "I'm Clare Maxwell. I'm honored you've chosen my little store. May I get you some champagne?"

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I grimace at Clare's ingratiating tone. There was a time when I reveled in having people bowing and scraping to me, but now it pisses me off. I've done nothing to earn such reverence, apart from being born into the Volante family.

"Please," Emilia answers when the silence drags on.

Clare sweeps her arm out toward a seating area with a sofa and two chairs. "Make yourselves comfortable. My head stylist will come and assist you in a moment."

"No." My tone is so abrupt, Emilia shoots me an admonishing glare. I try to tamp down my irritation. "That won't be necessary, thank you. We'd like to look around by ourselves."

From the glower on her face, it's clear this isn't how Clare usually deals with the brides who come into her store, but the last thing I want is someone fussing over me. I don't feel like answering a thousand questions about the wedding plans and my husband-to-be. It's going to be hard enough to pick a dress while wrestling with my mixed emotions over marrying Piotr. Listening to some overly enthusiastic assistant twittering in my ear about how lucky I am would be unbearable.

"Very well," she says tightly. "I'll have some champagne brought out."

As we walk farther into the store, my heels sinking into the plush lilac carpet, the door opens behind us and Alessia breezes in. The grin on her face spells trouble.

"What's that look for?" I ask.

“Ran into that asshole Dante outside.” Alessia and Dante seem to love pissing each other off. “Didn’t know he was babysitting today. Bit below his paygrade, isn’t it?”

I snort derisively. “Antonio called in the big guns to make sure I don’t skip town.”

I exchange a kiss on each cheek with my cousin and then step back.

“Is that a possibility?” Alessia’s grin slides away to be replaced by concern.

“No, I’m resigned to my fate.” Realizing I’m standing between my two bridesmaids, I move to the side. “Do you know Emilia?”

“Yes, we met at Aunt Ava’s, I think.”

“That’s right.” Emilia accepts a kiss from my cousin. “You’re a student, yes?”

Alessia’s chest puffs up a little. She’s justifiably proud of her academic achievements. “I’m doing my Masters in International Relations.”

“You want to be a diplomat?” Emilia asks.

“Not really.” Alessia’s long, dark ponytail swishes as she shakes her head. “I want to work for Antonio. I thought learning about complex relationships would be useful.”

“Good luck getting the sexist asshole to give you a job,” I grumble.

“Antonio’s not the dinosaur you think he is,” Alessia protests. “He’s been asking when the course is finished. He seems interested in my progress.”

“Perhaps he wants to marry you off to one of his associates and needs you to be done with college first.” I can’t stop myself from taking a jab at her.

“Nah.” Alessia brushes off my comment. “One of the benefits of being related on your mom’s side is that Antonio doesn’t interfere in our personal lives.”

That’s true. Alessia’s father, Robert, doesn’t come from a Mafia background. He’s of English, rather than Italian heritage. When he married my aunt Angela, he made it clear he intended to stay well out of our family’s business.

“Shouldn’t we start looking?” Emilia asks as a young woman comes over, carrying two glasses of champagne. “We don’t have much time.”

“I guess so.” I take a glass from the assistant, and she hands the other to Emilia. “Could we have another for my cousin, please?”

“Yes, of course, Miss Volante. Right away.”

As she scurries off to do my bidding, Emilia waves a hand toward the sea of white satin and lace before us. “So, what sort of dress are you looking for?”

Sipping my champagne, I drop onto the white leather sofa in the center of the room.

“I have absolutely no idea.”

After five grueling hours, I finally arrive home alone, having found the perfect dress. I’d have liked to take my bridesmaids to dinner, but Alessia had to complete an assignment for college, and Emilia had a few things to take care of at her hotel. I suppose I’m lucky they could find time to come with me at such short notice. They have busy lives.

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It's odd to walk into my mother's house and not find any of my family here. I've never lived on my own and I'll probably never get the chance to. I don't think I'd want to be by myself, anyway. Having grown up with five brothers, I'm used to having people around.

It's been getting steadily quieter in the house over the past few years. Apart from Gio, my brothers have all had their own homes for a while now. They still stop by regularly to see our mother and check on me, but it's not the same as it was when we were younger. When my brothers visit, they often bring their wives, who I'm gradually growing closer to. Gio hasn't found a woman who'll put up with his assholery yet, but he's abroad right now, exploring Scotland. He won't be coming back for the wedding. Though we're not particularly close, I will miss him. When Gio's around, he takes some of the heat off me. Our brothers worry about him as much as they despair over me.

Even the staff are away this evening. They've all gone to Connecticut to help set things up. Our housekeeper, Janetta, who runs the Westport house, is fantastic, but even she can't handle the mammoth task of preparing for a wedding by herself. I'm not entirely alone, of course. The omnipresent guards are lurking outside and in the house next door, which Antonio bought to give them a base. None of them will come in here unless there's an emergency. Even Dante, who is Antonio's most trusted friend, saw me safely to the door and then left. It's ridiculous how these brutal men act sometimes. They're afraid that being alone with me will lead to scandal. But in the world we inhabit, reputation is everything.

As it's rare to have the house to myself, I decide to make the most of it and watch a movie. Our home theater doesn't get much use. None of my brothers can sit still long

enough to enjoy it and my mother prefers to read.

With nobody around to complain about how I'm dressed, I decide to change into something more comfortable. I headupstairs to my bedroom. Sinking onto the super-soft mattress of my four-poster bed, I pull off my high-heeled ankle boots. They've been squeezing my toes unbearably all day. I strip off my jeans and silk top, then take some time to remove my makeup.

When I've cleaned off the last traces of foundation, I tie my hair in a ponytail at the nape of my neck. I put on the yoga pants I would spend my life in if I didn't have to keep up appearances, and a soft pink jersey camisole. Then I wander down to the kitchen in search of snacks. It's strange. This has been my home since I was a toddler, but walking around when there's nobody else here makes me feel like I'm doing something illicit.

After my bedroom, the kitchen is my favorite room in the house. Its dominant feature is a massive stove. There's usually something simmering away on it, creating mouth-watering smells, but right now there's nobody here to cook. I could order takeout, but by the time the guards have pawed through it to make sure it's safe to give to me, it will be cold.

I rummage through the pantry, grabbing some cookies and a bag of chips. The refrigerator yields some guacamole that smells fresh and a can of soda. I take everything to the media room. Though she isn't here, I can still hear our housekeeper's voice telling me not to make a mess, so I carefully lay everything out on a table between two large leather armchairs. I'm about to turn on the projector and find a movie I want to watch when the intercom buzzes on the wall behind me. We have a communication system set up throughout the house to link us with the guards who provide our security.

Sighing heavily, I go to the phone and pick it up. "What is it?"

“You have a visitor, Miss Volante.” The voice belongs to Donnie Rizzo, a relatively recent recruit who got the job because he’s friendly with my brother, Gio. He’s a capable soldier for my family’s organization, but manages not to be as big a jerk as most of Antonio’s men.

“Who is it?” I’m not expecting anyone. None of my friends would come here uninvited and a family member would just breeze in through the front door.

“Dario Maroni.”

My legs almost give way. Why would Dario come here? It’s been more than a year since I last saw him. We haven’t spoken since the night I confronted the prick about selling the photos he took of me to my brothers’ enemies. I’ve never forgiven myself for allowing him to take those pictures, and he’ll never worm his way back into my favor. I thought Dario loved me, but by the time he was finished with me, I felt anything but cherished. When I found out he was working for Joey Gallo all along, I was devastated.

Though he’s the last person I want to speak to right now, I am curious about why he’s here. If there’s a chance he’s going to cause trouble for me, I want to be prepared.

“Let him in, Donnie.”

“He’s not on the approved list.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m approving him.”

Donnie makes a clicking sound with his tongue. “I should check with the boss.”

“Don’t bother.” I rub my temples as a headache threatens to build. “Dario isn’t a security risk. He’s an old friend from school, so why don’t you check him for

weapons and send him in?”

“Okay, miss, but I’ll need you to stay close to a panic button.”

“Yeah, okay.”

There are buttons all over the house that my mom and I can press if we feel threatened. Within seconds, dozens of men will swarm in and save the day because, as far as they’re concerned, I can’t defend myself. The truth is, while I would never instigate an attack on someone, I’m not completely helpless. For years now, Jimmy has given me lessons on self-defense and escaping from dangerous situations. His intention is to give me the tools to keep myself alive until help can reach me, but I like to think I could kick ass if it came down to a life-or-death situation.

I slam the receiver back into its cradle and step out into the hallway. It takes a full two minutes before the front door opens and Dario enters. Tall and broad-shouldered, he’s wearing his jet-black hair a little longer than he used to. He’s lost none of his swagger. As he walks along the corridor, he tucks his black t-shirt back into his jeans. I guess Donnie was thorough when he searched him for weapons. When he sees me, a smug grin spreads across his face.

“What are you doing here?” I demand.

“Heard you’re getting married. Wanted to offer my congratulations.”

He saunters toward me, arms thrown wide, as if he’s about to hug me. Thankfully, he doesn’t try to, though he gets closer than I’m comfortable with.

“Bullshit!” I fold my arms defensively across my chest. “Tell me what you really want.”

I try not to flinch as he lifts his hand to stroke my cheek. “I want to give you a wedding gift, for old time’s sake.”

“What gift?”

“Those photos we took. I can get them back for you.”

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He makes it sound as if I was a willing participant when he took those photos, rather than the naïve eighteen-year-old he pressured into it.

“How?”

“Joey asked someone to keep them safe for him. They’re willing to give them back to you.”

I narrow my eyes as I’m gripped by suspicion. “Why?”

He grins. “For money, of course.”

I should have known. It always comes down to money. Heaven forbid anyone act out of the goodness of their heart.

“It’s not much of a gift if I’m paying for them.”

“The gift is me introducing you to the person who has them.”

“I see.” I smile tightly. “And how much do they want?”

“You can discuss that when you meet her.” Dario winces. I don’t think he meant to reveal it’s a woman. That’s interesting. I try to think who Joey might have entrusted the photos to. He wasn’t married, but perhaps he had a girlfriend he trusted.

“When does she want to meet?”

“Right now. I came to bring you to her.”

I shake my head. Even if I could get out of here without being trailed by bodyguards who report back to my big brothers, I don't trust this situation.

“I can't do that.”

Dario steps closer. When he speaks, his voice is softer, more persuasive. “Come on, Liv, it's easy. Just tell your guards we're going to a club. We'll lose them on the way.”

Shaking off my brothers' men would be harder than he thinks. They know I'm marrying Piotr Reznov at the end of the week. They'd be suspicious of me going off with some man they know nothing about.

“It's almost impossible.”

“No, it's not, Liv.” Dario reaches out and curves his hand around my cheek. “Look, I'm trying to help you here. I know I hurt you before, but I've changed. I want to put things right.”

He sounds so sincere it would be easy to believe him, but I've trusted Dario before and he betrayed me in the worst possible way.

“Dario, I...”

Whatever I was about to say disappears behind a scream as Dario is suddenly wrenched away from me and thrown against the wall. He's not a small man, but next to the angry Russian who has him pinned with an arm across his chest, he suddenly seems completely insignificant.

“Piotr, I...”

“Shut your mouth, Olivia.” Despite the violence radiating from him, his voice is cold. “I want this piece of shit to explain why he dares touch my fiancée.”

“We’re just friends,” Dario grits out. He doesn’t try to fight Piotr off, either because he knows exactly who he’s dealing with or because Donnie and Salvatore, another of my brothers’ men, are standing by the door.

“That’s not what I asked.” Piotr pulls Dario forward, only to slam him against the wall again. There’s a sickening thud, and Dario’s head lolls forward like he’s dazed. Piotr shoves him toward my brothers’ men. “Teach him a lesson and send him on his way.”

As Donnie and Salvatore lead a struggling Dario out of the house, my heart thunders in my chest. Piotr turns to me. His expression is blank, but his eyes burn with rage.

“Now, Olivia, I think we need to get a few things straight, don’t you?”

CHAPTER 5

Piotr

Though I have a powerful urge to strip Olivia bare and show her just who she belongs to, I resist. Call me old-fashioned, but I want to wait until our wedding night to fuck her. The first time I sink my cock into her snug pussy, the act will be symbolic, a sealing of the legal bond we’ve created. It will make her irrevocably mine. That doesn’t mean she’ll escape the consequences of allowing another man to touch her, though.

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When I walked in here and saw that asshole caressing her face, the self-control I pride myself on almost shattered. It was bad enough she allowed some man into her home when none of her family is here, but then she let him touch her. It wasn't an innocent gesture. There was intimacy in it. If I'd been another minute later, would I have caught them kissing?

"Do you want to take a seat?" Olivia motions toward the living room door.

I nod and she walks in ahead of me. Like the other parts of the house I've seen, this space is ultra-feminine, with cream floral curtains framing the windows and throw pillows on the pale pink sofas. My uncle Boris spends a lot of time here now that he's marrying Olivia's mother. It's strange to see him at ease in such a flowery room. His own apartment is decorated in shades of gray, black, and white, a stark palette that better suits his stoic personality.

Recently I've noticed a change in my uncle. Since he and Ava Volante started dating, he's been happier than I've ever seen him. I'm pleased he's found a woman who brings him peace. Ava is a calming influence. I doubt I'll experience that with Olivia. She'll challenge me at every turn. That suits me. I'm not looking for a quiet life.

"Please, sit," Olivia says. "May I offer you a drink?"

Her forced politeness amuses me. I hadn't planned on making myself comfortable, but if my fiancée wants to play hostess to soften my irritation, I'm willing to see where this takes us.

There are two sofas and an armchair in the room. I opt for the wing-backed chair by

the fireplace that offers a view of the door and the window. In my line of business, it's essential to be aware of my surroundings. More than one attempt has been made on my life.

"I'll take a vodka," I reply. "Neat."

"Water's for wimps." Olivia smiles. "I remember."

I'm irrationally pleased she recalls the brief conversation we had at the Volantes' Tuscan villa and noted my preference. She goes to a cabinet in the corner of the room and opens the door to reveal several bottles of hard liquor sitting alongside a variety of glasses. As she pours a large measure of vodka and brings it to me, I cast an eye over her. I don't think I've ever seen her like this. Usually, Olivia is dressed immaculately, with flawless makeup. I prefer this. With all artifice stripped away, it's like glimpsing the real Olivia Volante.

"What are you wearing?" I ask as I accept the glass from her.

She looks down at herself as if she needs to check what clothes she put on. "I was planning to watch a movie."

It takes all my self-control not to roll my eyes. Can nobody give a direct answer anymore?

"I didn't ask what you were planning to do, Olivia. I asked what you're wearing."

She appears confused by my question, her brow furrowing. "Oh, it's yoga pants and a top."

"Do you usually welcome visitors into your home dressed like this?" It's not her clothes I object to, but the way they mold to her body, accentuating her curves. It

angers me that another man saw her like this.

“I wasn’t expecting anyone tonight.” She sinks into an armchair across from me, strategically putting the coffee table between us. “Why did you come?”

If the little minx thinks she’s going to steer me away from finding out more about the asshole I caught her with, she’s mistaken. However, I will let her divert me for now.

“I wanted to check on the wedding preparations.” I sip the vodka she gave me. It’s not as smooth as my preferred brand, but it’s passable.

Olivia’s eyes widen. “I didn’t think you were interested in all that.”

I’m not. As far as I’m concerned, any fuss is unnecessary. A trip to the courthouse and a celebratory meal at a Bratva-run restaurant would have satisfied me. My uncle had other ideas. Egged on, no doubt, by Ava, he insisted on giving the Volantes free rein. I don’t want to upset Ava. She’s a woman I admire and Olivia is her only daughter, so I agreed to let them do whatever they want. It’s not as if they’ll be able to create the sort of three-ring circus I’d hate in a week.

“In the details, no,” I reply. Flowers, canapes, and all that shit are of no importance to me. “But I wanted to ensure things are progressing as they should be.”

“Afraid I’m using this week to plan my escape instead of a wedding?” Olivia tilts her chin defiantly.

“Plan all you want, malyskha, but if you run, I will hunt you to the ends of the earth. I’ll burn everything in my path to find you.”

Olivia rolls her eyes like she expected such a declaration. “How romantic.”

“And you thought I was a cold-hearted bastard.” A smile touches my lips. I like this banter between us. I’ve never had this with a woman before. “Now, tell me, are the wedding preparations on track?”

“Yes. The advantage of having so many sisters-in-law is that there are plenty of people to help. I delegated most tasks to them and my mother. My bridesmaids helped me shop for a gown.”

“Did you find one?”

“Yes, it took me ages to find the perfect one, but it was worth it.”

The thought of her shopping for the right dress pleases me. It shows she’s taking the wedding seriously and hopefully that means she’s reconciled herself with our union.

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“That’s good.” I reach into my inner jacket pocket and retrieve a red velvet pouch.
“Hopefully this will complement it.”

Olivia reaches across the table to take the pouch as I hold it out to her. She opens the drawstring and empties the contents into her palm.

“This is beautiful.” Her smile as she studies the necklace seems genuine.

“It’s not expensive, but it has sentimental value.”

The silver chain with a heart-shaped pendant belonged to my grandmother, the woman I owe my life to. Lena Rezanova is the one who saw how my mother neglected me after my father abandoned her. Burdened with chronic asthma, my grandmother couldn’t care for me alone, so she roped Uncle Boris into taking on a paternal role. It’s thanks to them I’m the man I am today.

“I love it.”

“Will it work with your dress?”

“Yes,” she replies without hesitation. “Perfectly.”

“Good. My uncle hoped you would wear it.”

“Oh, it’s from Boris?”

Is it my imagination or does she look disappointed? Perhaps she thought it was a gift

from me. I'm not the sentimental one in the family. I leave that to my uncle. Yet as Olivia's face falls, I find I don't want Boris to have all the credit.

"It belonged to my grandmother. I want you to have it."

Olivia drops the necklace back into the pouch and sets it down on the table next to her. "I'll take good care of it."

"I'm sure you will. Now, perhaps you can tell me who thatmudakwas and why he had his hands on you."

The sudden shift in topic should catch her off guard. The way her mouth drops open tells me the tactic worked.

"Dario's an old school friend." The quiver in her voice tells me there's more to it. "We went to St. Mary's High School together."

Dario. I'll store that away for later. No matter what Olivia tells me, I'm going to have him thoroughly checked out.

"And what did your old friend from St. Mary's High School want?"

Olivia moves uncomfortably in her seat, and I suspect she's about to lie to me. "He heard about the wedding and wanted to congratulate me."

"And he had to do that in person?"

Olivia shrugs. "I guess he was in the neighborhood."

Again, I think she's lying because she swallows so hard I hear the gulp. It's reassuring, I guess, that she has trouble concealing her deceit from me.

“So, why did he have his hands on you?”

“He was just... It was a friendly gesture.” She gets up and walks to the window in a futile attempt to evade my scrutiny.

“Did you like this friendly gesture?”

Olivia turns to me. “I don’t know why you’re making a big deal out of this. It was nothing.”

“Nothing?” Downing the rest of my vodka in one go, I set the glass down on the table and stalk toward her. “I’d hardly call another man touching you nothing.”

As I move closer, Olivia steps away from the window, backing up until she traps herself in a corner. I lean in and run the back of my fingers down her cheek. She stiffens.

“Tell me, Olivia, did you like him touching you?”

“No.”

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“But he’s not a friend, is he?”

Panic flares in her eyes. “He used to be when we were in school.”

“You haven’t seen him since high school?”

“Yeah, but not...” She’s getting flustered, a sign she’s not being entirely truthful with me.

“Tell me, Olivia, has he fucked you?”

She gasps in outrage, but doesn’t answer.

“Has that asshole fucked you?” I demand, grabbing hold of her ponytail and using it to force her head back so she has no option but to look at me.

“No.” Her tone is so vehement, I believe her.

“Has he touched you?”

“No.”

That strikes me as a lie, but I’ll deal with it another time. Right now, I want her to come undone for me. Keeping a firm grip on her hair, I slide a hand down her front, skimming over her firm breast. It fits perfectly in the palm of my hand. Olivia trembles, as responsive to my touch as she was in that parking lot in Florence.

I watch her closely as I slip my hand under the waistband of her tight stretch pants and wrench her underwear out of my way. She isn't wet, but stroking her clit with my middle finger quickly changes that.

"Piotr," she moans as I tease her clitoris.

"Do you like that, malyskha, or do you think I'm treating you like a whore?" I throw her words from Florence back at her.

"No, I... I like it."

I huff out a laugh. "Then you'll love this."

Letting go of her hair, I drop to my knees. I drag Olivia's pants and underwear down her long, slender legs and help her step out of her clothing.

"So eager," I murmur as she kicks the gray pants and black lace thong aside. "Now, spread your legs."

Olivia doesn't hesitate. She's as hungry for me as I am for her. Moving her feet apart, she widens her stance to give me easy access to her bare pussy.

"Clasp your hands behind your back and keep them there."

Not only does the position push her delectable tits out, it also ensures she doesn't touch me. I don't want the distraction of her tugging my hair or trying to use me as an anchor to stop herself from getting carried away. I want her to fall.

Generally, I'm a patient man, but tonight I'm driven by an overwhelming need to demonstrate to Olivia she belongs to me. Diving right in between her legs, I swipe my tongue along the length of her pussy. Her taste is sheer heaven. The mewls she

gives as I lap at her tender flesh are intoxicating. I could lose myself in this woman, but tonight is not about feasting on her. I have other business to attend to, so I'm going to have to make this quick.

Finding her clit, I swirl my tongue around the tight bud. Olivia moans and tries to pull back from me. She won't get away that easily. Curving a hand around her waist, I drag her closer. I lap her tender flesh, enjoying how she quivers at my touch. I thrust my tongue inside her and then withdraw, replacing it with two of my fingers.

"Piotr!" Olivia shrieks as I curl my fingers to stroke that sweet spot inside her. "I can't..."

"Oh, but you can, malyskha."

As I shove my fingers deeper into her tight channel, I wrap my lips around her clit and suck hard. Olivia bucks her hips against me, almost knocking me off balance with the force of her movement. I sit back and watch her unraveling as she comes. Her cry of ecstasy is a sound I want to hear over and over again. Sadly, I'll have to wait until after the wedding.

As I get to my feet, Olivia slumps against the wall, breathing hard. Her face is flushed and her eyes are unfocused. Just wait until our wedding night. Then she'll know what it is to be truly fucked.

"I want to make something clear to you, Olivia." I straighten the cuffs of my shirt. "If any man touches you, I'll kill him and punish you in ways you can't even imagine. From now on, you spread your legs only for me. Do you understand?"

"Piotr." She speaks softly, as if she thinks she can appeal to my better nature.

Shooting my hand out, I grab her chin. My fingers dig into her cheeks until she

whimpers. “Do you understand you’re mine and mine alone?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl.” Releasing her, I turn and head toward the door. “Enjoy your movie night, malyskha. I’ll see you at the altar.”

CHAPTER 6

Olivia

What sort of asshole gives you the most incredible orgasm one minute, threatens you the next, and then cheerfully tells you they’ll see you at your wedding? The sort of asshole I’m a half hour away from marrying, that’s who. It’s been a couple of days since Piotr paid that brief visit to my home, and I’m still reeling. The man can cause an enormous amount of confusion in a very short time without even breaking a sweat. I don’t know where I am with him, and I suspect he likes it that way. He wants to keep me off balance.

As the stylist fussing with my hair inserts one last pin to hold the elegant chignon in place, my sisters-in-law all coo in admiration. Except for Emilia, who’s been getting ready to perform her bridesmaid’s duties in a different room, they’ve kept me company all morning. They’ve been telling me all about the sweet things my brothers have done for them. I guess it’s their way of trying to assure me that these tough Mafia men have a softer side.

It turns out Leo, of all people, can be romantic when he chooses to be. My big bad enforcer brother takes Vinnie to the zoo regularly and buys her stuffed animals from the gift shop.

“I only have to mention wanting to try a new bakery or takeout place and he brings me something home,” Vinnie says in the clipped British accent that gives her an air of posh-ness.

“Antonio likes to leave little gifts around the house for me to find.” Isabella seems to have completely forgiven my brother. He almost exiled her for a second time when he found out she’d been covering for me with Joey Gallo. My brother has been a total asshole to her for most of their marriage, but apparently none of that matters now.

“Matteo’s brought me flowers every day since we came back from Italy.”

I don’t point out to Giulia that it’s barely been a week. She’s here with the others, trying to give me hope my marriage won’t be as bleak as I expect, so I can’t be mean to her.

“I doubt Piotr’s the romantic type.” There’s no concealing the despondency in my voice. It would be nice to have a husband who brought me gifts and took me to places I want to visit, but I can’t imagine that’s what I’m getting with Piotr. He doesn’t seem the type to show such consideration, but perhaps I’m underestimating him. For all I know, he might be a hopeless romantic. I won’t hold my breath waiting to find out, though.

“You know it’s not too late to back out,” Giulia says. “I owe you a plane ride if you need it.”

“And miss the chance to show off this dress?” I try to keep my tone light. There is a part of me that’s tempted to jump on a plane and leave all this behind. The trouble is there’s no destination far enough to take me beyond Piotr’s reach.

“There, Miss Volante.” Corinne, the stylist my mother hired to help me get ready, places a band decorated with silver flowers in my hair. “You’re all set.”

“Thank you.” Looking in the mirror, I tilt my head from one side to the other, admiring the way the light glints off my headband.

As Corinne grabs her things and leaves the room, Alessia enters. As my second bridesmaid, she’s been busy with my mother and Emilia getting ready and ensuring there are no last-minute hitches.

“You look gorgeous, Liv.” Alessia circles me as she carries out a thorough inspection.

“So do you.”

The strapless baby blue gowns we selected for her and Emilia to wear have chiffon trains that billow out as they walk. It makes them appear as if they’re floating. The dreaminess of their dresses fits with the ethereal quality of mine.

“I know, right?” Alessia knows how attractive she is. With flowing black hair and vivid green eyes, she’s never short of male attention. “Your mom will be up in a minute. She’s grilling the best man about his marriage prospects.”

I roll my eyes. My mother cannot bear to see a man in his late twenties without a wife on his arm. Though I haven’t met Piotr’s friend, Sev Baranov, there are loads of photos of him online. He’s seriously hot, so I doubt he lacks for female company. If he wanted to get married, he would.

“What’s Sev like?” Isabella asks.

“Uh, he seemed nice.”

“So, not your type?” Giulia quips.

“Nah.” Alessia grins broadly. “I’m all about the assholes.”

“Well, there’s certainly plenty of those around here.” The corners of Vinnie’s mouth turn down in distaste. As the daughter of a now-deceased Mafia boss who exiled her and her mother to Europe when she was a baby, Vinnie has a poor opinion of the men in our world. I can’t work out how the hell she ended up all starry-eyed over Leo, who’s one of the biggest dickheads I know.

“Speaking of assholes,” Alessia says. “You’ll never guess who Dante Parisi brought as his plus one.”

Whoever it is, I’m sure he only dragged the poor woman along to piss off Alessia.

“Who?” Giulia asked when Alessia’s pause for effect showed no sign of ending.

“Marissa Locatelli.”

A collective groan comes from everyone but Vinnie, who hasn’t had the pleasure of Marissa’s company yet. “Who’s Marissa Locatelli?”

“A two-faced bimbo slut.” Giulia can’t hide her disdain for the woman who teased her at the funeral of her first husband. Matteo had joined Marissa in cruelly mocking Giulia, and she’d cut him out of her life for several months before they finally got together.

“She stole Alessia’s boyfriend in ninth grade,” I add.

Alessia snorts. “If Dante Parisi’s her target, she’s welcome to him.”

I don’t believe that and neither do any of the others. Anyone with eyes can see that Dante and Alessia are hot for each other. It’s only pigheadedness that prevents either of them from admitting it. There’s no chance to tease her about that, because my mother walks in.

Stunning in a floor-length green silk dress, Ava Volante is a timeless beauty. Despite raising six unruly children, she doesn’t bear the wrinkles of many women her age.

“You girls need to take your seats,” she tells my brothers’ wives. She glances around the room. “Where’s Emilia?”

I was wondering about that myself.

“Alessandro dragged her into the linen closet ten minutes ago,” Alessia answers with a grin.

My mother rolls her eyes. “That boy! The way he accosts poor Emilia every chance he gets, you’d think I would have a grandchild on the way by now.”

“I don’t think they’re planning a family yet. Emilia’s too busy with work.” Aside from that, she’s only twenty-one, a year older than me. It’s not an argument that would work on my mother, though. She already had Antonio and Leo by that age. She sees nothing wrong with popping out kids the moment you get married.

“Well, someone needs to make me anonnasoon.” She stares pointedly at my sisters-in-law, who are all on their feet and heading for the door. Vinnie’s cheeks flush and she lowers her gaze as she passes my mother. Interesting. Is she hiding something from the family? Are she and Leo about to inflict his spawn on the world? I’ll have to watch her at the reception to see if she drinks any alcohol.

As the other women troop out, my mother motions for Alessia to follow them. When we’re alone, she curves a hand around my cheek and smiles softly. “You look beautiful, *bambina*.”

“Thanks, Mamma.”

“If you have any problems with Piotr, if he doesn’t treat you well, come to me. Boris loves his nephew, but he won’t hesitate to set him straight if he hurts you.”

“I’ll be fine, Mamma.” Even to my own ears, that wasn’t convincing. I don’t think Piotr would ever be violent toward me, but I don’t know how much care he’ll take of my feelings.

“Okay.” She pats my arm. “Matteo’s waiting to speak to you. Can I send him in?”

My brother and I haven't seen each other since we returned to New York. I guess he was still smarting about me helping Giulia to run from him. Since they've reconciled, I assume he's decided to forgive me. If he hasn't, well, I can deal with that too.

"Of course. Tell him to come in."

Careful not to mess up my hair and makeup, my mother pulls me in for a quick hug. She doesn't show me the same affection as she does my brothers. We've been butting heads for years and I guess we're not as close as we once were. It's something I'll try to put right once I'm settled into my life with Piotr.

"I'll see you downstairs." She gives me one last squeeze and steps out. Matteo comes into the room mere seconds later. Was he standing out in the corridor, waiting to see if I'd speak to him?

"Wow!" He shakes his head as if he can't believe what he's seeing. "You look beautiful, Livvy."

"Thanks. You're kind of handsome in that suit."

"This old thing?" He grins as he tugs at his tie.

There's a moment of awkward silence as Matteo builds up to whatever he has to say. My siblings and I aren't great at making up after we fight. For one thing, none of us ever wants to admit we were in the wrong and, for another, we don't like to dig too deeply into our emotions.

"So you're not mad at me anymore?" I ask when I realize my brother doesn't know how to say whatever it is he wanted to.

"No, you did the right thing. Giulia leaving me like that helped me gain some

perspective.”

I can’t help scoffing at that. “One of my brothers recognized he was acting like a jerk? We need to mark this day on the calendar.”

“For more than one reason.” Matteo steps closer, concern etched in the lines around his narrowed eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

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“No, but I’m going to do it, anyway.”

“Why?”

I could say it’s to please Antonio. That’s partly true, but that’s not the entire story.

“Because I think it could work.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” Marriage to Piotr will bring challenges, but I think given time I can work out what makes him tick and use it to my advantage.

Matteo studies me for a moment and then nods. “Okay, if you’re sure you want to do this, I’d be honored if you’d let me walk you down the aisle.”

“What about Antonio?” I assumed, as head of our family, he’d be the one to give me away. I feel a little hurt. “Doesn’t he want to do it?”

“Of course he does,” Matteo assures me. “He’d be proud to have you on his arm, but this is your day and he thinks you’d be happier with me.”

It’s a surprisingly sweet gesture from our oldest brother. He’s usually all about appearances, and it may look strange to some people if he’s not the one who walks me down the aisle. Perhaps he cares more about me than I realized.

“Okay, then. Let’s do this.”

Matteo offers me his arm, and I link mine through it. Emilia, who doesn't look like she's just been in the linen closet with Alessandro, and Alessia are waiting in the corridor. They help me by lifting the train of my dress as we walk down the main staircase into the entrance hall. We make our way along the corridor with pictures of my family looking down on us until we come to the library. At the door, Alessia hands me my bouquet. She gives me an encouraging smile, and then she and Emilia go in ahead of us.

"Ready?" Matteo asks.

As the harpist starts to play, I take a breath and nod to show him I am. We enter the room to find my mother and brothers waiting along with my aunts, uncles, cousins, and some of the highest-ranking men from the Volante and Reznov organizations. Apart from his uncle, I don't know if Piotr has any family here.

The library has been transformed. The dark, austere room is filled with floral arrangements in a riot of color. Rows of white wooden chairs have been brought in. There's an arch adorned with blush pink roses standing in place of the large mahogany desk where my father used to work whenever we came to Westport. He rarely took a real vacation. His mind was always on business.

Piotr stands in the archway, looking amazing in a gray suit with matching vest and a pink tie that's the same shade as the peonies in my bouquet. I'm not sure how he pulled that off since we didn't confer, but I'm impressed.

The hulking brute of a man beside him is Sev Baranov. He's not pretty like Piotr, who's been blessed with angelic features. His jaw is square and his nose has a distinct bump near the bridge. A silver line cuts through his lips, a scar from an injury healed long ago. His sexiness stems from his level of confidence. He carries himself like a man who knows what he wants and how to get it. Reputed to be a merciless killer, he looks surprisingly warm as he smiles at me.

Piotr, by contrast, is completely devoid of expression, until I get up close and see the searing heat in his eyes. When we come to a stop next to him, Matteo kisses my cheek and steps back. I take a deep breath and turn to Piotr. The determination clear in the hard set of his jaw tells me all I need to know. There's no escaping him now.

CHAPTER 7

Piotr

When I set a one-week deadline for our wedding to take place, I had hoped the short timescale would make it impossible to organize anything but a small, intimate gathering. I attend a lot of big events—fundraisers, corporate dinners, and such—but I've never really enjoyed them. Being around a lot of people poses security issues, but aside from that, I just don't enjoy socializing outside of my small inner circle. Making polite conversation, pretending to be interested in people with whom I have little in common, wastes my time and hurts my head. Most of the guests at the wedding were invited by the Volantes and my uncle for political reasons. Apart from the men who'll work beneath me when I become Pakhan, I don't give a shit about any of them.

It shouldn't have been possible to pull together such a lavish wedding in so short a time but, somehow, Olivia and the other Volante women have done it. There's a huge marquee with a hardwood floor erected on the lawn at the back of the mansion. That alone should have taken a week to build.

The marquee is filled with more flowers than I've ever seen in one place. At the entrance to the space is a huge ice sculpture with the letters V and R woven together. It's fitting for the merging of two powerful families, but I can't help noticing the Volantes' initial comes first. If they think I'm a junior partner in this alliance, they're mistaken.

A string quartet will entertain the guests as they enjoy canapes that look like works of art. They'll wash them down with the finest Prosecco because apparently the Volantes won't betray their heritage by serving champagne at a wedding.

Tables with white cloths and huge floral centerpieces fill half of the space while the rest has been left clear for dancing. A stage at the far side of the room stands ready for the swing band Antonio told me will play later. I blame my uncle for that. He loves 1940s American music.

Here in the library, where the ceremony is to take place, there was less scope for going over the top, yet somehow they've done it. Flowers in every conceivable shade of pink dominate the space. This is far beyond the simple wedding I'd have organized, but it's taught me something. I must never underestimate the woman I'm about to marry. If she can achieve all this in a week, she can do anything.

As one o'clock approaches, I feel a twinge of anger that I'll have to rein in. Since I last saw Olivia, I learned the asshole who was in her home the other day was more than the old friend she claimed he was. Dario Maroni worked for Joey Gallo, the man who passed photos of Olivia to Grigori Balogh. I suspect Maroni's the man in the photos. My informants tell me he boasted about how he'd fucked the Volante princess. Either he's lying or she is, because she all but told me she's a virgin. My men are out looking for Maroni, but tonight I intend to discover the truth from my blushing bride.

"Get off your fucking phone," I snap at Sev. My best man has been scrolling through messages for the last couple of minutes.

"Oh, sorry." He's not in the least bit apologetic, but he puts his phone back in his jacket pocket all the same. "Did you need me to explain what to do on your wedding night?"

“If I needed pointers, you’re the last person I would ask, mudak.” My friend is in no position to offer advice on how to handle a woman. He fucks like an animal, laying waste to the female population of whatever city he’s in. Shattered hearts litter his past. I plan to ruin Olivia for all others. A man like Sev would decimate her. “What was so important, anyway?”

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“Mila wants a meeting.”

“Mila Lenkova?” I ask as if it would be anyone but her. Along with her brothers, the Bratva queen is one of our closest allies. Sev and I are part of a European syndicate that works together to ensure our organizations remain profitable. The Italian branch of Olivia’s family belongs as well.

“Yeah. She suggested Marseilles the day after tomorrow. I’ll make your excuses.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Uh, your honeymoon.” He says that like it’s a given I would take time off to spend with my new bride. I have no such intentions. Olivia will have to understand from day one that I’m a busy man. My personal life takes a back seat to business.

“That can wait.”

Sev shoots me a look of disapproval, but I doubt he’d skip an important meeting for the sake of a woman either.

“Get back to Mila.” I decide to compromise. “Tell her Paris would be more convenient.”

I had arranged for my plane to take me and Olivia to London tonight. The Reznov organization recently acquired a five-star hotel in Knightsbridge and I wanted to check it out, but we can easily divert to Paris. If Olivia has the fashion capital of the world to explore, she’s less likely to cause a fuss over my refusal to put business on

hold for her.

“Paris would be good,” Sev agrees. “We can meet at my place.”

He reaches into his pocket, but before he can grab his phone, the wedding officiant, Judge Brentwood, moves into position in front of us. The Volantes’ choice of a female judge to perform the ceremony surprises me. I’d expected them to rope in their family priest. Perhaps they thought it would offend me and my uncle if they chose a Catholic priest over a Russian Orthodox one. If that was the case, they had no need to worry. I rarely set foot in a church and Boris is no hypocrite. He’d never claim to be a godly man.

Everyone turns as the bridesmaids, Emilia Volante and Alessia Davis, come into the room. The harpist plays as Olivia follows on Matteo’s arm. I’m completely stunned, and not just because she deigned to be on time.

Olivia has always been gorgeous, but today she’s hit a new peak. There are no words to describe how breathtaking she is. She’s like a faerie queen in that white dress. Shimmering satin overlaid with lace clings to her curves then billows out from her waist.

Silver flowers adorn her hair and she’s wearing subtle makeup that accentuates her natural beauty. When I imagined Olivia walking down the aisle, I pictured her with dark, heavy eyes and crimson lips. I expected her to wear her dress like a shield.

Seeing her so soft and feminine throws me off balance. My bride is spectacular. I realize for the first time how much power this woman could wield over me if I let her.

As Matteo kisses her cheek and steps aside, he gives me a curt nod. He may be handing his sister over to me, but he isn’t happy about it. I get that. He knows me well enough to understand I’m not the sort of man to coddle a woman. Olivia’s days

of being a pampered princess are over. If she's going to be my queen, she'll have to prove herself worthy.

Judge Brentwood gives a short spiel about the importance of love and marriage. It takes effort not to roll my eyes. Nobody here believes this is a love match. As the judge feeds me the vows I need to repeat, I study Olivia's body language and facial expression. There's a heady mix of fear and determination emanating from my lovely bride. It's clear from the trembling of her fingers and the rapid blinking of her eyes that she's afraid. Her resolve not to give in to her fear shows in the clenching of her fists and the way her lips press together.

When it's Olivia's turn to recite her vows, her voice is calm. She sounds almost eager to marry me. I listen intently until we come to the words I've been waiting to hear. Following my instructions, Judge Brentwood asks Olivia to love, honor, and obey me.

Shoulders stiffening, Olivia tries to cut me with her glare. She's obviously guessed I was the one who asked for the traditional vows rather than something more modern. Several seconds pass in which I almost hear the string of curses whirring through her mind. Then her lips twitch as the merest hint of a smile forms.

"To love, honor, and support from this day forward."

The room thrums with nervous anticipation as everyone waits to see how I'll react. Despite our frequent business dealings, none of the Volantes really knows me. They're on edge in case I take offense and lash out at Olivia. Honestly, I'm amused by the little minx. I'd have been disappointed if my new bride had vowed to obey me. It's much more fun if she challenges me. Besides, she promised to support me and I intend to hold her to that.

"Please continue," I tell the judge, and the atmosphere in the room decompresses.

Olivia and I exchange the wedding bands Sev had in his safekeeping for us. He was surprised I decided to wear a ring, but for me there was no question. As much as I want the world to know Olivia is taken, I want to show the world I'm now a married man. It's a sign I'm ready to assume the mantle of leadership and also of how seriously I take my vows.

After I slip the ring on her finger, the judge declares us husband and wife and instructs me to kiss Olivia. Unlike some men, I don't feel the need to publicly stamp ownership on my wife. Everyone here knows who she belongs to. By the end of the evening, so will she.

I lean in and brush my lips over hers. It's a brief, passionless kiss. As I pull back, Olivia arches a slim eyebrow in question. I think I detect disappointment in her eyes. She doesn't dwell on it, though. She takes the hand I offer her, and I lead her back down the aisle, accepting congratulations as we go.

When we get out into the corridor, Olivia leads me to the living room. It's decorated in a similar feminine style to the house in New York, but this time in a palette of blues and creams.

"We can wait in here until it's time for our big entrance at the reception," she tells me.

I nod as I close the door behind me, sealing out the rest of the world. I spin her around to face me. "You're mine now, *malyskha*."

"It doesn't feel like it." Her tone is sulky. Does she want me to claim her with my kiss? Now that we're alone, I'm happy to oblige.

Stepping closer, I grab a handful of her hair, not caring if I tug it loose from the elegant knot it's been gathered into. I pull Olivia against me and this time as my lips

meet hers, there's nothing gentle about it. My kiss is demanding, possessive. As I tilt her head back, her mouth opens on a gasp and I push my tongue past her lips.

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Olivia puts her hands on my shoulders and digs her nails in as I taste and tease her. There's a sweetness on her breath that's as intoxicating as the delicate scent of lilies on her skin. I slide my free hand down to cup her firm ass and mold her body to mine. We fit so perfectly together.

I kiss her like both our lives depend on it, showing her no mercy as I possess her thoroughly. My tongue dances with hers until she's breathless. When she whimpers with need, I release her and she stumbles back, steadying herself on the arm of a chair.

"Now does it feel like you're mine?"

I can't help grinning at her loss of composure. Tendrils of chestnut hair have come undone. Her lips are red and puffy. What I enjoy the most, however, is the glazed look in her eyes. It's as if she's drunk. Satisfaction washes over me as I acknowledge the effect I had on her. If that's how she responds to one kiss, what sort of mess will she be once I've fucked her?

That's a question for another time. Right now, I want an answer to the question I asked her.

"Olivia, does it feel like you're mine?"

"Yes." Her voice is quiet, and she stares at the floor, her body slumped forward as if she just admitted defeat. Perhaps in this moment she feels as if she did. I'm not foolish enough to think I've somehow tamed her with a single kiss. She's just shell-shocked by the magnitude of our union. In the coming days and weeks, she'll truly

get to grips with what it means to be my wife.

“Good girl,” I tell her. “Now, tidy yourself up. We have a wedding to enjoy.”

CHAPTER 8

Olivia

Piotr is being a lot nicer to me than I expected him to be. In fact, I would describe the way he’s acting as sweet. He’s been super-attentive and now and then he whispers a compliment in my ear. It’s mainly about how I’m being a good girl. That should raise my hackles, since I’m desperate to assert my independence, but I kind of like his praise. Has he unlocked a kink I didn’t know I had?

As we mingle with our guests, he keeps an arm wrapped around my waist, giving me the occasional encouraging squeeze when he realizes I’m close to being overwhelmed by the relentless exchange of pleasantries. I don’t know how he reads my discomfort so easily. I’ve been trained from a young age to project a confidence I don’t always feel, yet he sees right through the façade.

When we sit down to enjoy our celebratory meal featuring an array of Italian and Russian dishes, Piotr makes sure I have enough to eat and drink. He limits me to a single glass of Prosecco, but I won’t hold that against him. Keeping a clear head for tonight is a good idea. I don’t want to be drunk when Piotr and I are finally alone. Losing my virginity holds a certain amount of dread for me, but I want to be lucid when it happens.

By the time Piotr takes my hand and leads me onto the dance floor in front of our many guests, I can’t help wondering if he’s putting on an act. Perhaps he’s trying to project the image of the perfect son-in-law to keep my mother happy. After all, she’s marrying Piotr’s uncle soon, and any apparent discord between me and my husband

might cause issues for them.

“Are you having a good time, malyskha?” Piotr asks.

“Yes.” I’m surprised to find I mean it. I hadn’t looked forward to this wedding, but I am enjoying myself. “Are you?”

“I am, but I’m afraid we must leave soon. We have a plane to catch.”

Though Piotr sent me a message via Antonio telling me to have a bag packed, he didn’t tell me where he intends to take me. I know little about his plans for our future. In fact, I haven’t got a clue where we’ll live. Piotr has an apartment in New York, but he also has properties in Europe.

“Where are we going?”

“To Paris, for a couple of days.”

“Paris?” I can’t hold in a squeal of delight. Should I read anything into him taking me to one of the most romantic cities in the world? Does it mean I’m more than a business acquisition to him? I won’t get my hopes up.

“Yes.” His lips twitch in response to my obvious delight. “Have you been?”

“Once, but that was years ago.”

I don’t remember a lot about that trip, except that I was disappointed my father didn’t make time to take us to the Louvre or the Musée d’Orsay, both of which were on my wish list. We saw the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe, but only in passing. Mainly, we were there to be shown off at dinners with my father’s business associates. His apparently perfect family was a symbol of his stability and

trustworthiness. My mother took me to Notre Dame and the Sacre Coeur, but churches have never interested me, no matter how impressive the architecture. I did like the chaos of the Montmartre, though.

“You’ll enjoy it,” Piotr says. “Lots of boutiques to spend my money in.”

That rubs me the wrong way. His money? Does he intend to grant me an allowance? What conditions will I have to meet to receive his beneficence?

“I have my own money.” Antonio allowed me access to the inheritance my father left me as soon as I turned eighteen, but still met all my expenses, so I have a decent sum squirreled away.

“You’d have more fun spending mine.”

“It depends on what strings are attached.”

“No strings. My wife needs to uphold a certain image. You’ll have access to a bank account and credit card.”

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“Okay, but I don’t just want to shop in Paris. There are museums and galleries I’d love to see.” I don’t want my new husband thinking shopping is all I’m interested in just because I happen to be good at it. “And I’d like to do a boat trip on the Seine and have a picnic in the park.”

“Well, we’ll be there for a few days, so I’m sure you can do all that.”

I can? My heart sinks. “Won’t you be coming with me?”

Piotr shakes his head. “I have business in Paris, but don’t worry, I will make some time to enjoy my new bride.”

“Oh, will you?” The nerve of this asshole. “Lucky me.”

Piotr shows no response to my irritation. As the music slows, he brings us to a stop and performs a courtly bow. The guests gathered around the dance floor break into raucous applause. If Piotr’s trying to sell the image of a golden couple, I guess they bought it. He takes my hand and leads me toward our table. We’re halfway there when we’re met by his uncle and my mother. Both are grinning broadly. I guess they’re sold on the fairytale too.

“Mamma,” I acknowledge her as she pulls me in for a hug.

“You look so good together.” There are tears in her eyes as she releases me and enfolds Piotr in an embrace I’m sure he doesn’t want. “Don’t they, Boris?”

“Yes, the perfect couple.” His accent is more heavily tinged with Russian than

Piotr's. It occurs to me I know nothing of my new husband's background. Did he grow up here? He mostly sounds like any other New Yorker, though he throws in the occasional word from his mother tongue. "I believe you need to leave soon."

"We do." Piotr checks the platinum watch on his wrist as he untangles himself from my mother. "Imminently, in fact."

Boris nods. "Then I will make the announcement."

"What announcement?" I ask as Boris puts his arm around my mother's waist and steers her toward the stage.

Rather than answering, Piotr shushes me. It's so patronizing I want to punch him in the face. I don't, of course. First, I don't believe in violence and second, it wouldn't make an auspicious start to our union if I got his blood on my beautiful dress.

The band abruptly stops playing as Boris grabs a microphone. He calls a waiter with a tray of drinks over to him and takes two glasses of Prosecco, handing one to my mother.

"My dear friends," he addresses the crowd. It's a testament to his power that everyone stops what they're doing to focus on him. "As most of you know, I'm about to embark on a new chapter in my life, with this beautiful woman by my side." He smiles down at my mother, who's gazing at him as she always does, like a love-struck teenager. I don't begrudge her the happiness she's found with him. She adored my father, and he loved her, but he didn't pay her the attention she deserved. Boris does, and I'm grateful to him for that. "And so I've decided that today, on the occasion of my nephew's marriage, that the time has come for me to step aside. Piotr, I hand all of my power and responsibility to you." He raises his glass. "Za bratva."

I only know a handful of Russian words, but I'm guessing that was some sort of toast

to their brotherhood. I glance at Piotr and find his expression steadfastly neutral as he inclines his head in acknowledgment of the great honor he's been given. He appears entirely unfazed, but I'm stunned. My stomach churns and my head spins. I feel as if I'm going to throw up.

This is a monumental change and I'm not sure I'm ready for it. Though I knew it was only a matter of time before Piotr became leader of the Reznov Bratva, I didn't think it would happen so soon. I hoped we'd find our feet as a married couple first. But Piotr is now king, and I guess that makes me his queen. Fuck! I am not ready for this.

As people flock to us to congratulate Piotr on his elevation and ingratiate themselves with the new Pakhan, I spot Alessia sitting alone at a table at the back of the room. She's staring into space, running a finger around the rim of her glass. Even from here, I can sense her unhappiness.

"Please excuse me," I tell Piotr. "I need a quick word with my cousin."

"Very well, but make it quick. We leave in five minutes."

"Of course."

Nodding in response to remarks from the wedding guests about how wonderful it is that Piotr's taking over for his uncle and how excited I must be, I make my way through the crowd to Alessia. She looks utterly miserable, but when she sees me, she sits up straighter and smiles.

"Well, Mrs. Pakhan." She grins broadly. "Aren't you going up in the world?"

"I guess." I take the seat next to her. "You seem upset. Did one of my brothers do something?"

I didn't see any of them speaking to her, but it's a fair bet one of the assholes is behind her low mood.

Alessia sighs heavily, which I take as confirmation. "It's nothing, Liv. I don't want to spoil your day."

"It'll be spoiled if I spend it worrying about you."

"Really, it's nothing."

"Okay, then I'll ask Antonio if he knows who upset you."

As I rise from my seat, Alessia grabs my arm and pulls me back down.

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“It’s not a big deal. I just won’t be working for Antonio, that’s all.”

“He told you that?” I ask, and she nods. “I’m sorry, Less. He’s such a prick. Did he give you a reason?”

“None I wanted to hear.” Alessia takes a large gulp of wine and sets her glass down. “Enough about me. How are you enjoying your big day?”

“It’s more fun than I thought it would be.”

“I can’t believe you pulled this off in a week.”

“You know how it is. Money talks.” I shake my head in disbelief. “I’m still amazed we got an ice sculpture in time.”

Alessia laughs. “It’s really fucking tacky. Your mom’s idea?”

I roll my eyes. “I couldn’t talk her out of it.” Grabbing Alessia’s glass, I take a sip. “It’s been a great day, but I wish Jimmy was here.”

Aside from close family, my bodyguard is the one person I wanted to have with me today. I haven’t seen him since I returned from Italy. I think that’s Antonio’s fault. He obviously preferred to have his own men watching me this week. Perhaps it’s because he knows Jimmy’s loyalty lies with me and not him. If I’d wanted to disappear before the wedding, my faithful guard would have made it happen.

Jimmy has messaged a few times to let me know he was thinking about me and

apologizing that he couldn't accept my invitation to the wedding. I get that. He's uncomfortable around a lot of people. Now that Piotr's whisking me off to Paris, I don't know when I'll have the chance to catch up with him. I hate not seeing him for so long. He's so much more than an employee to me.

"Yeah, I noticed he was missing. What's with that?"

"You know how he is at big events. He was afraid he'd scare the kids."

"Those little horrors." Alessia motions toward the other side of the room where several of my young cousins are tearing one of the floral arrangements to pieces and throwing petals at each other. "It would take more than a few scars to scare those beasts."

"He's sensitive, and most of these assholes don't have a filter." Mobsters aren't known for their considerate natures. I've heard some of the men in this room say truly horrific things to people. While Jimmy doesn't show any sign of being bothered by his scars when he's on duty, I haven't seen him at any social gathering since he was injured. "He said he had a surprise for me, though. I guess I'll find out what it is when Piotr and I get back."

"Where are you going?"

"Paris."

"Paris?" Alessia groans. "Lucky bitch."

"I know, right?" I don't tell her I'm likely to be enjoying one of the most romantic cities in Europe alone. Well, as alone as I can be with a security detail trailing after me. I'm sure a man like Piotr won't allow his wife to wander around unprotected.

I look up as one of the servers approaches the table.

“A message arrived for you, miss.”

I hold my hand out to take the small white envelope from her. “Thank you.”

When I tear open the envelope, my heart stops. Inside is a photo. It’s me, sitting on the bed in that cheap hotel room Dario took me to. I’m completely naked. I flip the photo over to find a message scrawled on the back. Does the Pakhan know what a slut his new wife is?

My heart practically stops. I scan the room, trying to work out who sent this to me. It has to be someone here because the announcement about Piotr becoming Pakhan was only made a few minutes ago. The thought that one of my guests might be watching me right now, waiting to see my reaction to the photograph, makes me sick to the stomach.

“Are you okay?” Alessia asks.

“No.” I stuff the photo into the envelope and crush it in my hand. I pass it to her as Piotr approaches the table. “Burn this for me.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Promise me, Alessia,” I hiss under my breath.

She nods. “Of course.”

“What’s that?” Piotr asks, pointing to the crumpled paper in Alessia’s hand.

“Nothing.” I get up from my seat to block his view of my cousin. “Someone’s idea of

a joke.”

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Piotr's cold blue eyes narrow. "Show me."

"It's really not worth seeing."

"Yet you seem flustered by it."

The man is far too perceptive. His eyes bore into me. "I'm not. Really."

I turn to Alessia, hoping she reads my pointed stare correctly. She does. Getting up, she hurries off toward the house, where I know she'll dispose of the offending photo for me.

Piotr grabs my arm and pulls me to him. "I don't like my wife keeping secrets from me."

"I'm not."

"Go say your goodbyes. We'll discuss this further on the plane."

"There's nothing to discuss."

"Oh, but my dear, sweet wife, I think there is."

Pulling free from his grip, I hurry off to tell my mother we're leaving. A shudder runs down my spine, and I look back to see Piotr staring at me. It's hard to read him, but the tightness in his jaw tells me he's angry. I guess the Mr. Nice Guy act is well and truly over.

CHAPTER 9

Piotr

From the moment we left her family's mansion in Connecticut, Olivia has been delightfully on edge. As we drove to the helipad, she fidgeted with her necklace, the one I gave her. Seeing the silver heart resting at the base of her throat fills me with more pride than I imagined possible. The treasured pendant my grandmother wore so often is perfect with the V neckline of Olivia's dress. I'm pleased she didn't have time to change her clothes before we left. I really want to strip her out of the virginal white gown myself.

We didn't talk on the helicopter ride to the airport. Olivia was too distracted by whatever thoughts were racing through her head and I wanted to draw out the silence, to unsettle her further. I don't appreciate being lied to, and my pretty new bride has been less than honest with me more than once. She needs to suffer, wondering what's going to happen to her.

It was impossible to miss the way she tensed when she opened the envelope the waitress delivered to her. I was across the room and I saw her shoulders stiffen. When I asked her what was in the envelope, she blatantly lied, writing it off as some practical joke. If that's all it was, she'd have shown me. Instead, she passed whatever it was to her cousin and had her scurry off to dispose of the evidence. The little brat was obviously counting on me not wanting to cause a major incident by detaining Alessia. If my wife thinks she'll get away with playing games, she's in for a shock.

As we walk up the steps to my Dassault Falcon jet, Olivia trips on the hem of her dress. She pitches forward, but I catch her before she falls. Grabbing her around the waist, I haul her back against me.

"Careful," I warn her. "You don't want to get hurt."

A tremor runs through her, and she shrugs me off. Lifting her skirts higher, she hurries up the remaining steps. At the entrance to the plane, Polina, one of my regular flight attendants, greets her. Olivia chats to her for almost a minute, warmly inquiring about her life. While other women might view the six-foot blonde bombshell as a threat, my bride speaks to her as if they're old friends. Her apparent lack of concern at the presence of a beauty like Polina among my staff surprises me. I'd have thought Olivia would be jealous. If she doesn't suffer from that affliction, I'm glad. Jealousy is an ugly emotion. It turns people into fools.

My wife will never have reason to feel insecure around other women. Fidelity matters to me. A psychologist would no doubt say it's a reaction to my feckless parents, who showed no loyalty to anyone, least of all each other. It would be a fair assessment. I will never allow myself to be weak like them. Now that I've made a commitment to Olivia, my attention won't be diverted elsewhere, and she'd damned well better not give any other man the time of day. I don't like to share.

Finally, Olivia moves on, giving me room to ascend the last couple of steps. Polina greets me with a smile that's friendly rather than flirtatious. She's never tried to blur the lines of our professional relationship, though she has fucked some of the men who've traveled with me. She prefers the more openly passionate type. Until recently, she warmed the bed of Damiano Volante. I suspect the earrings she's wearing were a payoff from him when his attention drifted elsewhere. She didn't land herself a wealthy husband, but she got some nice jewelry as a consolation prize.

"Everything is set up for your comfort, Mr. Reznov." Polina must be referring to the bedroom I asked her to ensure was ready for us. We'll be arriving in Paris in the early hours of the morning, so sleep will be necessary, not that I intend to get much. There's the consummation of my marriage to deal with, the one part of the day I've genuinely looked forward to.

"Thank you, Polina. Please serve the champagne immediately."

“Of course, sir.”

While Polina hurries off to the small galley kitchen that sits between the main cabin and the bedroom, I join Olivia. She’s standing in the aisle, looking lost.

“Sit wherever you like,” I tell her. “I have no preference.”

Olivia nods and scans the space around us. There are two sofas at the rear of the cabin, and four pairs of individual seats that face each other and have a small table between them. She goes to the front of the plane and chooses a seat on the left.

“I prefer to face forward when traveling,” she explains as I sit opposite her, my back to the cockpit. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“It’s all the same to me, malyskha.”

I look up as Polina approaches with two glasses of champagne on a silver tray. She offers it to me first. I take both glasses and hand one to Olivia.

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“That will be all, Polina. Please prepare for departure.”

“Yes, Mr. Reznov.”

As she rushes to secure the doors and tell my pilot, Yan, that we’re ready to leave as soon as he gets clearance, I raise my glass. Olivia gives me an expectant look.

“To my deceitful bride. May she soon learn to tell the truth.”

My wife’s jaw tightens. She sets her glass down on the table that separates us.

“Don’t you want your champagne?”

“No.” She pushes her crimson lips into a pout.

“Why not?” I ask, though I know exactly why she has that petulant expression.

“Because I don’t appreciate that bullshit toast you made.”

I didn’t imagine she would. “You deny you’ve been less than honest with me?”

She drops her gaze to the floor, her lack of response an answer in itself. I suppose I should give her credit for not compounding her lies with some false protestation of innocence.

I sip my champagne and watch her closely as she turns to look out of the window. She remains stubbornly focused on the tarmac until Polina returns to collect our

glasses and check we're safely buckled in as the plane taxis to the runway.

"Was the champagne not to your liking, Mrs. Rezanova?"

Olivia turns to acknowledge her, a tight smile forming on her luscious lips.

"It gives me heartburn."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Polina gushes. "I didn't know."

"It's not your fault." Olivia puts a reassuring hand on her arm. "Something else has left a foul taste in my mouth."

Polina correctly reads the tension emanating from my bride and hurries away. Olivia returns her attention to the window. Her focus on the view doesn't waver as the plane accelerates down the runway. It isn't until we reach our cruising altitude and Yan announces it's safe to get up and move around the cabin that Olivia looks at me again.

Unfastening my seatbelt, I get to my feet. I hold out a hand to her. "Come on."

Olivia blinks twice. "What?"

"Come. With. Me." I enunciate each word clearly since she didn't register what I said the first time.

Olivia unclips her seatbelt and stands. She obstinately refuses the hand I offer her. If that's the way she wants to play, so be it. Gripping her upper arm tightly, I lead her to the back of the plane. I shove her through the door into the bedroom and she stumbles to a stop. Her shoulders stiffen as she takes in the purewhite linens on the bed, scattered with blood-red rose petals. This is Polina's doing. I'd imagine most women

would see it as romantic, but when Olivia turns to me, her furious expression suggests she views it more as a taunt.

“What is this?” she demands.

Glancing past her, I shrug. “It looks like a bed.”

“Don’t be obtuse.” Her lips thin as she makes her disapproval clear. “I know it’s a bed. Why are there rose petals on it?”

“I suppose Polina thought it was romantic.”

Olivia folds her arms across her chest. “Why would it need to be romantic? Why are we even in here?”

“Now who’s being obtuse?”

Olivia’s lip wobbles, and she sucks in a breath. “Do you really plan to do it right here on the plane?”

“Do what?” I’m not letting her get away with such vagueness.

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“You know.” She waves a hand in the air, then throws up her hands in exasperation. “Ugh! Have relations.”

Have relations? I don’t know why Olivia’s so outraged by the notion. It’s like she’s regressed to the Victorian era.

“I intend to fuck my wife,” I tell her bluntly. “Does that offend you?”

“Of course it does. The idea of you jumping on me the minute we’re alone is pretty offensive. I might as well be one of those sex dolls.”

“You think I want to fuck an inanimate object?” I throw back my head and laugh at the absurdity of her remark.

“An inanimate object would probably suit you better. It wouldn’t bother you with thoughts and opinions.”

“Oh, no, my dear sweet wife, I want you, a flesh and blood woman, not some toy.” I give her a moment to digest that. “And I’m not going to jump on you. I’m going to possess every inch of your body so thoroughly you’ll never be free of me.”

Olivia makes a strangled sound that could be shock, dread, desire, or a combination of all three.

“But first we’re going to play a game.” My hands go to the buckle of my belt.

Olivia’s face blanches. “What sort of game?”

“One where I ask you questions and then punish you for each lie that spills from your beautiful lips.”

My wife’s eyes widen. “Punish me how?”

Rather than answering, I slowly unfasten my belt and slide it through the loops on my pants. Doubling it over, I snap the two halves together. The crack makes Olivia jump.

“Piotr?” She backs away, but there’s not much room in here and she soon comes up against the wall. “What are you doing?”

“First, I’m going to spank you with my hand for the lies you’ve already told. Then I’m going to ask you some questions and use this belt on your ass every time you lie to me again.” I crook my finger, beckoning her closer. “Now come here. I want you out of that dress.”

Olivia doesn’t move. She wrings her hands together and swallows so hard I hear the gulp from across the room.

“Come here, Olivia.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t do this.”

“Of course you can, malyskha.” I hold my hand out to her. “What happened to the woman who’s stood up to me all this time? What happened to feisty Olivia, who made me wait for her and refused to promise to obey me? Was she another lie?”

Olivia closes her eyes. She hunches over her shoulders, and an air of defeat surrounds her. I hate to see her like this, but she soon composes herself. She breathes in deeply and then looks up at me with enough fury in her eyes to make a weaker man piss himself. That’s the woman I want.

“Let’s get this over with.” She marches toward me and spins around to offer me her back. “You’ll need to help me out of the dress.”

“With pleasure,malyskha.”

The delicate fabric of her gown is held together by a hundred tiny pearl buttons. My fingers are too big for the task of unfastening them. I only open two of them before I realize this will drive me insane. Taking the knife from my pocket, I flick it open. Olivia turns to me with startled eyes.

“Don’t look so frightened,malyskha. I’m going to cut the dress, not you.”

“I like this dress,” she protests.

“So do I.” The gown is stunning on her, the soft white beautiful against her lightly tanned skin. “But it’s in my way.”

“And you destroy anything that gets in your way?”

“Hmm, you know me well.”

Olivia huffs. “I don’t know you at all.”

“You’ll know me a lot better by the time we’re done here.”

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A shiver runs through her body as she takes my words as a threat. I'm not sure if I meant them that way. I put a hand on her shoulder to hold her steady as I slide my knife between the delicate fabric of her dress and her skin.

"Hold still," I warn her. "I'm not opposed to a little blood play, but I suspect you're not ready for that."

Olivia gasps in horror. She needn't worry. I was only trying to get a reaction out of her. I have no desire to cut her beautiful skin, so I take great care not to nick her accidentally as I slice through the back of her dress, right down to her hips. She shimmies out of what's left of the gown and steps clear of the fabric that pools at her feet. She turns to face me. In her white strapless bra, panties, and lace-topped thigh-high stockings, my bride takes my breath away.

"If I'd known you were wearing this beneath your dress, we'd have left the wedding a lot earlier."

I make a circular motion with my finger, instructing her to turn for me. She spins around quickly, denying me the chance to take in every inch of her as I wanted to.

"Try that again," I command. "Slowly this time."

She does as I asked, rotating on the balls of her feet to perform a perfect pirouette. My wife has incredible form. If I recall correctly, she said she was outside a dance class when she was subjected to the ordeal of an attempted abduction. I wonder if she's kept up her training as she's gotten older.

“Beautiful,” I say when she comes to a stop.

Olivia’s body is lean, her limbs long and elegant. She has a mole beneath her left breast, but no other obvious blemishes on her skin. Her hair is still up in a knot, accentuating the length of her slender neck. She’d be stunning even without the effort she puts into her hair and makeup. But my wife plays the part of Mafia princess well and is never caught looking less than perfect. Now that she’s my queen, she’ll continue the illusion in public. In private, I want something real.

“Let down your hair, malyskha.”

Olivia reaches up and removes the strategically placed pins keeping her up-do in place. It’s not like in the movies, where a woman takes out a single clip and her hair tumbles over her shoulders. It takes almost a minute for her to carefully pull out each pin. When she’s done, she runs her fingers through her hair.

“What now?” she asks, a hint of defiance in her tone.

“Get on the bed. I want you facing away from me, head down and ass up.”

“Piotr!” She all but stamps her feet.

“Do it, Olivia, unless you want to incur more punishment.”

She sends me one last withering glare before turning and climbing up onto the bed. She gets into position with her arms beside her. I doubt she’ll have the self-control not to reach back when I spank her, so I remove my tie to bind her wrists.

“Hands above your head, wrists together,” I order her.

Olivia does as she’s commanded, but takes her own sweet time about it. She makes a

show of stretching her arms out over her head and then rotating her wrists before laying her hands down on the mattress. The little brat won't submit without a fight, but nothing good ever came easily and I'm prepared to put in some effort to have her where I want her. She doesn't utter a sound of protest as I wrap my tie around her wrists and secure it with a neat bow.

"How does that feel?" My intention is to prevent her from interfering with her punishment, not to cut off her circulation.

"Fine." Her tone is one of supreme boredom. Let's see how long that lasts once I get started.

Positioning myself at the side of the bed where I'm able to watch her face while I spank her, I draw my hand back and bring it down hard on her bottom. Olivia exhales sharply as her flesh ripples beneath my palm. If she imagined I was going to give her a few gentle taps to warm her up for my belt, she's mistaken. I want her to feel every bit of this punishment, to realize how seriously I take being lied to.

My palm connects with her firm ass four times in quick succession before I stop to admire the pink bloom on her skin.

"So pretty," I murmur.

"Just get on with it," Olivia snipes.

I hunch down low and grab a fistful of her hair, forcing her head back so she's looking into my eyes.

"You think you're in a position to make demands?"

Olivia glares at me for a minute, then lowers her eyes submissively. "No, sir. Sorry,

sir.”

Her tone oozes sarcasm. I let go of her and push to my feet. Little minx. After her initial fear, she seems determined to prove she’s got a backbone. That’s commendable, but she may push it too far.

“Let’s see if you’re still mouthing off a minute from now, Olivia.”

I resume the spanking, lavishing attention on every part of her ass. My palm cracks off her left butt cheek and Olivia gasps. It’s a breathy little sound that shoots straight to my cock. I adjust my stance and pick up the pace, spanking her harder and faster. My beautiful bride squirms on the bed.

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“Hold still.” At my command, she freezes. I pause for a moment as she burrows her face into the mattress. “Olivia, look at me.”

She turns to me, glowering through tear-filled eyes.

“Five more,” I say. Her ass is a fiery red now and her lips are twisted in discomfort.

Olivia doesn’t respond, but I didn’t expect her to. She rests her face on the mattress and continues to scowl at me as I spank her quickly, four more times. Her lips maintain their pout as she steadfastly refuses to make a sound. There’s nothing she can do to stop the tears from falling, though. I draw my arm back and bring my hand down across the width of her ass for the last time. Olivia yelps, then quickly composes herself.

“You did so well, malyskha.” I am genuinely impressed by her fortitude. If she’d shown any signs of weakness during the spanking, I’d have gone easier on her, but it seems my bride is made of tougher stuff than most people realize. “Now for the fun part.”

CHAPTER 10

Olivia

If I said I hated being spanked, it would be a lie. Do I like pain? Not really, but I enjoy the exhilarating rush the sharp sting gives me each time Piotr’s palm connects with my ass. What I am into is the vulnerability of being laid out for my husband to punish. Lying on the bed while Piotr reddens my ass is strangely intimate. I enjoy

being bound and helpless more than I could ever have imagined. Ceding control to a man like Piotr is remarkably freeing. Of course, I wouldn't want to submit to him outside of the bedroom, but from what I've seen he isn't going to ask that of me.

I get a huge kick out of knowing I'm affecting Piotr. His breathing is a touch heavier than normal and there's no mistaking the bulge in his pants for anything other than a massive erection.

"I want you to keep looking at me, understand? I want to see your face."

"Okay," I agree.

Piotr snaps the ends of his belt together and the sound makes me jump, despite my resolve to maintain my composure. While his hand might as well be made of steel considering the impact it made on my ass, I didn't fear being spanked with it. The belt is an entirely different prospect. It's a thick strap of leather and it's going to sting like hell. Could it break the skin if Piotr's not careful? I hope not. I guess I'll have to trust he knows what he's doing.

"Okay, Olivia, here's what's going to happen. I'm going to give you one lash of the belt so you know what you're in for if you dare lie to me."

I brace myself, afraid of how much this is going to hurt. Even the wordlashsounds more vicious than spank. I twist the bedcover between my fingers and wait for the belt to land. It does with a crack that seems to ricochet off the walls. My stoicism evaporates and I scream as fire dances across my flesh.

"Breathe, Olivia," Piotr says as I scramble to get control of myself. He waits for a few seconds until he's satisfied I'm okay. "First question. Who is Dario Maroni to you?"

“I told you already. He was in high school with me.”

“Yes, you told me that, but I’m asking about your relationship. Was he your boyfriend?”

“No.”

The lie is instantly punished as the belt smacks off my ass. The initial sting makes me yelp, but it’s the painful tingling sensation it leaves that has me wriggling on the bed trying to find relief.

“Oh, Olivia, don’t fall at the first hurdle,” Piotr says with mock pity. “Let’s try that again. Was he your boyfriend?”

It isn’t worth continuing to lie. “We dated a little.”

“I see. Has he ever touched you?”

“No.” My response comes automatically.

I scream as the harsh leather falls across both butt cheeks. I dig my nails into the palms of my hands.

“We both know that’s a lie,” Piotr says.

I realize it was stupid to lie when Piotr saw Dario touching me at my house a couple of days ago.

“Well, yes, he touched me, but I thought you meant, like, down there.”

“Down there?” Piotr laughs derisively. “We are going to have to do something about

your vocabulary. Now, tell me, did he ever touch your pussy?”

Why does Piotr using that word make me all warm inside? I decide to be honest.
“Maybe once.”

“I see, and what else?”

“There’s nothing else.”

I hear the lie in my voice, but I don’t want to go into detail about the things Dario and I did. Piotr can thrash my ass all he likes, but there are some secrets I intend to keep. That resolve shatters when the belt slaps down on my throbbing backside again. I let out an animalistic wail.

“I’m telling you, Piotr, there’s nothing else.”

“Olivia,” he warns. “I can do this all night.”

He can, but I can’t.

“Alright,” I yell before he can spank me with that damned belt again. “He put his fingers inside me, but I didn’t like it.”

“He hurt you?” Piotr’s tone is murderous.

“Not really. He just wasn’t...” I don’t know how to explain the revulsion I felt when Dario pawed at me. “It wasn’t like when you did it.”

“Are you saying you enjoyed my touch?”

“Yes.”

Piotr runs his hand over my aching butt. I rock my hips and moan as desire floods me. His touch does unbelievable things to me.

“Are you trying to distract me from questioning you, Olivia?”

“No.” It hadn’t occurred to me to try, and his tone tells me it’s just as well because he’ll see right through any attempted manipulation.

“Okay, so tell me, Olivia, what was delivered to you at the wedding?”

“Nothing important.”

“If it’s not important, you can tell me.”

This isn’t a conversation I want to get into. “It was nothing, I don’t even remember it.”

Another flash of heat sears my skin as Piotr spans me with the belt once more. Tears stream down my cheeks.

“It was just a message.”

“Saying what?” Piotr demands.

I breathe in sharply. “Does the Pakhan know what a slut his new wife is?”

Burying my face in the mattress, I cry in earnest. I don’t want Piotr to know about what happened between me and Dario. I hate that some faceless asshole has called me a slut. That term cuts right through me because it’s the last thing I am.

The bed dips as Piotr sits next to me. He gently rolls me over so I’m lying on my back. I hiss as my undoubtedly swollen ass hits the mattress.

“Why would anyone say such a thing about you, malyskha?” he asks gently. “Why

would anyone think that?”

“I don’t know.” I bring my bound hands down to cover myself as he brushes the hair from my face, making me feel cared for in a way I didn’t think he’d be capable of.

Amazingly, he doesn’t press me for more information. He seems to understand I’ve reached my limit and can’t take any more. He unties my wrists, then pulls me onto his lap. I sob against his chest for a minute, wetting his shirt as I purge the emotions I’ve built up during a stressful week.

“I like you this way,” he says.

I look up at him in shock. “You like me crying?”

He shakes his head. “No. I like you soft, seeking my comfort.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what to make of that. An awkward silence grows between us.

“Are we going to fuck now?”

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“Not if you don’t want to.”

I look up at him, stunned he would make that concession to me. I know how marriages work in our world. It’s important to formalize the union. Faced with Piotr’s enemies and business associates alike, our bond has to be unassailable. Besides, despite my reservations about Piotr, I am deeply attracted to him and I’m ready to do this.

“I want to.”

Piotr gets up and deposits me carefully on the bed. He strips off his clothes, removing his shirt first. He’s muscular without being heavy. A couple of tattoos are inked on his glowing skin. The one on his shoulder is of an eight-pointed star, which I believe signifies his high rank within the organization. The tattoo over his heart is in Cyrillic script. I have no idea how to read it.

“Moya zhizn’ za bratstvo,” Piotr says with an air of pride when he catches me staring. “It’s my pledge to the brotherhood.”

He removes his shoes and socks before unzipping his pants and lowering them along with his boxer shorts. My mouth drops open as his cock springs free. It shouldn’t surprise me that this man is well-endowed, but I wasn’t prepared for this first sight of him. Logically, I know he’ll fit inside my body, but I can’t help but wonder how.

“Lie back,” Piotr instructs.

I scramble into position, not knowing what to do with my hands as Piotr climbs onto

the bed. My ass is sore, but that's soon forgotten as he parts my thighs and stares down at me as if this is the first time he's seen this intimate view. Strictly speaking I suppose it is from this angle.

"Such a pretty pussy," he murmurs. "I can't wait to fill it with my cock."

Heat rises to my cheeks. I both love and hate the way he speaks so plainly about sex. Dario tried to talk dirty to me, but like everything else about him, it left me cold. I still don't know how I fell for his golden boy football star persona.

Piotr grabs my foot and kisses the side of it. My lips form an O. Who knew that could be so erotic? He drags his lips slowly up my leg to my inner thigh, making me squirm as anticipation builds. Parting my legs farther, he swipes his tongue along the length of my pussy. The most intense humming sensation travels through my lower body. I can barely stand it.

As Piotr laps at my sensitized flesh, I wriggle. When he pushes his tongue inside me, I lift my hips from the bed. Piotr splays a hand across my abdomen to hold me down as he continues his intimate exploration. Holy shit! I have never felt anything like this. He swirls his tongue around the edge of the hole and my eyes roll back as the pleasure grows. I'm close to orgasm when Piotr pulls back. I whine in frustration.

"When you come, you'll come with my cock deep inside you."

He positions himself over me. Propped up on his palms, he studies my face.

"Is this your first time?"

"Yes." My tone is indignant. I'm insulted by the question. I already intimated to him that night at my house I'm a virgin.

“Then I’ll take it slow.”

I shake my head. Slow and steady is not what I want. It won’t satisfy my needs. “No, just do it.”

“You’re sure? It will hurt.”

I know it will, but drawing the moment out will only make things worse. I want to get past the pain and onto the pleasurable part. Piotr can make this good for me. There’s no doubt in my mind about that. A man like him prides himself on his ability to make a woman come.

“I’m sure.”

Piotr wastes no more time. He shoves his cock into me, hard. I squeal in pain and shock at the sudden invasion. He holds still as my eyes fill with tears.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” At least I will be. Though I can’t read concern on his face, the fact he’s checking I’m alright helps me relax. My body softens a little as I get used to having his massive cock inside me. I’ve read descriptions of this moment, of feeling stretched, experiencing fullness, but I never expected being joined with a man to be so overwhelming for my emotions. I want to laugh and cry at the same time.

When Piotr moves, it’s with shallow thrusts at first, but he soon picks up the pace. I wrap my legs around his waist and try to match his rhythm as he fucks me ruthlessly, too wrapped up in chasing his own release to worry about whether he’s hurting me. I assume my gasps and moans tell him I’m enjoying this.

I dig my nails into his broad shoulders to spur him on. This wild, abandoned version

of Piotr is what I craved without realizing it. I've never seen the stoic Russian so close to losing control. Knowing his lack of composure is for me is exhilarating.

“So perfect,” he murmurs. “My bride takes my cock so well.”

He toys with my nipple, flicking a finger back and forth over the taut peak. Goosebumps spread across my skin as my clit beats a rapid tempo. My body clenches around Piotr's length. My back arches off the bed and I scream as an orgasm grips me and refuses to let go.

A tsunami of pleasure threatens to sweep me away, but suddenly Piotr is lying next to me, dragging me into his arms. I rest my head on his chest and listen to the reassuring beat of his heart as the tremors shaking my body slowly subside.

“That was incredible, malyskha.” He kisses my forehead. “Just as I knew it would be.”

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I turn my head to look at him. While I feel like a sweaty mess, he doesn't show any signs of having exerted himself. The man clearly has greater stamina than me.

"Did you come?" I ask, my voice tinged with uncertainty.

"Yes, malyskha. I came harder than I thought possible."

I wring my hands together as anxiety grips me. "So, I guess we're compatible, then."

Piotr strokes my arm. "When it comes to fucking, at least."

That's not the reassurance I was seeking, but I guess it's something I can build on. This marriage may not have been what I planned for my life, but I'm going to make it work.

I shiver as a cold waft of air breezes over me. Piotr draws the sheet across the bed to cover us. It strikes me as a sweet gesture. Perhaps he has a caring side. Snuggling under his arm, I revel in the closeness. I shut my eyes and will myself to sleep.

CHAPTER 11

Piotr

Olivia slept for most of our flight, waking only to dress in wide black pants and a white blouse before taking her seat for landing. I watched her for hours, basking in her serenity. My life is hectic with legitimate deals and Bratva business competing for my time. It's rare I sit back and enjoy a moment of stillness. There were ways I could

have occupied myself while Olivia was asleep. A hundred emails awaited my response. But I couldn't take my eyes off my woman.

There's something about Olivia that makes me feel things I never have before. I know I didn't get the whole truth out of her about Dario Maroni and the message she received at the wedding, but I found myself unable to keep pushing her. The way she sobbed over being called a slut told me all I needed to know about the photographs I have in my possession. It left her feeling worthless.

When I saw her tears, something stirred deep inside me. An instinct to protect this woman rose to the surface. I will allow no man to hurt her, not even me.

"What are you doing to me?" I murmur as I brush the hair back from her face.

She fell asleep again the moment we got into the car, but she doesn't appear to be resting as peacefully as she did on the plane. Her nose is scrunched up as if she's grappling with some minor irritation. I guess the back of a car, even one as luxurious as this, is not the most comfortable place to slumber. Thankfully, the drive to Sev's building, where we'll be staying for the next seven days, will only take thirty minutes. I have something planned for Olivia at the apartment, but I may have to put her straight to bed and surprise her in the morning instead.

As we drive through the city, I turn to glance out of the window. It's still early, but already Paris is coming to life. Municipal workers sweep the streets and collect garbage. Vendors arrive at their stores to prepare for the day ahead. This is my favorite time, before the masses wake.

When Marko, the driver Sev has loaned me for the week, pulls up at the apartment, I get out of the car first and go around to Olivia's side. I carefully unbuckle her seatbelt and lift her into my arms. By some miracle, neither the sudden manhandling nor the whisper of cold air on her skin wakes her.

“Have our bags taken up to the apartment, but tell the housekeeper to leave the unpacking until this afternoon,” I tell Marko.

Sev’s building is an eighteenth-century apartment block with no elevator, so I carry her up the narrow staircase to the third floor where our accommodations are. The apartment is below Sev’s penthouse. I don’t have my own place in the city, but that may change, depending on how much Olivia enjoys being here. Paris is one of the few places I spend time that I don’t own a home in. I have apartments in London, New York, Las Vegas, Florence, and Rome, as well as a villa in Majorca and a bungalow in Sri Lanka. Buying a Paris pied-à-terre won’t make a dent in my bank balance, but it might be a worthwhile addition to my property portfolio.

As I step into the apartment and shut the door behind us, Olivia stirs in my arms. Her eyes pop open and she looks around.

“Damn,” she says sleepily. “I missed it.”

“Missed what?”

“You carrying me over the threshold.”

I furrow my brow in consternation. I didn’t realize she cared about those sorts of tradition. “Isn’t that just for our own home?”

Olivia shrugs. “I don’t know. I just wanted to...”

Her voice trails off. She doesn’t know why she wanted to experience the moment. I suspect she’s trying to create something romantic out of our union. It’s not a priority for me, but I guess I can give her that.

“You want me to take you outside and carry you back in?”

The suggestion is so absurd I can't believe I'm making it, but Olivia's face brightens with a huge smile. "Please."

It's impossible to deny her. As I open the door and walk back out into the corridor, Marko gets up from the seat where he's posted himself to ensure nobody enters the apartment without our knowledge. I shake my head to let him know he's not needed. Olivia reaches for the handle of the door and closes it.

"Okay, Mrs. Rezanova." I open the door and enter the apartment once more. "Welcome home."

"Thank you." She stretches up to kiss me with her soft, warm lips.

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“You liked that, huh?”

“It was perfect.” She wriggles to be let down and I carefully lower her to the floor. Her nose scrunches up. “Why am I Rezanova?”

“It’s the feminine form of my name.”

“Not Reznova?”

“No.” I purse my lips. “Don’t you like it?”

She shrugs. “It’s just odd that the names are different.”

“Well, you’re American, not Russian, so I guess if you prefer to be Mrs. Reznov, nobody will jail you for it.”

“No, I like Rezanova. I just didn’t get why that was the form my name would take.”

“It’s a different naming convention, I guess.”

Olivia giggles. “This is a banal conversation for a pair of newlyweds.”

I couldn’t agree more. “Yes, it is.”

Olivia looks around the hallway. It’s compact, with corridors leading off to the left and the right. There’s a mirror on one wall with a half-moon table beneath it. An arrangement of fresh roses has been placed on it, Sev’s idea, surely because it wasn’t

mine.

“Where’s the bedroom?”

“Along there.” I motion toward the left. “But we can’t go there yet. I have a surprise for you.”

“What is it?”

“It wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you.”

I usher her along the corridor to our right.

“I’m intrigued,” Olivia says, “but I should warn you now, I’m not really into diamonds. If you want to win my heart, it will take a country house and a dozen puppies.”

That’s not what I expected to appeal to her. Everything I’ve seen suggests Olivia is all about fashion. I already discerned she craves romance. Perhaps she also dreams of a life away from the spotlight. It will be hard for her to achieve as my bride. Perhaps that’s why she was resistant to the idea of marrying me. She wanted something simpler than the world she grew up in.

“A dozen puppies?”

“Well, we can start with one. I like West Highland Terriers.”

I shake my head. Dogs are not my favorite animals. “Aren’t they yappy little brutes?”

“Only if you don’t train them right.”

“And you know how to train a dog?”

“I could learn.”

Realizing my wife could easily persuade me to buy her a puppy if this conversation continues, I decide to reveal her surprise. I open the door to the living room.

“Go on in,” I tell her.

She walks ahead of me into the living room and lets out a massive squeal that tells me I did the right thing. She runs across the room and launches herself into the arms of Jimmy Marrone, her bodyguard.

“What are you doing here?” she asks. “What’s going on?”

Jimmy gently sets her down on the floor and takes a respectful step back.

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“Mr. Reznov asked me to continue working for you.”

“As my bodyguard?”

At his nod of confirmation, Olivia turns to me, an expression of sheer joy on her face. My gesture in bringing Jimmy here wasn't entirely altruistic. I know I can depend on him to protect her with his life. He's already sacrificed a great deal for her. His face, which may at one time have been handsome, is a ruin because he put her safety before his own. He'll keep her safe better than one of my men who'd only be doing it for their next paycheck. Jimmy will make sure nothing happens to her because he loves her as if she was his own daughter. He made that very clear when I interviewed him about coming to work for me. The man's loyalty is not to the Volantes, but to Olivia alone.

“This is the best news!” Olivia claps her hands together excitedly.

“Thank you, ma'am.”

Displeasure radiates from my wife as she turns to me. She probably thinks I told him to be more formal in his relationship with her. I didn't. My guess is he's trying to show me respect.

“There's no need for formality,” I tell him. “It would make my wife uncomfortable.”

“As you wish, Mr. Reznov.”

I nod curtly. The familiarity doesn't extend to me. I hold my hand out, an instruction

for Olivia to return to my side. She seems to understand the necessity to do as I ask when others are present and hurries over to me. She places her hand in mine.

“Liaise with Marko,” I tell Jimmy. The two men have already met. I asked Sev to send Marko to collect Jimmy from the airport so they could get acquainted. “My wife will wish to explore the city after she’s had some sleep, and you need to discuss security protocols.”

“Yes, sir.” The bodyguard nods respectfully. I don’t like many people, but he may be an exception. He has an old-school sense of honor. Everyone I spoke to about him had good things to say.

As he leaves, I take Olivia to the bedroom we’ll use for the duration of our stay.

“This is nice,” she says as she walks around the room. It’s decorated in earth tones with an enormous bed in the center. It has a padded headboard that extends halfway up the wall. There are nightstands on either side of the bed and a dressing table with a mirror by the far wall. A long, padded ottoman sits at the end of the bed. I grin as I imagine Olivia kneeling on it while I plow into her from behind.

“Oh, our bags are here.” She notices the suitcases lined up at the door of the closet.

“Yes, the housekeeper will unpack them later.”

“That’s fine. Everything I need is in my overnight bag.” Olivia grabs a small leather bag from the top of the pile and heads for the only other door in here, which she’s correctly guessed is for the bathroom. “I’m going to go get ready for bed.”

While she disappears into the bathroom, I sit at the edge of the bed and get my phone out. There’s a message from Sev detailing our meeting this evening. It seems my associates want to have dinner after our business is concluded so they can meet my

bride. I message Sev back to let him know I'm fine with that. These people are not only my business colleagues; they're the closest thing I have to friends. It's essential for them to meet the woman who'll stand at my side from now on.

I look up as Olivia comes back into the room. The breath catches at the back of my throat. Wearing a white satin corset, matching panties, and high-heeled shoes, she's left her hair to tumble around her shoulders. She's a goddess.

"I thought you'd be tired," I say, as she lowers her lashes seductively.

"Not too tired to thank you for my surprise."

She sinks to the floor and crawls to me. Fucking crawls. This is the last thing I expected from her with no prompting. I have to be honest, I'm not sure I trust it. As she comes to a stop in front of me, she sits back on her heels and unfastens my pants. My cock, ready for action as it always is around her, springs free. Olivia looks up at me and smiles. She takes an inch of me into her mouth and swirls her tongue around the head of my cock, lapping up the pre-cum.

"You've gone from blushing virgin to cock slut incredibly fast."

I curse myself for the comment as soon as I make it. Olivia's my wife and she's trying to please me. Thankfully, she doesn't withdraw to lock herself in the bathroom.

"Only for you," she whispers.

"Damned right, it's only for me." I push my fingers through her hair at the back of her head and hold her in place. "And my cock is only for you."

She hums contentedly, sending a vibration along my shaft. I throw my head back as she draws several more inches of me into her mouth. The tentative way she explores

my length thrills me. I know I'm not the first man to have her hot little lips wrapped around him, but I can tell her experience is limited. I will be the one to teach her what to do.

"Use your hands," I urge her. "And don't hold back. You won't hurt me."

I shudder with pleasure as Olivia's fingers close around the base of my cock. Taking me deeper, she applies more suction. She runs her tongue along the underside of my cock and cups my balls with her other hand. She squeezes me gently as she slides back and forward, getting my shaft good and wet.

I let her continue at her pace until the desire to take over becomes unbearable.

"Hands behind your back," I command.

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She makes a surprised sound, but does as she's told. Keeping a tight grip on her head, I lift my hips and thrust deep, hitting the back of her throat. She gags and stares up at me with tear-filled eyes. She doesn't try to pull off me as I slide out over her lips and drive back in again.

"Fuck, that hot little mouth feels so good."

I pump my hips in a steady rhythm, enjoying the way she chokes on my length. Tears stream down her face, but she kneels there and takes it like a good girl. No, not a girl. Despite the mess I'm making of her, my wife is a fucking goddess.

As the pressure intensifies, my balls tighten and I know I won't last much longer.

"Ya blizko!" I yell, giving her only a second's warning in a language she doesn't understand before coming down her throat.

Olivia swallows everything I give her. I untangle my fingers from her hair, allowing her to pull back. She rests on her heels and swipes away the tears and saliva from her face. She looks over her shoulder and then down at the floor, anywhere but at me. Reaching forward, I put a finger under her chin and tilt her face until her eyes meet mine.

"That was incredible, malyskha."

"Really?" Her voice is strangled, as if she's on the verge of tears.

"Yes, a perfect gift from my new bride, one I appreciate very much."

A tremulous smile forms on her face and I realize she was worried she hadn't pleased me. Despite her outward appearance of confidence, I've witnessed flashes of insecurity from my wife since I started to watch her more closely. Today, her façade has slipped more than once. It's not surprising considering the number of changes the last twenty-four hours have brought for her. No longer the only sister of a Mafia boss, she's now aPakhan's wife. It's a lot to drop on her, but she'll adjust soon enough.

"You need to get some sleep," I tell her. Exhaustion will only exacerbate her emotional state. I stand and tuck myself back into my clothing before helping her up from the floor. I pull back the covers of the bed. "In you get."

She looks up at me with what I can only describe as hope. "Will you join me?"

Fuck, I can't say no to those big blue eyes. "For a little while. I have work to do."

"Of course." I don't like the resignation in her voice.

Leaving my clothes on, I get into the bed next to her. If I undress, I'll only end up fucking her and she really needs to sleep. I draw the sheets up over us and put an arm around her. Holding her tight, I wait until she drifts off. It doesn't take long, an indication of how tired she really is.

When I'm sure she's fast asleep, I get up and go for a shower. I have business to deal with, and I can't let Olivia distract me. No matter how tempted I might be.

CHAPTER 12

Olivia

When I wake, it's with that groggy feeling I get if I sleep too long. I open my eyes and blink as they adjust to the sunlight flooding the room. Piotr is gone, but that

doesn't surprise me. He made it clear he won't be using our honeymoon to show me the sights of Paris. Perhaps I should take revenge and spend a shitload of his money while he's in meetings. I read about a neglected bride doing that in a novel recently. The trouble is he hasn't given me a credit card I can take my anger out on. Not that I'm mad at Piotr for combining our honeymoon with business. I'm not comfortable enough with the man to want to be with him twenty-four/seven yet.

As I think about Piotr, I burrow my face into my pillow and groan in embarrassment, recalling how emotional I got earlier. I was overwhelmed after sucking his cock because no matter how hard I try to banish the memory, I still remember how Dario ridiculed me after making me do that to him. He called me a worthless whore, not even capable of giving a decent blowjob.

Piotr didn't mock me for my amateur efforts. He assured me he enjoyed what I did. I don't think he'd have said that just to be nice. Soothing egos isn't his style. He must have enjoyed fucking my mouth. At the time, I sensed he did, but the moment he came down my throat, doubt crept in. I worried if he thought badly of me. Shaking my head, I decide to get a grip. My husband's approval shouldn't matter this much to me.

I get up and take a quick shower, drying my hair before I dress. The outfit I choose is mainly for comfort, but it's still cute. Blue jeans and a white crushed silk top will help me blend in with the crowd. They're also the only clothes the housekeeper won't need to run an iron over before putting them in the closet. I'm a terrible packer. Despite trying all the different internet hacks I've come across, everything ends up creased.

Anticipating I'll spend a lot of time on my feet today, I slip on baby pink sneakers. The outfit doesn't scream rich American, and it certainly doesn't suggest Bratva queen, but that's intentional. In New York, everyone knows who I am. Here, I can have a break from the wary recognition that follows me wherever I go.

When I'm ready to face whatever's left of the day, I make my way out of the bedroom and along the corridors, following the smell of coffee until it leads me to the kitchen. The room is tiny. It makes the two large males crammed into the small space around the table in the corner look faintly ridiculous. I didn't expect to find Piotr here. Perhaps he's done for the day.

He and Jimmy aren't talking to each other. They're both staring at their phones. The empty plates in front of them tell me they ate a meal together. For reasons I can't explain, that makes me happy.

Despite having his back to me, it's Piotr who's first to notice my presence. He rises from the table and walks the few steps across the kitchen to greet me with a kiss. He's incredibly handsome in black slacks and a matching shirt. The angel of death vibe suits him.

"You didn't sleep long," he remarks.

"I didn't?" I feel as if I've been out for hours.

"No, it's only nine-thirty."

"Wow." I expected it to be past noon. "I thought you had to work."

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“I do. I was just about to leave.”

“Right.” Why does that disappoint me? I don’t want to spend the day with him.

“Yes, unfortunately, but I’m glad I saw you. We have dinner tonight with my business partners.”

“What time?”

“Seven-thirty. It’s upstairs in Sev’s penthouse. Depending on how long our meeting runs, you might have to meet me up there.”

“Okay.”

“You can handle that?”

I snort in disbelief. “Are you seriously asking if I can walk upstairs by myself?”

Piotr shakes his head. “No, I meant...”

“Yeah, I get it,” I interrupt him. I know what he meant. He wondered if I had the nerve to walk into a virtual stranger’s apartment and enter a room full of people I don’t know by myself. It’s not as if arriving alone at an event is new to me. Piotr seems to have forgotten who the fuck I am, though. That’s my fault for allowing him to see me during moments of weakness. Now he’s questioning if I can handle basic socializing without him there to hold my hand. “I’m a big girl, Piotr, used to big, scary men. I can cope with anything that’s thrown at me.”

“Of course.” He nods, then kisses my cheek. “Wear something stunning.”

“Show off your prize to full effect,” I snipe. “Got it.”

Piotr doesn’t react to the vitriol in my voice. He simply nods curtly before turning and walking away. Moments later, the front door closes, signaling his departure.

“He won’t play your game,” Jimmy says as I join him at the table.

“What game?”

“The one that feeds your victim complex.”

I scowl at that. I do not have a victim complex. “What do you mean?”

“You provoke a fight so the other person will come down hard on you and you can play the injured party. It’s the game you’ve played with your brothers your whole life.”

I pout as I reach for a piece of bread from the plate at the center of the table. I am guilty of doing exactly what he said, but I’m not happy about being called out on it and by Jimmy of all people.

“You’re meant to be on my side.”

“I am on your side, Livvy, always will be, but that doesn’t mean I won’t speak up when I think you’re going to blow it. You get away with this act with your brothers. Reznov won’t allow it.”

“So I should let him insult me and say nothing?”

“When did he insult you?” Jimmy asks. “Were you really so offended he checked you’d be okay with arriving at the dinner alone, or is it because he asked you to dress up because he’s proud of his new wife?”

“He isn’t proud of me.”

Jimmy arches his thin gray eyebrow. “You’re not giving him much reason to be right now, are you?” He reaches across the table to pat the back of my hand. “Look, Livvy, I know it’s not my place to say, but you’re a remarkable young woman, strong and capable. But you love to revel in self-pity.” He affects a pout and mimics my voice. “Poor me, I’m so hard done by. The men in my life all think I’m useless.”

“The men in my life do think I’m useless.”

“You let them think that. Show Reznov you can be an asset, not a petulant brat who’s a drain on his energy.”

“Fuck, Jimmy, tell it like it is, why don’t you?”

He’s never spoken so bluntly before and I hate to admit it but I need to hear it. He tilts his head and smiles fondly at me. The corners of his mouth don’t quite meet since he was injured while protecting me. Even now, I feel a pang of regret over what happened that day.

“Your whole life you’ve got in your own way with your bratty behavior. Now’s the time to grow up. You know I’m right and you know I love you, so stop looking at me like I shot your puppy in the face.”

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“You’re right.” I scrub a hand over my face. “I’ll do better.”

“Good girl.”

He gets up and pours me a cup of coffee, setting it down on the table. As he retakes his seat, I grab his hand. “And don’t ever think it’s not your place to tell me what’s on your mind. You’re important to me, Jimmy.”

He carefully slides his hand out from under mine. His eyes glisten and he looks away. It’s the most emotional I’ve ever seen him. He clears his throat.

“So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

“Thought we’d go to Disneyland.”

Jimmy’s face drains of what little color it holds. I let him stew for a moment before laughing. “I’m just kidding.” Visiting a theme park might be fun, but not for him. “I just wanted to see your face.”

“Thank fuck. My happy place doesn’t involve princesses and talking fucking animals.”

It’s probably best not to ask what his happy place is.

“So what do you want to do, Liv?”

“I want to see the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe. I’d like to get a hot

chocolate at Angelina's, visit the Musée d'Orsay and the Louvre and I want to have a picnic in the Jardin de Tullieres. Oh, and some shopping on the Champs Élysées, perhaps."

"All in one day?" Jimmy asks doubtfully.

"Well, no, but I don't know how long we're here for."

"Your husband said a week."

Well, I'm glad he shared that information with someone. I hold back from making a snippy comment because Jimmy is right about me curbing my bratty behavior, outside of the bedroom at least.

"I'm starved. What did you eat?"

"I brought bagels. There's a couple left if you want one."

"Nah, I want something greasy. There's got to be somewhere around here to grab breakfast, right?"

Jimmy nods. "Get your purse. Oh, I almost forgot." He reaches into his pocket and slides a black credit card across the table. "Mr. Reznov asked me to give that to you."

"Why didn't he give it to me himself?"

"Well, either because he didn't think he'd see you before he left, or because he thought you'd stamp your foot and accuse him of trying to buy you."

I hold up my hands in surrender. "Okay, Jimmy, message received. I'm a pain in the ass."

“Yeah, you are.” He gets up from the table. “Grab your things and I’ll meet you at the front door.”

Pocketing the credit card, which I may use to buy a new dress for this evening, I head to the bedroom to fetch my purse. Then I walk back along the corridor to the front door, which is open. I find Jimmy just outside, talking to a man whose somewhat weathered face is familiar. It takes a minute to place him as the driver who picked Piotr and me up at the airport last night. I didn’t speak to him because I went out like a light the moment my ass hit the back seat of his SUV.

“Hi, it’s Marko, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Livvy,” I correct him. “Or Mrs. Rezanova, if you insist.”

“Ma’am,” he repeats with a polite nod. I guess he’s not going to loosen up anytime soon.

The two men walk ahead of me down the winding staircase and out onto the sidewalk. It’s a glorious day. The sun is already hot, and the sky is clear. A car is waiting at the curb. A brute of a man leans against the door. His pose is casual, with his legs crossed, but his eyes scan the street as if he’s looking for someone to kill.

Even if I was a complete outsider, I wouldn’t mistake this man for anything other than Russian Mafia. He fits the stereotype. Tall enough to dominate the NBA, he has broad shoulders and bulging biceps. Several tattoos are visible beneath the neckline of his black shirt. His severely cropped black hair and steely gray eyes add to the sense that this is a dangerous man.

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“I am Vlad.” His clipped tone tells me he’s the taciturn type. “I will drive you.”

“Oh, I thought...” I wave a hand at Marko.

“I will drive. Marko guards you.”

“Wow, three men all to myself. It’s like my own reverse harem.” I wince as I realize Jimmy is one of the three and I could never think of him that way, not that I’d consider sleeping with the other two, either. Even if I found them remotely attractive, Piotr is as much brooding male as I can handle.

“What if I prefer to walk?”

Vlad shrugs. “We will follow.”

I’m not sure I like the idea of strolling along the boulevards of Paris with three men trailing me.

“How far is it to the Eiffel Tower?” I ask.

“About two kilometers.”

I have no idea what that equates to in miles. It doesn’t sound far, but I am hungry and it’s hot out, so I’ll maybe save the walking for when I tour the galleries and museums instead.

“Let’s take the car.”

Vlad nods. He opens the back door for me. I get in and Jimmy joins me while Marko takes the passenger seat.

“Can we stop somewhere for breakfast first? I need something seriously unhealthy.”

“I know a place,” Vlad confirms. “Bacon, eggs, sausage, as much as you like, very cheap, very delicious.”

Cheap isn't a priority for me, but delicious is essential. “Okay, then, Vlad, I'm in your hands.”

I get my cellphone from my purse and snap a quick selfie to send to Piotr with the message, “Going to be a great day. Hope yours is too.”

I don't add an emoji because my husband doesn't seem like the type of man who'd appreciate a string of red hearts. He'd probably view it as a sarcastic gesture, which I guess it would be since I don't love him. At least, I don't yet. The day may come when my attraction for him grows into something deeper. Until then, I'll just have to enjoy him on a purely physical level and hope that's enough.

CHAPTER 13

Piotr

“Everyone's here,” Sev announces as he walks into the room, letting me know the other members of our consortium have arrived.

I look up from my cellphone, which I've been staring at for the past ten minutes. I've been rereading the messages Olivia has sent me throughout the day. She's checked in with me five times, sending me pictures and brief comments about what she's up to. It isn't something I asked her to do and I'm surprised she wants to share so much

with me. The last photo she sent was from outside a clothes store. She captioned it with buying something sexy for tonight. I don't know whether she's trying to show me what I'm missing by not being with her or if she just wants to keep in touch, to build a relationship. Either way, I appreciate that she's trying.

I get up from the seat behind the desk. "Thank you for giving me the use of your study today."

Despite being distracted by my wife's messages, I got a lot done today.

"I still don't understand why you didn't take the day off to be with your wife."

My jaw ticks in irritation. "Business doesn't stop for Olivia. She needs to learn my work comes first."

"Did she have to learn it on the first day of your marriage?"

I don't know what's crawled up Sev's ass. "Since when are you a relationship expert?"

He shrugs. "I've never claimed to be, but even I can see that neglecting a woman who was reluctant to marry you in the first place is a bad idea."

"Olivia will be fine. She's used to..."

"To what?" Sev interrupts. "Being ignored? She may accept that from her brothers, but from you she needs more."

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I clench my fists at my sides as he tweaks my last nerve. “You’re like an old woman, Sevastyan. Where is this concern for Olivia coming from?”

“It isn’t concern for Olivia, mudak. I want you to be happy.”

We rarely indulge in personal talk, and I have no idea why Sev’s decided to stick his nose into my private life now. I can only imagine my wedding has triggered some desire in him to settle down. I suspect seeing Lara Ivanova at my wedding is to blame. Sev has had a thing for my uncle’s goddaughter for years. Lara’s parents were killed shortly after her twelfth birthday and although Boris didn’t raise her personally, he has watched over her closely. Sev believes she’s his, but my uncle won’t allow him to have her, not when he has such a terrible reputation for treating women as disposable. I’m not close to the girl, but I don’t want to see her hurt, and I fear Sev would destroy her.

“Thank you, my friend, but I’m still not going to ask my uncle to let you have Lara.” Although I’m Pakhan, Lara’s future is a family matter. Even if I was so inclined, I couldn’t overrule Boris on that.

Sev clasps my shoulder. “I wouldn’t ask you to. Now, we should go through. We’ve kept our friends waiting long enough.”

I follow Sev through to the room he has set up for business meetings. It was the grand salon back in the nineteenth century where people of note used to gather to discuss the arts and politics. Sev has left some of the original details in the room, like the moldings on the ceiling and the enormous fireplace. It’s an impressive space. A huge rectangular table sits off to one side, several of its seats currently occupied by our

closest allies.

Niamh Donnelly has taken the seat at the head. A bubbly blonde, the Scots-Irish fixer for the Lenkov Bratva hides a ruthless streak beneath her sweet demeanor. Because she's a born peacemaker, she chairs our meetings and keeps everyone on track. With so many massive egos in the room, it's necessary to have a voice of calm.

When she sees me, Niamh gets up and comes to throw her arms around me. "Piotr! Congratulations on your marriage."

I didn't invite any of my European associates to the wedding, preferring to keep my dealings here separate from the North American business I am taking over from my uncle. What I've built in the UK, Italy, and France is mine alone.

"Thank you."

Niamh releases me from her hug and resumes her seat. Fortunately, the one other woman in the room is less prone to physical displays of affection.

"Mila." I don't insult her with a formal greeting that would include her patronymic name. She hated her father with a passion. The Lenkovprintsessais a ruthless killer wrapped up in a stunningly beautiful package. There was a time when my uncle Boris considered her as a potential bride for me, but she married her family's head of security.

Now I have Olivia. I'm glad a union with Mila wasn't something I seriously entertained. She may be a force to be reckoned with, but Mila doesn't compare to my bride.

Mila's brother, Daniil, sits next to her. Their other brother, Timofey, is absent from the group, but that's not unusual. He prefers to carry out plans rather than making

them.

Damiano and Lorenzo Volante occupy two of the spaces across from the Lenkov siblings. Their brother, Gabriele, is a valued member of our group, but I haven't seen him in the flesh for several years. Badly scarred in an ambush, he retreated to his villa in Rome and has barely emerged since.

Sev goes to sit with the Italians while I take the seat next to the last member of our group, Joe Dalgliesh. He's here to represent the interests of the Cameron family to whom he's closely related.

"Where's Livvy?" Damiano asks.

There's a hint of disapproval in his voice that I've chosen to attend this meeting alone, but he can hardly have expected me to bring Olivia with me. Spouses have no place at this table.

"My wife will join us later for dinner."

"Excellent." Mila flashes a feral grin. "I can't wait to meet the woman who landed Piotr Reznov."

"You'll play nice," Niamh warns. She grew up with the Lenkovs and is an honorary sister to them all. She knows, as we all do, that Mila loves to push people's buttons, to see what they're made of. I'm not sure if Olivia's up to the challenge.

"I always play nice," the sultry brunette answers with a pout.

"That's far from true," Daniil murmurs.

"So, what are we here for?" I interject before the siblings can launch into an endless

round of bickering. They're fiercely protective of each other, but when they argue, it turns vicious fast. Mila usually emerges as the winner because she's prepared to hurl the sort of insults Daniil is too gentlemanly to return.

"There are several items for discussion," Niamh says. She runs these meetings like we're the board of a corporation. It works well, mostly. "Joe, do you want to go first? Yours is the least complicated issue."

"Aye." With his blond hair and blue eyes, Joe looks like Niamh's male counterpart. He comes from a politically influential family based in Edinburgh and London. Behind the golden boy image the media portrays of him lies a ruthless enforcer who's not afraid to spill blood to advance his family's interests. "As you know, my brother's been elected to parliament. Our father's positioning him to become the next prime minister of the UK. He needs me to make sure that happens."

"So you're stepping back?" Mila asks. "Will your cousin join us?"

"Aye, Sandy's ready to step up."

"Sandy?" Lorenzo screws his nose up.

"It's a diminutive form of Alexander," Niamh explains.

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“I see. I thought we were going to have another woman in our ranks.” He holds his hands up in surrender when he sees Mila’s murderous expression. “Not that I object.”

None of us at this table has any problem having women in our group, provided they bring an appropriate skillset. It’s one of our great advantages. The sexism that permeates some of our enemies’ organizations prevents them from making progress. I may be a little sexist in my personal life, but as far as business is concerned, I’m willing to embrace anyone who can help things run smoothly.

“You believe Alexander is ready for the responsibility?” Damiano asks, getting the conversation back on track.

None of us knows Alexander Cameron well. It was his brother, James, who initially joined our group. He was murdered along with his parents and younger sisters four years ago in an event that shocked us all. The Camerons had gone to the home of their rival, Stewart Drummond, to celebrate the signing of a marriage pact. Alexander was to marry Stewart’s daughter, Cara, and put an end to a feud that had rumbled on for decades. When they sat down to dinner, Stewart Drummond had Alexander’s entire family murdered. Not even the girls, two of them still teenagers, were spared.

Alexander escaped the initial slaughter, but was chased down and shot in the stomach. He tumbled sixty feet off the edge of a cliff and landed in a freezing river. Somehow he survived. Niamh Donnelly’s men found him and took him for medical treatment. She’s helped him to hide all this time while he recovered his strength and planned his return.

“Is he fit enough?” Daniil asks before I can voice the question.

Alexander suffered amnesia and has only recently regained his memories.

“He is.” It’s Niamh, rather than Joe, who replies. “I’ve spoken to him several times and apart from the occasional headache, he’s back to his old self.”

“And all our current arrangements will remain in place?” Damiano checks.

Our trading routes through Glasgow to Ireland and then onto North America are working well. Nobody wants to upset the balance.

“Aye, the transition will be a smooth one. Alexander’s eager to let the world know he’s alive and get back to business as usual.”

“Okay.” Sev slaps a hand down on the table. “Let’s vote on it.”

“There is one issue that needs to be resolved before Alexander comes out of hiding,” Niamh says.

“What?” Lorenzo asks. He looks bored of this conversation now. It’s typical of him. Unless we’re focusing on one of his pet projects, he doesn’t show much interest in anything.

“His youngest sister, Eilidh, is still alive,” Joe says.

“What?” Mila glares at Niamh, so I’m guessing she didn’t share this information with her closest friend.

“You’re sure about this?” I ask.

“Yes.” Niamh takes out her cellphone and hands it to me. There’s a photograph on it of a young brunette standing next to an older man. Her head is bowed, but her face is

tilted toward the camera. Her expression is one of defiance, but there's also fear in her eyes. "That's Eilidh Cameron standing next to Jason Henry."

"How is this possible?" Sev reaches across the table to take the phone from me. "I thought all their throats were slit."

Joe shrugs. "That's what we thought, but Henry obviously spared her. She was first seen out with him about three months ago, right after Stewart Drummond died. Henry's telling people he's her guardian."

"We think he's showing her off before marrying her off to the highest bidder," Niamh says. "My sources tell me Semyon Barevsky has been spending a lot of time in Scotland. We think he's interested."

"Fuck!" Damiano makes his thoughts known for the first time. "If that monster gets his hands on the girl, she'll wish she'd died alongside her family."

I have to agree. My past dealings with Barevsky have always been deeply unpleasant. His primary trade is in women and children. I wouldn't discount any of the rumors I've heard about his depravity.

"So what's the plan?" Mila asks. "Do we go in and get her?"

Niamh shakes her head. "We can't risk storming in and causing a bloodbath."

"So what?" Lorenzo asks, now more invested in the conversation because he hates men who hurt women. "You leave her there and risk her becoming Barevsky's latest toy?"

"No," Niamh flashes him a sweet smile that suggests she's about to drop a surprise on him. "We're going to send in a suitor of our own. Alexander can't reveal himself

until he knows she's safe. Hewants her married into a family he can trust to look after her. The Volantes are known for their honor."

Lorenzo shakes his head when he realizes what she's hinting at. "Don't look at me. I'm no knight in shining armor."

"Nor I," Damiano says.

"As if she'd try to marry some poor girl off to either of you!" Mila snipes.

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“You’re not thinking of Gabriele?” Daniil asks.

“It might persuade him out of the house,” Lorenzo says.

Damiano shakes his head. “Even if it did, he’d be no good for this girl. If she’s been kept prisoner all these years, she’ll need careful handling.”

“What about Giovanni?” I suggest. “He’s in Scotland at the moment.”

“I didn’t consider him,” Niamh admits. “I thought he was trying to distance himself from the family.” She looks at Damiano. “What do you think?”

“No idea,” the Italian replies. “Gio has always been a mystery to me.”

“Ask Olivia about him tonight,” I tell Niamh. “My wife will know if he’s a suitable candidate or not.”

“You don’t mind us talking business with your wife?” Daniil checks. I know he’s of the belief that his work and personal lives should be kept separate as much as possible.

“Not at all,” I reply. “And it’s not really business, is it? This is a personal matter.”

“True,” Niamh agrees. “Thank you, Piotr.”

“Now, shall we vote on welcoming Alexander into the fold?” Conscious that Olivia will arrive for dinner in just over an hour, I want to move things on.

“Yes.” Niamh looks around the table. “All those in favor of Alexander Cameron taking his rightful place among us, say aye.”

A murmur of assent goes around the table.

“Good.” Niamh looks at Mila, signaling that she’ll be the next to raise an issue. “Now, let’s get onto the main order of business. Mila, do you want to tell us what you’ve learned about the Albanian’s new partnership with the Corsican Union?”

As Mila launches into detail about how the two groups have come together to disrupt their business at the port of Marseilles, I grin. This is the sort of problem our group was created to solve. By the time the people around this table have had their say, we’ll have come up with a plan that will make our enemies wish they’d stuck to their own territory.

CHAPTER 14

Olivia

It’s kind of vain to look at yourself in the mirror and think, damn, that’s hot, but I can’t deny the truth. My body is outrageously sinful in this dress. I can’t decide if Piotr’s going to love or hate it. Will he be mad about me for showing so much leg in front of his business associates or will he preen with pride that his wife has made this effort to look good for him? I’m slightly worried it will be the former. He told me off for not covering my legs properly once before.

I dismiss my anxieties about how my husband will react. He told me to wear something stunning, and mission accomplished. I feel incredible and if he doesn’t like it, he’ll just have to learn to be careful what he asks for.

As I fasten the diamond teardrop earrings I treated myself to with my own money, I

can't help smiling. Today was so much fun. I love the energy in Paris. People are in less of a hurry than they are in New York, but they're not as laid back as the residents of Florence or Rome.

The atmosphere around the Eiffel Tower was buzzing. Jimmy, Marko, and Vlad were freaked out by the crowd size at first, but they soon calmed down when they realized we were surrounded by tourists and not potential assassins.

I enjoyed the bustle and the chaos around the Arc de Triomphe, even if the traffic around the monument scared the living daylights out of me. At one point, I thought Vlad was going to leap out of the car to fight a little old lady who cut us off in her battered Citroen and then cursed him out. If I'm honest, I think she'd have kicked his ass.

Shopping at the Galleries Lafayette was an amazing experience. I've shopped in some beautiful places, but that beat them all. I bought my outfit for tonight and got gifts to take home to my sisters-in-law.

The highlight of my day, however, was sitting in Angelina's watching Jimmy and Marko stirring whipped cream into their hot chocolate. Neither of them wanted to join me for the delicious treat, but I insisted. Jimmy took little persuading, partly because he has a sweet tooth, but mainly because he hates to refuse me anything unless it puts me in danger. Marko was harder to convince, but in the end I think he was afraid I'd run crying to Piotr about what an awful man he was if he didn't do as I said. Both men enjoyed their drinks and the dainty cakes I ordered, no matter how much they pretended eating them was a chore.

Vlad remained outside, leaning against the car and watching everyone who walked by with suspicion. The terrifying bodyguard barely spoke to me all day, but he cracked a smile when I took a doggy bag with some eclairs out to him. From that point on, he was friendlier to me, so I guess it's true that the way to a man's heart is through his

stomach.

I wonder what I could feed Piotr to make him like me more.

I check myself in the mirror one more time and grin. The dress I chose for tonight makes a bold statement. A vibrant shade of red, it hugs my curves scandalously. One good sneeze would probably burst its seams. The daringly short length is made up for by a more modest neckline and full sleeves. My black leather ankle boots have insanely high heels and sharply pointed toes. I could probably maim someone with them if I wanted to.

My makeup is flawless. I went for dark, smoky eyes and lipstick that matches my dress. I leave my hair down in loose waves because I prefer it that way. It looks effortless, but took me the better part of an hour to perfect.

When I feel ready to make my entrance, I head upstairs with Jimmy and Marko training behind me. It seems like a waste of manpower to have both of them accompanying me up a single flight of stairs in a Bratva-owned building, but they have their orders. As much as being shadowed wherever I go pisses me off, I won't make the men responsible for my safety feel bad for doing their job.

There's only one apartment on the top floor of the building. I ring the doorbell and wait. A few seconds elapse before a tall, thin man answers. He peers down his crooked nose at me and his lips purse in distaste. "And you are?"

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“Olivia Rezanova.” It feels odd to say the name, but I love how it sounds. I hold out my hand for him to shake.

“I am Jacques.” He glares at my offered hand until I drop it to my side. “Please follow me.”

I turn to Jimmy and Marko. “You guys can head off now.”

Jimmy nods politely. “Have a great evening, ma’am.” His sudden deference is no doubt a response to the French asshole looking at me like something that was scraped off the sidewalk.

“Thank you, James.” I flash him a grin. “Marko.”

Now that I’m safely delivered, they can head off for the night. Perhaps Marko will take Jimmy out and show him some of the sights of Paris he wouldn’t dare take a Pakhan’s wife to. Jimmy deserves a little fun.

I follow Jacques along a wide corridor. Its cream-painted walls are lined with art. Sev’s clearly a fan of the Impressionists, or perhaps his decorator is. There are several very nice reproductions on display. At least, I hope they’re copies because I’m pretty sure the originals are supposed to be in the Musée d’Orsay.

Jacques opens a door and ushers me into a large room with several large white sofas and a massive fireplace with a marble surround. There’s a magnificent gold chandelier hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room.

“Mrs. Piotr Reznov.” Jacques’ booming announcement is overkill, since there are only two people in the room. I grimace at the way he stripped away my identity, reducing me to the role of Piotr’s wife.

As he backs out of the room, a heavily pregnant woman hauls herself up from a sofa and comes to greet me, surprisingly graceful despite the massive bulge of her belly.

“Ignore that pompous ass.” The pretty brunette smiles broadly as a large, tattooed beast of a man saunters over to join us. “I’m Evie Lenkova and this is Nikolai Morozov.”

“Olivia Rezanova.” I return her smile and admire her bravery in wearing four-inch heels when it looks like she could give birth at any moment.

“I know. I’ve been dying to meet you.” Evie sounds genuinely thrilled. “It’s good to have another Bratva bride to talk to.”

Bratva bride? Ugh. I hope we’re not calling ourselves that.

“You’re Daniil Lenkov’s wife?” I check. My knowledge of the European families isn’t as extensive as I’d like, considering Piotr mingles with them as much as he does with the Americans.

“That’s right, and Niko is Mila’s husband.”

My eyes widen. “You’re Mila Lenkova’s husband?”

“Da.” His broad grin tells me he enjoyed my awestruck reaction. His wife is someone I’ve heard a lot about. Notorious for her exploits, she’s like the monster under the bed for a lot of Mafia men. Whether or not it’s true that she has a habit of slicing the dicks off men who upset her, people believe it and they’re scared to cross her. “You will

meet her when their business is concluded.”

“Oh, she’s in the meeting with Piotr?”

“Of course,” Niko says.

“And you’re not?”

Niko shakes his head. “I leave that side of things to my wife.”

Even knowing Mila’s reputation, I’m amazed she’s involved in the business meeting while her husband isn’t. It’s unheard of in our sexist world. Perhaps Piotr’s associates are more enlightened. “Who else is in the meeting?”

“Uh, your cousins,” Evie tells me.

She’s undoubtedly referring to Damiano and Lorenzo. I know they do a lot of business with Piotr. That instantly dispels my hopes that this group is open-minded about women’s capabilities. My cousins are chauvinist pigs.

“Sev Baranov is there,” Evie continues. “Then there’s Joe Dalglish and Niamh Donnelly.”

I’ve heard that name before. Niamh Donnelly is renowned for her skills at bringing people together and making deals happen. If they’re working with her, perhaps my cousins are only sexist assholes with family.

“Who’s Joe Dalglish?” He’s the only one of the group I’m not familiar with.

“He’s part of the Dalglish dynasty.” Evie smiles as she notes my blank expression. “They’re based in Edinburgh and London, but I guess they’re not that well known

outside of Europe. Joe's father was an advisor to the late queen. His oldest brother is tapped to become the next prime minister."

"Of France?" I realize it's a stupid question the minute I ask it. Evie mentioned the queen and that the family has homes in both Scotland and England.

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“The U.K.,” Evie says. If she thinks I’m a complete moron, she doesn’t show it.

I swallow hard as I think about the people I’m going to sit down to dinner with tonight. They’re all highly accomplished. Even Damiano and Lorenzo have impressive resumes. I wish Piotr had warned me who I’d be meeting here.

“Don’t worry.” Evie must pick up on my anxiety. “Everyone’s really friendly once you get to know them.” She elbows Niko. “Go get Olivia a drink, will you? That stuck-up butler of Sev’s isn’t going to offer.”

“Of course.” Despite looking like the sort of man who’d rip his enemies’ heads off with his bare hands, Niko smiles fondly at his sister-in-law. “What can I get you, Olivia?”

“I’ll take a vodka, please. Neat.” It’s not what I’d usually go for, but this feels like the right moment to try Piotr’s favorite drink.

Niko nods approvingly, then leaves the room. Evie steers me over to one of the sleek white sofas and we sit.

“You’ll do great, Olivia.” Evie’s kind to soothe my fears, which I wish I was doing a better job of hiding. This is so unlike me. I attend dozens of social events every year. Usually, people are nervous about meeting me.

“I don’t want to let Piotr down,” I admit.

“I was afraid of disappointing Daniil at first. I didn’t know how to behave around his

business partners. At least you were born into this life.”

“You weren’t?”

Evie shakes her head. “No, before I met Daniil, I didn’t know a thing about how the Bratva, or the Mafia, or any of this works.”

“So, how did you meet?”

“I worked at a swimming pool Daniil used to come to. One night he was there after hours and I spotted someone suspicious outside. I realized they were coming for Daniil, so I warned him.” She laughs, a melodious sound. “Actually, I threw a shoe at him to get his attention. You should have seen his face.”

“That’s a story to tell your grandkids.”

“I know, right? Anyway, he killed the bad guys, but couldn’t leave me as a witness, so he carried me off on his private jet and the rest, as they say, is history.”

She rubs a hand over her belly.

“Is this your first child?”

“Second. It’s a boy. Our daughter, Mirabel, is back at the hotel with her nanny.”

“Mirabel.” I test out the name. “That’s pretty.”

“Thanks. She’s a sweet wee thing, but she can also be a holy terror. Daniil’s brother has twin sons, and the three of them create havoc together.”

“I can imagine.”

Suddenly, it occurs to me that Piotr and I haven't discussed children. I mean, we haven't talked about much, but the subject of kids seems like an important one for newlyweds to broach, especially since we fucked without a condom. Though I want a family, I want to achieve something of my own first. I have ambitions I've never told anyone about. Will Piotr give me a chance to fulfill them or will he insist I focus all my energy on being his wife and then a mother to his children? As much as I hate the thought of having that conversation, I guess it'll have to be done.

When Niko returns with a glass of vodka, filled halfway, I take it gratefully and drink it in a single gulp. It's got a pleasant, fragrant taste, but it burns the back of my throat. Somehow, I manage not to embarrass myself by spluttering.

"You sure you're not part Russian?" Niko says with a laugh.

"Not even a little."

I jump to my feet as people trickle into the room. Damiano is the first face I recognize. He's closely followed by Lorenzo.

"Did you forget to put a dress on?" Lorenzo murmurs by way of a greeting as he leans in to kiss my cheek.

His comment pricks my insecurities about how I look, but I cover it with a haughty glare. "Don't you have a pretty restaurant owner to harass?"

My cousin scowls, but if he thinks his obsession with Lucia Lazaro is a secret, he's in for a shock. The entire world knows he wants her, and she's giving him the runaround.

Before he can snipe back at me, Piotr appears by my side. He slides a possessive arm around my waist. "Olivia."

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His eyes are dark as he glances at me with obvious disapproval. Shit. I should have gone with my gut and worn something to please him and not myself. He doesn't get the chance to voice his complaint about my appearance as we're swarmed by his business associates, all keen to meet me. Piotr makes brief introductions and I smile warmly as everyone welcomes me into the fold. Well, almost everyone.

Mila Lenkova, whose dress is even shorter than mine, slides an assessing gaze over me, declares Piotr's choice of bride interesting, and then drags her husband off to the side of the room. She lays claim to him with a kiss that would make Satan blush, not that Niko seems to mind.

Just as it looks as if the couple might have completely forgotten they have an audience, Jacques appears in the doorway. "Ladies and gentlemen, dinner is served. Please make your way to the dining room and take your allocated seats."

Evie was right. The man is a pompous ass. As Sev leads everyone out of the room and along the corridor, Piotr grabs my arm and drags me in the other direction. He opens a door and shoves me into a small room. There's a countertop with a sink in it, a washing machine and a dryer. I guess this is Sev's laundry room, though I'd bet good money he doesn't even know it exists.

"Piotr, what...?"

"Shut up, Olivia."

I bristle at the command as he spins me around and bends me over the counter. He draws my dress up and yanks my panties down with such force I hear the flimsy

fabric rip. Despite my shock at being handled so roughly, my pussy grows wetter.

Piotr spans my ass hard, the crack of his palm on my flesh impossibly loud in this small room. I gasp at the impact as he strikes me again. When his hand ricochets off my tender flesh for the third time, I squeal.

“Keep quiet!” Piotr hisses.

I clamp my lips shut as he delivers one sharp smack after another. My ass throbs, but so does my clit. I wriggle my hips, trying to ease the pain and catch hold of the pleasure that’s building. Piotr spans me twelve times in total as I writhe helplessly against the marble countertop. By the time he’s finished, I’m drenched. My clit pulsates, and I’m desperate to be fucked. How the hell has he conditioned me to this so quickly? I guess the desire to be punished was always there.

When he turns me to face him, I breathe deeply to compose myself. It’s probably futile to hope he doesn’t know how being spanked affects me.

“What was that for?” I ask, my voice steady.

“For this atrocity.” He grabs the sleeve of my dress and gives my arm a shake. “What the hell were you thinking?”

This is a pivotal moment, I realize. If I give in to him over my clothing, what other demands will he make? The dress may be over the top, but it flatters my figure and I feel good in it. Is this a hill I’m willing to die on? Yes, I think it is.

“That this is something stunning.” I flick my hair back over my shoulder. “As requested.”

Piotr stares at me for a moment, his brow furrowed and eyes narrowed. I don’t know

what he's thinking. I rarely do, but I decide to take a risk.

"It worked." I grab the collar of his crisp black shirt and tug him closer. "You're stunned."

I push up on my toes to kiss him. He's only a couple of inches taller than me when I'm in these heels, but he tilts his head back, making me chase him. As my lips capture his, he remains stubbornly rigid. I tangle my fingers in his hair and flick my tongue out to coax him to open for me. He doesn't.

"Piotr," I moan against his obstinately closed mouth. "Husband."

That jolts him into action. He curves a hand around the back of my neck and hauls me up against his taut, muscular body. He takes over the kiss, pressing his lips to mine. Our teeth and tongue clash as we fight for dominance. Piotr ultimately wins, subduing me utterly. When he's stolen almost all the breath from my lungs, he breaks the kiss, leaving me panting with need.

Cupping my aching ass, he lifts me onto the countertop. I hiss as my heated flesh meets the cold surface. Piotr kisses me again as he steps between my legs, forcing me to spread my thighs wider to accommodate him. His teeth drag across my lower lip, then he bites down until I taste the bitter tang of blood. Fuck! That hurts in the best possible way.

"Piotr, please."

"What do you want, malyskha?"

"Your cock."

"Where?"

“Where do you think?”

Piotr’s eyes light with dark desire. He likes it when I challenge him.

“Here?” he asks, running his thumb over my lips.

“Try again.” I am not getting down on my knees for him while my pussy is crying out to be filled.

“Your ass?” he asks.

I snort derisively. “Keep dreaming.”

“Oh, but I do dream, malyskha. I dream of what it will be like to fuck that tight little hole for the first time.”

I’m not sure how I feel about that. It’s something I thought would come up, but whether I decide to grant him access to that last part of me or not, one thing is for certain. It won’t be happening in the laundry room of his friend’s house.

Piotr slides a hand between my legs. “Or perhaps it’s this greedy little pussy you’d like me to take care of.” He holds his fingers up. “Look how wet you are for me, malyskha.”

“I’m drenched.” I meet his gaze and hold it as I push my hips forward. “Desperate. Just for you.”

“Fuck, Olivia.” Piotr unzips his pants and frees his impressive erection. A hundred years could pass and I wouldn’t tire of the sight, of knowing that’s all for me. “You’re so fucking...”

Whatever he was going to say is forgotten as he drives his cock into me so hard I scream. Piotr slaps a hand over my mouth. A man who doesn’t indulge in public displays of affection probably doesn’t want to share my screams with his business associates.

Something about him silencing me turns me on even more. As he pounds into me with harsh, unforgiving thrusts, my cries are muffled. With his free hand, he palms

my breast, squeezing until my eyes water. He fists my hair and pulls my head back, exposing my neck. He bites my throat, hard enough to leave marks. I grab onto his shoulders and try to hold on as he fucks me. With his hand over my mouth, I'm not getting enough air. My head gets lighter until I think I'll pass out. Strangely, it only intensifies the clenching at my core.

Just as the sensation threatens to overwhelm me, Piotr removes his hand and I gulp in air. He digs his fingers into my hips.

“Come for me, malyskha.”

He changes the angle of penetration, so he hits a sweet spot inside me and my pussy clamps down on his swelling cock. My muscles clench and then the tension is released as I come with a low, deep moan.

Piotr wraps his arms around me, and I drop my forehead to his chest. We stay like that for a moment before he gently pushes me off him.

“We'd better get you cleaned up,” he says. “Only I get to see you like this.”

I smile up at him. For once, he looks disheveled.

“As long as only I get to see you like this.”

“That I can promise you.” As he stares into my eyes, there's no doubting his sincerity. “No other women could ever compare to you, Olivia Rezanova.”

As he kisses me softly on the lips, my heart swells and a dangerous realization hits me. I'm falling for this man and I don't know the first thing about him.

CHAPTER 15

Piotr

My wife's face is exquisite. Her nose is long and straight. Her bow-shaped lips pout so prettily, and they looked incredible wrapped around my cock. What really draws me in, however, are her eyes. They're blue like the ocean and as tumultuous as any sea when she's upset. She has the longest lashes I've ever seen. Right now, they're lowered as she looks down at her tablet, reading some book.

Olivia was up remarkably early this morning. We didn't get back from Sev's apartment until well after midnight, and then I fucked her twice. The first time was over the hall table. I made her watch in the mirror as I plowed into her from behind. The second time was in our bed, where I took my time to explore every inch of her before fucking her on all fours.

She had only five hours' sleep before slipping out of bed, putting on her silk robe and coming through to the kitchen to read. Whatever she has in front of her, she's completely engrossed. She barely acknowledged me when I came in.

As I pour myself a cup of tea from the pot, she finally speaks.

"Have you ever considered piercing your tongue?"

I set down the teapot and meet her gaze across the table. "Have I ever considered piercing my tongue?"

"Yes, you know." She sticks her tongue out and waggles it at me.

Chuckling, I motion toward her tablet. I imagine the unexpected topic of conversation has something to do with her book. "What on earth are you reading?"

"It's an MC romance."

“A what?”

“A romance where one of the main characters is in an MC.” Her tone is imbued with the sort of patience people use when explaining something to a child. It makes me itch to spank her ass. “You know, a motorcycle club.”

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I barely restrain myself from pulling her over my lap for a couple of swats. “Yes, I know what an MC is.” I’ve had dealings with several of the unruly fuckers in the past, but none of them have been what you’d call romantic encounters.

“Well, the main character has a tongue piercing and a Jacob’s ladder and he knows how to use them.”

She raises her eyebrows and nods suggestively toward my crotch. Is she for real? Olivia only lost her virginity a couple of nights ago, and now she’s fantasizing about having all sorts of weird piercings rubbing against her pussy.

“Piercing is not my thing, Olivia.”

“Aw!” She pouts adorably. “But it could spice things up a bit.”

Spice things up? “We’ve only been married for two days, malyskha. If you’re bored already, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Oh, I’m not bored yet.” Olivia sets her tablet down. “But I was thinking, in years to come, things are bound to get a bit dull.”

“It will never be dull between us.” That I can be sure of. With a wife like Olivia, I’ll have no trouble keeping our sex life interesting.

“Well, you know...” She picks up her coffee cup and takes a sip. “Something to think about.”

She grins wickedly over the rim of her cup and I realize she's been trying to get a rise out of me. Little minx. Again, I get the urge to spank her ass, but I'm afraid she'll become immune if I dish out punishments for every little thing.

I pour my tea and then add a splash of milk and a spoonful of honey.

"That's not how I expected my big, bad Bratva hubby to take his tea."

My wife appears to be in a mischievous mood now that she's got her nose out of that book.

"After a comment like that, I never want to hear you call me or any of your brothers sexist again."

"Was that sexist?" Olivia muses. "I didn't say the drink was unmanly, did I?"

"It was implied."

"Maybe." She screws her nose up. "And when have I ever called you sexist?"

She doesn't deny referring to her brothers as such. Sexist pigs are one of her favorite descriptions of Antonio and Leo in particular. I consider whether she has made that accusation against me. In the past she has flung some harsh words at me, but I don't actually recall sexist being among them.

"You're in fine form this morning," I remark.

"Well, I'm on a bit of a high." She leans across the table and lowers her voice as if she's sharing some great secret. "You see, I went to a delightful dinner party last night. I met some good people, had great food, and I fucked a demigod."

“Only a demigod? I must be slipping.”

Olivia flicks her hair back in what I’ve come to realize is one of her signature moves when she wants to show confidence. “I’m trying to stop your ego from getting out of control.”

“You do it so well.” I raise my cup in a toast to her.

Olivia laughs, and then her expression sobers. She sits back in her seat, suddenly deflated.

“What’s wrong?”

“Everyone knew what we did in the laundry room.”

“And that bothers you?”

I already know the answer. When we joined the others at the dinner table last night, Olivia was quiet at first. Withering under the scrutiny of Damiano and Lorenzo, she clung to my hand under the table, seeking my support. She answered every question with monosyllabic responses until Evie Lenkova, who sat on her other side, finally drew her into conversation and helped her regain her voice.

“Yes, it bothers me. Did you see the way Mila looked at me? She was disgusted.”

Disgust is not what I saw. It was fascination. Mila studied Olivia as if she was a butterfly pinned beneath a microscope. She likes to get under a person’s skin, to see what makes them tick.

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“Mila practically mounted Niko in front of everyone. Us fucking in a cupboard isn’t something she’d care about.”

“Laundry room.” Olivia corrects me as if the venue really matters. “Maybe she didn’t care about that, but she hated me. She picked on everything I said.”

“She was trying to discover your worth.” I reach across the table and take her hand. “You impressed everyone last night, Olivia.”

I’m not saying it to make her feel better. Massaging egos isn’t my thing. When I tell her everyone was impressed, I mean it. She held her own on every topic of conversation and showed great insight when Niamh asked her about whether Gio might make a suitable husband for the Cameron girl. Olivia even suggested how they could win Antonio’s support for the idea by helping with a problem he’s been having with the Irish on one of his Midwest supply routes.

“Maybe,” she concedes.

“Why is it so important for Mila to like you, anyway?”

“It isn’t,” she denies.

I suspect my wife has a bit of a girl crush on Mila. She certainly made a bigger effort to speak to her than anyone else last night.

“Really?”

Olivia glances at the clock on the wall behind me to avoid answering. “Didn’t you say you have things to do this morning?”

I didn’t share my plans with Olivia, but she’s right. There are several important matters that require my attention, especially after last night’s meeting. I need to do my part to ensure the Albanians who’ve been messing with our business in Marseille are put in their place.

“I do.”

Olivia nods curtly, her disappointment palpable. She quickly covers it with a tight smile. “And I have a big day planned, so I’d better get ready.”

As she gets up and heads for the door, she brushes past me. I grab her arm and pull her back.

“Where’s my goodbye kiss?”

“It crawled up my ass and died along with everything I was stupid enough to wish for.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“Of course you don’t.” Olivia yanks her arm out of my grip. She leans down, getting right in my face. “If you want me to be a good little wife who kisses her husband goodbye and welcomes him home with open arms, then act like a husband and not some asshole who fucks me, then puts me back in my box.”

I’m so stunned by the vitriol in her voice, I don’t react. Olivia storms off and a few seconds later, the bedroom door slams shut. I wouldn’t be surprised if she took it off the hinges. Fuck, my wife is magnificent. I don’t know what’s got into her, but as I

wonder what to do about the raging boner she's left me with, I realize something. This woman's going to be the death of me. What a sweet way to go.

CHAPTER 16

Olivia

There's a sign not ten feet from me declaring the grass in this park off limits, but I don't give a single shit. This is where I want to eat my picnic and if someone wants to arrest me for it, good luck to them because I am not in the mood to go quietly. I've been here for thirty minutes so far, soaking up the sun and enjoying my charcuterie. Nobody has challenged me. With Jimmy, Marko, and Vlad standing guard, they wouldn't dare.

As I'm relishing my third slice of thick-cut garlic sausage, I spot a familiar figure striding along the path toward me. There's no need to ask myself how Piotr found me. I've sent him regular updates on my activities throughout the morning, and I'm sure he can track the Range Rover Vlad has been driving us about in.

I can't help noticing he's changed his clothes. At breakfast he wore his signature black pants and black shirt, sleeves rolled up to his forearms. Now he's in jeans, still black of course, and a white t-shirt. Dark sunglasses shield his eyes from the glaring brightness. Damn, he looks hot. I don't think I've ever seen him dressed so casually.

I tense as he steps over the short metal fence blocking off the grassy area and comes toward me. Shit. I've eaten a ton of strong-smelling food. My breath is going to stink. I hold my hand in front of my mouth and breathe out. Yuck! It's a good thing I wasn't planning to kiss him, I suppose.

"Can you not read French?" Piotr asks as he walks up to me.

“I know whatinterditmeans.” I flick my hair back over my shoulder. “But I chose to ignore it.”

He snorts in what I think is amusement as he hovers over me. I don’t get up, even though I feel incredibly small and vulnerable right now.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as he sinks to the ground with irritating grace and stretches his legs out on my picnic blanket.

“Thought I’d give the husband thing a go, since it means so much to you.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” I mutter.

I pick up the wooden knife the deli supplied me with and aggressively smear brie on a beetroot cracker. I pop it in my mouth and experience instant regret. That is not a combination I enjoy. I swallow it anyway because I’m damned if I’m spitting food out in front of Piotr.

“It’s not a favor.” Piotr steals one of my grapes and eats it. “My wife deserves some of my time and I want to give it to her.”

“And that makes you think you deserve to share my lunch?” I ask as he helps himself to some of the incredible ham from the platter. Having grown up with five brothers, I’m a bit territorial with food and there’s only enough here for one person. I wasn’t expecting him, and my bodyguards ate cheeseburgers in the car like a bunch of heathens before we hit the deli. I swear, if Piotr tries to eat my chocolate éclair, I’ll ram this wooden knife through his heart.

He sticks out his bottom lip in a futile attempt to look sad. “You wouldn’t want me to starve.”

“No, that would be a terrible way to die.” I grin as wicked thoughts run through my mind. “I wouldn’t object to you getting run over by a bus, though.”

Piotr sighs. “You’re still angry with me.”

I shake my head. “Not really. It’s just, there’s something about you that makes me want to say mean things.”

“It’s desire. You want me, but don’t know how to express it yet, so you try to provoke me.”

Though he’s hit the nail on the head, I don’t acknowledge it. Instead, I throw my head back and laugh.

“You’re impossible to stay mad at, Mr. Reznov.”

“It’s my boyish charm.” He takes a piece of garlic sausage and eats it. That probably cancels out the effect of my stinky breath, but I’m still not sure I want him to kiss me.

“You don’t possess any charm, boyish or otherwise.”

It’s a lie. Despite his reputation for coldness, Piotr does have endearing qualities. He’s shown me a playful side that few people get to witness. I guess that alone should make me feel special.

“So, what was wrong this morning?” Piotr asks, surprising me. I didn’t think he’d care.

“I was feeling neglected.” That’s as much as I’ll admit. I’m not going to tell him I have hopes he’ll fall in love with me one day. At some point in my life, I want someone to cherish me and since I’m now married to Piotr, it’s going to have to be him.

I’ve always wanted someone to lavish affection on me. My mother isn’t a terrible parent, but she values her sons more than me. Antonio, as the oldest, has always been special in her eyes, and Alessandro is her clear favorite. I come at the bottom of her list. My father never had time for me either. He was busy ensuring his boys would grow up to be men he could be proud of. Though he called me his princess and lavished gifts upon me, he never once tucked me in at night or attended one of my

dance recitals.

Matteo and Jimmy are the people I've been closest to, but my brother has a new wife to focus on and my bodyguard, well, I know one day he'll get sick of this life and move on. Besides, it's not the same. As sweet as Jimmy can be sometimes, he doesn't love me the way someone like Piotr could.

"I'm a busy man," Piotr says, as if this is news to me. "But I'll give you as much time as I can."

Reaching over, he cups my cheek and caresses my face with his thumb. I can't hold in my surprise. "Huh!"

"What's that for?" he asks.

"I thought you didn't like public displays of affection."

"I don't dislike them. It's nice to feel connected sometimes."

"Physically, you mean?"

"Sure, and on a deeper level, too."

"You mean emotions? I didn't know you felt them." I never thought he was a sociopath, in the strictest sense of the word, but he is known for his ice-cold demeanor.

"Of course I do. Anger, lust, hatred, love. I feel them. I just don't show my hand very often."

"Okay, I get that, but it's hard not knowing how you feel about me."

“I like you, Olivia. I want to possess every part of you. Protecting you from the world and even from yourself is the most important task on my mind.” He steals another grape. “But if you’re asking if I love you, then my answer is no. We’ve only been married for two days.”

“Most people fall in love before they get married.”

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“Do they?” Piotr speaks as if the notion is absurd.

I shake my head in disbelief and decide to steer the conversation toward safer waters.

“So, how was your morning?”

“Good. I sent some trusted envoys to help deal with a transport problem and I signed a deal to buy a plot of land in central London.”

“Is there land to buy in central London?” I ask, scowling as Piotr grabs a cube of cheese, his hand perilously close to the paper bag that contains my chocolate éclair.

“Yes, but it’s hard to find and very expensive.”

“I’m sure you got a good deal.”

Piotr flashes a shark-like grin. It’s deeply unsettling.

“After some negotiation, yes.”

“I know little about your business.” I drink some champagne from the half bottle I bought at the deli. Public drinking makes me feel naughty, but to hell with it. This is Paris and the rules are different here. “I know little about you.”

He spreads his arms out like he’s an open book. “What do you want to know?”

“Well, for a start, your age.”

“How old do you think I am?”

I am not playing a guessing game with him. “Somewhere on the right side of sixty.”

“I’m twenty-eight.”

“Young to be a Pakhan.”

Piotr shrugs. “Daniil Lenkov was in his early twenties when he formed his own organization. What else do you want to know?”

“When your birthday is.”

“October seventh.”

Does he possess typical Libran qualities? Perhaps. He does have an eye for beauty. He married me, after all.

“Mine is July twenty-sixth.”

“A few weeks away.” Piotr smiles. “You’ll be twenty-one, right?”

“Yes.” I shouldn’t be so pleased he knows how old I’ll be. It’s the bare minimum of information a couple should have about each other. “Where were you born?”

“Moscow, but I left there when I was three. I was raised in New York and London by my grandmother and Uncle Boris. I dropped out of an economics degree at Cambridge after six months to help my uncle win a war against the Irish.”

“You went to Cambridge?”

He quirks an eyebrow in response to my obvious incredulity. “Did you think I was all looks and no brain?”

I roll my eyes. “No, I thought you were all modesty and humility.”

“Those words are not in my vocabulary, nor do I think they’re in yours. You aren’t afraid to flaunt your beauty.”

I’ve been lauded for my physical attributes my entire life, so he’s right that I’m not shy about how I look. My issue is trying to show people I also have a brain. I wonder if there was a touch of judgment in Piotr’s tone just then.

“Are we back to that bullshit about my dress?”

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“I was wrong about that. You should wear what makes you happy, within reason.”

Wearing a garbage bag would make me happy if I was standing next to a man who loved me. Ugh! Why am I so needy? Hoping a man will fall for me has only led to trouble in the past. That asshole Dario wanders into my thoughts, but I swiftly kick him out again.

“So, what’s on the agenda for this afternoon?” I assume Piotr dropping by to see me is a mere interlude in his day.

“We can do whatever you want.”

We?He intends to spend the afternoon with me. He was serious about trying to be a husband.

“Uh, well, I was thinking of visiting the Louvre, but the line was insane when we passed by earlier.”

Piotr shakes his head and tuts reproachfully. “Olivia, you were a Volante. You’re now a Reznov. A woman of your status does not wait in line.”

I grimace. “It’s obnoxious to cut the line.” I mean, I’ve done it at clubs and restaurants back home, but it seems rude to do it in a foreign country.

Rolling his eyes, Piotr gets out his phone and lifts it to his ear.

“Sev, are you still in touch with Minette at the Louvre? Yeah. I want a private tour

tonight at seven-thirty. Perfect.” He ends the call and puts his phone back in the pocket of his jeans.

“Do you always speak to your friend like he’s a servant?”

Piotr shrugs lazily. “He isn’t some wilting flower, malyskha. He doesn’t care how I talk to him.”

“I’ll bet he does. Even Bratva assholes have feelings.”

“You thought I didn’t.”

“True, but Sev is... uh... he seems like he has a sensitive side.” I spoke to him last night about his art collection. He said the paintings reminded him of some woman I’m pretty sure he’s pining for.

“Does he?” Piotr sounds unconvinced. “Should I send him flowers to apologize for my tone?”

“If anyone needs flowers from you, it’s me.”

“Who needs flowers when I’ve organized a private tour of the Louvre? I assume you heard that while analyzing my tone.”

“Yes, I did, and I’m looking forward to it, so thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So what are we going to do until seven-thirty?”

“Well, first we’re going to split that éclair you’ve been hoping I didn’t notice. Then

I'm going to take you back to the apartment, tie you to the bed, and fuck your beautiful ass."

"Didn't you say this afternoon was about what I wanted to do?"

"I did," Piotr concedes. "Do you have a better suggestion?"

I try to come up with something, but my mind draws a blank. As much as I dread the idea of him taking that last piece of me, a part of me really wants to give it to him.

"Nope," I say resolutely. "There's nothing I'd rather do."

CHAPTER 17

Olivia

When Piotr said he would tie me to the bed, I thought he would improvise, using whatever came to hand, like his belt or something. Instead, he's come prepared with wide leather cuffs in a pretty shade of rose gold. They have shiny clips for them to be attached to something. I don't know what he'll fasten them to. Perhaps they clip together.

"Did you just have those lying around?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood, which has become unbearably intense.

“No, I bought these for you.”

Piotr’s tone has taken on an edge of darkness. He was playful in the car as we headed back to the apartment after leaving my security team at the park. Despite his driver sitting up front, Piotr lavished affection on me, peppering me with sweet kisses and twirling my hair around his finger. His demeanor changed the minute we entered the bedroom. He let go of my hand, which he’d been holding tightly, and ordered me to strip. I haven’t fully obeyed the command yet. I’d only just taken off my sneakers and socks when Piotr distracted me with the cuffs he produced from a drawer in the nightstand.

“Oh, okay.”

It’s good he hasn’t used them on a dozen other women before me, I suppose, but it makes me wonder if his suggestion at the park was as spontaneous as it seemed. I thought he just wanted to have a bit of fun, but knowing he had shackles at the ready puts a new complexion on things. Suddenly, the idea of letting him tie me up and take the last piece of my innocence is a lot scarier.

“Didn’t I give you an instruction?” His voice is calm, but not in a reassuring way. It makes me shudder with dread.

“Uh, yes.”

“So, why are you not carrying it out?” Piotr steps closer and cups my cheek with his palm. I can’t resist leaning into his touch. “Don’t you want to show me what a good girl you are? Don’t you want to give me your obedience?”

“I didn’t vow to obey you.”

Piotr smiles tightly. “Ah, we’re back to your little rebellion at the altar. You know, I’ve wondered how you could refuse to obey me, yet promise me your love.”

“Well, love comes in different forms. I thought one day I might develop a fondness for you, like I would for a pet.”

“Hmm,” he muses. “The problem for me, Olivia, is that I don’t require your love in any form. What I require is your obedience when we’re in the bedroom.”

“Only in the bedroom?” I don’t like that he called me Olivia. He does it to keep some distance between us. When he’s pleased with me or seeking closeness, he calls memalyskha.

“And wherever else I choose to fuck you. Is that an issue?”

I consider that for a moment and decide it isn’t a problem. Obeying when we’re in an intimate setting doesn’t bother me. I like his dominance. Something about the way he takes charge makes me feel safe. Perhaps it’s because I’m less experienced than he is, and I’m afraid I’m going to embarrass myself by doing the wrong thing.

“No, it’s not an issue.”

“And yet you thought you could ignore my command to remove your clothes.”

I don’t point out that I had, in fact, hurried to do as he asked before I got sidetracked.

“Is that why you’re so angry?”

Piotr shakes his head as if my question shocked him. “You think I’m angry?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No, but I am disappointed you still haven’t done as you were told.” He blows out a breath as my bottom lip wobbles. I crave his approval so badly I could cry. “Olivia, I thought you understood the sort of man I am. While I might give you a lot of leeway in where you go and what you do, with your personal safety and our sex life, I require control.”

“Okay, I understand. It’s just you were so sweet to me in the car, but since we got back here you’ve been different with me, colder. I thought I’d done something wrong. You called me Olivia.”

Piotr furrows his brow. “It’s your name.”

“But you call memalyskha when you like me better.”

“I think you’re overanalyzing things, malyskha.” He emphasizes the endearment. “When we’re alone like this, you don’t need to read into everything I say or do. Just obey my instructions and trust me to take care of you.”

Maybe I am thinking about this too much. It’s just all so new to me. I was a virgin a mere twenty-four hours ago and now we’re talking about doing anal. Although I had some experience with a man before Piotr and I got married, it didn’t prepare me for this. Am I ready to put myself in Piotr’s hands? I think about it for a moment and decide I am.

“Okay, I can do that.”

“Good girl.” Piotr’s praise warms me. “Now, take off your clothes and place them neatly on the chair.”

Under his searing gaze, I pull my floral silk blouse off over my head. I reach behind me to unhook my lacy bra and quickly slip it off. I turn and walk across the room to set both garments down carefully on the chair in the corner of the room before going to work on my jeans. Keeping my back to Piotr, I unfasten the button and lower my zipper. I shimmy out of my jeans and fold them, placing them with my other clothes before taking off my panties and dropping them on the top of the pile.

“So beautiful,” Piotr says as I turn to face him. “And every inch of you belongs to me.”

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The possessiveness in his voice makes my thighs clench. The thought of being owned by him, by any man, shouldn't thrill me, but it does.

“Yes, Piotr, I'm yours.”

His eyes gleam with delight. He probably expected me to argue.

“Get on the bed, malyskha. I want you on your back.”

Brushing past Piotr, I walk to the bed and climb up onto it. I lie down with my head on the pillow, but I can't get comfortable. Staring up at the ceiling, I try to calm my swirling thoughts. Self-consciousness grips me as Piotr's eyes trail slowly over every inch of my body. I can't help squirming.

“Easy, malyskha,” he murmurs, as if soothing a wild animal.

He gets up onto the bed and straddles my legs. With his knees at either side of my thighs, he's got me trapped. Why do I like that so much?

He grabs my right arm and wraps one of the leather cuffs around my wrist, fastening so it fits snugly. He doesn't ask me how it feels, just runs his finger between the leather and my skin to make sure it's not too tight. Then he draws my arm up and to the side to secure the clip on the cuff to a brass ring on the bed. I frown. Was that there earlier? I didn't notice, but it must have been. Piotr couldn't possibly have had that installed while I was out this morning.

Oh, who am I kidding? This is Piotr Reznov. He only has to click his fingers to get

whatever he wants done. If he decided to turn the guest bedroom into a sex dungeon, he'd have done it, even if this is someone else's apartment.

"You're overthinking again," Piotr scolds me. "Just relax."

I scoff at that. "There's nothing like being told off to help a person to relax."

Piotr's eyes narrow. "Do you need me to thrash your ass before I claim it?"

Would that calm my raging nerves? No, I don't think so. This is going to be strange enough for me without enduring the conflicting emotions a spanking sparks inside me, too.

"No." I'm unable to banish the petulance from my voice. "Sorry."

Piotr chuckles. "You could attempt to sound convincing."

I bite back another retort as he binds my other wrist and attaches it to another hook on the headboard, so my arms are spread wide. Piotr lifts my head and steals the pillow, tossing it to the floor. Then he grabs my hips and drags me further down the bed until my arms are stretched taut.

"Sadist!" I grumble.

"Pray you never see my sadistic side," Piotr says darkly as he gets off the bed.

His eyes fix on mine and don't release me for even a second as he strips off his clothes to reveal his incredibly toned body. His cock is jutting out proudly. Knowing he's so eager for me gives me a thrill, but I'm still apprehensive.

Piotr gets onto the bed, shoves my legs apart and kneels between them.

“For what I intend to do to you I don’t want your legs tied down, but if you fight me or hesitate to obey my commands again, I won’t hesitate to chain you to the bed, plug your ass, and whip you until you learn to behave.”

There’s no smart comeback for a threat like that, so I keep my mouth shut. I need to trust that Piotr won’t hurt me and show him I can follow instructions without smart-mouthing him at every turn.

I’m rewarded for my silence a moment later when Piotr lowers himself to kiss me. It’s soft and surprisingly tender, an almost loving gesture. He slides his tongue over mine, but there’s no battle for dominance here. He takes a moment to tease me and then pulls back. Staring deep into my eyes, he caresses my cheek, before moving lower.

When his lips skim over the sensitive flesh of my breast, I moan. Despite the stretch in my arms restricting my movement, I arch upward to get closer to his warm lips. He pushes me back down with a hand on my chest as he takes my nipple into his mouth. With a firm pressure, he sucks until a tight peak forms. My mouth falls open on a groan as his lips move away, but he quickly lavishes attention on my other breast.

Just as I think I might come from this alone, he moves. He trails kisses down my abdomen and I wriggle restlessly.

“Patience, Olivia.”

When he gets to the apex of my thighs, he looks up at me.

“Already soaked, malyskha. Is that all for me?”

There’s no point denying it. “Yes.”

“Such a lovely gift.”

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He licks slowly along my feminine seam. I pant desperately as the pressure inside me grows. Piotr's in no hurry to give me the release I desire.

"Please," I beg as he brings me to the edge.

"Since you asked so nicely."

Piotr shoves two fingers inside me while his lips wrap around the throbbing bud of my clitoris.

"Oh, my god!" I squeal as he adds a third finger and pushes them deep.

Never easing the insistent pressure on my clit, he fucks me with his fingers until I feel as if I'm about to explode. My head thrashes from side to side and I buck my hips. Fluid gushes from me and I go still, overcome with mortification. As Piotr sits up, his lips are wet, and he's grinning triumphantly.

"I am so sorry." My cheeks heat as embarrassment washes over me. "I didn't mean to."

Piotr cocks an eyebrow. "What do you think you did, malyskha?"

"I, uh..." Did he not notice? "I peed."

"You squirted," Piotr says. "And it was incredible."

"Oh, okay." I'm going to have to look that up later because, as incredible as it felt, I

didn't know my body would do that in the throes of passion.

Piotr, thankfully, doesn't dwell on my moment of naivety. He reaches over me to the nightstand, his upper body hovering above me. I can't resist stretching up and nipping his chest with my teeth. I guess I bite a little harder than I meant to, because Piotr jerks back in surprise.

"Careful, malyskha." His warning holds no malice. "I might repay you in kind."

"A girl can dream."

Piotr grins as he retrieves a bottle of lube from the drawer in the nightstand. He really was prepared for this moment. Sitting back, he uncaps the bottle and pours some transparent gel into his hand. He strokes his cock firmly, coating it thoroughly.

"Put your legs on my shoulders."

His command surprises me. I thought I'd be on all fours for this.

Piotr seems to read my mind. "I want to watch you as I claim your ass."

He helps me to get my legs in the right position. I flinch as he smears some of the cool gel over my rear opening and pushes a finger inside. It feels okay until he adds another finger. Then my body tells me to resist.

"Be calm, Olivia," he says in that soothing tone he used before.

He scissors his fingers, stretching me. To my surprise, the sensation is quite pleasurable. My pussy clenches. Piotr smirks knowingly and withdraws his fingers. He positions his cock at my rear entrance, and I can't help but tense up. His cock is larger than his fingers.

“Relax, malyskha. I’ll take it nice and slow.”

While I urged him to just get it over with when he took my virginity, I appreciate he intends to be careful now. I’m not sure I’m ready for this, but as he pushes the tip inside me, we’re past the point of no return. My fists clench and I blow out a harsh breath as his cock breaches the tight ring of muscles inside me.

“Good girl,” Piotr says. “You’re doing so well.”

I breathe slow and steady until he’s all the way in. He pauses for a moment, letting me get used to this strange invasion before withdrawing and thrusting back in.

“Look how your tight little ass welcomes my cock.” There’s no denying the note of victory in his voice. “Every part of you is mine now.”

As the tension drains from my shoulders, Piotr fucks me harder. His balls slap off my ass, the sound of flesh meeting flesh filling the air. I feel so stretched and yet there’s something missing.

“Piotr, I need...”

I don’t know what I’m asking for, but my husband does. “Is your poor pussy feeling neglected?”

Propping himself up on one hand, he uses the other to tease my clit. He presses his thumb down on the swollen nub as he pushes two fingers inside me. As pleasure jolts through me, he leans over and bites my breast, repaying me for the nip I gave him. I cry out as agony and ecstasy clash.

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“Come for me, Olivia. Come for me as I ravage your ass.”

Fuck. Nobody has ever spoken to me that way. Something inside me explodes. I jerk violently against Piotr as his seed spills inside me. My pussy clamps down on his fingers and I cry out as I’m thrown into a whirlpool of sheer bliss. I’m still shuddering as Piotr reaches up to free me from my restraints.

“You did well, sweetheart.” He eases my legs off his shoulders and clambers off the bed.

I’m about to protest about him leaving me when he bends to lift me into his arms. He carries me into the bathroom and carefully sets me down on the floor. I wince as I straighten my legs.

“Sore?” Piotr asks.

“A bit.”

He steps into the shower and turns the water on. Steam quickly fogs up the glass panels surrounding the shower. Piotr holds a hand out to me.

“Come, malyskha. Let me take care of you.”

I don’t hesitate. I take his hand and squeal as he pulls me into the warm water. As he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me close, his erection pokes into my stomach. It seems my husband is ready for round two.

CHAPTER 18

Piotr

Olivia lets out the most adorable shriek as I pull her into the shower with me. I switch our positions so she's directly under the stream of warm water. I don't want her to get cold. Closing her eyes, she tips her head back, exposing her long, slender neck as she wets her hair. Fuck, I want to mark her perfect skin.

It's only a minute since I fucked her gorgeous ass, but I'm already hard for her again. As I press against her, letting her know the effect she has on me, she gives me a timid smile. I enjoy these glimpses of her softer side. From the moment I saw those photos of her, I knew there was more to this woman than the spoiled princess the world sees. I never expected her to show me hints of vulnerability so soon. I thought it would take months of building trust before she let her guard down. The mix of sassiness and shyness intrigues me.

"Can I touch you?" Olivia sinks her teeth into her bottom lip as she gazes up at me with wide, innocent eyes.

"Of course. I'm yours as much as you are mine."

Her eyes flash with surprise. "You are?"

How does she not know this? "Yes. There will never be another woman for me."

"Oh." She splays her hand across my chest and slides it slowly down my abdomen. Her touch is soft. Her fingers glide over my skin as she takes time to explore my muscles before she reaches my cock. With the backs of her fingers, she strokes me almost reverently.

“The skin is like velvet, but this vein is...” She shakes her head and laughs. “You know what it feels like.”

“I do, but I want to hear what you think.”

Olivia wraps her fingers around my length. “It feels long, thick.” She pumps her hand up and down twice. “It feels powerful.” She bends to lick the head of my cock. I groan as she dips her tongue into the slit. Olivia straightens to look me straight in the eye. “It feels like heaven when it’s inside me.”

Fuck! That’s it.

Spinning her around, I pull her back against me and band an arm around her chest to hold her in place. I slide my hand down her front.

“Tell me what I feel like,” Olivia commands.

“Your skin is soft. Your breasts are the perfect size.” I slip my hand between her legs. “The skin on your thighs is like silk. And your pussy.” I shove two fingers into her. “When I’m inside it I feel like I’m whole.”

Olivia’s head drops back against my shoulder. Her mouth forms an O as I fuck her with my fingers. She whimpers as I press the heel of my hand against her clit.

“Too much?” I ask.

“Not enough.” Her words come out in a breathless rush. “I want you inside me.”

I could never deny my wife. Pulling my fingers out of her, I push on her shoulders to force her to bend. She grabs onto the handrail that the previous tenant of the apartment installed. I kick her feet farther apart.

“Hold on tight.” It’s the only warning I give her before putting my hands on her hips and impaling her on my cock.

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“Fuck, Piotr!” she shrieks as I fuck her with an intensity she hasn’t experienced yet.

I rut into her like a wild animal. My cock drives deeper with each thrust, and I know I won’t last. Pulling her up so her back is flush against my chest, I wrap my arm around her waist and pound into her hot little pussy. Squeezing her breast hard, I pinch her nipple. Olivia whines and writhes against me, but I don’t let up. As warm water cascades over us, I kiss her neck, then suck until I’m sure I’ve left a mark.

“Piotr!” Olivia’s tight channel squeezes around me and I can’t hold back any longer. My balls draw up tight and my cock swells. I pull out of her and my cum splatters across her thighs.

Breathing harshly, I drop my head to Olivia’s shoulder and hold her as she quivers with the aftershocks of her orgasm. A few seconds pass before Olivia wriggles out of my embrace. She peers up at me from beneath her thick eyelashes, blinking as water gets in her eyes. I cup her cheek with my hand, and she leans into me, seeking reassurance.

“That was incredible, malyskha.”

“Yes, it was.” She doesn’t sound like she means it.

“Wasn’t it good for you?” I ask.

“It was amazing. It’s just, well... do you think I’m a slut?”

I don’t know where that’s coming from. Is she still thinking about the message she

got at the wedding?

“Why would I think you’re a slut?”

“Well, I’ve let you fuck me on a plane, in a laundry room, in the shower.” She drops her gaze to the floor. “That all seems pretty slutty to me.”

“Is this a Catholic thing?”

Olivia scoffs. “I haven’t set foot in church for anything but a wedding or a funeral since I was eight years old.” She purses her lips.

“Then it’s your brothers to blame.”

“You think?”

“They chastise you for every little thing they think you’ve done wrong. They kept boys at arm’s length. It’s given you a fear of exploring your desires.”

Olivia contemplates that for a moment, then nods. “You know just how to make me feel better. Of course it’s my brothers’ fault I have these doubts about myself. Everything’s their fault.”

“You want me to beat them up for you?”

Olivia laughs. “I wouldn’t ask you to do that. Well, unless you want to punch Leo. He’s a dick.”

“Leo’s the worst of them?”

“He’d die for me just like the rest of them would, but he’d use his last breath to tell

me my skirt was too short.”

I laugh, but make a note to tell Leo to watch how he speaks to my wife in the future. Olivia turns her back on me and grabs the shampoo. She washes her hair and then lathers shower gel over her whole body. I also wash and we step out of the shower together. There are two fluffy white robes hanging on the back of the bathroom door. The housekeeper must have left them there for us. I hold one out for Olivia and she slips her arms into the sleeves. She ties the belt around her waist and heads back into the bedroom. I put on my robe and follow her.

She picks up her purse and takes out her cellphone. I sit on the bed. Olivia fiddles about with her phone for a couple of minutes, presumably answering messages.

“Come sit with me,” I say as she puts her phone away. “We still have a while before we have to get ready for our tour of the Louvre.”

“You want to snuggle?” she asks as I open my arms for her to clamber onto my lap.

“Yeah, but don’t tell anyone. I wouldn’t want to wreck my ice prince persona.”

Olivia settles against my chest, and I enjoy our closeness. This isn’t something I craved until I set my sights on her. Now I think I could develop a real cuddling habit. I stroke her hair and her breathing gets deeper. I think she’s asleep until she speaks.

“We haven’t talked about kids.”

The topic shouldn’t surprise me considering we’re newly married, but I still find myself entirely unprepared.

“Aren’t you on the pill?” I know she is because I saw a full medical report on her before we married, not that I’ll ever tell her that.

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“I am, but I need to know if I should keep taking it.”

My instinct is to tell her yes, but I want to know her thoughts on the matter.

“Do you want a baby?”

Olivia shrugs. “It would give me something to do.”

I push her away gently so I can see her face. I need to know what she’s thinking. Fatherhood isn’t something that will come naturally to me, but even I know you don’t have kids to pass the time.

“A baby’s a commitment, not a hobby.”

“I know that. It’s just that I’m...”

“Bored,” I fill in for her. This is something I knew would be an issue at some point. I just didn’t expect it to arise so soon.

“I’m not bored now, not while we’re here like this, but when we go back to New York.” She pauses and frowns. “Will we go back to New York?”

“Of course.” It’s where my primary residence is and my uncle’s business concerns are largely based in the city. “We’ll also come to Europe often.”

“Okay, so once the honeymoon is over, you’ll have wheeling and dealing and torturing your enemies to keep occupied. What will I have? Shopping, dinner parties,

and more shopping.”

“You have four sisters-in-law.”

“They’re all busy with their own projects. My friends are all working or traveling. Even Alessia has college.”

“You want to go to college?” It could be a nightmare for security, but I’m not opposed to the idea.

Olivia shakes her head. “I want to run my own business. I’ve been thinking about it for a while now.”

“Have you worked up a business proposal?”

“Not yet. I didn’t know if it would be worth putting all that effort in if I was going to end up married to some sexist asshole who wants his wife to stay home and warm his bed.”

“Do you think I’m going to demand you do that?”

“No, I don’t, but I don’t know you well enough to be sure.”

“If you want to stay home and warm my bed, I’ll be happy.” I put a finger beneath her chin and force her to look at me as she scowls and tries to turn away. “If you want to run your own business, I’ll be happy with that, too.”

“And what about having kids?”

“I’d like a couple, but to be honest, right now isn’t the best time. My uncle only just named me Pakhan. I don’t expect a rebellion over it, but you never know.”

Olivia nods as if she understands the problems I could face. I suppose she saw it all when Antonio took his place as head of their family. There was a lot of bloodshed as he established control.

“Okay, so I can go ahead and put together a business plan.”

“Yes.” I stroke her arm. “And when you’re ready, I’d like you to show it to me. If the numbers look good, I’ll be your first investor.”

A smile spreads across Olivia’s face that warms me to the core. Fuck, seeing her happy is the best feeling in the world. This woman is fast becoming everything I never even knew I wanted.

CHAPTER 19

Olivia

I can think of a million ways I’d rather spend my afternoon than having tea with my mother. Piotr and his uncle are supposed to be here with us, but I arrived a half hour ago and there’s no sign of them yet. My mother has gone all out. The table is laid with our finest china. There’s a fancy cake stand with delicate finger sandwiches and the most incredible looking pastries that she won’t allow me to touch until the men get here.

Sighing heavily to signal my displeasure at being made to wait, I look out over the garden. It’s pretty at this time of year with the flowers in full bloom, but I can’t help wishing I was back in Paris. Piotr and I spent ten days longer in the city than he originally intended. Although we had a couple of dinners with his business associates, most of the time it was like we were in our own blissful bubble, shielded from the real world.

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It was incredible to wake up next to Piotr each morning. Though he had to work, he didn't leave until we'd had breakfast together and he took an hour for lunch to spend with me each day. I spent the rest of my time exploring the city with Jimmy, Marko, and Vlad by my side. The Russians turned out to be surprisingly good company. Marko was knowledgeable about history, and Vlad knew all the best places to eat. I was sorry to leave them behind in Paris, but they work for Sev, not Piotr.

Everything changed when Piotr and I got back to New York. He's been working eighteen-hour days, coming home to fuck me, and then falling asleep. He's always gone before I wake. I hate rattling around in his enormous apartment on my own. It doesn't have the charm of Sev's place in Paris. The views are horrendous. All I can see are other apartment blocks. Piotr told me I can start looking for a new place, but I don't want to house hunt without him.

"You're very distracted," my mother says, cutting into my thoughts.

"Just thinking about Paris."

"Are you sure that's it? There's nothing you want to tell me?"

"Like what?"

I follow her pointed gaze to where my hand is resting on my stomach. I roll my eyes. Is she seriously asking if I'm pregnant?

"Mama, I've been married for two weeks. It would be too early to tell."

“I thought perhaps something happened between you and Piotr when you were in Florence.”

She makes it sound as if we’d gone there together on some romantic trip when, in fact, he followed me over there when Antonio banished me. I shake my head despairingly.

“You know I didn’t want to marry Piotr, but you still think I was fucking him in Italy?”

“Don’t be so vulgar, Olivia.” My mother picks an imaginary piece of fluff off her cardigan. “And I thought you were stringing the poor boy along, making him work to win your hand.”

I don’t set her straight. My mother rewrites history to suit her own romantic visions. It’s why she’s never taken my brothers to task for the ways they won their wives.

“Regardless, there is no baby on the way and there won’t be for some time. I plan to start a business.”

“Olivia!” She reacts as if I announced my intention to burn down a nunnery. “You can’t be serious.”

“Why not? Emilia runs a hotel, and Giulia and Vinnie both run their own charities.”

“Yes, but that’s not what I raised my daughter to do.”

That’s true. She concentrated all her efforts on teaching me to catch the eye of a powerful man and bend over backward to make him happy.

“It’s what I want to do.”

My mother purses her lips. “What do you know about running a business?”

“As much as I know about having a baby.”

“But having a baby is natural.”

My mother may only be in her early fifties, but her mindset is that of a much older woman. She speaks as if the sexual revolution never happened. I suppose in our world it didn't. Infact, the attitudes of the people around me seem firmly rooted in the distant past.

“Just drop it, Mamma,” I snap just as Piotr and Boris come into the room.

Boris looks smart in a dark brown suit with a beige vest and a patterned tie. Piotr is dressed in his usual black ensemble. He bends to kiss my cheek before taking the seat to my right while Boris greets my mother and sits next to her.

“Tell me you don't approve of Olivia's nonsense.” Rather than dropping the subject, my mother tries to recruit Piotr to her side. “Tell me you're not putting off starting a family so Olivia can play at running a business.”

Her condescending tone has me gritting my teeth.

“What's this?” Boris looks at Piotr rather than me. “What business?”

Piotr smiles placidly. “Perhaps you would like to tell my uncle about it, malyskha?”

He might simply be giving me the lead because I haven't shared details with him yet, but I choose to believe he's trying to empower me.

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“Well, I want to start my own line of bath and spa products. You know, soaps, shampoos, oils, lotions.”

Boris frowns. “That’s a very crowded market.”

“Yes, but I was thinking I could start by supplying a few hotels. They could use my products in their spas and in their guest rooms. If people like them, they could buy some to take home with them.”

“You have hotels lined up?” Boris asks.

“She’ll start with the Reznov hotels here in the States,” Piotr says, surprising me. “And you thought you might approach Emilia about her hotel, didn’t you, malyskha?”

“Uh, yes.” I smile at Piotr, hoping he knows how much I appreciate him jumping in. If he hadn’t, I’d have been forced to admit to Boris that I hadn’t worked up the courage to ask my husband for his help yet. “I’ve also found suppliers for the raw materials and I’m looking into suitable manufacturers.”

My mother huffs out a breath. “And you’re okay with this, Piotr?”

“What my wife does with her time is her concern, but I am happy she’s pursuing her interests.”

Boris smiles, but it’s patronizing. “It’s good to support your wife’s little hobbies.”

I bristle with outrage, but Piotr squeezes my hand in warning.

“I’m sure if Olivia sets her mind to it, she’ll become a major player in the industry. After all, she’s as accomplished as your other children, isn’t she, Ava? I am right in thinking she has a higher GPA than her siblings and that she won many awards for dance and cheerleading as well as representing her school in regional math competitions?”

Right now, I don’t care how he knows all that when I didn’t tell him. I’m almost pathetically grateful to have someone standing up for me for a change. Even Matteo wouldn’t set my mother straight like Piotr is doing.

“That’s all very well,” Boris says. “But dance and cheerleading are hardly a good foundation for running a business.”

The corner of Piotr’s mouth twitches. I get the feeling he’s not just trying to put my mother in his place, but to remind Boris of his, now that he’s stepped aside from the Reznov organization.

“On the contrary, Dyadya,” Piotr says smoothly. “Her achievements show her commitment and work ethic. I support her plans wholeheartedly.”

Boris nods approvingly, seeming to accept that Piotr means what he says and that his word is now law. If I didn’t know it would give my mother a heart attack, I would climb onto my husband’s lap and kiss him senseless.

“Now, shall we have some tea?” Piotr suggests. “It’s been a busy day and I haven’t had time for lunch.”

“Oh.” My mother looks flustered. It’s not like her to fail in her duty as hostess. “Of course. Please, help yourself to some sandwiches.”

Piotr releases my hand to fill a plate. As he places it in front of me, I can’t help

leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

“I love you,” I whisper, the words coming out before I can stop them.

Piotr raises his eyebrows in mild surprise, but says nothing. Feeling awkward, I nibble on a smoked salmon sandwich while my mother pours everyone’s tea. I don’t even like the drink, but I don’t complain.

“Ava,” Boris says. “Why don’t you tell Olivia the plans for her birthday?”

Shit. I forgot I told her to arrange a gathering. She was bugging me months ago about doing a family dinner and I did what I always do to get her off my back. I gave her free rein. It’s something I always end up regretting and I’m sure now will be no different.

“Yes, we’ll hold the party at Hotel Madeline. Emilia offered The Vicente, but it’s just too small.”

My eyes widen. “What do you mean too small? It’s just family, right?”

“Of course not.” My mother speaks as if the notion is absurd. “Some of your brothers’ men have known you a long time. They want to mark your special day.”

I try to contain my frustration. “How many people have you invited?”

“Three hundred.” She doesn’t even blink as she drops the bomb on me.

“Three hundred? We’ve only just had the wedding.”

“Yes, but that was a rushed affair. Some people couldn’t make it. I’ve been planning your birthday party for more than a year.”

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I rub a hand over my eyes. “You only asked me about a family dinner a few months ago.”

“Yes, the family dinner’s a separate occasion,” she says.

“So now there’s a party and a dinner?”

My mother smiles as if she thinks I’m pleased by this. “Of course. You only turn twenty-one once. It’s the day you become a woman.”

I glare across the table at her. “And here I was thinking I became a woman on my wedding night.” I scoff loudly. “Or wedding evening, since Piotr couldn’t wait until we landed in Paris to fuck me for the first time.”

“Olivia!” My mother shoots me a scandalized glare.

I push to my feet and look down at Piotr, who as usual gives away nothing of what he’s thinking. There might be a glint of amusement in his eye.

“I have a headache. Can you take me home?”

Piotr instantly rises from his seat. He places an arm around my waist.

“It was a pleasure, as always, Ava,” he says politely before steering me from the room. He ushers me out to the car. His driver, Yuri, puts his phone away and starts the engine as soon as we’re settled in the back seat. Piotr leans over to speak to him and a moment later, the privacy screen between us is raised.

“Is it always like that between you and your mother?” Piotr asks.

“She thinks everything I do is wrong, yet she worships my brothers, who are actual criminals.” I clench my fists. “And now she’s wrecked my birthday.”

“It won’t be so bad,” Piotr says. “Everyone will fall at your feet. You’re no longer a princess, remember? You’re my queen.”

“You always know the right thing to say, unlike me.”

“Yes, that remark about our wedding night was unnecessary.”

I bite my thumbnail. “Yeah, I know. I just blurt out any old shit to shock her.”

Piotr turns to face me. He strokes the hair back from my face. “You know, you don’t need to get a reaction out of her or your brothers anymore.”

“And what about you? Do you want me to stop trying to provoke you?”

Piotr smiles. “No, I’m always up for the challenge, malyskha.” His smile fades. “Did you mean what you said back there?”

I don’t pretend not to know what he’s talking about. “That I love you?”

“Yes, that.”

“I meant it.” I lean into his touch as he caresses my face with the backs of his fingers.

“Then say it again.”

“I love you, Piotr.”

He stares at me for a minute, then unclips my seatbelt and drags me onto his lap.

“I love you too, malyskha.” He kisses my neck. “So fucking much.”

“Oh, yeah?” I reach for his belt and unfasten it. “Show me.”

Piotr doesn't hesitate. He lifts his hips to drag his pants and briefs down, then rips off the flimsy lace underwear I wore beneath my sundress. He helps me get into position and I slowly sink down onto his cock. I grab onto the seat behind Piotr to brace myself and start to move. Riding him feels like heaven. As he suckles on my neck, no doubt marking my skin, happiness sweeps through me. I'm finally where I belong. So why does it feel like it's all going to come crashing down?

CHAPTER 20

Olivia

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By the time my twenty-first birthday comes around, I'm excited about my party. My mother doesn't apologize for plowing ahead with her plans for a grand event, but she checks in with me about the choice of canapes and flowers. It's her way of smoothing things over with me because apologies just don't happen in my family.

As we drive to the Madeline, the flagship hotel in the Reznov Bratva's considerable property portfolio, I take a moment to admire Piotr. For once, he's wearing a white shirt rather than his signature black. Despite the searing summer heat, he's got a jacket and tie on in deference to my mother's strict dress code. My gown probably won't meet with her approval.

A sapphire blue that brings out the color of my eyes, it's a simple beaded sheath dress with a slit that goes all the way to my thigh and a neckline that shows the swell of my breasts. It's held up by thin straps that Piotr will no doubt tear apart later when he rushes to get me out of the dress. He told me before we left our apartment that's what he intended to do.

My hair is slicked back in a low ponytail and my makeup screams femme fatale. This is my party, after all, and I intend to ensure everyone knows who their new queen is.

When we pull up outside the hotel, Piotr doesn't get straight out of the car.

"I want to give you your present before we go in," he says.

"You already gave me this." I touch the diamond necklace encircling my throat.

"That's a mere accessory." He speaks as if it didn't cost more than most people earn

in ten years. I have to admit I'm delighted there's another present. Diamonds are nice, but I'm not a huge fan of jewelry. I only wear it because it's expected of me. "This is the actual gift."

"Your phone?" I tease, as he pulls it out of his pocket.

"No, smartass." He opens his photo app and passes the phone to me. "This is."

My jaw practically hits my knee as I stare at the image on the phone. It's a large house, set in a beautiful garden.

"I know this place. It's in Westport."

Piotr nods. "I thought you'd like somewhere near your family's place."

"It's beautiful."

"You'll have to redecorate," he tells me, as if that's some sort of hardship. "The previous owners haven't updated it in thirty years."

"This is amazing." I can't believe he bought me a house. I lean over to kiss him, but he backs away. "It's not all. Look at the next photo."

I flick to the next image and gasp. A cute fluffy white face looks back at me. "You bought me a puppy?"

"Not yet. There's a litter of Westies available and I thought you'd like to choose one. We're going to see them on Sunday."

I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him. He listened when I told him what would make me happiest. It was such an inconsequential conversation I didn't think

he'd remember it.

"You really do love me, don't you?" I ask.

"Of course I do." Piotr brushes my cheek with his knuckles. "How could I not?"

For once, I don't come back at him with a sassy but self-deprecating comment. Instead, I revel in knowing this incredible man loves me.

A minute passes and then Piotr clears his throat. "We should go in. Everyone is waiting for the guest of honor."

Piotr gets out of the car first and waits patiently while I slide across the seat. He takes my hand to help me. The moment my feet hit the sidewalk, people call my name and photographers jostle each other in their attempts to get the best shot of me and Piotr. It's been a while since the paparazzi have shown any interest in me, but my marriage to a powerful businessman and reputed mobster has put me back in the public eye.

We don't stop to pose for pictures. Piotr wraps a protective arm around my shoulder and hurries me into the hotel. As we enter the ballroom, the band stops playing.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the singer announces. "Please put your hands together for our guest of honor, Mrs. Olivia Reznov."

I wince, not because he addressed me incorrectly, but because I didn't want to make such a grand entrance. Now that I'm the focus of attention, I smile and nod gracefully, like a beauty pageant contestant as everyone applauds. As Piotr leads me across the room, the fuss gradually dies down.

Dozens of people greet me, wishing me a happy birthday. Instead of gifts, I've asked for donations to Giulia's charity, a community center that helps women and kids from

Mafia families. It wasn't intended to bridge the gap between Matteo's wife and me, but it's had that effect, anyway. Giulia and I have met up several times over the last week to discuss how she'll use the money. We've known each other all my life, but this is the first time we've acted like friends.

The ballroom is beautifully decorated with flowers in pinks and creams. There's no ice sculpture, thank goodness, but photographs of me through the years play in a loop on a massive screen. My mother rushes toward me, an anxious expression on her face.

“What do you think, Olivia?”

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“It’s perfect, Mamma.” I bend to kiss her cheek.

“Not too much?”

“No, it’s wonderful.”

Taking my words as the peace offering they were meant to be, she visibly relaxes.

“Where’s Boris?” Piotr asks.

“He’s with Lara.”

I’ve only met Boris’s goddaughter once, but she seemed like a sweet girl.

“There seems to be some tension between them.” My mother lowers her voice to avoid being overheard. “I think it’s over some boy.”

“Ah,” Piotr grimaces. “Then I’ll leave them to their discussion.”

“Don’t you want to step in and do your big, bad Pakhan thing?” I tease.

“Not on this occasion. Lara is my uncle’s responsibility, not mine.” He seems relieved about that. “Come on, let’s say hello to your brothers’ wives.”

Leaving my mother to mingle with other guests, Piotr and I walk to the table on the edge of the dance floor where my sisters-in-law are all sitting. He greets them politely as he pulls out a chair and helps me to sit. Then he excuses himself to go to the bar

where my brothers are standing, keeping watch over everyone.

“You look amazing,” Isabella says.

“Thank you. So do you.” I glance around the table. While Isabella is in a classic black dress, Giulia has opted for a shimmering silver gown and Emilia is wearing blue.

“Where’s Vinnie?”

“Leo made her stay home. She’s sick.”

“I think she’s pregnant,” Isabella says.

“Of course she is,” Emilia agrees. “At least four months, though they’re not admitting to anything yet.”

“I suppose they want to keep it to themselves for a while. You know what my mother will be like when she finds out.”

Emilia nods. “Perhaps I can distract her with my news.”

“You’re pregnant?” I grin as she nods her confirmation.

“Three months today.”

“I am so happy for you,” Isabella says. “Antonio and I are hoping to be pregnant soon.”

“It’s going to be baby central around here.” I can’t decide if this will take the heat off me or if my mother will nag me to join the baby club. I look across the table. “Giulia? Anything to add?”

She shakes her head, and a strand of her vivid purple hair flops over her face. “I’ve only been married a week longer than you have.”

“Tell that to my mother. The woman’s a nightmare when it comes to babies.”

“When the time comes, you’ll be glad of her help,” Isabella says. “You’re the only one of us who has a mom to support you.”

Shit, that’s true. Isabella hasn’t forgiven her mother for not trying to contact her when Antonio sent her into exile. Giulia, Emilia, and Vinnie all lost their mothers when they were kids. I suppose, on reflection, I am lucky. My mother can be a pain in the ass, but she’ll probably be an incredible grandmother.

“So how’s married life?” Emilia asks as Isabella and Giulia chat about something else.

“It’s good, but I wish I was more experienced. I feel incredibly naïve around Piotr.”

Emilia nods. “I was the same with Alessandro. I didn’t know what I didn’t know until he taught me.”

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“Piotr’s great, but I keep thinking I’m going to do something wrong and he’ll think I’m an idiot.” I lower my voice. “I mean, I know about sex, but reading about it isn’t the same as doing it.”

Emilia smiles, and I’m glad she seems to understand where I’m coming from. We can’t continue the conversation, however, as my aunt Angelia slides onto the seat next to me. My mother’s younger sister is usually fun to be around. She married an outsider, so isn’t bound by the rules of our world

“Livvy, you look stunning, sweetheart.”

I accept the compliment with a smile. “How are you?”

“I’d be a lot better if my daughter wasn’t trying to give me a stroke.”

“Why? What’s up with Alessia?”

“She’s marrying Dante Parisi.”

“What?” I can’t contain my surprise. “But she thinks he’s an asshole.”

My aunt nods. “Which is why I can’t understand it. Perhaps you could speak to her. Find out what she’s thinking.”

“Yeah, okay. Where is she?”

“Ladies’ room, but she can wait. Tell me what that gorgeous man gave you for your

birthday.”

“This.” I point to the necklace.

“Oh, that’s beautiful,” she gushes.

“He also gave me a house in Westport and he’s buying me a puppy.”

Angela gives a low whistle. “He’s a keeper.”

“Yes, he is.” I look up and spot Alessia coming into the room. “Ah, there’s that cousin of mine. I’ll see what I can find out.”

I follow Alessia across the room, grabbing a couple of glasses of Prosecco from a waiter as I pass him.

“Here.” I thrust a glass at Alessia as I finally catch up to her close to the exit. “You look like you could use this.”

“Thank you.” She takes the glass and downs its contents in a single gulp.

“What’s this I hear about you and Dante Parisi?”

“My mom told you?”

“Yes, she’s really confused about it.”

Alessia pinches the bridge of her nose. “My father lost everything. Mom doesn’t know.”

“Fuck! Alessia, that’s awful.”

“Yeah. Dante swept in with an offer. If I marry him, he’ll bail my dad out.”

Stunned, I sip my Prosecco. “Why don’t you ask Antonio to help your dad?”

“He’s the one who put Dante’s offer to me. He strongly suggested I take it.”

Now her mood when Piotr and I got married makes sense. “He spoke to you at my wedding, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Alessia’s shoulders slump. I hate to see her like this. She’s been studying so hard, determined to forge a career for herself. Because her family’s not part of the Mafia, she thought she was safe from our fucked-up politics.

“I could ask Piotr to help.”

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Alessia shakes her head. "It's done. Signed in blood and all that."

"Fuck! Are you sure? I mean, Piotr could..."

She puts a hand on my arm. "Don't worry about it, Liv. Just say you'll be my matron of honor and everything will be okay."

I seriously doubt that, but I'm not about to refuse her. "Of course I'll be your matron of honor." I can't hold back an incredulous laugh. "You're really going to marry him."

"Oh, I'll marry him alright." Her words sound like a threat and suddenly I wonder if Dante's the one I should feel sorry for. "Anyway," Alessia shakes her shoulders as if casting off all negative thoughts. "I have some gossip for you. Renata Romano has been making eyes at Jimmy all night."

"Jimmy? My Jimmy?" I'm surprised not just to hear he has an admirer, but that he actually came tonight. I scan the room and find him sitting at a corner table by himself.

"Yeah. She's hot for him."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. I heard her asking your mom if he's still single. They were sweethearts back in high school apparently and it seems she never got over it."

“Renata’s a widow, right?”

“No, she never married. Her fiancé was killed in a shootout with the Bianchis twenty years ago and nobody else ever offered for her.”

“Wow. You think I should do something about it?”

The idea of playing matchmaker for Jimmy is irresistible. Alessia shrugs. “Will he appreciate that sort of interference?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Leaving Alessia in a better mood than I found her, I head for the corner table where Jimmy is sitting alone, nursing a beer.

“Liv.” He gets to his feet to greet me. Before he can object, I throw my arms around him and pull him in for a hug. Someone behind us gasps, scandalized. The people in our world are assholes. Most of them look at Jimmy with either pity or disgust. They’ve long forgotten he received his injuries while being more heroic than most of them will ever be. “Go and ask Renata Romano to dance.”

“She doesn’t want to dance with me.”

“Yes, she does.”

Jimmy looks hopeful for a moment. Then he shakes his head and gestures to his face.

“Okay,” I say with a sigh. “Enjoy your night.”

My bodyguard slumps back into his seat. I hate the air of defeat that surrounds him, but if he thinks I’m so easily deterred, he’s mistaken. I make a beeline straight for

Renata and sit in the vacant seat next to her.

“Miss Volante.” Her pretty brown eyes widen in surprise. “I mean, Mrs. Rez...”

“Call me Livvy.” I don’t have time for formalities. “Tell me, you and Jimmy Marrone, you were high school sweethearts, right?”

“A lifetime ago.”

“Do you want a second chance?” I don’t waste any time trying to feel her out.

“Uh, what?”

“With Jimmy? He’s single. You’re single.”

“He isn’t interested in me. I’ve been trying to get his attention all night, and he hasn’t looked at me once.”

I take her hand. “He wants to ask you to dance, but he’s so self-conscious.”

Renata frowns. “Because of his face?”

“Yes.”

“Silly man!” Renata shakes her head. “Only a shallow fool would care about that. What should I do?”

“Ask him to dance.”

Renata bites her bottom lip. “It’s not proper, is it?”

“Who gives a shit about proper.”

I get up and leave her to think about it. As I resume my seat at the table my sisters-in-law have now all vacated to dance with my brothers, I turn to see Renata approaching Jimmy. They talk for a moment and then they get up and he leads her to the dance floor. He scowls at me as they pass me, but he’s not really mad.

“I saw what you did.” Piotr appears behind me and nods toward Jimmy.

“You’re not going to tell me off for interfering, are you?”

“No, I’m going to ask my wonderful, considerate wife to dance.”

We get up and join the thirty or so others on the dance floor. My mother hired a band that’s playing an eclectic mix of songs. I don’t know the one they’re playing right now, but it has a slow, sultry tempo. I put my hands on Piotr’s shoulders and he grabs hold of my waist. We sway in time to the sensuous beat. I have to admit the man has some moves, but the dance floor is my domain and Piotr soon releases me to watch as

I let the music seep into my soul.

As I wiggle my hips, an icy chill goes through me. Dario Maroni is here. Standing by the door leading out to the lobby, he's staring right at me. When he sees he has my attention, he motions for me to come outside.

"Olivia?" Piotr asks and I realize I've frozen in place. "Are you okay?"

"Uh, yes, I just need to go to the ladies' room."

He frowns with apparent concern. "You want me to come with you?"

I shake my head. "Don't be silly. The place is swarming with my brothers' men and yours. Nothing will happen to me."

Piotr looks unconvinced, but before he can stop me, I rush from the room. When I get into the lobby, I don't see Dario at first. Then I spot him at the entrance to the corridor where Emilia and I were attacked on the night some asshole tried to abduct her.

"You've got to be kidding me," I mutter.

There is no way I'm going down there with Dario. I don't trust him not to drag me out of the building and there's an exit down there. I follow him a few feet along the corridor, so I'm still close enough to the reception desk that someone will hear me if I yell for help.

"This is far enough," I tell Dario. In his black pants and white shirt, he looks like a server. I wonder if he's trying to blend in with the staff. "What do you want?"

"You got my message at the wedding?"

“That was you?”

“Of course. My employer asked me to get your attention. She still wants to sell you the photos.”

“And you came here to tell me that?”

“I couldn’t get to you anywhere else, Liv.” He steps closer and I back up against the wall. He reaches out to touch my face. “I want to help you, Liv. Come with me and meet my employer.”

“I can’t,” I hiss. “My husband is here. Do you have any idea what will happen if he finds us together? He’ll kill you.”

“Yes, I will.” A deep voice draws my attention. I turn to find my very pissed-off husband standing at the end of the corridor. Like a coward, Dario runs off, making his escape along the passageway. I put my hands on Piotr’s chest to stop him from following. Though I don’t care if he beats Dario to a pulp, I can’t risk him finding out about the photographs.

“Piotr, it’s not what you think.”

“You don’t know what I think, Olivia.”

Before I can speak, he grabs my upper arm and drags me to the elevators. He presses the call button and when the door opens, he flings me inside. Grabbing my throat, he backs me up against the wall.

“Piotr.” I try to soothe the violence I sense in him. “Please, I’m sorry.”

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“Oh, you will be, Olivia.” He squeezes my throat until I fear he’ll cut off my air. “Believe me, you will be.”

CHAPTER 21

Piotr

Anger pulses through my veins. I tighten my grip on Olivia’s throat, relishing the flash of fear in her eyes. She deserves it for sneaking around with Maroni. She reaches up to grab my wrists, trying to pull me off her. I squeeze a little tighter, a warning, and then release her. She slumps against the mirrored wall and sucks in several large gulps of air.

I clench my fists at my sides. Though I want to punish Olivia, she’s not the one I’ll kill. The worst excesses of my violent streak will be reserved for that mudak she was with. I’m going to tear him limb from limb once I’ve dealt with my deceitful wife. Despite her claims that there’s nothing between them, this is the second time I’ve caught them together.

When the lift stops, I take hold of Olivia’s arm again and drag her along the corridor to the honeymoon suite. Fuck, that’s a joke. I reserved this room as a way of making up for taking her virginity on my plane, something she seemed pissed about. I ordered fresh flowers, chocolates, and champagne. What an idiot I’ve been, pandering to her desire for romance, lavishing gifts upon her while she’s involved with another man.

Olivia stumbles as she tries to keep up with me, but I don’t slow my pace. I open the door to the suite and shove her inside. As I slam the door, Olivia turns to me, her face

pale. She knows exactly how much trouble she's in. She holds her hands up in a placating gesture, but I'm in no mood to be soothed.

"Piotr, I'm sorry."

"For what?" I need to hear her admit to what she's done.

"For speaking to Dario."

Just hearing his name on her lips makes my blood boil.

"Speaking to him? You make it sound so innocent." I step closer, getting right in her face. "But the truth is you betrayed me."

"No." She shakes her head vigorously. "It's not like that."

"Then tell me why he was here, why you left me to go to him."

"I wanted to know why he came."

"Why did he?"

Olivia's gaze dropped to the floor. "I can't tell you."

"Then I have to assume the worst."

"Or you could just trust me."

Trust her? I wish it was possible, but she's held secrets from me since the start. I've given her opportunities to confide in me about the photographs, to tell me the truth about the role Dario Maroni plays in her life. Yet she stubbornly refuses to tell me

what I need to know.

“Pull your dress up to your waist and bend over the bed.”

Olivia’s lip quivers. “Piotr, I’ve done nothing to deserve this.”

Can she really be so naïve? “Haven’t you, *malyskha*? Have you not been hiding something from me all along?”

Olivia hesitates. She opens her mouth and then closes it again. She looks up at me, her eyes glistening with tears. A better man might feel some pity for her. “I don’t deserve a spanking.”

“Don’t you? Then how should I punish you? Should I lock you away from the world? Chain you to my bed and use your treacherous body until I have no more use for you?”

Horror fills her big blue eyes, and she shakes her head. “No, Piotr. I love you. Don’t do this.”

“You love me?” When she first said those words, my heart swelled with pride. It was more than I’d hoped that this incredible woman could offer me the greatest gift imaginable. Now her words ring hollow. “Then perhaps you’d like to prove it. Get on your knees.”

Wariness passes across her face. She bites her bottom lip, and I think she’s going to deny me. I don’t know what I’ll do if she does. I’ve never hurt a woman, but I’m teetering dangerously close to the brink.

“On your fucking knees!” My temper is hanging by a thread. I need to purge the rage inside me.

As I step closer, Olivia is jolted into action. She drops to her knees. I unfasten my pants and push them down my legs. I wrap my fist around my cock and pump twice until I'm rock hard.

“Open your mouth.”

Olivia instantly does as I command. I step closer and unceremoniously shove my cock into her mouth, right to the back of her throat. She chokes and casts an accusing glance at me as a tear slips from the corner of her eye. I pull back a little to allow her to catch her breath. If she passes out on me, I won't get what I need.

I twist her ponytail around my fist and she winces as I tilt her head back, getting the angle just right. Olivia whimpers as I slide in deep, forcing her to take more of my cock than she has before.

“Such a good little whore,” I sneer as my balls slap against her face. Her eyes widen, but she doesn't pull away from me.

I groan as I plunge in deep. Her mouth is hot and wet. Her lips clamp tight around my length. At first she tries to please me, massaging my shaft with her tongue, but as I pivot my hips, driving into her hard and fast, she gives up. I fuck her mouth mercilessly, ignoring her pathetic whimpering. If she struggled to get away from me, I'd let her go. At least, that's what I tell myself.

Olivia gags each time I hit the back of her throat. She never quite catches her breath. Her face reddens from lack of air. Tears stream down her cheeks as she chokes on my cock.

It doesn't take long before I erupt, my seed bursting forth to coat her tongue. She swallows every drop.

“That’s it, my deceitful little slut. Take it all.”

As I pull my cock out of her mouth, I let go of her hair and she falls back, catching herself on the palms of her hands. Her face is a mess, streaked with tears. Her lips are swollen and red after the abuse I heaped upon them. A sob rips from somewhere deep inside her, but I don’t believe her sorrow for a second. This woman is a liar. She’s been going behind my back with another man.

“Why are you crying?” I sneer. “Isn’t this what you like? To be treated like a whore?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why do you keep going back to him when he treated you this way?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you spreading your legs for Maroni, sucking his cock in some seedy little hotel room.”

Olivia scrambles to her feet. “Piotr, I...” She furrows her brow as realization hits her. “How do you know about that?”

I’m famously even-tempered, but this woman seriously tests my control. My frustration spills over and I yell at her. “I have the photos, Olivia.”

She stumbles backward, her mouth opening in shock. “Since when?”

“Since before I began to pursue you.”

“What?”

Something about her obvious distress fuels the anger inside me. How dare she act like the wounded party here? I advance on her, but she holds her ground.

“I saw those photographs, and I knew what you were. I wanted you for myself. I wanted you on your knees, my perfect little slut with her whore lips around my cock.”

Olivia draws back her fist and punches me in the face, the blow hitting my right cheek. I have to hand it to her, it actually hurts. She gasps in horror at what she’s done and tries to run, perhaps fearing retaliation. Grabbing her arm, I pull her back to face me.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Wherever you’re not,” she spits. “And don’t try to stop me.”

“Stop you?” I let go of her arm. “Why would I try to stop such a worthless whore from running back to her lover?”

The look of utter devastation on her face is more than I can bear.

“Piotr.” The hurt in her voice kills me.

“Go,” I whisper. “Just leave.”

She hesitates, puts her hand on my arm as if she can still salvage something here, but we’re beyond that now.

“Get out!” I roar.

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As my wife flees from the room, I sink to the floor. I ruined her, just as I knew I would, but I brought myself down with her. Closing my eyes, I bow my head and try to breathe. It's impossible with regret crushing my chest. I punished her without giving her the chance to explain. The desolation I saw in her eyes kills me. What the fuck have I just done?

CHAPTER 22

Olivia

Swiping tears born of anger and frustration from my cheeks, I hurry along the corridor and get into the elevator. I feel dirty, used, and unbelievably hurt. The way Piotr looked at me makes me wonder if there's any way back for us. His disgust was palpable. He thinks I betrayed him and he hates me for it.

Though I should have been honest with him about Dario from the start, the way he treated me just now isn't okay. He acted like I meant nothing to him. His revelation about the photographs shocked me. I have no idea how I'm supposed to feel about that.

I need to know how he got ahold of the photos. I don't think he did business with Joey Gallo, but of course I know little about my husband's dealings. It's hard to understand why he kept the pictures to himself. Was he just waiting for the right moment to throw them in my face? Perhaps it was a game to him, to build me up to where I was happier than I ever believed possible and then wreck the illusion. Because that's all it was, right? A fantasy.

Piotr having the photos raises so many questions. I wonder if he's the mystery person Dario's been working with all along. No, that can't be right. He said the person who wanted to sell me the photos was a woman. Perhaps Piotr doesn't have all the photos, or just as likely, there are duplicates out there. I wouldn't be surprised if Joey made copies as insurance.

I feel like shit after what happened between Piotr and me, and the stupid thing is he's the one I want to seek comfort from. It's Piotr's arms I want around me, his words of reassurance whispered in my ear. Nobody has ever made me feel as valued as he did, and that makes everything worse. I fear he's been laughing at my naivety all along.

A part of me wants to go back to the room and confront him. I need to know if what we had was real or if he's been playing me. I'd like to lay the truth bare and see if there's anything of our marriage to salvage. My heart tells me to return to him, to not let anything fester. I long for his closeness. My head tells me that's not a good idea right now, that some time apart will allow our emotions to settle. It's my head I decide to follow.

A quick glance at the elevator's mirrored wall tells me it would be unwise to return to my party. People will speculate about my red, puffy eyes and bruised lips. Wisps of hair have come loose from my ponytail, completing the dragged-through-a-bush look. Even if I could do something about my appearance, I'm not in the mood to celebrate now. Hopefully, I can slip out of here without running into anyone I know.

That hope is dashed the moment I step out into the lobby and come face to face with one of the last people I want to see right now. Dante Parisi. He's a judgmental ass who loves to point out my every little flaw. Thankfully, he doesn't seem to notice how disheveled I am.

"Have you seen Alessia?" he demands.

“No, I haven’t and you should leave her the fuck alone.” I am sick of the men in our world using women as pawns in their ridiculous power plays. “She doesn’t need an asshole like you in her life.”

Dante’s face darkens. If he was any other man, I’d be afraid, but he’s my brother’s closest confidant and no matter how much he’d love to smack me right now, he’d never risk upsetting Antonio. “Keep your opinions to yourself.”

“Fuck you, Dante.” I storm off across the lobby, muttering under my breath. “Fuck all of you.”

As I head for the exit, I spot Leo making his way out of the hotel. He’s not the brother I would normally choose to help me, but I don’t want to go into the ballroom in search of one of the others. Leo walks into the street and heads for his car. His latest acquisition is a flashy neon green McLaren Artura. It’s not his usual style, but I heard he took it from a debtor and is driving it around to rub salt in the guy’s wounds.

“Leo,” I call after him. “Wait.”

He turns around and looks me up and down. “Olivia? What the fuck happened to you? Where’s Reznov?”

“We had a fight.”

Leo grasps my chin and tilts my head one way and then the other as he inspects my face beneath the glow of the hotel’s exterior lights.

“Ouch,” I grumble when his fingers dig in too hard.

“Did he hit you?” Leo snarls.

“Of course not.” Do I really look so bad that he thinks I’ve been beaten?

“I’ll kick his ass if he did.”

As touching as it is that Leo is willing to avenge me, that’s not what I need him for.

“He didn’t hit me,” I say firmly. “We had a fight, and I walked out. I need somewhere to stay tonight. Can I come to your place?”

Leo looks uncertain. No, worse than that, he looks appalled by the very idea. He rubs the back of his neck. “Wouldn’t Matteo be better? I can go get him.”

Nine out of ten times I would prefer the company of Matteo or even Alessandro, who’s more tolerable now that Emilia has softened his harsh manner, but Leo’s who I’d rather be around right now. I don’t want someone to console me and tell me everything will be alright. I want someone to tell me to pick myself up and fight for what I want. Tough love is what I’ve always got from Leo and for once I’ll welcome it.

“No, I want you to take me to your place and let me sleep in one of the four fucking guest rooms I know you have.”

“Olivia, I...”

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Whatever excuse he's about to pull out of his ass, I don't want to hear it.

"For fuck's sake, Leo. I'm your sister, not some disease-riddled outcast you don't want to let into your home."

Startled by my tone, he nods. "Okay, get in."

As I settle into the surprisingly comfortable leather seat of this phallic symbol on wheels, Leo starts the engine. He doesn't drive off.

"I could drop you off at Mamma's house," he says.

Is he still trying to fob me off? I'm not feeling much brotherly love here.

"Leo, for the last fucking time, I want you to take me to your place. You'll give me a bed for the night. I'll leave in the morning, and you can go back to pretending I don't exist except on special occasions."

His mouth flaps open and shut as he tries to come up with a response. Eventually, he just nods.

"Just don't disturb Vinnie. She's sick."

"I'll be quiet as a mouse." I use two fingers to make across my heartgesture. "She won't even know I'm there."

Leo's expression still suggests he'd rather jump into a vat of bleach than play host to

me for the night, but he doesn't argue. He pulls away from the curb and takes off down the street at hair-raising speed.

"So, what was your fight about?" he asks.

"Do you care?"

Leo shrugs in a typical display of indifference. "I might have some advice to offer. Vinnie and I have gone a few rounds over most topics."

"Oh, yeah? Did you treat Vinnie like a whore because she talked to a man, then announce you've acquired photos of her that she was being blackmailed over for months?"

"What?" My brother knows exactly which photos I'm referring to because he's been helping Antonio in his quest to find them. "Why does he... shit!"

I'm pressed back into the seat as Leo suddenly slams his foot down on the accelerator. We take a sharp right and then a left, heading away from his apartment building. I glance over my shoulder to see a couple of black SUVs gaining on us.

"Here." Leo takes his cellphone from his jacket pocket and thrusts it at me. "Call for backup."

"Passcode?" I ask as I find the phone locked.

"1504."

I key in the code, which I believe is Vinnie's birthday, and open his contact list to find Antonio's number. I press call and my oldest brother answers after two rings.

“Leo?” he asks.

“It’s me, Olivia. I’m with Leo. We’re being chased by two black cars. We’re headed down...”

I don’t get a chance to find a street sign as a car slams into our side. As the car spins, I scream. I’m thrown against the door and the phone flies from my hand. After what seems an eternity, the car comes to a stop as it slams into a metal post.

Dazed, I take a minute to process what just happened. My shoulders and chest hurt, but I don’t think I’m badly injured. Leo, however, is unconscious. Blood gushes from his nose as he slumped over the steering wheel. His side of the car took the brunt of the impact, and he wasn’t wearing his seatbelt. I reach across to tentatively touch his arm.

“Leo?” I shake him gently. “Leo?”

He doesn’t stir. With shaking hands, I release my seatbelt and look around, trying to find Leo’s cellphone. It’s on the floor by my feet. Grunting in pain, I lean down to pick it up, but before I reach it, my door is flung open and someone grabs me. I don’t recognize the man’s face. He’s an ugly brute with a spider web tattoo on his neck.

He drags me away from the wreckage of Leo’s car as a gray box truck screeches to a halt beside us. The back doors open. My captor picks me up and throws me into the back of the truck. There’s already a man in there, pointing a gun at me.

“Get up here.” He motions to the bench seat opposite the one he’s sitting on.

I do as I’m told and clamber up onto the hard metal seat. A moment later, my brother is dropped heavily onto the floor in front of me, still unconscious. Two men jump into the truck. They handle Leo roughly as they drag his arms behind his back and

slap metal cuffs on him.

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“Who is she?” One of the men, a heavy-set guy with a buzz cut, nods toward me. “She’s not the wife.”

“She’s Reznov’s bitch,” the man on the bench opposite me replies. They all have accents, not Russian, but something similar. “The Italian punk was supposed to grab her, but he failed. We got lucky she was with Volante.”

As the doors slam shut, my heart thuds. I guess if nothing else, I’ve learned that both Leo and I were targets of these thugs. I don’t know why anyone would want to hurt my family and Piotr, but it must be something to do with business.

As the van takes off, its tires spinning on the asphalt, I realize nobody has bothered to restrain me. Clearly, they don’t see me as a threat. I can use that to my advantage.

Leaning into the role of damsel in distress, I heave out a dramatic sigh, close my eyes, and flop forward onto the metal floor of the truck. The impact reverberates through my already aching body, but I don’t make a sound.

One man chuckles darkly. “Pathetic whore. I hope I get to fuck her before we kill her.”

It takes every ounce of strength I have not to flinch at that. As nobody makes a move to pick me up, I continue to play dead. The weaker our abductors think I am, the more likely they are to let their guard down. If they focus on Leo as the greater threat, they won’t notice what I’m doing. I’ll wait for the right moment to get myself and Leo out of this mess. Then I’ll gather the joint forces of the Volantes and Reznovs and make the men who took us sorry they were born.

CHAPTER 23

Piotr

When I was a child, my uncle Boris disappeared for three days, taken prisoner by the Irish mafia. My grandmother did her best to assure me that everything would be alright, but even then, long before I was inducted into the Bratva, I knew what my family's enemies were capable of. I'd seen evidence of the pain they could inflict. Thinking of what my uncle might be going through had driven me mad. To this day, I remember the fear and helplessness I'd experienced. My uncle was safely returned to us and I vowed never to allow myself to sink into such despair again. Today, I'm breaking that promise. The dread I feel at the thought of what Olivia is going through is almost too much to bear.

It's been six long hours since Antonio Volante banged on the door of the honeymoon suite to tell me his brother and my wife were missing. As we drove here to the office in his home, he relayed the details of her phone call to him. He'd heard the crash, her screams, then silence.

We've pooled our considerable resources to search for Leo and my wife, but we're still no closer to bringing them home safely. We have no idea who took them, whether this was an attack against the Volantes, or me. Perhaps we were both targets. We have several enemies in common.

Our phones ping constantly with messages from our men, letting us know they've hit dead ends or are pursuing new leads. Olivia's brother, Matteo, has been out with Jimmy, hunting for Dario Maroni. My gut tells me he has something to do with this. It's too much of a coincidence that he turned up at the hotel tonight before my wife went missing.

Dante Parisi is helping my right-hand man, Josef, to scour through footage from

security cameras around the site where Leo's car was found wrecked. There wasn't a camera at the scene, but they picked up two black Mercedes SUVs and a gray truck following Leo and Olivia along another street. They haven't found any decent images of the men involved yet. The vehicles were last caught on camera heading for the George Washington Bridge, so we have men out kicking down doors in New Jersey, looking for anyone who knows something about the abduction.

Alessandro Volante has been tasked with the job I would want the least. Along with my uncle Boris, he's ensuring the safety of the women of the family. Apart from Antonio's wife, Isabella, who insisted on staying here, the women have been taken to a secure location just outside of the city. The last thing we need is another kidnapping.

I can only imagine how high emotions are running at the safehouse. Vinnie Volante is no doubt distraught that her husband is missing. I'm barely holding on myself. It's the lack of progress that gets to me the most. Everything that can be done is being done, but we're getting nowhere.

When I get my hands on whoever took Olivia, I will kill them in the most brutal way imaginable. I'll take my time to flay the skin from their bones. They'll pay in blood for the terror that grips me at the thought of losing my wife. Anyone who so much as touches her will suffer a slow, agonizing death.

If Olivia comes out of this alive, I intend to spend the rest of my life making up for the way I treated her last night. When I saw her with that skin sym, I lost all sense of reason. I should have given her a chance to explain why she rushed out of the party to speak to him. Instead, I used her mercilessly and threw my possession of the photographs in her face.

Needing fresh air, I slip out through the French doors onto the terrace at the back of Antonio's house. As I stare into the darkness, I fight back tears. I haven't cried since I

was a boy, but tonight I may succumb. If I don't get the chance to kneel before Olivia and beg her to forgive me, I may never recover.

"Regret is a waste of time." A soft voice startles me as Isabella Volante joins me on the terrace. Her footsteps are so light, I didn't hear her coming.

"I feel it anyway."

She comes to stand beside me at the wooden railing. "Antonio told me what you and Livvy fought about."

When Antonio asked me why his sister was with Leo and not safe with me, I spilled the entire story. I admitted everything, right down to the shameful way I revealed I had the photographs. Antonio looked as if he wanted to kill me and, in that moment, my self-loathing was so great I'd have let him. Then he shrugged off his anger, telling me it was between me and my wife. Clearly he didn't mean that since he shared my private business with Isabella and fuck knows who else.

"Do you think Dario Maroni is the man in the photos?" she asks.

Though I still don't have proof, I think it's likely that the photos connect him and Olivia. I no longer believe she's seeing him behind my back. I've replayed their encounters in my mind and realized something. She isn't comfortable in Maroni's presence. He makes her skin crawl.

"Antonio shouldn't have told you about the photos."

"I already knew about them." Isabella smiles ruefully. "Olivia came to me when Joey Gallo tried to blackmail her into spying on her brothers. I did what I could to help, but ended up making a huge mess of things."

This isn't a story I've heard before. "How?"

"I let Joey and Vito into the house, thinking they just wanted to talk to Antonio." She grimaces as I arch an eyebrow at her. "I know. It was stupid, but sometimes when we're trying to help someone we care about, we don't think things through."

I nod in understanding, though I doubt I would ever be so naïve. "What happened?"

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“There was a fight. Antonio got shot, and I got sent away.”

That explains the year she was missing from her husband’s side. “But you and Antonio are together again.”

“Yes, we made up. It helped that Olivia told him the truth.”

“Ah.” Things are becoming clearer now. “That’s why he sent her to Italy.”

“Yes.”

“She should have told me all this,” I mutter, more to myself than to Isabella.

“Perhaps she was afraid you’d think less of her.” Isabella sighs heavily. “She’s a puzzle, that girl. So tough, so confident, yet so fragile.”

My wife is a contradiction, but I suspect given the right encouragement, she’ll triumph over her insecurities. She was already well on her way to proving herself a worthy partner for me.

“You think she’ll forgive me?”

Isabella nods. “She will, and she won’t force you to grovel half as hard as you should. She’s too generous to make you suffer.”

“I’ll grovel as much or as little as she wants. I just want her back safely.”

“Leo will protect her.”

I don't frighten Isabella by telling her I doubt he's in any condition to look out for Olivia. Whoever has them will waste no time in making sure he's in no fit state to fight. The blood on the driver's side of the car suggests he was already injured. Leo's a beast of a man, but he's still human. Subjected to enough brutality, his body will break.

I try to summon words of reassurance for Isabella, but I draw a blank. Thankfully, I don't have to fill the awkward silence that descends as a commotion from inside draws our attention. Holding a hand up to Isabella to signal that I should go first, I open the door and walk back into the study.

Matteo and Jimmy are dragging a bruised and bloodied Dario Maroni into the room. His wrists are zip-tied and he has a gag stuffed in his mouth. His eyes are swollen shut and his nose is broken. They drop him onto a wooden chair in front of Antonio's desk. Isabella pushes past me and stares down at him with disdain.

“Is this Maroni?” She glances at Matteo for confirmation. He nods, and she snorts in disgust. “You're getting blood on the carpet, asshole.”

“Isabella.” Antonio places a hand on her shoulder. “Why don't you go upstairs?”

“First, I want to know one thing.” She yanks the cloth gag out of his mouth and tosses it on the floor. “Was it you who took the photos of Olivia?”

Maroni says nothing, but he twists his bloodied lips into a smirk. Isabella draws back her hand and slaps him hard. Then she turns and strides from the room. She's not a patch on my wife, but she's still magnificent.

Jimmy grabs a handful of Maroni's hair and pulls his head back. “Tell them what you

told us.”

“It’s Leo she wants, and him.” He tips his head toward me. “And anyone else who was there the night her son was killed.”

“Whose son?” I demand. “Who are you talking about?”

“Zita.”

There’s only one woman I can think of with that name. I furrow my brow in confusion. “Zita Balogh?”

“Yeah.”

At Maroni’s confirmation, I exchange a look with Antonio and Matteo. They’re clearly as surprised as I am to hear she’s behind this. Her son was a small-time criminal. We didn’t expect there to be repercussions when we killed him.

“Who is she working with?”

When Maroni doesn’t answer, Matteo punches him, sending blood and saliva flying from his mouth.

“I don’t know anything.” Maroni coughs violently. “They’re from Europe.”

“Hungarians?” I muse, since that’s where Balogh was from.

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Antonio nods. “Where did they take my brother and sister?”

“Don’t know.” Maroni’s answer is unconvincing, and from the expressions on the faces of the men around me, none of them believe it either. Antonio gives Matteo a nod. He takes a knife from his belt and rams it into Maroni’s shoulder. He screams like the pussy he is.

“Try again.” Antonio’s tone holds a menacing calm.

“Newark,” Maroni spits out. “Some warehouse near the airport.”

“Josef.” I look over to my Bratva brother, who’s already tapping away at the laptop. I turn back to Maroni. “What’s your part in all of this?”

“Joey paid me to get pictures of Liv. He gave them to Balogh to look after. When you killed him, Zita called me. I was supposed to bring Olivia to her. An eye for an eye and all that.”

The temptation to shoot this mudakin the head is almost overwhelming, but we may need more information from him.

“Get him out of here, but don’t end him yet.” Antonio clearly thinks the same as I do.

Jimmy hauls Maroni out of the room. I walk around the desk to where Josef is searching through property records.

“Here.” He taps the screen, which displays an image of a large industrial building.

“Registered owner is an LLC owned by Katerina Balogh.”

“Katerina?” I ask.

“Yeah. Zita is a stage name. She used to be a cabaret singer.”

I clap Josef on the shoulder. I’m grateful to have someone who’s so adept at finding information on my side. “Send us the address.”

“Yes, boss.”

As Matteo and Antonio bark out orders to their men, I’m already heading out to one of the waiting SUVs. I’m going to bring my wife home and heaven help any man who stands in my way.

CHAPTER 24

Olivia

With my back to the wall, I face the door and try to work out a plan. The heavy steel door is the only way in or out of this stark little room. The window is too high for me to reach and even if I could get up there, it’s too narrow for me to squeeze through. There are no heating vents that might provide a means of escape and no loose bricks in the wall. Believe me, I’ve checked.

Playing dead as we were driven here allowed me to focus on gathering information that might be useful. The men who took us are Eastern European. They’re doing this for a payday, not because of some loyalty to an organization. That could be useful. Perhaps the promise of cash will persuade one of them to help me. I’d be willing to offer the diamond necklace I’m still wearing as a down payment.

As far as I can tell, there are six people involved in our abduction. Their leader is an older woman with an accent. When I was carried out of the truck, she spat at me and said something about getting payback for her son's murder. I don't know who he was, but it's a safe bet one of my brothers disposed of him.

We're at a warehouse close to Newark Airport, I think. I've heard planes taking off and landing. The time we took to drive here would be about right, and I know we drove across a bridge. I don't know how long we've been here, but I haven't seen Leo since we arrived. I have no idea if he's still alive. There was a heart-rending cry of pain a while back that I'm sure came from him and then it went quiet out there. I can't bear the thought of Leo being hurt or worse, so I do my best not to dwell on it. If I'm going to get out of here, I need to keep calm and look for the right moment to act, just like Jimmy taught me.

If I can get my hands on a gun, I'll use it without hesitation. In the meantime, the spiky metal heel of my shoe will make a decent weapon if I can swing it with enough force. That might be difficult. My shoulder is bruised from where the seatbelt restrained me in the crash.

I console myself with the knowledge my brothers will look for us. I wonder if they told Piotr what happened. Is he out there frantically searching for me? I hope he is because I know he'll find me. What happened between us tonight was horrible, but I intend to put it behind us. There will be no recrimination, no postmortem of what was said and done. I want to draw a line under it and move on.

My heart flutters as a scraping of metal signals a bolt being slid across. The door opens and Leo is shoved into the room. Unable to hold himself up, he stumbles forward and hits the floor hard.

"Leo!" I scramble over to him.

“We’ll be back for you soon, princess.” The short, balding creep winks at me.

As he slams the door, leaving me alone with Leo, I quickly scan my brother, trying to work out how badly he’s hurt. He’s only wearing boxer shorts. There’s blood everywhere. The marks on his back tell me he’s been whipped. There’s barely an inch of him that isn’t bruised, and he has several knife wounds. The cuts all look shallow, but his breathing is labored and I’m worried he has internal injuries. His face is a mess.

“What have they done to you, Leo?”

“Liv.” He’s never called me that before and it’s not a good sign. The lack of focus in his eyes as he peels them open tells me he’s in pain, suffering. I grab his hand and squeeze it tight. Leo and I have had our differences over the years. I’ve even claimed to hate him, but that’s all bluster. I love him and seeing my big brother so weak, so helpless, tears me apart.

“Who are these people, Leo? What do they want?”

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“The woman.” Leo inhales sharply. “We tortured her son. Piotr killed him, I think.”

“You think?”

“It was after we left. I don’t know what happened, but Balogh wasn’t around anymore, so...”

“Okay, I get it.”

“They’re going to bring Piotr here. Make him watch while they hurt you.”

“The only thing he’ll have to watch is me washing the blood off my hands when I kill anyone who tries to touch me.” I speak with more conviction I feel. “Now, focus, Leo. How many of them are out there?”

“Three, including the woman.”

“There were more.”

Leo nods. “Probably outside.” He coughs violently. “Watching.”

“Yeah, makes sense.”

“Save yourself, Liv. If you get the chance, run.”

I carefully stroke his hair. “And leave my fourth favorite brother to die?”

He chuckles. “Edged out Antonio, did I?”

“By a hair. You’re both insufferable brutes.”

Leo closes his eyes and takes a deep, shuddering breath. He goes still. Too still. I put my hand on his shoulder and give him a gentle shake. “Leo.”

“Vinnie,” he says suddenly. “She’s pregnant.”

“I guessed as much.”

“You need to tell her...”

I tighten my grip on his hand. “No, Leo. You can give Vinnie your half-assed declarations of love when you see her. Now pull yourself together because we are getting out of here and I’m not carrying your dead weight.”

The ghost of a smile plays on his lips. “I wish I saw this side of you sooner.”

“If you missed me being a bitch, you weren’t looking close enough.”

Leo shakes his head. “Not a bitch. Strong, capable, a fucking warrior.”

He coughs again, and this time he spits up blood. Shit. I need to get help for him soon.

“Don’t get sentimental on me, Leo. I need you to be your usual asshole self if we’re going to get out of here.”

Letting go of his hand, I head to the door. I have no plan other than to get the attention of the assholes out there. I lift my fist to bang on the door and then pause.

There's a loud popping sound. Gunfire?

I turn to Leo. "I think the cavalry's here."

Leo says something, but his voice is faint and I don't catch it. I run over and crouch next to him. "What was that?"

"They'll try to use you to get out of here."

"It's okay." I slip my shoes off my feet and grasp one in my hand. "I'm ready for them."

The chance to test the truth of that statement comes sooner than I'd hoped. The metal bolt scrapes and the door flies open.

“On your feet, kurva.”

He grabs my upper arm and instinct takes over. As he pulls me to my feet, I use the momentum to swing around, driving the heel of my shoe into the side of his head with enough force that I hear a sickening crack. My assailant loses his grip on me as he stumbles backward.

Not giving him a chance to recover, I bring the shoe down hard on his right wrist. The gun he was holding goes flying. I dive for it, but he’s on me before I can reach it. I try to wriggle out from under him, but he’s too strong for me. He spits curses at me in a foreign language as I struggle to throw him off me. His hands wrap around my throat, but he barely has a chance to squeeze before he’s suddenly ripped away from me.

Rolling over, I see him and Leo wrestling on the floor. The blond-haired man is shorter than my brother, but they’re evenly matched for muscle and Leo is hurt. The asshole ends up straddling Leo. He grabs a knife from his belt.

“Run, Liv,” Leo yells.

There’s not a chance I’m leaving him now. I reach for the gun, aim and fire, hitting the blond asshole in the chest. He slumps over Leo, who pushes him off before collapsing back on the floor.

Footsteps thunder in the hallway outside. I raise the gun, ready to take out whoever comes through that door and then lower it when Piotr runs into the room. He’s wearing all black clothing, a bulletproof vest and is carrying a handgun. Matteo,

who's dressed in similar fashion and wielding an AR-15, is close behind.

"Help Leo," I instruct Matteo as Piotr pulls me to my feet and wraps his arms tight around me.

"Fuck, Olivia. I thought I lost you."

His obvious relief tells me everything's going to be okay between us. I step back from him as the room fills with people. Antonio comes in, followed by Jimmy and Dante. They take turns to hug me, and I assure them I'm fine. Leo is the one who needs their attention right now.

"Fuck, Livvy." Jimmy shakes his head. "I was so scared for you."

I nod toward the body on the opposite side of the room. "I remembered what you taught me."

"You took him out?" Piotr asks.

"Yes, and I'd do it again," I say firmly, seeing the look of concern on his face. "It was him or Leo."

"This bastard's still alive." Dante crouches over our assailant.

"Keep him that way," Antonio says. "I want to question him."

Dante nods. He motions for Jimmy to help him and together they carry the man from the room. I almost feel sorry for what he'll endure at my brothers' hands. I watch as Antonio and Matteo get Leo up off the floor. They put their shoulders under his arms to support his weight. He's barely holding on, but as they drag him past me, he reaches out to pat my cheek.

“Fucking badass,” he murmurs.

As the room clears of people, I sway on my feet. I’m tired, hungry, and my entire body aches. Piotr tries to lift me into his arms, but I wiggle free. If Leo can walk out of here on his own two feet, more or less, then so can I. Slipping my shoes on, I slick back my ponytail and hold my head high as Piotr leads the way out of the warehouse.

Our path out to the car is littered with bodies. I try not to look. I don’t want the images of these people ingrained in my memory.

“Are any of these ours?” I ask Piotr.

“No. One of your brothers’ men took a bullet to the thigh, but he’ll live.”

“Good.” I hate the thought of anyone dying to save me. Piotr would no doubt say they should consider it an honor, but I don’t think that way.

Piotr helps me into the back of a black Mercedes SUV and settles on the seat next to me. He wraps an arm around me and I rest my head on his shoulder. I groan as I try to make myself comfortable.

“Are you hurt?” Piotr asks.

“I’m a bit banged up, but I’ll live.”

“You fought in there?”

“Yeah, I channeled my inner Mila Lenkova.”

Piotr laughs as he caresses my cheek with his index finger. “Should I be concerned about you fangirling over Mila?”

I sit up and arch an eyebrow at him. “Should I be concerned about you using the word fangirling?”

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“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

I shrug. “Just doesn’t sound like something you’d say.”

“Okay, should I be concerned about you hero-worshipping her?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not about to start hacking off men’s dicks because they look at me the wrong way. I just think she’s a good role model. There aren’t many strong women in our world.”

Piotr curves his hand around my cheek, the way I like. “Compared to you, Olivia, she’s nothing. Like your brother said in there, you’re a badass.”

“When I have to be.” I lean my head on the back of the seat as the driver, one of Antonio’s men, starts the engine and drives us away from the warehouse. I look up at Piotr. “Why did you kill that woman’s son?”

Piotr sighs. “He helped the people who tried to kidnap Emilia. Your brothers and I tortured him for information, and he offered me a deal. The photos of you for his life.”

“Why did he have them?”

“Gallo left them with him for safekeeping.”

“So you got the photos and killed him anyway?”

“Yes. Once I saw those photos and knew he’d seen them, I couldn’t let him live.”

“Why?”

“Because no man gets to see you like that, Olivia. I knew as soon as I saw the photos you were mine.”

I frown deeply. “I don’t understand. Those photos are horrible. Why would you want me after seeing them?”

Piotr shakes his head and shrugs at the same time. “I don’t know. I saw something in them. There was a mix of vulnerability and strength. I wanted it for myself.”

I nod, though I don’t really get it. I suppose it’s not important when he first realized he wanted me. The fact is we’re together now and we have something worth fighting for. “You realize there may still be copies of the photos out there?”

“There might be, but I will kill anyone who tries to use them against you.”

“That’s quite the declaration.”

“I mean it, Olivia.” He takes my hand. “Nobody will hurt you ever again.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Not even you?”

“I will put a bullet in my brain before I ever treat you as I did last night.”

“You were awful to me, but I should have told you why Dario was sniffing around from the start.” I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. “What will happen to him?”

“Your brothers will take care of him.”

“Good.” I snuggle up closer to Piotr, enjoying the comfort his warmth brings me.
“I’m so glad you came for me.”

He gazes down at me. “Did you doubt I would?”

“No, but I wasn’t waiting around for it to happen. I planned to get myself out of there if I could.”

“Good girl, but just so you know, I will always come for you. I’d walk through the fires of hell to get to you.”

I sit up and cast a glower at him. “Why would I be in hell?”

Piotr laughs. “You wouldn’t be. You’re a fucking angel.”

“Damned right.” I slap his shoulder and then groan as pain fires through me.

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Piotr's expression immediately turns to one of concern. "Are you okay? We need to get you to a doctor."

"No. What I need is to go home and get into a nice, warm bath."

Piotr nods. "And then you're going to bed for a week."

"Uh, no, I don't think so." I roll my eyes when he gives me a questioning look.

"We're choosing my puppy on Sunday, remember?"

He shakes his head. "That can wait."

I stick my bottom lip out. "The cute ones will all be gone if we wait."

Piotr pulls me onto his lap, and I cuddle close. He kisses the top of my head. "I despair of you, Olivia Rezanova."

"No, you don't."

"No, I don't." He strokes my shoulder. "I love you more than I ever thought possible."

Tiredness overwhelms me, and I yawn. At some point, it will hit me just how much danger I was in tonight and I'll crumble. But I know Piotr will be there to catch me when I fall. Safe in my husband's arms, I close my eyes and let sleep claim me.

EPILOGUE

Five months later...

Olivia

Ashiver runs down my spine as I hear the familiar snapping of leather behind me. I stand up from the dressing table where I've been getting ready for dinner and turn to Piotr as he stalks into the room. He has his belt in one hand and a muddied shoe in the other. Oh, no. Not again.

"Your dog buried one of my favorite shoes," he says.

"Favorite shoes?" I arch an eyebrow. Piotr doesn't give a shit about footwear. I doubt he knows one pair from another. "Which designer are they?"

Piotr shrugs. "I don't know."

"Exactly." I jab a finger at him. "You couldn't pick those out of a line-up."

A smile touches Piotr's lips. He's not really angry, just looking for an excuse to dish out punishment. He's been restless all day, so I knew this was coming. I'm looking forward to it.

"That's not the point," he says. "You said you'd stop her burying my things, and she's still doing it."

I grimace. The puppy is more of a handful than I expected her to be. She loves to dig holes in the garden of our Westport home and bury things. Well, Piotr's shoes mainly. She seems to appreciate fine Italian leather.

"I can't control everything Mila does."

Piotr rolls his eyes. “You know she’ll be pissed if she ever finds out you named your dog after her.”

“Why? It’s a compliment. Terriers are tenacious, feisty. Who wouldn’t want to be a terrier?”

Piotr drops the shoe and slaps his palm with the leather belt. It’s equally menacing and arousing.

“You need to be punished.”

“But my family will be here in thirty minutes.”

We’re hosting a family dinner tonight to celebrate my brother Gio coming home. Everyone will be there, including Leo and Vinnie with their newborn daughter, Grace Olivia Volante. My brother was so impressed by the way I held it together when we were held captive, he wanted to give the baby my name.

“So we’ll need to be quick.” Piotr isn’t letting me off the hook. “Now, bend over the dressing table, ass out and legs spread.”

Holding onto the edge of the table, I lower my torso and push my ass out. Piotr pulls my hips back and kicks my legs farther apart, getting me into the exact position he wants. I glance up to meet his smoldering gaze in the mirror. He grabs my panties and rips them from my body. Excitement fires through me.

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“Five,” he says. “And I want you to count them.”

I hate when he makes me count. I know he does it so I have to focus. If I’m yelling out numbers, I can’t let my mind drift. I have to be present, aware of each sensation.

As he draws back his arm, I try not to tense. He brings the belt down on my left cheek.

“One,” I gasp, more from surprise than anything else. That didn’t hurt.

He spans me with the belt again.

“Two.” He’s not hitting me very hard. This is foreplay rather than punishment.

The belt cracks across my ass again. “Three,” I say, my voice clear.

“Good girl,” Piotr murmurs.

The next blow lands with more force. “Four,” I hiss.

I wiggle my ass, loving how the prickly heat spreads through my flesh. The bite of pain is just enough to ignite the dark desire at my core.

“Last one,” Piotr says.

He brings the belt down hard. Pushing up onto my toes, I squeal. “Five.”

Piotr throws the belt across the room, unfastens his pants, and rams his cock into me. Being stretched like this is something I'll never get used to. I'll never take the feeling of completion for granted. Wasting no time, Piotr fucks me at a relentless pace.

I watch myself in the mirror. My lips are parted. My eyes are glazed with lust. Only my husband can coax this wanton creature out to play.

“Your cunt is perfect.” Piotr digs his fingers into my hips and I moan in pain. “Who do you belong to?”

“You.”

He thrusts harder and my hips hit the edge of the dressing table.

“Who?”

“You, Piotr.”

“Fucking right you do.”

He pulls out suddenly, spins me around and lifts me onto the table. I cry out as he shoves his cock back into my welcoming depths. As I wrap my legs around his waist, he kisses me with ruthless possession, mirroring the way he thoroughly claims my pussy.

His hand wraps around my breast, and he kneads the tender flesh. Then he takes my nipple between his forefinger and thumb and twists. My hips buck wildly.

“Piotr!” I scream his name as I come.

His cock swells as he follows me to completion. He wraps his arms around me and

holds me tight as my body quivers. When I stop trembling, I pull back.

“That was some punishment,” I tease.

Piotr’s answering grin sends a wave of dread through me. “Oh, that wasn’t the punishment, *malyskha*.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a familiar silver object.

“I can’t wear that tonight.” The very idea of having a plug in my ass when I sit down to eat with my mother and my brothers makes me blush. “Everyone will know.”

Piotr shakes his head. “No, they won’t. Now, be a good girl and get in position.”

There’s no point in arguing. Piotr won’t give way once he’s made his mind up about something. I turn and lean over the dressing table, propping myself up on my elbows. Piotr runs the cool metal plug along my drenched pussy, getting it nice and wet.

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“I want your ass filled and your cunt weeping for me all night,” he murmurs as he bends over my back.

He positions the shiny metal toy and slowly pushes it into my rear channel. I keep my breathing slow and even, allowing myself to relax until the plug is all the way in.

“Good girl.” Piotr sweeps my hair aside. His lips find one of my most sensitive zones and his kiss makes my skin tingle. “Stay right there. Like that.”

He disappears into our closet and returns a minute later with a pair of white lacy panties. He helps me step into them and pulls them up so the fabric presses against the base of the plug.

“This is going to be hell,” I grumble.

“Perhaps,” Piotr concedes. “But think about the reward.”

“Will there be a reward?” I ask, playfully biting my bottom lip.

“Of course.” Piotr runs his fingers through my tousled hair. “Now, come on, let’s go before our family gets here.”

I place my hand in his, and he leads me downstairs. As we walk along the corridor, Mila trots past us with another one of Piotr’s shoes in her mouth.

“Mila!” I groan. “Drop it!”

As usual, she ignores me and heads for the kitchen, where she'll squeeze out through her doggy door into the garden.

Piotr shakes his head. "Looks like someone's in for another punishment."

The dark promise in his voice sends a ripple of desire through me. A smile spreads across my lips. Whatever he has in store for me, I can hardly wait.

The End