



Innocently Captured By the Bratva

Author: *Isla Brooks*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: A bossy Bratva stranger kidnaps me and knocks me up.

He's a decade older than me, and I know how feared he is.

When he sees someone coming onto me, he gets pissed and possessively claims me as his fiancée.

And the next thing I know, he handcuffs me to his car and takes me home.

I was meeting a client for my dating business when he entered my neat, organized world.

He got obsessed and started stalking me to make sure I'm "safe".

When he decides I'm not, he drags me to his car and brings out the handcuffs.

He forces me to act as his fiancée. It's the only way out of his prison.

I refuse to play his games, but he fights dirty.

He cruelly teases my curves until the longing inside of me explodes.

He claims me as his toy until I cannot fight my need for him.

I know he's just using me, that he's playing with me until he's done.

What will he say when he finds out I'm pregnant?

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Chapter 1 - Quinn

I use the corner barstool I'm perched on as my vantage point, subtly surveying the room for one particular person—a client I've never met before.

In my line of work, discretion is essential. Naturally, he never submitted his photo, nor did I request one. My clients are wealthy, influential men who prioritize privacy above all else. All I have to go on is a vague description of his height and features.

The mental image of my new client appears in my mind: tall, with dark cropped hair, in his mid-thirties, and likely exudes the kind of confidence that comes from either having too much money or too little sense.

Seeing that no one fits the criteria for my client, I turn back to my wine and take a small sip. The polished mahogany bar is cool under my fingers—tap, tap, tap. The restlessness gnaws at me. I flick my wrist up, my eyes darting to the slim gold watch encircling it. It's 8:38 p.m. We were supposed to meet by 8:30.

The kind of men I deal with are only ever late if something catastrophic happens, like the sky falling on their heads. They value their time and reputation far too much to commit such a faux pas. Could my client be here already, and I simply can't find him, or have I made a mistake on my calendar?

I pull out my phone to take a quick look at my schedule, which doesn't seem to have any empty spots on it. Each hour is color-coded, with every moment demanding attention. Running Quintessentially Yours, a high-end dating agency for the city's lonely elite, feels like organizing a school play where every kid wants to be the star.

My schedule is constantly jam-packed, with each appointment planned weeks in advance, leaving no room for error—or, for that matter, a personal life.

My business consumes so much of my time that my own romantic pursuits are scheduled somewhere between ‘unlikely’ and ‘what’s that?’ on my calendar. My love life is a theoretical concept, always just out of reach, like the last olive at the bottom of the jar—you know it’s there, but man, do you have to work for it.

It’s not that I couldn’t find a man to fall in love with. Heck, I get asked out on dates plenty. But when I take a man up on his offer for dinner and try to schedule it two months down the line, it usually ends before it even begins. I don’t blame them.

And the fact that my parents keep asking whether I’ve met the one makes me half consider hiring someone to bring along to our next Christmas dinner. But then again, knowing how invested my family is in my well-being, they’d just keep asking me about him, and I’d have to come up with yet another excuse for why we didn’t work out. It’s better to stay honest and single. It’s less complicated that way.

I scan the sea of bodies once again when my gaze catches on him. There he is, standing by the window, overlooking the stunning New York skyline, his profile matching the snapshot I’ve formed in my mind.

Dark, short hair—check. Towering height—check. An Armani suit that he probably dropped ten grand on, if not more. And that posture? It screams self-importance. If he were a peacock, he’d have his tail fanned right out.

Looks like the hunt for Mr. Right Now just got interesting.

I push back the bar stool, the metal legs scraping against the fine marble. Rising to my full height, I smooth down my navy suit jacket—a no-nonsense choice for a business meeting.

I make my way to him, and when I approach, he turns. My breath catches sharply in my throat, just the slightest hitch that I pray he didn't notice. The description I had was accurate, but words fail to do justice to the kind of man who can stop a room in its tracks. He has a face that makes you look, then look again—chiseled, sharp angles softened by full lips and framed by a jaw that could have been carved from granite. His eyes, a deep, piercing blue, meet mine, and I feel a jolt of electricity, unwelcome and inconvenient.

A man this gorgeous shouldn't just be strolling around in public without a warning label.

Why does he need help finding a woman? Suddenly, I remember where I am, who he is, and why I'm here. He's my client, and I shouldn't be ogling him like this.

It takes effort to put on a confident smile when I'm still reeling from how devastatingly handsome he is. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting long?" I ask, extending my hand. My voice comes out husky and a little nervous. I chide myself internally for it.

He looks me over, his gaze appreciative, which only serves to infuriate me slightly. When his eyes finally meet mine again, a smirk plays at the corners of his lips. "And you are...?" he drawls in a charming accent.

"Quinn Desmond," I say. "I run Quintessentially Yours, and I'm here to help you find the right woman." I keep my hand extended, waiting for him to take it. When he does, his handshake is firm, warm, and far too brief.

He gives a small chuckle, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Well, Quinn Desmond..." He drawls out my name like it's something he enjoys. "I'm afraid there's been a little mix-up. I don't need any help finding the right woman. In fact, I don't need help getting any woman, and I feel mild pity for men who require services

like yours.”

My jaw clenches at his arrogance. I want to smack that smirk right off his face. I step forward and stare up at him, my voice dropping like it does when I’m angry. “Oh, really? So you’re one of those men who think the world revolves around them, and every woman should just fall at their feet?” I tilt my head, my hair sliding over one shoulder. “I wonder—how’s that working out for you?”

“I think it’s working just fine.” He shrugs, his broad shoulders stretching the fabric of his tailored shirt. “But I appreciate the concern,” he grins without holding back.

“Concern?” I laugh, the sound sharp. “You’re not even on my radar, Mr.—”

“You can call me Mark,” he says, flashing a smile that’s so damn full of teeth and charm it makes me want to knock it right off him.

“Well, Mark,” I retort, my tone laced with sarcasm, “I’m sure your self-sufficiency is quite a burden to bear. And while we’re at it, my clients are not to be pitied. They’re far too successful to waste their time filtering through multiple women in search of the right one. It’s my job to help them save time, since they have so little of it.”

He raises an eyebrow in amusement, his eyes sparkling as though he finds this whole endeavor of riling me up to be something fun. “Oh, sweetheart, you’ve got fire. I like that.”

My blood boils at the pet name, but my traitorous heart, which is utterly out of my control, flutters in my chest. I cross my arms defensively over my chest.

“Well, this has been... enlightening,” I say, my voice sharp enough to cut through any man’s smile, but not his. “But I don’t appreciate being toyed with or underestimated,” I add coolly.

“Hey, you’re the one who walked up to me,” he adds with an audacious wink. I grit my teeth at his inability to be flustered by anything. A man like him can go through life without batting an eyelash. By now, I’ve figured that the longer I stay, the more this argument will escalate, and there’s no point in trying to convince him of anything other than what he believes to be true.

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I don't need his approval, and I certainly don't need to change his thoughts about anything—including my career choice or the judgment of my clients.

"You know what?" I say, taking a step back. "I need to go look for my client. Dotry not to charm too many women with that dazzling personality of yours; the world can only handle so much. Goodbye!"

And with that, I turn on my heels.

His laughter follows me, and I can feel his eyes on my back, sending a trail of heat down my spine. I have to fight the urge to look back and check if he's really watching or if I'm just imagining it out of hope. I force myself to be present in the moment by drowning myself in the scent of bourbon and the sound of jazz, but all I can think about is the man I just left behind.

Chapter 2 - Mark

I swirl the scotch in my glass and attempt a nonchalant look around the room for the woman from earlier. I spot her walking out of the restroom, tossing her hair over her shoulder with undeniable sass. I want to watch her longer, but that feels borderline creepy, so I quickly look away.

What the hell am I still doing here, lingering around this bar when I should have left ten minutes ago?

The truth is that woman—Quinn—won't leave my thoughts. It's not just her face, her voice, or the way she looked at me as if I were something she'd scrape off her shoe

that keeps running through my mind. It's not only that she's hands down one of the most beautiful women I've ever laid eyes on, with her long legs and that power suit that screams don't mess with me. It's the little things that prevent me from forgetting her. Take, for example, her strawberry-blond hair and the way it caught the light when she snapped at me earlier. It reminded me of fire. That's what she is. And I can't stop thinking about it.

Her striking beauty lingers in my mind—those piercing green eyes and curves that her no-nonsense suit can't hide. But more than how unbelievably gorgeous she is, it's the spark in her that I can't shake.

I take a sip, the burn doing nothing to calm the itch under my skin. My eyes scan the room again, almost against my will. It's a habit I can't shake now, this need to see if she's still here, still glaring at someone, still—

Then I spot her across the room. My pulse quickens.

But she's not alone.

My grip tightens on the glass. She's across the bar, leaning slightly against the counter—but her posture is stiff. She's uncomfortable. Of course she is, given how standing next to her—just a bit too close—is none other than Charlie fucking Letvin.

Irritation rises to the forefront of all my churning emotions, and memories of our long-standing rivalry resurface. Charlie and I go way back to our school days. He's got that same smug grin plastered on his face, the one he's been wearing since we were teenagers trying to outdo each other on our Russian school grounds. Back then, he would do anything to prove he was better. In class, he always put in extra hours to get a higher grade, though hardly ever managed. In sports, he played dirty to become Captain, and when it came to girls, he tried to one-up me every time, even though it was never a competition for me. Now? He's doing the same in business, power, and

whatever else he can steal from under my nose. And still, I can't help but smirk; he's still not getting the outcomes he desires.

"How can he, when he's such a fucking loser?" I mutter sarcastically under my breath, setting the glass down harder than I mean to. The bartender glances at me, but I wave him off.

Although our families weren't enemies at the time, everything changed when he took over his business. He initially tried to earn my trust, claiming we were part of the old school network and that our rivalry was just boys being boys, but when I learned he was trying to buy out my men to usurp our position in the Bratva underground, that was it. From that moment on, I realized that the sneaky prick would screw me over in a heartbeat if given the chance. God knows he's been trying.

He's like a fly constantly buzzing around wherever I go, always causing some kind of trouble. While he's not our biggest threat or problem, his presence is enough for me to be alert because it never comes without trouble.

I watch as Charlie says something to Quinn, his hand gesturing wildly as if he's recounting some grand tale. Quinn's lips press into a thin line, her arms crossed over her chest. She's not buying it, which is good. However, I notice the tension in her shoulders and the way she shifts her weight as if she's ready to bolt.

Charlie leans in closer, his hand brushing against her arm. "Keep your hands to yourself, Letvin," I growl, clenching my fists to keep the anger at bay. I don't know why I'm angry. Perhaps it's protectiveness or just plain irritation, but it's there, and I'm finding it hard to set it aside.

I should stay out of it. I should. But the thought of Charlie putting his greasy paws anywhere near her makes my skin crawl. I order another scotch, sipping it faster than I should. I need this drink to distract me, but my fingers tap a restless rhythm on the

bar as my eyes keep flicking back to Quinn and Charlie over and over again.

Seeing him with Quinn puts me on edge. What the hell is she even doing here with him? Can't she see he can't be a serious client? She doesn't seem like the type to buy into the stories of slimy bastards like Letvin. Then again, maybe she doesn't realize what he's capable of.

"Stay out of it," I mutter to myself while taking another sip of the watered-down dregs in my glass. "Not your problem, Zolotov."

Except it is. Every time Charlie leans in closer, his hand brushing against her arm as if he owns her, my jaw tightens. I can only imagine what he's thinking. He has always had a way of making everything—and everyone—his personal playground.

As I continue watching them, that uneasy feeling twists around my gut. Quinn's expression is polite, but I can tell she's uncomfortable from the way she leans back slightly as Charlie invades her space.

Charlie places his hand on the counter beside her, stepping forward until he's just a few inches away. I notice how she stiffens and turns her head, her green eyes narrowing as she takes a deliberate step to her right. Her lips move, sharp and quick, but I can't hear the words over the low hum of the bar. Whatever she's saying isn't enough to make Charlie back off. If anything, he leans in closer, that smug grin fixed on his face as if he's already won.

"Typical," I snort under my breath. Charlie's always been an overconfident prick, but this—this is next-level arrogance. He stands too close, his body angled as if he's trying to box her in. Quinn crosses her arms over her chest to create a clear barrier, but he doesn't take the hint. Instead, he laughs loudly and obnoxiously, probably at his own joke, and proceeds to put his hand on her waist, nearly gripping it.

Her shoulders tense, and she looks annoyed when she steps aside to evade his grip. He still doesn't get the hint, angling his body to face her and continuing to say whatever it is he's saying.

She's holding it together—barely—but there's no mistaking the way her fingers tighten around her glass. If she were anyone else, I'd say she's about two seconds away from throwing that drink in his face. But Quinn's smarter than that. She's calculating and weighing her options since this is probably the client she was supposed to meet. Still, the fire in her eyes is unmistakable. It's the same fire that caught my attention earlier, and now it's burning brighter with every second she's stuck with Charlie.

“What's your play here, Letvin?” I murmur, narrowing my gaze. He's up to something—he always is. And Quinn? She's either in way over her head or playing a game I don't understand yet. Either way, it's pissing me off.

I know I should walk away. I should. But the thought of leaving her alone with him doesn't sit well with me. She's too smart to fall for his act, but that doesn't mean he won't try something, and when he does, she might find herself in trouble. And if there's one thing I know about Charlie, it's that he doesn't take no for an answer.

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An idea forms in my head. Perhaps I should step in? “Damn it,” I mutter and look up at the ceiling, letting out a long groan. This is a bad idea. Aterribleidea. But I can’t just sit here and watch this play out when I know how wrong things could go for Quinn.

Charlie says something, his voice carrying just enough over the sounds of the bar for me to catch the condescending tone. Quinn’s jaw tightens as she takes another step back, her heel hitting the edge of the barstool behind her. She’s cornered, and Charlie knows it. The bastard’s enjoying this.

“That’s it,” I say under my breath, pushing off the bar.

I don’t have a plan, but I know one thing for sure: Charlie Letvin will not take up any more of her time.

I weave through the crowd, my eyes locked on Charlie. He’s too focused on Quinn to notice me approaching, that overconfident smirk plastered on his face. It makes me want to punch him. Charlie leans in closer, the back of his hand brushing against Quinn’s like he’s testing the waters. She stiffens, her green eyes flashing with enough anger for even me to see that Charlie’s advances aren’t fucking welcome.

When I come closer, Quinn’s gaze flickers to me, flashing with recognition and then surprise. I come to a stop beside her, my hand settling on the small of her back as I flash Charlie a tight smile.

“Hello, sweetheart.” I coo at her, gently leaning down to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. She looks stunned.

I kick the barstool behind her out of the way and gently pull her toward me, creating more distance between her and Charlie.

“Um...hi?” It feels more like a question than a greeting, and I can see her mind racing, attempting to decipher what I’m up to.

Quinn furrows her brows while Charlie’s smug expression falters and his gaze shifts nervously between Quinn and me. It’s almost comical how quickly his confidence falls.

“You’re interrupting our meeting,” Charlie protests.

My gaze shifts to Quinn, who watches me with confusion and wariness. I give her a small, almost unnoticeable nod, which I’m certain only she notices, before I turn back to Charlie. “My apologies. It’s not every night I have dinner and drinks planned with my fiancée, and I’m afraid you’re occupying her time. We have a date to get to.”

The words slip out smoothly, a spontaneous lie that hangs in the air between us. I watch as Quinn arches her eyebrows, her eyes widening slightly, clearly struggling to believe what she’s hearing. But to her credit, it’s a brief moment of surprise, and the next thing I know, she plays along like a pro, leaning into my touch with a wide smile.

Well, well, well, looks like Quinn Desmond is far more trouble than I thought.

Chapter 3 - Quinn

When I hear the word “fiancée” roll off Mark’s tongue, my heart starts to race. Fiancée? Is he crazy? I barely know the man, and now he’s claiming we’re engaged? A thousand thoughts race through my mind—the main one being that this man is utterly insane. But one thought stands out: His intervention is ridiculously timely.

The gears in my head crank into overdrive. If playing his game means dodging Charlie's sleazy advances, then let the charade begin. If I contradict him now, it'll only make things worse with Charlie, who has made me uncomfortable since the moment I met him. He hasn't taken no for an answer and has ignored every attempt of mine to keep this professional.

So, I plaster on a smile, hoping it looks genuine, and lean into Mark. No harm can come from this lie, given that Mark definitely isn't into me. How could he be? We've only spoken for five minutes.

"Fiancée? Is that so?" Charlie's voice drips with suspicion.

He narrows his eyes at Mark in utter disbelief. I can tell he feels he's been dealt an unexpected hand and is desperately trying to call a bluff, but he simply doesn't know how.

"Of course," Mark says, removing his arm from my waist and casually draping it over my shoulders, as if we've stood in this position a million times already. His confidence is infuriatingly attractive—it practically oozes from him like some kind of pheromone. "Quinn here has been the light of my life for quite some time. Haven't you, Darling?"

I force a smile, trying to make it as warm and bright as a mid-July sunny day, hoping it hides how my hands tremble as I lie. "Absolutely," I purr, leaning into his side. It feels like cuddling up to a marble statue. But damn, does he smell good.

"Really?" Charlie probes, clearly unconvinced. There's a twitch in his jaw, which I take as the subtle tell that he's on edge. "I didn't know you were seeing someone, Mark."

"Didn't realize you still had tabs on me, Letvin," Mark replies, his tone icy enough to

chill me to the bone. My gaze shifts between the two men, and I start to understand that, somehow, they know each other.

Mark wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me close. "Besides, it's a recent development," he says smoothly, his lips brushing against my temple. "We wanted to keep it private, didn't we, Babe?"

I nod, leaning into his embrace despite the voice in my head screaming at me to get out of this ridiculous situation. "Y-Yes, it's all very new." My voice wavers slightly, and I sincerely hope that Charlie doesn't notice.

"Congratulations," he says, but there's no warmth in his words. "Your brothers must be very happy, considering you're not one to play the knight in shining armor. I thought you were more the 'love them and leave them' type." He gives me a pointed look, as though he's revealing some big secret to destroy our supposed relationship, before turning back to Mark.

"I guess I never found the right one until Quinn," Mark retorts sharply, pulling me closer, almost possessively. "A woman as incredible as her is hard to come by."

A shiver runs down my spine at the motion, at the defensiveness in his voice for me, a complete stranger.

I glance between them, sensing a history I'm not privy to. The way they stare each other down and the barely concealed hostility in their words make it clear that they know each other well and that there's some bad blood between them. But now is not the time to pry. I have bigger problems to deal with, like the fact that I'm now apparently engaged to a man I barely know.

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The ‘love them and leave them type?’ I’m not surprised, seeing how goddamn confident, handsome, and clearly successful Mark is. I have no doubt he’s had a colorful past.

Not that it’s any of my business.

“The wedding is going to be intimate,” Mark lies smoothly, his fingers digging into my hip. “Family and close friends only.”

“Close friends. Intimate wedding,” Charlie repeats, the word dripping with doubt. “Right. Whatever you say.”

“Whatever I say? Unlike you, Charlie, I don’t have to lie about a thing,” Mark laughs in his face.

“Now what the hell do you mean by that?” Charlie bellows, his voice rising so high that a couple of patrons look in our direction.

Okay. Clearly, there’s a history of rivalry here that runs deep, and somehow, I’m caught in the crossfire.

“What I’m saying is, I choose to live my life with dignity. Unlike you, who needs to hire people like my fiancée to help you improve and learn to be the kind of man a woman might be slightly interested in. Knowing you, you’re going to have to weasel your way into a relationship, aren’t you?”

“Fuck you, Mark,” Charlie says, his face turning red with anger. “I doubt a marriage

with an asshole like you is ever going to last.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about my future,” Mark laughs. “I could always hire a little matchmaking service like you did.”

The jab hits its mark. Charlie bristles, the vein in his neck throbbing with indignation. “Careful, Mark. Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.”

“Glass houses?” Mark chuckles, the sound dark and menacing. “My dear Charlie, I prefer fortresses. Keeps out the riffraff.”

Their words are sharp, each sentence delivered to cause a hit to the other’s pride. I stand there mute, too afraid to help calm this situation down, and mildly curious about how all this will play out.

Charlie scoffs, shaking his head. “We’ll see about that. Fortresses aren’t all that strong.” He turns to me, his gaze raking over my body in a way that makes my skin crawl. “I’m afraid I’ll have to cancel our meeting, Quinn. It seems you have your hands full at the moment.”

I feel a rush of relief, followed by a twinge of indignation at how creepily he’s staring at me, as if I’m some object he wants to pick up. But I force a professional smile, nodding curtly.

“I understand, Charlie. Maybe another time.”

Just then, Mark intervenes. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, my fiancée and I must get going.”

Mark turns around, pulling me with him. I stumble slightly, caught off guard by the sudden movement, but his arm around my waist keeps me steady. I glance up at him,

taking in the hard set of his jaw and the anger in his eyes. In this moment, he looks like a very dangerous man indeed. One whom I wouldn't wish to cross under any circumstances.

As Mark leads me away, I can feel Charlie's gaze boring into my back. My hands feel clammy and my breaths come out rapid. I may have lost a client. But I avoided an uncomfortable situation and can only bring myself to feel relief.

Once a little away, I pull away from Mark's gentle hold on me. He looks down at me, his expression unreadable.

"Are you alright?" he asks in a gruff voice.

I nod and crane my neck to look him in the eye. "I'm fine. Thank you, for..." I gesture vaguely, unsure how to put my gratitude into words.

He shrugs, a half-smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Don't mention it. I couldn't let that slimeball put his hands on you."

I arch an eyebrow, a smirk playing on my lips. "Oh, so you were looking out for me, were you?"

Mark's eyes hold a glint of amusement as he looks down at me. "You think I'd let someone like him ruin my chance of having a stunning fiancée by my side?" His tone is teasing, but still, my heart races at the strange thought that he might be flirting with me.

I'm just imagining things, I tell myself. There's no chance he means it.

"Well, lucky for you, I can play the part of a devoted fake fiancée," I retort, smirking at him. The banter feels oddly comfortable, given the circumstances. "But the show is

over, and I've already taken up too much of your time."

I start to leave, but his strong hand grips my wrist and pulls me back. I turn, my breath catching at the touch.

Mark leans in, his breath warm and heavy against my ear. "We should move to another table and pretend we're on a real date. Charlie might try to follow you home."

I stiffen, my heart skipping a beat at the thought. "You really think he'd do that?"

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“I wouldn't put it past him. He's not used to being told no.”

I hesitate, weighing my options. On one hand, the idea of spending more time with Mark is strangely alluring, but at the same time, it also makes me nervous. I don't know who he really is, and while he did help me, he's also unbelievably arrogant. Do I want to be stuck with him for an extra hour or even more? On the other hand, the thought of Charlie stalking me home makes me very, very nervous.

“Alright,” I say and glance up at Mark with a resigned expression. “Lead the way.”

He takes my hand, his fingers lacing through mine as he guides me through the crowded bar. I can't help but notice the way people part for him. He doesn't even know the effect he has on those around him.

We settle into a booth in the back corner, and the angles of his face appear even more pronounced in the shadows created by the dim lighting. “Comfortable?” He leans back, one arm stretched along the top of the booth, his posture the epitome of casual arrogance. Yet, his eyes are anything but relaxed. They scan the crowd like a predator on the hunt, never quite settling.

“Sure,” I lie, crossing one leg over the other as I attempt to match his nonchalance. My heart races, betraying the falsehood I'm trying to convey.

Our gazes meet for a moment, and I feel myself caught up in his, the seconds passing us by. An electric charge fills the air, a push and pull that dances between us, daring either of us to make a move.

“Thanks for... again... you know,” I start, breaking the silence that had begun to throb with unspoken words, realizing I’m repeating myself.

“Playing your knight in shining armor?” he smirks, raising an eyebrow.

“Something like that.” A reluctant smile tugs at my lips, even as I roll my eyes at his ego.

“Well, they say the third time’s a charm,” he says, now leaning forward, his hands interlaced on the table.

“Third time’s the charm?” I ask, confused.

“For you to thank me.” He gives me a wink.

Oh, so he noticed my little goof-up. I blush and say nothing. To my surprise, he catches on and changes the topic. “So, what should we drink?”

“I wouldn’t mind a wine,” I say, twirling a strand of my hair around my finger for comfort, a habit I’ve had since I was a little girl.

He raises a hand and motions at the waiter. “A bottle of...?” he questions, looking back at me.

“White, please.” I give him a smile.

“Bring me the 1996 Chapoutier Ermitage Blanc and some of those lovely salmon tarts,” he says, handing the waiter a bill as an advance tip. Meanwhile, I’m still reeling from the fact that he ordered a bottle of wine without even glancing at the menu. I quickly skim through it and quietly notice it costs five hundred dollars.

I choose to say nothing. When the bill arrives, I'll pay my share. God knows I earn enough and rarely get to spend it. After the adventure tonight has been, I might as well regard it as a night to remember.

"Of course, Sir," the waiter says and wanders off.

"So," he says, his voice low and rough. "Tell me about yourself, Quinn. What made you decide to start a dating agency?"

I blink, taken aback by the question. "I... I wanted to help people find love," I say, my voice wavering slightly. "I know how hard it can be to put yourself out there. To be vulnerable."

He nods, his eyes never leaving mine. "And have you? Found love, I mean."

The question is so damn loaded and I wonder why he asked it. It's just curiosity, I assume. It takes me by surprise and I find myself at a loss for words. Just then, the waiter returns with the wine and pours us both glasses, giving me time to think.

He raises his glass and we cheer, before taking a sip.

"So?" he sets his glass down.

I swallow hard, my heart racing beneath my ribs. "No," I whisper. "I haven't."

"Maybe you've been looking in the wrong places." His gaze softens with kindness, an emotion I didn't expect from him. It takes me by surprise, compelling me to speak the truth.

"If only I'd been looking, that is."

”Oh?” he inquires.

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"My work. It keeps me busy," I shrug. "Never had much time to indulge in a love life."

"Well," he shrugs back. "It's not too late. You're young."

I watch him closely and sip my wine. "I am," I say, watching as the waiter lays down the salmon tart. Mark leans forward and puts one on my plate before serving myself. That's when I notice the little grey on his stubble, the crinkles around his eyes.

He's handsome, but definitely has a decade more in life experience.

"What about you?" I ask. "You've found love?"

"Trying to buy yourself a new client, are you?" He breaks into the most heartbreaking grin.

He leans back, laughter dancing in his eyes as I blush furiously at the thought of setting him up with someone else. For some reason, that idea seems odd.

"Hey, it doesn't hurt to ask," I laugh, poking at the salmon tart on my plate. When I look up to meet his gaze, his eyes are locked right on me, as though he's trying to see right through me.

"To answer your question," he says as he looks at me intently, "I wasn't lying earlier. I haven't found the right woman."

To my surprise, he reaches over and gently caresses the back of my hand. I look up in

shock, trying to pull back, but he only holds on to it tighter and whispers through a smile. “Charlie’s watching.”

I keep my gaze on him, trusting him, and tilt my head, giving him the sweetest smile ever. “Thanks.”

He takes my hand to his lips, gives it a small kiss, before setting it down. My skin burns from the contact, and my heart races like a girl way in over her head.

This is all a show, Quinn, I tell myself. From the corner of my eye, I see Charlie head to the bar for another drink.

”He’s not looking anymore,” I say, and pull my hand away from him.

Mark frowns and leans forward to whisper conspiratorially. “You have no idea who you're dealing with, Quinn. Charlie's not just some wealthy client. He's dangerous.”

I lean forward, meeting his gaze head-on. “I know, but I can handle it.”

But he chooses to be unrelenting. “This line of work you do. It doesn’t seem safe.”

”My clients are perfect gentlemen, and I can handle myself,” I say, annoyed by this assumption he’s making. I’m running a matchmaking service, for god’s sake. Not peddling drugs!

”Ah, but you forget, I'm the one saving your pretty neck from Charlie's less-than-gentlemanly intentions.” His voice is low and teasing, yet there's steel underneath. “Surely, you can hire someone else to handle these meetings?”

Just then, Charlie wanders by the table, observing us from a distance.

"Tonight was a one-off and it doesn't give you the right to question how I run my business." My hushed tone is sharp as a knife, even though it slices through a grin.

"Of course not," he concedes with mock sincerity. "You handle your affairs so... adeptly."

"Mark." I glare at him, knowing this was an underhanded comment regarding the situation we find ourselves in now.

"Quinn." He mirrors my tone, the corner of his mouth twitching.

The act is back on, and we're suddenly the picture-perfect couple to anyone looking our way. His hand finds mine across the table, his fingers intertwining with a possessive strength that sends a slow, delectable shiver down my spine.

"Smile, Darling," he murmurs with a wink, as if we're sharing an intimate joke.

"Like this?" I bat my lashes exaggeratedly and flash an exaggerated fake smile, hoping it looks genuine from a distance.

"Perfect," he deadpans. "If you're into that sort of thing."

"Next thing I know, you'll be asking for a kiss," I warn under my breath, aware of the eyes skimming over us. "We only need people to think we're together, not that we're about to elope."

"Wouldn't dream of either," he jokes back.

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I roll my eyes and glance around the room, only to see Charlie turning his back on us. I can tell he's getting ready to leave. He hands the waiter some bills, shoots us one last angry look, and walks out of the bar, slamming the door shut behind him.

Mark's hand, however, still lingers on mine. I turn to face him and find him fixated on my face.

"He's gone," I say.

"What?" he asks, as though he were lost in some thought.

"Charlie. He's gone," I say again.

He nods, his eyes clearing, and slowly pulls back his hand before reaching for the wine.

There are a few brief seconds of silence between us, creating a lingering tension.

"I think we should ask for the check," I finally say, realizing there's no reason for us to continue sitting here together.

"The night doesn't have to end quite yet," he suggests slowly, testing the waters.

I tense, my mind racing as I try to figure out his angle. Is he simply bored? Or is it something more?

The idea of something more seems unimaginable. He and I? We have nothing in

common. Besides, tonight was an accident, and despite the sparks I likely imagined we felt, this isn't going to lead anywhere.

Not after what Charlie said—that he's a love-them-and-leave-them kind of a guy.

"I have an early day tomorrow," I finally say, even though a wave of disappointment washes over me. Why the hell do I feel like sticking around? The wine has probably gone to my head.

"Of course," he says, acceding and calling for the check. I reach for my wallet to take out my share, but I feel a sturdy hand over my shoulder.

"I insist," he says, his eyes blazing fiercely. I try again, but he shakes his head in warning.

I put away my wallet with a nod. "Thank you," I say softly.

"Anytime," he says, turning to get the check.

Once done, we both stand. I turn to walk away, only to find him by my side.

"It's alright," I say. "I've got it from here."

"I'd rather see you to a cab," he insists.

I nod, trying to ignore the flicker of what appears to be concern in his stormy blue-gray eyes. We walk side by side toward the door. He holds it open for me, letting me pass.

To my relief, there's a line of cabs outside without much of a wait.

I turn to him. "So I guess it's goodbye then," I say with a smile.

"I guess it is," he says, and walks me to the cab.

"Can't believe I owe you one," I mutter as a parting joke, reaching for the handle of the backseat of the cab. "Just so you know, this doesn't mean I'm signing up for your protection services or anything."

"Of course not," he scoffs, taking over and holding the door open with an exaggerated flourish as if I were royalty. "But let's be honest, Quinn, you're not exactly cut out for handling this stuff."

"Excuse me?" I stop in my tracks. "Just what kind of stuff do you think I deal with? I run a successful business, thank you very much, and I've been doing it for two years now. I really don't need any more of your advice or judgment."

He smiles in a way that annoys me even more, but his eyes are soft, as if he's enjoying every moment with me, even in the middle of a god damn argument. "I never doubted your business acumen, Quinn. I was referring to the dangerous situations it might land you in."

"There's nothing dangerous about a matchmaking service, for the love of God! I help people find love; that's all!" I say, somewhat annoyed. I brush past him and hop into the cab, gripping the door. "As I said earlier, tonight was a one-off and I host my meetings in public places for a reason. Stop making up the worst-case scenarios in your head based on the only snapshot you've witnessed!"

And with that, I slam the cab door shut and ask my driver to take me back home. Just when I thought he could be redeemable, that arrogant judgment had to show up all over again!

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Well... good riddance.

Chapter 4 - Mark

I stare at the computer screen, my eyes fixed on Quinn's profile on her website. I've already spent an hour reading about her when I should be working. But I can't bring myself to stop thinking about her, and this is one small way I can satisfy that longing.

Besides, I'm worried. For some reason, that whole incident with Charlie Letvin replays in my mind every night, and even though I know she's practically a stranger, the fact that I was there to help her when she got into trouble makes me an invested party in her safekeeping.

I scroll through her impressive credentials. She graduated with honors in Corporate Communications and PR from NYU. She built a high-end matchmaking business from the ground up, raking in over half a million dollars in annual revenue within the first year. The connections she made during this process are equally remarkable. This woman is no ordinary 23-year-old.

My mind whirls with conflicting thoughts. What started as simple curiosity has spiraled into an obsession I can no longer control. I rationalize my actions by convincing myself that I am tracking Quinn's every move for her own safety. Since she fell into my orbit, it has become my duty to protect her.

But deep down, I know there's more to it than that. She's gotten under my skin, and I find myself thinking about her often, wondering what it would be like to see her laugh at something I say, to hold her in my arms for just one night. Will she be soft

and coy, or will she be pure fire? I shake my head, trying to clear these inappropriate thoughts. I certainly shouldn't be obsessing over women.

Yet here I am, unable to look away from her photo. My pulse quickens as I imagine her reaction if she knew the extent of my interest. Would she be flattered? Disgusted? Afraid? A part of me longs to find out, to catch a glimpse of what she thinks about me.

But I can't risk it just yet. For now, I have to watch from afar and ensure her safety. As for my growing desire for her? That's a problem I'll need to handle on my own. It's better to cut it off at the root, if I can.

I pick up the phone and dial a familiar number. "Dmitri, I have a job for you."

"Yes, Boss?" His voice is gruff, but I can hear the underlying respect.

"I need you to follow Quinn Desmond. I'll send you more information. Learn about her routines, meetings, and everything else. But be discreet; I don't want her to catch on. She's an ally, not an enemy, and if you think she's in trouble, intervene."

"Understood. I'll put my best men on it."

I hang up, satisfied with the plans made. If I can't be near her, at least I'll know she's safe. And who knows, maybe Dmitri's intel will give me the perfect excuse to finally make contact.

Days turn into weeks, and the reports keep coming in. Quinn's life basically revolves around client meetings and business deals. We've also discovered that her connections run deeper than we thought. From billionaires and politicians to members of the mafia, Bratva, and other underworld figures, she's influenced every corner of the American and global elite in helping them find love. She's gone so far as to

arrange marriages among royals. Even Dmitri seems impressed, and that's saying something.

I find myself poring over the details, memorizing her favorite coffee order and the route she takes to work. It's becoming an obsession, one that's getting harder and harder to justify. What started as a simple background check has transformed into something that consumes every free moment of my waking day.

As I sit in my office, nursing a glass of vodka, a thought strikes me. What if I booked a meeting with her agency? It would be the perfect opportunity to see her again, to be in her presence without arousing suspicion.

I nearly choke on my drink at the absurdity of the idea. What am I thinking? Booking a matchmaking service? The idea makes me laugh out loud. And yet, the temptation is there, coming at me like a persistent itch.

I slam the glass down, disgusted with myself. This is ridiculous. I'm a grown man, not some lovesick teenager. I can't let some woman, no matter how intriguing, distract me from my daily life in such an unhelpful manner.

But even as I try to convince myself to forget her, I know it's a losing battle. Quinn Desmond has gotten under my skin, and no amount of making excuses for my actions can change that.

Two weeks later, while my men are busy gathering intel on a theft attempt on our shipments, I find myself sitting in my car, parked discreetly across the street from a high-end restaurant where Quinn is meeting with a client. My men have been tracking her movements and provided me with her schedule, but since they couldn't make it today, I had the urge to check on her safety myself.

Through the window, I catch a glimpse of her, and my breath hitches. She's stunning, her strawberry-blond hair falling in soft waves around her face, and her green eyes sparkling as she laughs at something her client says. She exudes C-suite confidence, her posture straight and her gestures animated.

In this moment, I admire her poise and professionalism, yet I am mildly annoyed at the way she seems to command the room without even trying. I had to work so hard to get there. She's a force to be reckoned with, that's for sure.

As I watch, Quinn leans forward with a serious expression while discussing something with her client. The man nods, clearly hanging on her every word. It's obvious that she's damn good at her job.

But there's another part of me, a darker part, that wants to claim her as my own just so I can keep her safe. I've seen her roster of clients. Not all men are innocent company. It's a dangerous thought, one that I know I shouldn't entertain. And yet, I can't seem to shake it.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes. I glance down at the screen. It's a worrying message from one of my informants, warning me of movement in Quinn's CCTV outside on her balcony. I know we shouldn't have hacked her cameras, but how else was I to know if she's safe when we're not watching her?

My heart rate spikes with worry, and adrenaline pushes me into action. There shouldn't be any movement. She lives alone, has no pets, and no one visits unless she's there. The thought of her being in danger is unacceptable. I have to act, and quickly.

Hopefully, she doesn't have to find out.

Without hesitation, I start the car, my mind already racing with plans. I'll need to

check on her apartment and make sure it's safe for her to come back to.

I pull up to Quinn's apartment building. The street is eerily quiet. I scan the building, my eyes finding her window on the third floor. It's open, the curtains fluttering gently in the breeze.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath. Quinn never leaves her windows open, not in this neighborhood. I have a gut feeling something is wrong.

I switch off the engine and step out of the car, making sure to focus on my surroundings. The air is thick with tension, and I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched. I move quickly, my steps nearly silent as I approach the building.

When I draw closer, I catch a glimpse of movement in the form of shadows behind the curtains. My hand instinctively reaches for the gun tucked in my waistband, my fingers curling around the cold metal. I narrow my eyes, waiting to see what it could be.

A tall man walks closer to the window. This entire situation feels sinister. I can't see his face from this distance. In shock, I hide behind a tree. I don't want to be discovered because there's no time for more trouble. Quinn might be back any minute, and I need to be there for her. I peek out, and he's gone. The window remains open. Fury courses through my veins at the thought of him being in there, rifling through her things.

Who could it be? For some reason, Charlie Letvin comes to mind. Call it intuition. If Charlie's involved, then Quinn's in more danger than I thought. I have to get to her

now.

I position myself near the entrance of her building from the parking lot, ready to stop her when she arrives from heading into the trap her home now is. My mind tries to piece together what Charlie's game is. Whatever it is, I won't let him win. Not that I ever have.

Time passes by, but feels like an eternity. I keep my eyes on the street, watching for any sign of Quinn's car.

And then, finally, I see her. She parks her car and exits with her head down, lost in thought and utterly oblivious to her surroundings. She has no idea what's waiting for her, no clue that her home isn't as safe as she thinks it is.

I step out from my hiding spot to intercept her. Quinn looks up and her eyes widen with surprise when she sees me. I don't give her a chance to speak.

"Get in my car," I growl, my voice low and urgent. "Now."

She takes a step back in shock. I close the distance between us in under a second, my hand reaching out to grasp her arm.

"What the hell, Mark?" she snaps, trying to wrench her arm free. "What are you doing here?"

I tighten my grip and pull her towards my car. "You're not safe," I say. "We need to leave, now."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," she says, her voice trembling slightly. "Let me go. What the hell are you doing here anyway?"

I don't listen, dragging her along to my car, though she puts up a fight.

"Are you insane? Where are you taking me?" she insists as I open the car door and gesture for her to get in.

I know my actions seem rash, even insane, but I don't have time to explain everything right now. Charlie could have other men lurking nearby, ready to strike at any moment. As Quinn hesitates, I see the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes.

"Trust me, Quinn," I say, my tone softer this time, trying to appeal to her sense of reason. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't important. Just get in the car, please."

She studies me for a long moment, her eyes searching mine as if trying to assess if I'm sane or not. Finally, with a resigned sigh, she relents and slides into the passenger seat.

"Where are we going?" she asks again.

"To my house," I say. "It's the only place you'll be safe."

"Wait, what? Are you crazy?" she shrieks, trying to step out, but I slam the door shut before she can.

Chapter 5 - Quinn

I take a moment to register that I'm stuck in the passenger seat of Mark's very expensive, very fancy black sports car. The leather feels cool against my skin, and despite the strangeness of the situation, the rich smell is pleasing to my senses.

But I'm not here to admire his car.

”Mark, what the hell is going on?” I demand in frustration. I sit up straighter to assert some control over the situation and swerve my body to face him. “You can't just kidnap me off the street like this!”

Mark glances at me, his eyes subconsciously wandering over my body, noticing how one of my legs is tucked beneath me, my skirt riding up my thighs. He follows the trail of skin, but I can see him forcefully avert his gaze. He’s trying hard not to look, to avoid showing me his moment of weakness.

I tell myself it can’t be because he wants me. It’s because he’s a man, and I’m a woman in a very short skirt. I immediately put my leg down, heat pooling wherever his gaze had roved.

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I realize how small this car is, how impossibly hard it is to not care about how close Mark sits. There's a charged silence between us before Mark clears his throat and looks ahead again. "I'm not kidnapping you, Quinn. I'm protecting you."

"Protecting me? From what?" I scoff, crossing my arms over my chest. Justwhodoes he think he is?

"There's no time to explain right now. We need to get you somewhere safe." He says it with a straight face, like this is just another day at work for him.

I let out a humorless laugh. "Safe? You don't even know me! Forgive me if I find that hard to believe."

I can't wrap my mind around this. One minute I was getting out of my car to go straight to my apartment, and the next I'm trapped in a car with Mark, a man I've met a total of one time. I don't even know his last name! How does he even know where I live?

"Quinn, listen to me," Mark says with an urgency in his voice I find hard to ignore. "I know you have no reason to trust me, but I need you to believe that I have your best interests at heart."

I narrow my eyes at him, searching his face for any hint of deception, but all I see is sincerity. He truly believes what he's saying!

Despite the part of me that wants to demand he undo the child lock and let me out right this second, I find myself hesitating. Maybe it's the way he speaks with such

angst or the stress radiating off him that makes me think otherwise.

I take a deep breath to steady my frantic heart. “Okay,” I say slowly. “I’ll hear you out. But this better be good, Mark. Because if you’re lying to me, I swear to god I’ll make you regret it.”

Mark looks over at me in surprise. “When I arrived at your apartment, I noticed your window was open. I watched your place for a while, Quinn. Someone was in there.”

“What are you talking about? Why were you watching my place?” The thought of him paying such close attention to my apartment is unnerving, to say the least.

He sighs. “It doesn’t matter how I know. What matters is that you’re in danger, and I need to get you somewhere safe.” His gaze meets mine briefly, and the intensity in his eyes steals my breath. “I’m taking you to my house. It’s the only place I can guarantee your protection.”

My mind reels. I’ve always prided myself on my independence and ability to take care of myself. But the thought of someone breaking into my apartment, of being in danger... It’s enough to make my stomach twist.

”How do I know this isn’t some kind of trick?” I ask, my voice wavering slightly. “For all I know, you could be the one putting me in danger. Besides, you said my window was open? It can’t be. I’m certain I closed it. You’ve probably got the wrong apartment.”

Mark’s jaw clenches, a muscle ticking in his cheek. “If I wanted to hurt you, I would have done it already.” His words are blunt, but there’s a rawness to them that catches me off guard.

”Okay,” I whisper at last. “I’ll go with you. But if this is some kind of game, Mark...”

“It’s not a fucking game, Quinn. There, look! That’s your damn apartment, isn’t it?” he points up at my apartment, and when I look, I freeze. The window is open.

“I... I thought I closed it,” I say again. “It’s always closed.”

“I know. Believe me now?” he says, beginning to put the car into drive.

”No!” I say, rather sharply. “I might have left it open by accident. Let’s just go up and check, okay? What you’re suggesting is crazy. I can’t just go to your house.”

”Why not?” he asks, like it’s the silliest concern I have.

”Because I don’t know you!” My voice comes out an octave higher in protest, to truly drive the point home. “Be reasonable.”

”Fine. You want reasonable?” he argues. “We’ll sit right here and watch. I thought I saw someone in there. He’s bound to make an appearance now.”

“If there’s someone in my apartment, I insist we go check it out,” I tell him.

”No,” he roars with such fierce protectiveness that a dull silence falls over the car. He sighs and runs his hand through his hair before shutting down the car and looking at me like I’m a complete pain in his ass. “We’ll sit here and watch. The man could be armed.”

There’s something about his command, the way he’s taking charge, that makes me stay planted in my seat, eyes fixed on the open window of my apartment.

”Fine,” I whisper.

”Fine,” he says hoarsely, his eyes locking with mine. Tension crackles in the air as

we stay fixated in that position until finally his eyes flicker between mine and then he turns back.

Once again, I notice how close we're sitting, how his sleek sports car leaves hardly an arm's length of distance between us. In this silence, I catch the scent of mahogany from him and the leather of these expensive seats.

The silence stretches between us as we sit in the car, my eyes mostly fixed on my apartment building. The anticipation is almost unbearable, creating a tightness in my chest that makes it hard to breathe. I glance over at Mark.

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With his jaw clenched like that, I can see every angle of his chin. The way his hand rests on the steering wheel, so casual and incredibly masculine, sends a shiver down my spine. I have so many questions, but one keeps coming up: Why does he care what happens to me? Why was he watching over me?

Despite the absurdity of the situation, I find the idea of a man like him checking in on my safety strangely appealing. Then, I entirely discard that crazy internal talk.

That's how victims of Stockholm Syndrome talk, Quinn, I tell myself.

As if he can read my thoughts, he chooses this moment to glance over at me. The way his gaze pierces through me makes my breath catch in my throat. I feel a blush creeping up my neck as I look back at the apartment. The tension in the air could generate electricity.

"How long do we have to wait?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

"As long as it takes," he replies firmly.

The discomfort I feel only grows stronger with each passing minute. The occasional exchange between us does little to alleviate the strangeness of the situation, no matter how hard we try.

"You know, if you wanted to spend more time with me, you could've just asked me out on a date like a normal person," I quip, trying to lighten the mood.

Mark's lips twitch at my little joke. "Where's the fun in that? I thought you liked a

little danger, Quinn.”

I roll my eyes, but a thrill runs through me at his words.

Suddenly, a flicker of movement catches my eye, and my heart drops to my stomach. There, in the window of my apartment, I see a shadowy figure moving behind the curtains. A strangled gasp escapes my lips, and I feel Mark tense beside me.

”No,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “This can't be happening.”

But even as the words leave my mouth, I know it's true. What Mark warned me about is real! I feel like I'm going to be sick.

Mark's voice cuts through my racing thoughts. “Your apartment is probably being bugged right now, Quinn. There’s no other reason for someone to be in there for so long. Or, they might be waiting for you to return to attack. But that seems unlikely, since they would try to hide and go unnoticed. Clearly, this man doesn’t care enough to hide, so I’m thinking it’s more likely the former reason he’s in there.”

”Why?” I ask, terror rife in my voice.

“I wish I had answers for that,” he growls and slams his fist against the steering wheel, making me lurch. “Listen, we should leave now before this situation gets worse. If whoever this is finds us here, things could get ugly.”

I look over at him and find myself caught off guard by the genuine worry in his eyes.

“I can't just leave everything behind,” I argue in vain, not prepared for this sudden turn of events, at having my life turned upside down. “I have a life here. I can't just leave my apartment!”

Mark sighs, running a hand through his short black hair. “You don't have a choice, Quinn. They know where you live, and they won't stop until they get what they want.”

I shake my head, refusing to accept his words. “No, I'll find another place to stay. A hotel, a friend's house, anywhere but with you.”

I reach for the car door, determined to leave, but Mark's hand shoots out, gripping my wrist. “Don't be stupid, Quinn. You're not safe out there on your own.”

I yank my arm from his grasp, anger and fear warring inside me. “I can take care of myself, Mark. I don't need you to protect me. But thank you for the warning. I think I'll call the cops for now.”

But even as I say the words, I know they're a lie. The shadowy figure in my apartment is proof that I'm in real trouble, and I've worked with enough dangerous men to understand that the cops can't always be of help. Still, I can't bring myself to admit it, not to Mark, not to anyone.

For if I do, that would make me helpless, when I've tried to be anything but.

I make another attempt to leave the car, but Mark is faster. He pulls me back, his hands firm on my shoulders, forcing me to look at him. His blue-gray eyes bore into mine, and for a moment, I'm lost in their intensity.

“I'm not going to let you walk into a trap, Quinn,” he says firmly. “You're coming with me, whether you like it or not.”

Before I can protest, Mark reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pair of handcuffs. My eyes widen in disbelief as he snaps one end around my wrist and the other to the car's door handle.

”What the hell do you think you're doing?” I demand, tugging at the cuffs. The metal bites into my skin, making me captive.

Mark turns to me, unapologetic. “Keeping you safe, even if it means doing something you don't like.”

I stare at him, shellshocked, my mouth hanging half-open. This can't be happening. I'm handcuffed in a stranger's car, completely at his mercy!

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"This is kidnapping, you know," I spit out at last, my voice trembling with anger. "You can't just take me against my will."

"I can, and I will," Mark replies, his tone leaving no room for argument as he puts the car into drive.

Chapter 6 - Mark

I lead Quinn through the threshold of my home, her delicate wrists bound by cold metal cuffs. She fights me every step of the way.

"What the fuck do you think you're playing at?" she snarls, her neck craning to give me a glare with furious eyes.

I nearly stop in my tracks. Even in her rage, she's breathtaking. Yet I keep pushing her forward, knowing that we're still too close to the door and any moment of weakness on my part would only make her run for it. "Now, now, Ms. Desmond. Is that any way to speak to your gracious host?"

"Host? You fucking kidnapped me!" She lunges back against me to make me lose balance, but I easily predict and sidestep her attack.

"I prefer to think of it as... an impromptu invitation." I keep my tone light, but my grip on her arm remains firm.

Quinn struggles against me, her slim body twisting and turning with surprising strength. "Let. Me. Go!" Each word comes with an energized attempt to break free.

I tighten my hold, marveling at her fire. Most women would be cowering in fear by now, but not Quinn.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Darling,” I say, gently pushing her towards the stairs. “You see, we have some rather pressing matters to discuss.”

She digs her heels in, nearly toppling both of us. “The only thing I want to discuss is that you’re going to jail for this, you hear me?”

I try hard not to roll my eyes. Jail? Is she seriously going there right now after I saved her life? What a woman! “Yeah? And who’s going to send me? You? I’ll take the risk until you’re no longer in danger.”

“I fucking hate you!” she hisses.

I lean in close, my lips barely grazing her ear. “You can hate me, alright. But you’re staying put.”

She kicks back, her foot attempting to kick my shin. I wrap my arms around Quinn, pulling her tight against my chest. Her body goes rigid, but I can feel the rapid rise and fall of her breath. My own heart races at the proximity.

“Settle down, Quinn,” I murmur, my lips brushing the shell of her ear. “You’re only making this harder on yourself.”

Quinn shivers, and I’m not sure why. It’s not anger. Could it be the same longing I feel? No, I tell myself firmly. I’m overreaching. The scent of her perfume fills my senses, making my head spin.

I feel her relax slowly in my arms, her back molding to my chest. It’s subtle, but I notice every tiny shift of her body against mine. The heat between us is palpable and

electric.

"Give me a chance to explain," I whisper, thinking I have an opening now to convince her to comply with me.

She stiffens once more, as if suddenly becoming aware of herself.

I take a step back, releasing Quinn from my embrace but keeping my hands on her shoulders.

"Now," I say, "let's talk about why you're really here."

Quinn takes rapid breaths and cranes her neck again to listen as I lead her up the stairs. "Oh, please enlighten me. I'm dying to know why I've been kidnapped and manhandled by an arrogant asshole."

I can't help but smirk at her fiery retort. God, she's magnificent when she's angry.

"Charlie Letvin," I say, watching her face carefully. "Ring any bells?"

Her brow furrows slightly as she stumbles on the stairs. I quickly wrap an arm around her waist to hold her steady, and she looks up at me inquiringly, her lips parted for air. God, she looks so wretchedly beautiful in this moment.

"You know it was Letvin in my apartment?" she asks, her voice husky.

I lean in, my voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Let's just say your potential client Charlie has taken quite an interest in you and there's nothing he wouldn't do to make sure you're his. And that's not dangerous for the reasons you might think."

Quinn's eyes widen for a fraction of a second before narrowing dangerously, but she

keeps up with me as we head up the stairs. “What are you talking about?”

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"You deserve to know the truth. That night, when I saw Charlie taking an interest in you, I couldn't just walk away because I know what he's capable of and who he is. I rescued you from his clutches that night, for sure. But something told me that wouldn't be the end of it. I kept an eye on you for your security, to make sure you were truly safe. During that time, I learned about your work. I noticed you've had powerful clients from all walks of life, including some from unsavory backgrounds."

"Unsavory backgrounds?" she asks, narrowing her eyes.

"The Bratva, the Mafia, drug lords. I think you'll understand when I say that Charlie has taken a strong interest in you and that he leads a fucking awful unit of the Bratva," I explain, enjoying the way her eyes widen in surprise. "And sweetheart, believe me when I say you don't want to find yourself caught in the middle of that shitstorm."

"I didn't know," she whispers, shaking her head.

"Well, now you do." We reach the top of the stairs and come to a stop. I gently release her shoulders and she turns to face me, her hands still handcuffed behind her.

"Look," she sighs, trying to negotiate. "Even if he is Bratva, I can handle it. I have connections. Previous clients who could help me handle this."

"No, I'm afraid you can't. It's personal. He has it out for you and there's nothing your previous clients can do about that."

"And why is that?" Her voice is cautious, picking up on what I might say.

"Because," I run a hand through my hair, "after I declared you my fiancée, Charlie's desire for you has most likely escalated. There's nothing he enjoys more than watching me lose, and he'll find a way to have you prove to me that he's won again. This has gone beyond his interest in you; it has turned into something darker."

Quinn's face flushes with rage as she shudders. "You bastard," she hisses. "This is your fault. Why did you have to tell him we were engaged? If you hadn't stepped in with that stupid declaration that—"

"I know," I raise my hands in a placating gesture. "I wasn't thinking beyond helping you in that moment. I wasn't thinking straight. But look, I'm here to help you now."

She laughs, a sharp, bitter sound. "Help me? Your grand plan made me a target for a Bratva mobster, and now you've had the audacity to kidnap me!"

"Quinn," I say, rather frustrated at why she isn't understanding that I did what I did for her. "Extreme circumstances call for extreme measures. Would you have come willingly if I'd asked?"

Quinn's silence is all the answer I need.

"Look," I say, running a hand through my hair, "I have a solution that'll keep you safe and Charlie out of your hair. We just need to—"

"No," Quinn cuts me off, her green eyes flashing with determination. "I don't need your help or your 'solution'. I can handle this myself."

I can't help but let out a sarcastic chuckle, which only seems to infuriate her more. "Quinn, you have no idea what you're up against. Charlie's not the kind of man you can reason with over coffee."

She takes a step towards me, her chin tilted up defiantly. "I built my business from the ground up. I've dealt with my fair share of difficult men."

"Not like this, you haven't," I counter, my amusement fading. "This isn't a game, Quinn."

"Oh, I'm well aware," she snaps. "But you already made the situation bad enough, so there's no chance I'm going to trust you now."

She turns to her side, one step in front of her, reaching for the stairs.

"Hell no!" I growl, sliding my hand around her stomach and pulling her back until her ass is rubbing against my cock. Fuck, her hair smells divine, and for a brief moment, I close my eyes, savoring the feel of her against me.

But she still struggles in my arms, and I force myself to remember that she isn't mine for the taking. She's simply here so I can protect her, and whatever effect she has on me needs to be blocked out now. I picture Charlie's face and grunt in her ear, "Don't you dare try to run."

She tries again, but I grip her firmly and pull her backward down the hall, toward the room. I can feel my jaw tighten. Her stubbornness is both infuriating and strangely appealing. "Your way will get you killed."

"Let me go so I can clean up this mess," she enunciates each word like a slap.

I feel my control slipping, my voice rising to match hers. "And what exactly is your brilliant plan? March into Charlie's office and demand he leave you alone? He'll eat you alive!"

"At least I'll die on my own terms," Quinn shouts back, her chest heaving.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down. This isn't getting us anywhere.

"Quinn," I say, my voice low and intense. "You're staying here. That's not negotiable."

Her green eyes flash with anger. "You can't just—"

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“I said I have a solution, and if you’d only listen, we can put this madness to an end.”

“I don’t want to hear a thing you have to say!” she shrieks, her voice echoing down the hallway.

”Fine then! Have it your way. But you’re staying right here until you’re willing to hear me out. This is for your ownprotection, Quinn!” I say, and kick open the door to her room. I turn her around to see it and let go of her.

”Your accommodations, Ms. Desmond,” I say, unable to keep a hint of sarcasm from my voice.

Quinn doesn't respond, her eyes fixed straight ahead at the room as I reach for the key to unlock her handcuffs. The metal falls away with a soft clink, and I watch as she immediately rubs her wrists with relief.

”Was that really necessary?” she mutters, flexing her fingers.

I shrug, pocketing the cuffs. “You didn't exactly give me much choice.”

Her eyes narrow. “Don't expect a thank you.”

”Wouldn't dream of it,” I reply, fighting back a smirk. “Get some rest. We'll talk more in the morning.”

I barely have time to step back before Quinn's hand shoots out, gripping the edge of the door. Her emerald eyes flash with defiance as she glares at me.

"Don't count on it," she hisses.

The door slams in my face with enough force to ruffle my hair. I hear the lock click immediately after, followed by the muffled sound of her heels stomping across the room.

I can't help but chuckle, despite being frustrated. "Stubborn little firecracker," I mutter, running a hand through my hair.

For just a moment, I lean against the wall opposite her door, staring at the polished wood, wishing I could see through it. The memory of Quinn in my arms, her body pressed against mine, floods my senses. I can still feel the warmth of her skin and the curve of her ass.

"Get it together, Zolotov," I growl to myself, pushing off the wall.

I toss and turn in my bed, the sheets tangling around my legs like restraints. Sleep eludes me, and my mind is a chaotic whirlwind of strawberry-blonde hair and fiery green eyes. Quinn's defiant glare haunts me, and her words echo in the stillness of the night.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter, punching my pillow.

I sit up, running a hand through my disheveled hair. The clock on my nightstand mockingly displays 3:27 AM. Fantastic.

"It's just for her safety and my benefit," I tell myself, pacing around my room. "Keep her close, keep her safe. Besides, I need her to help me take Charlie down a notch or two. I'm going to put him in his place, and she's going to help me do it."

Though the words leave my lips, I know they're a lie. The way my heart races when I think of her, the electric charge I feel when we're close—it's more than just strategy.

I pause at the window, staring out at the city lights. “She's eleven years younger than you, for Christ's sake,” I growl. “And she hates your guts.”

But the rational part of my brain is quickly drowned out by the memory of her scent, the feel of her body against mine as I held her still.

”This is going to be a problem,” I sigh, leaning my forehead against the cool glass. “Nothing good can come of this.”

As dawn breaks, I've made a decision. I'll keep Quinn close and protect her from Charlie, but I'll maintain my emotional distance. It's the only way to keep control of the situation.

But as I hear movement from the guest room, my pulse quickens.

This situation is going to be the death of me.

Chapter 7 - Quinn

I jolt awake, my heart pounding as if I just ran a marathon. I slept fitfully, my subconscious replaying frustrating conversations with Mark before transforming them into passionate imaginary encounters that set my skin ablaze.

It was just a series of nightmares, I tell myself, forcing myself not to think of how tightly he laced his hand around my stomach and pulled me away from the stairs to hold me against him. I still remember every inch of our bodies making contact, the way his presence slithered into me and made my heart race. I shake my head, trying to clear the fog of sleep and unwanted attraction.

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"Get it together, Quinn," I mutter, running a hand through my tangled strawberry-blonde hair. "He's your kidnapper and the reason you're in this entire mess."

And yet, I think of the way his gaze seemed to undress me, how his deep voice sent shivers down my spine.

No. I refuse to think about him for one more second. I swing my legs over the side of the bed, my bare feet hitting the cold hardwood floor. After freshening up, I sit on the corner of my bed, wondering what the plan is now.

Would someone please bring me breakfast? Will he really leave me to languish here all day? I scan the room for a landline I can use to check if there's an intercom or something, since I don't have my cell phone. Finding nothing, I head for the door.

That's when I try my luck and find, to my surprise, that the door is unlocked from the outside. My heart skips a beat as I approach, testing the handle. It turns effortlessly in my hand.

"Well, well," I whisper, a plan already forming. "Looks like Mr. High-and-Mighty made a mistake."

It has to be a mistake, considering he used handcuffs on me the previous night... right?

I glance down at my silk pajamas, debating whether to change. But time is of the essence. Who knows when Mark might return?

"Screw it," I decide. I'd rather escape in my PJs than spend another minute in this

prison.

I crack open the door, peering into the hallway. It's clear. I take a deep breath, steeling my nerves.

"You've got this, Quinn," I tell myself. "Just act natural and walk out like you own the place."

With one last glance behind me, I step into the corridor and rush down the stairs. Freedom is so close I can taste it. All I have to do is make it to the front door without running into—

"Going somewhere?"

I freeze, my blood turning to ice as that familiar voice washes over me. Slowly, I turn to face my captor, my heart sinking as I meet Mark's amused gaze.

"Just stretching my legs," I lie, plastering on a fake smile.

Mark's lips quirk up in a dangerous smirk. "Is that so? Well then, allow me to join you. I'd hate for you to get lost in the gardens."

As he steps closer, I can smell his cologne—spicy and masculine. My traitorous body responds even as my mind screams in frustration. I've gone from the frying pan right into the fire.

So much for my great escape.

"Actually," I hesitate. "Maybe I'm not that interested. I'm a bit tired after yesterday. I think I'll just head back to my room."

I try to step past him, but he shifts to his right, blocking my path. With his eyes laser-focused on mine, Mark gestures toward an open doorway, his smile unwavering. “Why don't we continue your morning in here? I was just about to have breakfast, and considering how tired you are, it might be better for you to eat.”

I hesitate, eyeing the exit longingly. My stomach chooses that moment to betray me with an audible growl.

“Come now,” Mark coaxes, his blue-gray eyes twinkling. “I promise I don't bite... unless you ask nicely.”

I roll my eyes, trying to ignore the way his playful tone sends a shiver down my spine. “Has anyone ever told you that your charm needs work?”

He chuckles, the sound rich and warm. “Only you, Quinn. Only you.”

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and something buttery wafts from the dining room, making my mouth water. My growling stomach wages war with my pride.

“Fine,” I relent, stepping into the room. “But this doesn't mean anything.”

“Of course not,” Mark agrees, pulling out a chair for me.

I sit reluctantly, my eyes darting around the opulent space. Crystal chandeliers, antique furniture, priceless artwork—it's like I've stepped into a museum. Or a very rich man's house. It smells of old money.

In this moment, I realize I never asked what Mark did for a living. Hell, I never even asked his last name. Though curious, I decide to bite my tongue, lest he mistakes my genuine curiosity for compliance.

”Hungry?” Mark asks, sliding a plate of golden crepes in front of me.

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I eye the food, wondering if I made a mistake coming in here. To maintain boundaries, wouldn't it be better if I ate in my room? But before I say a word, Mark leans in and decides to serve me himself.

"I haven't poisoned the food," he says, setting the plate aside and proceeding to pour coffee into a delicate China cup before me. "I swear it's just breakfast."

But as I meet his intense gaze across the table, I know nothing with Mark is ever "just" anything. But how wrong could breakfast go?

I pick up my fork.

Just as I'm about to take my first bite, the door bursts open. Three impeccably dressed men saunter in, their boisterous laughter filling the room. My fork clatters against the plate as I startle, nearly choking.

"Ah, brothers!" Mark greets them, his demeanor shifting subtly as he gives me a wary look before turning back to them. "Join us for breakfast?"

My eyes dart between the newcomers, taking in their striking resemblance to Mark. Their genes are strong, it seems.

"Sure," says the tallest one, running a hand through his dark hair as his eyes flicker over to me.

"Who are you?" another asks, staring right at me.

"Manners truly are a lost cause on you, aren't they, Denis?" the taller one states. He looks at me and introduces himself. "Vladimir. And that," he tilts his head towards the third and probably oldest amongst them, "is Abram."

"Quinn," I offer.

Abram nods at me while Denis winks with a devilish smile and plops himself down in a chair.

"Where's Lara?" Mark asks, passing around the dishes to his brothers, who have all made themselves comfortable around the table by now.

"Lara's gone shopping."

"Again?" Mark chuckles, shaking his head. "Our sister could buy out Saks Fifth Avenue if we let her."

"Thank goodness it's on the Orlov Amex now."

"And we Zolotovs are no longer footing that bill," Denis says, and all four men begin to laugh.

I freeze mid-chew, my ears perking up at the name. Zolotov. As in the infamous ZolotovBratvafamily? From what I learned during my research on notorious criminal families while arranging a marriage for a Mafia princess, the Orlovs operate some of the most exclusive nightclubs worldwide, alongside their more sinister dealings in the underworld. I never got the chance to find out more, though, since the Mafia Don insisted on an Italian for his daughter.

As they continue their casual chatter, my mind races. The way they toss around names I've only ever heard whispered in the shadowy corners of my dating agency

sends an icy shiver down my spine. The Zolotovs, the Orlovs—I realize, with a start, that I'm sitting at the epicenter of a global criminal empire, casually nibbling on crepes as though it's an ordinary day.

Mark's hand brushes against mine as he reaches for the coffee pot, snapping me back to the present. His touch leaves a trail of fire on my skin, but this time, I don't just see him as Mark. I see him as Mark Zolotov, the most feared member of the Bratva family in both Russia and America, who also happens to be the man who kidnapped me to keep me safe.

"Everything alright?" he asks, his voice low and intimate.

I nod, not trusting my voice. As I meet his gaze, I realize I've stumbled into a world far more treacherous than I could have imagined. And Mark Zolotov, with his criminal ties and magnetic pull, might just be the most dangerous part of all.

"Mark, I think she thinks you're a ghost," Denis says, watching my pale face transfixed on Mark. I'm immediately pulled back into the present and put on a smile as his brothers begin to tease Mark.

"He's a mirage," Vladimir chuckles.

"An abomination," Denis adds.

Mark picks up a grape and chucks it at Denis, who opens his mouth and catches it.

"Impressive, you didn't choke," Mark observes.

"A pity, really," Vladimir adds, and I let out a snort.

"She agrees." He waves in my direction while Denis frowns, and I chuckle.

They tease each other mercilessly, trading barbs and inside jokes that have me stifling unexpected laughter. To my surprise, Mark gives as good as he gets, his usual arrogance replaced by a dry wit that catches me off guard.

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I watch him, fascinated by this new side of him. The way his eyes crinkle when he laughs, the easy affection in his voice when he ribs his brothers—it's like looking at a completely different person. For a moment, I almost forget the circumstances that brought me here, caught up in the warmth of this family dynamic.

Just then, Vladimir's phone buzzes. He looks down and then informs the room that it's time to leave. Lara is coming over to his place to catch up, and Vladimir and Denis have a meeting with the Orlovs.

I feel their eyes on me before I see them. The lively banter dies down, replaced by a heavy silence that settles over the room like a shroud. Glancing up from my plate, I'm met with three pairs of curious eyes darting between Mark and me.

"So, Brother," Vladimir asks. "Before we leave, care to introduce us properly to your... guest?"

Denis, the most direct of them all, leans forward and stares right at me. "Yeah. Who exactly are you, Quinn?"

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, the weight of their stares making me acutely aware of my rumpled appearance. Mark, however, remains frustratingly calm, taking a leisurely sip of his coffee before responding.

"Quinn," Mark says simply, "is my fiancée."

My heart skips a beat, and I whip my head around to stare at him in disbelief. Did he just...? The smirk playing on his lips confirms it. He did.

The siblings' reactions are a cacophony of surprise and amusement. Abram's eyebrows shoot up with disbelief, Vladimir lets out a low whistle, and Denis barks out a laugh.

"Well, well," Denis chuckles, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "The notorious Mark Zolotov, finally tamed? This I've got to hear."

"We never knew you were seeing someone, Brother," Abram adds with a frown.

Mark shrugs.

Vladimir's eyes seek mine, studying me with curiosity. I force myself to look away, my cheeks burning. This is insane. I'm not his fiancée; I'm his prisoner, for God's sake! But as I glance around at the expectant faces of his siblings, I realize I'm trapped. If I contradict him now, who knows what consequences I'll face?

"How long have you held on to this little piece of information?" Denis asks, his eyes darting between Mark and me.

I plaster on a smile, hating how natural it feels. "It's... still new," I manage, hoping my hesitation comes across as shy excitement rather than barely contained panic.

What the hell am I doing, a voice shrieks in my head, playing along with this charade? I'm in such shock that it feels like the ability to think critically has left the building.

My mind races, desperately seeking an escape route from this ridiculous situation. But Mark's hand is now on mine, his thumb tracing small circles on my skin, and it's infuriatingly distracting.

The rest of the inquiries blur into a series of forced small talk and evasive answers,

while my mind races. I need to escape this place, away from these dangerous men and their world filled with secrets and lies.

As soon as the brothers stand at the doorway ready to leave, I seize my chance. “Mark,” I say, injecting as much sweetness into my voice as I can muster in case they overhear, “can I speak with you for a moment? Privately?”

He nods and leads me into the hallway. The moment I hear the door to the house shut, I turn to him, all pretense of affection vanished.

”What the hell was that?” I hiss, keeping my voice low but unable to hide my fury. “You introduced me as your fiancée to your family? Are you out of your mind?”

Mark leans against the wall, maddeningly calm. “It's the simplest explanation for your presence here, Quinn. If word gets out that this is all a ploy, even if it's accidental, Charlie's pride would be wounded even further from being fooled, and God knows what lengths he'd go to for revenge against both you and me.”

“You think your brothers would betray your secret?” I ask, my voice rising an octave.

”Well, not on purpose.” Mark looks away from me and runs a hand through his hair. “But accidents happen. They're always surrounded by men. They could tell their wives and one of them could slip up. Look, it's better we maintain this front through and through.”

I clench my fists, fighting the urge to stamp my foot like a child, but I can't stop myself from nearly shouting. “You want me to tell the whole world we're engaged? Your family? Who's next? I won't be a part of this... this insanity! You can't keep me locked up in here forever. I won't have any part in this, you hear me?”

I turn on my heels, making my way to my room and slamming the door shut loudly

enough for him to hear.

Chapter 8 - Mark

The clink of silverware against fine China fills the dining room as Quinn and I sit across from each other, a spread of breakfast pastries and eggs between us. She daintily wipes her mouth with a linen napkin before setting it beside her plate.

“I want to call my parents. Let them know I'm okay.” Her green eyes meet mine, flashing with defiance.

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms. “I'll let you do that, as soon as you agree to hear my plan.”

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“Never.” She stands abruptly, the legs of her chair screeching against the hardwood floor as she stalks out of the room. I chuckle under my breath. She's a stubborn little thing.

Later, I find her in the library, curled up with a book in the chaise lounge by the window, the morning light illuminating golden streaks in her hair. She has her legs stretched out before her, wearing those short shorts that shouldn't be allowed.

For a brief moment, my eyes linger on her long legs before I look away and clear my throat, drawing her attention.

I clear my throat, drawing her attention. Quinn looks up from her book, annoyance flickering in her gaze. I take a step forward, my hands in my pockets as I give her a pointed look.

“What?” she says, sitting up in the chair.

“Your phone's been ringing,” I say casually, dangling her phone in front of her. “I believe it's your office calling. You can have it back if you'll just hear me out about my plan.”

She jumps off the chair, hurrying towards me. Did she really have to wear a god-damn crop top? As if those shorts weren't bad enough. Blood rushes to my head as she comes within an inch of me, reaching for the phone.

I hold it above my head, and she stands on her toes, arms stretched out above her, her shirt riding up. It takes every ounce of courage in me to resist faltering, to avoid getting lost in her. It's difficult to focus on why I'm here when it's so easy to forget myself around her.

She stands on her tiptoes, her fingers brushing against my wrist. Her gaze locks with mine, a silent challenge igniting in those defiant emerald eyes. In that moment, all I can see and feel is her, so close yet frustratingly out of reach.

The tension crackles in the air between us, thick and palpable. I sigh heavily. This woman will be the death of me.

"You can have it," my voice comes out hoarse. "If you agree to listen to my plan."

"Then I guess I'd rather not have it," she says with fire in her voice before she steps back and walks out of the room, as though I'm not even worth the dirt beneath her shoes.

That afternoon, I'm in my study when Quinn bursts through the door, face flushed, eyes wild.

"My clients will be wondering where I am! I have meetings and appointments to keep. You can't just keep me locked up here!" She paces the room like a caged tigress.

"Ah, so you've been thinking of my proposal."

"I've been thinking of what a dick you are," she snarls back.

I lean against the edge of my desk, watching her, amused and aroused by her fiery display. “You’re willing to risk your business over your pride, Quinn?” I raise an eyebrow. “Are you being serious right now? All I need is your ear to just listen to what I have to say.”

She turns to face me, her strawberry-blonde hair flying. If looks could kill, I'd be six feet under. “If I listen to what you’re saying, I’m just enabling your crazy plans. You kidnapped me, for the love of God. I doubt anything else you say would be sane!”

“Then let your clients wait,” I snap back at her.

With an inarticulate sound of rage, she spins on her heel and storms out, slamming the door behind her.

Living in close quarters with Quinn is turning into a unique kind of exquisite torture. We're always at each other's throats, bickering and throwing barbs. She matches me quip for quip, never backing down. It's infuriating. Yet, oddly sexy as hell.

I often catch myself watching her when she's not looking. The sway of her hips as she walks, the crease between her brows when she's lost in thought, and the way she bites her bottom lip while reading all captivate me. I want to soothe that lip with my tongue.

Keeping my hands off her is a herculean effort. But I'm nothing if not disciplined. No matter how much the curve of her ass and the fire in her eyes test my famous control...

I drum my fingers on the mahogany desk, pondering my next move. Quinn's stubbornness proves to be a formidable obstacle. But I didn't get to where I am by

giving up easily. If she won't listen to reason, maybe it's time to fight a little dirty.

An idea sparks. I grab my phone and call Dmitri. "I need you to learn everything you can about Quinn's business. Specifically, any high-profile clients she has been trying to land."

Dmitri's reply is prompt. "Will do, Boss. I'll have the info to you within the hour."

True to his word, an email from Dmitri dings my inbox 45 minutes later. I scan the content, a slow grin spreading across my face. Well, well, well. There's someone I recognize on this list. It seems Miss Quinn Desmond has been trying to snag a certain billionaire bachelor as a client: Viktor Petrov. An old family friend who runs a successful vodka brand... and to the public, a notorious playboy. But as an old friend, I know he's been looking to settle down.

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I hit speed dial. “Viktor, how’s it going? Listen up. I’ve been thinking about your situation and might have a proposition for you. ”

An hour later, I'm standing outside Quinn's bedroom door. I raise my fist and knock. “Quinn. We need to talk.”

The door flies open, revealing Quinn in a tank top and yoga pants, her hair pulled back in a messy bun. My gaze drifts over her curves before snapping back to her face. “What do you want?” she asks, her voice laced with irritation.

“We're having a guest for dinner. I expect you to be ready and downstairs in an hour.”

Her eyes narrow. “No thanks.”

I shrug, feigning nonchalance. “Suit yourself. I just thought you might want to meet Viktor Petrov. You know, the billionaire?” I pause, letting that sink in. “He's an old friend looking to settle down with a good wife. Something about how his inheritance from his mother’s side won’t come through until he has an heir. I'm sure I could put in a good word for you... if you play nice.”

Quinn's mouth drops open. I can practically see the gears turning in her head as she weighs her options. Finally, she huffs out a breath. “Fine. I'll be ready in an hour.”

“Excellent. Wear something... appealing.” I let my gaze drift over her again, teasing her to see that spark I so love.

A pretty flush stains her cheeks. “Get out,” she hisses, shoving at my chest.

I chuckle as she slams the door in my face. Quinn Desmond, in a sexy dress, forced to play nice. Tonight is shaping up to be quite entertaining indeed.

I watch as Quinn charms Viktor over dinner, her green eyes sparkling as she laughs at his jokes. She's a natural at this, effortlessly steering the conversation to her business and the elite clientele she serves. Viktor hangs on her every word, clearly captivated.

And damn if she doesn't look stunning in that red dress, the silky fabric clinging to her curves. I want to run my hands over her smooth skin, to taste her lips and claim her as my own.

“Well, Ms. Desmond,” Viktor says, interrupting my inappropriate thoughts, “You’re quite certain you’d be able to help me find the right woman?”

“Of course, Mr. Petrov,” Quinn exclaims enthusiastically. “I recently arranged a marriage between a Thai prince and a princess from Bhutan. We have a very elite circle of prospects, and, in fact, some of my clients are paired by their parents who share the same concerns you do! No one wants a partner who will exploit their status and wealth. I can find you an equal, a partner in every sense.”

Viktor laughs. “I think I read about the Thai prince's wedding in one of those tabloids. If that’s the case, you've convinced me. I'd be glad to sign on as a client.”

Quinn beams at him. “Wonderful! I'll have my office send over the contract tomorrow.”

As Viktor takes his leave, Quinn turns to me, triumph written all over her face. “I got

him.”

“I noticed,” I reply dryly. “Well done.”

She raises a brow. “Admit it, you're impressed.”

I shrug. “Moderately. But Viktor was an easy mark. The question is, how exactly do you plan to send over the contract when I have your phone?”

Her smile fades. “Is that all this is to you? A chance to have it your way?”

“Not at all,” I say fiercely. “This is a chance for you to hear my plan because, from where I stand, Quinn, you don't grasp the one simple fact: Charlie Letvin isn't someone you can handle on your own. Besides, you might find that I'm not just doing this to protect you; I might have something to gain from this situation as well.”

We stare at each other for a charged moment. The air between us practically crackles with tension.

“Tell me,” she demands.

“Are you ready to hear my proposal now?” I ask, checking if she is finally willing to comply. “I did just help you land a verylucrative client, after all, and it would be a shame not to see it materialize.”

Quinn sighs. “I suppose it's only fair. Let's hear it then.”

I smile slowly. “Oh, you're going to love this, sweetheart. Trust me.”

I gesture for her to take a seat on the plush leather couch. She perches on the edge, arms crossed, watching me warily as I pour us both a drink from the bar cart.

“Here's my proposal,” I begin, handing her a glass of scotch. She takes it but doesn't sip. “I will personally connect you with high-value clients, both from my organization and outside of it, from fields like business, politics, and more. Powerful men who will pay top dollar for your services.”

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Her eyes narrow. “And in return? What was it you had to gain from it?”

I give her a mischievous grin. “In exchange, you’ll act as my fiancée in public. Join me at events, smile for the cameras, and make it seem like we’re madly in love. This will not only keep Charlie off your back and protect you from him, but it’ll also make me look good in his eyes. I need to maintain a certain image, you see. Especially around men like Charlie Letvin.”

“Your rival,” she states. I incline my head in confirmation.

“Precisely. With a beautiful, successful woman like you on my arm, it will show him his place. Charlie won’t be able to touch me, nor you. It’ll hit him where it hurts, bruise his pride, make him weak. What Charlie Letvin hates most is not getting what he wants.”

“Me,” she states, simply.

“Precisely.”

Quinn takes a long sip of her drink, considering. “So you’re asking me to pretend to be your arm candy, a prisoner of sorts.”

I chuckle. “Hardly a prisoner. You’ll have the freedom to conduct your business, to come and go as you please. Within reason, of course. You’ll have a bodyguard with you at all times for your safety.”

“A bodyguard?” She frowns.

“Just until Charlie buys our act. Then, in time, he’s bound to find someone else to dally with and forget all about you. Until then, you are to live with me.”

“You’re joking!” she protests. “I’m to reside here?”

“Naturally. We must keep up appearances, and besides, it’s safer this way.” I drain my glass and set it aside. “Do we have a deal?”

Quinn stands, slowly approaching me. The sway of her hips is hypnotic. She stops mere inches from me, close enough that I can smell her perfume and feel the heat of her body.

“Once we’re back in here, the act dies out. This is only a business arrangement, you understand?” she says, looking up at me through her lashes.

I nod.

“Yes,” she says breathily. “We have a deal.”

I let my gaze wander over her, enjoying the view of her, this captivating creature who has fascinated me so completely.

“Excellent. I look forward to this partnership, Miss Desmond.”

Her smile is razor-sharp. “As do I, Mr. Zolotov. As do I.”

Something tells me that our little arrangement is going to be far more interesting than either of us anticipated. Quinn is no blushing flower. She's a wildfire, and I have every intention of letting her consume me.

Chapter 9 - Quinn

I'm curled up on the living room sofa, engrossed in the latest thriller novel, when the doorbell chimes, echoing through the house. Curious, I set my book aside and sit up straighter, my ears perked. The click of the maid's heels on the hardwood floor is followed by the creak of the front door opening. Muffled voices drift down the hallway—one is a woman's, light and friendly.

Intrigued, I swing my legs off the sofa and smooth my skirt just as footsteps approach the living room archway. A striking woman with long silky black hair and sharp black eyes enters, a warm smile on her pink lips.

“You must be Quinn!” she exclaims, breezing into the room. “I'm Lara, Mark's sister. It's so lovely to finally meet you.”

I stand quickly, taken aback by her genuine friendliness. Gathering my wits, I return her smile and extend a hand. “Lara! Hi. I’m afraid Mark isn’t home.”

She grips my hand tightly, her smile growing. “Oh, that’s too bad. When Vladimir told me about your engagement to my brother, I just had to come see him and figure all of this out. I can’t believe I’ve never met you! Congratulations on finally tying him down. I hope I’m not bothering you.”

Her eyes, so unlike Mark's, twinkle with joy and warmth. Maybe the Zolotovs aren't all stone-cold criminals.

“Not at all,” I assure her, gesturing to the sofa. “Can I get you anything? Coffee, perhaps? I was just about to make myself a cup.”

Lara nods eagerly. “Coffee would be wonderful, thank you. Black, please—I like my coffee as dark as my soul,” she jokes with a wink.

I laugh, deciding I like Mark's sister already, feeling some of the tension melt from

my shoulders. “Two black coffees are coming right up. Make yourself at home, and I’ll be right back,” I tell her breezily, heading for the kitchen.

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As I bustle about pouring our drinks, I muse that Lara's unexpected appearance feels like a test—to see how the outsider handles being thrown into the deep end with the sharks. But she seems more like a playful dolphin than a bloodthirsty predator.

Still, I remind myself to stay on my toes as I carry our steaming mugs back to the living room. After all, none of this family knows that our engagement is nothing but a ploy.

I settle onto the sofa next to Lara, handing her a mug. She takes it with a grateful smile. As we sip our drinks, I watch her more closely, noticing the genuine openness in her expressions that puts me a bit at ease.

“So, Quinn,” Lara begins, leaning forward conspiratorially. I'm dying to know how you and my brother met. Given how quickly things seem to have progressed between you two, it must be quite the story.”

I feel my cheeks flush slightly, and I quickly take another sip of coffee to buy myself a moment. “Oh, you know, it's a long story,” I say with a casual wave of my hand. “Honestly, I think Mark should be the one to tell it. He has a way with words that I could never match.”

Lara laughs, a rich, melodic sound filling the room. “That's true. My brother does have a flair for the dramatic.”

“You're telling me?” I roll my eyes, remembering how he kidnapped me.

“So, how's it going?” she sings. “Settling in okay? Have you two set a wedding

date?”

I nearly choke at the question. A wedding date? Damn, his family’s really buying this whole charade.

“Not yet,” I say nonchalantly. “You know your brother. Always so busy!”

Now, she rolls her eyes. “Don’t let him take you for granted! Make him work to keep you around.” She playfully shoves my shoulder with hers.

“Oh, I will,” I chuckle. Suddenly, an idea strikes me. Lara would know a lot more about Charlie Letvin than I do. Until now, I haven’t understood why Mark is so adamant about keeping me here, but Lara seems open, and something tells me she could provide what I need.

“Just the other day,” I tell her, “I threatened to break up with him if he didn’t take me on a nice, fancy date. I’m cooped in here all day, and the man never comes home before dinner!”

“I can only imagine!” she sighs. “My husband is exactly the same. So, where did you two go? Was it fun?”

“Oh, just a skyline bar,” I tell her. “It was fun, but something soured his mood,” I say in as casual a tone as I can manage.

She quips up, curious now. “Really?”

“Yeah. We met some guy. Charlie Letvin. He seemed to be a friend at first, but I could tell there was some history between him and Mark. I didn’t pry too much, though.”

Lara's expression darkens slightly, a flicker of something unreadable passing behind her eyes. She places her mug on the coffee table, her posture stiffening almost imperceptibly. "Ah, yes. Charlie Letvin," she says, her voice laced with distaste. "He and Mark have quite the rivalry, one that goes back years."

I lean in, my curiosity piqued. "Really? What's the story there?"

Lara sighs, running a hand through her sleek, dark hair. "It's a tangled web, to be honest. They went to school together, always competing in everything. At first, it was just typical boyhood rivalry, but as they grew older and took over their respective family businesses, things turned uglier."

She pauses, her gaze distant as if she's lost in memory. "Charlie started to do underhanded things, little jabs aimed at undermining Mark and our family. Nothing overt enough to spark an all-out war, but enough to keep us on our toes. Mark knows that, given the chance, Charlie would stab him in the back without any hesitation."

I listen to this information, information I already knew. My heart sinks with disappointment, wondering if there truly isn't more to it. Just because of a past rivalry doesn't mean I'd be in danger. I dig deeper.

"Strange man, that Charlie Letvin," I comment. "He was also there with some woman. She looked...uncomfortable."

Lara narrows her eyes at my observation, a flicker of concern crossing her features before she schools her expression into neutrality. "Yes, that wouldn't surprise me. Charlie Letvin has a history, you know. A sordid one."

Curiosity prickles under my skin as I lean in, the conversation taking a darker turn. "What kind of history?"

Her gaze sharpens, almost warningly. “Charlie Letvin is not the man he pretends to be,” she begins, her tone dropping into a low murmur tinged with caution. “He’s had... incidents in the past. Unsavory ones.”

I hold her gaze, now fully intrigued by the sinister turn the conversation has taken. “What kind of incidents?”

Lara hesitates for a moment, weighing her words carefully. “Let’s just say there are whispers within certain circles about Charlie and his... proclivities,” she says cryptically. “Things he’s managed to sweep under the rug: sexual assaults and such,” she whispers sadly at the last two words. “Some say he sent a woman to the hospital once because of how he brutalized her, but she didn’t have nearly the connections he did, and was forced to settle for money out of court. He’s always managed to silence the accusations, but I believe the women.”

My blood runs cold at Lara's words, a chill settling deep in my bones. I knew Mark believed Charlie Letvin was dangerous, but I hadn't fathomed the depth of his depravity.

“That's... horrifying,” I manage to say, my voice barely above a whisper as I try to wrap my mind around the revelation. “And Mark knows about this?”

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Lara nods grimly. “He does and has tried to put Charlie in his place. But proving anything against Charlie is like trying to catch smoke with your bare hands. He's cunning, manipulative, and has powerful connections that protect him from the consequences of his actions.”

Silence hangs heavily in the air between us. Knowing what I know now about Letvin makes my skin prickle. To imagine he was in my apartment, to think about what could have happened, suddenly helps me understand where Mark is coming from. A mild wave of gratitude washes over me. Mark might be part of the Bratva, but he's not evil. He might have kidnapped me, but it was only to keep me safe. He's never had any ill intentions toward me.

Both these men, from the same world, couldn't be more different.

I meet Lara's gaze, my own expression resolute. “Thank you for sharing that with me,” I say sincerely. “It's helpful to have a better understanding of the dynamics at play here.”

Lara nods, a glimmer of respect in her eyes. “Of course. You're part of the family now, Quinn. It's important that you know what you're getting into.”

As we continue chatting and our conversation flows more easily, I genuinely enjoy Lara's company. Her insights and anecdotes paint a vivid picture of the Zolotov family, allowing me to see them in a new light—as a complex tapestry of individuals, each with their own motivations and desires, who love nothing more than their family.

At the center of it all is Mark, the man who has turned my life upside down in ways I could never have imagined.

That evening, I hear a knock on my door.

“Come in,” I say.

Mark steps inside quietly, leaving the door ajar behind him. He leans against the frame for a moment, one hand in his pocket, and I’m reminded of the first night we met at the bar. In this stance, with his side profile catching the light, he looks as handsome as he did that night.

“Hi!” I say, and stand to walk towards him, without thinking. Halfway through, I stop. What’s the grand plan here? Go over and hug him? Dear god, no!

I chide myself for my impulsive move, and he watches me closely. “Hi,” he says, standing tall and stepping toward me, his eyes locked onto mine.

His presence fills the space, commanding and magnetic, and I feel my pulse quicken despite myself.

“Lara came over today,” I state, taking a step back, trying to regain some semblance of control, all of which seems to have gone out the window at the unexpected sight of him.

“I see.” There’s a small frown on his face.

“We had a good time,” I add, and the frown wipes off.

“I’m happy to hear that,” he says. “I came in here to see if I could borrow you for a moment. I have something to show you.”

I raise an eyebrow, curiosity piqued even as wariness coils in my gut over how civilized this conversation feels. “Oh?”

Mark nods, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “Come with me.”

I hesitate for a moment, then follow Mark out of the room, acutely aware of his presence at my side. He leads me down a hallway I haven't explored yet, stopping in front of a closed door.

“Close your eyes,” he instructs, and I comply, my heart pounding in my chest as I hear the door swing open. Mark takes my hand, guiding me forward, and I feel plush carpet beneath my feet.

“Okay,” he says, his voice low and close to my ear. “Open them.”

I blink against the sudden brightness of the lights, and then my jaw drops. The room before me is a stunning homeoffice, complete with a sleek desk, a state-of-the-art computer, and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

“Mark,” I breathe, turning to face him with wide eyes. “What is this?”

He shrugs, but I notice the satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. “I wanted you to have a space of your own here,” he says. “Somewhere you can work on your business without distractions. I had it renovated, and,” he pulls my phone out of his pocket and hands it to me. “Here’s your phone, as promised. You should get back to your clients and parents. They must be worried sick.”

I gaze at the device, moved by the gesture. He kept his promise. I listened to his plan,

and in return, he did his part. Could it really have been this simple?

I step further into the room, running my fingers along the polished surface of the desk. It's clear that a great deal of thought and effort went into this space.

“Why are you doing this?” My voice comes out hoarse at the unexpected kindness.

“Because, Quinn, as I said, I’m not keeping you prisoner. I’m simply trying to keep you safe and remind Charlie Letvin of his place in the world.”

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Despite my reservations about this over-the-top gesture, I can't help but feel a flicker of warmth in my chest.

“Thank you,” I say softly, glancing back at Mark over my shoulder. “This is... incredible.”

He inclines his head, the faintest hint of a smile lingering on his lips. “I'm glad you like it,” he replies, his voice tinged with an emotion I can't identify. “I want you to feel comfortable here, Quinn. In every possible way.”

The words send a shiver down my spine, and I turn away to hide the flush rising in my cheeks. “I appreciate that,” I manage, busying myself with setting up my phone and logging into my email. “Really, I do.”

“Get to work,” he whispers, but I hardly notice, given the number of emails I have to get back to. I walk over to the desk and turn on the computer.

I lose myself in my work; the familiar routine of emails and spreadsheets offers a welcome respite from the past few days. Minutes bleed into hours as I tackle my to-do list with single-minded focus, the outside world fading away until there's nothing left but the glow of my computer screen and the steady clack of my keyboard.

It's not until I feel the prickle of awareness along the back of my neck that I realize I'm not alone. I glance up, startled to find Mark leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest as he watches me with an inscrutable expression.

“How long have you been standing there?” I ask, my voice rougher than I intend.

He shrugs, a fluid ripple of muscle beneath his crisp white shirt. “A while,” he admits, pushing off the doorframe and sauntering into the room. “I didn't want to interrupt.”

I sit back in my chair, fighting the urge to fidget as he perches on the edge of my desk. “Is there something you need?”

His gaze sweeps over me, pausing on the loose tendrils of hair that have escaped my bun and the ink smudge on my fingertips. “I wanted to check in on how you were settling in,” he says, his tone remaining carefully neutral. “And I wanted to ask about your business. How's it going?”

I blink, caught off guard by the question. “It's... fine,” I hedge, unsure how much to reveal. “Busy, but that's normal.”

He nods, his eyes never leaving my face. “And your clients? Any interesting cases lately?”

I hesitate, torn between the desire to protect my clients' privacy and the nagging feeling that Mark's interest is mere idle curiosity. “Nothing out of the ordinary,” I finally say, choosing my words carefully. “Just the usual mix of high-powered executives and trust fund brats looking for love.”

He chuckles, the sound low and rich in the quiet of the room. “I can only imagine,” he murmurs, leaning in slightly. “It must be fascinating work, playing matchmaker for the rich and famous.”

I shrug, trying to ignore the way my pulse kicks up a notch at his proximity. “It has its moments,” I allow, forcing a casual note into my voice. “But at the end of the day, it's just a job like any other.”

His eyes glint with amusement, as if he can see right through my nonchalant facade. “Is that so?” he muses, reaching out to toy with a stray pen on my desk.

I look up at him, my heart skipping a beat as I take in how close he is. “Are you truly interested or just bored?”

He furrows his brows, as though offended at being asked that. “I was just thinking,” he murmurs, his eyes never leaving mine, “about how impressive you are, Quinn. Building this business from scratch, handling all these high-profile clients... It's no small feat.”

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry. He's truly interested. “Thank you,” I manage, my voice wavering slightly. “I've worked hard to get where I am. In the earlier days, I used to cold call a thousand clients before I landed one. Now, it's simpler.”

“Word of mouth?”

“Word of mouth,” I nod in agreement.

“I've studied your work, researched it. The number of clients you help each year is impossibly large. The highest success rate in New York. Do you ever find time for yourself?”

His words struck a little too close to home, my parents' words resurfacing to haunt me. All those times they worried about whether I was doing okay. “I'm not lonely,” I insist, though I don't know to whom. “I have my work, my clients. That's enough for me.”

But even as I say the words, I know they're a lie. And from the knowing look in Mark's eyes, he knows it too.

“Is it?” he challenges softly, his gaze holding mine. “Is it really enough, Quinn?”

I open my mouth to reply, but no words come out. Because deep down, I know he's right. As much as I love my work, there's a part of me that yearns for something more.

Mark notices the hesitation in my eyes and presses his advantage, leaning in even closer. “There's no shame in wanting more, Quinn,” he whispers. “Success isn't the be-all and end-all.”

I stare at him, my breath coming faster as I feel myself being drawn into his orbit. Every instinct tells me to run, to push him away, and to retreat behind my carefully constructed walls.

“Perhaps,” I say, turning to look back at my computer. “But there's a lot more I need to achieve before I consider myself to have achieved some semblance of success.”

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He chuckles, and I don't look up when he leaves, closing the door behind him.

Chapter 10 - Mark

I hold the door open for Quinn as we arrive at Chez Noir, the chic, upscale restaurant. She steps inside, her green eyes scanning the room with a hint of skepticism. I lean in close, my lips nearly brushing her ear as I whisper, "It's essential to maintain appearances, to be seen in public together."

Quinn turns to me with a smirk. "How romantic. Way to sweep a girl off her feet."

I flash her a charming grin. "I could take you on a real one sometime."

"I'd rather eat dirt," she quips, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

I chuckle under my breath as the hostess leads us to our table. Quinn's fiery wit never fails to amuse me. I may be the one holding her to a bargain she never wished to be a part of, but she refuses to be a passive prisoner. It's one of the many things I find intriguing about her.

We take our seats, and I lean back in my chair to observe Quinn as she peruses the menu, her brow furrowed in concentration. Her strawberry-blonde hair falls in soft waves around her face. Even in the dim lighting, her beauty is undeniable.

"What's your poison tonight, Princess?" I ask, nodding towards the drink menu. "Let me guess—something fruity and girly?"

Quinn's eyes narrow as she meets my gaze. "Vodka martini. Dry. And don't call me princess."

"As you wish, Your Highness," I retort with a smirk.

She rolls her eyes, but I catch the hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth. This playful back-and-forth has become our ritual. I enjoy pushing her buttons, and sometimes, I feel she likes to push mine, too.

The waiter comes over to take our drinks and dinner orders. "I'll have a scotch, neat," I say without looking at the menu. "And the lady will have a large vodka martini. Make it extra dry and extra dirty."

Quinn gives me a look that could cut glass, but doesn't correct me. I stifle a satisfied grin. Little by little, I'm learning how to navigate her moods—when to push and when to yield. I know ordering her a double shot is something she'd never pick a fight over.

Once the waiter leaves, I shift my focus back to Quinn. She's watching me closely, her green eyes glowing in the flickering candlelight, stunning beyond belief. In moments like this, it's easy to forget that she's merely a partner in crime. The boundary between us feels blurred, dangerous, even perilous. At least, from my perspective.

Our drinks arrive, and I pass her hers. "Don't go dancing on tables once you down this," I tease.

"You wish." She rolls her eyes, taking the glass from me. When our hands touch, I feel a spark go up my arm and quickly retreat.

"You're right. I'd hate to see that disaster." I grin over at her.

She flicks her hair over her shoulder. “I’ll have you know I’m an excellent dancer.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen me yet,” I shrug, and jump off my chair, give a complicated twirl with a click of my fingers, and sit back down.

She laughs. God, how she laughs. I instantly realize I’d do anything to hear it again.

“You dance like my grandfather,” she says, trying to catch her breath through her laughter.

“Your grandfather? Tell me about your family, Quinn. What were they like?”

I ask because I’m genuinely curious.

She hesitates for a moment, her gaze drifting to the white tablecloth. “My parents are the most loving people you can imagine. They always put my needs before their own. They’re retired now, traveling the world.” A wistful smile plays on her lips. “I lost my grandparents when I was young, but I still remember how they doted on me. They made every visit feel like a special occasion.”

I nod, sensing the undercurrent of sadness beneath her words. “I never got to meet mine.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, clutching at her chest. “And your parents?”

“They passed when we were in Russia. I miss them every day.”

Quinn meets my gaze, a flicker of understanding passing between us. “I’m sorry,” she says softly.

I shrug, attempting to downplay the sudden vulnerability I feel. “It was a long time

ago.” I take a sip of my scotch, welcoming the familiar burn. “Growing up in a Russian Bratva family wasn't easy, but my grandparents always ensured I felt loved, even when my parents were occupied with other things. They're the reason I have any good memories of my childhood.”

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Quinn leans forward, her curiosity piqued. “What was it like? Growing up there?”

I paint a picture for her of snowy winters and lively family gatherings, of the warmth that thrived amidst the harsh realities of our lives. “I moved to New York over a year ago,” I continue, “to help my cousins, Ivan and Boris, with their business. It was an opportunity to start anew, to build something of my own.”

I can practically see the gears turning in her head as she pieces together the fragments of my past. Sharing parts of myself I usually keep locked away is a strange sensation, but there's something about Quinn that makes me want to open up.

Soon after, our food arrives, momentarily breaking the charged atmosphere between us. I raise my glass in a mock toast. “To warm winters,” I say, my voice tinged with irony.

Quinn mirrors my gesture, her lips curling into a wry smile. “If a New York winter is warm, keep me far away from Russia,” she laughs, and we both drink in camaraderie.

I lean back in my chair, watching Quinn as she takes another bite of her grilled fish. “So, tell me,” I drawl, a mischievous glint in my eye, “what made a nice girl like you start a high-end dating agency?”

Quinn scoffs, setting her glass down with a clink. “Who says I'm a nice girl?” she retorts, arching a brow in challenge.

I can't help but grin at her fiery response. "Fair enough. But seriously, what made you choose this line of work?"

She shrugs, a hint of vulnerability flickering across her face. "I guess I just wanted to help people find happiness, even if I couldn't find it for myself."

The admission catches me off guard, and I find myself leaning forward, intrigued. "And why is that? Too busy playing matchmaker to focus on your own love life?"

Quinn meets my gaze head-on, her green eyes sparking with defiance. "Maybe I just have high standards. Not everyone can handle a woman who knows what she wants."

The tension between us is palpable, and our banter carries an undercurrent of attraction. Just as I'm about to throw out another teasing remark, our next drink arrives, momentarily breaking the spell with the waiter's presence.

As we continue to dig into our food, a comfortable silence settles over us, punctuated by the clinking of cutlery and the low hum of conversation from nearby tables. Between bites, I steal glances at Quinn, marveling at how graceful and poised she is.

She catches me staring and quirks a brow, a half-smile playing on her lips. "What?"

I shake my head, chuckling softly. "Nothing. It's just... I'm not used to this. Having dinner with a beautiful woman who isn't afraid to put me in my place."

Quinn rolls her eyes, but I can see the blush creeping up her neck. "Or perhaps you've been too dense to notice the women who have."

"Ouch." I pretend to hold my heart in pain.

She giggles.

We fall back into our easy banter, trading stories of our lives past as we savor our meal and drinks. With each passing moment, I can feel the walls between us crumbling, the initial hostility giving way to a tentative connection.

Just when I finish placing our order for dessert, a familiar voice cuts through our conversation, shattering the fragile bubble we've created. "Mark? Is that you?"

I turn to see Natasha, an old fling from my wilder days, sauntering towards our table in a low-cut, fitted black dress. She's stunning, yes, but a bit too wild for my taste. Her red lips curl into a friendly smile, but there's a calculating glint in her eyes as she takes in the sight of Quinn and me together.

"Natalia, what a surprise," I say, rising to greet her with a polite kiss on the cheek. I can feel Quinn's gaze boring into my back, assessing the situation with a guarded expression.

"It's been ages! How have you been?" Natalia gushes, her hand lingering on my arm just a bit too long.

I give her a tight smile, my body language making it clear that her presence is unwelcome. "I've been well, thanks for asking. If you'll excuse us, we were just in the middle of dinner."

Natalia's eyes flick to Quinn, a hint of jealousy flashing across her face before she composes herself. "Of course, I didn't mean to interrupt. It was lovely seeing you, Mark. Don't be a stranger! If I remember correctly, you used to call me at all hours of the night!"

With a final, lingering glance, she sashays away, leaving an uncomfortable silence in her wake.

I turn back to Quinn, expecting to find her brimming with questions in that curious way of hers. Instead, I'm met with a carefully neutral expression, her eyes shuttered and distant.

“An old friend?” she asks, her tone deceptively light.

“Something like that. Just a fling, actually,” I reply, trying to gauge her reaction.

“Ancient history, really.”

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Quinn nods, her fingers toying with the stem of her wine glass. The easy camaraderie from earlier has evaporated, replaced by a palpable tension that hangs heavy in the air.

I attempt to lighten the mood with a joke about my misspent youth, but Quinn's laughter rings hollow, her smile not quite reaching her eyes.

By the time we finish our dessert—hers still barely touched—I can sense her retreating further into herself, her responses becoming more reserved and guarded.

“Quinn?” I ask, tentatively. “Is everything alright?”

Did I do something? Did I say something?

Quinn sets down her fork with a soft clink and meets my gaze. “I'm feeling a bit tired, Mark. I think it's best if we call it a night.”

I study her face, noting the slight furrow of her brow and the tension in her shoulders. Is she truly tired, or is it something more? I can sense her desire to retreat, to put some distance between us.

Part of me wants to press further, to coax her into staying a little longer. But I know that would only push her further away. So instead, I nod in understanding and signal for the check. “Of course, Quinn. Let's get you home.”

I can't help but feel a pang of frustration as I pay the bill. We were making progress, slowly chipping away at the walls she's built around herself. What the hell happened?

Chapter 11 - Quinn

I lean back in my chair, stretching my arms above my head as I try to shake off thoughts of Mark. My work was finished over half an hour ago, but I'm still stuck in my office because this is the one place I won't accidentally run into Mark. The image of Natasha draping herself all over him last night at the restaurant keeps replaying in my mind—her hand on his muscular arm, her tinkling laugh as she asked him to call her. What did she mean when she said he used to call her at all hours of the night? Exactly how many women does Mark call at all hours of the night? I grit my teeth.

As much as I hate to admit it, seeing them together stirred up an ugly swirl of jealousy inside me, which is ridiculous. Mark is my fake fiancé, nothing more than a means to an end to keep Charlie Letvin off my back. And he's a notorious playboy—exactly the kind of man I usually avoid like the plague.

But damn it, despite his arrogance and bossiness, there's something about Mark that really gets under my skin. The way his chiseled jaw tightens when he's concentrating or angry, the intensity of his blue-gray eyes locked on mine, the raw power of his tall, muscular frame. I can't help but imagine what his large hands would feel like gripping my hips, his lips blazing a trail of warmth down my neck...

No. I shake my head firmly. I refuse to be just another notch on Mark Zolotov's bedpost. This is strictly a business arrangement, and I need to remember that. No matter how attractive he is or how weak he makes my knees with a single smoldering glance, I have to keep my distance.

I stand up from my desk chair and stretch my arms overhead, feeling a restless energy thrumming through my body. Sitting here stewing over Mark isn't helping me at all. I need a distraction, something to clear my head before I drive myself crazy overthinking this entire fake fiancée situation.

I need a walk.

I wander down the endless hallways with no end destination in mind, my fingertips gliding over the luxurious wallpaper.

My footsteps echo softly in the cavernous space, the only sound until a distant, rhythmic clanking catches my attention. I pause, head tilting as I strain to listen. It's coming from the slightly ajar door ahead of me. Curiosity piqued, I approach silently until I can peek through the gap.

The room beyond is a state-of-the-art gym, filled with gleaming metal and stark lighting. In the center of it all stands Mark. Did I mention he's stopless? He's facing away from me, every perfect muscle of his back and arms flexing as he lifts what looks like a hundred and fifty-pound barbell.

I can't look away from how his skin glistens with a sheen of sweat, from how his muscles ripple and dance with the powerful movements he makes. He's a pure beast and a pleasure to watch.

Heat blooms in my cheeks, a traitorous response to the sight of his muscled back, shimmering with sweat. I silently curse my own weakness, feeling angry at myself for being affected by him. Distance, I remind myself sternly. I need to maintain a professional distance.

But even as I form the thought, my treacherous mind conjures an entirely different scenario. In my fantasy, I stride boldly into the gym, the click of my heels announcing my presence. Mark looks up, surprise flickering across his face.

I don't give him a chance to speak. I close the distance between us, planting my hands on his sweat-slicked chest and shoving him backward. He stumbles, off-balance, and we both tumble onto the mat.

I land astride him, my skirt riding up my thighs. His hands immediately find my hips, his touch searing even through the fabric of my clothes. Our eyes lock, the air between us charged with tension.

“Quinn,” he growls, his voice rough with desire. “What are you—”

I silence him with a bruising kiss, pouring all my frustration and pent-up longing into the clash of our mouths. He responds with equal fervor, his fingers digging into my flesh as he drags me closer.

Buttons scatter as he impatiently rips open my blouse, baring my breasts to his heated gaze. I arch into his touch as he cups the sensitive mounds, his thumbs dragging over my taut nipples. The rasp of his calluses against my skin sends sparks of pleasure racing down my spine.

“Mark,” I gasp, grinding against the hard evidence of his arousal. “I need...”

He flips us over in a sudden move, his heavy body pinning me to the floor. “I know what you need,” he rasps, his breath hot against my ear. “And I’m going to give it to you.”

His mouth trails down my throat, his teeth nipping at my pulse point as his hands skim over my ribs, my waist, my hips. He hooks his fingers under my skirt and—

“Quinn? Enjoying the view?”

I wrench myself back to the present with a shuddering inhale, my skin flushed and my heart pounding. Damn him. Damn my own reckless imagination.

I freeze, heat flooding my cheeks, unable to come up with a reply to put him in his place. He's watching me with a knowing smirk, his eyes glinting with amusement and something darker, more intense.

“I was just...” I scramble for an excuse, hating the breathless quality of my voice. “I mean, I didn't mean to interrupt.”

“Oh, I don't mind.” He takes a step closer, his tall frame crowding me back against the wall. “In fact, feel free to interrupt me anytime.”

I swallow hard, my mouth dry from his closeness. Up close, the scent of his sweat and masculinity is even more intense, making my head spin.

“Don't you have a party to get ready for?” I manage, trying to steer the conversation back to safer ground. I remember he mentioned it over breakfast this morning.

“We both do. You're coming with me.” His gaze drags down my body, before snapping back to my eyes. “You're going to need something appropriate to wear.”

I bristle at his condescending, commanding tone. “I don't think I'll be needed tonight.”

“Oh, you are very much needed. It’s a big gathering, and no better place to be seen publicly.” His lips curve into a wicked grin. “Anyway, I’ve had a selection of dresses sent to your room. Why don’t you go try them on?”

My jaw clenches at his presumption. “I don’t need your fashion advice, Mark.”

“Humor me.” He leans in, his breath fanning over my cheek. “I want my fiancée to look her best tonight. We have important people to impress.”

I grit my teeth against a sharp retort. As much as it galls me, he’s right.

“Fine,” I bite out. “I’ll go play dress-up. Happy?”

“Ecstatic.” His eyes gleam with satisfaction. “I have some errands to run, so I’ll meet you at the venue later. Try not to miss me too much.”

With a final, infuriating wink, he strolls past me and out of the gym, leaving me fuming in his wake. Arrogant, controlling bastard.

But even as I silently curse him, I can’t ignore the way my body reacts to his, the simmering heat his presence ignites. Keeping my distance is going to be harder than I thought.

Squaring my shoulders, I march toward my room and the waiting dresses, determined to find something that will make his jaw drop. Two can play at this game.

I stride into my room, slamming the door behind me with more force than necessary. However, my irritation fades as I take in the sight before me. Approximately three dozen dresses hang from a portable rack, creating a dizzying array of colors and

styles. Sequins and lace, satin and silk—each one more stunning than the last.

I run my fingers over the delicate fabrics, marveling at the sheer extravagance. But as I examine the dresses more closely, a strange question comes to mind: Why does Mark have so many women's dresses lying around?

Jealousy coils in my gut as I picture faceless women draped in these gowns, hanging off Mark's arm at glittering events. Women he's wined and dined, charmed and seduced. Women who've shared his bed, his life, in ways I never will.

The thought makes me want to scream, to tear the dresses to shreds and watch the scraps flutter to the floor. But I force myself to take a deep breath, to push down the irrational anger bubbling up inside me.

What right do I have to be jealous? Mark and I aren't real. This engagement, this whole arrangement, is nothing more than a business deal. I can't let myself forget that.

If I weaken, I'd only be another conquest, another notch on his bedpost.

The thought makes my chest ache in a way I don't want to examine too closely. I shake my head, forcing myself to just pick a dress.

I square my shoulders, my resolve hardening. If Mark wants me to dress the part, then that's exactly what I'll do. I'll find the sexiest, most jaw-dropping gown in this entire collection, and I'll wear it like armor. I'll show him and everyone else that Quinn Desmond is not a woman to be trifled with.

Silk, satin, and chiffon in every color imaginable hang before me. All very pretty. But I'm not looking for pretty or demure. No, tonight I need something that will make a statement. Something that will show Mark Zolotov exactly who he's dealing with.

My fingers glide over a sleek black dress featuring a plunging neckline and a daring slit that reaches high up the thigh. It's the type of outfit that commands attention and turns heads. Perfect.

I decide to be bold and remove my bra, sticking on some nipple pasties before slipping into the dress, the cool fabric hugging my curves like a second skin. It highlights every dip of my hips, the curves of my waist, the bones below my waist, and the alluring barely-there swell of my abdomen. As I turn to face the mirror, I smile at my reflection. The woman staring back at me is a force to be reckoned with, all fiery hair and dangerous curves.

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I take my time with my makeup, trying to make it as flawless as possible. Bold red lips, dramatic winged eyeliner, and a dusting of highlighter along my cheekbones. Every stroke of the brush, every swipe of the lipstick, feels like a tiny act of rebellion, a way to get my revenge on Mark.

As I style my hair into loose, tousled waves, I can't help but wonder what Mark will think when he sees me. I hope he eats his wretched heart out.

Chapter 12 - Mark

I stand at the edge of the ballroom, my gaze sweeping over the sea of designer gowns and tuxedos. The clinking of champagne glasses and the hum of polite conversation fill the air, but it all fades into white noise as impatience claws at my insides. Another dull gathering of the city's elite, pretending to care about each other's trivial lives. But I'm not here for them. I'm here for the Letvins.

My eyes flicker to the entrance every few seconds, eager for a glimpse of the one man who gets under my skin like no other. I tap my fingers against my thigh, the rhythm mirroring the ticking clock in my head. Come on, where are you?

And where the hell is Quinn? Letvin needs to see us both together when he arrives. My heart races. What if Letvin intercepted her? My men outside are watching for her arrival, but what if they missed something and she's in danger?

Just as I'm on the verge of losing my last shred of self-control over my spiraling thoughts, the room falls silent. Heads turn toward the entrance, and I follow their gaze.

And there she is. Quinn Desmond.

She stands at the top of the stairs, a vision in black satin. The dress clings to her curves like water, the low cut revealing an enticing glimpse of her creamy skin. A slit runs up the side, teasing at the length of her toned leg with every step.

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry. I've seen her before, but never like this. Never with her hair cascading down her back in loose waves, never with her lips painted a sinful shade of red.

She's breathtaking.

Every eye in the room is on her as she descends the stairs, her heels clicking against the marble. I can't look away, can't tear my gaze from the way her dress shimmers under the chandeliers and how her hips sway with each step.

She's a goddess among mortals, and I'm not the only one who notices. Whispers follow her path, men lean in to get a better look, and women eye her with envy.

And then her eyes meet mine.

Green. They're a vivid, piercing green that cuts through the crowd and straight into my soul. For a moment, I forget how to breathe, how to think. All I know is that I need to be closer to her, to feel the heat of her skin against mine, to taste those tempting lips.

But I can't. Not without reason, not without scaring her off.

I force myself to look away, then meet her gaze again.

And when I do, she's watching me like a hawk.

I have a feeling this party just got a whole lot more interesting.

The crowd parts like the Red Sea as Quinn makes her way toward me, her hips swaying. She is aware of the effect she has on every man in this room, myself included, and she isn't afraid to use it to her advantage.

I can't take my eyes off her, even as I feel the lingering stares of men flicking to me, wondering who has her attention. They all desire her, and it pierces me with a peculiar jealousy, but she's only got eyes for me, and that calms my nerves.

“Do I look alright?” Her voice is like honey, sweet and smooth and teasing.

She knows she looks insanely beautiful, sexy, stunning.

“Dazzling,” I flash her my trademark grin, the one that's charmed countless women into my bed. But Quinn isn't just any woman. She's a challenge.

She raises a perfectly sculpted eyebrow, her lips curving into a smirk. “Oh, good. I was worried I might not fit in.”

Liar.

She smiles at me. “So, how boring is this party exactly?” she whispers, inching closer.

“Boring enough, but it might get interesting soon.”

“Why's that?”

“Believe it or not, I find your company enlightening.”

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“Oh, I might need a drink to register the praises you might accidentally send my way,” she says sassily and spins on her heel.

She's not going to make this evening easy for me, I can already tell.

As Quinn turns to leave, I instinctively reach out and grasp her wrist, the heat of her skin searing into my palm. She freezes, her eyes widening as they connect with mine. The air between us crackles with tension, and I can feel the pulse beneath my fingers quickening.

“Not so fast, Desmond,” I murmur, my voice low and dangerous. “We're not done here.”

She arches a brow, a hint of a smirk playing at the corner of her mouth. “Oh? And what else did you have in mind, Zolotov?”

I tug her closer, our bodies nearly touching. The scent of her perfume wraps around me, intoxicating and alluring. “A dance,” I say, my gaze locked on hers. “You and me, right now.”

Quinn hesitates, her eyes searching mine. I can see the internal battle raging within her, the desire to give in warring with her stubborn determination to resist me. “I don't think that's a good idea,” she whispers, but her body betrays her, swaying slightly toward me.

“Afraid you can't handle it?” I challenge, my lips curving into a smirk.

Her eyes flash with indignation, and I know I've hit a nerve. "I'm not afraid of anything," she hisses, her free hand coming up to rest on my chest. "Least of all you."

"Prove it with a dance. We have to show people we're together, remember?"

I let go of her wrist and reach out my hand, an invitation and a challenge all in one. She gazes at it for a prolonged moment, her chest rising and falling with each quickened breath. Then, with a bold lift of her chin, she places her hand in mine.

As I lead her onto the dance floor, I can feel the eyes of the room on us, curious and speculative. But I don't care. All that matters is the woman in my arms and the fire burning between us.

We move together, our bodies in sync despite the tension. Her hand rests on my shoulder, and mine on her waist, the satin dress smooth beneath my palm. The heat of her skin ignites a fire within me, threatening to consume us both.

Quinn follows my lead with ease, her movements graceful and fluid. Yet there's a noticeable distance between us, an deliberate space that signals her resistance. She's determined to stay in control, to show she's unaffected by my closeness. But I can see the flush creeping up her neck and feel the rapid flutter of her pulse.

Around us, the whispers grow louder and the glances become more pointed. I catch snippets of conversation—speculation about the notorious playboy and the beautiful stranger in his arms. Quinn tenses, her steps faltering as she realizes the attention we're attracting.

I twirl her out and back in, her back to me, before waltzing to the front. My eyes linger on hers, but hers dart around the room nervously.

"Why are they all staring at us?" she asks, her voice tight. "It's like they've never seen

two people dance before.”

I pull her a fraction closer. To help her relax, I try to tease her a bit. “Maybe they’re wondering what a wonderful woman like you is doing with a man like me.”

My little quip works for she relaxes a little with a chuckle. “They might be right about that.”

“Or,” I suggest, “they’re probably assessing us as a couple.”

“Assessing us?” Her eyes widen at my comment.

“Uh-huh.” I give her a playful wink. “We haven’t even kissed as yet. Right about now, some of those men are placing bets on which one of us wants out of this relationship. We’re missing the steamy passion these folks love to lap up.”

She shivers, her fingers curling into the fabric of my suit jacket. “I’m not here to be a spectacle, but are you suggesting we kiss?” she retorts, but there’s a breathlessness to her words.

“Then why are you here?” I challenge, my hand sliding lower on her back, edging toward dangerous territory. “Why agree to make people believe we’re together, knowing the risks?”

Her eyes meet mine, green and gold and full of thoughts I can’t pry out. And then, to my surprise, her lips curve into a smile that borders on a warning. “Fine. We can put on the show they so want.”

I grin, the thrill of this turn of events coursing through my veins. I had only teased her to help her calm down, but this outcome is more than I hoped for. “Be careful what you wish for, Quinn. You might just get more than you bargained for.”

“I doubt it,” she whispers, leaning up and whispering in my ears, before bringing her face an inch away from mine.

I let my hand drift lower on her back, savoring the way her breath hitches at my touch. She leans in closer, her lips just a hair's breadth from mine. The world around us fades away, with the music and the crowd becoming little more than background noise.

Right now, there is only Quinn—the scent of her perfume, the warmth of her skin, the tantalizing promise of her lips so near to mine. I feel the anticipation rising, the desire to claim her, to make her mine.

My fingers tighten around her waist, pulling her flush against me. Her hands glide up my chest, coming to rest on my shoulders. We're so close now, our breaths mingling, our heartbeats racing in tandem.

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I chide myself. It's all pretend. Get it over with. Don't stumble in the process. But gods, I can't wait to kiss her.

I close the final distance between us, capturing her lips with mine in a perfunctory kiss. I'm gentle at first, quickly pulling away to see how she feels, but when she reaches for me again, I close the distance.

Her lips are soft and pliant under mine, and I can't help but deepen the kiss, my tongue sweeping into her mouth to taste her. She's gentle yet so soft. But god, how she sears through my soul. I moan, losing myself in the moment, and pull her body closer by pressing against her lower back.

She responds with equal fervor, her fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me closer. It's electric, the way our bodies fit together, the way she arches into me like she can't get close enough. It makes me forget that this is all for show, makes me lose all fucking control.

I lose myself in the feel of her, the way her curves press against my hard planes, the little sounds she makes in the back of her throat. I want to devour her, to claim every inch of her until there's no doubt that she belongs to me. I want to rip those clothes off her back, hear what other sounds she makes as I drive into her and fuck her senseless.

My entire body is alive, and my mind conjures fantasies I slowly lose control of. But as I drown in the taste of her, in the fire she's ignited under my skin, the song changes, and a small part of my brain reminds me where we are. We're in the middle of a crowded ballroom, surrounded by people who are no doubt watching our every

move.

I try to pull back, to regain some semblance of control, but Quinn chases my mouth, her teeth catching my bottom lip in a way that makes me groan. It takes every ounce of willpower I possess to gentle the kiss, to ease us back from the brink.

I become acutely aware of the eyes on us, whispers rippling through the room. Quinn looks slightly dazed, her breath short and rapid, her cheeks flushed a delicate pink. I can't help but feel a surge of male pride course through me. I did that. I made her look like that.

But it's more than just physical desire. Something has shifted between us, the kiss serving as a catalyst, a point of no return. We've crossed a line, and there's no going back. The thought is both exhilarating and terrifying.

Quinn seems to sense it, too. She glances around, her eyes widening as she takes in the curious stares and knowing smirks. "Mark," she whispers, her hand tightening on my arm. Everyone's looking at us."

"Good," I whisper. "We need them to believe."

God, I want to throw caution to the wind, to give in to the need pulsing through my veins. But I can't. Not here, not like this. If I ever did take her, it'll be on my terms, in a place where I can have her all to myself.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself, before leading her off the dance floor.

Chapter 13 - Quinn

I smile and nod as the investor rambles on about market trends, but my mind is a million miles away, still reeling from Mark's electrifying kiss on the dance floor. The

ghost of his touch lingers on my skin, sending shivers down my spine despite my best efforts to focus on expanding my business contacts at this lavish party.

“So, what do you think about the potential for growth in the luxury services sector, Ms. Desmond?” The venture capital investor's question snaps me back to reality.

I clear my throat, scrambling to remember the key points I had prepared. “Absolutely, the demand for high-end, personalized experiences is on the rise. My agency is uniquely positioned to capitalize on that trend by...”

As I begin my well-rehearsed pitch, my gaze can't help but wander across the room, searching for Mark's imposing figure. He's engaged in conversation with a group of men, leading the conversation. They're all hanging on to every word he says.

The memory of our kiss flashes through my mind unbidden—the way he pulled me flush against his muscular body, the intoxicating scent of his cologne, the searing heat of his lips on mine. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced before, a kiss that consumed me entirely and left me aching for more.

“... don't you agree, Ms. Desmond?” The investor's voice intrudes on my thoughts once again.

“Yes, certainly,” I reply automatically, silently cursing myself for allowing Mark to distract me. I've worked too hard building my business to let one arrogant, infuriatingly attractive man throw me off my game.

But even as I steer the conversation back to safer topics, I can feel the magnetic pull of Mark's presence, the way my body instinctively reacts to his proximity. It's maddening, this hold he seems to have over me after just one earth-shattering kiss.

I take a deep breath, channeling my inner CEO. I'm Quinn Desmond, dammit. I run a

successful high-end dating agency. I control my own destiny and need to take advantage of this party to attract more clients.

But then, my eyes find Mark again, and this time my attention shifts to the stunning brunette who has taken him aside for a private conversation. She's all long legs and perfect curves, just the type of woman a notorious playboy like Mark Zolotov would be drawn to.

An irrational surge of jealousy twists in my gut as the woman laughs at something he says, and he joins in. She whacks him playfully on his chest, and he wipes away tears of laughter. Clearly, they know each other well.

I try to dismiss the feeling, reminding myself that I have no claim over Mark.

And yet, I can't seem to tear my gaze away from them. My mind conjures up scenarios of what might happen after the party. Will he take her back to his place? Has he done this in the past?

“Ms. Desmond, your thoughts on these new dating apps?” The investor's question jolts me back to the present.

I put on a smile, hoping it doesn't look as forced as it feels. “I believe it's a very impersonal approach. A true match requires digging deep into a person, and the whole swiping thing gives people so many options that they often swipe past the right person along the way.”

“You're right, Miss. Desmond! Absolutely right.”

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I excuse myself and make a conscious effort to talk to more people, the very reason I'm at this party in the first place.

But even as I throw myself into networking mode, my mind keeps circling back to him and her. The hold he seems to have over me after such a brief encounter is infuriating.

I excuse myself from the group I'm conversing with, desperate for a moment to gather my thoughts. I head over to the bar.

"Vodka martini, dry, please," I tell the bartender, my voice sounding strained even to my own ears.

As I wait for my drink, I can't help but sneak another glance in Mark's direction. He's still engaged in conversation with the brunette.

I quickly look away, heat rushing to my cheeks. Get a grip, Quinn, I chastise myself.

My drink arrives, and I drink it faster than I should, so I order another before I finish the first, just in case.

A familiar voice interrupts my spiraling thoughts. "Well, well, if it isn't the lovely Quinn Desmond."

I turn to find Charlie Letvin standing uncomfortably close, his eyes raking over my body in a way that makes my skin crawl. "Charlie," I acknowledge, forcing a tight smile. "I didn't expect to see you here."

A lie. Mark told me we're here to show Charlie Letvin what an incredible couple we are. But now, I find myself alone while Mark does God knows what with that brunette.

He leans in, invading my personal space. "I'm full of surprises, Sweetheart. And I must say, you look absolutely ravishing tonight."

I take a step back, my discomfort growing by the second. "Thank you, but I should really get back to Mark."

Charlie's hand shoots out, gripping my wrist. "What's the rush? Surely you can spare a moment for someone who could have been a client."

His touch feels like a vice, and panic starts to build in my chest. I try to pull away, but his hold only tightens. "Charlie, please let go."

"Come on, Quinn," he purrs, his breath hot against my ear. "We both know there's always been something between us. Why resist it? We know you and Mark can't possibly last. What do you see in him, anyway?"

I'm about to tell him exactly where he can shove his "something" and how he could only hope to be the quarter of a man Mark is when a deep, commanding voice cuts through the tension.

"I believe my fiancée asked you to let go, Letvin."

I turn to see Mark standing behind Charlie, his broad shoulders squared and his eyes blazing with barely contained fury.

Charlie releases my wrist, turning to face Mark with a sneer. "Zolotov. I should have known you'd be sniffing around."

Mark takes a step forward, his presence imposing and dangerous. “And I should have known you'd be harassing a woman who wants nothing to do with you. As usual.”

The air crackles with tension as the two men stare each other down, a silent challenge passing between them. I can feel the history, the bad blood that runs deep. When Charlie takes one step closer to me, I see Mark reach into his coat pocket.

Is that a gun he's threatening to pull out?

Charlie's eyes follow his hand, and then, to my surprise, Charlie scoffs and takes a step back. “Whatever, Man. She's not worth the trouble.”

He shoots me one last leering glance before slinking away, disappearing into the crowd.

I let out a shaky breath, my heart still pounding in my chest.

But as I meet Mark's gaze, I'm struck by the intensity within it. It's not merely anger or protectiveness. It's something much more primal, more possessive.

“Are you okay, Quinn?” His voice is softer now, the earlier possessiveness replaced by genuine worry.

I nod, willing my racing heart to slow down. “I'm fine. I was handling it, until you stepped in.”

Mark frowns. “Are you... upset?”

“No,” I say, passive-aggressively. “I'm not upset. I'm just sick of you coming over and taking control of every single situation I find myself in, like some god damn alpha.”

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Mark's frown deepens, his blue-gray eyes searching mine. "I was only trying to help, Quinn. Letvin was practically holding onto you."

His tone catches me off guard, and a flicker of guilt dances within me. Maybe he was just trying to protect me. But why does he have to do it in such a domineering way?

"Well, next time, let me handle it," I snap back, my voice sharper than I intended.

There's a charged silence between us as Mark's jaw tightens, his gaze unwavering. "Fine," he finally says, his tone clipped.

I feel a pang of regret about how I lashed out. It wasn't completely fair of me to blame him for coming to my rescue after knowing what he knows about Letvin, but the truth is, deep down, I'm still reeling from the sight of him with that brunette.

Before I can think of a way to smooth things over, Mark nods towards the exit. "Let's get out of here," he says curtly.

"I think I'd rather stay," I protest, but he grabs my hand and pulls me away from the bar.

Mark's grip on my hand remains firm as he guides me through the throng of partygoers, his broad shoulders parting the crowd with ease. As we step outside, the cool night air hits my flushed skin, and I take a deep breath, trying to clear my head.

But my momentary relief is short-lived as Mark practically shoves me into the waiting limousine, his jaw clenched tight. He slides in beside me, slamming the door with more force than necessary.

“What the hell was that about?” I demand, my earlier gratitude giving way to indignation. “How can you force me to leave the party? I don't need you swooping in like some kind of savior.”

Mark's eyes flash dangerously in the dim light of the limo. “Some kind of savior? Letvin had his filthy hands all over you!”

I bristle at his accusation. “He wasn't putting his hands all over me. And even if he was, he wouldn't have gone far.”

“You don't know him like I do, Quinn!” he challenges, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “From where I was standing, it looked like you were about two seconds away from becoming another name on his list.”

“Screw you, Mark,” I spit, my temper flaring. “I'm certainly not your property.”

He leans in close, his breath hot against my cheek. “Who said you were?”

I despise how my body reacts to his, how my pulse races, and my skin tingles. I resent that even now, in the heat of our argument, I can't help but wonder what it would be like to close the distance between us, to feel his lips on mine once more.

This change in our situation makes me feel dizzy with conflicting thoughts. I need to get out of here before I make another mistake—like the one I made on the dance floor, leaning into the kiss and drawing him in for more. Besides, the alcohol is making me impulsive, fiery, and heated.

“Well, enjoy your delusions,” I say, yanking on the door handle since the car is still on wait. “I’ve got a party to get back to.”

But before I can open the door, Mark's hand shoots out, slamming it shut. He traps me in, his body just inches from mine. His scent, an intoxicating blend of power and masculinity, envelops me, clouding my senses.

“Drive,” he tells the driver, his eyes not leaving mine.

He leans in even closer, until our noses are practically touching. “We’re going home, Quinn. Our work here is done tonight.”

His proximity to me fans the flames of desire that have been smoldering inside me all night, and I can feel the heatcreeping into my cheeks. I open my mouth to deny his decision, to lash out, but no words come.

“That's what I thought,” he says, his voice dripping with satisfaction. “Home it is.”

As the limousine begins to move, I try to ignore the electric tension between us, the crackling chemistry that seems to have a mind of its own. Mark's intense gaze remains fixed on my face. He still has me caged in, as if he's attempting to decipher the storm of conflicting emotions swirling within me.

Time seems to lose all meaning. Logic flies right out the window. All I can think about is how badly I want this infuriating man.

Before I can think, I part my lips, and his crash against mine, his tongue demanding entrance to my mouth. I don’t resist. I melt into him, my fingers tangling in his dark, silky hair. His hands roam my body, cupping my hips and then sliding up my thighs, hiking my legs up to rest on his. Then, he pulls out from beneath me and inches his body over mine.

I moan and grab the back of his neck, arching my body against his, my nails digging into his skin.

As the passion between us intensifies, I feel a primal need to get closer to him, to be one with him.

His hand slides up my thigh, the heat of his touch searing through the thin fabric of my dress. I gasp and reach for the buttons of his shirt, telling him it's okay, telling him I want more. The tension between us reaches a fever pitch. "Tell me you don't want this," he growls, his voice a low rumble that sets my insides on fire.

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“I can’t,” I whisper, sliding my leg completely through the slit.

His eyes roam over my body. “You’re going to be the death of me, you hear that?”

I open my mouth to say something—anything—but the words die on my lips as he kisses me again. I quickly undo every button on his shirt. God, I need to take off his coat, need to remove that shirt, need him naked above me. The back of the limo be damned.

“Mark,” I moan into his mouth, biting his lower lip. In response, he slides his hand up between my thighs. Slowly, agonizingly. I part my legs, his fingers leaving a trail of fire in their wake until he reaches the apex.

My body jerks when he dips his fingers under the lace edge of my panties and lets it slap back against my skin. His touch is electric, sending shivers racing down my spine. God, how I want him. I’ve ached for him since that first heated kiss on the dance floor, and now, here we are, alone in the back of a limousine, our restraint hanging by a thread.

I moan, arching my hips into his touch, abandoning any pretense of resistance. The next thing I know, he has my panties sliding down my legs.

“Open up for me,” he commands, and this time, I don’t bristle at his tone. His voice is thick with desire, his warm breath tickling my ear as I comply. I revel in the thrill of being wanted like this, my body responding eagerly to his touch despite the cloud of alcohol lingering in my system.

When his fingers begin to tease my folds in torturous exploration, I clutch his lower back, begging for more. Slowly, he slides a finger through my slit, before slamming it into me. I gasp, my hands falling down from his back, nails now digging into the leather seat beneath me.

He teases, taunts, and drives me wild with desire. When he curves his finger and taps against my clit from inside, my head spins, the world reduced to the feel of his fingers inside me. The way he knows just where to touch to make me break apart.

“God,” he moans into my ear. “You’re so wet.” Then, he takes to my neck, sucking at it. I throw my head back just as he picks up the pace, adds another finger, and circles them inside me.

I buck off the chair as his fingertips hit that one sweet spot. “Right there,” I moan, breathily.

I feel his own breath hitch in his throat as he pounds me relentlessly, just where I want it. I feel a small spark emerge, ready to burn through my body. I’m teetering on the edge of orgasm, my moans taking over the car.

“Cum,” he commands. “Let me watch you cum, Quinn.”

The way he says it sets me alive. I close my eyes and grip the seat, and the wave begins to take its route. I see slivers of light, can hear the blood pound in my ear, and then, the most beautiful high washes over me as I cum to the tune of his fingers, my muscles clenching tight around him, my legs trembling beneath him.

He wraps his arms around my waist and kisses my neck until the last wave of pleasure subsides. I’m exhausted, drained, yet so desperately hungry for him.

Without thinking, I reach for his belt. He slides his fingers out from my pussy, and

reaches to help me with the belt before coming back in for a kiss. I let out a sigh.

He stops, his hand reaching for mine, preventing me from loosening the buckle. I whimper in protest, my eyes flying open to meet his. “You’ve been drinking,” he says, his voice a low growl. The tension in the car spikes again, this time with a different kind of energy.

I blink, caught off guard by his sudden change in demeanor. “I had a few Martinis at the party,” I try to argue, my voice defensive. What’s it to you?”

He rakes a hand through his hair, his jaw clenching. “I don’t want you making decisions you’ll regret in the morning, Quinn. Not when it comes to this, to us.”

In one swift motion, he gets off me and gently pulls down my dress until the hem is back at my ankles.

I swallow hard, my mind reeling as I try to process what just happened.

Chapter 14 - Mark

The next morning, I stand at the entrance to the dining room, and my heart immediately goes into overdrive when I spot Quinn at the breakfast table. Thoughts of her kept me up all night, the way she moaned when I had my fingers all up in her, the way she arched her back for more, the way her long, creamy legs beckoned to be parted. Fuck. I’m in over my head as the same ravenous desire I had for her last night resurfaces.

I walk in and take my seat. She looks up, her green eyes meeting mine briefly before darting away. The memory of last night floods my senses—her soft skin against mine, the intoxicating scent of her hair. I clear my throat.

“Morning,” I say, trying to keep my voice casual.

Quinn nods, focusing intently on her coffee mug. “Morning.” She doesn’t say anything more.

“Can I have the butter?” I ask, and she reaches for it, passing it to me without looking in my direction. I wonder what she’s thinking about, whether last night felt as good for her as it did for me.

All night, I thought about her and what our little escapade meant for us. There’s no doubt in my mind that I want her, but based on how she’s acting—cold and distant—maybe she thinks I don’t feel that way.

“Quinn,” I say to clear any doubts she might have about how I feel and make my intentions clear. “About last night—”

“About last night...” she cuts me off, biting her lower lip. “It was a mistake. We shouldn’t have—it can’t happen again.”

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Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. Wait.What?

“Didn't seem like a mistake at the time,” I growl in protest.

She flashes her palm at me, stopping me from saying more. “Don't. It was a lapse in judgment. Let's just forget it ever happened, okay?”

I lean back in my chair, watching her intently. The determined set of her jaw, the way her fingers clench the mug. She's trying to persuade herself as much as me. But I can't forget. The taste of her lips, the way she quivered beneath my touch—it's etched into my memory, and there's no way I'm going to be able to keep my head clear if I'm around her.

If last night was a mistake for her, it wasn't for me.

“Whatever you say, Quinn.” I grab my keys and stand up, needing to put some distance between us before I do something foolish, like pull her into my arms and show her just how unforgettable last night was. “I have business to take care of. Don't wait up.”

I stride out of the house, my mind reeling from our conversation. I should head into work. In the car, I try to go over some things I need to address, but all I can think about is Quinn. She's driving me crazy, clawing her way into my head the way she is.

Days pass, yet her presence haunts me. I catch glimpses of her strawberry-blonde hair

and hear her voice echoing in the halls, but I choose to run in the opposite direction. It's the only way I know to give her what she wants. If I'm near her, I can't pretend that night was a mistake. Each time I accidentally see her, it's like a jolt to my system, a reminder of what I can't have. I try to bury myself in work and make it a point to hardly be at home, but even when I'm away from her, I can't keep her out of my thoughts.

"Mark, are you with us?" Abram's voice snaps me back to the present. My brothers are gathered around the table, maps and blueprints spread before us as we plan our next move.

I nod, running a hand through my hair. "Yeah, just thinking through the details."

Vladimir shoots me a concerned look. "You seem distracted lately. Everything all right?"

"I'm fine," I snap, irritation flaring. "Let's focus on the job."

"Okay," Denis adds cautiously. "The Smirnovs have stolen our shipment, and we believe they're hiding it in the warehouse on the East. Tomorrow, we attack and bring back what's ours."

We proceed to discuss strategy and contingency plans should our attack fail, but my mind wanders once again. To her. To Quinn. No matter how hard I try, I can't shake the hold she has on me. It's like an obsession, consuming my every waking thought.

The next night, we move into position. Abram takes point, his movements precise and calculated. Vladimir and Denis flank him, their eyes scanning the surroundings for any signs of trouble. I bring up the men on the rear.

We approach the target location, a nondescript warehouse on the outskirts of town. Our rivals are using it as a storage facility for our stolen goods. Our goal is to send a message, to remind them who really runs this city.

As we breach the perimeter, I think of Quinn, having dinner alone at home. Is she wondering where I am? Why hasn't she checked in all these days?

"Mark, watch your six!" Denis hisses, snapping me back to reality.

I mutter a curse under my breath, realizing that I've let my guard down. I scan the area, my heart pounding in my chest. We are exposed and vulnerable.

Suddenly, the sound of gunfire rips through the air. Instinctively, I dive for cover, my hand reaching for my weapon. Bullets ricochet off the concrete, sending debris flying in all directions.

"Ambush!" Abram shouts, returning fire.

I join him, my muscles tensing as I aim and squeeze the trigger. But even as I fight, my mind is torn.

How can I be so consumed by her, even in the heat of battle? It's a weakness, a liability that can get us killed.

As the firefight rages on, I force myself to push Quinn from my mind. I can't afford to be distracted, not now. My brothers are counting on me.

"Behind you!" Denis yells out in warning.

I dive behind a crate as bullets ricochet off the metal, my heart pounding in my chest. My brothers are scattered around the warehouse, each fighting their own battle.

Vladimir is a whirlwind of motion. He quickly takes down two attackers, their bodies crumpling to the ground.

Denis is more methodical. He picks off the attackers one by one, his shots finding their mark with unerring accuracy.

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And then there's Abram. He's by my side, his gun blazing as he covers my back. We've been through hell together, and I know he'd die for me, just as I would for him.

As this attack escalates, I can't shake the feeling that something is off. The attackers are too well-organized and too well-armed. This isn't just a defense against our attack—it's a coordinated assault.

The Smirnovs aren't this capable.

My mind races with possibilities, striving to piece together the puzzle. Who would dare to attack us like this while we strike at another? Someone has been watching our movements.

As I ponder the question, a sudden movement captures my attention. One of the attackers is making a break for it, sprinting toward the exit. I'm on my feet in an instant, pursuing them.

My legs pump as I sprint after him, dodging bullets and leaping over crumpled bodies. I hear my brothers shouting behind me, but I block them out. All that matters is catching this bastard and making him talk.

I'm catching up to him, my breath coming in ragged gasps. Just a few more steps and he'll be mine. But suddenly, he spins around, his gun aimed at my chest.

Time seems to slow as I stare down the barrel of his gun. I know I should be scared, but all I can think about is Quinn. Her face flashes in my mind. If something happened to me, Letvin would come for her. She would be in danger.

With a roar of defiance, I lunge forward, my hand closing around the attacker's wrist and cracking it upward. A bullet goes off, and I feel a searing pain on the side of my waist. We struggle for control of the gun, our bodies slamming against the wall.

I hear a sickening crack as his head collides with the concrete. The gun clatters to the floor as he goes limp in my grasp. I stagger back, my chest heaving.

As I step back, a sharp pain lances through my side. I grit my teeth, trying to ignore it, but the pain only intensifies with each breath. I press my hand against the wound on my waist, feeling the warmth of blood seeping through my fingers. I lift my shirt and see that the bullet grazed my skin. It didn't lodge, thank God.

"Mark, you're hurt," Abram says, his voice laced with concern.

I brush off his words with a forced smile. "I'm fine. It's just a scratch."

But as I take a step forward, the world tilts dangerously. I stumble, my vision blurring at the edges. Vladimir's strong hands grip my shoulders, steadying me.

"You need to get that looked at," he insists, his brow furrowed.

I shake my head, pushing past them. "I said I'm fine. We have more important things to worry about."

"Leave," he growls, and instructs one of his men to guide me to the car. "We've got this."

"Listen," I say, aware that arguing with my brother is pointless. "This attack isn't a defense."

"We figured," he nods. "The Smirnovs are hiding inside the warehouse. The attackers

are another party. We'll find out who it is.”

I don't say I have my hunches. Evidence is all that truly counts, and it's better if my brothers find a concrete answer.

Finally, the driver pulls into my house's driveway, which brings a small measure of relief. I sit in the car for a moment, gathering my strength.

I need to get inside without Quinn seeing me. I can't let her know just how badly I'm hurt. She's already worried enough as it is.

I take a deep breath, wincing at the pain in my side. Then, with a grunt of effort, I heave myself out of the car, refusing my driver's help and making my way toward the house.

Each step is agony, but I force myself to keep going. I pray Quinn is already in bed.

I slip through the front door, my heart pounding in my ears. The house is quiet, the only sound the ticking of the clock in the hallway.

I take a step forward, and suddenly the world tilts sideways. I stumble, my hand reaching out to steady myself against the wall.

That's when I hear her voice, soft and concerned. “Mark? Is that you?”

I close my eyes, cursing under my breath. So much for sneaking past her unnoticed.

I straighten up, trying to mask my pain as Quinn rounds the corner. Her green eyes widen when she sees me, her gaze drawn to the bloodstain on my shirt.

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“Mark, what happened?” she gasps, rushing towards me.

I hold up a hand, stopping her in her tracks. “It's nothing. Just a scratch.”

Quinn's eyes narrow, her voice taking on a determined edge. “That's not a scratch, Mark. You're bleeding.”

She reaches for my shirt, but I flinch away, my pride rearing its head. “I said it's nothing. I can handle it.”

Quinn's hands settle on her hips, her lips pressed into a thin line. “Stop being so stubborn. You need help, and I'm not taking no for an answer.”

I open my mouth to argue, but the words die on my tongue as a fresh wave of pain washes over me. I sway on my feet, and Quinn's there in an instant, her arm slipping around my waist to steady me.

“Come on,” she murmurs, her voice softening. “Let's get you to the bathroom.”

I nod, too tired to fight her. She helps me down the hallway, her touch gentle but firm. I lean on her more than I'd like to admit, my pride crumbling with each step.

In the bathroom, Quinn eases me down onto the edge of the tub. She kneels in front of me, her hands deftly undoing the buttons on my shirt. When her fingers graze my skin, I feel a searing desire wash over me. God, having her just inches away stings in an entirely different way.

I watch her through half-lidded eyes, my breath catching in my throat as her fingers brush against my skin. She's so close, her scent enveloping me, and for a moment, I forget about the pain.

But then she's peeling my shirt away from the wound, and I hiss through my teeth, my body tensing.

“Sorry,” she whispers, her brow furrowed in concentration as she examines the gash in my side.

I let my head fall back against the wall, my eyes drifting shut. “It's okay. I've had worse.”

Quinn doesn't respond, but I can feel her gaze on me, laden with concern. She retrieves the first aid kit, carefully applying saline-soaked water to my wounds. She's trying so damn hard not to hurt me.

Her touch is the most soothing thing I've felt in a while.

“What happened?” she asks after working in silence for a minute. She begins to apply the antiseptic carefully. It stings, but I don't wince.

“We were raiding a warehouse that held goods stolen from us. A third party attacked.”

Her eyes widen. “Someone was keeping tabs on your operations?”

I nod, wincing as she presses a bandage against my side. “It seems that way.

Quinn's expression darkens, her jaw set in determination. “We need to find out who's behind this. You can't keep fighting like this, Mark. It's too dangerous.”

I meet her gaze and see the worry and fire in her eyes. She cares more than she admits, which both frustrates and comforts me. Why does she have to hide how much she cares? That I mean something to her?

“It’s all part of the business,” I respond, attempting to sound nonchalant so I don’t cause her any worry.

“Who could it have been?” she asks.

“I think it was Charlie Letvin,” I say, without skipping a beat.

“Charlie?” she squeaks, the fear in her voice barreling through.

“It was extremely well-coordinated. The weapons were state of the art. He’s the only rival I can think of who has such resources.”

“You...you’re certain?”

“I can’t know for sure. I have no proof.”

“We can’t let him get away with this,” she declares, her voice firm. “We need to be one step ahead of him.”

I watch Quinn, admiring her fierce spirit as she tends to my wounds. Despite the pain throbbing through my body, a warmth spreads in my chest at the sight of her standing by my side during this dark hour.

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Quinn finishes the dressing with careful precision and a gentle touch. She leans back slightly, studying her handiwork before meeting my gaze.

“Did he... was anyone hurt?”

“A few of our men died,” I say, with sadness.

She turns pale, and her voice trembles as she speaks. “I never thought he could be capable of such violence. To needlessly kill!”

“Charlie Letvin is a monster,” I say through gritted teeth, locking eyes with her. “Quinn, you have no idea what he’s done. I didn’t want to scare you, but there was always a reason I didn’t like him being around you. He’s dangerous.”

She listens to me in silence, the gravity of the situation sinking in as she processes what I say. Finally, she says, “I trust you, Mark,” her voice unwavering.

“You do?” I ask, surprised.

She nods, offering me a small, gentle smile. “You may have kidnapped me, but during my time here, you’ve done more for me than you realize. You’ve helped me with my business, created an office space, and done absolutely nothing to make me uncomfortable. I can’t believe I never said this, but... thank you for looking out for me.”

My chest tightens at her words, and her admission catches me off guard. I search her face, seeing the sincerity in her eyes and the vulnerability she rarely shows.

“You don't need to thank me, Quinn,” I reply, my voice soft. “Protecting you is...it's just something I do.”

She reaches out, her hand resting on mine, the contact sending a jolt of warmth through me. “I know,” she says, her gaze unwavering. “And I appreciate it more than you can imagine.”

For a moment, we sit in silence. I'm keenly aware of her hand on mine, each brush of her skin against me. It's both comforting and torturous, and I find myself craving more even though I know I shouldn't.

Our eyes meet, and I see her lips part, her breaths coming in short, raspy bursts. From where I sit, I can see a slight flush creeping up her cheeks. The last time she looked like that, I had my fingers inside her.

In this moment, I know without a doubt that she's deceiving herself. She wants me just as much as I want her. Being near me ignites a fire within her. If I weren't feeling so exhausted, I would have made a move. But this isn't the right time. I won't be able to give her what she truly deserves.

I break eye contact. Finally, she withdraws her hand and stands up to clear the space, her work finished. She comes back with some water and a pill. “A painkiller until we can get you to a doctor.”

I nod and down the pill. “Thank you.”

Quinn watches me with worry. “You're welcome. Just...don't scare me like that again, okay?”

I meet her gaze. There's something there, lurking beneath the surface. Something that makes my heart skip a beat.

“I’ll try,” I murmur, tilting my head at her.

She smiles, but it's fleeting, gone as quickly as it appeared. She gives me her hand, helping me to my feet.

“You should rest,” she says, her voice soft but firm. “I’ll help you to your room.”

I nod, suddenly too tired to argue.

Chapter 15 - Quinn

I step out of the house, hurrying toward the waiting car, excited for the date I've planned for Viktor Petrov and Elena Sokolov tonight. When I approach the sleek black vehicle, I'm surprised to see Mark standing there with his hand on the door handle.

“Mark? What are you doing here?” I ask, my brow furrowing when I don’t see my usual bodyguard. “Where's Sergei?”

Mark smiles. “I figured I'd tag along tonight to see what all the fuss is about with this matchmaking thing you’ve got going on.”

I narrow my eyes at him, suspecting there's more to it than that. “Is this about Charlie Letvin? Because I told you, I'm fine. Sergei can handle him.”

Mark shrugs, his eyes glinting in the fading light. “Can't a man be curious about his...friend's line of work? Besides, I figured you could use the extra security.”

I roll my eyes but can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips. Mark's hovering is incessant, but there's something undeniably charming about his persistence. “Fine. But don't get in my way, Zolotov. I have a job to do.”

He grins, opening the car door for me with a flourish. “Wouldn't dream of it, Desmond.”

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As we head to the venue, my mind races with the final details for Viktor and Elena's date. I've spent weeks planning this evening, determined to create the perfect atmosphere for these two high-profile clients. Mark sits uncharacteristically quiet beside me, giving me the silence I need to focus.

We arrive at the private estate, and I'm immediately in my element. The sprawling grounds are bathed in soft light, and the air is scented with jasmine and rose. I move through the space with purpose, checking items off my mental list as I go.

The table is set with crisp white linens and gleaming silver. A centerpiece of violets imported from Holland adds a touch of romance. Twinkling lights are strung overhead, casting a warm glow over the intimate setting. A string quartet plays softly in the background, its melodies mingling with the gentle murmur of a nearby fountain.

"Not bad," Mark murmurs, his eyes scanning the space approvingly. "You really go all out for these things, don't you?"

I glance at him over my shoulder, a flicker of pride warming my chest. "Only the best for my clients. And for Viktor and Elena? They deserve nothing less."

I lead Mark through the venue, explaining my process as we go. "It's all about creating the right mood," I tell him, adjusting a place setting with a critical eye. "The lighting, the music, the little touches—they all work together to set the stage for romance."

Mark listens intently, his gaze following my every move. "You make it look

effortless, putting all this together,” he remarks, a note of admiration in his voice.

I flash him a smile, feeling a burst of satisfaction at his praise. “It's not effortless, but it's worth it. When I see my clients connecting, really falling for each other? That's what makes it all worthwhile.”

As the appointed hour draws near, I discreetly take my position, Mark at my side. We watch as Viktor arrives, looking dashing in a tailored suit. He seems nervous, fidgeting with his cufflinks as he waits for Elena.

But the moment she steps into view, all of Viktor's anxiety melts away. His jaw goes slack, his eyes widening as he takes in her beauty. Elena is a vision in a flowing red gown, her dark hair cascading down her back in soft waves.

“I've never seen him look like that,” Mark murmurs, leaning in close. “He's completely smitten.”

I nod, a thrill of satisfaction coursing through me. This is what I live for—the magic of two people connecting on a deeper level.

As Viktor and Elena take their seats, I keep a watchful eye on the proceedings closely. The waitstaff move like ghosts, materializing only to pour champagne and deliver each perfectly timed course before fading into the background once more. The string quartet plays on, its music swelling with each shared laugh and lingering glance between the couple.

“You're really diligent,” Mark observes, his voice low and warm. “The fact that you're hiding out here just in case you're needed until the date comes to its completion... It's impressive, Quinn.”

I glance at him, surprised by the sincerity in his tone. For a moment, I'm caught off

balance, unsure how to respond. But then I smile, letting his words wash over me like a gentle wave.

“Thank you,” I murmur, holding his gaze. “That means a lot, coming from you. All I’ve seen you do is work. No one works half as hard as you do.”

“Really?” he raises his eyes in surprise. “I felt the same about you all this time.

We lapse into a comfortable silence, watching as Viktor and Elena lose themselves in conversation. They lean toward each other, hands brushing, eyes locked. Their chemistry is palpable, a living, breathing thing.

For a moment, everything else fades away—the stress, the long hours, the constant pressure to be perfect. All that matters is this: two people falling in love and the knowledge that I helped make it happen.

As Viktor and Elena's laughter rings out across the venue, Mark turns to me, curiosity glinting in his eyes. “So, why her? Why choose Elena for Viktor?”

I take a breath, considering my words carefully. “Elena is more than just a pretty face. She's an independent heiress with a successful fashion label. She's driven, passionate, and unafraid to pursue what she wants. Besides, she’s already pledged 80% of her wealth to charity. There’s no doubt she’s here to create a better world, not swayed by material goods.”

Mark nods, a flicker of admiration crossing his chiseled features. “Sounds like a perfect match for Viktor. He needs someone who can keep up with him, challenge him, show him that businesses can do good.”

“Exactly,” I agree, my gaze drifting back to the couple. They're completely engrossed in each other, oblivious to the world around them. “But it's not just about finding

someone with complementary qualities. It's about creating a genuine connection, a spark that can grow into something real and lasting.”

Mark shifts beside me, his shoulder brushing mine. “And you think they have that? That spark?”

I nod, feeling a rush of conviction. “I do. I wouldn't have brought them together otherwise.”

He falls silent, studying me with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine. “You really believe in this, don't you? In love, in a happily ever after.”

I meet his gaze head-on, refusing to back down. “I do. I've seen it with my parents. I've seen love blossom all around me.”

My mind drifts to my distant uncle, to the lessons he taught me about the power of human connection. “My uncle always said that love is the greatest gift we can give or receive. That it has the power to heal, to transform, to make us better than we ever thought possible.”

Mark's expression softens, a hint of understanding flickering in his eyes. “You sound like you were close to your uncle.”

“I was,” I murmur, a bittersweet smile tugging at my lips. “He's the reason I started this business, the reason I'm so passionate about what I do. He told me to chase my wildest dreams. ‘Life's too short, Kid. Don't take any regrets with you to the grave’.”

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I take a deep breath, steeling myself against the sudden rush of emotion. “He believed that everyone deserves a chance at love, at happiness. And that's what I want to give my clients.”

Mark's gaze lingers on me for a moment longer, his expression inscrutable. “You're a hopeless romantic, you know?” he says, a hint of amusement in his tone.

I bristle at his words, my defenses rising. “And what's wrong with that?”

“Nothing. Except it can lead to disappointment.”

“Perhaps you're just a cynic.”

“Or perhaps true love doesn't exist,” he says simply.

I turn to him, incredulous. “You don't believe in love?”

He chuckles, the sound low and rich, sending a shiver down my spine. “I never said I don't believe in love, Quinn. I just think true love isn't all it's meant to be. Love takes work. It's not for everyone. I've seen it firsthand, how it can consume and destroy.”

There's a darkness in his eyes, a glimpse of the pain he keeps so carefully hidden. “And true love, the kind that lasts? That's a fairytale, a pretty lie we tell ourselves to make the world seem less cruel.”

I shake my head, refusing to accept his bleak worldview. “You're wrong, Mark. I've seen it too, the power of real connection, of two hearts finding each other against all

odds.”

He steps closer, his gaze burning into mine. “And what happens when it falls apart? When the person you trusted most betrays you, leaves you broken and alone?”

The intensity of his words takes my breath away, and for a moment, I'm lost in the depths of his eyes. “Then you pick yourself up and try again,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “Because the alternative is giving up, and I refuse to do that.”

For a long moment, we stand there, locked in a silent battle of wills. Then, just as suddenly as it began, the tension breaks, and Mark steps back, a rueful smile on his lips.

“You're a force to be reckoned with, Quinn Desmond,” he says, shaking his head. “A light in the darkness.”

His praise is so high that I don't know what to say. With a smile of acknowledgment, I turn my attention back to Viktor and Elena, watching as they lean in for a soft, sweet kiss. The sight fills me with a sense of triumph and purpose.

“Look at them,” I murmur, my voice filled with wonder. “They're falling in love, right before our eyes.”

Mark follows my gaze, and I can see the reluctant admiration in his expression.

As Viktor and Elena stand to leave together, their hands intertwined, I feel a rush of pure elation. It's moments like these that make all the hard work worth it.

“We did it,” I squeal, turning to Mark with a grin that stretches from ear to ear. “They're perfect for each other, and we made it happen. Tonight was an absolute success!”

In a burst of sheer joy, I throw my arms around him, and he reaches for my waist, pulling me closer with a laugh. I pull back from his neck, his scent lingering on my senses, and the next thing I know, my heart races as we stand there in each other's arms, our eyes locked on one another.

Mark gently lifts his hand to my cheek, and I lean into it. His touch sends a jolt of electricity through me, igniting a fire I can't ignore. I part my lips, and his gaze is intense and searching.

"Quinn," he breathes my name like a whispered prayer, his voice low and husky.

Instantly, I slam my lips against his. My heart pounds in my chest, the sound echoing in my ears. Every rational thought evaporates as I find myself drawn to him like a moth to a flame. The world fades away until it's just the two of us, suspended in this charged moment.

His stubble grazes against my skin, but I don't care. I slide my tongue across his lips and part mine, for him to enter. Our breath mingles, warm and enticing, and when Mark's hand clutches the back of my neck to pull me closer, I nearly melt.

God, I want him. I want him with every fiber of my being. He gently releases my neck, an impending sign that this kiss is coming to an end.

And then, as quickly as it began, the moment ends. I pull back, my cheeks flushed, my heart pounding in my chest. "I'm sorry," I stammer, suddenly self-conscious. "I don't know what came over me."

Mark's eyes darken, and his gaze is intense and focused solely on me. "Don't be," he murmurs, his voice low and rough with emotion. "I'm not."

And then his lips are on mine again, his kiss deep and hungry, filled with a passion

that steals my breath away. I melt into him, my fingers tangling in his hair, my body molding against his as if we were made for each other.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathless, our chests heaving. Mark's eyes are hooded, his expression unreadable. "We should go," he says, his voice thick with desire. "Back home."

"Yes," I say, without skipping a beat. This time around, I want to get home as fast as I possibly can.

Chapter 16 - Mark

I grip the steering wheel tightly, my knuckles turning white as I race through the dark streets. Anticipation for what's to come pulses through my veins with each rev of the engine. For so long, I've had Quinn on my mind, conjuring images of everything I want to do with her. Tonight, she's ready to be mine. Quinn sits beside me, her eyes wide and chest heaving, occasionally stealing glances my way. I feel my veins throb against the purr of the V8.

My gaze darts to her, drinking in the sight—hair tousled by the wind from the open windows, cheeks flushed, lips parted. I reach over and take her hand, bringing it up to my lips before setting it down. She tilts her head at me, her eyes drinking in the sight of my body. Desire pounds through me, urging me faster. Faster. Have to get her home. Now.

The tires screech as I whip the car into the driveway. I'm out in a flash, barely remembering to slam it into park. In two strides, I'm at Quinn's door, wrenching it open.

I pull her from the car and into my arms, my mouth claiming hers in a kiss filled with tongues, teeth, and desperation. She responds with equal ardor, her fingers digging into my shoulders as her back hits the car from the intensity of my kiss.

I break away, panting. "Inside. Now."

Quinn nods, her eyes glazed with desire. I take her hand and nearly drag her to the front door, fumbling with my key. It takes three attempts before I finally manage to

get the damn thing open. It's late, and all the house staff are fast asleep.

As soon as we're across the threshold, I spin and press Quinn against the wall, caging her in with my body. I feel the mad thrum of her pulse where my lips meet her throat. She fists her hands in my hair, pulling me impossibly closer.

God, the sounds she makes—breathy little gasps and mewls that shoot straight to my groin. I palm her breast through her shirt, reveling in the weight of it, the hardened peak of her nipple against my thumb.

I want to devour her. Consume her. Meld her body to mine until I don't know where I end and she begins. It's visceral, this need, and primal. Unlike anything I've ever felt before.

Dimly, I register that we're still in the foyer. I tear my mouth from Quinn's with a labored breath. "My room or yours?"

"Whichever is nearest," she says, breathlessly.

"Mine then," I grin. I bend and hook an arm behind her knees, hoisting her up. She lets out a startled squeak that morphs into a moan as I suck at the sensitive spot behind her ear.

Each step is agony, the ache in my core building to an inferno. I stagger up the stairs and down the hall, Quinn's slight weight hardly registering. All I can focus on is getting her naked, sinking into her heat. Losing myself to the madness...

I kick open the door and set her down, grabbing her waist and bringing my lips to hers again. She moans and reaches for my tie, loosening it before casting it aside. I walk her backwards against the door, shutting it close behind us.

She wraps her legs around me, and I lift her effortlessly, her soft curves aligning perfectly with my rigid edges. Our lips mold together in a feverish dance, the taste of her driving me to the brink of insanity. She's clutching to my shirt and I carry her onto my bed, gently throwing her down on it.

She looks up at me with a grin. "Impatient, are we?"

I growl and jump in, my knees on either side of her hips, anchoring her in. "You've been in my head, Quinn," I tease, taking her hands and holding them above her head, against the bed.

"Should I apologize?" She arches into me, giving me a look that can only be comprehended as a challenge. A challenge to take her.

"No apologies necessary," I hold her wrists between one hand, and take my other hand to the buttons of her blouse. My hand shakes as I unbutton it swiftly. A button or two fly, but I don't care. I want her. Now. Within seconds, her top is undone, her breasts rising and falling through that black lace bra. I release her hands, needing both free to feel her, to caress every inch of this delectable body.

"God," I whisper into her ear, biting at her lobe. "You're gorgeous."

"Mark..." she moans when my hands reach beneath her back and with one single flick, undo the hook of her bra. Her breasts spill free, and I slide my hands beneath her neck, pulling her up. She rests on her forearms as I slowly slide off her shirt, the straps of her bra. She trembles the whole time, before her head falls back on the soft pillow.

Her chest rises and falls rapidly as I hover over her, capturing every detail of her flushed face, her parted lips, her eyes glazed with desire. My fingers trace a path down her body, igniting goosebumps in their wake, before I trace back to her nipple

and give it a flick. I dip my head low, sucking on her soft breasts. She tastes like temptation and everything I shouldn't want but crave with every fiber of my being.

She runs her fingers through my hair, and I feel her come alive for me as she bucks her hips towards me, hinting for more. She pulls my head up and forces me to look at her. Her eyes meet mine, green fireworks in the dim light. "Mark."

"Shh." I silence her with a searing kiss, one that leaves us both panting. My hand slides down to her jeans, working the zipper, and she lifts her hips obligingly. Her skin beneath my fingertips is like silk over heated steel as I pull down her pants, and then slide my fingers through her panties, pulling them down next. I groan, and it comes out more like a growl than anything else.

I sit up on my knees, take in the sight of her completely naked form. The swell of her breasts, the dip of her waist, the curves of her hips. She's a living, breathing piece of art.

I tear my gaze from her breasts, rosy and aching for my lips, and slide a hand up between her thighs. She parts her legs, trembling as I cup her at the apex. The way she lurches off the bed before falling back down when I slide a finger into her and flick her clit hits me right at the cock. Within seconds, I shed off all my clothes, knowing neither of us can wait any longer. She's wetter than a riverbed.

I position myself at her entrance, then reach for her cheek, asking gently for her consent one last time. "You sure about this?"

Her only answer is to wrap her legs around my waist and pull me closer.

"God, Quinn," I whisper into her ear. "You're wetter than sin."

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“Then fuck me already,” she growls, her green eyes ablaze with desire.

And fuck her I do. I dive into her, feeling her warmth envelope me and each one of my senses. I see her, feel her, hear her. Only her. My cock is halfway in, and I ram it in whole. Her nails dig into my skin, matching the intensity of my movements as I bury myself deeper into her.

I roll my hips, holding her waist tight to keep her in position beneath me. She closes her eyes, and her hair falls down to her breasts, covering them just enough to keep me hungry. I find a pace, fix a pace, and when she clutches my ass and jerks her hips to meet my movements, I know she wants it faster.

Faster I go, harder. I hold her tight, my balls digging into her as I arch my hips to hit her spot. “Mark!” she squeals with delight, clenching her pussy tight around my cock.

It's like we're in our own little world, detached from everything else. I grip her tightly, my fingers leaving marks on her skin that I know will fade by morning. I find myself unable to stop as my cock throbs for more of this drug.

Slow. Hard. Fast. Our bodies are a symphony of moans and grunts and the headboard banging against the wall. Sweat glistens off our skin, her curves dance to my tunes. We're a whirlwind of passion, like two people who've been waiting their entire lives for this very moment.

She wraps her legs tight around my waist and pulls me deeper. I bury my face in her neck and drive in deep, circling my hips.

“Oh my god, Mark,” she mewls. “That’s it. Just like that.”

I feel my cock grow painfully hard, and ready to explore. “Quinn, I can’t hold on much longer,” I admit, knowing that we’re about to reach the precipice of our desire.

“Don’t,” she commands, her nails digging into my back.

Her orgasm rocks her first, and she cries out my name as her legs tremble from all the control she’s losing. Her convulsing orgasm milks me to my core. I follow right behind her, spilling into her, our bodies melded together in the aftermath.

I bury my face in her neck as I pulse inside her, lost to the ecstasy. Slowly, I come back to myself. Quinn is boneless beneath me, her skin dewy from the heat. I roll to the side, gathering her in my arms. She tucks her head under my chin with a contented sigh.

We lie there, hearts pounding in sync as our breathing evens out. In the aftermath, a sense of peace settles over me. It’s foreign, this feeling of rightness, like she was made to fit in my arms.

I brush a kiss on her forehead, marveling at the turn my life has taken. Just days ago, this infuriating, captivating woman became an obsession. But now? Now, I can’t imagine my life without her. If I weren’t so spent, I’d take her over and over again.

I want to shout my desires from the rooftops, but I know I need to tread carefully. I’m confused by how insanely good that felt. How addictive. It’s like she’s the first woman who makes me feel like I couldn’t tire of her.

I need to reign in these thoughts. I fucked her to get her out of my system. The obsession that’s been creeping up is unhealthy, and perhaps by the morning, I’ll finally be able to get her out of my head. It’s all still fresh, maybe that’s why I want

her still.

Or so I tell myself.

“That was... fun,” Quinn says quietly, drawing circles on my chest.

“It was fun while it lasted, wasn’t it?” I admit, trying to see what she thought of it.

She looks up at me with a question in her eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing,” she says, shutting her eyes as if to soak in this moment. For a while, I consider disturbing her, eager to know what’s on her mind.

But what’s the point? This is a one-time thing, isn’t it? Shouldn’t I leave sleeping troubles at bay?

So I say nothing. Instead, I gather her closer and drift off to sleep.

Soft morning light filters through the curtains, gently awakening me from slumber. I blink my eyes open, feeling disoriented for a moment before the memories of last night come rushing back. Quinn, naked and writhing beneath me, her skin flushed and her eyes dark with desire. The way she clung to me as we both shattered.

I turn my head to find her still asleep, still naked beneath that blanket, her face peaceful and achingly beautiful in the golden glow. My chest tightens with desire. How did this fiery woman manage to get under my skin so quickly?

Quinn stirs, her lashes fluttering as she wakes. When her eyes meet mine, she gives me a sleepy, contented smile that makes my heart skip a beat. “Good morning,” she murmurs, her voice husky from sleep.

“Morning, Beautiful.” I pull her closer, relishing the feel of her warm, pliant body against mine. She fits so perfectly in my arms.

We lie tangled together, savoring the quiet intimacy of the moment. I trail my fingers along the curve of her waist, marveling at the softness of her skin. Quinn sighs and burrows deeper into my embrace, while desire thrums in my veins.

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I know I should be satisfied, should be ready to move on now that I've finally had her. But as I breathe in the sweet scent of her hair, I realize that one night will never be enough. Not with Quinn. Not when every cell in my body is screaming for more.

Fuck, what is this woman doing to me? I've never been the type to get attached, never wanted anything more than a few nights of mutual pleasure. But with Quinn, everything feels different.

What the hell am I doing, wanting to fuck her again? But she's in my mind all over again, my thoughts consumed with having her. I can't fight it any longer and lean in, ready to capture her lips in a kiss, praying for a reenactment of last night, but she pulls back just about then. "I need to get to work," she says, already slipping out of my grasp.

"Work? Now?" I try to mask the disappointment in my voice, but it's a futile effort.

Quinn is already up and searching for her clothes. "Last night was fun, but I've got a long day ahead of me, Mark and..." She trails off, but the implication is clear.

I sit up, watching as she dresses with quick, efficient movements. The intimacy of just moments before has evaporated, replaced by a growing tension.

"You're right," I said at last. "All good things must come to an end."

Quinn pauses for just a moment, then finishes dressing and grabs her purse. "I have to go. I'm sorry." She doesn't look at me as she says it, her gaze fixed firmly on the door.

I want to stop her, to pull her back into bed and lose myself in her all over again. But I force myself to stay still, to let her walk away. The click of the door closing behind her echoes in the sudden silence of the room.

A deep disappointment crushes me. Shit, when did I become such a fucking sap? I'm Mark Zolotov, the guy who never lets a woman get too close.

I flop back onto the pillows, staring up at the ceiling as my mind races. What the hell just happened? Why did watching her walk away crush me like that? I knew my obsession with her ran deep, but now I've had her.

Shouldn't I be over it now?

But even as I ask myself the question, I already know the answer. I want her, more than I've ever wanted anyone or anything. And now that I've had a taste, I'm more obsessed than ever.

Fuck, I'm in trouble.

Chapter 17 - Quinn

I'm buried in my phone, replying to an email as I enter the dining room. When I look up, I find Mark sitting there, a table laid out for two.

"Oh," I stammer, memories from three nights ago rushing back at me. He's looking devastatingly handsome. Enough to know I'll be in real trouble if I let myself stumble.

"Join me?" he asks, rising from his chair.

"I ... I just remembered I have some more meetings to set up. I think I'd rather eat in

my room.”

“Right,” he looks... disappointed? But I’m probably just imagining things by projecting my own feelings onto him. The truth is that I’ve been trying to keep my distance from him because of what happened between us, and I’m not sure if I can be around him without wanting more. And from how he spoke about the time we shared, something about how all good things come to an end, I already know he’s not in it for anything long-haul.

And his actions match his words.

He hasn’t pushed for answers. Hasn’t pushed for time with me outside of what is necessary. That’s probably because the night we shared was nothing but a casual hookup for him.

“I’ll ask the maid to send up your dinner,” he says as I stand there silently before him, lost in my thoughts.

“Yes, please,” I say, and my heart feels crushed that he hasn’t tried to convince me to stay.

“After all, we can’t keep the busy bee waiting for her nectar,” he teases. I force a laugh, feeling the weight of the unspoken tension between us.

As I turn to leave, Mark’s voice stops me in my tracks, “Quinn, we have that charity event to attend tomorrow night.”

A part of me wants to decline, to put some distance between us, but another part reminds me to hold on to my end of the bargain.

With a sigh, I nod, “Seven it is.”

He smiles, a glint of satisfaction in his eyes, and I turn to walk away.

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I gaze out the window of Mark's sleek black Mercedes, the city lights blurring past as we speed toward tonight's party. My thoughts wander to that evening, to the warmth of his breath against my skin, the pressure of his body against mine. I shake my head, trying to push the memories away. Focus, Quinn. This is just a business arrangement.

Mark's deep voice breaks into my thoughts. "Penny for your thoughts, Princess?"

I roll my eyes at the pet name, refusing to let him see how it affects me. "Just mentally preparing for tonight. We need to make this engagement look real."

"Don't worry; I'm an excellent actor." His blue-gray eyes sparkle with mischief as he grins at me.

Three nights later, I sift through the designer dresses Mark sent over, settling on an emerald-green piece that hugs my curves. As I zip it up, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. The dress is a far cry from my usual no-nonsense suits, but it makes me feel powerful and beautiful, exactly what I need tonight.

Mark waits by the door downstairs, looking criminally handsome in his tailored tux. His gaze rakes over me approvingly. "You clean up nice, Desmond."

My heart races, highlighting the obvious fact that I subconsciously dressed up for him. Does he see it, too?

We share a charged look, the air between us crackling with tension. But I steady my

spine, smoothing my dress. I can't let myself forget—this is all pretend. Mark and I come from different worlds. Falling for him is the last thing I can afford to do because he certainly won't fall for me.

As we step into the opulent ballroom, Mark's hand rests on the small of my back, a gesture that feels both possessive and reassuring. I take a deep breath, putting a smile on my face as we navigate through the throng of well-dressed guests.

“Mark, Darling!” A woman dripping in diamonds approaches us, air-kissing Mark on both cheeks. “And who might this lovely creature be?”

“Elena, meet my fiancée, Quinn Desmond.” Mark's arm tightens around my waist, drawing me closer. “Quinn, this is Elena, an old family friend.”

I extend my hand, my smile never wavering. “Pleasure to meet you, Elena.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, assessing me with a shrewd gaze. “Likewise, Dear. I must say, this engagement comes as quite a surprise. Mark's always been such a...free spirit.”

I laugh, the sound a little too bright. “Well, when you know, you know. Right, Baby?” I turn to Mark, our eyes locking.

For a moment, I swear I see something real flicker in his gaze. But then it's gone, replaced by his signature charm. “Oh, I knew from the moment I laid eyes on you, Princess.”

The way he says it makes my heart skip a beat. For a split second, I let myself believe his words contained a fragment of truth, a hint of the feelings I've been desperately

trying to suppress. But then reality crashes back in, reminding me that this is all a facade, a performance we're putting on for the world.

Elena glances between us, clearly searching for gossip. "Well, Quinn, you've definitely charmed the uncharmable Mark Zolotov."

I share a look with Mark, both of us trying to keep up the act. "Oh, it was love at first sight for both of us," I quip, forcing a laugh as Mark's hand tightens imperceptibly on my waist.

As Elena moves on to greet other guests, I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. Mark leans in, his lips brushing my ear. "You're a natural at this."

I shiver, trying to ignore the heat that courses through me at his proximity. "I learned from the best."

We make our rounds, our act flawless. Mark's hand never leaves my back, his touch a constant reminder of our charade. But as the night wears on, the lines begin to blur. His laughter sounds genuine, and his smiles reach his eyes. When he looks at me, I almost believe the adoration I see there.

A pang of longing hits me, sharp and sudden. What would it be like to truly be a part of his life? To have his affection, his loyalty, for real?

I shake my head, banishing the thought. This is a game, nothing more.

But as he catches my eye, his gaze heated and intense, I can't help but wonder...what if?

As we mingle at another party next week, a woman in a sleek silver gown approaches me, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Quinn, Darling! I've been eager to hear more about your engagement.”

I plaster on a smile, my mind racing for a response. “Oh, you know how it is. When you find the right person, everything just falls into place.”

The woman leans in conspiratorially. “But how did he propose? I bet it was terribly romantic.”

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From the corner of my eye, I catch Mark watching me, his gaze intense. I swallow hard, feeling the weight of his stare. “It was a private moment, just the two of us. Mark's not one for grand gestures, but he has a way of making even the simplest things feel special.”

The words come easily, a lie that feels dangerously close to a confession. The woman sighs dreamily, clearly satisfied with my answer. “You two make such a lovely couple. I can see the adoration in his eyes when he looks at you.”

I force a laugh, trying to ignore the way my heart clenches at her words. If only she knew the truth.

As the woman drifts away, Mark's hand rests on the small of my back. “You handled that well,” he murmurs, his breath warm against my ear. “Just enough details, but not too many to give us away.”

I tilt my head to look up at him, my pulse quickening at his proximity. “Thank you.”

His lips curl into a smirk, yet there's a softness in his eyes that takes me by surprise. “Dance with me,” he suddenly says, taking my hand and guiding me to the center of the room.

I follow silently, my skin tingling where his fingers intertwine with mine. As we sway to the music, Mark draws me closer, his body shaping to mine in a way that feels both familiar and exhilaratingly fresh.

“Quinn,” he breathes, my name a caress on his lips. “I...”

But before he can continue, an apologetic friend of his appears, asking for some urgent advice. The moment broken, Mark steps back, his mask slipping back into place.

I watch them walk off the floor. What was he about to say? And why do I feel a flicker of disappointment at the interruption?

As the party starts to wind down, Mark guides me towards the exit, and I feel a sudden surge of panic at the thought of leaving his side. It's irrational, I know, but after spending the evening playing the role of his adoring fiancée, the idea of being alone feels strangely unsettling.

As if sensing my unease, Mark tilts his head in my direction. "You okay?" he murmurs.

I nod, unable to speak. The truth is, I'm nowhere near okay. The lines between pretense and reality are blurring, and I'm uncertain how much longer I can maintain this charade without completely losing myself.

We step out into the cool night air, and I take a deep breath, trying to clear my head. But before I can fully compose myself, Mark leads me towards his sleek black car, its engine already purring. "I hope you're not too tired. We have one more appearance to make."

"Where are we going?" I ask, my voice sounding small and uncertain to my own ears.

Mark's lips quirk in a half-smile, his eyes glinting with excitement. "My family's place. My sister Lara and her husband Dima Orlov are throwing a little gathering."

My heart stutters in my chest, and nervousness sweeps over me. “We’re meeting your family?”

“All of them,” he nods.

As we pull up to the sprawling mansion, I take in its grandeur—the manicured lawns and towering columns speak of wealth and status. Mark helps me out of the car, his hand lingering on the small of my back as he guides me towards the entrance.

The moment we reach the doorway to the living room, I’m engulfed in a whirlwind of activity, the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses filling the air. A bunch of curious faces turn in our direction, and I stiffen, suddenly nervous.

Mark’s arm tightens around my waist, his presence a steadying force amidst the chaos of my thoughts. “Relax,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my temple. “You’re with me. You’re safe.”

I lean into him, drawing strength from his solid frame, and we move into the living room together.

The next thing I know, we’re surrounded by a group of people. I recognize Lara immediately, who embraces me. “I’m so glad you dropped by!” She turns to introduce me to a tall man. “This is my husband, Dima.”

“You’ll find that we Orlovs are much better company than the Zolotovs,” Dima grins at me, helping to put me at ease.

“That’s because you’re all frightfully boring,” a man I don’t recognize chimes in, giving me his hand. I laugh as I take it.

“Sergei,” he introduces himself.

“The most notorious of my cousins.”

“Don’t tell my wife that,” he winks at me as a beautiful woman slides up to him.

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“Hi, I’m Amelia,” she says sweetly, before swatting at her husband’s arm. “Keeping secrets, are we?”

I find myself laughing along with them, the tension slowly ebbing away in the face of their easy banter and genuine warmth. Mark stands beside me, his hand never far from my back.

“Can I get you a drink?” he whispers in my ear. The air hits my neck, and I shiver from unwanted desire.

“Yes, please,” I say, my voice coming out hoarse.

We make our way to the bar, where Mark hands me a glass of red wine before introducing me to several others. I already know his brothers, Abram, Vladimir, and Denis, who greet me warmly. Then there’s Mikhail, with his booming laugh and infectious smile, and Caterina, elegant and poised, who regards me with keen interest. Lastly, there are Lev and Pippa, the bickering yet clearly devoted couple who remind me so much of my parents.

“So, you’re the woman who finally managed to tie down our Mark,” Artyom, the youngest of the Orlovs, comments. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

I laugh, the sound a little too high-pitched to my own ears. “Well, what can I say? I’m pretty irresistible.”

Artyom chuckles, clearly amused by my response. “I like you,” he declares, raising his glass in a toast. “Welcome to the family, Quinn.”

I clink my glass against his, the gesture feeling oddly significant, even though it's all but a lie. As I take a sip of my drink, I catch Mark's eye, a flicker of something unreadable passing between us.

Throughout the evening, Mark remains attentive, his hand always finding the small of my back or the curve of my waist. He refills my drink without being asked, his fingers brushing against mine as he hands me the glass.

“Having fun?” he murmurs, his breath warm against my ear.

I nod, leaning into his touch. “Your family is...a lot,” I admit, my voice low. “But in a good way, I think.”

Mark chuckles, the sound vibrating through his chest. “They can be overwhelming,” he agrees. “But they mean well. And they seem to like you.”

I glance around the room, taking in the smiling faces and the easy laughter. Despite my initial reservations, I find myself starting to relax, the warmth of the family's welcome seeping into my bones.

As the night wears on, I find myself drawn into more conversations, each one a little easier than the last. Mark's siblings regale me with embarrassing stories from his childhood, their laughter infectious as they share memories of a young Mark getting into all sorts of trouble.

I can't help but join in, my laughter mingling with theirs. For a moment, I forget the pretense, the fact that this is all just an act. In this moment, surrounded by the warmth and camaraderie of Mark's family, I feel like I belong. I get caught up in the experience, savoring the various cocktails and snacks they keep offering.

Watching them, I feel a pang of longing so sharp that it takes my breath away. I've

always been independent, proud of my ability to stand on my own two feet. However, seeing the warmth and love that surround Mark's family, I can't help but wonder what it would be like to be a part of something like that. All I have in this world to call family are my parents, who are happy in their retirement and traveling the world.

Memories of my uncle gush back. I remember how he filled our home with laughter on his visits and how special he made me feel. But when he passed, we were down to just three, and I wonder, on a certain level, what it might be like to have a family this big, this boisterous, this large, and happy.

Lost in my thoughts, I don't notice Mark approaching until he's standing right beside me. "Penny for your thoughts?" he murmurs, his voice low and intimate.

I startle slightly, then shake my head. "It's nothing," I say, forcing a smile. "Just...taking it all in."

Mark studies me for a moment, his blue-gray eyes seeming to look right through me. "Come on," he says, taking my hand. "Let's go get some air."

He leads me out onto the balcony, the cool night air a welcome respite from the warmth of the house. For a moment, we stand in silence, looking out over the twinkling lights of the city below.

"I know this isn't easy for you," Mark says finally, his voice soft. "Pretending to be something we're not."

I shrug, trying to play it off. "It's not so bad," I say, but even I can hear the uncertainty in my voice.

Mark turns to face me, his expression serious. "Quinn," he says, and the sound of my name on his lips sends a shiver down my spine. "I know we didn't exactly start off

well. But I want you to know that... I'm here for you. Whatever you need.”

I swallow hard, my throat suddenly tight. “I just...” I hesitate, the words sticking in my throat. “I’ve never had this before. A family, I mean. Not really.”

Mark's expression softens, his eyes filled with understanding. “I know,” he says quietly. “It’s truly something special, isn’t it?”

He reaches out, his fingers brushing against my cheek in a gesture that feels almost unbearably tender. For a moment, I lean into his touch, allowing myself to envision what it would be like to experience this, not just the pretense, but the reality of it. To belong to someone, to be part of something greater than myself.

But then reality comes crashing back in, and I pull away, my heart racing. “We should get back inside,” I say, my voice rough. “Before someone comes looking for us.”

Mark nods, but there's a flicker of disappointment in his eyes. “Of course,” he says, offering me his arm. “Shall we?”

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I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders as I slip my arm through his. Together, we step back into the warmth and light of the house and head straight back to the bar.

Chapter 18 - Mark

I help a tipsy Quinn into the passenger seat of my car, unable to suppress an amused grin as she sings my family's praises. Her strawberry-blond hair is slightly tousled, falling into her bright green eyes as she babbles enthusiastically.

“Mark, Natalia is soooo cool! Did you know she's made over three million dollars in sales with her clothing business? Three million! And she's only 29!” Quinn exclaims, her words just a little slurred. “And your cousin Damien—he told the funniest joke about a Russian bear walking into a bar...”

She bursts into giggles, tilting her head back against the seat. I laugh softly as I fasten her seatbelt, allowing my fingers to hover briefly over her collarbone. Even slightly drunk, her enthusiasm for life is contagious.

“I'm glad you had a good time, Myshka,” I tease. “They can be a rowdy bunch, but it seems like you fit right in.”

“Myshka?”

“Little mouse,” I chuckle as she playfully whacks me on the arm in protest.

As I slide behind the wheel and pull out onto the lamp-lit streets, Quinn continues recounting the evening's highlights, her hands gesturing animatedly. I navigate the

familiar route to my place, only half-listening, distracted by the way the passing lights dance across her delicate features.

“Oh, and your brother Vladimir told me the most hilarious story about you as a kid!” she announces gleefully, poking me in the bicep. “Something about you stealing a police car and taking it for a joyride when you were fifteen?”

I groan, shaking my head ruefully. “That traitor. I’ll have to have a word with Vlad about the importance of brotherly discretion.”

Quinn laughs, a melodic sound that warms me like a sip of fine vodka. “From the sound of it, discretion has never been your strong suit, Mr. Zolotov.” Her voice takes on a mischievously admonishing tone. “Taking a cop car for a joyride, flirting shamelessly with all the ladies...”

I smirk, glancing over at her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. “Well, I’ve always been a man who knows what he wants.” I let my gaze linger on her for a weighted moment before returning my attention to the road. “And right now, what I want is to get you home safe and sound.”

I navigate the lamp-lit streets with practiced ease while Quinn chats on, blissfully unaware of the intensity of my desire. For now, I content myself with stealing glances at her animated face, committing every smile and laugh to memory. She’s already an addiction, and I know I’m in trouble.

When we return home, I maneuver the car smoothly to the porch. Killing the engine, I turn to Quinn with a smile. “Home sweet home. Let’s get you upstairs to your room, hm?”

She blinks at me, those mesmerizing green eyes slightly unfocused. “Upstairs? To your room?” A giggle bubbles out of her. “Why, Mr. Zolotov, are you trying to seduce me?”

I chuckle, shaking my head as I exit the car and move around to her side. “Believe me, Quinn, when I seduce you, you’ll know it.” I open her door and offer my hand. “Right now, I’m just trying to make sure you don’t faceplant on the sidewalk.”

She pouts but accepts my assistance, stumbling slightly as she tries to find her footing. I catch her easily, one arm snaking around her waist to steady her. The heat of her body bleeds through the thin fabric of her dress, igniting a fire in my blood.

“Whoops!” she laughs, leaning into me. “Guess I’m a little tipsier than I thought.”

“Just a little,” I acknowledge, savoring her presence in my arms. It would be so easy to pull her closer, to claim that tempting mouth with my own. But I resist the urge, instead guiding her up the stairs with gentle pressure. “Come on, let’s get you some water and a comfortable bed.”

By the time we reach her room, Quinn hums contentedly, resting her head on my shoulder. “You know, I think Lara and I are going to be best friends,” she declares, her words slurring slightly. “We just... we just clicked, you know? Like puzzle pieces.”

I raise an eyebrow, amused by her certainty. “Is that so? Should I be worried?”

She laughs, the sound pure and unrestrained. “Nah, you’re safe. I promise not to tell her all your dirty little secrets.”

“And what secrets would those be?” I drawl, intrigued.

Quinn taps the side of her nose with a conspiratorial wink. “Remember when you kidnapped me?”

I guide her to the bed to help her into it. She wobbles a bit in her heels, and I tighten my grip on her waist reflexively.

“Easy there,” I murmur, my thumb rubbing soothing circles on her hip. “I’ve got you.”

She leans into my touch, humming softly. “You always do, don’t you?” Her voice is low, almost wistful. “Even when I don’t want you to.”

I pause, surprised by her words. There’s a vulnerability in her tone that tugs at something deep within me. It stirs a desire to promise her the world, if only to chase away the shadows in her eyes.

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But before I can respond, Quinn pushes away from me abruptly, tottering away from the bed on unsteady legs. “God, I need to get out of these clothes,” she mutters, reaching behind her back for the zip of her dress. “It’s so tight.”

“Wait, Quinn, No—” I protest, but she’s already gotten it unzipped. I hold back a groan as she begins to shimmy out of her dress, revealing the curve of her back and the lacy edge of her bra. It’s almost as if she’s moving in slow motion, her movements both deliberate and hazy with alcohol-induced confidence.

My eyes widen as she casually steps out of the puddle of fabric at her feet, standing before me in nothing but her underwear and fucking sexy heels. The air between us crackles with an electric tension I can almost taste, my gaze tracing the delicate lines of her body.

I should look away. I should grab a blanket and cover her up, maintain some semblance of propriety. But my traitorous eyes refuse to obey, fixated on the sight before me.

Quinn,” I rasp, my voice thick with desire and a hint of warning. “This isn’t... You shouldn’t...”

“These shoes,” she gasps. “God, they’re killing me. The playboy in me almost dies and reaches heaven when she bends over, revealing her creamy thighs, the curves of her ass spilling out of her panties.

I watch her struggle for a moment, feeling both an overwhelming concern and a frozen awe at the pure beauty before me. However, the man in me, the one who is

beginning to understand just how much Quinn Desmond means to him, can only see her discomfort and the risk of injury.

With a sigh, I step forward and crouch down in front of her. “Here, let me.”

Quinn stills, her eyes widening as I gently bat her hands away and take over the task of removing her heels. My fingers graze the delicate bones of her ankles, and I feel her shiver at the contact.

“You don't have to...” she starts, but I silence her with a look.

“I want to,” I say simply. And it's true. In this moment, there's nothing I want more than to take care of her, to smooth away the weariness etched onto her lovely face.

She swallows hard, her gaze locked on mine as I slide the shoes from her feet and set them aside. The air between us is charged, heavy with unspoken emotion and simmering desire.

I know I should stand up and put some distance between us, but I can't tear my eyes away from the mesmerizing sight of Quinn Desmond, soft and vulnerable and oh-so-tempting, standing half-naked above me.

God help me; I'm in trouble. As I rise, I can feel the heat radiating off her body, the sweet scent of her perfume, and the warmth of her breath on my chest.

“To bed, now,” I growl and take her hand, turning my back to her to guide her in. She gets in and I put on the covers and switch off the lights from the central controls on her bedside, leaving just a small lamp on.

I'm about to turn away when I feel her grab my hand. I turn, surprised.

“Stay with me?” she whispers, her voice barely a whisper. “Just... just for tonight. I don't... I don't want to be alone.”

I freeze at her request, my heart racing as I meet her vulnerable gaze in the dim light. My mind is filled with conflicting emotions—desire warring with restraint, tenderness clashing against common sense. Quinn's green eyes search mine, a silent plea lingering between us.

Without a word, I carefully slide into the bed beside her, keeping my distance. She's drunk, and I want to play no part in taking advantage of her. No matter how bad I want to take off those remaining items of clothing, to feel her skin against mine, her warmth on my cock.

She shivers and inches back against me. “I'm so cold...” she stammers. She curls into me, seeking solace in the shelter of my arms, and the warmth of her body seeps into mine. Her strawberry-blonde hair tickles my chin as she settles her back against my chest, and her soft breaths create a soothing rhythm in the darkened room.

I wrap my arms around her delicate frame, careful to keep one below her neck and the other around her waist. She's half-naked, and I want to be cautious not to overstep any boundaries, even though it's driving me crazy not to have more. The scent of her perfume mingles with the faint aroma of alcohol.

Her body molds perfectly to mine, her soft curves fitting seamlessly against my hardness. The dichotomy is not lost on me.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “For tonight. For everything.”

“There's nothing you have to thank me for,” I whisper into her ear.

“Oh, but there is,” she says, half in slumber. “You showed me there's another way to

live.”

“I did?” I ask, curious.

“You once told me you don’t believe in true love, Mark. But tonight, I realized you don’t believe in it because you’ve never had to consider it. Your family—that’s true love. You’d do anything for each other. You’re your own little army, you know that? I’ve always been alone. No siblings. Busy parents. I never felt that anything was missing when I was a child, especially when my grandparents and Uncle were around, but tonight, I felt lonelier than I’ve ever felt. I’m jealous... Mark.”

She’s blabbering. Saying the very first thing that comes to her mind, yet it’s the most devastating monologue I’ve heard her deliver. I listen, my grip around her tightening imperceptibly as she talks. Quinn’s honesty hits me in a way I never expected.

Her vulnerability tugs at something deep inside me, showing me the fragility of her desires. They’re simple, really. A family and love. That’s all she asks for.

“Family comes in many shapes, Quinn,” I whisper into her hair. “You’re so young, and there’s a lifetime to build one.”

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“I don’t know if I’ll ever have that. A happy ending...” Her voice trails off, and I can tell she’s getting sleepy.

“You might be surprised,” I pull her a bit closer as she continues to shiver. “Besides, we Zolotovs love taking in strays. You’re one of us now.”

She snorts out a chuckle at my lame joke and then says nothing more. Soon, her soft snores fill the room, and I, too, close my eyes.

Chapter 19 - Quinn

Warmth envelops me, a living heat that pulses with a rhythm distinct from my own. I blink open my eyes; the morning light streams in like an uninvited guest, and I squint against its glare. My mind feels sluggish, trying to catch up with the reality of Mark's solid body pressed against mine, his breath steady in the quiet room.

I piece together the jigsaw of last night's events. The memories trickle in—laughter, the clink of glasses, the slide of silk against my skin as I somehow ended up stripping down to my underwear while Mark tried to get me into bed.

I groan. Good job, Desmond.

Now fully awake, I can't help but cringe at the mental replay. Mortification floods my veins as hot as the flush spreading across my cheeks. Yet, there's also an odd surge of relief. Despite his playboy reputation and the way he can command a room—or frankly, anything or anyone—with that bossy, charming arrogance, Mark hasn't taken advantage of the situation, or me.

I remember how he got down on his knees and took off my heels, one by one. How he didn't just take last night. I reflect on the unexpected chivalry, the tenderness in his actions.

Thanks for not being a total cliché, Zolotov, I think to myself, unsure if I'm more grateful or just plain surprised by his restraint. He's seen me at a moment of absolute disarray and chose respect over opportunity. In this moment, a deep admiration forms in my heart. I recall that first party we went to, how even back then, he refused to fuck me when he realized I was drunk.

Mark Zolotov, full of surprises, I think, my lips curling into a half-smile as I feel my heartbeat pick up its pace ever so slightly.

Just as this silent praise settles within me, Mark stirs beside me. His short black hair is a tousled mess, adding a softer edge to his chiseled jawline. With his eyes still closed, he stretches, the sheets shifting and revealing the contours of his perfectly sculpted abdomen as he raises his arms, his shirt riding up in the process.

How I long to run my hands through them.

"Morning already?" His voice is groggy, yet it rumbles through me, setting off tiny sparks.

"Seems so," I reply, watching as he blinks open those blue-gray eyes. They lock onto mine, and for a suspended moment, the world outside this room ceases to exist. It's just him and me, and the weight of a gaze that feels like a touch.

"Sleep well?" I ask, my voice low.

"Better than usual," he admits, and there's a trace of surprise in his tone—an admission of how sharing my bed was the most comfortable thing in the world.

The air between us crackles. Without a second thought, I reach my hand beneath the covers until I find his. His fingers graze softly against my skin. I swallow hard, entranced by the gravitational pull of our mutual attraction that we both strive to deny.

“Your restraint is...noteworthy,” I manage to say, keeping my voice steady despite the tempest brewing inside me.

“Can’t say it was easy,” he admits, his voice hoarse.

“Thanks...” I trail off, as ‘thanks’ feels too small for the storm he’s stirring in my chest, for how he’s slowly dismantling all my defenses with nothing but a look.

The heat from his skin is a silent siren call, and I’m a willing captive to the allure. I shift closer, my breath catching at the proximity, at the dangerous dance we’ve been skirting around since that first and only night together.

“Quinn,” Mark says, voice barely above a whisper, but it carries a weight. It’s a question and an invitation all rolled into one syllable, and it sends shivers down my spine.

“Mark,” I exhale, my voice barely more than a fragile thread. My hand rises, grazing his chin, and this simple contact sends a jolt through me. It’s enough. Enough to shatter the dam of restraint that’s held back the river of desire coursing through me.

I lean in, closing the distance, and our lips meet in a kiss that ignites like a spark in dry tinder. Passion flares, hot and undeniable, as I press myself against him, my hands tangling in his short black hair. His arms wrap around me, pulling me closer, deepening the kiss until there’s no room for thought, only feeling.

I’m still half-naked and his hand rests on my lower back, making me tremble. The

world narrows down to the taste of him, the scent of his skin, the hard lines of his body against mine. There's no room for doubt or hesitation now; there's only this moment, raw and real.

He rolls us over, pinning me beneath him, his eyes blazing with an intensity that sears straight to my soul. "Tell me you want this," he growls, his voice rough with need.

"Yes," I gasp out, lost in the storm he's awakened within me. "I want this—I want you."

That's all he needs. He kisses me again, a possessive claim that leaves no room for anything but surrender. Then he's trailing kisses down my neck, my chest, and lower, taking his time as if he plans to memorize every inch of me with his lips. When he reaches the edge of my underwear, he looks up, seeking permission in my heavy-lidded gaze before he slips it off.

When he looks at me like I'm in the orbit of his world, my head spins. "Part your legs, Quinn," he growls, sliding his hands up my thighs. With a racing heart, I do as I'm told. I watch him dip his head down between my legs, and then I feel his tongue slide over my slit. It's the sweetest, most maddening sensation, and immediately, I feel alive.

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He slides it over and over and over, from the bottom to the top, and on the fifth slide, he flicks his tongue over my clit. “Mark,” I gasp, my hands reaching for his hair as a surge of pleasure washes over my senses. “Stop teasing...”

“Where’s the fun in that?” his voice vibrates against my pussy, setting off a whole different chain of sensation. He flicks his tongue again, pressing it hard in short intervals.

I feel myself soak, and when he slides a finger into my pussy, I know he realizes it too. “Quinn,” he gasps, pleased, and he curves his finger, his tongue still flicking against my clit.

It’s a meditative trance. He’s slow and gentle, and when I begin rolling my hips for more, he listens. He puts in another finger, the tips fluttering against the spot just beneath where his tongue is. He consumes me, makes me blind to anything but him.

I bite into my lower lip, and my fingers clench the sheets. “Mark...” My voice is faint, a squeal. He begins fingering me harder, his tongue lapping me up like the river, and I feel my juices drip down beneath my legs.

“Oh my god,” I mewl as I feel the epicenter of pleasure take form, ready to erupt. I lurch off the bed, and Mark’s steady hands reach for my stomach, pushing me back down as he continues his efforts.

The world around me drums away, and I feel the drop coming. “Mark...” I scream, and then I burst, the tingling sensation bursts from that one spot, spreading through my core, making my legs tremble and my back lurch. I see stars and hear Mark pant

as he continues to finger me through clenched muscles.

Only when the last of the orgasm fades does Mark extract himself from between my legs. I watch, breathless, and he makes quick work of his clothes. There he is, sitting with his knees on either side of my hips, an Adonis of a man. Without thinking, I lift off the bed, my hands gliding down his muscled chest, those toned arms, to the curve of his ass.

He growls and pushes me back against the bed with his weight, his arms holding him up. For a moment, all I see is my reflection in his eyes.

“You’re fucking beautiful, you know that?” he says.

“Have you ever seen yourself naked?” I reply.

I see a glimmer of pride in his eyes as his hands move between our bodies until they rest on my thighs. He navigates between them, encouraging me to open wide.

I part for him, and he positions himself above me. I watch, my breath hitching in my throat when his eyes glaze over as they travel away from my eyes to my throat, down to my breasts. He links fingers through the strap of my bra, inching it down and moving on to the next one until my bra rests below my breasts.

His head dips, and he licks my nipple, his other hand caressing my breast. By now, I’m a trembling mess of want, need, and desire.

I reach for his lower back and pull him closer, and when I feel the tip of his cock hit against my apex, I gasp. A slow, lazy smile spreads over his face, and he gently inches into me, just an inch or so.

I want to scream, yell, run for more. But he’s the kind of man who takes things slow,

before turning into a run. I know that, so I allow him to enter me agonizingly slow, his hands now cupping both my breasts for support as he slides into me. He squeezes my breasts just as he fills me to the hilt, his balls squeezing against me, and I scream out his name—“Maaark!”

It’s infuriating, it’s delightful. It’s everything.

“God, you feel like heaven,” he whispers into my ear, before pulling out and ramming into me, harder this time. He pulls out again. Ram. Out. In.

“Fuck,” I moan, grabbing onto his hips, my own lurching to meet his. He slides back in and this time, doesn’t leave. He begins to fuck me, every roll of his hips, every touch of his hand, every sound of his moans an assault on my senses. I clutch his ass and hold him in...deep.

He pounds me hard and fast. His hands reach for my waist, locking me into position as the bed moves below us. It screeches and groans in protest, but we’re fucking so hard that there’s no concern that the whole house might hear us. Mark tilts his hips up, his cock hitting against my upper wall, and I feel a spark form.

“Oh my god,” I say. “Right there. Yes, right there.”

He leans back, his large hands now gripping my waist, his fingers spreading over my stomach, and he moves so fast that the sweat trickles down his forehead, falling on my skin. I don’t care. I grip the sheets, and he smiles as he continues to pound me.

That spark has become a wildfire, and when his tip touches the spark this time, I explode. “Mark,” I moan. “It’s happening.”

“Cum for me, sweetheart,” he commands. “Cum for me.”

It's the way he wants to please me that acts as the tipping point. My eyes blast open, and the colors around me merge into stars as the blood gushes to my head. The pleasure rides up my back, down my legs, across my core. I feel his cock stiffen and he spills into me as my pussy convulses from the orgasm, pulling him dry. This moment is the highest high I've ever felt, and I close my eyes as the last of my orgasm rips through me.

Mark catches his breath, still inside me, and a minute later pulls out. We're both panting when he gathers me in his arms. We lie like that in silent stillness. The sheets are twisted around us, evidence of the storm we just weathered together. He has one arm thrown over his head, looking every bit like a Bratva prince at rest, and the other draped possessively over my waist.

"We should get to work," I murmur, my voice husky—or maybe it's from screaming his name half an hour ago.

"Should we?" He turns his head, a smirk playing on his lips, his blue-gray eyes gleaming with something like triumph.

"Unlike you, I have the ability to get fired," I can't help but smile back at him, though his arrogance should be grating. Instead, it's endearing, which is its own kind of danger.

His thumb draws lazy circles on my hip bone, sending little sparks of pleasure radiating through me. I trace the line of his jaw, feeling the stubble that didn't exist last night.

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“Careful,” he teases, capturing my finger with his lips briefly. “I might start thinking you're getting attached.”

“Never,” I say, but my heart twists into itself, and in that moment, I know it’s a lie.

Later, the day finds its rhythm, and we retreat to our separate corners of this sprawling house—Mark to his office, brimming with shelves of organized folders and hard disks, and me to mine, chaos reigning supreme.

“Quinn,” Mark calls out, suddenly appearing at my doorway with an impish grin. “How do you feel about Chinese for lunch?”

“Only if you're buying,” I answer without looking up from my laptop.

“Like I’d ever let you,” he says, aware that he's leaning against the frame, watching me work. It's distracting to have him here, all that casual power and smoldering looks. Yet, it's also invigorating, like a shot of adrenaline straight to the heart.

“By the way, you type loudly,” he observes with mock severity.

“And you're annoyingly observant,” I shoot back, finally glancing up to catch the humor dancing in his eyes.

“Guilty as charged.” He pushes off from the door and strolls in, placing a takeout menu on my desk. “Pick your poison.”

“Kung Pao chicken,” I say. As I hand him back the menu, our fingers brush. The touch is electric, sparking a warmth that spreads up my arm and settles in my chest.

“Thanks,” he says, holding my gaze a moment too long, his blue-gray eyes searching mine. I swallow hard. It's happening again—that pull, that inexplicable tug at my heartstrings. I'm falling for Mark Zolotov, and isn't that just the most terrifying thing? I quickly turn back to my computer, hoping he can't see the effect he has on me.

I can feel his gaze linger on me for a moment longer before he retreats, and the soft click of the door signals his exit.

The rest of the afternoon passes in a series of these small interruptions—flirtatious banter, shared smiles, a touch that lingers a beat too long. Each time, I'm left a little more breathless, a little more aware of how deep I'm getting in this game we're playing.

As the sky starts to darken outside my window, I lean back in my chair and stretch. The house is quiet, too quiet, and I find myself wandering toward Mark's office, pulled by an invisible force I can't—and don't want to—resist.

I reach the door, but then stop in my tracks. What is there to say? By now, we've run out of excuses. Dinner is behind us, and it's late. If I go in, I'll end up in his bed.

I want that tonight. But what happens when I want the same tomorrow? And the night after? And after? What happens when he says he's done? Charlie Letvin hasn't been a name I've heard around here much lately. Something tells me Letvin has found a new toy, and I'm no longer a target. The goal of keeping me safe seems to be a success, and now that the plan has worked, whatever this is has to come to an end... right? This contract will see its fruition one of these days, with Mark and I both having fulfilled our side of the bargain.

I feel a lump in my throat and quietly retreat to my office. What was I thinking? Every glance through an open doorway, every shared joke that's too intimate to be casual—it's like stitching a pattern I didn't intend to create. I'm not just playing house with Mark; I'm weaving myself into the fabric of his life. A life I will soon no longer be a part of.

Back in my office, I sink into the chair, wrapping my arms around myself. I can't deny it anymore. My feelings for Mark are deepening, seeping into places they have no right to be. He's a Zolotov, all charm and danger wrapped up in a criminally handsome package. And I'm... what? A girl who runs a dating agency, smart enough to know better than to mix feelings with whatever this is.

Not to mention, it's the deception that gnaws at me, eating away each time I catch him smiling at me like I'm someone special, like I'm his. We're meant to be playing pretend fiancées, nothing more. His family shouldn't be misled by my presence or the lies we're spinning. Yet, here I am, relishing the facade, craving the moments when we forget it's all just an act.

How can I reconcile this guilt, this pleasure, this deceit? His family doesn't deserve to get their hopes up, only to have it dashed.

I don't either. I push back from my desk and stand, pacing the room.

My hopes can't be dashed if I don't allow them to be. Perhaps I need to live in the moment and savor the stolen seconds, the shared glances, and the one-off night in his bed. Because when this comes to an end—and it will come to an end—I'll have these memories to hold on to. Memories of being wanted and cherished, even if it was all just part of the game.

Mark needs to be taken like a dose of medicine. With caution and warning. He soothes my soul, but it's only temporary. Sooner or later, we will no longer have

Charlie Letvin's shadow hanging over us as an excuse. This whole situation will end, and his family will find out the truth, and I will have to go back to my ordinary life.

For now, I realize I should enjoy what's probably the last few days between us and not hold any expectations. Unless I want to get burned.

Chapter 20 - Mark

I pull Quinn close, my fingers tangling in her silky strawberry-blonde hair, and kiss her. She melts into me, her curves fitting perfectly against my body.

"Mmm, good morning to you too," she murmurs, eyes sparkling with mischief as we break apart. "Someone's in a good mood."

"How can I not be waking up with you in my arms?" I flash her a roguish grin, my hands roaming over the smooth expanse of her back. Sometimes, it still amazes me how utterly right this feels—like she was made just for me.

Quinn laughs, a breathy sound that pierces my heart. "Always the charmer, Zolotov." She glides a finger along my jaw, sending shivers down my spine. "If you keep this up, we might never leave this bed."

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“Is that a promise?” I nip playfully at her earlobe.

She swats my chest. “Behave. Some of us have work to do, you know.”

“In a bit. I’m not done with you yet.” I flip us over, pinning her beneath me as I trail hot kisses down the graceful column of her throat. Quinn sighs in pleasure, hands fisting in my hair.

My mind drifts as I lose myself in her sweet surrender, marveling at the unexpected turn my life has taken. If someone had told me a few months ago that I would fall head over heels for the feisty woman I kidnapped, I would have laughed in their face. But here we are. I’ve never been happier.

Later that week, I’m in the shower when the door creaks open. Quinn freezes, eyes wide as they rake over my naked form.

“Oh! Sorry, I didn’t realize—”

I don’t let her finish, reaching out to snag her wrist and tug her under the warm spray with me, designer suit and all. She squeals in surprise, water plastering her hair to her head.

“Mark! What are you doing? I’m fully dressed!”

“Not for long,” I growl, peeling the soaked fabric from her skin. She shivers from the cold, or anticipation—I’m not sure. All I know is I need her, right here, right now.

We make love under the cascading water, desperate and needy. Like we'll never get enough of each other. Maybe we won't. All I know is she has ruined me for anyone else.

That weekend, I find her passed out at her desk, hair mussed and papers strewn everywhere. My workaholic girl. I shake my head with a fond smile, scooping her up and carrying her to bed.

She stirs groggily as I tuck her in. "Mark? What time is it?"

"Late. You need rest."

The next morning, I surprise her with breakfast in bed. Quinn props herself up on her elbows, taking in the feast with an arched brow. "You cooked? Who are you and what have you done with Mark Zolotov?"

"Don't get used to it," I grumble, but I'm not really annoyed. I like taking care of her. It feels right, natural.

As she digs in with appreciative moans, I study her, committing every detail to memory: the way the sunlight turns her hair to burnished copper, the fullness of her rose-tinted lips, and those captivating green eyes.

In this moment, it hits me hard. This is it for me. She's it for me. I can't imagine my life without her in it anymore. This infuriating, passionate, brilliant woman has carved out a place for herself in my blackened heart.

And god help anyone who tries to take her from me.

I stride into my office, where my brothers are already gathered around the mahogany conference table. Their faces are grim, souring my mood, which has been on a constant happy high by Quinn's side.

"What's so urgent?" I demand, taking my seat at the table.

Abram slides a folder my way. "Preliminary intel points to Charlie Letvin. It seems the prick couldn't resist the opportunity to take a swipe at us, and he's the one who planned the attack against us that night we went back for the shipment the Smirnovs stole from us."

I flip through the pages, jaw clenching as the evidence mounts. Security camera stills show Charlie's men lurking around our territories. Transcripts of intercepted phone calls show suspicious transactions with men for hire. Financial records show suspicious transactions with men for hire.

"Cocky bastard," Denis snarls. "Thinks he can fuck with the Zolotovs and walk away unscathed?"

Vladimir, ever the strategist, leans forward. "It's a bold move, even for Letvin. The question is, why now? What's his endgame?"

I steeple my fingers, my mind whirring. Charlie and I have been rivals since our school days, always trying to outdo each other. But this... this crosses a line. He attacked us when we were drawing a boundary with someone who crossed us. Even wars have rules.

"Doesn't matter," I say decisively. "We'll send the Letvins a clear message."

"The thing is," Abram clears his throat. "The Letvins aren't the problem."

“Oh?”

“Charlie acted alone. His clan is in the dark.”

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“How do you know that?” I ask, confusion rippling through me. “He couldn’t have acted alone.”

“He hired thugs for the attack. The Letvin crew was sitting idle that night,” my brother explains.

“Which means he wanted to keep it secret.” I put two and two together. “His family won’t wish to cross us.”

My brothers nod in unison, a fierce, unified front.

“The Letvins have never been a problem,” Vladimir adds. “Charlie has.”

“We need to send a message,” Denis suggests, a glint in his eye. “Remind him who he's dealing with.”

“Agreed.” I stand, buttoning my suit jacket. “We'll confront him directly. Show him that we are not to be trifled with.”

The warehouse reeks of fear and desperation as we stride in, our footsteps echoing like gunshots in the cavernous space. Charlie Letvin stands in the center, flanked by his hired men.

“Mark.” Charlie spreads his arms wide, a mockery of welcome. “To what do I owe the pleasure? I was so thrilled you called for a meeting.”

I smile, cold and sharp as a blade. “Cut the bullshit, Charlie. You know exactly why we're here.”

His eyes narrow. “I'm afraid I don't follow.”

“The attack on us while we raided the Smirnovs.” I take a step forward, gratified when he flinches. “Did you really think we wouldn't find out it was you?”

Charlie scoffs, but I can see the sweat beading on his brow. “You've got it all wrong, Mark. I had nothing to do with that.”

“Lie to me again,” I growl, “and I'll rip your tongue out myself.”

The tension in the room ratchets up, thick enough to choke on. My brothers fan out behind me, a silent, menacing presence.

His men draw their guns, and my brothers and I follow suit, aiming ours directly at Charlie.

“If any of your men shoot, it'll be you who goes down first.”

“I-I swear,” Charlie stammers, his cockiness evaporating like mist. “It wasn't me. I wouldn't dare...”

I grab him by the throat, slamming him against the wall. “Listen closely, you sniveling worm. If you ever come near us or Quinn again, if you so much as breathe in our direction or hers, I will end you. Slowly. Painfully. Until you're begging for death.”

Charlie's eyes bulge, his face turning an amusing shade of purple. “Please,” he wheezes. “I can't breath.”

I release him, watching with disgust as he crumples to the floor. “You're lucky I'm feeling generous today. Consider this your one and only warning. If you cross us again, we will go to your clan and show them the evidence we have of the coordinated attack you pulled off against us. We will declare war on all Letvins. Let's see who shelters you then, when your family realizes you were the one responsible for their fall. You'll have nowhere to run. Nowhere to go.”

We turn to leave, our point made. But I pause at the door, glancing back over my shoulder. “Oh, and Charlie? If I were you, I wouldn't try anything smart. Because next time, there won't be any mercy.”

As we exit into the crisp night air, I feel a rush of savage satisfaction. The Zolotovs' power is absolute, unquestioned. And heaven help anyone foolish enough to test it.

The drive home feels like an eternity, my body thrumming with restless energy. I can't wait to see Quinn, to wrap her in my arms, and to share the good news. With Charlie dealt with, we can finally focus on ourselves and on building a future together.

I pull into the driveway, almost jumping out of the car. The house is warm and inviting, with the soft glow of lights calling me inside. I can already picture Quinn curled up on the couch, her nose buried in a book, waiting for me.

“Quinn?” I call out as I step into the foyer, shrugging off my coat. “Sweetheart, I'm home.”

Silence greets me, an eerie stillness that raises the hairs on the back of my neck. Something's wrong. I can feel it in my bones. At this time, Quinn would be eating dinner, or reading a book, or listening to a record, or the news.

“Quinn?” I try again, my voice echoing through the empty halls.

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I move further into the house, my heart pounding against my ribs. The living room is deserted, and a half-empty wine glass is on the coffee table. I check the kitchen and the study, growing more frantic with each empty room.

“Quinn, where are you?”

Panic claws at my throat as I take the stairs two at a time. Our bedroom door is ajar, a sliver of light spilling into the hallway. I push it open, bracing myself for the worst.

And there she is, my beautiful Quinn, curled up on the bed. Relief crashes over me like a wave, so intense it nearly brings me to my knees.

“There you are,” I murmur, crossing to her side. “I was worried sick.”

But as I draw closer, I realize something's off. Her face is pale, her brow furrowed in pain. She clutches her stomach, a soft whimper escaping her lips.

“Quinn?” I drop to my knees beside the bed, my hand finding hers. “What's wrong? Talk to me, sweetheart.”

She looks up at me, her green eyes glassy with unshed tears. “Mark,” she whispers, her voice trembling. “I don't know...I'm in so much pain.”

My heart stops, the world screeching to a halt around me. “What do you mean? What's happening?”

Quinn takes a shuddering breath, her fingers digging into her stomach. “Cramps.

Really bad ones. I've never felt anything like this before.”

I swallow hard, trying to push down the icy terror clawing its way up my throat. “Okay. Okay, we're going to figure this out.” I brush a strand of hair back from her forehead, my hand lingering on her cheek. “I'm right here, Quinn. I'm not going anywhere.”

She nods, leaning into my touch.

Chapter 21 - Quinn

I lie in bed, the remnants of stomach cramps still twisting inside me. Mark sits by my side, his presence comforting. He gently adjusts the covers, tucking them around my shoulders with a tenderness that surprises me.

“Do you need anything else?” he asks, his deep voice laced with concern. He then tucks the hot water bottle under the covers against my stomach.

I force a smile, trying to mask the pain. “Thanks, Mark. I'll be fine, really. You don't need to fuss over me.”

He takes my hand in his, his calloused fingers intertwining with mine. He sits there in silence as moments pass by. I have a gut feeling there's something on his mind that he needs to share, but he isn't because he's worried that I'm not feeling very well.

“How was your day?” I ask, at last.

“It was good. I believe you'll be relieved to hear about it, actually.”

“Oh?”

“My brothers found out that Charlie was behind the attack against us, just as I had suspected all along. We confronted him, and it’s safe to say that Charlie Letvin is no longer a threat. You’re safe now.”

“I...I am?” I ask, not knowing what that means. Mark had made it clear in the past that I was to stay here until Letvin wasn’t a problem. “What does that mean?”

“Well,” Mark said in a teasing tone, breaking out into a smile. “I guess we should enjoy our last few days together, given how you’re soon going to be a free bird!”

I nod, my lips curving into a reassuring smile even as my heart shatters inside. This can only mean one thing. Mark Zolotov no longer needs to be with me. Soon, I’ll be out of here, and we’ll go back to being strangers, just like it was when we started.

How can I tell him? How can I possibly explain that what I wanted once is now my worst nightmare? The thought of this ending alone sends a wave of nausea through me, and I swallow hard, fighting back the bile rising in my throat.

But fight it, I do. Because I knew this day would come. I knew this whole situation was casual from the onset. Even if Mark keeps me around longer, it’ll be because he’s entertaining himself until someone more exciting comes along. Once a playboy, always a playboy, right? He said so himself. We should enjoy our last few days together. I’m a free bird—free to be out and about, free to be with someone else, free to forget all about him.

It’s better if I keep my emotions at bay, heal myself before I break. “Thank you for being here, for taking care of me,” I say at last.

Mark’s blue-gray eyes soften, and he brings my hand to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss against my knuckles. “Always, Quinn.”

But as I gaze into his eyes, I wonder if that will still be true when our contract officially ends soon. Will he still look at me with such tenderness, or will distance darken his handsome features? The uncertainty eats away at me like cancer spreading through my veins.

For now, I embrace this moment of comfort, a brief respite from the storm gathering on the horizon. I lean into Mark's touch, savoring the warmth of his skin against mine.

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But the cramps return with a vengeance, and I furrow my brows as I reach for the hot water bottle to press it tighter against my belly.

Mark's brow furrows as he studies my face, concern etched into the lines of his chiseled jaw. "Quinn, what could be causing your stomach pain?"

"Maybe I ate something," I say, forcing a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes. "Just some cramping, that's all."

"I'll be right back," he says, rising from the bed with determination in his stance. "I had the maid place a first-aid kit in the bathroom just for you, and it might have something to help."

As he disappears into the adjoining room, I let out a shaky breath, my hands trembling as I clutch the bedsheets. His words replay in my mind in a loop: Charlie Letvin will no longer be a problem. That means I will no longer be Mark's problem.

But before I can dwell on the possibility of what that means, he's back, the first-aid box tucked under his arm as he settles onto the bed beside me once more.

"Here," he says, handing me the box with a soft smile. "I thought you might need this, given the timing. Your period might be coming up soon, too, right? That could be the cause of your cramps."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, the air rushing out of my lungs in a sudden whoosh. I can feel the color draining from my face, my heart pounding so hard I'm sure Mark must be able to hear it.

“Y-yeah,” I stammer, my voice barely above a whisper. “Thanks.”

I take the box with trembling hands, my mind racing as I try to grasp the implications of his words. How long has it been since my last period? Two months? I simply didn't think much of it since I've always struggled with irregular periods, yet at the same time, I've never had cramps unless I'm bleeding. My period might be coming... yes. But I shouldn't be having cramps, should I? My impulsive decisions come rushing back, the first one being that we didn't use protection. How foolish of us.

The realization strikes me like a freight train, and the possibility of pregnancy hanging over me like a dark cloud.

But as I meet Mark's gaze, I force myself to smile, to push down the rising tide of fear and uncertainty that threatens to consume me. “I appreciate it,” I say, my voice steadier now, even though the lump in my throat becomes so wretchedly painful. You're always so thoughtful.”

The words feel hollow, a cheap imitation of the gratitude I know I should feel. Now, with Charlie Letvin handled and the possibility of pregnancy looming over me, I know my time with Mark is running out.

Mark nods, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “It's nothing, Quinn.”

He leans in, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead before standing up. “I'll let you rest. If you need anything, just call for me, okay?”

I watch him go, my heart aching with a mixture of longing and dread. As soon as the door closes behind him, I let out a shaky breath, my hands trembling as I set the first-aid box on the bed beside me.

For a long moment, I simply stare at it, my mind whirling with the possibilities of

what lies inside. Part of me wants to ignore it, to pretend that everything is fine and that my missed periods are simply nothing, as they've always been. Yet the logical side of me knows better, understands that I can't run from this forever, given how we haven't been safe during our sexual escapades.

With a deep breath, I reach for the box, my fingers fumbling with the latch. As I lift the lid, my eyes immediately land on the pregnancy kit nestled among the tampons, period pain relievers, pads, bandages, and antiseptic wipes. My breath catches in my throat, my heart stutters in my chest as I pick it up with trembling hands. Smart of the maid to have put it there. Lucky that Mark didn't see it.

I can feel its weight in my palm, the plastic casing cool against my skin. It's just a simple test, I tell myself, trying to calm the rising panic in my chest. It's just to prove I might not be pregnant and my missed period is nothing but the occasional irregularity in my cycle, as has happened in the past during times of stress. But deep down, I know that it's so much more than that. It's a turning point, a moment that could change the course of my life forever.

As I sit there, the pregnancy kit clutched in my trembling hands, I can't help but wonder what the future holds. Will Mark still want me if I'm carrying his child? Or will he see me as nothing more than a burden, a mistake he wishes he could erase?

The latter, probably.

The thought is almost too much to bear, and I can feel the tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. But I know I can't let them fall, not until I know for certain.

I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders as I rise from the bed. I tuck the pregnancy kit into the pocket of my robe, my heart hammering in my chest as I head toward the bathroom.

It's time to face the truth, to confront the reality of what my missed periods and these stomach cramps might mean.

With trembling hands, I lock the bathroom door behind me. The small room feels stifling as I reach into my pocket and pull out the pregnancy kit.

The plastic casing feels foreign in my grasp. I take a shaky breath, trying to steel myself for whatever comes next. With fumbling fingers, I tear open the packaging and follow the instructions, feeling every heartbeat thud in my ears like a war drum.

As moments pass, anxiety coils in my stomach like a serpent ready to strike. My mind races with a multitude of thoughts. What if it's positive? What if it's negative? Each possibility sends a distinct wave of fear crashing over me.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity, I glance down at the small window of the pregnancy test, my heart pounding in my chest. The seconds stretch into forever as I watch a faint line slowly appear, a ghostly whisper that transforms into a clear shout.

Positive.

My breath catches in my throat, and tears prick at the corners of my eyes, threatening to spill over at any moment.

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I press a hand to my mouth, trying to muffle the sob that threatens to escape. How did this happen? How did I let myself get into this situation, where everything is spiraling out of control?

Yet, at the back of my mind, one feeling rings true the loudest: I'm about to have my own small family, which is something I've always wanted. This baby will be loved, and I will do everything in my power to keep it out of harm's way. He or she will be loved beyond belief, and I'd never let them lack for anything.

Mark's charming smile flashes before my eyes, now a silent promise of abandonment. Mark signed up to save me from Charlie, and he had me enter a contractual agreement where my safety came at a price: a chance for Mark to show Charlie his place in the world.

He did that today. He doesn't need me anymore, and in his eyes, I don't need him.

It's only a matter of time. He might keep me around a bit longer, enjoying me as a convenient plaything, but eventually, the dust will settle. As for me? I carry his child and feelings I can't admit. The longer I stay, the more it'll hurt.

I can't stay here, I can't let him use me until he inevitably discards me like a broken toy. It's better to leave before he breaks my heart and inevitably, our child's heart. It's best he never finds out.

The next morning, I stayed in bed longer than usual. When I went down to inquire

with the guards about where Mark might be, just so I could stay out of his mind, I learned, much to my surprise, that he had to go away to Atlanta for a last-minute overnight trip. They told me he left me a note.

I nod and run back to the room. I slept fitfully last night, considering ways to leave without causing a fuss. This morning feels like a gift from fate itself.

The note lies on the bedside table, beckoning to me like a siren's call. With a fluttering heart, I reach for it, my fingers trembling as I unfold the paper. Mark's elegant handwriting stares back at me, each stroke of the pen feeling like a chisel chipping away at the crumbling facade of everything being okay, that I've been desperately holding together.

Quinn,

Hope you're feeling better. Had to leave for an urgent business meeting in Atlanta. Won't be back until tomorrow.

My heart sinks as I read those words, knowing that my window of opportunity is closing rapidly. If I want to leave without a trace, without giving Mark a chance to stop me or convince me to stay, I have to act fast.

Grabbing my bag and hurriedly stuffing in a few essentials, I pick up my phone and book a cab, waiting for immediate confirmation. I take one last look around the room that transformed from a prison to a sanctuary. The bed where Mark kissed me goodnight, the windows that framed a world I no longer belonged to, and the door that led to a life I had to leave behind.

I swallow the lump in my throat, steeling myself for what comes next. With one final glance at the note lying on the bedside table, I fold it carefully and tuck it into my pocket, a small memento of a chapter in my life that was as fleeting as it was intense.

As quietly as I can manage, I slip out of the room, my heart pounding in my chest like a drumbeat of urgency. The mansion is eerily quiet, as if holding its breath in anticipation of my departure.

The guards are stationed at their posts, their gazes sharp and unwavering. I offer them a small nod as I pass by, praying that they won't stop me or, worse, alert Mark to my escape.

"Miss," one of them intervenes. "Your bodyguard?"

"He's waiting right outside with the car. I'm running late for a meeting," I lie through my teeth. The guard nods, having no reason to believe I'm lying.

I rush out of the compound without looking back, right into the waiting cab I had booked moments earlier.

Chapter 22 - Mark

I reach home the next day, eager to see Quinn before doing anything else. Frowning, I check the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom—all empty.

I dial her bodyguard's number, pacing the length of the hallway. "Where the hell are you two?" I demand when he picks up. "What time will you be back?"

"Sir, we need to talk. I'm on my way in now."

The line goes dead. I head downstairs as Dmitri steps through the front door, his expression grim. "Sir, Miss Desmond left yesterday without telling me. She tricked the guards and said I was waiting for her by the car. She hasn't returned since and isn't at her address. I checked. She's not picking up any calls either."

His words hit me like a sledgehammer, stealing the breath from my lungs. Shock ripples through me, quickly replaced by a searing mixture of anger and hurt. “She...left? Without a word?”

The bodyguard nods, an apology written on his face. “I'm sorry, Sir. She took all her things. We had no idea she'd—”

I cut him off with a wave of my hand, my mind reeling. How could she do this? After everything we've shared, everything I thought we had...

I dismiss Dmitri with a curt nod, barely registering his exit as my head drops into my hands. The betrayal stings like a knife to the heart. I thought we had something real, something deeper than just a business arrangement. Why would she leave without a trace?

She hasn't been picking up calls? She isn't at her address? Does she not want to be found? I run a hand through my hair, trying to make sense of it all. Did I misread the signs? Did I push too hard, too fast? The questions swirl in my mind, taunting me with their lack of answers. The thought of losing her, of never seeing her again, leaves me feeling hollow inside.

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Yet even as the anger and confusion rage within me, a small part of me clings to hope. Maybe this is just a misunderstanding. Maybe she had a reason for leaving so abruptly.

I pull out my phone, my fingers hovering over her contact. I need to hear her voice, need to understand why she left. She doesn't pick up.

I toss the phone aside, my jaw clenched. No, I refuse to accept that. I'll do whatever it takes to find her, to understand what happened.

As terrifying as it is to admit, even to myself, I now know the truth: Quinn Desmond has become more than I ever thought possible. This house feels empty without her. My heart feels like it is missing a piece. She has become the one thing I never expected to find—someone who makes me want to be a better man.

When she doesn't pick up any of my calls, I storm into the security office, my anger reaching a boiling point as I confront the guards. "How could you let this happen?" I demand, my voice echoing off the walls. "How could you let her just walk out of here without even trying to stop her? Didn't you see the fucking suitcases in her hand?"

The guards exchange uneasy glances, their postures stiffening under my furious gaze. "Sir, we had no reason to suspect—"

"No reason?" I cut him off, my fist slamming against the desk. "She's my fiancée, for Christ's sake! It's your job to protect her, to make sure nothing happens to her!"

I know deep down that it's not their fault, that Quinn is too clever and determined for them to have stopped her. But right now, I need someone to blame, someone to lash out at. Because the alternative is facing the gut-wrenching reality that she chose to leave me.

The guards remain silent in fear. I turn away, running a hand through my hair as I try to control my temper. "Just...find her," I mutter, my voice rough with emotion. I don't care what it takes. Bring her back to me."

The next day, I head into work. I need to focus and channel this rage into something productive. However, as I make my way to the office, my thoughts keep drifting back to Quinn.

When I arrive, my brothers are already waiting, their faces lined with concern. "Mark, what's going on?" Abram asks, his brow furrowed. You look like hell, and you didn't tune in for the conference call last night."

"It's nothing," I snap, brushing past him. "Let's just get this over with."

"You sure everything is okay?" Denis asks with worry in his eyes.

"It's just one fucking conference call. Will you all calm down?"

My brothers exchange looks, but say nothing.

But even as I try to lose myself in the mundane details of business, my mind keeps wandering, replaying every moment with Quinn, searching for some clue, some hint of what went wrong. The others cast me wary glances, but I ignore them, too consumed by my own swirling emotions to care.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes, and I glance down to see Lara's name on the screen. For a moment, I contemplate ignoring it, but a masochistic impulse compels me to answer. “What?” I bark, my tone harsher than intended.

“Well, hello to you, too,” Lara says, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “I was just calling to see if you and Quinn wanted to join us for dinner tonight.”

The mention of Quinn's name is like a knife to the gut, and I close my eyes, drawing in a shaky breath. “Not tonight,” I manage, my voice tight. “Something's come up.”

“Is everything okay?” Lara asks, concern creeping into her tone. “You sound—”

“I'm fine,” I interrupt, my grip tightening on the phone. “I'm working, Lara, and you should be too.”

I hang up before she can respond, tossing the phone onto the table with a clatter. My brothers are staring at me with concern now. But I can't handle their questions, can't bear the thought of explaining the gaping hole in my chest where Quinn used to be.

So instead, I push to my feet, my chair scraping against the floor. “I need some air,” I mutter, striding towards the door.

As I step out into the hallway, I lean against the wall, my eyes squeezing shut. The anger is still there, simmering beneath the surface, but it's tempered now by a bone-deep weariness, a sense of helplessness that I've never felt before.

I stride into my bedroom, slamming the door behind me with a resounding bang. My mind races as I sink into my bed, my fingers already reaching for the phone. I have to find her, have to hear her voice again.

I dial the number for my head of security, barking orders the moment he picks up. “I need you to find Quinn Desmond's new contact information now.”

“But Sir,” he stammers, “that could take some time—”

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“I don't care how long it takes,” I snap, my free hand clenching into a fist. “Just get it done. Use every resource we have. Spies, telecoms, whatever it takes. I want that number on my desk within the hour.”

I hang up before he can respond, my heart pounding in my chest. I know I'm being irrational, letting my emotions get the best of me. But the thought of Quinn out there, unsure of what she's feeling, is enough to drive me to the brink of madness.

The minutes tick by with agonizing slowness, each second feeling like an eternity.

Finally, after what feels like a lifetime, my phone buzzes with an incoming message. I snatch it up, my eyes scanning the screen frantically. There, in black and white, is a phone number. Quinn's number.

I don't hesitate; I don't stop to think. I punch in the numbers with shaking fingers, my breath catching in my throat as I lift the phone to my ear. It rings once, twice, three times. Each unanswered ring feels like a knife to my gut, twisting deeper with every passing second.

And then, just when I think I can't take it anymore, the line clicks and a familiar voice fills my ear. “Hello?”

“Quinn,” I breathe, her name falling from my lips like a prayer. “It's me.”

There's a long pause, and for a moment, I'm terrified that she's going to hang up. But then she speaks, her voice soft and uncertain. “Mark? What are you doing?”

“I needed to hear your voice,” I confess, the words tumbling out in a rush. “I needed to know that you were okay.”

“I’m fine,” she says, but I can hear the waver in her tone.

“You left!” My voice comes out more like an accusation, and less from concern. I take a deep breath, then speak gently. “What happened, Quinn? If you wanted to leave, all you had to do was speak to me about it.”

“I didn’t know I could,” she says, simply.

“Didn’t know you could?” I ask, incredulously. “Were you and I living under the same roof, sharing the same bed?”

“But Mark, we had a deal. A contract. You said Charlie Letvin won’t be a problem and that I was a free bird. You said we should enjoy our last few days together. I couldn’t just—”

“Dear god, Quinn. I never expected you to live under my roof unless you wanted to. I only meant our last few days together in that house. I only said it because I didn’t wish to assume more than it was from your end. To hell with the contract,” I growl, my grip tightening on the phone. “Quinn, what we had was more than just some verbal agreement. It was real.”

“Was it?” she asks, and the vulnerability in her voice nearly undoes me. “Because from where I’m standing, it seems like maybe it was all just part of the game. And if it wasn’t, I couldn’t have known, could I? Unless you expected me to read your mind.”

I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words to make her understand. “Quinn, I know I’ve made mistakes. I know I haven’t always been honest with you about how I

feel. But you've come to mean something to me... It's not a game. It's real, and it's overwhelming, and it scares the hell out of me. I miss you, god damn it."

There's a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line. "Mark, I... I don't know what to say."

"Just tell me you feel it too," I plead, my heart pounding in my chest. "Tell me I'm not alone in this."

"You're not," she whispers, and for a moment, hope soars in my chest. But then she continues, her voice growing stronger. "I miss you too. But Mark, I can't do this. Not now. I need time to think, to figure out what I want."

Frustration wells up inside me, but I force it back down. "How much time?"

"I don't know," she admits. "I've never been in such a situation before."

Her words are like a punch to the gut, but I know she's right. I've given her every reason to doubt me, to question my intentions. If I want a future with her, I'm going to have to prove myself worthy of her trust.

I clench my jaw, frustration and longing battling within me. Her admission only confirms what I already knew—Quinn was fiercely independent, even guarded, and accustomed to charting her own course without anyone else's input. Despite the ache in my chest at her words, I couldn't fault her for needing space to make a decision.

"Okay," I say softly, my heart aching with the weight of all the things left unsaid between us. "I'll give you time, Quinn. As much as you need. But I'm not giving up on us. On what we could be."

She stays silent for a long moment, and I can almost hear the gears turning in her

mind. "I'm not making any promises," she finally says. "But... thank you, Mark. For understanding."

"Always," I murmur, closing my eyes against the sudden sting of tears. "I'll be here when you're ready, Quinn. I'm not going anywhere."

The line goes dead, and I'm left alone with the weight of my own emotions. But beneath the pain and the uncertainty, there's a flicker of hope. A promise of something more, if only I can be patient enough to wait for it.

Chapter 23 - Quinn

My finger hovers over the call button next to Mark's name. I miss the warmth of his voice and the sparkle in those slate blue eyes. However, I hesitate, the weight of our complicated relationship pressing down. I asked him for space, and calling now would only create confusion when I'm still unsure of what to do next.

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With a sigh, I scroll down my contact list. It would be better to call Mom and Dad instead. Their voices are a comfort, even from thousands of miles away.

As the line rings, I sink back into the couch. When did we grow so distant? It's been months since I've seen them in person, their adventures whisking them away. Bali, Machu Picchu, Tanzania—I can hardly keep track.

“Quinn, Darling!” Mom's melodic voice fills my ear. “How are you, Sweet-pea?”

I smile. “Oh, you know. Same old. Working too much, cooking too little.”

Dad chuckles. “We'll have to fix that. I've got a new recipe for you.”

“Oh really?” I ask, even though finding a new recipe is the last thing on my mind. I thought speaking to my parents would help me, but it only reminds me of Mark and what I'm missing.

“I'll email it to you!” Dad promises.

We chat about their latest safari, laughing over Dad's sunburn and Mom's fear of elephants. Their love is a constant, even now.

“And Quinn, you won't believe what your dad did last week!” Mom chimes in.

“What?” I ask, her infectious energy spreading through me.

“He said he booked us a flight to Botswana, but turns out he totally forgot and only

said it to get me off his back. The day we were supposed to fly out, he covered his tracks and tried to book us a flight, but couldn't find one. I was livid!"

"For like five minutes," Dad chimes in.

I laugh. "Oh, look at you two. Always in love."

"Not always," Mom laughs. "Last week reminded me of our earlier days."

"What are you talking about?" I tease. "You two were born in love with each other or something. Thirty years of being happily married, without any major fights. That's huge, you guys!"

"Quinn, Sweetie, we weren't always this way, you know. Your father and I... we had our rough patches."

"What?" I squeal. "This is news to me!"

"We were business rivals," Dad tells me.

"And your father was a total playboy. Oh, how I hated the sight of him! I found him once, trying to flirt with my secretary!"

"What? Dad was a playboy?"

"The baddest in town," Dad laughs. I hear Mom smack his shoulder. For some reason, this part of their story calls to me, as though it's an answer I've been looking for. If Dad were a playboy and my parents are where they are today, then maybe Mark and I...

"What happened?" I ask, nearly in a whisper.

I hesitate. Do I really want to dredge up ancient history? But curiosity gets the better of me. “How did you two go from enemies to...this?”

Mom chuckles. “Oh, it was quite the scandal at the time.”

“We were young, driven by ego more than good sense,” Dad adds. “I had my East Coast conglomerate. Your mother ruled the West Coast. Each was determined to crush the other.”

I try to reconcile this cutthroat picture with the gentle parents I know. “What changed?”

“Over time, the lines of battle blurred,” Mom says. “Bitter rivalry turned into begrudging respect.”

Dad jumps in. “Then, one fateful conference, we got trapped in an elevator together. Forced to talk without posturing for our companies.”

“We saw each other clearly for the first time. Understood we weren't so different after all.”

“The rest is history,” Dad says softly. “We combined our companies and never looked back.”

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I'm struck by their journey—once enemies, now inseparable—and it gives me hope. Mark and I have our own obstacles to overcome, but if my parents found their way together, maybe we still have a chance, too.

Their words echo in my mind long after we say our goodbyes and hang up. Is Mark worth fighting for? I'm not sure. But as I sit there in the gathering dusk, my phone clutched tightly in my hand, I know one thing for certain: I can't keep running from my feelings forever.

But to face whatever I feel head-on, I have to first be honest with myself and the world.

The breeze whispers through the cafe's open windows as I wait nervously for Lara, shredding a paper napkin into smaller and smaller pieces. I've never been more grateful for her friendship than in this moment, when I desperately need a listening ear outside of the situation with Mark, even if it is with Mark's sister. Besides, she deserves the truth.

The tinkling bell over the door announces her arrival. I stand automatically, almost knocking over my chair.

“Hey, sorry I'm late,” Lara says breezily, pulling me into a quick hug before sitting across from me. Her bright smile fades as she takes in my tense posture. “What's going on? You said it was important and Mark's been acting strange...”

I don't beat around the bush. Instead, I take a deep breath, folding and refolding my hands. "You know how we told you Mark and I got engaged?"

Lara nods, her expression sharpening with concern.

"Well, I haven't been completely honest about how it happened." I force myself to maintain eye contact, even as shame burns through me. "Charlie Letvin had his eye on me and suggested that it would be safer for me if I belonged to him. But I never dreamed we'd... that I'd..." I trail off helplessly.

"Oh, Honey!" Lara takes my hand and motions for the waiter. "Two coffees and the largest slice of chocolate cake you have."

The waiter hurries away, and Lara turns to me. "Chocolate always helps."

Her kindness almost kills me. "Lara, I'm so sorry. We lied to you all, let you all believe..."

"No, no, Quinn," Lara's voice is firm. "You don't have to apologize. I understand why you did what you did. Mark can be...overbearing at times and have the strangest plans and convince you to go along with them, but I've seen the way he looks at you. And let me tell you, eyes don't lie."

The coffee and cake arrive, providing a welcome distraction. We sit in silence for a moment, sipping our drinks.

Then, Lara leans in, her green eyes serious. "Quinn, listen. I know what it must have cost you to tell me all this. But you need to remember something—Charlie might have forced your hand into this fake engagement, but that doesn't change how you and Mark feel about each other. You've been through so much together already. I can see how whatever is happening between you is affecting him."

“I moved out,” I whisper in confession.

“No wonder,” she clutches her heart. “We’re all worried about him... and now, I’m worried for you too, Lara. I’ve known my brother a long time, and the way he is around you, I’ve never seen him that way.”

“Are you certain?” I ask, with raw desperation. If there’s anyone who would know, it’s his sister. It’s Lara.

“I won’t lie to you, Sweetheart. There’s nothing I could gain from it,” she says with brutal honesty.

Something about her words makes me feel like a fog has lifted. She’s right. There’s no reason for her to lie. Lara has been nothing but brutally honest from the beginning. If she believes I truly mean something to Mark and sees that he feels the same way about me, she’s simply calling an apple an apple.

As we finish the last bites of chocolate cake, I feel a sense of determination settling over me. Lara's unwavering support, coupled with her insight into Mark's feelings, has given me a newfound strength. I can't keep hiding from the truth, especially not from Mark.

“Lara,” I begin, setting down my fork with newfound resolve. “Thank you for listening, for understanding... for everything.”

She smiles warmly at me, her eyes reflecting genuine care as she extends a hand. I let out a shaky breath, gripping Lara's hand like a lifeline. Her reassurance is a balm to my battered spirit.

“I've been so confused,” I confess. “Pushing Mark away because I didn't trust what we had. But hearing you say that...it gives me hope.”

Lara smiles. “The heart wants what it wants. Don't overthink it.” She tilts her head. “Although with his reputation, I can understand your hesitation.”

I nod ruefully. “Mark's not exactly known for commitment. But when we're together, it feels different. Real in a way I can't explain.”

“Then trust that.” Lara squeezes my hand. “Give him—give yourself—a chance. You both deserve to find out if this is something more.”

Her words resonate through me, a truth I've been avoiding. Mark and I have something unique, something worth nurturing. I've been letting fear hold me back, but no more.

I meet Lara's earnest gaze. “You're right. I'm going to call him.” Saying it out loud fortifies my resolve. “I need to tell him how I feel, and find out if he's willing to try again—for real this time.”

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Lara grins, pride shining in her eyes. “That's my girl. Go get your man.”

I know I can't delay any longer. After attempting to pay the bill, which Lara wouldn't allow me to settle, and sharing a tight hug with her, I step out onto the bustling street. The evening air feels cool against my skin as I walk briskly toward my rented apartment.

The city lights flicker to life around me, and my heart beats rapidly in anticipation. I need to see Mark to tell him how I feel before it's too late. I pull out my phone, ready to set my plan in motion.

Mark's number lights up the screen. My heart pounds wildly in my chest.

This is it. Time to lay my cards on the table.

I take a deep breath and hit call, lifting the phone to my ear. The line trills endlessly. Maybe he won't answer. Maybe this is a sign I should wait-

“Quinn?” Mark's gravelly voice stops my spiraling thoughts.

“Hey,” I say softly. Silence stretches between us, the weight of unspoken feelings hanging heavy.

I force the words out in a rush. “I miss you. And I know I said I needed space, but...I was wrong. I don't want to be apart anymore.”

Mark inhales sharply. When he speaks, his tone is guarded. “What are you saying?”

“That I want to try again. For real this time. No more pretending, no more games. Just you and me, seeing where this goes.” I grip the phone tightly, vulnerable in this moment. “If you want that too.”

The line goes quiet. I picture Mark running a hand through his dark hair, those stormy eyes searching for truth. Finally, he lets out a shaky breath.

“Hell yes, I want that. Want you. I only ever wanted you, Quinn.” His voice drops an octave. “Get back here and I’ll show you how much.”

A thrill races through me at his words. I grin into the phone. “I’m on my way!” I say, and end the call.

Just then, a figure emerges from the shadows, blocking my path. I freeze, my breath catching in my throat as I recognize the man standing before me.

“Hello, Quinn,” Charlie says, his voice deceptively calm. “I think it’s time we had a little chat.”

My heart pounds as I face Charlie, his presence an ominous shadow in the dimly lit street. “What do you want?” I manage, my voice tight with fear.

He walks closer, pushing me against the wall. The next thing I know, I feel something hard and cold pressed against my stomach. Instinctively, I reach for it to protect myself and my baby, only to discover it’s a gun.

I pale, my hand dropping to my side. “Charlie, no!” I beg, tears rising to my eyes.

A black van pulls up, two feet away from us. “Get in the car.” He tilts his head towards the vehicle, the gun pointed straight at my stomach.

Chapter 24 - Mark

My phone buzzes, and I grab it, my heart skipping a beat when I see Quinn's name flash across the screen. I answer immediately, a smile playing on my lips. “Hey, Beautiful. I’m waiting to see you. How far?”

“Hello, Mark.” The voice on the other end is distinctly male and definitely not Quinn's. I clench my fists as the blood gushes to my ears. Charlie fucking Letvin.

“What the fuck are you doing with Quinn's phone?” I demand, my voice low and dangerous. Fear claws at my throat, threatening to choke me.

Charlie chuckles, the sound sending a chill down my spine. “Now, now, is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“Cut the bullshit, Charlie. Where is Quinn?” My hand clenches the phone so hard my knuckles turn white.

“She's...indisposed at the moment. But don't worry, she's still breathing. For now.” He pauses, letting the threat hang in the air. “I think it's time for a little chat, Mark. Just you and me. I'll text you the address. Come alone, or the next time you see your precious Quinn, she'll be in pieces.”

The line goes dead, and I'm left standing there, my heart pounding against my ribs like a caged animal. Fuck.

I wait for Charlie to text me the address, and in the meantime, I conference call my siblings. They should know where to go if something happens to me.

Abram is the first to speak. “What's up?”

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“Charlie has Quinn.” The words taste like acid on my tongue.

Lara screams through the phone in shock. “What? How? I just saw her!”

“You were together?” I ask.

“Doesn’t matter now,” Denis adds. “Tell us what happened.”

“I don't know,” I grit out. “Charlie called from her phone and threatened to kill her if I didn’t show up to meet him alone. So I'm going to get her back.”

Vladimir interrupts. “We're coming with you.”

“No,” I say vehemently. “He said to come alone. I'm not risking Quinn's life.”

“You can't go by yourself, Mark. It's too dangerous,” Denis argues.

“I don't have a choice!” My voice rises, desperation clawing at my insides. “He'll kill her if I don't play by his rules.”

Abram’s voice rings through. “Okay, let's think about this strategically. We can't send you in there without backup.”

“I'll wear a wire,” I say impatiently. “But I have to go alone. At least initially. You can come for me if you don’t hear from me within a few hours.”

“No, Mark, stop!” Lara screeches so loudly that we’re all forced to listen. “Listen.

You can go today and bring her back, sure. But chances are Letvin won't let you walk out. Even if he does, he'll pull a stunt like that again when he discovers how much Quinn means to you. If you let him win this time, he'll always win."

"She's right," Abram sounds impressed.

"So what do you suggest?" I ask, through gritted teeth.

"I say we bring him down once and for all," Vladimir speaks.

"How?"

"By going through on our last threat. To make him fear us, there must be consequences."

"You're saying—"

"The Letvins. It's time that bastard's family knows what their precious Charlie is up to. Please, Mark. Let's call for an urgent meeting with the Letvins. It'll only take an hour at the most and who knows? They might know just how to help," Abram insists.

"Yes, Mark. You can't do this alone," Lara whispers.

I close my eyes and think about their proposition. Last time, we had cornered Charlie and told him we'd go straight to his family if he ever laid a hand on Quinn. If we don't follow through on our threat, then they're right, he'd think us weak and pull a stunt like today's all over again.

"Deal. See you at the Letvins," I end the call.

I drive to the Letvins' territory, my heart pounding against my ribs. The air is thick with tension as I approach the meeting spot, a double-storied house fifteen minutes from where I am. My brothers are already here. I told Lara to stay back and call the Orlovs if she does not hear from us within the hour.

I park my car and catch up with Abram, Vladimir, and Denis. Together, we walk up the stairs and ring the bell. A man opens the door, leading us to a living room.

We spot Gavril and Maksim Letvin, Charlie's younger cousins, waiting for us. Their faces are grim.

"Gentlemen." Gavril nods curtly. "Welcome."

"Cut the bullshit, Gavril," I snap. "You know your precious brother Charlie has Quinn."

Maksim shifts uncomfortably. "We don't want any part of this, you all know that. Charlie's gone too far this time."

"Not just this time," Gavril adds. "He's a loose cannon and the entire clan is always watching their back, always waiting for him to make one more mistake."

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Abram steps closer, his voice a command as the head of our unit. "Then help us get her back."

"What can we possibly do?" Gavril says, giving his cousin a worried look.

"You're worried about upsetting Charlie?" my voice booms through the room. Beside me, Denis places a calming hand on my shoulder. In a calmer tone, I add, "You said yourself he's a loose cannon. He'll burn you at the first chance he gets."

I see a flicker of doubt in Gavril's eyes. I press on, my tone persuasive. "Look, I know we've had our differences in the past. But this isn't about that. This is about an innocent woman's life. Not just any innocent woman. My woman."

There's a tense silence in the air, an unspoken understanding of what that means. Kill the Bratva, leave the women and children. There are rules, even amongst thieves.

Finally, Maksim nods. "We'll do everything we can, knowing how much she means to you. You know we can't risk becoming enemies with the Zolotovs and Orlovs. It's bad for business, and we don't want to face the consequences for something we had no part in."

Gavril's jaw clenches. "What do you need from us?"

Relief surges through me. "I need to get into Charlie's compound undetected. I have a plan, but I need your help to pull it off."

They exchange a glance. "What's the plan?" Gavril asks.

“You need to call Charlie and ask to meet. Maksim and you. I’ll join you. The only thing is, he won’t know who I am. Remember, gentlemen, what we need most is the element of surprise. I’ll disguise myself as one of your bodyguards.”

Maksim nods slowly. “We can do that. But Mark, if this goes sideways...”

“It won’t,” I say firmly. “I’ll get Quinn out, and we’ll deal with Charlie once and for all.”

We shake on it, a tense understanding passing between us.

I change into the bodyguard uniform provided by the Letvins as quickly as I can. Every second counts.

Abram helps me strap on a bulletproof vest. “You sure about this, Mark?”

“I have to be.” I meet his gaze, my eyes blazing with resolve. “I can’t lose her, Abram. I won’t.”

He nods, understanding in his eyes. “We’ll be right behind you. Just give the signal, and we’ll come in guns blazing.”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what’s to come. I picture Quinn alone and afraid in Charlie’s clutches.

Hang on, Baby. I’m coming for you.

With one last nod to my family, I slip out of the room and join the ranks of the Letvin men. My brothers can’t risk infiltrating so soon; too many of us could give ourselves

away. But I know they'll be watching from a safe distance, ready to come if we need them.

My heart hammers in my chest as we get into a G-wagon and drive towards the warehouse where Charlie has asked his cousins to come to for a meeting. It's the same location he had sent me.

Quinn needs me, and I'll move heaven and earth to bring her back safely. Even if it means staring down the barrel of Charlie's gun myself.

We reach the nondescript warehouse and exit the vehicles. I walk with the other bodyguards behind Maksim and Gavril. They flash their IDs on the monitor, and once we enter, Gavril looks at me and gives me one final nod before we continue walking.

The warehouse has a dampness to it, a dinginess and darkness. My blood roars in my ears at imagining that Quinn is down here in this filth. Charlie Letvin is about to learn a lesson he should have learned years ago.

I keep my eyes open for doors, exits, and turns in the hallways. If by chance Quinn isn't with Letvin, I'll need to sneak out and find her. For any door that is ajar, I look inside, and when I find it devoid of Quinn's presence, I make a mental note not to use that one if I have to return down this route in search of her.

At last, we reach a door at the end of a hallway to the right of where we entered from. It's wide open, a light spilling out. Maksim and Gavril exchange looks and motion at us to follow them into a large, circular room.

I hear Charlie before I see him.

“Cousins,” he says, stepping out from the darkness with his arms outstretched to his brothers. “What gives me the pleasure of seeing you today?”

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In typical narcissist fashion, Charlie doesn't even bother looking in the direction of the bodyguards. In the direction of where I stand.

The bodyguards and I spread out across the room, allowing us to move as we wish without being noticed. I scan the room, and my heart nearly stops when I finally catch sight of Quinn. She's tied to a chair, her head drooping to the side, her once vibrant strawberry-blonde hair matted with blood. Even from a distance, I can see the bruises marring her delicate skin, and a white-hot rage surges through my veins.

I want to rush to her, to gather her in my arms and shield her from any further harm. But I force myself to remain still, my muscles coiled with tension. I can't risk making a move, not yet, not when Charlie's men are watching my every breath.

Quinn stirs, her green eyes fluttering open, and for a moment, our gazes lock. In that brief exchange, I try to convey everything I can't say aloud—my love, my determination, my promise to get her out of this hell.

She blinks, a flicker of recognition and hope dancing across her face before she slumps forward once again, her energy depleted.

I turn my attention back to Charlie's men, my mind racing with possible scenarios. I know we are outnumbered and outgunned, but I refuse to let that stop me. Quinn's life hangs in the balance, and I'll be damned if I let her slip away.

“Charlie,” I hear Gavril speak first. “We hear you crossed the Zolotovs. Let the girl go.”

I watch as Charlie's face twists in anger, his eyes darting toward Quinn, who is bound in the corner. His cousins follow his gaze, and I watch as they recoil in horror at her condition.

I can see the panic flicker in Charlie's expression before he puts on a mask of false bravado. He's nervous that his cousins have found out, that they might not agree with his actions. Good.

"It's none of your business, Gavril. This is between me and Mark," Charlie sneers, his voice dripping with arrogance.

But I can see the fear lurking behind his bravado, the way his eyes keep darting towards the exit. He knows he's trapped, cornered by a group he never expected to turn against him.

As Gavril and Maksim buy time, asking Charlie about his motivations for taking such an unnecessary step, the guards and I quickly pull out our silent dart guns. By my calculations, Charlie and his guards total ten. Maksim, Gavril, and we bodyguards add up to six. Each of our guns carries six needles that deliver instant unconsciousness to those shot.

I nod at the men, and we each take aim.

"Three, two, one," I scream, and the darts fly. Six guards fall to the ground, their bodies thumping.

Now that's what I call the element of surprise.

"What the hell?" Charlie screams.

Chaos erupts among the three remaining bodyguards as they draw their guns. I make

my move, my body surging forward with a burst of adrenaline. I slam my elbow into the nearest guard's face, feeling the satisfying crunch of bone beneath my strike. He crumples to the ground, but I don't have time to savor the victory.

“Him!” Charlie points in my direction, realizing who I am and that his cousins plotted against him. The remaining two men rush towards me, their shouts echoing off the concrete walls.

I dodge a fist aimed at my head, retaliating with a swift kick to my attacker's knee. He howls in pain, but I'm already moving, my eyes locked on Quinn's tired form. I have to reach her to get her out of this nightmare.

I'm a whirlwind of motion, my fists and feet striking with deadly precision. The bodyguards join in, and together, we bring down the remaining three guards by darting them with the drug.

Good. They'll all be out for the next hour.

As I finally leap over two fallen bodies and rush toward Quinn, I hear a slow clap echoing through the room. I turn to see Charlie stepping out from the shadows behind Quinn's chair, a twisted grin on his face.

“Bravo, Mark,” he sneers, his eyes glinting with malice. “I must say, I'm impressed. But you didn't really think it would be that easy, did you?”

I clench my fists, my body trembling with barely contained rage. “Let her go, Charlie. This is between you and me.”

He throws his head back and laughs, the sound chilling me to the bone. “Oh, but where's the fun in that? You see, I've been waiting a long time for this moment. To see the great Mark Zolotov brought to his knees.”

He pulls out a gun and points it directly at Quinn's head.

"Come on now, Charlie," Maksim tries to interfere. "Don't do anything stupid now, will you?"

I take a step forward, my voice low and dangerous. "If you hurt her, I swear to God, I'll—"

"You'll what?" Charlie cuts me off, his tone mocking. "You'll kill me? Go ahead, try. But know this: if I die, she dies with me."

My heart clenches at his words, and I feel the true depth of his madness hit me like a physical blow. I know he's not bluffing. Charlie is a man with nothing left to lose, and that makes him all the more dangerous.

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“Oh. I won’t kill you if anything happens to her,” I say, through gritted teeth. “Death is easy. If I catch you, I’ll hang you by your legs, ice you every single day, lash you, break each finger, and keep you alive just enough to make you beg for death.”

As I speak, I watch Charlie’s eyes widen with fear. Despite all the bravado, there’s nothing Charlie fears more than pain.

I inch closer. “My brothers are right outside, Letvin. Run if you can. If they catch you...”

From behind Charlie, one of Gavril’s guards reaches for Charlie’s hand and seizes it, twisting his wrist up. Charlie howls as the gun goes off and hits the roof, careening off into a corner.

I lunge forward, my fist connecting with Charlie's jaw with a satisfying crack. He stumbles back, momentarily stunned, and I seize the opportunity to close the distance between us. We grapple, trading blows, as Quinn's muffled cries echo in the background.

“Mark!” she screams, her voice laced with terror.

I can feel my strength fading, the toll of the past few hours catching up to me, but I refuse to give in. With a surge of adrenaline, I wrap my hands around Charlie's throat, squeezing with all the force I can muster.

His eyes bulge, and his face turns a sickly shade of purple, but he manages a twisted smile. “You'll never win,” he rasps, his words barely audible. I'll always be one step

ahead.”

Suddenly, the room plunges into darkness, and I feel Charlie slip from my grasp. I spin around, my heart pounding, trying to gather my bearings in the pitch black. “Quinn!” I yell, my voice raw with desperation.

But there's no response, only the sound of retreating footsteps and a door slamming shut. I fumble for my phone, my hands shaking, and turn on the flashlight. The beam illuminates the empty room, and my stomach drops as I realize the truth.

Charlie is gone, and he's taken Quinn with him.

With a roar of frustration, I push myself to my feet and direct the guards to head into the hallways. I need to find them now. Maksim and Gavril split up with their men. I will find her at any cost. I will make Charlie pay for what he's done.

And when I do, there will be no mercy.

I rush through the dark hallways, my heart pounding as I search for any sign of Quinn or Charlie. The sound of a muffled cry catches my attention, and I race towards it, my feet pounding against the concrete floor.

As I round the corner, I freeze, my breath catching in my throat. Quinn lies crumpled on the ground, her strawberry-blond hair matted with blood. I drop to my knees beside her, my hands trembling as I gather her into my arms.

“Quinn, , Baby, I'm here,” I whisper, my voice breaking. “I've got you.”

She looks up at me, her green eyes glazed with pain. “Mark,” she breathes, her voice barely audible. “I'm sorry, he tried to make me run faster, but I couldn't keep up. I was slowing him down, and he pulled me along, dragging me across the ground. I-I

tried to fight him off, and then he kicked and left—”

“Shh, it's not your fault,” I assure her, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “You're safe now, I promise.”

As I cradle her against my chest, I notice the growing red stain on her skirt. My heart clenches with fear as I realize she's bleeding from between her legs. Why is she bleeding between her legs? What the hell is happening?

“Quinn, we need to get you to a hospital,” I say urgently, trying to suppress my panic.

She nods weakly, her face pale and drawn. I lift her into my arms, holding her close as I hurry towards the exit. “Quinn? Quinn?”

Her eyes roll shut. That bastard hurt her hard enough to make her lose consciousness. The bruises under her eyes, the blood on her head, between her legs—she's been through hell. I put her into the back of the waiting car.

“Hospital, now!” I shout, cradling her in my arms in the backseat. My mind races with worry, the thought of losing her threatening to overwhelm me.

But I push those thoughts aside, focusing instead on the woman in my arms. She's alive, and that's all that matters. Once we get to the hospital, everything will be okay.

Chapter 25 - Quinn

The sharp scent of antiseptic jolts me awake, and my senses struggle for clarity. I blink, squinting at the harsh lights above. The room sways like a carousel, and shapes blur. Sterile walls, beeping machines, and starched sheets scratch my skin—I'm in a hospital.

How did I end up here? My mind struggles to find an answer. Charlie Letvin's face flashes in my memory—his hands shoving me into a van. Trapped, terrified, praying for a rescue. Then Mark, like an avenging angel, burst in, his eyes blazing with fury as he fought to reach me.

“Quinn, you're safe now.” Lara's soothing voice pulls me back. I turn to see her beside my bed, her kind eyes filled with relief. She gently takes my hand.

“Lara,” I croak, throat dry. “What happened? How long was I out?”

“You've been unconscious for a few days. The doctors had to sedate you to help you heal after... what that monster did.” Her voice trembles. “But Mark saved you, Quinn.”

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I nod weakly, the trauma rising in my chest.

A sudden, terrifying thought hits me. I clutch my stomach in panic. “The baby! Lara, is my baby okay?” I try to sit up, heart racing.

Lara gently presses me back down. “Shh, rest.”

“Please, tell me,” I beg.

Lara sighs, her voice steady. “There was some bleeding and uterine trauma, but the baby is fine. Strong heartbeat. You're both going to be okay.”

Relief washes over me, and I slump back with tears streaming down my face. “Thank God,” I whisper.

Lara smiles warmly. “Congratulations. It's not ideal, but it's wonderful news.”

“I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner,” I murmur, guilt twisting my stomach.

“Hush,” she says, squeezing my hand. “You have nothing to apologize for. You're both safe. We'll get through this together.”

“Thank you,” I breathe, exhaustion taking over.

But then my eyes snap open, a new thought jolting through me like an electric current. “Mark,” I rasp. “Where is he? Does he...does he know?”

Lara's expression softens with understanding. "He knows, Quinn. The doctor informed him during a routine update after they checked on you when you were first admitted."

I swallow hard, my heart hammering against my ribs. "How did he react? Was he angry? Upset?" My voice cracks on the last word, betraying the depth of my fear.

"Oh, Honey." Lara brushes a strand of hair from my forehead, her eyes full of compassion. "He was worried sick about you. He stayed by your side for days, refusing to leave until our brothers practically dragged him out to get some rest."

I blink, trying to process this information through the haze of medication and exhaustion. "He stayed with me?" I whisper, hardly daring to believe it.

Lara nods, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "He did. I've never seen him like that before, Quinn. He was so focused on you, so desperate for you to be okay. It was like nothing else mattered."

I feel my heartbeat ramp up in speed. The idea that he might want this baby...it's almost too much to comprehend.

The road ahead is far from clear, but for the first time since I woke up, I feel at peace. "Okay," I whisper, meeting Lara's steady gaze. "Okay."

The door opens, and my heart leaps as Mark steps inside. His usual polish is gone—hair tousled, a shadow of a beard on his jaw. But it's his eyes that stop me—haunted, raw.

"Quinn," he breathes, my name falling like a prayer. In a heartbeat, he's by my side,

his large hand enveloping mine. “You're awake. Thank God.”

His touch is tender, desperate, making my chest tighten.

“I'm okay,” I rasp. “You know about the baby...?”

A knock interrupts, and the doctor enters. Sensing the charged air, her warm smile flickers between Mark and me. “Ms. Desmond, Mr. Zolotov,” she greets, calm and professional. I have updates on your condition and the baby.”

My heart races with dreadful anticipation. What's the news? Will this be too much for Mark? His hand tightens around mine, an unspoken promise that he's here.

The doctor checks her chart, expression neutral. “Both you and the baby are stable. The bleeding has stopped, and we've prevented further complications.”

Relief floods me, nearly stealing my breath. Our baby is safe. That's all that matters.

I study Mark, watching his reaction. His brow furrows, his eyes widen slightly as the doctor confirms our baby's health. And then, a smile—small but unmistakable—tugs at the corners of his mouth. Pure joy.

It's a revelation. The notorious playboy, the arrogant Bratva boss, is now a man who is awestruck by the miracle inside me. In that moment, something shifts within me. Maybe he really wants this baby. Wants us.

As the doctor leaves, Mark turns to me, his expression softening. My heart pounds. This is it. The moment of truth.

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“Mark,” I whisper, voice raw. “Talk to me. Please.”

He’s silent, his gaze fixed on our joined hands. After a long moment, his eyes meet mine, intense and steady.

“I mean what I’m about to say, Quinn,” he says, voice low, rough. “I’m here for you and the baby. No matter what happens, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Oh, Mark,” I whisper, tears welling.

“I wish you’d told me sooner you were pregnant. Is that why you ran?” he asks.

“Partly,” I murmur.

He nods, acknowledging my truth. “I know I didn’t make things easy, didn’t say what I should have when I should have shouted my feelings from the rooftops in sheer joy. But I’m willing to do anything to prove I’m here—for you, for our child.”

I search his face, finding only sincerity. “I know,” I whisper.

He reaches out, fingers grazing my cheek. The tenderness makes my breath catch. I lean into his touch, letting myself feel this moment of connection, of safety.

Over the next few days, as I recover in the hospital, Mark will be a constant presence at my side. He will bring me prenatal vitamins and ensure I take them religiously.

When I shiver from the hospital's overzealous air conditioning, he will tuck an extra blanket around me, his hands lingering on my shoulders.

And when the bland hospital food becomes unbearable, he sneaks in a pizza from my favorite place. "Just don't tell the nurses," he whispers conspiratorially, with a playful grin on his face.

These small gestures, these moments of care and attention, tell me I made the right decision to call him that day, Charlie Letvin took me. Here's a man who wants to build a life with me and be a father to our child.

I know it's not going to be easy. We have a lot of baggage and many obstacles to overcome. But as I watch Mark doze in the chair beside my bed, his hand resting protectively on my belly, I feel a flicker of something that feels dangerously like hope.

Maybe we can do this. Maybe we can find our way to each other, to that family I always dreamed of having. It's a terrifying thought, but also an exhilarating one. And for the first time in a long time, I'm ready to take that leap of faith.

As the day of my discharge approaches, I find myself growing restless, eager to leave the confines of the hospital room. Mark senses my impatience and gently squeezes my hand. "Just a little longer, Quinn."

I nod, knowing he's right, but the need for normalcy, for a sense of control, itches beneath my skin.

As I watch Mark carefully pack my belongings, double-checking with the nurses to ensure we have all the necessary prescriptions and instructions, I feel a wave of

gratitude wash over me. He's been my rock through all of this.

When the final paperwork is signed and I'm officially discharged, Mark insists on pushing me out of the hospital, despite my protests that I'm perfectly capable of walking. "Humor me," he says with a wink, and I can't help but roll my eyes, a smile playing at the corners of my mouth.

As we exit the hospital doors, the sunlight warming my face, I take a deep breath, savoring the taste of freedom. Mark's hand finds the small of my back, a reassuring presence as he guides me towards the waiting car.

"Ready to go home?" he asks, his eyes searching mine.

Home. I look at Mark, the man who has proven time and again that he's willing to fight for me, for us, I realize that home isn't a place but a feeling.

"Ready," I say, my voice steady and sure.

Chapter 26 - Mark

I stand across from Maksim Letvin, my arms crossed and jaw clenched.

"So, Charlie's out then?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

Maksim nods curtly. "He overstepped. Thought he could run things his way, but our family decided otherwise."

Relief washes over me, but I maintain my stoic expression. "And you're in charge now?"

"That's what the family chose," Maksim confirms, a hint of pride in his gruff voice.

“Things will be different. No more sneaking around, no more underhanded deals.”

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I give him a nod of gratitude. With Charlie gone, the threat to Quinn and my family diminishes. But I can't let my guard down completely.

“Good to hear,” I say, uncrossing my arms. “But I'll be keeping an eye on things, just to be sure.”

Maksim's eyes narrow. “You don't trust me, Zolotov?”

I meet his gaze unflinchingly. “Trust is earned, Letvin. I'll have my people watching, making sure Charlie doesn't try anything.”

“Do what you must,” Maksim shrugs. “But know that the Bratva stands united now. Charlie's days of causing trouble are over.”

I nod, my mind already racing with plans. I'll need to send out spies, gather intelligence. I can't risk Charlie resurfacing and targeting those I love. Quinn's safety is my top priority, and I'll do whatever it takes to ensure it.

“We're done here then,” I say, turning to leave. “Keep your house in order, Maksim. I won't hesitate to step in if needed.”

Just as I'm about to exit, I turn around. “But, Gavril and your help will always be remembered. Do reach out if we can ever return the favor.”

I return home, my thoughts still consumed by the need to keep Quinn safe. As I enter

our bedroom, I find her sitting on the edge of the bed, her face pale and her eyes unfocused. A wave of concern washes over me, and I rush to her side.

“Quinn, what's wrong?” I ask, my voice tight with worry. I cradle her face in my hands, searching her eyes for answers. “Are you feeling ill?”

She looks up at me, managing a weak smile. “I'm just a little dizzy, that's all.”

But I'm not convinced. The sight of her looking so fragile sends a jolt of panic through me. “We need to get you to the hospital, now,” I insist, already reaching for my phone. “I'll call for the car.”

Quinn places her hand on mine, stopping me. “Mark, it's okay,” she says softly. “I don't need the hospital.”

“But you're not well,” I argue, my brow furrowed with concern. “I can't just sit by and do nothing.”

She takes a deep breath, her smile growing a little stronger. “It's just morning sickness, Mark. It's perfectly normal.”

Relief washes over me, followed by a twinge of embarrassment. Of course, it's about the pregnancy. I should have seen that coming. I sink down onto the bed beside her, pulling her into my arms. “I'm sorry, I overreacted,” I murmur into her hair. “I just worry about you, about both of you.”

Quinn leans into me, her head resting on my shoulder. “I know you do, and I love you for it. But you don't need to panic every time I feel a little off. We're going to be just fine.”

I nod, holding her closer. The thought of anything happening to her or our unborn

child terrifies me. But I know I need to trust her; she knows her body best. “You're right,” I say, pressing a kiss to her temple. “I'll try to relax, I promise.”

She looks up at me, a mischievous glint in her eye. “Good, because I'm going to need you to be the calm one when I'm dealing with swollen ankles and weird cravings.”

I chuckle, the tension easing from my body. “I think I can handle that,” I assure her. “As long as you promise to tell me if anything doesn't feel right, okay?”

“Deal,” she agrees, her eyes locked on mine. A gentle smile graces her lips as she moves closer to me. I'm drawn to her like a moth to a flame. I lean in, taking her lips in a soft kiss. The instant our lips touch, a surge of electricity courses through my body, igniting every nerve ending. I feel alive, my hunger for her intensifying with every passing second.

My hands explore her curves, reveling in the softness of her skin beneath the delicate fabric of her dress. I hold her cheek, my thumb brushing below her chin as I deepen the kiss. Quinn reciprocates with equal passion, her fingers twisting in my hair as she presses herself closer to me.

The urgency between us builds as I gently slide my hand beneath her neck and pull her down, laying her back on the bed with her feet still planted on the ground. I get off her, and she protests, “Mark!”

I get down on the floor and slide my hands up her legs, savoring the smooth expanse of her thighs. She shivers and trembles when my fingers clutch the hem of her dress, inching it higher as I graze the sides of her breasts. With deliberate slowness, I slip the dress off her body, rising with my movements, revealing her naked form beneath.

I stand above her, drinking in her beauty. Quinn's strawberry-blonde hair fans out on the bed, framing her face like a halo. Her skin glows with an ethereal light, and her

body is shaped like an instrument to be played. “You are so beautiful,” I whisper, my voice rough with emotion. “You are the sexiest woman alive.”

Quinn blushes, a delicate pink spreading across her cheeks as she looks up at me. She touches her belly, a small smile playing on her lips. “I’ll be showing soon,” she murmurs, a hint of vulnerability in her tone.

I shake my head, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. “You’ll be all the more beautiful then,” I assure her, my hand covering hers on her stomach. “You’re carrying our child, Quinn. There’s nothing more incredible than that.”

She looks up at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears, and gets on her forearms, reaching for my shirt. Gently, I push her down by her shoulders. “You’re working hard enough giving me a baby,” I insist and stand up straight to quickly shed down to nothing but my boxers.

I watch her watch me and feel a flicker of pride as she bites her lower lip at the sight of my chiseled muscles.

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I then kneel before her, my hands grasping her ankles as I spread her legs wide. Quinn's breath hitches, and when I look up, I see her green eyes darkening with desire. Slowly, I trail my fingers up her calves, relishing the smoothness of her skin. When I reach her thighs, I hook my fingers into the waistband of her panties and tug them down, exposing her glistening folds.

“Mark...” she whimpers, her hips lifting off the bed in a silent plea.

I lean forward, inhaling her intoxicating scent. “Shh, Baby,” I murmur, my breath ghosting over her sensitive flesh. “Let me take care of you.”

With that, I delve in, my tongue parting her slick folds. Quinn gasps, her hands fisting the sheets as I explore her most intimate places. I lap at her hungrily, savoring her taste on my tongue. My fingers join the fray, stroking and teasing as I build her towards her peak.

“Oh god, Mark!” she cries out, her back arching off the bed. “Don't stop, please don't stop!”

I double my efforts, my tongue flicking over her clit as my fingers pump in and out of her warmth. Quinn's moans grow louder, her hips rocking against my face as she chases her release. I can feel her tightening around my fingers, her inner walls fluttering with her impending climax.

“That's it, Baby,” I encourage her, my voice muffled against her flesh. “Let go for me.”

With a keening cry, Quinn shatters, her body trembling as waves of ecstasy crash over her. I continue my ministrations, coaxing every last bit of pleasure from her until her pussy stops convulsing around my fingers and she's a boneless heap on the bed. Until I'm sure the last of the wave has passed.

I rise to my feet, my own arousal straining against my boxers. "Get on your hands and knees, Quinn," I command, my voice rough with need.

She complies eagerly, rolling onto her stomach and lifting her hips in the air. The sight of her, posed and ready for me, nearly undoes me right then and there and my cock groans in protest. Her back arches, accentuating the curve of her spine. Quinn's perfect ass is on full display, tempting me with its lushness. She looks over her shoulder at me, her lips parted and eyes heavy-lidded with desire.

I strip off my boxers in record time, the roar of urgency thundering in my ears. Joining her on the bed, I grasp her hips, aligning myself with her entrance. She's soaking wet, her ripeness teasing my tip. We both groan as I slide slowly into her slick heat, her body welcoming me home.

I pause for a moment, savoring the exquisite feel of her wrapped around me. Slowly, I begin to move, setting a gentle rhythm as I tenderly make love to her.

"Mark," she breathes, pushing her hips back to meet my thrusts. "More, please."

I oblige, picking up the pace as I drive into her with increasing fervor. The room fills with the sounds of our passion—the slap of skin against skin, our mingled moans and gasps of pleasure. Quinn meets me thrust for thrust, her body a perfect counterpoint to mine.

"You feel so good," I groan, my fingers digging into the soft flesh of her hips. "So tight, so perfect."

“Don't stop,” she pleads, her words dissolving into a whimper as I hit a particularly sensitive spot.

I can feel the tension coiling within me, the pleasure building to an almost unbearable crescendo. Quinn's movements become more erratic, her breathing more labored, signaling her own impending release. The bed creaks, her hips roll, her ass bounces—all for me.

“I'm close,” she gasps, reaching back to grasp wrists since my hands are otherwise occupied, clenching onto her waist. “So close, Mark.”

“Let go, Quinn,” I urge her and tilt my hip, my thrusts becoming more forceful, more demanding. “Cum for me, Baby.”

With a keening cry, Quinn shatters, her inner walls clamping down around me like a vise. She trembles beneath me, her muscles convulsing and milking my cock. The sensation sends me hurtling over the edge, and I see lightning, hear thunder, feel that maddening pleasure erupt from the point of origin, and I bury myself deep as I find my own release, spilling into her with a guttural groan.

For a long moment, we remain locked together, our bodies trembling with the aftershocks of our shared climax. Slowly, I withdraw from her, gathering her limp form into my arms as I roll onto my back. Quinn nestles into my chest, her heart beating in sync with my own.

We lie entangled, our sweat-slicked bodies melding together, and a profound sense of contentment washes over me. Quinn's head rests on my chest, her silky hair spilling across my skin. I stroke her back with gentle reverence, marveling at the softness beneath my fingertips.

“I could stay like this forever,” Quinn murmurs, her breath warm against my neck.

“Then let's never leave this bed,” I reply, only half-joking. In this moment, the outside world ceases to exist—there is only Quinn, only us, cocooned in our own little universe.

She lifts her head, resting her chin on my chest as she looks at me with those mesmerizing eyes. A playful smile tugs at her lips. “As tempting as that sounds, I think we might eventually get hungry.”

I chuckle, tweaking her nose affectionately. “I suppose you're right. But for now, I just want to hold you close and never let go.”

Quinn's expression softens, her eyes shimmering with emotion. “Mark, I...” She pauses, seeming to search for the right words. “I never expected this, you know? When we first met, I thought you were just another arrogant playboy.”

“And now?” I prompt, my heart suddenly racing in anticipation.

She takes a deep breath, as if steeling herself. “Now, I realize that I was wrong. You're so much more than that. You're strong, protective, loyal... And somewhere along the way, I fell in love with you.”

Time seems to stand still as her words sink in. Love. She loves me. A wave of pure, unadulterated joy crashes over me, threatening to sweep me away.

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“Quinn,” I breathe, cupping her face in my hands. “I love you too. God, I love you so much it terrifies me sometimes.”

Her eyes widen, a beatific smile spreading across her face. “You do?”

“Of course I do, you silly woman,” I tease, even as my eyes mist over. “How could I not? You've turned my world upside down and made me question everything I thought I knew. You've turned me into a believer, Quinn. I believe in true love because I know that's what we have. The only thing I'm absolutely certain of is that I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Quinn surges forward, capturing my lips in a searing kiss that leaves me breathless. When she finally pulls back, her eyes are soft and sweet. “Well, I suppose it's a good thing you knocked me up then, huh? Now you're stuck with me.”

I laugh, a full-bodied, joyous sound that echoes through the room. “Many things scare me, but being stuck with you isn't one of them, Sweetheart. You and this baby—you're my everything.”

Chapter 27 - Quinn

“Ooh, look at this adorable onesie!” Lara points at a tiny green bodysuit with a smiling turtle embroidered on the front. “I think this would be perfect for our little guy's coming home outfit.”

I smile, picturing a tiny version of Mark dressed in the soft cotton outfit. “It's so adorable! Let's add it to the cart.” I press the ‘add’ button on my phone screen and see

the onesie join the growing list of baby items we've chosen. And to think we're just getting started shopping for more!

Lara scrolls through more options, her eyes lighting up with each new find. "Quinn, you won't believe how much stuff a tiny human needs! Diapers, wipes, burp cloths, pacifiers..."

"Don't forget the car seat, stroller, and approximately five hundred receiving blankets," I chuckle, enjoying the easy banter with my new unofficial pregnancy guide. Who would have thought a few months ago that I'd be shopping for baby supplies with the sister of a Russian mob boss?

"You're going to be an amazing mom," Lara says softly, her hand resting on my growing bump. "This kid is so lucky to have you and Mark."

Warmth blooms in my chest at her words. "Thanks, Lara. I'm still terrified, but knowing we have you and Dima for support means everything."

Suddenly, a black van swerves in front of us, tires screeching against the pavement. I lurch forward in my seat, barely managing to brace myself against the driver's seat.

"What the hell?" I cry out, instinctively shielding my stomach as the van blocks our path.

Lara's eyes widen with fear. "Quinn, I think we're being attacked."

Before I can respond, the van charges toward us again, metal crumpling as it collides with the front of our car. I scream, my heart slamming against my ribs as the impact jolts us violently. The windshield shatters up front, spraying the interior with razor-sharp shards.

“Get down!” the driver shouts as Lara unbuckles her seatbelt and dives to shield me with her body.

The tires squeal as the van reverses. My mind races, frantically searching for an escape route, but we're trapped—playing a sickening game of cat and mouse on the deserted side street.

I prepare for another assault, but it never comes.

Through the cracked windshield, I catch a glimpse of what's happening. The van door flies open, and a familiar figure storms toward us, his face contorted with rage. Charlie Letvin slams his fist against my window, his eyes wild with fury.

“Open the fucking door, you bitch!” he screams, his voice dripping with venom. “You think you can hide behind Mark forever?”

Lara trembles beside me, her body shielding mine. I reach for her arm, trying to offer some comfort, but my own fear paralyzes me.

Charlie's gaze remains on me, his lips curling into a sneer. “You're just as guilty. Spreading your legs for that Zolotov bastard, thinking he'll protect you.” He laughs, a harsh, grating sound that sends shivers down my spine. “Well, guess what? He can't save you now.”

My heart pounds in my ears, my mind only on one thing. My baby. Please. Don't harm my baby.

Just as Charlie reaches for his waistband, a sleek black car screeches to a halt behind the van. The door swings open and Lara sits up, letting me straighten, and relief floods through me when I see it's Mark who emerges.

“Get the fuck away from them, Charlie,” Mark growls, his voice low and dangerous.

Charlie spins around, his hand still hovering near his waistband. “Well, well, if it isn't the man of the hour.” He sneers. “Come to save your whore and sister?”

Mark's jaw clenches, his eyes flashing with barely contained rage. “I'm only going to say this once, Charlie. Leave. Now.” He takes a step closer, his body coiled with tension, ready to strike at a moment's notice.

Charlie scoffs, his hand twitching near his waistband. “You think you can order me around, Zolotov? This isn't your turf. You don't make the rules here.”

Mark's lips curve into a humorless smile. “I make the rules wherever I go, Letvin. You should know that by now.”

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In a flash, Charlie reaches for his gun, but Mark is faster. With a swift, fluid motion, Mark draws his own weapon and fires, the sound deafening in the confined space of the alley.

I gasp, my hands instinctively covering my ears as Charlie crumples to the ground, a crimson stain spreading across his chest. Mark stands over him, his gun still trained on Charlie's motionless form, his expression impassive.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, my voice trembling. I can't tear my eyes away from the gruesome scene before me, the reality of Mark's world hitting me with full force.

Mark lowers his gun and turns to me, his gaze softening as he opens the car door and helps me out. “Are you okay, Quinn?” He reaches out, his hand gently cupping my cheek, his touch a stark contrast to the violence that just transpired.

I nod, leaning into his touch, seeking comfort in his presence. “I'm fine, just shaken up.”

Mark pulls me into his arms, his embrace strong and reassuring. “I'm sorry you had to see that, but I couldn't let him hurt you or Lara.”

As I cling to Mark, I hear the sound of approaching footsteps. Mark's brothers emerge from the shadows, their expressions grim as they take in the scene before them.

“We'll handle this, Mark,” Abram says, gesturing to Charlie's body. “You take care of Quinn.”

Mark nods, his arm tightening around my waist. "Thank you, brothers. Make sure it's clean."

I watch as Mark's brothers efficiently set to work, removing any trace of the confrontation with Lara, calling the Orlovs for help, covering up this situation with the cops, should someone have called them.

Mark leads me away from the chaos, his hand firmly grasping mine as we make our way to a dimly lit alley. The fear still coursing through my veins makes my heart race. We reach a quiet corner, and Mark turns to face me, his hands cupping my cheeks.

"Are you sure you're okay, Quinn?" he asks gently.

I nod, trying to steady my breathing. "I am now, thanks to you. One moment, we were going shopping for the baby, and the next..." My voice falters, and my gaze locks with his. But why did you come? How did you know we were in trouble?"

Mark sighs, running a hand through his short black hair. "We've been tracking Charlie for a while now. I had a feeling he might try something, so I had my men keep an eye out." He takes a step closer. "I couldn't let anything happen to you, Quinn. Not when I..."

He trails off, a flicker of vulnerability crossing his chiseled features. I tilt my head, curiosity mingling with the unexpected flutter in my chest. "When you what, Mark?"

A wry smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. "When I love you."

"Oh Mark," I step closer just as he extends his arms out, only for me to rush into them. I bury my head in his chest and instantly feel safe. "I love you too."

He kisses the top of my head. "I could never get tired of that, you know?"

"I feel the exact same way," I say, closing my eyes as I break off into a blissful smile.

"Hey, Quinn?" he murmurs against my hair.

"Mm-hmm..."

"If you're not too tired, have dinner with me tonight?"

"You don't have to ask twice."

Later that night, I look over myself in the mirror one last time and smooth out my dress. I grab the pearl clutch from my dressing table and pull half my hair back with it, leaving the rest to flow freely over my shoulders.

I put on some light rose blush, add some pearl earrings, and put on my heels. With my purse slung over my shoulder, I'm ready to go.

It's been a while since Mark and I spent some quality time together, and tonight's dinner has me excited for all the right reasons.

I move downstairs and find Mark waiting for me. Just when I reach down, he turns at the landing and looks up at me with a smile, and one hand extends out to take mine. I catch my breath, momentarily lost in the movement of him. Tonight, he looks picture perfect in that coat and tie, his hair swept back just right, his eyes smoldering in my direction in a way that tells me I dressed right.

Together, we walk out of the house, but to my surprise, there's no car. I look up at

him only to see him jerk to his right, asking me to follow.

Wordlessly, we walk the paved path until we enter through a flower-ridden garden arch and find ourselves in a tiny alcove. My eyes run in every direction, noticing the candles laid out across the pathways, the twinkling fairy lights strung over bushes and plants, gorgeous white lanterns hanging down trees. And there, right in the center, just aligned with the fountain, is a gorgeous white table laid out for two, with champagne waiting on ice.

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I turn to Mark with a squeal, “Mark! I thought we were going out!”

“Out wasn’t good enough, Quinn,” Mark shakes his head. “Not for what I have to ask you.”

Confusion sweeps over me, the kind that tells me I have this wrong, but my heart tells me I don’t.

“Mark...” I lead, needing him to go faster.

“Today was less than ideal,” he shakes his head ruefully. “I didn’t just happen to be around when Letvin attacked. I had this whole surprise planned for you. A romantic proposal, something to sweep you off your feet. That’s where Lara was taking you. The whole shopping thing was a sham. I was waiting at a nearby restaurant for you to arrive, until Charlie fucking Letvin ruined all my plans.”

I blink, my mind reeling from the sudden shift in conversation. “A proposal? You mean, like a real one?”

Mark chuckles, his voice deep and rich. “Yes, a real one. I know our engagement began as a facade, but somewhere along the way, I realized I want it to be more than that.” He reaches out, tucking a stray strand of my strawberry-blonde hair behind my ear. “I want you, Quinn. Not just as my fake fiancée, but as my partner, my equal, my wife. We’re starting a family together, and we should do it right, because I’ve failed you in many ways, but the one thing I know I’ll succeed at is being your husband.”

A faint smile tugs at the corners of my lips as I take in the sight of Mark, and then, he

lifts his hand to cradle my cheek before he gets down on one knee. With a racing heart, I try so hard not to fall to the ground, and take him in my arms.

He got down on one knee. For me.

I shake my head, a laugh bubbling up from within me as my entire body trembles. My gaze softens as I reach out and look down on him, gently brushing a strand of hair from his forehead.

Mark's expression turns serious as he pulls out a small box from his pocket and opens it to show me a dazzling diamond unlike any I've ever seen before. When he speaks, I force myself to look away from the ring and to the one man who means the world to me now. "Quinn, I know I've made mistakes, and the timing is far from ideal, but I need you to understand how much you mean to me." He takes a deep breath, his eyes fixed on mine. "From the moment I met you, I knew you were different. You challenged me and pushed me to be better. Somewhere along the way, I fell for you, harder than I ever thought possible."

My heart races as I listen to his words, each one filled with a sincerity that I never thought I'd hear from the infamous Mark Zolotov. "Mark, I..." I start, but he lets the box fall and gently brings the ring to my finger, not quite putting it down.

"Let me finish, please." His voice is soft, almost pleading. "I know I'm not perfect, far from it. But with you by my side, you make me want to be the man you deserve, the man I never thought I could be."

My breath catches in my throat as he slides it on just a little, but not the whole way. "Quinn Desmond, will you marry me? Not just for show, but for real. Because I can't imagine my life without you in it."

Tears well up in my eyes as I stare at the ring, then back at Mark. The man who once

represented everything I despised is now the one I can't imagine living without. "Yes," I whisper, my voice trembling with emotion. "Yes, Mark, I'll marry you."

The smile that breaks out on his face is blinding, and he puts the ring all the way through before jumping up to his feet. He sweeps me into his arms, spinning me around as he laughs with pure joy.

"I love you, Quinn," he murmurs, his forehead resting against mine as he sets me back down. "I know with every fiber of my being that we're meant to be."

I smile, my heart so full it feels like it might burst. "I love you too, Mark. And I'm ready for whatever comes next, as long as we're together."

Epilogue - Mark

One year later

I quietly approach Quinn from behind as she sits at the bar of the private club, watching the couple she set up on their first date. When my hand gently touches her shoulder, she startles and turns to face me, her green eyes wide with surprise.

"Mark! What are you doing here?" She glances around, lowering her voice. "The baby?"

"Shh, it's okay," I reassure her, unable to stop the smile spreading across my face at seeing my beautiful wife. "Lara's watching Natasha for the night. I wanted to come support you."

Quinn's tense shoulders relax, and a pleased grin lights up her face. "I'm so glad you're here." She laces her fingers through mine.

We both turn to watch the young couple at their candlelit table, heads leaning close together as they talk and laugh. They are clearly hitting it off. The man gazes at the woman adoringly while she speaks animatedly—their chemistry is palpable even from here.

“Look at them. You did that, Babe.” I squeeze Quinn's hand proudly. “In the year since we got married, you have had our baby girl and your matchmaking business has really taken off. I'm in awe of you.”

Quinn ducks her head, a slight blush coloring her fair cheeks. “I couldn't have done any of it without your support, though. You've been my rock.”

“No way, Quinn. Your success is all you—your passion, smarts, and tireless work ethic.” I lift her chin to look into her eyes. “Never doubt how incredible you are. I'm just along for the ride.”

She smiles up at me, emerald eyes shining with emotion. “Partners in everything, though, right?”

“Ride or die, Baby,” I confirm with a wink, pulling her in for a lingering kiss, not caring who sees the infamous Bratva bad boy utterly smitten with his wife. She's had me wrapped around her finger from day one.

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We pull apart from the kiss, and my gaze drifts back to the couple as they gaze into each other's eyes, completely enthralled. I smirk and lean close to Quinn's ear. "Fifty bucks says your lovebirds are definitely getting laid tonight."

Quinn whacks my chest, eyebrows raised. "Mark!"

"What? Like you weren't thinking the same." I grab her hand, giving it a playful tug. "You know, speaking of... how about we get out of here ourselves, Mrs. Zolotov?"

Quinn glances back at her clients, biting her lip thoughtfully. Then a mischievous grin spreads across her face as she interlaces her fingers with mine. "What the heck—let's get out of here. I think they'll be just fine without us."

Hand in hand, we slip out the back entrance to where I parked the Porsche. Once settled inside the sleek sports car, I turn to Quinn with a raised brow. "Where to, wifey?"

Quinn looks at me from under her lashes, tracing a fingertip along my thigh. "How long did you say Lara has the baby for again?"

"All night long," I confirm with a wolfish grin, already knowing exactly where her dirty mind is headed.

"In that case..." She leans in close, warm breath fanning my ear as she suggests in a throaty purr, "How about you get us a room at the Ritz-Carlton?"

Lust jolts through me at the naughty promise in her eyes. I cup her face, claiming her

lips in a searing kiss that has us both breathing hard. “Your wish is my command.”

My hands glide over Quinn's curves as the kiss deepens, our tongues tangling hungrily. I can never get enough of her sweet taste. Sliding a hand beneath her skirt, I skim my fingers up the silky skin of her inner thigh, relishing her shuddering exhale against my mouth.

When I reach the damp lace of her panties, I groan low in my throat. “Someone's eager,” I rasp, tracing teasing circles over the fabric. Quinn whimpers and arches into my touch, shameless in her need. I love how responsive she is, how she comes undone for me so beautifully.

“Mark, please,” she pants, pupils blown with desire as she grasps at my shoulders. Her hips rock against my fingers, seeking more friction. I oblige, slipping beneath the scrap of lace to slide a finger through her slick folds.

“So wet for me already, Quinn.” Pride and possessiveness swell in my chest. This stunning, passionate woman is all mine. “Just wait until I get you spread out on that hotel bed. I'm going to worship this sweet little body until you're screaming my name.”

Quinn mewls, head tipping back as I stroke her most sensitive flesh. I can feel her already starting to flutter around my fingers, telling me she's close. But tonight, I want to take my time with her.

Regretfully, I pull my hand back, bringing my fingers to my mouth for a taste. Quinn watches with heavy-lidded eyes, her chest heaving. “Why did you stop?” she demands breathlessly.

Flashing her a wicked smirk, I turn the key in the ignition, the Porsche's engine purring to life. “Patience, Sweetheart. I've got all night to make you fall apart. And I plan to savor every... single... second.”

Quinn's frustrated groan mingles with my low chuckle as I peel out of the parking lot. The night is young and I intend to make the most of every minute alone with my insatiable wife.

THE END