



Samuel

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: Standalone Romance, but please note this short story was previously released in the mafia anthology Sin and Snowflakes as “A Contract Bride For Christmas”.

Samuel Levkin needed a wife.

She was a bridge the powerful alliance he needs.

They were married sight unseen — a simple business transaction.

When they finally meet in person, everything gets very complicated.

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prologue

Natalia

“How can you expect this of me, father?” I ask, tears stinging my eyes. My father is an asshole. I’ve always known it. He’s as cold as the Russian winters he seems intent on dooming me to.

“It’s done. I don’t know why you’re getting so upset.”

“You don’t know why I’m upset? You just arranged my marriage to a man from the Levkin family that I haven’t even met. The Levkin family, Father. You know what Ivan did and my would-be husband was right there with him! Don’t you care for me at all?”

“Of course I do. Samuel has agreed to all my terms. You’ll be treated well. Nothing has changed, Natalia. You just need to sign the agreement and say I do over the video conference call.”

“Video conference call?” What the hell is he talking about now?

“Exactly. You don’t even have to meet him until you finish this foolish school degree that you insist on getting. The two of you will get married over the call. The appropriate paperwork will be signed electronically, and Samuel’s people will make sure everything is filed properly. Once you graduate or whatever, you will fly to Russia.”

I keep my face blank. He thinks me wanting a degree and my own life is ridiculous. To my father, I have one purpose. To broker an alliance and to produce heirs. “In one year, there will be no chance at a life of my own, Father. I’ll be married to a man I don’t know—a man that I don’t even want to know.”

“You will make a good life with him.”

“Are you even listening to me? I don’t want to be married to Samuel Levkin!”

“When did you mistakenly come to the conclusion that you had a choice?”

“Father—”

“Enough Natalia. You are a member of the Navarro family. Your life is not your own. You are doing this for the family. If you keep pushing, I’ll take away any record of your foolish schooling. Then move on to more substantial things. We both know I can do it. Now, I expect you back in my office in one hour. You’re dismissed.”

I stare at the monster I once called my father, then I walk away to prepare for my wedding.

prologue continued

Samuel

I walk out of the gym, invigorated after a rough workout. I’d gone extra this morning, needing to work out the frustration of being here. While I’m not fond of living in Russia, it’s necessary. After everything I’ve done, I deserve it. Hell, I kidnapped Angelina, trying to recapture feelings from our youth. I was tired of being alone. Sometimes I’m scared by the emptiness inside me. I believed Angelina would agree to be my bride. I do love her. I always have. Yet, when I saw her with Victorio, I

knew our time had passed. She belongs with him. She was never meant to be mine. He has her heart.

Today my life resets. It starts with a marriage to a woman I've never met. It's not the life I wanted, but my new alliance with the Navarro family will bring me more power. With the Navarro family backing me, our enemies will think twice before trying to revive the old war.

When my uncle killed my father, worms began crawling out of the woodwork, smelling weakness. It's the nature of the game. Old enemies perceived an opportunity to take over the Levkin empire. My marriage with ...fuck, what was her name? Nora? Nancy? Whatever her name is, in one year, she will come here. I gave myself a year of freedom before I have to play the dutiful husband. Apparently, my bride-to-be also needed time to finish some type of education. We've agreed to getting married over a video conference. Her father says she views this as a business deal. That's good, but I hope we get along. It would make things easier. Our contract has laid everything out, right down to the fact that all affairs must be discreet and approved by one another. This is not what I wanted in a marriage. It is, however, what I will have. I will just have to make the most of it.

1

samuel

Phoenix, Arizona

Six Months Later

"Fuck, Ivan. You've been hit," I hiss as I crouch down to look at my uncle's side. I yank my pullover off, pushing it against the wound. Instantly, deep red color seeps in, devouring the stark white of the material.

“Tell me you ended that motherfucker,” Ivan snarls.

“I got him. The Titans are on clean-up. We need to get you to the hospital.”

“Damn, asshole, you just can’t make anything simple, can you?” E-Z taunts, walking in. He’s the president of the Titans motorcycle club here in Phoenix. He’s built wide and solid as a brick, he’s a laid-back guy with longer hair, and covered in ink. He’s almost too pretty for the fucked-up shit we pay him and his club to do.

“Fuck you,” Ivan mutters, closing his eyes.

“I can have Shadow take you two to the hospital, but I’m pretty sure you’re going to get more attention than you want.”

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“Does the club have a doctor?” I question, still applying pressure on Ivan’s wound.

E-Z rubs the back of his neck, then sighs. “Well, sort of.”

“What does that mean?” I huff.

Ivan can’t keep losing blood like this. I’m going to have to take him to the emergency room. Shit. When I agreed to this harebrained operation, I should have thought to bring along a doctor with my soldiers. Ivan said it would be simple. I was stupid, forgetting rule number one. Nothing is ever simple in this family. We were to break into a safe house where a rival club was keeping two women who were members of the Navarro family. I asked for specifics from the head of the family—Daniel Navarro. I don’t trust him. I made this alliance with his father Juan, but he died of a heart attack just weeks later. Daniel stepped up at once. He didn’t have the issues I had. It seemed people were happier to deal with him rather than Juan. I found that a little confusing. I preferred Juan who did anything to placate me.

Daniel was extremely vague about all of this. He’d only asked for help, saying the girls were family. I’ve been thinking more and more of breaking our alliance—along with my marriage to Natalia. I wouldn’t mind getting that particular monkey off my back. I only agreed to stop the families that wanted to challenge us for power. Things have calmed down. I could handle anyone that might pop up at this point. I don’t need the Navarros. The only thing that makes me hesitant is that once news that the Navarro alliance has ended, idiots may try once more to cause issues.

I would like to end the marriage, however. Hell, the day of our video conference, there was a hurricane, causing video to be unavailable. So, the marriage was over a

phone conference. I've yet to see her. I haven't even requested a picture of the woman or performed a background check. Fuck, I didn't even tell Ivan how I brokered the alliance. He'd lose his shit if he knew I married a woman without having her vetted. I'll eventually tell him, but she's just not worth the effort right now. She's a means to an end—not really important in my life.

“We do, but presently he's passed out back at the club. It's his birthday. The club girls wanted to give him a special treat.”

“Fuck,” Ivan groans, pain evident in his voice—something he would normally never allow. It makes me that much more worried about him. He's been more of a father to me than my real dad ever was.

“The two girls we rescued dressed in scrubs. Maybe they can help,” he suggests.

“Bring them here,” Ivan huffs. He doesn't seem as if he's dying. I hope that means something.

E-Z disappears and a few minutes later one of his men—I think his name is Brick, but I don't care enough to see if I'm right—comes in with the women. They appear to be a mixture of frazzled and pissed off. One is on the shorter side. She's probably around five-four, with curves in all the right places—an hourglass figure designed to make a man ache. The blue doctor scrubs she's wearing cling to her body in all the right ways. Her breasts are phenomenal. They strain against her top, pulling it tight. She's at least a D cup. She has long chocolate-brown hair that flows down her back in soft waves. Her eyes are a beautiful hazel. I could stare into them all day. Unfortunately, I don't think I have that luxury. The other woman is taller, slimmer, yet still has a nice body. She is wearing scrubs, too, only these are black to match her long, straight hair that's pulled back in a high ponytail. She has emerald green eyes. They're filled with anger, making them shine brightly.

“I asked if they were doctors,” the man from E-Z’s club says. “The tall one said not yet. No idea what that means, but maybe she can help.”

“I can’t. He needs to go to the hospital,” the woman argues at once, squatting down beside me to look at Ivan. Her handreaches out, as she presses a couple of fingers against his throat. She goes quiet. I’ve seen enough junk medical dramas on television to figure out she’s checking his pulse.

“Not an option. Can you fix him up?” I respond.

“Here?” she asks, looking at me like I’m insane.

“Yes.”

“Sure, if you want him to die.” I growl, but she doesn’t flinch. “I don’t have medical supplies here. Besides, I’m not permitted by law to do anything without a doctor overseeing me.”

“Do we look like we’re concerned about the law here, Doc?” the MC guy responds. My gaze moves to him and the patch on his cut reads Brick. Guess I got it right.

“I can’t help him without supplies and equipment,” she mutters.

“Bell, we have to do something,” the sexy girl says. I wonder if she’s filled with gratitude and would warm my bed tonight. It’s been over a year since I’ve been with a woman. I was waiting for Angelina and when that blew up, I got married. I don’t owe her fidelity, but I didn’t actively look for a woman either.

“Are you one of the idiots in charge?” The snappy girl responds. There’s clearly no gratitude in her. She seems pissed as hell. I won’t risk asking her to warm my bed. She’s pretty, but with her attitude, she’d probably bite a man’s dick off.

“I’m the one in charge. Well, me and the man needing treatment. If you could dial down the attitude, it’d be good. Especially considering he was shot trying to rescue your ungrateful ass.” She narrows her eyes at me, making me smirk. “Keep trying me. I could always turn you back over to the dickwads that kidnapped you to begin with.”

“I might prefer them, but unfortunately, you killed them all. Now, are we going to continue to argue between us to see if your dick is bigger than mine, or are you taking him to the hospital?”

“You have a dick hiding under those scrubs, Doc?”

“Mine might be figurative, but I’d be willing to bet I have bigger balls than you,” she challenges.

I hear Ivan laugh in the background, but it ends in a cough. Setting aside my annoyance, I concentrate on getting him help. I look over at Brick. “Get the bitch to give you a list of supplies she’ll need to patch Ivan up. Send Alex and Dimitri out to get it all. Tell them to be quick meet us back at your clubhouse.”

“Does your doctor have some medical supplies there?” the woman interjects.

“Usual shit. Bed, general medicine. He’s patched a few of us up over the years. Dug out a few bullets.”

“Let’s get over there. Maybe we’ll be good. Still send the twins out, though,” I respond, looking at the woman. She’s smart to ask that question.

“E-Z is already pulling our men out. He’ll meet you there.”

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I nod. “Let’s go ladies,” I mutter.

“Call me bitch again and you’ll be the one needing medical care,” she hisses, walking past me.

I don’t bother responding. I just need her to patch up Ivan, then I’ll send her and her scrumptious little friend back to Daniel. Although I might grab a taste of little Miss D cup first.

“Isabel doesn’t mean anything. We’re really glad you rescued us. She’s just upset,” her friend explains, while Brick leads two of the men that came with them over to lift Ivan.

She’s gorgeous, sweet and quiet—just my type. Angelina’s quiet personality is what always drew me to her to begin with.

“What’s your name, beautiful?”

She smiles at me, blushing. “Natalie.”

“Stop hitting on my private nurse, nephew. Natalie, how are you at giving sponge baths?” Ivan purrs—the asshole. I don’t stop him, but I might. I wonder if this is my would-be-wife. Surely Daniel would have told me if I was here to save his sister. I shake my head. I’m just indulging in wishful thinking. There’s no way Natalie is my wife.

I couldn’t be that lucky.

samuel

“Is it done correctly?” I ask. She carries herself like royalty. As I watch her, I can tell she’s really fucking good. She speaks to Ivan with every move she makes. I can tell she’s worried about his pain. She takes off her gloves and turns to stare at me, clearly upset. At this point, I’m pretty sure I annoy her just by breathing. I hate to break it to her, but the feeling is mutual.

“I have a name, you know,” she mutters, tossing her gloves in a trashcan.

“Bell, I heard it.”

“Isabel. Only family calls me Bell. That is not you.” Before I can respond, Ivan chuckles. It’s amazing to me he’s even trying to laugh right now.

Isabel moves at once to check on Ivan. “You crazy fool, are you trying to tear yourself open after I’ve just sewn you shut?” she mutters, her skilled hand gliding over my uncle with a gentleness I wouldn’t expect.

“I like the fire in you,” Ivan answers.

She puffs out an annoyed breath and shakes her head. “You like Natalie’s boobs. I don’t know if I should be flattered or relieved you like my attitude but barely look at my boobs.” If I hadn’t seen the twitch of her lips, I would have missed the humor behind her words.

“I can’t apologize for being a man who loves tits. Yours are good, too. You just hide them with bigger clothing,” he drawls.

“Stop flirting, Ivan. Daniel won’t appreciate you hitting on one of his cousins.”

“Cousins?” she questions, looking at me in surprise.

“Daniel said you were family. I assumed you were a cousin. Am I wrong?”

“I’m not his cousin.”

I nod. “So, you’re family because you are a friend to Natalie. It doesn’t matter. You fall under the Navarro family.”

“Hmm ...”

She doesn’t seem impressed with my response. The woman may have talent, but she is way too headstrong and opinionated. I like my women far more docile. “Where is the beautiful Natalie?”

“One of the cute bikers, I think he said his name was Claw, took her to the room E-Z provided for us,” she murmurs.

“Didn’t she need to assist you?”

“Natalie? No. She’s a CNA, but she doesn’t need to work. We met for lunch the day we were kidnapped, or we wouldn’t have been together,” Isabel explains.

“Bad luck for you,” I murmur.

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“Bad luck?”

“If you hadn’t been with a member of the Navarro family, you wouldn’t have been involved,” I point out.

“Oh,” she says, surprised. “I guess you’re right. Although, it was a good thing for Ivan that I was.”

“Averygood thing,” Ivan agrees, winking at her—making her giggle.

“You’re not what I expected,” she says, studying him.

“You’ve heard of me?”

“Ivan Levkin? Hasn’t everyone? I might not be related to Natalie, but I’m aware of your reputation.”

“I don’t see fear in your eyes,” my uncle responds.

“That’s because I don’t feel afraid. I’ve known bad men. I mean, Iamfriends with Natalie. You don’t give me the same vibe.”

“I can be very bad,” he says with a smirk.

This time the woman laughs out loud. “I bet you can.”

“If you’ve heard of my uncle, you must have heard of our whole family,” I point out.

“What’s your name?” she asks, giving me her attention.

“Samuel,” I respond.

I expect some sort of acknowledgement. Yet, she stares at me blankly. “Never heard of you,” she says with a shrug.

Ivan cackles, before hissing out a muffled, “Fuck.”

“I told you not to pull at your stitches. I don’t suppose I could convince you to take some pain meds so you can sleep?”

“That depends,” Ivan answers. “Would you crawl up here and rest with me?”

“If I agree, can I give you a pain shot?” she asks, shocking the hell out of me.

Ivan is not the type of man a girl like Isabel would flirt with. Or at least, I don’t think he is. She’s apparently studying to be a doctor. It’s not like she’s part of the Bratva or an allying family looking for power and position. Maybe she’s just looking to get laid. I push away that thought. She’s not my concern.

“Yes.”

I watch as Isabel stands and goes to a cabinet, grabbing a small bottle and a syringe. Ivan pats the bed for her, but she shakes her head no. “Shot first,” she chuckles. Ivan dutifully holds out his arm. She sinks the needle and grins down at him. “Now, when you wake up, you might be a tad upset with me.”

“Why’s that?” he asks.

“Because you’re going to be asleep before I count to ten,” she quips with a wink.

“You’re sn-sneaky.” My uncle’s words are already slurring.

“You have no idea, I.T.”

“I-I ... I.T.?”

“Ivan the Terrible,” she supplies, her whole face lit up in humor. “Sweet dreams, big guy.”

“What did you give him?” I ask, stepping close to peer down at my uncle.

“Nothing bad, I promise. He’ll be fine. I.T. will probably sleep for the rest of the night, which he needs. The stitches will dissolve on their own. He should be good to go. You just need to make sure he takes it easy.”

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“Thank you,” I respond, giving her my attention.

“No need. Just make sure none of this leaks out. I will not lose my future medical career because you were too asinine to take I.T. to the hospital.”

“It won’t. Ivan’s not going to like that nickname.”

“Odd, I think he’ll love it,” she argues.

I shrug. This woman is just weird. “I think I’ll go check on Natalie. I have some questions for her.”

“No need. I’m going to go in there and say goodbye. She’s probably sleeping. I’ll wake her up and send her your way. I’m going to get Claw or one of the others to take me to the hospital to see how screwed I am for missing rounds the last few days.”

“You can’t leave. Daniel wants us to bring the both of you to his home.”

“No need. I’ll call him. As you said, it’s not like I’m really family. You can deliver Natalie to him.”

“I’ll need to confirm that with him.”

She huffs. “Fine. Hand me your phone.”

I reach into my pocket and get it, unlocking the screen. She punches in the number

and it's clear that she knows the number by heart. Hmm ... I think I was wrong. She is probably fucking Daniel. I wonder how he'll react to the knowledge that she's been flirting with Ivan. I think I'll make sure he knows. It'll make me happy to bring her down a peg or two. Isabel is way too full of herself.

"Daniel? It's Izzy. Yeah, they got Natalie and me. I want one of the bikers to take me to check in with the hospital, but—What was your name again?" she asks.

"Samuel," I growl.

"Samuel seems to think you wouldn't like it if I left. Can you tell him to let me leave?" She's silent for a bit. "Yeah, that's right. I'll meet you for breakfast. You, too. I'm going to switch you to speaker now."

"Samuel?"

"Yes, Daniel," I respond, taking my phone back, annoyed as fuck listening to her. It's clear that she has a personal relationship with him. Does she think it's okay to flirt with Ivan like she was? "I'm not sure it's a good idea to let Isabel leave."

"She's fine. You killed the men that were holding her and Natalie, yes?"

"Of course, but?—"

"Isabel will be fine. I'll send men to meet her at the hospital. I appreciate your help."

"What about your sister?" The phone goes quiet.

"My sister?"

"Your sister," I confirm. "I'd like to spend some time with her. I'm sure you can

understand why.”

“Isabel?”

“Yes, Daniel?”

“If my sister wants to stay, that’s up to her.”

“I understand. See you soon.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Izzy,” he sighs.

“Of course I do,” she answers. Before I can question Daniel further, the bastard hangs up.

“I’ll send Nat out to you, Mr. Levkin.” Without another word, she walks off. I barely resist the urge to follow her ...and I don’t even know why.

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samuel

I smile when I hear the hesitant knock on the door. “Come in,” I call out, knowing only Natalie would knock so gently. I’ve been expecting her since Isabel left about half an hour ago. I’m in the room E-Z gave me when I got here. Mikhail—my other uncle—is sending men for us within the hour. I told him not to be in a hurry. It’s important for Ivan to rest as much as he can. I want to focus energy on my wife—who apparently doesn’t know who I am. Surely if she did, she would have approached me on her own. I’ve been biding my time. She’s gorgeous, being married to her won’t be a hardship by any stretch of the imagination. She seems calm and free of drama, unlike her friend. I shake my head, pushing thoughts of Isabel away. The girl is infuriating. There’s no other way to explain it. I need calm in my life. There’s no way Isabel would bring it to me. She’d constantly push my buttons. That might sound fun on the surface, but it’s not what I like.

“You wanted to see me?” Natalie asks, her cheeks flushed red. She seems uncomfortable, but there’s a gleam in her eye. She’s interested in me. I can tell by the way she’s quietly sizing me up when she thinks I’m not noticing. It also doesn’t escape my attention how she’s brushed her hair until it shines. She looks beautiful. Isabel could take some notes from her. Although the doctor did look quite beautiful. There’s something to be said about a woman who doesn’t try to impress anyone with her looks. She’s naturally gorgeous.

“Hey, Natalie. I was thinking it’d be a good time for the two of us to get to know one another.”

“It would?” she questions, walking deeper into the room.

“Of course it would. Come sit with me. I think it’s past time the two of us spoke, don’t you?”

“I didn’t think you would want to talk to me to be honest.”

“Why? You’re beautiful. Surely you know that.”

“You think so?” she asks, looking shy and scrumptious. She nervously holds her hands in her lap. The movement causes her breasts to push together, deepening her cleavage which is exposed in the V-neck of her top. I never thought scrubs could be sexy, but she might make me change my mind. Come to think of it, the doctor looked pretty good in scrubs, too. She looked good enough to catch Ivan’s attention. Ivan enjoys women, but they come to him. He rarely gives one attention first. He never flirts either. It’s not his style. He was flirting heavily with the doctor.

She sits beside me. I throw my arm over the back of the sofa. It shouldn’t feel awkward but fuck, it does. Part of me is wishing I hadn’t asked for her to come see me. It’s probably because I really resent being married. I instigated it, but I don’t have to be happy about it.

“I do,” I answer, remembering what she asked. “Do you know who I am, Natalie?”

“Should I?”

I smile. She seems so innocent and unsure of herself. She reminds me of Angelina. Yet, somehow, it’s not as appealing as I thought it would be ...

“I’m Samuel Levkin, sweetheart,” I finally respond. Her eyes dilate. I proceed to bend down, capturing her mouth in a kiss. Our tongues slide against one another and when she whimpers, giving herself over to pleasure—I ignore the fact that this feels all wrong. I might not want to be married, but I am.

I can't go back.

4

natalia

“Want me to stick around until Navarro's men show up, Doc?”

I grin up at Claw. He really is cute. Too bad my asshole father couldn't have married me off to someone like him. I know that would never work, though. My father wouldn't allow someone like Claw to get close to me. Maybe that's why I find him so appealing.

“Do you like me so much that you can't stand to see me walk away?” I reply, grinning.

“You're damn easy on the eyes,” he replies, making my smile deepen.

“Are you flirting with me?”

“What if I were, Doc?”

I can't deny the tingling feeling that zips through me at the idea of this sexy biker being interested in me. My gaze rakes over his blond hair, wavy and wild, like some eighties rock god. His tight jeans, thermal top, and leather vest barely contain his massive, well-defined body. He has ink anywhere you look. I've never been a big tattoo girl, but something about Claw's makes me want to lick him from head to toe. Sadly, I can't let myself go there—yet. “I'd tell you I'm not free, but I'm hoping I will be soon. If you're still interested once that happens, you'll know where to find me.”

“I’m not seeing a ring on your finger, Doc.”

“Nope, and you won’t. I’m kind of married in name only. Only met the jerk once and let’s just say, neither one of us was impressed with the other.”

“Then, he’s a fool.”

“I agree with you,” I murmur, placing my hand flat on his chest while leaning up to kiss his cheek. I pat my hand against him, keeping my fingers over his heart. “Here’s hoping we meet again, Claw.”

I turn to walk away, stuttering to a stop when I feel his hand swat my ass. “Take care, Doc,” he chuckles with naughty smirk.

I shake my head, as I walk into the familiar chaos of the hospital. I call out some hellos when people spot me. In thirty minutes, I have a meeting with my supervisor and Phillip Pope, who is the Director of Emergency Medicine. I’m hoping I won’t catch flack for being MIA. Honestly, I’m not sure you can call what I’ve been through kidnapping. They fed us takeout, and other than being locked in a bedroom for the last five days, we were fine. They were trying to get my brother to agree to let them into his territory.

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Daniel is a good man, very different from my father. He is, however, a Navarro—and you don't fuck with him. I'm not sure why he called my would-be husband in. I'm not thrilled about that. When he saw me, I was afraid that he'd try to claim me. I didn't want that. My residency still has a couple months remaining. I was hoping I could talk him into letting me remain in the US. I refuse to live in Russia.

I shouldn't have worried. The asshole has no idea who I am. I knew him immediately. It became clear that he didn't bother to discover what I looked like since our marriage. For some inexplicable reason, it pissed me off watching the way he practically slobbered when looking at Natalie, while dismissing me. I mean, I know men fawn over Natalie. Still, I'm not exactly chopped liver. I'm fairly confident about who I am. Maybe that's why Claw flirting with me felt so good. Watching my so-called husband eye-fucking another woman was a blow to my ego. Even if I don't want him, I dreamed he'd one day get down on his knees and beg me to be his once he got a look at me.

I have friends who have been a part of arranged marriages. It's not that uncommon in my family and among our allies. Still, not a one of them has gotten married over a damn phone. In each case, the man at least tried to get to know the woman they were marrying. Some made the marriage work, others shared an open marriage—but in each case, energy was put forth to make the union work. I know myself enough to realize, I couldn't handle an open marriage. Yet, I would have given my all to make the marriage work if the man in question was worth it. Tonight made it clear that Samuel wasn't.

The truly surprising thing was that I liked Ivan Levkin. I've heard the horror stories about the man. I've no doubt they're true. He was a lot different in person, however.

He reminded me of my brother, and I can appreciate the fact that he's probably one person with those he cares about and another with his enemies. My world is not black and white. I live in a world of morally gray.

As I make it to the locker room, I undress, slipping on the spare scrubs in my locker. I don't know if Phillip will let me work, but I'm hoping he will. After being away from the hospital, I'm itching to get back to it. Medicine is like a drug for me. I'm addicted to the adrenaline and the high I get when I save someone's life. That's why I chose emergency trauma and medicine.

As I quickly brush my hair, then push it back up in a messy bun, my thoughts return to Samuel. I enjoyed toying with him—taking stabs at his obviously huge ego. I thought about staying longer, but I didn't want to risk him getting a clue and putting two and two together. Before I left, I had a conversation with Natalie. I know she'll keep my secret. She's an opportunist. We're work friends. The two of us are nothing alike. She knows how powerful Samuel is. If Natalie thinks she can get his attention, she'll do whatever it takes. The only reason she wanted to be friends to begin with was to get to my brother.

Samuel's probably in bed with Natalie right now. It shouldn't bother me, but it does. It's probably because of our fake marriage. It can't be anything else. He clearly didn't like me and if I didn't know who he was, I sure as hell wouldn't think twice about him.

I push all thoughts of him out of my head. Let him get lost in Natalie's charms. He'll be contacting Daniel soon demanding an annulment, and I'll grant it while giggling like a little kid.

Samuel doesn't want me, and the feeling is freaking mutual.

samuel

It's a good kiss. Some would say spectacular. I wouldn't. I can't explain why either. It's just the way I feel. The kiss fell flat. It's not what I want. When the image of Isabel flashes through my mind, my body recoils. Or maybe that's because Natalie's hand has found my crotch and she's rubbing against my cock. I'm a man, so I'd be lying if the thought wasn't there to give in. Still, we're married. Doesn't she want to talk before we go further? Plus, she doesn't know me. Why the fuck would that bother me? I've been without a woman for a while. What the hell is going on with me?

"What are you doing?" I ask, pulling away and barely resisting the urge to wipe my lips off, trying to get rid of her taste.

"I want you," she murmurs, pressing against me. "When Isabel said you wanted to see me, I thought you felt the same. Am I wrong?" Her voice sounds so sweet and innocent. It's the complete opposite of the lust in her eyes. She should be the perfect woman for me. Christ.

"We don't need to rush this, Natalie. We have the rest of our lives together."

"The rest of our lives?" she asks, her eyes round. Something flashes in them I don't understand.

"Marriage is forever, Natalie. At least it is in my book."

"Marriage? You want me to be your wife ..."

"I realize we didn't start out in the way a woman dreams of meeting a husband, but I think the two of us can make a go of our union. Don't you?" I prompt. Yet, even as I'm talking to her, I want to end this conversation. The deal I made with the Navarro family feels even more wrong.

“I can’t believe this is happening. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted,” Natalie gushes. I fight the urge to roll my eyes. She didn’t want this marriage any more than I did. Hell, she’s the one that put in the stipulation that she wanted to finish school first. Seriously, Isabel said Natalie was a CNA. I’m no expert, but I think classes are taught through vocational school that don’t require exorbitant amounts of time. Her father said she’d invested years into this career.

I’m starting to feel like this damn family has played me for a fool since day one.

“Why don’t you go back to the room you and Isabel were given. I’ll have my men come collect you when we’re ready to leave.”

“Do you know how long it will be?”

“I—”

“I only ask because Brick mentioned there’s a party here. I was thinking of going.”

I school my features—it’s not easy. “You’ve been kidnapped and held prisoner. Are you sure you’re up to a party?”

“I’d like to unwind. You could join me,” she hums, curling her fingers into the fresh shirt that I borrowed. I’m not sure who it belonged to originally. It’s a little big but fits relatively well. E-Z brought it to me. “I hear the Titans’ parties get a little wild. Might be fun for us to enjoy together.”

“Wild?” I repeat, and I can’t keep the sternness out of my voice. What the hell is going on here?

“Yes. A coworker of mine usually comes to a couple every month. You wouldn’t believe what she tells me goes on during them.”

“And you want to take part?”

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“Yes, I mean, obviously I’d want to share those experiences with you,” she qualifies.

At this point, I’m pissed, shocked, and numerous other emotions that I can’t name. I just stare at the woman that I’m married to. I’m wishing we could’ve remained strangers.

“Go to your room. We’ll be leaving before the party starts,” I bark. If my voice is too stern, I don’t give a damn. I must rethink everything. I don’t need the Navarro alliance any longer. Perhaps I can talk with Daniel and offer to keep our pact in place but annul the marriage completely. I’ll call him later to discuss our options.

That’ll be the first thing on my list tomorrow morning.

6

natalia

“It’s about time you drag yourself home,” my brother growls when I walk into his office.

I collapse on the sofa, throwing my arms over my head, shielding my eyes. My head is pounding. It’s ten in the morning. I got excited when they agreed to let me work last night, not holding the week I missed against me—well, not too much. I will be jumping through hoops. I get the graveyard shift for at least the next month. I’m also scheduled alongside the grouchiest trauma surgeon around. No one wants to work with him. Still, they didn’t kick me to the curb, so I’ll deal.

“I worked all night. Cut me some slack.”

“I know. Tayko told me.”

“Tayko’s going to be pissed at you for putting him on me. He spent all night at the nurses’ station bored out of his mind.”

“I pay him very well. He’ll live,” Daniel dismisses. I’m glad I have my head covered so he can’t see me rolling my eyes.

“That wasn’t my point.”

He exhales. Even though I can’t see, I feel the weight of Daniel’s stare. I force my tired body to sit up. He’s pinching the bridge of his nose as he stares at me. I’m clearly annoying him. I do it often, so I recognize the look.

“You were kidnapped, Isabel. It’s my job to protect you. For some unknown reason, I love you.”

I can’t help but giggle. “I love you, too,” I reply. My brother is the only member of my family who has ever shown me warmth, acceptance, and care. Daniel has been everything to me. He’s the complete opposite of my father, and I am very thankful for that.

“Is that why you’re always giving me headaches?” he asks.

“That’s just an added bonus,” I joke. “I don’t see why I need a guard. I don’t believe Ivan or Sam would be sloppy enough to let any of my captors live.”

“You’re right, but there are others. They just took care of the belly of the snake—not the head.”

“Are you trying to tell me, brother dear, that you’re not already dealing with the snake?”

“You’re annoying, you know that?”

“It’s a family trait. You are taking care of them, correct?”

He curses under his breath, while leaning back in his chair. “I sent Ferry after them. It’ll be done by nightfall.”

I scrunch my nose at the mention of Ferry. His name is actually Ferrin. He’s an assassin for hire. I’ve never met him. I don’t want to. My job is to save lives, his is not. In fact, that’s why my brother calls him Ferry. It’s short for Ferryman—the Greek figure who delivered people to hell. Just the mention of him gives me the creeps. There are rumors he used to actually be a priest or something. Then, after his son was murdered, he took matters into his own hands, became a vigilante, hunted down the killer, and ended his life. Now he’s basically a murder-for-hire kind of guy.

“So, I’m all good. You should let Tayko have time off to pull wings off butterflies or something.”

“You’re not all good. I just received a very irritated phone call from Samuel Levkin.”

I ignore the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach when I hear that name. If Natalie screwed this up, I may just hire the Ferryman to come get her. “What does that have to do with me? Samuel was more than glad to say goodbye to me yesterday.”

“Oh, I figured that out on your phone call yesterday.”

I don’t bother to hide my chuckle. “Thanks for holding your tongue, by the way.”

“You realize if he finds out that you’re his actual wife, we’re going to have an irate lead of the Bratva on our doorstep?”

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“Hm ... I don’t think so. He doesn’t like me. This is really a win-win. What did he call about?” I ask innocently.

“He wants to talk to me about maintaining our alliance but annulling your marriage to him.”

“Shut up! Are you serious?”

“You’re such a kid sometime. I should ship you to Italy to complete your training in the hospitals there,” Daniel complains.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time. I love Italy. In fact, I’ll even agree to take Tayko with me if you do that.”

“Never going to happen. You terrify Tayko and he’s never afraid. He once took down a black bear with no other weapon than his hands.”

“Pfft ... I didn’t do anything.”

“Except warn him that if he didn’t back off, you were going to sedate him when he least expected it.”

I shrug. “Some men would look forward to the rest I was offering.”

“Then, you proceeded to tell him how you knew the quickest way to slice him open, wrap your hand around numerous vital organs and give him so much pain that it would either kill him or make him pass out after praying for death.”

“I was just sharing some of my medical knowledge. He overreacted,” I lie, while sniffing as if Tayko is just a big wimp.

“I don’t suppose you plan on attending my meeting with Samuel Levkin on Wednesday?”

“Nope! I’m going to be working doubles at the hospital. I’ll pack up tomorrow and spend Wednesday night working, then crash on an ER cot Thursday morning.”

“I’m not stupid Izzy. When the truth comes out, Levkin will be out for blood. We’ve led the man to believe you are that whore you insist on hanging around with.”

“Now, brother, you’ve probably had as many lovers as she’s had,” I point out helpfully.

“Doubtful. In any case, I can confirm that I’ve never had more than two lovers at one time. I believe Natalie’s record is eight.”

My hands slap over my ears in response. “I don’t want to hear that!” I screech. “Damn it, Daniel! I do not need the mental picture of my brother getting it on with two women at once.”

“Who said it was two women? There are many ways to have threesomes, Izzy,” he replies with a lazy smile.

My eyes go wide as I look at my brother. “But you’re not into men.”

“No, but I’m into pleasing my partner in whatever way she enjoys. Some women like a little more attention.”

“Whatever you say, Daniel. You shouldn’t slut-shame Natalie then. Threesomes

aren't that far away from an eightsome. Actually, I guess you could call it an octasome."

"The word you're looking for, dear sister, is orgy. There's no intimacy or tenderness needed. It's just fucking."

"Well, anyway, let Samuel believe he's calling off the wedding to Natalie. Get him to sign the appropriate paperwork and I'll do the same. This whole marriage can be behind me. I'll finally begin living my life without having a black cloud hanging over my head."

"What happens when he figures out that you are his wife, and he was lied to?"

"How could he? He doesn't know you are aware he's been talking to Natalie thinking she's me. If anything, he may get mad at me, but it will be done. The worst that can happen is he'll forfeit the alliance. He's not going to declare war on the Navarro family. Since you've taken over, your support has doubled. You have just as many allies—if not more—than he does, Daniel."

"You're playing with fire, Izzy, and it is going to get you burned."

"I'm a doctor. I can deal with burns. Just get me out of this horrible marriage I'm in. I'll make sure I'm gone Wednesday."

"What happens if he brings Natalie and tries to make her sign the documents?"

"Shit. I didn't think of that." Daniel shakes his head. His facial expression leaves little doubt that he thinks I'm insane. If I am, being married to a stranger made me that way. "I'll call Natalie. She'll play along if for no other reason than she wants Samuel single so she can sink her hooks into him."

“Did I tell you that you’re playing with fire?” Daniel asks, exasperated.

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“You did, but look at the bright side, brother.”

“What would that be?”

“She’ll finally leave you alone,” I giggle. This time Daniel joins in with my laughter. I really love my brother. He has always hated the fact that our father bartered me out to the Levkins. He’s only agreeing to all of this because he wants me to live the life that I’ve always dreamed of. It also helps that he doesn’t want me living in Russia. My brother wants me close by. Truthfully, I feel the same. It has always been the two of us against the world.

I never want to give that up.

7

samuel

“Sammy, I don’t have time for this tonight. I have plans.”

“We have to do it now. If you’re going to work Wednesday, it’s the only alternative.”

“We can do it another time. I have plans tonight,” Natalie huffs. “Drop me off at my apartment. If you hurry, we’ll have time for me to show you how good we are together.”

I barely hide my grunt. This woman has sex on the brain. That sounds more entertaining than it’s turned out to be. She’s beautiful, but I swear her brain is empty.

If I have to have her tied to me for life, I might slit my throat. That woman is the last person I'd want as a wife. The very last.

"Sammy! Are you even listening?"

"For God's sake, Natalie. I've told you my name is Sam or Samuel."

"You know, you're starting to be a drag. I need a man who is fun. There needs to be more than just money and power. I want to live my life to the fullest. You need to watch how you deal with me, or this whole marriage you have in mind is out the window. I have more men in my life than you. You're going to lose me if you keep it up, and baby, you don't want to lose the fun I can give you. You and I together would be the things dreams are made of. I'd give everything I have to make sure you're happy and I do mean everything."

"I know why I agreed to our marriage, but wouldn't you like to at least see what we have in common? You must have certain things you want from our relationship." I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I guess I'm trying to figure out where things went so wrong. I should have had Natalia checked into. Ivan is going to have my ass over this. At the time, it wasn't important. I was grieving Angelina. I had the family and our position to worry about. That's all that mattered. I mistakenly thought that Juan, and even Daniel, would follow the old rules and keep his daughter chaste until she was in my care. Hell, even if she wasn't a virgin before the contract, I at least thought they would keep her from men after signing it. I seriously doubt Natalie going one day without someone in her bed.

That's another thing that bothers me. She has a beautiful name, Natalia. Gorgeous. Yet, she shortens it to Natalie. Who does that? This marriage won't work. I'm going to end it tonight. I keep my attention on the road. I haven't told Natalie the real reason for being here. I was worried that if I told her, she wouldn't come with me. I don't suppose she needed to, but I didn't want her in my home

anymore. Okay, so the Levkin compound. It's not mine.

I've enjoyed my time here in the US, I've missed it. Russia is nice, but I don't want to live there. I need to talk with my uncles. That will happen, but not until I get this marriage dissolved. I'm hoping I can do that without letting Ivan and the others know what an idiot I was.

"Sammy? Did you call Daniel and tell him we're coming? He doesn't like surprises. Trust me, I know. There was this one time I tried. I dressed up in a little French maid costume. You know the kind? I decided to dust his office. I was strategically bent over his desk when he opened the door?—"

"What the fuck? Jesus, just shut up. What kind of family are you people? I don't want another fucking word out of your mouth. We're almost there. When we arrive, I'm giving you back to Daniel. This marriage shit is done!"

Fury rolls through me. I see the fear that hits Natalie's face, but I don't give a damn. I want her to be scared. I'm about two seconds away from ripping out her damn tongue.

I drive to the gate, waiting for the guard. I'm glad I drove my personal car. All I need is for my driver to hear this conversation. I'd never live it down. "Samuel Levkin, I'm bringing Natalie back," I snap at the guard. He turns away and I can tell he's talking to someone through his earpiece to get clearance. If Daniel denies me, I swear to God, I'll ram my car through his front door. The man slaps my hood. "Go on up."

The minute I come to a stop, Natalie bails out. She starts to run back toward the gate. I can see it. I don't know where the fuck she's going to go, but it's not happening. I clamp my hand on her upper arm, basically dragging her to the front door.

"Not a word from you," I warn her.

Her eyes dilate. The fear I saw moments ago intensifies. I should feel like a bastard, but right now, I'm just glad she's not talking.

A man opens the door, and I drag Natalie through the entryway. "Where's Daniel?" I snap. Visions of the woman who was supposed to be my wife, bent over the man's desk half-naked dance in my head. I don't know what kind of fucked incestual relationship these two have, but I'll not be a part of it.

"Samuel? What's the meaning of this? Our meeting is not until tomorrow," Daniel gripes, coming down the stairway.

"We're going to have this out tonight. Then, you can have your sister back." I look at Daniel's face. There's something going on behind his eyes. Before I can say another word, however, one of the last women I ever expected to see comes through the front door.

Isabel.

Natalie and I are standing away from the staircase, almost to the area where I assumed Daniel's office was. So, she doesn't see us immediately. I'm glad. She must know what kind of woman Natalie is. Hell, she's probably been laughing at me this whole time. She immediately looks up at him, laughing.

"Daniel, you should tell your latest woman not to be so eager. The car door is open," she laughs. Apparently, everyone here is fucked-up. If Isabel is having a sexual relationship with Daniel, it's clear that it is an open one. I shake my head. "I'm going to go up and pack a bag. I'll be working at the hospital for the next two days and staying there. You can have the house all to yourself, brother dear," she laughs as she starts jogging up the stairs.

I just stare up at them—not quite sure I believe what's happening. Is she

Natalia?What the actual fuck?

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“Izzy,” her fucking brother mumbles.

“Daniel?” she asks.

“We have guests,” he says, and she turns around, finally seeing us.

Suddenly, my mood improves exponentially. I watch as the color drains from her face. I even smile as I look into the eyes of my wife. She’s going to pay for this and I’m going to enjoy every damn second of it.

8

natalia

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

Why didn’t I just keep working tonight? I had the chance. I thought I was being so smart coming home to pack. I wanted to make sure that I was nowhere around when Samuel came by. Now, look at what a mess I’m in. My eyes are fixed on Samuel, not knowing what to say. I’m pretty sure I look like an idiot with my mouth open. I can’t seem to move. I’m caught in the evil stare of my so-called husband.

“Well, hello there—wife,” Samuel practically purrs.

I snap my mouth shut, narrowing my eyes at him. “Hello, asshole,” I scoff. That should piss him off more.

Instead, his smile deepens. He lets go of Natalie and starts walking toward me. I take a step back as he comes forward. I finally hit the railing of the stairs way before Samuel stops. He's standing right in front of me and I'm doing my best not to make the situation worse by knocking that arrogant look off his face.

"I think it's time you and I get to know one another, Natalia."

"My name is Isabel. The only person who called me Natalia was my idiot sperm donor." There's a look on his face that I can't decipher. It's gone so quickly that I must've imagined it.

"Are you off work tonight, Shnookums?"

"Donotcall me that. If you're wanting to put out the terms for our divorce, then I can be free for that easily."

"Now, Pookie, why would I be here to talk about a divorce? We're married. That'sforever."

"You don't like me. I like you even less. Divorce is the best option."

"Danny, he hurt my arm. Will you be a doll and take me to the emergency room to get it looked at?"

"Izzy, look at Natalie's arm."

"But Danny!" she whines.

"God, how could you find that attractive?" I mutter under my breath.

"I was mostly looking at her tits before I realized her brain was vacant," he responds.

His voice is quiet. I doubt Natalie could hear it over her incessant whining, but I still shoot him a dirty look. “I think the two of you would make a terrific couple.”

“I could tell by the way you let me believe she was you,” he snaps back. “Do you realize I could have taken her to bed. You would have been the reason I committed adultery.”

“Oh, please. I doubt you’ve been saving yourself these last six months. Besides, we can draw up the paperwork tonight to start our annulment. You’ll be good to drag Natalie back to your house and tie her to your bed.”

He just stares at me. “Daniel?” he calls out to my brother, his eyes, never leaving mine.

“Let’s go to my office to talk. Tayko, I will need you to take Natalie home.”

I giggle when I hear my bodyguard grunt. He hates Natalie. “This is your fault, Izzy,” he mutters as he passes me.

“I’ll make it up to you. I’ll get Reva’s phone number for you,” I offer quietly.

Tayko stops and looks back at me. “Not enough.”

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I laugh, despite being terrified of meeting with Samuel. “I’ll also give you her favorite flower and which chocolate she loves to the point she says it’s better than sex,” I add in my sing-song voice.

“That’s because she hasn’t had sex with me yet,” he mutters. “Let’s go Natalie.”

“Who is that?” Samuel asks, his hand grabbing mine. I try to pull away, but he just holds me tighter. Jerk.

“My bodyguard,” I exhale. “Let’s get this over with.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Samuel agrees, leading me toward my brother’s office. I frown, obstinately thinking that he doesn’t have to sound so happy to get rid of me.

“Amen. The sooner we end this, the better for all of us,” I practically growl, yanking harder on my hand. Samuel smirks down at me and refuses to let me go.

“Sammy! If you get all this taken care of, you can call me. Maybe me, you, and Danny could have some fun.”

I don’t miss the way Samuel’s body goes tight. “If she calls me Sammy again, I’m going to rip her tongue out of her mouth and wrap it around her neck.”

“Yikes,” I gasp, looking up at him. I don’t think he’s joking at all. Perhaps he’s more like Ivan than I realized. I liked Ivan once I met him. Samuel, however, has been a grade-A ass since the beginning. The sooner we get this annulment done, the better.

He leads me over to a seat in front of Daniel's desk. My brother is already in his chair. I don't miss the look he's giving me. It's clearly a silent warning to watch my mouth and not alienate Samuel further. I roll my eyes, but I give a slight nod. I don't want to make trouble. If it gets me free, I'll be a good little girl. I'll smile pretty and nod—all the while biting my tongue to keep from telling Samuel Levkin what an arrogant jackass he is. I just hope I don't have to bite so hard that it's in two pieces when this meeting is done.

9

samuel

"Is there a reason you brought that woman to my house, Samuel?" Daniel asks.

I look at Isabel, who just smiles at me like she doesn't have a care in the world. There's a fire inside of her that shines through her eyes. I noticed it before—even as she was annoying the shit out of me. Now, it's all I can see. It challenges me. I grin at her. I'm rewarded as a skittering of fear moves over her features.

That's it, darling wife, be very afraid.

"To get rid of her. It seems I was misled as to who she was," I respond, looking once more at Isabel. The woman doesn't even blink. She just stares at me. I'm starting to think this might be fun. "Once Natalie began telling me how she dressed up as a French maid to clean your ...desk, I knew you'd like to have her back as soon as possible."

"Misled? I seem to recall you personally telling me that Natalie would be staying with you," Daniel answers, after grimacing through my explanation about bringing the woman back. I get the feeling he's had as much, if not more, trouble from her as I have.

“Hmm ... I think my dear wife thought it would be nice to lead me down the path of adultery,” I explain.

“Oh, please. Get over yourself. No one had to lead you down that road. You were going willingly. You were following Natalie’s fake boobs like they were the yellow brick road, and you were the scarecrow.”

“Izzy,” Daniel warns.

“You sound jealous, wife. Don’t worry. I’ll give you equal time. Yours don’t quite measure up to hers, but they may keep my attention if you get inventive,” I purr, baiting the hell out of her.

“No thanks, I’d rather stick needles in my eyes. Can we get on with this meeting? The quicker we end this marriage, the better,” she retorts.

“Perhaps it would be better if we discuss the terms of the annulment,” Daniel suggests.

“The only terms I have are that I want it done yesterday,” Isabel says, speaking up immediately.

I’m barely containing my smile. My darling wife is in for a very rude awakening. Daniel lets out an exasperated breath. I bet Isabel provokes that response from every man in her life. Too bad for her that soon I’ll be the only one allowed to get close.

“Samuel, I’m fine with dissolving this entire arrangement, although I do think it would be advantageous to keep our alliance in place.”

I stare at him, pretending to think things over. My gaze moves to my wayward wife. As much as she annoyed me and drove me nuts before, I’m extremely attracted to

her. Her little trick also revealed she has a cunning mind. She'll never bore me. As much as I cared about Angelina, I'd be the first to admit I never understood how she'd lose herself in books and go quiet for hours, lost in her own little world. My time with her when she was fully present made it all worth it, however. I have a feeling it wouldn't be an issue with my wife. She excites me in ways I never imagined.

“Well?” Isabel prompts—clearly put out with me not answering.

“I don't think I agree, Daniel.” I completely ignore her, knowing that will piss her off. I'm eager to see how she retaliates.

“What?”

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It's all I can do not to laugh out loud at her screech. I keep my gaze trained on Daniel. He shakes his head. I'm pretty sure he sees how much I want to laugh.

"Why would you want to end the alliance? Do you realize how much support my brother has? He's nothing like our sperm donor. You should count yourself lucky that he's even extending the offer!"

"Isabel, enough."

"Daniel—"

"Enough," he demands again. I glance in her direction. Her expression is mutinous.

"Fine," she huffs.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Samuel. I'll have my attorney draw up the annulment paperwork for your approval. A courier can drop it off sometime tomorrow."

"I think you and Isabel are both misunderstanding me."

"We are?"

Isabel becomes very still. My wife is very astute. She probably suspects I'm up to something.

"Yes. I'm not here about the alliance or an annulment."

“Then, other than bringing that woman back, why are you here?” Daniel asks, interrupting his sister.

“Well, now that I know Isabel, here, is mine. I’m here to claim her and bring her home.”

“Are you insane?” Isabel shrieks.

Daniel pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes as if he’s asking The Man Upstairs for patience. I just lean back, grinning at my wife. She stares at me, plotting my murder. I’m not sure I can remember being happier. It’s confusing, but true.

“Now, Pookie?—”

“Stop with the weird names!” she orders, standing up, her face red. “You are not claiming me. I’m not going anywhere with you. Even if we don’t get an annulment—which, mark my words, Sammy, we are! I?—”

“Daniel, can you leave and let me have a moment alone with my wife?” I ask politely, standing up.

“My brother is going nowhere! You are!”

“Daniel?” I prompt.

“I think it’d be best if you calm down, Izzy. The two of you need to speak calmly to decide the best way to bring this situation to an end.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am. Samuel, I’ll give you twenty minutes. Do not try to take my sister—you won’t

get out the door. If you hurt her in any way, you won't be leaving here alive."

"You'd risk war to protect your sister?"

"In a heartbeat. I am not my father. Greed does not rule me. My sister is, and always will be, my priority."

The man doesn't blink. My respect for him blossoms. I may have thought little of him in the beginning, but it's clear I've misjudged him—and his father, for that matter. I'm realizing that Juan Navarro was a greedy bastard. Isabel likely thinks I'm the same. There's a lot that the two of us need to learn about each other.

"Daniel—"

"Talk to him, Isabel. I won't let you be hurt or railroaded. You know that." I watch as the man walks over and kisses his sister's forehead. For a moment, jealousy pushes through me. It comes out of nowhere, blindsiding me. Then I hear him whisper. "Yo siempre te protegeré."

They probably think that I don't understand his words—or maybe they just don't care. I almost feel like an intruder here as they talk. It's clear that these two are close in a way that I can't even fathom. Then again, I never had anyone close. I trust my uncles, but I wouldn't say we had a loving relationship. We have a mutual respect and a trust that has been earned between us.

"Te amo, Daniel."

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That jealousy from moments ago springs up once more. I imagine Isabela whispering those words to me. Just the thought of it makes my cock twitch in my slacks.

“Right back at you, Izzy,” he responds with a smile.

Once Daniel exits, the tension in the room thickens to the point it affects the air. I watch every move she makes. She slowly sits back down, taking a couple of minutes before looking at me.

“You don’t like me. I don’t like you. Why are you even doing this?” she finally asks.

“Correction. We don’t know one another, Isabel. I think it’s past time that we do.”

“Why? I’m not staying married to you.”

“The contract, which has your signature, says you will. You freely agreed to everything in it, Isabel.”

“Nothing involving my father was freely done, Samuel.”

I frown, tapping down any emotion I feel. “Regardless, you signed the contract. I think we should see if we can work this out so that both of us are happy.”

“It’s impossible. I’d be miserable in Russia. I love being a doctor. I’ve worked hard to get where I am with my career. I don’t want to move to another country, trying to scrape my way to the top once more. I also refuse to leave my brother.”

“You had to know this day was coming, Isabel.”

“I didn’t. I figured when the year was up, we’d meet and agree to end everything. At the very least, I thought you would agree to keep going like we have been. I still don’t see why you’re trying to insist you’re here to claim me. You don’t like me. We both know that. The feeling is quite mutual in case you were wondering.”

“I’m here to propose a deal,” I respond, not taking my eyes off her. “I’ll be here to pick you up tomorrow. You’ll live with me for the next six months. If we can’t find common ground, then and only then, will I agree to this annulment.”

“Are you not hearing me? I don’t want to be married to you.”

“Too bad. You already are. You agreed to that with your signature. If you fail to uphold your end of the contract, I can and will seek retribution. Doing that will affect your brother directly. I don’t think you want that, Isabel.”

“This isn’t my brother’s fault. Besides, he has as many alliances as you do—if not more.”

“Isabel, my family rules the Bratva. My word is law. Your brother might try to start an uprising, but I’ve faced that before. I can do it again. Before you try to call me on that, I will tell you, dear wife, I’ve never lost a challenge. I’m not about to start now. You can agree to be a good girl and uphold our agreement, or essentially sell your brother out and leave his ass blowing in the wind. The choice is yours.”

“You’re a bastard,” she hisses.

I shrug. “I’ve been called worse.”

“I have a job here. I don’t want to go to Russia. I don’t want to leave my brother.”

“Then, you’re in luck. I’m currently living here in Phoenix. I will remain here—at least for the next six months.”

“If you force me into this, I’m going to make you regret it, Sammy,” she warns. Something settles inside of me. I’ve won round one, and hell if I’m not anticipating round two.

“I’ll look forward to it,” I purr as the warmth of my victory settles over me.

“I’m going to continue to work.”

“When do you go back?” I ask, studying her.

“Tomorrow night.”

“Then be ready in the morning. I’ll pick you up. We’ll have breakfast and when you go to work tomorrow, one of my men will go with you.”

“I already have a bodyguard. Tayko.”

“I don’t know him. I trust my men. You’re my property. People could try to use you against me. My men will be the ones guarding you. I won’t take a chance on your wellbeing, Isabel.”

“Six months and then this sham is over,” she finally says, reaching out her hand as if I’m supposed to shake hers.

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I take her hand, jerking her so that her face is close to mine. I feel her breath caress my skin. “Six months and you’ll be mine completely,” I croon. Then, before she can stop me, I take her mouth. I feel her body stiffen, but choose to ignore it, biting down on her lip. When Isabel opens her mouth, I thrust my tongue inside. I explore and conquer, devouring her. I groan as her tongue seeks mine out. She softens against me, losing herself to the feelings that we’re creating. When my lungs burn—needing oxygen—I force myself to pull away. Her face is a mixture of hunger, shock, and confusion. “Be ready for me tomorrow morning by ten, Pookie.”

She remains quiet as I walk out. That kiss was fucking phenomenal. I think I just won another round ...

10

natalia

“You’re living here?” I ask, looking around.

“Not up to your standards?” Samuel asks, making me roll my eyes.

“It’s a penthouse apartment in a five-star luxury hotel. I simply meant that I expected you’d be in a home surrounded by guards and a staff to do your bidding.”

“Worried I won’t be able to protect you, Pookie?”

I walk over to him and pinch him a little too hard on the cheeks. “Not at all, fluffy-wuffy. I just found it curious.”

He cocks an eyebrow up and assesses me. “Fluffy-wuffy?”

“If you’re going to use icky nicknames, so will I.”

Samuel laughs, humor lighting up his eyes. I refuse to acknowledge how good that makes him look. He’s already sinfully gorgeous. Relaxed and happy, he might just be deadly. I push those thoughts away. If I’m going to survive, I need to keep my wits about me—and my legs closed.

“I think I shall concede this round. You win. If I’m not calling you a pet name, which do you prefer? Natalia or Isabel?”

“Maybe Natalia. The only person to call me that was my father. I hated him, too. So, it seems fitting.”

That erases the sexy look on his face. “Isabel it is,” he responds. I shrug. “The staff will put your stuff in your room. How long until you leave for work?” he asks, taking my hand and pulling me from the foyer toward the open kitchen and giant island. The apartment is beautiful and modern. At the top of the ceiling and walls, there’s a deep, rich chocolate finish that reminds me of Samuel’s eyes, and the bottom is a soft vanilla set off with some wood accents to make it pop. The wood cabinets and trim are a Brazilian oak. The island is made of the same wood, with a dark granite top. Throughout the apartment, there are modern gray wood floors that are striking, while still allowing the oak accents to stand out. There’s a small room that separates the entry from everything else that is entirely glass. Inside the room is a huge bonsai tree in a blue pot. It’s almost as tall as I am. There’s a huge chaise that invites you to lie on it, fitting three people easily. There’s also a curved stairway leading up to the roof of the penthouse. I could happily live in just that room.

“I’m working another double. I’ll need to be there by four,” I answer.

“You work too hard,” he murmurs, but doesn’t look at me. “I am free until a video conference with Avi at midnight. We can spend the day getting to know one another.”

“It’s the Christmas season. It’s always busy,” I explain. Why are you having a video conference at midnight? Is Avi another candidate for a bride, or maybe a sex show?”

He laughs. “You’re forgetting the time difference. That’s only ten in the morning in Moscow. As for Avi, he works alongside me. I’m hoping to put him in charge there, so we can live here,” he explains, pulling out a stool for me.

“Oh,” I breathe. My stomach feels unsettled as he casually mentions us living together. I focus on the smorgasbord of breakfast pastries, sausage, eggs, and toast in front of me. Samuel apparently planned to feed me. Since I am hungry, I grab an empty plate and start filling it.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Orange juice, please.”

“I thought all doctors live on coffee?”

“I do that later in the day. I just need to be awake—not climbing the walls,” I explain, looking over the offerings before me.

“What’s that look?” he asks, bringing my juice over, sitting beside me, as he fills his plate.

“Huh?”

“You look disappointed. Did I order the wrong things?”

“Oh, no. I just like fresh fruit in the mornings,” I explain.

“I’ll remember that for tomorrow,” he murmurs to himself. The response gives me a funny feeling. What is going on here? “I was thinking after breakfast we might get out for a bit. Spend some time exploring the city and Christmas displays.”

“Why?”

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Samuel stares directly at me. “We’re married, Isabel. We need to see how compatible we are—get to know one another.”

“Did you forget that a couple of days ago you couldn’t stand to be in the same room with me?”

“I think we should start with a clean slate, so to speak.”

“Um, no,” I deny at once, putting my fork down.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to be married!”

He stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. I feel like I have.

“But we are. A deal was struck?—”

“By my father. Not me. I didn’t want this.”

“But you signed the contract.”

“At my father’s order,” I argue.

“But you signed it.”

“You can’t legally force someone to marry you—contract or not.”

“Actually, you can. You agreed to the contract. I fulfilled my part. That makes it binding.”

“Your part? What was that—being a jerk?”

“Did you not even read the contract, Isabel?”

“There was no point. My father told me everything. When Juan spoke, it was better if you didn’t question him.”

I can see the surprise on his face. He shakes his head. “You’re a doctor, for Christ’s sake. You should know to read everything you sign.”

“Thanks for the advice. Also, I had one dad—he was useless. I don’t need another.”

He stands, quickly walking from the room. I shrug. I guess I pissed him off again. Maybe he’ll agree to the annulment faster now.

I finish eating as he comes back in. Standing up to take my plate and glass to the sink to rinse it out, I ignore him. I expected him to sit down, but instead he follows me, slapping a folder on the counter. He moves behind me, gathering my hair in his hand and pushing it over to one shoulder. I should move but can’t. I think I’m in shock. Samuel leans against me. The hard ridge of his erection pushes against my ass, as his hot breath caresses my ear and neck. “Read the contract, Izzy. Then look at the receipts that are attached. I’ll give you today to come to the realization that you are my wife—bought and paid for, for at least five years. I’ve not broken the rules and as such, I don’t plan on letting you go. We will try to make this work—as previously agreed.” He rubs his nose against my ear before slowly dragging his lips along the side of my neck. I bite my lip, trying to think of all the reasons I should be angry, but can’t form a clear thought. His teeth gently rake against my tender skin. It takes everything I have not to moan as he sucks on my skin. His hands hold my hips as he

continues pushing against me, showing me just how much he desires me. He places a small kiss against my pulse point, before taking his lips away. “I’ll make sure you have someone here to go with you to the hospital. Don’t leave without them. If you do, you won’t like how I retaliate,” he warns.

He walks away, then I hear the door open and close. My legs feel shaky as I take the folder and go back to the island, sitting down. Inside is my marriage contract. I force myself to read it. With every page I turn, my heart rate quickens. I feel like I’m having a panic attack. It’s all here in black and white. Samuel was right. I should have read it. It was stupid not to. I thought it was just a simple alliance. Nothing could be further from the truth.

This contract makes me seem desperate. I agreed to marry Samuel in exchange for him paying for all my college tuition and expenses. Not only that, but he’s also deposited twenty thousand a month into a checking account under my name, in conjunction with a ten thousand a month clothing allowance. Hell, the man even bought my car—not my father, as I believed. All receipts are attached. There’s no refuting it. I was sold to Samuel Levkin.

The marriage is for a period of five years, with an option of longer should both parties agree. The only thing that can void the contract is if Samuel physically harms me or fails to pay for the items listed. My only requirement apparently was to become his wife and agree to perform the duties he requires from a spouse, such as attending business meetings and events. I’m also to live with him after I finish my degree. All of this makes me sick to my stomach. Yet that’s not the thing that makes me want to dig my father up, bring him back to life, and kill him again. Nope. It’s the fact that the bastard agreed I would give Samuel Levkin an heir and sign over all rights to said child once it was done.

I pick up my cell and call the only person I know that might help me right now.

“Izzy?”

“I need you,” I whisper, my voice cracking.

“Izzy, what’s wrong?” my brother asks.

“I’ll text you the address. Please come here.”

I hang up, immediately texting the hotel name and room info. Then I slide from the chair to the floor, hugging my legs to my chest as I cry.

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I always knew my father was a monster, but I failed to realize how truly evil he was.

11

samuel

“I’m not having sex with you.”

I’ve barely walked through the door of my apartment before Isabel stands in front of it. It just takes one look to tell that she’s been crying. My gaze automatically goes to my watch. It’s after seven. She should be at work. I purposefully stayed gone all day to give her time alone to come to terms with everything. As I see the way her eyes are bloodshot, her face washed out and the pain that is easy to see on her features, it seems that was a mistake.

“Oh, you are,” I correct her. “We’re going to work on this marriage, Izzy.”

“Why? What about me would make you want to do that? When we first met, you made no secret of the fact that you disliked me.”

I purse my lips and study the woman in front of me. “You infuriated me, tested me when we first met, Izzy. That’s never been the kind of woman I thought I wanted.”

“See!” she cries.

I walk over to her, putting my hands on each side of her neck, forcing her to look at me. “Even then, I was attracted to you, Izzy. You would always come up in my

thoughts. There's something between us. I don't think you can deny that."

"There's a contract between us!"

"Ignore the fucking contract. Let's just concentrate on what we could be to one another."

"I'm not having sex—especially with a man who is intent on knocking me up and taking my baby from me."

I slide my thumb along the side of her cheek. "You don't know me, but I can promise you that if you will give this a chance with me and it works, I will want you by my side until they put me in the ground. If we have kids one day, I would love for her to be strong like her mother, someone with a career that will take control of any situation—even being kidnapped and having the head of the Bratva bleeding out in front of her."

"Sam ..."

"I like you shortening my name," I murmur, meaning it completely. My name sounds natural coming from her lips. "Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"I had a panic attack after reading that damn contract and called Danny to come over. He phoned my boss. Apparently, I have the rest of the week off."

"Good. That gives us a week to see how good we could be together."

"Or how bad," she mutters.

"Optimistic, aren't you?" I laugh.

“We could end this here,” she suggests.

“I’m thinking we go out to dinner instead. Maybe find a Christmas tree.”

“A Christmas tree?” she repeats, blinking as if she doesn’t quite believe what I just suggested.

“It’s almost Christmas, Izzy. It will be our first Christmas together. We need a tree.” She doesn’t respond. Instead, she just keeps staring at me. “Izzy?” I prompt.

“You’re a very strange man, Sam. I’m trying to tell you I have no intention of abiding by this freaking contract—that we need to go our separate ways—and you want to go shopping for a Christmas tree.”

“That’s because this contract is binding and while I’m willing to negotiate on the clauses you’re upset about, I’m not willing to end it. Now, let’s go have dinner. We can discuss what you would like to change in the contract. You’ll find that your husband can be very reasonable,” I say with a wink. Isabel looks like she wants to slap my face. That shouldn’t make me happy, yet it does.

“Do I have to change for this dinner?”

I let my gaze drop to rake over the way those jeans are hugging her curves. She’s wearing a loose pink sweater, and her hair is pulled up high on her head in a ponytail. She looks gorgeous. I’m used to women pouring themselves into skimpy dresses that are so tight their boobs almost fall out—all while wearing makeup so thick it makes me wonder how they’re breathing.

“You’re perfect the way you are,” I tell her truthfully.

“I think I like you better when you’re not trying to be nice. I don’t trust this new

Sam.”

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“You’re just hungry. Let’s go find some food.” I hold out my hand and I watch as she stares at it. It’s like she thinks I might strike out and bite her. Eventually, she puts hers in mine and I smile.

I don’t say a word as we move through the hotel, then into the parking garage. When I discovered Isabel had tried to trick me, I was looking forward to a little revenge. Now, I find myself thinking about spending time with her—bringing her into my life. I wasn’t lying. She’s stayed in the back of my mind since the night we met. Isabel challenges me. There’s something about her that makes me feel energized. I’m drawn to Isabel. That’s not something that has happened since Angelina. At this point, I’m not even sure Angelina’s pull was this strong. Isabel is her complete opposite. The more I find out about my wife, the more I find I appreciate that fact. I’m not letting her get away. I want Isabel.

And I’m going to keep her.

12

natalia

If you’d asked me earlier what I’d be doing after reading the contract I signed with Samuel, I would have told you I’d be hopping on a plane and flying far, far away. I even told my brother to bring my passport with him. Daniel was willing to help. He’d never seen the actual contract. My father always handled everything on his own. After he died, my brother had his hands full. He hadn’t checked into the particulars. He—like myself—thought our father just formed an alliance, and that was it. He had no way of knowing my father was taking money from Samuel under the guise that it

was for me. It wasn't. I've been working to pay my own way, because my father refused. He thought my career was a waste of time. Sure, I have a lot of student loan debt, but I don't care. I feel good that my career rests solely on my shoulders.

I checked the account listed in the agreement. There was one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in it. The very first deposit was withdrawn and transferred into my father's private account. The rest of it hasn't been touched since my father's death. If he were still breathing, there wouldn't be a dime in that account—of that, I have no doubt.

"I think we should head to the Christmas tree lot next," Samuel says as we walk out of the restaurant. I wasn't dressed for the place he took me, but not once did he make me feel self-conscious. He centered his attention on me, and it stayed there—even as the waitress flirted with him.

I curl up my nose. "I hate live trees."

"You do?" he asks, sounding completely stunned.

"They make a mess, and they look so sad. They need to be in the ground, growing."

"What kind of tree do you normally get then?" he asks, making me sigh.

"We don't."

"Don't?"

"My father didn't allow us to acknowledge Christmas."

"It seems we may have had similar fathers, Izzy."

“Lucky us,” I mutter sarcastically.

“You can say that again,” he laughs. “Okay, so if you’ve never had a Christmas tree, do you know what kind you would have liked?”

“My friend Riley invited me home with her over Christmas break last year. They had like this huge nine-foot tree. It was flocked, so it looked like it was covered in snow. I remember staring at it, with the decorations and twinkling lights, thinking it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.”

“Then that’s the kind of tree you’ll have. Let’s head out to the home center. They should have Christmas trees there.”

“Are you sure it wouldn’t be better to just agree to end our marriage? You wouldn’t have to waste money on Christmas that way.”

He yanks on my hand and pulling me into his body before I even realize his intent. “I’m giving you the Christmas you want and the one you deserve. I’m not wasting money because we’ll be using this tree next year and the year after, too.”

His words make something flutter in the pit of my stomach. I feel warm all over. If I let myself, I could fall for Samuel Levkin. That thought alone is kind of terrifying. I have to stop this. “We’re going to get a div?—”

I don’t get to finish telling him I want a divorce. He stops my words by kissing me senseless. I want to deny him. My hands go to his chest to push him away. Instead, as Samuel deepens the kiss, my fingers curl into his crisp, white shirt and I groan as I lose myself in our kiss. He walks me backward, his mouth never leaving mine. I find myself pressed between him and the wall at my back. My body feels as if I’m on fire. All I want is more. “Sam,” I whimper.

“Shut up and kiss me, sweetheart. We’ll worry about the rest later,” he demands against my lips. This time I don’t argue.

I give in to what we both want.

13

natalia

“What do you think of this one?” Samuel asks.

I look over and I can’t stop my giggle. He’s standing in front of what I guess is a Christmas tree. It’s basically gold feathers in the shape of a tree that are assembled over one of those mannequins a tailor or seamstress would use. “I should make you buy that ridiculous thing and put it in the penthouse so that anyone could see it as they come through the front door.”

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He laughs, and I have to admit, it's areallygood laugh. I am quickly finding that I like him. He's funny and easy to be around, but can be just as snarky as I am. We played twenty questions during lunch. I discovered we had a lot in common. Samuel said he admires how I insisted on ignoring my father's wishes and becoming a doctor. I truly believe he was telling the truth, too. He told me a little about his father, so I think he understands my need to prove the asshole wrong—even if he is dead.

“So, I take it, that's a no.”

“Um ... actually, I do want it,” I decide, putting a finger up to my cheek and surveying the monstrosity. The top of the tree falls between the breasts with a small start at the tip that lights up, casting a glow on the breasts—fake breasts that actually havenipples on them. The nipples also have miniature candy canes hanging from them.

“Izzy, I'll buy you anything you want, but please don't make me put this in our home.”

I blink. I'm getting comfortable by the way he keeps calling me Izzy. Still, when he saidourhome, I felt a pain in my chest. I pull myself from my thoughts and smile sweetly at Samuel. “But Sammy! It wouldn't be Christmas without this,” I whine, giving my best Natalie impression.

I see shock on Samuel's face for a second, and then he's right in front of me. His hands are on my ass and he's pulling me up against him. The man is literally lifting me up right here in the middle of the store—to the point I'm forced to hold on to him and wrap my legs around his body.Who does that?“You like to play with me, Izzy?

You might find you'll get more than you bargained for."

My heart is running away with me. I stare into his deep brown eyes with the golden flakes sparkling and I bite my lip. "I might like it, Sammy," I tease, though my voice is soft. It sounds more like I'm inviting him to kiss me again. I really want him to.

"Fuck," he hisses under his breath, right before his lips find mine.

"Get a room," someone calls out and I immediately stiffen. What am I doing?

Samuel reluctantly pulls away. "Maybe we should table this until we get home," he suggests. I nod. I don't think I can form words right now. He grins, letting me slide down onto the floor. He keeps his hands on my hips for a minute before giving me a smile. "Do you really want this ugly thing?"

"Definitely. I'm going to give it to Ivan."

Samuel's mouth falls open. Shock is written all over his face. Then, all at once, he starts laughing. "Oh, Izzy, you have no idea how well you're going to fit into this crazy family," he says, while shaking his head and bending down to grab one of the mannequin-tree-thingies—which should be the official name of such a monstrosity—from the floor. He puts it in the buggy and for some reason, I feel myself unreasonably happy with Samuel's words. It's almost like he's proud of me. Other than Daniel, I've never had that.

Never.

“I don’t suppose I can convince you to sleep with me tonight?”

“You have to be kidding,” she scoffs, shaking her head at me with her rejection.

I exhale, feeling disappointed—even if I knew her answer. “Can’t blame a man for trying,” I joke. We’re standing in the middle of our apartment after what has been the best day of my life. Isabel is getting ready to go to bed, while I have to have my phone conference here in a few minutes.

“I had a really nice time with you, Sam, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to have sex with you.”

“I didn’t say anything about sex, Izzy. I asked you to sleep with me. I want to hold you tonight in my bed. I promise nothing will happen—unless, of course, you want it to.”

“Do I look like an idiot to you?”

“I’m serious. I will be the perfect gentleman. I’ll even wear pajamas.”

She cocks an eyebrow up, staring at me in disbelief. “Do you even own a pair of pajamas?”

“Um ... Okay, I’ll wear a pair of gym shorts.”

“And a T-shirt,” she adds.

For a second, I can’t breathe. I’m that shocked. Izzy is giving in. I did not expect that at all. “What’s wrong? Afraid you can’t control yourself around me, sweetheart?”

“Fine,” she huffs. “I’ll see you in the morning, Casanova.”

“Wait!” I call out as she starts to walk away. Hell, I probably even sound panicked. “Fine. T-shirt, too.”

She smirks at me. “You sounded a little desperate there, Sam,” she purrs, while slapping me gently on the chest. “You should watch that.” She winks at me and walks away. I watch, admiring the view and wondering if I haven’t found the perfect woman—quite by accident. Hell, if I could go back in time, I would have flown to the states to claim this woman in person six months ago. I don’t have a doubt in my mind that she is improving my life.

I shake my head and rush to my office. This phone conversation with Avi is going to be one of the quickest I’ve ever had. Shit, I’m already dialing the number as I sit down.

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“You’re early,” Avi mutters into the phone.

“I have a wife to win over. I can’t do that if I’m on the phone with you. Is there anything I need to know about?”

“Wife? Man, you’re already married to the Navarro princess. What are you doing?”

I think about Isabel and her commanding personality, and no-time-for-shit attitude and grin. She might be a princess to the Navarro family, but the woman is more of a ball buster than her brother. Christ, she might even give Ivan a run for his money when I bring her in. I’m making her go with me tomorrow to give him that atrocity of a Christmas—shit, I can’t call that thing a tree. I have no idea what it is. I just know Ivan will laugh his ass off. I also think it’s a good thing I’m already married to Isabel. If I wasn’t, Ivan would try to steal her away. He usually likes his women a little softer, but I didn’t miss the way he looked at mywoman. I was jealous—even if I didn’t want to admit it at the time.

“I’m talking about her.”

“I thought you said you were going to steer far away from the Navarros while you were over there. You said and I quote, I don’t want that fucking woman clinging and begging for my dick until I’m forced to.”

I lose myself in the thought of Isabel begging for my dick. I’m instantly hard picturing her on her knees as I palm my erection. I can literally see her licking her lips, saliva running down my shaft because I’ve just slid from between her lips. The thought of her begging me to give it back, to fuck her mouth ...

Christ. I'm going to have to take a cold shower and rub one out in there. If I don't, I'll never keep my hands to myself tonight.

"I believe I said I didn't want her trying to lay claim to me until I was forced to put up with it."

"Semantics," he discounts, making me roll my eyes.

"Natalia Isabel Navarro would never beg a man for anything," I tell him proudly.

"Hell, she might be the only person to makemebeg."

"Fuck, you went to America and lost your mind, Samuel."

I grin. "Probably. Now, back to work. I want to hurry so I can be the big spoon for my woman."

"Big spoon? Do not let the fucking Volkov family ever hear that coming from your mouth."

"Yeah, well, the Volkov family can suck my dick. Are they still causing issues?"

"Minor ones. Denis likes to run his mouth. I'm handling it. His brother Arkadi is keeping him under a tight leash."

"Good. You will keep me updated. I'm thinking of mostly staying here in Phoenix. That will leave you in charge. If you are against that, let me know now Avi. I can always make other arrangements."

"I'm fine. We've spoken about this before."

"I know. I don't think my mind was made-up until I met Izzy, though. She's settled

here. I want her happy. I think I'd even leave the family if it meant making sure she stayed that way."

"I'm going to need to meet this woman in person. I'm not quite sure what to think about the change in you, Samuel. I've known you since we were both small children. I cannot recall you ever being willing to change for anyone—not even Angelina."

I take a second to think about what Avi just said. He's right. I wasn't willing to change for her. It's one reason I went so long without her in my life. If I think back, I didn't even regret walking away from her. In comparison, the thought of leaving Isabel is unimaginable to me. One day with her and I don't want to spend another night without her.

"It's the first time I've felt like this," I admit. "Now catch me up on what I need so I can get back to her." Avi laughs, but switches to business mode. I somehow push thoughts of Isabel away so that I can function, but damn it ...I don't want to.

15

natalia

They always say not to eavesdrop because you will probably hear something bad about yourself. It's something like that anyway. I didn't mean to listen in on Samuel's phone conversation. I decided to tell him I'd changed my mind. I had the best night with him. It shocked me how much. I didn't really want the night to end. When he asked if I'd sleep with him, I laughed it off. He kept pushing it though, even promising to wear pajamas. I knew he didn't have any. He's not the type. After I called him on it, however, we compromised.

Still, once I got back to my room, I panicked. I don't know Samuel. I'm crazy attracted to him. He's my freaking husband. All that said, we've had on a real date. It

was a great date—don't get me wrong, but I'm not the kind of girl to just fall into bed with a man. I had trudged back to Samuel's office. I knew I had time, because his conference wasn't supposed to be till midnight. When I heard him talking, I stopped outside the door. I had every intention of going back to my room and waiting for him. Until I heard him say something that made it hard to breathe.

"I know. I don't think my mind was made up until I met Izzy, though. She's settled here. I want her happy. I think I'd even leave the family if it meant making sure she stayed that way."

I didn't stay to hear anything else. I had to get away. I had to breathe and sort out what I was feeling. Somehow, I found myself in Samuel's bed, wearing pajamas, hearing his words repeating over and over in my head. Samuel had been telling his partner that he was planning on staying in Arizona and leave him in charge in Russia. I ignored most of that because he had already mentioned that to me. My attention wasn't drawn to the conversation until Samuel said he wanted to make me happy and would leave his family to keep me that way.

He wants me happy. No one has ever cared about that except for Daniel. Samuel had no way of knowing I was there. He didn't say that to mislead me. He really meant it. I'm uncertain what to make of that. I know I've been drawn to him since the moment I first saw him. I would have been attracted to him even if I didn't know he was the man I married.

Now I'm here. I'm in Samuel's bed, after having the best date of my life with a man I'm attracted to. I haven't had sex in almost two years. I want him, but I'm not ready to be intimate. Even knowing all that and although being in bed with him is dangerous, I'm here. I can't help it. Hearing Samuel say he wanted me to be happy, though, is affecting me.

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“Are you asleep, Izzy?” he asks. He settles in the bed, pressing his body against my back. His hand wraps around my waist and the heat from him seeps into my bones. It feels like heaven.

It feels right.

“No,” I whisper. “I’ve been thinking.

“What about, sweet Izzy?”

I roll over on my back and Samuel shifts so he’s kind of leaning on his elbow, his upper body hovering over me, while his hand is pressed against my stomach. I bite on my bottom lip as I stare at him. He really is too beautiful. It should be against the law for a man to look as hot as he does.

“Did you mean it when you said you would be proud to have a daughter like me?” I ask lamely. Afraid to question him about what I overheard.

“Absolutely. I meant what I said about wanting to make this thing between us work. I think the two of us could be spectacular together, Izzy.”

“You make me want to believe you, Sam, and I think that is kind of insane. We don’t know each other.”

“We will. I’m not going to rush you. We’ll go as fast or as slow as you want.”

“What if I want you to kiss me but nothing else right now?” I ask, hypnotized by his

beautiful eyes with golden flakes in them.

“I would kiss the hell out of you. Fuck, Izzy, I want to so bad right now that it’s hard to breathe.”

I reach up to slide my hand against his neck, rubbing softly against his pulse point. “Kiss me, Sam. Make me forget all the bullshit and just feel like a normal woman kissing a man she really wants in her life.”

“Thank fuck,” he growls quietly, his lips crashing down on mine. I open my mouth immediately, granting him access. I lose myself in the feel of being close to him and the way he conquers my mouth.

When we pull apart, his eyes are darker somehow and filled with lust. “Maybe marriage to you won’t be so bad,” I whisper. His full lips spread into a smile. He kisses me again while his hand slides under my pajama top. I stiffen slightly. Although, I don’t want to stop kissing Samuel, he pulls back.

“I’m sorry. We’ll just kiss. Whatever you need, Izzy. I’ll give it to you. You’ve asked for time. I promise you, sweetheart, you can have all of it you want.” He kisses me again and I forget about everything but letting myself feel the pleasure he gives me.

This man is making me believe that I could have a future with him.

16

natalia

One Month Later

“Now how did I know I’d find you here?” Samuel asks. I give him a soft smile as he

sits down on the sofa beside me. He pulls my legs up and puts them back down, so they lay across his lap. I angle my body so I can face him. He leans over and kisses my forehead.

“Because you know I love to sit here and look at the Christmas tree?”

“You okay, sweetheart? You’ve been quiet since we left my uncles’ home.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I can’t believe Ivan is using that thing we bought him,” I giggle. “I thought he might use it for target practice or something.”

“He loves it. I’m not sure Mikhail and Sebastian feel the same, however,” Samuel chuckles.

“Yeah, that much was perfectly clear. It was nice of them to invite Daniel over.”

“He’s family now, Izzy. You are my life. I hope you see that. I never want you doubting that you’re important to me. You’re my wife. I’ve never been happier, Izzy. I’m addicted to you—all the forms of you.”

“All the forms of me?” I question, cocking my eyebrow up in challenge.

“The sleepy-grumpy-but-I-had-to-get-up-early Izzy is adorable and sexy as fuck. The woman-in-charge Izzy is sexy as fuck. The devious but cute Izzy is sexy as fuck. The?—”

“I think I’m getting the picture,” I laugh. “You may need therapy.”

“Nope, all I need is my wife.”

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“We’ve only been trying this couple thing for a month, Sam. How can you be so sure?”

“I’ve never been more positive about anything in my life. Are you saying this past month hasn’t been good for you?” he asks.

“How could it not be? You spoil me,” I answer honestly, my fingers going to the emerald pendant I’m wearing. Samuel bought it for me for Christmas. It’s an emerald heart that is surrounded by diamonds.

Samuel’s gaze drops to take in the way I’m basically petting the necklace. His entire face relaxes. I think I even see pride shining in his eyes. “You like it.”

“I love it,” I answer truthfully.

“It reminded me of your eyes. I couldn’t resist.”

“I guess I should give you my Christmas present now.”

Immediately, he looks surprised. “Izzy, I told you I didn’t want anything.”

“I think you’ll want this—or at least I’m hoping you do,” I counter, more nervous than I thought I’d be.

I know this is a big step, but it’s not like I’m a virgin. Our marriage might not be conventional, but this past month has been wonderful. I could make a huge mistake. A month isn’t a lot of time. Still, Samuel and I have spent every night together.

We've moved up from just kissing to heavy make out sessions. When I went back to work, he started working at night so he could sleep with me throughout the day. We fit together. There's no other way to say it. When I'm worn out from work, Samuel meets me at the door, takes me in his arms and takes care of me. I somehow make him relax when he's stressed, make him eat when he forgets, and we always find time to unwind together. I even like his crazy family. He comes to the hospital to pick me up often. Watching him walk to me always makes me smile. A few days ago, he came in when Natalie was volunteering. When she walked up to him and tried to kiss him, I lost it. I grabbed her by her hair and pulled her away, telling her to keep her hands off my husband. I thought Samuel would be upset. He wasn't. He crashed his mouth down on mine and kissed me until I almost begged him to take me right then and there. I didn't care who was watching. That's when I knew what I wanted. So, I asked my brother to help me. However, at this moment, I am really nervous.

"Izzy, I've never been much for holidays. If you want the truth, this is the first Christmas me or my uncles have celebrated since I was a small child. That I get to spend it with you is all I could ever ask."

"Daniel and I never really did the whole Christmas thing, either. I'm glad my first one got to be with you, Sam."

"Why don't you grab the throw from the sofa and spread it out in front of the tree? Find one of those cheesy as hell Christmas movies you've been watching, while I get us both some wine. We can relax and enjoy the night together."

"I'd like that," I admit.

"Good," he whispers, bending down to kiss me gently, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth and sliding his tongue over it, like he doesn't want to stop.

I don't want him to.

He stands, pulling me up with him. He kisses the top of my head and gives me a sly wink. “I’ll be back.”

I nod, spending the next few minutes fixing the blanket in front of the tree while grabbing the remote for the television. I don’t really want to watch a movie. I’d rather be in Samuel’s arms and talk. I flip the television to the freebie Christmas background that shows a raging fire on it, with the fireplace decorated in pine swags, holly leaves, and berries. I dim the overhead lighting, grab some throw pillows off the sofa, and settle in. Samuel walks into the room, holding two glasses, and offers me one before he sits down beside me. I grin and then reach over to the tree, sliding my hand under the pretty pale blue skirt we have around the stand. My fingers latch on the manilla envelope I had hidden there. I pull it out, handing it to Samuel. He looks confused, and I try to fight through my anxiety by plastering a fake smile on my face. “Merry Christmas.”

He carefully takes my wine, stretching to put the glasses on the coffee table. Then he takes the envelope. His face looks ...annoyed. “Interesting wrapping paper, Izzy.” I shrug. What can you say to that? He looks at the envelope and then tosses it away.

“What are you doing?” I cry, already struggling to get up and fetch the damn thing. Samuel doesn’t let me. He pulls me back down before pinning my body on the floor with him over me.

“I’d hoped this last month you would have stopped being so damn stubborn. Seems that’s not going to happen.”

“Sam—”

“You’re mine, Izzy. I don’t care if it’s been a month, a week, or a fucking day. You’re mine.”

“But—”

“We’re married. You’re in my bed every night. I may not have been inside your body, but I know what it feels like to make you come. If you think I’m going to let you walk away and risk some other man having what belongs to me, you’re insane.”

“Damn it, Sam, the papers?—”

“I’ll fucking burn them, Izzy. I don’t know what you have in that beautiful but dense head of yours, but we are staying married.”

“Sam, you’re pissing me off,” I hiss, tugging on my hands he has trapped over my head.

“Good, because trying to give me divorce papers after the single best fucking day of my life has pissed me off. You don’t get to give me a taste of the life I’ve always wanted, then callously pull it away, Izzy. It’s not happening. You’re home for me. We belong together and if I must fuck you into submission, that’s what I’m going to do.”

“You’re being an asshole,” I growl, ignoring the way his words are setting my body on fire.

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“Yeah, well, I’m your asshole, and it’s time for you to learn that.” His hand reaches under my long red silk skirt that I wore tonight. I hold my body completely still. My breath lodges in my chest as I feel Sam’s hand slide against my wet panties. “You’re soaked.”

“Sam—”

“You’re fucking soaked and still thinking about ending this? There’s no end, Izzy. You’re not walking away. I belong with you, woman. I refuse to let you push me away.”

He hooks his fingers into my underwear, quickly pulling it down my legs. I lift one leg and use my foot to help him push the flimsy lace fabric down. I repeat the same movement with my other leg, needing Sam’s touch.

“Please,” I whimper.

“You sound awful needy for a woman who was trying to push me out the door, Izzy,” he growls, as his fingers push between the lips of my pussy. My head goes back and my entire body arches toward him as I feel his fingers slowly circling my clit. I tug against his hold, wanting my hands free to touch him. “What do you want, sweetheart?”

“Let me touch you,” I demand, desperation thick in my voice.

“You’re not calling the shots here, Izzy. I am. I’m going to show you who this sweet little body belongs to.”

“Sam, please. I wasn’t going anywhere. I don’t want to leave,” I confess.

His hand goes still, and I cry out, not wanting him to stop. “You don’t want to leave me?”

“No,” I respond, moving my hips, trying to get pressure in the right place because he’s not cooperating. “Damn it, Sam. I need more.”

“Who do you belong to, Izzy? Tell me.”

“You,” I sob.

“Damn straight,” he practically snarls. “This is going to go quick, but I’ll take my time with you after,” he promises. I don’t argue because he’s finally let go of my arms. I immediately unlatch his belt and unzip his pants. “Izzy?” he asks. I look up at him and his beautiful brown eyes are filled with a hunger that makes me ache.

“I want you, Sam. I want all of you tonight.”

“What my wife wants, my wife gets,” he promises. I smile as he moves away. I’d protest, but instead, I watch as he strips out of his clothes. I yank off my top while he does that. He grabs my skirt and pushes it down my hips. I lift to help. His body is on me once more and the heat alone is enough to fuel my desire for him into a burning inferno.

He undoes my bra with a flick of his wrist and tosses it with the rest of our clothes. “Hurry, Sam.”

“You don’t know how much I’ve wanted this, Izzy. You’ve been slowly driving me insane. I almost pinned you against the wall and fucked your brains out in front of all your coworkers that day you claimed me as your husband.”

“I wouldn’t have stopped you,” I breathe.

My gaze drops down as his hand wraps around his cock. He fists it, clenching it as he strokes in a deliciously slow movement. The sheer beauty of the act has the inside of my thighs drenched. I’ve never been this turned on in my life. “Look at you so gorgeous laid out for me, your eyes begging me to fuck you. You’re perfection, Izzy,” he croons. I watch as precum slides down the head of his cock and runs along his hand, making me lick my lips. He leans down, pressing his cock between my folds. “Hold your pussy open for me,” he rasps, staring down at my throbbing clit as I do exactly what he says. I let out a loud, keening cry, full of need as the plump head of his cock presses against my clit before he drags it through my cream and lines up with my entrance. “There’s no going back, sweetheart.”

“I know. I want this. I want you,” I tell him.

He pushes inside me, and I gasp as my body stretches to accommodate his size. He pauses, staring down at me. I wrap my legs around him, causing him to sink even deeper. His forehead presses against mine. “You feel like heaven,” he shakily exhales. “What was in the envelope?”

I lick my lips, wanting him to move, but knowing he’s only pausing because he needs to know, after weeks of me stopping him from claiming my body, why I’m giving in. “A new contract stating that we agree we both want this marriage, with all the time limits and conditions, especially concerning children, null and void. We are going to move forward together without limitations. I want a genuine marriage and if we have kids, they will be ours—not bargaining chips.”

“I’ll sign it as soon as I’m done making love to my wife.”

“I put a clause in there that if you ever broke our marriage vows, I had permission to perform surgery on you, cutting your dick off and sticking?—”

“If you want to finish what we got started here, you should really stop talking about maiming that particular part of me.”

“Does that mean you’re finally going to move and give me what I need?”

He grins down at me. “Izzy, sweetheart, I vow right now that you will be the only woman for me—ever. I will give you what you need, exactly how you need it, any fucking time you want for the rest of our lives.”

“You can add that to the contract,” I groan, as his cock begins sliding in and out of me.

“It’s a deal,” he whispers, against my lips and then he’s kissing me, and I turn myself over to the pleasure as he drives us over the edge.

I never wanted to get married the way I did. Now? Well, now, I’d do it all again if it means that I would have Samuel as my man. We have a long journey ahead of us, but I’m not worried.

We can handle anything together.