



Scarlet Secrets

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: ERIN

It was a one-night stand with a bratva boss.

I never expected to end up pregnant.

Or run into him again three years later at my friend's wedding.

He knows I'm hiding something,

but he has no idea that 'something' is his son.

Before he can question me, the wedding is ambushed.

He forces me to go with him so he can keep me safe.

I need to escape so I can get home to my son.

Whatever happens, I can't let him find out about Sasha.

Demyan

The moment I lay eyes on the kid I know he's mine.

She kept him from me and for that she needs to be punished.

I lock her away and refuse to let her see our son,

making sure she knows that she belongs to me now.

When the lives of those I love are threatened,

I join forces with an enemy,

I make a promise that will ruin my life.

because I have to keep them safe.

F*ck the consequences.

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Chapter One

ERIN

I hate red eyes.

The late-night flight to New York's JFK had a mom with a screaming kid on one side and a man-spreader on the other. The mom and kid I normally wouldn't mind, but I'd barely slept the night before the flight, and I had to be in a boardroom pitching a new ad campaign, the biggest of my career, the moment my car picked me up at the terminal.

The car that was late.

And now... after a day that started with a quick bathroom change and a baby-wipe bath and mind-numbing presentations, topped off with a sweaty subway ride to the Maynard Hotel on West Seventy-Second and the Park, an old swank hotel full of yesteryear's grandeur, I'm ready for the bar.

The hotel's sandstone exterior and intricate black wrought iron on the doors and Juliet balconies are stunning. Inside, the lobby's marble, rich reds, brass accents, and cherrywood finishes make it a place I'd want to stay for more than a night.

But first, I need to check in.

"I'm sorry, Miss Banks, but your room isn't ready yet."

I stare at the concierge. “Not...” I try to find the right words that don’t involve an explosion of swearing. “Not... ready?”

“I’m sorry.”

“But check in is at noon. It’s almost six o’clock.”

The concierge smiles his practiced smile. “There was a mix-up, but the room will be ready in half an hour.” He taps something on his computer. “Make it one hour. And dinner is on us. The restaurant here has a Michelin star.”

He clicks some more and slides a key to me. “For when it’s ready. Top floor. I’ll come personally and let you know. If you’re heading out for the evening...” His eyes move over me. “We’ll let you change and clean up in one of the empty rooms.”

I try to regulate my breathing. “Just give me whatever’s ready now.”

“Trust me, you don’t want one of those.”

“I’ll be at the bar,” I mutter, taking the key and throwing a thank you over my shoulder.

I head straight for the sleekly curved, gleaming cherry-red wood and sit on the barstools, trying to smooth out the wrinkles in my dress. The bartender comes over, a good-looking guy, the type who knows it, and his easy smile has women lined up at the bar. I order a gin and tonic, and he asks for my room number. I hesitate.

“There was a mix-up and...”

“We also take cards,” he says.

I dig mine out of my purse and put it down. Everything on the room is charged to the company. Anything outside that's out of pocket. Apart from the car service provided. But Manhattan traffic can be so bad that taking the subway's faster to get downtown to where the meetings are in the Financial District.

That's something I learned the hard way last time I came to the Big Apple.

As the bartender puts my drink down, someone leans over me and whispers in my ear, "Hey, baby, you wanna hit the town or just paint your room red?"

I laugh and spin around, hugging my best friend, Kara. "Are you talking about turning it into a murder scene?"

"No!" She stops and gets the giggles as she takes the seat next to me, and my night suddenly cheers right up. "I got the thing mixed up; it's paint the town red or go to your room?"

Kara pushes her black curls over her shoulder, taking in the old school swank, the cherry red of the bar, the velvet seats and brass fixtures. "Oh my. Are you boning Old Man Clearwater?"

"He's about seventy."

"And he likes them young," she says about our boss. The owner of the entire company.

I smack her playfully on the arm as the bartender finishes serving someone else and comes over, taking his time and drinking her in.

"What can I get you?"

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Somehow, I manage not to roll my eyes at the slink in his voice as he basically asks her to get naked for him with his gaze and tone.

Kara being Kara doesn't notice, and she just turns to me. "You know you need to drink a Manhattan when in Manhattan, not a G and T."

"A regular Manhattan," he asks, "or a Maynard Manhattan?"

"What's in that?" Kara's one for actual fancy cocktails. And she leans on the bar, her big brown eyes on the bartender.

To his credit, he doesn't self-combust. "It's like a regular Manhattan but smooth, like butterscotch and it's got an extra kick."

"Sold." She straightens, slams a hand on the bar, and grins. "I'll have two. And she'll have one. Not all at once, but after this round..."

He heads off to make the drink for Kara and I sip what she thinks is a drab gin and tonic. But for me, the drink's a workhorse, dependable. I always know what I'm getting and if they use one of the newer, fancier gins and some small batch tonic, then that's a perk. Actually, mine is pink and tastes elevated, so I assume he did that.

"I'm not sleeping with the big boss." I pause. "Or any boss. Or coworker." Then I swallow. "Or anyone."

"Erin, I'm sorry, I..." She trails off, squeezing my hand. "I didn't mean anything by the joke. I've stayed here before, but I'm staying in New York longer than you, so

I'm somewhere a little less..." She rubs her fingers together. "Fancy."

"I know it was a joke."

She leans in. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." I try to think of something to change the subject. The room snafu would be perfect. With a sip, I turn to her just as her drink is delivered to her, and she gets drawn into a conversation with the bartender, who clearly wants to see her outside of work.

Thing is, Kara's my best friend—sweet, feisty, spirited, loyal Kara—and I think she might be more hurt than me over her brother's cheating.

Well, okay—not in all ways. There's still a giant piece of my ego and self-esteem lying on the floor with everything else he reduced to scraps.

Three years of my life. Three. And I honestly don't know if Toby, who came across as being just as loyal, had been cheating on me the entire relationship. I don't even get the bittersweet victory of ending things.

No, he did that two months ago—went to town, chewed me up and spit me out like I was nothing. And I let him.

Hell, I was so blindsided, so gobsmacked that words couldn't even form when he told me he'd found someone better, someone he'd been seeing for a while. Someone who rocked his world.

If I'd been a dude, he'd have told me she had a bigger dick than mine.

As it was, he told me they clicked she was glamorous, gorgeous, and had

ginormous—He didn't actually drop the ginormous tit bomb. But his new piece sounds like a cross between a porn star and Marilyn Monroe.

Yep, I dated my best friend's brother and didn't even get the T-shirt.

I suck down the rest of my gin, and the bartender actually tears himself away to return with my next drink, the Maynard Manhattan.

Before he can resume his position, a group of people in fine suits and gorgeous dresses enter. After-work crowd? High-end visitors? I really don't know. Behind them sits a dark-haired man, in a bespoke suit, alone, tapping his fingers on the bar. A lowball glass rests in front of him, along with his phone. He glares at the screen, nodding and occasionally speaking into what I assume is his Bluetooth earbud.

Then the crowd blocks my view, and the bartender steps in to serve them.

The crazy little beat in my veins stops its thrumming the moment he's out of sight.

I turn back to Kara. "Try it, Erin!"

The damn drink is like butterscotch and the smooth hit of warming bourbon, an extra kick from something else, and the vermouth. I'm not a big drinker, but I've worked on enough ad campaigns to have done my duty tasting the products at parties—and pitching ad campaigns that won awards for others.

"It's good." And I smile. I know her; she'll want to head out and party. She's here for a few weeks; I'm leaving tomorrow night. Another damn red-eye from JFK.

Kara fusses with the edge of her dress. It's borderline too short for the office, but Kara is tall and dark like her brother, and she can pull off whatever she wants. Besides, she always brings her A game.

“How’d the meeting go?”

“There’s a second one tomorrow. And... I’m taking the credit or the fall, but I think they’re going for it. They were on the fence about tomorrow, but now they want that meeting.”

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Her eyes flash as she grins. “You go, girl!” Then her smile fades. “You know I want to say I’m sorry my brother did that to you. I mean, I’d picked out my bridesmaid dress. I hate her. And I’m so mad at him.”

“It’s not her fault. He was the one in a relationship finding fresh pussy. I don’t even know if she knew about me. He made it sound like she didn’t. The?—”

I stop. It’s her brother. And a fancy bar.

“We’ll go out?—”

“I’ve got that meeting, remember?”

Kara sips her drink. “I just don’t want you to be lonely. I want you to have fun, Erin. I want us to have our own advertising company. Modern.”

“Everton and Banks?”

“And I hate that he might have ruined that.” Her eyes narrow. “Call me shallow.”

“You?” I say. “Never. And I’m totally fine, totally over him. I can’t remember his name.”

“You should. He’s a terrible excuse for a human.” She squeezes my hand. “And that’s why we should go out. Find you a hot man and practice your filthy low-down rebound sex on.”

I laugh and hug her, right as the bartender puts her next drink down. Then he's off. It's busy now, so he can't interrupt. "I'm not doing that. You should get his number."

"The imaginary rebound man?"

"No, the bartender."

"Go find a hot man to fuck and make Toby shrivel up inside. I'll get T-shirts printed of you and Hottie McHotFace."

A groan slips free. "Toby's your brother; you don't have to hate him for me. I appreciate you more than you could know."

But she straightens, finishes her first drink and puts it down, then eats the curl of lemon rind. "Candied," she says. Then she looks me up and down. "What he did to you was low, Erin. Not worthy of the name Everton, and not worthy of you. I'm going to make sure he never forgets it."

"I love you, Kara."

"I love you." She grins. "Let's go out."

"Dinner? We can have some here."

Kara sighs, saying, "I guess I could eat."

The food's excellent, and we have wine with it.

After dinner, we continue our fun conversation—I've missed that spark she brings to the gossip and mundane tales since we don't work in the same department. She's into computers and loves packaging pitches, but they have her stuck doing admin work at

Clearwaters. The company is on the edge of hip—just old-school enough to be cool—but she hates handling admin accounts if she doesn't get to be creative. Which they don't allow.

Even me, who's clawed her way up from my first intern job there as a freshman in college, had to pay dues photocopying, doing the duller parts of copywriting, of graphics before they cottoned on to my skills and then just took my input and turned it into their successes. Luckily, the CEO took a chance on me this time. And I'm determined to make it happen.

And then when we put in enough time, by age twenty-eight, three years from now, I hope we can walk to start our own agency.

But there's a lot of sweat and finger-bleeding thankless times between now and the future. Things are changing for me. I can feel it. So I can't fuck this up.

When Kara starts in again, this time about some cool place in Brooklyn, just over the Williamsburg Bridge, I concede to another drink at the bar.

"Fine, but you're missing out," she says.

I laugh. "I don't need that kind of hangover. Tomorrow's big. Especially if you want to grab our dream."

"I said fine."

We head back to the bar and stick to wine, and I don't say anything as Kara orders another bottle for us on my tab. She doesn't know the tab's my personal card, but I can afford it. I've got a trust fund. The upside of dead parents, I guess.

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We jump around topics, landing on favorite comedy, the cutting edge one that's set here in the Big Apple on Netflix.

"So," Kara says, topping off our drinks from the bottle, "about that casual sex?"

"It's not my style and you know it. I've never had a one-night stand."

"Are you sure?"

"I think I'd know."

She rolls her eyes. "I meant the casual sex. Because there's a hot and sexy man who keeps checking you out."

I'm saved by the concierge, who comes over and gives me a key card. "For your room, Miss Banks."

"That," I say as he disappears, "is my cue to leave."

"With the hot man?"

"Alone."

"If you don't go for him," Kara calls out as I get up to go, "I will."

I turn back and laugh. "Knock yourself out."

The elevator takes me up to the top floor and when it opens; I check the card and the number. But lucky for me, I don't have to use it as the door's open, a maid coming out of it. Hurrying, I hold the door for her and her cart, which is loaded with fresh towels that steam.

When I step inside, I'm in another world.

I grew up well-off. But this... this is another thing completely. There's a ground floor with a large lounge suite and TV and a bathroom that looks like something out of Vogue. There's even a balcony. A real one.

There are other rooms, but I hurry up the sweeping stairs to the immense room. A king-sized bed dominates it and there's another bathroom, this one with a view from the bed to a giant claw-foot tub set against a window overlooking the park. I press a button and the windows darken a little, but I can still see out and a thrill passes through me. Tinted. And as I turn to the vanity, there's a towel, wet, steaming, and scented. I pick it up and hold it to my face.

I'm in heaven.

What I should do is work on tomorrow's meeting, but I know it backward—every word of my presentation all the counterpoints. And I'm a little tipsy and need to wind down. So instead, I fill the bath, pouring in some of the spiced scented oil. I can't place it, but it's divine, with a hint of dark sugar to it, clean and rich and something I sort of want to eat.

Then I strip and sink in.

It's so relaxing I could do with a drink and my Kindle or an actual book, but doing nothing is Zen, too.

I'm half dozing when something shakes me. Footsteps.

My skin buzzes and before I can do a thing other than start to sit up, a shadow falls over me.

"I didn't order an escort," says a deep voice of fine gravel, "so would you mind explaining what you're doing in my room?"

Panic hits. And before I can scramble up, he's there and I can't breathe.

The man from the bar. Dark hair. Bespoke suit in the richest blue-hued charcoal. He's tall—much taller than I guessed in my brief glimpse—and he's older.

Even better-looking.

My mouth goes utterly dry. But I manage to gather my wits and glare. "This is my room. How the hell did you get in?"

"Role-play? Didn't order that, either, though if I did, it wouldn't be quite so... mundane."

Outrage takes me over, and I rise from the water, intent on kicking him out, intent on?—

He's staring at me. Ice-blue eyes, like the tundra, are on me and melting fast as his gaze traces over my wet breasts and my nipples tighten, and then when he's had his fill, he drops to my bare pussy.

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Bare.

Oh. My. God.

I'm naked. I squeal and start to step back, and my feet slip.

He's there in an instant. Electric hot fingers on my wrist, holding me up. I can't look at him and instead look past him to the open closet. There's a tux. And shoes. And now that I'm looking, there's a shaving kit, too. A sonic toothbrush in black on a stand. How... On the bed's a briefcase and a key card.

The key card.

That's how he got in.

I want to die.

I'm in the wrong room.

But something warm, soft, and somehow less pleasing than his hand presses against my front. My collarbone.

"Yeah," he says, humor lacing his voice. "The last thing I want is the high-class escort with mundane role-playing game fantasies suing my ass after falling in the tub."

"This is your room?" I swallow. Hard. Because I still can't look at him and behind

him, on the vanity, is a glass of golden liquid, and I can smell that pleasant sugared scent of whiskey on him with him so close.

“It is.” He helps me out of the tub and I wrap the towel around me, clocking his ice-blue gaze, not lifting as I do so. “Do you mind telling me what you’re here for, aside from the... obvious.”

Does he mean bath? Then heat flashes through me as he steps back to get his drink and leans back against the vanity. I catch a glimpse of a blonde wild child trapped in icy headlights in the mirror, but I turn my gaze to him from my reflection. “Apart from the hooking?”

His mouth curves and my heart throbs, and down deep between my legs, I tingle. It’s a hell of a sexy smile. “I said escort.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Money and class,” he says, “and you’re nothing like any escort I’ve met.”

I somehow withhold a snort. “Met many?”

His grin widens and then vanishes behind his glass as he takes a sip. “A few.”

“So...” I say, “I’m not your first?”

“Oh, you’re definitely a first.”

I gather my flailing thoughts. I’m naked under a towel and it isn’t mine. “Can you turn around while I dress... Actually, get out of here. Please.”

“I’ll let you dress.”

Oh fuck. Oh, holy shit. Oh, everything. I slip my dress on, which has seen better days, and try to pull it from sticking to my damp skin. I rush down the stairs and almost run into him. With a stumble back, I put up my hands.

“I’m sorry, I thought... there must have been a mix-up.”

He holds up my key card. “Right card, wrong room.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. Oh hell, is he good-looking, and I can’t read his expression. This man, this room, is out of my league. “I just thought they hadn’t sent up my bag. I... there was a mix-up, and they upgraded me. I’m here for some meetings and I’ll go. I’m sorry.”

I start for the door, but he just holds out a drink. “What’s the rush? You’re here now, on the clock.” He smirks and winks at his little joke. “So you might as well join me for a drink.”

And even though it’s not something I do, I nod. “Okay.”

I take the drink.

Chapter Two

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DEMYAN

Of all thefucking things I figured today would throw at me—and it's been a whole damn lot—a naked little blonde in my bathtub wasn't on that bingo card.

She sips the whiskey, her nose wrinkling with each swallow like she's not used to it the way I drink it.

So, I place an order with room service. Vodka and caviar blini with all the trimmings and a bottle of Krug. I then motion for her to sit, slightly disappointed in the dress. It's creased and is clearly made for office work. She's the blonde I noticed when I went to the bar much earlier. She and her stunning friend had been there, and I... well, let's just fucking say I had balls to crush into dust.

Something I don't like to do over the phone, but in this case...

Fucking Aleksandr. Fucking amateur. Thinking he can take my spot, thinking he can waltz in and... I take a swallow of the whiskey.

It was a long evening.

Balls were crushed.

After my evening appointment and not, unfortunately, Aleksandr's.

I'm not even here for business. Not this weekend.

“I really should go,” she says, gripping her glass like it’s the holy grail. “I’m keeping you and I need to get?—”

“Sit. Drink. Stay. You claim you’re here on a business trip, but I say you’re an escort.” I look her up and down, the image of those soft, gorgeous tits with the cherry-red nipples and rose petal areolae still sparking and throbbing in my head.

All of her really, from that perfect fucking pussy, bare, closed lips, small lips, the kind I could suck on and—With effort I drag myself up from the gutter, one I’d like to explore with her.

But she’s angelic. The damp blonde halo of hair, and the big hazel eyes add to that thought. As does the blush she wears like it’s makeup, lighting her cheeks, the column of her throat.

The woman’s not overly tall, not to me, and she’s a little on the thin side. Her legs are long, though. And the way her hands flutter when not holding the glass, I’d say she’s not sure why she said she’d stay for a drink.

I’m glad she has, though. Not that I wanted company tonight, or thought I wanted it. But she’s like an unexpected refreshing breeze, the kind of thing on a stinking hot, humid New York summer day a man likes to bask in.

And fuck, I’m losing what’s left of my goddamn mind.

“Maybe,” she says, trying again, “I should go. I feel like I’m holding you up. I saw the tux.”

Damn, but the blush deepens.

“Fishing?”

“I forgot my rod.”

The words I’ve got it right here, Lyubimaya, sit on my tongue and I swallow it down. I don’t mind crudeness. It has its place. But not with her. I’m not planning on fucking her. Just having some fun.

Unwinding.

Still, my mouth twitches and I top off my drink, holding the bottle of Japanese whiskey to her. She shakes her head and sets down her drink and stands.

I take a sip. Her hips are nicely rounded. I’d been distracted when she was naked in my bathroom, but now I notice. Not wide, but with a curve and a small waist. Exquisite—that’s the word. From her quiet prettiness to the boring dress and bare feet, like she’s part woodland fairy, part desk jockey.

Fuck. “I’m not sure I should let you go,” I say, keeping my tone light. “I’m still getting to the bottom of your being here.”

“I told you?—”

“That you’re the world’s most unusual lady of the night.”

Her lips press together, but the light dances in her eyes.

So I go further. “Tell me, is the B and E your special brand, or was tonight your first time?”

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She makes a sound like shock and hooks a strand of her blonde hair behind one ear. “Are you asking if I’m branching out?”

“Yes.”

“A girl’s got to have a backup career, you know? But no,” she says, her soft, rich voice that’s like music plays in the air, the humor threading around me. “It’s just the first time I’ve been caught.”

Her comeback has me rooted to the spot. The blonde doesn’t have a clue who I am, and that’s fucking refreshing. Not to be labeled a deadly member of the bratva is somehow freeing and it makes me a little drunk.

“And caught you are.”

“I should go,” she says again, big eyes on me like she doesn’t know if she wants to run or come closer.

Luckily or unluckily for her, there’s a knock, and I just put a finger to my lips and go to the door, accept the cart from the server, tip him cash, and wheel it in.

“And leave me with a bottle of champagne, caviar, and blini? Should I add cruel to your list of careers?”

“I’m not sure there’s a career in the cruelty business,” she says, smiling, shoulders relaxing.

There are so many, but I'm not in the mood to crush her in any way, even if I had a reason to, which I don't. So I just make a sound like a laugh as I pop the cork.

Her big eyes light up at the bubbly, like she's never seen a decent bottle or been offered some. No, I'm not going to crush her, not even if she broke the fuck in. Besides, how does one crush a woman so... mesmerizing?

Mesmerizing because she's such a fascinating mix, and there isn't even a hint of any play with ulterior motives. Fuck, I don't even think there's play.

Pity...

I know the fact she got in here so easily should piss me off and make me want to spill blood or have heads roll, or at the very least have half the staff fired, something I could do. But it doesn't. Instead, I pour the champagne and hand her one, my fingers brushing hers. She jerks a little, like the fire that seared along my arm did the same to her, and yeah, I wouldn't mind seeing where this goes.

"Drink up, eat up, Lyubimaya. Keep me entertained." I sit opposite her on the big white sofa, twin to hers. The curtains are open, privacy turned on so no one outside can see in, and the views of Central fade to nothingness with her.

"Are you sure?" she asks, voice soft and hesitant and a note of something else in there, something like longing, and for a moment, she isn't looking at me as a vulnerable expression slices across her face.

Maybe there is some mudák who needs crushing. Someone who hurt her.

"I'm sure."

She doesn't breathe out in relief. Her breath is shallow and her fingers not holding the

glass, clutch at the hem of her dress. “I’m not... I’m not being presumptuous or thinking... thinking anything’s going to happen, but... you’re not married? You don’t have a ring. A girlfriend?”

“Lyubimaya, if I was married, I’d wear a ring and you wouldn’t be here. I don’t cheat. After all, if I had a girl, why would I need the charming, bathing beauty escort slash burglar?”

She breathes a little easier. With a sip of her champagne, her eyes flutter shut and a look of pure bliss crosses her face.

It delights me.

“Maybe,” she says, “you’re a villain.”

That hits home, but she has no idea who I am. I offer her the grin of the big bad whatever. “And you’re a tasty morsel?”

My soft words send a quiver through her, and I pull back. I want her. I know that. But she needs to breathe, relax. I stand and prepare a blini, dipping the silver spoon into the caviar. “Want one?”

“I haven’t...”

“Fuck me, you haven’t had one of Mother Russia’s favorite dishes?” I hold mine out. “Here.”

She takes it and bites into it, a moan sliding free as her eyes flutter again. “Oh my God. This is amazing.”

“Good caviar, made on premises blini. Have as much as you want.” I was peckish,

but now my hunger has veered into other arenas.

“I did have dinner earlier...” Her eyes are on the blini and she reaches out, pressing her finger on a stray black pearl, lifting it to her mouth and sucking it in. Then she blushes as her eyes dart to mine. “But I could eat more.”

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“I like a working girl who puts stamina first.” I’m pushing the line, walking the edge so close I’m in danger of toppling off. And the way her blush deepens is a delight. She knows exactly what I mean.

“I’m not sure these little salty morsels give stamina,” she says, crossing her legs and letting me see that smooth expanse of leg.

Our eyes clash as I look up.

Her blush is pure rose.

“Depends.”

I top off my glass. I’m being reckless, but I’m not looking forward to the weekend I need the fucking tux for. It arrived on time, fresh from being made for me. Alina doesn’t give a shit if I show up in a bespoke tux or if I’m in jeans. But I do.

My little sister is my one weakness; she’s my heart. But fuck the rest of them, hard.

Pity this tasty thing isn’t a hooker or high-class escort because I’d fuck her in a heartbeat and dress her up like a slut to take to Alina’s eighteenth birthday bash my father’s going all out for.

I’m already his biggest disappointment and I fucking hate that it eats at me, but shit, would I love to bring the blonde with me.

“On what?” she asks.

And my dick starts to get hard again. She was naked and glorious in my tub, after all.

“On how adventurous you are.”

“I’m—oh.” She catches on. Then her lips turn up in a smile. “I’m not sure you could afford me.”

I take the champagne and sit next to her, filling up her glass. “Do you see my suite? I can afford you.”

“This?” She shrugs. “A pittance. This is like the gutter to me.”

“Ouch.” She’s fucking funny, too.

She leans in. “I’m very, very expensive.”

“You might be worth it.”

“I—”

“Eat some more,” I say, cutting her off. It’s an order wrapped in soft silk, and I don’t miss the slight dilation of her pupils as she registers it in some part of her psyche. But she helps herself to more.

I want to push. I like to push. But the truth is, while I’d love to leap over that edge, I like having her here more.

I’m not a man who gives in to false modesty. The effect I have on women is... not legendary, but panties drop for me. Women will do what they can to get at me—my cock, my money, and my power. And I’m not above using any of those to get what I desire.

But this one... she's a different game and I think I could sit here and just flirt, keeping it on the right side of decency. Just.

"I really am sorry for the mix-up," she says, blushing again, and a slow burn of annoyance starts. "I should have paid more attention when entering your room and I just wanted to relax and take that bath and... I used your hot towel. That's why the maid service came in so late, isn't it? They knew you were coming."

I take her face in one hand, turning it, making her face me. And I try like hell not to think about the soft warm silk of her skin or the fact if I slipped my hand down, I'd have my fingers on the hot beat of her pulse.

"This is your problem, how exactly?" I ask, keeping my voice even.

"I should have looked." She drops her eyes to the blini in one hand and she turns all pinched, like she's done something wrong, and the annoyance flares close to anger.

"Not. Your. Fault." Her eyes dart to me. "Let me ask you something. Who made you so apologetic, gave you that nugget of down-on-yourself and it's all your fault?"

The blush that rises is enough to let me know it was a man and I entertain some light fantasy murder.

"I'm—"

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“Don’t apologize again,” I say, letting her go.

She finishes her blini. I wouldn’t mind one, but... I’m fucking hard and she’s too close.

“Relax. You made a mistake. Someone should’ve seen you to your room.” And heads will roll, which isn’t her concern.

That’s mine.

One I look forward to.

“But you’re a welcome distraction.”

“I am?”

“You, the bath? That’s either a distraction or an attention grabber. Definitely the latter when you’re in there. The former now, because, damned if I try not to, my brain keeps snagging on that.”

She drains her champagne as her pupils dilate, and bless her innocent heart, she drops her gaze to my crotch where I’m sure she can see what she’s doing to me. I’m not advertising it, but I’m not hiding it, either.

“Are you sure you’re not going out and I’m stopping you? The tux...”

“No, Lyubimaya, it arrived tonight, rush job from one of the finest tailors in town. Not

Milan or Paris or even the UK. This is one who's hidden in Chinatown, who does the most exquisite suits. And the rich and famous who go are always asked who they're wearing, but they never tell."

"The same one who made the suit you're wearing?"

I loosen my tie. "Da. My little sister's turning eighteen, so it's a big-ass bash. And I got that for her."

"She wears men's suits?"

I smile. "Funny. No, she's got some slinky number that'll hopefully give the old man a heart attack." I'm still smiling, but the steel that's pierced my tone isn't.

I fucking hate my father. Demyan, you're never good enough. Demyan, you disappoint me. Another scandal, Demyan?

The list goes on. The asshole never acknowledges the work I do. The money I make him, the order I keep when people like Aleksandr try to rise up.

And the more he pushes me, not to be better, stronger, deadlier, but to be more like him, the more I fight back. I'll do things my way. He's a fossil, a dinosaur, last of the old guard.

There's a reason the bratva is changing; the different factions are splintering or joining. The power shifts are something he's got to feel but clearly refuses to let it in.

I wish I could walk, but it's my birthright and I want it before he destroys it all. But until that time comes, I enjoy my scandals that work twofold. One, they piss my father off, and two, they make friend and foe alike underestimate me.

Only those close to me know the ice in my veins, my utter ruthlessness and razor ways with business. I don't give too many chances. Exactly three. And then goodbye forever.

To life.

She looks at me, a slight frown marring her brow. "You don't mean that."

I do. But I flip the subject. "It's been a long day for me, too. But you're here and you're... lovely."

Thing is, I love the scandals and I'm half thinking of convincing her to stay and come with me as my inappropriate date; however, scandal to fuck my father off is one thing. Scandal that'll have the potential to ruin Alina's party is another.

But I have a reputation; I move through these scandals like a fucking hurricane. I sleep with whatever sexy woman I want, whoever catches my attention.

And this one...

I top off her champagne.

Maybe she's the distraction I need. For tonight. And maybe she'll save a head or two of the staff along with their jobs. "Do you have a name?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. It's Erin."

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“Pleased to meet you, pretty Erin.” I take her free hand and kiss it. She smells like my products and warm lavender honey. It’s an insanely evocative mix.

And with that, I know I want to mix our scents more.

But first... I lean in, closing the gap, a flash of anticipation rioting through me as she subconsciously tips her chin. An offer. It’s better than me stealing it.

I take it and feather my lips against hers, the warm lavender honey of her a subtle twist around me as her mouth opens a little. Storming the gates is totally my style, but not this time. The strike’s underhanded, a taste of seduction and one I’m not immune to.

The tip of her tongue touches mine, and I take it as an invitation to deepen the kiss. I flip it into a deeper taste. She’s soft and warm, salt and fruit and the richness of her. And when she makes a tiny sound, leaning in and opening further, I skate the line of decency.

She tastes like desire and innocence. Of sex and deep, untested wells of passion. And she’s sweet, but the shake to her is an invitation all its own and I want entry to every part of her. All of it. Now.

Fuck. I end the kiss.

Erin blinks and her cheeks hold a subtle flush that I want to see if it goes all the way down.

“D-do you have a name?” Erin asks.

I toss back the rest of my champagne and set the glass down, and I don’t let go of her hand. It’s warm and sends little pricks of delight through me.

“Of course I do. But this will be much more fun if you don’t know it.”

“What will?”

“You and me,” I say, “naked. I know you felt that need, too. There in our kiss.”

She doesn’t move.

“You can get up and walk out. Fuck, I’ll even walk you to your room or to the elevator if that’s what you want. But if you want to stay...”

Erin swallows. “What?”

“You don’t strike me as a one-night stand girl, but there is fun in that. So if you stay...” I get up and she does too, pulling her hand to her side. “If you choose to stay, you’re going to be thoroughly fucked. I’ll make you come so hard you won’t be able to walk straight, and you’ll see stars for weeks.”

I take her in. I honestly don’t know which way she’s going to go. Give in to the want I keep seeing in her eyes or run.

I smile. “So.” I step closer to her, holding out my hand. “Are you staying or leaving?”

Chapter Three

ERIN

I'm a rabbit caught in the middle of the highway at night and he's the truck with bright, mesmerizing headlights bearing down on me.

I know I should run, get out of harm's way.

But I don't.

This man he... he wants me.

My mouth still buzzes with that truth. His kiss has imprinted deep, reaching down to stroke between my thighs. I'm aching deep inside, my clit throbbing.

And I'd love to say my reaction to him has blindsided me, but it hasn't. I've been too aware of his gaze, of him, not to react. But this man wanting me?

I can't believe it.

Men just don't.

Some of them specifically cheat to get away from me. And this man, this insanely good-looking and sexy man, is eyeing me—kissing me—like I'm hot.

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He wants me.

So, yeah. I'm trapped in his headlights.

His words swirl in my mind, and I lift my head to meet the ice-blue of his eyes. Right now, they're flames of pale-blue fire and I want to test that heat.

"Staying or going?" he asks again. That low voice does things down deep. I've no idea who he is apart from perhaps of Russian descent or one of the countries from that area. He's pure American in speech, but the foreign words are a giveaway—da, doubly so. It's the one word I pathetically recognize.

So what I know is he's seen me naked; he's perhaps of Russian descent, and he's very, very rich. Which is nothing at all.

There's one more thing.

He. Wants. Me.

That's something.

I swallow, taking in a shaky breath. "Staying," I whisper.

The world seems to go still as my word hangs in the suddenly charged air.

Oh, holy shit. Am I doing this? Stepping into the fray of one-night stands with the biggest bang possible? A rich man—whose name I don't even know—just

propositioned me, and it's beyond fantasy-tier level. I don't even do one-night stands.

But there's something about him. Mesmerizing, compelling. Something that I can't say no to. When he touched me... I can still feel the pads of his fingers and thumbs on my cheeks. Like he held me with a deep, dark pressure. That's the effect his gentle touch of skin on skin had.

A brand.

I'm drunk. Not on the booze I've had. On him. He's intoxicating.

And he's looking at me with a propriety gaze, like I'm his. Like I'm the only woman in the world. Tiny jolts of electric current spark down my spine.

"Staying?" he asks, even though his tone suggests he didn't think he'd hear a different answer; it's smug, masculine, triumphant. And it holds pleasures I want.

I don't do this. And I haven't wanted to get out there, my wounds still fresh, my self-worth down and sodden on the floor. Holding my own in the boardroom or a meeting is different than opening up to someone. Toby was the last guy I thought I'd do that for, and I trusted him with the inner me, the whole jumbled mix of who I am inside, and he threw it in my face, finding it—me—wanting. Finding someone else.

I shove it from my head.

I don't need that. I want this. Whatever fantasy this man is offering. And he's right, there's something extra lascivious about him not telling me his name.

"Staying."

"You and me," he says. "Fuck your ghosts."

“I don’t have any.”

“Lies.” His mouth twists up and the air throbs with unspoken needs and wants. “But leave the prick who made you hesitant at the door, Lyubimaya.”

How the fuck did he pick up on Toby? I’ve always been a little shy initially, but I’m not the closed-in thing I’ve become. Toby didn’t like flash or attention going to me. He liked me as his, at home. And I whittled away my downtime with friends, including Kara, for him. More time for me, more time to concentrate on my career.

But as I look back, I can see it. How I compromised for him, changed, let his criticisms and words get to me.

I smooth my fingers down my thighs, and I’m not sure what to do. He comes in, brushing me with his body, and I light up, wild, exhilarating. His erection is there, so there and?—

“Why the fuck do you hide your gorgeous form in this shapeless dress?”

“Work?”

“Hmm.”

He’s right. Before Toby, I never would have gotten this dress. I’ve never been sexpot style, but I had style and that’s gone too. How did I not even notice that? He got me down to be the woman he could have there, dull and dutiful and going nowhere, until he decided he wanted something else.

“Just a work dress.”

He comes in close, his mouth touching my ear, his breath warm, and my toes curl with the way it sends delight through me. “Promise me something, Lyubimaya. Never wear something like this again. You’re beautiful. And you do shine, despite this. Shine brighter. You should dazzle rooms. Fuck me, I noticed you when I was knee-deep in bullshit work at the bar. Imagine if you’re at full potential, Erin... Actually... I think I like you naked more.”

My breath catches. I’m so turned on I could burn the room down. And I want this man to rock my world hard. I can barely think, the thoughts melting and dripping through me, turning to want.

With him, I don’t need to worry about cheating. I never thought I had to with Toby either. Although, now, as I look back, I can see the signs. But this man? It’s one night. Him and me and pleasure.

And I’m taking it.

For once in my life, I’m taking what I want.

Maybe I’ve healed enough. The idea shocks me a little. Maybe all the damage done and all the work I’ve applied to me has me here, in a stranger’s hotel suite, saying yes to getting fucked hard.

“You don’t even know me,” I whisper.

He takes my face, caressing under my jaw as he maneuvers me back across the room until I hit something. The window. My whole being is on fire. “I know enough, and believe me when I say that I can have anyone I want. And right now, that’s you.”

“You think you can have me?”

“I know so. But more than that...” He lifts my chin so my mouth is close to his. “When I say I want you, I fucking want you more than anything in this moment.”

The bottom falls from my stomach, and I’m not sure I’m anchored to the earth anymore.

When he says those words, I believe him. There’s no need for sweet-talk. He laid out what he wanted, and I said yes. Not that the words are sweet. They’re visceral. Real.

For me.

I don’t think, I just pull him in and kiss him again, stretching up to put my mouth to his and his hand drops to my neck. He presses me in against the glass, taking his fill, kissing me deep. It’s an invasion, full of gunpowder, sweetness and something irresistibly moreish.

The kiss is full of dark promises of the kind of sex I don’t think I dream about, but I might just start now. Filthy, dirty sex, the kind that fuels a solar system. Our tongues dance and duel and the kiss turns feral. I want that wildness. I crave it.

But he breaks the kiss, and I’d have crumpled if he wasn’t holding me. He turns me and his fingers are deft as they stroke down my back, undoing the zipper. The dress slides off my shoulders, and he steps away, letting it fall to the floor, my bra with it.

He turns me back to him, and his mouth is slightly turned, but not in a smile, and that

look is proprietary, a spark to a fuse in me. I want that. In this moment, I want to be his. To be owned. To belong.

“Now, that’s a sight. You have gorgeous tits, Erin.”

To prove it, he ducks down, drawing one nipple into his mouth, his tongue and teeth playing over it, then he sucks and pulls with his teeth and it’s a live wire straight to my clit. I groan. He transfers his attention to the other one, and I’m wet, moisture soaks my panties and dampening my thighs. My pussy is a mass of tingling need.

Like he can read me, his hands skim low, between my legs.

“Wet for me,” he says, lifting his head, biting my bottom lip. “I’m going to need you spread out.”

He doesn’t wait, just sinks to his knees, and using his teeth, he pulls my panties down. The sexy stranger pulls them off and tosses them. Before I can do a thing, he’s there, between my legs, his tongue lapping at my thighs. I jump, moaning. My insides contract as a tiny bolt of pure pleasure shoots through me.

“Oh my God.”

He looks up. “I haven’t even started yet, darling, my Lyubimaya.”

And then he’s back at it, fingers parting my lips, sliding over my slickness, his tongue moving in, hot, soft, slightly rough. He licks me from my opening to my clit and I shatter.

“Fuck, Lyubimaya, I’m good, but not that good. Who the fuck was doing things wrong with you?”

He doesn't wait for an answer and dives back in, one hand pushing on my stomach, holding me up. My legs are pure liquid gelatin, and he's the only thing that keeps me standing. And his other hand. Oh, dear everything, his other hand... He licks and sucks, his teeth working me with gentle precision like he knows exactly what to do. What buttons need pushing, to keep me up there and to keep me from tumbling once more. And his hand...

He slides it back and forth as he licks and sucks. Palm. Side of his thumb. All the way from the perineum to meet his lips and then... then he pushes two fingers in me.

Before I can explode, because that one movement rockets me right up, he says against my clit, blowing breath on my wet, sensitive flesh, "Don't come."

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I pant, unable to form words, and I claw at the window, only vaguely registering that's where I am.

“Don't come unless I say. If you do, I'll turn the privacy off the window and I'll fuck your ass against it so all of Manhattan can see.”

And then he starts to move his fingers, sliding a third one in. He thrusts, curling his fingers as he rubs my G-spot and sucks my clit. Every single thing in me is focused on that, on the wild waves that undulate out, held back by at first him and how he changes his tactic, and then when he hits something steady, I have to.

And it's impossible. I'm trembling, sweating. My entire life is his fingers and tongue and teeth. It's the pleasure that builds, fighting against the agony of denial that brings its own sweet knife edge.

I need to come. I need it. The more I try not to think about what he's doing, that sweetness right there, the more I do. Soon it's consuming me whole.

When he adds his thumb to my ass, I scream, something I don't do. But I scream because it's weird. It's so unbelievably good. I'm so full and not full enough and how the fuck are his fingers magic?

“I-I-I can't?—”

I manage those words. And he starts in earnest, a rhythm that beats through me, setting everything into an inevitable crash and burn. And I'm lost, so lost, and I am the impending orgasm. I'm being transformed, and I need to be.

“I can’t... please... please... please let me come.”

“Come.” He bites down softly on my clit and it’s like an electrocution. I’m tossed up and into that storm and over the edge. I convulse and scream and cry, my pussy throbbing hard, clenching down on him, over and over.

Before I can do a thing, he pulls his fingers out.

And then slams them back in. I shriek. I’m too sensitive. I try to twist away, but that one hand holds me firm. The man’s strong. He puts his mouth back on me, going in harder, building me up. I can’t take it. It’s just too much.

“No, please,” I say, grabbing at him. But he doesn’t stop and suddenly, as he keeps going, something else starts inside, a deeper beat of orgasmic bliss beyond my clit and pussy. This comes from... I don’t even know where, but I stop fighting him as it builds and start tugging him to me.

I’m out of my mind. Wave after wave of reality-shifting pleasure hits and I’m not there yet. But he keeps pushing and I undulate against him, my fingers digging into his thick, soft hair, jerking him against me, and then I come apart. It’s like a supernova, a universe being born. It’s mind-bending. And my entire body is pleasure. Every single part of me.

Someone’s screaming, crying, pleading, and as the bliss starts to ebb down into the levels of normality, I realize with horror that it’s me.

He lets me go as he pulls free, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his suit. Catching me before I fall, he wraps around me, taking my mouth for a kiss that gives the orgasms a run for their money.

“Oh. My. God.” The words escape, and I try to uncurl my toes on the smooth, wide

floorboards.

“Now, that’s what I call a pussy,” he says. “Fucking delicious. So wet. And you’re the poster girl for responsive, Lyubimaya.”

“I’m not sure I can walk.”

“Then get on your knees.” The wickedness in his voice lights another fire in me.

I want to blow him.

I want to do something I stopped liking when I couldn’t do it good enough to please Toby.

A part of me balks. I don’t want his name in my head tonight.

As I start to go down, he grabs my arm, stopping me. “Believe me, Lyubimaya, I want my cock in your mouth more than anything, but something tells me you need some attention.”

I look away, take a breath. Fuck it. I’m naked and I’ve just been eaten out at a window by a man dressed in a bespoke suit. By one of the hottest men I’ve ever set my eyes on.

“Well, then,” I say, curling his tie around my fingers, “maybe we need to take this to the next level. Literally. After all, didn’t you promise to fuck me so hard I’d be seeing stars?”

“After you finish walking funny.”

Inside, I’m shaking, but I’m Erin, the former B&E expert tub-dwelling escort. I can

do this thing.

With that in my head, I walk, leading him by the tie, up the stairs and into the massive bedroom.

Then I let go of his tie and push him on the bed and climb on top.

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His grin rips into my heart. There's something so intimate about it that turns me on all over again, to the high and dangerous levels, and I lean down and kiss him.

But he's got different ideas. He slides his hands into my hair and brings my mouth to his, kissing me with soft, seductive kisses. They're deadly symphonies, designed to pull a woman apart and put her together, only to shatter her again and again. Every part of me is already thrumming and when he flips us so he's on top, I let him.

Let? I don't think this man can be stopped. He kisses his way down over me. Lips and cheeks, my throat, taking his time to lick and suck as he goes. It's golden liquid fire wherever he touches.

My hands, thighs, calves, feet. Back between my thighs. And to my mouth once more. He's everywhere. Almost like I'm on an altar and he's the priest worshipping me.

My heart and soul flutter at the thought and it's a warmth that spreads through me, from that one thing. Like I'm wanted.

He rises and strips.

I know he's done this countless times, seduced women. The honeyed forwardness of giving me an out, the way he asked me point-blank.

Not like he was showing off, but like it was nothing. Asking was nothing, but I was something.

My breath catches at that.

“You have an expressive face. Did you come to an epiphany about the asshole who hurt you, Lyubimaya?”

“I feel... wanted. For the first time in a long time,” I say, not hiding the tremor in my voice. “I feel beautiful, special, wanted. A prize.”

Again, that gem of a smile appears, and he pumps his impressive—thick, long—cock with one hand. “You are. All that. More. And I have tonight to show you just how much.”

He comes over to me and pushes my thighs apart. I expect... I don’t know, but not the soft kisses, the way he stretches me before pushing slowly into me.

“Fuck, you are tight.”

And he’s big. Too big. I know Toby was decent, but this man... holy cow.

When he’s all the way in, he wraps my legs around him and then he starts to move. Thrusting deep with moves that are deliberate, controlled, getting harder, deeper, never faster. But I’m shaking and moaning. The pleasure starts to beat. Shivery waves of heat.

He’s not kissing me. He’s watching me. And it’s intense. It’s breathtaking.

Every time I think I’m going to start to come again, he changes his pace until he groans and pulls out.

Before I know what’s happening, he flips me, pulling me to the edge of the bed, and he pushes me down a little. He grabs my hips and slams balls deep into me. A wave of pain that’s dull and tinged by something good ricochets. His balls slap up. He angles me again and when he thrusts in, it’s deeper, I’m narrower or he’s bigger, but I

feel him. Everywhere.

My pussy squeezes him, pulsating on its own. Like a tiny orgasm takes me.

But he doesn't slow his pace. His fingers dig into me, biting deep, and he starts to let loose, fucking me hard, like he's fucking every atom of me, and all I can do is moan and cry and plead and lift my hips, pushing back into him, greedy for even more.

I'm unspooling, coming apart, and I try and try to let the pleasure spin out. I try not to come, but with a grunt, he reaches around and rubs my clit and I explode, him immediately after, his cock twitching as his cum floods me in spurts, deep inside.

Trembling, I lay there as he collapses down on me, then eases out. Then he pulls me up to the top of the bed. A wave of exhaustion hits me. I don't know how long we've been at this. Minutes? Hours? I've come more than I did for the last year of my relationship and it's a revelation I can float on.

"That was..."

"Seeing stars?"

I grin into him, wiggling back, sticky, messy, sore, and he just throws an arm around me and holds me close. "Yes. Systems of them."

"Good."

"I can't keep my eyes open."

He smooths my damp hair from my throat and kisses it before hugging me in tighter. "Then don't."

I start drifting when he speaks again.

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“After all, I want you rested for round two and three.”

Two and three?

Oh, holy shit.

Chapter Four

DEMYAN

Erin.

Her name is Erin.

It's pretty. Like her. And she's fucking amazing in bed. Her cunt is tight. And she's so responsive it's a wonder I didn't come in my pants.

She's sleeping naked. One tit peeking out, her hip showing, the white of the quilt tangled, and her blonde hair is spread out around her.

I wasn't fucking kidding about the prick who hurt her.

So fucking obvious. Her hesitancy, the way she kept drifting to start with. Normally, that'd piss me the fuck off, but it was more like she was comparing and coming to some kind of realization.

Hopefully, it was one that told her if she could come like that with a total stranger,

then it was him and not her.

Of course, this isn't my business. She'll be gone by tomorrow and I need to get shit done. The party's tomorrow night, so I need to go to the jeweler's, a beautiful one, not a big name, to pick up the piece I'm having designed for Alina—a pendant, along with a belly button ring that my father would give birth to kittens over if he found out about. I know about the piercing. And I like the idea of her having something that's special for her, a secret. After all, I took her to the parlor for the piercing.

It was either that or Alina would have found someone subpar.

I shift my gaze from Erin to the phone in my hand and read the message again. It's late. If I head out at five to take care of this shit, then... I crush the phone tight.

She shifts behind me in the bed, a soft sound escaping her lips in sleep, and in the half light, I turn and set the phone down. Yeah, I've got time to indulge.

Taking hold of the quilt, I pull it off her, revealing her slender limbs, the fullness of her tits, and I start at her feet, kissing my way up, parting her thighs, and feasting on her sweet cunt.

Long slow licks are like a taste of heaven and she moans low, her hips undulating up and into me, rocking as her thighs spread. I push a finger into her. She's hot and wet, the narrow canal soft and inviting. The lips of her pussy are pinkish red, still swollen from me fucking her. I push her legs farther back, licking down, then all the way up as a slow spasm hits and she gasps. She's still mostly asleep, a sweet spot of vulnerable and pliability as I move up. My cock's hard again, needing warmth. I need to fill her with my cum once more.

Her pussy squeezed me last time like she milked me, and I already know what I'm going to do.

I want all her holes. I want to mark her.

Make her mine in some indelible way.

Even if we never meet again, which seems unlikely, she's number one in my spank bank and I want to imprint on her so deep that when she does the sweet slide, I'm her go-to.

I push into her as I rise up over her, thrusting slow and deep, and she's already coming. Her pussy is a fucking magicthing that clenches me, and I want to be in here forever. I kiss and bite her throat as her legs suddenly snap tight at my hips and she lets out a strangled little sobbing moan as she opens her eyes.

The lust and need and pleasure there fuel me and I fuck her harder, keeping the pace steady as her arms come around me. Erin makes tiny gasps, and they're pure fucking music. I pound into her harder, wanting to lift the pace, but keeping it where it is because I know she'll come around; the tiny ripples of aftermath of her orgasm that woke her tell me.

She seeks my mouth and I kiss her, hard. It's the kind of untamed filthy kiss I wanted to give her earlier, and now I do. I delve in deep, then I pull back, biting down hard on her lip and she comes around me, hard.

I don't stop. I pound harder, needing her to rise again and I know she will even as she tries to pull back. "Work for me. Give me all your orgasms. Give me your all, darling. Come."

She moans low. "I can't. I can't. It's too much." Her fingers dig deep into my skin at the back of my neck and she rocks up into me even as she starts to shake. "It's too... oh... my... God..."

Her “god” is a shriek in the air and she shatters, coming so fucking hard that I slam into her through it, riding her wave, my spine tingling all the way to my balls that tighten. I swear to fucking God my dick gets bigger, harder, and the ache there is borderline agony. I’ve never wanted to come so much in my life.

And her cunt crushes down on me over and over and finally that rush of pleasure, dark, sweet and wild, sweeps me and my cock jerks and twitches and I come deep inside her.

I roll off her onto my back, breathing hard. “I had to have you.”

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She pushes a mass of blonde hair from her eyes as she props herself up, hand on my abs, and she looks at me. “You know I’m going to have to charge you double.”

I start laughing, and it’s like a weight lifted one I didn’t know I had. “I’m not done.”

“What are you? A machine?” she asks, slightly breathless as her fingers softly stroke my belly, and unbelievably, I’m not because, like a sorceress, she’s performing magic and making me rise again. Her hand shifts lower, brushing my junk.

And her eyes go wide. “Oh my goodness, I think you are.”

“For you.” I want her. I can’t and won’t deny that.

But I like the ease of nothing between us, not even notions or a minute’s worth of history outside this room. It means we can be anyone we want and I want... I just want to play.

My day’s about to explode into a nightmare of logistics and possibly blood before it hits nine in the morning, and then—I don’t want to think about the bratva. I don’t want to think about the perpetual cloud of disappointment that’ll come and the sidestepping of taking care of the trouble coming before it arrives.

For Alina. That’s what I tell myself. For her. I do it all for her.

My father’s only redeeming quality is the love he has for his baby. But even then... I don’t trust him not to try to sell her to someone for a better alliance. So I’ll make those. To make sure her life is her own.

“For me?”

I smile again. Erin makes it easy, even though I’m not a smiler. I’m not one given to showing emotion, any cracks in my armor.

But. Again. This is a moment out of time.

“Yeah.” I turn my head, her fingers wrapping about my cock, pulling it lightly, her thumb exploring the head, that sensitive underside, and I groan. “So how much? Are you open to negotiations?”

“Like a twofer?”

“More like the whole package. There has to be a discount.”

“Don’t you have money since you can afford to book this suite?”

“Oh, Lyubimaya,” I say, capturing her chin as my cock jerks under her administrations, and I pull her mouth close. “That’s how you get rich. Bargains.”

She kisses me, laughter on her lips, then she pulls back. “I’ll see how you do.”

“Not all things in bargains are about money.”

She blushes hard. “Oh.” Her gaze goes to my cockhead and then back to me and she says, “I’m not very good at it.”

“False modesty,” I say, deliberately sidestepping her serious note. “Too bad I know better. All the best escorts can blow a man properly.”

She swallows, and though I’m teasing, she takes it as gospel and goes down on me

and the moment her lips meet my cock, the humor's gone.

I need to be in the back of her throat. I clench my teeth and let her play, explore. Erin licks along the veins, down to the base, and her tongue slips farther down, over my balls, and she sucks one. My hiss of breath seems to scare her.

And she backs off.

“Too good, darling. Way too good. Your mouth is also magic. Suck me in deep. As far as you can go and I'm gonna try to keep my hands to myself.”

“Why?”

“Because, Erin, I'll be fucking your throat like it's your cunt if I don't.”

“Oh.”

She starts in and I shove my hands behind my head and my body's a live wire of electric current as she does that.

At first, she licks around the head, cleaning up the pre-cum, licking me clean of our juices. She bathes my length, coming back up to the underside of the head that makes me shudder and clamp my teeth hard together.

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And then. Oh fuck. Then she sucks me in. Her teeth scrape a tiny bit. Just enough that gives it grit and edge, like I fucking love it. Rough and hard so I can throat fuck is the name of the game and here I am. Demyan fucking Yegorov letting a girl set the pace. She's young, no more than twenty-two or three, and I bet she can count the sexual encounters of her life on one hand with fingers to spare.

I really don't care. Not usually. Why should I want innocent? It's clumsy, boring. And my tastes run to older, more sophisticated women.

But there's something about her.

Something that crawls under my skin. Lights, matches, and sets things alight inside me and I'm struggling, really fucking struggling to find things to think about other than the mind-blowing head she's giving me.

Erin works me over, trying to fit as much in her mouth as she can. And she's struggling, but fuck, the way she tries, choking, sputtering, drooling, is one of the hottest things ever. This is an honest, enthusiastic blowjob and I'm so turned on it's a wonder I don't blow a fucking fuse.

She tries to go down and swallow me and she gags. The spasms of her throat work my cockhead and shit—I'm going to come if I let her keep going.

"No." I pull her off and up and I kiss her long and hard and deep. "That's not where I want to come. I want your ass."

"My—"

“I want all of you.”

She’s lost, and I take that and run. Her eyes are pools of sleepiness and satiation and the tendrils of arousal.

“I’ve never...” Erin looks at me and fuck, if there isn’t trust there. I don’t know why. Outside the fantasy, she’s got no reason to. And she shouldn’t. She isn’t anyone. She isn’t my tight inner circle. She’s a chick I decided I wanted to fuck.

The moment the thought hits, I want to take it back. Because regardless of the truth in those words, there’s the other thing I can’t deny. The fact there’s something spectacular about her. Special.

And she isn’t mine.

But tonight, she is.

“It’s up to you, Erin.”

“Caution to the wind,” she says, voice wobbling, “right?”

I’m up, halfway to the bathroom to get the lube I carry, when she speaks again.

“If... if I don’t like it, if I change my mind...”

I look at her. “We’ll stop.”

I get the lube and go back to the bed and it’s a wild out-of-body moment I have. Ass, mouth, pussy, I love them all. A hole is a hole as they say and the women I bed never say no. They’re hungry for it; they want to be a notch.

This woman, Erin. She isn't a notch. She's different, so the moment I'm ready to ease into her ass, if she changed her mind, I'd stop. I know it. Fuck, if she just wanted to make out like teenagers, I'd do that too. Her mouth is that good.

I kiss her, taking my time. Her throat is delicate, her pulse throbbing hard as I suck on it gently. I spread lube on my fingers, then I slide my thumb into her cunt and then my finger into her ass. I rock in and out of her, letting her get used to it before I add another finger. I'm biting and sucking on one of her nipples. That hard little nub, all that soft flesh, it's hard to not want to go to town and lose myself.

But I stretch her open before adding a third finger and when she moans and starts to rock, I slide farther down, sucking her clit and using my tongue to bring her up and into orgasm.

The moment she does, I pull out, and she's lost in it, so I move back up, hooking her legs on my shoulders. Grabbing my cock, I ease slowly into her, inch by inch.

"Oh. Oh. Oh." Her eyes go wide and she bites her lip.

I stop. When she doesn't protest, I push a little farther into her, more and more, until finally, I'm balls deep.

She's tight everywhere. Some guys might carry on about that, but it isn't one passage being tighter; it's the act, the feel. Her ass is a stretchy thing, so when she's used to it, I can slam home even harder than I can in her cunt.

I start to fuck her and there's real delight in her ass. I pick up my pace as she digs her fingers into my arms and she lifts to meet each thrust. I kiss her. I need her mouth. I need her tongue. I need all her magic. I'm fucking addicted to her.

She shakes and pulses, and she's fucking coming again. This girl is orgasmic. And

she has the insane ability of setting me off. The pleasure sweeps through me, and I ride through her orgasm. The intensity of it has her eyes rolling back and her scream is voiceless. She clutches at me, biting me on the shoulder, sinking her teeth in deep and sharp and setting off my own orgasm. I come in her deep, shuddering. When we both come down, we lay curled, her skin damp, arms boneless as she molds into me.

I brush my lips over her temple. “You okay, Erin?”

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“Better than okay. That was... intense. Intimate. I never thought...”

“About that bill...”

She rubs her cheek against me. “You can settle it in the morning.”

And I hold her until she drifts off. I hold her until I have to get up, pack, shower, and go.

Walking out that door on my one-night stand that’s breathed something into me is the hardest thing I’ve had to do.

Chapter Five

ERIN

I sit up suddenly.

Where am I? I blink, looking around, the sound of my buzzing phone and a nag in my subconscious snapping me from dream to real world in seconds flat.

“Oh, Toto,” I say to my phone, “this isn’t Kansas. At all.”

It’s not my room either.

And I’m naked.

In an opulent open-air room with light streaming through the floor-to-ceiling window, from here I can see I'm on the second floor and across the vast floor is a sweeping staircase. To the right is a huge closet that's empty.

Something snaps.

Just like that, everything falls into place.

I'm in the hotel suite of the man I had insane sex with for half the night. I can't even get dreamy, as the light tells me it's later than it should be. And—Fuck. I've got that presentation.

My phone buzzes again, and it's from work.

Meeting moved to the end of day. Flight back at midnight. Enjoy the morning. I think they'll green-light it. See you at 4.

A slow smile takes over as warmth floods me.

I don't have to be anywhere and I'm in the lap of luxury. After a night out of an X-rated fairy tale. The night... this morning in the early hours, was incredible. A dream. I did things I've never done, never thought I would. And he made me come so much my clit flutters with sparks of delight just thinking about it.

The most gorgeous and hottest man I've ever met looked at me and found me alluring. He wanted me. More than that, he treated me like I was a treasure. It's not like I've gone around sleeping with many people. There was one other before Toby, and I fooled around with my boyfriend in high school, but that was just kid stuff. We touched, never even did the whole mouth to fun bits part.

But this man. This man. He... lit my entire world up. He was amazing.

And if I'm honest, it's not just the fact he made me come so much and fucked me so hard. It's how he kissed and touched me everywhere, made little jokes, and he not only learned what I like, he showed me what I like. I don't think I ever knew myself as a sexual being before.

With Toby, he never paid attention; he never took time to get me off first. He tried once, and after that, I learned to pretend. He went down on me maybe three times. And... ugh. What had I been thinking? Three years with Mr. Mediocre when there was a world of better men out there.

I smile and reach out to touch his pillow, and my heart stills. It's cold. As are the sheets.

Then I look around.

The closet's empty and even from here, I can see theremnants of his using the bathroom up here, the sexy one with the giant bathtub. The rain shower's glass is spotted with water but not steamy. I get up and pull on the robe that's draped on the end of the bed, turning the edges up to breathe in the scent, hoping it's him, but it just smells fresh and unworn.

There's no sign of him other than the shower. All his things are gone from the vanity. Turning, I go downstairs. There's no case, no briefcase. No sign of him.

My heart hits my feet. It really was a one-night stand.

He's gone.

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On the coffee table between the sofas is a hotel notepad. And in strong writing is a note.

Order room service. Finish your bath. Everything is paid for.

I study the note, struggling with the sudden emotions that swirl through me. He left without saying goodbye?

Then again, why should he? It's what people do with one-night stands, right? They have sex and move on without the awkwardness of the morning after. That's the point. No strings and you never have to see the person you had sex with again.

I sink onto the sofa.

"Too bad, because the sex was pretty fucking mind-blowing." And I think he felt the same. He couldn't get enough of me and in my limited experience—in my Toby years, I should say—that didn't happen.

A guy didn't keep getting it up over and over for a woman he wanted because he was bored. Right? "Right?"

Then I spot something.

My suitcase, in the little alcove near the door. I don't know why, but it somehow calms me. There's a thoughtfulness to it, having it moved in here. I can't even remember how long I told him I'd be here, but then again, it's not like I get squatter's rights when checkout comes around.

Since I have most of the day... I check my phone. It's eight a.m. Yep, I slept late. I'd have already been up, prepping for the day. And I can still do that in here. Get out my computer, go over my presentation, and have breakfast.

The menu's exclusive for up here, it seems, as I pick up the print menu. I can also order online, but there's something quaint about doing it the old-fashioned way, running a finger down over everything until something catches my eye. I order and when it arrives, maple yogurt, berries, and granola, along with a fresh juice and a coffee, I get to work.

Thing is, while I can eat and work, my body keeps sending tingles through me, all of them loaded with sense memories of moments from last night and the early hours. His tongue on my nipple, teeth against my throat. Tongue in my mouth.

Fuck, he tasted divine, like someone had distilled the best parts of a man. And his scent was subtle. The bath oil I used, that was him. And the spiced dark sugar, which wasn't sweet, just a rounded and complex scent, had whiskey in there, too. The heat of it. And I need to stop because I'm starting to throb with need.

I'm not really sure how I can since I'm just a ball of ache and sore muscles I never knew existed. My ass... even that kind of wants him again. It was weird, anal, slightly uncomfortable, until it felt good, until I came so hard. A deeper throb of an orgasm. Something to be savored. Sometimes to keep me warm down the line when I need those memories.

When I'm done with breakfast, I push the plate away and close my computer. Then I select the clothes I need for the day from my case.

Usually, I'd just grab the plainest dress in there, but I grab the red one with the pencil skirt and the stockings, light, fitted jacket, and the low-heeled red shoes. This was my meeting with Kara outfit, the one I never got to wear.

I'm feeling freer. Like a girl who takes risks. Even tiny ones.

But first, I need a shower. No. I need a bath.

I take my clothes and jog up the stairs, then hang up the dress in the bathroom to let any creases smooth out.

The bath takes a while to fill, so I brush my teeth and strip, looking at myself in the mirror, trying to see if it's obvious there's a change in me.

I haven't morphed suddenly into some sophisticate. I'm still me. Blonde, eyes big and... just me.

Except... Oh shit. I touch the bruise on my throat, pressing in, and everything in me lights up, a spark of desire. A mark where he sucked and bit me. And as I keep looking, I have bruises, bites, tiny marks to show the way he worshipped me. Because that's how I feel. Worshipped.

Divine.

I turn off the taps and, since the oil isn't there, I add some of the hotel bubbles, a nice soft, clean scent with a hint of lemon. Then I step into the giant tub and sink down, closing my eyes.

Last night, when he walked in here, he took his fill, drinking me in like a man handed a drug he coveted, and even then, totally mortified, I felt... like Venus rising, like a sensual, sexual being, someone who could command armies of men to my bidding.

I felt like I wanted to jump his bones. What would he have done if I'd commanded him closer, rather than having him turn from me?

He'd have climbed into the bath, fully dressed, only taking the time to lower his zipper and pull that magnificent and impressive cock out and have me sink down on him. The tub's big enough and kissing him, fucking him in here would be...

Orgasmic.

I'd rock on him, rising and falling, taking control, fucking him senseless. Then he'd stand and strip, present me with that cock, and push my head down on it so he could fuck my mouth.

A shiver races through me as my hand slips down between my legs and I start to pleasure myself, pretending it's him. I only have to touch and I'm off, the throb increasing, the sweet delight expanding, and now in my fantasy, he's lifted me out of the tub and has me sitting on the edge of the vanity, legs spread so he can eat me out.

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A shudder of need passes through me and the pressure inside builds. I stroke and push against my clit with one hand and with the other I press into the bite, setting off a good pain, like he's doing it to me now, and it mainlines straight down to my sex.

I want him again. I do. He's divine, and how can one night be enough? In my fantasy, it's every night, all the time, and I never get tired. I want him in every way. I want him to take my ass, my pussy, my mouth. And as I remember the way he stretched and filled me, how I could feel that cock everywhere, almost like I could feel every vein of him as he pushed into me, invading in the best way possible, I come, shaking and moaning.

My hand's pretty good. It does the job. I used to say it's second best to my rabbit vibe, but now he slides into the top space, the man whose name I don't know.

That deflates me. I finish my bath. Once I'm dried off, I get ready, do my hair, and put on some makeup, more than usual so I can cover the mark a little, then I get dressed. I pack up my case and head down.

As the elevator arrives, I start to laugh. I never even got to see my upgrade, though I'll take that hot man any day.

The hotel lobby is busy, and since I have both key cards, I head to reception to check out and hand in his.

Then I do something I'd normally never do. The guy at reception is cute and young and he's trying to subtly check out my dress and my breasts. I straighten my shoulders and put on my best high-class escort aura—whatever that is—and smile

sweetly at him, leaning in.

“The second card?” I say.

He turns red as he realizes he’s staring at my cleavage again and I’m looking at him, but I’m still smiling as he looks up and his relief is palpable. “The grande rooms?”

“Yes, I wanted to thank him. I want to make sure I got the name right.” I flutter my eyelashes. “Can you spell it for me?”

“Sure. I mean, I shouldn’t, but you were there, so... uh... hold on. I’ll write it down.”

“Even better. Thank you,” I say, glancing at his name tag, “George.”

“My pleasure, Miss Banks. Do you need us to look after your bag until later?”

I completely forgot hotels do that and I nod. “That would be extra perfect.” I hook my computer bag on my shoulder with my handbag and take the card.

It’s not until I’m outside that I look at it.

Viktor Verev.

Russian, like I thought. Viktor. I guess I can get behind the name?—

“What are you thinking? You just got out of a relationship, and you need to work on your career, woman,” I mutter.

I’m not in any kind of headspace to stalk my one-night stand. Still... I drop the card into my bag where his note is.

But just because I'm not about to embark on some stalking mission, doesn't mean it's not nice to have a name for him. Viktor.

Name and face locked in.

And who knows? This is going to be nothing more than one night out of time, but in the future if I run into him? Maybe... Or maybe I could even one day look him up. If I'm brave enough to do that.

But the fantasy of it is enough. Knowing I can do that now is enough.

I like that. I really do.

Ever since I got back from New York, my life's been frantic. Work has doubled, and the pay hasn't. And I slog away at it, even though I've caught some kind of stomach bug.

When Sarah brings in donuts, the smell of them makes my insides revolt and I know I'm going to be sick.

Again.

I get up, rushing off to the bathroom, making it just in time.

When I'm done, I collapse and hug my knees, wishing I was home where I could be truly pathetic and lie on the bathroom floor.

But I don't think I'll ever be sick enough to do that here. I can't even drink coffee; the scent is like garbage right now.

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The door to the ladies' room slams open and heels tap on the floor.

They stop in front of my stall.

“Erin?” Kara raps on the door.

“What?”

“Are you alive in there?”

I groan. “I’m not sure. I might be dead and in hell.”

“Come on out. Now.”

With a groan, I get up and unlock the door.

“You look horrible,” she says. “All pale and pathetic.” She’s clutching two bags.

“What... what are you doing?” I ask, sounding possibly more pathetic than I look.

She looks at the bags, then at the sinks where my computer bag sits, and then at me.

“What do you think? I’m escorting you home. I told them you have the flu.”

Kara takes my elbow and steers me out and into the elevator. When we’re finally in her car—I took public transport today—I close my eyes.

“How long has it been?”

“About a week of feeling worse and worse?—”

“Not the being sick. How long since New York?”

“Four weeks.”

“Right.” She abruptly pulls to a stop, and I open my eyes. She’s running into the pharmacy she’s somehow managed to get a spot in front of. When she comes out, she hands me a Gatorade in lemon-lime.

“I don’t like?—”

“Drink it. There’s also Pedialyte in here, so…”

I take her threat under advisement and open the lid. Christ, I must be ill if the smell of the Gatorade is appealing. I take a sip and end up drinking half the bottle.

By the time we get out of the car at my apartment complex, she’s in full control, herding me in, pushing me toward the bathroom. And she hands me the bag from the pharmacy.

I peek inside and screech. “I don’t need a pregnancy test.”

“Your eating habits changed. You’re throwing up every morning. You look like shit. When was your last period?”

“It’s due…” I trail off. It was due two weeks ago, and I didn’t even think. “I’ve been busy. So?—”

“Erin, you’re like clockwork. By estimations, you’re twoweeks overdue. So, if you had a one-night stand in New York, that was four weeks ago. So. Go pee on a stick.”

I don't say a word but go into the bathroom and do just that.

Ten minutes later, the door opens and Kara bursts in. I'm sitting on the edge of my bathtub, staring at the plastic stick.

She snatches it from me. "Shit."

"Holy shit," I say.

"Erin. You're pregnant." She pauses. "Congratulations?"

Fuck.

Chapter Six

ERIN

Three years later

Sasha glares at me, tiger eyes bright with unshed tears and a bullish expression, a thunderstorm on his face.

“No, Mama!” He puffs out air.

I run a hand over his soft brown hair and he snuffles. “Yes, baby,” I say. “Mama’s got some things to do.” I don’t say party. He’ll think of cake, balloons, jumping castles.

“No, Mama!” he says again.

I kiss his silky cheek, still round with baby fat, and breathe in that powdery, warm little boy scent of his. “I’ll be back when you wake in the morning. And guess what?”

Suspicion lights up his gaze.

“Aunt Kara’s gonna be here with you. So if you’re good, she’ll read to you.”

The tears dry as his gaze sparks to the door, and a smile brightens up his face. “Kara.”

She's standing there, and she waves to him, then holds up *The Adventures of Baby Pig* picture book, his favorite. "I'll be right back, Sasha. Going to see what snacks we have."

"Snacks!" he says, clearly dismissing me, and I follow my friend out.

I pat her on the arm in the small kitchen. "You know how to get him."

"Yeah, me and the kid, we're snackin' buds," she says with a laugh.

"You're a sucker."

She shrugs. "What can I say? I'm a sucker for the amber eyes on that kid."

"Tiger eyes."

"They're like yours, but hold ice. He's gonna break hearts when he hits kindergarten."

"He's two."

"They start young, Erin. Why are you still here? Go!" She shoos me like a fly.

I hover and dither in the hall but Kara's right there, so I can't go back in and check on Sasha; maybe climb on the bed and read to him and have Kara feed us snacks. But she knows me too well and she just blocks the way, one hand holding my wrap, the other my car keys.

"Maybe I shouldn't go." I smooth my hands down the red of the dress. "What if?—"

"Hate to break it to you, but he's got me. Go have fun."

“I haven’t seen Max in ages,” I whisper, “so...”

“It’s a wedding, woman.” Kara jingles the keys. “Go. Now.” A wicked grin crosses her face. “Or I’ll be forced to fill your purse with condoms.”

“You wouldn’t.” But she would until bursting, so if I even thought about opening it, bam, a condom avalanche.

“Flavored and glow-in-the-dark ones.” Then Kara relents. “Go, Erin, it’s your night off.”

“I know. I just feel guilty.”

“Don’t.”

I bite back a sigh. “But Kara, I never go out and leave him?—”

“Exactly. Go. Have fun. I put a fun hat in your bag, just in case.” She winks at me lewdly and heat flares through me.

She hands me my wrap and my keys. I pull on the soft black cashmere and pick up my bag, shoving my keys in. Of course, she put a condom in there. “Thanks for this, really.”

“Nonsense. I love Sasha to pieces and I’m here anytime, any excuse. Go make the most of your night off. Use the condom. I mean, when was the last time you had sex, anyway?”

I roll my eyes. “None of your business.”

And it’s time to go. I check myself in the mirror in the hall, lipstick on straight, blonde hair pinned nicely, so there’s no reason to hang around. I don’t want to be late.

She follows me out to my car and yells, “Pretty sure it was the night Sasha was conceived!”

Goddamn Kara, anyway. I bite down on my grin and give her the finger without looking back, then I get in the car.

As I drive off, I try to settle the dancing butterflies in my stomach. Kara's right.

That one-night stand was the last time I had sex. Phenomenal sex, but sex with consequences. One I wouldn't ever change. I can't imagine my life without Sasha.

But apart from a difficult life of being a single mom, from having to quit my job and put my dreams on hold—now I office temp at various places, I started with real estate and now I'm temping in the property development arena, fitting it all around Sasha—I don't have room for a relationship. And one-night stands?

Not my thing, never have been, and that hasn't changed. I haven't suddenly become a woman of the world in that arena.

Who'd blame me after getting knocked up with that first one?

Besides, being pregnant and then a single mother isn't exactly a turn-on for men. And those who've shown interest backed the hell out when I told them I have a kid.

After I pull up at the swank wedding venue and the valet takes my car, I head in. I probably should have timed it for the nuptials, but they're doing drinks first and then the wedding, which is nice.

Max is on the other side of the room, talking to a distinguished gentleman and looking every inch the handsome groom in his tux. He sees me, grins, and waves. I wave back, happy for him.

A waiter offers a tray of lightly pink champagne, and I take it. The first sip is like magic and the pink must be from some kind of juice I can't place but elevates the bubbly.

"How do you know the bride and groom?" a man asks me when he narrowly avoids

bumping into me. He's double-fisting the champagne.

I don't know him. I don't know a soul here apart from Max and his fiancée, whom I've met once. "I went to college with Max; we're good friends. I met Alina once, but she's perfect for him."

"Yes, she is, isn't she?" He looks past me and nods. "My wife wants her drink. Enjoy the wedding."

I take my drink and walk around, making small talk when someone engages Max in conversation. My aim is to see Max, but somehow, I don't think that's happening until after the wedding. There are too many people, important-looking men, talking to him.

Max was my best friend during my college years and life happened and we drifted apart, he moving to another state, and me... well, me throwing myself into work and then motherhood. But we talk on the phone every few months and chat here and there during the day over various apps.

I still remember the thrill of happiness that lit me up when he told me he'd met someone. I heard it in his voice. She was the one. And Max deserved that. He proposed to his girl, who said yes, and when I met Alina, she looked at him like he was the universe.

Max deserves all the happiness in the world and so does she. Though I only met her once, we hit it off, and it was so clear she was sweet, charming, and smart.

My glass is empty, and I don't see the bride-to-be. Max is still caught up in conversation. He throws me an apologetic look, but I just grin and make my way through the swathes of guests I don't know to the bar.

Maybe this time I'll have a Manhattan. Why not? It's been ages since I had a real cocktail. And one won't hurt. But, of course, three years of being responsible lands me ordering a white wine.

I take it and turn and almost run into a man.

Every nerve in me sparks and fizzes. Awareness spreads through me, low, throbbing, invasive, and I slowly look up over the immaculate suit in black with the pale-gray silk shirt and the black tie. In the breast pocket is a creamy rosebud. He's broad and tall and I can't breathe, and I know. I know before I meet his ice-blue eyes who it is.

My one-night stand from three years ago.

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How the hell have I forgotten how gorgeous this man is? Or is it that he's better-looking than before? A sprinkle of gray peppers his hair, and he's leaner in the cheeks, but oh Lord, he's sexier than ever.

Him. Sasha's father. The man who gave me the best damn night of my life.

I struggle to breathe.

His eyes lock on mine as I tell my feet to move.

And recognition passes darkly through them.

Without a word, he slides his hand around my arm and leads me to a quiet corner where artfully displayed tall, manicured rosebushes sit in tubs.

My pulse is haywire as his touch burns. It isn't tight. I could pull away, so why the hell am I going with him?

Shock.

Bemusement.

Some kind of latent lust?

Fuck.

He gently pushes me against the wall and lets me go. Then his gaze moves over me,

taking his time.

We're not alone, but he makes me feel that way, and I'm pinned to the wall, a butterfly on display, unable to escape, there for his eyes, his enjoyment.

I swallow, hard.

"What a coincidence," he says, that low, deep voice, one I've dreamed of, sliding through me. "You here at this wedding. And knowing nobody."

I'm about to correct him, but suddenly I narrow my eyes. "By coincidence, do you mean anything but?"

"You know what they say, if the shoe fits..."

Anger bubbles hot and wild inside. How long has he been watching me here?

"Are you honestly trying to suggest I came looking for you?" I shove at him with my free hand, but he doesn't move. "You think after three years I hunted you down here? We had a one-night stand three years ago. Sure, the sex was good, but not: I'm still trying to hunt you down three years later good."

I'm lying to him. It was that good. But in all honesty, he could be the king of orgasms, and I wouldn't want to tangle with him. I don't want to tangle with anyone. I've been actively trying to avoid tangles. Hair, clothes, men, relationships. All of them.

"Says the woman, going on about how long it's been. Why are you here?"

I open my mouth and close it again.

This is not a good man. I know that. When I found out I was pregnant, I tried to find him, not to do anything other than let him know, and do the right thing. If he wanted to see his kid, he could, but I wasn't asking for anything from him.

But he registered under a fake name. So Tom, my half brother, tracked him down and he told me this man is not someone I want to mess with.

The takeaway is I don't think he knows he's father to a two-year-old. And while Tom wouldn't tell me details, he felt the need to repeat I was to stay away from him. Stay the fuck away were his exact words.

"It's not your business," I say as politely as I can manage. "So if you don't mind..."

But he doesn't move. He doesn't budge when I push him again and I drop my hand to my side rather than continue to touch him.

"I mind."

"Please," I say, vowing to protect my child from this man. The layer of charm's gone and I can see the hardness in him, one that could easily turn to brutishness. "We don't know each other. One night was a long time ago. I barely remember."

His smile is swift, devastating. "Really? Why are you here? Hmm? What is it you want? Who sent you? You don't just turn up at a wedding not knowing anyone without an agenda."

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Something snaps in me. “You’re being paranoid. I’m a guest. I’m a good friend of the groom, if you must know. So, sorry to burst your bubble, but I’m not stalking you and no secret organization sent me after you. I’m here for Max. That’s it.”

“Did your homework, I see.”

“Not homework.” I push out as he eyes me with suspicion. “A guest.”

“And I’m not buying it.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Good, because you’re a shit liar.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. I barely remember you.” I stop myself saying I regret doing anything with him because then I wouldn’t have my Sasha, but honestly... “So, can you get your paranoid ass out of my way?”

I don’t wait. This time, I push hard, knowing he won’t budge, and then I dart to the left of him.

“I’m not done,” he growls.

Panic pushes at me, because I remember the suite, the money it had to have cost. And he looks even richer. The suit itself is clearly made for him and it’s gorgeous. This is a man who could take my baby from me. I try to gauge the situation. I need to get the fuck out of here and leave the moment the wedding’s over.

It won't take much to ask Max not to say a word about me or Sasha to anyone. And surely this guy won't bother the groom today.

But one look at him tells me he would.

I just need to get out of here.

I'm not done? Fuck that.

"I am," I say. "So back the hell off."

He lets me take three steps. Three. And then he has my arm. This time the grip is hard, and he pulls me in and pushes me into the wall, harder this time, and he moves in, pinning me there.

His mouth is a breath from mine. "No one walks away from me. Especially not you, Lyubimaya."

Chapter Seven

DEMYAN

On any kind of numerical scale, I'm probably up near obnoxious and bordering on bullying, but fuck it. Why is she here?

There are ways to handle things, but I'm still reeling from seeing this woman again, and touching her is like no time has passed since the last time.

She raises her chin, beautiful face carved from angry, unforgiving stone, and she says, "Get the fuck out of my way, or I'll cause a scene."

It's the calm flatness that strikes me. And I have to say it's impressive. Not many would stand up to me or speak to me like that.

I stare at her a moment, taking her in. Just how serious is she about making a scene? And would that reinforce or negate her apparently knowing Max? But... Fuck, I don't know.

What are the odds of her turning up here? Especially when I haven't seen her in years, when my sister or Max never mentioned her. And Alina loves to point out all the prettywomen in the hopes of getting me to settle down with someone nice.

Someone, she says, who isn't part of some business deal.

"I mean it," the blonde says. She opens her mouth like she's going to scream and I shake my head.

"Cause a scene, and that's the last scene you'll want to create."

"Why?" she asks, big hazel eyes glittering. "Is that a threat? You're what? Going to kill me?"

Well, fuck it all. It crosses my mind to point out I never mentioned killing anyone, and why the hell would I over... whatever this is. But it's piqued my interest. Because me telling her I'll drag her ass off if she even dares to think of ruining Alina and Max's wedding maybe tanning it a glowing red has somehow equated to a death threat.

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It's excusing the damn pun, overkill. Which makes me suspicious. What's she hiding?

"Why would you think I want to kill you?" I ask softly, shifting against her to slide a thigh between hers.

Anyone looking and they'll think this is the normal wedding hookup.

"Because of the bad sex? You don't want me telling the truth."

The spitting fire in those hazel eyes makes me want to smile. Worse, it gets my dick's attention. She wants to stick sharp little barbs in me and all she's doing is stirring up desire.

Unwanted desire.

I won't lie and say I haven't rubbed one or two out to her over the last three years. Her lips on my cock. Her tight cunt. Her asshole. The taste of her and the way she responded. Yeah, not going to fucking lie.

But I've got an extensive spank bank. Just because she's been the go-to star of it is nothing at all. I've fucked countless women. One-night stands are my thing. Sometimes it extends to two.

I'm bound at some point to run into one.

Thing is, I'm careful. I don't tend to choose from my circle if I don't want it coming

back. If the woman doesn't know who I am, then I want to keep it that way. It's easier. Cleaner.

"I think we both know the truth," I say, leaning into her, close to that delicate ear, and I get a nose full of her scent.

This time she doesn't smell like me, the lemon of the bath oils, or my whiskey-tinged honeyed leather and lavender. No. She's like roses warmed by vanilla, real vanilla, that heady complex scent.

Somehow, I resist rubbing up into her, just to see if she still moans in that same erotic way.

What I do is ease back. Meet her gaze.

"And what's that?" she asks, spiky with it.

I take her wine and swallow a mouthful. "Hot. Erotic. Something good enough you somehow found yourself here to sink your teeth into me."

"What is wrong with you? I didn't?—"

"Or something more sinister?"

"Your ego needs adjusting. Christ, you're annoying. I wish—" She stops herself. What was her name? Erin... Erin stops herself and blushes, her gaze skittering from me. "Please let me go."

"No." Whatever Erin was about to say, she changed her mind, like she's hiding something. "It's a hell of a coincidence you turning up at the same wedding I'm attending. Out of the blue. No one's so much as mentioned you."

I expect the fight, the anger, a barrage of explanations. After all, I'm being an asshole of the highest order. I left her in that hotel room without even a goodbye, and I'm being rude now. But instead of a tongue-lashing, she swallows, the blush draining until she's pale, like a damn fucking ghost, and sheer terror's all over her face.

Erin opens her mouth, closes it, and perspiration pops up on her forehead, like... shit, I don't know what. Like she's up to no good. Fuck. She's not just looking terrified. Erin looks terrified of me.

Wordlessly, I step out of her way and hand her the glass, her fingers cold and clammy, snatch it, and she pushes past me.

"What the fuck was that?" I'm going to have to ask about her, look into her. In fact... I reach for my phone, intent on getting Ilya on the job, when a rumble of voices builds into a cacophony of commotion.

I look up as a loud pop cracks the air, and people scream. I don't think, I move. It takes two steps to grab Erin as another gunshot fills the air.

A succession of quick pops follows the shot, and the air fills with more screams.

"We need to get moving," I say.

But Erin isn't having any of that. The terror on her face has ratcheted up.

Another shot.

She shrieks and yanks her hand free, disappearing into the chaos of the crowd. There's more shouting and with the screams and yells, I can't make it out, but I fear it may be an enemy.

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What if Erin was the distraction?

I grit my teeth and force myself to remain on the right side of calm. My sister's out in that melee, but Max is with her, and he's got a good head on his shoulders. She's the only reason I'd panic and the very reason I can't.

I search for them, making my way from the corner where I was with Erin, and take in the scene before me.

Where did I see them last? Up the back to the right, talking to some older people, Max's boss and I don't know who else. No one of importance to me. No rival bratva.

Shit. Is this bratva related? It could be, but to cross me on the evening of Alina's wedding is a death wish for whoever's behind it. So, that means someone big trying to rise up and take my empire or someone I've never heard of. Someone from Russia herself, perhaps?

Or a robbery gone wrong? There's a lot of money in here tonight. Jewels, for starters, and important people who could go for a pretty ransom.

I don't even know which I prefer, I think, making my way to where I last saw my sister. One is deadly, but I usually know how they operate, so it could be a renegade, and the latter is just an unknown. Both are dangerous, both something I need to stop.

And where is Alina?

People are running, most to the exit, and another scream fills the air to the left of me

and it sets my heart hammering and I turn.

“Demyan! Demyan!”

Alina.

Terror rips into me as I push people out of the way to get to where I heard her, but there’s too many, and the scream goes up again. “Demyan!” This time behind me.

I spin and scan the crowd frantically, trying to spot her or Max. Something to let me know where to run. But there’re too many people.

As I listen and make my way toward the area the two screams rose from, knowing she might not be there anymore, I scan continuously and place that call to my second-in-charge, Ilya. “Backup, now,” I snap in Russian.

This is a fucking wedding, not a meeting for factions. It’s meant to be a day of love and peace, and I don’t have my fucking gun. Alina insisted no weapons. On me.

Even if this isn’t bratva, I should have ignored Alina and armed myself and the guards to the teeth. But the guards I have weren’t allowed—her orders again—and while I broke that, they’re on the down-low, so why...

Unless they were the recipients of the gunshots. Fuck. Fuck. And fuck.

I call Ilya again. “Armed to the fucking teeth.”

“Got it,” he says as I hang up.

Men will be coming to meet me, and they’ll have weapons. All I’ve got is a knife, so I pull that, ready to pop open the switchblade.

I don't know what's going on, but it's not good.

Oh fuck, there are a few people on the ground not moving. Two are my men. I grab the gun from Gregov's dead hand and check it before sliding it into my waistband in easy reach. I keep hold of the knife. It'll be deadlier in close combat. If it comes to that. And if I need the gun...

I almost trip over a body. A woman in a purple dress. And then, just beyond her, I spot a familiar form.

Max.

Alina's fiancé.

The love of her life.

He's on the floor, not moving, and I reach him in record time, my heart trying to break free. "Shit. Fuck."

Blood seeps and pools around him from several bullet wounds to the chest. I drop, heart racing to feel for a pulse. But he's cooling already, and his eyes are open, unseeing.

Max is already gone.

"Sorry, Max," I mutter, getting up and frantically searching for my sister. Where the hell is she?

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Not on the floor. Thank fuck. No girl in white is down and bleeding, but where is she?

“Alina?” I call her name, but no answer comes and I fight the mounting terror.

I need to find her. She’s my one priority. And she better be okay. Apart from being my only family I have left, I love her with all I am. She’s one of the very few on this planet I actually care about.

Losing Alina isn’t an option.

The room is now mostly empty. People are hiding and cowering, those who didn’t make it out, and I waste a few seconds racing to the bar and peering behind it. Just the fucking staff and a friend of Alina’s, who’s crying.

I don’t even bother speaking to her. If my sister is anywhere of her own will, it’d be with Max, so I’m betting she’s not in here. Someone’s taken her.

With that thought, I run to the exit, hitting outside just in time to see three fucking men, trying to shove Alina and Erin into the back of a car.

Motherfuckers.

Both women struggle but my sister, who has a big red handprint on her face and blood at the corner of her mouth—I’m ready to rip off heads and piss down the throats of those who did that to her—sees me as I sprint and starts to fight more.

“Cunt!” The man holding her punches her in the face and I go for the gun, right as the man holding Erin looks up at me.

“Let her the fuck go,” I roar.

Erin suddenly ruins my shot by slamming her head into the man’s and kicking him in the balls. He doubles over and lets her go, and she scrambles away.

I’m still too far away and my sister struggles too much to get a clean shot. And it doesn’t help that Erin, though she scrambled free, dives back in to help Alina. Too many fucking people in my way.

Shit.

“Hold on, Alina,” I say.

One of the men goes to run after Erin but the one she kicked gasps out, “Ostav'te suku nakh! Berem sestru i valim!” Leave her. We don’t need the bitch. Just take the sister.

This all happens in seconds. It feels like a slo-mo forever.

I bear down on them, managing to squeeze off a shot, winging the one Erin kicked.

But I’m too late for Alina. They shove her in the trunk and jump in the car, fleeing, right as I get there.

Erin stumbles, hitting the pavement, hands coming down to catch herself, and I pivot, grabbing her and pulling her up, running my hands over her to check for injuries.

She’s not bleeding. Nothing’s broken.

And anger and pain consume me. I put on my coldest stone face. “You, come with me. Now.”

Erin shakes her head. “I-I didn’t do it. I tried to help... I... I just... I need to go home.”

“No.”

“What do you mean?—”

“What do you think? No.” I drag her off, tucking the gun away. There weren’t any plates on the car, so of course I couldn’t get the registration tracked.

But they were fucking Russian and that makes it easier. And deadlier.

“I tried to help her. I?—”

“Helped her into that trunk.” I move her to safety, so I can take a moment. Think.

I don’t mean what I’m saying. She was grabbed like Alina and she tried to help, but until I know what’s going on...

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Sister, they said fucking sister.

I close my eyes as a wave of nausea hits me. They were after me.

Max is dead because of me. My sister is gone because of me.

Erin's speaking. And her voice brings me back. "...let me go! You're hurting me!"

I loosen my hold just as Ilya pulls up.

"You're not going anywhere, Erin."

Leave the bitch. Just take the sister.

"We need to get the fuck out of here," I say to him, not letting go of her. "And get people on this. Find out who did it. They got Alina."

"Fuck," Ilya says, gaze shifting to Erin.

I don't explain.

"Let me go." Her eyes are on Ilya's big gun.

But I push her into the back seat of the sleek, armored black car. "Until I can figure out who those men were and why they took Alina... until I know what the fuck they wanted, I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Chapter Eight

ERIN

The back of the SUV is roomy, more so than it looked, and it smells, not new, but nice.

Not like it belongs to gun-wielding maniacs.

This thug is who, exactly?

For a second, I close my eyes. This thug's the father of my child. And he's the sexiest, most handsome thug I've met. Maybe thug isn't the right word. What about brutal overlord? Dangerous God? Mafia? Criminal? Devil?

I shove a hand against my mouth to stop the sickened laughter.

He's not good, whoever he is.

Is Alina even anything to him? What about Max? I can't see Max hanging out with this man. He's so cold and emotionless. I...

What would he do if I put my foot down or tried to call the police? Oh, that's right, my bag and phone are back in that mess. Back... I swallow.

I don't think he'll let me go. Not then and not now.

He's on the phone, speaking in a harsh tone in Russian, like he's barking orders. And the man with the big gun is in the passenger seat in the front, talking on his. It's like I'm in the weirdest newsroom ever.

Panic and pain flutter through me.

There's a break in his conversation, and then something cold and wet touches my arm and I almost scream.

“Here.”

I look down. A water bottle. With shaking fingers, I take it as he then pours a whiskey—I can tell from the smell—into a glass from an open little compartment on the seat's back opposite him.

He should look cramped, ridiculous, but he doesn't. There's room in here and it's clearly custom. Part of me wants a whiskey, but I open the water and drink some.

“I tried to stop them. I thought... thought if we could get to Max or safety, then—” I shake my head. “These assholes grabbed us.” I flick my glance at him. “Max must be...”

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Something in his face makes me stop talking and the words dry up. And again, I question who he is and the danger levels he represents. Maybe he's worse or just as bad as those men.

But I'm here and Max is... Max is... not.

I wait for him to speak but he doesn't, so I gulp in a breath, then take another, my skin both hot and cold and my insides roiling.

Trapped. In a car. With my son's sperm donor.

That's what he is. We had sex, and he managed to knock me up and he certainly didn't look for me like I did him. Sperm donor.

It makes me feel better thinking about it like that.

He'll let me go soon when he sees I know nothing about this, and I'll swear blind I don't know who he is. Swear I've never met him. What I won't do is slip up and spill my secret.

My heart clenches tight as I grip the bottle.

Sasha... Fuck, how the hell do I let Kara know what happened? She'll call the cops if I don't return and no doubt the shooting's made the news. But my baby. I've never been away from him longer than a few hours. Tonight marked the milestone of a few more. But I'd have cut and run after the wedding, and now... now... now I'm caught.

How long is this dangerous, rich man going to hold me?

He is dangerous. My brother was right. We're in a car with other Russians who have guns. He has a gun.

I turn to demand I go home. To tell him I have to, but the moment his gaze hits mine, I stumble back mentally and point at his whiskey. "Can I have one, please?"

He pours one and hands it to me. "Feeling better?"

"You can't keep me," I say. "You know that, right?"

"Got somewhere to be?"

Everything in me screams yes, but I just say work in the morning. He makes a sound and goes back to his phone, this time sending messages.

Shit. I can't say I have to go home. Even if he let me go, he'd then know where I live. Or worse, he'd see me home. I can't let him find out about Sasha. Because if he did, he'd see that I kept our son from him, denied him his heir or whatever, and then... then he'd kill me.

Or take Sasha and never, ever let me see him, which is the same as killing me.

Three years. I kept our son from him for three years. From the moment I found out, I was pregnant to now. Yeah, he'll take him and punish me.

This is a brutal and dangerous man. After all, he didn't even react to a shootout at the wedding, to the kidnapping of the bride. To... to checking me with fast and competent hands like he did it all the time.

The man's not shocked. Not afraid. What the fuck kind of dark and deadly world does he live in?

It must be brutal and violent. Tom was right to urge me to keep away from him. Shit, I don't even know his real name; Tom wouldn't tell me.

And now... I'm in the lion's den and my son's in danger because of it. I don't want my baby in this horrible world of his.

"Erin?"

I look at him and our gazes clash and it hits me down in the pit of my stomach. "What?"

"I was going to ask you the same. You're shaking."

"Oh." I didn't even realize. Before I can say anything else, he strips off his jacket and hands it to me.

"Put it on." He pauses. "Please."

I take it and slip it on, letting the heat of his body that clings to it seep in, and that whiskey, honeyed lavender scent with notes of leather surround me and make me slightly woozy with memory.

"Thanks."

“Are you okay?”

His words startle me, and I glance at him, shrugging. “After all that? Not really. But I will be.” I close my eyes. “Poor Alina.” Then my eyes snap open. “Oh my God, Max. We need to go back and get him. “

“No.”

The dark note in his voice makes me shiver for entirely different reasons. Earlier, that look on his face... My stomach churns.

“What do you mean, no?”

He sets his phone on his thigh and rubs his eyes, then takes a swallow of his whiskey. My fingers clench around my glass. “I mean we can’t.”

“They kidnapped Alina and he?—”

“He’s dead. They shot him.” His ice-blue gaze locks on me. “He was gone when I found him.”

Not even that flatness that promises retribution, that holds the truth, can touch me. For brief, shining moments, I’m in denial. Rejecting his words and their meaning. Clearly, he’s wrong. He’s insane.

Max isn’t dead.

He's getting married.

I swallow hard as sadness pricks deep. But I shake my head. "No. No, you're wrong," I say quietly, emphatically. "He can't be dead."

"Three bullet wounds to the chest. Probably got his heart. He'd have been dead instantly. Before he hit the ground."

"You're wrong," I say again. "You made a mistake."

This time he doesn't say a thing. He finishes his whiskey and picks up his phone, but those ice-blue eyes are on me.

"No. I just spoke to him last night when he called to make sure I was coming."

"And why would he do that? You're good friends, according to you, so why wouldn't you go to the wedding?"

A jagged bolt of heat savagely rips through the cold in me. And I bite down on my response. Because of Sasha, clearly. But this man can't know that. Not ever.

"Max was so happy. I've never heard him so happy. And... and earlier, I saw him. We waved as he was caught up in conversation." I'm aware I'm babbling and can't stop. "He looked so happy, so full of love and his future. So he can't be dead. You're wrong."

My eyes start to burn with tears, vision blurring. My heart hurts and my throat's tight.

"Yeah, well, I'm not. I wish I was, but I saw him."

"Used to dead bodies, are you?" I snap.

“Ya videl svoyu dolyu.” He pauses. “I’ve seen my share.”

Of course he has. He’s a dangerous man, that’s more than clear. And I can’t lose sight of that or of who he is.

He’s dangerous, powerful, and to him, I’m no one but some girl he fucked once. Right now... it’s more than rescuing. I’m almost positive he wants to find out what, if any, involvement I have in this.

Which is zero.

If I stay with that and don’t let anything about Sasha slip, I’ll be fine.

“How did this happen, anyway? Max is—was—a great guy. I can’t think of anyone who’d want to hurt him.”

He doesn’t answer. And I lift the glass, taking a small sip of the rich liquor, letting the burn warm me.

What I want is to down it and then another, but the numbness I’d be trying to reach carried danger, like loosened tongues. And besides, the pain of losing Max, of Alina’s kidnapping, would still be there.

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“Collateral damage.” He sighs, sends a text, then puts the phone back on his thigh, his long, strong fingers holding it, and—I’m not going there. He doesn’t look at me as he continues. “He wasn’t the target. Alina was.”

There’s a burst of savagery in his tone and I study him a moment, take in the stoic, almost emotionlessness of him. I can’t help but think there might be a world teeming with all kinds of sharp and wild emotions.

Yeah, probably of the deadly kind.

“I still don’t understand. She was terrified. I don’t know her that well, but I like her. And...” I stop. “Why were you there, anyway?”

“My sister is the bride. I’m the reason they took her. Fuck.”

Everything in me goes cold and I swear my jaw drops. Alina’s his sister? I can sort of see it now, but shit. When I met her weeks ago, I had no idea I was meeting Sasha’s aunt.

The webs were getting thick and?—

“We’re here.”

I don’t ask him where here is. It’s a mansion set back on a large property, surrounded by a tall brick wall and there’s a guard box, automated gates, and beyond that, there are quite clearly men in black uniforms with guns. Big ones.

So many of them. Everywhere. And once the guard checks the driver, the gates open and we drive in.

The grounds look expansive, dark but for two or three windows glowing.

All that consumes me as we make our way up the long drive that's clear of trees is how it offers a sightline from the mansion to the gate, removing any cover for a surprise attack.

This must be his mansion. I swallow hard and force myself to say, "How long?"

"How long what?"

He already sounds bored and I clench my fingers on the glass and the plastic of the water bottle. "How long am I here for?" The more I stare at the grounds and high wall, at the guards we pass, and the looming mansion, the more this whole thing resembles a prison.

"As long as it takes."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Sasha, I want to scream, that's why not. "Because I've got a life, and this is unreasonable. This is kidnapping."

"Or tit for tat, as they say."

"I don't know who took your sister."

“And yet you were there. Front and center. And Max is dead, so he can neither confirm nor deny your story of friendship.”

“So you’re holding me against my will. I don’t even know your name.”

“I’m Demyan Yegorov.”

I swallow hard again, my throat sandpaper. There’s something I can’t put my finger on, something familiar, but then again, I probably heard his last name when Max introduced me to Alina. Tom didn’t say a word about his real identity, just to keep away. And here I am, headed straight for his lair.

So I just nod stupidly, and as we get closer, I take in the gardens that start, the beauty of the mansion itself. Almost gothic in its build. If this were another time, and maybe broad daylight, I’d find it beautiful, the old-world charm appealing.

We pull up, and no light comes on to welcome us, just guards watching. And like something out of a horror film, the front door opens, offering more darkness.

I don’t move. Demyan reaches over and plucks the glass from me, then takes the bottle. Finally, he unclips my seat belt, which I don’t even remember putting on.

He leans in farther, body brushing mine, and it sends my heart skittering. He shoves open my door, then peels away, opening his. “Get out,” he says stepping out of the car.

For a moment I sit, wondering what would happen if I refuse. But the crunch of gravel grows and his shadow falls over me, making where I sit darker still. The front doors slam. Footsteps move away.

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He remains. "I said get out. We're going inside. Now."

With a tone that brooks no argument, a tone that lays down every law, a tone that would shoot to kill if it could. Reality slaps me hard, and I'm diminished. I shrink down somehow and I scramble out.

Something tells me no one crosses this Demyan and lives to tell anyone about it.

This man is a brute.

My son's father.

One I'm determined won't ever be allowed near him. Sasha is a sweet, kind, loving toddler and, if this man got his hands on him, would shape him in his own image and that's monstrous.

I clip along across the gravel, clutching his jacket, hating that it's against me and yet grateful for the warmth because each step I take sends ice shooting through me.

And Max... poor Max... A lump forms and the hot tears, the only thing hot in me, press at my eyes. Max might have fallen for the lovely and sweet Alina, but he never deserved to be caught up in this dangerous world that Demyan clearly inhabits.

Alina might have been born into it, but she had an innocence that I suspect meant Demyan sheltered her from the hellish world he lives in.

A thought strikes me. I'm sure Demyan's going to get revenge on whoever took his

sister and whoever killed Max. Not because he liked Max, but because Max made his sister happy.

Demyan doesn't look at me as lights come on as he walks, striding fast through the door at the other end of the foyer, one that's like a barrier. The inside of the mansion is beautiful, what I can take in, with polished woods, antiques, and art déco that shouldn't work but does.

There's a door down the hall on the ground floor that's open, light spilling out and inside voices spitting Russian at each other.

Bratva? A corrupt oligarch? Or just plain organized crime without a label and a rich man who does what he wants whenever and doesn't have to bother hiding any bodies.

They're all the same, those people, whether American, Russian, Italian, or Irish.

He hits the stairs and doesn't look back, so I don't get to see in the room. I follow. We go up to the first landing, then the next, where it's quiet, the furniture is more modern, but we're in a wide hall with art on the walls, one of which I think might be an actual Picasso.

Suddenly Demyan stops and punches in a code, opening a door. I almost barrel into him but stop just in time.

He just gives me a cold look and pushes me inside.

Fuck this. I turn and start forcing my way out, but he blocks the way. He takes the coat and pulls out a knife and a wallet, then hands it back.

"I'm not staying in here. I've done nothing. I'm not your prisoner, Demyan, whoever you are. Let me go."

“Or what?”

“Trying to tell me no one will hear me scream?”

A cold little smile hits his mouth. “No. They’ll hear. But no one here will do anything about it. You’re staying in here for your own protection. I have things to do, but when I return, I’ll let you out. Be a good girl.”

He slams the door in my face.

I drop the jacket and throw myself at the door, but the bastard locked it. I thump the door. “Let me out! I demand you let me out.” Oh God. “You can’t just leave me here!”

But after a while I stop. There isn’t a sound from the other side, so I’m assuming he’s gone.

I’m on the third floor, but surely I can get out. Climb down a drainpipe, or maybe there’s a balcony with an interconnecting door.

I spend the next five minutes checking everything. Tapping the walls, checking the closet for a hidden door or Narnia. But there’s nothing. The en suite is self-contained and there isn’t a window, just lights that mimic daylight or a more romantic mood. With disgust, I switch them off.

The lamp’s too light to use as a weapon, and there isn’t even a handy statue or clock to use as a weapon either.

I look at the curtained windows. Climbing isn’t my strong suit, but there are gardens at the side of the house, just expanses of lawn leading up to hamper someone’s approach.

Fine. I'll climb out, drop or fall on handy bushes, and steal a car. Somehow.

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It's not even a plan, but I check the windows anyway and my heart turns to stone.

The windows are fitted with steel bars.

There's no way out.

There's no phone.

Nothing.

Defeat is bitter in my mouth I sit on the bed. Emotions rock me and tears start to spill.
For my friend. For Sasha and Alina, too. And finally, self-pity.

After a few minutes, I wipe the tears away and nod.

Right now, there's no way out, but I'm going to find one.

And when I do, I'm getting the hell out of here and back to my son.

After that?

I'll do whatever it takes to keep Sasha away from this monster.

Chapter Nine

DEMYAN

I pace my office. The voices from my trusted men come from the second dining room, or what should be a dining room. I don't use it for parties. In fact, I don't use it for anything apart from meetings.

But right now, I'm teetering, and I don't need the distractions. What I need is to think and not give into some cockeyed plan to go scorched earth until we find Alina.

I have to play this fucking smart.

The woman I've locked up for her own good doesn't help matters. She keeps stealing pieces of me that brood over her. I want to touch her again, taste her. I want to fuck her so hard she begs for mercy, use her to release some of the tension.

I want to use her to feel something other than this darkness that's building inside.

Who the fuck blew up the wedding? Killed the groom and took the bride?

I'm pretty fucking sure Max died saving my sister. He probably got in the way or jumped someone.

They weren't looking to shoot her, or she'd already be dead.

That sends a better message than taking her if her demise was the end goal.

No, this is something different.

I clutch the bottle in my hand, the one I'm thinking about drinking from. I don't.

When I first met my pretty prisoner/rescue, she captivated me with that mix of innocence and openness. She had fire, too, that I unleashed.

Could she have been some long game plant? To what end, though? My sister would have been easy to take at her birthday celebration. And this... Sure, I have the inherited enemies of my father, not to mention new ones.

Fuck. I laugh and eye the seat that's mine in an office he never used and yet I can see him there, behind the desk, fingers templed, distaste and disappointment aimed at me.

And I can hear his words.

‘Ty pozvolil moyey miloy devochke uyti. Ty trus. Neumelyy durak.’

‘You let my sweet girl get taken. You coward. You inept fool.’

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English or Russian, the shame is the same.

“Fuck you, old man,” I say, setting the bottle down and spinning my laptop toward me. The news remains the same: nada, and the dots on the screen of those out looking are still spread far and wide.

I pull up a different screen. This one with the faces of those who might have done this.

In truth, it could be anyone. People always try to snatch power and I have power. But the retributions are such that most who think about it, think again and slink back into the shadows.

But I’m not arrogant enough to believe I’m untouchable.

No one is.

It’s only how you play the game and the allies you make that change things.

I play smart, better than my father, but I also straddle the line between the old world and the new and that brings dangers of its own.

Some allies feel betrayed or sidelined. Most keep it to themselves. Those who don’t... they’re presented with an option, fall in line or walk away.

The third option always remains unspoken. Death.

With a sigh, I pull up the page on Sergio Augusto.

Powerful. Mafia. A man not to be underestimated.

He just might be behind this.

We had an exchange of words recently over territory issues. I believe we need more flexibility, judicious blind eye. He believes in iron walls and Old Testament punishments.

If it were just that, I'd dismiss him, but it's not. The bearded man with the arrogant dark eyes seems to mock me in the image on the screen. There's tension between us. He's more my father's school of doing things than mine and though he knows he needs me and I need him, the tensions have been festering. Slowly building.

An escalation to where he'd decided to take matters into his own hands, perhaps.

Out of all of them, he seems most likely. He's powerful enough. Feared.

But not by me.

If he has taken matters into his own hands and his last few angry words to me that I'd regret the damn day I stood up to him, then that's a decision he'll regret. I'll make sure of it.

What I can't be sure of is exactly how long he'll regret that decision.

I'd like to make him suffer, but if my temper snaps... then his life is done. It'll be done, anyway, but sooner rather than me drawing his death out.

"Boss?"

I look up from the computer as Ilya walks in, face grave, eyes blazing. I hate it when he calls me boss, but he does it when he means business, and in private, when he's giving me shit. Considering we're in private and there's not a joking word that would come near him right now, I steel myself for whatever he's going to say.

"Do you know where she is?"

He hands me a tablet. "I've got a location, but no confirmation of who's holding Alina. The vehicle you saw matches, as well as the thugs."

"Who?"

He smooths his hair. "I don't know. This came from a source. He claims he saw her, described Alina pretty damn perfectly, down to the dress, and the car, too."

"Could be a red herring." Fuck. I press my lips together for a moment, then meet Ilya's gaze. "Can this source be trusted?"

"Frankie's a junkie working with three different gangs. So... probably not. He might have seen her or got word of her dress, though he doesn't strike me as fashion forward."

"Girl in white, Ilya. What's he asking?"

“Too much.”

“So it could be a shakedown for his next few fixes, then.” I hand him back the tablet. What I want is to smash the whiskey bottle. Break something large. Destroy half the fucking planet.

I breathe in, lean against my desk and fold my arms. “Thoughts?”

“Frankie’s unreliable enough. But do we really want to dismiss this and risk not following up?”

“Let’s go, then.”

“Like there would have been another choice.”

I get my gun and load it. “None at fucking all.”

We drive a small convoy that’s deadlier than most. We hit the outskirts of town and pull up a healthy distance from the old warehouse.

The area’s full of them, most of them falling down, derelict. Except one.

It’s in better condition than most and while I don’t see any cars, there are tracks in the dirt that cover the asphalt.

Ilya hands me an extra weapon and extra rounds. I thank him as my men wait for a signal. While we wait to see if there’s any movement, I say, “Thoughts?”

“If this were me, and I had a big name, big reputation, and a whole lot of power, or even if I didn’t, I’d choose this place if I wanted to hurt you.”

I nod. “Why?”

“It’s a no-man’s-land and thus harder to pin on any faction.”

I smile grimly. “Do it on your own territory and you can still cry that you didn’t know.”

“But you seem weak. This way...?”

“I’m betting she’s here.”

Silence falls. We don’t see anyone, but then there’s a sound, like a raised voice, suddenly shut down. Male, not my sister.

Ilya’s fingers flex to the door, something I ache to do, but I’m waiting for the scout’s report.

In the silence of the car, Ilya’s earpiece crackles, and I hear the voice of Stefan. “Not sure how many. Four hidden cars. About six men, I can see. No sign of Angel.”

Angel. The code for Alina. Dad’s code.

Ilya picks up his phone and meets my eye, then sends the message.

I feel nothing. It floods like cold water into every pore. And I’m more than grateful for it. Time enough to rage. But I need to be nothing more than death and destruction.

Almost at once, his phone goes off with a barrage of signals. Everyone’s ready.

Good.

“Time to fucking roll.” Strike first, ask questions later. If anyone lives. My sister is the first and only concern.

I reach for the door when Ilya puts his hand on my arm.

“Boss, if she’s there, maybe I should?—”

“Don’t finish that,” I say quietly.

We get out, and Ilya leads the way, just in front of me. I know what he’s doing. He’ll die for me, but I’m no coward and the moment we step in, we’re fury from the fucking gods.

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The bastards in here don't have time and we hit them hard with bullets until none stand. My men take care of the others that pour out of crevices like rats. The air's alive with shouts and cries and flying bullets and the rat-a-tat-tat of a semiautomatic.

"Demyan!"

I spin at Ilya's warning and plant a bullet between the eyes of a snake who'd been hiding. When we're done, no one stirs.

And I pull my knife, crouching over my last kill. I do a rudimentary pat down, but there's not even a wallet or cash on him. No burner, either. This is a preplanned holding place. I'd bet my right nut on it.

Taking the dead man's hand, I flick open the knife and cut off his finger, wrapping it in a handkerchief I have, and then shove it in my pocket.

None of these bodies will have ID, so I should be able to get a print. Guys like these always have rap sheets. And then I'll be able to confirm or rule out if Sergio conducted the attack.

I stand and kick the guy, then look around. My men are scouring the place, but I note Ilya's doing what I'm doing. Standing, thinking.

There's nothing here, I figure, as one of my men peers into a barrel, he's pried open. Someone else has opened another. They're old barrels but that means nothing. They're perfect storage for drugs, guns, girls.

Bodies.

But I assume they're empty as no one's raised an alarm. Suddenly, Ilya raises a hand and everyone falls silent.

I hear it too. A thump, so soft, coming from what looks like just a wall. We look at each other and I nod. Together we approach, stepping carefully, silently, until we reach the wall.

Part of it's in shadows, and I see it. A handle. I point and together we approach. He sends a message and behind us, in heavily accented English, Stefan calls out, "Nothing more here. Let's go."

Most of the men are out, only three others remain, one a sharpshooter. And they wait, weapons aimed.

The door might be unlocked or locked, but my money's on the latter. On a silent count to three, I slam into the door, kicking it open.

A bullet whizzes by as I duck and Alina gives a muffled scream.

It's all I need. I turn, aiming my gun, and I pull the trigger as the fucker aims again. I hit him point-blank between the eyes and he hits the fucking ground.

I step over the dead asshole to Alina, who's in the corner, dress torn and grubby, her mouth swollen, hands tied. Shaking, I drop to her and ease the tape over her mouth off, and I check her over, as gently as I can, cataloguing every rip in her gown, each piece of exposed skin, the grubby handprint on her left breast—and if I've shot the ass who did that I want to cut off his dick and shove it down his throat or resurrect him and do that to him while he lives and then kill the fuck.

Her eyes are swollen, the summer blue stormy, and tear tracks cut through dirt and makeup on her face. She's got a black eye, and a bruised lip, dried blood on the inside of the corner of her lower one where the tape didn't touch.

Her right cheek is black and purple and swollen.

But apart from the handprint, she doesn't seem disheveled from sexual violation. I've seen what these kinds of animals do and they never leave the woman with dignity. And she clings to me, a good sign, too.

There's no intrinsic distrust of men, even if I am her brother.

"Alina, are you okay? Did they?—"

"No." Her voice wobbles and breaks, and she grabs my lapels. "I'm... I'm okay. They didn't..."

She stops.

"Can you stand?" I untie her ankles as she nods and I help her up. They didn't rape her or beat her, she wanted to say.

Someone hit her a couple of times, but she was also manhandled into a car's trunk, so some injuries might be from that.

I'm still murdering the fucker who orchestrated this.

"Is she—" Ilya stops, takes in her bruised, tear-stained face. "I should have made some of them suffer before I sent them to hell."

We start to lead her out, and she stumbles at the door, grabbing at me. "Max! M-max,

is he okay?”

My heart shatters for her and I shake my head as I sweep her up in my arms, holding her close. Ilya looks how I feel as her slender body shakes and she sobs into my neck and shirt.

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Her hysteria is enough she can't contain it. Her sounds of grief ring out as we race her to the car and I bundle her in, gathering her to me again.

As Ilya takes off, I kiss her forehead.

"He died saving you, protecting you," I whisper.

But she shakes her head, hands gripping tight as she sobs. "No. I got him killed."

She's wrong. I did.

Simply by being who I am, my sister's love is dead.

And I've failed again.

But this is the last time. From now on, nothing will ever get in my way. Nothing, no one.

"I'll fucking kill whoever did this, Alina. Mark my words. It's a promise to you. On the graves of our parents, I swear."

I make that particular promise for her.

I don't need that kind of incentive.

Because even if they lived, I'd still hunt down and destroy the cunt who did this.

I'll stop at nothing, and I'll find the one responsible.

And when I do?

I'll make them pay.

And pay.

Chapter Ten

ERIN

I pace, trying not to look at the door. There's an old-fashioned lock as well as the keypad. But he used the pad, not the lock, and that means I'm stuck.

Without my phone, I don't know how long I've been in here. It's still night, so it only feels like forever, but it must be late. Kara must be worried. Even if it's not hideously late, she knows I'd have called by now. It's what I do now that I have Sasha. Not that I go out.

A sob escapes, me and I push my hand to my mouth to stop myself from crying. If I lose it, I won't stop.

I've already kicked off my shoes, as sitting is almost impossible and my feet are aching.

Suddenly, there's a sound at the door, a scraping sound. The door swings open. A woman is there. She's just as expressive as Demyan, but older, wider, and she looks like she could take me down with the flick of her wrist.

But when she speaks, her voice is melodious. "You must be thirsty and hungry.

Please sit.”

She’s polite, but I do as told because it’s not a request. She nods and walks in, setting the tray on the bedside table.

Then she turns and goes, the key scraping once more. I look at the food. Borscht, by the looks of it, with dill and sour cream and though I’m hungry and it smells good, my stomach turns. But I make myself take a mouthful of the beet soup. It’s all I can deal with. It’s ash to me. I pick up the water and take a sip, a shudder passing through me.

The knots in my belly have knots and though I’m not an anxiety-ridden person, I’m beginning to understand them. My heart is racing and I’m clammy. Everywhere. The room’s small now and getting smaller, and I can’t breathe.

He can’t keep me here forever, can he? Surely, he’ll let me go. And Sasha, he?—

Oh, my baby. All I want to do is hold him and feel his little body against me, kiss his dark head. And I desperately want to fill my lungs with his sweet smell.

“Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.” I hiss the words. The sudden grief at being apart from him for the next, however long, is growing and rolling over me. And if I wasn’t locked in here by a damn keypad, I’d?—

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The woman. She might have used the keypad to open the door, but she also used the key. And locked it with the key. Maybe...

My heart beats even faster, harder as I set the glass down, rising on shaking feet. I cross to the door, but it's locked. However, the flat part of the keypad that had a discreet light on it earlier is now dull. Maybe... maybe she just locked it and took the key. If so, then I could try one of my hairpins.

Tom and I used to do this when we were younger, pretend we were spies and break in and out of the doors inside our home.

I try not to shake as I listen at the lock, but I don't hear anyone at all.

The longer I stand here, stay here, the further from seeing Sasha I get. Kara will be worried, and he has never been away from me. And if she calls the cops, then it might get on the news, especially with the shootout at the wedding. What if I become a person of interest since I'm missing and they mention Sasha?

Demyan would find out and?—

I'm spiraling and I have to stop. I breathe in deep and pull out a hairpin, straightening it.

It takes me precious minutes to remember how to do it. And it takes minutes more to get it to work. But finally, it clicks and my lungs freeze as I try the door.

It swings open.

With shallow breaths, I rush to the bathroom and turn on the shower, then I shut that door. It's far-fetched, but I'm desperate to buy even seconds. I rush back to the door and slip out into the hall.

No one's about. But I'm on the third floor and I need to get down to the first. I start to the stairs, but a voice rises from the floor below. Whoever he is speaks Russian, and I scurry back into the shadows. Of course I can't go that way, and from the other voices that float, the mansion's far from empty.

Except up here, where I'm trapped. What am I thinking? The grounds are teeming with armed guards, too.

A stair creaks and I dart into a darkened room, knocking into something, and I just catch what feels like a vase before it hits the ground. I close my eyes, willing my pulse to calm and my breathing to still.

Whoever it was must have climbed from the foyer to the second floor. I clench my stockinged toes on the floorboards.

Okay, these old mansions always have some kind of back staircase for servants. I think.

I poke my head out and start to walk the moment the coast is clear, and it's not until I turn into another room, a pool of silvery moonlight calling to me, that I realize I have the vase. I carefully set it down in the room and look around. It's a beautiful library, a place I'd love to spend time in if I wasn't a prisoner, but I hurry to the window and look down. I must be at the back of the mansion because there are gardens and trees and bushes and I can see a partial fence. If I can get there, maybe I'll have a chance...

With that thought firmly in my head, I set out again, and I go from room to room,

peering in those that are open, and after one that creaked when I opened it, I pass all the closed doors.

I almost miss it, the curve of a wooden banister at the back, past a guest bathroom. The stairs are steep, uneven, and plain. I don't have a choice. I make my way down, pausing and shifting every time one starts to creak, but I find the right way, the edges of the stairs. At the landing on the second floor, I pause as two men argue just out of view, but I can't stand here forever. The longer I'm here, the lower my chances of escape are. So I dart across the opening to continue down.

I'm almost at the bottom of the stairs where a door closes off the rest of the place. I reach to open it when someone bangs against it. More Russian. Some laughter. And then the voices move off.

Shit. I must be close to the epicenter.

Nerves screaming, my mind in freefall because how the fuck am I going to get out of here in one piece, I slowly open the door.

It's an annex kitchen, like a casual room to eat, drink, hang out in, probably for staff, and just through the door ahead, I can see three men talking. A fourth is farther along, looking at his phone, frowning. I look in the opposite direction. A larder.

Now or never.

And it's got to be now.

I move.

Hurrying as fast as I can silently go, first to the larder, where I figure I can hide before I search for the door.

It's cool in here, and I look to the other side. The door is open, the smell of cigarette smoke strong.

Shit. Is someone there?

My insides try to crawl inside themselves, but I make myself stay where I am and breathe. The smoke's still strong, but it's not coming in waves. The smoker isn't smoking; maybe they're back in here or moved on.

Like my feet aren't mine, they move to the door, and I slip through, pressing against the wall, a light pooling down over me. A cricket sings, and I can't move. I'm exposed, I know it, but moving is...

“Do it,” I mutter under my breath.

For Sasha.

With that firmly in my brain and heart, I run to the nearest trees in the dark, and then I drop behind a bush.

Just as footsteps round a corner.

The guard doesn't wait. I think he's doing rounds, so I stay where I am, as small as I can, and wait until he passes.

This must mean I have a few minutes, so I just get up and run, stumbling, rocks biting into my feet as I race through the foliage and across in the cool dark of the garden's growth. The back wall isn't watched, I don't think, and it's low, so I try and climb it, skinning my hands and knees as I go. But I'm not strong enough.

The tears push at me, and I fight back a sob. No, I'm not going down so close. I look around. The tree nearest the wall is low, so I climb that, edging along the lower limb until I can get to the wall. Then I fling myself over, narrowly missing an old bike and hitting a bush instead.

I again look around. The house is dark, and I realize with horror this must be part of the property. Perhaps for guardsor staff. But I don't stop. I get up and run, stumbling, sticking to the shadows until I hit another wall. It's not that high, and I go for it, right before I see the wire. And hear the buzz. Shit.

Electric.

“No.” I hurry along the edge until I reach the side. There’s a normal gate and it’s not powered. Clearly, there are usually guards here, too. And... I gulp.

There’s one right now, but he’s on the phone, and he’s at the front facing the street and the opposite direction, so I take a chance and run low, not stopping until I hit the side street. Then I dart in a zigzag, passing big properties, trying to avoid the lights.

I stop about three streets away.

Fuck, I don’t know where I am.

Voices rise up from somewhere behind me and I’m terrified I’ve been discovered. I sink low, but no one comes closer. Staying low, I keep moving until I round another corner.

Panic blooms as a roar fills my ears.

Wait, I know the sound. The freeway. I run toward it. And the area becomes dirtier, barer until I’m near the freeway and bright, garish lights beckon.

A gas station.

I scurry up to it, right as a car pulls out and I flag it down, not wanting to go into the station and risk being on camera.

The driver stops and rolls down her window. “Honey, what happened?”

“Please, help.”

The man with her throws open the back door. “Sit,” he says, “we’ll call the police. I’m George and this is Gwen, my wife.”

I hover, knowing I need to get in, but too scared. Scared of them taking me to the cops. Scared of something happening to them because of me. Scared of Demyan’s soldiers turning up and dragging me off. Just scared.

The woman, Gwen, gets out and hurries around. They’re older than me, maybe in their forties, but she’s got kind eyes as does her husband, and when she carefully tells me she’s going to help me, that she’s going to touch me, something crumbles inside.

“We’re just going to help,” she says, repeating herself. “And I’m going to help you. I’m going to slide an arm around your waist and help you to the car.” Her gaze drops. “Your feet are bare, hon. And you look like you’re going to fall over. So you can just sit, door open, and we’ll call the cops.”

“No.” That threat snaps me out of my fear-soaked gaze and sets the adrenaline pumping. “No police.”

“Something’s clearly happened,” Gwen says. “We’ll wait with you?—”

“No.” I stop, forcing myself to breathe normally, and I try again. “I can’t risk the police. I-I have a son, and if they go after his father, then...” I swallow and grip her arm. “He’s rich and he’ll take him. Please... I just need this to go away. I need to get home to my boy and my friend.”

I’m hoping she can read between the lines. See what I’m trying to say.

“He doesn’t know?”

“No.”

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“I still think we should?—”

“I can’t risk it. It’s complicated, but if he finds out about my boy, because the police turn up, then...” I suck in air. “He didn’t hurt me. But he could, if...”

If.

If goes wildly in all directions, and I can see some of those places on her face as she mulls my words. “Where do you live?”

I give her my address.

“We’ll take you home, okay?”

“Thank you.”

And I get in the car.

Kara’s hug on the driveway is enough to send George and Gwen off after Kara showers them with words of thanks.

But now we’re inside, and I’ve just told her what happened.

She goes to my cupboard above the stove and pulls out a bottle of sherry I bought once when I made a fancy dish for a potluck once. She pours herself a drink and waves the bottle at me. I shake my head.

“When my phone started to explode with news flashes, and I couldn’t get hold of you, I lost my fucking mind.” She sets down the bottle and glass. “And Max...”

I sniff and nod. “I can’t think about that or I’ll lose it.”

But the shock on her face is deeper than that. “This man, Demyan, he sounds... horrible. And you—” Kara shakes her head. “What are you going to do, Erin? He’s got to be organized crime. All those guns, that mansion. Shit. And you ran...”

“I’m going to get the hell out of here before he knows I’m gone and before he figures out, he’s Sasha’s father.”

“You told him?” Her eyes almost bug out.

“No, but a man like that will find out. It’s just a matter of time.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Make sure I have some time. If anyone asks about me...” I flash her a look as I go to my room and grab a wheelie bag and start to pack.

“I’ll say who?”

Kara digs out a backpack. She throws things into it for Sasha, his baby goat toy and bear, his favorite books, and she leaves that by the door to his room as she heads back to the kitchen.

I throw jeans, shirts, shoes, and tops into the bag, along with toiletries. Some jewelry I could sell if I have to. Then I need to get all of Sasha’s stuff. I inventory it in my head because I’ll get that last. Thank fuck he and Kara clearly played in the living room, and since his toys were there, he must have passed out.

I change into jeans, sneakers, and a sweater, and panic hits.

“Where’s your purse?” she asks, running up with his favorite box mac and cheese he only gets on occasion.

“At the wedding venue.”

“Fuck.”

“I’ve got emergency cards.” I wheel the bag into the hall. “They’re in my room, bottom dresser drawer.” I run to get them and shove them in my pocket, then I slide into Sasha’s room, his night-light showing his chubby little face, the perfect little mouth. And my heart breaks.

But I don’t have time for broken things.

I raid his closet and drawers, packing what I need. I sling the pack over my shoulder when something horrific hits me.

“Kara?” I rush out to her. “My car, it’s?—”

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“Take mine. The gas tank’s full. And it’s got the car seat for Sasha.”

I never thought I’d be so grateful for her snobbishness with cars when we go out. She insisted on getting the special seat for outings with Sasha. Besides, if she ever babysat him, she wanted to be able to hit the road if they needed to go on a snack run.

“Thank you.” I take the keys and hug her, wanting to cry.

“Stop that. Get him. I’ll put the bags in. Hurry.”

I tuck his quilt and blanket around him and scoop him up with his pillow. I hold him close, and bless his little heart, he doesn’t stir.

Outside, I load him into his seat, clipping him into it.

“I can come too,” Kara says, but I shake my head.

“No. I’m not putting you in danger. I’ve got the cards?—”

“No way, Erin. You’re not using them.” Kara opens her bag and hands me a large wad of cash and one of those ghetto preloaded cards from money-wiring places.

“That’s your emergency card. There’s no name attached.”

“Why...”

She shrugs. “In case I don’t want someone to know who I am. Hey, I can be mysterious.” But she pushes it all into my hands. “Take it, use it as emergency funds.

There's a few thousand on there. And don't use your cards. Get a burner phone and call me the minute you can."

"I have money?—"

"Babe, I've seen Law and Order. If this Demyan's as dangerous as you think, as Tom thinks—he told you not to try and find him, right? If he is, then he can track you by your bank cards. In no time. So be smart. Cash, low-rent places."

The tears fall and I hug her tight. "Kara, thank you! I don't know how to repay you..."

"Nonsense. You'd do the same for me. Now go and call me when it's safe to do so. I wrote my number down for you."

I almost laugh. In this day and age, I barely know my own number. "I love you, Kara."

"And I love you. Stay under the speed limit. Now go."

I nod, and clutching the keys, I get in the car. With one last look, I drive off.

An hour later, I'm struggling to keep my eyes open. I honestly don't know where I'm headed, apart from anywhere a long way from here. I'll go to California, New York. Hell, I'll go to Wyoming if I have to. I have my passport, but I'm not that stupid to try and use it. Besides, I don't have one for Sasha yet.

Sasha's sleeping soundly and when I find myself drifting, I know I have to find a place for the night. It's two in the morning according to the dashboard clock, and I keep my eyes open for a motel.

There are some, but I don't stop at the fancier ones, or the seediest. Both of those will draw attention. Then I see one. It's old, but there are cars, and some of them look like family cars, so I pull in and go to reception. The bored guy there recites the prices for a night. And when I pay cash and book it under a fake name, he asks for ID.

"My purse is down at the bottom of my bag; it's just me and my daughter." The last-minute lie trips a little.

But he just nods, takes the money, and hands me the key. "If you stay another night, I'll need the ID. Protocol."

I leave and find the room. It's at the end of the row in the back of the motel which suits me. And I leave most of our stuff, just carry a sleeping Sasha in.

I tuck him in and lock all the doors and windows and then, still dressed, climb on the bed with Sasha and hold him like I never want to let go.

Chapter Eleven

DEMYAN

"What the fuck do you mean she's gone?" I yell into my phone.

We're almost back at the fucking mansion when this call came through. Vitor takes a moment to respond. As head of security, Vitor should be calling with a mundane report, not that some girl beat out a whole team of trained men.

"Well?"

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Alina flinches next to me at my bark, but right now, I'm concerned at the lack of security at my compound.

Erin's not trained. I don't even think she has anything to do with this. Not really, but the fact she's not there...

"Walk me through this again, Vitor."

"Sir, the door of her room was open. Magda discovered it. She'd brought her soup and some water earlier?—"

"If you're trying to tell me Magda fucked up, I'll explain in exact detail with my fists just how wrong that is and how much I don't appreciate cowards. Magda doesn't make those mistakes. She would have locked the door. And even if she didn't, you're telling me one female evaded a host of armed, trained men?" I grip the phone tight as he swears in Russian.

Then he says, "We're searching a second time, all the rooms and the grounds, but the adjacent property? Mikel thought he saw something, but it was on the street, so..."

Pissed isn't the word for the thrumming emotion rushing through me. I'm volcanic, about to erupt. The only thing keeping me grounded here is Alina.

She's a ball of misery, curled in on herself, and her pain hurts me. Worse than I ever thought it could because there isn't a fucking thing I can do. Even if I kill them all, every last person involved in her kidnapping, in Max's murder, it won't ease the pain in her. It won't make up for her loss.

I suck in a breath. “He thinks he saw something? Thinks? That place is meant to be a first warning lookout.” I switch to Russian. I’m so angry. “What’s the fucking point in having a security team if they can’t secure the damn premises?”

“They were looking for invaders, not someone escaping.”

“That doesn’t make it better, Vitor. Heads are going to roll. If this Erin could get out so easily, that means anyone can get in, which is fucking unacceptable. There’s a reason we keep the properties surrounding us in the back. They’re there to help keep people out, too. So they’re either not kept up and unmanned or the entire team is useless.”

“Sir—”

“I’ll deal with you later. Right now, I need to find this fucking Erin.” I hang up on him.

Next to me, Alina stirs and looks at me blankly, eyes swollen, tears leaking, and she’s dazed like she got hit by a Mack truck and hasn’t realized she should be down, not walking around.

No. She looks like the survivor of a bombing.

Or someone who just lost the love of her life.

Fuck.

“Who’s Erin?” she asks, voice slurred, flat, lost. It’s the shock. I take her hand and it’s ice. “What’s going on?”

I unclip my belt and slide over to her, putting an arm around her to try and warm her.

“Someone who got mixed up in the attack at the wedding. She was with you.”

“I don’t... don’t remember anything. Just...”

“Shh, it’s okay, she is—was a friend of Max’s.”

Alina lets out a moan of pain, and I mentally kick myself.

This fucking vehicle doesn’t have a minibar, or I’d have her halfway to oblivion.

I lean forward, looking in the rear window from the back as Ilya drives. Our little convoy seems fine and part of me wishes for an attack, just to get this shit over and done with. Give me something to do, someone to punish.

But most of all, I wish I could take Alina’s pain from her. I’d carry it gladly, but that’s the one thing I can’t do. She has to suffer, and I fucking hate that.

When we get home, I ignore everyone else. “I’m going to take you to your room, and Ilya’s going to bring you some cognac. The stuff you like.”

She doesn’t answer me, just pushes her face into her hands.

I gather her in my arms and carry her in and up to the second floor. I go into her room and call in Magda to help her change. Then I wait outside. But when Magda comes out, she shakes her head.

“Alina will not take off the dress,” she says in Russian. “Go be with her.”

Ilya arrives and hands me a glass and a bottle. “I’ll be out here if you need me.”

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Without a word, I go into my sister's room and she's curled on the bed.

I set down the glass and bottle and ease out the quilt, pulling it up around her.

The posters of her favorite movie stars and bands are on the walls, old dolls and favorite bears still lined on the pale-pink vanity.

She hasn't lived with me in a long time, not since she moved in with Max. And even during her college years, her time here was sporadic. But I left it as is, a time capsule of a girl growing into a woman, just in case she needed it, a familiar and safe place.

I'm glad I did.

I just hate it's under these circumstances.

"Will you have some cognac?"

She doesn't answer.

"I can run a bath. You still have clothes here."

Still she doesn't speak and I sigh, then I get up on her canopied queen-sized bed and wrap myself around her, holding her close, willing my body heat into her, so she's not a lump of ice, and I kiss her forehead.

"Angel," I say in Russian, switching to the language we grew up with. "Please talk to me. Anything at all. You can scream and cry. Even hate me, just talk and let me know

you're okay. Please."

She still doesn't answer, and a lump grows in my throat as my chest tightens. It hurts. All of it. I bury my face in her hair, willing her to be okay.

Finally, she stirs a little and turns. Her face is something I'll never forget. The utter devastation there.

"I'm not okay," she whispers. "I might never be okay again."

"You have me, Angel." I kiss her forehead, brushing her hair back. "I'll stay if you need me to."

"No." She shakes her head. "Whoever did this killed Max, Demyan. He didn't do a thing and he tried to stop them from taking me. Go find Erin."

"What do you mean?" I go still. Erin's on my agenda and that's my plan, but...

"You need to find her before these monsters do. She tried to help so they might think she's important. I remember her." Alina's words slur. "I met her a few weeks ago. Once. She's nice. And she's the one with the little boy."

I frown, a shiver running over me. Her need to get away, her panic, both at seeing me and when I took her. I understand it to a point, but hers was off the charts and...

"Alina, how old's the boy?"

But my sister just shrugs and rolls over, her shoulders shaking as she starts to sob again.

I set a box of tissues next to her, then lean down and kiss her head. "Get some rest,

Angel. There'll be a guard outside if you need anything. And one word from you and I'll come back."

"Where..."

"I'm going to find this Erin." A pulse of adrenaline and fury flashes through me. "To keep her safe, like you asked."

She cries louder, and heartbreakingly, I leave.

Downstairs, Vitor is waiting, but he's lucky I don't have time for punishment. I look at him. "Do your fucking job and keep my sister safe. And if anything happens to her, you'll be paying with your life. Slowly, in agony."

I grab my weapons and leave. Once in my car, I set up my phone and take off. When I hit the road, I call Ilya.

"Find out everything you can about this, Erin. Name, address. Friends. Make and model of her car. I want a list of every man she's spoken to in the past three years. All her jobs. Family members. I want it all."

"Boss?"

Irritation cuts through me at the word. "What?"

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“Her car will still be at the wedding venue. But it’s...” Papers rustle. “Erin Banks.”

“Get me the rest.”

“Will do.”

I hang up. Someone, at least, is doing his job. He got back when I did and is already knee-deep in digging up all information on the guests. He’ll make her his priority and... fuck, I don’t know where I’m going.

But I need to do something. And the drive helps. There are people I can see, talk to, intimidate about the events, and that’s my agenda. I’ll hit the sex club where so many of the shadier guys in my world like to hang out. Apparently, the pussy is prime.

I’ve been there for meetings, and the girls are fine, but it’s not my jam, that kind of pussy. If I share, it’s an arrangement with the lady and without money being exchanged. But the club’s perfect for information.

My head returns to Erin.

A kid.

She’s got a fucking kid.

A boy.

Surely, it’s a coincidence. But she didn’t act like someone with a kid when we

hooked up. Then again, how the fuck is someone meant to act? It's not like a woman becomes a mother and has a personality overhaul.

A boy.

Fuck. I don't even know how old the kid is. And we had a one-night stand; what's to say she doesn't sleep around, doesn't have them all the time. She's definitely single. She didn't wear a ring; she didn't mention a husband, and she was there alone. No man would let me wander off with her. He might not stop me, but I'd have noticed a dude seething.

Maybe the boy's father is one of her many one-night stands.

And I'm not slut-shaming. I was worse back then, and I'm damn lucky I don't have a boatload of kids. I'm careful, but like that night, sometimes, not careful enough.

I also don't even know if she slept with half of America since I last saw her or just me or only a handful. Is it even my business?

Only if she tried to claim paternity, or I did. And even then... Shit. It doesn't matter who.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck and fuck." The bottom line is if she has a kid and it's mine, that's all I care about.

For a brief second, I wonder if that is why she came to the wedding, but I dismiss it. If it was, she'd have told me about my child—if he's my child. No, she was there for Max and I was what? A bad coincidence?

I don't even bother to acknowledge I gave her nothing on how to find me. People have ways and though I keep the fuck out of the limelight, I'm known.

The phone lights up with Ilya's name and I punch the button. "What?"

"I've got the details of her car, but it's at the venue."

Of course it fucking is. "Her address?"

"Got that. And someone called an Uber from there a couple of hours ago."

"She took an Uber?" What the actual fuck? I slow down because there's something in his tone. "Ilya?"

"It went to another address here, a suburb away from Erin. One Kara Everton. She has a car. Don't you think it's strange she took an Uber? I mean, her friend was supposedly at a wedding, so it's not like they had a night on the town. Anyway, I tracked the car's GPS. It's at a motel about an hour out of town. I'll send through the address."

The moment it comes through, I hit the brakes, spin the car around, and head in the opposite direction at top speed.

I make it there in thirty minutes.

The car's easy to spot and I pull up beside it, noting the kid's seat in the back. I don't bother with the fucking reception. She's smart. If she's hightailing it out of town, then the chances are she didn't give her name. There's a light on low, like a TV that lights the curtains with a flickering glow.

Fuck it. I knock once and the light goes off and there's silence. Almost silence. I can hear the soft sound of a kid.

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Fury overtakes me like liquid heat and I kick the door open, wood splintering.

I slam on the light and there she fucking is, half on the ground, terror on her face, trying to shield a little boy.

I don't even have to see him to know he's mine.

Her terror tells me. It rolls off her and the futility of her hiding him only angers me more. I'm not being reasonable, and I don't give a fuck.

The kid starts to cry.

“Sasha, shh, it's okay, the bad man's going away.”

Bad... Oh, fuck no.

The kid looks up. Dark hair in soft curls and the pale ice blue of my eyes.

He's mine.

He fucking looks just like me.

A growl fills the air and the kid—Sasha—buries his chubby face into his mom's body, and she closes around him, looking at me like I'm the devil incarnate.

Another growl and I suddenly realize it's coming from me. I force myself calm.

I'm pissed. Beyond pissed, and into a realm I've never been before. But I don't want to scare my kid any more than I have.

"Get your fucking stuff, Erin, and follow my orders to the letter, or you will regret it."

"What—"

"Shut the absolute fuck up. Now, pack up and get in my car. Now. Or I swear you'll never see my child again."

She makes a sound like a wounded animal, agonized, pitiful, and it should touch me. The little boy hugs her tight.

A son.

Holy motherfucking shit.

I have a son.

Chapter Twelve

ERIN

I don't move. I'm frozen as my worst nightmare stands in front of me and stares. Ice-cold, made of unfeeling stone. Demanding his son.

From somewhere I find words as I hold Sasha's shaking little frail body. He's a baby, he's innocent and this man...

"You're not his father. I gave birth to him, sacrificed for him. I'm the one raising him, loving him. I'm?—"

“Enough.” Demyan’s voice is cold as he cuts me off. “Not here.”

“But—”

“We’ll talk about this.” His tone’s as harsh, stiff, unfeeling as he is. And he sweeps his gaze around the bare-bones motel room and part of my brain’s trying to work out how I can pay for the door.

I haven’t unpacked much, just a couple of essentials, a snack for Sasha, a book, toothbrush. His stuffed baby goat.

Like an organized storm, Demyan sweeps things into the bag that’s open and shoves it all in, never seeming to take his gaze off us for more than a second.

“I’m not going?—”

“You are. We’ll talk about this, but right now, my priority is getting you and... your son to safety.”

He then drags things out and car doors slam. Then he’s back and he reaches for Sasha, but I turn. “We need his seat and his bedding.”

“For fuck’s sake.” He grabs the bedding as it’s obvious it belongs to a little boy, and then he nods at me and I slowly get up. “You can hold him.”

“There are laws.”

“Like I give a fuck.”

“For safety.”

“We wouldn’t need safety items if you hadn’t run off, which was a really fucking stupid thing to do.”

I swallow and make myself say, “I wasn’t thinking. The only thing I cared about was getting to my son.”

And away from Demyan, but that I keep silent.

He finishes putting things in the car and returns, holding out his arms. “Give me the child.”

“No.”

He sighs like his patience is so thin it's practically nonexistent. “I don't know how to put a damn child seat in, so you'll have to do it.”

Anger bursts bright, but I try to push it down. “I'll just follow you.”

“Like hell you will. We go together and you're not driving my fucking car.”

“Like I'd trust you with my child.”

“Give me the kid. Now. And put the seat in, then check I got everything.”

I don't want to. I'd rather cut off my own foot than give him my child. My child. Not his. All he ever did was accidentally donate some sperm.

But there's no room for that kind of fury, that argument. The man's powerful, rich, dangerous. And I think he might just shove us in the car and risk Sasha's life.

Reluctantly, I hand him over, my sobbing, shaking little boy. I suspect Demyan is smart enough to work out how to install the child safety seat, just like I'm sure he's efficient enough to get all our things on the first sweep.

He just doesn't trust me.

With good reason.

Given a chance, you bet I'd run with Sasha.

The furious look Demyan gives me burns deep as he takes Sasha and I hurry out to take the seat from the back of Kara's car and put it in the flashy one that belongs to

Demyan.

When I go back in, he's holding Sasha so gently, saying soothing things to him that have him quieting down. Things in Russian, since I don't understand them.

And it hurts.

Something big rips inside me, and I can't help the hot tears that storm through me, tears I somehow hold back. Like my boy's betraying me, wanting this man who hates me, is angry at me for the lies and the fact I never told him about his son.

It doesn't matter that without Tom, I'd never have been able to find him, just like it doesn't matter Sasha's not betraying me; he just finds the big man soothing and he probably likes his voice.

It doesn't matter because emotions aren't exactly part of critical thinking or common sense, they just are.

Our eyes meet over Sasha, and it's like the world stops.

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Demyan's tenderness and brutality are intrinsically linked. They were when we fucked, and they are now. The tenderness here is for Sasha, the brutality is aimed at me, and I drop my gaze first.

He just turns with Sasha and heads out.

Stumbling, I follow as a moment of panic flares. What if he takes him and leaves me, what?—

“Here.” The reluctance in his voice tugs at something deep inside.

Demyan stands at the open back door and gives me Sasha.

“Mama.” And I'm rewarded with a sleepy, tear-stained smile. His gaze drops to his baby goat. “Mine.”

I strap him in as he hugs the ratty thing, and then I tuck the blanket around him that Demyan dumped on the seat.

“Get in the fucking car, Erin.”

I do, because it's my only option. He slams the door, then goes into the room. I don't see what he does, but he's tucking something away as he returns and gets into the car.

When we're on the freeway, I ask for his phone.

He snorts and shakes his head. “Fuck no.”

“I need to call my friend.”

But he doesn't answer, just punches a button on his phone, and a man answers.

“Boss?”

“Ilya?”

There's back and forth in Russian, started by Demyan. When he disconnects, he says, “Ms. Everton's car is going to be picked up and returned to her. Ilya will explain you're staying with a friend.”

Pressing my lips together, I nod. There's no point in arguing over this. No point stating this Ilya's got a fight on his hands when Kara hears that.

“She'll call the cops.”

“No,” he says flatly, “she won't.”

I shiver and turn back to look at Sasha, but he's sleeping and I don't miss the sudden grim set to his mouth as I do.

“What's going on? I have a right to know now that you've dragged Sasha into it. He's just a baby.”

He doesn't answer, so I try another angle.

“Did you find Alina?”

That works. He nods. “She's okay, I got her back. But you and our son are in danger?—”

I don't miss the emphasis he places on our. "Because you grabbed us. No one knows."

"I worked it out. Someone else will. And I won't risk my child. I can protect him. And you."

"We don't need protection."

"You do. As I fucking said, you're in danger because I'm going after the men who killed Max, the men who kidnapped my sister. And when I do, when they find out what I've already done," he says, sending a shiver of ice down my spine, "when they discover I'm going to destroy them all, they'll most likely attempt revenge."

My stomach churns, queasy and tender.

It sinks in. Down into my bones.

Sasha and I are in danger because we'll be the obvious targets if we're not already.

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And part of me wants to say they won't know, but all it takes is one person seeing us at the wedding or back in Chicago and a little research into me and Sasha's age...

Fuck, one look at a photo of Sasha and they'll know. He looks so much like Demyan right now.

And this is why I ran, why I didn't try to find him when Tom warned me, this crushing danger.

I wanted to protect Sasha from exactly this, and...

A sound escapes, and I stare at our ghostly reflections in the window.

"This isn't your fault," he says, words low. "It just is."

No, I think it is. And it's also Demyan's.

The mansion is just as beautiful as before and there are more men on the grounds and this time, even though it's Demyan behind the wheel, security shines a light into the car, on me, on the sleeping Sasha.

It might be beautiful, but to me it's lost any charm it might have. The whole thing, the grounds, the guards, the mansion, they're all somehow more oppressive than before.

Because this time, I don't think there's going to be a way out.

He slows to a normal pace, the kind one does when taking a longish road up to an

expansive house that sits on even more expansive grounds. But to me, it's excruciating in its slowness, like he's some kind of sadist, exploring a new realm of his hobby... torturing me.

The fact the front is clear of most vegetation and the main gardens are in the back which is flanked by other properties, some with electric wires on the fences, makes me both shiver with wonder that I'd gotten away in the first place and the stone-cold knowledge I can't do it again.

Not with Sasha.

I'm not risking him being shot.

If I'm to find a way out, I have to plan, plot, and play the waiting game. Sasha's smart, but he's only two. He gets being quiet but sometimes that's a crapshoot with a toddler.

Shit. I risk a glance at the hard features of the man next to me, the set to his jaw I know a little too well, and not from memory. Sasha does that too. Usually when he's digging his heels in.

But unlike a baby, I can't bribe this man.

Hell, I'm finding it hard reconciling the fact he turned me to melted butter.

Though, if I strip the terror and fear, his touch still sings.

He—what am I thinking? That I can seduce him into letting us go? I probably could manage the first part if he was bored or looking for sex. But the letting go?

Never.

Sasha is his.

He won't let his son go.

Another man might, but this one... I feel it in my bones. He won't ever let my son go.

I'm going to have to be smart.

I suck in a breath as his gaze hits mine for a second.

“Whatever the fuck you're thinking, Erin, don't.” His tone is flat.

Demyan finally pulls up to the front of the mansion, sending gravel spitting. I open my mouth, twisting in the seat, but those cold ice-blue eyes shut me up. He gets out and closes the door with a decisive click and I can't help it, I pull hard on the seat belt, the nylon cutting in and I look at the ignition, my hand already outstretched.

But, of course, the keys are missing and he says from the back, “I'm not a fucking idiot.”

He already has the door open and is working the straps holding the sleeping Sasha. He scoops him up and gets out, cradling him.

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I'm out so fast I pitch almost face-first on the gravel, heart thumping as I stumble, managing at the last minute to right myself.

A sound, horrible and keening, is wrenched from my soul as I grab the car, legs buckling as he stands, holding my child with a gentleness that belies the brute he is.

He stalks off, barely affording me a glance, the anger radiating from him so hot I'm burned.

For a moment I stand there, staring, and I half turn to the car. I'm about to close the door when I see something. I scramble over the back seat and scoop up Sasha's pillow and stuffed baby goat, hugging them like they're my boy, and I race off after Demyan, who's disappearing in the mansion.

He's furious, mad at me, I tell myself. I know this. Sasha does this. The world ends, and he's anger— burning, melting anger—and nothing will ever be right again. No one is forgiven. And then... I am. And he's sunshine and smiles through the tears on his cheeks.

Demyan's the same. He's obviously angry, but unlike a two-year-old, he's reasonable and he'll be willing to listen to me. Maybe not right this moment, but in a few minutes when the anger settles. He's smart. He can be gentle, and I assume loving. He loves his sister, and he was once nice to me. Even if it was to get into my pants, he was nice. He didn't need to be.

I probably would have fucked him if he was an ass because he's that hot and he was paying me attention.

Pushing out air, I rush into the foyer. “Demyan,” I say, “can we?—”

“Quiet.” He looks over to a woman who’s young and attractive. She’s not the one who fed me. Of course, he’d have more staff. And she’s staff. She’s wearing the same uniform as the other woman. “Olga, take my son to the living room.”

Without waiting, he hands him over and then turns to me, grabbing my wrist in a hard, manacled grip and drags me away.

“No, no, Demyan, my son, I need?—”

“Nothing, so shut up.” I open my mouth again, but the deadly fury is locked up behind an unfeeling mask that I find more terrifying than the anger. “If you know what’s good for you, shut the fuck up.”

He drags me up the stairs. Past the second floor, to the third one, where there are guards at the top of the stairs. He opens a different door to a bigger room, more like a suite. Outside, two more guards take up residence. He pushes me inside.

This is a long-term cell. Luxurious, but a cell. There’s no old-fashioned lock, just a high-tech lock that looks like it has a scanner and a keypad. Both sides, but the one on my side is dead. I stand near what looks like a small living area and stare at him.

“Let me have my son.”

But he steps back and I lift the hand with the toy and the pillow to me, hugging them, breathing in Sasha’s scent.

“Until you can be trusted, you’ll have no contact with Sasha at all.”

And he walks out, closing the door.

Locking me in.

Chapter Thirteen

DEMYAN

Jesus, fuck, is the kid small.

He's chubby and yet so fucking fragile I might actually throw up.

How the hell do you stop something like him from getting hurt? Crushed? Killed? Not even in the grand scheme of things. I mean the day to fucking day. Bumping into things, falling, getting crushed underfoot?

And the baby is... gorgeous.

I rub a spot on my chest that's both ice and fire at the same time. Impossibly full and empty. I don't get it. I'm not a fucking baby person. I don't even think about them.

And yet...

Here he fucking is.

My son.

Looking like me, yeah, but her, too.

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He's what? Two? A fucking breakable baby.

And she kept him from me.

Sasha frowns, scrunching up his face in his sleep as one tiny, chubby hand opens and closes like he's reaching for something that isn't there.

But he doesn't wake. And Olga's in the corner, watching him, not looking at me, not saying a thing. Good. She knows better.

She did build a little pillow fort for him, so he can't roll off and hurt himself.

Shit. I need baby crap.

I turn and stalk out because if I stay in here, I might not remember how to breathe.

This place isn't exactly where I like to spend too much of my time, but it is, for want of a better term, home base. It's fitted to be a stronghold. All the place needs are turrets, a moat, and my father's fucked-up vision would be complete.

Funny. It wasn't a home filled with happiness, love, and memories he wanted, but a fucking kingdom, a fortress no one could penetrate or escape from.

No one, that is, except one fucking female who has no idea of my world.

But instead of my Chicago duplex penthouse, this place is home base, the head of operations, and fills in all the other terms.

As I stand at the base of the stairs and peer up, the soft lighting and polished woods do nothing to warm me. Just like the guards outside and now dotted throughout the house on actual posts do nothing to assuage the thing that won't settle inside.

This place is usually empty, and now it beats with life. Innocence, pain, and fury, they're all here. Coming at me through the walls.

My sister with her shattered heart, the small toddler that's part of me, his mother who no doubt wants my head on a pike. All of it fills and sings and chatters in the air.

As one of the guards posted at the bottom of the stairs risks a glance at me, I turn and stalk off to the downstairs office.

I dial the number, toss my phone now set on speaker onto the sofa, pour myself a Laphroaig, down the fine single malt, and pour another, just as Ilya answers.

"Demyan?"

"First thing, I need you to buy quality clothes—the whole gamut—and toys for Sasha."

There's a beat. "Who the fuck is Sasha?"

"Are two-year-olds toilet trained?"

"How the fuck do I know?" Ilya says. "Have you lost your fucking mind, boss, and kidnapped a kid?"

I finish the second glass and throw myself down on the sofa for a moment. "Sasha's my son."

There's absolute silence. And then he says, "Your what?"

"My son."

"Since when do you have a kid?"

"Since two years ago. And yeah, I just found out." I switch to Russian. "I'm just as shocked as you, Ilya. That woman, Erin, had my kid and didn't tell me about it."

"Do you want a kid?"

"He's mine," I snap. "And she didn't tell me."

Ilya sighs. "A child is big, Demyan."

"I know."

“Is this something you want?”

“He’s mine.”

That ends the conversation, and Ilya knows. And I know him. It’s only over for now.

I breathe out and run a hand over my face.

Ilya’s right to ask if this is what I want. I’ve never been a man who gets soft about children. When traitors use their offspring to plead out of a beating, punishment, death, it only annoyed, never swayed me.

To me, it just seemed like they were convenient to the guy who’d fucked up, a thing to trot out as their saving grace.

I shudder.

My never giving in to the coward who told me of his pregnant wife or the young one at home helped earn me some of my nicknames; most of them I forget as nothing has stuck, but the sentiments? They have. I’m carved of ice and rock. I have no heart. I’m a demon. I hate children.

I don’t. But they’re a gift, not a right, and even for a man like me, I’m not opposed to them. But my life story never had room for a child, not how I wrote it.

Maybe I should just say kids were never on my radar, because the last person I ever want to be is my rotting in hell father.

I've been too focused on proving that bastard wrong in his assessment of me. Too focused on turning the tides to prove I was good enough to run the bratva. And now I'm running it better than he ever did, ever could. Because I can see how the future changes and the bratva must change too. Or die out.

Thinking about it, I guess I always had a vague notion that one day in an unmapped future there'd be kids when my position was more than cemented, after I married someone to further the bratva.

But like this? Now? I'm not...

It's a fucking lot to wrap my head around.

With a sigh, I get up, restless inside. Ilya can't do anything until first thing in the morning. I go up and check on Alina, easing her door open when she doesn't respond to my knock.

She's fast asleep, still in the wedding dress, curled up, tears still damp on her skin. Hundreds of balled-up tissues litter the floor and bed.

I pull the covers up over her, brushing the ones on the bed to the floor. My heart breaks, the ache bone-deep. I fucking hate that my baby sister's in pain and there's not a thing I can do.

Short of bringing Max back or turning back the clock, it doesn't matter what I say or do. Nothing will make this better. Nothing.

I tuck her in, smooth her hair from her face, and kiss her forehead. Then I creep back out, closing the door softly.

Above me, a certain room calls, but I close that down.

I'm not ready to face her.

The anger in me, the latent threads of lust—because that thing that drew me to her three years ago is still there, alive and well—are things I'm not interested in exploring.

So I head back down, crossing the foyer and going down the hall to the living room. I take a breath before I open the door.

“Take a break,” I say to Olga.

She nods and leaves.

After she goes, I stand, the golden low light of the lamps warm and inviting, something a small child might find comforting.

I stare at the toddler, curled up, his chubby little hand fisted on the pillow Olga got from who knows where. For a moment anger flares at her leaving him alone, but I don't think she did. There's enough staff here to do her bidding on my behalf.

The cushions are now scattered that previously formed a fort, he is wedged in with actual pillows, and his blanket neatly tucked around him. Something inside goes tight, twists, and I'm flooded by a pure warmth that prickles.

I'm heavy and light at the same time. Sasha is so peaceful in his sleep, like he belongs, like he's always been here. He fills the space so solidly I can't imagine it without him.

Shit. My throat goes tight and I walk over to him, crouching down, and I gently touch his forehead as I brush a strand of silky hair from his skin. He's like warmth itself. A tiny angel of joy and now my heart is swollen and I blink hard.

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How the fuck do I even feel this fierce love for him, a kid I don't even know? But I do, and there's a connection so strong I can't breathe.

With it comes fucking fear. What if I mess this up? What if he's hurt somehow because of me? Terror rips through me.

I stand and stumble back, rubbing my chest. With deep breaths, I manage to sit on the armchair next to him, and I watch him. He's perfect, real, and mine.

But I've no idea where to start with this kid. Sasha's two, and I'm a stranger. He's going to be very attached to his mother. That's a given. She's all he knows. And she clearly loves him and cares for him with the utmost reverence. I'm guessing they're each other's worlds.

And I'm...

Nothing.

A fucking stranger. One who burst in and made him and his mom cry.

A monster.

The bad man.

Christ, this kid's gonna be hysterical when he wakes to me and not his mom. Worse when he discovers she's gone. He might reject me.

I clench my fist.

There's no way I'm punishing a small child for not knowing me, for not wanting me. But I am, I guess, going to punish him by proxy by keeping her from him. Because I sure as fuck am going to punish Erin. She has to fucking pay for keeping my child from me. Essentially stealing him.

I'm aware this line is completely unreasonable, but I really don't care. It's how I feel.

Because how fucking dare she do this? He's mine. Mine.

A soft sound draws my attention and I look up. Sasha's awake. He lets out a small grizzle. "Mama." And then, "Goat."

He looks about and his mouth quivers.

"Mama?" He starts to cry. "Mama!"

He sees me and starts screaming.

"Hey Sasha," I say as soothingly as I can as I go to him.

The boy shrinks back and his screams and sobs get louder. "Mama! Mama! I want Mama!"

He's scared of me.

I reach for him and his hysteria reaches such heights I'm worried for his safety. His face is brick red and his screams and sobs are full of water and snot. I'm not even sure he's breathing.

What the fuck do I do? His screams get worse and panic sets in.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” And I just stand there because if I move toward him, he’ll just get worse.

“What the hell...” Alina says above the noise.

I turn and for a moment I can’t breathe either. She’s blotchy, her face swollen, and she and Sasha could take their act on the road, they’re both so grief-stricken, though his is more tantrum and fear than grief.

“Mama!” Sasha’s eyes latch on Alina and there’s a flash of something like recognition, and he holds out his arms.

She shoots me a look and then scoops up the toddler. “Hi, Sasha. It’s okay, it’s okay. Mama’s asleep. I’m Alina, I’m here...”

“Dino,” he says between sobs. “I want Mama.”

“How are you feeling?” I ask her.

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But she ignores me as she rocks and hugs Sasha, murmuring things to him until he slowly calms finally, like a fucking miracle, he's calm enough to hook a handful of her hair and stare up at her with a smile. "Dino."

Dino? He's calling her Dino? Or maybe he has a dino somewhere. But he's looking at her with adoration, like she's a perfect mama substitution until his own mama wakes up.

My jaw tenses as they talk, and she nuzzles him, blowing raspberries on him until he giggles.

And instead of happiness or relief, my chest gets tight. I know I should be happy he's responding to one of us and he's stopped trying to bring the mansion down by screams alone. But I wanted it to be me, his father. Instead, my son prefers his aunt, whom he's never met. Shit, maybe they did as Alina knew Erin had a kid, but it would have been once and briefly.

It doesn't matter, I'm a failure. My son hates me.

Fuck.

Sasha finally falls back asleep, and she carefully puts him back on the little bed made up on the sofa. My sister spends a while stroking his hair until her shoulders rise and fall and she gets to her feet.

"I'm glad you found them, Demyan. I'd hate to think of Erin and this sweet little boy out there. Whoever took me probably thinks she's part of our family since they tried

to kidnap her, too.” She’s speaking Russian, her pain and anger and despair more pronounced. “Where is Erin? I told him she was sleeping but...” Her eyes go wide.

“She’s fine,” I say. “She...” I nod. “She’s sleeping.”

“Okay.”

I look at my son. “He hates me; he thinks I’m a monster.”

“No, he doesn’t. He’s a little boy and you’re a big man, Demyan. I think it’s just been Erin and her son, no father or boyfriend, just them. So...” She offers a sad, tired smile. “He woke with strangers in a strange place. It’ll take time, but he’ll come around.”

I have to tell her. “Alina, you don’t understand. I... I met Erin once before. In New York. Three years ago.”

“So she should...” she trails off, her gaze locking on mine. “Demyan?”

“He’s my son.”

My sister closes her eyes. “I don’t have the bandwidth right now, but... you didn’t rescue them to protect them?”

“She kept my son from me. I never knew, Alina. He’s mine, and she hid my son from me.”

“Demyan?”

“She’s here, upstairs. She’s not going to see him. Right now, how I’m feeling, she won’t see him before he’s twenty-one.”

“That’s going to win his favor.”

I give her a sharp look. “Alina.”

“This is... this is complicated. I’m going to bed. I can’t... I’m sorry.” She squeezes my hand. “It’ll take time. He doesn’t hate you; he’s just scared. He’ll come around.”

She leaves, head low, and I hate I dumped all that on her.

“He’ll come around,” I whisper.

I hope so, and deep down, intellectually, I know that. But it doesn’t make it better. And it doesn’t stop how I feel inside.

The failure that my father accused me of being.

Chapter Fourteen

ERIN

I’m beyond frustrated and I can’t stop the sobs that rack me. Everything is black and empty and consuming. Even getting up is difficult. I could lie here and just die.

But I’m not going to.

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Sasha needs me.

Another sob catches hard in my throat, and my eyes burn, vision blurring. You'd think there were no more tears left in me, but there are. A seemingly endless display.

Sasha.

I hug his baby goat to me, his pillow, too. I can't believe I still had them clutched in my hand as that monster who fathered him dragged me up here and locked me up like a prisoner.

But he did. Because he's heartless, cruel. A monster behind that handsome facade.

Tom warned me.

And I listened.

But it wasn't enough.

Fate stepped in and put us together, and he somehow found out about Sasha.

All I can think about is his sister, the girl I tried to help, the one my friend loved and died for. She told him. It's the only thing that makes sense. I get he's powerful, but to find out he has a son so quickly, I...

She didn't even meet him.

She didn't even see a photo of him.

But Max did. I'd met with Max and he'd gushed over the photo of Sasha, and when Alina arrived, he talked about my son and told me to show her a picture. But I'd rolled my eyes, stating she probably wanted to focus on her wedding and not some kid.

She'd asked, but we got distracted by the waiter. She didn't see a picture of Sasha, but I'm betting she mentioned I had a two-year-old to Demyan.

It's how it goes.

Which means he got her back.

Or hell... maybe I'm just flinging something like blame out and he looked into me with his vast power networks. I don't know.

I don't care.

I just want my fucking son.

"And lying here isn't going to help."

Pushing myself up, I stagger to the bathroom but don't look in the mirror. I just wet a towel under the cold water and press it to my face. Then I return to the rest of the suite.

Bed, sofa, and coffee table, closet, a small table and chair that could be a desk or somewhere to eat.

And, of course, bars on the window.

I squeeze the towel and wince, my hands swollen and sore from banging on the door the first time after he locked me in.

The second time? When Sasha screamed and cried for me. His terror filled wail of 'Mama' could have brought the building down and I slammed my fists, over and over, screaming, threatening, pleading, crying, until I crumpled down to the ground in exhaustion.

No one came.

All I heard was the creak of a floorboard, and at some point when I lay in a puddle, I saw a shadow move across the space at the bottom of the door.

Change of guard?

I don't know.

I just want my boy.

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So I sit on the edge of the bed and practice slow breathing, calming the hysteria and the tears, ignoring the exhaustion from the emotional wringer.

I lock it all up as best I can because I'm going to have to fight. Be smart and wait.

And when I get the chance to run, I'm going to have to never stop until I'm so far from him it won't matter.

Or I'm going to have to kill him.

I wait for the horror to hit at that thought. But it doesn't.

For my son, I'd do anything.

Even though it's futile, I cross to the door and try the lock, and I press at the dead keypad and screen. Nothing happens. It's still locked, the pad still useless, and a small "Please..." breaks free.

No one, of course, answers.

My stomach turns and for a moment, I think I'm going to throw up.

I raise my fist, my resolve of being smart dissolving and I'm going to slam into the door again when it opens.

I'm so shocked I stumble back.

Demyan is there, hard and cold, taking up space. He sucks the oxygen from the room and makes my heart slam.

“Please,” I whisper, “please, this is killing me.”

Not even a flicker of compassion or anger crosses his face. He’s cold and empty like the tundra.

His gaze takes me in, drops to my reddened, bruised hands, and that cold, soulless gaze hits me again as he goes to close the door.

Something snaps and I lunge, but I only make it one step before the door slams and an iron band of an arm locks around my waist.

For a moment, I’m overcome by the furnace of his hard body. It sears into me, at odds with the ice, and I want to curl in, I need... I?—

“Even if you managed to make it out the door, you’d never make it to the top of the stairs. And my men have no compunctions in shooting to kill.” He lets me go, pushing me from him as though I’m sullyng him. “Sit the fuck down.”

I hate him. Rage surges, but I manage to do as he orders, his threat to kill me still in my head. And all it does is strengthen my resolve to escape with Sasha.

“Fucking listen to me,” he says when I look at him. There’s something terrifying about his soft, low tone. The fact he’s not yelling or full of fury is worse. “You need to pay.”

“For what?” I make myself look at him. “Having a baby on my own?”

His eyes narrow. “You fucking lied to me about my son. An omission, Erin, is a lie.”

I swallow the anger and frustration rising. “I did ask for your name, but you checked in under a fake one. I tried to find you, but how the hell am I meant to when I’ve got nothing to go on?”

Demyan’s eyebrow rises. “Really? Thing is, I don’t believe you. If you wanted to, you’d have found me.”

“You were a one-night stand. And I tried. I promise.”

“More lies, Lyubimaya?” His tone turns silky. “See, I did my homework tonight. Researched you. Seems your brother’s a well-respected private investigator. He’d have found out through the name I used and that particular hotel who I was and my bratva connections. He’d have known I am the bratva.”

I freeze, which is stupid, because I know that. But hearing him gloat, say it out loud brings it home.

“Lyubimaya, pretty little Lyubimaya; I believe you knew exactly what you were doing, keeping my son from me. You wanted to hurt me. Fuck, maybe you’re on a payroll.”

I stare at him, sucker punched. “Are you insane? What payroll? And even if I did know what you are, why would I want to hurt you? I don’t know you. Your world isn’t mine. And maybe, since we’re playing hypotheticals, if I did keep him secret, it was to protect him.”

“Bullshit.”

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I bite down on my retort as my eyes fill and blur and burn.

“Demyan—”

“I know what you did. You stole my child?—”

“My child, Demyan. Mine. I gave birth, I nurtured him, mine.”

“No, mine. You tried to hide him and deprive me and steal his father from his life. I’ll never forgive you for that. It’s the ultimate betrayal.”

I swallow down a sob. “Demyan, I didn’t... I never meant to keep him from you, not... I didn’t know you, please.”

He nods. “It’s easy, isn’t it, to play victim after the fact, but you didn’t try to find me. In fact, your brother would have told you about me and who I was and you chose to hide Sasha. And for that, I’m going to make you pay.”

The sob breaks free, but the contempt he flashes at me makes me fight the next one down.

“You’re making me pay. Please don’t punish him in punishing me. He needs me.”

“He’ll get over it.”

The cruel words slap me and even though I’m sitting, I jerk back, legs suddenly useless.

Then he reaches in his pocket and hands me a phone. With nerveless fingers, I take it. And shock hits me. The phone is mine.

“My men got your things from the venue.” He nods at my phone. “You have five minutes to text anyone who might be worried about you. Maybe your lover wants to know where you are. Explain your absence, and that you won’t be back for a while. You’re on an extended trip or something.”

“I don’t?—”

“Do it.”

I fumble, unlocking my phone, and for a moment I think of Tom. He’d get it immediately, but I dismiss it. Demyan will never allow that.

So I text Kara, who’s got to be beside herself.

Hey, Kara. Thnx 4 letting me borrow ur car. U should have it back. All good. Sasha and I R fine. We’re taking a long trip. I’ll reach out when I can. XOX

He takes the phone before I can press send. Demyan studies it like it’s code, but finally he presses send and pockets my phone.

“Good girl. Then again, you had to be, didn’t you?” He studies me now.

I lick my lips. “She’s the only person who’d be worried.”

“Your brother?”

“T-tom’s busy. He checks in every few weeks,” I say. “We’re not that close.”

He nods and turns to the door and the bottom falls from my stomach. “Demyan!”

I’m on my feet fast and he turns so fast we’re way too close and all I can do is smell that evocative scent of his, the one that makes a part of me swoon, even now, and I hate that part, I really do.

“What?”

“Sasha. Please, please let me see him. I’m all he knows; he’ll be so scared. He’ll be hungry. He?—”

“You’ll see him when and if I decide.”

Panic digs into me and I start babbling, “His things, there’s a book in there he likes, read that to him. And...” I grab his pillow and baby goat toy and thrust them at him. “This is his pillow and his favorite toy.”

I don’t want to give them up; they’re all I have, but there’s no way I’ll deprive my child, either. And I need him to have them more.

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But Demyan sneers and steps back, the pillow and toy falling. “He doesn’t need those.”

“He’s two; he loves the goat and the pillow calms him. Please, Demyan?—”

“Sasha won’t be surrounded by flea-bitten rubbish. He’ll have new bedding, a room of his own, along with quality clothes and the best toys. And you? You won’t get to see him at all if you keep this up.”

He walks out.

“Fucking bastard!” I scream and fling myself at the door. “You heartless, fucking monster! You’re punishing and hurting a baby to get to me! You don’t love him, you can’t. You’re incapable. Let me out! Let me have my son! I hate you!”

I sob, sliding down the wall as the fight finally ebbs away again.

When I can move, I gather baby goat and his pillow and climb on the bed and hug them, crying into them, my resolve in tatters, the locks I tried to use on my emotions broken and twisted.

I don’t know if I pass out or enter some weird fugue state, but I don’t hear the door, just the voice. And when I sit up, my tears are dry.

It isn’t the woman from earlier. It’s the pretty one, whom I’m sure Demyan sleeps with.

She has a tray and I try to judge how much force I'd need to take it and beat her down with it. But it's pointless because there are guards with guns on the other side and the door's shut and locked behind her.

"You are Erin?"

I don't move.

"Magda saw you earlier and I am here now. I'm Olga. Here."

She sets down water and a plain-looking sandwich before dropping the tray to her side.

"Magda asked about you."

She's being friendly but not soft, yet I have to try. "Please let me out."

"I can't do that."

"Sasha, you took him... is... is he okay, please? Have you seen him again?"

She nods. "Your boy is safe and well."

I start to cry again, and she shoves a tissue at me. "I'm sorry..."

"Crying won't help," she says. "Obeying Demyan will."

"No, me being with my son will help. I need him and he needs me. I heard him screaming for me. Please let me go," I say.

But Olga shakes her head. "I can't. I don't wish to be on Demyan's bad side. He'll be

angry just for this.” She gestures to the sandwich, then reaches in her pocket and puts a candy bar down. “I’m meant to just give you water, not food, but you must be hungry.”

I reach for her. “You can let me go. I can say I overpowered you.”

“Demyan’s a very powerful man. If he found out about this, I’ll be punished. God only knows what he’d do if I helped you escape.”

“How can you work for such a horrible monster?”

Olga glances at the door, then at me and she takes my hand, squeezing it. “Stay strong, little Erin. Under the armor he wears, he’s a good man. And Demyan will calm down. Eventually.”

But I’m not sure I believe her.

Demyan isn’t good.

He’s a monster, and he wants not just to take Sasha, but he’s hell-bent on making sure I never see him again.

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I need to get out of here. With my boy.

Because I fear for both our lives.

Chapter Fifteen

DEMYAN

My head hurts.

I think I slept for about forty minutes and every one of those minutes managed to be filled with dreams.

I can't shake the idea I'm being unreasonable. Fuck that, I know I am. I just can't stop. She took my son, denied me of the chance to be a part of his life and I don't know how to reconcile that. I don't fucking know how to begin to forgive her.

Erin's still up there.

She's been crying, yelling, and Olga snuck her a sandwich. I'll let it slide. I'm not a monster. I'm not going to starve her, but I also don't want someone like Erin winning the staff. I want them, a little afraid of what I might do if they're too nice to her.

I fell under her spell. She's feisty and strong, innocent and sweet, and under all that? Guilty as the fucking devil.

By the time seven a.m. rolls around, I close my computer and stalk out of my study,

down the hall, and into the dining room where Alina, Olga, and Magda are fussing over a screaming Sasha.

Who the fuck built tiny kids with such big lungs?

I'm not sure why he's crying again. He had a good sleep, and I got a text from Ilya that he'll be here at eight with all the things needed for Sasha. Already, workmen are turning the bedroom near mine, my hated childhood room, into a new, brightly painted room of his own for Sasha.

We don't have the furniture, that's coming, but the paint is a bright lemon yellow and I was flicking through motifs in between work, things we could put on the walls for him to make it more homelike when his one child band of noise destroyed my morning.

Sasha sees me, and his bright-pink cheeks wobble as he lets out a fresh round of tears and cries for his mama. He shrinks back, pressing into Magda.

I just look at her, and Olga scurries off, but Magda strokes his head. "Sir," she says in Russian. "The boy wants his mother."

"He'll get over it. I'll have the usual for breakfast. Alina?"

My sister shakes her head, but I ignore it.

"Alina will have the same."

Magda has balls. She's known me since I can remember and there are times where she'll walk right up to insolence. This, it seems, is one. "And the boy?"

"He's fussing, Demyan." Alina wrings her hands. "We've tried everything. Even

cereal. Maybe we should get some chocolate puffs?—”

“The boy will have milk, orange juice, and toast.”

There’s an actual moment I think Magda’s going to defy me, but she nods and ruffles Sasha’s hair before bustling off.

He’s in some kind of booster seat. The fuck knows where it came from as Ilya isn’t back yet, but I’m betting someone dragged something in from home. I really don’t care, as long as he has a seat.

I sit and pour a touch of milk into my coffee that appears next to my print paper. My tablet’s there, too. I like the feel of print, but today I use the tablet so I can keep an eye on the fussy child.

“Here you go,” Magda says, bringing out the bacon, eggs, and toast. There’s some for Sasha, too, but as I eat, he turns his nose up at everything offered to him by Magda.

He doesn’t want the boiled egg. He doesn’t want the bacon. Or the juice. Or the milk, and Sasha makes it known, turning his head and pressing his lips together whenever food comes near him.

“Noooo,” he cries. “I want Mama, I want Mama!”

“She’s not here,” I snap.

And he cries harder.

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Magda sends me a narrow-eyed look but leaves, and Alina sighs. She gets up to try to comfort him.

I want to do that, but even looking like I'm going to move closer sends him into hysterics and screaming for his fucking mother.

"Eat your damn toast and quit crying, Sasha," I say, "or you'll go hungry."

He lets out a high-pitched wail and starts to thrash around as he cries, and Alina gathers him to calm him, but the child's just in his own world of tears and screams.

"I mean it, Sasha. Eat or you'll have that served for dinner and lunch and tomorrow's breakfast until you do."

"Demyan." The quiet condemnation in Alina's soft voice irks me, and it cuts deep. Her eyes are puffy and I'm pretty sure she's been giving Sasha a run for his money on the crying game, but unlike him, her tears are warranted.

"Leave it," I say, guilt biting at me. "He needs to learn."

"He's only two, Demyan. He's just a little kid, and he doesn't understand what's going on. He's in a big, strange place, and his mother's gone. He's scared."

I glare at her. Yeah, I'm fucking aware of that, but am I meant to let this woman take my child again? Am I meant to let her get away with what she did? This boy hates me because of her, and it rips my fucking heart from my chest. And that's on her.

He would know me if I'd been there from the beginning, and he'd have the world. I can give him the world. But...

"She did this, Alina."

My sister's quiet a long time, and she tries to offer Sasha a toast soldier, but he shakes his head and utters a watery, "Mama."

"Demyan..." She pauses, and I try to quell the rising anger. Not at my sister or the boy who both break my heart and make it want to burst, but at the woman who robbed me of him for two fucking years. "Demyan, I get it. Your anger and your pain. But your reaction and punishment with Erin is..."

"Unwarranted?"

She sighs. "No, I get it, but as warranted and justified as you might be, can't you see how unfair this is to Sasha? He's two. He's clearly terrified. He doesn't know us."

My hand clenches hard on the table.

"Right or wrong, we're strangers and the only reason he reacts to the women is we're the closest he has to his mom right now."

"He'll—"

"What? Get over it?" Alina shakes her head. "I'm barely hanging on but even I see the wrongness. You're not unreasonable. You're not..." She swallows, looks at my son, then at me. "He clearly needs his mom and you're going to do long-term damage by keeping them apart. I know you know that."

Her words are sharp, poisoned barbs and they hit deep. The anger in me is swirling,

looking for an out and I can't lash out at Alina. But she also doesn't get to speak to me like that.

"Mind your own fucking business, Alina. How I handle Erin and my son is my decision, my choice. No one else's. When you have kids, you can make decisions for them."

The silence is damning and the expression in her eyes, like I punched her, is devastating.

She pushes back her chair. "That's never happening, is it?"

"Fuck, I'm sorry, I lashed out, Angel. I didn't mean that. I'm just?—"

"No, Demyan. No." And she utters a sob, turns, and runs out.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. When did I turn into this monster? I'm exactly the failure that my father saw.

Only a monster demands a small child eat or go hungry. And only a monster tells the sister he loves insensitive shit about having kids. Her fucking fiancé's dead. The man she planned to spend her life with was excited about starting a family with, whom she loved with her whole heart is gone, and then I go say fucked-up shit to her?

"Olga." The maid isn't here. I raise my voice some more and she comes running. "Get him to eat his breakfast and keep an eye on him."

I take off after Alina.

She's in her room, crying like she's Sasha's other half, that inconsolable note I'm fast learning is there, in her voice.

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I sit on the bed and put a hand on her back, her body so fragile as it shakes. “Angel, I’m sorry. I’m an asshole and I was way out of line.”

She sniffs and turns. “It’s not even that. It’s... it’s everything.” Her gaze meets mine and my heart breaks for her all over again. “How do I move forward without him? I feel like he just stepped out, even though I know he’s gone. And I expect him to just walk in. Why Demyan? Why Max? He was so good. How did this even happen?”

And she dissolves once more.

I’m stricken. In Russian, I say soothing things, sweetthings, all the lies and fairy tales I can think of and she just sobs.

What the hell am I even meant to do? Find the guilty party and make them and theirs suffer, sure. But it’s not going to help Alina. It won’t bring Max back.

Shit. I try to think of something else, but it all sounds fake, wrong, and finally I do the thing I don’t want.

“Alina, what about funeral arrangements?”

She moans and gives a shuddering breath. “His mom’s arranged a small service, immediate family only.”

“All his friends should?—”

“M-max wouldn’t want big; he wouldn’t even what this. I know he’d want a party to

celebrate, so people could cheer each other up, but..." She shakes her head. "I don't know if I could ever face that. Not yet, not for a while."

I search for the right words, but they don't exist, so I settle. "If there's anything you need, I'm here for you, okay?"

"The only thing you can do that I need," she whispers, "is to punish the animals who did this."

I latch on to that, something I'm working on anyway. "I can do that."

"I... I'm going to try and sleep, okay? And be nice to Erin. She lost Max, too."

Oh, I know that, but it doesn't change a thing. But I nod and make my way back downstairs.

It's still a war zone down here and Sasha's winning. I admire his tenacity, even if it drives me fucking insane. He's a stubborn child. But right now, I need him to fucking eat and he's still refusing.

"We made more toast, but he refused. And no one wants cold egg and bacon," Olga says.

I bite my tongue as I go in the kitchen. There's got to be something in here. I throw open the cupboard, but I eat clean and I tend not to have much in the way of processed food. And somehow, the high protein granola mix Magda makes is not going to be something he likes, but I reach for the container and pull off the lid, turning and almost running into Olga and Sasha.

"This?" I offer it to him, but he takes one sniff and starts howling like I offered him poison. I set it down and bend down, trying to ignore his recoil. "C'mon, Sasha," I

say, motioning to the table in the kitchen and Olga puts him down on the seat, a cushion beneath him, “work with me here. I’m not going to starve you, but you need to eat. What do you want?”

He slows his crying, and he looks at me, then at the cupboard and points at something.

I get up. I don’t know who the fuck it belongs to, but there’s chocolate puffs in a box. I grab the milk, a spoon and a bowl, and pour some in, adding the milk.

He stares at it, then me, and I hold my breath.

“Snack!” he says, taking the spoon and shoving the food in his face. Some actually gets in his mouth, though his shirt is filthy and soaked by the end and the table is a mess.

Christ. If that’s the crap she feeds him, then maybe he’s better with me. At least I can wean him on to healthy foods.

I look at the mess and pull a soggy puff from my hair. What I need to do is?—

He smiles.

Sasha smiles.

It’s not big, but to me, it’s the brightest, most amazing thing I’ve seen. He looks at me and it dims, just a bit, but he doesn’t seem as scared of me as he was.

Magda appears, armed with cleaning products, beams at the boy, scowls at me, and says, “Out, out. Take him to play. The day is nice.”

And from the sounds coming from the front door and the shouts in Russian, the furniture and bedding have arrived.

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“I’ll make sure it’s all set up,” she says, irritated I’m still there. “Go.”

Olga would never speak to me this way. In fact, the only person who’d dare come close is Ilya, and even then, he knows just how far to push. Magda’s mood says she doesn’t care.

“He needs to get changed.”

The irritation grows. “Are you scared of some milk, Demyan? He’ll get dirtier. Here.” She shoves things at me and points to the back, and it’s clear she expects me to pick him up. Me, pick up the boy who hates me.

But he doesn’t now. He’s full of sugar and milk and his smile is still there. Best of all, the word mama hasn’t passed his lips.

I take a breath.

I’ve walked into deadly situations. Had the odds against me. I’ve faced and killed real human monsters.

Why the fuck am I terrified of a little boy?

Because, I realize, he’s mine. And I don’t want to fuck it up. I want him to love me like I love him. That love was sudden, and it’s still there, growing by the second. Is this how?—

I don’t want to think about Erin.

So I set down the things Magda gave me and I pick him up. He goes stiff, but he doesn't fight me. He doesn't cry. I hoist him on a hip and grab the plastic bowl and big silicone spoons from Magda and take him out into the sunshine.

"Mama? Where's Mama?" His face starts to crumple and I toss him the scrunched-up foil I grabbed to use as a ball.

His face suddenly turns up into a smile and a giggle bursts free as the sun hits the silver, making it shine and seem to glow. He misses it by a long shot, but he runs to it, short, pudgy legs eating up the grass. "Mine. It's mine."

And he throws it up in the air where it lands a few inches from him. I come in and get it, handing him the bowl and spoon he's been using as a drum.

Aside from the occasional mama and little bouts of tears, he's mostly smiles and laughter. And screams. He screams when he's sad, when he's scared, and when he's happy and excited, apparently, but I don't mind when it's from positivity.

He's having fun.

And so am I.

Genuinely.

He's delightful, intriguing, and so fucking adorable I can't stand it. This little boy is also getting used to me. The fear's forgotten when he wants to bang his bowl drum, play with the silver foil ball, or run around.

It's all so surreal, that this little guy's mine. I made him. The idea I'm a fucking father is something I'm still wrapping my head around.

But one thing I know, one thing I can't ever forgive, is the boy has been alive for over two years and I didn't know. That time was stolen. I'll never get it back.

"Boss?"

I look up from where I'm sitting on the grass taking a video of Sasha playing and laughing to himself.

"We need a swing, some outdoor things for him to play on and climb," I say to Ilya as I stop filming and put my phone away as I get to my feet. "Order some."

"The room's been set up for him, and I have clothes, shoes, and toys." He opens a bag. "I brought some of them out, as Magda says he might need a change of shirt."

"Sasha?" He stops and looks at me, suspicion creeping in. I pull out a T-shirt. It has a big friendly dinosaur on it. "Come here, please."

He shakes his head and Ilya says, "He's a child. Bribe him with a toy."

I pull out what looks like a giant robot and he's intrigued enough he comes over. We manage to get him in the shirt, which is a little too big, and I play peekaboo with him to stop him crying when he stands on the silver foil ball, crushing it.

He laughs hysterically and hugs the robot and the new ball Ilya hands him.

Sasha's giggles are magic and I brush away the anger of what Erin took from me. Instead, I just try and enjoy the now.

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But soon he's more whiny and teary and cranky than before, and I take him in, up to his new room. He's clearly tired, and even though he holds my hand on the way up, he tugs free and shakes his head and blows out his cheeks as they start to turn red. He's going to throw a tantrum; the tears are already flowing and his asking for his mother is growing in frequency.

"She's not here. You need to get changed and have a nap."

But he shoves me and shakes his head, distressed at the new room. "I want my mama. I want my goat. I want my story. I want my room. I. Want. Mama. Mama!"

I pick him up and he goes stiff as a board kicking, screaming, and I don't get how someone so light and small can be so impossible to hold. I dump him on the bed out of fear of dropping him and he scrabbles up, screaming and crying now.

The door opens, and Alina appears. "Let me try. I could use the distraction."

She goes to him. He's half off the bed now, and she tickles him and his screams turn to watery giggles. "No. I want Mama. Mama."

But she doesn't give up, and soon she has him under the covers. She climbs up next to him, holding him, rocking him gently, and he starts to settle.

She looks at me. "If you have things to do, go do them. I'll stay with him."

I don't want to. I don't want to miss a moment, but Ilya and I have things to do.

In my study, I close my door and look at him.

“What have you got for me?”

“I still say this is Sergio’s work,” I say.

But Ilya shakes his head. “I don’t think it’s him. He’s the type to announce it, not hide like a snake.”

The man’s a snake, but I don’t say it. “He might have decided to exact a punishment on the lowdown.”

“Maybe,” Ilya says, “but if so, he’s exceptionally good at covering his tracks. And I’m not sure he’s that good. He has an ego, Demyan. It can’t be underestimated. Ego like his demands acknowledgement.”

I tap my fingers on my desk. “I’ll take it under advisement. What’s the latest on the ID from the severed finger?”

Anyone else might point out there hasn’t been enough time, but not Ilya. He can work magic, and he knows how to expedite things. He has contacts high and low.

Ilya sighs. “We’re still waiting for the results. But she’s fast-tracking them for me.”

“We’ll work it out eventually,” I say with a frown. “And when I find out the culprit, I’ll rain hell down on them and everyone dear to them. Every single one.”

Chapter Sixteen

ERIN

“Let me see my baby...”I bang on the door, something that’s become a ritual, just like the silence of the nonresponse. The words are a scratchy whisper of defeat.

I finally sit.

No one else is in my prison suite. No one’s been in here for days. At least, that’s what it feels like.

Olga delivers food twice a day. The guard at the door stands in the room as she sets it down, face averted. Once the older woman, Magda, came. She made the guard wait outside as she gave me a smile that smacked of pity. And towels.

Someone has been through my suitcase and dug out yoga pants and a T-shirt for me to put on.

The food is simple sandwiches, but at most I’ve nibbled at two. Somewhere inside I’m hungry, yet eating is repugnant and I can’t manage more than a bite.

There’s nothing to read. Nothing to do, and I’m teetering on the edge of sanity. Only Sasha and the faint hope of escape keeps me tethered.

It doesn’t help that I occasionally catch the sound of his voice and it just rips me apart.

How the fuck long is Demyan planning on keeping me here? Planning on punishing me? As it stands, it’s beyond cruel. I’d prefer life in prison with no hope of parole if it meant visitations from my boy.

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Demyan isn't the hot man I thought he was. Oh, he's hot, but he's capable of deep, dark viciousness. The kind of cruelty I'd never before imagined.

He's intent on blaming me for this. And he's right. I never told him. But he was a one-night stand, one I dreamed of, masturbated to, but one I never knew beyond those hours and most of them weren't spent getting to know each other.

More than that, he was a one-night stand my brother warned me to keep away from, and for the sake of the baby inside me, I did.

He's acting like I set out to have his child hurt him. To twist the knife and I don't know what to do with that.

It's unreasonable, it's poisoned, and while he doesn't strike me as volatile, I think he has that in him beneath the layers of ice. Worse, I think he's capable of all sorts of heinous acts.

Like locking me up and depriving me of my son.

And that's just me. What about Sasha? I can't even fathom what he's going through. I'm all he knows. His little world is me, home, Kara, and my brother when he's around. He's used to love and familiar things and...

Not knowing what to do, I get up and pace, then with his stuffed toy in my hand, I go to the window to look out, the futility of the motion not lost as I hope a miracle will happen and I can see the grounds and my son, instead of the drive.

I squeeze his plushy.

He must be missing his toy.

He must be so confused and frightened.

I've never been away from him this long.

My legs shake and I sit on the bed, hugging the plush goat with its worn patches from Sasha, loving it so much. I breathe in his scent that still clings to it. He must be asking about me, desperate for his mama.

What's Demyan told him? Dread trickles down my spine. I can't help but think he's never going to let me see Sasha again. Maybe he'll keep me here forever, a fucked-up version of Miss Haversham, but instead of the decaying wedding feast, it's just the decaying motherhood stolen from me.

I don't want to think about Dickens.

I don't want to go morbid.

But I can't help it because, oh God, what if he tells Sasha I'm dead?

A laugh breaks free, tinged with hysteria. He's not going to keep me up here for my life in yoga pants like the modern Haversham. No, Demyan will kill me.

Maybe that's the plan, kill me and raise our son like I never existed and Sasha, at two, will forget me.

Worse, he'll grow up cruel and twisted like his father.

I want to throw up.

“You’re letting your imagination take control,” I say, burying my face in the goat’s tummy. “He wouldn’t...”

I’d love to think Demyan wouldn’t do something so cruel. Not to his boy. Not even to me. But there’s a part that believes Demyan’s capable of anything.

Like keeping me around and turning me into someone Sasha hates.

He might?—

The door lock beeps and my head snaps up as the door opens.

Demyan’s there, filling the frame, dark hair curling soft on his forehead, handsome despite the flatness of ice in his light-blue eyes. He’s like a demon who wears the skin of an angel and he takes up way too much space. I can feel him, even from here, like a brush against my skin.

His gaze flickers over me. And I recoil at the burn of contempt.

Demyan steps in, closing the door, and he leans against it, hands in his suit pants pockets.

“Your son is fine,” he says, sounding bored. “In case you’re interested.”

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I'm on my feet so fast my head spins. I glare at him, anger coursing through me. I hate him. I despise every single thing about him, and I can't stand the implication I don't care about my reason for living.

"You fucking bastard," I say, forgetting who has the power for a second. And when I remember, I don't care. "You asshole. Don't try to act like I've been neglecting him. You put me here, you took my son. Sasha's the only thing I've cared about for the last two years, so let me see him. Now."

My eyes start to burn as my throat closes.

"Please."

He pulls his hand from his pocket and tosses me his phone. I say his. It's not locked, so it's probably a higher end burner. I start to shake. He's letting me have a phone? Is that how I'm meant to communicate with Sasha? A?—

"Open the photos. Press play."

My stomach starts to dance queasily. I do as I'm told.

I can't move. My entire world melts down to the video playing.

Sasha. In the sunshine, the backyard, I imagine. The one I snuck out through. I can see the back of the mansion, the flowers and the shade of a tree in the area. And Sasha, laughing, running, and playing.

He squeals with delight and starts chasing something and the camera zooms in. A butterfly. Sasha's happy little face then fills the screen and I'm bombarded.

Relief and happiness at the fact he's thriving, he's fed and healthy.

And a crushing pain that makes the phone slip and the air disappear.

I can't breathe and someone's making sucking, wheezing sounds. It's not until the backs of my legs hit the bed I realize it's me.

The pain is deep, spreading, and my hearts is squeezed and crushed into nothing.

This video is of a boy who's adjusted to life without his mother, like he doesn't care or remember me, like I'm nothing at all.

I'm gone, and he's... happy.

The phone clatters to the floor as a sob breaks free. I look up and everything goes cold.

Triumph lights up Demyan's face.

He wanted this reaction from me. He wanted me in pain, to feel like I want to die.

He wanted me to see Sasha thriving and happy without me.

The cruelty is almost beyond comprehension.

For long moments, I can't move, and I know I'm shaking.

What I want is to lash out and hurt him, claw him, make him bleed. I want to rip his

heart from his chest.

And I want him to never, ever teach the child he's clearly taken from me to be like him. Sasha is good.

"What was that?" he asks.

I realize I spoke. "I said Sasha is good. There's no bad in him. Don't... don't let him ever do this to someone."

"You did it to me."

Another sob breaks free. "Are you two? The world isn't black-and-white, Demyan. Maybe what I did was wrong, but it was never this. Never vindictive. It wasn't like I got knocked up deliberately to keep your child from you. I did... I didn't look further after my brother told me to keep away. I never had your name. And he did that out of love, so leave him alone."

"My issue is with you and your vile actions."

"My..." I stop and take a shaking breath. "There are plenty of guys who'd be happy not to know or be financially responsible for an accident from a one-night stand. I'm not..."

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I shove the toy against my mouth as he scoops up the phone and I try not to cry.

“Yeah, well, you fucked up, Erin. He’s where he should be. With me.”

God, I want to rampage, hit, scream, hurt. But I struggle to keep it all under control, and I try to get him to understand, to see Sasha needs me.

“Demyan, I understand you’re angry. I get you’re still processing that you never knew about him until the other day.”

“And I’d never have known except for fate.”

“Maybe. And maybe when, he asked we’d have found you. I don’t... I’d never hurt him. Ever. And if that meant finding a-a dangerous man because he wanted to know his father, I would do that.”

“He’s two.”

“One day. In the future. My goal isn’t to hurt you. It’s to protect him. Always. But if one day he wanted to know about you, then I’d have found you.” I make myself look at him. “And I get it. You’re hurting. But Demyan, you can’t do this to me or our son.”

He gives me a look he might give a piece of dirt on his shoe. “Give me one good reason not to do it, Erin. Just one.”

The tears burn hot and blur. “Because I love that little boy more than anything in the

world. And he loves me. Have you even thought what cutting me from his life will do to Sasha? He needs his mom.”

“Does he?”

I flinch. “Yes. And I’m sorry, more than you can know, that I kept him from you, but I did it to protect him. And I’m glad you know about him and want him. You care, I can see it. The only thing better than one parent is two.”

He doesn’t say a word and I know I have to do it, be the bigger person. For Sasha. He’s all that matters to me, and Demyan’s going to do what he wants. “Can I have the phone?”

“Want to call someone?”

“No. Pull up the notes screen. Please.”

For a moment I don’t think he’ll do it, but he does, and feeling like I’m cutting off my own arm, I start typing.

“You hold my fate, Demyan. I can’t change that. If you want to kill me, you can. If you want to keep Sasha from me, you can do that, too, but... don’t... don’t be cruel to him. He’s just a baby. He doesn’t know. He’s stubborn and he’ll try your patience, but he’s worth every moment.”

I take a shaky breath, forcing the words out.

“If you must hurt someone, make it me, not him, never him. And Demyan, teach him to be good, to be kind. Because he is.”

A tear falls on the screen, and I hand him the phone.

“What the fuck is this?”

“A list of what he likes and doesn’t. His nap times, his toys, his favorite books. He likes box mac and cheese, but only as a very special treat. He hates strawberries, but he loves raspberries and watermelon. He hates seeded bread, unless you call it special bread. I... it’s all there. The essentials.”

Then I hand him the toy and his pillow and I’m dying. I can feel it. Inside I’m shriveling up and dying.

“Please take these. Please. He loves them.”

At first, I think he’s going to let them fall, but his hand comes around them. And that ice in his eyes seems to warm. But then it slams down.

And like I’m nothing at all, he turns and walks out, the door, locking behind him.

Now I have nothing of Sasha’s. I can’t even smell him. I crumple to the ground, lost in a haze of grief.

Chapter Seventeen

DEMYAN

“Are you listening?”

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I'm not. I shoot a glare in the general direction of Ilya as we sit in my living room on the second floor. It's an old library, one I converted the books in another room. In here, things aren't for display. I've no interest in keeping books, paintings, furniture, or statues that speak of wealth and famous artists and designers, and I definitely don't give a fuck about rarities.

Things in here are mine. It's my space.

One where I read or spend time with Ilya. I don't bring women here. They go to my penthouse duplex in Chicago, overlooking the glitter of the city and the Willis Tower in all its neo-Gothic glory.

This room usually brings me peace.

Not tonight.

I shift on the sofa and sip the vodka he brought with him, thick and ice-cold from the small dedicated vodka freezer that's attached to the wet bar.

The black bread is still sitting on the tray with all the various toppings Magda set out.

He gives me a flat-eyed stare back and moves from the window. "Because you seem like you're not listening. Tvoja golova v oblakakh."

"My head is not in the clouds, Ilya."

He snorts and pulls out the vodka, topping his glass up. Really, it should be thrown

back, not sipped, but I'm not in the mood to get drunk. I can't afford it, not with a child here, and not with this issue.

"You told me your contact in the police force had information."

His irritation is real. He knows I wasn't paying attention. But Erin is taking up space in my head, and for some reason her pain's cutting into me. The flea-bitten toy's sitting on the sofa next to me and I know I have to give it to him. He's asked for his goat before and I'm not so cruel that I'll make a tiny child suffer.

"I said, Demyan, that she told me the print from the finger was from a lower ranked member of the Fedorov Bratva."

"Fuck."

Revenge. Pure and simple. Those bastards ruined my sister's life over fucking revenge. "Where is Niko?"

"You can't get to him. He's gone to ground right now. Observing is my guess. Official word is he's out of the country."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Two years ago, I killed that dickwad, Denis. A greedy, duplicitous guy. Niko Federov's younger brother. The capo doesn't seem to understand it was within perimeters that Denis ignored warnings, crossed lines, and faced the consequences.

But Niko never understands anything. His thirst for revenge is legendary. I breathe out, then toss back the last mouthful.

"Ilya, set up a meeting with Sergio."

His eyebrows rise. “Boss?”

“Shove that boss shit up your ass,” I say to him in Russian. Then I add a few choice words about his mother.

“She would, but she doesn’t fancy you. Boss.” Then he sighs. “Are you sure about Sergio? The don’s got a host of wants. Augusto is accommodating when he chooses, but his favors are never cheap and often hold a nasty sting.”

I shrug. “I can handle Augusto.”

“It’s not about handling, Demyan; it’s about the man himself. He’s been useful so far in carefully controlled areas, but this is one where we can’t bluff as if we don’t care. We can’t be blasé, or the man will take advantage.”

“Perhaps, but he’s got no love for Fedorov. That works for us. He has connections.”

“Fuck,” Ilya mutters as he knocks back his vodka before setting the glass down and folding his arms. “He’s got connections, but he’s not exactly trustworthy. Didn’t he screw over Abram Popov last year?”

“In a bid to take over his assets, yes.” I meet Ilya’s gaze and hold out my glass. He fills it and I knock it back. He fills it again. “I can handle him.”

“He’s slippery.”

I hold up a hand. “Just set up the fucking meeting.”

“Demyan...”

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“I can handle the fucker.” I drain the glass and stand. “I’m going to need his help in bringing down someone as callous as Fedorov, and you know it.”

“You’re powerful?—”

“I’m not talking about power in brute strength. I’m talking about the new ways. I need help with that attack. His funds, assets, his territories and allies. I want to destroy and take it all and for that, we need coalitions.”

“You think Sergio will be fair?”

“I just want Niko dead. Let Sergio think he’s stealing myshare from me. It’s his. I just need his help in bringing the fucker down and reducing his empire to rubble before I kill him. To Sergio, the world, we want our share. But personally? His head is all I want.”

Ilya is about to say something, but the cries of Sasha fill the room from the little monitor I have.

“Maybe we should use baby monitors as the first line of defense. When an enemy approaches, we’ll know.”

“You think you’re funny, Ilya,” I say to him in Russian.

“Da, I am.”

Leaving Ilya to set up meetings, I head to Sasha’s room, the ratty plush toy in my

hand.

Sasha's sitting up in his bed, tear tracks on his face, the little night-light on, and he breaks my heart, huddled and small even if he's on the verge of losing his shit.

"You don't know how good you've got it, kid," I mutter.

He cries louder, building to a wail, and I hold out the toy.

In moments flat, he's quiet, his gaze zeroing in on the goat, and then he smiles and laughs. He screams. "Goat!"

I give it to him, and he hugs it tight. I try to shove away the guilt of ignoring Erin and the toy the first time she tried to give it to me. The kid loves the thing and now that he has it, he's compliant, snuggling down, eyes wide as he struggles against heavy lids. "Story."

There are books but some are in Russian and some in English, and I haven't had a chance to look them over. I think Ilya just grabbed a bunch of books and didn't think. Though, I'm not mad at him. Like me, he doesn't have kids. He doesn't know Sasha.

I stop.

I have a child.

I don't fit that category anymore. I grab a book and start reading. I don't even take in what it's about. The adventures of a naughty bird. I show the pictures to him and he quickly goes from awake to asleep, a small little smile on his face, the goat tight and safe in his arms, his head against it.

My heart flips and swells. He's mine, this kid. This perfect child is mine. And he let

me read he smiled for me. He went to sleep for me.

We're forming a bond and it's the most thrilling thing. Not to mention frightening. That's how he makes me feel, like I need to make this world safe for him, and to keep him safe within it.

A pain that should be dull from years of carrying starts to cut into me again. It's now a reminder that my fucked-up, shit childhood is mine to carry, not mine to share. If I had to have that, then it's knowing not what to do with Sasha.

My father hated me on bad days, tolerated me on good, and the rest of the time I didn't exist.

He blamed me for my mother dying when I was a baby. He always said I killed her. Slowly, painfully, that after giving birth, she'd declined until she died. And that was my fault.

I was a few months old when she passed.

When I did get attention, it was to berate, and belittle me. Communication was frigid silence or yelling. There wasn't anything soft.

But like it or not, I was his only son. So I had to be the heir, the prince who didn't deserve the crown but got it anyway.

That was my father's view of me.

And yet when he married again and Alina came along, he loved her, doted on her. She was his princess. The holy one, who by fate of her birth, couldn't inherit his crown.

I got why he loved her. Alina was and is an angel, and she is my heart. I never thought anyone else could find space, but this little boy has.

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I've known him for what... a day or two and I feel closer to him than I ever did with my father. It's insane. It's right.

How crazy that from this tragedy Erin's back in my life and with her my son. I couldn't have planned something like that.

I go still.

Planned?

If Niko had enough foresight to ruin my sister's wedding, shoot it up, kill the groom and kidnap her, then he could have planted Erin. After all, maybe they weren't trying to kidnap her with Alina, but take her with them since she was part of it all.

I'm being insane, crazy, I know this, but now that the thought is there, I can't shake it.

Because what if he isn't mine and I'm just seeing what I want to see. I get up, stumbling back, my heart twisting with love for the boy, and I instinctively know if anyone wanted to hurt me, you attack through the one vulnerability I have.

Love.

It's very specific. Narrow. Until now it's been Alina and look at what happened there. Alina is innocent, not a killer. And the boy's only two. Both innocent. Make me think he's mine and love him and someone could rip me apart by taking him away and letting me know he's nothing to do with me. It'd be too late.

The love's real.

Shit.

Plant Erin in my life with the boy and it might be easy to bring me down from the inside.

I'm not just being unreasonable. I'm being batshit insane, but I've locked on. If he isn't mine and he's taken, then I'm destroyed. It wouldn't matter the parentage, I'd love him. And I couldn't do a thing to have him if he wasn't biologically mine.

Erin... she...

Maybe it's the vodka coursing through my veins, but I ease out of Sasha's room and take the stairs up to the third floor, where I dismiss the guards. They won't go far, but I don't want anyone to overhear my coming conversation.

I punch in the code and storm in. She's sitting on the bed, so like how I found Sasha that I stumble, heart contracting, but her look is pain and defeat and I... I harden myself against it.

"Are you going to let me see him?" she asks, voice dull, "or just torture me some more?"

For a moment, I'm not sure what to say. Either she's being honest and I've lost whatever is left of my mind or she's in the running for a fucking Oscar.

"Why are you really here?"

Erin laughs and hooks a strand of her unkempt blonde hair behind her ear. It should diminish her, the layer of neglect about her, but it doesn't. It just tugs at me, hard.

She's a beautiful woman, but it's not that; it's the thing in her that won't die. The thing that burns, no matter what.

"You kidnapped me, Demyan."

I narrow my eyes. How can she glow like that even though she needs a brush? "Are you working for Niko?"

"Who?"

"It's a little too much of a coincidence you were there, and you have a child you're passing off as mine."

She goes still and a bitter triumph fills me. I don't believe a word I'm saying and yet I can't stop. I want her to be the villain. I need it because I know just how horrible I've been, my anger turning me into a man who shames me and would make my father proud because of how I'm treating her is how he treated me.

Outrageous accusations, the twist of different knives, the need for pain and suffering inflicted on the victim.

If she's the villain, then I'm not the monster.

"What are you talking about?" she whispers.

"Don't pretend you don't know."

I stalk up to her, and she's on her feet fast and backing away. "You're crazy. Who the fuck is Niko? Why on earth would I try to hurt you? I don't want to cause anyone pain. I just want Sasha safe and with me."

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“You’re hiding something.” My gaze skims slowly over her, lingering on her tits beneath the fitted pale-rose T-shirt, drinking in their swell, the rise and fall.

She lets out a small sound, full of distress, and I hate myself more. “Hiding something? You kidnapped me, Demyan, dragged me here, or do you mean on me?”

There’s a flash of wild, feral light, a tangle of anger and pain in her eyes, and she whips off her T-shirt, pushes off the yoga pants and she stands there, in a plain cotton bra and mismatched panties. The bra is white, panties black, and she looks even better than the last time I saw her in a state of undress. She’s more rounded.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

She shoves me. “If you think I’m hiding something, I’m showing you I’m not. Or do you think you need to do a full body cavity search?”

“Seduction isn’t going to work.”

Erin laughs. “You think I want to seduce you? I don’t. I never want to see you again. I want my baby and I want us to be gone. You’re crazy, Demyan. Batshit crazy.”

I move in, and she stumbles back until she hits the door and I cage her in. Her body heat radiates and I buzz, being so near, she’s like an electrical field. I want more.

She’s fucking right. I am batshit crazy.

“I’m a lot of things, Erin,” I say, slipping a finger over her cheek, “but crazy isn’t one

of them.”

I might have lost my mind somewhere from Sasha’s room to here, but I’m not sharing that with her.

“No, you’re crazy.”

“Who’s Sasha’s father?”

“You.”

“And you expect me to believe that?”

“You did when you kicked down the motel door. You did when you threatened to never let me see him, when you claimed parentage. Who do you honestly think his father is? He looks like you. He’s your kid.”

“You can’t possibly know that for sure.”

“I do.” Her voice is tight. “You were the only man I was with that could possibly be the father. I broke up with my boyfriend three months before that. So unless it was a miracle birth, you’re his father.”

I frown. “Erin?—”

“I’ve never heard of this, Niko. So if you’ll excuse me, I’m tired.” She pushes past me, collecting her clothes and pulling them on. “Believe what you want, but don’t you dare hurt that child or I’ll kill you.”

Her words are so matter-of-fact that despite my fucked-up behavior, I want to smile. But instead, I sit on the bed and run a hand through my hair. “I lost it there. I... this

Niko is the one responsible for?—”

“Max?” Her whisper is ragged. “I hope you end him. Max... he didn’t deserve that. And neither did Alina.”

“Yeah, well, planting someone here is something he’d do.”

“I’m not— Sasha’s yours.”

Her words play in my head. No one else but me in all that time. And the way she said it, like there’s been no one...

It grips hard, that notion that the last man who touched her was me. “You said you hadn’t been with anyone before me, and after?”

“You’re the father. I know it because since that night I haven’t... There’s... I don’t do one-night stands, and that was an aberration.”

Just me.

It shouldn’t make me hard, turn me on, but it does.

She’s mine, like he is.

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I try to eject the notion, but it stays. There's something so fucking primal about it, so satisfying I want to... I don't want to do a thing. I'm already acting like a psychopath. I don't need to put moves on her after accusing her of being a spy and trying to make her admit the child who looks like me isn't mine.

The last time I was like this was... was never.

“Not at all?”

“Do you want a plaque, Demyan? This is embarrassing enough to admit. There's been no one but you. At first, I was busy, then I found out I was pregnant, and being a single mother, well... I've been asked out, but...” She bites her lip. “I don't date. Being a single mom makes it hard.”

She edges up, and I meet her gaze. “I'm not going to eat you or anything. You can sit, Erin.”

“Is that an apology?”

“It's what you get.”

She sits, putting a little space between us. “Okay.”

“You didn't think about?—”

“Termination? No. I wanted him. It fucked up my career path, but the moment I found out, I wanted that baby. He's stubborn, contrary, and a pain in the ass

sometimes, but I wouldn't have it any other way. It's worth it for his smile. He started his stubborn ways early. I went into labor, and then he refused to come for forty hours, putting me through hell."

"That sounds like my boy, right there."

She smiles and I do, too, as pride swells in me. Part of me wishes I was there, but the pride is bigger.

"When I say hell, I mean it, but you know what? The moment I laid eyes on him with his perfect little face, I forgot the pain. He was worth it. Worth so much more. That little baby was the entire world, and he still is."

I try to think of something to say, but I can't. My throat's tight and full because, though I can't possibly know childbirth, I know what she means. That love that's instantaneous, that's all-consuming and right, I felt that when I saw him for the first time.

"Demyan... Sasha's the best gift anyone's ever given me, and I want to thank you for that. He's an amazing boy. Kind and gentle and loving."

"That's you."

"It's nature and nurture, so that's you, too. He's stubborn and smart and I know, even at two, he's going to grow up into such a strong young man. And you can help in the ways I can't, but he's so special, Demyan."

"He can light up a room just like he lights up my heart. The word love isn't big enough, is it?"

I stare at her. I can feel it. Her love for him. It's strong, a steady beam of power, of

life, and this woman would give anything for his happiness, even if it cost her own.

Christ, maybe keeping them apart is the wrong thing to do.

But she kept him from me. For all her words, she deliberately kept him from me.

“D-Demyan, can I see him, please? It’s killing me. And I dread that it’s hurting him, too. We’re a little unit and he must be fretting over where his mama is. Please.”

Abruptly, I stand.

“I’ll think about it,” I tell her. And before I can be swayed, I leave the room, locking the door behind me.

And I think her sobs will haunt my dreams for a long time to come.

Chapter Eighteen

ERIN

I barely sleep. How can I? The man walked off and never returned. Not that I expected him to. Not that he’s shown a drop of human emotion.

It’s like he keeps coming in here to torture me, taunt me with our son. Still, at least he took the goat. That’s something.

Every time I close my eyes, I see Sasha happy, Sasha chasing the butterfly.

Sasha not missing me.

And I hate it.

Not that I want my child to hurt or be sad. But it's like he forgot me in this short period of time.

“Selfish fucking thing,” I whisper to myself.

At least I have a change of clothes, a sundress, from my case. I don't even remember packing it. But Olga brought it with a brush and my toiletries and... What the hell am I meant to think about that?

Good? Bad? A sign he's keeping me here for the foreseeable future.

Heartless, hard, a man of ice and stone.

I swallow.

Except... Except last night I picked something up, a small thing, like a glimmer of hope. The faint hint of pride and softness when I spoke about Sasha. That male idiocy when I told him, there's only been him so that's how I know who Sasha belongs to.

That and Sasha looks like we made him. He has his father's stubborn streak because it must be stubbornness keeping me locked up, stubbornness in Demyan's search for something real to blame me for, and he has Demyan's eyes and hair.

But what use is any of that if I'm trapped in here?

None at all.

But the worst thing is, when I opened up to Demyan and his eagerness to know about the birth, about his son did something to me.

I should have insisted on letting him know.

I've robbed the man of two years and I know how precious that time was; it's something I treasure. So how must he feel, knowing...

"You know how he feels, and I didn't rob him. I didn't know how he'd react."

Saying the words out loud doesn't exactly help. They don't assuage the guilt I'm suddenly feeling. I shouldn't, I know that. Things happen and I didn't do a vindictive thing. Unlike him.

But I can see how and why he's being like he is. Perhaps not the whole picture as I know nothing of his past, but sure, I see how he's feeling like this.

It's Sasha.

Anyone would want to be part of his life.

Especially his biological father.

He's angry.

And I hope to God he puts Sasha's needs first, not his. That's what I'm trying to do. It's what any good parent would do. And if I can't see him, all I can do is hope and

pray Demyan loves him like I do.

I can't see why he wouldn't.

Sasha's very loveable.

Voices outside my door infiltrate and I go still. Male voices. Is that Demyan?

My heart is beating hard and wild as the door opens and he walks in. As always, he sucks the space in the room into him and it's just me and him and nothing else.

I can't breathe as I try to stand, my heart caught in my throat.

"Demyan? Is everything all right? Is Sasha okay?"

He doesn't answer, just studies me. Then he nods. "He's fine."

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The air rushes out of me. “I just... I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

“Follow me.”

But I can’t move as terror and hope swamp me in equal measures.

Demyan lets out an exasperated breath. “You’ll live another day, Erin. We’re going downstairs to have lunch. You, me, and Sasha.”

My legs almost give way and he catches my arm, electricity shooting through me at his touch.

My eyes blur with tears of happiness but I dash them with my hand as he lets me go. I’m not going to cry. Sasha won’t understand.

But the happiness swells and I stare at him. “Really?”

“Yes.”

I don’t think. I throw my arms around him and hug him tight, the warmth of his hard body seeping in and enveloping me like a psychic hug.

He doesn’t move and I hug him harder, the beat of his heart strong and slightly erratic.

Demyan mutters something in Russian as I press against him. He feels good, I won’t lie, but he feels even better because I’m getting to see Sasha.

“Thank you. Thank you.” And I sob a little, shoulders shaking, unable to stop myself.

For a moment he remains a solid wall of hot rock, and then his hands come up to grip my hips. Large, strong, my body bursts into life.

I remember that touch, how it burned and set off further fires inside. I rub my cheek against his chest and thread my fingers into his thick hair, breathing in that honeyed whiskey and lavender and leather of him.

“You smell like warm summer and flowers, not honey and lavender,” he says.

“That’s you.”

“Is it?”

A laugh bubbles up, followed by the slam of reality. He probably never read the scent profile of whatever he wears. I don’t even know if it’s just his products or an expensive perfume that’s so subtle a woman needs to be up close.

I go to pull free, but his fingers skim my side and tip my chin. Our gazes mesh and for a moment I’m lost in him.

“No tears, good,” he says.

Then I pull free, embarrassed by my reaction. I’m getting caught up in some sick fantasy about the man who’s kept me prisoner and away from my child and he’s checking I’m not a blubbering mess for Sasha to see.

I don’t know what the hell my reaction was. But I shove it away and straighten my dress.

“Come on, Erin.”

I follow him and as we near the landing on the ground floor, he says, “Just remember I’m watching.”

“What am I going to do? You’ve got guards everywhere.”

The scents from the kitchen reach me as we go down the hall and he suddenly grabs me, pushing me against the wall.

Heat radiates from where he touches. He leans right in, breath teasing my skin, and I’m in overdrive for reasons I can’t fathom. Maybe because I’m so pathetically grateful to be out, or maybe it’s because he’s the only human touch I’ve had in what seems forever. Or maybe?—

His face is calm, but his voice could cut bone. “Fucking me over right now would be a very bad, very dangerous move.”

“I wouldn’t?—”

“I’m talking, Erin, and you’ll do fucking well to listen. This is your one and only chance to prove you can be trusted. Do you understand?”