



# Vicious Doll

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Thriller

**Description:** They taught me how to kill without remorse.  
Now they're about to learn I can live without mercy.  
The Dollhouse is cracking—and so am I.

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I didn't volunteer.

They took me — dragged me out of my life and dropped me into The Dollhouse, a covert black-ops unit wrapped in silk and secrets. Now I'm Landry James: spy, seductress, disposable asset. They trained me to be a weapon — all curves, claws, and kill shots — but they never expected me to think for myself.

Because beneath the lingerie and lipstick, something darker is unraveling. Secrets that don't add up. Allegiances that don't hold. And a mission that smells more like a setup.

I was supposed to follow orders.

Instead, I'm about to blow the whole damn thing open.

High-octane thrills. Dark twists. Zero apologies.

Welcome back to Dirty Doll Ops.

Warning: This is Book 3 of 4, and it ends with fire.  
Cliffhanger. Consequences. And no turning back.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:35 am*

I wake to the taste of copper and ketamine.

My tongue feels twice its size, mouth dry as a Mormon wedding. The drug fog lingers—that floaty, disconnected sensation where your brain's still online but your body's filed for divorce. Everything's too bright, too sharp, like someone cranked the contrast on reality and forgot to adjust the exposure.

I try to swallow but my throat sticks to itself. Gritty eyelids scrape against eyeballs that feel sunburned, even with the weak light filtering through dirty windows. The headache builds behind my eyes like pressure before a storm—the kind of pain that comes with chemical assistance, courtesy of whoever jammed a needle in my neck.

Memory comes in flashes: the safehouse. Harlow, that rat-fuck traitor. The shotgun kick against my shoulder. Blood spray painting the designer furniture like a Jackson Pollock made of some poor bastard's frontal lobe.

Killion's hands checking my wounds, clinically assessing damage without ever meeting my eyes. Running. The split-second decision to separate when another team ambushed us in the extraction corridor.

Then darkness. Chemical darkness. The kind that comes with a needle and the certainty that whatever happens next, you won't have a fucking say in it.

I peel open my eyes to unfamiliar ceiling—cracked plaster, water stains blooming like cancerous flowers against dingy white. Soviet-era construction, if I had to guess. The kind of building that's survived regimes and revolutions through sheer stubborn refusal to fall down.

My clothes are gone. I'm wearing a man's shirt, buttons askew, and nothing else. The fabric smells of unfamiliar detergent and expensive cologne—not the industrial scentless shit Dollhouse uses that costs more than designer perfume just to smell like nothing at all.

My panties are missing, a violation I file away for future reckoning. The air smells like damp concrete, cigarettes, and something earthier—mold maybe, or the particular tang of a foreign place with foreign dangers.

"Finally awake, kotyonok." The voice slides through the room like smoke, accented and amused.

I turn my head too fast, vertigo making the room spin like I'm on a carnival ride designed by sadists. Acid crawls up my throat; I swallow it down with a grimace.

He sits in a leather chair by the window, framed in weak winter light that does nothing to soften the hard edges of him.

One leg crossed casually over the other, a cigarette balanced between fingers that look equally capable of performing surgery or snapping necks.

Smoke curls around him like a living thing, a dragon lounging in its lair, his profile sharp as a freshly-honed blade against the gray sky beyond.

Alexei Volkov.

Gray Suit from the bar. The man who killed Victor Reese with a bullet to the brain. The ghost that Killion was hunting—or who was hunting us. Hard to tell which way that particular food chain flows.

"Where am I?" My voice sounds like I've been gargling glass and chasing it with

gasoline. I push to my elbows, refusing to lie flat before a predator.

"Somewhere safe," he says, his accent heavier than I expect. Russian, but polished by years elsewhere—Europe, maybe London. His consonants have edges like broken bottles. "Somewhere your friends won't find you until I allow it."

I test my limbs. No restraints, but my muscles respond like they're swimming through molasses, drugged and sluggish.

My thigh throbs where wood splinters tore into it during the firefight, a dull pulsing heat that suggests infection lurking at the edges. Someone's cleaned and dressed the wound—neatly, professionally.

The bandage is hospital-grade, applied with precision that speaks of medical training.

Another violation to catalog: he or someone he employs has handled me while I was unconscious. Stripped me. Dressed me. Tended my wounds.

Each breath sends inventory reports from different parts of my body. Bruised ribs. Shoulder wrenched from the shotgun recoil. Split skin across my knuckles where I connected with some faceless operative's jaw. Nothing life-threatening. Nothing that would prevent me from killing my captor if I got the chance.

The room is sparse but not a cell. Heavy wooden furniture, old but quality, the kind with stories carved into every scratch and stain. A bed that's seen better decades, sagging slightly in the middle, covered in sheets that smell of unfamiliar detergent.

A desk with nothing on it but whorls in the grain that form faces if you stare too long. One door, thick enough to muffle screams. One window, double-paned against whatever winter waits outside.

Beyond the glass, white sky stretches like a blank canvas, highlighted by the spindly black fingers of leafless trees reaching up like drowning men's hands. No cities visible. No landmarks. No clues except the architecture and the light—the particular quality of winter sun this far north, this far east.

Okay, quick recap: I've been abducted by the Russian male version of the Wicked Witch of the East—minus the broom, plus a Glock.

"What's your deal, Volkov." I push myself to sitting position, ignoring how the room tilts on its axis, refusing to show weakness even as my stomach lurches in protest. "If you wanted me dead, I'd be dead. So what's this? Interrogation? Leverage? A really fucked-up meet-cute?"

He studies me from across the room, eyes the color of frozen mud. Not cold, exactly. Just... remote. Like he's watching me from a great distance through precision optics, calculating wind resistance and bullet drop.

His stillness is unnerving—not the rigid control of military training but the patience of something that knows it's at the top of the food chain.

## Page 2

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"Smart girl," he says, voice a low rumble that seems to vibrate through the floorboards. He crushes his cigarette in an ashtray—crystal, incongruously elegant in this decaying room—before immediately lighting another with practiced efficiency.

I gestured toward his cigarette. "Careful, those are going to kill you someday."

He chuckles, the flame from his antique Zippo briefly illuminates the planes of his face, casting dramatic shadows that highlight cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass, jaw darkened with precise stubble that's been cultivated rather than neglected, a scar bisecting his left eyebrow like a question mark missing its dot. "Not likely," he says with a shrug and he's probably right. There's a reason you never see old spies. The retirement plan is a bullet.

Handsome in that ruthless, Eastern European way that suggests he knows exactly how many ways to kill a man with a shoelace and has had occasion to use at least three of them. The kind of face that belongs on propaganda posters or movie villains—striking enough to remember, controlled enough to fear.

"But you are asking wrong question," he continues, exhaling smoke through nostrils like some dragon taking measure of a knight. "Question is not why I keep you alive. Question is why Director Harlow wanted you dead."

My laugh comes out harsh, brittle, scraping my throat raw. "What can I say? Sometimes I rub people the wrong way."

The understatement of the century. I've spent my life as sandpaper on other people's soft spots—Isaac's suburban dreams, men's ego-wrapped lust, now agency directors

with God complexes. If there's a line to cross, I'll fucking dance over it while giving the middle finger to whoever drew it.

Volkov shakes his head, standing with the liquid grace of a predator who knows exactly how much energy each movement requires. Nothing wasted. Nothing excessive. Just pure function wrapped in expensive fabric.

He moves to the bed, and I tense, calculating odds and angles, but he only sits on its edge, far enough to be non-threatening, close enough that I can smell his cologne—something expensive with notes of pine and some underlying spice I can't identify.

"Harlow wanted you dead before that," he says, voice dropping lower, intimate as a confession or a threat. He doesn't lean in—doesn't need to. His presence fills the space between us, heavy as lead, sharp as a blade. "Before Victor Reese. Before you were ever sent to that apartment. Why do you think you were chosen as bait, Nova? Or should I call you Landry?"

The sound of my real name on his lips sends ice water cascading down my spine, flash-freezing every vertebra. Only a handful of people know both my identities.

"How do you?—"

"I know everything about you." His eyes don't leave mine as he takes another drag, the cigarette's ember reflecting tiny points of fire in his pupils. The smoke hangs between us. "Landry Elizabeth James. Thirty years old. Married to accountant Isaac, who thinks you are on extended girls' trip because he is too stupid or too willfully blind to see what sits across from him at breakfast table."

He taps ash into his palm—a strangely fastidious gesture in this decaying room—before continuing. "Former fixture at sex club Malvagio. Regular partner:

Derek Klein, who was left in alley the night of your extraction and now seeing therapist for nightmares. Recruited by Killion three months ago after... what was phrase in your file? 'Demonstrated aptitude for extended deception and sexual manipulation.'"

Each fact lands like a slap, precise and stinging. He knows me—not just the file details but the little things, the personal things, the dots that connect to form the constellation of my fucked-up life choices.

He leans closer, and I fight the urge to recoil. His proximity carries no sexual threat—somehow that's worse. Like I'm a specimen under glass, a problem to be solved rather than a body to be used. I know how to handle men who want me. I have no fucking clue what to do with one who sees through me.

"I know you think you are special asset," he continues, voice almost gentle now, which somehow cuts deeper than cruelty would. "But you were chosen for exactly one reason: you are hot enough to get the job done but ultimately, expendable."

The words land like body blows, each one finding soft, vulnerable tissue beneath my armor. Ribs, kidneys, solar plexus. Places that don't show bruises but bleed internally.

"Bullshit," I spit, but a worm of doubt crawls through my gut, burrowing deeper with each passing second. The safehouse op. The convenience of my selection. Killion's odd warning not to trust anyone, not even him. "I'm one of their best. I learn fast and I get results."

My voice sounds hollow even to my own ears. Three months is nothing in an organization like the Dollhouse. I was a baby, a newcomer, no matter how quickly I adapted or how well I performed.

Volkov's smile doesn't reach his eyes. It stops at his cheekbones, a mechanical



movement of facial muscles that mimics human emotion without containing any. "You got results because you were set up to succeed. Victor Reese was already compromised. Already monitored. Killion needed convincing bait for Harlow trap. Someone good enough to seem legitimate but new enough to be sacrificial."

He leans back slightly, giving me space to process, to drown in the implications. "You were burned asset before you ever began. Walking corpse from moment you signed contract."

The words sink into my psyche like poison, spreading tendrils of doubt through every memory, every mission, every moment since Killion dragged me from my old life into his shadow world. Was any of it real? Was I ever valued, or just convenient cannon fodder with good tits and a talent for lying?

"Prove it," I challenge, shoving doubt aside with the same stubborn denial that's kept me functioning through every catastrophic life choice. "If Killion used me—prove it."

Volkov reaches into his jacket—moving slowly enough that I don't flinch, another calculated courtesy—and produces a slim tablet. He swipes through files with the efficiency of someone who knows exactly what he's looking for, then turns it toward me without fully surrendering it. Close enough to see, not close enough to grab.

Photos. Documents. Audio transcripts. Evidence of an operation stretching back years. Harlow selling secrets—not to Russia or China or any expected adversary, but to a private intelligence firm with tentacles in every major government. Plausible deniability through corporate buffers. Money laundering through offshore accounts and crypto.

Worse, communications between an unknown name and Killion. Plans for the Reese operation. My name, circled in red. Phrases like "acceptable collateral" and "containment protocol" jumping out from the text like neon signs pointing to my

grave.

"This could all be fabricated," I say, but my voice lacks conviction, the words hollow as a promise from a politician's lips. Digital evidence is the easiest to fake, but the sheer volume, the specificity, the consistency across formats—if it's fake, it's a masterpiece of deception.

"Could be," Volkov agrees mildly, retrieving the tablet. His fingers move across the screen in practiced swipes, muscle memory for whatever security protocols he's established. "But isn't."

I push away from him, needing distance, needing space to process. The shirt—his shirt, I realize with fresh discomfort—slides against my bare skin, a constant reminder of vulnerability.

## Page 3

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If Volkov's telling the truth, I've been played from the beginning, a pawn sacrificed in a game where I never saw the whole board. If he's lying, he's doing it to drive a wedge between me and the only allies I have left.

Either way, I'm fucked sideways without dinner or a kiss.

"Why show me this?" I demand, voice steadier than I feel. "What's your angle?"

Everyone has an angle. Killion taught me that much, if nothing else. Nobody does anything for free, especially not in this shadow world where information is currency and loyalty is a fairy tale told to rookie agents before they learn better.

He stands, pacing to the window, his back to me. Through the thin shirt, I can see the outline of a shoulder holster, the slight bulge of a compact pistol. He knows I see it. He wants me to see it. Another message: I'm not afraid of you.

"Killion is not good man, but Harlow has compromised your organization to core," he says, voice neutral as a weather report describing catastrophic floods. "He sells not just secrets but people. Your people. Dolls."

He turns, backlit by the pale winter light, face in shadow. The stance should diminish him, make him a silhouette, a target. Instead, it transforms him into something mythic—a dark sentinel against the colorless sky.

"Including one who mattered to me."

Something in his voice—a ragged edge beneath the control, a hairline fracture in

perfect steel—catches me off guard. This isn't just business for him. It's personal. And personal is always more dangerous, more unpredictable, than professional.

“Who?”

His gaze slews away from me, shutting me down with cold silence. He's not going to share that intel. Okay, fair enough.

"So what?" I shift on the bed, gauging distance to the door, calculating how far I'd get with drugged muscles and a throbbing leg wound. Not far enough. “If I'm nothing but a pawn in this game, how do I play in your little revenge plan?”

“You are pawn, yes, but you can be so much more if you pick right partner.”

“And, let me guess...you're the right partner?” I laugh. “Be so for real right now. Why the fuck would I help the man who killed Victor Reese and kidnapped me? You shot a man in the head and drugged me unconscious. Not to mention, the intel I had was that you were working with Harlow. That doesn't exactly build a good working environment, Volkov.”

He moves with liquid speed that belies his size, crossing the room before I can blink. No wasted motion, no telegraphing, just pure deadly efficiency.

His hand catches my jaw, not violently but firmly, tilting my face up to his. Those dark eyes bore into mine, searching for something—weakness, understanding, compliance, I can't tell which.

“Do not mourn Victor Reese—he was already selling your name when I put bullet in his head,” he says, voice dropping to a dangerous purr that vibrates through his fingers into my jawbone. “I could have left you for Harlow's cleanup crew. Right now, I am only one not trying to make you disappear.”

His grip loosens, fingers trailing along my jawline in a gesture too intimate for comfort, too deliberate to be mere power play. My skin prickles with awareness—danger, adrenaline, and something darker I don't want to name. Something that responds to the predator before me not with fear but with recognition.

"Also," he adds, thumb brushing my lower lip, the callus catching slightly on delicate skin, "because you are survivor. Like me. You use what you have—your body, your mind, anything—to stay alive. To win."

The assessment is too accurate, too penetrating. It bypasses my carefully constructed armor, the scar tissue built over years of bad choices and worse consequences. He sees the raw, ugly truth of me—the desperate creature beneath the bravado who will chew through her own leg to escape a trap.

I jerk my face away, but don't retreat further. Showing too much fear is as dangerous as showing none. "Don't psychoanalyze me, Volkov. You don't know me."

"I know you better than you think, kotyonok." The Russian endearment slides from his tongue like oil on water, foreign and slick. His eyes hold mine, unblinking, reptilian in their focus. "I've watched you since Malvagio. Since before Killion took you."

The revelation hits like a slap, stinging and disorienting. My brain scrambles to recalibrate, to reassess every memory of the club, every dark corner and private room, searching for glimpses of him. Had he been there? Watching from the shadows while I fucked my way through LA's elite, chasing cheap thrills and cheaper validation?

"You were watching me before the Dollhouse?"

The question comes out more vulnerable than I intend, edged with the particular violation that comes from discovering you've been observed when you thought

yourself free.

He nods, returning to his chair with that same economical grace. Distance reestablished. Power dynamic reset. "You were not random recruitment. You were targeted for specific reason."

"Which is?"

"I do not think you are ready to hear that," he answers, lighting a fresh cigarette. The ritual seems to center him—flame, inhale, exhale. A meditation in nicotine and fire. "Let's just say you are more than meets the eye and Killion has not been truthful to you."

I hate being confused. And Volkov's cryptic intel? Confusing as fuck.

“What the hell are you even saying?”

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Look, I'm not exactly lining up to be martyred on Killion's cross, but swallowing the idea that he's the bad guy? That one sticks in my throat.

Or maybe this was all Volkov's attempt to pit me against Killion?

"So what now?" I ask. The chessboard reshaping itself with each new revelation. "We team up like some fucked-up buddy comedy? Hunt down Harlow together? You wear the bad cop hat, I'll bring the donuts? And what about Killion? What if he's looking for me?"

"Killion is not looking for you," Volkov says, stubbing out his cigarette with precision that borders on ritual, "You are loose end that he no longer has to snip. Forget Killion. Help me find Harlow and his network, or I end your journey right here and now."

"Those are shitty options," I mutter. Working with a stranger who killed my last target and knows too much about me, or doing the dirt dance in a foreign country.

He shrugs, a fluid roll of shoulders beneath expensive fabric that seems at odds in the drab surroundings. "Life is full of bad choices. Trick is picking one you can live with. Or through."

I study him—the coiled tension beneath his casual posture, the calculated distance he maintains, the way his eyes never stop assessing, cataloging, recording. He's everything Killion trained me to fear and hunt. Everything I should be running from.

But if he's telling the truth...

"I need proof," I say finally, crossing my arms over my chest, suddenly too aware of my near-nakedness, my vulnerability in this strange place with this dangerous man. "Real proof. Not just files that could be doctored. Not just stories anyone could fabricate."

"Fair." He rises, extending a hand to help me up. I ignore it, standing on my own despite the wave of dizziness that nearly sends me face-first into his chest. Pride is all I have left. I'll break my nose on the floor before I'll take his hand. "Come. We eat, we talk. I show you proof no one can fake."

For the next hour, he lays out what he knows—Harlow's network, his contacts, his probable escape routes. The man is methodical, I'll give him that. His intelligence is comprehensive, his analysis surgical.

I feel the needle nudging in the opposite direction. What if Volkov is telling the truth and Killion was using me to get to Harlow? And what about Sienna? Was she in on the ruse, too?

As the afternoon stretches into evening, the dynamics shift. The room grows smaller, charged with something beyond the tactical discussion. I'm acutely aware of his eyes on me when I'm not looking, of the predatory grace in every movement, of the careful distance he maintains—not from fear, but calculation.

Look, I've always had a thing for the bad boy. It's not a huge stretch of the imagination to realize that Kidnapper Comrade is starting to turn my crank a bit.

Besides, there's just something feral about him lurking beneath the surface that I find super hot, even if I'm pretty sure he would slit my throat the second I wasn't useful to him.

When he offers vodka, I accept. The liquor burns clean and sharp, warming me from



inside as night falls beyond the windows. I still don't know where we are—somewhere in Eastern Europe, judging by the architecture and the brief glimpse of Cyrillic on a document on his desk. A safe house, but one used regularly, with personal touches that suggest Volkov comes here often.

Which meant, I'm a long way from home. It's not like I can just catch a bus back to HQ to grill Killion for being a duplicitous prick.

"You should rest," he says eventually, noticing my fatigue. "Tomorrow will be difficult day."

"I'm fine," I insist, even as exhaustion pulls at my edges. The ketamine has mostly worn off, leaving me with the bone-deep weariness of too much adrenaline and too little sleep.

"You are swaying in chair," he observes dryly. "Stubborn, but not useful."

I glare, but he's right. I can barely keep my eyes open. "Fine. But I need clothes. And my own room."

"Clothes, yes. Own room?" He shakes his head. "Building has only one bedroom with proper security. You stay there."

"With you?" The question comes out sharper than intended.

His eyes glitter with something like amusement. "Concerned for your virtue, kotyonok? After Victor Reese and so many others? Iv'e seen you fuck."

Heat flares in my cheeks—anger, not embarrassment. "I fuck who I choose, when I choose. Not because I'm cornered in some Eastern Bloc safe house with a known killer."

"Good policy," he says, unfazed. "I also only fuck those who choose me. Makes for more satisfying encounter."

He stands, stretching like a big cat, all lean muscle and coiled power. "You take bed. I take chair. Professional courtesy."

Points for irony, acting like the gentleman when he literally dragged me across the country in a drugged stupor just to coerce me into working with him.

Yeah, real courteous, but whatever—I'm too tired to bitch.

I return to the bedroom, find a t-shirt and sweatpants laid out—both too big, both clean. I change quickly, hyper-aware of the door between rooms, of Volkov on the other side.

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The bed feels like heaven after everything—firm mattress, clean sheets. I sink into it, intending to stay alert, to plan my next move, to figure out if I'm making the biggest mistake of my life trusting Volkov even this far.

Instead, I'm asleep between one breath and the next.

I dream of fire and falling bodies. Of Killion's eyes as he handed me to the wolves. Of a woman I don't recognize, screaming at me to run but there's something preventing my feet from moving.

I wake gasping, sweat-soaked, to find Volkov beside the bed, hand on my shoulder.

"Nightmare," he says, statement not question. "Drink."

He offers water. I take it, gulping greedily, trying to shake off the dream's tendrils. The clock reads 3:17 AM. Beyond the window, nothing but darkness and the skeleton fingers of winter trees.

"Sorry," I mutter, suddenly aware of how I must look—wild-eyed, sweaty, vulnerable.

He gives a cold shrug, not moving from his position. "Nightmares are weapons. Brain dismantling itself. Makes you weak." His eyes flick over me, assessing the damage. "Control it or it controls you."

In the half-light, he looks exactly like what he is—a predator at rest. The stubble doesn't soften his jaw but darkens it like war paint. His scar pulls tight across his

brow, a permanent scowl carved by someone's blade.

With his jacket gone and sleeves rolled, his forearms display a museum of violence—exit wounds, knife scars, burn marks. Nothing accidental. Each one a lesson that didn't kill him.

"For a professional killer, you're surprisingly full of shit," I rasp, throat raw from screams I don't remember.

"Professional killers are human too," he replies, taking the empty glass. "Despite what Killion taught you."

"Why do you hate him so much?" I ask. "Killion, I mean. It feels personal."

Something flickers across his face—an old pain, quickly masked. "We have history."

"What kind of history?"

His eyes find mine in the half-dark. "Kind written in blood and betrayal."

The answer should shut me down, but it does the opposite. In this liminal space between night and morning, between enemy and ally, I want to know more. Need to know more.

"Tell me," I press, shifting closer. "If we're working together, I deserve to know."

He's silent so long I think he won't answer. Then:

"Killion left me to die in the Budapest sewers."

He taps his side—calm, flat, like he's reciting a grocery list.

"I crawled out on my own. Took three days."

I grab his arm before I can think better of it. "Show me."

For a second, his eyes go dead—a shark before it bites. I brace for pain, maybe a broken wrist.

But instead, he yanks his shirt open, buttons flying like shrapnel against the wall.

Okay.

Dramatic? Yes.

Fucking hot? Also yes.

His torso is a war zone—puckered bullet holes, knife slashes, burn marks blooming across muscle like he's been systematically tortured by professionals. But the most brutal? An ugly starburst below his ribs where a hollow point expanded on impact.

"Killion did this?" I trace it, feeling his skin flinch under my touch.

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I took his silence as an affirmative. "So you both tried to kill each other. That's your big revelation? Seems like an occupational hazard in this gig."

His hand catches my wrist, fingers digging into bone. "You understand nothing."

"I understand enough."

Something snaps between us—some invisible wire holding back the inevitable. I grab his face, or he grabs my hair—doesn't matter who moves first. We collide like wrecking balls, all teeth and tongue and zero tenderness.

He tastes like nicotine and violence. I bite his lip hard enough that copper floods my mouth. He growls—an actual fucking animal growl—and slams me back against the headboard hard enough to crack plaster.

"This what you want?" he says, one hand crushing my windpipe, the other tearing at the shirt I'm wearing. "To fuck the monster?"

I claw at his chest, leaving red furrows that well with blood. "Better than fucking a liar."

The shirt disintegrates in his grip. He shoves me flat, face against the mattress, knee forcing my legs apart. I buck against him, not to escape but to make him work for it.

"Still fighting," he says, voice gone guttural. "Even now."

I twist, catch his jaw with my elbow. It's not enough to hurt him, just enough to make

him angrier. "Always."

He flips me over, pins my wrists above my head with one hand. The other rips my underwear aside like tissue paper. His eyes are blown black, his breathing ragged. For a split second, he pauses—the last check before crossing a line.

"Do it," I hiss. "Or are you all talk, Volkov?"

Whatever restraint he has left snaps like a rubber band pulled too tight. He slams into me without preamble, no gentleness, no preparation. The pain is bright and clarifying, a reminder that I'm still alive in a world where everything else has turned to ash.

"Yes," I gasp, not in pleasure but victory. Drawing out the beast. Making him as unhinged as I feel.

He sets a punishing pace, hips pistoning with mechanical precision. The headboard slams against the wall, cracks spider-webbing through decades-old plaster. I rake my nails down his back, leaving trails of blood that drip onto my stomach.

"Tell me," he growls, fingers tangled in my hair. "Killion. What did he offer you?"

"Go to hell," I gasp between brutal thrusts that drive the air from my lungs.

His teeth scrape my exposed throat, not a kiss but a threat. "Wrong answer." He slams harder, using pain as interrogation. "Everyone breaks. Matter of time."

"Fine," I snarl, matching his rhythm with savage pushback. "Purpose. He offered fucking purpose. Happy now?"

He flips me over with military efficiency, face grinding into the pillow, ass hoisted in the air like merchandise at auction. One hand clamps onto my hip, fingers digging

into flesh hard enough that tomorrow's bruises are guaranteed. The other hand pushes my face deeper into the mattress until breathing becomes a luxury I have to fight for.

His cock drives deeper from this angle, battering into my cervix with each brutal thrust. The pain blurs with something that isn't quite pleasure—more like electricity short-circuiting my nervous system. Each impact jolts my spine, drives the breath from my lungs in strangled gasps.

Sweat drips from his chest onto my back, hot and slick. The bed frame creaks dangerously beneath us, metal joints protesting as he uses my body like a punching bag with a pulse. His breath comes in animal grunts.

My knees slide wider on the sweat-soaked sheets, opening me to deeper violation. He takes the invitation, adjusting his angle to hit that spot inside that makes my vision fragment into white-hot static.

A sound I don't recognize tears from my throat—part scream, part sob, all surrender to a biological imperative I can't fight.

“Always the same lie,” Volkov's voice is sandpaper rough above me. “Always they fall for it.”

We're not fucking anymore. We're trying to break each other, to find the weak points, to prove something neither of us can name. The mattress springs screech in protest. Sweat makes our skin slip and catch in a sickening rhythm.

I reach between my legs, desperate for release, for oblivion, for anything to shut out the noise in my head. Volkov knocks my hand away, replaces it with his own. His fingers are brutal, precise, manipulating my body with the same cold efficiency he probably brings to dismantling bombs or breaking necks.



"Cum," he orders, like it's a military command. "Now."

I want to tell him that I don't cum on demand but my body betrays me in a humiliating detonation of pleasure. I scream into the pillow, the sound raw and animal. He follows immediately after, his whole body going rigid, a stream of Russian curses cutting the air like machine gun fire.

For one second, two, we're frozen —predator and prey, though I'm not sure which is which anymore. Then he pulls out and away, leaving me empty and aching in more ways than I can count.

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No condom. No protection.

As long as Volkov isn't crawling with some kind of gross STD, getting raw-dogged is fine — all the dolls are implanted with birth control so I'm not worried about getting knocked up.

But disease is something else. That would be the icing on this fucked up cake.

I roll over, staring at the ceiling. My body feels used, broken, alive in a way it hasn't since Killion recruited me. Volkov sits on the edge of the bed, breathing hard, blood from my nails tracing crimson streaks down his back.

The room looks like a crime scene. Sheets torn and lamp shattered on the floor. Plaster dust covering everything like dirty snow. My thighs are already bruising, lip split, throat raw from screaming or his hand or both.

Volkov rises, a lean-mean fucking machine, utterly unself-conscious in his nakedness. His body is a battlefield—old scars, fresh wounds, all worn with the same indifference. “You fuck like wild animal,” he said, a note of approval in his voice. “Is good to release tension before job.”

I do feel more relaxed.

The flame from his lighter illuminates his face—all sharp angles and hollow eyes. He offers me a cigarette. I take it, let him light it, inhale poison to chase away the taste of him in my mouth.

"This doesn't change anything," I say, exhaling smoke. "I still don't trust you."

"Good." He doesn't bother sitting, just stands there smoking, his spent cock glistening with my pussy juices, watching me with those predator eyes. "Trust is luxury we cannot afford."

"What happens now?" I ask, not bothering to cover myself. What's the point? He's already seen, touched, tasted everything.

"Now we finish mission," he says simply. "Together, will find Harlow."

"And then?"

"Then we kill him." No hesitation, no qualifiers. Just simple, cold-blooded intent.

"Slowly, if time permits."

I should be horrified by the casual way he discusses torture and execution. Instead, I find myself nodding. Maybe I'm buying time. Maybe I'm switching teams. Not sure yet. "I need to shower," I say, standing, legs unsteady beneath me. Not from emotion. Just physics. The laws of action and reaction played out on bruised flesh.

"Through there," he gestures to another hidden door. "Don't think of running. No place to go but wolves."

In the bathroom—cracked tiles, rusted pipes, mirror spotted with age—I examine myself. Bruises bloom like ink spills across my skin. Bite marks on my neck. Fingerprints around my throat. Eyes too bright, too alive.

I barely recognize myself. Not Landry the bored housewife. Not Nova the perfect Doll. Someone new, someone forged in blood and betrayal and the animal thing that just happened in that bed.

The water's barely lukewarm, but I stand under it anyway, watching pink swirls circle the drain—his blood, my blood, impossible to separate. My mind replays Volkov's scars, Killion's betrayal, the total destruction of life as I know it.

I'm so lost in thought I don't hear him enter until the shower curtain rips aside. He's naked, but this time there's a Glock in his hand.

"Get down," he orders, voice flat as a battlefield execution. "We have company."

The first rule of gunfights? Don't be naked when they start.

Volkov tosses clothes at me while grabbing gear from a hidden compartment beneath the bed. The same bed where, thirty minutes ago, he was buried inside me, making animal sounds against my neck. Now we're doing the combat version of the morning-after shuffle.

"Fucking Killion," Volkov confirms grimly, checking the magazine on a matte-black Glock with the casual efficiency of someone who's fired it more times than they've brushed their teeth. "I know his extraction formation like own heartbeat."

I want to crow, "I told you he'd come for me" but that sounds like some pathetic damsel waiting to be rescued and I'm definitely not that girl, so I remain silent as I yank on pants.

No underwear. No time. My thigh wound burns as the fabric scrapes against it, but pain is just background noise now. The t-shirt follows, my skin still damp from the shower, making the cotton cling like a second skin.

"How many?" I ask, scanning the room for anything resembling a weapon. Volkov tosses me a knife—blade balanced for throwing, handle wrapped in black grip. Not ideal for a gunfight, but better than fingernails and attitude.

"Six-man team, standard Dollhouse extraction protocol." His face is all business now, no trace of the animal that was growling against my skin minutes ago. "Two snipers, four ground. Sienna will be coordinating."

The mention of her name twists something in my gut. Sienna, who trained me, who shaped me, who never quite felt like the enemy even when everyone else did. The woman who taught me how to use pleasure, how to read a target's desires before they knew them themselves. The closest thing to a friend I had in that concrete hell.

Now she's hunting me.

## Page 8

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"How do you know their?—"

The window explodes inward in a shower of glass and splinters. We both drop, combat instinct overriding everything else. Bullets punch through drywall, tracking a pattern that would have ventilated our vital organs if we'd been half a second slower.

"Questions later," Volkov grunts, sliding a second firearm across the floor to me. SIG Sauer, compact but deadly. My hand wraps around the grip like it's greeting an old friend.

Three months ago, I was a woman who fucked strangers in club bathrooms for a thrill. Now I'm a weapon with tits, as comfortable with a gun as I used to be with a cocktail glass. The metamorphosis should frighten me, but instead it feels like coming home—like I've finally found the skin I was always meant to wear.

We move in tandem toward the door, the awkward post-coital tension replaced by the cleaner adrenaline of survival. My brain slips into combat mode—the one thing Killion taught me that I'm actually grateful for. Everything narrows to exits, angles, threats.

The first operative comes through the bedroom door like he's been launched—wearing all black, night vision, weapon leading. I don't think. Don't hesitate. My bullet catches him center mass, dropping him before he clears the threshold. The recoil travels up my arm, familiar as a lover's touch.

His blood paints the doorframe in an arterial spray, surprisingly bright against the dingy wallpaper. Some small part of me recognizes I should be horrified—I've just

killed someone who might have been a colleague, might have eaten at the same cafeteria table, might have nodded at me in hallways.

But that part is buried under layers of survival instinct and the cold, mechanical precision Killion drilled into me.

Volkov is already moving, drawing fire away from me as we execute a textbook crossfire pattern. It's terrifying how in sync we are, like we've been killing together for years instead of fucking for hours.

The hallway becomes a killing ground. Two more operatives down—one mine, one Volkov's. The smell of cordite and blood fills the narrow space, acrid and metallic. My ears ring from gunfire in confined spaces, but through the high-pitched whine, I catch familiar tactical communications.

"Subject located. Resistance encountered. Four down. Request backup."

Cold precision. Dollhouse protocols. My people.

Or are they?

Were they ever?

We clear the main living area, moving toward Volkov's preplanned exit—because of course this paranoid bastard has one—when I see her. Sienna. Crouched at the far end of the hall, coordinating the assault with hand signals I recognize because she taught them to me.

Her sleek form is unmistakable even in tactical gear—the predator's grace, the absolute economy of movement. The woman who molded me like clay, who taught me to use my body as a weapon and my sexuality as a skeleton key. Sienna, who

once made me cum with just her fingers while explaining exactly how to destroy a man's will with pleasure.

Our eyes lock across twenty feet of bullet-chewed hallway. For a split second, something flashes across her face—recognition, regret, determination. A history of intimate violations disguised as training, a bond forged in the strange alchemy of transformation.

Then the moment shatters as a new player enters the game.

Killion materializes from the smoke and debris like a demon stepping through the gates of hell. Even in combat gear, he moves with that lethal grace that's always made me think of big cats—mountain lions and panthers, predators who kill with elegant economy.

"Nova!"

His voice cuts through the chaos, steady and certain. The use of my handle purposeful. He doesn't raise his weapon—doesn't need to with four operatives flanking him, all with rifles trained on us. Actually, no.

On Volkov.

None of them are aiming at me.

That realization hits like a splash of ice water. I'm still valuable. Still an asset worth retrieving. Or eliminating personally.

Killion's eyes find mine, holding them with that penetrating stare that always made me feel like he was reading my thoughts directly from my brain stem. The same eyes that watched me break under his training, that assessed my pain with clinical



detachment, that saw every weakness and exploited it with surgical precision.

"Whatever he told you...it's a lie," he says, and something in his voice shifts—not soft, Killion is never soft—but the razor edge dulls just enough to show the man beneath the handler. This isn't the training room Killion, this is something else, something almost... concerned.

"He's got the receipts, Killion," I shoot back, daring him to refute the evidence. "You played me."

My finger tightens on the trigger, not enough to fire, just enough to feel the resistance. Three months of training, of breaking and rebuilding, of becoming what he needed—all potentially built on lies. The thought makes something primal and violent twist in my chest.

"What has Volkov actually proven? Documents? Files?" He takes a careful step forward, ignoring Volkov's weapon trained on his chest. "These can be manufactured."

"Stay where you are," Volkov warns, but Killion keeps those winter-cold eyes locked on mine.

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"You're smarter than this," Killion continues, something almost like respect threading through his words. "He's using your emotions against you—your fear, your anger. Classic manipulation."

I adjust my grip on the SIG, mind racing, loyalties splintering. "Funny how everyone wants to tell me what I'm thinking instead of just giving me the fucking truth."

Volkov snorts, a sound like gravel under tires. "Truth is, your handler sold you out. Put you in apartment as bait. When Harlow's men came, Killion was supposed to delay extraction. Let you die. Tie up loose end."

"FSB psychological operations," Killion counters, voice dropping to that private tone he used during training, when it was just the two of us in steel rooms with blood on the floor. "That was Volkov's specialty before he went private. Turning assets by exploiting vulnerabilities. Ask yourself—how did he know exactly what evidence would convince you? How did he predict exactly what would make you doubt me?"

For the first time since I met him, Killion's mask slips. Not much—just a hairline fracture in the granite facade—but enough to glimpse something human underneath. Something that might actually care whether I live or die.

The realization hits me like a punch to the sternum.

This man broke my body in the name of training, reshaped my mind, turned me into something that kills without hesitation. And now he's looking at me like I matter—not as a weapon, not as an asset, but as a person.

It's almost worse than the betrayal.

"If Killion values you so much," Volkov presses, "why did he send you alone to that apartment? Why was extraction team conveniently delayed?" Then to Killion, voice laced with old venom: "Tell her about Budapest. Tell her about agent you left bleeding in sewers. Tell her about Vahnya."

Vahyna. Who the fuck was that?

The name lands like a grenade between them. Killion's expression doesn't change, but something in his eyes does—a shadow, a flinch so subtle I'd have missed it if I hadn't spent three months studying his every micro expression.

The air between them practically crackles with shared history, with blood spilled and trust shattered. I wonder, if they were once as in sync as Volkov and I were minutes ago, clearing that hallway like we'd trained together for years.

"I've made mistakes," Killion admits, the words clearly costing him. "Hard choices. But I have never sacrificed an asset without necessity. And I have never betrayed my own." The last words directed at Volkov with loaded meaning, revealing deeper wounds between them than just bullets and scars.

I stand perfectly still in the eye of this hurricane, gun steady despite the storm raging inside me. Both men watching me, waiting for my choice.

The building groans around us, damaged from the assault. Somewhere outside, sirens wail—this level of gunfire doesn't go unnoticed, even in whatever Eastern Bloc hellhole we're currently occupying.

Blood drips steadily from a cut above my eyebrow, tracking warm and sticky down my cheek. The coppery taste fills my mouth when I lick my lips. It centers me,

reminds me what I am now.

Not a wife. Not a doll. A survivor.

"Time's up," Sienna calls from her position. "Secondary team two minutes out."

Killion extends his hand—not reaching for me, just offering. An invitation, not a demand.

"Come home, Nova. Whatever you've been told, whatever you believe happened—we can sort it out. Safely."

His eyes hold mine, and I see something there I've never seen before—not manipulation, not calculation. Something almost like concern.

Home. As if that concrete prison ever was one. As if I've ever had a real home beyond the temporary highs of danger and sex and walking the razor's edge between life and death.

It's the most human I've ever seen him, and that's what decides me.

Because the devil you know is still the devil.

I shift my weight, telegraphing compliance, watching Killion's shoulders relax infinitesimally. Then I swing the SIG toward him, not to hit but to force him back, and dive toward Volkov and his escape route.

The look on Killion's face in that split second of betrayal is almost beautiful—the perfect mask finally cracking to reveal something raw underneath. Not anger, not hatred. Something more complex.

Gunfire erupts behind us as we crash through a hidden panel into a service corridor. The surprise on Killion's face before we disappear is almost worth the shitshow my life has become—not anger, not betrayal, but what might actually be respect.

Volkov moves like a shadow, leading us down cramped stairs that smell like piss and desperation. My thigh wound throbs with each step, but adrenaline keeps me moving, keeps me focused. Behind us, boots thunder in pursuit.

"Transport?" I gasp as we hit street level.

"Three blocks west. If we make it."

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We burst out into frigid night air, and I finally get my bearings—Eastern Europe for sure, some mid-sized industrial city where Soviet architecture crumbles alongside half-hearted attempts at modernization. The air tastes like coal smoke and impending snow.

Midnight streets empty except for the occasional drunk staggering between streetlights. The perfect backdrop for a chase scene—no witnesses, no bystanders, just hunters and prey playing out ancient patterns under modern lights.

"Why should I trust you?" I demand as we sprint through narrow alleyways, keeping to shadows.

"You shouldn't," Volkov replies without breaking stride. "Trust gets you killed. But right now, I am only one not actively trying to put bullet in your skull."

He's right, which pisses me off even more.

We reach a nondescript sedan—German, midrange, forgettable in the best possible way. The kind of car that blends into traffic like beige wallpaper. Volkov hot-wires it with practiced efficiency while I provide cover, scanning rooftops for sniper positions.

As we peel away from the curb, tires spinning on icy streets, I finally let myself breathe. Not safe. Not even close. But alive, which counts for something.

"I'm not choosing you," I say as the city blurs past our windows. "I'm choosing the monster I don't know over the one who's already proven he'll sacrifice me."

Volkov's lips twitch—not quite a smile, but as close as a man like him probably gets. "Self-preservation is good instinct."

"It's not about self-preservation," I counter, checking the magazine in my stolen weapon. Still half-full. "It's about finding the truth. Then making everyone who lied to me bleed for it."

His eyes flick to me briefly, assessment written in the glance. "Perhaps there is little bit of Russian in you after all, Landry James."

I lean back against the headrest, watching the unfamiliar city disappear behind us as we head for God knows where. The adrenaline crash is coming—I can feel it hovering at the edges of my consciousness, waiting to turn my limbs to lead and my brain to mush.

Blood dries in flaking patterns on my skin. The SIG rests heavy in my lap. My reflection in the passenger window shows a stranger—hollow-eyed, blood-smeared, something feral lurking behind the exhaustion.

But for now, I'm riding the high of the most fucked-up truth in my increasingly fucked-up existence: I've never felt more alive than I do right now, with blood on my hands and chaos in my wake.

Rational people run from danger. I've always preferred to fuck it instead.

Let's see where this particular bad decision leads.

The car smells like blood and cigarettes. My blood, Volkov's cigarettes. We're twenty miles outside whatever Eastern Bloc shithole we just shot our way out of, and I'm watching the unfamiliar countryside blur past like a fever dream—all skeletal trees and Soviet-era power lines silhouetted against a sky the color of a fresh bruise.

"You look like death fucked a corpse and had ugly baby," Volkov observes, flicking ash out the cracked window. The winter air slices in, sharp enough to make my eyes water. Or maybe that's just the adrenaline crash finally hitting.

"And you look like the undertaker who dressed the body," I shoot back, pressing a wadded t-shirt against my reopened thigh wound. The fabric's already soaked through, warm and sticky against my palm. "Where the hell are we going?"

"Secondary location. Less comfortable, more secure." He takes a hard right onto a road that barely qualifies as one—more like a suggestion of gravel scattered over mud. The car's suspension screams in protest.

My stomach lurches as we hit another pothole. Pain throbs in time with my heartbeat, a full-body percussion of hurt. "You know, most men just offer dinner and a movie after sex. Not a firefight and a getaway car."

Volkov's mouth twitches—the closest thing to a smile his face seems capable of producing. "You seemed bored with conventional men. That is why you fuck strangers in club bathrooms, yes? Why you let husband believe ridiculous lies?"

"Stay out of my marriage, Volkov."

"Marriage." He spits the word like it's rotten meat. "Is arrangement of convenience. Like most things in people's life."

The observation cuts closer than I want to admit. I glare out the window, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a response. The sky's getting lighter, that peculiar pre-dawn gray that makes everything look slightly unreal, slightly apocalyptic. Somewhere in the hazy distance, a factory belches black smoke into the already filthy air.



Home sweet Eastern Europe.

My fingers find the pendant that should be around my neck—the poison failsafe Killion gave me—before remembering it's gone. Probably removed while I was unconscious in Volkov's safehouse. One less escape hatch if this all goes to shit.

If I truly made the wrong choice by ditching Killion.

"We're being followed," I observe, catching the flicker of headlights in the side mirror. The same ones for the past ten minutes, keeping precise distance.

Volkov doesn't even check. "Yes."

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"And you're not concerned because...?"

"Because is Mikhail." He glances at me, those cold eyes assessing how much I need to know. "Insurance policy. In case Killion put tracker in you."

I straighten, suddenly alert. "What are you talking about?"

"Standard Dollhouse protocol." He gestures vaguely at my body. "Subcutaneous tracking implant. Usually shoulder blade or lower back. Primitive but effective. Mikhail has signal jammer, creates electronic noise. Buys time."

I resist the urge to claw at my own skin, to search for the foreign object potentially buried in my flesh. Just another violation to add to the list. "And you didn't think to mention this earlier?"

He shrugs. "You did not ask."

"And you wanted Killion to track me," I surmised, feeling like meat all over again.

"Yes." He doesn't bother denying it. At least there's that. "Was test."

"I'm getting real tired of being used as bait," I grumble, shooting Volkov a dirty look. "If you've got a hard-on for Killion, you ought to figure that shit out on your own. Leave me out of it."

"Not hard-on," Volkov returns with a curled lip. "Not anymore."

Oh, the plot thickens. I want to ask more on that score but it probably wasn't the time to start delving into the dark and kinky spaces formerly occupied by Volkov and Killian.

But I'll put a pin in it for later.

I close my eyes, counting backward from ten before I put a bullet in his face. "Okay, so we have temporary cover. How long before they track us the old-fashioned way? Bribes, informants, facial recognition?"

"Long enough." He taps ash from his cigarette with mechanical precision. "We have what they do not."

"Which is?"

"Direction," Volkov says simply. "They hunt blindly. We hunt with purpose."

We turn onto an even narrower road, this one little more than tire tracks through scrubby forest. Pine branches scrape against the car's roof like skeletal fingers, leaving trails in the early morning condensation.

After another fifteen minutes of kidney-punishing terrain, a structure materializes from the mist—not the relative luxury of the previous safehouse, but a squat concrete bunker that looks like a Soviet architectural wet dream circa 1962.

"Please tell me that's just a scenic lookout point and not where we're staying."

"Cold War relic," Volkov says, something like fondness in his voice. "KGB listening post, abandoned after Berlin Wall fell. Now personal project."

The car stops, engine ticking as it cools. Behind us, a battered Lada pulls

in—Mikhail, I presume. The man who emerges is built like a refrigerator with a beard, all muscle and scar tissue wrapped in a canvas jacket that's seen better decades.

The bunker's interior is a shock after its grim exterior—not comfortable by any stretch, but humming with technology that belongs in a spy thriller, not this Communist-era tomb. Monitors line one wall, servers stacked in climate-controlled cases, satellite equipment that looks cobbled together from military surplus and custom-built components.

"What the hell is all this?" I ask, taking in the electronic wonderland.

"Hobby," Volkov says, dropping his tactical bag on a metal table that's seen better days. He moves to a complex-looking setup of monitors and begins typing rapidly.

"In my line of work, information is more valuable than bullets."

Mikhail grunts something in Russian, then disappears into what I assume is a supply room, returning with a first aid kit that looks better stocked than most emergency rooms.

"Take off pants," he orders in a voice like gravel being crushed. "Need to clean wound before infection sets."

I raise an eyebrow. "What, no dinner first?"

He gives me a look that suggests humor died in his world around the same time as Stalin. I sigh and drop my blood-crusted pants, wincing as dried fabric tears away from half-congealed scabs.

While Mikhail works on my leg with the gentle touch of a butcher deboning a cow, Volkov hunches over his equipment, fingers flying across keyboards, eyes scanning

data streams that make no sense to me. The tech looks like what would happen if Radio Shack fucked the NSA and had a baby with developmental issues—part cutting-edge, part jury-rigged, all deadly serious.

"What exactly are you doing?" I ask through clenched teeth as Mikhail irrigates my wound with something that feels like liquid fire.

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"Intercepting Harlow's communications," Volkov replies without looking up. "Man is creature of habit. Uses same encryption, same channels. Amateur."

"The Director of a black ops agency is an amateur?"

Volkov makes a sound that might be a laugh in someone with an actual soul. "Harlow is bureaucrat with gun. Dangerous, yes. But predictable."

The device he's manipulating looks like the bastard child of a satellite phone and a circuit board that exploded. Wires spill from its guts, connected to three different monitors and what appears to be a modified signal amplifier. Whatever it is, it's clearly not standard issue.

"That doesn't look like something you can buy at Best Buy," I observe.

"SVR prototype. Improved with personal modifications." His fingers don't pause their rhythm on the keyboard. "Canisolate encrypted communications using signature recognition algorithms. Harlow has distinctive digital footprint. Like fingerprint, but for electronic transmissions."

"You stole Russian spy tech?"

"Not steal. Appropriate. After they tried to kill me." He glances up, eyes glittering with dark amusement. "Russian government and I have... complicated relationship."

"Don't we all," I mutter, hissing as Mikhail begins stitching my thigh with the sensitivity of a longshoreman.

The bunker's generators hum beneath the electronic chirps and beeps of Volkov's equipment. Outside, dawn has broken fully, pale sunlight filtering through narrow windows set high in the concrete walls. I try to make sense of the maps and data streams flickering across the primary monitor, but it's like reading hieroglyphics written by a drunk alien.

Suddenly, Volkov straightens, eyes narrowing at a particular set of data scrolling across his screen. "Interesting."

"Care to share with the class?"

He beckons me over, pointing to what looks like an intercepted message—strings of code and fragments of text. "Harlow is moving assets to secondary location. Black Sea facility." His finger traces a pattern across the screen. "Evacuation protocol. Full data purge scheduled."

"Which means?"

"He's destroying evidence. Covering tracks." Volkov's expression darkens. "And moving something valuable. Something he calls 'Vahnya Initiative.'"

That name again. The one that made Killion flinch.

"What the hell is Vahnya?" I demand.

Volkov's eyes meet mine, something almost like emotion flickering in their depths. "Not what. Who." He taps a command, and a grainy photograph appears on screen—a woman, beautiful in that severe Eastern European way, witheyes that could drill into your soul and cheekbones sharp enough to slice bread. "Vahnya was my wife."

The admission drops like a grenade between us. I stare at the photograph, at this

ghost from his past, and suddenly the layers of history between him and Killion take on new dimensions.

"Was?"

"Killion happened." His voice goes flat, emotion cauterized by old pain. "Budapest, three years ago. Extraction went wrong. Or so I thought." His finger traces the woman's face on the screen, a gesture so tender it feels obscene coming from hands I've seen kill without hesitation. "Now I find her name in Harlow's files. Connected to program I never heard of."

"She's alive?" I ask, understanding dawning like a knife to the gut.

"Perhaps." His expression shutters closed again, the moment of vulnerability sealed behind steel doors. "Or her name is being used for something else. Either way, answers are at Black Sea facility."

"What exactly is this 'Vahnya Initiative'?" I press, studying the grainy photo of his wife.

Volkov's jaw tightens as he pulls up more intercepted files. "Based on these communications, appears to be chemical enhancement program. Pharmaceutical cocktails, genetic targeting, combat conditioning. Creating perfect assets who never question, never fail, never break."

"You're talking about brainwashing? Mind control?"

"More sophisticated. Neurochemical manipulation." His fingers bring up fragmented documents with chemical formulas and medical jargon. "Drugs that restructure synaptic pathways, create completely loyal operatives." His voice remains clinical, but his eyes burn with something raw. "And Vahnya—my Vahnya—is listed as



'primary architect.'"

"You think they're using your wife as some kind of... blueprint?"

"If she is still alive," he says, voice hollow, "they are using more than her name. Harlow's files mention 'continued extraction procedures.' Blood samples. Tissue. DNA sequencing. I don't know full scope. I've been searching for her for three years. Now, is close to finding."

The implications hit me like a sledgehammer. Not sci-fi super-soldiers, but something worse because it's real—human experimentation disguised as national security. The kind of black-ops horror story that governments deny until the evidence is overwhelming, then excuse as necessary for freedom, democracy, whatever bullshit justifies treating people like lab rats.

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I absorb this, recalibrating everything I thought I knew. Personal vendettas masked as professional missions. Old wounds disguised as tactical objectives. The lines between handler and asset, predator and prey, ally and enemy blurring until they're meaningless.

"If your wife is there—if she's alive—what's your plan?" I ask.

Volkov's expression hardens. "Extract her if possible. Kill her if necessary."

"Jesus."

"Vahnya would rather die than be used this way." Something flickers across his face—a ghost of what might have been tenderness in another life. "But first, we document everything. The program. Harlow's involvement. Every dark corner of this operation."

"Why? So you can sell it to the highest bidder?"

"So no one can hide from what they've done," he corrects. "Including Killion."

"We're going to the Black Sea," I state rather than ask.

"Is possible." Volkov's answer is uncertain, his brow furrowing. "Need confirmation before we leave safehouse."

"What kind of confirmation?"

He points to another intercepted communication, this one featuring details that make my blood run cold. "Black Sea facility," Volkov says, tapping the screen. "According to this, Harlow has accelerated timeline. Moving all evidence tonight."

My world tilts sideways, reality reshuffling itself like a deck of cards in the hands of a rigged-game dealer.

"They're consolidating," I realize aloud, scanning the encrypted message. "Cleaning house before anyone else can follow Vahnya's trail."

"Or preparing to sell entire operation," Volkov adds, ever the optimist. "Private military contractors pay premium for programmable assets with no oversight."

I stare at the screen, at the clinical language discussing human beings like they're software to be patched or hardware to be upgraded. People whose minds have been hollowed out and refilled with whatever the fuck Harlow decided they should be.

People like me.

"I need a gun," I say, voice steady despite the storm raging behind my ribs. "And a plan."

Volkov raises an eyebrow. "Does this plan involve calling Killion? Because would be mistake."

"Who said anything about Killion?" I meet his gaze, something cold and focused crystallizing in my chest where panic should be. "We handle this ourselves."

Volkov snorts, loading a fresh magazine into his weapon with practiced efficiency. "You trust me now? After everything?"

"Trust is a luxury we can't afford," I shoot back. "But right now, the enemy of my enemy is the closest thing to an ally I've got."

Because here's the thing about being underestimated your whole life, about being the pretty face no one takes seriously, about being written off as the expendable asset: people never see you coming until you're already at their throat.

And I've been sharpening my teeth for years.

The safehouse smells like gunpowder, cheap vodka, and male sweat. Three days since the shootout with Killion's team, and we're holed up in some Soviet-era concrete shitbox that makes my first Dollhouse cell look like the fucking Four Seasons.

The walls sweat dampness, pipes clank like they're having seizures, and the radiator hisses with the rhythmic persistence of a dying man's last breaths.

Sharing space with Mikhail, the Serbian brick shithouse with hands like Christmas hams and a vocabulary limited to grunts and the occasional "da" and Volkov is a mixed bag.

My reality is nothing short of a crazy, whirligig of confusing intel. Most of which doesn't even make sense when I try to untangle the threads.

Why did Killion say that Volkov was working with Harlow when Volkov seems dead-set on putting a bullet in Harlow's head?

And what the hell happened in Budapest between Killion, Volkov and this mystery woman, Vahyna?

Look, I get that the spy game is built on a foundation of lies but c'mon, give me a

break, this shit is excessive. I can't tell who's lying, if I'm making the right choice sticking with Volkov, or if I'm ultimately putting my trust in the hands of my killer.

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The thing is, I can't put my finger on it, it's been bugging me since the botched Harlow sting, but why is there something about Volkov that feels familiar?

It's an itch in my brain I can't scratch.

The answer sure as hell isn't just lying around for the taking. Until I get answers that make more sense, I'm sticking with my current travel partners.

Where Volkov is all sleek predator, precise movements and calculating eyes, Mikhail is raw power—broad-shouldered, neck thick as my thigh, silent as a fucking execution chamber. He moves through rooms with the quiet deliberateness of someone who's broken more necks than he's bothered to count.

I catch myself staring at him while he cleans weapons at the kitchen table, those massive fingers surprisingly delicate with the gun parts. His fingernails are impeccable—not manicured, just meticulously clean. A killer who washes his hands before and after the job.

"You keep looking at him like that, he might think you want something," Volkov says, materializing behind me with that fucking ghost-walk of his. Three days and I still haven't heard him approach once.

"Maybe I do," I reply, not bothering to deny it. Subtlety died somewhere around the time I shot a man in the chest to escape Killion's extraction squad.

"Mikhail doesn't talk much," Volkov says, lighting up another cigarette. The man's lungs must look like fucking coal mines. "But he understands everything."

Something flickers in Mikhail's eyes—those flat, gray pools that register everything and reveal nothing. He doesn't look up from the disassembled Glock, but his movements slow fractionally. He's listening.

"How long have you worked together?" I ask, pouring three fingers of vodka into a chipped mug with a faded hammer and sickle logo.

"Eight years," Volkov replies, taking a seat at the rickety table covered with surveillance photos of Harlow and building schematics. "Since Odessa."

The way he says Odessa—like it's a scar rather than a city—tells me there's a story there, one written in blood and probably several missing persons reports.

"And before that?" I press, perching on the windowsill. The glass is frosted with ice crystals, the world outside an indistinct blur of gray and white. We could be anywhere in Eastern Europe—Poland, Ukraine, Belarus. Volkov hasn't bothered to tell me, and I haven't bothered to ask. Geography matters less than the distance between me and Killion's reach.

"Before that, he was Spetsnaz," Volkov says, exhaling smoke. "Before that, nothing worth mentioning."

Mikhail's hands pause over the weapon for a microsecond. Another tell, so slight I'd have missed it without Killion's brutal training in reading bodily subtleties.

"Bullshit," I say, sipping vodka that tastes like industrial solvent. "Everyone's got an origin story."

Mikhail finally looks up, eyes meeting mine with an intensity that makes my skin prickle. He says something in Russian—low, rough, the syllables like gravel churning in a cement mixer.

Volkov actually laughs, a sharp bark of sound that's over before it really begins. "He says you ask too many questions for someone who betrayed her handler yesterday."

"Didn't betray shit," I snap. "Can't betray someone who was using me for bait from day one."

"Is same meaning," Mikhail speaks, his accent thick as molasses, each word carefully formed like he's testing its weight. "Loyalty gone. Trust broken. Only matters who breaks first."

There's something disarming about his simplicity. No mindfucks, no psychological warfare. Just brutal pragmatism wrapped in muscle and scar tissue. He wasn't ugly, but he wasn't good-looking either, somewhere in between.

"And who broke first with you two?" I ask, gesturing between them. "You seem awful cozy for a couple of stone-cold killers."

Volkov's eyes narrow, that calculating gaze assessing how much to reveal. "War makes strange bedfellows," he finally says. "And enemies of the same monster become...convenient allies."

"Killion," I say, the name hanging between us like an unexploded bomb.

"Killion," Volkov confirms, crushing his cigarette in a makeshift ashtray that started life as a Soviet-era military medal. "And Harlow. And all they represent."

"Which is what, exactly?" I drain my vodka, welcoming the burn. "Because three weeks ago, I was just a housewife looking for cheap thrills, and now I'm in the fucking Kremlin's basement plotting revenge with Russian Murder Incorporated."

Mikhail actually smiles at that—just a brief tug at the corner of his mouth, but it



transforms his face from stone monument to something almost human. He says something else in Russian, longer this time.

"He says you are funny for American," Volkov translates. "Most are too...how you say...self-righteous? Even when killing."

"Nothing righteous about me," I laugh, the sound sharp and bitter. "Just trying to figure out which devil gets my soul this week."

I pour another drink, liquid courage for questions I shouldn't ask. "Vahnya—your wife, what happened?" I ask Volkov, watching his face freeze into that perfect mask of nothingness.

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The temperature in the room drops ten degrees. Mikhail's hands stop moving entirely, his eyes flicking to Volkov with something I can't quite read—warning, maybe, or concern.

Volkov says after a silence thick enough to choke on. The words fall like stones into still water. "Killion's recruitment. His asset. His responsibility."

The revelation hits like a gut punch. Volkov's wife had been a doll? The pieces start clicking together—his hatred, the personal vendetta, the shared history dripping with blood and betrayal.

"What happened to her?" I ask, knowing I'm pushing too far but unable to stop. It's my most self-destructive trait—charging headlong into emotional minefields just to see what explodes.

"Same thing that happens to all assets who outlive usefulness," Volkov says, voice flat and empty as a corpse's eyes. "They disappear."

Mikhail stands abruptly, moving to a cabinet where he retrieves a bottle of something darker, stronger than the paint-thinner vodka I've been drinking. He pours three glasses without asking, sliding one to Volkov with a gentleness incongruous with his massive frame.

"To the dead," Mikhail says, raising his glass.

"And to revenge," Volkov adds, knocking back the brown liquid in one practiced motion.

Except, they didn't know if Vahyna was dead, right? Probably not smart to mention that part.

I drink with them, the liquor burning a path to my stomach where it settles like napalm. The taste lingers—smoke and earth and something metallic that reminds me of blood.

"Enough ghost stories," Volkov says, shaking off memories like a dog shedding water. "We have work. Harlow will be in Vienna tomorrow before heading to Black Sea location. One chance to intercept."

He spreads photographs across the table—surveillance shots of Harlow entering buildings, meeting contacts, living the high life of a traitor with government connections. In each one, he looks exactly like what he is—a man who believes himself untouchable, above consequences, immune to the chaos he creates.

"What's the plan?" I ask, forcing my mind back to the mission. "Snatch and grab? Public execution? Make it look like an accident?"

"Information first, then death," Volkov says, clinical as a surgeon discussing tumor removal. "Needs to be private. Controlled. We need his network, his contacts."

"His passwords," I add. "Access to whatever the 'Vahyna Initiative' is."

"Da," Mikhail nods, loading a fresh magazine into the reassembled Glock with a satisfying click. "Then pain. Then death."

The casual brutality should shock me. Three months ago, it would have. Now it just feels like professional courtesy—the respect of admitting what we all are.

"I'll need gear," I say, all business now. "Clothes that aren't soaked in someone else's

blood. Weapons that can't be traced back to a firefight with American operatives."

"Is provided," Mikhail says, jerking his head toward a duffel bag in the corner. "Women's clothes, your size. Weapons clean. Papers for border."

I rummage through the bag, finding black tactical pants, tops, even underwear in my size. Either they've been watching me longer than I thought, or they're very good at estimating measurements.

In the three days since holing up in this shitbox, Volkov hadn't once made a move toward me. My bruises from the last time we fucked were starting to fade. I craved more.

And I was tired of waiting around for a little action.

"Let's fuck."

They exchange a glance I can't quite interpret. Mikhail says something in Russian, low and questioning. Volkov replies with a shrug that somehow communicates volumes.

"We've got twelve hours to kill before Vienna," I continue, taking the direct approach that seems to be the only language they fully understand, "we've got twelve hours to kill before Vienna, a shitty safehouse with one bed, and enough tension in this room to power a small city." I drain my glass, setting it down with deliberate precision. "We might as well fuck the edge off before we go hunting."

The silence that follows is nuclear, pressing against my eardrums like I'm deep underwater. Mikhail's expression doesn't change, but his pupils dilate, black eclipsing gray. Volkov watches me with the same clinical interest he'd give a particularly complex explosive device.

"Don't look so shocked," I say, leaning against the table. "You've both seen me naked already. Mikhail when he patched me up, and you," I nod to Volkov, "when you fucked me raw."

"Is bad idea," Mikhail rumbles, but his eyes say something different, something hungry and primal beneath the professional control.

"Oh please," I snort. "Like either of you gives a shit about workplace ethics. We're plotting an assassination. I don't think there's an HR department that covers our profession."

Volkov's lips twitch—not quite a smile, but close enough. "She has point, Mikhail."

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"Doesn't mean smart," Mikhail counters, but he makes no move to leave, his massive body angled toward me like a compass finding north.

"Smart died back in that apartment," I say, stepping closer to him, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his broad chest. "Smart stayed with Killion. This is about survival now. And people like us survive on adrenaline, violence, and skin against skin."

I reach up, my fingertips brushing the stubble on Mikhail's jaw. His skin is hot, almost feverish, the muscle beneath tensed like he's fighting his own response. "Am I wrong?"

His hand captures my wrist—not roughly, but with the implacable strength of someone who could snap bones without trying. For a second, I think he'll push me away. Instead, he tugs me closer, until I'm flush against him, feeling the thunderous beat of his heart through layers of fabric.

"Not wrong," he concedes, his voice dropping to a register that vibrates through my ribcage. "But complicated."

I glance at Volkov, who watches us with unreadable eyes, cigarette burning forgotten between his fingers. "Life's complicated," I tell him. "Death's simple. I prefer the messy option."

Volkov crushes out his cigarette, the gesture deliberate as a full stop at the end of a sentence. "Then we choose life," he says, rising from his chair with liquid grace. "For tonight."

His hand slides along my jawline, thumb brushing my lower lip in mirror of our first confrontation days ago. "But understand, kotyonok. There is no love here. Only momentary distraction from what we are."

"Love is for greeting cards and suicide notes," I reply, leaning into his touch. "I'm just looking for something real in a world built on lies."

Mikhail makes a sound deep in his chest—not quite a laugh, not quite a growl. His massive arm encircles my waist from behind, creating a cage of muscle and heat. I'm trapped between them now, Volkov's lean predator body before me, Mikhail's solid bulk behind, their contrasting physicalities creating perfect equilibrium.

"Then we give you real," Mikhail murmurs against my neck, his breath hot against my skin. "Nothing pretty. Nothing gentle."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," I say, tilting my head to give him better access, even as my hands find the buttons of Volkov's shirt.

We move toward the bedroom like a six-legged creature, a tangle of hands and mouths and competing desires. The vodka burns in my veins, loosening muscles and dissolving whatever boundaries might have existed.

Clothes fall away like discarded morals—Volkov's precision giving way to uncharacteristic urgency, Mikhail's controlled strength becoming something darker, hungrier.

The bedroom is spartan—nothing but a mattress on a metal frame, sheets gray with age but clean. The light from a single naked bulb casts harsh shadows, highlighting the topography of scars and muscle that map these men's violent histories.

Naked, they are studies in contrast. Volkov is all lean efficiency—whipcord muscle

over blade-sharp bone, skin mapped with the precise scars of someone who's survived by skill rather than luck. The bullet wound from Killion puckers beneath his ribs, a starburst of angry tissue that never quite healed right.

Mikhail is a monument carved from flesh—broad-shouldered, chest thick with muscle and dark hair, thighs like tree trunks. Where Volkov's scars are precise, Mikhail's are brutal—jagged tears across his back, burn marks on his flank, what looks like shrapnel damage scattered across his left side. His cock matches the rest of him—thick, heavy, intimidating in its proportions.

I stand before them, tits out and pussy wet. They circle me with predatory focus, assessing weaknesses, points of entry, places to exploit—the same calculation they'd bring to a mission, now applied to flesh and desire.

I don't want the fake shit," I say, meeting their eyes as adrenaline drums through my veins. "No gentle bullshit. I'm not made of glass."

Mikhail's laugh rumbles like distant thunder. "We see you clearly," he says, those bear-paw hands circling my waist, lifting me like I'm hollow-boned. "Cut from same cloth. Damaged goods who damages back."

He deposits me on the bed like I weigh nothing, the mattress creaking in protest beneath us. Volkov follows, movements fluid as mercury, his eyes never leaving mine as he positions himself behind me. I'm caged between them again—Mikhail's broad chest before me, Volkov's harder angles at my back.

What follows isn't sex so much as consumption—teeth and tongues and grasping hands, choreographed violence channeled into something almost like pleasure. Mikhail kisses like he's trying to devour me, all teeth and urgent hunger, while Volkov's mouth traces the vertebrae of my spine with scientific precision, identifying each nerve cluster, each sweet spot that makes me arch and gasp.



Their hands map me like territory to be conquered—Mikhail's grip bruising my hips, Volkov's fingers tangling in my hair, yanking my head back to expose my throat. The pain blurs with pleasure until I can't distinguish between them, my body responding to both with the same electric current.

"Tell me, kotyonok," Volkov murmurs against my ear, his accent thicker with arousal, "did Killion fuck you too? Make you his in every way?"

The question lands like a slap, shocking in its directness. "No," I gasp as Mikhail's teeth find my nipple, the sharp edge of pain sending lightning down my spine. "Not like that."

"But you wanted," Volkov presses, hand sliding between my legs, finding me already dripping. "I see how you look at him. With hate, yes, but something else."

I start to deny it, but Mikhail chooses that moment to drop to his knees, spreading my thighs with those massive hands, his mouth finding my center with devastating accuracy. The denial dissolves into a strangled moan.

"Don't lie," Volkov continues, two fingers sliding inside me from behind while Mikhail's tongue works magic from the front. "I'll know if you lie."

The dual sensation short-circuits my brain, pleasure building like a gathering storm. "Fine," I pant, hips rocking between them. "I wanted. Happy now?"

Volkov's laugh is soft and dangerous against my neck. "Thought so. We all want what destroys us."

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He maneuvers me until I'm on hands and knees, Mikhail's massive cock positioned at my lips, Volkov behind me. They enter simultaneously—Mikhail's thickness stretching my jaw to its limit, Volkov's more moderate but still substantial length filling me from behind.

It's not the first time I've been in this position but it's so much better than anything I've ever experienced before. Maybe it's the thrill of fucking such dangerous men that puts the cherry on top but being taken, used, filled from both ends nearly makes me writhe like a cat in heat.

I take Mikhail deeper, feeling him hit the back of my throat, using every trick I learned in club bathrooms and Sienna's specialized training. Behind me, Volkov sets a punishing pace, each thrust driving me forward onto Mikhail in a feedback loop of penetration and surrender.

Time dissolves into a blur of sensation—positions changing, bodies rearranging, sweat-slick skin sliding against skin. Mikhail lifts me like I'm weightless, impaling me on his substantial length while Volkov watches with predatory interest, stroking himself until he's ready to replace Mikhail.

They pass me between them like a weapon being shared, each using me according to their nature—Mikhail with brute force that knocks the breath from my lungs, Volkov with calculated precision that finds nerves I didn't know existed.

"Harder," Volkov commands Mikhail, his voice precise as surgery even with his cock destroying my throat. "Arch your back more." His fingers thread through my hair with a hard grip, using me like a whore and I loved it.

"Bozhe moy," Mikhail groans, his earlier one-word vocabulary suddenly flowering into strings of Russian that flow like dark poetry. "Ty prekrasnaya v svoey sile... kak ogon', kotoryy ne mozhet byt' potushen." The words spill from him in rhythm with his thrusts, eloquent in ways his English never allowed.

"Look at me," Volkov growls, grabbing my hair as Mikhail pounds into me from behind. "Fuck, your eyes when you're being taken..." His breathing hitches as he watches me get filled, his own cock rigid. Sweat drips from his forehead as he thrusts, matching Mikhail's brutal rhythm. "That's it, take him deeper. Show me what that pretty throat can do."

His composure cracks when I hollow my cheeks around him, a Russian curse tearing from his lips. His hips buck forward involuntarily, control slipping as pleasure overtakes calculation. "...just like that," he hisses through clenched teeth, his accent thickening with each thrust.

Mikhail grips my hips, surprising me with tenderness. "Ty ponimayesh', chto my vse tut slomannye?" he whispers, words flowing like wine now that pleasure has unlocked his tongue.

"Fuck," Volkov grunts, fingers digging into my scalp as he empties down my throat with a strangled groan. He staggers back, collapsing onto the mattress, chest heaving as he watches Mikhail take over.

And holy shit, the mountain of silence turns into a fucking avalanche. Mikhail's massive hands bruise my hips as he drives into me like he's trying to split me in half, muttering filthy Russian phrases that don't need translation to understand. The quiet, stone-faced giant becomes pure animal—all grunts and growls and sweat-slicked power.

It's always the quiet ones who fuck like they're exorcising demons. The ones who

barely speak two words suddenly find religion when their cock's buried deep.

We fuck like the world is ending—because for us, it might be. Tomorrow brings Vienna, brings Harlow, brings the possibility that one or all of us won't survive what comes next. This isn't about connection or even particularly about pleasure. It's about feeling something real, something visceral, something that cuts through the layers of lies and masks and false identities.

When I finally cum—Mikhail beneath me, Volkov behind, both filling me in a fullness that borders on pain—it's not with a scream but with a broken laugh that might be mistaken for sobbing. The release isn't just physical but existential—a momentary clarity in which I recognize exactly what I've become and find I don't particularly care.

Afterward, we lie in a tangle of limbs, sweat cooling on skin, the room thick with the scent of sex and spent adrenaline. No one speaks. No one needs to. This wasn't about words.

Volkov is the first to move, extracting himself with that same fluid efficiency, reaching for cigarettes and lighter. The flame illuminates his face briefly—calm, composed, already mentally elsewhere. He passes the cigarette to me after one drag, a strange intimacy more revealing than what came before.

Mikhail stirs, his massive arm still draped across my waist, his breathing already steadying toward sleep. He murmurs something in Russian, too low for me to catch, but Volkov's expression shifts—just slightly, a secret glimpse of what might be genuine emotion.

"What did he say?" I ask, exhaling smoke toward the cracked ceiling.

Volkov reclaims the cigarette, taking another drag before answering. "He said even

broken things deserve moment of peace."

The words settle over me like a blanket—not warm, exactly, but substantial. I close my eyes, feeling the steady thump of Mikhail's heart against my back, the weight of his arm anchoring me to the present.

Tomorrow brings Vienna, brings Harlow, brings the next bloody chapter in whatever story I'm writing with my bad choices and worse luck. But tonight—for these few hours stolen from fate—I'll take the closest thing to peace people like us can find.

In the arms of monsters who recognize their own kind.

Morning breaks like a headache across Eastern Europe—gray, persistent, and unwelcome as fuck. I peel myself from the rumpled sheets, Mikhail's massive arm still draped across the mattress where I'd been.

My muscles scream from the kind of workout Equinox doesn't advertise in their glossy brochures. Three people, one mattress, and enough baggage to sink the Titanic twice over. Just another Tuesday in my new life.

Volkov's already up, of course. The man probably schedules his REM cycles with military precision. He's at the grimy kitchen table, surveillance photos spread before him like tarot cards predicting someone's bloody future. Harlow's, if we're lucky.

"Coffee," he says, sliding a chipped mug across the table without looking up. Not a question, not an offer—just the bare minimum acknowledgment that I exist and might require caffeination before discussing murder plans.

I take it, grimacing at the first sip. Tastes like motor oil filtered through Soviet-era asbestos. "Jesus. You Russians consider this coffee? No wonder you're all so fucking grim."

His eyes flick to mine, that ghost of amusement dancing at the edges. "Is fuel, not pleasure."

"Story of my life lately," I mutter, dropping into the chair across from him. My thighs protest the contact, bruised in patterns that match Mikhail's massive hands. Memory flashes—his Russian poetry when he was balls-deep, the eloquence that only emerged when his brain short-circuited with pleasure.

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Speaking of the mountain, Mikhail emerges from the bedroom looking fresh as a fucking daisy. His shirt stretches across shoulders wide enough to block out the sun, hair still damp from a shower I didn't hear running.

"Transport ready," he announces, helping himself to coffee. "Three hours to Vienna."

I squint at the wall clock—5:47 AM. Perfect. Nothing like planning an international assassination before sunrise.

Volkov tosses me a passport. I catch it one-handed, flipping it open to find my face staring back. Different name, different nationality, same dead eyes.

"Sofia Petrov. Russian citizen. Business consultant." He shrugs at my raised eyebrow. "Best cover. Americans too noticeable."

"And this?" I gesture to my obviously not-Russian face.

"Many ethnicities in Russia. You speak passable Russian. Will not be questioned."

I do speak "passable Russian," thanks to three weeks of Killion's language immersion torture—having vocabulary drilled into me while hanging upside down from ceiling hooks tends to make lessons stick. Still, "passable" is generous.

"Our cover?" I ask, swallowing another mouthful of liquid punishment.

"Business associates meeting potential client." Volkov taps a photograph of an elegant hotel. "Harlow stays here when in Vienna. Meeting contact in restaurant at

noon."

His finger traces the building's entrance points, exit routes, security camera blindspots—the blueprint of an ambush in the making. I focus on the mechanics, trying to ignore the persistent thought lodged like a bullet fragment in my brain.

Did I want Killion?

The question Volkov tossed at me last night while buried inside me. The one I answered with a breathless "yes" while balanced on the knife-edge between pleasure and rage. The truth I'd rather carve out of my skull than examine by daylight.

Wanting the man who sculpted me into a weapon? Fucking textbook Stockholm syndrome. Or maybe just proof that I've always been drawn to the ones who'd hurt me worst. Nothing says "daddy issues" like lusting after your handler-turned-potential-executioner.

"Focus," Volkov barks, snapping me back. "You understand plan?"

"Intercept Harlow, play the frightened asset seeking protection, get him somewhere private, stick him with the happy juice, extract intel." I recite it mechanically, like a shopping list for milk, bread, and kidnapping supplies. "What could possibly go wrong?"

Mikhail's laugh is like gravel in a dryer. "Everything. That is why we have backup plans."

"Which are?"

"We kill everyone and burn hotel down," he offers with complete seriousness.



"Subtle." I can't help but smile. God help me, I'm starting to like these merciless fuckers.

An hour later, we're packed into an unmarked sedan, weapons stashed in hidden compartments, headed west toward Austria. The landscape rolls past like someone set the world on grayscale—frozen fields, skeletal trees, abandoned Soviet-bloc architecture crumbling back into the earth. We pass borders with forged papers and practiced stories, Volkov's connections smoothing our path like expensive lubricant.

Vienna rises from the winter mist like a fairy tale somebody fucked up—all Baroque splendor and imperial grandeur frosted with dirty snow and modern commerce. Horse-drawn carriages share streets with BMWs, centuries of history packed into blocks where Mozart and Hitler both once walked. The perfect backdrop for a high-stakes kidnapping.

No time to sight-see when you're on a mission. More's the pity.

We check into our staging area—a nondescript apartment in the 4th district rented under yet another false identity. Thirty minutes to prep, then we move to positions. I strip and change into Sofia Petrov's wardrobe—charcoal pencil skirt, silk blouse, heels that make my ass look spectacular but would be a bitch to run in. Good thing the plan doesn't involve running. Much.

Volkov watches me transform with clinical interest, none of last night's hunger visible in his assessment.

"Your walk," he says as I step into the heels. "Too American. Smaller steps. Less"—he waves his hand—"hips."

"I'm not exactly trying to blend in," I remind him. "The whole point is for Harlow to notice me."

"Yes, but not immediately as American agent." He demonstrates, his walk suddenly shifting to something more contained, more precise. The shit they must teach in Russian spy school.

"Fine." I adjust, shortening my stride, pulling my shoulders back in a posture that reeks of old-world discipline.

Volkov nods approval. "Better. Remember, twelve minutes from first contact. After that, even best drug cannot guarantee clean extraction."

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"Twelve minutes to mindfuck the Director of Special Operations, stick him with a needle, and get him to a secure location." I check my watch—a sleek Cartier that's probably worth more than Isaac's car. "No pressure."

"Pressure makes diamonds," Mikhail rumbles from where he's assembling a suppressed pistol with the tender care most men reserve for their dicks.

"Or corpses," I add.

"Think good thoughts," Volkov says with that bloodless half-smile. "Everything will work out."

I don't know about that but fuck it, I'll take all the good vibes the universe can offer.

We split three blocks from the hotel, Mikhail peeling off to secure our extraction vehicle and backup position, Volkov heading for the service entrance to neutralize security cameras. I continue alone, heels clicking against ancient cobblestones, Sofia Petrov's credentials burning a hole in my designer handbag.

The Hotel Imperial stands like an aging aristocrat among peasants—cream-colored facade, flags hanging limp in the winter stillness, doormen in uniforms that probably haven't changed since the Habsburg Empire fell.

I stride through the revolving doors like I belong, like I'm just another business consultant meeting a client rather than an operative hunting the man who tried to have me killed.

The lobby gleams with old-money opulence—marble floors polished to mirror shine, crystal chandeliers throwing fractured light across the faces of the wealthy and the wannabes. I note exits, security personnel, camera positions—all the details Killion drilled into me until they became second nature.

Killion. Fuck. His name rises unbidden again, an uninvited guest at my mental dinner party. I push it aside, focusing on the now, on the hunt, on staying alive.

The bar is where Harlow should appear after his meeting—the Oak Room, all dark wood paneling and discreet lighting, the kind of place where champagne never goes flat and secrets never leave the premises.

I select a seat with sight lines to both elevators and main entrance, order a mineral water I have no intention of drinking, and settle in to play the deadliest game of my life.

My hand brushes the tranquilizer pen in my jacket pocket. Volkov's voice echoes: "One click to disorient. Two clicks to drop. Simple." Yeah, simple until it isn't.

Time drips like cold molasses. Twelve minutes. Eleven. Ten. The bar slowly fills with afternoon drinkers—business deals being brokered over thirty-year-old scotch, affairs being kindled over wine older than their participants, secrets being traded like baseball cards.

I check my watch. 1:47 PM. Harlow's running late, which means the plan is already fraying at the edges. The longer I sit, the higher the risk of being made by hotel security or—worse—someone from the Dollhouse.

That's when I feel it—that prickling awareness at the base of my skull, the sensation of being watched. Not the casual glances of men appreciating my legs, but the focused attention of a predator.

I turn, expecting Harlow's silver-fox composure.

Instead, I find myself staring into a ghost's face.

Killion.

Standing at the bar entrance, winter light haloing his dark silhouette, eyes locked on mine with the intensity of a targeting laser.

He's found us. Found me.

And somewhere in the hotel, Volkov is about to spring a trap that's already been compromised.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I maintain my composure—Sofia Petrov wouldn't panic, wouldn't flinch, wouldn't betray with a tight expression that her entire world just tilted sideways. I sip my water, eyes meeting his over the rim in silent challenge.

Come and get me, you son of a bitch.

He moves through the room like smoke, purposeful but unhurried, taking the seat across from mine without invitation. Up close, he looks exactly the same yet somehow different—same predatory grace, same controlled intensity, but something new lurking behind those eyes. Something almost like concern.

"Hello, Nova," he says, voice pitched low enough that only I can hear. "Or should I call you Sofia now?"

I smile, brittle as thin ice. "Killion. What a pleasant surprise. Let me guess—you just

happened to be in the neighborhood?"

"I've been tracking you since Prague." No preamble, no bullshit. Pure Killion efficiency. "You're making some questionable alliances."

"Says the man who used me as expendable bait."

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His jaw tightens fractionally—a tell so slight anyone else would miss it. "Is that what Volkov told you?"

"He showed me the files. The communications. My name circled in red with 'acceptable collateral' written beside it." I keep my voice steady, even as rage bubbles beneath the surface like magma under thin crust. "Pretty compelling evidence you were planning to feed me to the wolves."

"Doctored," he says, the word precise as a scalpel. "Every communication altered just enough to be believable. It's what Volkov does—psychological warfare, turning assets, creating doubt where there was certainty." His eyes never leave mine, searching for weaknesses, for cracks in my armor. "He's using you, Nova."

The sound of my name on his lips sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine. "And you weren't?"

"I was training you. There's a difference."

"Is there? Because from where I'm sitting, everyone wants to use the pretty girl with the talent for deception. Volkov, Harlow, you—just different flavors of the same poison."

His hand moves across the table, not touching mine but close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his skin. "If I wanted you dead, you would be. Think about it. The extraction team at the apartment—why did they fire warning shots first? Why announce their presence when they could have just put a bullet in your head when your back was turned?"

The question lands like a grenade in my lap, uncomfortable because it makes a certain twisted sense. The team at the safehouse had been loud, clumsy almost—nothing like the silent precision I'd expect from Killion's operatives.

“They weren’t even my team. I hired mercenaries for the job,” he said with a faint sense of urgency. “Casualties were never the plan. I just needed Harlow.”

"Maybe you're just getting sloppy in your old age," I counter, but doubt has wormed its way in, a parasite feeding on certainty.

"Bullshit." The curse sounds strange from him, like a priest breaking vows. "You're smarter than that. You know me better."

And I do, is the thing. Three months of brutal training, of being broken and remade under his watchful eye—I know Killion's methods. Know his ruthless precision. Know he doesn't waste resources, doesn't make unnecessary noise, doesn't play games he can't win.

"Why are you here?" I ask, unwilling to concede but needing to understand.

"To stop you from making a catastrophic mistake." He leans forward, voice dropping even lower. "Harlow isn't coming. He was tipped off—probably by Volkov himself. This whole thing is a setup."

"That makes no sense. Why would Volkov tip off the very person he’s sworn to take out?"

"I can’t tell you everything —you’re not ready but trust me when I say there are things in play that will absolutely change the board. You’re playing a game without the instructions and you’re going to get taken out. Volkov is using you for his own purposes. Trust me, I know Volkov in ways you don’t.”



“Sounds kinky,” I retort, not falling for his bullshit but also, not completely discrediting it either. Hell, who can tell which end is up in this crazy game?

His eyes search mine, looking for the operative he trained, the weapon he honed. “What has he told you about Vahnya?”

The name hits like a slap. “That she was his wife. That you left her to die in Budapest. That Harlow's been experimenting on her as part of some mind-control program.”

Killion's expression doesn't change, but something flickers in his eyes—pain, maybe, or resignation. “Half-truths wrapped around a core of lies. Vahnya Orlova was one of ours—a deep-cover operative assigned to infiltrate Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service. She and Volkov were lovers, but not married.”

My head spins with competing narratives, with versions of truth so tangled I can't see where one ends and another begins.

“Budapest was supposed to be an extraction. Things didn't go to plan,” Killion continues. “Vahnya had uncovered evidence of Volkov selling secrets to private contractors—the same network Harlow eventually connected with. We were bringing her in when Volkov intervened. Three of my team died that day. Vahnya was wounded but survived. She's been in protective custody ever since.”

“And I'm supposed to just believe you? Take your word over the evidence I've seen with my own eyes?”

“I don't expect you to believe anything without proof.” He slides a phone across the table—slim, black, encrypted. “Verify it yourself. Call this number. Ask for Vahyna.”

I stare at the phone like it might bite. “Why should I trust this isn't just another trap?”

"Because despite everything, you know me, Nova. You know what I am. What I'm not." His eyes hold mine, unflinching. "And what I'm not is a man who betrays his own."

The moment stretches between us, taut as a trip wire. In my pocket, the tranquilizer pen feels suddenly heavy, a decision waiting to be made. I could end this now—two clicks and Killion drops, can be delivered to Volkov gift-wrapped with a bow. One problem solved.

Or I could be walking straight into another layer of deception, another level of the game where I'm still just a pawn being moved across the board.

The hotel lobby beyond the bar suddenly feels too quiet, too still. The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention, that animal instinct for danger cutting through confusion.

"Something's wrong," I murmur, scanning the room. "Where is everyone?"

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Killion's posture shifts subtly, combat-ready despite his casual appearance. "When did you last hear from Volkov?"

"Thirty minutes ago. He was securing the service corridor."

"And you didn't find it strange he hasn't checked in?"

Before I can answer, the first explosion rocks the building—distant enough to be muffled but strong enough to rattle crystal glasses along the bar. Guests look up in confusion, murmurs rippling through the room.

Killion's hand closes around my wrist, his grip iron. "We need to move. Now."

"What the hell was that?"

"That," he says grimly, "was the sound of Volkov burning bridges. I told you he couldn't be trusted."

Another explosion, closer this time, followed by the scream of fire alarms. Smoke begins curling under the door from the lobby, thin tendrils becoming choking clouds. Chaos erupts—people pushing toward exits, security guards trying to maintain order as panic spreads like contagion.

Killion pulls me to my feet, his body automatically positioning itself between me and the nearest threat, the handler protecting his asset even now. "East stairwell. We've got maybe two minutes before this place is completely compromised."

"Volkov and Mikhail?—"

"Are either behind this or caught in it. Either way, they're not your concern right now." His eyes harden. "Survival first. Questions later."

My training kicks in, overriding confusion. I follow him through the thickening smoke, Sofia Petrov's heels abandoned for fleet-footed survival. The stairwell is already filling with fleeing guests—perfect cover, terrible bottleneck.

"This wasn't the plan," I say as we descend, staying close to the wall where the crush is thinnest. "Volkov wouldn't risk this kind of chaos unless?—"

"Unless he was desperate," Killion finishes. "Or unless this was the plan all along and you weren't privy to it."

The second option lands like lead in my stomach. Had I misjudged again? Trusted the wrong monster? The night in that broken-down safehouse, the raw connection I'd thought I'd found with two men as damaged as me—had it all been an act?

We hit the ground floor, pushing through emergency exits into the winter air where smoke billows black against gray sky. Police sirens wail in the distance, fire crews already responding. The street is chaos—hotel guests in various states of undress and panic, security attempting crowd control, onlookers with phones raised to capture the spectacle.

Perfect cover for an escape. Or an ambush.

Killion guides me through the crowd with practiced efficiency, one hand at the small of my back, eyes constantly scanning for threats. The touch is professional, impersonal, yet it burns through my clothes like a brand.

"My extraction team is three blocks north," he says, voice low enough that only I can hear. "We'll be wheels up within the hour, back in secure territory by nightfall."

"And if I don't want to go with you?"

He stops, fixing me with that penetrating stare that's always made me feel transparent. "Then walk away. Right now. But understand what you're walking towards. Volkov isn't your ally, Nova. He's using you to get to me, to get to Vahnya, to finish what he started in Budapest."

"And you're not using me?"

"I invested in you," he corrects. "There's a difference."

Something pricks at my consciousness—he keeps calling me Nova, not Landry. A tiny voice of intuition is whispering at the back of my skull that his reasoning matters.

Behind us, a third explosion rocks the Hotel Imperial, this one larger than the others. Glass shards rain onto the street as windows blow out, screams rising in harmony with wailing sirens. In the confusion, I could disappear—lose myself in the crowd, find my own way, trust no one but myself.

It would be the smart play. The safe play.

Instead, I find myself saying: "That phone. The one you wanted me to call Vahnya on. Give it to me."

His expression doesn't change, but something in his eyes does—a flicker of what might be relief. He hands over the slim device, our fingers brushing in the exchange.

"One call," he says. "Then you decide."

I take the phone, stepping away from him for the illusion of privacy. The number is pre-dialed. All I have to do is press connect and find out if everything I've believed for the past week has been another elaborate lie.

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Behind me, Vienna burns. Before me, Killion waits. And somewhere in this city, Volkov moves like a shark through bloodied waters.

I press the button, raising the phone to my ear.

Time to find out which devil gets my soul today.

The phone weighs heavy in my palm, pre-dialed number glowing like a time bomb. Around us, Vienna burns in winter twilight, the Hotel Imperial belching smoke while sirens scream through ancient streets.

Civilians scatter like frightened pigeons, emergency responders pushing against the flow of human panic. The air stinks of cordite and fear, that unmistakable cocktail that follows violence like a faithful dog.

Killion watches me, that glacier-eyed focus never wavering. Behind him, his extraction team awaits —my golden ticket back to the Dollhouse's concrete embrace. If I choose it. If I trust him.

Fat fucking chance.

I press the phone to my ear, keeping my eyes locked on Killion's face. Trust is a luxury I stopped being able to afford somewhere between the first time someone tried to kill me and the third time I killed to survive. The connection takes its sweet time, encryption protocols buzzing like angry wasps.

"Identify yourself," a woman answers, voice like polished steel with Eastern

European edges. The kind of voice that's seen too much shit to be impressed by anything short of the apocalypse.

"You first," I counter, watching Killion's face for any hint of reaction. His jaw tightens a fraction, pupils dilating slightly—tells so small most people would miss them, but I'm not most people. "If you're really Vahnya Orlova, prove it."

"I do not prove myself to anyone Agent Nova," the voice is cool, clipped with that accent that made her sound hard and refined at the same time. "I am Vahnya Orlova, codename: Red Angel — and you are wasting time."

"Yeah, well it's my time to waste. Why's everyone so hell bent on getting their hands on you? What's so special about you that you've got people blowing shit up and stacking up the body count whenever your name gets mentioned?"

Around us, Vienna quakes with aftershocks of the explosion. A woman stumbles past, designer coat smeared with ash, mascara painting black rivers down her cheeks. The world is ending for the civilians caught in our crossfire, but for people like us, it's just Tuesday.

"Because I know too much," Vahnya answers simply. "About the program. About what they've been doing to assets like us."

"Assets like us?" I repeat, catching the plural. Something cold slithers up my spine—not fear exactly, more like recognition of a truth my body knows before my brain catches up.

"Nova," her voice takes on a different urgency, almost...familiar? "Nothing about your life is what you think. The club, the extraction, the training – it wasn't recruitment. It was recovery."



A cold feeling creeps up my spine. "What are you talking about?"

"You weren't recruited from Malvagio," she says carefully. "You were already one of us. Before."

What.The.Fuck? "Are you on drugs, lady? What are you talking about?" I look to Killion, my expression screwing into an incredulous mask of irritation and uncertainty. "This chick is saying some crazy shit."

But Killion just stares, something in his expression sending a chill down my back. There's no surprise there, no confusion—just calculation. Like he's watching a chess piece make exactly the move he anticipated.

The world tilts around me, reality fragmenting like a mirror struck with a hammer. Flashes of memory that never felt quite right suddenly parade through my mind—the way I knew exactly how to dismantle a pistol the first time Killion handed me one. The way I could read people's private thoughts through subtle tells like they were billboard-sized confessions. The way I could pick up different languages without breaking a sweat.

"The butterfly tattoo on your left ribcage," the woman continues without hesitation. "It's not decorative. It's a mission marker—the ink contains compounds that trigger specific physiological responses during certain interrogation protocols. You didn't choose it — it was chosen for you."

My hand involuntarily moves to my side, knowing the outline of the tattoo through silk blouse—the one I'd always believed was a drunken mistake after graduation. The one Isaac always claimed to hate. I'd always wondered why I couldn't remember getting it, why the memory was fuzzy at best. I'd chalked it up to too many tequila shots, but now...

"How would you know that?" I demand, voice steady despite the earthquake reshaping my internal landscape. My mind races, cataloging every inconsistency in my memories, every dream that felt too vivid, every inexplicable skill that came too naturally.

"Because I designed it, Nova. We were on the same team before Budapest. Before you were taken and rewritten into Landry James."

I'm scanning not just Killion but the street around us now, hyperaware that this call is either the first honest thing I've heard in months or the most elaborate trap yet. The burning hotel casts hellish shadows across the ancient streets, turning Vienna into a Bosch painting of chaos and flames.

Somewhere in the distance, a secondary explosion rocks the foundations, and I wonder if that's Volkov's handiwork or just the universe's way of adding percussion to my personal breakdown.

Still my head is spinning even as something about what she's laying down feels true. Too true. The kind of truth that lives in your bones before it reaches your brain.

"If we were on the same team, what was my extraction phrase?" I throw out, testing, fishing—knowing there won't be an answer because I just made that shit up.

Except Vahnya doesn't hesitate: "Blackbirds fly at midnight, but ravens own the dawn."

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The phrase hits like a physical blow—meaningless, yet sending shivers of recognition through my body that make no rational sense. My muscle memory responds before my conscious mind can process why.

My shoulders straighten, my breathing evens out, my stance morphs to something more balanced, more lethal. Combat-ready, without a single conscious command.

Jesus fucking Christ.

"Who am I?" I whisper, the question stripped of everything but raw need. Three words that contain every existential crisis in human history, distilled into one desperate plea.

"You were Nova Cross before you were Landry James," Vahnya says. "Asset classification Vixen-09. Deep coverspecialist. You died in Budapest three years ago. Or so it was made to believe."

My eyes snap to Killion, searching for confirmation or denial. He remains statue-still, face unreadable. But there's something in his eyes—a watchfulness, an intensity that speaks volumes. He's waiting to see if I remember, if the shell he built around me cracks entirely or just enough to let the truth seep in.

"The Vahnya Initiative," I press, stepping further from Killion, though not far enough to lose sight of his hands. "What is it?"

"A perversion of the Resurrection program," she says, each word precise as a bullet. "Reclaiming operatives believed killed in action. Wiping. Reprogramming. That

night at Malvagio? The club? The extraction? All theater for your benefit. You weren't recruited, Nova. You were recovered."

The words land like body blows, each one finding vulnerable tissue. But with each hit comes clarity—pieces clicking into place with sickening precision.

The strange comfort I felt in the Dollhouse despite its brutality. The way Killion's training methods seemed tailor-made for my responses. The way three months turned me from suburban housewife to efficient killer.

Because I wasn't learning. I was remembering.

My fingers tighten around the phone until my knuckles bleach white. "Isaac," I whisper, the name suddenly foreign on my tongue. "Is he even real?"

"He's one of ours," Vahnya says, her tone matter-of-fact. "A handler disguised as a husband. Assigned to monitor you while your memories stabilized. The Landry identity needed anchoring—a domestic environment was ideal for our purposes." She pauses. "The original programming is designed to resurface gradually during training. Notice how naturally you took to killing?"

The observation lands like a sledgehammer to the sternum. The way combat training felt like remembering rather than learning. The way my body responded to danger without conscious thought. The way death came so easily to my hands.

I think back to the first man I killed in the safehouse—how I didn't hesitate, didn't falter, my body moving with the mechanical precision of someone who'd done it a hundred times before.

Because I had.

Now I feel bad for being such a bitch to my fake husband. Babysitting a sleeper assassin while she cheated and treated him like wallpaper had to be the worst assignment ever.

He probably breathed a sigh of relief when I disappeared. Although, now it made perfect sense why he never pitched a fit when I told him I was going on an extended girls' trip.

No, actually, that's a lie, I don't feel bad at all. I'm pissed.

Who was I before? What happened in Budapest? Why did they need to put me on ice for three years? Why thaw me out now?

"Where are you?" I demand. "I need?—"

"Go with Killion. Now."

The line goes dead, connection severed. Whether by Vahnja's choice or someone else's, I can't tell. I stare at the screen, willing it to reconnect, to provide the answers that will stitch my fractured identity back together. But there's nothing. Just deafening silence and the distant wail of sirens.

I lower the phone, mind racing through implications faster than I can process them. Killion watches me with the careful attention of someone monitoring an unstable explosive.

Which, let's be honest, is exactly what I've become—a ticking bomb of conflicting identities and unleashed muscle memory.

"She's telling the truth, isn't she?" I ask, though it's not really a question. The answer is written in the tense set of Killion's shoulders, in the calculated distance he

maintains, in the way his hand hovers near his concealed weapon.

Before he can answer, movement catches my eye through smoke and chaos. Volkov, materializing like a ghost from winter fog, bleeding from a shoulder wound but still moving with predatory purpose.

His eyes lock onto mine, then flick to Killion with undisguised hatred. The kind of hatred that requires a personal touch—not professional rivalry but intimate betrayal.

"You motherfucker," he hisses, his gun trained straight at Killion's head. "Where's Vahyna? Take me to her or you die like the traitorous dog you are."

Despite staring down the snub-nosed barrel of certain death, Killion doesn't flinch. The air between them crackles with history—Budapest, Vahnya, whatever came before. A triangle of betrayal with me as the unwitting fourth point.

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"She's safe," Killion said but gave nothing else. "Forget about Vahyna, Volkov."

"Fuck you." Volkov spat, the animosity between the two men glowing like an ember from a campfire. "I don't believe anything you say." To me, he gestured with disgust, "Did he tell you whole story or only his convenient version of Budapest?"

I see it now—the connective tissue between these men. Vahyna. Me. Budapest. Whatever happened there destroyed us all in different ways. Volkov's rage isn't just professional; it's personal. The scars Killion left on him aren't just physical. And I'm the ghost in their machine, the variable that everyone wanted to use for their own purposes.

"If you knew who I was...why didn't you tell me?" I swivel to Volkov, directing my ire his direction. As far as I'm concerned, both Killion and Volkov are equally guilty — liars using different strategies, manipulators with different techniques. "Those nights in the safehouse, when we fucked, when you had every opportunity—why keep up the charade?"

"Wasn't right time," he answers reluctantly. "The truth would come out with Vahyna."

Right. Because nothing says "trust me" like withholding fundamental truths about my existence.

I'm fucking tired of being jerked around. What they're saying sounds like spy-movie bullshit but my mind is already connecting dots—how quickly I adapted to training, my photographic memory, my unnatural comfort with violence. The way kill shots

felt like muscle memory. The way I read people like they were books printed specifically for my eyes.

Memories start surfacing like corpses in a flood—fragments of missions I never ran, faces I've never seen but recognize bone-deep, languages I shouldn't understand flowing through my mind. Nova. Vixen-09. A codename, a classification, an identity buried beneath layers of carefully constructed fiction.

"Where's Mikhail?" I demand of Volkov, needing to account for all players on this fucked-up chessboard. If he was part of this too—if that night of brutal intimacy was just another layer of manipulation—I'll put a bullet in him myself.

Before he can answer, the first shots crack through the winter air. Harlow's privatized hit squad has arrived—not to capture but to clean up. Professional in black tactical gear, moving with military precision through the chaos. Civilians scatter, screaming, as bullets chip ancient stonework around us.

Shit.

"All three targets acquired," crackles over a militant's radio, loud enough for me to catch. Three targets. Me, Killion, Volkov. A neat solution to Harlow's problem—eliminate everyone who knows about the Vahnya Initiative in one fell swoop.

"Enough," Killion growls, "that's Harlow. We have to leave. Now."

"Like I would leave anywhere with either of you," I shoot back, but if I truly am the formerly-presumed dead Nova Cross, I didn't want to try my luck with a second rise from the grave. "Maybe I'll take my chances with Harlow. At least he hasn't lied to me yet."



"Jesus, Nova, get your head out of your ass. Harlow is the one who wants you dead," Killion says, irritated as fuck, like I'm the one being a problem and not the liar twins both wanting me to choose them. "I'm trying to save your life."

"Sure you are." I didn't believe him. At this point, I don't believe anyone. Hell, I'm not even sure the voice on the phone was anything more than an elaborate part of this fucked up play.

For all I know, they're all in on it together—an elaborate game of cat and mouse with me as the mouse who thinks it's a cat.

A flash of movement on a rooftop catches my eye—Mikhail, positioning himself with a sniper rifle. His massive frame silhouetted against the winter sky, scope gleaming in the firelight.

Within seconds, the first shot drops one of Harlow's mercenaries with surgical precision. The others scatter, looking for cover, suddenly realizing they're caught in crossfire.

Volkov reaches for me but I whip my gun out, pointing it straight at his face. "Don't fucking touch me. I'd rather take my chances with a crocodile that hasn't been fed in days than either of you."

His hand freezes mid-reach, those calculating eyes assessing my seriousness. He must see something in my expression that convinces him, because he doesn't push it. Smart man.

"This is your fault," Volkov spats at Killion. "Everything you do is for you only." To me he said, "If you want to stay alive, don't trust this fucker no matter what he tells you."

I don't need Volkov's advice on that score. I look between them—two predators who've stalked the same territory too long. Two men who've each held pieces of my fractured reality, doling out truths and lies like dealers cutting marked cards.

Vienna's ancient streets become a battlefield around us—bullets pinging off cobblestones, civilians screaming, smoke clogging the winter air. It's a perfect metaphor for my mind—chaos, destruction, the present colliding violently with a past I can't fully recall but can't entirely deny.

Who am I? Landry James, shitty housewife with a taste for danger? Nova Cross, deep-cover operative presumed dead? Or something new entirely—a chimera patched together from fragments of both, greater and more dangerous than either?

I've spent my life—both lives—being defined by others. Controlled. Directed. Manipulated. Isaac, Killion, Volkov, Harlow—different masters pulling the same strings. Even my rebellion as Landry—the club hookups, the lies, the thrill-seeking—was just programming reasserting itself through the cracks in my false identity.

Well, fuck that.

"I'm going to find Vahnya," I tell them both, backing away. "Then I'm burning your whole fucking world down."

I don't wait for their response. Using the cover Mikhail provides, I slip away into Vienna's chaotic streets, instinct guiding me through unfamiliar terrain. Behind me, Killion shouts something that's swallowed by gunfire. Volkov doesn't waste breath on words—he knows me better than that.

Or maybe he knows Nova better than that.

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My feet know these streets though I've never walked them. My mind catalogs escape routes through alleys centuries old. My body moves with the liquid grace of someone who's spent a lifetime in the shadows. Muscle memory. Operational conditioning. The ghost of Nova Cross rising from Landry James's ashes.

The cold realization settles in my gut like lead: I've been playing someone else's game from the start. Landry James never existed except as camouflage for a weapon someone wanted to keep hidden. Nova was real. Is real.

But whoever the fuck I am now? I'm nobody's asset anymore.

As I disappear into Vienna's labyrinthine heart, a new purpose crystallizes in my mind. Find Vahnya. Recover my past. Decide my future—not as Landry, not as Nova, but as whatever hybrid monster they've created in their arrogance. And then make everyone who used me pay, one bullet at a time.

The game is no longer theirs. It's mine. And I'm changing the rules.

Has Landry survived the trap...only to become the weapon they fear most?

The Dollhouse is burning, enemies are watching from the shadows, and loyalties are a luxury no one can afford. In this war of masks and monsters, only the ruthless survive.

\* \* \*

Somewhere out there, Volkov is bleeding.

Good.

Let him.

Because I'm coming—and this time, I'm not playing by anyone's rules.

Not Killion's.

Not theirs.

Only mine.