



Defiled Innocence (Innocent Brides #6)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Amelia Moreau is barely holding herself together in the wake of her brother's death. Lukas had been her guardian, her rock—and now, his loss has left her adrift. But when she learns the terms of her inheritance, her grief turns to shock: to claim the fortune Lukas left behind, she must marry.

Not just anyone, but Dimitri Dragunov, a commanding Russian mob boss whose reputation is as dark as the secrets he keeps.

Her first instinct is defiance. But rejecting Dimitri isn't without consequences. Too many lives depend on her decisions, and walking away would leave the people she's vowed to protect vulnerable. She has no choice but to agree.

Determined to endure the arrangement, Amelia steels herself for a cold, transactional union devoid of intimacy or emotion. But Dimitri has no intention of allowing her to fade into the background as his wife. With a dominance that leaves her breathless, he demands not just her compliance but her surrender—mind, body, and soul.

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Amelia

Nothing good happens on a Tuesday.

My mother died on a Tuesday.

Years later, my father died on a Tuesday.

And four weeks ago, my brother died on a Tuesday.

“Lia?” A kind voice interrupts the silence of my office. It’s only lasted five minutes, the quiet, and now it’s gone.

“Good morning, Sarah.” I get up from my desk. I need more coffee. The two cups I’ve had so far haven’t put a dent in my exhaustion.

It’s only ten o’clock and I’ve already had to deal with a bed shortage at the halfway house, had a meeting with the counseling staff, and checked two of our clients into the full-time rehab facility we work closely with.

“I know you’re busy, but there’s an attorney out here who is demanding to see you.” She frowns. “He says he’s already left you several messages.”

I grimace.

Luther VanCroft. My brother’s estate attorney.

“Can you get him to make an appointment? I can meet with him later.” I slide my mug beneath the Keurig after popping in a fresh pod.

“I suggested that, but he said you’ve already missed two appointments.” She tilts her head a little to the left. “I don’t think he’s going away this time, Lia.”

I sigh. Putting off the reading of my brother’s will wasn’t intentional.

At first.

After the funeral, everything erupted around me. At first, I was glad for the distraction.

I’d just lost my brother, leaving me the only person left of our little family. Having to navigate the funeral, the separate memorial services for him, and multiple social gatherings in his name left me drained.

I didn’t have time to process that he was really gone. My daily calendar is always full of meetings, emergencies, and events. The fact that every event in the past few weeks was in his honor didn’t really hit me. I’ve been on autopilot.

Even with our father having been gone for eight years, there were still plenty of his political associates that wanted to extend their condolences. There were two small memorial lunches for Lucas last week given by groups that helped keep my father firmly seated in his Alderman chair.

They’d held out hope that Lucas would follow in our father’s footsteps. Right up until the accident, they’d sought him out to seek political appointment.

“Lia. He’s not going to leave,” Sarah says when I remain quiet, trying to figure out a way to put this part off for a little bit longer.

Once he reads the will, there's no more denying that Lucas is gone and never coming back.

Tears I've managed to hold at bay threaten, but I clear my throat and blink until they retreat.

"Fine. I'll see him." I dump the third spoonful of sugar into my coffee and stir in the creamer.

Luther has been my family's attorney, or least one of their team, forever. He's in his early seventies and probably should have retired years ago. The last time I had to deal with him directly was when my father died, eight years ago.

It was a short meeting. Dad left everything to Lucas, except a small bit he put aside in a trust fund for me when I turn twenty-five. Lucas had been named my guardian, as I'd been only sixteen at the time.

"Amelia." Luther greets me as he walks in carrying his outdated, but still somewhat fashionable briefcase. "I'm glad you're able to see me."

I gesture to the chair in front of my desk as I sink into mine.

"I don't have a lot of time; can we do this quick?" The sooner I can bury my head in the sand regarding all of this, the better my day will be.

He eyes me over the rim of his thick glasses as he gently places his briefcase on top of a pile of papers on my desk. "It shouldn't take long."

"Good." I take a sip of my coffee. Ooh, a little too much sugar. I put the mug down again.

After closing his briefcase, he hands me a copy of the will and keeps a copy for himself as he leans back.

“Can you just summarize it for me?” I put the document on my desk after my eyes sweep over my brother’s name listed under the last will and testament heading.

He looks a little relieved at my request. “Yes, that’s fine.”

“Lia.” Caroline, one of the counselors, bursts into my office. Glancing at Luther, she winces. “Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Is something wrong?”

“I have a probation officer on the phone demanding clinic notes. I’ve told him three times I can’t send them without a court order or a release from the client. But he’s insisting.”

“I assume there is no subpoena on file and the client hasn’t agreed to share clinical information?” I clarify.

“That’s right. I told him I can give him an update on if the guy has shown up for his sessions, which he has, but I can’t give him anything else without the other things.” She looks at my phone, a soft plea in her eyes.

I sigh. “What line?”

“Two. Thank you. I have a client waiting on me.” She wiggles her fingers at me with a big grin and hurries from the room.

“Sorry, Luther, one more minute.” I grab the call and deal with the probation officer who is more insistent than a man in his position should be.

He knows the law as well as I do in this situation; he's just trying to strong-arm us to avoid having to do the legwork to get it done the right way.

After I hang up, leaving him just as annoyed as he was when I took his call, I sink back into my chair.

Luther clears his throat, reminding me he's still in my office, waiting for me.

"Sorry. Okay, let's get it done." I fold my hands on my desk and give him my undivided attention.

"Your brother made things very straightforward in regard to his estate," Luther starts out. "As you know?—"

"Lia. Shit. Sorry." Ramon, one of our social workers, rushes into the room, cutting short when he sees Luther.

"It's okay, what do you need?" I give Luther an apologetic smile.

"Sherman, the fifty-year-old you found a bed for this morning?" Ramon shakes his head. "He's being transported back here. The shelter had some mix-up and there's no bed for him. I tried calling Julia, but she's got nothing."

I hang my head and take a deep breath. That bed had been nearly impossible to get in the first place.

Sherman doesn't need rehab services, just somewhere to sleep and shower while he finds his footing again.

"All right." I pinch the bridge of my nose, willing my brain to find a solution here. "I'll pull a favor. One sec."

They both watch me as I make a quick call to a shelter up north. It's an hour's drive away, and outside the city limits, but that might be just what he needs. A day or two away from all the bars and clubs calling his name at night.

"There." I hang up my phone and scribble the address on a piece of paper for Ramon. "Call the bus and let them know to take Sherman there. They won't have an actual bed for him until this afternoon, but he'll just have to make do. He can stay there for three days; that's their limit for emergencies. If he wants a more permanent solution, he needs to be assigned a caseworker there."

Ramon glances at the address. "This isn't even in the city."

"Right." I nod. "That's why it's a last resort. They can get him set up with a social worker, job training, and a more permanent housing solution. It's that or nowhere, Ramon."

He nods. "He's going to hate it, but I think it'll be good for him. The city drags him down."

We've worked on and off with Sherman over the last three years since we've opened the doors to the Moreau Community Center. He's a good guy, and he tries, but he's definitely one of our more needy clients.

"I'll call it in. Thanks, Lia." Ramon takes the address and leaves the office.

"Sorry about that." I smile back at Luther.

"You're busy around here." He tries to give a sympathetic smile, but I can see the tension behind it.

"Unfortunately, there are a lot of people struggling with mental illness and drug abuse

in this city. Actually, everywhere, but I can only handle one area at a time.” The tiny section of the city that we service overloads us most weeks.

We’ll help anyone who walks through our doors, but most of our clients are from this neighborhood.

“I’ve always admired the work you’ve done with the foundation your brother helped you set up.” His eyes warm a little. “Which is partly why I’m here; there’s something in the estate that needs to be addressed right away because it affects the foundation and more directly the center.”

Now he has my attention.

“Oh? I assumed everything would roll to me? I mean, I’m sure Lucas has left a good amount to a bunch of charities he liked to donate to, but the foundation shouldn’t be given away.” My stomach clenches.

Lucas knew how important the center was; he wouldn’t have given it away.

“Oh, good. Sarah said you had the attorney here.” Christian Sendell, the third member of the board of trustees for Moreau Foundation, waltzes into my office.

Christian roomed with Lucas in college, and they’d stayed close friends.

So when we made the move to start Moreau Foundation, and we needed a third member for the board, he’d been an obvious choice.

For the most part, he stays out of the way. A third name on the papers for legal purposes.

“Christian. I didn’t realize you were coming by today?”

“It’s April, Lia. Our quarterly meeting.” He shifts his coat to his other arm and digs into his suit jacket for his phone that’s ringing.

Without a glance at the screen, he declines the call.

“I’d forgotten about it.” I blink a few times. “I mean, without Lucas...” My voice trails off and I take a deep breath.

“Yes, well, like I was saying, you do need a third member. And your brother has named the person to take his seat,” Luther continues, his expression tightening with the addition to our meeting.

“He can do that?” Christian asks, stepping closer to us. “I thought we’d be able to replace him on our own.”

I pull back a little. Replace him?

“I just mean we’d find someone to be the third member,” he says when he notices my expression.

“If I could just get through all of this, it will all make sense.” Luther spreads his hands out over the will still sitting on his lap.

“All right.” Leaving my desk, I shut the door and press my back to it. “Go on, Luther.”

He takes a deep breath. “All right. Thank you.” He turns slightly in his chair so he can see both me and Christian. “Lucas has indeed left nearly everything to you, Amelia. All of his properties, his cars, the bank accounts, and your trust fund, which is still closed until your twenty-fifth birthday.”

I nod. “All right.”

“But.” He pauses, as though he needs a moment to gather his strength.

The doctor did the same thing at the hospital when he was getting ready to tell me Lucas hadn’t pulled through surgery. That they’d done everything they could, but he’d suffered too much internal damage in the car crash for them to repair. He’d passed away in the operating room.

“Luther. You’re scaring me, what else could there be?” I push off the door.

“Technically, the entirety of the estate goes to you, Amelia, but in order to collect the inheritance and keep the foundation alive, which would keep the center open, you have to?—”

“Lia, there’s a delivery out back. They need a signature.” Carey, the front desk reception lead, hits me with the door when she opens it. “Shit. Sorry.”

I blink a few times. His last words were drowned out by Carey’s arrival.

“Hold on, Carey.” I put a hand up and step toward Luther again. “Say that last bit again. What do I have to do?”

He swallows hard, like having said it the first time was hard enough, and he didn’t want to do it again.

“You have to marry. Specifically, you must marry Dmitri Dragunov.”

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Dmitri

“You look tired,” I comment on my cousin’s appearance as Nikolai pours himself a drink from the bar in my office. “Being a father has worn on you.”

“It’s exhausting, but worth it.” A content smile touches his lips just before he pours two fingers of whiskey past them.

I only shake my head a little as I lean into my chair.

“I got a call from Roman this morning.” Nikolai takes the seat across from me. “It seems Yogi Kozlov is trying to make a move into New York.”

“The Kozlovs? They were sent back to Russia with their tails tucked between their legs, I thought. After what you told me what happened with Roman’s wife.”

Nikolai nods. “Yes, at first, they did. But it seems since my father has gone into retirement, Yogi thinks he can fuck around. His brother was the smart one of that family, and he’s gone now.” After what he did with Roman’s wife, he’s lucky there’s any Kozlovs left to be so stupid.

“Ah.” I steeple my hands. “Are they here in the States already, or on their way?”

“They have feelers out right now. I just wanted to make sure you knew about it. They won’t go to Boston, but these assholes think they can try for this city.” A darkness comes over his expression. “After what they tried to do to Roman’s wife, they’ve got some fucking nerve.”

I tense at the word ‘wife.’ It won’t be long now before I have one of those, too.

“They can’t be stupid enough to make a move here in the city. We have a large presence here; they’d be taken out the moment they showed face. Are you sure your information is solid?”

He frowns. “I am. I don’t want them in this city.”

I give a hard nod. “Agreed. If they try to set up here, or anywhere on the East Coast, we’ll burn them to the ground.”

No one touches what’s ours.

“I heard another rumor.” Nikolai smiles. “Arman told me, and I said he has to be wrong. No way this is true.”

He leans forward toward me, with the same playful tone as when we were young boys teasing each other.

“What gossip have you and your brother been whispering about on the playground?” I fist my hands in my lap, already knowing what’s coming.

I’ve only spoken to Arman about the situation I now face. He no doubt blabbed to his brother.

“You’re going to be married?” A chuckle escapes with the question.

“Did he explain everything or just that part?” I ask.

He laughs. “Oh, he told me the rest. You’re inheriting a wife that comes with a lucrative real estate empire. I mean, it makes sense, right. It will give you even more

legitimacy here than the club.”

I drum my fingers on the top of my desk. Velvet Tower isn’t some dance club where early twenty-somethings come to get drunk and find someone to roll around the sheets with for the night. It’s the most elite multi-floor club in New York.

The first floor has a nightclub feel to it, with the most popular DJs from all over the world making appearances. The second floor requires a buy-in of ten thousand dollars to be given a tray of chips for a spot at the tables in our casino. The most elite of the floors is the third floor. VIP suites are rented out with extreme discretion.

We follow every state and city law. All zoning licenses, liquor licenses, and any other fee or license is kept up to date. There are no reasons for the government to put their eyes on this place.

Which makes it a good spot to hold meetings, such as the one I’m having with my cousin to discuss other business.

“It’s a business arrangement,” I explain, not that I have to. Marriage is inevitable, or so I’ve been told countless times. Marry, have children. No point in building the empire if there’s no one to oversee it once I’m gone.

My father passing away last year put a ticking timer on my mother’s patience for me to ‘take care of business.’

“Have I met the girl?” Nikolai asks.

“No.” My jaw tenses. Girl? Amelia is young, yes, but she’s all woman. Forced to grow up much faster than most, she’s done an impressive job at such a young age.

“I remember her brother. Lucas was a good man.” His tone turns somber.

“He was,” I agree. “We made a lot of money together.”

Nikolai’s brow arches. “Money? Haven’t you been working with the man for something like fifteen years?”

“I did. Yeah.” I shrug.

“And Charlotte says I can be cold.” He laughs. “What do you know about his sister?”

“Not much.” That I’m willing to tell him anyway. The last time I saw Amelia other than Lucas’ funeral, she was twenty years old and angry as hell at Lucas for making a boy she wanted to date turn her down.

Lucas had been right to get involved. The man in that situation wasn’t worth the dog shit on the pavement. Just because he came from money didn’t mean he had anything of value to offer.

She’d ignored me in the office entirely while ranting at him to stay out of her personal life. With her cheeks flushed red and her hands had fisted at her sides, I waited—impatiently—for her to stomp her foot at him.

She wanted to, I could tell, but she managed to tamp down the urge.

I remember being disappointed.

“Didn’t you talk with her at the funeral?” Nikolai prods.

“No. She had a lot to deal with and she hadn’t been told about the arrangement yet.” So instead, I watched her from across the service.

She hadn’t cried. At least not while I was watching her. She kept her back straight,

her shoulder rolled back, and her chin thrust forward as though she were enduring a battle instead of mourning her older brother.

“When are you meeting with her? I assume she’s been told by now.” Nikolai rolls his shoulders back, stretching.

“The attorney was supposed to meet with her yesterday, but I haven’t followed up with him yet.”

His eyes widened. “I don’t understand you, cousin. So, are you going to marry this woman or let her off the hook?”

“Let her off the hook? Why would I do that?” I shake my head a little. “I have to get married eventually, and this arrangement comes with business opportunities.”

“You really are a cold bastard, aren’t you?” Nikolai sighs.

Before I can answer my cousin, the door to my office flies open, bouncing off the wall from the force.

Amelia Moreau barges into my office with her hazel eyes ablaze and her cheeks bright red. From frustration or the slight chill outside, I’m not sure.

Nikolai jumps to his feet and spins to face her.

She takes one look at him, narrows her eyes, then moves on to me.

“You’re Dmitri.” It’s an accusation.

“I am.” I nod slowly, still sitting in my chair. Her fluster, the wild eyes, the windblown chestnut hair, and that clenched jaw have me intrigued.

And hard.

My reaction must not be what she was expecting. With my admission, she seems to relax. Her shoulders drop and she takes a slow breath.

“This is my cousin, Nikolai Romanov. We were in the middle of a meeting.”

She swallows, looks back at Nikolai.

“Nikolai, this is Amelia Moreau. My fiancée.” I keep my eyes on her when I make the claim, and she doesn’t disappoint. Irritation floods her expression.

Her nostrils flare and her cheeks redden another shade.

“No. I’m not.” She sweeps her heated gaze to my cousin, immediately softening. “I mean, I am Amelia, but I’m not his fiancée.”

“Dammit. I told her to wait.” Oleg hurries into the office, his breath short. “I was dealing with a delivery when she rushed in, I told her to wait, but...” He swipes a hand through the air in her general direction.

He needs to start working out if chasing a young girl up a flight of steps to my office has him so winded. My office is on the second floor of Velvet Tower with a private entrance into the casino from the back.

“It’s fine.” I wave him off. “She’s to be let up whenever she’s here, Oleg. Let the others know. Amelia Moreau.”

I stand, bringing my eyes to meet hers.

“Well, at least for a little while longer. It will be Dragunov by the end of the month.”

She pinches her lips together and drags a long breath into her lungs.

“Stop saying things like that,” she demands and she has that look about her again. She wants to stomp her foot at me.

And just like before, she denies me the pleasure of watching her temper tantrum.

It’s for the best, I suppose. If she were to behave so poorly, I’d have to do something about it. I won’t have her being a brat when she doesn’t get her way, especially in front of my cousin. Or anyone for that matter.

“Saying things like what? The truth?”

She shakes her head. “It’s not the truth. I’m not marrying you.”

Amelia draws herself up, rolling her shoulders back. Visibly she calms.

“Let me start again.” She looks to Nikolai. “I’m sorry if I interrupted a meeting.”

“Not at all. We were finished.” He grabs his jacket from where he draped it over the back of the chair and looks to me. “Charlotte is filling in at the deli today.”

“So, you need to go watch her work?” I cock an eyebrow. His obsession with his wife—the same as all three of my cousins—makes no sense to me. A wife is a necessity in our world, but to put his entire life on rotation around her has no logical sense to it.

“No. I need to make sure she’s letting her staff do their jobs and isn’t overworking herself.” He folds his jacket over his arm.

On his way to the door, he stands in front of Amelia, blocking my view of her.

“It was nice to meet you, Amelia. I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other.”

She huffs. “Thanks, but that’s really unlikely.”

Nikolai shoots me a look of amusement after he’s passed her and she can’t see him anymore. As he shuts the door, I can already hear him laughing.

“You’ve met with your attorney finally.” I make my way around my desk toward her.

“I did.” She jerks her head in a single nod.

“Good. Then all we need to do is discuss the details.” It’s better to have a simple understanding at the beginning.

“Details?” She tilts her head like I’ve said something she didn’t understand. A beeping sound comes from her purse, and she scrambles to unzip the bag and grab the phone.

I watch as she hits the call button and answers it, turning her back to me as she does.

“I’ve already sent over the appointment history... Then he’ll need to wait until I get back... I don’t care if he has a subpoena, he’ll need to wait until I get back and can review it.”

While she’s arguing with her phone, I move to the front of my desk and lean back against it. Her tone is firm, steady. While I can see the annoyance in her body language, she’s keeping it out of her voice.

“Yes.” She cranes her neck to see me and her frown deepens. “I’ll be done here shortly then I’ll head right over. Thirty minutes, I think.”

After another short conversation regarding legal documents, she hangs up and takes another calming breath. When she turns all the way back to me, she's steady again. Her shoulders are rolled back, her chin thrust forward as before.

"I don't have time for a long discussion. I'm not sure what happened or why my brother lost his mind before he put that stupid stipulation in his will."

"The last time I saw Lucas he was very much his usual self." I fold my arms over my chest.

The inheritance clause in his will was a little surprising. For many reasons, but at the moment none of it matters. I want to see her blush again, and the more annoyed she gets, the redder her cheeks become.

She huffs. "I don't even know why Lucas would know you, at least not closely. Why would he even think that someone like you?—"

"Someone like me?" I cock my head to the side. "What does that mean exactly?" I thicken my accent as I question her. "Is it because I'm Russian? I was born there, but I have lived in this country for many years now."

"What? No." She shakes her head. "I mean a man of your... well, what you do."

"I own this club," I answer, enjoying the way her eyes widen.

Her lips are nearly white as she pinches them together while eyeballing me. She's unsure how to deal with me.

"I understand Lucas had some sort of business with you. I'm not sure what it was exactly, but we can sort it out later. You have to see how insane it is for my brother to arrange a marriage on my behalf."

A ghost of a smile touches her lips as she waits for me to agree with her.

Except I don't. "It happens all the time, arranged marriages."

"It's barbaric." The hint of a smile is gone, and a fierce, hardened expression replaces it.

Before I can answer, her phone rings again. Her annoyance switches from me to the screen, but she accepts the call. Once again, her back is to me and she's muttering into the phone.

I approach her, taking in the soft smell of lilacs as I get closer to her and reach for her cell phone.

"Sarah, I'll be back as soon as I—" Her words cut off as I slip the phone from her grasp. She spins around, mouth dropped open in shock and fire burning even brighter in her eyes.

I put the phone to my ear.

"Sarah, Amelia will return to the office within the hour. She's unavailable until then." I end the call without waiting for an acknowledgment.

"You took my phone." The words are barely above a whisper as she stares at the device cradled in my palm.

"I did."

"Give it back."

"Not until we get a few things straight, moyo dikoye plamya."

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Amelia

He's an absolute caveman!

With his squared jaw covered in a salt and pepper beard, the neatly combed lush hair brushed away from his face, and the dark brown eyes filled with storm clouds, he gives off the impression of a modern businessman.

But he's stuck in the stone age.

"Yes." I nod. "Let's get a few things straight."

I take a step toward him, expecting him to retreat a step, but he doesn't move, and I end up stepping on his shoe.

His left eyebrow peaks, and he looks down where my ballet flat-covered foot presses against his highly polished, probably tailor-made Oxford.

Do they tailor-make shoes? Fashion has never been of any importance to me. Lucas was the one who like the finer things money bought. I couldn't care less about material things.

Losing one's mother and being nothing but a hindrance to one's father did that to a person. Who cared about things when the basic needs weren't being met?

In the end, it's me that retreats a step, but that's fine. Space is a good thing in this situation.

It will keep me from slapping him.

“First of all, we’re not getting married. Second, give me my phone!” I thrust out my hand, palm up, and wiggle my fingers at him.

He stares at it.

The silence stretches.

Then, while I’m still wiggling my fingers, he tucks my phone into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

The jacket fits him too damn well. I can make out his muscular form beneath it.

“Did the attorney not go over what happens if you don’t marry me?” he asks, his accent lightening now that I’m not accidentally insulting him.

“He did.” I drop my hand to my side.

Maybe he can be reasoned with. I just need to calm down. Even if my heart is jackhammering in my chest and the urge to kick this man in the shins is nearly overwhelming.

A calm head will solve this.

“If I don’t marry you, then I lose the full inheritance.”

“Not entirely,” he cuts in. “You’d still be entitled to a small trust, a hundred thousand dollars, if I remember the number right. But more important, for me, I wouldn’t receive the majority shares of the Moreau Investment Firm.”

I roll my eyes. I don't give a god damn what they do with Lucas' investments or his firm. It's the foundation that's important.

"I don't really care about any of that."

"Oh? So you don't want the multimillion-dollar inheritance your brother left you? You don't care about that?"

"Of course I do, but I've managed just fine without all of that this far." My phone rings, drawing my attention to his breast pocket. "I need to get that."

"No."

Just that.

Just one word given hard and full of an authority this man does not have over me.

"No?"

"Yes. No." He nods.

The phone continues to ring. It could be a problem at the center.

My jaw clenches.

The sooner I get this finished, the faster I can get back to work.

"Okay, let me get straight to it then." I scramble to remember the little speech I had prepared for when I arrived.

I had it memorized. I practiced it over and over on the cab ride over, but as soon as I

entered the office and saw him, it all just flew out of reach.

Anger mixed with surprise at how attractive he was messed up my entire plan. But I had my head on straight again and getting back to the plan was best.

“Let’s start over.” I clear my throat to get rid of the little squeak I heard in my voice. “I’m not going to marry you. I understand that means you’ll only inherit a small percentage of his shares in the firm. However, you’ll have enough shares to yield some power. I just need assurance that you’ll keep the funding for the foundation intact.”

I take a short breath. Appealing to how this benefits him will work best.

“You have a lot of wealth. You don’t need Lucas’ investment firm. So, this way, you don’t get stuck with me as a wife, you still earn good money from the firm, and all you have to do is agree that the foundation keeps getting funded.”

He stares at me a moment; I assume to think it over.

“No.”

“No?” This man is going to make me absolutely bonkers if he doesn’t stop with one-word answers.

This is my future at stake. The future of the Moreau Center that an entire community depends on hangs in the balance. There is more than just me involved here.

He draws in a breath, making himself even larger than he already appeared.

I mean really, the man is at least six two, a full foot taller than me. Does he really need to make himself that much bigger? He takes up the whole room just with his

ego.

“I’m not sure you listened to your attorney,” he starts. “According to the bylaws of the firm, the majority of the shareholders needs to remain a member of the Moreau family. Or a spouse of a Moreau family member.”

“Yes, he told me that. But you’ll still get some shares if we don’t marry. So, you’ll still get money.” Why isn’t he listening? It doesn’t make any sense to marry a stranger when he can still have shares and be free of me.

“You’re not understanding. If the majority of the shares aren’t held by a member of the Moreau family, or their spouse, then the firm is no longer obligated to fund the Moreau Foundation.”

He pauses a moment for me to digest the information.

“Without Moreau Investment Firm, the endowment that the foundation is funded by will be the only source of funding. Which means, once that money is gone, the foundation is gone with it.” He explains this like he’s already looked over everything. And he probably has.

I shouldn’t have put the attorney off for so long. Dmitri has had more time to come up with a battle strategy than me.

“The endowment earns interest,” I fight back. “And so long as the investments are well managed, we can continue to survive.”

He tilts his head. “Who has been managing the investments this long?”

My stomach sinks. “Lucas.”

“Your brother has been investing in the foundation for years. Your expenses are more than the yearly interest earnings.”

“Are you saying I don’t run the center well?” I won’t allow that insult to go unchecked.

I may not know the ins and outs of the investments, having been more than happy to let my brother handle that, but I know damn sure that I know how to do my job.

“No. I’m saying the cost of running it is more than interest alone can handle. The money you receive from donors every year helps, but your brother’s yearly contribution has kept your doors open.”

“Then I’ll take over the shares. I’m a member of the Moreau family.”

He waits a moment, like he’s waiting for me to catch up with him.

“What?” I blurt out when he remains silent.

“If you remain unmarried, you lose the inheritance altogether. Which means you can’t take over the shares. So, you lose the company. And without the income from your brother, you’ll be out of money within a year. Your foundation will close, and the center will be out of business.”

He’s a cold-hearted bastard.

Why the hell would Lucas want me tied to this man in any way? He’s completely backed me into a corner. If I had been married by now, my husband would take over the company, leaving me to keep running the foundation while the funding continued to flow. But since I’m not, Lucas picked this man, this arrogant, mountainous man for me. To go against the marriage, I lose everything.

“Why do you want the company? Are you big into real estate investment?” I look around his office. “You seem to be doing fine with your club.”

He lifts a shoulder, like it’s an insignificant question.

“Marrying you gives me controlling shares of the company. Anything less than that is a waste of my time.” An arrogant grin tugs up the left side of his mouth. “Also. It’s time I marry and start having children.”

I stare at him. My jaw slackens.

“And I suppose I’ll do?” The ice in this man’s veins could air-condition the entire building.

“Lucas talked about you many times over the years. You are intelligent, have a good work ethic, and are young enough to give me many children.” He lists these things as though he’s checking off a job requirement form.

“Give you children...” I blink, unsure how to combat his level of crazy. Maybe I should have Ramon talk to him. This man may need a lot of counseling.

“Yes.” He nods, like there’s nothing else to say to that.

“Maybe you’re too old to have kids, ever think of that?” As insults go, this is pretty weak. But it’s not my fault.

He has me all flustered.

Because not only is he saying the most outrageous things, his eyes warm as he says them. The few men I’ve dated in the last few years have been annoyed by my goals. He seems to appreciate them.

Dmitri takes one small step forward, putting him too close to look at unless I tip my head.

“My age isn’t an issue,” he says. “Men can have children much longer in life than women. Unfair, but true.”

“I’m not having children with you.” I want to yell it, but it comes out soft. It’s because he’s crowding me.

How can a woman think with him so damn close?

“I’m not marrying you, Dmitri.”

“Then you will lose the foundation.” His statement is given in such a casual, ‘too bad for you’ sort of way.

My hands ball into fists, and I’ve never wanted to stomp my foot so hard in my life. A full-on tantrum. That’s what I want to have right now.

I want to throw myself on the floor, kicking and screaming about how unfair all of this is.

I’ve lost everything. Lucas has ripped everything from me with no warning. And now this Neanderthal won’t help me get it back.

If I’ve ever earned the right to have a tantrum, this is it.

“Amelia.” His soft voice pulls me from the storm I’m letting myself get pulled into. “You have no real options here.”

“There’s always options.” I swallow hard. When I look up into his eyes, I’m unsure

of myself. I want to hit him, but at the same time I want him to touch me.

A sense of humanity. Something to tether me while the winds of my panic and grief try to tear me away. If I could have a connection, something that's real and tangible, maybe everything wouldn't feel so outside of my control.

There has to be a way out of this; I just haven't found it yet. "The only option you have now is to decide if you want to have a large wedding in a church or if I should have a judge meet us at the house to perform a small ceremony."

I blink.

He's talking about the wedding.

My phone goes off in his pocket again, and I'm whisked away from the cloud of insanity this entire conversation has thrust me into.

"I have to get back to work," I say, pressing my hand against his chest. Damn. Stone has more give than this man.

"You need to make a decision."

"I told you. I'm not marrying you." I swallow hard when he leans into me. His mouth is only a few inches from mine.

How the hell did I get here?

And why can't I make my body move away from him?

"And I told you, you don't have a choice, moyo dikoye plamya ." He slides his hand across my cheek, cupping my face.

His mouth overtakes mine. It's not a gentle or romantic kiss, but one of possession and domination. His fingers curl into my hair at the base of my neck, pulling just enough for a bite of pain to spread through my nerve endings.

Straight to the very center of me.

My fingers twist the lapel of his suit as his tongue brushes against mine. I haven't been kissed so thoroughly since... I can't remember when.

By the time he breaks away, I'm lost in a haze again.

He kissed me.

I told him I refused to marry him, and he kissed the sense right out of me.

"I have meetings tonight, but tomorrow, I will take you to dinner and we will sort out the details." He gently tugs my wrist, signaling that I'm still gripping his suit jacket.

My face heats and I let him go, stumbling back a large step. He reaches out, grabbing my arm and helping steady me before I embarrass myself even more by falling on my ass.

I clear my throat again and look away from him, waiting for the warm tingle in my lips to subside so I can talk properly.

"I told you, Dmitri. I will not marry you and I meant it." I hold out my hand for my phone. "I have to go."

Keeping his stoic eyes on me, he pulls out my phone and lays it in my palm.

"I'll pick you up at seven tomorrow night." He walks to the door and opens it. "Do

not make me wait. I've been patient today, but I am not a patient man."

Patient?

He doesn't even know the meaning!

"I'm busy tomorrow night," I lie. I haven't had the need for a social calendar since college. And even then it was full of study groups. My days are filled with business stuff, but come nightfall, I'm as free as a bird.

"Seven o'clock," he says, putting his arm out to stop me when I start to walk through the door.

I don't give him the satisfaction of looking up at him. I can be just as stoic and cold as he can.

He leans down to my ear, the warmth of his breath sending a shiver down my spine.

This man should not be having so much effect on my body. It's annoying.

"Unless you'd like to learn your first lesson of what disobeying your husband will look like."

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Amelia

“I was a little surprised by your call.” Christian slides a glass of white wine to me over the kitchen island.

“Why? I’ve called you before.” I move up to my toes and climb onto the kitchen barstool.

“Yeah, but you weren’t engaged to Dmitri Dragunov then.” He tries for levity, but falls way short.

“I’m not now, either,” I correct him, glancing at the time illuminated on the oven clock just behind Christian.

Five minutes to seven. Dmitri is probably pulling up to my building right now. In a few minutes, he will discover I didn’t sit around and wait for him like some dutiful lapdog.

Christian leans back against the countertop, cradling his glass in his right hand. “You understand what that would mean. Not marrying him.”

“That’s why I’m here.” I wrap my fingers around the stem of the wineglass. “The Moreau Foundation depends on annual contributions from Lucas’ firm. If I can find a way to fund the foundation without that contribution, maybe I can convince Dmitri to call off this craziness. He can have everything else; I just want the foundation to be safe.”

Christian eyes me for a long moment in silence, then puts his glass down on the counter.

“You think he’ll do that? He’ll just let you walk?”

“Why wouldn’t he? If he doesn’t marry me, he still gets shares in the company.” From a business standpoint, it’s a no-brainer. All that nonsense about it being time to settle down was just that, nonsense.

“What do you need from me?” Christian asks.

“Lucas handled the foundation’s investments. I need to see them, and we need to come up with a plan to keep it managed. I know you hate the financial stuff.” Christian is more of the marketing type. He has brilliant ideas, but bringing them to life has never been his strongest attribute.

Christian sighs.

“I can call a friend of mine; he works at a brokerage firm. We can have him look over what Lucas has done so far and see if he will agree to manage it.”

“You don’t look confident that he’d say yes.” I finish the last bit of wine.

He lifts a shoulder. “Going up against Dmitri Dragunov? It’s not really something many are going to be willing to do.”

“I know he’s a little dirty, but—” I’m cut off by Christian’s burst of laughter.

“A little dirty? Lia, he’s not just a little dirty, the man is the dirt.”

Confused, I stay silent. “He’s the dirt?”

He shakes his head. “I mean, he’s Russian mafia. Aside from his own dealings, his family is the Romanovs.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t connected the two when I met Nikolai this afternoon. The Romanovs are partly the reason centers like mine exist.

New drugs hit the streets almost daily, and a large portion of them are sold by the Romanov family. Mostly party drugs that they would argue aren’t addictive, except to someone who’s running away from reality. It’s the escape they become dependent on. And using the shit the Romanovs pump into the streets works just as well as harder drugs like cocaine and heroin.

“Why would Lucas want me to marry him then?” I need to understand. “You’re his best friend, Christian; he had to have told you something. Why would he want me to marry into the Russian mafia?”

Christian slides over when I bring my empty glass to refill it. A heavy scent of spiced liquor follows him.

“You know, there might be another way out of this.” Christian turns, pressing his hip into the counter’s edge and watching me pour a healthy glass of wine.

“Like what? Pay him off? The man’s a billionaire by all accounts.”

Christian glides a fingertip along my cheek, pushing a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

A little jolt of something, not heat or excitement, something uncomfortable, runs through me. When I look back up at him, his eyes are softer.

“Like you could marry me.”

“Marry you?” I try not to laugh because he seems to be serious.

“Yeah.” He scoots closer to me, taking my glass away and putting it on the counter.

“The attorney said if you weren’t married then you’d have to marry Dmitri to get the inheritance. You marry me, that takes care of the obligation.”

“Christian, I’m not marrying anyone.”

“Lia. You’ve crushed on me for years.” An arrogant smile pulls on his lips. If I had been drinking, all of the wine would have been spit on him.

“Did Lucas tell you that? That was years ago, Christian. I was in middle school.” I smile at the memory of an infatuation from long ago. A lifetime ago.

“Okay, but still.” He lifts a shoulder. “If you marry me, you’ve fulfilled the obligation, and we can contest the will.”

My eyes narrow a fraction. “And then we’d get everything.”

“Right.” He nods with another grin, and I wonder if this is what he looks like when he’s at the clubs. Lucas was always complaining about how much time Christian spent at dance clubs picking up what he called the ‘flavor of the week.’

“Contesting the will can take a long time, and I don’t need to be married to do it.” I sigh. “No judge in his right mind would force me to marry someone, right? I mean, that’s the stuff of third world countries.”

My phone dances on the kitchen island countertop next to my purse. I check the time again, five after.

He’s realized I’m not home.

Christian's hand wraps around mine, squeezing gently.

"We'd make a good couple, Lia," he says softly. I look down at where our hands are entwined. Did every male in the city lose his mind when Lucas died?

"You want his company." I try to pull free, but Christian tightens his hold.

"I want what's best for you." He leans closer and I smell it. Bourbon. Another glance behind him and I see the bottle open on the counter with the empty Glencairn glass next to it.

The seal strip lays beside the newly opened bottle. He's nearly a quarter way through it already.

"No, you want what's best for you." I yank my hand away and heave a sigh. As I turn, he snags my arm and pulls me back.

"Christian. Stop it." I shove against his chest.

"He didn't leave me a damn thing. Not a single penny or share in his stupid company. You know, I was the one who had the idea of him starting that firm." His lips twist downward.

"Nothing he did with his estate makes any sense." I push harder, but he's not letting me go.

"Marry me, we'll contest the will, and you can have the foundation. I'll keep funding it the way he was, then we both get what we want."

"And for your trouble, you'll take his company? How much have you had to drink tonight?"

“It could be good between us.” He pulls me closer, holding me by both arms. I twist my head to the side as he leans into me.

How had I not noticed how heavy his eyelids are this evening? Because I’d been so caught up in my own problems, I wasn’t paying any attention to him.

“No, Christian. It won’t be.” Damn, even in his state, he’s strong. I can’t get loose from his grip.

“How could he not leave me anything?” Christian’s eyes darken, his grip gets tighter.

“I don’t know.” Struggling isn’t getting me anywhere. “Christian, you’re hurting me. Stop. Let me go.”

His eyes go wide, like he’s just waking up and he looks down at where his hands are squeezing my upper arms.

“Shit.” He lets me go so quickly, I stumble back a step. “I’m so sorry, Lia.” He rakes a hand through his soft brown hair, leaving several strands standing on end.

The doorbell chimes.

“It’s okay.” I rub my hands over the tender spots. “You’ve been drinking…”

“It’s just.” He pauses. “How could he do this to me? To you?”

The doorbell rings again.

“Should you get that?”

“What? Oh. One second.” He brushes past me and turns down the hall to the front

door.

“Amelia.” A dark voice sends a jolt through me a moment later.

No. He couldn’t have found me here. It’s only ten minutes after seven; he couldn’t have gotten here from my apartment in only ten minutes.

“Lia?” Christian’s voice is laced with concern, but I’m not sure if it’s for me or him.

After a quick deep breath, I make my way to the foyer.

Dmitri Dragunov stands in the front hall, towering over Christian with a stormy glare.

“Dmitri.” I stop in my tracks. “What are you doing here?”

He drags his eyes to mine. “I told you I was picking you up for dinner.”

“Yeah. But... this isn’t my apartment.” I point out the obvious.

“Yes. That’s something we will discuss later.” His glare turns back on Christian.
“When we’re home.”

Home?

Infuriation burns in my stomach. The utter arrogance of this man is almost impressive.

“How did you find me?”

“Your arms,” he states at the same time as I ask my question. There are red handprints on my arms from Christian’s grip. They’re fading, but they are obviously

hand prints.

“Oh.” I rub my hands over the marks, like I can erase them. “My skin is really sensitive.”

Christian’s cheeks drain of all color. Even the red in his eyes fades.

Dmitri’s hand wraps around Christian’s throat as he throws him against the wall, lifting him until his toes barely touch the floor. Christian grabs at Dmitri’s hand, and already he’s gasping for air.

“Dmitri. Stop it.” I try to get between them, but Dmitri closes the gap to keep me away. “I’m fine. Nothing happened. Stop!”

I grab at his arm and yank, but I’d have better luck pulling a semi across the interstate.

“Please. Stop it, you’re hurting him.” I yell, glancing at the panic in Christian’s eyes. If Dmitri wanted him dead, it would only take a small increase in his grip. A flick of his wrist, and Christian would be lifeless at my feet.

“Please.” I soften my tone. Dmitri swings his eyes to mine, his jaw sets. Reluctantly, he lets go and Christian stumbles forward, grabbing at his throat and sucking in as much air as he can.

“You touched her.” Dmitri’s hands flex at his sides and I’m not sure how long I can keep him from getting his hands on Christian again. “You put your hands on my wife?”

“Well.” I huff a laugh. “I’m not your wife.”

He ignores me.

“I’ve removed men’s hands for lesser insults.”

Okay, that statement gives me pause.

“I didn’t mean to grab her. We were talking and... it wasn’t on purpose.” Christian stumbles over his words, most of them slurred from the endorphins mixing with the bourbon.

“Dmitri. I’m fine. It wasn’t anything. Let’s just go.” I twist my head to see Christian. “Can you get my coat and purse from the kitchen?”

“Sure.” He squeezes past me and hurries out of the foyer, still rubbing his throat.

Unfortunately, this leaves Dmitri and me alone. Making me the only target for his heated gaze. And when it lands on me, ice runs down my back.

“Dmitri.”

“Never take a side against me, Amelia,” he says softly, then steps up to me. “Are you alright?” He gently cups his hands over my arms, over Christian’s marks.

“I’m fine, Dmitri. Really, it wasn’t anything. Christian was Lucas’ best friend, my friend for a long time. He’s having trouble with Lucas’ death.”

Dmitri stares at me for a long moment. “It’s the only reason he’s still breathing. But if he ever puts so much as a fingertip on you again, I will have more than his hands removed.”

I have no doubt he means exactly what he says.

Christian brings my coat and purse. “I put your phone in your purse.” He hands it to me.

“Thank you.” I smile. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Get some sleep.”

He swallows and nods, giving Dmitri only a passing glance.

“Yeah. Thanks.” He holds the door while Dmitri pulls the jacket from my grasp.

“It’s chilly outside.” He holds the coat open for me. I want to argue, to tell him I’m perfectly capable of putting on my own jacket, but Christian looks like he’d like us out of his apartment as quickly as possible.

After I give in and slide my arms into the sleeves, he spins me around and works the buttons closed.

“I can do that,” I grind out softly.

“I didn’t say you couldn’t.” He finishes the last button at the top. “Let’s go.”

Without another word to Christian, Dmitri laces our hands together and tugs me from the apartment and into the hall. As soon as we’re clear of the door, it shuts, and I can hear the distinct sounds of the bolt being slid in place.

“My car is here,” I say when we get into the elevator. “If you’ll tell me where we’re going, I can meet you there.”

He hits the button for the lobby then stands beside me, his hands clasped in front of him.

“You’ll drive with me. I’ll have your car brought later.”

“Fine.” I watch the lights flicker as we slide down the fifteen floors to the lobby. Arguing with him doesn’t feel like the right move right now. There’s a lot of aggressive energy rolling off of him.

“You disobeyed me, Amelia,” he says, cutting through the silence.

I could tell him he’s wrong. That I’m a grown woman and I don’t have to do anything he tells me to do, but he picks up my hand and laces his fingers through mine again as the doors sweep open.

He pulls me through the lobby like some errant child being dragged out of a store for having a fit. There’s an older couple walking into the building. The woman gets one look at Dmitri and gives me a pitying glance.

“You’re not taking me to dinner anymore, are you?” I ask as he brings me to his car. No, not a car. A Bentley Bentayga EWB. It stands out against the other cars on the street with its sleek lines and smooth black finish. The diamond-patterned front grille practically shines with the headlights on. Everything about this screams rich and powerful. Perfect for a man like Dmitri.

He yanks the passenger door open and gestures for me to get inside.

“I’m not going with you until you tell me where we’re going.”

His dark eyebrow arches higher, like he can’t believe me.

I can’t believe me either. A Russian mobster has just made claim to me, threatened to cut off a man’s hands for touching me, and now I’m about to climb into his car.

A car that costs more than what I make in a year.

He stares at me, like he can outwait me. But I get the feeling that the longer I take to get in the car, the worse the evening is going to go.

“Are you taking me to dinner?” I ask, stubbornly holding my ground.

“No.”

A single word again.

“Are you taking me to my apartment?”

“No.”

My stomach flutters.

“Where are you taking me then?”

He leans into me, brushing his lips across the shell of my ear. “I’m taking you home, moyo dikoye plamya .”

“What does that mean? What you keep calling me?” My nervousness makes me interrupt him. He’s called me that a few times, but he’s always saying outrageous things that distract me from asking.

“ Moyo dikoye plamya ? It means my wildfire. Now get in the car, so we can get home. Then you can have your first lesson of being my wife.” He nips my earlobe, sending a shockwave of arousal through me.

I swallow past the moan fighting to get out. “What—what lesson is that?” The words squeak out.

He stands tall, leveling his darkness on me. “Obedience.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Dmitri

He had his fucking hands on her. The markings on her arms were bright pink. Had I stopped him from hurting her more with my arrival?

I grip the steering wheel tighter, wishing I had the prick's throat there again.

"Dmitri." Amelia says my name with a sweetness I'm sure she's acquired since realizing I'm not taking her to her apartment.

"Amelia." I clench my teeth. "Why did he grab you like that? What was his intention?"

"Christian?" She feigns confusion. "It was nothing. He was upset about Lucas?—"

"Lying to me will only make things worse. Tell me the truth." As I pull up to a red light, I swing my gaze at her. She's worrying her bottom lip.

"Fine. He had a harebrained idea about us getting married and contesting the will. I said no, and well, like I said, he was upset. He didn't mean me any harm."

I should have killed him.

"He wanted you to marry him." It's not a question. "You're engaged to me."

She sighs.

“I can’t keep going over this. I’m not marrying anyone.” She leans her head against her window. “It’s like talking to a brick wall. You just refuse to hear me.”

Before I can correct her, my phone rings with Boris’ number popping up on the screen. I take the call.

“I’m not alone,” I say as the call goes live through the car’s Bluetooth function. In Russian, I add, “She’s with me.”

Amelia pulls her own phone out and scrolls through it while Boris tells me about a problem at Velvet Tower.

“You’re busy, Dmitri. You can drop me here. I’ll catch a cab back to Christian’s and get my car,” Amelia offers with a fake sweetness meant to persuade me.

“You’ll come with me, and we’ll have our discussion after.” I pause a beat. “And you’re never going back to Christian Sendell’s home again. I don’t want you alone with him.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. He’s been a good friend for a long time.”

“He’s not now.”

“You can’t tell me who to be friends with.” She’s going to be disappointed when she realizes there’s very little in this world I can’t do. Keeping her away from that fucking prick is definitely one of the things I can and will do.

He had his hands on her. He tried to get her to marry him? I should have pulled his tongue out. Gutted him and left him to bleed out in his own fucking hallway.

“That’s just it, Dmitri. We don’t need to have any discussion. I’ve decided I’m going

to contest the will. No judge is going to force me into a marriage.”

“You’re wrong about that.” I come to a stop at another red light. “Not only will a judge not rule in your favor, but he would probably perform the wedding ceremony right there for me.”

Her eyes narrow on me.

“How did my brother ever get involved with you in the first place?”

I stare at her a moment, taking in the innocent beauty. She grew the Moreau Foundation from the ground up while in college. In the last two years since graduating, she’s made the center a pivotal part of the community. She has no doubt seen some horrible things dealing with the people she helps.

But none of it compares to the world I grew up in. She may think she understands the world, but in truth, she’s an innocent babe.

“Your father.” I hit the gas, propelling us through the intersection.

“My dad?”

“I did business with him once, and I met your brother through that.”

“Dad was an Alderman. Is that how? Dad was corrupt?” She twists in her seat to ask her question.

I raise a brow. “All politicians are corrupt.”

“And Lucas?” She pauses. “You know, never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

“Your brother was a good man, Amelia. He was not like your father,” I say, but don’t push her further. There are some things she doesn’t need to know. Lucas went to great lengths to protect her. I won’t undo that now.

“You don’t think my father was a good man?” she asks, but I can hear the sarcasm lacing the words together. “He always seemed like a loving, sweet man.”

I turn to her, feeling the anger vibrating from her.

“He wasn’t a good father.”

She looks out her window. “No. He wasn’t. Or a good husband either.”

The traffic breaks and the rest of the ride is spent in silence. We make it to the club in short order.

She’s not wrong about her father. The only love that man had in him was for wealth and power. When Lucas told him he wouldn’t be going into politics, his father went off the rails with disappointment.

But Lucas wanted to be nothing like him. And while in some ways, he shared traits with the old man, he succeeded in being a better parent to Amelia than their father ever could have been.

“I won’t be long, but you’ll stay in my office,” I say as Amelia steps out of the elevator.

“Maybe I don’t want to wait in your office,” she argues as we reach my office.

“I didn’t ask what you wanted.” I open the door for her, but stop her before she walks through. “You’ve already disobeyed me once this evening; it would be a mistake to

do it again.”

She eyes me with annoyance, but I don’t miss the challenge lurking there. This woman wants to run wild, but there’s something there telling me she wants to be reined in as well.

“You’re an arrogant asshole, Dmitri Dragunov,” she responds flatly. She watches me to gauge my reaction to her little verbal assault.

“I’ve been called much worse.” I lean closer to her, where I can inhale the sweetness of the perfume she wears. “But if you were wise, you’d understand the amount of trouble you’re in and would stop adding to it.”

“I’m twenty-four years old. I don’t get into trouble, Dmitri.” She raises her chin in defiance. And the blaze burns brighter in her eyes.

“Oh, but you do, moyo dikoye plamya . And I promise you won’t like it if you aren’t in my office when I get back.”

“I already don’t like it and you’re standing right in front of me.”

“Dmitri!” Boris calls to me from down the hall. I don’t have time for spoiled brats who refuse to pay attention to reality.

“Your henchmen are calling.” She folds her arms over her chest and smiles. I watch her lips, the gentle curve upward, the fullness of them and I want to kiss her again.

Not just a kiss. Possession. I want her to feel my ownership, to know there’s no getting away from me now.

She’s mine.

“Do not test me any further tonight.” I touch the tip of her nose and step out of the room. Her growl of frustration makes me smile as I head down the hall to deal with more serious matters.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Amelia

“Don’t test me,” I mutter to myself as I throw my coat over the back of a dark brown leather armchair.

Who the hell does this man think he is? Lucas was bossy, but he had every right to be. He was my brother. He’d been in charge of me since my father passed away.

Lucas was a pain in my ass sometimes with his overprotectiveness, but this man takes it to the next level. Telling me I have to stay in his office like some sweet obedient puppy while he goes off and does mafia stuff?

I stop short, standing at the window overlooking the city. We’re only on the second floor so the view isn’t spectacular, but I can feel the energy through the glass. This is New York City. I can do and be anything I want.

And right now, I want to go downstairs and get a drink.

Leaving my coat behind, I throw my cross-body purse over my head and yank the door open. After a quick peek down the hall to be sure no one is coming, I hurry in the other direction to the stairs I used yesterday.

The heavy thump of the music vibrates the floor as I get closer to the club. Nightclubs have never been my thing. In college, I’d be the first to end the night while the rest of my roommates stayed out until dawn.

The same man that chased me up the stairs yesterday stands by the door leading into

the club. For a second, I think he blanches. Did Dmitri get mad at him for letting me get past him?

“Hi again.” I offer a wide grin.

“Does Dmitri know you’re down here?” He glances up the stairs.

I laugh. “Would I be down here if he didn’t?” Hopefully the background noise of the music seeping through the door drowns out the little crack in my voice. Lying has never suited me.

He looks conflicted.

“He had to meet with some people. You can go up there and check, but it looked urgent.” There, let him decide if it’s worth a chewing out for questioning his boss.

After another second of thought, he grasps the door handle. “All right, but I’m letting the security team know you’re in there.”

I lift a shoulder. “Of course.”

Multicolored lights and music assault me as soon as I enter the club. There’s a DJ stand at the front of the room, lifted up on a stage with more lights aimed down at the crowd, swirling over the dancing figures.

It takes a minute for my senses to get accustomed to the bombardment, and I make my way to the nearest bar. As soon as I reach it, a bartender appears as if by magic in front of me. He jerks his thumb at the men standing in front of me to get them out of the way.

“What are you drinking tonight, Mrs. Dragunov?” He leans over the bar and is loud

enough that I can hear that he's just called me Mrs.

I grit my teeth. The man keeps calling me his wife and I haven't even agreed to marry him.

The arrogance is astounding.

"Can you make an Amaretto sour?" I'm not much of a drinker, but I like the sweetness of that drink.

He makes a face like it's one of the odder requests he's gotten tonight.

"I'll get it done. One sec." He disappears, looking at the bottom shelves for something.

"Hey, I know you." A warm hand rests on my arm.

Sliding my arm from beneath his hand, I turn toward the man. I've never seen him before in my life. He has sandy blond hair with swampy green eyes. He's grinning down at me, showing off the deep dimple that pops up on the left side of his cheek.

"I'm sorry?" I shout up at him. He's good looking in the pretty sort of way. Maybe if he was older, or had a beard like Dmitri, he would emanate the same masculine energy Dmitri does.

Fuck.

I shake my head. Where the hell did those thoughts come from? I'm not going to compare men to Dmitri. No.

No. Absolutely not.

“Yeah. I think we went to school together.” Pretty boy slides a little closer to me.

“NYU?” I play along with him. His smile gets even wider, like a boy who’s just been let into the candy store after hours.

“Yeah!”

“Sorry. I went to Hunter College.”

His smile drops, but he recovers quickly. “Oh, my sister went there. Maybe I saw you at one of the parties.”

I shake my head. At least he’s quick on his feet.

“I doubt it.”

“Well, anyway. I’m Brad.” He leans his elbow on the bar and gives what I’m sure he thinks is his best smoldering look.

“Nice to meet you, but I’m not really looking for company.”

“Here you go!” The bartender reappears, sliding an Amaretto sour on a small napkin my way. “Everything good here?” He eyes Brad.

I turn toward my drink. “Everything’s fine. Thanks.” I pick up my drink and take a sip through the tiny bar straw. It’s perfect.

“Hey, maybe we got off on the wrong foot.” Brad moves even closer to me.

I notice now that he’s unbuttoned the top three buttons, trying to show off his chest, but other than a small patch of hair, there’s not much to see. His sleeves are rolled to

his elbows and there's a thick gold necklace dangling around his neck.

I'm not really sure which cliché he was going for when he got dressed tonight.

"No. We're good." I try to brush him off as I turn to find a corner to enjoy my drink in, but he's not very good at taking signals.

"What's your name, at least give me that," he shouts into my ear from behind me. It's loud enough to hurt, so I cover my ear and spin around to face him. My drink spills over a little, and droplets of it land on his silver button-down.

He spreads his arms out, like I've just struck him instead of spilled a few drops of orange juice on him. "What the fuck, man?"

Pretty boy pulls at his shirt, trying to rub away the little dark spot where some of the juice landed. When it doesn't go away, because, well, because you can't wipe off liquid, his cheesy smile fades. His jaw clenches and that little dimple he had before disappears.

"I'm sorry. You yelled in my ear. It startled me." I try to take a step back, but he grabs hold of my arm.

"Where are you going? We're just getting started."

The music changes over and the crowd erupts with more energy. Someone bumps into him from behind and he uses the opportunity to lean into me. My drink hits his chest and more spills.

"Fuck!" he yells, again in my ear.

I try to pull away from him. "I'll get you some napkins." Not that it will do any good.

“No. You stay here.” He grabs me again. “You ruined my shirt, the least you can do is dance with me.”

Brad takes the glass from me and downs what’s left of the drink.

“Let’s go.” He jerks his head toward the exit near the back of the club.

“No.” I spin, ready to rush back to the bar, but he snags my wrist and yanks me back to him.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Spit hits my cheek as he yells in my ear again. His chest is pressed to my back, and he wraps his arm around my waist.

I pull my arm forward, aiming my elbow for his stomach, but in the next breath I’m free of his grasp. Stumbling forward, I catch myself before I fall to the floor.

Turning around, I find Dmitri holding pretty boy by his throat. Two men stand behind Brad and the crowd has opened up around us, giving Dmitri more room.

“I’m sorry, man,” Brad squeezes out.

Dmitri grabs hold of Brad’s right hand, the one that’s been grabbing me for the past ten minutes.

“You will be. I promise.” Dmitri wraps his own hand around Brad’s fist and squeezes until Brad screams. Tears run down his cheeks and he’s gasping for breath.

Dmitri tosses Brad at his two security guys. “Take him.”

“Dmitri.” I pull at his arm to get his attention. “Don’t. You can’t kill him,” I shout over the music at him.

Heated, angry eyes meet mine when he looks down at me. His gaze moves to where my hand is clenching his suit jacket. The dark energy seeps through my fingers and I release him.

The security guards drag Brad away, his limp and broken hand cradled in his other hand.

Dmitri leans into me, his warm breath brushing over my cheek as he presses his mouth to my ear.

“This is the second time tonight I’ve had to deal with a man who’s had his hands on you because you did not stay where I told you to.” Even with the music thumping, the crowd screaming around us, I hear every word. And he’s not even yelling.

“I just wanted a drink.” It’s such a flimsy thing to say given how fiercely he’s staring at me.

“It’s time you learned what happens to naughty girls who don’t know how to listen.”

My insides heat. I must have heard him wrong. Maybe the music is getting in the way more than I think. Without another word, he picks up my hand, laces his fingers through mine, and tugs me along with him through the crowd.

It’s as if everyone knows who he is and parts for him as he drags me through the dancers like some errant little girl who’s been caught out after curfew. A few pitying glances are thrown my way by passing waitresses.

Do they know what’s happening?

Because I sure as hell don’t.

Boris frowns when we pass him at the exit. I try to twist around to say something to him, but Dmitri just tugs me harder when I slow us down.

As though his mere presence controls the elevator, the doors slide open as we approach and he pulls me inside.

“Dmitri.”

“Quiet now, Amelia.” He squeezes my hand a little. “No talking yet.”

He continues to stare at the elevator doors as we are lifted up to the next floor. I’m not really sure what to make of his sudden silence.

Anger still radiates from him, so I know it’s not because he’s come to his senses that I’m a full-grown woman who can go down to the bar if she wants.

I was perfectly safe. Even if he hadn’t shown up, I’m sure one of his security guards would have caught up to me and handled Brad. If he’d been a few minutes later, I could have handled Brad myself.

Dmitri’s fingers rub against mine. It has an oddly calming effect. Not ten minutes ago, this hand broke bones, but now it’s gentle—even if a bit firm.

I take a chance and look up at him. His jaw is still tense, his eyes firmly set in front of him. When he swallows, there’s a ripple in his throat. The man has the thickest neck I’ve ever seen, and there’s a black tattoo sneaking up from his shirt collar.

When the elevator dings our arrival, he leads me into the hall. There’s another man standing in front of his office looking like he wants to talk to Dmitri.

“Not now.” He waves the man away and walks us into the office, kicking the door

shut behind us.

“If you need to talk to him...” My words fade with a simple squeeze of his hand. No talking, right.

Dmitri walks me to the far end of the office and positions me ahead of him, shoving me lightly into the corner.

As soon as he lets my hand go, I turn, but he’s right there and I walk straight into his chest. His hands grasp my shoulders, and he simply turns me back around.

“You stand here.” He keeps a hand on my shoulder like an anchor.

I’m standing in the corner.

He’s put me in the corner like some naughty little girl.

Heat rushes up my back. Isn’t that what he called me downstairs?

“Dmitri. What are you doing?” I try to laugh it off, like this is just some silly game he’s playing with me.

“Starting your punishment.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Amelia

He can't be serious.

I try again to twist around to face him, but his anvil of a hand keeps me stuck facing the damn corner.

“You stand here until I tell you to come out. Do you understand?”

“No! Of course I don't understand. This is insane. I'm twenty-four fucking years old, not some child you can reprimand with corner time.” Unfortunately, I lose some credibility by stomping my foot.

He places a hand on my other shoulder and leans into me. His massive chest presses against my back as his mouth hovers over the shell of my ear. Tingles run through me at the sensation of his breath washing over my skin.

I shouldn't be reacting to him to like this.

Fighting him, screeching, and trying to claw out his eyes. That's how I should be reacting to his insane dominance.

“You've made me very angry tonight. Standing in the corner is only a moment of your punishment, so we can talk. So I can calm myself.”

His voice is rock steady. If this is him not calm, I'm a little scared of what it looks like when he's really lost it.

“I went downstairs for a drink.”

“There is a full bar in this office. You could have poured yourself a glass of wine. You didn’t go downstairs for a drink; you went down there to prove a point.”

His fingers squeeze my shoulders. He’s not wrong, but that doesn’t give him the right to put me in a corner.

I can’t even believe this is happening.

I run an important foundation that helps people in horrible situations. Drug addicts, alcoholics, the homeless, anyone who needs help. And here I am, being anchored in the corner by a Russian mob boss who refuses to understand he has no power over me.

“You wanted to show me that you’ll do whatever you want. That my words have no meaning.” He brushes hair away from my ear. “And now I’m going to show you what happens when you disobey.”

That word, disobey, sends a ricochet of electricity through me. With a surge of energy, I shove away from the wall. Taking him by surprise, I think, because he stumbles back a step before he grabs onto my arm.

I barely get one step away before I’m snatched up.

“Still such a bad girl,” he growls, dragging me to his desk.

“What are you doing? Dmitri, let me go!” I yank and twist, but he’s more determined than ever.

Steel has more give than his grip right now.

The edge of the desk presses into me as his hand sinks into my hair, fisting at my scalp. Tears spring to my eyes with the sting. Struggling only makes it worse, so I stop.

“Twice tonight I’ve had to search you out. And twice tonight I find you with another man’s hands on you.” His accent thickens with his irritation.

I could remind him that Christian didn’t have his hands on me when Dmitri arrived, but he tightens his fingers and my scalp burns anew, so I decide against it.

“You’re hurting me, Dmitri.” I try to push his hand out of my hair, but he only yanks me back to him.

“I haven’t begun to hurt you, Amelia.” His free hand reaches around my waist.

Nimble fingers undo the button on my black slacks. Before I can react and shove his hand away, he’s sliding his fingers into my pants.

“Dmitri.” It’s meant to be a warning, but his fingertips glide beneath the elastic of my panties and keep wandering further.

“A soft patch of curls,” he whispers just before his fingers dip lower, pressing against my clit.

An unexpected wave of pleasure shoots through me. I moan.

Someone save me, I actually moan at the sensation this brute of a man is giving me.

“Your pussy is already wet for me.” He nips my earlobe. “All your complaining and defiance has been a ruse, I think.”

“No, Dmitri. No.” I push my hand against his arm. “Please.”

“Don’t worry. Your pussy isn’t the aim of my punishment. At least not tonight.” He swirls his finger around my clit, putting pressure exactly where it does the most damage to my concentration.

I try to keep my moan contained by biting my lip, but still the sound escapes. His chest rumbles with a chuckle.

“How long since you’ve been touched here?” he questions, then his hand stops. “Don’t answer that. If I have to deal with any other men tonight, I won’t stop at breaking his fingers.”

My body softens at his words, as though he’s just said something insanely romantic. He’s threatened to kill my ex-boyfriends because they touched me, and my soul warms as though he’s brought me flowers.

Something is wrong with me.

His touch is gone in the next moment, and he shoves my pants and panties down over my hips. No amount of wiggling saves me from the humiliation of him exposing my bare ass.

“Bend over the desk. It’s time for your punishment.”

“No.” I won’t do it. I will not cooperate with this insanity.

A heavy sigh blows through my hair.

“Very well. The hard way it is,” he says, just before using his hold on my hair to shove me down over the desk until my cheek is pressed against the highly polished

wood.

He pushes me up more until my toes barely touch the floor and the edge of the desk digs into my pelvic bones.

“Dmitri, don’t! Just don’t!” I swing my arm back, but he easily catches it and pins it to my back.

He’s had to let go of my hair to manage it, but the pain in my scalp has only been transferred to the strain on my shoulder.

“I warned you, but you wanted to push. Now we’re here.” He moves to my left side, his grip on my hand pressing down into my back.

“I will never forgive you!” I shout, but it’s no deterrent for a man like him.

A sharp thwack hits my ears a millisecond before the pain of his hand spanking my ass cheek registers.

“Ow!” I increase my fight, but there’s no use. I kick my feet, trying to touch the floor enough to aid in my struggle.

Another smack and then another. He spans my left cheek then the right, keeping to this pattern for several more swats.

“Stop it! Stop!” I scream. “Let me up!”

Another heavy sigh.

“No, not until you’ve learned your lesson. And it seems we’re far from there.” He goes right back to spanking me, except now there’s no pattern. He spans randomly,

and harder.

No amount of wiggling will get me out of this, and the pain is growing with each smack. My ass burns, white-hot pain with each new smack.

I kick my legs out, but now from the ache.

“Please!” I cry out when he moves his focus lower, now swatting my upper thighs. “It hurts!”

“Yes.” He’s back to one-word answers.

“Stop.”

“No.” He readjusts his grip on my hand, shifting his position beside me. Through his slacks, his hard cock presses against my hip and I freeze.

“Dmitri, please.” I gasp for air. “I’ll be good. I promise!”

“What does that mean? How will you be good? Will you finally admit we’re getting married?” His hand rests on my ass and the contact makes my skin hotter.

I swallow hard. I won’t lie.

“No. Not that, but I won’t... Dmitri!”

He starts up again, spanking me hard, in rapid succession, covering every inch of my ass and thighs.

I’m left breathless again, tears streaming down my face when he stops.

“We are getting married, Amelia. Tomorrow. And until you vow to stop fighting it, you’ll be bent over my desk. But I wouldn’t take too much longer. Your ass is getting very red.” He pats my right cheek lightly.

If only embarrassment could kill. I’d be out of this mess already.

“We need to talk about this. Like logical adults,” I say through heavy breaths.

I can’t get enough air like this, and when I try to crane my neck to see him over my shoulder, I can’t find him.

“You’ll also promise to stay where I put you. No more making me search for you.” He rubs his hand over my ass in small circles, and it’s almost soothing.

“I can’t just do whatever you say.” I find the error in my statement only a second later when his hand rains down on my ass again.

Alternating between my cheeks and my upper thighs, he reignites the fire across my battered flesh. He keeps it up for what feels like an eternity.

“You will do as I say. Because when I give an order, it’s for your safety. My club has tight security, but even here there are bad men that can hurt you. A woman as beautiful as you wandering around alone is dangerous.”

I have a retort all set to go, but then my brain empties and only one thought pops back in. He thinks I’m beautiful?

Time stands still as the silence stretches between us.

“Okay. I can understand that.” It’s a small concession, tiny really.

But it's enough.

Gently, he helps me off the desk. Once my feet are planted on the floor, I reach for my clothing that has bunched up at my knees. He stops me though, and brings my hands in front of me, holding them both in one hand.

"You'll marry me tomorrow," he says firmly.

"Why?" I whine. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Because." He wipes the tears from my cheeks with his thumbs. "I want to."

"Does it have to be tomorrow? Can't we wait?" I sniffle.

He shakes his head. "Better to get it done."

"I don't want to talk about it right now." Exhaustion rolls over me.

I don't want to fight him anymore. Not tonight, and not about this.

Even if I contest Lucas' will, it would put the center at jeopardy. I could run out of funds within a few months.

The allowance I receive through the trust fund my father set up for me won't be enough to keep the center functioning. And I won't get my full trust for another three months when I turn twenty-five.

"We can talk later then." He pulls me close, and I think he's going to hug me, but instead he spins me around and bends me back over the desk.

"What are you doing? I said I wouldn't argue!"

“I’m checking to be sure you aren’t injured. Your stubbornness required a harsher punishment than I had intended.” His hand roams over my bare ass again.

“You don’t have to do that. I’m fine.” But my words come out as a groan.

His fingers dip between my thighs until he finds what I hoped I could keep from him. My utter arousal.

“I think being punished has turned my girl on,” he chuckles. “Your pussy is more soaked than before.”

I clench my teeth as the fat of his middle finger rolls my clit with the perfect amount of pressure.

“No, I just... oh... oh...” I squeeze my eyes closed as two of his fingers slide inside of me, stretching me.

“Fuck, moyo dikoye plamya , you’re so tight.” He leans into me, his hard cock pressing against my hip again.

Before I can respond, his touch is gone and in one smooth movement, he grabs my clothing and rips the bundle over my feet, taking my shoes with it. There’s a thud when the ‘bundle’ hits the floor several feet away from us.

“Dmitri, what—Oh!”

He flips me to my back, and I wince as my ass hits the desk. I’m more tender than I thought.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he leans over me with one forearm bracing himself on the desk.

His mouth hovers right over mine. It's full and warm, and I can't help but want him to kiss me again.

Dmitri brushes his fingertips over my temple, tucking my hair away from my face.

"You have such pretty eyes, Amelia," he says in a deep, seductive whisper.

"You know, everyone calls me Lia," I say stupidly. I can't help it. It's all I can do not to melt into a puddle on his desk.

His mouth kicks up to the right. "I'm not everyone."

The arrogance of this man. I don't know how I continue to be surprised by it other than the fact that he just has so much of it.

Dmitri lays a hand on my stomach. "Put your feet up and spread your legs for me," he orders with a gruff sound.

Part of me wants to tell him to go fuck off, I've had enough of his arrogant domineering tonight. But that part of me must be disconnected from the part that controls my arousal, because I do exactly as he says. Planting my feet on the edge of the desk, I open my knees.

"Ah, she can be a good girl." He runs his hand down my torso, back over my curls, and cups my sex. "You're so wet, you're making a mess on my desk."

Heat rushes to my cheeks and I snap my knees back together, trapping his hand between my thighs.

He brings his eyes to mine again, leaning closer to me. "Open them, bad girl."

Two simple words should not carry so much weight. I tell myself I'm only doing it because his hand is there, but I'm a liar.

"Keep them open while I play," he orders.

The spice of his aftershave envelops me as he shifts his position, bringing his neck closer to me.

"I don't think we should?—"

Whatever protest I was going to give flies out the window as soon as the pads of his fingers touch my clit.

He grins down at me. Arrogant bastard.

"Of course we should. I'm still teaching you a lesson." His fingertips rub over my clit, again with the exact amount of pressure, and touch the right spot, sending a current of pleasure through me so strong my muscles tremble from it.

It's been so long since I've had a man touch me there. That has to be why my response is so immediate, so intense.

"What lesson are you teaching now?" I moan with the question, failing completely at trying to sound like his touch isn't affecting me.

"Disobedience is punished, but obedience is rewarded." His eyes blaze with arousal as he pushes two fingers into my pussy.

My back arches off the desk.

"Hands at your sides, don't touch. This is for me only." His fingers curl inside me as

he drags them back, nearly leaving me entirely. “Such a wet pussy.”

I whimper, desperate to hold in the moans he’s eliciting with his touch. Slowly, he sinks his fingers back inside, twisting them and spreading them to fill me even more.

My own arousal slides down between my ass cheeks when he pulls back again. I’ve never been so needy before.

Fisting my hands at my sides, I push my hips up when it seems like he’s going to pull away. He lets a dark laugh loose before he presses his lips to my cheek.

“You’re always chasing after what you want, isn’t that right?” He thrusts his fingers harder this time, the heel of his hand hitting my clit and driving my pleasure deep into my core.

I breathe in, my fingernails dig into my palms as he continues to thrust his fingers.

“You like this, being my little toy.” He kisses my ear, nipping at my earlobe. “Being my good little toy, letting me fuck you with my fingers.”

He drives his point home by slipping a third, thick finger inside.

I arch upward again; the third finger is almost too much.

“Dmitri,” I whine.

“Shh, you’ll take all three fingers. My cock is thicker than this, you’ll need to be stretched if you’re to take me easily.” He dusts my neck with his lips, trailing soft kisses over my electrified skin.

Every new touch from him makes my skin come alive.

He eases his fingers in and out of me, curling them in exactly the right place and hitting my G-spot. With expertise he massages the area until I can barely breathe from the immense pleasure radiating through my body.

“Are you going to be my good girl and come for me?” he asks in a husky whisper.

“Dmitri,” I moan as I wrap my fingers around the edge of the desk, keeping myself anchored as the pressure builds.

My thighs tremble and he must notice it, because he increases the force of his thrusts. The heel of his palm rubs my clit as he finger-fucks me on his desk.

“Be my obedient good girl,” he growls in my ear. He sounds almost as desperate as I feel.

“Dmitri!” I groan as the first waves of orgasm build higher and higher.

“Give me your eyes. Look at me,” he orders in a stern voice, much like the one he used when he was spanking me.

I open my eyes and find his intense stare fixated on me. His lips are pinched together and his brow knitted. “Good girl.”

And that’s all I needed to hear. The final strike of the match that sets off a five-alarm fire in my body and my orgasm crashes into me.

“Dmitri!” I scream his name, but don’t dare take my eyes off him as pleasure rips through me.

With gentle strokes, he continues to caress my pussy until the last shudder fades.

Blinking my eyes back into focus, I find him still staring down at me, licking his fingers that are coated in my arousal. An inferno ignites across my face.

“Such a good girl, let’s see how well you’ve learned your lessons.” He winks and reaches for his belt.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Dmitri

This woman is going to be my complete ruin.

When I got the call that she was in the club downstairs and there was a man with her, my blood heated. By the time I got down there and saw him actually touching her, my blood boiled.

For the second time in one night, another man had his hands on my wife.

Technically, she's not my wife yet. But the vows are a formality. Amelia was my wife the moment I set my eyes on her and decided to go through with the marriage.

"What if someone comes in, Dmitri?" She eyes my office door.

"No one would dare," I promise her as I fist my cock, pulling it free of my pants. Squeezing my shaft to take off some of the pressure, I sigh.

Fuck.

The spanking was a punishment and not just for her. Every time her ass bounced beneath my hand, my cock hardened. Her ass may have felt the blows, but my dick suffered just as much.

Amelia looks down the length of her body, still spread open for me on my desk, and her pretty eyes widen. Pressing the fat head of my cock against the hot, wet entrance of her pussy, I squeeze my shaft again, stroking it slowly.

“Dmitri...” Her words die off as soon as I push into her pussy. She sucks in a sharp breath when I thrust forward.

Fuck, she’s tight.

I clench my jaw, stopping myself from plowing straight into her. I don’t want to hurt her.

Not this time.

Not like this.

“Baby, you have to relax,” I say when her body tenses around me.

“I’m trying.” But she’s not, not really.

Her shoulders are pulled up, her thighs are flexed, and her pussy has a vise grip around me. And it’s that tightness that makes it nearly impossible for me to hold still.

“Breathe, baby.” I reach between us, rubbing the pad of my thumb over her clit in a rhythmic circle. “Just breathe. You’re going to take all of me.”

She swallows again, and her eyes are already glassing over with arousal. Her bottom lip tucks between her teeth.

If I could spend an eternity in one place, this would be it. She’s perfect. So hot and wet and tight and the way her eyes find mine when her arousal peaks, it’s almost too much for a man to have to bear.

Slowly, I push forward. Inch by inch I ease into her. As I watch her pussy swallow my cock, stretching around my shaft, my ache for her worsens.

“Fuck,” I groan, leaning over her and propping myself up on my forearm. “I can’t hold back, baby.”

She spreads her legs further for me, sucking me inside.

My jaw tightens. This woman is trying to kill me. It would be the best death.

Sliding my hand down her right thigh, I slip beneath her knee and lift her leg up higher. Her eyes roll. She wraps her hands around my neck.

“Don’t hold back, Dmitri,” she says and arches her back a little more, sucking my cock further into her tight sheath.

A low growl escapes my chest. She’s my undoing. I drive into her, stopping only once I’m fully seated inside of her.

She cries out, which only fuels my need to bring her back to the edge. I want her screams of pleasure. I want to hear her chant my name when she comes unglued.

And I’m a man who gets what I want.

“Such a good girl.” Moving my arm from the desk to her hip, I hold her down as I drive into her again.

I lean over her body, capturing her mouth beneath mine as she whimpers with need. This isn’t just a fucking. This is a claiming.

This woman is mine.

For now and forever.

“Be a good girl and come for me again. I want to feel you come on my cock.” I twist my hips, angling upward as I increase the pace of my thrusts.

“I—oh, fuck!” She grabs at my shirt, holding me steady as she lifts her ass off the desk, meeting me thrust for thrust. “Yes. Oh, god!”

Releasing her leg, I move my touch to her pussy, finding her clit swollen and wet and waiting for me. Dusting my fingertip over the sensitive spot has her thighs shaking.

“Dmitri!”

Putting more pressure on her clit, I rub in a circular motion. Her mouth drops open in a silent scream as she comes unglued beneath me.

Her body trembles. The vibration of her orgasm squeezes my cock, making it damn near impossible not to unleash into her. I’m lost in the beauty of her release; it’s this distraction that holds me back.

Only when the last wave of her pleasure has receded, do I grab hold of her hips. She flashes me a look filled with sated contentment and presses the heels of her feet into the desk, lifting her body up to meet mine as I pump into her.

“Fuck,” I groan, driving harder into her, thrusting faster and faster until the pressure building inside of me becomes too much.

Pounding into her once more, electricity zips down my spine. An animalistic roar takes over as my cock unleashes deep inside of her and the unadulterated pleasure of it blinds me.

Catching my breath, I fall forward, bracing myself on my forearm to keep from squashing her into my desk. Whatever papers and miscellaneous items I had on my

desktop moments ago are gone, thrown to the floor.

Once my breathing is back under control and the sparks have finally left my vision, I gaze down at her. Her cheeks are flushed, and her lips are swollen. From my kiss or her biting them?

When I heard from the attorney what Lucas had done with his estate, I'd briefly entertained the notion of letting her off the hook. I figured I'd let her back out, take the smaller number of shares, and we could both go our own ways.

Now, looking down at her, having the warmth of her body against mine, I'm never letting her go.

No matter the benefit or the danger.

She is mine.

"We shouldn't have done that," she whispers, like she knows she's ruining a moment but can't help herself.

"We definitely should have." I kiss the corner of her mouth and slide out of her.

My cock immediately feels the loss of her warmth, but I console myself with the vision of my cum leaking out of her pussy.

An urge to swipe it up with my finger and shove it back inside where it can do its work overtakes me, but I fight it back. Once I have my name attached to hers, then I will pump a baby into her.

Fuck. Just the thought of her belly swelling with my child inside makes my cock hard again. I tug my slacks back on and zip before she has a chance to see how much I

want her again.

I help her off the desk, delighting in the new blush that creeps up her neck when she takes notice of the mess left behind.

“Someone’s going to see that,” she mutters and scurries across the room toward the adjoining bathroom, stopping only to scoop up her clothing.

I finish buckling my belt and straitening my own clothes before she gets back, carrying a towel.

She shoots me a heated glare as she wipes the mess already drying on the desktop. If I hadn’t seen her come completely undone only minutes before, I might think she’s actually annoyed.

“Look.” She comes back from the bathroom after depositing the dirty towel and puts her hands on her hips. “I know it will take a miracle to get a judge to change the will, and I know you’d benefit from our marriage.”

“All right?” I lean back against my desk, folding my arms over my chest.

I’m not going to take whatever deal she’s concocted in that pretty head of hers, but hearing her out won’t hurt. It might be enlightening.

“If I agree to marry you, can you agree that it’s in name only? You’ll live your life, and I’ll live mine? Maybe we can even divorce if one of us finds someone they’d actually like to be married to?”

A storm of rage floods me at her last statement. Someone she’d actually like to be married to?

“No.” It’s not enough, the weight of my voice as I answer.

But if I expand, I’m likely to say something that will anger her, or hurt her, and for the moment she’s being slightly cooperative.

“That’s it? Just no? No counteroffer?” She’s trying to keep her voice level, and it’s not working all that well.

“This isn’t a marriage in name only, Amelia. You’ll be my wife, not just for a little while, but forever. There will be no other men. No separate life. None of that. You and I will be married, and that’s final.”

She pinches her lips together in frustration, but I can see in her eyes she’s already accepted her fate. Having her freedom would mean losing the foundation, and she won’t do that.

“See. I knew we shouldn’t have done that.” She jerks a pointed finger at the desk.

I laugh. “That changed nothing. You were always going to be my wife.” I push off the desk. “And now that you’re finally understanding that, we can focus on the next thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Moving you out of your apartment and into my home.”

She starts to argue, but then snaps her mouth shut.

“Good girl.” I wink. “You’re learning already.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Amelia

A chill runs through Lucas' apartment. It's been over a month since I've been in here, having stopped in after the accident only to find his best suit for the burial.

It's just as horrible standing here now as it was then. Without Lucas here, it's just an empty apartment, even with his things still filling the space.

The artwork he hated that he purchased at an auction, but our father wanted it, still hangs in the hallway. Lucas spent a small fortune outbidding the shopper Dad had sent.

Pulling my cardigan tighter around me, I make my way through the living room to his office.

His assistant has already gone through the files and pulled anything that should be brought back to the office. Everything else is just his personal files or copies.

My phone vibrates in the back pocket of my jeans, and I pull it out. It's Saturday so the center shouldn't have too many emergencies. But I'm always only a text away.

Don't forget. We have an appointment with the judge this afternoon.

I frown at the screen.

My romantic fiancé.

An appointment.

He makes it sound more like a doctor's visit than a wedding ceremony.

No.

It's more like a trip to the dentist.

I'm aware. I type back.

Seriously, it's been three days since that night at the club. A night I can't stop thinking about and one that keeps ruining my panties whenever I do.

I've tried explaining to myself that just because he's able to do things to my body that no one has ever done before doesn't mean this is going to work. It's a forced marriage. I have no choice here.

So fine. I'll marry the brute, move into his place tonight like we agreed on, and be done with this whole thing. Come Monday morning, I'll go back to work and keep doing what I do.

He can do whatever mobsters do, and we'll just live our lives.

Ours won't be the first loveless marriage. I watched my mother and father go through life barely even speaking to each other.

It ruined her, having a husband who wouldn't pay a moment's notice to her. And when she started on the pain pills, he only became more obsessed with ignoring her.

But I'm not my mother. I won't turn to drugs to numb my pain. She went into her marriage believing Dad wanted her, that he loved her. I'm not going in blind.

There's no love here. Only a mutual benefit to fulfilling my brother's insane stipulations.

Sitting at Lucas' desk, I lean back in the leather office chair, remembering all the times he sat here lecturing me on my grades or how late I was staying out with my friends.

Losing my father at sixteen had been a weird blessing. No one wants to believe losing their parent is a good thing in their life, but Dad wasn't exactly a father.

Not in any real sense. I lived with him, at least in the same house. He occasionally showed up for dinner, but as for any actual parenting, he couldn't be bothered.

Him dying meant I was able to move in with Lucas full-time and have someone around who actually wanted me there. I was just a reminder to my father. The reason he had to marry Mom. Her golden ticket.

My chest aches with the memory of his nickname for me. On the rare occasions he actually had to deal with me, he liked to throw it at me like a dart aimed at a board. And he hit the bullseye every time.

Lucas, even though he was my half-brother, never treated me as anything other than his little sister. Overprotective sometimes and nosey to a fault, especially when it came to my social life, but he was never cruel.

Unless you count the current situation.

A framed picture of the two of us sitting on the corner of his desk catches my eye. It was taken at my college graduation two years ago. His arm is slung over my shoulder and I'm holding a huge bouquet of flowers he'd brought for the occasion. We're both smiling like nothing in the world could hurt us.

He'd been so excited for me. We'd already gotten the foundation started, but with my degree finished I was put in charge of the center.

It had been his stipulation when I finally got him to agree to my plans. Finish school, then he'd give me full control of the center. I'd already been working there since we opened it a year before, but he'd hired outside help to get it on its feet.

For the first year the center was opened, I trained every day with the manager he'd hired to open it. She'd shown me all of the ins and outs, making the transition after graduation a smooth one. And Lucas had been standing behind me every step of the way, supporting and encouraging me.

Tears threaten, but I shake them off.

I don't have time for a breakdown right now.

I have a mission. Last night, it occurred to me that if Lucas had thought ahead enough to put this insanity into his estate will, he might have left something behind explaining it to me.

He'd never mentioned Dmitri to me, so I have no reason to believe he would have pushed this union if that car hadn't stolen Lucas from us.

Lucas always kept our personal documents in a safe here in his office, but I've never actually seen it. After looking around, I don't see any obvious looking safe, so I start opening drawers and file cabinets.

I finally find it in the closet full of file boxes. Grabbing the key ring with a mess of keys his assistant gave me after the funeral, I sit in front of it, trying each one. It would have been nice if they'd been labeled.

The fifth key does the trick and the door opens. I scoot out of the way and move in front of the opening, expecting to find a few files inside.

There are several file folders beneath a leather-bound ledger, so I lift it out of the way, dropping it on the floor beside me. Each file folder has a name on it. One for him, my father, his mother, my mother, and then mine on the very bottom.

As I move further into the closet to lean against the wall, my knee flips the ledger over and it falls open. Cradling the files in my lap, I pull mine to the top of the pile and flip through the papers.

He's put my high school report cards in here along with my transcripts from college. Other certificates from my school year are in here, too.

Random accolades like making the dean's list all four years of college, the letter of recommendation I received from a teacher in high school to help me get into college, it's all here like some proud parent would store.

My chest tightens. That's what he was, really. After Mom died, he'd taken on her role even though he didn't live with us. He'd checked up on me when I was sick. If the school needed to contact someone, they called him first. My father had been second on the call list.

I lean my head back against the wall and take a deep breath. He was always trying to protect me, so why has he delivered me into the hands of the Russian mafia?

There's nothing here to help me understand. No letter left for me, no explanation of anything. I suppose that's what happens when you die unexpectedly at forty—no answers are left behind.

I gather up the files and pick up the ledger. It's time to really start going through his

apartment. I can't keep it forever.

As I lift the ledger into my lap, I catch a name scribbled in Lucas' handwriting.

Dragunov

Scanning the pages, I see it written over and over with phrases like 'approval pending' and 'redirect to third-party escrow.' Why is Dmitri's name in here? I flip to the first page of the ledger. My father's handwriting is on the first page.

At the beginning of the ledger only his surname is written, but by the time I reach present day, his first name is being used and it's all Lucas' writing from the year my father died.

I shove up to my feet, carrying the files and the heavy ledger to his desk so I can get a better look at it.

Page after page is documentation of how entwined my family has become with the Dragunov family.

I'm no accountant, but it seems evident that my father and then my brother have been washing money for the mob for years.

The first date on the ledger is years after Mom died, but it already had a running total. There must be another log somewhere. I set the book down on Lucas' desk and go about finding the first book.

It's not in the same safe, but Lucas wouldn't have just one small safe.

My father was an Alderman. If anyone found out about this, he would have been completely ruined.

It would have destroyed Lucas' chances at building the real estate investment firm he worked so hard to build from the ground up. No one would have trusted him with the funding that they did if they knew he and my father had ties to the Russian mob.

Why would he risk so much?

My phone dances on top of Lucas' desk as another text message comes through. Deciding to check it in a minute, I tear through the rest of Lucas' closet trying to find another safe. When I find nothing, I open the first file box.

There are more files, but beneath them are more leather-bound books that look just like the first one I found. Flipping through them quickly, I find the first entry.

It's dated a month after Mom died.

I sink to the floor, staring at the entries as though they can somehow speak to me. To explain what my family was doing getting mixed up with the mafia.

Our father was no saint. And not to speak ill of the dead, but the man is probably roasting in hell at the moment. He was as corrupt as any politician could be; why would he need to get money from the mafia?

My phone vibrates again from inside the office, pulling me out of my confused daze.

Climbing back up to my feet, I drop the ledger into an open box. They're all open now, spread out around me in the closet, and a few have spilled out into the office.

I step over one of them on my way to the desk and snap up my phone as another message comes through.

It's three fifteen.

Shit. I look at the time on my screen.

I was supposed to meet Dmitri at his penthouse for our wedding half an hour ago. The judge is probably already there.

On my way.

If I ignore the speed limits enough, I can make it across town to his place in the next twenty minutes.

“Lia?” Christian’s voice calls from the doorway and I stiffen. “Lia, what are you doing?” He walks into the office and sweeps his gaze over the boxes strewn across the floor.

“Hey, Christian.” I push on a light air. “I just needed to get some files.”

I pick up the manila folders and put them on top of the first ledger I’d found that’s still sitting on the desk.

He eyes me. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. What, uh, what are you doing here?”

“I came to check on the place. You’ve been so busy, and it’s been a lot, so I just stop in once a week, make sure everything’s okay.” He eyes the boxes. “Did the maids leave all that out? They’re not supposed to be cleaning out the closets.”

“Oh, no. They didn’t. But that reminds me, I should cancel the service. And I need to get all this stuff boxed up and at least put into storage so the apartment can be rented out.”

“I can do that for you. I know how hard all of this has been.” He tilts his head and gives me a pitying smile.

It mirrors the hundreds of them I was given at Lucas’ funeral.

Odd, I don’t remember getting any at Dad’s funeral service. Mostly blank stares or polite nods.

“I can handle it, Christian, really. But thank you for checking up on the place. I hadn’t even thought to do it.”

“Are you sure you’re all right? I haven’t heard from you since that guy stole you out of my apartment a few nights ago.”

I bite back a laugh. Stole me? If that’s how he remembers it, he sure didn’t do much to help save me.

“I’m fine,” I say. “But... you should know I’ve agreed to go through with the marriage.”

His eyes widen. Panic washes over his expression, but it’s short-lived before he gets control of himself.

“You don’t have to do that, Lia. We can fight the will.”

“We can. And it will take a year, maybe more, and in the process the foundation and the center will suffer. Even when I get my trust in a few months, it’s not enough to fund the center for more than a couple of months.” I sigh. “I can’t take the risk of having it close down. Too many people depend on it.”

He’s quiet for a moment, then takes a small step toward me.

“Look, Lia, I know you have wrapped yourself up in the center, especially after what happened with your mother, but you can’t sacrifice yourself like this. Not even for that.”

“Do you know how much Dmitri Dragunov is worth?” I don’t give him time to answer. “He’s worth five hundred million dollars, and that’s just what’s on paper. His actual worth is probably closer to a billion.”

“Unless the IRS gets a hold of him, or the Feds,” he cuts me off. “You can’t be serious about this. He’s dangerous.”

“It’s a business transaction, that’s all.” Moreau Investments continues to fund the foundation, which keeps the center open.

I want nothing to do with the realty business. Lucas knew that. Maybe if I’d minored in finance the way Lucas had originally wanted me to, I would have some interest there. But money isn’t my thing. The everyday care for people in need, that’s where my passion lies.

“You’re not thinking clearly.” Christian frowns, like he’s disappointed in me. Like I have a real choice here, and I’m making the wrong one.

“I am. I’m being responsible,” I insist. “My mother married a man she thought loved her and look how it turned out. My eyes are open here. Dmitri and I will have a businesslike marriage.”

Except for the moments his lips are pressed against my skin, or when his fingers probe the deepest urges I possess. Christian doesn’t need to know about that. Those little bits are just for me.

A reward for agreeing to do this. Just because a marriage is loveless doesn’t mean it

has to be passionless.

And from what I've experienced beneath his touch, I can say there's at least passion there.

That will have to be enough.

"I just don't want to see you unhappy." Christian pauses. "Lucas wouldn't want that."

"Lucas left me to marry a man I don't even know. I'm not sure my happiness has anything to do with why he put this stipulation into his will."

My phone goes off again. Ready to fire back a text telling Dmitri to just give me a few more minutes, I flip the phone over to the screen.

Sorry to bug you on a Saturday. A pipe burst. We're flooding.

"Dammit." I type back that I'm on my way. "Sorry, Christian, I really have to go."

I grab my purse on the way to the door.

"Everything okay?"

"It's the center. A pipe broke." I look around at the mess I've made of the office.

"I got this. I'll put the boxes back. Go." He waves me off.

As I race down the hall and out of the apartment, my phone goes off again. This time Dmitri is calling. Like I don't have enough problems at this very moment.

I push him to voicemail. When I get the center dealt with, I'll call him.

Once I explain, he'll understand.

Amelia

Water-soaked carpet squishes beneath my feet as I walk down the hall toward the stairs. The two meeting rooms in the lower level are still an inch under water, but at least we've found the problem.

We'd taken over an old building when we opened the center. Lucas had a thorough inspection done and we'd made a lot of repairs. The pipes had been okay; at least there hadn't been any problems.

Now, though, the corrosion from being so old was too much and two of them sprang a leak. Thankfully, it's only affecting the lower-level meeting rooms and we're able to make do for a little while with the rooms on the main floor.

"Lia!" Sarah hurries to me as soon as I step off the stairs onto dry flooring. "He's here again."

"Who's here?" I brush my hair back from my face, while shaking the excess water from my feet.

My feet are probably all wrinkly from the amount of time I've been walking around the water downstairs.

"The big one." She raises her eyebrows. "Dmitri Dragunov."

My shoulders drop.

Right. I'm supposed to be getting married right now.

"Is he in my office?" I want to ask how angry he looks, but from the way she came running over to me when she spotted me, I think I have a good idea.

Also, there was the last text message that came through twenty minutes ago.

Obviously, another lesson is needed.

"Yes. And he has other men with him, too. Three of them." She swallows. "And two of them are just as big as him. None of them look happy."

I sigh.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she questions after I stay frozen to the floor in silence. "I mean, marrying a man like him... are you sure?"

I grab hold of her hands she's wringing and squeeze. "He's not as scary as he looks, Sarah. I promise."

She walks with me down the hall to my office.

"But there has to be another way. I don't understand why Lucas did this." Her voice trembles.

"I don't either, but I'm sure he had a reason." I stop at my office door.

It's closed, but I can hear deep voices inside speaking. They're keeping their conversation in Russian so I have no idea what they're talking about until I hear my brother's name. A moment later, my name is uttered too.

“Do you want me to go with you?” She gives a hesitant look at the door.

“No. Thanks, I got this.” I push on what I hope is a warm smile. “Everything’s going to work out fine. What I really need is the carpet cleaners to get here, the sooner the better. We can keep today’s meetings up here today, but we need downstairs back up and running by Monday.”

She nods. “Got it.”

“Thanks.”

Her expression darkens as her gaze lifts over my shoulder, and then higher still. A cold shiver runs down my back.

“He’s there, right?” I whisper. “Right behind me?”

She nods a little. “Yeah.”

“You should go.” I gently pat her arm. “I can handle him.”

She swallows, then turns on her own water-soaked heel and hurries down the hall, taking one more look back at me before turning into the front office.

“Are you going to be reasonable about this or are you going to be all Dmitri about it?” I ask, still facing away from him.

“The option for reasonable passed an hour ago when I was informed you left your brother’s apartment and came here instead of home.” His hand clamps down on my shoulder and he turns me.

Yep. He’s intending to be very Dmitri about this.

Impending hurricanes have less darkness in them than his features right now.

His jaw is pressed so tightly together, there's a real chance he's going to break a tooth.

"A pipe burst," I explain. "I had to come—wait. How did you know I came here after leaving Lucas' apartment?" I retreat a small step, out of his grasp. "Are you having me followed?"

"Yes." He confesses this as though it's a ridiculous thing that I even asked. Because why wouldn't a Russian mafia boss have his fiancée followed everywhere she went.

"How? I didn't notice anyone."

"You don't notice anything when you're rushing off everywhere. Anyone could have hurt you or kidnapped you. You're an easy target."

"Who would want to hurt me or kidnap me?"

"You're changing the subject," he accuses.

"I'm not sure which subject to deal with first. You having me followed. You showing up here and scaring my staff. Or that you think there's an actual chance of me being kidnapped."

"Then I'll make it easy on you." He moves forward, towering over me and grabbing my chin.

When he brings his gaze in line with mine, my stomach flips. Several times.

This man!

“First, we’ll deal with the subject of our wedding. Then we’ll deal with the subject of your utter disregard for obedience. Then we’ll deal with the subject of consummating our union.”

“None of those things were on my list,” I say.

“No more delay.” He drops his hand from my chin and steps back, sweeping his arm toward my office.

“You said the marriage first.” I swallow hard.

He’s got that look in his eye like he did at his club. He wants to punish me. And as much as I want to think I can stop him, I can be honest with at least myself that there’s no possibility that I can stop him once he touches me.

“We are.” He stares at me, not even blinking.

“You brought the judge with you?” I step past him and hurry into the office to see who’s all inside.

Sarah was right. Two men just as big as Dmitri stand inside talking with each other. I recognize Nikolai, but the other man is new to me. His resemblance to Nikolai tells me he’s related though.

Then there’s the judge. A smaller man by stature, but just as foreboding as the other men. He frowns when he notices me.

“Ah! We can get started.” Nikolai claps his hands together with a grin aimed at Dmitri as he walks in behind me. “Just a nervous bride?”

“I had something to deal with,” I explain. “A pipe burst downstairs. Actually, I still

need to get a few things dealt with. Maybe we should—” My words die when I twist and catch Dmitri’s glare.

“Everything’s already being taken care of,” he states. “My men are on their way to take care of the carpets. You’ll have new carpeting once everything’s done. The drywall that’s been damaged will be replaced by Monday.”

“But I have people?—”

“It’s being taken care of. All you need to do right now is repeat the words the judge gives you.” He comes to stand beside me.

“He’s not even going to introduce me,” the man standing beside Nikolai says with pretend offense.

Dmitri rolls his eyes.

“That is my cousin, Arman. We needed two witnesses,” Dmitri explains then grabs my hand in his and turns me to face the judge.

His thumb runs over my fingertips. Moving things out of the water has left my fingers tender and wrinkled. A low growl rumbles through his chest, but it’s so quiet I’m not sure anyone but me heard it. The man doesn’t even bother to hide his displeasure.

“I’m fine,” I assure him, and he grunts.

“Your fingers are like prunes. You have a full staff here, including a maintenance staff. You shouldn’t have been down there working in the water.” He doesn’t even look at me while trying to chastise me for doing my job.

“And they were helping, too. Just because I’m in charge doesn’t mean I don’t have to

do the work here.”

He shoots me a glare that I think means he doesn't want to talk about it now. Or it means my answer has only fueled his irritation, and I should stop talking.

I haven't learned all his cues yet.

Dmitri points to the judge who's now standing in front of us with a little black booklet in his hands. “Go.”

“Are you sure you want to do this here?” I question. “I'm not even wearing a dress.”

Dmitri squeezes my hand, a signal to be silent, I'm sure.

“I mean my shoes are soaked. My clothes are wet, and my hair isn't even neat. Maybe we should wait until I can change into something more appropriate.” Like a straitjacket for going along with this craziness.

“You might want to get on with it, Judge. This is about as patient as he's ever been.” Arman moves to stand on Dmitri's left and Nikolai flanks me on my right.

Are they thinking I might bolt?

Hell, I'm thinking I might bolt.

“Yes. Alright.” The judge opens his booklet and starts to read the first part about what marriage means, but a simple clearing of the throat from Dmitri has him skip straight to the vows.

After he's read off mine, I stare at him like he's grown a second head with horns and a furry beard.

“I’m not saying that.” I turn to look up at Dmitri who has one eyebrow perfectly arched.

“They’re your vows.” He squeezes my hand. “Speak them.”

“That’s not the normal vows.” I point at the judge’s book with my free hand.

“No. These are the vows that we are taking. Now repeat what he said.”

“Dmitri. Women don’t say things like that anymore.”

“My wife did,” Nikolai leans forward to say to me.

“Mine, too. But I admit she was hesitant at first,” Arman pipes in.

“See? Now repeat the words,” Dmitri orders.

I shake my head. “I’m not promising to obey and honor you.”

“Then we’ll wait.” Dmitri drops my hand.

He tugs on his sleeves like he’s adjusting them from beneath the suit jacket, looking almost bored. I have no doubt the man will simply stand and wait for his orders to be followed.

“Well, I’m sure your cousins have better places to be than to stand here and watch you be stubborn.” They have to help me. Aren’t these men all about helping a woman in distress?

“Actually, I have the afternoon clear. Anya won’t be home until past dinner tonight.” Arman slips his hands into his pants pockets, clearly taking the position that he’s on

his cousin's side.

“And Charlotte's with Anya, so we both have time.” Nikolai checks his watch as though he's going to time me. How long can I hold out.

“You can't be serious.”

“I've never known him not to be.” Arman grins.

“Fine. We'll just stand here.” I fold my arms over my chest, ready to dig my heels in.

If they want to stand here and stare at each other, I can play that game too.

When I was young and my parents would get into one of their screaming matches, I'd hide in my bedroom waiting for them to stop before venturing back out. I got really good at waiting.

This won't be any harder.

“Actually, I do have another meeting,” the judge faintly intervenes into the madness.

“They'll wait,” Dmitri assures him. “If her stubbornness causes them to delay their wedding, you can assure them my wife will have consequences for her behavior.”

My cheeks burn. How can he say such things in front of the judge? His cousins?

Speechless, I turn to look at Nikolai, sure he's just as appalled, only to find him nodding in agreement.

Arman looks just as satisfied with Dmitri's threat.

The judge is the only one with any real decency to at least look surprised by his words.

Obviously, even if I don't promise to obey this man, Dmitri's going to see to it that I do.

"You're impossible." Kicking him in the shin would help deflate the balloon of anger building in my chest, but I have to settle for stomping my feet as I move back into position beside him. "What was the line again?"

The judge glances at Dmitri and waits for him to nod his permission before repeating the vow.

"Fine." I take a deep breath, steadying myself to spew the words. "As Dmitri's wife, I promise to honor him, obey him, and... seriously, Dmitri, I can't."

He lifts a shoulder. "Then we wait."

I groan. Maybe if I just rattle it off, it won't hurt so much.

"And to willingly-accept-any-consequences-he-sees-fit," I huff after rattling off the last, horrible bit. "And that's it."

The judge, who seems unsure if he should accept what I said or not, pauses a moment. Thankfully, he doesn't try to get me to repeat it more clearly and continues on with the rest.

"You're now man and wife. You may, uh, well, kiss the bride." The judge shuts his booklet and lets out a relieved breath.

Dmitri grasps me by the back of the neck and pulls me into him. His lips barely brush

against mine, sweeping across a second time before capturing me beneath the most domineering kiss I've ever been a part of.

Moving my hands to his chest, partly to push him back, but also to steady myself, I can feel the tension of his muscles beneath the expensive suit. His fingers tighten in my hair as his tongue sweeps past my lips, deepening the already mind-altering kiss.

My mind may have fought the words of our vows, promising to obey him, but my body has no qualms about folding into his embrace.

By the time he breaks the kiss, my lips are swollen, my lungs aren't sure how to work, and my heart bangs out a heavy metal jam against my ribs.

Fuck. He has to stop touching me. If I can keep his hands off me, I can think better.

"Now we can move on to the second subject." He presses a soft kiss to my cheek and moves to press his mouth against the shell of my ear. "Your disregard for obedience."

Dmitri

“You pout like a child.” I break through the thick silence of the car as I maneuver through the city to my condo.

Amelia sits beside me, one leg crossed over the other and her arms tucked tightly across her chest while staring out the window. Her bottom lip is even protruding slightly.

“Well, then you’ve married a child,” she shoots back at me. “I mean compared to your age, I guess I am.”

“Fifteen years isn’t that much.” And she’s definitely not a young twenty-four-year-old.

There’s an old soul inside her. She’s seen things in her young life that have aged her.

Lucas didn’t talk about his family often. Our business together rarely touched on our personal lives. Occasionally, he’d mention Amelia. Especially after his father had the good graces to die and leave her in Lucas’ hands.

When he spoke of her, it was as a proud older brother, especially when she graduated high school at the top of her class, missing valedictorian by a hair.

She had wanted to skip college and go to work for an addiction center on the south side of the city, but he’d put a stop to it, opting to help her set up the foundation and the Moreau Center, so long as she worked toward her bachelor’s degree.

He'd brought up the center when he had heard I was going to start merging some of my business with my cousins. The Romanovs deal with party drugs, and he wanted to be certain none of the cash I ran through his business had been dirtied by their hands.

Gun money was fine.

Drug money was off limits.

"Lucas was my guardian. Basically, my father." She turns to glare at me. "You're the same age as him. So... basically, you're like my father now too."

"Worse. I'm your husband." I turn down an alley and head to the garage of my building.

"How is that worse?"

"Because after I've punished you, you can't run off to sulk in your bedroom. You'll have to stay and let me comfort you like a husband comforts his wife. And you'll love that part." I wait for the garage door to open before pulling through. "And you'll hate to love it."

"I don't sulk." She ruins her bravado by forcefully twisting away, giving me her back.

"No. Not at all," I say as I pull into my parking spot and watch as the two SUVs behind me drive past the garage doors.

"Are those my spies?" she asks, noting me eying the rearview mirror as my men depart.

"If that's what you want to call them." I turn off the ignition and pick up my phone

from the center console where it's been charging.

Several texts have come through while I was driving, but I didn't take them since she was in the car.

When she reaches for her door handle, I tap her knee and swish my finger from side to side. The annoyed huff she gives goes straight to my cock.

Who knew having a brat for a wife would be so much fun. Spanking the attitude out of her is going to be one of the most enjoyable events of our time together so far.

Keeping my phone in my hand, I climb out of the car and round to her door. She won't be patient enough to wait for me, so I lean against her door to keep her inside while I scroll through the messages.

A shipment has been delayed at the Port of Novorossiysk. The reason behind the delay isn't clear yet.

A gentle rapping on the window draws my attention from my messages to the woman I've trapped in the car. After sending off orders to get to the bottom of the problem, I slowly turn around to face my wife.

She's pulled her hair up into a high bun, securing it with a hair tie she must have dug out of her purse. It's messy and gorgeous at the same time. Just like her.

I open the door for her and hold out my hand, which she ignores and climbs out on her own. After shutting the door behind her, I gesture toward the elevators.

"I know today hasn't gone the way we agreed it would, but I really did have to get to the center." She tries for civility as the elevator takes us up to my penthouse.

“You have a full staff. I understand they need to let you know when an emergency happens, but you didn’t need to be there. They could have handled it themselves.”

“Well, that’s not how I do things,” she says, stepping in front of me. Again, she’s giving me her back.

“Most men would think twice before turning their back on me,” I say, reaching out to pick up a loose strand of hair that didn’t make it into her ponytail.

Wrapping the dark lock around my middle finger several times, I tug, pulling her back a step.

She hisses and tries to swat my hand away, but I’m not going anywhere. And it’s about time she understands that.

“Dmitri.” She tries to twist around when the elevator door slides open, but I step forward, blocking her movements.

“I’ll give you the tour later. Right now, we need to have our second lesson in obedience,” I grate in her ear and push her out of the elevator and into the penthouse.

“I’m trying to explain. I wasn’t purposely avoiding meeting you. It was an emergency.” She reaches behind her head and grabs my wrist, not that it will do any good.

“You could have texted me that. You could have answered any of the numerous calls you pushed to voicemail. You could have waited for me to come meet you and help you take care of it. You could have done a lot of things. But you chose to ignore me. You chose to ignore our appointment. You chose this.” I pull my hand back and unleash a hard smack to her ass, propelling her forward a step.

The hair I have wrapped around my finger acts as a leash, and she curses the moment it's tugged too tight.

"I didn't choose any of this." There's an air of annoyance mixed with desperation in her tone.

I uncoil my finger from her hair, giving her only a moment of reprieve.

"You can explain yourself once you're in position." I grab her hand, lacing our fingers together, and pull her along to the winding staircase that will take us up to the second floor.

"What position? Dmitri, seriously, this isn't necessary." She keeps up with me step for step as I lead her down the hall to the corner suite.

"Is this really how you want to start our marriage?" she asks once we're inside my room and I've let her go.

Her hands hook onto her hips, and I take a long moment to look her over.

The black slacks she's wearing are wrinkled and barely dry as they cling to her ankles. Her shoes are probably ruined from walking around the flood water in the basement of the center.

"No," I agree. "It's not."

"Good." She sighs and smiles a little. "Like I said, I'm sorry, but it couldn't be helped, really."

I shake out of my suit jacket and toss it on the loveseat in the corner of the room.

“And we did get married, so I kept my part of the deal,” she continues as I strip the tie from around my neck and reach for the buttons at my throat.

Her eyes flicker to my hands as I methodically unbutton my shirt, pulling it from my trousers when I get to the bottom. As soon as I shuck out of the shirt, her gaze freezes on my chest.

An old scar runs across my chest from my midsection up to my right shoulder. The physician my father used at the time did what he could to sew up the gash. It had been a nasty wound, and saving my life had been prioritized over making the scar pretty.

“What happened to you?” She runs a feather-like touch along the raised, jagged scar.

“It happened a long time ago,” I assure her when her worried glance hits me. “I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt anymore.” I gently wrap my hand around her wrist.

“Who did it?” Fire burns in her question.

Does she plan to avenge me? A smile tugs at my lips with the mental image of her going into battle on my behalf.

She’d go into a fight for anyone she felt needed defending.

I cup her chin, bringing her gaze away from the scar. “I’ll tell you all about it after.”

“After?” She blinks, like she’s forgotten what’s lurking just ahead.

I smile. “Your punishment.”

She drops her fingers from my chest as though my skin has scalded her and retreats a

step. “Dmitri. You can’t.”

Grabbing the straight-back chair from the vanity in the corner of the room I had brought in for her, I bring it to the foot of the bed.

“I assure you, I can.” I grasp the buckle of my belt, enjoying the tremble making its way through her expression when she realizes I’m removing it.

“You’re insane if you think for one second, I’m going to just let you?—”

“Going back on your vows already?” I question as I tug the leather strap free from the loops of my pants.

Her jaw drops at the sound, and I wonder if she’s ever truly been punished before.

The little spanking I gave her in my office was probably the first time she was ever held accountable. Lucas meant well, I’m sure, especially after the mess of their father, but he gave in too much to her.

The chair creaks when I sink onto it.

I fold the belt in half, and then half it again and fist it in my right hand. Resting my hands on my knees, I stare up at her.

“Come here, pull your pants and panties off, and lie over my knee,” I order as gently as I can, given my patience is wearing thin.

Silently, she shakes her head.

“Amelia, don’t make me come get you. Now. Come here.” I switch the belt to my left hand so I can offer my right to her.

Harming her isn't my intention, but this is going to hurt.

Her eyes soften as the realization that there's no way out of this except for through it hits her. She's smart, pragmatic. If she runs, I'll catch her, and it will be worse. If she refuses, I'll come get her and it will be worse.

"Dmitri." My name is used as a plea, but her hands have already moved to the button on her slacks.

Her face reddens as she pushes them over her hips, and they fall to her feet.

In silence, I admire the gentle beauty of her movements. She steps out of the clothing and her thumbs hook into the elastic of her soft lavender briefs.

A soft blush covers her face entirely by the time she stands beside me, her hands folded in front of her as though she could hide the sweetest part of her.

"Hands at your sides," I say, brushing her arms away, revealing the small patch of curls.

Slowly, I drag my gaze up over her body to her eyes. She's not meeting my gaze, settling her stare on my hand holding the belt.

"Dmitri, you can't?—"

"If you tell me I can't punish you one more time, I will have to prove to you exactly what I am capable of." I rest my hand on her hip, drawing her attention back to my face. "And I never want you to see the monster I can be."

Her throat constricts as she swallows again. For a moment, I think she's going to beg me to let her go, but her expression hardens.

“Lie over my lap, Amelia. Ass up high for me.” I move my hand from her hip.

It’s important that her actions are on her own now. She won’t be able to tell herself I forced her over my knee. She won’t find any comfort thinking she didn’t participate.

Slowly, she steps closer to me until her knees touch my thighs before she bends at the waist, crawling over my lap.

She reaches out, grabbing for the chair legs when she’s low enough to keep from falling forward, then continues until her body drapes over my thighs.

Her ass—her beautiful, plump ass—rests on my right leg.

As I help settle her, slightly more toward my knees, her right leg pushes outward, giving me a prime peek at her pussy. Already her lips glisten with arousal. If I were to sink my finger inside her, I’d find her soaked and hot for me.

My cock, already hard and aching for her, presses with more urgency against the zipper of my pants.

“Why are you here, Amelia?” I force my tone to remain flat as I stroke my hand over her upturned ass.

Fuck, all I want to do is throw her on the bed and pound her until we both go blind from our orgasms.

“Because you have the emotional intelligence of a Neanderthal who can’t take an apology when it’s given.”

I freeze my movements.

“All right.” I move the folded belt into my right hand. She was given a chance.

She chose her road.

Her ass tenses as I raise my hand, but it’s no use. She cries out with the first lash. With the belt folded like this, its bite isn’t as sharp, but I’ll make do. Harder and harder I spank her, covering every inch of her plush ass.

“Dmitri!” Her right arm swings back at me, trying to cover her reddening cheeks with her hand splayed out.

Easily, I snatch it up into my hand and pin it to the small of her back.

“Tell me again, Amelia, why are you here? Why am I spanking you like a naughty little girl who can’t obey her husband?”

She huffs and for a second, I think she’s going to come up with another snarky remark.

“Because I didn’t tell you what was going on and I ignored your phone calls and text messages.” She sounds pained and it’s not from the spanking.

No, she hates that she’s in the wrong here and she’s having to admit it.

I don’t bother asking if she’ll do it again, because she will. We both know it.

“Good. Now we can start.”

“Start?” She tries to buck up at me, but I have a vise grip on her arm, and she’ll tumble to the floor before she’s able to get up.

To be sure she doesn't go anywhere, I slide my right leg out from beneath her and lay it over her, trapping her.

"Dmitri! I already said I'm sorry! Let me up!" Her struggles continue and she does her best to twist out of my grip.

"No." I emphasize my position by peppering her ass with strikes of the belt, leaving not an inch of her creamy skin untouched.

She howls as the belt lashes across the bottom of her cheeks. I move my leg down enough to get access to the tender spot where her thighs meet the sweetness of her ass.

The howling gets worse.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" she screams while still doing her best to wiggle off my lap.

So much for accepting her consequences.

"It hurts! Dmitri, it hurts so much!" Her voice cracks while stating the obvious.

"I know it does," I say, slowing the smacks just enough that she can hear my words. "It wouldn't be a punishment if it felt good."

Pleasure can be found within the pain, but not like this. Not when the goal is to teach her. Later, when she's not so willful, when she finally settles into her new life, I will show her how sweet the bite of leather can be.

Needing to feel the warmth of her skin beneath my hand, I drop the belt to the floor. Her ass is hot to the touch, and each swat of my hand makes her cheeks bounce. My

cock strains for relief at the sight.

Slowly, the fight in her wanes.

“Amelia.” I rest my hand on her red, hot ass. “Have you learned your lesson?”

She sighs. It’s a sound of relief this time, not frustration.

“I won’t ignore your calls and if we are to meet, I’ll be there. Or at least talk to you if I have to be late.” Her body softens and when she tries to pull her wrist from my grasp, I release her.

“Good girl,” I pat her ass gently, enjoying the bounce.

Moving my leg from on top of hers, I shift her position to straddle my left knee. The heat from her pussy radiates through my pant leg.

“Can I get up now?” she asks, but is already pushing her way off my lap.

Reaching down, I cross my arm over her chest and swing her up to my lap, making her straddle me.

Her face is flushed, her wet eyes wide as her ass rubs against the fabric of my pants.

“What are you doing?” she asks, blinking away unshed tears.

I reach between her thighs. “I’m making you feel better.”

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Dmitri

Arousal fills her eyes as she places her hands on my shoulders, steadying herself while I slide my fingers through her folds. She's already soaked for me.

Her punishment has us both urgent and ready for each other.

"Did you want to tell me how much you hate me again?" I ask, rolling her clit beneath the pad of my middle finger.

Finding the right amount of pressure with her is easy; her expression gives her away. I doubt she even knows how to hide it from me.

She curls her fingers into my shoulders, the nails biting into my flesh. "I will hate you more if you stop."

I slap her bare ass with my left hand.

"If you tell me again you hate me, I will put you back over my knee." It's a facade.

Punishing her again would only serve to delay getting inside of her. And that won't happen.

She groans as I rub her clit harder and kiss her neck.

"Tell me you love my fingers in your pussy." Thrusting two fingers up into her tight passage, I clench my teeth. She's so fucking tight.

“I do.” She nods. “But more, Dmitri, I need more.”

She sinks down a little as though to seek out a third finger.

“No, Amelia. No more until you take my cock.” I lick the little spot on her neck just above her collarbone, then sink my teeth into the flesh.

She unleashes a melody of hisses at the sensations of pleasure and pain mingling together.

“Then fuck me. Like this.” She reaches down between us, searching out my pants.

“No. Not like this. On the bed.” I pull my fingers from her pussy, sinking them immediately into my mouth to taste her sweetness. “Now.”

I smack her ass again, harder than before so she knows I mean business.

She rolls her eyes, letting me know she’s not intimidated. This woman will forever keep me on my toes. Not five minutes since, she was lying over my lap with a hot, red ass from her punishment, and now she’s rolling her eyes at me.

I watch in the mirror on the wall as she climbs off my lap and struts to the bed. Her ass cheeks, still a bright pink, sway with her movements and the urge to bite into her sweet flesh overwhelms me.

As I make my way to her, I’m already shucking out of my pants, shoving my boxers to the floor and kicking the mess of fabric away. Her eyes widen when she gets a look at my naked form.

Scars litter my chest and abdomen. My back is no better. While some men in my world cover the blemishes up with tattoos, I have chosen to leave them uncovered.

These are the markings of my past. Each wound brought me closer to my goal, to sit at the top of my own destiny.

No one handed me my empire. Every brick was laid with my blood.

The bed dips as I climb up beside her, moving between her thighs. She leans back against the pillows. Her hair, completely out of the hair tie from all her squirming over my lap, splays out behind her.

I hold myself over her, my forearms on either side of her head, and my mouth hovering a mere breath over hers.

“You’re my wife now, Amelia,” I say, my cock nudging against her entrance.

Her heat beckons me, and all I want to do is plow straight into her and pound her until the bed breaks through the wall and we’re both screaming with release.

“Yes, Dmitri.” She nods a little, pushing her hips up toward me, as though to force my cock into her before I’m ready.

No matter how much I give her, she will always try to take more.

Smart woman.

Take what you want and refuse to be denied.

“Your ass is still red from my hand, and your pussy is soaked with need for my cock.”

Her blush returns to her face, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from shoving all the way into her tight pussy right now.

“You don’t need to say it like that.” She tries to turn away from me, but I grasp her chin and pull her back for a kiss.

A long, seductive kiss that leaves me with more desperation to be inside her than before.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re so proud of yourself.”

“I am proud. You took your punishment well, even with all your squirming.” I let her chin go. “You may still fight how much you enjoy being bent to my authority, but your body knows who it belongs to.”

I nudge forward enough that the fat head of my cock pushes just past her entrance, making her gasp at the sudden invasion.

“Arrogant,” she mutters, but then moans as I push further inside.

Too slow for any sort of reprieve for myself. It’s taking too much energy to keep from fucking this woman into oblivion.

“There are other ways to punish naughty wives.” I reach between our bodies, finding her wet and swollen clit. “I can easily find my own pleasure, use this gorgeous body of yours for myself, and leave you panting and wanting.”

I flick her clit until her body tenses beneath me. “I can leave you on the edge, not letting you come until you learn to be a good girl for me.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Oh, god, Dmitri.”

She digs her heels into the mattress and pushes up, taking my cock inside another inch as I rub her clit faster and faster.

“Will you be good for me, Amelia?”

She nods fast and furiously, but I think I could make her promise anything at this moment and she’d agree.

There’s a whimper when I pull my hand back from between our bodies. “Promise me. Say it, Amelia.”

She looks up at me, the desperation in her eyes matching the feeling in my chest. If I don’t get inside of her soon, I’m going to die.

“I promise, Dmitri. I’ll be good for you.” She licks her lips. “I’ll be a good girl.”

When she finally says it, when the words reach my ears, I drive into her hard up to the hilt. My balls smack against her ass cheeks as I bury myself fully inside her hot, wet, tight pussy.

I groan as her body squeezes around my cock. Fuck, she feels perfect.

I’ve fucked women, many women, but none of them compared to this. Her heat wraps around me, but not just around my cock. Every inch of my body, of my soul warms with her touch.

Her walls clench around my cock. It’s too much.

Pulling back until I’m almost gone from her warmth, I pause, line up our gazes then plow back in.

“Fuck!” I grind out. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

I grab her hip, pinning her to the bed as I drive into her harder and faster.

“Dmitri,” she whimpers, lifting her legs and wrapping them around my waist.

She opens her mouth, like she wants to say something, but it’s cut off by my kiss. Her lips part easily, giving me full access to fuck her mouth with my tongue while my cock drives her harder into the bed.

I growl, breaking the kiss and arching my back, twisting my hips just enough to change where my cock hits her walls as I continue to fuck her.

“Oh, god. Oh, god!” She grabs at my arms, lifting her hips to meet my thrusts.

“Dmitri! Oh, fuck, Dmitri!”

“Say it again, Amelia. Say you’ll be my good girl. Say it. I need to hear you.” Electric heat zips down my spine as my balls pull tight.

I will die like this, and it will be most heroic death a man can face.

“I’ll be good. So good. I’ll be your good girl.” Her nails scratch down my back and it’s all I can stand.

“Come, Amelia. Now. Come now!” I piston my hips, driving harder and grinding my pelvis against her body.

She screams my name into my ear as she comes a moment later. Her voice gives out and she’s left with her mouth dropped open, a silent cry stretching her throat.

Gritting my teeth, I plow once, twice, and then once more before stilling inside her

tight pussy. Her own release continues to spasm around my cock, clenching and pulling my orgasm from me.

My roar of relief fills the space between us as I arch my back and unleash inside of her, splashing the walls of her pussy with my seed.

Maybe one will plant in her womb tonight.

A shudder runs through me as the last wave of my release fades.

Moments later, when I'm settled beside her on the bed, she rolls over to face me, placing her hand on my chest. She trails a scar with the tip of her finger.

"You haven't had an easy life, have you, Dmitri?"

I cover her hand with my own. If she keeps touching me so sweetly, I'm going to want her again. And she's probably already sore from what we've just done.

"No worse than I can handle." I sweep my fingers over the back of her hand.

My eyelids are heavy with sleep. Even though it's barely eight o'clock, I want nothing more than to wrap my arms around this woman and carry us both to sleep.

"Hmm. The people who come to the center, they're not having an easy life either."

I pause, open my eyes to look at her. Where is she going with all of this?

"The work you do is important," I agree. She pushes her lips together as though she's not sure how to proceed.

"I was the one who found her, you know." She rests her head on my chest and

snuggles closer to me.

“Who?”

“My mother,” she says softly, like just saying her name brings back the pain of it.

“I didn’t know that, no.” I go back to stroking her arm.

Her mother’s death was hard on her. She’d only been a child. Thirteen years old, at a time when a girl needs her mother most, Amelia had lost hers.

“I did. I came home early from a friend’s house. I was supposed to be staying for dinner, but I wanted to go home. I could just feel something was wrong.” She leans up again, resting her chin on my chest. “Isn’t that weird? I could sense something terrible.”

“You were close with your mother?” I offer as an explanation.

“I was,” she agrees. “When I got home, I yelled for her, but she didn’t answer. Her car was in the driveway, so I knew she was home. Our cook wasn’t there either. The house was empty. I ran up to her room, thinking maybe she was just sleeping. She did that a lot when she was using hard.”

I tense, knowing exactly what the little girl Amelia found when she finally came upon her mother.

“She was in her bathroom,” she whispers. “Sprawled out on the floor in just her robe. She’d passed out and hit her head on the counter on the way down.”

I squeeze her hand as though I can transfer my strength to her.

“There was blood everywhere,” she says.

I recall the scene. It wasn’t just in the bathroom either; the blood had sprayed out of the door, leaving spots on the carpeting in the bedroom.

“You’ve not had an easy life either,” I say after moments of silence pass.

I’m not sure why she’s telling me this. Or why I didn’t know she was the one who found Marion.

“The center helps people like my mom, and I have plans to expand with a women’s shelter within two years. People need it.” She turns again, staring at me, but her features have hardened.

A storm brews beneath her stare.

“I need you to swear to me that you will never make me close the center. You will always find a way to fund the foundation so I can help women like my mother who thought drugs were the only way to make life bearable.”

I push up to my elbow, effectively rolling her to her back as I hold myself over her. Concern wrinkles her brow as she looks up at me.

“What is bothering you? I’ve already told you the foundation will remain funded. There’s something else you’re worrying over.”

“I know what your connection was to my brother. I know why he made me marry you.”

“What reason do you think Lucas had to make his will the way he did?” I question her.

Until I know her way of thinking, I can't form a response.

"Promise me the foundation will be protected first."

"We already discussed that before. I've already given you my word. Are you questioning it now?"

"I don't know you, Dmitri. Not really. You got what you wanted out of this. We're married and the shares will roll to you now. If you chose to leave me, you could easily take what Lucas left me. At least half of it, anyway. Which means the foundation would be in trouble. I need your word that won't happen. You won't take the foundation from me." Her features tighten. "Ever. For any reason."

"Amelia." I run the back of my knuckles across her jawline until the tension eases. "I told you; this marriage is forever. There is no leaving. No divorce. No splitting estates. You're mine now."

"The foundation," she insists.

"Continues to be funded by Moreau Investments and if not from there, Velvet Tower will make annual contributions." I lay my finger over her lips when she looks ready to speak again. "Now. Tell me what you think you know about your brother."

"I found his ledgers," she says against my finger.

"His ledgers?" I shift my weight and move my hand from her mouth.

"Yes. I know he's been hiding money for you. It's why he left the firm to you, why you having controlling shares was so important. So you could keep washing your dirty money.

“The company has been washing money for you for years, and in order for that to continue you’d need to have the controlling shares. If I had been married already, Lucas would have brought my husband into his company so that he’d be able to continue it if Lucas died.”

“And you got all that from some numbers in a ledger?”

“Are you denying it?” She hardens her voice, as though my answer will determine how the next leg of our relationship is going to go.

I demand honesty from her, and I will always give her the same.

“No, I don’t deny it. The business I had with your brother has been good for me, and for him. I believe he changed the bylaws of his company in order to always keep someone in your family in charge, so our business would never be affected. You’re probably right. In order to keep our arrangement, he made the stipulation in his will.”

It would have been nice had he warned me about it, but I don’t tell her that.

“He sold me to protect your scheme with him.”

“Sold you to me?” I can’t help the pull of my lips as a grin takes over.

“Yes. Don’t laugh.”

“I’m not laughing at you. But if you had taken over the company, I would have had the same arrangement with you as I did with him.”

“How do you know I would keep up the agreement? Working with the mafia isn’t really my thing.” She frowns. “But I didn’t think it would be something Lucas would do either.”

She thinks it over a moment.

“Why did Lucas go into business with you? Did you force him?” Her brow wrinkles.

“No one forced him to do anything. Your brother was his own man. He had his own reasons for making his decisions.”

“It did make our father mad as hell that he wouldn’t go into politics. Lucas wanted to do things his way,” she muses. “But that doesn’t explain why you would agree to this. You have so much already; did you really need his firm?”

“No.”

“No? Just no?” She nudges my shoulder. “Tell me. Why would you want to marry a stranger who brings nothing to the marriage?”

I grin. She’s gorgeous when she gets riled up. Her eyes flash and the tip of her nose reddens. It’s different than when she’s embarrassed. Her entire face burns bright when that happens.

“Dmitri.”

“It’s simple, Amelia.” I brush a piece of hair from her cheek. “I wanted to.”

Her frustrated growl makes my cock hard again. When she shifts her hips beneath me trying to get away, my decision to keep my hands off her until morning changes.

Amelia

“I can’t believe you invited your entire family over and didn’t warn me.” I come out of Dmitri’s en suite bathroom with a thick towel wrapped around my torso.

Dmitri sits at the foot of the bed, watching me with an expression that suggests I should have stayed in the bathroom to get dressed. He looks ready to pounce.

“You should have told me earlier,” I admonish as I pad my way to the door.

“Where are you going in that towel?” His question is given with such force it nearly slams the door shut on its own.

“To get my things. I unpacked the suitcases last night.”

He frowns. “I had them moved in here this morning when you were having breakfast. Did you really think I’d let you stay anywhere other than my bed?”

“I thought by this morning you’d have come to your senses, yes. Having separate bedrooms isn’t the end of the world; a lot of couples do it.”

“We don’t,” he says. “And you knew that, which is why you waited until I was busy before you snuck into the other room to unpack your things.”

I turn back to the dresser where he’s pointing and pull open the drawer. Inside stacked neatly are my leggings and jeans, exactly as I had them in the other bedroom.

“They moved everything in the hour I was downstairs?” I check the other drawers to find everything just as I had it, only now it’s in here. “Do you have magical staff?”

“I have an efficient staff,” he says as I open the door to the closet.

The closet is breathtaking.

There’s enough room in here to turn it into a small bedroom. On one side of the closet hangs suits, dress shirts, and there are several racks of ties. An entire shelving system is used for his shoes.

My clothes don’t even fill the whole half of the closet he’s cleared for me. But everything’s there. My five pairs of shoes are on my own set of shelves.

“I would have thought you’d have more clothes.” His voice sends a shiver over my skin as he appears behind me.

From the full-length mirror against the far wall, I watch him press himself behind me, looking down at my profile.

My nipples tighten beneath the plush towel.

“I don’t have any need for it. I have enough to get through the work week. I have a few nice things for when I had to go to a dinner with Lucas or some benefit. It’s enough.” I start pushing the hangers aside to find something for this afternoon.

His cousins, their wives, his uncle, and other people I lost count of when he finally got around to telling me about them are coming over for dinner. In an hour.

“This might do.”

I pull out a navy-blue dress I wore to a holiday luncheon Lucas' friends held. He'd dragged me to it as his plus one because he'd broken up with yet another girlfriend the week before.

Dmitri removes the hanger from my hand and turns it more into the light before hanging it back up.

"No. Nothing that formal."

"Too formal? Aren't you wearing a suit?" I haven't seen him wear anything other than suits and ties. Aside from last night when he wore nothing at all to bed.

"No." He glances down at the black button-down he put on this morning before going down to breakfast with me.

"Fine. A blouse and some slacks then." I push the dresses aside and pull out a pair of black pants. "These alright?"

He eyes them. "You need to go shopping. Lucas should have made sure you had more than what you have. He had the money."

"I didn't take his money." I turn away from him and go back to searching for a blouse that would go well with the pants.

"Why not?"

"Because it was his money. Not my money." I find a soft pink blouse, but think better of it.

If I spill something at dinner, it will be painfully obvious.

“You were his sister.”

I sigh. He’s not going to stop picking until he gets the answer he wants.

“My father liked to remind me, at every opportunity he could, that my mother tricked him into marrying him by getting pregnant with me. He said I was her golden ticket.” I pull out a dark purple blouse, realize he’s shaking his head no at me, and put it back.

“You father said that?” he presses when I go back on the hunt.

“Yes. He said she only wanted his money. Which wasn’t true, but he never would listen to anyone. This one?” I find a gray sweater.

“No. This one.” He reaches past me and plucks a green blouse I haven’t worn in a while. “It brings the green out in your eyes.”

“I don’t have green eyes.” I take the hanger from him.

“No, you have hazel eyes. A nice blend of brown and green. This will bring out the green,” he says. “Now go on, what other nonsense did that old man fill your head with?”

His tone changes when he mentions my father, almost as if there’s a hatred lingering there for him. Dmitri wouldn’t be the first person to have past anger at my father, but I’m curious as to what his issue is.

“He made it a point to make sure I understood his money was his money. I hadn’t earned a penny of it. I think that’s partly why Lucas wouldn’t go into politics with Dad. He didn’t want my father to be able to hold it over him that he’d given him a leg up.”

“Lucas built his firm without your father’s help? Not even the startup cash?”

“No. Lucas and I didn’t share a mother. Well, you knew that, but anyway, his mother had died from breast cancer when he was in high school. She had her own money; her father had been an investment broker or something like that. When she died, everything she had went to Lucas. She specifically left my father out of her will.”

Dmitri’s eyebrows rise. “Really? She cut out her own husband?”

“Yes.” I smile. “Lucas told me once he thought his mother saw through Dad’s bullshit and knew if she left it to him, Lucas wouldn’t see a dime. So, when she got sick, she changed her will and cut him out.”

“So Lucas used that to start his firm.”

“Some of it. Yes.” I nod. “He wouldn’t use the whole amount because he didn’t want anyone to say he didn’t do it on his own. So he put up some of the cash and then got a few investors. He was very persuasive when he wanted to be.”

With my outfit picked out, I try to step around him to the door.

“Dmitri, move,” I laugh. My underwear is in the dresser. I can’t get dressed without that.

“Not yet.” He takes the shirt and pants from me and hangs them on a hook near the door.

“What are you doing?” I take a small step back, understanding the look in his eye perfectly well.

He’s moved back into his predatory mood.

“Take off the towel, moyo dikoye plamya .”

“Dmitri, your family will be here soon.” I clutch the towel with one hand and try to ward him off with the other as I back up a step.

“They can wait. I’ve waited for them before.” He stalks toward me until he’s only arm’s length away. “Take off the towel, Amelia; don’t make me tell you again.”

But his accent comes through thicker when he gives his warning, and I have to make him tell me again. If only to see the flash of dominance in his eyes.

“You have guests coming, you’re being rude.” I take a small step back, but not far enough.

He easily snatches me by the arm and yanks me to him.

“You’re being disobedient.” He tugs the end of the towel out from where it’s tucked. “And that’s worse. I promise.”

Holding the corner of the towel, he spins me around to face away from him. Leaving me naked in the middle of the closet.

Worse.

I’m naked standing in front of the full-length mirror in the middle of the closet.

His eyes meet mine in the reflection. The bastard did it on purpose.

“Now we can both admire your beauty while I fuck you.” He drops the towel and steps back up to me.

With his foot, he hooks the leg of a bench and pulls it toward us, maneuvering it in front of me.

“I don’t think?—”

Before anything else can come out of my mouth, his hands are on me, cupping my breasts. He pulls me back against his chest while his fingers roll my nipples.

“All you do is think, Amelia.” He kisses my neck, then my shoulder. “I want you to stop thinking for a few minutes. Just feel.”

My toes curl into the carpeting as his fingers tighten. It hurts, but a tingling of sweet sensations scurries across my skin with the bite. I don’t complain.

“Feel me give you pleasure.” He slides one hand over my stomach, past the small patch of curls that are still damp from my shower, until he reaches my wet pussy.

And it has nothing to do with my shower and everything to do with this Neanderthal manhandling me.

If Mom had lived long enough, she probably would have warned me about men like him. A man who can make you forget all your principles and independence with one simple touch of his lips against your skin.

He’s dangerous. And it has nothing to do with his mafia family.

“Feel how tight your pussy grips my fingers.” His words vibrate in my ear as he kisses just behind it and thrusts two fingers into me.

I lean back against his chest, turning my head to the side so I can feel his warmth against my cheek while he finger-fucks me. At first his fingers move slowly,

dragging across the sensitive spot inside I didn't think any man knew about.

"Does this feel good, Amelia?"

"It does," I whine because it's not enough.

"Do you want something else?" His fingers still while he presses the pad of his thumb against my clit.

I nod.

"Tell me, Amelia. Maybe if you ask sweetly enough, I'll grant it." He curls his fingers more and thrusts them back inside, harder than before, faster too.

"Dmitri, I want you." I lift my arm, wrapping it around his neck. "Please. Please fuck me."

He growls and the vibrations from his chest hit my back.

"Put your hands on the bench, Amelia." He slides his fingers from me, immediately making me feel abandoned and empty.

Bending over, I press my palms into the leather of the bench. The jangle of his belt being undone makes my ass clench, and I look up at him through the mirror.

An arrogant grin greets me.

"Not today, but you'll learn to love my belt across your ass." He shoves his pants down, pulling his thick cock out and fisting it. I swallow the drool forming in my mouth at the sight.

“Dmitri.” I start to stand up, but think better of it. If I disobey him now, he’ll get all authoritative on me and won’t give me what I want.

“Please, I want to...” I bite down on my lip.

I’ve never vocalized this need before.

“You want to what?” His grin gets bigger. Arrogant prick. “Ask.”

He squeezes his cock until a bead of pre-cum forms at the tip. I lick my lip as though I’m licking it away.

“Dmitri, I want to taste you.”

He takes a small step back. “Then get on your knees.”

He points to the spot on the carpet just in front of him.

The arrogance of it should piss me off. Instead, I find my pussy getting more slick, my nipples tightening at the domineering way he talks.

Slowly, I move from the bench to my knees in front of him. The masculine scent of his cock fills my nostrils, I’m so close to him.

When I reach my hand out to him, he pushes it away.

“Your mouth, Amelia. Open your mouth. I’m going to feed it to you, and you’re going to take it.” He rests his free hand on top of my head as he brings the tip of his cock to my lips.

As soon as I open my mouth, he pushes forward. The silky-smooth round head of his

cock glides over my tongue, and further still until it hits the back of my throat. I swallow, trying to keep from gagging on the thickness of him.

“Fuck.” His fingers curl into my hair. “Good girl. Keep swallowing.”

He pulls back a little, only to thrust back in. Each time he hits my throat, I swallow, and he groans a little louder.

Working my tongue beneath his cock, I stroke the sensitive spot just on the underside of his head as he thrusts into my mouth.

He fucks my mouth faster as I suck hard. Flicking my tongue over him, I drive him as wild as he drives me when his fingers are torturing me. Payback is fun.

I cup his balls in my hand, squeezing just a little until he groans again.

“Fuck, yes.” He continues to fuck my throat, stretching me, choking me with his cock. Spittle forms at the edges of my lips, and he catches it, swiping it up and smearing it across my cheek.

“Good girl, sucking your husband like such a good girl.” He pats the wet spot on my cheek and continues to use my mouth as he does my pussy.

His balls tighten in my hand, and he stills.

“Up. Get up, I want to come inside you.” He yanks out of me and hauls me off my knees before I can really think about what’s happening.

Spun around and shoved between my shoulders, I’m bent back over the bench. A second later, his cock thrusts into my soaked and hungry pussy.

“Dmitri!” I fall forward onto my forearms as he fills me. There’s a sweet burn as my body stretches around him.

He reaches around our bodies, between my thighs, and flicks my clit. I rise up to my toes as the electricity shoots through my body.

“Look in the mirror, Amelia. Watch me fuck you.” He sinks his hand into my hair, pulling my head up.

Somehow, he’s moved the bench and we’re now sideways in the mirror. From this angle, I can see his cock as it pulls back from my body, glistening with my juices.

“Oh!” I fist my hands as the burn in my scalp matches the pleasure between my legs.

“Good girl.” He rubs my clit harder and the coil inside me tightens to unmanageable levels.

“Dmitri, Please. I have... fuck, I have to... oh, god!” Before I can even get out what I need, or want, or whatever half-baked thought was popping into my arousal-infused brain, an orgasm unlike any other rips through me.

As my body shudders with release, he lets go of my hair and grabs my hips. Dragging me back toward him, he plows forward, fucking me harder and harder.

Through glassy eyes, I see the mirror, see my ass bouncing each time his cock thrusts into me.

Again and again until he stills and lets out a roar that should shake the walls. His hot cum fills me as his cock pulsates inside of me.

Out of breath and a little shaky, I hold myself up while he catches his own breath.

Moments pass before he finally slides from my body. He helps me turn around and sit on the bench before he swipes the towel from the floor and hands it to me.

I press it to my chest, too winded and in a daze to care much about his cum leaking onto the leather.

He puts himself back together and grabs his phone from his back pocket. When I look up at him, he has a twisted smile on his lips.

“They’ve all arrived.”

Dmitri

“We can’t allow them to keep your shipment at the port; what’s being done to stop them?” My uncle leans back in his chair, balancing his glass of whiskey on the arm.

“Kost is heading there this week to fish out the problem. It will be solved soon and the shipment sent off. But I agree, we can’t let Kozlov get away with getting involved here.” I glance at the door of the study.

Amelia has been a great success with my family. Everyone has fallen for her head over heels already. Every question and conversation was aimed at her during the entirety of dinner, and she navigated all of it with perfect grace.

After we’d finished eating, the women shooed us out of the dining room so they could have Amelia to themselves.

Anyone would be overwhelmed with all the attention, but she simply shrugged at me and said she’d let us know when the coffee and desserts were ready.

“Konstantin?” Nikolai clears his throat. “Your brother?”

I drum my fingers on the arm of my chair. How long can it take to brew a pot of coffee and cut up some cake?

“Yes.” I glance once more at the door.

“You think it’s wise to involve him again?” Arman questions.

The last time my younger brother was entwined in business dealings on my behalf, a war erupted back home.

“Kost knows who to deal with at the port. He’ll get it handled, and the shipment will be released. If I allow it to be delayed any longer, I’ll have to answer to some very upset dignitaries who have paid an obscene sum to be certain their weapons get into the wrong hands at the right time,” I explain.

Not making good on my part of a deal gives them leverage, and I make it a point to keep very few people out in the world who can claim to have that.

“In order for Kozlov to have gotten the Zhukov family who control the Novorossiysk port, they’ve had to have come to an agreement of some sort. Yusef Zhukov doesn’t like the Kozlov family any more than we do,” my uncle points out.

“And you wanted Roman to marry one of their daughters?” Arman frowns. The bad blood between my uncle and Arman has healed, but it’s no surprise that Uncle Igor would try to get involved with his oldest son’s marriage plans.

“I wanted Roman to marry.” Uncle Igor swipes a hand through the air. “The Kozlov girl wasn’t a horrible idea at the time, but once he told me about his engagement to Billie, I dropped it.”

“You have a habit of backing the wrong horse,” Nikolai jokes. “Maybe you should stay out of the matchmaking business.”

“Who’s making matches?” Uncle opens his arms wide like he’s tired of being the butt of their harassment. “All I ask now is my sons fill their nurseries so I can have dozens of grandbabies.”

“I’m doing the best I can,” Arman laughs.

They announced at dinner that Anya is expecting.

Igor swings his gaze onto me. “A few grandnieces and nephews would be nice as well. I can hear my sister complaining all the way from Russia that she has no grandchildren.”

“She’s said nothing to me.” I lift a shoulder.

“You lie straight to my face?” He leans forward, the levity dropping.

I grin. “Of course not, Uncle. You know her as well as I do, and she’s told me at length what she expects. I’ve gotten married; doesn’t that allow me at least a week before the screams for babies begin?”

Though, my own thoughts have already turned to the subject. I’m not an old man, but I’m not young either. Having my baby swell Amelia’s belly soon is in the forefront of my mind.

“Maybe Kost will find a woman soon and start a family,” Nikolai says with a straight face as he brings his drink to his lips.

“Kost?” Arman laughs. “He’d sooner cut off his left foot than settle down with one woman.”

“He enjoys his life the way it is,” I agree with a frown.

It wouldn’t hurt him to settle in one place for longer than a few months. But he’s always enjoyed the adventures that come with the work he does.

Uncle Igor raises a glass to me. “He’s never not found his mark, I’ll give him that. No man can hide from Konstantin.”

I glance at my watch then the door again. What are they doing in the kitchen? I should have asked the cook to stay instead of listening to Amelia about letting her have the night off.

“Then there’s Dmitri here, who hasn’t stopped looking at the door since we sat down.” Nikolai laughs. “Let your bride have time with the girls. She’s probably filling their heads with all the insane things you’ve done since she found out she had to marry you.”

“Don’t look so angry. Anya accused me of losing my mind at least once a day when we first got together.” Arman pushes up from his chair to refill his glass.

“That’s because you did, and there are days when you still do,” Anya says, sweeping into the room with Amelia and the other women right behind her.

Anya brings the tray with plated desserts to a nearby table and Amelia brings a tray carrying the coffee.

The carafe looks wobbly, so I get up to help her, not wanting her to spill the hot drink all over herself.

“I have it.” She frowns at me when I get to her side.

“It’s heavy.” I take the tray from her grasp and bring it to the table where Anya has put the dessert.

“It’s just coffee.” She shakes her head at me. “I can carry a pot of coffee.”

“That’s not the point,” Charlotte and Anya say in unison at the same time as I do.

I shoot them a heated glare, but they only grin back at me.

“Don’t look at my wife like that, Dmitri. Only I get to glare at her like that.” Nikolai picks up his wife’s hand.

It’s a facade, his anger toward me.

“Then do your damn job, cousin,” I shoot at him, only to be laughed at again.

“Don’t antagonize them, they’re family,” Amelia says softly as she pours coffee into a cup. “Do you want some?”

“You’re serving me coffee?” I question hesitantly.

This woman was ready to remove my heart with a spoon only twenty-four hours earlier; should I trust anything she hands me?

“It’s just coffee, don’t get all Dmitri about it.” She places the cup on a saucer and hands it to me. “Who all wants a cup?” she calls to the rest of the room.

I take my cup back to my seat and watch as she pours and serves coffee to my family. Charlotte and Anya have already passed out the chocolate cake and sit beside their husbands in the chairs each of them has vacated for their wives. The men have moved to straight-back chairs brought in from the dining room.

“Lia, Nikolai told me that you’re in charge of the Moreau Center.” Charlotte swipes a finger beneath her lips, wiping away a bit of chocolate frosting. “That must be a lot of work.”

“It is.” Amelia nods. “But it’s good work, you know? I mean the mundane things like building maintenance, budgets—all that stuff is annoying, but the actual helping people makes up for all that.”

“You don’t have enough staff to do all that?” Anya questions.

Amelia eyes the chair beside me. It’s the only one left for her to sit in, but she remains standing with her coffee. The urge to demand her to sit with me, in my lap actually, is strong, but I won’t push the issue.

She’s been so gracious with my family and all of their questions during dinner, I’ll let her have this tiny defiance.

“I do, but there’s only so much everyone can do.” She takes a sip of her coffee and her eyes widen. “That reminds me, I have a meeting tomorrow with the accountant I’ve been putting off.”

“The meeting rooms in the basement will be ready by morning,” I contribute. “The last of the drywall was installed and painted this afternoon. All the carpets have been replaced.”

Her shoulders relax as though I’ve just pulled a boulder off of them. A small, but genuine smile touches her lips.

“Oh, good. Thank you.”

I feel five sets of eyes turn on me and my jaw clenches at the attention. If I would allow it, I think my cheeks would heat.

“What does the accountant want?” I ask, skipping right over the moment.

She lifts a shoulder. “I have no idea. He’s been trying to meet for a while, but I’ve been busy and then Lucas—” She cuts off at the mention of her brother.

There’s silence for a beat; she looks shaken in that moment, but she clears her throat

and continues. “When Lucas died, things were too chaotic to deal with him. But it’s been long enough. I need to start settling things.”

“Yes, we heard about your brother. He was a good man,” Uncle Igor pipes in.

She brings her eyes to him and for a moment they harden. The reason he knows her brother is probably running through her mind.

“Now that the marriage is settled, we can start working our way through whatever else needs to be done for his estate.” I get up, bringing my half-empty cup to the table and placing it on the tray, standing behind her.

“The paperwork after something like this can be so overwhelming. When my father passed, it was like an avalanche fell on me.” Charlotte gives a sympathetic smile.

“Thankfully most of that is taken care of, but I need to sort out his apartment. I might just let Christian handle it like he offered. He’s Lucas’ closest friend,” she says to the girls.

“Christian?” I step closer to her. “When did he offer this?”

The muscles in her neck tense.

“Yesterday. He stopped by the apartment when I was there. He’s been good enough to check on the place since it’s empty. I hadn’t even thought to do it.” She takes a sip of her coffee.

“You saw him yesterday.” My palm itches at the idea of her being in the same room with that asshole.

There’s a reason Lucas never brought Christian into the fold when it came to his

business. They had been close friends, but Lucas didn't trust him. Not when it came to money or business.

"I did." She puts her cup down on the table. "Does anyone need a refill?"

All five of our guests decline the offer, turning their eyes to me. My cousins have knowing grins tugging on their lips. Her continued disobedience amuses them. From the stories I've heard, they had their own troubles with their women at the beginning.

"Even after I said I didn't want you alone with him again?"

She puts the coffee carafe back down. "I didn't know he was going to show up. He just did."

"To check that the apartment in a highly secured building in the city was still there?" I scoff. "What else did he want?"

"Can we talk about it later? We have guests." She turns a heated stare on me.

"Are you talking about Christian Sendell?" Arman brings his empty plate to the table.

"Yes. Do you know him?" Amelia asks curiously.

"Not personally, no, but I've heard him mentioned here and there. I only made the connection now because I recall one of the few times I met your brother, Christian was with him." He slides his hands into the front pockets of his slacks and eyes me. "I never got a good feeling about him."

"Oh, he's harmless," Amelia defends him. "He was friends with Lucas since college. He's got a great head for marketing, but he sucks with investments. That's why Lucas never brought him into the firm, but he's the third person on our board of trustees for

the Moreau Foundation.”

“What sort of access does he have to the foundation’s investments and accounts?” I question.

She frowns at me. “I guess he has the same access as I do. We put all three of our names on the bank accounts in case there was ever a situation where it was needed.” She’s quick to add, “But he’s never so much as even looked at a bank statement. He and Lucas left the foundation and the center completely up to me.”

Uncle Igor’s gaze hits mine and he doesn’t need to voice his concerns. I’m having the same.

But I won’t argue with her about it right now. Once I have information, I’ll bring it to her.

“Nikolai, Sophia isn’t going down,” Charlotte says while tapping on her phone. “I’m sorry, but I think we need to go.”

Nikolai is up on his feet before she’s finished speaking. “Sophia is having a hard time at night and sometimes won’t go to sleep unless Charlotte is there.” He eyes his wife. “A problem I think is getting worse because we continue to give in to what she wants.”

“She’s a baby. You can’t spoil a baby with too much love,” Charlotte chastises him. “How would you like it to have the one thing you depend on in life to just abandon you? You’d hate it.”

Nikolai raises an eyebrow and shakes his head a little. He’s choosing his battles as much as I am, and this isn’t the hill to take a bullet on.

“We’ll go.” He brings his coffee cup and Charlotte’s empty plate. “Good luck to you. If she’s anything like mine, you’re going to need it,” he mutters to me as he passes, slapping me on the back as he escorts his wife out of the study.

“We should probably get going, too.” Arman puts his hand out for his wife.

“But it’s early still,” she complains. “And I didn’t get a chance to talk with Lia on my own.”

“She’s family now, Anya. You can talk to her whenever you want.”

Anya steps up to Amelia.

“Next weekend you, me, and Charlie should go out for lunch. Maybe a little shopping. Some of my pants are starting to get a little tight already.” She pats her belly that has only the smallest bulge from the baby resting inside.

“She will join you,” I answer for her. The woman needs more clothes.

Twice what she currently has, I think. And shoes. I’ve never known a woman to own fewer shoes than me.

“I can answer for myself.” Amelia shoots me a glare. “But, yes, that would be fun, and I do need a few things for work.”

“Work,” I mutter beneath my breath. All she thinks about is work; she needs to take a day off. To rest.

To breathe.

Has she taken even an afternoon off since Lucas’ accident?

Anya gives her a quick hug.

“She’s grieving not only her brother, but the life she had. Give her time,” she whispers to me when she hugs me goodbye.

Arman glares at me. If we were not blood, he would consider removing my ear for letting his wife’s lips get so close.

I can’t blame him.

I would do the same.

“I’ll walk you out,” I say to my uncle as he makes his way past me.

He’s retired now, not working in any of the family affairs and it’s done him a world of good. Not only for his temperament, but he’s looking younger. The stress of our world damages us at a faster rate than most.

“I’ll get this cleaned up.” Amelia starts to pile up the plates.

“I have a full staff, Amelia. Let them do their jobs.” I stop her, but when she looks up at me, I can see the tiredness in her eyes.

Everything between us has been a struggle. Maybe she’s just as exhausted by it as I am.

Now that we’re married, maybe we can start fresh. Stop fighting each other and become one team.

“Just don’t overdo. You said you have a lot going on tomorrow, you should get some sleep.”

“It’s not late.” She checks the time on her phone. “But I do have some reading to do. I’ll get this cleared and head upstairs.”

I press a kiss to her forehead. “Good girl,” I whisper just for the fun of watching her eyes dilate before me.

She’s so responsive, it would be cruel to deny myself.

Uncle Igor clears his throat, reminding me he’s waiting for me.

As we walk down the hall toward the foyer, he pockets his hands.

“That boy she mentioned, Christian Sendell,” Uncle Igor says, coming to a stop once we’re at the front door.

“What about him?” I grab his coat from the closet and hold it out to him.

He drapes it over his arm and frowns.

“I never worked directly with Lucas or his father before him, but I remember there being some trouble with Christian. It was a while ago, mind you, years back. Lucas’ father was still an Alderman at the time.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“Gambling debts if I remember right. Nikolai might remember. If I’m right, he’d taken a loan to cover the debts and when he couldn’t repay, Lucas came to his rescue.” He shuffles the coat open to put it on.

“I’m not getting in the middle here; I learned my lesson on that with my own sons. I’m just suggesting you might want to take a closer look at him. If he’s so friendly to

Lia, there might be other reasons.”

“I’ll look into it.” I’m already listing what information I want by morning about this man in my mind.

“Good.” He gives me a hard nod as he buttons his last button. “Let me know if you need anything.”

He smacks my shoulder and heads out, leaving me alone in the foyer.

“Shit!” Amelia yells and a second later a clamor of cups and plates echoes down the hall.

She definitely tried to carry everything at one time.

Amelia

“Peter from Freedom House is on line one for you.” Sarah peeks her head into my office. “And I’m going across the street to get a coffee, I need a latte. You want something?”

I look up from my computer screen where I have the bookkeeping software open. “Yes.”

Grabbing my wallet, I pull out cash for her. “A caramel latte, the biggest they have and with an extra shot of espresso.”

“This one’s on me. You got it last week.” She wiggles her fingers and leaves without taking a single bill, calling back to me, “Don’t forget line one!”

“Line one. Right.” I shove the bills back into my wallet and turn my chair to find my phone.

It’s buried beneath pages of bank statements I printed off this morning to get ready for the accountant that should be here soon.

The Freedom House is a halfway house that we’ve worked closely with over the last year.

Some people will leave a full-time recovery facility and opt to room with them until they are back on their feet full time. We work with them to get those people counseling and set up with job skill workshops that will help them get employment

easier.

“Hey, Peter. How are you?” Pinning the phone between my ear and my shoulder, I continue shuffling papers around, trying to put them into some sort of recognizable order.

“Hey, Lia. Sorry to bug you, Judy is out for the day, Sarah said, and I have a client I’d like to send over. He’s just joined us this morning and he’s having a bad afternoon. I thought I might be able to get him hooked up with Ramon?”

“Of course, let me just pull up the schedules.”

I brush away the papers lingering on top of my keyboard and wiggle the mouse until the screen comes to life. Just as I’m typing in my password, there’s a soft knock at the door.

Mr. Pederse with his typical stoic expression peeks around the half-open door.

“Come in, I’ll be just a second.” I wave him over to the chair in front of my desk and quickly pull up Ramon’s schedule. “Okay, Peter, Ramon has an opening this afternoon. Just send him over and we’ll get him set up with a caseworker then send him to Ramon.”

“Great. I don’t have transport at the moment, so it’s probably going to be about an hour unless he wants to take the bus.”

“That’s fine. When he gets here, we’ll figure it all out.” Snatching up a pen, I scribble the client’s name on a post-it note and a cell phone number we can reach him at.

After shooting off a message to Ramon that I’ve blocked off time for the new client this afternoon, and another message to one of our newest caseworkers, Jessica, that

he's on his way over, I blow out a loud breath and turn my attention to Mr. Pederse.

"Sorry about that." I smile. "Can I get you something to drink? Sarah just ran to get coffee; I can text her if you'd like one?"

He shakes his head. "No, thank you, I'm fine."

He rests his briefcase on his knee and unzips the bag, digging through the files.

"So." I fold my hands onto of the mess of papers on my desk. "You made it sound like there was a problem? I know I sent over last month's financial ledger, and you've had access to the bookkeeping software."

He peeks over his wire-rimmed glasses at me with a firm stare. "Yes. What I'm here to discuss isn't about that."

My stomach sinks.

"Oh? Did the money from the endowment not transfer? I know, with Lucas having passed..." I have to pause a moment and swallow down the swell of emotion that clogs my throat. Dammit. There isn't time for that right now. "With him gone, there might be a hiccup with his estate."

"No." He finally finds the files he's looking for and yanks them out from between the numerous other folders he has stuffed in the bag.

"No, it didn't transfer?"

"No, that's not what I need to discuss with you. The transfer isn't due until next quarter." His briefcase lands on the floor at his feet with a thud and he leans back in his chair, holding the folder to his chest.

“All right then. What’s the problem?” I lace my fingers together, squeezing tightly.

He’s going to tell me we didn’t pay enough in taxes last year, or the property taxes are going up this year.

“Every quarter I do a financial audit of the accounts.”

“Right. I have the report you sent over here somewhere.” I start looking around the papers. It could be anywhere at this point. “We haven’t had our quarterly trustee meeting yet.”

“What I found isn’t in the report.” His fingers tighten on the folder.

“Why wouldn’t it be in the report?”

Sarah pushes through the door, carrying two cups of coffee in her hands.

“Sorry to interrupt.” She smiles at Mr. Pederse and hands my cup to me over the desk.

“You’re my favorite employee today.” With a grin, I take the large paper cup out of her hands.

“Of course I am.” She laughs, but stifles the sound when she notices the stiff in the chair staring up at her. “Sorry. I’ll let you two get back to it.”

“Thank you.” He frowns.

Once she’s behind him, she rolls her eyes and heads for the door.

“Sarah, can you close it, please?” I call to her just as she steps out into the hall.

“Now, what did you find and not disclose in the report?”

I take a quick sip of the caramel deliciousness before setting the cup to the side. At this rate, I’m going to need something stronger than coffee to get through this meeting.

“It didn’t go in the report because I felt a personal meeting would be best to discuss the matter.” He pulls a sheet of paper out of the folder and hands it to me.

Glancing over it, there’s nothing weird to me. It’s a list of vendors and the amounts we’ve paid over the last quarter. Flipping to the second page, I see another list from the last quarter of last year.

“What am I looking at?” I ask when he seems determined to make me figure out this puzzle on my own.

“In quarter four of last year, a new vendor appears to be used that’s not on the approved list.” He taps the top of the paper.

“Do you mean this Finity company?” The first sheet is full of the vendor payments.

“Yes. It appeared in quarter four, but only sporadically so it wasn’t questioned. When we did the year-end reporting, it didn’t look overly odd. However, when I went over this last quarter, it has appeared nearly weekly for the entire quarter.”

“Okay, but what is Finity? What do they do for us?”

“Lia,” he sighs. “That’s a question I ask you. The bookkeeper only writes checks and makes payments that are requested through you or anyone else that has financial permissions.”

“Okay, well, I don’t know who this company is, and I’ve never sent a bill over to be paid for them. There has to be a mistake.” I try to hand the papers back, but he refuses them.

“Here.” He slides a stapled packet of pages to me. “These are all of the invoices that have been paid to Finity. If you’ll notice, there’s an initial at the bottom of each invoice.”

“These are Lucas’ initials.” I run my thumb over the letters scribbled in the corner. “This isn’t making any sense. Lucas never dealt with the finances here. Other than to look at the quarterly reports, he never even looked at the books. Why would he be sending invoices for payment, and these invoices don’t even show anything? Just the name and one line item with a date on it. How was this categorized in the books?”

“According to the bookkeeper, she was sent an email from your brother with the first invoice telling her to categorize it as an office supply expense.”

He reaches across the desk and pulls the first bundle of papers he handed me and flips to the last page. “In this last quarter that amounts to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

My throat closes around a groan. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

“Did you try to find this Finity company?” The question barely has any sound to it when it’s asked.

“Yes. I found nothing. There is no business listing for that company.” His chair creaks when he leans back, having given all the news he prepared for me.

“You’re suggesting Lucas was embezzling money from the foundation.”

“I’m only pointing out a discrepancy.” He splays his hands out as though he’s not making any accusations.

“Have there been any invoices sent over since his death?”

“No.”

“All right.” I drop all the papers onto my desk. “If he was doing what is being suggested, there shouldn’t be anything else going forward.”

“I would assume not.”

“Can you direct the bookkeeper not to send any more payments to this vendor, and if any invoice shows up for it, to direct it to me?”

“Of course. However, I don’t recommend letting the matter simply die.” He catches his choice of phrasing and winces. “Sorry. What I mean is if this is discovered in a government audit, the foundation could lose its tax-exempt status.”

“What do you suggest then?”

“I think we should do a full forensic audit to be certain there are no other issues. It would also help be certain that it was in fact Lucas or if there was someone else involved.”

“Have there been any strange donations in the last quarter? Something that might offset the expense?”

His brow pulls tight. “Not that I noticed, but that would also be found during the audit.” He leans toward me, sympathy playing in his eyes. “If there is an embezzlement issue here, you are obligated to report it. There is also a possibility of

recovering the funds if you file a claim with your fidelity insurance. It covers this sort of thing.”

A throbbing takes over my head and all I can hear is the beating of drums in my ears.

“I need to sort this out before I make any decisions. Give me a few days to look all of this over. Maybe there’s something I’ll see that you missed.”

His brows lift. “I doubt I missed something.”

“Well, maybe I can figure out who this Finity company is. I’ll go to Lucas’ apartment tonight and look through his personal files. If I find anything that suggests he did this, then we’ll go forward with the reporting and filing a claim. Just give me a few days, all right?”

After a short hesitation, he nods. “Very well. If there’s anything you need clarified or any other reports, just let me know.”

“Thank you.” Some of the crushing weight rolls off my chest with the time I’ve bought, but it’s still hard to breathe.

I stand up as he gathers his things and walk him to the door of my office. Only once he’s gone, and I have the door shut and locked, do I lean back against it and clench my eyes closed.

This could ruin the foundation. It could destroy the community’s trust in the center.

If Lucas was washing mafia money through his company, there is every possibility he was doing the same with the foundation.

A tornado of anger and grief wrecks my ability to think.

And now I'm married to the very mafia he did this with.

Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?

“Fuck!”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Dmitri

“The shipment is still here.” Kost pauses. “For the moment. If we wait much longer, they’ll have it disappeared.”

“They’ve secured it for themselves?” I tap the end of my pen against the desk.

I’ve been waiting for this call, confirmation that not only is Kozlov behind the delay in my shipment, but that everything is still at the port.

If it’s there, I can get it back and move it in a timely manner. If they’ve had it shipped elsewhere, the entire order will need to be redone.

Which would result in more than a little delay; it would cost me millions of dollars and most likely the buyer would go elsewhere next time.

“I believe they are looking for a buyer; once they’ve gotten that they’ll redirect the shipment,” Kost explains.

A car horn blasts from his end of the call and he shouts something away from the phone.

“Have you been able to find out why they are targeting me? I know they have issues with the Romanovs, but going after my shipments doesn’t hurt them.” I squeeze the pen, wishing I had the bastard’s neck in my fist instead.

“Nothing solid. There’s talk about them wanting to move to the East Coast, but the

Romanovs are preventing it. And the fact they put their hands on Roman's wife keeps the old men here from helping them."

"They're lucky they were allowed to leave New York at all."

"Well, not all of them did," Kost points out.

"No. Not all of them." And if anyone touches Amelia, they will face the same fate. "Roman had every right to do what he did."

"No one debates that. But the Kozlovs still want to expand to New York. If they get the okay to make the move, your shipment might be set free. Not what I would do, but you're more diplomatic than me." Another car horn blares. "Let me get inside, it's getting loud out here."

"Where are you?" I check my watch; it's almost ten there.

Kost's day is just getting started. He's always been a night owl, and with his career choice the night is his friend.

"Back at my place. Need to get a quick shower and change before I head out." A door creaks and shuts. "So, what do you want me to do from here? I can get a few guys together and get the container on the next ship out."

"That easy?"

"Well, for us. There'll be a few bodies to sort out later." He laughs. "But that's not a problem."

"I don't want bloodshed. Yet." Leaning back in my chair, I pinch the bridge of my nose. "What about the men at the port? Bribery?"

“That would work too, but not as much fun.” Another door shuts from his end. “You want me to find out the price?”

I sigh. Enough money exchanges hands just for me to get my shipments through that port, now I’ll probably lose half my profit on this order just to get it out of there.

The Kozlovs will never set up business in this city.

“Get me the number.”

“And other shipments? If the Kozlovs have gotten to the port authorities to get this order delayed, what’s to say they don’t do it again? What if they’re getting a cut of the bribe? Your cost of doing business here will go up. If they really want into New York, this won’t be the last attempt to get you and the Romanovs out of their way.”

“I thought you didn’t like dealing with the business end of this shit?” I question. Kost would sooner put a gun to a man’s head than try to negotiate a deal. While his way has proven to be lucrative for us in the past, it’s not the way I work. Keep things above board as much as possible. At first.

If a body has to drop, it will. I don’t fuck around, and if anyone tries to cross me, they find out quickly how I handle the bullshit.

It’s just not my first move.

“I don’t, but I know how this works.”

“Can you find out how close Yusef Zhukov is to this situation? If they are getting a cut of the bribe, there won’t be one.”

“I could have this handled in one night, you know.”

“Not yet.”

“Right. We’ll try it your way, but you know in the end, my way will get it done.”

I laugh. “I know it will, and then I’ll have to move operations to a new port.”

“You might, yes.”

“Get the information, but I think you’re right. We’ll probably need to go at this your way. Just not yet.”

“Fine. Your way first. Now. Tell me about this wife. You really married the woman?”

“I did.” I drop the pen and run my fingers over the edge of the desk.

Amelia hasn’t left my thoughts for more than a few moments today.

It’s been tempting to have Boris sit inside her building so I could have updates on what she’s up to, but I decided against it. She’d put her claws away last night with my family. Fighting with her every day won’t prove to make a happy marriage, so I decided to give her space.

Not too much.

Boris sits outside her building to be sure there’s no issues. Just because the Kozlovs are keeping their attack on us in Russia doesn’t mean they haven’t deployed anyone to New York to make a personal attack.

“Why would you do that? You’ve gone this far in life with escaping the clutches of marriage, why ruin it now?”

“Maybe when you’re all grown up, you’ll understand.”

He grunts. “I’m thirty-three and I have the world by the balls. I’m as grown up as it gets.”

“Fucking your way through Europe and North America isn’t the legacy you think it is,” I snort.

“Asia, too. I was in Bangkok last month.” I can imagine the arrogant grin playing on his lips with that statement.

“I hope you see a doctor regularly.”

“One of the best.” He laughs. “You like this woman then?”

“She’s—” My sentence gets cut off by the door to my office flying open and banging off the wall.

Amelia charges to my desk.

“Here. She’s here. I’ll have to call you later. Let me know what you find out about the bribe,” I instruct, keeping our conversation in Russian.

“Will do.” He clicks off the call.

“Amelia.” I swivel my seat to face her fully. She’s flushed and her eyes are wide with raw emotion. “What’s wrong?”

“You.” She throws a file folder on my desk. “You ruined him. You ruined everything!”

“Who?” I shove up from my chair and open the file folder, but before I can read what’s inside, she slams her hands over the papers.

“My brother! You ruined him. You took a decent man, a proud man, and turned him into a criminal. And now I could lose the foundation and the center with it!” Panic shakes her voice.

“Amelia, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Slow down, explain what happened.” I move around the desk.

If I can get my hands on her, she’ll relax.

But as soon as I get close enough, she slams her fist into my chest, trying to shove me away.

“Don’t touch me.” Her purse slides down her arm with all her wild movements and gets tangled up around her elbow.

It takes her a few seconds to unwind herself and she throws the bag onto the desk. On top of the papers that might explain what’s gotten her so riled up.

“You’re upset, obviously, but you will not barge in here and start screaming at me like this.” I stand my ground.

I should have known coddling wouldn’t help her.

She needs—no, craves—a strong hand. Whatever’s happened has gotten her all lost in her thoughts. She needs something to help settle her, something that will ground her so she can get them all in order again.

“Screaming?” Her voice dips dangerously low. “I haven’t even started yelling yet,

you arrogant, fucking prick.”

Shock flashes in her eyes. She’s surprised herself with her outburst, I think.

“Hmm. All right.” Scooping her off the floor, I carry her, wiggling and fighting me, to the corner of the room. The same corner I placed her in the night I found the frat boy’s hand on her.

“What are you doing?” She spins around the second her feet touch the floor.

“I’m helping you.” Anchoring my hands on her shoulders, I turn her back to the corner.

“This isn’t helping!” She slams her palms into the wall.

Maybe she thinks she can push back at me and get away.

I lean into her, pressing my chest into her back and bringing my mouth to her ear.

“ Moyo dikoye plamya. Trust me here. I’m helping. I could bare your ass and punish you for the way you’ve behaved since you’ve walked in, or you can stand here and calm down so we can talk.” Pressing a soft kiss just below her ear, I feel her heartbeat. It’s racing.

“I don’t want you to punish me.” She rests her forehead against the wall, dropping her hands to her sides. “I’m angry.”

I smile. “Yes, I see that. But why?”

She drags in an unsteady breath. “I think I need another second.”

“All right.” I retreat a step, letting her have some control in this moment as she seems to have lost it on the way into my office.

“No. Don’t go.” She holds her hand out to me.

Linking my fingers with hers, I move back behind her, letting her feel my warmth. And my length.

This woman’s obedience and her willfulness keep my cock hard for her at nearly all times. I’m not going to hide it from her. She needs to know the effect she has on me.

She adjusts her footing, pressing her ass back at me until my cock nestles between her ass cheeks. If she wasn’t wearing those damn slacks, I could feel more of her.

Maybe I should get rid of all her pants and force her into skirts at all times. Then when moments like this happen, I can easily flip the material up out of my way.

“Amelia.” I move the chestnut locks away from her ear. “Tell me what happened. Did someone hurt you?”

Already, I have in mind who I will send to pick up whoever did it. I won’t let them handle it though, that will be my pleasure. I’ll have him dumped into the basement of one of the Romanov warehouses. Then I’ll deal with him.

“No.” She shakes her head.

The movement makes her bump into my chin. After another slow drag of air, she breathes out the answer.

“Lucas was stealing money from the center. And the accountant says I have to report it, otherwise I risk having the foundation and the center shut down for fraud.”

Gently, I pull her arm until she's facing me again. The redness of her cheeks has dulled to a pink blush, and the tension has eased from her eyes.

"Why would Lucas be stealing money from the foundation or the center?" They're basically one and the same, but there are two ways to get money if he wanted to embezzle.

Her expression hardens again. "Because of you."

"Me." I flatten my hand against my chest.

I've been accused of many things, and most of them have held some truth to them, but making someone embezzle from a charitable foundation is not one of them. Or would it ever be.

There are much better ways to make money, and more lucrative too.

"What did I have to do with it?"

She seems to lose some of her steam as her shoulders drop and she lets out another heavy sigh.

"He got the idea from you. Or he got the taste for criminal activity from you. I don't know how you're involved; I just know Lucas never would have done it on his own."

I nudge her chin with my knuckles when she looks away so that she's focused on me again.

"Amelia, if I wanted to steal money, your foundation would be the last place for something like that."

“He stole two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. That’s not a small amount.”

I suppress the smile tugging on my lips. It’s easy to forget that while Amelia wasn’t raised without excess around her, she has never seen the amount of wealth that I possess.

“Amelia, I earned that amount before I rolled out of our bed this morning.” I run the back of my hand along her jaw, hoping to ease the tension building again.

She’s angry and confused and hurt and I hate every one of those emotions as they play across her beautiful features.

I want her safe and warm and happy, tucked away where I can protect her from all the harm the world can do to a person. Knowing first-hand the horrible people that run this world, I can’t help but want to hide her away from it.

“You did?” She frowns. “Of course you did.”

She steps back into the corner and pushes her head back until she’s staring at the ceiling. “Why would he do this?”

“Are you sure he did?” I walk back to my desk and pick up the folder she threw down.

“The accountant was certain. Lucas had emailed the bookkeeper with invoices and there are also transactions that he himself entered into the books.” She reaches across my arm and points to the ledger I’m scanning. “See, there’s his sign on credentials. We all have them so the software can track who did what.”

“Does anyone have your password to the software?” I quickly flip through the lists and ledgers in the folder.

The accountant has reason to be concerned, but Lucas wasn't a man for this sort of thing. He wouldn't steal from his sister. He wouldn't have done anything that would put the center in danger of being shut down.

"Me? No." She pauses, scrunching up her lips. "Well, I mean they don't have it, but Sarah knows where I keep my passwords. You know, in case something ever happened."

"Like what?" I question. "What would happen that she would need to use your passwords?"

"I don't know, like I was away, and I needed her to get into something for me." She's pulling answers out of her ass.

"Like the banking software?"

She lifts a shoulder, frustrated. "I don't know, Dmitri. Maybe?"

"We'll talk more about your security system later, but the reason I ask, is if you have someone who can get into your passwords, there's no reason to believe Lucas might not have had the same. Could his assistant have been able to get into his email?"

She thinks for a moment. "Probably, but Richard has been with Lucas forever. I can't see him doing this either."

"Well, what about employees? Friends." One in particular comes to mind. "What about Christian?"

She pulls back, insulted. "No. Absolutely not, he wouldn't do this."

"You don't know that. Maybe he needed the money, or he still does?" Which would

explain why he risked his fucking life by suggesting she marry him instead of me.

“You just don’t like him.” She sinks into a chair.

“I don’t. The only reason he’s still walking around with all his fingers and toes is because of you.” I drop the papers onto the desk and lean back against it.

“Christian wouldn’t do something like this. He’s never even hinted at having money issues. If he had, Lucas would have given him money. There wouldn’t be any reason to steal it.” She leans back, resting her head on the back of the chair.

It’s difficult to share her faith in this man. Lucas kept him at arm’s length when it came to business matters. And other matters.

“The center is safe.” I fold my arms over my chest. “You’ll need to trust me, though.”

She looks up at me with her hazel eyes full of apprehension.

“You’re not going to threaten the accountant, are you?”

“No.”

“Because you can’t do that, Dmitri. You can’t just go around threatening to rip off people’s fingers because they don’t do what you want.”

“Actually, Amelia, I can. It works well.” I let a little smile slip through.

She’s sweet like this, thinking she can dictate how I get things done. It’s cute.

“I don’t want you to do anything to him. It’s not his fault and he’s just doing the job we pay him to do.”

“Exactly, you pay him. You tell him what to do and what not to do.” I push off the desk. “I will get to the bottom of this. All you have to do is focus on the center.”

“I can’t.” She shakes her head as she gets to her feet. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” I step in front of her when she turns toward the door. I could demand it, threaten to strip her bare and punish her if she gets in my way.

But this is different than her usual defiance. Something runs beneath it, not simply a stubborn nature.

“Because it’s my problem. Not yours.” Her shoulders drop again, but not because she’s softening to me. No, it’s the weight she’s put on herself that keeps her down.

Golden ticket.

Isn’t that what her father called her? She was her mother’s golden ticket.

And she is still trying to outrun his criticism.

“Amelia, in our marriage everything is ours. There is no yours and mine, it’s all ours.”

“Oh? So you’ll let me in on the problem you’re having in Russia? You’ll tell me what your brother and you were just talking about when I walked in?” She cocks her head to the side, like she’s just caught me in something.

“One of my shipments is being held up at a port there. Someone’s interfering in my business. Kost is working on the problem for me.”

She blinks. I’ve surprised her. Good.

“Shipment of what?” She thrusts out her chin, thinking she’s got me now.

“Weapons.” I arch a brow.

“Oh.” She’s not sure what to do with that information.

I haven’t told her anything that might put her in danger, but enough to show her we are in this life together. “You’re an arms dealer.”

“Among other things. Yes.”

She nods. Complete acceptance. Beautiful.

“Fine. But still, I’m going to handle this.” She reaches around me, picking up her purse from where she dropped it. “I have to get back.”

“You can dig into paperwork and computers and ledgers, but you’re not to go questioning anyone. Do you understand? I won’t allow you to put yourself in danger.”

“Allow?” She laughs. “Dmitri, I agreed to this marriage to keep the center open. I even said those stupid words during the ceremony to keep us from standing there all day. But don’t for a second believe you allow anything.”

Ah, there’s the hellcat that barged into my office a short time ago. The fire burns brightly in her eyes now.

“Alright.” I nod slowly. “We’ll talk more about it tonight.”

Her phone vibrates in her purse.

“Tonight?” She stares at me while digging it out.

“Yes. Tonight.” Folding my arms over my chest, I smile. “We can discuss the rules tonight. You seem to have forgotten who makes them and who follows them.”

Tucking her purse under her arm, she taps out quick messages on her phone.

“I haven’t forgotten anything, Dmitri. I have to go.”

I walk ahead of her to the door, opening it for her.

“Tonight.” I grin.

“Whatever.” She rolls her pretty eyes at me as she passes.

An act that would usually annoy me, but with her in this moment it only fuels my desire for her.

She can play act that she doesn’t crave my authority, my dominance, but I see through her. When I tried to be soft, she rejected me. It was only when my dominance came through that she softened.

She’ll learn.

Amelia

It's nearly nine by the time I walk in the front door of Dmitri's penthouse. Boris, the spy assigned to me for today, walks in behind me carrying the boxes I've brought back from Lucas' apartment.

"Let's put them in the spare bedroom." I try to lift the top box from him, but Boris turns and shakes his head. "Fine, you stubborn ox. Carry them yourself."

We're halfway up the staircase when Dmitri appears at the top of the stairs. He hooks his hands on his hips, staring down at us. I try to keep my gaze from lingering, but he's already stripped out of his suit jacket and tie.

His shirt is unbuttoned halfway, and his shoes and socks are gone. He looks so casual. Casually hot.

It's not fair that he looks so damn good after a full day of work, and I look like I've been through a tornado.

My hair is all windblown and messy from all the times I've sunk my hands in it today.

I haven't checked a mirror lately, but I would bet this month's salary that my makeup is smeared and half gone from rubbing my eyes. It's a horrible habit, but I've never been able to beat it.

By late afternoon, most of my mascara is gone. But this time of night, I probably look

like the walking dead.

“What’s all of this?” Dmitri asks as I reach him.

“All of the ledgers I found at Lucas’ apartment. He had more hidden in his bedroom closet in a locked chest. There’s a few more boxes in the car, but Boris refused to let me get them.” I shoot a dark look at Boris who completely ignores me, steps around us, and continues down the hall to the spare room.

“He was right.” Dmitri watches Boris turn into the bedroom. “You’re keeping them in there?”

“I didn’t want to clutter up your bedroom.”

“Our bedroom,” he corrects immediately.

“Okay.” I’m too tired to argue with him tonight.

I just want to find the box I marked so I can get the bank reports out of it.

Boris passes us to go back down and collect the other boxes.

“You know, you don’t need to have someone sitting outside my building all day,” I say as we make our way to the bedroom at the end of the hall.

“Until the issue with my shipments in Russia is resolved, Boris will be with you to be sure you’re safe.”

“You think someone involved in that will hurt me?” I stop short at the bedroom door.

“No. But it’s a precaution. I won’t let you be in danger.” He’s so firm when he says

it, a warm current runs through me.

Lucas had been protective, but it wasn't in this sort of way. It was a brotherly duty. He felt obligated, but with Dmitri it's different.

I suppose he has an obligation since I'm his wife now, but it's deeper than that. It's personal to him.

"All right. But if he's going to be there, he might as well come inside."

"I'll let him know." His lips curl at the edges.

"Good. Now, I've been thinking about a hot bath all day." Walking past him, my hand brushes across his body, across the hardness in his pants.

Another thing I've been thinking about all day.

It's really becoming an annoying habit to find myself drifting off into thoughts of his hands on me, his lips on mine, and his cock filling me.

Worse is when my daydreams bring me to thoughts of sitting with his arms around me. The casual intimacy of his lips brushing across my cheek before I left for the center this morning. It's alarming how much of my day was spent reliving that moment.

I make it all the way to the bathroom door before the words hit me.

"Of course. I'll allow it."

Pausing for a moment, a scathing response burns my tongue. If he's looking for an argument, he's going to have to wait. As much as I would like to rip his pride in half,

I want that bath more.

“Great,” I mutter and head into the bathroom.

His tub could hold three people, it’s so large, and there are power jets. Growing up, I’d never wanted for anything. Material-wise anyway. Love and affection from a father who seemed more relieved when his wife overdosed in her en suite than heartbroken was more my desire growing up.

We’d always had a beautiful house and wonderful things to fill it, but I never knew true wealth until meeting Dmitri. The white, high-gloss acrylic tub stands free, as though it’s hovering over the floor.

“Hello, bath.”

I lean into the tub and turn on the hot water, feeling the temperature of it as it falls from the waterfall spout. Once it’s the perfect temperature, I close off the drain and let it fill.

Dmitri’s staff completely unpacked my things. I find my hair ties all bundled in a crystal bowl on the marble countertop. My other toiletries have been put away in my own set of drawers. Even my toothbrush has its own place, beside Dmitri’s.

Beside Dmitri.

How long can this relationship actually last before we turn on each other? When does the resentment of having to marry me settle in for him?

And when it does, will he banish me to my own set of rooms like my father did to my mother?

It wasn't enough that he barely spoke to her when he was home. He had her things moved to a different bedroom altogether. He'd played it off that he was always getting home so late he didn't want to wake her, but she'd known what it meant.

He was finished with her.

The water cut off behind me and I spun around, expecting to find Dmitri standing there.

He wasn't.

A sensor panel had been reached, and it must have shut off the water to keep the tub from overflowing. I turn the faucet to close it off, then peel off my clothes.

As soon as my feet touch the warm water, a sigh escapes me. Sinking into the heated pool softens each muscle as I find a comfortable spot. The built-in headrest is a marvel. Whoever invented it should be given a raise.

Moments pass as I lie with my eyes closed, my body softening into the heat, and the quiet of the room giving me peace.

It's been nonstop problems today. Then the accountant happened and my visit to Dmitri's office.

I was awful to him, barging in the way I did. He had every right to be angry with me for it. If he'd marched into my office that way, I would have been more than angry; I would have probably thrown him out.

Not that he would go.

He's an unmovable force.

“What has you so worried?” His voice falls over me like silk.

My eyes fly open to find him standing over me, stripped down to his boxers. It takes a long moment before I can get my brain to function properly. I mean the man is all muscle and beauty and he’s just standing there looking down at me with concern and sexiness.

“Nothing.” I suddenly wish I’d used bubbles or something. He can see everything through the water.

Not that he hasn’t already, but it’s different when he’s just looking at me like this.

Like he’s ready to devour a dessert he’s being waiting the whole meal to have.

“This tub is enormous. Do you have parties in here?” I make a horrible attempt at a joke.

“Standard tubs are too small for me. I’m a large man.” He grins as my cheeks burst into flames and my eyes move down to the hard bulge in his boxers.

“What were you thinking about when I came in?” he questions again.

“I already said nothing. Just relaxing.” I lean back against the edge of the tub.

My muscles have softened thanks to the heat of the water and some of the tension has eased from my neck. Even the dull ache behind my eyes has finally subsided.

“Hmm, I think you’re lying.” He slides a towel from the rack. “I’m feeling generous tonight, and I’ll give you another chance to come clean. What were you thinking about?”

After he pushes the button to start the tub draining, he opens the towel for me. I sit up, pulling my knees to my chest.

“Maybe I’m not ready to get out?”

“Don’t make me ask a third time.” He frowns. “Tell me.”

I sigh as I push up to my feet. He really is an unmovable force.

“This afternoon. I was thinking about what happened in your office,” I confess, stepping out of the tub onto the lush bathmat.

He wraps the towel around my body, pulling me into his chest.

“What about your visit?” Using his big hands, he rubs the towel over my skin, gently wiping away the beads of water left over from my bath.

From the reflection in the mirror, I catch the way he looks at me as he moves lower on my body, over my hips and legs. He’s fully attentive to his task, but his expression warms as he runs the towel back up my legs to my pussy.

“Amelia,” he prompts me, grinning at me through the mirror when moments have passed, and I’ve remained quiet.

“I was rude.” I try to take the towel to wrap it around me when he’s finished, but he tosses it onto the counter, out of reach.

“You were,” he agrees, turning us so we’re facing the mirror head on. His arms wrap around my waist. “But you were upset.”

“You didn’t punish me.” I say it so softly, he has to lean into me to hear my words.

“Did you want me to?” he questions, moving his hands to my hips and holding me against him.

“No.” It’s a lie.

A bold-faced lie, and he can see through me like the human lie detector he is.

“Did you want to try that answer again?”

“Not really.” I frown at us. “I don’t want to say it.”

He grins. “Then I definitely want to hear it.”

“You just like embarrassing me.”

“I like your blush. It’s not the same thing.” He pauses. “Do you want me to punish you? Should I bend you over my knee again and spank you for being so naughty today? Being rude and loud and yelling accusations?”

His words do things to my body that hands have never been able to.

“Do you want me to make you bend over the counter here so I can make your ass as red as your face? Punish you until you beg for mercy?”

I press my legs together tightly, sure he can see my arousal building at his words.

He moves his hands from my hips to cup my breasts. Taking my nipples between his fingers, he pinches them.

“Do you want me to punish your body for being a bad girl today?” He licks the sensitive spot behind my ear.

Somehow this man has learned in only a week what no boyfriend has ever been able to master. Every spot on my body that reacts to his touch is mapped out in his mind.

“I don’t know.” The conflict inside of me grows as he pinches harder and a spark of pain forms, shooting through my body.

“You do know, but you don’t want to say it.” He kisses my shoulder, releasing my nipples at the same time.

Exquisite burn spreads with a new sort of pain as the blood rushes back into place. I raise my hands, thinking to rub away the new sensation, but he grabs them and holds my arms at my sides.

“It hurts,” I whine, but it’s more of a plea for more and not a cry for it to stop.

“Say it, Amelia. Tell me what you want.”

His dark eyes lock with mine in the mirror. There’s a warmth inside the storm of arousal and dominance that pulls me closer to him.

“I want you to punish me, Dmitri.” I breathe out the words, certain he’s going to laugh.

Why wouldn’t he? A grown woman asking to be punished by her husband? It’s absurd.

“Place your hands on your head.” He pats my ass and steps out of the way.

He waits as I lift my arms up, placing one on top of the other. I’m completely on display with this position. Every part of me is vulnerable to his gaze, his touch.

“Don’t move.” He pats my ass again and disappears into the bedroom.

Moments tick by and I’m wondering if the punishment is just to leave me here while he goes to bed. A little humility probably wouldn’t hurt, I suppose.

Just when I’m ready to drop my hands, he appears in the doorway. He’s holding my vibrator.

Heat surges through my face and I have to look away. How did he find that? I packed it myself, but I didn’t unpack.

Oh, no.

His staff unpacked my vibrator.

“What’s wrong, Amelia?” he questions with too much levity.

“Who... dammit, Dmitri, you should have let me unpack my own things.” I start to drop my hands.

“Get back into position,” he snaps. “Or I can get my belt. A punishment to begin the punishment.”

Slowly, I put my hands back. My embarrassment radiates through my entire body, sending a blush all the way down to my legs.

“I didn’t know a body could blush this way,” he says, coming to stand behind me. “Open your eyes. You don’t get to ignore me.”

When I open them, he’s staring at me in the mirror.

“Spread your legs a little for me.” He touches my left leg with my vibrator.

It’s a short device, meant mostly for clitoral stimulation, but it still has the usual shape of a penis. And to see it in his large hand is almost comical.

Sliding my feet apart, he dips the vibrator between my thighs. He presses the tip just above my clit, but the soft vibrations seep into my body.

“Does that feel good, Amelia?” His breath is warm against my neck.

I swallow, trying my best to remain unmoved by the pleasure he’s giving me. But Dmitri isn’t one to be ignored. He twists the base until the vibrations grow stronger.

“How about now?” He pushes the head of the device harder against me until my clit shoots little shocks of pleasure through me.

I moan. It’s impossible not to when his lips are so close to my ear and the vibrations are dragging me closer to the edge. How does this man know how to do this so fucking well?

“What was it you said to me in my office?” He nips my earlobe as I push my pelvis toward the toy. My muscles are already tightening.

“I don’t know.” It’s the truth.

I don’t remember anything at this moment other than my orgasm is only a breath away. I bite down on my lip, leaning back into him.

“Hmm, really? You don’t remember what you said? Something about what I will and will not allow when it comes to you?”

The first wave crests. I'm so close.

My toes curl into the bathmat. I'm going to launch into space at any moment. Just another second.

"Please," I whimper, already guessing what he's going to do. "Please."

"Sorry. Naughty girls aren't allowed to come so quickly." He pulls the device away just as the first glimpse of my orgasm ripples through me.

"No!" I cry out.

Keeping my hands planted on top of my head is nothing short of a miracle, but I'm learning quickly that Dmitri will only prolong my punishment if I don't.

"Did you want to come?" he asks; a rueful grin hits me from the reflection in the mirror.

"I'll get you back for this," I threaten, but we both know I have no way to follow through.

Even if I were to try the same thing with him, he'd simply have to run his fingertips over my body to get me to soften and fall at his feet.

It's insane. This power he holds over me.

I would hate it, if I didn't love it so much.

"I would love for you to try," he chuckles. "Let's do this again."

He wraps one arm around my middle, holding me tightly as he presses the vibrator

directly against my clit.

“Oh, god!” I cry out as my body immediately tenses with pleasure.

In the mirror I witness the effect on my body. My thighs tremble, my nipples could probably cut glass at this point, and my face is cherry red.

“Should I allow you to come?” he asks in that sultry tone he’s perfected. “Do you want me to allow you to come?”

I clench my teeth, and my eyelids close. If I can ignore him, if I can just tap into my body, I can get to the finish line.

“I guess not.” He takes the toy away again with impeccably horrible timing.

“Dmitri!” I stomp my foot, missing him by a hair.

He laughs.

“All you have to do is ask. Just ask me to allow you to come, and I will.” He kisses the spot behind my earlobe that he’s learned all too quickly sets a fire burning in my core.

“Let’s try something else.” He picks me up and brings me to the counter. “Sit here.”

My ass hits the chilled countertop, but before I can get settled, he pulls me forward until I’m seated at the very edge.

“Keep your hands up,” he orders when I go to reach for the counter. “I won’t let you fall,” he promises.

He pushes my chest until I'm leaning back against the mirror. I'm only given a moment to assess this new position before the thick head of his cock pushes into me.

"Oh, fuck," I moan as I'm stretched around his cock.

"That's the point, yes." He pushes further in. "Now, let's try this again."

The vibrator makes another appearance, pressing directly onto my clit at the fastest speed while at the same time he thrusts fully into me.

With one hand, he's holding my hip, keeping me still as he plows into me. The other twists the vibrator over my clit, rubbing it in circles, making the sensations increase ten times over.

"Should I allow you to come?" he asks again, though I can hear the tension in his tone now too.

This little lesson is punishing him at the same time.

If I wasn't so desperate to find my release, I'd use it to my advantage. But desperation has definitely set in.

"Yes!"

"Not good enough, say it," he orders, thrusting harder.

The burn of my body stretching around him makes my need even greater.

"Please, Dmitri. Let me come," I beg him, my hands fisting in my hair.

I don't dare disobey him right now.

“Try again,” he orders, driving harder into me as he pushes the vibrator against my clit.

“Allow! Please allow me to come! Please!”

“Fuck,” he groans. “Come, baby. Come hard.”

He drops the vibrator, grabbing my hips with both hands and pulling me toward him as he plows into me.

“Oh, god. Oh!” I come unglued. Every nerve ending in my body fires off and the waves of pleasure ripple through me at an intense rate.

“Fuck. Fuck,” he chants as he drives into me again and again until he stills.

His eyes widen and he grunts as his own release carries him away, his forehead dropping to mine.

My body hums as we stay like this for long moments.

Slowly, I ease my arms down and frame his face with my hands.

“You’re cruel,” I whisper, lifting his head to kiss him.

There’s no heat or accusation in my words. I’m too tired, too satisfied to really hold a grudge against him.

“I did tell you I’d teach you.” He kisses me back. It’s different than before.

The possession is still there, and the hunger, but it’s more intimate now. He’s not trying to grind me beneath his heel. There’s no power struggle here. Just a man

kissing his wife.

“Did you learn?” he asks after breaking the kiss.

“I think so,” I sigh, snuggling into his neck. “But you might have to go over it again in the morning. You know, just to be sure.”

Dmitri

“Why would a man want to have three wives?” I hand Amelia a cup of hot tea as I take my seat beside her on the couch in the media room.

It’s been years since I’ve spent any time in here watching anything, much less a reality television show.

For the last four nights, I’ve found her here watching these people live out their lives for all the world to see. I tell her not to wait up for me on the nights I have to be at the club, but each night I find her in here.

It helps her relax, she’s told me.

And since I’ve been able to move her focus from her brother’s possible embezzling to the summer carnival the center puts on every summer, she needs time to relax at night. The woman works too hard.

“Four. He has four. Well, he did. He’s down to two, or is it one?” She takes a sip of her tea then sets it on the table next to her.

“He’s losing wives?” I place my beer on the coffee table.

“Yes, it’s a whole thing. He has a favorite wife, and you’re not supposed to do that, so that one,” she points to the screen as a blonde woman sitting in a chair comes on for her interview, “left him, then another one is on her way out, and then there’s the first wife who he hasn’t loved in a long time, but he wouldn’t tell her. He just kept

dragging her along, but I think she's getting it now."

I watch her expression soften as she explains how this man has managed to mess up three of his four relationships.

"But still, why would he want four to begin with?" I lean back, draping my arm around her shoulders and pulling her closer to me.

The allure of finding her half-asleep waiting up for me each night has been the reason I've made it home from the club within half the usual time.

Having members of the police force on the payroll has its perks. Like not being pulled over after running a red light doing twenty over the speed limit.

"It's a religion," she finally says and tucks her legs beneath her as she leans into my chest. "That's why he keeps stringing along the first wife, at least that's what he says. He says the man can't leave."

"Hmm. But she can leave him? Then why not tell her he doesn't want her anymore? She'd leave him then, right?"

She pushes up and looks at me with a grin. "Exactly!"

I chuckle and kiss her forehead.

"What was that for?" She pulls back, her smile slipping a little.

"I wanted to." I shrug and hug her to me, putting her back on my chest.

"If he doesn't want her, he should tell her," I say with all seriousness. "He sounds like a coward."

“He is,” she agrees as the show comes back on from the commercial. “So, you think divorce is all right, then?”

Her question comes out softer, like she’s prodding a sore area.

“For them, sure.” I tighten my hold on her.

“So, if a man doesn’t love his wife, he should tell her so she can leave.” She stiffens. “I mean, in a relationship like that, where love is a factor. Not like our marriage, I mean a real marriage.”

It’s my turn to go rigid.

“How is our marriage not real?”

“Well, it’s not. I mean it’s legal and we... you know... do what married people do... but it’s not like them.” She gestures to the screen where the man sits with the only wife who can still tolerate him.

She’s talking about love.

Before I can respond, a new thought grabs her attention and she changes the subject completely.

“Oh! I almost forgot. I talked to your mother tonight.” She reaches over to the remote and pauses the streaming.

“You did? How did you talk to her?” I say a small prayer that my mother didn’t put any horrible thoughts in Amelia’s head.

Like the option of living in separate countries.

“She called me.” Amelia laughs. “She said you wouldn’t give her my number, so she had to dig around herself for it. She’s nice. Why wouldn’t you give her my number?”

“I wanted to give you more time before dealing with her. My mother can be a little controlling.” I’d prefer we go back to talking about the show than my mother, but Amelia is so relaxed I won’t do anything to ruin it.

“So that’s where you get it from?” She laughs again; the casual sound of it brightens the room. To hear her relaxed and having some fun—even at my expense—eases the soreness from my soul.

“Maybe.” I squeeze her again. “Did she say if she’s planning a trip here?”

“No. She said she hates New York and won’t step foot here ever again.” Amelia twists so she can look at me better. “What happened?”

“Nothing. She just prefers Russia. My father made us move here when I was young. When he passed away, she packed up and moved back.”

Other than the ruthlessness of my family’s business, there’s little drama on my side of our family. It’s Amelia’s family that has brought all the excitement.

“Hmmm, but she mentioned your brother. She said he should come here, that he’d do well to learn from you on how to catch a wife.” She makes a face. “But you didn’t really catch me, you inherited me. Does she know that? I wasn’t sure, so I didn’t tell her.”

“She knows your brother and I had business together.” I will have to thank my mother for keeping old secrets safe.

At some point, Amelia will need to know, but not yet. Not while she’s still sorting out

the death of her brother.

“Anyway, it was a short conversation. And not as scary as I thought it would be. Though I’ll admit she made your brother sound a little scary.”

“Kost? He can be, yes. Especially if he’s put you in his sights. But you’re safe from him.” I kiss her forehead again.

“And from you?” She twists her body until she manages to straddle my thighs. “Am I safe from you?”

I grab hold of her hips, pulling her firmly down on me so she can feel the hardness she’s created.

“No, Amelia. I don’t think that will ever be the case.” I pinch her hip. “How is the carnival planning?”

She sits back on my legs, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“It’s going. We’re going to use the same company as last year, so that’s a big item off my list.” She pauses a moment. “The accountant called today.”

“About what?”

“He said that you replaced the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars and he would be making the adjustments to the chart accounts.”

I’d told him not to bother her with it, but apparently, he doesn’t listen any more than my wife does when I give an order.

“You shouldn’t have done that.” She scoots herself closer to me on my lap. “I handle

the foundation and the center; you handle everything else.”

“I’m not getting involved in the running of the center. I paid the money back to get the accountant off your mind. It’s resolved as far as legalities go.”

“So, you do think Lucas did it?”

“I don’t know, but this puts the issue on the backburner. Now you can focus on the carnival and the day-to-day issues.”

“So, you won’t interfere anymore?”

“Unless I need to, no.”

“That’s not exactly what I’m looking for.”

“Well, it’s the best you’re getting.” I pat her ass.

Fuck, just touching her playfully like this makes me want to throw her over the arm of the couch and fuck her until we’re both gasping for air.

“I’m tired, so I won’t argue, but I reserve the option of getting mad about it later.” She unbuttons the top button of my shirt. “You came home early tonight. Why?”

“I wanted to spend time with you.” I slide my fingers beneath the hem of her t-shirt to where I can feel the warmth of her skin.

“You wanted to spend time with me?” Her eyes widen.

“Yes. You’re my wife and between your work and my work, we barely see each other.”

Her bottom lip sinks between her teeth.

“We talked last night,” she points out with a coy grin.

“Yes, we did. We had a whole conversation while I dragged you up to bed after you fell asleep on the couch. And in that conversation, what did I say?”

Her cheeks blush again, and I’m going to be a fallen man if she keeps this up.

How can I even pretend to be the ruthless violent man I’ve been up until the moment this woman barged into my life, when just a pretty little blush makes my knees weak with need for her?

“You said that I needed to get more sleep. Which I did. I slept in this morning.”

Squeezing her hips, I shake my head. “You were up at six this morning and out the door by six forty-five. You skipped breakfast and had a coffee instead.”

“Are you spying on me?” She tries to pull an angry expression, but I easily slide my hand down between her spread thighs and press against her sex.

“How can I keep you safe if I don’t know what’s going on?” I rub my hand over her pussy, already feeling the heat and wetness through the material of her pajama shorts.

Her fingers curl into my shoulders as I push the shorts to the side to get to her wetness.

“You could just ask me,” she says, arching her hips toward my touch as I glide through her folds, seeking out her opening.

“I could.” I push two fingers upward, into her tight sheath. “But what would Boris do

with his day if he didn't have you to watch over?"

"So, it's for Boris' benefit you have him stalk me all day long?" She sinks down over my fingers, her pussy clenching me.

"Yes. Think of poor Boris." With my free hand, I pull the neckline of her t-shirt down until her breast is exposed.

The dark dusty rose of her nipple peaks with the air brushing across it.

"Poor Boris?" She laughs.

"Shhh. I don't want to talk about Boris anymore." I lean toward her, flicking my tongue over the pert nipple and basking in the sweetness of her sigh.

"Me either." She reaches between our bodies, seeking out my cock. I adjust my position so she can unzip my pants.

When the warm, smooth touch of her hand wraps around my cock, I moan. It's a heavenly touch a devil like me should never experience.

"Fuck, Amelia." I scrape my teeth across her nipple then take it between them, biting down enough to make her squirm.

Her pussy tightens around my fingers, sucking me further inside as she rides my hand.

"Dmitri," she yelps when I release her nipple and swipe my tongue across it, licking away the burn I've given her.

"Yes? Does my wife want something?" I curl my fingers, thrusting a little harder into

her pussy.

“Please.”

“You have to ask, you know that.” I push a third finger inside of her and she sucks in a breath.

“Fine.” She drops her chin down and lines up our gazes. “Fuck me, Dmitri.”

I chuckle. “You didn’t say please. A young lady should always use her manners,” I tease.

“Such an old man,” she bites back with a grin. “Please, Dmitri. Please fuck me.”

I pull my fingers free of her pussy and bring them to her lips.

“Clean my fingers,” I order, my voice firming. Obediently, she drops her jaw and pushes her tongue out for me. “Such a good girl tonight.”

She smiles around my fingers as she closes her lips, licking off her own arousal.

“Where are you going?” I grab her hips and keep her planted on my lap when she tries to climb off.

She looks behind me to the door we left open.

“Someone might walk past.”

“No one will bother us.”

“But they’ll see.”

“They know better than to interrupt me.” I push her shorts to the side and fist my cock, lining up the head with her pussy.

“Dmitri—”

My cock impaling her as I shove her hips down onto me stops her complaint.

“Oh, fuck.”

“Exactly.” I push up at her. “Ride me, Amelia. Ride me hard.” I slap her ass to get her going.

“It’s tighter like this,” she breathes while moving her feet to the couch cushions and pushing herself up.

I tighten my hold to keep her from letting my cock slip from her warmth.

“Yes.” I grit my teeth. “Hard, baby, fuck me hard.” I yank her down on me again.

“Oh, god.” She plants her hands on my shoulders and rides me.

Urgency crosses her features as she bounces up and down on my cock.

I lean into her again, sucking on her breast while slipping a hand between our bodies and flicking her clit as she rides me hard.

“Such a good girl,” I mutter against her breast, breathing in the intoxicating scent of her.

It’s nothing in particular, not her body soap or her perfume. It’s just her. Everything about this woman makes me drunk.

“Oh, oh, Dmitri.” She screams my name as I thrust up into her, filling her with my cock as her pussy pulsates around me.

Her orgasm rips through her, silencing her cries of pleasure with quiet gasps for air while I continue to piston my hips, fucking her while she’s riding the waves of her release.

“Amelia. Oh, fuck, good girl, good girl!” I roar, thrusting upward once more and filling her with my cum.

Sparks fly somewhere in the background, or maybe it’s just my vision.

This woman does things to me no other women have ever been able to do.

“Shit,” Amelia whispers as she clings to me.

“What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

“No.” She lays her cheek on my shoulder. “I just realized what the date is. We should have used something.”

“What do you mean something?”

“A condom. I haven’t had a chance to pick up my birth control.”

I press a kiss to her cheek. Like I would ever allow anything to come between my cock and her body.

“Dmitri?” She leans back as my cock slips out of her, my seed already spilling from her body as I place the material of her pajama shorts back in place. “You’d do that, right? You’d wear a condom?”

“No.” I move her to sit beside me on the couch so I can tuck my cock back into my slacks.

It’s sticky with her arousal still clinging to it, but I don’t mind.

“Why not?” she asks as I reach for the remote to the television.

“You know why not.” I pull the neckline of her shirt back up, fingering a spot that’s overstretched. “I tore it.”

“You’re not as complicated as I thought. You’re very simple.”

I lean back on the couch, wrapping my arm around her shoulders and pulling her back to my chest. Nothing compares to this feeling right here. My freshly fucked wife, snuggling with me on my couch.

Perfection has been achieved.

“I am. Marry. Have Children. Enjoy life. Simple.” I kiss her forehead again. “Let’s finish watching this stupid man ruin his life, then I’m taking you to bed.”

“I’m not that tired,” she argues.

“I didn’t say we were going to sleep.” I press the play button on the remote and rest my chin on her head.

Yes. Perfection.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Amelia

“He really goes everywhere you go, huh?” Sarah peeks over my shoulder. I have to twist a little to see who she’s talking about.

This bar is tiny. At least five fire codes are being broken by having so many people in here to listen to Rust Riot.

We need to book one more band for the carnival nights, and Sarah insists this one is the one.

They’re loud, they play hard rock, and I’m pretty sure one of the piercings on the drummer’s cheek is slightly infected. But other than that, she’s right. They’re going to be a big hit.

“Boris?” I laugh. “Yes. Unfortunately, he’s stuck being my shadow.”

“Because he works for the mafia, right?” She leans in to ask her question, even though with all the music and yelling going on around us, no one would hear her.

Someone bumps into her as they pass through the crowd, and she knocks into me.

I manage to keep the domino effect from continuing, and steady us both. “Why would you think that?”

It’s a ridiculous question, and she gives me a look that expresses that exact thought.

Rust Riot ends their set, and the crowd shouts and claps them off the stage.

“So?” she asks with wide eyes.

“I love them. Should we try to get backstage to talk to them now?” I move up to my tiptoes to see where they’ve headed.

“We can try, but they usually take off right away.” She shrugs when I wait for more information. “I might have tried to meet the guitarist once or twice.”

I laugh. “No luck?”

“Not yet.” She pumps her eyebrows up and down.

“I’ll call them in the morning then,” I say as the crowd pushes us both in a wave of movement.

“So.” She nudges me with her arm. “What’s it like being married to the mob?”

I roll my eyes. “You’ve seen too many movies.”

“I know.” She sighs. “But tell me anyway.”

“It’s an arrangement. That’s all. I told you all of this. Dmitri and I aren’t like regular married people.”

“Didn’t you tell me earlier he sat watching trashy TV with you two nights ago?” She tilts her head. “Guys don’t do that for girls they don’t like.”

“We just hadn’t really seen each other in a few days, that’s all.”

“Oh. So, he had been so busy with work.” She pauses to air quote the word. “That he hadn’t seen you, so he uses the little spare time he has to watch reality TV with you. But it’s not because he likes you.”

“You’re making it sound different than it is.”

“You two are sleeping together, right?” I’m suddenly aware I share too much with Sarah during our working lunches.

She’s one of the few people at the center that’s relatively close to me in age, and we’ve often swapped stories about the men coming and going from our lives.

“It’s just not like that,” I argue my point with absolutely no evidence to back up my claim. And by the sly grin she has while she sips her beer, she knows it.

“Okay. I mean you’re full of it, you know, but fine. I’ll let you live in your delusion a little longer.” She shakes her beer bottle. “I’m going to get another, you want another?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” I finish the last bit of my drink and hand her the empty bottle.

It’s been a long week. Between the usual chaos I deal with on any given day, the carnival planning has taken up even more time.

The company we used last year is booked for the weekend we’ve picked and gotten permits for, so it was a scramble to find another.

When my calendar flashed Friday this morning, it made waking up at six in the morning a little easier. Finding Dmitri still in the shower made it even better.

Just remembering the way he beckoned me into the shower with a crooked finger

makes my body crave him. A memory of his tongue on my clit flashes in my mind and my pussy is wet for him again.

Casually, I cross my legs, trying to stamp out the fire building in my panties. The memory alone of the mind-blowing orgasm he gave me before we finally got down to washing ourselves is enough to make me crave him.

It's a story I won't be relaying to Sarah, or she'll never believe that our marriage is more like friends living together. I mean there is such a thing as friends with benefits. But I'm not sure that extends to sending a bodyguard with me everywhere I go or watching shitty TV.

Is it possible that this situation has turned on me when I wasn't paying attention?

Since I agreed not to go digging into the embezzlement issue, I've been more relaxed. He had my back. He took care of it so I wouldn't lose the center.

His determination to keep me from remembering Lucas as any sort of criminal didn't just come from some loyalty he had to an ex-business partner. He seemed genuinely concerned that my memory of Lucas be only of the great brother he was.

By the time Sarah gets back with the drinks, I'm more than ready to have mine. These thoughts are getting me all muddled up in my mind. They're dangerous.

My dad lulled my mom into a sense of love and safety too, and look what happened. She was unloved and uncared for so long that she turned to drugs. If he had shown her any compassion, any sort of caring, maybe she wouldn't have overdosed.

"Whoa, you okay?" She laughs after I chug half the bottle.

"Yeah. Just thirsty." I nod, covering my mouth as a burp threatens.

“Lia, you’re vibrating.” She pokes my pocket where my phone is nestled.

“I am!” I take a few more sips, then dig it out. “Oh, it’s Christian.”

“Hmm.” She raises her brows while drinking. “I think he has a thing for you; he’s been calling the center trying to get a hold of you for a few days.”

“Has he?”

“He never leaves a message, just checks to see if you’re there and if you have a second.”

“Oh. That’s weird.” I swipe my screen to life.

Hey, Lia. Just checking in to see how you’re doing. Look, I have a great opportunity that I think you’d be really interested in. Could mean a good amount of money for the foundation.

I read it a second time because it doesn’t sound like Christian. It sounds like a sales pitch, and that’s not the guy I know.

What is it?

I have no clue when it comes to investments.

When I dove into running the center and the foundation, I spent all my time focusing on the daily stuff. I learned who needed to be credentialed with what organization to be able to perform certain services at the center.

My focus was on how to get help to people. Lucas handled the money stuff.

But maybe it's time I started getting more savvy with it. I can't expect Dmitri to help me. That wasn't our deal.

A startup company needs like three hundred thousand investment. You could get double back in two months.

Double return in a few months for a new company?

Can you send stuff over and I'll look? I need to think about it.

"What's going on?" Sarah leans over to see my phone. "He okay?"

"He wants me to go into some investment."

His next text is immediate.

Yeah, but need an answer by tomorrow night, and best to keep that guy out of it. He shouldn't be involved in your money.

My eyebrows rise with that message and when I look up at Sarah, she has the same look that I feel.

"That's a huge red flag." She leans back on her heels.

I shoot another text going along with him and put my phone away. Whatever he's up to, I'll deal with it later. I can put it on the bottom of my list.

"Hey, you ladies wanna do a round of shots with us? Two of our buddies took off before we got them, and we have extra." A dark-haired man taps on Sarah's shoulder.

I look beyond him to where his friends are watching us from the bar. The bartender is

still holding a tray of shots.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Fireball.”

“Oh, those are dangerous,” Sarah laughs.

“Why not. One won’t hurt, right?” I nudge her. “It’s been a long week and next week is going to be worse, let’s have some fun tonight.”

Anything that will erase Dmitri from my mind for a little while. It’s too confusing to keep thinking about him without getting angry at his existence.

“All right.” Sarah nods in agreement. “But just one!” she yells as we follow the guy back to the bar.

Several shots later, I lean against the bar laughing at something Sarah said.

“Wait. What’d you say?” I ask when I can’t remember why I’m laughing so hard.

“I said the big guy’s here.” She taps my shoulder too hard then points behind me. “And he’s bringing the cute one with him.”

I turn a little to find Dmitri parting the sea of drinkers just by his presence and Boris marching behind him. Both have heavy glares.

“Oh.” I swallow. “How... how many shots did we do?”

“I dunno. Two?”

I start laughing again, because I'm sure we passed two a long time ago.

"Why does he look so mad?" Sarah asks.

"Did I miss a call? He gets so angry when I ignore him." I pull out my cell phone, but drop it before I can swipe the screen open.

When I bend down to pick it up, a pair of black shoes steps right in front of it.

I know these shoes. My mind spins and I stumble forward. Dmitri is on his haunches in a blink, grabbing my shoulders.

"Steady, Amelia." He grabs my phone and pockets it as he helps me to my feet.

"Hey. That's mine." I try to get it back from him, but the shots haven't blurred my vision enough to not see the flash of dominance in his eyes.

I pat his chest. "Okay, you can have it."

Sarah laughs. "He already took it."

"Did you call? I can't feel the phone in my pocket," I tell him, hoping to alleviate his irritation.

"No." He winces when the new band starts playing.

"You don't like the band?" I turn to face the stage, but my head spins again so I only make it halfway.

"No. I don't." He pulls me into his chest. "How much have you had?"

“It’s because you’re old. If you were young like me, you’d like them,” I say.

His eyebrow arches. “When you’re old like me, you’ll know better than to get drunk off... what were you drinking? Fireball?”

He makes another face.

“It tastes like Cinnabun, no, cinnamommm, no... cinnamoon?” Sarah laughs and stumbles a step.

Boris catches her with a deep-set frown.

“You should have stopped after the first one,” he tells her with the same tone Dmitri uses on me when he’s getting all lecture-y.

“It was good. So, we had another. And you don’t tell her what to do.” I point a finger at him.

Boris looks to Dmitri.

“Yeah! You don’t tell her what to do... I mean me. You don’t...” Sarah stops talking and sighs. “You know what I mean.”

Dmitri nods toward Sarah. “Take that one home and I’ll get my wife home.”

He cups my elbow.

“Maybe I don’t wanna go home.” I try to escape his grasp.

“Too bad.”

“But...” I’m suddenly too tired to argue. “Home would be good.”

He smiles a little then urges me forward. “That’s what I thought.”

The late spring air outside feels amazing against my face as we make our way to the car. Dmitri drove his own car to get me.

“Did Boris tell on me?” I ask as we’re pulling into the garage of the penthouse.

I must have fallen asleep when I got into the car.

“He did.” He pops open his door and comes around to get mine.

“He’s a tattletale.” I sigh heavily.

“That’s his job.”

“Oh. Well, then he’s good at it.” I step into the elevator with him and lean against the wall. “I’m tired. And I don’t feel good.”

He stands behind me, pulling me into his arms while the elevator whisks us up to his penthouse. It’s such a smooth ride, not like that car that kept hitting potholes.

The penthouse is quiet when we enter, and the lights are dimmed. Which is good, because my head is spinning and all the lights in the garage made it worse.

Dmitri helps me up to our bedroom and starts to get me undressed.

“I need to tell you something, Dmitri Dragunov.” I jab him in the chest when he’s standing in front of me, sliding my bra down my arms.

“I’m all ears, Mrs. Dragunov.”

“Oh, that sounds nice.” I pause; no, that’s not what I wanted to say. “You can’t do that. You can’t be nice. It makes me think you don’t hate me. So don’t do that.”

“I don’t hate you,” he insists while pulling a nightshirt over my head.

“Oh.” My stomach rolls. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

I dart away from him to the bathroom, making it just in time.

A moment later, his big hands are there pulling my hair back and fisting it at the back of my neck as another wave of nausea hits.

He says something softly in Russian that I don’t understand, but it still calms me. It’s too easy, how he can settle me just by being with me.

“How are you now?” he asks when I sink back on my heels.

“Better.” I grimace. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ll be sorrier when you wake up, I’m sure.” He smiles and it’s sort of nice.

There’s no malice or agenda behind it. It’s just a nice smile.

“I need to brush my teeth.”

He helps me to my feet and puts me in front of the sink with the toothpaste already on my brush for me.

“You don’t usually drink. What made you start tonight?” he asks, leaning against the

counter watching me.

“I don’t know. I was thinking maybe we aren’t just some business arrangements. And then I remembered my dad and how he treated Mom and why don’t you do that? Or when will you do that?”

I rinse my mouth then hand him my brush.

“Then I got the text from Christian about the investment thing and that made me think about Lucas and all the things I still need to do and then that guy offered us a shot... I’m really tired, can we talk about this tomorrow?”

Silently, he scoops me off the floor and I lean my head into his chest.

“What investment?” he asks while tucking me into bed.

The pillows are like clouds, and I’ve never loved them so much as right now.

“He wants three hundred thousand for an investment. But I’ll get my money back. He texted, just look at that.” I wave my hand at him.

“All right. Go to sleep now.” He brushes my hair from my forehead and kisses me softly.

“You know, Dmitri. I think I like you.” I close my eyes and snuggle into the pillows.

“Good.”

“No. That’s bad. But don’t tell Dmitri. He doesn’t like it when I’m bad.” I roll to my side. “Promise.”

“Alright, I promise.”

I give him a thumbs-up and let the darkness sweep me away.

Dmitri

Rage heats my skin as I read the text exchange between Christian and my wife again.

I've been fisting her phone for the last half hour while I've waited for information to get back to me. I'm not sure what he's up to, but I'm damn sure there's no startup company.

"Mr. Dragunov, she's up." Maria pops her head into my office. I'd asked her to bring some toast and water and a bottle of aspirin up to my hungover bride.

"Did she eat anything?" I ask, already out of my chair and walking toward her.

"Not yet, she said she needed to brush her teeth first." She smiles. "She looked a little pale, but I'm sure she'll be better after she eats something. Do you want me to bring up something more filling, maybe some eggs once she's finished her toast?"

"Let's see how the toast goes first," I say, heading toward the stairs.

Amelia's just walking back into the bedroom when I step inside. Her hair's pulled back in a messy bun on top of her head, loose strands falling around her face. Maria's right. She does look a little pale.

"Good morning." I close the door behind me.

She lifts a hand in greeting and sits on the edge of the bed.

Maria left the tray on the dresser, so I grab the water and aspirin bottle and bring it to her. After shaking out two pills, I hold them out to her.

“You’ll need this. But you need to eat so it won’t upset your stomach.”

She winces, probably at the memory of getting sick last night.

“Thank you,” she says, taking the little white pills and the glass of water from me.

After she swallows them, she takes a few more sips of water and puts the glass down on the nightstand.

“Are you mad at me?” she asks, sliding back onto the bed and pulling her feet up.

“Why would I be mad?” If Boris hadn’t been there, her head wouldn’t be the only thing hurting on her today.

But he was, and she was with a friend.

“Because I got drunk at a bar.” She half smiles. “On fireball shots, of all things, that some guy gave us.”

“Some guy gave you?” Okay, maybe I’m a little upset. Boris left that part out.

“Well, not gave, just invited us to take a round with him and his friends,” she explains. “I think they wanted us to hang out with them, but after Sarah told them my name, I think they got scared.”

“How?”

She looks up at me, her eyes still glossy from her adventures last night.

“She told them my name is Amelia Dragunov. She also told them I was married to you, which is when one guy got a little pale, and they made an excuse to leave.”

“Ah.” I’m not going to pretend it doesn’t fill me with pride that my name alone can protect her.

“But my name’s not Dragunov. Not yet. I haven’t had time to go to the social security office.” She picks up the glass and takes another small sip.

“It’s already done. I had it taken care of.”

She blinks hard. “You had it taken care of?”

“Yes.” I nod.

She laughs. “Of course you did. Is there anything you can’t do?”

“There are a few things.” I bring her the toast and place it next to the water. “You need to eat. If you can handle this, Maria will make you something more substantial.”

She eyes it. “I’m not hungry. My stomach doesn’t hurt, I’m just not hungry.”

“Eat anyway.” I push the little plate closer to her.

“Fine.” She picks up a piece of toast and takes the tiniest bite off the corner before putting it back down.

I merely shake my head at her.

“I don’t understand. I’ve seen you drink way more than I did last night, but you don’t even get tipsy.” She folds her legs beneath her.

“When I was your age, I overdid it a few times, too.” I grin.

It’s been ages since I fell so deep into a bottle though. A lesson everyone learns at some point.

“Besides, you’re not a drinker. But last night you said you were thinking all sorts of things that you wanted to forget. Do you remember?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s nothing bad, just… personal. Let me sort it out on my own, all right?”

It probably has something to do with her admission that she likes me. I suppose given how we’ve cultivated our relationship so far, it would make sense. Realizing there are feelings when you don’t want there to be can be unsettling.

“Does it have anything to do with the investment Christian wants from you?” I poke at a different hornet’s nest.

She thinks a moment, then remembers.

“No. But don’t worry, I’m telling him no. I don’t have that kind of money anyway,” she says.

“You do.” I hand over her phone. “The deposits all went through yesterday.”

“What deposits?” She takes the phone and swipes the screen to life.

After a moment of opening her bank app, she looks up at me with shock. “What is this?”

“The money your brother left you. The only thing left to deal with is the sale of his

apartment.” I slide my hands into the pockets of my jeans. “I had his two cars sold.”

She looks at the screen again.

“Dmitri.” She turns the phone toward me as though I should be as surprised as her. “There’s almost five million dollars in here.”

I nod. “Yes.” Most of his worth is tied up in his company. If he had sold those shares, he’d have probably triple that amount.

“Let me guess, you made that before rolling out of bed this morning?” She laughs, still staring at the number on the screen.

“No. That takes me a day or two sometimes,” I tease. “So, you have the money to give him, but I don’t want you to give him any.” I pause a beat. “Ever.”

“Are you asking me not to or ordering me not to?” Now she teases.

A touch of pink brushes across her cheeks and my jeans gets tighter.

Fuck, this woman stirs everything inside of me with just a simple smile.

No. It’s more than that. It’s the way she jokes, the easy way this conversation flows.

“I don’t trust him, Amelia. You’ve known him a long time, but that makes it easier for him to manipulate you.”

“He’s not manipulating me. He’s looking out for me; he probably just thinks that I’d make money on the deal.” She pauses. “But I won’t give him any money. He did sound a little desperate in those texts.”

Cupping her chin, I pull her head back so I can brush my mouth across hers.

“Good girl,” I whisper just to watch her pupils dilate and that blush spread further across her face.

“I need to take a shower. I can still smell that fireball on me.” She scoots around me and slides off the bed.

“Do you need help?” I offer, ready to strip out of this shirt and jeans to get in with her.

She laughs and waves me off. “No, thanks. The last time you helped clean me, you got me all dirty instead.”

My cock gets even harder remembering the sight of my cum spurting across her ass in the shower. The water washed it away too quickly, though.

“Fine. I’ll be in the kitchen. Do you think you can handle something more than toast? Eggs, maybe?”

She scrunches her face. “Maybe not those. Pancakes? And coffee? Really strong coffee.”

I grin. “Of course.”

Once she’s dressed for the day, maybe I’ll take her shopping. She needs more clothes and the girls haven’t been able to nail her down to get them. The center keeps her too busy, and now with the carnival planning she’s buried even deeper.

Yes. I’ll demand she take the day off and we’ll go shopping. Get lunch, too. Something casual. Something ordinary married couples do on the weekend.

“Boss.” Boris meets me at the foot of the stairs.

He’s got a frown so fierce my walls immediately go up.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen to that girl?” He’d been tasked with taking Sarah home.

If something happened, it would hurt Amelia. And I don’t want anything ruining today.

“No. She’s fine.” There’s something weird about his tone when he says that, but he starts talking again before I can figure it out. “Christian Sendell is here.”

My muscles tighten.

“Why?”

“He’s in the living room. He wants to see Amelia. I told him to fuck off, but he wouldn’t go. Says he’s been trying to get a hold of her, and she won’t pick up. If he can’t see her, he’s going to call the cops.”

“That’s ballsy,” I grunt.

It’s not usually a good idea to tell men in my world that you’re going to report them to the authorities.

“I’ve had her phone. He hasn’t called once.” Anger simmers in my veins. “I’ll talk to him.”

He nods and heads off, leaving me to deal with the prick.

I find the asshole pacing across my living room. He's jamming one hand through his hair and muttering to himself. Whatever mess he's found himself in, it must be serious.

"Christian," I announce myself and he freezes, turning slowly to me. "I thought I made it clear I don't want you around my wife."

"You can't keep her locked up here like some prisoner," he demands, gesturing wildly at me.

His eyes are bloodshot and his skin pale. There's a jitter to his hand as he points it at me.

"She's free to come and go as she pleases." I take a step down into the living room. "Depending on how this goes, I'm not sure that can be said for you. What do you want?"

"I want to see Amelia." It's practically a whine at this point.

"She's not coming down. What do you want?" I take another step toward him.

"I just want to go over an opportunity with her." He swallows.

"She told me about it; she declines." I roll my shoulders back. "You should go."

"No!" He slices his hand through the air. "It's a good investment. It's a good one, it will help."

"Help? Who? Her or you? Why do you need that sort of cash? What have you done?"

Panic rises in his eyes at my question and there's no doubt. He's gotten himself in

deep with something or someone. A debt? Drugs? Who does he owe that much money?

“Nothing.” His voice cracks as he makes his denial. “Look. I just need that money. And I know she’d make it back. I can get it back to her.”

“You’re not getting a cent from her.”

He’s panicking. The vein in his neck throbs.

“Fine. Then you give it to me.” A calm suddenly comes over him with this demand.

He stands straighter and raises his chin. “Yes. You give it to me.”

I don’t even bother wasting energy on keeping a stoic expression. I laugh right at him.

“Never going to happen.”

“You should think twice about it. I mean, you know... I know.” He points at himself. “I know what you did, how you and Lucas met, I know.”

Now he has my attention.

“Whatever you think you know, I don’t care. The only reason you’re still breathing is because it would hurt Amelia to have another death in her family.” And I would sooner cut off my own limb than let her feel the sorrow of losing someone else she cares for.

Even if it is this scumbag.

“Yes, and if she finds out, it will hurt her. You don’t want to do that, so just give me the money.”

“Better men than you have tried to blackmail me.” I step toward him again, enjoying his retreat when I do.

The man has no spine. He’s desperate and pathetic.

“If you won’t give me the money, I will tell Amelia. I swear I will.”

A second later, a soft voice shatters through the tension of the room.

“Tell me what?”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Amelia

Dmitri's back tenses as I step into the living room.

Christian turns his attention to me, his eyes red and glassy like he hasn't slept in days. His hair is tousled like he's been pulling at it.

"What's going on? Christian, are you alright?" I move to stand between them.

Dmitri looks ready to rip Christian's head off his shoulders. His hands fist tightly at his sides.

"Dmitri?"

"He was just leaving," Dmitri says through gritted teeth.

"No. Not yet." Christian wipes a hand over his face. "You need to know something," he says, eyeing Dmitri as he speaks.

"Amelia, go upstairs," Dmitri orders.

The gentleness of this morning, of only half an hour ago, is gone. Back now is the ruthless man I met in his office only weeks ago.

How can it only have been a few weeks? It feels like a lifetime has passed between us. At least it did, but now with that hard tone and the steely gaze he levels me with, I'm not sure which reality I was living in.

“No. I want to know what’s happening.” I stand my ground.

Christian is obviously upset. Something’s happened.

“Amelia.” One single word from Dmitri.

Just my name, but it means so much more. It means go upstairs and don’t argue. It means obey me because you vowed to. It means do what I say without thinking for yourself.

“No.” My voice shakes a little, but it’s from irritation, not fear. I’m not afraid of this man.

He may tower over me.

He may have a glare that could scare a saint to confess sinful deeds.

He may still be wearing that thick leather belt I hate to love so much, but I am going to stand on my own two feet.

“I want to know what’s going on, and I want to know now.” I turn my back to my husband, an act he told me men wouldn’t dare. “Christian, what do you need to tell me?”

“It’s about your mom.” Christian’s eyes flick to Dmitri.

Some of the wind has gone out of his sails. His shoulders slump back, and he keeps swallowing.

“What about her?” I fold my arms over my chest.

There's a long pause. They keep staring at each other; Dmitri with a heated glare and Christian with a plea in his tired eyes.

"She didn't overdose." Christian swings his attention to me as he speaks.

"What?" I glance to Dmitri who is still trying to kill Christian with his glare. "What is he talking about?"

A moment later Dmitri turns his glare on me, but there's less anger and more worry. "If you'll just go upstairs, I'll come up and explain everything."

"Yeah, so he can lie to you again. And he can kill me," Christian barks, jabbing a finger in Dmitri's direction.

Dmitri shoots something off in Russian that neither of us understands. But the tone says enough to make Christian take a step back.

Boris and two other men show up, probably after hearing the shouting, and stand ready in the doorway.

Dmitri doesn't even have to look at them to give them orders. They just stand there, ready to intervene if they need to.

"Okay." I rub my temples. The banging in my head is returning rapidly. "Okay, everyone just relax. Christian, just tell me what you want to tell me."

Dmitri makes a low sound, like he's just about ready to lose his temper.

Christian swallows hard again, looking over my shoulder at the men ready to jump in if needed.

“Don’t worry about them.” I sidestep, putting myself between Christian and the men. “Just tell me what you wanted to tell me. Why do you think she didn’t overdose?”

Christian brings his bloodshot eyes to mine. “Because she didn’t. She and your father got into an argument and he...”

He stops short, takes a deep breath like he needs to ready himself to say the words.

“Your father hurt her. She didn’t accidentally hit her head on the counter.”

For a second, I forget to breathe.

My brain has a lot of other things to do, like figure out what he said. Because I must be putting the words in the wrong order.

“But... I found her. She was on the floor; the pill bottle was empty in the bathroom. She’d... she’d taken too many.” I grab at my throat, willing more air to get in.

“Amelia.” Dmitri steps toward me, but I put a hand out to ward him off.

It’s never worked before, but this time, he stops.

“Your father made it look like that,” Christian continues. “When your dad realized what he’d done, he left the house. But then you came home and found her. You were so young you don’t remember what happened after that. But your dad needed help to cover up what he’d done.”

Christian swings his eyes to Dmitri.

“Dmitri? Did you know?”

His eyebrow arches. “I did.”

My mind reels.

“Yeah, he knew. And he told your father exactly what to do to get away with it. He and his men came in and set up the scene, made any evidence that would point to a murder disappear. And then he forced your brother into business with him as payment.” Spittle forms at the corners of Christian’s mouth.

“Lucas? You said you didn’t force Lucas.”

“I didn’t. Your father suggested the arrangement when he realized he would owe a favor. Our help didn’t come free.” He speaks like he has nothing to be ashamed of. “He suggested Lucas use his real estate investment company to help us with a cash flow problem we were having. It was new at the time; Lucas had only been open a year. Lucas agreed, so long as you never found out the truth.”

When he says the last statement, he turns to Christian.

“But Christian tells you now, not out of friendship, but out of blackmail. He’s desperate for money and thought hurting you was the best way to get into my wallet.”

A gun clicks behind me, and I turn a little to see all three of his men, holding their weapons.

“I don’t believe you.” I exchange looks between them both. “I don’t believe either of you.”

Stepping away from them, I bump into a table. A vase of flowers falls to the floor, water spills onto the carpet.

“You’re lying,” I say again, trying desperately to cling to a reality I’ve lived for decades.

“Amelia.” Dmitri walks toward me.

“No. Just... give me a minute. I need a minute.” I turn on my heel and run from the room, past his men with their guns, and past Maria who stands at the foot of the stairs with a cup of coffee in her hand.

All of the boxes from Lucas’ office are in the spare bedroom. There was a file folder with my mother’s name on it that I hadn’t looked at, thinking it was probably just old records for her.

I rip off the cover of the first file box, but don’t find it. It’s in the third box I look in, sitting right on top, just staring up at me.

Opening the file, her death certificate is the first document, but I slide it onto the floor to get what’s behind it. The autopsy report has a big red stamp on it that reads Original Copy. My eyes fly over the words, the findings of contusions all over her body, and the horrible truth.

She had no drugs in her system. No alcohol either. Cause of death reads blunt trauma to the head.

I sink to the floor, my knees hitting the carpet as I shove the report out of the file and the photographs are there.

“Amelia.” Dmitri’s voice echoes behind me, but it’s as though he’s standing on the other side of a dimension.

He’s not in this world with me.

This world is shattered and broken.

The bruises.

There are so many bruises on my mother's shoulders, and chest, and arms. A red handprint on her throat stands out like a huge arrow pointing at the truth.

My father killed my mother.

"Amelia." Hands rest on my shoulders, and through watery eyes I flip through the photographs.

"You made this all disappear, but Lucas kept it," I sigh, wiping away the tears before they can fall.

"Lucas wanted something to be able to hold over your father's head. It was a way to protect you. Everything Lucas did was to protect you."

"He got into business with the mafia so I wouldn't find out the truth about my mother's death?" I look back at the photos. "Because he didn't want me to know about this?"

"Your brother wanted you safe from this, yes." Dmitri takes the photos and the file, closing the folder.

"And then he made me marry you?" I push to my feet. "Because that did what? Completed the payment they owed you for covering up the murder?"

He shakes his head. "No. That had nothing to do with it."

I huff. "And I should believe you? All this time you knew my mother didn't

overdose, that what I'd walked in on was a murder scene and you didn't tell me."

"Your brother wanted you never to find out."

"Yeah? Well, my brother is dead!" I yell at him. "He's dead. He died and left me here with... with... you!"

"He did what he thought was best for you."

"He left me to live with the man who murdered my mother. And then he left me to be married to the man who helped cover it up. How was any of that best for me?"

After Mom died, Dad withdrew from me. It wasn't that he grew meaner, he actually softened a little. But he wasn't really there, even when he was.

"Lucas tried to make your father let you live with him, but he refused. The only way Lucas could have managed it is if he used this against him." Dmitri lifts the folder. "But if he'd done that, you would have found out the truth."

"And marrying you?"

His confidence wanes. "To protect our business arrangement without having to involve you in it."

Again, I laugh.

"You're nothing but a criminal who lies and steals and kills." I look at the door. "Christian."

"He's fine." Dmitri grabs my arm when I start to head out. "He won't be killed. You have my word."

I yank out of his grasp.

“Your word doesn’t mean anything to me. Just leave me alone.” I hurry from the room, unsure if I can remain steady if he touches me the way he usually does when I’m upset.

If he holds me, or kisses me, or brushes my hair from my face, I might crumble.

And I can’t.

I can’t depend on him.

I’ve been so stupid letting myself fall into his strength, letting my heart soften to him.

And even dumber for falling in love with him.

Dmitri

“Did you hear what I said?” Nikolai raps his knuckles against my desk. “Dmitri.”

I move my gaze from my phone, and the unread messages I’ve sent Amelia this afternoon, to my cousin.

“I did.”

“And?” he urges with a tip of his head.

“I’ve already asked Kost to take care of it.” I wave my hand as though I can push away the thickness of the air.

It’s been a week since Amelia’s world crumbled around her. An entire week since she’s locked herself away from me.

“Oh.” Nikolai sits back in his chair. “Why didn’t you just say that?”

“You seemed like you needed to vent.” I slide my phone onto my desk. Boris is with her today. If anything happens, he’ll let me know.

“Do you think he was really acting on his own? I’m not sure I buy the jealous lover act,” Arman pipes from the window where he’s looking down at the street below.

“I don’t either,” I agree. “But my shipments are moving again.”

“Have you lost your taste for revenge, cousin?” Nikolai tilts his head with concern.

“Well, that answers our question.” Arman lets out a little laugh.

“Answers what?” Did I miss part of the conversation?

My thoughts keep wandering to my wife. To the pain in her eyes and voice when she found those reports her brother left in his belongings.

He’d wanted to protect her from all of it, yet he kept the evidence in order to be able to use it against his father if needed. Lucas didn’t expect to die before he destroyed the files, but he should have been more careful.

Damn him for not thinking to destroy it all after his bastard father died.

“If you were capable of loving your wife.” Nikolai hooks his ankle over the opposite knee. “The answer is yes.”

“What are you talking about?” I push the phone away from me and lean back in my chair.

As though the extra inches can somehow push her from my mind.

It’s all I’ve been able to think about. And the more consumed I’ve become, the more distant she’s made herself.

“You love her,” Arman says simply with a shrug. “It’s easier to just admit it and go grovel for forgiveness than whatever this mess you’re doing now.”

Grovel?

Dragunov men do not grovel.

But for Amelia? My knees would hit the ground faster than she could blink if she asked.

“Charlotte said Lia has buried herself so deep into work, it makes her look lazy,” Nikolai adds his two cents.

Charlotte, Anya, and Sarah have all taken turns blocking me from my wife. On the nights I’ve been home while she was still awake, one of them has been there having dinner with her or they’ve been holed up in the TV room watching movies.

But most nights, I find my wife already asleep in bed. It’s a fake sleep, but I made the decision to give her the space she needs so I’ve let her get away with it.

“She’s planning a summer carnival for the center on top of all her usual work. She’s been busy,” I allow with a shrug.

“Hmm, and it’s not that she’s been hiding from you?” Arman presses.

“Maybe he likes it this way. He has Lucas’ company, which protects his interests there. Maybe we’re wrong. Maybe he doesn’t care about her,” Nikolai needles.

These two are like old hens.

“Marriage has turned you into gossiping old women.” I frown.

“If you would just admit you love her, go make whatever amends you need to in order to get her back, then you can join us in our bliss.” Nikolai’s grin spreads wide.

“Loving her isn’t enough,” I argue. “She just found out her father murdered her

mother, and I helped cover it up. She sees me as a monster. I let her father get away with what he did.”

“You think it’s the injustice of it that is bothering her?” Nikolai asks.

“I hid his crime.”

“People get away with murder all the time. Her brother helped in his way, yes?” Arman adds. “It’s not that you hid the crime back then that has her so upset.”

“You think to know my wife better than me?”

Nikolai laughs. “No, cousin. Calm down. But you’re too close to it to see it for what it is. She’s hurting. And badly from what the girls have said.”

“She can’t trust me, that’s what she said,” I argue.

“She can, she’s just hurting too badly to see it. Her brother died, has she even truly mourned him yet?” Nikolai points out.

She hasn’t dealt with anything at his apartment. All the delay with the attorney and his will. I’m not sure she’s even cried over his death, at her extreme loss.

Instead of dealing with the grief, she’s been shoving it aside. And now, learning about her father and her mother, it’s too much. She can’t push any more of it away. It’s all falling down on her and instead of facing it, she’s still trying to run away from it.

And in my stupidity, I’ve allowed it. Instead of forcing her to face the horror, I’ve let her hide away.

In order to get her through this, she's going to have to face it all. And it's going to hurt.

Both of us.

I can't protect her from what's already happened, not anymore. But I can be there with her to hold her, comfort her, to keep her safe while she navigates the storm of grief.

I pick up my phone as I get to my feet, tucking it away.

"I need to go." I shove the chair out of the way as I round my desk.

"You're going to have to tell her you love her, Dmitri. She needs the words now more than ever." Nikolai gets up to face me.

"I'm going to do a hell of a lot more than tell her, cousin." I slam the door behind me.

Amelia

“The kitchen is huge.” Sarah steps into the galley-style kitchen with me, her eyes going wide.

She inspects the stove and the fridge, while I peer out the single window that looks down at the alley below.

“Don’t you think?” She asks.

“It’s bigger than what I had in my old apartment,” I say, taking in the gloomy weather outside.

It’s been overcast for the past two days, like it wants to rain but just can’t let it out.

I understand the feeling too well.

“There’s a washer and dryer in here too?” She gestures to the stacked unit in the closet just outside the kitchen. “Not going downstairs to the communal laundry room is going to be awesome.”

A drop of rain hits the window, and I watch as it slides down the pane. Singular. None follow it.

“Lia, did you see the living room closet?” She pokes her head back into the kitchen.

Finding me still at the window, she steps inside. “Hey.”

I turn away and throw on a smile. “Living room closet. No, is it big?”

“You don’t have to do this, you know.” She stops me when I get close to her. “We can go do something else.”

I shake my head. “No. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.” She follows me as I cross the empty space of the living room to the closet.

The agent who let us into the apartment stands in the far corner of the room, giving us free range of the apartment.

“I promise. I am.”

“You still haven’t talked to him, have you?” she questions.

“I don’t need to.” I shut the door. “Not until I’ve decided what to do.”

She stares at me in silence, and I know she wants to push me. I throw on another smile, even if it doesn’t fit the way I feel inside. This isn’t about me today.

“I think you’d like this place,” I say, sweeping my arm out. “It’s got a lot of room, and the in-unit laundry is life changing.”

She hesitates only a moment before turning to the agent. “She’s right. I’ll take it!”

“Perfect. If you’ll follow me down to the office, I’ll get the lease agreement all filled out and we’ll get the credit check started.” She leads us from the one-bedroom apartment to the office on the ground floor.

“Is he still out there?” Sarah asks when we’re seated back in the waiting area.

I casually walk over to the large picture window looking out at the busy street.

“At least he’s sitting in the car this time.”

Boris has become my shadow, especially whenever I meet Sarah. The last two apartments we’ve looked at, he’s stood outside on the street with a disapproving glare settled on the building.

“Maybe he likes this one then?” she asks with a little more hope in her words than I would expect, considering how much of a hard time she’s given him after he took her home from the bar.

“It’s in a good part of town and there’s a lot of security checks to get in and out of here. I’m sure he’d approve if you’d ask his opinion.” I nudge her as I take the seat beside her.

“I’m not asking him.” She pulls her phone out of her purse and starts doom scrolling. “Thanks for coming with me, Lia. I know you’ve been having a bad time lately.”

“I welcome the distraction,” I assure her, even though nothing seems to work to get the horrible memory of those pictures of my mother out of my mind.

How could my father have done something so horrible and then acted like the deeply wounded widower?

“If you do decide to move out, you can get an apartment here. It’s just a few subway stops to get to the center,” she points out. “Which reminds me, I scheduled the plumbing inspector to come tomorrow like you wanted, and I moved your meeting with the new Freedom House manager to next week.”

“That’s fine.” My phone dings inside my purse.

“There’s also supposed to be a board meeting for the foundation, since the April meeting didn’t happen.” She hesitates a moment while I dig through my purse. “Is Christian still on the board?”

I close my eyes a moment. “No. I don’t think he’ll be on it anymore. One more thing to sort out.” I grimace as I swipe my phone to life and see two messages from Dmitri.

There was a time only weeks ago, the last message in the list would be a veiled threat for ignoring him. Now there’s only a question.

Do you want to meet for a late dinner?

“He’s really gone, huh?” she questions about Christian.

“Yeah.” I sigh. “It’s for the best.” And his safety.

“I can’t believe he was taking money from the foundation. I mean he always had a little creepy vibe to him, but I just chalked it up to him being a frat guy who never outgrew being in a frat.”

I turn to her, a smile genuinely touching my lips. “You know, that’s exactly what he was like.”

I look back down at my phone, at the small olive branch Dmitri offers.

“I hope he gets help,” she continues. “You know, maybe we should think of adding a gambling addiction group session.”

I look up from the message. “That’s a good idea.”

It won't help Christian now. Even if he got the help he needs, Dmitri would sooner rip off his head than let him anywhere near the city again.

It was only for me that he let him leave New York in one piece.

"Sarah? I have everything ready, if you'll just come sign." The building manager waves at Sarah.

"I'll be right back."

"Take your time." I lean back in the chair, glancing once more at the message my husband sent.

After another moment, I send a simple message back.

No, thanks.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:46 pm

Amelia

“Lia, the plumbers are here to inspect the pipes?” Sarah peeks her head into my office.

I wave a hand.

“Can you bring them downstairs? They are going to do a full inspection to see if we have any other weak spots to worry about.”

“Yeah. Sure.” She pauses. “Lia. Maybe you should take the day off. You’ve been staring at that contract for an hour.”

I blink a few times until my vision focuses on my computer screen again. She’s right. I haven’t even gotten through the first paragraph yet.

“I’m fine,” I sigh and turn away from the computer. “I just need some coffee.”

She shakes her head with the same concerned expression she’s had all week.

“Okay.” It’s not a convincing tone, but she doesn’t say anything else before leaving me alone in my office.

Alone.

That’s exactly what I am now.

Completely alone.

It's been ten days since I found out what a monster my father really was. And nine days since Dmitri has tried to get me to talk to him.

He's given me exactly what I said I wanted. He's left me alone.

The bastard.

"Lia. Sorry to bug you, but the school just called. Tony's sick and I need to go get him. I called Ramon. He's on his way in to handle my appointments today." Susan, one of our counselors, frowns.

"All right." I look up. "Thanks, I mean, sorry. I mean." I heave a sigh. "I hope Tony's feeling better soon."

She gives me a small smile. "You know we have six amazing counselors on staff and they're all at your disposal." She slides her purse strap over her shoulder. "Including me, if you ever want. Just plop your ass in my office."

"Thanks, Susan. I'm fine." I push up from my desk.

More coffee. That should fix me right up. Caffeine to give me the energy to continue pretending my life isn't a complete dumpster fire at the moment.

"All right, but the offer stands." She offers another smile before disappearing from the door.

"Lia."

My muscles tense at my name. I've barely made it to my coffeemaker before

someone else has come into my office.

At first, I wanted the distraction. To bury myself in work and other people's problems so I could ignore my own.

But my body hurts from being so tense.

I'm exhausted from lying beside Dmitri every night and fighting with myself to keep from rolling over and diving into his arms. He'd hold me, I know he would, if I would just turn to him.

But he's doing the one thing I thought he'd never do. He's giving me space. And I think it's killing him a little.

I hear the gruffness of his voice when he's on the phone before he finds me pretending to be asleep in bed. He's getting grumpier than before. Even Maria has started to avoid him.

"Yeah?" I ask once my cup is full of coffee, and I turn around.

Dmitri stands in my office.

His hands hang at his sides, making him look more like a statue than ever with his stoic expression and the enormity of him. I used to think it was just his ego that took up the whole room, but it's him.

"Dmitri." I swallow, afraid a sigh of relief will escape. "What are you doing here?"

"Too long, moyo dikoye plamya . I've waited too long, and it stops now." He's back to using his dominating tone.

I put my cup of coffee down to keep from spilling it with my shaky hands.

“Too long for what?” I manage to ask without a tremor in my voice.

“I’ve let you hide. It’s over now.”

My heart sinks. Of course.

Why would he want a wife who ignores him and fights him at every turn?

“Alright,” I say, unable to keep the shake from my words this time.

He shakes his head. “No. It’s not alright.”

Going to my desk, he picks up my phone and my jacket.

“What are you doing?” I take a step.

Is he trying to throw me out of my own office? Maybe he’s going to force the close of the foundation.

We need three chairmen, and Christian isn’t one of them anymore.

I haven’t heard from him directly, other than a voicemail with an apology and telling me he’s going to be moving. I tried calling him back, but he’s blocked me.

Dmitri could shut us down if he really wanted.

“I’m taking you somewhere, let’s go.” He holds out my jacket for me so I can slip my arms in.

“Where?” Maybe to the attorney’s office to sign divorce papers.

He can get anything done, and if he wants me out of his life, he can make it happen in a blink of an eye.

He drops his hands a little and takes a breath. Is he trying to compose himself?

The control is there in his eyes, but it’s mixed with something else. Is he nervous?

“I need you to trust me.”

“Lia—oh, shit, sorry.” Javier stands in my doorway. “I just need a quick second.”

“No,” Dmitri answers before I can. “Lia is busy for the rest of the day. Sarah can help you, and if she can’t, it will have to wait.”

Javier’s eyes widen, but then he grins and backs out of the doorway.

Dmitri brings the coat to me, sliding one sleeve up my arm.

“I can do it.” I try to brush him away, but he’s steadfast in his mission and he not only gets the jacket on me, but buttons it up too. “Wait. Did you just call me Lia?”

He hands me my phone.

“That’s the name you like, yes?” he questions.

“I—” How can I tell him I’ve come to like him being the only one who calls me by my full name? It’s become something like an endearment.

“Let’s go.” He links our hands together and pulls me from my office.

A part of me thinks I should argue with him and refuse to go. But the rest of me is tired.

Tired of fighting. Not just him, but myself, my father, my brother. I've been in a constant battle with ghosts for the last ten days and it's exhausting.

The late April weather is chilly when we walk along the sidewalk headed to his car only a few hundred feet from the entrance to the center. A breeze blows, seeping through the thin coat I'm wearing.

When he opens the passenger car door for me, his eyes meet mine. I'm not sure I'm ready to see them though.

It's harder to look at him when he isn't glaring with his fierceness on display. There's something softer, almost vulnerable in them today.

"Thanks," I say as I climb into the car.

After shutting my door he jogs around the front of the car and gets in on his side. The car jostles with his weight.

It only takes a few moments to lose myself in the sights outside my window as he maneuvers us through the traffic of the city. It's only when we hit the highway that I turn to him for answers.

"I thought we were going home?"

"Not yet."

I go back to window watching as the city fades and we're soon driving through more spacious roads. He exits the highway and my heart squeezes in my chest.

The cemetery.

“Dmitri?” I lean forward, looking through the windshield as the sign for Rosewood Gardens comes into view.

With its softly rolling hills, aged statue monuments, and willow trees flanking each side of the road, it’s a somber place.

A spot filled with peace.

“It’s time, moyo dikoye plamya . Time to face what’s happened,” he says quietly as he pulls the car to the side.

Lucas’ monument is on top of a small hill. On a clear day, there’s a limited view of the city skyline.

“I don’t want to be here.” I swallow back the thick grief trying to climb its way out.

“I know.” The car jostles again as he turns to face me. “I know, but you need to. Trust me, I would sooner cut off my own hand than hurt you.”

I look away, still finding this softer side of him unsettling. The harshness is easy. It’s something to push against, something to lean on. But this... this brings us into unknown territory.

The car door opens and shuts, and a moment later my door opens too. His hand appears in my line of sight, and I take it.

Maybe he’s right.

Maybe I’ve been avoiding what should have been dealt with. A moment of closure

might help ease the pain that's been nesting in my chest.

Dmitri holds my hand as we climb up the hill to where my brother was laid to rest almost two months ago.

So much has happened, has changed.

Except how much I miss him.

That hasn't changed at all. And now, seeing his headstone come into view, it's an overwhelming sensation.

By the time we reach his resting place, breathing becomes harder. The tears are getting harder to hold back, and the ball in my chest is going to explode.

"The day your mother died, your father called me, begging for help." Dmitri's words cut through the silence. "I didn't know you then. You were just a child. And I didn't know Lucas either. I made a deal with your father that suited me and my family."

"You don't have to explain." I try to slip my hand from his, but he holds tighter.

"No. I do." He takes a breath. "Your father suggested the partnership with Lucas, and he agreed—so long as you never learned the truth."

"Would it have been that horrible? To know what really happened?" I take a shaky breath, trying to imagine myself back then.

"For a little girl to learn her father did that to her mother? Yes, it would have been a heartbreak your brother wanted to protect you from. Your father had his political ties. The odds that he was actually going to pay any sort of consequence for what happened were small. Even without my help."

He's not wrong on that account. Dad could have found a way to get someone else to take the fall. Or he could have paid off the right judge or DA.

"What I did was give you the ability to never know your mother felt any pain." He lets go of my hand. "And you wouldn't have if Christian hadn't?—"

He stops when the anger shakes his voice. "I couldn't protect you from what he told you."

I turn to look at the headstone again. At my brother's name etched so perfectly in the stone.

Loving Brother scripted just beneath.

Tears burn my eyes.

"He wanted to protect you. I knew him mostly in a professional manner. But he talked of you often. You were his pride. And he would do anything to protect you."

Tears roll down my cheeks and this time, I don't bother trying to stop them. It's too much. It's been too long. The weight of it all is too hard to keep carrying on my own.

"Like make me marry a Russian mobster?"

He wipes away a tear with his thumb.

"I spoke to his attorney yesterday. Lucas put the stipulation in three months before the accident. He probably figured he had more time to tell you about it. Or he thought you'd be married on your own by the time it was even an issue. The point was to protect you in the only way he could think of. Even if it meant marrying a Russian mobster."

“I’m doomed to be surrounded by overprotective men who constantly want to protect me. I guess it’s not the worst problem to have. Lucas was a great brother, and he must have trusted you a great deal to do this. He knew you would continue protecting me.” I try to smile, but instead a sob breaks through.

My brother is gone. Forever.

But I’m not alone.

Not anymore.

I have Dmitri.

He pulls me to his chest, hugging me tightly to him as sobs that I’ve held back for months shake me. His chin rests on my head as he lets me ruin his shirt with my tears and what little makeup I managed to get on this morning before I ran out of the house.

I’d wanted to get out before I ran into him.

And now, all I want is to never leave his arms again.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so distant. That I blocked you out,” I mutter into his shirt.

“I know.” He places a warm kiss on my head. “I’m sorry I let you.”

And he did. He hasn’t forced a conversation or intimacy or anything. He gave me exactly what I said I wanted.

Space.

“But understand, I won’t ever again allow it. Your place, my place is by each other’s side, for all the bad and all the good. So never again will I leave you alone.”

I lean my head back to look up at him. “I don’t want you to. It’s been horrible, being so close to you but making myself be so far away.”

He wipes away my tears. “Never again.”

“No. Never again,” I promise.

I take another look at Lucas’ grave. “I miss him so much.”

“You will for a long time, maybe forever. But you have me to lean on. You don’t have to handle everything all by yourself.”

“I know.” I nod, but he takes my face between his hands, leveling me with a stern look.

“I mean it, Lia. No more taking on the world by yourself.” His accent thickens when he gets all dominating.

I love it.

“Don’t call me Lia,” I say in response.

His brow wrinkles.

“Everyone calls me Lia. You’re not everyone.”

His lips spread wide in a knowing grin.

“I love you, Amelia Dragunov.” His lips crush mine as he kisses me, possessing me with a simple phrase.

“I love you too,” I breathe as soon as he breaks the kiss.

“Good girl,” he says in that silky tone of his that makes my body melt for him. “Let’s go home.”

I nod as I wipe away another tear that falls.

“Yes. Let’s.” I take his hand and let him lead the way down the hill to the car.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it. Whatever it is, it can wait.

I’m going home with my husband.

But when it continues to vibrate, I pull it out to turn it off. Notifications of emails and text messages. Nothing that can’t be put off for a day.

As I hit the power down button, my calendar pops up and I freeze.

It’s Tuesday.

Maybe everything horrible doesn’t happen on Tuesdays.

“Turn it off. Ignore the world for one day.” Dmitri covers the phone with his hand.

Once it’s off, I toss it into the backseat.

He flashes me a grin. “Such a good girl.”

Dmitri

My wife whimpers my name as I press the flat of my tongue against her soaked pussy. Licking the length of her, I enjoy the trembles of her thighs as she gets closer to a release I've been holding from her.

"Please, Dmitri." She begs so prettily these days.

The defiance in her still rears its head now and then, and I hope it always does.

Life with my Amelia will always be exciting. This moment, this bit of control I hold as her pussy clamps down around my fingers, begging me to let her orgasm rip through her, is proof.

"Not yet, baby," I mutter, flicking the tip of my tongue over her clit and thrusting my fingers harder into her, curling them at the knuckle until her body arches with pleasure.

"Please!" She tugs on the sheets beneath her. "I need to come, Dmitri. Please!"

I press a single kiss just above her clit.

"Not yet. And it would be a very bad idea to disobey me now," I say as I drag my fingers out of her hot and slick pussy.

Before she can register the emptiness, I cover her with my body, plowing my cock into her tightness up to the hilt.

“Fuck,” I growl, nipping at her earlobe.

She rolls her head to the side, giving me more access to her neck. My wife likes my little bites to her throat while I fuck her hard into the mattress.

And my wife gets what she wants.

“I have to. Please. Let me! Please.” She runs her nails down my back, sending electricity zipping down my spine.

My balls pull tight.

“Come for me. Be my good girl. Be my good wife.” I’ve barely finished giving my permission before her body obeys.

Her cry of pleasure hits my ear as I pump into her harder and harder, driving through her release until she softens beneath me.

“Fuck, sweet girl, you’re so beautiful when you come for me,” I say through gritted teeth as I plow again and again until my own release overtakes me, stealing my ability to breathe, much less think.

“You’re pretty hot when you come, too.” Her fingers swipe away my hair from my forehead moments later.

I kiss her, a soft but powerful kiss. One that doesn’t just tell her how much I love fucking her, but how much I love her.

I rest my hand on her belly, finally swelling enough to show my son rests inside.

“Are you alright? I wasn’t too rough?” I sink beside her, holding myself up on my

elbow.

She laughs. She always does when I ask her this.

“The baby is fine.” She covers my hand with hers. “We’re both fine.”

I kiss her again. “I’m going to ask the doctor to be certain. Maybe you should be on your hands and knees from now on. That way there’s no pressure on the baby.”

She laughs harder. “You’re going to ask the doctor if fucking me doggy style is safer for the baby?”

She likes to tease me, no matter how often I threaten to spank her for it.

It’s a useless threat. I won’t do anything that might harm the baby sleeping in her womb.

But once she’s given birth.

Her ass is mine.

“Keep it up and you’re going to have a hell of a time sitting after you give birth.” I kiss her cheek then roll off the bed to get a warm washcloth to clean her.

By the time I get back from the washroom, she’s ready for me, her legs opened and her hand resting on the small baby bump.

“It was really nice of your mother to come all the way from St. Petersburg. Maybe we should have asked her to stay longer,” she says after I’ve finished cleaning her and helped her back into her nightgown.

“My mother prefers Russia to all things. She’ll be back when our son arrives,” I assure her.

The only reason my mother traveled this time was to attend our wedding.

Our real wedding. With a priest in a church and our entire family in attendance. Charlotte and Anya took Amelia shopping for a wedding gown and stood up as bridesmaids for her.

The party is finished, and all of the guests have gone home. My mother was on the first flight out of New York this morning.

Four months of planning and it’s all over with now. No more planning and shopping and stress over Amelia working too much and too hard in addition to the wedding planning.

Just peace.

I climb back into our bed and lean against the headboard, pulling my wife to my chest.

“It’s too bad Kost couldn’t make it, though. I’d really like to meet him,” she says, tapping her fingertips against my chest.

“He said he’d visit soon. He’s been working.” My cousins were right to question the validity of the excuse the Kozlovs gave for the holdup of my shipments.

They tried to claim a man who had fallen in love with one of their women had inserted himself. Payback for the retaliation against her for what she’d done to Roman’s wife.

A complete lie.

Once the Zhukovs were given the incentive to stop backing the Kozlovs' attack on my family, the Kozlovs lost the ability to keep my shipment hostage. The weak lie the Kozlovs gave was more to divert revenge.

Weak men sit at the head of that family.

But Kost didn't stop at merely getting the Zhukovs to back off. He's tracked down every asshole who had anything to do with the delay. And every one of them has paid the consequence.

Thanks to his diligence, there won't be any more problems at the port. And we'll be even richer with the fees we'll be collecting for other shipments going through there.

He may hate the business end of our world, but he's fucking amazing at it.

Amelia yawns and snuggles further into my chest, wrapping one arm around me to anchor herself.

"Dmitri?" She says my name softly, and I know exactly what she's doing.

She's about to say something that's going to make me angry.

"Yes?" I prepare myself.

"Christian sent me a text today." She squeezes me tightly when my body reacts. "It was just a text. And he knows he's not supposed to call me."

"I would say that's not true since he contacted you."

“He didn’t call,” she argues gently. “He just wanted me to know that he’s up in Washington now. And he wanted to thank you.”

“Thank me?” I scoff.

I doubt that asshole has any gratitude. I should have killed him. And I would have, but Amelia would have been upset about it. She still thinks the man has redeeming qualities.

It’s a childhood fantasy, but I’ll let her keep it. So long as he stays several states away from her. And the eyes I have on him continue to report that he’s managing to keep his word on that front.

The lengths I go to in order to keep my woman happy. I’m as bad as my cousins.

“Yes. He’s got a job up there, and he’s dating some girl. Anyway. I wanted to thank you too. For, you know... not killing him.”

She pushes up to give me a small smile.

“He stole from the foundation. He tried to steal your inheritance by getting you to marry him instead of me. And he did the one thing your brother asked him never to do.” Reminding her of all this doesn’t seem to faze her.

“I know. But when he told me about that... it sort of fixed us. Right? I mean, it brought us closer, so in a way... he helped?”

I shake my head. “How can you look at such a bastard and see any sort of good?”

She touches my cheek. “Some would say the same about you.”

For the first time I don't have a rebuttal. She's right. I've killed, I've ordered the death of dozens, and almost nothing in my life is legal. Yet, she welcomes me home every night with a warm smile and a kiss.

At least on the nights I can get her to stop working and get home at a decent hour.

"He's not allowed back in New York, Amelia. You'll never get me to say otherwise." I keep my tone firm, so she knows I mean it.

And just to be sure she understands, I place my hand on her ass and squeeze. "If you even hint at it, you'll be face down over my knee so fast your head will spin."

She smiles and moves closer to me. "You said I'm safe from your hand until the baby is here."

Something I regret almost daily.

"That doesn't mean I'm not keeping track." I pat her ass.

"I figured you would." She rests her head back down. "The closing on Lucas' apartment is next week. Would you like to go with me to sign the last of the papers?"

"Do you want me there?" I was never not going to be with her when she signs those papers, but I've learned it's best to let her come to these conclusions on her own.

"I do." She sighs. "It's the last bit to deal with. Now that everything's final, the foundation is fully funded so the center is safe and Lucas' investment firm is solidly in your hands, things can calm down now."

I kiss the top of her head. "I don't think anything will ever be calm in our lives again." I rest my hand on her belly. "And I'm grateful for it. There's also the matter

of the shelter.”

“Right.”

The Marilyn Heart shelter is due to open next spring. Amelia used the trust fund her father left her on her twenty-fifth birthday to get the wheels in motion. Within a year the women’s shelter will be open and in full swing.

“And you’ll have a full staff, so you don’t have to handle everything on your own.” I kiss her again. “Understand me, wife?”

She looks up at me with a wry smile, and I realize I’m going to have to chain her to this bed at least once a week to be assured she doesn’t work herself to death.

“Think of the baby,” I try and she laughs.

“Having kids hasn’t slowed Charlotte down and she’s a wonderful mother.”

“Yes, and my cousin is getting grayer by the day.”

She tousles my hair. “Then I guess it’s good you’re already in your salt and pepper stage.”

“You’re poking fun at my age again.”

She forces a stoic expression. “I would never.”

I can’t help but laugh. “You do all the time.”

“Do you really think my working will be bad for the baby?”

“No. It may take some time, but we’ll find the right balance.”

“And the baby will always be with me, so there’s that.” She rolls to her back.

“Speaking of the baby. He wants more cake. There’s still some in the kitchen, right?”

“Ah, you stay here. I’ll get the cake.” I pull her back into bed when she tries to climb out.

“You’re the best.” She sighs happily and rests her head against the headboard.

“I am. I know.” I kiss her forehead as I slide my arms into my robe.

“I love you, Dmitri,” she says as I open our bedroom door. “A big piece!” she adds before I can respond to her first comment.

I laugh. “Of course. A big piece.”

If she asked me to bring the baker over to make her a brand new cake, I would have her here within the hour. Nothing my wife asks for will be denied.

And in all things, I will protect her and cherish her.

Not just because she’s my wife, but because she’s my everything.

And I will get to spend the rest of my life proving it to her.

Because I’m the luckiest monster in the world.

Kost

“Sorry.” A man scrambles past me after bumping into my shoulder.

He’s gone in the next moment, hurrying off to catch up with his family that is already at the customs line.

A quick scan and I find the chestnut-haired mark scooting her way into line behind a woman that’s shuffling three kids in front of her toward the desk.

I take my time making my way into line behind the tired and weary travelers who want nothing more than to get out of this airport. There’s no rush on my account.

The hunt is the best part for me.

As the mark reaches the desk, she drops her passport. Bending over to retrieve it, her backpack slips off her arm, smacking her in the face as she gets back up.

She takes a moment, inhales an angry breath before turning back to the desk and thrusting her passport at the attendant.

He does his best to hide the smirk, but I see it. He’s laughing at her. My fingers curl into a fist as I move up a spot in my own line.

After collecting her stamp, she adjusts her backpack again and forges through the double doors into the baggage claim along with the horde of people from our flight from Moscow.

“What brings you to the United States?” the attendant at my custom desk asks, dragging my attention from the doors to him.

“Visiting family,” I say, forcing a grin. “A short visit.”

He looks back at my passport—it’s a forgery. One too well made for him to detect, even though he pretends to try. After scanning it and clicking a few things on his computer, he hands it back to me.

“Have a good visit.”

“Thanks.” It’s getting too easy, slipping in and out of countries without being detected.

There’s very little challenge in it these days. I would have thought with all the new technology it would become harder, but as the governments gain tech, so do my associates.

It’s almost boring.

My phone rings the moment I step into the baggage claim area. It’s an explosion of people fighting through crowds to get to the conveyor belts carrying luggage.

“Dmitri,” I greet my brother.

“I got your message. The last one is gone?”

This is what I like about my older brother. He gets right to the point. No small talk, just straight to what he wants to know.

“He is. You won’t have a problem from the Kozlov family again. They’ve broken too many deals with the others back home. What we haven’t taken care of, they will.”

“Good.” An announcement cuts off his next words.

“What did you say?” I ask once it’s finished.

“Are you in an airport?” he asks.

“O’Hare.” I catch a glimpse of my mark; she’s in line at the exit doors with her lavender suitcase with the daisies printed on the sides.

She stands out against all of the dark-colored bags. The woman isn’t one to blend.

“Chicago? Why?”

“I have work.” I move up.

Five people stand between me and her. It would be easy to grab her once we get through the doors. People will be scrambling to make their next flights from Chicago to whichever city they are trying to get to. Others will be too concerned to getting outside to the cabs to care about some woman being snatched.

“You have work in Chicago?” Always the questioner.

“Just tying up loose ends. That’s all.”

“When you’re done, come to New York. Meet your sister-in-law. Your nephew will be arriving soon; you could stay for his birth.”

I chuckle. “Always so arrogant. What if it’s a girl?”

“Amelia wouldn’t dare give me a daughter first.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” I walk through the doors, past the last level of security and

into the main hallway of the airport.

My mark is quick; she's made it outside already. A taxi pulls up to her and she's handing over her suitcase.

Ending the call with my brother, I step outside just as she climbs into the back of the cab and it pulls away from the curb. I catch her eye just for a brief moment when she glances back out the window.

Something must spook her though, because she flips around in her seat and remains looking forward until she's out of view.

I pull out the card from my coat pocket. She was so preoccupied with her passport and ID back in Moscow, she dropped it out of her purse. I snatched it before she noticed it was gone.

A business card for the Chicago library.

Harper Bennett.

It's more than enough for me to find her again.

I don't let loose ends go free.

And Harper is definitely a loose end.

Innocent Brides will continue with book seven,

Stolen Innocence , coming soon!

In the meantime...

If you loved the Innocent Brides Series and want more obsessive alpha-heroes,
check out the Sacred Obsession series.