



Leo, My Partner (Family Ties #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Leo

Pretending to be like everyone else is exhausting, but I've mastered it. No one knows what really lurks behind the mask I wear every day. I'm not like others. I don't experience emotions like they do. I have no need for human connection, but when I see Tyshawn, that changes. One look and I know he's mine. It doesn't matter that I've never been with a man before. He makes me want, he makes me burn. When he catches me ... working ... my second job, he has to decide if he wants to stay with me. I have to convince him that I'm willing to do anything for him ... including slaying some of his demons.

Tyshawn

Owning my own bakery is my dream. When a friend of mine pushes me to contact the owner of Ray's Beanery for a tasting to display my baked goods at his coffee shop, I jump at the opportunity. The sexy coffee shop owner I meet is as unexpected as my instant feelings of desire for him. That is, until I walk in on him covered in blood while he's ... working. I realize there is more to him than meets the eye. I'm terrified of him, but when I hear him out, I'm intrigued. I know what he's capable of. Am I capable of it too?

Total Pages (Source): 26

CHAPTER 1

TYSHAWN

“How do I look?” I ask my roommate, Sam, holding out my arms.

Sam stands from the couch, circling me and taking in the simple blue polo shirt and gray dress pants I have on. The outfit is nothing fancy, but I’m not going to a corporate job interview, so it should be fine.

The look of approval is clear on his face when he circles back in front of me, and I grin at him. “Professional, but laid-back. Like you’re going to give a kick-ass tasting to those uptight fucks at Ray’s Beanery.”

I laugh, dropping my arms to my side and running a hand over my hair, making sure not to mess up my waves. “Yeah, well, those uptight fucks might open a door for me to get my baking out there.”

Sam shrugs. “You can do it on your own. Everything you bake is fucking delicious. Beth wants to come over for your cupcakes more than she wants to see me.” He taps a finger on his chin as he talks about his girlfriend. “Now that I mention it, I’m a little upset by that.”

Rolling my eyes playfully, I step in front of the mirror mounted beside our front door and check myself out. Even though it’s cool in our apartment, my nerves are getting the better of me. A light sheen of sweat coats my forehead and upper lip, making my brown skin look damp and shiny. I quickly dab at it, not really making a difference.

Sam hands me a tissue from the box on the table, and I take it with a quick thanks.

I got a haircut yesterday must for this interview, my fade fresh and neat. My barber even offered to make my face baby smooth with a straight razor. I was scared shitless, but he didn't nick me at all, and it came out well.

Even though I'm confident, nervousness and apprehension shines back at me from my different colored eyes. The blue and brown reflected stare gives me pause, but only for a moment. I look and feel good, but there's always a chance this won't pan out. The boss at Ray's Beanery could tell me no, that they don't want to exclusively stock my goods.

But why would they return my call about the inquiry if they were going to turn me down? They could have said that shit over the phone or, better yet, replied to the email I sent.

Ray's Beanery, the only coffee shop that's not owned by any major corporation, advertised they'd let locals bring in baked goods to sell about a year back. I was hesitant, afraid they wouldn't not be interested or drop the idea after a few months. But Sam convinced me to give it a shot, and they messaged me promptly with a time for a tasting. I had to read and reread the email before I believed it was real.

I blow out a long breath. I can't have thoughts that I'm going to fuck up—I haven't even stepped out of the apartment yet. As my grandfather used to say, "Don't borrow worry. It'll be there if you need it."

Sam must see my mental dilemma. He steps up behind me and rubs my shoulders, his six foot three frame making my five foot seven height appear small. His dark brown eyes are bright, radiating calm that I soak up like a greedy fucking sponge. He takes several deep breaths in and out, giving me a nudge to imitate him. I do, meeting his gaze in the mirror.

“You got this, Ty. This is your gig. Soon, Ty’s Delicious Creations will be everywhere,” Sam says, hyping me up. I give him a droll look. “We’ll go back to the drawing board to figure out a name for your bakery. But the word delicious needs to be in there somewhere. I don’t know what you do to those muffins, but they’re fantastic. Beth loves them too. I think if you were bi, she would leave me solely for your baking.”

That gets a real laugh out of me. Shaking my head, I push his hands off my shoulders and grab the basket that contains what I hope to be the first of many baked goods that Ray’s Beanery showcases. “I’m sure that’s not true. She only has eyes for you.”

Sam waves me away good-naturedly. “You know how long she gushed about your eyes?”

I smirk. My eyes are a noticeable feature. Most people don’t have one blue and one light brown eye. I’m not sure where the blue came from, as both my parents and their parents before them have either light or dark brown eyes. It’s always the first thing someone notices about me. It gets kind of old.

Checking myself over one more time, I nod and turn to Sam as I’m pulling open the apartment door. “Wish me luck, Sammy.”

“Good luck, even though you don’t need it. Beth and I will take you out for drinks after you nail this shit!” he shouts to my back just as I’m closing the door. The faith he has in me makes my heart light. I need to shake the nerves off and have faith in myself.

The drive to Ray’s Beanery is short. I don’t have time to worry that this is a mistake or they won’t like what I baked. Baking is in my blood. Hopefully the owner thinks what I prepared tastes as good as Sam and Beth do.

Before I go inside of the coffee shop, I blow out a few long breaths, trying to center myself and build up my confidence. “You got this, Ty,” I mutter to myself. “You got this. Even if they only showcase your baked goods for a few days, that’s enough. Even one person tasting and wanting more would mean the world. This is your stepping stone. You got this.”

If I stay in this car much longer, I’ll put it in drive and go back home. I grab my basket and throw open my car door, ready to blow Mr. Ray away with my treats.

The coffee shop is busy, even though it’s a little after noon on a weekday. A college crowd is bustling about, laptops open and books littering the tables. The shop has a nice vibe.

The aesthetics are nice too, reminiscent of something I’d see on a movie or TV show. The chairs and tables don’t really match, but they’re the same color scheme made up of earth tones—browns and different shades of green. As I look around, splashes of color peek out that give the shop an authentic feel. It not only speaks but shouts the impression that this is a coffee shop owned by an individual rather than a corporation. You can’t buy this kind of down-home feel. I love it.

When I approach the counter, the Hispanic man behind it smiles at me. “Welcome to Ray’s Beanery. I’m Marco. What can I get you?”

“I’m here to see Mr. Anderson. I’m Tyshawn Glassby.”

The man’s face furrows in confusion, but his smile stays in place. “Um ... Is he expecting you?”

“I think so?” Fuck, the nerves are back. I figured the boss would have told whoever was at the counter that I had an interview today. “I have these?” I hold up the basket and kick myself. He doesn’t know what’s in the basket, so that answers nothing. And

why am I ending all of my sentences like a question?

To his credit, Marco doesn't laugh or call me a dumbass. He simply nods. "I'm not sure Leo is in. Give me a moment, and I'll go check the back. You can have a seat by the stage. That's usually the least crowded place."

That's a good idea. If I stand here much longer without Mr. Anderson making an appearance, my legs will give out. "Thank you. I'll be just over there." Then I point, like a fucking imbecile. Of course, I'll be over there. That's where he told me to go.

Instead of making an even bigger fool of myself, I weave around the tables and chairs and sit down beside the stage. I'll be even more on edge if I keep watching the door, hence why I'm looking at an empty stage.

I should have asked Sam to come with me. Even if he didn't sit in on the tasting, he could have been my support. Sammy works from home as a graphic designer. Since he makes his own schedule, he could have chilled here for an hour, made sure I wasn't spiraling, then left when he saw I had shit under control.

A frustrated sigh leaves my lips as I drum my fingers on the table. I can do this. I'm capable of handling this interview on my own.

"Sorry, I'm late," a smooth voice says, and my mouth drops open when a good-looking man drops down in the empty chair in front of me.

This whole time I thought an old man owned the place. The man sitting across from me is a fucking snack. Holy fuck.

He's maybe early or mid-thirties, tall, blond, and fucking jacked. I'm not sure how he fits in the small chair he's perched on. Not like he's steroid built. He's solid, muscles gained from strenuous gym workouts or hard labor.

Not only is his body nice, but he has the face to match. His blue-green eyes are luminous and vibrant, the smile tilting his lips crinkling them in the corners. And his smile, Jesus his smile. He has dimples so deep if I stuck my finger in one it might get lost. Even, white teeth flash at me as he folds his hands on the table.

“You’re not old,” I blurt out and want to fucking kick myself. Sometimes, the filter between my brain and my mouth is broken.

Thankfully, the man—Mr. Anderson, I presume—chuckles, shaking his head so his blond hair falls into his face. He pushes it back with a quick swipe of his hand. “No, I’m not. I’m thirty-three. Though to some, that’s still pretty old. What about you?”

“Oh. I’m twenty four.”

His smile hasn’t dimmed, a sign that I didn’t fuck this tasting up before it started. “Forgive me,” he says in an apologetic tone. “I’m Leo Anderson. I have a partner, June King, but he’s on vacation this week. I’ll be conducting your tasting today.” He holds his hand out, and I shake it firmly. His much larger hand engulfs mine, warm against my palm.

“Tyshawn. Tyshawn Glassby. Though most people call me Ty. You can call me Ty. Or Tyshawn or Glass. No, not Glass, that’s stupid. No one calls me Glass.” I clamp my lips shut. I’m rambling. I square my shoulders and try again. “I’m Tyshawn. You can call me Ty.”

“So Glass is off the table?” His eyes twinkle with mirth, and I’m not sure if I should be mortified or roll with it.

Fuck it. I’m going to roll with it. “Glass is off the table. Sorry for the inconvenience there.”

Leo chuckles. “Maybe I’ll wear you down one day.”

Is he flirting? That tone sounded very flirty. “I doubt it, but you’re welcome to try.”
Fuck, am I flirting now?

We sit silent for a moment, just staring at each other. Fucking hell, Leo is fine. Like really fine. It’s obvious he knows it, the self-assured air surrounding him telling me as much. He has the right to feel that way with a face and body like that.

Finally, I shake my head to get myself back in the game. “I have some baked goods for you to sample. They’re recipes passed down in my family that I tweaked and made my own. I’d like to showcase some here if you’ll allow me.”

“Let’s see what you have.” Leo sits back in his chair to give me space to rest my basket. His eyes bore into me, like he’s trying to stare into my soul. It’s not a bad feeling. It sends a shiver down my spine that I fight to suppress. “We don’t have anyone on the calendar for the foreseeable future, so if they’re as good as your email claims, you could be a permanent fixture here.”

I’ll admit that I talked myself up in my email, telling Mr. Anderson—Leo— that my cupcakes will be the best he’s ever tasted, and if he’s not a cupcake person, I have cookies and Danishes that would satisfy anyone with a sweet tooth. I went all out selling myself—I just hope it doesn’t come back to bite me in the ass.

Keeping up my confident air, I say, “They’re better. Which would you like to try first?”

He points to one of the cookies with a smile. “I’ll try one of these first. The cupcake can be next.” He winks at me, and my face heats. “What is it?”

“It’s a lemon drop and lavender cookie.”

Leo wrinkles his nose. “Lavender in a cookie?”

“Don’t let that deter you. It’s not a lot of lavender, and it helps balance the taste of the lemon drop. It’s not sweet like most cookies, but it packs flavor.”

Grabbing a napkin from my basket, I place a cookie on it, and I slide it over to him. For some reason, I expect Leo to stuff the whole thing in his mouth with little to no grace. He surprises me when he takes an almost dainty but hearty bite. My lungs stop working as I wait for his verdict.

Leo chews thoughtfully, his expression giving nothing away. I stare at his mouth, surprisingly more because his lips are nice and plump than wondering if he likes the cookie. Focusing on Leo and his good looks bring my nervousness down rather than making me even more so. For some reason I can’t quite put my finger on, he’s calming me. I don’t know him, and he practically holds my future in his hands— and mouth—but I’m at ease enough to joke and even flirt. After my word vomit earlier, that is.

While Leo chews, he maintains eye contact. There’s something behind his stare that I can’t nail down. It’s searching, roving, and ... something else. Something more intimate and intense.

Finally, Leo swallows and nods, dropping his gaze as he sets the rest of the cookie back on the napkin. I blow out my pent-up breath, both from nerves at if he liked the cookie and from how intensely he stared at me. “I didn’t expect a lavender cookie to taste so good.” I beam. “What’s next?”

The cupcake is placed in front of him, and he picks it up in the same graceful way he did the cookie, peeling the wrapper from the base.

“That’s a red velvet cupcake with homemade vanilla icing,” I say.

Leo takes a generous bite, and to my immense pleasure, he groans as he starts chewing. He waits until he's swallowed his mouthful before he gives me the verdict. "That's delicious. Jesus, I don't think I've ever had a cupcake that moist. Looks like you were right about them being better than you described."

I want to laugh at the word moist because I'm obviously a child, but I stifle it by sheer force of will. "Thank you."

"Another cookie?" he asks, pointing to the one with the cinnamon on top.

"Mhm."

I slide it over to him. "That's snickerdoodle and marshmallow."

Leo takes a bite, then his eyes roll to the back of his head. He groans in satisfaction. Fuck, there's nothing hotter than a man enjoying my food and making it obvious he loves it. "Okay, I don't need to taste more. Whatever you want us to showcase, we will. You're truly talented, Ty," Leo says earnestly.

I duck my head, smiling. "Thank you." Those two words don't seem like enough, but it's all I can muster right now.

"You're welcome. How long have you been baking?"

"All my life, really. My parents loved to cook, and my mother and I spent a lot of time tweaking old recipes and making up our own. The snickerdoodle and marshmallow cookie is the first recipe we wrote in our family cookbook," I tell him, pointing to the cookie.

He nods, picking it up and taking another bite. Once he swallows, he says, "I think that one is my favorite. Your mom will be proud to see your creations in front of

people.”

I smile sadly. “She would have been. She died two years ago.” I swallow down the pain of her loss. “It means a lot that it’s your favorite.

“I’m sorry,” Leo mutters. Something about his condolence sounds ... hollow. Not like he doesn’t mean it. Like it’s a reflex because that’s what people say rather than him actually empathizing.

That’s probably not the case, and my grief is overshadowing his sincerity. Maybe my assessment of him is all in my head.

“Thank you,” I mutter, accepting his condolences. Not wanting to dwell on my pain, I search around for something to talk about. I’m not sure why. He’s already said he’s going to showcase my goods. I should go home and geek out in peace. “Who’s the shop named after?”

“My old boss. He died about a year ago. Left the shop to me and my best friend.”

And I bring the conversation back around to death. I’m really knocking it out of the park here. Though he might know some of what I feel since someone close to him died. “Fuck, I’m sorry.” I slap my hand over my mouth. “Fuck, I shouldn’t say fuck. Dammit. Shit. Fire me now.” I drop my hand and lower my head.

Leo’s laugh makes my chest feel light. Something about him makes me feel good. It’s weird since, again, I don’t know him. “I’m technically not your boss, so you can say fuck if you want.”

A relived chuckle bursts forth. “I’m actually going to quit while I’m ahead.” I clear my throat and ask, “Do I need to sign something or...?”

“Yeah. It’s a quick liability contract, but I don’t have it. June, my business partner, will send it to you when he gets back, along with the quantity of items we want on a given day and some other stuff I have no idea about. He does the paperwork because he’s more organized than I am.” Leo jokes. Then he winks at me again.

I’m not sure why, but that wink sends all the blood from my brain south to my dick. It wasn’t even overly sexual, but my brain takes in his flirting, his deep, penetrating gazes, and his probing questions and thinks the wink adds the cherry on top of my “I want Leo” fantasy cake.

I have to get out of here. If I don’t, I’ll say something stupid, like I think he’s hot, and since he’s not my boss, we should have a drink and see where the night takes us. That’s crazy on many levels, namely that I don’t know if Leo is even into men. His bulging biceps look like they could pack quite the punch, literally. I’d rather not get my ass beat because I hit on a straight guy.

Standing quickly, I scoop up the basket and almost topple my chair over. Leo stands at a more sedate pace, an eyebrow raised.

“Thank you, Leo. Mr. Anderson. Thank you. I appreciate you seeing me today. I can’t wait to work with?—”

“You have really interesting eyes. I’m sure you get that a lot.”

That comment deflates me. Of course that’s why he’s staring at me. I already get asked if I’m wearing contacts because it’s a novelty to see a Black person with any color eyes besides brown. Add to that one is an almost piercing blue? Yeah, I get the looks and questions. That’s the only reason Leo was staring at me so hard I thought his gaze would sear my retinas. It’s my eyes. Nothing more.

Sighing, I nod. “So I’ve been told.” I shouldn’t be upset. I need to push this silly

crush out of my mind. “Thank you again.”

I turn away before he can say anything more. I almost make a clean getaway, until I trip over a bag on the floor I didn’t see. Tumbling forward, I throw out my hands to break my fall, but one swipes on the edge of another chair, and the other scrapes against the floor.

“Son of a bitch!” I curse, my hands burning. I turn them over and cringe at their state. Blood is trickling down one of my palms. Thankfully, the other is merely skinned. How fucking embarrassing.

The guy whose bag I tripped over runs to get me some napkins, apologizing while tucking his backpack away. A little late for that.

Leo kneels in front of me, taking my hands in his. His hands feel fucking amazing—large, gentle and so warm.

His fingers ghost over the skin of my palm that’s bleeding, and I try to pull back so he’s not touching my blood, but he holds my hand steady, swiping his index finger through the coppery liquid. “Let’s get this cleaned up. I have a first aid kit.”

Leo’s eyes flick up to mine, and I’m entranced. I would have said yes even if I didn’t need first aid. I’m not sure what kind of hold he has over me after only thirty minutes in his presence, but it’s dangerous.

Funny, I’ve always shied away from danger before.

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CHAPTER 2

TYSHAWN

I'm unable to pull away, even if Leo running his finger through my blood is a little weird. I follow him to the back of the coffee shop after grabbing my basket.

He leads me into a bathroom that looks old but clean and turns on the water before sliding my hands under the cool spray. Leo doesn't shy away from the bleeding, washing my hands with the nice-smelling soap on the sink. I should think it's weirder than it is, but for some reason, I like him touching me.

Okay, now that is weird. I don't know him. I shouldn't like him touching me. But I can't help how my body responds to him, blooming in a way it hasn't in years.

Tamping that down takes effort, but I do before he can see in my eyes that I'm thinking all kinds of filthy thoughts about him. I look up at him in the mirror, taking in his handsome features, how his eyebrows are furrowed as he concentrates on cleaning me up. His lips are tipped down, almost in a frown, but that doesn't stop his dimples from making an appearance. Fuck, how can a man have such deep, sexy dimples? It gives him a boyish appearance, but it's obvious Leo is all man.

His big body crowds me in the small bathroom, but I don't mind. The heat coming off him is making it harder for me to keep my babbling musings to myself. I manage it but barely.

Leo's gaze meets mine in the mirror suddenly, and I visibly start, jerking my hands

out of his, causing a splash of water to wet the front of my pants. “Shit,” I mutter, reaching for the paper towels so I can clean up and make a break for the door. It seems like I’ve been embarrassing myself a lot today. I would like to leave this meeting with some dignity intact.

“Let me,” Leo says, smoothly snapping a few paper towels from the holder. He sinks to his haunches, dabbing the water from my pants. Like a fool, I allow him to do it, trying to keep my breathing normal. I know he’s not doing it for the reason I’d like him to, but Leo on his knees in front of me is hot as fuck. I threaten my cock that I will cut it off if it gets hard. It mostly listens, twitching miserably but staying soft.

“There,” he says, rising to his feet and tossing the paper towels away. “Let’s get a bandage on your hand.”

The bleeding has mostly stopped now, only small dots of blood here and there. “I think I’m good.”

Like he did before, Leo grabs my hand and wipes his finger through the blood droplets. “You’re still leaking. Come on, it won’t take long.”

Guess he’s going to bandage me up.

Leo drags me to his office, sits me in the chair behind the desk, and kneels in front of me. He needs to stop that. My dick can’t differentiate between help and head.

He pulls a first aid kit from the bottom drawer and extracts a gauze pack, tape, and an alcohol wipe.

Quickly, he swipes the wipe over my torn flesh, and I hiss, not expecting it to smart as much as it does. It’s been a while since I’ve skinned my hand, probably not since I was a kid. As a baker, I get burns more than anything else, and that’s a whole other

level of pain.

Leo's eyes flick up to mine, searching my face with his gorgeous blue-green stare.

"Does that hurt?"

"Stings a little. But of course, alcohol stings. I expected it to sting since I have an open cut, but I wasn't prepared for it." I snap my lips shut to stop the babbling pouring from my lips.

"Sorry," Leo murmurs, then purses his lips and blows on my hand to dispel the pain. My eyes lock on his mouth, and again, I have to tell my dick not to get hard as his plump pink lips form a perfect O as he tries to rid me of discomfort.

With Herculean effort, I pull my eyes from his lips and look around the office, trying to find something else to focus on. "You didn't have to do this."

"I know. I want to." Leo puts pain relieving salve on my hand before applying the gauze and tape, making sure to cover all the skin that was torn in my fall. "You lived here long?"

Huh? "Um, no. I'm from Corpin, like seventy miles away? My roommate and I moved here after my mother died. I wanted a fresh start, but I couldn't afford the rent on my own."

"Where's your dad?" Leo grabs my other hand, swiping it with the alcohol pad. The skin isn't too badly damaged on this hand, so after he cleans it, he puts a small bit of ointment on it, foregoing a Band-Aid.

"He's still in Corpin. Even though I was close with both my parents, my mother and I had a tighter bond. He also has a new girlfriend, and I'm not really okay with that yet."

I know people move on with their lives after a loss, but I didn't think my dad would get a girlfriend six months after my mother's death. It made me feel like he didn't love her as much as he said he did.

Leo gathers the trash and tosses it before leaning on his desk. "Do you like it here?"

"It's fine. Quiet. I like quiet. What about you? Are you from the area?"

He smiles. "No. I was born about an hour away, but I grew up mostly in Russia."

My eyebrows shoot up. "You're Russian?" I never would have guessed. He has the whole surfer boy appearance, so I would have guessed he's originally from California or something.

Leo nods. "Half. My father is. My grandfather raised me."

"Why?" Eyes wide, I slap my hand over my mouth. "I'm sorry," I say, voice muffled since I haven't moved my hand.

"Sorry for what?"

Dropping my hand, I smooth my fingers over the makeshift bandage. "That was an intrusive question to ask. You don't know me well enough to share something so personal."

Head tilted, Leo eyes roaming over my face. My skin heats under his gaze. He licks his thick lips, and I track the movement greedily.

"Would you like to?"

"Huh?" My brain isn't fast enough to tell me not to sound like such an idiot.

“Get to know me. Would you like to?”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me take you out. We can talk over dinner.”

My mind races. Leo wants to what ? Why me? With the way he looks, he can have any man he wants. Not like I’m ugly or something—without sounding too cocky, I’m a handsome guy. But I’m also awkward. I’ve made a fool of myself the entire time we’ve been conversing. I’m sure it won’t get better when we’re sitting down for a date.

Meeting his eyes, I ask, “Why?”

His smile is blinding, and I want to take the word back and just replace it with yes.

“Honestly?” Leo asks and I nod. “I’m not sure. You’re interesting. I want to talk to you more. I think we’d have a good time.”

“Okay.”

“Really?” he asks, his grin growing, the skin around his eyes crinkling in the most adorable way.

“Sure. When?”

“Tomorrow night. Give me your phone.”

Almost of its own volition, my hand reaches into my pocket, pausing only to enter my unlock code, and passes it to Leo all before I could give it the command. Thankfully, Leo doesn’t comment on my eagerness—he simply taps a few buttons on

the screen, then hands it back to me. He pulls his own phone out and types. My device buzzes in my hand, and I see a simple message that says, It's Leo.

Standing, I slide my phone in my pocket and grab my basket. Leo pushes off the desk, walking close to me so our chests almost touch. "I'll text you tonight so we can iron out our date."

"Oh ..." I mutter, not able to pull my eyes from his mouth. "Yeah. Yes. That's ... yes."

"And my partner will message you about the contract."

That snaps me back to why I was here in the first place. My sore hand tightens on the basket, and relief and giddiness flows through my body, a delayed reaction from when Leo told me he wanted to showcase my baking.

Smiling, I pull my eyes from his mouth and nod. "That sounds good. All of it. I'm excited to work with you. You two. You and your partner. Your business partner. Ray? No, you said Ray died. Fuck, that was blunt. I'm sorry. What's your partner's name?" I say everything in one breath.

A smile stretches his face, those amazing dimples popping. "His name is June. I like you, Ty. I like your babbling."

"You're the only one," I say. The few guys I've dated in the past thought it was annoying. But when I'm nervous or overwhelmed, words sort of vomit from my mouth. I've tried to control it, but that's a lost cause.

"I'm sure that's not true," Leo says. "Come, I'll walk you to the front."

I follow Leo like a puppy, gripping the basket as hard as my sore hand allows. My

eyes stay firmly on his back, avoiding dipping to his ass, even though I'd love to get a look at it. I'm sure it's as tight as?—

My eyes drop to the firm globes, and my cock stirs. Fuck, he's so fucking sexy. I wonder how that ass would feel under my hands as I spur him on to fuck me, my fingernails sinking deep into the plump flesh.

I scoff as Leo pushes the door open. Just because he asked me on a date doesn't mean he wants to fuck me. He could like me now but change his mind when he gets a load of my rambling.

Shaking my head, I clear my thoughts of fucking and firm asses. I can have my fantasies when I get home.

When we get to the front of the coffee shop, Leo turns to me and holds his hand out. "It was great meeting you, Ty. I can't wait to taste more of what you have."

Was that flirting? Was Leo talking about more than my baked goods? No, he meant the baked goods. "I can't wait to let you taste whatever you want." Okay, that was me flirting.

Leo's grin widens. "I'll text you later. Be safe."

Nodding, I shake his hand gingerly and leave the coffee shop.

I'm safely in my car when I do a happy dance and shout almost at the top of my lungs in excitement. Grin still on my face, I drive home, eager to tell Sam what happened. Then I have to sit my ass down and make a schedule for when I'll start to bake. Depending on how much Leo and his partner June want, I might be busy for the next few days.

Making my dreams come true feels good.

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CHAPTER 3

LEO

When I get home, I force myself to shower and start dinner before I reach out to Tyshawn. I've been thinking about him all day. If it didn't make me seem overeager, I would have sent him a text as soon as he stepped out of the door of Ray's.

This is stage five clinger behavior and I know it. When something is mine, I claim it. It's how I'm wired. Most people would think it's psychotic, and I don't disagree. That comes with the territory of being a psychopath.

Asking Ty on a date is as close to claiming him as I could get without tipping him off that I'm not completely ... normal. If it were up to me, I'd tell him he was mine and have him move in with me today. Blu told me that's not how I'm supposed to go about things, so I kept it cool.

Once I'm out of the shower and dinner is on the stove, I pull my phone out and send Ty a text. It's been about five hours since I saw him. That's plenty of time.

Me: Hey.

I have to stop myself from sending more. The only thing that stays my hand is I don't want to overwhelm him. If I give him all of my clingy quirks, he'll bolt for sure. I'd rather he be with me willingly than kidnapping him and chaining him to my headboard. My dedushka, Ivan, said I can't take people against their wills and expect to stay out of prison. While I like to keep what is mine close to me, I don't want to

get locked up and be away from him forever. That would defeat the purpose of kidnapping him in the first place.

My phone beeps in my hand, and I quickly swipe my thumb over the lock screen to open it.

Ty: Hey, Leo. I didn't expect you to text me.

Why wouldn't he? Ty is fucking hot. Besides that, an unfamiliar feeling flowed through me when our eyes met. Something about him had alarm bells ringing in my head but not in warning. It was a soul deep realization that Ty was mine.

I couldn't stop staring at him during the tasting. He's so fucking handsome, and his nervous, adorable babbling gave me a foreign swooping sensation in my belly.

Not only did he have those beautiful fucking mismatched eyes that had me practically in a trance, but everything about him was just beautiful. His rich brown skin was clear, the fluorescent lights making it glow in a way I've never seen. His cute little nose twitched every time he started babbling, something I didn't know I would find attractive, but fuck if I didn't like looking at it. His lips are plump, the lower thicker than the upper, and my mind kept imagining how his lips would feel on mine. Which is crazy because I can count on one hand how many people I've kissed. I didn't like any occasion that called for it, but here I am, thinking about Ty's lips.

Focusing on the text, I reply.

Me: Why? I told you I would.

The small dots appear and disappear at the bottom of the screen, and I hold my phone tighter so I won't miss his message. He's either backspacing a lot or is sending me a long message. It's the former, and for some reason, that makes me smile.

Ty: I'm not sure. What are you up to?

Even though I want to pry, I don't give in to my curiosity. On our date, I'll find out all I need to know about him.

Me: Just finished cooking dinner. Do you work tomorrow?

Ty: Yes, but I'm usually off by six.

Me: I'll pick you up at 7:30.

Ty: I'm sure you're supposed to ask, right?

I chuckle. Ty doesn't know me, but he'll find out soon enough that I don't waste my time asking questions when I know the answer.

Me: No need. What's your address?

Instead of a text back, my phone rings for a FaceTime call. A flutter dances in my belly as I answer the phone.

"Hello, Ty."

Instead of a standard greeting, a cute scowl crops up on his face. "Are you always like this?"

"Like..." My voice trails off so he can fill in the blanks for me.

"Demanding?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Does that bother you?"

He lets out a long-suffering sigh that has me chuckling. “It should, but no, it doesn’t. You’re set on taking me to dinner, huh?”

“Yep,” I answer honestly. I want to get to know Ty. I’ve already claimed him as mine. It would be nice to learn more about him besides that fact. “If you give me your address, I can pick you up on time.”

Ty shakes his head, a small smile on his face. “Leo, are you sure?”

“Surer than you know. Address, Tyshawn.”

“I’ll text it to you.” He chuckles. “You’re relentless.”

Smiling like a cat that ate the canary, I murmur, “You have no idea.”

Sighing once more, Ty tells me, “I’ll see you tomorrow, Leo.”

He hangs up, and a few seconds later, a text with his address comes through.

I smooth down my jacket after I knock on the door of Ty’s apartment. It’s seven twenty eight. Our dinner reservation isn’t until eight, so we have time.

The door flies open, and I almost swallow my tongue. Holy fuck, Ty looks good. Like me, he has on a leather jacket over his blue button down shirt that almost matches his right eye and has on a pair of black skinny pants that meld to his body. I can see the definition in his toned legs, his thick thighs almost bursting the seams. I’m at the gym a lot, so I know when someone doesn’t skip leg day.

I’m not sure if he got a haircut between yesterday and today, but his fade looks fresh, and his clean-shaven face appears dewey. Like he has on?—

I reach out and thumb gently along his cheek. “You have on makeup.”

Ty lowers his head, a beautiful blush cropping up where I just touched him. “Yeah. Is that a problem? Some men don’t like when other men wear makeup, but ... I think it makes me look ... pretty.”

Smiling slightly, I step into him, just inside the door of his apartment. “You’re pretty without it. But you look gorgeous.”

“Yeah?” His smile is brilliant, and fuck yeah, he looks good. More than pretty. He’s fucking beautiful.

I’m not going to think about the fact that Ty is the first man I’m attracted to in a sexual way. I don’t care. He belongs to me. Nothing else matters to me.

Tilting my head, I give him an easy smile. “Better than pretty, kotenok.” I thumb over his bottom lip that is slathered with clear gloss, his mouth looking plumper than it did yesterday. “Come. I have a reservation for us at Mama Bellas.”

The faint blush is still high on Ty’s cheeks. “Okay. Let me grab my keys and lock up. My roommate isn’t home, or he’d do it. He’s with his girlfriend. I think they went on a date or something. I’m not sure. It’s not like he checks in with me.” He turns around and grabs his keys from the coffee table. “I don’t ask him to, you know? He’s grown. It would be weird if he checked in with me.” I step back as Ty pulls the door closed, locking it behind us. “Even if I asked, I’m sure he’d tell me to shut up and ...” He trails off, then his eyes widen. “God, I’m sorry. I’m rambling.”

“I like hearing you talk.”

“Why?”

I shrug, because even I don't fully understand why I enjoy listening to him so much. "Your voice is soothing."

Listening to Ty speak calms down the urgent need to kill. The need and compulsion is always there, bubbling just under the surface. Most times, I'm able to ignore it. When it gets to be too much, I select a job to set me on an even keel. But lately, run-of-the-mill kills haven't been giving me the high that I want. I need a kill that will leave my hands bloody in more than the metaphorical sense, requiring dismembering a body. I haven't had one of those in a while.

But yesterday while I was with Ty for his tasting and again in my office, that part of me was quiet. Not even a flicker or nudge. Pure silence. When I thought about him after he left, that urge that wanted me to go out and slit a random person's throat was gone. Ty's voice quiets the urgent need to kill. It's as welcome as it is disconcerting.

Ty's shy smile broadens. Seeing this expression on his face is becoming my obsession. I've never met anyone as gorgeous as him. He's probably this beautiful on the inside as he is on the outside. The complete opposite of me. I might look like just a pretty face, but I'm as dark as they come. If I believed in a thing like a soul, I would say mine is too stained to be close to a pure light like Ty's.

But I'm a selfish bastard, so I won't stay away. Ty belongs to me. I'll try not to sully him too much.

"I've never heard that before. Thank you."

When we get to my car that's parked on the curb, I open his door, which makes his cheeks turn rosy and his beautifully colored eyes sparkle as he looks at me. "You're the perfect gentleman."

Little does he know...

The drive to the restaurant is spent in silence, which I don't like. Hearing Ty's voice brings out emotions in me I didn't think I had. I told June when he found out I was a psychopath that I could feel emotions but not as much as a normal person. Happiness is a more abstract emotion that comes to me briefly. The last time I remember being genuinely happy is when I found my cousin Blu. Other than that, I would feel something akin to "okayness". Just making my way through life, faking whatever emotions are required of me.

Once we pull up to Mama Bellas, I hand the valet my keys and hold out my arm for Ty. I don't think I'll ever get enough of a blush flaming his warm brown cheeks.

"Thank you," he mutters when I lead him up to the host stand. I give the man behind the stand my name, and he leads us back to our table. I help Ty remove his jacket and get into his seat before I take the chair across from him.

"This is the beginning of our date, but it's already the best I've ever been on. No one has opened the car door for me or helped me into my seat."

"It's the first time I've done it," I admit. I don't go on dates. I've been out to eat with women, but we'd usually meet somewhere and go back to their place to fuck. Dinner was just a formality. Something I knew I had to do to appear normal.

Ty grins as he picks up his menu. "I'm not sure if you're fucking with me or not, but I appreciate the effort."

Our server comes over a few minutes later, taking our drink and food orders. When he leaves, I give Ty my undivided attention. "Tell me about your baking. Do you have a culinary arts degree?"

He beams and nods. "Yeah. I went to a tech school while I was still in high school and got some training. I worked part-time at a bakery in Corpin as soon as I

graduated. I only left because ...” His smile drops, and his eyes cloud over with what I can only assume is pain from his loss. I’ve never felt that before, so I can only guess. “After my mom died, I quit that place and moved here. I work in a law office now as a clerk.”

“Why not another bakery?”

Our server comes back with our drinks, and Ty grabs his and takes a long sip of the wine he ordered. “Fuck, that’s good.” He meets my eyes and smiles again. “Sorry. It’s been a while since I had good wine. Mostly it’s some shit that Sam gets from a box. Oh, Sam is my roommate. That’s his name. Anyway, he gets wine in a box. His girlfriend and I tell him that’s gross, but he’s cheap, and he doesn’t like to listen. He says wine is wine, cheap or not because it serves the purpose of getting him drunk. He even said it paired well with some lasagna I made, which was a lie because I drank some and gagged for about five minutes straight. I don’t drink his wine in a box anymore. So yeah, first time in a while I’ve had good wine.”

God, why is the rambling so fucking endearing?

Though I give off a jovial attitude all the time, I get impatient with people when they don’t get to the point.

With Ty, I don’t feel the urge to stop him from speaking. If nothing else tells me he’s mine, it’s that.

“To answer your question,” he continues after he takes another sip of his wine, “None of the bakeries were hiring here. I needed a job to pay the bills.”

“Do you want to work in one?” I swig some of my whiskey neat, enjoying the conversation. I usually only like talking to June and Blu for any length of time. This is new, and I love it. Well, if I can love anything.

Love isn't an emotion I've ever felt. Obsession, though? I'm intimately familiar with that feeling.

"I want to own one." His tone is guarded. "I'm young, but I can handle my own bakery. It wouldn't be easy, but I've never been afraid of hard work, you know?"

"Yes, I do. That's admirable. What would you name it?"

The relief is evident on his face, and my heart soars that I said the right thing.

"Sam said Tyshawn's Delicious Creations, but that's weird to name a bakery. I was thinking Tessa's Bakery, after my mother. I don't know, it would make me feel closer to her."

Even though I nod, I have no idea what that kind of connection is like. My mom and dad were afraid of me as soon as I turned six and sent me away for the first time when I was eight. I've only seen my mother once in over twenty years, when my father was on his deathbed, and not since then.

"How did she die, if you don't mind my asking," I say as gently as I can. From his reaction earlier, it's still a sensitive subject.

Grief is a strange sort of emotion. It lingers, probably longer than most people want it to. June still tears up when he talks about Ray, even though he's been dead for a year. In my mind, two years is plenty of time for Ty to grieve the loss of his mother, but I would never say that. It's one of the things I'll puzzle over, about people with regular feelings, on my own.

Ty shakes his head slowly and pulls in a breath. "No, it's fine. She ... uh ... car accident. Some kind of malfunction with her car. Her death caused this whole thing with one of the big car companies because the power steering kept going out. All the

cars of that make and model were recalled. My father filed a wrongful death lawsuit, but the case is still in court. She had discussed the issue a few times with her mechanic, which helps my father's case since there is a paper trail. She also made complaints to the dealership and manufacturer to no avail. If nothing else, she was tenacious," he finishes with a small chuckle.

"You miss her," I say, hearing the sadness in his voice clear as day. His eyes are expressive, very easy to read even though I've only known him for a day. They reflect the deep pain of her loss, a loss he won't be over anytime soon.

"I do. Every day. She was the best. Taught me everything I know about cooking and baking. That's why I want to honor her memory by naming a bakery after her. It should have been our dream together. Now, I'll do it for both of us."

"You're a good son," I mutter, tossing my drink back and motioning for our server to bring me another.

Ty shrugs, leaning on the table with his elbows. "I had good parents. Why did you grow up in Russia?"

I smile at him, though I'm sure it doesn't reflect anything close to happiness. "I wasn't the best child. My parents couldn't handle me, so they sent me to stay with my grandfather. My dad told me if my grandfather's strict ways didn't break me, the cold of Russia would."

My father's face as he repeated those words to me pops up unbidden in my mind. He'd just finished beating me across the back with a belt because of some animal I killed and let rot in my room. By that time, I was eleven and didn't care that I was different and made them uncomfortable. I did what I wanted, and killing animals made me feel.

I conveniently left out the part where my parents sent me to a reform school until I was ten, then shipped me off to my grandfather's after I committed my first murder. It's still shocking my father raised a belt to me, knowing I had no compunction when it came to killing. He somehow figured out I killed the director of the reform school I was sent to. I'm sure he figured familial ties would save him. It was a near thing that I didn't slit his throat while he slept.

"Where are your parents?"

Shrugging, I swirl my drink in my glass before I take a sip. "Dad is dead. I'm not sure where my mother is."

"Fuck, Leo. I'm sorry."

"I'm not. They were shit parents."

Silence stretches for a moment, Ty looking like he doesn't know what to say. Finally, he asks, "Did you enjoy Russia?"

A chuckle bubbles from my throat. "God no. I fucking hated every minute of it. I couldn't wait to get back to the States. But I learned a lot. My grandfather was thorough in his lessons, that's for sure."

For some reason, Ty's eyes turn sad. "Did he hit you?"

"Not the way you're thinking, no. He taught me to defend myself, so I was struck on occasion to help me learn. But he didn't beat me as punishment."

A relieved expression crosses his face. "That's good. Can you teach me? Self-defense, I mean? I'd like some pointers in case someone tries to?—"

Ty shrinks away, putting a hand across his chest as his eyes grow wide. I wonder at his reaction until I realize I'm growling.

Clamping my mouth shut, I cut the sound off and shake my head. What the fuck was that? I've never had that reaction to the thought of someone touching another person. But Ty isn't just anybody—he's my person.

"Sorry about that," I mutter, sipping my drink to give my mouth something to do while I think. "I don't know where that came from."

Even though he tries to hide it, Ty's lips twitch as if he wants to smile. "Demanding and possessive," he drawls, sipping more of his wine. "Either the heavens have sent me the man of my dreams, or you're a psychopath. I'm not sure which one."

Looks like Ty hit the nail on the head there.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:49 am

CHAPTER 4

TYSHAWN

Our date was amazing. We spent most of the time talking and laughing. There's something about being with Leo that I like. After a while, the nerves stopped bubbling up inside me and I simply enjoyed his company.

It's late by the time we leave. I work in the morning, but I refused to ask Leo to take me home early. I was having too good a time.

When we pull up to my apartment building, I lean back against the headrest and look at him. Now the jitters have returned, and they're threatening to render me mute. Which is a feat, since my nerves usually make me babble like a loon.

"I had fun tonight, Leo. Thank you for asking me out."

"Thank you for saying yes," he says, turning his big body to look at me. Seriously, how could a man be this big without making me feel overwhelmed? He takes up a lot of space but doesn't intimidate me. God, he's fucking perfect. "I'm sorry I kept you out so late."

Cheekily, I ask, "Are you really?"

"Not at all."

We both chuckle, which helps relax me for the first time since we got in the car to

head home.

“Come on. I’ll walk you to your door,” he says.

Leo hops out and rounds the hood before opening my door. I grab the hand he holds out for me, giddiness threatening to take over my body. It’s a near thing that I don’t lace our fingers together like a weirdo.

We walk up the flight of stairs, and I turn around when we’re in front of my door. “This is me.” I thumb toward my door unnecessarily. “I had a great time tonight. Shit, I already said that. But it’s true. It was fun. This is the best date I’ve been on. Not because you took me to a fancy restaurant, but because of our talking and stuff. We had a?—”

“Tyshawn,” Leo mutters, stepping into me.

“Hmm.” I snap my mouth shut, glad he cut my rambling off before I could really get going. My body weaves closer to him of its own volition.

“Be quiet for a second.”

Before I can take offense to him hushing me, Leo plants his lips on mine, soft and gentle. A needy whimper drifts up my throat, and Leo opens me with his tongue, taking the sound for his own. My head swims as he kisses me slowly and thoroughly. All my nerves flee as I follow his lead, letting him take my mouth how he wants.

A strong arm wraps around my waist, and I gasp at how good it feels to have it there. I’m not used to a man holding me so tightly but with so much care. My dick takes notice and lengthens behind my zipper. There’s no way Leo doesn’t feel it. I would be embarrassed if his own dick wasn’t a hard rod in his pants, pressing against my belly.

Leo doesn't try to crowd me. He lets me come to him, and I do, greedily. Pushing up to my tiptoes, I lean into Leo and wrap my arms around his neck. He groans, sliding his hands down to rest just over my ass. I want him to go lower, to grab my ass in those big hands. The scent of his cologne encircles me like a hug, burrowing deep into my senses. God, I wish we were in my bed, Leo over me as he kisses me until my toes curl. I definitely need to invite him in so we can finish what he started.

Everything happens so fast, I wouldn't have believed it happened if I wasn't there.

As if from far away, a throat clears, and my name is called. Then I'm left stumbling forward, my lips and body feeling cold without the heat of Leo's body.

"What the fuck?" Sam croaks. Shaking my head to clear it from the lust haze, I zero in on Leo with his hand around Sam's throat, a purely evil look on his face.

"Who are you?" Leo roars, almost picking Sam off his feet.

Moving between them, I place a hand on Leo's chest and try to get him to remove his from my roommate. "It's Sam! Leo, it's my roommate, Sam!"

As if a light clicks in his head, Leo drops his hand and steps back, putting his hands behind his back. "Sorry. I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't, you fucking maniac," Sam rasps, rubbing his injury and giving Leo a dark look. "You just go around choking people?"

To his credit, Leo looks a little chastened. "No. I didn't know who you were, and you were behind me. My self-defense training kicked in."

My mind goes back to dinner where Leo said his grandfather taught him self-defense while he lived in Russia. That's some training. I don't think I could have reacted that

fast.

Sam stands up straight, still eyeing Leo. “You okay?” he asks me.

“I’m fine.” He has angry red marks around his neck. “Fuck, you’re going to need ice.”

Sam shakes his head. “It’s okay. I’m not fragile.”

Sighing, I turn to Leo. “This is Sam, my roommate. Sam, this is Leo.”

Neither man reaches for the other. They just stare, Leo with a hint of amusement and Sam with a look that’s a cross between apprehension and anger.

I’m not sure how long we stand like this, both men staring at each other and me in the middle. Finally, Leo smirks and gazes at me. “I’d better go. I’ll call you later, kotenok.”

Like Sam isn’t even there, Leo grabs me by the waist and brings me close to him, nuzzling into my neck. I’m helpless to do anything but hug him back. “Okay,” I whisper.

With one last kiss on my cheek, Leo breezes out, his amazing smelling cologne lingering in the small hallway.

Cautiously, I peer over at Sam, who doesn’t look as upset anymore. “What the fuck was that?” he asks.

“I’m sorry. He told me his grandfather taught him how to defend himself. In fucking Russia. Imagine the kind of shit he needed that training from. They have like bears and elk and shit. Maybe he had to defend himself against animals? No, that’s stupid.

People. Dangerous people. Maybe his neighborhood wasn't safe, or something. That would make more sense than Leo choking Bambi out."

Sam's lips twitch as he steps around me and pushes into the apartment, moving aside so I can walk in. "Definitely not choking Bambi like that. I get him knowing self-defense and why he might need it. But fuck, he's strong. I didn't think he'd let me breathe." After he hangs up his jacket and takes off his shoes, Sam pulls me to the couch. "I wouldn't be your friend if I didn't warn you to be careful. I don't want him to turn on you like that someday."

I hear what Sam is saying, but Leo wouldn't hurt me. He's so careful with me. I doubt he'd ever raise a hand to me. But I won't be stupid.

"Thanks for looking out for me." I tilt his chin up, eyeing the ring around his throat. It doesn't look so bad now, but it still might bruise. "Ice," I mutter, pointing a finger at him.

"Yeah, yeah. How was your date?"

The grin spreading across my face is answer enough, but I tell him about it anyway. I start with how Leo complimented me when he came upstairs and how he opened the car door for me.

I end the conversation with, "He was giving me a kiss goodnight when ..."

"When I snuck up behind your Russian lover and scared him," Sam finishes with a laugh.

He winces when I playfully slap him on the arm. "Yeah, that," I mutter, sitting back on the couch. "Maybe I shouldn't see him anymore. I had a good time, but what if you're right? What if he tries to attack me too?"

Sam cants his body toward me, pulling one leg under him. “That’s true. But I didn’t announce myself and was almost on top of you two when I called your name. If you say he has training for self-defense, I might have just startled him. Be careful, but don’t write him off. I would expect the same thing from a solider. That kind of training is engrained. Keep your eyes open, but I don’t think you have to worry about him. He looked at me like he wanted to murder me, but when he looked at you —” Sam’s eyes land on me, almost studying me to see what Leo saw “—he looked like he’d kill anyone that tried to touch you.”

I scoff at the absurdity, but my chest glows with happiness. I’ve never had anyone look at me or treat me the way Leo did. It’s definitely something I could get used to. “If you say so.” Standing, I stretch my hands above my head and glance down at him. “I’m off to bed. Get some ice.”

“Goodnight, Ty,” Sam says with an eye roll.

Blowing him a kiss, I march to my room, fall on the bed, and stare at the ceiling. I had the best time tonight. Sure, the experience is marred by the violent outburst from Leo, but as Sam said, he was startled. I don’t know what kind of self-defense training his grandfather taught him, but with military personnel, they’re instructed to react at the drop of a hat. Maybe Leo’s grandfather was in the military in Russia?

Rolling onto my side, my thoughts continue to play back the events of tonight, and the goofy smile won’t leave my face. It was fucking perfect. I felt cherished the entire evening. When I looked at Leo while I was rambling whatever popped into my head, helpless to stop myself, he didn’t give me fake indulgent looks so he could get in my pants. He really appeared like he enjoyed listening to me. That’s never happened to me before.

Usually, men will pretend they don’t care at the beginning of the night, but by the end, they’re wishing I’d shut the fuck up so I could suck their dicks. Leo didn’t seem

to have a motive.

My phone pings on my nightstand, and I scoop it up, swiping my thumb over the screen. The smile jumps to my face when Leo's name pops up.

Leo: I had a great time tonight. I wish you hadn't seen me like that. I'm sorry.

My heart melts. I believe him. But as Sam said, I'm not going to be stupid. I'm going to keep my eyes open.

Me: Is that normal?

Leo: No. Only when someone sneaks up on me. You have no reason to trust me, but I'd never hurt you. You'd always be safe with me.

I do trust him. I hope that doesn't make me a fool.

Me: Okay. Good night, Leo.

Leo: Good night, Ty. I wish I could have kissed you more.

Smiling, I put my phone on my chest. I was thinking the same thing.

Over the next few days, Leo and I text back and forth, but we don't see each other again. He asks, but I make excuses for why I can't see him. I'm putting off meeting up as a test on if he'll flip out or stop pretending to be interested in me. I want to make sure he's not putting up a front about having a temper. Usually for men that have violent outbursts, they don't like being brushed off. Eventually, they'll show their true colors.

Not Leo. He's doesn't push when I tell him I have to work late or I have plans with

Sam or that I want to stay in. He says okay, and we continue to converse about meaningless things. This might not be the best method to gauge his temper, but it's all I got.

While at work the next week, my real estate agent sends me an email for vacant buildings and restaurants. Only one of them fits my price range for the business loan I was pre-approved for.

Scooping up my office phone, I give him a call.

"Roger Mormont speaking," he answers in a cheery voice.

"Hey, Roger. It's Tyshawn."

"Tyshawn! Hey!" he says excitedly like we're old friends. "Did you get a chance to look over the listings?"

"I did." I scroll down the buildings, looking at photos and wishing I could afford some of them. Unfortunately, most of the money from my mother's life insurance went to funeral costs and paying off the bills she accumulated from surgeries to prolong her life after her accident. There wasn't enough for me to put down on a space. I've been working my ass off to have money for a down payment, but it won't be enough for any buildings but the most run down one. The renovations alone would bankrupt me.

Even though it will be a costly venture, opening my bakery will be worth it. Better to try than to live my life with regrets. If it doesn't succeed, at least I can say I tried and put myself out there for desserts I think everyone should taste.

"Great!" he exclaims loudly enough that I have to pull the phone from my ear. "What do you think? Any places catch your eye?"

Sighing, I shake my head, though he can't see me. "Yes, the space off Fairmont. I know that's not the best neighborhood, so I'm wondering about security."

One thing I like about Roger is he doesn't try to bullshit me. He's in it for the money, but his reputation means more to him. "Yeah, I can't tell you about that after dark. During the day, it's safe enough, a few robberies here and there, but at night ... I'm not sure."

My shoulders sag as I rub my forehead, staving off a headache. "Can I check it out anyway?"

"Sure. Let's set something up for next week and?—"

"What about today?"

"I have clients all day, but I can give you the code to the key box, and you can have a look around. I trust you not to damage anything."

We exchange a few more pleasantries and make an appointment to check out a few more properties before we hang up. I spin around in my chair, wondering if I'm on the right path.

The job I have now is cushy, but it's not the job I want. Baking is in my blood. I'd rather do what I love, not just what pays me. I like working here, but I want to love going to work every day. When I'm baking, I'm the happiest I've ever been. Not even the thought of my mother's death dampens my mood. In fact, it makes me smile, knowing I'm doing what brought us closer.

Turning back in my chair, I click on the building on Fairmont and scroll through the pictures. It's run-down for sure, but it has good bones. It looks sturdy and roomy but quaint.

I haven't been down Fairmont in a while, but the last time I went, it looked like a place where you have to know the right people to be safe. Businesses there have survived and thrived, so I'm not too worried.

Reaching into my desk drawer, I pull out my phone and bring up the text thread between me and Sam.

Me: My realtor sent me a listing for a place on Fairmont. Want to go with me to take a peek?

Sam: When?

Me: After I get off work. That sound be around five. No one in the office but me.

Sam: Sounds good. I'll meet you there so I can go to Beth's house right after.

Me: Thanks!

Sam: Welcome.

I smile, excited to discuss possible renovations with Sam.

Jinxing myself fucking sucks.

Instead of getting off at five like I usually would, I don't stumble out of the building until eight. My boss needed some files so he could type up his notes and had me do some research on his current case. That took longer than either of us thought.

Thankfully, he loves paying overtime and compensates me fairly, but it was a shitty day for him to ask. He rarely does, so I didn't mind telling him yes.

When I get into my car and start the engine, I call Sam on my Bluetooth, hoping he's still up for meeting me. Fairmont isn't a war zone, so we should be fine going down there after dark.

Sam answers after the second ring. "I tried to wait around, but Beth and I had plans. I'm at her place. I texted you."

I groan, pulling my phone out and seeing the string of messages from Sam. "Sorry," I mutter. "My phone was on silent so I could concentrate."

"We can go tomorrow. Beth said she wants to see the space too, so we can make a day of it."

A sigh leaves my lips, but I can't complain. I like Beth, and her opinions are always welcome. "Maybe. I'll let you know."

I hang up and head home, sad I can't see the space tonight. I'm not sure why I'm so eager. Roger has sent me plenty of options—some within my budget and some not—that look miles better than this place on Fairmont. But for some reason, this space is calling to me. It's strange, but from my superstitious family, I've learned to listen to signs.

Tomorrow will be fine. I can wait until then.

Turns out, I can't wait until tomorrow. I toss and turn in my bed, wondering why there's this nudge urging me to get up and go see that property now !

Whatever it is, I listen. But I won't be foolish.

After I get dressed, I shoot off a quick message to Leo, to see what he's up to. It's 11:27, so he's probably asleep, but it's worth a try. Sam will just talk me out of going

this late, so I don't even consider texting him.

Unfortunately, I don't hear back from Leo. Still, that doesn't stop me from sliding on my shoes and pulling on a jacket once I have my keys in hand. I grab the knife my father gave me before I moved away, sliding it into the pocket of the leather jacket I threw on.

The drive is longer than I'd like, but I still don't turn back. If anything, the longer I'm driving, the more the anticipation of discovering builds. Discovering what? No fucking clue.

I can't pinpoint or name the feeling telling me to go to this rundown space, but I know I would be foolish not to listen to it. Something is there that's meant for me to see, and I'm not going to miss it just because it's late.

I'm way down the road on Fairmont, farther than I've ever driven. Even though there are businesses lining the streets when I turned onto Fairmont, the farther I drive, the sparser the buildings become and the more rundown they appear. I check my GPS, making sure I'm following the directions. To be extra sure I'm on the right track, I look out of the window, checking the building numbers. I'm looking for 459 and I'm only at 437. I still have a ways to go.

Finally, I pull up to my destination, checking the storefront out, loving the old feel of it. It looks like a building that's pulled out of the 1950s and placed in the middle of the twenty-first century. I can't see through the boarded-up windows, but the outside has an old diner look to it.

There aren't many buildings nearby, and none of them appear to be operational. It doesn't bode well for a successful business, that's for sure. I should just turn around and go home, cutting my losses. But something is telling me not to leave.

I get out of my car, make my way to the front of the building, and try the code Roger gave me on the keypad. It doesn't open. I try it a few more times and nothing.

Growling in frustration, I pull my knife out and walk around the building, hoping there's a back entrance I can slide through. I'm sure Roger won't have an issue with me going through this way.

When I round the corner, I find there is a door at the rear of the building that's beside a large blue dumpster. With giddy excitement, I stride to the door, hoping it's unlocked.

A triumphant eek! leaves my lips when the door opens. I clap my hand over my mouth, looking around to make sure no one is following me. Then I wonder if someone lives in here. It's vacant, so there could be a squatter.

My skin tingles with awareness, my brain finally telling me to pause for a moment. Pulling out my phone, I check to see if there's a text from Leo. Nothing. He's probably asleep, and I'm here, in a bad part of town on my own.

Should I leave? I try to convince my legs to go back to my car, but they don't move. I'm rooted to the spot, indecision warring. I desperately want to see the space, but I don't want to be reckless. Well, more reckless than coming to a known bad part of town because of a feeling.

Flicking the knife open, I turn on the flashlight on my phone and pan it around the space I can see. There's a long hallway with three doors on the left and two on the right. They're all shut up tight as far as I can see, so at least I don't have to worry about anyone creepy jumping out at me when I walk past a doorway.

Looking back at the alley, I drag in a deep breath and step inside.

CHAPTER 5

LEO

My favorite scent is blood. My favorite sound? The screams of my victims. The warm, coppery aroma burrows into my sinuses as it drips onto the chipped linoleum floor of the abandoned building. The sound of my marks screams is like adrenaline through my veins, pumping furiously and making my limbs tingle.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it. I can't be bothered with anyone right now. I'm in my true element.

A grin spreads across my face as I stare down at the man that's tied to the chair in front of me.

My victim's mouth is cranked open wide as I yank on one of his molars. I'm none too gentle as I rock the pliers back and forth to pull the tooth from the root. I tried with a few others but broke the crowns off before the tooth would come free. I'm determined to get the root with this one.

My free hand grasps under my victim's chin, holding him still so I can get my prize. Pulling teeth that don't want to be pulled is hard work.

"Yes!" I exclaim when the tooth comes free, the root intact. I hold it up, turning it in the meager light. Three perfect roots, whole and bloodied with chunks of gum tissue surrounding it. If I kept trophies, I'd take this one in a heartbeat.

But my work necessitates me being as discreet as possible, even if I cut off body parts and appendages as I work.

Head lolling, my victim, Ralph, cries softly, wrenching at his binds to try to bring his hands to his sore and bleeding mouth. That won't do him any good. My grandfather taught me how to tie those knots. No one can get out of them once they're in. His eyes are nearly swollen shut, but they bulge wide in pain and fear. He's an unassuming man; neither big nor small. Average-sized, if a little doughy around the middle.

He's very plain, honestly. Lank, brown hair, a small nose, a wide mouth that reminds me of a fish, and pasty white skin. He gives me the impression of someone you'd trust because he looks so unassuming and doesn't draw attention to himself. How very wrong everyone was about this piece of shit.

He coughs, spitting out blood that has filled his mouth from the three molars I pulled, along with a few enamel shards from when I broke them while trying to get my perfect tooth.

"Please," he implores, voice muffled from pain and the ever-flowing, lifesaving sustenance dripping down his chin.

"Please, what?" I ask, head tilted as I size him up. They always beg. It's pointless that they attempt to sway me since I've already been paid—and I would never cancel a job just because my victim begged—but I like to hear the pleas. I relish in knowing that they believe they can persuade me. They try with their last breaths.

It's been a while—four months, two weeks and six days to be exact—since I've been able to torture someone. The last time was when I was with Blu and June. Even then, I didn't go all out. I didn't want June to see me like that. Even though he knows I'm a killer and a psychopath, I don't think he could have handled the injuries I really wanted to inflict. But on my own, I can get as creative as I'd like.

My cousin, Blu, is also a serial killer, though he doesn't get paid for what he does. He's driven by something he calls his beast, murdering whoever it directs him to. As Blu's boyfriend, June goes with him on his kills. The one I tagged along with them on, I got to do a little bleach torture. But I wanted so much more.

While training with my Grandpa Ivan in Russia, he taught me different torture techniques. A lot of them are my favorites, and I wish I could use them as often as I'd like. But unfortunately, not everyone that hires me calls for their marks to be tortured. For this kill, fortune shined down on me. When I read what the client wanted, I accepted the contract without hesitation.

Ralph swallows thickly, starting his begging anew. "Please, I need a doctor."

A light laugh burst free from my lips, reverberating against the walls of this shitty building. "You need chemical castration since you like touching children. But we can't always get what we want."

From the email I received along with the first half of my payment when I accepted the contract, this piece of shit was a counselor at a local youth center and has too many victims to count.

The person that hired me asked me if I could cut his fingers off first, then his dick, then slit his throat to end him. He gave me free rein for what I did in between.

Ralph wiggles his finger stumps, looking at his missing phalanges as he cries softly. "I'll apologize. I'll confess. I'll do whatever you want me to do. Just let me go."

Getting down on my haunches, I meets Ralph's eyes with my most serious expression. I'm not sure I pull it off, since he starts sobbing again. "If I let you go, you'll tell the police what you did? What you've been doing for the past fifteen years? You expect me to believe that?"

He nods vigorously. “Yes! Yes, I’ll go. You can drop me off after I’m seen by a doctor. Please!” he shouts, crying louder. “I don’t want to die.”

“And you won’t tell them what happened here? You won’t tell them how you got carved up and how I practiced being a dentist on you?”

“No! I won’t breathe a word! I swear it!” He gives me an earnest expression, like he believes every word and is trying to use his swollen eyes to implore me to do the same.

“Oh, Ralph.” I pat his cheek and stand, sliding on a new pair of gloves and grabbing my machete. It’s perfect to slice off his cock but is maybe overkill to cut this throat. I walk back over to him and pat his cheek again in a patronizing way. “That won’t work. I’m paid to kill you, not negotiate with you. My deal is already made.”

“Help! Hel—” I slap my hand over his mouth, squeezing tight so he feels the ache of his empty gum sockets. He thrashes, eyes watering as he tries to dislodge me. It’s not like anyone can hear him—I staked this place out, and it’s not near any open businesses or residential areas. I just don’t want to hear the screams for help right now. His howls of pain are more welcome.

When he’s had enough, I remove my hand but not before I give him one final hard squeeze. I’m glad I have on gloves. I hate the mixture of blood and spit. Terrible consistency. “I need one thing from you before we finish this.”

“Anything,” Ralph says on a sob. “Anything you want. Just let me go.”

“Anything, huh? Are your cock and balls included in that?”

His head flies up, and he tries to thrash out of my grasp. Before he can wiggle away from me, I grab Ralph’s dick and balls with one hand and slice them off in a jagged

swipe with the other. There is no finesse with how I relieve him of his offending parts, and I don't give a fuck. As long as the appendage is gone, my job is complete.

Ralph's aborted scream makes my heart hammer, and a rush goes through my veins. Fucking yes . This is what I live for. The screams, the pain, the agony they suffer. I fucking love it.

“Time to finish this. I would ask if you had any last words, but I think you've said enough. Besides, you can't muster any, can you, champ?” I ask rhetorically. By now, Ralph is making ragged groaning sounds, not able to scream anymore. Tapping the machete against my thigh, I tell him, “Jeremy Koffer sends his regards.”

Ralph's swollen eyes bulge again, and he twists more to break free since he knows there is no hope for him. Blood is gushing from between his legs, but he's still trying to get away. Even if he could break from the ropes binding his wrists, he wouldn't get very far from how much he's bleeding. He has some fight in him, I'll admit that.

From what I could dig up, Jeremy used to frequent a youth center in his neighborhood because his mom was always at work to support him and his siblings. His abuse started about a month after he met Ralph. Ralph was able to continue the abuse for a few years before Jeremy had the courage to tell someone. But Jeremy being from a low-income family and Ralph having a nearly spotless record, the authorities didn't do anything. Ralph was fired from his job but continued to work around kids, since he didn't have to disclose why he was let go from the community center.

Jeremy decided to stop him since the law didn't.

Ralph knows he fucked up because Jeremy was the only one who came forward. Jeremy vowed to get his revenge when nothing came of his report.

Avoiding stepping in the blood that accumulated under Ralph's naked and mutilated

body, I pull his head back and place the machete against his skin, right over his Adam's apple. Smiling, I draw the machete slowly across his throat. I slice it open, cutting from ear to ear.

Ralph pulls against the ties and thrashes in the chair as if to dislodge himself, but there's no way he can. I watch, smiling down at him so he knows the Grim Reaper paid him a visit for all of his misdeeds.

When the light leaves his eyes and they drift closed, I let his hair go, and his head drops forward.

This is what I love about the kill. Watching that light dim from their eyes, their hearts ceasing to beat because of me. I fucking love it.

Letting my head fall back, I take a minute to revel in the kill, feeling more alive than I do on any given day. Taking life makes me feel invincible.

That voice inside me is finally quiet, though I haven't heard much of it since I had my date with Tyshawn. He's taken up most of my thoughts over the past few days.

It's odd, thinking about someone in more than a murderous way. He dominates my thoughts, and it's never because of what he could possibly do for me, but what I could do for him. I could take care of him, make sure he has everything he needs, since he's mine.

That's another thought I never dreamed would crop up in my head. As a psychopath, I don't have normal feelings, so I don't crave a relationship like most normal people. I'm fine being alone, and if I want company, it's only for the night or a week at most. But with Ty, I want him all the time. I've been trying to get him on another date, but he's been keeping me at arm's length.

Could have a lot to do with me choking his roommate, but he snuck up on me, calling Ty's name like he had the right. Ty is mine. No one has that right but me.

A shuffling sound pulls my head up, and I come face to face with the man I've spent countless days thinking about.

I blink, and blink again, trying to make sure he's actually in front of me, not my fantasies conjuring him up.

But nope, he's there, his expression contorted in a mask of horror as his eye ping-pong between me and Ralph's mutilated body. He must be in shock because he hasn't moved. He's barely breathing, his mouth open but no sound escaping.

"Ty," I whisper, taking a tentative step toward him. There's not much I can say, since he caught me with a machete in my hand and blood down my front.

I've never wanted to explain my behavior away from anyone. My parents caught me killing animals red-handed, and when they asked why, my only answer was because I want to. That's not what I want to tell Ty. He deserves to know everything, the entire truth. All I can hope is he's okay with it.

From how he's staring at me like he doesn't know who I am, he's not okay with it.

"Don't come near me," he whispers, then turns on his heels and starts running.

Knowing Ralph isn't going anywhere but pissed that I can't enjoy the kill in full, I take off in Ty's direction.

He glances over his shoulder at me, a look of abject fear crossing his features. I dig my feet harder into the ground, pounding after him before he's out of my reach. He makes a left around the corner, causing me to slow down a bit. He pulls ahead. His

arms and legs are pumping furiously to get away from me. I can't have that.

Just before he reaches the exit, I throw my arm out, grip his collar, and pull him back.

Ty makes a choking noise as his collar digs into the soft flesh of his throat, and I slam him against the wall. His face is contorted from the effort of running and his terror at seeing my work.

A sharp pain slices across my belly and I look down to figure out what the fuck happened. He has a knife in his hand. Smart. He had some way to defend himself when walking into an abandoned building. My question though is why is he here ?

The cut isn't deep, but it will leave a scar. I smile because I have a token of Ty's I can keep with me forever.

I relieve him of his knife quickly. After I catch my breath, I ask, "Why are you here?"

The smart thing to do would be to kill Ty so I don't have any witnesses to my crimes, but that thought is so abhorrent that I physically recoil from it. I would no sooner cut off my own hand than hurt Ty. He belongs to me, not in the ground. I'll have to figure something out.

He whimpers, tears running down his face. "Leo, please. Please. I didn't see anything. Please don't kill me. Please!"

These aren't the screams I enjoy. He's not a victim on my table, and he's not someone I want to kill. Hearing his pleas make me feel remorse for the first time in my life.

I have to explain. I have to make him see reason some way. I slide my hand into my pocket, pull out one of the syringes that contain a tranquilizer, and bite the cap off. I

let the cap drop to my feet so I can pick it up later. No need to leave any evidence behind.

This sends Ty into a tailspin. “Please, don’t. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to ... I was just ... I won’t tell anyone, I don’t want to die. Leo, don’t do this to me.”

“Sshhh, kotenok.” I shush him, pressing my forearm against his chest to keep his squirming body in place. Even though he’s thrashing and trying to kick out at me, I jab the needle into his throat and depress the plunger about halfway. The dosage I had for this syringe was filled to kill someone Ralph’s size—in case he got away from me and I had to dispatch him quickly. Ty can’t be more than one hundred and fifty pounds.

After a few more seconds of crying, Ty’s lids flutter, and he goes limp. Sighing, I gently lower his body to the floor, then pick up the cap of the needle when he’s safely on the ground. Looking down at him, I notice blood from my shirt transferred onto him. I’ll change his clothes before I let him go.

Blu told me he had to dose June to get him home the night he found him cornered by a serial killer. I guess I’m more like my cousin than I initially thought.

Taking my gloves off, I pull my phone from my pocket to check the time. I see a text from Ty and shake my head.

Ty: I know it’s late, but are you free to check out this building with me? It’s where I might have Tessa’s. I have a good feeling about this place.

So that was what he was doing here. How strange he would want to view a property this late at night in this part of town. I chose this building specifically for its location. This would be a terrible place for him to open a bakery. I’ll be sure to tell him that after he wakes up.

Since I dosed Ty with the tranquilizer, I can go finish cleaning up. He'll be out for at least six hours, so I have plenty of time. That doesn't mean I can delay. When I dump the body parts, I have about an hour drives to my destination. I need every minute I can spare to get Ty away from here, out of his bloodied clothes, and into bed so he can sleep off the drugs.

I stare down at Ty. He's fucking perfect. Gently, my hand passes over his face to wipe the wetness away. He truly is beautiful, more so with tears on his cheeks.

I only take a moment more to admire his beauty before I pick him up and take him to my car. After sliding him into the passenger seat and leaning it all the way back—rolling the window down so he won't overheat—I pull out my phone to make a call.

Blu answers on the fifth ring. His voice sounds thick with sleep, but whatever. I need his help. "Leo."

It's still odd for him to call me Leo instead of Brad, my birth name, but I hated that fucking name. Thankfully, Blu respects me enough to use the name I chose.

"I need your help." Quickly, I fill Blu in on everything that transpired tonight. "Can you and June come move his car back to his apartment? I wouldn't ask if?—"

"Yeah, we can take care of it." I hear shuffling and soft whispers on the other end of the phone. "Give us twenty minutes. You need me to take care of this Ty fellow, too?"

"No one touches him," I growl, making it known to my cousin that he's mine without saying the words.

"No problem. Need help with clean up?"

“Six hands are better than two,” I answer.

“Be there is twenty,” Blu says and hangs up.

Blowing out a long breath, I tilt my head to the heavens, gazing up at the infinite sky. I’ve already killed tonight. Let’s see if I’m up for the job of keeping someone alive.

CHAPTER 6

TYSHAWN

I come awake slowly to the scent of bacon and eggs. My head is pounding, but the smell of the food wins out for me relaxing in bed until the headache goes away. Sam must be up early, whipping up some food. Normally, I would be the one to make breakfast—Sam is a terrible cook—but I can't. My head is killing me. The aroma has my mouth watering though. Even still, I burrow deeper into the pillows, breathing in the scent of pine needles.

Wait, pine needles? When did my pillow start smelling like pine needles? We don't exactly stay in a large city, but pine trees aren't close enough for my bedding to hold the scent.

My eyes fly open. I don't recognize where I am. My eyes bounce around my surroundings, and I take in the white sheets I'm lying on, the dresser with a flat-screen TV perched atop it just out of my periphery, and the door across from me that's cracked slightly to show it's a bathroom.

This isn't my bedroom. Where the fuck am I?

I sit up, trying to get away from wherever I am. I instantly regret rising so quickly, lying back down as shooting pain vibrates through my skull. What the fuck? Did I get drunk last night? Am I hungover?

Not fucking likely. I search my memories, trying to piece together why I feel so

shitty. Last night, I couldn't sleep, so I went to see the lone building I could afford on the list my realtor sent me. I didn't make any extra stops.

A hiss drifts past my lips, my head throbbing in time with my rapid heartbeat. Clenching my teeth, I breathe in deeply through my nose, trying to calm myself so I can figure out what is going on.

While I lie there, I slowly open my eyes and look around again. My eyes drop to my clothing, and something niggles in the back of my mind. This shirt doesn't belong to me. It's way too big. I don't let the revelation shock me too much, lest my head start pounding again. I store the information away until I can better deal with it, but one thing does stand out: I was undressed last night.

Cold sets into my bones. Fuck, was I ... did someone ...? I take stock of myself to ensure I wasn't a victim of assault. I don't feel bad. I'm not sore ... there. The only thing hurting is my head, but that's starting to abate. So why were my clothes changed?

When my headache goes from heavy pounding to a dull ache, I try getting vertical again. This time, I sit up slowly, squinting my eyes against the bright morning rays drifting through the blue gossamer curtains. It appears to still be early morning, the sun not too high in the sky.

I take a better look at my surroundings and can't conjure up where I am. The door across from me is open, but I don't see anyone through the open space. The smell of eggs and bacon is heavy in the air, but it's closer, like it's right beside?—

“Glad to see you're up,” a deep voice says beside me, and a scream rips from my throat, my hands held out in front of me. I'm not sure why that voice elicits such a visceral reaction out of me. My heart thumps heavily, and sweat beads on my brow. Blood rushes my ears as I wait for a blow or something worse.

Nothing happens.

Slowly, I lower my hands, and I'm met with the blue-green stare of Leo. A long breath leaves my body as I locked eyes with him. It's Leo. Leo is safe. He's not?—

All at once, the memories of last night flood through my brain. Walking into the building, my cell phone flashlight illuminating the hallway. Hearing a gurgled sound just as I rounded the corner of what I assume used to be an employee break room. Seeing Leo standing over a dead man, blood down his front and a drenched machete in his hand.

I scramble farther up the bed, not worried about my head pounding and how hard the metal bedpost of the headboard is digging into my back. I grab the pillow and hold it front of me as some sort of flimsy protection. It won't help, but that doesn't stop me. All I can think about is Leo being a killer.

Holy fuck, Sam was right. He's dangerous. Why didn't I listen? My stupid plan to try to make him angry wasn't very clever at all. Anyone can fake things through text.

Leo peers at me with a patient expression, like I'm a toddler throwing a tantrum, and he's waiting for me to see the error of my ways. It makes me angry, but my fear totally eclipses that.

“What did you do to me? Are you going to kill me?” I whisper, trying to meld my body into the headboard to get as far away from him as I can.

He takes a seat in the chair I didn't notice when I was looking around the room, stretching his long legs out in front of him. “No, Tyshawn. I'm not going to kill you. If I wanted to, you wouldn't have woken up.”

“Holding me hostage then? So I don't go to the police?”

Leo raises an eyebrow, a hint of a smirk on his face. “Will you let me explain before you do something that drastic?”

Wrapping my arms around the pillow against my knees, I look at him with wet eyes. “What is there to explain? You’re a murderer. You killed that man in cold blood.”

Grinning at me, Leo seesaws his hands. “Killed him, yes. In cold blood, nah. He deserved what he got. Most of them do.”

My blood runs cold. “Most? You’re ... you’re a serial killer?” Why am I asking questions instead of trying to get the fuck out of here? Why am I having a casual conversation with a murderer?

Leo blows out a long breath, but he doesn’t look angry or impatient. How does he do it? How does he stay so composed when there’s a risk of imprisonment if I’m able to escape? He’s fucking crazy.

Unless he doesn’t plan to let me live. Is he telling me all this because he knows if I’m dead, I won’t be able to share his secrets? A hot flush drifts over my body when I think that I may only have minutes to live.

Maybe if I keep him talking, humanize myself, he’ll let me go. That’s what law enforcement says to do.

Another realization flashes through me, and my hand flies to the side of my neck, the only other thing that hurts besides my head. “You drugged me? Why?”

“I had to. You hungry?” he asks casually, like he didn’t just drop a bomb on me. He drugged me and he’s a serial killer. Who the fuck did I meet? “I made you breakfast.” He holds up the plate with perfect slices of bacon and a fluffy omelet on it. My stomach growls, but I’m too queasy to think about eating.

I shake my head. “What are you going to do to me?”

Since I don't reach for the food, Leo puts it down and stands, rounding the bed to sit closer to me. Fuck! I'm stuck at the top of the bed. There's no way I can get away without scrambling past him, and Leo is way too big for me to slide by without him grabbing me.

It's only then I realize he's shirtless. Fear is still a firm passenger, but now, lust and admiration join the chat. I go to the gym often, but from the looks of it, Leo lives there. His chest is wide, his pecs hard, and his abs rippling, though a bandage covers his middle. The definition in his arms is insane. He could kill me by just flexing his bicep at my throat.

That douses my wayward thoughts. Leo could definitely kill me. He's killed before. I walked in after the fact, for fuck's sake.

Leo perches on the end of the bed, leaning toward me. He threads his hands together, elbows on his knees when I shrink back. “If I tell you what I am, will you believe me?”

My knee-jerk reaction is to say no, that I know what he is, and I won't believe shit he says, but the look in his eyes radiates nothing but honesty. Leo and I haven't known each other long, but he doesn't strike me as a person that would lie for the sake of lying. Besides, like he said, he could have killed me when I was asleep— drugged , not asleep.

Licking my lips, I nod jerkily. “I think so. I mean, what choice do I have? It's not like I can leave, right? You'll make me stay here and listen?” I snap my mouth shut, cutting off the nervous rambling. Leo gives me a soft, patient smile, and my flesh pebbles while my fear climbs. My body doesn't know what it wants to do.

“Good enough.” Leo sits back, crossing his massive arms over his chest. “Yes, I’m technically a serial killer. But I don’t go out and kill people randomly. I get paid to do what I do. People that don’t have it in them to kill someone that wrongs them hire me.”

“It’s supposed to make me feel better that you’re a hitman?” I murmur, hanging on to his every word.

He shrugs. “The truth doesn’t usually make people feel better or worse. It just is. Last night, the man I killed? He was a child molester. One of his victims hired me to torture and kill him for what he did to him when he was a child. I abhor people that take advantage of children.”

Something in the way he says that pings in my brain, and I put my fear aside, and sympathy takes its place. “Did that happen to you? Is that why you’re a killer?”

Leo smiles at me, and it’s not the smile he graced me with when we met. It’s still beautiful, his dimples popping and his teeth flashing, but it also gives me a peek at who Leo really is. There’s a sharpness to the smile, a bite to it that displays how deadly he can be, what his victims probably see before they die. A shiver runs down my spine.

“No, I was already a killer before Mr. Eldridge tried to touch me.”

“Who is Mr. Eldridge?” How did we go from him being a serial killer to me finding out he may have been a potential victim of abuse?

“Director at my reform school. He was already an ass, but when he tried to touch me, I took matters into my own hands.”

I shake my head, not sure what to do with that bit of information. Leo continues

talking as if he doesn't see my turmoil. "My brain is wired differently than most people's. I know the difference between right and wrong. I just don't care. But I wouldn't ever hurt you."

I gape at him. "Why should I believe that? You drugged me, Leo. You changed my clothes while I was out cold and couldn't do anything about it."

He nods. "Yeah, I drugged you, but so we could talk. I only changed your shirt because it was a mess from our struggle. I figured you wouldn't want to wake up covered in blood."

"I wouldn't have been covered in blood if you weren't a killer."

"Touché," Leo mutters with a smile. Even as afraid as I am, I have to admit to myself that Leo has a great smile. It makes his eyes crinkle, giving him a carefree expression. God, why does he have to be crazy?

"You said you were wired differently. What does that mean?" I ask.

"I'm a psychopath." He says it so plainly and without a trace of humor. I stare at him, waiting for him to change his answer or tell me he's joking, but he doesn't. He stares back at me evenly, seemingly waiting for me to digest that bit of information.

"What?"

"Well, technically," he tells me, crossing his feet at the ankles, "I have antisocial personality disorder, but for people to understand, psychopath is easier to say. Also, most people correlate ASPD to sociopathy. While I have sociopathic tendencies, psychopath fits better."

Am I in the fucking Twilight Zone? Someone is telling me they're a fucking

psychopath without a smile or a jest. This can't be real.

Leo must know I'm close to losing my shit, because he slides away from me, giving me some space. "I'm not explaining this right. I've never had to. Here, would you talk to my best friend?" He pulls his phone from a pair of pajama pants that hug his thick thighs. "He has some experience with it."

"Your best friend is a psychopath too?" I ask, voice going up an octave.

Chuckling while pressing buttons on his phone, Leo says, "No." I let out a breath but it immediately hitches when he tacks on, "My cousin is. My best friend is dating him."

"Did they meet on a psychopath equivalent of Grindr?" I murmur, feeling lightheaded and close to a damn heart attack.

"Nah." Leo's phone pings in his hand. "Just talk to him. He can help. I've never claimed anyone, so I never had to explain what I am."

"You can't claim me. I'm not your pet," I tell him, snatching the phone from his hands. What else do I have to lose? I can pretend to believe this shit, and when I get back to civilization, I can go to the cops and tell them about the murder.

It hits me that my car is still at the building Roger told me about. That gives me hope that someone will wonder why there's a random car parked in the lot and send out a search party.

With that same beautiful and scary smile on his face, Leo says, "That's where you're wrong, kotenok."

Before I can respond, his phone rings in my hand. Leo makes his way to the door.

A photo of a good-looking light-skinned man with a blue stripe dyed in his curly hair pops up. After shooting a glare at Leo's back, I connect the call. "Hi," I say nervously.

"Oh my God! Hi!" the man says, smiling wide enough to make his eyes squint and show all thirty-two of his teeth—if you count the wisdom teeth. Most people don't, since they either don't erupt from beneath the gum surface or they're extracted when they become painful. Having wisdom teeth is an evolutionary trait we don't need any more since we don't need them for tearing raw meat and?—

Fucking great. Even my thoughts are rambling now.

"You're Tyshawn," he says, resting a hand under his chin. "I thought Leo made you up. He's right, you are gorgeous. And your eyes. Ugh! I want them!"

Even though I'm in this weird situation, I can't help but smile. I'm not sure if he's a babbler like me or he's excited, but he sets me at ease. "You're June, then?"

"I am." He's quiet after that, just looking at me and smiling. Then he says, "You don't have to be afraid of Leo."

"He told me he's a killer," I whisper. "I walked in on him after he ..." I swallow roughly as the memory assails me. "What's to stop him from doing the same to me?" My voice catches, and I wipe away a stray tear from my eye.

My fear ratchets back up, thinking of the man I saw tied to the chair last night. He looked like he suffered. From the brief glances I took, he didn't have fingers, and his face was beaten to shit. His throat was sawed open, and a glint of bone caught my eye—maybe his spinal column? Leo did more than killed him—he made it hurt, bad.

June's face softens. "It's scary, I know. I'm not sure if Leo told you, but my

boyfriend Blu is like him. But Blu wouldn't dream of hurting me. After he said I was his, he took care of me. He still does. They're not normal by any stretch of the imagination, but they're loyal, and they're not liars. If Leo says he won't hurt you, he won't. He had plenty of time to hurt me, but he never did. I didn't know he was a killer until I found out he was related to Blu. But that's a whole other story."

"How can you be so blasé about them killing?"

He shrugs. "I wasn't with Blu, not initially. I was fucked up about him killing innocent people. Then his beast shifted its focus when I asked him to, killing only people that deserved to die. Leo is moving in that direction too, since there are so many people that would serve that purpose. Ask him. He'll do it for you."

A heavy chuckle drifts past my lips. "I'm supposed to just what? Forget he's a killer?"

June shakes his head. "No. But Leo is a good guy. He's been there for me for years. He's been a good friend. This is a part of who he is but not all of who he is. You like him, right?"

I'm nodding before I can come up with a lie. "He's perfect. But?"

"Don't think about that right now. We both know what he does. We're talking about who Leo is. You've been having a great time with him, right? You've liked getting to know him?"

Again, I nod. June grins again. "Like I said, Blu is like Leo, and I'll admit I was afraid of him. But he saved my life. He also helped me get through that trauma. He's been the best boyfriend I've ever had."

Am I insane for wanting to see what happens between me and Leo? He told me he's a

psychopath and a killer with no lies and no excuses. Even with the knowledge that I could tell the police, he bared it all to me.

He hasn't tried to hurt me. It would have been smarter for him to kill me and be done with it, but he brought me here to try to explain. It might not sound like a lot, but he changed my bloodied clothes so I wouldn't be uncomfortable when I woke up.

I think about him telling me he mostly kills those that deserve to die, but the people they wronged can't do it themselves. I know what that's like, wanting someone dead but not having the power or ability to do it myself.

When I was seventeen, my best friend Juliette was raped by her tutor. Even with evidence and a confession, he was only sentenced to three months in prison. Afraid of what he would do when he was released and from the pain of such a light sentence, Juliette ended her life.

After her death, I wished with everything I had in me that I was strong enough to kill her rapist. Just put a gun to his head and pull the trigger to end him. But I couldn't. I was afraid. I wasn't strong enough.

Is that what Leo does? He said mostly, so does he kill completely innocent people too? As a hitman, I'm sure he does. He takes money to kill people—they don't all have to be guilty of a crime. That's how hitmen work. I think.

God, this is so much to take in. But there's no denying that even with my terror at what I saw, I still have feelings for Leo.

I am a fool.

Snapping back to the conversation, I ask June, "How do I get past it? How did you?"

“Blu killed the man that was going to kill me,” June says quietly. My eyes bulge at that bit of information. “So that went a long way in me seeing him in a different light. But I didn’t know Blu before that happened. He burst into my life like a deranged superhero. You know Leo. You’ve been on a date with him, and you’ve had many conversations with him. What does your gut tell you?”

My gut tells me that Leo might be the one. Not even because he deals with my rambling, but he’s been patient and kind to me, putting me more at ease than anyone I’ve ever met. Leo makes my soul feel good. It also makes me happy that he’s talked to his best friend about me. That means he likes me too, right?

Does that mean I want to date a serial killer? Sounds like the makings of a dark romance novel.

June sees the resolve in my eyes. He chuckles and pushes the blue stripe dyed in his curly hair off his forehead. “Tell Leo to call me later. Oh, we moved your car last night, so you don’t have to worry about someone stealing it.” I’m sure he thinks that’s helpful information, but it deflates me. There goes that plan, in case things go south with Leo.

“Thank you,” I mutter.

June nods and hangs up. I’m left sitting against the headboard by myself, contemplating my next move.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:49 am

CHAPTER 7

LEO

While Ty is on the phone with June, I slide on a shirt and go sit outside, breathing in the fresh air. This place is idyllic with its quiet and seclusion.

I acquired this safe house two years ago, just in case something happened and I had to evade authorities. If this hideout doesn't keep them off my ass, I have a hidden tunnel where I can get away and passports and identification with different names and countries of origin on them. With some contacts and a good dye job, I can blend in with the crowd, and no one would know who I am.

It was a gamble, telling Ty who I am and what I do. I'm hoping it'll pay off.

If anyone can help plead my case, it's June. He's a ray of sunshine, the bright light for Blu and me. Even though he's helped with our kills, June is still pure. Maybe he can get another pure soul like Ty to take a chance on someone like me.

I've never worried about keeping someone in my life, but I can't let Ty go. Even if I have to hold him hostage here in my secluded cabin, he can't leave.

As I'm thinking of ways I could possibly get him to stay without resorting to kidnapping, the front door opens, and Ty steps out, appearing nervous but gorgeous. I'll never get enough of looking at him, especially in my oversized T-shirt. It hangs from his body, but he makes it look unbelievably sexy. With a shaky hand, he passes me my phone.

He lowers himself into the rocking chair on the other side of the door, bringing his knees to his chest. He rests his head on his knees and pegs me with that blue-and-brown stare of his. For many long moments, he doesn't say anything, and I don't push. Whatever he's thinking, he has to work through on his own. If I try to give him that little extra nudge, he could scurry away, closing himself off to me.

So instead of attempting to burrow into his head to see where he's at, I continue to meet his gaze, not shying away from his scrutiny.

After a few more beats, Ty breaks eye contact and studies the scenery around him. I do the same, trying to look at the place with fresh eyes. It's a nice stretch of cleared land in the middle of a thick forest. The man I took it from was a survivalist, ranting and raving about how Armageddon was upon us and he'd be one of the only people to survive. He would have been if I wasn't hired by his daughter after she found out he killed her mother. Before he was relieved of his life, he signed the place over to one of my lesser-known aliases, and it became mine. He's somewhere on the property, his body being used as fertilizer.

The surrounding woods are bonus. The quiet and seclusion reminds me of Ivan's two room cabin I was raised in while in Russia. Our nearest neighbor was twenty miles away. It made his training easy. We never had to worry about anyone hearing any screams, and there were plenty of places to bury bodies.

A chuckle escapes my mouth as I think back to all the times Ivan made me bury a body we'd just finished with in the dead of winter. Some days I wasn't sure I'd survive, my hands frozen stiff. But I was able to push through, getting done what needed to be done. Plenty of bodies litter the land around my grandfather's shitty cabin.

Ty glances over at me, his expression inscrutable. "What's funny?"

I meet his eyes, wondering if I can tell him the truth. He's already afraid of me because I said I'm a psychopath and a hitman. Telling him my grandfather made me bury bodies of people we tortured and killed won't endear me to him.

But lying to him would do more damage than that. Instead, I try to give him an out. "Do you really want to know?"

Searching my face, Ty nods slowly. "I asked, didn't I? Or do you not want to tell me? If you don't, that's fine. Unless it's something that you can't tell me. Well, I guess that doesn't matter because I don't think you're supposed to tell people you're a hitman, but you told me. So yeah, I want to know."

My lips tip up as Ty babbles. It's like words rush out of his mouth, each wanting to be heard right after the one before it.

Fuck it. He asked. Hopefully, he can handle the answer. "When I was in Russia, we lived in an area similar to this. With much more snow of course." I tack on. "During my training, my grandfather made me cart all the bodies into the woods and bury them. We stayed in a large stretch of woods, so we had plenty of places to pick."

Ty releases a rough breath but nods. "I see. Anyone buried here?"

"Just the previous owner of this place. His daughter hired me to kill him after he slaughtered her mom." I thumb behind us. "I buried him about two miles that way."

I watch his throat convulse as he swallows. "This is all so weird, talking about you killing people. I should be more frightened than I am, right? Who sits around and discusses murders?"

"Do you want me to stop?"

He shrugs with an almost pained expression on his face. "I'm not sure. June said you don't always kill innocent people. But you sometimes do?"

"I can't tell you for sure. I kill the people I'm hired to kill, besides kids. If some of those people were innocent, I wasn't privy to that information. Most of the time, all I get is a name, location, picture, and price. Does that make it better for you?"

When June found out about Blu, he wrestled with Blu dispatching innocents. Now, Blu only kills those June has vetted as guilty monsters, his beast wanting to do anything to keep June happy.

One of Ty's shoulders lifts. "I don't know. It's all a lot to take in."

I stare at him for a few beats, then ask, "Are you afraid of me?"

"No."

His answer is so quick and sure. A small breath puffs out of me, and I realize for probably the first time in my life I was nervous. Butterflies danced in my belly before I asked. I think those were nerves. I can't be too sure though.

Like most psychopaths, I have feelings and emotions, but for me, they're very rare. But when I do feel, it's deeply. My obsession with Ty, for example. It's risky to tell him everything he wants to know. It could all end up backfiring in my face.

"Does that make me a fool?" he asks in a small voice.

"No," I reassure him. "You don't have to overanalyze it. But know this: I'd cut off my own arm before I hurt you. You don't ever have to fear me."

A slight smile tugs at his lips. "Can we skip the self-mutilation?"

I dip my head, making Ty shake his and look back out over the forested landscape.

“If I ask, would you only kill people who deserve it?”

“Yes,” I answer. He looks at me quickly, his eyes bouncing around my face. “It’s not even that hard. June and Blu have a system they use, and it’s been successful for almost a year now. June picks, and Blu kills. Some people deserve to die, and June and Blu are their executioners.”

“Are you expensive?”

With a smirk, I turn to him. “Why? You want to hire me?”

Ty bites his plump bottom lip, his blue-and-brown stare darkening. He places one foot on the porch and pushes off, rocking himself. “What if I did?”

Before I can stop myself, I’m in front of him, grabbing his hand, squeezing it between mine. “Did someone hurt you? Who is it? I’ll rip their fucking heart out.”

Ty grins, shaking his head as he stops pushing against the porch to rock his chair. “No. But I’ll admit it’s fucking hot how angry you just got. Your eyes went all fiery, and your usual happy demeanor dropped.”

I rub a hand down my face. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t. Not really. It made me think of what June just told me. That you wouldn’t hurt me, but you would hurt people for me.”

“That’s right.” I sit on the porch at his feet, still holding his hand. I’m thankful he hasn’t pulled away. “Who is it you want killed?”

Ty's face closes off, and his jaw ticks. His eyes burn with rage, a look I didn't think he was capable of. Ty seems so friendly, so happy, that the expression is out of place on his face, and I want to gut the motherfucker that caused it.

"His name is Michael Kerry. He ..." he pauses, swallowing thickly before he looks at me with tear-brimmed eyes. "He raped my best friend. She went to the police, got the kit done, did all the things they tell victims to do. She was brave and strong when she gave her statement. But that didn't matter. The fucker was only sentenced to three months in prison. When Juliette heard the verdict, she couldn't live with it. She feared he would come after her when he was released." Two fat tears drop down Ty's cheeks, and I wipe them gently, still not letting go of his hand. He leans into my touch, looking at me with a vulnerability that makes my heart clench. "She killed herself the day after he was sentenced. He got out less than ninety days after because of time served and went on to live a normal life."

"Do you know where he is?"

Ty shakes his head. "He moved from Corpin when he got out. I tried an internet search of him a few years back, but there are so many Michael Kerrys that popped up and not all of them had photos. I didn't have money at the time to pay for an in-depth search."

"If you want him dead, I can find him, and I'll do it for free. Anyone that fucks with you deserves death."

He nods vigorously. "I do. And I want to watch." I open my mouth to advise against it, but Ty grips my hands. "Please, Leo. I need to watch him die for what he did to her. He is one of the people that doesn't deserve to live. I'm willing to bet Juliette wasn't his only victim. There's no way he stopped after her."

"Ty, you saw what I do. My scenes get ... messy. Can you handle that?"

His pupils dilate and his breathing picks up as he sinks into himself. I'm never careful with my kills, especially when they're in abandoned buildings like the one I took Ralph to. I'm great at cleanup, as Ivan taught me how to ensure I leave nothing behind. With that in mind, I kill as I want when it comes to a torture and kill session. Ty sounds like he wants a torture and kill session.

His darkened eyes meet mine, and he nods. "I can. For Juliette, I can handle it."

I grin at his conviction. Ty might have been frightened earlier, but he's tough. I could tell by how he snatched my phone from me when June called. If he were as afraid as he should have been, he would have done anything to keep me from getting angry. Instead, he let his irritation show, not lying down for any bullshit.

If I could fall in love, that would have been the moment.

"Then we can do it. Let me figure out where he is, then we can get started planning. Know this," I tell him, pegging him with serious eyes, "there will be no going in half-cocked. I plan all my kills to minimize any chance of fucking up. I don't fuck up. I've never had a partner before, so you'll have to follow my lead, even if you don't like it. I don't have emotions to cloud my actions. You do. Bury that shit while we're killing, got it?"

He nods slowly. "I got it. I can do that. I promise."

"Let's get started."

I wince when I push to my feet, the slice across my belly stinging. When I got Ty changed and in bed, I went to the bathroom and cleaned myself up. It's not deep, but the cut hurts like a motherfucker.

"What's wrong?" he asks, looking up at me without taking my proffered hand.

Smiling, I lift my shirt, showing him the bandage. “You sliced me good, kotenok. I can show you how to hold your knife better to get a deeper cut if you’d like.”

Sliding down to the edge of the rocking chair, Ty lifts shaky hands to the bandage and drags his fingers over the nearly white cloth. It only bled through a little, but it’s time for me to either change it or take it off completely. “I’m sorry,” he mutters.

“Don’t be. It was well-placed. You did well for being so scared.”

Ty looks up at me, his gaze burning with resolve and heat. Heat? Fuck yes, there’s definitely heat there. His lips pucker as he plants a soft kiss over my lower belly. I bite back a groan. I want his lips on me, but I don’t want to scare him away.

I watch with rapt attention, chest rising and falling rapidly as he kisses the wound better for me.

My cock takes notice too, growing as I eye those sexy lips on my skin. I try to cant my body away, my dick basically in his face, but Ty places a hand on my hips, holding me steady.

“Does that feel good?” he asks in a sex-drenched voice.

“Better than you could imagine. Ty, I’ve never been with a man before. I’m out of my depth here.” It’s the first time I’ve been uncertain about anything. I wouldn’t normally care, but I don’t want to disappoint Ty. I don’t want to fuck it up and make anything bad for him.

He stops kissing me, and I curse my big fucking mouth. “Do you want me to stop?” he asks, gazing at me with those sexy fucking eyes.

“Fuck no.”

“How far can I go?”

With a growl, I cup the back of his neck and drag him up to me, kissing him deeply. Ty lets out a shocked gasp but doesn't stop me from tunneling my tongue into his mouth, dragging it over his. Ty gives as good as he gets, holding on tight to my shoulders as he moves closer to me, his hard dick brushing against my thigh.

When I've had my fill of his mouth, I pull him back. “As far as you want to go,” I finally answer him.

Ty pecks me once more then drops to his knees, dragging my sweatpants down with him. “Tell me if you don't like something.”

“I'll like everything you do.”

He simply smirks, wrapping a hand around my dick and stroking.

“Fuck,” I grit out, pushing into his fist. That one simple motion feels so fucking good. I can only imagine what his wet mouth will feel like.

Opening wide, Ty wraps his lips around the head of my dick, and my hips buck of their own accord, causing a few inches of my cock to slide into his mouth. Ty pulls off, gagging slightly.

“Fuck, I'm sorry,” I mutter.

With a mischievous look on his face, Ty slides his hands to the back of my thighs. “Do it again. Make me gag on your dick, Leo.”

My cock jumps at his command. Is Ty aggressive in bed? I fucking hope so. It's hot as fuck.

Grabbing my dick at the base, I shove it in Ty's mouth, watching his eyes grow wide and his pupils dilate as tears stream down his face. He's so fucking beautiful with tears streaking his cheeks. He gags over and over but doesn't pull my dick from between his lips.

"Shit," I groan, pushing into the wetness of his mouth. The image of my dick appearing and disappearing, slick with his spit, is more than I can handle. I want to close my eyes to stop my impending orgasm, but I can't look away.

"Ty, I'm gonna come. Pull the cum out of me, kotenok. Swallow it all."

His free hand tugs on my balls and it's over from there. My hearing dims, and my vision fuzzes out as my release shoots from my dick. My hips buck as my orgasm leaves my body into the warmth of Ty's mouth. The swallowing motions of his throat places more suction on my crown, and I have to lock my knees so they don't buckle under me.

Once my balls are empty, Ty lets me slide from between his lips, licking my cockhead when a small drop of cum leaks from my tip. "You taste really fucking good, Leo. Fuck, I've been dying to have you down my throat."

"My turn," I mutter, lifting him from the ground and placing him in the rocking chair. I lower myself to my knees, coming face to face with his twitching erection. I stare at it, my mouth watering. I've never wanted to suck a man's dick before, but I want it now. More than I've wanted anything in my life.

Ty places a gentle hand on my face, lifting my head until I'm meeting his eyes. "You don't have to. You said you've never ... with a man ..."

Gripping his chin, I pull him in for a kiss, tasting the saltiness of my cum on his tongue. "I want to. Thinking of sucking you ... fuck, it's making me hard again."

I reach into his pants, fishing out his cock. It's beautiful, slightly darker than his warm brown skin, and looks fucking delicious. I moisten my lips as I drag my hand over his shaft. Ty moans, leaning back in the rocking chair.

Glancing up, I take in his half lidded eyes and his slightly parted lips, panting breaths escaping. "That feels good," he mutters, maintaining eye contact with me. "But I need more. Wrap your lips around my dick, Leo. Suck me in."

Doing as he commands, I settle back on my heels and hollow my cheeks around him. It's a strange feeling, having a dick slide across my tongue, but I'm already fucking addicted. If they elicit the sounds from Ty like they are now, I'll do it every fucking day.

"Augh. Leo. Suck harder. Fuck yes. Just like that." Ty moans as he grips my hair tight, the sting urging me on. I take in more of his dick and choke when it activates my gag reflex. "Holy fuck, that's hot. Do that again," Ty demands.

Opening wider, I lower myself on his dick and gag, keeping my mouth around his cock like he did me.

I fucking love the way he tastes. His precum leaks on my tongue, and I lap it up, wanting more. What will his cum taste like? Will it be salty and musky like his precum, or will it be a stronger flavor?

"Leo. Oh God. Yes. Oh my God. God, fuck. Yes. I'm close. So close. Leo, please."

Doubling my efforts, I suck him harder and faster, using my hand to stroke up and down his dick. I bob on his shaft, wanting him to spray in my mouth and paint my throat with his seed.

It doesn't take long for Ty to get there. His fingers dig deeper into my hair, guiding

me up and down. His hips leave the rocking chair, and he fucks my mouth hard. “Do you want to swallow?”

I groan, hoping he realizes that’s a resounding fuck yes. Ty takes it for the answer it is and grunts loudly, his hot cum coating my tongue. I can’t swallow it all, some of his release leaking from the corners of my mouth, but I try my best.

Ty collapses in the chair, breathing heavily. When his dick drops from my mouth, I lean up and slant my lips over his, feeding him some of his release. Ty moans, his tongue greedily gliding around my mouth. He sucks my tongue, taking the last of his taste from me.

When I release his lips, Ty sighs, looking up at me with a sated expression. “That was ... you sure you’ve never done that before?”

Chuckling, I grip the front of his shirt and kiss him one more time. “I’m sure. Is that you telling me I did a good job?”

“Fucking excellent job.” His smile is fucking gorgeous, lighting up his entire face.

When I’m standing, I hold my hand out and pull him out of the chair when he grasps it. “Let me get you cleaned up, and we can talk about this Kerry motherfucker.”

“Can I go home? Or do I have to stay here?” He doesn’t look afraid or like he’s trying to placate me with an orgasm. His eyes are clear and set, like he’s ready to take care of the man that raped his friend.

“You can go home.”

He stands on tiptoe and gives me a kiss. “I want to get some clothes. Then we can come back here. It’ll be easier if we work together where no one can overhear us. I

have a lot of vacation days saved up. We can kill Michael while I use some of them.”

Ty is serious about this kill. I can't wait for him to see me in action.

CHAPTER 8

TYSHAWN

We don't say much on the drive to my apartment. Leo gives me my phone back, and I spend some of the time returning calls and texts. Sam sent me about ten messages throughout the night and this morning, getting more and more desperate with each one. Instead of texting him back, I call him.

"Ty! What the fuck man? I know you don't have to report to me, but it would be nice to get a heads-up you'll be out all night. I was fucking worried. I thought you went to Fairmont alone and got kidnapped."

Close, but not quite. "Sorry," I mutter. "I was with Leo. We, uh ... he took me on a date," I lie. "We're on the way back now."

"I'm glad you're safe."

"I am. Listen, I'm going to be staying with Leo for a week or so. I just..." I look over at Leo, watching a smirk play across his lips as he listens to my end of the conversation. "We're having a great time, and I don't want our date to end." I decide to lay it on thick for Sam so he won't ask questions. "He's perfect, Sam."

I'm not exaggerating that part though. Leo is perfect. Before I found out he was a contract killer, I thought he would be someone I'd be with for a long time. Hell, I'm not sure him being a contract killer fully erases that. I can't change who he is, but like June said, I can maybe channel it to those that need death to absolve them of their

sins.

Just as I thought, Sam takes what I said, hook, line and sinker. “Sounds like things are getting real. Has he, ya know, been violent?”

“Not at all,” I say. He hasn’t been violent to me . I’m choosing to use that as the distinction for the question he asked. “He’s been really sweet. We’ve talked and gotten to know each other.”

“And if I know you, his dick ended up down your throat.”

A bark of laughter bursts from me. That’s what I love about Sam. As my best friend, he’s had to listen to my sexcapades, and he’s never been weird about it. He does the same with me, and it’s only been weird with Beth, since I’ve grown to love her like a sister.

“Yeah, well, what can I say?” My laughter trails off. “Seriously though, Sam. He’s really something.”

Leo threads his fingers through mine, and I look at him with a smile. He winks at me, and butterflies flap around in my belly. Why does a wink make me feel this way?

Thinking about Leo’s dick has my own stirring in my pants. He was thick and long, stretching my jaws to the max. Thinking about his strong hand on the back of my head, guiding me as I gagged around him sends a shiver up my spine. I don’t miss Leo’s smug smirk as he looks over at me, his eyes glancing down to my crotch. My dick is tenting the loose sweat pants he loaned me.

“Be careful, Ty. You don’t know if he’s dangerous.” Sam says, bringing me a back to our conversation. My dick flags when I think about what I walked in on last night and just how dangerous Leo is. All that blood and the body parts on the table.

I shake that thought away. I'm going with him to kill Michael Kerry. I need to get used to the idea of seeing blood. Because I want Michael to go out painfully, relieved of a few body parts.

Sam continues speaking. "I know you're tough, but I want you to keep your eyes open."

"I'm not worried about Leo hurting me, Sam. I trust him."

"Good. I want you to be happy, Ty. You're more than my roommate. You're my best friend." He chuckles softly. "Beth wants the same thing. She keeps telling me to set you up with her filthy coworker, but I don't think he's your type."

I chuckle along with him. That's definitely not my type. "I'm happy with Leo, so tell Beth I said thanks but no thanks."

We chat for a few more minutes, then hang up. Then I steel myself and return the other missed call.

His deep voice washes over me, and I close my eyes, missing hearing it every day. "Hey Ty."

"Hey, Dad. How are you?"

I don't hate my dad. I'm just upset that he moved on so quickly. It's not fair of me to put what I think is an accurate time to grieve on him, but I can't help it. He said my mother was the love of his life, but six months later, he's seeing someone else. It's hard for me to reconcile that he's not missing my mother.

It isn't fair because his girlfriend, Cynthia, is a nice lady. But she's not my mother.

Every time I think like this, I get pissed at myself. My father deserves to be happy. Hopefully, I can work out how I feel and become close to my dad like I used to be.

“Good, son. Real good. I was calling to see if you were going to visit soon. It’s been a few months since I’ve seen you in person.”

The last time I went to visit, I left early when I saw how Cynthia and my dad were with each other. It reminded me of times he was with my mother, and I couldn’t take it. It wouldn’t have been right to ask Cynthia to leave, so I did, driving the two hours back home after only being at my old house for an hour.

“I have plans with ...” I look at Leo, who seems to not be paying attention to what I’m saying, but I know he can hear. We’re in an enclosed space for fuck’s sake. “I have plans for the next week or so. Then, yeah. I can visit.”

“Great.”

My chest burns at his excitement. I want to be a better son for him. I promise I’ll work on it.

“I’ll call you when I’m back in town, Dad. I love you.”

“Love you too, son.”

I hang up and blow out a long breath, my chest still tight. I wish this rift between us didn’t exist—a rift I caused. Hopefully soon it’ll be better. My dad doesn’t deserve to be alone. He deserves the happiness Cynthia gives him. If my mother had a say, she’d want him to move on with his life. It’s the type of person she was. I have to do the same.

Leo squeezes my hand. “You okay?”

Sighing, I say, “Yeah. It’s just hard to talk to my father. It’s like my brain knows he didn’t do anything wrong, but my heart is taking a while to catch up.”

“I don’t understand what it means to love my parents, so I can’t give you any advice there. If you ever want to discuss your feelings, call June. He’s a regular guy, like you.”

That makes me chuckle. Looking at Leo, you wouldn’t think he was a psychopath. He looks like a happy-go-lucky guy that loves to smile. He must have worked hard to make his emotions come across as genuine, since he told me he doesn’t have any. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And Blu is a psychiatrist. If you need to talk about shit like that, you can book an appointment.”

I almost swallow my tongue. “Your cousin that’s also a serial killer is a psychiatrist?”

“Yep. He’s a pretty good one, from what I hear.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be fine,” I tell Leo. “It means a lot that you would try to help though.”

It does. Even though he says he doesn’t care about things or can’t feel, he’s trying to help me untangle my feelings.

The rest of the ride is spent in silence, my head still hurting a little. Leo told me it’s from the tranquilizer he gave me. We had a long conversation about that after I got out of the shower.

When we pull up to my apartment, I invite him up so he can help me pack some clothes and we can talk more. As I’m tossing some pajamas in a bag, Leo, who’s

leaning back on my bed watching me, asks, “Why were you out last night? I meant to ask earlier, but you went down on me, and all thoughts left my mind.”

Shooting him a grin, I ask, “Was it that good?”

“Better than I can describe. I’ve never been sucked off like that.”

My chest swells with pride. I’m glad he enjoyed himself. I enjoyed giving him head too, his cock hard and thick in my mouth. I can’t wait to do it again.

“Answer my question,” he says before I can get sidetracked.

“I told you I wanted to open a bakery when we went on our date,” I say and Leo nods. “Well, I’ve been working with a realtor. Every so often, he’ll email me listings. He sent me some yesterday, and the one that’s down on Fairmont is within my price range. I wanted to go with Sam and take a peek when I got off work. But I ended up working late, and by the time I was free, Sam was with his girlfriend. He told me to wait until the morning to go see it, but something kept nudging me to go check it out right then.”

Leo slides off my bed and folds the clothes I tossed by the bag before stuffing them inside. “Why do you think that is?”

“I’m not sure. But the more time passed, the more insistent the nudge to go was. So I got dressed and drove over. My dad bought me the knife I was carrying to make sure I was safe.” I glance at him dryly, and Leo chuckles softly. “Then I walked in on you and ...”

“His name was Ralph. He was a predator.”

“What did you do to him? There was a lot of blood. I know the body holds a lot of

pints, but it looked like more than a person should have. And it was everywhere. There was a big puddle under him. Did you cut him low? Like gutted him until his intestines fell out or something?" I shudder, even though I know I need to get used to it. Hopefully I'm only having this reaction because I was caught off guard, not because I can't handle seeing a bit of blood. Well, it was more than a bit, but still.

Leo barks a laugh. "No. Nothing like that. Though I'll have to try that sometime in the future. I've never gutted someone before." I can't tell if he's joking or not, so I just keep my mouth shut, waiting for him to tell me what happened.

"First, I cut off his fingers." Leo stops folding my clothes and walks his fingers across my back. They're soft and gentle, making me shiver. His voice even takes on a sultry quality, and I'm ensnared in the picture he's painting me. "Then, I pulled a few of his teeth, trying to get one with the root intact." His fingers dance across my face, stroking my cheeks. He lowers his lips to my neck, kissing me gently. My head lolls back, and I lean against him, chest heaving from his touch and his lips. "Then, I cut off his dick, like my client asked me." Leo's hand drifts down to my cock, which is hard, rubbing gentle fingers over me through these too large sweatpants.

Like most men, I should cringe when Leo talks about relieving someone of their manhood, but the web he's spinning, his touch, and his mouth has me distracted.

"Once I was done and he was on death's door, I tilted his head back—" Leo grabs under my chin and tips it up until my throat is exposed "—and slit him from ear to ear." He drags a gentle finger over my throat, and I tremble.

I spin around and kiss Leo, taking his lips in a brutal kiss that he returns with equal fervor. He glides his hands down the back of my thighs and lifts me up until my legs are around his waist. My back hits my open bedroom door, and Leo holds me up by my ass while he ravages my mouth.

Why did him telling me how he killed someone have me so fucking hard? I should have run screaming from the room, but instead all I can think about is his lips and his touch and surprisingly, my desire to see him in action. I want to see how efficient he is when he kills, if he enjoys it and how he does it. I want to see it all.

My fingers thread into his hair, pulling and rubbing at the strands. I want him as close as possible, devouring his mouth.

The sound of keys in the door puts a halt to our kissing. Sam and Beth's voices mingle together as they step into the apartment, reaching our ears over our heavy panting. I wiggle in his arms, signaling for Leo to put me down. He gives me one more kiss, then sets me on my feet.

"We'll finish this when we get back to the cabin," Leo mutters against my ear, nipping at the lobe before he pulls away.

Yes the fuck we will.

We go back to packing my clothes. Sam and Beth pop into the room, Beth giving me a long hug and staring open-mouthed at Leo before she goes to stand beside Sam. I get the sentiment. Leo is hot as fuck. But she only has eyes for Sam.

Beth and Sam look good together, both with a rich tan, brown hair and brown eyes. Where he's over six foot, Beth is closer to my height with a cute, curvy body.

Sam begrudgingly shakes his hand, and Leo apologizes again, though I can tell he doesn't mean it. It's like the rose-colored glasses have been stripped from my eyes when it comes to Leo, and I can read his expressions clear as day.

Sam doesn't know that, so he accepts his apology, inquiring about the self-defense training he has. Leo smiles at him, and though it reaches his eyes, it's an empty

gesture. “I can show you some time, when Ty and I come back from our week away, though I’m not an expert.”

“My throat begs to differ,” Sam jokes, rubbing at where he was hurt.

Beth slaps his arm. “Well, don’t sneak up on someone that has training, and your throat will be fine.”

I shoulder my bag so we can leave, but Leo takes it from me. How can a psychopath be such a perfect gentleman?

“Time for us to go. I’ll text you.” I give both Sam and Beth a hug, then lead Leo out of the door, back to his sanctuary in the woods so we can plan a murder.

CHAPTER 9

LEO

We don't get started looking for Michael right away. After talking, giving each other orgasms, and driving back and forth to the city, we were both too exhausted to do anything when we arrive back at the cabin. Instead, I made us some dinner, and we sat around and watched television. Ty gave me more information about Michael Kerry—his age, appearance the last time he saw him, and what prison he was housed in. That'll make it easier for me to start a search.

June is good at hacking and taught me a few things so I'd stop calling him and Blu in the middle of the night when I took a contract. That knowledge is coming in handy, since I don't want anyone to help me with this. Ty asked me to avenge his friend and I want to do it on my own for him. This is our thing, and I'd rather not have other eyes on it. Having his trust to do this for him means more than I thought it would.

When Ty yawns one too many times while lounging on the couch, I tuck him into bed. He rolls his eyes when I undress him and help him into his pajamas, but he doesn't stop me.

Before I can leave to rest on the couch—the cabin only has one bedroom, and we didn't discuss sleeping arrangements—Ty grabs my hand and pulls me down. “You can sleep in here with me.”

“You sure?”

He yawns again so hard I think he'll dislocate his jaw. "Very sure. Come on. Make me the little spoon."

Chuckling, I strip down to my boxer briefs and climb in behind him. My arm tucks around him, pulling him closer to me so I can breathe him in.

"Are you sniffing me?" he mutters with humor.

Holding him tight, I burrow my nose in his neck and draw in a long breath. A high-pitched laugh bursts from Ty's throat as he wiggles against me. "You're crazy," he says as he giggles, tucking his head to cut off my access.

"You smell good, kotenok."

He's still giggling when he says, "Thanks. You do too." He turns onto his back, looking at me with those beautiful eyes. "Is this crazy? That I'm okay with you killing people?"

"No," I mutter, placing a hand on his chest and resting my chin on it. "It's better that you accept it. I don't think you would have liked being handcuffed to my bed until you came around."

Ty searches my eyes with an incredulous expression. "You're serious."

With a grin, I answer, "Deadly."

He scoffs, shaking his head with a smile. "Yeah, you're crazy." His eyes sparkle as he looks at me. "I think I like it. It's definitely something I'm not used to. Then again, I'm accustomed to assholes that only want to fuck me. The one relationship I had was in college, but neither of us was ready for anything serious."

When he pauses to take a breath, I bend to touch my lips to his. Ty sighs against my mouth, wrapping his arms around my neck. The kiss is slow and searching, my tongue probing so I can commit his taste to memory. Ty doesn't try to deepen it, seemingly content to following my lead.

I don't want anything from this kiss. I simply want to have my mouth on his. Our kisses earlier were packed with heat and lust, done to get a rise out of each other. Now, they're gentle and slow, the touch of our mouths meant for seeking, for learning.

Ty sighs again when I pull my lips from his. "Did you only kiss me so I'd stop talking?"

"No," I tell him, dragging a finger over his plump bottom lip. "I told you, I like listening to you. I just wanted to kiss you."

"If it does start to bother you, let me know. I can try to stop."

"It won't. I don't want you to change a thing about yourself."

Ty nods, but he doesn't look like he believes me.

"Did something happen? Did someone say they didn't like it?"

He nods jerkily. "Yeah. The last guy I went on a few dates with. After we had sex, he told me he could finally stop pretending my rambling was cute because he got what he wanted."

Ty wears his emotions on his face at all times, never hiding what he's feeling. Staring down at him, I read embarrassment, shame, and hurt. I don't fucking like it.

“What’s his name?” I ask casually, hoping he doesn’t catch on to why I’m asking before he answers.

“Evan Hayes. Why?” His eyes grow wide. “Leo, no.”

“What?” I ask, mirroring his expression. I’ve become quite adept at mimicking what others feel. I’ve had to in order to survive. I’m sure I’m not nailing the innocent look I’m going for this time, but I keep it up.

“He’s an asshole, but he only hurt my feelings. He’s not one of the people that deserves to die.”

Loosing a dramatic sigh, I give him another kiss. “Fine. If you change your mind?—”

“I won’t,” he says quickly, making me laugh.

“Okay. Come on. Let’s get some sleep. How’s your head?”

Blu said the aftereffects of the tranquilizer should wear off before the end of the day.

“Better now. Thanks.” Ty turns over, slotting his ass right over my cock. “Good night, Leo.”

Kissing him gently behind his ear, I whisper, “Good night, kotenok.”

I didn’t expect to sleep as well as I did with someone else. I’ve never slept in a bed with another person. All my hookups were at their place, and I left as soon as I busted a nut.

But that’s not the case with Tyshawn. The sun breaking through the thin curtains wakes me up a little after dawn, and I didn’t realize how much rest I needed until I

got more than four hours. I can function fine with that amount of sleep, but I have to admit that I feel better and more rested having slept longer.

During the night, Ty and I separated, and when I open my eyes, I'm greeted with the sight of him on his side, facing me. His hands are tucked under his head, soft breaths leaving his mouth.

Gorgeous isn't a strong enough word to describe him. Ty is fucking radiant. Everything about him draws me in, making me want more.

Having never been with a man means nothing now. Especially since I've stuffed his mouth full of my cock and had his at the back of my throat. It's him as a person that drew me in. That and the persistent feeling that says he belongs to me.

With a soft hand, I brush over the stubble on his face, the light hairs pricking my fingers. I think about how he looked with makeup when we went on our date, and my cock stirs. It's not something I thought I would be into until I saw it on Ty. How the highlighter on his cheeks seemed to light up his brown skin, making it look smooth and vibrant. The mascara made his eyes pop, the blue and brown irises shining as he peered up at me, a gentle smile on his glossy lips.

God, that image will live rent-free in my head. Hopefully, there will be many more dates and memories I can get with his face painted up just for me.

As I've been enjoying doing, I ghost my thumb over his bottom lip, loving how soft it is. Touching him is becoming my new favorite hobby.

He stirs, slowly blinking his eyes open. Ty smiles as I thumb over his lip, gazing at me with sleepy eyes. "Good morning, Leo."

"Morning, kotenok. How did you sleep?"

“Good. What time is it?”

I shrug, still rubbing over his lip. “Maybe seven. Not too long after dawn. I’m used to being up much earlier. But sleeping beside you relaxed me.”

Ty searches my face. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No. I liked it.” I pull Ty to me until he’s lying on my chest. “I don’t feel about a lot of things, but when I’m with you, I feel things very acutely. Blu told me it could happen, that our diagnosis isn’t cookie-cutter. We’re not supposed to feel much of anything, devoid of happiness, sadness, fear, and guilt. But I think with you around, that won’t be the case. I can be ... human.”

“You are human,” he mutters. “Maybe not what society would call normal, but you are. I’ll convince you of it one day.”

Smiling, I kiss him gently. “Thank you, kotenok. What is it about you?”

“I could ask you that.” Ty sits up and stretches, his undershirt pulling tightly against his body. I reach up and stroke his chest, my hand drifting down his tight belly. He glances at me with a grin. “We’re going to look for him today, right?”

Nodding, I sit up and wrap an arm around his waist. Ty leans his head against my chest, his soft hand rubbing between my pecs.

“Yep. After we find him, we’ll start to make a plan for how we’re going to get him. Do you have any ideas of what you want to happen?”

Ty shrugs, blowing out a shuddering breath. “I don’t know, but I want him to hurt. Bad. I want his last moments to be spent in agony.”

That leaves a lot that I can do. Before I killed Ralph, I longed to find a mark I could torture before I killed them. Now, I could have two in a row. That thought makes the blood sing in my veins.

I nod. “I can do that.” Pulling him away from me, I tip his head up so he can look in my eyes when he answers. “Do you want to be the one who kills him? You want to land the final blow?”

Wide-eyed, Ty stares at me. “Me? I wouldn’t know how.”

“I can show you.”

“Show me? How would you ... like train me? To kill Michael?”

“If you want. Or I can do it all myself, and you can make sure it’s done. Up to you.”

“Can I think about it?”

Kissing his forehead, I say, “Of course, kutenok. We can get started on finding him now. We’ll make a plan when we have his location.”

He looks shaky, but his eyes are steely, so I know he’s still in this, even if he’s frightened about the actual murder.

After kissing him once more, I tug him out of bed and get the shower going for him. While he’s showering, I cook him breakfast, a hot plate of bacon, eggs, and waffles in front of him by the time he exits the room.

“Yum,” he mutters, sliding into one of the chairs at the dining room table. “Tomorrow, I’ll make you some homemade muffins if we can go into town and get the ingredients.”

I hand him the syrup. “What about some of those snickerdoodle cookies? I love those.”

Ty’s tinkling laughter washes over me, and something settles in my chest, making me smile in turn. Him being happy makes me happy. Outside of killing, I’ve never felt this kind of contentment. “I’ll make anything you want. I do more than bake, you know? I can cook you dinner sometime.”

“I’d like that.”

We eat breakfast in silence, Ty looking out at the woods through the back window. The sounds of nature drift in through the cracked sill, fresh air blowing through, making the air smell of pine needles. Being out here makes me feel more content than I’ve ever been—mainly because it reminds me of Russia and where I got my start. I may have hated being in the cold ninety-five percent of the time, but it was the only home I ever knew.

Once we’re done eating, I clear our plates, and Ty goes to sit on the porch. I take my laptop outside and sit on the bottom step of the porch as he perches in the rocking chair.

I pull up the prison website where Ty indicated Michael spent his time and look up the name Michael Kerry. About ten people pop up, so I enlarge all of the photos and ask Ty to pick him out.

The first five are a bust, Ty shaking his head as I scroll through them. When I get to picture six, there’s a visceral reaction from Ty. He gasps, and his hands shake, tears brimming in his eyes. “Him,” he mutters. “That’s him.”

Michael Kerry would be considered a good-looking man if he wasn’t scowling at the camera that took his mugshot. Light brown hair, small green eyes and bushy

eyebrows. Even pissed off, he has a smug energy, like he knows he won't be put away for long. Just looking at him, I can tell that this isn't his first offense, just the one he was caught for.

Like recognizes like. Michael and I are the same. He's a fucking psychopath, there's no denying that. Now I'm wondering if he's killed anyone before. That's probably why he hasn't had more victims. They're probably not alive to tell their stories.

Not knowing how to comfort him but wanting to try, I set my laptop down and turn toward Ty, gripping his hands and rubbing my thumbs over the soft skin. "You okay?"

A choked sob leaves his lips as he shakes his head. "No. That fucker is a monster, and he's walking the streets like he didn't fucking kill my friend. He's the reason she's dead."

Bringing his hand to my lips, I kiss the back of it and pat it, hoping this is the thing that normal people do to comfort their mates. "I'll take care of him for you. I promise."

Tears dripping down his face, Ty mouths, thank you , too overcome with emotion to actually speak the words.

Instead of continuing to gently stroke him, I pull Ty off the rocking chair and hug him to my chest. I don't have to think about this—I simply wrap my arms around him. Ty breaks down, soaking my neck with his tears, his body heaving with heavy sobs.

"It's okay, kotenok. Get it all out. I'm here."

"I want him dead, Leo."

“It’ll happen, baby. I promise you that.”

Ty pulls back, tears still coursing down his face. “I want to do it. I want to stab that fucker in the heart until it stops beating. Can you teach me that?”

Taking his face between my hands, I nod. “Yes.”

I kiss his forehead and put his head on my chest, letting him cry himself out. Oh yes, I’ll teach Ty. I’ll teach him everything he needs to know.

CHAPTER 10

LEO

After a few more minutes, Ty assures me he's gotten himself under control, and we go back inside to plan in comfort. Sitting side by side on the couch, I hack into the prison's database and obtain Michael's social security number and track his movements from there. He didn't have to register as a sex offender for some unknown reason, so he can't be found that way.

It doesn't take too much digging to locate his current job and his most recent address.

Michael lives a few hours away from us in a small town in Virginia. Ty and I can take a couple of days to drive up and find an abandoned building nearby. That will take the longest—ensuring we're isolated in an unfamiliar environment. It's not something I'm unfamiliar with, so I'm not foreseeing any issues.

“Why can't we just kill him at his house?” Ty asks, looking at me with a curious expression.

I put my laptop on the coffee table and pull Ty onto my lap. “We can, but we run the risk of neighbors discovering us if they spot an unfamiliar car, hear a strange sound, or someone drops by unannounced. If we're somewhere isolated, we won't have to worry about being interrupted. We can hear his screams of pain without the fear of the police walking in on us and gunning us down.”

Ty frowns, but he nods. “Okay. You're the expert.”

“I am. Glad you understand that.”

Ty scoffs, his beautiful eyes filled with mirth. I trail my fingers under his light brown eye, stroking the soft skin there.

“It’s funny. I’ve never seen?—”

“A Black guy with a blue eye?” he cuts me off, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

I can’t help laughing. “No,” I say after he joins me in laughter. “Someone with two different colored eyes.” Then I add cheekily, “Black or otherwise.”

Ty huffs but grins. “It’s called heterochromia. One of my cousins used to tell me it’s because I swallowed my twin in the womb who probably had blue eyes. Used to scare the shit out of me. I cried to my parents so many times, thinking I killed my twin. He was an asshole.”

“I bet,” I say with a chuckle. “I like them. I also like how expressive your eyes are. They’re beautiful.”

He ducks his head, a blush forming on his cheeks. “Let’s get back to the subject at hand please.”

I nod, smirking at him.

“So are we staking Michael out? Studying him and shit?”

Getting my head back in the game, I say, “More or less. What we’re trying to do is nail down a routine. We’ll only be there for a few days, so it won’t be as in-depth as I’d like it. Unless you want to wait to kill him.”

“No,” Ty says quickly. “I want to do it now. As soon as possible.”

“Okay.” I rest my hands right over his ass. Ty arches his back gently, blowing out a quick breath. “We take care of him now. We can leave tomorrow to get started if you want.”

“What do you plan to do?”

Reaching up, I rub over his bottom lip with my thumb. I love the plump flesh. “First, we find out his evening routine. After we have it down, I’ll snatch him, and we’ll drive him to whatever abandoned building we locate. From there,” I murmur, pulling him close to me to plant a soft kiss on his lips, “I’ll do whatever you want me to do. This is your kill. You make the rules.”

“Anything I want?”

I nod, pecking his lips a few more times before I slide my tongue into his mouth. Ty groans, circling his arms around my neck as he arches more into me. His strong hands thread into my hair, stroking his blunt nails against my scalp as he slowly rolls his hips on my lap. His firm ass fills my hands, and I give it another squeeze, causing another moan to drift into my mouth.

Snatching my lips away, I trail them down his neck, licking and sucking on his flesh. “Anything you want,” I whisper against his Adam’s apple.

Breathy moans meet my ears, and I grip his body tighter, the high-pitched sounds making my dick hard as steel.

“I want you to torture him.”

“I can do that.”

“Burns hurt the worst.” His breath hitches as I graze my teeth over his sensitive skin. “I know from experience. So do that.”

“Any other special requests?” I trail my lips across his collarbone, nipping at it to hear his sharp gasp. “Want me to cut off his hands? His toes? Ears?”

“Oh fuck,” Ty moans as I nibble at his flesh. “More, Leo.”

I slide my hand under his shirt, gripping the muscles of his back so I can pull him closer. “What else do you want, kotenok?”

“All of it. Everything. Just ... don’t stop. Don’t fucking stop.”

My lips become more urgent on his skin, licking and tasting him as he writhes on my lap. I like how wild and uninhibited he is right now, but I don’t want wild. I want to learn his body and what gets him off more than reaching a quick orgasm.

Separating my lips from his body with great effort, I look up at him, taking in his lust-filled eyes. “What can I do with you?”

“Anything.”

“No limits?”

His breathing saws in and out of his chest as he shakes his head. “With you? None.”

Just the answer I wanted to hear. Gripping under his ass, I stand and walk us to the bedroom, laying him out on the bed. “I’m going to take my time with you. We can fuck after I’ve learned every spot that makes you tick.”

“Why not both?” Ty asks huskily.

I blanket him with my body, taking his mouth in a slow kiss. Ty tries to deepen it, but I move back slightly, wanting to keep this kiss how I want it.

He whines, but I ignore him, not deepening the kiss until I want to. Soon enough, Ty settles, letting me take the reins. I kiss him slowly, trailing my hands down his sides. He wraps his arms around my neck, holding on tight.

After I've had my fill of his mouth, I trail down lower, kissing his chin and along his neck. I suck the skin into my mouth, making sure to leave my marks behind. I want my marks everywhere on his skin, so when he looks in the mirror, he knows who he belongs to.

I fist the hem of his shirt and pull it over his head, exposing his chest to me. Fuck, he's hot. I sit back on my heels and admire him. He raises his hands over his head, posing for me. My fingers dance over his tight belly, and Ty gasps, his hard cock jutting out at me.

When my fingers find his tight and pebbled nipples, Ty arches into my hand, moaning softly.

"Sensitive?" I ask as I continue to play with him.

He nods quickly, biting his lip as he looks at my thumb and forefinger tweaking the responsive bud. Lowering my head, I capture the nipple in my mouth, slicking it up with my tongue. Ty's fingers immediately go to the back of my head, holding me in place while I give him pleasure. I switch to the other nipple, rolling my hips and bumping my cock against his. Ty cries out when our dicks rub, his grip getting tighter.

"More, Leo. Fuck, I can't take it. I need you in me."

I chuckle against his hard nipple in my mouth. “Not yet. But soon.” I slide my hand between us and cup his dick, squeezing it in pulses. “I want you to come all over yourself while my dick is inside you. But not until I’ve tasted every inch of you.”

There’s no rushing me, though Ty lets out little impatient breaths when I move my hips so I’m not frotting against his dick.

Drifting down, I tongue his body, licking and sucking at him. Ty writhes on the sheets, babbling my name and for me to hurry up and make him come. I ignore him, continuing to take my time with him. Lower and lower, I nip and kiss, stopping at sensitive areas that make him squirm more than others. His belly button is especially sensitive, Ty almost bowing off the bed when I dip my tongue inside. I play with him that way for another minute until Ty is a panting mess.

When I feel like he can’t take much more, I slide down lower, mouthing over the hem of his pants. I pull them down so I can get to my prize.

I close my lips around his cockhead, suckling him and drawing the precum down my throat.

“Fuck. Leo, yes.” Ty pulls at my hair, rolling his hips. The sting of him tugging at my strands makes my dick pulse. Ty is fucking perfect.

After I’ve driven him wild for another minute or so, I let his cock slide from my lips and continue my path down, sucking one ball, then the other into my mouth, wetting them up.

“Leo. Leo please. I can’t take much more. I can’t. Please. Please please please. Make me come. I need to come. I need you inside. Oh god. Please. I need you. I need ... I need ... I need ... Please!”

Even though his begging makes me want to sink my dick into him, I'm not done driving him crazy yet.

I release his balls with a pop, then move over to the juncture of his thighs, licking up and down the space. Ty groans, pushing up to meet my lips. I grin, loving how responsive he is to my touch, my kiss, my mouth on him.

For the next ten minutes, I make my way down his body, learning him. He's sensitive behind his knees, his ankles, and his toes. When I suck them into my mouth, Ty's entire body vibrates, his cock leaking and twitching against his belly.

By the time I lower his left leg, Ty has tears dripping down his face. His face is screwed up in what I can only describe as pleasurable pain. So fucking gorgeous with tears on his cheeks.

Reaching into Ty's bag, I pull out the lube I slid in his side pocket when we were packing his clothes. I lean over his body and kiss him, placing the bottle into his hands. "Get yourself ready for me," I say against his mouth. "I'm going to sit back and watch."

I've done enough research on the subject of fucking a man to know what to expect. I would have done the job myself, but I want to see what Ty likes and how he does it so I can make it good for him next time. And there will be a next fucking time, especially if I'm the one stretching his hole.

I settle at the end of the bed and smile as Ty turns over shakily. His ass looks so fucking good, plump and firm, with enough jiggle to keep me entranced. I give it a slap, making Ty groan and push his ass back to me. I do it again on the other cheek, watching the red bloom there. God, that color looks good on him.

Ty pants and pushes into my hand when I grab the place where I spanked him. "If

you keep doing that,” he murmurs, rotating his hips, “I’m going to come before you can fuck me.”

With one more squeeze, I let go, watching him coat his fingers and bring them to his crack. He slides his digits up and down the space, looking back at me with a hungry expression. He bends at the waist, and I get my first look at his pucker. My cock twitches as I gaze at it. I should have tasted him there too, but I know if I did, I wouldn’t have been able to keep things slow. I’m so desperate as it is.

“Come on, kotenok. Sink your fingers inside that sweet hole.” I grab my hard dick, stroking it through my pants.

Ty groans a curse, sinking one finger, then two into his hole, pumping in and out slowly. He scissors them, widening his pucker for my viewing pleasure.

It takes only a few minutes, but it seems like forever as I watch him open himself up for me. I have to let go of my cock. Just watching him while I’m stroking myself is enough to get me too close to the edge.

With a long sigh, he removes his fingers and drops his chest to the bed, grabbing both of his ass cheeks and pulling them apart. His entrance contracts, inviting me to sink inside him, and I swallow the urge to devour him. “Fuck me like this, Leo,” he pants. “Fill me up.”

I scramble behind him, grinding against his lubed and stretched ass before I slide my pants down. It’s too much for me to get naked right now. I’ve edged us both over the past hour.

Taking the lube from where he dropped it on the bed, I coat my dick, rubbing some over my entire length. I press the head of my cock to his hole, not breaching him just yet. “You ready?”

“Yes. Please fuck me, Leo.”

Needing no more urging, I ease into Ty’s entrance. His heat engulfs me, and I barely suppress a groan as I continue to slide into him. I bottom out and curse as his hole pulses around me. Ty cries out, a long moan leaving his mouth.

“You okay?” I mutter, sliding my hands up his back to his shoulders. “Want me to stop?”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he says breathlessly. “Move. I can take it.”

I pull my hips back until my cockhead is tugging at his rim, then slide back in to the hilt. Fuck, he’s tight. An involuntary groan drifts from my lips as I hold Ty’s hips and fuck into him. I try to keep it slow, but it’s like my body has taken over, ecstatic to finally be inside him after tasting his entire body.

“Yes, baby,” Ty moans, circling his hips. “You feel so fucking good.” His ass swallows my dick, pulling me in. “Faster, please. I need to come.”

Ty’s hand drifts under him and he starts to jerk himself off. I match his pace with my strokes.

Gripping his hips hard, I push into him, my balls smacking against his. That fucking sends fire through my veins.

Wrapping my left arm around his opposite shoulder, I pull Ty up until his back is to my chest. I bend down and bite his neck as I pound into him. Ty moans get higher and higher as he jerks his cock fast and slams his ass back on my dick. His pucker tightens around me, pulsing every time I slide out.

“Come, kotenok,” I mutter against his skin. “I can’t hold back.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Ty chants as his hips lose rhythm. “I’m coming, Leo. Come with me, baby.”

I hold him tighter and plow his ass, getting closer and closer to my release. Ty shouts a curse, and I watch the white ropes shoot from his cock onto the pillow. His hole grips my cock, and without warning, I climax, my cum spilling into his ass. I continue to thrust, not done painting his walls.

Once I’m spent, I sag, holding on tight to Ty. He leans into my body, his breaths heaving in and out as soft moans sound from his lips.

“God, Leo.” He reaches up to grab my head, pulling me down until our lips meet. I kiss him, rolling my hips, still not getting enough of his tight ass.

We break apart, and Ty giggles, shaking his head. “That was ... no one has ever made me feel like that. You were perfect.”

“I plan to be with you for the rest of my days, kotenok. I need to know what makes you feel good.”

Another giggle reaches my ear. “That’s a bold statement. You might get sick of me.”

I plant a kiss against his neck. “That’s not likely. You’re mine. I’m not letting you go.”

Ty sighs in contentment.

When Ty starts to wiggle on my lap, I lay us down—away from the pillow with his cum on it—and Ty spins around in my arms.

“Your come is dripping out of me,” Ty notes but doesn’t make any moves to leave

my arms. There will be a wet spot on the bed, but we can change the sheets. Next time I'll have to remember to put a towel down.

I hum, trailing my hand to his ample ass. Ty draws in a sharp breath when I squeeze his cheek, then slide my fingers through his crease. I collect some of my cum, rubbing it over his ass cheek. I've already claimed him with my words, now I'm marking him with my seed.

"You're filthy," Ty mutters, burrowing his head in my chest.

"Do you hate it?"

Ty lifts his head, his blue and brown stare boring into me. "Not even a little bit."

"Good." I kiss his nose.

He sighs, throwing his leg over mine so I can get to more of my cum to rub into his skin. Ty twitches, moaning softly when I dip my fingers inside him.

"That was your first time with a man," he says breathily as I finger his ass.

"Yes."

"Was it weird for you? Did you enjoy it?"

Chuckling, I kiss the top of his head. "I'm rubbing my spunk onto your ass. That should tell you something."

His warm laugh flows over me, and my breath catches. Why does an action so simple as his laughter make my heart flutter? Something is happening to me when it comes to Ty. I don't know what, but I'm not going to try to stop it. I rather enjoy these new

feelings that are cropping up.

But if I'm honest, they fucking alarm me. These feelings have the power to bring me to my knees if they get too deep. For the first time in my life, I don't know what to do.

Kissing Ty on his forehead, I say, "I love the way your hole looked with your fingers stuffed inside. So fucking hot." I grab his ass and haul him up, kissing him hard. "I can't wait to put my tongue where your fingers were."

Ty's eyes grow wide. "You want to ... rim me?"

"Fucking right I do. I would have done it tonight, but I got too impatient. Seems like I teased us both."

"Can I ... can I taste you too?" Ty asks hesitantly. "I mean, you can say no. It's fine if you don't want me to. Not everyone likes to be rimmed, but it feels so fucking good. I think you'll like it. But don't take that as me trying to change your mind if you say no. I'm just saying it does, and you would like it."

My grin hurts my face. Ty is so fucking adorable. His rambling when he's nervous is fucking precious. "You can. No one ever has before. Not many women are into it, and there wasn't much foreplay when I fucked."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure, kotenok." I kiss him one more time, sliding my tongue over his. "Come on," I mutter while pecking him gently. "Let me clean you up and change the sheets. We'll be busy in the morning."

CHAPTER 11

LEO

The next morning, Ty has me in the kitchen, making snickerdoodle and marshmallow cookies. On the way back to the cabin, we'd stopped by the grocery store to get ingredients for everything he wants to bake. Even though we're in the middle of planning a murder, Ty still wants to make everything he wants to bake for Ray's. He had me load up the cart with everything he needed and asked me to be his assistant so prep and baking ran smoothly.

I'm not sure if I'm helping, since I don't know how to bake. Cooking is one thing, but getting ingredients right and putting them together at the perfect time isn't as easy as I thought.

Ty doesn't seem to mind. He grins at me while I struggle, helping me when I fuck up. He grabs my wrist quickly when I try to dump salt into the new spoon. "That's too much. One tea spoon. Not a table spoon. You'll have everyone gagging when they bite into these cookies." He takes the tablespoon from my hand and gives me a teaspoon to use.

"Why do you need salt for cookies?" I ask as I sprinkle some into the bowl. Sounds counterproductive to me.

His tone is patient as he explains, "There are many reasons salt needs to be added to cookies. The biggest factor is they make them last longer. The salt helps hold moisture so they can stay fresher for a prolonged period."

“What other reasons?” I ask while trying to add the right amount of salt to the bowl.

“It brings out the flavor of the other ingredients. They all have their own tastes—the salt adds to it and combines them, if that makes sense. Makes the flavors more acute. Like the chocolate and the marshmallows will mingle, but you’ll taste them separately. That’s because of the salt being added to its natural taste.”

As he’s speaking, I watch Ty and how his eyes brighten as he talks about baking. He loves it. I’ve always wondered what that kind of unabashed happiness for a healthy hobby felt like.

I continue making the cookies, trying to mix the dough into a cohesive whole. According to June’s contract, Ty has to bake fifty of everything to start, then add to his order every few days for the next couple of weeks to see how things go. Ty is worried about if anyone will buy his baked goods, even though I’ve told him how much I enjoy them. I’m sure he doesn’t fully believe me, but I told him that while I can lie effortlessly, I wouldn’t to him. I know enough about relationships to know lying is the easiest way to fuck things up.

“So,” Ty begins, arranging some of the ingredients for his cupcakes in a way I don’t understand, but I’m sure he knows what he wants, “what is the plan for Michael? Can I ask that?”

“Fire.” I answer simply.

“Fire?” he parrots.

“Yep. Do you want details, or do you want to be surprised?”

A slow smile spreads across Ty’s face. “Surprise me. Like I said, burns hurt.” He stretches out his arms and shows me a few scars. “Hot pans coming out of ovens, hot

pans on the stovetop, hot cupcakes falling on you.” He chuckles. “Shit hurts. So fire sounds good.”

“You said you want to kill him?” I ask. Ty nods, jerkily, his hands shaking as he opens a bag of flour. “How do you want to do it?”

“I told you I want to stab him in the heart.”

I take his shaking hands in mine. “Have you ever stabbed anything before?” He shakes his head. “Okay. I’ll give you a quick lesson.” I look around and grab a butcher’s knife from the block on the counter. “Take this. Get a solid grip on it. Good. Now—” I move behind him, wrapping my hand over his “—for the heart, you’ll want to stab down and put all your body weight behind it.” I raise and lower his hand in a fluid motion, careful to avoid our bodies.

“Okay,” Ty whispers.

“The breastbone and the ribs,” I say as I tap his chest with the flat of my free hand, “is hard to break through. You’ll need extra power behind the strike. If you want to stab him somewhere that will give you the same result for a lot less effort, I’d suggest stabbing in the neck. Right at the jugular vein. You’ll open it up and his frantic heartbeat will do the rest.” I let his hand go and move back to my bowl.

Ty gives the knife a few more swings, smiling as he slices it through the air.

“You already have good form,” I mention as I swipe over my belly. The bandage is gone, but there will be a scar left.

His grin is still bright on his face when he looks at me. He places the knife back in the butcher’s block and moves back to his makeshift workstation. “It’ll be my first. Firsts are big deals.”

I shrug again, doling out more ingredients so I can start another batch of cookie dough. “Sometimes.”

We work in relative silence for a few minutes, other than Ty telling me what I need to add to the cookie recipe.

While he’s adding food coloring to the vanilla he’s mixed in his bowl for the homemade red velvet cupcakes, Ty looks up at me cautiously. “What was your first kill like? How old were you?”

I glance over at him quickly. No one has ever asked me that. I volunteered the information to June and Blu when Blu asked where I’d been for so many years. Ivan never inquired—all he knew was my father wanted me out of his house and the reason was because the reform school didn’t work. He knew I was just like him and didn’t need to know any specifics. I told the story before, but no one ever asked.

For some reason, it makes my heart thud. I’m not sure if it’s from excitement to share this story with Ty or giddiness that he even asked, but I’ll take either one. “Do you want to hear about my first body or the entire story?”

Ty searches my face, his soft with what I can only describe as sympathy. “All of it,” he whispers.

Turning back to my bowl, I pour my dry ingredients into a bowl and make sure everything is mixed properly before I begin my tale.

“When I was eight, I was sent to a reform school that was supposed to temper my behavior and get rid of the urges to set fire to shit and murder any animal I came across. Those are usually the first signs of a psychopath.” I look up at Ty to gauge his reaction, but he only meets my eyes briefly with a nod before he goes back to scooping the cupcake mixture into their tins. “By that time, I’d killed a few strays I

found—setting most on fire to see how they burned—and my father’s business partner’s prized poodles. They were both white and fluffy. I wanted to see what the red of their blood looked like against their fur. They caught me in the act of that one.” I think back to that moment, a bloodied knife in my hand and the body of one the dogs in front of me while I held the other close, watching its blood flow from the wound I just gave it. There was no way I could have denied it, even if I wanted to.

“After paying an outrageous amount to compensate his business partner for his loss, an apology, and probably some serious ass-kissing, my dad promised his partner that’s he’d fix it. He got the bright idea that this reform school would make me act normal. So in the middle of the night, these men abducted me. They tossed me in the back of a van, my hands and feet zip-tied, and drove me states away.”

Ty gasps, looking up at me from the bowl he’s still scooping cupcake mix out of. “In the middle of the night? You didn’t know they were coming?”

I shake my head. “Not really. That’s their whole thing. They grab kids in the middle of the night so they can’t try to run away.”

“That’s awful.”

“Didn’t bother me,” I tell him with a shrug. “My parents were whispering about it before they came for me. I didn’t fully understand it, but I heard my dad repeating the directions back to the director of what was expected when they came. So I was more prepared than most. Honestly, I wanted to see what they would do. I was more curious than scared.”

“Curiosity killed the cat, Leo,” he mutters with a twinkle in his eyes. I shoot him a wink, making him blush.

“Anyway,” I pick the thread of the story back up, “when I got to the school, I was

told what was expected of me. It was a glorified military school. Wake up at six, physical training at six thirty. Breakfast, school, chores, blah, blah, blah. I didn't give a fuck. I wanted to do my own thing. But I needed to bide my time until I could get out. I had to pretend. Blu used to give me lessons on how to act like a normal person with feelings, so I tried that."

"Blu is the psychiatrist who's dating your business partner, right?"

"Yep. I hope you can meet him one day. He'd be fascinated by you."

Ty looks up at me with wide eyes. "Why? Did I do something?"

"You're with me. He'll want to know why so he can further study our ..." I wave my spoon around trying to find the right words, dough dropping onto the counter. "...mental state. People like us aren't supposed to feel deeply. It's surprising to him as a medical professional, so I'm sure he's going to want to ask you questions."

"Fun," Ty deadpans.

I chuckle, then get back to telling him about what led up to my first kill. "Pretending worked for a while, but I was never good at controlling my emotions at that age. Small shit would set me off—I got into a fight once because a kid was chewing too loud." Ty gives me a wide-eyed look that makes me laugh as I'm scooping dough onto the pan. "I was ten. I blame it on my age."

"I bet," he mutters.

"After that, I stopped pretending. I was the way I was. Most of the other kids there had ASPD so it was whatever. The director, Mr. Eldridge, hated me." I see Ty's eyes flash with recognition at the name. "It was like he looked at me, saw my dimples, curly blond hair, and blue-green eyes, and loathed on sight. He would single me out,

making an example of me. If I was in a group that got caught doing something, he would beat me and make them watch, saying that the pain of them observing was punishment enough. That was bullshit, but he didn't care. I was tough, so I could handle it, but it got old fast.

“One day, me and a few of the other boys were caught stealing food. They barely fed us, and we were starving. We'd get two meager meals a day and were worked to the bone from sunup till sundown. I was the smallest, so I was able to get into this vent in the pantry door. When he caught us, Mr. Eldridge sent the others back to our dorm. When he had me alone, he told me he would look the other way, even give me more food if I did what he wanted. I knew exactly what he meant, and I wasn't down with it. I said no and tried to hit him in the balls. Like I said, I was small, so he was able to block my attempt effortlessly. After that, he got angry. No one had ever told him no or fought back. He beat me so badly I couldn't walk. The only reason he didn't try to force himself on me when I was in no shape to move was because one of the security guards heard the racket and came to investigate. He stopped Mr. Eldridge and took me to the infirmary. The security guard was new, so he didn't know he was supposed to look the other way for shit like that. The nurse thought Mr. Eldridge broke my back because I couldn't feel anything from the waist down for days.”

“Jesus,” Ty whispers, his face drawn as he slides both pans into the oven.

I turn to him and lean against the counter, crossing my arms. “I was in the hospital wing for three weeks until I could limp back on my own to my dorm. The nurses thought it might have been a pinched nerve. They were days away from taking me to the hospital to be seen. They knew the whole operation would have blown up in their faces, so they were reluctant. I was eleven. I had been there for close to two years, and that was the worst it got. It was also the first time I felt a strong feeling of hate, so strong I was willing to risk my life so Mr. Eldridge would pay for what he did to me. I didn't give a fuck about those other boys. It was because of how he treated me. I vowed right then and there that no one would get away for fucking me over.”

“As you should,” Ty says, arms wrapped around himself as if he’s protecting himself from my shitty story. “Is that when you killed him?” he asks, eyes brimming with anger. It’s a shock that he feels that way about something that happened in the past. People with authentic emotions are puzzling.

I shake my head. “No. I waited. I figured he would be expecting me to make a move. I still did the same shit I did so he didn’t think I changed my behavior, but I didn’t give him the sense that I wanted revenge. I wanted him to assume I was trying to put it behind me. I stayed out of his way, trying not to draw his ire. When I didn’t immediately retaliate and made him feel as if I was afraid of him, he dropped his guard.” I smile as I think about what I did next. “Everyone knew Mr. Eldridge was an alcoholic. He drank everyday while he was working and always left a bottle of whiskey in his bottom drawer. A few of the older boys told me they’d sneak sips, careful not to drink too much or he’d notice. So one night after he went home I snuck into his office and put finely crushed rat pellets in his bottle.”

“Shit. That had to be painful.”

“Oh, it was. I made sure of it. There was enough in there to have killed a man many times over. My only regret is they found him dead at home and I couldn’t stand over his body and tell him it was me.”

“How very Olenna Tyrell of you,” Ty mutters, walking over to me slowly. He wraps his arms around my waist, resting his chin on my chest so he can look at me. “Did you feel bad? Regret it?”

“Fuck no,” I say, wrapping my arms around him. “I can’t feel regret, but if I could, I’d regret that the least.”

“What happened next?”

I kiss his forehead twice, then tip his head up and kiss his lips. Ty sighs and leans into me. “After the director was killed, there was an investigation at the school, and it got shut down. A lot of people were charged, but no parents, as far as I know. Most of them claimed they had no idea what was going on there. They thought it was a military school that taught structure, excuses like that. My father had his suspicions it was me. The nurse called him about my injury and how I got it, but dear old dad told her unless I’m dead, don’t contact him anymore. He didn’t know for sure until I killed the new family cat with crushed rat pellets. Since I didn’t see what happened with Mr. Eldridge, I wanted to see what it did to a body. When he came into my room and found the cat, he beat me with a belt until he broke it across my back and shipped me off to Russia. He thought Ivan would end up killing me because of my attitude. But my grandfather didn’t mind. He saw someone he could train and pass on his legacy since he’s just like me and Blu. I was made into who I am because my grandfather knew he couldn’t stop me from killing but wanted me to do what I do and get paid for it.”

“That’s ... smart,” Ty mutters, probably because he doesn’t one hundred percent agree with me slaughtering people. Not the innocent ones. “Where is he? Your grandfather?”

“Still in Russia. He’s semi-retired, only taking a few contracts a year. He’s over seventy. He hands some off to me, but for the most part, he passes on contracts. It’s not like he needs the money.”

The oven dings, and Ty gives me a quick kiss before he pulls the pans out. “I’m sorry that happened to you when you were a kid. Your parents shouldn’t have sent you away. They could have put you in therapy or something.”

“My father hated me, so I don’t think he cared that I wasn’t there. My mom did whatever he wanted, so she probably didn’t care either.”

“That’s awful. I might have been closer to my mom than my dad, but my dad and I still had a great relationship. He never would have treated me like that.”

After he puts the hot pans down, I pull him to me, kissing the back of his neck over and over until he starts giggling.

“Leo, stop, you weirdo.”

I smile against his skin, breathing him in and holding in his scent. “It’s okay,” I tell him, returning to his previous comment. “I think I would have been in prison or dead if it weren’t for Ivan. He gave me what I needed so I could remain free. I kill, but I’m smart about it. He passed on the tools necessary for me to survive. If my father hadn’t treated me the way he did, I wouldn’t have had that opportunity.”

“That’s the perfect way to look at it,” Ty says, turning his head to kiss my lips softly. “Now, let’s get these cupcakes and cookies and Danishes wrapped up. We have to take them to June before the end of the working day.”

One more kiss to his sweet-smelling skin and I let him go so we can get wrapping. We pack the cupcakes in their own personal boxes, not wanting the icing to get ruined by the plastic wrap. I find myself smiling as we pack everything up, especially when looking at the care Ty takes to make sure everything is arranged to his liking.

He’s making sure everything is as perfect as he is.

CHAPTER 12

TYSHAWN

We're careful when we load up the trunk of everything we baked today. Leo was quite the sous chef, not minding taking orders from me, giving me these faint smiles when I stopped him from making a mistake. And there were a lot of mistakes. But I didn't mind. It felt nice to have someone help me. Sam would occasionally if I needed extra hands, but that was very rare.

It was actually a lot of fun to having Leo in the kitchen with me. Even though I'm particular about how I do things and it would drive most people crazy, Leo took all of my instructions in stride, doing what I ask without complaint.

He also asked questions and didn't mind if I gave him long-winded answers. Leo is unlike any man I've ever been with before. If he didn't kill people for a living, he'd be the perfect guy.

What am I saying? He already is the perfect guy. Perfect for me. I'm not sure what that says about me, overlooking murder and all, but I'm only human.

The drive back to the city is spent with me singing loudly to the radio and Leo shooting me indulgent smiles. I love that he doesn't try to change my weird. He leans into it, giving me the space to be me.

Ray's Beanery is busy when we pull up, people coming in and out quickly. When we step inside, I have to dodge someone rushing to the counter to get their lunchtime fix.

They almost bump into me, narrowly avoiding making me drop my cupcake boxes. Leo growls, but I lay my hand on his arm, hoping to convey he needs to calm down. He glances at me and gives me an imperceptible nod.

We weave around those in the way, Leo nodding at a harried-looking Hispanic man behind the counter who's trying to take and relay orders to a petite Black woman working with him.

Leo pushes through the door behind the counter and leads me back to the same office he asked me out in. My face heats as I think about how he looked at me while he was bandaging my hand. He still looks at me that way, like he wants to get me dirty and clean me up when he's finished with me.

When we step inside, the man I talked to on the phone about my serial killer boyfriend looks up from a stack of papers. June smiles at Leo but absolutely beams at me. "Oh my God! It's nice to meet you in person." He ducks under Leo's outstretched arm and gives me an awkward hug, careful not to jostle the load I'm carrying. "How are you?"

"Good. Really good." I hold up the boxes in my hands and show them to him like a weirdo. "Got cupcakes. Leo and I made them this morning. He's an amazing sous chef. Didn't complain once. That's important when you're baking, if someone is helping. They have to take your directions so whatever they're working with doesn't get fucked up. He almost put too much salt in the cookies earlier. Would have been a disaster for everyone who tasted one." My eyes widen, and I clamp my mouth shut. It's one thing to babble all over Leo, but June doesn't know me. He doesn't know my weird. He probably thinks I'm a lunatic that has to blab everything he's thinking.

Instead of giving me a dry, bored look, he's smiling at me. "Oh, you're perfect. I see what you mean, Leo." June relieves me of my load and tucks them under his arms. "Are there more boxes? I know we discussed fifty of the cookies, cupcakes, and

Danishes.”

I nod. “Yes. There are more in the trunk. Only cupcakes. The Danishes and cookies are all packed in their own boxes.” I point to the boxes Leo has in his hands. “The cupcakes had to be packed separately so I wouldn’t ruin the icing. It’s homemade.”

June smiles. “Leo told me. Can I eat one before I set them out? I love red velvet cupcakes.”

“Please,” I say, gesturing to the ones he’s holding in his hands.

He helps Leo and I bring in the rest of the cupcakes and set them in the office. June informs me he’s going to display them tomorrow when he opens since the morning rush has already happened. “These will be great for a sugar rush in the morning to go along with the coffee,” he mentions absently as he pulls the paper from the cupcake he snagged and bites into it. His groan makes me smile so hard my cheeks hurt. “Fucking hell, Tyshawn. These are amazing. You said they’re homemade?”

“Yes. They’re actually not that hard to make when you get used to the recipe. I can teach you if you want.” I fight hard to cut off any rambling before it begins so I don’t annoy him. I like June and want us to be friends. He won’t want to be friends with me if I word vomit all over him.

“I’d love that. How about tomorrow, if you’re free?”

Leo interjects. “Can’t. We’ll be out of town.” He shuts the door, then leans against it. “Ty wants to ...” He makes a gesture around his neck, as if he’s cutting his own throat. “We found him in Virginia. He wants to get started as soon as possible, which is tonight.”

June’s eyes grow wide. “Your first?” he asks me, and I nod. “Bad guy?”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I nod again. “He raped my best friend, and she killed herself.”

His eyes soften, and he sets his cupcake down, walking over to give me a long hug. He pulls back and meets my eyes. “I’m glad you’re taking out the trash then. Well, when you return, I’d love to learn to make these cupcakes. Blu would love them.”

Leo and June talk more about how long he’ll be gone and about their business, then we take our leave. We get in Leo’s car, and he pulls onto the interstate, driving us north into Virginia. Nerves thrum through me, but I swallow them down. This needs to be done. Michael doesn’t deserve many more sunrises.

I’ll make sure he doesn’t get them.

Two hours later, we’re pulling into the parking lot of the hotel we reserved, and Leo checks us in. He told me to stay back and wait for him, just in case something happens and someone gets a good look at me. Having two different colored eyes is a feature that stands out in people’s minds, making it easy for witnesses to recall. I’m glad he thought of that because I would have waltzed up to the counter and had to thank someone who complimented my irises.

Instead of waiting until the morning, we drop our bags off in our room and drive the thirty minutes to Michael’s job. Over the next few days, Leo and I sit and watch his routine, to see if he does the same things every day or if he’s spontaneous.

“Spontaneity is good,” Leo told me the second day we were sitting in the car, watching Michael’s home. “If he had a routine and didn’t show up for something, he’ll be found quicker. Doing things differently all the time makes it harder to keep track of him.”

Michael is single, so we don’t have to worry about a partner wanting him to come to

their place or anything. He doesn't have pets, so no fear of him not feeding them and a nosey neighbor coming to check shit out. As far as we can tell, he's a loner, has very few friends, and from what I remember, his family cut him off after he was found guilty, even though he got a short sentence. Leo said he's the best kind of kill because of his self-imposed isolation.

After Leo and I have his routine down—as sparse as it is—we find an abandoned building to take him to. That's the hardest part. Since we're not familiar with the area, it's difficult to know what buildings the unhoused may squat in to have a roof over their heads and stay out of the elements. It takes us three nights to find the perfect location—an apartment building that's condemned, scheduled for demolition the next day. It's risky, but we know there won't be anyone there, for fear they'll get caught in the demo.

“Okay,” Leo mutters after he gets what he calls his kill kit together. His cleaning kit is already loaded in the back of the car. “Are you ready?”

I look at myself in the mirror again, taking in the clothes Leo suggested I wear—a black cap that's pulled over my hair, a black long-sleeved shirt that hugs my chest and covers all exposed skin to just below my wrists, a pair of black cargo pants that are snug but comfortable, and a heavy-duty pair of boots. I look like a badass.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Leo is dressed similarly, hot as fuck in black from head to toe. It makes his blue-green eyes shine bright. I'm sure they're also bright because he gets to kill tonight. Leo told me he enjoys the kill, and whenever he described one to me, his eyes would take on this luminous quality.

Nodding, I pull the cap lower on my head. “I'm ready. Tell me the plan again.”

“I already disabled the cameras in the hallway, so we can leave without anyone seeing us. You'll drive to Michael's house, making sure to stay just at or a little over

the speed limit. I'll go in, drug him, and bring him outside. His neighbors are in bed by ten and have no outside cameras, so we're good there. When I get him outside and in the trunk, you'll drive to the apartment building and set everything up in the room we have ready for him. I'll come in with him, and we can get started." Leo steps up to me, rubbing my cheek gently. "You can handle this, kotenok. I know you can."

"I can handle it, Leo. I just don't want to disappoint you." Leo is used to killing people, working at his own pace. Then here I come, asking him to take someone out for me, then changing my mind to say I'll do it, probably wrecking his entire process. I should have just let him handle things himself, doing his process how he does and asking him to tell me about it when he was finished. What was I thinking, wanting to see or, in my case, commit a murder?

"Come back to me, kotenok," Leo whispers just before he kisses me softly. I kiss him back desperately, hoping to borrow some of his calm. "You won't disappoint me. Follow my instructions, and it'll be fine." He smiles big, his dimples popping, making me swoon. "This is my kitchen."

An unexpected laugh leaves my throat. God, he's fucking perfect. It's not even startling when I realize I'm falling for him, hard and fast. But that's a conversation for another day. "Okay, it's your kitchen. I can do it."

"I know you can, kotenok. Come on. I'm going to pop your murder cherry."

Chuckling at his ridiculousness, I grab his free hand, and we head to Michael's house. My hands are clamped around the steering wheel at the perfect ten and two, but Leo doesn't judge me. He keeps up a running commentary about what we're going to do when we get back home, his ideas for the coffee shop, and how he plans to get another room built on the farmhouse. I listen while letting my mind wander, not babbling for maybe the first time since we met.

This is big. In another hour, I'll be a murderer. Am I okay with that? Will I be the same person once it's done? Well, of course I won't be the same, but can I handle the man I'll be?

For Juliette, I sure fucking can. I would have done anything for her, including taking her place so she wouldn't have been assaulted. If I were braver back then, I would have killed Michael as soon as he exited prison, but I wasn't. I am now, with the help of Leo.

He makes me feel like I can take over the world. No fear can touch me when Leo is nearby and giving me so much encouragement. My nerves are still there, but they're more about the anticipation of it all. The lead-up is a killer, but I'm not afraid of the act itself. Not anymore. Leo makes me strong.

When we pull up to Michael's house, I turn off the headlights and look over at Leo.

"As soon as you see me exit the house, pop the trunk. I want to have him dumped in the back no more than fifteen seconds after. Remember, drive away at a sedate pace so no one will recall screeching tires."

"Okay. Be careful." I pull him in for a quick kiss that Leo deepens. I sigh happily into his mouth as he takes control, gliding his tongue over mine.

"I will," he says against my lips. With one more peck, he gets out of the car and blends in with the night.

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel, waiting for Leo to come back out. My nerves rise to the surface again as I look around, making sure no one is meandering about. We've been to his neighborhood before, so we know what times it's usually a ghost town. Now is one of those times. I'm only hoping someone doesn't have a reason to leave their homes right now, like needing to take their dog out for a late

night walk.

Two minutes after he goes in, I spot a shift in Michael's front yard, and my heart hammers in my throat as I stare at a misshapen figure coming toward me. Then I realize it's Leo with Michael over his shoulder, and I breath out a sigh of relief, hustling to pop the trunk. It opens quickly, then I hear a thump as Leo dumps Michael heavily into the back.

Leo opens the passenger door, sliding into the seat. He gives me his sweet but frightening grin that I find irresistible. "Easy," he quips.

I roll my eyes playfully, then put the car in drive. Praying I can pull this little task off, I force my foot to land on the gas pedal gently. I exhale softly when my body does what I tell it.

The drive to the abandoned building passes in a flash, probably because I'm moving on autopilot. This is it. There's no turning back from what I'm about to do. Am I afraid? About being caught, yes. Do I want to call the whole thing off and let Michael live as a free man without being truly held accountable for the rape and suicide of my best friend? Absofuckinglutely not.

I'm snapped out of my thoughts when the GPS announces, ' You have arrived at your destination,' s hattering the silence in the car. Against my better judgement, I jump.

Leo covers my hand with his. "You nervous?"

"Yes," I answer him honestly.

"I'll take care of you, kotenok. Don't worry."

"Okay," I whisper.

Like we agreed on last night, I pull around the back of the apartment building, extinguishing the lights when we get to the first floor emergency exit that Leo taped open.

“Grab my kits. I’ll get Michael.”

I do what he says, turning on my flashlight so we can see while Leo hoists Michael over his shoulder and brings him in.

We step into the first apartment on the left, the only one that still has furniture inside. The last occupants left a kitchen table behind. It’s rickety and dented from heavy use, but it’s sturdy. Leo laid on it to ensure it would hold Michael’s weight. And Leo has about thirty pounds on Michael, so we’ll be set.

Once I drop the bags on the floor by my feet, I look around at our kill room as it is. It’s littered with trash prior tenants didn’t clean up. There is a fine layer of dust left behind, making my nose tingle from the urge to sneeze. A faint mildew smell hangs in the air, but that will change as soon as Leo gets started on whatever he plans to do to Michael. He didn’t tell me what exactly that was, just that I’d be pleased with how much it’ll hurt.

Leo drops Michael on the table, his head banging on the surface roughly. I smile, happy that he’ll wake up to a throbbing skull.

After Leo arranges Michael on the table, I grab the kill kit and open it, pull out one of the rolls of duct tape and hand it to Leo. I take the other and help him tape Michael down. Leo is quick and efficient, and I try to mirror his motions. Michael’s feet just hang off the table, and Leo takes off his socks—he snatched him from the house with his pajamas on, so we didn’t have to worry about shoes. I give Leo a questioning look, and he just winks at me. Shrugging, I wrap the tape around Michael’s forehead so he can’t lift his head when he wakes up.

Leo stands beside me, checking that Michael is secure. I paste myself to his side, loving how warm and solid he feels. “What now?” I ask, staring at the man I’ve wanted dead for almost six years. He fucking disgusts me. Having him tied down and at my mercy is exactly where he deserves to be.

“I’ll get some smelling salts to rouse him. Then we can have some fun.”

I return the smile Leo is flashing at me and let him go so he can wake Michael up.

The smelling salts work immediately. As soon as Leo puts the capsule to his nose, Michael snorts and tries to shake his head to get away from the strong aroma. When he can only move his head an inch in either direction, Michael tries to look around.

His frightened eyes lock on Leo’s, and he opens his mouth to let out a shrill scream. My hands fly to my ears, trying to drown it out. Of all the things to come out of his mouth, I didn’t expect a shriek.

Quick as a flash, Leo stops the scream a few seconds later with his hand tight on Michael’s throat. Choking noises replaces the high-pitched sound and I’m thankful. My ears ring even after he stops.

Leo leans close to his face and in a snarling voice says, “If you don’t shut the fuck up, I’ll slit your fucking throat.” Michael glances at him with wide eyes and nods frantically. Leo lets him go, then looks over at me. “Want to talk to him first, or can I have my fun?”

Michael visibly shakes as he tries to peer over at me. Since he can’t move his head, he can’t see me from where I’m standing. That doesn’t stop him from asking questions. “Hey! What’s this about? Talk to me about what?” When neither of us answers, Michael shrieks, “Please! Tell me what this is about. What have I done to you?”

Anger surging inside of me, I stride over to Michael so he can see me. His face doesn't show recognition, but I'm sure my next sentence will bring it all back to him. "You remember Juliette Barner? Remember what you did to her?"

Michael goes chalk white as he tries to shake his head. Yeah, he remembers. Juliette and I sat beside each other at his trial, hoping and praying for a good outcome. Our prayers weren't answered.

I slap a hand on Michael's forehead much harder than necessary and hold him still so he can meet my eyes. "Fucking look at me! Look at me and tell me why! Why did you do it?"

"Do what? I didn't do?—"

"You're a fucking liar!" I roar and strike him. I punch him in the face repeatedly, wanting to vent my frustrations. Anger floods my body, the rage threatening to tear me apart. My hand repeatedly bashes into the soft flesh of his face, my fist warming with blood.

When my left arm gets tired, I switch to the right, pummeling Michael into the table.

Leo lets me go on until Michael's face is bloody and swelling. He finally stops me when it looks as if Michael will pass out. I look up at Leo, chest heaving with blood running down my closed fist.

Smirking at me, Leo pulls me close to him—not worried about the blood that's splashed on me—and kisses me deeply. "Fuck, I can watch you work all day. You're fucking hot."

Despite my irritation at the lie this fucking rapist told, I blossom under Leo's lips and his words. I rub up against his hard dick, eager to get this kill over with so I can get

Leo alone.

Michael groans pitifully behind us, but I pay him no mind. Leo's kiss conveys that he's here for me and he'll handle everything from here.

I can't wait to watch. But first, I have questions.

Breaking the kiss, I pull back from Leo, grabbing a cloth from his cleaning kit and change my gloves. Once done, I step back to the table and grab Michael's face. He looks at me with swollen eyes, groaning as I grip his chin roughly. "Do you remember Juliette?"

"Yes," he croaks, shaking his head to try to loosen my grip. I grab on tighter. "Fuck! Yes! I remember her. But I did my time. I paid my debt to society."

"The fuck you did!" I shout, slapping him quickly across the face. "You did less than three months, and she fucking killed herself. You took away any kind of hope for her future. Why did you do it?"

"Tell the truth," Leo mutters from behind me. "Tell the truth and we'll let you go."

Michael's swollen eyes light up, and he nods as much as he can with my hand gripping his chin and his head tapped down. "Okay. I was her tutor. She flirted with me all the time, telling me if I helped her, she'd make it worth my while. When it came time to collect, she said no. But she fucking promised. She told me that?—"

My anger gets the best of me again, and I punch Michel in the nose. "She meant she'd pay you extra money, you dipshit. I saw the text messages." Juliette messaged Michael about coming to help her for an extra hour her parents weren't paying him for. She said she'd make it worth his while, and when Michael asked how, she said she'd pay him a hundred dollars for the hour so she could pass her algebra two final

exam. “She didn’t want to have sex with you. You were old enough to know that.”

Michael groans, his hands twitching as if he wants to grab his nose. “I said sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

“Yes, you did,” Leo says behind me, his voice sounding soothing, as if trying to set Michael at ease. I give him a puzzled look, but he shakes his head slightly at me. I step back, letting Leo do this thing. He has more experience with this type of stuff than me. “You did mean it. And she’s not the only one, is she? What did you do to the others?”

Michael looks up at Leo, staring into his eyes. I’m not sure what’s going on here. It’s almost like Michael is under a trance, caught in the blue-green stare of Leo.

After he swallows roughly a few times, Michael says, “I killed them. I wasn’t going back to prison, but I couldn’t stop. I’m sick. I need professional help.”

My blood boils at his statement. It’s only sheer force of will that holds me in place from socking him in the jaw again.

Sounding like he’s proud of Michael for confessing, Leo says, “Good. Who are they?”

“Will you let me go if I tell you?”

Leo smiles as if Michael can trust him, but I see it. This smile is one of disgust and contempt, not the friendly nature that Michael thinks it is. I’ve learned to read Leo’s smirks and smiles and emotions over the past week we’ve spent together. This is not a friendly smile. “Of course.”

Michael gives us three names and where the girls are buried. He tells us he kept a

trophy from each girl—earrings he snatched from their ears before he killed them.

My stomach roils, hearing him talk about raping and murdering young girls like it's nothing. Leo listens attentively, his face not giving away anything about learning this bit of information. I find it hard to not fucking deck him again, but Leo gives me another small shake of his head, so I back off.

Once Michael is done talking, he licks his lips and wiggles. "I won't tell the cops what happened. I'll tell my job I got into an accident or something. You can trust I won't tell anyone you kidnapped me. Besides, I can't go to the cops if I told you about what I did to those girls." Michael laughs nervously as he looks at Leo. "You can let me up now."

"Oh, Michael. What gave you the idea that I'm not a liar?" Leo smiles his real smile, all his dark thoughts flashing on his face. Michael's eyes widen, and he starts begging, telling Leo he'll give him whatever he wants, to just let him go.

Leo ignores him, walking over to me. "Can I have my fun?"

I slide closer to him, kissing him gently on the cheek. I've asked all I needed to know. Now it's his turn to keep his promise to me. "Yes. I can't wait to see."

CHAPTER 13

LEO

Ty might be small, but he's powerful as fuck. It wasn't that he hit this rapist in just the right place to split his shit open; it's that every punch he landed released a torrent of blood. Michael's face is a fucking mess, and I want to glide my hand through the hot, sticky liquid that's cascading down his cheeks. Even through my gloves, I'd be able to feel the coppery substance on my hands. But I control myself. What I have planned for him will more than satisfy my need for blood and gore.

Taking a deep breath and trying to calm my arousal from watching Ty, I point to the bag at our feet. "There's a handheld blowtorch in there. Grab it for me."

Michael chokes on a sob. "Wha-wha-what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to have fun. I haven't done this in years."

Ty hands me the blowtorch and steps back, smiling at me. He told me burns cause a different kind of pain, which gave me an idea.

Once, when Ivan brought home a man that pissed him off in a pub for me to use as a torture victim, he lit the fireplace and put some metal rods in the flames. Ivan showed me places to burn a man that would leave him in agony. The sensitive areas. That was over fifteen years ago, and I've barely had the chance to do it again. When Ty mentioned burns, I knew this would be the perfect time to use the techniques Ivan taught me.

But it'll be different. No space or time to let metal rods heat until they glow cherry red. What I have is more than enough.

I flick the blowtorch on, heightening and lowering the flame. I want him to hurt, but I don't want him passing out from the pain. I also don't want him to get third-degree burns. Third-degree burns destroy the nerve endings, and he won't feel the pain as acutely. He needs to suffer for me to be satisfied and for Ty to feel like his friend is getting justice.

Smiling with excitement at being able to work like this, I take the blowtorch to Michael's fingers. He screams, the sound rocking my ear drums. With a wide grin, I breathe in the acrid smell of burning skin. It's been so long.

I move the blowtorch from one finger to the next, watching the flesh bubble and blacken under my ministrations. I make sure I spread the burning out, lest it go too deep. Michael tries to move his hand while he screams loud enough to wake the dead, but the tape has no give. He's at my mercy.

Once his entire left hand is burned to the point of being almost unrecognizable, I move to the right. Michael's screams build higher in pitch, then he starts to gurgle from the pressure at the back of his throat from the intensity. I fucking love that sound. The screams of my victims are the highest form of praise for my work.

I turn the flame off, giving Michael a bit of a break so I can enjoy his cries. I look over at Ty, who's watching with rapt attention. I grin over at him, and his eyes widen before he returns it. What does he see in my eyes? Does he see the excitement I can hardly contain when I get to play with fire? Especially when I get to play with fire on a person? Ivan told me fire was too unpredictable, only a spark needed to cause an inferno. But I have experience, having killed most of the animals with fire. I know how to handle it. The blowtorch makes it easier, guiding the flame exactly where I want it.

Fire has a way of cleansing my mind when not much else can. I've come a long way from setting fires to watch shit burn and killing animals, but I'll never stop enjoying watching what fire does to flesh.

Michael cries and moans, begs and prays. I soak it all in, letting his cries go on for another minute or two. Then I get back to work.

Turning the blowtorch back up, I move down to the soles of Michael's feet, answering Ty's earlier silent question of why I removed his socks. I hold the blowtorch to the bottom of his right foot, watching Michael thrash on the table as the skin begins to peel away. It doesn't take long for the soles to blacken and curl, turning into hard shells that reveal the pink flesh underneath. I keep going, frying the exposed tissue.

When the soles of Michael's feet are crispy and he's sobbing and screaming, I turn the blowtorch off and toss it aside. With my gloved hands, I grab a hold of Michael's foot. It's still warm to the touch, his sloughed off skin sticking to my glove. Squeezing tight, I pull up, taking the skin along the way. I toss the skin on the table, then move to his other extremities, pulling the blackened skin off. At this point, Michael is making inhuman sounds. I smile. The air hitting the exposed areas of his feet is probably torturous, and I'm loving that. I drag a finger over the burned flesh, listening to another sharp cry leave Michael's throat.

Once that messy work is done, I remove those gloves and don another pair. I close my eyes, breathe in deeply, then let the air glide out. When I open them, my eyes land on Ty, who hasn't moved from the spot he initially took. His blue-and-brown eyes flash as he takes in the scene, and I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Instead, I go to my kill kit, bring it to the table near Michael's head, and open it. "I'm done with him, *kotenok*. I think he'll be in enough pain until the end. You're up. Which would you prefer?" I ask Ty, indicating the numerous weapons in front of us.

Michael sobs louder, irritating me now. I'm trying to talk to my man. He needs to shut the fuck up. "Please don't. Please. Just ... please stop. I'm so sorry. I'll tell the cops what I did and where the bodies are." His voice is hoarse from his screaming. "People will look for me. They'll know I'm missing." He sobs more, the tears leaking from his eyes quickly.

"No, they won't," I tell him conversationally, gently touching the knives that are in my kit. "You're a loner. No partner, no friends, and your family fucking hates you because you're a rapist. You don't even talk to your neighbors. No one will know you're gone for a few days, maybe even a week." I glance back at Ty, indicating for him to step closer to the table.

Ty sidles up to me, looking down at Michael with a look of pure disgust, then glances over at the blades. "I don't give a fuck who will be searching for you, Michael. You don't deserve to live. Your family should know you're a killer on top of being a rapist, and they will. Everyone will know." Ty stops talking and glances back at Michael. "I'm going to kill you. And I'm going to enjoy every second of it."

The sound of glee in Ty's voice makes me hard, and I rub up against him. Bending to his ear, I say, "See what you do to me?"

He looks at me with a wide grin. "You're a mess."

"I know." I kiss the top of his head just as he pulls out the paring knife. He twists it back and forth between his hands, smiling. As a baker, I'm sure he's used this knife before and knows how to handle it. The meager light glints off the blade. I approve of his choice. It's small but sharp, packing a punch, like Ty himself.

Looking down at Michael, Ty whispers, "You killed Juliette. Even if you didn't give her the pills and make her swallow them, you killed her. I won't be like you. I'll actually be the one to end your life. You deserve nothing less."

With that, he stabs Michael in the throat. When Ty pulls the knife free, blood sprays everywhere, getting on both of us. Ty jumps back but doesn't take his eyes off Michael, who's struggling on the table. Michael gurgles and thrashes, his eyes wide as he tries to move his fucked up hands from the tape binding him.

It takes him another minute to die, the blood spurting from his neck wound with the slow beat of his heart until it stops altogether. A long exhale leaves his lungs, then Michael stirs no more.

An unfamiliar feeling washes over me as I gaze at Ty, who is still focused on Michael's body. A feeling so strong my knees almost go weak from how hard it hits me. I'm not sure what it is, but my heart hammers as I look down at him, and an overwhelming need crops up in my chest. Like I need to protect him, make sure he's happy, be his everything.

What does it mean? It can't be love, right? I can't feel love. Love is as foreign a concept to me as a dog speaking English. It's not supposed to be possible.

Then again, Blu loves June. And I think if there's a scale for measuring a psychopath, Blu would be at the end for the most unfeeling and unemotional. But he fell in love with June.

As I'm falling for Ty. Fuck, that's what it is.

Grinning down at him, I kiss him lightly on the lips, hoping to convey how proud I am of him for what he was able to do. I don't recall ever feeling pride for anyone about anything. Ty is giving me all sort of new experiences, namely watching someone other than fellow psychopaths kill someone.

"Is he dead?" Ty asks against my mouth.

I step away from him and check Michael's pulse at the wrist. When I don't feel a heartbeat against my fingers, I look at Ty and nod. He exhales roughly but smiles, coming around the table to throw his arms around me. "God, Leo. That was wild. I didn't think I could do it. But I did! I fucking did it! I killed the asshole that raped my friend. I sent him to fucking hell where he belongs."

Chuckling at his rambling, I pick him up and spin him around. "You did. I'm proud you."

"Thank you. Thank you for doing this for me. And you made it hurt! Jesus, Leo! You fucked him up."

"Did you enjoy the show?"

"Fuck yes!" Ty's expression sobers. "We have to tell the cops about the girls he killed. How can we ensure they'll believe us?"

"Leave an anonymous tip with the location of the bodies and Michael's name and address. They'll search his place and find the earrings. They'll get justice."

Ty gives me a watery smile, a tear sliding down his cheek. "Thank you. Juliette can rest in peace now."

"She can." I kiss his tear away, then set him on his feet before hugging him tight.

After we break apart, we get started on cleaning up, making sure we don't leave any fingerprints or DNA behind. We both wore gloves and hats to ensure no hairs float on the body or the table.

Even still, we sweep up the floor and wipe the table once we get Michael free and tossed on the floor with no finesse. I won't dump the body anywhere, since the

demolition is planned for the morning. There's an electrical crawlspace in the hallway by the apartment we're using so Michael's resting place will be under a pile of rubble.

Once I toss the body down the short drop, I come back to the apartment, we gather our supplies and get ready to go.

Ty tucks himself close to me, looking around the room. "Thank you, babe. Thank you for helping me with this."

"Anything for you, kotenok." I kiss his forehead, then his lips gently.

The ride back to the hotel is relaxed. I'm glad. I feared Ty would curl in on himself after the adrenaline wore off from the kill, but he's still acting as he usually would. His fingers are threaded through mine, and he's humming along to the music. Ty seemed happy with the kill. I hope he doesn't regret it. From his expression, I think he kind of liked it.

I did too. I liked him watching me. While I was burning Michael, I felt Ty's eyes on me like a physical thing. Fuck, I'm in deep with Ty. I don't know what it means for me or my future, but I don't really give a fuck right now. His warm hand in mine and his humming in my ears is enough for me at the moment. It'll be enough for me for a long time. In this moment, I know Ty is it for me. He is mine.

I never thought I'd find someone I'd want to spend the rest of my life with. I assumed I would have to hide who I am, never letting someone close to me so they wouldn't see behind the mask. Then Ty comes along and not only accepts me for me, but he joins me in my work. A true partner.

When we pull up to the hotel, Ty slides over to me, kissing along my neck and ear. "When we were back at the building, you said I made you feel a certain way." His

hand drifts down to my cock, which hardens under his hand. “Want to show me what you meant?”

“Fuck yes,” I mutter, groaning at the feel of his soft, wet tongue over my skin.

Biting down on my earlobe, Ty whispers, “Then show me.”

Turning in my seat, I grab Ty by his throat. “After I wash the smell of blood off you, I want in your ass. And I won’t take it slow like I did last time. Can you handle that?”

Ty’s throat bobs under my palm as he swallows. “I can handle it all, baby.”

I get Ty clean as quickly as possible, ridding him of the blood and the smell of burning skin. As much as I want to get him in bed and under me, I want to make sure he doesn’t have any trace of death clinging to him.

Once I get him out of the shower and dry, I scoop him up, take him to the bed and lay him in the middle. I step back, admiring how he looks splayed out for me. That swooping sensation happens in my chest again, and I’m struck by how strongly I feel about Tyshawn being ready for me, his hard cock jutting out in front of him.

“Ty, kotenok. You’re so fucking beautiful. What did I do to deserve someone like you in my bed?”

He grins, appearing shy as his hand drifts down to his cock. My eyes track the movement as he strokes once, twice, three times. I swallow roughly. I never in a million years would have thought I’d be riveted by the sight of a man jerking off, but Ty has my attention.

When I meet Ty’s eyes, I see the heat and desire behind them. I love that he wants me as much as I want him.

Climbing on the bed, I slot my body with his, our dicks brushing against each other. Ty wraps his legs around me, rocking his hips so our cocks rub together deliciously. “You have lube, right?” I nod, leaning down to kiss him lightly on the neck. “I want to feel you, Leo. Let me get ready for you.”

“Turn around. Get on your hands and knees. I’ll get you ready this time. I want you to fuck yourself on my fingers before you take my dick.”

Whimpering, he turns over, peeking over his shoulder at me. Ty spreads his legs wider, showing me his hanging cock and balls. I lick my lips as I take him in. He’s a fucking vision, with his tight hole and lean body. I’m going to enjoy ruining him for other men. I’ll show him why he belongs to me.

Reaching for the lube in my bag, I coat my fingers and glide them over his tight pucker, teasing the rim. He moans, and my dick grows as I watch him enjoy himself.

My gaze is locked on his hole as my fingers disappear into his entrance. Ty pushes back against my digits, grunting when one, then two fingers push past his rim. I pump it in and out a few times before adding a third finger.

Ty speeds up his movements, getting himself ready for me and enjoying what I’m doing at the same time. His eyes drift shut as he lies his chest on the bed. Pleasure shoots to the head of my cock as his plump ass sways in the air.

Not able to help myself, I lean forward and place a sharp slap on his ass. Ty moans, looking back at me with lust filled eyes. “Again,” he mutters. As he rocks on my fingers, I slap his ass again, the sting of my palm going straight to my dick.

“That’s right, kotenok,” I mutter, slapping his ass once more. The red on those cheeks has my cock throbbing. “Let me open that hole so I can slide my dick into you and use you as my cock sleeve.”

He whimpers, moving his hips faster. One more slap is all I can deliver before I've had enough. After I remove my fingers from his hole, I drizzle some lube on my dick and stroke myself to coat it. "I won't go slow, kotenok." I spread his ass with one hand and hold my cock steady with the other as I slide my cock between his crack. Even that feels good, his lubed crease slick around the underside of my cock.

Ty looks over his shoulder and nods, his mismatched stare blazing. Gripping him hard, I push inside him. He's so fucking tight, squeezing me like it doesn't want to let me in.

Then his walls relax, allowing me to glide in fully on one thrust. Ty cries out, then moans, rocking against me. "God, Leo. Oh fuck. Why do you feel so good?"

Swallowing audibly, I hold Ty's hips in a firm grip as I try to get used to being enveloped like this. Never have I felt something so good around my dick. "I'll be gentle next time, I promise, kotenok."

"Take me hard, Leo. I want to walk funny for a week."

"Your wish is my command, kotenok."

Pulling my hips back, I slam into him hard, impaling Ty on my dick. The most beautiful half scream, half moan drifts from his lips. I wish I could see his face while I take him like this. Next time for sure. Right now, I need to fuck him, and I need to fuck him hard.

I grip his hips and fuck him with deep, thorough strokes. Fuck, I want this to last, but I know it won't. He feels too fucking good, and I'm too turned on from watching him kill a man.

His cries of pleasure burrow into me, even better than the screams of my victims. I

can't get enough.

“Oh God. Oh God. Leo ... Oh God.” Ty rotates his hips, meeting me stroke for stroke as I pound into him. His ass sucks me in, practically holding my dick hostage. “I’m close, baby. So close. I can’t ... Oh God.” Ty grips his dick, jerking fast to match the speed of my thrusts. I wish I could watch. I know he looks fucking beautiful getting himself off like this.

Ty lets out a guttural scream and announces his orgasm, his ass clenching around me. “Fuck,” I mutter, my climax rushing up from my balls to the head of my cock. “I’m going to fill you up, kotenok. I want to see my cum leaking from your hole.” Two strokes later, I’m exploding into him, filling him with my cum.

I keep ahold of his hips, breathing heavily as aftershocks roll through me. My hips continue pumping, though shallowly, making Ty moan softly.

When I soften, I pull out of Ty, turn him over, and lay between his legs, kissing him long and deep.

We lie like this for minutes, still not getting enough of each other, even after our orgasms. When I release his lips, Ty sighs, then chuckles. “Maybe we should have showered after we did that. You made a mess of me.”

Smiling down at him, I wipe his plump bottom lip, loving how soft it feels. “I’ll clean you up. Then we can sleep.”

“You’ll hold me?”

“All night.”

After I clean him up, I do just that.

CHAPTER 14

TYSHAWN

As promised, Leo holds me through the night. It's like we didn't move as soon as we got comfortable and slipped into sleep. I wake up with Leo's arm gripped tightly around me, holding me against his big, warm body.

I burrow deeper into him, loving how his arm flexes and pulls me closer. It's like we don't even have air separating us. "Good morning, babe."

"Morning, kotenok. How did you sleep?"

"Really, really well. You?"

He breathes in deeply, as if scenting me, then says, "Same. You make a good teddy bear." Leo nips at my neck and I giggle.

I roll over, lying on Leo's chest. He wraps his arms snugly around me, and I sigh, never having felt more content in my life.

After kissing me on the top of my head, Leo asks, "How did you meet Juliette? You never told me."

Usually, when someone asks about my best friend, my heart clenches and my eyes prick with unshed tears. But now that she's avenged, my heart feels light. I want to cry but because I'm happy I got to kill the man that hurt her. I have a feeling every

memory going forward will be thought of with fondness, not with a shadow of pain clouding it.

“We met in middle school,” I began, thinking back to Juliette walking into my art class, a new kid that just transferred from Florida. “She looked scared shitless, like she didn’t know where to sit or who to talk to.” I chuckle briefly thinking about her wide eyes and pale face. “I waved her over, telling her she can sit with me. We were inseparable after that.”

“You were a social butterfly,” Leo mutters.

“Sorta. But more than that, I felt like Juliette was meant to be in my life. She could have sat at my other empty table, but I wanted her to be near me. Come to find out, my father worked with her father. Our fathers became friends, so I saw Juliette all the time. We were closer than siblings, since neither of us have them. For six years, we were always together. I’m sure we’d still be inseparable if Michael hadn’t done what he did. I wish she’d talked to me before she took those pills. I would have tried to help her.”

“I don’t think it had anything to do with you,” Leo says gently. “A lot of people live in their heads and don’t want to burden anyone with their problems or their pain. I can’t say for sure, but she was probably in so much pain that no one or nothing mattered but that. So don’t beat yourself up about it.”

Smiling with tears sliding down my face, I lean up and ask Leo, “Are you sure you don’t have any feelings or emotions? You’re great at comforting me.”

He trails his thumb down my face to wipe my tears. “I read a lot, especially Blu’s mental health books. I read a few from attempted suicide survivors. Their mind isn’t on their family or friends, it’s on their pain and trauma.” He pauses, then says, “I’m trying to be good at comforting you. Did killing Michael help?”

I nod against his chest. “So much. I didn’t think I’d be the type of person that would want to kill or be okay with it, but I am. I think I got justice for Juliette.”

“You did, kotenok.” Leo tips my head up and kisses me softly. “Come on. Check out time is rolling around. Let’s shower and get out of here.”

We get out of bed and climb in the shower, Leo’s arms wrapped around me as the water beats down on us. The water pressure sucks, but I’m not complaining because Leo is here with me.

It’s mind boggling that it’s been less than a month since I met Leo. My feelings for him are so strong, I’ve had to fight not to blurt out my true emotions.

Truth be told, I’m fucking crazy about him. My feelings for him almost can’t be contained by my body. If I’m not careful, I’ll end up blurting out how I feel and scare him away. He’s okay with my rambling and babbling—that doesn’t mean he wants to be saddled with me for the long haul with my weird quirks. Leo said he claimed me. That has nothing to do with the love I have for him threatening to burst from my chest. He didn’t sign up for that bit.

Before we leave the city, I ask Leo to stop by a local big box store and buy a burner phone. Once he’s back in the car, I call in the tip about Michael’s victims and where their bodies can be found. I also tell them his name and his history of being a rapist, so they’ll be more inclined to take the tip. The call lasts less than a minute, then I toss the phone out of the window on the highway. Hopefully those girls will be found and their families can get some closure. Michael was a piece of shit, and I’m glad I put him down.

I grab the hand Leo doesn’t have on the steering wheel and thread our fingers together. He glances at me and smiles, giving my hand a quick squeeze.

“Can I help you again?”

Leo gives me a side long look. “Again? You have someone else in mind?”

“No. You said you have a website, right?” I ask. Leo nods. “Someone from there. I’m sure I took time from you with this kill you did for free.”

He lifts one shoulder. “I have enough money that I wouldn’t have to work for at least twenty years if I didn’t want. So you didn’t take time from me at all. You know everyone I kill isn’t guilty, right? Some are just regular people that end up on my list. It could be someone that wants a promotion, but someone is in their way or someone who wants their parent’s life insurance, and they’re taking too long to die,” Leo says matter of factly. I swallow hard but nod jerkily. “Can you handle that?”

I don’t answer right away so I’m not speaking out of turn. I want to kill more people like Michael. I know they’re out there, walking the streets because there wasn’t enough evidence to convict or the person they hurt didn’t want to come forward.

Could I kill someone that is too good at their jobs and is in someone’s way? Could I kill some old person that’s enjoying living to a ripe old age? I don’t think I can. I might have gotten the taste for killing after Michael but not for killing the innocent. It rubs me the wrong way.

Sighing, I hold his hand tightly. “No, I can’t. I know it’s what you do, and I won’t try to make you stop, but I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Leo smiles as he keeps his eyes trained on the road. “I’m not. I like you being innocent.”

I bark a laugh. “I just killed a man, Leo. I don’t think I am anymore.”

“You are. According to the rules of general society, he deserved it, so you were simply taking out the trash. There are plenty of cases where someone wants someone that hurt them or who hurt someone they love dead. You asked me before if I would kill only the guilty if you asked. If you’re asking, I can.”

I don’t know why a giddy feeling flows through me as I nod. “Fuck yeah. I’d love that.”

Leo doesn’t say anything, just reaches for the dash and scrolls through his listed numbers. When he finds June’s, he presses the call button. The ringing of the phone sounds, and is answered a few seconds later. “Hey, Leo. How did everything go?”

“Good. It’s done. Listen, I need you to do me a favor.”

“What’s up?”

“Ty wants to join me in my work going forward. But only the trash that needs to be taken out, understand?”

June pauses for a moment, then says, “Got it. What do you need me to do?”

“Send me over about five names to my second email so Ty and I can take a look. He wants to choose.”

“A man after my own heart,” June says, chuckling. “I’ll check through your site and send them over. When will you be back?”

“On the way now, but we’ll still be out of range. I’ll be back at the condo in a few days. You need me to come in for work?”

He chuckles. “Not you. Ty. His cookies, cupcakes, and Danishes sold like fucking

hotcakes. People are asking for more. I'm sure there will be a riot if we don't keep them in stock."

My chest feels light as I smile wide enough to hurt my cheeks. "Thank you, June," I say, squeezing Leo's hand tight.

"You're welcome. Now hurry back so someone doesn't burn our coffee shop down to get to your baking."

He hangs up, leaving me feeling all kinds of happy with myself. "That's a relief. I was worried people would hate them."

"Not likely," Leo mutters. "Everything you baked for me tastes fucking delicious. If you want, I can help you make more. I had fun the last time."

"That would be great."

Just then, Leo's phone beeps, and he scoops it up, clicking a few buttons as he keeps his eyes on the road. "Here." He places his phone in my hand, an image on the screen. "There are a few people that June found that requested my services and they're not innocent. Pick from those. When you find someone, I'll accept the contract. We can make plans for how you want to kill them, and we can take care of it."

As I'm looking through the images, I read the emails from the people who sent them, finding out what crimes they're accused of. "And these are legit? Not a person just wanting someone to die and making shit up?"

"June vets them. If he and Blu join me for a case, he wants to be sure it's someone that needs to die."

“Okay.” I read through every email carefully, my chest thudding because I want to fucking kill them all. If I have my way, I’ll help Leo make short work of this list.

When I get to the last person, I know I’ve found the one I want to kill. The others on the list are gross, but this one is fucking despicable.

From the email and the police reports attached, he was a camp counselor that trafficked underaged kids to his shitty friends. Fifteen kids. They came forward, and charges are pending, but by the time they get around to sifting through the evidence, some of these kids may end up like Juliette.

Teeth clenched, I say, “Him. Ian McCaffy. Fucking sex trafficker.” A noise of disgust drifts from my lips, and I toss his phone onto the dash, crossing my arms over my chest. “I want him to die now.”

“Easy, killer,” Leo mutters with humor. I can’t help but crack a small smile. “We have to make plans. But it’ll happen. I promise. When we get back to my house in the woods, I’ll track down all the information on him that I need. Good thing is he’s local, so it won’t take long to get started. There are several abandoned buildings I use that will make things a lot easier. We’ll bake, and we’ll plan. How does that sound?”

It sounds really fucking good. When there’s a lot on my mind, I like to bake. The rhythm, the smells, the repetition, it all grounds me. Baking helps me think about shit that makes little sense unless my hands are busy measuring, mixing, and scooping.

“Why are you so perfect?” I mutter, my heart thumping as those three little words dance on my tongue.

If I thought I was just falling for him, I was wrong. I’ve fucking fallen, hard. It could be how well he treats me. It could be how he listens to my babbling and rambling without complaint, giving me his undivided attention. It could also be because he

tapped into some part of me that I didn't know existed and helped it flourish. Honestly, I don't give a fuck what it was, but something made me fall, and I'm there gratefully. I'm not sure if he can feel the same—since he says he can't feel love—but that doesn't matter. My feelings for him don't have to be reciprocated.

I glance over at him, taking in his beautiful face. His dimples pop when he smirks at me, and I think I fall a little more in love with his angelic features. He looks like he could be the boy next door. He has everyone fooled, but he chose to show me the real Leo. That's as good as love to me.

“I don't know about perfect. But I'm trying to be enough for you.”

“Does it mean that much to you?”

He sighs, but nods nonetheless. “It does. It's so strange because I've never wanted to be anything to anyone besides their Grim Reaper. But with you? I want to be so much more. You're mine, Ty. And I'm not letting you go. Ever.”

I should be afraid of that little declaration, but it just deepens my feelings. He's claiming me. That's enough, even if he can't tell me he loves me. Saying I'm his is the same.

A few hours later, we pull onto the hidden driveway that leads up to Leo's secluded house, and I smile. “This place is pretty but creepy.”

“I don't come here often. I promise my condo looks much better. But the seclusion will work in our favor.”

“How so?”

“To teach you. I can show you how to use a variety of different weapons, guns

mostly, and no neighbors will hear the sound.”

I’ve never shot a gun before. Never thought about it. But it would be smart to learn. I probably won’t be able to stab every person I want to kill. It would be helpful to learn different ways to put people in the ground. “I want to learn how to handle a gun. How many do you have?”

When we step inside, Leo pulls me to his bedroom and shows me a large safe in his closet. He opens it, and I see just how many guns he has. There are many different kinds, from guns small enough to fit unseen in my hands to handguns so big, they’d probably knock me off my feet. There’s even one that has a big drum hanging from it that looks especially deadly.

“We can get started tomorrow. First we bake, then we shoot. Sound like a deal?” Leo asks.

Smiling, I nod as I continue to look at all the guns. “Deal.”

CHAPTER 15

LEO

The next morning, I wake up to an empty bed. I sit up and stretch, smiling when I hear Ty moving around the kitchen. We have more baking to do so we can take everything to June.

I wonder what Ty's plans are for a bakery. Clearly the building he went to late that night is out, since it's a crime scene—though not an official one. He could always work with me at the coffee shop, but I'm sure he wants his own space.

An idea starts to formulate in my head, but I have to get with June to see if it's something we can do, since technically Ray's belongs to him. Before he died, I convinced Ray to only put the business in June's name in case I had to flee.

I slide on a pair of sweatpants, go to the bathroom, and brush my teeth before I step out of the room. Ty is in the kitchen, elbows deep in some dough. Flour is on his cheeks and some in his hair—he's never looked so gorgeous.

He peers up at me and smiles before going back to his kneading. Watching his deft hands as he manipulates the dough has me wondering what they would feel like gripping my ass as I ease into him.

I've only had Ty from behind, but now, I want to see his face. How his eyes widen when I sink into him, how he clutches at my back when I bottom out, how his lips meet mine as he kisses me messily.

“Good morning, baby.” He glances up at me quickly to greet me. “Sleep well?”

“Yep.”

I walk over to him, standing behind him as he continues to knead the dough. I think he’s making croissants. He told me he wanted to take some with the cookies and cupcakes instead of making Danishes. Doesn’t matter. He’s right where I want him—leaning over the counter so I can have my way with him.

“What’s up?” He looks over his shoulder at me.

I angle toward him, wrapping my arm around his waist as I kiss his neck. He smells good, like vanilla and pine. The aroma of the woods agrees with him.

Since he smells of vanilla—his body wash—he’s already taken a shower. I’ll question later why none of that woke me, since I’m generally a light sleeper. For now, I’ll get on to what I want to do.

My knees hit the floor as I drop down behind him, hooking my thumbs into his pants. Ty tries to turn, but I hold fast to his hips. “No, don’t move. Keep working on your dough, kotenok.”

Ty shudders, his back going rigid. “Leo...”

I pull his pants down, exposing his naked ass. “No underwear,” I mutter, leaning forward to kiss his left ass cheek. “How did you know I wanted to eat your ass for breakfast?”

“Fuck.” Ty pokes his ass out as I switch to the other side, nipping at his right cheek. “I’m trying to make croissants.”

“I’m not stopping you.” I spread his ass, taking a look at his delicious hole. Fuck, I never thought the tight pucker of a man would have me wanting to risk it all to get a taste.

Leaning forward, I give him a quick lick and groan as my eyes roll in the back of my head. Fuck yes. He tastes fucking amazing. I lick at him again, and Ty shudders against me.

I close my lips around his entrance, groaning when his musky flavor hits my tongue again. “Jesus,” I whisper against his hole before I flick my tongue over him again and again. “You taste fucking good, kotenok.”

His sticky hand glides through my hair, holding me in place, but I don’t mind. That’s what shampoo is for. “Eat me,” Ty moans, rolling his hips in my face. “Just like that. Fuck me with your tongue.”

With a low growl, I spear my tongue, sliding it in and out of his hole. Ty’s moans are music to my ears, high and sweet. His hand is tight in my hair, the sting on my scalp making my hard dick turn to fucking steel.

My hand comes down on his ass hard, the smack ringing loudly in the room. Ty cries out, grinding his hips harder on my tongue. “Yes. Fuck, yes. I’m close. I’m so close. God your tongue. Feels so fucking good. What are you doing to me? I’ve never ... Oh God, I’ve never felt like this. Leo....”

Holding his ass cheeks in a death grip, I spread him wide and flick my tongue over his hole, teasing the puckered skin. I spit on his entrance, getting him wet before I dive back in. I lick and suck, lave and lap at him, not getting enough of him. His taste and his sounds alone have me close to the edge. But I want his ass clamping around my dick before I nut.

Giving him one last long lick, I stand and wipe my mouth before turning Ty around to face me. He's fucking boneless, barely able to stand on his feet as he sways into me. His eyes are glassy and half lidded, lust brimming in his gaze. My lips are greedy when they take his mouth in a hard kiss, hoisting him onto the counter. I slide my pants down my hips, slotting our cocks together. Ty groans low in his throat, his tongue wild in my mouth.

Snatching my mouth from his, I look around on the counter until my eyes land on the olive oil. Quickly, I drizzle the oil on my dick, coating it with a few quick strokes. Ty adjusts himself on the counter, exposing his asshole to me. I slather oil on his hole and dip my fingers into him briefly to make sure he's slick.

I get a tight grip on his hips, place my dick to his opening, and push inside. Ty's eyes flutter before they clamp shut, a long, low moan drifting from his mouth. His chest rises and falls quickly as I continue to give him inch after inch of my dick.

I don't pause when I bottom out. He holds tight to my arms, his messy hands digging into my skin as I pull out and push back in. Over and over, I thrust into him, watching as he pants and babbles, rambles and pleads with me.

"More, Leo. Give me more."

My hips move faster, our skin slapping against each other as I fuck him deep. I pull Ty closer to me, holding him tight as I plow into him. Ty grabs handfuls of my ass, his blunt nails digging into my flesh. His moans spur me on. My hands drift down to grip his ample globes, holding him still so I can fuck him.

Ty leans back, meeting my eyes. That simple action has my orgasm crashing through me, giving me no warning as I grunt my release. Shudders wrack my body as cum spurts from me into Ty's tight ass.

Reaching between us, Ty strokes himself a few times, then shouts his release, his warm cum shooting onto my stomach.

My hips move in shallow, aborted thrusts. I'm not ready to stop feeling his walls around my dick just yet.

Ty tips his head up, and I meet him halfway, kissing him greedily. I cup his face, holding him in place so I can devour his mouth.

He sighs and pulls his lips from mine, closing his eyes as he grins. There's that feeling again, punching me right in the gut as I take in his unabashedly happy expression. The after-sex glow illuminates his face, making him look even more beautiful than he normally does.

I need to know what this means.

Opening his eyes, Ty says, "I guess that's a good way to start the day."

Chuckling, I kiss him once more before I pull out of him. "Let's take a shower."

Ty nods, looking at the mess on the counter. "This dough is useless now." He frowns at me over his shoulder, making me chuckle. "I can make more after we clean up."

"While we're doing that," I say, grabbing his hips and walking behind him to the bathroom, "I'll get supplies we need. Weapons training today, remember?"

"I remember. I'm excited. I've never shot a gun before."

"As long as you listen to my instructions, you'll do well."

"Are you proficient with all the guns you have?" Ty asks, turning on the shower and

stripping off his clothes.

“Every single one.”

We step in the shower, and I grab Ty’s washcloth and body wash, cleaning his loose asshole and thighs before I wash him anywhere else. “I hate that I have to wash my nut off you. Do you know how fucking sexy it is to see it leaking out of your ass?”

“Yeah, but it’s messy.”

“I like making you mess,” I tell him with a smirk.

I hand him my washcloth and turn around so he can wash my back. “Do you want to go on another date with me in a few days when we return to the city?”

“Yes. Where?”

“It’s a surprise. Don’t worry, it’s nothing dangerous. I think you’ll like it.” I turn around when he’s finished. “Wear makeup again for me?”

“Yes,” he murmurs again, blushing prettily.

We get out of the shower, and after I dry Ty off and help him get dressed—he grumbles the whole while but doesn’t tell me to stop—we go our separate ways. I grab a bag of cans I have set aside for my own target practice and step outside. The early morning air is crisp, tingling my nose as I breathe in deeply.

Trotting down the stairs, I walk deeper into the woods, heading for the area I usually set up my targets. I’ll set the cans closer for Ty, since this is his first time shooting a gun.

While I work, I think about the feeling I get when I look at Ty. It's so strong, and even thinking about him makes me feel emotions I've never experienced. I search within myself, trying to pin down the feeling, but it keeps eluding me.

Since it'll take a while for Ty to get the dough made and wrapped for baking, I sit on one of the stumps where I set up my cans. I close my eyes and try to figure out the emotions I have flowing through me. Obsession, for sure. Infatuation. And something ... more. What is that more? It's almost like?—

My eyes pop open, and I gasp, not believing it. It can't be. The shitty therapist that was in the reform school told me it wasn't possible. I've believed it for the past twenty years.

My hands shake as I pull out my phone. I'm nervous. I've never been nervous about anything.

The phone rings a few times against my ear before Blu picks up.

"I have a patient, Leo," he says by way of a greeting.

"I think I love Ty."

Silence greets me for a few moments, then I hear Blu mutter unintelligibly. A minute later, he's back on the line. "Why do you think you love Ty?"

I tell Blu all about the unknown emotions I've been having, how I look at Ty and get this overwhelming feeling I can't put a name to. I also mention how I felt this inexplicable draw to him the first time I laid eyes on him. The urge to claim him was so immense I had to wrestle it down until I had it subdued, which was no easy task.

An unexpected chuckle drifts through the line. Blu rarely laughs. Hell, he hardly

smiles unless June is around. It shocks me enough that I stop talking.

“Leo, you know the answer to that question. For people like us, it’s not easy to come to terms with, what with most studies saying we can’t feel love. But not every psychopath is the same. Take me and you for example. You feel different emotions than I do. You formed a genuine friendship with June while I haven’t ever had a real friend in my life.”

I run my fingers through my hair. “Yeah, but June is June. He’s different.”

“And so is Ty, if you love him.”

“Fuck, Blu. What do I do?”

“There’s nothing for you to do. He’s already yours. You’ve claimed him, and he knows it. He’s not going anywhere. How do you feel when you’re with him?”

That’s a question that can be answered easily but with as much shock as finding out the emotion I’m feeling is love. “Happy. The first time I was happy since I can remember.”

Blu hums. “That’s how I feel with June. It took me a lot longer to come to terms with it than you did, and I had to work it out alone.”

“I’m glad you’re here for me to talk to, Blu. I’m glad you’re back in my life.”

“Me too, cousin. Need anything else?”

I look at my watch, trying to gauge if Ty is done so we can get started. He should be wrapping the dough now to rise, and I have to get the guns out here.

“When do I tell him?”

“That’s up to you. Be sure before you do though. Normal people like to ask questions like ‘how do you know’ and shit like that.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Got it. Thanks, Blu.”

We hang up, and I head back to the house to retrieve Ty. When I walk in, he’s just wrapping the dough and sliding it into the fridge. He smiles over at me, saying, “Just in time. I’ll leave the dough for a few hours, then we can get started baking everything else. If you want, we can make them in the morning so they’re fresh, along with everything else. Or we can?—”

“I love you.” Blu told me to be sure before I said it, and I am. I’m surer about my feelings—even though they’re new and uncharted—than I have been of anything else in my life. I’ve probably been in love with Ty since our first date, if I’m analyzing the emotion I felt then correctly. It’s not just obsession, it’s more. Deeper. More meaningful.

His eyes bulge, and he puts a hand on his chest. “Come again,” Ty squeaks.

“I said—” I take long strides over to him until I have him in my arms “—I love you. I’m in love with you, Tyshawn Glassby.”

“Really?” His eyes are still as round as saucers. “I mean, you said you don’t feel normal emotions. Love is a normal emotion. I don’t want you to feel like you have to fake things with me. I can feel love enough for both of us. But I don’t want you to think your feelings aren’t valid. They are. So okay. If you mean it, then yes.”

“Yes, what?” I ask simply.

“I love you too,” is his immediate response, and it makes me glow deep within my chest. Holy fuck. It’s the first time anyone has told me they loved me. Maybe my parents said it when I was too young to remember, but I’ve never heard those words directed at me in my life.

Gathering him in my arms, I kiss him deeply, hoping to convey the entirety of my feelings for him, more than what three words could encompass. Ty is my everything.

When I release his lips, his eyes are shining. “Who would have thought the man I fell for would teach me how to kill people?”

I bark a laugh, kissing his forehead before lacing our fingers together. “I’ll teach you anything you want to know. You’re my partner now, kotenok.” With one more kiss, I pull him to the bedroom so we can get packed up for his first lesson in firearms.

CHAPTER 16

TYSHAWN

Partner. I'm his partner, and he's mine. God, I love the sound of that.

Even if it's just when it comes to murder.

I never thought I'd want to kill someone, that I'd want to take a life, erase someone from existence. But after Michael, knowing there are more people like him than the law can deal with—if the law even works half the fucking time—made me want to do something. Leo and his cousin are doing something. Granted, Leo kills random people too, but that's not the point. I have a partner that wants me to work with him, ridding the world of scum that slips through the cracks.

The morning air feels good on my skin. I tip my head back and peek at the fluffy clouds that are just visible through the thick canopy of the tree foliage. It's lovely here, peaceful. A little too isolated for me to enjoy full time, but it's a nice getaway. The quiet and seclusion are great decompressors.

"So pretty out here," I mutter, hopping over a tree root as thick as my arm. "But I do miss the city."

"We'll go back soon. I could take you to a shooting range near my condo, but I wouldn't be able to bring all my guns with me."

I nod, following behind Leo and staring at his ass. Fuck, his ass is so nice. A perfect

fucking squat booty. “Where do you go to the gym?” I ask, my eyes still locked on that peach in front of me.

“My building has a gym with top-of-the-line equipment. I haven’t been since the day before we came here. I’m slacking.”

“Me too. Though I didn’t have a choice since someone kidnapped me.” I wink at Leo when he turns to look at me.

He lowers the bag in a clearing with a bunch of tree stumps at differing heights and distances. “Yeah, well, look at you now. Learning how to kill people. So maybe you shouldn’t complain.”

My smile is wide. “Hey, that’s not the tone you take with your partner. I’m sensitive.”

Leo laughs and wraps an arm around me, pulling me tight to his body. “I probably should apologize for kidnapping you, but I can’t say I’m sorry.”

“Neither am I,” I mutter before I stand on tiptoe and peck him on the lips. “What are we starting with?”

Rummaging through the bag, Leo pulls out a handgun. “This is a Glock 19. A semi-automatic handgun. This is great for beginners.” He slaps it in my hand and starts to describe the weight and all the other specs. I pay rapt attention, making sure to take it all in. He won’t quiz me on it, but I want him to know I’m attentive when he’s going through the trouble of telling me. His face radiates seriousness, a far cry from the jovial expression he usually wears. “It holds fifteen rounds in a normal magazine, but it can hold extended magazines. Most people use these guns for home security, so they usually keep it to a fifteen round mag.”

“What is this one?”

“Fifteen rounds. Now, the first rule to shooting a gun is treat it like it’s loaded. Point it only at your target and keep your hand off the trigger until you’re aiming it at your target.” I nod, moving my finger from the trigger.

He teaches me a good stance, how to grip the weapon and proper aim. It’s a lot to take in, but I’m liking this training business. Leo is so serious, and it’s hot as fuck.

Leo moves behind me, raising my hand level to the can closest to me. “I want you to try to shoot that can. If you don’t hit it initially, that’s fine. I want to see how you react to the recoil. Then we can either keep practicing with this one or work with a smaller weapon you can handle.”

I nod, taking a deep breath and holding it. “Don’t hold your breath,” Leo whispers just behind me, his breath ghosting over my ear. “Breathe normally, but fire when you breathe out.”

He steps away from me, and I look down the sight of the gun. Fuck, this is harder than I thought it would be. Every time I think the can is in my sight, it seems to move again. I don’t want to shut one eye like I saw in movies because Leo didn’t tell me I should do that. And this isn’t like a rifle with a scope or something, so I’m sure it’s not necessary.

Just as he said, I breath normally and squeeze the trigger. I’m careful not to jerk my finger on the trigger like Leo told me. The recoil isn’t too bad since I know what to expect.

Surprisingly, the can flies off the stump, landing a few feet away. I lower the gun—sure to take my finger off the trigger—and look at him in disbelief. “Did I shoot that off or did a rock hit it?”

Leo chuckles. “That was all you, kotenok. Try another.”

I turn back to the stumps and find the next closest and take aim. I breathe normally and shoot when I exhale. Again, the can flies off the stump. A whoop leaves my lips as I put the gun on safety and set it down. I jump into Leo’s arms and wrap my arms around his neck. He laughs, holding me under the ass.

“Did you see that? I shot two of them, Leo. Two! My first time and I got two!”

“I saw.” Leo kisses me quickly then sets me on my feet. “How as the recoil? Too much?”

“No. It was manageable.”

“Good. Let’s test your limits.”

That’s exactly what we do. He has me shoot a 9mm Beretta, a Sig Sauer, a Glock 30, and a Heckler and Koch HK before we move on to an assault rifle. I don’t shoot as well with the others as I do the Glock 19 and Glock 30, but I still hit the majority of my targets.

When I’m finished firing at the paper target he pulled out of his bottomless bag, Leo takes the weapon from me and turns me around, eyes sparkling with what I can only describe as pride. “Kotenok, that’s the best shooting I’ve seen in years. Almost as good as Ivan and he’s the best. How did you learn to shoot like that?”

I shrug. My parents never had guns, and Juliette was afraid of them, so we never tried to shoot one as kids. As an adult, I never got around to buying one for protection or going to the range. My first time holding a gun was an hour ago when he put that Glock 19 in my hands.

“Can I shoot someone? Please?” I beg, giving Leo my best puppy dog eyes. Leo’s deep laugh burrows into my ears, making me smile. “Maybe this camp counselor.” A frown tips my lips down at the thought of the man walking free after what he’s done. “I want to see what happens when a bullet enters someone’s body.”

“Yeah sure. What else do you want to do?”

I shake my head, not wanting to tell him. “You’ll think I’m sick. I mean, I never thought about killing people before, and now I’m thinking of ways to torture.”

“I’m a psychopath, *kotenok*. Nothing you say can make me think differently of you. Tell me what’s going on in that beautiful mind of yours.”

Sighing, I move around his clearing, helping Leo pick up the cans. Since I’m not looking at him, it’s easier to describe what I want to happen. It’s not bad, but it will be extremely painful. I’m sure he’s seen or maybe even done worse.

After I describe what I want, I expect Leo to gape at me, at my depraved mind. But he just looks at me with a thoughtful expression for a beat, then nods. “That’s doable. I think I can scrounge up those tools somewhere.”

While I smile at his willingness to do what I ask, my excitement to have it done is giving me pause. Not that I want to take it back. Fuck that guy. He trafficked kids for money, and he deserves pain. My question to myself is: where is the anger coming from though? Have I always been like this?

No, I don’t think I was. My view of the world changed. After what happened to Juliette, I started to wish more and more that people who committed horrible crimes and got away with it would be fucking put down. Knowing Leo can help me do that without getting caught soothes my nerves and my second guesses. “That’s what I want,” I tell Leo. “I want him to suffer. Those kids suffered. He deserves nothing

less. Can we leave him somewhere people will find him? Juliette isn't here for her to know Michael is dead. His other victims aren't either. But the kids that went through what Ian put them through are. If anything comes of this, it'll be them knowing the man that did this to them is dead."

"I can do that. June does the same with the victims he picks for Blu. Like I said," Leo says, throwing an arm around my shoulder, "anything you want."

We walk back to the house in silence. I'm not sure what's going on in Leo's head, but mine is a mess. I'm wondering if I'll freeze up with this murder since I don't have a personal vendetta against Ian. He's a sick fuck, but I don't know the children he sold personally. Can I still do it? I hope so. I want this fucker in the dirt.

Leo takes the guns inside while I relax on the porch. I should go inside and start the croissants, but right now, I want to think for a bit. I could always roll the dough in the morning and bake everything at once.

I sit in the rocking chair, pushing off slightly as I let my mind empty. This is the best place to relax and think about nothing. The soft breeze, the sounds of nature, the fresh smelling air. I'll have to convince Leo to bring me back here sometimes when I get overwhelmed back in the city.

The only thing that can make my head full is wondering how I'm going to get my bakery. I want nothing more in the world than to see me and my mother's dreams of our own recipes being tasted and enjoyed by others. I've thought about making a site and selling online since I haven't been able to afford a building space.

I sigh at that option. With the way technology is now, an online bakery would be lucrative, but people would have to take a chance on it. I could advertise all I want, but if someone hasn't tasted the food, they wouldn't want to buy the goods. And what if their order didn't arrive? A customer could rate my shop negatively, and other

people would be hesitant to give me a shot.

The best way to build my business is in person, so there can be taste tests. I stand behind everything I bake, but all taste buds are different. Someone could say they liked my lavender cookies, and someone else could say they taste like ass.

I wish I could get a larger small business loan, but I'm lucky to have the one I was approved for. When I got my first three credit cards as soon as I turned eighteen, I was hella irresponsible and barely paid them off. It took years to rebuild my credit and get the loan. I'll just have to work with what I have until I can locate somewhere more ideal.

"Want to sit out here for a while?" Leo asks when he steps back out.

I start, since I didn't hear him come outside. "Just for a few. Then we need to find the address for the camp counselor. The sooner we get rid of him, the better."

Leo pulls me out of the chair, sits down, and rests me on his lap. The rocking chair squeaks but holds both our weight. I'm surprised. Leo is so fucking big, I almost think it'll crack at any moment. When we're rocking for another minute with no more squeaking, I relax against him.

"What were you thinking about?"

I could tell him my thoughts about my bakery, but I haven't figured things out with it. It would be nice to get his opinion on it but only when I've considered all options myself.

Instead of mentioning the bakery, I say, "It's nice out here. I'd like to come back with you sometime. I'm not sure how often you get away or what will happen when we're back in the city and our real lives, but we should make time to decompress here. Even

if it's just for a night or two."

"Sure thing, kotenok. I like it here too. It's made even better with you here."

My heart melts as I gaze into Leo's eyes. "You're sweet," I mutter.

"I'm honest. I enjoy my solitude, and this place brings me that, but I get this wonderful feeling in my chest seeing you out here. The look on your face every time you step out of the house and breathe in the clean air makes me ... happy. I've never felt happy about anything outside of a kill in my entire life. But you make me feel that way."

My eyes fucking mist as I listen to him. No one has ever said anything like that to me before and meant it. And Leo means it. The conviction in his voice and the earnest look in his eyes is all I need to know he's for real.

Feeling choked up, I lean in and kiss him softly. "I really love you, Leo. It's too fast, but ... I love you."

"I love you too, kotenok. It's not too fast. We don't need to go by anyone's timeline but our own."

"Our own timeline," I mutter, kissing him again as I relax into his strong arms.

CHAPTER 17

TYSHAWN

Leo and I got the goods baked that night so we didn't have to wake up early to do it. We left the cabin early the next morning so June could have the cookies, croissants, and cupcakes before it was time to open the coffee shop.

After we dropped them off to June—who was a little too excited so early in the morning—Leo asks if I want to go back to his place to take a nap. Although I rarely take naps, I'm not used to waking up at four in the morning to pack a car and drive an hour home. For some reason, I can't fall asleep in cars, so I spent the time talking to Leo about the camp counselor, making sure our plan is watertight.

Now, I'm exhausted. "Yes, please," I answer his question, leaning my head back against the passenger seat headrest.

The building we pull up to is nicer than anything I've ever seen. It looks like something from a movie—all sleek steel beams and floor-to-ceiling windows. Sleep is forgotten when I step inside the building, looking around with wide eyes. I spin around to take it all in. Everything is so bright and clean, so modern. There's even a doorman and valet.

"This is nice," I mutter to Leo as he stops by the bank of elevators.

"It's home," he replies simply.

We take the elevator up to the fourteenth floor, and Leo holds the door for me. Leo tells me only two condos are on this floor, and he owns the one directly in front of us, and the one around the corner is vacant. “I wanted to buy that one and knock the walls down, but the contractors said something about load-bearing walls that I didn’t understand and nixed the idea. Mine is enough space as it is.”

He pushes the door open and steps to the side, allowing me to step in. An involuntary gasp leaves me. This place is fucking amazing. The floor-to-ceiling windows are here as well, but instead of them being uncovered to allow unobstructed light to filter in, Leo has the same kind of gossamer curtains that he has at his cabin in the woods. Though here, the curtains are black.

Instead of the light colors of the cabin, these colors are darker and a little ominous. It fits him.

His living room has one of the largest leather sectionals I’ve ever seen, the material appearing buttery soft. The black of the material plays off the red pillows nicely. Just looking at it brings back my earlier exhaustion. I wouldn’t mind taking a nice nap on that couch.

Even though Leo has carpet, a large red-and-black rug is in the middle of the living room floor that my bare feet would probably sink into. There’s more black than red, the splash of color dotted here and there, creating a space of dark foreboding that I find intoxicating.

I walk over to the window, sliding the curtains back gently so I can look down at the street. I’m not a fan of heights, but this view is perfect.

“Wow, I love your place.” My apartment is on the second floor, not getting views like this. Where my place is modest and we live within the middle-class price range, this building is clearly for the wealthy. A memory of Leo saying he wouldn’t have to

work for twenty years if he didn't take hitman contract rings in my head, meaning he's well-off, but I didn't think that included living like this.

"It can be our place." He doesn't say it as a question, more a statement of fact as he comes to stand beside me. "There's plenty of space for you."

"You want me to move in with you?" My voice is full of incredulity.

Leo grabs me around the waist, spinning me so I'm looking up at him. "Of course I do. I told you, *kotenok*. You're mine. You're not going anywhere. So after you wake from your nap, we'll start bringing your things over."

Giving him a dry look, I ask, "Aren't you going to ask me first?"

His face twists up in confusion. I've never seen anything so adorable in all my life. "Why would I do that? You're going to say yes."

"Ugh, you're literally the worst."

"You said 'the best' wrong," he quips, laughing at me when I put my hands on my hips with a lot of attitude.

"Whatever. Just show me around my new place, since I don't have a choice on if I'm moving in or not."

"Smart man," he mutters before kissing me quickly. He laces our fingers together and shows me around my new condo. The kitchen is to fucking die for. I can't wait to get in there and start baking. He has a double oven and a six-burner cooktop. I have so many ideas for things I can cook in there.

"June and Blu live upstairs. They own the entire fifteenth floor, so if you want to go

up, simply give June a call so he can unlock the elevator.”

“The entire floor? How?”

Leo shrugs, pulling me into the bedroom and sitting me on the bed. He squats in front of me and takes off my shoes. “That’s the only floor they built to take up the entire floor. He told me his parents were looking at it, but when they turned it down, he bought it.”

I like that June is so close. Even though we’ve only met twice, I like his vibe. And he knows what it’s like to knowingly date a psychopath and a serial killer. If we have nothing else in common, we have that. It’s nice to know I’m not alone in that regard. We could also hang out when the guys have a kill together—Leo told me he and Blu sometimes get together and kill one of the guilty parties June vets.

God, I never thought I’d want to go on a murder double date.

“Arms up.”

Snapping out of my musings, I lift my arms, and Leo drags my shirt over my head. He tosses it to the floor and looks at my naked torso. “God, you’re fucking beautiful everywhere.” He reaches out and lightly grazes a finger over my nipple, causing me to moan and arch into his hand. “So responsive to me. I fucking love that.”

Before I can get too turned on from his touch, Leo rids me of my pants and tells me to slide up to the top of the bed. “Come on. Let’s nap. Then we can pack some of your stuff. You owe me a date tonight.”

I yawn, sleep already bogging me down. “Okay.”

Leo kisses the top of my head, then exhaustion takes me under.

A few hours later, I open my eyes, grinning as Leo kisses my shoulder. “Hey.” My voice sounds thick with sleep.

“Hey. Do you feel better?”

I nod, turning onto my back to look at him. Fuck, Leo is hot. His hair is messy, all over his head like a halo. Those deep dimples make an appearance as he grins down at me before planting a soft kiss on my lips. I’ll never get enough of kissing Leo. When his plush lips meet mine, I’m like a puddle of goo at his feet.

“You going back home to pack, right?”

I give him a wry grin. “Do I have a choice?”

“Of course you do, kotenok. I already made it,” Leo quips. I roll my eyes. “Do you need me to help?”

I roll out of bed and stretch, my arms over my head as I rise on my toes. That nap was fucking delicious. My phone reads 10:18, so I didn’t sleep long. It’s crazy that I feel like I slept forever but it’s still midmorning.

Leo slides behind me, grabs me around the waist, and draws me onto his lap. I giggle, throwing an arm around his shoulders. “You like touching me.” It’s not a question. It’s a statement of fact. Leo is handsy, and I love it.

He hums, the rumble drifting through my palm placed on his chest. “Do you have a lot that needs packing?”

“No. But I won’t pack everything right now. Just enough for a few weeks. Sam and I have to sit down and discuss the lease. Luckily, we only have about three months left, and we haven’t decided if we want to renew or not. I guess it’s fate that you came

along, huh?”

“Or that you walked in on me after a fresh murder.”

An unexpected laugh forces its way up my throat. “God, you’re terrible.”

“Don’t take too long. You still owe me a date, kotenok.” Leo slaps me on the ass when I head to the bathroom.

It only takes us about twenty minutes to get dressed and out of the condo. Leo gives me an extra key, and my heart skips a beat because I’m moving in with him.

This is really happening. I always thought when I moved in with a man other than Sam, we’d have been together for some years, having gotten to know each other’s quirks and habits by spending the night at each other’s houses and making it known that we don’t plan to be with anyone else. Leo has done that, right? Albeit in a very demanding way, but he told me I’m his end game.

He’s mine too. It’s super fucking new, but Leo is it. I feel so comfortable around him, so safe. He’s been nothing but caring and loving to me since we met. He assures me my rambling is okay and doesn’t criticize me for wearing makeup.

The most obvious way he’s shown me that we’re forever? He let me see who he really is. After I walked in on him killing that man he could have killed me. No one knew where I was. No one would have known. But he kept me alive to explain things to me.

After walking me down to my car and helping me into the driver’s seat—despite my protests—Leo drags me to his mouth, kissing me greedily. I melt into him, turning so he can deepen the kiss. My hands glide through his hair, holding him close as he ravages my mouth.

I groan, then pull away from him, breathing heavily. “If you keep that up, I won’t want to pack.”

Leo licks the seam of my lips, and I groan again. “You can always wear my clothes. They look good on you.”

“Thanks, but no. I would like to wear my own underwear. I’ll be back soon. I’ll get enough for a few weeks.”

I’m on cloud nine during the drive to my apartment, and when I unlock the door, I practically float inside. Sam looks at me from the couch, eyes widening with happiness when he sees me. “Hey! I was going to call you.”

“How’s everything going?” I ask, plopping down beside him.

“Good. Look.” He turns his laptop to me, showing me an enlarged picture of a three-stoned diamond ring.

It takes me a moment to understand, but it clicks, and I can’t help grinning. “You’re going to ask Beth to marry you?”

Sam returns my smile. “Yeah. She’s the one. I can’t see my life without her.”

“She’s a good woman. I like her.”

Beth is a great person—friendly, responsible, and has a heart of gold. She’s much like Sam in that regard. They’re perfect for each other.

I give Sam a quick hug. “I’m happy for you. You guys are great together.”

“Thanks. I just hope she says yes.”

“Yeah, because she’s not head over heels in love with you,” I say dryly. Sam laughs, poking me in the side. “When do you plan to ask?”

“As soon as the ring comes in. I’ve been talking to Beth’s sister, and she somehow got her ring size. She likes lab-created diamonds, so they’ll make it to my specifications.” He points the photo on the laptop, turning the image from side to side so I can see all of it. “I’m hoping it’ll come sometime next week.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Will you be my best man?” Sam asks and my eyes bug out as I look at him. “You’re my best friend, Ty. You’re the one I want to stand up for me.”

Overwhelmed with his request, I sputter even as I nod. “God, I ... that’s ... okay. Yes. I’ll be your best man.”

Sam grins at me. “Thank you.”

I lean my head on Sam’s shoulder, and he wraps an arm around mine, squeezing me against him. “You plan to move in with Beth?”

Sam tenses. “I wanted to talk to you about that. I know we have a few months left on our lease, but after that, I was going to move in with Beth. We want to buy a house together. But if you need more time or don’t have money to live on your own,” Sam says quickly, sitting forward and looking at me, “I can?—”

“No, it’s okay,” I say. My cheeks heat. “I wanted to talk you about that as well.” I turn toward him and pull a leg under me, blowing out a deep breath. “Leo asked me to move in with him. I said yes. I’ll still pay my share of the rent for the next few months, but we should go ahead and turn in our notice to vacate.” I don’t mention Leo told me I was moving in with him, not asked, but whatever. I like Leo’s

approach. “I know it’s fast, but it doesn’t feel that way to me. It feels like I’ve known Leo forever. Is that stupid?”

Sam doesn’t answer right away. He fiddles with his laptop for a bit, placing the order for the ring before turning to me. “It’s fast, yes, but that doesn’t mean it’s not right. When I saw you two together, the way he looked at you ... I’d like to think that’s the way I look at Beth. As my granny would say, he’s besotted with you.”

I snort laugh at his use of the dated term. “Yeah, I think he is. Just as I am with him. He’s so perfect, Sam.”

“So are you. Make sure he treats you right.”

“He will. Just as I’ll treat him the same.” I pat his leg and head to my room. Over my shoulder, I say, “I’ll be slowly moving out. I only came to get a few things since we have a date today.”

“Yeah?” Sam asks, getting off the couch and leaning on my doorjamb. “Where to?”

I shrug. “He won’t tell me. But he told me to wear makeup. I’m not sure if he’s planning on taking me somewhere fancy or just wants to see me with makeup.”

“Take something for both possibilities.”

After gathering some clothes and some of my makeup, I pack everything into my car.

When I’m back at Leo’s condo, I raise my hand to knock on the door, then remember he gave me the key to our condo. Smiling, I slide the key into the lock and open it wide.

Leo shouts, “In here,” from his second bedroom as soon as the door shuts. I drop my

things in his room and go to where I hear his voice.

“Hey,” I wrap my arms around his neck from behind, kissing him gently behind the ear. “What are you up to?”

He points to the computer. “Getting the address for Mr. Ian McCaffy. He’ll be our plan for tomorrow night.”

Grinning, I kiss him once more, then turn his chair around so I can sit on his lap. “Thank you for letting me join you. I know it’s not personal, and I can be a liability, but thank you for trusting me to try this.”

“Anything for you, kotenok. But I don’t think you’ll be a liability. You’ll do well. Don’t worry, I’ll be there with you the whole time.” His lips meet mine in a gentle kiss. “Now let’s get ready for our date.”

“Am I dressing up or down?”

“Down. Jeans and a T-shirt if you have it.”

“I do. Give me fifteen minutes, and I’ll be ready to go.”

Hopping off his lap, I give Leo a kiss on the forehead and trot to his room where I dropped off my clothes. Well, our room. I won’t very well be sleeping in the living room or his office. Smiling, I gather what I need and head to our adjourning bathroom.

Since Leo said we’ll be dressed down, I only apply a light layer of makeup just in case we’re outside—I don’t want to sweat it off.

When I glance up, Leo is standing in the doorway watching me. “You like?” I ask,

rolling on a little more mascara.

“I love.” Leo grins, shaking his head. “I’ve never loved anything until I met you. What are you doing to me?”

“Exactly what you’re doing to me, baby.”

I cap the mascara and check over my makeup to ensure it looks okay. I kept it light, only using a fine layer of foundation, highlighter, and eyeshadow. The mascara makes the colors of my eyes pop.

Leo walks over to me, pulling my back to his front. “You’re beautiful, kotenok. I’m a lucky man.”

“Yes you are,” I joke. Leo chuckles, and his dimples pop. Just because I’ve been thinking about it, I poke a finger into one. Leo gives me a crazy look, making me laugh. “I’ve wanted to do that since we met.”

He rolls his eyes. “Come on, weirdo.”

We head downstairs to leave, the valet bringing his car around for us. Leo thanks the man and helps me inside, grabbing my ass before I sit down.

I’m shocked when we pull into a mini golf park. I look over at Leo, who shrugs. “I thought it would be something you’d like. You seem like more of a fun date guy, not a dress up and be fancy kind of guy.”

Grinning, I lean over and kiss his cheek. “It’s perfect.” He’s right. I’d rather do something like this than sit in a stuffy restaurant. That’s not to say our first date was bad, far from it. But this is more my speed. Having fun like a normal person.

We play two rounds of mini golf, Leo beating me mercilessly. It's the most fun I've had in years. A few times, I try to block his shot with either my club or my body, jumping on his back or bumping him with my hip, but it's like Leo anticipates it and shoots in a completely different direction, his ball still going into the hole.

"Ugh," I mutter when we get to the end of the course for the second time. "How are you so good at it?"

"I don't know. Maybe because I analyze everything. I have to with my job, making sure to anticipate everything that could happen and planning accordingly. When I look at the course, I scrutinize how the ball needs to move to get in the hole, so I do that."

"You don't just hit the ball like normal people?" I deadpan, putting my hands on my hips.

"Where's the fun in that?"

Laughing, I shake my head and slide my club in the stand at the end of the course. "Yeah, no fun at all." We head back inside the park hand in hand. There's a small fast-food restaurant off to the left that Leo leads me to. We order burgers and fries, taking a seat when our number is called.

"You excited about tomorrow?" Leo asks. He doesn't have to say what he's speaking about—there's only one thing I'm looking forward to.

I nod, popping a fry in my mouth. "I can't wait. Michael was personal. This will kinda be business, right? I mean, for me. It's your business all the time. Which reminds me, we need to talk about if I'm going to help in the future. I have to work around my job. Sometimes, I work late, if my boss has a case. I only have a few days left on my vacation time now, so we'll have to put things on hold until the weekends.

Which will suck, since I'll be working every day during the week, the weekend will be the only time we have to spend together. And—" I snap my mouth shut, realizing I not only rambled, but I also got way off topic of what he initially asked me. "Sorry. Yes, I'm excited."

Leo grabs my hand and squeezes it gently. "You never have to apologize about your rambling, *kotenok*. You never hide what you're thinking. And I told you I like hearing your voice. I'll never stop you from saying whatever you want."

I know that's true. Whenever I go off on a tangent, Leo has allowed me to continue until I cut myself off. He's never looked impatient or like he wants me to get to the point. I believed him when he told me the first time, but there was always a nagging feeling in the back of my mind that he would grow tired of hearing me prattle on and on about nothing.

"Quit your job," Leo says, breaking into my thoughts. "You can be my partner full-time, and I'll split the profits with you. Depending on what people want, you can make over ten grand a night."

"Work with you?" I look around and lean in to whisper, "Killing people?" It's loud in the restaurant, many families with young kids sitting around and eating, more shouting and laughing than food consumption, honestly. No one will overhear if I said it in a normal voice, but I don't want to take any chance.

Leo wipes his mouth with his napkin as he meets my eyes. "Yes. When I said you were my partner, I meant in everything. Quit your job and work with me."

"You're really fucking demanding," I say with a grin. Giddiness rises in me as I think about quitting at the law office and working with Leo. That kind of money would help me get my bakery faster, without having to use the business loan. I could find a location that I want, not one I have no other choice but to occupy until I make

enough money to upgrade.

“What’s your answer, kotenok?”

“Oh, you’re asking now?” Leo gives me a dry look, and I chuckle. “Yes. My answer is yes.” My excitement bubbles up, and I laugh aloud. “Oh god! I can’t believe it! I can get my bakery by the end of the year.” Tears brim in my eyes, and I hold my hand to my mouth, a soft sob escaping.

I didn’t expect to feel emotional being so close to my dream. But here I am, joyful and crying. A few tears escape my eyes, and I wipe at them quickly. I’m not sad. It’s quite the opposite. Knowing I can make Tessa’s a reality makes my heart happy, though a pang does go through it. My mother should be here for this. But it’s okay. I’ll bring the bakery to fruition for the both of us.

Looking up at Leo, I flash him a smile to ease the worried crease of his brow. “Thank you. My mother would be proud that people will be tasting our food.”

Leo grabs my hand and kisses the back. “I’ll do anything to help you reach your dream, Tyshawn. Anything you need from me is yours.”

Thank you , I mouth, not able to speak past the lump in my throat. I’m overwhelmed by his generous offer. It’s not lost on me that people have to die for me to open my bakery, but if they committed heinous crimes and escaped justice, they deserve it, and I won’t lose any sleep over it.

When the lump dislodges from my throat, we finish our lunch and head home. It’s the best date I’ve ever been on. Probably even more than our first date because I got to see Leo’s playful side. From how he told me he grew up, both with his parents and his grandfather, I don’t think Leo has had a lot of fun. I’ll have to take him on some fun dates so his only enjoyment isn’t dismembering a corpse.

My phone rings just as we're walking inside the condo. When I see my father's name on the screen, my heart clenches. I don't want to feel this way about my father. He's the only parent I have left, and he's been a good dad. I need to face how I feel about him head-on and not hide behind my grief. Mom has been gone for two years. My father and I need to hash things out—more like I need to hash things out. He probably doesn't know anything is wrong. He deserves to know why I'm so distant.

For the second time today, a lump lodges in my throat. It takes effort, but I swallow it down before I answer the phone. "Hey, Dad."

"Hey," he says, sounding just as he always does, like he's happy to speak to me. I wonder if he can hear the distance between us in my voice. "Haven't heard from you in a while. Wanted to see how you were."

Relief washes through me when I smile at his worry. It gives me hope there is still affection towards my old man since I'm happy he's worried about me. "It's only been a week, Dad."

"Yeah, I know. But I don't see you anymore, so hearing your voice is all I have."

Ouch. The hurt is evident in his voice. It's time I faced my feelings and talked to my father. As a family, we were always able to talk to each other about anything. That didn't happen when he got a new girlfriend so soon after my mother died, but that's what we have to talk about.

Making a quick decision, I say, "I'll come visit this weekend."

"Really?" Dad asks excitedly, and I know I've been slacking as a son. "I'll get your room ready."

"I'll be bringing my boyfriend."

Leo looks at me with a wide smile, his eyes dancing with happiness. Those dimples pop, and I grin back, my heart thumping. I'll never get enough of seeing those dimples.

"That's great, son, really great. I'll see you in a few days. Please call your old man in between that time. I'd like to know how you're doing."

"I will, Dad. See you this weekend." I hang up the phone and look over at Leo, who's stretched out on his couch. "You up for a road trip to meet my dad?"

He grins and nods, hooking his finger for me to come over to him. "I don't mind meeting your dad, kotenok. Thank you for inviting me," he says as I lie on his chest. His strong arms wrap around me, and I sigh. I can visit my dad and tell him why I've been distant.

I can do anything with Leo by my side.

CHAPTER 18

LEO

“Good,” I croak, tapping Tyshawn on the arm three times. He unwraps his arm from around my neck, and I’m able to breathe again. I’m teaching him the proper way to do chokeholds. The one I just showed him cuts off the blood supply to a person’s brain. It’s taken him a few tries, but he has it down now.

I told Ty I would train him to be my partner, and he’s holding me to it. We’re killing Ian, the camp counselor, tonight, but Ty said he wanted to learn a few things before we do that. My living room is large enough that we can do a few hand-to-hand drills, though I’d like to have some mats to really get down to it. That could be a project for the future.

“You okay?” Ty asks, kneeling beside me and running cool fingers over my throat. I’m sure there will be a faint red mark, but I won’t bruise.

“I’m okay. That was good. Next time, grip your other arm or your other shoulder so your opponent won’t be able to pry your hands off them.”

I let him help me off the floor, even though I don’t need it. “Tomorrow, we can use other items for strangulation. That’s not my favorite method of killing because it takes too long. Five or more minutes, even if you use something other than your hands. I enjoy torture, but I don’t like to wait for the kill.”

“You’ll still teach me, right?” Ty asks.

“Of course, kotenok.”

A knock at the door has both our heads turning in that direction. No one visits but June and Blu, so I figure it's one of them. Either way, I motion for Ty to have a seat, away from the door.

Looking through the peephole, I find June standing there. I undo the locks and open the door, meeting the wide grin of my best friend.

He pushes past me, looking around. “Hey, Leo,” he says over his shoulder, then rounds the corner to my living room. His face brightens when he sees Ty. “Ty! Hey! I'm glad you're here.”

June gives Ty a hug, who returns it with a small smile on his face. “Really? Why?”

After June pulls away, he sits on the couch, Ty sitting beside him. “Well, I was going to tell Leo to invite you on a date with me and Blu, but since you're already here, I can ask you two at the same time. Blu is taking me to my favorite French restaurant, and I wanted to know if you guys would like to join us.”

“When?” Ty asks, tucking a foot under himself.

“Tomorrow night at eight.”

Ty looks over at me, and I nod. He grins at June and dips his head. “Yeah. I'd like that.”

June squeals, grabbing Ty's hands. “Good, I'm glad. Listen, if you ever want to get together without Blu and Leo, you can always give me a call. It's nice to have someone around I can talk to about my psychopath boyfriend and best friend.”

Ty laughs high and loud, the musical lilt making me glow. I love that he's happy. I'm always wondering if I'm doing a good job at bringing him joy since I don't know anything about relationships or how to make someone else happy. But Ty would tell me. His rambling thoughts would spew from his lips if he were displeased with how I treat him. "I would like that. My best friend wouldn't understand that my boyfriend is a psychopath. We can get together for lunch sometimes."

Ty and June talk for a few more minutes, both laughing as they discuss me and Blu. Seeing my best friend and my boyfriend getting along has another one of those weird swooping in my belly that I'm recognizing as contentment. This is the life I want for both Ty and June—someone they can connect with and talk to about something they can't otherwise discuss with anyone else.

After they exchange numbers, June gives Ty a long hug, then does the same with me before he leaves. Ty's face radiates joy when he walks over to me and wraps his arms around my waist. I kiss the top of his head, loving how his slight weight feels against me. "We have a few more hours before we get started with Ian. Do you want to go with me to pick him up, or do you want me to come get you when I have everything organized?"

Ty shakes his head, looking up at me with excitement. "I want to be there for the whole thing."

"Okay. Let's get started."

Grabbing his hand, I lead him back to my office. Something I splurged on—beside the condo itself—was having a secret room built. I told the contractors it would be for a large safe that would hold my important documents, but the safe contains all the weapons I'll ever need for my jobs.

Ty's mouth drops open when he sees the contents of the safe. "Holy fuck, Leo. This

is amazing.”

I grin as I load up a kill kit for him, sliding in a roll of knives, a garrote, rolls of duct tape, and two handguns—a Glock 19 and a Sig Sauer. Ty is great with both, so he can have his choice of which to use when the time comes.

Zippering his bag, I hand it to him and close the safe. “This will be your kill kit. After every kill, we’ll clean your guns and sterilize your knives. After a few months, we’ll switch everything out, so your equipment is fresh and ready for use.”

“Fuck, it’s so hot to hear you talk about weapons. Is that a kink?”

I smirk, brushing my lips over his. “If it’s not, you can make it one.” Our lips meet again, then I’m leading him out of the bedroom.

We make a quick stop at a local hardware store to pick up rope, plastic wrap, and a few things that we’ll need for cleanup. Before we go abduct Ian, Ty pulls over to a gas station with an outside bathroom, and we change into black clothing and heavy-duty boots. Ty looks fucking hot in his clothes, and I have fight not to bend him over the sink and slide my dick between his ass cheeks.

The sun set about an hour earlier when we head over to Ian’s house and wait for the lights to go out. Once they do, I give Ty a quick kiss and head to Ian’s back door. After sliding inside, I pull the syringe from my pocket and tiptoe to his bedroom, only to find him awake in bed, watching porn and jerking his tiny dick. I’d hate to ruin an orgasm, but Ty is in the car waiting, so he won’t get to finish.

I push the door open wider, striding over to him. He’s so into getting off that he doesn’t even know I’m there. Not giving him a heads-up, I press the needle into his throat and depress the plunger. Ian slaps the syringe away, looking at me with fear. Before he can do anything about it, his eyes flutter, and he slumps to the side, his

hand still locked around his cock.

God, why couldn't he be sleeping when I came to retrieve him? I'm glad to see he's watching porn with people over the legal age. If he wasn't, I would have killed him right then and there for being fucking disgusting, and Ty would have been mad at me.

It's easier to have him naked when I start working on him than to remove clothes, but I still have to grab him now.

Giving him a withering look he can't see, I lift him and toss him over my shoulder, keeping my hand away from his naked ass. I reach down and grab the discarded needle, awkwardly capping it so the tip doesn't poke me.

Because he inconvenienced me by being naked when I came to snatch him, I'm none too careful as I maneuver him around through the door, hitting his head at least twice as I step outside.

I dump him in the opened trunk, frowning when I get back in the car with Ty.

"What's up?" he asks with a worried expression. "Everything go okay?"

"Motherfucker was jerking off when I walked in the room. I had to take him out ass naked."

Ty's mouth drops open in shock, then he bursts out laughing. "What the fuck? Naked?"

Even though I try to keep a straight face, I laugh along with him. "Next time there's a naked mark, you're carrying him."

Ty scoffs. "I need to go back to the gym to be strong enough for that."

We visited the gym in the building yesterday before we started hand-to-hand training. Ty is in good shape—his lean but muscular body told me that before we even went on a date. He's nowhere near as big as me, but I like how small and tight his body is. I'm sure it'll look even better when he's on top of me, riding me until my cum coats his insides.

“We can arrange that.”

Ty puts the car in drive, and we head to the abandoned building Blu and I used a few times. It's off the beaten path, and there's no foot traffic. The unhoused don't venture down that far, so we don't have to worry about anyone suddenly popping up to take up residence.

Once we arrive and park, I drag a naked Ian out of the trunk and carry him in the building. Ty tries to hold in a laugh, but he's unsuccessful.

I drop Ian on the floor beside the chair and pull the ropes out of the kill kit Ty places at my feet. Awkwardly, I set Ian up in the chair, angling him so he doesn't slip off before we can get him bound to it.

“You have to tie his feet, kotenok,” I tell Ty, looking up at him with a grin.

Ty rolls his eyes, kneeling in front of Ian. “Gross,” Ty mutters, tossing a towel over Ian's dick. “That's better. Now, where do I start?”

I make quick work of tying Ian's hands behind his back, then lower myself beside Ty. I pick up a length of rope, unrolling it so it's all spread out. From there, I instruct him how to tie it, ensuring that it won't come loose.

“When you tie it like this,” I say as I loop the ends through a space between Ian's feet, “they'll tighten the more he struggles.”

I untie the rope and hand it to Ty, who is eager to try it himself. It takes him about fifteen minutes to get it correct, but he doesn't get flustered or overwhelmed. He asks questions or for help when he needs it. For some reason that makes my chest swell. No one has ever deferred to me about things like this. It was usually me with Ivan, asking all kinds of questions and his eyes shining with pride when I completed a task correctly. This was probably how Ded Ivan felt when I took to all his lessons.

Once Ian is tied properly and his feet are flat on the floor, I nod and smile at Ty. "Perfect. You did good."

He beams at me. "I've never tied a knot like that before. Are there more ways?"

I nod. "Yep. I can teach you."

"Yes, please."

Reaching into my bag, I pull out the smelling salts and put them under Ian's nose. He sniffs and sputters, trying to move but unable to.

"What the fuck?" he cries, his gaze bouncing between me and Ty. "Who are you? Who are you!" His eyes bulge as they ping-pong back and forth. "Answer me!"

Ty's fist shoots out before I realize, connecting with Ian's mouth. "Don't make demands of us," he says in an overly calm voice. "We don't answer your questions. You answer ours." My cock lengthens from watching him.

"What questions?" Ian's voice is now whiny, his mouth bleeding from Ty's punch.

"Why did you do that to those kids?"

Ian scoffs, his lip curling in disgust. "Because I wanted the money. Why else? Who

are you? A parent?"

"No. Just a local neighborhood garbage man."

"Do what you have to do," Ian growls. "I didn't tell the cops shit, and I won't tell you shit either."

I expect Ty to get pissed, beat the shit out of Ian like he did Michael, but he simply nods and looks at me. "You ready, baby?"

A grin splits my face, and I nod, leaning over the table and bringing Ty's lips to mine. "I'm more than ready."

Ty slides my bag over to me, then steps back a few paces.

I pull out the mallet and chisel I ordered from Amazon, twisting the chisel this way and that, watching it gleam in the light.

When Ty told me he wanted to see someone's toes removed with a mallet and chisel, I knew I'd found my soulmate. Even I never thought of something that diabolical.

Not looking at Ian, I say, "I've never used one of these before. But you can see the appeal, right? I can remove the toes with it, but it won't be easy. It'll hurt like a bitch, but it'll get the job done."

Ian sputters, trying to move his feet away. But as I told Ty, the more he struggles, the tighter the ropes get. "You wanna cut my toes off with that thing? Don't! No!"

Straightening Ian's foot, I place the chisel to his big toe, then slide it over to his baby toe. "Big toe or little toe?" I ask Ty over my shoulder.

“Baby toe first, please.” Always so polite.

This is fucking perfect. I’ll never get this anywhere else. No one will understand me like Ty does. No one will be able to see me the way I am. Without the secrets, without the mask. And he loves me anyway. It’s hard to wrap my head around, someone wanting me for me, but I’m not going to question it.

Setting the chisel to the smallest toe on his right foot, I tell Ian, “Don’t move. It’ll hurt more if you struggle.”

Ian doesn’t listen, trying to dislodge my hand. That doesn’t help, since the ropes are now so tight they appear to be cutting off circulation.

I raise the hammer high, allowing him to see it so it ratchets up his fear, then I bring it down but not with my full body weight. I want to see how much power it takes to remove the toe.

Not a lot, apparently. When the hammer lands on the chisel, the tiny toe is lopped off, spinning a few inches from its previous home. Ian screams, the sound almost inhuman. I close my eyes and relish the shriek of pain. Blood spurts everywhere, getting on my clothes. I’m surprised that much blood came out of the small space. I’ve cut off feet and hands but never toes.

I make my way down his foot, amputating his toes, but not all at once. With the third toe, I put a fraction of my power behind it, only getting to the bone. Ian cries and begs me to stop, wiggling in the chair, but Ty comes behind him, holding it still so I can work. Two more strikes and the toe rolls away.

By the time I move to the other foot, Ian looks as if he’s going to pass out, so I stop, giving him a break.

Looking up at Ty, I smile. “Wanna try?”

He thinks about it, eyes greedily taking in the sight of Ian’s discarded toes littering the floor in front of me. But he shakes his head. “No. I like watching you more.”

Nodding, I wipe the chisel off, ridding it of bone and tissue before I begin to lop the rest of his toes off.

Once all of his toes are removed, I set back on my heels to gaze at Ian. He looks fucking terrible, his skin ashen and pale from pain, sweat, tears, and snot leaking down his face. “Please stop,” Ian groans, voice hoarse from screaming. “No more.”

“Oh, no, Ian. I’m just getting started. If I could, I’d cut your fucking head off, but my boyfriend wants the honor of ending your life. Stay with me now. I’m just getting to the good stuff.”

I reach into the bag and pull out a pair of pruning shears. Moving around him, I grip his left hand and place the end of the shears to the bottom of his index finger. Since I did the same thing to Ralph only a few short weeks ago, I know how much pressure I need to cut fingers off.

Ian starts to scream anew when I work on his hand, hacking off the fingers. Now that the shears have gotten a taste of blood, they seem eager to glide through the bone of his fingers. I’m in fucking heaven listening to Ian’s screams. They crank me up, making me want more. I want to hear all his screams, all the begging, all the pleading. Just for me to tell him to fuck off so Ty can kill him.

“Stop, Leo,” Ty mutters, staying my hand before I can relieve Ian of the last two fingers. I was lost in my work, looking up at him as if waking up from a deep sleep. “Look.”

I glance around at Ian, whose face is deathly white, and his eyelids are drooping. Dropping the shears, I move in front of him and check Ian's pulse. He's still alive, but it's weak and erratic. Fuck, I think I pushed too far.

I slap him across the face, wanting him to be awake for the main event. Ian groans faintly, his head lolling as he blinks slowly at me. "Don't die on me yet," I mutter, kneeling and slapping his cheeks.

Ian looks up at me with defeated eyes. "Please kill me. It hurts. It hurts so much."

"Good. I'm glad you're feeling this amount of pain," Ty seethes. "That's what those kids felt, you piece of shit." I look up to find Ty standing over us with the Glock 19 pointed at Ian. I get out of his way, letting him handle his business.

Ty doesn't waste time. He pulls the trigger, plugging Ian three times in the chest. His body jerks, then he's still, blood dripping like a faucet down his chest. Ty steps back before more gets on his boots.

His back bumps into my chest, and I wrap a bloody arm around him. "How was that?"

Ty drags my hand down, putting it over his raging erection. "So fucking sexy watching you work on him. Hurry up and get me home so I can sit on your cock."

I bite Ty on the neck hard enough to leave a mark behind. "Let's clean up, and we're out of here. Then I'll have your ass, kotenok."

Cleanup takes no time, Ty and I working quickly so we can get back home, and I can fuck him thoroughly. Having a partner with me on these kills has a definite upside.

Once we have everything nice and tidy, I load the body in the back of the car—on top

of the tarp I laid earlier—and we drive off to the shore where Ty decided to dump Ian. It takes no time to get him and his body parts from the car and out in the open.

Luckily our outfits are black, and the blood isn't noticeable from afar, so no one gives us any looks as we walk through the lobby. We rush upstairs, barely able to keep our hands off each other.

As soon as we step inside, Ty has me up against the door, slanting his mouth over mine. His kiss is wild and feral, and I fucking relish it, gripping his ass and pulling him into me. Our hard cocks brush, turning me on even more. Ty pulls his lips away, hooks his thumbs into my pants, and drags them down around my ankles.

His smaller hand wraps around my length, and I groan, pushing into his grip. Ty licks the seam of my lips as he jerks me off. Even dry, it feels like fucking heaven.

“Fuck, *kotenok*.” I grip his hand, pushing in and out of his fist smoothly. Ty grips me harder, his hand twisting as he reaches the head of my dick. “Let me fuck your fist. I’d rather it be your ass, but we can get to that soon.”

His moan reverberates in my mouth as he kisses me again. Ty jerks me faster, and I stuff my hand in the front of his pants, wrapping my hand around his leaking shaft.

“Leo,” he mutters into my mouth, trying to keep up with the kiss but unable to take both my tongue and my hand. If we weren’t covered in blood, I’d have him on his knees so I could come down his throat and then have him do the same to me. Until we can shower, this will have to do.

“That feels good,” I mutter when Ty reaches under me and tugs on my balls. I grip his ass tighter, kneading the plump globes.

Batting his hand away, I spin him around until his back is against the door, grab both

our dicks, and spit between us. When we're both lubed up as much as we can be, I jerk us at the same time.

Ty's hands fly to my shoulders, and he holds on tight, throwing his head back. "Holy fuck, Leo. Yes. Please. Make me ... make me come. I need to come. Oh God, please. I need it. I need to... Leo..."

I move my hand faster, the hot skin of his cock feeling like silk against mine. Ty thrusts his hips, holding on tight as I pump us off. "Like that?" I ask, dipping my head to kiss and lick along the column of his throat. The taste of his sweat makes my tongue tingle.

"Yes. Squeeze a little harder." I grip us tighter, moving my hand quicker. "Just like that, baby. Oh Christ, I'm not going to last long."

I hold Ty close, and we move in tandem, working together to get us both to the finish line. His warm breath tickles my neck as he moans and babbles against my skin. His hips stutter, and he chases his release. My cock throbs with the need to mark him. Ty mumbles against my chest, moaning as his body shudders. He sounds like a fucking dream.

"Leo, Leo. Oh God, Leo. I'm coming." The wetness of his release coats my hand as I stroke him through it. It makes the slide easier as I barrel towards orgasm.

Listening to Ty moan and cry out gets me there, and my cum is joining his. My knees almost buckle from the force of my release—I have to throw my hand against the door to stay on my feet. I don't stop until we're both drained dry.

We stand there, Ty breathing hard against my neck as I whisper softly to him, asking if he's okay and telling him I got him, that I won't let him fall. Once again, we're both covered in cum. I want Ty's ass covered in my cum, but fuck, I can't move. I'll

have to take a rain check on sliding between the firm globes of his ass.

Swallowing hard, Ty asks, “Can we shower? We’re covered in blood and come.”

“Come on, kotenok. I’ll get you clean, then I’ll make you the little spoon, yeah?”

“Fuck yeah,” Ty says sleepily, leaning into me heavily as I drag us to the shower.

I set Ty against the counter while I start the water, making sure it’s warm enough for him. Once I’m sure the temperature is right, I go back over to him, bending down to unlace his boots and remove them. Then I pull off his socks, pants, and underwear. When I stand, I drag his shirt over his head. Ty sways, dead on his feet from the anticipation of the kill, the kill itself, and the orgasm I gave him.

Grabbing his hands, I pull him into the shower and wrap him in my arms. “You did so good tonight, kotenok. How do you feel?”

“Tired right now.” We both chuckle. In a more serious tone, he says, “I’m fine. I don’t feel bad about killing Ian. He deserved it. He wasn’t even sorry about what he did. No better person to start our partnership with.” Ty meets my eyes, his lips tipped up. “Thank you for doing that. I thought it was batshit crazy, some fucked up thing I wanted but shouldn’t have. But you listened and did exactly what I asked. Thank you for that. And thank you for checking on me. But don’t worry. I’ll always let you know if I’m not okay.”

“I know, kotenok. You were fucking hot, so good with that Glock. I can’t wait to see you do it again.”

“I’m putting in my two weeks’ notice tomorrow and using the rest of my paid time off to cover it. We can check your site tomorrow to find someone else. I know you said we were partners, but I don’t want to take away from your business.”

I've already told Ty I have enough money that I don't have to work as a hired killer anymore, but he needs the money. He said he wants to get his bakery sooner rather than later, and I want to help him with that. Though I do have a plan that I have to work out with June that might solve that problem for him, and he can keep the money he makes with me. A win-win.

Grabbing his washcloth and body wash, I clean the blood and gore off Ty, watching the water change from pink to clear. I quickly do the same to myself before shutting off the water. I dry Ty off, scoop him up in my arms, and walk him to the bedroom.

I pull the covers back with one hand and lie in bed, arranging Ty on top of me. "Sleep, kotenok. I'll hold you till morning."

Ty sighs, kisses my cheek, and settles in. He's fast asleep before we can exchange more words. Feeling content, I'm right behind him.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:49 am

CHAPTER 19

TYSHAWN

Our date with Blu and June is nice. We go to a French restaurant that June said Blu took him to on their first date, since June grew up in France.

“My creeper of a boyfriend,” June says, glancing at Blu with love shining from his eyes, “did a background check on me and saw where I lived. He figured I’d like this place.”

“Was I wrong?” Blu asks matter-of-factly, gazing at June with the same emotion.

Leo was right, Blu is completely different than him. Where you would think Leo was a regular guy who had normal feelings and emotions, it’s hard to tell with Blu unless he’s gazing at June. While he’s devilishly good-looking, his blank stare would give me the creeps if I didn’t know he was a psychopath, too. He tries to pass off emotion, but it’s like he gives up after a few minutes, not worried if anyone buys his act or not. I find it hard to believe this is the person Leo said tried to teach him how to fake emotions to trick people. Blu isn’t fooling me.

It could have more to do with me knowing what he is than being able to spot a psychopath in a crowd. There’s no look to a psychopath. Leo looks like a surfer guy or boy-next-door type, but I know his mind.

June grins, resting a hand over Blu’s. “No. But you have to admit, it’s creepy.”

“Not to me,” he says plainly, sliding food into his mouth.

After giving Blu a long, curious look, I turn to June and lower my voice so no one around us can hear. “Leo drugged and kidnapped me. So I think their line for acceptable is not ours.”

June’s eyes twinkle. “Blu did the same. Except he put me to bed instead of taking me to his condo. Then he told me ‘I can help you with your trauma.’ Like he wasn’t the cause of my trauma.”

I’m not sure why, but that cracks me and June up. I can understand where he’s coming from. Seeing Leo standing over that body will probably play on a constant loop in my mind, all kinds of traumatic. The only thing that makes it better is knowing he’d murdered a child molester.

Leo drapes an arm around my shoulder. “Yeah, now look where you are. In love with a psychopath.”

Rolling my eyes, I look up at him with a small smile. “I don’t think I had a choice. You did kidnap me.”

Leo kisses me gently, nipping at my bottom lip before he pulls away.

When I glance over at Blu and June, I find Blu studying me, his eyes intense as he looks back and forth between the two of us. I raise an eyebrow at him. He smiles, and it’s almost identical to Leo’s when he’s cutting off appendages from one of his victims. It’s unhinged, but—call me fucking crazy—it makes him look more handsome than he usually is.

“Does this scare you?” he asks. “Being with someone like Leo?”

Instead of answering offhandedly, I ponder on it. I'm not going to lie, finding out Leo was a killer was the scariest thing I've ever learned. I was afraid of him, but I also wasn't? When I woke up in his bed—in different clothes, no less—in the back of my mind, I knew he wasn't going to harm me. Seeing him covered in blood didn't help my initial thoughts, but talking to June, knowing he had a friend at all, definitely helped.

Thinking about all that, I shake my head. “No. I'll never be safer than when I'm with Leo. How I found out what he really is, that was scary. But he's made me feel taken care of.”

“And you've joined in?”

I don't have to ask Blu what he means. “Yes. Twice now. He's my partner, and I'm his.” I peer over at Leo, who's already smiling down at me. Those dimples will get me every time.

“Partners,” he whispers before kissing my nose.

June has his hands clasped to his chest, his eyes suspiciously shiny. “God, this is adorable. After I met Blu, I've wanted Leo to find his person.” He gives Leo a look when Leo scoffs. “I have. Besides Blu, you're my best friend. I've wanted you to be happy in any way you can be.” June glances back at me. “I'm glad you could make that happen. You two are cute together. And I love your makeup.”

I grin at him. “And I love your hair. Hair paint?”

He touches the blue strip in his curly ponytail and smiles. “Blue is my favorite color.”

“Ugh, stop,” Leo says, shooting him a grin.

We talk more over dinner, and I enjoy myself immensely. While Blu may be a little cold on initial observation, he has a dry sense of humor, and he always speaks the truth in an almost clinical way. Despite my reservations about him when dinner started, I like Blu. He and June are total opposites but they fit together like a lock and key. I only hope Leo and I are the same.

When the waiter comes around to ask if we'd like dessert, I excuse myself to the restroom. I don't have to use it, but I want a little time to myself to think.

The dinner was great, but I'm feeling overwhelmed because I've never had anything like this. Not even with Juliette. We never had boyfriends at the same time, so we never did the whole double date thing. And Sam never invited me with him and Beth. Not that he has to, but I've never had the opportunity.

Is this the beginning of a different dynamic of friendship? Will Leo and I join Blu and June more often on dates? And to be out with someone that understands my and Leo's relationship is even better.

Standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom, I take a good look at myself and can't remove the beaming smile on my face. I'm happy. Truly happy. I haven't felt like this in years, and it's all because of Leo. He's brought me such joy, helping me with my baking, helping me find a purpose that will stop monsters from ruining lives or making them pay for the lives they ruined, and supporting my dreams. He also fucks me like a man possessed, something I also haven't had before. Whether it be him getting to know my body and taking his time to deep throating my dick like he was born to suck cock, it didn't matter. No one has ever given my body what he has. No one has enriched my life so much. I'm absolutely fucking smitten.

My eyes snap up when the door opens, and Leo steps inside. He smiles when he flips the lock and prowls over to me with a lustful glint in his eyes.

I turn around, leaning against sinks, my hands resting on the lip of the counter. “What if someone needs to use the restroom?” I joke.

“They can fucking wait,” Leo growls, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me close, kissing me hard and desperately. “You look so fucking good.” He gazes down at my suit before he takes my mouth in another deep kiss.

Unlike Leo, who’s wearing all black—shirt, shoes, socks, and suit—my suit has a burgundy jacket to add a splash of color.

I don’t get the chance to tell Leo how fucking hot I think he is before he’s dropping to his knees in front of me. He has my pants down to my ankles and my cock in his mouth before I can even formulate another response.

“Fuck yes,” I mutter, weaving my fingers through his hair. Leo looks at me as he bobs on my shaft. His mouth is so fucking wet around my dick that I almost can’t stand it. “Suck me, Leo. Mmm, yes. Faster. We don’t have much time.” We are in a bathroom after all. The door is locked, but I imagine the face of some stuffy person trying to use the restroom and finding it locked, only for the two of us to leave with wrinkled clothes and puffy lips.

Leo tightens his lips around me, gazing up at me with those blue-green eyes, and I can’t hold back. I thrust into his mouth quickly, chasing that release I so desperately need. When he reaches up and tugs my balls, I have to shove my fist into my mouth to prevent me crying out.

My cock erupts, and I spray down Leo’s throat, my body trembling with the force of my orgasm. Leo keeps his lips wrapped around my shaft, taking my seed and swallowing it greedily.

When my dick is too sensitive, I pull out of his mouth. Leo keeps licking me,

cleaning up every drop of cum on my dick.

He stands, pulling my pants up over my ass. Leo maintains eye contact as he tucks me in and buttons my fly. After making sure my dick is out of the way, he zips me up. Soft lips meet mine, and I open for him, rolling my tongue over his. My dick twitches when I swallow my lingering taste.

“We need to get home,” I mutter against his plump and swollen lips. “I want your dick in my mouth and your cum in my ass. We’re skipping dessert.”

Leo’s deep chuckle rumbles through me as his chest meets mine. “That’s a good plan. Let’s go pay the check, and we’re gone.”

I nod, kissing him once more, then unlock the door. Just as I open it, the person ready to push the door open jumps back. “Sorry,” I mutter, face heating as I brush past them. Leo steps out a moment later, running his fingers through his hair to tame it. We probably should have taken care of that before we walked out.

The gentleman nods, whispering, “That’s okay,” before he steps into the restroom. I laugh as I grab Leo’s hand, pulling him to the table.

June’s face is knowing as he takes in my wrinkled pants and Leo’s mussed hair. “We already got the check.” He and Blu stand, putting their jackets back on. They lace their fingers together and Blu leads June over to our side of the table. June gives us a quick hug. “Come visit sometime, Ty. And bring some of those snickerdoodle cookies. They sell out so fast I’m never able to get a few to Blu. I’ve been raving about them to him but haven’t given him one. He’s starting to think I made them up.”

Blu graces me with a small smile. “He worships them. I’d love to taste them sometime.”

I nod. "I'll make you some tomorrow. Can't do it tonight," I murmur when Leo kisses me on the forehead.

June laughs with a look of understanding. "See you tomorrow."

The valet takes way too long to bring Leo's car around and by the time it arrives, I'm almost pulling at his clothes to get to him. By sheer force of will, I keep my hands to myself.

Once Leo is behind the wheel of the car and drives away from the restaurant, I lean over to his side of the car, unzip his pants, and free his straining erection. I open wide, sucking him down to the base. A groan rumbles up my throat as his taste hits my tongue. God, his flavor is intoxicating.

Gripping his shaft, I jerk him as I bob up and down. Leo places a hand on the back of my head, controlling my movements as he drives effortlessly. He grunts, rolling his hips in the seat to shove farther into my mouth. Another groan is unleashed as I suck him hard, pulling as much precum from him as I can.

"Don't make me come," Leo mutters, still pushing into my mouth. "It'll be in your ass, not your throat."

Fuck, yes. I slow my pace, making sure to keep him right on the edge but not close enough to come. His moans and grunts fill the car and my cock stiffens, begging for another release. But I hold off. The next time I wrap my hand around my dick, I want Leo's inside me.

Finally, we pull up to our condo, Leo giving me a heads-up so we can straighten ourselves up. The valet gives us both a weird look but doesn't say anything as he takes the keys from Leo's hands.

Unlike last night, I don't attack Leo as soon as I get him inside. I lead him to our room where I remove his clothes until his strong tan body is on display for me. I take him in—his strong chest, his abs with a new scar my slash made, his hairy and thick legs, and his heavy cock and balls hanging between them. Leo is fucking perfection.

I push him down on the bed, straddling him as I bring my lips to his. Leo grabs my ass, holding on tight as he moves me over his erection.

Pulling my lips from his, I kiss down his chest, licking his nipples and through the valley of his abs. My tongue lingers on the small, raised scar from my knife, kissing it and licking at it.

“You think you hurt me?” Leo asks in a voice that sounds like gravel.

Smiling against his skin, I look up at him with a grin. “Didn't I?”

“Oh, *kotenok*, it'll take a lot more than that to hurt me.” Leo grabs me by the front of my throat, hauling me up to his body as he sits up. He drags me onto his lap, sliding his tongue into my mouth. I moan, wrapping my arms around his neck.

Leo makes quick work of my shirt, ripping the buttons off and tossing the material to the floor. He flips me over, removing my shoes and dragging my pants and underwear down. Leo slides between my legs, pinning me with his hard body. I arch up into him, kissing him with everything I have. I've never felt this turned on from just a kiss, and it makes me want more.

Reaching over and rummaging through the nightstand drawer, Leo grabs the lube, resting it by my head before dipping down for another kiss. I wrap my legs around his waist so our bare cocks brush against each other. I moan into the kiss, a zing of pleasure shooting up my spine. Leo's hot, thick shaft against mine is one of the hottest things I've ever felt. Him being inside me will feel even better.

After lubing his fingers, Leo glides his hand under me until his fingers are dancing against my hole. One of his fingers slides into me easily, getting me ready for him.

Groaning, I snatch my mouth away from his, panting as I absorb the feelings of him finger fucking me. In and out, Leo glides inside me, kissing along my neck, chest and ear. “More...” I grunt out when he pushes another finger into me. “I’m ready. Give me more.”

Leo nods, his free hand gripping my waist as he fucks his fingers into me. His long digits brush my prostate, and my back arches of its own accord. Leo curls his fingers, and I mewl, my body on fire.

Taking one more suck at my neck—sure to leave a nice mark there—Leo sits back on his heels. He slips his fingers out of me, and I pout, not liking that I’m so empty.

“I can’t go slow,” he mutters, lubing up his rock-hard cock as his eyes bounce everywhere along my body. “You’ll have to take what I give you, and I’ll make it good for you next time.” Again, I nod. I have a feeling Leo hasn’t been as unrestrained with me as he would like. I’d love to see that side of him.

Settling back between my legs, Leo grips behind my thighs and pushes them up to my chest. His lips part as he stares at my wet hole. “I can’t wait to be inside you,” he mutters, sliding his hard cock over my dick and balls. “Being in you is indescribable. I wish you could feel what I do.” His words send a thrill down my spine, making my cock twitch on my belly.

“Show me,” I groan, rolling my hips so our dicks glide against each other. “Show me how I make you feel.”

Moving one hand from my thighs, Leo grabs hold of his cock and pushes into me in one thrust. My breath catches, not quite expecting him to slide in so quickly. But I

want it. This is what he meant when he said he can't be gentle. My dick leaks at his painful intrusion.

Leo practically bends me in half as he pushes my knees back to my shoulders. His hips snap into mine, and I keen, my hole contracting around his dick. He sets a relentless pace, pounding into me hard and fast, pegging my prostate with each thrust. My cock bounces against my belly, leaking onto my abs as Leo takes me hard.

I've never felt anything like this. With every thrust, I'm flying higher and higher, closer to release with every slide of his dick inside me. He grunts each time he plunges into me, gripping my thighs harder.

"Fuck, kotenok. Your ass belongs to me. You belong to me. Don't you?"

One of Leo's hands closes around my throat, and he picks up the pace of his hips. Though I can't draw in a full breath, I nod and answer. "Yes, Leo. I'm yours. Please."

"I love when you beg, kotenok." He bends down to me, kissing me messily as he fucks me hard. I can barely keep up, moaning and keening and babbling.

He snatches his mouth from mine, moving to my neck and nibbling at my flesh. I cry out, my hands going to his ass to spur him on so he can fuck me harder. Leo growls, picking up the pace as my blunt nails dig into the ample flesh of his ass.

"Fuck, kotenok." Leo grunts against my neck, his hips pounding freely into me. "I'm close. Your ass feels like fucking heaven."

I have no words. I can't speak. All I can manage is grunts and groans, moans and breathy whimpers. Leo's hips slam into mine, and I absorb the pain and the pleasure. He's fucking wrecking me.

God, I'm so close. So fucking close. All I need is that one thing to push me over the edge. Just that one ... thing.

Leo wraps his fingers around my dick and jerks me once, and I'm fucking done. My body bows off the bed, and I come hard. My release is so intense I can't breathe. My brainwaves short, and I think I black out. My warm seed lands on my belly, and my body continues to shudder after ropes of my orgasm leave my cockhead. My head lolls to the side as I try to catch my breath. Leo keeps using my oversensitive body, and I let him, too weak to protest, and it also feels too fucking good to ask him to stop.

When my brain comes back online, I look up at Leo, and heat and awareness rolls through me. His eyes are locked on my twitching cock, and he looks hungry. He looks ... feral and unhinged. Fuck yes.

"Leo, please," I rasp, my voice fucked from all my moaning and screaming.

He makes gazes me and bites his lips, his eyes blazing. "I'm gonna come, kotenok. I want my cum leaking out of this tight hole."

Five strokes later, Leo's hips stutter, then he stills over me, a long groan leaving his lips. He's fucking fantastic in his release—his head tossed back, neck muscles straining and his teeth bared from the intensity of his climax. My dick throbs against my belly. I rake my fingers up his side feeling the heat of his skin, wanting to touch him everywhere.

When he's spent, Leo lowers himself until we're chest to chest, taking my lips in a slow kiss. He pulls back, rubbing a thumb under my blue eye. "You okay?"

I smile. "Are you sure you're a psychopath? Are you supposed to be worried about my well-being?"

A rumbling chuckle leaves his throat, washing over me. God, I love this man. “I wouldn’t care enough to ask anyone else. Only you, kotenok.” His smile is replaced with a deep frown. “I was rough with you. I?—”

I put my hand over his mouth. “You were perfect, baby. Really fucking perfect.”

Leo rolls us over until I’m lying on top of him, his half hard dick still inside me. “Want to clean up now or in the morning?”

We’ll probably regret not doing it now, but I’m too boneless to move. “In the morning. I don’t think my legs work at the moment.”

Leo barks a laugh, gliding his hands down my ass. “I would say I’m sorry, but I wouldn’t mean it. Next time, I’ll be gentler.”

“You don’t have to be but thank you.” I lean up and give Leo a quick kiss before I lay my head back against his chest. “We have to be up early tomorrow to make more sweets for the coffee shop. And to prepare a separate batch of cookies for Blu.”

“Anything you need from me, kotenok. I’m yours.”

Those words play in my head as I drift off to sleep, a smile on my face.

CHAPTER 20

TYSHAWN

The week flies by, with only one kill in between. Our mark was involved in a hit-and-run that was intentional—striking his ex-girlfriend and their child—but he got off on a technicality. Luckily the kid survived, but sadly, without their mother. So Leo had some fun cutting off a few fingers, and he let me use a garrote that time. It was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I don't want to use that again. It took close to five minutes and all my strength to kill him.

Before I know it, the weekend rolls around, and I have to go see my dad like I promised. The day before, my stomach is in knots, and the kitchen is overflowing with cookies, cupcakes, muffins, croissants and Danishes. When I'm stressed, baking helps me channel my thoughts. Usually.

It's not working this time. No matter how much I bake, my mind is still clouded. It's like the ghost of my mom is telling me to let it go and give my father some grace, but my heart isn't ready to hear it.

For some reason, I feel like he betrayed her, which is stupid because he can't be in mourning forever. I think I'm hung up on the six months part, not that he moved on. It just seemed like it was too fast.

A light knock sounds at the door, but it opens before I can answer. June comes around the corner, smiling widely at me. I try to return it, but my lips only twitch. Yeah, far from convincing.

“Uh oh. Did Leo fuck up?” He looks around the kitchen, his eyes brightening when he spots the red velvet cupcakes. “Maybe he should fuck up more often if you bake like this.” He glances over his shoulder and winks, biting into the cupcake. He groans, and I chuckle, feeling lighter already. “God, Ty. If you were single, I’d marry you just for the baking.”

A full belly laugh erupts from me as I put a batch of chocolate chip cookies in the oven. “Don’t get me wrong, June,” I mutter, wiping my hands on the apron Leo bought me that says, ‘Cutie on Duty’, “you’re handsome as fuck but definitely not my type. I’m more interested in psychopaths.”

June laughs, climbing on one of the barstools in the kitchen. “So what’s up? Why the lone man bake off?”

I sigh, leaning my hand against the counter and lowering my head. June and I aren’t close, not like me and Sam. But I want us to be. I want June and I to become good friends, someone I can talk to about the kills me and Leo might do or when I have questions about Leo’s behavior that June can give me some insight on. And June just seems like a positive person. His vibe radiates friendliness and happiness, someone I can come to if I have life issues, and I wouldn’t have a problem being that same person for him.

Glancing up at him, his expression is open and welcoming but also a little concerned. I decided to tell him all my issues. Hopefully he doesn’t think I’m dumping on him.

Exhaling roughly, I say, “I’m going to see my dad tomorrow.”

“Are you close?” June asks, resting his arms on the counter.

“We were. More so to my mom, but we still had a strong bond. My mother died a few years ago, and I expected him to work through his grief alone, ya know?”

June nods, giving me his undivided attention.

“But six months later, he’s introducing me to his girlfriend. My parents were married for twenty-five years and he moved on in six months. I just ... I’m having a hard time reconciling that.”

June is silent for a moment, finishing off his cupcake with a thoughtful expression on his face. When he’s done, he folds the paper up into a small square. Only then does he look at me, eyes filled with compassion. “My parents have been married for almost thirty years, and I know if one of them died, the other would be devastated. Can I be frank though?”

“Please.”

“If your mother is anything like mine, she wouldn’t want your father to be alone. He’s not replacing your mother. He’s probably just trying to find a new form of happiness that protects him from the pain of losing his life partner.”

A trapped breath leaves my lungs at June’s explanation. He’s right. I know he is, but it still hurts to let that image go. I’m so used to my parents being together that it’s hard to see him with someone else.

“It’s tough,” I whisper, wiping the lone tear from my eye. “I miss her, and I expect him to miss her too.”

Climbing off the stool, June comes over to me, giving me a one-armed hug. “Just because he moved on doesn’t mean he doesn’t miss her, Ty. Talk to him. Get his side of things and don’t hurt your own feelings making up a scenario in your head. He’s your father, and if you were close, he deserves the benefit of the doubt.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. I laugh briefly. “Had I asked Leo that, he wouldn’t have

known what to say to help me.”

“Yeah, Blu is better at comforting me than he used to be, but he definitely would have been lost with that. Or he would have psychoanalyzed me. He’s good at that.”

“Thank you, June. I needed this talk.”

“You’re welcome. I want us to be friends. I’ll always be here when you need an ear. A bit of advice if I may?” His voice goes up at the end, as if posing it as a question. I nod, giving him my attention. “Hear your father out. Try to wipe the thoughts you conjured up in your head and let him tell you what’s going on. Your relationship will be better for it.”

Those words swirl in my head as I drive myself and Leo to my childhood home. Leo has his fingers threaded through mine, and I have his hand in a death grip. He keeps giving me looks, but I always shoot him a shaky smile. I know he wants to help, but right now, I need to focus on what June told me. I think that’s the only way I’ll be able to continue this drive and not get off on the next exit to head for our condo.

I pull into my old neighborhood, and a smile breaks across his face. It’s been a while since I’ve been here, but I have so many memories.

Pointing out of the window, I tell Leo, “See that small cove right there?”

“Yep.”

“That’s where I had my first kiss. I was in the ninth grade. Upperclassman named Morgan.”

Leo growls. “Fuck Morgan.”

I laugh, squeezing his hand again. “I didn’t, if you were worried about that. It was just a kiss. He wanted to practice, and I had no experience, so I was all for it. He was a nice guy. We lost touch over the years. Last I heard, he was living abroad with his partner and their kids.”

He grunts, and I laugh. I’m glad I brought Leo along. I think I’ll need him near after a conversation with my father.

My dad is waiting outside when I pull in to the driveway. He’s beaming as I put the car in park, and I can’t help returning the smile. Regardless of how his moving on made me feel, I missed my dad.

I run into his arms, giving him a big hug. He pats me on the back, rocking me back and forth.

“Hey, son. So good to see you.” He lets me go, holding me at arm’s length. “You look great. Been in the gym?”

“You know it.” I work out, but I’m not as fit as my father. Even at fifty-seven, he’s still in excellent shape, hitting the weights multiple times a week.

My father, Jermaine, and I resemble each other, besides him having two golden brown eyes and he always has a beard. I keep my face clean-shaven—probably because I can’t grow a full beard. It comes in patchy. His dark brown skin matches mine and so do all of his other features. Well, besides the hair. I’ve been trying to get him to shave his head bald to get rid of that receding hairline, but he doesn’t listen. It makes me happy to see some things never change.

With one last hug, I turn to Leo, who’s standing by the car. “Dad, this is Leo, my boyfriend. Leo, this is my dad, Jermaine.”

Leo reaches his hand out, and my father takes it in a firm grasp. A smile graces Leo's face, and if I didn't know any better, I would think he was simply a polite man meeting the parents, not someone hiding their true nature to make a good impression. "Nice to meet you, sir. Tyshawn has told me a lot about you."

My father's eyes soften when they drift over to me. "Good things, I hope."

"The best," Leo assures and I blow out an imperceptible breath. I only told Leo the doubts I have about my father jumping into a quick relationship. His lie on my behalf makes my heart squeeze.

We head inside, and Dad walks us into the kitchen. "Want something to drink?" He opens the fridge and pokes his head inside. "I have beer, water, juice, and a few cokes."

"Water for me, sir," Leo says.

"I'll take one as well."

Dad pulls out two waters for us and a beer for himself and motions for us to follow him outside to the back deck. The grill is going, and he opens it, smoke fanning everywhere. He waves it away and flips burgers and hot dogs. "I figured you'd appreciate the grill master hooking you up rather than a kitchen-cooked meal."

I throw my head back and laugh. Dad would tell me and Mom he was the grill master since he couldn't bake as well as we did. After my conversation with June, that cloud of sadness doesn't even mar my memories of my mom, and I'm thankful.

Leo gives me a long look, and I raise my eyebrows at him as if to say what? He tilts his head to the house.

Getting his meaning, I say, “Dad, can we talk? Please?”

Standing by my dad, Leo pulls his hands from his pockets and says, “I’m no grill master, but I think I can keep the food from burning.”

Dad looks over at me, searching my face. After a few seconds, he says, “Okay.” He hands the tongs to Leo, patting his back. “To be a part of this family, you have to know how to cook. Tyshawn and Tessa baked, and I was grill master. You ready for that?”

Leo chuckles, taking the tongs from my father. “I got it, sir.”

“Call me Jermaine. But if I return and find my shit burned, you’ll have to go back to calling me sir.”

I laugh along with them and stand from the table to wait for my dad by the door.

After tells Leo when to flip burgers and turn hot dogs, he follows me to the living room.

We sit and are silent for a moment. It’s awkward, since my father and I haven’t been in the same room alone in over a year. I don’t like having the wedge between us, and I’m going to work hard to remove it. Starting with this conversation.

“Where’s Cynthia?” I ask, looking around. The living room still has photos of my mother and father together, us as a family, and surprisingly, photos of my dad and Cynthia. That softens a little of the resentment I have toward her. It’s obvious she knows my dad has these pictures of my mother up and doesn’t demand he take them down.

His smile is shaky and uneasy, so he probably noticed the estrangement too. I feel

like shit for shutting my dad out like this. “She’s coming over later if you’re okay with that.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him to invite her on reflex, but we need to hash some things out first. “Why did you move on so quickly?” I ask abruptly. I probably should have asked with more finesse, but sometimes—along with rambling—I blurt shit out.

“I wondered when you’d ask me that.” He leans back, crossing his ankle over his knee. “I didn’t go out looking for it. When Tessa died, I didn’t think I would be able to go on. I thought I’d die along with her.” A lump forms in my throat at the thought of both my parents no longer being here. “I started going to grief counseling a month after she died, I’m not sure if you remember?”

I nod. He asked me to go with him, but I handled my grief differently, not wanting to talk to a room full of strangers about how I felt.

“I wanted to be stronger for you. The way I was carrying on wasn’t healthy, so I tried to get some help processing. That’s where I met Cynthia. Her husband had died a few months before.

“For a few weeks, I would go and not share, just listen to attendees talk about their spouses and feel content that I wasn’t alone—that other people had lost the ones they love, and I could get through it because they were. Then one day, when I was missing Tessa so much I felt like I would choke on my grief, I shared about her. I talked about how we met, how we bought a house and raised you, how we lived a good life together. And about how she ... died.” He trips over the word, and I have to blink back tears.

Here I was , thinking Dad no longer cared about Mom and he moved on because he didn’t give a shit. But he’s still hurting. “It’s okay, Dad,” I whisper, not wanting to

upset him anymore.

“No, let me get this out,” he says with pleading eyes. I acquiesce, folding my hands in my lap. “After talking about her, I felt lighter, like I could go on because, no matter what, Tessa would always be with me. In here,” he mutters, pointing to his heart. “Once the meeting was adjourned, a few of us went out for coffee, just to talk and bond. They always asked, but I usually didn’t take them up on the offer. But something told me to go this time. What started out as five of us conversing and getting to know each other ended with me and Cynthia chatting about our spouses. She lost her husband in an accident at his job.

“We just got to know each other, and over time, we developed feelings. It may have felt fast, but it’s not how you’re thinking. Cynthia knows I’ll always have a special place in my heart for Tessa, just as she always will for her late husband.” Dad looks at me, a sheen in his eyes. “I’m simply trying to get on as best I can, Ty.”

I slide over to him, throwing my arms around his shoulders. “Dad, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have?—”

“No, Ty. It’s okay.” His arms wrap around me, and I break down, crying out all the tears I’ve been holding in for years. I should have come to him before, but my own grief held me back. It didn’t even cross my mind my father was struggling just like me.

“I’m so sorry, Dad. I’ll do better, I promise. I should have been here.”

He kisses the top of my head like he used to do when I was a child, and I smile, more tears dripping down my face. “It’s okay, son. I’m the parent. I should have made sure you were okay too.”

Pulling back, I wipe away my tears. “From now on, let’s be there for each other.”

“Deal.”

I give him one more hug, feeling so much better after our long overdue conversation. I’ll have to work hard to get back to the place we used to be, but I’m willing to do anything to fix the relationship with my dad.

“You can invite Cynthia over. I’d like to get to know her.”

“She’d like that,” Dad says with a grin.

We make our way back outside to Leo, who has a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead. His loose blue shirt is sticking to him, but he looks relaxed in front of the grill. He smiles when he sees my dad, handing him the tongs. “Can I still call you Jermaine?”

Dad takes the tongs, moving burgers and hot dogs around. He looks at Leo with a grin. “Yeah, son. You can call me Jermaine.”

Leo comes to sit beside me while my dad removes the meat off the grill. “I’m a grill master,” he mutters, kissing me behind the ear.

A shiver runs down my spine, and I slap his chest so he’ll chill. I might be a grown man, but I don’t wanna do any over-the-top PDA with my dad so close by. “And a good baker. You might be a double threat.”

Another shiver racks my body as he leans to my ear. “A triple threat if you count how I make you come.”

“Behave,” I hiss, begging my cock to go down. Turning to him, I kiss him softly. “Thank you for coming with me. I love you.”

“I love you too, kotenok. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

CHAPTER 21

LEO

The weeks roll by, and Ty and I have gotten into a rhythm. We take contracts for people that are guilty of a crime but the courts found them innocent, or they're obviously guilty of a crime, but their victims haven't or can't come forward. As I told Ty, we're partners, so I give him half the money I'm paid to get rid of them. He's pleased every time he checks his account. Though he doesn't know that money is for him, not his bakery.

I've talked it over with June, and he's on board with my plan. I've been waiting on plans to clear with my contractors, and they called today to let me know it's a go. Excitement flows through me—a feeling I'm becoming more familiar with when it comes to Ty—as I think about the news I'm going to give him.

I'm also nervous. Ty is the type that likes to work hard for what he has, getting the sense of accomplishment when he reaches his goals.

But we're partners. I keep telling him that, and I mean it in all things, not just us murdering together. He's mine, and I'll give him anything he wants. Including Tessa's.

Ty steps inside our condo, dropping his bag by the door. "Today was my last day. No more work at the law office." It's perfect that today was his last day. The news I want to share can be a career upgrade present of sorts.

He comes over to the couch where I'm lounging, draping himself over me. My hands automatically drop to his ample ass, squeezing gently. "Happy?"

"Very. I trained my replacement, and she's all ready to go. Now I can focus on getting Tessa's up and running. I'll need to work a bunch more jobs to get what I want, but it'll happen. I was looking through some buildings I like, but nothing really spoke to me. Now that I think about it, the building I found you in doesn't speak to me anymore either. You think it's because I found you there or because I found you there?" he asks earnestly. I raise an eyebrow, not getting his meaning. "You know, found out who you were because I went there. Not physically showing up. Though that could have something to do with it."

"Could be," I say with a shrug. "Or it's not the place you're supposed to have Tessa's."

"No?"

"No. You belong to me and with me. So Tessa's belongs at Ray's."

Ty sighs, lying on my chest. "I can't keep baking here and bringing things to Ray's. I need a place where I can bake everything fresh and not run out. I'm sure your customers don't like when they show up and there aren't any more muffins or Danishes. They go perfectly with a nice cup of Ray's coffee. I know because I've had a Danish and muffin with your coffee there, and holy fuck it's phenomenal. Can you get me some of those coffee beans for days I don't go into Ray's? It would be nice to make some at home."

Smiling, I nod, lifting his chin so I can kiss his nose. "Yes, kotenok. But that's not what I mean," I say, bringing the conversation back to what we were talking about. "I meant you belong at Ray's. I talked to June, and he okayed it."

“Okayed what?”

My heart thumps, and my hands start to sweat. I’ve never felt nerves like this in my life, and I’m not quite sure how to handle it. I know he can feel the rapid beat of my heart under his palms because Ty gives me a questioning look.

Clearing my throat, I sit up so Ty is straddling me. He raises his eyebrow, his curious expression adorable.

“Okayed buying the empty building beside Ray’s, knocking the wall down, and renaming the coffee shop Tessa and Ray’s Bakery and Beanery.”

Ty’s eyes grow wide, and his mouth drops open. He stares at me for a solid thirty seconds. Squirming, I jostle him slightly. “Say something.”

Shaking his head, Ty drops his head in his hands, and his shoulders heave. Fuck, what did I do? He looked stunned but not like he was hurt. Is he upset I didn’t ask him first? Fuck, June told me it might backfire, but he also said it could be fine. Maybe I overestimated fine.

Dropping his hands, Ty wipes at his tear-streaked face. “Leo. You’d do that? For me? Change the name of your coffee shop, the neighborhood staple for me?”

My heart stops thudding against the walls of my chest, and a soft sigh leaves my lips. “Yes, kotenok. I’d do anything for you.”

Ty laughs prettily, then brings me in for a kiss. “I’d like that, Leo. Ray’s is where I got my start. I’d love to join you and June there.”

I lean in to kiss Ty again, but my phone vibrates in my pocket before I can touch my lips to his. With an aggravated growl, I pull it out, ready to tell whoever it is to fuck

off, but I stay my hand. The caller ID is blank, which means it can only be one person: Ivan.

He only calls once a month to check in, to make sure I haven't been caught and sent to prison. We've already had our monthly check-in, so I wonder what he could possibly want.

Gripping Ty by the waist, I move him from my lap and hold up a finger, saying, "It's Ivan. He never calls outside of our regular check-ins, so it must be important."

Ty nods, shooing me away as he wipes tears from his cheeks. "Go. I'll be here when you get back so we can talk about Tessa and Ray's." His grin is fucking gorgeous. I can't resist bending to steal a kiss before I go back to my office. I don't need privacy, but I'll be speaking in Russian, and I don't want Ty to feel like I'm saying something secretive about him.

Once the door is shut, I answer the phone. "Ded."

Instead of greeting me in Russian, he speaks in strongly accented English that's as familiar to me as breathing. "Leo. I need help. There is job, and I need extra hand."

I raise an eyebrow. Ivan never asks for assistance. When he brought me in when he was training me, it was for the experience, not because he required my presence. "Details."

"Two target that need gone at same time, so they don't run. Extra hand necessary because I cannot be in two places at once. Understand?"

"Understand, Ded. When and where?"

"Three days. London. Can you hop flight?"

“I can.” I smile, stuffing a hand in the pocket of my sweat pants. “Your English is getting better.”

The pride is evident in his voice. He may be a psychopath, but he’s a sucker for compliments. “Practice has been working. Russian is still superior language.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. It’s an argument we’ve had plenty of times. I taught him some English when I moved to Russia, just as he taught me Russian. Most of our conversations were held in Russian because Ded said English hurt his ears.

A thought pops in my head, and I rush to ask, “Can I bring someone?”

“You have friend?”

“I have a boyfriend, Ded. And he works with me. I’d like to show him what an organized job with you looks like.”

Ivan is silent, probably absorbing what I said. In Russia, traditional values are what they live by. And Ivan is old. He grew up in the era where being gay was against the law, then it was decriminalized, then harsher treatment was placed back on the community. I didn’t care one way or the other, since I planned to leave Russia at eighteen and because I wasn’t dating when I lived there, men or otherwise.

Surprisingly, Ivan hums. “Bring boyfriend if you are training him. I want to see what he knows. Three days. I will send you information on hotel.” With that, Ivan hangs up.

I’m not sure what his easy acquiescence means, but whatever. Ivan doesn’t have to agree with who I’m with, he just needs to keep any biased opinions to himself. I would hate to have to fuck my grandfather up for saying some slick shit and hurting Ty’s feelings.

Ty is right where I left him, except he's taken off his dress shirt and slacks, lying on the couch in his undershirt and briefs, watching something on YouTube. "Everything okay?"

"It's great. By chance, do you have a passport?"

"Yep. Sam and I went to the Canada side of Niagara Falls right after my mom died so I could get my mind off things. It's still current for a few more years."

"What do you say about going to London?"

"Uh, fuck yes." He sits up quickly, excitement brimming in his eyes. "When?"

"A few days. My grandfather needs help with a job and asked me to come."

Ty deflates a little. "Your grandfather? You want me to meet your grandfather? Is he okay with that?"

"He's fine with it. I told him about you already. Besides, he doesn't get to clear who I bring with me on a job. He needs me, not the other way around."

He perks back up, getting to his feet and wrapping his arms around me. "I've never been to London. Are we only going to kill someone or can we go sightseeing?"

"Whatever you want, kotenok."

"You always call me that. What does it mean?"

A smile crops up on my face. "Kitten."

Ty rolls his eyes but smiles too. "You're the worst. But I like it."

I peck him lightly on the lips, then slap his ass. He yelps, moving his hand down to his sore cheek.

“Get packed. We’re not leaving for another few days, but I don’t want you to forget anything.”

With a happy squeal, Ty gives me a quick kiss and hurries to our room to prepare for our first vacation together.

Our flight touches down at London Heathrow Airport three days later close to nine in the morning. We took an early flight with a one long-ass layover so we could be here in enough time to take a quick nap and do some sightseeing. I don’t really give a shit about any of that but Ty is really excited about it.

He’s bouncing in his seat, looking out the window as if he can see some of the sights from the airplane. “This is so exciting,” he says with a grin, eyes flashing as he looks at me. “I’ve always wanted to visit London.”

“We have a day to be tourists.” Tomorrow is the day we take the couple out. Ivan got their schedule down pat, knowing where they’ll be at any given time.

Our job is to dispatch a couple, another hitman team. They decided they didn’t want to be in the life anymore. In itself, that’s fine, no one can make anyone stay longer than they’d like. We’re freelancers, after all. But before they got out for good, the couple tried to leak information to shut down their handler for reasons unknown. It’s not like in the movies where if we leave the life, we have a bounty on our head. If we want to leave, if we have a handler, they’ll find someone new that can take our spot and the contracts.

The information they released was intercepted—not sure how—and the handler hired us to get rid of their old employees. Their handler went underground, and word got

out he'd taken his own life rather than giving himself up to the police. In truth, he'd hidden, spreading false information until the couple was comfortable they'd tied up their last loose end so they could live out their lives. He'd hired Ivan to take them out but only after he'd disappeared for over a year.

This kill took some planning. Over the past few days, Ivan and I have been exchanging messages to figure out how to execute this flawlessly. Our targets may look like oblivious people as they walk around the city, but they're scanning around all the time. Ivan has been doing the surveillance on them for a few weeks to try to find a weak spot. Our plan came together late last night.

From what Ivan could gather, they moved to London because of the abundance of CCTV cameras, hoping it would stop anyone from wanting to retaliate for their snitching. Ivan is great at what he does, finding a way out of any puzzle or situation.

Another precaution the couple has taken is spending their days apart, thinking if one were killed, the other would have time to flee. I'm sure they planned to keep that up until they were sure their handler was dead and didn't send anyone after them.

For this kill, I get to use a long-ranged rifle, one I haven't used in almost a year. I like the up-close-and-personal kills, but there's something calming about sitting in one spot to make sure I'm locked in on my target.

The plane doors open, and I grab Ty's hand, leading him through the busy airport. He looks around, his head on a swivel as he takes everything in. I hate waiting at baggage claim, so Ty and I packed everything we'll need in a carry-on bag. Anything we forgot, we can buy here.

When we step outside, Ivan is standing in front of a taxi, looking the same as he did the last time I saw him. Like me, he's tall and built wide, his shoulders stretching his shirt impressively. His hair and eyes are dark, with a hooked nose and thin lips.

As we approach, I notice he looks a little thinner and tired. It's to be expected—Ivan has been at it since before I was born, and he's over seventy. It's about time he gets some rest. Not many of us retire. Ivan is the best in the business. He can hang up his blades if he wanted. He probably relishes killing too much to stop though.

"Ded," I mutter, halting in front of him.

"Nieto. Your flight. It was good, yes?"

I shrug. "Fine." Grabbing Ty's hand, I pull him closer to my side. "This is Ty. My boyfriend."

Ivan's eyes trace down Ty's body, and I start to push him behind me in case Ivan does or says something stupid, but Ivan smiles, holding out his hand. I'm not sure I successfully hide my surprise. Ded doesn't smile. It's like the mechanics of his face don't work and that function isn't programmed in him. I think I've seen Ivan smile once, and it was after he killed some guy that cheated at cards in a pub he was playing at. "I do not like cheaters," he told me in vehement Russian as he wiped a blade on the man's pants. "Now he knows that too."

Ty reaches out a shaky hand, clasping Ivan's. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Pleasure is all mine," Ivan says, tilting his head to the side. "Your eyes. Different color. Very uncommon."

Ty nods, and I can tell he's trying to keep the irritation off his face. I know he's tired of hearing it, but Ty is too polite to tell Ivan that. "Yep. I ate my twin in the womb." When Ivan just stares blankly at him, Ty blushes, shaking his head. "Sorry, that was a joke. A bad one, obviously. My cousin used to tell me that when I was younger when I wondered why my eyes were different colors and not like everyone else's. I didn't have a twin in the womb. Not as far as I know anyway." Ty pulls in a deep breath and

starts to speak again, then folds his lips in. He looks at me with wide eyes like he thinks he's embarrassed himself. I give his hand a squeeze, letting him know everything is okay.

Ded doesn't even flinch at Ty's ramblings. With a small smirk, he nods to the taxi. "Come. We get to hotel, and we talk where no ears can hear."

I open the taxi door for Ty to slide in and get in behind him. Ivan sits in the front seat, telling the cabbie where to take us.

Once we're checked in at the hotel and in our room, Ty takes off his shoes and climbs to the top of the bed, and Ivan sits in the armchair beside the window. I perch at the end of the bed, waiting for him to speak.

His position and demeanor reminds me of when I was a kid. There was never any rushing Ivan—he spoke when he was ready.

I pull off my shoes and slide them under the bed, then put my elbows on my knees, waiting. A hacking cough racks Ivan's body, and his frame vibrates with the force of it. I sit up, raising an eyebrow. Alarm bells sound in my head, but I'm not sure what they mean. Ivan always told me to trust my instincts, but I'm not sure which ones I should be trusting right now. He waves me off, plucking a tissue from the box on the desk and wiping his mouth.

Finally, Ivan turns to me. "Tomorrow afternoon, one o'clock. The woman will be at eatery. She go to eatery once a week. She may be earlier, may be later. She does not go before one in afternoon. I have you set up on roof. You be ready, right?"

"We'll be ready. Where will you be?"

"Across the city. Her husband eat somewhere else. They communicate by phone

during lunch.”

I nod. “Okay. What do we do after it’s done?”

Ivan shrugs. “I have flight back home. You are free to do what you want.”

“How is home?”

“Cold.” He coughs again to emphasize his point. This cough wasn’t as bad as the first, but it still looks like it’s causing him pain.

“You should move to the States. You’d enjoy the warm weather of Florida. That’s where retirees go.”

Ivan waves a hand. “Pagh. Retired. I not retired yet. Still have kills to do.”

I hum. There’s no use trying to get Ivan to think about hanging it up. Like me and Blu, he loves the kill. He would probably go out with a gun or knife in his hand, seeing it as a life well lived.

“But you’re sick. You should probably live somewhere with better weather.”

He shakes his head. “Just travel cold. I been here for two week. Different weather than Russia. No doubt it will be better when I go home.”

Ivan looks past me at Ty, who has his legs pulled up to his chest and a small smile on his lips as he listens to us. He asks, “You are partner? How did that happen?”

Ty looks at me, and I nod, indicating he can fill Ivan in on how he found out what I really am. After he’s done, Ivan nods emphatically. “That is not ideal, but what can you do? You like it, taking life?”

“I wouldn’t say I like it,” Ty says, resting his chin on his knee, “but I like knowing someone that hurt or killed someone is no longer on the street.”

“Vigilante killer. Not bad.”

“What about you?” Ty asks, and I see the surprise on Ivan’s face. Like me, no one ever asks questions of us. We’re used to keeping all of our secrets close to the vest, not letting anyone in. But Ty is different. He knows what we are, and he’s not afraid. He’s not like us, but he accepts us.

“What you like to know, kolibri?”

A growl crops up at Ivan giving Ty a pet name, but Ty doesn’t seem to notice. Probably because I’ve been calling him kotenok for months now.

“How did you get started? Who taught you?”

Again, Ivan smiles, and I think he likes Ty. He seems relaxed, speaking freely about something I’m sure he’s only told me. “I am self-taught. Forgive me, kolibri. My English not so good. Patience, yes?”

“Of course.”

“I teach myself. I had to learn so I would not go to ...” Ivan pause, looking up to think of the word he wants. “prison.” He finally finishes. “Death penalty. But before that, hard labor. I am not ...” Ivan pauses, tapping the side of his head. “Sound...here.”

Ty’s face softens, and he leans his head on my shoulder. “You’re like Leo.”

“Yes. That is why me and him work good together.” Ivan gives me a long, searching

look, but before I can question it, he glances back at Ty, perking up more than I've seen him in years. "Tell me, kolibri. Have you used butterfly knife?"

Ty's eyes brighten. "No. You have one?"

"Always. It is my go-to. Want to learn?"

"Fuck yes."

For the next hour, Ivan teaches Ty how to open a butterfly knife and how to use it on someone. My hands aren't as dexterous as Ivan's so I can't flick it open as he does. Ty doesn't have that problem. Probably because he's a baker and needs deft hands. He snaps it open with ease after a few tries and has the strikes Ivan taught him learned in no time.

The look of pride Ivan reserved for me when I got something right is aimed at Ty, and my belly does that swooping it did when I figured out I was in love with him. I don't know what it means in this context, but I'm not going to worry about it.

"Good. You can keep that one. I have others," Ivan says, sitting down heavily in the chair. He looks exhausted. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his cheeks look gaunt.

"You okay, Ded?"

He stares at me for a few moments, and I start to think he won't answer. "I am perfect. What is word you use for tired from flight?"

"Jet lagged," Ty supplies.

"Yes. I am jet lag."

I don't exactly buy that since Ivan has been here for two weeks, and like me, he rarely sleeps longer than four hours. But there's no way I can refute it. I raise an eyebrow at him, but Ivan waves me off.

Ty slides the knife in his pocket and sits beside me. "We're going to take a quick nap, then go see some sights. You should join us, Ivan."

"I am not tourist, kolibri."

"Please?" Ty bats his eyes innocently at my grandfather, and I watch Ivan give in in real time. Looks like I'm not the only one enchanted by Ty. Even a hardened Russian psychopath doesn't stand a chance.

"Only a few hours. I am old man. I need sleep." Again, I give him a dry look. Ivan doesn't need sleep. Something in the back of my mind is saying Ivan isn't telling me everything. We're not exactly the sharing type, but we usually don't have to talk—we just know things. But for some reason, I can't figure out what Ivan isn't telling me.

Ty smiles, resting his head on my shoulder. "London Eye first?"

Looking down at him with a happy grin on my face, I nod. "London Eye first."

"Knock on door when you ready." Ivan goes to his room, leaving me with a tired, but excited Ty.

"I like your grandfather. Really stern, but I like him."

Yeah, he's something. "That's good, kotenok. Let's take a nap. We'll have a long day ahead of us if you want to visit every attraction." We plan to leave the morning after the hit, not wanting to linger around for risk of getting caught.

We strip down to our underwear, and we're out like a light before either of us can say anything else.

My phone alarm wakes us two hours later, and Ty eagerly bounds into the bathroom to get changed.

CHAPTER 22

LEO

The line for the London Eye is long, but I don't mind waiting with Ty. I'd rather slit everyone's throat so Ty can skip the line, but I don't act on it. Ivan looks like he wants to do the same. He keeps glancing at Ty, a soft smile playing on his face. I'm not sure what Ivan is thinking about my kotenok, but he seems to like him too.

We finally get in one of those bubbles on the London Eye, and it takes us slowly to the top. Even though it moves at a sedate pace, more and more of the landscape is revealed the higher we get. "Wow," Ty mutters, face pressed to the glass. "It's pretty. Come, Ivan, Leo. Check it out."

Like puppets on a string, we both move to where he's standing and listen to Ty gush about everything he sees. I don't really care about the scenery or sightseeing, but I love how Ty's face glows as he looks around.

After we get off the London Eye, we go past the Big Ben, taking pictures of Ty in front of it. He also weasels me and Ivan into a photo. Neither of us looks too upset by it. We ride a river cruise that Ty loves, smiling the entire time as he listens to the orator and reads the pamphlet we were handed.

By the time we're done with the sights, Ty is dead on his feet, and I'm shocked that Ivan looks bushed too. I've never seen him tired, even when he made me stay awake with him for forty-one hours on a stakeout. Something is definitely up.

We go back to our hotel, and after Ty insists we see Ivan to his room—pointedly ignoring Ivan’s stoney gaze—we return to our own. We take a quick shower and lie in bed. I don’t even remember falling asleep.

Ty and I float in and out of sleep until around ten the next morning, then we get Ivan to have some breakfast. Once again, we go over our plan, but we whisper in Russian, hoping not many people can understand it. We still keep our voices low, but we don’t switch to English. I told Ty it was necessary for us to communicate in a language not widely used in the UK so he wouldn’t feel left out.

A few hours later, we head to the city center to get into position. Ivan separates from us, heading to the nest he set up yesterday, and we go to the one he has sorted for me. There, I find the rifle case Ivan left and put the weapon together. I assemble it slowly, explaining what I’m doing to Ty as I go just in case he’d like to work with long-range rifles in the future.

Once it’s assembled, Ty sits beside me with a pair of binoculars, wanting to see what happens.

Looking through the scope, I scan the area, checking for my target. She hasn’t arrived yet. Pulling the weapon away, I ask Ty, “Wanna see?”

“Yeah,” he says excitedly. We trade, Ty handing me the binocular as he takes the rifle. I move behind him, adjusting his arms, posture and the rifle until they’re both in good positions.

“Is that comfortable?” I ask, tipping the barrel up just a touch.

Ty hums. I drop my hands and shuffle back, allowing Ty to get a feel for the rifle. I have to admit, he looks good with it in his hands. Then again, Ty looks fucking good all the time. Seeing him with a rifle perched on his knee only makes the image hotter.

After a few minutes, Ty lowers the rifle and hands it to me. “I think she’s here.”

I take it from him and get into position, scanning the area. On my second sweep, I spot her, sitting down with a drink and a sandwich. She’s older, maybe late fifties. That’s good in this business. Most of us don’t grow very old. Ivan is an anomaly, in his seventies and still taking contracts.

Her phone is to her ear, and she laughs like she just heard a funny joke, but her eyes are shifting around quickly, like she’s on high alert. Too bad she’s not looking up.

Clicking the setting on the scope, I put her in better view. I take up a good position, ready to pull the trigger when it’s time.

Ten minutes after my target arrives, my phone rings. I don’t move much to answer it so I don’t throw off my sights. I slowly ease my hand up to my ear, pressing the button on the Bluetooth to connect the call. “Ded.”

“I have him,” he says in his accented English. “Tell me you ready.”

“Ready. Count me down.” I click my sights once more, making sure my aim will be perfect. I pull in a deep breath, hold it for a beat, then blow it out slowly. I get tunnel vision, not paying attention to Ty’s burning gaze, what’s going on down below, or even my own discomfort as I get ready for the kill.

“Tri,” Ivan mutters, counting down from three in Russian, his voice and this ritual reminding me of our previous buddy kills. “Dva. Odin.”

When the last syllable leaves his mouth, I pull back on the trigger smoothly, holding it even after the shot is fired until I hear that lovely metallic click. Then I watch as the woman’s head explodes. A beautiful array of red mist and gray matter paint the air, her head knocking back, then her body following.

“Whoa,” Ty breathes beside me, bringing me back to my surroundings.

I only sit for a second to admire my handiwork before I hang up with Ivan and break down my weapon. Ty already has the case open, waiting for me to place the pieces on the foam inside. It takes me less than thirty seconds to have the pieces apart. It’s a shame this weapon will be incinerated—it’s fucking awesome.

Instead of dragging the heavy case down the stairs and in full view of people probably running and screaming from the crime scene, I slide it into a crevice that Ded told me would be on the roof. Someone will dispose of it soon. I turn to Ty, pulling his hat down snugly on his head. He does the same for me with a smile and kisses me quickly.

When Ivan mapped out this site for the kill, he had our exit strategy ready to go. We make our way from the roof by a staircase on the side of the building, trying to look as if we belong. No one notices us. They’re too busy running in the opposite direction, screaming and claiming a woman had been shot. I school my face in a puzzled expression that Ty mirrors, and we get swept up in the crowd.

I pull Ty to the Underground and catch a train to our hotel. We sit down, and Ty leans his head on my shoulder. “That was fucking hot,” he murmurs so only I can hear.

Smiling down at him, I rub my thumb over the back of his hand. “That’s exactly what I was thinking when I was watching you look down the scope. I would show you just how hot, but I don’t want to be arrested for indecent exposure.”

Ty giggles, tucking his arm through mine and leaning his head on my arm until the train gets to our stop.

When I get back the room, Ivan is already there, changed out of his black attire. “Any issues?”

“None. You?”

“No. Now, I go home. This city too hot.”

Ty steps up to Ded, throwing his arms around him. “It was great to meet you, Ivan. You raised a great man.”

For a few seconds, Ivan is frozen. Like me, he’s not big on anyone touching him. But after a few moments, he wraps his arms around Ty. “It was nice to meet you, kolibri. I will see you soon, yes?”

“I’d like that. You’re always welcome at our home, anytime. Right, Leo?” Ty lets Ivan go and walks back over to me, putting his arm around my waist.

“Ded is always welcome, though he’ll never fly that far.”

Ivan shrugs, walking over to the door. “You never know. Until next time, nieto.”

He breezes out the door, leaving me and Ty alone. Sighing happily, Ty turns to me. “Shower?”

“Lead the way,” I tell him.

Once we’re naked and in the shower, Ty has me against the wall, his mouth pressed firmly against mine. The icy chill of the tiles on my back do nothing to dim the red-hot desire coursing through me. His hard cock pokes against my thigh as he rolls his hips into me.

“Watching you today—” he pants against my mouth before he takes my lips again
“—I’ve been hard all day thinking about it. Thinking about your dick inside me while I ride you slow, looking into your eyes when we come.”

I reach around and grips his ass, digging my blunt nails into his flesh. Ty groans, holding me tight.

“How does that sound?”

Just the thought of Ty riding me has my cock twitching and leaking. I’ve thought about it for weeks. Every time he straddles my lap makes me wonder what he would look like impaled on my cock.

I slide my tongue into his mouth, tasting him. “Anything you want, kotenok.”

Ty grins at me slyly, giving me one more kiss before dropping to his knees. Without pause, he slides my hard cock between his lips, sucking me in deep. I groan, putting my hand behind his head. “Shit,” I drawl. I stare down at him, watching my cock appear and disappear between his lips. He flicks his eyes up to mine, the mismatched orbs blazing as he swallows me whole.

My head tips back, and I grunt, fucking his mouth. It feels so fucking good, always hot and warm, his wet tongue gliding over my shaft.

He pulls my cock from his lips, kissing along the shaft and slapping it across his wet tongue. I curse, holding the back of his neck as he laps at me. “Let’s go to the room.”

Ty stands, pecking me once before he turns the water off. I drag him back to me, kissing him long and hard, anticipating feeling Ty’s hole clenching around my hard shaft.

When we’re dry, we make our way to the room, kissing and touching as we go.

Lying on my back, I palm my cock, jerking it slowly. “You want me like this?”

His hand wrapped around his rock-hard erection, Ty watches me, licking his lips as he tugs himself off. His eyes are locked on my length as I stroke myself. “Fuck yes.” He meets my gaze. “Lube?”

I point to the bag that’s on the floor by the bed. With a last look of longing at my cock, he hurries to the bag and pulls out the lube. He tosses it beside me and climbs onto my lap, moving my hand so our cocks can meet.

His mouth lands on mine, and I open for him, gliding my tongue over his. My arms go around his waist, and I hold him close as I roll my hips into him. Ty’s warm weight settles something in me. Since he’s been in my life, I’ve felt a quiet contentment I didn’t know I was missing. He’s completed me in more ways than I can describe.

We explore each other’s mouths, licking and tasting. I want to roll him over and push into him, but Ty wants to ride me, and I’m on board for that.

When he pulls his mouth from mine, he grabs the lube and slicks his fingers. Once they’re coated, his hand drifts behind his back and down to his hole. I want to see what he’s doing, but I don’t want him to move from over me. His cock throbs against mine, leaking precum as he moans.

Ty and I keep eye contact as he gets himself ready for me, his hand moving slowly, then faster as he opens his hole.

“Fuck, Leo. I want you so bad.” His eyes drift closed, but he pries them open so he can focus on me.

“You have me, kotenok,” I tell him, angling my hips so our dicks brush. “Are you ready? I need to be in you.”

He nods and removes his fingers. Grabbing the lube, he drizzles some on my cock, running his hand up and down my shaft to make sure I'm covered.

Climbing on top of me, Ty rests his hands on my chest and slots my cock between his lubed ass cheeks. "Fuck me, Leo. Put your dick inside." He angles his hips until his hole is resting above my cockhead.

I take hold of the base of my dick, gripping his hip in one hand as I push into his tight channel. His eyes meet mine, mouth cranked open in a silent gasp. If he didn't look so fucking blissed out, I'd think I was hurting him.

"Grgh, fuck," I curse, the pulsing of his hole feeling fucking phenomenal.

"Holy fuck, Leo," Ty grits out through clenched teeth, face tight with concentration as he lowers himself on me. "God, you feel so good."

When I'm fully seated, Ty leans forward and takes my lips in a greedy kiss. Then he clenches his inner walls, making me groan in his mouth. Jesus. He's never done that before. Fuck. It feels fucking amazing.

As he kisses me, Ty rolls his hips, riding me slowly, my cock stroking against his walls. He whimpers in my mouth, and I swallow the sound, wanting to taste more. Ty frames my face as I thrust into him.

When I pick up speed, Ty snatches his mouth from me, groaning as he places his hands on my chest, lifting and lowering his hips. "Leo, baby. Yes, fuck me."

I tighten my hands around his waist, lifting my hips to impale him on my cock. Ty cries out, bouncing on my dick as his blunt nails dig into my pecs. A loud groan leaves my lips as Ty grips my cock with his hole again, making it hard for me to thrust into him.

When I curse again, holding him tight to stave off my orgasm, Ty looks down at me with heavy-lidded eyes and a sex-drunk smile. “Feel good?” he mutters, squeezing my dick with his walls again before rolling his hips. “Tell me.”

“You know you feel good, kotenok.” I manage to grunt out while I’m pounding into his hole. “You always feel good. Squeeze my dick again.” He does, and a tingle licks up my spine, my release imminent.

Ty kisses me messily as I piston into him in rapid thrusts.

“Tell me you’re close.”

“So close. Christ .” I bite my bottom lip, fucking him with everything I have as he meets my thrusts.

He’s taking me higher than I thought I could go, making my head swim as I try to focus on making him come first, getting him off before me. All I can do is peg his prostate, hoping that gets him there before my orgasm shoots from me.

He has me going out of my mind with pleasure. I eagerly chase my orgasm as I try to push him over the edge.

“Fuck, kotenok. Come for me, baby.”

Ty rests his hands on my pecs, grinding down on me as he absorbs my thrusts. He twists his hips, fucking himself on my dick hard. He moans every time my cock hits that special place inside him.

Just looking at him has me so close to the edge. I know I can’t hold back, no matter how hard I try to stave it off. Without warning, my back bows off the bed, and my cock erupts, spilling my seed into Ty. Rope after rope rips from me as I grip his hips

tight, this orgasm taking every ounce of my strength.

Thankfully, Ty is right behind me, his hips stuttering and a whispered grunt of, “I’m coming,” entering my mouth as he comes without touching his dick. He cries out when wetness hits my abs, and I let loose a relieved groan that he’s reached his peak.

After he stops shuddering, Ty collapses on my chest. He kisses me gently, lips soft on mine.

Sighing, I roll us onto our sides. Ty reaches up and pushes my hair back from my sweaty forehead. His eyes are shining as he smiles at me. “That was amazing.”

“Agreed.” I murmur dazedly. He laughs, kissing my chin. “What was that you did when I was inside you?” I ask in wonder. My cock throbs as I think about the way his hole hugged my dick.

Ty laughs sleepily, shaking his head. “I can’t tell all my secrets.”

Chuckling, I kiss him once more, rubbing my hand up and down his back. “I love you, kotenok.”

With a happy sigh, Ty says, “I love you too, baby.”

CHAPTER 23

LEO

A few weeks after we return from London, I receive a call from the contractors that they're ready to start the renovations. In about three months, Ray's Beanery will become Tessa and Ray's Bakery and Beanery.

Ty is over the moon. He moves around the space that will be expanded to encompass his dream, smiling from ear to ear. "This is great, Leo. I can't believe this is happening." He clasps his hands under his chin, looking around with bright eyes. "Are you and June sure this is okay? I just?—"

I walk over to him, placing a finger against his lips. This isn't the first time we've had this conversation. Ty keeps asking if it's wise to expand the coffee shop when it's already doing so well. His biggest fear is us being shut down for a few weeks and possibly losing business to the chain coffee shops. But we leased a food truck that will be right outside during the time that the contractors will be working on the beanery side, so there will still be coffee and baked treats available to order.

"We're sure," I tell him, kissing the furrow between his eyebrows. "June thinks it's a great idea to have your baking in-house. He said it's for purely selfish reasons, like those cupcakes."

Ty grins, shaking his head as he continues to look around.

"I keep telling you, Ty. I'll do anything you for. Giving you a bakery is easier than

finding someone for you to kill.”

Now he barks a laugh, his head tossed back and his teeth flashing. “Thanks for both. Really. I appreciate it all.”

I lightly peck him then lead him around so he can have a look at everything.

The plan is to knock down the wall where the stage is to make room for the bakery itself. We’ll build a longer counter space, so we can have orders for coffee and baking ready for customers without them bumping into each other. We’ll add cases that will display all of Ty’s baked goods, giving them their own spaces. Since we’re building onto the coffee shop, we’ve decided to upgrade the coffee machines as well. His kitchen will have at least two industrial-sized ovens and metal countertops that are easy for cleanup. The contractors are also fixing the walk-in refrigerator the restaurant next door already had.

We finish our tour and grab food from a drive-thru, driving around the city and talking while we eat.

“I have to start doing some best man shit soon. Sam and Beth's wedding is in four months. All I know is to organize a bachelor’s party and make sure he shows up to the wedding sober. What else is there?”

“Don’t ask me,” I mutter around a fry he stuffs into my mouth. “No one I know has gotten married. I’m sure Blu and June don’t plan on getting hitched either.” I glance over at him briefly. “Do you want to get married?”

He sputters, choking on the soda he was sipping. Eyes cracked wide, he asks, “Are you proposing?”

A laugh bubbles up my throat as I shake my head. “No. I was asking if you wanted to

in your future.”

Ty lets out a long breath. “Oh. Okay. To answer your question, I’m not sure. I think for most people, marriage is the logical next step. Like you date, get married, have three kids, a dog, and the white picket fence. But that’s not me. Not because I didn’t see a positive example of it. My mom and dad were married for decades, and their marriage was solid. But I don’t know. Some things are better left as they are. If I date someone and we want to spend the rest of our lives together, a piece of paper doesn’t make it any more serious. The only thing I can think a marriage would be good for is in the event my partner is sick and I need to make medical decisions. Then again, a medical proxy can fix that.”

“Is that a no?” I ask jokingly.

“It’s a no. I’m on the fence about kids, but right now, marriage isn’t the goal for me. I like going to weddings though. They’re fun. Good food, good music most of the time, and the couple is happy and dressed nicely. I like the atmosphere. But I don’t think I want to be standing up in front of a bunch of people, some I might not even like, to commit my life to someone. What about you?”

“Never thought about it. Never thought I’d be with someone long-term to lead to marriage.”

Ty nods, holding another fry to my mouth. “Then we’re on the same page. That makes things a lot easier for the future.”

I hum, chewing my food. He’s right. If Ty wanted to get married, I would put a ring on it, but I like where our relationship stands right now. What we have is perfect—a slip of paper won’t make it stronger. Some people feel strongly about the institution of marriage, but it’s not something I’ve given thought to.

We pull into the condo, the valet taking my keys. When we step into the lobby, the doorman says, “Mr. Anderson?”

I look at him with a raised eyebrow. It’s very rare he gives me anything but a polite nod.

“You have a visitor.” He inclines his head to a chair by the elevator, and both my eyebrows rise this time.

Ivan.

His eyes are trained on me and Ty, who bounds over to Ivan with a wide smile.

“I didn’t think you’d actually come,” Ty says brightly, hugging Ivan when he gets to his feet. Ivan wraps his arms around Ty, that same smile on his face that makes him resemble a robot trying to mimic emotion. I’m glad Blu taught me lessons in emotions at an early age. If left up to Ivan, I’d have been locked up a long time ago.

I look at Ivan, really look at him. He’s more tired and gaunt than he did when we were in London.

“What’s up?” I ask when he unwraps himself from Ty. “I didn’t think you’d ever set foot in America.”

“Yes, well. We need to talk.” He glances at Ty, and asks, “Can we speak Russian? My English miserable.”

We step inside the elevator, Ty pasted to my side. “Sure. I’ll give you two some time alone.”

The elevator dings when it reaches our floor. Once inside, Ty hugs Ivan once more

and kisses my cheek before he heads to our room.

I motion to Ivan to have a seat on the couch while I go in the kitchen to get us something to drink. Ivan lets out one of those deep hacking coughs that follows me the whole way. The same thing that tickled my brain in the UK tickles it now.

I pull glasses from the cabinet for our drinks. Why is Ivan here? He vowed to never set foot in America, since it's where my grandmother fled to get away from him. There were many jobs he would have enjoyed here that he shuffled off to me so he wouldn't have to come.

Ivan is leaning heavily against the back of the couch, his eyes closed. They pop open when he hears me, and he sits up straight—or as straight as he can—and takes the glass of water I hand him.

“What's up?” I ask again, this time in Russian. “There's no way this is a social visit.”

He replies back in kind, his Russian faster than mine, and it takes a minute for my brain to catch up. “As a matter of fact, it is. I want to meet my grandson. Blu. And see my son, Dimitri. Aleksandr is dead, but Dimitri is still alive, and I want to see him before it is too late.”

“Who are Aleksandr and Dimitri?” My father's name was Henry, and Blu's father is Clinton.

“Their mother changed their names when she absconded with them to America. Clinton is Blu's father's name now. I spoke to your father when he sent you to me, and he said he never wanted to hear from me again. He is dead, so no need to worry about him. I have not heard from Clinton in over four decades. It is time I do.”

“Why? Why is it so urgent?”

“I’m dying, Leo. Lung cancer. I have known for a while and did not plan to come. But my soul will rest better if I can see the two of them.”

The gut punch at the news that Ivan is dying is unexpected. Ivan and I have a good relationship, with him treating me as well as can be expected with both of us lacking basic human emotions. He took me in and did the best he could with me. Hell, he could have killed me instead of honing me into a hitman able to sate his bloodlust and stay a free man at the same time.

My chest aches at the news that any day now, Ivan will be taken from me. Clearing the unexpected lump from my throat—since I never cry or feel such strong emotion about anyone—I say, “Yeah. I think Blu is at work, but I can call him and see. Grandpa, why didn’t you tell me in London?”

“We had a job to do,” he says casually, covering his mouth with a handkerchief as he coughs so violently I can hear his bones rattle. When he pulls the cloth away, I see it stained with blood. “I wasn’t at risk of dying right then.”

“You should be in a hospital.”

Ivan laughs without his lips tipping up into a smile. “So the doctors and nurses would make me stay until I die, then I get buried in an unmarked grave since I have no family in Russia? No. I’d rather die here with family.”

I nod, understanding now. He doesn’t want to be alone in his last days.

“Let me call Blu, see if he can leave work early.” I look at my watch, and it’s just after three. If Blu isn’t off now, he will be soon. “We can go to Clinton’s house when you have the chance to talk to Blu.” I haven’t seen Clinton since I was a child. I’m not sure of the reception I’ll receive. He wasn’t mean to me like my father, but I could tell he was a little afraid of me back then.

Looking at me intently, Ivan leans forward. “This man, Ty. How serious are you about him?”

I tense, hoping Ivan won’t spout some dumb shit. “Very. He’s mine.”

Ivan nods. “That is good. I never had the capacity to feel anything for anyone but you my entire life. Even though it’s a foreign concept to me, I wanted you to find the happiness most of the world feels. The way you look at each other, I think you have found what has eluded me all my life.” He switches back to English. “And I like him. He good for you.”

“He is. I love him, Ded.”

Ivan nods sagely. “I can tell.”

I pull out my phone and give Blu a call. He’s off work, upstairs with June. I ask him to come down because I have someone I want him to meet. I can tell Blu’s antennas are up, but he trusts me, so he doesn’t ask any questions.

“Be right there,” he says before hanging up the phone.

Two minutes later, there’s a knock at my door, and Ty shouts that he’ll get it. Blu and June round the corner, looking puzzled.

When Blu sees Ivan, his eyes widen, and he freezes in place. June looks back and forth in confusion, taking Blu’s hand.

Ty steps up, grabbing June’s elbow. “Come on. They need to talk. I’ll explain everything.”

After they leave, I stand and motion to Ivan. “Blu, this is Ivan. Our grandfather. He

raised me.”

Slowly, Blu walks closer, his eyes not leaving Ivan’s face. He sits down across from him and stares. Blu has the facial expression perfectly in the middle of me and Ivan’s. He can appear stern, almost scary when he’s not trying to fake emotions. When he has to, he looks like your average hard-ass but not like a psychopath. Maybe Ivan could have learned a thing or two in that area.

“I didn’t think I’d ever meet you,” Blu finally says.

“Me either,” Ivan says in a hoarse voice. I’m not sure if it’s from his coughing fits or from emotion. “I do not have much time. Weeks, maybe months if lucky. I should have met years ago. But I did not want to disrupt your life.”

Blu nods, still staring at Ivan as if he’s trying to memorize his face. “What’s wrong with you? Why don’t you have much time?”

“Cancer. Radiation has not made tumor small, so I decline more care. Easier to come here and die in comfort.”

I pipe up. “I have a place about an hour away I can take you to. I was telling Ty it reminded me of our house in Russia, without the snow. I think you’ll like it.”

Sighing, Ivan nods, then breaks out into a fit of coughing. When he has himself under control, he says to Blu, “Your father? Where is he?”

“Home, I presume,” Blu shrugs. “He retired from his job a few months ago. Do you want me to call and tell him you’re in town?”

“No. Surprise him.”

Blu pulls out his phone and steps into another room.

“You should have told me,” I say to Ivan with more venom than I ever have before. “I should have known. I could have brought you here for top-of-the-line care when you found out. I have enough money to make sure of it.”

“Nyet. I wanted to stay in my home for as long as possible. I also had to settle affairs. I have left everything to you and Blu. Now that is complete, I can live my last days with family.”

That foreign lump forms in my throat again just as Blu steps back into the room. “He’s home. We can go now if you’re up for it. He lives an hour and a half away.”

Ivan stands on shaky legs, using the arm of the couch to assist him. I don’t try to help—he’s too proud to accept it anyway. He’s dying, not helpless. “I just spent ten hours on flight to America. I can handle one hour, nieto.”

Blu dips his head. “Understood. Little fox,” he says over his shoulder. A few seconds later, June comes out of my bedroom with Ty, pasting himself to Blu’s side. “This is Ivan. My grandfather.”

June smiles wide and holds out his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m June.”

“He’s mine,” Blu says simply.

That stiff smile blooms on Ivan’s face when he shakes June’s hand. “It is nice to meet you, June.”

I hold out my arm, and Ty ducks under it, threading our fingers together. “We have to take a quick trip to Blu’s father’s house. You two keep each other company.”

Ty nods. "I can teach him now to bake those cupcakes he likes."

"Can you bake raspberry pirogue?" Ivan asks, his face lighting up in a way I've never seen. "I have not had in many years. Would love some before I die."

Ty gasps, making his way to Ivan and grasping his hands. "Die? Ivan, are you sick?"

He nods. "I am, kolibri. But it is okay. I am here. Dying," he shrugs, "not so bad."

A small sob leaves Ty's mouth as he gingerly hugs Ivan. "I'm glad you came, Ivan. We'll take care of you. Right?" Ty peers at me pleadingly, and I nod. He glances back at Ivan, framing his frail face. Even though Ivan towers over Ty, he looks small. "You don't need to worry about anything."

"Spasiba, kolibri." He pats Ty's hand softly. "Now, I need to see my son."

Ty hugs Ivan, then walks back over to me. "I'll find out how to make the pirog." Ty tries the word out, and Ivan nods appreciatively when he gets it right. Ty beams at him.

Bringing his face to mine, I give Ty a quick kiss. "I'll be back in a few hours. Love you."

"Love you too. Take your time."

Ivan, Blu, and I ride the elevator down in silence and climb into Blu's SUV when the valet pulls it around. The SUV is easier for Ivan to get in and out of, something I'm sure Blu recognized.

The drive is quiet as well. From the backseat, I watch how Ivan looks around at the surroundings, his face scrunched as if he's trying to remember everything he sees.

My heart thumps for a completely different reason than what Ty makes me feel. The impending death of the only parent that gave a shit about me hurts more than I imagined it would.

It's insane that I figured he would be around forever, but Ivan always seemed larger than life. A Russian force no one could defeat. I've seen him take down men twice, three times his size with ease. For him to be brought low by cancer almost seems laughable, though there's nothing funny about it.

We pull up to the extremely large house, Blu parking in the middle of the circular driveway. Ivan steps out slowly, like everything hurts, but he squares his shoulders and follows Blu up the stairs to the door.

It flies open, and an older version of Blu steps out, a look of disbelief on his face, his gaze bouncing from me to Ivan. Even though Blu and I have been in touch, I haven't brought up wanting to see my aunt Barbara and uncle Clinton again. There was no reason for me to. When I left North Carolina for Russia, I never looked back, wanting to forge my own life.

His hand flying to his mouth, Clinton mutters, "Brad? Papa?"

Ivan straightens his shoulders and nods his head solemnly. "Privet, Dimitri."

CHAPTER 24

TYSHAWN

Two days later, Leo, June, Blu, Ivan, and I are sitting around the table at Blu's parents, Clinton and Barbara's house. They asked us to have dinner as a family since Ivan dropped the bomb on Clinton that he's dying.

I don't know Ivan well, but I really like him, and it hurts he's not going to be around for much longer. When we met in London, I figured there would be plenty of time for me to get to know the man that raised Leo. While he's here though, I'll make sure to keep him comfortable.

Ivan has been staying with us in Leo's office, but half the time, I forget he's there. He moves around so quietly. Then he'll let loose one of those hacking coughs, and I'll remember.

I did manage to make the raspberry pirog he asked me about, and he told me it was the best he's had. My heart felt light as he ate, complimenting me in both English and Russian.

Now we're at Blu's parent's home, passing around more pirog after we've finished our meal.

"This is fantastic," Barbara says, looking at me with a smile. "I've never tasted anything like it. It's your favorite dessert, Ivan?"

Ivan's eyes flick over to Barbara, and her wide smile falters a bit. It's hard to be stared down like that by a psychopath, but she's been holding her own. "It is. Ty did good job." Ivan squeezes my shoulder, and I pat his frail hand.

It's only been about a month since London, and Ivan has already lost a ton of weight since then. I've been making sure he eats well and drinks plenty of water, but the cancer riddling his body won't allow him to maintain weight. I hate seeing it.

Clinton looks at Ivan, his gaze questioning. "We didn't have it when we were growing up. It seems Mom didn't want any reminders of you."

If Ivan feels any way about that remark, he doesn't show it. "I suppose that make sense. She change your name, after all."

"No, she kept it. Dimitri is my middle name."

Ivan's throat bobs, but he simply nods.

Clinton's eyes drift to Leo. "Brad, I?—"

"Leo."

"I'm sorry?"

"Leo. That's my name. I haven't gone by Brad in almost twenty years."

Dipping his head, Clinton picks up the conversation. "Leo, I didn't think I'd see you again. Henry said you were gone with Papa, but that's it. We tried to look for you—for both of you—but we hit a dead end. Searching for someone wasn't as easy as it is now."

Ivan places a shaky hand on Leo's shoulder. "Leo was good kid. Never had problem from him." Leo smiles at Ivan, like they're a normal family, not an older generation of psychopath who trained a younger one. "We stay off grid. Not easy to find. Not your fault."

In a low, sad voice, Barbara tells Ivan, "I'm sorry to hear about your diagnosis. If there is anything we can do ..."

"It is okay," Ivan mutters, pulling his handkerchief from his pocket and coughing into it. "Seeing Dimitri is all I want before I die."

Barbara reaches out and pats Clinton's hand.

For the rest of our time there, we talk about unimportant things, just content to have a conversation. We stay for another hour before Blu says, "We need to get home, Dad, Mom. We still have an hour's drive, and I don't want to be on the road too late. Besides, Ivan needs his rest."

"Of course," Barbara says, getting up from the table. "Let me make you all some leftovers." She shoos us away when we try to help and busies herself cleaning up the table and packing us some food.

When we have bowls stacked high in our hands, we bid them farewell. Clinton hugs Ivan for many long minutes.

Once outside, June gives me a pointed look, and I nod. I hook my arm through Ivan's and ask, "How are you feeling?"

He peers at me with tired eyes. "I am okay, kolibri."

"You up for a surprise?"

Ivan nods, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief. “I like surprise.”

Leo raises an eyebrow. “Surprise?”

“Yeah, me and June have something for the three of you. We need to hurry though. To make sure we have enough time.”

Though Leo and Blu try to pull information out of us, we don’t tell. I don’t think Ivan cares one way or another, just along for the ride.

We all pile into Blu’s SUV, June driving so he won’t have to give Blu directions.

It takes us about an hour and a half to get where we need to go, since our surprise is outside the city. I’m hoping our surprise is still where we left it earlier today. June assured me he gave the right dosage for them not to wake for about eight hours, and we’ve only been gone for a little over six.

“Where are we going, little fox?” Blu asks, looking out of the window. “Wait. I know this place.”

June smiles. “It’s where we killed the priest.”

He parks right outside of the building, and we file out of the car, entering the building. June leads us deeper inside until we get to the kitchen, where a man is hanging from a hook, gagged and drugged.

The man we surprised the guys with tonight, Spencer Gordon, is a serial rapist, out on bail for some unknown reason. We caught him as he was ready to skip town. June and I were afraid we wouldn’t be able to do it on our own, since we only saw Leo and Blu drug people, but we made it work. It was actually easier than we thought—sneaking into his home and jabbing the needle in his throat while he was

looking at something on his phone. The real bitch was getting the guy down the stairs of his third floor apartment. That took a lot of lifting, reminding me that I haven't been back to the gym in weeks.

Now Spencer is here, tied up, and waiting for Blu, Ivan, and Leo to do whatever they want. June and I decided to take a backseat and watch the three of them work.

"Surprise," I say, inclining my head to Spencer. "Ivan, you didn't get to have your retirement kill, so I figured you three would like to do it together."

Leo chuckles, kissing the top of my head. "You're perfect, kotenok."

Ivan says, "Thank you, kolibri. This is thoughtful."

Leo and Blu work together to pull the man off the hook and lay him on the stainless-steel table. Ivan takes some rope and ties the man down. These knots are different than what Leo taught me with Ian. They remind me of the knots I saw holding the man down when I walked in on Leo. It's funny how small things like that stick out in my mind.

When that's done, Leo and Blu step back as Ivan circles the table, looking at Spencer. "Blu," Ivan says, without looking up. "Have you ever peel off fingernail?"

Blu lets out a noise that sounds like a chuckle, but I can't really tell because his face doesn't move. "Never. I usually just get the kill out of the way."

Ivan tsks. "Torture is fun. Get a lot of information with torture. And it help release stress." Ivan finally looks up, making eye contact with me. "Wake him up."

I dig in the bag and pull out the smelling salts. I crack one and slide the small package under Spencer's nose. I step back when he snorts and sneezes. He tries to sit

up, but the ropes Ivan tied hold him fast, and he can only lift his head. Spencer looks around frantically, his eyes landing on each of us before they lock on June, the least threatening of the five of us.

“What’s this all about? Who are you people?”

Ivan leans his hip against the table, arms crossed. In this moment, he doesn’t look like he’s tired or in pain. He appears like he’s in control and will fuck someone up. His eyes flash as they dance down the body of the man spread out on the table before he meets his gaze again. “We are death, suka.”

Spencer trembles, pulling at the ropes. “Why are you doing this? I’m innocent. I didn’t do shit.”

“You’re not innocent,” June says coldly, showing me a side of him I haven’t seen yet. His face is stern, and his voice takes on a deeper and more threatening quality that sends a shiver down my spine. I like it. “You raped five women. They’ll never be the same again because of you. You deserve this.”

Spencer’s eyes bore into June, probably not seeing him as the weaker one after all. “Those bitches asked for it! They asked for it!”

Blu steps up to the man and punches him in the nose, making it explode and blood gush everywhere. The man cries out, pulling at his ropes. His fingers flex, like he wants to cover his nose. Too fucking bad, Ivan tied those ropes tight as fuck.

“You were saying something about fingernails?” Blu asks Ivan.

Ivan’s eyes light up as he nods, reaching into the bag on the table and pulling out a pair of pliers. He grabs Spencer’s hand and holds it still, even though Spencer fights against him. “You want to get good grip,” Ivan explains, doing exactly what he’s

telling Blu, “and pull up. Most people think you pull nail out immediately, but that will only dislocate finger. A good cause of pain but not what we want. When you pull up,” Ivan pulls up on Spencer’s finger, making him scream and thrash on the table, “you twist at same time. Then, you have full fingernail.” Ivan does the steps he outlined and shows Blu the fingernail he pulled off. There’s more blood than I expect but not enough that Spencer will bleed out anytime soon.

Flicking the nail onto the table, Ivan turns the pliers over and hands them to Blu. “You try. It is easy.”

Blu flashes a smile at Ivan, taking the pliers. Grasping Spencer’s other hand—despite the screams and protests of the man—he places the pliers under the nail of the index finger and does what Ivan told him.

“Well done, nieto,” Ivan says when Blu has the fingernail off. “It is not hard, see? Fingernail hard, but also brittle. Will come off with good technique. When I had target that had information, peeling fingernail is best way to extract information.”

The man on the table sobs hard, his cries filling the space of the kitchen. None of us pay him any mind. He doesn’t have our sympathy.

Reaching into the kill kit, Ivan pulls out a sharp fillet knife, places it against Spencer’s leg, and slices. The skin splits apart easily, the red of his muscle showing prominently before the bleeding starts. It takes Spencer a few beats to realize he’s even been cut—his screams cropping up three seconds after the wound is inflicted.

“Sharp blade,” Ivan whispers before he looks up at Leo. “Do you remember how to flay?”

Leo smiles, his dimples popping, and I swoon, despite Leo smiling about cutting someone’s skin off. But how his eyes light up and his smile is so genuine, it’s hard to

stop the thrill from traveling down my spine. “I remember. But I’d rather watch you work.”

Ivan grins stiffly and nods. He slides on a new pair of gloves and grasps the man’s thigh, right above where he sliced him. From there, he slides the knife into the wound and cuts only the skin in a long strip. Spencer screams so hard he blacks out. Ivan doesn’t mind—he simply waits until he wakes up to get started again.

Over and over, Ivan slices off the man’s skin, flaying him. Blood flows, and screams bounce off the walls. Ivan doesn’t stop until the man shudders and stops breathing.

“I have not had man die of shock in many years,” Ivan mutters, tossing the knife back into the kit. He looks over at me with a twinkle in his eyes. “Thank you for this, kolibri. And you too, June. Best retirement gift.”

“You’re welcome, Ivan.” I walk over to him and give him a long hug, not worried about the blood getting on me.

Pulling back, I smiles at him once more before I jog outside to get the cleaning kits and our changes of clothes. June and I made sure to pack something for everyone to ride home in that isn’t covered in blood.

Since there’s four of us—Ivan having used most of his energy on the kill—we make quick work of cleaning and disposing of evidence. I pull out the tarp, and Leo and Blu roll Spencer into it. They hoist him up and carry him out to the SUV while Blu and I finish wiping up the blood from the table.

When we’re finished and changed—Leo helping Ivan into fresh clothes—I grab Ivan under the arm and wrap my arm around his waist. I can tell he’s proud, but I’m not sure he has any energy left in the tank to even get to the car. June takes his other side, smiling up at Ivan when their eyes meet. “Kolibri, lisica. I appreciate this gift. You

two are perfect for my grandsons.”

“Of course,” June says, blushing at Ivan’s words. I’m sure my face is flaming too. It means a lot that Ivan thinks we’re good for Leo and Blu. It means he accepts us as family.

We make our way slowly to the exit, taking it easy for Ivan’s sake. We make it outside, and Ivan climbs into the front seat under his own steam. June slides in the backseat with me and Leo, sighing when he leans against the headrest. “What a long day.”

I nod in agreement, laying my head on Leo’s chest. “But a good one.”

“Yes,” Ivan says sleepily from the front seat. “A very good day.”

CHAPTER 25

LEO

Two weeks after his retirement kill, I'm standing over the casket gazing at the weathered but timeless face of Ivan. He looks at peace, now that he's not coughing and in pain.

Ty stands beside me, wiping tears from his eyes as he gazes down at Ivan. "I'm going to miss him." He sniffles.

I know he is. Ivan and Ty got close in the two weeks we stayed at the cabin. Almost every day, Ivan would ask for a Russian baked delicacy, and Ty would bake it for him, trying to pack in memories for him in his last days. They also talked. A lot. I never joined in on the conversations, but I liked to listen to them. There was so much I didn't know about Ivan.

The cabin we lived in while in Russia was the one he was born in, having stayed there his entire life. His parents left him there when he was sixteen without warning and never returned. He had no idea what happened to them and didn't want to know. He said being left alone was the only time in his life he was at peace.

"That was," he said in his heavily accented English, "until I met you, nieto. You give me purpose."

A lump formed in my throat as I listened to him. I don't know if I'll cry—I never cry, no matter what happens—but I did feel more emotion listening to Ivan than I have

about anything in my life, besides my love for Ty.

Ty fed Ivan his meals, taking care of him better than I could have. I tried, but Ty shooed me away, saying he had it. I was there when he needed me for anything, like helping Ivan out of bed and getting him in the shower, but other than that, Ty took on the job of being his home health aide. He was there, making sure Ivan was comfortable. I thought after the first few days, he'd get tired of it, but Ty seemed content to make sure Ivan had peace at his end.

The day before he died, Ivan sat up with more vigor than Ty and I were used to. "Take me to see trees, kolibri, nieto. I want to feel earth before I return to it."

We got him dressed in warm clothes and led him outside, to the place we used for target practice. Ivan smiled when he saw the bullet holes in the tree trunks and the shell casings on the ground. He gazed around with weary eyes and breathed in deeply, filling his lungs with the scent of the morning. "This perfect. Remind me of home." He looked down at both of us, his eyes drooping but his face radiating happiness, something I've never seen outside of a kill. "But here, I have family."

Ty buried his face in Ivan's chest, not wanting him to see his tears. "You're my family, Ivan. I'm glad I got to know you."

"Me too, kolibri." He hugged Ty tight, his thin arms not seeming to want to let him go.

To my surprise, when he let him go, he waved me over, arms outstretched for me. I went willingly, receiving the first hug I'd ever gotten from Ivan. Even though he was frail, it packed strength. I held on as long as I could.

The next morning, we found Ivan dead, arms over his chest and a permanent smile etched on his face.

Now, we're holding his funeral, his family around to mourn him. That's to be expected, since the only friends Ivan had were handlers whose faces no one saw.

Kissing Ty on the top of his head, I say, "I know, *kotenok*. He's not in pain anymore." I would never give Ty any platitudes, but it's true in this case. In his last days, Ivan was in an immense amount of pain, but he tried not to show it. If I hadn't lived with him for eight years, around each other night and day, I never would have noticed. He looks almost serene now.

It's rare that someone in our business would have a natural death—as far as it not being a murder. And with Ivan being seventy five, he surpassed his life expectancy by at least a quarter of a century.

Blu steps up beside us, peering at Ivan's relaxed face. "He looks like Clinton. It's uncanny."

"And nothing like Henry." I guess my father took after our grandmother, who died before I was born. I don't know what she looked like.

June wraps his arm around Blu's waist. "You okay?"

"Perfect, little fox," he mutters, kissing his forehead.

We all take a seat, allowing Clinton and Barbara to approach the coffin. Like Ty, Clinton is in a puddle of tears as he speaks softly to Ivan's corpse. It must be something that regular people do, because Ivan sure can't hear him. They spent more time together after we went to Clinton's house for dinner. He and Barbara visited the cabin a few times to talk to Ivan and for Clinton to reconnect with him in his last days. I didn't like so many people knowing about my little slice of heaven, but it was important to Ivan, so I didn't complain.

The funeral officiant says some things about Ivan being a good man and returning to the earth and becoming dust. That last part is true. Ivan being a good man? Not so much. He was as good to me as could be expected for a man that was teaching his grandson how to torture and kill, and he wasn't abusive. Unlike my father and the stupid fucking director from the reform home, he didn't hit me. He took the time to teach me as much as he could. His training might have hurt—like when he made me dig graves in freezing temperatures—but it made me better at my job. I got strong, able to break through ground that was nearly frozen solid. That strength came in handy.

After the funeral is over, we stand around and talk for a moment. Clinton brings me in for a long hug that I return, only so I can still appear normal to him. He knows I'm like Blu, but he doesn't give me the haunted looks that my parents used to give me. Clinton actually treated me like I was a kid, not a burden, even though I could tell he didn't think I was normal.

Pulling away, he pats my shoulder. "Come visit me, Leo. We'd love to have you and Ty over for dinner."

"I will, Uncle Clinton. Great to see you, Aunt Barbara," I say to her, giving her a kiss on the cheek and a quick hug.

Clinton wipes under his eyes as more tears leak. "I'd like to hear more stories about Papa, if you don't mind."

"Don't mind at all." There's not much I can tell him that doesn't involve torturing, killing, or disposing of a body. Good thing I'm adept at lying and can weave a tale together to make him happy.

I lead Ty out of the funeral home, opening the car door for him so he can slide inside. He sighs heavily when I lean over him to put on his seatbelt. Kneeling just outside the

door, I tip his face over to me while I grip his hand. “You okay, kotenok?”

He nods, even though a few tears leak from his eye. “I am. I know he’s not in pain, but it’s sad that he’s gone. I know you don’t feel regular feelings, but?—”

“I know what you mean. I’m sad too. Ivan was the only parent I had that cared about me. After spending so much time with someone, it’s hard not to feel something for them. Ivan was ... my family.” For the first time in my life, I know what normal people feel. This is grief.

Ty frames my face, his expression one of deep sorrow. “I know, baby. I’m always here if you need me. You want to talk about him?”

I shake my head. “No. I think everything that needed to be said to and about Ivan already was. Thank you, though.” I lean in and give him a soft kiss, easing both of our sadness.

A few days later, the urn with Ivan’s ashes is delivered to my condo, and Ty and I head to the cabin to spread them. Ty asked why I didn’t include everyone, but me and Ivan were a team. The funeral service was for everyone else. This is private.

Ty and I walk to where we have target practice, where we took Ivan on his last good day and spread his ashes. Sniffles fill the air as Ty dips his hand into the urn for a fistful of ashes. “I hope you’ve found peace, Ivan.” He lets the ashes slip through his fingers.

Tipping the urn over, I walk around, spreading the ashes evenly around the tree stumps. “Peace be with you, Ivan. Thank you for all your lessons,” I mutter in Russian.

When all of his ashes are emptied from the urn, I walk back over to Ty, who gathers

me in his arms. “I love you, baby,” Ty says, giving me comfort with his strength.

“I love you too, kotenok. Thank you for being here with me.”

Ty smiles, rubbing my cheek with his clean hand. “Always. Now let’s go clean up the house. Ivan didn’t leave much of a mess, but I want to air it out. The cloud of death seems to be hanging over the place.”

Nodding, I give him a quick kiss, and we thread our fingers together.

We start cleaning up immediately. I plan to purchase a new mattress in the next few days. No way will I lie Ty on this bed, knowing Ivan took his last breath on it.

Some of the desserts Ty made for Ivan are still out, and I grab a piece of strawberry pirog, the last thing Ty fed him. It’s hard to swallow with the lump lodged in my throat, but I manage. Ivan was right, Ty made these perfectly. I only had them once when we went into town and Ivan was in a giving mood. He turned it down, saying no one could make it as good as his grandmother. Ty changed his mind on that front.

The man in question steps out of the bedroom, stuffing the used sheets in a garbage bag. He snaps off his gloves and slides them in the bag as well before walking over to me. He scoops up a piece of pirog, biting into it and groaning. “Maybe we should add this to the menu. Or I can switch them out. Dedicate one day a month to Ivan. What do you think?”

Smiling, I turn and put my arm around his waist. “You really loved him, didn’t you?”

“Is it weird that I looked at him like a grandfather in such a short period of time? Even though he seemed cold, he reminded me of you. His tales, his life, his demeanor.”

“I’m not a cranky old man,” I retort, jostling him in my arms.

“No?” Ty asks, voice light as he smiles at me. I raise an eyebrow at him. He laughs, shaking his head. Then he sobers. “I’m going to miss him. Despite only knowing him for a few months, I loved him.”

Smiling a sad smile, I nod. “He loved you too, kotenok. He may have never said it, but he looked at you with love.”

Ty kisses me again, then sighs. “Ivan didn’t have much, but what do you want me to do with his suitcase?”

“I’ll put it in the storage closet here,” I say. Ty nods, pulling his lips in. “Hey, don’t be sad, kotenok. Ivan lived a full life. He did what he wanted and loved.” I wipe the tear streaking down his face.

A quick laugh bursts from his lips, and I look at him in confusion.

“For a psychopath, you sure know what to say when I’m hurting. Thank you.” Ty kisses my palm.

“I’ll always be here to comfort you, Tyshawn. I love you. I’m so glad you’re in my life, kotenok.”

“I feel the same way. Who would have thought me walking in on you after you killed someone would have led to this? Love, a new bakery, more family? My life feels more complete now, and it’s all because of you.”

Lacing our fingers together, I lead him into the room and grab Ivan’s suitcase. I glance down at the tattered case, weighing it in my hand. In this case are the last possession of a man I looked up to. The possessions of a man that meant more to me

than I thought.

Blu told me that psychopaths aren't all built the same. The tumult of emotions I feel towards Ivan solidifies that. He might have been a mean and ornery old man, but he cared for me. He showed it by his diligence to teach me what I needed to know to survive.

My father told me Ivan would end up killing me for my attitude, his voice almost sounding hopeful. But Ivan molded me into a man that could kill and remain free, giving me tools to survive this life I didn't ask for.

"You're my family, kotenok. You're mine just as I'm yours. You're not going to leave me, right? No matter what?" I can't help how small my voice sounds. Ivan was the one constant in my life. Now that he's gone, my mind is spinning, and I want to hold on to everything I have. I tried to hold on to him, give him all I could in his last few days, but I wasn't able to keep him here. Ty has to stay with me.

Ty smiles knowingly, hugging me tight. "I'll never leave you, baby. You're mine. You can't get rid of me now."

I kiss the top of his head and hold him tight. I never want to let him go. We're forever.

EPILOGUE

TYSHAWN

Three months later...

The suit is hot, and we've been standing at the head of the church for what feels like forever, but both Sam and Beth look radiant. I'm able to look past my discomfort for their day of happiness.

I took care of all the best man stuff, but luckily, Sam didn't want a regular bachelor party. Instead, me, Sam, and a few of our friends from Corpin got together and had a night of light drinking and games. It was way better than sweaty people dancing on us and getting shitfaced just for the sake of it. Sam liked it better than dancers, that's for sure.

Scanning the crowd in the church, my eyes snag on Leo, and I smile. He grins back, his dimples showing as he basically undresses me with his eyes.

Before I got to the church, I had to beg Leo not to try to blow me when he saw me in my suit. His hands were fast and nimble as he undid the buttons on my shirt. I had to follow right behind his fingers to redo them, dancing out of his grasp. The only reason he left me alone was because I told him I'd go to the wedding by myself if he kept it up. His growl of displeasure almost had me stripping my clothes off instead of running away. But I had my duty as the best man to uphold.

The pastor snaps me out of my impure thoughts when he asks, "Can we have the

rings?”

Quickly, I stuff my hand in my pocket and pull out the ring that Sam had made for Beth. It's nice, three lab-created diamond stones gleaming in a platinum band.

Sam smiles broadly at me, taking the ring from my hand with a pat on my shoulder. Beth's hand shakes as he slides the ring on her finger, her face open in a smile so wide it takes over her face. She's stunning in an off-white strapless mermaid gown with buttons down the back. The tiara that adorns her updo complements her perfectly, making her look like a princess.

After they recite their vows, the pastor announces, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

They come together, kissing sweetly, looking at each other with all the love they have evident on their faces. The church full of their loved ones erupts in applause and hand in hand, Sam and Beth walk down the aisle together, smiling and waving at those assembled.

We have a good time at the reception. After I give my best man speech, I spend the rest of the time sitting with Leo and people-watching. I get in one dance with Beth before she and Sam decide it's time to leave for their honeymoon.

Their exit couldn't have come fast enough. I think I'm all peopled out.

Right after the happy couple leaves the reception hall, Leo and I take our leave. My phone rings just as I'm getting into the passenger seat. When I'm settled in, I pull it from my pocket and smile when I see Dad's picture on my screen.

Since we went to visit my father all those months ago, Leo and I have been back at least once a month. It's been great seeing him so often. He's always happy we're there, going through a lot of trouble to make us dinner, though he's only fired up the

grill one more time since my first visit. It's getting too hot in North Carolina to stand over a grill, he said when Leo asked.

Cynthia has come by every time we've visited. She's a nice, gentle woman—I can see why my father fell for her. I initially loathed to admit it, but my mom would have liked her if they'd met. She treats my father well, and she's welcoming to me and Leo every time we come over.

The wrongful death suit my father filed against the big car manufacturer got about one hundred more plaintiffs, which didn't look good for them if they went to trial, so they settled out of court, awarding each plaintiff between two hundred thousand to two point five million dollars. My father tried to offer me some of the money to get Tessa's up and running, but I told him about the plan to combine it with Leo's coffee shop. Since I didn't need the money for the bakery, he bought me a new car and told me not to complain.

Smiling, I answer the phone, his handsome face popping up on FaceTime. "Hey, Dad."

"Hey, Ty. You look nice. Sam's wedding was today, right?"

"Yep. We're just leaving now. It was really beautiful."

"Tell him congratulations for me, will ya?" my dad says. I nod. "I was calling to see if you'll be back next month. It's Tessa's birthday, and I wanted to know if you'd like to celebrate it here with us."

I raise an eyebrow. "Us? Cynthia too?"

Dad smiles. "It was her idea. I planned to visit Tessa's grave and leave her some flowers, but Cynthia suggested we have dinner to celebrate her life."

Yeah, my mother definitely would have liked her.

Fighting back tears, I say, “Yeah, Dad. We’ll be there.”

“Great. We’ll be at Tessa’s favorite Greek restaurant on her birthday at eight o’clock. How does that sound?”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll see you then.”

“See ya. Tell Leo I said hello.”

Leo pipes up as he starts the car. “Hey, Jermaine. I’ll see you soon.”

I hang up and place my hand on Leo’s thigh, his quads feeling hard and tight. Someone has been killing it at the gym lately. “What did you think about the ceremony?”

Leo shrugs. “It was nice. I’ve never been to a wedding before, so I didn’t know what to expect.”

Even almost eight months after we met, it’s strange to realize Leo didn’t have a normal life. He didn’t really have friends until he moved here and met June from what he told me. It makes sense that he’s never been to a wedding.

“That’s pretty much what all weddings I’ve been to are like. Sam and Beth kept it simple, which is great.”

We slip into silence as we pull up to the condo so we can get changed. The suit is nice, but I’m not used to wearing one, and the shirt is pinching at my throat.

Leo pulls me against his body, kissing down my neck. “After you change, we need to stop by the coffee shop and bakery. Then I have a surprise for you.”

I'm confused, since he was so intent on getting my clothes off before we went to the wedding, but now he wants us to leave? What is he up to?

I don't question him though—I just take a quick shower, since I was sweating under those lights, and step into the bedroom. Leo has a pair of black joggers and a black T-shirt laid out for me.

Again, I don't ask questions. When I'm dressed, I meet Leo in the living room, and we head to the bakery.

Tessa and Ray's Bakery and Beanery has been busy since we opened our doors three months ago. After I hired a few recent graduates from the local culinary school, we hit the ground running. It took them no time to learn and memorize my recipes and get them displayed in their cases.

June suggested we hold a grand opening, which built up a lot of buzz for the desserts I baked. On opening day, the line was almost out the door. I had to step into the back a few times so I could cry in private, knowing people were loving the recipes my mother and I perfected.

Word got out about my recipes statewide, so much so that I had to build a website so I could ship orders. Even though it's only about a month old, it's doing well, giving me another avenue to have people tasting our food. I thought it would be hard to have an online presence, but with the help of the two bakers I work with, it's been easy, and we've been busy on that front too.

The regulars at Ray's already loved what was on the menu initially, but they went crazy the first week I baked the pirog. I had so many requests for it that I made it a permanent part of my menu. I still get teary eyes when I see it listed on the product board. He probably wouldn't say it, but if Ivan was around, I think he'd be proud.

Even though I only knew Ivan for a matter of months, I still think about him often.

Our conversations in his last days were a comfort for me. The situation wasn't the same, but being there for him gave me closure for my mom's death. I wished I was there with her in her last days, but that wasn't to be since she never regained consciousness after her accident. Being there for Ivan and taking care of him healed some part of me, even though his death broke my heart.

I find myself smiling whenever I see the butterfly knife on my nightstand.

Every time we go to the cabin, I think about Ivan and how he would regale me with tales of Russia and how he grew up. Ivan lived an interesting life. If I was an author, I would have loads to write about him, though it would have to be marketed as fiction. No one would believe half the shit he told me, but he wasn't lying. I even heard about a few high-profile kills on the news he told me about, namely a prime minister being shot and killed about fifteen years ago that is still unsolved.

I'll miss our talks for sure, but it opened the door for Leo to tell me about some of the kills he and Ivan did together. His story about he and Ivan sniping a group of sex traffickers before any of them knew what was happening was riveting. They worked together so seamlessly when they killed the couple in London, which spoke to their ease with being partners.

Though he doesn't admit it, I know Leo misses Ivan too. One day when I asked if he wanted to take a case alone, he said he was waiting to see what Ivan had for him, then got quiet, a tight expression on his face. He may not feel normal emotions, but I know Ivan's death is still fucking with him. Leo misses the old man exponentially more than I do. All I can do is be there for him.

Blu and June come to listen to some of the stories too, both of them as riveted I am.

Over the past few months, June and I have gotten closer, texting and calling each other often when he isn't in our condo or I'm not up at theirs. We spend a lot of time baking and talking. June is now a professional at making the red velvet cupcakes and

the homemade icing.

“You need to stop feeding me, or I’m going to have to buy new clothes,” he told me a few days ago.

I chuckled, sliding the cookies into the oven for Blu. “You can always join me and Leo at the gym.”

“Ugh, no. Blu already makes me run on the treadmill. That’s good enough.”

I smile as I pull on my pants. They’re a little snug around my waist, but I’m not sure if it’s because we’ve been in the gym and gaining muscle or because the calories have been getting to me. I tell myself I’m going to stop making as many sweets on my off time. Blu will have to come into the coffee shop to get his cookie fix.

Stopping in front of him, I hug Leo around the middle. “Okay, I’m dressed. What now?”

“To the coffee shop, then to your surprise.”

“What’s the occasion for this surprise?” I ask, looking out of the window of the car, watching the world pass me by. Since Ivan died, I’ve been trying to enjoy the little things more.

“It’s because I love you. Does there need to be another reason?” he asks with a wry smile.

“That’s a good enough reason for me, baby.”

Leo only stops at Tessa and Ray’s for a moment, tacking up the new schedule since they like to have a printed copy after sending out the electronic one. It’s Leo’s week to oversee the day-to-day stuff with the bakery and coffee shop, so he has to be on it.

Once that's done, he takes me to the abandoned building I was looking at to start Tessa's, and I bounce in my seat with excitement. He must have vetted someone that needs to be off the streets, and I'm more than ready for it. On a whim, I slid Ivan's knife in my pocket before we left the condo, and now I'm glad I did. Tonight is the night I use it on someone.

Leo helps me out of the car, dragging me to the door. "Remember that case you were ranting about two months ago? That guy who killed his family and was let off due to lack of evidence?"

A flash of anger overtakes me, and I fist my hands at my side to stop them from shaking. Joey Wells. Killed his wife and three kids and confessed to the crime but recanted when he got to trial. Then his confession was inadmissible anyway because he wasn't read his Miranda rights. There was no evidence against him other than his confession, but we hacked into the police department's server and read it. There's no way he wasn't guilty.

But the jury couldn't see what we saw, and they let him walk. We won't make that same mistake.

"I remember," I say through gritted teeth as we step into the building.

Leo makes a sweeping motion when we step into the break room that I saw him when he killed that child molester. Zip-tied to a chair is fucking Joey Wells.

Smiling, I walk over to him, looking at his slack face. "How did you get him here? We were at the wedding all day."

"June and Blu. They left only a few minutes ago. This one is all yours."

I'm surprised they didn't stay. June and I have been vetting a few people that we want our psychopaths to kill, Joey being one of them. I guess since this is my surprise

from Leo, they'll just join us on the next one.

“You’re not going to start with torture?”

Leo shakes his head, picking up a black bag and dropping it at my feet. My kill kit. “Nope. This one is yours. Me and Ivan taught you all we know. Now you get to use that knowledge.” He bends down and kisses me lightly. “You can do it, kotenok.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him deeply, stroking my tongue over his. I can’t wait to get him home. Leo palms my ass, pulling me against him, his hard cock poking my belly. Looks like Leo feels the same. My hand drifts down to his dick, rubbing over the material. “When we get home and out of the shower, I want your dick in me. Understand?”

Leo smiles, kissing me hard. “Go on, kotenok,” he mutters against my mouth. “Let me watch you work.”

With one more kiss, I turn to Joey, who’s just coming to, his breathing changing as he raises his head slowly.

Standing in front of him, I smile and reach into my pocket. Joey’s eyes widen when I flick the butterfly knife open.

“Hey Joey,” I say as he gazes at me, chest heaving and eyes peeled wide. “Let’s begin.”

THE END