



Sinful Embers (Vegas Bratva Kings #2)

Author: *Kat Steele*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: I was bet in a poker game by my scumbag father.

Not just to anyone—but to Radomir Molchanov.

The King of Vegas.

The sinfully drop-dead gorgeous owner of the Diamond Hotel and Casino.

Oh, and the cold-blooded head of the Molchanov Bratva.

Radomir has claimed me—body and soul. His touch sets me on fire, his icy gaze sends shivers down my spine, and his cruel smirk reminds me that he owns me.

For the past decade, Radomir and his ruthless cousins have been hunting the woman they believe murdered his father and uncle—the elusive Greek Matriarch.

If my problems weren't bad enough, here's the kicker: A decade ago, I lost my memory. My past is a blank slate, haunted by nightmares of a monster with icy-blue eyes. Now, that I'm living in Radomir's world, those memories are clawing their way back—and the truth is not just dark, it's deadly—for me!

If Radomir finds out who I am, he'll kill me.

But I have one chance to survive.

The baby in my belly — his baby.

It's my only hope.

If it doesn't save me... nothing will.

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Chapter 1

LEIGH

The cold seeps into my bones, dragging me out of a groggy haze. My head throbs like someone took a hammer to it, and the bitter taste in my mouth makes me gag. My throat feels raw, like I've swallowed sandpaper. Blinking against the dim light, I try to make sense of my surroundings, but my thoughts remain sluggish, wrapped in a fog I can't shake.

Where the fucking hell am I?

The cot beneath me is stiff, barely better than lying on a slab of concrete. The scratchy blanket draped over me does little to shield me from the icy air. I push myself up, wincing as my muscles scream in protest. My pulse quickens as I take in my surroundings.

This isn't a room. It's a goddamn cell—straight out of my nightmares.

A metal table dominates the center, its surface gleaming under the dim overhead light. Restraints hang from the sides, thick leather straps like silent threats. Chains dangle from the ceiling in the far corner, their shadows dancing on the rough brick walls. My stomach churns.

The dim wall lights illuminate a toilet, hand basin, and crude shower at the foot of the cot. There's no privacy, no barrier—just sitting there for anyone to see upon entering. Across the room, there's a door with a small observation window and four chairs line

the wall next to it, like some twisted waiting room for an audience I don't ever want to meet.

I shiver, tugging the blanket tighter around myself. The cold bites at my bare feet, and the rough fabric of the green scrubs I'm wearing rubs uncomfortably against my skin.

Green scrubs?

I glance down at myself, and the sight jars me.

What the crap?

Fragments of memory push against the fog clouding my mind: Radomir's hands on me, his lips trailing fire over my skin, his weight pressing me into the mattress. I remember the pleasure, the intensity of it, and falling asleep tangled in his arms.

But I didn't fall asleep like this.

My pulse quickens as the realization strikes me. Someone dressed me.

Revulsion churns in my gut, and I tug at the neckline of the scrubs, their texture coarse and alien. My gaze darts around the room again, taking in the restraints, the table.

Shit, I'm not wearing scrubs—it's a fucking prison uniform.

I feel like I can't breathe as panic surges through me and the blanket suddenly feels suffocating. I shove it off, swinging my legs over the side of the cot. The motion tugs painfully at something heavy on my ankle, and a clink of metal makes my heart lurch.

I look down.

A fucking chain.

The cuff around my left ankle is thick, cold steel. It's attached to a long chain—a leash.

A wave of déjà vu crashes over me, unearthing something dark and distant.

I've seen this place before.

A hazy memory shimmers at the edge of my mind, just out of reach. Chill blades run down my spine as my panic rises. My chest tightens with the oppressive weight of being trapped. Instinctively, I yank at the cuff, my breath coming faster, but the metal doesn't budge. It just digs into my skin, leaving a sharp ache.

Think, Leigh. Think.

But my head feels too heavy, and my throat too dry to focus. My gaze lands on the metal table. A bottle of water sits on its surface, the clear liquid catching the light. Beside it, three books are stacked neatly, topped with a small card.

I squint at the books...

From where I'm sitting, they look like some of my old songbooks. My breath catches. That can't be right. My old songbooks—except the one I use—are packed away in boxes Radomir has stored somewhere.

What the crap, is going on?

I clutch my head, trying to remember how I got from Radomir's bed to here. My last memory is falling asleep in his arms. My eyes widen as a voice echoes in my mind: Your phones been cloned! Nikolas's warning slams into me.

A jarring gasp escapes my lips. Could Radomir have discovered my plans to leave him? Does he know about Matriarch Records?

I shake my head. No, he couldn't have. Even if the estate is bugged, I didn't say anything about the Gambler's Cross out loud.

But I did talk to Sabrina and then Nikolas.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck, oh fuck!

My chest constricts, each breath shallow and strained. Radomir must think I was planning to double-cross him, that I intended to escape—even after the agreement we made before we were married.

My still-bruised, painful left hand from punching my father throbs as I lift it to find my ring finger bare. Radomir must've removed my engagement and wedding rings to make a statement—shit, he does think I went back on our agreement.

He still thinks I'm going to run.

Taking in the room once again, my eyes widen with fear as I realize I must be in a dungeon—one of Radomir's dungeons!

I try to swallow, but my mouth is so dry it feels like I've been eating sand. My head throbs as I eye the water bottle. It could be drugged, but my throat is parched, and I need something—anything—to drink. I turn and look at the facilities at the end of the cot—there is no way in hell I'm going to drink toilet water, or from that basin as there's no telling where the water from it or the shower comes from.

Again my eyes land on the bottle of water on the table and a bitter laugh escapes me because if Radomir wanted to drug me, he wouldn't need to disguise it. Besides, he

probably already drugged me to get me in here without waking up. If he wanted to keep me drugged he would've done it already.

I stand cautiously. The chain rattling as I shuffle to the table, the sound slicing through the silence like a blade. My hand trembles as I grab the water bottle, twisting it open. The seal cracks, reassuring me it hasn't been tampered with.

The water is cool and crisp as it slides down my throat cutting through the dryness. I take a few sips, just enough to soothe the ache.

As I recap the bottle, the books and the card draw my attention again.

The card on top bears my name in neat calligraphy, like a place card at a grand wedding. Beside it sits a small plastic box. I pick it up, finding two aspirin tablets inside. My head feels like it's two sizes too big, and for a moment, I'm tempted to take them.

I pick up the card. The neat, handwritten message chills me: Maybe these books will help you remember.

Remember what, exactly? I wonder.

My brow furrows as icy fingers twist around what feels like every nerve ending in my body, making my mind scream at me to step away from the books and the table.

But I ignore my instincts and don't give into the temptation to move away. Instead I read the footnote at the bottom of the card: The aspirin is for the headache from the chloroform.

The word hits me like a blow.

Chloroform.

I was drugged with fucking chloroform.

I stagger back, my knees buckling as the weight of the realization hits. The pounding in my skull, the metallic taste coating my tongue, the songbooks that only Radomir had access to—it all clicks into place.

Fragments of memory surface: Fredrik's warning about how they subdue targets with the shit, Dolph's smirk as he casually mentioned how Radomir's men always keep chloroform on hand.

My breath hitches.

My pulse thunders, each beat driving the truth deeper, cutting like a blade..

Oh my God. It is Radomir!

But then, a fleeting thought cuts through the whirlwind of fear and rage, leaving an ache I can't ignore.

What if I'm wrong? What if he's looking for me right now?

The idea lingers for only a moment, but it's enough to send cracks through the certainty I cling to.

Doubt and hope war within me, a cruel tug-of-war that makes my chest tighten. But I can't overlook the chloroform or the fact that he's the only one who could've had access to my song books. Anger swells again, replacing all doubt.

No, it has to be him.

And he's trapped me down here like a rabid dog on a leash.

A tremor rolls through me, ice and fire colliding in my veins.

My hands clench, my nails biting into my palms as rage swells in my chest, hot and blinding. He drugged me. Stripped me of my rings and tossed me in this cell like I'm some kind of traitor.

"That fucking bastard," I whisper, my voice shaking with fury.

Radomir must've found out about my plans to leave him sometime after I fell asleep and then without so much as a thought, threw me in here.

I glare at the books but don't touch them. My gut twists with instinctive revulsion that I don't quite understand as they're my books... still something about them feels wrong—dangerous—like traps baited with cheese to catch a rat.

I shake the feeling away and turn away from them. Right now, survival is my priority.

The chains drag noisily scraping against the floor as I pace, adrenaline surging through me, heightening my senses. Every detail of the cell feels like a piece of some twisted puzzle. My head snaps toward the door with its little rectangular glass peephole in it. I move toward it, but the chain tightens and yanks me to a stop a few feet past the table.

"What the fuck?"

I test the length of the chain, finding I can't move anywhere near the door or the chairs lining the wall beside it. But I can get to the toilet and shower. Panic resurges making my head even more painful, so I decide to take the aspirin and gulp them down before I talk myself out of it.

I need a clear non-painful head to find a way out of this place. And I will, somehow get out of here.

I take a deep breath calming my nerves. Radomir must think he's won. But he doesn't know me—not really. He keeps underestimating me, and my father's voice suddenly springs into my head:

Never let anyone see all of you, Leigh, keep parts of you to yourself. That way people will always underestimate you and won't expect what's coming.

As his voice fades away I suddenly find myself grateful for all the training my father put me through. He taught me to never give up even when I feel all hope might be lost—where there's a will, there is always a way.

My eyes land on the chain around my ankle, and I tilt my head as I assess it more thoroughly. It's heavy and polished to a cold gleam, its edges smooth but unyielding. The links are thick, industrial-grade steel, each one as thick as my thumb. There's no rust, no sign of wear—this wasn't thrown together on a whim.

I bend over and trace the cuff's edge with my fingers, feeling its seamless surface. A faint line runs along one side, barely visible, but unmistakable. My stomach tightens as recognition floods through me.

I know this kind of cuff.

My father had shown me one year ago, sitting me down like he was teaching me how to ride a bike. But this was no father-daughter bonding moment. He'd laid out a series of restraints—zip ties, handcuffs, rope, even duct tape—and taught me how to escape them.

“A good con knows the tools of the trade,” he'd said, his tone oddly serious. “And a

smart one knows how to beat them .”

One of the cuffs he’d shown me back then looked just like this one. Pressure-locked, he’d called it. No hinges, no screws—just a tight fit and a locking mechanism buried deep inside.

“ This ,” he’d said, holding it up like a trophy, “ is the worst. You need special tools to crack it open, and those tools are never lying around when you need them. ”

The memory of my father’s voice rises once again: “ If you ever see one of these on you, Leigh, it means someone isn’t planning to let you go. Not easily, anyway.” His eyes had gone distant, and he’d muttered. “It usually means whoever put it on you, isn’t going to let you go alive.”

A shudder rattles through my bones at the thought of those last words and how that was one of the few times he’d looked at me with something resembling sincerity. His eyes had darkened, his mouth a grim line. At the time, I’d thought he was just being dramatic. But now, staring at this cuff, the weight of his words sinks in.

“Maybe, not fucking easily,” I whisper, my voice low and bitter. “But I will, do it.”

The chain scrapes against my ankle as I shift, the cuff biting into my skin. It’s snug but not tight enough to cut off circulation. Whoever put this on me knew what they were doing. They wanted me restrained, not injured. That realization sends a fresh wave of anger surging through me.

My jaw tightens as I scan the room with fresh eyes. Every detail feels calculated, designed to trap me both physically and mentally. The table, the books, the card—they’re all pieces of a sick game—one I have a feeling I’ve been in the middle of before.

But I won't play by their rules.

I inhale deeply, trying to steady my pounding heart. My father's voice echoes again, this time less grim and more practical: " Every trap has a weakness, kid. You just have to find it. Keep your cool, and don't let them know you're looking ."

Keep my cool.

I glance back at the cuff, my fingers brushing over the seam. It's smooth, seamless, but there's always a way out. The question is whether I can find it before Radomir or one of his goons comes back.

The thought sends a jolt of fear through me, but I shove it aside. Panic won't help me now.

I shuffle back to the cot, the chain dragging against the floor. Each step is a reminder of my captivity, but it only fuels the fire burning in my chest.

Radomir thinks he's got me cornered. He thinks he's in control.

But he doesn't know me.

I sit down, the cot creaking under my weight, and tug the blanket around my shoulders. The cuff is cold against my skin, a constant presence, but it doesn't scare me anymore. If anything, it pisses me off.

I may not have the tools to break this chain yet, but I have something just as powerful.

Determination.

Leaning back, I let my eyes drift shut, my mind racing with plans. I'll get out of here, chain or no chain. And when I do, Radomir will learn the hard way that Leigh Dalton isn't someone you can trap and forget.

He wants to play games?

Fine.

But he's about to find out that I'm the one who always wins.

A distorted voice suddenly cuts through the silence.

"Hello, Leigh. Nice to see you're awake and have taken the aspirin."

My eyes snap open, and I bolt upright instantly searching for the source, my gaze darts to the small glass window in the door—it's empty.

I scan the rest of the room, my heart hammering in my chest.

Jesus, I'm being watched.

My skin prickles and I try to find where a camera or speaker could be hidden but there is no obvious signs—not even on the roof.

The voice comes again, distorted, a chilling rasp that slithers through the silence.

"If you need light reading, try one of the books I left for you. It might bring back some memories... memories you lost ten years ago. Wouldn't it be nice to fill in the holes about your past?"

A shiver runs through me, leaving my blood ice-cold. The thought of regaining those

lost memories hits harder than I expect, twisting in my gut as fleeting images of darkness and pain flash before me. My pulse races, and dizziness washes over me, drowning out the unsettling sense of being watched. The idea of reaching into those memories terrifies me for reasons I can't quite place.

I try to steady myself, as thoughts turn over in my head: Why would Radomir or his men bother disguising their voices? What could they gain by me regaining my memory?

But then, another thought hits me like a punch to the stomach— what if the person who has me here, isn't Radomir?

My eyes widen. Oh my God—have I been kidnapped?

Panic surges through me, and my head spins as confusion clouds my mind. The room tilts, and the cold fingers of oblivion begin to creep toward me.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, squeeze my eyes shut, and force myself to take slow, deep breaths, trying to push through the overwhelming sensation that my body is melting into the air around me. I can't let myself pass out—not now.

If this isn't Radomir holding me captive, then who the hell is it? Fear grips my chest, setting every nerve on edge. How could they have taken me? Each new question only makes my heart race faster.

"Oh, no..." I whisper, my voice trembling. "Has something happened to Radomir?"

I fight for control, trying to calm myself, to think of another explanation—maybe Radomir was drugged, and that's how I was taken. But my attempts to rationalize only fuel the panic, which rises up inside me, mingling with my fear. The cold hands of darkness grab me, pulling me under.

As my body turns limp, a faint, mocking laugh echoes through my mind. Then, a voice that has haunted my nightmares whispers in the depths of my consciousness, “ I told you I’d come for you, Leigh. ”

Tumbling into oblivion a terrifying names spills into the darkness with me: The Iceman .

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Chapter 2

RADOMIR

The faint glow from my laptop casts eerie shadows across the desk. It's a cold, lonely light that matches the knot in my stomach as I sift through endless search results for Ice Man Industries. Every click brings up the same polished corporate front: a global cold food distribution company led by Wanda Manning. Her rise as CEO came after her father was killed, and shortly after, she married a Russian oligarch. Innocuous enough on the surface, but the mention of a Russian oligarch connected to Wanda, gnaws at me like a bad itch I can't scratch.

Could the oligarch be the Ice Man? If so, what the fuck does he want with Leigh? Or my family? How is Carlos involved in this tangled mess? My thoughts churn, spiraling deeper into questions I can't answer. And then there's Nikolas. I'm not even sure I should be trusting him, and I've just let him help in our investigations because Sabrina vouched for him—but trust is a fragile thing in my world, especially at this moment in time.

My eyes drift to where Nikolas is hunched over Dolph's laptop, his sharp gaze scanning the hotel's security footage. He hasn't said much in the last few hours, but his focus is razor-sharp. Still, I can't help the doubt curling in my gut.

"Why did you arrive at the penthouse when you did? It was right after Leigh was taken. That seems a little convenient." My eyes narrow as I watch him intently.

Nikolas doesn't glance up. "I got an SOS from Leigh. She said she was in trouble and

needed help.”

His voice is flat, almost robotic, but there’s a weight to his words that makes me believe him. For now. “Do you know Wanda Manning, the CEO of Ice Man Industries?” I ask, leaning forward. “She’s from London, like you. Don’t all high-society types over there mingle, and know each other?”

“I didn’t mix in those circles,” he replies without looking away from the screen. “My circle was more military.”

Of course it was! That explains a whole lot of things, like his frightening calm under pressure.

I press further. “Can you ask your mother if she knows Wanda?” I tilt my head. “She is like a Greek God in your circles, right?”

“No, I can’t ask my mother.” He finally glances at me, his expression hard. “Why don’t you ask your mother? Galina grew up in Europe. If Wanda’s around her age, they might’ve crossed paths.”

I study him, narrowing my eyes, ignoring his suggestion to ask my mother—I’m not going to involve her just yet. “Why can’t you ask your mother?”

Nikolas leans back, his face darkening. “Because she thinks Carlos is me. And that I killed my father, uncle, and two cousins.”

The bluntness of his words slams into me like a punch. “Oh, fuck.” I pause, absorbing the weight of what he’s just said. “And did you? Kill them?”

“No.” His tone is sharp as he shakes his head, fixing me with a cold glare. “Carlos did.”

I don't bother hiding my skepticism. "If your own mother believes you killed them, how do you expect me to believe that Carlos killed them? Maybe him taking Leigh is revenge for you pinning the murders on him?"

Without a word, Nikolas rolls up his sleeve, exposing a patch of scarred flesh. It's a grotesque, puckered reminder of a fire that left its mark long after the flames died. "My body is covered in more of this," he says evenly. "And I've got a bullet scar near my heart."

My chest tightens as the image of it forms in my mind. "What happened?"

"My cousin Carlos was supposed to meet us at the Matriarch head office boardroom to discuss him coming back to the family after a... let's just say a long absence over a dispute." Nikolas's voice lowers, his tone steady but weighted with something darker.

"But Carlos had other plans for the meeting. He literally came in there with guns blazing—a fucking mini Uzi, to be exact." Nikolas pauses, running a hand through his pepper-streaked black hair. "He walked in and said, 'I'm not interested in a reconciliation,' then opened fire on us. He shot my father and his."

Radomir narrows his eyes. "Jesus. What the hell kind of family meeting was this?"

"A deadly one." Nikolas reacts to the comment, his voice growing colder as he continues, "I managed to pull my other cousin, Carlos's identical twin brother, Costa Junior, to safety. Luckily, the Uzi jammed, giving me just enough time to act." He exhales sharply, his jaw tightening. "I was about to make my move, but Carlos took flight."

His hands grip the edge of the desk as he leans forward. "Costa Junior and I gave chase, desperate to catch him, before he could escape. But we weren't thinking straight—we drove right into a trap. Costa was shot through the brain, and I took a

bullet near my heart. The car crashed into a wall, and I woke up in a burning wreck, my flesh on fire.”

The details churn in my gut. “Jesus. Carlos did that? What the fuck was the dispute that kept him from the family about?”

“He was always a troubled person. But I don’t know if Carlos was the one who’d set the trap,” Nikolas admits, his voice bitter. “But he was working with a Russian syndicate at the time. Could’ve been him—or one of them.”

“Russian?” I repeat, the word triggering a cascade of thoughts. “One of my family’s enemies, perhaps? That might explain why they’d target us.”

“There are plenty of reasons why Carlos, and if he’s still with that syndicate, might target your family,” Nikolas says, his tone sharp. “The biggest one being that your mother controls Leigh’s access to her inheritance.”

My pulse spikes, my mind racing to connect the pieces. “So my mother knows Carlos?”

“Yes,” Nikolas replies. “Your mother and my late sister, Thea, were best friends. They met at an elite Swiss boarding school.” His eyes softening and there’s something in his tone as he speaks about my mother that puts an edge on my nerves. “Galina spent a lot of time visiting us in Greece and London when she was younger. Your mother met Carlos on numerous occasions.”

The mention of his sister blindsides me. “Thea was your sister?”

His voice tightens, his jaw clenching. “Yes. And we believe Carlos killed her as well.”

The weight of his words presses down on me. “Jesus,” I mutter. “Was he cleaning house? Trying to wipe out the Vasilikis family to get his hands on the Matriarch money?”

Nikolas nods grimly. “We believe so. He wants to hand it to his lover.” His eyes narrow dangerously. “Matriarch Corporation isn’t just powerful—it’s a cornerstone of global innovation, and it always has been. It was founded during World War II by my great-grandmother, a widowed Greek immigrant who developed groundbreaking electronics to aid the British war effort. What began as a small operation manufacturing radar components and cryptographic devices quickly grew into an empire. By the time the war ended, Matriarch was already branching into consumer electronics and early computing.”

He pauses, his jaw tightening. “Over the decades, the company has expanded into automotive technology, state-of-the-art recording equipment, private banking, and advanced military weaponry. It doesn’t just touch lives—it controls industries, governments, and even the flow of information.”

The weight of his words settles heavily in the room, but Nikolas doesn’t stop. “Matriarch has always remained in Vasilikis hands. By tradition, it passes to the eldest sibling of the family. That means it’s mine—or my heir’s—until the day I die. And Carlos knows that. He knows that if he becomes me, he doesn’t just take my name or my life. He takes Matriarch. The control. The power. Everything.”

The air feels thinner as his words sink in . Fuck . I’d known Matriarch was powerful—my mother had made sure of that—but this... this is an entirely different league. This isn’t just about wealth or status. It’s control. Global, all-encompassing control.

And Leigh—my wife—is part of that legacy. By marrying her, I’ve tied myself to one of the most influential families in the world. Nikolas isn’t just sharing this to explain

Carlos's obsession—he's warning me. I've stepped into a world far bigger, far more dangerous, than I ever imagined. My enemies already circle like vultures. If Leigh claims what's hers, the stakes will be beyond anything I'm prepared for.

I exhale slowly, forcing myself to stay calm. "Lover?" I ask, narrowing my eyes at Nikolas, needing to find the thread that ties Carlos to all of this.

Nikolas exhales sharply, leaning back. "My cousin, Carlos, is head over heels in love with the head of that fucking Russian syndicate—obsessively so."

"Really?" My brows raise curiously.

Nikolas gives a curt nod. "Twenty years ago, Carlos's father, Costa Senior, disowned him, with full support from my father and Carlos's identical twin brother, Costa Junior."

"Why was he disowned?" I press.

Nikolas's expression becomes grim. "Our fathers wanted Carlos to marry a heiress. They wanted something innovative her father designed. But Carlos refused. He came out as gay and declared he was already in love."

I wince, knowing they're Greek, and how, if they were religious, that would go down. "Strict Greek Orthodox family?"

He snorts bitterly. "Exactly. Carlos wouldn't comply. They disowned him." Nikolas shakes his head. "My family doesn't fuck around when it comes to things like that. My father and uncle were fair, but go against them..."

"Yeah, I can relate."

Nikolas nods. “Carlos disappeared for a year after that, and during that time, a Russian syndicate rose in Europe. Guess who was affiliated with them?”

“Carlos,” I whisper, the name heavy on my tongue.

“Not just affiliated with them either. Carlos is the leader of the Russian syndicate’s right-hand man,” Nikolas says, his voice sharp. He glances down at the screen, his jaw tightening. “That Russian bastard stays hidden in the shadows and uses Carlos as the face of the syndicate.” His gaze darkens further. “Let me correct that statement—he uses my face as the face of the syndicate.”

I scoff, leaning back in my chair. “Fuck, he really does look like you. Are you sure he’s not obsessed with you?”

Nikolas lets out a brittle laugh, the sound cold and humorless. “He’s always been jealous. It’s not just about looking like me—it’s about what I have. Matriarch, Archontis... everything he couldn’t touch.” He shakes his head, his lips twisting in disdain. “He hates that I was set to inherit it all while he was left with far less than what he thinks he deserves.”

My eyes narrow as I consider his words. “What I don’t understand, is why he’d want to become you, if your mother and Mark think you killed your father, uncle, and cousins.” I pause, then add thoughtfully, “If the heir to two such powerful empires was seen to align with a Russian syndicate, it would destabilize everything—the companies, the shareholders, and the military wouldn’t be too happy about that especially because you mentioned Matriarch created weapons.” I raise my brows knowingly. “Not to mention the scandal it would cause if it got out that the very same heir aligning with a Russian syndicate also killed his father, sister, uncle, and cousins.”

Nikolas exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair. “They didn’t know who’d

killed my father and uncle for a few months after it happened.” His jaw tightens, and I can see the weight of the memories pressing down on him. “But after Thea was killed, the agency and I decided we had to sever Carlos’s connection to Matriarch completely. We figured the only place he’d have left to go was the syndicate.”

“How did you do that?” I prompt curiously.

I can see whatever’s coming has haunted him. “We sent a recording to my mother and Mark—the agency I work for doctored the security footage I had taken from the company the day Carlos had killed my father and uncle. The footage showed Carlos, looking like me, standing in the boardroom and announcing that he didn’t need Matriarch anymore. He claimed he was building something far bigger with his partner—the king of a new Russian syndicate.”

My brows shoot up, startled. “You framed yourself? That’s fucked up.”

“We knew what my mother would do.” Nikolas’s voice was bleak. “She’d be forced to have to cut me completely out of everything associated with Matriarch and her family’s organizations. To protect them, and Leigh.”

“By declaring you dead.” Realization dawns on me. “That way if the video was leaked or Carlos did anything as you, she had plausible deniability.”

“Yes,” he confirms with a slow nod. “My agency worked with her to ensure I was erased. Carlos knew that if he tried to approach her as me, she wouldn’t fuck around and would publicly demand a DNA test to prove he wasn’t me. And... given my mother’s connections, even if it was me, the test would say otherwise.”

I stare at him thoughtfully for a long moment seeing an opportunity to get some answers. “Why does your mother command so much fear?” I ask finally, voicing a question I’ve held for years. “I’ve wondered for a decade why men would rather die

than cross her—especially the Greeks. No one will speak of her, not even in whispers.” My brow furrows. “There are even some powerful crime families that are petrified of her.”

Nikolas’s lips press into a thin line, his green eyes sharp as glass. “Let’s just say... the Archontis family has its own dark history. Like her father and grandfather before her, my mother has kept that history buried in the shadows to protect everything the Archontis name stands for today.” He pulls a face, shrugging slightly. “But those shadows are still there, and some things... some people... don’t forget.”

A gnawing unease stirs within me. What the hell are he and his mother hiding? And what the fuck have I gotten myself into by marrying Leigh? This rabbit hole keeps pulling me deeper and deeper, and I’m starting to see the truth—what we call the light above our criminal dark world isn’t as bright as it seems. And what is this agency Nikolas keeps speaking about?

“This agency of yours... what the hell is it?” I drum my fingers once on the desk. “And don’t give me some bull crap. I’ve seen you disarm men like it’s nothing, and they have enough clout to erase you as well as falsify police reports.” I catch the corners of his mouth lift slightly, a rare flicker of amusement. “So I doubt it’s some environmental protection agency and more like some covert government branch or elite task force.”

Before Nikolas can answer, the door creaks open, and Sabrina strides in, her oversized bag slung over her shoulder. “He’s a government eraser,” she says flatly, cutting through the tension.

Nikolas and I greet her as she takes the seat beside him, dumping her purse on the floor at her feet. “Uncle Nik erases people—either gives them new lives or sends them to the next one: heaven or hell, depending on what they deserve. At least, that’s how Sam explained it when Leigh and I were ten.”

“An eraser,” I mutter under my breath. “Of course, you are.” Glancing at Nikolas, I ask, “Why let Carlos take over your life in the first place if you work for an agency like that?”

Nikolas answers without hesitation. “They wanted Carlos to lead them to the elusive and camera-shy leader of the Russian syndicate. No one—except Carlos—knows what he looks like or what his real name is.”

“And to steal weapons, government secrets, and whatever else Uncle Nik’s high-level access gave him, which is something no ordinary civilian would ever have,” Sabrina interjects. “Especially since Uncle Nik is also UK SAS.” She pauses, her expression darkening. “And as you can imagine, having the face of Nikolas Vasilikis would give him direct access to Leigh, as her father.” Blowing out a breath, she adds bitterly, “Pity Carlos didn’t do away with that Vivienne bitch when he had the chance.”

“He tried,” Nikolas says flatly. “It was one of the reasons she and Leigh were relocated by Galina”—he glances at me—“and Mark Dalton.”

Sabrina’s lip curls as she looks at me. “Mark thinks Nikolas killed his wife,” she says, her tone heavy with accusation, before adding for my benefit, “His wife was Uncle Nik’s younger sister, Thea. Leigh told me stories about her. She was young when Thea died, but she still had fond memories of her—well, when Leigh still had her memories.”

I sit forward, the weight of the revelation hitting me square in the chest. “Fuck!” I exclaim. “Mark’s Leigh’s uncle? But why let him take care of her? He’s nothing more than a gambling-addicted, grifting drunk.”

“Shows how much you know,” Nikolas counters, his tone sharp. “Mark is not just some grifter. Everything the man does has a well-designed purpose. People like you take him for nothing but a loser, which is exactly what he wants. That way, you don’t

pay too much attention to him.”

“Fuck, I knew it,” I mutter, shaking my head as the truth sinks in. “My mother took great joy in telling me that Mark was the one who won the game the night Leigh came into my care—and that I’d played right into his hands.”

“You did,” Nikolas confirms. “If you hadn’t bet Leigh, Mark would’ve.”

Sabrina glares at Nikolas, her temper flaring. “Jesus!” she spits. “And you allowed this? I’ve always thought you were the best father—besides mine, that is—ever. But now...”

Nikolas meets her fiery gaze without flinching. “It was either that or locking Leigh up,” he says, before turning his attention to me. “Although now I’m thinking my idea would’ve been the better of the two. I had a secure site set up and ready as well.”

The truth lands like a punch to the gut, the blame cutting deep. I don’t need Nikolas to say it aloud—I know he holds me just as responsible for Leigh’s current predicament as he does himself. And he’s right. The guilt weighs heavily, suffocating me.

I swallow hard and ask the question clawing at the back of my mind as I look accusingly at Nikolas. “How long have you, my mother, and Mark been planning the poker game scam to introduce me to my future wife?”

My eyes narrow as I include Sabrina in my accusing glare. “Fuck no!” she snaps, crossing her arms. “I didn’t know a thing about this.”

“No, Sabrina did not,” Nikolas says, backing her up. “We know how loyal she is to Leigh. And we also know that while Sabrina wouldn’t directly have told Leigh, she’d have found some ingenious way of foiling the plans.”

Sabrina grins, unrepentant. “You’re damn right I would’ve,” she says, turning her glare back on me. “No offense, Radomir, but you’re not who I would’ve wanted my best friend to marry. Leigh has had enough shit happen in her life. A big part of it is a black hole to her. All she wanted was to become a songwriter—maybe even a singer.” Her eyes flash with anger. “But you clipped her wings, and she may as well still be living in the tight invisible chains Mark had around her.”

“I’m nothing like Mark.” I bristle at her words, but I don’t interrupt. “He used her in his cons,” I say finally. “I’ve given her a life of luxury and I never discouraged her writing. In fact I think she’s a fucking amazing song writer and I was going to offer to help her get them out there.”

“Her family own fucking Matriarch Records...” Sabrina points out and then looks at Nikolas scathingly. “You could’ve told me you owned it.”

“I did tell you,” Nikolas reminds her. “I told you and Leigh that I bought a record company for you both when you girls were about eleven.” Before giving her a chance to respond he turns his cool green eyes to me. “As for Mark, he never conned anyone who didn’t deserve it.” He steps in to defend the man. “We called him the con artist Robin Hood. He conned people who had been stolen from or unethically targeted in some way or the other.”

Sabrina’s jaw drops. “Oh, fuck!” she exclaims, the realization hitting her like a freight train. “You know, I always wondered why, when he pulled off those big elaborate cons, he and Leigh just seemed to scrape by. They never had a lot of money to buy big extravagant things. I thought the fucking bastard must gamble and drink all the money away.”

“Nope,” Nikolas says, shaking his head. “He’d help the person the money was originally taken from. And as Mark was a damn good investment broker, he’s helped a lot of those people double what was stolen from them. And they always had money,

Mark just didn't flash it around and for good reason."

"Still" I say, stunned by this new image of Mark. It doesn't fit with the man I've come to know—or rather, the man I thought I knew. "Mark wasn't the best option to hide Leigh and Vivienne? If my mother helped hide them, my uncle Gunther, who had been widowed for years back then, would've been the better choice. He's at least bratva."

Nikolas and Sabrina answer in unison. "Really?"

"Your uncle Gunther was not a very nice man," Sabrina says, her voice tinged with disdain. "You haven't read any of the journals yet, have you? If you did, you'd know exactly what I mean."

The mention of the journals makes me swivel toward the bookshelf where I put them before the wedding. My stomach sinks when I see the empty space where they were.

"Fuck!" I hiss. "The journals—they're gone."

Nikolas taps a key on the laptop, pulling up a specific frame of security footage. "That's what he's doing in your office," he says, turning the laptop slightly so I can see it, and pointing to the screen. I lean in and see a clear image of Carlos walking to the book shelf where the journals were. It must've been right before he took Leigh.

I turn to Sabrina, my expression darkening. "While we're on the subject of the journals, you said I wouldn't like their contents. What's in them?"

"Which journals did they take?" Nikolas asks before Sabrina can respond.

"One to three," I reply, my voice low. "But I believe there's a fourth one I inadvertently gave to Leigh. When I went to get it back, it was gone." More guilt hits

me. “I may have been the one to trigger Leigh’s memory episodes she had yesterday.”

“I was the one that put the journal in Leigh’s packing boxes in the hopes that she’d find them before she went to Los Angeles,” Nikolas admits then tells us that the night before the wedding he put the journal beneath her pillow while he was keeping an eye on her because I was in Vegas.

Before we can delve further, Temur enters the office. His face is grim as he reports, “I’ve searched the penthouse and the bedroom thoroughly. No bugs. No clues. I can tell you that if Leigh had a phone I couldn’t find it so assume that it’s missing. But I found her songbook in her purse.” He hands it to me, and I place it on the desk beside me.

“I’ll get the board for you,” Temur says, addressing Sabrina. “And I’ll bring it up shortly.” With that he excuses himself and leaves the office.

“What board?” Nikolas and I ask in unison.

“A crime board,” Sabrina says matter-of-factly, “If we’re going to figure this out, we may as well do it right.”

Before I can respond, my phone buzzes. It’s Sergei, my head of security at the estate. I answer immediately.

“Boss,” Sergei says, his tone clipped. “We’ve had an incident. Your study and bedroom were broken into and ransacked last night. We think it might have been Michael. He came home drunk, couldn’t get through the gates saying he’d lost his pass key. Artem helped him. When one of the other guards hadn’t heard from Artem for a couple of hours he went looking for him and found him knocked out by the kitchen door.”

“Fuck,” Sabrina says, her eyes narrowing. “My apartment was also ransacked last night while I was here.”

“That’s why we were sent here,” Nikolas realizes, his voice sharp. “So I wasn’t at the estate—or you weren’t in your apartment.”

“Can you go to my office, Sergei?”

He nods and walks there showing me the room. “Fuck!” I sneer and notice that my safe’s been broken into, and I freeze. Alarm shoots through me—only a handful of people know about it. Which means someone close to me is helping that fucking bastard Carlos.

Sabrina suddenly gasps. “Wait!” she says, pointing at the screen. “Can you show the bookshelf again?” Sergie nods and turns his phone back to where Sabrina asked him to. “What’s that book on the shelf beside the safe?”

Sergei moves closer and shows up.

“It’s the fourth journal.” My voice is low and gruff as excitement courses through me mingled with suspicion as to why Carlos would’ve left it. If it wasn’t the journal he was looking for, then what was it?

Sergie reaches out, plucking the book off the shelf. As he picks it up, it falls apart, leaving him holding only the leather cover. “Fuck,” he mutters bending to scoop the book up. “I’m sorry, boss.”

“Wait,” Sabrina says again, her eyes widening. “Show us the book.”

Sergei holds it up, and my stomach drops. “Fuck—that’s not the fourth journal,” Sabrina says, glancing between Nikolas and me. “That’s Leigh’s songbook.”

All eyes dart to the desk. I pick up the songbook Temur handed me earlier and open it. My heart pounds as I flip through the pages, and I feel my hands start to tremble—it's the fourth journal.

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Chapter 3

LEIGH

The cold bites at my skin as I wake, a sharp chill dragging me out of the fog. My head throbs, a relentless drumbeat pounding against my skull. The sound of a heavy door scraping open jolts me fully awake. My heart leaps into my throat as I sit up abruptly on the stiff cot.

A masked figure steps into the dungeon, their presence commanding and unnerving. They're wheeling a metal trolley toward me, its polished surface glinting faintly under the harsh light. The clatter of wheels echoes off the brick walls, each noise magnified in the oppressive silence. The smell hits me next—warm, rich, and mouthwatering. My stomach growls in response, reminding me just how long it's been since I last ate.

“Who are you?” My voice is hoarse, scratching against my throat like sandpaper. I try to focus on their features, but the mask obscures everything.

The person doesn't answer, doesn't even hesitate. They push the trolley close enough for me to reach it but maintain a safe distance. As I glance at the tray, I see covered dishes, bottles of water, and a steaming mug of coffee. It's almost... inviting.

“Put the trolley back here when you're done eating.” The voice startles me, distorted by a modulator. The figure points to a small cross marked on the floor. “And don't try to be clever about it, or you won't like the consequences.”

A spark of defiance flares in me. “What could possibly be worse than this?” I snap.

Before the words fully leave my lips, a jolt zaps through my ankle. Pain shoots up my leg, leaving me gasping. I clutch the chain attached to the shackle, the metal biting into my skin. My eyes dart to the figure, and I spot the device in their hand.

“That.” The message is clear, and it makes my stomach churn. I’m not just chained; I’m a dog on a leash, complete with a shock collar.

The masked person tilts their head, almost amused. They say nothing more, retreating as quickly as they arrived. The heavy door closes behind them with a metallic groan. The sound of a bolt sliding into place reminds me that I’m caged, leaving me alone with the trolley and my trembling body.

The smell of the food is too tempting to ignore. My stomach aches with hunger, but questions churn in my mind. Who are they? Why feed me like this? The dishes are covered, the setup meticulous, as if this were a luxury dining experience instead of a dungeon.

I shuffle closer to the trolley, the chain dragging noisily behind me. My hands hover over the tray as I hesitate. What if it’s drugged? But then again, the water wasn’t drugged earlier. If they wanted to incapacitate me, they’d have done it already.

As my stomach growls again, but this time almost painfully, I hear Radomir’s voice whisper in the back of my mind: If you’re pregnant...

I freeze. The thought makes my eyes widen. I stop my first instinct to touch my stomach—I’m being watched, and I would rather my captors not realize I might be with child. I don’t know if I am, but I can’t afford to risk harm—not to my baby or myself. My defenses crumble under the weight of hunger and fear, and I lift the first lid.

Eggs, bacon, toast, and a perfectly cooked hash brown. Everything is plated with care, like it came from a five-star restaurant. A chill runs down my spine. They've done their homework as these are all my favorite breakfast foods. My stomach growls again, and I give in.

I move the trolley closer to the table where one chair is pushed beneath it. Pulling it out, I'm surprised to see the seat is padded and offers decent back support. "Huh!" I snort softly, glancing at the hard, cold metal chairs lining the wall beside the door. "A good breakfast and comfortable chair." My brow furrows as I move the plate of breakfast coffee... "Is that fresh apple juice?" Another of my favorites.

I stop trying to second guess everything as the hunger now almost consumes me and I transfer everything from the trolley to the table. The first bite is heavenly. The food melts in my mouth, and I savor every piece, desperate for the comfort it brings.

But with every bite, my unease grows. Whoever my captor is, they want me alive and well—at least for now. That thought is far from comforting but at least it may give me some time to figure out how to get the fuck out of here.

As I eat, my gaze drifts to the books on the table beside me. The card rests on top, mocking me with its message: Maybe these books will help you remember .

I reach for the books, my hand trembling slightly. "How the fuck are my song books supposed to jog my memory?" I wonder out loud. "I've been through each one dozens of times over the past ten years. I'm sure if they were going to..."

My words fade, and my brow furrows deeper. The leather binding feels familiar, but the gold writing on the book – Songbook 1 is familiar. I look for the small gold L at the bottom right-hand corner but it's nothing but a few gold blobs—the lettering erased over time with wear.

But I'm sure my songbook 1 still had my L on it. My heart pounds, and every nerve in my body goes on high alert as a voice in the back of my mind screams: Stop! Put the book down and back away!

My hand shakes, and my throat suddenly feels dry, but I swallow then force myself to open it, my breath catches.

These aren't my books .

VV – Book 1 —I go cold, and my eyes shoot to the other two books—these are my mother's songbooks.

“No,” I whisper, my pulse quickening. “No, no, no.”

Panic grips me. How did they get these? My father told me that my mother's books were packed away in a storage locker waiting for me to get my memories back before I could have them. This isn't just someone playing a game. They've dug deep into my life, into my past.

My mind reels as I remember Nikolas—my father? Confusion sends sharp pinpricks of pain shooting through my skull.

No. Mark is my father. Mark Dalton. I'm Leigh Dalton.

No, Lulu-Petal – you're not. I can hear Nikolas's voice echo in my head.

“Yes I am!” I fling the book across the room, scrapping the chair back to push myself to my feet. “I'm Leigh Dalton.”

The room starts to spin, and I grip the back of the chair squeezing my eyes shut to steady myself, forcing air into my lungs in a slow steady rhythm to calm me. A cool,

clear head is what I need not panic and dread.

Feeling calmer I open my eyes and go pick up the book. Bringing it back to the table I place it beside me, sit and finish my breakfast while ignoring the books. Instead I concentrate on being pregnant and wondering when is the earliest I'd know if I was.

I pick up the coffee, savoring the taste and another thought hits me— Fuck! Should I be drinking coffee? I'm sure I heard or read somewhere that there is food and things you shouldn't drink if you're pregnant. I put the mug down and say out loud. "Not smart, Leigh. You gave up coffee, remember?"

I glance around the room. "If you're listening. This is not cool. You seem to have done your homework on the foods I like but your data is out of date about what I like to drink. Sure, I love coffee, but I gave it up a week ago as I realized I liked it a bit too much and my father's an addict, so I reasoned I'd also have addiction tendency's, so I gave up coffee." I push the cup aside. "I've replaced it with low to no-caffeine herbal teas. They're also better for the stress headaches I get and help me sleep better."

I feel like a complete nut job talking to the room, but I know they're there somewhere watching and listening to me. I'm like a goldfish in a fucking glass bowl. When I finish eating, I place everything except the water back on the trolley. My movements are mechanical, my mind racing. I wheel the trolley to the marked spot, careful to align it exactly as instructed. If I am pregnant, I won't risk doing anything that could harm the baby.

I won't be like my mother, I'll be better! That thought hits me like a slap, and a sudden ache blooms in my skull. I clutch my head as a sharp pain radiates through it.

"What the fuck!" I exclaim through gritted teeth. "My mother was a good mother..." Fragmented pieces of memory feel like someone flipped a box filled with broken

images and scattered them across my brain. Nausea rises and I start to feel giddy. I stagger over to the edge of the cot and sit. “Wasn’t she?”

Rubbing my temples I try to piece the images together. My memory of her in the warm, sunny studio begins to morph, and the room I remember slips away as if it were never there. A mirage covering something darker.

Where are they, you fucking little bitch? A sharp sting blisters the skin on my cheek and my hand flies to it the memory is so real. I would never have had you if it hadn’t been stipulated in that fucking marriage contract. All you are, is my golden key to ensuring I stay living in this life of luxury!

Something warm trickles from my nose. I push myself up and grab some toilet tissue dabbing at it as my nose starts to sting. I look at the tissue—blood.

“Great. A fucking nosebleed.” I grab some more toilet tissue and press it to my nostrils. As I sit back on the cot, trying to stop the bleeding, my mind churns. Just who the hell was my mother really? My brow creases as I try to remember more but the shards of memories pop and disappear just giving me more pain in the head and nose.

Closing my eyes I do some more breathing exercises to try and relax—clear all thought from my mind. But as I begin to relax I feel a twinge behind my eyes right before my memories of mother crack open, splintering like an eggshell. Only the center is rotten—putrid. I see her face—she’s beautiful but I know it masks the ugliness within her.

I can hear her voice—low, seductive, sultry and she sings like an angel only her mouth is venomous as a snake. She loves to slap me in the face delighting at the redness and then basking in any bruising it may have caused—Vivienne wasn’t the warm, happy, loving mother of my broken mind—she’s more evil than the queen in

Snow White. Only Vivienne didn't have poison apples she had poison crossbow bolts.

My eyes shoot open and shoot upright, ignoring the pain slicing through my head. I push the sleeve of the scrubs up to unveil my arm— “It was a bolt that went through the top of your arm. It poisoned your system, sweetheart.”

I run my fingers over the smooth mushroomed flesh of the scar and turn my arm to see where it had gone right through. Fuck, it was a poison arrow that went through my arm. Realization makes my stomach churn as I try to remember who shot me with the arrow. I close my eyes trying to recall what happened, but I'm met with darkness this time.

Frustration coils through me and my hands ball into fists, my nails biting into the soft flesh of my palms. Why is it when I don't want to remember—bam! They slap me in the face and then when I try it just nothing. A black screen systems failure.

I rub my temples, trying to make sense of the chaos that is my mind. The door slides open, jolting me out of my spiraling thoughts. The masked person enters, their movements quick and purposeful. They place an ice pack and a bottle of aspirin on the table without a word.

“For the headaches and nosebleeds,” they say, their modulated voice reminiscent of the robotic tones from old sci-fi movies.

They check the trolley, ensuring everything is as it was, then wheel it out. The door slams shut, the bolts sliding into place with a metallic clang.

Frustration and confusion swirl within me, merging into a tidal wave of anger. “Fuck, why all the security?” I snap, glaring at the walls. “You've got me chained so I can't reach the fucking door anyway. Not just chained—chained with a shock shackle.

Who do you think I am? Fucking Houdini?"

"Come now, Leigh." The distorted voice makes me jump. "You must've realized by now that we've been watching you for a very long time."

My spine stiffens as their words sink in. "You've been watching me?" I demand, my voice rising. "Why?"

"You're very important to us," the voice replies calmly.

"Why am I important?" Alarm bells ring in my head, competing with the pounding headache.

"You're the key to getting us everything we want."

The voice fades, but their words linger in the air, casting a dark shadow over the room. As silence fills the space, another memory crashes into me. All you are, is my golden key to ensuring I stay living in this life of luxury!

And just like that I'm nearly bowled over by the tsunami of memories that flood my mind:

Images of me screaming at Vivienne: "I hate you, Vivienne. You're nothing more than a fucking psycho whore!" The memory hits me with the force of a train. Vivienne. I didn't call her mom. I called her Vivienne.

"Oh, my God! I didn't love her at all. I hated her!" I whisper to the empty room. My voice trembles, barely audible as I feel the resentment for the woman that birthed me fill my veins.

More memories flood in, disjointed and cruel. Mark's face appears, kind and patient.

I'm younger, laughing as he pushes me on a swing. Push me higher, Uncle Mark!

"Uncle Mark?" I murmur, my voice breaking. "What the fuck?"

My eyes spring open. I stagger over to the table, grab a bottled water, swallow the aspirin, and take the ice back with me back to the cot. Lying back I pull the tissue from my nose and put the ice pack on my head as I will the aspirin to work quickly to dull the now pounding ache in my head.

Before I know it I'm drifting off into my disjointed memories of my past.

I'm twelve, lying on a hard cot just like the one in this cell. My arm burns, the pain excruciating. A man with icy blue eyes looks down at me.

Vivienne's voice cuts through the memory, sharp and desperate. "You can't take her without me!"

The man turns, his expression cold. "What the fuck have you done?" His voice was low and dangerous. "Look at this mess." His eyes glance toward me before they turn back to Vivienne with a look of utter disgust. "Just how low and perverted does a person have to be to do this to their own daughter?"

"I told you, she stole from me and had to be taught a lesson when she refused to give what she took back," Vivienne hisses. "You can't judge me. You forget—I know who you are and what your tastes are."

"They're not children!" He says through gritted teeth. "And would certainly never be my children I'd drag into a place like this. So congratulations, Vivienne, you're not only the world's worst human being but the world's worst mother as well."

"But I'm still a mother," Vivienne growls back and points behind her toward me.

“Her mother. And without me, you’ll never get her!”

“Fortunately, we don’t need you for that anymore, Vivienne.” His cruel laugh echoes in my mind, sending a shiver down my spine . “ It’s always been Leigh that is important to me , ” he says, his voice calm and chilling. “ She’s the key that unlocks everything I’ve ever wanted.” His eyes narrow a bit more. “You? You’re just an obstacle in our way.”

My gaze falls on Vivienne’s purse, and her words echo in my ears : The silver arrow is for the man with your father’s face. The gold one... that’s for the Ice Man.

I snap back to reality, dumped into the present. My mind spins like an out-of-control top. My lips part, the words spilling out before I can stop them. “I shot you with the gold arrow.”

The silence in the dungeon is deafening as I sit and swing my legs over the bed.

“The gold arrow was supposed to kill you,” I say, my voice shaky and rising as the memory becomes clearer making me frown and shake my head. “No, it can’t be you. I shot you. I shot you in the heart with the golden arrow.”

The bolts grind open. My heart stops as a very tall, broad-shouldered man steps into the room. He’s wearing a mask, but his presence is unmistakably menacing, and familiar.

“So, you do remember,” he says, his voice deep and unmodulated.

“No, just pieces,” I reply. My heart races as my fingers dig into the cot. “If you think I remember you, why are you still wearing the mask?”

He pulls it off slowly, and I gasp.

Fear slices through me like a knife.

His icy blue eyes pierce into mine, a stark reminder of every nightmare I've ever fought to forget.

The edges of my vision blur, the world tilting as I fight to stay upright. I fight the dizziness overtaking me. But the darkness is too strong and reaches for me, pulling me under.

As the world fades, I utter one word: "Oleksi."

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Chapter 4

RADOMIR

Temur enters my office, rolling in Sabrina's murder board with a satisfied air. The oversized whiteboard teeters on its wheeled frame, and my eyes narrow at the absurdity of it.

"A murder board?" My eyes meet Sabrina's, and she gives me a big grin. "Really?"

I glance at Temur, raising an eyebrow. His only response is a shrug and a casual, "Sabrina asked for it."

The room feels tighter as Sabrina stares at the board as if it's a lover and holds all the answers to the universe. Nikolas sighs, casting me a glance that says he's resigned to this nonsense.

"She loves doing shit like this," he mutters, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Just go with it."

"I don't really have an option," I reply dryly, my eyes shifting back to Sabrina, who is practically vibrating with excitement.

Temur sets a pack of colorful markers on my desk, nods curtly, and walks out without another word. The room falls silent, save for the faint scrape of chair legs as Sabrina slides her seat back and stands.

I stare at the huge board, sure Temur found the biggest one we had. “What the fuck are we, detectives now?”

Sabrina doesn’t even flinch. “Yes,” she says simply, starting to walk around my desk. “Just give it a try. It’s not like we have anything to lose. Especially since your way hasn’t exactly been working, has it?” She gives me a smug smile, batting her ridiculously long eyelashes at me.

She’s about to reach for the journal beside me, and before I can retort—or Sabrina’s fingers hit the cover—Nikolas moves at the speed of light and snatches it. Sabrina immediately stiffens, her brow furrowing as anger clouds her blue eyes.

“What the fuck, Uncle Nik?” she snaps, her eyes narrowing.

Nikolas meets her gaze with the same calm authority that makes even my men tread carefully around him. “I can’t let either of you see this before we’ve discussed...” His voice trails off awkwardly as he glances pointedly at me. “A few things.”

“That’s bullshit,” Sabrina fires back. “What are you trying to protect us from?” She slams her hands on her hips.

She’s small enough to go unnoticed in most rooms, but her fury makes her seem as towering as Oleksi himself. And I’ve seen her penchant for blowing things up.

“Rina...” Nikolas warns her, his voice dropping to a tone that would make most men realize they’re crossing a line. But not Sabrina. The woman has absolutely no fucking fear. “There are things in here that—”

“Are X-rated?” Her brows shoot up. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Uncle Nik, but I’m no longer an innocent tween and haven’t been since I watched my father’s head explode when a bullet—I now know was meant for me—hit him between the eyes.”

“What the fuck, Sabrina?” My heart lurches as I look at her. “That’s why you no longer like going to your father’s cabin.”

“Something like that.” She glances at me and turns back to Nikolas. “And besides, I’ve read all the bitch’s other journals, and as you know, I don’t forget—a thing. So I already know Vivienne was a fucking narcissistic, hedonistic, sadistic, perverted whore!” Her eyes drop to the journal. “She got her rocks off fucking Gun...”

“Enough!” Nikolas’s voice is barely raised, but it feels like the room shakes. His eyes turn greener than I thought possible as they bore into Sabrina. “That is not the way to approach this. While you may have read the other journals”—his eyes fall on me—“Radomir has not.”

I lean back in my chair, studying Nikolas. “What’s in the journals?” My voice is calm, but the edge in it is unmistakable.

Nikolas hesitates, then says carefully, “Vivienne, Vladimir, and Gunther were... close.”

“Close?” Sabrina scoffs, her lip curling as she turns to me. “Vivienne was fucking your uncle and father. They had regular threesomes while torturing someone—or their latest ‘plaything’ in what Vivienne termed your father’s pleasure dungeon. They’d record it, and she’d always take a copy to play over and over again—probably to masturbate by.” She shudders and makes a gagging face. “God, that’s so gross to even think about. But then, I guess it’s no worse than the twisted shit she documented in her journals.”

I shouldn’t be that surprised by her words, but they still hit me like a punch to the gut. I keep my expression neutral. I’ve heard whispers about my father and Gunther’s proclivities—rumors I dismissed as exaggerations because the staff and people were scared of them. Hearing it from Sabrina, however, feels different.

Nikolas doesn't react to her words, but the tightening of his jaw tells me he's struggling to hold his composure. "We don't need to focus on that right now," he says, his tone clipped. "We have bigger problems."

I nod, pushing past the bile rising in my throat. "Like the fact that someone in my organization might be working against me—and that's how they got to Leigh."

Sabrina walks back around the desk and picks up four pens: red, green, black, and blue. Then she walks to the board, waiting for me.

Nikolas raises an eyebrow. "Go on."

"Two days ago, another one of my trucks was hit," I say, taking a steadying breath. My gaze flicks to Sabrina as I explain what's been happening over the past two years—the sporadic attacks that have steadily escalated, especially over the last month. "Viktor suspects Daniil, the driver, might be involved. Every shipment Daniil was responsible for, or every warehouse he oversaw restocking, ended up being attacked—always after his involvement, as if the targets were chosen deliberately."

Sabrina separates the board into four partitions. In black, she writes Molchanov, in green, she writes Leigh, in red, she writes Enemy, and in blue, she writes Other. Under Molchanov, she jots down Daniil, his sister, and a few other names I rattle off.

"Viktor and Judy uncovered more of my trusted staff members than I'm comfortable with, who were working against me." I rub my temple, the tension building as I continue. "Seeing my safe at the estate opened—and knowing there aren't many people who know about the helipad door from this apartment either..." My words trail off. Voicing my fear makes it feel too real.

Sabrina's eyes widen slightly, but she doesn't interrupt, her pen darting across the board as she jots a few more points. Nikolas remains silent, his sharp gaze fixed on

me, waiting for me to finish.

“After Leigh was taken, I can’t ignore the possibility that someone in my inner circle—someone who knew about my safes and the secret door to the helipad—might be feeding information to Carlos.”

The weight of my own words hangs in the air, pressing down like a lead weight. For a moment, the room feels oppressively silent.

Nikolas leans back, his expression unreadable. “Who is your inner circle?”

I rattle off names: Oleksi, Gavriil—my cousins. They’re blood, and I hate even having to name them. But my mother learned the hard way that sometimes it’s those closest to you who are the most dangerous.

“Viktor, Judy, Temur, Fredrik, Gunner, Dolph, and Sergei,” I add, rubbing my chin. “Then there’s my mother, Galina, and my grandfather, Boris Mirochin.”

“I thought your inner circle would’ve been just you!” Sabrina snorts, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “Don’t big bad Bratva kings only trust themselves?”

“Funny.” I shake my head, though she isn’t wrong. In my world, there really isn’t anyone you can trust one hundred percent. But it’s nice to fool yourself into thinking there are those you can count on.

“What about Dmitri?” Nikolas asks, glancing at the names Sabrina has scrawled on the board.

“Isn’t he dead?” The question comes out more as wishful thinking than certainty. If they thought Vivienne, my father, and Uncle Gunther were bad... fuck, they should meet Dmitri. He brings a whole new meaning to sick, twisted, and megalomania. A

jolt runs through me at the thought of Dmitri, and my eyes narrow. “Dmitri does know this place very well. Before he was kicked out of the family, he spent a lot of time here in Vegas.”

“Dmitri Molchanov,” Sabrina mutters as she writes the name.

“No,” I correct her. “It’s Mirochin. He’s my mother’s younger brother.”

“Oh!” Sabrina nods, erasing the last name and rewriting it. She turns to Nikolas. “There, now, there are all the people who could be helping.” She taps next to where she’s written Unknown Enemies and a big red question mark. “Now your turn, Uncle Nik.” She caps the black pen and uncaps the green one. “Who are your enemies, or anyone you know who’s after Leigh?” Before he can answer, she writes Carlos posing as Nikolas. “Let’s put Mark here too since he hates you because he thinks you killed Thea.”

“I have more people than I can think of who would love to take me down,” Nikolas admits, his tone grim. “But this isn’t about me or what I do for a living.” He turns his chair slightly, watching Sabrina’s progress. “This is about taking control of five major entities with two key players in the middle of it all.”

His words send a shiver down my spine. I know he means Leigh and me.

Sabrina draws two interconnecting circles, one in black and one in green. In the middle, she writes Leigh in green and Radomir in black. She takes a brown pen and draws a curly bracket beneath them, writing Married at the point of the bracket. She stands for a moment, staring at the board, tapping the pen against her lips before turning to me.

“Who do you trust?” she asks, drawing a larger circle around both inner circles and looking at me pointedly.

I hesitate, the question cutting deeper than I expect. “Right now? Everyone in this room. That’s it.”

Sabrina scoffs, rolling her eyes. “I can see how hard that was for you to admit.”

“I see it this way,” I explain. “Only the three of us are invested in finding and getting Leigh back.” I turn to Nikolas. “You obviously love your daughter. You’ve been skulking in the shadows protecting her for years. You even sacrificed yourself, so she’d be safe, even at the cost of losing her.”

“She’s my Lulu-Petal,” Nikolas says softly, so quietly I almost don’t catch it. A strange pang runs through me at the love I see in his eyes—a love I would’ve given anything to see in my father’s. All I ever got from him was judgment and the occasional pat on the back when I did something he approved of.

My attention shifts to Sabrina. “And you, Sabrina, I could only wish for a friend as loyal as you are to Leigh.”

Her eyes shimmer, tears threatening to spill, but she gets her emotions under control quickly. “Thank you,” she says, her voice steady.

“And the instant you knew I was trying to help Leigh the other night, you extended that trust to me.” I pause, the memory still humbling. “You didn’t know what would happen to you, and you know my reputation, yet you didn’t hesitate to jump into the fire to help Leigh.”

“That’s our Sabrina,” Nikolas says, pride evident in his tone, as if she were his own daughter. “She’s always been like this.”

“The two of you obviously trust each other,” I say, pointing between Sabrina and Nikolas. “I’m guessing not many people know you’re alive, Nikolas.” I glance at

Sabrina. “And from what I can gather, you’ve known about his secret since you were a kid.”

“And both she and Leigh have kept it,” Nikolas adds with a soft laugh. “Although Leigh does have dissociative amnesia. But even before she lost her memories, Leigh and Sabrina didn’t say a word to anyone since they were...” He frowns, glancing at Sabrina for confirmation.

“We were six,” Sabrina reminds him. “Well, that’s the first time I met you.” She turns back to the board, writing at the top of the larger circle in brown: Trust: Sabrina and Nikolas. At the bottom in red, she writes: Common Enemy: Ice Man and Wanda Manning—Iceman Industries. Then, returning to Leigh’s section, she writes Greek Monarch in parentheses beside Carlos and jots down Alexandra Vasilikis (Greek Matriarch).

“Wanda Manning has a Russian oligarch husband,” I tell them, frowning. “How does the Ice Man connect to my family?”

“Fuck!” Nikolas suddenly hisses, his voice tight. He’s staring at the laptop, his fingers tapping the touchpad. He spins the screen toward Sabrina and me. “The night of the poker game—did you notice these two?”

Nikolas points to two men in the hotel foyer on the security footage.

“Yes.” Nodding, I explain how Enzo Fabri’s son, Luca, had been tracking those men because they killed Enzo.

“What?” Nikolas sputters, his face paling. “Enzo’s dead?” His expression hardens. “And Luca’s sure these are the men who killed him?”

“Yes.” I nod, my tone firm. “They’re Greek Special Forces.” I narrow my eyes,

wondering why Nikolas looks so alarmed. “They’re your mother’s men. Luca said they infiltrated the game looking for Mark because he has something your mother—the Greek Matriarch—wants.”

“No!” Nikolas’s jaw tightens as he zooms in on one of the men’s necks. “See that tattoo sticking out beneath his collar?”

“Yes,” Sabrina and I say in unison.

“That’s a hydra.” Nikolas pinches the bridge of his nose, his expression grim. “Are you sure Luca said these were the men who killed Enzo?”

Nodding, I ask, “Why do I feel like I’m not going to like where this is going?”

Sabrina leans closer, her brows knitting together as she examines the footage. “Are you sure they’re Greek Special Forces?” She glances at me.

“According to Luca, they are.” I recount what Luca told me. “His father wouldn’t tell them where they could find Mark, so they killed him.”

“Are you sure they were looking for Mark?” Nikolas’s words make my chest tighten.

My heart slams against my ribcage as I remember Daniil’s words from the truck ambush: He wants the golden key, the journals, and Dalton.

“Fuck!” I hiss, locking eyes with Nikolas. “They weren’t your mother’s men, were they?” My fists clench, and I slam one against the desk, making Sabrina jump. “They’re Carlos’s. And the Dalton they were after wasn’t Mark—it was Leigh.”

I glance at the screen again, another memory hitting me like a freight train. “I actually saw that tattoo on a few of the men who ambushed us after the truck heist.”

“So, they are with Carlos.” Nikolas’s voice is calm, but there’s a dangerous edge to it. He stares at the screen, his eyes narrowing. “They leave as soon as Leigh bolts through the door.”

“Yes, I noticed that.” I frown, my gaze flicking between Nikolas and the footage. “What I don’t understand is, if they were following her, why not take her then?” My voice sharpens. “Leigh ducked around the back streets and lay low for quite a while before trying to get to the Golden Lights.” I turn to Sabrina. “At least, that’s where my men presumed she was going to find you.”

“Maybe they were hoping she’d lead them to the journals?” Sabrina offers, her eyes narrowing as she studies the screen again. “I don’t think those men are Greek.”

“They’re not.” Nikolas looks up from the laptop, his tone grim. “That tattoo is on both men’s necks. You can’t see it as well on the other guy, but the tip of one of the hydra’s heads is visible.”

“Isn’t the hydra from Greek mythology?” I ask, a flicker of memory surfacing. If I recall correctly, the hydra lived in the swampy waters of Lerna near some ancient city in Greece, and it was slain by Heracles. “Didn’t Heracles shoot it with poison arrows and then cut off its head or something like that?”

“Basically.” Sabrina nods and points to the screen. “But those two men are not Greek.” She glances at Nikolas for confirmation. “They look more Russian to me.”

Alarmed, my eyes dart back to the screen. A fleeting memory taunts me. “Russian?” The word tastes bitter on my tongue. I look to Nikolas. “Is she right?”

He nods slowly, his jaw clenched, his expression unreadable. “They are. And that tattoo means Carlos isn’t here alone this time. He’s brought backup.”

The weight of his words hangs in the air, heavy and foreboding.

Chapter 5

RADOMIR

Sabrina and I gape at Nikolas.

“The Hydra symbolizes the multi-faceted nature of the organization. The Hydra perched on a mountain of gold represents their ultimate goal—total dominance,” Nikolas explains. He picks up one of Sabrina’s pens and approaches the board, his movements sharp with purpose. Beneath Ice Man, he writes Zolotaya Gidra. “The Hydra on the mountain symbolizes their ambition—global dominance in the underworld, corporate world, and militaries.”

He sketches the tattoo with practiced ease, labeling it as he speaks. “The Hydra and the gold represent the alliance of Greek and Russian powerhouses. Together, they’re unstoppable.”

“A mix of Russian and Greek.” My eyes narrow at the board.

“Like you and Leigh.” Sabrina glances at me before addressing Nikolas. “You’re not exaggerating about the world dominance thing, are you?”

“I’m afraid not,” Nikolas says, his tone grim. “And Leigh and Radomir are right at the nexus of it all.” He gestures toward the board. “At first, I thought Carlos was just after Leigh. I can imagine why he and his Russian would want her. But then again, what happened ten years ago never quite made sense to me either.” He frowns, the tension etched across his face.

“Why did you mention ten years ago?” Sabrina asks before I can.

Nikolas meets my eyes, and his words hit like a sledgehammer. “Carlos was there the night your father, uncle, and Vivienne were killed.”

“You mean here in Vegas?” My heart slams against my ribs, hope mingling with dread. Does Nikolas actually know something about that night?

“No.” He shakes his head, his gaze shadowed. “I mean in the dungeon beneath the Diamond Hotel, where your father, uncle, and Vivienne were killed.”

A chill snakes down my spine, and Sabrina gasps beside me.

“How would you know that?” The roar in my ears drowns out my thoughts. For ten years, all I’ve heard is: We’re not sure—the video feed was wiped clean, everything erased. Only a professional would’ve pulled off something so meticulous. My eyes narrow on Nikolas. “You were there, weren’t you?”

“I came to get Leigh and your mother,” Nikolas replies, his tone even. “I wasn’t there when your father, uncle, or Vivienne were killed.”

“What the fuck, Uncle Nik!” Sabrina blurts. “Leigh?”

“My mother?” I snap, my voice hard.

“Wait!” Sabrina lifts a hand, her expression tight with disbelief. “What are you saying?”

“Leigh was there?” My mind spins, confusion blurring my thoughts. “You’d better start at the beginning. Fast. My trust in you is tanking.”

Nikolas gestures for us to sit. “You both should probably sit down.”

Sabrina’s glare softens as she points to the journal in his hand. “Is that what’s in there?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Sit.”

Reluctantly, Sabrina and I settle into our seats, facing him at her murder board like students awaiting judgment.

“Two days before the event, Sabrina found Vivienne’s journals and brought them to me,” Nikolas begins. “As Sabrina will tell you, the first three journals are... shocking. I knew Vivienne was evil, but I didn’t realize how deep her depravity ran.”

“Your uncle beat the crap out of Oleksi when Judy turned him down, and while she watched, she and your father fucked each other,” Sabrina says bluntly, her words knotting my stomach. “They put Oleksi in the hospital because Judy rejected his marriage proposal and confessed her love for someone else. Your uncle wanted Oleksi to teach Judy and her new love a lesson for daring to say no to a future Pakhan.”

“Jesus Christ.” My pulse thunders. I’ve done fucked-up things as Pakhan—things I’ll never be proud of—but this? “My mother’s number-one rule was never to turn on family unless they were threatening your life.”

“Well, Oleksi didn’t threaten anyone’s life. He refused to punish Judy, and then had to endure it himself,” Sabrina explains. “I don’t like your cousin, but I respect what he did.”

“Hold on.” My brow furrows. “Oleksi took a few days off from UCLA to propose to Judy. That was—”

“A few days before your father and uncle were killed,” Sabrina finishes.

“The reason Gavriil and I weren’t at the hotel that day was because we were at the hospital with Oleksi. He told us he’d been attacked when he finally came around.” My blood boils, the anger from that day reigniting. “Fuck. That was my uncle?”

“You don’t even want to know what he did after dumping Oleksi at the hospital,” Sabrina mutters darkly.

“That’s why you didn’t want me reading the journals,” I realize.

“That and other things I didn’t think you wanted to know about your family,” she says softly, a rare note of compassion in her voice.

“You’re remarkable, you know that?”

Her lips twitch into a faint smile, but the seriousness in her eyes remains. She turns back to Nikolas. “Okay, so I gave you the journals. Then what?”

Nikolas nods. “I called Galina after reading the fourth journal. It’s her blackmail journal—a list of abbreviated names and coded numbers tied to every person she had dirt on. While the others focused on her twisted pleasures...” He holds up the journal. “This one detailed her blackmail victims and her plans.”

“And I’m in there?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“You and Leigh,” Nikolas confirms grimly. “In fact, it’s where your mother got the idea for a marriage between you two.”

“Is that why you didn’t want me to see it?”

“Not just that.” His tone hardens. “There’s a plot in here to kill your mother and, eventually, your father. The goal was for you to ascend as Pakhan. Then, once you married Leigh and had an heir on the way—”

“She’d get rid of me,” I finish bitterly.

“Not Vivienne.” Nikolas’s voice tightens. “Gunther.”

“Gunther?” My brows draw together. “No fucking way.”

“I’m afraid so. Gunther wanted it all—with Vivienne as his wife.”

“Jesus.” I rake a hand through my hair, my mind spinning. “What the fuck is wrong with these people?”

“Criminals,” Sabrina states flatly. “It’s the world you live in, so I don’t see why you’re so surprised. Of course he’d want his family to have it all.”

“That doesn’t sound like Uncle Gunther,” I say, shaking my head. “I just can’t see it. He was a ruthless, evil bastard, but he was lazy. If it wasn’t for my father, he’d never have gotten the Mirochin Bratva to where it was before Oleksi took over.”

“I’m sorry, Radomir, but it’s all in here.” Nikolas pats the journal and then looks at Sabrina.

“Let me guess, there’s something incriminating in there about my dad?” Sabrina asks, crossing her arms.

“Not just your father, Rina,” Nikolas replies with a small, grim smile. “But your mother, your sister, and you.”

“What the fuck?” Sabrina’s eyebrows knit together as her voice rises in disbelief.

“But we can’t get distracted by what’s in here now,” Nikolas cautions, his tone firm. “We need to focus on finding Leigh and putting a stop to Carlos and his Russians’ plans.”

“Let’s start with the night in the dungeon,” I say, pulling the conversation back to where it began.

“I contacted Galina to come and read the journals because she needed to know what Vivienne and Gunther were planning,” Nikolas continues from where we left off. “Sol was already at the cabin. Sabrina had asked him to bring her and Leigh there.”

“The cabin you blew up the other night?” I glance at Sabrina, who nods.

“What I didn’t know was that Vivienne had somehow found Sol’s cabin earlier that same day,” Nikolas says grimly. “And she’d seen your mother there with me.”

“What?” Shock hits me like a freight train. “What the fuck were you doing with—” I hold up a hand before he can answer. “You know what? Forget it. I don’t want to know.”

“Good, because I wasn’t going to tell you,” Nikolas admits, his expression dark. “That’s your mother’s choice. What matters is that Vivienne told your father the moment she realized I was alive. We didn’t know she’d found out until the day of her death—when all hell broke loose.”

“So Vivienne and Leigh weren’t in an accident?” Sabrina’s voice is soft, almost hesitant.

“No,” Nikolas says flatly, his gaze distant. “I wasn’t there when it happened, but by

the time I got there..." He trails off, his jaw tightening with suppressed emotion. "I knew I should never have let Sol take her home. Something didn't feel right."

"That's why you left me with Sam at the cabin," Sabrina says, the realization dawning on her.

"Yes." Nikolas nods. "I told Sol to take Leigh and wait at his house, but it was too late. Vivienne had already taken her. It was Leigh's birthday, and Vivienne told Sol she wanted to take her shopping for a present."

"That should've been the first red flag," Sabrina mutters. "That bitch never did anything unless it benefited her."

"While I was on my way to Mark's house, I got an urgent message from your mother, Radomir. She said Vladimir knew I was alive and that we'd been together at the cabin. She was afraid of what he might do."

My gut twists at his words. "You said you tracked Leigh to the dungeon."

"Yes," Nikolas says. "I tracked Leigh's phone to your dungeon beneath the Diamond Hotel. Sol and Sam wouldn't let me go alone, so I waited for them to back me up. I shouldn't have. If I'd gone straight there—"

"You'd have been killed," Sabrina interrupts. "Don't do that to yourself, Uncle Nik."

"When I arrived," Nikolas continues, his voice heavy, "your father, uncle, and Vivienne were already dead. Leigh was lying on the cot, delirious, with a poison arrow from Vivienne's handheld crossbow lodged in her arm."

"You told me she got that in the accident," Sabrina accuses, her voice trembling. "You said the crossbow accidentally went off during the crash that killed Vivienne."

“Honey, you were twelve,” Nikolas says gently, his expression softening. “It’s bad enough you’d read part of those journals. We told you what we could.”

“Yeah, a big fat fucking lie,” Sabrina snaps, glaring at him.

“So Leigh was in the dungeon where my father and uncle were killed?” My heart pounds like a war drum. “She saw who killed them?”

“She was delirious,” Nikolas admits. “But, yes, Leigh was there.”

“And my mother?” My voice is sharp, demanding.

“She was locked in the dungeon next door,” Nikolas replies. “When I let her out, she was badly beaten—your father’s handiwork—but all she cared about was Leigh. Vivienne had dragged Leigh into her cell, shouting that this was what happened to people who stole and lying, cheating whores—her words, not mine.”

“That fucking bastard,” I grind out, my stomach churning. “It wasn’t the first time that he’d laid hands on her like that.”

“I know,” Nikolas says bluntly, and I see his eyes darkening in anger which speaks volumes to me. “Your mother didn’t see what happened and she couldn’t hear anything either.”

“Why the fuck did Vivienne take Leigh there?” My voice rises, every muscle in my body tensing. “She was twelve. Why would Vivienne want to teach her a lesson about lying cheating whores?”

“I don’t know.” Nikolas’s jaw clenches, the storm in his eyes dark and dangerous. “There was no one to ask and Leigh was too delirious. There’s no telling what Vivienne, your father, or Gunther were planning or had already done to her, but it

wasn't good."

"It was bad enough that she got dissociative amnesia!" Sabrina's eyes have also darkened with anger.

"Leigh's shirt had been cut open down the front, and someone had tried to tie it back together." He swallows and if I didn't know how much he loved his daughter before I sure as fuck did then. The pain, regret, anger, and guilt in his eyes said it all.

"Fuck!" I slam my fist against the arm of the chair. "Leigh was down there? In that place? I can't believe her own mother took her there."

"That fucking whore bitch Vivienne got what she deserved in the end," Sabrina spits venomously. "She was a horrible mother—an all-around dreadful human being."

"I can't even argue with that or say she never used to be like that because Vivienne had always been like that," Nikolas declares. "Even her own mother and father had washed their hands of her."

"Who can blame them?" Sabrina states.

While Nikolas and Sabrina talk about Vivienne one thought keeps rolling around in my head. "So, the only person who might know the truth about who killed my father and uncle has dissociative amnesia?"

"I'm afraid so," Nikolas confirms grimly. "What we do know is that Carlos and the Ice Man were there, too."

"Seriously?" I sit up straight. "How do you know that?"

"Leigh!" Nikolas rubs the back of his neck. "She kept mumbling that the Ice Man and

the man with my face had punished Vivienne because of what she'd done to her. Then she'd get all agitated and terrified because they'd also told her they'd be back for her when the time was right."

"You said there was poison on the arrow?" I ask. "What kind of poison?"

"Some concoction Vivienne had made for her "hunting" arrows. She called it her designer poison," Sabrina is the one who answers. "Luckily Uncle Nik knew who made it for Vivienne and the person was able to cook up an antidote." She glances at Nikolas with narrowed eyes. "Or was that a big fat lie too?"

"No." Nikolas shakes his head. "That part was the truth."

"Who?" I look at Nikolas. "Who made the designer poison?"

"I can't disclose that," Nikolas replies flatly, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"Convenient," I snap, leaning back in my chair, glaring at him.

"So, it could've been the Ice Man or Carlos who killed my father and uncle?" I ask, shifting the conversation back to the murders.

"I don't think it was Carlos," Nikolas says, his voice low and steady. "I believe he killed Vivienne. Her neck was snapped—after the Uzi episode that became his signature method of killing."

Sabrina's gaze shifts to the murder board. "'So, Carlos and..." Her voice trails off and jumps up to walk to the board, tapping on the jumping up and stepping closer on the section labeled Russian Oligarch. "It has to be him." She spins around, excitement bubbling in her expression. "We need to find out who Wanda Manning's husband is—the oligarch. He has to be the Ice Man—and possibly your father and uncle's

killer.”

“Or,” I counter, “Carlos could be the Ice Man.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:52 pm

Chapter 6

RADOMIR

“No, the Ice Man isn’t Carlos.” Nikolas cuts in sharply, shaking his head. He picks up Vivienne’s journal, his expression darkening. “In here, Vivienne describes Carlos as the man with her late husband’s face and the Ice Man as two distinct people. The Ice Man, she says, has eyes so icy blue they look like they were cut from glass.”

“When Carlos isn’t wearing those contacts, what color are his eyes?” Sabrina asks, her brow furrowing.

“Brown,” Nikolas replies without hesitation.

Sabrina’s lips press into a thin line as she processes this information. Then, as if struck by an idea, her eyes widen. “What is the golden key?” she asks suddenly, her voice tinged with urgency. “Radomir, you said Carlos wanted the golden key.”

“I’m not sure,” I admit, my mind racing. Rising from my chair, I stride to my safe, unlocking it with practiced ease. I pull out the document Mark gave me and hold it up for them to see. “Fuck! Could this be it?” I point to the gold key logo stamped on the letterhead.

Nikolas stands abruptly, his gaze sharpening. “Is that what I think it is?”

Sabrina snatches the document before he can. “Holy shit,” she mutters, her tone awestruck as she looks up at Nikolas. “This is your father’s will.” She points to the

header. “Look—Gold Key Legal Group.”

Nikolas takes the document from her, his expression hardening. “Have you been carrying this around with you?” His voice is sharp, laced with accusation.

“I’ve been keeping it safe, moving it between secure locations,” I explain. “Until I can get to my bank and put it in a safety deposit box.”

“You need to contact your mother,” Nikolas orders. “She’ll need to coordinate with Gold and Key, and all three of them have to know what’s going on.” He pauses, then adds, “And make sure Galina keeps my mother out of this.”

“Why?” I snap, glaring at him. “My mother can be involved, but not yours?”

“Alexandra isn’t well,” Sabrina interjects before Nikolas can respond. She frowns, glancing between us. “She’s actually staying here at the hotel—in the VIP suite. You know, the one you keep for high-profile guests with targets on their backs.”

My eyes narrow. “How do you know that?”

Sabrina shrugs. “My mother. I overheard her on the phone with your mother. I think she forgets I’m fluent in Russian.”

“You speak Russian?” The words escape me before I can stop them. I shouldn’t be surprised—Carla Craft is Russian—but Sabrina never ceases to catch me off guard.

“I do,” she replies, unbothered. “And Greek. Italian, Spanish, French, German, Dutch, Japanese, Mandarin, Cantonese...” She starts counting off languages on her fingers. “Oh, and I’m learning Farsi.”

“Jesus Christ.” I stare at her. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Don’t you have

better things to do? Don't you get enough sex?"

Sabrina laughs, shaking her head. "No, I get plenty. I just like learning."

Nikolas clears his throat, his discomfort palpable. "As fascinating as this conversation is—and awkward, considering Sabrina is like a daughter to me—can we focus?"

For the first time, I see Nikolas Vasilikis truly uncomfortable. My mind drifts to Leigh, unbidden. Fuck. I miss her. My cock twitches, my heart jolts, and my thoughts spiral into worry. I force myself to refocus. If I want her back, I need to stay sharp.

"Could the will be the golden key?" I ask Nikolas again, needing confirmation.

He hesitates, his expression thoughtful. "It could be," he shrugs. "That's Leigh's copy of the will, and she'll need it to claim her inheritance. But there's also something else..." He glances down, looking almost sheepish. "She'll need a passcode."

Sabrina and I speak simultaneously. "What passcode?"

Nikolas looks pained for a moment before he answers. "It's a song I wrote for her. A short, four-line lullaby."

Sabrina's eyes light up. "Oh, oh! Is it the one about the little duchess—"

"Yes," Nikolas interrupts curtly. "That one. But there's no mention of a gold key in the song." He glances at the will again. "This document holds additional cryptic clues. Gold and Key will ask her questions to verify her identity before inviting her for a meeting."

"Invite her?" I ask, baffled. "Who the fuck are they, royalty or something?"

“They may as well be,” Nikolas replies. “The firm exclusively serves Matriarch and Archontis.”

“Oh, that kind of royalty,” Sabrina quips, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “Snobs. And why do you call them Gold and Key?”

“Their names are Giles Gold and Parker Keys.”

“Of course they are.” Sabrina rolls her eyes.

As Nikolas hands the will back to me, my eyes skim over the document, searching for anything that might stand out. Sabrina leans over, clearly reading my intent, and taps her finger on the paper.

“At a guess, I’d say it has something to do with the mix of metric and imperial measurements—and the weird UK and US date formats.”

I blink at her, startled. “What the fuck? How did you even spot that?”

She shrugs, the corner of her mouth twitching into a small, self-satisfied smile. “I’m good with cryptic shit.”

“She’s a high-potential individual,” Nikolas says with a faint hint of pride.

“Jesus. You really are a lot packed into a small package,” I mutter, locking the will back into the safe. Sabrina’s knack for noticing patterns and unraveling puzzles is a hell of an asset.

Silence falls over the office as I sit back down. Sabrina returns to the murder board, her focus laser-sharp as she studies it. Nikolas folds his arms, his expression contemplative. For a moment, the room feels heavy with unspoken questions and a

shared sense of urgency.

“Did you find out the name of Wanda Manning’s Russian oligarch husband?”
Nikolas asks suddenly, breaking the quiet.

“Give me a minute.” I turn to my laptop, grateful for the distraction. My fingers fly over the keyboard, but frustration builds as I scroll through countless search results. “Fuck. There’s nothing—no name, no photos. Just that he likes to stay out of the public eye.”

“May I?” Sabrina asks, motioning toward my laptop.

“Knock yourself out,” I reply, pushing it toward her.

She dives in, her fingers flying across the keys as she works her magic. While she types, I glance back at the board, grudgingly admitting to myself how useful it’s become. The connections, the suspects, the questions—it’s all there, mapped out in a way that makes the enormity of our task feel just a little more manageable.

“Got it!” Sabrina’s triumphant voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

Nikolas straightens immediately. “What did you find?”

“His name is Timir Midrichon,” she says, glancing up at us. But her excitement falters as something clicks in her mind.

Nikolas freezes. “What did you say?” His voice is low, dangerous.

“I hacked into UK marriage records,” she explains, biting her lip. “Their marriage certificate says they were married on December fifth, ten years ago.” Her face falls as realization dawns. “Fuck... That’s the same year...”

“My father and uncle were killed,” I finish grimly.

“Leigh lost her memory,” Sabrina adds softly.

“And Vivienne died,” Nikolas finishes, standing abruptly. He grabs a red pen and strides to the board. Beneath Golden Hydra, he writes: Leader = Timir Midrichon – Ice Man. He turns to us, his expression dark. “Timir Midrichon was the man I was hunting eleven years ago. He led the Zolotaya Gidra to Russia to take over Dragunov Village.”

“That’s where I recognize the name Golden Hydra,” I say, my memory snapping into focus. “It was the syndicate my uncle Dmitri tried to take down. He got a lot of my grandfather’s best men killed, along with some villagers. We nearly lost that village—it’s critical to my grandfather’s operations in Russia.”

“That’s why your grandfather disowned Dmitri,” Nikolas adds.

I glance up at Sabrina. Her eyes are fixed on the photo of my family. The one that had upset Leigh yesterday after our wedding.

“Who’s that?” Sabrina points to one of the men. I tell her and she frowns squinting at the board once before scooting around my desk and grabbing a pen then head toward the murder board.

Sabrina grabs the pen from him, turning toward the board. I watch as she scribbled something on the board, keeping what she’s written hidden. When she spins around her eyes are sparkling with triumph.

“Timir Midrichon’s not a real name, it’s an anagram,” she says, her voice laced with excitement. “I’ve teetered between the Ice Man being Oleksi, Carlos, even maybe someone on Radomir’s staff. Although the only thing that would make sense was for

the man to be someone that connected your family to Leigh.”

“Okay.” I look at her curiously.

“How did the Ice Man and Carlos get into the dungeon, Uncle Nik?” She addresses him.

“Most of the me were dead,” Nikolas tells her. “But whoever killed them...”

“Managed to get close enough that the guards in the dungeon wouldn’t have thought he was a threat,” Sabrina points out. “Someone who they knew.”

“More than likely,” I agree with her.

Sabrina points to the photo on my desk, her eyes meeting mine. “It all made sense when I saw that picture on your desk. You told me that after your wedding when Leigh saw that photo she was terrified of Oleksi.”

“That’s right.” I nod, hoping she wasn’t going to say it was Gavriil or that my father or uncle faked their own death.

“Then I asked myself, why would a Greek oligarch married to a heiress such as Wanda Manning want to keep his identity a secret?” Sabrina explains. “To me he’d either be a spy, living two separate lives, or a criminal.” She steps away from the board exposing the unscrambled name. “I’m guessing a criminal.”

“Holy fuck!” I spit as Nikolas rushes to the board.

“Jesus, kid.” Nikolas glances at her in amazement. “Why didn’t I see this before?”

“Because you weren’t looking at it with all the pieces,” Sabrina replies.

My eyes dart to the photo on my desk. “Fuck. I’ve just never seen the resemblance before,” I mutter. “Icy blue eyes... like glass.” I look at the unscrambled name again—I should’ve thought of it before: Dmitri Mirochin .

Nikolas exhales sharply. “There is one person who can verify that he and Carlos know each other or at least me.” His yes meet mine. “And to do that, you’re going to have to call your mother to confirm it.”

I nod, my mind spinning as I stare at the board. Dmitri Mirochin —it all made sense now. He must’ve been the one to kill my father and Uncle Gunther and it would explain why he’d take their rings. It also make the message he’d left in Olives blood make sense—Dmitri always thought the Mirochin Bratva should’ve been his.

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Chapter 7

LEIGH

The world sharpens into focus, slow and disorienting, like surfacing from a nightmare. My head throbs—a dull, relentless pulse behind my eyes, pounding with every heartbeat. The cold air seeps into my bones, stiffening my muscles, turning them leaden and unresponsive. I try to sit up, but each movement sends sharp stabs of pain through me.

"Careful."

The deep voice slices through the fog in my mind, and I freeze. My head snaps toward the sound, breath catching in my throat. A shadowy figure looms over me, holding out a bottle of water, condensation glistening on the plastic.

For a brief, paralyzing moment, my heart slams against my ribs—panic tightening its grip. Oleksi . But no—this man is older. Silver threads pepper his jet-black hair, his features more defined, his posture too controlled.

"You're not Oleksi," I rasp.

"No." A smirk tugs at his lips. "But I'm flattered you'd think so."

I push myself upright, wincing as another jolt of pain rips through my body. Still, I take the water cautiously. "Who the fuck are you?"

He doesn't answer immediately. Instead, he walks to a chair near the table, sits, and takes a slow sip from his own water bottle—completely at ease.

"I'm Timir Midrichon," he finally says, his voice smooth, detached, laced with a faint Russian accent that makes it all the more menacing.

I frown. "Midrichon? What kind of name is that?"

He lets out a soft, humorless laugh that sends a chill up my spine. "Russian. With a touch of Greek."

I pop the cap off the water bottle and take a few tentative sips, forcing down the unease twisting in my gut. "What should I call you then? Timir? Murderer? Or maybe Ice Man?"

His icy blue eyes flash with something sharp, dangerous—there and gone in an instant. "Timir is fine."

I press my lips together, steeling myself to meet his gaze. "What do you want from me?"

He leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. "That's a question with more than one answer," he says, unreadable. "But I'll start with the simplest one: I want what's locked in your memories."

A cold dread slithers through me. My memories. The ones I stopped trying to recover long ago. I always figured if they mattered, they'd come back on their own. They never did.

Like an overstuffed closet, crammed full of junk, until one day it bursts open, spilling everything you forgot existed. My past is that closet—one I never wanted to unlock.

"Any particular memory you'd like me to dig out of the dark recesses of my mind?" I ask dryly, my voice sharp despite the tremor beneath it.

Timir chuckles, the sound low and dark. "You're still just as sassy as you were as a child."

That throws me off. My pulse stutters. "How the fuck would you know what I was like as a kid?" My skin prickles. "Have you been watching me since then, you pervert?"

"No," he says evenly, the faintest trace of amusement in his voice. "And I certainly wasn't the pervert in your story." His gaze darkens slightly. "I knew you as a child because your mother and I were... close."

I blink, nausea twisting my stomach. "You mean you were one of her lovers," I say, my voice laced with disgust.

Memories flood back unbidden—Vivienne at seedy hotels after her sets, draping herself over whatever man had caught her attention that night. How many times had I seen her disappear into a bathroom with a stranger?

I shudder, stomach rolling as another memory slams into me. The night I stumbled into the wrong stall.

God. Why that one?

I shake my head, pushing it down. But the mention of the bathroom reminds me—I need to go. Badly. Still, I refuse to move while I'm this exposed.

"Sorry, do you need the ablutions?"

My head jerks toward him. Jesus. Who even uses that word? "No." I shake my head, but my bladder protests sharply. "Yes. But I can't exactly go when there's nothing closing it off. I'm not about to piss on display in this damn goldfish bowl."

Timir sighs, pulling out his phone. He taps the screen, then holds it up to me. "This is your cell's feed. It's blank."

He places the phone on a chair near the toilet. "I'll leave it here so you can see there are no cameras."

Then, without another word, he walks out, pausing only to remind me, "You have five minutes." The door clicks shut behind him.

I don't waste time. My bladder won't last much longer. I rush to the toilet, yanking my pants down, surprised to find a Velcro band along the side. It runs all the way down to the ankle shackle.

Huh.

I hate to admit it, but I'm impressed by the design.

After washing my hands—relieved to find antibacterial soap and a towel wedged between the basin and the shower—I glance at Timir's phone. Could I use it to call someone?

I shake the thought away. No chance.

Instead, I return to the cot, noting the small nightstand beside it. I must have been too preoccupied with Timir watching me sleep to notice it earlier.

There's a knock. "Leigh, are you done?"

I consider yelling "No," just to be difficult, but I sigh. "Yes. Thank you."

Timir re-enters, taking his seat at the table once more. "Feel better?"

"I do." Before he can say another word, I blurt, "Why was Vivienne so scared of you?" My gaze flicks toward the door. "And where's the man with my father's face? Wasn't he your sidekick?"

Timir's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "He's around. But trust me, it's better if you don't meet him. He doesn't like Vasilikis."

I stiffen, his words hitting a nerve. "Then why the fuck does he have my father's face?" The words spill from my lips before I can stop them, my chest tightening as I realize how easily I've just referred to Nikolas as my father. "Didn't he live with Vivienne and me for a while when I was young?"

Timir leans back, crossing one ankle over his knee, watching me like I'm a puzzle he's trying to solve. "What do you remember?" His voice is careful, almost too measured.

It reminds me of the way therapists talk. What do you remember, Leigh? How does that make you feel, Leigh?

Like I want to punch you in your stupid face.

I shake off the memory of those useless therapy sessions—the ones Mark insisted I needed. Therapy never unlocked my memories. It only pissed me off.

"Not much," I admit. Pieces of memories claw at the edges of my mind, just out of reach. The ones that have surfaced don't make sense yet.

I shift on the cot, trying to get comfortable, but the thin mattress makes it impossible. "This fucking cot is a goddamn torture device," I mutter, stretching my stiff limbs.

Timir raises an eyebrow, his tone dry. "Look at you—a few patches of memory from your old life, and you're already pining for all the luxury you grew up with."

"I was never rich," I snap defensively. "I grew up with Vivienne and Mark, remember? There was no fucking luxury in that life. No money for anything luxurious."

Suddenly, the memories—the ones I've spent years burying—start clawing their way to the surface, demanding to be seen.

I hear Vivienne's voice now. The real one. Not the twisted, softened version I'd reconstructed in my head. I'd spent a decade convincing myself she was someone she wasn't.

Then a memory hits me like a wrecking ball.

My breath hitches. "Why did we have to leave England?" I demand, my eyes locking onto Timir. "It was because of you, wasn't it?"

Timir's expression hardens slightly, but he doesn't look surprised. "Vivienne thought Carlos and I were trying to kill her."

My heart pounds. "And were you?"

They want to kill us, Leigh. We have to leave now.

Vivienne's voice echoes in my head.

Timir exhales slowly. "That question has multiple answers."

He coughs suddenly—harder this time. He reaches for his water bottle, taking a slow sip, but I don't miss the flicker of pain in his eyes.

"How about this one then?" I press. "Who is Carlos?"

Timir's gaze sharpens. "My sidekick, as you so eloquently put it earlier." A flicker of amusement crosses his face, but it's gone as quickly as it came.

I frown. "So his name is Carlos?" The name tugs at something in my brain, just out of reach.

"Yes."

I hesitate, the weight of my next question pressing against my ribs. "If he doesn't like Vasilikis, then why does he have my father's face?"

Timir's expression remains unreadable. "Because he wanted to take over your father's life," he says simply. "To gain access to you. To use you as his way back into the Vasiliki fold."

A sick feeling curls in my stomach. "Why me?" I demand, the chain around my ankle rattling as I step forward. "Why would he want me? Why do you want me? What the fuck am I doing here?" My voice cracks, my frustration boiling over. "Why am I chained in a dungeon like a fucking dog with a shock collar?"

Timir sighs. "Don't you recognize this room at all?"

My frustration spikes. "Should I?"

"Carlos thought being down here might trigger some of your memories."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Oh, my God. Did Vivienne chain me up in a dungeon like this? Is that why I hate her so much?"

Timir shakes his head. "Not that I know of."

"That's not a no," I snap. "That's a 'maybe she did.'"

My fingers curl into fists. I want to hit something. I want answers, not half-assed riddles.

"You know how this works, Leigh," Timir says. "I can't tell you about your past. You have to remember it on your own. If I tell you, it could alter the way the memories surface. The mind is a tricky thing."

I roll my eyes. "Blah, blah, blah. You don't think I've heard that a million times?"

I close my eyes briefly, willing myself to calm down. When I open them again, I say, "Do you know how it feels when I get these memories? Deep down, I can feel they're real. I know they happened. But they don't make any fucking sense."

I glance at the cold, bare floor. Blank. Empty. Just like my mind.

"It's like starting a mystery movie in the middle and trying to piece everything together. When I ask people, did this happen? No one will give me a straight answer. I just get the same damn speech over and over."

Timir studies me for a long moment. "I can only imagine how that must feel."

His gaze flicks to his watch. "It's almost lunchtime."

He stands, grabbing a stack of journals and pushing them toward me. "Read these. I know they won't paint your mother—"

"Vivienne," I cut in sharply. "She was just Vivienne to me."

His lips twitch. "Noted."

Then, suddenly, he coughs again. Violently. This time, when he wipes his mouth, I see the dark smear of blood on his handkerchief.

A chill rushes down my spine. What the hell?

"Are you okay?" I ask, my voice wary.

He nods, tucking the handkerchief away. "Allergies. The dust down here sets them off."

Bullshit.

Something Vivienne once told me tickles at the edges of my mind, just out of reach. Then, like a switch flipping, I hear myself say:

"I shot you."

Timir arches an eyebrow. "Did you?" His tone is mild. "Tell me, Leigh, why would you do that?"

The words tumble out before I can stop them. "Because Vivienne drummed it into my head to shoot you with the golden arrow. The silver one was for the man with my father's face. Both were laced with poison."

Timir exhales, shaking his head. "She didn't just turn you against me, Leigh. She turned you into a weapon."

Then, like a slap to the face, another memory slams into me.

My eyes drop to the scar on my arm. My stomach twists violently.

"It was Vivienne," I whisper. My throat tightens. "She really did shoot me."

Timir coughs again, steadying himself against the table. "Do you remember that day?"

I shake my head, frustration bubbling. "No. I just remember the pain. It felt like a fire raging through my bloodstream.

"I know that feeling." Timir's words are so faint I nearly don't hear them. Timir's gaze lingers on me for a moment, unreadable. Then, as if deciding something, he steps toward the door. "Lunch will be here soon."

He hesitates, glancing around my cell. "I'll get you a clock. And a better bed."

I blink, startled by the unexpected gesture. "Wait!" I call after him. "What about the open toilet and shower? I can't exactly pee or shower when I'm completely exposed." I gesture toward the pathetic excuse for facilities at the far end of the room.

Timir pauses, nodding slowly. "I'll see what I can do."

He leaves without another word. A few minutes later, the masked man returns, this time with several others.

They move efficiently, installing a metal rail along one corner of the room and

hooking a curtain onto it. Privacy. It's not much, but it's something.

Another man hauls in a mattress—an actual mattress—and places it on the cot frame. Fresh linens follow, along with a thicker blanket, pillows, and sheets.

I stare at it all, momentarily thrown off. Why? Why the sudden upgrades?

A small woman, avoiding my gaze, sets down a stack of folded towels, soap, and a few other toiletries. I study her closely, but she keeps her eyes down.

Then, another woman enters, pushing a trolley. The scent of freshly cooked food fills the room, and my stomach growls in response.

Before I can say anything, the masked man sneers. "Don't get too comfortable, princess." His tone is ice. "Timir might be going soft, but I sure as fuck won't."

I ignore him, turning to the woman with the food. "Where are we?" I ask bluntly, pushing down the rising unease. "Are we still in America?"

Her gaze flicks to mine—just for a second—before she quickly looks away and hurries out.

I exhale sharply. Well, that was useless.

The masked man snorts. "You know what to do with the trolley." His gaze rakes over me in a way that makes my skin crawl before he turns and slams the door shut behind him.

Good fucking riddance.

Now alone, I take a deep breath, forcing my frayed nerves to settle. Panicking won't

get me anywhere.

My stomach growls again, and I move toward the trolley, lifting the cover off the dishes.

Jesus.

The food is not what I expected. It's well-prepared, rich in aroma—like something out of a high-end restaurant. If not for the accommodations, it could almost feel like room service at an upscale hotel.

Almost.

I eat slowly, taking in my surroundings. They're keeping me well-fed. Why?

Shouldn't they be starving me, using hunger as leverage to break me down? Unless...

A sharp spike of paranoia jolts through me. Do they know?

Radomir's voice echoes in my head. You and the baby will become a target.

The thought makes my blood run cold. Is that what this is really about? Not me—but a potential baby?

My breathing turns shallow. Not a fucking chance.

I glance at my stomach, forcing my thoughts to slow. You don't even know if you're pregnant yet. There are still twelve days before I can be sure.

There's no way they could possibly know.

But Timir's voice whispers in my mind: We've been watching you for a long time, Leigh.

I set my fork down, my pulse thundering. No. This is insane. Too far-fetched.

I let out a sharp, bitter laugh. What, do they have spies in every pharmacy? Tracking my period like some fucking ovulation cult?

But then, an unsettling memory surfaces.

Two years ago.

The drugstore Sabrina and I had gone to since we were teenagers suddenly had new owners.

New owners who always had our monthly order ready before we even asked for it.

No. No way.

I shake my head. I'm being ridiculous. Everything would have had to align perfectly for them to use me as some kind of breeder.

Still...

I stare at my empty plate, my stomach twisting.

I need to take my mind off this. My eyes land on the stack of journals, but a deep nausea churns inside me at the thought of reading anything Vivienne wrote.

Not yet.

Instead, I raise my voice, knowing they're listening. "I need a notepad and something to write with."

Maybe if I start jotting things down, I can track my memories.

Or keep a countdown to the day I'm supposed to get my period.

A few minutes later, the door slides open again. The same small woman from before shuffles inside, carrying a pile of clothes—orange, pink, and blue scrubs.

Great. My new prison wardrobe.

She places them on the table, then reaches into her apron pocket. Slowly, she pulls out a notepad and a pencil.

She shows them to me. "You ask," she says in a thick Russian accent.

Her voice is carefully neutral. But there's something in her eyes. Something hesitant.

I frown.

She hesitates for only a second before setting the notepad on the table. "Tea will come soon," she adds quickly. Then, before I can respond, she turns and wheels the trolley away.

Intrigued, I walk to the table and pick up the notepad.

The first page is already flipped open.

My breath catches.

There's a message.

Neatly written, in careful handwriting: You are in Russia.

A cold shiver rushes down my spine.

Russia.

I grip the edge of the table as the reality crashes into me.

Not in the U.S. Not even close.

How the hell is Radomir supposed to find me now?

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Chapter 8

RADOMIR

The name Timir Midrichon stares back at me from Sabrina's murder board, but the anagram still churns in my gut like a bad omen—what it spells out is circled in red a dozen times—Dmitri Mirochin. My fucking uncle.

Jesus. Dmitri is the Ice Man? If he is, then Leigh is in his hands.

The rage in my chest is a slow-burning fire, curling through my veins, threatening to consume me. But I force myself to stay fucking calm. Focus . Because fury won't bring Leigh home. Only strategy will.

I rake a hand through my hair, taking deep breaths as I feel the rage dissipate.

Fuck, I truly hope it's not him—that he's dead . Because if he's alive and working with Nikolas's deranged cousin, Carlos, then Nikolas is right. This isn't just a vendetta—it's a calculated move to seize more power than men like them should ever have.

"I'd love to know what their endgame actually is," I mutter.

"They want to take over the goddamn world!" Sabrina huffs, shaking her head.

"Come on. Even for a Bratva psychopath, that sounds far-fetched." I snort.

This sounds like something out of a bad movie, but my gut pinches, knowing she's probably right. My head tilts as I study the names of the organizations Leigh has tied together—especially now that she's married to me.

"It's not as far-fetched as you think." Nikolas exhales, rubbing his temples. "When Carlos was ten he was diagnosed as a sociopath. To be exact, four experts said he was a sociopathic megalomaniac with obsessive tendencies."

"Oh great!" Sabrina harrumphs. "So we're dealing with a megalomaniac sociopath and a psychopath." She turns and looks at me smugly. "So then, world domination as their endgame isn't that far-fetched!"

This just gets better and better.

"I feel like we're in a movie and have just discovered a meteor heading for the earth and no one else knows but us," Sabrina states.

"That's a good metaphor," Nikolas tells her. He's quiet for a few seconds before saying, "Because if those two get what they want... Jesus." His eyes flash with worry before he turns to me. "There's something else you should know, Radomir."

"Is this where you tell me that you're actually from another planet and have superpowers?" I narrow my eyes.

"Fuck." He exhales. "Okay, there are two things you should know." Nikolas gives me a long look before speaking. "The Archontis side of my family aren't just Greek prime minister, olive and pharmaceutical tycoons."

"Is this the dark secret you mentioned earlier?" Sabrina asks before I can.

"Yes." He leans back, his expression unreadable. "My mother's family the

Archontis's, they were originally a Greek Crime family."

Well blow me down with a fucking feather. I wasn't expecting that.

Sabrina makes a noise in the back of her throat. "So not only is Leigh one of the richest heiresses in the world with two global empires at her feet, she's like Greek mafia royalty?"

"No. She is not." Nikolas denies. He clearly does not like that side of his family. Shit and he works for the UK Government. How the fuck did that happen.

"How can you work for the UK Military and this secret government agency with that hanging over your head?"

"My grandfather wanted to be prime minister of Greece from an early age," Nikolas explains. "So my great-grandfather went legit. He turned the crime side of the family into an elite special forces unit. It wasn't hard considering all the government officials he had in his pocket he was able to clean up the Archontis name."

"He used brute mob force to pave the way for his son," Sabrina translates in disgust.

"Maybe. My great-grandfather was a force to be reckoned with and well-respected by his men. They were given two options—reform or imprisoned for life." Nikolas shrugs. "My grandfather became prime minister of Greece, and my grandmother turned Archontis Olives and Pharmaceuticals into an unrivaled powerhouse in their sector."

"Then your mother married Dante Vasilikis, the heir to one of the biggest corporations in the world." Sabrina continued for him, skepticism lacing her voice. "I'm betting that your grandmother went pretty much unrivalled because of who her husband's secret organization."

"No, actually," Nikolas's voice is sharp as he sticks up for her grandmother. "My grandmother wasn't a criminal and by then there was no more Archontis crime family. He'd lost his eldest son to the brutality of the criminal underworld, and he'd lost his taste for that life." He glances between us. "The thing is, Carlos was always fascinated with my mother's family's background and coveted her special forces team."

"Jesus." I hiss. "He really is a megalomaniac."

The room falls silent as we all digest this new layer of insanity. Leigh has been at the center of this power struggle her entire life, and she doesn't even fucking know it. Maybe it's a good thing she lost her memories. Hell, maybe that's why she doesn't want them back.

"You said there were two things you had to tell me," I remind Nikolas.

He nods, his expression serious. "As you know, Leigh shares a rare genetic trait with me and my mother."

I exhale sharply. "Yeah, those unnatural green eyes of yours."

"That too. But I'm talking about something far more important." He turns his wrist, revealing a small but distinct medical alert tattoo: RH-Null. There is a number is inked beneath it.

A prickle of unease runs down my spine. "What the hell is that?"

Nikolas meets my eyes, his tone unwavering. "RH-Null. The rarest blood type in the world. Less than fifty people have it globally. And Leigh is one of them."

"Yes, that's right." Sabrina rummages in her bag and pulls out a wallet. Flipping it

open she grabs a card and hands it to me. "This is Leigh's medic alert card."

"Why the hell do you have it?" Nikolas looks at Sabrina in alarm.

"Because I got this for her." She pulls a small box from the magic purse and opens it to reveal a gold necklace with the medica alert tag on it. "The chain broke, and I got it fixed for her."

"So she's been without it for days?" Nikolas's voice is tight with worry. "Fuck. She doesn't have it on her now?"

"I don't know much about this shit," I admit. "But I take it Leigh can only get RH-Null blood?"

"Yes." Sabrina and Nikolas say in unison.

"She donates blood to a mobile clinic that comes around to her every six months," Sabrina tells me.

"Does my mother know?" As soon as the question leaves my mouth, I know it's a stupid thing to ask—of course she does.

"Yes." Nikolas nods.

"Great!". " My heart is now pounding in my chest so hard it feels like its going to hammer its way right through my ribs.

Before I can dwell on it, Sabrina's phone beeps loudly, cutting through the room.

She glances down, then groans. "Oh, for fuck's sake."

Nikolas and I both glance at her as she silences the reminder.

“What?” I ask, my patience wearing thin.

“It’s a reminder to buy tampons. My period starts in twelve days,” she says, completely unbothered.

I blink. “Thanks for sharing. I could’ve gone my entire life without knowing that.”

Nikolas glances at her as if she’s grown two heads.

Sabrina glares at me. “As a dancer, I have to be prepared. When I was fourteen, I had an incident during gymnastics.” She shudders at the memory. “Ever since then, I set reminders fourteen days before my cycle starts. It also reminds me not to have unprotected sex—not that I have unprotected sex.”

Her words trail off. Her eyes widen. “Oh, fuck.”

“What?” Nikolas and I say at the same time.

Sabrina swallows. “Two years ago, the drugstore Leigh and I have gone to since we were teenagers changed hands. A new creepy pharmacist took over.”

I sigh. “Is this more about your monthly problems?”

“The previous pharmacists knew us very well, and they always ensured they had what Leigh, and I needed each month.” Sabrina ignores me, her voice sharp. “But this new dude.” Her brow rises as she pulls a face. “He’d go beyond that and every month, didn’t matter if we went two days before our usual pick-up date, because we tested it, the guy would have our orders ready and bagged before we even walked through the door.”

“That’s just efficiency,” Nikolas points out. “What’s so suspicious about that? Maybe he was as uncomfortable as I am right now talking about my daughter’s monthly woman problems.”

Sabrina glares at him. “It was creepy. And get this.” She looks at me. “He kept pushing this new fertility and women’s health clinic. Telling us that they gave free checkups, bringing high-end medical care to people like us who can’t afford it.” She scratches in her wallet again pulling out a business card. “Eventually, Leigh and I thought, what the hell, free six-month checkups.”

Nikolas shifts uncomfortably. “While I’m glad you and my daughter take care of your health, can you get to the point, Rina?”

“For one,” she snaps, “the creepy pharmacist is Russian. Second, the clinic was obsessed with freezing our eggs. They kept telling us we were in our prime.”

A cold chill rushes through me. Little Vasilikis test-tube babies? The thought makes me want to punch something.

“And you know how when women live together, their cycles sync up?” Sabrina presses on.

“I’ve heard of it,” I mutter, and Nikolas nods.

“Well, Leigh and I lived together for years.” She gives me a pointed look. “So if my period is due in twelve days... so is Leigh’s.”

The realization slams into me like a freight train.

“That means...” My breath catches. “Leigh and I had sex during her fertilization window.”

“ Ding fucking dong ,” Sabrina says grimly and gives Nikolas a smug smile. “Now are you still feeling uncomfortable, or do you realize that your daughter is more than likely carrying the next Molchanov, Mirochin, Archontis, Vasilikis hybrid?” She pauses to let her words take effect. “So I'm thinking her net worth just skyrocketed—especially on the black market.”

Nikolas lets out a low curse, and my blood boils. Sabrina pushes the business card toward me and the name of the woman’s clinic hits me between the eyes.

I clench my jaw. “My mother sponsored that women’s clinic two years ago. To help women who couldn’t afford care.”

"Huh!" Sabrina chews her mouth thoughtfully. "If she sponsored that I'm guessing she probably took over the drugstore as well because they're affiliated. Which means that..."

Nikolas’ eyes darken. “Galina and Mark planned this down to the fucking finest detail.”

Fury builds in my chest. We were set up from the start.

I yank out my phone, hitting video call.

My mother answers after a few rings. She smiles at me.

"Hello, darling," my mother greets me. "How is married life?"

"Hello, Galina," Nikolas and Sabrina chime letting her know we were not alone in the office.

When she sees Nikolas and Sabrina her smile widens. “Nikolas, it’s so good to see

you! And Sabrina, darling, how is your mother?"

"I'm going to say she's fine," Sabrina says unabashed that she hasn't checked up on her mother who has a broken leg.

Before my mother can say more, I cut through the pleasantries. "Mother, is this clinic yours?" I hold up the business card.

She blinks. "Yes. We provide top care for women who need it but can't afford it. Why?" She answers proudly.

"Did you take over Lanes Drug store two years ago as well?" Sabrina asks her.

"Yes." My mother nods frowning. "Why?"

I grind my teeth. "Did you monitor Leigh's health?"

"Yes." My mother doesn't even flinch. "I also kept an eye on Sabrina and Tara health as it's important."

"Did you set Nikolas and Leigh up when you did to ensure she'd get pregnant?" Sabrina doesn't hold back.

She blurts the fucking answer right out there stunning my mother. In fact I don't ever think I've seen my mother stunned speechless before, it's almost laughable if the truth wasn't shining in her eyes.

"I don't think we should be getting into this now." Nikolas's voice is low and warning. "This is not helping Leigh and getting heated over this is only going to cloud your judgment when you need to stay focused and clear."

"What do you mean not helping Leight?" My mother glances from Nikolas to me questioningly. "Has something happened to her?" Her eyes widen. "Is this something to do with the clinic or drug store?"

"No," Sabrina replies and before I can get a word in she's filling my mother in on the situation. By the time she's done I can see the fury blazing in my mother's eyes.

"Jesus, Christ !" My mother sneers and turns angry eyes on me and Nikolas. "Two of the most capable and power men and you let her get stolen right from under your noses?"

"The Ice Man took her!" Sabrina delivers the coup de grace.

"What?" The tone in my mother's voice is enough to blister ears before her face falls and fear flashes in her eyes as she turns toward Nikolas. "He's back? Leigh was right—he was coming for her."

The pain and anguish in my mother's voice is alarming.

"Galina, we think we know who he is," Nikolas's voice is filled with soft tender notes as he addresses my mother making my hackles rise but I push it aside.

"Who?" My mother asks.

"Dmitri," I answer, and she gasps.

"Dmitri—my younger brother?" My mother gapes at me in disbelief. "What makes you think it's my brother?" She frowns. "I'm sure I heard he'd died."

"Or maybe he just had his Dmitri head cut off and it grew back as Timir Midrichon," Sabrina quips.

"Who?" My mother asks in surprise. "The Greek oligarch that married Wanda Manning?"

"You know her?" All three of us ask in unison.

She frowns. "Yes. She attended school with my late best friend, Thea and me."

Sabrina leans forward. "Did Dmitri ever meet Carlos Vasilikis?"

My mother nods, her expression darkening and I can see she's already realized where this line of questioning is going. "Dmitri did know Carlos," she admits. "Whenever I visited Thea, Dmitri tagged along. I think he was in love with her."

Nikolas' jaw clenches. "Do you know where the Mannings live?"

"England," Galina says. "But they have homes all over the world."

A knock at the door. Oleksi.

"I found something," he says, stepping inside and stops when he sees my mother on a video call and greets her fondly.

"Hello, Oleksi, what did you find?" My mother asks.

Oleksi looks at me and I nod.

"The Ice Man helicopter has a hangar at LAX." He puts flight details in front of me. "After the helicopter returned to LAX early hours of this morning the occupants boarded a private jet headed to London."

"Then that must be where Leigh is," I mutter, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

"Then you know exactly where you need to be," my mother snaps and I hear her name called in the background. "I have to go. Keep me updated."

She says goodbye and the call ends as I turn I see Oleksi's shoulders go rigid as his eyes fall on the murder board then turns to me, his face twists in fury.

"I'm a fucking suspect now?"

Sabrina shrugs. "Everyone is."

Oleksi snarls. "And yet you and Nikolas aren't."

"Because we have nothing to gain," Sabrina shoots back. "You, on the other hand—"

Oleksi glares. "Oh really? I'd say you and St. Nik have everything to gain."

"That's enough," I cut in. "We don't have time for this shit. Sabrina is right everyone is a suspect. In fact you were here in the penthouse while Carlos was taking Leigh."

"How do you explain that?" Sabrina says smugly.

"If you must know, I was in the special room with a good friend Rebecca." He lifts his shirt exposing his impressive body and shows the claw marks. "Would you like Rebeca's number?" His eyes run the length of Sabrina's tiny frame. "She'll gladly reenact our night for you."

"Oleksi!" I bark. "That is enough."

"But do give Uncle Nik her number to verify your alibi," Sabrina stands her ground and is interrupted by a knock on the door.

Viktor enters. As soon as he sees Oleksi his shoulders stiffen as do Oleksi's and tension crackling between them. He greets Nikolas and Sabrina, deliberately ignoring Oleksi, then turns to me. "Mark Dalton woke up," he informs us. "The doctors say he'll make it."

I nod. "That's good."

"You wouldn't happen to have news about my mother?" Sabrina asks sheepishly and Viktor smiles.

"Actually I do, she's fine," he assures her.

"Viktor I was about to call you. I need you to get the jet ready."

"Going somewhere?" Viktor asks curiously.

"London, I think Leigh's been taken there."

Nikolas look at me "I call my contacts in London. You'll have everything you need and a secure place to stay while you look for Leigh. I'd love to come with you but..."

"I understand." I nod. "Besides, I need you here if you don't mind keeping an eye on things."

"I'll help him," Viktor volunteers.

"Great." I push myself up. "I best get packed."

"Not so fast!" Sabrina stops me from leaving the office. "I'm coming with you."

"I need to leave right away, Sabrina," I tell her although she would come in handy

with her ability to solve puzzles and see things others don't. "Do you even have a passport?"

Sabrina grins and pulls her passport from her purse. "Always be prepared."

I stare at her. "Of course you have that in your magic purse." The point at it. "You'd best clear that thing out. Store all the non-explosive stuff in the guest bedroom."

Forty-five minutes later we are heading towards LAX, I keep one hand on my suit jacket. Inside, I have Leigh's will, her birth certificate, and our marriage license. My mother is going to arrange a meeting for me with the elusive Gold Key Legal Group.

Two hours later we are taking off in my private jet. Sabrina and I are sitting across from each other and Oleksi is in the cockpit annoying the pilot.

With a glass of champagne in hand, Sabrina pulls out a book.

"Travel guide?" I lift a brow. "You know, you don't need that. I'm an expert on London."

She gives me a cheeky grin. "That's good. Because this isn't a travel guide."

I frown as she turns it, and I choke.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"I thought we might need Vivienne's fourth journal, so I borrowed it from Uncle Nik." She winks.

I grin. Smart girl . Turning to look out the window I mutter. " Hold on, Leigh. We're coming for you, my love ."

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Chapter 9

RADOMIR

The moment we step off the jet at London Heathrow, I scan the arrivals terminal, eyes sharp for anything out of place. It's not paranoia—it's survival. Leigh is in enemy hands, and until I get her back, every shadow, every passerby, every fucking glance in my direction is a potential threat.

Sabrina strolls beside me, oversized purse slung over her shoulder, looking every bit the tourist in a flowy black dress, huge sunglasses, and a wide-brimmed hat. Everything with her is oversized. Amusement streaks through me—it's probably because she's only five-foot-four and petite, so everything just seems bigger in proportion to her.

"Is that our contact?" Oleksi nods toward the tall, stunning woman.

She has sleek black hair cut in a sharp bob, red lips, and the kind of grace that makes men hesitate. She wears tailored navy pants, a white silk blouse, and I notice she has a holster concealed under her navy blazer. Not the kind of woman you'd fuck with unless you had a death wish.

She spots us instantly and heads over, moving with lethal precision.

"Radomir, Oleksi, and Sabrina, I presume?" Her British accent makes her voice smooth and crisp. "I'm Syd Purdy. Nikolas sent me."

"I hope we get to see the rare golden tiger here," Sabrina says, pulling off her sunglasses and eyeing Syd suspiciously.

"There are no golden tigers here," Oleksi tells her, looking at her as if she's stupid.

Syd gives him a scathing look. "Actually, there is." She turns to Sabrina. "We'll have to go to the country zoo at night as that's the only time you can see Oriol."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Oleksi snarls. "Country zoo?" His eyes narrow. "We're not here for fucking tour of England."

Syd nor Sabrina are phased by his outburst. Although something shifts in her eyes and her voice is low with a distinct warning tone. "I don't remember asking if you were." She turns to back to Sabrina. "Nikolas said you could vouch for your flight companions."

"Yes." Sabrina nods, grinning she points to me. "Saint." Then to Oleksi. "Jackass."

Right! Sabrina's code to ensure we have the right person. I roll my eyes and sigh. I guess you can't be too careful, and no one would know the crazy shit Sabrina makes up.

"It's their safe code," I explain to Oleksi.

"That's some crazy shit." Oleksi rubs his temples. My cousin doesn't travel well.

Sydney's lips twitch in amusement, and she nods, touching her ear. "Clear."

She looks past us and then at the two small duffle bags I have and the one slung over Oleksi's shoulder. "Is that all your luggage?"

“Yes, we didn’t have much time to pack,” I reply.

Syd nods. “Where are you phones or any devices such as tablets, laptops, smart watches?”

“Nikolas took them before we left,” Oleksi’s voice is filled with impatience. “Are you wanting to strip search us or can we get the fuck out of this exposed terminal?”

Her eyes are cool as she stares at him for a few seconds then turns toward Sabrina and I. “Come on, I have a car waiting.”

We follow her out of the terminal where’s is nice bright sunny June day. A sleek black Range Rover is parked at the curb. The driver stands waiting for us. He’s stocky and muscular, with a scar bisecting his brow.

“This is Clyde Smythe,” Sydney introduces. “Your driver and additional security.” She turns to him. “These are our guests.”

Clyde gives me a once-over, assessing before his shrewd eyes move to Oleksi. He’s built like a tank, but his movements are sharp, controlled—he is definitely military-trained.

“Pleasure,” he grunts, opening the car door for us.

Oleksi slides in first with a grumbling Sabrina, who makes it clear she hates always being squashed in the middle, and I follow her. Sydney takes the passenger seat, and Clyde pulls out smoothly, merging into London traffic.

“Where about in London are we going?” Sabrina asks.

Her head swiveling from side to side, taking everything in. I nearly forgot this is her

first time in England—it's her first time leaving America—the first stamp in her passport.

“We're heading to Mayfair,” Sydney says, twisting slightly to glance at Sabrina. “Nikolas has a townhouse there. One of his safe houses.”

Of course he does. The man may have walked away from his inheritance, but he'd still have the hefty salary from his elite job and probably still had a whopping trust fund enabling him to own property in Mayfair.

A thought strikes me and my brow creases. I wonder if Carlos has a trust fund even if he was disowned?

That could be one of the reasons my leech of an uncle latched onto the man and has kept him around as long as he has. From what I know of my uncle, his friends, lovers, and even fiancé didn't live long. As Dmitri was cut off without a penny he'd need a cash cow.

We weave through the city, passing rows of immaculate Georgian townhouses. It's wealth, old money—no different from the kind of power I grew up around in Vegas, but more refined. Less gold chains and diamond watches, more tailored suits and centuries-old estates.

Clyde pulls up to a white stone townhouse, four stories high, with black wrought-iron railings. Sydney leads us inside, punching in a code at the entrance.

The interior is sleek and modern, but with a warmth that surprises me—wood floors, high ceilings, and an open-plan living space with a large marble fireplace. A sleek bar lines the far wall.

Sydney tosses a set of keys on the cabinet beside the door. “Make yourselves

comfortable. This is where you'll be staying until we get more intel." She nods down the hallway. "The kitchen is down there and is fully stocked as is the bar." She walks down the hall. "There are rooms upstairs. Take your pick." Turning into the home office she continues explaining. "Clyde's on standby if you need him."

Syd goes to a large painting of horses on the wall and pulls it open, revealing a hidden safe. She retrieves three phones and a black case, bringing them over to the large oak desk.

"Are those for us?" Sabrina points to the phones.

"Yes." Syd hands us each one. "You have each other's phone numbers on them, labeled as Guest 1, Guest 2, and Guest 3. My number is under Oriol, Clyde's is Decker, Nikolas's is Hunter, and Galina's is Queen."

"My mother's on here?" My brows shoot up and I take the phone Sabrina hands to me.

"Yes, Nikolas asked us to put her on there." Syd's eyes narrow. "I take you know the rules. These are clean and can't be traced, but you are not to put any other numbers on them unless authorized by Nikolas. No contact with family or friends back home or anywhere else in the world. And don't use it for internet searches."

She walks back to the safe and brings out a tablet, handing it to Sabrina. "This has all the necessary fail safes on it. Nikolas asked me to give it to you."

"Thanks." Sabrina's eyes light up. "This is amazing." She eyes the high-end device out like it's her favorite candy bar.

Syd nods and gets back to the black box, flipping it open and sliding two pistols onto the desk.

“These two Glocks are unregistered.” She skillfully checks each one before handing one to me and one to Oleksi. “Clyde will kit you out with holsters and ammunition.”

She turns back to the box and pulls the top half off pulling out two cans of pepper spray. "These are for you, Sabrina." She smiles. "They're not your average gun shop cans. They're a bit more lethal, so be careful not to spray yourself—this stuff will melt your skin."

Sabrina whistles, her eyes lighting up even more than they did when she saw the tablet. “Awesome.”

“At least they’re not explosives,” I comment.

Sabrina quickly debunks my statement. “Wanna bet?”

“No more blowing shit up!” I put the Gun on the desk and power the phone on, and almost immediately, it rings.

I see it’s Nikolas.

“How long have you been waiting to get an alert my phone was turned on?” I answer.

“Not long,” Nikolas replies. “I take it you’re all settled in, and the accommodation is to your liking?”

"Five-star all the way," I reply. "Any news on Leigh?"

“I’ve got my people checking all Manning properties around England,” Nikolas says. “So far there is no sign of Leigh.”

My grip tightens around the phone. “Maybe they have her in one of their

warehouses?” I suggest.

“We’re checking all Manning’s properties including warehouses, office building, even containers on the docks,” Nikolas assures me. “Trust me, son, I’ve thought of everything.”

I don’t miss the way he just called me son and for some reason it makes me feel closer to Leigh. I feel it also means Nikolas has just put his complete trust in me, like I’ve passed some test of his.

“I know,” I tell him. “It’s just getting a bit much and I feel like we’re limping along.”

“Hang in there.” Nikolas encourages me. “We’ll get her back, and I’ll update you as soon as I know more,” he continues. “Until then, lay low. And for God sake, look out for Rina and keep her reigned in. She has a big heart that unfortunately sometimes makes her react rather fiercely to situations.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep everything under control,” I promise.

His tone shifts. “Has Rina cracked any of the encryption in the fourth journal?”

Uh-oh—busted!

I look over at Sabrina and she frowns at me curiously.

“You know about that?”

“Do you really think if I didn’t want her to take it I’d have let her steal?” Nikolas laughs.

“I don’t think there’s much progress... yet,” I answer cryptically.

Nikolas sighs on the other end. "Keep me posted."

The call ends, and I fix Sabrina with a glare. "Her knows about your travel guide."

"Yeah, I thought he did," she says breezily and shrugs.

Oleksi groans from the doorway. "I need sleep," he mutters and turns toward the office door. "Jet lag is a bitch. Wake me when you have something."

I nod as he takes his things and leaves just as Syd walks back into the office with rolled up sheets of paper in her hands. I didn't even realize she'd left the office.

"Clyde just brought you these." Syd hands them to me. "They're the plans for the Ice Man Industries head office in Manning Towers, Fenchurch Street." She looks from me to Sabrina. "If you need anything else just give me a call. I have to head out, but Clyde is around if you need him."

With that Syd leaves Sabrina and I standing awkwardly in the office for a few seconds.

"Should we check out the plans?" Sabrina's eyes fall on the rolled up sheets I've put on the desk.

"Why don't we freshen up first," I suggest, needing a bathroom break and a cup of coffee. "Get some coffee and something to eat first."

"Or..." Sabrina counters. "We can freshen up, look at the plans and then go out for coffee.." She grins. "Maybe around or near Manning Towers. That way I get to see a bit of London and we do some recon."

"Good idea."

Manning Towers, Fenchurch Street,

London

Sabrina and I blend seamlessly into the crowd of business professionals moving in and out of the towering glass building. Dressed in dark, neutral clothing, with hats and sunglasses, we look like any other person grabbing coffee in the attached café after having browsed through the hi-end boutiques installed in the small mall beneath the building.

Sabrina slides into a seat near the floor-to-ceiling window, her “travel guide” in hand. The dust jacket is a perfect disguise for the real book hidden beneath.

I settle across from her, scanning the lobby. There are no obvious threats except for the usual security camera’s that we skillfully avoided. As far as I can tell we weren’t followed and I’m hoping Dmitri and Carlos haven’t somehow been alerted to our arrival in England yet. I know if I’d stolen from him I’d have clocked him the moment he boarded the plane to go to America. So I’m pretty sure he’s on the lookout for me.

Sabrina flips to a marked page in the journals and taps the paper. She keeps her voice low as she runs her finger over a list of symbols and abbreviations. “Vivienne abbreviated all her victims first and last names.” She points to one of them. “Usually when we abbreviate a name we used SC for Sabrina Craft for instance.”

“Yeah.” I nod and sit straight when a server approaches.

Sabrina closes the book and gives the young woman a big smile. “Can I have an almond mile caramel latte please?”

“Sure,” the young woman smiles and turns to me. “And for you, sir?”

“Just a black coffee,” I reply.

“I’ll be right back with your order.” She leaves. Sabrina opens the book once again.

“Vivienne abbreviated her victims using the last letter of each name. So my name would be AT.” She turns the book to show me.

“Victims?”

“Her words not mine.” Sabrina shrugs. “Blackmail Victims is what she’s labeled the page as, so she wasn’t very subtle.”

“No wonder you didn’t like the bitch.”

“No one did,” Sabrina assures me before continuing on about the journal. “Look here, beside each name, there’s a symbol—it’s a reversed Greek alphabet letter, followed by a Greek numeral, an English number, and then an EM dash to either GM101, GM307, or GM409.”

I frown. “And that means?”

Sabrina exhales and shakes her head. “I don’t know. But maybe we could call one of her blackmail victims as she’s listed the phone number using Greek numerals as country codes, Roman numerals as area codes, and Russian numerals as phone numbers.”

“Jesus,” I mutter. “She really was a complicated bitch.”

Sabrina leans closer. “But this?” She taps another section. “This might be a clue to the mysterious gold key.”

I follow her gaze to a tiny symbol—a key, stamped in the margin.

“Is that a stamp?”

Sabrina nods. “Yeah, she had a whole lot of stamps. I guess it made her feel important. She’d stamp our naughty and nice cards she had for Leigh, my older sister, and me.”

“Nice mother,” I comment.

“You have no idea.” Sabrina blows out a breath.

My eyes scan the page, and I notice the initials beneath each one of the entries and beside the little key stamp: “What’s this D&Y—LP.” I point to it. “It’s under each name.”

Sabrina frowns thoughtfully before her brows shoot up. “Gold and Key Legal Group.”

My pulse kicks up. “You think this is tied to Gold Key Legal Group?”

She nods. “If anyone knows what GM101, GM307, and GM409 mean, it might be them.”

It’s our first real lead on the golden key.

Now, we just have to wait for my mother to set up that meeting with the Gold Key Legal Group.

Sabrina snaps the book shut and shoves it back into her bag. “We should go.”

“We haven’t had out coffee yet,” I point out.

“Yeah, we’re going to have to leave it.” Her eyes move to behind my head, and I turn.

Two massive men in black suits are heading out way and I don’t think they’re your average businessmen.

“Fuck!” I scan the room. “That way!” I nod to the door on the other side of the coffee shop.

But before we can move, a big brute steps up behind Sabrina.

“You’re coming with us,” he growls.

I immediately see the tattoo on his neck—a Golden Hydra insignia peeking out from his collar.

Dmitri’s men .

“We’re in a busy coffee shop,” Sabrina points out.

“And we’re security,” the goon in front of her informs us. “Right now, everyone thinks you’ve either done something wrong or are being escorted to into the building as no one gets in there without a security escort if you don’t work there.”

“So don’t make a scene,” the goon warns.

Sabrina and I go along with them. As we near the front door of the building the third goon breaks off and walks back into the building. The other two walk us out the doors and SUV with blacked out windows waiting on the curb.

I glance at Sabrina who raises an eyebrow before starting to sneeze. She's about to open her bag when one of the goons grabs her arm. I instantly react to her being manhandled but I'm grabbed by one of the other goons.

"I need a... a..." Whaaaa chooo! She spits all over the man's suit. "Tissue. I'm getting a tissue."

He nods and releases her arm. Sabrina's hand disappears into her purse, and in a flash, she whips out a canister of pepper spray. The goon barely has time to register before she sprays him full in the face.

Chaos erupts. I turn and land a hard punch to the second goons ribs.

He staggers but doesn't go down.

The first guy, still blind, roars in fury, reaching for his gun.

Sabrina doesn't hesitate. She hurls something at me—a second canister.

"Don't spray it the wrong way!" she warns. "It really does melt skin."

I snatch it out of the air and blast the second bastard in the eyes.

He howls, dropping to his knees and I know him out. Before I can get to help Sabrina she delivers a brutal kick to the first man's balls. He crumples. As he goes down she swings her purse—whack—straight into the first guy's skull.

He goes down.

I grab her hand. "Move."

We bolt in the opposite direction to the waiting SUV, slipping into the London crowd, ducking into alleyways, weaving through side streets.

We need to disappear. Now.

We catch a cab, keeping our heads low. When we finally get close to the townhouse, we slip into a shopping mall, taking a long, winding path back to the safe house.

Once inside, Sabrina collapses onto the couch. “That was fucking insane.”

I rub my jaw. “They know we’re there.”

“Do you think someone tipped them off?” Sabrina looks at me in disbelief. “Other than the five... six of us from back home, no one besides Syd and Clyde know we’re here.”

“Fuck.” I spit. “Dmitri must have someone in immigration or aviation that flagged the jet.”

“Yes, but you didn’t use your jet,” Sabrina reminds me. “We used the Archontis jet just to be careful.”

“It seems our little switcheroo—sending my jet to Russia as a diversion—didn’t work.”

“Or..” Sabrina holds up her index finger. “We’ve been compromised by someone in our circle.”

Fuck! I shove my hands through my hair. She’s right, we’ve probably been compromised from within. It’s probably the same bastard that helped Carlos take Leigh.

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Chapter 10

LEIGH

The scent of old paper and ink fills the dimly lit dungeon as I turn another page of Vivienne's journal, my stomach twisted in knots. It's been hours since dinner, and I've barely looked up, lost in the depraved mind of the woman who birthed me. My mother.

No.

That word tastes wrong on my tongue. She was never a mother. She was a monster. She was just Vivienne.

The words scrawled in her delicate but precise script blur slightly as I struggle to absorb them. My pulse pounds in my ears. My hands tremble.

This can't be real.

But it is.

Vivienne Vasilikis was a sick, twisted, insatiable nymphomaniac who saw people as nothing more than tools. To be used and abused. To be manipulated. To be destroyed.

She loved control. She thrived on it. And she wrote about it with the same enthusiasm most people use to describe a favorite meal or a thrilling adventure. She got off on other people's pain. The more they screamed or begged, the more pleasure she

derived from it.

“Oh, my fucking God.” I shudder.

Her first journal details her “partners in sin and pleasure,” as she calls them—IN and SS. Obviously two men. She describes their bodies in graphic detail—their cocks, the way they fucked her. But the way she refers to them...

“My perfect trio.”

“Together, we will own this world.”

“Fucking insane.”

Jesus. The things they did to people. The things they did together.

I gag, swallowing down the bile rising in my throat. I force myself to keep reading, skimming past the more grotesque details. She never saw people as humans, only as opportunities—tools or toys.

And me?

I was just another tool in her arsenal.

She even wrote about me. Not as her daughter. Not as someone to love or protect. But as an object. A means to an end. Apparently, my tears, rosy cheeks from the slaps she doled out, and split lips were aphrodisiacs to her. It’s no wonder I never cried. I was scared she was going to collect my tears and drink them.

I flip the page and pause, my breath catching.

“ That little parasite that nearly ruined my body as she leeches off me for nine months owes me. When she’s older she’ll be of use to me. We’ve just got to ensure that her fucking father dies, and that SS wipes out the entire family including that bitch trying to steal IN from me. Once they are gone and the false heir takes over as the parasite’s father, I can get him to ensure I’m the executor of the will—then I can get rid of him. Granted he is the apex monster and the best fuck in the world. The things he does. But he too is competition for In and people like him are hard to control.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Did I just read Vivienne planning to kill my family?

I slam the journal shut, chest heaving.

My fingers dig into my temples. The pressure isn’t enough. Nothing could be enough to push away the sickness crawling under my skin.

Maybe I’m lucky my memories are Swiss cheese.

Because if I had to remember this woman—really remember her—no therapy in the world would fix me.

I stare blankly at the candle silver table. I’ve been at this for hours, sitting in this dungeon, pouring over her words. I must have skimmed half the pages, but the worst part? My mind is desperately trying to piece together the things I don’t remember.

I reach for Journal Two.

My fingers hesitate over the cracked leather cover before I force myself to pick it up. The first entry dates back to the year we moved to Vegas—the March before I turned four.

I begin to read.

“I’ve finally gained the interest of my target, and oh my God, is he a monster. More than I could ever have hoped for. And his body is magnificent—Jesus, I’ve never had such a perfect cock—Oh yes, I think one day RN will be my next husband. Together, we’ll create a legendary empire, and that little parasite bitch will finally be of some use. My little HS is the NY to everything I’m about to get and everything that will ensure I keep it. I will never have to bow down to anyone ever again. I will be the apex monster.”

My body goes cold.

RN.

RN. RN. RN.

Who the fuck was RN?

I flip through the journal with shaking hands, searching for another clue. A confirmation. And then I find it.

“What a fuck! Tonight I got pleased by two brutes after they let me help them interrogate a traitor. Oh my God. Tonight, I found mine and RN’s third—RV. And if he wasn’t married, he’d be my next husband. Maybe he still could be if I could get rid of the bitch he’s married to.”

RN. RV.

My breath comes in shallow gasps as I grab a notepad and scribble the letters down.

Gunther Mirochin – RN – That’s it. Vivienne uses the last letter of each name to

abbreviate.

Vladimir Molchanov – RV.

I stare at the words, my entire body vibrating with horror. My stomach churns violently.

Vivienne was going to marry me off to Radomir.

I was fucking four years old, and she had already mapped out my life. Who I'd marry—without one fucking thought or care about me. Then another thought hits me like a sledge hammer to the brain.

My mind spins, nausea gripping me hard. Did Uncle Mark know? Did my father?

Nikolas... my father... had one of Vivienne's journals. My head tilts as I look at the three books laid out in front of me. He'd said the book would help me remember—that I had to remember because my life was in danger. Something nags at the back of my mind.

Suddenly I hear my father's voice: "I bought you each four songbooks. Look, they have leather covers, gold writing, and I had each of your initials put on the bottom right so you wouldn't muddle them up."

"What the fuck am I going to with books?" Vivienne had fumed.

"You both like to write music. Maybe it will help you bond with Leigh. For fuck's sake, Vivienne, she's your daughter too."

"She hates me," Vivienne whined. "You're never here to see how rude she is."

“She’s three, for fuck’s sake,” Nikolas had growled. Then his voice dropped, low and threatening. “Put it this way, Vivienne—if you don’t at least try to make an effort with Leigh, then when the divorce comes through, I won’t be able to let you see her. At least not without a chaperone.”

“Divorce?” Vivienne spluttered. “Are you serious about that?”

“I told you I was,” Nikolas said flatly. “The papers will be ready by the end of the month. You know we’ve never worked. You’ll be set up for life—comfortable. And as soon as I’m confident you can get along with Leigh, we’ll set up visiting rights.”

Vivienne and Nikolas were getting a divorce—the year we moved. The year Popop Dante died.

I clutch the edge of the table, trying to steady my breathing. But it’s too late. The memories are coming too fast, crashing over me like a tidal wave.

Sometimes, Leigh, the mind protects us from ourselves as well, not just from pain. The reason you don’t want to remember isn’t just because of the trauma—it’s because you’re afraid of something.

The words of one of my old therapists echo through my head, but the voice that follows makes my heart slam against my ribs.

This is my fault. I hurt them. This happened because of me. It was me—I killed them. I killed them because I’m just like her. I don’t want to be like her!

The voice is young. My voice.

It’s not laughing. Not sassy. Not confident.

It's hysterical. It's afraid.

"Fuck," I whisper hoarsely. "I didn't want to remember because I didn't want to be like Vivienne."

My throat constricts, making it harder to breathe. My vision swims.

I shut my memories away. I shut my memories away.

My chair scrapes against the stone floor as I push back abruptly. Panic wells in my chest, clawing up my throat. My breathing is too fast. Too shallow.

Then—

A blast.

The impact rattles through me. The force vibrates up my arms, through my fingers.

I look down.

Blood.

My hands are covered in blood.

No. No, no, no.

I stumble back, my breath coming in ragged gasps. My pulse pounds against my skull as I bolt toward the basin in the corner, my hands trembling violently.

I scrub. Hard. Desperate.

Tears blur my vision as I frantically try to wash it off, but the blood won't come off.

I press my palms against the cool stone, gripping the edge as my body convulses with silent sobs.

The images hit me like a freight train.

The gunshot. The screams. The blood on my hands.

And a voice—Vivienne's voice—whispering like a ghost in my mind.

You're my little key that unlocks the world I've always dreamed of and keeps me safe from the cunts that would try and take it from me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but I can't shut her out.

I can't escape her.

I can't escape myself.

Chapter 11

LEIGH

Desire.

It snakes through my veins, slow and smoldering, awakening me from the depths of slumber into a world clouded with intoxication. A soft exhale of breath grazes my ear, warm and familiar. A voice—deep, jagged, and saturated with possession.

"Leigh."

The mattress beneath me shifts as moves over me. A firm hand cups the nape of my neck, the rough fingers extending down to my shoulder, thumb caressing the sensitive skin just below my ear. A delightful shiver races down my spine, accumulating between my legs.

"You're safe now," Radomir murmurs, his lips gently brushing against my temple.

"It's over."

I release a breath I didn't realize I was holding. My fingers dig into his bare chest, feeling the solid muscle beneath my palm, the familiar scent of him—spicy musk—surrounding me like a second skin.

He's here. He found me.

"Where are Carlos and Timir?" I whisper.

"They're dead," he snarls, his voice dark with promise. "They'll never hurt you again."

A sob of relief begins to rise in my throat, but Radomir silences it with his mouth. His lips crash against mine, as his tongue intertwines with mine in an eager dance. His body is heavy and warm as he presses me down into the thin mattress, his muscular form encasing me.

"Radomir," I gasp as he bites my lower lip gently, tugging it between his teeth before easing the sting with his tongue. "I'm so glad you're here. I thought you'd never find me."

"I'll always find you, Leigh." His voice is thick with passion. "I told you, you're mine now; I'll never let anyone take you from me again."

"Yes, I'm yours," I breathe. "Always."

His growl of satisfaction vibrates against my throat as his mouth ventures lower, leaving soft, tender kisses down my collarbone and over my naked chest. His calloused hands cup my breasts, thumbs grazing gently over my already hardened nipples.

I arch into him, desperate for more, yearning for the unique friction only he can provide. He doesn't make me wait. His mouth envelops one sensitive peak, sucking gently while his other hand slips between my thighs. His fingers glide over the damp heat between my legs, and I let out a cry.

"You're so fucking wet for me," he growls against my skin. "I need to be inside you, Leigh."

"Yes," I whimper, rocking against his hand. "Please, Radomir."

He moves swiftly, tearing my panties down my legs and positioning himself between my thighs. His erection is thick and rigid, the tip teasingly probing at my entrance. My nails dig into his back as I brace myself.

He enters me with one forceful thrust.

A sharp gasp escapes from my throat as he fills me entirely, stretching me, taking possession of me in the way only he can. My body clenches around him, needy and insatiable.

"Damn," he groans, his fingers gripping my hips so tightly that I know there will be bruises. "You feel perfect, Leigh. So tight."

He begins to move then, setting a relentless rhythm. Each stroke is powerful and deep, pulling me higher and higher into blissful oblivion.

"Does that feel good, baby?" he growls, his breath hot against my ear

"Yes," I choke out. "Yes."

"Did you miss me? Did you miss feeling my cock slamming deep inside your tight pussy?" He impales himself inside of me with intensity.

"Yes, yes, please, please, give it to me harder." I'm desperate to reach the summit as my hips gyrate in time to his. "I need you so much."

He leans forward his teeth nipping my neck. The pleasure intensifies like a wildfire, spiraling out of control as his thrusts become harder—faster hitting that secret spot inside me. My body clenches around him as an orgasm engulfs me like a ferocious storm.

"Rad—" My cry is stifled by his mouth as he claims my lips in a passionate kiss, his hips continuing their relentless motion, pursuing his own release.

But then—

Something shifts.

The air around us changes.

Radomir's hands tighten on my wrists, yanking them above my head. His body stiffens, no longer warm, and I no longer feel safe with him. His deep blue eyes darken, filling with something cold and merciless.

I blink up at him in confusion, my post-orgasmic haze dissipating.

"Radomir?" I whisper.

The world around me shatters.

The bed disappears. The warm sheets vanish.

Suddenly, I'm cold. Exposed.

I'm no longer beneath Radomir.

I'm bent over a cold silver table, my bare skin pressed against the unforgiving surface. My arms are stretched wide, wrists shackled to the metal. My ankles are locked to the floor, my legs spread apart, leaving me utterly vulnerable.

"What did you do, Leigh?" His voice is razor-sharp, slicing through my skin like a blade. "I know it was you."

Panic explodes inside me. Radomir forces my chin onto a rest that looks like one of those you put your legs in for a gynecological exam.

He shoves his cock that is straining against his cotton pants into my face, laughing and his voice has now changed. It's rougher with a hint of a Russian accent.

"There. That's just the right height for my cock to slide into that lying mouth of yours."

"Why are you doing this?" Confusion and fear flood through me.

"You have their blood on your hands." His breath is hot against my ear as he leans beside next to it to whisper. "You know what that means for you. Especially in my world."

"What did I do?" I cry it's getting harder to speak in this position.

He moves around behind me, and he forces my legs apart. I feel hard clamps lock my legs in place. The gold hard metal table pushes painfully into my belly and my hips.

My belly! My baby!

"Please, you're hurting me,"

"Karma's a bitch!" He laughs behind me and again it doesn't sound familiar to me.

"You hurt them and now it's your turn to hurt and pay for what you've done."

I try to turn my head, but the chin rest keeps me from doing it.

"No," I shake my head frantically. "No, it wasn't me. I didn't—"

No. No, no, no. This can't be happening. Radomir said he'd keep me safe.

I struggle, my breathing ragged.

Radomir's voice is distant, echoing around me like a cruel specter. "This is what we do to liars, thieves, and murderers in my world who kill one of our own."

Terror surges through me like a wildfire.

"No," I rasp, my throat raw. While my mind can't grasp what he's talking about it's like my subconscious does as I'm racked with guilt and drowning in confusion at the same time. "Please—I didn't—it wasn't like you think—" I'm not sure what I'm saying or why I'm saying them, but it feels right.

"Shut up, you fucking lying, murdering whore," he snaps. He runs his hand down my naked spine, over my buttocks and rubs his pants covered cock against my exposed crack. He runs his fingers over my clit. "You're sopping wet." He leans over my back. "Did you enjoy it? Did it make you feel good?"

"No," I sob. "No, please, I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I didn't know. I swear to God, I didn't know!"

"It's too late for you," his voice is final. "The blood has been spilled."

Panic claws up my throat.

"I didn't—" My voice is hoarse, shaking. "What if I'm having your baby?"

Silence.

Then—his laughter.

Cold. Mocking.

"I'll keep the baby," he sneers. "But you'll meet the same fate as my father, my uncle... and your mother."

"She was never my mother!" I scream, my entire body trembling. Images of a knife slicing down my top and yanking my shirt open flashes through me. I instantly know I was in danger. "She was going to hurt me. They were all going to hurt me!"

Vivienne's voice slithers through the darkness and her face moves down to see me. "You're still part of me, Leigh. You can never escape it. You hurt them. It was your fault. You shouldn't have stolen from me."

"No," I whisper, but the word feels meaningless.

"Tell the truth, Leigh," Radomir's voice commands. "You killed them."

A shadow looms in front of me.

A woman.

Judy.

Her face is pale, her expression empty, but her eyes—her eyes burn with betrayal.

"I was hurt because of you," she says, her voice eerily calm. "Tied to the table like you are now. Raped, beaten, brutalized. Because of you."

Tears choke my throat. "Judy, no. I didn't know. I swear, I didn't know."

Another figure steps forward.

A man—his body covered in open wounds, blood seeping from the whip marks. His skin is torn, raw, as if he's been flayed alive.

Viktor.

Oh, God.

"You let her do this to me," he rasps, his voice barely above a whisper. "I was whipped until my skin split. Raped. Forced to watch as the love of my life was brutalized." He grabs my hair painfully forcing my chin a little higher, my throat cutting into the hard chin rest. "It doesn't feel good to be betrayed, does it? I doesn't feel good to lie and keep the truth from people"

"I didn't know the truth." My voice is muffled because my air is being cut off from the awkward angle of my head. My stomach wrenches violently. "It was locked away in my mind. I didn't know.! I'm sorry—I'm so sorry!"

Just like that Viktor drops my head on to be replaced by a cold clammy hand gripping onto my jaw, forcing my head up once again.

Vivienne's cruel face fills my vision.

"Don't lie, you little parasite," she hisses. "You enjoyed it, didn't you? Watching them suffer?"

"No! That's why you enjoy, you fucking sadistic whore!"

Thwack! Her palm stings my cheek.

"I'm nothing like you!" I scream, fighting back the tears. I won't let this bitch see me cry. I won't let her see me beg. I'll die before I give her that satisfaction and repeat

vehemently, “I’m nothing like you.”

She laughs, the sound jagged and sharp.

"Then how do you explain this?"

The room changes again.

I’m twelve years old and no longer on the cold hard table. I’m wearing jeans and my favorite yellow and pink T-shirt, but it’s been cut open in the front slicing through my brand new training bra exposing my young breasts. I want to cover up, but I can’t. I have no control on the scene unfolding—I’m just a passenger in the mind of a twelve year old me looking through the terrified eyes of younger me—living a memory through a nightmare.

While I have no physical control here, I can feel everything she does like something heavy in my hands. I look down it’s a gun.

Again the world swirls and I hear a blast ring in my ears and echo through the dungeon vibrating through my hands and up my arms.

My eyes scan the room, and my breath catches in my throat seeing the two bodies lying motionless on the floor.

Gunther Mirochin and Vladimir Molchanov.

I stare down at them, my small hands shaking, the gun still warm in my grip. I know I should be horrified but all I can feel is relief—relief that there are two less monsters in the world

Vivienne’s laughter echoes in my skull.

"Tell me again, Leigh," she taunts. "Tell me you're nothing like me. Tell me it doesn't feel good taking down those monsters."

I suck in a breath and—

I scream myself awake: "I'M NOTHING LIKE YOU! NOTHING!"

Sitting bolt upright in the dark cell, my heart hammering, my stomach churning.

Tears streak down my cheeks. My hands tremble as I press them against my face.

For a long moment, I struggle to breathe, to remember where I am.

But the truth slams into me like a wrecking ball as just like that the door to the overflowing closet of my suppressed memories bursts open.

I remember.

I remember everything.

A cold, hollow weight settles in my chest as I press a trembling hand to my stomach. It's still too soon to know for certain, but deep in my gut, I feel it. There's a little life growing inside me—Radomir's baby.

But that won't change anything for me—not now that I know the truth and it won't be long before Radomir and his family figure it out.

Desperation spurts through me— I have to get out of here.

I have to run as fast and as far as I can then disappear.

But it's not just from Timir and Carlos.

But from Radomir and his cousins.

Because now I know—they've been hunting the wrong person for ten years.

It's not the Greek Matriarch they want.

It's me.

I'm the one with Radomir's father and uncle's blood on my hands.

And when he finds out—

There will be no mercy. No forgiveness.

Not even our baby can save me.

Chapter 12

RADOMIR

The English countryside is a miserable fucking place.

It's been two weeks of endless searching, tracking ghosts and dead leads, while my patience wears thinner by the day. Every known location associated with Carlos, the Gold Hydra, and the Mannings has been turned inside out.

And still—

No sign of Leigh.

No sign of Dmitri, Carlos, or Wanda Manning.

Fuck.

I lean against the window, the cold glass pressing against my temple, the drizzle outside matching the storm churning inside me. The estate we're holed up in is as grand as any we've stayed in, but it doesn't matter. The luxury does nothing to dull the ache inside my ribs, the constant burn that tells me I'm wasting time.

She's out there somewhere.

Alone.

And I should be with her.

Sabrina sits curled up on the other end of the couch, scrolling through her tablet. She's been restless too, though she hides it well behind her sharp tongue and quick retorts.

Tonight is different.

Tonight, she's quiet.

Because today is the day we would have known if Leigh was pregnant.

Red Day, as Sabrina called it earlier, muttering the words under her breath before downing a shot of vodka like it was medicine. My gut twists at the thought, my grip tightening into a fist.

If she's carrying my child—

No. I can't go there. Not yet. Not until I have her back.

Oleksi strides through from the dining room, having just finished eating. He came in when Sabrina and I had already finished.

"I'm going to shower," he announces, glancing at the clock on the mantel. "Then I'm heading out."

I frown. "Again?"

Oleksi shrugs. "Why not? London's nightlife isn't terrible. Syd and Clyde know all the best spots—places I never knew existed, and you know how many times I've been here."

I watch him. We're all frustrated about not finding Leigh. Oleksi just wants to find Dmitri, as he has more than a few grievances with the man. Oleksi has a habit of drowning his frustrations between a pair of warm thighs after a good night out.

I nod. "Enjoy but just keep your head down and watch your back."

"Always do, brother." Oleksi glances toward Sabrina. "You could join us if you like. Clyde has the hots for you. You may get lucky."

"No, thank you. I like Clyde, but he's not my type, and I'd rather stick a hot poker in my eye than spend an evening with you," Sabrina tells him with a saccharine grin.

"Your loss." Oleksi turns to me. "You could come too. It might do you some good to get out."

"No. But thanks."

"Clyde and Syd should be down soon as well. They're also getting ready." With that, Oleksi leaves the room.

Sabrina watches him with mild disinterest. She doesn't like him, and the feeling is mutual. The two of them together are like a dog and a cat that have learned to tolerate each other simply because they have no choice.

"Is it just me, or did he just overly explain his actions?" Sabrina says, annoyed. "Like he was rubbing it in our faces that he's going out while we're stuck here in misery."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it that way." I stick up for my cousin. "He was probably just trying to reassure me."

Sabrina nods, and we fall into a heavy silence, which she is the first to break with a

question that does a complete 180 from our last discussion. “Don’t you find it alarming that no one has seen Wanda Manning in four weeks?” Her brow creases. “Even her executive assistant said it was unlike her to just disappear for so long.”

I exhale sharply. “I have a lot more to be alarmed about than that bitch. As far as I’m concerned, she was instrumental in kidnapping my wife.”

“But she’s been gone since a week before Leigh was taken,” Sabrina points out, tilting her head. “What if she wasn’t part of it? What if she’s just another pawn in Dmitri and Carlos’s game? Now they have her company and Leigh...”

I rub my jaw, considering her words.

Maybe she’s right. Maybe we’ve been looking at this the wrong way.

“Think about it,” she presses. “We’ve been chasing ghosts, tracking Carlos and Dmitri, and we have nothing. What if we’ve been looking in the wrong direction? What if Wanda Manning is the key to finding them?”

I glance at her. Smart.

Before I can answer, her phone buzzes.

"Why the hell is your reminder still going off?"

She pulls it out, glancing at the screen. “It's not my reminder. It’s Uncle Nik.”

She hits answer, and Nikolas’s face fills the screen. I lean closer, my pulse spiking.

“Tell me you’ve got something. We’re chasing our own tails here.”

"We think we should stop looking for Dmitri and Carlos and track Wanda instead," Sabrina chimes in.

Nikolas nods, his expression serious. "We have been watching Wanda as well."

Sabrina straightens. "And?"

"She was spotted in Russia four weeks ago."

The blood in my veins goes ice-cold.

"What?"

"She bought a palace," Nikolas continues. "On the outskirts of a small town about five miles from Dragunov Village—it's called the Golden Palace, and I believe it used to be owned by Dmitri before your grandfather froze all his assets."

"I know it." I grind my teeth. "It's about ten miles from Dragunov Village. I'm surprised he went back there. It was the incident at Dragunov that got him exiled."

"No." Viktor's voice hardens. "Dmitri was cast out for murdering Vasily Dragunov's daughter. He should've been executed."

"My mother started selling some of my grandfather's properties in the last few years." Everything inside me goes razor-sharp. "I guess it's no surprise Dmitri would get his rich wife to buy back his golden palace." I frown. "You think they're at his palace?"

"Possibly," Nikolas admits. "We already have a team checking it out."

"Carlos has been spotted in that town," Viktor says. "Seems he likes to frequent a certain bar there."

My mind races. “I’m packing.” I glance at Sabrina. “Be ready in an hour—we’re leaving for Russia tonight.”

“Then you’d better stop your cousin from hitting the clubs,” Sabrina reminds me of Oleksi’s plans.

“He can catch up later.”

“Not so fast.” Nikolas’s voice is firm. “We need to scout it out first. No use rushing in blind.”

I clench my jaw. “I’m not waiting around here.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Nikolas snaps. “You and Sabrina are expected at a meeting tomorrow morning.”

I glare at him. “What meeting?”

“With Giles Gold and Parker Keys. They will send you the address where the meeting will be held by 8 a.m.” Nikolas informs us.

Sabrina narrows her eyes. “Can’t we meet them later? After we get Leigh? I mean, London is kinda between Russia and home.”

Nikolas’s expression hardens. “No.”

My gut churns, a dark feeling creeping into my veins. “I agree with Sabrina. I don’t care if we have to wait another fucking month to meet with them. Finding Leigh is more important than meeting a bunch of fucking attorneys.”

Nikolas exhales sharply, his voice dropping into that lethal calm that means there’s

no arguing. “Take your ‘travel guide,’” he tells Sabrina, his eyes flicking toward the fourth journal disguised beneath the unassuming cover. “Giles needs to see it.” Then his gaze lands on me. “And you—take the documents your mother told you to bring.”

I nod, already knowing which ones he means.

“And ID,” Viktor adds. “Galina said to remind you both—Giles and Parker are thorough.”

Sabrina makes a face. “Why does that sound like we’re applying for fucking visas instead of meeting a couple of lawyers?”

I rub my jaw, considering that for a moment. Viktor isn’t wrong. The men we’re about to meet deal in more than just legal contracts. They’re the kind of people who don’t just represent the most powerful—they manage them, protect them, and, when necessary, make people disappear for them. If they want ID, it’s not for bureaucratic bullshit. It’s for control.

Nikolas watches me carefully before his next words drop like stones in my gut. “Don’t tell anyone where you’re going. Not even Oleksi. Not Syd. Not Clyde.”

Sabrina sits up straighter. “Why?” Suspicion laces her voice. “Do you think they’ll feel left out for not being invited?”

A loaded silence stretches between us before Viktor speaks. “Because we don’t know if we can trust them.”

I snap my head toward him. “What the fuck are you saying?”

Viktor doesn’t flinch. Instead, he sends a hard look to Nikolas, something unspoken passing between them before he turns back to me. “Clyde seems okay,” he admits,

“but he’s loyal to that Syd woman, and she...” He hesitates before finishing with, “She seems rather fond of Oleksi.”

“Fond?” Sabrina scoffs. “Syd and Oleksi have been fucking.” She leans back, crossing her arms. “I figured it out when they both kept disappearing together every night.”

My jaw tightens. I’d suspected something was going on between them, but I hadn’t thought much of it. Not until now.

“Listen,” Viktor moves the conversation away from Oleksi’s sex life, his voice grave. “There’s something else. Molchanov, Mirochin, and Fabri have been using a subsidiary of Ice Man Industries for various ‘exports’ over the past two years. We’ve been using them since a month before our first truck was hit.”

A cold sensation creeps up my spine. My hands curl into fists. “Fuck. Was this Daniil’s doing?”

Viktor shakes his head. “No, Rad...” His voice trails off, but his hesitation says everything before he does. “Oleksi. He set up the contracts with them.”

I go still.

A beat of silence.

Then rage ignites in my gut, scorching through my veins like acid. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Viktor doesn’t blink. “I said Oleksi has been using that subsidiary for two fucking years.”

The betrayal slams into me like a hammer to the ribs.

My cousin. My brother.

Bile rises in my throat, fury thickening the air around me. “I’m going to rip his fucking insides out.”

“You will not!” Nikolas’s command is delivered in a low dangerous tone. “In about four minutes, agents will arrive. They’ll tell you they’re Alpha Team. Passcode 4477. They’re here to detain Oleksi, Syd, and Clyde.”

Sabrina’s sharp intake of breath cuts through my pulsing rage. “That’s a bit harsh,” she says. “What if Syd and Clyde have nothing to do with this?”

“They know the rules,” Nikolas says flatly. “Syd compromised herself the second she got in bed with him. Clyde? He’s become Oleksi’s new favorite drinking buddy.”

Jesus.

“You’re not allowed to socialize in your team?” Sabrina bites out, disbelief warring with anger.

“Nikolas is right.” My voice is clipped, barely containing the rage simmering beneath the surface. “I’d do the same.”

Oleksi. Fucking Oleksi.

A part of me doesn’t want to believe it. But another part—the part that’s watched him disappear night after night and take secret phone calls on a phone we should have secret phone calls on... that part of me knows he’s been holding something back—knows it’s true.

“Did he tip off Dmitri?” My tone is clipped. “Did he know this entire fucking time where Leigh actually was?”

Was Sabrina right about the penthouse? Shit I didn’t even get to question the woman Oleksi claimed to be screwing the night Leigh was taken.

“We don’t know that yet,” Nikolas says, reading my thoughts. “But we’ll get the information from him. Don’t worry.”

I grind my teeth, my hands flexing at my sides. “No—I need to deal with this.”

“No, you don’t.” Nikolas’s voice sharpens into a command. “You and Sabrina have other things to attend to. Like going to see Giles and Parker tomorrow. Right after that, we’ll have a jet ready to take you to Russia and you’ll have a new security detail.”

Sabrina snorts. “Maybe make them ugly this time.”

Nikolas ignores her sarcasm and cuts his gaze back to me. “Leave this to us, Radomir. Focus on your mission.”

A muscle ticks in my jaw, but I nod once, forcing my fury down into something colder. Controlled.

“We’ll call as soon as we know what’s going on in Russia,” Viktor adds.

“The team is ready to move in,” Nikolas says, his voice slightly raised as if alarmed and then they sign off.

The moment the call ends, my phone buzzes.

I answer.

“This is Alpha Team 4477,” a clipped voice informs me. “We need you and Miss Craft to remain where you are. We’re about to storm the house. Be advised—our teams have the place surrounded, and snipers are positioned strategically.”

Beside me, Sabrina lets out a low hiss. “Jesus. That’s a bit overkill.”

“No, it’s not. Not when you’re dealing with a man like Oleksi,” I tell her. My heart is slamming against my ribs, and my instincts want to jump in to protect my cousin while my mind wants to rip into him. “Nikolas knows what his team is capable of. And he knows Oleksi.”

Before I can think further, the front door bursts open.

In an instant, the house floods with men dressed in black tactical gear, moving like a wave of controlled chaos.

Sabrina and I are immediately held in place by two of the team while the others spread out, clearing every inch of the house.

The raid lasts minutes.

Then the Alpha of the team approaches, his eyes sharp, his expression lethal. “Where are they?”

His tone isn’t a question—it’s a demand.

Sabrina answers first. “Oleksi went to shower. Clyde was in his room. Syd was probably in the shower with Oleksi.” She rattles off the last part, her tone laced with sarcasm.

“They’re not here.” The Alpha Leader’s eyes narrow. “Where are they?”

“Did you check under the bed?” Sabrina drawls. “Or in the closet?”

“Miss Craft, if we for one second think you’ve helped the fugitive escape we’ll have no option but to detain you,” Alpha Leader obviously had no sense of humor and if he lays a hand on my friend I rip his goddamn arm off. “Where are they?”

Frustration flares in my chest. “How the fuck should we know?” I seethe. My fists clench, my anger barely leashed. “They must’ve heard Nikolas on the phone.”

“How?” Sabrina glances around. “There was no one else here.”

“We had just finished a video call with him.” My voice is sharp. “Then you burst in here. There’s no way they got out that fucking fast.”

“They could’ve been lurking.” The Alpha Leader’s gaze darken with suspicion.

A tense silence.

Then Sabrina’s expression shifts, realization dawning in her eyes.

“Unless one of them was lurking while we were on that call.” She turns to me, her voice quiet but urgent. “They could’ve overheard us.”

The Alpha Leader steps away, his expression grim as he speaks into his radio.

“Targets are not on-site. Repeat—Oleksi, Syd, and Clyde are gone.”

A crackle of static, then another voice cuts through.

Nikolas.

“Secure Radomir and Sabrina. Take them to the safe site. They are not to be left alone.”

My blood turns ice cold.

What the fuck did he just say?

I exchange a sharp look with Sabrina, who stiffens beside me. Her fingers twitch, like she’s resisting the urge to grab a weapon.

The Alpha Leader acknowledges the order, his gaze locking onto me. “You heard him.”

I step forward, fists clenched. “Like fuck you will.”

“It’s not up for discussion,” he states coolly. “Nikolas’s orders.”

Rage floods my veins. Nikolas is calling the fucking shots on me now?

I glare at the Alpha Leader. “Find my cousin. Find Clyde. Find Syd. But you’re not taking me anywhere.”

Sabrina crosses her arms. “Yeah, I’d love to see you try.”

“Sir, this isn’t personal. It’s protocol.”

“Protocol?” I bark out a humorless laugh. “Tell me something—whose protocol is this? Because I sure as hell don’t remember handing over control to Nikolas.”

The Alpha Leader doesn't flinch. "It's not about control. It's about safety."

Sabrina snorts. "For who? Us or them?"

No answer.

I feel the leash tightening around my throat, and I fucking hate it.

Nikolas knew. He knew Oleksi would run with his new lethal team of assassins.

I glance at Sabrina, reading the same conclusion in her eyes. Nikolas either set this up or saw it coming and said nothing.

I grind my teeth. Fine.

Let them think they have us under lock. For now.

I slide my hands into my pockets, my stance casual, but my tone laced with ice.
"Lead the way."

The Alpha Leader gives a curt nod. The team closes in.

As we step out into the night, I let one thought settle deep in my bones.

Nikolas better start talking. Because I'm done being anyone's pawn.

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Chapter 13

RADOMIR

Leigh is everything .

Soft, warm, mine.

She arches beneath me, her body curving into every touch, every kiss, every slow drag of my hands across her skin. She's breathless , her lips parted on a quiet moan, her fingers threading through my hair, tugging, urging me closer.

I give in.

I bury my face in the crook of her neck, inhaling the scent of vanilla, heat, her. My lips trace a slow path down the delicate curve of her throat, and she shudders, writhing beneath me .

“Radomir...” Her voice shakes, but it's not fear— it's need.

Her name is a growl in my throat as I take her breast in my mouth, teasing her nipple with my tongue. Her back arches, pressing herself into me, her body pleading for more without a single word.

I'm more than happy to oblige.

My hands roam lower, fingers tracing the dip of her waist, the soft swell of her hips.

She's warm, wet, ready. I spread her thighs, my fingers teasing, circling, until she gasps, her body trembling beneath me.

She's already close, already lost in the sensation, but I want to take my time. I slide a finger inside her, groaning as she grips me, desperate, tight. Another joins, stretching her, stroking slow, deep and slightly bent, hitting the spot just right to ensure pleasure.

She shatters .

A sharp gasp before her body tenses and her release is all-consuming. I watch, mesmerized, as she breaks apart beneath me, her thighs trembling, her breath uneven.

Only then do I push inside her, sinking deep, filling her completely.

She gasps, her hands clutching at my shoulders, nails pressing into my skin. For a second, I don't move—just savor the feeling of being buried inside her, of claiming her in the most primal way.

Then I do .

I use slow, deliberate thrusts at first, then harder, deeper, until we're lost in it—chasing the inevitable, a raw, unrelenting rhythm that neither of us can control.

Her body grips me, tight, perfect, pulling me deeper with every movement. Her nails drag down my back, her moans broken, breathless, each one unraveling whatever restraint I have left.

She's close again—I can feel it in the way her pussy tightens around my throbbing cock, and the way she gasps my name like a prayer.

“Come for me,” I murmur against her ear.

And she does.

A strangled cry, her release pulling me over the edge with her, my own pleasure blinding, unstoppable as I fill her with my seed.

I don’t let go.

Her legs stay locked around me, her body still trembling, still wrapped in the heat of our release.

But just as satisfaction starts to settle—

Everything changes.

Leigh’s moans twist into something else.

A broken sob. A cry for help.

I blink, but she’s not beneath me anymore.

She’s strapped to a cold metal table.

Exposed.

Writhing—but not from pleasure.

Terror shines in her green eyes.

“Radomir, please... help me.”

I lunge for her—

But I can't move.

A cruel laugh echoes around me.

I know that voice.

Gunther.

Then another.

Vladimir.

And the last— Vivienne.

"You let this happen," she hisses, stepping into view. Her face is twisted with malice, with triumph. "She's suffering because of you."

Leigh screams.

I wake up roaring .

Bolting upright, gasping, drenched in sweat.

The sheets are tangled, the air thick and suffocating. My pulse thunders in my ears, my muscles tight, and coiled.

I shove a hand through my hair, trying to ground myself.

I reach over touching the bed. I know deep down she's not there, but the dream was

so real. I look down and stickiness oozes through my boxes— Fuck when last did I have a wet dream ?

I scan the room again looking through the darkness.

She's not here.

I have no idea where she is.

I push myself from the bed to get cleaned up.

And for the first time in my life—I'm terrified.

It's taken another good two hours since my wet dream about Leigh turned into a motherfucking nightmare that have my gut twisted in knots.

I'm halfway between sleep and a killing rage when something prods my cheek.

I snap awake instantly, my hand closing around the wrist of the intruder.

Sabrina yelps. "Jesus, Radomir! It's me."

I release her immediately, and sit up only to get blinded by the small flashlight light in her hand. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Get dressed." She keeps her voice low. "We need to go."

I blink at her. "Is this some fucked-up nightmare?"

"No, but it's about to be."

I glance at the clock. It's the dead of night. My senses sharpen instantly.

Something's wrong .

I sit up. "Explain."

"Not here." She gestures toward the bag she's already packed. "Just trust me."

I hesitate for a second. Then I nod.

Ten minutes later, we're dressed in dark clothes, hoodies drawn up, slipping out of the compound like shadows.

Sabrina moves like she's done this a hundred times. She probably has.

We stay off the road, sticking to the trees until we reach a small village about three miles out. Cars line the quiet street. Not a creature is moving. It's unnerving.

Just like the tiny woman scanning the cars like a seasoned pro until she zeroes in on an older model VW Beetle.

"This one."

I stare at her. "That piece of shit?"

"It's a classic." She rolls her eyes. "It has no GPS and is easy to boost."

I exhale sharply. "You're really going to steal a car?"

"You have a better idea?" She raises a brow. "What, you thinking of ordering an Uber?"

I scowl. “No. I’m not dumb, you know.”

“No,” she agrees. “Just a spoiled Bratva boss used to having brute force at his disposal.”

She’s not wrong.

She slides into the driver’s seat, hot-wires the car in under a minute.

It purrs to life.

I shake my head as I climb into the passenger seat. “You’re frightening.”

She grins. “So you’ve said.”

One Hour Later – just outside of London Sabrina pulls into a gas station, parking near the convenience store.

“The tank is full,” I point out.

“We don’t need gas,” she says. “We need a map.”

I pause. “Isn’t that why we have—” Then I remember. Our phones were taken. “Fuck.”

“Yep.” She slides out of the car. “Old-school map it is.”

Inside, she grabs a handful of supplies—water, snacks, a flashlight, and a huge map book.

I pay in cash.

Back on the road, she navigates while I drive.

Correction —while I attempt to drive this toy car on wheels.

The steering wheel feels like it's going to wobble off in my hands, my knees are practically at my chest, and every time I shift gears, I'm afraid the gear shift is going to come off.

Sabrina, of course, finds this hilarious.

"I swear to God," I growl, trying to adjust my position. "If I hear one more fucking giggle—"

"You're just mad because you look ridiculous in this thing." She tosses a bag of Skittles into my lap. "Here. Have some candy. It'll help."

I glare at her. "Do I look like I eat Skittles?"

She smirks. "No, but I think you should. Sugar might help with your delicate mood."

I toss the bag onto the dash without opening it. "I don't need sugar. I need a real car."

She sighs, opening the bag herself. "Tough luck. We're rolling in this beast until we reach the ferry." She pops a handful into her mouth, then offers me one. "C'mon. Just one."

"I'd rather choke." I keep my eyes on the road, jaw tight.

She shrugs. "Your loss."

The damn Beetle rattles as I push it over sixty. I have to fight every instinct not to put

my fist through the dashboard. I swear I can feel the chassis swaying every time a truck passes us on the highway.

This is a fucking insult.

I'm Radomir Molchanov. Heir to a Bratva empire. Feared across three continents. And here I am, getting overtaken by a Prius while Sabrina hums along to Ice Ice Baby, which is blaring from the car's ancient, stuck cassette player.

Kill me now.

I grind my teeth. "Turn that shit off."

"I can't." She taps the radio. "The eject button is jammed. Guess we're stuck with Vanilla Ice."

I stare at her. "You did this on purpose."

She grins. "What, hot-wired a car just to torture you with bad '90s music?" She gasps in fake innocence. "That's crazy, Radomir."

I mutter a curse under my breath, focusing on the road ahead.

We need to reach the coast before sunrise.

The ferry to Calais, France leaves in two hours. Once we're across, we can disappear into Europe and find another way to Russia that won't have every security checkpoint scanning for us.

I grip the wheel tighter.

Sabrina's words replay in my head.

We've been used as decoys.

The truth stings like a knife to the ribs.

Sabrina wasn't supposed to overhear those men talking, but she did. And once she put the pieces together, she knew we had to get the fuck out of England.

"They played us," she mutters, like she can read my thoughts.

I nod grimly. "Nikolas."

She tosses another Skittle into her mouth. "You think he did it on purpose?"

I don't want to believe it. I want to believe my uncle is on our side. That everything he's done has been in Leigh's best interest.

But the timing. The way we were sent chasing shadows for two weeks.

And now, the fact that Oleksi, Syd, and Clyde have disappeared without a fucking trace?

It all lines up. Too well.

"I think," I exhale sharply, gripping the wheel tighter, "he knew exactly what he was doing."

Sabrina nods. "That's what I thought too."

I glance at her. "But why? Why go through all of this?"

“Because he needed time to track Leigh without us getting in the way.” She leans back in her seat, stretching out her legs. “And maybe, just maybe, he also wanted to flush Oleksi out.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

She crunches on a candy before answering. “I think Nikolas knew Oleksi was playing both sides, but he needed proof. That’s why he insisted we bring Oleksi with us. If Oleksi thought we were clueless and distracted, he’d keep doing what he was doing—leaking our location, feeding Dmitri intel. That’s why Nikolas took his sweet time leading us nowhere.” She shrugs. “And when we got too close to figuring it out, Oleksi bolted.”

I shake my head. “That still doesn’t explain why Nikolas kept us out of Russia.”

Sabrina’s expression darkens. “Because according to the Alpha dickwads, we were being followed, and I guess while Dmitri’s men were following us it left Nikolas’s team able to scout out Russia. The classic illusion Mark would say. Keep the people looking here so they don’t see what’s going on behind them.”

We reach the ferry terminal with twenty minutes to spare.

I park the Beetle between two trucks and kill the engine. “This piece of shit is staying here.”

“Fair enough.” Sabrina grabs our bags. “But admit it. You’ll miss her.”

I stare at the car. “I’ll set it on fire first.”

She snickers.

We board the ferry as walk-ons, blending into the sparse crowd of late-night travelers.

I keep my hood up, my stance casual, but my eyes scan every face, every movement, every possible threat.

Sabrina does the same.

We don't speak much as the ferry pulls away from England, crossing the dark waters of the Channel.

There's too much left unsaid.

Too much uncertainty.

When we dock in Calais, we move fast. Sabrina pulls more cash from a hidden pocket in her bag, and we rent another car—a nondescript sedan this time.

We drive.

France to Belgium.

Belgium to Germany.

Germany into Poland.

By the time we reach our destination—a small border town with an under-the-table flight to Russia—we're both exhausted.

“Last stop,” I mutter, rolling my shoulders. “If this plane is a piece of shit like that Beetle—”

Sabrina pats my arm. “Don’t worry. No Ice Ice Baby this time.”

We board a cargo plane with minimal security. Within a few hours, we’re finally in Russia—far from Moscow, in a small industrial airport where no one is asking questions.

The moment we land, I feel it.

Like a wire pulled tight inside my chest.

We’re here.

And Leigh is close.

We rent another car—an old but sturdy SUV—and start the final leg of our journey.

The closer we get to Dragunov Village, the thicker the tension gets.

Sabrina reads the map, guiding us toward the outskirts of town, near where Wanda Manning’s so-called palace is located.

“Two mile to Golubaya Laguna.” Sabrina yawns. “According to the travel book—there’s no accommodation and the place doesn’t fucking exist. So I do hope we find something, or I call dibs on the back seat.”

Sabrina has been a champion. The entire trip she’s kept me going. I know she’s just as fucking worried about Leigh as I am and as we draw closer to our destination we’re both trying not to think of the worst. I keep my hands on the wheel, my mind locked on one thing.

Leigh.

I don't know what I'll find when we get there.

But I do know one thing.

Whoever stands between me and my wife?

They're already fucking dead.

We finally arrive at Blue Lagoon, a shadowy little fishing village clinging to the Black Sea's edge. The air is thick with brine, diesel, and the faint scent of smoked fish. The streets are narrow, winding through clusters of old, weather-beaten buildings that look like they've stood against centuries of storms—and men with secrets.

Near the docks, a pub squats low against the tide, its timbered frame sagging under years of wear. The windows glow dimly, shadows moving behind the thin curtains. A sign out front, half-hidden by rust and peeling paint, advertises rooms available.

"It's shady and sleazy," Sabrina mutters, eyeing the place like it might give her tetanus just from looking at it. "We're probably going to catch something, and it's not fish." She sighs, rubbing a hand over her face. "But I'm so fucking tired right now, I'd sleep on one of those fishing boats."

I cut the engine and climb out of the SUV. "Come on. Let's see if there's room at the inn."

She doesn't follow immediately. When I glance back, she's hesitating, shifting on her feet. For the first time since we left England, I see a flicker of something close to fear in her eyes. It's gone just as fast, masked under her usual sharp wit, but it twists something in my gut.

“I’m not being funny or forward,” she says, her voice quieter than usual. “But... can we share a room? Twin beds, maybe.” She clears her throat, eyes darting around the darkened streets before locking onto mine. “I—uh—don’t do well in strange places.”

That explains a lot. The light in her room was on every night in England. She never said anything, never let on, but I should’ve noticed.

I nod, keeping my voice even. “I was going to suggest it.” A lie, but one that lets her keep her pride. This woman has more courage, more honor, more fucking loyalty in her little finger than most of the so-called men I’ve trusted. If admitting something like this took effort, I’m not about to make her regret it.

“It’s safer this way anyway,” I add. “We don’t know what we’re walking into here, and it’s best if we stick together.”

Her shoulders relax slightly. She nods once. “Good.”

Without another word, we head inside.

The interior, it’s dimly lit, thick with cigarette smoke and the low murmur of Russian and Ukrainian. A few grizzled men sit at scattered tables, nursing vodka like it’s the only thing keeping them alive. Sabrina leans against the counter, doing what she does best—blending in, reading the room.

A woman with sharp cheekbones and tired eyes stands behind the bar. “Rooms?”

“Da,” I answer, keeping my voice low. “We need one.”

She doesn’t ask for details. Just names a price. Sabrina hands over cash before I can, and a key is slid across the counter.

“There is still food being served and breakfast at six,” she tells us in Russian.

I nod and am painfully aware of how bone-weary Sabrina is. We both are. Running on fumes and tension. This isn’t over, but we need rest if we’re going to save Leigh.

We find the room. It’s small, spartan, but surprisingly clean. Even the bed linen is crisp and fresh. The locks are sturdy. It’s good enough.

Sabrina tosses her bag onto one of the beds and turns to me. “You can have the one closest to the door.” She yawns. “I’m going to shower.”

I nod. “I’ll get us food.”

She disappears into the bathroom, and I step out, making my way back to the bar.

I’m standing waiting for our order leaning against the bar when I notice a man coming down the stairs.

Surprise jolts me when I see his face—Nikolas?

No.

That’s not Nikolas.

Now that I know what to look for, the differences are glaring. He’s a bit shorter and stockier. The set of his mouth isn’t right, the shoulders slightly narrower. His face—a near-perfect mirror of my father-in-law’s, but not quite and his missing the scar that runs down the hairline on the side of Nikolas’s face.

My heart slams against my ribs. Carlos.

Fucking Carlos Vasilikis .

The man I shot a few weeks ago at Sabrina's cabin—the cockroach as Sabrina calls him.

He doesn't see me.

He moves to the bar, speaking in low Russian to the bartender, who nods and hands him a folded slip of paper.

"I'll be back in the morning," Carlos says, his voice smooth. "Make sure the usual order of vodka is ready Stefanos."

The bartender grunts in response. Carlos slides over a thick stack of rubles. Obviously paying for whoever he was fucking upstairs.

He turns—and my hands clench into fists.

Every muscle in my body coils tight, a killing rage rising in my blood like wildfire.

He's right fucking there. I could end him.

Rip his fucking throat out, make sure he never breathes another breath, never touches Leigh.

But my body refuses to move.

Because one thought cuts through the fury like a blade to my gut—

Leigh.

She's valuable to them.

They won't kill her.

But if I make the wrong move, if I tip him off... they might do something worse.

I force myself to stay still.

My vision tunnels, my heartbeat pounds in my ears. It takes everything in me not to tear across the room and end this motherfucker here and now.

He finishes his drink, turns, and strides out of the bar into the cold night.

I exhale slowly, dragging myself back under control.

The bartender slides my order across the counter—two plates of food, two bottles of water, and a small bottle of vodka.

I grab it all, nod once, and head back upstairs.

My hands are still shaking when I reach the door.

I knock. "Hey. You decent?"

No answer.

A different kind of fear slams into my gut.

I shove the door open, ready for anything.

But Sabrina is curled up in one of the twin beds, fast asleep.

Her hair is still damp, strands curling around her face. One arm is tucked under her pillow, the other curled up near her chest like a kitten burrowing into warmth.

The fight drains out of me.

For the first time in days, she looks small. Young. Vulnerable, even.

I tuck the blanket around her shoulders.

Then I lock the door. Twice.

For extra precaution, I drag the rickety wooden chair beneath the handle. If anyone tries to get in, they won't do it quietly.

After a quick, scalding shower, I eat, drink a few slow sips of vodka, then stretch out on the bed.

My mind should be racing, but the exhaustion finally catches up.

As my body gives in, one thought drifts through my mind.

Tomorrow, Leigh.

We'll find you.

And when we do—they will fucking pay.

Chapter 14

LEIGH

Two weeks .

Two weeks in this hellhole, breathing in the damp, stale air of the dungeon, listening to the slow drip of water from the cracked stone ceiling. Two weeks since I last felt sunlight on my skin or breathed air that wasn't tainted with mildew and iron. Two weeks since my mind shattered open and my past came pouring back in, raw and unfiltered.

And in two weeks, I've learned one undeniable truth.

If I don't escape I'm never leaving this place. They haven't said it outright, but it's been implied.

You can make this a lot easier on yourself and accept your new life. Timir's voice echoes through my mind.

Timir and Carlos are both monsters, but in different ways. Timir is cold and calculating, his cruelty measured and precise. And Carlos... he's just fucking unhinged. Where Timir operates with purpose, Carlos thrives on chaos, feeding on pain like it fuels him. He's the one who gets off on making me feel powerless. The one who slams me into walls, yanks me from the shower, makes me stand there, dripping wet, naked and fully exposed—on display to his sick roving eyes while he asks the same useless questions over and over.

What new memories do you have for us today, princess?

The way he drags out the word princess grates on my nerves and makes me want to punch his nose into his brain. Yes, I remember my self-defense training now. I've been getting through the drudgery of the day by exercising and training once I get bored with writing or trying to sift through my thoughts and get them in order.

It's been like the worlds untidiest filing cabinet in my head.

So I'm not lying when Carlos tries to humiliate and terrorize me into remembering and I tell him that I remember things from my childhood vividly but not much about what they're asking about.

That usually gets me a slamming against the wall and himself against me and rubbing his cock into me. It's never hard. I think he might have a problem or he's gay. He loves to tell me that while other's find me appealing I'm just an ugly little whore with a pretty fortune he will get his hands on.

I remind myself I've survived worse—much worse! While his threats and rough treatment of me are physically and somewhat mentally damaging. I will not let him break me. I have enough shit going on in my mind. Enough guilt and anguish over what I've done. And I stopped fearing them on my second day here when I was jolted into the past and memory of that awful day came steaming toward me bowling me over.

The marks, bruises and welts on my flesh from scraping against the wall or him digging his fingers into my flesh will heal. Any scars he leaves I will wear as my battle scars and when I get out of here I won't let them get to me. I have much bigger problems to deal with like getting the hell out of here and then somehow disappearing.

I wonder if my grandmother can help me. I wonder if Yaya Alexi is even alive. I haven't seen her in ten years and even if I had I'd probably not have recognized her. Fuck! That must've been awful for her. I frown as I wonder if she even tried to come see me? I can still picture her, smell her, and feel her loving arms around me. Everyone feared Yaya Alexi, but not me. To me she was all the love and warmth my own mother was not.

Of fuck! I swallow and pinch the bridge of my nose—Mamma Galina! No I can't call her that now. I'm not sure what to call her now.

My eye shoot open. Is she still having an affair with my father? I guess it's not really an affair anymore now that they're both single. I shudder thinking about that as it's just so fucking weird—my father with my mother-in-law. It doesn't even sound legal of course I know it is—they're not related. It just sounds incestuous.

I wonder if she knows what happened in their dungeon that day ten years ago? I know she, Judy, and Viktor are okay. My throat suddenly goes dry thinking about the three people that almost died that day because of me. Because my fucked up whore of a mother thought I'd stolen her journals. I didn't even know she had journals.

My eyes land on the clock above the cell door—5:30 AM. That's my cue.

I wake before the guards change shifts, just like I have every morning. I don't even need to look at the clock on the wall—I've memorized the rhythm of this place. The guards rotate every two hours, their heavy boots giving them away as they stomp past my cell. I've given them all nicknames—Stomper, Dragster, Clomper, and Cruncher—based on the sounds they make as they patrol.

They changed guards at 5 so now it's time to shower and get ready before breakfast—before that dipshit Carlos wakes up as his favorite game is interrupting my shower to see me naked. Another shudder rushed down my spine. The man is a

fucking pervert.

I throw off the blanket and make my bed, tucking the sheets with military precision. The cold tiles bite at my feet as I move toward the bathroom, stripping out of my clothes quickly. The dungeon's water is frigid in the mornings, but I've gotten used to it. It does warm up quite quickly but it's not hot like it was when I first got here. I'm sure I have Carlos to thank for that. Another of his little psychological games.

I scrub my skin quickly, my fingers shaking as I check myself in the steamed up mirror. I wish there was someone I could find out if I was pregnant but other than getting a pregnancy test kit, I'll have to wait another month to be sure.

I of the small tally marks I've etched onto the back cover of my memory notebook to count down the days to my period. Today is day fifteen since I ovulated. I should have started my period by now.

But I haven't. That now familiar jolt at the thought I might be pregnant zaps through along with the wave of conflicting emotions causing havoc with my nervous system.

I press my hand to my stomach, heart pounding. If I am pregnant...

God, what would Radomir do?

The sounds of gunshots blast through my head and once again I feel the vibration of the pistol in my head as if it just fired. I squeeze my eyes shut. Don't look at your hands, don't look at your hand. It's not real.

I quickly dry off and put on a clean pair of scrubs—purple ones to day. Not a pretty purple either—Barney the dinosaur purple. Thinking of Barney send my mind spinning back to becoming a mom. It's both exciting and terrifying. In all honestly when I think about it, I have to try and steady myself as I want my baby, I just don't

know what kind of life I'm going to be able to give my child as our life will be one on the run, hiding in the shadows, under many false names.

The door swings open jolting me from my thoughts.

Timir steps inside, looking like he hasn't slept in days. His usual sharpness is dulled, but his eyes—those cruel, intelligent eyes—still pin me with unsettling precision.

Behind him, a housekeeper wheels in a cart piled high with food. A full spread. Not the usual single plate.

My pulse spikes. Something's different today.

"I thought I'd join you for breakfast," Timir says casually, stepping aside so the housekeeper can place the dishes on the table. "Carlos tells me you've remembered more."

"Carlos told me you've been ill that's why you have been here lately," I counter, taking the lid of my plate and notice the carefully laid out healthy breakfast. There's no secrets now. They know I might be pregnant and as such I'm now on a strict healthy pregnancy diet.

"I can't disagree," Timir tells me, pulling the lid off his dish and I notice his breakfast is just as healthy as mine.

"Are you also a health nut?" I watch and he pours us tea.

The housekeeper takes my wet towels and dirty laundry, and our eyes meet.

I freeze.

Recognition slams into me.

She looks exactly like Tracy Volkov.

Same delicate features, same sharp, intelligent eyes. But it's not her. This woman is older than Tracy. There something in her eyes as she notices I recognize her. Like she trying to convey a message, but it's gone as soon she turns toward Timir.

"Can I get you anything else, sir?" She asks Temur.

"No thank you Stasya." Timir shake his head.

Stasya gives me once last quick meaningful look before ducking out the door. What is she doing here? Her parents have worked for the Molchanov's for generations. He eldest and youngest sisters work for Radomir. Her brother is one of his most trusted men.

Radomir did say he had traitors in their ranks and even in his most trusted inner circle.

Timir leans over and pulls a bag from the trolley pushing it toward men/

"What's in the bag?" I ask, my voice carefully even.

He gestures toward it. "See for yourself."

I reach for it, my fingers tightening when I recognize the branding on the boxes.

Pregnancy tests.

Dozens of them.

My stomach flips as I rifle through them, pretending to be more irritated than alarmed. But what really catches my attention? The magnetic security strips attached to the packaging.

My mind spins. I could use these.

I have a flashlight—the pieces could make a strong enough magnet to disrupt my shackles.

But then what? I still don't know the full layout of this place. I'd need a better plan before I tried anything. I also need an easy mark to steal a phone from.

I force myself to stay calm, tossing the bag back onto the table.

"I've been stuck in this dungeon for two weeks," I say instead. "I need fresh air."

Timir doesn't react. "If you take a test after breakfast, we'll go for a walk."

I lift a brow. "And if I don't?"

He smiles—slow and dangerous. "Then Stasya will assist you." He leans in. "Or Carlos."

Ice coats my spine. I know full well Carlos wouldn't hesitate to assist me peeing on a stick. If I do it on my own, I can tamper with it. Put water on it and ensure a false negative. That could work in my favor. Twice now the other housekeeper has asked me about my period. At one point I was thinking I should lie and say I had it. But then what? Am I still valuable? As soon as they have what they want from my mind I'll be disposable.

I clench my jaw. "Fine."

I grab one of the tests and disappear behind the curtain, heart pounding.

But I don't take it.

I unscrew the top, dip it into the toilet bowl instead, letting the water disrupt the results.

When I'm done, I set it on the table between us and sit down, forcing a smirk.
"Nothing like breakfast and a pee stick."

Timir glances at his watch. "We'll know soon enough."

I stab my fork into half an avocado, my mind already racing.

The Clock is Ticking

I have to get out.

I have to get to a phone.

Some of the other bigger memories are of my real father, Nikolas. He was always trying to prepare Sabrina and I for anything. One of those preparations was an emergency number I should call should I find myself in a difficult situation. The number is as clear as day, but I do wonder if after all this time it's still active.

And now, I have one more reason to escape.

Because if I am pregnant, I refuse to let my child be born into this nightmare.

I eat my breakfast and soon his watch bleeps. He picks it up.

“You do know I peed on that, right?”

“Pee isn’t that bad,” Timir shrugs. “It’s negative.” He frowns. “It’s probably too early to tell the lady at the pharmacy did warn me this could happen. “Tomorrow morning as soon as you wake up you must take another test. It when your pregnancy hormone is at its highest.”

While I’m not too thrilled about the test. I’m happy for the boxes and that little magnetic strip.

After breakfast I put the silk pumps Timir brought me. He pulls a magnetic key from his pockets and runs it over the ankle shackle that pops open, and he sucks in a breath when he sees how raw my ankle is. “It’s not supposed to do that.”

“I’ve been wearing it day and night for the past two weeks, what did you expect,” I point out.

“I’ll get you some cream for it,” Timir says. “Come on.” He stands and I notice the slight tremor in his hands as he puts his dish back on the trolley. “Let’s go for a walk around the grounds.”

I slip my feet into the silk desk shoe slippers I was given and follow him. As we walk through it, it reminds me a huge wine cellar except it’s divided in to eight cells each with heady metal doors like mine and peep holes. My eyes secretly scan for position of cameras, the guards and how far it is to the door.

As we step outside I’m hit by the warmth of the early summer morning and the smell of the earth after rain. “Did it rain last night?” I ask.

“Yes, it did.” Timir answers then says. “Welcome to my homeland Leigh. Welcome to Russia.”

“My first time out of the US and I don’t even get a stamp in my passport,” I mutter then turn my eyes widening as I see the big golden palace looming behind us and that’s when I smell it... the ocean. I swivel and notice the ground stretch toward the sea. “What sea is that?”

“The Black Sea,” Timir tells me, giving me an idea whereabouts in Russia we are. “Where you not impressed with my palace?” He frowns at her.

“What?” I ask confused and glance back at the sprawling mansion. “It’s beautiful. I bet it’s even more so inside.”

“I hope one day soon, when you’ve come to accept your new life, I’ll be able to show it to you,” Timir tells me.

My heart slams against my ribs as he once again refers to my new life. Deep down a part of me wants to accept it. To run and hide in that great bit ostentatious gawdy golden palace. Jesus. That’s over compensation for something. I get my thoughts back on track. That’s the easy way out. To hide from Radomir, his mother, and his family.

But that’s just trading one cage for another, and I have a feeling while Timir wants to upgrade my accommodation, Carlos wants to whip away the tiny luxury’s I have in my cell and let me sleep on the cold hard floor like a dog. So I very much doubt I’ll get to see the inside of that gawdy palace anytime soon.

We start walking. “Let me show you around the gardens and we can talk.”

I follow Timir, taking in as much detail about the place as I can.

Suddenly we stop and he starts having a coughing fit and this time I see the blood he wipes from his lips.

I point toward a bench. "Let's go sit over there for a while."

I notice Timir doesn't resist and we sit on the wooden bench looking out over the Black Sea sitting in silence while Timir gathers himself.

"You're dying, aren't you?" I catch his icy blue eyes.

Timir sighs resignedly and nods. "I am."

"It's the poison that was on the gold arrow, isn't it?"

"Yes." Timir nods again. "The doctors managed to find something that has helped slow down the progression of the toxin. But they haven't been able to crack how it was made or the antidote. Apparently it's been bio-engineered and needs specific DNA which we believe was Vivienne's DNA."

"Figures that bitch would do something like that," I seethe.

While the man is a monster to be honest he's never been one to me. I have memories of him being nothing but kind and even sticking up for me against Vivienne. Even now, locked in his dungeon, he's tried to make as comfortable as possible, which doesn't add up or make sense to me.

"That's why she scathingly told me that day she died that I'd never find the antidote for you without her," Timir tells me. "But I knew as soon as I found out your real father was still alive, I knew he'd find the antidote for you."

"What about you?"

"At the time, I didn't realize the arrow was poison until black streaks started spanning out from the point of impact." He wipes his mouth again. "I still have them only now

they've spread across nearly my whole body."

He rolls up his sleeves and I suck in a breath. That's why he wears long sleeves all the time. He looks like someone took a permanent marker and drew lines all over it.

"I'm sorry!" The words escape my lips before I can stop them. "What are you looking for in my mind?"

"The gold key," Timir repeats what he's told for what seems like the millionth time.

"Yes, but what is it?"

"I always presumed it was a key that unlocked some safety deposit or bio box," Timir answers.

"What the heck is a bio box?"

"Whoever engineered Vivienne's designer poison also made her a series of bio box's." He shakes his head. "They are really nasty lock boxes too. If you put the wrong DNA on it... poof, contents destroyed."

"Did you try tracking down the person who made this shit for her?" My eyes search his questioningly.

"We did and that person is dead," Timir answers and my eye widens. "My only hope now is to find the golden key and then the lock box it opens."

"How much time do you have?" My mind starts to tick over with possibilities.

"Six months at the most." Timir shrugs.

“Then why are you doing this?” I ask him. “Why kidnap me? Carlos has made your plans quite clear to me. I know you somehow manipulated Mamma...” my voice trails off. Shit I nearly slipped there. “Galina Molchanov into getting my uncle Mark to deliver me to Radomir so they could force us together to create a super heir. Our marriage and child cement the alliance between two huge global giant corporations with their fingers in pies that would serve the Brava well.”

Timir sighs again. “Can I trust you with a secret, Leigh?” He looks at me. And I’m stunned at the sheer resignation in the depth of his eyes, and he looks exhausted.

“Sure.” I shrug. “Who am I going to tell? My good buddies Brick One and Brick Two in my cell?”

“If this gets back to Carlos, we’re all in danger and I won’t be able to protect you,” Timir’s words shock me.

I want to laugh. Is this what he calls protecting me? But I don’t laugh as he’s dead serious and Mark and Carla taught me to never be rude to my elders no matter who they are. I nod instead.

“Nineteen years ago I had big dreams. I created the Golden Hydra Syndicate to take down my family’s Bratva and show my father, I have always been the better son. My older brother was a lazy dick who rode to success on the backs of other hard working people.” Timir’s eyes darken with anger. “I started hanging around with your mother and Carlos again. Vivienne was distraught because she’d just found out that Nikolas was filing for divorce.”

“I remember that argument, well,” I tell him. “I can remember feeling so excited. We were finally getting rid of the bitch.”

“You really hated her?” His eyes search mine. “But what she put you through, it’s no

surprise.”

My eyes widen. “Oh shit, you’re one of her partners in crime.” My stomach rolls.

“I was.” Timir nods. “A few weeks after Carlos killed your grandfather and uncle. We thought Nikolas was dead and Carlos had plastic surgery to fit into your life. You told Vivienne to get that man out of your house. He wasn’t your father. You knew right away Carlos was not Nikolas.”

“What plans?”

“Vivienne, myself, and Carlos had all been disowned or somehow tossed aside by our families,” Timir explains. “We wanted revenge. We wanted undeniable power and control.”

“That’s not psycho at all.” My voice drips with sarcastic disdain.

“The plan was simple but brilliant. Carlos would become Nikolas. As your father he had full control over you.” He stares out over the ocean lost in his memories. “We were going to wipe out all the Vasiliki’s, Archontis, Mirochin, and Molchanov’s. Leaving only a few. A few that would have no option but to follow me as the Pakhan of what would then be the biggest most power Bratva not to mention it’s power associated with giants like Matriarch and Archontis.”

“Wow!” I look at him astounded. “And I was the tool to getting you all that.”

“You were,” Timir answers honestly. “But then after the plan was set in motion things changed.”

“You grew a conscience?” I look at him skeptically.

“No. I’m Bratva. That’s been bred out of us.” Humor flashes in his eyes.

“Did you just make a joke?” I look at him in amazement.

“I tried.” He shrugged. “I admit to not being very funny.”

“That’s because you’re a...” the truth suddenly dawns on me, and I look at him. The likeness to Oleksi. Setting me up with Radomir to join all the Mirochin and Molchanov Bratva’s. The penny finally drops. Why hadn’t I realized this sooner?

“You’re related to Radomir.”

“I thought you’d realized that the minute you called me Oleksi?” He pulls a face.

The world feels like it started to sway as I stare at him in shock for a few seconds before I’m slammed by gut wrenching fear. My breathing becomes shallow, and the thought hits me like a ton of brick— he knows. He was there the day I killed his brother and brother-in-law!

“You’re Dmitri Mirochin!” His names tumbles from my lips, and I hear Vivienne’s voice: Remember this name, Leigh, Dmitri Mirochin he’s the Ice Man!

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Chapter 15

LEIGH

“Leigh.”

Dmitri’s voice reaches me through the haze of shock, sharp but not unkind. A hand lands on my shoulder, warm and firm, tethering me back to reality.

I jerk away on instinct, my breath coming in shallow pants. My mind reels, trying to grasp onto something—anything—that makes sense, but nothing does.

He’s Dmitri.

Dmitri Mirochin.

The fucking Ice Man.

I want to scream. To launch myself at him. To demand what kind of sick, twisted game this is. But instead, I force my hands to unclench from the wooden bench beneath me. I focus on my breathing, pushing down the panic that rises like bile in my throat.

I can’t afford to lose control now.

“Are you alright?” His voice is calm, but I hear the underlying tension.

I swallow hard, shoving away the terror clawing at my insides. “You said something changed nineteen years ago,” I rasp. “Before we got sidetracked.”

He watches me for a beat, then exhales slowly.

“Yes,” Dmitri murmurs, turning his gaze toward the Black Sea. The sun is higher now, glinting off the water, but it does nothing to warm the ice in my veins. “Nineteen years ago, the first real love of my life died. She was killed in a hit-and-run while out jogging.”

My brows knit together. A strange sensation prickles at the back of my mind, like a puzzle piece sliding into place.

“My aunt—” The words spill out before I can stop them. “Thea. She died the same way.”

Dmitri’s jaw tightens. His fingers flex against his thighs, but he doesn’t immediately respond. When he does, his voice is softer than I expect.

“She was that person.”

My heart lurches violently in my chest. “No.” I shake my head, the word instinctual, an immediate rejection of the truth. “That’s not—she was married to my uncle Mark. I thought—”

“I know.” Dmitri sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. “At first, I wanted to remove Mark in any way I could.”

My stomach churns.

“But I knew I never wanted to win Thea’s heart that way. And Mark... he changed

for her. Gave up everything. Went legit. Became a damn good Wall Street broker.” His lips twist bitterly. “For her, he became the man I never could.”

I stare at him, my pulse roaring in my ears.

“He did get back into stockbroking,” I murmur. “When we moved to Vegas with him, he had a firm there. But after Vivienne died, everything just... fell apart.” My throat tightens. “Maybe that was my fault.”

“Why would you say that?” He looks at me curiously.

“When I think of it now...” I swallow, my throat feeling dry. “I realize just what a burden I must’ve been to everyone. They had to live this lie because one word of the truth could’ve sent me into so weird psycho episode.”

Dmitri’s head snaps toward me. “Don’t do that Leigh,” he says sharply. “None of what happened to you was your fault. Unfortunately you were born to be a heiress of not one but two of the biggest organizations in the world. That a big cross to bear for an adult let alone a little girl. Unfortunately you weren’t blessed with the best parental figures either.” He coughs and wipes his mouth as he continues. “Your grandmother had a stroke after her husband was killed and then she lost Thea and Nikolas. It took her a long time to recover. She entrusted you to her daughters best friend and widowed husband.”

I blink. Why is he being so... so... caring? It’s confusing me and making me feel awkward as I not only have his brother brother-in-law’s blood on my hands but I’m the one responsible for the poison that’s eating him from the inside out. Yet here is still in his own fucked up way trying to protect me.

“You were never a burden, Leigh.” His voice lowers, rough with conviction. “The people around you banded together because they loved you. They bent the world to

fit the reality you knew so that you'd feel safe. Not because you were weak. But because you were fiercely protected."

Something thick lodges in my throat.

"I envy that kind of love," Dmitri admits after a beat.

I glance at him, surprised by the rawness in his tone.

"My father always favored my brother," he continues, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "No matter what I did, it was never enough. He was always the golden child."

I tilt my head slightly. "So you stole an heiress to build your own empire and top his exponentially."

Dmitri's lips quirk, but there's no humor in it.

"At first," he says simply. "But after Thea died... something changed." His eyes darken. "Then one day, I walked in on Vivienne abusing you."

A shiver rips down my spine.

"She'd yanked a chunk of your hair out. Your little cheeks were blood-red from where she'd slapped you." His jaw tightens. "I looked into your eyes, Leigh—your green, green eyes—and I saw it. Defiance. Courage. You refused to cry."

I stiffen, my breath hitching.

"You were three," Dmitri says, almost in awe. "And that's when I fell in love with the bravest little girl I'd ever met."

A wave of nausea rolls through me. “What?” My voice is strangled.

He exhales sharply. “Not that kind of love, Leigh.”

I recoil, disgust twisting through me. “You pervert—”

Dmitri hisses, cutting me off. “Not. That. Kind. Of. Love.” His tone is sharp, irritated. “The kind of love a father has for his child.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

“I thought your father was dead. You had no one to champion for you,” he goes on. “And I knew what Carlos and Vivienne were doing. I was part of that plan.” He clenches his fists. “But I also knew what kind of monsters they were—fuck, I’m that kind of person too. Seeing you like that... I knew that day my plans had changed. I started seeing Vivienne and Carlos in a whole new light. I knew too that the only way to protect you was to go ahead with the fucked up plan only I’d be the one running it.”

I stare at him, my skin prickling with unease. “Still you’d end up with all the power.”

“No. I’d end up ensuring no one stole your power.” He exhales sharply. “To this day I’ll always regret the way I handled Vivienne the day I walked in on her abusing you. She was enjoying your pain. Feeding off it.” His eyes flick to mine, stormy and unreadable. “I snapped. I told her I’d kill her if she ever laid a hand on you again.”

A tremor runs through me.

“A few hours later, your grandmother announced that your father’s body had been found. Burnt beyond recognition.” His jaw flexes. “That the man posing as him—bearing an uncanny resemblance—was an imposter.”

My stomach lurches. “That’s why my mother ran.”

“That,” Dmitri nods, “and because Carlos tried to kidnap you. He planned to hold you for ransom. Demand Matriarch from your grandmother.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Galina helped us leave,” I whisper, memories surfacing. “She took us to Uncle Mark. We weren’t allowed to take anything. I couldn’t even say goodbye to Yaya Alexi.”

“It had to be done,” Dmitri says simply. “Galina and Mark didn’t want you to your grandmother after she’d had a stroke.”

I don’t know whether to believe him.

Then he drops the next bomb.

“Carlos eventually told me that Vivienne was the one who killed Thea—that was eleven years ago.”

Everything stills.

A sharp, ringing silence fills my head.

“She was jealous,” Dmitri continues, his voice almost... gentle. “She knew I cared for Thea. And she hated that.”

A harsh, broken laugh escapes me. “I can’t believe Vivienne would do that.”

“Believe it.” His expression is unreadable. “I wanted to kill her with my bear hands. But if I’d approached Vivienne, she would have known I’d been keeping tabs on her and you the entire time. Making sure no harm came to you.”

A deep chill seeps into my bones.

“Eleven years ago after Dmitri told me what Vivienne had done to Thea, I was ready to disband the Golden Hydra. It was time to make a change,” Dmitri says. “I was going to turn Dmitri over to the agency the real Nikolas worked for. I knew they were looking for him.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “But Carlos had other plans.” His face hardens. “He was tired of waiting. He wanted to take down my father. He knew Galina was the executor of Dant’s will and was convinced my father knew where you and Vivienne were hiding.”

I swallow.

“He planned to force the information from him—by holding Dragunov Village hostage.” Dmitri shakes his head. “I warned my father. He didn’t listen. He refused to give me men. I had no choice but to gather what few villagers I could, plus some loyal Mirochins and ensure Carlos wasn’t successful. I had to slaughter my own men and for the first time in my life, I could no longer stomach the life I was born into.”

My fingers tighten against my knees.

“What a fuckup that was,” Dmitri mutters. “So many villagers died. But I killed every last Golden Hydra that attacked them.” His voice drops. “My father was furious.”

“Why?”

“He was furious that I took over the mission.” Dmitri’s voice is grim. “Because one of the men that were killed was the village elders’ son-in-law, I had to atone. I was to marry his daughter grieving daughter Zoya and look after he family while recruited men to protect and work in the village.”

I listen as he continues, and I sense he needs to talk it out.

“Carlos showed up a week later,” he continues, his tone clipped. “Pissed that I wasn’t marrying Wanda Manning instead as we needed her money and her company. She was willing to help us as long as we got rid of her father for her.”

I shake my head, disgust curling in my gut. “You say that like it’s nothing.”

Dmitri shrugs. “I grew up in a world where it happens all the time.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.”

“No, it doesn’t.” His voice is quiet. “But in our world, it’s kill or be killed.”

My heart pounds.

Dmitri exhales slowly, his gaze drifting over the Black Sea. The wind shifts, carrying the briny scent of the ocean, but it does nothing to clear the suffocating weight pressing down on my chest.

“I know,” he murmurs, voice quieter now. “I tried so hard to keep you apart from it.”

I let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh. “Yeah, right,” I bite out. “Then why the fuck am I here? Married to your nephew?”

Dmitri turns to me, eyes dark with something unreadable. “Leigh—”

“No,” I snap. “I don’t want to hear whatever bullshit excuses. I was set up and I’ve never been in control of my own life. All I wanted to do was write music not be some fucking g...” My eyes open wide. My head snaps around to look at him. “What did Vivienne tell you about the golden key?”

“She always bragged about how her golden key opening all her secrets.” He frowns.

“I’m betting there are a lot of people wanting that key now.”

“I still don’t know what it is.” It’s not a lie. I don’t but I know at some point I must have because there is this nagging at the back of my mind each time it’s mentioned. Just the antidote.

His fingers flex against his thighs, a flicker of something—regret, maybe—passing over his face. “I came to get you ten years ago when I realized what Vivienne was up to.”

I freeze.

“You didn’t have your father. Mark was off on some weird-ass Robin Hood crusade. My sister had turned into a fucking politician—balancing my father, my brother, her husband, and raising three boys.” He shakes his head. “She put your care in the hands of Carla Craft and Mark.”

He turns toward me, expression darkening. “The only person I had any real faith in was Sol Craft.”

The name slams through me like a sledgehammer to the chest.

Uncle Sol.

Tears burn the back of my throat.

“He—” I choke on the words. “He died.” My voice wobbles.

Dmitri stiffens beside me, his posture going rigid. “Oh shit.” His head snaps toward me. “Did you—did you forget that?”

A horrible, twisting guilt curdles in my stomach.

I nod weakly. “He was one of the people I just... didn’t remember.” My hands curl into fists in my lap. “I feel awful.”

Dmitri watches me for a long, heavy moment, then sighs, rubbing a hand down his face. “Carlos did that.”

My stomach clenches. “Did what?”

His jaw tics. “He killed Zoya. And then he doctored the video to make it look like I did it.”

A cold shiver slithers down my spine.

“I found out later he’d been drugging me.” Dmitri’s voice is low, hoarse. “For months. I wasn’t even sure where I was or what the fuck I was doing half the time while I was at Dragunov.”

Bile rises in my throat.

“Then my father disowned me,” he continues, his voice bitter. “And the only place left for me to turn?” He lets out a humorless chuckle. “Wanda.”

I stiffen.

“Just like Carlos wanted.”

“Then he tried to kill my father.” Dmitri exhales, leaning back against the bench. “Ten years ago, Boris had a car accident in Los Angeles. I flew out to see him, and that’s when I realized what Vivienne was up to.”

I swallow hard, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“She’d aligned herself with my older brother and Galina’s husband.” His eyes flick to mine, sharp and assessing. “She’d convinced them that marrying you to Radomir was a strategic move.”

A cold sensation prickles through my veins.

“Vladimir had already put the idea in my sister’s head,” Dmitri says. “And I couldn’t fucking believe she was considering it.”

I clench my jaw. “But she did.”

“She, Mark, and your grandmother called it their backup plan.” His voice is grim. “The one that would ensure your protection if Nikolas ever showed up.”

I stare at him, heart pounding.

“Remember,” he continues, “they thought Carlos was your father. That he’d gone rogue and joined the Golden Hydra.”

My blood runs cold.

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Dmitri tilts his head slightly. “And now you’re wondering,” he murmurs, “why the fuck I stayed with Carlos and the Golden Hydra, aren’t you?”

I nod stiffly, my throat too tight to speak.

Dmitri exhales, his expression unreadable.

“I had no choice,” he says finally. “By then, I’d been exiled. My father had disowned me. My brother wanted me dead. And Carlos had already set Wanda’s company up to help ship product for crime families. If I took him out he’d release all the evidence he had against Wanda and my family to the FBI.” His lips press into a thin line. “Then two years ago I approached Oleksi. I needed help and I didn’t know where else to turn to. Wanda and I have been married ten years and... I love her.”

My breath hitches.

“I think you mean that!”

“I do.” Dmitri sighs. “Dmitri realized what I was doing so he took something I loved away to keep as leverage. Leverage that I’d honor our plan of getting you married to Radomir, and hopefully pregnant on or around your twenty-second birthday when you could get your inheritance.”

“Then you led me into a fucking trap.” Anger boils inside me.

“No. I went to my sister and your father,” Dmitri admits. “I told them that Carlos was coming for them—for you. I couldn’t do anything about it because he had Wanda.”

“So it was Galina and my father that led me into the trap with the compliments of my Uncle Mark.”

It is not a nice feeling having other people dictate my life, which if Radomir finds out what I did. I fear it is not going to last much longer. So what little time I may have left? I’m fucked if I’m letting anyone dictate the terms to me.

My eyes scan the grounds, and I frown when I see movement to the side of near a mermaid fountain. I watch for a few seconds more, but nothing moves. It must’ve been the wind. I turn back to Dmitri. I now have conflicting emotions for the guy.

He's bad as all hell but I feel he's being genuine when he says all he wanted to do was protect me, although I don't know how protecting it is that I'm locking in a dungeon unless he's expecting a nuclear fallout.

Chapter 16

RADOMIR

“Shit.” Sabrina hisses. “I told you these sneakers were too big. I just tripped over them, and I was nearly seen.”

“You tripped over the shoe lace you’re refusing to tie properly,” I point out softly, gripping my gun so tightly my fingers ache. My heart slams in my chest, a violent, pounding rhythm that makes it hard to think.

Never have I been so happy to see anyone as I was Leigh. She’s right there.

Sitting in the gardens, the sunlight casting a glow over her auburn hair, her head tilted slightly as she listens to the man beside her.

Dmitri fucking Mirochin.

My uncle my cousins and I once thought was the coolest man alive until he turned out to a psycho fuck nut.

And now he’s casually sitting on a bench with my wife They look like they’re on a fucking morning picnic.

My blood surges, rage making my vision tunnel. I’m moving before I realize it, my body operating on pure, unfiltered fury.

Sabrina yanks me back, her nails digging into my wrist. “Are you goddamn crazy?” she hisses, her voice low but sharp as a blade. “There are guards everywhere.”

“They are right there,” I growl, trying to pull free, but she holds tight and she’s freakishly strong for a tiny person. “I could just shoot the bastard right now and we could grab Leigh and get the hell out of here.”

Sabrina stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Oh, sure, because it’s that simple.” She gestures around us, her voice a furious whisper. “Look around, Radomir. You’ll be taken out before you get two steps.”

I grind my teeth, my breath coming hard and fast. She’s right.

I hate that she’s right.

I force myself to see. To take in what my blind rage had covered up. There are guards positioned strategically—watchful, alert. If I fire, even once, we won’t make it five feet before bullets rip through us.

Sabrina’s nails press harder into my wrist. “Calm down Speedy,” she murmurs. “We need a plan.”

I exhale slowly, reigning in the beast clawing inside me. “Fine. Do you have a plan? Because I forgot mine back at the inn as my mind was all consumed with finding Leigh. So I’m open to any suggestions.”

A slow grin curves her lips. “I think I might just an idea.”

Before I can stop her, Sabrina is already moving, slipping through the trees like a wraith. I curse under my breath, gripping my gun tighter.

Then, suddenly, chaos.

A loud, jarring crash echoes through the garden as Sabrina somehow manages to tip over the ugly waterfall fountain doing the garden a great service. Leigh gets startled, her head whipping toward the sound. Dmitri tenses beside her, already rising to his feet. I wait poised catching a glimpse of Sabrina nestled in the tree line opposite me.

Leigh and Dmitri wonder over to the statue. Just a few more inches...

Now.

I lunge from the shadows, my body a coiled weapon.

Dmitri barely turns before my fist slams into his jaw. A sharp, satisfying crack vibrates through my knuckles. His head snaps back, and he staggers. I don't give him time to recover. I hit him again—harder. He crumples, out cold.

Leigh gasps, stumbling back, her eyes wide, disbelieving.

“Radomir?” Her voice is barely a whisper, her hands trembling.

Then, suddenly, she's crying—sobbing.

I barely register the movement before Sabrina is there, pulling Leigh into her arms. “Oh, Leigh,” she murmurs, stroking her hair. “I know. I know. You must be beside yourself. But we have to go.”

Leigh clings to her, her body shaking.

I step toward her, my hands itching to touch, to pull her into me. But there's no time.

“We need to move, now,” I grind out, scanning the area.

We can’t risk staying here. The crash might have drawn attention, and once the guards realize Dmitri is missing, we’ll have a fucking army on our asses.

But then—

“No.”

Leigh pulls away from Sabrina, wiping at her eyes. “We can’t leave him.”

My entire body locks up. “What?”

Leigh points at Dmitri’s unconscious form. “Carlos will kill him.”

“Good.” I spit the word, fury crackling in my veins. “Maybe we’ll be lucky and they’ll kill each other.”

“Or maybe,” Sabrina muses, “if we take him, Carlos will come looking for him.” She lifts a brow. “And you can finally kill that maniac.” She shrugs. “You know—two birds—one stone.”

A dark thrill courses through me at the thought.

But I don’t give a shit about Dmitri. I don’t.

Then I see it.

The bruises on Leigh’s wrists.

I freeze.

Rage blinds me.

The dark, mottled fingerprints stand out starkly against her pale skin. Handprints. Someone had held her down. Someone had fucking hurt her. Something inside me snaps.

“Who did that to you?” I say through gritted teeth trying hard to control my rage as I take her wrist in my hand..

“It wasn’t Dmitri,” Leigh assures me.

“I hope you’re not covering for him,” I warn her. “Because, trust me, he not worth the time of day.”

I don’t realize I’ve stepped forward until Leigh places a shaking hand on my chest.

“Radomir.” Her voice is quiet, but firm. “I’m not leaving without him.”

Our eyes lock.

And I know she means it by the stubborn set of her jaw and defiance in those insanely green eyes.

I grit my teeth so hard my jaw aches. Every instinct in me wants to leave him. To let Carlos finish what he started.

“Fuck.” I reached down and heft him over my shoulder. I’m alarmed to feel just how frail he is.

We head to the SUV in silence, and I can feel something is wrong. Something in Leigh has changed and my gut wrenches as black thoughts tumble through my mind

wondering what else the fucking dick Carlos did her to.

I find some rope in the back of the vehicle and tie Dmitri's hands behind his back.

"Is that necessary?" Leigh asks. "He's really sick and ..."

"Jesus!" I give a low whistle as Dmitri's sleeves hike up and there is a spider web of black line creeping up his arms. "What the hell is that?"

"Vivienne's designer poison," Leigh replies, and I see her eyes heavy with guilt. What the fuck is going on here?

"That's..." Sabrina sputters. "That's what you arm looked like from the bolt, Leigh."

Leigh's head snaps toward Sabrina. "You saw it?"

"Not the bolt in your arm but the veins." She nods. "They spread nearly all over your body."

"How come you're cured and he's not?" My brow creases, not that I give a fuck. I hope there is some pain to go with it.

"Different types of designer poison," Leigh mumbles. "The sliver is for the man with your father's face and the gold for the Ice Man."

I start to become alarmed as I see Leigh zoning out.

"Leigh!" Sabrina hisses. "There's plenty of time to moon later. We have to move now and maybe get you some new clothes. Barney's spring wear does not suit you."

Leigh snorts and I breathe a sigh of relief to see the dark clouds in her eyes lift a bit.

“Not my choice of wardrobe I promise you. For the past fourteen days I feel like I’ve been wearing E.R. hand me downs.”

We all pile in, and I take off hitting the dirt back road, if you can call it that, it’s more like tracks made from a horse cart. Luckily we’re not in the Beetle as we’d never have made all this rocky gravel terrain.

Eventually we hit a main road and the old SUV rattles as we speed down it. The Russian landscape blurs past in streaks of green and brown.

Leigh is curled up in the seat beside me, staring out the window, silent.

Sabrina watches her, concern etching her features.

Dmitri groans, stirring.

Then—

“What the fuck?” His voice is raw, furious. He jerks upright, only to realize his hands are tied in super tight knot. “Radomir?” He glances at Sabrina. “Miss Craft I presume?”

“You presume correct.” Sabrina nods, watching him with suspicious eyes.

“Where are we?” Dimitri demands. “Leigh? Are you okay?”

“She is now!” Sabrina assure him. “And I sure hope for your sake it wasn’t you that bruised my friend.”

“I never touched Leigh,” Dimitri said, defensively. “But seriously. What are you two doing? Are you out of your fucking minds? When Carlos realizes we are gone...” I

glance in the mirror and see fear flash in his eyes. “Jesus, Radomir turn around, you don’t know what you’ve done.”

“I could ask you the same thing, Uncle, because clearly you were out of your fucking mind when you snatched my wife. ” I shake my head. “Did you think you were going to get away with it?”

Dmitri glares at me, eyes blazing and his nostrils flare. “You’re going to ruin everything.” His anger radiates through the car until his body convulses with violent coughing.

Leigh shifts, her expression tight with worry. “Do we have any water?” She looks at Sabrina. “Do you have a tissue?”

Sabrina, who is sitting beside Dmitri, nods and pulls out some water and tissues.

“Here!” Sabrina holds the bottle to his mouth and quickly dabs the dribble of blood on the side of him mouth.

“Do you have TB?” I ask, a little alarmed and I can’t help my eyes darting to Leigh stomach.

“No!” Dmitri hisses. “Thank you, Miss Craft for the assistance.”

“Sure.” Sabrina nods. “We’ll just leave this here for you.” She caps the bottle puts the tissue near it and then pulls out her hand sanitizer.

“I’m not contagious,” Dmitri assures her. “I was shot with a poison arrow and it’s affecting all my organs.”

“It’s not you,” Sabrina tells him. “I don’t like touching blood.”

“She really doesn’t,” Leigh backs up Sabrina’s statement. “If we were near a shower now, Sabrina would’ve gone and taken one.”

Dmitri nods and then turns his attention back to Radomir. “I know you have no reason to trust me and every right to be fucked off with me, but you need to go back.”

“Not a chance,” I tell him.

“Look, this is now what it seems. I hadn’t seen Carlos in nine years when he showed up two years ago,” Dmitri tells them. “He needed a job, and my wife employed him to coordinate shipments.”

“I don’t care,” I hiss.

“Look, Carlos has Wanda, and he’ll kill her,” Dmitri pleads.

“So you exchanged my wife for yours?” I roar.

“Radomir, watch out!” Leigh’s hands grab the dash board bracing for a sudden stop as we hit a road block of Black SUVs.

“What the fuck!” I hiss and another spurt of anger bursts through me—Oleksi and his new crew.

“I see Oleksi’s new crew of traitors has grown since we last saw him scurrying from the house like the fucking rat he is!” Sabrina’s voice vibrates with anger.

I glance in the mirror. “I presume they’re here for you?”

Knock. Knock. Oleksi raps on the window. “You need to get out of the car, Rad.”

I look at him. That at the group of SUVs blocking the road ahead. My hands tighten around the wheel. As I see Syd's head pop up from the back of the vehicle where I presume she's just rolled out a carpet of spikes.

Sabrina lets out a long sigh. "Well this is just fucking fantastic."

Oleksi steps forward, his gaze locked on Dmitri.

"Rad, please don't make us use force. You need to hand Dmitri and Leigh over," he orders.

Leigh stiffens beside me. "No." She bellows and looks at me, placing an arm on my sleeve. "Please, I can't go back there and neither can Dmitri."

The car goes silent.

Everyone turns to look at her.

Oleksi's brows lift. "Leigh..." He warns. "This is bigger than just you and Dmitri."

"What is?" Sabrina retorts. "You're ego?"

Oleksi barely glances at Sabrina and can see him stiffening getting ready to act with force.

"This is your last chance to do this the peaceful way," Oleksi tells us.

"I said no." Leigh's voice is ice. I look at her frowning for a second. It's like someone flipped a switch and let the princess out. "You're not taking him." Her eyes narrow as she stares him down. "

“Okay, time’s up.” Oleksi growls. “Can opener.” He orders and Clyde flicks out an expanding baton heading for the car.

“Leigh, are you sure we can’t just throw him out the door?” I ask her.

“No!” Leigh shakes her head. “Please, Radomir. You don’t understand.”

Sabrina frowns. “Leigh, this isn’t... like, a captor syndrome thing, right?”

Leigh gives Sabrina an impatient look. “No!” She scrunches up her face. “I...”

Clyde comes up to the back window. “Cover your eyes.” He growls.

“Wait!” Sabrina yells at him. “We’re getting out.” She glances at us. “Look lets just humor them.” She looks toward their cars. “We’re trapped.”

Chapter 17

RADOMIR

Leigh nods and we climb out. Oleksi help Dmitri out and unties him.

”How are you feeling?” Oleksi asks Dmitri. “Syd, can you take Dmitri and wait for me?”

“Sure,” Syd comes over and looks at Leigh. “And Miss Vasilikis?”

“It’s Mrs. Molchanov ,” I correct her icily. “And she stays with me.”

“Go with Dmitri,” Oleksi snaps.

“Wait,” Dmitri says. “I dropped my pills in that car.”

“I’ll get them,” Syd offers.

“No. I don’t like people touching them.”

Dmitri goes to the back of the car. I keep an eyes on him as I don’t trust the fucker and I don’t know what game he’s playing or what’s up with my cousin.

“I should shoot you right now,” I tell Oleksi. “You fucking traitor. What are you working for that bastard now.”

Oleksi lets out a breath. “Look I can’t speak now. But meet me at the Blue Lagoon pub tonight.” He turns and calls Syd again. “Syd, I need you to go with these three to Blue Lagoon. They can stay at the same Inn they stayed in last night.”

“Keeping tabs on us still?” Sabrina hisses.

“I’m scared you might fall through a crack and disappear.” He snorts then turns back to Radomir. “I’ll find you that drink and I will tell you everything later. We need to go do clean up after the mess you caused and hope that Wanda is still alive.”

An hour later we’re back at the sleazy inn Sabrina and I stayed at the night before. Leigh and I have a double bed in our room and Sabrina is bunking with Syd. I go down to order us all some food which I offered to deliver to Syd and Sabrina as they didn’t feel comfortable in the pub.

I’m waiting at the bar when the woman who checked us walks up to the bar tender, and she pissed off.

“That prince from the palace did not come and pay for her lunch today,” She is agitated. “I had to take it up there. I told him and you I didn’t want to get involved. Now I must do the dinner too. I am not a housekeeper to feed his whore.”

My brow furrows and something nags at me. The prince for the palace? I’m sure she must be speaking about Carlos. I can’t ask because I don’t want to draw attention to the fact that I was eaves dropping. So I pretend to read the menu while I wait for my food. It arrives just before the food she ordered did. I drop my wallet and bend to pick up letting the woman go up the stairs first.

There are only eight bedrooms and it’s a straight hallway. I walk up the stairs and make my way to Sabrina and Syd’s door. I knock as I covertly watch what room the woman goes into. She takes the key and doesn’t bother knocking just goes in. I will

be back to get the tray and fix you up. Syd opens the door just in time.

“Thank fuck, I’m starving.” Syd snatches the food and frowns at me instantly alert.

“What’s wrong?”

“Did Carlos really kidnap Dmitri’s wife?”

“Yes. Wanda Manning,” Syd explains. “She gave Carlos a job coordinating shipmates for her company as she felt sorry for him, and he did introduce Wanda and Dmitri.”

“So it’s true? Dmitri has gone legit?”

“I never fully trust ex-mob.” She pulls a face. “No offence.”

“I understand.” I rub my chin, holding the brown paper bag with mine and Leighs food and some erotic desert in one hand. “Any idea where he’s hiding her.”

“We’ve looked everywhere,” Syd tells him. “We weren’t on a wild goose chase when we went all the UK and Ireland. We were trying to find Wanda Manning as well as Leigh.”

“I thought you all knew Carlos was here in Russia for weeks?”

“He’d been in and out of Russia, so we honestly didn’t know,” Syd answers honestly.

“But Dmitri left that warning in blood...” I mutter. “Only he could’ve known about my safe and helipad.”

“Eleven years ago, Dmitri was still working with Carlos. Carlos knew all of Dmitri’s secrets which meant learning Dmitri’s family secrets too.” Syd tells him.

“You believe that?” I ask and Syd nods. “After what happened to your father, other uncle, and Vivienne.” She shuddered. “Dmitri knew he need to get rid of Carlos for good. He’d fallen for Wanda and Carlos didn’t like that. Before he could kill another one of Dmitri’s woman he loved or was about to marry Dmitrie hand him over to the feds.”

“Do you want to help me with something quickly?”

“Okay.” She frowns.

I start walking down the passage to the room the woman from the front desk had just exited. “Last night we stayed there, and I saw Carlos coming down the stairs from one of the rooms. While I was waiting for our food the lady from the front desk was going on about the prince from the palace not paying his bill for today or coming by to see to his whore.”

“Okay?” She says again. “Should I have my weapon.” She pats he leg and pulls out that one. “I’ll use this one.” She puts the small pistol in the waist band of her pants. “What are you thinking?”

“Well, firstly Carlos is gay,” I tell her. “And I doubt he’d been seen dead fucking anyone in this place.”

Her eyes widened and she looks at the door. “You think...”

“We could always pretend we’re in the wrong room if it’s not,” I shrug.

“Then let’s get in there,” Sabrina makes us jump and within a few minutes she jimmied open the lock.

We barge into the room and there’s Wanda. She looks out of it like she’s been

drugged. The next half an hour goes by in a blur of sirens ambulances and us getting upgraded to Dmitri's palace. After another grueling forty minutes of questions from Oleksi, Nikolas, and my mother I finally get to join my wife.

I walk into the room and halt abruptly. Leigh stands in front of a full-length mirror, meticulously brushing her hair. The silky negligee she wears accentuates every perfect curve, the delicate fabric barely concealing the fullness of her breasts, the dip of her waist, the gentle flare of her hips.

My cock hardens instantly.

Silently, I approach her from behind, drinking in the sight of her reflection. Mine.

"You look stunning," I confess, my voice husky with desire.

Leigh smiles softly, dragging the brush through her thick auburn waves. "I'm glad you like it," she murmurs. "We never really had the chance to celebrate our wedding night properly."

A flicker of sadness crosses her eyes, a shadow of the harrowing fortnight she spent in that dungeon.

Maintaining eye contact through the mirror, I wrap my arms around her waist, my lips grazing the delicate curve of her neck. I breathe her in—warmth, sweetness, something uniquely Leigh. She shivers as I trail slow, open-mouthed kisses along her shoulder.

My hands move with purpose. One slips under the sheer fabric, palming the heavy swell of her breast, my thumb circling over her nipple. The other slides lower, fingers skimming over her stomach before dipping between her thighs.

My name escapes her lips on a breathy gasp.

I press my erection against the curve of her ass as my fingers explore, finding her warm, slick, and ready. "So wet for me already," I groan, teasing the sensitive bundle of nerves with slow, deliberate circles.

Her lashes flutter, her body instinctively arching against me. "Radomir..."

That voice. Like sin, like surrender.

In the mirror, our eyes remain locked, our reflection a sinful tableau of dark desire.

She reaches for the hem of her negligee, lifting it to grant me full view of my fingers working between her thighs. Fuck. It's so erotic I feel my control slip.

Her hips begin a slow, hypnotic grind, rolling against my fingers. Her tongue flicks out to wet her lips before she catches the bottom one between her teeth, her pleasure building.

"Take it off," I murmur, voice rough with need.

Leigh purrs in response, slipping the straps from her shoulders. The fabric pools at her feet, leaving her bare and exposed before the mirror.

Perfection.

I move my fingers down. "Open your legs for me."

She does as I ask, her breath coming in short, needy gasps as she watches me touch her.

"Show me how you pleasure yourself, Leigh." My voice is dark, commanding. "Open that pretty pussy and make yourself come for me. I want to watch."

A whimper escapes her lips as she hesitates, eyes flicking between my reflection and the sight of my fingers still circling her clit.

Then—she obeys.

With one hand, she parts her slick folds, exposing herself to me. The other begins a slow, teasing dance over her swollen bud, her fingers gliding, pressing, flicking.

"Ahhh," she exhales, her body trembling.

She's close. So fucking close.

But before she can tip over the edge, I grab her wrist and bring her fingers to my mouth, licking them clean.

"You taste so sweet," I growl. "I want to eat you."

I strip off my shirt, my body pressing against hers as she rubs her back against my solid chest. Then I drop to my knees, pulling her down with me until she's straddling my face.

"Feed me your pussy, Leigh."

Her pupils dilate. Lust, surrender. She gives herself to me completely, sinking down onto my waiting mouth.

I devour her.

My tongue plunges into her, lapping, stroking, twisting. I hold her thighs wide apart, savoring her, drowning in her. She writhes above me, her fingers tangling in my hair, guiding me where she needs me most.

I drag my tongue up to her swollen clit, swirling, sucking, flicking. Leigh's hips jerk, grinding against my mouth.

"Oh God, yes," she moans, voice wrecked. "Don't stop—I'm going to—"

Her body tightens, a strangled cry tearing from her lips as she shatters. I lap up every drop of her pleasure, not letting up until she's shaking above me, her thighs quivering against my face.

Before she can fully come down, I stand, stripping off my pants in one swift movement.

"Hold onto the side of the mirror," I command, my voice like gravel. "Bend over. Legs apart."

She does exactly as I tell her, exposing herself to me. My control snaps.

I grip her hips and thrust inside her in one slow, punishing stroke. A guttural groan rips from my throat as I sink into the tight, wet heat of her.

"Radomir," she gasps, her fingers pressing into the mirror.

"Good girl," I rasp, gripping her hips as I pull back before slamming into her again.

The pace builds, each thrust harder, deeper. I watch our reflection, watch her push back against me, desperate for more.

"You're so deep," Leigh breathes, her head dropping forward. "Oh, that's so fucking good. Harder... harder... yes—"

I drive into her, our bodies moving in perfect sync, until I feel her walls begin to tighten around me.

"Come for me, Leigh," I growl, reaching around to palm her breast.

Her cry echoes through the room as her pussy clenches around my cock, milking me for everything I have. I follow a heartbeat later, spilling inside her as I hold her close, my lips pressing against her damp skin.

Breathless. Spent. Completely fucking wrecked.

I rest my forehead against her shoulder, one hand still on her breast, the other splayed over her stomach.

Leigh lets out a soft, satisfied sigh.

I lift her into my arms and carry her to the bed, where we curl into each other, our bodies still humming with the aftershocks of pleasure. My lips find hers in a deep, lingering kiss—slow, reverent, filled with everything I can't put into words.

When we finally break apart, she nestles against me, her breath warm on my skin, and I hold her close, unwilling to let go.

As sleep starts to pull me under, a thought settles deep in my bones—now that I have Leigh back, I finally feel whole again.

Chapter 18

LEIGH

I wake with a jolt, my body drenched in sweat, my breathing uneven. The room is dimly lit by the first pale hints of dawn creeping in through the curtains. For a moment, I can't remember where I am. The weight of a muscular arm draped across my waist pulls me back to reality.

Radomir.

I'm wrapped in his warmth, his strong, possessive hold anchoring me to him even in his sleep. His steady breath brushes against the back of my neck, his body molded to mine, skin to skin. The scent of him—dark spice and musk—makes my stomach twist painfully.

Because I don't deserve this.

I don't deserve him.

Guilt floods my veins, thick and suffocating. I killed his father. I killed his uncle. And the moment he finds out, he'll have no choice but to do what Bratva law demands. No forgiveness. No exceptions.

I have to leave.

Now.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing my heart to slow its frantic pounding as I carefully move, inching toward the edge of the bed. But just as I think I'm free, Radomir tightens his grip, pulling me back against his chest with a sleepy groan.

“Where do you think you're going, printsessa?”

His voice is husky, thick with sleep, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

Shit.

Before I can answer, before I can think of an excuse, Radomir flips me onto my back, pinning me beneath him. His weight, his heat, his sheer presence swallows me whole. Blue eyes, still heavy-lidded from sleep, blaze down at me, filled with hunger, with something deeper.

Possessiveness .

He slides a hand down my body, tracing my hip before gripping my thigh, spreading me open beneath him, his lips ghosting over mine.

I should push him away. I should fight harder to get up. But when he kisses me—slow and deep, his tongue teasing mine, his body grinding against me—I'm lost.

Radomir doesn't just kiss. He claims.

And I let him. Because I want to feel him all over and inside me one last time.

For my grand goodbye, I take control. I roll him onto his back, my hands splaying over the hard ridges of his abs as I press soft, teasing kisses down his chest. Radomir watches me, his gaze dark, heated, and filled with something primal.

I slide lower, my mouth trailing over the deep cut of muscle leading to his cock. He stiffens, his fingers threading through my hair as I wrap my lips around him, taking him deep, savoring the taste of him.

A guttural groan rumbles from his chest. His grip tightens, but he doesn't force me—he lets me take what I want.

I work him slowly, deliberately, watching the way his muscles tense, how his breath stutters. I love this—watching him unravel because of me, feeling his control slip, his body trembling beneath my touch.

Just as I feel him start to lose himself, he curses, dragging me off him. His chest rises and falls in rapid bursts, his jaw clenched tight. “Not like this,” he growls, pulling me up toward him. “I want you riding me when I come.”

I gasp as he pulls me onto his lap, positioning me above him. His hands grip my hips, guiding me down onto his cock, filling me inch by inch until I can barely breathe.

“Fuck,” I moan, my nails digging into his shoulders.

Radomir groans, his hands gripping me tighter as I start to move, rocking against him. His fingers slip between us, finding my clit, stroking it in time with our movements. The pleasure is overwhelming, and when I come apart, crying out his name, he follows with a deep, shuddering growl, his arms wrapping around me as he thrusts deep one final time.

His mouth finds mine, kissing me fiercely, as if he knows. As if he senses that after this, everything will change.

When he finally drifts off, his body sated and warm beside me, I slip out of bed.

I move quickly, my heart hammering as I wash up in the bathroom, ignoring the ache in my chest. I pack a bag—just a few clothes, essentials. I leave my wedding ring and engagement ring that I only got back last night, on the nightstand.

Then, I sit on the edge of the bed and write.

A letter to Radomir.

I pour everything into it—the truth about what happened that day. That I was the one who pulled the trigger. That I never meant to, but it doesn't change what happened. That I love him, but I know what his code demands.

That's why I have to leave.

I place the letter on my pillow beside him, staring at him for one last moment. Then I force myself to walk away.

Dmitri's palace may be over the top but he has a garage of the most awesome cars of which he told me I could help myself anytime. I chose one that's not flashy and will just blend in to my surrounding. I drive for hours, following the GPS coordinates on my new phone that I know I will have to ditch when I leave the car in a carpark near the train station then take a bust to the airport. That's what my Uncle Mark taught me—I'm not sure I'll ever gets used to calling him Uncle Mark even though it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

Every few minutes I find myself checking the mirror expecting him to come after me. But the road stays empty.

I pull into a car park a few blocks from the bus station and along the way I call the number my father drilled into me as a child. A security protocol if I was ever in danger.

The line connects. A cold, professional voice answers.

“Gold Crown Security.”

Relief slams into me so hard I nearly cry.

Two hours later, I’m in Moscow, checking into a five-star hotel under an assumed name my security detail provides, and they assure me I’m safe. No one, not even my father will find me. I’m safe.

For now.

I stare at the small bag from the pharmacy—the pregnancy tests I bought at the airport. My hands shake as I take them into the bathroom, my stomach is a mess of nerves.

Minutes later, I stare at the results.

Three tests. All positive.

A choked breath escapes me. My knees buckle, and I sink onto the floor, gripping the counter.

I’m pregnant.

With Radomir’s child.

I let out a shuddering sob, pressing a hand to my stomach. I should be happy. But all I feel is fear. Because when he finds out the truth... there will be no coming back from it.

The next morning, I get the call.

“Miss M, your presence is requested at the Gold Matriarch Private Bank in Mayfair. We have sent a private jet for you to Moscow to fly you to London and we’ll see you in the morning.”

I look at my new classic wrist watch – analogue and non-traceable.

This is my life now—analogue and untraceable. The front desk rings my room.

“Your car is here, Miss M.”

“Thank you.” I hang up and have one last look at the sleek, expensive woman in the mirror. I don’t recognize her. She doesn’t even feel like me. Because it’s not me—it’s Miss M.

Taking a breath I leave the luxurious room behind, zoom down the lobby and I walk to the front pick up where I step into the sleek black car waiting for me.

Six hours later I’m making my way through toward London in another long sleep black car from the private airstrip the Gold Key Legal Group jet landed on.

When I arrive at the Matriarch Gold Bank, I’m treated like royalty. I’m ushered into a luxurious office where two men stand waiting—Giles Gold and Parker Keys.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” Giles says, smiling warmly.

Parker gestures to the table. “There’s a lot to go through.”

Hours pass as I sign paperwork, securing my inheritance, my assets. Then, Giles hands me a small velvet case. Inside are three gold keys.

“The keys to Vivienne’s deposit boxes,” he explains. “Inside each are two bio-lock boxes.”

Parker hands me a sterile needle after they usher me into the big private room. I get the boxes and secured into a viewing room.

The instant I see the bio boxes I remember them. The fight I had with Vivienne who was always wanting me to get blood tests for this, then give blood or plasma for that. It’s bad enough because of my blood group the amount of times I have to give blood wherever I am to ensure if anything happens to me I have blood. I prick my finger, letting a drop of blood fall onto the scanner.

The box unlocks.

Inside, there are documents, thumb drives, confessions. They are all the same. I wonder what is on them but after having read her journals I actually don’t want to know. In fact I should get all this shit destroyed.

The last box I open has one smaller bio box in it marked Leigh .

I open it and find six vials with a thick liquid in it.

The Vials are marked:

Gold P. Gold A. Platinum P. Platinum A. Silver P. Silver A.

I know exactly what they are.

And exactly what I need to do with them.

I shove the small lock box into my purse and everything else goes back where I found

it.

I lock everything away, and ready myself for the next part of my journey before I leave even Miss M. behind for good.

Chapter 19

RADOMIR

I wake up to an empty bed.

The sheets are still warm beside me, her scent lingering—a mix of wild roses and something uniquely Leigh. My body feels heavy, sated from the night before, but something is off. The silence, the absence of her weight against me. I stretch my arm toward her side of the bed, only to feel the soft rustle of paper beneath my fingertips.

A note.

A cold wave crashes over me as I sit up, yanking the letter from the pillow. My heart slams against my ribs as my eyes scan the words, my fingers tightening around the paper with each line.

Dear Radomir,

This is the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I lost my heart, body, and soul to you the moment our eyes met that first night. While I was locked away in that dungeon, I realized how much I loved, missed, and yearned to be with you. Which makes this so much harder, as being without you for a week was torture—a lifetime will be hell.

But there is no future for us. Our worlds are not only different, but I know the code you live by, and by that code, you'd have to make a decision to end my life. I know there's never an excuse for taking a life, even if it was to save my own and those of

three people who meant the world to me.

My memories came back with force while I was locked away, and I now know who killed your father and your uncle—it was twelve-year-old me.

I'm the Greek Matriarch you've been searching for this past decade. Now that I remember who I am, I remember everything about my family, and if you come after me, my family won't stop until every one of yours is gone. I can't have more blood on my hands, so as of tomorrow at 4 p.m., I will be erased from your life and everyone else's.

I wish there was another way.

You will always have my heart.

Leigh

My fingers tighten around the paper so hard it nearly rips in half.

A growl of fury rumbles in my chest as I swing my legs out of bed. The rage—hot and burning—threatens to consume me, but beneath it, something deeper, something raw and unnamable tears through me. She fucking left me.

She didn't trust me. She ran instead of talking to me.

I slam my fist against the wall, the impact jarring my bones. How dare she make that decision for me? How fucking dare she?

A dozen emotions claw at me—anger, betrayal, disbelief—but the one that tightens like a vice around my throat is this ferocious, undeniable need to find her. Not just because she killed my father and uncle.

But because she's mine.

And she fucking ran.

Within the hour, I gather the people I trust most. Sabrina, Oleksi, Dmitri, and Wanda are physically present. Gavriil, Galina, Nikolas, and Mark join via video. The only one missing is Carla—she has a doctor's appointment for her broken ankle.

I don't waste time with pleasantries. I slam Leigh's letter onto the table and read the part where she confesses to being the one who shot my father and uncle.

Silence. Deafening, suffocating silence.

Mark's face pales on the screen. Nikolas exhales sharply, his jaw tightening. Sabrina presses her lips together, her fingers clenching around the chair she's sitting in.

"I want to know what the fuck happened that day," I demand. "How did a twelve-year-old end up in that dungeon? How the fuck did she kill three grown people twice her size?"

Nikolas sighs, rubbing a hand down his face. "Vivienne thought Leigh had stolen her journals and dragged her to the dungeon to teach her a lesson about what happens to lying, cheating, thieving bitches."

Galina flinches at the words, and Nikolas glances at her. "Those were Vivienne's words."

I turn to my mother. "You were there?"

Galina nods. "I was in the dungeon beside that one. Tied to a chair. I didn't see anything until Nikolas and Sol rescued us."

I clench my fists. “So, no one saw exactly what happened?”

“No,” Nikolas says, his voice tight. “By the time I arrived, Leigh had been shot with a poisoned arrow.”

“Hold up,” Sabrina interjects. She pulls a book from her backpack and flips through it. “This isn’t mine.”

“Oh, I put that in there,” Dmitri says. “I thought you could make sense of it. It’s written in a language I don’t understand.”

I arch a brow. “What is it?”

“It’s Leigh’s memory journal.”

The room stills.

“You can read it?” Dmitri asks.

Sabrina nods. “Yeah.”

“What does it say?”

Sabrina’s breath hitches. “Oh, my God...”

She begins reading, and with every word, my stomach twists tighter, my rage building, my heart hammering against my ribs.

Vivienne. Gunther. My father.

The things they did. The things they tried to do to Leigh.

Gunther's tongue reaching for her. Vivienne slicing her clothes open. The way they brutalized her before she fought back.

I see red.

The room fades, the sounds around me disappearing as I can all but see the scene in my head. If Gunther weren't already dead, I would kill him. Slowly. Painfully.

How the fuck does a child survive that?

The door opens, breaking the silence. The butler enters, holding a package from America. It's for Dmitri. He opens it, revealing a note from Leigh.

I have it on good authority that you are still viable for the antidote. Try to stay out of the way of golden arrows. –Leigh

Dmitri stares at it in shock, then lifts his gaze to me. "I was there that day. I walked in after Vladimir was shot, but I do know what happened. There was a witness."

His voice is quiet but weighted with something dark. "Carlos shot Gunther."

A heavy pause.

"What?" I growl.

Dmitri nods. "Carlos killed Gunther. And he shot your father just before the feed was cut."

Judy and Viktor step forward. Viktor lifts his shirt, revealing scars—horrible, deep, whip scars.

“You’re Tor?” I breathe.

Viktor nods. “Your father and Gunther chained me. Stripped me. Whipped me. Sodomized me. And Vivienne... she raped me. Then made me watch as they did the same to Judy.”

Judy nods, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “One brave twelve-year-old saved us. And she didn’t shoot your father—Gunther did. On purpose. He was jealous. He wanted Vivienne to himself.”

My chest tightens. My jaw locks.

Judy hands me a thumb drive.

“It’s all on there,” she whispers. “Everything.”

I don’t know what to say.

Dmitri steps forward. “Leigh saved my life when she was three. She is one of the bravest, most loyal, compassionate people I know. I’ve seen that video feed, Radomir. It’s rough. But trust me, I will protect her with my life.”

Sabrina pulls something from her pocket and hands it to me.

A pregnancy test.

Two pink lines.

My world tilts.

Sabrina smirks. “Looks like you’ve got another reason to find her, Daddy.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:52 pm

The ropes bite into my wrists, the rough fibers cutting into my skin with every slight movement. Carlos sits across from me, his dark eyes alight with an unsettling glee, his hands meticulously cleaning a knife as if he has all the time in the world.

"You know, princess it didn't have to be this way," he muses, tilting his head. "You could have been useful. Beautiful, intelligent, with blood more valuable than gold. But no, you had to play house with Radomir. Such a waste."

I refuse to give him the satisfaction of a response, even as my pulse hammers in my throat. I'm terrified—not for myself, but for the life inside me. My baby. Radomir's baby.

Carlos sighs, as if truly disappointed. "He won't come for you, you know. And if he does, well—" He twirls the knife between his fingers, a slow, deliberate movement that makes my stomach churn. "He'll die. They all will."

I lift my chin, my voice steady despite the fear twisting in my gut. "You're delusional."

Carlos laughs, the sound grating against my nerves. "Oh, darling, I've been called much worse. But at least I'm not a fool in love."

My fingers curl into fists behind my back. I refuse to let him see me break.

RADOMIR

I crouch behind a fallen tree, my eyes scanning the perimeter of the cabin through the

dense tree line. Sam, the caretaker, had been knocked out cold, left to bleed in the dirt. The bastards had taken over his cabin—the only one left standing after Sabrina blew the other to hell. She had actually pouted when she realized Carlos wasn't inside it. "Would've saved us the trouble," she had muttered.

Now, we prepare. I glance at the people who have gathered—my family, my men, my allies. Dmitri, bruised and sick but standing firm. Viktor, already perched in a sniper's nest, his scope locked on the target. Sabrina, her eyes burning with determination. Oleksi, Judy, and Viktor standing together, a united front I never thought I'd see. Even Gunner, the cold-hearted torturer, looks ready to rip Carlos apart with his bare hands.

I swallow hard, my throat tight. Leigh did this. Her loyalty, her love, her bravery—it brought them all here.

And now, we're going to get her back.

I pull out my gun, my voice low but firm. "No mercy. We take them down, we get Leigh, and we end this fucker once and for all."

They nod, their faces set in grim determination.

We move.

LEIGH

A loud crack shatters the silence. Gunfire.

Carlos curses, standing so fast his chair clatters to the ground. His men scramble outside, barking orders. My pulse leaps. They came.

Radomir came.

Carlos grips my jaw, forcing me to look at him. "If I go down, I'm taking you with me."

I don't doubt him.

With one last sneer, he yanks me upright, the rope binding my wrists digging deeper into my skin. "Move."

He drags me toward the back door, the distant shouts and gunfire growing louder. My heart slams against my ribs as I dig my heels into the ground.

"Carlos—"

A gunshot rings out.

Carlos jerks, his body stiffening before he collapses forward, his grip on me going slack. Blood pools beneath him.

I spin toward the tree line.

Viktor lowers his rifle, his expression unreadable as he confirms the kill.

Carlos is dead.

Radomir bursts through the doorway, his face wild, frantic. And then his eyes land on me, scanning for injuries. He crosses the space between us in two strides, his hands cupping my face, his gaze burning into mine.

"Are you hurt?" His voice is raw, thick with emotion.

Tears burn my eyes, and I shake my head. "No. I—"

I don't get to finish. His lips crash against mine, desperate, possessive, claiming. A sob escapes my throat as I cling to him, my fingers fisting his shirt, grounding myself in the only place that has ever felt like home.

The others flood the cabin. Sabrina lets out a relieved curse. Gunner actually wipes at his eyes before scooping me into a suffocating bear hug. "Shit, Leigh," he grumbles. "Don't do that again."

Sabrina snickers. "Pretty sure that's not how this works, Gunner."

Slowly, everyone filters out, giving me and Radomir space.

And then it's just us.

RADOMIR

Leigh stands before me, still trembling, her green eyes glistening. I cup her face, my thumb brushing over her cheek.

"You ran," I say hoarsely.

She swallows hard. "I had to."

I exhale sharply, resting my forehead against hers. "You should have trusted me."

Her hands grip my shirt. "I was scared, Radomir. I thought—"

"I know," I murmur, cutting her off with another kiss. Slow, deep. "But you're mine, Leigh. You always were. You always will be."

Tears spill down her cheeks. "I love you."

Something in me snaps. I lift her into my arms, carrying her to Sam's spare bedroom. I don't wait. I don't hesitate. I strip her bare, my hands memorizing every inch of her skin, reassuring myself that she's real, that she's here.

She arches against me, her lips parting in a breathy gasp as I sink inside her, filling her completely.

"Radomir," she moans, her nails digging into my back.

"I've got you," I whisper, moving deep and slow. "I'm never letting you go again."

She clings to me, her body moving with mine, matching my rhythm, my need. When we finally shatter together, her name falls from my lips, a vow, a promise.

I hold her close, pressing kisses along her damp skin.

As the aftershocks fade, Leigh exhales shakily. "Radomir, I need to tell you something."

I already know. I saw the test Sabrina gave me.

I brush my lips against her temple. "You're pregnant."

Her breath hitches. "You—"

I tilt her chin up, my thumb tracing her bottom lip. "I got your message."

Her eyes search mine, uncertainty flickering there. "Are you—"

I silence her with a kiss. "Happy? Fuck, printsessa, I've never been happier."

Her tears fall freely, and I kiss them away.

There's so much to do, so much to fix. An empire to rebuild.

But that's for tomorrow.

Tonight, I just hold my woman, my future, my everything.

And for the first time in a long damn time, I feel whole.