



Unwilling Bratva Bride (Vadim Bratva #7)

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Category: Urban

Description: He paid to have me as his bride. Now he wants me to carry his baby as well.

I was trying to drown my misery at the bar when I ran into a much older stranger.

He said he'd make all of my family's problems vanish immediately.

All I have to do is marry him and become his Bratva bride...

I gave up everything for my family's small business. Now it's about to go bankrupt.

There is only one way to save it: Marry the Bratva. Become his unwilling wife.

Of course I say no, of course I run from him.

But he knows I don't have a choice. He knows I'm forced to accept his terms.

I didn't know anything about the Bratva, but he teaches me.

He watches me in his bathtub until the bubbles pop.

He teases me about my innocence until I'm exhausted by the fight inside of me.

I struggle against him until my body gives itself over.

Can the Bratva heal my scars?

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Alcohol hit the back of my throat, and I stifled a wince as I swallowed. The little shot glass smacked down on the bar top with a solid thunk, my move to set it there gently failing spectacularly.

“Cheers to the MacCormacks’ utter fucking failure. Way to go, Adley. You’ve done fuckall to help the situation, and now you’re buzzed. Excellent.”

The sarcasm stung my ears, but I couldn’t force myself to find that grit my grandmother had always been on about before she passed. I was too damn tired at this point, and I was pretty set on drinking my troubles away. As far as ideas went, it sounded like the one most likely to succeed today—hell, the whole damn year.

The bartender walked by, the classic towel slung over his shoulder, and I nodded to get his attention.

“Another, please.”

“You should slow down. You’ll be on your ass before you know it; a tiny thing like yourself keeps knocking ‘em back like that.”

I smirked, full of venom and redirected anger. “I assure you, bucko, I can handle it fine. I have a hell of a tolerance.”

The guy raised his eyebrows before shrugging and pouring more Jameson into my glass. As he walked away, I raised it to him, sipping gently so he wouldn’t bother again. I was in a sour ass mood, which was rare for me, and I wasn’t about to let him spoil the one thing that was making me feel better.

Still, I didn't knock it back as fast as the first. I wasn't a moron. I still needed to walk to the El to get home.

Shitty music played on the jukebox, and I was too close to a speaker to ignore it properly. Some dumb song by some dumb pop princess that probably would have been fine if it weren't for the fact that my entire family was looking at eviction soon.

Hours. I'd spent hours today walking around downtown on foot and talking to stuffy-ass bankers who lacked any form of sympathy.

I'd been begging. I knew that's what it was, but still. You'd think one of them would have had half a heart. We just needed a little more time. It had been rough everywhere, and with the state of the world, mom-and-pop bodegas like ours were getting hit damn hard by the lack of foot traffic.

We'd bounce back. It couldn't stay broken out there forever. At least, that was what I'd thought—until about thirty minutes ago when the last bank turned me down for the loan.

I have no collateral, no down payments, and no proof that I could help my folks make the rent this time around.

“Yeah, you're fucked, Adley. First art school, now this.”

And worse, it would mean no college for the twins, either.

I'd set aside my aspirations to go to the art school to help Mom and Dad care for the shop and prevent my mother from working herself into an early grave. Oh, not to mention the fact that they could never afford it.

The twins were just hoping to go to community college, and it was still a damn

stretch to make tuition, and that was before the only source of income for the entire family was in jeopardy of being shut down forever.

My heart ached at the prospect, and I chugged down the rest of my shot as the words of the last banker I'd spoken to today burned in my mind.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but the bank cannot support you without a down payment or collateral. We don't feel you'd be a good option for a small business loan. Stores like yours—well, they're a dying breed. I would encourage your parents to look into becoming part of a franchise if they can save up."

Save up. Like it was that fucking simple. Sure, they can't pay the rent on the shop, which also happens to be our home, but of course. They'll just rub their pennies together and see if they multiply like rabbits.

The shop hadn't been open for a week because we weren't permitted to keep it open while we were in violation of our rental agreement, and each day it sat closed was another we weren't earning money.

And it all fell on my shoulders. I was the oldest, after all. My sibs were sheltered and babied endlessly by my parents, and I couldn't help but be a little bitter about the fact that it looked like they got to have a childhood while mine had been cut short.

But that's how it goes when you're the eldest sibling, I guess. At least for me.

"God, I'm as low as George fucking Bailey."

I spun the shot glass around, listening to it rolling against the resin-covered surface as I tucked a long strand of hair behind my ear. It had fallen loose from my braid, and I wasn't about to redo the thing now. Just as I was about to ask for another, a shadow darkened the area next to me.

I turned and looked up into the face of what could only be described as a thug—straight up out of the movies with the tattoos, steely expression, and leather jacket. He was so damn tall, with light blonde hair that was styled into a sleek if tussled, cut that was shorn around the sides and back with long, sweeping pieces on the top, including a tempting chunk that fell into his eyes.

He looked down at me with a smirk, fire lighting up behind his blue-gray eyes as he chewed on a toothpick.

“Who’s George fucking Bailey?”

My entire body seized up as he spoke, his voice penetrating my brain like a drill. It was deep, so fucking deep, and coarse enough to file down glass.

Furrowing my brow, I swallowed hard. “What?”

Realization hit, and my brows shot to my hairline as warmth filled my cheeks. “Oh! Umm...it’s from a movie.”

Seriously? Had I just said that? I was so pathetic. I would blame the alcohol if I didn’t really have that ironclad constitution, but I did, so that was a no-go.

The massive guy chuckled, and my eyes wormed their way across his forehead as I realized that the shadows across it weren’t actually shadows. It was a tattoo, and as I looked closer, I could just make out the shape of broken glass spiraling out from the point of impact, which appeared to be some type of scar.

“I see. So, now, what’s making such a pretty girl like you frown? Hmm?”

That deep, raspy voice held the hint of an accent that I could totally place but had to assume was from somewhere like Russia or Ukraine. We got plenty of diverse

customers at the bodega, and I'd gotten pretty good at telling where they were from.

Beyond that, though, was the fact that when he spoke, my heart felt like it would explode out of my chest. And he'd called me pretty .

"Umm, it's a long story. I'm sure you're not interested." I shook my head, my gaze falling back to the bar where my empty shot glass perched between my fingers.

"On the contrary. I assure you that I am. 'Sides, I'm in no big rush. Indulge me."

My stomach clenched, silent alarm bells going off in my head as he pulled out the stool next to me and sat down.

I couldn't help but look over at him again. Damn, he was terrifying—those tattoos and his entire vibe just screamed ex-con. Hell, it screamed current con, and I wasn't sure if that's exactly what this was.

I'd had to watch for trouble-makers trying to pull one over on the shop, steal, or just quick-change me. I wasn't about to let it happen now after everything else I'd dealt with today. Because he might not know it, but I was far from drunk, and that was the only way he was getting one over on me.

Still, as he smiled at me, my thighs involuntarily clenched together. He may have been a scary-ass guy, but he was also...beautiful.

It was as if Brad Pitt and the guy from that motorcycle show had a baby, genetic impossibility aside.

"Umm, I should probably be going, actually. But thanks for the—"

His hand snaked out and took my arm. It wasn't rough, but there was an unspoken

command behind it—to stay put, or maybe he’d chase me.

“Come on. I’ll buy you a drink. Maybe I can help?”

I wanted to say no. I should say no. But his damn eyes penetrated me through to my backbone, and I felt somehow compelled to list out the terrible truth if just to show him how unappealing of a prospect I really was.

Sliding back down into the stool, I raised my brows at him. “Make it two, and you’ve got a deal.”

He laughed, the sound way too sexy for a reasonable human to possess, and nodded. “Can do.”

After my shots were delivered, I knocked one back straight away and let the floodgates open up. As the story left me, it felt oddly good to get it all off my chest. Venting, it’s good for the soul.

“My parents will lose their bodega, which is also our house, which means we’ll all be out on the street. We’re behind on the rent. No fucking sales because some fucking quickie mart opened a block down from us, and no one’s coming. I tried to get us a loan to buy some time, but we’re ‘poor candidates’ or some shit.”

A sigh left me, and I hung my head before I downed the other shot. The guy next to me, who was still nameless, just watched, his eyes glued to me in a way that felt too intense and intimate.

“I’ll probably just get a job somewhere to help them, but my mom’s health sucks, and my dad is getting old. And!” I gestured at him, that buzz hitting harder. “I’ve got twin siblings trying to go to college in the next few years! Ha! No one in my family is going to claim that honor.”

Mystery Man smiled gently, sipping at his vodka like a true Russian. “What’s your name?”

“Adley. Adley MacCormack. Nice to meet you, strange bar dude who just got the full download on my shitty luck.”

He laughed again, and dammit, it should not be that hot.

“It’s Ivan. Ivan Ustinov.”

“Ha!” I slapped a hand down on the bar, which stung. “I knew you were Russian.”

He grinned at me, those dark blue-gray eyes of his pulling me in like a well. I was sure he was about to say something, but he just sat there. I wanted to look away because, as far as everyday human interactions went, this was way too long to be staring at someone, but I couldn’t.

Ivan was so damn compelling, this lingering Hollywood charm that had no business being accompanied by such a gruff exterior creating a strong cocktail of its own.

Across the bar, his hand snaked toward mine, and I didn’t pull away. His fingers brushed over my knuckles, and the heat in his touch was alluring, stirring my nerves like a warm bath.

“Adley, it sounds like you work too damn hard. Your folks, too, and you know, my family and I were just looking for a new place to do our business. So, how about I offer you a deal?”

My heart hammered against my ribs, and that nagging feeling that this guy was up to some shady business flared forward.

“What do you mean a deal?” I sat straighter in my chair, not laying across the bar top anymore as I had been, and blinked several times.

“A deal. I help your family pay for the past due rent and bring in some new business in the form of my family. We’re all about supporting local businesses and like to take our work lunches at places we know we can trust.”

My mouth fell open. This guy, this Ivan Ustinov, who just fucking met me, was offering to save the bodega?

“Why? Why would you do that? What’s in it for you?”

He grinned again, a tiny dimple forming on his cheek, and finished his shot. “I’ll hand it to you, Adley. You’re smart. I like that. I like a lot of what I can see about you.”

Ice ran through my veins, mingling with the fire still banked in my core. My body was a mess of apprehension and arousal, making my head spin, and the alcohol did not help.

“Thanks,” I said dryly. “You still haven’t said what you want.”

Nodding, Ivan licked his lips before answering me. “Easy. You.”

“I’m sorry?” I raised my brows and stuck my head out in question.

“You, Adley. I want you to come back home with me. I want you to be mine.” He met my eyes, his intensity blazing through him like an inferno. “As my wife.”

My jaw dropped, and I nearly choked on my own spit. As it was, I lost my grip on the little shot glass I’d been squeezing, and it toppled onto the bar with a loud clattering

sound.

“What? You can’t be serious.”

Ivan shook his head before taking the shot glass I’d knocked over and set it back down properly.

“Can’t I?” He uncrossed his legs, turning in his stool to face me head-on. “Look, I’m a very particular kind of guy. I don’t mess around with things I’m not interested in. But I’m interested in you. More than I have been in anyone else. I’m also really fucking busy. I don’t have time to piss around. I see something I want, I take it. And I want you, Adley MacCormack.”

Shaking my head, I got off my seat, shoving the thing back and making that terrible screeching noise on the floor.

“You want me? So what? You just pop the damn question to a stranger at a bar and expect me to go home with you? Are you nuts?”

The corners of his mouth turned down as Ivan chuckled. “I’ve been told that before, so...And yes, I expect you to come home with me. To live with me, fuck me, carry my children, and enjoy every comfort I can offer as your husband. In exchange for the safety of your family’s shop.”

The world tilted on its axis, and I was sure I was about to pass out.

“So, Adley, what’ll it be?”

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From the moment I saw Adley sitting at the bar, I knew. I knew she had to be mine, and there was little that mattered outside of that fact. I'd watched her sit there, chatting with the bartender and feeling sorry for herself. At first, I'd thought I'd be content with just that, finishing up my drink and smirking at how her tight leggings showed off the curves of her ass.

She wore boots, and the thin flannel over her tank was clearly there to make her look a bit more put together. It wasn't working, really. Adley still looked casual, stripped clean of hair products, makeup, or silly frills.

However, when she'd informed the bartender about her tolerance, I'd noticed the frown. Adley's brows had been pinched together, the darker blonde slashes framing her soft blue eyes. That face, the way her full, plump lips were turned down at the corners and her honey-blond hair hung in her eyes. It had knocked me right on my ass.

And the bones still fucking hurt.

I just couldn't understand why I needed her so fucking badly. It was like a damn magnetic pull; I was iron and useless to fight it.

The fuck, Ivan? This isn't like you.

Chastizing myself wasn't stopping me, though. I knew this was beyond the norm for anything remotely related to any of the Unholy Trinity. I was a self-described gruff asshole who did not have time for bullshit. And yet, I couldn't stop myself from going up to her and asking what was wrong.

Who the fuck was I now?

Sarcastic, brash, and tactless—I'd been called worse. I didn't care about anything that wasn't paying me, a typical Vadim. They were blessed with the only bit of loyalty I could manage outside my brothers.

And yeah, I'd been called on for my alliances as an independent contractor, and I knew I could be charming enough to get any girl in my bed. But none of that shit went further than skin deep. I wasn't looking to settle down and get married.

But here I was, asking this gorgeous fucking tart to be my damn wife.

And it wasn't just the blonde waves plaited into a thick braid—perfect for tangling around my fist—that draped down to her lower back or the way her cerulean eyes looked up at me with a combination of fear, annoyance, and intrigue. Hell, it wasn't just those pouty, dusky pink lips of hers that would look so damn pretty wrapped around my cock, either.

It was something else that I couldn't name, which was downright fucked in its own right.

But I had to have her. I just...did. And I had a feeling that she was more interested than she was letting on, too. Adley had stuck around for much longer than someone else might, which told me a lot about her.

“So, Adley, what'll it be?”

Her eyes flared wide before she stepped even further away from me. As she stood, I got a better look at her slim figure and ran my eyes down her body. Adley was thin but shapely, the light tan of her skin a gentle warmth against the black of her tank and pants. She wore two necklaces stacked on top of each other, which were likely real

gold—and the most expensive things she owned.

Any other time, I would have considered swiping them, but as it was, I was much more interested in the breasts that were perfectly encompassed by the stretch of her top.

I didn't think she was wearing a bra, not that I minded in the slightest. No, this choice gave me an excellent idea of what was hiding behind the thin fabric of her shirt, those tiny straps begging me to pull them down. She wasn't small-chested, but Adley wasn't sporting massive tits, either.

The delicate swells that caught my attention were perfection—gorgeous curves that could fill my hands.

“Up here, buddy.”

Chuckling, I watched as her expression changed into fury and outrage, and it really shouldn't have been as attractive as it was. God, I love it when she pouts .

“You are out of your damn mind.” She shook her head at me, scoffing.

Then, Adley turned away, going for the door as quickly as she could, her flannel trailing behind her as the rushing air caught in it. Still, just before she stormed out, I snagged her arm, stopping Adley in her tracks.

“Wait, just a second, sweetness.”

Yanking her arm out of my hold, she glared at me. “What?”

I reached into my pocket, pulled out my wallet, and went for the business card I usually left my cleanup clients with. The sleek, black card only showed my name and

a QR code that would take the scanner to my most recent burner phone number.

“Here. When you want to get in touch with me.”

She scoffed again, that fire in her blue eyes beyond alluring. God, will you be a little brat when you come home with me? Please say yes.

Glaring, Adley folded her arms over her chest. “And what makes you think that’s going to happen.”

“I don’t think, sweetheart. I know.”

Making to leave without the card, I slipped it into her back pocket, which I was surprised didn’t result in me getting slapped. Still, Adley ground her molars as she shook her head. After that, she just pulled herself away and bolted for the door.

I watched as she left, admiring the curves of her fantastic ass as she stormed out and silently thanked the leggings for doing such a good job of keeping it on full display.

As the silence around me grew, I sat back at the bar. I needed another drink before I went home—if just to clear my head so that I could think around the blood rushing to my erection.

“Bartender, one more please.”

He nodded at me, snagging the bottle of Grey Goose and refilling my glass. I laughed to myself. Adley had pegged me as Russian, and while that wasn’t impossible, it was still interesting, considering I tried to tamp down on my accent most of the time.

Very interesting.

I knocked back the shot. I knew Adley would be calling. She truly did not have many options, and I was content enough to wait for her. Still...breaking that news to the boys was going to be a thing. Abram would never let me hear the end of it, and speech or not, Vlad would come up with quite a few choice phrases on his phone.

I sighed. Duty was calling, and I still had an Irishman to trail, so I paid the tab and headed for my car. As the music played, I pulled up the map on my phone. I had quite the drive before I got to the meeting location, and I had a feeling I'd be spending it digging up all the dirt I could on one Adley MacCormack.

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I tried not to let the door slam as I walked into the bodega, using my key to unlock the door. We were closed today since I hadn't been there to help, and the catch twenty-two of that situation was not lost on me. Can't make money whether I'm here or not, I guess .

The place was quiet, and I roamed my eyes over the dozens of shelves lined up evenly throughout the open space. Cereal, canned goods, dishes, pots and pans, imported items from Ireland that you couldn't get anywhere else—they were all there, silently waiting for someone to buy them.

As I walked to the back, I debated whether I wanted to go up the stairs. It was late in the afternoon, so it wasn't like I was going to wake anyone. But I'd still see them, and I wasn't sure if I wanted that right now.

“Ugh,” I sighed. “All day. For nothing.”

Instead of gracing my folks with my less-than-stellar presence, I went to the little area at the back of the store where my mom liked to do tea leaf readings for the poor customers she goaded into it. Mom would talk about how the fairies would help her find the answer in the leaves and deliver their messages to the person about love, life, and money.

A small laugh melted out of me as I sat down in the chair, looking at the tea set that was set up for tomorrow.

“What are we going to do, Mom?”

As I hung my head in my hands, I noticed the thin envelope on the table. It was already cut open, and when I turned it over to see who it was from, I saw the familiar name of the medical center Mom went to for her steroid injections.

“Dammit.” I pulled out the bill for her latest treatment. “Past due. Of course.”

The letter spoke about sending the bill to collections like the two before it, and it took everything in me not to crush the damn thing in my grip. Mom’s fibromyalgia was getting worse and worse. She could barely stand, and those injections were the only thing keeping her from being completely immobile in her right hand—and she still couldn’t use it properly even with them.

I got up. Mom kept a store of alcohol that not even Dad knew about in the bottom section of the sideboard against the wall. I pulled out the small bottle of whiskey and brought it back to the table, pouring it into the teacup.

Filling it to the brim, I set the bottle down before knocking back the drink. I coughed hard at the sharp taste.

“Jesus, Mom, what is this?”

I snatched the bottle again and looked at the label a bit closer. Some nothing brand with a percentage high enough to clean rust. She didn’t need to worry about Dad drinking it, that was for sure. He had a particular taste when it came to whiskey, and that was not it.

Still...

Downing the rest of the alcohol, I winced. “Waste not.”

The warmth of the shitty whiskey burned the whole way down, and I reached for my

braid, going for the hair tie at the end and unwinding it from around the bottom. When it was off, I began to loosen my hair from the French braid, shaking my head as the tension from the style disappeared.

It had started all neat and orderly, but like most things in my life, it didn't stay that way. The comforting feeling of my hair tumbling around my shoulders eased some of the stress, and I fanned out the waves around me. Mom had always been so impressed with how fast my hair grew, and I'd learned to love it—the length, the color—because she loved it.

They're really getting older, and I'm supposed to be taking care of them—not the other way around.

My eyes stung, and I knew I was going to have to go back upstairs at some point. I tortured myself with another quick shot of whiskey before standing up and making my way up the creaky old staircase to the rooms on the second floor.

Mom was peeling potatoes at the little kitchen table, and the twins were washing and drying the dishes in the sink. When the little bottle of rice jingled on the doorknob, they all looked up.

“Hey, honey. You were gone for a while. Get over here. I need your help with dinner.”

I smiled, kissing Mom on the head as I sat down with her at the table and started helping her peel.

Molly looked over at me with her hands draped in a towel as she dried a plate. “Any luck?”

I shook my head. Our mother was unaware of what I'd been doing, under the

impression that I was looking at places for the twins to work over the summer.

“No, sorry. But it’s fine. You’re both starting school in the fall, so it was only going to be for a few months anyway.”

Frowning, Molly went back to the dish. She was only fifteen, and I didn’t want her to be burdened with the shop. I’d been doing it for years; that was my job, and I would keep her and Ryan out of it if it were the last thing I ever did.

“Dinner’s beef and potatoes, so I need you to grab the flour down for me, Ryan.”

My brother nodded, humming over his shoulder at Mom. “I’ll get right on it when my hands aren’t literally in a sink full of water, Ma.”

She smirked, and I thought my chest might actually crack in half right then and there.

“Umm, I’m going to change, Mom. I need to get out of these shoes.”

With a nod, my mother just kept peeling. “Sure, sure.”

I walked back to the far end of our little apartment and up the tiny set of stairs that went to the attic storage. When the twins were born, I’d given up my room, and Dad and I refinished the attic to be my new bedroom.

The stairs were narrow and steep, and even my tiny five-foot-nothing frame could easily bump my head into the ceiling above me.

Opening the door, I went inside, straight to my twin bed, and sat down. I pulled off the boots because I really did want out of them, and then the flannel was next, getting tossed into the hamper in my closet. The tank was good enough, but with the oven on the house was a damn furnace, so I decided to switch to shorts.

As I pulled off the skin-tight fabric of the leggings, Ivan's black card popped out of the pocket and fell to the floor. The thick, seemingly innocuous bit of plastic hit the rug by my bed with a gentle thump, and I stared down at it, remembering what he'd said.

A deal. I help your family pay for the past due rent and bring in some new business in the form of my family.

The temptation, like being presented with an apple in hell, made my damn mouth water. I didn't want to say yes. I didn't. At least, that's what I kept telling myself. Because we really were running out of options. I couldn't expect my mother to keep this up, and Dad was out on a delivery right now on that damn scooter he's too old to ride.

It was insane and unsustainable.

Hell, the twins wanted to go to college down the line, and I wanted to help them. They'd researched a few grants, but it wasn't enough to cover out-of-state housing. They were so smart, too. Molly wanted to go for her teaching degree to help special needs students, and Ryan wanted to study computer science. He had developed a real passion for it, even though we didn't have an electronic younger than a decade anywhere in the house.

Was I keeping their exceptional skills from the world by not accepting Ivan's offer?

The only things I was good at were running the store and painting. It wasn't like the world lost anything in my absence, and it wouldn't cause a massive upheaval in anyone's life if I weren't here.

If my folks had enough money to keep the bodega open and not work it, they could find a different kid to work behind the counter. There were plenty in our

neighborhood looking to make a bit of money. They didn't need me in particular, so if I was gone...

"Okay, no. You still have the announcement tomorrow to see if we can get that city business funding. Wait until then."

I picked the card up from the ground, leaning it against the mirror on my dresser, and went back to my closet to look for the shorts I wanted. I had a few pairs I actually liked, and this time, I was going for the most comfortable.

The deep gray fabric poked up from inside the hamper of clean laundry, and I pulled them out, pulling the cut-off sweatpants up my legs. Mom needed me to get going on those potatoes, and Dad would likely be back soon, so I hurried downstairs to help with dinner.

It was the least that I could do.

It had been two days since I ran into a mobster named Ivan in a bar. During those two days, I heard back from the city stating that we wouldn't receive that grant because we didn't meet the requirements for a proper dining establishment. There was a tiny area where people could eat, and we served fresh food items, but apparently, that wasn't enough because we were primarily a grocer.

To top it off, yesterday, my mother's hands were in so much pain that she'd lost grip strength while holding a pot of boiling water, and it spilled down her leg. She would be in the hospital for the next few days, treating the burns.

Which was a lot of money because our insurance wasn't covering all of it.

Basically, if anything, the forty-eight hours following my fateful interaction at the bar had taught me one thing—we were not getting out of this mess on our own.

And that sucked. I didn't want to accept help from an accredited bank, let alone a person who I was fairly certain was a member of a criminal organization or gang. I didn't have much choice now, though, did I? That was proven in spades by what had happened this weekend.

Sitting on my bed, black card in hand, I sucked in a deep breath, locking eyes with my reflection.

“Okay, so...” In the background, I heard the twins arguing with each other, the nagging urge to do anything to help them go to college swelling higher, “all right.”

I looked at the QR code on the card, pulling up my phone to scan it. It took me to a link displaying a number, so I copied it and put it into the keypad. My thumb hesitated over the green call button, but after another deep breath, I pressed down lightly, and the dial tone started up quickly before ringing.

It rang one time.

“Hello, Adley. Nice to hear from you again.”

I could hear the smirk in his voice, and I nearly hung up. But I knew why I'd called, how desperate I was.

“I...I want to talk about that deal. Can we meet to discuss things?”

His sexy chuckle rumbled through the phone. “I like a woman that cuts straight to the point. Meet me at the same bar in an hour. Yes?”

Again, I hesitated, but even less so now.

“Yes. I’ll be there.”

“I’ll see you then, sweetheart.”

Ivan hung up, and I tossed the phone down on the bed. I wanted to change, maybe take a few things with me. I wasn’t sure how fast he would move things along, but considering how he responded to the call, I could assume fast.

In any case, I wasn’t telling my folks or the twins where I was going. I hadn’t said yes yet, and I...I just couldn’t think of what to say. I was essentially becoming a fucking courtesan or escort or something, and regardless of how bad we were doing, I knew my parents wouldn’t like it.

“All right, Adley. Time to put on a show.”

Because when it came to any job interview—and especially to men—looking the part was the best way to get them in the position you wanted.

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I fiddled with my glass, swirling around the few mouthfuls of vodka I had left in the glass. My nerves were humming. I was really looking forward to seeing that little blonde again, and it didn't tamper down my ego to know I'd been right. She did call, and it had only been two days.

Sweet, innocent little Adley. Goddamn, I am looking forward to this way too much.

The door opened, and I looked over from my seat at the bar to see the target in question walk in from the sunny day outside. As I stared down her body, I noticed that Adley had certainly dressed to impress.

She wore another pair of sleek leggings in black, this pair framing that perfect ass of hers like the others had. Paired with it this time was a simple black crop tee, exposing a bit of her abdomen, and a leather jacket that had clearly been around for a while. There were subtle cracks in the material, and it hung loose on her frame like it had been passed down.

Mmm, tasty indeed.

"Hello there."

She walked toward me, and I stood up from my stool, pulling one out for her.

"Glad you called, Adley." I kept my voice low, admiring her long blonde hair that had been worn down around her shoulders today.

"Hello," she replied, sitting and clearing her throat. "So, what are the details of this

deal of yours?”

I chuckled. “Right to the point, huh? Shit, I was at least going to buy you a drink.”

She sighed, looking over to the bartender and getting his attention. When he came over, Adley offered a tight smile.

“Hi, could I get a double whiskey on the rocks, please? Jameson.”

The guy nodded, and I called out to him to put it on my tab. When he returned and delivered the drink, Adley took a large gulp. She exhaled hard as the burn hit her, and I just smirked, taking one from the vodka.

“All right, I have a drink. So, can we please talk about the deal now?”

It was charming how impatient Adley was, how much she couldn’t wait to get things started, and how clearly flustered she was. Nodding, I leaned on the bar with one elbow, taking out a toothpick with my other hand and chewing on it.

“Very well. As stated previously, I will help you get the rent payments and such up to date for your family’s bodega. I will also have my family and associates visit the shop to spend money on a regular to help keep it afloat. In exchange, you are to come to live with me as my wife and do as I ask.”

Adley narrowed her eyes, chewing on that full bottom lip of hers. “How long am I supposed to do that? Stay with you?”

“For the foreseeable future.”

She blanched, her eyes going wide. “Forever? Are you serious?”

I nodded, smirking as I chewed on the toothpick. “Deadly.”

“Can I leave to see my family? Friends?”

I considered it, knowing that once she was living with me, there was no way to keep her in the dark about what I did for a living.

“Yes, permitted that you agree to keep the conversations away from my business and with an escort there to keep an eye on things.”

She scoffed, and Adley rolled her eyes, taking a quick drink. “How am I supposed to play off some stalker watching me? People will notice that.”

I shook my head, the corners of my mouth turning down. “I assure you my men can be very discreet.”

Adley ran her eyes up and down, taking in my own change in presentation now that I wasn’t meeting a client but her. I’d ditched my smart clothes in favor of my favorite pair of jeans, twin holes in the knees, and a simple black tee. My own leather jacket was in place, and hell, we looked like we could be a couple.

“Discreet, huh? As discreet as you? Because that’s maybe not as great a cover as you think it is.”

Another easy chuckle left me, and I just picked up my vodka and finished it off.

“Next question, sweetheart. We’ll need to be going soon if we hope to close this deal before the end of the business day.”

“Still so fucking cocky,” she replied, and I watched as a determined fire lit behind her eyes, igniting the blue enough to make it sparkle like crystal. “Fine. How exactly do

you plan on paying for the bodega's rent? It's behind a fair amount, and frankly, you don't look like you have the cash to handle that."

This time, when I barked out a laugh, it actually caught me by surprise. Adley was judging me by outward appearances, and while that was understandable, it was hardly the most important determiner of someone's ability.

"I assure you, I'll have the payments taken care of. What's that old saying? Don't judge a book by its cover."

Adley rolled her eyes, and it took everything in me not to yank that pretty stare back into place.

"Right, except everyone does that." Adley finished off her double, and despite that self-proclaimed tolerance, I was surprised that she wasn't at least buzzing afterward. "So, what? I just take you to the bank, and you work your magic? What about keeping the place afloat? It's not like we're rolling in customers these days."

"That's unfortunate. And essentially, yes. I'll go with you to settle the debt, and as for the future, I told you. My family and associates need a place to store items, talk shop, that kind of thing. They'll pay monthly stipend and order food while they're there."

Adley's eyes narrowed, and I could see the cogs turning inside her pretty little head. She was debating whether to say something. The look was easy enough to read. Because unlike my sweet, naive mouse here, I read people very well. It was part of the job, and I'd gotten damn good at it.

"Spit it out, Adley."

She grumbled, rolling her eyes before they landed on me again. "Can we please be honest? If you're going to be my fucking husband, I think I deserve the truth."

“Fair enough.”

“Good, so these family members of yours, what exactly do you mean?”

She already knew I could tell that much, but Adley wanted me to say it. She needed me to be the first one to say it so that her brain could fully process what she was really doing and what she was saying yes to.

“I mean,” I drawled, letting her hang there on the edge because I liked to watch her squirm, “the family-based organization I work for. The one that has purchased a lot of business downtown and offers protection. For a fee.”

Adley ducked her head, lowering her voice to a whisper. “The mob.”

I grinned, leaning in toward her and ghosting my lips over the shell of her ear. “The mob. Specifically, the bratva Russian one.”

She sat back in her stool, widening the space between us, and she looked up at me with the oddest expression. Adley’s face was tilted low, and she chewed on her lip. She blinked slowly, and her breathing hadn’t shot through the roof either.

Trying to work on your poker face? Not bad.

“Thoughts, sweetheart?”

But Adley just stared at me. The silence between us stretched on, and I allowed it to. Adley could take her sweet time deliberating. I knew she’d say yes, and it wasn’t rare for the good old silent treatment to help win over someone who had yet to make up their mind fully.

She looked at me, peering as hard as she could to see inside my head. I just smirked. I

was a bit more skilled at this game than she was, and it was unlikely that a newbie like herself would get anything out of my expression that I didn't want them to.

I eyed the way she still chewed on her lip, the curve of her teeth making the pink flesh of her lip pale under the pressure. Adley eyed me right back, still combing over me like she was studying a map. Her stare landed on my tattoos several times, and I knew they were something of a distraction.

It's why I'd gotten them after all.

Still, it was the way her gaze kept returning to my mouth that had me the most on edge. The air was charged between us, invisible electricity surging through the air like cable ends nearing each other. The second they'd touch, they'd be sparks, and the power behind them was enough to jump a car or stop a heart.

"I just don't understand," she whispered. "Why me?"

My smile spread across my face easily, naturally. "I'd like to lie and come up with some line, but since you went and made me promise to be honest..."

I rolled my stare down for a moment, taking all of her in before flicking my gaze back up to her face. Adley visibly stiffened.

"I don't know. I saw you, and that was it. I had to have you. The bodega, well, I'm familiar with families struggling to get by, so that's a bonus. But really, it's just you, Adley. You...fascinate me. And that's rare."

One more prolonged beat of silence hit, a rubber ball smacking the cement, and then Adley reached for her whiskey, realizing it was gone.

"Get me another drink, and then..." she swallowed, "yes."

I smiled. I fucking grinned from ear to goddamn ear like I'd won the fucking lottery or finally ended that Pavel asshole and had time to spare on more lucrative jobs.

“Bartender,” I called out, “get my fiancé another drink, please.”

Adley blanched slightly as I said the word, but there was no going back now. As the guy came over and set down her new drink, Adley reached for it like it was the cure to some poison—and not, in fact, the poison itself.

I shot my hand out, snatching her wrist before she could grip the glass.

“You’re going to need to talk to the banker when we get there. I hope that your tolerance wasn’t just a show.”

She shook her head slowly, those blue rolling. It was a gesture she gave me quite a bit, and I was genuinely looking forward to getting back home and teaching her just how that bratty display was going to be rewarded. Or rather...punished .

“I’m fine. And trust me, a little buzz will help me sound less like I’m being forced to sign my life away to save my parents’ business.” She shook off my hand, grabbed her drink, and knocked back a solid swig. “I really hope that your wallet can stretch. I have twin siblings looking to go to college, too.”

Chuckling, I considered my end of this bargain. I knew I was good for it, and the Vadims would love having another place to do business.

“You’re real funny, sweetheart. I promise the family will be thrilled to drop at least a grand each week to ensure their new hot spot is spouting a strong signal. Hell, they’ll be tickled that the money is going toward school.”

Adley’s mouth fell open again, and she sat forward in her chair with her eyes wide.

“A grand a week?”

“To start, I’m sure I’ll be able to argue for more.”

Gawking, Adley curled into herself before that snarky attitude found her again. She shrugged, finishing the whiskey like a pro, and sighed heavily.

“All right,” I took out my wallet, going for my unique business credit card, “it looks like we have several errands we need to run. And I’m sure you’ll want to swing by your place to grab some shit.”

Adley snapped her attention to me. “You’ll... You’ll let me go home? Umm...okay.”

“Okay,” I returned, standing up from the chair and offering my arm to my new bride.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm

Ivan's car, his fucking Escalade, was way too nice. There were customizations I didn't realize were even an option, and something told me that it was probably bulletproof, too. I was buckled in tight in the front seat, and even though I'd been just as close to him in the bar, I felt awkward riding in the car with Ivan.

"Where to, sweetheart?" He looked over at me, his finger poised on the navigation system.

"Oh, right." I gave him the bank's address and watched as he entered it.

"Looks like a quick little drive, and then we can head to your old house. Gotta say I'm dying to meet your folks."

My heart dropped to my feet. I had no fucking idea how that was going to go, and I still didn't know how to bring up the fact that I hadn't talked to them about any of this. I was sure that Ivan wouldn't give a shit about my discomfort, the idea of explaining to my folks that I was marrying a mobster to save their asses not sitting well in the slightest.

"I'm sure they'll love you," I joked, not knowing what else to say, and then we were off to the downtown branch of the Republic Bank of Chicago.

We parked in the lot a block down from the bank, and my heart hammered against my ribs so damn hard that I could hardly breathe. I looked down at myself as we walked to the front door. I hadn't really dressed for a meeting at the bank, but I guess

it didn't matter. We were going there to pay off the accounts, so who cared how I was dressed?

At least, I'm sure that's how Ivan felt.

"Ladies first," Ivan drawled, opening the door for me as we reached the main entrance to the bank.

Rolling my eyes, I forced a smile. "Gee, thanks."

I went inside, looking for a banker we could speak to about the account. The room seemed pretty full of other patrons, and the stations at the central desk were all occupied, so I stood in line behind someone, ready to wait for them to finish with their business.

Ivan walked right past me and toward a section of the bank at the back, where several offices were in a row.

"What the hell? Ivan, stop. Wait!" I whisper-screamed the last word, running after him as he walked right to the first open door and went inside.

Oh my God. This is insane. The fuck does he think he's doing?

But when I reached the office, Ivan was already in the middle of talking with someone, and I was stupidly flustered.

"We're here to settle accounts on the—" Ivan turned over his shoulder, looking back at me, "what's it called?"

The confused banker glanced up at me from his desk. His brows were at his hairline, and I could hear my pulse in my ears.

“Umm, sorry. The, umm, MacCormack bodega. On ninth,” I offered, hoping the guy could appreciate my apologetic expression.

“Very well then. Have a seat.” The man, Jacob Winslow, going by the placard on his desk, gestured to the two chairs in front of him.

Ivan sat down, crossing one leg over the other at the knee, and it was only then that I realized he was still chewing on that damn toothpick. He looked over at me, and I mimed throwing it away. Still, Ivan just acted confused, his exaggerated expressions grating on my nerves.

“Out,” I whispered. “Throw it—”

“All right, Ms. McCormack. I see that your family’s establishment is several months past due. Is it your intention to bring the account current? Is that right?”

I refocused, ignoring Ivan, and nodded. “Yes. That’s correct.”

Mr. Winslow narrowed his eyes on me, and I knew he was judging the jeans and leather jacket that we were both wearing. “How will you be settling the account?”

“Card.” Ivan’s voice was sharp as a blade, cutting through the air in a slick slice as he reached for his wallet and pulled out that same weird credit card from before.

“All right,” the banker replied, clearly suspicious of this guy I’d brought with me, and for good reason. “The total to bring the account into good standing is twelve thousand nine-hundred and forty-eight dollars.”

Ivan didn’t even back an eye. He just leaned forward and handed the banker his card. “Sounds good.”

My mouth fell open. I knew that's why we'd come here, but I was still shocked that the guy could do it.

Mr. Winslow took the card and ran it through his back-end system. It only took a few seconds for the thing to pop up as approved, and suddenly, my parents weren't in debt to the bank anymore. My eyes stung with unshed tears that I was decidedly not going to let out.

"You know, while you're there, why don't you just run it for next month too? Make sure we're all in the clear since it's already the fifteenth."

The banker glared at Ivan, clearly unimpressed by his cocky, nonchalant attitude and unhappy that the card had been processed correctly.

"Very well."

The guy took the payment for the next month and then looked at me. "You're all set, Ms. McCormack. Thank you for using the Republic Bank of Chicago for your loan servicing needs."

"Umm, great. Thank you, too."

There was literally nothing else to do while we were there, so I stood up from the chair, Ivan doing the same, and then followed him out of the bank.

When we got to the car again, I was more than a little shell-shocked. Just like that, Ivan had paid off the bodega's debt, and he was prepared to keep offering up a hefty chunk of change to keep the thing afloat.

Something akin to jealousy burned in my chest. It was so easy for him to just pay it off. My parents, the entire family, had been struggling for years. Working tirelessly

day in and day out was our fucking norm. And Ivan...he just got what he wanted.

“You all right there, sweetheart? I’d have thought you’d be excited about being out of debt. But you’re staring at the dashboard like someone just kicked your puppy.”

Whipping my attention to him, I glared. “First off, what the fuck? Who kicks puppies? And don’t answer. Yes, I’m thrilled my family won’t be kicked out of their house and lose their business. Thrilled. But you just walked in there and did it like it was nothing. Do you know how hard we’d have to work to raise that kind of money ourselves? Because I do, and we still didn’t get it. Everything just seems so damn easy for you, and I can’t say I know what that’s like.”

I looked forward again, crossing my arms over my chest. “And for your information, I’ve never had a puppy or any pet for that matter. Too expensive.”

There was silence then, and Ivan sucked in an audible breath reaching for the navigational system again.

“Address, sweetheart. We still need to swing by your place and pick up a few things. Or would you like to skip that part now?”

The idea almost seemed tempting, but I’d be leaving without saying goodbye, and I couldn’t have that.

“1042 9 th Street.”

Apprehension gnawed at my guts as he entered the address, and we started driving. I needed to see my parents and the twins to say goodbye, but I still didn’t know how I was supposed to pull that off. And now, I felt so weirdly indebted to the man sitting next to me that my resolve to see this through actually...strengthened.

He had upheld his end of the bargain. Your turn, Adley. And you've never let someone down before.

My brain churned up useless idea after useless idea until the navigational system declared that we were about eight minutes away from the bodega. I couldn't think of anything to tell my parents, so I finally broke the silence of the car.

"What am I supposed to tell them? I can't exactly say that I'm going to be a mobster wife to save them insurmountable debt."

He glanced over as we sat at a red light. "You didn't tell them anything about meeting with me?"

"No, okay. I just said I was going out." Guilt stung in my chest, heavy and sickening. I never lied.

"Ha!" Ivan chuckled. "Well, you've gotten yourself into a little pickle there, haven't you?"

"Do you enjoy this?" I glared at him, knowing it was true and not enjoying it being pointed out. "Watching me suffer while you sit there and make jokes."

"Yes, actually," Ivan smirked.

"Ugh. Great. You're so helpful."

The light went green, and Ivan pulled through the intersection. Quickly flicking his eyes to me, he grinned—toothpick still in place.

"I am. Just paid for your rent, remember?"

I rolled my eyes. “Haha. Very funny. You’re my big hero.”

“Ooh, I think I like the sound of that.” There was something dark in his voice that made the hairs on my arms stand up.

“And,” he drawled, taking out the toothpick and pinching it between his fingers, “why don’t you tell them that you found a job as a live-in housekeeper, and I’m your new employer? I’ve offered a gracious signing bonus to have you start right away, and the pay is incredible. A true stroke of luck.”

My jaw went slack. That was actually a perfect suggestion. It covered the basis of why I wouldn’t be there, but they’d know they could still call me. And best of all, we knew that fancy rich people did that shit all the time.

We’d delivered to a few places where the housekeeper was the only person we ever saw. Apparently, rich folks also really enjoyed getting special imported food, even if it was just meat and butter from Ireland.

“See,” Ivan added, his smirk still cemented in place as he stuck the toothpick back between his teeth, “helpful.”

“You’re going to need to do something about,” I gestured at him, “that. My parents may be older, but they’re not dumb, and neither are my siblings.”

Ivan looked down at himself incredulously, the corners of his mouth turning down in a way that made my own tick up in a half-smirk. He was way too funny for his own good. Hell, for my own good.

“You don’t think a rich man looking for a housekeeper would wear a leather jacket?”

“Not one like that,” I countered.

He snickered, holding back the laugh to play into his role of being offended. But I was right, and he knew it. Ivan did not look like a rich man who could take care of our family's money troubles by hiring me to clean his massive estate. He didn't look like he owned a massive estate.

"Fine, fine. As it turns out, I have a change of clothes in here for those pesky situations where I need to be more...What was the term we used? Oh, right. Discreet."

He winked at me, and damn my stupid heart for the way it skipped a beat, loving the flirtatious way he teased.

"Right." I nodded. "Well, I imagine that you need to change quite often in your line of work. Can't just go shaking down business owners for a cut of their profits in jeans."

Ivan smiled over at me as we pulled onto my street, and there was something about it. We played off each other well. We both knew it. And the jokes and jabs we both exchanged landed so perfectly in sync that you'd have thought we planned them.

Mom calls it chemistry. And damn, we have it in spades.

"That's actually not my specialty. But if you need any dirt on someone, maybe an ex-boyfriend who needs his herpes diagnosis blasted all over the web, you know who to call."

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied, my voice low as I shook my head.

When he parked, I unbuckled myself and reached for the door handle, pausing just before I got out.

“I’ll wait for you outside while you change, Mr. Ustinov.”

His eyes darkened as he smirked all the harder. “Don’t leave on my account.”

I swallowed—hard, but somehow, I managed to school my expression. “I don’t think I’ll be missing anything.”

“Ouch.” He pulled off his leather jacket and stepped into the back seat of the large SUV. “Suit yourself.”

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I could tell Adley was nervous about speaking to her folks, and I usually wouldn't give one single solitary fuck. Still, that instant pull I'd felt toward her made it impossible for me to ignore her discomfort about speaking to them. Not enough to change what I was doing, however.

No. I needed Adley with me, craved it like an addict looking for their next fix, and I was not looking to go into rehab for this particular addiction. I'd gone once when I was younger, and frankly, it wasn't the group's holier-than-thou bullshit that got me to quit; it was my brothers.

So, not the point of this little endeavor, Ivan. Come on.

Straightening the jacket I'd throw on over a new button-down, I ensured my fly was zipped up and hopped out of the car to meet Adley standing on the curb outside the closed bodega.

The new outfit was a bit more appropriate for a businessman: a black suit jacket, pants, and a black shirt. Sure, I had no tie, and I still had a number of visible tattoos, but it did read a bit better, especially when I brushed my bangs forward to cover the broken glass tattoo on my forehead.

"All right, toots. Let's go."

Adley sighed as I stepped up to her, but when she turned to give me an appraisal, she actually looked surprised.

"You clean up pretty well." She reached for the buttons open on my chest. "But

maybe we do these up just a bit more.”

With a smirk, I let her up the “decency factor,” enjoying how close she was to me.

“You done?” I asked playfully.

Shaking her head, Adley stepped back, regarding me. “It’ll have to do. Please don’t...touch anything inside.”

“Ugh,” I scoffed. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Not in the slightest.”

The return was quick, and I bit back on the laughter that bubbled up my throat. Goddamn, playing with her was so fucking fun.

As we turned toward the brick building, I paid it more attention, running my gaze across the old signage and awning that had seen better days. The rusty red of the bricks was somewhat obscured by ivy that crawled up the side of the building, graffiti decorating parts of the building that I could see down the alley to the left.

It was a two-story building, and I could see an Irish flag hung in one of the windows and a box air conditioner in another.

The awnings over the front door and long side window were striped white and blue. They were a bit frayed on the ends, likely from the wind. The signs that hung in the window read, “McCormack’s Irish Grocer.”

They were a sunny yellow color, but they’d faded thanks to the actual rays of sunlight that beat down on them day after day. It sat right on the corner of their building, the storefront curving around that corner on two sides.

Smaller signs tucked into the bottom of the windows said, “delicatessen,” “groceries,” and “Irish favorites-bangers, meat, dairy.”

We walked to the front door, the neon sign turned off, and Adley stuck her key in to let us in.

“What? Not up to your standards?”

When I looked back at Adley, who’d pushed the door open to reveal the large room of rows upon rows of shelves, I shook my head.

“Hardly. It’s...I get it. I can see the years of love put into the place.”

She looked a bit shocked, and I took advantage of the opportunity and pushed my way past her and inside.

The shelves in the shop were all spaced out evenly, their contents nearly overflowing—canned goods, paper goods, and several different bottles of what I guessed were oils and sauces. Off to the left was the main counter, where the cash register sat next to a cooler case showcasing meats and what I assumed were butter and cream cheese packages.

There was even a small eating area right near the front window up to my left and a cooler on the far right that held beers and other chilled drinks.

It was quaint, and it was really fucking weird to actually see something that fit that description. My life was anything but, after all.

The jingle of bells rang out behind me as Adley stepped through and closed the door behind her. She relocked the door and followed me deeper into the shop, leading the way to the back. There was another small table there, and I noticed teacups and loose-

leaf set out in the center.

“What’s that all about?”

“Oh,” Adley chuckled through a sigh, “my mom likes to do tea leaf readings. It’s a dumb tradition from Ireland.”

“Do people go for that?” I cocked a brow as she regarded the table with a pained expression.

“Yeah, sometimes.” She quickly shook herself out of it. “Let’s get this over with.”

I gestured toward the other door I could see in front of her, which probably led to the second floor.

“After you, sweetheart.”

“Please stop calling me that. At least around them.”

Smirking, I just nodded. Adley opened the door, and a steep set of stairs led to the next story. It was hard to imagine her folks, who I assumed were likely in their upper sixties, walking up and down them every day.

When we reached the top, Adley stopped, holding her hand back toward me to keep me from going further in. I took the hint and let it slide for now. Getting her out of this place smoothly was going to make things easier for me in the long run, anyway.

I watched as she crossed the small living area to the kitchen, which was in the far corner and had no wall to keep it separated from the front room. A woman stood before the stove, cooking what I assumed were potatoes, by the smell.

“Hey, Mom.” She turned around, facing Adley and giving her a big hug. “Where’s Dad and the twins?”

Adley’s mother smiled, gesturing to the short hallway on the other side of the house.

“Dad’s just lying down. He had a hard delivery, and the twins are in their room. Why?”

Just as Adley was about to reply, her mother’s attention landed on me, and I offered a nod of hello.

“I have some news. Good news, actually.” Adley looked between her mother, who stared at me, and the hallway at my back. “This is Mr. Ustinov. I think we should get them, though.”

Her mother nodded, eyeing me hard before she looked back at Adley. “All right, hun. Go ahead. I’ll wait with our guest.”

Adley passed me quickly as she went down the hallway, which offered three doors. She went to the farthest end first, opening the door and calling for Molly and Ryan to come to the living room.

As I looked back at her mother, I was surprised to see the woman had walked much closer to me. Her glare rakes across my body like she is studying for weaknesses. I liked her.

“Mrs. McCormack, I assume. Pleasure to me you.”

She narrowed her stare, folding her arms over her chest. “Russian, huh? Are you going to hint at what this is all about?”

I smiled, holding up my hands briefly like I was surrendering to her. “Adley can explain, but I’ll say it’s about a job. No funny business.”

That was, of course, a lie, but I watched as her mother relaxed just a hair.

“All right then,” she nodded, still eyeing me, “and it’s Eleanor.”

“Pleased to meet you, Eleanor. As Adley said, I’m Mr. Ustinov. But you can call me Ivan.”

Eleanor nodded again, the gesture working as her default as she studied me. “Ivan.”

“Okay, now what’s this all about.”

The voice that came from behind me was low and deep, a touch of his Irish accent peeking through. This would be Mr. McCormack, then.

As I turned around to face the hall, I saw the older man walk up behind Adley, with her younger siblings following after. They were clearly twins with similar facial features, almost identical, even though they were fraternal twins.

The girl, Molly, was a bit shorter than her brother. While they did look related because of that bone structure, that’s where their similarities ended. Molly had dark hair that hung in thick waves to her shoulders and deep brown eyes to match. She had a comparable complexion to Adley, fair and freckled, but her undertones were cool where Adley’s were warm.

Ryan, the boy twin, was the exact same—dark hair and eyes, fair skin with a smattering of freckles, and a soft pink undertone to his skin. He was taller than Molly but still shorter than the elder McCormack, who, even hunched, had an inch or so on him.

“Adley, who’s this?” Mr. McCormack asked, and he stepped past me to his wife.

The man wrapped his arm around her protectively, and while Eleanor smoothed herself against his side, she still stood tall, her gaze not leaving me. They were quite the pair, and I could see where Adley got her attitude from.

“Dad, this is Mr. Ivan Ustinov.” Adley crossed in front of me to stand halfway between her parents and me, the twins sneaking behind her to stand on their folks’ other side. “Ivan, this is my dad, Conall McCormack.”

I nodded, offering a hand that Conall shook with surprising strength, considering I’d just heard he’d been lying down. I could sense the pride behind that shake, and it was clear he wasn’t about to let himself look weak. I liked him, too.

“Mr. Ustinov.” He looked back at his daughter. “Adley, out with it.”

She chewed on her lip, her head ducking just for a moment before she looked up again with determination set on her features.

“I found a job.”

Her family collectively eyed her, shock registering in all of them.

“Mr. Ustinov has a large estate and was looking for a live-in housekeeper. I saw the ad online and thought I’d give it a shot. I didn’t want to get everyone’s hopes up if I didn’t get the job, but I did. And he’s being very generous, too.”

The McCormacks looked to me, and even for this hardened mafioso, it was a bit like being a bug under a microscope.

“Nonsense, Adley. I’m paying what it’s worth to hire you. I can’t do everything at the

estate myself and need someone to look after things while I'm away on business. I know how much of a task that is, and since I'm able to pay top dollar, why wouldn't I?"

"What is he paying you?" Eleanor asked, not looking at Adely but continuing to lock her gaze on me.

"Mother," Adley replied, clearly taken aback by the question.

"It's fine, Adley. You already told me about the financial burden you were looking to help with. I'm sure they'd like to know how this will benefit them."

My skin prickled. I wasn't unfamiliar with talking to people like this, and the truth was I'd had a pretty damn good education from tutors and the like, thanks to my own Russian bratva family's insistence on it. Still, I didn't use my "bullshit businessman" voice unless I needed to, and unfortunately, right now, I did.

"Adely will be receiving sixteen thousand a month, which includes funds for room and board. I've provided a signing bonus immediately of just over twelve thousand to get the payments on your bodega current."

The room was so quiet you could hear a fucking pin drop, and everyone in the room was guilty of letting their mouth fall open.

"You...That can't be right. You...You paid off our debts?" Eleanor's voice was shaky, and I could see the tremble snaking through her.

Conall pulled her closer, and he frowned at me. "If this is some scam."

"Please, call the bank and confirm for yourself."

Adley's parents stared at me, but her father held out his hand toward Adley, silently requesting the phone. She took the cordless handset out of its dock and placed it in her father's subtly shaking hand.

After a few moments on the phone, her folks realized I wasn't lying to them, and they both sat on the couch in shock. Eleanor's eyes were a bit glassy, and Molly had come up to her, kneeling in front of the sofa as she took her mother's hand.

"This is huge. Do you think...do you think we'll be able to save up for school then?"

"School?" I asked.

"The twins want to go to college in the next few years. And yes, Molly, you'll both be able to go with my paycheck," Adley replied. "And Ivan has some friends who love to support local businesses, so they'll probably be stopping by the bodega a lot to have lunch and stuff."

Smooth, Adley.

Her parents looked up at her from their position on the couch, and Adley stepped up to her father, holding his hand.

"You're leaving right away? It just feels so fast, but..." Conall glanced over at me before returning his attention to Adley. "I suppose if you think you'd like to work for him, then of course. With that help, I could hire Johnny from down the street to help at the shop. He's young and needs money for those movie games and whatnot."

"It's video games, Dad. And yeah, I'm sure he'll take you up on the offer if you tell him he can have a store discount. His mother is obsessed with the roast beef we get in."

He stood up, hugging Adley, and they both pulled back from the encounter with glassy eyes. It felt beyond awkward to be standing there for it, and I averted my gaze by focusing on the hallway where they'd come from.

"I'm going to go up to my room to pack a few things, but I'll be sure to call you guys when I get settled."

The entire family circled together around Adley, giving her a hug, and my chest did something weird as I watched from the corner of my eye. It wasn't a mystery that I didn't have much of that going for me, and really, it was only my brothers who I trusted like that.

Back in Russia, our father had been a particularly ruthless bastard in the bratva. His own men had taken him out, and we left, wanting nothing to do with them. We built up a name for ourselves—the Unholy Trinity—and used our skills to prove we were useful to the local bratva here in Chicago.

The Vadims were the closest thing we had to a family organization here, but we outsourced our skills to anyone who could pay.

Adley's situation wasn't anything like that. This was a real family who loved and respected each other, and taking her away from it...well, I almost felt guilty for half a second. But I was a bit of a bastard myself, and when I saw something I wanted, I took it.

"I'd be happy to help you get your stuff, Adley. The least I can do for taking you away from these lovely people is carry your bag."

I'd followed Adley up another set of obscenely steep stairs to a tiny attic space that

acted as her room. It was definitely cramped, but it was also littered with the things that symbolized who Adley was. There were a few knickknacks I could see that were probably given to her by family members—Irish momentos like small figurines and little flags—but the rest of the walls were covered in drawings.

“You really like to sketch, huh?”

She looked over at me from where she stood near her closet. There was a duffle bag on her bed, and Adley had already filled it quite a bit.

“Oh, yeah. I was... never mind.”

Turning back to her bag, Adley tossed in the pile of clothing she held and zipped the duffle shut.

“Okay, I’m all set. I just want to grab some stuff from the bathroom, and we can go.”

I cocked a brow at her, holding out my arm so that she couldn’t walk past me and out into the hall.

“Now, hold on there a minute. What was that all about? What ‘never mind?’”

Adley frowned, tilting her head as she huffed out a breath. “It’s not important. Let’s go.”

She pushed against my arm, but I wouldn’t budge. When Adley glared at me, I took her duffle and tossed it into the hall, putting myself between her and the exit. To her credit, Adley didn’t back down, and damn, did I love this dance between us.

“Tell me.”

“Why? It’s not important. Why won’t you just drop it.”

I smirked, still blocking the door with my arm, and I shifted in front of her when Adley tried to cut around to the other side.

“Just tell me.”

I could see the fury blazing behind Adley’s eyes, her frustration making her clench her jaw. She looked so adorable all worked up like that, and my cock twitched behind my fly.

“Ugh!” She threw up her arms, taking a step back. “I was going to go to art school. We couldn’t afford it. Now let’s fucking go already.”

Closing the distance between us, I took Adley’s chin in my grip, forcing those blue eyes to look up at me.

“So, she likes to draw, hmm?” I lowered my mouth toward hers, hovering just over her lips because I enjoyed teasing her too much to resist. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The moment hung, stretched, and taught like a bowstring. I admired the way she didn’t flinch, trailing my gaze over Adley’s face. I wanted so fucking badly to kiss her right then, but I knew myself too well.

I wouldn’t stop there, and when I fucked her, I wanted Adley to be able to scream my name.

But maybe just...

“Be quick in the bathroom, sweetheart. We have a date back at my place.”

Locking my eyes on her until I couldn't, I leaned past her lips and found the smooth skin behind her ear, buried behind those honey waves cascading down her back. I pressed my lips to the spot, absolutely living for the way Adley's breath shuddered out of her and her skin prickled with goosebumps.

As I walked away, I could just make out the hard shape of her nipples beneath her tank top.

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By the time Ivan and I were back in his car, and on our way to his house, I didn't know which was up or if the sky was, in fact, blue. That stunt he'd pulled in my bedroom still had my blood boiling in my veins.

He'd kissed me.

And yeah, it wasn't on the lips, but I had a feeling that was only because he enjoyed teasing me.

Well, two can play at that game, asshole.

But what was I thinking? I couldn't be like that with him. Ivan had upheld his end of the bargain, which was the only reason I was still going along with this ridiculous deal of his, but I was not giving myself to him.

Wife or not, I had my dignity, and as much as I'd just sold it away, I would cling to that card for as long as I could.

Still, some part of me knew that I was fighting a losing battle. Ivan was charming as hell, and I kind of hated that, sure, but I couldn't deny it. The way he talked that cocky, sarcastic air of his, I'd be lying if I said it wasn't at least a little attractive.

"We're almost there, sweetheart. So, you should probably know that it's not just us who'll be living in the house."

My heart skipped, stuttering before my pulse leveled out again. As it was, a light sweat touched my forehead, and I stiffened in my chair.

“I’m sorry, what?”

I knew I sounded annoyed, but I wasn’t going to be schooling how I sounded. If Ivan really wanted me all that much, he was going to have to get used to it.

He smirked, clearly amused by my panic. “I have two brothers that share the house with me.”

Relief flooded through me, cool as water on a hot day, and I didn’t want to examine why I was so glad that he didn’t have a house full of other women waiting for him. It wasn’t jealousy. Don’t be stupid.

“Brothers?” I raised my brows. “I assumed you were hatched.”

He laughed. “Like a bird?”

“Like a snake,” I countered.

Ivan refocused on the road, but I could see the lingering smirk he wore, and there was a not-too-small part of me that wanted to smack it off his face.

“Well, anyway, you’ll meet them soon enough, but I thought I’d give you a heads-up.”

“Thanks.” But my tone was short and dry as I stared forward through the windshield.

The faster I could get this part over with, the faster I could go to bed for the day and maybe wake up to a world where Ivan was bored with me already.

It was a long fucking drive, and my legs ached for a stretch after being cooped up in the car for so long. And yeah, Ivan had nice wheels, but there was nothing aside from walking around again that was going to get my ass to stop tingling.

We were way out past the edges of the city, where the houses stopped being lined up all next to each other in tight rows. We'd followed the interstate to where the fields began to stretch, no city blocks in sight, and that futile part of me that had hoped I might be able to escape back home was squashed.

"Jesus, you live in bumfuck nowhere."

Ivan laughed again, and every time he did, I cursed how wonderful it sounded.

"We wanted room to stretch our legs, so..."

He let it hang there as we pulled into an exceedingly long driveway. As the SUV rumbled over the gravel path, the rock crunching beneath the tires, I looked around the plot of land, which was populated by a fair amount of trees to provide more privacy.

What appeared at the end of the drive, where it curved back around on itself, was nothing like I imagined.

The tall three-story house featured thick black metal beams. They made up all the sections of the walls and roof, but what made my mouth hang open was the floor-to-ceiling windows between those beams. And in some cases, those ceilings stretched at least twenty feet up.

This odd combination of a traditional Victorian shape with a triangular pointed roof, a wrap-around porch on the second floor, and the modern industrial look of all those strong I-beams was spectacular.

“Holy shit.”

Ivan was laughing at me again, but I didn’t care. I was too struck by the enormity of the gorgeous house with all that glass. I could see into the floors, each room looking well furnished and somehow still cozy.

God, it’s a good thing they do have all these trees. Zero privacy without them.

My blood chilled at that thought. Ivan definitely had plans for what we might be doing behind those walls, and now that I knew he had two brothers, the idea of them seeing what we were up to had me feeling preemptive mortification.

My eyes roamed the rooms as we got out of the car, and Ivan grabbed my bag from the back.

From where I stood, there was a living room on the right side of the house, and I could see massive couches and what I guessed was a kitchen tucked behind it. Right in the middle was an enormous foyer, where I could see stairs heading up to the next floor. On the left side was another sitting area, and I could just make out a large dining table in the considerable spot behind that.

“Well, stop craning your neck. Let’s go in.”

I snapped my attention to Ivan, and the cat had thoroughly gotten my tongue because all I could do was nod. Following him, Ivan led me up to the main door, which was up a long set of stairs, and he pushed inside.

I was a little surprised the door wasn’t locked, but as I stepped in, I saw the security feed to my right behind the door. Ivan and his brothers could see everything around the property for at least a mile, so I guess they were covered.

The downstairs was how I'd see it as I came in. Still, I was again surprised to see that the furnishings were a combination of modern convenience and rustic, cabin-like style. Nothing looked too breakable or so ornate that it was sure to be horrendously uncomfortable.

The couches looked used, clean but plush and slightly worn. The large dark wood table across the house from it looked ready to entertain a fleet of hungry Russians, and now that I was inside, I could see a patio out the back of the house.

It was so much bigger than anything I'd ever seen before. A small house would fit there. Outside on it, I could see a seating area with a table, which had a tree growing through it, a large walkway that seemed to stretch around to the side of the house, and flickering with sunlight just below was—

“No way! You're on a lake?!”

“Yup, that's why we picked this spot.” Ivan set my bag down on a small table near the stairs. “Want to take a look before I show you to the master suite?”

I wanted to say no. I wanted to tell Ivan to get fucked for putting me in this position, but again, all I could do was nod.

We walked out onto the porch, if you could call it that, and indeed, it did sit right on the water. It was dark and cool back here, but when I looked to my left, there was another section of this outdoor space that went to an outdoor hot tub.

You couldn't get to that from this spot, though. It looked like a set of stairs from the second floor went directly down into the water, and speakers and rocks surrounded the jacuzzi.

Lush greenery came right up to the edges of the porch no matter where you were, and

when I turned around and looked up, I could see the bottom of the wrap-around porch on the second floor.

Ivan took me back inside, walking me up to the next floor as I tried to understand what I was seeing. This place was like a private oasis, and I felt wholly separated from the city I knew was just a forty-five-minute drive away.

The second story was just as open and wall-less as the first. There was a section off to either corner where I could see actual doors, but aside from that, it was an expanse of wood, glass, and light.

There were several more seating areas, and at the back wall on my right was a pool table and gaming lounge. On the other side was a sunken-in living area, with the couch built right into the floor. Several industrial-style bookshelves surrounded that area, filled to the brim.

“And what’s this?”

A deep male voice called out from near the pool table. When I spun on my heel in that direction, I saw a tall man—obviously related to Ivan—coming from the patio on this floor. He was followed by another man who clearly looked like the other two, and I had to assume these were his brothers.

“This is our new resident, boys. Adley, this is Abraham.” I looked at the tall guy leading the way in and nodded.

He had lighter hair like his brother, but where Ivan’s eyes were a gray-blue like a storm, Abraham’s were green and bright. He was littered with just as many tattoos, and he sauntered over for a handshake, looking as though he could just as soon kill me as shake my hand.

“So, this is who wrapped my brother’s cock around her finger.”

“Fucking hell, Abe. Shut it.”

Ivan shoved his brother playfully, and Abraham took it all in stride, knocking him on the shoulder before walking away toward the stairs.

“Nice meeting,” Abraham called over his shoulder, his hand raised in a wave. “I need food.”

Left a bit turned around, I glanced over at the other man who’d come in from outside. He was just as tall as the others but somehow... darker—in every sense of the word.

The guy’s hair was a much deeper brown, nearly black, and his entire being exuded a shadowy aura. If I believed in that shit. His muscles bulged underneath the fitted black shirt he wore, sleeves stretching to his wrists even though it was a warm spring day.

One of the most startling things about him was the scar that slashed across his chin down his neck in a jagged line. That nasty-looking old injury was just half the shocking finale, though, because the guy’s eyes were so pale greenish-brown that they looked almost...yellow.

“Adley, this is Vlad. Don’t expect the same greeting.”

I could guess that much. For as blunt as Abe had been, he was at least sort of friendly. Vlad did not look friendly in the slightest.

“And it’s not just because he’s an uptight prick. Vlad doesn’t talk.”

My stare flicked from Ivan back to his brother. “Oh, well. Sorry about that, I guess.

Umm, nice to meet you.”

When in doubt, always go with kindness.

Vlad regarded me, his oddly colored stare seeing into my bones. But just as quickly as he’d laser-focused on me, he blinked, nodding before he offered a short wave and went downstairs.

“Aww. I think he likes you.”

I glared over at Ivan as he smirked, but all he did was laugh, hoisting my bag up on his shoulder again and nodding at another set of small stairs to my right that went up.

“What? We’re going to the attic?”

Dragging my feet just a bit, I followed Ivan toward the steps when he turned around and met me with that devastating grin of his again.

“We’re going to my room, sweetheart.” He cocked a brow. “Oh, excuse me. Our room.”

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I walked up the stairs that led to my bedroom. Oops, did it again. Our bedroom . Excitement bubbled through me like I was a fucking kid at Christmas or something. Not that we ever did that shit in my old house. Still, the feeling was electric, and the memory of being so close to Adley in her old room was still burning in my mind.

I was desperate to taste her again, and now that she was here, well, the hard part was over.

Sure, I still had a bit of explaining to do when it came to house rules and what exactly was going to be happening regarding my “work,” but dammit, I wanted to enjoy this. We were here, and that tight little body of hers was going to be mine soon enough.

Though teasing her is so damn fun.

As I approached the door leading to my private suite, I reached into my pocket for the key. We didn’t lock the front door much, but each of us had keys to our own rooms, which were a comfortable distance away from the others for noise reasons.

Being the oldest, I got the top room, and both Abraham and Vlad had to suck it. They’d been pretty pissed about it at first, but I knew what I had to do to buy them off—and it didn’t hurt to remind them that I encouraged my nighttime visitors to be loud.

“This needs a key? Seriously, you guys make no sense.”

“Don’t worry, your pretty little head, sweetheart. We keep the house nice and safe.”

I pushed open the door and stepped inside. As I walked to my bed, which sat on the right-hand wall, I tossed down Adley's duffle. She would be getting her things unpacked, and I wanted to see them all mixed up with my clothes, cementing her presence here.

It was an odd thought, but I wasn't going to question it. Not now, anyway. Like I'd already told myself, I wanted to enjoy this.

Adley climbed the last stair into the room, and her lips parted gently as she gasped. The tiny sound was barely loud enough to reach me, but there was no mistaking the awe painted on her face.

There wasn't much to this room aside from my bed and the dresser on the wall straight ahead of the door. Still, the bed itself was massive: a low platform with black wood as the base and deep gray sheets.

It sat on the only solid wall, red bricks spaced between the metal I-beams; the rest of the walls were all glass, like downstairs. From here, you could look out and see the entire valley where the house resided, nestled right against the lake in a sea of green and blue.

I loved it up here. Coming home after a long day to this made me feel like a person again. There was no point sugarcoating it to myself, and I had to admit that on most days, my job was messy and violent and a downright slog. This view? It made all the difference.

And you still have to explain a bit more about that to Adley.

"Well, I'll admit," Adley said quietly, walking up to the window across from my bed, "the view is spectacular."

I smiled. “Ain’t it just. But we’ll have time for that. Right now, why don’t you get unpacked.”

As much as that would typically be a suggestion, I knew that both Adley and I understood the command that it really was.

She glared that cheery expression on her face dying as she walked over to the bed and began to take out her things from the duffle. When she’d gotten through the first two shirts she brought, Adley looked over her shoulder at me, her brows knitted together.

“Are you just going to stand there and watch me dick around with clothes?”

Smirking, I folded my arms over my chest, leaning against the taller dresser next to me. “Yup.”

“Ugh,” she grumbled, returning to her task.

What Adley pulled out from the bag was far from girly. The growing pile of clothes was mostly black, with a splash of red plaid and blue denim. I noticed the way she kept the jeans and leggings folded but opened the shirts. She was clearly going off motor memory, which was an odd little window into who she was.

Adley hung her shirts and folded her pants—it was just a dumb thing to know about a person, but it felt weirdly intimate.

“Where am I supposed to put these, then?” She turned to me, her arms full of folded pants.

I knew the dresser likely made more sense, but it was full of tactical gear, and the bottom drawer held weapons, so that was a no-go. I leaned over, opened the closet, and gestured inside.

Inside was a sizeable island-like counter in the center of the space, which was decked out in a similar deep wood across all the walls and floor. It had a few drawers, only one of which was being used for my socks and boxers.

“Second drawer down.”

Adley nodded, her eyes still narrowed on me as she stepped in. When she reached the counter, she pulled out the second drawer and laid her pants inside. I was half-tempted to shut the door behind her and trap her in there for a while, just for fun.

But “good sense” got the better of me, and I let it go, allowing her to exit and grab the shirts waiting for her on the bed. As she went back for them, I scanned the remaining contents in her bag from where I was standing. It looked like she’d brought another pair of shoes—sneakers that had seen better days—and that was it.

Two pairs of shoes? There goes that myth about girls and footwear.

Still, I had to remind myself that Adley was coming from meager finances prior to my involvement.

Adley walked past me as I regarded her and went straight to the racks of hanging tees of my own. There was a section at the far left that wasn’t as full as the others, and she took a few of the hangers there and hung up her shirts. Shoving them to the side, Adley was sure to maintain a healthy distance between her stuff and mine.

No, no, no.

Stalking up behind her, I reached over her head, smelling the remnants of her shampoo, and slid the two halves of clothes together, getting things good and snuggled.

I could feel Adley bristle as my chest brushed across her back, and she spun around, suddenly boxed in by me, and met my eyes hard.

“Seriously? Are you really expecting me to just be so damn thrilled about this and melt for you? Because it won’t happen.”

Gripping the pole that held the hangers, I looked down at her with a smirk. I stood quite a bit taller than Adley, and as she stared at me, those soft blue eyes blazing, I sensed how my sheer presence pressed down on her. She swallowed, refusing to duck her gaze away, and my cock twitched at the defiance.

Fuck, I’m looking forward to giving that ass a good spanking.

Leaning in a hair more so that my lips ghosted over Adley’s skin as she turned her face away, I lowered my voice, knowing that the only person in the world who could hear me was her.

“I promise you, sweetheart, you’ll melt. But I have no problem breaking you beforehand.”

I could feel her shiver against me, a sweet blush filling her freckled cheeks as those full, full lips parted just enough to let out a shaky breath. She had a tiny dimple on her chin, barely a thing at all, but each part of her seemed to combine to make this insanely appealing package.

Her wavy locks fell across her shoulders and down her back to her waist, her fucking button nose, the delicate sheen of tan to her skin that contrasted with the darker brows that sat above her denim blue eyes.

Fucking masterpiece.

“I...” Adley still wasn’t looking at me, and I was more than happy to stand right here, towering over her. “I...I have a few more things to put away.”

She quickly ducked under my arm and went straight to the duffle she’d been working on. I could practically see the steam coming off, and I could guess how much she tripped between those slender thighs of hers.

I have never had so much fun in my life.

As Adley took out the last little pouch from the duffle bag, the shit she’d grabbed from the bathroom, I stepped out of the closet, shutting the door and taking up my place next to the dress as I flicked off the light inside.

It surprised me a bit that the contents she’d brought for the bathroom were nearly as extensive as her clothes altogether. But I could guess that taking care of all that hair took some doing.

It looked like two smaller bags, and I watched Adley fumbling with them to keep a hand on both. I could have obviously lent a hand, but watching her struggle with that was too much entertainment to pass up.

I chuckled quietly, and her eyes landed on me over her shoulder in a stern glare.

“Sure, just stand there. It’s not like I couldn’t use—”

From between the two smaller bags, something tiny slipped to the floor. I wouldn’t have made a deal about it, but then I saw the look in Adley’s eyes. They went wide, her eyebrows shooting up to her hairline. More of that pink flooded her cheeks, and I could tell she was embarrassed. Mortified even.

She scrambled to pick the thing up before I could see it. Unfortunately for Adley, I

was quicker than she was, and I wasn't trying to manhandle two full pouches of bathroom shit.

Snatching the small box from the ground, I pulled up what looked like a thing of over-the-counter medicine. But then I looked closer, reading the description until the brand name, Opill. I pulled open the top flap and took out the only remaining sleeve pills. A neat set of rows were all lined with that typically aluminum backing, a few pills already punched out.

“And what do we have here?”

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Oh my fucking God. You've got to be kidding me. What the hell is my luck right now?!

My heart slammed against my ribcage like it was trying to reach for the box itself, desperate to take the thing back and hide it away from Ivan's critical glare. As I stood there, my throat constricting and frozen, Ivan held my fucking birth control pills in his hand.

"I..."

But what the hell was I supposed to say? Of course, I brought them. I mean, what if he wanted me to...okay, I didn't want to go there just yet. But it wasn't like I was an idiot. Ivan had been very clear about me living with him and his plans to make me his wife. I know what wives usually do with their husbands. I'm not a four-year-old.

So, I thought it better to be prepared. I mean, yeah, I wasn't planning on letting that shit just happen, but I also wasn't sure exactly what kind of choice I was going to have in the matter. Ivan didn't necessarily seem like the type to... force me, but again, better safe than fucking sorry.

Oh, and there's that little thing you don't want to admit, Adley. That you'd like him to—

I cut off the thought, trying and failing to meet Ivan's eyes.

"Look," I managed to squeak out, flicking my stare to Ivan before quickly ducking it down again, "it's mine. Just...give it back."

Silence hung as my mind continued to churn through possibility after possibility. I wasn't sure how long before this whole "marriage" thing happened anyway, and maybe Ivan would be changing his mind after he spent a few annoying days with me. At least, that was my unspoken plan.

But as I forced myself to make eye contact with him, all I could see on Ivan's face was a dark expression I hadn't seen him wear before. It made a shiver run down my spine, and as I reached for the box, futilely hoping he'd give it to me, Ivan yanked his hand back while shooting out his other to grip me around the throat.

I gasped, tension ricocheting through my body to make every muscle lockdown. Ivan lowered his face closer to me again, boxing me in under the weight of his size and personality. Just like in the closet and my bedroom before that, my body betrayed me, a sinful core of my being enjoying the way Ivan manhandled me.

What the hell is wrong with you, Adley?

"You will not be getting these back," he ground out through gritted teeth.

I could see his easy-going composure crack, pressure from within him making that cheery exterior crumble. I had only seen one side of him. This was the other half of the Ivan coin, the one that landed down on most occasions, the one he only pulled out when it was the right moment.

Apparently, that moment was now.

"Ivan, I—"

His fist squeezed tighter, cutting off my words. "These will be going straight down the toilet, sweetheart."

As if to nail home the point even more, Ivan pressed in, dragging his nose across my neck as he moved his lips over my ear. His breath skittered across my skin, causing goosebumps and a tiny whimper that I wished to pull back as soon as it escaped.

He growled with his lips touching my ear, his words rumbling out in the deepest tone. “I will have every bit of you, and that includes your ability to carry my child.”

My body shook despite myself, and the feeling of his lips on me did something I wasn’t prepared for. I was reeling, my brain short-circuiting. There was something about him being close like that, of having him pressed to this vulnerable part of my neck that made my thighs clench together, my core weeping with arousal.

I’d clearly lost my damn mind, but that was the thing about doing so. I was powerless to fight it.

“Do you understand me, sweetheart?”

With nothing else to do, my voice gone, I nodded.

“That’s a good girl. And just in case you forgot,” his breath still wafted over my skin, his lips touching my throat as he moved his thumb from my neck to the pad of my bottom lip, “I got you out of this deal. That’s what I want. That’s what I’ll be owning.”

Ivan’s thumb pulled my lip down, then dipped into my mouth, hooking on my bottom teeth. I quivered where I stood, unsure if I wanted him to back the fuck up or keep going with his exquisite torture.

“Don’t pretend you don’t want it, either.” His head tipped down, his forehead touching my shoulder, and I heard him suck in a deep breath. “I can see those perky nipples of yours straining through your shirt, Adley. There’s no hiding how badly you

want me to corrupt you.”

As Ivan lifted himself back, still holding my face, he met my eyes, which I knew were wide as saucers in my face.

“And I will be doing so. Soon. Right now,” he held up the birth control, flicking his eyes to it briefly, “it looks like I have some disposing to do.”

I didn’t even know who this guy really was or if what he did for a living was as illegal as I imagined. Still, my entire being thrummed with the need to let him take me, to open myself up to his assault and ride the incredible waves until I was too gone to stand.

Over your head. You’re in so over your head, Adley.

“And you’re going to help me.”

“I’m what?”

But Ivan didn’t bother with an answer. Instead, he spun me around in his grip, holding me out in front of him, and marched me toward a room at the back of his master suite. I had to assume it was the bathroom, and I was proven correct as Ivan directed me inside and turned me sharply around the corner into the little room that was made just for the toilet.

He held me there, standing before the thing, then angled my head down with his thumb.

“Open the lid.”

I was shaking. I could barely tell if this was real, but somehow, I found it within me

to do as he said. I opened the lid, and the water inside the bowl reflected the light.

Before I could ask another stupid question, Ivan slapped the packet of pills into my hand with a loud thwap .

“Punch them out. Every. Single. One.”

I didn't know if it was the shock or something else, but I didn't cry. I didn't shake my head or try to fight against him. I just held the thing of BC in my hands and started punching the tiny pills out of their packet and into the toilet.

They hit the water with little plinking sounds, and I just kept going until they were all gone, even the sugar pills. When the container was empty, I held it up for Ivan to see the evidence.

“Good girl.” I blushed, my veins roaring with fire. “Now, flush.”

Reaching for the handle was difficult with Ivan's grip on the back of my neck, but I strained forward, just landing the edges of my fingers on it. When I had enough of a hold on the lever, I pulled down, sending the birth control pills into the sewer.

Ivan was pressed up against my back in the next moment, his erection digging into my ass. It was insane to think that I was the reason this intimidating man was aroused, that my dumb self had him hard as a damn rock.

Clearly, that insanity was two-fold because I adored it for some stupid reason. I loved knowing that I made Ivan like this. For as little physical control as I had, I had this. My presence, my being, was enough to get this hardened man thinking of nothing else than taking me.

That was fucking intoxicating.

His lips found my ear again as Ivan pressed in over my shoulder. “That’s very good, sweetheart. And damn, I am just so excited to see what you look like fucked raw and bred with my seed.”

It was the dirtiest thing that had ever been said to me. My entire body shuddered, my pussy clamping down around nothing. I wasn’t going to survive in this house the way I thought. In fact, nothing about his “deal” was how I thought it would be, and not for the first time, I knew I’d gotten in way over my head.

Ivan spun me around again, making me face him, and holy shit, that was just as powerful as having to watch those little pills drift down the drain.

“Sweet, sweet, Adley. How good will you taste, hmm?”

Lowering his face to mine once more, Ivan hovered his lips over mine. He was so damn close. Was he finally going to kiss me? God, did I want him to? Hell, torture, tantalizing torture, this was all of that.

Featherlight, not truly a touch, Ivan’s bottom lips hushed over mine. Slick dripped from my slit, and I whimpered in his hold.

“It’s going to be very fun to find out.”

I felt his words as he spoke, warm breath rushing over my lips and making them hum. Shit, my entire body was humming, thrumming with need for this sadistic man.

And then he just pulled away.

Ivan left me there so quickly that I actually stumbled forward. Shocked to my core, I sank to my knees, listening to the sound of Ivan’s steps taking him farther and farther away. When I couldn’t hear anything more, I shuddered in a deep breath—alone in

the tiny room for the toilet with an empty contraceptive packet clutched in my grip.

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My blood was pumping faster than it had the last time I had to get out quickly from a job. The adrenaline lacing my veins was a potent drug that zinged through me like an electric current. I was having way too much fun in there, and I honestly didn't know who the fuck I was anymore.

I enjoyed commanding things in the bedroom as much as any dominant type, but that had been...different.

Adley's presence brought out something raw and primal within me, something that demanded to have every inch of her inside and out. She was mine to possess, to claim, to keep, and God have mercy on the fucker that stood between me and what was mine.

Mine .

The thought reverberated through my skull, strong as a punch to the head. Seriously, who the fuck am I right now?

Shaking my head, I shut the door behind me and paused there on the steps, resting my hand against the cool wood of my door. Everything inside me ached to go back inside and take what was rightfully mine, but I'd also felt my phone buzz in my pocket.

I didn't get messages unless it was necessary.

I sucked in a deep breath, reaching for my cell as I jogged down the stairs to the main area on the second floor. When I glanced at the text, I saw it was from Lev. He was still concerned about what that fucker Pavel had started with his successful, if brief,

ascension.

Brief because the asshole was buried six feet under, thanks to yours truly and a well-placed shot from his daughter.

And he had good reason to be. That asshole had nearly started his own criminal organization within the span of a few months. Talk about climbing the ladder. Pavel had gone from loan shark to bonafide problem way too quickly, and it was instilling a lot of descension in the ranks.

Hell, he'd nearly killed Lev, and if it weren't for that new bride of his, my boss would be six feet under. I couldn't blame the guy for wanting to quell any remaining unrest—and fast.

While it didn't look like many Dons were still shopping the market, as it were, there were still a few lower-ranking organizations in the area looking to capitalize on any challenge to Lev's status.

Particularly Tommy Donovan.

The Irish mobster had been searching for a way to take down Lev since he rose up to Don, and these days, he was working every angle in a bid for power.

My steps hit the stairs hard, echoing down the small stairwell that only went to my room. I hoped that Abe and Vlad were still downstairs so we could chat. Knowing Abe, though, it was a fifty-fifty chance. He usually liked to be gone when I brought the rare woman back to the house.

Thankfully, my brothers were both at the pool table when I reached the second floor. A low smack sounded as Vlad knocked his last solid ball into the pocket, and I grinned. Asshole just has the eight-ball now.

“I hate to say this, Abe, but I think you lost.”

Turning over his shoulder to glare at me, Abe ran his tongue along his teeth as he slowly raised his hand. When it was level with his face, he flipped me off. I just laughed, and then the sound of Vlad sinking the last shot sounded behind him.

Abe looked down at the pool table and sighed, tossing his cue onto the black felt surface.

“Well, fuck.”

Vlad stood up from taking his last shot. He barely smirked, but that was pretty typical for the guy. As I walked over to the table, Abe leaned against it and folded his arms over his chest while Vlad circled around to the same side.

They both stood there for a moment, just staring at me.

“What?” I grumbled, already annoyed with their answer.

“Hasn’t been long since the last one. I would have thought your appetite was satisfied for a while.”

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. “Thank you for the astute observation, Abe. But that’s not why I’m here. Lev is concerned about Donovan. He wants us to step up the attention.”

“Sure,” Abe said, raising his brows innocently as the corners of his mouth turned down.

“That’s it? We’re going to be out for at least the entire day tomorrow running down Lev’s laundry list of leads, and you give me ‘sure.’”

He licked his lips, unmoving otherwise. “Yup.”

Clearing my throat, I looked between my brothers, not buying this no-comment bullshit for a second.

“Great.” I hesitated, chewing on the inside of my cheek. “My guest will be staying here while we’re out, so...we may want to lock up the more sensitive shit.”

Abe and Vlad both stared at me, their eyebrows raising as they exchanged a quick look with each other and then returned their glares to me. I wasn’t about to ask because I really didn’t care about the fucking answer, but Vlad went to his pocket, pulling out his phone.

I waited for him to type something out in his notes app. We’d all learned to give Vlad the time he needed because he’d make you feel like shit well enough without speaking if you didn’t. Abe and I silently agreed that we’d always give Vlad the space he needed to express himself.

And I only ever ignored his messages when I was truly pissed.

He held out his cell, and I took it with a long sigh.

“Why do we have a woman staying here? Morning-after walks of shame are one thing, but this?”

My stare circled up to the ceiling again, and I handed the thing back to Vlad.

“Because I want her here. End of story.”

Abe picked up on what Vlad had asked. We had both gotten pretty good at it, actually, and he regarded me with a bored smirk.

“You’ll excuse us if we’re a little...surprised. It’s not like you to want ‘em around for longer than they’re useful. And need I mention that a stranger in the house equipped with enough arms to take out the military might not be the smartest move?”

“As I said, Abe,” my words eeked out through gritted teeth, “lock up the shit that she shouldn’t play with. She’s not going anywhere. For the foreseeable future.”

I tried to leave, but that bombshell hit with enough force to knock Vlad and Abe off their asses and into motion. Abe stepped in front of me, blocking my way downstairs to get a much-needed drink, and Vlad posted up on my side so that I couldn’t just head in the other direction.

“Move, Abe.”

“Oh-ho, no. You’re not getting away with that one so easily. Foreseeable future? The fuck does that mean?”

Vlad grumbled low, his version of a “yeah, that.”

My heart was pounding again, and for a much less fun reason. I didn’t know how to talk about this shit regarding Adley with either of my brothers and while I knew they had every reason to question me, I was leaning toward the “put that conversation off” route.

“Look,” I met Abe’s eyes, trying for my usual cocky confidence, “Adley will be living here. So get used to it, or get out.”

Abe’s brows sank low over his eyes as he clenched his jaw. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him ball his hands into fists, and he cocked his head as he held my stare: shit , good job, Ivan.

It was Abe's quintessential "I'm about to fuck you up" pose, and I knew I'd managed to piss him off, which wasn't my intention. Not really. I just wanted the guy to drop it.

"You're risking us for some cheap piece of ass?" He bit out.

Everything inside me snapped; my rational mind kicked to the fucking curb.

There were a rare few moments when my brothers and I actually fought. I could count them on one hand. We were siblings, after all, and it was bound to happen occasionally, particularly when you lived with the grumpy bastards.

Still, they were my family above all things, and we'd stuck together through thick and thin since we left Russia. Our father had been a piece of shit, and we'd all outgrown his unique form of corporal education. Once he'd managed to kill our own mother with his temper, we were out.

Abe and I were a bit older when it happened. Vlad though. He'd been lovingly referred to as "the mistake" by Dear Old Dad because it was clear that the fucker hadn't meant to knock up our mom that time.

With us, Igor Ustinov had wanted to sow his seed and flood the world with little carbon copies of himself. It hadn't worked, clearly, so he'd stopped trying. Vlad's arrival after that was, of course, a bit of a surprise. You know, as much as unprotected sex leading to a pregnancy can really be considered a surprise.

However, it meant that when he'd lost his shit on a drunken bender, Vlad had still been small. He was playing with our mother when it happened. Hell, Abe and I had barely gotten him out of the line of fire.

Considering what he witnessed, let's just say that if I'd been him, talking would have

seemed too much to me, too.

After that, we'd left—the three of us and nothing else.

But we made a name for ourselves. We dealt justice to people who appeared unstoppable, and we chose an alliance with the Vadims based on mutual understanding and respect. We were a team, a family. Unbreakable.

Except, of course, for right fucking now.

Faster than anyone untrained, I shot forward, pinning Abe to the wall behind him with my forearm pressed into his jugular. My blood roared hot in my veins, drowning out any other sound, and I zeroed my focus on Abe's eyes going wide, veins filling up the white as he struggled to breathe.

“You will not say shit about her again. Am I clear?”

Abe struggled against me, scowling harder than I'd seen him do in quite some time. A hard yank jerked the arm that was pinning Abe, and I distantly understood that Vlad was trying to pull me off him.

Still, my brother decided to remain quiet. I knew I'd left him enough room to speak, and for several long moments, we just glared at each other. The room was deadly silent, pins dropping and jaws clenching were loud as gunshots in the space.

“I can wait here all day, asshole. How long do you think you can keep this up?” I lowered my face a hair closer to Abe's. “I, for one, am loving this shade of blue on you.”

It was still about twenty seconds before Abe exhaled hard, and I felt the tension go out of his chest.

“Understood,” he gritted out.

I shoved against him, pushing myself away as I pressed him into the wall one more time for good measure.

He didn’t break eye contact, just glaring away as the color moved from his chest and neck to his face. Abraham was no softy, and as “Irish twins,” the fucker had been right there next to me for as long as I could remember. The fifteen months that separated us often landed me in the same grade as my younger brother, and we both fucking hated it.

Until, of course, we’d both been yanked from public education when we were ten. Couldn’t let the government teach his kids, The Old Man would say.

Vlad moved to stand near Abe, glaring right back at me, and for the guy who never picked a damn side, I was actually a bit surprised.

Ugh. The aggression was probably uncalled for. Not backing down now, though. But...

“Sudden change. I get it. But she’s here.” I looked between them both. “So, watch what you say to my wife.”

With that, I left. Adley needed to know about tomorrow, and I was done with this conversation.

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The growing well of nausea and insecurity that swarmed my guts like bees grew every passing second. This room, the entire fucking house, was like a goddamn dream that someone else should be living. I couldn't stop staring at the incredible view, and still...

I clutched the empty package of birth control in my hands. I hadn't even moved from where I'd managed to shuffle over to the bed. Nothing in my brain made sense right now, as oddly juxtaposed as the scenery and the darkness I'd seen come off Ivan in an all-encompassing wave.

"Umm..."

I didn't really want to say anything, not even to myself, but I needed to break the silence that still hung over the room. It pressed down too effectively, and I just couldn't stand it anymore.

Nearly laughing at the ridiculousness of my thoughts, a shuddering breath left me instead, and I slowly stood up from the bed. I was unsure where I was going; my body just moved, and I ambled around. Eventually, I found myself in the bathroom again.

The room with the toilet and tiny trash can was right there.

I stepped inside, holding my hand over the small garbage as I pressed down the lever with my foot. After a few seconds, I open my fingers. They shook as the useless container fell into the bin.

What in the absolute hell is my life?

A buzzing sound shook the stagnant air, and I realized my phone was vibrating. It stopped as soon as I heard it, suggesting a notification or text message.

Mom?

Speed suddenly felt important, and I hurried back to the bed, not sitting on it but sliding down onto the floor next to it as I grabbed my forgotten phone. Flicking open the screen to indeed a new text, I quickly saw that it wasn't from my mother but from Dad. I frowned, my brows pinching together.

He didn't text hardly ever.

Hey Sunshine. I just wanted to tell you again how truly grateful we all are. Mom and the twins. Me. You've saved this family. SUCH BIG TIME. The twins say thank you, too. They're excited to start school when the time comes and say you have to BTS shop with them? I don't know what that means. Love you.

I giggled lightly as the tears streamed down my face. Dad constantly texted like an English professor or something. Periods, commas, etc. It was hilarious...and I suddenly missed it like I wouldn't see it again.

Which is ridiculous. Ivan said you could see them.

"Such big time," I murmured—our little catchphrase.

Holding the phone between my hands, my thumbs poised at the ready, I tried to think of what to say. I couldn't exactly tell Dad I was having second thoughts or that, apparently, he was going to be a grandpa at some point.

My heart thudded against my ribs, and I sighed. They...they needed me. And I would not let them all down.

Of course, Dad. Sorry, it was so abrupt. I just wanted to act quickly. Ya know? I love you. Tell Mom and the twins the same. I'm beat. Heading to bed.

I hit send and set the phone down, not bothering to look for the delivered notification or read one, for that matter. I was actually tired—tired of trying to process what exactly was happening and why Ivan still intrigued me.

“Clear your head. You need to just reset, Adley.”

Looking around the room again, I tracked the room in a circle, from the view in front of me to the wall with the closet and bathroom doors to the bricks behind the bed. I knew I shouldn't leave, and I didn't really want to chance going downstairs and running into Ivan or his scary-ass brothers.

My clothes were put away, and I winced a little at the memory. I wasn't going to sleep and wasn't hungry enough to go for the granola bar I'd snuck into my duffle.

“Sooo...”

I eyed the room again, and my attention landed on the bathroom. Through the open door, I could see the massive claw-foot tub in the middle of the far wall. There was a little tray that sat in the middle of the thing, dark wood and holding a washcloth and a candle. It seemed incredibly unlikely that Ivan used the thing much, but damn, a bath sounded really good to me right now.

Getting up off the floor, I tossed my phone on the nightstand and walked into the cooler bathroom. My steps were light on the white marble floor, and I proceeded straight to the tub, turning on the faucet.

The sound of rushing water filled the silence, and without breaking eye contact with the liquid filling the bath, I began to strip. Each layer I peeled away felt like releasing myself from the weight of the day, and before I knew it, I was standing naked in a pile of clothes.

I leaned over, moving the tray closer to the faucet so that I could step inside the tub. A tiny bottle was there, and I picked it up, realizing that it was a bubble bath.

“Huh.”

I poured some in. I didn’t understand why Ivan had it, but I wanted it all the same. As the foamy bubbles churned into being, I bundled my hair up in my hands, twisting it over and over until it naturally coiled in on itself. Taking the hair tie from my wrist, I secured my hair to keep it out of the water.

Returning my attention to the tray, I looked at the candle. Next to it was a silver lighter—the classic kind with a lid that flicked on and off. I stepped into the water, goosebumps rushing over me as I lowered myself down and picked up the lighter.

Holding it to the wick, I noted that it wasn’t white, char covering a little portion of the end. He’d used it at some point, and I didn’t really want to consider why. Guys usually did that shit when they were “entertaining” women, and the idea made my stomach turn over.

I shook it off, not wanting to examine that emotion any more than I already had. Soft light filled the dim bathroom, and I set the lighter back down before leaning back against the tub.

Bubbles wafted around me as the tub filled. They covered the entire surface, and then I used my foot to turn the faucet off. I was glad that it only had one handle, unlike back home, where there was a hot and a cold knob.

Silence crept back in. The only sounds were my breathing and the gentle flicker of the candle. As the water filled up, I realized how deep the tub was. There wasn't an overflow drain at the top near the faucet, either. I was able to fill the tub right up to the brim.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the way the warm water felt on my skin and muscles. Everything was so tense, and that slowly began to bleed away as the therapeutic heat sunk in.

"Ahh," I sighed, "at least you can always count on a bath, huh, Adley?"

A mirthless chuckle left me, and I was so damn tempted to slip under the water. Still, I wasn't ready to deal with the trouble that would cause, thanks to my hair, so I just reached up for my face, scrubbing my wet hands over my skin.

The memory of Ivan right up behind him, his obvious erection pressing against me, swirled in my head. I couldn't believe that had happened on so many levels. He'd been hard when he touched me, and I couldn't deny the way he'd been looking at me since we first spoke.

Ivan had also been a bit terrifying, and I could peg the exact moment that the feminism had left my body when he'd made me flush those pills, and my pussy still wept with excitement.

Seriously, Adley. What is wrong with you?

I couldn't deny how I felt, though. Ivan was this new, mysterious, and undeniably attractive addition to my dull existence, and he looked at me in a way no one ever had. I...liked it. I liked to be stared at like I was the hottest thing in leggings, and the fact that he didn't do it with the usual pity I saw behind people's eyes made it that much better.

Mr. Ustinov...Yeah, sure, because that doesn't sound made up. He paid for me. Essentially. And that really shouldn't be so flattering.

But who was I kidding? Of course, it was. The guy had spent thousands of dollars and was apparently going to keep doing so to hang out with me—to own me.

I really didn't feel like I was worth that much or even half that, and Ivan not only did it without batting an eye, but he was also showing no signs of buyer's remorse. He wanted me. He wanted to claim me, marry me, and...breed me.

My skin rippled with renewed goosebumps as I remembered Ivan's words.

I am just so excited to see what you look like fucked raw and bred with my seed.

Time slowed, and I tried to let my mind wander aimlessly, but again, it settled on Ivan—his striking eyes and the tattoos that covered his skin. My eyes closed, and I slipped into another place, no longer thinking of the bath, the pills, or the future.

Behind my lids, I could see his fierce stare as it stalked my body like prey, that hungry look drawing out something deep and primal from within me.

How had I not noticed how compelling those eyes of his could be? Focused and somehow soft in a way that didn't speak to the violence and bloodshed I knew dogged his steps. I could imagine the darkness that likely filled him up. Hell, the guy's stunt with the BC spoke volumes.

Still, all I could think about now was how his eyes tracked me, the way it felt to have his hand on my throat, stealing my air. There was this animalness to Ivan, one that should have scared me.

Sure, it did a bit, but it also fascinated me and set something in my soul ablaze.

It intrigued me in a way it really fucking shouldn't, distracting me from my concerns over my family and filling my thoughts with images of Ivan coming toward me in the dark of night. Was he going to hunt me down tonight ?

Fuck you until you can't remember your name...

Alone in the bath, I smoothed the water over my skin, thinking of Ivan's hands on my skin. The world fell away, and it became just the visions of Ivan and me tangling with each other, his muscular body dwarfing me with its raw power.

I imagined him touching me as I lay there naked in the water—in his tub. Ivan's mouth on mine, his hands gripping my hips as he shoved his cock deep into my pussy, his cum filling me and apparently breeding me like his good little wife.

Losing all track of time and my sense of reality, the images swirled, driving me to sink my hand lower, finding the growing wetness that pooled deep inside as I dipped my finger past my folds.

Stroking slowly, I circled my finger against my walls, and my pussy squeezed. My breaths fluttered, a chill rushing over my nipples as they peeked out of the water. Thank God for the damn bubbles, or I'd have to really face what I was doing.

Why was I like this? Why did it fill me with some kind of sick enjoyment that I was driving that man to such dark, possessive thoughts?

But there were no answers in the bath, just the need to feel myself fall apart as I pictured Ivan's thick cock spearing into me. I was clearly a desperate hussy who needed to get fucked, because all I could think of was how damn good he'd feel—claiming me, tasting me, making me his...

The sensations intensified, and I slipped another finger inside me and pushed down

on my clit hard enough to feel it burn. I was barreling toward an orgasm, and I didn't have the wherewithal to stop myself, to feel guilty about it.

Goddamn, Adley. Over your fucking head...

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My steps dragged as I walked up to my bedroom. Another fight, which was likely what I was going to get from Adley, wasn't how I wanted to spend my evening. Still, the idea of showing my bride-to-be how that mouth could be more useful did have merit.

The room seemed especially quiet as I reached the top of the stairs and pushed open the door. It was pretty damn dark, too, what with the sun going further and further behind the trees.

I stepped inside, shutting the door silently. Adley wasn't sitting on the bed or anywhere else in the main bedroom, but I knew she hadn't left. I'd been standing just a few feet from the stairwell, and I would have noticed her come down.

Hmm...Whatcha doing, sweetheart?

Orange light flickering near the bathroom door stole my attention, and when I looked over in that direction, I could pick out what was likely the glow from the candle I had in there. Fancy shit to make a bath more appealing to a potential partner, and unsurprisingly it looked like it had worked again.

Adley needed to know about spending the day here alone tomorrow, but who was I to interrupt her "me time?"

At least, not for a conversation I wasn't.

My steps were ghostly quiet as I approached the bathroom. I tilted my head so that I could get a glimpse of the tub as I just barely passed into view. Adley lay inside, her

head back and her eyes closed.

In the dim light, I could just make out the gentle motion of the water as she reclined in the bubbled-filled tub. Her clothes were in a pile on the floor, and knowing—without a shadow of a doubt—that she was naked and just a few feet away had me hardening behind my zipper in a flash.

Well, hello there.

Normally, I would have jumped into action, hurrying over to the bathtub and yanking her out. But this time, I just watched.

I stared at her, admiring every glistening curve of Adley's perfect body and enjoying the way her breaths forced her nipples to break the surface of the water. From this distance, and with the low light, though, I could hardly see them. And that was a crying shame.

The rough fabric of my briefs rubbed against my shaft as I stood there, hovering at the door and raking my gaze over every available inch of skin—the thought of claiming that tight, little body shot to the front of my brain once again.

Adley was just so damn...intriguing.

Those long honey-blond locks of hers had been pulled up into a spiraling knot on her head, and fuck, if I didn't want to reach for it and pull it down. I wanted to see those waves of hair dripping in bath water as I drove my cock into her, Adley's skin slick and shimmering.

I wanted to take her completely, fill her up, watch her take my spend—every last drop.

Creeping closer, that invisible thread between us pulling me toward her, I absently reached for my cock, squeezing it through the fabric of my pants. All fucking mine. She's all fucking mine, and I need to feel her.

The water made hushed slaps against the porcelain, and Adley's face screwed up slightly as she arched. Wait...

Drips of the liquid sluiced down her skin, and I was getting closer, getting a better glimpse at what exactly she was doing beneath those bubbles. They popped more and more as I approached, and damn, the ache in my shaft was nearly enough to force me to my knees.

A few feet was all that separated us now, and then, oh right fucking then, my sweet pet moaned, the sound leaving her parted lips in a whisper.

"Ugh..."

I squeezed harder on my hungry cock, enough to make a grunt slip from me. In the quiet space, it was just loud enough to catch Adley's attention.

She jumped, yelping as she flailed in the water and scrambled to wrap her arms around her chest. Honestly, I didn't care. I was perfectly fine with her realizing I was there. The time for watching was over, and I was going to take what belonged to me.

"Enjoying your bath, sweetheart?"

Adley's breaths shuddered, and I trailed my gaze down the lock of hair that had slipped free from her top knot down to the shiny curves of her breasts. She looked flushed, red from the heat of the water and more than likely her little "activity" as well.

“Jesus Christ, Ivan! You could have knocked or something. Hell, I’d settle for clearing your throat loudly.”

I smirked, tilting my head as I regarded her. “And where would the fun be in that?”

She blushed harder, and only then did she finally flick those pretty blue eyes down to my waist. I still held my hand gripped around my dick, and Adley’s eyes flared wide, her brows shooting up to her hairline.

God, the color she turns is fucking adorable.

“Umm...Look, I just needed to, umm, relax. If you’ll give me a minute, I can meet you in the bedroom.”

Her voice was decently level, but I could just make out the tremble haunting her words. I just smirked more, not moving an inch.

“Oh, I’m perfectly fine right here. And you didn’t answer my question, Adley.” I held her gaze as she gapped at me, stroking slowly over my pants. “Are you enjoying your bath?”

Adley’s pupils dilated, large enough to see in the dim lighting of the flickering candle, and I took a step closer. She didn’t speak, likely couldn’t, and I licked my lips as I flicked my stare over hers—parted and glossy.

“Cat got your tongue?” She blinked at me as I drew level with the tub, leaning over her with one hand on the ledge. “I was coming here to tell you I’ll be going out tomorrow, but this? This was a damn treat.”

At once, Adley blinked again, shaking herself in some effort to collect her thoughts. “Wait. You’re going somewhere and leaving me alone ? In your house?”

“I assure you, darling, you won’t be able to get very far. But I do expect you to behave yourself while me and my brothers are away.”

Something changed in her expression, the demure shock receding to be replaced with a sassy scowl that filled up my dick even more.

“And if I don’t?”

I chuckled low, stroking again, which Adley definitely clocked. “Oh, please, sweetheart. Give me a reason to spank that ass of yours. I’m dying for a nice long session with you bent over my lap.”

Her brows rose, but then Adley frowned again, meeting my eyes hard as her fists squeezed around her breasts, most likely unintentionally.

“You aren’t spanking me, Ivan Ustinov. I may have agreed to be here with you, but I’m not your property.”

That was enough to level up this conversation. I darted my hand off my erection and snatched her thick bun, yanking Adley forward in the tub. She collapsed to the side, her hands moving to catch herself as her breasts pressed into the porcelain.

Unfortunately, I still hadn’t gotten a good look at them.

“Au contraire, sweetness. You belong exclusively to me. Every inch, every curve, every tight little hole that I plan on filling with my cock.”

Adley whimpered as I held her pinned, her eyes locking on mine. She didn’t pull back, and hell, if it didn’t look like she was enjoying this. I was a damn good judge of character, after all, and that lidded gaze spoke volumes.

I broke eye contact to look down at the bubbly water. The bubbles were rapidly dissolving, and the corner of my mouth turned up in a sadistic smirk. Leaning down onto one knee, I used my free hand to swirl the water, making her fluffy protection disappear faster.

“I have no problem moving things along without you admitting it, but I’d really like to hear the truth from you, Adley.”

Even through that lust-ridden gaze, Adley glared, looking up at me as I held her head back by the hair.

“What truth?”

Smiling, I hovered my mouth over hers, ghosting my lips against her skin like I had earlier.

“That you want this. That your pussy is dripping for me. That you know as much as I do that you belong to me, and you fucking love it.”

Her brows rose, her breath rocking her body harder. “I...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Gripping her hair tighter, I yanked her head to the side, craning her neck. “Don’t lie to me, Adley.”

She groaned, a featherlight moan bleeding out of her uncontrollably.

“I...I...” Adley shook her head, meeting my eyes again as she chewed on her lip. “How are you doing this?”

“Oh, sweet thing.” I smiled. “It’s easy with such a willing target.”

And then I kissed her.

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Ivan's lips were pressed to mine in a claiming kiss that seared my very soul. I wanted to hate it; I wanted to be a better person who knew this was wrong and ran away.

But I wasn't.

I knew what I'd been doing when Ivan walked in on me. I knew how I felt and craved this man in a way I never had. Still, some conditioned part of me fought against the overwhelming desire, screaming in my head about the impropriety of it all.

What would your parents think? What would anyone think about you just giving yourself to this man?

I flailed against him, making the water churn. I knew it was dissolving what remained of the bubbles, and more of my hair slipped from the messy bun I'd put it in. Ivan's fingers speared through the knot, too, encouraging my long hair to tumble free.

He didn't stop kissing me even as I lifted my hands to pound on his chest, even as I pulled against his hold on my hair. But then he dropped his hands to my wrists, holding them in place as he slipped his tongue over the seam of my lips.

My hair fell free in a waterfall of familiar honey-blond locks, and I felt them whoosh down my back. Ivan moaned against my mouth, the sound vibrating into me, and my eyes flared wide open from being squeezed shut.

He moaned...for me.

Something told me he enjoyed the fact that my hair was loose now, and something

about that fact zinged through my chest. Ivan liked my hair. It was such a stupid, silly little thought, and still, it struck me. This hardened man, this charming, cruel criminal who could get anything he wanted, liked it when my hair was down.

The lightbulb I'd kept on dim mode inside me since I met him brightened, flaring like a supernova behind my sternum. And I stopped fighting.

I softened in his hold, melting into his kiss and letting Ivan's tongue slip past the seam of my lips. My wide-eyed stare backed down until my lids eventually shut, and before I could think better of it, I dared to reach out my tongue and touch it to his.

A tiny moan escaped me as we connected, and then Ivan was pinning my hands behind my back as he pressed me to the edge of the tub. The porcelain was cool against my hard nipples, and the grip on my wrists made my pussy clench around nothing.

After a moment, Ivan pulled back, holding my arms in one hand as he looked down at me, admiring.

"There's my good girl." He smirked, and I fucking blushed, heat rushing to the surface of my cheeks, to my slit.

With his free hand, Ivan shoved the tray on the bathtub all the way to the side. It hit the upper lip of the tub, and the lit candle wobbled enough for the wax to flood over the wick and put it out.

The room plunged into darkness, but there was enough ambient light from outside the window to create a shadowy tableau in front of me. Ivan's gray-blue eyes sparkled despite the poor lighting, and I raked my stare across the tattoos on his face.

Not for the first time, I wondered about the broken glass image created on his

forehead, about the numbers scrawled beneath the tattooed cracks. Ivan seemed all too pleased to let me gape in wonder at his expression, but as quickly as he'd shoved the tray away, Ivan darted his hand into the water and pulled the plug free.

The loud rush of tub emptying boomed in the quiet room, and I knew that in moments, I'd be completely revealed to him.

The scar...

It wasn't a surprise that my mind wandered to one of my biggest insecurities. However, I was still furious with myself for caring so much. It was just a scar, a remnant of a bad car accident I was in as a kid.

The twins hadn't even been born yet when the drunk driver crashed the front of his Benz right into my rear passenger door. My parents walked away unscathed, but the door had crushed in, and when I turned away out of instinct, the panel juttied out, hitting my spine.

There had been days when the docs weren't sure of the damage or if I'd ever walk again, but the injury was successfully repaired with the fusion of a few disks, and I didn't lose mobility.

I should be thrilled about my damn luck, and still, to this day, all I could think about was how the thing "disfigured" me—dumb patriarchal standards of beauty .

However, my time for overthinking the issue was over as the tub emptied out, and a chill raked over me as the cool air hit my wet skin. Goosebumps skittered to life all over my body, and Ivan grinned down satisfactorily.

Ivan craned his head to the side as he still held me pressed to the edge of the tub. His free hand circled my hair into a rope around his fist, and he held it up from my waist,

clearing the way for him to inspect the goods.

“Damn, Adley. That ass of yours is so much better without the leggings.” He dragged his gaze over me, and the embarrassment warred with the arousal blooming stronger and stronger. “What will the rest of you look like, hmm?”

For a moment, I wondered if he was going to yank me back or pull me out of the bath by my hair. I couldn’t put either of those things past him clearly, but what he did instead was somehow...worse.

Ivan released me, stepping back from the tub and folding his arms over his chest. He just stared down at me, waiting.

“Out, sweetheart.”

My heartbeat screamed in my ears. He just wanted me to get up—naked—and just what? Stand there and let him roam his eyes all over me. That felt so damn invasive, a level of vulnerability under his hungry gaze that I wasn’t sure I could take.

“Don’t make me pull you out by the hair.”

I flinched, my suspicions confirmed, and my eyes squeezed shut as I dropped my forehead to the ledge. Long hair was my friend right now, and I let it sweep over my shoulders before I stood up, my entire body trembling.

The curtain of my locks didn’t hide everything, of course, and I could feel the blush claim me from head to toe as I held my hand just in front of my pussy.

“Ugh,” he groaned appreciatively, “seeing you dripping...I could get very used to that. But I did say out darling, so be a good girl and come over here.”

My blood hummed in my veins, and with little else to do, I carefully lifted one foot and then the other, climbing out of the bath and taking two tiny steps toward Ivan.

“Better. But I need you within arm’s reach.”

I swallowed hard. What the hell was this? The entire situation was so, so...fucked. I was mortified to be covered in nothing but shadows and long locks, some foreign part of me fascinated—aroused—by the way it felt to be commanded around like Ivan’s little doll.

Damn-near tasting the pounding of my heart in my throat, I somehow managed to cross the wide bathroom floor toward Ivan. The marble floor was cold beneath my feet, and my skin still dripped with water. Even the ends of my hair had gotten soaked, and they slapped against me as I walked.

“Ivan, I can’t just—”

“You’ll do exactly what I say, sweetheart.” He leveled me with a malicious grin. “And you’ll love every fucking minute of it.”

My teeth clicked together as I snapped my mouth shut.

Ivan’s everything was short-circuiting my brain. He was terrifying and enthralling and so damn gorgeous. This life he led, without rules or restrictions, was undeniably attractive. I couldn’t lie to myself and say I didn’t want some of that for myself.

Another chill shook me, ruffling the waves of my hair enough that I wondered if Ivan had gotten a peek. Despite that, though, my blood boiled. Between the terrible insecurity and humiliation—and the rogue arousal that made wetness pool between my thighs—I was on fire.

Without even realizing it, I'd crossed the room to him, and I stopped short right in front of Ivan, within an arm's reach .

His eyes traveled down my body, and in another move too quick to process, he snatched my arm, yanking me forward. It sent my hair flying behind me, and I looked up at him in shock.

“There you are.” He ate me up with his eyes. “Little peach, look at those sweet, perky tits. Your nipples are fucking aching to be touched, aren't they?”

I didn't know what to say, all the words I knew evaporating into thin air. Ivan's stare continued down as I was held there by the sheer weight of his presence. I'd never been looked at like this, studied so thoroughly I was convinced he'd memorized my curves.

I wasn't a particularly endowed woman. Hell, I was a solid B-cup with thick nipples that showed through nearly every bra I wore. But I also knew I had a decent ass; a boy once described it as an apple with juicy cheeks.

Not that guy from ages ago—a random shopper at the bodega—nor any of the other few I'd tussled with looked at me like this .

“But it's those lips, Adley. Those pouty fucking lips of yours that really stole my attention at the bar.” Ivan maneuvered my hand to his belt buckle, his other one sliding up my arm to tangle in the hair at the back of my neck. “And this incredible hair. It's the perfect tool for getting those lips to the right place.”

With that, I was thrust down to my knees, and Ivan leered down at me, gesturing with his head to his waist.

“Help a guy out, would ya?”

My fingers trembled as I reached up with my other to work on undoing Ivan's belt. The buckle was sinched tight, and it took several long moments for me to pull the leather through the metal. All the while, Ivan just grinned, watching me with rapt attention.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what Ivan wanted me to do after the belt, and as I slipped my fingers around the button to his pants, I swallowed hard. Was I really going to do this? Have sex with him?

Why the fuck not? A dark voice whispered in my skull, and I was shocked by the raw truth behind the words.

Sure, I had a handful of reasons not to, but I also had a couple of rather big ones to give this a try.

One, Ivan was undoubtedly attractive, and how my body responded to him was something otherworldly. Two, I'd promised him I'd do this, to be with him here in the house in exchange for a favor that had already been an enormous boon to my family.

So...

I flicked the fabric over the button, sliding my fingers down to his zipper and pulling it down. But my confidence faltered at that point, and I looked up into his stormy eyes, desperate for some kind of direction or word of encouragement. I knew that was a foolish endeavor, but when I met Ivan's stare, he licked his lips, his hands going for the hem of his shirt.

Oh my.

Ivan swiftly yanked the thing over his head, tossing it to the floor. He was just as

covered in tattoos as I expected, and yet it was a marvel to behold them all. Both of his arms were covered in black-and-gray tattoos that spanned from realistic depictions of skulls to several sections that artistically portrayed his skeleton beneath his skin, which extended down to his fingers.

On his chest, a massive eagle stretched down to his stomach, and a dead rabbit was clutched in its sharp-looking talons and drawn in a neo-classical style.

Smirking, Ivan went for his pants next, and my mouth, which was already hanging open, dropped all the farther when he revealed himself.

All I could do was stare, my pussy flooding with arousal as I ran my eyes up and down Ivan's body. Those tattoos continued all down his legs to his toes, but I wasn't exactly paying attention to the artwork anymore.

He's fucking huge.

Hard as a rock and glistening at the head, Ivan's erection stood out proudly from his hips, reaching straight up. It curved gently upward, and the tip was just in line with his belly button. How the hell was he going to fit? I was a small person, and that monster looked like it was going to tear right through me.

Ivan chuckled. "Cat got your tongue, sweetheart?"

I blinked, ducking my head as I knelt there. I really didn't know what the hell to say, and I shook my head. When I risked a glance up, Ivan took hold of my hair again, shoving my mouth toward him.

"Open up."

Nervous energy flared inside me, and I panicked, gripping Ivan's thighs as I resisted

him. His other hand went to my jaw, his fingers pushing between my teeth to get me to open.

“Don’t make me wait, Adley.”

My body hummed. I didn’t want to make him wait. In fact, as I finally opened my eyes again, staring face to face with Ivan’s glorious cock, all I could think to do was take him in. I was damn aroused by him.

And yes, I was not very experienced, and yes, I didn’t think I could actually take him completely.

And yes, this could certainly never be described as something a “good girl” would do.

But I just didn’t care anymore. I was too desperate for Ivan, too needy for the feeling of someone claiming my body like no one ever had before.

I shifted forward, smoothing my lips around the head of Ivan’s cock. He groaned low, and I began to slide further, testing myself to see how much of him I could take. It wasn’t a lot by any means. Ivan was thick, and that girth stretched my jaw considerably. Still, he tasted like sin and wine, sending the lust flooding my veins into overdrive.

“That’s such a good girl, swallowing me down.”

Ivan’s hips began to rock, and I struggled to keep up with his movements, my breath shuddering in and out of me.

“Don’t you fucking stop, sweetheart. Those noises are too damn good.”

The attention he brought to the filthy slurping sounds, the moments where he shoved

in as far as he could and choked me on his dick, had humiliation roaring through me. This was so fucking wild. I'd never let anyone do this to me, not like this .

Not so rough...

But I didn't want him to stop. Hell, I was aching for him to continue, for Ivan to pay this kind of attention to my dripping pussy.

He seemed to read my mind because, after another shove that forced his length down my throat, Ivan yanked himself back. Leaning over me, Ivan thrust his arm between my legs and hauled me up off the floor. I was flung over his opposite shoulder, my slit sliding across his skin.

I yelped as Ivan carried me to the bedroom and flung me back down on the bed. I landed on my side, and then Ivan's hands were on my hips, pulling them up and back so that I kneeled on the mattress with my shoulders still down.

My cheeks burned. I knew exactly what I looked like in this position, my pussy on full display. I could feel the cooler air flowing over my wet folds, and I was utterly frozen.

"Goddamn, sweetness. You're so fucking wet for me already."

The bed dipped as Ivan climbed on, and I futilely tried to clench my thighs together. My hair had fallen into my face and bunched around my shoulders. At once, I realized that the long scar on my back was totally visible now, and the light in the bedroom was brighter than in the bathroom.

I whimpered.

"What's this?" Ivan's fingers trailed along the healed injury, and I shook beneath his

touch. “Don’t tell me you were a reckless teen.”

Shaking my head, my eyes burned. “No. I...”

What was I supposed to say?

“What? Tell me.”

The command in Ivan’s voice was deep, but he still smoothed his fingers over the skin so gently.

“Car accident. My side was hit. I...I had some disks fused.”

That was certainly the short version of the story, but the words were out, and I actually felt a bit relieved to have just let it out like that.

“You had surgery?”

I hummed a confirmation.

“It was pretty bad, then?” He asked, and I tensed, pulling my arms closer to my sides. I was still just splayed open for him, and Ivan’s fingers still traced the line that ran down my lower spine, almost...petting me.

“Yes.” It was all I could say.

“Well, it sounds like you have a better excuse than I did.”

My heart slammed against my ribs, and I turned to face him, pulling my hair back so I could see his face.

Ivan smirked, lifting one side of his mouth, and pointed with his free hand at the tattoo on his forehead.

“I caused this one. Car accident. Though, I’d been young and stupid—and really fucking angry—and nearly got myself killed.”

“Ivan, I...” My eyes fell, and I shook my head.

“Scars happen, sweetheart. But they don’t define you.”

The words hit me as hard as that car had, and I looked up to search Ivan’s face for...something. He just grinned, easy and beautiful as ever. The stroking across my scar stopped, and he slid his hand up my back to wind my hair around his fist.

Softness didn’t exist then, and Ivan pulled me backward until my back crashed against his chest. I could feel his erection slide between my thighs, the ridge of his head teasing my slit, and I moaned roughly.

“Don’t ever doubt your worth, Adley. Some scar, some shitty job, doesn’t create who you are. You do that.”

Ivan’s other hand snaked around to my breast, and he found my pebbled nipple, pinching down on it so hard I cried out, arching into his grip.

“That’s it, baby. Sing for me.”

I was so blown apart by his words and the way he manhandled me I’d do whatever he wanted at this point. I was raw and exposed and so vulnerable to him. I could hardly tell what was up and what was down, and all I knew was that I needed this.

I needed Ivan to claim me like this, needed to feel desired and worthy and satisfied

for once in my miserable fucking life.

He continued the delicious torture on my nipple, and I couldn't stop myself from rocking my hips back and forth, my folds gliding across his erection as I did. It felt devious and wonderful, and I ached for him to fill me up.

“That’s my good, little slut. Rub that pussy all you want on my cock.”

Blanching, my eyes popped open at the reality of how wanton I was being, and I stopped, gasping slightly.

“Oh, feeling shy all of a sudden?” He pinched my nipple again, pulling my head to the side by my hair. “Don’t fight what you want, Adley.”

I trembled, shaking my head for who knew what reason. A ragged whine left me as Ivan smacked the sore nipple he’d been abusing, and his hand dragged down my stomach before finding my slit and spreading me open.

“Ivan!” I cried out, his cock now briskly rubbing against my clit as he thrust his hips. “Oh, God. I.I...I’ve never...done anything like this before.”

He chuckled behind me, still stroking his erection against my clit. “Done what, sweetheart?”

I moaned as the sensations built and sent me straight to the edge.

“I’ve never...Ugh, oh, God...I...”

“Use your words, sweetness.”

But it was damn-near impossible with Ivan’s dick sliding against me like that. My clit

burned, an orgasm poised right in the tip, and my legs shivered as Ivan kept up this new method of torture.

“I’ve...Ugh.” I was so damn close. “I’ve dated like...two people. It wasn’t...It wasn’t like... this .”

Ivan jutted his hips forward, forcing his cock through my folds hard. “This?”

“So...intense.”

That gorgeous, sadistic chuckle sounded behind me again, and Ivan brought his mouth to the shell of my ear.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I promise to fuck the memory of anyone’s cock but mine from that pretty little head.”

With that, Ivan shoved me back down to the bed and sheathed his erection up to the hilt in my throbbing pussy. I came immediately, clamping down around him as my clit pulsed. It washed over me like a shot, like a drug, and I was utterly blown apart by the feeling of his thick length stretching me.

“That’s it, baby. Come on my dick.”

He started up a brutal pace, and I moaned shamelessly as Ivan thrust in and out. The ridges of his thick cock rubbed against my walls, and he shot his hips forward in a hard smack that had the blunt head of his dick hitting my cervix.

I cried out, gripping the sheets until my knuckles ached.

“Take it, sweetness. Take my cock like my good girl.”

His fingers dug into my hips as Ivan barreled into me with everything he had. The hedonistic sounds of our bodies colliding filled the room, backed by my endless moans and whimpers. Ivan grunted as he pressed in deep, bottoming out inside me. The sensation was maddening—the stretch, the fullness—I didn’t know if I could stand it.

“Ivan! Fuck, please, it’s too much.”

One hand went to my hair, gripping it as he held my hip again. The other cracked down over my ass cheek, and I jumped, forcing Ivan deeper as my skin burned.

“You’ll take it, sweetheart. You’ll take every fucking inch.”

The pummeling onslaught kicked up, and my body exploded again, screwing up tight as the wave of pleasure rocked me to my core. My pussy ached and burned, but dammit, I wanted more.

“That’s it, precious. Ugh,” Ivan grunted, his cock swelling even more. “Yeeesss. Fucking hell. That tight pussy is gripping me so hard, begging me to fill it up.”

I lost track of everything then, only knowing the pleasure coiling through my insides. Ivan’s hips jackhammered, and as this last release stretched over my entire being, I felt him come.

Warmth flooded my pussy, and Ivan’s spend overflowed from me until it slid down my thighs. Stillness settled in, and I couldn’t move, couldn’t even open my eyes. It didn’t take long for the exhaustion—very much physical and emotional—to win out, and I fell asleep.

Naked and fucked within an inch of my life.

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Adley was completely out. It would probably take something equal to a bomb going off to wake her up. Usually, at this point in the story, I'd have left. I did with all the other women I'd brought back here, using that dumb blindfold trick so that they couldn't find their way back.

But I was just staring at her.

Curled up on her side now, still blissfully naked, Adley was only covered across her waist by the thin blanket I used. I didn't bother with a sheet—because why the hell did I need more fabric making me sweat—and she was tucked against my pillow, her breathing even and deep.

I smoothed her long hair away from her back, trailing my eyes over her lightly tanned skin. She was tiny compared to me, thin and almost...fragile-looking compared to the hardened, tattoo-covered jackass persona I wore on the regular.

That scar on her back caught my eye again.

Gently, gentler than even I thought I was capable of, I ran my fingers down the length of it, feeling the subtle ridge beneath my fingers. Disk fusions were no joke. Adley must've been hurt pretty damn bad for the doctors to order that shit.

But she'd survived.

Adley twitched slightly in her sleep, and I pulled my hand away, rolling onto my back and scooting up the bed so my head was actually on the pillow. I stared up at the ceiling.

I really should be leaving right now. That's what I always did once I had sex with someone. I was a hit it and quit it kind of guy, but for some fucking reason, I didn't want to.

I wasn't sure what that was about, except for the obvious pull I had to her. I mean, hell, I'd done all this shit for her—to get her back here—and I guessed that maybe that was why I was content to just lie next to her while she slept.

Enjoying the feeling of lying with someone. That's a fucking surprise.

Still, it wasn't the craziest thing I'd done today. I couldn't even give that honor to yelling at my brothers. Nope, the piece de resistance in terms of going absolutely batshit was the fact that I'd made Adley toss her BC.

Because, come on. Who the hell was I for doing that? I wanted her to get pregnant? What was wrong with me?

That was not typical for me. Hell, it wasn't even just a dumb, temporary kink that I could write off as a one-time interest. I wanted to do that to her again. I wanted to see Adley ripe with my child, fuck her that way, and then do it all the fuck over again.

"You've lost your damn mind, Ivan," I whispered to myself, careful not to wake Adley up.

And as much as that was probably likely—if I wasn't already bat shit enough to be considered a true psycho—I felt powerless to do anything about it. She was just...it. I needed every part of Adley in ways that I couldn't put into words or begin to truly comprehend.

I remembered what I needed to do tomorrow. Lev's fucking lead .

It had to be dealt with. I knew that. But every part of me just wanted to stay in this room with Adley and see how many more times I could make her fall apart for me.

My brain churned as tiredness began to settle in, my muscles aching damn good after our little workout. It pulled on something else I recalled about Lev and our several conversations as of late. It even circled around to Pietor.

They'd both been pretty vocal about their new additions to the family, the women that came into their lives and changed everything. Was that what this was?

I do not have time for that.

Life didn't usually give a shit what you had time for, though. So, I just slipped my legs under the blanket and looked over at Adley one more time.

Tomorrow is going to be...interesting.

When morning hit, I woke, surprised that we'd both slept through the night. That was a fucking first for me, and the rest just made me more ravenous than ever. I boomed with energy, and as I turned over onto my side, Adley still lay facing the other direction, curled up.

And still so very naked.

My cock twitched. I was already hard from the relaxation, but seeing my woman splayed out next to me flooded me with arousal that had precome dripping from the tip of my dick. Sliding over, I ducked my hand down between Adley's legs, stroking.

She jerked awake, but her gasp melted into a tiny, desperate moan as I continued to

toy with her slick folds.

“Wha...Ivan...what are you...?”

I sunk my finger inside her. “No talking. Not unless you’re screaming my name, sweetheart.”

She moaned, rolling her hips against my hand as I worked her core.

Breath rushed in and out of her as I stroked harder and faster, pulling out to rub the needy bundle of nerves in Adley’s clit. She groaned frantically, and I could feel her clamp down on my fingers as I shoved them back in.

Adley was already so close, and fucking hell, I loved every second of it.

Just a few delicious swirls later, and she was tipping over the edge. I yanked my hand back as the orgasm began to claim her, and Adley turned toward me, her eyes wide and pleading.

I could see she was about to speak, which meant it was the perfect opportunity to stuff my fingers in her mouth, forcing her to lick them.

“That’s Adley. Suck them clean..”

Her wide eyes held mine, and I growled as her tongue slid between my fingers. The sight was too damn good, and I needed to taste her for myself. Moving up onto my knees, I grabbed each of Adley’s legs, yanking her into position and sinking down between her thighs.

“My turn.”

Holding her legs apart, I drove my tongue into her wet pussy, and she cried out for me, yelling my name like a good girl.

“Ivan! Fuck!”

Feasting on Adley was better than I could have imagined. Having her beneath me, writhing and squirming as I tongued her soaked pussy was heaven. I’d been imagining this delicious taste since I offered to help with her family’s debt, and damn, it felt good to get exactly what I wanted from her.

I swirled my tongue inside her, rubbing my thumb against her clit. I was determined to wring every last drop of pleasure from her until she was a spent puddle again, that good girl image she hid behind obliterated and replaced with who she really was.

My good little slut.

She arched against my mouth as another orgasm drew closer. Adley’s fingers tangled in my hair, her nails digging into my scalp. I relished the sting, my cock rubbing against the bed as I instinctively rocked my hips.

The moans and pants peaked, and Adley’s legs trembled as she fell apart for me. Her taste flooded my mouth as she came.

I need her wrapped around my cock—now.

Pulling back, I smirked down at Adley’s flushed face, her chest heaving as she caught her breath. Her nipples strained, and all I could do was grin as the obvious embarrassment turned her pink.

“Such a naughty thing. You can’t hide from me, Adley.” I gripped my cock, stroking as I held her stare. “You love coming all over my face like my good little whore.”

Her eyes blew wide, and she bit her lip. Adley might want to fight how much she loves this. But that won't last long.

I grabbed Adley's legs again, dragging her closer to me and positioning my dick right at her folds, rubbing through them again. She whimpered, already so worked up, and I lifted her legs up over my shoulders. Pinning her hands to the mattress and framing her face, I licked my lips, still tasting her.

"Say you want it, Adley."

She blinked, her expression at war with the way she rubbed herself against my shaft.

"I..."

Gripping her wrists in one hand, I used the other to fist her throat.

"Say it."

"Please, Ivan," Adley whined. "I want it."

I thrust my cock inside her, relishing how she cried out from the onslaught. Bottoming out in her tight pussy, I rocked my hips to stimulate every inch of her.

"Ahh!"

Adley arched, her walls squeezing me, and I rammed my hips forward, bouncing her sweet little breasts as I bucked into her hard. Mine. If anyone touches her, I'll fucking kill them .

The thought consumed me as Adley moaned and gasped around the pressure on her neck, mewling as she clenched her hands into fists. Gentle tears bloomed at the

corner of her eyes, her eyes shut so damn tight.

“Fucking beautiful, sweetheart.”

Everything around me condensed down into that exact moment, and all I could think about was the tight, wet slide of my cock deep into Adley’s pussy—breeding her.

I needed to fill her up like I needed air, and her wonderfully tight cunt squeezed around me as the orgasm claimed her.

“Ivan!” She screamed my name, her body pulsing and trembling.

Adley milked my release, and I grunted—damn-near growling like a beast—as I emptied myself into her warm, wet core. She was all fucking mine, and I would have it no other way.

The frenzy calmed, air rushing in and out of me as I leaned forward and rested on top of Adley. Her breath whispered across my skin, and that delicious scent of hers filled my nose. She whimpered lightly, a hiss of discomfort, as I slid myself free.

I was sweaty from fucking her twice now, and a shower would definitely be necessary.

As I looked down at her, Adley struggled to meet my eyes, renewed exhaustion making her eyes lidded.

“I’ll be gone most of the day, sweetheart. Don’t get yourself into trouble.”

She blinked, looking between me and the bed, but didn’t say anything. As she rolled onto her side, Adley grabbed the sheets, pulling them over herself. I was about to yank them away when she sat up and then stood before me.

“Can I...shower too?”

My jaw nearly hit the floor. I was likely this more relaxed version of Adley, and I was glad to see that the dumb notion that she didn't want this was slipping from her. She was my sweet, naughty girl, and she was going to start loving it if I had any say.

“Only if you plan on sucking my dick clean in there.”

Adley's eyes flared wide, her lips parting. Still, I could sense the way her body responded, seeing her nipple harden again beneath the thin sheet.

“And you won't be needing that.”

She looked down at her hands, which held the bunched-up fabric. She offered a tiny nod before letting the sheet tumble to the ground. I groaned, gripping myself tightly. I was already up to go again. That was a lovely treat.

I opened my arm toward the bathroom, gesturing for her to start walking. She did, and as Adley passed by, I smacked her ass hard and quick. She yelped, turning over her shoulder to look at me, and all I did was give myself a stroke that had more dripping from the tip.

Eyes flaring, Adley blinked and then turned around for the shower.

I did not have time for this. I was already running late thanks to that wake-up, but Lev and his information could fucking wait. Right now, I had my prize to enjoy, and I would delight in every possible second I could claim her.

And right now, that meant watching her suck my cum-covered cock as I washed my hair.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm

After the morning's sins, I fell back asleep again, waking up sometime around ten. I never slept in, and on top of that, there was the fact that I'd had sex with Ivan twice and done quite a bit in the shower in the span of twelve hours.

I could hardly recognize myself.

Who even was this girl who enjoyed being dominated so thoroughly like that? Who was this person who knew she should be questioning things a lot more but had been content enough to give herself over not once but twice?

A sigh escaped as I sat up and stretched. I needed to get out of this bed, out of this room, and an actual shower was likely the best way to wake my brain up. I padded over to the closet to retrieve a set of clothes and hopped back into the impressive shower with the water set to cool.

I hadn't noticed it when I was using the tub, but the shower was more like a massive platform off to the right side of the room from the door. The water came right out of the ceiling in a gigantic square fixture that had to be at least two feet wide. It rained down from above, the square surrounded by a skylight that let the sun in.

There was also a traditional showerhead with a detachable option. The rainfall showerhead was put to shame by the one in the ceiling, but it could be angled to shoot forward with it, creating a wall of water that fell from nearly every angle.

Plus, there was the damn handheld nozzle. The whole shower was decked out.

And adding to the shit I'd never seen before was the fact that the shower was wall-

less. It was completely open, and you stood on a large square platform, about six inches off the ground, that had a lip of a few more inches to catch all the water.

The wall at the back and all the shower's structural pieces were a swirling marble of white and black. The entire area that could be considered the shower was about seven feet by four feet, and on the marble wall was a large bench built into the back beneath the hot and cold knobs.

The glass walls throughout the rest of the bathroom made it look like I was out in the trees, and the shower was actually butted up against one which featured a sliding glass door. I'd opened it, curious about the temperature outside, and God, I was so glad that it was warm.

With the patio door open, the plants and trees that were there, including those hanging over the house and stretching their branches across to the roof, could spill inside. It was like I was taking a shower outside with all the plants that crowded the patio and decorated the room with their large pots that went right up to the edge of the shower.

The room was alive with green and bright light and the sounds of birds.

When I finished, I switched the water to the handheld nozzle and used it to water all the plants within reach. It did the job perfectly, and the water just drained right into the water without having to worry about cleaning up.

This was by far my favorite thing so far.

Still, there was a lot of house left to explore, and if Ivan and his brothers were out, that's exactly what I intended on doing.

I'd walked the entire upstairs and middle floor when I decided that in addition to checking out the bottom floor a little better, I also needed something to eat.

I knew where the kitchen was, but there was a nagging part of me that didn't want to stop snooping around until I found more to go on when it came to Ivan's shady dealings.

I could guess what kind of work he did. Hell, he'd been pretty forthright, but I'd always been naturally curious, and I wasn't going to be satisfied until I had more evidence that I could see for myself—hold in my hands.

After a few more tries, I found another closed room that wasn't entirely open to anyone looking. It was near the back corner of the massive house, and when I stepped inside, it looked like an office.

The back two walls were solid at the bottom, with large windows going from the center of the wall to the ceiling. In the center, there was a large desk with a computer and several shelves around it. As I walked up to the desk, I noticed the neat presentation of Ivan's datebook and supplies. I ran my fingers across the ridges of the planner's wire spirals.

Sitting in his chair, I studied the top and front of the desk. There were drawers built-in beneath, and I took my rounds opening them. The top was more pens and shit, the bottom was a file drawer that wasn't used that way, holding a small, black leather bag instead.

I unzipped it, and inside were tools I'd never seen before.

"The hell?"

I picked through them a bit, but all I could guess was that it was used to break into

places or something. I had nothing else to go on.

However, when I reached for the smaller drawer above that one, it was locked. My interest peaked, and I searched his desktop for something I could use to get it open.

A small letter opener shaped like a dagger was kept in a small jewelry-like box off to the side. I took it out, feeling the solid weight settle against my fingers. It was a glimmering silver and sharp.

Gently, I slid the point of the letter opener through the thin gap at the top of the drawer. I knew it would do me any good in the lock itself. So, I threaded it between the wood pieces at the top, hoping to be able to move the latch over and disengage it.

In just a few minutes, I heard the satisfying click, and I smiled. I'd figured out how to get into my dad's desk as a kid, and I was a little tickled to see that those skills were still alive and well.

Inside the drawer were passports, a gun, a small metal box with a combination lock, and a set of handcuffs.

"Jesus," I whispered.

The passports were all images of Ivan and his brothers, but the names changed on each one. My stomach pinched down, and my worries about the guy's day job began to solidify.

I took out the metal box and set it on the desk. There were six numbers needed for the combination, and I racked my brain. I didn't know why I was trying so hard to snoop like this. Ivan had told me to essentially not do this exact thing, and here I was.

Still, I had to know. I needed to understand who I was living with, who'd "bought"

me in not so many words.

An image of Ivan's cheek came to the front of my mind, and I remembered the numbers tattooed there.

“Zero four, zero six, nineteen eighty-one.”

It didn't work. There was one other unaccounted-for string of numbers that had been tattooed just beneath that one. If I was even remembering them correctly.

““Zero four, thirty, nineteen eighty-six.”

Still nothing. I sigh, about ready to give up. No, come on—one more try .

“Maybe if there's a zero...I don't need it.”

I started punching in the numbers—four, six, umm, three, hmm...Wait. I hesitated, but after a moment, I decided to try eliminating the duplicate numbers too.

“Four, six, three, eight, one, six.”

The electronic lock beeped, and the box clicked.

“Holy shit. That worked.”

Opening it up, I was terrified of what I might find. Strangely, however, what lay inside didn't seem all that sinister. There was a bunch of cash, sure, and some of it was from different countries, but beyond that, there was just a little black book.

I picked it up and scanned its contents. Inside were several names, phone numbers, addresses marked as “known” or “safe house,” and several notes attached to each

name. They detailed things like the next contact and last known location on some. There were even some with allergies and medical conditions listed.

And then it hit me.

This was a list of Ivan's enemies. Anyone Ivan knew was listed in this book, with personal, private information about each one. This book would be deadly in the wrong hands. When I noticed the line slashed through several, I had to assume that those particular individuals weren't a concern anymore.

My stomach clenched, and I dropped the book back into the box. Shoving everything back in the drawer and slamming it shut, I rushed out of the room and right back into the confines of Ivan's room.

Guessing that someone worked for the mob was one thing; having proof of it was another.

My heartbeat raced higher with each step, I paced around Ivan's room.

"What am I supposed to do? He's a fucking killer! I...Oh my God, I need to leave. I have to—"

My phone chimed, and I looked over to where it sat on the nightstand. I rushed over. The message was from Molly.

Hey. Hope you're okay. You didn't say much yesterday.

Ryan and I are

Worried.

But seriously, this is huge. Can we really go? Are you sure?

Also, that guy is hot as hell. He's your boss?

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Molly was always so interested when a hot guy came into the shop. The raging hormones of a teenager were not something I enjoyed dealing with, and I was just glad that my folks would be the ones to deal with the "birds and the bees" talk once Molly was old enough to actually start thinking about having sex.

You know, in like a year from now.

And hell, she was just so excited about going to college in a few years. I wanted her to go and experience life. I wanted Ryan to be able to go. He was so incredibly self-sacrificing, and the guy deserved a break.

Being the only boy, our traditional parents always put too much on his shoulders, and I did what I could to take some of the weight as the oldest. But Dad was still convinced that Ryan was the only person who could do the heavy lifting. Hell, he was ripped because of it, and the poor guy hadn't even kissed anyone yet.

Yeah, because adding gay to the list of things would not make Ryan's life easier. He only came out to you last year, Adley.

A heavy sigh hit me, and I typed up a response to Molly.

Hey. Sorry. I'm fine, though. Don't worry. But yeah, Ivan is...he's not really a "boss" boss. He...

My fingers hesitated, but I owed my sister more than a brush-off. She told me about the guy who got handsy at her first dance. I needed to tell her about this.

He's sort of in with some crazy shit. But he can help. And those friends of his will really spend money at the shop. I had to. You know, for Mom and Dad.

Plus, you're not wrong about the hot thing. We may have...you know. Don't tell anyone.

It was barely a second before Molly's text came back, and I giggled as I read it, so grateful for my goofy sister and her unshakeable loyalty.

HOLY SHIT. Really? Nice! And yeah, like I'm going to tell anyone. Ryan says he supports your move to somewhere nice and parent-free. I want details, though! Later anyway. Mom has us going to the market for new produce. Shop's reopening tomorrow. Big whole thing.

My heart squeezed, and I plopped down on the foot of my bed, cradling my phone between my hands as my eyes stung.

Oh, good. I...I'm sorry I can't be there. I love you guys. Really. Details later if you can manage to actually help Ryan. Don't make him carry everything. He'll tell me if you do. Talk soon, k? Love you.

Ugh, you're so not fun. Okay. Later. Love you too.

Stillness crept back in, and I was immediately itching to move, to run, to fucking do something. I hated being cooped up in this house like a prisoner, but what exactly was I supposed to do?

Ivan had been pretty clear about sticking around, and...I still wanted to know more about him. Despite everything, he intrigued me. And it was unlikely that I would forget how he looked at me—or stop wanting that whenever I could get it.

Looking over toward the duffle I'd brought, the black tote bag I'd snagged with my art stuff lay next to it. It had been a while since I'd had the time to just sit and paint, or sketch or draw, for that matter.

"Not a lot of options. So..."

I stood up, crossed the room to retrieve my stuff, and pulled out the large sketch pad and the set of pencils and charcoal I kept in a small tin.

No ideas flew into my head as I set up the paper in front of me. I was definitely blocked, and that's when it hit me.

When I couldn't sketch, or the ideas dried up for a moment, I always went back to the basics, filling the pages with figure drawings. It was hard to go off of nothing. I usually used a reference. So, it was back to another old standby: setting up on the floor in front of the mirror and using myself as the model.

My fingers picked up the motions, and I remembered how to create the shapes as I sketched furiously. After a few minutes, the mood changed, and I surrendered myself to the artistic impulse.

I was different. The light and surroundings were different. Opening the patio door even more, I let in the sounds of nature and then sat back down in front of the sizeable full-length mirror that was propped up in the corner by the tub.

The wind rushed over my skin as I studied how the light hit me in that spot—dappled and full of contrast, thanks to the shadows created by the trees and their leaves.

A thought pinged.

Who am I beneath the layers of who I was? Who's at the core of it?

Pulling my shirt over my head and tossing it to the side, I fluffed up my hair, letting the long waves cascade around me. I pulled off the leggings I'd chosen, and there in the mirror, I studied the woman seated there, scribbling her down onto the page.

Everything else melted away.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm

Everything from the waist down and on the back hurt from sitting in the damn car for hours. We'd tracked Donovan to several meetings throughout the day, and several required fucking waiting on my ass while he shot the shit with his contacts. Thank God for surveillance equipment, or I wouldn't have been able to peg down that location for tomorrow.

Still, I was beat, and a fucking beer was sorely needed.

Abe and Vlad were still being pissy with me too, which was fucking annoying and had been that the car was especially quiet. They just needed to chill and get that fucking stick out of their asses. Nothing that a little family dinner wouldn't cure.

After all, if they could have their chance to see Adley for themselves—and ask too many fucking questions—I was sure they'd get over the abrupt change.

My steps dragged as I climbed up the steep staircase to my room. The trek was a familiar one after a long day, but what awaited me inside was a new perk that I was really looking forward to sinking my teeth into again.

I was deadly quiet as I cracked open the door. I didn't know what Adley had been up to all day, but the idea of getting a glimpse of her again without her knowing was too good to pass up.

Where are you, little peach?

I'd chucked my duffle of supplies into my office before coming up so my hands were free to roam over my sweetheart if I walked into a compromising position again.

Like before, Adley wasn't in the main bedroom when I walked in. But I could hear strange scratching noises coming from the bathroom. Heading that way, I noticed that the black bag which held Adley's drawing shit was open.

Hmm...

Being as quiet as I could, I entered the bathroom, and there she was. Sitting on her legs, Adley was in front of a large sketch pad propped up on a small easel. She was in front of the full-length mirror I'd tucked against the wall on the far side of the tub, and I could tell immediately that she was drawing.

As I padded further in, thanking that impulse to put a mirror by the bath so that I could watch myself fuck in it, I briefly flicked my stare to the open patio door. She'd clearly discovered the tricks that the shower setup offered.

Adley sat up straighter, turning her attention to the mirror, and I instinctively moved closer to her. It was then that I noticed her distinct lack of a shirt. Well, hello there .

Quickly roaming my gaze across what she'd been drawing, I could finally see the gorgeous piece. She'd been working on a sketch of herself, her body at least. In the image, her head was turned away, and I could recognize the pose from what she was doing now in front of the mirror.

The image was almost complete, Adley having expertly rendered her lithe form and fabulous breasts. The soft curves were sketched to such perfection that I was really upset that the picture couldn't come to life and join the fun. Two sets of perky, b-cup breasts would be so damn nice.

After a moment of studying how she looked in the mirror, Adley went back to the drawing and finished shading the right side of the portrait, the stark shadows depicted by precise lines and smudges.

“Oh, okay. Done.”

I smiled as she spoke, loving that she still hadn't noticed me. Adley raised her hands over her head, stretching out long. I could imagine her back was stiff, and she let out a gentle sigh as she reached over her head.

When Adley's eyes opened again, I met them in the mirror.

“Ivan!” She jumped, spinning around and using her hair to cover her chest. “Christ! You have to stop scaring me like that.”

Smirking, I chuckled quietly. “But it's so fun.”

Crossing the remaining few feet between us, I circled around the tub and sat down on the ledge. I smirked down at Adley as her cheeks turned pink, reaching for her hair and tossing it back over her shoulder.

“Never hide yourself from me.”

The flush in her cheeks deepened, and Adley ducked her head down, looking at the floor. “Right. Sorry.”

I narrowed my eyes and took her chin in my hand, getting her to look at me. “I'm not looking for an apology, Adley. And as much as I adore how embarrassed you get, I like the thought of you being comfortable in your skin.”

Her eyes flared wide, and I wasn't quite sure where that came from myself. She reached up tentatively, wrapping her smaller hand around mine where it gripped her chin.

“I'm not used to this.” She laughed slightly, flicking her eyes to the floor and then

back up. “You have to know that this ‘wooing’ you’re doing is far from typical.”

I snorted, smirking as I slid my tongue around my teeth. “I think you’ll find that very little about me is ‘typical.’”

Adley grinned, smoothing her hand down my arm, which made me drop it. “Well, you’ve got me there.”

There was a beat of silence where I just stared at her, admiring the curves of her breasts, the way the afternoon light hit her skin, and the cooler breeze made her nipples pebble.

“You were drawing?”

She nodded, that thread of bashfulness still tangled in her. “Yeah. I, umm, I thought about going to go to school for it once. I just...”

Adley looked over her shoulder, eyeing her sketch.

“I just have to sometimes. It...settles my nerves. Drawing just...it’s a part of me, I guess.”

With a laugh, her attention returned to me, and Adley rolled her eyes with a head shake.

“Wow, that sounded lame.”

“Hardly.” I met her stare hard when she gaped up at me. “I may not be as artistically inclined, but I understand.”

A small smile touched the corner of her mouth, turning it up, and she looked between

me and the floor again. After a moment, Adley sat up straighter, chewing on her lip. She wanted something.

“What?”

Another little giggle and then a sigh. “You’re too good at that. Reading people.”

“Part of the job, sweetheart. Now tell me.”

Adley tucked her hair behind her ear, letting out a long exhale. Before she faced me, she grabbed her pencil.

“Would you...let me...” I was going to die of old age if she kept taking so long to ask for something. “...draw you?”

My mouth actually dropped open.

“I’m sorry, what?”

The sound of my blood was suddenly screaming in my ears, and I was acutely aware of how I stared at Adley. No one in their right mind had ever asked for my photograph, let alone to draw me. Why would anyone want to for that matter?

“Is that against the rules or something?” I could see Adley try to play it off, but there was obvious nervousness beneath the lilt in her voice.

I scoffed, truly shaken, and leaned back, putting some space between us. My skin felt hot and itchy, and I couldn’t hold her eyes, choosing instead to focus on the floor.

“No. It’s not ‘against the rules,’ Adley. I just...why?”

I was not a fan of the airy sound of my voice, so I immediately cleared my throat. What in the absolute fuck had prompted her to ask me of all people. God, this felt so weirdly...intimate.

For a moment, neither of us moved. Hell, neither of us breathed, but then Adley sighed, and I looked at her again. She was staring off into the middle distance, that blush in her cheeks high again. When she looked up at me once more, the way her eyes burned into mine was something I'd never forget.

“You’re beautiful, Ivan. I...I want to put it down on paper.

The gruff chuckle was a knee-jerk reaction, and then I shook my head before grinning down at her. “That’s not something I’ve ever been called before, sweetheart. I’ll admit you took me a bit by surprise.”

Adley smiled—a gentle, easy thing that stripped me bare.

“Really?”

She nodded.

With a sigh, I rolled my eyes. I planted both my hands on the tub to my left and right and got into a position that was marginally comfortable. Enough for a quick sketch, anyway.

The giddy look in her eyes was all I needed to feel better about my decision, and she shuffled backward toward the sketchbook. Flipping to a clean page, Adley cocked her head, considering me.

“Hmm...Could you come down here on the floor? The light’s better.”

Rolling my eyes again, I obliged her and scooted down onto the floor in front of Adley. At least it was more comfortable than the other location, though I was getting blinded a bit by the angle of the sun.

“Perfect.” She grinned at me, a kid in a fucking candy shop, and it took everything not to cancel this little “outing” and just have my way with her. “Hmm...but no shirt, please. I like to see the musculature.”

“Of course you do.” The sarcasm was more than obvious, but again, I humored her and pulled my long-sleeve tee over my head. “Am I losing the pants, or is this good?”

Adley smirked. An honest-to-goodness devilish grin, and I nearly came right there. I was having an influence on my sweet prize, and I was more than okay with where she was headed.

“Not this time. But I may need that for a later drawing.”

“You think you’re getting me to do this again?”

With another cocky grin, Adley shoved her hair over her shoulders, revealing her breasts as she put the tip of the pencil to the paper.

“Yup.”

That one floored me a little, and I let the silence hang as Adley drew. She set to work sketching out my image, and I watched as the lines on the paper slowly transformed into curves, shadows, and someone who looked quite a bit like me.

“You’re really good, Adley.”

She looked up from the paper, smiling as she blew the hair out of her face. “Thanks.

It's not much, but I've done it for ages. That much practice is bound to pay off, right?"

An easy laugh let me, and I nodded. "Absolutely. But tell me something."

She finished a line that depicted the broken glass on my forehead, and I studied the other tattoos she'd drawn on me. They looked like perfect little replicas of the real things.

"Okay, what?"

"Is that actually how you see me?"

She regarded the paper, a bit of concern threading through her brow. But then she seemed to gather what I was alluding to and quickly nodded.

"I took very few liberties with your appearance; just made the tattoos less detailed because I don't have eight years to perfect them all."

Adley's grin was accompanied by her eyebrows up to her hairline as she eyed me.

"Can you answer me something now?"

I wanted to say no. But fair is fair.

"Shoot."

"Hmm...all right, I have two. One, what really happened that made you get that tattoo on your forehead? Dumb accident doesn't seem right. Two, how is it that someone as cocky as you doesn't think they should be drawn?"

Scoffing hard, I let it meld into a laugh, rolling my eyes all the way around as I leaned back like I'd been punched.

“Not taking it easy on me, are you?”

She shook her head. “Nope. You can take it.”

Ooh, that was good, Adley . “It was a dumb accident, but...I managed to get my brothers and myself really hurt. According to the doctors, I should have died or wound up in a coma for years. I didn't, and I can't exactly say why the universe would seize the opportunity to get rid of me. So maybe it was dumb luck. This...”

I pointed to my head and then returned to the pose Adley wanted me in for the picture.

“Is my reminder that luck swings both ways. Disaster bisexual that it is.”

Adley considered me, nodding when she'd determined that I wasn't bullshitting her. “Okay, and two?”

Narrowing my eyes at her, I chewed on my lip. “I can't say I really feel like answering that one.”

“Come on. You can ask me something.”

Adley smiled hopefully, and dammit, she was too fucking cute like that. We were broaching some intense territory, though. I didn't talk about my past much with my brothers and zero with anyone else.

But that past was roped up in the whys about how I got into the line of work and the reason I never looked for anything better for myself. The reason why I didn't expect

shit for myself, kept everyone at arm's length, and didn't believe for a second that anyone out there could ever...love me.

Feelings are gross. I hate this.

“Ugh, Adley, I—”

“I had to pee while working the register once, and it got bad, so I left to go, and right then, the person at the counter swiped a bunch of cash. We were robbed because I peed.”

I burst out laughing harder than I had in...well, forever, and I couldn't stop myself from just losing it to the story. It was too damn hilarious and random, and I put my fist to my chest, leaning back again as the laughter took over.

Adley joined right in and lowered her head, her hair falling in a curtain around her as she giggled wildly.

After a good two minutes, I was finally able to stop, wiping the tears that had collected from laughing so hard.

“Oh, shit, sweetheart. I don't think I've laughed like that in years.”

“Well, I hope it earned me a tiny confession, too.”

She wiped under her eyes, too, and I abruptly remembered that we were both sitting around topless, and she was much closer to me now.

“All right. All right. You've earned it.” As I thought about my father, the good mood that had blossomed was squashed. “My dad was a dick. Of monumental proportions. He didn't...he didn't really appreciate any of us thinking too highly of ourselves. It

was made pretty damn clear that we were expected to do what he said because he was all we would ever have.”

Adley frowned, her attention refocusing on me as the memories took over. A thousand-yard stare took me, and I cleared my throat when I realized I’d drifted off somewhere else.

“We were lucky if we got to clean his boots, you see. And I mean, look, I know that I can get a woman to come back here with me. I have several times, but...that’s a skin-deep thing. It doesn’t change what’s been drilled into my head for years.”

When Adley spoke again, it was a faint whisper. “Why do you do this then? If you know that it’s an extension of that past?”

Well, that was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm

Ivan was so different like this. I'd certainly not expected to hear what I did, and that well of curiosity about him had only grown with each word he spoke. It felt so odd to be sitting here with him so comfortably, considering our situation. Yet, I couldn't deny that I was drawn to Ivan in a new way.

The pull toward his bare chest was still there, of course, but a new interest in who he really was burned brighter. Getting to know him felt like uncovering missing pieces to a puzzle. It made me consider him and his past, and I was attracted to his drive to push through all that.

I waited for Ivan to respond, watching him as he looked down at the floor in his comfortable position on the floor. My hand went to the sketch pad reflexively, and I added more details to the portrait.

"That's a hell of a question, Adley." Ivan sighed, and it melted into a mirthless chuckle. "I needed to take care of my brothers. I'm the oldest, the one who's been around for just a bit longer...and what I knew about was what my father taught me. Getting out from under his influence...from under his fists...meant finding someone who'd take a chance on a kid who was ready to volunteer for grunt work."

My sketching stilled as I realized what Ivan was saying. His father had been abusive, and he'd fled with his siblings to protect them.

Holy shit. That's...not what I expected.

"Vlad was still pretty young when I knew we needed to leave. My mother...well, let's just say that she didn't survive my father, and it fucked Vlad up so damn bad."

“He doesn’t speak,” I offered quietly.

“No. And I wouldn’t either. I needed cash to support them. I needed a place for them to stay. So, we found Sergei Vadim. I worked my way up the ranks for him. Got damn good at my job and brought my brothers along with me. It’s just...how it went.”

It was such a silly little shock that I nearly laughed. Of all the people and things in the entire world, the guy who had essentially bought me knew exactly what it was like to do everything for your family—for your siblings.

It was too damn funny, in that horrible way that hurt your chest behind the smile.

Looking over at Ivan, I met his eyes when he finally brought them up again. “I get it.”

He cocked his head, his brows pinching together. “You get it? And how’s that? Your parents are practically saints.”

“Well, no. I don’t get that part personally. But I understand it.” I set the pencil down, now finished with the drawing. “I get what it’s like to put your siblings first. To do everything to ensure they’re okay and that they have everything they need.”

At that, Ivan nodded slowly, rolling his eyes down to the floor before returning them to me.

“I guess you do. You’ve thrown yourself in bed with a stranger because you wanted what was best for them—and the shop.”

The air was so thick with tension that it was like I was wearing it—sticky, heavy weights glued to every inch of my skin.

Ivan grinned, gesturing at the pad with his head. “You done?”

Turning back over my shoulder to look at it, I smiled at the portrait and nodded. “I am.”

He got up onto his knees, crawling across the floor to sit in front of the picture next to me. Ivan didn’t say anything at first, and I wasn’t about to push. He’d already offered plenty. Still, his presence next to me felt different. I want to put my hand on his where he leaned on it. I wanted to rest my head on his shoulder so that he knew I was right there with him.

It was a knee-jerk reaction to hearing such intimate details about his life. My brain wanted me to show him I was empathetic to his situation.

I didn’t know if he’d appreciate it, though. Most guys that I knew didn’t enjoy looking weak or vulnerable.

So, I just relaxed into myself, not moving away as Ivan leaned toward me.

“Hmm...” He gripped his chin like he was some critical art review. “Good use of shadow. And the likeness is excellent.”

I laughed. Ivan was too amusing with his pretend art snobbery. “Why, thank you.”

He flipped back to the other drawing I’d done of myself, eyeing it from top to bottom like he did me.

“I think I’ll hang them up in here. Give the place a little bit of artistic flare.”

I was actually touched, but I raised my brows at him, chuckling through my lips. “Umm, and what about the glass walls?”

“They’re not all glass. The brick one behind the bed will work.”

Nodding, I just smiled gently as Ivan continued to stare at the images. “Sure.”

After a beat, Ivan turned toward me with a soft grin. He reached up for my hair, tucking it behind my ear. As he did, he held onto a thin lock of blonde and smoothed his fingers down it until his knuckles ghosted across my nipple. Ivan followed the hair all the way down to where it pooled on the floor next to me.

And that was it. Just a simple touch that had my entire body brimming with a shimmering thread of desire. When I met his eyes again, Ivan leveled me with his stare—so intense and wholly focused on me.

“Dinner is happening soon. Why don’t you get dressed and meet me downstairs? I’m sure my brothers are looking forward to chatting with you.”

Nervous energy flared, and I swallowed down the anxiety that rose up the back of my throat.

“Should I be concerned about that?”

Ivan’s familiar cocky smirk was right back in place as he stood up and retrieved his shirt from the floor. His muscles rippled as he straightened and pulled it over his head. I’d seen him shirtless quite a bit at this point, but it was still quite a sight.

“Probably. I’m sure they’ll give you the fifth degree.” He yanked down on the hem of his shirt, getting it to lay smooth, and then ran a hand through his hair. “After all, it’s not every day that I bring home a girl intent on marrying her.”

Before I could respond, Ivan took off for the door, and I was left alone in the bathroom again. I was more than a little apprehensive about dinner with his brothers,

and as Ivan's words lingered in the room, I crossed my arms over myself, suddenly self-conscious.

"Wife. Right. Because that's totally normal."

I sighed before standing up and going to the closet with my discarded shirt to find something new to wear. I'd had sex with the guy yesterday, and now I was meeting his family properly. As far as timelines went, this one was definitely clipping along at top speed.

After years of nothing, it was more than a bit shocking. But here I was. I could only deal with what was in front of me, one step at a time. So, for now, I was going to focus on choosing an outfit for dinner.

And then I'd worry about not getting murdered by Ivan's brothers.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm

I hurried down the steps to my room and went straight for the kitchen. I actually didn't mind cooking, and the thought of doing it for Adley, in addition to my brothers, filled me with a strange happiness that I wasn't about to look at too closely.

They were at the table playing pool when I passed through the second floor and headed for the ground level. Vlad hummed as he watched me B-line it for the kitchen, and Abe added in his usual, "Cook it up, Betty Crocker."

It was easy to ignore them. The fire worming through my blood was thoroughly distracting. I had to hand it to myself; it was a damn surprise that I hadn't seized the opportunity to fuck Adley silly. Still, I'd taken a not small amount of pleasure knowing I'd left her there to squirm.

Throwing together a few ingredients in the kitchen for a stir-fry was easy enough. I added a bit of the fresh peppers and broccoli that we'd picked up to make sure it had plenty of crunch.

Cloud nine had nothing on me, but then I sat down at the island in the kitchen to let the sauce thicken when something crinkled in my pocket and stole my attention. Reaching into my jeans, I pulled out the string of notes I'd taken while following Donovan.

"Shit. I need to file this."

Getting up, I headed for my office just down the hall from the kitchen. I flicked on the light as I entered, walking around my desk to sit down. As I went for the key to the locked drawer in my other pocket, I noticed the drawer in question sitting just a

centimeter or two forward.

“Well, well.”

I pulled on it, and it slid toward me with zero resistance—because it was, in fact, not locked anymore.

“Adley, what have you been up to?”

Extending the drawer out to its full length, I added the notes I’d taken to the small book with all my details regarding the rival families and big players in town. I’ll transcribe it later. As I tucked the drawer back into place, noting that all the contents were still there and accounted for, I locked it back up and leaned back in my chair.

Putting my hands behind my head, I reclined in the comfortable leather seat and stared up at the ceiling. Adley had been snooping around the house, looking for hints about my line of work, no doubt.

“Oh, sweetheart. What are we going to do about this?”

Still, as I sat there, it wasn’t rage or annoyance that flared through me. No, I wasn’t angry. I was just...interested in making sure Adley understood the rules. If she had a question, she needed to ask it. Not go searching through my shit to find it herself.

However, the lack of fury struck me. I’d never been a particularly forgiving or merciful kind of guy but with Adley...Well, something about her made the entire thing more amusing than infuriating.

She would be punished, in any case. Actions have consequences, and of anything, I wanted honesty from her. I didn’t accept liars. Adley had made a mistake, and I would give her the chance to make up for it.

Down on her knees.

But dinner needed my attention right now. I got up and returned to the kitchen to finish cooking up the stir-fry. Adley would be done any minute, and I was looking forward to seeing how she handled dining with my brothers. So, her punishment would wait.

I sat across from Adley at the large formal dinner table. My brothers sat to either side of me, and they lasted until about five minutes in before they started in with the annoying comments.

Well, Vlad just snickered and smirked behind his hand. Abe supplied all the actual words.

“So, you’re Ivan’s new plaything, huh? Gotta admit two days is longer than any of his other dates. And he’s had a lot of them.”

Adley’s eyebrows rose, and she looked across the table at me as a subtle blush started behind her cheeks. I could tell she was already ready to head back upstairs.

“How’s the food, Abe?”

He glanced over at me as I asked. I never asked about the food. They could eat it or get fucked. So, when I offered him the chance to take a potshot at me, Abe narrowed his eyes, calculating my motives. I could see him reading me, and it didn’t take him long to realize that I was putting out an olive branch and a distraction simultaneously.

Abe could take the chance to insult me, and it took the heat off Adley. If only for a second. Would he take it, though?

“You could give up crime and work at Panda Express, bro.”

I laughed, actually amused by that one, and took another bite. Abe did the same, and when I glanced over at Adley, she relaxed slightly into her chair.

Running my eyes over her face and body, I appreciated what she'd chosen for dinner. Adley had pulled her long hair back into a ponytail that sat high on her head, and she wore another flannel top, this one green and black, and had paired it with a black cropped tank top and a pair of black shorts.

The bottoms came up high on her waist but barely covered her ass. Needless to say, I liked them.

“So, Adley,” Abe started up again, “how'd you meet my brother?”

She swallowed down her bite of food and then set her fork down on the table, wiping her mouth.

“Oh, well, I was at a bar feeling sorry for myself about my parent's failing bodega, and Ivan came over and offered to help.”

Abe's brows hit his hairline, and I fought the desire to roll my eyes and groan.

“Oh really? We got a new meet-up location?” He leaned forward on his elbows, resting his chin on his hands.

Vlad clicked his tongue, something I knew meant “ditto.”

“Yes, we have a new meet-up location. I already texted Lev about it. It's a cute little place. Quiet. And it's unknown.”

The benefits of a new place to conduct business unknown to our rivals were clear to all of us, and Abe nodded as the corners of his mouth turned down.

“Hmm?”

I heard Adley and turned my attention to her end of the table. Vlad held out his phone to her, and Adley shakily accepted the thing, reading the message he’d typed out. Her eyes went wide again, and she looked up at me and then back over to Vlad.

“Vlad, do we need to revoke phone privileges?”

“No, no. He’s fine.” Adley answered for him, and I furrowed my brow at her. “Can I...?”

She waved the phone a little before handing it back to him, and Vlad just shrugged, leaning back in his chair and taking a swig of his beer.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Adley’s eyes circled over the table before landing on me again, and she offered an awkward smile. “He just said that you, umm...seem to be in a better mood than usual. He said thanks.”

I looked over at my brother, who just shrugged again, and I couldn’t hold back the short bark of laughter.

“Oh really? Well, fuck. I guess we do have you to blame for that.” I stared into Adley’s eyes, enjoying the way she felt put on the spot more than I should. “Should I give you a reward or something?”

She blushed, waving her hands in front of her. “No, no, no. That’s so...No. I’m good.”

“Well, good because we don’t dole out bullshit prizes for non-existent sports. No participation trophies.”

Abe’s words cut through the air as sure as a blade, and I sighed, rolling my eyes at him.

“If only we could find a mood booster for you, Abe. Take that stick out of your ass.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m very happy with my current situation. Being pulled around by the short hairs in a desperate attempt to get some tail isn’t my thing. I’ll leave that to you.”

My pulse ticked up another notch, and I could feel the vein in my temple throb. Abe was barreling toward a beating just because he didn’t like that I had someone. Jealousy or not, I wasn’t about to let that one go.

“If you think—”

“Excuse me, it was Abraham, correct?” Adley’s voice was level and strong as she shoved her way into the conversation.

Abe’s brows shot up as his mouth dropped, and even I was about ready to fall out of my chair from the shock. Hell, Vlad had sat forward in his chair again, his fingers poised on his phone like he was ready to play the bell that meant “everyone back to their corners.”

Leaning her direction and putting one hand on his hip, Abe glared at Adley, his brows down low over his eyes.

“Yeah.”

“Excellent.” Adley met his stare, unflinching. “Well, Abraham, it occurs to me that my presence here is weird. Hell, it’s downright astonishing. But I can assure you that I’m not pulling your brother around by any hairs. That’s not why I’m here. My parents run a bodega that was about to go out of business for good. Ivan stepped up to help, and part of that agreement was that I would be here with him. It’s unorthodox at best, but I’m not manipulating him for some ulterior motive. I did what I had to do to protect my family. From what I understand, you’ve done the same for your brothers.”

The table hung in silence, and I looked between Adley and Abe. They were both frozen in place for several long seconds and just as I was about to break the silence, Abe let out a hard chuckle that shook the whole room.

“Well, hot fucking damn.” He looked over at me, his mouth turning down at the corners as he nodded. “I’ll say I’m fucking impressed. It looks like my brother has better taste in women than I thought.”

Relief threaded through my muscles, and I relaxed the fists I’d made. “Get fucked, dickface.”

We both laughed, and even Adley was smiling. Vlad clinked on his glass, holding it up for a toast. It was as close to a “blessing” as I would get from either of them, and I was a bit surprised at how much that actually meant to me. Abe was quick to follow suit with his glass, and Adley and I joined right after.

“To Adley. You’re way out of Ivan’s league, and if you’re ever looking for a job—”

“That’s good, Abe.”

He smirked at me while I heard Adley do her best to hide a chuckle.

“I’m just saying if you want to retire, Ivan, I think I found a better negotiator than

you.”

I threw my napkin down on my plate, grabbed my beer, and pointed it at Abe.

“You are fucking dreaming. I can’t believe I’m getting booted by my own guest.”

Adley held up her hands again, this time like she was surrendering. “Oh, no. I said nothing. You cannot put this on me.”

And just like that, the awkward meeting was over. We were chatting, Vlad doing his phone thing, and it all felt so... normal. We were just shooting the shit about dumb nonsense that both mattered and didn’t, and Adley told my brothers more about the bodega.

Some of it I was hearing for the first time, too, and I was intrigued to learn that her great-grandparents had come over from Ireland and the shop had been passed down through the generations.

It was beyond evident that it meant a lot to her, but I could also hear what she wasn’t saying. That running it had been her parents and grandparents’ dreams, not hers.

“Sounds like you’re going to need to hire someone to take over when they can’t work it. Any thoughts?” I cocked a brow at her as I circled the table, collecting the plates.

“God, no. That would make my life easier. I’d always assumed it would be me, but if...” She got quiet, staring down at her napkin on the table.

I looked up at Abe, and he just shrugged. God save the person that ever hooked up with him. He was fucking terrible at small talk. And relating, and really anything to do with maintaining a relationship that wasn’t about killing people for the Vadims.

I mean, hell, he wasn't great with me or Vlad for that matter.

As I carried the plates across the room and set them in the sink, I called over to the dining room. "But it's that a good thing. It doesn't sound like you actually enjoy running the shop, just that you do."

Adley's head shot up, and she glanced over at me with her brows up to her hairline. "I never..."

But we both knew I was right.

"Shit. Well, yeah. I guess I don't. But that doesn't exactly solve the problem for my folks now, does it?"

"No, but putting out an ad will. There's plenty of people looking for a job, and you can fire them if they don't work out."

She gaped at me slightly, and I couldn't help but smirk back. Sometimes, it took an outside perspective to see the simplest way to solve a problem. The Unholy Trinity was good at finding the answer to any issue that might plague our clients.

"Yeah," Adley offered, "I guess we could do that. I'll...I'll tell Molly to get it set up for them."

"And there ya go." I smiled, rinsing off the plates and then walking around the island to meet Adley back at the table.

As I did, the hallway that led to my office stole my attention for a moment, and that smile turned dark. I still had plans for Adley, and they were going to be very fun.

"I cooked. You assholes do dishes." Abe rolled his eyes, finishing his beer and

standing up. “Adley, why don’t we retire for the evening? I have something I’d like to...discuss with you.”

Her eyes flared wide, and I watched her swallow down the immediate nervous tension that filled her.

Very, very fun, indeed.

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When I was little, before the twins, I'd dragged a chair in from the dining room to reach the cookies my parents kept hidden on the top of the fridge. My mother had heard the chair sliding across the floor from the other room and came in to see what I was up to.

She waited until I had my hand in the literal cookie jar before she cleared her throat. I'd jumped so much that I smashed my elbow down onto the lip of the fridge. It hurt like a bitch, but nothing had compared to the panic crawling up my spine from being caught.

Right now, as I followed Ivan up the stairs to his room, that same welling terror surged through my veins. I am so fucked.

He had to have figured out I went through his desk. It occurred to me just as we started climbing the stairs that I hadn't locked the drawer back up again. I'd just run off because I was spooked.

A sigh escaped me, and I closed my eyes briefly, holding onto the banister to guide my steps upward.

Why did he wait until after dinner? Why not say something before I got all cozy with his brothers? Ugh, fuck, fuck, fuck .

Ivan stopped at the top of the stairs to open his door. I waited behind him, the swell of adrenaline making me tingle everywhere. I was even a bit dizzy from it all and just kept chewing on my lip.

Not knowing what someone was going to do and what the consequences of your actions would be was probably worse than anything they had planned.

At least, that was true in most cases, but this was Ivan. I was sure his retribution would be...unique.

Turning over his shoulder, Ivan met my eyes and held the door open. "After you, sweetheart."

I was already in trouble. This wasn't the time to dawdle, so I stepped up the last few stairs and walked past Ivan into his room.

His presence loomed over me as I passed by, and even though I couldn't be sure, I was damn near confident that he sucked in a long breath when I shuffled around him and inside, a predator scenting his prey.

I was fidgety and jumpy as I rushed forward into the room. I didn't know where to go or what to do with my hands. I settled for standing in front of the bed and wrapping my arms around myself as I stared at the floor.

"Well, it looks like you already know why I brought you up here."

Looking at Ivan was out of the question. It didn't matter how even and calm his voice sounded or how badly I wanted to see his eyes, to lose myself to those stormy blues.

Even stranger was how the anticipation bubbling through my body felt...good.

I hadn't ever really been given the chance to see if I was an adrenaline junky. But as far as sneaky little kids went, I did that shit constantly growing up.

That side of me had been dormant for so long with my parents' failing bodega and

health. Being around Ivan, especially like this, was bringing it out again. And I didn't know if that was a good thing.

“Answer me, Adley.”

The command made my eyes flick up in his direction, and I swallowed hard. “Y-yes.”

He stepped forward, closing the door behind him and locking it. “Yes, what?”

I faltered. Did Ivan really want me to just blurt out that I'd dug through his desk? Or was this something else? My brain churned for what to say as he got closer, moving within just a foot of me and towering over my much shorter stature.

“Yes...sir?” The word just fell out of my mouth, and I looked up at Ivan, shaking from head to foot.

He chuckled at me, his dark smile twinkling in the low light. “Well, that's not what I was going for, but I will definitely take it.”

His hand crawled up my arm before snaking around to the back of my neck. His thumb brushed over my cheek lightly and then smoothed across my bottom lip, pulling it down.

“What did you do, Adely? I want to hear you say it.”

The tremble that rocked my entire body was equal parts fear and arousal. Why did this feel so alluring, having Ivan demand my honesty for something stupid that I'd done? God, I felt terrible for snooping, and there was a large part of me that was ready to get down on my knees and ask for forgiveness.

Which was ludicrous, but here we fucking were.

“I...” Ivan held my stare as strong as iron, and it was impossible to deny him. “I looked through your stuff.”

Ivan hummed, his thumb still stroking. “Looked through? Leaving out a pretty crucial part about the drawer, aren’t you?”

The tension in his fingers ticked up a notch, pressing into my neck just enough to get the words spilling from my mouth.

“I broke into the drawer.” A pathetic whimper left me when Ivan’s grip tightened just a bit more. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done it. I was just...”

His brow cocked, his mouth inching closer to mine. “Curious?”

I nodded briskly, trying to look down, but Ivan’s hand kept my head in place. “Yes.”

That condescending hum left his lips again, this time inches from mine, and I was sure that if he didn’t break this tension soon—get me off the hook I was dangling on—I would explode.

“If you’re curious about something, sweetheart,” he ghosted his lips across mine, “you need to just ask me. I won’t tolerate snooping around behind my back.”

“I’m so sorry. I’ll never do it again. I—”

But then Ivan gripped my neck and squeezed. A lick of discomfort skittered down my throat, and I squeaked. As if that weren’t enough, Ivan spun me around so that he could sit on the bed, and the next thing I knew, I was draped over his lap.

“I don’t think you will, but there are still consequences to face, sweetheart. And naughty girls get spanked.”

My stomach dropped through the floor, and I tried to look back over my shoulder at Ivan.

“What?!”

“It’ll only be worse if you fight it, but I’m prepared for either way—quick and easy or slow and hard.”

In a swift pull that had my head spinning, Ivan yanked down my shorts and freed them from my legs. I was lying there in my panties, and I did not want to face just how wet they were because of everything Ivan was doing.

He worked my flannel top off and threw it to the floor on the other side of the bed.

“You can’t be serious!” I tried to thrash against him, but it was useless. “You’re not spanking me. I’m not a child.”

Ivan’s chuckle bloomed from behind me, so dark and alluring. I froze in place as his fingers dusted over the very edges of my ass cheeks where the panties didn’t cover. A needy moan slipped free despite how hard I tried to hold it in, and then his other hand grabbed my ponytail, winding the hair around his fist.

“I don’t think you are, Adley.” Ivan’s fingers traveled between my thighs, just grazing over the center of my panties where they were damp. “But I do think you’re enjoying this far more than you want to admit.”

My cheeks burned, and I clammed up. There was nothing to say, after all. Ivan was so very right, and I knew it. He knew it. There was something so sinfully wicked about how much I enjoyed this that buried part of me coming to the surface and loving the thrill of being “punished” like this.

“You have two choices, Adley,” Ivan whispered, his touch roaming over my ass cheeks and then down between my thighs again. “You can count to five with the panties off. Or you can count to ten with them on.”

A shiver rocked through me from my head to my toes. I honestly didn’t know which one I wanted. I’d never been spanked before, in any context, and I wasn’t sure how much I could take of his bare palm against my skin.

But surely five was less than ten?

“Umm...”

“If you don’t make a choice, I’ll make it for you,” he bit out, his voice low and rough.

“Five,” I exclaimed. “Five.”

And then, just like with the shorts, my panties were yanked down my legs and tossed aside. Ivan’s hand landed on my ass, but it wasn’t a slap. I wasn’t that lucky. He was just warming me up, patting the skin to get the blood flowing.

Oh my God. I’m going to die.

“Count them out, sweetheart.”

Everything clenched, my entire being thrumming with electricity that had nowhere to go.

And then his palm cracked down over my ass.

I yelped—loudly—jumping slightly against the harsh burn that roared through my skin. Holy shit, that...hurt.

“Adley,” Ivan drawled, and I shook my head, trying to breathe through the sharp sting.

“One.”

Ivan rubbed across the other cheek, his touch light. “Good girl. Four more.”

I whimpered. One had been enough to get me vowing never to snoop again, but I knew it was pointless to say that. I’d violated Ivan’s trust by going through his things, and I needed to face the consequences.

He hadn’t started up with the next one I realized. Ivan was waiting for me to indicate that I was ready. Fucking hell .

I nodded, and as soon as the gesture had been given, Ivan cracked his hand down on the fresh cheek. The pain flared through my skin, burning, and I clenched my thighs. It was impossible to keep myself from gripping him. Still, Ivan appeared utterly unphased by my nails digging into his leg, and I had to keep track of the damned strikes.

“Two,” I whimpered, renewed wetness pooling between my legs.

In quick succession, two more slaps rained down over each cheek. I hissed in a breath with both, still jumping as I was draped over Ivan’s knees. My ass burned, a steady throb echoing through each cheek as my heart beat faster.

“Three and four,” I sobbed, rocked by how painful and pleasurable it was.

“Good girl,” Ivan crooned, and that naughty side of me that enjoyed this so damn much beamed with pride.

I readied myself for the last strike, but Ivan was nothing if not an expert at keeping me on my toes. He unwound my hair from his fist, letting my head fall forward, and then ghosted that hand over my likely red ass.

The featherlight touch gave me goosebumps all over, and where they rose on my sore cheeks, it felt incredibly strange and new.

“These are going to look so pretty, sweetheart.” He dragged his fingers over me, back and forth. “And this time, I want to feel how tightly that little pussy of yours clenches when I spank this naughty ass.”

Ivan’s other fingers found my slit, twirling over my clit before shoving inside me. I yelped, and it melted into a moan. He pressed them deep, holding them there, and I knew what was coming next.

Crack!

His other hand came down over my ass, hitting both cheeks and making them sting terribly. I clenched around his fingers, already brain-numbingly close to an orgasm. As the burn paired with the slow pump of his fingers, I gripped his pants until my knuckles ached.

“Five,” I whispered.

The slick in and out of his fingers didn’t stop, and Ivan gripped my hair again. “Such a dirty girl. You love taking your punishment.”

God, I do. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Your skin is so beautifully pink, Adley.” His fingers pressed into my G-spot, and I cried out. “Now, you’re going to come for me, sweetheart. And then you’re going to

do it again on my cock.”

The onslaught didn't let up, Ivan's fingers working me to a climax in seconds. My vision whited out as I crashed over the edge, coming as he buried his digits inside me, still bent over his knees.

At once, I was lifted and spun around to straddle his lap. My ass throbbed, the pressure of sitting making me wince.

“Take me out.”

My brain was jello, so I just reached forward and freed Ivan's erection from within his pants, downing the zipper and pulling him through. God, I was barely able to think, but I knew I wanted him inside me. I needed it.

A rumbling groan traveled up Ivan's throat, and he pulled my mouth to his, claiming me in a hard kiss. His hands then went to my hips, and he thrust me down onto his erection in one smooth motion.

Hollering out against his mouth, I squeezed around his cock, and in moments we both worked to establish a punishing rhythm. Ivan rammed up into me as I arched, my chest pressing into his.

“Fuck me, sweetheart. Make me come.”

Ivan's thrusts stopped, everything on me. I used my grip on his shoulders to push myself up, my knees supporting me on the bed more as I did everything I could to make Ivan orgasm. He grunted and cursed as I bobbed up and down on him, and that sinful pride of mine swelled again as he made those beautiful sounds.

One hand went to my hair, and then Ivan slammed me down onto him. He bottomed

out, making me scream. It was so much, maybe too much, but I fell apart all the same.

As I came around him, my pussy fluttering against his shaft, Ivan thickened inside me. Just as my clit began to burn from the furious rub of his pelvic bone against it, warmth filled me. Ivan's dick twitched as he pumped me full of his release. I sighed, utterly blissed out, and then I couldn't hold myself up anymore, collapsing forward onto his chest.

Silence hung as Ivan carried me with him to the back of the bed. He stayed buried deep in my pussy, lying back on the bed and pulling me down to rest on his chest. His heartbeat was solid in my ear against his pec, and with that, I had zero intention of moving any time soon.

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We lay like that for some time before it was time for the second bit of my lesson. I didn't bother moving Adley. There was no need, and I bushed her hair off her back to stroke down her spine, getting her attention.

“What do you want to know, Adley? I'll answer your questions honestly.”

She scoffed lightly, jostling me as I was still warm inside her. “Now? You want me to ask you now?”

Pulling her chin up so that she looked into my eyes, I nodded. “Yes.”

Her brow furrowed, but Adley sighed after a moment, still lying on top of me with her arms pulled into her sides.

“Okay. Well, I guess the easy on first. You work for someone named Vadim you said. Is that the mob?”

I had to chuckle, the simplified breakdown of everything that the Vadims were making me roll my eyes.

“Basically. It's not like the movies, but yes. Sergei Vadim is the Don, and I work for the family. The whole lot of that crew of assholes.”

Adley nodded against my chest. “Do you...do you kill people?”

That was the big one—the one I was expecting and the one that would be the most difficult to fully explain.

“Only when necessary. If someone poses a serious threat to the family, me or my brothers, I won’t hesitate to take them out. But I do try to find other ways through the situation. Killing is messy, and I don’t always have the time or tools for clean up.”

There was a long stretch of silence. I wasn’t about to break it, either. Adley could take as long as she wanted getting used to that one. I was in no rush.

“What do the Vadims do? I mean, what are there ‘jobs’ as far as mob people go?”

That one made me laugh, and I smirked as Adley looked up at me, still stroking my hand up and down her soft skin.

“Mostly, they sell recreational supplements and own clubs where people can use and get shitfaced. They’re not big on selling arms anymore. They used to, but it was too risky.”

“Oh.” Adley’s voice was quiet, and I made her look at me again.

“Oh?”

“I just thought...it would be worse, I guess.” She shrugged against me, and I still held her chin, making eye contact.

“It’s not peachy, but sure. Most of the trouble comes in the way of other families trying to take over Vadim territory or hinder the supply. But yeah, the ‘company motto,’ so to speak, is to sell to the rich assholes who can afford it. Their dumb asses can sort it out when they have a problem.”

“Ha, well, they tend to have good lawyers, so...”

She let that one hang, and I could sense the contempt from her. “Not a fan of the rich,

Adley?”

“Not particularly,” she admitted, shrugging again. “They’ve tried to push out the bodega for years. Rich folk are the reason my family struggles, and I’ve yet to meet a wealthy person who didn’t step on anyone and everyone they could to get to the top.”

I laughed, wrapping my arms around her. “You’re not wrong.”

Stillness crept back in, and after a few moments, I could feel Adley’s body relax completely, giving up to the exhaustion as I ran my thumb up and down her arm.

I wasn’t especially tired, but I wasn’t moving either. So, I just closed my eyes, content to stay right where I was until I couldn’t anymore.

When morning came, I told Adley I had more business to attend to. Donovan needed tracking, and I needed more information about what he was planning. He would be in the city “running errands” today, which meant he’d be making the rounds among his allies and either guaranteeing their support or cutting off the fat.

Adley seemed to understand and promised not to do anymore snooping while I was out with my brothers. As I finished pulling on my leather jacket, I stopped Adley before she got into the closet and fetched clothes. Now that she’d showered, I pulled her up against me.

“I mean, you could. I’d just have to punish you again.”

Her cheeks flushed that delicious pink, and she looked down at the floor for only a moment before her eyes found mine again. The bath towel wrapped around her pressed against my shirt, making it damp.

“I’ll ask you if I have a question. I said I would. But...” Adley leaned backward, putting space between us even as I chased after her. “Maybe I’ll go to that library of yours and rearrange all the books. They really should be color-coded and then arranged by size. Don’t you think?”

I laughed, nuzzling into her neck and kissing her smooth skin. “Hmm, if you’re looking for a punishment from me, I wouldn’t start with the library. That’s Vlad’s domain.”

“And yours?” She asked breathlessly.

“Oh, between your thighs.”

A tiny squeak left her as I reached around her ass to play with her slit, teasing the skin where I could get at it under the towel.

“Ivan!” She giggled, and holy fuck, we were not supposed to be doing this, teasing and toying with each other like teenagers.

But I couldn’t help it.

“Get out of here. Before you’re late and that Donovan person eludes your expert tracking.”

A solid spank on her ass made Adley jump, hissing as the pain played over the sore flesh.

“Be naked when I get home.”

“Ivan,” she eyed me, “I’m not staying in this room naked all day. If you want me naked, I think you’re perfectly capable of doing it yourself.”

I glared playfully. “Barreling toward another spanking, sweetheart.”

“Oh, so that’s what does it? Hmm...”

Yanking Adley against me, I narrowed my eyes at her. “Don’t get any ideas, sweetheart. Unless you’re ready to accept the consequences.”

She blushed, and from down the stairs, I heard Abe’s voice call out. “Pull out or finish, fuckface!”

Adley flinched back from his words, and I rolled my eyes. “We’ll continue this later.”

As much as I wanted to stay, I really did have an Irishman to track, so I pulled her to my lips for a claiming kiss and then left her to get ready for the day.

Tracking people has always been equal parts interesting work and highly tedious. Right now, it was more annoying than ever because I had something I’d much rather be doing.

Or someone as the case was.

As far as long ass days went, this one had been top tier. My bones ached from perching on a roof across from Donovan’s warehouse, the only place he used for his most covert meetings.

Thankfully, the surveillance equipment had been effective, and I’d been able to listen in from a crumbling, dingy rooftop to an out-of-commission water tower nearby. Donovan had chosen a decent spot as far as security went. There were no other buildings around aside from the defunct tower that had been a severe risk to

climb—both from falling injuries and tetanus.

“Ugh,” I groaned, coming up the stairs to my room.

Adley would be inside after a day of not doing much, and I envied that. Still, she was about to work for me a bit. We were going right back out, and I needed a date to improve my cover.

Pushing open the door, I found Adley wandering through the bathroom with a watering can. She paid attention to each of the many plants, letting the shower run a bit to get the ones near the balcony.

Huh. Well, I guess she wasn’t just sitting around.

I could also tell that she’d cleaned up the place a fair amount, and there was another sketch completed on her easel. This one depicted a woman lying in bed, some invisible figure tending to her and eliciting a look of bliss.

Recognizing the inspiration behind the image, I smiled. This one was certainly my favorite so far.

“Hey, you’re back.” Adley’s voice pulled my attention to the bathroom again, and I watched her walk over to the shower and turn it off.

“I am. But,” I took off my jacket, hanging it on a chair near my door along with the bag of clothes I’d picked up for Adley, “I’m not finished. And you’re coming with me.”

Her eyes flared wide. “I’m sorry, what?”

Stalking toward her, I started pulling my tee over my head. We both needed to

change.

“Donovan will be at a boxing match. He doesn’t go to that kind of shit often. I know he’s meeting with someone there. I need you to come with me as arm candy.”

Adley scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “You can’t be serious. I’m not a mob-type person. What would I even do?”

Letting my shirt fall to the floor, I enjoyed how Adley couldn’t keep herself from eyeing my chest. Still, we didn’t have time for that, unfortunately.

“You don’t have to do much. I just need you to be there to keep eyes off me. If I walk in with you looking like a million bucks, the crowd will be less concerned about who I am.”

Her brows were still raised, and I could see the tension locked in her muscles from my position a few feet away. Adley was clearly freaked by the idea, but she didn’t have a choice. This was my best way in.

“Look,” I stepped forward again, grabbing her hand and pulling her toward me, “I don’t plan on killing him or something right there in the club. I just need to see who he’s meeting with. Get an ear on their conversation if I can. Okay?”

Eyeing me, Adley sucked in a deep breath. She was still rigid, but her stare flicked down to the floor as she closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, Adley met my stare hard.

“You promise. I...I really don’t want to be there for an assassination.”

Rolling my eyes, I nodded. “Yes. Now, would you hurry up? I need you to get changed.”

Adley shook her head, pretending to search the room. “Into what, Ivan? I don’t exactly have club clothes.”

“I’m aware.” I pulled her forward, leading her back to the bedroom and the bag I’d hung up. “That’s why I picked something up for you. Get changed. I need to swap out the jeans for a monkey suit.”

Patting her on the ass made Adley yelp as she reached for the bag, and I just smirked, walking off toward the closet to don my suit.

When I came out of the closet, decked out in my only suit—a simple black one with a sleek tie that gave off serious John Wick vibes—I found Adley smoothing her hands down the shimmery wine-colored satin of her gown.

My heart skipped around under my ribs, and my cock roared to life. Adley’s slim figure looked like it had been painted with the shiny fabric, every curve accentuated by the tight, form-fitting dress.

“Oh, you’re changed. Okay, how does this look? Do I look ridiculous?” Adley asked nervously.

I had to clear my throat before speaking, and my mouth suddenly felt very dry. “Not the word I’d use.”

Her expression melted into a small smile, her cheeks turning pink. “Oh. Well, good, then.”

Approaching her, I smirked, so fucking tempted to pull up that dress and fuck her right then and there. As it was, I sauntered closer, dragging my fingers down her bare arms and admiring the deep cut of the gown’s neckline.

The exaggerated V-shape dipped between Adley's breasts, the tension from the strings holding up the top giving her excellent cleavage. Tracking down the rest of her body, I took in how her waist looked especially small compared to her round hips. The dress put the focus on her ass and tits, and fuck, it was doing an excellent job.

"Good, indeed." I spun her around slowly, pulling her hair off her back.

The crisscrossing strings that wove through the back of the gown tied right at the small of her back, and the fabric covering her ass was ruched right in the middle. I'd had to ask the clerk what that was called, but seeing it in action, the slight bunching of the fabric did not disappoint.

God, she looks like a goddamn snack.

I was straining behind the fly of my slacks, my dick rubbing against fabric when all I wanted was to bury it inside Adley as far as I could.

"You should do something with your hair. The back of this dress...well, you need to show it off."

Adley looked beyond flustered, her blush creeping down her neck and across her chest. "Yeah, I was planning on it."

I toyed with the string over her shoulder, lowering my lips to her skin. "How'd you even get this tied up?"

A small laugh left her, and Adley pulled away to walk to the bathroom. "I don't exactly have anyone helping me back home, now do I? I got good at it after a few proms."

Calling out after her, I grinned as I watched her ass in that gown. "Couldn't your

mother or sister help?”

“My sister is too busy with her own shit, and my mom’s hands aren’t great. She has fibromyalgia.”

Nodding even though she couldn’t see me, I waited for Adley to come out with her hair finished. I expected her to come out with her long waves hoisted up into a ponytail, and to an extent, that’s what Adley did. Still, there was a lot more going on than I would have thought possible in just fifteen minutes or so.

Adley’s flowing honey-blond waves were piled up into a swirling bun high on her head. Wispy pieces of hair fell naturally into her face, which had shorter layers. At the back, several long strands tumbled down in a random pattern, trailing down her back and drawing the eye downward to the straps.

When she got closer, I realized that part of the section at the front was actually braided into a wide plait. She’d also swiped on a bit of makeup, her lips shiny from gloss and her eyes sparkling against the subtle smoky eye.

“Damn. I’m impressed.”

“One bathroom, five people. Time was always in short supply.”

I laughed, holding out my arm for her so that we could leave. Abe and Vlad were staying behind, and the thought that I’d have Adley like this all to myself was more than a little appealing.

“Oh, umm, would you help me quick? I can’t really reach in this dress.”

Following Adley’s eyes, I looked down to see her holding out her foot. The strap of her heel had come undone, and I smirked. I got down on one knee, patting the top of

her to get Adley to put her little foot there.

She did, that blush swirling again, and I smiled as I held her eyes, tossing the long fabric of her gown up over her knee. I buckled up the strap easily, making sure it would be secure for her. When it was in place, I hiked the dress a hair further and pressed my lips to the inside of her thigh as my hand slid up.

“Ivan, I—”

But her words stopped as I reached her bare slit. Adley let out a low moan as I swiped my finger across it, and I chuckled darkly.

“No panties? You naughty girl.”

“You tell me how panties would work in his dress. You can see everything with how tight it is.”

I placed her foot back on the floor, straightening up and kissing her lips briefly. “Oh, I don’t mind. I’m going to be thinking about that all night.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm

As we walked into the massive room, the ceiling at least twenty feet high and crisscrossed with thick metal beams, an attendant led us away from the main floor, where the ring sat in the middle of the floor toward the far right corner. Apparently, the match wouldn't begin for some time, and we had a private VIP booth where we could watch it broadcast live.

As we passed through the crowded space, with dozens and dozens of people packed inside and lined up at the numerous bars, I realized this wasn't exactly a "legal" boxing match.

The building was hardly where you'd go to see an actual match, and the crowd all had the same air about them as Ivan.

"Would you like anything to drink? Scotch? Champagne?"

I sat up straighter, suddenly aware that the attendant was asking us a question. Ivan smiled at him, ordering a scotch, and then they both looked at me. I had no idea what I wanted, so I just went with the only other thing the man offered.

"Champagne, please."

The attendant nodded and left us to the private booth. It was small and cozy compared to the large open space we'd walked through. What's more, the lighting outside was dim except for the ring itself, but back in here, it was as dark as a nightclub.

I felt slightly relieved for that, all too aware of how I was dressed—how much of my

skin was exposed.

“You seem nervous.” Ivan’s voice cut through my inner ramblings, and I looked around the space, shrugging.

“A bit. I mean, I’m not exactly familiar with how all this goes down. I feel...vulnerable and weird in this dress, and how are you even supposed to hear this Donovan guy when we’re tucked away in here?”

Ivan chuckled, and I wanted to smack him. Nothing was funny about this, and it felt far too much like I was being laughed at .

“Calm down, sweetheart. Everything’s fine.” He scooted closer to me on our curved, velvet-covered bench.

“That’s easy for you to say.” I knew I was sulking a bit, my lip jutting out in a slight pout.

“If you’re going to pout, Adley, I could always bend you over my knee right here. Make sure everyone knows what a naughty girl you are.”

My mouth fell open, but a strange thrill ran down my spine. The idea lit something up inside, but I wasn’t ready to look too closely at that. Besides, we were here on business, and I knew Ivan really wanted to snoop on this guy.

Before I could speak, though, his hand came up to my cheek, his thumb stroking over my bottom lip.

“You’re turning a delightful pink, Adley. Is that embarrassment or want?”

I couldn’t answer, and furthermore, I didn’t think I needed to. Ivan knew precisely

what he was doing to me. He always did.

“I...Don’t we need to keep an eye out for Donovan?”

His devilish smirk never faded, and as Ivan slid his hand down from my face, grazing over my arm, he gestured at the exit from our VIP room.

“He’s got one of these as well. However, I’ve been told that he likes to watch the fights up close and personal. And he likes to bet. A lot. So, I’ll follow him to the bookie’s desk when we’re closer to the fight.”

“Oh. Okay then.”

As the silence filled in, the attendant returned with our drinks, and I’d never been so fast to snatch up a champagne. It wasn’t the taste I was looking for, of course, but it was alcohol, which was all that mattered at present.

“I really would have thought you’d order a scotch.”

I looked over at Ivan as he sipped his drink, my stare lingering on the caramel-brown liquid.

“I...I got flustered. Next time.”

When he finished with his sip, Ivan reached out and took the champagne from my hand, replacing it with his rocks glass.

“Problem solved.”

“I...You don’t have to do that.” My voice was so damn squeaky I wanted to scream.

“I know I don’t. I wanted to. Besides, it’ll keep my head a bit clearer, too.”

My body warmed, and Ivan stared at me until I took a drink of scotch. It was perfect, definitely aged, and the precise thing I wanted at the moment. It felt so silly to be so touched by his gesture. He’d just swapped drinks with me, but something about it made my chest squeeze—in a good way.

After amusing ourselves for nearly an hour, someone announced over a speaker that the betting was now open and that the fight would begin in thirty minutes.

“Well, it looks like the time has come. Finish your drink, and we’ll head to the main floor.”

I did as instructed, following Ivan as he led the way back to the ring from our private little, velvet-covered VIP booth.

As we walked, I pulled Ivan closer, whispering in his ears. “What did this guy do that has your boss so upset?”

He laughed lightly as I lowered my heels back to the ground and looped his arm through mine to lead me through the crowd.

“Boss is a bit of a stretch. I prefer...client. But in any case, Sergei and Lev are pissed because the guy is looking to make a bigger name for himself. In order to do that, he has to work with his allies to push out Vadims’ holdings. Steal the territory.”

I tried to keep up with what he meant, understanding that Ivan had to be a bit discreet since we were out in public.

“So, they’re upset because a competitor is looking to set up ‘stores’ where they already have businesses.”

With a grin, Ivan nodded, eyeing me as the corners of his mouth turned down. “Exactly. That’s a very apt way to put it.”

A nervous chuckle bled from me. “I guess I’m sort of getting the hang of this.”

“Well, then, let’s see if you can keep up at the bookie.”

We made our way over to the large area that was bustling with activity. There were dozens of people clamoring to place their bets at the counter, and only three people were taking “customers” at a time.

Several intimidating bouncers circled the place, their hulking forms making Ivan look average in comparison, which was saying something. Their stares roamed over the crowd on the lookout for anything that might signal foul play or sudden violence.

Considering the place's illegal nature, I was a bit surprised to see them. Still, I imagined that crowd control was necessary whenever there were large groups of people, and not even criminals wanted to get injured in a brawl.

As we approached the counter, Ivan grabbed my wrist, holding me back from walking up to the next available teller.

“What?”

He gestured to the man being helped at the next station to our left. “Donovan. Let’s get in line behind him.”

“This may sound childish,” I whispered, “but you want us to cut in line? Is that wise?”

Ivan smirked, pulling me after him as he pushed through a few drunk patrons to the

line behind Donovan. When we got there, he paused, reaching for a woman's thin purse strap.

Slipping out of his sleeve was a tiny pair of scissors. I didn't even see him grab them, and then Ivan was cutting the connection from the strap to the purse's body. The thing flung loose, tumbling to the ground.

"Shit!" The woman cried out.

Her date, likely another mafioso, pulled her to the side and began helping her clean up the mess of makeup and pills that had spilled all over the ground. Not that he looked happy about it.

Seamlessly, Ivan nudged me along and slid his way into their spot without anyone noticing, too distracted by the commotion he'd caused.

When Ivan looked over, I nodded with my brows up. "Smooth."

"Thank you."

After that, I could see Ivan concentrating on what Donovan was saying in front of us.

"Who's the dunce?" Donovan's voice was quiet, and I could just make out his words and thick Irish accent around the noise.

The teller glanced down at him, cocking a brow. "Sir, I'm afraid I don't—"

"Yeah, you do. It's Tommy. I called and spoke to Saul. So, who's the dunce?"

With his eyes wide, the man behind the counter slowly nodded, looking down at something beneath his main book.

“I believe Rodrigo is the dunce tonight.”

“Twenty grand on Rodrigo it is. Pleasure doing business with you.”

Donovan offered up a card similar to Ivan’s, and when the teller was through running it, he handed it back, and Donovan left the counter.

“Well,” I whispered to Ivan, “did that help us?”

He grinned—wide and genuine. “It did. Come on.”

Ivan pulled me up to the counter with him, going up to the same teller. “Hello there. Saul instructed me that Rodrigo is the dunce, yeah?”

The teller nodded.

Leaning in closer, Ivan whispered, “How much to get the guy an education?”

For a moment, I was sure that the teller was going to kick us out or something. He glared down at Ivan hard for several long seconds. But when Ivan didn’t flinch, the guy nodded.

“Education is expensive, but,” he glanced down at that paper beneath his books again, “looks like Rodrigo hasn’t been to class yet tonight. A lesson can be arranged, but I must remind you that this is done separately by the proprietor, and any and all altercations that arise as a result will be your responsibility. My associates and I will not be held liable.”

Ivan nodded once. “Understood.”

“Ten thousand,” the teller replied, and aside from the fact that I didn’t know what the

fuck they were talking about, I knew that was a lot of money to pay.

“Done.” Ivan presented his card. “And put another twenty down on Morozova.”

The teller smiled. “Of course, sir.”

After a moment, the teller gave Ivan his card back, and Ivan held out his arm for me to follow him.

“Pleasure working with you,” Ivan glanced at the man’s name tag, “James.”

“And you, sir.”

As we left the counter, Ivan headed in the same direction as Donovan, keeping a close tail on him, which made me hustle in my ridiculous dress.

“Now what?” I whispered.

“Now, we watch.”

Ivan tracked Donovan to the side of the ring, where he stood with a few other men who were looking smug and satisfied. When one of the bouncers passed by again, Ivan got the man’s attention, leaving me to stand by one of the large poles that supported the roof.

I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but Ivan pointed back at Donovan, and the bouncer made a face that could only be described as a snarl. Ivan shook hands with the man and walked back over to me.

Without saying a word, he pointed at Donovan, and I just watched, confused and intrigued. In seconds, however, a fleet of bouncers surrounded Donovan and his men.

They hauled the men off their feet, working to drag them away from the ring.

Donovan looked furious and fought against the massive thugs gripping him as he cursed and screamed out.

“Who the fuck did this?!” Donovan thrashed harder to no avail. “Don’t you know who I am?! This is fucking bullshit!”

Punches started to be thrown by Donovan’s crew, and he even tried one on the colossal guy who was pulling him away by the back of his shirt. The disgusting sounds of bones cracking and blood splattering to the ground turned my stomach, and Ivan held a hand out in front of me as Donovan was yanked past us.

“You’ll all fucking pay for this shit! Let go of me! I—”

But he stopped, Donovan’s eyes locking on Ivan as he was dragged off from the VIP booths to the opposite side of the building. His eyes flared wide as they landed on Ivan, and a chill ran down my spine that had nausea pooling in my gut.

“You,” he growled, and in a quick jerk, he managed to slip his bouncer.

Donovan rushed at Ivan, who shoved me backward toward the pole. I hit it with a slap just as Donovan launched his fist forward and smashed it into Ivan’s jaw. The noise was awful, and I flinched back as the Irishman punched Ivan.

It was a cheap shot. Ivan had been ensuring I was out of harm’s way when Donovan clocked him. As Ivan righted, Donovan took advantage of the momentary confusion to jab his fist into Ivan’s face again.

Blood bloomed from Ivan’s brow as Donovan’s fist slid over it, and I flinched again.

I was about to yell when I considered where I was. Yelling Ivan's name or trying to help could very well be the worst idea, and I didn't want Ivan getting in any more trouble than he already had.

Donovan lined up to hit him again, but this time, Ivan caught his fist and punched back. Ivan's large hand smashed into Donovan's nose, and the guy flew backward, hitting the ground.

Might be able to throw a punch, but Donovan clearly can't take one.

The bouncer who'd grabbed him before was finally able to push through the crowd and hurried over to Donovan, pulling him up off the floor as his nose gushed blood.

"You all right, sir?" The bouncer asked Ivan.

"Fine. He's all yours."

The bouncer pulled Donovan off, and when they were out of sight, I rushed up to Ivan's side.

"Christ, are you okay? You're bleeding pretty good."

He shrugged, touching his brow gently to see the red dripping from it himself. "Ah, I'm fine. I've had worse. Besides, that should keep Donovan out of our hair for a while."

I rolled my eyes, crossing my arms over my chest. "There had to be a better way of doing that."

With a smirk, Ivan offered his arm to me. "Maybe. But it worked. How about we head back home so you can patch me up?"

The innuendo was clear, and as much as I wanted to be upset with Ivan, I was still impressed by what he'd been able to pull off. And I knew that as soon as we got back and Ivan had me alone again, he'd be deep inside me before I could get so much as a bandaid on his head.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm

It's been two weeks. Two fucking weeks of tracking that asshole, Donovan, to learn more, and all I've done is taken care of other contacts Lev—and, by extension, Sergei—wants dealt with.

Enough of the info I found on Donovan led to several of his supposed allies. Over time, I've been able to track each of them down in the hunt for more usable data. A handful were less than thrilled about ratting him out, but a good session in the chair loosened their tongues.

Still, there were five who wouldn't budge, sure that Donovan was the new player in town. They all met the same fate as anyone else looking to mess with the Vadims and my brothers and I had been there to deliver Vadim justice to each bastard who threatened them.

Tonight signaled the last of the leads I had to go on, and it hadn't panned out. I was pissed, grumpy as all hell, and ready to get back home to Adley.

"Have the cleaners come. We can't have this shit found," I bit out, and Abe cocked a brow at me.

"What crawled up your ass?"

I sighed, raking a hand through my hair. "Ugh, sorry. This is just a bit frustrating, ain't it? We've been looking for a better lead on Donovan's plans for two weeks now. It's getting old."

Abe shrugged as he nodded once, pulling out his cell to text the clean-up crew.

“No shit. But that’s the job.” His fingers danced over the keys, and then he slid the phone back into his pocket. “They’ll be here in ten. And I, for one, am looking forward to the break. We’ve been hitting it every fucking night, and for the first time, I’m actually running out of gas.”

Vlad groaned in agreement, rubbing the back of his neck. He’d worked over our latest target for at least an hour, and I was sure his back was sore from leaning over the guy as he was strapped to the chair.

The sound of water running also started up, and I looked over to see both him and Abe washing their hands in the dingy sink we’d had installed in what we affectionately called “The Work House.”

“Yeah, boys. I think a night in is just what the doctor ordered.”

Images of Adley filled my mind, and my bad mood was dissipating faster with each second.

When they were cleaned up, my brother sauntered over, Abe knocking me in the shoulder with his. I shoved back, playing our dumb little game, but then Vlad caught me by the arm and swung me around to look at his phone.

Reading the message, I rolled my eyes and groaned. “Oh, fuck off, Vlad.”

Abe pulled up to a stop, clearly amused and interested in what the asshole had texted. “And what’s all that about?”

He rushed over to Vlad, and even as I tried to interpose myself between them so that Abe could suffer without reading the message, Vlad managed to lift his phone over my arm and shove it in Abe’s face.

Abe started to read the thing aloud, his words choppy as he dodged my strikes.

“Just be more quiet this time. I’m sick of hearing you bone. Ha!”

Having utterly lost this battle, I gave up, sighing as I walked to the exit. “I hate you both.”

“Whatever you say,” Abe yelled, “bone daddy!”

Finally, back home, I was glad to be done for the evening, and I wasted no time heading straight upstairs and to my bedroom. It was quiet as I came up the steep stairs, but then, in the distance, I heard the distinct sound of someone worshipping the porcelain throne.

Adley?

Hurrying up the remaining few steps, I got inside and shucked off my coat and boots. Sure enough, I heard the sound again and then the frailer noise of Adley moaning with discomfort.

“Ugh, make it stop,” I heard her mumble from the bathroom, and I padded over to see what was up.

I’d cooked last night, and if I’d given her food poisoning, I was about to feel like a real dickwad.

“Adley? What’s going on in there?”

The door to the private toilet room was closed, and I heard the thing flush and another

low groan from Adley. In a few moments, the door opened, and she stepped out, looking worse for wear.

She glared up at me as she heaved in several breaths, and I was almost sure Adley was going to turn around and puke again until she shook her head and walked past me toward the bathroom counter.

“What’s going on in here, buddy, is your fucking fault.”

Adley’s tone was exhausted and annoyed, and I’d rarely heard her sound this snappy since she’d been living here. She hung her head over the sink, turning on the faucet to splash her face with cold water.

Another several seconds dragged on before she turned off the water and spun slowly around to face me. Her color was still off, but cooling herself down looked to have eased some of that nausea plaguing her.

“My fault?” My stomach dropped, and I could suddenly feel my heart beating in my chest. “Fuck, it was the food. Dammit, Adley. It hasn’t affected me or the guys. I didn’t think—shit. I’ll toss out whatever we have left.”

A dry, sarcastic chuckle left her, and Adley rolled her eyes. “You moron. It’s not the food.”

She stared at me, her eyes wide and brows up to her hairline. I just stood there, too confused about what she meant by that if it wasn’t the food.

“Adley, I don’t think I under—”

“Ugh, men. They can be so thick sometimes.” She walked away from the counter, coming back toward me.

I thought she might be coming in to pull me somewhere or even shove me, considering her mood, but Adley just stepped around me back into the tiny room that housed the toilet. She bent down, retrieving something small off the ground. Another pained moan left her as she straightened up, and then she walked back up to me and clapped whatever she was holding against my chest.

As she walked away again, I reflexively caught the thing before it fell back to the floor.

“Ugh, remind me not to bend over anymore.”

She was back at the sink, splashing her face again when I finally looked at what she’d given me.

My jaw actually dropped.

“Wait. Is this—”

“Yup,” She replied, looking at me through the mirror.

“So that means you’re—”

“Yup.”

“Oh my God, Adley, I...holy shit!”

Everything spun and jumbled together, the world flying around off its axis as I processed what was happening. Reality hit me like a bulldozer, but I looked into her crystal blue eyes in the mirror again and dashed over to her side.

Spinning her around as gently as I could, I fell to my knees in front of her, looking

straight ahead at her lower belly.

“You’re pregnant,” I whispered, a burn behind my eyes that I wouldn’t acknowledge.

I heard Adley release a breathy chuckle, and then her hand came to my face, the other threading through my hair. When I looked up at her, the annoyance appeared to be gone, and her eyes were soft and glassy.

“It’s so fast. I didn’t think...Wow.”

A genuine laugh left her that time, and Adley smiled down at me. “Like something out of a teen drama. You knocked me up on the first try.”

Like a damned fool, I started laughing, throwing my head back as the burn in my eyes got worse. I wasn’t that guy. I wasn’t about to cry over some emotional bullshit, but damn, this was way better than I expected. After a second, I looked back at her lower belly again, putting my lips to the area over her leggings.

“Hello in there.”

Adley laughed, but when I looked up at her, I could see she wasn’t being as stoic as myself. Tears slid down her face, and when I got back up to my feet, I swiped my thumbs under her eyes to clear them.

“Stupid hormones.”

I cocked a brow. “Are you sure you can use that excuse already?”

She swatted at me. “Damn straight, I can. If this baby is making me puke my guts out, the hormones are definitely working their magic.”

“How did you get a test? It’s not like we’ve been to the store.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “You dope. I ordered it and had the thing delivered. You still have an address even all the way out here. I just used Google.”

I wasn’t thrilled with the idea that finding the house could be that easy. Still, I could always make sure that the driver’s delivery records disappeared. I knew several excellent hackers.

“Well, however you got it, I’m about to frame the thing.”

Kissing her, which she tried to pull away from, likely because she had just been sick, Adley laughed against my lips. I scooped her up despite any protests, however, carrying her to the bedroom and lying her down.

Together on the bed, I stared down into those soft baby blues, putting my hand on her stomach. Adley sighed, a tired smile still in place on her features.

“I think you can tell, but I’m fucking thrilled. You’re creating a human, our human. It’s...it’s a raw sense of power and connection I haven’t known before.”

She giggled. “Look at you getting all deep. Mostly, it feels like a raw sense of nausea and exhaustion to me.”

I grabbed her chin, making her look at me as I held her stare. “Whatever you need. You fucking tell me all of it. Understood?”

“I will.” Adley held my hand where it claimed her face.

With another long sigh, Adley snuggled deeper into the bed. “Rest is what I’m feeling right now.”

Making her look at me one more time, I held her chin as I covered her lower belly with my other hand.

“Tomorrow, we’re getting you a dress. I’m not waiting another minute to make you my wife.”

Her eyes flared wide. “Tomorrow? Like tomorrow tomorrow?”

Smirking down at her, I used my knee to guide Adley’s legs further apart. “I’d do it now if I didn’t have other plans.”

She looked at me like I’d lost my damn mind. “Pregnancy and a proposal is a lot for one day, and now you want to add...”

Adley let the innuendo speak for itself. If she was going the nonverbal route, then I could, too. I reached for the hem of her leggings and then yanked them down, taking her panties with me.

“Ivan!”

I wasn’t listening to any of her protests right now, though. Adley was carrying my child, and along with the swirl of emotions that brought, there was also this thrum of possessive energy that gripped me, making me want to claim her as mine all over again.

Squirming, Adley tried to redirect me, but as always, I was taking what I wanted from my sweet, feisty girl, and she was going to lay back and take it. I tossed her pants to the side, lying between her legs and reaching up for one of Adley’s breasts as I spread her for me with the other.

She moaned low, her breaths flowing in and out in quick succession. “Ivan, I... You

know what, never mind. Go for it. Maybe it'll make me feel better.”

I smiled just before diving in, dragging my tongue through her slit and finding the growing wetness that was always so responsive for me. I was going to make her come at least twice on my tongue before sinking my cock inside her.

My perfect girl. Pregnant and claimed and mine.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm

“Absolutely not. Do you see how many ruffles that has? No.”

I shook my head, almost laughing, as Ivan shoved the monstrosity that was that dress back into place on the rack. He had no idea what he was doing when it came to wedding gowns, and I didn’t blame him. But ruffles? Bell sleeves? I mean, come on. Who does he think I am? I am not a girly girl. No way.

“And no veils. We’re not exactly your traditional couple. I don’t think a veil is necessary.”

He shrugged, stepping away from the massive collection of white dress after white dress. I was being annoying right now; I knew it. But apparently, I was getting married today—while pregnant, no less—and I was feeling a bit grumpy about the pace.

Talk about a short engagement, right?

And yes, it was most definitely the hormones and the nervousness. Hell, as much as I didn’t want to think about it right now, it was also the fact that I was kind of...excited. I wasn’t that girl who fantasized about getting married, but it had crossed my mind. I wanted a partner to spend my life with as much as most people did.

And now it was sort of happening. It is in a bizarre fashion, but it is happening nonetheless.

“All right, sweetheart. I tried. I’m going over here now.”

Ivan plopped down on one of the overlarge plush chairs, and I sighed. Whoops .

“I’m sorry. It’s just...it’s a wedding dress, Ivan. It needs to fit who I am.”

“I get it. I do.” He cocked his head, squinting. “Well, as much as I can anyway. Just hurry up if you can. I’d rather not spend the day in this damn shop. There’s a much more appealing place back home.”

I rolled my eyes at him, walking back over to the rack of dresses. I’d refused help from the sales attendant since I wasn’t here to be told what I “should” wear, and Ivan had already made it clear that it didn’t matter what the dress cost, so I was firmly on my own.

Which would be fine except for the fact that I didn’t know what I wanted.

Maybe you should get some help.

I didn’t move away from the rack, though. I just kept working my way through the array of dresses, trying to find the one that just spoke to me. The one that lept out and said, “I’m the one.”

So dumb. At this rate, I’m just going to grab the first one without a million frills and call it a day.

“Excuse me, miss? I know you’ve been struggling a bit, but perhaps you’ll let me show you one.”

Turning around, I found the attendant holding a dress draped over her arms. I could see a bit of lace at the top of the gown, but before I could protest, she held up her hand and smiled at me.

“I know you don’t like frills. I assure you, this gown isn’t over the top. It has just enough. But you need to see it on to understand.”

With a sigh, I gave in. I needed something to wear, and Ivan was getting impatient—as was I.

“I’m going to go try this on, okay? I’ll be right back.”

He raised his brows at me and nodded, perfectly content to sit and wait on the likely thousand-dollar couch.

The saleswoman walked me to a private dressing room, and with a bit of her assistance, I got changed into the dress. I was nervous, clearly, but when I turned around to look at myself in the mirror, my jaw dropped.

"This one."

The chamber where we met the judge was larger than I expected and completely cleared out of anyone but exactly who Ivan wanted there. Part of me mourned the fact that my parents and siblings weren’t around. Still, once this entire situation with Ivan had been going on for a while, we’d hold a proper ceremony with my family.

If we last that long.

My throat tightened at the thought. As much as I still wanted to fight it, I did feel connected to Ivan, drawn to him stronger than a moth to the flame. And I was having his child. Our child.

I hadn’t wanted to take it back once. It had only been two days, sure, but my initial

thought when I'd taken that test was not, "Oh no." I'd felt...excited. Overwhelmed, of course, but so very eager to meet whoever this little person was.

Just outside the door at the back of the room, I waited for my cue. I peeked through the crack in the door and could see Ivan's brothers, all decked out in suits, standing to the left of the podium.

The room was one of the tiny courtrooms that was right next to the judge's office, but somehow, they'd managed to create a little "aisle" for me to walk down when everyone was ready. The officiant looked happy enough to be performing the impromptu wedding when we'd arrived, and I wondered if he was on the books, so to speak.

"Ms. MacCormack," I heard him call out, "please come in."

Not MacCormack for long, though, huh?

Pushing forward through the door, I stepped into the makeshift "chapel." Abe and Vlad smiled as I walked down toward them, and the black of their suits stood out in stark contrast to the golden brown wood of the walls.

My heart hammered so hard against my ribs, and the familiar nausea was beginning to peak. I wasn't going to let myself be sick, though. Not now. After eons, I finally found the courage to look over just a hair to where Ivan was standing.

"Holy..."

I gasped just slightly, and Ivan mirrored my surprise. Neither of us had let the other see our final outfits, and to say that Ivan cleaned up damn good was an understatement. His black suit was crisp and structured over a soft white shirt. He wore a long black tie, and he's apparently freshly trimmed his hair and stubble.

He looked...beautiful. Terrifying as always, but also so very handsome, and my entire body warmed.

The rasp of fabric on my chest drew my attention to my gown, and I admired the obvious desire in Ivan's expression. The saleswoman had been right to pick this one, and I could tell how much he liked it.

The long skirt hung in sleek lines down to the floor, a short train of the satin fabric flowing behind me. Ivan's eyes traveled up the slit that opened gently around my left leg with each step and widened as he reached the apex, where it sat right at the front of my hip.

Being careful about my strides was crucial because I'd apparently found my wild streak and decided to go without panties.

Ivan's gaze didn't stop there, though. His eyes ran up my body, taking in the cinched waist where the satin abruptly changed to white lace, several sheer sections creating a tantalizing view of my flesh beneath.

It was only thanks to the strategic placement that my nipples weren't on full display. Though as it was, they were hard as a rock and straining against the fabric because I was both quite cold and desperately aroused.

The lace traveled down one arm to the wrist in a long sleeve while scooping over my chest and leaving the other arm wholly uncovered. The pattern in the lace was especially subtle, and I'd pulled my hair back into a high twist. Both things combined to make me feel particularly exposed despite how much clothing I was actually wearing.

It's probably the no bra or panties, Adley.

When I finally reached the short walk to the front of the room, I stood next to Ivan, turning to face him as the judge cleared his throat. Ivan took my hand as the man began his little speech, and I could do nothing but stare into those gorgeous gray-blue eyes.

“All right,” Judge Henderson said, “you have both come here today to be joined in lawful matrimony. You have gathered your witnesses to this undertaking and are both of sound mind and judgment. Correct?”

Ivan nodded. “Yes.”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Very well, that it is within my power to join you two in the state of Illinois as man and wife. Do you wish to say anything?”

He looked to Ivan first, and I was sure the judge would be met with a solid headshake. But Ivan surprised me, sucking in a breath through the nose and then turning to me.

“Adley,” Ivan steadied himself before continuing, “it is my honor to become your husband. I promise you that for as long as there is air in my lungs, I’ll do whatever it takes to protect you and any children that may come in the future. Everything that you are and will become is mine—to safeguard, to keep, to fulfill.”

My jaw fell open again, and a burn set up shop behind my eyes that I didn’t want to acknowledge for fear of crying and ruining the makeup I’d worked so hard at. I hadn’t prepared to say anything, but there was no way I was leaving Ivan with nothing after all that.

I smiled as he met my eyes, clearing my throat and squeezing his hand.

“Ivan, it is my honor to become your wife today. You have given me and my family so much, and I will never be able to repay that generosity. I...I have felt at home living with you, and a future that I never dreamed was possible might actually be a reality because...”

My throat closed briefly, and I had to suck in a fresh breath to fight back the need to sob.

“Because you noticed me across the bar. I take everything you are and might become as I take your hand.”

Ivan wouldn’t cry. He wasn’t the type. But the fact that I could see the glimmer of his eyes shine all the brighter in the gentle light of the room spoke volumes.

“Very well,” the judge cut in. “Mr. Ivan Ustinov, do you take Ms. Adley MacCormack to be your lawfully wedded wife.”

He wasted no time in replying, “I do.”

“Ms. Adley MacCormack, do you take Mr. Ivan Ustinov to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

I nodded, shaking my head to shoo away the damn tears that hormones were determined for me to shed.

“I do.”

Judge Henderson nodded with a polite smile. “Then it is with the power vested in me by the state of Illinois to pronounce you husband and wife. You may—”

Ivan’s arms snatched me around the waist, pulling me forward as he crashed his lips

into mine. I yelped slightly but quickly melted into the feeling of the deep kiss. Regardless of anything else, I knew without a doubt how perfect Ivan felt against me.

“How sweet.”

Ivan yanked back, squeezing me tight as we both looked over at the unknown voice. But as soon as I realized where I’d heard that man before, my stomach dropped. Oh shit.

“Donovan,” Ivan gritted out, and he maneuvered me behind him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Abe and Vlad start to shift their positions closer to Ivan, and the judge was doing his best to slink backward.

“Hello there, Mr. Ustinov.” Donovan cocked his head, smirking maliciously at us. “You caused quite the commotion at the fight, didn’t you? And what do you know, that bullshit you pulled went straight to the top. Cost me millions. Millions .”

Three men flanked Donovan on either side, and I looked past them to see that the door was now shut at the back of the room. I could guess that they’d locked it. We were trapped in here with them, and Ivan really needed to call for backup ASAP.

“This was a stupid fucking move, Donovan. You really think you and these fucking pissants are going to do anything to the Unholy Trinity?”

Donovan’s eyes were cold, but a potent fire of rage burned in the core, making him grip his hands into fists as he stood just a few feet away from us. His men had their hands inside their jackets. It had to be a move for their guns.

A mirthless chuckle let him, and Donovan scrubbed his hand over his face. “I’m going to fucking try. And I’ll be more than satisfied if all I’m able to do is take out

that little bitch of yours.”

My hand flew to my stomach on instinct. No one knew I was pregnant except Ivan. He hadn't even told his brothers yet. So there was no way Donovan knew, which made it all the worse, actually.

Not that I believed for a second Donovan would change his mind if he knew.

“Last chance, Donovan. Get the fuck out or pay the price.”

The judge had all but disappeared at this point, using a door off in the corner to return to his private chambers. Donovan threw his head back in another crazed laugh, and I felt Ivan shove into me with the flat of his hand. He wanted me to run, to get out of the line of fire, and I knew I needed to.

But I was frozen.

Ivan was in serious, very real danger of getting shot, and I couldn't bring myself to leave him. I also didn't want anything happening to the pregnancy, which of course, made the situation real damn complicated. Fuck!

“Nah,” Donovan drawled, sending shivers down my spine because of his nonchalance. “I think I'll stay. After all...”

He let the words hang as his men circled around him, moving closer to us as they pressed down the sides of the room.

“You owe me. I'll either take that payment in cash...” Donovan raised his hand in the air, holding up two fingers, “or blood.”

With that, Tommy Donovan, Irish mob boss and rival of the Vadims, pointed his

fingers right at me—like a gun.

The room erupted into chaos as guns were drawn and bullets zinged through the air. Ivan spun around, pulling me into his chest as he dove with me behind the nearest row of pew seating. The leap sent us crashing onto the cheaply carpeted floor, and I landed on my shoulder with a hard thump.

Pain ricocheted through my arm, and I pulled myself behind the wooden bench for cover from the bullets. It wasn't going to do much good for long, however. Donovan and his men could just walk over here and shoot down at us.

“Stay down. Let me handle this.”

Ivan's words were short jabs of fury through the air, and right now, I wasn't about to argue with him. I may have been a self-sufficient woman, but even I knew when I was in over my head. So I just nodded.

“Good.”

Ivan reached into the back of his pants. He had a gun stashed in his waistband and pulled it out, checking the clip.

“Ahh!”

The scream stole both our attention, making us look up and over at where Vlad stood. He held one of Donovan's goons by the arm, which was twisted so far behind the man that I couldn't believe it wasn't broken.

Snap .

Oh, well, never mind then. It's broken now.

My stomach lurched, nausea forcing me to blink rapidly and take shallow breaths through my nose.

As the man fell to the ground, Vlad held onto the goon's hand, putting his foot on the man's shoulder and pressing down. The guy cried out again, but Vlad leveled his gun at the back of the man's head, and with a quick squeeze of the trigger, the attacker was dead.

I'd never seen someone be killed before, and I reeled backward, trying to make myself as small as possible against the wooden pew. Weirdly, I wasn't appalled by Vlad's actions. I knew he was defending not only himself but me from these men, and I was actually...grateful.

Then, at my side, Ivan shot up, taking in the scene around him before drawing his weapon and firing off two rounds into the nearest thug. I couldn't see what happened, but the solid boom of something heavy landing on the floor told me enough that Ivan had at least dropped the guy.

"Goddamn you, Ustinov! You and your fucking brothers will pay! You hear me!"

I looked up at Ivan, who knelt with his arms outstretched over the top of the pew, smirking.

"You know, I missed that. Probably all the gunfire. Maybe if you wanted to stop—"

More firing kicked up in response, and Ivan quickly ducked down before pulling back up to return his fire himself.

"Did you fucking see that, Abe? Didn't even let me finish."

I could hear Abe call out from the other side of the room, the crack of gunfire coming

from that direction.

“So rude. Just interrupting you like that? Ugh. I wouldn’t stand for it, Ivan.”

As shots rang out over my head, Ivan smirked, but I could see the way he clenched his jaw. He was clearly pissed, but worse, I could sense the fear coming off him. I didn’t want to think about that or the way that my stomach fluttered with terror all its own.

He can’t die. He can’t. I won’t lose him.

“You know, I don’t think I will.”

Several decisive shots went off, one after the other. I heard the corresponding thud of bodies hitting the floor, and then Ivan stood up.

“That’s the last of your men, Donovan. Now come out and face your punishment like a good boy.”

Nothing. Not a single sound played out as I waited for Donovan’s response. Looking up at Ivan and meeting his eyes, he pointed down at the floor, signaling for me to stay put. I wasn’t about to move until I knew it was safe. Then Ivan looked across the aisle at Vlad and Abe, silently asking what they could see.

I leaned forward to see Ivan’s brothers better, and they both shrugged. Ivan gestured for them to move out from their positions, probably to find Donovan. Abe and Vlad moved silently as they crept through the tiny pews, searching.

Maybe Donovan is dead.

Quickly dismissing the thought, I crawled out—just a hair—on my hands and knees. I

didn't think we were lucky enough for Donovan to be out of the picture just like that.

"Fucking bitch."

Whipping my head around, I came face-to-face with Donovan as he slid out from his hiding spot in the pew behind me. The barrel of a gun stole all my attention as he raised it toward me, and dimly in the background, I heard Ivan holler my name.

But the loud crack of the gun going off was already sounding in front of me, and then there was just black.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm

I'd heard probably a million gunshots in my life. I couldn't even remember them all or the times when it was me firing versus my brothers or our opponents. Gunshots weren't anything special to a mobster.

But I'd be remembering this one for the rest of my life.

“Adley!”

I was already diving for her when I heard Donovan give away his position. My body collided with hers, taking my new wife to the ground as the explosion of Donovan's pistol tore through the impossible silence hanging around us. My shoulder collided with the ground with a hard thud, knocking it out of the joint.

Still, I held onto Adley, rolling us so my back was between her and Donovan. There was a fraction of a second where I just waited for him to pop off another round. He didn't, and that was my only opportunity to take him down and finally end this.

Swinging my arm in a wide arch, I fired as soon as my gun was pointed in Donovan's general direction, hitting him in the shoulder. He screamed, falling to his knee as he gripped the injury. Abe and Vlad were over in a flash, grabbing the gun out of his hand and clocking him in the jaw for good measure.

I looked down at Adley, still clutched in my arms, and held her dazed stare.

“Hey. Talk to me. Are you okay?”

She turned slowly, blinking up at me with unfocusing eyes. “I...what...”

Warmth pooled in the fabric covering my arm under Adley's neck. Shit. Not good.

Paying more attention, I leaned back, and reality hit me as soon as my eyes left Adley's. Blood oozed from a deep laceration across her shoulder, right through the trapezius muscle. I'd knocked her out of the way of a more severe hit, but Adley had been shot, and she was bleeding way too much for my liking.

"Adley. Fuck," I gritted out, pressing my hands to her neck forcefully as I got her to the floor as gently as I could. "Abe! Get us a safe exit the fuck out of here. We need Parker. Now!"

The sound of boots hitting the floor circled me, and I knew that my brothers were taking care of ensuring Donovan's thugs were out of commission.

Donovan .

Picking my gun up from where I dropped it on the floor, I pressed my hand to Adley's shoulder as I raised my weapon toward Donovan. Vlad was still there, keeping an eye on him, and as soon as he saw me aim for the fucker's head, my fucking brother started up with that damn headshaking.

"He dies, Vlad. He shot Adley."

Vlad stepped around Donovan, still holding his gun trained on the man, but he didn't fire. I knew what he was doing. I knew it was the fucking protocol with shitbags like this. I knew that both Sergei and Lev wanted a word with this asshole.

But he'd shot Adley.

"Vlad," I dragged out, clamping down on my molars.

He shook his head, holding up his wrist with his watch. He wanted me to wait. He knew there wasn't time for this, too.

"Ivan..."

I snapped my attention to Adley. Her color was off, and the wound was still bleeding heavily.

"Goddamn it!"

My gun clattered to the floor as I dropped it, and I returned my hand to Adley's neck, pressing down. She moaned as pain rocked her, and my brain scrambled. I wasn't losing her. I wasn't watching this woman die on the damn floor moments after saying, "I do."

"Abe!"

He was at me in a flash. "Cleaners are two minutes out. You need to get back to Lev's. I'll get you both in the car. Vlad and I will wait for them and meet you there with our new chum."

Abe looked over his shoulder at Donovan, and I cursed. That fucker was going to pay for what he did to my wife. After Sergei and Lev had had their words with him, I was going to snap Donovan's neck with my bare hands.

But we did need to go—now.

Standing up, I lifted Adley into my arms as gently as I could. She groaned, and Abe quickly took off his jacket and pressed it to her wound. I held it there, trying to staunch the flow of blood, and then met his eyes briefly for a quick nod.

He knew as much as I did that it was as close to a “thank you” as I could muster right now.

I looked back at Vlad. “You got him?”

He nodded, tearing a piece of Donovan’s jacket free as he stole it from him. Vlad wrapped the ragged fabric around the man’s bleeding shoulder. He was in better shape than Adley for now, and I locked my eyes on him as he glared up at me.

“You’re going to give Lev and Sergei everything they ask for. If you do, I’ll kill you quickly. But if they decide you’ve been less than helpful, I’m going to take my time breaking the bones in your hands and feet until you’re begging me for mercy.”

Donovan tried to offer up some stupid rebuttal, but Vlad clocked him again, knocking the guy’s head back with a solid right hook.

Starting for the door, I called over my shoulder, sure Donovan could hear me.

“Don’t worry, Tommy. We won’t bury you in some ditch. You’ll be delivered back to your family. A warning for everyone about what happens if you so much as ruffle a hair on my wife’s head.”

The car ride with Adley was a blur of panic and desperation. I drove so quickly to Lev’s that I was sure I’d broken my record for speeding offenses. And red lights had become just a suggestion.

There weren’t any by Lev’s mansion, tucked away in its own private little corner of the world, and I mentally thanked the paranoid fucker for being cut off. Any cops that had been alerted to my complete disregard for the law lost me in the twists and turns

leading to Lev's.

Adley's eyes fluttered as I looked over at her. We were pulling up to the door now. She just needed to hang on a little longer.

"Come on, baby. You're okay. Stay with me."

She didn't respond. She hadn't for a while now. But I could still see the rise and fall of her chest. Adley wasn't gone. She wouldn't be gone.

Swinging through the curved drive that led up to the front steps, I slammed the car into park and jumped out to get Adley from her seat. The passenger side was stained red with her blood, and my stomach dropped yet again.

Panic had swelled so high in my veins that it choked me, and I hoisted her into my arms and ran for the house. Kicking the door open, I called out into the echoey room.

"Parker! Parker, help!"

Only seconds later, she was rushing down the stairs with her medical bag. She met me in the front hall, directing me off to the side where the dining room had been changed into an impromptu med bay complete with a hospital bed.

As I laid Adley down on the pristine white fabric, streaking it with crimson as her blood smeared across it, my brain kicked up the thought that they must have stolen all this stuff.

"Your brother called. Move." Parker shifted me away from Adley to her other side. "Lev! Pietor! Finishing scrubbing up and get down here!"

I couldn't speak as Parker got to work, and the men I'd known for years suddenly

appeared at her side, lending their aid and listening to her barked commands like she was the mafia, Don.

Adley's skin was so pale, and I squeezed the hand of her opposite arm as the three of them worked to stop the bleeding and stitch up her wound. I'd seen my brothers suturing up their own injuries dozens of times. It never turned my stomach, but right now, I was inches from throwing up.

"Clean exit. No debris." Parker spoke out loud as she assessed each aspect of Adley's gunshot wound, and the words just passed through my brain without meaning. "That line started?"

Lev nodded in my peripheral vision. "Yes."

"Good. Pietor," Parker held out her hand, "let's get this closed."

Time flew by in start and stop moments that didn't quite connect. Adley was sutured, and the line Parker had mentioned flowed into her arm, delivering antibiotics and fluids.

Another one of Lev's men rushed in from a different doorway. He carried a bag of blood marked O negative.

"She's doing all right. Probably will still need a transfusion for the blood loss."

Suddenly, I realized that Parker was talking to me. I didn't know how long it had been. As I met the woman's eyes, mine burned, and it all came rushing out.

"She's pregnant. Just found out. I...It was Donovan." My voice deepened into a growl. "He fucking shot her."

“Pregnant?” Parker’s question was echoed by the same words coming out of Lev and Pietor. “Okay, definitely needs the transfusion then. Okay. Here!”

She raised her hand for the blood and set up what I had to assume was the transfusion. I didn’t know what the fuck she was doing, but it was what Adley needed, so I didn’t question it.

Several more minutes dragged on before Parker and the guys were finished with their work. I wasn’t sure what I’d seen or what had happened, and I could logically place the phenomenon to being in shock.

When the room was empty aside for Parker, she reached out with her freshly ungloved hand and laid it on mine.

“You did good, Ivan. You got her here fast. I’ve done everything I can to make sure she’s okay. She’ll need time, and I’ll watch her closely. I promise.”

I nodded, unable to do anything else, and then I was left alone in the room with Adley.

The silence was deafening, and I looked down at my bride , her wedding gown speckled with blood. My heart lurched behind my ribcage, and I swallowed hard, trying to hold back the desperate sob that clawed to be free. My efforts were pointless at this point, and with no one around to bear witness, I finally let myself break down.

“You can’t fucking leave me, Adley.” I gripped her hand, staring down into her unconscious face. “You can’t. I...”

I wasn’t sure why I was still hesitating. There was obviously no one around, and even Adley couldn’t hear me. They were just words. It should be no big thing to say them out loud.

But that was the rub.

I'd never said them since my mother and never believed I would. Mom ...She'd been killed by some fucker just like Donovan, cruel and sloppy and unimpressive. How was it that the smallest of men could do the most damage?

The gentle beep of the monitor Lev's men had brought in filled the quiet. Parker had said Adley would be moved to a recovery room they'd set up when she was stable. I hadn't even asked about the equipment and the new setup.

Parker was the doctor, though. So, I had a feeling she ensured the house's medical supplies were up to standard.

Adley's color was better now that the transfusion had been running for a while, and I reached up to stroke my thumb across her cheek.

"Adley, I...dammit." I sighed, my head falling to the bed next to her hip. "Don't fucking leave me. Got it? I need you. I...love you."

And that was it. I'd said the big L-word, but there was no response because Adley was out. She had to wake up. She had to be okay. Because I wasn't about to have the only person who I'd said "I love you" to die without hearing it.

She's not dying at all. Neither of them are.

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Waking up after a hangover felt better than this. I jumped ever so slightly when I came to, still worried that I was in that damned courtroom. I wasn't, of course, but the flinch made my shoulder ache all the harder, and then a blooming nausea filtered out of the depths behind it.

Ugh, one morning when I'm not nauseated. That's all I want. How long is this shit supposed—

“The baby!”

I shot forward in the bed, and then suddenly, hands were on my arms, trying to keep me from shifting around too much. Pain flared through the injury near my neck, and I winced, hissing in a shallow breath.

“Whoa, whoa. You're all right, Adley. The baby is all right. Try to calm down.”

Looking up at the woman standing before me, I was shocked to see a woman in a doctor's coat offering a gentle smile. Her strawberry blonde locks were pulled back into a ponytail, and the warmth of her green eyes immediately settled me.

I sucked in a deep breath, giving that calm thing a good try. “I...Where am I?”

She smiled. “You're at Lev Vadim's house. He works with Ivan. I'm Parker. Lev's wife. And the resident MD around the parts. Do you remember what happened?”

Looking down at where I lay in the bed, I noticed the distinct lack of a wedding dress; my body was covered in a hospital gown instead.

“Yes,” I nodded, “but how did I get here? The last thing I remember was looking up at Ivan. God, where is he? Is he okay?”

Nervous energy pounded through me, imagining bullet holes riddling the father of my child. He’d knocked me out of the way of Donovan’s shot. Did he take the brunt of it? Was he still alive? Oh, God. He has to be alive. I can’t...No, no, no. I—

“Hey, hey.” I looked up at Parker as she seemed to read my mind. She was shaking her head, doing her best to calm me as my thoughts raged. “He just left to get some sleep. I made him rest in a bed because he’d been in that chair for too long.”

Looking to my left, I noticed the small chair pulled up to the side of the bed. It was then I realized that I was, in fact, in some type of medical suite, but it was far from the undecorated rooms you saw in a hospital. Parker had said I was in Lev’s house. That made sense. The place had painted walls and carpeted floors instead of the usual all-white walls and tile.

“Oh, okay.” I drew in more air, hoping to settle my nerves, and then I looked back up at Parker. “So...Ivan didn’t get shot. He’s...okay?”

She smiled. “He is. Unfortunately, you caught the bullet in that exchange, but thankfully, it was a clean through-and-through, and it wasn’t near any vital organs or bones.”

“Umm...” My hand drifted over my stomach as I considered my other colossal concern. “And the baby is...”

“The baby is fine. You’re really early in your pregnancy, and it actually benefited you. The blood needed to support the pregnancy isn’t as high yet. As far as I can tell, everything is okay. You haven’t spotted since you arrived, but we’ll keep an eye on it until I can perform a scan.”

My heart was in my throat, and I just nodded again. “Okay. I...I just found out the other day. I’m not, umm, far along. I...”

Emotions were a bit too hard to process right now. I was thrilled the baby and Ivan were okay. However, there was still so much ahead of me with all this, and that constant anxiety I’d felt since I found out I was pregnant was still very much present.

With a soft grin, Parker took my hand. “Congratulations, Adley.”

My eyes welled up, and I had to blink several times to see Parker clearly.

“If you’d like, I would be happy to help you keep an eye on the development over the next few months. I’m not an OBGYN, but I know what our men do for a living, so...you can be honest when you’re with me. Though, I still suggest finding an OB or midwife to look after you.”

“Right. That, umm, makes sense. Yeah, I’d like that.” I nodded like a bobblehead. “And I’ll find a doctor or something. I think...Ivan will probably take me.”

My head spun, the details of my potential future swirling around in my brain and making that nausea flare. There was a gradual recession in the pain that thrummed through my neck and shoulder, though—and even the discomfort tucked behind my ribs.

I was alive, the baby appeared to be okay, and Ivan was alive. That’s all I could really ask for.

Still, a stitch pulled in my heart with each beat. Because the truth was I wanted to ask for more. I wanted a real relationship, a partnership, with Ivan. Consciousness had been iffy at best after being shot, but the same thought had kept tumbling about in my head.

I cared about Ivan. I could quite possibly love him, and I wished for nothing more than to hear Ivan admit the same.

I want my happy ending, dammit.

“Hey,” Parker took my hand as she sat on the bed beside me. “I know this has been a lot. And if your situation is anything like mine, I understand how it feels to be on the receiving end of the Vadim family’s unique ‘wooing’ techniques.”

That one actually got me to laugh. Parker’s insight was great, and it felt really good to know that someone else knew what I was dealing with and how overwhelming it could be.

“That is so true.” I nodded, wiping under my eyes again. “Is it...is it wrong of us to want them? To be okay with all that comes with who they are?”

A long sigh dragged out of Parker, and she scoffed lightly. Looking down at our hands, Parker chuckled lightly, just a bit of air rushing out of her nose, and then she glanced up at me with a sympathetic smile.

“I’m not going to say it’s not complicated, but wrong? No, I don’t think so. These men...well, they’re criminals, yes, but they’re also humans. They have wants and needs and lives that they want to protect. Since being with Lev, well, I’ve seen the difference between brutal and evil. Does that make sense?”

I considered her words, and after laying out what I knew about Ivan in my head like an invisible conspiracy board, it did.

Ivan and his brothers, the Vadim family, were criminals. They didn’t take shit from anyone. But they were also fiercely loyal to each other, they didn’t go out of their way to hunt down women and children, and they had their reasons for choosing a

less-than-legal career.

Nodding, I squeezed Parker's hand. "Yes. Could you...could you find Ivan? I want to talk to him."

"Of course. I know he'll be thrilled to hear you're awake." She raised her brows at me. "I'd prepare yourself for one hell of a hug."

I laughed, and then Parker was going somewhere in this strange house to find Ivan, my husband .

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The door slammed against the wall behind it as I ran into the room, my eyes searching for Adley's. I needed to see that soft blue color like I needed air.

“Adley?!”

As I rushed in, she looked up, her eyes finding mine, and relief like nothing I'd ever felt coursed through my veins. I was immediately intoxicated by the potency of it, and I hurried to Adley's bedside and wrapped my arms around her.

Pulling her against my chest, I breathed in the scent that was distinctly her and clutched her hard enough to make my fingers ache, the feeling of her long hair against my palm grounding.

“I-Ivan,” she squeaked, “you're crushing me.”

I relaxed my grip—only a hair—and then yanked Adley's face up to mine, crashing my lips against her mouth. She tasted like she always did, that sweetness I'd never get enough of, and I didn't give a single fuck that my hands shook as I held her or that my concern was as noticeable as a neon sign.

After a moment, I pulled back, resting my forehead on hers. “Don't fucking do that to me again.”

Adley chuckled lightly, her hands coming up to my chest and gripping the fabric of my shirt. “I'll try not to. I promise.”

Meeting her eyes, I held Adley's stare for several long moments. I couldn't look

away. I needed to know that she was really here, safe and whole.

“I’m okay, Ivan. I swear. Parker did a good job.” She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

My stomach clamped down, my pulse kicking up again. “What? Is it the baby? Is it—”

She shook her head, her brows raising. “No, no. It’s fine. As far as they can tell, this early in the pregnancy, anyway.”

Relaxing a bit, I cupped Adley’s face, stroking my thumb across her cheek. “Then what? I can see you’re upset. Is it just...all fucking this ?”

I gestured around us with my head as I asked. It would make sense if Adley was feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. I was, and I hadn’t been the one to get shot, for fuck’s sake.

“A bit, yeah.” She nodded slowly. “I’m...shit, Ivan. I’m bad at talking about my feelings on a good day. This? This is...”

The words drifted off, and a profound ache set up shop behind my ribs. She wanted to leave. This was too much. Fucking hell. I couldn’t blame her. I’d want out if it were me. Between nearly getting killed and enjoying my sunshiney presence on the regular, I’d understand if Adley was over all this.

And I wouldn’t stop here. I...couldn’t.

Slipping back, I looked down at the bed before raising my eyes to her face again. I kept my expression neutral, relying on my years of experience to school my features into something that didn’t reflect the massive crack that had formed inside me.

“It’s fine, Adley. Just say it.”

Cocking her head, Adley’s brows knitted together, her lips parting gently. She just stared at me for a moment, but then she shook herself, waving a hand like she was done with whatever we’d been talking about.

“No, wait. Hold on. I think you’re getting ahead of yourself. Just sit.”

I wasn’t one to take orders from just anyone. I listened to Lev and Sergei only as much as I needed to, and this was a civilian talking to me like this. But who was I kidding? She was my civilian, my wife . I’d do anything this woman asked of me.

Walking over, I took a spot on the bed near her bent leg, trying to breathe evenly even though I was itching to get out of the room. I’d never been dumped before, and you know what? It fucking sucked.

Adley smiled, her brows up like she hadn’t expected me to listen. “Thank you.”

I just nodded.

“Ivan,” she began, reaching for my hands, “first off, thank you. Again. You saved my life, and I will never not be grateful for that.”

When I tried to reply, Adley silenced me with a look, and I gestured with our joined hands that the floor was hers, rolling my eyes slightly.

“Truthfully, no one has ever put themselves in harm’s way like that for me. It was...fearless, and if I didn’t think you cared before, I certainly do now.” Adley let out a nervous chuckle, and I could see her eyes go glassy. “I had no idea if I was going to survive that. God, I was terrified. I’m still so worried about the baby, and I need you to be okay with me going to see a doctor as much as necessary to ensure

this pregnancy goes okay.”

Wait. Is she...

My mind spun, and I was left there perched on the edge of my seat, as sharp as a blade and ready for it to slice right through me. But if Adley was saying what I thought she was, then maybe we—

“I’m going to take the silence as a yes. So, good. I need something else from you, too. I...” I could hear the shake in Adley’s voice, and her hands trembled in my grip, so I squeezed them back. “I don’t want to just be some...trophy. I’m your wife now, and...I want that to mean something. I know I promised you I’d stay—to take care of my family. And I don’t want to break that promise, but I...I need to hear you say it, Ivan. Can you tell me what I mean to—”

“I love you, Adley.” I cut in. “I love you more than I’ve ever fucking loved anything on the face of this earth, and I promise to be there for you and the baby. I meant that shit at the courthouse. You’re mine.”

Adley’s eyes flared, looking like saucers in her face, and my fingers actually stung from how tightly she gripped them. She pulled me forward before I could say another word, forcing my lips to meet hers in a feverish kiss. Her arms went around my neck, and I put one of my hands on her face as the other reached for her lower belly.

Solid, real, and mine. Adley was here, right fucking here, in my arms, and I was never going to let her go. Ever .

Her lips left mine with a snuffle, and I looked down into her eyes as she grinned from ear to ear.

“I love you, Ivan. I don’t care about any of the other stuff. I love you and want to

make this work—for real.”

Nodding, I held her in my arms, stroking down her long hair and thinking very strongly that the first thing I was going to do for her when she was released was run her a bath. Having her wet and glistening for me was just a bonus.

“For real.”

A minute later, the door clicked open, and I looked up from still holding Adley to see Lev. I was fucking indebted to the guy now, and even though the odds of me taking my skills elsewhere had always been slim, they were nonexistent now.

“Hello, Adley. Glad to see you’re doing better. Ivan.” Lev regarded me, a slight smirk touching the corner of his mouth. “I thought you would like to know that we found more details of Donovan’s dealings in his car. He’s currently being held downstairs.”

Renewed anger boiled in my guts, twisting them until I reflexively clenched my jaw so hard that it actually cracked.

“I want time with him.” I stared directly into Lev’s eyes. “Alone.”

He nodded once. “I expected as much, but he’s not going anywhere, and my men have strict orders to be ‘gentle’ with him. Take your time here. When you’re ready, just come find me.”

“I will.” I swallowed hard, old habits dying hard, but after a beat, I nodded. “Thanks.”

Lev smirked, his brows rising. “Well, well. How ‘bout that. You’re welcome, Ivan. We have quite a bit to discuss later, and your brothers have been detailing the event.

Interesting how Donovan managed to find you. Looks like we may have a few loose ends to tie up.”

I offered another nod, narrowing my eyes. I’d wondered that very thing myself, and the thought that there was a mole somewhere in our network sat really fucking bad with me.

“Sounds like.”

With a head tilt toward Adley, Lev went to leave. “Like I said. Come find me.”

When he was gone, I was left alone with my wife once more, and I stretched out on the bed next to her, pulling her into my arms as gently as I could.

“Get some rest, sweetheart. I need you healthy—and fast.”

“Oh?” She regarded me, her mouth tilting into a soft smile.

“Damn straight. As much as I like Lev’s, it’s not the house. Getting you back home and in our bed is my top priority.”

She hummed gently, closing her eyes. “Hmm, I like that. Being your main concern. I’m definitely going to milk that for all it’s worth.”

“You do that, love. You do that.”

We’d finally been allowed to go home, and as promised, the first thing I did for Adley when I got her upstairs to our room was run her a bath.

She had to be careful with the bandages and still wasn't cleared for vigorous physical activity. Still, Parker seemed to know exactly what my actual plans were, and she'd instructed me very sternly to make sure Adley didn't hurt herself because I was desperate to have her.

As long as I can taste her again, feel her around me, I'll be more than satisfied.

With Adley comfortable in the bath, I grabbed the old-fashioned sponge from the ledge and dipped it into the warm water. I ran the rough, tan surface over Adley's arms and legs, soaking it over and over again in the hot water.

"Goddamn, Ivan. That feels incredible. Thank you for taking care of me."

"Anytime, sweetheart."

She turned, laying her forehead on the small towel hanging on the ledge and sitting cross-legged in the bath. The low light gleamed against the droplets that ran down her back, and my chest squeezed.

The vulnerability we'd both shown in the past few days had me reeling in ways I'd been unprepared for. Still, I wouldn't change it, and Adley—naked and under my care—had my heart swelling.

The ache for her was beyond intense; the sensation felt like I could die without her still ringing in my brain even now that I knew she was safe. My rational mind balked at how strong the feelings were, but I was learning to let go of my usual distancing reflex.

Life had always been a strange tumble of events. There was never a way to predict how or when something would start—or end.

Adley adjusted in the tub, sitting up with a gentle smile. The water trickled down her skin, the sight going straight to my cock.

“Happy to be home?”

She grinned, her lips finding mine as she leaned over the ledge. Her soft, full lips—the ones I’d been obsessed with the moment I saw her—felt like heaven against my skin, and I could still feel the fear of losing her too real in my veins.

I needed to feel her, to remember that she was safe.

That she was mine.

Slipping my tongue past the seam of her lips, I massaged Adley’s, and she pulled me closer, wrapping her wet arms around my neck. I gripped the roots of her long blonde hair, which had been piled on top of her head, and our kiss became a frenzy—a dance of mutual desperation to lose ourselves in each other.

Sitting back only slightly, Adley looked up at me. “Get in here.”

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Ivan didn't hesitate, pulling off his shirt and reaching for the buttons on his pants. In a flash, he was stripped down to nothing, tossing his clothes to the floor in a heap. I reached for his chest, gliding my wet hands over his skin.

I was so hungry to feel him, to get him inside me. I knew I had to take it a bit easier, but if I didn't feel Ivan sinking deep into my core, I was going to lose it. He stepped into the large tub easily, pulling me onto his lap.

My legs draped behind his as we sat in the middle of the bath, and I took Ivan's face in both hands.

"I don't understand how we got here, really. How you found me in that bar and swooped in like some knight in shining, stolen armor. But you did."

As I stared into Ivan's eyes, I ran my hands down his arms. He felt solid and alive beneath my fingertips, and my pussy was already squeezing at the thought of him sheathing himself up to the hilt.

It had been too long. I needed him. I needed Ivan to remind me just who I belonged to and how right we felt together.

"I don't either, Adley. It just...did." He slid his hands up my arms to my cheeks. "I only know two things. One, this is more real than anything I've ever felt. And two, I'm going to claim every inch of you as often as I can. You belong to me, and I'm nothing without you."

I smiled, brimming with latent fear and the ever-present arousal I felt from just being

around Ivan. “Please, husband. Make me feel alive.”

He crashed his lips to mine, and behind the intensity was a burning connection. I wanted every touch to last forever. I wanted to savor every single sensation with everything I had, giving myself entirely to Ivan as he claimed me all over again.

Our tongues played in delicious swirls, and Ivan dragged his hands from my face to my hips. His thick erection pressed between us, and my pussy was throbbing with need, slick and wet for him.

Lifting me slightly, Ivan slid his cock inside me. My head fell back as he sheathed himself inside up to the hilt, and he gripped my back, lowering his mouth toward my breasts where his tongue could flick across my nipples.

I slowly began to rock my hips in lazy circles, testing my stamina. Being in that fucking bed for the past few days had been a nightmare, and being in my body like this was exactly what I needed.

Ivan was what I needed.

Setting up a steady rhythm, I moved so the head of his dick rubbed against the sensitive area deep inside my pussy, making me moan low. Ivan scooped his hand under my breast, bringing my nipple deeper into his mouth.

The water sloshed gently as we moved, and the flickering of the candles made me feel like I was in a movie or something—low and romantic lighting for the first moment we’ve had like this since I nearly died.

A deep, guttural moan tore from me as Ivan’s impressive erection reached deeper inside me. Then he was sliding his other hand beneath my ass, helping me to ride him up and down in the tub.

It was perfection.

I squeezed around Ivan's shaft as the deliberate movements drew out every inch of sensation that racked my body—intense and pointed and nearly too much to handle. From his thick cock stretching me to the way he teased and nipped at the hard peaks straining on my breasts, everything felt magnified by the enormity of our connection and the private place in the world we carved out for ourselves.

“Ivan! Ugh!”

My voice was breathy, and I could scarcely restrain the hunger rising in me. Ivan thrust up in time with the circles of my hips. Slow ins and outs made me focus entirely on how he slid into me, filling me up completely.

My orgasm built, and my oversensitive body was inches from blowing apart, lost to the feeling of my husband claiming me so thoroughly.

“That's it, sweetheart.” Ivan seated me fully, bottoming out so far that he nudged my cervix. “God damn the feel of you.”

It's not long before I need more from Ivan, more of this mind-numbing connection that I had been so desperate to feel again. Ivan immediately picked up on it, lifting me and pushing me down to my knees in the tub.

A devilish smirk lit up Ivan's face, and he held my stare with a vibrant intensity as I took him in my mouth.

Water sloshed louder as I moved my entire body in time with my thrusting head, taking every inch of Ivan's cock down my throat. I took him as far as I could and then brushed his sack with my tongue when he bottomed out.

Ivan grunted, low and animal, and his hands threaded through my hair as he thrust in

and out faster.

“So damn beautiful, love. God, you feel like fucking heaven.”

Before he finished, I pulled back, turning around to lean over the edge of the bath. Finding my slit with his fingers, I drove them deep, twirling them slowly and sending me right back to the edge. The desire to come pulsed in my clit, driving me wild. He reached around my hip and patted the sensitive skin of my clit lightly.

“Ivan!”

I bucked as the orgasm raked through me, clamping down around his fingers as he continued to fuck me with them aching slow. As it backed off, Ivan circled around me, coming to the other end of the tub so that he could get on his knees before me.

Standing straighter, I watched as Ivan slid his fingers back into my pussy and sucked the needy bud of my clit into his mouth.

“Oh my God...fuuuuck.” My words tumbled out of me, half delirious and utterly blissed out.

I came—again. Even more, I fluttered harder as I watched Ivan stroke his cock while his tongue and fingers worked me. A massive wave of pleasure unfurled from me like a tsunami, and Ivan lapped up every drop, his eyes hungry and entranced.

My legs trembled, and Ivan spun me around to sit back down on his shaft. I didn’t know if I could take more, but the need for this unbridled passion still flooded my veins.

I’d nearly lost him. He nearly lost me, and I knew that we were reminding each other that we were still there, still together.

Riding Ivan with my back to his chest, he held my hips up enough so that he could fuck into me hard. My shoulder ached, but I ignored that pain, or rather embraced it. I'd almost lost this for good, and I wasn't about to let the discomfort take it away from me.

The strokes were still slow and purposeful, forcing me to know nothing else but the sensations rocking my body. The way it felt to glide up and down the ridges of his erection, particularly the head, how Ivan's fingers pressed into my hips enough to bruise, the possession that he exuded for everything I was and everything I might become.

Reaching around to my breast, Ivan pinched my nipple, and I clenched around his shaft. The slow pumps of his hips speared him up to the hilt inside me, rough but unhurried.

"God damn , Ivan." My eyes clamped shut, moisture clinging to my lashes. "It's too much. Too good. Don't ever leave me."

"Never, sweetheart." Ivan pumped in still more brutal strides, bouncing me on his lap. "This pussy is mine. You are all mine. Nothing will ever take you away from me."

My fingers went to my clit, caressing Ivan's shaft as it disappeared inside me. He groaned, and my head fell back onto his shoulder.

Somehow, my body both melted into him and sparked to life even more, the feelings overcoming everything else. Water splashed to the floor, and lust-drunk words flooded out of me.

"Please! Ivan! Ugh!" I worked myself harder, letting go of everything that I'd ever held back. "Harder. God, please, harder."

The world didn't exist, and yet, our efforts grounded me to the planet.

We rocked together, chasing the extraordinary sensations roaring from within us. Then I fell apart around his cock once more.

Ivan's erection twitched inside me, and then he was emptying himself into my overworked pussy. The orgasm took over everything, and I cried out, the sounds echoing in the intimate space of the bathroom.

After a moment, both of us were utterly spent, and stillness returned to the house. The sounds of our ragged breaths were the only noise, and I laid my head against Ivan's chest.

"I promise, Ivan, I'm yours. No matter what."

"And I'm yours, Adley. For as long as you'll have me."

He wrapped his arms around me, stroking his hand up and down my hair. The world was a terrifying, chaotic place, but I knew it would all work out as long as I had Ivan by my side.

And the potential of the future looked bright. In nine months, give or take, we would meet the newest member of this little family we created, introduce them to my family, and there was no one in the world I wanted to jump into that unknown with more than Ivan Ustinov.

Mafioso or not.

Epilogue - Ivan

My entire body ached, and I knew I was wearing a fair share of the red stuff on the outside. Thankfully, most of the blood wasn't mine. Unfortunately, the stuff still

stained, and I had a feeling this shirt was FUBAR.

The house was quiet as the guys and I walked in. Abe went directly to the “mudroom,” using the large sink there to rinse his hands before prying off his shoes. Vlad and I were right behind him, ready to do the same—and then probably shower .

When we were at least good enough to touch things, I exited the room with my brothers and looked around for Adley.

“I swear to God, some of it got in my mouth. I’m brushing my fucking teeth,” Abe groaned out, and I laughed as he walked over to the stairs.

Vlad chuckled lowly, and I clapped him on the shoulder as I let out a long sigh.

“Thanks for covering me back there. You’re sure you’re not hit?”

He nodded once, the corners of his mouth turning down. He went for his phone, and I waited a few moments for him to type up a message.

“I’m good—just a scrape. But I should get it stitched up. I’ll be upstairs.”

“Oh, shit. Okay. Do you want help?” I cocked a brow at him, but Vlad just shook his head, turning on his heel and heading right to the stairs.

“Don’t fucking bleed out in the bathroom because you couldn’t reach it, asshole.”

Waving behind him, Vlad let out a low grumble, his version of “Yeah, yeah.”

There was no budging the guy. He was as stubborn as all of us, and I’d already pushed my luck by calling that psychiatry practice to see if they could fit in a new client. He didn’t know about that bit yet, and Vlad was going to fucking kill me when he found out.

“Well,” I looked around, noticing that the patio door at the back of the house was open. I guess I can find the wife.”

When I reached the back deck, which was still one of my favorite spots in the house, I saw Adley sitting on the lowest platform with her easel in front of her. Grace was plopped inside what we lovingly called the “Yoda Pod,” happily squeaking.

I did everything I could to keep my steps quiet. I still loved sneaking up on Adley, but Grace looked in my direction as I got closer, and her delighted cooing just got louder, giving me away.

“So much for that plan.”

Adley turned around, grinning as she shook her head. “Your daughter is better than a guard dog.”

Going straight for the little stinker, I reached down to pick up her, but Adley was quick to swat me away.

“Um, absolutely not. You’re filthy. No cuddles until you shower.” She glared playfully at me, and I put on an exaggerated pout. “Do not give me that face. You need a bath as much as your daughter. But you can’t blame it on finger paints.”

Laughing, I looked inside the little playpen of sorts. There were several large sheets of paper taped to the bottom, and Grace’s hands and feet were covered in an array of colors that she’d smeared over her masterpieces.

“Training her early, I see.”

Adley got up from the deck, stretching. The low cut of her tank stretched over her breasts, and I couldn’t stop myself from staring intently. Her chest had grown a bit—apparently a side effect of pregnancy and breastfeeding—and my cock twitched

as Adley's nipples stood out against the thin fabric of her shirt.

"She saw me painting and kept grabbing for the paints, so..." Adley gestured at the Yoda Pod. "I'd intended to save the finger paints for when she was maybe one, but here we are. At least she hasn't put her hands in her mouth."

As if on cue, Grace gave her fingers a good suck and immediately cried. The paint couldn't possibly taste good, but at least it was nontoxic.

"Well, shit. Okay, inside the both of you. You're getting baths."

Adley scooped up Grace, tickling her to distract me from the unfortunate paint flavor, and I smirked.

No one was ever truly "ready" to be a parent, but watching Adley with our daughter over the past few months has been incredible. I tried my damndest to be around as much as possible, too. Between the two of us and her pair of overprotective uncles, this little girl had an entire house wrapped around her finger.

It was perfect.

Adley started inside, and I followed along all the way up the two flights of stairs to our room.

"You know, we're going to need to call those contractors again. I'm not waiting another three weeks for them to get started."

I nodded when Adley looked over her shoulder. "I'm on it, sweetheart. I'll put the fear of God in them."

She knew how well I could do it, too, and Adley rolled her eyes. Yes, she was right. I needed to play it a little nicer with the company we'd found to add another room onto

the third floor. Still, Grace wasn't going to fit in her bassinet forever, and she needed her own room.

"Okay, little paint fiend. In the bath."

Grace squirmed happily in Adley's arms as she brought our daughter to the bathroom and began to strip her down for a bath. The sound of rushing water filled the quiet room, and I headed directly to the hamper to deposit my nasty clothes.

It was a shower right after that, and the water ran red and pink for several minutes before I got all the blood off.

"Why are you so gross, anyway? I thought it was a recon job?" Adley called out.

"It was. Unfortunately, one of the men got twitchy and started lighting up the place during the meeting. The Irish are in shambles after Donovan, and they couldn't hold their own against the Italians. Good for us, though. We were able to basically decimate the remaining few, and it won't come back to the Vadims. When you see an opportunity..."

Adley hummed. "You have to take it. Fair enough. But please be careful. Okay?"

I turned around to face her, meeting her eyes through the haze of the shower.

"Always, babe. I promise."

After Grace and I were clean, Adley dried off the baby while I got dressed. Dinner was in dire need by the time we were finished, and I went back downstairs to cook as Adley sat on the couch nearby to feed Grace.

"Nope, that's not it, hun. Come on." Looking over at them, I watched Adley try to get Grace properly latched with a grin. "There you go."

Having a baby was so wildly different than what I expected. It was wonderful and messy and exhausting and so funny. Nothing was ever clean. Adley seemed to take the brunt of every hard day, and doctor's appointments were nearly constant.

She'd once mentioned that being the baby's only source of food was getting exhausting, and we were in the process of getting Grace to use bottles. She wasn't a fan.

My job was to ensure that Adley and Grace had everything else they needed to make things run smoothly. I could cook and help clean, and whenever Adley needed time to herself, I was right there to step up. I also knew she needed to see her folks and the twins, so we planned visits when my "schedule" allowed. They'd finally been able to meet the baby in person, not just Facebook video chats.

Besides, I loved that little girl more than I could put into words, and watching her roll around on the mat was actually the best.

"Stirfry or spaghetti?" I called out from the kitchen, roaming my eyes over what items we had to work with.

"Don't we have a pizza in the freezer?" Adley called out.

With a laugh, I looked over at her from behind the pantry door. "We do. Is that all you want? I can make real food."

"I don't want real food." She shrugged with an amused smile. "I want fast so that I can relax."

"I'm on it, hun."

Evening rolled around quickly enough, and the quiet end to our day blanketed the house as Grace slept soundly in her bassinet while Adley and I lay in bed.

“Mom and Dad say hi, by the way.” Adley’s eyes were closed as she took in the moment of silence.

I leaned up on my elbow. “Did you video chat today?”

“We did. Right before Grace spit up all over the place. So, laundry is done.” Adley let out a tired chuckle. “I’m glad that they can still take calls with the shop open again.”

“Well, another day of a job well done, Momma.” I pulled her close to my side, kissing the top of her head. “But you know, you never got a bath, did you?”

Adley looked up at me, a twinkle in her eyes as she smirked and narrowed her stare on me. “Why, Mr. Ustinov, are you trying to get me naked?”

“As a matter of fact, Mrs. Ustinov, I am.”

She laughed, reaching up to kiss me. “First of all, I never changed my name, so...”

“Not for lack of trying on my part.” I glared at her, but Adley just giggled.

“Second, I’d love a bath.” Her expression turned mischievous, and Adley chewed on her full bottom lip. “With some company.”

Wasting no time, I scooped Adley into my arms and carried her to the bathroom. I knew that Grace actually loved the sound of the shower running, so I turned it on quickly before setting Adley on her feet to strip her down.

Her shirt was up over her head in a flash, and I spun her around to lay my lips gently on the scar on her back. Any chance I could, I wanted Adley to know that I loved

every inch of her: scars, stretch marks, freckles, all of it.

She moaned gently, and then I had her facing me again so that I could work on her pants. Hooking my fingers into her waistband, I slowly pulled them down as smoothed kisses across her lower belly. I knew Adley felt... ways about what pregnancy had done to her body, but it was all still so fucking gorgeous to me.

“You’re so beautiful,” I murmured against her skin, sinking lower across the slim plain of her stomach and hips. “So fucking strong.”

“Ivan, you don’t have to—”

But I silenced her with the quick yank of her leggings. Her legs were freed quickly, and her panties were soon to follow. First, though, I nuzzled between her thighs, dragging my tongue against the wet spot already growing on the thin fabric.

“I want to, Adley.” Gripping her, I hoisted Adley’s leg over my shoulder, her fingers sinking into my hair as her head fell back. “I want you .”

I pulled her panties to the side, going straight for that sweet pussy of her and dragging my tongue through her folds. Adley bit back a yelp, tugging on the roots of my hair. She was wet and warm against my mouth, and I sucked her clit between my lips, circling it with my tongue.

I held her hips with my free hand, using my other one to graze my thumb across her slick, swollen skin as I pulled back to look up at my gorgeous wife.

“That’s my girl.” I smiled, hungry for all of her. “You’re going to let me have all the fun I want, Adley. And I plan on being her for a while.”

THE END