



The
DARKEST
Temptation

HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE HER SAVIOR.
NOT THE DEVIL IN DISGUISE.

DANIELLE LORI

THE MADE SERIES

The
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temptation

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*For my mother:
the strongest woman I know*

Playlist

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Cry Like Me—Frances

Creep—Radiohead

Slow Dance—AJ Mitchell

Trampoline—SHAED

Liar—Camila Cabello

Cold Little Heart—Michael Kiwanuka

I See Red—Everybody Loves an Outlaw

Señorita—Shawn Mendes and Camila Cabello

Girl—Maren Morris

Someone You Loved—Lewis Capaldi

La La Land—Bryce Vine

Dance Monkey—Tones and I



PART I

“THE DEVIL IS AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN A GENTLEMAN.”
—Diane LaVey

CHAPTER

One

fernweh
(n.) an ache for a distant place

Mila

BREATH RAGGED FROM THE RUN, I dropped my heels on the grass and padded barefoot across our manicured lawn, not stopping until I'd climbed onto the rocky embankment and felt the cool waves lapping at my toes and the hem of my evening dress. I panted as sweat glistened on my skin beneath the heavy moon. A gentle breeze tousled my long hair, rustling the palm trees and my lacy cap sleeves, but the paradise constrained me as tightly as the Dior belt around my waist.

The five-mile run wasn't enough to shake the combustible feeling that expanded inside—though, as always, the sea held me back.

I itched to rip the pearls from my neck, to tear my dress to shreds like Cinderella's stepsisters had, but doing so would demolish a facade I'd maintained for so long I wasn't sure what lay beneath. So, instead, I dug my French-tipped nails into my palms.

There had to be more than this, more than a world behind The Moorings' gates, but the desire for more than a life of opulence inflated a kernel of guilt in my stomach. Staring out at Biscayne Bay, the wide, glittering path that led to the endless ocean, I felt as adrift and stagnant as the buoy that bobbed in the water. The only difference was, I was floating on a mundane sea of expectations.

I closed my eyes and mentally recited, *Je vais bien. Tu vas bien. Nous allons bien. I am okay. You are okay. We are okay.*

I was allowed only a few seconds alone before Ivan's familiar presence caressed my back. He moved to stand beside me, his suit jacket touching my bare arm.

"You cannot run off like that, Mila." A Russian accent and exertion roughened the edge of his voice.

The smallest amount of humor arose at the visual of Ivan chasing me through Miami's streets in a suit and a grumpy disposition, but the amusement faded with the next wave that washed up on the rocks.

"If you keep following me like a stalker, I'm gonna end up catching feelings," I said drily.

He gave me a look. "You know it is my job."

Ivan had come home with my papa after one of his business trips to Moscow years ago. Having been only thirteen at the time, and him eight years my senior, I'd thought he was the most handsome boy I'd ever seen. I'd fallen in love with his accent and endearingly limited knowledge of English, and I couldn't have embarrassed myself more by following him around our spacious Spanish Colonial home.

Now, he followed me.

One hand rested in his pants pocket, and the other held out a small red velvet box. "From your

papa.”

I stared at the box for a long second before taking it from him and opening it. Blue heart-shaped earrings. Papa always said I wore my heart on my sleeve. The stones were fake. He knew I never wore the real thing, not after watching *Blood Diamond* when I was a preteen.

This wasn't the first time he had a gift delivered after missing something important to me. The difference was, this time, I couldn't push this feeling, this budding *suspicion*, away any longer.

“I hope you didn't sprain anything,” I said.

Ivan cast me a questioning look.

“It's a strenuous job digging through Papa's backup gift drawer.”

With a sigh, he ran a hand through his blond hair. “He cares, Mila.”

“He sure has an interesting way of showing it lately.”

“He is very busy,” Ivan remarked. “You know this.”

I made a noncommittal noise. My papa must be busier than the president to explain why he hadn't shown his face for the past three months. He'd missed the last two holidays, and now, my twentieth birthday.

We celebrated my birthday at the same table in the same five-star restaurant without fail every year. Papa would order a steak. I'd smile at Enrique, the owner and chef who'd taken our orders personally since I was a child, and change it to something heart-healthy. Papa was supposed to be watching his cholesterol. I'd fret; he'd argue. But he'd eventually give in.

Tonight, I sat there for two hours with Ivan and my unblemished reflection in the porcelain plate. That is, until an anniversary party at the next table exploded everywhere, shattering my resolve into gold confetti. Ivan was chatting up a waitress at the bar when I escaped the restaurant and ran the five miles home.

“He's never been gone this long, Ivan . . .” My voice trailed off before I said, “Something's not right.”

As usual, the same ambiguous words began to leave his lips—*so very busy, important business deal, blah blah blah*. I tuned him out to watch a single seagull soar above the water. I envied its wings; its courage to leap from a nest without knowing yet that it could fly. Here I was, grounded behind golden gates by Dior and the desire for my papa's approval.

I didn't realize I'd turned to walk away until Ivan grabbed my arm.

“Where are you going?”

“Home” was on my lips, but something entirely different, something that shocked even me, came out. “Moscow.”

Had cool and collected Ivan Volkov actually paled at that single word, or was it my overactive imagination? He released my arm, his quiet intensity freezing me to the wet stone.

“Moscow,” he repeated slowly, like he'd heard me wrong.

I raised a brow. “The capital of Russia? The place I was born? The—”

“*Zamolchi.*” *Be quiet.* “Why do you want to go to Moscow?”

“Papa practically lives there these days. You know he's not watching his cholesterol. What if he's sick and doesn't want me to know?”

“I promise you, he is not sick.”

At the sincerity in his eyes, I believed him. The knowledge released a small weight from my shoulders, but it also added another.

“What if he's in some kind of trouble?” I'd met a number of papa's business partners, and there wasn't a single one I would be comfortable being alone with.

“And once you are over there, what will *you* be able to do if he is?”

“Contact the police.”

Ivan didn't look convinced. Actually, after a few seconds of staring at me, he cast a disinterested look out at the bay and released a breath. It held a tense note, as if the idea of me going to the Russian police had equally amused and disturbed him.

His eyes came back to mine, seemingly oblivious to the incoming tide that soaked his Italian loafers. “You do not know how things work over there.”

My fingers tightened around the jewelry box. That was only true because I wasn't allowed more than an inch of freedom, but I kept the retort inside.

“If you're not careful, Ivan, you'll surely burst with all the confidence you have in me.”

His dry expression showed he was not close to bursting in any way. “It is January.”

“So?”

“When we were in Aspen last year, you complained about the cold. It was forty degrees.”

“Only an Eskimo would think forty degrees isn't cold,” I returned with conviction. “Regardless, I'm not that delicate. I can handle a little cold.” It was the worst time in the world for a strong breeze to pick up and blow a cold front off the Atlantic. I fought a shiver—though, of course, Ivan noticed.

He pulled off his suit jacket, set it on my shoulders, and tucked a strand of blonde hair behind my ear. “As of today, you are twenty. You do not need your papa to hold your hand anymore.”

His comment stung, but I didn't believe I was asking for much. I just didn't want to sit in front of a Christmas tree with only him and our cook Borya, who were both paid to be there. I didn't want to feel like the ballerina in the music box on my dresser, spinning in an exhausting and eternal pirouette just to please someone who had deserted me.

A part of it wasn't even about all that.

“What about your date tomorrow?”

“I don't want to go,” I said, pulling my eyes from his to the bay.

“Why not?”

I searched for a reasonable answer but remained silent. Ivan would think I was crazy if I told him the truth.

“Your papa likes Carter.”

“Maybe he should date him then.”

“Mila,” he chastised.

For years, Papa had hinted he would be happy if Carter became his son-in-law. I was sure it was only because his father was a business friend and a famous attorney from old money. Like always, I'd given in to Papa's insistence, and Carter and I had shared a traditional courtship for six months now.

“He's going to pop the question tomorrow, isn't he?” I asked emotionlessly.

It should have been a ridiculous thing to ask considering we weren't even monogamous. All anyone had to do was turn on *TMZ* to find out who twenty-five-year-old playboy Carter Kingston had been sleeping with. But he was taking me to The Grande, a restaurant well-known for marriage proposals. I could only imagine his papa had pushed him toward the archaic idea, just as mine had.

Ivan didn't say anything, but his eyes told me all I needed to know.

I nodded even though, inside, the thought of saying yes, of knowing I would force that word past my lips, trapped me in a glass box slowly depleting of oxygen, and I was banging on the walls, choking, coughing, *begging* for air.

I forced the feeling down. “Carter will still be here when I get back.”

Ivan remained quiet for a moment before he tossed out his best card. “You know your papa would

not approve of this.”

I chewed my lip. In the past, whenever I'd asked to tag along on one of Papa's business trips, he'd refused. But even as a child, I noticed something in his eyes, a spark that couldn't say no with more volume than if he'd shouted the word. I was never, ever permitted to set foot in Russia, that much was clear.

“I know, but he's not here right now, is he?”

“You are not going.”

I stared at him.

Ivan might complain sometimes, but he never told me what I could or couldn't do. It was always, “Yes, Mila.” “Of course, Mila.” “As you wish, Mila.” Kidding. That one was a besotted, sword-wielding Westley in my dreams. My point was, he never said, “No, Mila.” I bet if I wanted to rob a bank, he would be my second, no questions asked. Naturally, he'd tattle on me to my papa afterward, but he'd still don a ski mask with me.

The suspicion I'd worked so hard to keep down popped like a balloon, grabbed ahold of my heart, and twisted. What was my papa hiding in Russia?

Another *family*?

The only conceivable reason he might hide something like that from me was he didn't want me in their lives. And, eventually, in *his* too.

Je ne pleurerai pas. Tu ne pleureras pas. Nous ne pleurerons pas. I will not cry. You will not cry. We will not cry.

The conjugations failed me, and a single, annoying tear ran down my cheek. Ivan angled my chin up to his and wiped it away, the soft brush of his thumb wrapping me in warmth and contentment. Something else filled the space between us. A pull. An attraction. A little electricity. Some days, when I was feeling particularly suffocated, it sparked hotter than others.

Neither of us ever acted on it.

My excuse was the fortune-teller I went to when I was fourteen. At that very gothic age, I'd asked her what my purpose was in life. She'd frowned, sitting behind her crystal ball, and then said I would find the man meant for me and that he would take my breath away. It was a generic response she probably told everyone, but it stuck to me like glue.

I breathed just fine around Ivan.

And Carter, despite experimenting with him out of sheer boredom. Not to mention, he was incredibly persuasive.

My time was running out like the last few grains of sand spilling through an hourglass. Yet still, I waited. For *more*. For some silly idea Madame Richie had put into my head.

That was my excuse.

Now, I was curious to know Ivan's.

I leaned into the thumb running across my cheek and blinked soft eyes up to his. “How come you've never kissed me?”

“Because I want to live more,” he deadpanned.

A corner of my lips lifted. I'd never even heard my papa raise his voice before, and certainly not to Ivan, who was practically a son to him.

“But really?”

He gave me a weighty look and dropped his hand. “No more talk about Moscow, all right?”

Releasing a sigh, I nodded.

I watched him walk up the lawn to the house, the sway and expanse of the Atlantic settling in my

bones with a sense of longing and seclusion from the rest of the world.

My phone vibrated inside my dress pocket, and I was tempted to ignore it, but I ended up reaching for it anyway.

Papa: *Happy birthday, angel. Sorry I missed it. Business as usual. We'll celebrate when I get home.*

Another message came in.

Papa: *Have fun tomorrow. Carter is good for you.*

I put my phone back in my pocket and replaced my earrings with synthetic blue diamonds. I imagined them glittering like the Heart of the Ocean as the sea dragged me down, forever suspending me in gasping breaths, pearl necklaces, and the lonely sounds of the ocean.

It was what convinced me.

Tomorrow, I'd be in *Russia*.

CHAPTER

Two

resfeber

(n.) the restless race of a traveler's heart before a journey begins

Mila

I WADED IN A PILE of clothes, half-bohemian, half-sophisticated socialite. The former, I felt compelled to buy but never wore. Papa seemed quietly disapproving of anything yellow and nonconformist, and I took peace signs seriously.

Until now, apparently, as I packed colors brighter than the sun into an old cheerleading duffle bag.

I wasn't home free of The Moorings yet, so I dressed the part in a loose blouse, checker-print cigarette pants, and white ankle boots. I caught my reflection in the mirror: a taller, less-pink version of Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* staring back.

On my way to the door, I stopped to unclasp my pearl necklace and dropped it into my jewelry box. Then, I wound up the ballerina, setting her on a lonely pirouette, before I tiptoed down the stairs at three a.m.

Passing Ivan's bedroom door, I stilled when a very feminine moan sounded on the other side. Ivan wasn't a Don Juan, but neither was he celibate. Sometimes, during my papa's absences, I'd come down to breakfast to find a half-naked woman in our kitchen. It never really bothered me—my childhood crush had faded long ago—but now, a flare of rejection started in my chest.

He wouldn't even kiss me earlier because *death was on the line*, and now he was talking dirty Russian to some random? Although, I found it more annoying than anything. He was so convinced I was such a doormat he hadn't even bothered to put his guard up after our conversation.

My nerves played havoc as I disabled the home alarm, expecting Borya to hear the quiet *beep* and come out armed with a spatula. I inhaled a breath of relief when no one showed, but this was only the first step to getting out of here alone.

I shut the front door quietly, pressed my back against it, and stared at the motion sensor on the porch ceiling. If activated, blinding lights would flick on like a choir of angels, and an ear-piercing alarm would sound. The UPS man hated us.

Holding my breath and my bag against my chest, I stepped directly below the sensor, hoping to land in its blind spot. I broke out in a cold sweat when the yard remained dark and silent.

Lowering to my stomach, I awkwardly army crawled to the bushes with my bag, remembering the path I'd learned to take as an unruly child playing James Bond. Though, back then, the sensor was a laser that would slice my arm off if activated. Now, it was my papa's disapproval staring a hole in my back, which seemed even worse.

When I emerged on the other side of the bushes, I stood, brushed my pants off, and jogged down the winding street. I doubted my feminine wiles would get me past our private neighborhood's gate without Carl, the sleazy Friday night guard, alerting my father or Ivan, so I took a turn through a

backyard, threw my bag over the iron fence, and climbed up and over it.

Pulling my phone out of my bag, I ordered a Lyft ride. It was the longest three-minute wait of my life. My heartbeats collided with each other in anticipation of Ivan running after me with his pants undone or a very disapproving phone call from my papa. But neither of those things happened. Not before my ride picked me up, and not after he dropped me off at the airport.

Uncertainty twisted my nerves into knots as I took in the bustle of people and the liveliness in the air. Everyone seemed to know where they were going, eyes bright with vacation dreams and independence. I was out of my element. I'd never even had to carry my own bag before, let alone travel solo, but determination pushed me to the ticket counter.

Luckily, due to a last-minute cancellation and my padded bank account—contributed to by a hefty allowance each month because my papa *trusted* me—I got the last seat on the plane, squashed between two boys throwing Russian insults and peanuts at each other. I didn't know where their mother was, but I had a feeling she was the woman across the aisle pretending they didn't exist.

Miami's nightlights disappeared from view, the orange glow fading into dark and turbulent water. I mindlessly watched a couple of PG movies considering my audience, though things blew up like explosives were going out of style on their screens.

Twelve hours later, we landed in Moscow.

Stepping off the plane and into the frigid jet bridge, I shivered. Inhaled. Exhaled. I could see my breath. I'd never experienced such cold in my life. It grabbed ahold of my lungs, stealing the heat from my body with icy fingers. I'd wanted to experience my birthplace, but I should have just climbed into our freezer.

As I stopped to slip on my coat, someone ran into my back. I turned with an apology on my tongue, but the little old lady who held a Chihuahua in a mesh carry-on bag beat me to it.

"Excuse me, dear," she said in a British accent. "I didn't see you there."

"No, I'm sorry. It was my fault."

She closed her sable fur coat and tilted her head. "You look very familiar. Have we met before?"

"Um, I don't think so."

"No . . . I'm sure I've seen you before." She touched her gaudy gold necklace in thought. Then something dawned on her. Something that made her put a hand on her chest and eye me up and down as if I was a hooker.

This was growing weirder by the second, but before I could say anything, someone rolled by in a wheelchair, and the tiny dog in her bag started to bark. While she tried to soothe little Rupert, I offered another awkward apology and made a quick exit.

On the curb of the airport, I unfolded a piece of notebook paper I'd found stashed in one of my papa's desk drawers. Feeling like Nancy Drew, with the help of Google Translate, I'd learned the Russian scrawl was an address to a home, complete with a record of bills he'd been paying there for years. I hoped this wasn't a dead end because I had nowhere to go from here, and I wasn't ready to crawl back to Ivan so soon.

I handed the taxi driver the paper, not having the faintest idea how to read the foreign alphabet. The cabbie's dark gaze met mine in the rearview mirror, holding eye contact just long enough to send a whisper of unease down my back.

He took me past a busy industrial area to a quieter neighborhood with cobblestone streets and old, unique townhomes, where he parked at the curb in front of a lime green house with white shutters.

"*Pyat'sot rubley.*" *Five hundred rubles.*

I paid the man with the money I'd exchanged at the airport.

Stepping out of the car, I grabbed my duffle bag and tightened the belt of my peacoat. It was perfect for a cheerleading farewell trip to Aspen last year, but not so great at blocking the bitter Russian air from my skin.

The frozen iron gate squeaked when I pushed it open. I walked up the cracked pavement, dodging patches of ice and snow, and knocked on the door.

An older woman with graying blonde hair pulled into a ballerina bun answered a moment later. She was wiping her hands on her apron when her eyes came up to meet mine, and as she stared, the color drained from her pink cheeks. I opened my mouth to say something but didn't manage a single word before she slammed the door shut in my face.

I closed my mouth and sensed she was standing on the other side of the door with her ear to the wood, waiting for me to go away.

When I knocked again, a thump sounded, followed by her shrieking in Russian, the words too muffled for me to pick apart.

The door opened once more, and this time, a thin gentleman in a black dress coat appeared. He was shaking his head and muttering to his wife, clearly believing she'd fallen off her rocker for good. She hid behind him, her apron grasped in her hands.

When his gaze found me, he froze like he'd just seen a ghost.

I forced a smile. "*Zdravstvuyte*—" *Hello*.

The woman ran.

"I'm Alexei Mikhailov's daughter . . . Mila," I said hesitantly, hoping he spoke some English because I was a massive failure to my heritage.

I'd given up the desire to study Russian years ago since Papa always claimed it was a waste of my time, so I'd only learned what I knew from Ivan and Borya. That included the bare basics, vegetables, and curse words.

A sliver of relief crossed the older man's expression, and then he let out an awkward chuckle. "Of course, of course. You gave us quite a scare there." He stepped back and gestured me inside. "Come in."

With my freezing hands in my pockets, I stepped into the house and turned to take in the foyer. I stilled when I caught him sticking his head out of the front door and looking both ways before shutting it. Was I about to be the next star on Russia's version of *Forensic Files*?

"This cannot be good," he muttered, shaking his head and hobbling past me. "Vera, *kofe!* We drink instant in this house. Hope you do not mind."

"Of course not."

I hated coffee, but I'd drink five cups if it got me a few answers.

"Come sit down, girl."

I set my bag on the floor and took a seat on a faded floral-print couch, while he took the armchair across from me. A crackling flame in the fireplace filled the room with much-needed warmth, and books and knickknacks littered every available shelf. The space was cluttered but comfortable in a lived-in way.

Vera placed two cups of coffee on the wooden table between us, watching me with big eyes, before she disappeared from the room like hellhounds were on her heels.

I stared at her retreat. "Is there a reason she's terrified of me?"

He waved a hand. "She is superstitious."

"I don't understand."

“You are Tatianna’s spitting image. We did not know she had a child. Well, we knew, but we thought you passed away shortly after birth. Problem with the lungs, your papa told us.”

I always knew my mother had died young, but the only reason I knew her name was because the one time Papa ever got drunk, he told me I looked too much like his Tatianna. I often wondered if that was why, as I became older, he spent less and less time with me.

“My lungs are fine.”

“I can see that,” the man said with a chuckle and sipped his coffee. “What brings you to our neck of the woods?”

“I’m on a mission . . . of sorts.”

He hummed with disapproval. “Have you not heard the phrase, ‘Curiosity killed the cat?’ You are just like your mother. Some things are better left in the dark.”

I’d never heard so much about my mother in my entire life than I had in the last few minutes. Finally, I was getting some answers. And, apparently, more questions.

“Why would my papa tell you I died?”

He frowned. “Is it not obvious?”

No, it wasn’t obvious. Nothing about this was.

I opened my mouth to ask more—

“Now, enough about that. I thought your papa might have sent you, but I can see now, he has not.” He set his coffee cup down. “You must go. It could not be a worse time for you to come here alone.”

Why did everyone think I needed a babysitter? “I’ll be fine. I know how to take care of myself.”

“No one knows how to take care of themselves against *D’yavol*.”

The Devil?

“Up you go, now.” He stood with a wince and rubbed his knee. “I like living too much to harbor you.”

“I can’t leave yet,” I insisted, getting to my feet. “I’m not sure why you think I’m here illegally, but I promise, I have my papers.” I knew Russia was a little medieval, but, God, did they really execute people for such a small offense as harboring a harmless girl?

“Pah. I’m not talking about the government, girl, but *D’yavol*.”

I stared at him, realizing I might be speaking to a crazy person.

“I’m agnostic,” I said dumbly.

He shook his head and murmured something unintelligible.

My gaze found Vera in the doorway staring at me like I was a piece of furniture that had just moved itself.

They were both crazy.

She dropped the apron she was wringing in her hands and disappeared again. To find her sharpest meat cleaver probably.

“Why is your wife terrified of me just because I look like my mother?”

He eyed me as if I was the strange one. “You do not just look like your mother.” Moving to the fireplace, he pulled down a white sheet that covered a portrait above it. “Girl, you could *be* her.”

The woman in the picture was frozen in time, leaning against a grand piano. She must have been painted decades ago, but she could be me standing here today. The long blonde hair, the almond shape of her eyes, the tall and elegant form, and the alabaster skin that would never quite tan.

The similarity was so uncanny, goose bumps rose on my arms. She’d looked just like me, yet I didn’t know the simplest things about her. I stared at the portrait until the burn in my heart and the backs of my eyes faded.

“She was a sight, I’ll tell you that.” He rubbed his chin. “But beauty like that is a blessing and a curse . . .” His eyes settled on mine, something heavy and resigned filling them. “It always ends up in the wrong hands.”

A sense of foreboding trailed down my spine. My overactive imagination cast a scene through my head: me, kicking and screaming, while the devil carried me down to hell.

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

I found it odd they kept my mother’s painting on the wall but covered it with a sheet like the beginning of too many haunted house films. Though, maybe Vera just didn’t like to dust.

“When did she die?” I asked.

“Not long after you were born, if I remember right. She got sick and could not get better. This was her home. Your papa could not part with it, so Vera and I take good care of the place for him.”

“My father didn’t live with her?”

He pursed his lips, contrite. “No, girl, your papa was married.”

And there it was. The secret family.

Or, maybe *I* was the secret.

Was that why he told people I died? So he could live his comfy life here, without me getting in the way?

In the end, I knew that wasn’t true. Papa had been around for more holidays than he was away—until this past year at least.

But knowing he kept something like this from me, that I might have siblings and other family I’d never had a chance to meet . . . The pain hit me in the chest so hard I had to focus on something else, or I wouldn’t be able to breathe. I forced my gaze back to the portrait, noting the dress that had to be from the eighteenth century.

“Why is she dressed like that?”

His eyebrows rose. “You do not know? Your mother was an opera singer. A very . . . beloved one at that. People will remember her, and that is why you need to go home.” He grabbed my bag and ushered me to the door.

“I didn’t even get to drink my coffee,” I protested.

“You do not want the coffee; you want secrets I cannot tell you. Go home, wherever home is, and do not come back.”

“Do you know where I can find my papa?”

“Probably Siberia,” he muttered, opening the door and letting the frigid air in.

Siberia?

“Why would he be—?”

“I do not know of his whereabouts or his number these days, or I would have already alerted him of your presence.” He threw my bag onto the porch.

“Are you sure I can’t stay here?”

“I like my head where it is now, attached to my neck.”

I blinked. “Is that a no?”

He pushed me out into the cold.

“Wait,” I breathed, spinning around. “Can you at least call me a cab?”

He scowled. “I might as well phone *D’yavol* to pick you up.”

I stared at him, thinking I should probably refrain from drinking the water here.

He shook his head. “Go home, Mila.”

Once again, the door slammed shut in my face.

CHAPTER

Three

schlimazel

(n.) a person who suffers from bad luck

Mila

AS THE DEADBOLT LOCKED INTO place, I wondered what happened to good ol' Russian hospitality. They hadn't even offered me anything to eat. Practically *blasphemous*, I'd learned from growing up in a Russian household, especially from a couple who seemed very in touch with their religious side.

With the weight of my papa's secret sitting heavy on my heart and the obvious fact I wasn't welcome here, a pathetic part of me wanted to listen and just go home. But if I returned now . . .

I'd dream.

I'd wonder.

I'd carry on existing.

And I wanted to *live* for a change. Just for a few days. Before The Moorings sucked me back into its passionless hole. Before I married Carter Kingston, had two-point-five kids, and drowned in social luncheons, pastel-colored cardigans, and ropes of pearls.

The iron gate swung back and forth in the icy breeze.

Squeeaak.

Clank.

Squeeaak.

Clank.

I slipped my duffle bag over my shoulder, put my numb hands in my pockets, and started to walk in the hope of finding some form of transportation. It was so cold I'd get into a cab even if the devil himself was driving it.

Jet lag and lack of sleep pulled on my muscles. I hadn't gotten more than a minute of shut-eye on the plane, mostly because the two terrors sitting beside me were little-boy versions of the Energizer Bunny.

Fishing my cell phone out of my pocket, I turned it on for the first time since I landed in Moscow and found thirteen missed calls and five voicemails from Ivan.

Someone was being a bit dramatic.

I read the texts I'd received from a couple friends and a few from Carter confirming our date at eight, reconfirming it, and, after I missed it completely, hoping everything was all right.

I'd stood him up.

I should feel guilty, but my chest was light, taking in breaths easier for the first time in years.

There was nothing particularly wrong with Carter. Our relationship was amicable, maybe, if I reached a little, even *nice*. But when it came down to it, the last time his lips were on mine, I spent the entire kiss mentally conjugating French verbs for my upcoming exam.

Papa didn't know about the few online courses I'd taken. He'd blown a gasket at my request to attend college, which meant he silently stared at me like I asked to visit North Korea before he said, "*Nyet.*" So I thought it was best to keep my classes on the down low.

The first four voicemails from Ivan sounded very Ivan-like and straightforward, excessively informing me he would land in Moscow at three a.m. and demanding I stay in my hotel room until he arrived. The fifth, however, raised the hair on the back of my neck.

He blew out a rough breath, then a curse, and a thump sounded through the line, as if he actually *hit* something. "*I cannot believe you did this. I trusted you not to go to Moscow.*"

"I didn't promise you anything," I muttered to myself.

It went silent for a moment, and then his imploring tone became cold, hard fact.

"*You want the truth for once? Fine. If you want to play games and do not tell me where you are, Mila . . . I'm a dead man.*"

He sounded so serious, I actually believed him. For a moment at least. Surely, he didn't think my papa would *murder* him. This was more likely just a desperate attempt to keep me from finding out he had a secret family.

Too late, I thought bitterly.

But I was a pushover, so I called him back to leave a message and put him out of his misery, only to realize I had no bars. I raised my phone in the air, turned it upside down—all the tricks—and nothing. My cell was supposed to work in Moscow, but I didn't know service would be this unreliable.

With a sigh, I slid my phone into my coat pocket. Then, looking up, I stopped. My shoes crunched on gravel as I turned in a slow circle. The sun had fallen, more than half of it hiding behind the horizon. Only a crumbling apartment complex and a few concrete buildings surrounded me.

I was completely lost.

Fighting the shiver that rolled through me, I started to walk.

The wind whistled.

The shadows grew darker.

And I suddenly missed Ivan very badly.

A crawling sensation stroked the back of my neck and slid down my spine. It was the feeling of being watched. I gripped my bag tighter, fighting the urge to look behind me, but the suspense turned into an anxiety that tightened my lungs, and I couldn't resist the pull anymore.

A man—undoubtedly, by the size and swagger—followed me. He wore jeans and a dark coat, and his eyes held steady on the black driving gloves he was pulling on, though I somehow knew I had his full attention.

I turned my head forward, my chest cold.

A gust of wind whipped at my ponytail, and with it, one word rode through my mind on a whisper that sounded like a pitch-black room and goose-bumped skin.

D'yavol.

I glanced behind me. He drew closer with every step, his strides much longer than mine. Only a few yards away now, I could see a jagged scar slashed across his face, from ear to jaw. The last ray of sunlight glinted on a silver knife in his hand.

Facing forward again, my breath escaped in pants, misting in front of my face, while my blood froze to solid ice. When parked cars and light from the windows of a building came into view, I dropped my bag and ran.

My long legs had always put me at the front of the pack during cheer practice in high school, but

the footsteps hitting concrete behind me now were close on my heels. I wasn't going to make it to the front door, so I changed course for the back and prayed it wasn't locked.

Please, don't be locked.

I came to a halt in front of the door, and in an instant, one of those black riding gloves wrapped around my ponytail and pulled. I cried out in pain as I went flying backward. My head hit the pavement, and a kaleidoscope of lights flickered behind my eyes.

Rough hands tore at my clothes.

"No," I moaned, but my consciousness was stuck in sticky black sludge, and I couldn't get out. Pain and icy air wrapped around my body, rousing me from darkness. I peeled my eyes open.

Scarred face.

Dark coat.

Denim-clad legs straddling my hips.

"No!"

I fought his hands, but my body wouldn't work right. My head—it felt like it was split open.

The man ripped my blouse down the middle.

"Stop," I sobbed.

He did.

It took a moment to realize what had caught his attention. He lifted the nautical star necklace from between my breasts and looked almost confused . . . or *afraid*. Whatever it was, I used his distraction to rake my nails down the scar on his face.

He reared back to cover the wound with a hand, hissing, "*Ty malen'kaya suka.*" *You little bitch.*

I scrambled out from beneath him. He seized my ankle, but I kicked back with the other foot, making contact with something that caused him to grunt in pain.

Stumbling to my feet, I fought the dizziness that grabbed at me but couldn't hold on. My sweaty grasp fumbled with the door handle. It opened, and I slipped inside, colliding face-first with something solid. I hit it—*him*—so hard, the remaining air in my lungs escaped me on impact. I fell backward, but with a soft Russian curse, the man wrapped an arm around my waist to steady me.

The door had just shut with a thud when a burst of cold air announced it was open again. I spun out of the man's grasp and moved behind him, expecting to see a scarred face, but it was only a boy wearing a white apron and carrying a crate of liquor.

"*Potrebovalos' vsego tri minuty, kak ya skazal,*" he snickered. "*Andrei, ty dolzhen mne—*" His gaze found me, and he stared, muttering a Russian, "Holy shit."

Sucking air into my lungs, I stepped back to take in my surroundings.

I'd lost my coat somewhere in the alley outside, and my shirt was ripped open, revealing the lacy white bra beneath. My thoughts were trapped underwater, and I couldn't find the energy to care what I looked like even with an audience.

Smoke lazed in the room lit by one weak light bulb. Boxes filled shelves, wooden crates littered the floor, and three men sat at a folding table and chairs, all silently staring at me. One of them chewed on a toothpick, while another leaned back in his chair and brought a cigarette to his lips. His suit jacket lay carelessly open, white button-up beneath, no tie.

I coughed on the smoke that twirled in the air.

"*Potushi sigaretu.*" *Put out the cigarette.*

The demand came from behind me, from the man I'd run into, his Russian words caressing my back with something equally hot and cold. It was the kind of voice that could pull a girl feet first into the dark.

Leaning forward, the smoker crushed his cigarette in the ashtray. Still trying to catch my breath, I turned around.

I was five-foot-ten with bare feet, but I only stood eye level with the top button of a black dress shirt that stretched across broad shoulders and defined arms.

I looked up.

And just before the dizziness caught me in its grasp and dragged me under, I thought he was handsome.

Handsome in the way rough palms muffle screams, the way people bow to kings, and most of all . . . the way an angel falls from *grace*.

CHAPTER

Four

viridity
(n.) *naïve innocence*

Mila

RUSSIAN VOICES, ONE CONCERNED, ONE rough and low, crept into my subconscious. Papa only spoke fluent Russian when he had Russian guests over, but why were they in my room?

It was weird.

And rude.

I sighed, reaching to pull the sheets over my head to shut out the noise. Instead, my hand slid over the familiar feel of one of my papa's suit jackets, wool and cashmere. But something was different. This one smelled like pine and cinnamon with a hint of cigar smoke. There was something very unfatherly about the scent, and it was what convinced me to open my eyes.

I groaned as a sharp pain shot through my skull.

"*Khorosho, ty vstala,*" a silver-haired man said, pulling a high-back leather chair from a large mahogany desk toward me. Square-framed glasses. White button-up. Black slacks. A cold sweat spread through me as I stared at the stethoscope around his neck.

Some people had nightmares about falling, or public nudity, or ghosts. Mine was waking up to a doctor looming over me. They were so cold and professional, with a snap of latex gloves and the reflection of blood and needles in their eyes.

The ache in my head thumped in tune with my heart as I sat up on a couch. A chill caressed my bare midsection, and I realized my ripped shirt had been partly concealed by the suit jacket. I slipped it on and pulled it closed.

Confusion clouded my thoughts as I took in the masculine, well-worn office. My breath stilled when I met eyes with a man leaning against the front of the desk. The man I ran into. The man I got a glimpse of before I fell at his feet, unconscious.

Everything came back to me.

The scarred man.

The near *rape*.

All I could think at that moment was, so far, Moscow really sucked.

The dark-haired Russian held my stare with a distant look of interest. I swallowed and pulled my gaze away when the doctor placed his chair next to me and sat. I eyed the briefcase beside him warily, knowing if he pulled a needle from it, I'd take my chances out on the street.

Getting a closer look, the doctor paused and tilted his head. "*Ty vyglyadish' znakomo. My ran'she ne vstrechalis'?*"

Sludge stuck to my thoughts like gum. He spoke too fast for me to understand any of it.

The doctor adjusted his glasses, scrutinizing me. "*Mozhesh' skazat' svoye imya, dorogoya?*"

I thought I heard “*imya.*” Was he asking for my name? I wasn’t sure, so I only blinked.

He frowned in concern. “*Ty dolzhen byl otvezti yeye v bol’nitsu.*”

I only recognized “*bol’nitsu.*” *The hospital.* However, I realized his words weren’t meant for me but for the only other man in the room. The one built like a brick wall, as uncomfortable as it had been to run into him.

At first glance, he looked like a gentleman, like he belonged in a CEO’s boardroom, looking down at the world through floor-to-ceiling glass. Though, if one stared longer than they should, everything about him—the way he leaned against the desk, arms crossed; the way shadows fought in his eyes; how black ink decorated his fingers—opposed it. A powerful, maybe even dangerous edge lay in the relaxed set of his shoulders.

He was war embodied, tailored in an expensive black suit, sans tie and jacket. I knew his was the one I wore now.

As if he could feel me staring, the man caught my gaze. The urge to look away was so strong it itched beneath my skin. He expected me to. Though something foreign and astute made me persevere. Holding eye contact with him felt like a deadly game. Like Russian roulette. A revolver and one bullet. A single wrong blink, and I’d be dead. But it also evoked a whisper of adrenaline, as warm as half a bottle of UV Blue and the Miami sun.

“*Poprobuy po-angliyski,*” he said, his eyes on mine. *Try English.*

The doctor’s brow lowered. “My English is no good.”

The other man pushed off the desk and came closer, dropping to his haunches in front of me. His dress pants kissed my preppy plaid ones. His black cap toe boots contrasted my white Rothys.

He was cool and calculated, from how he moved to how his gaze settled on mine, though something so alive played in his eyes. Eyes I could now see weren’t black, as I originally presumed, but a very, *very* dark blue. Darker than the heart-shaped stones in my ears.

I didn’t know if it was the sudden uprising of nerves, his closeness, or a result of hitting my head, but the words slipped past my lips without thought. “You’re really uncomfortable to run into.” I said it so seriously, like it was something he should be concerned about.

“My apologies.” A Russian accent and amusement touched his voice.

I stared at his lips, at the thin scar on the bottom one and the two rough words pouring out of them like vodka over ice. I wondered how he got the scar. I wondered if his voice tasted like vodka too; if it would burn my throat and warm my stomach. I felt . . . weird. My thoughts seemed to have no filter, ping-ponging against my skull like a game of pinball.

I opened my mouth to explain myself, but all that came out was, “You’re very Russian.”

He drew a thumb across the scar on his bottom lip. “You’re very American.”

The doctor shifted in his chair and spoke, but I barely heard it over this man’s presence that was *so* very loud. He was an eclipse, blocking the pain from my head, and, probably, the sun. Though overwhelming, it wasn’t unpleasant. It was warm. Persuasive. Worldly. A royal flush in a den of iniquity.

“Do you know your name?” he translated.

Slowly, I nodded. “Mila . . . Mila Mikhailova.”

The doctor shot a censorious look at the man in front of me, but he either didn’t notice or didn’t care because his gaze remained on mine, pulling curiosity to the surface.

“What’s yours?” I asked on a shallow breath.

He smiled. “Ronan.”

His name grew heavy in the air until the doctor cleared his throat and said something I couldn’t

translate.

“What day of the week is it, Mila?” Ronan asked.

“I, uh . . . Fri—?” I cut myself off when he shook his head with a hint of a smile. I tried again. “Saturday?”

The doctor made a *hmm* noise, apparently not impressed with this man helping me. No surprise. Doctors were no fun.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” Ronan translated.

I stared at his other hand resting on his knee, at the tattoos on his fingers in between the first and second knuckles. One was a cross, another a raven. The third, a king of hearts playing card.

Ink and déjà vu.

I didn't know what was wrong with me, but I couldn't stop myself from touching him, from drawing an index finger down the tattooed raven. The whispered words were pushed from my depths by an irresistible force.

“Darkness there, and nothing more . . .”

The quote condensed the space between us, dipped in something as thick and dark as tar.

I was sucked back into a tunnel, reading Edgar Allan Poe under my papa's desk, with dirt on my face and uneven bangs I'd cut myself. Papa was speaking to Ms. Marta, my childhood tutor, unaware I was near. He was concerned about my imaginary friends and lack of real ones, my introversion, and my disinterest in schoolwork.

He thought something was wrong with me.

I thought so too.

Those whispered words in the hall coiled inside me like a snake sinking its fangs in and slowly spreading poison as the years passed by. Poison that sent me on a warpath to acceptance.

Sometimes, it was the little things that made us who we were.

The heavy, empathetic look in Ronan's eyes tightened my stomach like the *click* of a trigger. I didn't expect him to understand what I said, but he did. I knew he did.

“Sleduyushchiy vopros,” Ronan said. *Next question.*

The doctor frowned. *“U tebya yest' sem'ya, s kotoroy ya mogu svyazat'sya?”*

“How old are you, *moy kotyonok*?”

From the way the doctor's eyes flared in disapproval, I realized he understood that English phrase, and it wasn't what he'd said.

I answered, “Nineteen,” before remembering I turned twenty yesterday.

The doctor released a tense breath. *“Devyatnadtsat'. Yey devyatnadtsat'.”* *Nineteen. She is nineteen.*

Ronan didn't look away from me. *“Ya slyshal.”* *I heard.*

I hardly listened to the exchange because I was trying to remember what *“moy kotyonok”* meant. My, what?

“Have you been . . . violated, Mila?” I watched the dark blue of his eyes grow black.

For a moment, his question confused me. A cloud obscured the entire scene in the alley as if it happened to someone else and I'd merely watched it unfold. It didn't seem real, and when I thought of it, I felt nothing but mild annoyance, which probably put me in the same crazy category as my papa's tenants.

I shook my head.

“Good.”

Just a single four-letter word, but it ballooned in the air like the most important thing in the room.

His voice was so rough and soft. So composed and accented. So lenient in its delivery it slipped beneath my skin, melting the tension in my body like butter. I bet people went out of their way to listen to this man talk.

“Do you have any pain besides your head?”

I nodded, staring at him.

A smile touched his lips. “Where?”

“My side.”

Ronan rose to his full height. As he and the doctor spoke, a boy—the one I saw carrying a crate of liquor—entered the room with my duffle bag in his hands. He dropped it beside the couch and sent a glance of disgust my way.

Ronan eyed him in silent warning. The boy swallowed and turned to walk out of the room.

“Kirill would like to take a look at you, if you will let him.”

I nodded.

When Ronan headed to the door, I got to my feet, fighting a spell of dizziness at the sudden move.

“Wait,” I blurted. “Where are you going?”

He turned his head to study me with cautious eyes. “Giving you some privacy, *kotyonok*.”

I chewed my lip, not knowing what compelled me to ask that. I was confused. And I really didn't like doctors.

“Please, stay.”

Kirill sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

After a pensive moment of silence, Ronan inclined his head and walked back to his desk. I was oddly comforted he would stay.

Kirill stood, pulled a flashlight from his dress shirt pocket, and checked my pupils. He listened to my heart, my breathing, and examined the back of my head. My gaze kept landing on Ronan, who leaned against his desk doing nothing but watching the scene.

When Kirill spoke, I pulled my eyes to him. He must have noticed where my attention was during the exam because his expression was tight with disapproval.

“He needs you to remove the jacket.”

I loosened my grip on the lapel and shrugged it off my shoulders to the floor. A red bruise, the shape of a hand, marred my waist, which explained why my ribs ached. But what I focused on was the dried blood on my stomach. Now, I noticed it was underneath my fingernails as well.

All of the warmth inside me went ice-cold, sending prickles down the back of my neck.

I didn't do blood.

A shaky exhale escaped me. My stomach turned. The room began to blur. I swayed, blackness tugged on my subconscious, and then it dragged me all the way under.

When I awoke, it was to a dry mouth, Kirill's frown, and Ronan crouching next to where I lay on the couch.

Realizing I'd fainted, I closed my eyes again.

As a child, I had anxiety attacks before getting a shot or having my blood drawn. Papa used to hold me down for my vaccinations until I eventually passed out. Even now, I'd rather cast my own broken arm with duct tape than go to the doctor's office.

Ronan held out the green can of soda Kirill handed to him. “You're not going to pass out on me again, are you?”

I sat up slowly, closed my blouse with one hand, and took the can from him with the other. Nobody but a small few knew about my phobia. I forced myself to watch gory horror films to get over

it, but it only desensitized me to *Saw* movies, not real life.

“I’m not the biggest fan of blood,” I admitted.

He eyed me with curiosity, like I said something amusing. “Interesting.”

“I’m sorry. You look like a busy man, and I’m sure I’ve ruined your entire night.”

“Drink your soda, *kotyonok*.”

I did. The cold fizz felt good on my throat. I licked my dry lips and looked around the room, from Kirill’s frown, to a crack in the plaster walls, to the frayed carpet. It wasn’t exactly a trendy executive office.

“I’ll reimburse you for everything,” I said. “The doctor and—” I glanced at the can in my hand, which amused Ronan.

“I’ll add the soda to your bill,” he said.

At that moment, I realized I completely overlooked his expensive suit, believing he’d have trouble affording a private doctor’s visit. Suddenly understanding he was only playing with me, I met his gaze.

Click.

It wasn’t the pull of a trigger. It was him clicking a pen in his hand.

“*U neye sotryaseniye mozga, i ona dolzhna byt’ osmotrena v bol’nitse*,” Kirill said.

“He believes you have a mild concussion,” Ronan translated. “The symptoms might last a few days.”

I guessed it explained my odd thoughts and behavior. However, I was already feeling a little better now I had some sugar in me. The lack of food and sleep probably didn’t help the situation.

An inkling tickled my thoughts. Kirill said “*bol’nitse*” again, didn’t he? I must have misheard him because Ronan hadn’t said anything about the hospital. I wouldn’t go regardless.

“Will you please thank him for me?” I asked. “He didn’t need to come here just for me.”

Ronan tilted his head in thought for a moment—*click*—then said to the doctor, “*Ona ne khochet idti v bol’nitsu*.”

That was the strangest Russian thank you I’d ever heard. “*Bol’nitsu*” must mean something else.

Kirill pursed his lips before responding.

“He says someone should wake you tonight. Protocol for head injuries.”

“Oh.”

“Are you here with anyone?”

I shook my head.

“You can stay here tonight. I will have someone wake you.”

“No, that’s okay,” I said. “You’ve already done too much for me.”

A sliver of displeasure passed through Ronan’s eyes. The quiet intensity could kill someone who wasn’t already used to the same look from their papa.

“You were assaulted in my alleyway. It is my responsibility to make sure you will be okay.”

No wonder he was standing so close to the back door. Did he hear my screams?

My thoughts and breath were cut off when he used his pen to lift the pendant sitting between my breasts. “Interesting necklace.”

He and my attacker were the only ones to ever notice it.

I’d never seen my papa wear anything less than a wifebeater and a pair of black slacks. Even then, that was only once, when I was eight years old and I glimpsed the nautical star tattoos on each of his shoulders. Of course, at that age, I wanted one for myself, so he gave me this necklace.

“It’s a family thing,” I breathed.

A thoughtful, “Huh,” was all Ronan said.

He lowered the pendant back to my skin, and the tiniest glide of his pen between my breasts set my pulse careening off its tracks. The can of soda slipped from my fingers. He caught it with his left hand, his gaze not leaving mine.

After a moment of heavy tension, Kirill got to his feet and put a bottle of pills in my hand. I looked at it. They didn’t do prescriptions here?

“For your pain.”

I forced a smile. “Thank you.”

He gave me an imploring look, grabbed his briefcase, and left the room. I didn’t know before that Russians were so very foreboding.

Ronan rose and set the can of soda on the side table. “I will have some food brought in for you,” he told me, heading to the door before he stopped in front of it and turned to face me. He was black from head to toe. His dress shirt. His tattoos. His hair. Even the blue of his eyes was drowned in shadow unless close-up. We might as well be from two different worlds—worlds divided by the lonely waves of the Atlantic.

He was the glimmer of adrenaline, the roughness of tracks beneath bare feet, and the siren of a freight train coming head-on.

And I was fascinated.

His eyes were unreadable. “You will be safe here.”

I believed him.

But before his dark silhouette disappeared from view, I remembered what “*moy kotyonok*” meant.

My *kitten*.

CHAPTER

Five

wallflower

(n.) a shy, awkward, or introverted person

Mila

I CRUNCHED ONE OF THOSE pills between my teeth, hoping for relief, and then dug through my duffle bag for my phone. That is, until I remembered it was in my coat pocket, which currently lay in a frigid Russian alley. It was surprising they hadn't found it considering my bag must have been a couple of blocks away, and my coat should be near their back door.

A knock sounded, and a redhead no older than seventeen, wearing a plain white dress, entered the room. She kept her eyes lowered as she set a bowl of soup and a slice of bread on a side table near the couch. I thanked her and asked if she knew what time it was, but from the way she didn't even acknowledge I spoke before she turned and walked out of the room, I guessed she must not speak English. Or at all.

The soup smelled so good it made my mouth water, but it looked like *solyanka*, which meant it contained meat. I'd been a vegan since I watched a meatpacking documentary in junior high. Borya hated it, but he always made something special for me. Regardless, I never could eat much when I was stressed. And now I was alone with my thoughts, I wondered if the attack was random or if it had something to do with Ivan's fear of my coming here.

Could my papa really be in trouble? He might be an adulterer and do business with some unsavory people, but he didn't gamble or drink in excess. Heck, he didn't even jaywalk. He couldn't be any more law-abiding if he tried. I brushed the thought off. I was a lone woman walking through a rough part of Moscow. What did I expect, a parade ride to the Ritz?

With that worry out of mind, I realized I really needed to use the restroom.

Avoiding looking at the dried blood on my skin, I swapped my ruined blouse for a yellow Beach Boys tee. Down the dimly lit hall, the clank of pots and pans and an occasional Russian curse came from a bright room to the right. It was a large industrial kitchen, and I wondered how long I'd been unconscious, because it was closing for the day.

After finding the bathroom and doing my business, I headed to the sink, where I scrubbed my hands and stomach with the bar of soap, growing queasy as I watched red run down the drain. I shuddered at the thought my attacker might carry some disease. Other than psychopathy anyway.

In the mirror, I stared into my ice-blue eyes. I always thought they lacked spark, their shine, even though I'd been told they were striking by a model agent who approached me on the street and slipped me his business card. I was intrigued. Models got to travel, to see the world beyond a television screen, but Papa shut down any idea of that real fast.

I started to head back to my temporary room for the night, but a voice—*his* voice—wrapped around my body and drew me to a stop. I should mind my own business, as Ms. Marta would say

when I interrupted our lessons by peeking out the window to see who'd come up the drive. But temptation tightened its grip, pulling me in the opposite direction.

As the hallway's shadows grew darker, one phrase came to mind: *Curiosity killed the cat.*

I brushed off a shiver.

A bartender stood behind an old wooden bar washing glasses. White dress shirt rolled up to his elbows, suspenders, a skull and crossbones tattoo on his forearm. He glanced my way and stopped to stare while wiping his hands on a towel.

I swallowed and swept my gaze away from him, over the round tables and booths in the timeworn and mostly empty restaurant. I found Ronan easily because the three men sitting across from him roared with laughter at something he said. He rested a lazy arm on the back of the booth, a cigar in his mouth. Russian Gypsy music played quietly over the dim room as I watched him blow out a white cloud of smoke, a smile touching his lips.

He glanced over, dark eyes settling on mine.

Madame Richie's voice pulled me back to that overly warm trailer parked at the carnival, a gaggle of preteen cheerleaders frowning at the décor behind me. Eyes closed, she rested her hands on her purple crystal ball, a cigarette dangling precariously from her lips. She peeked one eye open to look at me, then closed it again in concentration. As her crystal ball filled with smoke and who knows what else, a frown knitted her brows. I let out a gasp when she grabbed my palm, pulling me halfway across the table to look at it. And then she saw something that made her laugh. And *laugh.*

She sat back, rested an elbow on the table, and took a long draw on her cigarette. "So *vat* do you *vant* to know?"

The fact I put any weight into what she told me should be alarming, but I'd never been able to let her words go. I wanted more than tepid caresses and French conjugations. I wanted more than Sperry loafers and soft hands. What I wanted was someone like this man, with Russian on his tongue and tattoos on his fingers.

He bit his cigar between his teeth and winked at me.

That wink settled into a tight ball of heat in my stomach as I headed back to his office and changed into a pair of shorts. The bowl of soup sat untouched on the side table while I curled up on the couch and pulled the new mysterious blanket over me. It wasn't how I thought I would spend my first night in Moscow, and I shivered at the idea of how badly it could have gone . . .

If not for a nautical star necklace.

A restaurant.

And a man wearing black with secrets in his eyes.



The scent of cigar smoke woke me. It invaded my senses, mixing with the deep, masculine scent embedded in the walls forever.

I sat up on the couch and met Ronan's gaze from behind his desk, self-consciously running my fingers through my long hair. I straightened it religiously, but every time I slept, those unruly curls

came back with a vengeance. They were too wild, too rebellious to fit the cultured mold I forced myself into.

My skin tightened at the awareness of how short my high-waisted shorts were. I didn't think I'd be sleeping in a man's office when I packed my bag yesterday.

He rocked back in his leather chair, tossing a stress ball between his hands.

Toss.

Squeeze.

A small smile. "You're a heavy sleeper."

Nobody had to tell him it was inappropriate to watch someone sleep. He knew. That much was evident by the roguish flicker in his eyes.

Maybe not so much a gentleman at heart?

The deep sleep I fell into after the grumpy redhead woke me a little after four a.m. had dulled my short memory of him. His presence was larger than life; a shadow where a shadow shouldn't be. He was still black from head to toe, no tie, but today his hair was slightly messy, as if he'd run those inked fingers through it, and judging by the twirl of smoke rising from an ashtray on his desk, he was smoking a cigar in what had to be the early morning.

I never had a problem with talking, with pushing words past my lips, but with this man's full attention on me, I found anything I wanted to say caught in my throat. So, with a blush I deeply resented, I turned my head and said nothing at all.

He chuckled softly, reached for a phone on his desk with a *cord*, and dialed a number.

I groaned in my mind. He thought I was *amusing*. Meanwhile, the mere touch of his gaze on my skin warmed me like the heat of the sun. And his voice, lightly accented and holding an experienced edge . . . I could listen to it all day and never tire of it.

I got to my bare feet and folded his wrinkled jacket and the blanket neatly, which evoked a quirk of his lips mid-Russian sentence to whoever was on the other end of the line. His stare slipped over my skin as I padded across the room to view the photos hanging on the wall. One showed a few smirking and smoking men, but the focus was a teenage Ronan with a rifle in his hand and a dead deer at his feet.

I'd never seen a gun in my life.

And I didn't want to.

Another black and white photo showed two kids, maybe twelve or thirteen, standing in the street. A smudge of dirt marred Ronan's cheek, his arm loosely around the neck of the other kid, whose unsmiling face was turned away from the camera. But it didn't hide a sliver of his eyes that were sharp enough to pierce through the picture.

They looked poor. Maybe even homeless.

My gaze slid to Ronan, from his suit to the black watch on his wrist. I always shopped for my papa since he had no care for it and no wife—or so I thought. He would only wear the finest of the finest, so I'd become an aficionado in expensive men's clothing, and this man was wearing a Dormeuil Vanquish.

From rags to riches . . .

I wondered what he did. He was obviously more than the owner of this restaurant, which was far closer to a hole-in-the-wall than a five-star establishment. I found it surprising, though also endearing, he displayed his past for the world to see.

"Sit down and eat, *kotyonok*."

I warmed at the nickname, even knowing he probably came by it because I reminded him of

something cute he might pat on the head. I sat on the couch and dug into a bowl of *kasha* and fresh fruit.

Ronan was still talking on the phone, that cord wrapped around one hand, stress ball in the other, but the heat of his curious gaze warmed every inch of me. I set the half-eaten meal on the side table and received a disapproving look from him. If I'd gotten the look from my papa, I would have forced down every crumb, but I was testing out a sturdier resolve. And I simply didn't want to finish it.

He hung up, shrouding the room in thick silence. I rubbed my hands on my bare thighs and searched for my voice, as it seemed to lose itself in his presence.

"You didn't happen to find my coat, did you?"

He didn't say anything for a moment, rocking back in his chair like a newspaper editor lording over his domain. "You're lucky we found your bag before it was stolen."

That was a no.

I chewed my lip. "My phone was in the pocket."

"Was it?" was all he said, not offering to let me use his.

I didn't feel like being more of a nuisance, and I also wasn't exactly thrilled at the thought of sharing what happened last night with Ivan, so I pushed the need aside. I'd buy a disposable phone and let him know I was okay later.

Ronan stared at me.

Toss.

Squeeze.

The man was always doing something with his hands, and it was distracting. I swallowed when silence filled the room once again. He seemed perfectly content to just sit in it, but it tunneled under my skin and made me itch to fill it.

I cleared my throat. "This place . . . it's nice. Very warm and . . . inviting."

It was far from inviting for a girl like me, and we both knew it.

His slow smile could devastate cities. "What about it makes you feel so comfortable? I shall have to rectify it as soon as possible." He watched with some form of dark interest as another stupid flush rose to my cheeks. If there was a God, he would have surely taken pity on me and opened a hole in the floor to let me fall through. I felt like Duckie in *Pretty in Pink*, and we all know how that ended up.

"The music. My papa listens to the same music."

"What a coincidence," Ronan drawled. His voice was indifferent, but also laced with something that evoked a shiver beneath my skin.

"Maybe you've heard of him?" It was a long shot, but with nothing else to go on, I might as well try to find another breadcrumb. "Alexei Mikhailov?"

Squeeze.

"Can't say I have."

Disappointment filled me.

"What does your papa do?"

"He's an investor."

That was all I knew. Papa never talked about work around me.

"Huh." After a moment of studying me, Ronan said, "And what brings an American cheerleader to Moscow, alone?"

I glanced at my bag with "CHEER" across the front. "I was a cheerleader in high school, not anymore."

"So a solid year ago then?"

“Of course not,” I said, like he was completely off the mark. “A year and a half.”

He smiled. “Ah, my mistake.”

After a beat of silence, I told him, “Moscow’s secrets.” The quiet words filled the room. “I came for its secrets.”

He watched me for a long time—so long, my heart slowed beneath the weight of his gaze—and then he stood and came around his desk. “Do you have somewhere to stay?”

I shook my head.

“I will have Albert find you a room.” With that, he headed to the door.

My manners rebelled against accepting his generosity, but a greater part of me was thankful. My head still hurt, and I didn’t want to wander aimlessly around Moscow looking for a ride and a place to stay. Though something else inside, something curious and *breathless*, wouldn’t allow him to walk away yet.

I got to my feet and blurted, “Do you have a fondness for opera?”

He stopped and slowly turned to me. “How did you guess?”

It took a moment to realize he was teasing me. I opened my mouth to respond but ended up pulling my bottom lip between my teeth to hold in the genuine amusement. His eyes flicked to my lips for just a second, and my pulse dropped into a vat of gasoline and fire.

I swallowed. “Do you happen to know of an opera house nearby?” I wasn’t going home without knowing more about my mother and her family. Maybe I could find some information at her previous place of employment.

“There are several, but the Moskovskiy is the closest.”

“The Moskovskiy,” I repeated, so I would remember it.

“It’s not in the best part of town anymore.”

His restaurant wasn’t exactly in the best part either, but I didn’t voice the thought.

Ronan regarded me for a second, and, seeing the determination on my face, something obscure clouded his eyes. “I will take you. Tonight, at eight.”

Then he left me without another word, and I couldn’t help but think . . .

Maybe Moscow wasn’t *so* bad after all.

CHAPTER

Six

dépaysement

(n.) when someone is taken out of their own familiar world into a new one

Mila

“NO, REALLY, I CAN PAY for my own room.”

Albert was obviously hard of hearing because his stoic expression didn't falter as he walked down the hotel hall with my bag in his hand. I trailed two steps behind the giant, struggling to keep up with him.

I knew he understood English. On the way over, I touched the window while taking in the sights, and through the rearview mirror, he looked at me like I'd just slapped his favorite grandma and grumbled at me to not smudge the glass. He'd be handsome if he wiped away that scowl and didn't shave his head like he was just released from prison. Though, with that attitude, I could only assume he was.

After driving me to a swanky hotel, he handed the straight-faced concierge a wad of cash. The older man didn't ask a single question before sliding a shiny room key into Albert's hand. It looked like a drug deal. Or a bribe. I couldn't be privy to Albert's illegal activities no matter how things were done here.

“Listen, I just want to pay for my room,” I said, slightly out of breath when I finally caught up to him. “I'm sure you have lots of other things to spend your money on. Giant underpants can't come cheap.”

He almost appeared amused. Or constipated? I couldn't be sure.

“The boss is paying for it,” he grouched.

“The boss” sounded a little too formal and weird. But then I would be the last person to know about an employer's correct title. The only job I'd ever had was volunteer work.

“You know, you don't look like an Albert,” I told him.

Not a blink.

“I'm just saying, when someone says ‘Albert,’ expectations are formed. Old men with cheerful personalities, to be exact. You've crushed those expectations, Albert.”

He stopped in front of room 203.

“I'd peg you as more of an . . . Igor.”

His lips pulled into the slightest frown as he slid the key into the lock and pushed the door open. Naturally, I followed him inside.

“It's okay to show your feelings, Igor. We all have them.”

He dropped my bag near the queen-size bed.

“Not to mention, men who cry? *Hot.*”

The disgusted look on his face was comical, and I bit my lip to stifle a smile as he passed me on

the way to the door.

“Will I see you later?”

He grunted and slammed it shut behind him.

With a sigh, I turned to take in the room. The alarm clock near the bed said it was only nine in the morning. All of a sudden, the jet lag and everything else hit me like a semi-truck. I needed to let Ivan know I was okay—and I kind of missed his voice—but I was too tired to figure out how to dial out on the hotel phone, so it would have to wait.

I took a shower and scrubbed my skin raw. In a towel, I padded back into my room and dug through my bag for some clothes. A muffled commotion on the street drew my attention to the window. Outside, a bicyclist argued with a disgruntled taxi driver, who threw his hands in the air when the teenage delivery boy hurled a newspaper at his car. I started to turn away, but something else caught my eye.

A black car sat parked on the side of the street. Tattooed fingers hung out of the window ashing a cigarette before the unfamiliar man brought it back to his mouth. I’d never met a man with inked hands before coming here.

Must be a Russian thing.

Lethargy pulled on my limbs, so I fell into bed without a stitch of clothing on and was dead to the world for a solid three hours. When I awoke, it was with a groan and a piece of still-damp hair in my mouth.

Removing the tags from a new pair of bell-bottom jeans and a vintage T-shirt, I smiled as I slipped them on. They fit me well, caressing my body with a cotton form of freedom. Next, I dried and straightened my hair, applied some strawberry lip gloss, and donned the heavy cardigan I wore in place of a coat on the way here.

The cold sucked the air from my lungs as I headed across the street to the nearest convenience store to buy a disposable phone. Maybe it was the lack of winter apparel, but I stuck out like a sore thumb. Eyes followed my movements, and I got cat-called twice. Not an odd thing growing up in Miami, but I thought someone even took my picture.

The attention made me wonder about my mother—if she really was so famous here, and why my papa hid it from me. He didn’t like to talk about her. I assumed it hurt too much, so I never had the heart to press the matter. But one would think he could share *something* with me. The fact she was a well-known opera singer maybe . . .

With a new phone in hand, I dialed Ivan’s number.

He answered immediately, his voice cautious. “Hello?”

“Hi, Ivan. It’s me.”

“Mila,” he breathed. “*Gde ty, chert voz’mi?*” *Where the hell are you?*

I had an apology on my tongue, but the fact the relief in his voice was so palpable like he had no faith in me at all—even though he was annoyingly accurate in this case—stopped it from escaping.

“Relax.” I shivered and tightened my cardigan around me. “I’m fine.”

“I have been worried sick about you,” he snapped.

“I don’t know why. Obviously, I’ve been doing just fine.” *Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

“Where are you staying?”

A clothing store’s window display drew me in. A bell dinged as I stepped inside, and I sighed in relief at the warmth.

“To be honest, I’m not entirely sure.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means I can’t read Russian, Ivan.” I headed to a clothing rack to peruse the dresses. I didn’t know if there was a performance at the opera house tonight, but I figured I should dress for one. Better to be overdressed than under in my learned opinion. “Besides, I stayed at a restaurant last night. I didn’t catch the name.”

Slowly, he asked, “Why did you stay at a restaurant, Mila?”

Well, crap.

“I wasn’t going to tell you that,” I said, and then before I could stop myself, I grumbled, “Must be the concussion.”

“The *what?*”

I was really digging myself into a hole here.

I bit my lip. “I’ll admit, yesterday wasn’t the most ideal situation, but it has nothing to do with my ability to take care of myself.”

“What are you talking about?”

I sighed, realizing I would have to tell him the truth because I’d never been a good liar, and there wasn’t a chance he’d buy the elaborate tale my brain was thinking up right now. It involved a bus and a kitten and a heroic sense of self.

“I’ll tell you, but you have to promise not to tell my papa. I don’t want to worry him.”

“I promise,” he grated.

“Well, if you want me to put it frankly . . . I was sort of attacked, and maybe almost murdered.”

Silence.

“But don’t worry. Apparently, the man had a phobia of star necklaces, and I got away.” I pushed a dress on the rack aside.

A colorful Russian curse. “Where are you?”

“I’m shopping.”

I wasn’t going to tell him about my plans tonight. I knew how well it would be received—at least by my papa once Ivan snitched on me. Ivan never cared about who I went out with. His indifference stomped on my first crush and fantasy—created by Ms. Marta’s dirty books I snuck away with when she wasn’t looking—of a white knight on a steed who’d behead other men just for looking at me. Though, in that fantasyland, blood didn’t squirt in the air like a fountain because blood simply didn’t exist.

My expectations were unrealistic, a little gruesome, and a lot illegal. But a girl could dream.

“Shopping?” He sounded confused.

“Yes?”

“You were attacked, and then you got up and went shopping.”

“What would you like me to do? Cry myself to sleep?”

Maybe I should be traumatized, but somehow, I still only felt irritated at the situation. I hoped Scarface was having a shitty day.

“Mila . . . I want you to look around.” A foreboding edge crept into his voice. “Is anyone watching you?”

I froze, the hair on the back of my neck rising. “What? Why would someone be watching me?”

“Just do it. And do not make it obvious.”

A chill crawling up my spine, I discreetly glanced around the store, from a couple of women talking at the front counter, to a few others trying on accessories and perusing clothing racks. They were looking at me here and there, though only like I was a tourist who didn’t blend in. I stared out the front window but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“Did you know my mother was famous here?” I asked. Maybe she had a Charles Manson-like group of fans?

He sighed.

“You did, didn’t you?” I accused. “Why wouldn’t you tell me something like that?”

“Because you would have gone digging where you do not belong.”

“Don’t belong? She was my mother!”

“Why don’t you say it a little louder, so the whole city can hear you?” he chided.

“Who cares if they do?”

“I want you to stay somewhere public until I come get you.”

The tone of his voice made my throat feel thick. “Ivan, you’re scaring me.”

“*Good*. Now, go hand one of the saleswomen your phone so I can find out where you are.”

I took a step in the front counter’s direction, but something stopped me. “I’m not ready to go home.”

“This is not about what you wan—”

“No, it never is, is it?” My voice rose. “I know about my papa’s other family. You don’t have to scare me into coming home to keep the secret anymore. For once, I’m thinking about myself.”

Silence.

“Mila—”

“Goodbye, Ivan.”

“*Mila—*”

I ended the call.

With a huff, I pushed a hanger on the rack aside. Receiving another call from him, I turned the phone off and dropped it into my pocket, but his ominous words still played on a reel in the back of my mind.

CHAPTER

Seven

la vie en rose
(n.) life through rose-colored glasses

Mila

MY DRESS WAS YELLOW AND flowy with an umber crocheted bodice. It was modest except for the inch it showed of my midsection and the slit up the thigh. The heels I wore were clear and sparkly, lacing halfway up my calves to show off my best feature. I was the queen of ponytails, but I chose to leave the straightened locks down, and as usual, I applied a light amount of makeup.

I was ready an hour early and spent the rest of the time chewing my glossed lip and pacing back and forth. Nerves swam in my stomach, making me lightheaded. I should have eaten something earlier, but I had an unhealthy habit of forgetting until food was placed in front of me.

I didn't believe Ronan thought of this as a date, but I couldn't stop the whisper of anticipation that tightened my lungs. A very stupid, romantic part of me had hearts in her eyes. Never mind the fact I was soon to accept an archaic proposal from a man who was probably screwing some Texan oil heiress right now.

Ronan knocked on the door at eight on the dot.

He consumed the entire doorway. Dark eyes, broad shoulders, and smooth black lines. He filled out a suit better than any man I ever saw, though his presence seemed to overwhelm the seams as if they could barely contain him.

We only stared at each other for a second longer than comfortable, and when my breath began to slow beneath his penetrating silence, I forced a word past my lips.

"Privet." Hello.

He raised a brow. "So you do know some Russian?"

A flush crept up my neck. "A little."

I stepped out, closing the door behind me. He didn't move back like I expected him to, and it left only a couple of inches between us. We were so close I couldn't breathe. So close, yellow and black almost touched. So close, I could kiss him with a small rise to my toes. In four-inch heels, I stood eye level with his mouth, which put him at a solid six foot five.

"You're kind of tall for a girl," he mused, looking down on me.

I released a shallow breath. "Thanks."

When he laughed softly, I sighed in my mind. My crush couldn't be any clearer if I waved an "I LOVE YOU!" sign like a fangirl at a boy band concert.

As we walked down the hall, I told him, "You didn't have to pay for my room."

"I wanted to." He said it as if when he wanted to do something, he did it, and I shouldn't even be questioning him. It was a little intimidating, so I didn't press the matter further.

"Well, thank you . . . for everything."

He turned his head toward me, and the look in his eyes was thoughtful but also tinged with something so profound my heartbeat tripped over itself. He didn't say anything until we stepped outside and I shivered as the cold rushed through my sheer cardigan.

"Where is your coat?"

I should have bought one while I was out today, but Ivan's phone call and the impending maybe-date had pushed the need to the back of my mind.

"I lost it . . . last night."

His eyes flickered with recollection and then darkness. He slipped off his wool suit jacket and put it on my shoulders. It was heavy, and it smelled so good my blood warmed, descending to a spot between my legs. He wore a dress shirt and vest underneath it, but still, it was a bitter cold that singed my lungs with each breath.

"What about you?" I asked.

A hint of amusement touched his voice. "As you said, *kotyonok*, I am very Russian."

How silly of me to think this man could ever get cold. He was a dark force of nature, heated by testosterone and muscle. He was probably hot all the time.

Albert leaned against a car at the curb smoking a cigarette. Ronan opened the back door and held out his hand to me while saying something in Russian, his attention on Albert. When I only stared at the hand he offered, his gaze came my way. My shallow breath misted in front of my face as I slid my hand into his. Ivory and tan skin. French-tipped nails and tattoos. Soft and rough. The difference flared in slow motion. Dark eyes, slightly narrowed, dropped to our hands before he helped me to step off the curb and into the car.

Silence and his presence crowded the back seat. Ronan's arm brushed mine, the small contact taking hold of my entire body. An electric current fizzed like that green can of soda in the space between us.

He kept his gaze out the window, but I couldn't stop drinking him in. How his shirt and vest fit his body like a second skin. The way the black fabric molded his thick arms and chest. Every inch of him seemed hard and formidable. A curious heat inside of me craved to run my hand down this stranger's stomach and find out if it was as tight as it looked. I'd never felt an attraction like this, and my inexperience threatened to bubble over like a pot of boiling water.

During the ride, he never looked my way once. I wondered if he felt anything I did, or if he only saw me as a nineteen-year-old responsibility.

We pulled up to the curb of a quiet building with gold doors and dim lighting. It didn't look like our destination, but I held in my questions while Ronan opened the door for me. It was a department store, with marble floors and a sparkly chandelier, and it sat empty except for one wide-eyed saleswoman who stood behind a glass counter.

"I think they're closed," I said quietly.

A corner of his lips tipped up. "Pick out a coat, *kotyonok*."

I stared at him for a moment, my breath slowing in surprise. *Get this fangirl some markers.*

Heels clicking on the marble, I walked toward a clothing rack and ran my hand down a mink coat so soft it challenged my principles. Anything here would cost an absolute fortune. I wouldn't be surprised to find three zeroes on the price tag.

With my back to him, I said, "I hope attacked tourists don't end up at your door often, because this is turning into a very expensive venture."

His only response was a smile I felt on my spine.

I turned to tell him I couldn't accept this, but when my gaze met his, my breath twisted in a knot,

the space between my heartbeats zapping like a hot wire. Ronan's hands rested in his pockets, his watch glinting in the low light. His eyes burned deep, *dark*, intimidating, but I knew up close, they were an entrancing blue.

I swallowed. "I can't let you buy me a coat. It's too much."

His gaze flickered with displeasure. "Nobody tells me what I can or cannot do."

I believed him with every cell in me.

What *did* he do, exactly?

I bit my lip and admitted, "I don't do fur."

He raised a brow and drawled, "Don't tell me you're a vegetarian too."

"Ah . . ." I gave him an apologetic smile. "Vegan."

He regarded me heavily, as if I was an odd breed of woman. His gaze set me on edge, so I distracted myself by perusing the clothing racks. Nothing had a price tag, to my dismay. Or *relief*.

I ran my hand down a white faux fur coat that had to be the cheapest of the lot and said, "This one."

His eyes narrowed—apparently, he was on to me—but he didn't voice his disapproval.

On the way back to the car, a flurry landed on my lashes. I stopped on the sidewalk and lifted my eyes to the sky to watch snow fall for the first time. It was like someone above had torn their wedding dress apart and let the pieces of tulle float to the pavement. I caught a flake in my palm, studying how it melted on my skin within seconds.

Looking up, I noticed Ronan watching me, and warmth rushed to my cheeks at his heavy attention. Quelling the unladylike impulse to catch a snowflake on my tongue, I continued walking to the car.

We arrived at the Moskovskiy ten minutes later. Elegantly dressed couples milled in through the front doors, hand in hand. My palms and neck itched when some slowed to look at us, the eyes on my skin bringing Ivan's earlier warning back. Goose bumps ran down my arms beneath my thick coat. Ronan didn't even put his jacket back on.

His Russian blood, I supposed.

We stepped inside, and I took in the high painted ceiling and gold crown molding. It was beautiful, and I wondered if my mother stood in this exact spot.

"You've never been to the opera?" Ronan asked.

I shook my head. "Never."

Eyes on the glittering chandelier, I followed him through the theater, up marble steps, and down a corridor, where a red-vested attendant silently opened the door to a private box giving a perfect view of the stage. Doors simply glided open for this man, while other guests seemed to require the use of their own commoner hands for access within.

"Are you a politician?" My curiosity slipped free as I stepped into the warm box, but on second thought, I wasn't sure what kind of politician hung out in a dingy restaurant on the wrong side of town while wearing an Audemars Piguet on his wrist.

He smiled. "No."

It was the only answer I got before we took our seats and watched people file in and take theirs below. In the comfortable yet electric silence, my attention caught on his fingers tapping the armrest, the black raven so close to my own unblemished hand. I had a feeling he understood what I said to him last night, and it was only confirmed when he spoke a single word now.

"*Nevermore.*"

Ronan pulled his gaze to me and winked.

He had tattoos on his fingers and he just quoted a famous poet. It made me feel ridiculously hot all

over. So hot I pulled the blanket of hair off the back of my neck, but the flush only spread further when his stare lit a line of fire down the exposed skin, sliding over my collarbone to settle on the star pendant between my breasts.

A theater attendant stepped into the box, diffusing the thick tension in the air like smoke. He asked for our drinks order, which seemed to be a service only we were experiencing.

“Kors. Chilled,” Ronan replied for both of us.

“I’ll just have water, please,” I countered.

The attendant didn’t pause as he rushed off to do Ronan’s bidding. Alone again, Ronan cast me a dry look.

“You are in Russia, *kotyonok*.”

And that was the end of that.

I accepted a tumbler of clear liquid knowing it wasn’t water. At home, I only drank the occasional glass of champagne besides a single drunken incident with a bottle of UV Blue and 7UP.

It took one night on a yacht that bobbed in the water and a smug dare to know alcohol and Mila Mikhailova didn’t mix. I’d stripped out of the modest swimsuit Papa had approved of before the party and then dove off the bow of the boat into open water, masculine cheers swallowed by the waves of the Atlantic. Ivan ended up carrying me home, grumbling about how heavy I was the whole way, and once there, the severe, quiet reprimand I received from my papa killed my buzz on impact.

I swirled the liquid with a frown, my father’s rebuke somehow still haunting me, even though, in his eyes, hopping on a plane to Moscow was much worse than skinny-dipping.

“You’re the first woman I’ve seen frown at a ten-thousand-dollar glass of vodka.”

My lips parted in shock, and I glanced at Ronan to see a lazy light in his eyes. He’d apparently learned I’d be horrified to know—let alone *drink*—something he bought me that cost so much. This was his payback for my picking out a cheap coat.

I stared at him in realization.

He stared back.

“Do you always get what you want?” I asked boldly.

His response was a clink of his tumbler against mine. “*Na zdorovie.*” *Cheers.*

I wasn’t going to win this one, but I didn’t want to torture myself by nursing the glass of pure liquor either. I tossed it back in one go.

Keeping his eyes on the stage, Ronan chuckled softly while I coughed and choked at the burn in my throat.

With the liquor settling like fire in my stomach, something magical electrified the air and swept over the hush of the crowd as the curtains opened and the performance began.

The opera was called *The Queen of Spades*. Since it was in Russian and my brain-to-mouth filter was impaired by two fingers of million-proof liquor, I asked a lot of questions. Ronan didn’t seem to mind, often translating what happened after a sip of vodka he savored on his tongue in such an impassive way it made it look like water.

“I’ll be disappointed if they don’t all die,” I announced to the mess onstage.

A corner of his mouth quirked. “I thought you would be the kind of girl to hope for a happily ever after.”

My happily ever after came on the lips of a mad fortune-teller, and sadly, I gave up on fairy tales and superstition long ago. Eyes settling on the stage, I pulled my star pendant back and forth, the heated lull of vodka in my belly softening my words. “I believe in happily-for-nows. They’re . . . real. Unique.” Dropping my necklace, I glanced at him, warmth and lightness pervading every cell in

me. "I like unique."

I sat in a red velvet chair in the heart of Moscow, holding this man's stare through the vibrations of an opera singer's soprano, buzzed on vodka and fascination, and it was the best happily-for-now I'd ever experienced.

The longer we stared at each other, the faster the intoxication spread through my bloodstream. Eyes half-lidded on his, I rested my head on the back of my chair.

"I'm thirsty."

"You're drunk." It was practically an accusation.

Laughing softly, I said, "You made me drink it."

"I didn't know you would down it like a fraternity pledge."

I smiled at the visual coming from his lips. "You can't have everything your way."

The expression he cast me said he absolutely could, and the dry, authoritative spark only stole the remaining wetness from my mouth.

"So thirsty," I echoed with a soft, languid lilt.

He stared at me for a moment, thoughtfully and with something darker than a cloudy night, then he handed me his glass, which was already refilled. I thought he might snap his fingers and a Perrier would appear on a silver tray, but I wasn't going to complain about sharing with him. I took a sip of vodka that didn't burn as hot as his eyes. After returning it to him, I pulled my attention back to the stage to silently watch and listen to Liza's hypnotic voice.

I was either drunker than I thought, or Liza kept glancing my way between her lines. She was gorgeous, with long black hair and exotic looks. It took a moment to realize she wasn't looking at me but at Ronan.

CHAPTER

Fight

basorexia
(n.) the overwhelming desire to kiss

Mila

DURING THE INTERMISSION, ONE OF the theater attendants slipped a piece of paper into Ronan's hand. He read it and then put it into his pocket. Call it intuition, but I knew Liza wrote the note.

As the curtains closed and the lights came back on, we headed down the hall to the exit, but something drew me to a stop. A portrait on the wall in a gaudy gold frame. My mother's hair was in an elegant updo, her eyes sparkling with an animate light. Ronan waited behind me, and if he noticed the uncanny resemblance, he didn't say anything.

I swallowed and followed him out of the theater.

My mother performed here. Now I knew for sure, maybe I could come back and question some of the employees tomorrow. Someone had to know if she had family and where I could find them.

Having beat most of the crowd outside, we passed the old-fashioned ticket booth, where my attention caught on an elderly woman sitting on the ground wrapped in a thin, tattered blanket. Her eyes were full of crazy, and, as they held mine, her throaty, terrified whisper reached my ears.

"D'yavol."

The hair on the back of my neck rose, my breath a ragged puff of vapor. I stopped and turned to look over my shoulder as if a red-horned devil would be standing behind me, but Ronan grabbed my arm.

"You're holding up the line, kotyonok."

"Sorry," I muttered.

That couldn't be what she said, could it? Did a concussion make you hallucinate?

We reached the car, but I hesitated. *"I'm sorry,"* I said. *"I'll be right back."*

Turning around, I fought against the crowd back to the ticket booth. When the old woman saw me coming, her eyes widened with fear. She started to get up, but I tried to reassure her.

"Nyet . . . druz'ya."

I thought I said "friends," but she looked at me like I just told her we were uncles, which was annoyingly possible. I crouched in my heels and fur coat in front of her, took some rubles from my clutch, and offered them out. I wished I could give her all of my money, but I knew if I pulled cash from an ATM, Ivan would find me and force me home. I wasn't ready to go yet.

The woman eyed the rubles warily for a moment, but then, as if she thought they might disappear, she snatched them from my hand. Her hands were red and raw, and with a gust of wind, a shiver wracked her. I chewed my lip in contemplation.

Oh, screw it.

I took the coat off and settled it on her shoulders. It swallowed her small frame. I didn't know

how Ronan would feel about me giving a crazy homeless woman a luxury coat he just gifted me, but my conscience wouldn't let me sleep in a warm bed tonight while she was out here cold.

She ran dirty hands over the white fur, an expression of awe on her face. "*Angel,*" she breathed. "*Ty angel.*"

Her belief I was an angel made me feel better about the *D'yavol* comment. Maybe her mind was stuck in an episode of *Supernatural*.

I avoided Ronan's gaze on the way back to the car, nervous of his reaction and wishing I was still buzzed. Albert leaned against the passenger door, watching me with cautious eyes and smoking another cigarette.

"That'll kill you, ya know."

He brought the cigarette to his lips and inhaled deeply.

I raised a brow at the challenge. "Keep smoking like that, and you're going to break a lot of girls' hearts when you go."

He grunted.

I finally brought my gaze to Ronan's unreadable expression. The theater attendant who served us drinks rushed over and said something quietly to Ronan, whose eyes lowered. I could see a hint of annoyance in them.

"I'll be right back, *kotyonok*." His dark gaze drifted down my body, caressing and setting fire to every curve encased by thin yellow fabric. "Wait in the car. You're not wearing a coat."

He walked toward the theater doors, the red-vested attendant following behind like a lapdog. Ronan stood out in the crowd, not only because people parted like the Red Sea to allow him by, but because of the smooth and powerful way he walked, as if he owned the pavement beneath his feet. The sight of his dark silhouette among falling flurries sent something dense and languid to every nerve beneath my skin, like the steady *beep* of a heart on life support.

Feeling unsteady, I turned to Albert, who actually rolled his eyes at me. Clearly, I wasn't very secretive about checking out his boss. My cheeks were flushed from the cold, but my blood burned hot, so I leaned against the car beside him. My arm brushed his, and he eyed me like I'd just challenged him to a spitting contest.

I raised a brow. "If you keep looking at me like that, I'm going to think you have a crush on me."

"He told you to get in the car."

"He's awful bossy, isn't he?"

He didn't confirm nor deny, just stared forward and blew out a breath of smoke.

"Serious question," I said direly, "and answer carefully, because this is the deciding factor in whether you and I can be pals." After a heavy pause to make sure he knew the gravity of the matter, I asked, "Team Duckie or Blane?"

His narrowed eyes came to me. "I do not speak whatever language that was."

I smiled. "Pop culture? Eighties films are back, you know."

He looked like he was suffering from a headache, and I couldn't hold in the small laugh.

After a moment, I asked, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"*Nyet.*"

"Considering your outstanding use of language, I don't see how that's possible."

He didn't respond, standing at his incredible height. He had to be pushing six foot eight. I'd felt obscenely tall my entire life, and it was nice to be the shortest one in the group for a change.

"I have a friend, Emma, who loves the giant, grunting types," I told him. "Says they have the softest, mushiest centers, and she just wants to climb them like a tree."

Not a blink.

I sighed. "Can you hear me okay from all the way up there?"

Something close to amusement passed through his eyes, and an ember of success filled me, so I continued.

"We volunteer at the homeless shelter every Tuesday evening." I rubbed my arms, feeling the icy chill creep in as I noticed the crazy woman had disappeared like a ghost in the night. "Her hobbies include knitting, scrapbooking, and cats." I laughed at the repulsed curl of his lips. "Just think, she could knit you an oversized Christmas sweater with little bells attached."

As if this tempted him, his cool gaze came my way.

"Just say the word, and I'll set you guys up," I said. "Long-distance relationships always build the best foundations for love."

He watched me like he was seriously contemplating it, but then he casually asked, "Does she like to be gagged and spanked?"

He was trying to shock me, and it worked. I couldn't keep the flush from my face, which finally evoked a small smile. Evidently, only my embarrassment would get a reaction from this giant bastard.

"Um, I'm not sure, but I can ask."

"You do that." He threw his cigarette butt to the pavement.

"Hey," I complained. "We only have one planet, Albert."

He stared at me like I was out of my mind when I stubbed it out before picking it up. And then like I was actually certifiable when I slipped it into his coat pocket.

"Do you want to live on Mars?" I asked. "Because I don't."

"Are you sure you're not from Mars?"

"Ha ha. I've read better jokes in the joke book our cook Borya keeps next to the toilet."

That earned me an actual laugh, one that sobered as fast as it came. Because Ronan stood behind me watching us like we were both Martians who had displeased him.

He opened the car door, and I slid into the back seat. When he sat beside me, the silence pressed on my chest. Ronan wasn't even looking at me but out the window, though his presence chafed my skin. He didn't have to say it for me to know he wasn't happy I gave my coat away. I had a feeling it didn't have anything to do with the money but something else entirely.

"I'm sorry." I swallowed. "About the coat."

His gaze met mine, searching and thoughtful, the weight of it stunning my body with a nervous energy. "You're big on apologies."

I opened my mouth to say something, but, consumed by this man's quiet disapproval that rivaled my papa's, what came out was, "Sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "You shouldn't give a fuck about what other people think. Trust me, they don't care about you."

For some reason, his words felt like a warning.

He was a conundrum dressed in Valentino with "fuck" on his lips . . . I didn't know why I found the contrast attractive. Maybe the novelty and honesty of it.

"That's a very pessimistic view."

He fought a smile like what I said was cute. "It's a realist's view."

It felt like I needed to prove him wrong, to convince him not everyone was out to get him. I may not believe in magical happily ever afters, but I'd seen goodness in its purest forms. I'd seen a man give the shirt off his back to someone who needed it more. I'd seen mothers walk miles to make sure their children were fed. There was good in this world, and that was a hill I'd die on.

“The boy in that picture in your office, I bet he cares about you.”

There was something between them—two dirty, homeless boys on the street—that screamed loyalty.

“And who cares about you?”

I didn’t hesitate. “My papa.” I knew it was true. No matter the secrets he withheld from me and the anxieties of abandonment, I knew he loved me.

Ronan found something unpleasant in my response. “You have a soft heart.”

I didn’t say anything because, as annoying as it could sometimes be, it was true.

“Don’t,” he said, as if I could simply change it. “The soft ones are easier to break.”

I wondered who gave this man such a jaded view on life, who cast him out into the cold street. Whatever happened to him, he was still kind and generous, and I couldn’t help but find that incredibly attractive.

“The soft ones are the most loyal,” I countered.

“And naïve.”

“If you mean *trusting*, yes.”

“I meant naïve,” he deadpanned.

“It’s not a crime to look for the best in people.”

Albert grunted from the driver’s seat, apparently eavesdropping.

I raised a brow. “If the world’s so bad, then why did you help me, a stranger?”

My words strangled the air as we held each other’s stares. I had to look away—needed to give in to the physical pull to avert my gaze before a *click* or a *pop* sounded against my head—but I didn’t. I didn’t want to. Somehow, this had turned into a challenge. He didn’t like it.

Or maybe he just wasn’t used to it.

His gaze narrowed. “Don’t play games you can’t win.”

“I’m not a sore loser,” I said, unwilling to give in just yet.

“You’re altruism’s poster child, aren’t you?”

“Of course not.” So many things said otherwise, but the defense that slipped out sounded superficial to my own ears. “Sometimes I eat dairy when there’s no other option.”

As if he couldn’t help it, he laughed softly. “That’s a concerning issue, *kotyonok*. I don’t think I’ll be able to look at you the same way again.”

All I got from that was he might want to see me again.

I ignored the annoying blush on my cheeks, but he must have noticed it because his expression went grim.

“You’re too sweet for your own good.”

“You can have some. There’s plenty to go around.” The offer escaped me without a single thought to how it might come across.

All of the playfulness in the air drowned beneath the intensity of his eyes. His stare burned me with the hot lick of a flame. My heart tightened at the tension, resolve wavering. But then he ran a thumb over the scar on his bottom lip and looked away.

I released the breath I was holding, a smile pulling on my lips.

He didn’t even glance my way, but he must have felt my triumph because he said with dry humor, “Not so gracious a winner though.”

Amusement filled my stomach again, but suddenly, with the motion of the car, a bout of dizziness hit me.

He noticed, of course. “When was the last time you ate?”

I chewed my lip. "This morning."

His eyes flared with disapproval, probably because it was the meal I only ate half of in his office.

"Do you starve yourself often?"

I frowned. "No. I just forget sometimes."

"What are you hungry for?"

Anything, really. But one thing came to mind.

"French fries."

He smiled. "Such an American girl."

Five minutes later, I had a hot container of french fries in my hand. I ate the salty pieces of heaven with relish. He watched me eat, giving me more attention than he gave to the opera we just watched, and it made my heart play with fire in my chest.

I offered him one, which annoyed him.

"Stop giving away the things I buy you."

To hide a small smile, I bit the fry in half.

His eyes dropped to my mouth, and warmth poured through my body as I licked the salt from my lips. Ronan's irises were a desolate black when he glanced away.

We spent the rest of the short ride in silence. His hand rested on his thigh, and I'd never been more aware of a man's hands in my life. I bet they would touch a woman with assurance, with confidence . . . maybe even a little roughly. At the thought, the thigh showing through the slit in my dress vibrated with hypersensitivity. Goose bumps spread across my body where my leg brushed his, and Ronan's narrowed gaze observed the contact, a tattooed finger tapping on his leg.

The soda can of a car popped and *fizzed*.

My body grew hot as I imagined him sliding his hand up that bare skin and beneath my dress. Just the idea of it hit me like a drug, a hot and restless energy expanding in my blood.

Although, I knew he wouldn't touch me. Not *naïve* and innocent me. I knew if I wanted him to see me differently, seriously, I would have to take matters into my own hands. I would have to be forward, like *Liza*.

Knowing a note from her sat in his pocket offering most likely some kind of sexy proposition and the fact he might have left me at the car to go meet with her, I felt oddly . . . *jealous*. An uncomfortable knot twisted and turned inside of me, and that hint of green fire gave me a rush of bravery.

Well, a tepid rush of bravery.

As he walked me up to my room, nerves danced and wreaked havoc in my stomach. My hands were clammy, so I wiped them on my dress.

"You never told me what you do," I said absently to distract myself, because that tepid bit of bravery grew colder with each step closer to my door.

He was saying something from one step behind, but I couldn't hear a word. My heart pounded in my throat, blood rushed to the surface of my skin, and then, I did it.

I turned around and kissed him, mid-sentence.

It was slightly off-center. Unpracticed. Our teeth clinked.

I pulled back to see his eyes sparkling with dry amusement as he wiped the side of his mouth with a thumb. But I was too *hot*, too high on the small contact of our lips to be embarrassed about what an utter failure that was.

"*Kotyonok*." He drew the word out in a low warning. "Do you know what you're doing?"

Nope.

Not at all.

I shook my head.

He watched me. “Do you usually kiss your dates like that?”

So, it *was* a date?

I shook my head again and said breathlessly, “You’re the first.”

The amusement in his eyes faded to pleasure. *Heat*. Something soaked in intensity and satisfaction. He stepped forward, forced my back to the door, and rested his hands on the frame above my head. My pulse was a distant *whoosh* in my ears, overwhelmed by the tremor that rolled across my skin and the closeness of his body. I couldn’t find enough air to breathe.

His voice resonated warmth, a thoughtful rumble so close to my mouth I could taste it. “I have always loved coming in first.”

Then his lips touched mine, softly, only a whisper. Like I was too young, too innocent to handle anything else.

A rage of heat dropped to my core at the lightest brush of his mouth on mine. I needed more.

So *much* more.

I touched his face, ran a hand across his cheek and into his hair, and pulled his lips harder against mine. He didn’t like that, and he told me so by nipping my bottom lip. The graze of his teeth moved a desperate noise up my throat. I thought he might step away, conflict and my heavy breath between us, but he drew on my lips sweetly, first the top lip, and then the bottom.

Every inch of me vibrated beneath the surface, hummed and inflamed whenever my body touched his. I rolled my hips and arched closer against him, feeling incredible heat beyond his expensive black suit, and then I licked the inside of his mouth. Like a reflex, he sucked on my tongue. Heat, tiny pricks of heat, consumed me from the inside out.

He pulled back to roughly say, “*Ty dazhe na vkus sladkaya.*”

I had no idea what it meant, but I didn’t care enough to ask. I just wanted the pressure of his mouth back on mine. I gave in to the urge to slide my tongue across the scar on his lower lip.

The lick saturated the air like some kind of dirty, carnal sin.

With a dark look, he closed the small distance, and I was lost. Any reservation in him melted with every press and dip, every touch of our lips. Each kiss was harder, wetter than before. A blaze seared through me as I drew my blunt nails down the length of his back. He growled low in his throat, and the slow glide of his mouth roughened.

Ronan stepped closer, pressing his hard-on against my lower stomach. When his lips moved to my throat, my head fell against the door with a moan. His hands remained braced on the frame above me. Hot and wet, he kissed a path down my neck that set off sparks deep in my core. My vision turned hazy, a heavy heartbeat pounding between my legs. I was a combustible ball of fire burning hotter every second.

He dragged his lips past my collarbone and nipped the soft flesh above my bodice. My nipples tightened at the closeness and warmth of his mouth. I was losing my mind in this hallway; would suddenly do anything for him to tug my dress down, bare my breasts, and put his mouth on them.

My hands were all over him: his face, his hair, now sliding up beneath his vest to feel his stomach, which *was* as tight as it looked.

“*Touch me,*” I begged.

His hands didn’t move from above my head, but as if he knew what I needed, he pressed his thigh between mine. Right against my clit. I panted, a wave of pleasure sliding down my spine when I rocked against it, already feeling the budding pressure of release.

I was nothing but *need*, flushed and wet and wanting.

He pulled back, his eyes narrowed but full of heat as he watched where I grinded on him. Watched the bare length of thigh that showed through the slit in my dress. Tension lit the line of his shoulders, tightened the muscles in his arms, and the idea he might be trying to stop only made me more desperate for this to continue.

I gripped a handful of his hair to pull his mouth back to mine. He refused. I tugged harder. He made a rough noise in his chest, then his eyes lifted to mine, alight with a challenge. He brushed my lips, but when I moved in to deepen the kiss, he pulled back just out of reach. To tease me, or to make sure I knew who was running the show. When I waited impatiently, he gave me what I wanted, nipping my bottom lip, *hard*, and then licking it.

I moaned into his mouth and rocked against his leg, needing more friction. The empty pressure between my thighs built and *built*, and I kissed him without finesse, humming desperately into his mouth.

“*Fuck,*” he rasped against my lips. “Are you going to come on me, *kotyonok?*” His accented voice grated abrasively as sand.

I couldn’t say anything if I wanted to.

He pressed his leg harder against me.

I put my face into his neck, biting down when the orgasm whipped through me—a sweltering inferno that knocked the breath from my lungs. In its aftermath, I shivered against him.

He finally touched me, fisting my hair and pulling my head back to look at me.

Eyes half-lidded, my head fell to rest against the door. Maybe I should be embarrassed by how easily and ridiculously fast he brought me to release. Instead, I felt nothing but his body heat, how incredibly hard he was against me, and an overwhelming tingling in my veins.

He stared at me for what felt like a long time. And then I watched something violent sweep away the lust in his eyes. Stepping back, his shoulders tense, he left me cold while I struggled to catch my breath.

“Go inside and lock the door, Mila.” It wasn’t soft at all, nor was it a suggestion.

I watched him for a moment and then acquiesced without a word.

Once the door shut behind me, I slid down it, trembling, while the hot burn of his lips still smoldered on my skin.

CHAPTER *Nine*

moonstruck
(adj.) dreamily romantic or bemused

Mila

A KNOCK WOKE ME. I groaned and pulled my pillow over my face when I saw it was only seven a.m. I'd stayed up watching Russian sitcoms into the early hours of the morning, my skin flaring with the aftermath of Ronan's mouth on mine. It made sleep impossible to find.

I still couldn't believe how quickly the kiss had escalated, that I *orgasmed* in a public hallway from only the press of his thigh. I would like to think it was the cyclone of teenage hormones and lust I suppressed, but I knew it was because we had chemistry. The kind that sizzled like the sun on hot pavement from simply being in the same room. And now I knew he felt it too. I could only assume his disturbed reaction afterward was due to him remembering I was only nineteen.

Like it would help, I planned to tell him I was actually twenty.

When the knocking continued, I sighed, tossed the comforter back, and padded across the room to answer the door, half-expecting Ivan to be standing on the other side. But it was only a teenage boy holding a large white box with a paper bag on top.

"Mila Mikhailova?"

"Um, yes?"

He shoved the packages into my arms and disappeared down the hall.

I watched him retreat and closed the door with my foot, then set the box on the bed. Peering into the bag first, I smiled. *Breakfast*. Opening the box, I found a card.

Don't give this one away.
—Ronan

I lifted out a long faux fur coat. This one was softer and more luxurious than the last. It had to be outrageously expensive, but my easy heart still grew twice its size. I slipped my arms into the coat and sighed as I fell back on the bed, where I ate the delicious vegan pastry while running my fingers through the white fur.

I liked Ronan.

I liked him a lot.

The mere thought of him made my heart pulse to an exciting rhythm. I came to Moscow in search of answers, but now I wanted to see where this *feeling* could go even more.

The pastry soured in my stomach at the thought of what awaited me at home: a terrifying lecture, Carter, and the mundane. I wished I could avoid it forever, but guilt already suffocated me at leaving

Ivan in the dark. I knew I wouldn't last longer than a week before telling him where I was and kissing my first taste of freedom goodbye, so I planned to make the most of my seven days in Moscow.

Pulling myself out of bed, I showered and dressed in a flirty lemon-colored dress and a pair of thigh-high boots that barely fit into my bag but were necessary for a boost of morale.

As I walked through the lobby, I greeted the girl behind the counter with a smile and a, "*Zdravstvuy.*"

Her eyes widened, then she dropped her gaze to the computer in front of her. My smile fell. It seemed everyone here disliked me with a single look. Maybe they could tell I was an American. Were our relations with Russia *that* bad these days?

The straight-faced concierge beside her silently took me in. He looked about as friendly as Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda*, but at least he acknowledged my presence.

I headed out the front doors, beneath the cold and overcast sky.

My walk was long, and the sliver of bare leg showing was numb three blocks over, but I had to use my cash sparingly and didn't want to waste it on transportation. With how oddly Ivan was behaving, I didn't know what lengths he would take to force me back to Miami before my week of freedom ended.

Moscow was a beautiful city, full of rich architecture and history. I took everything in with wide, curious eyes. I was born here, and walking the streets made me feel close to my roots. Even the air felt lighter here, filling my lungs with the taste of emancipation.

I had to stop and ask for directions twice, but eventually, I stood in front of the opera house. The wind whipped at my ponytail, and I shivered beneath my coat. The place looked deserted, but I tried the front door anyway.

It was locked.

I gave it a harder wiggle, but it didn't budge. I cupped my hands and peered through the glass. The foyer sat empty, not even a janitor sweeping the floors. Maybe I'd have better luck at a later hour.

Disappointed I'd gotten nowhere, I started my trek back.

A few blocks over, a familiar awareness touched the nape of my neck. With an uncomfortable chill seeping through my skin, I halted and turned around. Pedestrians split off to walk around me on the sidewalk. Nobody seemed to pay me any attention, so I tried to push my discomfort away.

I didn't make it far before feeling it again. Another glance behind me, and through the crowd on the street, I saw a tattooed hand bringing a cigarette to a masculine set of lips. The image reminded me of the man sitting in his car across from my hotel yesterday.

My lungs went cold. Could someone actually be watching me like Ivan said?

Why?

Horrid things like sex trafficking consumed my thoughts as I slipped my hands into my pockets and picked up the pace. I glanced behind me again to see the man in a black coat smoking and following at a comfortable distance. My chest tightened with each quick, shallow breath. Just as I made it to the hotel doors, I looked back to find he was gone.

Then, I ran into something hard and yelped.

"Whoa."

I knew that voice. I put a hand on my heart as Ronan steadied me.

"You all right?"

"I thought I . . ." I was out of breath.

Maybe that man worked close by, and it was just a coincidence. If he wanted to hurt me, surely he would have done so while I was peering into an empty building on a deserted street like a sitting

duck. Right?

I was becoming paranoid. And for that, I blamed Ivan.

“I’m sorry,” I said and stepped back, my unease fading in the heat of his presence.

“What did I tell you about apologizing?”

I frowned. “I ran into you. I was taught better manners than that.”

“Twice,” he said thoughtfully.

I blinked. “What?”

“You’ve run into me twice now.”

How could I forget? It knocked the breath from me. An unfamiliar awareness sparked inside. Madame Richie’s laugh ping-ponged through my head, and a shudder ran across my skin. Confused and slightly disturbed, I opened my mouth to apologize for that again but closed it when his eyes narrowed.

“This city is going to eat you alive.”

I took that literally, and my imagination cast a gruesome scene of zombies tearing into flesh inside my mind.

“You’re not superstitious, are you?” I asked suddenly.

A half-smile pulled on his lips. “Of course I’m superstitious. I’m Russian.”

I rolled my eyes playfully. “Great. Don’t tell me you believe all that *D’yavol* nonsense too? I’m unwilling to suspend my disbelief regarding red skin and forked tails.”

He eyed me seriously, running a thumb across his bottom lip. “Oh, he’s real, *kotyonok*.”

I raised a brow.

“Causing havoc and stealing away virgins at night.”

He said it so sincerely, a soft laugh escaped me. Something heavy and warm settled with each frozen breath between us.

His eyes were cautious as they took me in. “I see you got the coat.”

“I did. Thank you. I definitely don’t deserve it after giving the other one away, but I appreciate it all the same.”

“You would freeze solid in five minutes here without a coat.” His warm gaze settled on my thighs, his next words reproachful. “And you should probably consider wearing pants.”

I glanced down and noticed, with my coat covering my dress completely, it looked like I wasn’t wearing anything underneath. My wardrobe may be impractical, but it was *mine* here.

“I might have been raised in Miami, but I was born in Moscow,” I told him. “I have some Russian blood in me as well.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, the warmth between us disappeared like a puff of smoke, replaced with something frostier than the cold. My lungs grew tighter each silent second until I gestured to the hotel doors.

“Would you like to . . . come up?”

“No.”

Okay. Talk about being shot down.

“You were just skulking outside my hotel then? Waiting for unsuspecting women to run into you?”

A snort sounded from behind, and I turned to see Albert standing at the curb smoking another cigarette.

Ronan walked toward the car. “Come. We’re going to lunch.”

He wasn’t asking, but my infatuated heart pulled me in his direction without a single complaint.

He turned to look at me. “Don’t expect french fries though.”

“In that case . . .” I stopped with my hands in my coat pockets as if I’d suddenly changed my mind.

It earned me a soft laugh that warmed my stomach like a sip of hot chocolate, and I gave Albert a winning smile. “Good morning, Igor.”

He rolled his eyes, about to flick his cigarette to the pavement, but he stilled when I pointedly said, “Mars.”

After a defiant stare-down, he begrudgingly walked five feet to the hotel’s plastic cigarette receptacle and tossed it in. Ronan lifted a questioning brow at the strange altercation.

“It’s an inside joke,” I told him, like Albert and I shared something special.

Albert seemed to disagree. I heard him scoff as he walked around the car.

“We’ve talked about this,” I said with concern. “We all care about you here. There’s no need to be shy.”

The oversized man rubbed his face to hide the tiniest flicker of sardonic amusement before slipping into the driver’s seat. Ronan watched our exchange with a humorless look. He wasn’t amused, that much was clear.

He pulled the back door open for me without a word, and I swallowed when he sat close beside me. He smelled so good it intoxicated my senses, bringing back the memory of last night. I ran my clammy hands down my bare, numb thighs.

“I’m twenty, by the way, not nineteen.”

He looked amused by the admission, like I was a child announcing I was now eight while proudly displaying a hand and three fingers.

“Are you?”

I swallowed. “My birthday was a few days ago.”

“I’m thirty-two, *kotyonok*.”

Oh.

I assumed he was still in his twenties and realized I probably hadn’t eased his conscience in the slightest. What was twelve years anyway? A lot, apparently, taking into account my inexperience and his dirty, practiced words when he’d asked me if I was going to come on him.

Though how I acted last night certainly didn’t seem innocent.

It went silent. My heart couldn’t find its beat in the thick tension, so I distracted myself by taking in the sights. The clouds parted, and a ray of sunlight fanned across my face while I absently pulled the star pendant on my necklace back and forth. I glanced at Ronan to find him watching me. Deeply. Strangely. Like I was a sharp icicle hanging from the roof above his head, but the sparkle was distracting him.

I wondered what he would do if I touched him right now. If I ran my hand across his thigh to even higher. Would he finally put his hands on me? Warmth rose to the surface of my skin and slowed my breath. He must be able to see the soft heat in my eyes because his darkened. With lust or anger, I wasn’t sure.

“They must not teach self-preservation in Miami.”

I stilled. “Are you warning me away from you?”

He showed me a flash of teeth, then looked away and pulled a piece of lint from his suit pants.

“Yes. If I were you, I’d get out and run now.”

I stared at him.

His gaze returned to mine, and a slow smile pulled on his lips. He was joking. But something in his eyes didn’t relent.

I swallowed and glanced back out the window.

Entering through the front doors of the restaurant I slept in a few nights ago was a different experience today. It may be timeworn and slightly dusty, but the delicious smells that hit me in the face made me salivate. Unlike the first time I was here, the place was now full.

I locked eyes with a man I recognized from that night. The smoker. He leaned against the bar nursing a glass of clear liquid. His gaze flickered with something so harsh I grew cold. I needed to look up United States–Russia relations the first chance I got.

Ronan removed my coat, and the glide of his fingers down the fabric of my dress dropped my heartbeat between my legs. “*Zholtoye*,” he said thoughtfully, his eyes on the dress, as if he’d been wondering what was beneath my coat. *Yellow*.

My breath slowed. “*Tebe . . . nravitsya zheltoye?*” *Do you like yellow?*

His gaze lifted, holding, pressing, burning mine while stealing every ounce of breath in my lungs. He never answered me, but something told me he liked yellow, as well as the unpracticed Russian on my lips.

We sat at a booth in the low-lit corner, and the conversation was easy and effortless in a way it shouldn’t be with a stranger. Ronan asked if I attended college. In an effort to not show him how trivial my life was, I changed the subject and questioned him about himself. I learned his last name was Markov, and he had a brother who lived in New York City with a pregnant wife and young daughter. Ronan sounded sentimental when he spoke of them, and I fell a little further into his hands. Soon, he’d be able to mold me like putty.

He was suave with rough edges, pulling an ice cube from a ten-thousand-dollar glass of vodka and biting down on it. It only reminded me of his mouth on mine, the dirty way he kissed, and the absence of his hands on my skin.

My cell rang incessantly in my dress pocket. When I saw my papa’s number on the screen, the phone slipped from my fingers and landed with a *thump* on the table that seemed to rouse the entire dining room’s attention.

I watched the device *buzz* and *buzz*, shaking the silverware beside it and the heart in my chest. I knew if I answered the call, my papa would talk me straight onto a plane headed home. I did everything to make him happy, going so far as to accept a proposal from a man I didn’t even want, thinking in the end, those whispered words in the hall would fade away, my papa would be proud of me, and everything would be all right.

Ronan lifted a brow. “Problem?”

I shook my head, unwilling to share I was hiding out from my papa and his hired babysitter. He already had reservations about my age.

With a shaking hand, I turned the phone off and put it back in my pocket. I just wanted a week. A single week wouldn’t kill anyone.

As we finished our lunch, the smoker with an obvious aversion to Americans approached the table. He didn’t look my way, but I felt his animosity against my skin. Dirty blond hair and a splayed-open suit jacket like he’d just gotten laid in the bathroom. Maybe he had. He was good-looking in a classic way, though he could probably work on his xenophobia.

He said a few words in Russian to Ronan too low for me to hear.

Ronan got to his feet. “Give me a moment, *kotyonok*.”

I nodded and watched him retreat to the back hall. The man was popular.

The dirty blond remained near the table with his hands in his pockets, looking at me like I was a bug he wanted to squash. “*Kill them with kindness*,” was my motto. Well . . . not always, but it was a principle I was working on.

“*Zdravstvuy*,” I said with a smile. “I’m Mila.”

A skin-crawling awareness touched me as his eyes ran down my body, and then he replied, “Kostya,” with a mocking leer. His gaze narrowed with intense focus. “He might buy you fancy things, but you are nothing but another useless whore to him. Remember that.”

My smile dropped.

I’d never been spoken to like that in my entire life. At home, insults were subtle barbs behind your back, not slurs in your face. This stranger didn’t even know me or the fact I was still very much a virgin, but the word “whore” punched me right in the chest.

Again, I was reminded I wasn’t welcome by many here. It made me feel like an outcast; something ridiculous that didn’t belong. Not truly in The Moorings, and not here. Rejection tightened like a vise around my throat until humiliating tears rose in my eyes. Kostya looked darkly pleased as one ran down my cheek.

“Excuse me,” I said, grabbing my coat off the back of the booth and slipping it on as I walked toward the front doors. When I pushed them open, icy air caressed my skin. Unsurprisingly, Albert was reclining against the car at the curb smoking a cigarette. His eyebrows lowered as I made my way over to him. I leaned against the car next to him and breathed in the cold, industrial smell of the city.

“Your face is all blotchy,” he said indifferently, blowing out a breath of smoke.

“Albert,” I sighed, “sometimes, a girl doesn’t want the truth. Just like when she asks you if her butt looks big in that dress, she doesn’t want you to tell her so.”

He frowned. “Someone said you have a big butt?”

No, they just called me a *useless whore*.

“Something like that.”

“You do not.”

I released an amused breath. “Don’t look at my butt.”

“I am a man. We look.”

Right on cue, a heavily pregnant woman walked by, and Albert’s eyes didn’t hesitate to settle on her ass.

I smacked his stomach. “Stop. She’s pregnant, you perv.”

“That only means she puts out.”

The male mind was an enigma.

“What is a perv?” he asked, his gaze following the woman down the sidewalk.

I laughed softly. “You know, a pervert.” He still looked confused, so I continued, “Today, it just means someone with sex on their mind all the time.”

“That is every man.”

“Maybe, but not every man wants to gag and spank women, Igor.”

He blew out a breath of smoke and met my eyes with a significant look that sent a shiver down my spine. “You’re not in Miami anymore, *blondi*.”

After a moment of awkward silence, I held my hand out for his cigarette. Albert eyed me suspiciously before he put it between my fingers. Feeling bold, I inhaled deeply, which brought on a cough so hard I thought a lung would come up.

“Oh, my god, that’s awful!”

He took the cigarette back. “What did you expect?”

“I expected to look really cool,” I complained between coughs. “Like Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.”

“I do not know what you’re talking about.”

That was such a travesty, I couldn’t even speak of it.

I put a hand on my chest. “God, I can already feel the cancer.”

He laughed.

A dizzy buzz rushed so fast to my head I stumbled. Albert steadied me by placing an oversized paw on my arm.

“Whoa,” I said with a laugh. “I think I’m high.”

“Fuck,” he chuckled. “You are a lightweight.”

And then he released me, the amusement in the air snuffed out by something tense and combustible. Something that could detonate a bomb. My smile wavered, and I turned to see Ronan standing behind me.

“*Nyet*,” was all he said to Albert. A very hard and restrained *no*.

I swallowed, feeling like I’d done something wrong.

Ronan opened the back door, his penetrating gaze not leaving his driver, while I climbed into the back seat. As soon as he sat beside me and the door shut, I had no idea what I was apologizing for, but I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “I’m sorr—”

He grabbed me by the back of the neck and pulled my mouth to his. I gasped, heat erupting like fire between my legs and licking at every cell in my body. I melted into his rough hold, getting lost in the hot glide of his tongue against mine. My nipples tightened as they brushed his chest, sending sparks lower, and I hummed against his mouth. He groaned low in his throat, pulling my bottom lip between his teeth.

As his hand slid up my bare thigh, I trembled at the feel of those inked fingers on my skin. His touch set my nerves tingling with a panting, unadulterated want. He tasted so good; an injection of vodka straight to my blood. Every inch his palm moved farther up my leg pounded deeper in my core, leaving an empty ache in its place.

I was shaking with need, burning up with each press of his lips. I couldn’t even find the will to care Albert was in the car. But before Ronan’s hand reached where I wanted it—*needed* it—he stilled, stopping the kiss.

“*Nyet*,” he said coarsely against my lips, his fingers tightening on the back of my neck.

We exhaled into each other’s mouths, soft breaths and a Russian *no* vibrating in the air. His hand slid down my leg, pulling my dress back to a decent length, and then he released me. Tension tightened his shoulders as he wiped a hand across his mouth and looked out the window.

Confusion entwined with the hot buzz beneath my skin. I had no idea what just happened, and the strain settled thick in my lungs while I tried to catch my breath.

Albert’s gaze met mine in the rearview mirror, a spark of concern in his cold eyes.

I inhaled and glanced outside.

If what Kostya said was true, Ronan could have treated me like a *useless whore* a moment ago. I didn’t know if I had the strength to stop him even with Albert present. But he didn’t. He stopped and fixed my dress before things went too far.

After a silent and strained car ride, Ronan walked me up to my room. When we reached my door, I turned to him—breathless, waiting. His gaze settled like a heavy weight on my skin, heating me from the inside out. Transparency filled the gap between my white faux fur and his pressed black Armani suit. Longing, soft breaths, and cartoon hearts.

“Thank you . . . for lunch.”

His eyes lowered to my mouth, and I exhaled when his thumb skimmed across my bottom lip.

“*Klubnika.*”

Strawberries?

My lip gloss. I tasted like strawberries.

His thumb pulled my bottom lip down slightly before it left me, the rough glide sending heat flaring inside. My gentle gaze met his, and, with a feeling of conviction, I knew I would let him do anything he wanted to me if he only came into my room.

I might as well have said that aloud because the sentiment blazed in the hall in a volatile wave.

Something lazy and hot flickered in his eyes, and then he took the key from my hand and unlocked the door. “*Do svidaniya, kotyonok.*”

He slipped the key into my coat pocket, and I watched his dark silhouette walk away.

CHAPTER

Ten

nazlanmak

(v.) *saying no and meaning yes*

Mila

I DIDN'T SEE RONAN FOR two days. I spent my time thinking about him, being the worst private investigator to exist, and deleting my papa's and Ivan's voicemails.

Food—thoughtfully, vegan—was delivered like clockwork by the same teenage boy with poor customer service skills. This was a relief because, one, it fixed the issue of my limited funds, and two, it let me know Ronan hadn't forgotten about me after that very intense and confusing kiss.

I went to the opera house twice during busier hours, but each time I questioned someone about my mother, they stared speechlessly at me, made the sign of the cross on their chest, or simply turned and walked away. It was frustrating, to say the least, but also . . . disconcerting.

My only relief was, I didn't see the man with tattoos on his hands again, and I was much more vigilant while out and about.

I shut the door, having just returned from sightseeing. One could say the priority to find information about my mother had become jumbled with the beauty of the city and thoughts of a generous man. Or maybe I was just stalling due to an uneasy feeling in my gut that threatened to open a Pandora's box I'd never be able to close again.

I'd just slipped off my boots and hung up my coat when a knock sounded on the door. I knew it was only dinner, but I was taken aback to find Ronan delivering it himself. Heat and anticipation rushed to the pit of my stomach, battling with uncertainty at how we left things two days ago.

"Hi," I said on a shallow breath.

He smiled. "*Kotyonok.*"

When I opened the door for him, he stepped inside, his large body and presence sucking the air out of the space. He strolled into my room like he owned it—and maybe he did. Maybe he was a successful hotelier. Curiosity bloomed, but I kept it inside. I asked him about his occupation before, and I refused to admit I was so nervous about kissing him I didn't hear a word.

He set the bag on the table by the window, and I told him, "I've never been as well-fed as I have in the last few days."

"Not surprising, Ms. French Fries." He glanced at me, then down at the flowy sunflower dress I wore. A little leg showed between the hem and my thigh-high socks, and the mere touch of his gaze on that sliver of skin sent my heartbeat off its tracks.

I leaned against the dresser while he moved around the room touching my stuff. The *Vanity Fair* on the nightstand, a tube of strawberry lip gloss. He lifted a headband with the tip of his finger. Apparently, I was an interesting creature.

"So this is where *moy kotyonok* sleeps," he said, standing at the foot of my neatly made bed.

“It’s not as comfortable as your office couch.”

He cast a lazy gaze my way. “Sounds like you miss it.”

“I do.”

The conversation was practically harmless, but the innuendo grabbed ahold of my throat.

He sat on the couch and fixed me with a heavy stare. A ray of remaining sunlight from the window fanned across his black-suited form, making the blue heart-shaped earring between his fingers sparkle.

I reached up to find an earlobe bare.

He smiled.

I didn’t know how long the earring was missing or how he got ahold of it, but he said nothing, only twirled it between his thumb and forefinger. His presence overwhelmed my senses, each breath more difficult to push out.

“Are you enjoying your stay?”

I swallowed. “Very much.”

“What do you like about Moscow? It can’t be our french fries.” He was amused.

I chewed my lip in contemplation and fidgeted with my necklace. “The architecture. The vibrant colors and rich history. I like how I can hear the bells from the chapel every day, and how I could live here for a hundred years and still not see everything the city has to offer.” The room held onto the words for a moment, though we both seemed to know I wasn’t finished.

Maybe he would shut me down hard, but I had to know what this was. I needed absolution from the twisted, consuming way I felt about him. I needed *more* before this was forced to end. Or maybe what I needed from him the most, from this man who seemed to be so respected, so commanding and alive, was to be accepted. Every yellow, rebellious, heart-on-my-sleeve inch of me.

“And *you*,” I added softly. “I like you.”

He watched me for a heavy second, then his eyes darkened. “Do you get off on embarrassing yourself?”

A flush crept up my neck, and the hot feeling of vulnerability twisted the next words from my mouth. “You should know what I get off on.”

The memory of me grinding on his leg sparked and hissed like electricity between us, burning the oxygen in the room like fuel.

Gaze glimmering between heat and something entirely unamused, he put my earring in his jacket pocket and rested his elbows on his knees. “Apparently, first dates’ thighs. Are all American girls as unparticular as you?”

He may as well have just called me easy. Resentment stirred inside, but I tamped it down. For whatever reason, he was trying to make me angry. I knew he felt this connection too, and I didn’t want to play games—not with him, not right now, and especially not after being rejected by half the city.

A restless buzz saturated the air, and I dropped my necklace to hold onto the edge of the dresser. “You can deny it all you want, but we both know there’s something here.”

His gaze narrowed. “There’s nothing here. Trust me, Mila, if there are happily-for-nows, I’ll never be yours.”

He said my name like I was young, *stupid*, like I was too immature to recognize something as simple as attraction. If he was aiming for a nerve, he hit it. Bitterness singed my lungs until it escaped in one harsh accusation.

“I may be naïve, but I know a liar when I see one.”

His pause was the only tell of his surprise, shortly replaced by a slow smile. “So there’s some

fire in you after all.”

There was so much fire in me, he had no idea. For years, it had festered inside like a volcano, rumbling and pressing at the seams of tight clothes and expectations. It was so close to erupting a cold sweat spread.

“Careful.”

His warning was the last straw. He wanted to see fire?

So be it.

“If the only reason you came here was to warn me away from you, then *get out.*” My words lashed at the air in the room, the release vibrating beneath my skin with cool adrenaline.

His eyes hardened, the shadows inside them rising to the surface. “Nobody talks to me like that.”

He’d blown the top off the bottle I’d pent everything up in for years. There was no stopping the backlash now. Not even the imposing and threatening presence on my couch.

“Maybe that’s your biggest problem.”

“*Kotyonok,*” he mocked, darkly amused, “so worried about my problems when you have no idea what kind of shit you’ve stepped into.”

I didn’t know what he meant, but I did know I didn’t appreciate him turning this around on me. He was the liar in the room. And my next words became a battle of wills to make him admit the truth.

“You feel this too,” I insisted.

“I don’t.”

If that was true, it wouldn’t bother him if I froze to death in this frigid city, would it? My frustrated heart sent a burst of energy through me. I paced to the window and slid it open. Then I walked past him with the coat he bought me, having every intention of throwing it to the sidewalk below. But I didn’t make it that far. He was on his feet, ripping it from my hand and tossing it onto the bed.

“You want to play?” His voice was a growl. “Fine, we’ll play.”

Maybe it was true. Maybe they didn’t teach self-preservation in Miami.

He gripped the back of my neck, spun me around, and slammed his lips against mine. Anger still brimmed inside me, and I pushed against his hard chest, but I might as well be trying to move a wall.

“Don’t fight me,” he said roughly against my lips. “You won’t win.”

I opened my mouth with a retort in mind, but he used the opening to slide his tongue inside. And then I was lost to the wetness and heat, the overwhelming fever writhing and pulsing in my veins. I rose to my toes to give him full access; to fit my body against his. I panted, fisting handfuls of his jacket to pull him closer.

He groaned and slid his hands around the backs of my thighs. I made a noise of protest against his mouth when I realized his intention. I was lithe but tall—I wasn’t light—and it was incredibly sexy how easily he lifted me.

Wrapping my long legs around him, I reveled in how well our bodies pieced together. He squeezed the bare flesh of my thighs possessively, making an angry sound in his throat like he’d been thinking about them too much and was furious with me for it. A palm slid beneath my dress, grabbing a handful of my ass as he walked us to the couch and sat.

I straddled his thighs, our mouths drifting apart so he could pull the dress over my head. The soft sound of fabric hitting the floor slowed the urgency of our movements.

My skin prickled with goose bumps where he looked at me. The lacy hem of my thigh-high socks, the thin straps of my white thong, the shallow dip of my navel, and the way my breasts pressed against the edges of my matching bra with every breath.

“*Idealnaya*,” he said roughly.

Perfect.

He gripped the flare of my hips, palms sliding up. A soft sigh escaped me as the pressure of his touch ached between my legs. He ran a thumb over the yellowing bruise on my waist, eyes flickering with violence. All of the fight in me died like a breeze against a flame, leaving something heavy and softer in its place.

His gentle caress wrapped around my heart and tugged it toward him.

“You feel this too,” I breathed into his mouth.

He bit my bottom lip and responded, “Shut up,” but there wasn’t any heat in it.

He caressed the bare curves of my ass, the skin on skin liquefying every nerve within me. His lips traveled down my throat to the tops of my breasts, and he nipped the skin before sliding a rough hand beneath my bra to squeeze the flesh.

Pleasure rushed to my core, and I hummed against his neck.

“*Pomni.*” His lips pressed against my ear. “*Ti eto prosila.*”

I didn’t get time to dwell on the Russian words because he unclipped my bra and pulled it off. My breasts felt heavy as cool air brushed them, and momentary shyness reared its ugly head. I didn’t know what I was doing with this man—if I’d get out of here in one piece, or if I even wanted to. The idea I might be in over my head sent a rush of nerves to prickle my skin, but the hazy, almost reverent look in his eyes as he ran a thumb across my nipple charged me with newfound confidence.

He leaned in and sucked a nipple into his mouth. I groaned, dropped my head back, and ran a hand into his hair, fisting it with each pull. The wet heat of his mouth tugged between my legs as he moved to the other, and flames curled low in my stomach.

My breasts weren’t more than a handful, but he didn’t seem to mind with the attention he gave them. He pressed the soft flesh together so he could bite, lick, and suck from one to the other. I was flushed with a wave so hot, so unstable, I didn’t know if I should push him away or beg him to never stop.

A quick wick burned from the warmth of his mouth to the damp material between my legs that grew wetter and more sensitive each second.

“*More,*” I begged.

He released a nipple with a graze of teeth and dragged his mouth up my neck. “What do you want?”

Anything.

Everything.

I merely grinded against his erection with a desperate noise.

And then his hand was where I needed it, palming my pussy through the fabric and running a thumb across my clit.

“This?”

My skin caught fire, burning everywhere, from my ears to the tips of my toes.

His thumb slipped under the strap of my thong, tugging it down a little. “*Snimi eto dlya menya.*”

I didn’t know what he said or if he even meant to say it in Russian, but then he pressed his lips to my ear to translate the command.

“Take it off for me.”

A tremble started in my hands as I pushed my thong down my thighs, adjusting on his lap to slip it all the way off. He released a breath, gaze black as he took in the most private part of me. Desire inflated in my throat when he ran his hands down my thighs, dragging my socks with them.

“The sight of your legs that morning in my office made me hard.”

God, that was hot. I’d had no idea he was sitting behind his desk with a hard-on. He found me attractive from the beginning, and I relished in the knowledge.

I pressed my lips to his, though he only complied for a moment so he could look at my body again. I was completely naked, and he hadn’t even removed his suit jacket. It felt like such a dirty act in a hotel room in broad daylight.

“Do you come on all your first dates?” he asked, eyes narrowed but full of heat on my body.

I’d been honest with him so far—I may as well take it all the way.

“Nobody else has made me come.”

A momentary pause was my only warning before he gripped my hair, and a gasp escaped me when he pulled my head back by my ponytail. I panted, unresisting the ruthless hold that kept my neck angled toward the ceiling.

“Don’t lie to me.”

I fought the aggressive hold with words. “You’re the liar, not me.”

After a second, he loosened the grip on my hair, but as his lips traveled down my neck, I knew he didn’t believe me. His palm pressed against my clit, applying the smallest amount of friction. His hand was rough, and I didn’t need much. I bit my lip to hold in a groan.

Maybe Carter could have made me come if his hands weren’t softer than mine, but on second thought, probably not. I didn’t feel even a fragment of passion with Carter compared to this.

Ronan watched his hand between my legs and roughly said, “I could set a timer and get you off in less than thirty seconds.”

“Do you want a trophy?”

He gripped my chin and pulled my eyes to his. “I want you to tell me the truth.”

By his voice and the tightening of his fingers on my cheeks, he expected me to appease his jaded soul in the next two seconds. He withheld the truth but demanded it from me. How ironic. And annoying. His palm moved at a tortuous grind against my clit, and frustration bubbled within. He was playing with me, and I’d lost my patience.

“Fine. You want the truth?” I snapped. “If you don’t get me off in the next thirty seconds, I’ll find someone else to do it.”

His hand stilled, and after a second that stretched like taffy, a low chuckle escaped him. The leak of darkness that tainted any humor in it raised the hair on my arms. “So sweet, and then all fire . . .” My breath caught at the nip he placed on my jawline, and when his eyes lifted to mine, they were filled with such intensity it stole the warmth from me. I shivered as he dragged a thumb across my lips.

“Count down,” he ordered.

“What?” I breathed.

“Count. Down.”

He slipped two fingers through my wetness and pushed them inside of me. I arched my back, dug my nails into his shoulders, and groaned in pleasure and a little pain. This was rougher than anything I was used to, but it only seemed to spark a fuse inside me.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Count.”

“Thirty . . .” I breathed. “Twenty-nine . . .”

Ecstasy unfurled in my veins like the hit of a drug—a mind-numbing, breathtaking drug—as he slid his thick fingers in and out. He rubbed a spot deep inside of me, hot pressure expanded, and my eyes rolled back.

Ronan smacked my ass, reminding me to count. The unexpected slap stung my flesh, but it also sent a vibration to my clit that stole my ability to do anything else but moan against his neck. Judging by the rumble that vibrated in his chest, he liked my reaction, though the noise ended on a cynical note.

“Use your words.”

I didn't know any words at the moment, so I shook my head.

The next spank wasn't as pleasurable. It was a lance of fire that brought a yelp up my throat and a tepid glare to my eyes. I thought he wanted to smile, but he didn't; he only continued to slowly fuck me with his fingers until the annoyance in my gaze faded to half-lidded lust.

When I managed to say, “Twenty-five,” he soothed the burn on my ass with a palm, liquefying every muscle in my body, and then he swallowed the sigh from my lips. The kiss lacked finesse while I grinded against his hand, panting numbers into his mouth. The impending release curled down my spine, and I wasn't even at twenty.

He'd never believe me if he got me off in less than ten seconds.

A cold sweat started beneath my skin, and my nails dug into his biceps as I tried to hold off for as long as I could.

He nipped my neck. “*Malen'kaya lgunishka.*” *Little liar.*

“Twenty . . .”

I trembled, the flush beneath the surface threatening to erupt. He wasn't even putting much effort into this, like he knew he didn't need to in order to win. I was the one riding his fingers. It was against my endgame, but I'd passed the ability to care. I was so wet, there wasn't any resistance. It was dripping down his hand and my leg.

“You're making a mess, *kotyonok.*” The words were bitten between clenched teeth.

“Sorr—” A gasp cut off the rest of my apology when his fingers thrust hard, curling against a spot that made me see stars.

“Fifteen,” he reminded me coarsely.

I shook my head, unable to say anything.

His thumb pressed on my clit, and another finger eased inside. The extra pressure sent me over the cliff. Prickles of flashing heat exploded, my vision dimmed, and my heart pounded to keep up with the scorching blood pumping through me.

His fingers moved slowly, in and out of me, while I caught my breath and the ringing in my ears faded. He didn't pull his hand away until he wrung the last pulse from me. Languid warmth spread through my body, sating me in a way I'd never experienced before.

Fifteen breathless seconds.

He won, and I didn't even care.

I kissed up his neck, making a soft noise of appreciation. The man smelled so good, so masculine and unlike Carter's expensive cologne. The heady scent hit me like a shot of dopamine.

“And now she's sweet.” His voice was soft but leashed. He angled his neck away from me like he wanted me to stop kissing him. I was too high on the heat of him and post-orgasmic bliss to stop.

I ran my fingers over his erection, relishing the thick, hard feel of him. My hand moved of its own volition to feel every inch while my lips and teeth teased a line down his neck. Soon, he hissed out a breath and gripped my wrist to stop me.

“I can't do much more of this unless we're going to fuck.”

Oh.

Hesitation flickered to life.

Was I ready for that? It would take little effort. I could unzip his pants and have him inside me in seconds—it would be so easy. But something held me back. The fact he wouldn't admit he felt this connection too. My pride wouldn't allow him to have everything of me without giving a piece of himself in return.

My eyes met his, and I knew he saw the resistance behind them. Letting out a breath of amusement and frustration, he kissed me on the lips and then moved me off him and stood. Naked and cold, with my ass cheek still stinging, I watched him walk to the door.

“Eat,” he demanded, and then he left without a parting look.

CHAPTER Eleven

zemblanity

(n.) the inevitable discovery of what one would rather not know

Mila

I WALKED DOWN THE AISLE stuffing my arms full of snacks: popcorn, chips, something sweet because salty. Obviously, I was eating my feelings, and the woman behind the counter was judging me the entire way.

I ignored her, grabbing a bottle of cucumber-flavored soda to wash it all down with.

After last night, the impending doom of going home and wearing Carter's diamond ring tore at my every nerve, but I couldn't just abandon my life forever. Not for a city that didn't welcome me. Not even for a man who made me *feel* for the first time in my life.

I wasn't naïve enough to believe I could hold Ronan's attention for more than a week. The thought of never seeing him again already ached like a hot coal in my chest. How bad would it be if I gave him my virginity?

I had to go home.

It was the only lasting thing I had.

I dropped my load on the counter. The cashier looked completely unimpressed with my purchases, but she didn't say a word as she rang me up.

I paid with one of my last ruble notes, planning to go to an ATM soon. I could no longer live on Ronan's generosity. It didn't feel right anymore.

Making my way out the door, I ran into someone.

"*Izvinite pozhaluysta*," I apologized, reaching down to pick up the candy bar that fell out of my bag—but I froze when tattooed fingers reached it first.

I was more than familiar with Ronan's hands, and these weren't his.

An icy breath escaped me as I lifted my gaze to the man's face. The same man I saw twice before. His frigid eyes touched my skin, spreading frost beneath my clothes.

"You must be more careful," he said, his voice heavy with a Russian accent.

I swallowed. "Of course. I apologize."

He looked at the candy bar in his hand, holding onto it possessively. My heartbeat was stuck in my throat, feet frozen to the sidewalk.

"Late time to be out for a girl so young," he drawled, and with a sweep of my body, he added, "so *beautiful*."

It was only half past nine, but the sun had set hours ago. The convenience store's outside lights shone so brightly they were almost glaring, yet fear cloaked me like a shadow.

"There are bad men out at this time, you see." His attention rested on the candy bar he took his time opening. He bit off a piece, and his gaze met mine. "We would not want anything bad to happen

to you, would we?”

I shook my head.

“Then continue on.” He gestured for me to go with the candy bar, but I was already walking away, feeling the crawl of his eyes on my back. “Enjoy your snacks . . . *Mila*.”

The haunting sound of my name on his lips squeezed my lungs.

I walked aimlessly down the street, unable to shake the foreboding presence that touched my skin. It was a Friday night, and multiple people were out, but the crowd did little to quell my anxiety.

After stopping at an outside ATM, I got lucky to see a taxi dropping someone off in front of the movie theater and slipped into the back seat before he could flip his “Vacant” light on.

The driver spewed a plethora of Russian complaints—something about being done for the night and his mother—but when I handed him a wad of cash, he shut his mouth. He watched me through the rearview mirror, exasperated, when I gave him vague directions to Ronan’s restaurant. Flustered, I mentioned Ronan’s full name as if it may help, and, surprisingly, it did.

Annoyance fading, the driver looked at me like I just sprouted horns from my head. “*Vy uverenny?*” *Are you sure?*

“*Da?*”

He muttered something in Russian that sounded like, “I hate this job,” before he put the car into drive.

With shaky hands, I dialed Ivan’s number. My skin chafed with impatience as it rang and rang, and then, finally, it went to voicemail.

“Ivan . . .” I began, my throat thick. “I don’t understand what’s going on, but I think you’re right. I think someone might be watching me. I’m sorry for not believing you . . .” I swallowed. “I—I met a man. His name is Ronan, and he owns a restaurant. I’m going there now. I’ll text you the address when I arrive.” My voice cracked. “I’m scared, Ivan.”

I didn’t know what else to say, so I ended the call.

The driver sped off as soon as I stepped out and shut the door, probably hurrying home to his mother. Darkness shrouded the restaurant. It looked closed, but the door wasn’t locked, so I pushed it open and walked inside.

The bartender watched me warily with a towel over his shoulder while he washed glasses. Kostya sat on a stool next to the hallway, his phone in his hand. When he saw me, he fixed me with a heavy stare.

“Is Ronan in?” I asked.

He regarded me thoughtfully for an uncomfortable amount of time, the silence itching beneath my skin, and then he gestured down the hall without a word. The bartender bit out a sharp curse. Words were exchanged between the two men, but I didn’t stick around to hear any more.

I passed the kitchen, which sat empty and dark. Stopping in front of Ronan’s office, I saw it lay vacant as well, though a few masculine voices reached my ears from down the hall. The chill of unease returned, curling in my stomach as I forced my feet toward the sound. The back room door was cracked, and I inched it open.

My heart stopped.

A man sat in a metal folding chair, his hands tied at his wrists, which rested on the table in front of him. His face was black and blue, white T-shirt covered in blood. My stomach roiled, but the confusion and horror trumped the dizziness that tried to pull me under.

Albert leaned against the back door smoking a cigarette and watching the scene with a bored expression. Other men occupied the room, but I could only see Ronan.

He sat with his elbows on his knees while he ran a finger across the sharp edge of a knife. He was talking, the words low and English. His voice sounded different than when he spoke to me. It was tainted with darkness and thrill; the kind of voice that thrived on lust and pain and control. I picked his words apart through the drumming of blood in my ears, putting them together like a puzzle.

It was a nightmare come to life.

Ronan was asking whether anyone really needed a pinkie finger. It sounded like a rhetorical question, but a few men piped up.

“He might forget the size of his cock with no finger to compare it to.”

“His wife would miss the shocker,” one said, eliciting hearty laughs around the room.

Ronan smiled. “I guess she will have to get it elsewhere.”

My vision dimmed, terror inflating in my throat, when he stood and slammed the man’s hands flat on the table.

“Any last words as a ten-fingered man?”

The man clenched his teeth.

Ronan chuckled. “So be it.”

With a quick glint of silver, the man’s pinkie rolled off the table and fell to the floor with a sickening noise. His painful groan didn’t swallow my gasp of horror.

Ronan’s dark gaze came my way.

I couldn’t breathe, paralyzed beneath the heartless, brutal sheen in his eyes as he wiped the blood off the knife onto the side of his pants leg. A hot rush of adrenaline lit inside of me.

I ran.

Knowing a man sat at the end of the hall, I took a sharp right into the dark kitchen, crawled behind the stainless steel counter, and pressed my back against it. Soft steps sounded in the hallway, growing closer. Tears ran down my cheeks. I covered my mouth to hold in a sob.

Dread tightened my lungs, smothering each breath before I could inhale.

“*Kotyonok*,” he mocked, the soft endearment sounding from somewhere in the dark. He didn’t turn the lights on, and I knew it was because he was enjoying this twisted game of hide-and-seek.

I crawled away from his voice.

Now, I could see a light from the service door leading out near the bar. My chest moved up and down in anticipation. Without warning, I was on my feet and running to it, but I didn’t make it out of the dark before arms caught me from behind.

Ronan’s hand covered my mouth, muffling my screams, while I fought against his iron grip with tears flooding my vision.

“Where are you going, *kotyonok*?” His menacing words pressed against my ear. “The party is just getting started.”

A sharp sting poked the back of my neck.

And then heaviness pulled my consciousness, down, down . . .

Until everything was dark.



PART II

FEEL LIKE PLAYING A GAME WITH THE DEVIL?

—Anonymous

CHAPTER *Twelve*

faodail
(n.) a lucky find

Ronan

I TOSSED THE EMPTY SYRINGE to the floor when her body went limp in my arms. I'd kept the injection in my pocket since she ran into me on her first night here, waiting for the right moment to put it to use.

And this was *not* the right fucking moment.

Anger sent a rush of heat through me as I wrapped an arm around her legs and lifted her, her long blonde ponytail hanging lifelessly. Beneath her coat, she wore a bohemian skirt with a slit to her hip and some kind of blouse that didn't reach her navel. So impractical for a Russian winter.

As always.

Her head rolled to rest against me, tear tracks wet on her cheeks. I looked away from her face and turned to see Albert behind me, his cautious gaze on the girl in my arms. He was as emotionless as ice, but I could only assume the barely-there look in his eyes was reservation about what I might do to her.

"I will take her," he said.

I was sure he would.

Annoyance flared in my chest. "You'll go clean up the mess with Adams. There's blood all over the floor."

I'd never told him to scrub a floor, but the fact he wanted to protect this girl from *me* . . . Well, that pissed me off. She was mine for the time being, and I'd do whatever I goddamn pleased with her.

His gaze touched her again before he moved to comply without a word.

Albert was loyal to a fault; he'd taken bullets for me. But I'd realized since Mila set foot in Moscow, I couldn't trust any of my men with her. The first fuckup was only ordered to scare her toward my door, not take one look at her and decide to rape her. My moral compass may be pointed south, but something felt . . . inappropriate about abducting a bruised teenage girl with a concussion. I prided myself on being a fair man, so, naturally, her attacker was floating in the Moskva without a single tooth or finger to be identified.

"Andrei," I said, passing him in the back room.

He pulled the toothpick from his mouth and followed me to the car in the alleyway. I deposited my package on the back seat. Her skirt rode up, baring too many inches of smooth, toned thighs. The girl had an annoying issue with pants. Instead of enjoying the sight, I experienced an urge to pull the fabric down and wondered if this was what human decency felt like. Slightly nauseating.

Slamming the door, I turned to Andrei. "Anyone even looks at her, kill them."

He put that stupid toothpick back into his mouth, his attention stuck on the girl's legs through the car window.

I clenched my teeth. “That includes you. I have better things to do than watch you blow your own brains out.”

He gave me a curt nod and slid his gaze from the window.

I headed back inside and made my way to Kostya, who sat on a stool at the end of the hall, his attention on his phone. I stopped beside him to see he was playing *Candy Crush*. The fucker was so engrossed in his little game, he jumped when I spoke.

“You got four jelly beans there.”

Cautiously, he looked at me. “*Gde?*” *Where?*

“There.” I pointed them out.

He pulled the red jelly bean into place and swallowed. “Thanks, boss.”

“No problem.”

Then I punched him in the face.

He flew backward to the floor. I kicked the stool out of the way and stepped on his phone, hearing it crack as I walked toward him. Grabbing a fistful of his shirt before hitting him again, I revered the burn in my knuckles.

“You better have a good fucking reason for allowing her back there,” I growled in Russian.

Blood poured from his nose. “She’s poisonous. Just like the stories of her mother.”

“Not a good reason.” I grabbed my gun from my waistband and pressed the barrel to his head.

He tensed. “You have been playing with her for too long. We can all see she’s digging her Mikhailov claws into you.”

Yeah, maybe I had let this go on for too long, but *I* made the goddamn decisions around here.

“*We?* Who else had a hand in her coming here tonight?”

He hesitated, and my finger tightened on the trigger.

“Vasily,” he blurted. “He only scared her.”

Irritation crawled up my back. I was losing patience with my men when it came to this girl. But what infuriated me the most was that nobody had the right to scare her except *me*.

“Do you think you could do my job better than me?” I asked. He’d have to kill me to do that, and we both knew that was a fight he’d never win.

His jaw clenched. “Pasha was my brother.”

The unfortunate truth was, I forgot the kid’s name when I had my fingers deep inside Mila.

Maybe she was poisonous.

I’d had my fair share of beautiful women and then some, but this one . . . It was like her body was designed just for me. Unfortunately, beneath that all-American cheerleader exterior lay a Woodstock advertisement. I had nothing against free love, but it would be an understatement to say I wasn’t someone who threw around peace signs.

A cab driver/drug runner of mine recognized Mila minutes after she stepped out of the airport. Since then, I’d learned a number of her ridiculous achievements: valedictorian, cheer captain, homeless shelter volunteer. She even organized a fundraiser to save humpback whales when she was fifteen. If that didn’t paint a clear picture, she was voted “Most Likely to Win a Nobel Prize” at her prestigious high school.

God was laughing at me when he delivered my revenge straight to my hands wrapped in a perfect, environmentally friendly package. Although, he must not have accounted for Mila to practically beg me to take advantage of her.

From the moment she came on me, grabbing fistfuls of my shirt with innocent desperation like I was the only one who could give it to her, it brought out a deep, unnerving fire in my groin. I’d be

lying if I said it wasn't impairing my decisions.

I despised how much I wanted to fuck Alexei's daughter, but I hated being called out on my shit even more.

"Get out of my sight." I shoved Kostya away from me. "You disgust me."

He got to his feet, wiped some blood with the back of a hand, and disappeared out the door. Putting my Makarov in the back of my waistband, I rolled the anger off my shoulders and returned to the back room.

"Albert." I snapped my fingers. "Let's go."

He rose from his haunches and tossed a bloody rag to the floor.

Outside, I slid into the back seat next to Mila, and when I adjusted for space, her head came to rest on my lap. She had hair for days, the color of wheat and summertime. I went to slide my fingers through her ponytail but stopped the impulse when I realized the ridiculous shit I just thought. Hitting my thirties had made me disgustingly sentimental.

Long blonde eyelashes rested on cheeks untouched by makeup. Full, parted lips. She looked innocent and vulnerable—but so did her mother, who'd been a real-life Poison Ivy, renowned for her voice though infamous for her sadomasochistic activities.

As naïve as Mila may seem, she was astute enough to see straight through me and to quote "The Raven."

Too bad her soft heart was her downfall.

Her breathing grew a little shallow, and my chest tightened with the thought I'd injected her with too much etorphine. I slapped her face. She flinched like her sleep was disturbed, and the uncomfortable sensation faded.

I didn't care about this girl.

I just didn't like killing women.

Though, after my brother and I did nothing but watch while our mother choked on her own vomit, it wasn't exactly an oddity. Some women deserved death. Especially my mother. And Mila's for that matter.

Albert drove us to the house outside the city. It was over an hour's drive at best, and I wondered what my pet would do if she awoke before we arrived. Would she cry, beg? Or would she show her Mikhailov colors?

Annoyed I couldn't find out now, I almost regretted drugging her. But I didn't have the patience for a hysterical woman in my car. It was the sedative or choking her until she passed out. The latter was less reliable, and something in me didn't settle well at the idea of hearing her struggle for breath—even though any offspring of Alexei's deserved that and more.

I pushed him out of Moscow last year. There could only be one ruler of this city, and I didn't like to share. I assumed he would go lick his wounds elsewhere, but the bastard was a sore loser. Pasha's mutilated body showed up on my doorstep three months ago. I saw red. My blood still burned just thinking about it. It was a fire that couldn't be doused until I had Alexei's head.

I didn't think he had any love in him, but he must care for his daughter if he raised her in secrecy in America. Once he conceded, she'd be free to crawl home. Until then . . .

"*Moy kotyonok.*" I ran a thumb across her parted lips. "I told you this city would eat you alive."

I just didn't tell her I owned Moscow and everything in it.

CHAPTER *Thirteen*

morosis
(n.) the stupidest of stupidities

Mila

MY MOUTH FELT AS DRY AS COTTON. A strand of hair tickled my cheek. I reached up to scratch it, but confusion clouded my mind when my hands refused to move.

I peeled my eyes open, blinking against the light coming from the television in the otherwise dark and unfamiliar bedroom. My heartbeat trembled when I saw my wrists secured to the armrests of a wooden chair. I yanked against the ropes, but a soft moan brought my gaze to the TV on the dresser. I stared at the scene playing in front of my eyes, revulsion rising in my throat.

The moan on the screen came from *me* while I sat naked on Ronan's lap, grinding on his hand.

He recorded us.

The video was shot from a high corner of my hotel room, on a camera that could have been there my entire stay. Humiliation churned in my stomach and twisted my heart like a wrung-out rag as I watched myself come and shudder against him.

Then the video began to play again.

I liked Ronan.

I *cared*.

And he was only using me.

Tears blurred my vision while I frantically pulled at the ropes on my wrists, trying to twist out of them. I froze when a heavy presence told me I was no longer alone.

Ronan stood in front of the door, a sliver of light fanning in from the hall. His eyes, the breadth of his shoulders, the black-on-black of his expensive clothes—they swallowed the shadows in the room.

Darkness there, and nothing more.

I called it in the beginning. Something inside of me always knew.

“You aren't going to do much more than hurt yourself. I learned how to tie a knot in prison.”

The indifference in his voice penetrated my veins, freezing my blood from the inside out. I tensed as he moved closer, his gaze flicking to the TV to watch me gyrate on his lap.

“A video of you riding my cock would have been better, but regardless, you make a good show, *kotyonok*.”

This man wasn't the one I came to know the past week. I realized now that “generous” man was nothing but a lie. Only someone sick could touch me, *caress* me, knowing all along I was just a pawn in whatever twisted game this was. I was so stupid. A stupid, naïve girl who'd walked right into a monster's arms.

I winced when my muscles tightened, still feeling a sharp sting in the back of my neck from whatever he stuck me with.

“What did you give me?” I breathed, my voice wavering.

He leaned against the dresser and crossed his arms, his shoulders nearly blocking all the light from the TV. Only yesterday, I found his size and strength attractive. Now, it terrified me.

“Etorphine.”

It sounded familiar, and I placed where I’d heard of it: the show *Dexter*. It was what he used to knock his victims out before torturing them. Images of saws and detached limbs made my veins shake, especially as I recalled how Ronan cut off a man’s finger without any remorse.

If he had a demented urge to mutilate me, why would he need to record us? And if he worked for a sex trafficking ring, why wine and dine me for so long? He’d had multiple opportunities to kidnap me, including the first night I slept in his office.

Nothing made sense, and the unknown spread ice through me.

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

“Such a loaded question,” he said, eyes on something small he twisted between his fingers. I knew it was my heart-shaped earring. “What do you think I want from you?”

I stared at him, my pulse racing with uncertainty.

“You really have no idea,” he drawled, gaze alight with amusement. “Apparently, they don’t make girls as smart as they used to.”

I was stupid. I knew it, and I accepted it. But hearing it from his lips sent a burst of fire through me.

“Just tell me what you want, you psychopath,” I snapped, yanking at the ropes on my wrists.

The flash of his eyes penetrated the dark as he pushed off the dresser, and I couldn’t hold in a flinch when he gripped my face. His voice was low and soft, and it scared me more than if he would have shouted.

“Watch how you speak to me, or you’ll soon find out how sick I really am.”

My breath shook, but I held his stare.

Russian roulette.

One blink, and I’d be dead.

Maybe that would be a quicker demise than what he had in store for me.

His eyes warned, *Don’t play games you can’t win.*

Mine said, *This isn’t a game. It’s hell.*

After a tense pause, he released me. “You, Mila, are just a means to an end. I won’t say I didn’t enjoy it though.” His gaze flicked to the TV as my moans grew louder. “Such an enthusiastic *kotyonok.*”

My stomach turned, but even worse, my heart ached like it was ripped from my chest. I fell for this man. I’d cared, lusted, *felt*. I closed my eyes as Madame Richie’s laugh crawled from the dark corners of my mind, raising my pulse and the hair on my arms.

I tensed, feeling him walk around my chair.

“To be honest, I expected more from Alexei’s daughter. I’m almost disappointed by how easy it was.”

I opened my eyes in more ways than one. “This is about my papa.”

He chuckled, and the vibration coasted a shiver down my spine. “Give the girl a medal.”

Ronan rested his forearms on the back of my chair, caging me in, and watched while I fucked his fingers onscreen. The soft sound of my breath and my recorded moans filled the room.

He leaned in, his voice a rumble in my ear. “I wonder what your papa would think if he saw this.”

Disgust bit at my veins. He couldn’t be that twisted.

“Shall we find out?”

When he held a cell phone in front of my face, my heart sank at the sight of its sparkly white case. It was mine. I thought it was long gone with my coat, but I knew now, he always had it.

He clicked on a draft message written to my papa to show me the video in the text box.

This wasn't real.

This couldn't be happening to me.

Panic expanded in my lungs, clawing and biting at the flesh. My grip tightened around the armrests so hard it hurt.

“Please don't,” I begged.

His thumb hovered over the send button. “And what will you do for me?”

I understood the insinuation in his voice. Tears ran down my cheeks, my chest heaving with the impossibility of the situation. I was torn in two different directions, but I knew even surrendering my body would be better than my papa seeing that video.

“Anything,” I cried. “I'll do anything you want.”

“The problem is,” he said softly, nuzzling his face against my hair, “I've already seen it all.” His words turned cold and careless. “The novelty has worn off.”

With one press of his finger, the sound of a message sending hit my ears.

My heart dropped to the floor, and I barely heard the toneless, “Whoops,” he taunted against my ear like it was merely an accident, before pulling away from me.

Acid climbed up my throat, and then I leaned over and threw up everything in my stomach onto the Persian rug.

He lowered to his haunches in front of me and wiped some puke from my bottom lip with his thumb. “What am I going to do with you, *kotyonok*?”

He was no longer a conundrum wearing Versace, indifferent to the blood on his pants and my vomit on his hand. He was a monster dressed like a gentleman.

I brought my tear-filled gaze to his and said three words I'd never said before. “*I hate you.*”

He smiled. “Took you long enough.”

I shook with humiliation. “Why are you doing this?”

And just like that, his amusement faded, replaced with a ruthless gaze that sucked all warmth from the room. He pulled his phone from his back pocket and shoved it into my face. I turned my head in revulsion at the photo on the screen, but he gripped my cheeks to hold me in place.

I squeezed my eyes shut, the image still burned into my brain.

Blood. So much blood.

Mutilated flesh.

Lifeless eyes.

He was only a boy.

“Your papa isn't an investor.”

I shook my head, tears running down my cheeks. I didn't believe my papa was responsible for . . . *that*. He couldn't be.

“The boy's name was Pasha. He was a good kid,” was all Ronan said, but I knew from his tone, somewhere in this man's black heart, he cared for him.

I opened my eyes. Even though it was grossly unwarranted given the circumstances, I couldn't help but feel compassion for that boy.

“I'm sor—”

I didn't get to finish the word because he slapped my face. It wasn't hard, but it turned my head in

surprise nonetheless. I'd never been hit in my life, and the action stunned me speechless.

"I've told you before, you're done with the apologies," he said harshly.

My phone rang in his back pocket. Ronan watched me, letting it ring and ring, before he swapped the cell in his hand for mine. He answered the call on speaker and rose to his full height.

"Alexei," he said. "I hope the weather has been nice in Siberia."

"If you've harmed my daughter, I will cut off your cock and shove it down your whore's throat." My papa's voice sliced like a knife through the room, so harsh and foreign it sent a chill down my spine. It felt like I'd been slapped ten times harder than when Ronan hit me a moment ago.

Ronan chuckled. "Creative as always, Alexei. Unfortunately, as you've just seen, my cock is much closer to your daughter than where you're hiding out."

My gaze settled on the tattoos on my captor's fingers, and my stomach went cold. He had men who did his bidding, he was outrageously wealthy, and he had apparently been to prison.

What was the word for Russian mafia?

Bratva.

It explained the strange men who came and went from our home, my papa's secrecy about his work, his refusal to allow me into Russia, and Ivan. It explained red paint leaking from beneath . . . *no*. I couldn't go there. It just explained *everything*. Every suspicion I'd ever had. His secret family now felt like a welcome reprieve.

"She has nothing to do with our business," Papa snapped.

"Semantics," Ronan countered drily, his thoughtful eyes on me. "She could be Tatianna's twin. Must be awkward you fucked a woman who looked just like her."

The only one who made it awkward was this heartless bastard.

"Mila is nothing like her mother."

"Now, that I believe," Ronan drawled, leaning against the dresser. "I've heard she was a sadistic bitch."

My throat tightened.

He was lying. He had to be. Though I couldn't help but remember the odd reactions in response to her name, including Vera's terror when she'd looked at me.

No. I wouldn't let him ruin my mother's memory—the memory I created at least.

"Enough," my papa grated. "We both know what you want. I will trade myself for her."

Understanding became terror that closed my lungs. "*No*," I breathed.

I knew what Ronan would do to my papa. I knew I would never see him again. The idea of having to traverse life all alone dropped a heavy weight on my chest.

I didn't know about my papa's transgressions—this secret, terrifying life he led—but I couldn't just forget the good father he always was. The one who braided my hair as a child in place of the mother I never had. The one who read me bedtime stories, kissed me on the forehead, and called me his little angel.

"*Mila*." It was a weary sigh over the line. He didn't know I was listening, and regret softened his voice.

"I'm so sorry, Papa," I sobbed.

Ronan's eyes narrowed.

"I shouldn't have kept my life a secret from you for so long. I only wanted to keep you safe."

Was that why he lied about my death as an infant and cloistered me in Miami?

"This should have never touched you, and I am sorry for that. Just know I have always loved you, Mila, no matter what you hear about me." That was the third time I'd ever heard him tell me he loved

me, and it split my heart in half.

“Please don’t do this, Papa,” I pleaded. “He’ll kill you.”

“Ivan will stay by your side. He cares for you.”

An unpleasant tension shortened the oxygen in the air. Ronan ran a thumb across the scar on his bottom lip, and something obscure passed through his eyes, but I couldn’t discern it through the tears.

“This is all my fault,” I cried.

“No,” Papa said harshly. “It is mine, and I will take responsibility for it.”

His tone told me the conversation was over. I bit my lip to hold in a response until I tasted blood. The metallic flavor would normally send my blood pressure diving, but in the horror of this situation, it didn’t affect me.

Ronan broke the silence, his expression dry. “This is all a bit melodramatic for me.”

I didn’t know what hatred felt like until this moment. A tight ball of destruction that inflated in my chest.

“Send me the coordinates for the trade,” Papa said.

Ronan remained silent, a contemplative and tumultuous glint in his eyes as he watched me.

“What, no gloating? Unlike you, *D’yavol*.”

My stomach dropped, and my lips parted in awareness.

Ronan chuckled at my expression. “Don’t look at me like I made it up. I prefer a woman screaming my Christian name when I’m buried deep inside her.”

I was wrong. The devil didn’t have red skin and a forked tail. He reigned havoc on Moscow with a dirty mouth, an easy smile, and a snake for a heart.

“Do we have a deal?” my papa snapped.

Ronan stared at me for many seconds, his cool gaze raising the hair on my arms. “No.”

“*Nyet?*”

“I think I would like to play with my new pet for a while first.”

I held his stare, unwilling to show him the dread inside. Thankfully, he couldn’t see the cold sweat beneath my clothes.

Papa’s teeth were clenched. “Touch her, and—”

“You’ll cut off my cock and shove it down Nadia’s throat,” Ronan finished, bored. “I heard you the first time.”

Nadia?

The devil had a girlfriend. I wondered if he kept her locked in his basement or if she was the opera singer who played Liza.

“If you show up in Moscow before I invite you, I’ll ship your daughter’s body parts to your home in FedEx boxes. *Ponimayesh?*” *Understand?*

“I’ll send you back to hell for this, *D’yavol*.”

“Can’t wait,” Ronan replied. “We’ll talk soon, Alexei.”

He ended the call before my papa could respond. It rang instantly. He turned it off and fixed me with a heavy stare that chafed my skin.

“So loyal to your papa,” he said coolly, though his eyes were darker than night. “Even after what I showed you?”

I didn’t even want to think about that boy and what was done to him. It turned my stomach and made me question *everything*. But I wasn’t given time to process it all, and right now, I had two options: the devil, or my father. The choice was easy. My gaze burned with that conviction.

His jaw ticked. “I guess you have more of your mother’s blood in you than I thought.”

I hated what he insinuated, that she was anything other than the honorable mother who died before I knew her. He was a liar. He was lying from the first moment I met him.

My body grew taut as he walked toward me. His shadow was a living presence that reached into my chest and stole the breath from my lungs.

“You don’t have to do this,” I told him.

“Wrong again, *kotyonok*,” he said, circling my chair. “Your papa will pay for what he’s done.” I exhaled as he tugged my head back by my ponytail, his voice hardening. “He’ll fucking sweat over what I’m doing to his precious daughter. And when I’m finished with you, his head will decorate my mantel.”

I swallowed. “You’re sick.”

He rubbed a thumb over my lips, spreading the blood from where I bit myself across my cheek. “We all have our vices, don’t we?”

My eyes shone with disagreement.

“*Malen’kaya lgunishka*,” he drawled. “I haven’t forgotten how fast you came onto me—and all over my hand, for that matter. You said so yourself, if it wasn’t with me, it would have been with another.” His grip tightened in my hair. “Albert, maybe.”

I felt sick.

Degraded.

Weak.

I didn’t know if I could survive this.

“Now the formalities are over, shall we give your papa a preview of what’s to come?”

I blinked when his phone moved in front of us.

The devil was sardonic and tech-savvy. My neck ached from his ruthless grip on my ponytail as he posed us for a twisted selfie.

“Smile for the camera.”

Click.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

machiavellian
(n.) *wicked, villainous, deceitful*

Mila

“YOU COULD HAVE AT LEAST tried to make an effort,” Ronan said like he was disappointed in me, examining the photo he took.

This man was disturbed.

The devil walking the streets of Moscow.

He put his phone in his back pocket and dropped to his haunches in front of me. Untying the ropes on my wrists, he absently ran a thumb over the raw skin beneath. Those little caresses convinced me only yesterday he cared for me, but maybe that warmth was just a secret villain's passed down to one another as a means of drawing their prey in before stomping their hearts beneath their feet.

“Is your papa as demented as you?” I asked tonelessly.

He looked at me, amused. “Not sure. Never met him. But if it makes you feel better, my mother was just as sadistic as yours.”

My eyes flashed with resentment, but his expression and the fact he was close enough to slap me again held my response in. His gaze contained a warning within before he rose and turned off the amateur porn on the TV.

I rubbed my wrists and stood, wincing at the ache in my muscles, and watched him cautiously as he leaned against the dresser, his attention on his phone. Probably sending that stupid photo to my papa.

He could have put a lot more power into that slap earlier; a red handprint on my cheek would have made a better selfie. I wasn't so convinced he wanted to hurt me. Maybe I could make him see reason. Maybe I could get out of this with my soul intact.

Though, sadly, all of my confidence fell to the floor when he spoke.

“Your clothes,” he said, eyes still on his phone. “Remove them.”

I stared at him, my breath going cold.

He'd already seen all I had to offer—had *recorded* it to watch whenever he wanted—but that wasn't the point. Every nerve in my body fought against submitting to his will. The pacifist inside of me wanted to obey. My brain ordered me to strip, *now*, but my pride and somehow my heart pulled me in the other direction.

Swallowing hard, I took a step back. The movement brought his dark gaze to mine.

I wouldn't hand this devil my soul.

If he wanted it, he'd have to rip it from my chest.

“No.”

His eyes hardened, holding mine as he set the phone on the dresser beside him and gave me all of

his terrifying attention. My resolve wavered like a plucked string. I backed up until my legs hit the bed.

“*Kotyonok*,” he warned, taking a step toward me, “‘no’ is no longer in your vocabulary. When I tell you to do something, you’ll do it with a smile. Don’t, and things will become very unpleasant for you. Take. Them. Off.”

I needed to know what he had planned for me. My imagination was a scary place, and it was thinking up a myriad of disturbing ways he might exact his revenge. The unknown twisted my lungs in a tight grasp. I wanted him to do his worst now, or the anxiety would eat at me until I was physically sick.

Heart racing against my ribcage, I held his gaze.

“No.”

He watched me for a second, and then he was on me so fast a scream rose up my throat.

Ronan threw me onto my back on the bed, dropping his body on top of mine. I twisted against him, managing to knee him in the groin. A human man would fall to the floor and grab his junk, but this monster merely paused for a second, closed his eyes, then let an animalistic sound escape between clenched teeth.

I took advantage of his distraction and turned onto my stomach to crawl away from him and up the bed, but he grabbed my ankle, dragging me down and underneath him, then rolled me onto my back.

“You’ve managed to piss me off,” he growled. “Not a good move.”

When he straddled my hips, I tried to buck him off, but I couldn’t find even an inch of leeway. He ripped my blouse open. Buttons scattered across the bed.

He was so heavy, so unmovable. If there was a God, he’d done a huge disservice to the world by putting this man’s soul in this body.

I fought Ronan with everything in me, my blunt nails catching his neck. He growled and slammed my wrists above my head, holding them with one hand while he jerked my skirt down my legs. I sank my teeth into his forearm.

“Careful,” he threatened, “you’re turning me on.”

The evidence of that was suddenly glaring and hard against my stomach. The idea of what he might do to me once he won this fight—and he *would* win—took ahold of my lungs. A cold rush of fear doused the flame in my chest with a weak *hiss*.

I went still, to his amusement.

My body trembled as he pulled the rest of my clothes off. He worked me like a doll, turning me to unclip my bra and remove my arms from my blouse. He slid my thong down my thighs, and out of instinct—or maybe just to feel like I held a semblance of control—I lifted my legs so he could pull it off.

I lay naked except for the star pendant between my breasts.

Straddling my hips, his hands holding my wrists above my head, Ronan took in my body beneath him. He wasn’t even breathing hard, yet I gave it my all. Resentment expanded in my chest. I needed to see a human response from him. I needed to know I had a chance at surviving him.

He leaned in and rested his body on mine. He felt hot to the touch, and I knew it was because he burned with the flames of hell. Pressing his face into my neck, he nuzzled me, his voice rough with restraint.

“Do you know how they tame falcons?”

I remained silent, staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

He ran his lips down my throat. “They lock them away, cover their eyes, and hand-feed them.”

“I’d rather starve.”

His chuckle was throaty, punctuated by his hips pressing into mine, his erection hard between my legs. Obviously, the novelty hadn’t worn off completely. Our bodies fit together like they were made for one another. What a joke that was.

I wanted to show indifference, but my nerves prickled with anxiety, each touch from him flaring with sensitivity. The mere brush of his shirt buttons against my skin sent a shiver scattering across my body.

He slipped his legs between mine, released my wrists to grasp my thighs, and dug his fingers into the soft flesh, spreading them wide so he could press his hard-on fully against me. The grind against my clit sent a sliver of heat through me, penetrating the dread like a hot trickle of water.

My heart began an odd gallop in my chest, the easy reception my body gave him tightening my stomach. I grabbed his hands, and he let me pull them away from my thighs—but only because he was already where he wanted to be, releasing a very human breath between his teeth.

Of course, it had to be lust that was his only mortal weakness.

I held his hands in my own, trying to stop them from touching me and disturbing my senses, though the act suddenly burned with intimacy, and I dropped them.

“Please don’t do this,” I breathed.

He wasn’t listening to me. He was running his palms up the flare of my hips, gripping my waist and pulling me harder against his erection, which sent another flare of heat up my spine. Haze and something bright shrouded the darkness in his eyes as he watched his hands on my body. He was somewhere else—somewhere Vikings went in the throes of bloodlust while pillaging and raping women.

I shouldn’t have fought him. Or maybe I shouldn’t have given up until the end. But it was a futile, ridiculous fight I’d never win, and I was preoccupied with a battle of my own: the warmth of his touch trying to cloud the resentment in my mind.

He braced a hand beside my head, leaned in, and kissed my neck, biting down on the skin before he sucked it into his mouth, undoubtedly leaving a hickey behind for another infamous selfie. My breath hitched. He cupped my breast and squeezed, running a thumb across my nipple. I rebelled against the hot sensation, a cold sweat of conflict rising in my blood.

I didn’t want this.

But my body wasn’t convinced as he kissed a path down my neck and ran his mouth between my breasts. He was surprisingly gentle. So gentle, I resented it.

I wanted him to hurt me.

I wanted pain.

Because then, I could feel only hatred.

He drew a nipple into his mouth, and a rush of fire swept to the empty pressure between my legs. I tried to push him away, but he grabbed my wrists, pressed them to the mattress on either side of me, and shackled them there in an iron grip. He moved to the other breast and scraped the taut peak with teeth before sucking. I bit my cheek to hold in the moan that wanted to escape.

His head moved lower, the wet heat of his tongue dipping inside my navel. My body tightened like a bow string when he pressed his face between my thighs and inhaled. His warm breath brushed my clit, and a fever unfolded inside, liquefying the tension in my muscles like melted butter.

“*Kotyonok*,” he said, the low rumble of his voice making my entire sex throb. “I bet you taste as sweet as you smell.”

I never thought *this* would be his intention when he won.

Fisting the comforter on either side of me, I fought the urge to lift my hips toward the wetness and *heat*. This was just another way for him to humiliate me; to pull my body to his will while my mind still despised him.

Begging and fighting hadn't stopped him, and as panic whirled within, my mouth spat out the first words it grasped onto.

“What kind of sadist are you? You consider *this* torture?”

He placed an open-mouthed kiss on my inner thigh, and I heard a slight smile in his voice. “I don't feel like torturing you right now. I feel like seeing how fast I can make you come with my mouth.”

He was obviously confident he could do it fast, and I hated knowing, even now, he probably could. My body didn't seem to have forgotten he gave it pleasure and food; how he evoked a desperate *want* inside of me that finally made me feel alive. It still grabbed on tight, unwilling to let go.

Shame expanded in my chest and burned the backs of my eyes.

I hated him.

He'd degraded me. Used me. Ripped out my heart. And when he got what he wanted—my papa's *head*—he'd throw me out with the trash.

Tears running down my cheeks, I went somewhere faraway. Somewhere desolate and numb. He must have felt the sudden surrender in my body before he put his mouth on me because his eyes lifted to my face. He watched me for a long, suffocating moment, and then he pulled away from me.

I gazed at the ceiling, my body suddenly shaking with each breath of relief.

When he returned a few seconds later, he grabbed my wrist and began securing it to the iron headboard. I didn't resist when he moved to the other. He probably thought I was pathetic; limp with submission and tear tracks on my cheeks. But I no longer cared what he thought.

He gripped my chin and turned my face so I looked at him. “You'll be tied up until I know you can behave.”

I was staring through him. He noticed, and the strain in the air tightened my lungs—then released, settling to the floor as calm and languid as still water. I exhaled when the unexpected brush of his thumb skimmed across my cheek. It slid over my lips and pulled the bottom one down slightly. A soft caress, heavy with possession.

“Don't tell me I've broken my pet already,” he said thoughtfully.

All of the emotion locked tight by years of obedience rose to the surface, and my eyes flashed. “Go to hell.”

He smiled. “Sleep tight, *kotyonok*.”

CHAPTER

Fifteen

acatalepsy

(n.) the inability to truly comprehend anything

Mila

I DIDN'T MOVE WHEN THE door shut behind him. A cool draft touched my bare skin and sent a shiver through me. I was naked and cold, my wrists secured uncomfortably above my head, but somehow, I managed to drift off to sleep.

Self-loathing was exhausting.

I woke to the sun slanting across my body and an uncomfortable pressure in my bladder.

For the first time, I viewed the room in daylight. I lay in the middle of a king-size bed with an elaborate iron headboard and a white duvet. Heavy drapes, the color of blood, framed the window with a reading seat beneath. The space was large, conveying wealth in a traditionally Russian way. Seeing no personal effects, I surmised I was in a guest room.

My eyes settled on a cracked wooden door leading into what I hoped was a bathroom. I really had to pee, and I wasn't about to add urinating all over myself to my list of humiliations.

I jerked against the ropes, trying to twist my wrists out of them, but they were so tight, all I managed to do was rub my skin raw. I let out an angry sound of frustration and pulled hard against them, ready to take the headboard down if I had to.

At the sound of the door opening, I froze.

A dark-haired woman stood in the doorway wearing skinny jeans and a frayed T-shirt over the slight curve of her pregnant belly. She held a toddler on her hip who wore an oversized Possessed band T-shirt as a dress and knitted thigh-high socks. And I swore, she was watching me with a hint of judgement in her eyes.

For an uneasy moment, I thought the woman could be Ronan's girlfriend and daughter. But then she spoke.

"Please tell me this is some kind of kinky role-play."

I didn't know what to say, but my expression must have told her everything she needed to know.

She sighed and muttered, "*In-laws.*"

I vaguely recognized this might be the sister-in-law Ronan mentioned, but I didn't have time to dwell on it because a man stepped into the doorway dressed in a cool blue suit, a sippy cup in hand.

The woman hefted the girl higher on her hip, her voice dry as she nodded toward me. "Christian, look at what your brother has done."

My body tightened in mortification when his gaze came my way, though he seemed to be assessing the situation more than noticing I was completely naked. His face was stunning, carved from ice into perfection, and the mere touch of his eyes made me recall that photo in Ronan's office.

He was the other boy.

Christian looked away from me and said simply, “She’s a Mikhailov.”

“What’s Mikhailov?” the little girl asked.

The woman put a hand on her hip. “I don’t care if she’s Satan’s daughter—”

“Close,” he responded.

“Satan has horns.” The girl looked at me with a sense of disappointment. “She don’t have horns.”

Weird child aside, wasn’t Christian’s brother the one they called *D’yavol*? I hated how everyone looked at me like I was some kind of monster. Now that I knew what business my papa was in, all the cold, fearful glances I’d received since arriving in Moscow suddenly made sense.

“I’m not leaving her like this,” the woman said.

“Mamma,” her daughter whispered. “Is she my babywatcher?”

“Babysitter. And no, *cara mia*.”

“Oh.” The girl pursed her lips. “Then we should probably let her go, Papa.”

How old was this girl? And had she been raised in a den of vipers?

He didn’t look pleased with his wife and daughter ganging up on him, but he didn’t argue. He grabbed the girl from her arms and turned toward me, his voice colder than a Russian winter.

“Touch my wife, and what my brother has done to you will suddenly look like fun.”

I swallowed.

His wife rolled her eyes. “He’s a little intense, but he means well.” She tried to shut the door, but he stopped it from closing with his foot, giving her a meaningful look to leave it open. She smiled innocently at him, like she’d behave. When he finally left, she waited with an impatient tap of her cheetah-print stilettos until he was far enough down the hall he wouldn’t notice, then she shut it.

“I’m Gianna, by the way.” She walked toward me. “I’m sure you don’t go by Mikhailov?”

I hesitated, not knowing what to expect from her considering her husband was terrifying, and her brother-in-law should be committed. Finally, I answered, “Mila.”

“Nice to meet you, Mila.” She sat on the edge of the bed. “Where are you from?”

“Miami.”

“Oh, I adore Miami. I’ve never eaten better Cuban food anywhere else,” she said, adding with amusement, “but, then again, I haven’t exactly been to Cuba.”

I stared at her. I wasn’t sure what kind of world I’d stepped into, and it was starting to hurt my head.

Gianna struggled with the rope on my wrist, murmuring in a language I thought was Italian. She was, so far, the nicest—if questionably sane—person I’d met since setting foot in Moscow.

“He learned how to tie a knot in prison,” I said tonelessly.

“Among other things, I’m sure,” she parried as if she was annoyed. “I wonder if he engaged in a threesome too.”

She laughed at my blankly confused expression. “Sorry, that was just my aversion to prison nurses showing. It happens at the oddest times.” She finally freed a wrist before moving to the other, and I winced at the ache in my muscles as I lowered my arm to my side. “I’ve never known Ronan to tie a woman to a bed only to leave her there. I hope it’s just a phase.”

I was beginning to understand crazy was just the norm around here.

“We can only hope,” I said drily. Then, I added with unease, “Does his girlfriend live here?”

That amused her. “I’m sure hell will freeze over before Ronan is monogamous.” She paused to look me over, her gaze settling on my neck, which I knew was marked with a hickey. “But then again . . . this makes me feel a little optimistic.”

I didn’t think she was kidding.

I would hate to see how she and her husband got together.

“I thought Nadia was his girlfriend,” I said slowly.

She wrinkled her nose. “No, thankfully. She would make an awful sister-in-law. I can just imagine the dinner conversation.”

A modicum of relief filled me at the knowledge I hadn't fooled around with someone's boyfriend. The idea only added to the sickness of the situation. However, that was the least of my worries right now.

“I try to stay out of my husband and his brother's business, but sometimes, eavesdropping gets the best of me. Ronan has an issue with your papa, not you.” She tugged at the rope with an Italian curse. “I'm sure it won't be long until he concedes, and this is all sorted out.”

She seemed indifferent to the fact *concede* meant my papa's *head* would decorate Ronan's mantel. The hopelessness of this situation pulled on my chest while I stared at the ceiling.

“My papa already agreed to trade himself for me.”

She raised a brow. “Then why does Ronan still need you?”

“Torture.”

She laughed and then sobered when she realized I was serious. “Well . . . that's interesting.”

Being sane and all, I had different words for the situation.

The other rope fell free, and I rolled off the bed. “Thank you. I just have to—”

“Go. I'll find you some clothes.”

Thankfully, the cracked door led into a bathroom, and I released a sigh as I relieved myself. I washed my hands and face with a bar of soap and then found a spare toothbrush in the vanity drawer that I made use of, scrubbing the acidic taste of last night's festivities from my mouth.

I returned to the room, suddenly feeling very, very naked.

Gianna sat on the bed with an article of clothing in her hand. “Here you go.”

I thanked her before slipping it on. The black, oversized T-shirt had Elvis Presley's face on it, and it reached only to the tops of my thighs.

“Sorry,” she said. “The shirt was all I could get. Ronan gave me a growly look that swore retribution.”

My expression conveyed alarm for her.

She smiled. “He's more bark than bite, I promise.”

“I saw him cut off a man's finger, and he's going to kill my papa.”

“Oh.” She wrinkled her nose. “I guess that puts him in an awkward light, doesn't it?”

Bad light, I corrected in my head.

I was that person.

“I'm sorry about your papa. I am. But you've been thrown into the underworld, and here, things aren't always black and white.”

I contemplated her words while she moved to the door.

“I have to go. My husband gave me a look that said we won't be staying for dinner. Which is a shame because Polina makes the best *medovik*.” She rubbed a hand over her pregnant belly. “Anyway, I'm sure next time we meet, there'll be less ropes and more clothes.”

She sounded optimistic, but I could only see my body parts being shipped off in FedEx boxes, my papa's coffin, and, if I survived this, a world to traverse on my own. My stomach tightened. A burn stung the backs of my eyes.

Compassion filled her gaze, her hand on the knob. “Just remember . . . you have a goddess inside you.” She stepped into the hall and turned to look at me. “You just have to find her.”

CHAPTER

Sixteen

strikhedonia

(n.) the pleasure of being able to say “to hell with it.”

Ronan

I SAT IN THE LIBRARY behind my desk, an unlit cigar in hand. I refrained from smoking it because my brother occupied the couch with a sleeping Kat. They were always welcome, uninvited or not, but I found myself irritated by the timing.

Silence held steady in the room with his cool eyes on mine. I knew he had something to say, and I knew what it would be about, but still, I waited.

“There’s a naked girl tied to your guest room bed.”

My muscles tightened, revolting against the idea he saw her naked—an odd reaction considering I’d never minded sharing women before, not with my brother or anyone else. But I forced myself to lean back in my chair and say, “She’s my pet.”

I assumed the uncomfortable feeling originated from the fact I was the one who caught Mila. I put all the work in. I didn’t want anyone else to see her misery. It was mine.

“Your *pet* looks like a Mikhailov.”

“That’s because she is.”

“Her papa didn’t give in to your demands?”

I trimmed the end of the cigar with my cutter. “He did.”

He watched me with those inquisitive eyes. Christian—or rather, *Kristian* as I knew him—had always been able to see more than he should. It was annoying as fuck.

“So why is she still tied to your bed?”

My gaze narrowed. “She’s my pet.”

He looked away from me, obviously seeing everything he needed to. “You’d better make the trade.”

Aggravation lit in my chest, but I kept my voice indifferent. “I don’t tell you how to do your fancy desk job, so don’t tell me how to do mine.”

I was surprised Alexei had conceded so quickly.

And I didn’t like being surprised.

Though something else—something visceral, *violent*—swept through me at the thought of giving Mila up before I got what I wanted from her. I had a better idea: Prolong Alexei’s suffering by holding onto his precious daughter for a while. If this was like-for-like, I’d send her mutilated body back to him. But I didn’t want to mar her skin. I wanted her naked underneath me, her nails in my back, while I saw how many times I could make her come. The need raged inside me, hot and unrelenting. I was sure once I had it, this obsession would subside.

Then I could have my cake and eat it too.

“She has a hickey on the inside of her thigh,” Kristian mentioned casually.

My gaze could kill a lesser man. I should have rolled Mila into a nun’s habit instead of leaving her naked, though even if I had, my brother would still come away with provoking observations. I was now regretting his open invitation.

“Normal people have normal hobbies,” I said. “Why don’t you find one that doesn’t include dissecting everyone around you?”

A smile played in his eyes. “You’re twice as fucked up as I am.”

“The fact you find the idea of me going down on a woman more concerning than her being my prisoner tells a different story.”

“I just find the former a bit out of character. And interesting.”

“You find infomercials interesting, so forgive me if your curiosity about my sex life doesn’t hold much weight.”

I could count how many times I’d given oral on one hand. All of those encounters happened when I was a young, horny teenager; when I couldn’t stop myself from eating the pussy spread out in front of me. But once I’d gotten familiar with it, the desire waned beneath the cold, childhood memory of seeing the sexual act through a cracked closet door—including my mother’s day job as a whore and the sick perversions she and her clients forced upon my brother. I could only blame almost going down on Mila on the fact seeing her naked, tied up, and at my mercy really fucking turned me on.

Gianna slipped into the room and moved to her suitcase near the couch. My gaze followed her movements as she grabbed something from the chaotic pile of clothes inside. She glanced at me. My expression darkened, telling her if she was clothing my little captive, I would teach her daughter every Russian curse word I knew. And between living on the streets and prison, I knew a few.

She glared and disappeared out the door.

“Your wife better not be freeing my collateral,” I said, biting my cigar between my teeth.

“It’s not like she’ll get far.”

Eighty acres of remote land surrounded the house. It was a four-hour walk under the best conditions. Even if Mila managed the snowy jaunt before I could catch her, I’d have all five-thousand men in my arsenal on her tail. She’d never make it out of Russia.

My brother worked for the corrupt director of the FBI and could probably find Alexei if I asked him to. Then we would be done with this whole charade. But this was my fight, not his.

“How’s the one-pussy life treating you?” I drawled.

His gaze hardened.

A smile touched my lips. He was so touchy about his little wife. He was never exactly a sharer before her, but now all locker-room talk was completely off the table. He didn’t even seem to give a shit a woman had him by the balls. I never thought I’d see the day. Our mother had fucked all of the love right out of us—figuratively at least. Although . . . the analogy hit so close to home, dark amusement rose in me.

“I haven’t exactly heard of any of your recent exploits lately,” he said. “Well, except for the teenager in your bed.”

I tapped my cigar on my desk, holding his gaze. “I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy for Nadia Smirnova?”

When we were younger, I was the sidekick standing next to my brother’s ridiculous face. I always had to put in a little effort with women, but it only made me excel at the chase. It’d taken fifteen minutes to fuck opera singer and spank-bank legend Nadia Smirnova facedown on my desk a year ago. She was easy and up for anything, though her jealousy was becoming more trouble than she was

worth.

“Nadia likes to be slapped around when she comes. It’s starting to kill the mood.”

“Charming.”

I chuckled.

His eyes settled on the claw marks on my neck. “It seems you haven’t tamed your pet yet.”

I rocked back in my chair. “Good things come in time.”

He stood, lifting Kat in his arms. “Your revenge is in your hands.” He stopped in front of the door and turned to me. “I’d advise you to take it and stop playing with your food before it bites back.”

I held in my response. It had to do with assuring him I wouldn’t eat my pet—at least in the way he suggested—and saying that would just give him more ammo to use against me.

“We’ll find another place to stay since it seems your guest room is occupied.”

“I have ten more. Take your pick.”

“Not sure the environment will be very family friendly.”

“I think it’s futile to shelter Kat. She probably has multiple plans of demise for her brother soon to be born.” It was a joke, but I did think she would reduce her sibling to the status of her slave.

Kristian didn’t think it was funny.

“How long are you staying?” I asked.

“A few weeks. Gianna wants to spend some time here before the baby comes.”

As soon as he left, I lit up, inhaled deeply, and kicked my feet up on my desk.

I didn’t expect Mila to fight me. I didn’t expect to lose my shit once she was naked either. There was just so fucking much of her. So much to touch, to play with. Her long legs and smooth, unblemished skin. Her newfound hatred and flashing eyes. I wanted to watch them go soft again when I finally pushed deep inside her.

My thoughts were interrupted by Viktor appearing in the doorway. The communist hammer and sickle tattoo on his shaved head caught the light. He got it in prison with a contraband sewing needle and burned rubber from his boot heel. I had more than a few souvenirs from the time I spent in the overcrowded cells of Butyrka. Ink and alliances included.

“Nikolay has become a problem again,” he told me in Russian.

The *vor* of mine had always made a sufficient amount from tax evasion and a used car dealership—or, more accurately, the brothel in the basement.

“He was arrested for pimping out a twelve-year-old girl.”

I bit down on my cigar, a lash of heat licking at my chest. Truthfully, I hated the prostitution business. I wouldn’t touch the industry with a ten-foot pole if I thought I could banish it from the streets of Moscow altogether. Even God couldn’t accomplish that, so I might as well capitalize on it.

But pedophiles . . . I loathed them most of all. Blood-stained sheets, cloying cologne, and the *clang* of coins on a grimy folding table. In prison, they were forcibly marked with a mermaid tattoo—that is, if they stayed out of my sight long enough to be inked before I beat them to death with my bare hands.

“Where is he?” I asked.

Viktor told me the name of a holding cell, one that employed multiple police officers in my pocket.

“Send Nikolay’s wife a sympathy card,” I said.

Viktor left without a word. Nikolay would be found hanged in his jail cell come morning.

I exhaled a smoke ring, eyeing the fake heart-shaped earring on my desk. My little vegan didn’t wear fur or diamonds. Her soft heart was unanticipated given her last name, but she also hid a fire

beneath.

I wanted to see how hot that fire burned.

And then I wanted to put it out.

I wanted Mila, but I wanted her willingly. Her tears unnerved me. Even the shocked expression in her eyes after I gave her a light slap to the face didn't settle right. Nadia would have been on her knees at my feet faster than I could blink, not giving me a look like I'd just strangled a baby humpback.

Apparently, I wouldn't be able to slap this girl into submission, which made things a little more complicated. Especially because I couldn't stand her apologies. They made me remember she was an innocent in all this. They made me feel like I had a conscience, and that wouldn't do at all.

After last night, it seemed I couldn't trust myself with her—not with her claw marks on my neck and the hot awareness of where she had the nerve to *bite* me. I'd leave her be for a few days, let the fire subside.

In the meantime . . .

Ivan rolled through my mind while I blew out a white cloud of smoke. A whisper of tension tightened in my body.

I wanted to find the man who had dibs on my pet when I was finished with her.

CHAPTER Seventeen

kakistocracy
(n.) to be ruled by the worst person ever

Mila

TAP. TAP. TAP.

I sat on the window seat tapping my finger on the cold glass while trying to get the one lone rabbit in the wasteland of snow's attention. He'd become my friend the past four days. The four days I'd spent locked in this room.

A middle-aged woman, owner of a tight bun, permanent scowl, and, apparently, one medieval black dress, delivered my meals three times daily.

"You can call me Yulia. I am housekeeper here. I do not like messes," was how she introduced herself.

I didn't respond, preoccupied with the perpetually locked door that finally lay open. I'd stepped toward it but froze when I saw a man standing in the hall with an assault rifle held across his chest. I imagined if I ran, a spray of bullets would follow.

By what I saw from the fixed bay window, I was on the second story of a remote house. Large and built of stone, with nothing but snow and trees surrounding it. If I shattered the glass and managed the jump without breaking my leg, I doubted I would get far with only a T-shirt and Elvis's smolder to keep me warm.

I refused every meal the first day, receiving a look of condemnation from Yulia and a, "You are going to get in trouble."

The second day, when I refused breakfast, she handed me a note.

*Every meal you refuse is another day in your room.
Choose wisely, kotyonok.*

I flushed the note down the toilet. And then, I refused lunch.

Yulia shoved another piece of paper at me.

*I can only assume my pet wants me to hand-feed her.
But just so you're aware, the thought of my fingers in your mouth
makes me hard.*

I ate the next meal.

Hours passed in this bedroom with nothing to do or watch except for the homemade porn on the TV. I washed my single item of clothing in the bathroom sink with a bar of soap and showered more often than necessary due to sheer boredom—and maybe with the small vendetta to skyrocket Ronan’s water bill in retaliation.

Soon, I realized solitude was the worst torture. Dwelling on my feelings of doubt especially. I wondered if my papa was responsible for that boy’s death, and if so, whether I would turn my back on him for it. I clearly wasn’t the honorable person I aimed to be because I didn’t think I could.

The truth was, love was self-serving. A greedy monster without morals, corrupting my most basic principles. Loyalty came hand in hand, tightly gripping my throat.

My thoughts and the walls closed in further each day.

I tapped on the glass again, drawing a look and a twitching nose from my furry friend. “I guess it’s just you and me, buddy,” I whispered.

And then an eagle swooped from the sky, his claws extended, taking off with my rabbit and leaving nothing behind but a wasteland of snow.



I woke to darkness and the Woman in Black at my bedside.

As a gasp of terror squeezed my lungs, I scrambled back against the headboard. My eyes focused in the moonlit room, and an exhale of relief poured from me. The phantom was none other than a skinny housekeeper.

“*God*,” I snapped. “What is wrong with you?”

Yulia arched an eyebrow, but I swore, as she moved to the door and turned the light on, her bony shoulders shook with silent amusement. Heart still pounding at the disturbing awakening, I blinked against the harshness of the overhead light.

“Your presence is required downstairs, *devushka*.”

The words settled on my skin like a thick, suffocating paste, and everything in me went quiet. I glanced at the clock on the wall to see it was twelve o’clock, and, slowly, I said, “It’s the middle of the night.”

Yulia yanked the comforter off me and began to fold it on the foot of the bed. “Laziness casts one into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger.”

Did she just call me lazy? Most importantly, did she actually quote the Bible while aiding and abetting the devil? I didn’t dwell on her brand of insanity for long. The ironic thoughts floated away on an icy flood of anxiety.

I hadn’t seen Ronan since he locked me in here days ago. I assumed he had so many superior villainous things on his mind he’d forgotten about the captive in his guest room. The solitude was a relief and a hell all at once.

It seemed I was no longer forgotten.

Maybe, at this symbolic midnight hour, he’d decided to finally trade me for my papa’s life. Or

maybe this was when the torture would begin. Maybe he'd decided the best revenge was to kill me instead.

My imagination conducted a circus in my head, flashing snapshots of my demise: Ronan pushing me out into the snow; inked fingers in my hair that forced me to my knees; his cavalier expression, and a *pop* as he put a bullet between my eyes.

A tremble rocked me at my core, and I grabbed the sheet Yulia was pulling away for something to hold onto. "I'm not going down there."

Eyes narrowed, she tugged on the other end of the sheet. "*Da, ty poydesh.*" *Yes, you are.*

I tugged back. "*Nyet, ya ne poydu.*" *No, I'm not.*

Her glare intensified. "Get up. You have already made them wait long enough."

Them?

The single word ravaged my body and soul, and the sheet slipped from my fingers. Yulia pulled it away, her expression smug with triumph, though her gloating was soon lost beneath the dread that poured in.

Maybe Ronan wouldn't just kill me. Maybe he'd pass me around to all of his men first. I felt sick. So sick, I was unable to move. My breathing accelerated; chest squeezed tight. The panic raged a storm within me, and I was on the verge of losing this horrid reality to darkness, but the winded sensation paused when Yulia set a silky piece of fabric on the bed.

I stared at it.

It was a white, modest dress—one that looked long enough to reach the floor even on my tall frame, so it couldn't have been an easy find. Why would Ronan make the effort to send me this dress if his men were only going to rip it off?

Disturbingly, the grip on my lungs eased at the thought maybe it would just be death.

But I refused to die in Gucci.

Somehow, the image of me lying in a frozen grave while vultures picked at my corpse adorned in a luxury dress sent a wave of amusement through me. It inflated in my stomach, rose to shake in my chest, and then, the laugh escaped in a deranged peal of hilarity that brought tears to my eyes. Yulia stared at me like I was one giggle away from being committed. Slowly, I sobered, wiped the tears from my cheeks, and headed to the door.

"You must dress, *devushka.*"

I didn't stop.

Her voice hardened. "He will be displeased."

Days ago, that statement ruled me, controlled my every movement like a puppet on a string. Now, with unhinged mirth in my veins and my demise on the horizon, it had no hold on me.

"I don't wear silk," I said, stopping in the doorway to give the dress a fleeting look. "But you can have it." My eyes took in her stuffy black uniform she probably slept in. "Your wardrobe looks like it could use some variety."

Her growl followed me into the hall. "I do not wear white!"

As of today, I didn't either.

If I was a virgin walking toward sacrifice, I'd do it dressed in a black hand-me-down.

CHAPTER *Eighteen*

fress

(n.) to eat without reservation and heartily

Ronan

SWEAT AND ANIMOSITY CLOAKED THE dining room like a saccharine shadow, though it remained silent enough to hear a pin drop. Or just the scrape of my fork.

This wasn't a usual dinner for me, and it wasn't due to the presence of two of Alexei's men, whose bruised bodies and egos were bound to their chairs, but because I preferred to eat supper at eight.

Polina swept in to grab my finished plate dressed in her nightgown, a frilly sleep cap askew on her head. Curiosity pulled her out of bed no doubt, rather than a desire to serve me herself; gossiping and cooking were two of her finest talents. It was the latter that made her become the only woman I considered marrying, regardless if she was twenty years my senior and probably weighed more than me. Poverty as an adolescent and four years of prison food taught me to enjoy a meal more than most.

When Polina continued to stand there and stare at my guests, I told her in Russian, "That will be all."

She practically jumped out of her nosy stupor and muttered, "Of course," before rushing from the room so fast her cap flew off. Her arm reached back into the doorway, a hand searching around until it grasped the ruffled hat, and then it and the rest of my cook disappeared.

Alexander, Alexei's nephew, sneered at the scene, but he didn't say anything. Probably because he was warned if he spoke a word, I'd cut out his tongue. There was nothing more nauseating than hearing loyal sentiments toward Alexei while I ate.

Albert sat at the end of the long table, eyes cold, arms crossed. Viktor sat beside him, both pinning my guests with intimidating stares. The overload of rivalry and testosterone was beginning to make me feel thirsty. And bored.

Sitting back in my chair, I trimmed the end of my cigar and wondered whether Mila would deign to make an appearance anytime soon or if I would have to drag her ass down here. Patience was a virtue. It was the only reason she got four days to play the isolated captive in my guest room. Of course the circumstances and end goal weren't so virtuous. Solitude was an effortless way to bring even the strongest men to tears.

I lit my cigar and wondered if seclusion had changed Mila's temperament; if it had dulled her hatred and turned her into a good, submissive pet. The idea ached in my cock, and a very impatient need to know how she would behave expanded. I found both reactions bothersome, so, instead of giving in to the urge to go retrieve her, I decided to wait a few more minutes.

I gestured to the servant who stood beside the door to pour me a drink. As always, the girl moved as quietly as a church mouse. She even squeaked like one when I grabbed her unsteady wrist before

she overfilled my glass. The noise was one of pain, and I knew I hadn't hurt her.

"*Izvinite pozhaluysta,*" she blurted. *I'm sorry.*

My grip on her wrist lifted the hem of her white dress sleeve an inch, revealing a purple bruise and the source of her discomfort. I released her, and she began to sop up spilled vodka while mumbling frantic apologies.

The girl—whose name I should know but didn't—put a hand to her forehead and swayed, clearly growing dizzy. I knew the culprit was her papa's short fuse—he was a reliable enforcer of mine. I didn't usually interfere in my men's family drama, but I gave a silent command to Viktor to speak with him. Good servants were hard to find, and I didn't appreciate mine being abused so they couldn't even do their job properly.

"Go," I told the girl. "You're no longer required tonight."

She fled the room without a word.

Alexander's eyes flared with disgust, probably believing I beat my servants on the regular. I merely raised a brow, amused at the show of bravery. His companion was sweating bullets and was moments away from pleading for his life.

Finally, Mila appeared in the doorway.

I pulled the cigar from my mouth, narrowed eyes sliding down her body and the stupid fucking T-shirt Gianna gave her that barely covered her ass. Elvis's smirking face front and center was the only amused one in the room.

Anger flushed hot and heady through me, though something else intertwined—something darkly satisfied. It might be the confirmation she clearly had some fight left in her, but it was more likely the fact I was going to spank her ass for this later.

"Come here, *kotyonok.*"

She hesitated for a beat before complying, avoiding my gaze the entire way. I'd saved a chair for her beside me, but since she disobeyed my order to dress and wouldn't even give me her eyes in the process, I pulled her tense body into my lap when she reached me.

Mila's rigid posture told me she couldn't be more uncomfortable with this seating arrangement, but she didn't voice her complaint. Ignoring the bound and bruised men with a nonchalance the race of her heart belied, Mila decided she was hungry for dessert.

"Is that *medovi*—?" The rest of the word came out on a breathy yelp when I cupped a possessive palm over her pussy beneath the table.

She was either the best fucking tease on the planet, or Gianna was stingy with her underwear. Hot, bare cunt pressed against my palm, and the semi I was sporting since Mila's ass settled on my lap hardened to stone.

"What are you wearing?" I asked darkly in her ear.

She panted, futilely tugging at my hand between her thighs, but she still managed to mock me with the obvious. "A T-shirt?"

I couldn't decide if her sarcasm angered me or turned me on even more. "Why aren't you wearing what I sent up for you?"

"I don't wear silk," she countered with heat.

I should have known she'd have a problem with the abuse of poor silkworms.

I was a second away from dragging her upstairs and forcing her into that dress, but her response changed things. She had a soft heart. I didn't want to destroy it. I wanted it in the palm of my hand.

And right now my hand was occupied.

I gave her a warning squeeze. She sucked in a breath, arching her back in an effort to escape my

hold, but when she realized she was getting nowhere by struggling, she stilled and dug her blunt nails into my hand.

The smallest amount of disquiet flickered through Albert's eyes. Mine told him to take his concern and go fuck himself with it. He pulled his gaze back to Alexander, whose expression seethed.

As the hostility in the room grew too abrasive to ignore, Mila finally took in our guests. She seemed to focus on the one with a pretty face.

"Don't get too excited, *kotyonok*," I drawled. "He's your cousin."

Her lips parted, the grip on my hand eased, and she took in Alexander and the scene more thoroughly now—from his bound wrists, to the man beside him, to the revolver that sat on the table.

I caressed her soft thigh with my thumb. "No better time for a family reunion, don't you think?"

She swallowed, and, in unveiled aversion toward my dinner party, she said, "A funeral would be a better time than this."

A smile touched my lips. "As you can see, we're still working on my pet's manners."

Mila either didn't like the degrading nickname or her manners being criticized because her nails pressed into my hand, leaving little crescent moons behind, if not blood. Her hair was in my face, curly, untamed, and exuding a faint summery scent. While I would usually be annoyed with a resentful woman on my lap who smelled like innocence and sunshine, I wasn't there yet.

"Do you remember what I said to your papa?" I asked her.

She shook her head, her eyes on Alexander. I couldn't say I'd ever had my hand between a woman's thighs while she stared at another man with devotion. The fact he was her cousin didn't quell the frustration that flared to life.

Pressing my thumb against her clit, I rubbed it in a slow circle. She tried to ignore me as goose bumps rose to her bare skin. The subtle reaction, the feel of how soft and wet she was . . . *fuck me*. When I continued the motion, her breath slowed to little puffs of air, and a pink flush rose up her neck. She turned her face into my neck and whispered, "Please don't."

The soft words ghosted down my spine, melting the irritation to a liquid heat that coiled in my groin, but with her attention back on me, I pulled my hand away. Maybe because she forced "please" past those lips. Or maybe because I knew I could get her off in a room full of men and something in me didn't like the idea.

"I told your papa if I found him in Moscow before I invited him, we'd need a lot of FedEx boxes to ship you home." I ran a thumb across her jawline. "*Ty pomnish eto?*" *Do you remember that?*

Her eyes finally met mine, iridescently blue and wary, and she shook her head like it had slipped her mind. I wanted to smile because, fuck, she was kind of adorable. But the awkward fact I thought that about anyone other than my niece quelled the impulse.

"Considering it wasn't your papa I found but two of his men, we need to discuss a different course of action." I reached into my suit pocket and set a single golden bullet on the table. "Since you're so fond of games, shall we play one the Russian way?"

She stared at the bullet for a long second before Alexander interrupted the thick silence.

"She has nothing to do with this," he snarled.

Viktor got to his feet to cut out Alexander's tongue for speaking, but I stilled him with a hand, and he sat back down.

It was when I met Albert's severe gaze, I recognized everyone in the room believed Mila would be on the other end of the barrel with a chance of one out of six. Dry amusement filled me at the ridiculous realization.

I wasn't going to shoot Mila.

I hadn't even fucked her yet.

Albert seemed mollified by whatever he saw in my expression, but I was no longer amused. My gaze hardened, telling him I would do whatever I wished with Mila, and he wouldn't intervene. As he held my stare, a dark, ruthless heat emerged at the idea he might actually be challenging me. I didn't want to fight Albert, and it wasn't because I thought he would win. He wouldn't. In fact, beating him half to death in prison after he insulted my brother even though he had three inches and thirty pounds on me was one of the reasons I gained his loyalty. He was also . . . a friend. The word sounded a little melodramatic and sour, but it was the closest thing I had to describe the relationship.

When he pulled his gaze away and relented, a flare of resentment for Mila surged. She was fucking not only with my head but my men's, so I kept up the façade she might not see tomorrow just to watch her reaction.

"Will you do the honors, *kotyonok*?"

"Wait," Alexander growled. "We deserve the punishment, not her."

"Shut up," his friend hissed and, if I wasn't mistaken, he kicked Alexander under the table.

Mila interrupted their quarrel. She grabbed the revolver and slipped the bullet into one of the cylinders, then stared at the gun in her hand like she was thinking about turning it on me. With a chuckle, I took it from her before she could follow through with that.

When I pointed the revolver at Alexander, two surprising things happened. Alexei's nephew looked relieved, and Mila—well, she finally acted like she gave a shit about our little game.

"No!" She struggled to escape my lap, but I held her still, if only to keep her from flashing everyone in the room something that belonged to me. "I thought . . ."

I raised a brow. "You thought what?" She wouldn't beg for her own life, but she would for two men she didn't know. The stupid, selfless act was the most irritating thing I'd ever experienced.

"I thought you—"

"*Hvatit.*" *Enough.* I was unable to listen to another word from her mouth right now. Gripping her chin, I pulled her eyes to mine. "You and I, *kotyonok* . . ." I stroked a thumb across her cheek, my voice softening. "We're far from finished."

She didn't look convinced, so I pulled her face closer and sealed the promise with a short kiss. She was as tense as a statue, but her lips were soft, pliable, warm, and somehow, she still tasted like strawberries.

The fleeting press of her mouth on mine swelled the ache in my cock to a raw throb, and an ounce of irony arose. I needed to get laid if a quick kiss got a stronger reaction from me than a woman's tongue on my cock.

I pulled the trigger.

Click.

Before Mila could finish a relieved breath, she jumped when I fired at the next man. The *bang* ricocheted off the walls. Smoke rose from the barrel, and his lifeless body slumped to the table. Mila trembled against me, a hand over her mouth.

"Guess we get that funeral after all," I said drily.

Blood spread across the table, and my gaze narrowed as it reached my plate of dessert.

"I'm going to . . ." Mila trailed off, her head lolled, and then she went limp in my arms, a comatose tangle of blonde hair and legs.

"What the fuck's wrong with her?" Alexander demanded. His wary gaze took Mila in, and he didn't even glance at the dead man beside him.

After adjusting Mila's weight so her head rested on my shoulder, I picked up my cigar and puffed

on it while viewing her unconscious form with feigned narrow-eyed concern. “Not sure. Do you think she needs to eat?” I blew out a breath of smoke and met Alexander’s gaze, mine sparking. “I thought Mikhailov women only needed to be fucked to survive.” For some reason, I didn’t want to tell him about her phobia. Those little details were mine.

“You son of a bitch,” he seethed. “She’s not her mother—”

“Save it,” I said, bored. “I’ve heard it before.”

“Let her go. You can take me instead.”

“Tempting, but you’re not my type.” I sent a look to Viktor to get him out of here. “Strip him,” I ordered. “He can crawl back to Alexei like a wounded dog.” Meeting Alexander’s eyes as Viktor hauled him to his feet, I said, “Make sure you tell Alexei how well his daughter fares.”

He glared. “Fuck you.”

Viktor punched him in the stomach before slamming his pretty face into the table. I sighed when blood splattered onto my piece of cake.

“Watch out for the wolves,” I added while he was being dragged out. “Although, I hope they have better taste.”

“Go to hell, *D’yavol*—”

Viktor yanked him out the door.

Sitting back in my chair, I held an annoying look with Albert before he got to his feet and left the room. I was blowing out a smoke ring, feeling oddly content, when Mila roused. I bit my cigar between my teeth and pulled the bloody cake to her.

“*Medovik, kotyonok?*”

Her expression paled, and as a soft chuckle left me, she scrambled off my lap and puked into a potted plant.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

cacoëthes

(n.) an urge to do something inadvisable

Mila

HEAD RESTING AGAINST THE WINDOW, I stared past the spiderwebs of frost on the glass. Moonlight cast a blanket of silver over the snow, and the frozen wasteland glittered like diamonds.

From my vantage point, it felt like I was a princess locked in a tower. Held captive by a monster who shot men in the head at a dining table set with crystal glasses and cake.

After I vomited the contents of my stomach into one of Ronan's potted plants and wiped my mouth with the back of a hand, for whatever demented reason, he let me walk back to my cage and shut the door. In the midst of bloodshed, it felt like the safest thing to do. But as two more days passed in this room, not even the memory of a man with a bullet hole in his forehead quelled the desire for air. The seclusion began to burn, to bubble, to encase my body and *squeeze*.

I'd started making tallies on the bathroom mirror with an old tube of lipstick I found, which probably belonged to Ronan's last "pet," and I was now at seven days.

A full week in hell.

The door opened, and a chill coasted through me as Ronan's shadow spread wings across the floor. He pulled a wooden chair toward the middle of the room, took a seat, and rested his elbows on his knees.

My gaze flicked to the open door behind him. I wondered if that guard was still stationed in the hall. At this point, I'd rather be shot than stuck in the same room as this man.

"Are you superstitious now, *kotyonok*?"

D'yavol in the flesh stared back at me. I didn't know he would embody a man dressed in black designer suits, tattoos, and a charming façade. I'd never be so naïve again.

I gazed out the window and said, "Yes. If there's a devil, there has to be a God."

"You think someone's going to save you?"

My throat tightened at the idea at least one had already died trying. Ivan suddenly came to mind. I missed him. I missed his safe, comforting touch. I even missed the lack of spark. Now I knew the kind of chemistry between me and Ronan could only be witchcraft.

"You've received a lot of calls on your little burner phone since you arrived in Moscow." His pause was oppressive, so stagnant and heavy, I couldn't help but give him my full attention. "Some from your papa, but most from another number."

I tensed at the subtle threat toward Ivan.

"No one can save you from me." His eyes shone indifference laced with a dark edge. "Not even God." The words condensed the air, grasping each heartbeat with an accented threat.

His gaze slid down my body, from my loose blonde curls, to my T-shirt, to my bare legs. The

mere touch of his stare scorched hot and cold, and the memory of his hand between my legs came to life.

I'd like to believe a calloused thumb would draw a reaction from any woman's body regardless of the circumstances. Although, my skin stretched taut as his words returned about my mother being sadistic and the fact Ronan could have brought me to release even in that twisted situation. He could have humiliated me in front of those men, in front of a cousin I never even knew existed, but he didn't. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the reason why.

With the heavy sensation of his perusal flaring an uneasy heat in my veins, I managed to say, "Goodness always prevails in the end."

Apparently, he found the idea amusing. He leaned back in his chair and watched me through eyes so dark and lazy they must have been formed by smoke pouring from a cauldron.

"What did you do to my cousin?" I asked.

"I let him crawl back to your papa."

My expression was disbelieving. "Why?"

"Luck," he said simply.

"You do all your business deals based on luck?"

"Some." He glanced at the room, relishing in the sight of his fortress of evil. "A little bit of luck got me here, you know."

"I think the word you're looking for is 'narcissism.'"

A hint of humor sparkled in his eyes. "That too."

I refused to say the word "luck" again because if anyone deserved to have a piano fall on their head while they walked down Wall Street, it was this man. So, I improvised with sarcasm.

"I guess you got really narcissistic when I stumbled into your lair, didn't you?"

"Mmm," he mumbled roughly, his stare holding mine. "I guess I did."

One single confused blink from Ronan would put the world to rights again. It would reassure me we were operating on two different wavelengths: good and evil. But of course the bastard understood me.

His gaze settled on the small crack in the window, the one I created by throwing the chair he sat on at the glass yesterday in a desperate attempt for oxygen. Yulia had set my dinner tray down and fled the room with a tattling look in her eye.

"I hear you don't like your room."

"The accommodations could be better."

He smiled. "I'm sure you'll find them preferable in my room."

I hated his smile. Sparkling white teeth and a dignified lift of his lips. He had the smile of a handsome gentleman, and what a lie it was. Though what I hated the most was how his smile made me recall how I fell into his hands in the first place, and how he tricked my body to his side.

I swallowed. "My room's fine."

He chuckled at my half-assed capitulation. "Let's not forget you had a big thing for me."

"Let's."

"Your crush was cute."

Irritation ran down my back. "As you said before, it could have been anyone else." I lifted an indifferent shoulder and repeated his words. "Albert maybe."

Eyes glinting with ice, his presence pulled at the seams of his black dress shirt. He was either possessive of his pets, or he'd just taken a hit to his overinflated ego.

"But as a rule," I said coolly, "I tend to stay away from men who cut off people's fingers."

“Yet you’re still loyal to your papa,” he drawled.

He found a sore spot. I’d forged walls of denial, and I wouldn’t let him tear them down.

“Don’t you have something better to do?” I snapped. Like *Nadia*?

His eyes flashed. “Watch it.”

My anger drowned beneath the simple warning, and I glanced out the window. “How long are you going to keep me here?”

“However long I want to.”

“I want out of this room.”

“You’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy. You don’t get whatever you want.”

I would lose my mind if I was trapped between these four walls any longer. My lungs grew tighter each second, and soon, I wouldn’t be able to breathe. As distress stretched inside, I forced two words past my lips.

“I’ll behave.”

He watched me for a long second, something unreadable passing through his eyes. “Prove it.”

I didn’t even want to consider how he wanted me to do that. The options were vast and all degrading. Holding his gaze, I waited—just waited for him to tell me what he wanted. Probably to get on my knees and blow him.

“Beg for it.”

Revulsion spread through me like acid. I’d rather blow him; I could wash that humiliation out of my mouth. But begging? It was a vulnerability I wouldn’t and couldn’t give. Words were a straight shot to the soul. I may not be free, but my soul was still *mine*.

I despised him for making me do this, for dragging me down to this level. With that fire, something hot, foreign, and unrelenting rose to the surface.

Our gazes held in thick tension, his unfeeling, mine fighting to hide the violence within. I stepped off the window seat, one long leg at a time, and then I lowered to my knees. When I slowly crawled toward him, Ronan’s eyes narrowed in heat and suspicion. So jaded. So astute.

“Is this what you want?” My voice sounded different, dipped in lingerie and seduction.

His penetrating stare followed my every movement, the low words a rumble of pleasure. “It’s a start.”

The sounds of my knees and hands on the floor, the steady beat of my heart, and the sweet thrash of our vengeance filled the room. I crawled between his spread legs and ran my face against his pants like a humble pet. He was hard. The sadist was getting off on this.

His inked fingers rested on his knee, and I caressed them with my cheek. He opened his hand and practically rumbled with satisfaction when I stroked the side of my face against his palm.

“*Please*,” I begged, sliding my hand over his erection and up his chest, my next words harsh, “*go fuck yourself*.”

I shoved him as hard as I could.

The chair tipped backward to the floor, taking its master with it. Wood splintered beneath his weight, and his growl vibrated through the room. Heart twisting in my throat, I was on my feet, but he spun out of the fall to grab my ankle and pull me down. I hit the floor so hard, all the breath whooshed out of me.

“*Kotyonok*.” It was a chuckle bit behind clenched teeth. “You’ve fucked up.”

He dragged me backward, and I clawed at the Persian rug to find purchase. My shirt slid to my waist, baring naked skin. I knew I couldn’t let him get me underneath him, or this fight would be over. Releasing my grip on the rug to feign surrender, I gasped, “I’m sorry!”

“No, you’re not,” he growled. “You just know you’ve lost.”

He didn’t expect a good fight from me. I was a girl going up against a battle-hardened man. But now I didn’t have a concussion. Now I had hatred burning a hole through my stomach. I couldn’t control these pent-up feelings, and when I had the right angle, they lashed out.

“You’re right,” I admitted. “I’m not even a little sorry.”

Throwing my elbow back, I hit something hard. Pain radiated through my arm. He hissed, but his grip on my ankle only tightened. The bastard must be made of fire and brimstone.

Suddenly, he released me. I didn’t stop to wonder why he was letting me go; I took the opportunity to crawl to the door and scramble to my feet.

When I collided with a man in the hall, his rifle dropped to the floor.

“*Chto za khren’*,” the guard cursed, grabbing ahold of me.

A hot rush of adrenaline took over, reducing me to flesh and bone and the fight for survival. I was almost as tall as him, so I used my height to headbutt him in the face. Vision dimming, an ache shot through my skull at the sickening *crunch* of his nose. Before he could retaliate, I shoved my knee into his groin. The guard dropped to the floor with a groan.

It happened within a few seconds. Just a moment in time tipped my morals upside down like the sinking *Titanic*.

Gripping a fistful of my long hair, the guard jerked me flat on my back to the solid hardwood. The action stunned me for a vulnerable moment.

“*Tupaya blyad’*,” he gritted. *Stupid whore*.

When my fingers brushed cold metal, I gripped tight. He straddled my hips, and as he tried to grab the gun from my clammy hands, my fingers slipped. *Pop, pop, pop* cut through the air. The pops vibrated through my hands and my finger on the trigger. My ears rang. Static pierced the hall and my skin.

His limp and heavy body fell on top of mine, pushing the air from my lungs, and panic turned to hysteria. I was drowning in a mass of motionless limbs, lifeless eyes, and sticky *red*. A scream tore up my throat, and I shoved him off of me. Blood spread across the floor. I slipped in it while scrambling backward.

Panting, my eyes lifted up, and up.

Ronan stood in the hall, his gaze on the guard’s body while he muttered a toneless, “Well, fuck.”

Warm blood soaked my T-shirt and dripped down my arms and legs. Somehow, I was dazed at the sight: the look in a villain’s eyes when he realized he’d taken a fatal blow. I was the villain now. The terror of what I’d done and the last flare of adrenaline pushed me to my feet.

Ronan’s stare lifted to mine, a warning within. But I was already running down the stairs. Bracing a hand on the wall, I caught myself from slipping in blood. My eyes set on an exit, and when I reached the foyer, I shoved the front doors open and ran outside barefoot, onto the icy circular drive.

I stopped in my tracks, heavy breaths freezing in the air.

Bright lights illuminated the yard guarded by men in every direction, assault rifles held in their grasps. German shepherds prowled through the snow on leashes. My heartbeat drummed in my ears, penetrated by the yips and barks of dogs that jumped in a chain-link enclosure attached to an outbuilding, disturbed by my sudden appearance. If I tried to run, they’d rip me to pieces.

The first tear fell, and hopelessness pulled on my body so heavily, I dropped to my knees. There was no escaping this place. No escaping *him*, who pushed my morals to the wayside and turned me into someone I didn’t recognize. The truth was, I didn’t know who I was. I’d never really known.

As the wind whipped at my curls, tears ran down my cheeks, and the cold drew its icy fingers

over my skin, I felt closer to that girl with dirt on her face and Edgar Allen Poe in her hand than I had in a long time. And that terrified me. Like a single snowflake drifting to Miami's hot pavement, if I escaped this alive and returned home, I wouldn't belong.

I remained still when Ronan's presence touched my back, ready for the torture to begin. He lowered to his haunches in front of me and brushed the tears from my cheek. His words held steady against the breeze that tousled my hair.

"Where is your God now, *kotyonok*?"

Goose bumps rose to my skin, but they weren't from the cold. The shiver was out of fear the devil had a soft side. Nothing was more frightening than a whisper beckoning me to step into the dark.

Then he lifted my deadweight and carried me back to hell.

CHAPTER

Twenty

hagridden
(n.) troubled or tormented, as by a witch

Ronan

IF SOMEONE ASKED HOW I envisioned my five-year life plan, it wouldn't have included carrying a bloody American back to a guest room where I was keeping her hostage. I had a specific area for hostages in the basement. I also didn't pick up a woman unless my dick was wet, and the angle was wrong.

Mila remained silent as I carried her up the stairs. Her weight felt solid in my arms. She was shaped like the kind of woman I preferred—the kind who could take a hard fuck without the worry she might break.

Just the feel of her body against mine sent a rush of blood to my groin. Meanwhile, the object of my hard-on reeked of despair.

As she should.

She actually elbowed me in the face. I didn't want to kill the girl—necrophilia wasn't my kink—so, after she split my lip and self-control, I released her with the belief Adrik holding an AK-47 in the hall would stop her in her tracks. I didn't account for her ability to lay him out and take his fucking gun.

Oddly enough, when I heard her cry of pain, a hot and unpleasant sensation expanded in my chest. I could only relate the feeling to the anticipation of receiving a package in the mail, only for the delivery man to shake it like a Christmas present and break it. Adrik had fucked with *my* package.

Mila may have been raised as a soft-hearted American, but it was now clear she could be a Mikhailov when she needed to be. The fact shouldn't turn me on, though after she'd gotten one over on me and I watched her unload three bullets into Adrik, all I could think about was fucking her raw in his blood. The urge was a little twisted, even for me.

Annoyed with this girl and the constant hard-on she aroused, I dropped her to the floor in her room.

She gasped, tossed the hair from her face, and shot me a look of resentment. I suppressed a smile and moved to the dresser to grab the discarded ropes from the top. Mila got to her feet, and, warily, piercing blue eyes met mine.

Fuck, she was stunning—even while she emulated Stephen King's *Carrie* with a singular obsession for Elvis.

She was drenched in blood and hadn't fainted. Maybe I'd broken my pet's phobia. I walked toward her, evading the broken chair on the floor, with the ropes in my hand.

She backed up and shook her head. "No."

There she went with that word again.

My eyes narrowed. “We’ve had this talk.”

Her almond eyes softened with something almost pleading, and the sight hit me in the chest and ached in my cock both at once. The unsettling sensation brought anger to the forefront. She drew my blood when I was focused on her naked ass. Foolish error on my part. And now, with a single look, she was making me question my ill intentions.

When she only stood there, I warned, “You don’t want to fight me right now.”

I’d do something I’d regret, like hurt her or fuck her. I realized I didn’t like the former, and I didn’t want to force the latter.

After a momentary stare down, she took my threat seriously and moved to the bed to lie on her back. As she dutifully raised her hands above her head, her shirt rode up her thighs. Forcing my gaze from the sight of the shadowed apex between her legs, I started to tie her wrists to the headboard.

She stared at the ceiling and didn’t say a word. So blue and clear, her eyes were practically transparent, and right now they were drifting to that absent place I hated.

While I was held up in Moscow for the past two days dealing with the unsavory business aspects of being “*D’yavol*,” wild blonde hair and a soft American accent drifted through my mind far too often for comfort—even between Yulia’s hourly updates on Mila’s activities. Just for invading my thoughts, I should leave her to stew in her misery alone. But I needed something from her. Something to hold me over. Something to tell me she thought about me inside her as much as I did.

With her wrists secured, I sat on the side of the bed and was unable to stop myself from trailing a hand up her bare thigh. She wasn’t given a razor on the off chance she might slit her wrists, but now I had the feeling she wouldn’t take the easy way out.

There was something novel and innocently sexy about running my hand over smooth skin and a light dusting of blonde hair. I hadn’t been with an unwaxed woman since I was a teenager, and those were usually clothed fucks against an alley wall.

“You need to shave, *kotyonok*.”

“You need to reach into your darkened soul and find your conscience.”

I chuckled and slid my palm up, bypassing the place I wanted inside the most, and beneath her shirt, where I caressed the flare of her hip with a thumb. “I’m not the one who just killed a man, am I?”

I almost regretted saying it when a single tear slipped down her cheek. She probably wanted to attend Adrik’s funeral and apologize to every member of his worthless family. In actuality, I didn’t know if they were worthless, but most family was.

“Stop crying.”

“I’m not crying,” she insisted as another tear escaped.

Fuck. This was killing the mood.

“It was self-defense,” I said, not giving a shit she’d killed Adrik. I didn’t need men on my side who got bested by soft-hearted women. “Say it.”

“But—”

“Say it.”

“It was self-defense,” she parried emotionlessly.

I didn’t know why I was offering out a tiny olive branch. The unsettling tears, maybe, but it was more so the fact it’d been a long time—if ever—since I met a woman with feelings. Mila was uncharted waters to me, filled to the brim with a selflessness I didn’t understand. And like a cat with a mouse, I wanted to play with her for a while.

I gripped the indent of her bare waist, which was so small I could probably touch fingers if I

wrapped my hands around it. A waist wasn't exactly the first thing I noticed about a woman, but ever since I'd stripped Mila naked in her hotel room, I wanted to hold her there while she rode me—a position I normally couldn't stomach. I attributed the weird desire to the fact this was the longest I'd ever had to wait to fuck a woman I wanted before, and the smallest things about this one made me feel like I was just released from prison after abstaining from sex for four years again.

I rested my other hand next to her head and pulled a blonde curl between my fingers. "I'll put a cross in the hall like you Americans do at car crash sites. We can even spread his ashes together if it'll make you feel better."

A disgusted gaze met mine, and it lifted a soft laugh from me.

"Shouldn't you be out stealing virgins and terrorizing Moscow?" she asked.

"Unless I run into your papa tonight, the city's safe from me." While that may be a lie, I was an optimist when it came to things like business and murder.

She swallowed and pulled her gaze back to the ceiling. "How magnanimous of you."

"When you say big words, it makes it harder to do the right thing here," I drawled before nipping her jawline.

She released a shaky breath. "You're beyond help, you know that?"

"And here I thought all I needed was an intervention." I swept my thumb beneath the curve of her breast, back and forth, the lightest of caresses. Her breasts lifted with every breath, her nipples visible beneath her shirt, and it reminded me of how sensitive and sweet they were.

Sliding my lips to the shell of her ear, I said, "I bet I could make you come just from sucking your tits, *kotyonok*."

The shiver that rolled through her was the only tell she hadn't shut me out yet, so I pushed a little further. Palming the weight of her bare breast, I squeezed the soft flesh and ran my thumb around her nipple, then sucked the pulse point on her neck, pulling the skin between my teeth to leave another mark behind. Her chest rose and fell quicker, but she refused to acknowledge my hands on her.

I didn't know why this girl smelled so good even covered in blood, but the feel of her breast in my hand and her soft scent was beginning to dim my vision. The relentless ache in my groin swelled, while Mila acted as bored as a baptist sitting in a church pew.

Her apathy was starting to irritate me, so I moved lower and bit down *hard*. She hissed in pain, but when I soothed the bite with my tongue, the ropes pulled taut, her head lolled to the side, and the subtle arch of her body told me she wasn't so fucking indifferent anymore.

I pulled back to see my handiwork—the dark hickeys I left behind. While I didn't think I'd ever given one before Mila, something primal inside of me enjoyed marking her up like my own little checkerboard.

"I think red is your color," I told her, this girl in my guest bed adorned in blood and hickeys.

"You would," she countered, but her words were husky, lacking heat.

When I finally ran my thumb across her nipple and pinched it, her ragged exhale came between wet, parted lips, though she still tried her best to ignore me.

"You call me sick," I drawled, "but I think you might be a little twisted too."

"I'm nothing like you."

I raised a brow. "Sure about that?"

"That I'm not a psychopath? Yes."

"I prefer 'sociopath.' More socially acceptable."

"Because this scene screams 'socially acceptable.'"

This girl had the odd ability to amuse me even while I was trying to be serious about breaking her

down as my temporary, mindless sex slave. And I didn't like when people threw a wrench into my plans.

I slid my hand down her stomach, between her legs, and pressed my thumb against her clit, applying the slightest amount of pressure. She closed her eyes tight, trying to fight the sensation, but when I gave her a little friction, she pulled her bottom lip between straight white teeth and faintly rolled her hips.

The sight flooded thick heat through me that curled down my spine and settled heavily in my cock. She was hot and wet, and, from what I'd learned, tighter than a fist. I wanted to give her what she needed; to slide two fingers home just to watch her eyes roll back. The idea she would let me at this point singed every ounce of willpower inside until my blood began to pound in my ears.

I may not give oral or let a woman take control, but I was hardly a selfish lover. Still, I'd never been so interested in making a woman come before. I couldn't even say three women at once got me harder than this single girl. The fact she was Alexei's daughter was just the icing on that nauseating cake.

She had to be a professional at this innocent act; at drawing men in. Just like her mother was before Alexei showed up to put a bullet between their eyes.

Mila fisted the ropes, eyes closed, a pink flush warming her cheeks. I'd barely touched her, and she was close to coming. Only an idiot would believe they were the first to get her off. She was a hair trigger, and there wasn't a chance she'd remained celibate considering how she threw herself at me.

I stilled my hand and asked, "How many men have made you come?"

She inhaled deeply, in relief or frustration. I wasn't sure she even knew which, but it was clear she had no desire to respond.

"Answer me," I demanded.

Silence.

She was stubborn, but so was I.

I slapped her between the legs.

A gasp escaped her before she slayed me with a lethal gaze. "Sorry, was I supposed to keep count?"

My teeth clenched. I vowed to make her count every orgasm I gave her until she begged me to stop. Before I could give in to the desire to start right then and there, I pulled my hand away and stood.

"Bad pets don't get rewarded."

Fury cooled all of the desire in her gaze. "You'll get what's coming to you, *D'yavol*. And when you do, I'll smile when they cover you with dirt."

Fuck. That was kind of hot. And annoying.

I gripped her face. "If I go down, I'll take you with me. Your Mikhailov blood will keep me cool in hell."

An uncertain flicker passed through her eyes, and then she looked at the ceiling, dismissing me in an arrogant way no one else would dare. I released her roughly, and with a hot rush of frustration, I walked out of the room to find Yulia scrubbing up blood with an obsessive mentality.

The woman had knocked on my front door seven years ago, unperturbed by the guards and guns, and announced, "I would like job."

I recognized her from two different occasions.

In my preteens, she fed me and my brother a hot meal and gave us a place to sleep for the night when she found us camping out in her car during a snowstorm. She was also on the news for

butchering her husband with a meat cleaver without a single explanation, serving a decade in the looney bin. I should have thought twice about it, but instead, I opened the door wide and said, “You can start today.”

She’d proven to be a loyal servant, which was invaluable in this house.

Standing on the front porch, I grabbed a pack of cigarettes from Ilya’s jacket pocket, took one out, and put it between my lips. Blood trailed across the driveway to the garage, where Albert was busy dealing with the body.

I slipped the pack back into Ilya’s pocket. “Lighter?”

He shuffled for his Zippo, flicking it open. I lit my smoke, inhaled on it deeply, and headed to the car parked in the drive before hollering at Pavel across the yard.

My newest recruit, lanky and still in his late teens, hesitated.

I watched him mosey his way over here, inhaling on my cigarette. “You got a stick up your ass or something?” I asked, blowing smoke out of the side of my mouth. “Or did your girlfriend try something new last night?”

Laughter resounded through the yard.

The kid turned red. “No.”

“Let’s go. You’re driving.” I flicked the smoke to the snow and sat in the back seat.

I hated the taste of cigarettes, but I’d needed a hit of nicotine. I pulled a piece of Big Red out of the center console, tossed one onto Pavel’s lap, and watched him grip the wheel with white knuckles.

“You know how to drive, don’t you?”

“I can figure it out,” he stammered.

Jesus.

Viktor recruited and trained my men, but apparently, driving wasn’t included. I could get someone else to take me, but instead, I sat back in my seat and prepared for a sketchy ride into Moscow. Pavel had to learn eventually.

I checked my watch, noting the blood on my hand and shirt. The kid must have gotten the brake and gas pedal backward; the car suddenly lurched forward and then stopped abruptly.

I ignored it.

One of my mother’s clients taught me how to drive when I was eleven. He was high as fuck when he put a gun to my thigh and told me to keep it at sixty kmph. Longest drive of my life.

I had a meeting with Alfonso in an hour. The Colombian drug lord’s latest shipment of cocaine was cut with laundry detergent, and I made it a priority to make sure what I put out was pure. A chemist in Rublyovka tested all my product in his basement. It was an interesting meeting in front of me, but all I could think about was the girl tied to my guest room bed.

I ran a thumb over my split bottom lip wondering how I was going to work her over. Diamonds and furs wouldn’t do it, unfortunately. She responded to a little seduction a moment ago, but I didn’t want to push her to a point of simply needing to get off. I wanted her to need me; to beg, live, and breathe just for *me*.

On second thought, I probably wouldn’t have time for all that, so I’d settle for a hard and willing fuck.

Unsure of the angle to take with this girl, the thrill of the chase mixed with the pent-up frustration tightening in my groin. I had multiple women I could call, Nadia included, but somehow, I knew I wouldn’t. The only lips I wanted on my dick right now tasted like strawberries.

The longer Mila made me wait, the more she’d regret it.

Her phone rang in my pocket. I turned it back on this morning, having the urge to gloat a little.

When I saw Ivan's name onscreen, a smile pulled on my lips. I answered the call and brought it to my ear.

"Ronan's Steakhouse. Home of the largest sausage in Moscow."

"*Ty sukin syn.*" *You son of a bitch.*

I chuckled. "Bitch is appropriate, but 'cunt' would be a better description of my mother."

"You touched her," he gritted through clenched teeth.

"My mother?" I parried with amusement. "No. Even I find incest unappealing." Then I added, "Not to mention, not a huge fan of STDs."

He made a bitter sound. "I'm sure you have a history with them. You've fucked half the city."

"Nah. I always wrap it up." And then I drawled a popular health provider's slogan. "Prevention is the key to health and happiness."

"You're a dead man walking, you know that?"

"Living on the edge always did make my cock feel a little tingly."

Pavel blew a stop sign, narrowly missing a T-bone collision with a farm truck.

"Jesus, kid," I snapped.

He white-knuckled the wheel. "Fuck, I'm sorry!"

"How did you coerce her to make that video?" Ivan growled.

This was all fun and games until now. My blood heated at the idea he'd watched it; that he'd seen Mila's body in person before; that he'd fucked her. My chest twisted with aversion, but from years of training, I managed to keep my voice indifferent. "Good show, huh?"

"I'd rather fuck your mother's corpse than watch that."

Good.

That was good.

Although, I now regretted sending that video to her papa. I didn't think he would show it to others, but if he did, they were dead men. She was mine for the time being, every goddamn inch of her, whether she liked it or not. I refused to analyze the feeling. I had enough shit to do.

"She wouldn't have done it unless you blackmailed her."

Interesting he was so concerned about whether she was willing or not, rather than if I'd harmed her since. Maybe he knew a hard shell of viciousness encased her soft heart.

"You know her so well, do you?" I asked.

"Better than anyone."

My grip tightened on the ridiculous sparkly phone. "Obviously not as well as you believe." The innuendo was clear: there was no blackmail necessary.

"You're an idiot if you think I'll believe anything you say, *D'yavol.*" A hint of vulnerability touched his voice, and I realized, with a sense of disgust, the man had *feelings* for her. I wondered if she shared them. The idea seemed more repulsive than watching the Hallmark channel for twenty-four hours straight.

"I prefer to talk about my prowess in bed over tea, but I'll make an exception today. I assure you, Mila has no complaints." *Had*, I corrected in my head.

"Remember, when you have your revenge, Mila will come back to me. We'll see who has better prowess then."

I gritted my teeth, and a murderous *buzz* flared to life beneath my skin. "Run, Ivan," I warned with a deadly calm. "Run fast. Because if I catch you, I'll rip you apart with my bare hands."

I ended the call.

The bastard was in my city, but he knew how to play the game. Not as good as me though.

I would find him.

And when I did, there was a space on my mantel with his name on it.

CHAPTER *Twenty-One*

abience

(n.) the strong urge to avoid someone

Mila

THE SUN ROSE TO FILL the space with rays, bound wrists, and retribution.

Yulia entered the room adorned in black, exuding irritation when she noticed the broken chair on the floor. Unperturbed by the sight of me, she took her time tidying things up while humming a creepy tune. I wondered where Ronan found his employees. The insane asylum?

Dried blood marched like ants down my body, itching and chafing. Worse than the crawling sensation was the guilt I fought from rising to the surface. I shouldn't feel remorse for defending myself, but a tightness still invaded my chest. I wondered if the blood on my skin was an eternal stain I could never wash off. I wondered if that man had family, *children*. The idea made me sick to my stomach, so, for the hundredth time, I forced the thought away and decided I needed to escape this place before it swallowed me whole.

My gaze found Yulia who was dusting the room with single-minded purpose. Every woman had to have a little maternal instinct inside of them. Maybe I could play on her sympathies to help me. I jumped when she smacked the dresser with a loud *thwack*. Then, she flicked a quarter-size spider to the floor with a disturbing amount of satisfaction. Obviously, the motherly side in this one was smaller than most, but it wasn't like I had many other options.

"Do you have children?" I asked her.

"Ikh slishkom mnogo." Too many of them.

Not exactly the best start, but Rome wasn't built in a day. "What would you do if one of them was in my situation?"

"I would tell them not to look a gift horse in the mouth."

I blinked slowly. "I must be unfamiliar with Russian gifts. In America, being kidnapped isn't equivalent to unwrapping a tin of butter cookies and that hideous scarf your grandma knitted for you on Christmas morning."

With a roll of her eyes, she moved to right the rug. "There are worse things than being fed three times a day."

"Like being tied to a bed covered in blood all night?"

"You got yourself into that mess, *devushka*." She must room next door or have secret passages in the walls she peeked through. I was growing annoyed she was painting me in the wrong here, and even more irritated a part of me felt she was right.

"And I imagine you'd just lie here and take it," I said in disbelief.

"You are dramatic. Master is not bad man."

A constant beat ached in my head whenever someone spoke to me in this home that defied all

rationality. The only thing Ronan needed in order to become the classic villain straight from the pages of a vampire novel was fangs. The fact Yulia couldn't see that, given she just referred to him as "Master," conjured the mental image of him brainwashing her with a supernatural power.

"I'm not sure how men courted in your day and age, but in the twenty-first century, this"—I tugged at the ropes on my wrists—"isn't exactly the best third date."

"Americans. Greedy, the lot of you."

I dropped my head back onto the pillow. Clearly, I wouldn't receive any help from Yulia.

"I have to pee," I deadpanned.

"Congratulations."

"Fine." I shrugged a shoulder. "It's not like I have to do the laundry around here."

Narrowed eyes met mine, and I held them in challenge. After a stare-off that lasted longer than anyone sane would be comfortable with, Yulia moved to the bed and untied my wrists with the quick type of skill that conveyed this wasn't her first time dealing with ropes or pets.

When I was free, I stared at my expression in the bathroom mirror. I looked like the college girl in a gory horror film who got killed first by a chainsaw. Considering the stupidity that got me into this situation . . . how apt a comparison. My stomach grew queasy, so I turned the shower to hot, stripped, and stood under the spray of water.

Red swirled down the drain, and at the sight, cold prickles erupted on the back of my neck. The memory crashed into me like a tidal wave, snatched the beating heart from my chest, and let it sink to the depths of the Atlantic.

Holding Mr. Bunny by his droopy ear, I watched the shiny red car pull into the drive from my window. I'd only seen the woman a couple of times after Papa put me to bed and thought I was sleeping.

I frowned, remembering the day before, when I told the neighbor boy I didn't have a mother. He looked at me like I was so dumb, and then, he said everyone had a mom, and if they didn't, they were an orphan. I didn't want to be an orphan.

This woman had long blonde hair, just like me.

Maybe she was my mother.

Suddenly, I felt very thirsty, and the glass Papa left near my bed wouldn't do. The water was old, and it probably had dust in it.

Mr. Bunny in hand, I tiptoed down the stairs in my nightgown. Papa always said he had a sixth sense that would tell him when I wasn't in bed like I was supposed to be, but only a four-year-old would believe that, and I turned five yesterday.

My tummy dipped when shouts drifted down the hall. Papa never raised his voice. He must be very angry. I drifted toward the sounds and stopped in front of the closed library door.

Bang!

My heart jumped. I leapt back, and Mr. Bunny slipped from my fingers.

Then, it went silent.

Red paint leaked from beneath the door, soaking my favorite stuffed animal. He was mine, and now he was ruined. I scooped him up while a sob worked its way up my throat. Warm paint stained my hands and nightgown. It was a mess, and now I'd have to take a bath. Everything was ruined.

The library door opened. Papa said a bad word and blocked the doorway with his body, but I could see his friend asleep on the floor with long blonde hair and red paint all over her.

Closing the door, Papa picked me up, my cheeks wet with tears.

"Mr. Bunny is ruined," I cried.

“We’ll fix him up.”

I sniffled, tears slowing, and whispered, “I’m thirsty.”

“You have water beside your bed.”

“It has amoebas in it.” I was going through a Bo phase from Signs.

“You don’t know what those are.”

He forced me to take a bath and combed conditioner through my hair. If he didn’t, my curls got too tangled, and they hurt to brush out.

“Papa, your friend . . . is she my mother?”

His gaze softened. “No, angel.”

My eyes grew heavy as he scooped me up in a towel. And the last image I had before sleep took me under, was red paint running down the drain . . .

I slid down the shower wall, numbness pervading every cell within me. I’d like to believe my mind had pushed the memory so deep it’d never see the light of day in an act of self-preservation, but that was a lie. Subconsciously, I always knew something wasn’t right, that things weren’t as sparkly as they seemed, and I smothered the guilt of ignoring the truth by living an altruistic life. Although, with the knowledge in front of my face, I couldn’t live in blissful ignorance anymore.

My papa may be a good father.

But he was not a good man.

Even now, I didn’t know what to do. In this world, everything was twisted and upside down, and as the numbness faded, uncertainty of where my loyalties should lie tore at me.

Picking myself up off the floor, I wrapped a towel around me and exited the bathroom, taking a step back before I ran into Yulia. Without further ado, she shoved my cheer bag into my arms.

“Dress. Then you come down to breakfast.”

I hesitated, looking at the bag that felt foreign in my arms. A week in this house, and my past was a distant memory. I’d wanted out of this room, but today I wasn’t so sure about anything.

“It was not request,” Yulia snapped impatiently.

“And if I don’t?” Casting a meaningful glance at her small frame that was easily five inches shorter than mine, I asked, “Are you going to carry me out?”

Her expression hardened, and with a *humph*, she turned on her heel to the door, steps filled with purpose. She was going to tell on me, and the last thing I wanted this morning was to be manhandled by an oversized psychopath.

“I’m going,” I growled.

She paused, and then, slowly, she turned to me with a triumphant smile.

“Evil woman,” I said under my breath, only to hear a returned, “Brat.”

Refusing to allow her to drag me down to an eight-year-old’s level, I ignored the insult and dug through my bag like it might hold the key to escaping this place—though, unfortunately, all it contained was a pile of bright, messy clothes.

I hadn’t gone this long without shaving since I was thirteen, but wearing pants to conceal it felt like Ronan would be winning an unsaid battle. I didn’t care what he thought of my appearance, and if it turned him off—even better. I slipped on a flowy off-the-shoulder bohemian dress and inhaled a breath for the confidence I would need to traverse the devil’s lair.

With bare feet, I followed Yulia down the hall, throat tightening as I passed the spot the guard fell. A lemon scent lingered in the air, and the floor sparkled like it was polished. I wondered if Yulia spent her morning knee-deep in bloody paper towels.

As we made our way downstairs, I took in my surroundings. The home’s decor was grand, with

tall ceilings, white crown molding, and marble floors. However, the Persian rugs, dark curtains, and mismatched furniture gave it a warm and masculine feel. If it wasn't my prison cell, I could almost say it was comfortable.

Ronan sat at the end of the long table in the dining room. He reclined in his high-back chair like a king, eyes as dark as his soul. Like some twisted version of *Narnia*, I was sure, if I stepped into his wardrobe, it would lead me straight to hell.

I stopped at the other end of the table with every intention of sitting as far from him as I could manage, though, with a cool gaze, Ronan pushed out the chair next to him with his foot.

What a grand gentleman.

I'd rather try the two-story jump from my window than sit next to him, but pride wouldn't allow me to reveal the shake in my veins. So I moved toward him like I did it every day; like he didn't shoot a man in the head in the same room days ago. I sat, the only sounds the soft scrape of my chair against the marble and Ronan's intrusive presence.

A dark-haired girl close to my age entered the room and quietly set fine china dishes on the table in front of us. *Bliny*. Russian pancakes served with fresh jam—my favorite meal Borya prepared at home in vegan fashion.

My stomach churned at the idea of forcing it down, but I would try. I wouldn't survive in this world if I couldn't adjust, and I refused to let it eat me alive.

I forked a *blin* and dropped it onto my plate. Ronan only sat back in his chair, the sparkle of my earring twirling between his fingers while he watched me add jam to the top. Cutting into a pancake, I halted when he still didn't move.

"Sorry, did you want to say grace first?"

He was amused. "It's not exactly a routine of mine, but if you want to, I'll listen."

"So sure you won't go up in flames?"

"Sounds like you're counting on it."

Catching Yulia's gaze as she stepped into the room to water a plant near the window, I said, "Who am I to look a gift horse in the mouth?"

Another *humph*.

I turned my eyes back to the table to see Ronan watching me intensely. "Don't patronize my staff, *kotyonok*."

With a sense of annoyance, it felt like I was properly censured. "Don't call me that."

"I'll call you whatever I want."

I met his eyes with bitterness. "Does it make you feel big and strong to push me around?"

"No. It makes me hard."

He held my gaze with purpose and "hard" still in the air. I refused to show that his crassness affected me.

"I'm curious, is your gentlemanliness an innate behavior, or did you take lessons?"

He slipped *my* earring into his pocket and rested an arm on his throne. "And if I did? You gonna write them a bad review on Yelp?"

"I'm sure Satan's Institute for Local Psychos has enough of them."

He ran a thumb across the scar on his bottom lip, a rough chuckle escaping him. When he laughed, he didn't appear as threatening. One could never say he looked like a normal man, but something altogether more devious and timeless.

When the laugh faded, caressing every inch of my body, he asked, "Did you sleep well?"

Of course not. I was covered in blood and guilt.

I was sure Ronan slept like a baby.

Stabbing a piece of *blin*, I said sweetly, "Great. Thank you."

"You're a pathetic liar."

"We can't all be as underhanded as you, can we?" The pancake tasted like a mouthful of dirt.

"Tell me how long you're going to keep me here."

The flare of his eyes expressed he didn't like me telling him what to do. He ran a finger around the rim of his teacup, eliciting a haunting *ring* that rose the hair on the back of my neck.

"There has to be an expiration date to this little *soirée*."

His concentrated gaze held mine, and that *ring* continued and continued, fraying the edges of my nerves. Apparently, he was only going to stare at me like I was a worthless plebeian. Every second he remained silent, the longer my heartbeats stretched until I couldn't handle the tension. I was approaching dangerous territory, edging near a viper's nest just to see how close I could go before I got bit, but hatred and a reckless sense of bravery spurred me on.

"Fine. Don't tell me." I shrugged a shoulder, bringing my teacup to my lips. "I bet Albert's lurking around here somewhere. He may not be a Chatty Cathy, but I'm sure I can figure out a way to get him to talk."

I knew I'd gone too far even before his hand lashed out, grabbed me by the throat, and pulled me in. The cup slipped from my fingers, and hot tea spilled down my dress, but I felt nothing except the flight of the pulse beneath his grip as the *ring* from his teacup faded.

"Don't manipulate me," he growled.

I swallowed at the restraint in his grip. He could crush my windpipe if he wanted to. The insinuation behind the warning squeeze that shortened my air supply conveyed he was allowing me to breathe, to *live*, and I should be thankful.

Head tilted to the ceiling, my eyes held his, expressing every ounce of resentment inside. But discomfort blended into something strange and electric when his thumb slid down the side of my neck. The action dulled the toxic heat in the air, smothering it with a simple soft touch.

"So ready to go home . . . What's waiting for you, *kotyonok*?"

A heavy diamond on my finger and a monotonous life behind golden gates that glimmered beneath a Floridian sun. In truth, without my papa, I had nothing of worth in Miami, but I refused to let this man know that.

The words escaped between pants. "My life."

"*This* is your life now." His voice lowered to a dangerous level. "I'll release you when I'm finished with you—no sooner."

We only breathed in each other's fury for a few seconds before he freed me. I fought to not rub my throat and remove the heat his hand left behind. Frozen in fading adrenaline, I watched him bring a teacup to his mouth. Tattooed fingers and fine china. It felt like I was Persephone dining with Hades, except the goddess came to love the ruler of the underworld.

And this wasn't a divine romance.

"The sooner I tire of your presence, the sooner you'll get to say goodbye to your papa. For his sake, I would do a better job of appeasing me."

A naked jaunt through Chernobyl sounded better than "appeasing" this man.

My dress was soaked, my neck was probably red, and my temples ached from the hatred in my eyes. A well-balanced person would take pity on me and release me from this twisted tea party. Unfortunately, Ronan was as rational as Mr. Hyde.

"Eat."

Somehow, I found an appetite—or just enough pride to pretend so. The devil sat back in his chair in Givenchy, an iPhone in hand, and, if I wasn't mistaken, he was playing a *game*. I could only imagine it was a twisted version of *Pac-Man*, but instead of dots, his emoji ate up souls.

“If you're finished, Yulia will escort you to your room.”

On cue, she appeared in the doorway, dispensing all doubt the walls of this house were alive, fueled by Russian tea and black magic.

I pushed my chair back and dutifully followed Yulia to my room, where, with a jingle of keys like a headmistress, she locked me in my cage.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

sapiosexual

(n.) one who is attracted to or aroused by intelligence in others

Mila

RONAN AND I DID THE same dance for three days.

We ate breakfast together like a couple with serious marital problems, then he went to Moscow to manipulate and maim most likely, and I was escorted back to my room.

In an effort to earn some freedom and a way out of this nightmare, I behaved as best as my mouth would allow even though I wanted to scream inside.

Ronan, Yulia, and the silent maid were the only faces I saw day in and out, and it was starting to mess with my head. I didn't know when the shift happened, but I began to look forward to breakfast if only to escape the mind-eating boredom.

On the third morning, I came to a realization.

"I know what you're doing," I announced at the dining table.

Ronan lifted his gaze from the iPhone that was probably glued to his hand. If "*Tasty!*" and "*Delicious!*" in a deep *Candy Crush* voice weren't coming from the stupid device, it constantly pinged with texts and emails.

A brow rose. "And what am I doing?"

"You're trying to Stockholm syndrome me."

I thought he wanted to laugh. "I don't think that's a verb."

"Like I need grammar advice from someone who uses 'fuck' as a noun, verb, and adverb in a single sentence."

"Fuck is versatile."

"Not that versatile."

The full weight of his gaze could rival a shock wave. "When I fuck you, *kotyonok*, I promise, you'll use 'fuck' in more ways than I ever fucking have."

Turned inside out by his words and the intensity in his stare, it became a battle not to avert my gaze or shift in my seat. The crass promise slowed my breath, but what sent an annoying surge of liquid heat to the pit of my stomach was the fact he knew how to use each part of speech properly. He even got the adverb right.

"Versatile enough for you?" he asked.

His expression spoke volumes.

Ronan: 1

Mila: 0

Unable to give it up, I muttered, "The 'fucking' was a little gratuitous."

"Thought you weren't a sore loser."

I silently mused on his response. I'd never been a competitive person, but every conversation with Ronan seemed like a fight I needed to win. Maybe being kidnapped by a Russian mobster changed a girl, or maybe I just wanted to peel back the edges of his skin to reveal the monster beneath. It wasn't fair he could cloak himself so easily in a handsome face and designer suits.

He stood, slipped his phone into his pocket, and buttoned his jacket. "I'll see you tomorrow, *kotyonok*." Then he walked out of the room without another word, leaving me alone once again, as if I was a mere fly of a thought swallowed whole by his plans for world domination.

He never answered my question, but his indifference and retreat invoked the idea I was wrong; that planning to manipulate my body and soul had never crossed his mind. Now, I felt ridiculous for coming to that conclusion. If he wanted to sleep with me so much, he could just take it. He wasn't exactly anyone's definition of a soft-handed man. Maybe he didn't care enough to force the issue. Maybe these morning "dates" satisfied his desire for a side of ridicule with his breakfast.

I twirled my spoon in the bowl of porridge he didn't force me to eat. An uneasy feeling swelled in my stomach. Disgustingly, I wasn't sure if it was due to the fact Ronan might be losing interest in me or that the remaining hours of my papa's life were ticking down on the timeclock.

The most revolting part of the scenario didn't have to do with either of those things. As Ronan's back disappeared from view, taking his "fucks" and the smell of the forest with him, a sense of loneliness took his place—a solitude Yulia's presence couldn't fill.



"Je le hais. Tu le hais. Nous le haïssons." I hate him. You hate him. We hate him. I stared at the ceiling, wearily conjugating French verbs in the most amusing way I could muster.

The door opened, and, after a short pause filled by her bending down to pick the broken doorknob up off the floor, Yulia said, "This is house. Not barn."

I believed she was talking about the hour I spent banging on the painfully solid door yelling, "LET ME OUT!" at five a.m. this morning. But who knew? In this house, she could be referring to my speaking French.

Ignoring her, I recited with zero enthusiasm, *"Je le déteste. Tu le détestes. Nous le détestons."* I detest him. You detest him. We detest him.

A stern face entered my view of the ceiling. "What is wrong with you?"

"I'm on my period," I explained.

Her nose wrinkled like I was a singular and disgusting creature, then she disappeared from the room for a moment, making sure to dead bolt the door behind her, before returning with a box of tampons she dropped on my face.

"Ow," I complained, rubbing my forehead.

She snickered.

"Witch," I groused.

"Bitch."

Today was the worst day for the cramps to creep up on me. This morning, I decided I would do

anything to get out of this room: rein in the sarcasm, sell my soul, blow the devil—you name it. One more day of this madness, and I'd end up as crazy as Renfield in *Dracula*. I was already nocturnal and questioning my veganism. Tomorrow, I'd be eating bugs.

My uterus punishing me for not getting knocked up this month was going to make controlling my mouth much more difficult. I'd never admitted to being perfect, but on my period? I was far, far from it.

“You are late for breakfast, *devushka*.”

“Just let me die here in peace.”

“I like this room. Go die downstairs.”

Ten minutes later, I entered the dining room in a blouse the color of the sun and a flowy skirt with Yulia on my heels. She cast an apologetic look at Ronan for delivering me late. I wouldn't blink if she bowed to him on her way out.

He merely nodded in acknowledgment, phone to his ear. I headed to my seat and loaded my plate with fruit. Ronan smiled at what whoever was on the other end of the line said. Probably Nadia. I felt a little sorry for her but also believed she had the personality of a goat-headed statue.

Lazily responding in Russian, Ronan watched me add three sugar cubes to my hot cup of tea. I had a bitter taste in my mouth, and only something sickly-sweet could wash it away.

Finally, he hung up, using an endearing and annoying goodbye, before shrouding the room in quiet. After a moment, he said, “If you wanted a cup of diabetes, you only had to ask.”

I bit the automatic retort back. *Do you think two would be enough to end my time here with you?* Instead, I said cordially, “I'm good. Thank you.”

He sat back, something close to amusement passing through his eyes. “Late night or early morning?” The insinuation was clear: he'd heard my shouting and banging on the door, and he'd *ignored me*.

Je suis calme. Tu es calme. Nous sommes calmes. I am calm. You are calm. We are calm.

“I just find it hard to sleep with all the excitement.” Sarcasm was a sneaky bitch who often got the best of me.

“I wasn't aware my guest room contained such great entertainment.” His eyes glinted. “Well . . . aside from what I left for you to watch at least. I know it's good TV, but you should branch out and try a sitcom every once in a while.”

We both knew he'd rigged that TV so I couldn't watch anything but endless porn. A surge of coldness washed over my skin while I tried to force the rising lava down. I refused to go back to that room. He'd have to drag me kicking and screaming, and that was exactly what he would do unless I appeased him.

“I'm not talking about the TV.” Taking a sip of the hot sugar in my cup, I relished the burn on my tongue. I had no idea what I was going to come up with to explain the earlier sarcastic slip, so words simply started to tumble out. “It's just the . . . atmosphere here . . .” My gaze caught Yulia in the hall who was humming and combing the hair of a porcelain doll that sat on a table of ornaments. I pulled my attention back to Ronan and forced a smile. “It's just so romantic. A Russian winter wonderland, very sturdy medieval doors, and an age gap. I'm living in a Disney movie.”

After watching me for a heavy second, he laughed, deep and sincere, like he couldn't believe what just came out of my mouth. Humor slid into his words. “I have the feeling you're not being completely sincere with me right now.”

“I have no idea what gave you that impression.”

I planned to plead my case for a longer leash at the end of breakfast, but if he continued to sit

there and watch me without touching his plate, this meal could last hours. It would be a struggle to last ten minutes without earning his displeasure, and somehow, the keen bastard knew it. He was going to drag this out as painfully as possible.

I tried to shut out his invasive presence, but his gaze and silence were living beings—two little demons that sat on each of my shoulders.

Je l'ignore. Tu l'ignores. Nous l'ignorons. I ignore him. You ignore him. We ignore him.

“I'm thirsty, *kotyonok*.”

Fork halfway to my lips, I stilled at the languid tenor in his voice that practically demanded I serve him. After a disbelieving beat ticked by, I allowed my gaze to travel to the lazy bastard, who lounged in his chair and, I knew from experience, had full use of both of his hands.

“Sloth is a sin,” I said, my gaze narrowed.

“So is pride,” he returned. “In fact, it's believed to be the deadliest of them all.”

Ugh. Now I had to serve him, or I was the greater sinner. I hated whoever took the time to teach this man the Bible.

I dropped my fork and forced a smile. “Tea or water, *D'yavol*?”

Elbow resting on the arm of his chair, he ran a thumb across his jaw like he was thinking about it. A hint of pleasure sparkled in his eyes at the demeaning situation he'd put me in.

My bare foot began to tap impatiently beneath the table, temper rising higher each second he took to make up his damn mind. His boot gently came down on my foot to halt the tapping.

“Tea.”

Pouring him a cup, I asked, “Sugar?”

“No.”

With a *plop*, the sugar cube sank to the bottom of his cup, and I slid it to him with the hope he was allergic. Just as I picked my fork back up, he opened his mouth again.

“Now that I think about it, water would be better.”

My restraint snapped, and the first words to enter my mind escaped. “Why are you the way that you are?”

The smallest flicker of humor arose, but at the disrespectful tone, his eyes darkened, and that expensive boot pressed a little harder on my foot.

“You're narcissistic I find you amusing.”

While that sentence wouldn't make sense to anyone else, it hit its mark and filled the space between us with a silent awareness. He was mocking my play on “lucky” from our earlier conversation. The devil understood the workings of my chaotic mind so well, I wasn't sure what it said about me.

A sense of closeness constricted my throat, and I pulled my foot out from underneath his boot. I'd most assuredly screwed my chances of gaining any freedom today, and I'd lost the humility to beg for it. I needed to cut my losses before I felt the sharp bite of fangs.

“May I be excused?”

His eyes narrowed. “No.”

See, this was what happened when I tried to behave.

We sat in a tense and uncomfortable silence for too long. I was beyond full, so I entertained myself by pulling my leftover toast into tiny pieces. Ronan wasn't even eating but checking his messages while I was forced to sit there like a child at the dinner table.

“Are you going to eat?” I blurted. “Or do you prefer to dine on human hearts in private?”

He glanced up at me. “You know what I prefer to dine on in private.”

Unwilling to continue that conversation, I changed the subject. “I want to talk to my papa.”

“Tough.”

My blood began to simmer. “Tell me, did you sell your soul, or does evil just run in the family?”

“Genetics probably play a factor in it. You should know. You have your mother’s blood in you.”

He could humiliate me all he wanted, but I wasn’t giving him my mother’s memory.

“Stop lying about her,” I growled.

He raised a brow, lips tilting as he taunted, “Your mother was sick, *kotyonok*. And I mean in a strangling-puppies way. Though, sick or not, from what I’ve heard, she was a great fuck—”

I threw my tea in his face.

All the pent-up resentment burst like a party popper, all over Ronan’s somehow calm and furious expression. Tension drowned the oxygen in the room before everything went deathly still. I was frozen to my chair, blood pulsating with adrenaline and a cold sense of dread.

He wiped his face with a hand, voice cool but restrained between clenched teeth. “I’ll give you a head start.”

If I ran from him, he would chase me. If I didn’t run . . .

He would kill me.

Terrifying things like FedEx boxes danced in my mind. Fear pierced my lungs and stole the breath from within. My chair tipped backward to the floor when I jumped to my feet, and then, I fled the room knowing I should have quit while I was ahead.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

typhlobasia
(n.) kissing with the eyes closed

Mila

HAVING BOLTED WITH PANIC IN my veins and no sense of direction, I slammed my bathroom door behind me, locked it, and stepped back, racing heart swelling in my throat.

Ronan was a rotten cheat. Everyone knew a head start was at least ten Mississippis. I got three seconds by the sound of his heavy steps that had pursued mine as soon as I reached the top of the staircase. He was quicker than humanly possible, his shadow nearly consuming my own before I locked myself in here.

“Open the door,” Ronan demanded, his words too calm for comfort.

Even knowing the contents of this bathroom down to the number of Q-tips, I dug through the vanity drawers in the hope something would magically appear to help me defend myself. No doubt Yulia had a key, and she would happily assist her master.

“You have five seconds to open this door before I break it down.”

I threw a brush over my shoulder. “Good luck with that.” I managed to respond in a cool voice even though the idea sent a wave of uncertainty through me. I’d tried to kick and pound and picklock my bedroom door, which was the same make as this one, and I’d achieved a number of injuries but not a single dent. “Your stupid doors could endure a tornado—”

Bang!

I jumped back when the only divider between us flew open and slammed against the wall with such force the top hinge snapped. The door swayed awkwardly until another kick broke it free from its frame, and then the solid piece of wood hit the floor inches from my bare feet with a loud *thwack* that rattled my body.

Eyes lifting to meet black ones that didn’t hold a sparkle, a toothbrush slipped from my fingers. Cold fear paralyzed me to the spot. I stared at him, chest heaving with the expectation of his retaliation. Regardless of what he had in store for me, I refused to plead for my life. If pride sent me to hell, so be it. At least I would leave this world with my dignity intact.

Ronan moved toward me, those expensive boots treading on the fallen door. The clank of metal brought my gaze to his hands, and as I watched him pull his belt from its loops, my heart fell through my stomach.

He was going to whip me like Carlo beat his pregnant wife in *The Godfather*.

Screw dignity.

“I’m sorry!” The words escaped on an uneven breath.

“No, you’re not, *malen’kaya lgunishka*.”

Legs carrying me backward, he followed my retreat. The coolness of the stone shower floor met

my feet. I was trapped, and he was closing in on me with that lax belt in his grip. I should accept the pain to bring me back to reality; to remember his company was nothing but a herald of death. It sounded good in theory, but in reality? It sounded like it would freaking hurt.

Grabbing a bottle of shampoo, I chucked it at him. "You deserved it!"

He evaded it and all of the other objects I hurled his way. Catching me by the waist, his dark voice pressed against my ear.

"Just as you deserve to have your ass whipped."

I pushed against him, trying to knee him where it hurt, but he grabbed my thigh with a punishing grip before it could make contact.

"Knee me in the nuts again," he growled, "and you'll be soothing the ache."

"Let me go!" I continued to struggle, but he had my wrists in an unyielding grip while he wrapped his belt around them and tied a knot.

When he stepped away, I tried to escape, but he yanked on the other end of the belt, and I collided with his chest. He secured the other end to the modern shower head on the ceiling, raising my arms above my head.

Panting, I looked up warily. "What are you—?" The rest of the words escaped as a yelp when icy water rained down on me.

I was tall enough that both feet rested flat on the floor, but there wasn't enough slack in the belt to escape the spray. I sputtered and choked on the unexpected downpour that was so cold pins and needles pricked my skin.

"What did I tell you about fighting me?" He gripped my face, lifting it so I would meet his eyes.

A violent shiver racked me as a torrent straight from the Antarctic soaked my hair and matted my dress to my body. I blinked the water from my eyes. I didn't know if it was the freezing water or the relief he wasn't going to whip me, but the fight within vanished, leaving me trembling and alone.

"It's cold," I complained through chattering teeth.

"Good." He was half-soaked as well, but he didn't even flinch, fingers tightening on my cheeks. "You have a temper, *kotyonok*." His grip alleviated a touch, dark eyes on mine. "Don't make me put a leash on you."

After his threat, I should apologize. I should beg for his forgiveness and a collarless neck, but, instead, the emotionless words that slipped out were, "I hope the tea was still hot."

The smallest hint of amusement on his lips clashed with the annoyance in his eyes, and his response was thoughtful, maybe even rhetorical. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Let me go."

Something subtle and conflicted passed through his eyes, and I wondered if he'd already made plans to release me soon; if he would exchange me for my papa's life in days or even hours. The idea tightened the walls of my chest, making me feel lost and alone, but despair wasn't the only feeling that bubbled to life.

"Mmm." The soft noise vibrated against my lips. "Not yet."

I knew even if I escaped having entertained the devil, his demons would follow me for life. As I imagined him walking away without a backward glance like I was a wad of gum on the bottom of his boot, unwanted and shortly forgotten, something fierce surfaced. It wanted to haunt *D'yavol* like he would me. Or maybe that was just an excuse for losing my grasp on hatred and letting it go up in smoke and flame.

I expelled a shaky breath at the glide of his thumb across my cheekbone. The contrast between his anger and caress threw me off my axis, lit a lightning bolt of heat in my belly, and arose the mindless

desire to invoke his softness and approval.

His thumb ran across my lips like he was testing if I would bite him. I didn't. I even let him push it slightly into my mouth. The low sound in his throat invaded the chill in the air, warming the water a few degrees, and at that moment, all I wanted was *heat*.

Even if it came in the form of hellfire.

I closed my mouth around his thumb, so he had to pull it free against the hot glide of my tongue and lips. Flames were started by less than the look in his eyes, and the full weight of his approval settled an ache between my legs.

The warmth inside conflicted the cold torture on my skin in such a way I felt dizzy. High. Drunk on a tumbler of ten-thousand-dollar vodka twenty stories in the air, and I could do nothing but yield to the touch when his thumb pulled my bottom lip down as it left me.

Wrists wrapped in leather, trickles of icy water pouring over my skin and down parted lips, time slowed beneath the thick pull between us that felt like half-lidded eyes and moonless nights. Ivory skin and goose bumps. Soaked Brioni and tattoos. Selflessness and greed.

The visceral need to close the distance stole the air from me, and I couldn't find enough oxygen that wasn't tainted by his heat and the intoxicating smell of the forest. My head was above water, but I was drowning; panting for the breath I knew this sin wouldn't satiate.

"Please, let me out of here."

We both seemed to know my words held two different desires: to be released from this glacial punishment and my internal cage.

My beating heart and the patter of water filled a moment of dense silence.

"You want your freedom, you have to earn it." The demeaning, suggestive statement should break the spell between us, though the sound of his voice—cultured but tainted by a thicker accent than usual—slid down the back of my neck like a caress. I wanted to lean into it.

"I'm on my period," I said dumbly, in the hope he would find it as unpleasant as Carter did, and I'd be saved from the immoral moment. I should have known that wouldn't be the case.

A smile touched his lips. "A little blood has never scared me off."

I swallowed. "What do you want me to do?"

"Get creative."

Throat thick, hesitation stalled me. I wasn't sure what he wanted from me or what I could even do with my arms tied above my head. This was my chance for some freedom, for a looser rein to figure out a plan of escape, but what good would that be if I drowned first? I guessed I would just have to learn to swim.

I did the only thing I could do.

Rising to my toes, I closed the distance until our lips were a hairsbreadth apart; until mine skimmed his with each shiver that rolled through me. I breathed against his mouth for a second, waiting for his reaction—any reaction that would induce the confidence to proceed—but nothing came. Frustrated, with a shaky wave of self-consciousness, I pressed my lips fully to his.

Gaining a little slack in the belt, my arms were held awkwardly above my head, so I rested them on his shoulders. He tasted like cinnamon, corruption, and something so masculine I inhaled deeply to breathe him in. As my mouth moved against his, all hesitation inside dissolved, replaced by a flood of fire that seared its way to the tips of my toes.

He didn't reciprocate the kiss. In fact, he'd seemed more engrossed in his little games at breakfast than he was now. I suddenly needed a reaction from him like I needed to breathe.

Kissing him soft and slow, my leg slid up the side of his, curling around his hip to draw him

closer, and then I licked the scar on his bottom lip. He exhaled roughly, stepping closer beneath the spray of water, and braced his hands on the shower wall on either side of me. He was warm, exuding so much heat I trembled and pressed against him to soak it in.

My blood vibrated in my veins, boiling below the surface. I slipped my tongue into his mouth, he sucked it with a graze of teeth, and the wet, hot glide pulsated in my core. His lips moved against mine, meeting every dip and lick with a more commanding one. As my leg tightened around his hip to urge him closer, a hand left the wall and grabbed ahold of my thigh, his fingers pressing into the flesh.

When he nipped my bottom lip, I bit him harder. The growl from deep in his chest vibrated against me. Desire inflamed in my stomach and tightened into a ball that demanded to be relieved. I was nothing but touch and feeling, floating on a cloud of lust so hot I was sure I wouldn't survive if it popped.

Deepening the kiss, I released a suppressed moan. He swallowed it, brushing his tongue against mine. Consumed by fire and ice, I arched against him, desperate for contact, for friction, for absolution.

But hell had brought me here.

And hell would get me out.

I teased his lips with mine, licked, bit, pressed, and breathed, an ache blooming between my legs I would suddenly do anything to fill, period be damned. Exhaling a desperate *hum* into his mouth, I pressed closer, my body flush with his. His grip tightened on my thigh, and the restraint behind it—the idea he could bruise me, *hurt* me, but didn't—only made me desperate for more.

He made an angry noise when I started to grind against the hard length of him in an effort to alleviate the ache, and that was when he pushed my leg off him and abruptly stepped away.

I was doused with cold water outside and in, but it didn't steal the heat he left behind. Chest heaving with each breath, I watched him turn off the shower and work my wrists free like nothing happened, like he wasn't affected at all, while I felt turned inside out, one foot in the underworld, and the other unsteady.

Then he walked away, leaving the door of my cage open with the chance of freedom beyond, but I could do nothing except stare after his retreat, shivering, with red wrists and the warmth of his mouth still on mine.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

qui vive

(n.) *heightened awareness or watchfulness*

Mila

“IT IS TIME FOR LUNCH.” The lace hem of Yulia’s dress that went out of fashion two centuries ago swayed as she came to a stop in the doorway.

I sat on the settee in the drawing room, sightlessly staring out the large front window. “I’m busy.” *Stewing in my own despair . . .* But busy all the same.

Her eyes narrowed.

I’d thrown tea into Ronan’s face, and he didn’t kill me. He didn’t even leave a permanent mark. On my body at least. As for my mind, pride wouldn’t let me dwell on it, especially because the burn of his scruff and the ache that came to life still hadn’t dissolved. It was there, a perverse and restless coil of need.

Now I had the gut instinct he didn’t want to torture me physically, but I was also sure he found it a diverting amusement to smash my soft heart beneath his boot. Why else would he play with me for so long when revenge was his intention from the beginning? Maybe he was just trying to get a decent video. Although, he didn’t even attempt to come into my hotel room after he took me to lunch.

“He will lock you back in your room,” Yulia warned.

I gave her a look of resentment, then got to my feet and followed her to the dining room, asking, “Yulia, did you know my mother?”

“Everyone knew your mother. She was famous.” She scrunched her nose. “I do not understand why God would allow that woman to be so talented. Though He does work in mysterious ways . . .”

“What was she like?”

“Immoral.”

Sleeping past seven a.m. was immoral to Yulia.

“Can you be more specific?”

“She fornicated with everything that moved.”

“So she was sexually liberated.” I was trying to see the best at all costs here.

Yulia stopped in the dining room doorway and gave me a harsh look. “Fornication is a sin. And so is adultery.” She must have said that because my mother slept with my papa while he was married. “She was also prideful, greedy, and cruel.”

“Yulia,” I sighed. “You’re just naming all the deadly sins.”

She arched a brow. “You do not believe me?”

“I’m trying to believe you, but you’re not giving me anything to work with besides she was a real bad sinner.”

Her eyes narrowed. “She helped your papa with his work.” She tilted her head and gave me an

almost sympathetic look. “Though I do not think you are ready to hear how.”

An uneasy energy slid through me. Curiosity begged me to ask, but my heart told me maybe I really wasn't ready. So I took a seat at the table, where, alone, I was served *golubtsy* by the same silent maid. I cut into a cabbage roll, noticing the cook had left out the animal products. Surprisingly, all the meals I was served were vegan.

After finishing the meal, I headed to the entryway. My faux fur coat hung from a hook, and a pair of my ankle boots sat on the floor like I was just an overnight guest. I donned the coat and shoes and stepped outside.

Both guards on each side of the double doors went silent. In fact, everyone in the yard quieted, watching my steps as I walked off the circular drive and trudged through the thick snow. If I ran, they'd probably shoot me in the leg. Couldn't kill Ronan's collateral after all.

I made my way to the outbuilding that served as a kennel. The dogs ran the length of the chain-link enclosure as they watched me coming. I stopped in front of it, kneeled in my luxurious coat in the snow, and told them what nice puppies they were. With *very* sharp teeth.

When I was somewhat confident they wouldn't bite me, I offered my hand through the fence, palm up. Only one of them came up to sniff me, while the others stayed put as if they didn't want to stoop so low to be petted by me. I scratched the friendly one's furry neck and smiled when he licked my hand. I'd never had a dog. Papa didn't like them. But I'd always wanted one.

A sable-furred German shepherd with a surly expression stood alone near the doggy door, hackles raised at my presence. I spoke to him softly, but he kept his distance, tail flicking and fur on end. Feeling like I'd distressed him enough, I got up to take a short walk around the house. The guards' eyes prickled on my back like I was caught in a sight's crosshairs.

Clouds parted, the sun sparkling against the snow. Trees lined the edges of the property, and I wondered how far I would have to walk to find civilization or even just a road with the occasional passerby. Although, even if a highway sat three feet outside of Ronan's yard, I wasn't sure how I'd reach it. Not with his constant night watch and dogs who were undoubtedly faster than me.

Having free rein of the house, I took advantage of it. It took hours to peek into every nook and cranny on the first floor, but, unfortunately, I didn't find a secret passageway that led out of here.

I hated the truth of the matter, but it was a gorgeous house.

Original paintings covered the walls, every piece of furniture held a timeless charm, and each room set a different mood. It felt like a home, not four walls of stationary stone.

And then I found the library.

Shelves stretched to the high ceiling, crammed full of books with a variety of colored spines. A large mahogany desk sat at the front of the room, and the smell of cloves saturated the air. I didn't know what I found more offensive: the fact Ronan smoked next to a shelf of *first editions*, or that I would have to share this space with him for however long he kept me here.

The first book I pulled off the shelf was *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. How ironic. The novel was a set of poems depicting Satan as arrogant and instrumental to his own downfall, and, eventually, he lost the fight against God.

I dropped the book on Ronan's desk on the way out.

The one glaring thing the house lacked was electronics. I didn't find a single telephone, radio, or computer. Either the frequencies disrupted Ronan's communications with the underworld, or he got rid of any way I could reach out for help.

The scrape of my fork and conflicted thoughts kept me company at dinner. I wondered if I was just as bad a person as my papa for having turned a blind eye to the truth and for protecting him even now

by not being able to bear the thought of losing him. I wondered how much family I'd never had a chance to meet. But mostly, I wondered what or *who* the devil was dining on tonight.

The room sat still and desolate without his presence, and somehow, his absence only intensified the restless feeling he created inside. The memory of his low sound of approval ran down my body, raising goose bumps in its wake. I shoved my plate away in frustration and mentally recited, *J'ai le syndrome de Stockholm. Tu as le syndrome de Stockholm. Nous avons le syndrome de Stockholm.*

Before the silent maid could take my leftovers away, I grabbed the plate, slipped on my coat and shoes, and headed outside. The sun had set, but bright lights lit the yard and my way to the kennel.

Once again, the guards' conversations faded as soon as I stepped out the door. Though the aloof dogs suddenly seemed interested in the dumplings on my plate, and they each took one, licking my fingers clean. I saved a *pelmeni* for the surly one, who sat alone in the corner staring at me. I dropped it beside him, but he didn't move toward it. The other dogs gave him a wide berth, and I wondered if he was the alpha of the pack or just temperamental.

The sound of steps crunched in the snow behind me. "Stay away from that one," Albert said. "He is not right in the head."

The dog was probably the only one who was right in the head in this place.

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Khaos."

"*Zdravstvuy*, Khaos," I whispered.

I turned to Albert and shoved the empty plate against his stomach. He grunted and grabbed the fine china before it fell.

"Thought you needed something to serve all that betrayal on," I told him sweetly before heading back to the house.

Nearing the front door, I passed a guard with a cruel edge. He nudged the man beside him with the butt of his rifle and said something that evoked a laugh between them. A week ago, the obvious insult would have felt like a stab to the gut; like they could see straight through me to all the dirty secrets inside. Now, in this fortress of evil, those secrets were the only way I'd endure. Something inside of me didn't just want to survive, but to *thrive*.

When I turned to look at them, something in my eyes made their laughter fade. I closed the distance between us, grabbed the unlit cigarette from the cruel-looking man's lips, and put it between mine. Mechanically, the guard beside him handed me a lighter.

I held down the button to release the butane in my cupped palm, and then I lit the gas with the lighter, so the flame was captured in my hand. It was a simple trick being an only child with a wild spirit taught me as an adolescent, but judging by the wary way the guards watched me light a cigarette from a pyro ball in my hand, I must be a witch.

I always was a *Practical Magic* fan.

I slipped the smoke back between the slack guard's lips, and when the cigarette went up in flames, curses erupted, and they both jumped back with a pat or two to their clothes.

Then, I turned to walk away, palm smarting beneath a cold Russian sky, and the first genuine smile touched my lips.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

madrugada

(n.) the moment at dawn when the night greets the day

Ronan

HANDS IN MY POCKETS, I stood in front of the library window watching light search the horizon. The grandfather clock chimed the eight a.m. hour, signaling I got less than three hours of sleep after returning from Moscow last night. But as soon as the sun rose, so did I.

Old habits die hard.

The quiet winter morning remained still when the first ray of light reached the toes of my boots. Dust particles floated in the thin golden beam. The sight reminded me of sunlight filtering through a grimy apartment window; of frozen breaths from chapped lips, hunger, and fading yellow bruises.

First light in my childhood meant my brother and I had to run the streets and steal pastries from local bakeries. Kristian would scope the restaurant out, and I'd do the dirty work. My mom wasn't exactly a cook. Or a mother who fed her kids. After she died, we were homeless and better off. To this day, my body still awoke charged every morning, expecting the need to find food. The involuntary response was called trauma, but I thought that sounded a bit dramatic.

When light glimmered on a flaxen head of hair, a lash of heat licked through me, slid down to solidify in my groin, and stretched my body taut. The rising sun created the perfect illusion of a halo on top of Mila's head before she disappeared behind the trees that outlined my property. For a second, I thought I was so sexually repressed I was imagining her. God only knows how many times I'd thought about fisting a hand in that hair while she sucked me off. I was sure He didn't approve, but maybe He should lower His expectations so we could all be happy.

The skirt of a sunflower dress slipped into view, and I sure as fuck knew my imagination wouldn't come up with *floral patterns*. Apparently, Mila rose just as early—or she was only up in an effort to find an avenue of escape. I was hardly concerned.

Yesterday flooded back: the taste of her mouth and the feel of her body pressed against mine. The only thing that stopped me from fucking her against the shower wall was the intrusive thought I'd tricked her into something her young, volatile hormones couldn't handle and that her submission wasn't genuine.

I could be generous when I wanted to be.

Since then, my decision stuck with me like a bad toothache.

There were a million productive things I could be doing right now, but instead, I stood there with the need to see what my pet was up to this early in the morning.

When Mila stepped around a tree and into sight, my eyes narrowed before sliding down her body. She was wet and muddy, the luxury fur coat I bought her hanging off one shoulder. At this point, a thrift store would throw it away. If I wasn't positive I didn't have any pigs, I'd assume she'd been

rolling around in a hog pen. The most ridiculous part of what I saw didn't have anything to do with her appearance but what she was doing.

Yulia entered the room, the familiar *swish-swash* of her dress sounding. Before she could announce breakfast was ready, I gestured for her to come stand beside me and said in Russian, "Explain this to me." I could see as clearly as Yulia, but I still needed confirmation.

She took a second, tilted her head to view the scene at a different angle, then straightened and crossed her arms. "The girl is climbing a tree with a baby crossbill in her hand. She must be trying to see if it can fly."

I ran a thumb across my bottom lip, which lifted with dry amusement. I knew Mila wasn't about to drop the baby bird from a tree branch. Rather, it was too young, fell out of its nest, and she was putting it back.

"Birds have parasites." Yulia wrinkled her nose. "And she'd better not bring all that mud in the house."

"Thank you, Yulia. I'll be in for breakfast shortly."

She nodded, quietly pleased she could be of service, and left the room.

Soon, Mila had an audience. Pavel stepped into view and appeared ready to catch her if she fell, which was laughable given Mila's height outmatched his and the fact she'd only take him down with her. It became clear his stronger motivation was to get a glimpse up her dress. I couldn't blame the kid, but I also experienced an odd desire to punch him in the face.

And then there was Albert, the sensible one, just watching Mila navigate her way up a tree with a bird in one hand. Her boot slipped on a branch, and bark fell to the snow before she found a better footing.

I was beginning to feel itchy and uncomfortable everywhere. Yulia better not have put peppermint in my tea. She knew I was allergic and that I broke out in hives worse than a Benadryl commercial.

Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I dialed Albert and brought it to my ear.

"*Da?*"

"Get her down from there now," I ordered in Russian.

His gaze coasted over to meet mine through the window. "I tried, boss. She won't listen."

"Are you telling me you can't corral one fucking woman?"

"No. Just not this one."

What was so fucking different about this one? My eyes drifted up the tree to watch Mila's ascent. How high was the nest? Heaven? I gritted my teeth and asked, "Why does she look like she's been bikini mud wrestling?"

He hesitated for a beat before admitting, "She was playing with the dogs."

The line went intensely silent for a beat.

"Not Khaos." It was more of a growl than a question. The dog had turned aggressive and unpredictable, and he needed to be put down.

"*Nyet.*"

I was glad he had a little sense.

"I told her to not touch the bird. The mother won't come back now."

This was why Khaos still breathed even though he'd bitten five of my men. Albert couldn't kill a fucking insect.

"That's a myth," I told him impatiently.

He scratched his cheek and made a casual sound that felt anything but. "That's exactly what she said."

“I want her down in the next five seconds,” I snapped and hung up.

The last thing I wanted to do right now was talk Mila down from a fucking tree. She’d probably insult me before climbing higher, and if I had to touch her right now . . .

Albert argued with Mila, who was clearly vehement about her conservationist efforts. After returning the bird to its nest, she began her descent back to earth. The relief was short-lived when, from ten feet aboveground, her grasp on the branch slipped. She slid a foot down the tree before she found purchase on another branch, and if I wasn’t mistaken, she *laughed*. Albert grabbed her ankle and tugged her down into his arms before setting her on solid ground.

I watched Mila brush pine needles off her muddy coat.

Give me a cold, dark cell occupied by five men who wanted to kill me, and I would make pancakes out of it. But give me *that*, and I didn’t know what else to do with it except fuck it. I’d yet to get there, so, admittedly, I was a little out of my element.

My phone pinged, and, welcoming the distraction, I grabbed it to read the message.

Nadia: *I haven’t seen you in so long. Don’t you miss me?*

I missed sex, that was for damn sure.

Catching movement out of the corner of my eye, I lifted my gaze to see Pavel approach Mila. The kid rubbed the back of his neck and said something. It looked like he was trying out some English on her. It was probably awful. She would never tell him.

Nadia: *Come over tonight. I will make you dinner . . . and dessert.* 🍷

Me: *Polina is a better cook.*

Nadia: *Does she suck cock better too?*

Me: *Give me a minute, and I’ll find out.*

I would never go there with my cook, but an irrational buzz played beneath my skin and spread further each second.

Nadia: 😡

Nadia: *What about your American? Does she know how to get you off as well as I do?*

My teeth clenched. I didn’t like Nadia even mentioning Mila.

Nadia: *I bet she doesn’t.*

Glancing up, I saw Pavel *blush*. The kid with an AK-47 slung to his chest.

Nadia: *What’s wrong with you lately? I apologized about that last incident . . .*

“That incident” was the last time I saw her, when she trashed her dressing room in a jealous rage because I didn’t take her up on her note offering a quick blow job during intermission.

Nadia: *I slept with someone last night.*

Me: *I’m shocked.*

I wasn’t.

Nadia: *He went down on me.* 🍷

Nadia: *It was nice for once . . .*

She acted like she was deprived, but I knew she received oral from men and women alike—and often. She just wanted to see me on my knees. I’d rather put my dick through a meat grinder.

Pavel stepped closer to show Mila something, his thumb and forefinger holding a chain around his neck. She shied away from his gun as if simply standing near it would make it go off. He’d noticed her necklace and was now showing off his. How cute.

Nadia: *Ronan . . .*

Mila was all smiles, probably speaking fondly of her sadistic papa to the only one here who

would listen—and only then because he wanted to get his dick wet. The scene was beginning to annoy the fuck out of me.

I wasn't doing a single thing, but I really didn't have time for this.

I knocked on the glass. When both of their gazes flicked to me, I gave Pavel a treacherous look. He swallowed, said something curt to Mila, and walked off, leaving my muddy captive to glare at me alone. Her transparent eyes must be poisonous. A single look from her pierced my chest and spread something heavy and greedy throughout.

My gaze told her, *Get inside right now.*

Her silent response wasn't important because it didn't include a hint of "submit," "slave," or "anal." Mila's glare intensified before she complied and walked toward the front of the house.

Nadia: *Are you ignoring me because you're jealous?*

I ran a thumb across my jaw, not knowing what that felt like, but I improvised.

Me: *Fuming. Can barely speak.*

Nadia: *You're a jerk.*

Me: *I'm busy. Stop texting me.*

Nadia: *Busy doing what?*

Me: 🙄

Nadia: *ARGH!*

I sat behind my desk and tried to get a clear head before breakfast. My gaze caught on a book on the desktop, and I picked it up. *Paradise Lost*, in which God won and *D'yavol* lost. A small smile appeared. I should make Mila read it to me while I fucked her.

CHAPTER *Twenty-Six*

nedovtipa
(n.) someone who can't take a hint

Mila

I WATCHED RONAN POUR MILK into his bowl of Fruit Loops. I didn't know what was more bizarre: the fact he'd actually imported the American product, or the sight of his murderous, tattooed fingers lifting a spoonful of rainbow-colored cereal to his mouth.

When I continued to stare at him, his gaze lifted to mine, a charming brow rose, and then an animated *crunch* of cereal and teeth sounded. The sight was disarming, inflating a kernel of humor in my stomach, and my lips tingled at the reminder of his mouth on them. I crossed my thigh-high sock clad legs to quell the heat rising.

"Cat got your tongue, *kotyonok*?"

I feigned apathy at the ridiculous idiom, but inside, a nervous energy vibrated beneath my skin, flaring between yesterday's humiliation and a heat too familiar to what I once felt for him.

"I have a headache," I lied.

"You want to know the best remedy I've found for that?"

"Child sacrifice?"

"A good fuck."

I knew that was coming, but his crude words still slid through my veins like hot water. "I'm not sure where I'd find that around here, so, please, point me in the right direction."

"We're not going to talk about how you grinded on my cock yesterday?"

A flush washed up my neck, but I still managed to pop the P on, "Nope."

"A-plus on creativity, by the way."

"Thanks."

He chuckled, and after the soft laugh filled the corners of the room, he pushed the box of cereal and almond milk toward me.

"I'm not hungry," I said.

His eyes narrowed. "Eat."

I glared at him for a second but, knowing this wasn't a battle I wanted to start, I acquiesced and poured a bowl, ignoring the stupid sensation that surfaced at the idea he still cared enough to force me to eat. My heart should be committed.

Frustrated with all these feelings, I decided to do the bare minimum and pick through the dry cereal with my fingers, eating one piece at a time and as slowly as possible. Holding his annoyed stare, I put a Fruit Loop in my mouth with a saucy *crunch*.

I didn't know if he wanted to smile or kill me. "The last man who tested me the way you do is floating in the Moskva in seven different pieces."

A bite of cereal caught in my throat, but I refused to cough or look away. Even having seen Ronan *murder*, I sometimes forgot the type of man he was. Maybe my view was distorted by the side effects of captivity, or by his smile, laugh, and handsome face. Although, deep down, I knew it wasn't those things.

I forced the cereal down my throat and plopped another in my mouth. "I guess I'm narcissistic I'm not a man then."

"You being a woman has nothing to do with it."

The childhood memory of my papa's girlfriend resurfaced, and I pulled my gaze from him, chest suddenly tight. "I don't want special treatment." *I don't deserve it.* "You should treat me like anyone else who happens to look at you the wrong way."

"I find your sacrificial lamb mentality nauseating."

"I'm sure selflessness is hard for you to stomach," I said in understanding.

"You think you have me all figured out, don't you?"

"Charismatic gangster who's an introvert at heart? Sexual deviant? A villain with a sad past I refuse to sympathize with? Check, check, check. If you were a subject on my SATs, I'd ace it."

A hint of a laugh passed through his eyes. "I have no idea where you come up with this shit."

What I would never tell him was, I'd always been a bit of an introvert too.

"Where I come from, you either sink or swim. I *swam*." His voice pulled me into his web, demon-spun, and as strong as his knots. "Can't say the same, can you?"

The cereal in my stomach soured. I hated how he could pick apart my flaws, my secrets, and then practically throw them in my face. I focused on my cup of tea and took a sip. Scrunching my nose at the bitter taste, I added some sugar.

"Did you enjoy your day of freedom?" he asked.

"You and I have very different definitions of 'freedom.'"

"Maybe, but mine is the only one that matters, isn't it?"

I didn't know why he had to wind me up until it felt as if I would pop like a jack-in-the-box. Maybe so I'd "misbehave," and then he'd have a reason to punish me and sate his sadistic soul.

"You can continue to have free rein of my home, but don't engage my men." A threat tainted his voice.

Stirring my tea, I offered him a saccharine smile. "Why? Because I'm a lowly Mikhailov who shouldn't deign to speak?"

"Your words, not mine."

The whimsical, mocking tune of my childhood toy played in my head as Ronan cranked the lever—not only from the degrading nuance in his voice, but because I forgot what a bastard the man was just yesterday, and I couldn't have humiliated myself more.

"If you despise me so much just because of who my papa is, then I feel sorry for you."

He gave a dry, amused look. "Coming from someone who spread her legs for her papa's enemy two seconds after meeting him. Perhaps the one who should be pitied here is you."

"That's your opinion. And it sucks." So did this tea. The bitterness left a thick aftertaste on my tongue.

A volatile energy condensed the room and slowed the beat of my heart. I said I wasn't perfect, and I was beginning to learn I had a fiery temper and more pride than sense.

"I hope using me to fulfill your twisted desire for revenge doesn't weigh too heavily on your pin-size conscience."

"I'm glad to hear you're concerned for my welfare, but just to clear the air . . ." His eyes

darkened. "I've enjoyed every second of it."

Loathing burned a hole through my stomach as "Pop Goes the Weasel" grew louder and louder in my ears. Then, something vengeful, almost sensual, arose to trace the edges of my voice.

"I think you're enjoying it more than you'd like."

He went still, and then his gaze slowly lifted to examine me like I was toxic. Somehow, the bitter tea went down smoothly beneath the force of his stare.

"We both know I could have you any way I want. Unfortunately for you, I have better things to do than Mikhailov whores."

A *pop* sounded in my chest, releasing an explosion of fire that turned my vision a hazy red. The *slap* to his face vibrated in the room and stung my palm, but the sight of his reddened cheek and violent gaze didn't quell the pounding of blood in my ears.

I was doused in flames, in *regret* and confusion. He'd taken everything from me—my papa, my mother's memory, my innocence—and still, I couldn't even slap him without a tight sensation of remorse and an apology rising in my throat. I hated it. I hated this house. But what I hated the most was what I *didn't* hate.

The pull between the feelings wreaked havoc on my body and the dining room. I shot to my feet and swept dishes off the table to the floor, including his stupid bowl of Fruit Loops. Fine china shattered.

He merely watched me smash every breakable item on the table, and when there was nothing else left to throw, my body shook, self-loathing pulsing through me in waves.

"Are you finished?"

My heart slowed to a short *bu-bum, bu-bum*, and all the blood inside rose to ache in my head. Violence was supposed to be a release, but I didn't feel so good. Nausea turned my stomach while I tried to catch my breath. A glare from the overhead light singed my eyes, sending a ringing through my ears, and I winced.

"*Mila.*" Ronan never called me that, but I couldn't focus on anything except the tightness in my lungs. There wasn't enough oxygen in here, though when I tried to move to find fresh air, a wave of dizziness took ahold of me, and I grasped the table to steady myself.

Something was wrong with me . . . As a fierce wave of sickness roiled within, an anchor dragged my heart down.

The *tea*.

Sudden tears ran down my cheeks. My desolate eyes met Ronan's, and my words reeked of betrayal.

"You poisoned me."

One of his "fucks" hit my ears before he shot out of his chair and caught me by the waist just as my legs gave out.

With my back to his chest, he shoved two fingers down my throat. I gagged on them, then threw up on his hand and the marble floor. He did it again, and again, until nothing else came up, and I begged him to stop.

Hot sweat permeated my skin, which made me shiver. My limbs were as weak as jelly, and tears saturated my cheeks from the presence of his fingers down my throat. But the knowledge he hadn't done this to me filled me with a disturbing amount of relief that alleviated the grip on my lungs.

When he lifted me, my eyes opened, and I blinked against the harsh light. Yulia dashed from the room after Ronan growled something at her.

Rainbow-colored vomit stained my sunflower dress and Ronan's Tom Ford suit. I wondered if

this was how I would die, poisoned by black tea in the devil's arms. I wondered if hell would feel as welcoming; if it had an accent, sharp incisors, and inked hands.

Madame Richie's laugh resounded in my mind, sending a chill down my spine that disturbed me so much I said between weak pants, "With how much I've puked around you, you'd think you would take the hint."

"Ne govori." Don't talk. It was soft but brusque.

He set me on the couch in the drawing room. As weight pulled on my muscles, I moved to lie down, but, on his haunches in front of me, Ronan held me in a sitting position by the back of my neck.

Yulia, whose dry expression conveyed she believed I was being dramatic, handed Ronan a glass of water and a white pill he tried to put in my mouth. I shied away from his hand and shook my head.

"Voz'mi tabletku."

My head pounded. I didn't have the energy to try to decipher the rough Russian.

"English, please."

A fleeting pause in his eyes vanished with something volatile. "Take the fucking pill, Mila."

He drugged me once before, and I should have learned my lesson. Although, with my puke on his shirt, my name on his lips still lingering in the air, and the closeness of his gaze, I let him put the pill in my mouth before I forced it down my sore throat with a drink of water.

His phone rang, and he stood to answer it. I took the opportunity to lean my head against the armrest and close my eyes to alleviate the ache behind them. A pat to my face made me groan and open them again.

"Ne zasypay," he told me.

"English," I reminded him.

After a second of awareness that told me he didn't realize he'd spoken Russian, he clenched his teeth and walked away to continue terrorizing whoever was on the phone. My eyelids were so heavy I allowed them to close again, but the peace was interrupted by another pat to my cheek.

I glared at Ronan as best as I could manage. "Stop it."

Phone to his ear, his gaze bore into mine. "If you fall asleep, I will spank your ass."

We stared at each other for a long second. If he hadn't done so for throwing tea in his face, he wouldn't punish me for falling asleep after I was poisoned. Although, for some reason, I let him have the threat and forced my eyes to stay open.

A moment passed, and he released me from his gaze and walked to the front door. He returned with a familiar face: the doctor I met my first night in Moscow. The one who tried to warn me. This home seemed so remote, I had no idea how he managed to get here so fast. My imagination played a scene of the doctor in the underworld boarding a train called Satan's Express. Nothing would surprise me anymore. While the two men shared Russian words, Kirill kneeled in front of me, shined a light in my eyes, and checked my pulse. It seemed I'd come full circle, but this time, I knew the devil was in the room.

When Kirill pulled an IV bag and a needle from his briefcase, anxiety pulsed through me in waves. Tired muscles shook as I forced myself to my feet, and, swaying slightly, I nonchalantly announced, "I'm going to my room."

Kirill frowned and said something to Ronan, who, with an ounce of dry amusement, caught me by the waist and pulled me back.

Weakly struggling against him, I said, "Really. I feel fine."

Ronan forced me onto the couch. "We're going to discuss your habit of lying later." He lowered to his haunches in front of me and brushed a piece of vomit-covered hair from my sweaty face. "Right

now, you're going to let Kirill treat you."

"I don't want to do this," I breathed frantically. "Can we do it tomorrow?"

The look he gave me said, *No*. He nodded at Kirill to continue before saying to him, "*Sdelay vse pravilno s pervogo raza.*"

Kirill swallowed thickly. I didn't need to know what Ronan said to know he'd just threatened him.

I tensed and closed my eyes tight, but the sharp pinch of the needle in the top of my hand didn't send my blood pressure diving like I expected. Maybe it was already too low. Or maybe being captive in this house changed my body's perception of what I should fear. It wasn't a needle or blood. Somehow, it wasn't even *D'yavol* on his haunches in front of me.

I opened my eyes to see the IV was in, the bag set up. A cool fluid shot through my blood, up my arm. My tired, half-lidded gaze met Ronan's, and the moment stretched through time and space as my body fought the poison within. But holding this man's stare was like looking into a well that granted immortality. It shimmered, beckoning me to jump into its dark depths, and obliterated the fear inside I might never make it back out.

"Am I going to die?" The soft words escaped me.

His gaze darkened. "*Nyet.*"

One should never trust a monster, but as something heavy filled my chest, I believed him. If anyone understood death, it was this man with eyes as black as coal. That is, unless an unsuspecting victim got too close and saw they sparkled like tanzanite.

I let my head drop against the back of the couch. He still had puke on his hand, having wiped some of it on his pants, yet he looked put together, too composed to be real. The sight reminded me of his previous words. "*I swam.*" A memory resurfaced, of my papa teaching me to swim off a yacht in the Atlantic after he strapped so many flotation devices to me I would be carried away like a balloon in a strong wind.

A nostalgic smile touched my lips as I asked, "How did you learn to swim?"

He watched me for a second. "When I was eight, in the back seat of a car after my mother put a brick on the gas pedal and drove it into the Moskva."

The smile slipped from my lips. I stared at him, the words tightening around my throat with cold fingers. He didn't look away. He didn't even seem to realize the horror of what he just said. Thankfully, Kirill interrupted the chaos in my mind by handing me a mask and gesturing for me to place it over my mouth. Avoiding Ronan's gaze, I breathed the treatment in for a few seconds while the doctor checked my blood pressure and spoke to him in Russian.

Suddenly too tired to keep my eyes open, I drifted in and out of consciousness.

I woke to movement and the softness of my bed beneath me.

"Up," Ronan said.

Understanding the command, I groggily lifted my arms, and he pulled my dress over my head. He ripped the seam from the collar to the sleeve so he could get it off with the IV in my hand. It was my favorite dress, but I didn't have the energy to complain. Not even as he unclipped my sweat-soaked bra and pulled it off along with my underwear and socks.

I was naked, inside and out. On his haunches beside me, he worked the IV bag through my bra strap, and my chest tightened when I saw the faint mark on his cheek. I couldn't stop myself from running my fingers across it.

He stilled, eyes lifting to mine.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "For hitting you."

We stared at each other so long my hand grew tired and slipped from his face. I must have fallen asleep again. When I opened my eyes, Ronan was gone, and Kirill silently read a book in a chair beside my bed.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

agathokakological
(adj.) composed of both good and evil

Ronan

ALBERT OCCUPIED THE CHAIR IN front of my desk, his careful gaze and silence on my skin. He had a good reason to be cautious. It was a while since I'd been so angry my hands shook—three months exactly, when I found Pasha's body mutilated by Mikhailov hands.

The irony of the situation was one of the reasons I'd forced myself to sit here and wait for the rage to cool before I shot my men one by one to find the traitor in our midst. The other reason . . . well, it made me a little nauseous. It was the idea Mila's soft eyes were almost permanently snuffed out by a cup of tea. The burn in my chest whenever I thought of it reminded me of the time I fought for air in an old Volkswagen filled with icy water.

I wasn't sure why I shared that story with Mila considering I didn't even tell my brother after walking into our apartment later that night dripping water on the cracked linoleum floor. I didn't often dwell on the past, but the odd sense of . . . relief Mila would live reminded me of my first breath after breaking my head through the surface of the Moskva.

"Where have you been?" Kristian asked me in Russian, pulling his gaze from the tiny TV with rabbit ear antennas that sat on the floor.

"Swimming," I answered.

Momma was passed out in the apartment's single bedroom. Dark hair covered her face, and an arm hung off the bed, a cigarette dangling from her fingers. I used to think she was pretty, but now, at eight, all I saw when I looked at her were burned silver spoons, empty eyes, and a heat in my gut that expanded further every day.

I grabbed the baggie of crack rocks off the table and flushed it down the toilet. There'd be hell to pay for that later, but I doubted it would be worse than another night of my momma smoking that stuff. It made her act crazy, and she'd say things that didn't make any sense.

After I stripped out of my wet clothes, I plopped down on the stained mattress next to Kristian and stole the remote from him.

"You don't know how to swim," he said, keeping his eyes on the TV.

I flipped the channel. "Do now."

"It's March."

My brother could be so annoying. He kicked me in his sleep, watched boring shows, and thought he knew everything. The fact he was mostly right irritated me even more. I'd also punch any kid who was mean to him. Momma's friends were mean to him the most. They never bothered me, but still, sometimes, an angry red mist covered my eyes when they were here. Those men were too large for me to hurt now, but someday, I'd be big enough.

"Everything's still frozen," he said.

I wouldn't admit I'd held onto a piece of ice until I reached the shore even if Kristian saw me at it. With a shrug, I said, "I got hot." In fact, I was feeling a little sweaty from the shaky nerves and my cold skin. I wiped sweat from my chest onto his cheek. He glared at me and rubbed it off with a hand.

The room went silent, the dark room lit by the TV with a broken speaker. "We should go there," he said to the TV, to a scene of New York City. "To America."

I shook my head. "I want to stay here."

His eyes came to me. "What are you gonna do, sleep on this mattress all your life?"

"No, dimwit, I'm gonna be like him." I nodded to the TV as a political commercial came on.

"He's the president," Kristian said.

"I know." I didn't know that. I just liked the way he looked in expensive clothes, with an audience in front of him.

After a moment, he said, "You could be the president if you wanted to be."

"I don't want to be the president." I rested a sweaty arm on his shoulders. "I'm gonna be something better."

"Like God."

The old lady next door invited me and Kristian over sometimes. We went for the tea and biscuits while she read us passages from the Bible. So many "thou shalt nots" and pointed looks over her glasses.

"Kind of like God," I said, and after a moment of silence, a smile touched my lips. "But I'd rather be the devil."

I took a drag from my cigar. My mother didn't remember what she'd done until the police knocked on the door the next morning and asked why her car was in the Moskva. She talked—or, rather, *fucked*—her way out of it, and then she made me and Kristian *syrniki*. The decent meal was almost worth it.

"Viktor is questioning Anna," Albert said.

I stared at him, not knowing who the fuck Anna was.

"The girl who's been serving your meals for the past three years."

"Ah," I mused. "The little mouse."

She was the most obvious suspect. Although, I had my doubts. I only needed to look in the girl's general vicinity, and she'd tremble with fear. It annoyed me so much, I ignored her presence like she was a frightened, stray dog. If she poisoned Mila, she didn't do it alone.

"How's Mila?"

My eyes narrowed at the concern in Albert's voice. "Alexei's daughter is fine."

Kirill was confident she didn't ingest enough poison to be in a critical condition.

Thank fuck I called the girl a whore. Otherwise, she might not have destroyed the rest of the poison in her teacup, and I would have lost my collateral. But the thought of my revenge slipping through my fingers didn't explain the tight sensation inside each time Mila's look of betrayal flitted through my mind.

"You know she doesn't belong here," Albert said.

Darkness spilled through me. "You got a new mind-reading ability you haven't told me about?"

"If Alexei hasn't relented yet, he's not going to."

I held his gaze. I hadn't told anyone but Kristian her papa was ready to trade himself in. The knowledge of that getting out would make me look weak, as if Mila had actually dug her Mikhailov claws into me. She hadn't. I just wasn't finished with her yet, and I knew if I let her go now, I would

end up dragging her back to finish what we started. That felt too close to monogamy for me to stomach. Not to mention, it would probably be a much more difficult task to get her into my bed with her father's head as a centerpiece on my table.

"We could have followed Alexander," he told me.

"We didn't need to follow him."

He raised an annoying brow.

"Alexei will come to heel soon enough," I said shortly, finished with the conversation.

"It would probably move things along if you sent him a finger or two." He was baiting me. I wasn't going to cut off Mila's fingers, and Albert knew it.

"Go make yourself useful somewhere," I said, eyes hard. "Like finding the fucking rat in my home."

I swore, the bastard fucking *smiled* as he stood.

He hadn't even stepped out of the room before we found the traitor. In fact, she threw herself at my feet and confessed in a flurry of Russian and tears. The little mouse was actually a rat. Viktor stood in the doorway. At least one of my men was making themselves useful.

I lowered my gaze to the trembling girl dripping tears to the floor. "I want names," I said quietly. "The names of who helped you. The names of anyone who even heard a whisper of the conversation."

"I—it was just me," she cried.

"Look at me," I demanded, and, rigidly, she lifted her gaze to mine. "You're going to tell me the truth sooner or later. And the longer it takes, the more time my men will have to make good use of you."

I really didn't want to torture this slip of a girl, but I didn't get to my position by being forgiving.

Anna swallowed, fighting an inward battle, and then she gave me three names. She didn't say them with sadness or loyalty, but fear. The girl was afraid of her own shadow, so it didn't mean much to me.

I nodded at Viktor. He grabbed the girl's arm and dragged her from the room. Two of the men she'd named were here, the other—Abram, her papa—in Moscow.

Another annoying family affair.

Pasha wasn't the only casualty instigated by Alexei's hands. Abram's uncle was killed last year in a hit-and-run. He was old enough he'd have probably died of heart failure if he got the chance.

"Find Abram," I told Albert, who still stood by the door. "Put his son and nephew in the basement until then."

Three hours passed, the sun high in the sky, before the four were lined up in the snow. The girl stood on the end, gaze to the ground, shaking in the basic white dress she wore every day.

"As I already told Albert, I didn't have anything to do with it." A drop of sweat ran down Abram's face and glistened in the sun.

I raised a brow. "You don't even know what you've been accused of, so how do you know you didn't do it?"

"Because," he sputtered, "I've been loyal to you from day one."

"You want to know what I hate more than traitors?" I stepped closer to him, a gun lax in my hand. "*Liars.*"

"I've never lied to you." His gaze flicked to the right exactly like a liar's would. "Catch me in a lie, and I swear, I'll let you shoot me in the head right here!"

"Hmm," I drawled. "We'll get to that."

My eyes slid to the other two men, the son and nephew. One of them was just released from

prison for raping a housewife. If I did background checks before recruiting, I wouldn't have a single employee to my name, including myself. The men both flicked subtle glances at Abram, clearly the lackeys in his master plan.

"So you didn't have anything to do with poisoning the Mikhailov collateral in my home?"

"What!" Abram had the audacity to act shocked. "Of course not!"

A dark chuckle escaped me. "Your acting skills could use some work."

"I don't know how I got wrapped up in the middle of this, but if it was the whore beside me who gave you our names, you should know, she's just trying to take us down with her."

"You mean, your daughter," I corrected, gaze flicking to the girl who held her arm to her stomach like it needed support.

"She isn't my daughter," he spat. "Especially after this."

I ignored the words. "Do you beat your daughter often?"

Something in my eyes made him lie again. "*Nyet*. She's just a slut who likes it rough."

I let the ridiculousness of his statement fill the air for a moment. My boots crunched in the snow as I walked toward the girl and stopped in front of her.

"Are you? A slut who likes it rough?"

She didn't lift her eyes as she shook her head. Her papa's face reddened, and then he kicked her leg, spitting an enraged accusation at her. With a whimper, she dropped to the ground. A hot rush of irritation expanded inside me. I kicked Abram's knee so hard a *crack* sounded, and as he fell, my boot slammed into his face, planting him on his back in the snow. He groaned, blood spurting from his nose.

"If you do that to your daughter in front of me," I growled, "I'd hate to see what you do to her behind closed doors."

"I don't do nothing to the girl!"

He'd just admitted his guilt with the double negative. I was growing a little more furious each second I continued to employ this man.

I lowered to my haunches in front of the girl who sat on her knees in the snow. "Who gave you the poison?"

Tears running down her cheeks, she flicked a frightful gaze to her papa for direction. She was terrified of him even now, with death on the horizon. Abram watched her with cruel eyes and a hand on his bleeding face.

"I—I did it alone," she stammered.

"See! I told you."

"Shut the fuck up," Albert growled.

After putting my gun in my waistband, I ripped the girl's dress open. Buttons fell to the snow. She sobbed, probably with the belief she'd be gang-raped to death. Her lack of bra wasn't the most obvious sight. An assortment of old and fresh bruises covered her torso. One of her ribs looked inflamed, most likely broken, and bite marks marred her small breasts, some deep enough to be open wounds.

She might have been involved with the poisoning, but, clearly, she didn't have much of a choice. Having been the underdog many, many years ago at my own mother's hands, one could say I had a soft spot for the situation.

"Go," I told her.

Her eyes lifted to mine, confusion within. After a second of staring at me, she stood, pulled her dress closed, and ran to the house.

“What the fuck?” Abram snarled. “She did this!”

I rose to my full height.

“She’s a whore! A lying whore!”

I aimed my gun at Abram’s head.

“Wait—” He didn’t get to finish whatever lie he was about to spew.

One after another, three *pops* cut through the air like a knife.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

clinomania

(n.) *an excessive desire to stay in bed*

Mila

I THOUGHT YULIA WAS A bad maid, but that was before I had her as a nurse. She plumped the pillow beneath my head like she was beating a lump of dough and pulled a piece of my hair in the mix.

With a resentful glance, I shied away from her. “Thank you, but my pillow is fine.”

She raised a brow before sliding a mischievous look away to mess with the tray of food at my bedside.

“I’m not hungry,” I said.

She ignored me and made a show of adding sugar to my tea. As if I’d ever drink tea again.

I’d stayed in bed for two days, and with each second that passed, I grew sicker of it. The only thing that kept me here was the knowledge someone in this house hated me so much they’d poisoned me. And then, my thoughts chanted I was an awful person for what happened to Adrik and that I deserved it.

My mind was a terrible place.

Yesterday, Kirill deemed me as good as new. Ronan, however, hadn’t shown his face since he carried me to my room and stripped me naked. I didn’t know what I expected. Certainly not an apology for what happened. But a simple, “Glad to see you’re not dead,” would be nice. He hadn’t even sent me a misogynistic note threatening me to eat.

Once again, it seemed I wasn’t a part of his thoughts, while he kept popping into my mind like a game of Whac-A-Mole—especially after he looked me in the eye and told me his mother drove him into a river when he was eight. I said I wouldn’t sympathize with him, but it was hard when he threw his tragic past in my face. I prayed Ronan wouldn’t talk about being an orphan living on the streets. Otherwise, I may as well just tie my hair back in preparation for signing over my soul.

When Yulia lifted a spoonful of soup to my mouth, I turned my head away in exasperation. She’d taken this nursing routine above and beyond just to irritate me. I wasn’t a paraplegic. In fact, the only thing I would die from at this moment was her attention.

The spoon tipped slightly—Yulia might be an old maid, but her hands *never* shook—and a drip of hot soup spilled onto my T-shirt. I grumbled, “Serious!—?” The word was cut short by her shoving the spoon into my mouth.

I spit it out with venom. Nonchalantly, she pulled the spoon away to fill it again. I threw the comforter back and jumped out of bed, shooting her a scowl.

“You must eat, *devushka*.”

“I told you, I’m not hungry. And I’m not staying in that ridiculously comfortable bed anymore. Point me in the direction of the dungeon. I’ll room there for the rest of my stay.” I was The Princess

and the Pea. Except the pea was the twisted dejection I was almost killed and then promptly forgotten by a man who fingered me on a secret camera and sent the video to my papa. Gen-Zs wouldn't know romance if it hit them with a bus.

“You act like someone has forced you to pout for two days.”

I was *not* pouting. “Would you go traipsing about a house occupied by someone who wants to kill you?”

“I excel at many things, but God did not create me to be nurse.”

“No kidding.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I do not wish to nurse you while you sulk, so I tell you, the men who tried to kill you are dead.”

I swallowed. “Dead?”

“*Mertvy.*” *Dead.* Picking up the bowl of soup, she said, “I had to wash their brains off the drive.” Then she sipped her spoonful like a lady.

Blood growing cold, I managed to say, “Lovely.”

She shrugged. “It is job.”

I rubbed my arm to quell the goose bumps that rose, as well as another disturbing sensation: a lightness, a deranged *contentment* Ronan had killed those men.

Like everything else, feelings were backward in this place. It would be my normal to fight them, to force them to be something they weren't, but a part of me didn't have the energy. Another part of me, the one I forced into tight clothes and the desire for acceptance, didn't want to be normal anymore.

Touching the heart-shaped stone in my ear, the other in *D'yavol's* possession, I finally understood Gianna's words.

In this world, things weren't black and white.

I preferred yellow anyway.

Tuning Yulia out as she stomped at some poor creature scurrying across the floor, I absently walked into the doorless bathroom. I took a shower, and I didn't feel anything but curiosity. A tone-deaf curiosity that bloomed with the memory of rainbow-colored vomit, unrealized Russian words, and men lying dead in the snow.



The house after dark held a certain charm, like the haunting creak of a door in the night, a sudden breath of air extinguishing a candle's flame, and the sensation of being watched through the cracks in the walls. I was grossly exaggerating the situation—regarding the first two at least—though knowing a devil lurked around any corner amplified every little sound, and it didn't help I stood in his bedroom.

It was undeniably his. His smell was everywhere, and the sheets were *black*. I shouldn't be in here, but its secrets drew me in from the hall after I wandered the mansion for an hour.

Even though it was the worst idea I'd ever had, just like Moscow, I wanted to delve into the dark

alleys of Ronan's mind. And finding something to help me escape wouldn't hurt. A phone, the internet, a Ouija board—anything to contact the outside world.

Going through his nightstand drawers, I examined their contents and dropped a pack of condoms like a hot potato. I was surprised Ronan wrapped it up, expecting him to want to spawn his demons into the world every time he conned a woman into his bed. Although, that would be true of the man I thought he was, and not so much the man I was getting to know one breakfast at a time.

Aside from the unsettling prophylactics, all I found were a couple of cigars, his tidy scrawl in Russian on some papers I was annoyed I couldn't read, and other junk that would serve me no purpose.

After stealing one of his razors from the bathroom fit for a king, I opened his closet door and moved inside. It was meticulously organized: expensive boots in a line, rows upon rows of luxury black suits, and shelves of sparkling cufflinks and watches.

A safe sat in the corner. I wiggled the locked handle. The keypad required a numerical code for access, so I typed, "6-6-6." The light blinked red, and the metal box let out an angry *beep*.

"What are you doing, *kotyonok*?"

I jumped back, a shiver scattering through me. Slowly, I turned to see Ronan leaning against the doorframe. The sight of him made my heart do an awkward palpitation as curiosity expanded once again.

My fingers tightened around his razor. "Looking for your staircase to hell."

He chuckled softly. "You're not going to find it in here. I keep it in the basement."

Something synonymous with amusement started in my stomach, but I tamped it down. I may have decided to let twisted feelings run their course but laughing with my kidnapper in his closet would just be crazy.

Ronan's eyes slid to the razor in my hand before he moved into the closet too, and even though it was the size of a child's bedroom, the space could now rival a cardboard box.

I took a step back and watched him warily as he removed his suit jacket. My throat felt tight when he pulled a handgun from his person and set it on a shelf. The pistol simply sat there, a few feet away.

If I had the chance to reach for it, would I? If I didn't, was I a product of my own enslavement? Of my papa's death?

On edge and entranced by that murderous piece of metal, I almost jumped when he spoke, his tone dryly amused. "You're not thinking about shooting me, are you?"

Eyes sliding to his, I grasped onto the first response that popped into my mind. "Depends. Would you die, or does it take a stake through the heart? I don't want to waste my time."

"A bullet hasn't killed me yet, but there's always a first time for everything."

It wasn't a surprise Ronan didn't fear dying. Even in death, he'd probably sit on a throne made of skulls and lord over all the other sinners. Though, the idea of this man, so alive and virile, ceasing to exist seemed to be impossible and . . . strange.

"Would you cry for me, *kotyonok*?" His dark gaze consumed me as he unbuttoned his shirt cuffs, and, somehow, the memory of his thumb wiping away my tears was so tangible, I felt the caress on my cheek like he'd touched me.

The walls closed in with each second of uncertain silence, tighter and tighter, until I decided to escape his presence. Only, when I moved by him, he grabbed my wrist.

"I didn't say you could go." The low words stroked the side of my neck, and an ember of heat stirred to life in my belly.

I tugged against his grip, so, of course, he pulled me closer. My bare feet touched his boots,

breasts pressed against his hard chest. Heat washed through my body, vibrating wherever it met his, and I turned my head to avoid as much contact as possible. He could probably feel my racing heartbeat; the thrum that battled morality and temptation.

“I was just poisoned,” I said, my throat thick. “Maybe you can manhandle me later.”

I felt his smile. “Yulia says you’ve been doing paganistic rituals in your room.”

It was called *yoga*, but he knew that.

“She lies,” I managed to say, though as the knowledge he’d been keeping up on me sank in, complacency relaxed any resistance inside.

My body grew lax against his, and he took advantage of it, edging me backward until the backs of my thighs pressed against his dresser. I was trapped between two immovable objects, one devastating me with so much male heat my thoughts slowed and stalled. Now I was just a girl with a razor in hand, and he was just a man I once had feelings for.

I gripped the edge of the dresser with my free hand to steady myself. He released my wrist, and my breath grew erratic as his fingers skimmed down the outsides of my thighs until they reached the hem of my dress. The motion was slow, so charged I wasn’t sure I could speak or if I would even be heard over the electricity in the air. The mere expectation of his touch struck a match in every nerve ending.

A rough palm slid beneath my dress, over the curve of my hip, to my ass. When he found me only wearing a thong, he made a low sound in his throat and squeezed a bare cheek. I panted as his approval skated between my legs and expanded. His hand traveled to my lower back. The action pulled my dress farther up my thighs, leaving only a thin barrier of fabric between my core and the heat of his erection.

I kept my head angled away from his in a pathetic attempt for distance, but the desire to rock against him pulled at every ounce of restraint inside. Sanity told me, if I went there with him, it would be with the full force of a tsunami, and no amount of swimming would keep me afloat.

His lips skimmed down my neck, igniting a line of fire in their wake. “How long are we going to play this game?” The words were engulfed by a wave of static and constraint so thick, a single wrong move would set everything in this room ablaze.

I couldn’t think. I could hardly breathe. The need to let go tugged at my body, drawing me in with deviant words that said drowning was the best way to go.

When he nipped my neck, expecting a response, the wet heat of his mouth sent a cascade of pleasure down my spine. I tightened my grip on the dresser and fought the moan rising in my throat.

An image flashed in my mind, of Ronan standing on the edge of a dark pool just watching me sink to the bottom of it, my curly hair floating and aglow. The visual evoked the last bit of resistance within.

I turned my head to meet his gaze. “As long as you plan on killing my papa.”

He held my stare for so long, something in me thought maybe, just maybe, I had something he wanted enough to forget his revenge. Then he stepped away from me, his shoulders tight.

I exhaled, an uneasy shake flaring in my veins.

“Get out.” He turned from me and continued unbuttoning his cuffs like I was an unwanted distraction. “And, *kotyonok*.” A narrowed gaze met mine. “If I find you in my room again, I’ll take it as an invitation.”

I held his dark gaze for a moment. And then I disappeared from his room, vowing to never set foot in it again.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

fasta

(n.) unwavering in devotion to friend or vow or cause

Mila

THE NEXT MORNING, OUR BREAKFAST “dates” continued. However, the atmosphere couldn’t be tenser if a ticking time bomb sat beside the teapot. I just didn’t know the silence was about to detonate in a way that would make an actual explosive a better alternative.

An edginess flared at the memory of last night. The pressure of Ronan’s body against mine awoke a heat wave beneath my skin that was so hot, I tossed and turned all night in emptiness and confusion. Even now, a restless ache persisted between my legs.

I curled my toes against the marble, knowing I should be ashamed of the feeling—especially since Ronan seemed to have forgotten last night entirely by his apathetic demeanor—but I refused to send myself on another guilt trip.

Instead of the silent maid, another woman served our food, and she was not the docile, invisible type. She could be Kylie Jenner’s blonde twin. I wouldn’t be surprised if the servant’s eyelashes were thickly mascaraed by the celebrity’s makeup line.

Slowly, she set dishes on the table, the *clink* of each one followed by a glance in Ronan’s direction. He wasn’t doing anything besides scrolling through his phone and running a thoughtful thumb across the scar on his lip.

A few of the maid’s dress buttons were undone, giving a generous glance down her bodice whenever she bent over. And she bent over a lot. I wanted to tell her to have a little self-respect, but I wasn’t sure it would resonate coming from a girl who would have probably had unprotected sex with Ronan on the first date if he’d asked.

I thought he was so busy reporting posts on Instagram he didn’t notice her painfully obvious interest—that is, until his eyes lifted from his phone, caught mine, and flickered with devious amusement.

Ugh.

“*Mogu ya predlozhit’ vam chto-nibud’ yeshche?*” the maid asked Ronan in a sultry voice. I didn’t need to know Russian to understand she’d just questioned if she could “tempt” him with anything else.

I hated blondes.

With Ronan’s eyes on mine, it couldn’t be clearer he was enjoying every second of this before saying, “*Nyet.*”

The maid followed his stare to me and finally recognized someone other than Ronan was in the room. She reduced me down to one fell swoop of her eyes. Evidently, my unmanageable hair and floral embroidered shorts romper didn’t exactly scream competition. I bristled at her perusal, but she was already carrying her tray out of the room, casting Ronan a longing glance on the way.

I usually had high respect for blue-collar workers, but that one . . . What a peasant.

“What happened to the other girl?” I asked.

Ronan gave me a look that said it was none of my business. At the thought the quiet servant could have had something to do with poisoning me, my stomach tightened. Ronan killing murderous mobsters was one thing; a meek servant girl, another.

“You didn’t . . . do anything to her, did you?”

His eyes narrowed. “*Nyet.*”

I guessed that word was all he was going to say this morning. He was becoming worse company than Khaos. The German shepherd growled at me every time I spoke to him and avoided my presence like I was the one who had fleas. I should stop disrupting the animal’s peace, but something behind his tough demeanor felt so lonely it pulled at my own outcast heartstrings. I refused to give up on him.

Even though Albert told me the kitchen was monitored closely now and that my food wouldn’t be salted with poison again, I was still hesitant to eat anything and had survived on Yulia’s crumbs for the past two days. The hesitance was due to the fact Ronan didn’t say a word to reassure me. Considering all his demands I should eat since we met, his silence now made me feel like he didn’t care. Maybe I was being dramatic, but since I’d already started down the path, I was going to own it until the end.

I put on a show of meticulously smearing a piece of toast with the vegan butter Polina made for me, though I couldn’t help but believe Ronan noticed the only thing I was truly ingesting was water. He had nothing to say about it.

As he sipped his tea, the silence sent an uneasy energy through me. I wanted him to say something, *anything*, to disperse the tension in the room—another “*nyet,*” a demeaning “*pet,*” or even a crass comment.

I was taking a drink of water when the front door slammed shut. A familiar masculine voice reached me. It took a few seconds to recognize it, and when I did, the crystal glass slipped from my fingers, hit the edge of the table, and the faraway sounds of *tink, tink, tink* fell to the floor.

Heart in my throat, I shot to my feet.

“Sit down.”

I barely heard Ronan’s command over the rush of blood in my ears. My mind told me to listen, but my body wouldn’t cooperate. All I could do was stare at Ivan as he stepped into the dining room—at the blood on his ripped dress shirt, at his bruised face, and at his hands tied behind his back. The sight of him was so welcome tears burned the backs of my eyes, but the reality of his presence twisted a knife in my gut.

Albert and Viktor stood on either side of Ivan, each restraining him by an arm. The three of them looked awful: cut lips, bruised eyes, and bloody clothes. Albert bled profusely from his side, which soaked his white button-up.

Ivan’s cool gaze found me and softened with relief before it slid down my body to inspect for injuries, but the only wounded ones were the men in the doorway. My empty stomach roiled at the thought Ivan was trying to rescue me from *D’yavol’s* hands while I was embracing the heat those same hands left behind.

“*Ty v poryadke?*” Ivan asked me. *Are you okay?*

Throat too tight to speak, I nodded.

“*Mila,*” Ronan said in an ominous tone. “Sit down.”

The volatile warning stroked my skin, but I couldn’t move or force my gaze from Ivan’s. Self-loathing and panic bit at my veins, overwhelming me, though when Ivan gave me a look that told me to

listen, numbly, I sat. Complying then only intensified the strain in the air. Each second was pulled taut and stretched to impossible limits.

“*Pochemu ty zdes?*” Ronan growled at Albert.

By their curt words and severe body language, I recognized Ivan wasn't supposed to be here, in the same home as me, as well as the fact Ronan knew Ivan had been found while he sat beside me and sipped his tea indifferently through breakfast. He wasn't planning to share the knowledge with me.

Apparently, Ivan had other ideas.

I almost wished for ignorant bliss. If something happened to Ivan; if my selfish act of coming to Moscow got him killed . . . My stomach threatened to expel the small contents inside.

Ivan's stare conveyed he wasn't convinced I was unharmed, and he was now probing for mental wounds instead of physical ones.

I'm okay, my gaze promised. But what about you?

Seeing the tears running down my cheeks, his split lip lifted in an unconcerned smile. The sight didn't alleviate the tight sensation in my lungs. After a strained beat, I realized the men had stopped talking and were now watching our silent conversation.

“*Ubiraysya otsyuda,*” Ronan snapped impatiently. *Get out.* “Take him downstairs for now.”

Downstairs? Was there really a dungeon in the house? My heart twisted.

Ivan shrugged the hands from his arms and headed down the hall. As cold and still as a block of ice, I watched him until he disappeared around the corner with Albert and Viktor following.

“How does he know where to go?” I wasn't aware the emotionless words had escaped until Ronan answered.

“He doesn't.”

Clearly, he did, but my curiosity dissolved beneath the heavy pressure on my chest. As Ronan stood and nonchalantly slipped his phone into his pocket, my entire being whirled with an idea of how to talk him out of whatever he planned for Ivan.

“I'll beg you,” I blurted.

He glanced up, the look darkly amused but conflicted by a hint of something cold and terrifying that leaked into his eyes. “I'm not sure it would feel very sincere.”

I wanted to scream at him that this wasn't a game, but he was already out the door. He was going to go about his day as usual and desert me to slowly die inside.

On my feet, I reached him in the hall and stepped in front of him so he had to give me his full attention.

He stilled, a muscle tightening in his jaw. I understood then, the ticking time bomb wasn't an elusive, mystical warning. It was *him*, as tangible as his eyes, posture, and presence. The darkness inside was close to devastating this home to stone and ash, and it would take me with it. I didn't care. I didn't care about humiliating myself. Pride no longer mattered—not with Ivan's life in jeopardy.

I dropped to my knees in front of him, my blood going colder than the hard marble. “I'm sincerely begging you,” I said, a tear leaking down my cheek. “If you let Ivan go, I swear, you can have anything you want from me.”

Ronan had me where he wanted me—a worthless commoner at a king's feet—but there wasn't an ounce of pleasure in his stare.

“I can already have anything I want from you.”

“There's a lot you couldn't have.”

He held my gaze to the sound of my desperation consuming the hall. “You're not really known for telling the truth, are you, *malen'kaya lgunishka?*”

Frustration pushed at me. If I couldn't convince him with words, then I would try with actions. I reached for his belt buckle, and as I worked to undo it, I realized my hands were shaking.

I didn't have the faintest idea how to give oral well, but I needed to figure it out because I knew Ronan wouldn't guide me. He didn't believe I was innocent in regard to sex. My stomach was so unsettled, I was afraid if he gagged me, I'd throw up. I was going to ruin this. At the thought of losing Ivan on top of my papa, a quiet sob rose up my throat.

Ronan grabbed my wrist to stop me. "As much as this is turning me on, I'm going to pass."

He wasn't turned on. He was angry—deadly even, given the ice-cold, heartless look in his eyes. With a low, furious sound, he tugged me roughly out of his way and headed down the hall.

All I knew at that moment was, I couldn't live with Ivan's death on my conscience.

"If you kill Ivan, you might as well kill me."

Ronan paused, but after a few seconds passed, he walked away, leaving me on the floor as desolate as always.

CHAPTER Thirty

súton
(n.) the end of something

Mila

THE HOME SAT AS STILL as a grave while I stood beneath the staircase and stared at the elaborate woodwork that hid a door from sight—the one Albert and Viktor just vacated before leaving the house. I expected the entrance to be locked or require a special passcode like it would in any decent spy movie, but it opened right up to reveal cement stairs leading down to hell.

Nerves shook in my hands as I hesitated at the threshold and listened for the tortured screams of damned souls, only to be welcomed by silence and a cold draft. A sane person wouldn't go down there, but it seemed I was losing my grasp on rationality with the rest of the house.

Closing the door behind me, I rubbed a hand over the goose bumps on my arm and headed down the stairs. When I reached the bottom, I pretended the room was any other unfinished basement with mortared stone walls and a dampness thickening the air, but the fallacy grew harder to accept each time I viewed a bloodstain on the floor as well as the barred cells lining the far wall.

I should have found it a reprieve the cells sat empty sans one and that I wasn't soundly sleeping upstairs while people rotted below, but there was nothing relieving about seeing Ivan leaning against iron bars and giving me the look he always did when I did something he disapproved of.

"You should not be down here," he censured.

It was bizarre seeing him existing in this *dungeon* so indifferently—this man I'd known for years, who was insanely picky about his Americanos and had an allergy to cheap cologne and traffic.

"Nobody told me I couldn't be," I returned, hiding my uncertainty of how Ronan would feel about it if he found out. Not for my own sake, but Ivan's.

"I am telling you now. Go back upstairs."

On my way to his cell, I ignored him and gingerly stepped around a bloody plastic tarp on the floor.

"Mila." It was a frustrated growl. "There is blood everywhere. I do not want you to pass out and hit your head on the cement floor."

As I reached him, a small smile appeared at the memories of him pushing my head between my knees after many altercations with O-negative while he murmured accented, encouraging words—especially one cheerleading pyramid fail where Ivan jumped over a fence to reach me, which aroused the entire team's envy. I'd always taken his presence for granted. I refused to do the same with his life.

Reaching through the bars, I wiped some fresh blood from his busted lip. His hand lashed out and gripped my wrist, a sudden wave of discontent rising in his eyes.

"What the fuck has he done to you?"

I blinked. “Nothing, really.”

“Nothing, *really?*”

“Well . . .” I swallowed. “I saw him cut off a man’s finger, shoot someone in the head at the dinner table, and, apparently, he murdered another few in the driveway. But things have been going okay for me.”

For a heavy second, Ivan watched me as if I was crazy before he released my wrist. “Nothing about this is ‘okay.’ You should be home where you belong, not—” He glanced around with disgust. “Here.”

Here.

Stay here.

You belong here.

Ivan’s voice, past and present, flashed through my mind, and like a puzzle piece clicking into place, I finally understood why I never fit in at The Moorings. The neighborhood was a shiny cage masquerading as paradise, and Ivan was compliant in my confinement from the beginning.

“Is ‘home’ supposed to be Miami?” The pent-up frustration of living a lie bubbled out of me. “The place Papa left me for months on end so he could go murder people—*boys*—in Moscow?”

“You do not know what you speak of,” Ivan returned with heat.

“Maybe not. But I do know I have family here—family I *desperately* wanted. Was I ever meant to know the truth? Or were you and Papa planning on lying to me forever?”

He tried to mask his expression, but he couldn’t hide a flicker of the truth in his eyes. I was supposed to marry Carter and live the life of a quintessential housewife even though they both knew it would slowly kill me inside.

“Your papa was only trying to keep you safe.”

There was a difference between caring about someone’s well-being and just keeping them alive. My father had always maintained the latter, and while I knew he loved me, the former was never a concern of his. Weight settled heavily on my chest, the burden pulling all resentment down until I only felt an ache that split my heart in two.

“You shouldn’t have come for me,” I whispered.

“Do you think I would leave you here to die?”

The closest I came to dying was halted by *D’yavol’s* fingers down my throat.

“He isn’t going to kill me.” I suddenly knew it with conviction. “He wants Papa, not me.”

He watched me intensely for a long second. “He sure is taking his time then, is he not?” The tone of his voice settled so thick in the air, it strangled the oxygen and slowed the beat of my heart. The unstable energy refused to disperse even after he spoke again. “You are really unharmed?”

“I don’t want to talk about me,” I said quietly. At the moment, my psyche wasn’t a refined place. Half of it still lay upstairs, leaking out at Ronan’s feet across the marble floor.

“Well, I do. And I think you owe it to me.”

I flinched, understanding the innuendo in his voice. I was the one who got him into this mess. I may be the one to sign his death certificate. Tears burned the backs of my eyes.

He sighed. “I did not mean it like that. I should have assumed you would go to Moscow. I should not have been distracted by that waitress.”

A quiet laugh escaped me even as a tear ran down my cheek. He reached through the bars and wiped it away. His knuckles were busted to match his appearance: torn-open dress shirt stained with dirt and mud. He was even missing his shoes and socks. It was such an odd sight, a miserable sound between a laugh and a sob arose.

He glanced down at my source of amusement, then chuckled. “They did not want me to hang myself with my shoelaces. Took my belt too. *Grebaniye ublyudki*.” *Fucking bastards*. Grasping the bars, he slid his gaze down my body with narrowed eyes like he was trying to see into my soul. “I thought you would be . . . different.”

He assumed he’d find me a ghost of myself, not dressed in bright yellow without a physical wound in sight.

“I’ll admit, being locked in his guest room for days on end really sucked, but other than that, it hasn’t been the worst situation for me.”

His presence exuded frustration. “Why must you always make light of things?”

“I’m not. I really haven’t been treated that poorly.”

He released a caustic sound and pushed away from the bars to pace. “You have been degraded, drugged, held captive, poisoned, and God knows what else. I would hate to see what you consider poor treatment.”

“How do you know all that?”

He cast me a dark look. “I have my ways.” Continuing to walk the perimeter of his cell, he said, “The blood thing. How did that disappear, Mila?” His anger burned like fuel against my skin.

I chewed my lip nervously. “A walk in the underworld, I suppose.”

“Which you seem to be handling well.”

It felt like he was accusing me of something. “Don’t look at me like I’m happy about these circumstances just because it rid me of my phobia. I’d rather be fainting at a mud run again in Miami than have you locked up here and my papa’s life in jeopardy.”

“Interesting you have not said anything about your own situation.”

I grew flustered. “Of course I don’t want to be a prisoner anymore.”

“You seemed so . . . *comfortable*”—he almost sneered the word—“with your kidnapper in the dining room.”

My throat felt thick. “It was breakfast, Ivan, not a cozy heart-to-heart.”

He made a noncommittal noise. “You know they do not call him ‘*D’yavol*’ for nothing, do you not?”

“I’m aware.” This conversation couldn’t be more uncomfortable if bugs were crawling beneath my skin. I never said the right thing when I was unsettled. “He doesn’t like sugar in his tea.”

Ivan shot me an aggravated expression.

“I have no misconceptions of who he is, but don’t pretend you’re a saint. You work for my papa. If you want to discuss my fear of blood and where it began, you should talk to him.”

“Your papa has never mistreated you.”

“That doesn’t mean he hasn’t hurt others.”

A bitter breath passed his lips. “Are you taking *D’yavol*’s side?”

“I’m not taking sides. I find you all a bit despicable.” The dry humor was supposed to lighten the mood, but Ivan didn’t find it funny. Unable to handle the grave tension rolling off him, I announced, “Maybe I could find a key to your cell.” I wondered if Ronan had a doggy guard around here with the key in its mouth like in *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

“I would ask if he has touched you, but I already know the answer. Out of all the men in Moscow, you had to go and fuck *him*?”

His words chafed me raw. Had he watched the video? The thought made me sick, so in an effort to hold down the nausea, I ignored the statement. “Maybe with the right leverage, we can pop this door right off.” I glanced around in an attempt to find something useful.

“How could you not see through him, Mila? I thought you were smarter than that.”

A girl could only be called an idiot so many times. I halted my search as heat ran up my neck.

“You know what? Maybe I wouldn’t have been so stupid if you and Papa didn’t shelter me my entire life.” Sarcasm took over. “I’m sure college has a course called ‘How to Not Fuck Mobsters.’ If only I was allowed to attend . . .”

“This is not a joke.”

“I’m not laughing. I might have made a mistake, but so did you and my papa by not telling me the truth. If someone hadn’t killed that boy, none of this would be happening.”

“You are just going to believe everything *D’yavol* tells you?”

“My only other option is to believe someone who’s lied to me for years. The pickings are looking a little slim. Is there a third party nearby I can ask?”

“There is no need for a third party. You should stand with your papa. With *me*.” He practically seethed.

The thing was, I wanted to be loyal. I wanted an easy route to take; to believe my papa was the lesser of two evils. But now, all I could see when I thought of my father was a mutilated boy and a woman bleeding out on our library floor. When I closed my eyes and thought of the other evil . . . my stance was too conflicted to comprehend.

Ivan must have seen the uncertainty behind my eyes, and it angered him. His jaw tightened. He stepped toward me, flicking a glance behind me, to a high point in the room. When his gaze slid back to mine, something underhanded, almost devious, flickered within. It was the first time I’d seen that kind of darkness in him, and the sight raised the hair on the back of my neck.

“Be honest with me. He has not hurt you?”

I didn’t understand where this was going, but my stomach tilted with the feeling I wouldn’t like the end result.

Uneasily, I shook my head.

“And he will not?” He moved closer—as close as the bars would allow. My hands grew clammy; my heart beat fast. It felt like Ronan was standing behind me and that I was sandwiched between two men on a battlefield who had every intention of killing each other. I didn’t want to get caught in the crossfire, but I realized then, I already had.

“Ivan . . . I—”

“Answer the question.”

The indecision tore me in half. My gut told me Ronan wouldn’t hurt me physically, but it also braced for a flood that would wash me away. I didn’t want to leave Ivan to worry about me, so even though I didn’t wholly believe it, I whispered, “No.”

Ivan ran a thumb across my cheek. The suggestion in the touch expanded unease in my stomach, the caress not evoking a sliver of the heat certain inked fingers did. Why couldn’t this burn? Why couldn’t I want *this*?

“If I am going to die,” he said with a dark form of amusement, “I may as well go out with a bang.”

I didn’t have time to process the statement before he grabbed the back of my neck and pulled my lips to his between the bars. Shock kept my mouth uncompromising for a second, but beneath his encouraging pressure, my lips softened and complied.

His tongue slid into my mouth, and I met it with my own, praying for the heat, the ache, the desperation I should feel—*needed* to feel. Warmth spread in my stomach, convincing me to kiss him harder and skim my hands over his shoulders and into his hair. He groaned and grasped my waist, pulling me against the cool bars.

Ivan's fingers exuded warmth as they traveled down my body to my ass, but the contact didn't ignite. The embrace was an ember in a breeze, unable to go up in flames without gasoline.

He tilted my head with the other hand to deepen the kiss, and I tasted a familiar hint of cinnamon. They chewed the same type of gum. They had history. The animosity between them was personal. I wondered how well they knew each other; if they'd shared each other's secrets on the streets of Moscow or in a cell much like this one.

When he pulled away, my breath was soft and stable, the pressure of his mouth fading to nothing but memory. Loyalty told me this was where I belonged—in the embrace of a man I'd shared so much with—but my soul begged for something else; for a fire that lit without fuel; for Versace, tanzanite, and hands that stole my breath. My body was underwhelmed, though inside, everything was crashing down.

If I could long for the devil, it meant I had some darkness in *me* too.

CHAPTER *Thirty-One*

oenomel

(n.) something combining strength with sweetness

Mila

I SHOULD BE QUESTIONING MY life choices, searching for a key to Ivan's cell, or doing anything remotely constructive. Instead, I sat in the drawing room and watched the sun sink below the horizon with the Bible on my lap. The book was in Russian and was therefore incomprehensible, but the words didn't matter. It was the divine support I needed—similar to a crucifix or a garlic necklace.

Je hais Madame Richie. Tu hais Madame Richie. Nous haïssons Madame Richie. I was beginning to hate the fortune-teller more each day. I put all the blame on her for setting something in motion I couldn't stop. I would take credit for my stupidity, but she needed to fess up to the spell she'd put on me to enjoy asphyxiation and the touch of darkness. Lack of college education notwithstanding, I knew nobody in their right mind longed for less oxygen.

The front door shut quietly, but it may as well have been slammed, the soft *click* sending an edgy vibration to the tips of my fingers. It couldn't be any clearer who just came inside if a marching band preceded him. The energy he carried in rivaled the insidious *screech* in horror films as a glinting knife stabbed at its victim.

Ronan must have had a bad day at work.

Stomach clenching, I picked up the book, opened it to a random page, and pretended to devoutly read. My back was to the doorway, but I didn't need to see it to know he'd silently entered the room. His presence settled over me like a blanket of slithering vipers: black, smooth, and threatening to bite.

I wondered if Moscow ran out of virgins to steal. I didn't count given I was already stolen. And a slut at heart.

Jokes aside, I was a little concerned for my welfare at this point.

I felt Ronan move to the couch opposite me and take a seat. It was a battle to keep my gaze on the illegible Cyrillic letters, but I wasn't prepared to acknowledge him yet. Disregarding the humiliation of this morning that raised a shameful flush to my skin, the suffocating tension he emanated was about as comfortable as jumping into a fire.

I realized he must know I went into his precious dungeon, and he was *not* happy about it. Yulia probably saw me at it with the eyes on the back of her head.

If Ronan didn't want me in the basement, he should have put a lock on the door.

Chink . . . click. The sound broke the silence and squeezed the pulse point in my throat. My mind was a mess trying to decipher the product of the noise, but I forced myself to nonchalantly flip a page.

Ronan knew I couldn't read Russian, yet he had nothing to say about the ridiculous, treasonable book in my hands. The room remained silent except for the incessant noise that frayed the edges of my

nerves.

Chink . . . click.

I imagined this was worse than Chinese water torture. I suddenly knew he would continue whatever game this was for hours and that I would die in one. I gave in, flicked my gaze to him, and asked, “Do you need something?”

Elbows braced on his knees, his eyes held steady on a Zippo lighter in his hand, which he opened and closed. His demeanor was so cold a chill spread through me.

“Tell me why you are here.” His accent grated like sandpaper, but what made me tighten my grip on the Bible was the fact the demand was spoken in the voice of *D’yavol*—the immortal man who ruled Moscow and probably killed American cheerleaders for sport.

His order was vague, but somehow, I knew what he wanted. As always, my spirit ached to fight him, though a voice in the back of my mind cautioned me. I was no longer the only one he could crush beneath his expensive boot.

“I’m collateral.”

Chink. “Whose collateral?” *Click.*

I swallowed. “Yours.”

“Who else’s?”

The powerplay was beginning to blister. I may as well be on my knees at his feet just so he could reject me again. *Je ne suis pas fière. Tu n’es pas fière. Nous ne sommes pas fières. I am not prideful. You are not prideful. We are not prideful.*

With a shallow breath, I forced, “Just yours.”

“Just mine.” The words froze to ice, and his eyes finally lifted to mine, an immoral matte black. “Your misery, your attention, your body—all *mine*.” The caustic words settled on my skin, slowing each inhale. “I’m beginning to think I need to prove it to you.”

My heart plummeted when I understood what this was about. The *kiss*. A recollection came back, of Ivan looking at something behind me before he made his move.

Ronan and his secret cameras.

I was nothing but a chess piece being played in their vengeful game. My feelings didn’t matter. They never had. Heat washed up my back as resentment stirred, obliterating all traces of self-preservation.

I slapped the book beside me on the couch and stood. “I’m really not interested right now, but maybe tomorrow.”

The growl from deep in his chest resounded in my ears before he shot to his feet and flipped the coffee table over. The antique hit the wall and cracked along with my composure. Fine ornaments went flying, shattered on the floor, and skidded across the marble.

And he said *I* had a temper.

Heart in my throat, I held my ground and his stare. He took advantage of the now clear space between us to stride toward me, an unstable violence raging in his eyes.

Something drew him to a halt. He exhaled and ran a hand down his chest in such a refined way it was like he believed he was the composed one before grating, “Go to your room before I do something I’ll regret.”

A second ago, that was exactly where I planned to go, though since he’d demanded it, my room was now the last place I wanted to be. He’d probably have Yulia lock the door behind me, and if I had to endure another minute of solitude, I’d explode into yellow confetti.

He was giving me an out I should take, but my feet refused to move even as my mind told me to

hightail it out of there. So many conflicting feelings tangled within, shoving my system off-kilter. Ivan had used me to get one over on his enemy. Ronan had betrayed, abducted, rejected, and *confused* me. I stared at him, digging my nails into my palms as the chaos inside begged for an outlet.

His eyes hardened, and, in a menacing tone, he threatened, “Go.”

I was warned, so, in essence, I had no excuse for what poured out of my mouth. On second thought, I blamed Madame Richie.

“*Bite me.*”

He watched me for a second that felt like an eternity, and then, a cruel, disbelieving chuckle escaped him, showing off sharp incisors. After wiping the mirthless laugh away with a hand, he gritted, “Don’t say you didn’t ask for it, *kotyonok.*”

In one stride, he grabbed the nape of my neck and pulled my mouth to his. The rough action stole my breath, which escaped in a hiss of pain when he bit down hard on my bottom lip. But as he soothed the sting with a soft lap of his tongue, a flame ignited, expanding liquid fire between my legs.

If the kiss was a chess game, I was the bespectacled novice. And he was the cheater who wiped the board clean and fucked me on top of it.

My mind disliked this man with a passion right now. I tried to shove him away, to turn my mouth from his, but the iron grip on my nape didn’t relent. My body held a different stance. It inhaled the heat of his, begging for more force, more intensity, more friction—so much *more*. The hot press of his lips and the taste of cinnamon sent a desperate *hum* through my blood, drawing me so close to the edge a cold sweat battled the inferno within. He slid his tongue against mine, creating a heavy ache in my core that scattered all thoughts for a feverish second.

Breath ragged, the struggle slowed, and my hands stilled on his chest. Vengeance bled into his kiss, which was soft yet furious and somehow *cold*—just like the look in his eyes before he left me on my knees this morning. He didn’t want me then. He only wanted me now to prove a point: I was his insurance, and only he could fuck with me.

Just as he thought the fight in me had faded, I bit down on his bottom lip so hard I tasted blood and threw my knee up. He evaded the hit to his groin with a growl and shoved me away from him. I caught my footing, the lack of his body heat making me cold.

“Where’s the passion you gave Ivan, *kotyonok*?” he asked harshly, wiping blood from his lip with a thumb. “I won’t believe you have reservations about kissing two men on the same day.”

A knot of anger stretched in my chest, forcing the insult from me. “The only reservation I have is kissing you.”

The next second of silence suffocated me, his eyes not leaving mine while a muscle ticked in his jaw. “I guess we’re both narcissistic then.”

Knowing his twisted definition of “lucky,” I swallowed and watched him warily. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

A sinful glint stole the heat from his eyes, the words cool and apathetic. “I’ve never been one to mix kissing and fucking.” The *hiss* of his Montblanc belt sliding through its loops dropped my stomach like a lead weight.

He didn’t intend for tonight to end with a cold shower.

Heart pounding like a racehorse’s hooves on dirt, I backed up until I bumped into the couch. The metal buckle hit the floor with a *clank*, stretching my skin taut. I told myself to stay strong and retain my dignity at all costs, but when he took a single step in my direction, I blurted, “I’m a virgin.”

He didn’t even consider it before laughing humorlessly. “You’re such a fucking liar.”

I shouldn’t have cried wolf so many times. Now, it was going to screw me over—*literally*.

“It takes one to know one, doesn’t it?” My voice shook. Each step he took toward me, I mimicked in the opposite direction until I stood behind the couch, a simple piece of furniture the only divider between us.

“Mm. We don’t know each other that well yet, but we will.” A shattered piece of porcelain crunched beneath his boot.

“You act like it will be memorable for me,” I retorted, forced to the front of the couch when he stepped around it.

“I’m sure it’ll be different than your experiences with pampered college boys.”

Frustration tunneled beneath my skin. That was the exact thought that led me into *D’yavol’s* arms, putting me in a position to be circling a couch to stay away from him.

“Ivan isn’t a college boy.” There Madame Richie went again, throwing Ivan under the bus.

His eyes narrowed dangerously as he braced his hands on the back of the couch. “Maybe not, but he is a pussy.”

“You don’t even know him,” I accused.

The subtle, dry look he gave me only affirmed my suspicion they knew each other, but the thought faded when fury reflected in his gaze, his voice harsh. “Mention him to me again, and you’ll be sleeping outside with the dogs.”

Uncertainty tugged at my throat. I countered one of his long strides, quickly taking a few steps to match it. “Stop sweet-talking me,” I said breathlessly. “I don’t think my heart can take any more romance right now.”

He almost looked as if he wanted to laugh—this man who was *stalking* me like a psychopath—but the darkness in him contained the humor.

“Your mouth isn’t going to save you this time.”

I didn’t know what he meant, but I also didn’t care at the moment. When I stepped to the side, he mirrored the motion. Nervousness radiated in my every cell, pouring out in winded words.

“I hope this isn’t how you normally get laid. It’s exhausting.”

A humored brow rose. “It’s a first for me, but thankfully, I’m open to new things.”

It was so nice he found the situation amusing while my heart was close to stopping. “I’m sure there are a number of nice women in Moscow who will accommodate you for a decent price.”

He watched me, shadowing each of my slow steps. “If I wanted another, it would take a single peach emoji text to have a woman here begging me to fuck her ass.”

The dirty mental image played behind my eyes, rose an innocent flush to my cheeks, and sent a cramped sensation to my chest. The feelings were so at odds with themselves that when he stepped around the couch, I faltered before finding my footing.

“I really can’t figure out how you get a woman after you open your mouth.”

“You’ll find out in a moment.” The weight of his stare made my throat dry.

I was growing a little dizzy from moving in a circle—especially with the small amount of food I’d consumed lately—but it didn’t stop my mind’s endless circus. I wondered about peach emojis and Nadia. I wondered if Ronan had been to the opera lately; if the singer wrote him another note and he took her up on the indecent proposition. The idea squeezed my lungs, creating a ripple effect from uncertainty to dejection to *anger*. Ronan could be having a threesome every night for all I knew, and I couldn’t even kiss another man without him turning into a virgin’s worst nightmare.

“Save your stamina for the next unlucky girl who catches your eye,” I said coldly. “Trust me, you’ll waste it on me.”

His stare threatened me to hold in what was on the tip of my tongue, but, admittedly, I didn’t take

orders well.

“There are *so* many men in Miami. You’ll soon be forgotten along with all the rest.”

The words didn’t get the time to settle in the air. A single kick from him to the side of the couch sent it sailing across the floor, where it hit the wall and left me grossly unprotected. Holding his dark eyes, the coolness of the marble beneath my feet spread through me, my blood *whooshing* in my ears.

I took off for the doorway, but I didn’t make it that far. Ronan could have easily grabbed me by the hair and thrown me to the floor like the guard did, though he caught a fistful of my dress instead. I resented it more than if he had hurt me. I was suddenly desperate for pain; for agony to remind me of how little I meant to him before he stole my innocence and, in consequence, my *soul* too.

As he started to pull me back, I grasped at the side table, knocking things over in search of a weapon—or at least a way to push him to a point he’d make me recall I was nothing but his pawn. Clammy fingers found purchase, and before I could think it through, I spun around and shattered the vase against the side of his head. Glass fell to the floor around us, the room going deathly still.

In the movies, men went down.

Ronan didn’t go down.

My chest heaved, feet rooted to the floor as he closed his eyes and inhaled sharply. When he opened them, I expected his retaliation; I didn’t anticipate him to silently wrap an arm around my waist, lift me over the broken glass, and drop me onto the couch.

When his body came down on mine, so did the guilt, blending with the heaviness of him on top of me. His legs forced my thighs apart, his hands holding my wrists above my head.

Regret thickening in my throat, I breathed, “I won’t apologize.”

He pressed his face into my neck, making a dark rumble of satisfaction. “So you are learning something after all.”

As the adrenaline faded, it left me sensitive, exposed, *ashamed*. I didn’t want to be the kind of person who hurt others just because they hurt me. Something inside of me hated the idea of hurting *him* more than anything, even though nobody deserved it more.

Inked fingers may be holding my wrists captive, but they’d also saved and avenged me.

Guilt inflated in my chest like a balloon, and suddenly, all I could see was a little boy in a car sinking to the bottom of the Moskva at his own mother’s hands. I wondered if it was how Ronan got the scar on his bottom lip. The fact I could be the person to add another mark made me feel sick. The pressure forced an apology up my throat, but when I opened my mouth, he skimmed his lips across mine, saying harshly, “*Nyet*.”

We only inhaled each other’s exhales for a second. A heaviness invaded my chest, pulling me into dark waters alongside him, where I’d sink, and he’d swim. My only question was: Would he grab my hand, or let me drown?

I wasn’t sure I cared anymore.

I kissed the cut I’d made on his bottom lip. The action flooded the room with my silent apology, eliciting a noise in his throat that reeked of displeasure, but the feeling swelling inside compelled me to continue.

I dragged my lips to kiss the corner of his mouth, then the thin scar, which I softly drew my tongue across. With a rough sound, he gripped my chin and angled my head back so I met his eyes.

“I thought you had reservations about kissing me.”

The Bible dug into my spine. I was sure there never was a clearer sign to resist sin than literal scripture burning one’s back, but the idea didn’t stop me from looking the devil in the eye and saying two words that would lead me straight to the gates of hell.

“I lied.”

Two heartbeats passed, his gaze a dark, stormy night that charged the air with electricity.

“That’s a bad habit.”

“Mm,” was all I could manage, my entire body vibrating beneath the surface.

I exhaled when he slid a thumb across my cheek, and a satisfied, villainous look so akin to him touched his lips. “Don’t worry, *kotyonok . . .*” He leaned in and nuzzled my neck, his warm breath raising goose bumps on my skin. “*Ya vyyebu vsyu lozh iz tebya.*” The statement sounded like a threat, but there wasn’t time to ponder it.

He ripped my romper open.

Buttons popped off and scattered across the floor. The thin seams tore easily down both thighs, leaving only the skinny straps intact.

I wasn’t wearing a bra—which was a normal wardrobe adjustment since being here—and as soon as the cool air touched my bare breasts, so did he, molding the soft flesh of one to fit his hand before squeezing.

My skin was so sensitive it hummed. The roughness of his palm worked a tremble through me. I was burning everywhere, the simple friction of Armani branding me with a hot and uncertain edge. I couldn’t seem to do anything but lie there, my wrists remaining where he’d put them above my head.

I sighed, my fingers curling into fists, when he sucked a nipple into his mouth. Pleasure slid south, compelling me to raise my hips to meet his erection. With a scrape of his teeth, he pulled back, leaving the tips of my breasts tight and aching.

As he tugged my thong down my thighs, I suddenly knew there wouldn’t be any more foreplay involved; the hands on my body were rough and selfish. Although, this man had one mortal weakness: the covetous haze in his eyes that told me he was past the point of reason. The sight should scare me. Instead, I only desired to let him take whatever he wanted from me.

With a half-lidded gaze, I watched him lift my legs to pull my thong off. He tossed the fabric to the side, then gripped the undersides of my thighs and edged them back toward my stomach. A flush consumed me at how exposed I was, but the warmth of his stare on my sex, like he wasn’t sure what to do with it first, swelled a raw ache inside.

I let my calves fall to touch the backs of his hands and instinctively spread my legs farther. A heated glance met my eyes before he dropped one of my thighs, ran two fingers across my clit, and pushed them inside of me. As hot pressure expanded, I arched my back, a moan passing my lips. I gripped the edge of the couch cushion above my head, unable to do anything but rock my hips against his hand to stroke the fire.

Ronan dropped my other leg, gripped my face, and forced my gaze to meet his. “*Eto moye.*” *This is mine.* He punctuated the harsh words by scissoring his fingers inside of me.

My eyes rolled back, stars flying. Pleasure licked at my veins, building and building, until the feeling was all that existed.

Panting, I lifted my head to watch his hand between my legs, then dropped it back to the couch with a moan when he rubbed my G-spot. I was so close to release—*so* close I’d do anything to get there.

“Don’t stop,” I breathed.

“*Ty dash’ mne trakhnut tebya?*”

I didn’t know what he said, but I wasn’t sure I’d comprehend the words even if he spoke them in English. I could only close my eyes and chase friction until he pressed his lips to my ear and demanded, “*Otvvet’ mne.*” *Answer me.* The words were soft and coarse but a command nonetheless.

I didn't have the breath to tell him he was speaking Russian. All I knew was, if he kept fingering me, he could have anything he wanted: my heart, my soul, anal—*whatever*. So I hoped he sought a “yes” response, and I nodded.

He abruptly pulled his fingers away. The budding release crashed, and desperation seared through me in waves.

“*No. Please,*” I begged, my eyes flicking open. “*Please—*”

He covered my mouth with a hand and pushed into me with one hard thrust that tore a cry of pain from my throat. It felt like a lance of fire, burning so intensely tears pooled in my eyes. I gripped his forearm for something to hold onto, my blunt nails digging through his shirtsleeve. Reflexively, my back arched in an effort to shove him out, but he was too heavy to remove.

Ronan's heart pounded against my chest, every inch of his body tense. “*Kotyonok . . . yesli ya—*” He clenched his teeth and tried again in English. “If I pull out, will I have blood on my cock?”

I didn't know how he expected me to answer with his palm still covering my mouth, so I only shook my head in a hopeful lie. It was the perfect timing for a tear to run down my cheek and over his hand.

He watched the tear's descent like it was acid, then pulled his palm away and braced both of them on the couch beside my head. “*Fuck,*” he growled before closing his eyes and exhaling. “Please tell me you're just a really tight and emotional fuck, Mila.”

Clearly, I just gave my virginity to the most charming man in Europe.

Ronan already knew the answer, but it seemed he was grasping at straws. A tightness spread in my stomach with the feeling he would end this if I confirmed I was a virgin. Even though the foreign fullness inside of me burned, the walls of my chest threatened to fall apart if he pulled out. I wasn't sure whether it was pain or something else that convinced another tear to run down my cheek.

“I think I just have some dust in my eyes,” I said shakily, throat thick.

He stared at me for a beat before releasing a frustrated noise between his teeth. I winced at the sting when he leaned back so he could watch his thick length slide out an inch. As a drop of wetness slid down my thigh, I realized he'd probably find evidence he thoroughly popped my cherry.

“*Malen'kaya lgunishka . . .*” he rasped, confirming I bled.

I forced a swallow when he ran a hand across his mouth, his gaze still between my legs. I didn't know if he was fascinated by the sight of the blood or if he thought it would give him some kind of allergic reaction that would ruin his entire night.

Apparently, he was willing to risk it because, with a rough breath, he gripped my hips and eased back in. Inhaling, I slowly adjusted to the fullness of him inside of me before he pulled out a little bit again. He watched himself fuck me an inch at a time, the look in his eyes clouded thunder. His grasp threatened to bruise, but with every slow slide, the throbbing in my core began to warm and tingle. I shifted, which pushed him inside so deep he hit a pleasurable spot that drew a small hum from my lips.

“*Fuck.*” Ronan pushed away from me like I was on fire, releasing an angry, tortured growl as if I was the villain in the room who just stole his innocence. He left me lying there naked, a shaky coldness in my veins and an emptiness swelling between my legs. Confusion ran rampant as I felt him walk to the other side of the room.

“I don't fuck virgins, *kotyonok.*” It was an icy, uncompromising statement.

I flinched as if he'd slapped me. The words were a blow considering he just took something I couldn't give to anyone else and then threw it away like it inconvenienced him. My heart clenched. I hadn't felt so vulnerable in my entire life. A hot and heavy mass invaded my throat.

With shaky hands, I closed my ripped romper as best I could and sat up, feeling so sick and naïve. I didn't know why I did this to myself; why I cared so much tears burned the backs of my eyes; why I couldn't hate him even now. If anything, I despised myself for serving Ronan the vulnerability on a silver platter, only for him to reject me like cheap vodka.

Je ne pleurerai pas. Tu ne pleureras pas. Nous ne pleurerons pas. I will not cry. You will not cry. We will not cry.

Pride seared like an ulcer in my stomach at the thought of Ronan seeing how much he affected me. So, even as a tear escaped, I managed an ill-humored, unsteady response.

"I wanted rose petals and lit candles for my first time, but, really, what could outdo this?"

His back was to me like he didn't even want to look at me. "Trust me, I did you a favor."

Honestly, what did I expect handing over my virginity to the man who abducted me? The fact that sentence even existed in my head told me I needed help.

Getting to my feet, a resentful scoff rose in my throat. "Yes. I can feel your good intentions. They're a warm ray of sunshine."

He released a dark, bitter breath and turned to face me, his eyes fierce. "I promise, your entire body would feel them like the weight of the fucking sun if I stayed inside of you even a second longer."

I held his stare, the words washing over me but unable to find purchase among the humiliation and self-loathing within. All I wanted right now was to lick my wounds anywhere Ronan wasn't. Too bad I couldn't eat my sorrows in a carton of ice cream without the chance of getting a spoonful of cyanide in the mix. This place sucked.

I took a step toward the door but halted when he spoke.

"You aren't leaving this goddamn room," he gritted, looking completely disgusted with me.

Today was going to give me a massive complex.

"*Sit.*"

Frustration singed my spine, but I knew if I refused, he would bodily set me on the couch. I didn't have the energy to fight him right now—trying to hold the walls of my chest together was a battle of its own—so, numbly, I sat, looking at everything but him. To say the room was a mess would be an understatement. Yulia was going to have a seizure.

I stared at the wall as Ronan dropped to his haunches in front of me. My throat grew tight when he wiped a tear from my cheek. I was tempted to push his hand away, but the heat of the caress overwhelmed me, tugging at the twine around my heart.

"Stop crying," he demanded softly.

"No."

His hand dropped from my face. "Keep crying then. Don't stop until I say so."

The tears suddenly stung like bleach, and I tried to blink them from my eyes. He made a dry, disbelieving sound in his throat, and I realized I was too distraught to gather he was using reverse psychology on me. Apparently, he'd learned I would do the opposite of whatever he commanded.

It went silent for a second before he spoke. "I can't fuck you like that, *kotyonok.*"

I didn't want to talk to him right now, but I was also too curious to let the brewing question go.

"Like what?"

"How you need it."

I pulled my lip between my teeth, the uncertainty and feelings inside going up and down like a yo-yo. The confusion became too much. The moment was just too much.

Finally, I met his gaze. "Can I go now?"

He held my stare for a beat, a muscle ticking in his jaw. “*Nyet.*”

I sighed in frustration. “What else do you need from me tonight? I don’t care if you send me five peach emojis, I’m not giving you my anal virginity too.”

“Fuck,” he chuckled roughly. “Stop talking about being a virgin.”

“Why? Does it make you feel guilty?”

“It makes me want to be the first to take your ass too.”

Ignoring the heat rising up my neck, I raised a brow. “What’s the point when you’d take it for two seconds?”

His gaze hardened, then a ragged exhale escaped me when he grabbed my thighs and yanked my ass to the edge of the couch. I had to brace my hands behind me to maintain any sort of dignified pose.

“Don’t spread your legs, *kotyonok.*”

I glared at him, unwilling to let the trick work this time. Ripped fabric parted, revealing the curves of my breasts, my nipples hardening in the cool air. Why was I always the naked one? The only bare part of Ronan I’d seen was a few inches of his dick because the rest of it was inside of me.

“How sore are you?” he asked coarsely, his gaze slowly sliding up my naked body to meet mine.

My throat felt tight when I realized he did feel a little guilty. The thought aroused a weird sensation of solace, spreading something warm and heavy that melted all the tension within.

“Sore,” I exhaled.

He murmured something in Russian that radiated down my spine. When he pushed my legs apart, they complied.

He thumbed the top of one of my thigh-high socks, growling, “These fucking socks, Mila.” He tugged one down a little and nipped the flesh beneath it, sending a hot shiver through me.

Pulling back, the heat of his eyes warmed my sex, the ache inside coming alive again and pulsing. I was growing warm everywhere, the feeling interrupted by a cold wave of shyness when I recognized his intention.

“*Wait,*” I blurted and tried to pull free from his grip—but, as usual, it didn’t budge.

The look that lifted to my face was heated and narrow-eyed with a silent question.

“I bled.” My body grew tense in his hands, ready to flee from the embarrassing situation.

His dry expression conveyed he didn’t understand the point I was trying to make.

I grew flustered at the fact I even had to explain this. “It’s . . . gross.”

A second passed, and I thought he wanted to laugh, but the humor was contained by the intensity in his gaze. “As much as I wish otherwise, there is nothing about you I could find gross.”

The warmth that rushed to my face was consumed by fire when he went straight for the soreness around my opening, tracing it with his tongue. The pressure stung a little, but the heat of his mouth relieved it and sent a zap of pleasure to my toes.

Breath shaky, I readjusted my purchase on the couch, my thighs falling open at the next lap of his tongue, which he then slid inside of me. My head lolled back, a moan escaping my lips.

“Fuck, *kotyonok. Dazhe tvoya kiska na vkus kak klubnika.*”

I understood the gist of the statement given the mention of “cunt” and “strawberries.” The dirty Russian pushed all reservations to the wayside. Bracing one hand on the couch, I slid the other into his hair. I ran my blunt nails across his scalp and felt a shudder ghost down his back.

He was ignoring my clit, each lick making it throb in anticipation. Every time he came close to where I wanted him, I rocked my hips to make him get there, but he only drew his mouth back to my opening, which he soothed with undivided attention.

A fire brewed beneath my skin, sending a flush to every cell inside of me. My breath accelerated

to little puffs of air, and the pressure in my core began to heat and build and blister. The flat of his tongue slid upward, so close to my clit I trembled, dying with need.

“*Please*,” I begged, my fingers tightening in his hair.

“*Nyet*.”

Ronan knew it would send me over the edge. I wanted to complain this wasn't about him, but I didn't have the words to do so—nor did I want this to stop yet.

Sliding a rough palm up my stomach, he squeezed a breast in his hand. I released a frustrated exhale as the ache inside swelled, desperate to be filled.

“*More*.”

Somehow, he understood what I needed and slid two fingers inside of me, immediately pressing against a spot that made my eyes roll back. The heat of his gaze warmed my face, a groan rumbling in his chest.

“*Eta pizda byla sozdana dlya trakha*.”

The pressure expanding, the sound of his voice—it was all too much. The final push that sent me over the edge was him sliding his tongue over my clit and sucking. Heat erupted, traveling down my spine like flames and sizzling in my blood before quieting to a languid hum. My core pulsed around his fingers. My clit grew so sensitive I tried to weakly shove his head away, but he took his time before stopping.

I vibrated everywhere in the aftermath, a quiet taking over and plunging me into sated darkness. I didn't know how much time passed before he lifted me and carried me to my room, but I did know I fell asleep before my head hit my pillow.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Two

xanthophobia
(n.) fear of the color yellow

Ronan

DARKNESS CAST THE ROOM IN shadow, though a golden sheen surrounded Mila's sleeping form like a halo. The strange glow could be a trick of the light, but the night was a moonless one, meaning there wasn't any fucking light. With a sense of annoyance, I realized I needed to get my vision checked.

My gaze narrowed as it swept down her body—from her cheek resting on a curtain of long blonde hair, to the shallow breaths escaping parted lips, to the rise and fall of her breasts, and the sliver of visible skin that trailed to her navel. The view was a painter's wet dream; the girl too flawless to be real.

I wanted to slap her.

The thought was the only thing that explained the slight tremble in my hands. I slipped them in my pockets, unsure of the bizarre reaction considering my throat tightened in revulsion at the idea of actually following through with it. Though slapping some sense into Mila may benefit her. Maybe then she wouldn't apologize to men who kidnapped and degraded her. Or fall asleep in their arms after they roughly took her virginity.

I shouldn't have taken her so hard even believing she wasn't a virgin. I especially shouldn't have continued to fuck her after learning the truth, unable to find the will to stop right away. My conscience was having a party—with tea and biscuits and pathetic deflating balloons. It was uncomfortable as fuck. Especially because I could still taste her in my mouth, feel her fingers in my hair, and hear the sound of her breathy moans. All of it burrowed beneath my skin, settling something heavy in my chest. It felt like . . . cancer.

When she shivered in her sleep, I automatically stepped forward to cover her up but stopped myself, a frustrated, "Jesus Christ," passing my lips.

Running a hand across my mouth, I recognized Mila was just as infectious as her mother was claimed to be. She was clearly having ill effects on my health. The shimmer my eyes painted on her skin suddenly became clear: it was a warning sign near a pool aglow with radioactive waste.

I needed to get rid of her.

The thought was a tug-of-war inside of me; a conflict that tightened my muscles, pulling and jerking each sinew taut. The fair part of me said Mila didn't belong here. Though another part surfaced, telling me *I* took her virginity. She was mine.

The first woman to get me on my knees in over a decade was apparently this one, and all I regretted was the fact Mila could come at the drop of a hat. She tasted so good, I'd wanted to fuck her with my tongue for an hour minimum. The memory of it and how tight she was flooded heat into my chest; sent my blood boiling to the surface of my skin. An uncontrollable urge to slip between her

thighs and wake her up with my mouth began to cloud my mind and judgement.

I turned and got the fuck out of there.

Shoulders tight, I headed downstairs to the library and poured a drink, then settled behind my desk. I swirled the vodka in the glass, staring at it thoughtfully, until I figured out a plan of action. Ignoring the multiple messages from Nadia, I texted Albert, whose presence I felt enter the room a moment later.

“Release Ivan,” I said in Russian, keeping my gaze on my drink. “He can hitchhike his way to Moscow naked.”

“The men won’t like it.”

Under any other circumstances, Ivan would be six feet deep. The day he took Alexei’s side was the day he was dead to me. I would have had control over Moscow years before I did if Ivan didn’t betray, fuck me over, and then disappear—to where I now knew was Miami. I’d relish putting a bullet in his head. Though a heavy weight sat on my chest over how things went down tonight and that I wasn’t sure I’d have stopped if Mila didn’t give in. I may be on a straight path to hell, but I’d never forced a woman before. I’d never lost all sense of control like that. It made me feel like the piece-of-shit clients my mother entertained. The only way I could think of to alleviate the feeling was to release Ivan—Mila’s friend/lover/whatever the fuck he was.

“Tell him to let Alexei know the deal is on for Saturday.”

Albert remained quiet for a second before replying, “I thought he wasn’t gonna bite.”

I didn’t say anything but I didn’t have to. Thankfully, Albert didn’t question it further.

“It’s Monday.”

I looked up to meet his gaze. “What are you, a news anchor? You gonna tell me what the weather is next?”

“I am just curious why you need the rest of the week to close the deal.”

My eyes hardened. “Because I can take as much goddamn time as I want.” And because I was compromising with both sides of the conflict inside of me the idea of letting Mila go invoked.

The fact she was a virgin fucked everything up. I didn’t have the patience to go slow and sweet and pretend the woman meant anything to me besides a good lay. Though the thought of someone else giving her that seared like acid in my veins.

Knowing I was the first to be inside of her made me feel slightly . . . selfish, like a kid on Christmas morning who didn’t want to share his new BB gun. And just as that gun would be forgotten a week later, so would the irritational greed I experienced concerning her. Then I would have my revenge and never again associate yellow with anything but tropical fruit.

“I was sure you would like to be the one to deal with Ivan.”

My grip tightened on the glass, a darkness flaring in my chest. All I’d been able to see since Kostya shoved the surveillance video in my face was Ivan’s hands on Mila. Most nauseating shit I ever saw. And infuriating. The sight coated my vision with a red mist, rage blistering in my blood. I forced myself to remain in Moscow until the flames cooled, but I guessed I should have stayed longer.

“Tell him I’ll kill him if I ever see his face again,” was all I said. I’d never spoken truer words, which was why I couldn’t look at him now without backing out on the decision I’d made to release him.

Without a word, Albert disappeared to carry out my order.

Now that was out of the way, I downed the vodka in my glass and focused on more important matters. Like what product would wash off the virgin blood still gripping my dick like a vise.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Three

mamihlapinatapai

(n.) a look between two people that suggests an unspoken, shared desire

Mila

“WHERE IS HE?” I DEMANDED.

Yulia sat in a rocking chair sewing a black doll dress. The shrewd glance she bestowed upon me behind antique spectacles made me feel like she knew all of the sinful happenings of the house—including last night’s. Beneath her stare, I shifted and bumped into a framed portrait of her that sat on the nightstand.

“Leave my room before you break things,” Yulia grumbled.

I righted the frame. “This isn’t a room. It’s a morgue.” Everything was so drab and black, I doubted anyone would notice the difference if an embalming table took the twin bed’s place. The only decorations that livened up the space were multiple dolls’ sightless stares.

“Where is Ivan?” I repeated.

I’d slept the night through, not waking until the sun caressed my skin. I thought I’d had a bizarre sex dream until I saw my torn dress. I wished I could tell Ms. Marta I was living the life of one of her bodice rippers—with more murder and much less declarations of love at least—but my old tutor was probably dead. Ronan’s pessimism was rubbing off on me. As well as other things.

I wasn’t going to analyze what happened between us because it was simply too much to process. And I had other matters to worry about—such as Ivan rotting away in the dungeon. Though when I went down there this morning with some food I stole from the kitchen, his cell was empty.

“I do not know,” Yulia said simply. Then an annoying, knowing lilt touched her voice. “Why do you not ask the master?”

Heat washed up the back of my neck. “First of all, stop calling him that. It’s beyond weird. Second of all, I’m not going to ask him because—well . . .” I trailed off, growing more flustered as a satisfied smirk played on Yulia’s thin lips, her eyes focused on the swoops of her sewing needle.

I had a good reason for why I wasn’t going to ask Ronan, and it had everything to do with being nervous as hell. There wasn’t a chance I’d admit it though. I didn’t know where he and I stood now or how to act around him. It was past the time for breakfast, but he hadn’t sent for me. He was probably being served a bowl of Fruit Loops by Kylie’s sex-hungry twin without a care in the world right now, the night forgotten as soon as he showered my virgin blood off him.

I pushed the uneasy feeling away and continued, “Third of all, I know you know where Ivan is, so why don’t you reach into your good Catholic heart and tell me?”

“I am not Catholic,” she grouched, her gaze sharp. “I am Orthodox.”

“Same difference.”

“That does not make sense,” she mumbled, pulling her attention back to the small lace hem she

was sewing. I couldn't help but notice the design matched Yulia's dress.

I closed my eyes for a second and took a deep breath before opening them. "Listen, if you tell me where he is, I'll leave. If not . . ." With a demure expression, I moved to the shelf of dolls, ignoring Yulia's "Do not dare!" and picked one up. "Aw, isn't she cute?" I pouted in thought, looking her over. "I don't think the black dress matches her personality though. I'm going to find her something yellow to wear." I took a step toward the door.

"They let him go," she growled.

Pausing, I turned around. "What?"

"Can you not hear? They freed the traitor."

My heartbeat pounded in my ears. "Why?"

"Put Lada down," she insisted, her eyes on the doll as if it was her child and I was about to drop her from a bridge.

"Tell me why, and I will."

She scowled and waved a dismissive hand. "He is just lackey. Not the one Master wants."

My eyes narrowed. "The real reason."

She returned the glare for a beat, but seeing I wasn't leaving without getting what I wanted, she said like she was pulling teeth, "They will not kill him even though he is worthless traitor. They shared time in prison." Then she frowned thoughtfully. "They probably tortured him some though."

I swallowed, hoping Ivan still had all his fingers and toes, but a weight lifted off my shoulders at the fact he was alive. I didn't understand why they captured him if they were just going to let him go. Not to mention, when I spoke to Ivan, he believed Ronan would kill him. I had the feeling something had changed between yesterday and this morning, and my mind could only settle on what happened in the drawing room after sunset.

Questions—*so* many questions—stirred. I could demand answers, though I thought I had already pushed Yulia too far by the look she gave me while stabbing her needle in the pincushion like it was a voodoo doll.

Gingerly, I set Lada back on the shelf and turned to the door. "Thank you, Yulia."

"Come to my room again, you will have bad luck for seven years!"

"Grouch," I muttered on my way out, only to hear a significant insult in return.

"*Harlot.*"

Ugh.



I was relieved to see the dining room sat empty except for a single filled plate in my spot at the table. After grabbing the dish, I slipped on my boots and coat and stepped outside. The men no longer went silent in my presence, now used to me traipsing around in the snow. Pavel even came over to greet me, following my steps to the kennel while trying out some of the English he was attempting to learn. It was awful, but I'd never tell him.

Albert barked something at Pavel, who gave me an apologetic smile. "I leave now. Boss teach me

how . . .” As he scratched his head in thought, a weird sense of anticipation ballooned in my stomach at just the mention of Ronan, knowing he was the only one referred to as “boss” around here. Unable to come up with the word, Pavel moved his hands like they were on a steering wheel.

“Drive?” I supplied.

“Yes. He tell me I suck ass.”

A laugh escaped me. Pavel should probably stick to letting Ronan teach him to drive and not English.

“Well, you’d better go learn then.”

He blushed, dipped his head, and started toward the car.

When I reached the kennel, I smiled at Misha, who excitedly paced the fence. A giant of a German shepherd with solid black fur, he looked menacing, but he always greeted me, tail wagging.

Albert had told me all of the dogs’ names as well as to not feed them human food because it would make them fat and lazy. I’d forgiven the giant for his part in my abduction, but I also thought he could toss his demands in the trash along with his cigarette butts.

Kneeling in the snow in my fur coat, I passed out the breakfast on my plate and joked, “You’re all going to be vegans in no time.”

Xander dropped a strawberry with a well-timed look of disgust.

“Okay, maybe not,” I laughed.

Eighteen days had passed since my vacation in Moscow took a twisted turn. Only two and a half weeks, but it felt like forever. It was a little sad to say I’d miss some of the dogs here more than the superficial friendships I’d gained from over twenty years in Miami.

Khaos wasn’t lazing in the corner like a lion this morning, which told me he was inside the kennel, most likely making an effort to avoid me. I saved the best piece of food for him even though he always turned down my offerings as if they were peasant fare.

The snow started to soak through my coat, but the chill was better than tiptoeing around the house to avoid Ronan. Though, just as the thought hit, so did an electric tingle that slid down my back, wilting my heartbeat to slow little thumps.

I turned my head to see Ronan step out the front door wearing Brioni sans jacket, with a handgun in his waistband. My throat grew thick. I wondered if the pistol was the one he would use to shoot my papa in the head. I had nothing else to barter to save my father; nothing I hadn’t already offered only to be turned down.

Ronan’s dark gaze met mine, warm like the sun and as cold as an icy whip of wind. The look reminded me of discarded Bibles, restrained wrists, and naked skin. My breath slowed, each frozen puff of air more difficult to push out. The eye contact began to sear; to search the dark corners in my chest, slip through the cracks, and spread outward. Unable to find my breath or control the fire running rampant, I was the first to look away.

I gripped the cold chain-link fence, vaguely noticing Misha’s nose nudging my fingers as Ronan’s presence prickled my back. It was a frustrating development that my body lit up like a firework display when the man was near, pushing aside all qualms he would murder my papa in cold blood. I needed therapy. Or church. Anything to exorcise the demons that raged in eagerness at the sound of his voice. He wasn’t even speaking to me, but the Russian brought back the rough words he said to me last night with his head between my thighs.

I closed my eyes as a flush rose beneath my skin, stinging on contact with the icy air. Of course a “fuck” came out of his mouth, reminding me of when he said it while deep inside me. The rasp of his voice stamped me like a brand, the burn licking at the soreness in my core and leaving an empty ache

behind.

One taste of sin, and now I was dying for another.

Car doors slammed shut, then the sound of tires moved down the drive. I released a ragged breath. I didn't know what I expected after losing my virginity, but if this insanity was what everyone felt, how did anything else get done besides procreation?

My legs were growing numb, so I gave Misha one last pet, then stood with my plate and headed into the outbuilding. Khaos lounged on a torn-up bed that leaked stuffing in his chain-link kennel. My heart sank when I saw his paw was bleeding, staining the cement floor with a few drops of crimson.

I lowered to my knees in front of his kennel to get a better look. Something sharp was wedged between his paw pads. His stare followed me, but he wasn't growling for a change, so I edged the gate open and slowly moved inside, speaking soft, encouraging words while watching for any sign I made him uncomfortable. He didn't do anything but view me with steely, dark eyes.

Nervously, I stayed a few feet away, having never been this close before. Even Albert maintained his distance, pushing Khaos's food bowl under the gate with his boot. The idea I was getting somewhere made my chest clench with hope, but the emotion faded as thoughts surfaced of how to help him. I wondered how anyone would remove the object in his paw without knocking him out. And I knew from experience, being drugged sucked.

"Can I see your paw, buddy?"

I swore, a kingly glint in the dog's eyes said "*nyet*" like I was a servant invading his rest.

"You're just going to lie here with that stick in your paw forever?"

He turned his head away from me as if I was a massive waste of his time. The dog had the weird ability to make me feel beneath him.

"Fine. Don't look at me," I said, oddly slighted. "But your choice is either me or etorphine, and, trust me, the latter leaves a massive headache."

He licked his front leg, bored with anything I had to say. A feeling arose that he knew he needed help; he would just never deign to admit it. I shared the stubborn trait, and it only made me more sympathetic to his plight. The fact I was so near to him and he wasn't up in arms gave me the courage to edge closer. My hands grew clammy, and I wiped them on my coat.

"This might sting a little, but don't hate me, okay?"

With a shaky inhale, I grasped the stick and yanked it out. Movement, bristling sable fur, and a snarl filled the kennel. It all happened so fast I didn't notice the bleeding puncture marks in my wrist until my vision began to dot and a shakiness flared in my veins.

Khaos bit me.

A cool numbness spread from the wound up my arm. The marks weren't that deep, but he must have nicked an artery because blood dripped steadily to the floor. With a growl, Khaos stalked away from me to the corner of the kennel.

My wrist began to throb, but even with the pain, I didn't blame him for biting me. Sometimes, I lashed out at the piece of furniture I stubbed my toe on. My rising concern was owed to the fact I hadn't eaten a decent meal in days. The emptiness in my stomach roiled. My blood pressure dived so low it left my head spinning and my muscles weak. I braced my hands on the cold cement floor and breathed deeply to sway the darkness rising, but it didn't help.

I passed out.

Consciousness returned, though as soon as I opened my eyes, I closed them tightly at the sight of Khaos standing over me, sharp teeth bared. My heart rate kicked into overdrive, fear grabbing my lungs.

“Please don’t eat me,” I blurted unsteadily. “I won’t taste very good to you. I’m vegan.”

A huff came from him, his hot breath warming my face. A tremble coasted through me while I lay supine on the cement floor with a blood-hungry beast deciding if I was edible. Even a freaking dog wasn’t sure if I was worth the trouble.

“If you’re going to make me a snack, just do it already.” I didn’t know if it was the fear of death or low blood sugar that suddenly clogged my throat with emotion. “Nobody will miss me.” A cold nose sniffed my cheek. “My mother’s dead and was apparently a sadist. My papa’s also a terrible person and will probably be tortured to death soon. Ivan thinks I’m a traitor.” A tear escaped. “The way it’s looking, if I get out of here alive, I’m going to end up in the sex industry.” The words came out with a sob. “And I’ll only make pennies because I’m an emotional fuck.”

A drool-laden lick to my face pulled me out of my pathetic reverie. Cautiously, I opened my eyes to see Khaos towering over me, his expression thoughtful.

“Just for clarification, does that mean you forgive me, or that you’ve decided I’m dessert?”

He tilted his head—then, seemingly over the situation, he moved to lie down on his bed and began licking his injured paw. A heavy breath whooshed out of me. I had stuffing in my hair, tears on my cheeks, and blood dripping from my wrist, but when I sat beside Khaos and he let me run a hand down his back, a sense of purpose filled a hole in my heart.

CHAPTER *Thirty-Four*

borborygmi

(n.) the rumbling sounds your stomach makes

Mila

JUST AS I REACHED THE kennel's exit, the door opened to reveal a stern-faced Albert. I took a step back, hid my wrist in my coat sleeve, and forced an innocent expression. His suspicious gaze slid from mine to take in the room behind me.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked.

"Digging an escape hole into the woods."

Albert was either used to my sarcasm or I was the most pathetic captive in town. He didn't even consider the possibility I was trying to escape, his eyes narrowing on the only dog in the building.

"What are *you* doing here? I thought you left to go kill people in Moscow." My stomach tipped when I realized if Albert was here, Ronan probably was too. They'd left the house together. I wondered if they forgot the keys to the underworld and turned back for them.

"So you wait to do the things you are not supposed to after we leave?"

I frowned in thought. "Yeah. That sounds about right." He grumbled something in Russian, and I pushed past him. "Now, excuse me. That escape plan didn't go very well considering the solid cement floor, so I need to go think of another."

I only took two steps out the door before his voice drew me to a pause.

"Mila." The word was a low warning against my back. "You are bleeding."

Glancing down, I saw a few drops of crimson on the snow and then closed my eyes. Albert had warned me to stay away from Khaos. Anxiety tightened my stomach at the thought something could happen to him because I didn't listen.

"What happened?"

"I fell," I said blandly.

"You fell."

"Uh-huh."

"Turn around."

I hesitated, sawing my lip between my teeth. Albert loved the dogs, even though he was prejudiced about the idea of them being fat and lazy. I could only hope he would understand and Khaos wouldn't be punished.

Slowly, I turned and allowed Albert to push up my coat sleeve. I winced when he brushed the wound. He took in the bite mark on my wrist and sighed.

"I told you not to go near him, did I not?" The disappointment in his voice made my chest ache.

"He had something stuck in his paw," I explained thickly. "I pulled it out. He didn't mean to hurt me . . . He even let me pet him afterward."

Albert shook his head. "You are lucky he did not take off fingers. The last man was not so lucky."

I swallowed as I recalled seeing a guard with only three fingers on one hand. I liked all ten of mine right where they were, but it still wouldn't have changed my mind about helping Khaos—especially now I'd gotten somewhere with him. He may look at me like he was doing *me* a favor by letting me pet him, but I knew he needed the attention. And dishing out affection was balm to my soul.

"Then you believe me? It was just a reflex. He didn't mean to do it."

"I believe you, but it does not change the fact you need stitches." He sighed and released my arm. "Go to the house."

"You won't punish Khaos, will you?"

He gave me a long, significant look. "I will not."

I trusted him, but Albert was suddenly not my concern. "Is Ronan here?"

"*Da*. In the house."

The nervousness that twisted my gut manifested a flare of frustration. "Why of all days is this the one you had to return unexpectedly?" I asked. "Can't a captive catch a break?"

His expression was dry. "Pavel hit a pothole and drove the car into the ditch."

"Oh . . ." I could just imagine all the "fucks" Ronan had to say about the incident. "No one's hurt, are they?"

"*Nyet*," he answered, and then a small smile appeared. "Besides Pavel's ego."

Poor Pavel. Though I couldn't focus on him for more than a second when the doubt intensified along with the throb in my wrist. While a part of me believed Ronan wouldn't care about a little flesh wound, another told me Khaos might end up at the pound.

"You won't tell Ronan what happened, right?"

Albert grunted. "Do not push your luck."

Hope crashed and burned, and, with a budding sense of urgency, I turned and walked back to the house, slipping through the door onto the freshly cleaned floors Yulia was still mopping near the staircase. Ronan was probably in the library, so I made my way there to explain the situation before Albert got the chance.

"*Stop!*"

Freezing, I followed Yulia's irate gaze to the mud I was tracking in as well as the blood dripping from my coat.

"Do not dare take another step!" she growled.

I kicked my ankle boots off toward the door, splattering more mud across the floor. Yulia sputtered in outrage. Again, I started toward my destination but halted at the next screech that reached my ears.

"And the coat, heathen!"

I glared and defiantly shrugged off the coat, letting it fall to a dirty heap on the marble. Before I could take another step, Ronan appeared from the hall that led to the library. Yulia went demurely quiet and began to mop the floor as if she wasn't just shouting insults at me.

The touch of his stare stalled the beat of my heart, washing in heat and uncertainty. Trying to conceal the wound as if it would protect Khaos, I held my wrist to my chest, but I couldn't hide the blood trailing down my arm. Ronan took in the sight, his eyes clouding over like a dark winter sky. I had a feeling he already knew what happened—no thanks to twenty-first century technology—and it was confirmed only a second later.

Coolly, he pulled the handgun from his waistband and headed past me and out the door.

My stomach plummeted. An icy sensation shocked me like an electric wire, freezing my feet to the

floor. As soon as the knowledge of what he planned to do sank in, I turned and ran after him. In my haste, I almost collided with a guard on the porch, who bit out a curse, but it was lost to me as well as the chill of snow beneath my bare feet.

“No!” I reached Ronan and grabbed his arm, but he shook off my hand. “Don’t do this,” I begged. My heart beat so hard it stole my breath. I moved in front of him to block his way to the kennel, only for him to push past me.

“Just let me explain!”

Grabbing a fistful of his shirt at his waist, I forced myself between him and Khaos again. I was trying to restrain a brick wall, and it only worked because he let me.

Ronan paused, drew a hard gaze to mine, and pointed to the house with his gun. “Go back inside.”

I ignored him and blurted, “He was hurt!” My grip tightened on his shirt, tears stinging the backs of my eyes. “I knew there was a chance he would bite me, but I helped him anyway. It’s my fault, not his!”

Ronan wasn’t listening to me. He didn’t care about the reason.

A blanket of tension lay over the yard, all eyes on us.

“Go. Inside.” His voice was calm, but the edges were rough, commanding absolute obedience and twisting my resolve. His gaze penetrated my blood with ice. He would do this no matter how much I begged. He would destroy Khaos and stomp on my soft heart in the process. Because I was worthless to him. Just like I was to my papa, to The Moorings, and to Ivan. But now I’d experienced a tiny slice of belonging in getting through to Khaos, I refused to let Ronan steal it from me.

Contempt swallowed me whole, lighting a fire in my veins.

“You want my misery? Then take it!” I shoved his chest, the ache in my wrist shooting up my arm. “You can have all of it, but I *won’t* let you do this.”

His jaw clenched when I hit him again, but he didn’t budge from his spot.

“You don’t throw things away just because they hurt you!” My chest heaved, the force of my feelings sending my blood pressure diving again, and black spots swam in my blurred vision. A wave of dizziness dropped my gaze to his lips; to the thin scar through the bottom one. The chill biting at my skin kept me conscious even as my ears rang like I’d been sucked underwater. It reminded me of how I believed he’d gotten the scar.

A heaviness pooled in my chest, snuffing out the anger within. “You hurt me . . .” The quiet words disappeared in a gust of wind that sent snow whipping through the air. “And I still would have helped you. I would have saved you when you were a boy, even knowing what you would do to me . . .”

I was crying steadily, laying out my heart at Ronan’s feet in front of all of his men, while his expression conveyed he’d be more interested in reading the dull section of the newspaper. Though something obscure passed through his eyes before they slid to my wrist, which throbbed with my heartbeat. Then he looked at my bare feet, making me painfully aware of the snow burning my soles.

The high emotions dropped, leaving me drained and unsteady. When I swayed, he put the gun back in his waistband, wrapped an arm around my waist, and lifted me. The man could shoot an old woman’s pet Fluffy without remorse, and still, I felt comfort in his arms.

A shiver coasted through me, my chilled body absorbing the heat of his. “I’ll hate you forever if you hurt him,” I said numbly.

“Your dramatics are a bit much for a Tuesday morning.”

His words made me uncomfortably aware of all the eyes on us. As a little embarrassment arose, I turned my face into Ronan’s neck and murmured, “It was a great monologue.”

“Oscar-worthy,” he returned with a trace of dry humor. “The near-fainting really brought it

home.”

When we entered the house, he spoke in Russian to Yulia on the way to the dining room, where he set me on my feet.

He held out his hand. “Let me see it.”

Knowing what he was asking for, I brought my wrist to my chest protectively. “It’s really not that bad.”

“Then let me fucking see it.”

I sighed and complied. Ronan’s eyes on the wound made it throb, and I bit my lip to hide a wince before saying, “I don’t suppose you have a Band-Aid around here?”

Ronan’s dark gaze met mine for a second with a sense of aggravation. “You need stitches.”

My stomach turned at the thought. I was already a strong breeze away from fainting; the pain of a needle sewing my skin back together would surely tip the scales.

“I want a second opinion,” I told him as if I’d just gotten bad news from a doctor.

He gave me a dry look, and when Yulia entered the room with a first-aid kit in hand, Ronan said something to her in Russian. She didn’t even glance at my wrist before announcing, “You need stitches, *devushka*.”

I glared at Ronan.

“Sit,” he demanded.

I plopped down in my chair.

Polina was next to join the party. She cast a curious glance at my wrist as if it was the most interesting thing to happen that morning. I didn’t see the cook often, but her Russian shouts after a loud *clang* of pots and pans were a daily occurrence.

When she set a filled plate in front of me, my stomach growled loudly. I was starving, though I was also made with two heaping cups of stubbornness. I thanked Polina but didn’t touch the food.

With a noise of frustration, Ronan grabbed my face and turned it to his. “You’re going to eat every goddamn crumb on that plate.”

I met his eyes. “I will if you promise you won’t do anything to Khaos.”

“I don’t have to promise you anything.”

Something told me he didn’t hand out promises often, and if I got one from him, he would uphold it.

“You don’t have to,” I said softly. “I’m asking you to.”

A long second passed, a muscle in his jaw ticking in thought. He was so close his eyes glimmered dark blue. I’d always thought he was insanely handsome, but now, the sight hit me like a blow to the chest, spreading warmth outward. Just the commanding pressure of his hand on my face dragged a hot net through my blood, sliding lower to the soreness between my legs. My lips parted, and his gaze dropped to my mouth before lifting back to my eyes.

“Your food strike is over,” he said harshly and waited for me to agree.

I nodded, my chest growing lighter with the realization he was compromising with me. His thumb brushed my cheek, and my body ached for him to draw the caress to my lips, which tingled in awareness.

“You’ll let Yulia stitch you up without a single complaint,” he continued.

Breathlessly, I nodded.

“And if I find out you’ve been anywhere near Khaos again”—his grip tightened—“not even a river of your tears will save him. Do you understand me?”

I pulled my lip between my teeth, liking that condition the least. Though keeping my distance from

Khaos was better than the alternative. When I nodded, his hand slipped from my face, leaving a hot impression behind. I wanted a verbal promise, but the subtle look in his eyes seemed to be more than enough.

I just compromised with *D'yavol*.

My heart clenched with all kinds of naïve assumptions: Maybe this promise would open up another; maybe deep beneath Ronan's hard shell, lay a wonderland made of chocolate; maybe I'd found his saving grace.

Though my hopeful musings nose-dived when he left with a parting word.

“Don't ever fucking disobey me in front of my men again.”

CHAPTER *Thirty Five*

kilig
(n.) the feeling of butterflies in one's stomach

Mila

INKED FINGERS SLID DOWN MY legs, and the roughness of his hands left goose bumps in their wake. My breath caught when he pushed my thighs apart. My skin was so sensitive, the lightest touch hummed below the surface. His mouth trailed down my neck, sucking and biting a path to my breasts. An emptiness pulsed in my core, begging for pressure and friction—

A *thump* snuffed out the flame inside of me like a candle.

My eyes shot open to see the noise was due to the book falling off my lap. I exhaled a ragged breath and, with a sense of disgust at the immoral daydream that sucked me under, I got up from the window seat to pace my room.

It was after eleven, but I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, a restlessness played beneath my skin, stretching my body thin. The pull of the moon was working its magic on my newly defiled state. I wished that was all it was, but my fantasies had nothing to do with carnal rituals and lesbian trysts in the woods.

I could still feel him all over me: my mouth, my neck, my mind. The persistent ache between my thighs. At the thought, my heartbeat slid to my core, my nipples hardening beneath my tank top.

I was losing my mind.

With rising frustration, I grabbed my book and padded down the hall. The house sat still and dark without Ronan's presence. He left for Moscow shortly after Yulia finished stitching my wrist and hadn't returned. I wondered if he was dining on Nadia at the moment; if he was fucking her how *she* needed it. The thought soured in my stomach, so I pushed it away.

I headed down the stairs, which gave a quiet creak under my weight. Moonlight cast the library in rays of silver that sparkled with particles of dust. I stretched to my toes to put *The Grapes of Wrath* back in its rightful place. And then the familiar smell of cigar smoke—spice and eucalyptus—filled my senses.

“*Kotyonok.*”

The book slipped from my fingers, and I spun around, my heartbeat shaking. Ronan sat behind his desk, a formidable shadow below a white cloud of smoke.

I put a hand on my chest. “*God*, you scared me.” It was at that moment I realized I no longer feared his presence and that the monster I once dreaded was now the one I was relieved to run into in the dark.

“If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to seduce me,” he drawled, his dark gaze running down my bare thighs with a tingling glide of heat. “But we both know your efforts are more forward—and, shall we say, *awkward*—than that.”

He looked and sounded like a gentleman, but as he exhaled an indifferent breath of smoke, tendrils curled like horns above his head.

He was talking about the first time I kissed him—how I almost missed his mouth completely. The annoying comment should stamp down all lust inside, but it didn't.

“It's not as if your seduction efforts couldn't use a little more tact,” I told him.

He watched me for a second. “Don't worry about my efforts, *kotyonok*.”

I raised a brow. “Then don't worry about mine.”

His eyes held mine, something darker than the shadows slithering through them. Silence settled in the air, putting pressure on my lungs. Trying to find my breath, I pulled my attention from him, picked up the book, and made sure I didn't damage the spine before putting it back in its spot.

I felt his gaze trail down my back, over my ass, and to the backs of my thighs. The look seared—hot and cold, like the burn of an ice cube on skin. I skimmed my fingers across the old spines, unable to focus on anything besides his presence wrapping around my body like black silk.

The ibuprofen Yulia shoved at me every four hours kept the pain in my wrist down, but it did nothing to stop the throb between my legs. The heat inside rivaled the time I was pressed against a hotel door with Ronan's thigh working me higher and higher.

My mind hit rewind, taking me back to that night in Moscow and my stay thereafter. Something clicked into place. The realization hit me in the chest, and my fingers slipped down the spines.

I turned to face him. “Why did you play with me for so long when you knew who my papa was from the beginning?”

Ronan's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything.

He didn't need to.

I knew why he'd waited so long to follow through with his plan of revenge.

He liked me.

Every yellow, rebellious, heart-on-my-sleeve inch of me.



An hour had passed since I walked out of the library and fell into bed. Sleep was now impossible to find. If it wasn't my heart jumping to ridiculous conclusions, it was my body growing hotter with every brush of the covers.

I kicked off the sheets, but I was still spun in a web of heat. With a groan of frustration, I rolled to my other side. My sleep shorts rode up, pulling tight between my thighs. I tried to ignore the way my clit tingled for friction, but all I could think about was how it felt when he went down on me and the roughness of his hands on my skin. My heart ran off course, my breaths becoming too tight to release.

The longer I lay there, the more the fire and resentment burned. Ronan had taken my virginity, stepped on it like garbage, and I was just supposed to say thank you. Frustration seared the back of my neck. It felt like I was in some kind of limbo that wouldn't end until he'd finished what he started. And I sure as hell wasn't going to feel like this for the rest of my life.

I shot to my feet and strode down the hall, determination urging me on. When I stepped into

Ronan's room, I stopped short. My mouth went dry at the sight: smooth, inked muscle beneath black sheets. He slept like a human man—lying on his stomach with one arm under the pillow.

For a moment, I second-guessed myself. He looked larger than life with so much skin visible. The sheets were down by his calves as if he'd gotten too hot and kicked them off, leaving the length of his toned back and black boxer briefs on display. All hesitation stalled at the desire to see the ink he hid behind Versace.

I moved closer until I stood beside the king-size bed. His face was turned from me, his breaths steady. The entirety of his back was covered with tattoos, from Russian letters spread across his shoulder blades, to a tiger, and a devil with wings and horns.

It was strange to see this man at his most vulnerable. Did he dream? And if he did, was it filled with blood and murder? We might not see each other ever again shortly, but a part of me hoped I'd leave him to dream of yellow.

Subconsciously, I reached out to touch the ink—though before I could, I was thrown onto my back on the bed, the coldness of a gun pressed against my temple. My chest heaved, my gaze on Ronan straddling my hips. He took me in for a second, almost as if he was confused.

I found another weakness.

He was weak right when he woke.

"Fuck, Mila," he growled and then threw his gun across the room, where it hit the wall and fell to the floor. "I could have fucking killed you."

As the shock died, I became aware of all the heat pressed against me; of his legs straddling my hips; of his shirtless torso decorated with more ink. My eyes slid down his body. I had no idea why he hadn't taken his clothes off sooner if he was trying to sleep with me. I'd like to say I was strong enough to resist temptation in all its forms, but . . . just seeing him in a pair of boxer briefs made me want to rock my hips against him and slide my hands from his pecs to his abs.

I pulled my lip between my teeth and dragged my eyes back up to his.

The confusion melted from his gaze when he saw my expression, morphing into a heat that smoldered. One hand braced beside my head, he ran the other across his face before dropping it and saying harshly, "I get enough easy pussy. I'm not in the mood for more."

His words should dissuade any woman and send her running to find literally anyone else. But I didn't want another. Not to mention, he was incredibly hard against me. Who was the liar now?

"You did this to me." My eyes narrowed. "Now, fix it."

CHAPTER *Thirty-Six*

noctiluca
(adj.) shining or luminescent in the dark

Ronan

“WHEN SOMEONE CALLS YOU A whore, you get the fuck out of their bed,” I growled. “It’s called having a little self-respect.”

Did I have to teach this girl the basics before she went home to Miami and let men degrade her? Simply the thought sent a violent fire up my back, searing me with the claim only *I* was allowed to degrade her.

“I don’t need your respect.” Her soft American accent crept beneath my skin, slid downward, and grabbed ahold of my cock just as I imagined her hand would.

My gaze hardened. “You don’t know what you need.”

“Maybe not, but I do know what I want.”

It was clear what that was, but I found myself asking anyway. “And what do you want?”

“Right now . . . you.”

Fuck. That wasn’t what I expected her to say. I anticipated a silent blush or for her to ask for an orgasm. Not *me*, her goddamn kidnapper. And right after I insulted her no less—which was a reflex to get her out of my bed before I took what she was offering. She had no reservations about putting herself out there. Her soft heart was going to get her killed. How she’d survived so long and still maintained her innocence was a mystery.

“You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“I’m not the one with a hard-on,” she returned.

A sliver of humor rose up my throat, but I held in the laugh. I was trying to make a point here—that you shouldn’t put your heart out for the world to see if you wanted to live—and I wasn’t going to let her ruin it with her mouth.

“This is why I don’t fuck virgins. They get clingy as hell.”

She laughed lightly. “I’m not going to fall in love with you, if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

First off, “afraid” was the last thing I felt when it came to fucking her. Second off, what the hell? This girl could fall in love with a goddamn rock. Then my thoughts went to Ivan, and poison blistered through my veins.

“Why not, *kotyonok?*” I slid my thumb across her lips, my voice lowering to a warning. “Is your heart already taken?”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear what she had to say, so, when her lips parted with a shallow breath, I pushed my thumb between them. Her eyes were half-lidded as she closed her mouth around my finger. The hot glide of her tongue slid down to solidify in my groin. I pulled my thumb free and wiped the wetness across her lips, taking in everything about her.

Moonlight played across her body as if it loved her. Venomous snakes had stripes; Mila glowed. The only shadows that touched her were mine.

Her skin was flawless, her waves of hair spread out like she was posed for a centerfold. A thin tank top concealed the rise and fall of her breasts. She was hard to look at and hard to look away from. So soft, so perfect, so goddamn fuckable.

It was a nightmare.

She sawed her lip between her teeth, her breath growing slower the longer I looked at her. I could close the distance so easily and feel her tongue against mine. I wasn't against kissing, but I'd never been so compelled by the idea like I was with her either.

Unwillingly, my gaze drifted to her nipples, visible beneath her tank top. The bright, sexless sunflowers all over it did nothing to help control the urge to yank down the thin fabric and suck a nipple into my mouth. As if her tits weren't tempting enough, the heat of her pussy seared my cock through her shorts. My muscles tightened as I resisted the urge to grind against the warmth; to tug her flimsy shorts to the side and push deep inside of her. I knew I'd find her wet and tight—so *fucking* tight. My blood roared in my ears and cast a cloudy sheen over my vision.

With a growl of frustration, I sat back on my haunches in an effort to put some distance between us so I could think. Karma would bite me in the ass if I fucked this girl. I knew what she needed and that I couldn't give it to her. My conscience was a goddamn cockblock. I wanted Mila so bad, the desire grabbed ahold of me, twisted beneath my skin, and demanded I take her. At this point, I didn't think I could allow her to go even if she changed her mind. And the loss of control suddenly made me hate her a little bit.

All thoughts stalled when Mila pushed up from the bed with a hand and ran the other down my chest. The simple touch burned like a line of fire, sending all the blood in my body south. We both watched her hand trail down my abs before it stopped at my briefs, where she traced the waistband with a finger. Each back and forth motion throbbed in my groin.

When her hazy gaze lifted to mine, a ripple of darkness slithered through me. The lust in her stare was all mine. Until Saturday at least. The idea she would give those eyes to someone else afterward made me fist a hand in her hair to keep her stare on mine. Fuck karma. I needed to get this shit out of my system right now.

"I want . . ." She flushed and, unable to finish the sentence, her fingers tugged my waistband down an inch, showing me what she wanted but couldn't say. Her hand grazed the head of my cock. The smallest brush turned my blood to liquid fire, drumming hot and heavy inside of me. But I needed to hear her say the words.

"You're going to have to be more specific."

"English," she said softly.

Jesus Christ. For the fifth time with this girl, I didn't realize I'd spoken in Russian. Frustration lit up my back.

"Be more specific."

My annoyance faded when her hand slipped beneath my briefs and over the length of my dick. I hissed through my teeth. Heat curled at the base of my spine, sending a shudder outward. Nothing was practiced about her touch—in fact, it felt a little unsure. I didn't know if it was because I'd waited so long to get to this point with her or because her inexperience was a novelty, but, disturbingly enough, her hand down my briefs made me harder than I'd ever been in my life.

"I want this," she breathed, wrapping her fingers around my cock before slowly stroking it from the base to the head. A low groan rose up my throat. I needed to tighten her grip, but knowing I

couldn't let her push me too far yet, I covered her hand with mine to still the movement.

"There aren't going to be any rose petals or lit candles," I told her.

She pursed her lips. "Not even one—"

"No."

The smallest smile appeared, and I experienced the weird urge to kiss it off her mouth. I found the compulsion so annoying my grasp on her hair tightened, roughly tugging her head back farther.

She exhaled. "Fine."

Feeling like I needed to make myself crystal clear, I said, "I'm not going to fuck you slow and sweet."

"Bummer." She pouted. "I thought I was in for something really romantic here."

I was too hard to be amused by her sarcasm.

"It'll mean nothing to me afterward."

"*God*, stop talking," she said with frustration. "I'm not that delicate. Just fuck me like you would Nadia."

My entire body quieted. The fact that shit just came out of her mouth sent a wave of fury down my spine. In a flash, I threw her onto her hands and knees, yanked her head back by her hair, and pressed my hard cock against her ass.

"*This?*" I growled. "This is how you want me to fuck you?"

She panted, not resisting the hold I had on her hair, before saying harshly, "As long as it lasts longer than two seconds this time."

I was now more pissed than I was hard. And it had nothing to do with her revoking my man card. Mila didn't seem to give a shit if I fucked her like anyone else, while I felt like setting Moscow on fire at just the idea she was imagining someone other than me.

When I released my grip on her hair, she exhaled, her head falling forward.

"I don't want to hear that name on your lips ever again."

"Why not?"

"Because I fucking said so." Because I didn't like it. If she wanted it just like Nadia, she should have brought another woman in with her. And, oddly enough, I didn't want anyone else's hands on Mila—females included.

She glanced at me over her shoulder, and the soft look in her eyes, unsure but hot, rushed all my attention to my dick pressed against her ass. The anger dissolved, leaving my body tight and throbbing with suppressed lust.

I grabbed her shorts and pulled them down, exhaling a ragged breath at the sight. Running my hands over her ass, I molded the soft flesh to fit my palms before slapping it. Mila inhaled, and her hips arched, all that blonde hair trailing to the small of her back.

I couldn't stop myself from pulling back to bite each bare cheek and then lick her from her pussy to her ass. She moaned and rocked back against me. I wanted to make her come on my tongue, but a single taste made my balls ache.

I wiped a hand across my mouth in an effort to calm the blood pounding in my ears. Though the sight of her on her hands and knees stretched my willpower thin. She was so goddamn hot, I slapped her ass again hard.

"Ow," she complained half-heartedly. "That hurt."

"You asked for this, *kotyonok*."

"Can you just get on with—" I pushed two fingers inside of her, and she sighed, "*Oh, God.*"

She clenched down on me so tightly, I groaned and pulled my fingers free before I could give in to

the urge to fuck her with them. Making a noise of frustration, she turned her head to watch me wrap my hand around my shaft and stroke it once, her eyes half-lidded.

“Do that again,” she breathed.

Fuck. She wanted to watch me jack off.

“Another time.” When I wasn’t going to have to fight the need to come.

When I rubbed the head of my cock against her pussy, the heat of it almost burning, a tremble coasted through her, and her fingers gripped the sheets.

“Nervous?” I asked coarsely.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

She was tense as fuck when I eased inside of her—so tense she almost resisted me completely. I caressed her ass and started saying shit I had no control of, unaware of what language I spoke. It could have been fucking Mandarin.

“I know you can take me, *kotyonok* . . . You’re so goddamn wet . . . This is the nicest cunt I’ve ever seen.”

She finally relaxed. I watched for her reaction while sliding in farther, until I was as deep as I could go. *Fuck me.* My eyes closed for a second. She gripped me like a tight, wet fist. Every cell in me ached for more, but I gave her a moment to adjust, running my hands over the curves of her ass and squeezing.

After a moment, she rocked back against me, and I gave her more, pulling out all the way before slowly pushing back in. She groaned and dropped to her elbows, bracing her hands on the headboard. I knew this pussy was made to fuck, but . . . *Jesus.* I slapped her ass in frustration, and when she clenched around me, it took every ounce of restraint to maintain the slow pace.

She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes settling on each lazy thrust. I rasped, “You like to watch?” and before she could answer, I fucked her a little harder.

Her head fell forward, and the sight of her biting down on my pillow to quiet her moan sent a heady rush to my head, lighting a violent fire inside me. I hissed at the tight pull of her cunt, pressure tightening at the base of my spine. I was lost for a moment, taking her hard and watching her ass jiggle with every thrust.

When she reached back and grabbed my wrist, her nails digging in, I realized it was a reflex of pain and slowed. She was probably still sore from last night, and I was fucking her too hard. I didn’t like the heavy feeling that knowledge sent to my chest. Though what I didn’t like the most was the fact she wasn’t going to tell me I was hurting her.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, I pulled her back against my chest. She was panting; fucked into a soft, compliant haze. Her head fell to rest against my shoulder. I felt her heart pounding, her fingers gripping my wrist, and her breath against my neck. They weren’t things I usually noticed, and somehow, all of it created a knot behind my ribs.

I skimmed my lips against her ear, my voice rough. “If it’s too much, tell me. Or I’ll stop right now.”

I’d rather take a bullet than stop right now.

“I told you I can take it,” she breathed.

“I don’t give a fuck what you can take. I’m not into dishing out pain.”

“You’re not into slow and sweet either. I don’t know what you want from me.” Insecurity touched her voice. “I want you to like it.”

Fuck. She wanted to please *me* right now. Why did she have to be so selfless? As much as it

annoyed me, it also hit me in the solar plexus. I couldn't seem to do the right thing with her. She felt too good, too soft, too fucking yellow. It was greedy as hell, but I wanted anything she would give me.

I nipped her earlobe. "Trust me, *kotyonok*, I'd like it if I were fucking you in slow motion." I tugged at her tank top. "Now, take this off."

She pulled it over her head, the motion consuming me with her soft, summery scent. She smelled so damn good I bit down on her neck and sucked, leaving another mark behind. With a sigh, she turned her head to give me more access. I squeezed one of her tits in my hand and told her, "I think I'll fuck these next."

With a moan, her head lolled on my shoulder when I rolled her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. As I played with her tits and sucked at her neck, she grew restless, rocking her hips for friction before rising, pulling me out almost completely, and then taking me back in as deep as possible.

I groaned and let her fuck me for a moment until she was whimpering and trembling for more.

I nuzzled her neck. "Do you want to come?"

"Yes," she panted. "Please."

The sound of Mila begging gave me a fucking rush that rivaled any drug on the market. At least, I imagined so. I'd never touched a single narcotic in my life.

I nipped her shoulder and said, "Such good manners," before sliding my hand between her legs. She bounced on me, taking me in with lazy strokes, while I rubbed her clit. Her sounds were pushing me to the edge. So much soft skin and hair. It was all fucking over me.

"I'm gonna . . ."

I pushed her to her hands and knees and fucked her through her orgasm, holding her hips up when her legs gave out. She shuddered and clenched around me so tightly, the heat sliding down my back threatened to erupt. Breath ragged, I stilled and ran my hand up her spine.

"I want to come inside you." I had no idea that came out of my mouth until it was too late to stop.

She sighed, giving me her lazy, nonverbal consent.

"Don't let me come inside you," I growled. I shouldn't even be fucking her without a condom—regardless if I was clean, and so was she considering her inexperience.

"I have an IUD."

I processed her words for a second before asking darkly, "Why?" She hated doctors. The only reason she would have an IUD was . . . fucking infuriating. "Were you going to let someone else have this?" I squeezed her ass cheek.

"No . . . I don't know."

Not the right answer. In fact, it was so much the wrong answer, I slapped her ass hard enough to welt. She yelped and arched her back, her eyes opening to shoot me a glare over her shoulder. Her annoyance faded when I pulled out and thrust back in at an angle that hit her G-spot. A low moan rose up her throat. I realized I'd never heard her say my name before. And I suddenly needed to.

"You want more, *kotyonok*?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me who's fucking you," I demanded harshly.

"Does it matter?" She tried to rock back against me, but I held her still by her hips.

"Yes, it fucking matters."

"Why? In the end, I'll only remember your headboard. It really is a sexy design."

Gritting my teeth, I threw her to her back so roughly she bounced. I pushed inside of her in one hard thrust, braced my hands beside her head, and watched her eyes roll back. Her fingers gripped my

wrists.

“Is this what you want?” I growled.

She was flushed from her orgasm, her breathing rough, but she still managed to say, “I want candles.”

It was so fucking ridiculous, my anger faded. Her soft hands slid down my sides and grabbed ahold of my hips to urge me on. I hated this position. Staring into a woman’s eyes during sex felt so intimate it was nauseating, but Mila wasn’t meeting my gaze; she was looking at where my cock was deep inside her. I found it hot and somewhat . . . annoying she was focused on the sight instead of my face.

“*Move*,” she breathed.

“No. You want your missionary fuck? Tell me who fucked you first.”

“You.”

She trailed her fingers up my arms, across my shoulders, and into my hair, sending a shudder down my spine.

“My name, *kotyonok*.”

“Ronan.”

A groan rumbled in my chest, and I started a steady pace, pushing into her with long, slow thrusts. She braced her hands on the bed behind her and rose up to kiss my chest with a graze of teeth, running her mouth everywhere she could reach. I couldn’t bring myself to make her stop.

“Who’s fucking you now?”

Kissing the corner of my lips, she breathed, “Ronan.” Then she slid her tongue into my mouth, and I had no willpower to resist sucking it.

I fisted her hair and tugged her head back so I could see her eyes. “And who fucks you from now on?” Until Saturday. Everything in me hated the idea so much, I thrust into her hard, forcing her next word out with a moan.

“*Ronan*.”

I dropped to my elbows, relishing the feel of her tits against my bare chest. She wrapped her long legs around my hips, and when I rolled my pelvis to brush her clit, a sigh of pleasure escaped her.

I skimmed my lips down her neck. “You like that, *kotyonok*?”

She ran her nails down the length of my back in response, rolling her hips against mine with every thrust. Her little moans were so damn sexy, I kissed her to taste them. She sipped on my bottom lip and then ran her tongue across my scar. I exhaled roughly. Whenever she did that, it made me feel as if I’d been lacking something until she came around and licked me.

Her lips were so soft, and I parted them with my own, slipping my tongue inside. The kiss went straight to my chest.

“I want to . . .” She panted the words between the slide of my lips. “See you . . .” I sucked her bottom lip and released the flesh with a graze of teeth. “Come.”

“You first, *kotyonok*.”

I grabbed her hands, held them above her head, and grinded against her clit until she shattered beneath me. Then I pressed my face into her neck and came inside her, a white-hot fire shooting through me so hard, my vision went black. My muscles shook, so I rolled off her before I crushed her with my body weight.

I caught my breath for a moment and almost laughed at the irony. A virgin made me come harder than I ever had before. When I felt the mattress dip, I automatically grabbed her wrist without looking.

“I’m tired,” Mila said and pulled against my grip.

Sliding my gaze to her, I saw she was refusing to look at me, her eyes on the door as if she couldn't wait to leave. I didn't know why, but I found it fucking irritating. I yanked her ass back to the bed beside me. She exhaled in frustration, and then I noticed the tear running down her cheek. *Fuck*. My throat felt tight. I knew Mila couldn't do a casual fuck. I knew, and I took it anyway.

"Go ahead," she said. "Tell me to stop crying and then let me go."

Instead, I brushed the tear away with my thumb. The wetness burned my skin and expanded a pressure in my chest that demanded I kiss her. So I did. She sighed into my mouth, her lips tentative against mine.

I pulled back to say, "I'll get Yulia to find some candles."

A small smile touched her lips. She thought I was joking. When I reached for my phone on the nightstand, she panicked and grabbed my arm.

"Really, I'm fine," she said just as another tear escaped.

I wiped the tear away. "*Malen'kaya lgunishka . . .*" Then I rolled her underneath me and braced my hands on either side of her head. Before she could complain, her eyes paused on my shoulders; on the nautical star tattoo on each one. I could do nothing but look at her as she touched the pendant on her necklace.

The moonlight loved her.

But not as much as my shadows.

"*Ti slishkom ideal'naya chto bi byt' nastoyashchey.*" The words escaped me without thought, and when she looked at me with wet lashes, so did the translation I pressed to her ear.

CHAPTER *Thirty-Seven*

heliophilia
(n.) the desire to stay in the sun

Mila

MY EYES OPENED TO A dark room, and confusion ran rampant until I saw the black sheet covering me and remembered I was in Ronan's room. In his bed. With his body heat at my back. The clock on the nightstand said two-thirty a.m., which meant I was only asleep for thirty minutes before waking with a full bladder.

The previous hours turned in my head. I'd anticipated sex and then for Ronan to slap my ass on my way out the door. I didn't expect for him to say I was perfect and then kiss me until I fell asleep. I hadn't known he had that kind of softness in him. It was more than I thought I'd ever get. So why did I feel so . . . *empty*?

God, I really was an emotional fuck.

Quietly, I pulled the sheets back and slid off the bed. When my feet touched the floor, I turned to glance at him. My heart grew heavy at the sight.

He slept on his back, an arm above his head. He looked so human, so vulnerable, so handsome, it stole my breath to even look at him.

Madame Richie's laugh resounded in my mind and raised the hair on my arms. No wonder she'd burst out laughing. The man meant for me was a mobster who kidnapped me and would soon murder my papa. My fortune must have been the most interesting one she ever foresaw.

I found my clothes on the floor and dragged them into the bathroom. I would have gone straight to my room, but come was leaking down my thighs. A condom had been my last thought when Ronan's hands were all over me, though now the lack of one filled me with uncertainty. I knew he wasn't celibate. I also knew he used condoms; they were stashed in his nightstand drawer. My stomach turned at the idea of him with other women in the same bed he just slept with me in—Nadia especially. Was he as soft with her as he was with me? The thought made me sick, so I pushed it away.

After I cleaned myself up, peed, and dressed, I exited the bathroom. Ronan was still sleeping, looking so peaceful I didn't want to wake him—not that I had a reason to. We'd only had sex; it meant nothing to him. He couldn't have made it clearer. I was the stupid one for thinking I could handle it and not feel anything for him afterward.

As I moved to the door, my gaze caught on something that glinted silver in the moonlight. Everything inside of me went quiet. Even my heart.

The pistol lay on the floor a few feet away.

My eyes traveled back to Ronan. As a heavy feeling disrupted the silence within me, I suddenly knew I would never turn him in for what he did to me. He may not be a good man, but the world

wasn't black-and-white. He was all the gray in between.

And I was falling for him hard—*so* hard, I worried when he was finished, there wouldn't be anything left of me.

I glanced back at the gun, my gaze as torn in direction as the sudden conflict ripping me in half. A part of me wanted to ignore the chance of freedom; the other wondered if this was my only chance to save my papa . . . and, selfishly, *myself*. I knew I couldn't take another's life in the process. I knew without a doubt I could never take Ronan's.

But most games were won by bluffs.

The moonlight felt like frost on my skin as my feet moved of their own volition. My hands shook when I picked up the murderous piece of metal. It was heavy—so heavy, I immediately wanted to drop it, but when my mind played a scene of me standing in front of my papa's coffin alone, my grip tightened.

“*Kotyonok.*”

The single word slid through me, restarting my body with a jolt of axles and wheels that echoed in my ears. My eyes shot to Ronan's. He sat on the edge of the bed in his briefs, his arms resting on his thighs. A narrowed gaze dropped to the gun in my hands before sliding back up to mine.

“Bring it here.”

A cold sweat flooded me, washing through me with shaky dampness. I didn't move. I couldn't. The battle within consumed every ounce of me, stealing the air from my lungs and suffocating me.

His gaze hardened. “I said, bring it here.”

This was easier when he was *D'yavol* and not the man who wiped away my tears. Just the thought burned the backs of my eyes because I knew, after this, he never would again. But I needed to do this now, before I fell so deep I couldn't find a way out.

“I can't.” The words leaked of despair.

He stood and stepped toward me, determination in his eyes. I raised the barrel to his chest. The gun was so heavy, my arms shook, the trigger burning my finger.

“Don't. Please don't.” My blood rushed so loudly in my ears it almost drowned out my voice.

Jaw tight, he paused.

“I can't be the reason my papa dies. I can't . . .” Tears ran down my cheeks. “Just let me go,” I pleaded. “That's all I want.”

He made a dark, disbelieving sound. “You're a better liar than I thought.”

“What?” My chest constricted.

“Was this your plan?” he growled. “Were you thinking about saving your goddamn father's life while fucking me?”

I blanched. “No . . . I didn't plan this, but even if I did, you have no right to turn this around on me.” I was so overwhelmed I couldn't find any anger. I didn't have any more emotion to give. “You lied to me. You used me from the beginning.”

“And I'd do it all again.” The statement was full of venom. I didn't think I'd ever seen him so furious. It shook the beat of my heart and forced me back a step.

“*Please*. Just let me go.” It came out as a sob. “That's all I want.”

“*Nyet.*”

He wasn't calling my bluff, though he also wasn't going to give in. It hurt me more than anything that he thought I could really shoot him. The idea almost made me drop the gun, but I couldn't. I didn't mean anything to him. I was a chess piece. And I couldn't survive being played anymore.

“Please, Ronan—”

“Don’t say my fucking name.”

I flinched. “I won’t,” I promised. “You won’t even have to see me again. Just let me go.”

There was nothing but my tears and silence for a second—this massive void of silence that would devastate anything alive.

And then he called my bluff.

He moved toward me, closing the distance so quickly I jumped back a step, and that was when my clammy finger slipped on the trigger.

Click.

Both of our eyes fell to the pistol in my hands right before I dropped it. The *click* replayed in my mind on a reel, each time sending a colder wave through me than the last. My thoughts were so jumbled, my body so numb, I couldn’t feel anything but the words in my head.

I just pulled the trigger on him.

The gun wasn’t fully loaded.

I didn’t mean to do it.

Ronan laughed humorlessly. “Guess I got really narcissistic tonight.”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me out of his room and down the hall. In a stunned haze, I didn’t say a word—even as he yanked me down the stairs and out the front door. The icy chill in the night air wrapped around my bare skin and fought the emptiness inside. But I didn’t feel anything, not even the snow beneath my feet while he dragged me through the yard.

Ronan opened the outbuilding door and pushed me in. I only heard his movements as he padlocked the gate to Khaos’s kennel to keep me out of it and the last thing he said before he slammed the door shut behind him.

“Sleep tight, *kotyonok*.”

CHAPTER

Thirty-Eight

noceur
(n.) one who stays up late

Ronan

I WAS STILL IN MY briefs, my hands trembling as I poured some vodka into a tumbler. The outbuilding where Mila was locked up pulled at every muscle in my body like a magnet. She'd been out there for less than ten minutes, and each tick of the clock tightened an invisible noose around my neck. I couldn't shake the feeling. I'd only distracted myself by turning on all the lights in the house and barking orders at Yulia. I wanted a cup of tea. My suit needed ironing. And why the fuck was there so much yellow in my house?

"She will die out there."

I didn't even hear Albert enter the room until he spoke. This was how men got killed in my position, but I didn't give a shit right now. If the cold feeling spreading in my chest was anything to go by, I was already six feet under.

"Get out," I ordered.

"It's below zero. She could get hypothermia in minutes."

The words ate at my veins, but I told myself it didn't matter to me. Mila had played me. She got under my skin, made me do shit I never did, and then she stabbed me in the goddamn back. Lashing out, I wiped everything off the bar. Glass shattered, and I saw blood dripping from my hand but didn't feel a thing.

I turned to Albert and growled, "I told you to get the fuck out."

"How do you think we're going to get our revenge if she dies out there?"

"I don't give a fuck about revenge," I seethed before realizing what I was saying.

Albert watched me for a second. "The men think Alexei is worming his way back into the city. You might lose some of them if you don't follow through with it."

The last thing I wanted was another war, but it would be inevitable if I didn't cut the head off the snake. Most of my men were Alexei's a few years ago. I'd like to think they were loyal to me, but nobody knew with fucking criminals.

I couldn't focus on it right now. I didn't know how I was supposed to sleep while Mila was locked in with the dogs in subzero temps. I shouldn't care. I *didn't* care. Pushing a hand through my hair, I paced the room.

"What did she do?"

"She shot me," I said coldly.

He took me in with a flat expression. "You look unscathed."

"Dry fire. The chamber wasn't loaded." I always kept my guns loaded. Always. It was a fucking miracle, honestly. Fate or some shit.

“You’re holding her as ransom for her papa’s head. Did you think she was going to thank you?”

I didn’t know what I thought. Earlier tonight, I felt sick to my stomach when I had a barrel pressed to her head, and it had been an accident. The fact she could do the same and say I never had to see her again . . . I’d never felt so betrayed in my life. I wasn’t thinking when I dragged her out to the kennel, and now everything was sinking in, regret pounded at the walls of my chest.

A part of me knew she didn’t mean to shoot me. But the part that consumed me was the fact she thought she could just walk away from me. As the anger died, it left me feeling hollow. Fucking awful. The thought of her out there, cold . . . I couldn’t take it anymore.

Brushing Albert’s shoulder, I strode from the room and out the front door, an uneasy feeling ablaze in my stomach. My men smoked cigarettes and went silent, watching me in curiosity as I made my way to the kennel barefoot and dressed in only my briefs. The fact I couldn’t leave her out here for more than fifteen minutes was sure to give them something to talk about. They could go fuck themselves for all I cared.

When I entered the kennel and saw Mila lying beside Misha, shivering, it felt like a knife to the chest. Without a word, I lifted her in my arms and started back to the house.

Her skin was like ice against mine, but I barely felt it over the blood pounding in my veins. Knowing confusion was a sign of hypothermia, I said, “Talk to me, Mila. What day is it?”

She trembled against me. “English.”

Relief flooded me at the fact she was still coherent.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered in my neck. “I swear I didn’t mean to do it.”

Her words were a punch to the gut—especially because I believed her. I knew it before I even dragged her outside. Truthfully, I couldn’t blame her if she meant to pull the trigger; I hadn’t exactly taken her on a vacation. The fact I’d reacted so irrationally and she was the one apologizing to *me* made me feel like my hands were too dirty to even touch her.

I didn’t know how to handle all the pressure in my chest, so I repeated in English, “What day is it?”

“I don’t know. I’m being held captive without a phone or calendar.”

“I’ll get you a calendar,” I promised.

I carried her inside and passed Yulia in the entryway. Her cool gaze flickered with a little concern when she looked at the girl in my arms. Mila was even winning over my unfeeling housekeeper.

I set Mila on her feet in my room. I didn’t think she was hypothermic—at least not critically—but I still had to get her warm. As I pulled her tank top up, she silently lifted her arms for me. I dropped to my haunches and slid her shorts down her thighs. She braced a hand on my shoulder and lifted each leg so I could remove the fabric. A shiver wracked her, and the pressure in my throat expanded, compelling me to skim a kiss across her cold thigh and roughly say, “*Izvini.*” *I’m sorry.*

I remembered the last time I’d said that. I was six and accidentally knocked over a cup of tea on the table, which washed away the line of heroin my mother was about to snort. She backhanded me so hard I hit my head on the fridge and blacked out. It was then I learned apologies were nothing but useless words, though Mila felt differently. And she could have whatever she wanted from me right now.

The subtle look in her eyes made me feel like she saw the memory in my head before she ran a hand into my hair and urged me to stand. I tugged her onto the bed with me, where I pulled her bare chest to mine, pressing as many inches of her icy skin against my own, and covered us with the covers.

She sighed in relief at the warmth. “You know I didn’t mean to do it, don’t you?”

I knew. That was the problem. The knowledge had forced me to apologize and feel all sorts of awkward things.

I’d wanted her body.

But now, I wanted her loyalty even more.

“I know, *kotyonok*. Now, go to sleep.”

CHAPTER

Thirty-Nine

toska

(n.) a dull ache of the soul

Mila

I WOKE AMONG BLACK SHEETS and a woodsy scent that consumed every one of my senses. Ronan sat in a chair beside the bed. His eyes were lowered, and his elbows rested on his knees as he twisted my heart-shaped earring between his thumb and forefinger. A single turn of the synthetic diamond symbolized our relationship: He held my heart in the palm of his hand, bringing it out to play sometimes before putting it back in his pocket to be forgotten.

He wasn't aware I was awake, and I took the opportunity to view his private moment. Still in nothing but his briefs, his hair glinted blue in the sunlight and was mussed as if he'd been running his hands through it all night. He was ink and vengeance and *so* very human beneath cold, steel armor.

In Moscow, cartoon hearts danced in my eyes when I saw him. Now, in this wintery Russian fortress, the sight of him created a sharp ache in my chest that threatened to rip me in half.

I wondered if Ronan's conscience was responsible for him changing his mind about leaving me for dead, or simply the fact he'd have to forfeit his collateral. He'd surprised me by apologizing, though he was the one who told me apologies were worthless. Clearly, he couldn't stomach the thought of being close to me for longer than it took to make sure I didn't die.

The earring fell from his fingers and sparkled as it bounced off the marble floor before rolling beneath the bed. My heartache disappeared in the dark where childhood monsters lay, leaving a coldness to spread within like spiderwebs of frost.

I covered my bare breasts with the sheet and sat up on the bed. Ronan's dark gaze lifted to mine. He didn't look tired, but something told me he was used to sleepless nights.

"Kirill came to see you already," he said. "You slept through it."

I found the fact he sent for a doctor slightly interesting—nothing more. Not seeing my clothes anywhere, I wrapped the sheet around me and stood.

"You didn't need to bother him again but thank you."

"Thank you," he repeated drily as if he couldn't decide whether he was annoyed by the words or simply didn't understand them.

"*Spasibo.*" I translated it to Russian for him and padded to the door, the black sheet trailing behind me like a woman in virginal mourning.

"I know what you fucking said," he grated. "And I didn't say you could go."

Obediently, I stopped in the doorway and turned to him, welcoming the numb sensation within. Ronan could move me around like one of Yulia's dolls right now, and I wouldn't feel a thing. My compliance was what he'd wanted all this time, yet by the hard glitter in his eyes, it seemed he still wasn't happy.

As he stood and strode toward me, I coasted my stare to the corner of the room—mostly because looking at him shook the composure inside. Like a splatter of paint on a white canvas.

“How do you feel?”

“Hungry,” I said simply.

Ronan made an impatient noise, now standing within arm’s reach, and demanded, “Your eyes, Mila.”

I pulled my gaze to his but stared through him. His attention warmed my face, the irritation in the air intensifying with each tick of silence. Then he reached up and ran a thumb across my cheek.

“No tears for me this morning?”

“Do you wish for my tears?” My tone conveyed I would muster up a few if he did.

His jaw tightened. An angry sound rose in his throat, then he pushed my face away and turned his back to me.

“May I go now?”

He shook his head and gritted, “You may,” before slamming the bathroom door behind him.

I bumped into Yulia in my bedroom doorway. She held out a glass of water and two ibuprofen for my wrist. As I plopped the pills in my mouth and swallowed them down with a drink, I thought I saw a flicker of softness in her gaze. Though it disappeared with a purse of her lips and the next words from her mouth.

“If she profanes herself by whoring, she shall be burned with fire.” Then she grabbed the glass from my hand, brushed past me, and headed down the hall, humming.

I was really living the dream here. No doubt Captive Barbie would be in stores next season.

After taking a hot shower, I drifted into the dining room for breakfast. Completely unconcerned with my presence, Kylie’s twin set the table between bouts of texting and delicate giggles. It was only when I poured a cup of tea that she stilled to examine me like bacteria under a microscope.

“They say you are Mikhailova,” she said very slowly.

The last thing I wanted was to make small talk, but my manners forced me to respond. “They’re correct.”

“They also say you are witch.”

I could only give a hint of a smile.

“You do not look like one.” Her unimpressed gaze slid down my wet hair and T-shirt dress. “Or like prisoner.”

“I guess they come in many shapes and forms.” I wasn’t sure if we were talking about being a witch or a prisoner at this point, though I guessed the statement worked for both.

“You seem . . .” She frowned as if she had to force the word out. “*Nice*. But what do they say?” She tapped her lips in thought, then her eyes lit up with a snap of her fingers. “Blood will out.”

Her excitement to use the expression watered down the insult. Apparently, she’d heard the rumors of my mother. Or my papa. I guessed I had a lot of bad blood on both sides, but it was clear she spoke of the former when her gaze slid to the hickey on my neck and she purred, “Though it seems you have already gone down that road.”

Kylie was a total buzzkill. I didn’t respond and added some sugar to my tea, which seemed to annoy her.

“You must know he does not actually *vant* you.”

A kernel of bitterness infiltrated my chest. It must be everyone’s mission to ruin my pleasant state of depression this morning.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” I told her blandly, “but yes, I’m fully aware.”

Ronan stepped through the doorway dressed in Givenchy, and by the hint of violence in his gaze, he'd overheard the conversation. What an eavesdropper.

He sat down in his chair like any other morning. I was again invisible to Kylie as she turned her full attention to Ronan and worked on his place setting. It couldn't be more obvious she'd waited to do it until he arrived. And, really, how many forks did he need? I buttered a piece of toast and ignored the scene while she spoke to him in Russian.

"Tea. Then get the fuck out of my house."

My butter knife faltered for a split second. That was a, "You're fired!" to rival *The Apprentice*. Kylie shot me a hostile expression as if it was *my* fault, quickly poured Ronan's tea, and fled the room.

"Do you seriously let people talk to you like that?" Ronan growled, his irate gaze on me. I avoided looking at him as if he were Medusa.

"Like what?"

"Don't play games with me." His anger chafed my skin. "She practically called you a whore."

The fact he was acting like he cared swept over me in an itchy wave of frustration, but if I didn't contain all feeling, I was afraid I'd explode like Hiroshima.

"You love calling me a whore," I returned indifferently. "And you told me to not patronize your staff. I was just doing what you told me to."

With a growl, he gripped my face and turned it to his. I didn't fight the hold, but I refused to meet his gaze. The eye contact would turn me to stone and then *crack*—right down the middle.

"If you're trying to please *me* right now, you're failing massively."

"Just tell me what you'd like me to do in those situations, and I promise, I'll do better next time."

"You can start by not pretending you don't give a fuck." When he released me roughly, I promptly turned my attention back to my plate. I knew he was talking about last night, but I played dumb.

"I don't care what your servants think of me."

"I swear to God, Mila." He stole the fork from my hand and placed it next to all five of his.

Searching through the multitude of dishes on the table, I asked, "Do you have peanut butter? I prefer peanut butter on my toast."

"You're going hungry until we talk about last night."

Nope. Not having that conversation. Just the thought agitated my self-control and expanded an emotional demon in my chest that grabbed ahold of my throat. I wouldn't give this man one more tear.

His phone rang, and while he pulled it from his pocket and hit ignore, I tipped a dish to look inside of it, frowning at the sight of honey. "Why don't we just make a party of it and stomp on some bees for breakfast?"

"Stop. With the. Goddamn. Dishes." He was close to throwing me out with the dogs again.

"I don't like dry toast," I said, continuing to peruse the condiments. "Seriously, no peanut butter? Are you on a budget or something?"

With one calm flick of his hand, the entire twelve-seater table tipped on its side, taking down chairs in its path. Dishes, plates, and silverware slid across the wood and clattered to the marble floor. The *bang* rattled my bones, washing away the numbness inside of me on a hot tide of resentment.

There went my freaking breakfast.

My burning gaze slid to Ronan to see he had the audacity to sit back in his throne and straighten his jacket cuff.

"I think you're holding a grudge, *kotyonok*. Not so altruistic now, are you?"

Heat cascaded down my body like an avalanche. “You’re one to talk,” I snapped and shot to my feet. “The only reason I’m here is due to one massive grudge you have with my papa.”

“Sit the fuck down.”

“You sit down!” He wasn’t even standing. He sat all composed as if he hadn’t just destroyed the room and my good mood.

Inked finger tapping the armrest, he said darkly, “Your papa is the last reason you’re still here.”

I was too unbalanced to figure out what he meant. The confusion only sparked more anger within.

“You shouldn’t have fired Kylie,” I told him coldly. “She’d appreciate your evasiveness and peach emojis more than I ever could.”

“She’s a manipulative bitch. And I didn’t like the way she was talking to you.”

“Please,” I scoffed, turning away from him. “What she said was less insulting than what you’ve said to me.”

“You want me to apologize for that too?”

I spun to face him. “I want you to let me go!”

My chest heaved in the silence that followed. Too late, I realized I was looking him in the eyes, which were blue and unwavering. I felt myself turning to stone. Cracks weaved through my resolve, splintering the anger and flooding in the thick emotion I didn’t want. The ache returned to my chest so intensely tears burned their way to the surface.

I turned to walk away from him, through the maze of chairs, but I didn’t reach the door. He grabbed my wrist and forced my back against the overturned table before bracing his hands on either side to cage me in. By the tension lining his shoulders, he was completely fed up with me.

“I don’t regret a lot of things, *kotyonok*, but I do regret what I did last night.”

“Because you almost lost your collateral,” I replied emotionlessly.

“No,” he said harshly. “Because you could have died.”

I wanted to believe him so much a cold sweat spread through me, but his voice was also so heavy my lungs fought for a dose of oxygen. I needed air, though when I tried to escape, he wouldn’t let me go. Not from the room, the house, or his *life*. The hold he had on my waist was like granite; hard but smooth to the touch. Futilely, I struggled even as the smell of him—a scent so rough and persuasive—reached my heart, convincing me the last thing I wanted was for him to let me go.

“Tell me what you really want from me, *kotyonok*. You can have it. Anything besides letting you go.”

A part of me desired to say I wanted nothing else from him, but it was a lie. It seemed I couldn’t force those words past my lips even to save my own soul. It was already his.

“You want to make it even and shoot me for real?” He pulled back and forced cold metal into my palm. “Go for it. It’s fully loaded this time.”

Just the weight of the gun broke a dam inside me, sending hot tears down my cheeks. I sucked in a shaky breath and shook my head, letting the pistol drop to the floor.

“That’s not what I want.”

“A treasure chest of fake diamonds?” He wiped a tear away with a thumb, and the caress pulled honesty from my throat.

“I want you to care . . .” The words settled so thick and uninvited in the room they made my ears ring. It went so silent one could hear a pin drop. Or a heart-shaped earring.

Ronan’s hand dropped from my face, and with a harsh sound, he pushed away from me. “You’re a goddamn headache, you know that?”

His reaction hit me in the chest. *I* was the headache? He was the one who was so hot and cold, he

gave me whiplash. I may be embarrassing myself again, but at the end of this, I would regret not having told him the truth. I would regret acting as if I didn't care. Now, he knew, and clearly, he didn't mean I could have "anything" by his look of disgust. This was turning out to be a really shitty day.

"I guess I'll take the fake diamonds then," I muttered and headed to the door.

"I feed my *captive* vegan," he growled.

The force of his voice stilled me.

"She spends her days doing yoga and playing in the yard and her nights reading classics by the fireplace." His sardonic tone lacked humor.

I couldn't decide if he was insulting me or showing he did care in his own twisted way. I wanted to hear more, but all I could do was turn around and accuse, "You've been spying on me."

"Be quiet," he snapped. "This is my monologue."

I closed my mouth.

"Keeping you here is a slap in the face to my men, but it seems I don't give a fuck about that." The eye contact seared. "The longer I put off revenge, the closer I get to another war with your papa. And I don't give a fuck about that either."

My throat tightened at the thought *I* was a source of that kind of violence. I had no idea my presence here had caused so much trouble.

His gaze narrowed. "You pull a trigger on me, and I can't even leave you out in the cold for fifteen fucking minutes. So you tell me, Mila, who cares more here?"

The words crept beneath my skin, wrapped around my heart like barbed wire, and tightened a fight-or-flight response in my muscles. I fought the impulse to flee even as he took a step toward me, violence reflecting in his eyes.

"You were going to catch a plane home without saying a word to me, weren't you?"

I swallowed. He knew I was planning to leave after the night I spent with him in my hotel room. For some reason, the knowledge contracted my chest with guilt. Ronan moved closer. His animosity wrapped around my body as his fingers gripped my face, forcing a ragged exhale from me.

"Am I that easy to leave, *kotyonok*?"

My breath shallowed at the angry vulnerability he let me see. The worst part was, I shared it: the fear of being abandoned; of not being good enough. This weakness of his twisted my chest. It forced me to change my view of him forever. I'd never again see him as the monster I'd once thought he was but as the hungry, abused boy the worst part of humanity had shaped into a cold-hearted man.

My heart felt so heavy, it compelled me to frame his face with my hands and skim my lips against his scar. The soft action contrasted his rough grip holding me in place. He tensed like he wasn't sure what I was doing; like he'd never been touched this way before in his life; like he was expecting pain to follow. His simple reaction was my undoing.

"You wanted my misery, but I'm giving you my forgiveness," I breathed, voice thick. "When you let me go, I won't turn you in even though I should. I can't be the person to send you back to prison . . ." I inhaled raggedly. "I'll walk away when this is over and I won't look back—though not because I hate you but because I don't. Not even a little bit . . ."

The words settled around us for a beat before he said drily, "This is getting too close to a Nicholas Sparks movie for me, *kotyonok*. I just wanted to convince you to let me fuck you again."

"I'm an emotional fuck," I replied. "Get over it."

He chuckled roughly. When my thumb brushed over his scar, he nipped it hard between straight white teeth. I hissed in pain and pulled it free with a glare.

“I’m a rough fuck,” he returned. “Get over it.” The look in his eyes turned turbulent. “If you want to turn me in, so be it. I’d go back to prison for you, *kotyonok*, but when I get out, there’d better be an ocean between us.”

I suddenly couldn’t even imagine returning to The Moorings; to Carter and the lonely sounds of the Atlantic. A weight compressed my chest, forcing the word from my lips.

“Why?”

His fingers tightened on my cheeks, voice dark. “You have no idea what you would be unleashing on Moscow after years of celibacy.”

As his words sank in, a hot rush of jealousy evaporated all other emotion. The idea of him with other women kicked me in the gut. My entire body rebelled against the idea. I suddenly wanted to imprint myself on him; to make him remember me forever—no matter the consequences.

I grabbed a fistful of his hair and dragged his mouth to mine, sliding my tongue between his lips. He hissed and lifted me so I could wrap my legs around his hips. I’d never felt so small; so feminine and *complete*. I suddenly knew I would never feel this again; never fit so well with someone else; never meet another man like *this*.

I may as well enjoy the happily-for-now while it lasted.

He pressed my back against the overturned table and licked the roof of my mouth. At the taste of him and the heat of his body, a fire brewed inside, searing *need* through me in thick waves. I hummed against his lips, dying for more—for everything he had. Grinding against him and unable to find the friction I needed, a frustrated noise escaped me.

“Fuck me,” I breathed, tugging at his belt buckle.

He groaned and pulled back. “Not here.”

“*Here*,” I begged, closing the gap again and nipping his bottom lip. “Any way you want. *Please*.”

“*Nyet*.” He tried to slide me down his body, but my legs tightened around him. I felt how hard he was and relished in his reaction—that is, until he gripped my ponytail and yanked my head back.

“Don’t tempt me, *kotyonok*,” he growled. “I’m not noble enough to turn down the offer.”

“Then don’t.”

He watched me for a second. “Jesus Christ.” With a frustrated noise like he was in pain, he released my hair. “I’ve Stockholm syndromed you.”

I fought a smile. “Mmm,” I agreed and sucked at his neck. “Now you have to deal with the consequences.” I dragged my mouth to his, and after a second of kissing his tepid lips, he kissed me back, gliding his tongue against mine. An empty ache pulsed between my legs, and I grinded against him.

“*I need it*,” I pleaded.

He stilled my movements. “You’ll get it in my room where someone can’t just walk in.”

“Then take me to your room . . . *please*.”

One of his “fucks” sounded, and I kissed it off his lips then slid my mouth down his neck, sucking and biting wherever I could reach. *D’yavol* carried me to his bedroom, and the fact I was here against my will no longer mattered when I knew he’d fill the void inside me.

In *one* way, at least.

CHAPTER

Forty

phosphenes

(n.) the colors or “stars” one sees when they rub their eyes

Mila

RONAN DROPPED ME ONTO HIS bed from a height that made me bounce and fell on top of me. Roughly, lips and teeth ran down my throat, drawing a sigh from me. Even bracing himself on his forearms, he was heavy. The weight was perfect, yet so consuming, a fleeting thought of self-preservation rose to the surface.

Though all uncertainty was forgotten when he pushed my dress to my waist, pressed his face between my legs, and inhaled.

“Fuck, *kotyonok*.” He pulled my thong to the side and slid his tongue inside me.

I groaned, my hips arched, and my hand found purchase in his hair. My legs fell open farther when he licked up to my clit, a shudder running through me.

“God, yes,” I breathed. My fingers tightened in his hair to hold him *right* there, but he shook off my grip before moving his mouth back down to my entrance. I made a noise of frustration, which turned into a moan when he fucked me with his tongue.

He pulled back, yanked my thong down my legs, and tossed the fabric to the floor. Gaze dark, he stared at my pussy for a second before pressing his face between my thighs with a masculine sound of satisfaction that broke my body out in goose bumps. When he sucked my clit into his mouth, my eyes rolled back in my head.

“Has anyone else done this to you?” he rasped.

Barely interpreting the words, I shook my head.

He made a pleased noise in his throat and pushed two fingers inside me. “And this?”

Panting, I rocked my hips against his hand, but he refused to give me any movement.

“And this?” he repeated roughly.

I never assumed *D’yavol* would be one to initiate conversation during sex. Though it wasn’t the Russian kingpin between my legs; it was the man who stole my breath and virginity—and maybe my *heart*. Knowing I wouldn’t get what I wanted until I answered, I nodded.

“How many men have had their fingers inside you?” he growled.

With a heavy sigh, I asked, “How many women have you done this to?”

He didn’t like the question. Hypocrite.

“We’re not talking about me.”

“Why are we talking at all?”

“Because this body is mine, and I need to know who’s fucked with it.” His fingers were still inside me, and it was seriously distracting.

“Can we have this conversation later?”

“*Nyet*. How many?”

I groaned in frustration, then rattled off a random number. “Seventeen.”

“*Malen’kaya lgunishka . . .*” His eyes narrowed. “Seventeen, and not one could get you off?”

“How many women have you been with?” I snapped. “I’m sure I’d need to have a one-night stand every day for ten years to match your number.”

He smiled. “Three thousand six hundred and fifty-two is a sum I could only aspire to meet—that is, if we’re taking leap days into account. If not, minus two, and I may have a better shot.”

Did he just do the math in his head? God, that was . . . *hot*.

“I have faith in you,” I told him. “But be careful. One of them might end up meaning something to you.” The words seared like acid on my tongue.

He watched me for a second. “*Ya dumayu uzhe slishkom pozdno dlya etogo*.” I didn’t know what he’d said, but the significance of his voice made my throat thick. The words felt . . . oddly touching in a way, even while he was manipulating me to submit by use of sexual torture.

I didn’t want to tell him about my past. I didn’t want to think about Carter and the one other man I’d let get to third base. The Moorings’ Mila and the Mila lying in *D’yavol’s* bed were so different, I was afraid if I introduced them, everything around me would go up in smoke.

After a heavy moment of eye contact, he pulled his fingers free and moved up my body.

“I need to know, *kotyonok*.” He pressed his lips to mine softly, and I sighed into his mouth, tasting myself on his tongue. When he pulled away, I grasped his hair and tried to drag him back, but he caught my wrists and shackled them to the mattress on either side of my head, his gaze suddenly serious. “I need to know everything. Who’s kissed you. What you wash your hair with. How many licks it takes you to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop.” His eyes hardened. “And if I have to tie you up again to get the answers, I will.”

It should matter that he’d just threatened to restrain me, but it didn’t. My heart loved everything he said and melted in my chest like chocolate. It was impossible to deny Ronan when he showed his semi-sweet side. And I really didn’t want to be tied up again.

“You first,” I said breathlessly.

By his unenthused expression, I didn’t think he’d actually indulge me, so I was surprised when he said, “What do you want to know?”

Oh, so much. Though now I was being given the green light for my questions, all of them evaded me. It was hard to think with him straddling me, his mouth so close to mine. If he wanted to delve into my minuscule sexual history, he had to be just as transparent.

“How many women have you been with?”

“I have no idea, but I can tell you how many I’ve gone down on.”

“And?”

“Four.”

Oh. That number was *a lot* smaller than I assumed. Still three more than I’d prefer to think about though. I pulled my lip between my teeth, wondering why he didn’t do it often.

“You don’t like it?”

A smile touched his lips as he kissed the hollow behind my ear. “I like it just fine.”

I shivered. “Then why only four?”

“Because it reminds me of shit I’d rather not think about.”

My chest suddenly filled with unease. His posture was relaxed and unmoving as he trailed his lips down my neck, sucking a spot hard enough to leave another hickey behind, but my imagination spun with a cold reality I found hard to stomach.

“You don’t have to tell me anything . . . but my mind’s thinking up the worst right now.”

He chuckled against my throat. “It’s probably right.”

My muscles tensed. “Ronan . . .”

“Relax. I wasn’t abused. Not that way at least.”

I exhaled, my body slackening, but I was still too disturbed to enjoy the press of his mouth. By the slight pause in his posture, he noticed my discomfort and sighed.

“My mother was a drug addict, *kotyonok*. Wouldn’t doubt if I was born one too.” He skimmed his lips across my frantic pulse point as if he was trying to reassure *me*. “She fucked to support her habit and was usually so high she had no idea what she was subjecting her sons to. My brother had it the worst. I just became very familiar with spots that can decently hide a five-year-old.”

My entire body was cold besides the burning in my eyes.

“Your brother was . . .” I couldn’t say the rest, but I didn’t need to.

“*Da.*”

“And you had to . . .” *Watch?*

“*Da.*”

Oh, God. I was going to be sick. How could a *mother* do that to her own child? The idea of how unloved and scared Ronan and his brother must have felt tore at my heart.

After a moment of silence, Ronan pulled back to see the tears rolling down my cheeks.

“Fuck,” he cursed softly. “I told you, nothing happened to me.”

I shook my head because the fact he could see it that way and be so indifferent to it told me he’d been through things nobody should ever have to go through.

A tear ran over my lips. He licked it away and then kissed me, slow and steady, until I found the will to return it. The stress faded beneath the press of his mouth, a kernel of warmth growing.

He ended the kiss. “Your turn.”

What?

Oh, right. His questions.

“Um . . . two,” I said unsteadily. “Two have touched me . . . that way.”

He made a rough noise. “*Dvoye mertvetsov.*” *Two dead men.*

I frowned. “I’m not going to tell you stuff if you’re going to kill people because of it.” Odd I needed to make that clear . . . but that was where I was.

His eyes darkened. “Was one of them Ivan?”

“No.”

The look in his gaze cooled. “Fine. They can live.”

“How noble of you,” I returned drily.

“Keep going.”

After a moment of thought, I said, “Five men have kissed me. When I’m not being held captive, I wash my hair with Pacifica. And it takes me three hundred and eighty-eight licks to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop.”

He laughed at the fact I knew the answer to that question. “Fuck.”

That single word said nothing and everything at once.

“Is your curiosity satisfied now?” I questioned.

His eyes grew heated, then he released his grip on my wrists and ran a thumb across my lips.

“*Nyet.*”

His touch burned and swelled heat inside me. My breath grew shallow. My chest burned. I was at the bottom of a pool, curly hair floating and aglow. And I no longer cared if I drowned.

“Will you fuck me now?” I asked.
He nipped my throat and growled, “*Da.*”
D’yavol may have stolen my breath.
But I gave him my heart.



Sweat ran rivulets down my back, my long hair was damp and stuck to my skin, and my muscles embodied jelly, moldable and pliant as Ronan put me through every sexual position known to mankind. We would have gone through three condoms by now—if we were using them at least. Not that I didn’t try to encourage it.

“*Wait,*” I’d breathed nearly two hours ago before Ronan pushed inside of me. “Condom.”

“You have an IUD.”

“Condoms are for more than birth control.”

“I’ve already been inside you bare. If I have something, you do too.”

“That’s comforting.”

He chuckled roughly. “I’m clean, *kotyonok.*” Then he filled me so perfectly my eyes rolled back, and my brain shut down.

Now, I was on my back with my legs over his shoulders while he fucked me so hard I’d feel him next week. My moans trembled with every thrust, my nails digging into his thick thighs. He was less human and more like *D’yavol* when he fucked. He seemed to have a never-ending stamina and a criminal sort of purpose, as if he was taking something he shouldn’t but relishing every moment of it.

He slowed his pace and rasped, “What are we on?”

Releasing a tortured groan, I tossed my head on the mattress. “*No . . .* I can’t. Not again.”

He pushed my legs off his shoulders, came down on top of me, and nipped my neck. “I think you can.”

With a sigh, I turned my head to give him more access. “Don’t you have to go to work?”

I felt his smile. “Right now, I’m getting paid to fuck you.”

“Like a salary sort of situation?”

He chuckled. “*Da.*”

The sound of his laugh did such heavy things to my chest, I turned my head and caught his lips with mine. He groaned into my mouth and fucked me slowly. My fingers traveled down his back, infatuated with the feel of him. I didn’t think I’d ever get enough—no matter how much I touched him or how close he was.

“What are we on, *kotyonok?*” he asked against my lips.

“Four,” I answered reluctantly. He’d made me count every orgasm he gave me, and I knew I wouldn’t survive another. “I’m a virgin. I can’t handle any more.”

“You’re no longer a virgin. I had the proof of that all over my cock.”

Who said romance was dead?

He sucked my bottom lip and released it with a graze of teeth. “You denied me this pussy for

weeks. I've got time to make up for."

"I'm too young to die," I groaned. "I'm only twenty."

He stilled, then a darkly amused gaze met mine. "Fuck. I forgot how old you are. I really don't need the reminder right now."

"Does it bother you?" I asked, my nails running down the length of his back.

His eyes dropped to half-mast. "Not enough." He punctuated the statement with a deep thrust that made me groan. A rough palm found my breast and squeezed.

I wrapped my legs around his hips, sighing when he sucked a nipple in his mouth. It was so easy to forget everything with him inside me. But I wanted to be more than just another woman in his bed. I wanted to know him inside and out. Because he was so much more than a single shade of black or white.

"Were you so gray at twenty?" I asked. The words shouldn't make sense—wouldn't make sense to anyone else—but it only took Ronan a couple of seconds to understand my meaning.

"*Nyet.*"

I shivered at the darkness and truth in his voice. If he were twenty now, things would have gone very, very differently for me. I'd never had a problem with his age, but now I appreciated his experience even more.

His mouth traveled down my neck, leaving a hot, wet trail behind, while he leisurely fucked me as if he had all week to do so.

I tried to blink through the haze of pleasure. "Were you in prison then?"

"No. I was released when I was eighteen."

"When did you go in?"

"Fourteen."

"What could you have done at fourteen?" I asked, aghast.

He smiled against my throat. "I cut off a politician's cock and shoved it down his throat."

I swallowed. I really shouldn't have asked that question. My body should be primed and ready to run for the hills after his answer. But I already knew Ronan wasn't Prince Charming. I somehow also knew the man he killed had deserved it and probably more.

Bracing his hands on either side of me, he pushed up so he could see my eyes. "What? No comment about my blackened soul?"

I held eye contact for a moment before saying softly, "No."

He didn't look happy with my answer. "You really shouldn't be letting me fuck you."

I realized he did feel guilty for taking something he thought he didn't deserve. The more he said, the harder I fell. I should shut my mouth and let him force another orgasm from me, but I suddenly needed to give him something I'd never given anyone else: the truth.

"I always knew, you know . . .? I always knew the man my papa was." My throat felt tight. "He killed someone—a woman—when I was little. I saw her lying in her own blood. And I forced myself to forget because I didn't want to believe it. But I never really forgot; I just got good at lying to myself. I'm not the angel my papa calls me . . ." A tear ran down my cheek. "I'm not even a good person."

"*Kotyonok . . .*" Ronan chuckled. "My dick's inside you, and you're crying about your papa."

It sounded a little silly when he said it like that.

"I was just—"

"I know what you were trying to do. And it was sweet. But there's still a big difference between you and me." The nautical star tattoos on his shoulders glinted black in the sunlight. "You'll never ask

me for more than I can give.” Darkness clouded his eyes, and his hand collared my throat, a thumb running across a hickey he’d put there. “I’ve already taken everything you have to give.” I held his gaze, my heart a battering ram pounding against the wall of my chest. “And now, I’m going to take a little more.”

CHAPTER *Forty-One*

tacenda
(n.) things better left unsaid

Mila

MY BREATH WAS STILL RAGGED, Ronan having just rolled off me. The simple action left me cold inside, and to distract myself from the heavy feeling, I needed to either leave or strike up conversation. I chose the latter.

“What did you tell me you did for work that night when I asked?”

“I went into detail about my chimney sweep business,” he answered lazily.

I blinked. “You’re kidding, right?”

“*Nyet.*” He chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. “Never thought a woman would throw herself at me after I told her I made minimum wage.”

A blush rose to my already flushed cheeks—even now, while lying naked beside *D’yavol*. “I didn’t hear you.”

“I know that now. You were too busy working up the courage to maul me.”

“I did not *maul* you.” I frowned. “That’s such an aggressive word.”

He laughed. “You were beyond sweet all night. I didn’t expect at the end of it you’d practically beg me to fuck you in a public hallway.” Then he added thoughtfully, “I almost did.”

That was why he pushed me away so suddenly. I loved knowing I had such an effect on him even though he was supposed to despise me because of who my papa was.

I rolled to face him and braced myself on my elbow. “Did you really think I would have believed you were a chimney sweep?”

“I don’t know,” he drawled, dragging his amused gaze to mine. “You looked at me like I was a god. I think you would have believed anything I told you—being a chimney sweep included.”

There were a dozen reasons he would never pass as a manual laborer—his obvious wealth number one. Though how I decided to confirm I wouldn’t have believed his lie was to roll my eyes and say, “There’s no chance you’d fit in a chimney.”

He laughed deeply. “My apologies for underestimating your deductive reasoning skills.”

I fought a smile. “Apology accepted.”

As I held his dark gaze, the amusement faded, and a tense silence worked its way into the room. It sat so heavily on naked skin and my heart, I suddenly felt the need for space. But again, Ronan grabbed my wrist.

“Where are you going?”

“To my room.” It came out a little breathless.

“Why?”

“To take a shower. And then to scrounge around for a snack since you ruined my breakfast.”

“*Nyet*,” was all he said before releasing me.

“No?”

“Yulia is bringing up some food. You can shower in my bathroom.”

My brow furrowed. “Do you share a telepathic connection with your housekeeper?”

He smiled as his phone buzzed on his nightstand. “Fortunately for her, only a technological one.”

I didn’t even notice he’d texted her. Though it wasn’t that surprising; the sight of him lying there naked was distracting. So many inches of pure man. He was perfectly flawed—from the scars to the crude tattoos—his body forged in bone and muscle and fire. I wanted to trace every line of ink on his skin with my tongue. Another desire rose and burned in my chest with a desperate emotion: I wanted to call him *mine*.

I straddled his hips and braced my hands on either side of his head, my breath thick. “Sometimes, I’m convinced you’re immortal.”

A smile played on his lips. “Just diabolical.”

Absently, I touched the sharp point of his incisor. It was a dangerous game putting my finger anywhere near *D’yavol’s* mouth, but he only gently closed his teeth on my thumb. I pulled it free, drew it across the scar on his lip, and was compelled to softly say, “So much more than that . . .”

My chest felt so heavy and light all at once. Then the thick silence was interrupted by a knock on the door. Naked as the day I was born, I cast a gaze to the sound just as Ronan said, “Come in.”

With a panicked noise, I scrambled off the bed and ran to the bathroom at lightspeed, Ronan’s soft chuckle following me. He wouldn’t think it was so funny if Yulia caught me in here fornicating with the master, killed me by sticking a pin in the heart of a voodoo doll, and destroyed his best chance at revenge.

I slammed the bathroom door shut behind me and rested my back against it. I had no idea what I was doing with Ronan, but I did know something about it felt *right*.

Of course, my mind reminded me of the many reasons I shouldn’t fool around with *D’yavol*, including but not limited to:

- ✓ He abducted me.
- ✓ He planned to murder my papa in cold blood.
- ✓ He threw me out to sleep with the dogs just last night.

My conscience was raining on my parade.

Feeling so conflicted it ate at me, I dragged myself to the shower, turned the faucet on hot, and stepped under the spray. As the water rained down on me, I thought of so much but seemingly nothing at all. If anything, after this experience, I knew with a certainty I would never marry Carter. A passionless marriage wasn’t in my future, and with that knowledge, a weight was lifted from my shoulders. But it didn’t diminish other heavy truths.

Even considering my papa’s lies, his criminal character, and his absences, I still found it impossible to imagine a life without him. He was my family, my father, the person I’d always looked to for the answers. And when he turned himself in for me, he would no longer exist. The thought constricted my chest so tightly I was sure I’d bruise.

Selfishly, I was just as terrified of being alone. I didn’t know how Ivan felt about me anymore, and I knew I couldn’t ask him to stay by my side just because I was scared of being truly, awfully alone . . . Madame Richie’s cigarette smoke and laughter swirled behind my closed eyes, clouding my mind with the smell of cloves and ruin. I wasn’t sure if it was the shower water or tears running down my face when an arm wrapped around my waist. I swayed into the contact, not resisting as Ronan pulled me back against his chest.

Disaster loomed in the distance, but the heat of his body washed away the coldness inside me. I used to despise his size and strength; now I leaned into it knowing he wouldn't let me fall. Yet.

Ronan pressed his face against my neck with a low groan. "*Inogda bol'no smotret' na tebya.*"

He wasn't going to translate the statement for me, but he didn't need to. I understood what he said. *Sometimes it hurts to look at you.* And now I knew it wasn't only water running down my cheeks.

All along, this man had been on the other side of the Atlantic.

And maybe . . . just maybe, my soul always knew.

CHAPTER

Forty-Two

nefelibata

(n.) one who lives in the clouds of their own imagination

Mila

THE SUN SHINED, CASTING A bright sheen behind my closed eyes, and rolled me in the soft warmth of heaven. Though the soreness between my thighs was the embodiment of Satan's harem itself.

I opened my eyes to find myself alone in *D'yavol's* bed. I stared at the ceiling while the memory of yesterday returned with a vengeance.

I didn't think Ronan noticed my mini-meltdown in the shower—or maybe he did, and that was why he took the initiative to wash me himself. My hair, my body . . . but not my conscience.

My mind worked backward, the memory hitting rewind from the moment I came, my head thrown back, beneath the spray of the shower. Each thrust had slid me up the shower wall, my thighs wrapped around his hips. Heavy breaths and Russian words. Stars on his shoulders. Stars in my eyes.

I'd dropped to my feet, spun around, and rose to my tiptoes. He slid inside me from behind. My forehead rolled against the wall, my fingers sliding down the stone. His hand on my throat; his lips at my ear. "*Moya. Vse moya.*" *Mine. All mine.* Inked fingers braced on the wall beside my own. Suds and skin and a raven called Nevermore. My chest held a brittle paper heart knowing, soon, this man would slip through my fingers like another lost Lenore . . .

I returned to the present, my arms spread on black sheets like a snow angel's, before I was again sucked back to yesterday.

After the shower, I was unable to find my clothes, so I dug through Ronan's closet and slipped on one of his T-shirts. It would be such a normal, domestic act if I didn't feel the need to check the fabric for a bloodstain before donning it.

It was lunchtime, and all the sex had made me famished. I sat on the bed and filled my empty stomach with the food Yulia brought up while Ronan pulled on a pair of boxer briefs and answered his phone. Masochistically, I wondered if Nadia was on the other end of the line. And then I consoled myself with the fact it was probably just a henchman who Ronan was ordering to drown some poor soul in a toilet.

Ronan was still talking on the phone when his gaze found me sitting cross-legged on his bed stuffing my face. After moving toward me with a glint in his eyes, he stole a carrot from my plate and brought it to my mouth. I gave him a dry look. If he thought he'd Stockholm syndromed me so good I'd let him hand-feed me, he was crazier than I thought.

I bit his finger.

With a chuckle, he bit off the end of the carrot and walked to the window to continue his conversation. His form blocked out the light, the shadow he cast having wings like the inked devil on his back. But now his darkness felt warmer than the sun.

After finishing my meal, I grew restless waiting for Ronan to finish his phone call, so, naturally, I started pushing the buttons on the wall near the nightstand. A blind began to slide down the window. In my haste to make it stop and not show my immaturity when it came to buttons, I pushed them all. The lights flicked on, and so did blaring music. A cabinet in the wall opened to reveal a flat-screen TV. Then the chandelier spun like a disco ball, its teardrop jewels glittering on the walls.

That escalated quickly . . .

Contrite, I cast my gaze to Ronan while the lights sparkled romantically, the blinds were haphazardly closed, and jazz played from hidden speakers. I pulled my lip between my teeth to hold in my laughter and offered, “Whoops.”

Ronan’s serious expression, as if I’d just interrupted a very important board meeting, only amused me more. He returned the room to its quiet state, and I couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“I had no idea you had such a romantic side.”

His lips turned up. “All that jazz came with the house.”

I laughed at the “jazz” double entendre. “I should have known. The chandelier button was dusty.” Leaning my head against the headrest, I said, “I hope I didn’t interrupt any of your plans to destroy the idea of world peace forever.” I squealed like a girl when he grabbed my ankle and yanked me down the bed.

“I think that was exactly your plan,” he countered, bracing his hands on either side of my head. “Or was I boring you?”

I vibrated beneath his closeness, his body heat finding its way under my skin. When I licked my lips in anticipation, his gaze followed the movement. Breathlessly, I nodded. Then his mouth touched mine so softly my chest ached. So softly, it wasn’t a kiss at all. It was all the words that could never be said. His lips left mine, the air so heavy and thick it put pressure on the backs of my eyes. To hide my reaction, I forced, “I hope one of those buttons didn’t launch a rocket to destroy the moon.”

A smile touched his lips as he pulled back to stand at the foot of the bed. “I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

“Without the moon, we might experience an ice age.”

“And you don’t wear pants, so we can’t have that.” He grabbed my ankle, nipped my instep, then sucked my big toe. I exhaled, bizarrely growing hot everywhere, and pushed his cheek away with my foot. He chuckled.

“Dresses are appropriate forms of clothing,” I returned.

“On you, I disagree.” He kissed and bit a path up my leg, and I moaned when he reached the inside of my thigh. My clit pulsed in anticipation, but what I wanted had nothing to do with his mouth between my legs—and not because of what he told me of his past; because time was limited with this man.

I grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled his lips to mine, barely skimming but burning nonetheless.

“Does the bed rotate too?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” he returned with humor, then his voice turned raspy. “But it does rock.”

The rest of the day passed with sex and food and Russian sitcoms.

And it was easily my favorite happily-for-now yet.



I ate breakfast alone. Ronan must have left for Moscow before I even woke, and the lack of his presence intensified an uneasy feeling in my chest. Had I given him exactly what he wanted, so he now had no reservations about handing me over in return for my papa?

I chewed my lip and walked through the house in a daze, trying to find something to do—anything to distract my mind from its horrid musings. I stopped short at the sight of the quiet serving girl in the laundry room.

“Oh, you’re back.”

With a wild flare of uncertainty in her eyes, she dropped her head and focused on the laundry she was folding, her movements nervous. I noted she looked better than I’d ever seen her. She was usually so pale, so fragile, but today, a healthy glow warmed her skin. Days ago, Ronan told me her disappearance was “none of my business,” and I suddenly knew he was responsible for her change in appearance.

Having nothing better to do, I moved closer, picked up a towel, and began folding it. She tensed, keeping her gaze lowered, but when her shaking hand lifted to her cheek, I realized she was wiping away a tear. The air really needed to be cleared.

“I know you poisoned me,” I said simply and grabbed another towel.

She dropped one of Ronan’s undershirts, her terror-filled eyes shooting to me.

I didn’t know what compelled her to serve me a cup of cyanide, but I did have the gut instinct it was one of those gray moments in life that couldn’t be categorized.

“I forgive you, you know? But please don’t do it again. It really sucked.”

I didn’t know how much English she understood, though I believed she got the gist by the feel of her incredulous gaze on me for a long moment while I worked my way through the bath towels.

“I am sorry,” she finally said softly, tears running down her cheeks. “I promise, I *vill* not do again.”

Her thick accent was endearing, and a warm smile touched my lips. “Now that’s out of the way, how does Ronan like his underwear folded?”

Glossy eyes slid to the boxer briefs in my hand, and the smallest hint of humor arose, which I imagined she hadn’t felt in a long time. Then she grabbed another pair of underwear and showed me how to correctly fold them. The simple moment filled another hole in my heart I didn’t know was there.

CHAPTER

Forty-Three

fudgel

(n.) *pretending to work while actually doing nothing*

Ronan

ALBERT HELD THE BANKER BY his collar and punched him in the face. Blood and spittle flew through the air. Leaning back in my desk chair, my eyes caught and narrowed on a blonde hair on my shirt sleeve. My first instinct was to pluck the strand off as if it carried a flesh-eating strain of bacteria. The hair was *yellow*. And these days, the color made my chest feel ridiculously tight.

The sensation was karma.

I knew it would catch up with me. And here it was, making me feel awkward as fuck with a single strand of Mila's hair. She clung to me when she wasn't even present. Her summery smell, the feel of her legs wrapped around me, the sound of her laugh . . . All of it had burrowed beneath my skin deeper than claws.

Albert's fist flew. The banker's jawbone cracked, and a tooth skidded across my desk.

Karma could have given me something easier to deal with—like an impending atom bomb or a nuclear disaster. But no, the comeuppance karma had dealt me was *feelings*. What a cunt.

Albert kicked the prone man in his ribs. He tried to block the blows with his arms. Bad decision. A boot connected with his head, though I vaguely paid attention, my mind still stuck in fluffy, Mila-induced clouds.

I'd been inside her enough times to memorize every inch of her body. My curiosity on that front should be satisfied. Though satisfaction was the feeling of a job well done; not the driving need to do it again and again until I died.

Sergey's pained groans filled the room as I stared at the strand of hair on my sleeve, relishing the fact it was there and hating it all the same.

I'd like to think my interest in Mila was just about her body, but I'd never talked to a woman as much as I did her without experiencing the pull of suicidal boredom. And yet I was the one striking up conversation even while balls-deep inside of her just to hear what that mouth of hers had to say. The truth was . . . Mila could have braces and leprosy, and I'd still want to fuck her six ways to Sunday.

I ran a thumb across my lip, coming to terms with the uncomfortable realization while Albert grabbed Sergey by the hair and threw him into the wall. The side table splintered, breaking beneath the banker's hefty weight.

Less than forty-eight hours. That was how long I had left before making the trade with Alexei. He was the one with a death sentence, but somehow, it felt like *I* was getting fucked over. The passing minutes mocked me, settling beneath my skin with an edgy feeling I couldn't shake.

Alexei's head no longer seemed an adequate trade for Mila. She was worth millions more . . . and the stolen Eiffel Tower. As a tension tightened my body, searing my chest, I pondered asking for

exactly that.

It would give me more time. More time to get Mila out of my blood. Though if things continued the way they were, she'd only work her way in deeper. Not to mention, this meeting told me the one thing I didn't have on my side right now was time.

Albert wiped the wall clean with Sergey's face. Picture frames fell, and glass shattered on the floor. Any other day, I would have something to say about Albert destroying my office, but all I could focus on was this token of Mila's she'd left behind and how, soon, it would be all I'd find of her.

It felt like a hot iron was wedged in my ribs at the thought of pushing her into Alexei's men's arms. The idea of Ivan being one of them made me grind my teeth. Apparently, jealousy was imagining smashing the other man's head into a wall. Five times. A sinister feeling spread through me, telling me she was mine—every yellow, sickly-sweet, hearts-in-her-eyes inch of her.

Albert slammed Sergey's face into the desktop, and blood splattered on my inked hands. The same ones that would separate Mila's papa's head from his neck.

She gave me her forgiveness.

I had nothing to give her but vengeance.

I brushed the hair off my sleeve and let it fall to the dirty carpet.

"I met with him!" Sergey finally gasped in Russian, hunched against the wall from the latest punch to the stomach. There was so much padding there, I was surprised he felt the blow.

Staying Albert's fist with a hand, I waited for Sergey to continue.

"I . . . I met with Alexei," he repeated, flicking his swelling eyes from Albert to me.

"We got that much," I drawled and leaned back in my chair. "This meeting of yours better be because you and Alexei are hiding a love affair."

"What?" He gaped. "N—"

"Because if you weren't fucking"—my eyes hardened—"it leaves me to assume you were discussing business. *My* business. So which is it? Are you fucking Alexei, or are you a fucking rat?"

By his expression, I'd put him in an impossible position. He wiped blood from his nose with the back of a hand, his eyes coasting to the exit he would never reach.

"I—we didn't discuss anything, I swear," Sergey said. "H-he only asked me some questions—"

"Like who would do the fucking." I nodded as if I understood.

He grew flustered, sputtering, "No! I didn't have a choice! He had a gun to my head!"

I raised a brow. "So you were definitely on bottom."

His bruised face turned crimson. "We didn't fuck! I'm not gay! Alexei asked me about stocks and liquid assets and to redirect some of your money into an offshore account. Said I'd receive ten percent if I did it." He was breathless, and when he realized how much he'd given away, his double chin wobbled. "*Oh, God.*"

I smiled with venom.

Sergey's shaky hands pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped sweat from his brow. "I can fix this! Just let me fix this. *Please . . .*" he whined. "I have a family."

Alexei was going down swinging. Anyone else would assume his master plan was to redirect all my funds so I couldn't pay my dealers and therefore my men, which would demolish their loyalty and leave me to live a sad, lonely life as a manual laborer. And apparently chimney sweeping was out. But knowing Alexei, this was just one annoying distraction of multiple others that were sure to come.

"Alexei didn't offer you ten percent," I stated.

Sergey swallowed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Alexei may be a cornered animal right now, but a leopard couldn't change its spots. The man held

onto pennies like each one was another day he'd live. His greed was one of the reasons it had been so easy to work my way up from the bottom of his ranks to sitting in his own cushy leather chair now.

"They make great prosthetics these days," I announced.

Sergey's shifty gaze came to me. "I . . . I don't understand." He was dripping sweat.

My eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I imagine typing speed may not be up to par, but at least you'll still be able to wipe your ass."

The banker's wide eyes dropped to his hands in understanding. "W-wait—"

Albert cut in. "I've read new prosthetic hands can even play rock, paper, scissors."

"Rock, paper, pliers," I corrected, pulling my gaze to Albert. "They can't scissor yet."

"There must not be a woman on that team then," Albert returned with amusement.

I chuckled.

"He offered me a girl!"

I turned my attention to Sergey. "Sorry, what was that?"

"H-he offered me a girl."

Tapping a pen on my desk to hide my distaste, I drawled, "So he's still dealing in flesh."

Sergey shifted uncomfortably.

"What does this girl look like? I'm sure he showed you a picture."

He fumbled for his wallet and pulled out a small photo, unable to hide a flicker of pride in his eyes when he put it on my desk. I slid it closer with a finger. It looked like a mug shot besides the fact it was a full-frontal of a naked girl, not a day over eighteen, standing in front of a white wall stained yellow from cigarette smoke. As beautiful as she was, her appearance was tainted by the bruises and glazed look of heroin in her eyes.

"She's definitely a step up from your wife."

Sergey didn't know if he should be offended—if it was wrong to call the purchased slave prettier than the wife—but in the end, he took it as a compliment.

"She's from France . . . Paris."

"Ah, the city of love. How romantic. Although, beaten as she is, she might not have very amorous words for you."

His gaze hardened a flicker. "She'll learn."

I smiled. "Maybe, but it won't be you doing the teaching."

Albert pulled out his pistol, and a *pop* split through the air. Sergey's body fell with a solid *thunk* to the floor, dreams of an underage sex slave still in his eyes.

I shuffled bloodstained paperwork, stapled them together, and slid them in Albert's direction. "Take these to the bank and tell Leonid I need a new banker." I tossed the girl's photo on top of the papers. "And burn that."

"What do you want to do with him?" Albert nudged Sergey's leg with his boot.

"Use him as target practice. Feed him to the fish. I don't give a fuck."

"That seems to be your current position these days. Well . . . besides one thing."

I lifted hard eyes to Albert's. "Why are you still here? The bank closes in an hour."

He grabbed the papers off the desk. "The truck's here, but apparently, I have very important papers to deliver."

Albert was calling me out on being distracted today, but I refused to go along with it. "I'll take care of the truck," I snapped and stood, stepping over Sergey's body on my way out the door.

I walked into the back room and straight into a brothel. Andrei's pants were around his ankles while he fucked a woman up against a shelf, her legs wrapped around his hips.

Annoyance brewing, my gaze slid to Kostya sitting at the card table shoving a handful of peanuts in his mouth. His little brother Vadim stared at the pair fucking with wide, unblinking eyes. I was having sex at his age, but I wasn't exactly the best role model.

The scene would have never bothered me before, though now it reminded me of fucking Mila. It seemed I couldn't go one minute without thinking about her today, and the knowledge worked aggravation through me.

I grabbed the collar of Vadim's coat and dragged him out of his chair toward the back door. Then I realized I knew those feminine moans and stilled, a dark chuckle escaping me.

"You reek of desperation, Nadia."

"You probably reek of your American!" she called out breathlessly between the steady slap of flesh.

Kostya dropped a few peanuts, his eyes going dark. I gave him a warning look and nodded to the back door, telling him to get out there now. He got up and stalked out.

"She's the reason you've been ignoring me, isn't she?" Nadia asked from over Andrei's shoulder, seeming to only tolerate his thrusts now. Apparently, he was fine with it. His pace picked up.

"Your jealousy is becoming a nuisance," I returned harshly.

I was surprised Nadia thought I would have a problem with her fucking someone else when I never gave a shit before. Hell, I'd even watched her with others. She either thought my feelings had changed, or this was merely a desperate attempt for attention.

"You haven't come to see me in weeks!" she whined. "What was I supposed to do?"

Dry amusement filled me at the fact she believed *this* was her best option. I tightened my grip on Vadim's coat collar when he tried to escape to get a better view.

"You need therapy."

"Me?" She sounded confused.

Andrei groaned, and I pulled Vadim to the back door, finished with the conversation.

"Wait!" Nadia pleaded. "Come over tonight."

"No thanks," I chuckled. "I'm not a fan of queues." My skin crawled at the thought of fucking Nadia ever again. I'd rather stick my cock in a seedy gloryhole.

Not to mention, I hadn't been using a condom with Mila and refused to wear one now. I may not want to think about her, but I knew I wouldn't have the willpower to stop fucking her, so that meant my dick had her name on it for the time being. *Fuck* . . . That sounded like monogamy. Odd the thought didn't seem to bother me as long as Mila was in my bed.

"Andrei, you have a minute to finish her off, then get your ass out here to unload."

"Got it, boss."

"*Ronan*, wait—"

The back door slammed shut behind me.

Kostya was already helping the driver unload the truck filled with frozen meat and cocaine. I released Vadim, who stumbled in a dreamy state of preteen lust before catching his footing.

"Damn," he mumbled and shook his head as if to clear it. "I think I'm in love."

I laughed. "You'll change your mind when you realize you have standards. Or just one."

"I don't know what those are, but when I saw her, it was like I couldn't breathe. Then I felt . . . tingly all over."

Kostya propped the back door open with a crate. "Sounds like crabs."

Vadim frowned. "Shut up. I ain't got crabs."

"Only because you've never got your dick wet."

The kid reddened. "Maybe 'cause I have standards."

"You didn't even know what those were a second ago."

I took the clipboard from the driver, scrawled my signature, and handed it back.

"I do now," Vadim returned stubbornly. "And I realize I have them."

"So you would definitely protest if Nadia Smirnova wanted you to fuck her when Andrei's finished."

Vadim's expression was torn, which made everyone laugh.

"Don't think about it too hard," Kostya said. "It'll never happen. You don't have a single thing a woman would want."

"What do women want?"

Listening to their conversation, I bummed a cigarette from the driver and leaned against the truck.

"Money," his brother told him.

This was apparently bad news for Vadim, who glanced at his scuffed boots before asking, "What else?"

"A big dick."

The kid raised a brow. "So you don't have what women want either."

I blew out of a breath of smoke with a chuckle.

"You little shit." Kostya dropped his crate and took off for Vadim, who hightailed it down the alley, hurling insults about his brother's small dick the whole way.

I inhaled on my cigarette and thought about what women wanted and how my view had changed when Mila entered the equation.

"Get lost, kid," the driver snapped, closing up the back of the truck and latching it with a click. The exchange was only background noise; my thoughts were centered on the girl I held captive in my home.

"I'm starving, sir."

Mila wanted candles, world peace, and most likely a lot of household pets.

"Talk to your momma about that."

"I don't got one!"

"Not my problem."

Mila would probably even like me more if I had a small dick. I bet it would remind her of a baby bird she needed to nurture.

"Hey, let me go, fatso!"

An uncomfortable edge slid through me when I realized Mila wouldn't care if I was penniless.

"Your momma's probably a whore!" the boy yelled. "And she's so fat and ugly, she gets paid to keep her clothes on!"

That finally brought my attention to the scuffle happening in my alley. I pushed off the truck to see the driver dragging a young boy away while the kid punched him in the stomach, struggling to get free. So this was the starving boy deprived of a momma. And with a creatively dirty mouth. He bit the driver, who dropped him to the pavement with a harsh curse. The driver moved to hit him, but my "Nyet" froze his fist mid-air.

"Snot-nosed little brat," he muttered to the kid before heading back to the truck.

"Hey, mister!" the boy hollered at me and got to his feet. "Can you spare a few coins?"

He appeared to only be nine or ten and small for his age, but it was the way he edged closer with his hands cupped like a cinema-inspired orphan that made me narrow my eyes. I knew what was coming before it happened, though it was too late to react.

He pulled a pistol on me, fired, and ran like a bat out of hell. Pain cut through my arm, making me drop my cigarette. I stared at the wasted nicotine with annoyance, then at the boy running down the alley.

“You’re a poor shot, kid,” I growled after him.

He turned and gave me two middle fingers.

The little fucker.

Andrei flew out the back door, pants unbuttoned and gun already drawn. Seeing the retreating kid, he started to go after him, but he stilled when I said, “Let him go.”

It wasn’t the boy who shot me. That was on Alexei. Contempt flared in my chest knowing I’d be busy with more of his shit all day.

CHAPTER *Forty Four*

zemlyanika
(n.) wild strawberries

Ronan

A TAP TO THE CHEEK pulled me out of a deep sleep.

I didn't need to open my eyes to know who woke me. She smelled like strawberries. I'd never been a fan of the fruit before her, but now, the scent made me hungry. And hard. Her hair caressed my bare chest. I was about to wrap a few strands around my fist and pull her mouth to mine, though I didn't get the chance.

She slapped me hard.

"What the fuck, Mila?" I growled, waking fully.

I was lying on the drawing room couch, a throbbing arm hanging off the side. Awkwardly, I wasn't sure how I'd gotten here. When I'd said I would be busy with Alexei's shit today, I meant it. The last thing I remembered was dealing with one of my train cars that derailed, crashed, and then exploded when I arrived. Little white pills had fallen from the sky like snow.

With a distressed noise, Mila shoved at my chest. I clenched my teeth. Apparently, I wasn't waking to her sweet side tonight. She tried to push away from me, but I grabbed her wrist.

"I couldn't get you to wake up!" she cried breathlessly. "I thought—I . . ."

The sight of tears streaming down her cheeks tightened my throat. She'd thought I was dead. No way I'd go down half-naked lying on a loveseat. The idea would almost be amusing if seeing Mila cry didn't make me feel like shit. Though the fact those tears were for me sent a warm sensation to my chest I could only associate with Christmas cheer. I didn't even like Christmas.

"I thought you believed I couldn't die, *kotyonok*," I said roughly.

She swallowed. "There's so much blood . . ."

A full moon lit the room almost as well as the overhead light. Blood dripped down my arm, coating my chest and her hands. She must have taken off my shirt to check the damage. I was surprised I didn't wake up, though I hadn't taken care of the gunshot wound as well as I should have. Alexei's games made that impossible.

Albert had dug the bullet out and wrapped up my arm, but it seemed to be bleeding decently now by the small puddle on the floor. The fact I could move my arm fine told me it looked a lot worse than it was.

"It's not all mine." The blood on my chest wasn't.

"Whose?" Her voice wavered. She probably thought it was her papa's. It should be. *Would* be.

"A priest's." As blasphemous as it sounded, he was a really shitty priest on Alexei's payroll.

She sawed her lip between her teeth. "Oh."

I was sure she'd have something more to say once the statement sank in, but she remained silent,

sitting on the edge of the couch in nothing but one of my T-shirts. She looked like Michelangelo's wet dream. As usual, she wasn't wearing a bra, her nipples visible beneath the white fabric. Apparently, I still had some blood left in me, and it rushed to my groin.

Tear-stained cheeks. Glistening eyes. Legs I would die for. She was so beautiful, the sight punched me in the gut. A train car had exploded like a scene in an action movie, but when pills dropped from the sky, all I saw was the memory of Mila dressed in yellow, standing on cracked pavement catching snowflakes in her hand.

Greedier men than me were out there—her papa included—but I suddenly knew I had them beat as the impatient, covetous heat erupted inside for this girl who cried for me.

Pulling her lip free from her teeth, I ran an inked thumb across her mouth. “Nothing to say about my blackened soul?”

Her soft eyes lifted to mine. “No.”

My gaze hardened, her response sending an irrational lash of annoyance through me. The knowledge was difficult to admit to myself, but I liked this girl an indecent amount. I liked her in my home—even with all the mud she dragged in. I liked her full attention and smart mouth. But what I really liked was her heart—the pliable organ in her chest I could mold to fit my hand like Play-Doh.

Her tears, her trusting eyes, her fucking existence—all of it made it impossible to imagine her walking away from me while I watched from a distance, my palm containing a remnant of sticky yellow Play-Doh I'd never be able to wash off.

My thumb pressed down on her lips, smearing my inner turmoil across the soft pout of her mouth. Her lack of self-preservation used to amuse me; now, it made me want to keep her locked in a bulletproof room only I had access to. And I didn't currently have one of those.

“Stupid *kotyonok*,” I growled in frustration.

Those cat-shaped eyes that originally gave her the nickname narrowed, and she jerked free from my grip. “You're the stupid one lying here bleeding out.”

Now, she was *moy kotyonok* because she was sickly sweet until she bared her claws.

Grabbing her by the throat, I tugged her lips to mine. She exhaled into my mouth, the slide of my tongue cutting off her protests. She braced her hands beside my head in an effort to keep her body weight off mine. I'd been shot in the arm, not the chest, though somehow, it felt like the latter when she was around.

I nipped at her lips and feeling the wetness on her cheeks that belonged to *me*, I grew harder.

“No,” she breathed into my mouth, trying to pull away from me, but my body took it figuratively—as in, fucking forever—and my grip tightened, the chaos inside me rising to the surface.

She turned her head. “Ronan . . . no.”

“What did I say about that word?”

“You're bleeding. Badly.” She sounded so distressed, I relaxed my grip but couldn't stop myself from running my mouth down her neck, leaving a mark on her in the only way I knew how.

Releasing her flesh with a scrape of teeth, I said, “That's what happens when you get shot.”

“You need to go to the hospital.” She struggled against me. “Seriously, what are you doing lying here?”

“I *was* trying to take a nap. But now I'm in the mood for something else.” I grabbed her thighs and pulled her to straddle me, ignoring the fire in my arm. The pain had nothing on the sudden physical need to be inside her. Oddly, I didn't think the desire had anything to do with my dick.

“I'm not having sex with you right now.”

Grinding her down on my erection, I said, “I've had a shitty day, *kotyonok*. Make it better.”

“I’m calling the doctor.” She tried to pull away, but I didn’t let her go.

“You don’t have a phone.”

“Ronan . . . *please*. Please, just call the doctor.” *Fuck*. She sounded close to a fresh wave of tears. It rubbed me the wrong way, though that warm sensation returned, cementing the comparison I’d given it earlier to the holidays. Although, my cock was rock-hard, so now, the feeling was closer to a softcore Christmas special.

“I’ll text him,” I told her. “But only if you help me occupy the time until he gets here.”

The unenthusiastic look she gave me wasn’t one I usually got from a woman I was about to fuck, but it was somehow adorable nonetheless.

“That can’t be advised on WebMD.”

I chuckled. “If you’re such a follower of theirs, I’m sure they have a tutorial on how to patch up a gunshot wound. Better wash your hands and find a needle.”

She sighed, cast a look at the blood dripping from the crimson-soaked binding on my arm, and gave in. “Okay. But text him right now. This is a Satan’s Express situation, not a leisurely drive through the countryside. Got it?”

My eyes narrowed. I wasn’t used to taking orders—especially with fucking “got it” attached to the end—but the ridiculousness of what she was saying overrode the annoyance. I pulled my phone from my pocket and shot off a text to Kirill, using Mila’s exact words. He’d figure it out. Or maybe not. All I cared about now was the woman sliding down my body and working on my belt buckle.

I tossed my phone to the floor.

Mila released me from my briefs and wrapped a hand around my hard cock, slowly stroking me like an apathetic fluffer doing her job behind the scenes of a porno.

“This is nice, *kotyonok*. But not exactly what I had in mind.”

She glanced up at me. Her eyes were a window to her soul. I suddenly knew, if I ever died, those eyes would have something to do with it. Somehow, it sounded acceptable to me.

“Will you show me what you like?” she asked uneasily. Then she lowered to her stomach between my legs, and I understood her reservation, nearly groaning.

“*Da.*” *Fuck da.*

It felt like I was a teenager about to get his first blow job. My heart beat overtime, which was probably making me bleed more, but I’d take that knowledge to the grave or else I knew Mila would stop.

This definitely wasn’t advised on WebMD.

The first slide of her tongue on my shaft hit me like a lance of fire. Residual heat spread up my stomach and tightened my abs. My head fell back to the couch, and I clenched my teeth in an effort to not make a sound as she licked my dick like a lollipop. I’d never make it to three hundred and eighty-eight.

My hand tightened in a fist as I fought the urge to slide my fingers into her hair; to hold her still and fuck her mouth. That was what I’d do with any other woman, but I couldn’t stomach treating Mila like everyone else—even considering the way she torturously licked every inch of my cock.

Her free hand slid up my taut abs. The slim ivory fingers appeared innocent. Soft as velvet. Unpainted, blunt nails. Unblemished skin. Yet the press of them on my stomach burned a path just as hot as her mouth. This was the first time I’d paid attention to a woman’s hands instead of her mouth on my cock. Maybe I really was bleeding out.

Her gaze met mine as she licked the head of my cock. I held in a groan, knowing the moment I was vocal, all kinds of demanding things would escape. Containing, but not limited to: “Gag on my cock

... Deep-throat me, *kotyonok* ... Tap my thigh when you need to breathe.”

The moonlight cast a halo over every inch of her body. It looked like an angel was sucking my dick—*D'yavol's* dick. I knew the real devil would never let her go. He'd cut off her wings and lock her away. The idea would have some merit if Alexei wasn't such a massive bitch and if karma wasn't fucking everything up with *feelings*, reminding me Mila wouldn't like that idea very much. As much as I appreciated the tears she shed for me, my skin also chafed at the idea of causing more.

She seemed to be getting more comfortable with this and enjoying herself too. The pad of her foot slid up the other ankle while she tortured me with little licks and sucks that only made me ache.

Her gaze lifted to mine. “You're being so quiet. Very ... passive.” She tilted her head, a hint of worry flickering in her eyes. “Are you feeling okay?” I had the impression she was close to touching my forehead to check my temp.

I wasn't being demanding, so I must be sick? *Jesus Christ*.

“I'm fine, Mila. Just suck my cock, would you?”

She frowned. “You're not telling me what you like.”

“I like it all.” It was partly true. She could breathe on my dick, and I'd enjoy it. If this day hadn't gone to shit, she could lick my cock for hours without any complaints. But right now, all I wanted was to come in that pretty mouth of hers.

She raised an impish brow. “Really? My friend said some guys like teeth.”

“Not this fucking one.”

“Sure about that?” She licked up my shaft and then snapped her teeth at me adorably.

I wanted to kiss her. I wanted her to keep sucking my dick. I wanted it all.

Here I was trying to be a gentleman for the first time in my life, but then she had to call me “passive” and bring teeth into the mix. Screw it.

Pushing her hair back from her face, I demanded, “Take me in your mouth and suck.”

She held eye contact with me and obeyed without a word. Taking me between her lips, she slid down a few inches and sucked like a pro on her way up. *Fuck*. My hand fisted in her hair, gliding her head back down. And up. And down. I restrained my movements, going easy on her. But when she made little humming noises around my cock and pressed her thighs together, I realized this was really turning her on. Fuck me. My restraint snapped.

“Deeper, *kotyonok*,” I ordered harshly.

Complying, her mouth slid down even farther to take in those last few inches. She gagged before she made it. The heat building at the base of my spine grew hotter and unstable. I knew it wouldn't take much more.

“Relax your throat,” I rasped.

I ran my thumb down the smooth column to show her what I wanted. She inhaled, and the next time she took me in her mouth, she slid down, managing to take every fucking inch.

“*Fuck*, *kotyonok*,” I growled. “Your sweet mouth is going to make me come.”

She pulled back to suck in a ragged breath. Her eyes watered, tears pouring down her cheeks. My heart pounded with force, but I softly held her hair back from her face, my voice a deep rasp.

“Then the only place left for me to come in is your ass.”

She hummed a breathy noise and rubbed her thighs together before licking up my shaft, then taking my cock in her mouth all the way again. I hissed through my teeth. She gagged, her throat constricted around me, and it was game over. The heat inside me erupted so violently my ears rang as I pulled back slightly to come in her mouth and not down her throat, unsure of how she would feel about that.

She looked up at me, her eyes watering little streaks down her cheeks, and swallowed. I made a

rough sound through my teeth, every cell in me on fire with satisfaction and . . . something else. She wiped her mouth with the back of a hand, her hair an unruly mess of curls reaching past her waist. The sight turned me inside out. Like someone had shoved a hand into my chest and ripped out my non-beating heart.

Fuck.

I grabbed the back of her neck and pulled her lips to mine, kissing her deeply, sliding my tongue into her mouth. Her fingers found purchase in my hair, which sent a shudder through me. I swallowed her sigh. That little puff of air of hers settled like an anchor in my empty chest.

Pulling back, I brushed some wetness from her cheeks. "These are the only tears I like."

Her eyes held mine for a moment, but where transparency usually lay was that absent place I despised. I knew it wasn't distress that caused her to put up a wall, but something else entirely.

I brushed another tear from her cheek and said, "Now sit on my face."

Her brow furrowed. "I didn't do that to get something in return. This . . . was just for you."

I smiled. She was cute. My perfect little martyr. But she had something wrong. She squealed when I grabbed her thighs and pulled her to straddle my face.

"This *is* for me," I said with a growl, pulling her thigh to the side and sucking her clit into my mouth.

"Oh, God," she moaned.

"You're wet, *kotyonok*," I scolded. "Is all of this from just sucking me off?"

"*Da.*"

I wanted to smile. I liked hearing Russian on her lips more than I should. Spreading her open with my thumbs, I gave her cunt little licks and sucks that made her shake.

"*Fuck,*" she breathed.

I chuckled roughly. "I think I'm a bad influence on you."

Her hand found purchase in my hair, and she grinded down on my face, yelping when I nipped where her hip bone met her inner thigh for being impatient. She sighed when I laved the sore spot with my tongue. Then I moved back to her pussy, sucking each lip into my mouth, releasing them with a light graze of teeth. Her forehead fell to rest on the couch arm with a moan.

"Ronan, I'm going to come."

"Christ, woman," I rasped. "I haven't even started the ABCs."

"I don't know what those are, but I do know I don't want a lesson on the alphabet right now."

I fought a laugh. "We'll start with A."

She groaned in frustration. "Ronan, no—" The rest was cut off by a raspy moan that would wake the dead. And probably Yulia. Even Mila's carnal noises sounded innocent. Sexy and feminine and perfect. I'd never get them out of my head.

I drew a B on her clit with my tongue before switching to C. Her thighs trembled while she mumbled incoherent moans. She was so close, I sucked her clit hard, and she shattered. I slid my fingers inside her just to feel the hot pulses, only pulling free after they stopped. She panted coming down from her high.

A sudden knock on the door caused Mila to fall off the couch. I couldn't hold in a chuckle. I knew this gentleman thing wasn't for me. Seeing Kirill in the doorway, I pulled my briefs over my cock. The doctor stood with his briefcase in hand and a massive look of disappointment.

Apparently, he was with WebMD on this one.

"He made me do it!" Mila blurted from her spot on the floor.

"*U neye ovulyatsiya,*" I explained. "*Ona prakticheski iznasilovala menya.*" *She's ovulating.*

She practically raped me.

Kirill's eyes narrowed in disbelief. "*I ty ne mog ot ne'ye otbit'sa.*" *And you couldn't fend her off, I see.*

I smiled. "*Ona sil'neye, chem kazhetsya.*" *She is stronger than she looks.*

Mila got to her feet and aimed a glare at me. "Ovulating? You're the one who's always ovulating if you ask me."

I laughed. She must have not understood the "rape" part of the conversation, or she'd have a lot more to say. My amusement nose-dived when I remembered she was wearing nothing but my thin T-shirt.

My gaze hardened. "Go put on some fucking pants, Mila."

She ignored me. Straight-up ignored me. If she thought the gunshot wound had made me so passive I wouldn't carry her ass up those stairs, she was wrong. But her words momentarily paused me.

"Will he be okay?" she asked.

The doctor understood the English but unfortunately couldn't translate his very superfluous response. "*Yesli odin vystrel v ruku ub'yet yego, ya razvedus' s lyubimoy zhenoy i trakhnu izvestnuyu shlyukhu s vich. Potom pereyedu v sibir' i budu vyrashchivat' repu, poka ne umru.*"

I laughed loudly.

Mila frowned. "Was that a no?"

"He said if one shot in the arm kills me, he'll divorce his loving wife and fuck a famous whore with HIV. Then he'll move to Siberia and farm turnips until he dies."

She pulled her lip between her teeth to hide a smile. "He thinks you're immortal too."

I wanted to return the smile but didn't. I'd escaped a lot of near-deaths. When I was younger, I thought even death didn't want me. Now, I thought fighting my way out of the freezing Moskva had awarded me an iron-clad resilience to live.

"*Nyet, kotyonok.* He's just seen me much worse than this."

She swallowed as her eyes slid down my chest, like she was seeing the scars for the first time. Some of the marks were long and thin from contraband blades behind bars. A few of them were round from gunshots—one in my side, one in my back, one now in my arm, and another an inch away from my heart, which was the scar Mila drew her fingers across. The touch made my skin crawl but was warm nonetheless.

"Who?" she asked shakily.

I knew she was asking who shot me—who almost *killed* me. But something inside me rebelled at telling her the truth. Mila wanted to live in a shiny bubble. A bubble her papa could be redeemed in. A bubble where his character looked a little dark but shiny nonetheless.

She might learn a lot about how he'd done business when he was dead. That he kidnapped girls younger than her and sent them into the sex industry. Her bubble was going to be popped someday, but I couldn't be the one to do it.

I smiled and lied, "No one you know."

Her fingers slipped off my chest, leaving a weird sense of absence behind. She stepped back to give room for Kirill to set up a blood bag. I gave him a silent warning to not put any pain-relief drugs in my IV. I hated the way they made me feel. At first, he'd complained, but now, he was used to it and merely nodded.

Mila hovered as if there was something she could do to help. I'd never been the source of someone's concern before her. I didn't need it. Here I was, four gunshots in and still alive. Yet Mila was on a roll trying to string some Russian together to ask Kirill about my condition. I suddenly hated

her concern. I hated it because I liked it. And the latter wasn't conducive in any way. Once she was gone, karma would leave me pining for a woman's love over a bowl of soggy Fruit Loops.

I needed to stop this Hallmark avalanche now.

"We both got off, Mila," I said harshly. "I'm not sure what you're waiting around here for."

She took a step back at my words, her complexion paling. And now I hated myself. What was a little self-loathing added to the mix?

"Okay," she murmured. "I guess I'll go then."

Mila hesitated for a second before turning to leave as if it was the last thing she wanted. I didn't think it was what I wanted either. She gave me a fleeting glance in the doorway that tightened my chest, and then she was gone.

I wondered if that was the exact scene that would play out in less than two days' time—a glimpse of her yellow hair and a brief meeting of eyes before a gnawing absence set in.



I fell into bed over two hours later in my bloody pants and boots. Kirill told me the wound would heal fine after shoving some antibiotics in my hand. He was pretty confident the bullet had missed bone, only tearing through muscle. How narcissistic I got once again. I'd normally be enjoying two fingers of vodka and a cigar after this day, though now all I could see was the heartbroken look on Mila's face.

The need to go to her room tore at me, but I quelled the impulse. I'd already apologized to her once; I didn't have another in me. Not to mention, it was futile to do so now, thirty hours before I murdered her papa.

I was sure she wouldn't welcome me anyway, and I'd never begged for a thing in my life—not even as a kid living on the streets. I simply took what I wanted. Unfortunately, Mila wasn't a handful of rubles or a loaf of bread. She just had to have feelings and some kind of voodoo power over me that wouldn't let me hurt her—apparently, even emotionally.

I'd never beg.

But this was the first time I'd wanted to.

I fell asleep to the thought of seeing Mila on the streets. I simply picked her up and carried her home to my Russian fortress, where I hand-fed her pomegranate seeds so she'd never be able to leave.

It was slight movement on the mattress that woke me. Again, I knew who it was. The pressure in my chest released when Mila slid into bed beside me and rested an arm on my chest and her head on my shoulder.

My perfect little martyr, lying in her father's executioner's arms. I had a job to do, and she was the chess piece needed to win.

The problem was . . . I didn't think I could ever play her.

CHAPTER *Forty-Five*

quatervois
(n.) a crossroads

Mila

I WAS BURNING IN THE flames of hell. It was the only thing that explained the heat consuming me from the inside out. Though hell wasn't supposed to be so inviting . . . or smell like a Russian forest . . . or fit as well as Armani.

It *did* contain the faint scent of blood, however.

I blinked against the sun streaming in through the window. The bright morning light was only shadowed by Ronan's body—which was, of course, the embodiment of hellfire itself.

My face was pressed against his chest, and I was pretty sure some dried priest's blood had rubbed off on my cheek. That should be the last straw to this messed up tête-à-tête, but somehow, I knew the deceased had been a really shitty priest.

One of my legs was intertwined with Ronan's as I slowly suffocated beneath his heavy thigh, the deadweight of his arm around me, and *all* the heat. It was bliss.

I'd always disliked my height, though that was before I realized if I was any shorter, I'd never be able to feel so many inches of this man at once. The closeness hummed in my blood, sating a deep-seated hole inside my heart.

"You feel pretty clingy right now, *kotyonok*." The words were rough and tired and so very sexy.

"You're the one holding me tighter than your favorite stuffed animal," I returned.

"I don't have favorites." A lazy hint of humor touched the words. "They all matter to me."

My laugh turned into an *oomph* when a small human jumped on top of me, pushing the air from my lungs.

"*Dyadya! Dyadya!*" *Uncle! Uncle!* The little girl bounced on me as if I was a trampoline until Ronan hauled her onto his chest. His *blood-smear*ed chest. The man may be wearing pants while I wore his T-shirt, but this scene was far from PG. She either didn't notice his wounded arm and all the blood, or she simply didn't find it important. From what I'd learned of her during our first meeting, I knew it was the latter.

"*Moya neposlushnaya plemyanitsa,*" Ronan chuckled, tickling the girl's sides. She giggled, her dark braids bouncing. She wore another band T-shirt as a dress—this one Death—and long socks covered with kittens.

I leaned against the headboard and watched them with a sense of awe. This was another side of Ronan I hadn't seen, and I had to say, this gray part of him was . . . one I undeniably loved. I realized it last night. With his hands in my hair, the carnal taste of him in my mouth, and his eyes on mine. I'd almost said it then . . . I'd almost let those three words escape, but something had blocked them from coming up my throat.

I loved him.

I *couldn't* love him.

So I forced the feeling to stay inside where it belonged and not out in the open where it didn't.

"Stop!" the girl squealed through tortured laughter while Ronan tickled her feet. He sniffed them and pretended they smelled bad, wrinkling his nose. She could barely breathe from giggling.

I'd never thought much about having children, but seeing uncle and niece interact filled my chest with a warm yearning. Though the feeling faded when I recalled this happy moment would just be a memory someday, and any kids I had would never be Ronan's.

When the tickle torture stopped, the girl caught her breath and turned to look at me. Again, her dark eyes filled with judgement. And maybe a little jealousy.

"*Dyadya*, if she's not Satan, who is she?"

Ronan cast a glance to me, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "She's my maid."

I shook my head with a smile.

The girl frowned. "Why she in bed?"

"She's trying to make the bed, but I refuse to get out, and she's too weak to move me."

She giggled at her uncle. "You're lazy."

"Lazily handsome." He winked at her.

The girl turned to me and announced, "Papa can move him." On second thought, she pursed her lips. "Nevers mind."

"Why never mind?" Ronan asked with humor. "Does it have something to do with his phone in your hand?"

She glanced at the cell and made a face like she didn't like the question. "Papa says I can play a princess game if I eat breakfast."

I smiled. "And I'm assuming you didn't eat?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't like eggs. Or toast. Or porridge. Or—"

"Okay," Ronan chuckled. "You don't like food."

Happy he understood, she nodded, then said quietly, "I *might* like food after I play new princess game."

Wow. This little girl was going to rule the world. Not to mention, she appeared to be about three with the vocabulary of a child much older. She would grow up to be a gorgeous female Einstein. Or a criminal mastermind.

She was giving Ronan those big dark eyes that would be impossible for even Hitler to resist.

Ronan chuckled and shook his head. "Okay, kitty Kat, what do you need from me?"

She smiled real big and handed him the phone. "Find game, please. I could do it," she said haughtily, "but Papa won't tell me the password."

"What a tyrant," Ronan drawled. "What's the game called?"

"I dunno. It was on commercial after one of Mamma's kissy shows."

It took Ronan three tries to figure out his brother's passcode. I was beginning to think this entire family was full of geniuses. He opened the app store and searched for princess games with bloody inked fingers.

His niece peeked over his shoulder while he scrolled through the games, and I felt more than content just watching them.

"Okay, we got Princess Hair Salon," Ronan said.

"Ew."

He moved on. "Princess Room Cleanup?"

Her nose wrinkled. Mine too.

“Princess Horse Club?”

“No, *Dyadya*,” she complained. “The game’s not pink.” She threw her hands up in frustration. “Everything’s pink.”

“Princess Makeover?”

“*Nyet*,” she sighed.

“That one wasn’t pink,” he returned.

She rolled her eyes. “Fuchsia is almost pink.”

This little girl was making me feel like my IQ could use a boost.

Ronan continued to scroll through the list of games before stopping on one that had no resemblance to the color pink.

“The Princess’s Reign of Terror?”

Her eyes lit up. “That one!”

I couldn’t hold in a laugh.

She grabbed the cell from Ronan’s hand and dived into The Princess’s Reign of Terror. Seconds later, noises blared from the phone: slices of blades, groans of pain, and a, “Cut off his head!”

“Well, this looks cozy.”

I turned my head to see Christian in the doorway dressed in a three-piece suit without a single wrinkle. I shifted, a little self-conscious at being caught in his brother’s bed willingly—the one who had me tied up naked the last time Christian was here. Though he didn’t seem surprised or even interested in me, which eased any awkwardness.

Christian was the kind of man who made a woman’s mouth dry just by looking at him, but as flawless as he was, I preferred his brother’s imperfections. That scar on his bottom lip. All the ink. His jaded soul I’d seen warm just for me.

Christian looked like Gabriel the archangel. Ronan was every part *D’yavol*. I knew if they stood on separate sides of an alley and I was running from danger . . . I’d jump into *D’yavol*’s arms.

“Your daughter was complaining of the emotional trauma you just put her through,” Ronan said. “What kind of uncle would I be if I turned her away?”

“A bad one,” the girl said without looking up from her game.

I bit my lip to hold in a smile.

“Kat,” Christian said with a warning.

She looked up at him and deadpanned, “Papa.”

“Breakfast table right now.”

“Is there pancakes?” she challenged.

Christian narrowed his eyes. His daughter held the eye contact. An intense, silent father-daughter battle was happening before me, and it was mesmerizing.

“Toast and porridge make my tummy hurt, Papa,” Kat said softly. She looked up at him from beneath her lashes, and that seemed to be when her papa waved the white flag.

“Fine. Pancakes. But you’ll finish your game after you eat.”

She smiled real big, jumped off the bed, and skipped into her father’s arms. He lifted her, and she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“I love you, Papa.”

His eyes softened. “I love you too, *malen’kaya volchitsa*.”

As he turned to leave, Kat wrapped her arms around his shoulders and said, “I really want chocolate chips in my pancake. And Fruit Woops. It would make me so happy, Papa!”

It was clear by Christian's enamored expression, there'd be chocolate and rainbow-colored cereal in his daughter's pancakes come hell or high water.

Ronan dropped his head against the headboard and chuckled at—I could only assume—how whipped his brother was. Christian gave him a dark look, glanced at me, then looked back to his brother. Ronan's eyes narrowed. A subtle smile touched Christian's lips, and then he carried Kat out of the room.

Their absence left this gnawing hole in my chest. I thought of my papa and how his love had never been as deep as what I'd just seen in Christian's eyes. How I could count on one hand how many times he'd told me he loved me; how I yearned for his affection and rarely received even a hug. Guilt expanded in my chest for thinking this way. My papa was sacrificing himself for me. Wasn't that the strongest expression of love?

Still, longing tore through me for that expressive kind of love I'd never had and that, soon, it'd be lost to me forever.

"Ronan," I said uneasily. "I want to talk to my papa."

Phone in his hand, he cast a look at me. The glint in his eyes was an unwavering "no."

I swallowed. "*Please . . .* I might not see him ever again shortly, and I really need this." My voice clogged with emotion. "I really need to talk to him."

He watched me for a moment, then reached into the nightstand, pulled out my phone, and handed it to me. "Put it on speakerphone."

I exhaled in relief. "Okay."

Turning the phone on with shaky hands, I was assaulted by multiple messages coming in. Most from Carter. *A lot* from Carter. The man barely gave me the time of day unless we were on a mandatory date. I wondered if he was in trouble from his father for letting his almost-fiancée fall off the face of the earth.

Finding my papa's contact, my thumb hesitated before I pressed "call" and turned on the speakerphone. I set the phone on my thigh, my stomach roiling with each shrill ring. Then they stopped.

"Alexei."

My throat felt tight. "Papa."

He released a breath of relief. "Mila . . ."

A tear ran down my cheek. I saw Ronan get to his feet out of the corner of my eye and walk over to look out the window.

"Hi, Papa." I didn't know what else to say or why this felt so awkward.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine." Just in your enemy's bed willingly. Guilt inflamed my gut.

"Are you really? Or are you only saying that because that bastard is listening in?"

My skin crawled at the insult, the demand to defend Ronan rising in my throat, but I didn't know what part to play here. Too much animosity cloaked the room, as if one wrong word would cause it to blow.

"He's here listening. But I promise, I'm fine."

I could practically hear the cogs in my father's head turning, wondering why Ronan was letting me speak to him. This phone call wouldn't benefit Ronan in any way. Papa must have believed me because he said, "*Khorosho.*" *Good.* "Mila, there are things we need to discuss. Things concerning you after I'm gone."

Another tear ran down my cheek. "Okay."

“You need to marry Carter, angel.”

Ronan’s shoulder’s tensed, and he turned to face me, but I couldn’t find the courage to fully look at him.

“I know he wasn’t your first choice—”

“He was never my choice,” I returned, cutting off my papa for the first time in my life.

I heard him grind his teeth. “What you want doesn’t matter right now. What matters is keeping you safe.”

“How could Carter do that? He’s a professional playboy.”

Ronan paced the length of the footboard, each step setting me further on edge.

“Carter’s father holds a very powerful position in Miami. This is why I encouraged the engagement from the beginning. It would have already been set in stone if you hadn’t run to Moscow and straight to *D’yavol*.” His voice went quieter, which meant he was internally seething.

His anger was a whisper compared to the other man’s in the room. And both of them were beginning to make me burn in frustration, forcing the next words from my mouth.

“So why don’t I just marry Carter’s father then?”

A long pause. “He is married.”

“Bummer. I’ve learned I have a thing for older guys.” I let my eyes meet Ronan’s, which glowed with a dark, violent light. Unable to hold his intensity, I looked away.

“Papa . . . I don’t want to marry Carter.”

“You do not understand, Mila. If you don’t want to live on the streets, you will marry him. There will be no money left when I’m gone. I raised you right, but I’m afraid I screwed up when it comes to your brothers.”

Brothers.

I’d reached a place where I didn’t even blink at the knowledge I had brothers. *Plural*. It felt like my entire life had been a lie, and this was where the real me began.

“They will clean everything out, Mila. The house in Miami. Everything. I need to know you’re taken care of.”

I rubbed the cold goose bumps on my thigh. “I thought you told me Ivan would take care of me.”

He was silent. So silent, my heart dropped.

“Ivan has other demands to take care of now.”

What he meant was Ivan didn’t want anything to do with me anymore. It felt like someone had stabbed me in the chest. I may not have loved Ivan romantically, but I did as a friend. I was losing my papa and my best friend. *Alone*. I wasn’t even alone yet, but the absence hollowed out my bones.

“I wish it was different. But this is the way it has to be.”

“My brothers . . . they won’t help me?”

A pause. “I’m sorry, angel.”

My heart left my body to float in the distance while tears poured down my cheeks. Rejection dug its claws into my cold skin.

“You will do this for me, Mila. Don’t let me die not knowing what will happen to you.”

I wasn’t going to marry Carter. Not if I was so poor I had to live on the streets. I would never subject myself to the life I’d felt so lost in. But I also didn’t have the heart to deny my papa’s last wish. Even if it was a lie.

“Okay,” I said softly. “I will.”

Ronan gripped the headboard, and I heard a crack.

Papa exhaled. “I am glad, angel. I have to go now.”

“Wait,” I blurted. The question needed no permission. It escaped from the depths of me like a volcano. “Was the woman you murdered that night my mother?”

I didn’t need to clarify I spoke of the blonde lying in a puddle of blood on our library floor. He knew who I meant by the sticky silence on the other end of the line, but he never got a chance to reply.

Ronan grabbed the phone and ended the call.

Numb, I sat there, ice spreading through my veins. Because I knew the truth. I knew my papa killed my mother. I knew it was her blood that stained my stuffed animal and childhood memories.

And Ronan knew too.

CHAPTER *Forty-Six*

induratize

(v.) to harden one's heart against love

Mila

“HOW DID YOU KNOW?” I asked Ronan, who walked away from me, the lines of his back as tense as granite. He knew I was asking about my mother and that my papa murdered her practically in front of my eyes.

“I don’t know anything,” was all he said before going into the bathroom and slamming the door shut behind him.

I stared at his absence and realized he didn’t want me to know the truth. He was trying to protect my view of my father. He knew how much my papa meant to me, and while I had no doubt Ronan was going through with his revenge, he still didn’t want to mar the vision I had of my father.

My papa killed my mother.

He callously shot her in the same house I was in.

My chest held an ache so sharp, the pain searched for holes to spread through. It was hard to fathom how the father I knew and loved could do that—though, in the back of my mind, I must have always known. The knowledge warped everything I thought I understood. Thinking about it sent a harsh throb through my head. I couldn’t deal with this right now, so I exhaled deeply and forced it to the back of my mind.

What came to the forefront was what Ronan was trying to do for me. He couldn’t act like he cared now I loved his every shade of black. He couldn’t throw out so much gray while I already struggled to contain the expanding heart in my chest.

He couldn’t do this to me.

He could use, restrain, and torture me—but he couldn’t act like he cared. Not now. Not when those cartoon hearts threatened to rain down on me in the shape of bricks.

Chest burning, I got to my feet and stormed to the bathroom, throwing open the door. Head bowed, Ronan stood in the shower, the water running red rivulets down his naked body.

“I know you’re trying to protect my feelings,” I snapped. “And I think it’s disgusting.”

Slowly, he cast me a dark look. I was dealing with *D’yavol* now. Good. He held onto his gray tightly—as well as his response when he wasn’t interested enough to reply. His expression made me feel unwelcome, so I continued.

“You’re truly the worst kidnapper I’ve ever met.”

His eyes flashed before he looked away to continue washing off the priest’s blood on his chest. “Coming from the girl who gives all captives a bad name. Spreading your sunshine all over my house, apologizing every step of the way. Let’s not forget the part where you came to your kidnapper’s room and begged him to fuck you. At least you’re not a cliché.”

Heat washed up my back. “It’s called Stockholm syndrome. What’s your excuse? Mobster Decency Disorder?”

Teeth clenched, his narrowed gaze returned to me. “Is Stockholm syndrome responsible for the lapse of memory you’re fucking engaged?”

“Technically, I’m not engaged. And it’s not as if it came up organically.”

His eyes were dark pools. “Technically meaning *yet*.”

I was the one who was supposed to be angry, and now he was? For what? I doubted his noble conscience would fault sleeping with a nearly engaged woman. The thought of him having protested out of pure honor if he knew was almost comical, but I didn’t have any humor left inside me.

I’d given this man my virginity and multiple other firsts. Didn’t he know he would haunt me forever? Apparently, it wasn’t enough for him. He had to control me from afar, guaranteeing I’d never forget or replace him while he moved on with others like Nadia. The idea roiled in my stomach, making me nauseous.

Ronan would forget me eventually. And that felt like the biggest rejection of all, searing the very core of my heart. Stinging pride was what forced the next words out.

“At least Carter doesn’t murder people for a living.”

Ronan made an unamused noise, practically baring his teeth at me. “Fuck you, Mila.”

I bristled. “Fuck you! And fuck your decency too. I’m so over it.”

He was on me so fast I didn’t even get a chance to escape. Not that I would. I didn’t fear *D’yavol*, and that was one of the biggest problems of all.

“You don’t want my decency?” he growled in my ear, pressing his wet body against mine. “So be it.”

A shiver ghosted down my spine. The anger, the truth about my papa and mother, the anxiety of the future—it was tangled; overwhelming; draining. I didn’t have the energy or desire to struggle when Ronan bent me over the vanity. The marble dug into my hips, but the hollow ache in my chest overrode the pain.

Ronan jerked my thong down my thighs, pushed my shirt to my hips, and shoved into me in one thrust. I hissed a noise of half-pleasure, half-pain, as his hand collared my throat. Water dripped down my collarbone like tears.

I braced my hands on the mirror while he fucked me hard from behind, each slap of flesh radiating his anger. There was no intimacy involved. Hardly any pleasure. But I took his rage, my heart suddenly deciding it needed him in any way it could have him.

He yanked my head back by my hair, his growl at my ear. “*Malen’kaya lgunishka . . .* fucking engaged.” The words sounded like a curse, but a subtle note in his voice reached my heart, tugging at each frayed edge. Beneath his fury, a hint of vulnerability lay.

I’d found another weakness.

He was weak when he was left behind.

Breathing harsh pants, my fingers slipped down the mirror, the words escaping my throat. “I never wanted the engagement.”

“Well, congratulations are in order then,” he gritted, “because it’s not happening.”

The word “congratulations” hit me with a mocking load of vulnerability: My papa murdered my mother and would soon be killed himself. *Congratulations . . .* Ivan hated me. *Congratulations . . .* I’d be left destitute by my own brothers. *Congratulations . . .* Ronan would again be on the other side of the lonely Atlantic. *Congratulations . . .*

The final truth sent hot tears down my cheeks. I dipped my head so Ronan couldn’t see them. My

fingers slipped farther down the mirror as I cried for an uncertain future and for a man fucking me physically and emotionally.

Ronan went still for a second before slowly tilting my head up so he could see my reflection. A smudged mirror. Red-tinted tears streaked paths through the dried blood on my face. Inked fingers collared my throat.

“*Fuck.*” He pulled out of me, turned me around, and framed my face with his hands. “Did I hurt you?”

I shook my head.

“I don’t mean just physically, Mila.”

His words burned the backs of my eyes, and I shook my head again.

“Why the tears?”

Throat thick, I simply lifted a shoulder, biting my lip to hold in the sudden urge to sob, but the gentleness of his hands on my face broke me like a dam.

With a rough noise, Ronan pushed my face against his chest. “I’ve never met a woman who cries as much as you. You’re like a faucet.” He let me sob into his chest for a long time. When the tears faded, he asked, “Is this about your papa?”

I swallowed. “Some of it.”

“The rest?”

I didn’t want to think of my father/mother/murder situation, so I avoided it. “Ivan hates me now . . .” It went silent for a second, but he waited for me to continue, somehow knowing there was more. “I always wanted family . . . siblings.” My voice was thick with emotion. “And it sounds like they hate me too.” A single tear escaped.

Ronan tipped my chin to meet his eyes, brushing away the tear with a thumb. “Lions don’t lose sleep over the opinions of sheep.”

My body quieted, every cell in me soaking up his words and leaving a weightlessness behind. He was being decent again, but I didn’t complain this time.

It was too late for that.

I loved his black and his gray and every shade in between. I loved him so much it was embedded in my skin. I loved him, and even knowing I would lose him, it felt like my heart would simply stop if I didn’t tell him.

With an exhale, I opened my mouth, but it slowly closed by what I saw in his eyes—or rather, what he saw in mine. His softness evaporated, and the cool, insensitive *D’yavol* returned. Without a word, he walked away, leaving me wet, cold, and drowning beneath the heavy weight of rejection.

I didn’t know how long I stood there before I caught my reflection in the mirror. Numb, I turned to meet it face-on. It had to be residual tears. Or a trick of the light. Though I knew it wasn’t either of those things when Madame Richie’s laughter returned, resounding in my ears. Her cackles turned into a witchy crescendo of “congratulations” while I stared into my ice-blue eyes holding a glimmer they’d always lacked.

I guessed sparks came from passion.

Even ones that eventually destroyed you.

The mirror shattered with one strike of my hand. It pinged like untuned music notes as I walked out of the room.

CHAPTER

Forty-Seven

acrasia
(n.) the lack of self-control

Mila

YULIA STOPPED ME IN THE doorway of my bedroom, giving me a derisive perusal from my head to my toes.

“We have guests,” she said sternly. “You must do something with your”—she flicked a hand at my chest—“bosom.”

I looked down at said bosom and saw nothing wrong with it. I was even wearing pants for a change—high-waisted bell bottoms. One would think Yulia would take that as a win. I knew Ronan would.

I lifted my gaze to hers. “They’ve been called ‘boobs’ for decades, FYI. And considering the fact I was tied to a bed *naked* the last time we had guests, I find your request a bit hypocritical.”

She put her bony hands on her hips. “That was only in guest room. You were not flaunting your bosom around the house.”

Spread-eagled naked for guests to see in the guest room: 🖐️

Not wearing a bra beneath my T-shirt downstairs: 🖐️

Made sense.

I sighed. “What would you like me to do with my bosom, Yulia?”

“Strap it in a bra,” she said as if it was obvious. “And not some see-through thing only meant to arouse men’s urges.”

When she began a spiel about the necessary amount of support a bosom needed, I put up a finger to quiet her and said, “I’m taking this into consideration.”

She scowled, tapping her foot impatiently. After a longer than necessary pause, I finally dropped my finger.

“Well?” she snapped.

“No.” I brushed past her and down the hall.

“Insufferable hussy,” she mumbled.

“Old bat,” I shot back.

I headed toward the dining room for breakfast but stopped in the hall when I saw Gianna and Kat on the drawing room couch with a massive platter of food in front of them.

“Mila!” Gianna exclaimed, a sly smile forming as she looked me over. “I told you the next time we saw each other, there’d be less ropes and more clothes.” Then a frown appeared, and she snapped her fingers like an opportunity lost. “I knew I should have bet on it, but you didn’t seem in the right mindset for a wager.”

I had the feeling she was serious.

“Apparently, I’m destitute, so your winnings would be slim.”

“No worries. I’ve already skimmed the top off Yulia’s pocketbook this morning,” she said. “Don’t let her poor housekeeper ploy fool you. She has a mountain of five-thousand-ruble notes in her closet, and she safeguards them like a troll.”

I’d believe anything these days.

I took a seat in the armchair across from her and stole a grape from the platter, pulling my legs up underneath me. “Do I want to know what you were betting on?”

Gianna pursed her lips in thought. “I usually love the power of playing with people’s minds, but I like you, so I’m going to keep this one a secret for now.”

My mind was a complete mess as it was, so I didn’t complain. “Thanks, I guess.” I plopped the grape in my mouth.

She laughed.

My stomach was in such knots from the earlier phone call and scene with Ronan, I had to force the grape down my throat. But in an effort to pretend my world wasn’t crashing down around me, I filled a small plate with fresh fruit. As I did, my attention turned to Kat, who was shoving a folded rainbow-colored pancake in her mouth, her eyes on her demented princess game.

“Your daughter is beautiful,” I said sincerely, knowing she’d be a jaw-dropper someday. Or jawbreaker.

Gianna cast a warm smile at Kat and ran a hand down her pigtail. “I’ll take that as a compliment since she and I seem to look a lot alike. But I blame her personality on her papa one hundred percent.”

A perfectly timed, “Cut off his head!” sounded from the phone, pulling laughs from us both.

When the amusement faded, Gianna made an uncomfortable expression and rubbed her pregnant belly. The baby was either massive like his papa and uncle, or she was close to popping any day now.

“When are you due?” I asked.

“Three weeks, but I have a feeling he’s never going to come out. When I get home tomorrow, I need to start doing yoga.” She sighed as if the thought put her out. “But that’s probably not going to happen because I’ve been excommunicated from my studio, and I’ve never been good at motivating myself.”

“Surely, there’s more than one yoga studio in New York City.”

She frowned. “I guess I should have said I’ve been excommunicated from *all* the studios.”

“Oh . . .”

After a short pause, we both laughed again.

Gianna radiated warmth, and I already felt lighter, but any chance of a better mood crashed and burned when a familiar sultry voice entered the equation.

“I hope I am not interrupting anything.”

Slowly, I slid my gaze to the doorway to see Nadia in the flesh. Her black hair was clipped to one side in a sleek wave that reached her waist. Dark red lips. Kohled eyes. She wore a nude wrap dress beneath a long mink coat. I wondered if Ronan had bought it for her. The idea wrenched my stomach, threatening to expel the single grape inside.

The opera singer was gorgeous, exuding sex from every pore. She was the kind of woman all women compared themselves to. A look at her made one feel lacking on impact. Why would Ronan spare me a glance when this woman was around? I rejected the thought just as fast as my new family rejected me.

Je suis parfaite comme je suis. Tu es parfaite comme tu es. Nous sommes parfaites comme nous sommes. I am perfect as I am. You are perfect as you are. We are perfect as we are.

Feeling the French work its magic, I pulled my gaze to Gianna just in time to see her roll her eyes. “Of course not, Nadia. It seems you’ve been cordially invited in anyway.”

Noticing the sarcasm in her voice, I finally spotted Pavel standing behind Nadia. He shifted uncomfortably. Clearly, Nadia wasn’t supposed to be here, but it seemed he didn’t know how to remove her. He was taller than her even though she wore five-inch stilettos, so, clearly, his turmoil was an emotional battle and not a physical one.

“Oh, good,” Nadia said with a charming Russian accent, waltzing toward us. “I do not know how I forget how long the drive here is every time.” She pursed her lips. “Though usually, I am not alone, and I do think they say time flies when you are having fun.”

I was going to vomit.

Literally.

I wouldn’t compare myself to her, but I still couldn’t stomach the thought of her hands on Ronan. Or his on her. The idea dropped a boulder on my chest. The urge to get up and walk out seared my every nerve, but doing so would only let Nadia win, so I forced myself to remain.

Nadia pulled off her extravagant fur coat, set it on the back of the chair next to mine, and sat, crossing her legs like a queen. A small gift box fell out of her coat to the floor.

Gianna raised a brow. “Have I missed someone’s birthday?”

Nadia laughed. “No. I saw something at the store and thought of Ronan, so I just had to buy it.”

“Well, don’t leave us in suspense,” Gianna said.

“Oh. Okay.” Her tone implied she was being pressured into telling us when it was clear she was desperate to share. “Do not tell him, but it is a Louis Vuitton scarf with vintage frayed ends,” she announced proudly.

We both stared at her. The only thing Ronan would do with a scarf was strangle someone with it.

“Wow,” Gianna deadpanned. “I am positive he will love it.”

Nadia smiled before saying, “God, I am famished.” Without another word, she began to load her plate with the *bliny* that weren’t rainbow-colored, apparently oblivious to the tension in the air.

“So what brings you here, Nadia, other than to give gifts?” Gianna sipped her tea. “I’m sure your French cook is just as good as Polina.”

Nadia’s perfect brows furrowed in concern. “I came to check on Ronan after what happened yesterday. I cannot believe that boy had the nerve to shoot him.” Then she added flippantly, “Though we all know it was Alexei who hired him.” Aloof, she rubbed a liberal amount of butter on her pancakes.

I stared at her impassively even as her words stomped on my heart: the fact my papa was the one who indirectly shot Ronan, and the inexplicable detail Nadia had been with him yesterday. If they had such a strong relationship, where was she last night when he was bleeding out?

The awkward silence must have alerted Nadia to the fact she’d hit a nerve—not that she didn’t already know. She looked at me like she was seeing me for the first time and feigned an apologetic pout.

“Oh, right. I forgot Alexei is your papa. Ronan does not talk much about you. It must have slipped my mind.”

I simply watched her. She was a natural beauty, but fakeness oozed from her like cloying perfume. When she shifted, I realized she was growing uncomfortable beneath my stare.

Maybe she’d heard I was a witch.

She glanced away with an awkward laugh and waved the hand holding her fork. “Anyway, I hope you take no offense. I am sure you understand why you may not be Ronan’s favorite topic.”

I almost laughed. I’d been surrounded by jaded high society women my entire life. I might have been the silent wallflower among them, but the position only gave me the opportunity to observe. I knew how to play this game.

“No offense taken,” I said sweetly. “It would be silly for me to not understand.”

“Absolutely silly,” she agreed with a hint of satisfaction.

“Although I’ve lived in the same house as Ronan for weeks now, and I haven’t heard him talk much about you either.” I frowned in thought. “In fact, when I think about it, never. I guess you and I have something in common, don’t we?”

The *blin*-filled fork paused at Nadia’s lips, her narrowed eyes sliding my way. “It is expected he would not share personal things with you. You are his enemy’s daughter . . .” Her gaze shimmered with pity. “I am sure it is not malicious intent on his part though. Merely captive/captor etiquette, would you not say?”

Gianna absently bit off the tip of a strawberry, her stare soaking in our conversation with relish.

“I would not say.” I laughed. “I’m not so sure Ronan knows much captive/captor etiquette.”

“Really? I always thought he would manage it just fine by all of our games together.”

Ignoring the nausea her words induced, I made a face of revelation. “Maybe that’s why he doesn’t talk about you. It doesn’t sound like there’d be anything appropriate to share.” My expression was sympathetic. “I’m sure it’s just because you come off so vacuous, he can’t see you on a deeper level.”

Kohled eyes spit fire.

“No offense, of course,” I added.

Nadia set her teacup on its saucer with more gusto than necessary, drawing Kat’s attention from her game. She gave the opera singer a single glance before returning to *The Princess’s Reign of Terror* and said, “Mamma, I don’t like her.”

I expected a scolding, but I forgot this world defied all norms.

“As much as I appreciate your honesty, *cara*,” Gianna said softly, “passive-aggressiveness gets the point across. It also makes us look like the better person in the end.”

“What’s passiveagressivness?”

“Sweetie, it’s been going on for the past few minutes. Pay attention.”

“Okay.”

Nadia and I pretended the conversation didn’t happen. I reached for a few more grapes. She set her half-full plate down with a frown as if she didn’t like the fare.

“Is there a reason the *bliny* taste like paper?” Nadia asked.

“Mila is vegan,” Kat announced proudly.

“That is . . . *cute*.” The wrinkling of Nadia’s nose told the opposite. She waved a hand toward the coffee table. “Is this all vegan?”

“Yep,” Kat said.

As the opera singer took in the knowledge, an ounce of resentment came alive in her eyes. One would think she was starving and had an allergy to all things vegan, but I knew the real reason she was filling with ire. She hated the fact I had any impact on Ronan’s household.

“That is . . .” Nadia was so flustered, I thought she was going to say “cute” again, but she stopped herself and forced a smile instead. “I do appreciate the humanitarian effort,” she told me, “but do you not think it is slightly . . . *selfish* to subject the whole house to your views?” She put a manicured hand on mine in concern. “Though I am sure you did not consider that.”

This was the first time I'd ever had the urge to stab someone with a fork. Instead, I brushed her hand off mine before her fakeness rubbed off on me.

"I'm not the one doing the subjecting here. Captive, remember?"

She frowned. "Obviously, the staff feels bad for you . . . Just think of the hassle your diet must put on poor Polina. She is getting older and . . . larger every day." Nadia shot a glance at Gianna's belly. "No offense, of course."

"Mamma isn't fat!" Kat yelled before anyone else could get a word in. "She's growing my brother. And you're rude!"

"Kat, what did I tell you?" Gianna chided with a small smile.

The little girl's scowl at Nadia faded, then she mimicked the feigned look of pity she'd observed countless times this morning. "I'm sure you're only so rude because of lots of past 'emotional trauma." Then she added, "No offense, of course."

It was a violent struggle not to laugh knowing she got that "emotional trauma" bit from Ronan earlier. Nadia's eyes narrowed, about to spit some retort at the little girl, but a frightening glare from Gianna changed her mind.

"Sides," Kat interjected, "Polina likes vegan. She told me so." Kat looked at Nadia from under her nose. "Even *Dyadya* says he's vegan because he puts vegan butter on his steak."

A small smile touched my lips. I had seen him do that, and it was just like him to take the moral high ground with the barest of minimum effort.

Nadia rolled her eyes and glanced at her nails before saying, "So where is Ronan? I hope he is recovering in his room."

Gianna and I laughed. So did Kat, though I thought maybe she was just picking sides here. Even having been shot yesterday, Ronan was probably out chopping wood. Or something else less manual-labory and more murder.

"*Dyadya* is out with my papa," Kat announced.

"Oh . . . I must have forgotten. He said something like that when he came to see me last night."

Interesting. I wondered if he went to see her after I blew him and rode his face or before I passed out with him in his bed.

"I suppose I shall wait until he returns then," Nadia sighed.

I'd rather be kidnapped by the real devil than sit through another moment of this.

"So, Mila, where do you plan to go after this?" Nadia asked coolly.

"Oh, I don't know. I like Moscow so much, I might stay." I was lying through my teeth, but her venomous expression made it *so* worth it.

"You. Are. Staying." It was not a question.

"Well, why not?"

"You are Mikhailov," she said as if the matter was obvious. "You do not belong here."

"Where does it say that?" I asked with a frown. "I haven't seen a single sign banishing Mikhailovs from Moscow."

Her eyes hardened. "He will not let you stay."

"Who?" I played dumb.

"Ronan," she growled. "You are nothing but collateral to him. And maybe a fleeting amusement, like a fancy new toy, but I assure you, his interest will pass."

I dropped my plate on the coffee table. "Is everyone on a mission to ruin my breakfasts?" I exclaimed. "And for your information, Nadia, I've never laid a claim on him." I thought of his earlier dismissal that still burned in my chest. "As far as I'm concerned, you can have him."

She gave me a disbelieving look.

The heat licking up my back forced me to my feet. “Congratulations . . . the mobster’s all yours.” My gaze narrowed. “Now, all you have to do is figure out how to keep him, because it doesn’t sound like you’ve been doing a very good job.”

Cheeks flaming, she jumped to her stilettos. Even with bare feet, I topped her by multiple inches. Considering the look in her eyes as she was forced to look up to meet my gaze, she hated it.

“You think I cannot keep him?” she asked derisively.

“Mamma,” Kat whispered, “is this passiveagressivness?”

“No, *cara*, this is just aggressiveness. Now, be quiet and pass me a pancake.”

A tense laugh escaped me. “Let me see . . .” I ticked each point off on my fingers. “One, you know nothing about him. Two, you’re so jealous you’re here harassing the *captive* he’s about to trade off like collateral. And three, you need a therapist. So no, I don’t think you can keep him. But I wish you all the luck.”

Over this in spades, I walked away, but a sharp tug on my hair drew me to a stop.

She. Pulled. My. Hair.

I gritted my teeth as a rage of resentment washed through me. Inhaling deeply, I decided to take the high road and walk—

“You are practically a slave here,” Nadia spit with malice. “I would like a drink. Fetch me one.”

What was the high road?

Without another thought, I grabbed a chunk of her ridiculously shiny hair and pulled, jerking her head to the side. She looked at me like she was the victim before a vicious fire filled her eyes. It was the next handful of my hair she pulled that made us lose balance and fall to the floor.

We knocked into the coffee table. Plates of food slid off and fell to the floor. Nadia grabbed a handful of porridge and smashed it into my T-shirt, growling, “I do not need therapist.”

“That’s the first thing nutcases say!” I straddled her and knocked her head into the floor.

“Ow! You amazon!” Nadia screeched, slapping me like a girl. “I cannot believe he would ever want you!”

“Go, Mila!” Kat cheered from the couch.

Nadia tugged my hair so hard it was like she was trying to rip out a chunk, forcing me to roll off her if I wanted to keep those strands.

“That tongue emoji was for you, was it not?” she asked, kicking me in the side with her stiletto.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, you psycho,” I growled, digging my nails into her wrist until she released my hair. Then I straddled her back and rubbed her face in the porridge on the floor.

“You bitch!” She turned her head so she didn’t suffocate in porridge. “Tomorrow cannot come soon enough.”

Something in the tone of her voice made me falter.

Noticing, she laughed. “You do not know? Tomorrow, you go—how do they say . . .?” When she figured it out, the words were a mocking titter. “*Bye-bye.*”

A coldness radiated from my chest to consume me whole. I barely felt someone drag me off Nadia.

“No, *Dyadya*,” Kat complained. “Things were just getting good.”

My feet dangled off the floor as Ronan held me by my waist. He was usually so warm, but now, his arm burned like an icy shackle. Sharp words were being exchanged, but the ringing in my ears drowned them out. My chest heaved from the exertion, though the anger was gone, leaving a cold detachment behind.

Nadia stood and wiped porridge from her face, her eyes glittering with malice. “She did not know,” she laughed, then a small pout appeared. “I hope it was not supposed to be a surprise.”

Ronan seethed, the fury vibrating in his chest.

Nadia stared daggers at me. “I should have known you would be just like your mother.”

She caught a glint of uncertainty in my eyes and laughed. “You do not know about your dear ol’ mother?”

“*Zatknis*’,” Ronan growled at her. *Shut up.*

“No,” I returned. “I want to hear what she has to say.”

Nadia raised an amused brow. “Where does one even start?”

As Ronan turned to carry me out of the room, a volcano erupted in my chest at the unanswered questions and the need to know the truth. I struggled violently, cursed him, and when I told him to never touch me again, he finally released me.

Nadia watched the scene with a venomous expression and finally turned her gaze to mine. “Should I start with the bad news or the slightly less bad news?”

“Just spit it out, Nadia,” Ronan snapped.

“Well . . .” She looked at her nails. “There was that rumor Tatianna was a whore who liked it rough. And when I say ‘rough,’ I mean like knives and animals involved.” She scrunched her nose. “But I suppose what she is really known for is what she did for your papa. She saw a cute girl on the street, charmed her into her Bugatti and—*poof!*—the girl was never seen again.”

I stared at her. My heart raced, but my mind was numb.

“Those are the rumors . . . though they do say in every rumor there is a grain of truth.” Nadia feigned a sympathetic look. “Unfortunately, in your mother’s case, there was an entire grain bin of truth.”

My papa trafficked girls.

And my mother had helped him.

It felt like the room was spinning while I tried to process the news. I needed space. Now.

Ronan turned me to face him and wiped some porridge from my cheek. I couldn’t do this. I just couldn’t. Though trying to pull free from his grip turned out to be as futile as always.

“Tell me you are okay,” he demanded.

“I’m okay. Now, please . . . let me go.”

It looked like he was about to deny the request, but something in my eyes must have changed his mind. He tipped up my chin and gave me a short, sweet kiss on the lips—ignoring Nadia’s outraged, “ARGH!”—before he let me slip through his fingers.

Moving on autopilot, I climbed the stairs, catching pieces of the fuzzy background noise.

“I missed you,” Nadia whined.

“This is the last time I will see you,” Ronan growled. “Or I swear to God, your career will disappear in front of your eyes.”

“But—”

“But no. Get the fuck out of my house, Nadia. And find a therapist, for Christ’s sake.”

“I do not need a FUCKING therapist!”

A few moments later, I sat naked on the shower floor letting the water wash over me. *Alone.* The word was a monster that would consume me someday. It wasn’t until Yulia knelt beside me and washed me like a child that the tears began to fall—while I mourned the loss of the papa I thought I knew . . . and his executioner.

CHAPTER

Forty-Eight

que sera sera
(prov.) *what will be, will be*

Mila

“MAYBE I COULD BACKPACK ACROSS Europe,” I announced.

Head resting on his paws, Khaos looked unimpressed with the idea. I’d snuck him in through the back door and up to my room. If this was my last night here, I didn’t want to spend it alone. Khaos had secured a decent chunk of my bed and was already shedding everywhere. I loved it.

Even after learning what my papa did for business, it was hard to see him in a different light than the father who washed my hair when I was a child. I couldn’t deal with the thought of him dying tomorrow or the truth of my mother, so I focused on the things I could control.

Lying on my stomach, I rested my chin on my hand. “I suppose you need some kind of monetary support to backpack—or at least a talent and a hat.” I sighed, depressed. “I don’t have either of those.”

“What about college?” I perked up. “Maybe I could get a scholarship. I am a little bit smart—book-wise at least. I can’t say I’m street smart, or I obviously wouldn’t be here . . . But if I got a scholarship that pays for room and board and vegan food and toiletries . . .”

Khaos lifted his ears as if to say, “Good luck with that.”

“It’s probably too late to apply anyway. And unrealistic. Since I graduated, I haven’t done anything but watch *Forensic Files* and have sex with a Russian mobster. My application would suck.”

I exhaled loudly and wondered what I liked to do. I knew there were plenty of things I enjoyed, but put on the spot, the first thing that popped into my head was eating french fries.

“Maybe McDonald’s will hire me,” I mentioned impassively. “And if my brothers are decent enough to leave me one of Papa’s cars, I’ll even have a place to sleep.” I ran my hand through Khaos’s fur and snuggled into his side. “See?” I forced an optimistic tone. “This is all going to work out.”

“Mila.” It was a scolding if I ever heard one.

I lifted my head to see Ronan in the doorway, his eyes narrowed.

“How long have you been standing there?” I asked, embarrassment sliding through me at him hearing my pathetic monologue.

“Long enough to know fucking a mobster wouldn’t look good on your scholarship application.”

Ugh.

“Eavesdropper,” I muttered.

“What did I tell you about the dog?” he said harshly.

“His name is Khaos. And he and I are cool now.”

“You still have five stitches from him biting you,” he deadpanned.

Brow furrowed, I glanced down at my wrist. “Yeah, when am I supposed to get these out again?”

“Mila.” His soft but no-nonsense tone drew my full attention. “Come.”

The single word slipped through my blood with a mixture of hot and cold water. As much as I was tempted to fall into Ronan’s bed just to forget everything for a little while, my heart couldn’t handle the act of saying goodbye with my body tonight and my mouth tomorrow.

I couldn’t say goodbye twice.

I shook my head.

His eyes hardened. “It wasn’t a request, *kotyonok*.”

Throat tight, I shook my head again, saying, “I can’t.”

Ronan took a step into the room, pulling a growl from Khaos’s throat. Ronan ignored him. “You’re coming, Mila, even if I have to carry you out.”

Feeling confident with the growling German shepherd beside me, I said, “No. I’m staying in my own room tonight.”

Of course, Ronan moved toward me, not stopping even when Khaos got to his feet on the bed and bared his teeth in a menacing growl.

“Ronan, stop.” My heart raced. “He’s going to bite you.”

“I’ll stop when you come with me.”

Unconcerned, he took another step, and when Khaos’s growl grew lethal, his hackles rising, I blurted, “Okay! Okay, I’ll come with you.”

Gah. The man was insufferable.

I slid off the bed and smoothed Khaos’s hackles down. “It’s okay, buddy. He isn’t going to hurt me.” At least, not physically. When the German shepherd settled a little, I turned to Ronan. “I’ll come if Khaos can sleep here tonight. He likes my bed.” I’d even set up a bowl of water and a plate of pumpkin pie I found in the kitchen.

Ronan wasn’t impressed. “Fine. But shut the door. My brother and his family are still here. And your dog is a nutcase.”

“You’re a nutcase.”

“You were the one involved in a porridge catfight downstairs.”

“She pulled my hair,” I explained simply and shut the door behind me.

His eyes darkened. “That won’t ever happen again. Nobody pulls your hair except me.”

Apparently, Ronan was just going to pretend tomorrow wasn’t happening. The lance of resentment burning through me only reaffirmed my decision to make a break for it and find a hiding place until morning. I couldn’t sleep with Ronan tonight. I couldn’t handle it emotionally, physically—any of the—allys.

He turned toward his room.

I sprinted down the hall in the opposite direction.

A rough exhale. A growled, “Mila.” And then the sound of his expensive boots on my trail. I flew down the stairs, frantically thinking of a good place to hide. In my haste, I barreled into the dining room and came to a full stop when I saw Gianna, Christian, and Kat enjoying a nice family meal.

I panted, chest heaving.

Gianna hid a laugh.

“Uh-oh,” Kat murmured. “Mila is in trouble.”

Ronan grabbed me by the waist and pulled me off my feet. “Make sure you try the *vatrushka*,” he said nonchalantly. “Polina makes the best.”

Christian gave his brother an indecipherable look before Ronan swung me into his arms and

carried me up the stairs. I could fight him, but now his masculine scent surrounded me and confused my senses. His warmth soaked into my skin, forcing the resistance to melt within.

He dropped me on his bed and straddled my hips. “You shouldn’t have heard any of that.”

I knew he was speaking about what Nadia had told me.

I swallowed. “Because I’m too weak to handle it?”

He shackled my wrists above my head. “Because you’re so sweet you fucking glow.” His eyes darkened. “And I’ll kill anyone who tries to take that light from you.”

“Don’t kill Nadia.”

“That’s still open for debate, but right now . . .” His lips ran up my throat. “*Ty mne nuzhna.*” *I need you.*

The deep rasp brushed my skin, burned my heart, and made the decision for me. I arched my neck to allow him more access, giving him what he needed even knowing he would be the one to destroy me.

CHAPTER

Forty-Nine

fanaa
(n.) destruction of self for love

Mila

RAIN DRIPPED DOWN THE CAR WINDOW, blurring my view of remote Russia as Albert drove us to our destination. Snow capped the pine trees, outlined the horizon, and covered the ground.

The winter wonderland melted and turned to mud in front of my eyes.

My mind returned to an hour before, when Ronan slipped my arms into a mysterious yellow faux fur coat. I hadn't said a word as he zipped it up before sliding my feet into a new pair of ankle boots. I hadn't realized how dirty and worn my others were until then. He rose to his full height, pulled my hair out from beneath my coat, and said, "*Poydem.*" *Let's go.*

Outside, I turned to give the house one last look and saw the menacing stone fortress in a different light. It was where Yulia's eccentricity dwelled. Where Polina's shouts and home-cooked meals could be found. Where rumpled black sheets lay undisturbed. Where doors, mirrors, and hearts were broken. And where sparks were made . . .

I turned to head to the car but stilled when Yulia appeared in the open doorway. We never acknowledged she'd taken care of me in the shower yesterday. The moment could have never happened, but I'd always remember it did.

Her permanent severe expression didn't falter as she shut the door.

I continued my trek to the car, unable to glance at the kennel where I'd returned Khaos this morning, but I knew he was sitting outside watching me. I'd break down if I had to say goodbye to him. I wished I could take him with me, but I didn't have a clue where I was even going, let alone if I'd be able to take care of him properly.

A single tear slipped down my cheek then and now, while I watched snow turn to mud through the car window. I wiped it away knowing if I let the tears fall, they'd never stop.

Ronan was unnaturally quiet, running a thumb across his bottom lip and watching the scenery pass by. I wondered if he cared he was devastating my life by murdering my father. My papa's actions may be unconscionable—and unforgivable—but Ronan wasn't his judge and jury. I wondered if Ronan cared at all that this would be the last time he'd ever see me. By his indifference, I couldn't believe I was even in his thoughts.

Maybe I was just a fleeting amusement that had already passed. So many insecurities and fears wreaked havoc on my mind. Nothing made sense in this state—with my chest squeezed tight in terror of what would happen when this car came to a standstill.

To find some relief from my thoughts, I asked, "Is my papa still married?"

"Da."

"What's she like?"

“As far as I can remember, she’s agoraphobic and addicted to coke,” Ronan answered without looking at me.

Oh. She sounded nice. Though maybe she had some trauma from my papa’s lifestyle as well.

“How many siblings do I have?” I continued.

“Three brothers.”

“Will they be there today?”

“Adrian and Dimitri probably. Dima’s in prison.”

When I imagined having a family, it never occurred to me they’d be mobsters. I guessed I should have lowered my expectations when I thought of magical family Christmases. I’d jinxed myself.

Ronan traded Russian words with Albert. I only caught the smallest pieces of the conversation, but by their serious tones, it was clear they were discussing details of the trade. It should be fairly simple, I thought. Swap me for my papa. Though the more they spoke, as if they were preparing for the worst, the colder my blood grew.

We took a turn off the road and into an empty plot of land occupied by a couple of worn silos. Two black cars were parked on the far side of the area, their windshield wipers flicking back and forth. My heart ricocheted in my chest as mud sloshed beneath tires.

When we pulled to a stop, Ronan finally turned to me. He unzipped my coat and slipped a roll of cash into the inside pocket. Turning on my phone, he handed it to me. I watched him with a serene feeling as he zipped my coat back up like I was a child.

He didn’t say anything to me, and the pain splitting my chest overrode my fear of anything else. Before he could open the door, the heartache escaped my lips with a desperate breath.

“*Proshchay.*” The word sounded soft, but its meaning held a poignant note. It meant goodbye forever.

Fingers on the door handle, Ronan watched me for a long second. I could practically see *D’yavol* rising to the surface of his eyes. Soulless sophistication.

When he didn’t respond, my throat tightened. He had to say something. He had to let me know this—I—meant something to him. I deserved the words, or I knew they would haunt me forever.

“Aren’t you going to say it too?”

“*Nyet.*” The reply was so cold, its ice burned the backs of my eyes, sending a single tear down my cheek. It wasn’t until he watched it fall that I noticed the tightness in his shoulders; the turmoil he hid so well behind Giovanni.

A rough thumb wiped the tear away. “*Ya ne govoryu togo, chego ne imeyu v vidu.*”

Then he opened the door and stepped out, gesturing for me to follow. I did without a word, my thoughts too chaotic to muse on what he said.

I stayed close to Ronan as doors slammed shut and men filed out. I knew Victor drove another car that had followed us here. I’d hoped it was just a precaution and not because we were going to war. I’d be a sitting duck in my bright yellow coat.

Six men stood across from us, my papa and Ivan taking the center. My papa wore a gray tweed suit I’d bought for him last year. The silver in his hair was more pronounced than I remembered, but nothing else seemed to have changed. He still looked like the papa I’d always known and loved.

Though when my eyes met his, pictures of the child he’d tortured flipped through my mind. Then the faceless girls he’d trafficked. And the memory of my mother lying dead on our library floor.

“*Papa, your friend . . . is she my mother?*”

His gaze softened. “*No, angel.*”

The truth was, my heart had mourned my papa since I was that little girl. I mourned the father I

wanted him to be. I mourned the love I needed to receive. And now, I had to mourn his death.

The wind whistled through the silos as rain dripped to the earth. Mud separated us from the men who were supposed to be my family; the ones to save me from *D'yavol's* clutches. Yet in my gut, it felt like I belonged on this side.

"We did not think you would show. You are an hour late," one of the dark-haired men beside Papa said, cracking his knuckles. Tattoos trailed up his neck, and his nose was crooked as if it'd been broken many times.

"It's called fashionably late, Adrian," Ronan said. "Don't tell me you're the guy who shows up to the party five minutes early."

I guessed the man who spoke was my brother. Doubtful I'd ever see him in a Christmas sweater.

Adrian scowled. "You are lucky we are even going through with this trade after you have used our sister up like a whore—"

"*Zatknis*'," Papa growled. *Shut up.*

Ronan didn't blink beside me, but an almost imperceptible tension radiated from him.

"Do you think just because you kill our father, we will not become a bigger problem for you?" another man said. His gaze was empty, like he'd seen so much death the lifelessness had snuck into his eyes. I somehow knew this was Dimitri, my other brother, and another probable no on the Christmas sweater.

Ronan chuckled. "You couldn't organize a luncheon, let alone an uprising."

With a growl, Dimitri lunged toward him, but Ivan held him back. Ivan had barely cast me a glance since I arrived. He either felt guilty for leaving me to fend for myself, or he was not the man I thought I knew.

Papa must hold some esteem for his sons because the insult to Dimitri made him seethe. He glared at Ronan with venom.

"An inch. A single inch, and you would have been dead. I will regret that inch until I die."

It felt like I had been transported to another world. One full of mud and gravity so heavy it dislodged my heart. This world revolved in the opposite direction. Spinning faster and faster.

"Then I guess you should be thankful you'll be free of that regret shortly."

"We have come to finish this," Papa snapped. "So let us do it now."

Ronan handed his gun to Albert just as Papa did so with Ivan. Detached, I followed Ronan to meet my father in the middle of opposing sides. My papa wouldn't meet my eyes. I didn't care. This world was heavy and unstable.

When Ronan looked at me, the spinning stopped. His eyes held me steady. Dark blue. The color of the one heart-shaped earring in my ear. And full of things unsaid. I didn't ever want to look away, but I was forced to.

An explosion threw me back a step and trembled the ground. With a curse, Ronan shoved me behind him. Pieces of the silo flew through the air, fiery tin chunks landing in the mud. And then a closer *boom* split through the air, nearly knocking me off my feet. My ears rang, and I touched one, wincing when I came away with blood. Disoriented, I blinked through the thick smoke.

This world was spinning and on fire.

Both silos were in flames, and a smaller blast sent sharp shards of tin into the air. Ronan grabbed me and cradled my head against the falling shrapnel. The smoke cleared just enough to see my papa and the silver glint of a pistol aimed at Ronan's back.

"*NO,*" tore through my body. I could handle mourning *so* much.

But not Ronan.

Never Ronan.

My heart made the decision for me. I shoved him away from me just as a *pop* sounded.

Then everything went silent.

The smoke drifted away.

Shrapnel stopped falling.

This world wasn't spinning.

It was cold, quiet, and so very dark.

CHAPTER

Fifty

absquatulate
(v.) to leave without saying goodbye

Mila

I'D ONCE THOUGHT RONAN WOULD let me drown; that he would watch me sink, curly hair floating and aglow. But in the end, it was his voice that dragged me from the darkness.

“*Prosnis*’, Mila.” *Wake up*. “Goddammit, *prosnis*’.”

Ronan had demanded so much from me since we met—so many orders he was confident would be met—but this request held a vulnerable crack. It wasn't a demand at all. It was a *need*.

I found another weakness.

He was weak for *me*.

Drawing in a shallow breath, I struggled to open my eyes. I forced them open and saw I was lying on the floor of a moving car that vibrated beneath me. Yellow and red. My new coat was ruined, the faux fur matted with streaks of blood. Crimson-soaked bandages lay discarded around me. My shirt was torn open, and the sight of the hole gushing blood in my stomach made me so dizzy I was almost pulled under again. Though Ronan's voice as he snapped something at Albert grounded me.

My eyes lifted to Ronan, who ripped open a new sterile bandage with his teeth and used it to put pressure on the wound. I tensed in expectation of pain but only felt a twinge in my abdomen as a tremble began to shake my entire body.

Our gazes met.

Russian roulette.

One blink, and—

I'd only miss the sight of him.

A dark, tortured gaze held mine for a long moment. Finally, it seemed to sink into him I was awake and farther from death's door than he'd assumed. Keeping pressure on my wound, he leaned against the back seat, rested an arm on his elbow, and dropped his head to his chest, eyes closed.

“*Ona ne spit*,” he exhaled roughly. “Fuck. *Ona ne spit*.”

“We are almost there,” Albert announced from the front seat.

I'd expected to be in a lot of pain from being shot, though my entire body tingled as if I'd been injected with lidocaine everywhere.

When Ronan opened his eyes, they pinned me with fury. “*Zachem ty eto sdelala?*” he gritted. “*Zachem?*”

“English,” I said softly.

“Why the fuck would you do that, Mila?” he growled with a deep rasp. “WHY?”

“You're not immortal,” I whispered, my throat thick. “I didn't want you to die.”

He stared at me with a mixture of disbelief, anger, and something else indiscernible. “You don't

get to sacrifice yourself for me.” He clenched his teeth. “You DON’T get to die for me, *kotyonok*.” His eyes crucified me. “If anyone dies between us, it will be ME. Do you understand?”

I didn’t understand, so I shook my head.

“Then let me make it clear for you,” he said, the shadows in his eyes flashing. “You would survive without me. You would move on.” His tone roughened. “I can’t imagine a world where you and all your fucking yellow doesn’t exist. So if you die, you’ll take me with you. Your sacrifice would mean nothing, *kotyonok*. NOTHING.”

A tear ran down my cheek as a coldness began to invade the tremble inside me. My marrow was turning to ice, and I shivered violently.

“I’m so cold, Ronan . . .” My eyes felt weighted down, so I closed them.

“*Nyet*,” Ronan growled, grabbing my face. “Don’t fucking close your eyes.”

“I’m so tired,” I whispered, lethargy pulling at every muscle in my body. “I don’t think . . .”

“If you die, Mila,” he said harshly, “I’ll send Khaos to a back-alley pound.”

My heart beat. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

When the car drew to a stop, Ronan didn’t waste a second. He picked me up and carried me into the hospital. I watched the doctors and nurses rush toward us and throw out questions in Russian. I couldn’t make sense of anything besides what Ronan had threatened as a cold weightlessness consumed me, tugging, pulling, trying to drag me down.

“Don’t do that to Khaos,” I pleaded weakly, interrupting the medical staff.

“Don’t die, and I won’t,” he responded while following the doctors down the hall.

He wasn’t being fair.

“Ronan . . .” A tear slipped down my cheek.

He wiped it away, his tone coarse. “Those are the conditions. You choose.”

How could I choose not to die? Today might be my day, and even *D’yavol* couldn’t stop fate in its tracks. I may have never gotten the family or love I’d always wanted, but at least I could say I gave it my best shot.

Ronan lay me on a gurney, and a nurse rushed me into an OR room. When a surgeon tried to stop Ronan from entering, he pulled out his pistol and pointed it at the doctor’s head.

“*Yesli ona umret, ty tozhe umresh’*,” he growled. *If she dies, you die too.*

The surgeon swallowed, stepped out of his way, and curtly nodded to an area where Ronan could stand.

A nurse put a mask on my face to induce sleep. I tried to pull it off, but it took little effort for her to hold it on while speaking to me in Russian. The gas started to pull my consciousness down, down . . . Though when I met Ronan’s eyes, I knew what I needed to say. *Ya lyublyu tebya. I love you.* In the end, only one word escaped with the fear I’d never wake up.

“*Proshchay* . . .”

The last thing I heard before the anesthesia took me under was, “Fuck your *proshchay*, Mila.”



Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

The steady beeps that drew me from a hazy sleep alerted me to the fact I didn't die. Or Satan just had a sick sense of humor.

My body was in a tranquil, painless state, but I hesitated to open my eyes as my imagination went wild. Maybe the surgeons had to amputate a limb. Maybe I was paralyzed. Maybe I was waking from a thirty-year coma. Unfortunately, what I saw was worse than what my imagination could cook up.

Alexei Mikhailov and *D'yavol* sat in the same room.

Papa occupied the chair beside the door, wearing a charcoal suit and a black eye. He was staring at his hands, radiating a sense of remorse. I felt nothing when I looked at him. Not nostalgia. Not respect. Not affection.

Everything he'd done tainted my view of him. In truth, I didn't think he'd ever planned to sacrifice himself for me. The phone call was just another lie and manipulation to make Ronan believe he'd conceded. My papa chose to put me in the middle of his war, unconcerned with the fact something could have happened to me. And it had.

Whether he lived or died, my mourning him was over.

My gaze slid to Ronan, who sat beside my bed wearing Tom Ford and tired eyes. Silently, he watched me. I somehow knew he'd stayed by my side for as long as I was unconscious. This man I once hated had become the man I loved.

Ronan was wrong.

I couldn't bear the thought of living without him.

It terrified me, this love that threatened dependence. The devotion was a bright glow that warmed my soul, though it also left me feeling vulnerable, as if my chest would simply tear open if I loved him anymore.

I didn't regret taking that bullet for Ronan, but the fact I'd almost died forced me to look at life from a different perspective. The truth was, I hadn't truly lived yet. I'd experienced nothing besides the view of closed golden gates, the inside of a Russian mansion, and falling in love.

If I didn't find myself, love would be all I'd be.

I knew what I had to do, though just the thought wrenched my heart. The fact I was about to hit one of Ronan's weaknesses made me want to throw up. He was the strongest man I'd ever met, and still, I couldn't stand the idea of hurting him.

"I guess Khaos doesn't have to go to the pound," I finally said, my raspy tone hiding the heartache inside.

My papa's head shot up at my voice, relief filling his eyes.

Ronan's stoic expression didn't falter. My stomach clenched when I realized he knew what I'd come to terms with at the same time I had.

"How long was I out?" I asked.

"Three days," Ronan said emotionlessly.

My papa got to his feet, came to my bedside, and grabbed my hand attached to an IV. "I am so sorry, angel. I am so—" His voice cracked. "I will never forgive myself for this."

I stared at his hand holding mine, unable to remember the last time he'd touched me intentionally. And all it took was being shot by his own gun to gain his affection.

Numb, I pulled my hand away. "I forgive you, Papa."

His pained eyes found mine. "I always wondered how I made a girl as compassionate as you."

"I'm compassionate, Papa, but not forgetful. I don't hate you—not for what you did to my mother, not for lying, being absent, or for putting me here." My voice was unnaturally calm. "But I will not forget."

He soaked in my words silently.

"You will always be my father . . . but I think it's best if we go our separate ways." It surprised me I could say those words without any emotion. Though I wasn't the same girl who'd boarded a plane to Moscow with hope in her eyes.

He looked a little stricken, but then sullenly nodded. "If that is what you wish."

"It is."

Without another word, my father walked to the door.

"Why did you do it?" I blurted.

He paused, his body tensing. He knew I wanted to know why he killed my mother. His hesitation created a heavy silence in the room, like he wasn't sure if he should tell me the truth. In the end, I knew he did.

"She was pregnant with another man's child."

Then he walked out of the room and out of my life, leaving me numb at his response. "*You look too much like my Tatianna . . .*" His Tatianna. My papa may care for me, but he'd never truly loved me. I was simply a token of his toxic obsession with a famous opera singer. It felt like he'd abandoned me years ago, but there was a finality in the realization and watching him walk away that sent a shard of glass through my heart. The mayhem in my chest convinced me of my next conversation starter.

Staring after my papa's retreat, I said, "If you hurry, you might be able to catch him in the parking lot."

"I'll pass." Ronan's tone was derisive.

"He knows you're not going to harm me now. You've lost the upper hand."

"He's been here all day," Ronan snapped. "If I wanted to kill him, I could have done it multiple times by now."

I drew my gaze his way. The sight of him filled me with a heavy longing that spread through my veins: for him to touch me, hold me, show me he cared. Though the reminder I couldn't have any of that felt like a blow to the chest.

I swallowed. "So you've given up on your revenge?"

He clenched his teeth. "You think revenge is on my mind right now?"

"You hit him," I challenged.

"That was necessary to regain my concentration."

"Your concentration of watching me sleep."

"Yes," he growled.

His response would be amusing if my heart wasn't burning and retaliating against the decision I'd made. Nervously, I focused on messing with the tape that held my IV in my hand.

"So if revenge isn't on your mind right now, then what is?"

"I'm waiting."

I glanced at him. "For what?"

His eyes narrowed. "For the speech of forgiveness, 'but it's probably best if we part ways.'"

I looked away, unable to see the turmoil flaring in his eyes. He didn't like being left behind—yet it seemed he was by everyone who mattered to him. And knowing I was only another one of them

tightened my throat, burning the backs of my eyes.

It wasn't until he got to his feet and set a single heart-shaped earring on the bedside table that the panic kick-started in my chest. What was I doing? Why was I doing this? As he headed to the door, my heart screamed at me to stop him. *Stop. Please stop . . .* But the grip on my throat refused to let out any words.

Ronan paused in the doorway for a second. He turned his head to meet my eyes and promised, "This *isn't proshchay*."

Taking a bullet had nothing on the pain of watching him walk away from me. The ache started in my heart, this raw bleeding throb, before it clawed at the walls of my chest.

It wasn't *proshchay*.

The promise didn't matter right now.

I wanted him back. Desperation burned in my blood, demanding I run after him and tell him it was just a mistake. Frantically, I tugged at the IV in my hand as the heartache tore through me, sending sobs up my throat that wracked my chest.

It wasn't *proshchay*.

Just as I pulled out the IV, the chaotic energy inside faded, leaving me so drained I could only cover my mouth as tears poured down my cheeks. I ignored the sharp throb in my stomach. A machine began to beep, alerting me to the fact a nurse would be in here soon, but I didn't expect a dog.

Khaos jumped on the bed and lay down beside me. Sobbing, I ran my hand through his fur, hugged him tight, and said, "It isn't *proshchay . . .*"

CHAPTER *Fifty-One*

lacuna
(n.) a blank space; a missing part

Ronan

THE GUNSHOT WOUND IN MY arm throbbed and bled through my shirt. I must have busted some stitches open when I punched Alexei. And then Albert, who simply opened the car door for me after Mila dismissed me from her life. I didn't know how to get rid of this irritable, edgy sensation beneath my skin besides violence—and even that didn't release the tight, hollow ache in my chest.

It felt like she was stealing something from me.

Pain I could stand.

Robbery I could not.

"I flew back for 'important' business just to watch you silently muse on all your life choices," my brother said in Russian, sitting on my office couch. "Care to share?"

I didn't know how to explain the feeling in any other way, so I sat back in my chair and said, "She stole from me."

He raised a brow. "Your pet?"

"Her name is Mila," I growled.

Kristian sipped the vodka in his glass, trying to conceal a smile. "So what'd she take? You do have some nice crystal glasses."

I didn't know why I'd opened my mouth. Clearly, all of this was out of my element, and my brother was loving every second of it. I narrowed my eyes and tapped my pen on the desk as that unsettling feeling clawed at my chest.

My brother watched me with a serious expression. "You may think I got the short end of the stick between us growing up, but you've forgotten you were the one living in closets for years or being beat up by our mother and her clients."

I raised a brow. "Are we taking a trip down memory lane?"

"I think it's time, don't you?"

"No."

"I may be slightly out of touch with human emotion, but at least I understand it."

I glared at him. "I understand it just fine."

"Coming from the man who rationalizes unrequited love for the Mikhailov girl to her stealing from you."

Being accused of "love" made me feel . . . awkward, so I deflected. "Firstly, nothing here is unrequited." If it was, I would make it requited. "Secondly, I've seen the Hallmark Channel. This isn't how love works."

Kristian laughed. "I thought I might have to explain sex tips to my younger brother. Not love."

“Think I got the sex thing down, but thanks.”

Staring into his tumbler glass, he swirled the vodka in his glass. “I loved Gianna for years before she ever even looked at me. Love isn’t hearts and flowers. Sometimes, it fucking sucks.”

“You’re really selling this to me,” I said drily.

“I don’t have to sell it. You’ve already gone and fallen for Alexei Mikhailov’s daughter.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t.

“I know you blame yourself for what happened to me.” The silence was heavy. “You feel so guilty over that shit you can’t let yourself care for other people—because if you couldn’t protect your own brother, why should you deserve any other meaningful relationships? Well, you need to get the fuck over it.”

Sometimes, I hated his unnatural insight. Other times, it made things easier for me because I never would have said that shit out loud.

“I feel like I should be lying on a psychologist’s couch.”

“You do have a pile of trauma-induced emotional issues on top of that if you want me to get into them.”

I gave him a “fuck off” look.

He smiled. “If anything, I should have been there for you more. I was the older brother. I shouldn’t have left the second I was released—especially knowing now how fucked-up you are.”

“This is truly therapeutic.”

“Good. Now, you can stop hitting people and start rehearsing how you’re going to tell Mila you love her.”

I chuckled. “Unfortunately, there’s no mirror in here, and I need to see myself during rehearsals.”

“By the way, welcome to the club,” he said with relish. “I’ve been waiting for the day I could call you whipped.”

Fuck.

I’d always avoided the word “love” like it was a disease, but now he’d put the idea in my head, it festered.

All that random stuff that came out of my mouth when I thought she could die was true. I’d fought death more times than I could count, but I knew I’d welcome it if it ever came down between me or her. I’d warned her about being selfless, and now it seemed I was practically sacrificial in regard to her.

The sickly-sweet girl with a soft heart and love of yellow had somehow filled a blank space inside me. And I couldn’t handle the thought of her anywhere else but with *me*.

Pros: My crystal glasses were safe.

Cons: It might really be unrequited.

I didn’t get time to muse on it further. The door flew open. My brother and I silently watched Kostya drag in a severed head and throw it to the floor. It rolled like a lopsided bowling bowl before losing momentum and stalling in the center of the room.

“What the fuck is that?” I asked, exasperated. My office was already a fucking mess.

Kostya was breathing heavily, covered from head to toe in blood. It dripped from the knife in his hand to the floor. Agitation worked through me. I was going to need brand new carpet at this point.

“Dimitri Mikhailov.”

I stared at him blankly, though internally, I was a second away from killing him with that knife in his hand.

“Are you hearing impaired?” I growled. “Or just fucking stupid?”

I'd ordered my men to stay away from the Mikhailovs. The desire for revenge waned the moment Mila had almost died. Retaliation wasn't a single option after I saw her bleeding out. I needed her in my life, alive, and without the tears that somehow made me feel powerless—which unfortunately meant I couldn't just kidnap her again.

Killing her papa might push her away forever, and I refused to accept that. Though I couldn't see Alexei dismissing his son's murder. Fury washed through me at the impact it would cause. I couldn't get Mila back while I was at war with her father.

Kostya clenched his teeth, but pain glittered in his eyes. "Dimitri was the one who killed Pasha on Alexei's orders. And since you haven't done anything but fuck his daughter, I took it into my own hands."

I smiled, but it wasn't a friendly one. I didn't want to kill Kostya and leave Vadim with two deceased brothers, but there didn't seem to be another option.

The knife slipped from Kostya's fingers, his voice thick. "Pasha was my little brother . . ." A single tear ran down his bloody cheek. "I had to do it. And I'm ready to accept the punishment."

He was ready to die for his brother. I glanced at mine, who watched me with a drily amused expression. He wanted to know how I was going to deal with this, because he and I would have done the same for one another.

Albert appeared in the doorway, his eyes grim above the shiner I'd given him earlier today. He'd accepted the punch as if it went along with a normal "thank you" before driving me here.

"We have guests," he said.

He didn't have to tell me who was visiting.

"Give us a minute," I told Albert before shooting Kostya a hard look. "You've fucked up bad this time. Disobey my orders or talk about Mila in that way again, and I will end you myself in the most painful way I can think of."

Kostya swallowed.

"Now get the fuck out of here," I growled. "I'm so disgusted with you, if Alexei is here to kill you, I'll let him."

Kostya didn't need to be told twice. He disappeared out the door, leaving a blood trail like crumbs.

A moment later, Albert returned with Alexei and Ivan in tow. My shoulders tensed at the sight of Mila's papa. I'd almost killed him when he showed up in her hospital room—not for Pasha, but for Mila. She'd stumbled into my restaurant nearly a month ago and changed my perspective on everything.

Alexei stopped in the doorway and took a long look at his son's head on the floor, a mixture of pain and rage crossing his face. The man looked like he'd aged twenty years in a single day.

He didn't say a word as he moved to sit on the couch across from Kristian. Alexei had always voiced his disappointment in his sons. I'd even seen him shoot Dimitri in the thigh once for fucking up. I expected revenge on the simple principle. I did not expect the man to put his face in his hands and . . .

Alexei Mikhailov was crying.

It was awkward as fuck.

I met my brother's gaze and nodded to Dimitri's head, telling him to do something with it—like nudge it behind the couch. He didn't. He gave me a dry look and sipped his vodka.

While Alexei was having his moment, Ivan leaned against the wall and stared daggers at me.

"Long time no see," I drawled easily in Russian, then frowned in thought. "Although there was

that one day you visited my home and left naked to crawl back to your owner . . .” My eyes narrowed. “And we can’t forget that other time where you almost killed Mila with your failed attempt to off me. But other than that, I’d say it’s been a while.”

His gaze hardened. “If you didn’t kidnap Mila, she would have never been in that position.”

Frustratingly true. “Maybe not. But we all know the position you want her in. Too bad you’d rather fuck Alexei than his daughter. Not that you would have had a shot with her anyway.”

I was sure I’d get a reaction from Alexei then, but the man was still immersed in awkward grieving.

Ivan shot a cautious look at Alexei before saying, “I could have had multiple shots. I just wasn’t interested.”

I laughed. He couldn’t have her, so now he wasn’t interested. “You know, you remind me of a two-faced bitch. I’m beginning to wonder if you even have a dick.”

“Because I chose Alexei’s side? You call me a bitch, but you’re holding a grudge like one.”

Unperturbed by the insult, my mind flickered to the past. “I always knew something was off about you—the awkward loner who sat next to the trash cans in prison. Charged with murdering your grandma. I mean, your fucking *grandma*. The news painted her as this sweet old lady, but you convinced everyone of how evil she was . . .” I leaned back in my chair. “She really was a sweet old lady, wasn’t she?”

Murderous heat flared in his eyes.

“What’d she do? Forget to cut the crusts off your peanut butter sandwich?”

“Go to hell, *D’yavol*.”

Kristian and Alexei were now silently watching us, but I continued because I had shit to say.

“When I took you under my wing, you liked *whatever* I liked. I could say I liked a cucumber shoved up my ass, and you would say you liked it too. It was fucking annoying, but you were loyal to a fault. Only you weren’t, were you?”

Red washed up Ivan’s neck. “I don’t regret fucking you over. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“I know. Because you’re a fucking snake that can reveal your true psychotic self under Alexei. He loves his men unhinged. I should know. I worked for him too.” I did multiple things on that man’s orders that I couldn’t even stomach thinking about today.

My eyes slid to Alexei to see his on mine. I wondered if he was mentally killing me, or if he was reminiscing on the past as well. Or maybe he was thinking about Mila and how I was indefinitely submersed in her life now—whether she liked it or not.

Kristian was content with his tumbler of vodka, though I could tell he was ready for things to turn south quick.

Ivan let out a bitter breath of amusement. “You call me a snake. Yet you’re the one who kidnapped a fucking innocent woman.” His eyes narrowed. “There’s no chance she’ll stay with you,” he snarled. “She isn’t that stupid.”

“So aggressive over a woman you supposedly don’t even want,” I drawled. “Let me guess . . . Alexei promised you Mila when I first took her. And then he changed his mind, thinking Carter would be better after all. And you went along with it because you’re content kissing his ass.”

The shady flash in Ivan’s eyes confirmed it.

“I’m sure he gave you a consolation prize though—a trafficked girl to tide you over. Did you cut her up like you did your granny?”

Ivan lunged for me but halted when Kristian pulled out his gun and aimed it at his head, tumbler still in hand.

“Yeah. I wouldn’t if I were you.”

Alexei got to his feet. Besides in the hospital, this was the first time I’d ever viewed him so passive and defeated. At this point, revenge was a non-issue. The man was slowly killing himself.

He met my gaze with venom. “You’ve murdered my son.”

I raised a brow. “You almost killed him when he strangled one of your expensive girls to death.” I shrugged an indifferent shoulder. “So I didn’t really think it would be an issue.”

His eyes flashed. “You have my daughter in your hands now, so I have no choice but to end this now. I can’t afford to lose her on top of Dimitri with more war.”

I didn’t exactly *have* his daughter . . . though he must assume she’d chosen my side by taking that bullet for me. The thought brought me back to the second I noticed what she’d done, and my chest tightened. If she would have died and taken all her sunshine with her . . . fuck. The idea made me sick and made me see red at the same time.

“It’s a good excuse, Alexei, but we both know you’ve lost your touch. If Moscow wasn’t mine, it would have been another’s by now.”

His jaw tightened as he held in a retort, and then he turned to the door. “Come, Ivan.”

As Ivan picked up the severed head and followed his owner like a lapdog, I said with feigned concern, “And I might reconsider your hiring process.”

“Go to hell, *D’yavol*,” Alexei snapped.

“Can you guys mix it up a little?” I returned with annoyance. “Your insults are tired.”

After they both left, Kristian drawled, “Well, that was unexpected.”

Agreed. Not a single person died.

I stood up and rounded the desk.

“Where are you going?” Kristian asked.

“To rehearse,” I announced and walked out.

I realized Mila might need some space. I didn’t like the idea—in fact, every cell demanded I drag her back to my bed where she belonged just to know she was *mine*. But I had to work with kidnapping the girl, threatening to kill her papa, and a slew of other serious offenses.

I could be patient when I really wanted something. But I didn’t want her; I *needed* her.

If this was what they called “love,” then I’d own it.

I never did anything half-ass.

CHAPTER

Fifty-Two

rubatosis

(n.) *the unsettling awareness of your own heartbeat*

Mila

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN IT wouldn't be so easy to get rid of Ronan. He might not be in the hospital room with me physically, but his presence was everywhere.

After the doctors examined me, I often thought they rushed out of the room, phones to their ears, to update him on my condition. Only *D'yavol* would receive that sort of hasty, nervous response.

The first conscious day in the hospital, a boy delivered a mini fridge full of vegan meals, a bag of dog food, and a note.

Eat.
-Ronan

I would have rolled my eyes at the demand a couple of weeks ago, but this time, it brought a smile to my lips and a throb to my heart.

Ronan had ~~pulled some strings~~ threatened someone to allow Khaos to stay with me, and I knew it because a dog's portrait in the universal red no-entry sign decorated the wall outside my room. The gesture filled me with relief, because I didn't think I could handle being alone with my thoughts right now. Khaos was the only thing holding me together.

Most of the staff steered far away from the surly tempered German shepherd, but a no-nonsense older nurse pushing into her sixties took the initiative to take him outside for bathroom breaks, even chiding him when he growled at her, which confused him enough to go along with it.

The second day, the boy delivered a new laptop loaded with every season of *Forensic Files* and another note.

*If you want to know how to kill someone and get away with it,
you only need to ask.*
-Ronan

The third day, the boy delivered Pacifica shampoo and body wash, and, of course, a note.

Stop arguing with the nurses.

—Ronan

This time, I did roll my eyes. Not only was Ronan being informed by my doctors, it seemed my nurses were tattling on me to him too. I'd refused to bathe after having one of the staff read me the ingredients on the back of their shampoo. The bottle was practically stuffed with a tiny murdered animal. When I finally washed my hair with Pacifica, my heart trembled little beats of longing.

The fourth day, the boy delivered two suitcases filled with clothes. Dresses, sweaters, underwear, shoes—it was practically an entire new wardrobe.

There are three pairs of pants under all that yellow.

Wear them.

—Ronan

He wished.

Though I was more than relieved to get out of my hospital gown. My wound had healed enough I could wear loose-fitting clothes without worry of chafing. The doctors—and when I said “doctors,” I meant ten of them—were pleased with my condition enough they told me I could be discharged in a couple days. As much as I wanted out of the hospital, nerves turned my stomach about what I would do when I left.

The fifth day, the boy delivered another package. Déjà vu raised goose bumps on my arms when I opened the box. It contained another lemon-yellow faux fur coat with “*Kotyonok*” stitched on the collar.

Get it dirty.

But NEVER again with blood.

—Ronan

I put it on and fell onto the bed like I had a month ago in an entirely different situation, my heart thumping hard. I pressed my nose in the fur, hoping—needing—it to smell like Ronan. It didn't. And as the ache in my chest rose to burn my eyes, Khaos nudged me with his head. I cuddled up beside him and whispered to him and another who couldn't hear, “*Ya lyublyu tebya.*” *I love you.*

The sixth day, the boy delivered a new iPhone, my passport, ID, an obscene amount of cash, and a plane ticket to Miami that left the next day. My hands shook as I picked up the note and read it. A single tear fell, smearing the ink.

This ISN'T proshchay.

—Ronan

The seventh day, I was being discharged. The nurses packed up my things while I sat on the bed, knees to my chest, waiting. Waiting for the boy to arrive and give me something else from Ronan. *Anything.*

But he never came.

Heart heavy, its beat rebelling in my chest, I gave one last look at my hospital room before walking out. A car picked me up and drove me to the airport while I moved on autopilot, unable to do anything as my body was pulled in two different directions.

I boarded the plane to Miami and froze in the service door, my heart beating so hard it stopped me from taking another step.

“Devushka, vy zaderzhivayete ochered’,” a flight attendant told me. When I blankly looked at her, she must have realized I didn’t know much Russian. Though not understanding her wasn’t why I was cemented in conflict. “You are holding up the line,” she repeated softly in English.

Throat thick, I forced my feet down the aisle with Khaos following behind. He’d gotten his own seat. I wasn’t sure if that was allowed either, but rule-breaking seemed to be Ronan’s thing.

I gave Khaos the window seat. It was his first plane ride after all. I rested my head against his soft fur and refused to cry, even as the raw ache in my chest grew heavier and heavier the farther we flew from Moscow.

CHAPTER

Fifty-Three

saudade

(n.) a nostalgic longing to be near something or someone that is distant

Mila

Four months later

WARM, HUMID AIR BREEZED INTO the studio from the open terrace doors, rustling the sheer curtains. Below the veranda lay a white sandy beach, crystal-blue water, and palm trees swaying in the wind.

Belize was gorgeous.

A paradise on earth.

Though even here, my thoughts wandered across the Atlantic Ocean. I wondered what Russia looked like in the summer. My imagination pictured the country covered in eternal ice and snow. Still, Moscow called to me while paradise's breeze caressed my hair.

"Chop, chop!" Flora clapped her hands in the air, her tribal-patterned poncho rising to show the leotard beneath. "Carlos is going to be here in ten minutes, and you know how much he hates to be kept waiting."

The stylist standing behind me rolled her eyes and spritzed my blown-out curls.

When I arrived in Miami four months ago, I'd returned to my childhood home even though Ronan had given me enough money to purchase a small condo if I wanted to. But I was compelled to do something before I left The Moorings forever.

Stepping through the front door, I found an empty house and lots of dust. Every piece of furniture sat in the same place, but the memories left behind were silent, like they'd left with Borya and the maids.

I ran a line through the dust on the banister as Khaos and I ventured up the staircase. Reaching my room, I wound the ballerina in my music box, setting her on one last lonely pirouette. Then I dropped my papa's birthday present from the balcony. The box cracked, the tune ended with a final sad note, and the dancer stopped spinning forever.

She never wanted to be a ballerina anyway.

I reached the door to leave but paused when I saw a small card lying in the dust-free square where the music box had sat. It was the business card the model agent slipped me on the street years ago. I'd hidden it after my papa refused to allow modeling of any kind and then forgot about it.

I picked it up and put it in my pocket.

Modeling was supposed to be a hard industry to get into. Although, I'd either gotten very narcissistic or divine intervention had stepped in. Because here I was now, modeling a campaign for a vegan product. I only went to go-sees and accepted contracts from humanitarian-conscious companies and designers—which my agent *hated*—but apparently, this new spark in my eyes worked out great for me.

Months ago, I believed I would be engaged to Carter—or even married at this point existing as a jaded housewife. I wasn't sure how Carter got the memo none of that would be happening, but when I ran into him last week picking up some takeout, he'd dropped his tacos as if the sight of me gave him a heart attack and immediately took off in the other direction.

It wasn't exactly the reaction I was expecting . . . but it would do.

No Carter. No working in the sex industry. And no living on pennies. All of those fears had evaporated, but I was still consumed with doubt of another kind.

I closed my eyes as one of the makeup artists applied mascara to my lashes.

“Good god, no!” Flora exclaimed. “Were you not briefed today?”

The artist frowned. “Yes. We're going with clean looks.”

Flora's brow rose above her sixties-style round glasses. “What about black mascara on a blonde says ‘clean’ to you? It says ‘slutty club girl’ to me. She already has a slutty vibe. We don't need to exaggerate it.”

Slutty vibe?

Flora waved a hand at my face. “Fix it. Just fix it before Carlos shows up.” Then she flounced off to harass someone else.

Twenty minutes later, I wore an athletic one-piece swimsuit and stood on a terrace giving a perfect view of the ocean.

Click . . . Click . . . Grumble.

“We need sexy,” Carlos snapped. “Not ‘I'm saving myself for marriage.’”

Okay . . . I was “slutty” a moment ago. Not to mention, it was hard to feel sexy with a milk mustache, holding a pint of almond milk.

Click.

“No, no, no.” Carlos rubbed his temples. “Please tell me you've had sex before.”

Sometimes, I questioned this career, but overall, I loved promoting my vegan lifestyle and that the substantial income gave me the means to truly make a difference somewhere.

“Yes, I've had sex.” A few times . . .

“Good sex?”

“Yes.” Heat rushed up to my neck because I knew where he was going with this, and I *really* didn't want to go there. “But can I ask a question?”

“No.”

I asked anyway. “Why does an almond milk advertisement need to be sexy?”

He sighed irritably. “Sex sells, darling.”

“I'm just thinking of the kids here . . . Wouldn't they want to send their parents off to buy this milk if I looked happy drinking it instead of, well . . . horny?”

Carlos gave me a dry look. “You are lucky you have the perfect look for this shoot. Or I'd toss you off this terrace so fast.”

I sighed.

“Now, think of the best sex you've ever had.”

Ugh.

Exhaling deeply, I closed my eyes and thought of inked hands next to mine on the shower wall. I thought of Ronan's mouth on my neck and the fullness of him inside me. His hand collaring my throat. *Vse moya*. The way he held me. How he smelled and tasted. I remembered. And it hit me with a ball of fire that erupted inside me.

I opened my eyes.

Click.

Silence settled on the terrace while longing tore through me. I hoped Carlos got the shot because I didn't want to be here anymore.

“Wow, girl . . .” Carlos murmured. “We definitely got it. But now we all want to hear the story.”

Everyone stared at me while my heart slowly ripped in half. I dropped the pint of milk and walked offset. Grabbing my bag, I exited the studio and sucked in a shaky breath of fresh air, heading to the villa I shared with a couple of models during the two-day stay.

I wished Khaos was with me, but some ridiculous pet quarantine laws had ended that idea, so he was staying with Emma, who still volunteered with me at the homeless shelter. And I *really* hoped Khaos hadn't eaten one of her cats. I was about to call her when my phone buzzed in my purse. I dug it out.

Papa: *The Miami house is being put on the market. If there is anything you would like to keep, you should do so by next week.*

That was the first correspondence I had with my father since he'd walked out of the hospital. I meant it when I'd said we shouldn't be in contact. The relationship always brought me down in a dark way rather than up, and these four months without his presence had lifted a massive weight off my shoulders. It was the right decision. Regardless of who my mother was as a person, I couldn't look at my father again without seeing her lifeless body and the sibling inside of her I'd never meet.

Me: *OK.*



The next morning, I flew home to Miami.

I'd rented an apartment in the downtown area but had yet to furnish it with anything more than a mattress. I knew I wouldn't be staying in Miami, but I was unsure of where I belonged yet.

In my heart, I knew.

I had a lot of time to think these past four months, and I now understood with a certainty where I belonged and what I wanted. Though I hadn't heard a word from Ronan since his last note. Insecurity had wedged itself in my chest with the belief he didn't have the same feelings anymore and that maybe it really was *proshchay*.

I'd rather live with a little hope than with outright rejection.

A cabbie picked me up at the airport, and I gave him the address to Emma's place, anxiety taking over. Emma had told me everything was perfectly fine on the phone last night, but there was a nervous edge to her voice and lots of hissing in the background. I definitely needed to figure out a better place for Khaos to stay when I was away.

Absently gazing through the window, the sight outside raised the hair on my arms, and I blurted, “Stop here.”

The cabbie thought I was crazy by the look he cast me through the rearview mirror, but he pulled over on the side of the road and let me out after I shoved some cash into his hand.

I walked across the street and onto the grassy plot of land where the carnival looked to be setting

up. The carneys gave me odd glances while they worked on half-mast tents, unloaded amusement rides, and crammed massive stuffed prizes on the game shelves.

The trailer looked exactly the same as it had six years ago: sun-faded exterior, an ominous red door, and purple beaded curtains.

With conviction, I walked up the warped metal stairs and knocked. There was no response, so I knocked again. Curses and grumbles came from inside, and then the door flew open, revealing Madame Richie dressed in a nightgown with a lit cigarette in her hand.

“*Vat* do you *vant*?” she snapped.

“A refund,” I demanded.

With a roll of her eyes, she stabbed a finger at the crudely designed sign taped to the trailer that said, “No Refunds,” in bright red letters.

“*Goodvye* now.” She tried to shut the door in my face, but I kept it open with my foot.

“Your sign should have a disclaimer saying once you go in, you’ll never get out,” I growled. “You’ve haunted me worse than any horror flick I’ve ever seen. Worse than *Saws*.” She didn’t blink. “And I’m *demanding* a refund. Right. Now.” I was breathing a little harshly after that speech, but this confrontation had been a long time coming.

“Haunted, eh?” She inhaled on her cigarette, slowly blew out the smoke, and let the door fall open as she ventured inside the trailer. “Come in. We discuss this refund.”

All I wanted was my dang fifty bucks back as if its return would erase her presence in my life, but it seemed I wasn’t getting it yet, so reluctantly, I ended up following her inside.

Madame Richie took a seat at the round table in the corner and assessed me with a long look. “Ah, I do think I remember your face.”

I stared at her, unimpressed. “I would hope so. Because I won’t forget you for the rest of my life.”

“This is doing *vonders* for my ego.” She seemed genuinely pleased as she gestured to the chair across from her with her smoking cigarette. “Have a seat.”

I hesitated. This woman was a ghost who’d followed me around for years, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to sit down with a phantom.

Her dark, painted-on brow rose. “You *vant* refund. You sit.”

The last time I stood here, I was a naïve fourteen-year-old cheerleader. Madame Richie may have given my young brain something to soak up like a sponge, but I wasn’t the same girl anymore. And I wanted my refund, damnit, so I slid into the chair across from her.

“You *vill* have to remind me *vhat* I foretold for you.”

“You said I would find the man meant for me and that he would take my breath away.”

She blinked false lashes. And then she laughed, head thrown back in pure amusement, cigarette perched between her fingers. Her laugh didn’t disturb me this time. It raised my ire as she laughed so hard a tear ran down her cheek. Because the suspicion I always had flashed in front of me like a neon sign.

I clenched my teeth. “I knew it! I knew that was one of your generic responses.”

Suddenly, she sobered, though still fighting her amusement as she wiped the tear away with sun-wrinkled fingers. “I plead the fifth.”

“Of course you do,” I grumbled.

She ashed her cigarette into a coffee cup. “I cannot offer you refund. But since I have distressed you, I can give you another reading.”

I scowled. “Are you crazy? Why would I want another reading when the last one wasn’t even genuine, and it also ruined my life?”

“How do you know it *was* not genuine if it has distressed you so? It may have been fate.”

Fate. *Please*. Madame Richie just got lucky.

She inhaled, and smoke whispered from her lips with the words. “That is the deal. Take it or leave it.”

I wanted closure from this visit.

I wanted to leave without her laughter over my head.

“I suggest you take it,” she said. “I do think I see great things in your future.”

Madame Richie was dangling a carrot on a string. Or rather, a piece of dog poop. But I guessed I was in such an awkward place in my life, I was interested to hear what generic foretelling she would come up with.

“Fine,” I answered, but then I narrowed my eyes. “But no laughing. Not a single chuckle,” I warned seriously.

It was clear she wanted to do exactly that, but she held it in by pressing her thin lips together. “Let us begin then.”

She moved the cloth-covered crystal ball to the center of the table and pulled off the cover with a flourish. She sure knew how to play the part.

She took a long look at me, then peered in to the ball with concentration. Tilted her head. No smoke appeared like it did last time. She probably didn’t have time to prep her parlor tricks since I’d arrived unexpectedly.

Lifting her head, she inhaled on her cigarette and deadpanned, “You are pregnant.”

I stared at her drily. “If I was pregnant, my stomach would be nearly as big as a basketball right now.”

She pursed her lips. “Could be small baby.”

“No.” Ronan’s baby? Yeah, right.

“*Vorth* a shot.” She shrugged.

She moved the crystal ball aside. “I do not see much now, so let us try the cards.” I didn’t know why I was still here, besides the fact I wanted her to work for the torment she’d caused me.

Madame Richie shuffled the tarot cards, the cigarette dangling from her lips. “So *vat* do you *vant* to know?”

Déjà vu on steroids slipped over my skin like electricity, raising the hair on the back of my neck. She asked me the exact thing six years ago, though instead of answering my question with something legitimate, she gave me a tiresome response about finding a man. I decided to ask the same thing again.

“I want to know what my purpose is in life.”

She raised a brow as if she found the question entirely bland, picked a card from the top of the deck, and set it faceup on the table.

I stared at it, my stomach on the floor.

The Devil.

A puff of Madame Richie’s cigarette smoke circled the card, a little humor in her voice. “*Vell* . . . this is interesting.”

Calmly, I got to my feet and headed to the door.

“That *vill* be fifty dollars,” she hollered after me.

CHAPTER

Fifty-Four

raison d'être
(n.) a reason for existing

Mila

I TOOK A LYFT RIDE to pick up Khaos on my way to The Moorings. Sweet Emma's hair was sticking out in every direction when she calmly told me, "Maybe this isn't the best place for him."

Khaos came to sit by my side, acting as innocent as could be, but one of the cats shooting a glare at him was missing a large tuft of fur.

I apologized profusely, feeling awful for leaving Khaos with Emma. Though I knew he wouldn't do well in a boarding kennel. I had no idea what to do with him the next time I had to leave, but I had two weeks to think about it before my next international shoot in Jamaica.

On the way to The Moorings, I thought of Madame Richie and her stupid tarot card. I mentally tried to figure out the odds of her drawing that card. I imagined all kinds of crazy ideas—like she'd watched me from behind trees for years and then played The Devil to unsettle me.

Frustrated with my musings, I exhaled and told myself it was just a coincidence. A freaky coincidence . . . But I refused to think about it again.

Khaos and I stood in front of my childhood home. I wasn't thrilled about being here again, though I needed to grab the important things—such as my high school diploma, my birth certificate, other accolades I was proud of . . . and maybe a few pairs of shoes.

When we entered through the front door, it was clear the electricity had been turned off. No lights. No water. And the worst: no A/C. The house radiated heat beneath the hot summer sun.

I grabbed a water bottle from my bag and poured a bowl for Khaos. Panting, he plopped down on the cool stone floor, not used to the high Miami temperatures.

Finding a cardboard box, I dumped out the paperwork inside and filled it with everything I wanted to keep. When I was finished, I came down the stairs and told Khaos, "Come on. You can take a dip in the bay to cool down."

As if he understood the words, he jumped up, tail wagging.

Jostling the box in my hands to open the door, I mused aloud, "Maybe we should move up north where it's cooler. What about New York?"

Khaos didn't look impressed.

"Chicago?" I asked him while shutting the door behind us. "Or Aspen?"

"What about Moscow?" The familiar Russian accent slid down my spine and shook the beat of my heart.

The box slipped from my fingers. The items inside fell out onto the pavement, but I could only focus on the presence behind me. My pulse pounded in my throat. It couldn't be him—not here in The Moorings, where I stared across the bay toward Russia dreaming of something I hadn't yet known

existed.

Breathless, I turned around.

Ronan stood in front of a black car parked at the curb. Dressed in Oxxford. Hands in his pockets. His hair gleamed blue beneath the Miami sun, though the light didn't touch his eyes fringed by dark lashes. They called him *D'yavol*, but there could be a halo above his head for as perfect as he looked to me right now.

Waves washed against the rocks, but the sound wasn't lonely . . . not with this man on the same side of the Atlantic. Those cartoon hearts coalesced into one and burst from my chest.

I didn't even think.

I ran across the yard and jumped into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck. He had to take a step back to keep his balance.

He chuckled roughly. "I wasn't expecting this response. I even rehearsed and everything."

I pressed my face into his neck, my entire body shaking. He felt so right, so warm, so comforting, the backs of my eyes burned. Tears streamed down my cheeks, the contentment in my chest blowing up like a balloon.

"Fuck," he rasped, his hand trembling when he slid it into my hair and cradled the back of my head. "*Ya skuchal po tebe.*" *I missed you.*

"*Ya tozhe skuchala po tebe,*" I breathed through tears before pulling back to see his face. *I missed you too.*

"Your Russian has gotten better."

"I've been studying." Hoping. Dreaming.

He wiped away a few tears while I clung to him, refusing to ever let go.

"That'll help," he said coarsely.

"Why?" I asked, my tears abating.

"Because you're coming home with me."

I raised a brow. "As your captive?"

That villainous look so akin to him touched his eyes, and then he said three words that stopped my heart dead in its tracks.

"*Kak moya zhena.*" *As my wife.*

I stared at him for multiple seconds as a combustion of thoughts and feelings overwhelmed me. I slid down his body to reach solid ground and took a step back to think, looking everywhere but at Ronan. Albert sat in the driver's seat of the car. I wondered if he knew his boss had lost his mind. Khaos nudged the side of my leg as he sat beside me, giving Ronan a distrusting expression.

"Wow," I finally managed, pulling my gaze back to Ronan's. "That's a massive leap. Usually, it goes captive, servant, despised acquaintance, seduced lover—"

"Those all sound great," he cut me off, "but I've had *four months*"—his eyes darkened as if the time had been worse than prison—"to think about this, and I know what I want."

"And you want a wife," I said slowly.

"I could buy a wife from a catalog if I wanted to," he returned harshly. "I want you. And if I can't have you as my captive, I want the next best thing."

A laugh lifted in my throat because . . . well, this was not how I thought I'd get proposed to. Though it was sure beating the proposal I knew Carter would have come up with.

"Which is a wife," I said as if I understood his frame of mind.

"*Da.* There are legal ties involved."

"Ah. I get it now." I laughed. "So as this theoretical wife of yours, do I get to move freely around

the house?”

His eyes narrowed. “There’s no ‘theoretical’ about it.”

“Okay, but I want to know how this would work. Do I get to watch TV, or do I have to ask you first?”

He chuckled. “Obviously, you have some trauma you need to sort out.”

“Blame yourself for that,” I returned, then I swallowed. “I don’t know about this though . . . It’s crazy, Ronan.”

He gripped my throat and tipped my head up to meet my eyes. “*Ty svela menya s uma. I teper tebye nuzhno razbiratsa s posledstviyami.*” *You made me crazy. And now you have to deal with the consequences.*

He was using the excuse I had once before, so I couldn’t even complain. I loved hearing Russian from his lips so much it melted my insides, but I couldn’t be distracted right now. I needed to think.

“English.”

“*Nyet.* I can’t say this in English.” His gaze flickered with conflict, like this wasn’t easy for him to vocalize.

“Say what?”

The fire, the turmoil, the truth in his eyes—it told me everything, and my heart floated in my chest.

I ran my thumb across the scar on his bottom lip. “*Ya lyublyu tebya* . . . Those words?” Then I realized he’d probably never said them. I’d even bet he’d never heard them either. The knowledge constricted my chest.

“*Ya lyublyu tebya,*” I said softly. “So much.”

His grip on my throat tightened possessively while my caress across his lips grew softer. I didn’t need the words from him. I didn’t want to make him feel as if he had to say something he wasn’t comfortable with.

“You don’t have to say anything you don’t want to—”

“Fuck, woman.” He pulled me in to kiss me deeply—just to shut me up, I think. Still, I sighed into his mouth, heat washing to my toes. I went in for more, but he pulled back and skimmed his lips across mine. “*Ya lyublyu tebya. Tak sil’no chto ne mogu dumat’ kogda ty daleko ot menya.*” *I love you. So much I can’t think when you’re away from me.*

Months ago, I didn’t believe in suspicions. Yet so much had convinced me otherwise. Maybe I was wrong about happily ever afters too. Maybe they really did exist. Just not with a shining knight in armor, but with the *villain*.

A tear slipped down my cheek, and I brushed my lips against his. “Yes.”

He tilted my head back to see my eyes. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, I’ll be your wife.”

He groaned in satisfaction and kissed me so deeply he stole my breath. I was burning up on the lawn, and it wasn’t from the Miami heat. I pulled back breathlessly to say, “But I have some conditions.”

Slightly amused, he waited for me to continue.

“The TV thing. I really want to watch it whenever I want.”

He laughed. “Tough negotiator.”

“And I have a career now. I model for—”

“I know.”

I raised a brow, and then suspicion set in and popped my bubble. I had doubts about how I got into the modeling industry so quickly, and it was confirmed by a single passing flicker in his eyes.

“I thought it was divine intervention,” I grumbled. “Now I know it was diabolic intervention.”

He chuckled.

“You really don’t have a problem with the modeling?”

“I don’t like the idea of the world staring at your body.” His eyes narrowed. “And if someone tells you to lose your ass, there’ll be a new missing person’s report added to the list. But if you like what you do, I’ll deal.”

I fought a smile. “That was a more aggressive response than I expected, but somehow more passive as well.”

“You won’t call me passive when we’re not on the street and you’re reminded of making me wait four months.”

I raised a brow. “I didn’t make you wait.”

“Theoretically,” he returned. “I configured how much space a woman would need from her kidnapper before he proposed to her.”

I laughed. “And you came up with four months?”

He ran a thumb across his upturned lip. “The results were inconclusive, so I waited until I couldn’t anymore.”

I pressed my face against his chest, soaking in his smell I’d missed so much. I couldn’t stop myself from saying it again. “*Ya lyublyu tebya.*”

He made a noise of satisfaction. “*Ya byl tyoim pervym I ya budu tvoim poslednim.*” *I was your first, and I will be your last.*

“Don’t you want to know if I’ve been with anyone after you?”

“You haven’t.” The response was so confident, it told me one thing.

“Who was watching me?” I accused. “I would notice Albert. He’s bigger than a tree.”

“Viktor.” Ronan didn’t even look apologetic about having me stalked.

“And what would Viktor have done if I took a male model back to my place?”

“Thrown him into the ocean,” he said darkly.

“And what about you?” I asked with unease. I didn’t want to know, but I also *needed* to know. “Have you been with someone else?”

“No. You’ve truly fucked with my head.”

The relief soaked in and warmed my heart. “Always so romantic.”

“Any more stipulations?”

I sawed my lip between my teeth in consideration. “What about my papa? I’ve only gotten a text from him, but other than that, we aren’t in contact. But I could find him if I wanted to, and I don’t ever want you to ask me to do that.”

“I had a great dialogue lined up for this, *kotyonok*, but you ruined it by throwing yourself at me again.”

“You’re the one who flew to me,” I returned.

He smiled, then sobered and ran a thumb across my cheek. “I won’t ever use you again. I regret ever doing it in the first place. As far as I’m concerned, Alexei can live his life ruling some sad Siberian city. Are we done talking now?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Then let’s go home.”

He collected my box and interlinked his fingers with mine on the way to the car, with Khaos at our heels. I knew then I’d follow this man to the fiery gates of hell if he just held my hand.

CHAPTER

Fifty-Five

scintilla

(n.) a tiny brilliant flash or spark; a small thing; a barely visible trace

Mila

EIGHT HOURS LATER, I GLANCED out the window of the private jet.

“Ronan . . . did Moscow get an Eiffel Tower of its own recently?”

“I would never allow that kind of romantic tourism in my city.”

“Huh,” I mused. “So why am I seeing the Eiffel Tower right now?”

“We’re in Paris,” he said indifferently.

And that had been his attitude the entire flight: indifferent. He and those stupid “*Delicious!*” sounds coming from his phone were driving me crazy. Albert wasn’t any better company. He was flipping through a *Cosmo* in the row of seats at the front of the plane.

I hadn’t seen Ronan in four months. I’d been burning up for eight hours waiting for him to touch me, kiss me, and drag me to the convenient bed in the back. But he hadn’t done any of that. When I got tired of waiting, I’d straddled his lap, ran my lips down his neck, and cupped his erection as it grew harder beneath my hand.

I thought I was finally going to get what I wanted, but then he shoved me off him to the couch and said, “I’m saving myself for marriage, *kotyonok*.”

I glared at him.

He thought it was funny.

Frustrated, I got up and sat on the couch across from him. I’d just keep Khaos company. He looked bored with me too, but at least he tolerated my presence.

“You’re cute when you’re pouting,” Ronan said.

I raised a brow. “You’re annoying when you’re pretending to be a gentleman.”

He gave me a heavy look that expressed so much but nothing I could understand.

We hadn’t said a word to each other after that until I noticed we weren’t in Moscow, where I thought we were going. I wanted to know why we were in Paris, though I held in my questions knowing Ronan would probably tell me we were here to see the tourist sites.

A car waited for us after we exited the plane. Khaos jumped into the front seat as soon as Ronan opened the door.

I stifled a laugh. “Looks like you’re in the back with me. I hope it doesn’t tempt your vow of celibacy.”

Ronan gave me a dark look, but he got into the back seat without complaint. While Albert drove us to a top-secret location, I ignored Ronan like he had me, though it became a much harder venture when he rested his hand on my bare thigh and slowly pushed up my dress to see what I wore beneath it. I guessed he’d been paying more attention to me than I thought. He knew what he would find.

Nothing.

Everyone knew thin material equaled panty lines.

Ronan made a rough noise and squeezed my upper thigh before pulling my dress back down.

“You’d better pray there isn’t a strong wind nearby.”

“We’re in Paris. I’ll fit right in.”

He wasn’t impressed, so I kissed the annoyance off his lips.

As we drove through the streets of Paris, I sat on the edge of my seat to take in the sights. I’d never been to the city before, and while I was excited to return to Moscow, Paris was an experience I wouldn’t turn down.

A restaurant wasn’t exactly the destination I was expecting. Sure, I was hungry, but I didn’t want to sit and eat without knowing why we were here. Albert stayed in the car with Khaos while I followed Ronan inside. The impatient question was about to slip off my lips, though a woman drew my attention to a seat near the window.

She stared at me, her face as pale as snow. She was beautiful, even pushing into her late sixties and dressed in a drab white uniform that told me she was probably a maid. She watched me as tears spilled down her cheeks.

With an uneasy sensation filling me, I said, “Ronan . . .”

He grabbed my hand and walked us to her table.

“*Mon Dieu,*” she breathed before getting to her feet and placing her hands on my face. “*Si belle. Tellement comme ma Tatianna . . .* So much like my Tatianna.”

My chest twisted as the knowledge sank in.

She was Tatianna’s mother.

My *grandmother*.

She pulled me into her arms and sobbed. The shock faded beneath her soft embrace. All those times I’d dreamed, wanted, *needed* this familial affection flashed through my mind like still shots, each picture fading away as my chest was sewn back together with a needle and thread. I didn’t even know this woman, but tears fell at the pain of the past and the relief of letting it go.

She pulled back to look at me, wonder glistening in her wet eyes. “You are probably shocked right now.”

Throat tight, I nodded.

“Me too.” She exhaled deeply to compose herself. “Please, sit down with me. I would love to get to know you and answer any questions you have.”

Nervously, I glanced at Ronan, who asked, “*Ty khochesh’, chtoby ya ostalsya?*” *Do you want me to stay?*

I wasn’t sure why he was using Russian or if he even realized he’d done it. Reservation flared behind his eyes, and I had the feeling he might think I would no longer need him now I was reconnected with my family. He was wrong. But this was something I needed to do alone, so I shook my head and spoke in Russian, hoping it would reassure him. “*Ne ukhodi daleko.*” *Don’t go far.*

He gave me a long look before walking over to the bar.

After I took a seat across from my estranged grandmother, she stared at me for a long time, another one of her tears escaping. “I’m sorry. You look so much like Tatianna, it’s shocking.”

“I understand.”

“You’ve probably figured out by now I am—*was*—Tatianna’s mother. My name is Estelle.”

All I could manage was, “I’m Mila.”

“I know. That man”—she looked toward the bar at Ronan—“got ahold of me and told me a little

about you. I did not know you existed until recently.” Nervously, she played with her napkin. “I am angry I have missed so much of your life, but also so blessed to finally find you.”

“Tatianna never told you about me?”

She frowned. “No. My daughter left home when she was sixteen in search of better things, I suppose. I never saw her again . . . Well, that is not true. I saw her in a few magazines.” She gave me a sad smile. “But I am curious about why you speak of her as if you didn’t know her.”

I swallowed. “I didn’t. I saw her visit my papa sometimes when I was little, but I never did meet her.”

She shook her head. “Oh, Tatianna. *Comment as-tu pu faire ça à ta fille?*” *How could you do that to your daughter?* “There is something you should know about your mother. She looked healthy on the outside, but on the inside . . . she was not well.” She dabbed her tears with the napkin. “Tatianna . . . lacked something inside her. She didn’t love in the same way others do . . . In fact, I’m not sure she loved at all. She may not have been in your life, but I promise you, her choice had nothing to do with you.”

I thought I’d gotten along fine without knowing much about my mother, but now, I realized I needed to hear this. It sounded like my mother really was a psychopath. I didn’t know how to process all the information, so I stared out the window at the passersby.

“You look so much like Tatianna, I thought it was her when you walked in. But I can see now, you are so much different than your mother.”

I pulled my gaze back to her. “How so?”

“Well, for starters, I never saw Tatianna cry. Not even as a child when she hurt herself.”

“I’ve been told I’m a faucet.”

She laughed. “You get that from me. I can cry at the drop of a hat.”

I smiled.

“Do you have a good relationship with your father?” she asked.

I shifted in my seat, my chest tightening. She couldn’t know my papa was the one who murdered her pregnant daughter. If she knew, would she despise me? My stomach churned.

I chewed my lip. “He always treated me well, but . . .”

“You don’t have to say anymore.”

I raised a brow.

“Those magazines showed me a lot more than just Tatianna’s pictures. I knew the people she involved herself with were not the best.” She added hesitantly, “Your papa in particular.”

I wondered if she knew the man I came here with was *D’yavol* himself. She could say whatever she wanted about my papa, but I knew I would defend Ronan even if it meant losing this new connection.

The secret inside felt like it would strangle me if I didn’t get it out. “I’m not sure how her death was reported, but it wasn’t suicide.”

She gave me a solemn look. “I know, dear. The moment Tatianna left home, I knew she wouldn’t come back.” *Alive* was the unsaid word. “If you know more than I do about her death, you don’t have to explain. In fact, I don’t want you to explain. I’ve had a long time to grieve. I’ve come to terms with her passing, and I don’t want to relive it.”

I exhaled as relief overwhelmed me. Maybe she already had an idea of what happened. Maybe those gossip magazines were right on the money.

“You know,” I said, “I’ve mentally recited French for years, and now it all makes sense.”

“Of course it does. You are half-French.” She laughed, her eyes sliding to the bar. “So tell me

about this man you came here with.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Ronan leaning against the bar, his eyes on mine. A woman was trying to talk to him, but I didn't think it was going well for her. I turned back to Estelle.

“I think we're getting married.”

“You think?” she chuckled. “Shouldn't you know?”

“I don't know. It's . . . complicated.” Unfortunately, there wasn't a better word to describe our situation. “It's all moving really fast.”

“You know, when I saw your grandfather for the first time, I knew I would marry him instantly.” Her eyes lit with a smile. “He was the new repairman at the hotel I still work at. I know it sounds silly, but that first glance at him, he looked ethereal—almost like he was too perfect to be real.” Her gaze fell. “He passed away a few years ago from cancer, and all I wish now was that I would have approached him sooner. We wasted so much time dancing around each other. If you feel that way for this man, don't waste any more time. It can't be brought back.” Seeing her tears made a few of mine fall.

“I'm so sorry about your husband.”

She laughed. “I expect lots of tears in our future. But let's make them happy ones.”

“I like that idea.”

She stood. “I'm going to be late getting back to work, but promise me we'll keep in contact. My apartment may be small, but there will always be a room for you if you need it.”

I got to my feet and accepted her tight hug. “Thank you so much.”

She pulled back, ran her fingers across my cheek, and whispered, “*Ma petite fille.*” *My granddaughter.* “Your mother might not have been able to love you the way she should have, but I always will.” She kissed each of my cheeks. “*Je t'aime, Mila.*”

A tear slipped down my cheek. “*Je t'aime.*”



Holding Ronan's hand, I walked out of the restaurant and sucked in a deep breath, feeling lighter than I had in years.

I turned and hugged Ronan. “Thank you for doing that for me.”

“You're welcome, *kotyonok.*” He tipped my chin up to see my eyes. “How did it go?”

“Well, we have a high chance of having psychopathic children, but other than that, great.”

He chuckled. “Good. They'll have a better chance of surviving Kat.”

Realizing we were causing a traffic jam, I pulled away from him and started walking down the sidewalk, ignoring the car sitting at the curb.

“Where are you going?”

“Sightseeing. Then maybe shopping.” Happiness bloomed in my chest, and I did a cliché twirl. “Wherever Paris takes me.”

His eyes narrowed on the flare of my dress. “Better not take you to *Barbès.*”

I assumed that was an area with a bad reputation. And since Ronan had ignored me for eight

hours, it was time for a little payback.

I paused and pursed my lips. “*Barbès* has a nice ring to it. Who knows, maybe I’ll end up there?” I shrugged with an impish smile and continued down the sidewalk.

Ronan released a frustrated growl, said something to Albert, and then followed me. “You’re narcissistic I don’t just kidnap you again.”

“I’m preparing my fake screams and, ‘*No, please don’t!*’ as we speak.”

He laughed. “I’m more concerned about what our children are going to inherit from you than your mother.”

“You really want kids?” I asked.

He ran a thumb across his bottom lip. “*Da.*”

“Lots of them?”

“However many you want.”

I raised a brow. “I want a whole houseful.”

“I can take your IUD out in this alley, and we can get started right now.”

I pretended to think about it. “Tempting. But I’m going to leave that to the professionals.” I cocked my head. “And I thought you were ‘saving yourself for marriage’?”

He cast me an intense, thoughtful look, but didn’t respond. I frowned at him, not understanding his behavior since the flight. Maybe he really had lost his mind.

I stopped to peer through a store window. It was a handmade boutique, and all the colors inside beckoned me.

“Hey, Ronan?”

“Yes, Mila?”

“I want to go in there.”

He chuckled. “Is this a trauma-induced statement?”

I turned to face him. “I just don’t want you to get bored while I go shopping.”

“You’re enough entertainment for me alone. It’s like watching a circus.”

I shoved his chest playfully and drifted into the store.

The retailer and owner was a knowledgeable Indian woman who wasn’t shy about telling me what would or wouldn’t look good on me. Ronan even shook his head with her when I came out of the dressing room in a peach-colored dress.

I bought three bags of dresses, shoes, and handmade jewelry. A long argument ensued at the cash register, which the owner found highly amusing. Ronan forced a black credit card on me. I may love him, but I didn’t want to spend his dirty money. In the end, he won—only because he told me I could donate all my earnings from modeling to save baby humpbacks if he paid for everything else. How he knew I had a love for the animals didn’t surprise me.

He literally pushed me into the next store. I looked at all the lingerie on the shelves and gave him an unimpressed expression.

“Why do I need to be here if you’re saving yourself for marriage?”

“Because we’re getting married today.”

I stared at him. Blinked. Then collected myself. “But we’re in Paris . . . Aren’t you chafing at the romanticism of it all?”

He laughed. “*Nyet.* We’ll have a traditional Russian wedding when we get home.”

That was all he was going to say about this extremely crazy idea?

“Ronan . . .”

The shadows in his eyes took over. He collared my throat and pulled me in, his rough voice in my

ear. “The next time I fuck you, I need to know you’re mine. And I need you *tonight*.”

I exhaled beneath his intensity. I guessed that explained the “saving himself” spiel. Estelle’s words returned. Ronan wasn’t as simple as an ordinary repairman, but nothing else seemed to matter when he was near. I wanted him in every way I could have him. But what I wanted more was to give him what he needed.

“Okay.”

His eyes lit with satisfaction, then he kissed me on the lips and released me just as the salesclerk sauntered up to us.

“*Puis-je vous aider à trouver quelque chose?*” *Can I help you find something?*

“*Quelque chose de sexy et de jaune. Et pas de soie,*” Ronan said. *Something sexy and yellow. And no silk.*

Of course Ronan spoke French.

Thirty minutes later, I left with more lingerie than I could ever wear. Laden with bags, we walked down the street before Ronan forced me to stop in front of a jewelry store.

“I don’t want a ring,” I said.

“You’re wearing a ring,” he returned. “It doesn’t have to be a diamond. It could be another stone.”

“No stone is one hundred percent conflict free.”

“Why are you such a hippie?”

“Why are you such a mobster?”

He was already halfway into the store, so, reluctantly, I followed him inside. While Ronan was practically being assaulted by two saleswomen, I peered into the glass cases, perusing the rings.

I pointed to a man’s black wedding band. “*Celui-là s’il-vous-plaît.*” *That one, please.*

The man behind the counter pulled it out of the case.

Ronan appeared beside me. “I don’t think that’s quite your style, Mila.”

“It’s not. It’s for you.”

“I figured that. But you need to pick something for yourself, or I will.”

I gave him a brilliant smile. “I have a better idea than a ring.”

A stare-off ensued for at least thirty seconds before Ronan gave in, bought the ring I picked out, and followed me down the street.

I stopped in front of a tattoo parlor’s window.

“*Nyet.*” It was a hard “no.”

I frowned. “You don’t even know what I want yet.”

His eyes narrowed. “You want a tattoo, and it’s not happening.”

“You have a million, and I can’t have one?”

“Yes.”

With a sigh, I grabbed his hand and ran my finger over the inked raven. “I want this. On my ring finger.”

I thought he liked the idea, but I didn’t stick around to find out. I opened the door and waltzed in. Ronan took over from there. I didn’t have to say a word as he spoke with the tattoo artist and showed him what I wanted. He didn’t threaten the man, but his tone was enough to intimidate the artist into not messing up a single line.

When we walked out of the shop, I flashed my new tattoo at Ronan and asked, “Do you like it?”

His eyes were dark, but his words were soft. “*Mne npravitsya.*” *I love it.*

I rose to my toes and kissed him, so in love it felt like I would drown, though I knew he would never let go of my hand. When I pulled back, a glimmer of light in the shadows of Ronan’s eyes was

gray. It was only a flicker before it was gone. But it meant everything.

He ran his thumb across my lips. "*Ty byla sozdana dlya menya.*" *You were made for me.*

I believed it with everything in me.

"*Dazhe ocean ne mog razdelit' nas,*" I breathed beneath the possessive pressure of his thumb on my lips. *Even the sea couldn't keep us apart.*

He smiled. "Not even hell, *kotyonok.*"

That night, I got married in Paris with a raven on my finger. Though, in my heart, I knew this man had never been my Nevermore.

He was my forever.

THE END

PREVIEW OF *THE VINTAGE CLUB*

CHAPTER ONE

RAIN DRIZZLED AS I STOOD in front of a two-story brick building and stared at the nondescript logo on the crimson door: a lapel pin in the shape of a V. It was the fine print below that made my palms itch.

I'd assumed The Vintage Club was a country club; that the most I'd have to deal with was the overeager attention of a frat boy wearing pink shorts and loafers.

Luck and I, however, had never been on good terms.

A rumble of thunder rolling across Chicago's smoggy nighttime sky was my only warning before rain poured like a tipped-over bucket of water that splattered on my head and soaked my clothes. I sucked in a breath at the wet and ominous assault, and with a growl of resignation, I yanked open the door that read, "Gentlemen's Club."

I wasn't a prude on principle. I just disliked strippers. They reminded me of my mother.

The door fell shut behind me, muffling the torrent of rain outside. Wet and tired, the toll of the day pulled on my muscles. None of the bus routes came to this part of the city, so I'd been dropped off twelve blocks from here. Chicago's elite must have an aversion to public transportation and compassion.

The entire entryway glittered: the tear-drop chandelier, crystal vases with real lilies, and a few ornamental mirrors. Even the glass desk sparkled as if it'd been carved from diamond.

I took it all in like Alice did Wonderland. Most of the clients I delivered packages to were wealthy, but this place took loaded to another level.

The strippers probably sweat gold.

I pulled my attention from the décor to an Alfred-looking receptionist who stood behind the desk, dressed in a black suit with coattails.

Cool eyes flickered with mounting displeasure as they swept from my messy ponytail, to the Angelo's T-shirt and jeans I wore to work, to the chucks on my feet, and finally, to the puddle I'd dripped onto the iridescent marble floor.

"We're not hiring," he said shortly before averting his attention back to the paperwork on his desk.

An ironic breath escaped me. "Trust me, this would be the last place I'd ever apply."

He didn't look convinced.

I stepped closer and, unable to resist the temptation, I moved to run my hand across the sparkly desktop as if it was an expensive car. Before I could touch it, Alfred's eyes hardened, embodying the stuffy owner who warned to not touch his Maserati.

With an impish look, I did it anyway.

He stacked his papers more aggressively than necessary. What was that? An NDA? Before I could see any more of the corrupt workings of this place, Alfred shoved the paperwork into a folder and said, "The bathroom isn't open to the public."

I scratched at the desk with a fingernail as if I was testing a mineral's hardness. "I'm glad I peed back at the QuikTrip then. They have free paper towels and a twenty-five-cent tampon dispenser. Best

accommodations you can find on the South Side.”

“How generous of them,” he said drily. “I’m sure if you return, you’ll be able to find patronage closer to your . . . qualifications.”

“Wow,” I chuckled, my curious fingers grasping a glass paperweight. “I think that’s the sweetest way anyone has ever called me a cheap whore before.”

He stole the paperweight in my hand that was angled toward the light while I examined the facets inside and snapped, “What will make you disappear?”

I raised a brow. “You know, Alfred, you’re not my usual type, but if you keep talking to me like that, I might change my mind.”

His expression conveyed he wouldn’t touch me with the end of a broomstick, and it brought a soft laugh from me.

“Okay, just business then.” Pulling a moist envelope from my back pocket, I slid it onto the desk. “I need to deliver this to one of your patrons, and I promise you’ll never see me again.”

I’d been doing this side job for my neighbor Lucas for a few months. He gave me a package—sometimes just an envelope—and I delivered it. The gig was most likely illegal: Drugs, black-market goods, or some kind of secret political revolution. I didn’t ask questions. Occasionally, the extra money was the only thing that kept the lights on.

“I’m sorry, Miss . . .” He waited for a last name.

I gave him my first. “Emilia.”

“I’m sorry, Miss *Emilia*, but this is a private club. The only way you’re getting inside is if you’re a guest of a member.” His gaze settled on a spaghetti stain on my T-shirt. “Considering the unlikelihood of *that* ever happening, do us both a favor and leave.”

I inhaled a deep breath for patience. Although, patience was a virtue, and I’d lost most of those years ago.

“Listen, Alfred. I worked a double shift today, and then I walked twelve blocks to get here. I’m tired. I’m so tired I’m considering curling up on your nice floor, shedding a few tears, and making a big scene. See this envelope?” I waved it in his face. “I don’t get paid unless I personally put it in the recipient’s hand. Now are you going to let me do that, or do I need to make a scene?”

Alfred stared at me for a long second before he picked up his phone and said, “Security.”

Ugh.

I shouldn’t have touched his stupid desk.

I could sit outside and chance getting struck by lightning until Mr. Brown exited. Although, soaking wet in a chauvinistic strip club, it was clear I’d already gambled with luck tonight and lost. Not to mention, my bed was calling my name, and I needed the two hundred dollars this job would bring in—plus, hopefully, a decent tip.

I glanced from the envelope in my hand to the black curtain concealing the room beyond.

Alfred’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t you dare—”

Pushing the curtain aside, I waltzed in. The sensual smell of perfumed skin, illegal blowjobs, and cigar smoke hit me in the face.

The lighting sat at a low romantic glow, and the booths were red, occupied by a few men in expensive suits sipping even more expensive liquor. A couple of women in lingerie served drinks, while a naked brunette danced on a pole in the center of the room.

While this club was the furthest thing from the one I remembered as a child, the carnal atmosphere still coated my skin with slimy *déjà vu*.

I searched for Mr. Brown from the ridiculously vague description Lucas had given me: white,

early thirties, black hair. I examined each man as I passed, receiving interested glances and even a proposition to sit down from a middle-aged man with a gold band on his ring finger.

I put a hand on my chest as if I was surprised and would be deeply honored to. He smiled a toothy grin and patted the spot beside him. Resting a palm on the table, I leaned in provocatively and whispered, "Not if you were the last man on Earth."

I didn't stick around to see the smile fall off his face.

Alfred seethed from across the room. His accusing eyes followed my movements as if I was a wild animal who'd been released inside his precious den of iniquity.

Security must be at lunch, I thought with amusement. The club didn't even have a bouncer to snap at the patrons when they got handsy with the strippers. I guessed that wouldn't be very classy.

"Mr. Brown?" I asked the only one in the room who fit the description and who happened to have a woman's bare ass in his face while she danced in front of him.

He glanced at me, and a devilish smile appeared. "Well, well. Are you new here?"

"What about this outfit says 'stripper' to you?" I asked.

"What's under it?"

A throbbing headache was imminent.

"Lucas sent me."

Mr. Brown's gaze filled with understanding, growing heated as it traveled down my body. Unwanted nostalgia, lingering eyes, and wet clothes chafed my skin.

"Damn, that's unfortunate," he drawled.

The dancer stilled with a huff, placed her hands on her naked hips, and glared at me. I rolled my eyes and handed Mr. Brown the envelope. He slipped it into his jacket pocket.

"Thanks, babe."

I held out my hand. He glanced at it, then pulled his gaze to mine, and raised a brow in question. I wiggled my fingers.

"Ah . . . You want my money," he commented with feigned disappointment. "I thought we had something real going here?"

"In your dreams."

He smiled and took his time going through his wallet so he could check me out a little longer. Voices brought my attention over my shoulder, and my heart quickened at the sight of Alfred pointing in my direction with an overgrown man in a dark suit by his side.

Mr. Brown slipped a fifty to me. I snatched it up.

"I'd say thanks, but you really inconvenienced me today."

"Whatever, babe."

A mountain of a man was headed my way with irritation in his eyes. I probably *had* ruined his lunch. So I did what any sane woman would do.

I ran.

Pushing a black curtain out of the way, I scrambled to find a way out of this place. Multiple doors lined the hall on either side, but no red exit sign beckoned me to safety.

"I swear to God, when I catch you . . ." the bouncer muttered from not far behind me.

It felt like I was a preteen again running from the police with a pilfered can of baby formula in my hoodie. The only options had been stealing or listening to hungry cries while my foster parents of the month were out on a binge.

Where was the freaking exit? This Wonderland was no longer sparkly, but a nightmare of red doors and black curtains.

The sounds of the bouncer's steps were closing in, and the idea of being caught in his oversized paws grabbed ahold of my chest.

I opened the nearest door and shut it with a quiet click. I kept my hand on the knob, listening to my heavy breaths and the bouncer's footsteps pass in the hall.

"I said I wasn't interested in entertainment tonight." The cold and distant voice prickled my back.

Exhaling, I spun around to see I stood in a private room furnished with a silver pole, a bar, red velvet chairs, and a couch where a suit jacket had been discarded.

A man sat at the booth in the corner. His forearms rested on the table while he studied the paperwork strewn in front of him. A white dress shirt molded his torso like a second skin, the fabric pulled taut at his biceps. The lighting was dim, but by the way the shadows caressed his face, it was clear he was undeniably handsome.

The designer suit, the watch on his wrist, the fade haircut that probably cost more than my monthly rent—all of it screamed money. Though the more obvious tells of power were the set of his shoulders and the heavy presence surrounding him like a shield. It was hot and uncomfortable to the touch as if I was standing close to the thick heat of a fire.

"Honestly," I sighed with tightly leashed exasperation, "do I look like a stripper?"

The man didn't even glance at me. "I couldn't care less what you look like." He sounded distracted and annoyed. "Leave."

I had no doubt when he said that single word women fled. His command burned in my stomach with the itch to submit. I hated it.

I'd grown a thick skin in my twenty-two years having to fend for myself a majority of that time. The best thing my mother ever did for me was put her boyfriend of the month—who she always swore was "the one"—before everything else, including me.

Her neglect taught me to protect myself from men at a very young age. It also showed me most of the male species sucked. And the fact this one threatened to crumble my confidence like the Berlin Wall with just a few words . . . well, that really annoyed me.

I took a step into the room, my eyes taking everything in, and nonchalantly asked, "Did your maid forget to put a chocolate on your pillow last night? Is that why you're acting like such a prick?"

His gaze finally came to me. Deep, dark, and hostile. Clearly, he'd never been called such a name in his life. I relished the opportunity to be the first.

He slid a stare down my body, criticizing my attire with a single touch of his eyes. He didn't have to say a word to announce he found me lacking in every way. Thankfully, I had a more-than-healthy amount of self-esteem.

"I can't figure out if you're a desperate attempt on the club's part to interest me, or if you're a lost orphan off the street who never got spanked as a child."

The quick wit was so surprising, a laugh escaped me. "Let me guess, you want to spank me?"

"No. Go away."

"Yeah, about that . . ." I ran my hand across the back of a soft, velvet chair. "We're kind of stuck together for the time being."

The look he shot me expressed he still believed I was a stripper; that this getup was a caught-in-the-rain waitress costume and I'd soon be taking it off. Though it seemed he wasn't lying when he said he wasn't interested. He returned his attention back to his paperwork. Tension tightened his shoulders, frustration evident in the muscles beneath. He looked like he really could use a woman's touch.

Too bad it wasn't going to be me.

In my quest to touch everything in sight, I meandered over to the pole in my chucks, ran a finger down it, and then looked at the pad of it as if I was inspecting for dust.

“Why so glum?” I asked. “Did Daddy disinherit you?”

His gaze flashed to mine. “You’re shitty entertainment.”

I laughed. “That’s probably because I’m not here to entertain you.”

The man looked like a gentleman, but he was so bluntly rude and quick in return to my taunts I was beginning to enjoy myself. It wasn’t often men surprised me.

His eyes scalded my skin as I grabbed the pole and slowly spun around it in my wet, spaghetti-stained T-shirt.

“You’re lucky you even have a father,” I said. “Mine left me with too many daddy issues.”

“I can tell.”

“Ouch.” I pouted and touched my heart. Walking toward him, I pulled myself up onto the table and sat on his paperwork. “What are you working on?”

His annoyance was so heady it filled the room like smoke. I suddenly needed oxygen; to escape this room before hot flames licked at my skin. But a cool spark of adrenaline swayed me.

Sadly, irritating this man was the most fun I’d had in a while.

Meeting his stare head-on, the urge to glance away tugged at my nerves. Now so close, his eyes glittering with displeasure, it felt like an illegal act to hold his gaze. He was the kind of handsome that made a girl’s breath slow. The kind that rushed all the blood in her body to the tips of her toes.

He was a Picasso behind a wall of glass, the ticket to look upon it too expensive for me to afford.

All of his flaws must be condensed into his personality, because, as far as I could see, there wasn’t a visible one in sight.

Luck sure was an unfair bitch.

He sat back. “Why explain it when we both know it’s over your head?”

I raised a haughty brow. “I’ll have you know I was at the top of my class at Brighton High.”

He recognized the name of the shittiest public school in Chicago. “A difficult feat, I’m sure.”

I leaned back on my hands and sighed like I was reminiscing. “Although, that’s mostly because I fucked my chemistry teacher.” That was a lie. The bastard had cornered me in his classroom and shoved his hand up my skirt. I understood my psyche. I used my painful past experiences to shock and, therefore, feel like I had control of them.

In short, I was a mess.

His expression tightened in disapproval. “Who taught you to talk like that?”

“My mom,” I said seriously.

“Charming.”

“What? Can’t say ‘fuck’ from that pretty boy mouth of yours?”

“What’s on your neck?”

I tilted my head to give him a better view, purposely swinging my long, dark ponytail in his face. I bit my cheek to hold in the smile when he evaded it with a look of annoyance.

The tattoo on the nape of my neck was a geometrical triangle. No, it didn’t mean anything. I just loved the design.

“You like?” I asked.

“No.”

Because he was being rude, I shrugged just so I could toss my hair at him again. But this time, he grabbed my ponytail and yanked me flat to my back on the table. A gasp passed my lips at the unexpected roughness, and the sudden heat flaring inside me shocked me so much I practically

growled at him.

Sitting back in his seat, a hand wrapped around my hair, he raised an indifferent brow. “Why swing it in my face if you don’t want me to grab it?”

“You think everything belongs to you, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

It was such a ridiculous answer I couldn’t grasp onto a quick retort, so I only glared.

Our tempers collided and condensed the space of the room. A second passed, and as if the action was unwelcomed and inadvertent, his gaze slid down my body and over the wet clothes exposing my every curve.

The touch of his eyes lit a line of fire in its wake, from the gentle rise and fall of my breasts, to the flare of my hips, to the black jeans with a frayed hole in the knee.

He released his grip on my hair with a sudden sense of annoyance and asked, “Why are you so fucking wet?”

Apparently, he hadn’t even heard the rain shower while sheltered in luxury. The sky would probably clear the moment he stepped outside.

I relaxed against the table as if this was where I wanted to be all along and stretched my arms above my head. “I don’t answer those kinds of questions on the first date.”

“This is nothing more than a poor striptease. One I would pay more to end than I’ve ever paid a stripper with actual experience.”

Amusement flickered inside me, but I forced a dire expression. “Your name doesn’t have a second or third on the end of it, does it?”

He yanked a piece of moist paper out from underneath me and gave me a dry look that implied he believed I already knew his name.

“I refuse to add a number to my future son’s name, so that’s going to be a hurdle for us to get past,” I said seriously.

“I guess we’re at an impasse then, because I’m not naming my daughter ‘Candy’ or ‘Cherry.’”

I laughed at the ridiculous stripper names. “We can agree on that. I was thinking ‘Bambi.’”

The man’s eyes narrowed at the smeared ink on his precious paperwork. He was the embodiment of broody, with a five o’clock shadow and discarded jacket. Though his features were so compelling, so masculine and perfect to the eye, I bet if I touched him he would disappear.

I sat up and grabbed the tumbler that sat on the table, took a sip, and released a soft moan when the whiskey hit my tongue. The man’s eyes lifted from his paperwork to my face, almost as if he was irritated but couldn’t stop the very male reaction to look when a woman made that noise.

“You know, I adore whiskey.” I swirled the liquid in the glass. “But not just any kind—the expensive stuff,” I told him. “If I was rich, I’d bathe in it.”

The sound of a knock on the door made me freeze.

Dark eyes watched me curiously before the man said, “Come in.”

I flew off the table and crawled underneath it, wincing when I bumped my head. Two sets of feet came into view: Italian loafers and black boots. Radio static sounded, and then a dispatcher’s voice. Shit. A *cop*. I’d cry if I had to sleep on a cot tonight and not my bed.

“Good evening, Mr. Romano,” Alfred said in a deferential voice as if he was talking to a king.

Romano . . . Sounded Italian. The man did have a warmer complexion. I couldn’t say the same for his personality though.

Unsurprisingly, Mr. Romano didn’t dispense in pleasantries and remained silent.

“We seem to have had . . . a breach in security,” Alfred continued.

I rolled my eyes.

“You’d think that wouldn’t happen with the amount I pay in membership fees.”

A throat cleared. “Yes, of course, sir. . . Naturally, due to the inconvenience, all services will be on the house for the rest of the month.”

I wondered what services that entailed. I bet the usual was a naked woman dancing on a pole while he ignored her.

The cop stepped forward. “Listen, sir, a . . . wet and poorly-dressed woman wouldn’t happen to be in here, would she?”

Poorly dressed? No doubt Alfred had given him that description.

“We have reason to believe she might have come in here about ten minutes ago.”

As a kernel of panic bloomed inside me, I wondered if they had a surveillance camera in the hall.

“And you think, what? That I’m hiding her underneath the table?”

A breath of relief escaped me when I realized he wasn’t going to give me away. He probably wanted to take me out back, hit me over the head, and dump my dead body in the river himself.

“Of course not, sir,” Alfred rushed to say.

“Are you accusing me of something? Should I call my lawyer?”

I stifled a laugh.

The expensive fabric of this man’s pants looked incredibly soft, like fine wool. I ran my hand down the material. He threaded his fingers through my hair and pulled my face toward his dick. I sank my teeth into his thick thigh, hard. He didn’t even flinch.

Alfred spewed a plethora of apologizes, sounding as if he’d agree to a little self-flagellation for the error. Then the pair left, and the door shut behind them.

I climbed up between Mr. Romano’s legs, straddling his thighs as if I’d done it a hundred times before. *God*, he was warm. And hard all over. I made it a rule to not sleep with men I didn’t like, but I’d almost make an exception for this one. I took the initiative to straighten his already-straight tie.

He eyed me cautiously. “What are you, a thief?”

A smile touched my lips. “Only of men’s hearts.”

I smoothed a palm down his silk tie, my fingers moving lower of their own volition. He grabbed my hand just as it reached his lower stomach, the muscle beneath tense and burning through his shirt. He had abs. I was just as much a sucker for abs as I was for whiskey.

Disappointed he’d stopped me, I pouted. “You’re just mad I’m not going to take my clothes off for you.”

“I assure you, it’s a relief.”

I was getting him all wet—as platonic as it was—but I still relished the idea that, after I left, I’d leave an imprint on his expensive and handsome veneer.

He let me slide my palm against his, measuring the gross difference in sizes and the contrast between my chipped black polish and his clean, blunt nails.

My skin was a shade darker than his olive tone.

I received all my melanin from my father. He was a black car salesman who worked at Autos 4 Cheap. He didn’t know I existed—in a familial sense at least—but sometimes I’d walk the long way home just to give him a wave from the sidewalk. He’d wave back while he charmed his customers with a toothpaste-commercial-worthy smile.

I wondered if he had ever loved my mother; if he was bereft when she suddenly left him behind for a string of other men. Most of all, I questioned what he would think of me if my mother had ever told him he was my father.

“Have you ever been in love?” I asked, my voice suddenly soft.

“No.”

“Do you want to be?”

“No.” He slipped his hand from mine, and a weird sense of loss expanded within me.

“Why not? No, let me guess,” I hurried to say as if he was actually going to answer me. “Your parents are cold and so full of ennui they never showed you any affection, so you don’t know how to love. And even if you did, you think all women are just after your money. How did I do?”

He grabbed my thigh and tipped me right off his lap to the floor.

I grinned. “Spot on, huh?”

“It’s a wonder your parents didn’t give you away in sheer annoyance.”

I raised a brow. “How do you know they didn’t?”

He watched me for a heavy second. “I’m busy, and you’ve been an irritating distraction. There’s a back exit down the hall to the left.”

Getting to my feet, I made my way to the door. “Goodbye, Romeo.”

“Romano.”

I ignored his correction. “Try not to think about me too much.”

“You’re already forgotten.”

I smiled. “Liar.”

And then I slipped out the door.

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Love,
Danielle xo

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