

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RINA KENT


KISS THE
VILLAIN
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ALSO BY RINA KENT

Rina Kent’s Books

Reading Order

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To the hunter who became the hunted

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

If you're new to my books, you might not know that I write darker stories that can be intense, unsettling, and even disturbing. My characters and their journeys defy societal norms and aren't meant for everyone.

The following paragraph contains content warnings and specific kinks that may spoil plot details. If you have no triggers, feel free to skip it.

Hunt the Villain contains depictions of parental abuse, homophobia, the death of a parent due to cancer, and scenes of violence and shootings. Please be mindful of your triggers before reading.

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BLURB

I’m hunting a monster.

The first time I met Yulian Dimitriev, it was hate at first sight.
He’s brash, chaotic, and a violence junkie.
In short, everything I disregard.
As heirs to two notorious mafia organizations, we were shoved together in an unorthodox
setting.
The more I learn about Yulian, the deeper my loathing seeps.
Until I truly see the person within, and something forbidden sparks between us.
But our coexistence is cut short when tragedy strikes.
Yulian and I go back to our respective parallel worlds that shouldn’t cross.
But they do.
And once again, I’m dragged into the orbit of a man I shouldn’t want.
Two men can’t be together in our world.
But Yulian blurs every limit I thought existed until everything is in jeopardy.
Our hearts included.

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PLAYLIST

Chokehold – Sleep Token
Saints – Echoes
We never dated – sombr
12 to 12 – sombr
Sucker – Arcane, Marcus King
The Emptiness Machine – Linkin Park
Pacify Her – Melanie Martinez
I Wish I Knew How to Quit You – sombr
Why'd You Only Call Me When You're High? – Arctic Monkeys
Good Luck, Babe – Chappell Roan
Sugar – Sleep Token
Aqua Regia – Sleep Token
Substitution – Purple Disco Machine, Kungs, Julian Perretta
Feel Me Now – If Not For Me
The First Time – Damiano David
Kiss Me – Rob Vischer
Fallin' – Why Don't We
Ocean Drive – Duke Dumont
Wait So Long – Swedish House Mafia
Gethsemane – Sleep Token

You can find the complete playlist on Spotify.

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1

VAUGHN

AGE FIFTEEN

It’s hate at first sight.

For this setting.

For these people.

For the entire charade, really.

I truly believe this is a waste of time, and I would like to leave immediately if possible. Please and thank you.

Unfortunately, that’s not something Dad would appreciate, especially considering his parting words this morning.

You’re my pride, Vaughn. You go out there and show them what the New York Bratva are made of.

So here I am. In this absolute clusterfuck of a place, exchanging pleasantries and empty words with one of the mentors overlooking this mess.

Sorry, it’s called a *summer camp*.

The Adirondack Mountains aren’t exactly my ideal location to spend the summer. Usually, I’d be off to Russia to stay with my maternal uncles and cousins for some intense training or somewhere in the Mediterranean soaking up some sun. Not this year, obviously, as I have to spend time in the mountains in what’s being described as a “historical” moment for the New York and Chicago Bratvas.

Also known as the strongest branches of the Russian mafia in the States.

As the Pakhan’s son, it’s my duty to represent my family at this camp. The mountain is supposed to be a middle-ground location, picked by both sides.

Apparently, our “mentors” for these hellish summer months are older people who are trusted by my dad and the Chicago Bratva leader since they served both sides. They’re “pure” Russian, as the house manager who’s now leading me to my room insisted.

Aside from the security surrounding the cottage-turned-dorm with its wooden walls and outdated common area, we’re not allowed personal guards or phones, and there’s no electricity after dark.

It’s a form of training—both physical and mental. A way to force us into relying on one another, to scrape at decades of rivalry that probably took root back in Mother Russia before my father even existed.

An old Russian ballad drifts through the halls from an ancient radio system, the melody warped by age. The house manager’s voice threads over it, polished and deliberate, speaking about the facilities and the “opportunities” this place offers.

While his refined Russian seeps into the air, my attention catches on the corners, the hairline cracks in the untreated wood…and then I see them. Small blinking cameras, half hidden.

Of course.

Doesn’t matter that Dad sent me here—neither he nor the leader of the Chicago Bratva trusts the other side. And with their heirs shoved into cohabitation, they’d both want full access to whatever happens here.

I let my gaze slide over the thick slabs of timber making up the walls, the clean but worn carpets dulled by years of footsteps, the rural paintings in faded gold frames, showing a romanticized version of eighteenth-century Russian countryside.

The windows capture my interest next. Unlike the scaled-down comforts of the cottage, they’re fitted with bulletproof glass. Too narrow for anyone to climb through—not that anyone could reach this place without an army.

The camp squats on an off-limits peak, far from any trace of human life, surrounded only by towering pines and an unbroken sky.

I can already tell this summer will be long.

And painfully boring.

Outside the large balcony doors, the grounds sprawl down below, with soldiers patrolling from both sides. I can tell they're as wary as the rest of us, considering how each group keeps to half of the terrain.

There will be a lot of testosterone wars this not-so-beautiful summer.

I can't wait for the hassle to be over.

In the meantime, I need to study the other side. If there's anything I've learned from my parents, it's to always be prepared.

Whether this truce proves to be lucrative or not doesn't matter. The Chicago Bratva will always be a thorn in our side for as long as I live, just like they've been in Dad's and the Pakhans' who ruled before him.

As much as I loathe this whole charade, I can't deny that it's realistically my only chance to get close to them and study their tactics.

While the house manager explains the facilities, I keep my attention on their men through the doors. All dressed in full-black combat gear, not suits like our side. While everyone is carrying precision rifles, theirs seem more sophisticated.

I need to figure out their weapon supplier.

The bald-headed one with a scorpion tattooed on the side of his head seems to be the leader, considering how the others stand behind him.

Hmm.

I tilt my head to the side to watch him closely. Blond beard, taller than average. Bulky, too. Scarred hands. Army background? No. Prison?

How do I find out more about him without garnering suspicion? Should I ask a guard to spy on them?

Dad specifically told me not to go into investigative mode and just enjoy this camp, but that's simply impossible.

However, the guards are under clear orders from Dad and won't listen to my instructions if I choose to infiltrate the other side.

I need to figure out a different method—

My feet still when a black ball rolls into view, stopping dead in the middle of the invisible line dividing our side from the Chicago Bratva's. The patrolling guards freeze mid-step, rifles snapping up, barrels tracking the harmless-looking object as it rocks lazily on the dirt.

Bang!

The blast rips through the stillness, echoing off the wooden walls, rattling the air. I move before thought can catch up, striding toward the

balcony, my hand sliding to the familiar weight at my waistband. My fingers graze cold steel, but I stop short of drawing.

I shove open the balcony door and am met with a burst of laughter—raw, unbothered, and out of place in the charged quiet that follows an explosion. A guy about my age darts out from behind a massive oak, a small wired device clutched in his hand.

His white sleeveless shirt, smudged with dirt and torn at the edges, has a ragged hole in the side, and his jeans are ripped at the knees. His dark hair is a mess of waves falling over his forehead, and his skin is marred with lacerations—on his elbow, his cheek, his hands. Like he rolled down the mountain. Or fought a bear and half won.

"Yulik!" The bark comes from the bald-headed leader.

A nerve twitches in his temple, the skin flushing red as his glare locks on the guy he called by the diminutive of his name.

Yulik.

Yulian Dimitriev.

I've heard the stories about the infamous son of Yaroslav Dimitriev. Didn't expect him to look like the human embodiment of a migraine.

"Sick new device, right?" His laugh—split by a busted lip—cuts through the air, sounding unfazed by the rifles still aimed in his general direction. "I came up with it. Cy helped a little."

"A lot." Another guy leans against the tree, lazily chewing a toothpick.

I narrow my gaze.

I didn't hear anything about a Cy or even a Cyrus joining this camp. He wasn't on any list from their side. Which makes him something I don't like—

A variable.

Scorpion Tattoo Man's voice hardens, dripping with irritation. "We were seconds away from shooting at each other. Do you realize how reckless that was?"

My thoughts match his word for word. In a place that's strung tight over a fragile truce, his stunt wasn't just reckless—it was a spark in a room full of gunpowder. All it would've taken was one twitch of a finger, and we'd be stacking bodies.

"Nah." Yulian shrugs, his voice light, almost mocking. "No one's stupid enough to be the first to pull the trigger and blow up this peace." His grin widens as he calls out, "Cy! Looks hot as fuck!"

A black hole—that's what looks *hot as fuck* to this lunatic.

Might call my dad and tell him we're done here, and we should wrap it up.

"Don't mind Yulian." The house manager who's standing in the doorway tries to smooth things over, his tone apologetic. "He's…" He hesitates, his face tinting red before he finishes, "Never mind. He enjoys defying logic and gravity for some reason."

"For some reason," I echo, not caring what that might be.

"You should go change before we meet the New York kids," Cy says to Yulian.

The latter glances at himself—dirt, blood, smudges of black powder staining his fingers—then smirks. "I'm perfectly presentable."

The sound I make isn't quite a laugh. More like a scoff edged with disgust. It ripples through the air loudly enough for both Cyrus and the guards to look up.

Yulian's head lifts last.

He stares up at me, and I look down from the balcony, standing taller because I was taught to always present myself as the most powerful from the get-go.

The most dominant.

Yulian's lips curve and it's lopsided, as if he's intrigued. Maybe entertained.

By what?

He holds my gaze, and I stare square into his creepy eyes. One is pale blue, and the other is dark brown, like a drop of ocean in the middle of a forest. A touch of mud on ice.

It's disturbing.

But somehow…slightly riveting. I've never seen such a mismatch before.

Of course, someone like him would be a paradox of epic proportions. I've done enough research on Yulian Dimitriev to know what I'm dealing with, and he seems to be an absolute wreck of a person in every sense of the word.

He runs toward the cottage at full speed, and I expect him to come inside, so I get ready to leave, which will force him to follow me around, begging for scraps of my attention.

Because that’s how it’ll be at this summer camp. I don’t care that he’s a year older than me; I’m the one who’ll dominate this relationship.

Instead of coming inside, Yulian grips the wooden pillars, uses them for balance, and then leaps and grabs the railing of the balcony, pulls himself up with impressive strength, and jumps directly into my space.

I have to step back so he doesn’t crash into me and stain my perfectly clean clothes with all that grime.

To my dismay, up close, this dirty heathen is slightly taller than me, but we’re about the same build, though his shoulders are wider. His face is less angular than mine, more square and defined.

He smells of musk and the actual woods and pine. Leaves cling to his skin and hair, one stuck stubbornly behind his ear.

He offers his hand—the one covered with dirt, dried blood, and multiple lacerations.

I stare down at it but make no move to take it.

“Ah! Sorry.” He wipes his palm on his equally soiled jeans, rubbing it back and forth before he offers it again.

This time, I reach into my pocket, then drop a handkerchief in his hand. “I don’t touch unclean things.”

If my jab affects him, he doesn’t show it on his face. He’s still smiling, displaying an unsettlingly open expression, not attempting to school his features or mask his emotions.

Surely, he was taught how to control his reactions.

Though it does seem like he couldn’t care less about the traditional ways of doing things.

Yulian scrunches the handkerchief in his grip, running his dirt-smudged fingertip along the embroidered initials at the corner.

V.K.M.

Now, I regret giving him a high-quality handkerchief.

“Vaughn Kirillovich Morozov.” He stares at me as he reads out what the initials stand for, then lifts the handkerchief and blows his nose in it.

My jaw grinds, but I force myself to remain calm and not allow his antics to get to me. My eye twitches, though, when he wipes at the blood in the corner of his lip.

“My name is Yulian. Dad told me you and I need to get along.” He speaks in perfect Russian.

When I say nothing, mostly preoccupied with the view of my ruined handkerchief, he snaps his fingers. “Oh! Do you prefer to speak in English? Heard New York kids barely know any Russian.”

“I know enough to call you a rabid dog,” I say in Russian.

“Rabid wolf?” he asks in English.

“Dog.”

“Wolf. You said *волк (volk)*, not *пёс (pyos)*.”

“I said dog.”

“Hmm. If you say so.”

His grin has grown wider, stretching his cheeks as he tilts his head to watch me closely. “You have a bit of an accent when you speak Russian.”

“I do not.”

“Then your tongue prefers wolves?”

“I said it correctly the first time. Not my problem you have hearing issues.”

He just continues to grin like an idiot, savoring his correction.

Fire blossoms at the center of my chest and tightens my muscles.

“By the way.” He steps closer, and since I refuse to give up any ground to the pest, we’re standing nose to nose when he speaks.

He smells of cigarettes. Nauseating.

A headache is pounding at the back of my head due to interacting with him.

Everything about this prick makes my eyes twitch.

“Let’s fight!” he shouts, bouncing in place like a hyperactive toddler.

I get distracted by a strand of dark-brown hair the wind has shoved into his eye.

The blue one.

The strand is damp, like his whole head of hair is, falling in long, haphazard locks past his nape and right above his shoulders, as if he dunked his head in a bucket of water.

He blows it away, his eyes gleaming, his grin widening as he shifts back and forth in place, almost as if he’s an idling engine ready to go.

“What do you say?” He jumps up and punches the air. “It’s a yes, right? Right?”

I just stare him down and say nothing.

“Come on! We have to know who’s the top dog around here. Or wolf. See what I did there?” He bends down, clutching his stomach as he laughs

at his own distasteful joke.

“No, thanks.” I turn toward the door, noticing that the old man has disappeared, abandoning me to this heathen.

Yulian leaps in front of me, his arms open wide, forbidding me from moving. “But how will we figure out who’s the top?”

“I’ll defeat you at actual training, not whatever this absurd thing is.”

“You won’t dare fight me, will you? You know I’ll drag you in front of your prim-and-proper friends, don’t you? Don’t you?”

“Nice try, but it’s not that easy to provoke me.”

“Boo. New Yorkers are cowards!” he shouts for everyone downstairs to hear.

“Who did you call a coward, motherfucker?” someone shouts behind us.

I recognize the voice without having to see who it’s coming from.

Before I can stop him, Nikolai, the son of two leaders in our Bratva, jumps at Yulian, and soon, they’re wrestling on the balcony, punching each other on the floor.

Yulian hits Nikolai, then hops up. He shoves the handkerchief I gave him in his pocket and hooks his index finger in my direction. “Come join the fun.”

Nikolai slams into him from behind, shoving them back onto the floor.

I walk inside, leaving them to bloody each other senseless.

Now I know who Yulian reminds me of.

Nikolai.

Both spring into action first, both are reckless, and both share one brain cell.

Only, I don’t dislike Nikolai. I just think he’s uniquely chaotic, and I actually have some form of respect for his authenticity. This Yulian, however, seems like an absolute nightmare.

I’d prefer our other friend, Jeremy, be here to rein in Nikolai.

Unfortunately, Jeremy is training with his father this summer.

Something I’d rather be doing instead of this. Hell, I’d like to be in Russia instead of this.

Whatever *this* is.

“Wait!”

I come to a halt in the middle of the hall when Yulian catches up to me. He stops in front of me, panting harshly, his chest rising and falling

chaotically, causing the scraps of his shirt to stretch against defined muscles.

"What do you want now—"

My words are cut off when he lunges at me.

I pull away, but it's too late, because the asshole is rubbing his palm on my face.

His *bloodied* palm.

The hygiene hazard is in my goddamn face.

I throw my fist in order to shove him away, but he's already stepped back, my hand barely connecting with his chest.

A dark glimmer shines in his mismatched eyes. "Hope that's clean enough for you, Mishka. You know, because you're such a baby."

Then he turns toward Nikolai, who's chasing him.

And I'm left behind, my fists clenched, my blood boiling, with literal blood handprinted on my face.

That's it.

I officially hate the bastard.

And I will make his summer hell.

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2

VAUGHN

"Go, go!"

I spit blood on the ground as the cheering intensifies from both sides.

Yulian jumps in place, half naked. His eyes are bloodshot, and he's sporting a black eye—not my doing.

What is my doing, however, are the lacerations on his chest. I pummeled the prick to the ground less than a minute ago, but he got me good with a punch to the cheek.

He's grinning, motioning at me to come get him, and as I catch my breath, I look at his left side, where a large bruise spreads along the skin.

Yulian is full of them. Bruises, scars, burn marks on his back—don't want to know the reason for those. Ever since the camp started over four weeks ago, he's been getting new injuries all the time.

The doctor on-site expects to see him at least once or twice daily. He doesn't go himself, so he's mostly dragged there by either Cyrus or Danil—that's the name of their chief guard on this convoy, the one who has the scorpion tattoo and seems to have been given clear instructions to keep this suicidal motherfucker alive.

A difficult feat with someone who truly seems to love challenging every law of physics available.

The last thing I want is to fight him. He's entirely too unserious for my taste, and getting involved with him is a waste of my time.

But this is physical training, and I had to take part in hand-to-hand combat with the bastard.

Guards from both our sides are circling our makeshift arena. Niko tries to fight Cyrus, who completely ignores him, so he moves to two other kids sent by the Chicago mafia.

The sun blazes down on what must be the hottest, most humid day of the camp. Sweat drips along my temples and glistens over Yulian's chest.

"Come oooon!" he shouts, holding up his barely bandaged fists. "Don't just stand there, Mishka."

I lunge at him and shove him to the ground. Then the force of gravity pulls me down as well, and I end up on top of him, my knees on either side of his waist. I pull at his hair, shoving his head back with the force of it as I snarl near his ear, "I told you not to call me that."

"But it suits you—"

I strike him in the face, and he grunts, but before I can bash his head into the ground, he shoves me away. In a blur of motion, he gets on top and punches my face as he grabs my collar and pulls me up.

"I can stop calling you Mishka if you quit being a baby."

"You goddamn—"

I drive my fist into his face again, then he does the same to me. Soon, we're rolling on the ground, wrestling and kicking, with everyone going wild. Niko's shouting, "Finish the bastard!" while Yulian's side cheers him on with renewed energy.

They actually call him a mad dog. I heard it the other day when they were talking about today's sparring match and how their "mad dog" would avenge them for my winning against them.

Mentors watch the match closely, not really expected to interfere unless there's a fatal threat. This isn't meant to be clean combat since that doesn't exist in our world anyway.

They're here to make sure we have the necessary skills, which is why I participated in the first place. Despite the world I come from, I don't fight unless I have to.

But I must say, I've been looking forward to bloodying this prick senseless.

He's had it coming.

For over four weeks, all he's done is challenge me to fight. I've refused every time, so he's fought Niko instead. Not that that's been a chore—

they’re kind of evenly matched in physical strength.

Problem is, every time I’ve said no, Yulian’s dirtied my shit with blood. First my face, then my notebooks and pens, then my damn clothes and shoes.

I nearly killed him when I opened my closet to find most of my neatly folded clothes scattered all over the room, touched by clearly bloodied hands. As if he snuck in right after a fight just to leave his mark.

He was only saved by being on the mountain to fetch wood for a punishment—which is a constant occurrence with him.

As mad as I was, I was glad he wasn’t around. I would’ve played right into his hands by starting a fight. The whole reason he did it was to get me to use my fists.

Which I refuse to do.

Instead, I’ve sabotaged his already shaky relationship with the mentors. I make sure they know whenever he’s sleeping during morning class, which is always. I signal every time he misses a chore, which results in him having to do double everything.

Due to his general laziness and unwillingness to put any effort into anything that doesn’t involve his fists, he gets punished the most.

He’s had to do more chores than anyone, has been sent to fetch wood from the mountain almost every day, and he’s been voted the worst member for three weeks straight. And you can bet I voted.

The fourth week was snatched by Nikolai for starting fights.

Still, Yulian is the worst.

He’s loud, brash, and a complete idiot in the academic field. He has average learning skills and is subpar at best when it comes to strategizing. In class, Cyrus gives him ideas and answers, otherwise his absolute idiocy would’ve shown through by now.

The only thing this guy has is perfect shooting sheets and sheer strength.

And chaos.

And pranks, which he seems to be pulling on his guards and friends all the time.

Though “friends” is a stretch. The two other guys accompanying him and Cyrus seem to respect him only because of his dad.

Actually, they don’t seem to like him that much.

The only one who’s always with him is Cyrus.

And Cyrus isn’t the son of any of the other leaders. Yes, I asked my dad when I called him soon after the camp started, and he mentioned that Cyrus’s origins are being kept under lock and key. All we know is that he’s being fostered by Yulian’s father.

When we finish wrestling and kicking each other senseless, Yulian and I are panting and barely standing. He looks rough, his mouth bloodied, his chest bruised, sweat dripping from his temples down to the veins in his neck, ghosting his collarbone and then slipping to his chest—

I snap my eyes back to his, an uncomfortable rattling sensation coiling in my stomach.

Revulsion. It *must* be revulsion.

We’re eyeing each other as we come to a standoff. One of us has to tap out, and it’s *not* going to be me.

“Is that all they teach you in New York?” Yulian pouts, blood coating his lips. “I expected more.”

I charge toward him, but when I try to punch him, he grabs my fist and swings me around so that my back is to his chest while he still has a hold of my arm. Then he twists my other fist behind my back.

“Tap out,” he whispers so close to my ear that discomfort rushes down my spine and into my veins. “Or I’ll break your arm.”

I fling forward to release myself, but he twists my arm harder, and I grunt as pain spreads and intensifies.

“You can’t win against me, Mishka. It’s impossible.”

I throw my head back and catch him in the chin. A groan fills my ringing ears as the pain sharpens in my arm.

Then, all of a sudden, we’re flung away from each other.

By guards.

I think one of the mentors who was supervising the fight spoke earlier, but I couldn’t hear anything he said when I was imprisoned against Yulian.

No. I couldn’t hear anything when he was whispering in my ear.

I glare at the bastard whom I suspect was dropped on his head when he was an infant. We’re both panting as the mentor, a serious guy with thick-framed glasses, says, “Both of you will be punished for not ending the fight when I requested, as well as intending permanent or semi-permanent bodily harm.”

Fuck.

I *did* plan to bash his head in.

I shouldn’t have had that thought during a mere sparring session.

“You never specified that!” Yulian protests.

“I did before the start of the match.” The man sighs. “It helps if you actually listen to instructions.”

“But that’s a waste of time!”

I drag my gaze to Yulian as he fights with the mentor, my temples throbbing, my fists clenching at either side of me.

The motherfucker made me break the rules. *Me*.

I actually deviated from a code of conduct because I wanted to see his brains spill on the ground.

For a minute, I forgot about the need to get along with the Chicago mafia that my parents drilled into me and that I’m here to represent them and our organization.

For the duration of the fight, I was consumed by the one thing I was meant to control and erase.

Bloodlust.

And it was because of this degenerate motherfucker—

He stops grumbling at the mentor and glides his freaky eyes toward me. Earth and sky, that’s what they look like. Elements of nature that brighten at the same time.

He says nothing, just holds my gaze as he wipes the blood off the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

And I stare back, square into his bruised face.

He looks like shit, his lip busted, the black eye looking terrifying around his blue iris, and his chest is full of bruises.

I’m proud of my handiwork—of thrashing him—but I can also feel throbbing at my lip, my chest, and my cheek. We did a number on each other, it seems.

The silence stretches for a disconcerting beat in the midst of the chatter from the others.

The mentor says something about punishing us by having us gather wood together.

Alone.

Not even the guards are allowed to accompany us.

Just the thought of spending alone time with this bastard makes my skin prickle.

Yulian is the one who gets punished, not me. Whether for causing trouble or smoking or being caught watching porn on the big screen that's reserved for events.

And I'm pretty sure he made one of the guards tattoo some stupid doodle he made in the dirt on him the other day.

He's a walking hazard pumped full of bad habits.

And I shouldn't be lumped in the same distasteful category as him.

But it's not the punishment that's making me clench my fists.

It's the way he's watching me with that blood on his hand. I'll be damned if I let him get his germs all over me again.

Besides, he's silent.

Yulian's *never* silent.

He's a goddamn yapper who doesn't shut up—as proven by the entire essay he directed at the mentor just now.

"What?" I grumble when he just keeps staring as if he's been possessed.

He lifts a shoulder. "No one won."

"And?"

"And we still don't know who's at the top, genius."

He rushes toward me.

And it's a *rush.*

He doesn't jog. He runs at full speed as if he's being chased.

I step back, expecting him to touch me with his bloodied hand.

But he doesn't.

Yulian comes to a halt as abruptly as he sprinted forward, then speaks low. "How about we continue later? Behind the utility garage or in the basement or… Oh! When we go to gather wood. I found a sick open space near the peak that would be perfect for a fight—"

"No." I start to bypass him, not bothering to let him finish talking.

The yapper is back, and Yulian truly doesn't shut up unless he's cut off. The only one who seems to tolerate listening to his word vomit is Cyrus, but I suspect part of that has to do with their familiarity or the fact that Cyrus doesn't talk much.

A harsh grip pulls at my hair until my skull throbs as Yulian yanks my head back so that he's looking down at me, his smile gone, his eyes darker. "Hey, it's not good manners to walk away while I'm still talking. Your parents didn't teach you that, fake Russian?"

I whack the side of my palm against his windpipe. He gags, the sound echoing in the air like a choked sob, but he doesn't release me. If anything, he tightens his grip on my hair, so I kick his shin, and then he kicks my calf.

Fuck.

My leg throbs and my skull hurts, but I'll be damned if I give this moron the upper hand.

"Hit a nerve?" He speaks in Russian, his lips tilted with a mocking edge. "Do you even understand what I'm saying? Should I speak slower?"

"I speak flawless Russian," I say in the same language.

"Flawless?" He laughs, the sound rich and smooth and…disconcerting.

"Like a native, actually. It's not my fault you don't hear correctly."

"I heard wolf just fine."

"I'll have you know that both my parents are pure Russian. My mother was even born in Russia and comes from the aristocracy, and my uncle owns an empire in Russia." I don't know why I tell him all of this. In Russian. As if I want to prove a point to him or something.

I speak five whole languages, while this prick only knows two and is barely literate in English. I shouldn't even want to prove anything to him, but I had to.

Call it a matter of pride.

Yulian leans down, his eyes peering into my face, and that's when I see the most curious view.

The brown flecks in his blue eye. Talk about rare and…*stunning.*

"Russian royalty, huh? Hmm. That makes sense," he whispers near my cheek, his breath spreading across my skin.

A shudder ripples through me as unease tightens my chest.

I loathe the guy so much, my body is revolting at his closeness.

I lift a fist and punch him, finally forcing him to release me.

Fucking prick got blood on my hair after all.

As I'm about to pummel him to the ground again, we're pulled away from each other by Cyrus, Nikolai, and the others.

"Come on, don't be selfish." Nikolai grins, his eyes brightening. "It's my turn to fight."

"Me!" Yulian shakes off the guy who was holding him and jumps into the middle of the arena. "I want to fight again. I'll beat you, Niko."

"You wish, motherfucker!" Nikolai screams back, laughing.

And so it begins—one of their daily fights that even the mentors don’t bother to interfere in anymore.

I stand there for a while, my arms crossed, occasionally darting my tongue out to lick my cut lip and tasting copper.

Not sure why I don’t get out of there right away, but something’s bothering me.

The discomfort. It still hasn’t disappeared, even though Yulian’s left me alone.

If anything, it’s spreading in my chest.

I shake my head and leave, my eyes flitting back to Yulian one final time as he exchanges blows with Nikolai, both of them laughing like maniacs.

Why the hell would I care that he instantly directed his attention to Nikolai?

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3

VAUGHN

I’m doing handrail pull-ups in the gym when Nikolai walks in, half naked, sweaty, and with his long hair damp.

I was hoping I’d have the gym to myself before I had to go up the mountain with the clown from Chicago.

And I needed to work out, because I’m still bubbling with pent-up energy from after the fight.

“Who won?” I ask Nikolai, unable to eradicate my curiosity.

“Me, of course.” He laughs. “Guess I have to thank you for tiring the bull.”

“Good.”

“He wants another fight after he comes back later, so I’ll be working my arms.” He grabs a few weights, then stands in front of the mirror and flexes, showcasing the random scattered tattoos he’s started to get. “Wanna spot me?”

“Give me a minute.”

Nikolai continues flexing during the whole minute, rolling his muscles and tightening his stomach.

Even though Niko and I are around the same age, we couldn’t be any more different. Where he’s too outward, I’m too inward. The reason we get along, however, is because we’re both loyal to the people we care about.

As I watch him, I wonder if his flamboyant personality is the reason he gets along with Yulian. If fighting all the time is considered getting along,

that is.

Nikolai points at his reflection. “Looking good.”

I pull myself up with a bit of a challenge for my fiftieth rep. “Is that important?”

“Is what important?”

“Looking good in this setting. It’s not like you’re crushing on one of them.”

He grins at me through the mirror. “Maybe I am.”

I go slack, my arms screaming under my weight, and then drop from the bar, my fall louder than usual.

“What the hell, Nikolai? If the wrong person finds out, you’ll be in danger. This isn’t exactly our turf, and your parents always told you to be careful around outsiders or those who don’t belong in the close circle.”

He lets out an exasperated sigh. “I know, I know. It’s not like I’ll be fucking left and right in public.”

My muscles are still tense as I help him set up the weights, then I frown.

Why the hell am I stressing out anyway?

Yes, Nikolai came out as bi a year ago and even threw a party to celebrate it, but he didn’t come out to his grandfather or uncles or even the elders in the organization. He needs to be careful about the places he announces he loves dick as much as pussy.

This camp is *not* one of those places.

“Relax. It’s just a harmless crush. For now.” He laughs as he lies down on the bench.

“Who are you crushing on?” I stand next to him as he lifts.

He blows out a breath, his face reddening with exertion, but he doesn’t say anything, completely focused on his task.

“Yulian?” I ask, sounding almost bored, but that sharp malaise settles at the bottom of my stomach.

“Yulian?” He hands me the bar, and I help him deposit it on the hooks.

“Yeah.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“I don’t know. All the fighting you guys do?”

“Fuck no. I wouldn’t trust that crazy motherfucker anywhere near my dick.” He sits up. “Also, pretty sure he’s straight, and you know I don’t fuck with straight guys.”

“How do you know he is?”

“Saw him laughing when he was FaceTiming a girl in secret.”

“He could be bi like you.”

“Nah, didn’t sense the vibes. Anyway, I’m not interested in him whatsoever.”

“Good. He’s bad news.”

“I’m bad news, too!”

“Not as bad as he is.”

“Cyrus, on the other hand…” He whistles. “I love guys who are so put together. I wonder what it’d take to make him crumble.”

“How do you know he’s not straight?”

“Just a hunch, I guess?”

I drop the barbell he’s pressing, and he struggles to hold it up. My eye twitches, and a spark of agitation ripples through my stomach, spreading like wildfire.

It takes me a few moments to regain my composure. “What type of *hunch*, Niko?”

“Queer men things. Not something you’d understand. Cy is queer, in a sense. Not sure what yet, but I’ll find out.”

“Did he give you permission to call him that?”

“Call him what?”

“Cy. Only Yulian calls him that. None of the others on their side dares to.”

“It’s cuter than Cyrus.”

“Ever thought maybe that’s the reason he wouldn’t want practical strangers to call him by his nickname?”

“Meh. It’s just a name.”

I grab the bar from him and set it down with a clank. “Have you figured out why he’s being fostered by Yulian’s dad?”

“I know it started, like, two years ago, because he moved in with Yulian’s family when he was fourteen, and he’s sixteen now.”

“Did he mention bloodline relations with the Dimitrievs or any reason why they’d take him in?”

“No. He changed the subject when I asked him.”

Of course he did. It was a long shot to have Niko investigate anyway.

“Buuut, Yulian said Cy is his brother from another mother—figuratively, I assume.” He sits up. “Also, the dad is here.”

“The dad?”

“Yulian’s dad. The leader dude from Chicago? He showed up when we were fighting, and everyone on the other side looked terrified. Maybe Yulian lost because of that.”

“Yaroslav is here?”

“Yeah, whatever his name is.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you say that earlier, Niko?”

“Didn’t think it was important.”

That tracks.

Nothing except for violence and sex is important to Nikolai.

I rush out of the gym, wishing I had access to my phone so I could message Dad.

Yaroslav wasn’t supposed to show up at the camp. Neither is my dad.

Hell, even the upper echelons of both organizations shouldn’t come here.

I have a bad feeling about Yaroslav’s sudden appearance.

It takes me a while to reach Yulian’s room, which he shares with Cyrus.

This camp might have been started to bring us together, but we’ve both kept interacting mostly with our respective sides of the fence. We even eat at separate tables. I work out either alone or with Niko. Yulian works out with Cyrus or their men.

We only really get together in classes or when Yulian and Niko are fighting.

My feet come to a halt near the closed door. Some muffled noises are coming from inside, but I can’t really make them out.

So I head to the next room and sneak inside. It’s a mentor’s, but he’s out grocery shopping today.

I slide to the balcony and jump across to Yulian’s, careful and silent.

Through the ajar glass balcony door, I can clearly see him standing in the middle of the room.

Yaroslav Dimitriev. The man whom even my dad thinks twice about before stepping into his territory.

He looks similar to Yulian, but his hair is a lighter blond, and both his eyes are pale, icy blue—like Yulian’s left eye. A beard shadows his face, and he’s unnaturally tall and bulky, his frame threatening to tear through the seams of his gray three-piece suit.

That’s where the similarities end. Yulian’s skin is warmer, his features sharper, his face undeniably more striking. From my research, I learned his

mother came from a minority ethnic group in the North Caucasus, which explains the darker complexion, the almond-shaped eyes, the quiet beauty that sets him apart from his father's brutish presence.

I flatten myself against the wall next to the glass door and remain still.

This is risky, and Yaroslav will have my balls if he figures out I'm spying on him, but this will likely be my only opportunity to get some information about him and his Bratva, so I can't miss the chance.

Besides, he shouldn't be here, and I need to find out why he chose to ignore that rule and the consequences.

"Twenty punishments in a month." Yaroslav's gruff voice carries through the room as he counts on his hand. "Smoking, drugs, loss of focus, wandering around without security, not improving learning skills." He switches to the other hand. "Fighting without supervision, poor results on intellectual tests, average strategizing, spending too much time on meaningless activities."

"Actually, I was making a bomb—"

Slap!

My muscles tighten as the harsh sound of flesh against flesh echoes in the room. Yaroslav hits his son so hard, he falls on the wooden floor, coughing.

Something in my chest twists when Yulian paints a smile on his cut lips and jumps up again, dusting his shirt off as if the hit were nothing.

That's not the first time it's happened.

Fuck. The black eye and the bruises on his side…?

Did Yaroslav come around last night as well?

"Have I or have I not told you to wait for permission to talk?"

"But it'd take a long time to mention everything I got punished for," Yulian says, then stiffens.

For a hit.

He knows he'll get hit and yet still runs his mouth?

What on earth is *wrong* with him?

His dad flexes his fist but doesn't hit him again. "What's with all the punishments? You have to do better than these lackluster results."

"I'm the best at shooting in this camp."

"That's not enough. You have to be the best at everything, or strive to be. But it seems you're trying to drag my name through the mud on purpose."

“I wouldn’t say that.” He lifts a shoulder. “You said I had to be here, not that I should be the best. You need to specify what you want from me, you know.”

“I’m *specifying* that you need to do better. If you don’t want to get Alina in trouble, that is.”

Something curious overtakes Yulian’s body language. Something that didn’t happen when Yaroslav slapped him.

A tightening of shoulders, a slight lift of lips, almost as if in a snarl.

It’s the first time I’ve seen him angry. He’s always clowning around, so I thought he lacked the capacity to be angry.

“Don’t touch her.” His voice is deep and raw, as if his vocal cords are ripped.

“Then stop being a fucking disgrace. You’re my heir. Act like it, and stop glaring.”

“I’m just looking.”

Yaroslav drives his fist into Yulian’s face.

Thwack.

It’s stronger than the slap, and it sends Yulian flying against the wall. The moment he hits the ground, Yaroslav kicks him in the stomach.

“Fucking useless piece of shit. All you do is piss me off. Talentless, stupid, irrelevant motherfucker. Kirill sends a perfect son, and I have this fucking moron who only knows how to get injured.”

“You’re the one injuring me, though,” Yulian grunts, sounding out of breath even as he tries to protect his stomach with his hands. His lip has busted open, and blood drips on the wood, forming a small pool.

“Shut.” Kick. “The.” Kick. “Fuck.” Kick. “Up.”

Yulian curls into himself, and I reach for the knob.

Fire tears through me like a volcano cracking from the core. Truth is, my muscles have been tight since the first time he slapped Yulian.

I don’t give a fuck if I’m not supposed to be here. I don’t even understand *why* I’m this worked up. I seem to end up in this state every time Yulian is around, but it’s worse now.

My father never hit me, so this concept of beating children is foreign—so foreign, it makes my blood boil.

Or maybe it’s the name-calling.

Or the way Yaroslav spits out hurtful words without an ounce of respect for his son.

No wonder Yulian seems messed up.

Maybe that's why I feel the urge to act—guilt. For judging him before knowing he's been his father's punching bag. Realizing maybe he talks too much because every time he opens his mouth at home, he gets hit for it.

Before I can step in, Yaroslav kicks him one last time and then steps back.

"This is my final warning, you worthless piece of shit. Mess this camp up and you'll never see Alina again."

He turns and leaves. Yulian struggles to sit upright, wincing as he runs his tongue over his cut lip, licking the blood away.

I take a step, then stop.

Because what the fuck would I say?

I'm sorry your father is an abusive piece of shit would make things worse, not better.

Someone like Yulian wouldn't want pity. I wouldn't either if I were him.

He stands, staring down at his feet, expressionless.

Ten seconds.

Twenty.

Sixty.

He stays like that long enough that I find myself holding my breath, waiting for him to show a reaction.

I remain rooted in place, almost as if unable to move.

No—refusing to move.

He's looking at the floor.

I'm looking at him.

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4

YULIAN

Well, this is inconvenient.

Fuck me sideways.

This entire stupid camp is a waste of time and space and effort, but I have a feeling that if I'd voiced those genius thoughts, I would've walked out from under Dad's shoe with a broken rib.

Not the first time that would've happened, but the memory of the pain makes me rein in that very logical thought of just fucking shit up.

"Got a smoke?" I lie on the floor and prop my feet on the side of the bed, where Cy's lying with a thick book in hand and stares down at me like I'm a freak.

Okay, I am, but he doesn't have to make it so obvious.

"Your dad said if anyone is caught supplying you with cigarettes, he'll use the butts to burn their faces."

"Oh no, the formidable Cy is scared of dear old Dad?"

"Shut your trap. Cigarettes aren't good for you."

"Yes, Mom!" I do a mock salute. "You got them or nah?"

He watches me for a few more minutes, tilting his book to the side, which is…well, let's say shit has hit the fan if Cy finds anything more interesting than his boring books.

His gray eyes scan my face as if he's trying to find the little freak he knows so well behind the bruises my dad left as a parting gift. Thank God

Cy wasn’t in the room when that happened, but as soon as he walked in a while ago, he noticed exactly what was up.

Sometimes, like today, I hate that he sees me at my worst. It makes me feel worthless.

Like a weakling, as Dad says all the time.

Finally, Cy reaches under his pillow and produces a Zippo and a pack of cigarettes, then throws them on my stomach. “You look like you need them.”

“No shit.” I slide a cigarette between my lips and light it as I fall back on the wooden floor while taking a long drag.

The nicotine hit doesn’t quiet the chaos, but it dulls my senses to a melody of nothingness or some shit.

Anyhow, I’d love a drink as well. I’m about to bring it up to Cy so he’ll make it happen—after some nagging, because he’s an old man trapped in a teenager’s body. Not that I can’t play my useless Yaroslav’s son card to make the guards do my bidding, but they report back to Dad in a flash, and he loves to make me see his fist and the sole of his shoe any chance he gets.

Cy can get any shit he wants just by sweet-talking his way through it or manipulating people into thinking it’s for some made-up reason.

I stare at him, and he’s still not focused on his book. Fuck me, that’s an anomaly.

Cyrus has the face of someone trustworthy. Ethereally handsome with platinum-blond hair, gorgeous East Asian-shaped light-gray eyes, sharp features that bewitch girls, and a silver tongue that makes everyone fall for him instantly.

Truth is, he wasn’t always so captivating with his speech. When I first met him a couple of years ago, when he first moved in with us, he didn’t speak. At all.

We were already wary about the guy whom Dad dropped in our midst, telling us he was part of the family now. I thought he was his son—wouldn’t have been the first time he’d spawned kids outside of marriage, since I already had two older half-brothers, but no, Cyrus clearly didn’t belong to Dad.

Because Yaroslav abuses his sons, and he’s always been more protective of Cyrus.

However, Cy didn’t speak to us and refused to utter a word for weeks. He looked like he came out of a nightmare—or maybe was still living in

one. The only evidence that remained of whatever had happened to him was the scar that slashes along the corner of his mouth, breaking up his fae-like looks a bit.

Mom and Alina tried their best to make him feel welcome, but he just *refused* to speak. During that time, he'd stand in front of the gate for hours as if he were waiting for someone to come pick him up. He still does that sometimes—just stands outside for a long time, staring at the horizon.

Dad made me take him to school and I wasn't thrilled, mainly because Cy was an antisocial freak who was hated by everyone. I was the opposite, quite popular—naturally—and was warned by my friends to stay away from him.

No one talked to him, and in the beginning, I couldn't care less, but as the days went by, I felt bad for him, so I sat with him at lunch and yapped endlessly about the most random shit. At first, he ignored me, but I grew on him.

The first thing Cy said, months after he was fostered by my parents, was, "You talk too much, Yulian."

After that, I adopted him.

No, really. I'm his only real friend. Kind of improved his image, too, which he's been changing over the past couple of years to serve his agenda better. Whatever that agenda is.

"What?" I ask when he continues watching me silently.

"What did your dad say?"

"Before or after he kicked me to near death?"

"Be serious."

I blow out a long cloud of smoke. "Same old bullshit about not humiliating him."

"Told you not to test your luck too much."

I shrug. "I was just acting normal."

"You were acting beyond normal, knowing full well he'd get reports of your behavior. Would it kill you to stay in line for just a few weeks?"

"Nah, not for me." I grin, then wince when the cut in my mouth throbs and I taste blood.

It's like a neuron snaps in my head, a current, a bout of electricity.

A goddamn spark.

I've always had this sense of restlessness. Ever since I can remember, I just can't *stop*.

Can’t stay still.

It’s just impossible.

Hitting, punching, talking, being hit, being punched, being cussed out nonstop.

Well, fuck me.

Keeping the cigarette in my mouth, I flip over and do some push-ups, clapping my palms in between. This rhythm dulls the electricity to a spasm.

A throb.

A flare, maybe.

Cy releases a long breath. “At this rate, you’ll go home in a body cast.”

“Not happening,” I speak around the cigarette, “you know how Mom worries and Alina cries whenever I get hurt.”

“Then put more of an effort into this camp.”

“I’m putting in effort.”

“Fighting Niko and taunting Vaughn every chance you get is *not* effort.”

I pause and tilt my head to the side. “No?”

“You’re only hurting your case by going against a perfectly groomed mafia heir. He’s already proved to be superior to you in every aspect.”

I jump up, drag the cigarette from my lips, and put up a hand. “Not every aspect. I’m a better shooter, and he can’t win against me in a fistfight.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, and he got punished for the first time with me.” I waggle my brows. “I’ll punch the shit out of him when we’re in the forest… Speaking of which, I should work out and hit the showers before we take off. Wanna join?”

“No, thanks. Just…” He runs a hand over his face, looking older than the old man Danil. I mean, Danil isn’t that old, but he acts as if he’s ancient. Same with Cy. Got some telepathy thing going on between them.

Danil should’ve been influenced by me, just saying.

“Vaughn goes by the book,” Cy says.

“And?”

“And he’s predictable. He won’t cause a ruckus, wouldn’t break rules he doesn’t have to. He walks around like someone who already has the weight of becoming Pakhan on his shoulders. He’s so mellowed out and levelheaded because he has to be. He’s *the* Kirill Morozov’s son, after all,

and someone like Vaughn will do everything in his power to live up to his father's legacy."

"I still don't see why you're bleeding my ears with nonsense. He's such a golden boy and barely Russian, what does that have to do with me… except that I want to humiliate him? Will totally fight him and win—"

"Yuliy," Cy cuts me off. "Focus. He can be an asset, not an enemy. The New York Bratva are different from back home. You have a rare chance to forge a bond with him and use it in the future when you need it the most. Namely, when you'll no longer be satisfied with being number two."

"Me? A bond with Vaughn? I'd rather punch him."

"Would punching him help you someday?"

"No, but it'll feel good."

He shakes his head. "Just think about it."

"I don't do that. You do it for me."

"We're all alone. You don't have to pretend to be clueless."

I lift a shoulder and leave the room so he'll stop bitching.

I swear to fuck, Cy has personally chosen to become the nagger-in-chief of my life, talking and whining and warning.

If they could all shut up, I'd be having the best time ever.

Minus the hitting.

And the facade.

And my entire existence, really.

But hey, Cy, Mom, and Alina are the exceptions. Mom and Alina are the reasons I've survived thus far, and Cy is my bro.

Doesn't matter that we're not actually brothers.

Cy's dad had some sort of an empire, similar to the empire my dad married my mother for—to get a piece of the business and inherit my dedushka's power.

Snuffed my mother's light in the process.

But anyway, Cy being orphaned and fostered by Dad wasn't a coincidence and definitely wasn't done out of the goodness of my father's heart, if you can't tell.

Yaroslav only cares about someone when they have a purpose.

Mom, Alina, and Cy.

Me? Let's say he'd exchange me with one of my older brothers the first chance he gets.

If only they weren't illegitimate children.

And if only he weren’t so set in old rules and traditional to the point of extremism.

So he’s ended up with me—his only legitimate male heir.

The *wrong* one.

My brothers would make better heirs than I, but they’ll never be allowed to, and I can’t give them the chance, because they’re like those tyrant kings from ancient empires.

The moment they take over, they’ll murder all eligible heirs to snub resistance at the source.

Well, good luck wiping me out. I’m a roach no one can get rid of.

But I have this grand plan only Cy is aware of, which includes me building some connections. Now, I’m not one for plans. You ask me about strategies, and I’ll pretend to be an airhead with frat-boy tendencies.

You know, a hopeless idiot, as my dad loves to call me.

But this one plan? I’ll carry it out as if my life depends on it.

Actually, my life *does* depend on it, and so does Alya’s and my mom’s, so it kind of needs to succeed.

Has to succeed.

It’ll take years, but I’m nothing short of persistent.

A sea turtle, if you will. I don’t care how long it takes. I’m crawling toward that finish line no matter how dangerous the path is.

Slam.

“Fuck!” I raise my fist, about to hit whoever’s run into me, but my hand remains suspended in midair upon seeing the one person Dad seems to have a metaphorical hard-on for.

Vaughn this and Vaughn that. Kirill’s son this and Kirill’s son that.

I swear he’d transplant me into his shell if he had the chance.

Well, Vaughn, aka Russian royalty per his gloating about aristocracy links, is Yaroslav’s dream all wrapped up in perfection.

He has perfect hair, always styled to precision, not a strand out of place.

Well-groomed, boyish features already sharpening into angular lines, high cheekbones, and the calmest, most undisturbed eyes I’ve ever seen.

Nothing like my creepy eyes.

His are a blend of brown and green, that blurred edge where earth meets trees in a forest. But it isn’t the color—it’s the look. The untouchable, holier-than-thou weight they carry without effort.

The constant reminder that guys like him exist—perfect lives, perfect scores, perfect fathers.

Probably perfect mothers, too.

Perfect grades, perfect manners, perfect physical condition, even perfect combat skills.

So great.

So admirable.

So fucking *irritating*.

Vaughn Morozov looked down on me the second we met, and I'll never forgive him for it.

Yup. Call the petty police.

Anyhow, I'd love to rip Vaughn fucking Morozov a new one, so he'll stop shoving people into the tiny boxes he has in his head.

They're probably color-coded and in alphabetical order.

I let my lips curl in the wide grin he hates so much. "Oh no. Mr. Perfect doesn't have perfect vision?"

Now he'll say I'm the one who wasn't watching where I was going while looking down his nose at me.

Again.

Cy's right. This prick is predictable.

I wait and wait, but Vaughn says nothing. He has a hand in his shorts pocket, and his white shirt is wet at the top. Not sure if it's because he spilled water from the bottle he's carrying or he's been working out.

Actually, uh, he was definitely working out. He wouldn't continue to wear a wet shirt if he'd spilled something on it. I know because I saw him remove his shirt the other day after Nikolai spilled some lemonade on it.

It was one of the few times he's gotten naked—half naked, to be precise.

I kept watching him that time as I licked the blood from my lip after a fight with Nikolai. The taste of violence exploded on my tongue while I took in the view of his lean abs glistening under the golden rays of the sun.

Once again, I find my attention zeroing in on the pulse that throbs in his neck.

His neck is coated with a sheen of sweat, and a droplet slides down it, gliding over his protruding collarbone before dissolving in the collar of his shirt.

"What?"

My gaze snaps back to his face at his question. No—actually, my eyes rest directly on his mouth because it's also glossy, slightly pink. Probably from the water.

And I'm just looking at it.

His lips, I mean.

It's like the most normal thing. Lips. Everyone has them.

And yet I can't help noticing how his lower lip is slightly fuller than the upper one, and that for some reason, now, of all times, a droplet of water is stuck at the dip at the top.

"Yulian?"

"Huh?" I say like a goddamn idiot, and Vaughn frowns, probably because I'm gawking at him as if I were caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

Which might as well be the case.

What. The. Fuck.

"Why are you staring at me?" he asks, his tone not at all as abrasive or cold or disinterested as when he usually talks to me.

If anything, he seems to be a bit…flustered? Out of his element?

I must be imagining it, because the Vaughn I know would never be either of those things.

"Just checking to see if you're watching where you're going." I mask my inner disturbance with a grin, because seriously, my brain still hasn't told me what the actual fuck is going on.

I mean it, brain. What the actual fuck?

I'd be lying if I said this was the first time I'd found Vaughn's muscles or lips…fascinating?

Interesting?

Arousing?

Whatever it is kind of gave me a strange, titillating feeling when I fought Vaughn earlier today. It's why I held him against my chest and demanded he tap out while keeping my lower half as far away as possible.

Let's say it didn't help that his skin flushed a bit, and I was so utterly fascinated by the way his shirt stretched across his chest, how his abs flexed, and how he wore my blood so well.

Nikolai killed the feeling when I fought him, thank fuck, but I was still disturbed.

I’m even more unsettled now, because why the fuck do I keep wanting to peek at his lips?

“You’re the one who bumped into me.” He points a finger at my chest.

His finger is *on* my chest.

The stupid discomfort floods my lungs until I can’t breathe.

It hurts.

Not because of the bruises Dad gifted me, but due to the spark of electricity that races through me, then surges and heightens.

All of a sudden, it’s like an earthquake that crumbles all of my insides.

I instinctively push back, wincing, because the lack of contact stopped the electricity, but it didn’t stop the pain.

The fuck?

Vaughn visibly cringes, taking a step back and shoving a hand in his pocket.

He’s *cringing* at touching me?

Fire erupts at the bottom of my stomach, and I don’t understand why.

This asshole has always seen me as someone who’s beneath him. A freaking rock in his shoe.

He ignores me most of the time and calls me names when he doesn’t.

Irresponsible.

Chaotic

Unclean.

Imbecile.

Waste of space.

Those are a few of the colorful words he’s used to describe me. So this shouldn’t feel any different. He’s cringed at my actions more times than I can count, and I gave him the metaphorical middle finger as I repeated those actions just to spite him.

So why the fuck is it *burning* now?

“I…” He trails off and squeezes the bottle between his fingers so hard, I’m surprised it doesn’t burst.

He blows out a breath and shakes his head, as if he’s trying to kill whatever thoughts are swarming in his head.

“We have to go to the woods. I’ll meet you in half an hour.”

His words are final.

He doesn’t wait for a response, just sweeps past me and strides in the opposite direction.

And I can’t tear my eyes away from him.

From the way his legs carry him in long, confident steps to how his shirt clings to his back, sweat turning the fabric into a veil that reveals more than it hides.

His back muscles shift with his steps, slightly tight, rolling and coiling and looking so goddamn—

I slap myself.

My skin burns and the bruises throb, but I do it again, this time forcing myself to look away from Vaughn’s body.

Because I refuse to let whatever this is blossom.

Fuck *that*.

“Uh, what the fuck is that?” I point at Vaughn’s backpack as we trek up the mountain.

I know it was said that we wouldn’t have security, but that’s impossible. Vaughn and I are too important to leave unguarded.

Therefore, members of security are currently following us, and judging by the sound of rustling leaves, they gave up trying to be unnoticeable.

But they’re far enough away that it feels like it’s only Vaughn and me.

He’s kind of the last person I want to be with after, you know, the epic freak-out an hour ago.

But hey, maybe it’s also good so that I can confirm this is absolute nonsense.

My theory is, Dad hit me on the head earlier and I’m imagining things.

Yup. Makes complete sense. We’ll go with my brain’s genius of finding solutions.

“Necessities,” Vaughn says in answer to my question, keeping his gaze on the trees spilling out on either side of us ahead.

“Necessities? Jeez, why do you need necessities for gathering wood?”

“I need necessities for everything.”

“Why am I not surprised?” I tilt my head to the side. “We’ll have to bring the wood back, you know.”

“And?”

“And how will you do that with a backpack on?”

“I’ll wear it on the front.”

“Extra weight for no reason.”

“There’s always a reason for necessities when out in the wild. I’m well prepared for emergencies, unlike a certain someone who only has water.”

“This is all I need.” I shake the bottle in my hand. “I don’t even know what the hell you have in that bag of tricks of yours. Any necessities to fight bears?”

“We have guns.”

I roll my eyes, trying hard not to watch his muscles flexing beneath the shorts with every step he takes.

He’s wearing different shorts now. These are dark green and slightly shorter than the ones from earlier, because his thighs are more visible. Add the black shirt, and I feel like I’m fighting for my life not to ogle him.

“Did you seriously wear hiking shoes?” I ask in an attempt to distract myself.

“Yeah, since we’re in the mountains and all.”

“But we didn’t come here to hike.”

“Then what do you call this, genius?” He stares at me as if I’m the most stupid idiot he’s ever met. “You of all people should have them, considering your daily trips to the mountains.”

“Very funny. Humor so dry, I’m choking.”

“I wasn’t trying to be funny.”

“Good, because you’re the most boring person I’ve ever met. Humor’s not for you.”

He glares at me.

Which is curious because Vaughn doesn’t really glare. He usually has this completely uninterested look, so when he glares, you can tell the hate is at its peak.

And I kind of like it. The way his eyes hood, how that pulse in his neck throbs.

I want to see more of this.

“Bet you bore girls to tears.” I slam my shoulder against his jokingly.

“Actually, I have a lot of girls crushing on me.”

“Because of your looks and money, maybe even your intellectual abilities, but definitely not for your personality.”

“That’s not true.”

“Think about it. What do they say to you? You’re so smart and you’re so handsome, right? Did any of them say you’re so funny?”

His lips fall open, but then he purses them again.

“Ha, told you! My condolences, Mishka. Girls prefer funny guys over stuffy intellectuals like you.”

He punches my side. “I told you not to call me that.”

“Aw, hit a nerve?”

He slams his entire body into me, flattening me against a tree as he grabs my collar in a tight fist. “I’ve been trying to ignore your provocations all day, but you’re so annoying and should learn when to shut the hell up. Stop trying to make me fight you.”

My lips part.

That wasn’t what I was trying to do, though.

Yes, I wanted to get a reaction out of him—not sure why—but I haven’t really thought about fighting him.

But now that he mentioned it…

I grin, about to throw the first punch when the sound of gunshots echoes in the forest.

Then I see it.

Someone dressed in black is aiming at us.

I don’t even think about it as I push Vaughn out of the way.

And then pain explodes in my side.

I’ve been shot instead.

Fuck *this*.

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5

VAUGHN

We're under attack.

It takes me only a split second to realize that.

I heard the gunshots, and my reflexes spiked fast, but not fast enough.

Not as quick as Yulian's.

Not only did he shove me out of the way before I could protect myself, but he's also hauled me toward a bush out of the snipers' view.

I grab on to his arm and pull him with me as he scrambles.

Because he's shot.

A splash of red widens on his side, soaking his striped shirt through. His face pales instantly, his lips are dry, and his temples are beading with sweat, but his eyes are bright and focused.

So focused, actually, it's a bit unsettling.

We throw ourselves behind the bush, and I make sure he lands on top of me. Again, because he's injured.

My hand lands on his back, holding him still as the earth keeps me grounded—or more like my backpack is spooning me, the straps digging into my shoulders.

Yulian's heavy, and I struggle as he nearly crushes me, but my fingers dig into him to keep him in place.

He looks down at me with a little pained grin. "Are you sure? I'm all bloody. Isn't that against your cleanliness code or some shit—"

“Shh.” I place my other hand on his mouth as I strain to hear any movement. “Stop talking for a second.”

I can feel his lips curving beneath my palm, but he doesn’t attempt to talk again. Instead, he plants a hand on the dirt near my shoulder and tries to hold himself up.

But I press on his back and knock him down again.

“Stay still,” I whisper-yell with a tinge of both rage and annoyance.

At myself. For not being fully prepared.

Yulian got shot because he was trying to save me.

Why would he?

He’s not my guard or a family member. We’re not even friends. Pretty sure he hates my guts and would love to leave this camp as much as I would.

So why…?

I don’t have time to ponder on that as the string of gunshots echo around us, our guards and the assailants each trying to get the upper hand.

The fact that no one is coming to get us to safety is a bad sign.

The *worst* sign, actually.

It means they’re so overwhelmed by the exchange of fire that they can’t spare anyone to ensure our safe transport.

“We need to go,” I whisper.

“Yeah, they’re outnumbered.” He stands up with surprising agility even as he groans.

I frown, watching him inhale and exhale sharply.

How did Yulian come to the same conclusion I did?

Pretty sure he’s a half-wit, so how did he make the quick connection…?

“You gonna gawk for long, sunshine? I know I’m a world wonder, but we need to get going.” He grins, pointing north. “Follow me. I know a place.”

“No, we’re going back down to the compound, where our guards are.”

“It’s cute that you assume the assailants haven’t thought of that possibility. Either the men below are neutralized, or the attackers have soldiers on every path leading to the camp to trap us. Don’t know about you, but I’m never getting fucking kidnapped again.”

Again?

Yulian’s already moving—too fast for someone who’s injured, might I add—using the trees as camouflage. His gun out.

I stare in the direction of the gunshots and rub a hand over my face. While I hate to admit it, Yulian's probably right. If they went through all this hassle to attack us on the mountain while we're mostly isolated, they probably thought we'd want to go back down and planted traps along the way.

However, following Yulian isn't really a foolproof plan. Yes, he's been up these mountains many times during the period we've spent here, but what if he's in on this?

What if Yaroslav, whom I'm already so wary of, decided to either kidnap or kill me to get to my father and asked Yulian to be in on the plan?

But then again, Yulian wouldn't have taken a bullet for me if that were the case.

Or maybe he did it so I'd trust him?

I groan. Guess I'll kill him in that event.

But right now, wandering north is my best bet for survival.

I jog behind Yulian while rummaging through my backpack until I find the bandage roll.

As soon as I catch up to him, I wrap it around his middle from behind, and he startles, pointing his gun at me, then lowers it and stops for a second to look at me.

"It's just a graze, not too bad…" His voice is low, too low, actually, the lowest I've ever heard, and it's full of a sort of…wonder.

"You're losing a considerable amount of blood. It could be bad. This will at least help stop it until we can disinfect it properly once we're safe." I tighten the bandage in a secure knot around the wound on his side, right below his rib cage. I can barely see it through all the blood, so I doubt it's just a graze—in fact, the wound is deep enough for the bullet to still be in there.

"We need to get going." He moves as soon as I'm done with the knot, his eyes focused forward.

I step in front of him, my gun pointed ahead. "Tell me which way to go. I'll cover you."

He moves right beside me with his own gun, scanning our sides and our backs. "I don't need you to cover for me."

"Don't be an idiot. You're injured. You've seen me shoot targets. I can protect us."

“Not sure if you missed the memo, Russian aristocracy, but targets aren’t real people.” He grabs my wrist and swings me around, then points his gun at a tree across from us and shoots.

A thud echoes around us as a body falls from the tree to the ground, a rifle in his hand, a mask covering his face.

“They’re always up there like fucking monkeys.” Yulian heads over and kicks the cadaver. “Yo mama sends her regards.”

My fingers twitch on the trigger. *Fuck.*

I didn’t even *notice* the sniper.

I mean, I was wary of them, but not to the point where I could pinpoint their exact locations and even shoot and kill them.

My eyes narrow on Yulian’s back as he cuts through the forest with the ease of someone used to every nook and cranny of this place.

Who the fuck is this guy? He’s entirely different from the incompetent, idiotic, and violence-prone Yulian I’ve known this summer.

“To your right,” I shout as I shoot a figure from behind the tree.

Yulian points his gun at me, and I freeze, but before I can react, he runs toward me and shoots right next to my ear.

The bang is deafening, and my ears buzz in a constant flow of nothingness. The sounds of the forest disappear, overwhelmed by the gunshots still echoing in the air.

When I look behind me, I find a body slumping against a tree.

So that’s what he was shooting at.

Slender fingers rub the curve of my ear, and I jump, goosebumps prickling along my skin.

What the fuck was *that*?

Yulian takes a step back, his brow furrowing, and he pinches his bottom lip between his thumb and index finger, then releases it and turns around. “That was the best angle.”

It doesn’t sound like an excuse or an apology, more like he’s irritated.

He was the one who shot right next to my ear, then caressed it like a weirdo, and he’s the one who’s *irritated*?

“Hurry up, Mishka. Don’t slow me down.”

I slam my shoulder into his as I fall in step beside him. “You’re the one slowing me down.”

“Ow, my injury hurts.”

I frown, staring at the wound. Maybe I should refrain from being physically aggressive when he's injured. "Can you move?"

"Ha, got you." He's walking backward, grinning like an idiot, even as blood slides down his striped shirt and onto his black shorts.

His lips are bluish now, which is a bad sign, but he's moving around as if it's nothing.

As if he doesn't actually have a hole in his side, so close to his heart.

I get it, adrenaline can make you forget pain. I know my blood is pumping full throttle, my senses entirely aware of my surroundings.

Any rustle, any movement is a possible sign of danger.

But fuck if I'd be this nonchalant if I were the one who'd been shot.

Not sure what I'd do, but I definitely wouldn't be grinning and messing around.

That nauseating malaise slithers more between my heart and rib cage the longer I watch him.

It's because I'm feeling guilty.

It *has* to be.

"Come on, smile, Mishka. You look better when you do."

"I told you not to call me that," I grind out, watching our surroundings to avoid looking at him. "Stop picking fights when we need to survive together, asshole."

"I'm not trying to fight, just stating facts…" He trails off, pointing his gun to my left.

I spin and fire at the same time he does.

My bullet tears through the head. Yulian's finds the heart.

I narrow my eyes but stay silent as he scoops up the dead man's rifle. I take it from him and sling it across my chest as we make our way up a steep incline. The hill punishes with every step, and I hear his breathing roughen, becoming ragged, uneven.

Gunfire echoes farther off now. The sharp *pop*, *pop*, *pop* is being swallowed by the flapping of crows and ravens scattering overhead.

I sweep the ridge one last time before grabbing his arm—the one without the gun—and hauling him in, my other arm circling his waist.

Although I feel his stare drilling holes into me, I refuse to meet it.

But I can still sense his grin anyway. "Aw, worried about me? I'm so touched, I might die."

"Please do so you won't slow me down."

“You’re so cold.”

“Logical.”

“Inflexible.”

“Rational.”

“Boring.”

“Let’s agree to disagree.”

“I guess. At least you’re still holding me up.”

“So we can move faster.”

“I’m hurt. We could die any second now. Can’t you be nice to me?”

“Why should I?”

“I don’t know, maybe because I might be the last person you see before you die.” He slides an arm around my waist, his fingers squeezing the muscle a bit too *tight* for comfort. “Heard you spend the afterlife with the person you die with.”

“Nonsense.”

“There must be a religion somewhere that believes that.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“Then I’ll invent one.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Is that another word for perfect?”

I open my mouth to cuss him out, but the sweat streaming down his temple catches my eye—and the blood that’s still gushing, staining both him and me.

The bandage helps, but it’s not enough. His lips are paler, tinged a darker blue.

He slumps harder against me—not because he wants to, but because his body is giving out.

But he doesn’t stop.

Yulian keeps staggering forward with an unsteady gait, but his eyes stay fixed on the horizon, his gun sweeping the tree line like he’s daring the forest to come at him.

I’m keeping an eye on him and our surroundings, focusing on the trees and the bushes.

While this isn’t the first time I’ve been in danger, it’s definitely the worst. There was an attempt to kidnap me and my cousin on our way home from school when we were around seven, but my father’s guards saved us before we knew what was happening.

A couple of years ago, someone tried to attack me and my dad while we were at a horseback riding club, but with the guards around, Dad didn't even flinch as he helped me rein in the horse. He just sighed as Uncle Victor and his men killed the attackers in cold blood.

Dad then proceeded to wipe everyone related to them off the face of the earth.

When Mom asked Dad if maybe he went too far, he said, "Of course not. They disturbed our father-son time. Evidently, I needed to eradicate their bloodline. Think of it as forced evolution of sorts."

Point is, I've never been in this type of situation, where I'm completely isolated from my guards, and while I believe it's a good experience to practice everything I've learned, it's still dangerous and full of the unknown that I hate so much.

"Over there." The words are strained, Yulian jutting his chin in the direction of some bushes.

I'm frowning, contemplating whether this is a good hiding place until we approach it.

Even though it looks like bushes and rocks, when we slide down, there's an opening to a small cave, completely hidden from view by the plants surrounding it.

The cave's entrance is so narrow that it brushes my shoulders as we slip in, the stone feeling cold and damp.

Inside, the air turns cooler, denser, carrying the faint mineral scent of earth. The space opens just enough to fit me and Yulian if we huddle close.

Water trickles from somewhere deeper, a rhythmic drip that echoes like a quiet heartbeat. The walls glisten with veins of quartz, catching stray beams of filtered light, and the silence is thick, only punctured by the sound of the water.

Yulian pulls from my grip while I'm distracted by studying our surroundings, but his hand lingers on my waist for longer than it needs to.

Almost as if he's feeling me up—

No. I'm imagining things.

As he sits with his back to the cave wall and places his gun to his side, I drop to my knees in front of him and neatly place the rifle and my gun next to his. I open my backpack and toss him a bottle of water since he lost his when we were shot at, and then I start rummaging through it.

“You’re not going to ask how I found this place?” He opens the bottle, wincing before he takes a large gulp. “It’s unlike you not to demand full details. Hmm, are you broken? Do we need a doctor?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to know you found this during one of your punishments.” I retrieve the bottle of antiseptic, pour some on my hands to sanitize them as best I can, then untie the bandage.

“Bingo! Had the best naps in this little nook. Not even the guards could find me in the beginning. If they survived, they’ll be here to get us—Fuck!”

He groans when I pour antiseptic on his wound, then punches the ground, releasing a shaky exhale.

“I’m sorry, but it needs to be cleaned. Who knows how long we’ll have to stay here.” I poke around carefully, hesitating every time he grunts loudly. “Probably need to remove the bullet.”

“Do you know how to do that?”

“In theory. I’ve never done it in real life.”

“You know everything in theory.” He rolls his eyes, the brown looking almost black in the shade. “Why do you even know stuff like that?”

“I had some first aid training, which was customized to focus on how to deal with bullet wounds. Dad wants me to be prepared for all situations.”

Yulian says nothing but drops his head back against the stone and stares at the ceiling of the cave.

I regret what I said immediately. I don’t really want to brag about my relationship with my dad when Yulian obviously has an abusive one with his.

“You said you wouldn’t be kidnapped again.” I change the subject as I study the stash I brought. We have a few protein bars that can last us at least two days.

An antibiotic shot, antihistamine pills, ibuprofen, a first aid emergency kit, a spare shirt, and two bottles of water, one of which is currently being finished by Yulian.

He needs to stay hydrated due to his blood loss, and I need to remove the bullet and stitch the wound—two things I’ve never done before.

And as proven by my reflex skills earlier, practice and theory are completely different.

“And?” he asks, sipping from the bottle.

“And does that mean you were kidnapped before?”

“You weren’t?”

“No…” I say slowly, feeling as if I’m saying the wrong thing.

“Of course you weren’t.” He laughs, the sounds not amused or mocking, just…unhinged, then he coughs and winces. “Bet you’re a sheltered little princess.”

“No, I’m not.” I dab the cotton harder, making him grunt. “People just don’t dare to go against my dad. I would’ve assumed it’s the same with your dad.”

“Nah, I’ve had so many attempted assassinations.” He counts on his hands. “The maid, the butler, my nanny, my teacher, my driver, the cook, the gardener…the whole household, really.”

I pause, staring up at him, but he’s smiling. “Staff members tried to kill you?”

“Kidnap me, mostly, or maybe some tried to kill me. I’m not sure. And not only staff members, everyone at school, activity clubs. I’m a moving target. You got stuck in my unlucky web. My condolences, Mishka.”

No wonder he could see the assassins coming. He had the worst experiences to gain that foresight.

“Your dad didn’t protect you?” I frown, because *surely*, even if Yaroslav doesn’t approve of his son, he would protect his heir.

“Nah. From when I was around seven or eight, when the attempts started, he told me a real man gets out of these experiences alive and stronger. If I died, then I was weak, and he didn’t need a weak son…motherfucker!”

Yulian is hitting the ground again because I pressed on his wound in my rage against Yaroslav fucking Dimitriev.

I knew we lived in a world full of monsters, but that man is the worst kind.

Who the hell leaves their seven-year-old son to fend for himself against assassins?

Seven goddamn years old.

“I’m sorry.” I search for the scissors. I’ll have to use Yulian’s lighter to sanitize them; he definitely has one, considering all the cigarettes he smokes on the regular.

“It doesn’t hurt,” he groans, lying through his teeth. “This is child’s play. I’ve had worse.”

“I’m sorry your dad is a piece of shit. And this is not child’s play.”

His lips part, and he pinches his lower one between his fingers, then drops his hand and looks in the direction of the cave's opening. "It's really nothing."

"Is it nothing that you decided to take a bullet for me?"

"I just wanted to get you out of the way."

"Bullshit. People don't throw themselves at death's door just for nothing."

Thing is, I don't even know what type of answer I want from Yulian.

I don't like this whole fucking situation, because now, I'm indebted to him.

With my life.

That's what my mom taught me. *You're loyal to people who are loyal to you, Vinyoshka.*

And while Yulian isn't exactly loyal to me, I also know that people's true colors show in the face of death; that's what Dad said.

In that moment where he could've died, Yulian's first thought wasn't to get out of the way, it was to push *me* away.

And I don't like how fucking conflicted that makes me feel.

Yulian Dimitriev has been a complication of epic proportions since the first time he smudged me with blood.

Literally.

"I'm used to being in danger." Yulian lifts a shoulder. "If they find us, you should go."

"Not gonna happen."

"You have a better chance at survival. Take the rifle and shoot everywhere until you get to the camp or find a phone and call for help."

"I said no, Yulian. That's not how I repay my savior. Now, stop yapping."

"Rude." His lips push forward, but he's smiling faintly. "I don't yap; I entertain. If I didn't have this pesky hole in my side, I'd be singing and dancing. I have killer moves, but don't ask Cy for reviews. He's a hater…"

"Yulian?"

His lids are growing heavy. "I'll just take a power nap…"

"No, no…" I slap both his cheeks. "You need to remain awake. Keep talking, okay? I'll listen to whatever you have to say."

"Ha…look how fast the tide changes, almighty Mishka wants to hear me talk after calling me a yapper…"

“Yeah, so open your eyes.” I grab his hair, shoving his head back as I stare down at him. “You are *not* going to die here, Yulian. I’m with you… I’m *with* you. Do you hear me?”

“Hmm.” His lips twitch as he stares up at me through heavy lids. One of his hands reaches up to my T-shirt, but falls back down before he touches me as he groans, “I’m *so* fucked.”

“I know, but I’ll help you, all right?”

“You’ll be with me?” He sounds lethargic, but he’s blinking rapidly trying to stay awake.

“Yeah.”

“Да (da)?”

“Да (da),” I repeat. “I keep my word. Yes means yes, Yulian.”

“Say it again.”

“Say what again?”

“That you’re with me.”

“Я с тобой (Ya s toboy).” I say it in Russian.

A grin curves his lips, looking wild, a bit disturbing, actually, especially with his mismatched eyes gazing so deeply into me that I think they’ll cut my face open. “I’ll hold you accountable for that, Mishka.”

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6

YULIAN

So there's this really huge, big-deal type of shit that's going on right now, and it's about the worst time it could happen.

I think I died and then came back to life.

Don't ask how. Just know that when Vaughn was doing his theory shit with scissors, rummaging around in my goddamn insides and trying to get the bullet, I contemplated biting my tongue and going to be with the angels.

Or demons.

Probably demons.

Definitely demons.

At any rate, he got the bullet out after a lot of fucking pain that made me nearly lose consciousness.

Actually, I did, because when I woke up, I found my head tilted back against the stone while he continued sitting in front of me, stitching up the wound.

That's what woke me up—the feel of a fucking needle sewing my skin.

Let's make one thing clear—judging by all the haphazard lines, this dude will *not* have a career in fucking haute couture.

But the thing is, Vaughn was also *shaking*. I thought it was me who was having all of his insides turned upside down with whatever kinky scissors shit he's into, but his hands were visibly trembling as he put the bandage on my side.

He was breathing harshly, too, blowing out a large exhale every now and then to get himself under control again.

Guess no one signs up for seeing someone's gory insides if they don't dream of cutting people up a la butcher style.

That was a couple of hours ago.

Now, he's much calmer and back to being a fucking delight—aka a boring little bitch—as he sits across from me with his knees bent.

The cave is too small—there's so little distance between us that I can see the contours of his muscles beneath his shirt despite the relative lack of light. All for the best, really, because now that night has fallen, it's cold as fuck in here.

What makes it worse is that we can't start a fire, or it'll give up our position.

Vaughn patrolled outside earlier and spotted a few men dressed in black searching the area, but there was no sign of our guards.

So he came back with some large evergreen boughs that he's used to build a makeshift bed around me for support.

Since then, he's been either pacing with his head bent low because the cave can't contain him, or peeking outside, or sitting around and moping.

Oh, and checking on me.

I still feel like shit. My side burns like hell, I'm drenched with sweat one second, then trembling with cold the next, but the antibiotic shot he gave me helped. Definitely would've been much worse without it.

However, I've been keeping myself busy, because while Vaughn's been doing his Vaughn shit—being a control freak—I've been watching him.

I don't mean merely *looking* at him, but full-blown creepily *observing* him, noting every goddamn detail about him as if it's an assignment.

Just kidding, I never work this hard on an assignment.

Studying Vaughn, though? My brain puts every ounce of its power behind it, recording every scrap of visible detail.

And I'm not talking about simple stuff like how his thigh muscles stretch against his shorts or how long his legs look or how his calves are full of small cuts from when we were running.

I don't mean the enchanting color of his eyes that look darker now or the way he tends to frown when he's stressed—more than usual.

No, it's not that.

It’s how now that his hair is disheveled, it looks longer, more…wild and untamed and beautiful, framing his forehead and falling over his ears.

It’s how all that running and adrenaline has made his natural scent overwhelm the clean, sharp-smelling cologne he wears. Like cold metal warmed by skin and smoke, then trapped in silk.

It’s strong, heady, and has kind of been fucking with my head since earlier, because I have to stop myself from getting closer and sniffing him.

Or biting him.

I would *totally* bite him if given the chance. Find out if he tastes as mouthwatering as he smells.

Not that I should be *wondering* what he tastes like.

Seriously, what the fuck, brain? Get your shit together.

“You think they were all killed?” he asks, and I’m looking at his lips because why wouldn’t I?

Why would you? that little voice of reason asks.

Shut up. It’ll be nightfall soon, and I need to soak this in.

Vaughn’s frowning at me, and I realize I’ve been having that conversation with my alter ego while staring at his lips.

Surely, he thinks it’s because I’m sick and not that I’m shamelessly ogling his lips.

“Who? The guards?” I pretend to be the dumbfounded airhead and the resident dumbass in the Dimitriev Bratva.

“Yeah.”

“Probably. Otherwise, they would have come for us.”

He stares at the cave entrance, then at the ground, where there are a few wrappers from the protein bars we ate. Because, yes, Vaughn brought those, a flashlight, and all the tools he used for Operation Frankensteining Yulian.

He starts pacing again. “Who do you think is behind this?”

“Who cares?”

“I do. And so should you, considering you were targeted.”

“If I cared about everyone who targets me, I’d be in a mental institute by now.”

He stops and frowns, this time tilting his head as if I’m this badass puzzle he wants to solve.

I like that.

Fucking hell.

I *love* that.

“You think it could be one of the people who tried to kill you before?”

“Could be.” I lift a shoulder. “Let’s talk about something fun, because I don’t want to think about depressing things if I’m gonna die.”

“You’re not—”

“Have you lost your virginity yet?” I cut him off, grinning, and yeah, maybe that’s not the best conversation starter, but I really need to distract myself from this thing.

You know, the big-deal shit that’s happening in my brain.

My question definitely catches Vaughn off guard, because he freezes, and I’m almost positive he blushed, but the dim light doesn’t offer a definitive answer. “Uh, why do I need to tell you that?”

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“No.”

“Okay, I’ll go first.”

“You don’t have to tell me—”

“I had my first sexual intercourse with a badass bartender about a year ago and have had a few others since.”

“How the hell were you allowed in a bar, let alone having sex with the bartender?”

“I look about twenty, so my fake ID worked.”

“Why am I not surprised you have a fake ID?”

“Everyone does.”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t count. Anyway, it was fun with her, and she gave awesome head. It took me a long time to come, though, which is apparently not normal for teenage boys.”

“I don’t need those details.”

“Loosen up a little and talk, would you? We need to make the cold pass by quicker. A question each, yeah?”

He muses for a bit, biting his lower lip, then releases a sigh and sits down in front of me. “Fine.”

“You still didn’t answer my question.”

“Not yet.” He seems visibly uncomfortable with the subject, shifting slightly. “I’ve made out with girls a few times and went further, but there was no actual sex.”

“Why not?”

“Eh, I’m still fifteen, Yulian.”

“Old enough.”

“I just…never mind.”

“Come on, tell me.” I shift forward and grunt when pain explodes in my side.

Vaughn pushes me back down. “You’ll just make fun of me. Forget it.”

“I won’t. Promise.”

He narrows his eyes, then blows out a breath. “There’s a girl I want to ask to be my girlfriend. I want to have sex for the first time with someone I like.”

“Very boring, indeed. On brand, really.”

“Very reckless of you to have sex with someone older than you after lying to them about your age. On brand, really.”

I lift a shoulder. “I wanted to fuck her, so I did it.”

“You do everything you want?”

“If I can, sure as fuck. Now, my question.”

“I didn’t ask mine.”

“Just did when you asked if I do everything I want.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Definitely is. Don’t be a baby. Anyway, the question is, do you have any siblings?”

“No, but I have four cousins. Mike is nine years older than me, and he lives in Russia, so we don’t see each other as often. My other two cousins, my aunt’s children, are way younger than me, so I just dote on them. I’m closest to my cousin, Lidya. We were born around the same time and were brought up together, so she’s like my sister.” He smiles fondly as if he can see her in front of him. “She wants to be a badass mafia leader, and Dad and Uncle said they’ll make it happen. She wrestles and boxes all the time, often coming home with bruises and cuts, which really worries her parents. Whenever she gets in trouble, she calls me so we can go together behind our parents’ backs and beat the shit out of anyone who’s hurt her.”

“She sounds like fun.”

“She is. A headache, too, sometimes.” He slides his eyes back to me, the shadows of the night starting to eat him. “How about you?”

“A sister, Alina. She’s a ballerina, plays the piano, and is a classical music snob. She’s the softest, most well-mannered kid you’ll ever meet, but she’ll roast you alive if you get on her nerves or criticize her favorite

composers—Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Chopin, by the way—so maybe don’t insult them if you ever meet her.”

His lips twitch. “Noted.”

“Next. Who’s the family you have in Russia?”

He pauses as if he’s choosing his words. “My maternal uncle and a cousin.”

“Are you close?”

“Yes. And I get to ask two questions now.”

“Touché.” I chuckle, then cough when my wound burns.

Vaughn makes a move toward me, but I hold up a hand because, really, I need the distance.

For his sake. Not mine.

He sits back down with a frown, but it soon disappears when I smile.

Vaughn pauses for several beats, then asks in a calm voice, “How does your mother let your father treat you like that? Surely, she’d stand up to him and demand he protect you properly?”

My smile falls. “Going straight in with the deep shit?”

“You never said what questions aren’t allowed.”

“Fiiine.” I stay quiet for some time, but he doesn’t hurry me up—just remains still, as if he’s anticipating my answer. “You’re assuming my mom could stand up to my dad. Maybe in your family, that’s normal, but in mine, and as much as I fucking loathe it, Mom and Alina don’t have a say in anything. She’d just get beaten and possibly kicked out, forcing her to abandon her children.”

He stiffens, tension rolling off him in waves.

My own spine is in a rigid line, because fuck this shit. I don’t want to talk to him about my fucked-up family. But at the same time, I don’t feel pity from him, just concern.

Why would he be concerned for me?

Maybe that’s why I add, “Besides, she has cancer and has been dealing with this chemo shit forever with no real results. She finished her last round of sessions before I came to the camp. She’s feeling better and the doctors are hopeful, but those assholes are always hopeful when they’re at the other end of a gun.”

“Fuck, that sucks.”

I smile. “You curse?”

“Sometimes.” His cheeks go a little red, which tells me it’s definitely less than sometimes.

“It’s unlike you.”

“I can kill, so I can curse.”

“Nah, they’re not correlated. Anyway, tell me about this girl you like and plan to lose your virginity to. I can give you pointers.”

“No, thanks.”

“Come on, don’t be shy, Mishka.”

“Shut up, Yulian.” He’s growing annoyed—I can tell because his lips are pursing, and while I’d love to push him further, I don’t really want to hear about the girl.

The only reason I asked is because of masochistic tendencies, really.

I seem to have those in spades. Fuck me sideways.

“We should huddle together,” I say. “Without fire, we need each other’s body heat to remain alive.”

He pauses for a second, then gives a sharp nod, because, yeah, it’s the most logical thing to do.

That’s not the reason I suggested it, though.

The moment he sits beside me, his body heat slamming with mine, my mouth waters, because his scent is everywhere, and it takes all of my willpower not to sink my teeth into his neck vampire style.

I just want a taste.

Just a tiny bit.

“Come closer. I’m shivering and you feel cold, too.” I inch around so that I’m facing him, ignoring the pain that throbs in my side and that I’m crossing into entirely dangerous territory.

“How much closer?” His voice is lower, slightly husky.

“Just close enough to hug.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Come on, I’m not gonna kill you. The night chill might, though.” I grab his hand. “It’ll be brutal without this solution, and you know it.”

“I said no.”

His refusal doesn’t hit as hard this time—probably because even he can feel the damn draft sneaking through the branches he jammed across the entrance.

The place is freezing, the floor slick and clammy, and it’s only going to get worse once night really digs its claws in. My skin’s on fire, burning with

fever, but the cave remains mercilessly frigid.

“All righty then, let’s both die of hypothermia. I wouldn’t say it was nice knowing you.” I start to scoot back into my position against the wall, my arms clenched around my ribs as if that’ll quell the fire burning beneath the stitches.

A long, exasperated sigh spills from Vaughn as he stands up.

Footsteps crunch in the silence, and I hear the shift of his weight as he lowers himself behind me.

I stiffen.

“Whoa, hold up. What are you—”

“Shut up. You’re the one who wanted to hug.”

“I didn’t want to hug. I wanted body warmth.”

He says nothing as his legs press against mine that are bent at the knees, then he shifts until his chest is glued to my back.

A zap of electricity jolts through me, similar to but more potent than when he touched my chest earlier at camp.

This time, it burns more than my wound.

It’s suffocating, actually.

I can’t breathe.

Fuck, I *can’t* breathe.

It’s the injury. Please tell me it’s the fucking injury, brain.

His arms curl around my front—just above my stitched side, carefully and deliberately avoiding it.

I suck in a sharp breath and jerk forward. I don’t mean it, but this closeness sends a rush of blood to my groin and my head, and I kind of blank out.

“You’re burning up,” he speaks so close to my ear, a shiver zaps down my spine, and the hairs on my arms stand on end.

I’m truly fucked, aren’t I?

“We only had that one shot of antibiotic, but I’ll give you more ibuprofen.”

I make an affirmative sound because, really, that’s the only sound I can make under the circumstances.

He moves and hands me two pills that I swallow with some water, then he’s back behind me in the same position.

His heartbeat knocks slow and steady against my spine, and I track it like a countdown, registering each thump as if my life depends on it.

Must be nice to be so calm. I think my own heart is sort of shoving itself against Vaughn's palms like a slut.

Jesus Christ.

My fingers twitch. My breath catches. My whole body aches, but it's not due to the wound.

No.

This is much more serious than a hole in my side.

I want him *gone*.

No. I want him *closer*.

"Let's continue the questions." His voice drifts calmly in the silence, sounding so fucking close to my ear, my head, and my thumping chest. "Is it my turn?"

"Mmm," I say, because fucking hell I can't even think past the feel of his chest against my back and his hands on my pectoral muscles and his legs rubbing against mine, let alone some stupid questions.

"Why did you take a bullet for me, Yulian?"

I shrug. "Because."

"That's not a reason."

I don't have another to offer, and I seriously don't even want to think about it at this moment, so I just remain silent.

"Since you didn't answer that question, I'll ask another one."

"Whatever.

"What do you plan to be when you grow up?"

"Huh?"

"I'll go first," he says. "I want to inherit my dad's position and continue his and Mom's legacy. I want to give them back a fraction of what they've given me and make them proud of how I take our Bratva to the next level. I'll be the strongest, most educated, and best strategizing genius our world has ever known. After Dad, of course."

I gulp because the whole time he was talking, his chest was vibrating against my back, and I kind of need to stop myself from getting hard, because I'm so close to embarrassing myself.

"What about you?" he asks when I remain silent, looking straight down and not daring to even peek sideways.

I, Yulian Dimitriev, who fucks around for breakfast, is absolutely terrified of Vaughn seeing the look in my eyes right now.

Cy would have a field day with this, record it, and show it to my goddamn grandchildren.

I clear my throat. “I’ll take over fucking Chicago and become so powerful, no one would dare to fuck with me, Mom, or Alya. I’ll be their shield even if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Hmm. That’s nice.” He sounds a bit sleepy. “I have so many people to protect, too. Mom, Dad, Lidya, my family’s legacy…”

He trails off, his head falling against my shoulder.

I hold my breath, willing my heart to stop beating so loudly.

He’ll definitely feel it against his palms and ridicule me…

“We should help each other out when we’re older, Yulian. We could make a great team. You can be the muscle, and I’ll be the brains…”

I wait for him to keep talking, still barely breathing, but nothing comes.

So I wait some more.

And more…

I peek at him, and huge fucking mistake.

His face is so close to mine, I feel his steady breath on my skin. His eyes are closed, long lashes fluttering against his smudged cheeks.

It’s so unlike him to be so unclean, but I messed him up with my blood, the dirt, everything.

My finger reaches for his face, wanting to…what? Wipe the grime? Push away that sole strand of hair that hangs close to his face?

I pause, my finger twitching.

I swallow thickly, but it gets trapped in my throat, because, fucking hell, he’s so beautiful.

That’s what I’ve been thinking since the fight this morning.

Maybe even for a while before that.

I kept thinking that he looks so fucking handsome that I want to sink my teeth into him.

And that kind of freaked me out. It’s *still* freaking me the fuck out because the feel of his body against mine has me buzzing in ways I can’t control.

As if it’s a hit of nicotine.

Drugs.

Every fucked-up substance on the market.

I’m feverish, so this could be a hallucination, but I simply can’t take my eyes off of him or direct these rampant thoughts away from him.

Don’t do it, Yulian.

I know. I won’t. I pacify the little surviving morsel of logic in my brain. *I’m totally* not *going to do anything. I’m just chilling.*

Yulian, this is the worst idea you’ve ever come up with, and all of your ideas are shit.

Rude, brain. Don’t go calling yourself names.

Vaughn releases a long exhale, and I close my eyes as the feel of his face on my shoulder gets warmer and warmer.

It’s the fever.

We’ll all agree to blame the fever. Got it, brain?

I move my hand that’s been suspended in the air and softly clutch his jaw, angling it slightly. I inhale sharply because the feel of his skin on mine burns. Or I’m burning up for a reason that’s entirely different from the fever.

My thumb strokes along his sharp jaw, and every rub of skin against skin, every instance of friction electrifies me.

I haven’t felt this stimulated in forever, and I’m *easily* stimulated.

My lips part, and I suck in a choked load of air, then stop, not daring to breathe as I lower my head. I pause for one fraction of a second, trying to find any form of reason.

But this feels like the rightest thing I’ve ever done.

And I just…go for it.

With a shaky breath, I drop my mouth to his.

Fuck.

Fucking hell.

My lips are merely touching his, but it’s as if a whole explosion is taking place in my chest. A goddam epic proportion of fireworks in the form of my erratic heartbeat and buzzing ears.

No.

No.

Fuck. *No.*

Vaughn shifts, and I jerk my head back, feeling as if I just committed the worst sin.

I wait for him to open his eyes and call me names.

Punch me, even. I’d take it. I certainly deserve it.

But he just remains asleep.

I close my eyes and let the cold press in—everywhere except where he's touching me.

For the first time, I think maybe I truly fucked up.

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7

VAUGHN

PRESENT — AGE NINETEEN

My life is everything it should be.

Excellent grades, Ivy League college, and a future mapped out for greatness.

My parents brought up the ideal heir for their empire. A perfect blend of their genes and the most suitable candidate to take over once they decide to retire.

So now that I'm in college, I'm being handed more responsibilities to prepare me for my role.

While my friends decided to go overseas to attend a college funded by our fathers that's situated on an island on the coast of the UK, I chose to study at Columbia University.

In order to stay close to my parents.

And to have full access to the operations side of things.

That's it.

That's *all*.

"This place looks divine." Danika marvels at the decor of the new Italian restaurant that's opening tonight in Manhattan.

The project was personally funded by my dad's friend from the Luciano family, also known as the head of an infamous Italian crime family.

As Dad and Mom had other engagements, I'm attending on their behalf.

Ideally, Jeremy and Nikolai would also be here on their parents' behalf, but they're fucking around on the other side of the ocean in England.

Uselessly, I might add.

Yes, sometimes I feel a certain type of loneliness from being without all of them. Nikolai was the last to go to the island, so now I'm forced to attend functions like this by myself.

Well, not quite.

Danika accompanied me.

She loves all of these opulent places and the preferential treatment she gets for being on my arm.

"The food also looks fab." She snaps a few pictures of the table.

Over the years, I've learned to never touch anything until she gets her fair share of pictures. I paint on an automatic smile as she takes a picture of me as well. She grins while scrolling through her phone, probably looking to see if she got decent shots.

"God, you're hot." She fans herself. "I feel so special."

"Not more than I do." I reach out and stroke the back of her hand, and her smile widens. "Did I mention that you look stunning tonight?"

"Yeah, a few times, but I don't mind if you keep repeating it. Gotta look my best on nights like these." She motions at the food. "Now, let's see if this tastes as good as it looks."

Finally, we dig in. Or she does, commenting on the level of spices, how well it's cooked, and whether or not the ingredients are high quality and fresh.

If it's not obvious, her dream is to become a food critic—and eat at the most high-end restaurants while at it.

Her family is well off enough, but her father's business has been struggling for the last few years, and to my knowledge, he might have to close down his New York office and relocate to Seattle.

I know it's been weighing heavily on her, especially since she was used to an extravagant lifestyle that's now being cut off. So I pay for her wardrobe as well as fancy dinners and expensive shows.

And I love providing for her. I don't really spend a lot of money personally, but funding Danika's lifestyle gives me a sense of accomplishment.

Dad's always said I have to take care of the woman I love. Put her ahead of everyone and everything. Always go the extra mile for her.

And I love Danika. I've loved her since the day we got together four years ago when she told me we'd make a great couple.

We do.

She's stunning, with long legs and huge brown eyes. Her thick dark hair falls in waves to the small of her back, and tonight, she's wearing a shimmering gold dress that complements her sun-kissed skin beautifully.

We picked it out together last week in preparation for this dinner—or more like, she picked and I paid. Not sure why she keeps asking for my opinion about clothes when everything she wears looks fine to me. But then again, I don't really care for picking clothes for other people.

She was ecstatic when we left the boutique with the dress, and I'm happy to see her de-stressing a bit, considering everything with her father's business. I believe tonight is perfect for getting her mind off things.

"Gosh, this is amazing." She takes a sip of her mocktail, releasing a long sigh of contentment. "The food's ending too soon."

"Eat however much you want. I'll order more."

"No, no, I'm not sacrificing my flat tummy, even if the food is amazing. Thanks, though. For everything." She reaches out and holds my hand. "I mean it, hon. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't by my side."

"I'll always be by your side." I lift her hand to my mouth and kiss it, inhaling the floral notes from her skin.

I mean it.

Danika is the perfect person to be my wife. She's smart, beautiful, and handles crises pretty well, which is a must in our world. Sure, she's not as savvy as my mom, but many people aren't. Danika is pretty involved in our world, though. Her dad has ties to the Bratva, and she grew up knowing he dealt in money laundering for the mafia.

I've asked Dad if we could invest in his business or offer a bailout of sorts, and he said he'll look into it. Being my father-in-law comes with certain perks.

And he *will* be my father-in-law.

Danika and I will get married after we graduate from college. We might be too young, but we've been together for years, and she's my perfect match.

My *only* match.

We've even talked about children. Danika wants at least two, and I'm fine with that, not because I'm thinking of kids at this age, but because I want to be a responsible, protective, and fun-loving dad, just like my parents are to me.

My friends, specifically Killian and Nikolai, say I was born with an old man's brain, but they never lived under the weight of expectations and responsibility like I have.

They don't understand.

No one does.

I'm about to drop Danika's hand when loud laughter catches my attention.

Familiar laughter with an edge of huskiness that I can pick out amongst a crowd.

My body stiffens, my skin breaking into a sweat, as if this is a full-on lethal attack, but my eyes are scanning the entrance.

My throat closes.

Donatelli, the owner of the restaurant, stands by the front door, welcoming his guests for opening night.

No way.

I must be imagining things.

And yet as Donatelli shakes the laughing maniac's hand, asking his staff to take the basket full of wrapped goods and the bottle of alcohol that one of the guards is holding, I feel the earth swaying beneath my feet.

Yulian Yaroslavich Dimitriev.

What the *hell* is Yulian doing here?

This is neither his territory nor the place he should be.

It's been years since I last saw him—four, to be exact—and it's as if time is still trapped in the nooks of that humid, drafty, and absolutely miserable cave.

On second thought, it's not.

He's taller now, still taller than me, and he's grown ridiculously bulky—as big as Nikolai, who loves building muscle for sport.

Seems Yulian has gone down the same path as Niko. His muscles are so defined, he's about to rip out of his white shirt.

While all men here, including me, are dressed in suits or tuxedos to fit in with the upscale event, Yulian's only wearing a white shirt with the first few buttons open, and black slacks that frame his tall legs. His hair falls in haphazard strands on his forehead, making him look every bit a gangster.

In reality, so am I, but I dislike the stereotype he's embracing so openly.

"Please come in, come in. This is a lovely surprise." Donatelli is personally leading Yulian to one of the tables opposite me. We have two

tables between us, but I track his movements as he flops onto a chair, an arm flung over the back and his legs stretched out in front of him, the usual grin on his face, the same boredom in his blue and brown eyes.

"I wasn't expecting you, but it's my honor you're able to make it to my humble restaurant." Donatelli grabs the menu from a staff member who looks to be sweating.

"My father sends his regards along with the basket of…delicacies." He winks at Donatelli, whose eyes widen.

Yulian wasn't supposed to be here.

Of course he wasn't.

This is as far away from their backyard as possible. It's like if I were to show up at an important restaurant opening in Chicago uninvited.

It's wrong.

Everything about Yulian is wrong.

"Hon?"

I'm jerked back to my table as Danika frowns. I release her hand as slowly as possible, realizing I've probably been tightening it in my grip the entire time.

"Yes?" I smile and have to physically stop my gaze from straying behind her, to where a huge complication has dropped in like a bomb.

"Can you order me tiramisu for dessert? I'll go to the ladies' room real quick."

"Will do," I say absentmindedly as she stands up.

Danika rounds the table so that she's standing beside me and drops a kiss on my cheek. "You're the best. Love you."

"Love you, too…" The last bit gets stuck in my throat because I'm being targeted.

It's not with weapons or anything similar, but a set of contrasting eyes that are zeroing in on me—Yulian's.

His gaze is sharp enough to cut; all of his grins have vanished and so has his easygoing demeanor. He's sitting upright in his chair, his body warring with tension as he stares.

No.

Glares.

What the…

As Danika sashays away, he stands up. I sit taller in my chair, holding his gaze with a glare of my own as I communicate.

Stay the hell away from me.

I still despise Yulian Dimitriev, maybe even more than before he took a bullet for me.

After the cave, I downright loathe the guy.

I hate him with every fiber of my being.

So I've always been glad we've never had to cross paths again, considering the major fallout that happened between our fathers following the attack.

But deep down, a part of me knew we'd eventually *have* to meet again.

In theory, it's better that this is happening in my territory so that I have complete control over the situation.

Now, if my muscles would stop tightening with every step he takes toward me, that would be terrific.

I could just stand up, walk away, and not talk to him, but that would be no different from running away, and I don't do that.

Not anymore.

Yulian stops by my table, his fingers resting on the white cloth, and I catch a hint of a tattoo that looks like a wing on the slope of his thumb and sliding to the inside of his wrist.

He taps his index finger twice, his hand looking thicker than I remember, veins stretching on the back of his hand and disappearing under the rolled cuff of his shirt.

I try to look away, but he's right in front of me, his presence seizing my entire attention. His black slacks contrast against the white drape as he taps his fingers on the table again, right in front of my plate of unfinished gnocchi.

"Why, hello, stranger. Long time no see."

I stab my fork into the gnocchi but don't bring anything to my mouth as I crane my head back to look at him.

His face definitely looks older now, having lost all the boyish traits that still lingered in his features four years ago. He looks positively menacing.

Not to me, but in general.

Yulian used to have a quiet type of beauty, even if his presence was loud as hell. Now, even his looks are striking.

In an extremely uncomfortable way.

His lips curl into a grin as soon as our eyes meet. "There you are. I thought you'd act like you didn't see me."

“And you are…?” I tilt my head to the side, pretending I’m trying to remember him.

His grin falters but doesn’t drop as he lifts his hand to my face. The moment his fingers graze my ear, I shove him away and jerk back, sending my chair flying.

A clatter sounds as my plate falls to the floor, the gnocchi splashing all over the tiles.

The incident stuns the whole restaurant into pressing silence.

A waiter and Donatelli rush in our direction. My chair is straightened, and the plate is scooped up in an unsettling gloom, the patrons barely moving, their utensils frozen in place.

I catch my breath, my hand flexing in the direction of my gun, but I can tell everyone’s uneasy. The crime families in NYC know of the feud between us and the Chicago mafia.

The two heirs fighting it out during a restaurant opening is about the worst thing that could happen tonight.

That’s probably why Donatelli’s sweating, his lips thin and pale as he asks with a hint of an Italian accent that apparently slips through when he’s nervous, “Gentlemen, is there a problem?”

“None at all.” Yulian’s grinning wider now as he throws an arm around my shoulders so that our sides are flush. “We’re catching up as old friends.”

My body locks in, trapped in a fight-or-flight response, and I want to punch Yulian in the face, but I don’t, because I’m not here to ruin my parents’ reputation.

I elbow him, though, and he groans and subtly releases me as Donatelli nods and asks a waiter to hurry and clean up the mess.

As the staff and Donatelli retreat, Yulian and I continue the glaring game—or I do, because the harder I glare, the wider he grins.

I flop back into my seat, and he takes Danika’s, sitting in that nonchalant way, his arm flung over the back of the chair, his legs so extended that his shoes touch mine.

Subtly, I slide my feet back.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing?” I speak low so the other tables don’t hear. “Leave, Yulian.”

“So you do remember my name. I was so wounded, I was going to cry.”

“Go. Away.”

“Wow, rude. Is this the type of welcome you New Yorkers offer?”

“I asked you to go.”

“I didn’t come all the way here just to go.”

“Then why are you here?”

He taps the table in front of him, but his entire intense and creepy attention is on me. “Why didn’t you enroll at The King’s U?”

I’m taken aback by the question, and I pause, frowning. “That’s none of your business.”

“All your friends are there, so the most logical option would’ve been to join them. Why haven’t you?”

“I prefer Columbia.”

He lifts a brow but says nothing.

I hate that look.

And I need to change the subject.

“You must know I’ll report your out-of-the-blue appearance to my dad.” I sit taller, my spine and teeth locking under the overwhelming tension. “You don’t get to come to our territories unannounced.”

“You have it in your heart to have me whipped half to death?” His lips push forward in an exaggerated pout. “I thought we were friends.”

“I’m not your damn friend, Yulian.”

His face falls back into that intense creepy look that’s so intrusive, I feel like his asymmetrical eyes will turn into actual beings.

“Now leave and don’t disturb my date.”

“Your date.”

It’s not a question, but I nod. “That’s what I said.”

“Is that the girl you had a crush on?”

“None of your business.”

“The one you wanted to lose your virginity to because you liked her, correct?”

“I said—”

“None of my business, I know, but here’s the thing.” He whistles. “I’m making it mine.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He pinches his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger, and I’m transfixed by the motion as flashbacks from that godforsaken night rush through my brain, into my blood.

My breathing turns shallow, and I loosen my tie, feeling as if I’m being asphyxiated by his mere presence.

He doesn’t have to say or do anything, just his being here is enough to grate on my last nerve.

Finally, he releases his lip. “What if I told you that by the end of this evening, you have to break up with her?”

I release a humorless laugh, but he doesn’t join me. “I’d tell you that’s a distasteful joke.”

“I’m not joking.” There’s no grin nor any nonchalance in his surprisingly firm tone. “Let that girl go and change schools to The King’s U.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because I want you to.”

I reach into my pants pocket, then produce a middle finger. “This is what I have to give about your wants and demands.”

He bursts out laughing, the husky sound intrusive.

For the first time in years, my stomach isn’t feeling well.

I’m nauseated.

“Good one. I see you developed a sense of humor.” His laughter disappears. “But I mean it. It’s better if you do what I tell you while I’m asking amicably.”

“And *I* mean it. You’d better leave now before I have my men fill your torso with holes.”

“Do it yourself, you coward.” He grins and winks.

Why the hell is he *winking*?

I open my mouth to say something, but Danika is a short distance away. Yulian notices her, too, because he stands up and starts to walk past me but then stops and places a hand on my shoulder.

His palm is big and heavy and as unsettling as his overwhelming scent. The mixture of cedar, lemon, and a hint of musk clogs my nostrils until he’s all I can breathe.

“You have until the end of the evening before I take matters into my own hands.” He leans down so his voice is closer, dropping into a husky whisper. “Remember what I said before. One way or another, I *always* get what I want, Mishka.”

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8

YULIAN

So here's the thing.

I truly, irrevocably, and without a shadow of a doubt always get what I want.

Always.

It doesn't matter what the circumstances dictate, what methods I use, or how far I need to go. If I decide it's happening, my fucked-up brain will come up with the necessary shitstorm to ensure the thing I want will take place.

You know, because I'm persistent.

And annoying.

A general eyesore, if you will.

Most importantly, I will take the blood I'm fucking owed even if it's the last thing I do.

That's how I find myself standing by the floor-to-ceiling window in a hotel room in downtown Manhattan, staring at the city that never sleeps.

I've never liked New York and it's not due to an idiotic snobbishness about being from Chicago—though my city is superior, just saying.

It's because the couple times I've been here, I ended up with a goddamn tragedy, blood on my hands, and a hole in my chest.

Literally and figuratively.

I ended up with a curse.

A weakness.

A pit in the fabric of my soul.

This time will be different.

Yes, I still returned and walked into that restaurant I had no business being in and made eye contact I shouldn't have.

Touched.

Breathed.

Felt.

I take a deep drag of my cigarette and release a cloud against the window, briefly closing my eyes, chasing the fucking burn in my chest, one not even the rush of nicotine can extinguish.

No, so actually, I have a *plan* this time. Very out of character, I know. But really, my brain is running in overdrive; I could give Cy a run for his money.

Just kidding, but seriously, I have an amazing plan that will definitely work.

It *has* to.

I've lost so much since I met that calamity Vaughn, while he's just thriving, looking so put together *and* flaunting a stunning girl on his arm.

But the thing is, I believe in karma. So he has to feel the pain I did and still do.

He owes me his life, and I'll slurp it the fuck out and pull him down into the mud I've been floundering in since he abandoned me and left me to die in that cave.

A beep echoes in the room.

A small smile grazes my lips, but I don't face the door.

I know exactly who it is without having to turn around.

It's my guards, who've opened the door, and I can hear the cautious steps before it shuts again with a soft click.

Instantly, the delicate smell of floral perfume permeates the air, clashing with the stench of nicotine.

It does nothing for me.

I mean, it does, usually. I like worshiping girls' bodies whenever possible, but I wouldn't say I'm particularly dying to fuck this one.

I know, me not being excited about sex? Kind of blasphemous, considering the highlight of my day is dicking someone to the mattress so hard, they see angels.

Or demons.

But, remember, I have a plan this time.

“Hey…” Her soft voice fills the space, sounding a bit on edge.

Hmm. Can’t have her changing her mind after I finally lured her here.

With a smile, I face the girl Vaughn had on his arm tonight. She’s even wearing the same golden strapless dress, her makeup touched up from earlier, her hair redone in a ponytail, two strands framing her face like a curtain.

Danika is Vaughn’s long-term girlfriend—the girl he liked and wanted to save his virginity for.

The girl I saw him kissing the day I lost everything.

It’s only poetic justice that she serves as the catalyst to the decimation of his life, no?

I’m nothing but the most vengeful bastard around.

“Wow, you look gorgeous,” I say, lowering my voice to a flirtatious tone as I kill the cigarette in the ashtray and walk toward her.

She blushes, fidgeting with her glittery black purse that she’s holding with both hands. “Thanks, you…look amazing yourself.”

No need to state the obvious now.

When I stand in front of her, my smile falters but doesn’t disappear. On the corner of her lip, she missed a smudge of red lipstick that’s been covered by powder but isn’t entirely invisible.

“So…leaving your number under my napkin at the restaurant as you were whispering to Vaughn was actually audacious, you know. I thought you’d lost your mind.”

“You texted anyway.” I stare into her dark doe-like eyes, then back at the smudge I can’t look away from.

“I’ve always loved bold men.”

“Hmm.” My grin widens. “Is that why you’re here? Because I’m bolder than your boyfriend?”

“It’s not that. I love Vaughn.”

Yeah, right.

I can tell a serial cheater when I see one. Danika wouldn’t have taken the bait if she were even slightly loyal to Vaughn. One look at her, and I knew she was as allergic to monogamy as I am.

Well, *almost* as much as I am.

The moment I smiled at her, she had a sultry look in her eyes, one her *boyfriend* didn’t notice, because he was busy murdering me in his head.

Danika's way of watching me, subtly checking me out, and texting me almost as soon as I was out of the restaurant told me she was open to flirting and possibly more.

Which means that she's done this before.

And while I'm disappointed I'm not the only one—because that would hurt the asshole more—I'm delighted that she has zero respect for him.

Danika stares up at me with heavy-lidded eyes.

I stare at the mark.

"But?" I lift my hand and trace the smudge at the corner of her lip.

I just can't help it.

A rush of pleasure rips through me, knowing exactly who touched this not so long ago.

Danika releases a puff of air, her lips parting as she whispers in a breathy voice, "But I want more."

"Then you came to the right place." I swipe her lower lip, smudging her reddish lipstick exactly to where the previous one was, my heart thundering the moment the marks collide.

Fucking hell. This is more thrilling than I anticipated.

I place an arm at the small of her back and pull her flush against me.

She gasps and her purse falls to the floor, its contents spilling everywhere, but she doesn't notice as her wide eyes droop and a whimper spills from her parted lips.

Danika's so turned on, I can smell her eagerness, but there's another scent that rushes to my groin. Something that's camouflaged by her perfume but still there—woodsier, harsher.

Male.

I inhale the top of her hair, filling my lungs thoroughly like it's a hit of powder.

I can smell him on her—smoke and damnation.

"Did you fuck him before you came here?" I croon, licking the side of her neck and nibbling slightly.

My taste buds explode with traces of him. Yes, it's covered up with her, but there are hints of him—masculine, harsh, and more fucking heady.

I'm getting so hard, it's a miracle I don't explode.

She moans. "Yeah, just a quickie… Is that a problem?"

"Of course not. You deserve more than a quickie, gorgeous."

She moans louder, gripping my shoulders as I lick and bite her neck, her ears, her collarbone, devouring every inch that he did.

Every fucking place that he touched.

Kissed.

Licked.

Tasted.

I'm taking away the love of his life, and it's making me feel so goddamn euphoric.

Like my father says, I'm a demon, and demons love to ruin other people's lives.

Their hopes.

Their dreams.

Their *love.*

I'll destroy Vaughn's perfect life until he has nothing left, and when that happens, I'll drag him down into the depths of hell with me.

As I pull Danika toward the bed with my fingers under her dress, my cock grows and lengthens until it's filling my boxer shorts.

I've had this plan for a while, though not too long, to be honest, because my brain kind of comes up with the most random shit at the most unexpected times.

But when I thought of this, I believed it'd just be a normal fuck.

Really, I love fucking girls, I do, but they're not my first choice. While I'm game for getting my dick into any available hole, I prefer animalistic sex.

The freakier, the better.

The rougher, the more enjoyable.

And most girls don't like that. I've had my fair share of amazing women who taught me how to please them and loved being bent and used, but not all women are into that.

So, in reality, I prefer using men for my unhinged tendencies. The pressure, the pain, the goddamn release.

Just two animals exploiting one another, then pissing off.

That's how I like sex—rough and with no strings attached.

Danika seems to love it when I bite her neck and throw her on the bed, her eyes lighting up as she pulls her dress up her thighs, opening her legs wide so I can see her soaked panties.

A smirk lifts my lips as I grab her by the hair and rip her dress down the back.

Because I can.

Because she clearly loves it.

And I will love the shit out of feeling Vaughn inside her.

Maybe that's fucked up, but I don't give two flying fucks. Ever since she told me they fucked before she got here, implying that she still wasn't satisfied, I've been getting so hard, my cock aches.

Not because I want to satisfy her.

No.

It's because I want to feel Vaughn inside her pussy.

Or maybe feel how he felt when he was pounding her. Have the same expression, make the same noises—

Fuck, I'm going to come just thinking about it, and I shouldn't be this fucking excited.

It's not part of my grand plan—the same plan Cy calls stupid, but he's an anti-fan, so his opinion means jack shit.

As I kiss Danika, I'm transported to four years ago, to the uncertainty and the pounding heart, to trembling lips and rattled insides when I kissed Vaughn.

It was a curiosity, a need, an innocent, albeit impulsive, action to test out why the fuck I couldn't stop my racing heartbeat around Vaughn.

The moment I kissed him, I couldn't deny how good it felt, how much I wanted to keep doing it, how hard it hit to just have my lips on his.

But then it became the worst decision of my life.

Vaughn Morozov gave me my bi-awakening, but it came at a calamitous price.

Because I started obsessing, even after he abandoned me, and I'm *really* not good with obsessions.

He consumed my heart, body, and soul.

I used all resources available to find him, call him, get in touch with him, and even traveled hundreds of miles to see him, but all I got in return was a gash in the chest and a fuck ton of regrets.

See, I thought I could let go.

And I did, because my young, immature obsession with Vaughn exacted more than I could handle.

But somewhere in the back of my head, I was waiting for him to join his friends at The King's U so that I could get closure once and for all.

I was itching for a battle.

A gloves-off type of battle.

But he continued to evade me.

Cy said it shouldn't matter if I'd already let him go.

But you know, it's not fair that he still has his perfect life. So here I am, ruining everything just like he did back then by taking away the love of his life.

And *I* am taking her away. Knowing his inflexible personality, Vaughn will *not* want to touch her again.

Not after I have.

Sooner or later, he'll be right where I want him.

Under my fucking shoe.

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9

VAUGHN

I haven’t been able to sleep.

Or think properly.

Or even *breathe* without the sensation of an oppressive object sitting on my chest.

Ever since that waste of space Yulian showed up out of nowhere in *my* territory, under my own nose, as if he has every right to, I’ve been on perpetual edge.

A pressure I haven’t felt for so long has been simmering, the tension coiling at the back of my skull.

I’m restless.

Almost neurotic, if I’m being brutally honest.

I spent the early morning hitting the bag, then running, then swimming. My limbs ache to the point of exhaustion, yet nothing has eased the tightness in my muscles, my stomach, my bones.

Everywhere.

I walk into my penthouse in Manhattan. I got this place despite my parents’ objection about security, since, objectively speaking, the most secure place in NYC is probably their mansion. They bulletproofed it so well, no one dares to come close.

However, I needed to have a place of my own after I started college, mainly so Danika and I could have our own space. Or maybe it’s because I needed *my* own space.

Because, despite Danika's numerous hints about moving in with me, I'd rather she doesn't. At least, not yet.

The penthouse is huge, with a contemporary-style interior design. There's a large, bold impressionist painting with green and red hues in the living area. It's the only break of color in the beige tones—both of these were Danika's ideas. It's not truly my personal preference, but I had to make the compromise so I could dodge her attempts to move in.

When I first decided to live here a few months ago, Dad bought the whole building, had most of it occupied by his security and the rest by people he trusts, so, in a sense, I didn't really leave home.

I don't blame him or Mom for wanting to protect me. For using every resource they have to ensure that I'm not only safe, but that I also have access to the best guards, who were personally trained by them.

Ever since the time I was almost killed at that cursed summer camp, my parents have become overprotective. They try not to infringe on my freedom to the point of suffocation, but there's only so much they can do without having guards in my surroundings at all times.

Their goal is to ensure I'm never separated from my guards again.

Not that I object—I have better things to do than die.

And really, if I don't focus too much, I don't notice the guards shadowing me.

As the penthouse's elevator closes behind me, I expel a lingering breath.

All right.

I need to focus on better things instead of uneven eyes and veiled threats.

With my new resolve, I unpack my gym bag, then put my workout clothes in the washing machine and start the cycle.

Yes, there are staff members who do this for us, but I always liked to take care of my own things. It's not really controlling tendencies, as my cousin Lidya tells me.

Or maybe it is.

If the shoe fits, I guess.

I just like having everything in order in my structured space. There's comfort in knowing everything is exactly where it belongs. The clothes in the washing machine, the sneakers in the shoe compartment, the bag in the closet, neatly tucked between other bags, all color-coded.

Mom says I take after Uncle Anton, and I guess I do. He's also neurotically organized, dare I say more than my parents combined.

After I arrange everything in place, I walk into the kitchen and retrieve some eggs and milk from the fridge. As I set them on the counter, my fingers still wrapped around the neck of the glass bottle, I pull out my phone.

I should text Danika good morning and check on her.

Truth is, I wasn't the best companion last night. At least, not after that pest showed up.

Break up with her and change schools, he said.

I release a huff.

Who the hell does that prick think he is, expecting me to follow his demands?

And they were *demands*.

He seems to have grown so much audacity in the past four years, transitioning from ridiculous to downright entitled.

At any rate, I was livid and distracted for the rest of the evening, and Danika got the short end of the stick of my changing moods.

We did spend time together, and I fucked her like I always do after dates, against the kitchen counter, making sure she orgasmed. After all these years, I've learned to touch her the right way to have her shake around my cock.

It's kind of my favorite part about sex, just seeing her enjoy what I give. It's how I manage to reach a climax myself.

Yesterday, though, I had to keep going for quite a bit. My thoughts drifted elsewhere, and my body was stiflingly not really into it.

Though really, sex is a habit at this point, which is natural for long-term relationships, I believe.

So when Danika said her dad expected her back to discuss their family's situation, I just let her go, then proceeded to toss and turn in bed.

When that got to be too much, I indulged in bad habits—things I always told myself I'd never do again.

I swipe open my phone and see a message from an unknown number. My brow furrows.

My phone number is encrypted, so no one should have access to it, let alone someone unknown.

Every instinct tells me not to open it, but then again, I need to know who the hell got hold of my number.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

For your entertainment

With a deepening frown, I click on the cloud link attached, and it takes me to a video.

The footage is a little unsteady, with faint light barely illuminating what appears to be a hotel room.

At first, I can't make out what I'm seeing as the camera trembles slightly, but gradually, it steadies, coming into sharp focus.

A huge hard cock lies between big breasts with brown areolas. I tilt my head to the side, a prickling sense of recognition washing over me.

"Damn, these tits are fucking amazing."

The *voice*.

The deep, slightly raspy voice, low and raw, like smoke curling in a noose around my throat.

That damn voice I'd recognize *anywhere*.

Fucking *Yulian*.

"You don't mind me filming, yeah?" he speaks again, thrusting his cock between the breasts cradled in a pair of scarlet-tipped hands.

"Why are you filming?" she asks in an extremely familiar breathy moan.

My fingers tighten around the bottle of milk.

"Because I want to keep this memory, beautiful."

"It's okay. Just don't post it online."

"I won't. This will be our *dirty* little secret." I can hear the smirk woven through the lazy drawl of his "dirty."

I don't need to see their faces to know exactly who's speaking. They're both etched so deep in my psyche, it's impossible not to recognize them.

Still, a part of me refuses to accept it.

"You're so fucking hot, did you know that?" The words fall from him in a soft growl.

The camera follows his cock as he slides it down her stomach and over the gold dress that's bunched around her waist.

"So are you." She moans, running her fingers over defined abs, and he films that, following the motion of her red nails. "Fuck me with your huge

cock, handsome."

"You want this cock pounding your little pussy?"

"Mmm."

He puts on a condom, and I tilt my head as he strokes his cock in one rough go, humming deep in his throat.

"Like this?" He thrusts inside her, and she screams, and it sounds like, "Yess, fuck me, please."

The camera shakes as he drives into her with long, harsh strokes.

In a way I've never fucked her before.

A way I *wouldn't* fuck her.

Because Danika is the softest thing in my life, and I treat her like a treasure.

She is.

She *was*.

Not anymore, though.

Because in the video, she's moaning and screaming as she's being fucked to within an inch of her life by someone else.

That *someone* flips her around, hauls her off the bed, and fucks her doggie style, shoving her head on the carpet as she blabbers and asks for more. He removes the condom, whirls her so that she's facing him and fists her hair as she deep-throats his cock. His fingers flex, his groans filling my ears as he fucks her face, making her gag, cum and saliva trickling down her chin.

Her face shows in those shots, so messed up with snot and tears and his cum, and yet she looks at him with big, wide eyes, her cheeks flushed, her expression eager.

Something I've never witnessed, because she's never looked at me the way she's looking at him—as if he's a god.

She's so into it, she comes more than once.

A few times, actually.

I can see it in her shaking limbs and hear it in the throaty moans and loud screams. I witness it in her eagerness to help him put a condom on. She even suggests removing it altogether, but he doesn't.

The entire thing rolls before my eyes in high definition. I see the way his cock plunges in and out of her pussy again. I listen to degrading, dirty talk I wouldn't dare say to her that she seems to get off on.

And I watch.

On and on.

Frozen in place as the video plays.

I witness the absolute sheer madness of how he fucks—going deep and slow, then harsh and fast as he kneads and slaps and parts her ass cheeks.

And I listen, *really* listen, to the way they moan and groan and how she whimpers and *begs.*

I've fucked Danika more times than I can count, and yet I've never seen her like this.

It's like I'm watching a stranger—someone so removed from my memories, it's as if I'm staring at an imposter.

But she's not.

An impostor.

Or removed from my memories.

She's just not someone who fits into my life or the scene in the perfect picture I imagined hanging in my future home.

My. Not *our*.

I don't believe I've ever thought of us as an actual "us," and I'd feel sorry for that under different circumstances.

That I'm not sentimental enough.

Not caring enough.

Simply not *enough.*

Not now, though.

As she rides Yulian and keeps praising his cock, his performance, and the way she's "feeling him in her stomach," I let my real emotions slip through.

Detachment.

I don't know how long the video lasts. It's long enough for them to go into multiple positions. Long enough that I feel like I'm watching porn stars on drugs.

I don't even see all of it since it was edited and cut and zoomed in on all the parts a "porn director" would think are fit to tantalize his audience.

Just when I think the video will never end, the final shot, the one that exists in all porn movies, comes through. He grunts, rubbing his cock—aggressively, I might add—then comes all over her stomach, breasts, and face.

He marks her in front of the camera for me to see as she licks his cum off her lips. Then, she moans with a sigh, sounding satisfied and positively

spent. “You should’ve used my mouth.”

I expect the video and the surreal experience to end.

It doesn’t.

Instead, the camera flips back to show the face of the man whose dick’s performance I watched for the past half an hour or so.

His hair falls on either side of his forehead, damp with sweat, his eyes glinting, the blue looking darker, almost gray, the brown as black as his soul.

He grins at the camera, then bites his lower lip, and says in Russian, “This could be us, Mishka.”

Then the video stops. On his face.

A smash echoes in the air, and I realize I’ve crushed the bottle of milk with my bare hand.

I remain calm as I watch my blood mixing with the milk, drops enlarging in a pool, turning pink. The liquid sloshes off the counter, drenching my shorts and leaving streaks across my white socks.

A mess.

Like my life right now.

Just because of a thorn in my side that I should’ve left to die in that cave.

But I didn’t.

The time has come to put him in his place and teach him the manners he obviously lacks.

I’M SURPRISINGLY CALM FOR SOMEONE WHOSE GIRLFRIEND OF FOUR YEARS cheated on him.

Someone who had to watch what could only be described as a sex tape of her riding another guy’s dick.

And not just any guy’s.

Yulian’s.

Not that it matters whose dick she was riding, but the blow is harsher knowing it’s him.

The one guy I just can’t stand.

Danika doesn’t know about it, or she wouldn’t have shown up at a charity ball put on by Aunt Reina, mother to my friends Gareth and Killian. She’s also Nikolai’s maternal aunt and an ex-mafia princess, but unlike Niko’s mom, she chose to stay away from the Bratva world and only indulges in charity-related organizations.

Her sons aren’t as distant, though. Jeremy, Nikolai, and I—the future mafia heirs of the New York Bratva—are their best friends.

I don’t even need to be here, but I asked Mom if I could attend on her behalf. She’s a big champion of this charity and is friends with Aunt Reina, but I convinced her it’d be good if I were to give the check instead of her.

However, I possess no philanthropic intentions tonight. I had the guards organize a romantic dinner for my parents and made each of them believe it was the other’s idea—you know, so they don’t have a chance to bail.

They’ll eventually know it was me and I had a plan, but by that time, I’ll be done.

I don’t want them to witness my most disgraceful form.

“Hon!” Danika throws herself into my arms.

I don’t hug her, just pat her shoulder mechanically, with a complete sense of indifference.

Once upon a time, I saw her as a partner. Right now, she’s nothing.

It should be frightening that I’m able to discard her so easily. I suppose it did hurt when I watched the video of my one and only girlfriend of four years cheating on me so blatantly.

But did it hurt enough? *Should* it hurt some more?

Possibly, yes.

I think other guys would be more devastated if they were in my place.

But then again, I’ve always been a pragmatic person, and emotions have little influence on my decisions.

Danika is just a rotten limb that needs to be amputated. That’s all.

“I missed you.” She drops a kiss on my cheek, then looks around. “This place is amazing. You should’ve told me beforehand, and I would’ve worn a better dress.”

That’s usually my cue to tell her she looks gorgeous in whatever she’s wearing—tonight, it’s a red spaghetti-strap dress. The marks from her wild night are hidden by makeup, but she was sloppy with a finger mark near her nape that’s not completely concealed.

A simmering hurricane bubbles beneath the surface of my psyche, shoving itself against my harrowing emotions with inexplicable intensity.

I reach out, meaning to skim my fingers against the mark—not even sure why I want to do that—but instead, my thumb stays there, on his thumb's mark. This is where he put his fingers when she was giving him head before he grabbed her hair, making her choke on his cock.

I've *never* made her choke on my cock, but he took the liberty to do so with what belongs to *me*.

So now, I press down on the faint trace of Yulian's thumb.

This is entirely…novel. I don't know why I want to do this or why I feel the need to dig deeper, go harder, as if it's his thumb that I'm jamming.

"Ow!" Danika yelps and I let my hand fall as if I've been possessed.

When I don't apologize and just keep staring, Danika's mouth pulls in a downturned pout.

"Is everything okay, Vaughn?"

"Not really, no."

"What's wrong?" She rubs my arm.

I stare at her hand, at the red nails that were digging into Yulian's arms and back, holding on for dear life, and then at her face. "I think you know exactly what's wrong."

"What do you mean…?"

I pull out my phone, make sure the sound is off, and show her the video. At first, she frowns, then her eyes widen, and she tries to snatch it away, probably to hide it? Delete it?

I don't know, and I couldn't care less, so I slide it back into my pocket and keep my hand there, in my pocket. "Was he the first guy you cheated on me with?"

"It's not what you think, it's—"

"Was he the first?" I cut her off, my voice unchanging, too calm, too detached. It should be disturbing how easily I'm able to see her as less than a speck of dust.

She bites her lower lip and looks down, tears welling in her eyes, confirming my suspicions. Of course he's not the first. She looks like she does it on the regular.

And I didn't notice.

Maybe I didn't *care* enough to notice.

Maybe I trusted her too much to question what she told me.

“I just… I just needed more,” she whispers, looking around, searching to see if anyone is listening to her fall from grace. Danika has only ever cared about her reputation, which I’ve always thought was a shallow fixation, but I’ve never really faulted her for it.

Now, I realize I don’t even know this girl.

“Was I that unsatisfying?” I ask, my voice stripped of emotion.

“No, it’s…you’re not rough enough and too nice, and I don’t like that all the time. But really, I love you—”

“Spare me the love confessions. You didn’t look like you loved me when you were being fucked by another man.”

She glares at me. “So if a man cheats because he’s not satisfied, it’s fine, but if a girl does it, it’s an issue?”

“It’s an issue both ways. And when did I *cheat*, Danika? I was fully devoted to you.”

“You were fully devoted to the life you wanted in which I just happen to fit!” she whisper-yells. “You don’t even love me; you love the idea of me.”

“Don’t belittle my feelings just because you couldn’t reciprocate them. I gave you *everything*.”

She laughs, the sound long and bitter. “Everything, yeah. Just not your emotions, not your jealousy, and definitely not your heart. Do you even have one?”

“Danika…”

“You’ll break up with me now, and you’ll do it publicly so you can humiliate me for daring to humiliate you. You just can’t stand the idea of another man touching your *thing*, I get it, but you know what, I don’t regret any of it, least of all last night. At least I spent the night being worshiped by a man who knows exactly what he wants and goes for it, which can’t be said about you.”

I narrow my eyes.

She laughs, but tears well in her eyes. “You thought I couldn’t figure out your plan? Fine, I knew the day would come that you’d find out about the sex and ditch me, or I’d marry you and live with a lifeless statue who knows all the right things to do and say, knows exactly when to smile, laugh, and say the right words, but lacks any fucking soul. I never really had you anyway. Guess I lucked out that it’s ending now instead of years down the road after we spawn kids.”

“Are you done?”

“Yeah.” She lets out an exhale. “I know I never had you fully. I never even had a fragment of you. All I had was an illusion.”

I let my lips set in a line as I speak in a loud voice for all those around me to hear, so that Danika’s precious social circle will become her downfall. She’s always loved gossiping about the new shit in town. It’s only fair that she becomes the topic.

“You, Danika, have cheated on me multiple times when I’ve only ever been loyal to you. You mistook the pedestal I put you on as a throne and are not fit for me. From today on, you’re nothing to me, my family, and my social circle. I do not want to see your face ever again.”

I don’t even look at her as I stride out of the venue amid whispers and gasps.

Nothing further is required on my part. After tonight, Danika will fall out of the Upper East Side’s grace faster than a shooting star.

In a few weeks, people will forget her name.

Her dad’s fall will be harder, and they’ll have to change states. Countries, even. She’ll be a has-been in no time, and I’ll never hear from her again. I asked the members of staff to burn her things at my place. Sterilizing my space from vermin, so to speak. I bought her most of that luxurious stuff anyway, and I can ruin it in a heartbeat.

I can burn her both literally and figuratively.

Just as I gave her power and status, I can revoke them just like that.

The extent to which she means nothing to me is almost coldhearted.

Maybe it’s always been that way.

Maybe it was really the picture I had in my head, not her.

Because ever since I watched her sex tape, I’ve only made methodical decisions. I revoked all her exclusive memberships that I pay for and had her banned from all of the Upper East Side’s prestigious clubs. Then I asked Dad to block any of our dealings with her father and presented him with damning financial data that will soon circulate in all mafia circles and paint her father as an irresponsible partner.

After that, I had myself tested for STIs, even though I only ever fucked her with a condom, but I had to be safe in case she gave me something nasty. Thankfully, the result came back negative.

I can safely say the Danika chapter is now finished.

Just like her.

I might not have killed her, but her and her family's fall from grace will be much worse than death.

For someone who cares about appearances more than anything, social banishment is the worst punishment I could inflict upon her.

I pull out my phone and put in my earbuds as I approach my car.

Once I'm in the back seat, I greet the driver and tell him to take me home.

As we start to move, I go to the cameras I had Jeremy's men in Brighton Island install at the mansion Yulian shares with his goons. Just like my friends have formed the Heathens' club, Yulian and his entourage have the Serpents' club, and they're rivals in the heart of The King's U.

Jeremy said his people could only access the outside, near the gate of the mansion, but that's enough.

For *now*.

I watch for the other things I asked Jeremy to arrange after I told him the story this afternoon.

He, like any logical person, expected me to be more devastated, but I was busy detailing my plans and exactly what he needed to do.

It's around midnight on the island right now. One camera shows a motorcycle flying through the gate, then stopping suddenly, throwing the driver onto the concrete, sending the bike to the opposite side of him.

A smile curls my lips as I watch him sit up with a groan while the guards rush up to him.

Yulian removes the helmet that saved his skull from cracking into pieces and shakes his head like a dog, grinning. "I'm totally fine! Good call about the leather jacket, Cy. I would've lost my fucking arm, goddamn!"

My smile falls as he laughs while *Cyrus* gets out of a sports car and approaches him, eyeing the bike suspiciously.

He should.

Not sure if Yulian tells that prick everything or if he had the time to inform him, but he probably did. I was able to confirm that Yulian flew back to Chicago on his private jet as soon as he was finished with Danika, so that gave him ample time to inform Cyrus.

Not that it matters.

"What's up, Zveroushka?" Yulian walks toward the bike. "Mad at me or something?"

Zveroushka. A diminutive form of Zver *(Зверь)*.

He called his bike Zver. Beast in Russian.

Who the hell gives diminutive forms to their motorcycles? Yulian apparently.

I watch as he keeps walking, his fingers tightening around the phone.

Just a few more steps.

Just a bit more…

“Yulian, stay away—”

Cy’s words are cut off when the bike explodes right in front of Yulian’s eyes. Cyrus shoves him out of the way at the last second as the flames mount to the sky.

There’s an army of soldiers running around, shouting orders as extreme chaos ensues, but Yulian isn’t rattled.

He’s laughing—manically.

He’s lost his mind. Good.

From the research I did, that bike is the most precious possession Yulian has. He also has a name for it, so it’s only fair he sees it blow up in front of his face. That’s why I asked Jeremy to have one of his men mess with the bike and plant an explosive that would go off around this time—when Yulian usually returns to the mansion.

I timed it perfectly.

If he hadn’t followed his routine, he would’ve been blown up while on top of it.

Which wouldn’t have been a bad idea now that I’m thinking about it.

I pull out his number and send him a screenshot of the fire as he sits there watching it burn.

ME

Just for the record, I could’ve killed you but chose not to.

I go back to the camera just in time for him to check his phone. Yulian jumps up and looks around, then grins at his screen.

I don’t like that expression.

He’s supposed to be in pain.

Or at least upset.

He *has* to pay for messing with me.

My fingers clench around the phone when he texts back.

YULIAN

Are you flirting with me? The answer is yes, by the way.

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10

YULIAN

Well, this is inconvenient.

And anticlimactic as hell.

Someone needs to do something because I'm seriously contemplating grand-scale things. You know, like bombs and assassination attempts, fifties mafia style.

And that's a good idea for a shitload of reasons.

"Are we seriously holding a funeral for your bike?" Cyrus stares between me and the rest of the Serpents' club that has gathered here today to commemorate a legend.

They say nothing because, unlike Cy, they're not safe from my temper—if they piss me off, they'll be gone in a heartbeat.

Listen, I don't remember the names of half the idiots who decided to join the club. Cy and the guards confirmed they're clean, and since they're the kids of other members in the Bratva, they're kind of obligated to respect me on the outside, even if they disregard me on the inside.

Tough shit. They're stuck with me.

The main reason our parents agreed to send us to The King's U, a university funded by mafia money on the depressing coast of the United Kingdom, is that they have full control over the board, the grounds, and the mansion we live in.

Another reason is that the other club at the college, the Heathens, is run by the New York mafia kids—sans the actual heir, if I may mention;

seriously, what's the point?—and we just love getting into each other's business.

Call it the Russian sense of camaraderie.

Anyway, the Serpents' club was born just to antagonize the Heathens. It's pretty recent—since Cy and I enrolled in college last year. Bro rejected all the Ivy League colleges in America just to be a pain in my ass. But I get it, really.

I don't trust myself half of the time, so it's a good call that he's here with me. If he wasn't, I'd already be worm food.

In short, this club is my personal stage for mischief and endless shenanigans. Partying, fucking, sneaking guys into my room, and bribing the staff so nothing gets back to my dad.

Let's say he didn't react well the first time he caught me with a guy. Almost killed me, actually.

He promised to "end the life he gave me" in the most painful way possible the next time I put my dick somewhere "unnatural." So, yeah, I'm not in the mood to die yet, so I'll be keeping the gay tendencies under wraps until further notice.

I still love the freedom of being so far from home. My dad can't touch me or backhand me or kick me until I pass out.

Yes, it's temporary, but it's better than *nothing*.

Cy said I can't trust any member in the Serpents' club, especially not with my semi-secret sexual orientation, or they'll use it to put a target on my back. Semi because Cy, Danil, and Mariana—my chief guards—know.

All the guys I've fucked know, too, but they're not part of this world, so they don't really matter.

I *hope*.

Seriously, can I not get killed at twenty for literally just *fucking* around? Please and thank you.

Cy has the mansion under control—handpicked staff and guards whose heads he probably holds shit over—but the other members aren't as solid.

They're potential spies.

And because of that, I make their lives as uncomfortable as possible. That's expected of me anyway, so why the hell not?

"Shh. Don't listen to his nonsense, Zver. I'll miss you so much." I pat the remnants of my baby that are holed up in the back of a van. I've kept it

in the garage since the brutal murder a few days ago, but Cy insisted on getting rid of the “scraps of metal.”

He got punched for calling Zveroushka mere scraps of metal.

“This is absolute nonsense,” he continues nagging to my right, like an annoying fly. “You should be focused on other important matters.”

“Don’t blaspheme. Nothing is as important as the death of my baby.”

“How about the one who caused the death of said ‘baby’?”

I shake my head, feigning sadness. “I even sacrificed my Zveroushka, and he’s still running away. Isn’t it sad?”

“It should be enraging, not sad.” Cy lowers his voice so only I can hear. “Someone breached our security and managed to blow up your ride—”

“My *baby.*”

“Fine. Your *baby*. You could’ve gotten killed. Why the fuck are you being so nonchalant about this?”

“Because I wasn’t going to get killed.” I tilt my head to the side, recalling the text I received from Vaughn right after the tragic death of Zver. “He didn’t want to kill me. He only wanted to punish me for messing with his toy. A toy for a toy, see what I did there?”

“And then what? Did your grand plan produce anything yet?”

“Don’t be impatient, Cy.”

“You said he’d be taking the next plane to the island that day.” He searches his surroundings. “I don’t see him anywhere, do you?”

I roll my eyes, then wave at the staff, who are driving the love of my life to her grave. The others scatter, getting ready for the party I decided to throw tomorrow on a whim.

The grounds of the mansion are massive, and with the typical cloudy sky, it looks like it’s cut from the Gothic era.

The place has too many windows whose glass has been bulletproofed to eliminate any security hazards. Spires like it’s trying to stab the sky, wrought-iron gates that creak even when they’re closed, and enough stone gargoyles to start a cult. The walls are a moody gray that always looks wet, like the place is permanently mourning someone—probably my Zver.

She went too early.

Cy follows me as I walk inside. We’re instantly surrounded by high ceilings, echoey halls, chandeliers that cost more than my soul, and rugs so thick, they could smother a man. The mansion smells like waxed wood, old money, and control.

There’s a panic room in the east wing. My father had it built for “emergencies.” I use it to store liquor, questionable tools, and a punching bag with his face drawn on it in Sharpie. Feels poetic, no?

Cy grabs my elbow and pulls me with him to a quiet corner out of the hustle and bustle of the staff preparing the grand hall for the party.

He’s a bit shorter than me, so it should make the judgmental look in his eyes comical at best. But no, he looks serious.

I *think*.

Fuck me sideways. And the nagging starts in three, two, one—

“You need to let your fixation with Vaughn go.” He speaks in a low, even voice. “It was stupid enough to fly to New York and fuck his girlfriend, then send him the video. He might let it go with blowing up your bike, so this is your chance to cut it out.”

“But I don’t want to.”

“The fuck is wrong with you? You want your dad to kill you or something?”

“What does this have to do with him? I’m just playing an extremely *innocent* game.”

“There’s nothing innocent about you, motherfucker.”

“That’s true. Anyway, seriously, you worry too much. My dad won’t find out. My revenge will be over before he gets wind of this.”

He narrows his eyes, then leans against the wall, his arms and ankles crossed. “Are you sure it’s even for revenge purposes at this point?”

“Of course it is.”

“Extremely doubtful.”

“God forbid a man wants another man to pay for his sins.”

“Four years after the fact?”

“I’m like a horse. I hold grudges for ages.”

“Camel.”

“What?”

“Camels are the animals known for holding a grudge, supposedly, at least.”

“Camel, horse, nobody gives a fuck.”

“I do.”

“You don’t count.” I shake my head and walk away. “Off to work out so I can look awesome at the party.”

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Does that mean I can’t shoot my way into the New York kids’ mansion?”

“*What?*”

“Just kidding.” I’m whistling as I wave without looking at him.

Cyrus can be tiring even in small doses, and it definitely has *nothing* to do with the fact that he’s usually right.

Okay, most of the time.

Fiiine. *Always.*

My phone rings, and I grin as I pick up the video call from my sister.

Her face appears on the other end, soft and radiant with huge blue eyes and auburn hair that falls to her shoulders in waves.

Except for her eyes, Alina’s looking more and more like our mom, which is a blessing because this way, I feel like I’ll never forget our mother’s face.

“How’s my favorite girl?” I ask, holding the phone up as I walk out of the main entrance.

“Bored.” She pouts. “And stuck on this piece I’m working on.”

“Oh no, need me to beat some sense into someone?”

She laughs, her voice ringing all around me. “You’ll beat some sense into my brain?”

“If need be, absolutely.”

“You’re so annoying.”

“Nah, resourceful. There’s a difference.”

She rolls back, and my chest clenches when I see her in the chair, dressed in a beautiful dark-red gown. Her room appears in the background, full of posters of classical music soloists and albums. “What do you think? I’m wearing this for the recital tomorrow.”

“Stunning as usual. I wish I were there to cheer you on.”

“No, it’s better you don’t meet with Papa that often.” Her smile drops a bit before she rolls back to the camera.

My sister has been paralyzed for four years, and every time I look at her, I feel the knife I lodged deep in my soul move and slash through my very existence.

Dying a little is the correct term.

Because Alya wouldn’t be in this predicament if I were there.

If I weren’t so preoccupied with the unattainable.

The fucking lethal *obsession*.

“We’ll have to meet eventually,” I say, keeping my tone light.

“Well, eventually doesn’t have to be now.” She’s silent for a moment. “I wish you could stay far away forever.”

“And leave you behind? No way in hell.”

“He doesn’t torture me to near death like he does you.”

“I still don’t like that you’re on your own with Lukas and Mikailo there.” Lukas and Mikailo being our older half-brothers—from different mothers, because Dad liked to fuck around—you know, the same thing he promised to kill me for with a slight change of gender.

“They don’t care about me enough to kill me. I think being in a chair makes me no competition whatsoever, so silver linings, I guess.” She laughs.

I don’t.

My heart is ripping from the inside out.

Our half-brothers, who keep working like dogs for the emperor’s—sorry, Dad’s—approval, don’t see her as competition now. But the possibility of her having children that could challenge them in the future isn’t a risk they’re willing to take.

“Sorry, bad joke.” She winces. “Anyway, miss you. Will send you videos tomorrow, okay?”

“All right.”

“Seriously, stop looking so grim. I lost my legs and ballet, but I can still play the piano.”

“You loved ballet.”

“Not as much as playing the piano. I’m serious. I don’t even miss ballet anymore, because my love for the piano flourished and I realized I’m better at piano than dancing. I enjoy it a lot more, too. Maybe what happened was a good thing, so that I can dedicate myself to one activity and excel in it.”

“You excel at everything.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re my brother.”

“Nah, you’re just amazing. I was your number one fan, remember? You used to make me sit around and listen to you play.”

She giggles, covering her mouth. “You were making little bombs with machetes and stuff stolen from the kitchen.”

“That means you provide the best inspiration.”

She laughs, then stops, probably remembering how severely I was punished for my creations or when I dismantled some device to see inside

it.

Then she tactfully changes the subject, talking about her preparations and our half-brothers. Alina hates them on principle, not because they're mean to her or anything, but because they antagonize me and are vying for my place.

She can't stand them for entirely unselfish reasons. Because she's always been in my corner, but I haven't always been there for her. I failed her once, and I'll never let that happen again.

By the time she hangs up, I feel a sense of loss.

No, it's probably that pesky crushing guilt again.

I spend an hour punching the bag with Dad's face on it, letting out the hostility that seeps into my muscles.

Still can't freaking punch him to smithereens, though.

What a fucking pity.

As I'm about to lift weights, my phone pings on the bench, and I rush to it and pick it up, sweat dripping on the screen.

My shoulders fall when I find a text from one of the girls I fuck asking me to wear matching clothes to the party.

I remind her that we're not dating. I probably won't fuck her tomorrow, because I need to get this aggression out and she's not one to enjoy that. Which means I need to fuck a guy—or two. The more the merrier.

It's ridiculous that my ragey habits have been mounting because the asshole whom I've been anticipating completely ignored me when I texted him after Zveroushka's death.

Though it wasn't one text. I kind of texted him on the regular for three days straight.

So you kind of never answered my question? The "are you flirting with me?" one, I mean.

It's okay if you are. I respect all sexual orientations.

Not that I'm saying you have a different one.

Unless you do?

No pressure, just an innocent question.

Maybe not so innocent, but you get what I mean. 😉

I see that you're reading my texts, you know. Care to spare me some words?

Not necessary, though. I will continue to fill up your inbox until you do.

By the way, heard you broke up with your girlfriend. Oh no, am I the reason?

That was a rhetorical question. I know I am. Should've broken up with her when I asked nicely. Honestly, you should thank me for outing her. The girl is as much of a pro as I am at sleeping around.

She kind of implied you don't satisfy her. Bet she didn't satisfy you, either, right?

Too soon? Anyway, I'm still asking nicely, so come to the island, or I'll have to do something about it.

Don't call my bluff. You know I'm unhinged.

With that text—sent late last night—I attached a video of me fighting Nikolai in the underground ring. Neither of us won, but we were both bloodied shitless.

I actually sent Vaughn a few of those videos of me fighting Nikolai, Jeremy, and Killian, just so he'd see me pummeling his dear friends that he refused to join.

You know, grand plan things.

And because he keeps ignoring me, I type again.

Just held a funeral for Zver. She died too young because of you. Shouldn't you offer your condolences?

Fine, I know you won't. Worth a try.

Anyway, I'm throwing a party tomorrow. You should come. Last warning.

If you don't, I'll invite Nikolai over and have a fuck fest, then send you footage.

Just kidding.

While Nikolai is bi, like me, he's *not* my type. I prefer feminine boys, and he's so far outside of that scope, it's a complete turn-off. Besides, he only fucks, and I *don't* get fucked. Period.

He's also too unhinged, too chaotic, and has far from the princeling, well-put-together looks of a certain pain in my neck.

A text appears on the screen, and I sit up taller, my breath stuttering.

Fuck me.

Vaughn actually *replied*.

MISHKA

You're not Nikolai's type.

ME

Are you sure?

Yes.

100%?

1000%

What do I get if I try and succeed?

My gun in your face.

Sounds hot. Might give it a try just for that.

Stay away from Nikolai.

Or what? You'll make me? You'll have to be here for that, you know.

Do you want me to come and kill you, is that it?

I have other things in mind, but coming here would be a fantastic start, yeah. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go get ready to woo Nikolai tomorrow.

Stop it.

Make me.

He reads it but doesn't reply.

Great, back to the ghosting stage. What an amazing place to be in.

Yet a smile tugs at my lips because something has changed—I got under his skin, even temporarily.

Now, I need to delve deeper into that skin and stay there.

Like scar tissue, almost impossible to get rid of.

Guess I need to find a way to provoke him into coming here.

Even if I have to seduce the bull Nikolai for it.

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11

VAUGHN

I didn’t mean to be here.

In fact, this is the last place I should be.

Logically.

Rationally.

If I consider this situation from every sensible perspective, I shouldn’t have allowed myself to jump on a plane and come to where that bastard lives.

And the most disturbing part is that I can’t find an explanation for my behavior.

I dug deep into my brain and came up empty—not too deep, though, because that would trigger impertinent thoughts and skeletons I’d rather not provoke.

Before I knew it, I found myself here.

On the island I swore to never come to—except for participating in initiations with the Heathens and indulging in mindless violence-slash-release.

But the upcoming initiation is still a couple of weeks away, so I shouldn’t be here.

And I definitely shouldn’t be in Yulian’s den.

The mansion is too loud—pulsing music, undulating bodies, and the heat of overindulgence. The scent of cologne, sweat, and expensive smoke

drifts through the open archways. The whole place is decadence wrapped in decay.

And I just stand here in the shadows, my mask cool against my skin and my hands in my pockets as I watch him.

I managed to infiltrate their security, mostly due to hacking an invitation to the Serpents' compound.

Unlike the Heathens, who don't throw parties often, the Serpents have these types of hedonistic gatherings on the regular in their mansion.

But then again, my group of friends doesn't contain a certain unhinged guy who loves to advertise his pleasure-seeking tendencies.

The thorn in my side I came here for.

No. I'm not here *for* him—I'm here to teach him a lesson if he goes anywhere near Nikolai.

I'd like to consider myself responsible for my entourage's well-being. And Niko's well-being would be impossible if he got involved with the terminal cancer called Yulian.

So my presence comes down to putting that bastard Yulian in his damn place.

Said bastard is right across from me.

He's wearing a black skeleton mask with gold serpents that gleams beneath the chandeliers. His obnoxious laughter lingers in the air as he talks to a group of people surrounding him in a reverent circle. The slightly husky sound is loud and carefree, like he's not shackled by any rule in our world.

He runs his fingers along a guy's arm, his body language loose and welcoming. The same slender fingers he had all over Danika not a week ago. The same type of sensual touch he used to steal my girlfriend.

It's on a random guy now—that same flirtatious edge. The same sensual appetite.

Yulian lifts his mask, only revealing his lips, then lowers his head toward the bottle in the guy's hand. His eyes on the guy, Yulian opens his mouth and closes it around the neck of the bottle. The guy tilts it, and Yulian takes a sip, his mouth still sealed around it.

As Yulian pulls away, some of the drink dribbles down his chin, winding over the taut veins of his neck before disappearing into the collar of his shirt. His lips are stained with something red—not sure if it's a drink or lipstick or both.

The guy who's holding the bottle swipes his hand along Yulian's neck, on the liquid shining there, then strokes the skin.

My fingers flex in my pocket the more the guy rubs Yulian's skin, but I force my hand still, even as inexplicable fire incinerates me.

I don't move. Don't speak.

Just watch.

And bide my time.

I'm good with waiting.

Monitoring.

Observing.

From a young age, I've always been described by my teachers as extremely bright but slightly withdrawn.

I'm not really withdrawn, per se. I just couldn't care less about the noise that's been surrounding me since I was born.

Tuning out distractions and carefully selecting what to focus on have been the most useful tools in structuring my life.

Though my brain would argue that my being here isn't part of that careful selection. I'm clearly succumbing to a distraction I thought I'd eradicated long ago.

I don't understand it.

And I'm growing uncomfortable with the obvious mismatch in my patterns and the nauseating, gratuitous scene in front of me, but I refuse to leave.

I'm here to protect Nikolai, after all.

Nikolai.

Yet my attention is completely confiscated by Yulian, who's swaying on his feet, leaning slightly against the guy.

I know he said in his distasteful text that he'd fuck Nikolai, hinting at his bisexuality, but how…could he be so *open* about it?

Though the guy obviously has a death wish. So maybe he couldn't care less about who figures out his preferences and whether or not he'll be punished for it.

Seriously, with a father like Yaroslav, how is he so fucking *sloppy*?

Irresponsible.

Absolutely nauseating behavior.

Yulian straightens and motions with his hand, signaling his departure. I wait for a beat, expecting those in his circle—namely the guy with the drink

—to follow him.

No one does.

Across the hall, I move parallel to him, silently slipping through the crowd.

He’s swaying a bit as he takes the stairs at a moderate pace.

I cast a glance at my surroundings, half expecting his shadow Cyrus to be there like a watchdog.

Honestly, I never liked that guy, which is odd, because I’ve hardly spoken to him.

I heard him talking to Yulian all the time at that summer camp, though. He always seemed half done with his shit, but he still had his back one hundred percent.

And I suppose I despise that.

Someone like Yulian should be on his own so he can finally suffer the consequences of his actions. Though if that were the case, he would’ve probably gotten himself killed by now.

I use the throngs of people standing or sitting on the marble stairs for camouflage as I shadow Yulian’s movements, strategically leaving a safe distance between us.

Then I start to get closer, but he’s too drunk to notice me.

What an idiot with no sense of self-preservation.

So what if he’s in his own mansion with his guards around? If he gets attacked right now, a knife to his throat would have him bleeding out in seconds.

Not that I’m considering the option.

Or maybe I should.

That could finally extinguish the fire that’s been raging in my soul since he sent me that sex video.

Or maybe since he appeared in that fucking restaurant.

He sways up the stairs, waving at a group of guys and girls huddling in the corner, and they raise their drinks back.

I narrow my eyes between them.

Yulian goes down a hall and stumbles against a door. As he’s about to stagger inside, a large figure appears in the doorway, wearing a mask similar to his. He’s around an inch taller than Yulian and dressed just like him in black jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt.

Yulian tilts his head back and laughs upon seeing him.

He does that a lot.

Laughs. Like a fucking idiot.

The husky sound echoes down the hall and into my ears, uninvited.

Something is said between them, but it's camouflaged by the chatter surrounding me, and I don't hear it.

As I slip closer, the man grabs Yulian's arm and pulls him inside, the door slamming behind them.

I stop short, my shoes digging into the carpet.

Was that…Nikolai?

No. Certainly not. He wouldn't have come here in the first place, and even if he did, he wouldn't have locked Yulian in a room with him.

As if…*what?*

My fingers clench in my pocket, and my right eye twitches uncontrollably.

Just because Niko's bi, he wouldn't go for Yulian.

Right…?

I'm walking before my thoughts can catch up to my actions, but as I approach the room, the door swings open.

I back up against a wall, hidden by a group of people as the man who pulled Yulian into the room stumbles through the door across the hall.

He's still wearing the mask, but I know it's not Yulian. The height and body type are not the same.

Call it an annoying observation habit, but I'd recognize that prick anywhere, even if he's behind layers of disguise.

After Yulian's copycat goes into the other room, a slender guy, judging by the frame, who's also wearing a mask, slips through the crowd and goes into that room.

I narrow my eyes on him as a sense of familiarity prickles me.

Hold on.

The lean body build, the perfect posture due to a decade and a half of continuous archery training…

Gareth?

Surely not. Why would he come here in disguise…?

But then again, *why would I*? Unlike him, I flew all the way from the other side of the ocean.

I remain still long after Gareth goes into the room. It's so…unlike him. He's the quintessential overachieving law student—meticulous about his

image and how others see him and by far the least violent among us.

Though I shouldn't be quick to label Gareth. Everyone has dark sides.

I stand in place, contemplating.

Considering my next course of action.

Yulian is clearly not sleeping with Niko. Because his copycat who pulled him into the room was not Nikolai—I only thought of that rationally now that my eyes aren't covered in a red mist.

What I came to prevent isn't happening, so I can leave.

I *have* to leave.

And yet my feet carry me in the direction of his room, completely unnoticed by the crowd surrounding me.

I halt in front of Yulian's door, my breathing deepening, my fingers hesitating on the doorknob.

Just like they did four years ago when I found myself in a place I shouldn't have been.

And that was also because of this prick.

It was the first time I ran away from home, the first time I defied norms, tradition, and my core beliefs.

The first time I used my intellect to outsmart my parents and leave their reach.

I felt so free, as if I were soaring in the sky.

Until I was crushed back to life again.

Back then, if I hadn't stood in front of his door, if I hadn't gone in, I wouldn't have had my hopes broken to pieces before they even started to be fulfilled.

I wouldn't have become the current version of myself.

If I turn back right now, I won't have to relive that experience.

I won't have to feel the cracks in my armor that I thought was impenetrable.

A noise comes from my right, and I turn the knob, then slip inside, locking the door after me.

The soft glow of a standing lamp illuminates the room.

His room.

Haphazard, chaotic, with clothes thrown on chairs, books open, pens scattered on the desk. He's drawn a bullet on the top corner of his notebook, like a child who needs pictures woven in with text.

Removing the mask, I scan my surroundings. There are a few dismantled electronic devices on the desk, exposed wires hooked into strange makeshift cubes. A few screws and pins are scattered about in a complete mess.

A rough groan draws my attention to Yulian, who's sprawled across the bed.

One arm draped over his head, T-shirt rumpled and untucked, jeans riding low on his hips. The serpentine mask lies beside him, glinting faintly in the low light as if the snakes will come out and devour him alive.

His thick brows are relaxed in sleep, but they still carry that arrogant slant. Lips parted slightly, full and flushed. Jaw sharp enough to cut someone.

The shadows shift across his face with every breath he takes, casting fleeting ghosts down the veins in his throat and collarbone. There's a small scar on the side of his cheek I hadn't noticed before. A fresh one across his knuckles. Another one peeking from where his shirt is lifted, on his abs, disappearing beneath the waist of his pants.

His body is always telling stories, and I have this urge to press my fingers against every line and make them speak.

There's something obscene in the way he sleeps so unguarded, so alive.

I want to reach out and squash him. Slit his throat or choke him to death so he can no longer speak or threaten me or text me when he's bored.

Just so he'll…*stop* disrupting the balance of my life.

My hand reaches down, wrapping around his throat.

And it's like I touched fire.

He's not burning up, but something inside me is. A tingling sensation shoots up my arm and settles in the pit of my stomach with a thud.

I don't squeeze.

Don't move.

My thumb twitches against his steady pulse point.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

A wave of dizziness coils in my chest, climbing up my throat—just like it always does whenever the prick is near.

But it doesn't stop there.

No.

It’s followed by a cocktail of feelings I can hardly fathom. Rage, pent-up emotions, and so many…regrets.

I don’t even know what the fuck I want to do with Yulian.

I don’t want to hurt him, not really. Or do I?

Actually, I do. Maybe if I shatter him to pieces, it’ll finally be over.

I squeeze his throat, my thumb and fingers sinking into his skin in one violent go.

His eyes flutter open, blinking slowly. If it were me, I’d reach for my gun now, shoot my assaulter between his eyes.

Not Yulian.

No.

Because his lips curl into a lazy smile. “Hmm, you’re in my dreams now, Mishka?”

My fingers tremble around his throat, and I squeeze harder, telling myself the only reason I’m shaking has to do with rage. “I told you not to call me that.”

“Pfft, that’s totally something you’d say. Dream scores five out of five for realism.” He clamps onto my forearm, his fingers biting into my skin, and a spark races through me, sharp and electric.

It’s like I’m a live wire.

Fucking shocked alive by his touch.

He yanks me off balance in one swift motion. I stumble forward, crashing against him, chest pressed to chest, legs tangled awkwardly on the bed.

My fingers are still around his neck, our faces inches away, his parted lips breathing into me, the smell of alcohol permeating my nostrils.

“Fuck, you’re so fucking beautiful.” His whispered words, almost sounding like he’s in awe, trace my skin like a shadowed curse.

An ancient one that’s impossible to undo.

It’s his eyes—they’re the source of the curse. The pools of blue and brown look darker, the rings surrounding them no longer there as his pupils dilate and his nostrils flare.

I’m so caught up in the little changes, in the feel of his heartbeat on mine, that it takes me a while to realize I’m breathing as harshly as he is.

Our exhalations twist between us, heavy as smoke.

Before I can put some much-needed distance between us, he lets out a choked puff of air. “God, I hate your face.”

Then he tilts his head, annihilating the last sliver of space between us, and our lips meet.

My eyes widen, my fingers trembling uncontrollably around his throat as he brushes his mouth on mine, sloppily, deliberately, his tongue peeking out to lick my lower lip before he bites down. His hand finds my hair, and he grabs a handful, pulling me toward him.

I realize I'm not breathing as pain explodes on the soft cushion he sinks his teeth into. A metallic taste fills my mouth as liquid heat rushes down my spine, expanding through my chest and down…down…

Fuck no.

I pull myself away from him, clutching his throat and forcing him to free my hair.

Yulian's tongue peeks out and he licks the blood on his lips—my blood—his eyes droopy as he hums. "You still taste divine."

His eyes drift shut, and I repeat the same thing I did four years ago.

I run away.

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12

YULIAN

It’s been less than two weeks.

Thirteen days, eight hours, and five minutes, to be exact.

What? It’s not my fault I can’t stop counting. Take it up with my brain.

Reality is, it’s been such a long time since I had that super realistic dream of me devouring Vaughn’s lips.

Now, listen up, I know it’s not healthy or normal that I was practically dreaming about the same man I intend to break to pieces, but fuck me if my dick understands the logic.

He doesn’t, just for the record, because I woke up with the most massive erection known to man, and when I wrapped my hand around my cock and closed my eyes, all I could picture were Vaughn’s wide eyes when my lips brushed his.

The way the hazel color darkened, and his heartbeat exploded against my own felt too good, too raw.

Too goddamn…real.

Naturally, I came in a minute at the image.

Then I was about to take another minute to figure out what the fuck I was doing but decided against it. What’s the point of thinking about it anyway? Nothing good ever comes out of that business.

I also decided against sharing the episode with Cy. One, he’ll judge me like the little bitch he is, especially since he thinks I’m wasting time and

energy on the Vaughn thing.

Two, because he'll judge me harder till kingdom come.

Still, I had to tell someone, so guess who the scapegoat happened to be?

That's right. The man himself who dared to invade my sacred dreams.

I mean, that's not the first time it's happened. I might've, kind of dreamed of fucking him instead of Danika the night I was done with her—good times—but it was definitely the first time he felt so fucking 3D, almost as if I could taste him.

Or more accurately, his blood that I sucked vampire style.

Anyhoo, my first plan of action was creative. Instead of texts that he ignored like a sport, I video-called him.

That's right. Reach for the sky, right? I'm the most ambitious motherfucker on the planet, bitches.

He still ignored me.

Actually, he *hung up* on me, if you can believe it.

So much audacity in that little shit. I swear he does it on purpose because he knows I'm not used to being ignored, so that he's the crowned champion of the "ignoring Yulian" game.

The only player, too.

Okay, fine, Cy comes second because the motherfucker tunes me out sometimes.

Anyway, back to the subject of Vaughn practicing his niche religion of pretending I don't exist—something I intend to change even if it's the last thing I do.

After he hung up on me a few times, I went for the second-best thing—sending a video.

I filmed myself lying in bed, my hair haphazard, my eyes still droopy from sleep and an orgasm, then stared at the camera for a beat and narrowed my eyes.

"So, in case no one told you, it's *really* rude to hang up on people *after* ignoring their texts. Knock, knock, who's there? Your manners, Vanya. Ha. What do you think of that? I know your name isn't Ivan, but it still fits. Seriously, why did your *fully* Russian parents give you an American name? Pretty sure they meant Ivan and slipped somewhere. Anyway, Vanya sounds adorable, no? Not cuter than Mishka, though. Speaking of Mishka, did I call you that recently? I swear I had the most realistic dream last night in which I was…you know, doing dirty things to you." I winked, grinning, then bite

the corner of my lower lip. “You were so into it, too, by the way. If you don’t believe me, we can reenact the scene.”

He saw that video aaand, you guessed it, he didn’t reply.

The fact that he saw it is enough.

For now.

So since then, I’ve been sending him my video diaries, just talking nonsense, sometimes in Russian, sometimes in English. Oftentimes switching up just to mess with him.

He’s seen every single one of my amateurish vlogs.

Not sure if he’s watched them, but the fact that the blue ticks appear not long after I send my video of the day is enough of a sign that I’m luring him into my trap.

And tonight is the perfect confirmation of my suspicions, because guess what? I received a QR code invitation to the Heathens’ initiation ceremony.

Yup, that’s right.

Heathens, here I come.

While I don’t give a fuck about them, I do give a whole *lot* of fucks that Vaughn joins his friends when an initiation happens.

However, the reason why I’m bubbling with excitement isn’t only because he’ll be there tonight.

No, it’s more due to the very logical conclusion I came to following a recent conversation.

My law professor, Kayden Lockwood. Just kidding, he’s Kayden Davenport—an important business associate of my dad’s and one of the reasons Yaroslav is so feared in the mafia world. Being friends with the Davenports is a fast track way to have power, influence, and carte blanche to kill.

Now, I’m not sure why Kayden came all the way from the States, abandoning his Davenport empire just to play law professor, but it doesn’t matter, because that’s not the important part.

It’s that Kayden said I was drugged that night.

Yup—the night I had a dream about Vaughn’s lips and hard chest pressing and rubbing against mine was the night my drink was roofied.

Maybe that was the reason the dream was so realistic, but you know what? Kayden said he dragged me to my room and saved me, but did he really? Because I swear there was someone other than Kayden in the room with me.

If there’s even the slightest chance it was Vaughn, I might roll off a cliff on my new bike in celebration.

Sure, I’m delusional—he was across the pond and all that—but I’ll stick with the fantasy, thank you very much.

I focus on the now. I’m walking through the forest where the Heathens’ initiation takes place.

Mist curls low around my shoes, the ground damp and eager to stain, and the trees are lined up like comical soldiers, all stiff and whispering secrets to each other.

Typical British weather has graced us once again today—cloudy, gray, and dramatic as hell. Seriously, why does the sky look like it wants to pour its guts out but keeps holding on?

For suspense, I think.

Honestly, the sky and that little shit Vaughn have too much in common.

I wonder if he loves the humble gift I left in his inbox today.

My lips stretch behind the stupid white bunny mask as the wind cuts through my jacket, carrying the scent of pine, old stone, and something darker.

Smoke.

No, sin.

Because fuck me, I’ve been wound up and vibrating with excitement since I got that invitation. No clue who sent it, but I’m so fucking stoked at the idea buzzing in my head.

I brush past a low branch, snag it on my shirt, and keep walking, whistling softly. A frightened scream echoes in the air somewhere ahead, possibly someone who was caught by the Heathens’ chasing games.

The whole atmosphere is fucking intoxicating, and truly, I’d be all over this shit under different circumstances. Chasing, blood, and frightened lambs?

Where do I sign up?

Not today, though, because I’m looking for someone.

I saw Vaughn on that balcony with the four others. He had a white neon stitch mask on, and yes, they all had masks on, so, in reality, I shouldn’t have been able to differentiate him, but then again, he’s so distinctive, even behind a facade.

Nikolai was the biggest and the loudest, so I could tell he was the one with the yellow mask from a mile away.

Jeremy stood in the middle with a club on his shoulder, so the orange mask was obvious.

Killian and Gareth have similar builds, and they held a baseball bat and an archery bow respectively, two weapons Vaughn wouldn't go near. Call it a hunch, but he'd want more control with his weapon of choice, so a gun would be his go-to, but since that's not allowed, he had something very Vaughn, so to speak—a thick chain that's wrapped around his neck like a serpent.

I grin wider when I catch a glimpse of him dragging a guy on the ground, his upper body bulging with exertion, his biceps flexing, the tendons almost visible through the gloves he's wearing.

And yes, I'm close enough, kind of floating between bushes to get near. I'm the definition of a moth flying toward the flame, my wings flapping about against the window, so fucking desperate to be let in.

Or maybe I'm a junkie who's so close to getting his first hit in weeks.

Months.

No—years. Four, to be exact.

A voice over the speaker declares the number scrawled across the eliminated guy's mask. I quicken my pace, using the sound to get as close as possible without Vaughn noticing.

A bit more, just near enough to breathe him in—

He lifts his head, his eyes shooting lasers in my direction.

It's getting dark, and even though I can't see his eyes clearly, I can see something else.

Tension crowds his shoulders, and he tightens his grip on the chain. His spine snaps upright, and he stands taller, his shoulders squared.

Not only does he recognize me, but I also unsettle him.

I unsettle the rigid-as-a-stone, emotionless-man-of-few-words Vaughn.

Fuck me, I'm already getting high.

"Yo." I wave, one finger at a time, then remove my mask, letting it hang in my hand. "Got to say, my heart skipped a beat when I received that invitation, and I've been wondering if *maybe*, *possibly* you were the one who sent it—"

My words come to a choked halt when he runs toward me, throws his chain around my neck, and slams me against a tree. The mask slips from my hand and clatters against the ground, cold metal biting into my skin as Vaughn pulls the chain taut between his fists.

I’m a couple of inches taller than him, but the way he stares me down through the two holes in his mask is fucking intoxicating.

It’s not the staring down per se, it’s how his chest nearly grazes mine, how his loud breaths sound unhinged against his mask in the near silence.

“Love it when you get rough, Mishka.” I grin, winking.

Apparently, that was a very bad idea, because he growls. Literally. The sound vibrates against my chest and goes straight to my dick.

Obviously.

I don’t get to marvel at the stupidity of said sexual organ being turned on by the one guy I shouldn’t go near, because Vaughn pulls me from the tree, then shoves me to the ground. He expertly maneuvers and elongates the chain so that he still has me in a chokehold.

The fall hurts, but not as much as my erection. *Go figure.*

Dying in the throes of desire would look fucking lit on my gravestone, though.

My thoughts are interrupted when he drags me over the fucking dirt with his grip on the chain around my neck.

My head bumps against the ground and pain explodes all over my back, but hey, he’s dragging *me*, not anyone else.

That’s what I call interest.

I laugh to myself as my number is announced on the speaker. Oh, now I’m eliminated from some nonsensical hunt.

Who cares?

Actually, I take it back. It’s *not* nonsensical. After all, I’m being hunted by *Vaughn*, or dragged, or what-the-fuck-ever.

Still counts.

I can fix him.

Just kidding, it’s probably the other way around, and he has to fix *me*.

Placing a hand behind my head, I try to observe his back as he proceeds to wipe the ground with me. But it’s really hard when my vision is upside down. His gloved fingers flex on the thick chains he has over his shoulders while he pulls me with brute, hot-as-fuck strength.

Which is odd. I swear I’m not really attracted to very masculine men and prefer feminine ones, but Vaughn’s strength is getting my dick hot and bothered.

“So, not that I’m complaining or anything, but don’t you think the quality of the date should be better if you intended to get freaky?”

He stops near a large tree, his back muscles flexing, his grip on the chain tightening.

A moment passes.

A second, almost.

Then he inhales sharply before tilting his head down in my direction, the white neon mask looking hot as fuck, if I may say so myself.

“Hi.” I wave again. “I’m open to new kinks, but I’m going to need you to take it real slow, Mishka. Nothing too crazy for the first time, deal?”

“Why aren’t you fighting?” He entirely ignores my suggestion—nothing new there—but he’s looking at me.

A win is a win.

Also, fuck me, did his voice always sound this nice? No, not nice—hot is the word I’m looking for. Deep and controlled and so goddamn delicious.

Can I devour a voice? Probably not, brain. Stop being so random and creepy.

“Yulian…” The subtle warning brings me to the present. No, not the present, to *him*, because I was looking at his mouth. Or where his mouth would be if there wasn’t a mask, imagining it rolling and saying my name in that eargasm voice.

“Oh.” I link my hands behind my head and grin. “Is that what we’re supposed to do? Fight?”

“That’s the whole point of this evening.”

“I thought it was so you could see me.” I stroke the chain around my neck—totally going to have bruises from this thing tomorrow. “Considering the date invitation and all.”

He remains silent, but his posture stiffens.

“What? I suspected it was you who sent the invitation, but I wasn’t sure until now. You weren’t surprised to see me, almost as if you were expecting me. So tell me, Mishka, what can I do for you? The date started rough, but I can *totally* make it better. Are you perhaps in the mood to try what I suggested in my latest vlog?”

He pivots around and stands astride me, his legs on either side of my stomach as he peers down at me with the neon glow.

Fuck me sideways, he looks ethereal with the sky and the trees framing him. I wish I had my phone so I could snap a picture.

Vaughn kills the vibe by saying, “The only reason I invited you is to teach you a lesson and put you in your place.”

“If that place happens to be here, I don’t mind.”

He grips the chain harder, choking me, the metal constricting my throat until I can’t breathe.

Oh my, he’s losing it.

The well-tempered, perfect mafia prince aesthetic he has going on is crumbling behind that mask.

“I’m warning you, Yulian. If you send me one more video while you’re naked, I’ll cut you.”

“Half…naked,” I strain. “Not my f-fault your imagination led you elsewhere.”

“I could see your…” He trails off because I’m resisting laughter. Can’t help it.

Not only did he confirm he’s been watching my videos all this time, but he also saw how I trailed my hand down at the very end, tilting the camera. I didn’t show him my dick, though I was tempted to, but he might have seen a hint.

Oops.

“Why the fuck are you laughing?” he grinds out. “Have you lost your damn mind?”

“Maybe,” I singsong.

“This is my final warning. Stop getting into my space.”

“So block me.”

Something curious happens then. Not only does Vaughn’s grip on the chain loosen, but I can almost see a dumbfounded expression on his face. The realization that he didn’t block me, even though he could’ve right after that first time I sent him a link to my sex tape with his girlfriend.

Not that it would’ve worked. I would’ve found out any number he got, even if I had to pay people my entire trust fund.

Just kidding. Or am I?

I wrap my fingers around the chain and tug, pulling him down in one go. Vaughn’s caught off guard, probably lost in that big brain of his, trying to find an explanation, but chop-chop, I’m an action kind of guy, so down he comes.

And fuck *me*. Even I didn’t count on such a toe-curling feeling when his chest slams against mine.

His mask crooks to the side, but he’s entirely glued to me from the chest down. I let out a low hum, because fuck my life.

I’ve had sex with so many people, but never have I felt so freaking intoxicated just by the feel of another man against me, pressed up all over me, his scent invading my nostrils.

I lift up his mask, shoving it away. The sound of it clattering to the ground seems to startle him, his body shaking slightly before he thins his lips.

“Much better. Hi there,” I whisper in a lower tone than intended. I meant to grin and laugh and provoke him, but I’m so doomed, because just the sight of his handsome face, all sharp lines and disapproving expression, has me in shambles.

Someone call 911—or whatever the fuck it is in England—because I’m having a heart attack.

No, seriously, that goddamn organ is beating so hard against my rib cage, I’m surprised Vaughn’s not startled by it.

Don’t sound too eager, boy. I try to chastise it. *You know he’ll beat the shit out of you if he senses your intentions.*

Am I known to listen to the rare bursts of logic from my brain?

Certainly *not.*

I reach out a hand, and he watches it, his eyes wide, seeming dark brown in the dim light. “Why, this seems a bit too familiar.”

Like that dream—the one I’ve been religiously jerking off to. Guess what I’ll be jerking off to now?

This scene, obviously.

But seriously, it’s much better in reality. I shudder when my fingertips brush his cheek, then when I hold it hostage, my heartbeat thrums, and my dick is so hard, it’s painful.

Just a taste, yeah?

One. I promise not to be greedy.

I’ll stop after *one*.

“Yulian…”

“Hmm,” I rumble, my eyes on his lips.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“You know what.”

“Nah, gotta spell it out for me, baby. I’m not as bright as you.”

His lips part, and he’s panting. Vaughn is *panting*, his breath racing along my skin. The same Vaughn who looks down on me as if it’s a sport

can’t breathe correctly because of *me*.

Hello, trouble.

“I’m warning you, Yulian.”

“About?”

“Don’t you fucking dare kiss me again.” His voice is slightly raspy, almost choked, but that’s not what makes my eyes widen.

His do, too, the slightest bit, his fingers tightening just a tad on the chain, realizing what he just admitted.

Fuck.

Fuck me.

Fucking hell of all the gates of goddamn hell.

“Again…?” I dig my fingers into his cheek. “That wasn’t a dream, was it? You were really there in my room on top of me as I kissed—”

“Shut the fuck up.” He pushes himself away, red climbing up his fair skin.

No.

Nah.

Nyet in all of its fucking glory.

He’s about halfway up when I yank him down to me. He tries to push me away, and we’re wrestling, each trying to get the upper hand, but I’m bigger than him and brutal as hell when I let my animalistic side take over.

I trap him beneath me on the dirt, holding his wrists above his head with one hand as I straddle his waist.

We’re both panting, the sound of our ragged breathing echoing in the forest around us.

And I’m laughing, my cock all but fucking leaking in my boxers.

You know, I always figured Vaughn was straight. He gave all the vibes, not that there are any set in stone, but he’s just the definition of a straight dude.

So I thought I’d never be able to seduce him—not in a million years, actually.

But the way he’s looking at me right now with wide eyes filled with uncertainty and fear and the fact that he invited me after making me believe that kiss was a dream gives me all the opening I need.

He’s *so* done for.

“Let me go.” His voice, not as firm as usual, is trembling, tilting on the edge.

“Too late.” I lick my lower lip. “You’re not going anywhere, Mishka.”

And then my lips devour his.

And sweet fucking Jesus. Sorry for bringing you up, but really, I think I can die now.

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13

VAUGHN

Yulian’s kissing me.

Again.

His lips are locked to mine.

Fucking *again.*

And once *again*, I find myself trapped so far under his pull, I can’t breathe.

Or think.

All I can do is *feel*.

His fingers are tangled in my hair, firm lips sucking on mine, teeth pulling on that soft cushion until it hurts.

He shoves his tongue against my sealed lips, and I realize they’re trembling slightly—my whole body is, my muscles coiling with tension, my heart pounding so violently, I want to yank it out.

And it’s all my fault.

What the fuck was I thinking?

Why did I believe inviting Yulian to the initiation after spending weeks trying to ignore him was a good idea?

I meant to teach him a lesson, to amputate him from my world, but once again, I’m right back in the same mess I tried to escape.

With his lips on mine.

And his wild, woodsy scent curling through me, his fingers threading into my hair, angling my head as he holds me captive.

Fight.

I should *fight*—

His teeth nibble and pull on my lower lip, and I groan, the sound making him hum greedily against the sensitive skin.

Fucking hell.

Is kissing a man supposed to be this…dangerously shattering?

Like lighting fireworks, every lick and suck and nibble of his lips sets tingles ablaze across my chest and spine and all the way to my groin.

"Let me in…" he rumbles against my mouth, his voice thick and unrefined, then he drops a soft kiss on it and breathes out roughly. "Let me taste you properly."

He's speaking in a raspier tone, edged with a growl, almost as if he's teetering on the brink of losing control—that is, if he has any.

Another kiss drops on my sealed mouth, lingering for a second, dousing me in fire before he stares at me. His eyes are shadowed and blown wide, a glint cutting through the darkness.

"I want to devour you," he speaks in a gravelly murmur against my lips, every charged breath sparking goosebumps across my body.

"Like fuck you will." I pause, startled by how strange my own voice sounds—low, almost unrecognizable.

"You're cursing." He licks my lips, leaving a trail of wetness on the soft skin. "I love it when you curse because of me."

"It's not—"

I realize I've made a mistake speaking, because he uses that slight opening to thrust his tongue inside my mouth.

Yulian's tongue is *in* my mouth.

I'm about to punch him, but then he lets out a guttural moan as his tongue hooks against mine, almost as if he's been waiting for this for a lifetime.

As if he's satiated from finally kissing *me*.

But why…?

I don't get a chance to think as he deepens the kiss, sliding his hand from my hair to hold my jaw. A jolt of pleasure engulfs me, spreading down my spine with terrifying speed.

Fuck.

God fucking damn it.

I yank my hands that he’s been holding in a death grip, forcing him to let me go, then I grab his arm and flip us, shoving him against the ground so that I’m the one on top.

Yulian grips the back of my neck, dragging me closer, refusing to release my mouth, seeming indifferent to being the one underneath me.

Then he hooks his leg on the back of my thigh and hauls me down in one powerful go so that I’m lying flush against him.

I grunt in his mouth as his massive erection presses against mine.

Yes, I am, unfortunately and tragically, hard.

I’m so hard, my cock is pulsing and throbbing in painful bursts.

I’m so hard, I feel like I’ll embarrass myself in seconds.

And all of this because of…*kissing*?

Kissing *Yulian*, of all people?

I don’t usually get this hard after kissing. I used to spend a long time making out with Danika just to have a half-erect cock, but just a couple of seconds with this prick and I’m a mess?

What the fuck is happening to me?

“Mmm…” he grunts, and I realize with horror that I’m kissing him, too.

No, I’m *devouring* him.

Violently.

As unhinged as he is.

I fist his hair, dragging his head back, forcing the kiss deeper, biting his lips, clashing with his tongue.

This can’t be real.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realize there’s no way I’d be kissing Yulian with this animalistic frenzy, almost as if I can’t get enough.

Almost as if I’ve waited for this—

No.

This is only to prove that I can get the upper hand in *everything*. That no matter what he tries, I’ll always come out on top.

But fuck, the taste of his lips wrecks me.

He’s poison and I’m hooked.

Drunk on him.

There’s a hint of mint, but the rest is all him. Heady, masculine, and entirely addictive.

I’ve always thought myself to only be attracted to girls, so why the fuck is a man’s masculine scent, taste, and the feel of his hard muscles and thick

cock turning me into an animal?

It’s not enough.

The pressure, the depth, the intoxicating feeling.

I knew a single taste wouldn’t be enough—it’s why I ran away.

It’s why I need to remove this idiot from my life—

A hand reaches between us—his hand—as he kisses me deeper, more violently, angrily almost as he grabs my cock through my pants.

What the—

“Mmm, you’re packed, baby,” he murmurs against my mouth, then licks and bites my lower lip.

“Shut the fuck up,” I bite back, sinking my teeth into his tongue until a metallic taste explodes at the back of my mouth.

The scent of the earth and pine mixes with blood and our gasping pants, forming a fucked-up cocoon around us.

And in the midst of it all, I know I should put an end to this.

I should push him away and leave. Put an ocean between us again and never come back.

But then he bites me a second time, harsh and unforgiving, making me feel the pain I inflicted, but he doesn’t draw blood. His leg on my thigh cages me against him, his hand in my hair, pulling, almost too savagely, as he unbuttons my jeans.

My ears ring as heady pleasure coils in my insides, and the scent of arousal overwhelms me.

I *need* to stop this.

It’s going too far.

I *can’t* let this go any further—

“Do you know how much I’ve fantasized about this?” His gravelly voice scrapes my ear, its low tremor spilling across my jaw, brushing my wet lips.

“Fantasized?” My own voice is raspy, my eyes hooded, because I can’t stop looking at the saliva on his lip and the smidge of blood spilling out at the corner.

I want to lick it, to lick *him* like a goddamn ice cream cone.

This isn’t normal.

“Mmm.” He opens the second button, slowly rubbing his cock against my thigh. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for such a long time.”

“How long?” I ask, my voice catching at the end because he kills the distance between us, licking the corner of my mouth, then my lower lip.

“For so fucking *long*.” He talks as he kisses and licks, his eyes almost closed from how much they’re drooping. “So unhealthily *long*.”

A moan catches at the back of my throat when he undoes the third button of my jeans, then his hand palms my aching cock through my briefs.

Fucking Christ. Why is it growing bigger at *Yulian*’s touch?

“I dreamt of licking you whole, your eyes, your nose, your lips, your jaw…” He nibbles on my jaw, then trails his mouth close to mine. “Your fucking soul, Mishka. And you know what?”

“What…?” I trail off, my voice quiet, because, really, I can’t go any louder, not with the onslaught of foreign sensations ripping through me.

“You taste better than I fantasized.” He plunges his tongue into my mouth, kissing me with renewed frenzy as he slides his hand inside my briefs and fists my cock.

A strangled noise echoes in the air, and I realize it’s mine.

I’m turned on in a way I’ve never experienced before and absolutely losing my mind.

Just because Yulian’s rough, big hand is around my dick.

This *must* be a simulation.

“Fuck, you’re huge, baby.” He pulls out my cock, stroking it from the base to the crown, taking his sweet time despite the small opening between us.

I exhale in rough bursts against his mouth, trapped in a world where my body seizes full control.

I can’t think or process or *breathe* properly as he jerks me, squeezing the crown and gathering the precum in his palm. He uses it to lube me up, moving up and down in a slow, rough motion.

“Love how your cock throbs in my hand. You feel so goddamn good, you know that?” He moans, rubbing his fully covered cock against my thigh.

“Shut up…” I sound so turned on, so…strange.

My cock has grown the hardest I’ve ever felt, and I truly refuse to think it’s because of Yulian.

Of all people.

Fucking *Yulian*?

I *hate* this asshole.

“Fuck…you keep getting harder. You’re making such a beautiful mess.” He squeezes my cock harshly, and I kind of slump over, only held by his hand on my face, as a bolt of pleasure shoots up my spine.

He does it again, and this time, he kisses me as he jerks me off in a fast, maddening rhythm. All my blood rushes to my groin, and I know I’m going to come so embarrassingly soon.

“S-stop…Yuli…”

“Oh, fuck. Calling me by my diminutive name?” He grunts, going in an even faster rhythm, rubbing himself against me, pulling me tighter on top of him.

I grab his head with both hands, yanking at his hair. “I’m going to come. Stop it.”

He bites his lower lip, then lifts his head and bites mine, stretching the skin between his teeth. “That’s the whole point, baby. I want to see you shatter for me.”

“Fuck you,” I grunt, my body tightening, my spine jerking, and that familiar rush bulldozes through.

“Shh, don’t fight it.” He fists my hair tighter, his rough murmur ghosting over my tingling lips. “Don’t run away, okay? This was meant to be.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Us, Mishka. We were *meant* to be.”

“There’s no us…” My voice chokes as he goes faster, precum leaking all over us.

“Yes, there is. Can’t you feel how much your body loves mine, baby?”

“Shut up…”

“You see, I went through so much fucking suffering to get you right here, so no, I won’t shut up. I’ll *never* shut up about how good you feel. How your cock is so huge and beautiful. Even more beautiful than I imagined while fucking Danika. That’s what I did, you know. I wanted to feel you while I was inside her, which is why I kept going on and on…and *on*.”

Fucking creep.

I punch him, but it’s weak because I’m already coming.

I’m coming so hard, cum splashes everywhere between us as I shudder. Yulian doesn’t react to the punch. He merely grins and kisses me as I shove my dick in his hand, using his hand as a hole until I’m spent of every drop.

Until my head is completely empty.

All I can do is breathe his woodsy, musky smell and the heady scent of arousal surrounding us.

All I can hear is the sucking sounds of our lips slamming together with the rare shout in the distance.

All I can feel is his hand fisting my spent cock, lightly stroking as he rocks his hips gently.

He pulls his lips from mine and licks them. “I knew you’d look like a goddamn masterpiece when you come, baby.”

A high-pitched ringing fills my head. I swing, my fist connecting with his jaw, then shove off him, yanking myself back and tucking my cock away from view.

I need to go.

What the *hell* have I done?

I back away from Yulian, unwilling to look at him, drowning in the certainty that I’ve just made the worst mistake.

“You can run, but you can’t hide, Mishka,” his voice calls after me, not smug but challenging, as if he knows exactly what kind of clusterfuck I’ve landed myself in.

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14

VAUGHN

"Where were you?"

I startle at my father's distinct voice, my hand pausing on the doorknob in the near darkness of my living room.

Fuck.

Shit.

Finding my dad waiting for me at my place close to two in the morning is *not* a good sign.

Schooling my expression, I turn around to face him.

He's sitting on the couch, phone in hand, as my mother rests her head on his thigh, fast asleep.

Double fuck. Both of them are here.

I pull out my phone and frown at the string of texts from Lidya.

Uncle Kirya is mad.

Just kidding, he's super mad. He mentioned reckless and irresponsible. I never thought I'd hear those words about you.

Prayers for you, Vonnie. Will become the most badass leader on your behalf when you're dead.

No, seriously, even Aunt Sasha is struggling to calm him down, and you know that's almost impossible. She's also worried about you. Can you believe it? You made your parents WORRIED.

They’re right, though. What’s going on, and why am I not in on your schemes? I thought we were bros.

Or cousins or whatever.

It would’ve helped if I’d received her texts while I was trying to calm myself during the six-hour flight from the island to New York.

Didn’t work, by the way.

Because every time I closed my eyes, all I could picture was brown, blue, the rough, shaky breaths, the masculine, woodsy scent, and the rush of adrenaline all the way to the base of my spine—

“You have something to say for yourself?” Dad’s low but firm tone pulls me out of the unorthodox thoughts I ran away from but still couldn’t eradicate.

“Maybe you should go to sleep,” I reply in a calm tone. “Mom doesn’t look too comfortable.”

“The only reason your mother is uncomfortable is because you seem to be taking these sudden trips out of New York without informing us beforehand.”

I swallow, walking toward him, basically forcing myself not to turn around and leave.

Confrontation with my dad—and my parents in general—isn’t at the top of my favorite things to do.

My father, Kirill Morozov, is a fair man who’s dedicated to his family, but he’s also the leader of the New York Bratva, and that comes with certain shackles.

As I sit across from him, I notice once again just how similar we look. Mom always says her genes never really fought back. Except for my eyes that look like hers, I got everything else from my dad—the sharp jawline, the dark hair, and the same expression.

Dad is the older, wiser version of me, and one of my role models—the other one is my mom.

He places his phone next to him, his other hand wrapped around my mother’s back as he pins me down with his eyes. “I’m waiting for an explanation.”

“For what?”

“Don’t play dumb. We both know tonight is the second time in two weeks you’ve taken a sudden trip outside of our territory, where you’re the

safest.”

I let out a breath, but it does nothing to expel the weight that’s pressing down on my shoulders due to his words. “I just wanted to pay the guys a visit.”

“You’ve always told us beforehand when you wanted to visit your friends, but not this time. We’re both aware that this is out of the norm, but it’s irresponsible of you, Vaughn. Without the right security in place, you could’ve gotten kidnapped, or worse, assassinated. Have you thought of what that could entail for the family? For me and your mother? Have you thought of the consequences?”

“I’m sorry.” The words feel heavier than the air.

He’s right. I could’ve gotten killed. Yes, the Heathens have good security in place on the island, but traveling there and back had less security than I’m used to.

I didn’t plan this accordingly.

Not like I usually do.

Because two weeks ago, I *wanted* to see him, so I just went. Earlier today, I also *needed* to see him, so off I went.

It doesn’t matter what excuses I told myself—so that he wouldn’t get involved with Niko, so I could teach him a lesson.

The fact remains, I indulged in an impulsive action because I wanted to see Yulian.

And what did that get me?

More confusion.

More regrets.

More fucking *hunger.*

“I don’t want to scold you.” Dad releases a sigh. “And I certainly don’t want to treat you like a kid, when you’re more adult than some middle-aged men in the organization, but you and I are fully aware this isn’t like you, son. Care to tell me the reason?”

An asshole with mismatched eyes I can’t seem to erase from my head.

I can’t tell Dad that, though, so I remain silent.

“Is it because of the breakup with Danika?” He softens his voice. “I know you’ve been together for years, so whatever misunderstanding you two had can be worked out if you want to try.”

“There’s no misunderstanding here, Dad. She cheated, and I’ll never get back with her.” My voice is firm and clear, but then I peek at him. “Do you

want me to?”

“Doesn’t matter what I want when it’s your love life, but I will say I wouldn’t be thrilled if you were with someone who wasn’t loyal to you.”

I smile. “Then you won’t have to worry, because she’s history.”

“Good.” He nods. “If it’s not Danika, then what is it? What’s the reason behind this change?”

“It’s not…” I trail off because if I said there was no change, I’d be lying, and Dad would figure that out in a heartbeat. “I’ve been thinking about transferring to The King’s U.”

He raises a brow. “All of a sudden?”

“It’s not all of a sudden, really. All my friends are there, and Danika, for whom I stayed in New York, is a footnote.”

“Don’t let your mother hear that. She thinks you stayed for us.”

“I did,” I say softly.

“But?”

“But I want something different. Even if only for a year or two. Will you…allow it?”

“There’s no reason why I wouldn’t if that’s what you want. Besides, it always struck me as odd that you didn’t follow Jeremy and the others there. Your mom might need more convincing, though. You know she’d hate not living on the same continent as you.”

“It’s not that I want to go right away…”

“You want to have the option,” he finishes for me, and I nod, smiling.

I’ve always loved how Dad and I get along, to the point of finishing each other’s sentences, because we’re both thinkers and very much goal-oriented.

Only, right now, the path to my goal, inheriting his position, is being muddied by a complication that I should’ve squashed a long time ago.

But I didn’t.

And now, it’s there to haunt me.

“Let me know when you want to go, and for the sake of all that’s holy, do inform us of your visits to the island.”

I nod.

He stands up and lifts Mom in his arms bridal style. “I’ll get your mother home.”

“You can stay in the guest room.”

“It’s fine. We prefer our room.” He stares at Mom. “Come for breakfast so you can have the same talk with your mother.”

I nod and smile as he carries her out of the house with effortless ease.

After they’re gone, I get into the shower and take the iciest one I’ve ever had, until my bones freeze and my fingertips turn blue.

And yet no amount of cold can dispel the memories that rush through my head with every splash of water.

Rough hands, soft lips, hard muscles, and low, growly whispers.

Punching and kissing and choking and jerking and coming—

“*Fuck*.” I drive my fist into the wall, wet strands falling onto my forehead as the water beats down on my tense shoulders.

My cock twitches despite the cold, and I groan, because seriously, what in the actual fuck?

I’m nineteen years old, and I’ve never had an orgasm as intense as the one I had in Yulian’s hand.

I’ve kissed many girls, but I’ve never felt a more out-of-body experience than when I was devouring Yulian, biting and licking and sucking and drinking his blood.

And I want more.

Of his lips and hands and fucking blood.

I want to suck him dry.

But I can’t. Because that’s not part of the plan.

He isn’t part of the plan.

Even if my body protests profusely at the thought of not having that experience again.

But screw my body. I’ve lived just fine up until now, having good enough sexual intercourse. That’s all I’ll be getting back to.

Not some rough touches and a fight for dominance and an orgasm so stimulating, I can’t stop thinking about it.

With another curse, I turn off the shower and get into bed, my tablet in hand. I go through some of the information I have my hackers send me on the regular, just in case we’ve come up with any dirt on the other factions.

My father taught me that the best defense is offense. The more we can win without spilling a drop of blood, the better it is.

So we need dirt. Consider it a preemptive strike of sorts.

After a while, I turn off the light and stare at the dark ceiling. Sleep doesn’t come.

Despite the fact that I need to wake up early to visit my parents. Despite my continuous thoughts that I need to rest.

It's almost as if my brain is on a high, my body's restless, and my soul is in shreds.

I pick up my phone and swallow when I see the text from Yulian. It's been there since about an hour after I left. Yes, I went to the airport as soon as I walked out on Yulian, not even telling Jeremy and the others. I needed to get out of there before I hunted down the bane of my existence and indulged in more impulsive actions.

Part of me says not to open the text, block him, and pretend he doesn't exist.

But that's never worked for me before.

With a deep inhale, I click on the text, and a video appears in which Yulian is lying on his back, holding up the phone, revealing his face and some of his naked torso.

There's a red bruise on his cheek, my doing, because he was being a creepy asshole about the whole feeling-me-inside-Danika thing.

But you came because of it, so what does that make you?

My gaze trails down to the defined ridges of his muscular chest, right above his left pectoral muscle, where he has a single tattooed sentence in neat Cyrillic.

Я с тобой (Ya s toboy).

I'm with you.

I noticed it the other day in another video, but I'm not sure what it means, and it probably has a meaning since it's the only tattoo on his chest.

"You know, it's rude to leave a man lying on the forest floor with a massive erection." He pouts. "I gave you a hand, so the least you could've done was reciprocate. Give and take, you know. A very simple concept."

I scoff, because he's playing the victim so well, feigning a wounded expression and everything.

"How did I take care of the problem? I'm glad you asked, Mishka. I just jerked off in the shower, picturing your beautiful face when you came all over my hand. Kind of contemplated not washing it for days, just so I could feel your cum, but that wouldn't have been feasible, unfortunately."

"Creep," I mutter.

"You just thought I was creepy as fuck, right?" He grins. "I am, so not denying that. But admit it—part of you likes that. You were so fucking tight

and wound up in my arms. You know, if you hadn’t run away, I would’ve come in my pants. I’m open to trying again whenever you feel like dropping by, let’s say next week? Or tomorrow if you like. I’ll keep my calendar open for you.

“You just thought I talked a lot, didn’t you? But listen, this is for your own good. I need to give you pointers now that you’re exploring your sexuality. Consider me your tutor of sorts. There’s no need to put a label on it—bi or gay or anything in between doesn’t really matter. Just do what you love.” He lifts a hand. “I’ll volunteer to be your sex coach. I’m the best in the market and can provide testimonials if you wish.”

I scoff.

“I bet you just glared or sneered at me. That’s okay. I know you don’t take me seriously; no one does. But my offer remains. Have sweet dreams, Mishka. I will dream of your beautiful, huge cock against mine. Hopefully, I won’t come in my sleep.”

He winks and the video ends.

Usually, I’d curse him or get annoyed, but right now, I just turn to my side and look at his face, wondering why the fuck I’m attracted to a man.

But not just any man.

The *only* man I shouldn’t want.

Because this morbid attraction would end both our lives in a heartbeat.

And I need to stop it before it starts.

Just like I did four years ago.

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15

YULIAN

FOUR YEARS AGO

White.

Everything’s too white.

And bright.

And loud.

Not sure why it’s loud in my head, thrumming into my skull through the fluorescent lights and the *beep beep beep* of monitors that have no business being so goddamn noisy.

My mouth tastes like dust and metal. The back of my throat’s dry enough to spark a fire, and I swear someone poured cement into my limbs while I was out.

I can’t move.

My head feels like I’ve slept through a damn apocalypse—maybe I did. Wouldn’t be the weirdest thing that’s happened to me.

The sheets are stiff and smell overwhelmingly like bleach.

The hospital. Of course, not my first—and let’s be real, not my last—visit to this place.

There’s a tight, itchy bandage on my side, and when I shift even an inch, pain slices through me like a rusty blade.

Right. I got shot.

Strings of memories start pouring into my fogged-up brain.

The cave.

Dark. Cold.

Vaughn.

His face comes back in the brightest flash. His body pressed close, his arms enveloping me, and his all-consuming warmth when everything else was ice.

And the kiss that I stole before…what?

Well, fuck me, I remember nothing after I let myself drift off to sleep with his taste on my tongue and his breath in my ears.

My eyes dart around.

Where *is* he anyway?

The question hits before I can stop it. Yes, the first question I ask myself after I wake up in the hospital is not how am I alive, not what the hell happened, just *where the fuck is Vaughn*?

I try to sit up, my teeth gritting, my breath hissing, and my lungs protesting as pain explodes all over my side.

The monitor freaks out six ways to Sunday, beeping like crazy. A nurse yells something from the hallway. I ignore her. My body's fucked, but my mind's already clawing its way back to that last moment—me bleeding out, him holding me like I mattered.

Vaughn telling me he's *with* me. We live together and we die together, right?

Maybe it's completely out of left field to have these thoughts about someone I've known for such a short time, but Vaughn was there for me like no one else has ever been.

Yes, I took a bullet for him, but he could've abandoned me and gotten himself to safety, yet he didn't. I felt him shaking when he got the bullet out, but he still did it.

Still had my back through it all, literally.

Not even my father or brothers, my actual blood, would ever do that for me.

And maybe it's clichéd, but I'm truly loyal to my saviors and repay them really well.

Though Vaughn is more than just a savior.

Fuck me, I'd pay whatever price necessary to have a taste of his lips again. Maybe while he's awake this time.

Because damn, that was an out-of-body experience like I've never felt before, and believe me, I've fucked enough girls to know this is different.

I need to find Vaughn before someone tells me I imagined the whole damn thing.

“Yulik!!”

I’m half sitting in bed when Alina rushes in, her auburn hair a mess, her eyes bloodshot and surrounded by dark circles. She’s wearing a beige tulle dress with a jacket over it, her appearance that she takes great pride in an absolute mess.

I let the nurse wrestle me into a sitting position on the bed.

I’m back in Chicago, right? I have to be. Dad would never allow my sister to travel away from home.

If I’m in Chicago, then where’s Vaughn?

Alya grabs both my hands in hers, fresh moisture cascading down her cheeks. “I t-thought we’d lost you… I thought you were gone.”

She’s sobbing now, her tears dripping down my hands and onto the mattress.

I groan.

Fuck.

Fucking hell.

If anything were to happen to me, Mom and Alya would be defenseless. Goddamn it, what was I thinking when I took that bullet?

Was it instinct? Fucking recklessness? An inherent, inexplicable need to prove myself to someone who looks down on me?

Daddy issues much, motherfucker?

“I’m completely fine, Alya,” I tell her in a softer voice as a horde of doctors come in and check me left and right.

My sister barely gives them any space, continuing to hold on to my hand for dear life.

“You were abandoned on a mountain and almost died. That’s *not* fine.” She’s sobbing again, always the sentimental one, my baby sister.

While she’s only two years younger than me, I’ve always made it my mission to protect her. Whether it’s from outsiders, the truth of my mom’s sickness, or from my dad’s wrath—by directing it toward myself.

She and Mom are the only splash of color in my world and the main reason I’ve been in survival mode since…well, ever. So I want to protect her innocence and let her live a completely different life from mine.

“Alya…don’t cry.” I stroke her hair. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“But what if you won’t be here for long?”

“Nonsense. I’ll always be by your side. I promised, remember?”

She nods, a little smile brightening her face.

Alya and I have been inseparable from the moment I first saw her tiny face the day she was born. I don’t remember it well, but Mama said when she put my sister in my arms as I sat on the bed, I stared in awe at her full head of coppery hair and those impossibly bright blue eyes—so wide, so startling against her delicate features. Mama said Alya stopped crying the instant she looked at me and even smiled as if she already knew I was her older brother.

From that moment on, I swore I’d always keep that smile on her face. Because when she smiles, she’s everything I’m not—radiant, innocent, carrying none of the weight that’s crushed me since I was a boy.

“You’re finally awake.”

I tense, the pain in my side paling in comparison to the tension that crowds my shoulders in an instant.

Yaroslav always has the worst effect on people. The barely-there smile that appeared on Alya’s face falls, and the doctors line up and then exit one after the other.

“Nothing major, just a bullet.” I plaster on a grin, staring back at my father’s stone-carved expression. “They make a man, right? Injuries and scars, I mean.”

He narrows his eyes at me but then directs his gaze at my sister. “Alina, go to your mother.”

Her grip tightens on my fingers. “But I want to stay—”

“It’s okay.” I show her the smile I always wear when she thinks Dad will hurt me.

It doesn’t matter how much I try to shield her from it—she’s extremely bright and knows exactly who’s behind the fresh bruises on my body, even when I say it’s because I fell or had a fight.

Her fingers linger for a few seconds before she lets go and reluctantly leaves the room.

As the door closes behind her, I tighten my body. I wouldn’t put it past this prick to hit me even when I’m injured.

Time alone with my father feels like a death match I’m destined to lose. There’s no satisfaction, no high, no familiar rush of bone cracking under my fist or the metallic taste of blood.

My muscles coil tight, my brain snapping into survival mode.

I used to wonder why my father despises me so much—why he always looks at me like I'm nothing more than a thorn in his side.

I'm never smart enough, strong enough, good enough.

Just not *enough*.

Forget about love. I don't think he even likes me.

The only fatherly love I've ever known came from my maternal grandfather during summers at his vast estate in the North Caucasus. He taught me to ride horses, to shoot, to chase the wind as if tomorrow didn't exist.

But he died too soon, and I was thrown back into the brutal reality of a father who would trade me away in a heartbeat if he could.

"How did I get back home?" I ask, my voice losing its mocking edge, because I don't think they pumped me with enough painkillers, and my side is throbbing. I don't want to be dear old Dad's punching bag on top of that.

He stands tall, his hands in his pockets, his expression solemn, the lines of age around his mouth looking more shadowy. Yaroslav has always looked and seemed like a wall I could never break through.

A fortress no one has ever been allowed to enter—not even his family.

"The more important question is, how the hell did this happen? Not only do you screw up the camp, but you also get involved in this?"

"Sorry, didn't know being shot at could be avoided, or I would've done my best to avert the crisis."

He strides toward me, and I lift both hands in a motion of surrender. "Wait…fuck…I don't know. I think it was some other faction who did it…"

"Does that other faction have bases in the heart of the New York branch?

"New York?"

"Yes. My intel tells me that's where it originated from."

My eyes widen even as pain throbs in my side and sweat trickles across my brow.

"No way…" I choke on a cough, gritting out a grunt as the sharp pain digs deeper into my side. "Why would they want to kill their…heir?"

"They didn't, did they? You're the only idiot who got shot."

My lips part, feeling dry and chapped, but I still shake my head.

This doesn't make sense.

No matter how smart Vaughn is, there's no way he could've anticipated that I'd take a bullet for him.

“If he wanted me dead, he wouldn’t have administered first aid and practically saved me,” I rasp to my father, each word torn from me as pain claws deeper.

The man who gave me life watches me struggle yet doesn’t so much as tell the medical team to dull the agony with painkillers.

Again, not a first.

As long as it doesn’t kill me, he doesn’t care how much I suffer.

If anything, he uses it as a form of punishment—on behalf of his fists.

“And you believed that nonsense?” He stares down his nose at me. “By God, you’re such a fool, Yulian. Always so eager to put your trust in the wrong people, just because they hand you a scrap of kindness for ten minutes. Vaughn abandoned you and left you to rot on that mountain. If our men hadn’t scoured every inch of that rock to find you, you’d be a corpse.”

My ears ring as I sink both my hands into the sheet so hard, I almost rip the IV out of my wrist.

No.

He’s lying.

Yaroslav is lying—

“Since we found the evidence that Kirill planned this, it’s war again. Forget about any attempts to build a bridge.”

“Wait…” I cough, my voice raspy. “Kirill wouldn’t be so stupid as to launch an attack from his home base. Put yourself in his shoes. Would you do it?”

“Even if he didn’t do it, his people did, and that’s even worse because it means he has shaky control over his organization. Not that it matters. This alliance was already doomed, even if the camp had been a success.”

He steps closer, and I pant as his hand clamps around my chin, yanking my head up until I’m forced to meet his eyes. “You’ve disappointed me enough for a lifetime this summer, and I will not tolerate this type of behavior again. Going forward, you will fall in line and play the role of my heir to perfection, or I’ll see that your mother and sister are sent somewhere you’ll never find them.”

My dad slams me back, my head cracking against the headboard. I bite down on my lower lip, so I don’t release a groan of pain. He views that as a weakness, and I guess a part of me doesn’t want to seem weak—not in front of him.

With one final glare, he heads to the door.

So much for “Get well soon, son,” I guess.

As he’s walking out, Mom comes inside, lowering her head when he glares at her while muttering curses about “a useless son and a useless mother.”

Right.

He thinks it’s my mother’s fault I’m such an “idiot.”

“Dusha moya…”

My soul.

That’s what Mom calls me in the softest voice as she approaches me.

I wince because I’m the one bleeding, yet she looks like she’s already embraced death. Her frame is skeletal, her once beautiful face reduced to bone and hollowed cheeks. The brown eyes I inherited half of are drained, lifeless. Dried tear tracks stain her skin, and the dress hanging off her is far too big for what’s left of her fragile body.

Her bright auburn hair is only a wig that mimics her actual hair. She lost it again during her last chemo session, along with her brows that are painted on now. She doesn’t allow me or Alya to see her at her worst, always wearing perfume to cover up the gutting smell of antiseptic. But we have seen her when she was too weak to move, too weak to wake up or kiss us good morning.

I try to sit up, grunting at the stabbing pain, and she gently pushes me back down and tucks me in. “Just rest.”

“I’m not a kid anymore, you know.” I try to smile, but it ends up in a grunt.

“You’ll always be a kid to me.” She strokes my damp hair away from my face. “I’ll never forget the day you were born. You were so tiny but had the rarest, most stunning eyes, and when you looked up at me, holding my finger in your little fist, I think I fell in love at first sight. You’re the best thing that’s happened to me, Dusha moya. You know that, right? I’m so glad I have you.”

“And I’m so glad I have you, Mama.”

At least one of my parents loves me so unconditionally, it almost makes me forget about the other one.

Almost.

She hesitates, then clears her throat. “Don’t…take your dad’s words to heart. You know he wants what’s best for you.”

Yeah, right.

But I say nothing, because my mother believes in Dad's strong-man rhetoric. The one that says you can't protect yourself or the people close to you if you're not *strong* enough.

And really, it's not that Dad hates her. She gave him control over her father's empire and plays the perfect role of his "traditional" wife. He probably likes her well enough if he didn't get rid of her after she got sick.

But then again, he probably did it for the sake of traditional values as well, so people wouldn't bad-mouth him for abandoning his sick wife.

At any rate, he still gets all the mistresses he can handle outside of the marriage, not to mention the two illegitimate children who pose more of a threat to me, Mom, and Alina than anyone else.

They'd kill us.

They'd use Mom and Alya against me because they know I'd do anything to protect them.

Anything.

Mom coughs a few times, her chest quaking.

"Are you okay?" I try to sit up, but she waves me off.

"It's normal."

That didn't sound normal. "What did the doctor say about the results of your latest treatment?"

Her expression remains the same. "We'll discuss it later after you get better."

That's not good news, is it?

My heart constricts. I feel like I'm watching my mother fade right before my eyes, and I can't do a damn thing.

It's not like I can seize cancer by its throat and fight it to death.

She's been battling breast cancer for so long, hanging on for dear life because, as she said, "I'll be around to watch you grow up properly." The cancer was initially treated a couple of years ago, but then it soon metastasized to her bones and lungs.

Sometimes, like now, she trembles because her bones hurt too much to sit up straight even if she's pumped full of meds.

"Rest, Dusha moya. I'll ask the doctor for painkillers."

"I'm fine." The pain in my side dulls upon witnessing her state. "Mama?"

"Yes?"

"How long have I been out?"

“About two days. You lost a lot of blood and had a fever. We were so worried.”

“Did anyone come to visit me? Or maybe try to?”

I don’t believe Vaughn abandoned me. Dad was just saying that to fit his agenda about declaring war on the Morozovs.

There’s no way Vaughn went through all of that to help me just to leave me to die.

Not to mention the whole attack is suspicious as fuck.

“Cyrus came by,” Mom says. “He should be around here somewhere.”

“No one else?”

She pauses, then releases a breath. “No.”

My heart falls, even as I try not to be affected. It’s not like I expect Vaughn to come all the way to a hostile territory in Chicago.

I mean, I would do that if the roles were reversed, but I obviously have some screws loose.

“Dusha moya…” Her voice is low and brittle, and I can barely see her through the blurriness in my eyes. “Cyrus mentioned that you were abandoned with Vaughn before they found you.”

“Yeah.”

So okay, I might have blabbered about Vaughn when I called my mom during the summer camp. I only mentioned him a few times.

Fine, I talked about him every time I called her. Sue me.

She’s my confidant, along with Cyrus. I tell her all about my crushes and sexual adventures, and she just shakes her head at my shenanigans.

Not that there was anything sexual with Vaughn, but still.

Her lips part before she purses them. “What happened in that cave?”

“I kissed him, Mama,” I blurt out. “I kissed a guy for the first time, and I want to do it again. Isn’t that crazy?”

“You can’t do that again.” She raises her voice, something she’s never done before. Ever. I think it’s the fever that’s making it sound heightened. “You simply can’t, Yulian, promise me.”

“But…”

“No buts. We’re a traditional family, and we don’t do any same-sex relationships, do you understand?”

I blink at her, my chest constricting. “It’s not that I want a relationship…”

“Good, because you’re expected to get married to a woman and have kids. Just like your father.”

“And treat my wife and children like shit just like him as well? Leave a trail of bastards who’ll attempt to kill each other while I’m at it, right? Should I torment them all and sleep with every available woman while being proud that I’m a *strong* man?”

She raises her trembling hand and slaps me. It’s not hard, but it’s the first time she’s ever hit me.

My heart shatters, mouth hanging open as the shock settles in my bones.

Mom seems just as shocked. Her body trembles before she breaks into sobs, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry…”

“Mama…” I try to sit up and reach for her, and she pulls me to her. The strong stench of antiseptic overpowers the floral perfume she wears.

I feel bones beneath my hands as she cries in my neck.

“Please, Dusha moya, please, I’m begging you. Erase that boy from your head, yes? You were fine sleeping around with girls, so just continue to do that. Take it as your mother’s dying wish.”

“You’re not dying, Mama…”

“Take it as if I am. If…if it’s found out you like men, your father will kill you and use your sister as a pawn. And without you around, no one can protect her. Please…please just…just stay away from that boy. I will not rest in peace if you don’t.”

“Okay…” I stroke her hair as she hyperventilates in my arms. “Okay… just don’t cry, Mama. I hate it when you cry.”

She pulls back to look at me through an overflow of tears and emotions and a woman who looks so *tired* of everything.

Why did the universe have to take my mother? Why didn’t it take Dad? Cancer should’ve hit him, not her. Why do people like him get to live while kind, selfless people like Mama have to suffer so badly?

Just why?

She strokes my hair, her fingers shaking. “Promise me you’ll marry a girl and have kids.”

“I’m too young for that.”

“*Promise* me.”

“Okay, promise.”

Fresh tears swell in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Dusha moya, so sorry.”

“For what?”

“For birthing you into this world. I wish I could support your preferences, but I can’t. It’s impossible for families like ours. Even if your father accepts it, which he never will since he’s too traditional, his entourage will kill you and him to set an example. You know that, right?”

I nod once.

Because I *do* know that. Slowly, reality slams into me like an explosion.

Truth is, my unconventional attraction could and would be fatal for me and the two people I love the most—Mama and Alya.

And yet as Mama hugs me again, all I can think of is my lips on Vaughn’s.

I have to—no, I *need* to see him again.

Even if it’s just one final time.

For closure.

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16

YULIAN

PRESENT

Sixteen days, four hours, and twenty minutes.

Is this starting to seem like a pattern? Some would say an obsession—some being Cy—but you know, if it looks like it, feels like it, and the shoe fits…

Seriously, though, my counting habits are getting out of hand because of another *major* fucking problem.

I suppress a groan as I wave at Kevin, who's leaving the room. He tried his best, but I'm just not feeling it, and that's a serious anomaly because I am a *sexual* being.

Violence and sex are what I'm good at, sometimes not in that order.

So the fact that I haven't been in the fucking mood since that night in the Heathens' forest is an issue.

A catastrophe, so to speak.

My dick hasn't been put to use, and I'm afraid it'll fall off.

Okay, just kidding; it was put to use, but only by my hand as I was picturing harsh lips, soft breaths, and uncontrollable trembling.

And that's even more of an anomaly.

I'll be the first to admit that I prefer boys like Kevin, who love dressing in the cutest panties and spreading their asses for me.

Maybe it's because the idea of dominating them ignites a feral feeling inside me, or maybe because they're both beautiful and adorable and love my twisted sense of humor—yeah, I know I'm an acquired taste.

In short, I have a type, and it's the same in men and women—soft skin, delicate features, and a submissive streak.

That's who I *go* for.

That's who I get *hard* for.

So why *the fuck* can't I stop picturing the one guy who has none of the above?

Vaughn is neither soft nor pliant. He's all muscular with masculine traits and sharp edges I'll totally cut myself on if I'm not careful enough. He's definitely *not* submissive and actually fights for dominance.

The memory of him flipping us so he'd be on top sends a throb down my spine and straight into my cock—the same cock that was dormant in Kevin's presence seconds ago.

I grunt. "This fucking sucks. Go away."

"Are you talking to your demon again?" Cy strolls into my changing room at the underground ring, throwing me his usual side-eye. The roar of the crowd dulls to a hum as the door slams shut.

I knock my bandaged fists together, then punch the air. "Nah, just talking to my alter ego, aka my dick."

"So demon number one." He sprawls out on the beat-up faux leather couch, crossing one leg over the other. "Demon number two, your fists, shouldn't be used for the second night in a row to fight, Yulian."

"Nonsense. The whole point of fists is to fight."

"Your bruises from yesterday and the day before and the day before *that* aren't healed yet. What's with fighting almost every day lately?"

I hit the air harder. "Tension."

"Get laid, then."

"Well, that's the fucking issue, Cy. I *can't*." I stop punching and swing around to face him. "You're smart, help me get back into my world-record sex life."

"Being smart doesn't give me solutions to your fluctuating libido." He focuses on his phone, narrowing his eyes the slightest bit.

Cy is tall and muscular, though leaner than me—his body's built more like a swimmer's, honed from years of swimming at dawn. Fighting isn't his thing, but he'll throw a punch when pushed, and he's lethal with weapons. Still, he acts like violence is beneath him, convinced he can get whatever he wants without ever lifting a hand.

While I bulldoze through issues headfirst, he analyzes, contemplates, and then usually comes up with the appropriate solution. I've lost count of how many times he's helped my dad in his strategic endeavors—and saved my ass in the process.

My father trusts Cy completely after he landed him a new shipping deal with the Davenports that kept us front and center of the Bratva branches, at the same level as the Morozovs.

Dad agreed to let me come to this island because Cy was also coming. He even allowed him to pick our guards—whom Cy personally vouched for—and plan our security system.

Let's say Daddy dearest wishes he had Cy for a son instead of me, having told me so himself after he nearly tortured me to death four years ago.

But that never made me despise Cy. He's my best—and *only*—friend. Sad, I know, but people usually don't like me, whether it's because of my last name or my personality. Cy, however, has stuck around.

He's put himself out there and performed so many tasks for my father, so I don't end up accidentally—or not so accidentally—getting shot dead by my extremely intolerant, impatient, and tyrannical sperm donor.

So really, Cy and Alya are all I have.

I remove my glove and snap my fingers in his face. "Focus, motherfucker. Give me a solution."

He slowly lifts his head, then flicks my hand away with his thumb and index finger. "I'm not your magic lamp."

"Nah, you're way better. I get infinite wishes." I grin, and he shakes his head, fighting a smile.

"You're a clown."

"Your *favorite* clown. Now, chop-chop, Cy. What do you think I should do to get over this annoying slump?"

"Have more flavor? Though, for the sake of all that's holy, be more discreet when frolicking with men. It's true that I have all the guards in the mansion on our side, so they won't tattle to your father, but I can't say the same about the Serpent members. I have them by the throat with some damning info, but that can change at any time, and your blasé attitude doesn't help."

"I don't go around fucking men in public."

"You flirt, Yulian. A *lot*."

“Yeah, but I *rarely* touch the guys. Anyone looking in from the outside will think I have a lot of friends.”

“You don’t.”

“Ha, I do. There’s you.” My shoulders hunch. “Besides, my dick’s not working, you know.”

“Does this have to do with a certain initiation you went to without telling me beforehand?”

My lips part.

So, I totally did *not* tell Cy about kissing the fuck out of Vaughn’s lips, sucking the blood off them, and not being able to get enough no matter how long I devoured them. Needless to say, he knows nothing about my attempt to extract Vaughn’s soul through his dick or that I was definitely the first guy he let do it.

I *totally* did *not* mention that it was the best handjob I’ve ever performed or how many times I’ve dreamt about Vaughn’s lust-filled noises in my ear.

I just said there was an altercation during the initiation, which isn’t a lie if you think about it.

“It doesn’t take a genius to notice the change. You’ve had a fluctuation in libido and have become more prone to violence since then,” Cy says. “Will you tell me what the *altercation* with Vaughn was?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll just bitch and nag.” And for some reason, I don’t want to disclose intimate details, even if it’s to Cy.

Strange alert, by the way. I usually tell him all the fucking details, the small and the big, including rating my orgasms and the hookup from one to ten.

Not sure why I don’t want him or *anyone* to find out about what Vaughn and I do in the dark. *Did* in the dark.

Once.

Here’s to praying it becomes a habit. *Amen.*

“As I should.” He sighs like an old man who’s three times divorced. “Seriously, he’s bad news, Yulian.”

“I know.” I grin.

“He outwits you.”

“Hey!” I kick him. “Are you calling me stupid?”

“You’re not stupid, but he has more intellectual range than you. Where you go with your gut, he follows logic, and that puts you at a disadvantage when facing him.”

“Then I guess we’ll see who wins. My instinct or his boring brain.”

He stands up, a frown appearing between his brows. “Yulian. This isn’t the time to play around. Your brothers are waiting for one misstep to take your place, and your father might be opposed to it now, but if you humiliate him—and as much as I hate it, you being found with a man *will* humiliate him—he’ll neutralize you, put one of them at the top, and marry off your sister to the highest bidder. And that highest bidder might abuse her.”

Fuck this shit. He’s just repeating Mom’s words now.

A searing pain explodes in my chest at her memory.

The *last* memory.

Because she asked me to end it, and I didn’t. I let the obsession take over and abandoned her in her last moments.

“I’ll admit that Vaughn is also playing a dangerous game by baiting you,” Cy continues. “But he’ll snap out of it—his kind always does—and then you’ll be the one who’s hurt. Again. You’ll be the one paying the price. *Again*. When push comes to shove, he’ll throw you under the bus. Just like he left you to rot and die in that cave four years ago.”

I swallow, but it gets stuck somewhere at the back of my throat.

Right.

I started this whole thing so I could mess with Vaughn’s equilibrium. Smash his attitude, ruin his life. I intended to make him lose the love of his life, then give him no other option than to move, so then I could sabotage everything else—his studies, his friend group, anything and everything I could destroy.

Revenge.

That’s what I told myself when I picked up the obsession where I left off, but I don’t seem to be thinking about that when I fixate on his replies to my videos.

He only texts once in a while to tell me either that I’m annoying, or that I shouldn’t test him, or that I’m asking for it.

Maybe I am.

You’re still texting me. I gloat, laughing like a maniac every time I see the blue ticks indicating that he’s seeing everything I send him.

Every single thing.

Revenge.

Yeah, right. I just want to fuck him.

And truly, that will be my ultimate revenge, because the idea of Vaughn losing all his precious control over me is making my dick throb.

Yeah, it's *totally* for revenge.

When have I even thought about that lately?

Cy's about to keep poking around, but I slip out of his grip. "Gotta go fight. Bet lots of money on me!"

I jog out of the room and into the tunnel. The crowd's chants turn deafening as I head toward the ring, many of them reaching hands out to touch me in between the vigilant shoves of my guards. This place is a nightmare for my security and Cy, but everyone knows I live down here, in the underground, amongst monsters, pummeling my way to the top.

Some people do it for the glory, the power, the title of champion, but I do it for the journey itself—the actual act of violence.

The screams and shouts heighten at the sight of my opponent. Nikolai.

Of course it's Nikolai. He's always around here. Not as much as me, but close enough.

As adrenaline junkies, we love the fuck out of this place.

He jumps into the ring, hopping in place and punching the air. All of his weird tattoos are on display, and his long hair is held in a bun. Nikolai and I are about the same size, both muscled and big, so it's often a close match, depending on who's feeling more murderous.

"Ready to go down, bitch?" he taunts, circling me as soon as I jump over.

"That's what I should ask, *little* bitch." I grin.

"Oh, you're fucked. You're *so* fucked. Totally coming over and raiding your mansion later tonight."

"Uh, just in case no one pointed this out, you kind of, sort of shouldn't reveal your plan."

"Well, I'm telling you, and it'll still succeed."

The referee announces the start, and he comes at me full force, but I put my guard up, because I'm used to Nikolai. I love how he has zero hesitation about anything. His friend could learn a thing or two from him.

Yeah, no. I'm not thinking about Vaughn when I have an eighty percent chance of being pummeled to death by this brute mountain-like man.

I hit back and we exchange some blows in the midst of the crowd's shouts and chants.

See, I live for that fraction of a second when fists clash and bodies slam together in a beautiful manifestation of violence.

"So who will come to raid my mansion?" I ask when I hold him in a guard position.

"Me and everyone in the Heathens, of course."

"And they'll follow you?"

He shoves me away and jumps back. "The fuck is that supposed to mean? Of course they will."

"Not sure I buy that."

"This motherfucker." He punches me, and I hold him, then kick him in the chin, sending him to the ground.

"It's not that I don't believe you, but…" I look down on him, adopting a sympathetic tone—yes, I learned provocation tactics from Cy. "We all know no one listens to you in that place, Niko. Jeremy is the leader, Killian and Gareth are the brains, and you're just…oh, what's it called? The muscle. Easily replaceable and discardable. I feel *so* sorry for you."

He jumps up and hits me across the cheek. My face flies to the side, blood spilling onto the canvas. "Feel sorry for yourself, motherfucker."

I laugh. "Listen, if you manage to raid my mansion with *all* the members on your side, including Vaughn, I'll take what I said back."

"You think I can't?" He lunges at me again, but I stop him, the weight of my body balancing his.

"As I said, I have doubts."

"I'll show you, you little fuck."

"Please do." I smile—more like laugh, really. Maybe I need to turn my threats to Vaughn about pursuing Nikolai into reality after all.

Hmm—

I lift my head and pause, my eyes widening.

Not sure why I even looked up in the first place. Call it instinct or a sixth sense, but something told me I had to.

And I'm glad I did.

I'm instantly drawn to a figure across from me in the stands, clad entirely in black, his face lost beneath the brim of a low baseball cap.

Wait. Is that Vaughn—

My ears ring, and I crash to the ground at Nikolai's brutish punch. A metallic taste explodes in my mouth, and I cough up blood through my guards as I jump up despite the pain.

When I search again, Vaughn—no, the man I thought was Vaughn isn't there. The place where he was standing is now empty, and everyone is shouting and banging and talking and talking and fucking *talking*…

No, no, no, fuck no.

I jump out of the ring, not caring about Nikolai and everyone calling out and telling me to get back in there.

There's a high chance my wild imagination is conjuring him up again, as I do sometimes.

Okay, *all* the time.

But anyway, if it is Vaughn, I can't let him indulge in his favorite hobby—running away.

I shove through the crowd, shouting at the guards to clear a path for me, because the last thing I need is people getting in my way.

When I finally arrive outside, a sports car revs out of the parking lot.

But not before I catch a glimpse of him through the driver's window.

I see the man who's plaguing my dreams and nightmares, and a wide, almost manic grin curves my lips.

You know, Cy is wrong.

Yes, Vaughn and I are different breeds, and yes, he'd probably win in a chess game—what are the rules for that anyway?—but it's not always the brainy people who get the upper hand.

The thing is, I'm not the one who keeps crossing the sea for six hours or more and showing up on a different continent—it's the other way around.

Some might argue that I'm a fucking pest with my texts, but I don't go to harass him in person.

At any rate, Vaughn is here, not for his friends, since he wasn't with Jeremy and Killian on Nikolai's side, but for me.

And I'll be damned if I let him go this time.

So I hop on my new bike, nameless because I refuse to cheat on Zver, and indulge in my new favorite hobby.

Chase.

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17

VAUGHN

Once again, I find myself in the one place I shouldn't have gone to.

It started with a simple text exchange with Jeremy earlier today.

He mentioned that Niko is stoked for a fight with the Serpents' leader. Jeremy wasn't thrilled, but he said it's better to have Niko occupied with fighting someone on his level than running around wreaking havoc.

The next thing I knew, I was on the plane—after informing my parents so they wouldn't worry like the last time.

While I soothed my conscious on that front, my brain needed a reason to justify this pressuring madness that keeps mounting and invading my life like a parasitic entity.

I came up with one.

The reason for this trip—one of many I've taken recently—is to make sure Yulian doesn't mess with Niko. I don't mean from a fighting perspective, since both of them are obviously into that business, but from the other perspective. The one where Yulian threatened to seduce Niko.

I wanted to protect my friend.

That's *all.*

But I also didn't want to alert the others to my presence, mostly because it's completely out of character for me to be here for something other than initiations. The last thing I need is someone calling me out on the unusual behavior. I can barely explain it to myself, let alone to others.

For the whole fight, I stood motionless in the middle of the chanting chaos and the noisy crowd. I remained still even as some students bumped into me in their excited cheering.

With every punch and jab and easy laugh leaving Yulian's lips, I was growing uncomfortable, feeling suffocated.

Nauseated.

A cursed emotion gripped my chest when he was coughing up blood, and it didn't disappear even when he grinned and jumped back into the fight.

I've often wondered why he has so little respect for his life after what happened four years ago when he was fine with taking a bullet and possibly dying. It feels as if he has absolutely no regard for his life, and that irks me.

Even now, fleeing the crime scene, the irritated sensation clings to me—a brutal squeeze in my chest, so harsh and sickening, it steals my breath.

And yes, I had to *flee* because Yulian looked at me.

It was a fraction of a second, and I was so sure the cap would give me anonymity, but like always with Yulian, he looked at me as if he could see through my outer layers—whether they're clothes or masks or anything in between.

The last thing I want is for him to find out I'm here. He'll think it's for him—not that that's wrong—and I truly can't give him any more ideas. He's already too audacious for his own good as it is.

So I drive away from the underground ring's arena in the rented sports car. I should leave and, preferably, never come back. It's clear that Niko isn't sexually or romantically interested in Yulian and probably never will be.

But other people *are* interested in Yulian. Such as the fair-skinned blond who left his changing room in the arena before Cyrus went in. I was able to sneak close, blending in with the arena's staff, and could see the guy walking out, licking his lips.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white.

I couldn't care less who that degenerate Yulian fucks as long as it's not Niko.

And yet…I can't get the image of that guy out of my head.

Then there's Cyrus.

Always fucking *Cyrus.*

A light flashes in my rearview mirror and I squint, then my shoulders tense. Despite the darkness, I can make out the man on the bike who's flashing his lights at me.

I'd recognize him anywhere, especially now that he's half naked, his helmet on, and speeding to catch up to me.

Yulian.

So he *did* recognize me.

Fuck.

I hit the gas, speeding down the empty coastal road. The sea breeze rushes through the half-open window, filling my nostrils with the smell of salt.

The moment I think I've shaken him off, his headlights flare in my mirrors. He surges forward, and within seconds, he's beside me, mirroring my every move.

Keeping one hand on the handlebar, he waves at me, then points ahead.

As if I'll stop just because he asked me to.

The *audacity.*

Something Yulian has in excess.

I push the speed, but he matches me, gliding in parallel no matter how hard I go—still waving like a reckless bastard. Who the hell rides a motorcycle half naked, bandages in place of gloves, with no sense of safety whatsoever?

Someone with a death wish, obviously.

Headlights flash at Yulian from the opposite lane, but instead of dropping back, he floors it, shooting past me and flying up the hill.

Gripping the steering wheel tight, I hit the brakes so hard, the seat belt digs into my chest at the impact, and my whole body lunges forward.

The other car blares its horn, the sound ripping through the silence of the night, as Yulian cuts in front of me, speeds ahead, then swerves—stopping dead across from me.

I grab the steering wheel firmly as the car comes to a halt, and so does my heart, because what in the ever-loving fuck—

Both my hands are trembling slightly on the steering wheel as I look up.

Through the windshield, I see Yulian's sitting on his bike, one foot on the ground, one hand on the handlebars as he waves at me one finger at a time.

This *motherfucker*—

I release my seat belt and swing the door open, then stride toward him. My hand instantly wraps around his throat, choking him in a fraction of a second.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, asshole? You have a death wish?”

“Nah, my wish is something less than that, actually,” he strains, tapping my arm. “A kiss, if you must know. From you, of course.”

This damn—

I shake him a few times with my grip on his throat, feeling the tendons tense beneath my fingers. “We could’ve died.”

“But we didn’t, because you stopped.” I can’t see his eyes beneath the helmet, but I can hear the grin in his voice. “You’ll always stop for me, won’t you?”

I tighten my grip on the bastard, then shove him away. He loses balance and nearly falls ass-first on the street.

But I know I can’t have a conversation with the asshole, not when he always seems to be in the perfect mood to piss me off.

“Why did you stop? I was starting to get into the kinky stuff.” He removes his helmet and shakes out his damp hair.

I stop cold.

My eyes lock on him in ways that scare the hell out of me.

Despite my attempts to deny it, Yulian looks like the living embodiment of attractiveness and ruin even with his bloody lips and bruised cheek. If anything, they add to his unearthly, primitive beauty. Bathed in moonlight that slips in and out of the clouds, he doesn’t look human. He looks supernatural. A monster born to haunt the night.

An anomaly.

Strands cling to his forehead until he shoves them back with one hand, his bicep flexing, veins stark even in the dim streetlight. I catch the veins running thick across his arm, down his abs, and disappearing under the waistband of his shorts—

“I’m up here, Mishka.”

My eyes snap to his face as he hangs the helmet on the handlebar, the blue and brown colors of his irises glinting like an animal on the hunt.

His bandaged hand slides down, across the muscles of his chest, pausing on the tattoo, then continuing to his abs. He fingers the waistband of his shorts. “But I can also be down here if you prefer.”

“Very on brand,” I say in a seemingly bored voice, even as I struggle to keep my attention on his face. “You always think with your dick?”

“If you’re around, hell yeah.”

My lips part, but I purse them. He probably says that to a hundred others on a daily basis.

Like that blond guy from earlier.

Yulian seems to be the type who flirts for sport.

He only opens his mouth to flirt or yap nonstop, it seems.

“Besides.” He leans over so that his face is close to mine. “You came here for me, so I can’t let you leave without blessing you with my attention.”

I look down my nose at him, my hand flexing at my side, because I refuse to step back. That would mean he has the upper hand, and that will *never* happen.

Yulian is only ever meant to be fucking beneath me.

“You’re delusional,” I speak in the same bored tone.

“And you’re in denial, Mishka.” He sniffs me like a feral dog, inhaling audibly. “Admit it, you couldn’t stop thinking about me after I gave you a handjob. How would you rate it out of ten? Actually, no need for a rating, just tell me who does it better, me or Danika?”

“Of course it’s Danika,” I say without emotion, lying through my teeth, mostly because I can feel his breath on my skin. His lips are so close, my mouth’s watering, my heart hammers, and obscene images rush into my head.

Images I’ve tried and failed to eradicate from my consciousness.

His hand clamps the back of my neck, dragging me forward until our foreheads crash, his voice dropping low. “If you only said that to piss me off, it’s working.”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want honest answers to.” I plant a hand on his chest and try to shove him away, but he pulls me even closer, his breath lacing with mine.

I’m breathing him with every inhale, and it’s making me lightheaded.

A drug.

He’s a goddamn *drug* I can’t wait to inject into my starving veins.

“You’re anything but honest, Mishka. We both know I can make you experience things you would never dream of. Not with Danika, not with anyone else. I’m your best option.”

“More like the worst.”

“But you haven’t seen what’s up my sleeve. I’ll take you to the moon and back.”

“Just like you took a thousand others, I presume.”

He bites the corner of his lip. “Hey, is that jealousy?”

This time, I shove myself away so hard, I stumble and nearly lose my footing. “I couldn’t care less what you do with others.”

“You know what I think?” He swings his leg off the bike and stalks toward me, and I move to the edge of the road. “I think you clearly do. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have flown here twice now just because you think I’ll seduce Nikolai.”

“I’m here for my friends.”

“How can you lie with a straight face? Teach me!” He cuts the distance in a heartbeat, caging me against the tall guardrail framing a cliff that overlooks the crashing waves below. “But seriously, you didn’t come for your friends. You wouldn’t have been in disguise if you had. Or run away for the dozenth time when I saw you. Would it kill you to admit you’re here for me?”

Yes, it would.

But I don’t say that because his question sounds quiet, almost wounded, and I don’t like that tone. Not from Yulian, who’s usually so confident, it grates on my nerves.

I keep my mouth shut, not knowing what to say.

Or do.

A fire burns me with every inhale of his masculine scent. It’s intoxicating—this feeling of closeness and the knowledge that if I reach out, I can touch him, feel his muscles up close.

Just one more time.

“Mishka…” he breathes out in a shaky breath. “Let me in… I promise to make you feel good.”

He reaches a hand out, but I slap it away.

“Don’t touch me,” I growl, glaring at him.

He flexes and unflexes his hand at his side. “Why? Because you know if I start touching you, you’ll want more?”

“I want *nothing* from you.”

“Then why do you keep crawling back to me?”

My hand shoots forward of its own accord, and I wrap it around his throat. “Because you had the audacity to sleep with my girlfriend, and I will make you pay.”

He grabs my own throat, squeezing with the same strength I squeeze his. “You should thank me for saving you from a cheater, don’t you think? Besides, you murdered my girl Zver in cold blood, so we called it even, but you still came back. Like a fucking *junkie*. You can’t get me out of your head no matter how hard you try. I’m already flowing in your bloodstream.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“I have my fingers up in that complicated head of yours, and I will keep toying around with it until you quit the denial.”

“I will break your bones. Don’t test me.”

“Love how you resort to threats when you’re cornered. Tell me more…” He yanks me close so that I *feel* his words on my skin instead of hearing them. “If I run my hands all over your body, you’ll be so hard for me, won’t you, baby? Your cock can’t get enough of me after one taste—”

I swing us around and slam him against the railing, his back twisting against the metal that rattles with the impact.

It’s true.

He’s right.

And I can’t *handle* that he’s fucking *right*.

Or that my cock has been in a state of high alert since I first touched this motherfucker.

Actually, it’s been like this since I saw Yulian in the rearview mirror, and it’s only gotten worse with us being in each other’s faces. The aggressiveness that pours out whenever we’re at each other’s throats turns me on in ways I never could’ve imagined.

And I categorically refuse to let him feel the effect he has on me.

Yulian flashes a grin, his eyes unhinged, glittering like the sea that rages beneath the cliffs. “You can’t control your temper when you’re angry. Good to know.”

Only when I’m angry at him, apparently. I’m usually skilled at reining in my anger, phasing it out before it shows.

“I’m telling you this once, Yulian. Stop messing around.”

“I’m not messing around—I’m trying to pursue you very, *very* seriously, swear on everything holy.”

He tries to shove himself farther into my space, but I tighten my grip on his throat, pushing him back, maintaining the distance.

And my sanity.

A horn blares, alerting me to the fact that we've stopped the car and the bike dead in the middle of the road.

A man leans out his window, glaring. "Fucking fags! Get out of the road!"

"Suck my dick!" Yulian shouts back, flipping him off. "Oh, wait! Yo mama did it first!"

I freeze, turning my head sideways even as the car speeds past.

Fuck.

I was so worked up and distracted by Yulian's provocations, I completely forgot we were outside.

In *public*.

Someone could take a picture, and it'll get back to our parents.

To our entire entourage.

We'd be hunted down, and this would destroy my parents' position.

What the fuck have I done?

What am I—

"Hey."

Rough, bandaged fingers squeeze my throat, pulling my attention from the abyss to Yulian's mismatched eyes. He lifts his other hand and palms my cheek. "Don't worry. I memorized his plate number and will cut his tongue out for daring to say that."

I let him go with a jerk and back off, my breath wild and chopped off. "I've got to go."

"You're leaving?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't owe you an explanation. You mean nothing to me."

"A *nothing* you keep coming back to?" His voice rises a notch, stripped and raw. "When will I expect you next? When I fight Nikolai? That doesn't seem to work, so maybe I'll sleep with him. Yup, I will do that tonight, actually. Sit tight and wait for another video—"

I swing around and punch him. "Do that and I will kill you."

He touches his cheek that's reddening, and I expect him to punch me back, go blow for blow like he did with Nikolai in that ring, or get in my

face like he usually does.

I'm fine with violence.

I *prefer* violence when dealing with Yulian.

But instead of giving in to his nature, he fixes me with a look sharp enough to kill. "If you don't want me to sleep with Nikolai, let me fuck you just once and we'll call it quits."

"You will *not* fuck me. I'll never let anyone do that."

He lifts a shoulder. "We'll fight over who gets to fuck the other. How about that?"

"No."

"Don't refuse outright." He runs a tense hand through his hair. "Listen, I've never allowed anyone to fuck me, but I'm offering a compromise here, giving you the chance to fight me for it. So compromise back. Meet me in the middle."

"I said no. Leave me alone, Yulian. Seriously, just let me be."

"I'm not the one who keeps catching flights. You are."

I'm breathing so heavily, it's audible in the silence, and he feels it, the conflict, and the urge that I can't control—the reason why I keep sneaking back here like a hopeless addict.

I initially thought this phase would pass, but it's only seemed to get worse.

Way worse.

I've managed to painstakingly keep Yulian out of my head for the past four years, very *narrowly* so, but he surged to the forefront of my thoughts the moment I saw him in that restaurant.

The sex with Danika made it more complicated, but truly, he's been messing with my sanity since he touched my godforsaken ear in the restaurant. Ever since then, I don't recognize myself.

"Tell you what," he muses when I say nothing, pinching his bloody lower lip between his fingers before releasing it. "I'll jump off this railing."

"*What*?"

"Hear me out. If I make it out alive, you'll have to give me a chance. If I die, then, well, I'll no longer annoy you. What do you think?"

"Jump. Drop dead, for all I care." I scoff and turn to my car. "Just stop messing around, and you better *not* get involved with Niko, or I'll shoot you in the face."

“You know…” His voice drifts as movement stirs behind me. “You’ve always underestimated me, Mishka.”

I spin and lunge forward, my arms outstretched. He flashes me a calm grin as he lets himself fall back.

“Yulian, no!” My fingers claw at empty air.

The motherfucker just threw himself off the cliff.

Water splashes violently against the rocks below, the sound reverberating in the night. I stare into the black current, gripping the metal railing so tightly, my knuckles ache.

Fuck.

Fucking hell.

I only said he should jump and drop dead to taunt him. I never meant for him to do it for real.

Fuck.

It happens in a flash—for the first time in my life, I move before my thoughts can catch up.

Before I realize what I’m doing, I dive in after the man who’s tearing my life apart.

Plunging with him into the depths of the ocean.

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18

YULIAN

I open my eyes to a void of white.

For a second, I think I'm back at the hospital where I saw my mother in her final days.

My heartbeat skyrockets, and I expect the machines to start beeping and freaking the hell out.

Silence.

Long, stretching silence.

Memories of the crashing waves trickle back in, and I grunt. Okay, so that wasn't one of my brightest ideas per se, and I'm pretty sure I underestimated how strong those damned waves could get. I was swimming to the surface in full-blown survival mode, only to get knocked back down again.

And then what…?

Holy shit. I sit up in bed—is this my bed in hell? I expected something less comfy.

Seriously, though, someone tell me that wasn't the end, and I didn't in fact die in the freaking ocean.

No, come on, that's so lame. I want to go out in battle like a badass warrior.

Wait. Hold on.

I remember large hands gripping my waist and slapping my face and…

Very typical of my brain to black out at the good part. Need to ask Cy for supplement recommendations because this shit's serious.

I pinch myself and it hurts, so that means I'm *totally* alive—you can't have me yet, Satan. Go sit in the corner.

Then it hits me—the reason I'm alive is because of Vaughn.

I *think.*

At least, I *hope*.

I mean, no one else was there—again, I *hope*—so he must've been the one who saved me. I don't remember swimming to the shore.

Running a hand through my damp hair, I take a look at myself and grin so wide, because guess what?

I'm naked beneath the duvet.

Yup. Completely in the nude.

Please tell me Vaughn removed my clothes. I'd pay my entire fortune to see him do that, and Cy's too—he'd do that for me. What are bros for, am I right?

My focus sharpens on the room around me. It's cozy, dark wallpaper patterned with leaves wrapping the walls. A lamp in the corner spills soft orange light across the wooden floor. The decor is simple, elegant, and structured—the kind of place I can easily imagine Vaughn living in. Nothing like my badass room with lots of shit everywhere. Though I believe this is an upscale hotel, not really a house.

The sliding door creaks open inch by inch, and I hold my breath as Vaughn's head slips through the gap. He freezes the moment his gaze collides with mine.

Fuck.

Fuck me all the way to hell.

I had hoped he'd be here, but I never dared to have too much hope. But there he is.

Right *here.*

I grin.

He scowls.

God, I love the guy's grumpiness more than I should. I'm a certified masochist when it comes to him, it seems. Thank you very much.

He steps in, clad in black shorts and a gray T-shirt that hugs his bulging muscles, his biceps flexing when he leans against the wall next to the door and crosses his arms.

Vaughn looks devastating even in loungewear and with damp hair framing his forehead. It's the way he carries himself—always composed elegance wrapped in control, his expression cool, locked behind the mask he wears so well.

"Where is this place?" I ask, my voice raspier than usual. "Somewhere on the island? How did you get me here?"

"Since you're awake," he says in his usual bored, calm tone, ignoring all of my questions. "Off you go."

I point at the clock on the nightstand. "It's two in the morning. You can't possibly expect me to leave."

"I absolutely do. Taxis run twenty-four hours a day."

"You're so heartless. I almost died and all you do is kick me out?"

"It's not my fault you threw yourself off a cliff, Yulian." His tone drops, rough and sharp, every word coiled tight like he wants to choke me.

"It kind of is."

"*Excuse* me?"

"I had to prove myself to you in some way. You're kind of hard to impress."

His upper lip lifts almost in a snarl before he breathes in and out audibly, stops, then smooths his expression. "You threw yourself off a cliff because I'm…*hard to impress*?"

"Uh-huh. It was a gamble to see if you'd give me a chance, and I won, by the way."

"You won?"

"Yeah, I didn't die."

"Because I *saved* you."

"Still didn't die. Method doesn't matter, only the result does."

"Is…your life worth that little to you? Why do you not care whether you live or die?" He exhales a long, tense breath. "Actually, don't answer that. Just forget it—and leave."

He starts toward the door, but I'm jumping up from the bed. My foot gets tangled in the duvet, and I lose my balance, but I catch myself, then jog toward him and grab his wrist just when he's about to leave.

Because fuck that. I won't allow him to.

Not now.

Not *ever*, actually.

But let’s not think about that part, because the idea of being in the uncertain for a long time kind of short-circuits my brain.

I haul Vaughn against me. He resists at first, but I’m able to slam him against the wall, not only due to strength—though I use it—but mainly because the moment his eyes drag over me, he turns his head to the side and stops fighting.

The sharp muscles in his jaw flex, and his hand balls into a fist.

“Put something on. I asked the hotel staff to place fresh clothes in the closet,” he speaks from between gritted teeth.

That’s when I realize he’s lost the fight because he saw me in my full naked glory.

Something inside me *snaps*.

Maybe it’s the tension that could be cut with a knife.

Or the irrational need I have for this motherfucker on the regular.

Or the fact that he’ll leave again, and I’ll be the one dealing with the fallout of the obsession.

As usual.

So I squeeze his wrist tighter as I lean closer, my mouth just a few agonizing breaths from his jaw. He visibly tenses, that brain of his probably conjuring a flight response, but I’ll be damned if I let him slip from between my fingers.

Vaughn has always been someone I’ve never fully grasped, but not tonight.

Tonight, I’ll take what I want.

My voice drops as I speak near his jaw, “You’re the one who removed my clothes, no?”

“Because they were wet,” he says in a firm voice that cracks at the edges.

“Hmm. I’ll take your word for it. Besides.” I lower my voice further, licking my lips. “You can look again, you know. I don’t mind. Unless…” I pause, distracted by the bobbing of his Adam’s apple as he swallows thickly. “You can’t *resist* me?”

He jerks his face toward me, his lips pursed, and it’s a shame, because now our lips are so close, if he just parted them a little, I would—

“I’m looking at you, now what?” He speaks calmly, trying his hardest to sound bored, but the tension beneath his words betrays him.

I lean forward, but he slams his palm over my lips. “Don’t you fucking *dare*, Yulian.”

I take his other hand and slide it slowly up the length of my thigh. My cock jumps to life, performing a goddamn standing ovation at the mere promise of Vaughn’s touch.

A rush of endorphins spills into my blood as my skin lights on fire and my heart beats so loud, I think I’m going to have an attack.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Just his hand on me is giving me pleasure I’ve never experienced before.

And I’m ravenous for it.

For *him*.

For fucking *more*.

So I guide his hand higher, closer to where my cock is basically jumping out of its skin for contact.

The entire time, my gaze remains on Vaughn. He drops his palm from my mouth, his hooded forest-like eyes zeroing in on his hand that’s on my cock.

I expect him to fight or try to remove it.

Or worse—punch or curse me or warn me not to touch him, but he’s frozen.

No, not frozen.

Riveted.

He’s completely caught in an unreachable focus zone.

His eyes darken and his nostrils flare as I plant his palm on my cock. He must feel it, too—the way it throbs as if vibrating with the same tension coursing through his body—because his pupils dilate and his hand twitches.

It’s as if he’s waiting for something—what, I don’t know, and I don’t give a fuck because my head’s on cloud nine and my heart is spilling into my throat with how crazy it’s beating.

“Fuuuck,” I groan, breathing heavily. “You feel how hard I am because of you, baby?”

He swallows thickly, the tendons in his neck bunching as he grabs my cock in a harsh, unforgiving grip. Of course it gets harder since it’s a literal dick and all.

A shadow cuts across Vaughn’s face at my reaction, his hand crushing tighter around me.

“Because of *me*?” His voice drops, his glare pinning me in place. “Is that what you tell everyone who touches your cock, Yulian? Hmm?”

I groan because, truly, he’s so hot when he’s a ball of angry grumpiness. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“*Maybe*?” he repeats in a low voice.

He squeezes me tight, pain sparking in my throbbing cock as his other hand clamps around my throat. In one motion, he swings me, slamming me against the wall. The table in the corner jolts, and a vase explodes on the floor.

Vaughn doesn’t release me. If anything, he’s so much more into my space, I breathe him in with every inhale.

Fuck me.

I meant to tease him, but I didn’t realize I’d poked the devil. His eyes are furious, his nostrils are flaring, and he’s jerking me off with such delicious pressure, I think I’ll come here and now.

Seems he *really* doesn’t like the idea of me with other people.

And because I’m a total goddamn tease, I grab his waist, my hand slipping under his shirt and onto his hip. “Why? You don’t like that I fuck anyone and everyone I wish?”

“Shut your mouth.” He squeezes the crown of my cock, and my head falls back against the wall, and I’m barely sucking in air through his ruthless grip on my throat.

He rubs me up and down in rough, long movements, eliciting sharp tingles down my spine. All my blood rushes to where his hand strokes my very purple, angry skin.

“You’re a fucking whore,” he speaks low in my ear. “An irresponsible piece of shit who doesn’t know how to keep his cock on a leash.”

“You’re right.” I reach beneath the waistband of his shorts and lick my lips when I find his cock so hard, he’s leaking against the fabric. “I’m horny all the time because of you, baby.”

He huffs, the sound laced with a moan as I match his rhythm. Seems that like me, Vaughn loves it rough. In an instant, my hand is dripping with his precum, and I use it to lube him up.

“You need to be taught some fucking manners.” His voice is raw, his breathing uneven and ragged as he picks up the pace, also using my precum as lube. His hand slides with more ease, pulling at the strings of my fucking sanity.

“Then teach me. I’m a fast learner.” I groan, my voice cracking.

I’m so close.

My cock’s already a Vaughn superfan, and now that it has his attention, it’s ready to explode in gratitude.

“Oh, I *will* teach you.” His hand tightens around my throat, his thumb grazing my chin, and my eyes lock on his, even as his hips drive forward and heat flushes his skin red. “I’ll teach you to stop being a fuckboy and to learn how to keep it in your pants, you little slut.”

“If that includes teaching me with your hand, then I’m game.”

He squeezes me brutally, and a low, gruff sound spills out of my throat.

“Stop yapping.” Pretty sure he means to sound harsh, but he moans because I’m touching him just right, rubbing his cock the way I did before he exploded in my hands the other time.

“But you *love* it when I yap.” I lift my face, but I only manage to drop a quick kiss to his mouth before he slams me back against the wall.

I don’t try again, because my balls fill up and my spine tingles, my hand trembles on his cock as I grab on to his shirt.

“Fuck, baby, I’m gonna come,” I moan on a gasp, holding on to him for dear life. “I’m gonna come for you, Mishka. Let me use your mouth, please, oh fuck, please…”

He pauses for a second, his brows drawing together, probably confused or unsure how I’d do that.

I waste no time. The moment his grip eases from my throat, I shove him back, sending him stumbling onto the bed.

I hop on top of him on all fours and turn around so that my throbbing cock is near his lips, and my mouth salivates for his that’s bulging against his shorts.

I pull them down and pause when I catch a glimpse of a series of numbers tattooed on his inner thigh, but I don’t focus on it for long, because his gorgeous, huge cock jumps against his briefs, and I’m distracted.

With a hum, I free it and grab it with both hands.

Fuck me.

It was dark the last time, and the angle didn’t allow me to get a proper look, but Vaughn is packing just like me. We’re about the same size, but his is slightly curved, and I already know I’ll devour it like a Popsicle.

When I look at him, he’s staring at my cock with a flushed face before he hesitantly reaches for it, wrapping both hands around it.

“That’s it, baby,” I grunt out. “Just do what I do. Mmm, fuck yeah.”

A moan is all the reply I get from him.

A moan is *all* I need.

I pull the crown into my mouth, swiping my tongue around the tip before I suck hard.

Vaughn’s gruff noises of pleasure pierce my ears, but then they get muffled because he does the same with my cock. His movements are more exploratory, but I feel every morsel of his enthusiasm as he nearly sucks my soul through my crown.

His precum explodes in my mouth and I nearly drown at the sweet taste of him.

Fuck.

Is he turned on because he’s sucking my cock, or because I’m sucking him, or both?

Doesn’t matter.

I swallow him deeper, licking and teasing his balls in the process. I expect Vaughn to take it slower since he’s new to the whole thing, but that wouldn’t be Vaughn.

He’s competitive to a fault, and it shows when he mimics me, taking my length down his throat. Naturally, he coughs and gurgles around it.

“Easy, baby,” I speak around his dick, kissing the length. “I know you love the competition, but you need to train the gag reflex. Relax for me, yeah? Open as wide as possible.”

He licks my crown, and I groan, my spine snapping upright, and then he slowly takes me in again, so I do the same, jerking my hips. I let my saliva coat his length then bob my head up and down, giving him the sloppiest friction before taking him to the back of my throat.

Vaughn’s hips move more frantically by the second, and I squeeze his balls just as mine fill up. He grabs my waist, his fingers digging into my skin, and lets me drive into his mouth and use it, opening it as wide as he probably can.

So of course I do the same, and he drives into me with frantic, unpolished thrusts. The sheer force of his power collides with mine, and we’re both panting as the smell of sex fills my nostrils like a hit of drugs.

I’m *so* close, and I can tell he is too by the way his hips jerk and his noises of pleasure heighten, getting muffled by my cock.

So I squeeze his drawn-out balls, making him gasp and moan so deep, I'm already there.

My groan matches his grunt as we come in each other's mouths almost at the same time.

My hips spasm and jerk as I thrust all the way to the back of his throat, filling him the fuck up with my cum.

His thrust is less deep, but it's forceful, making me swallow every last drop.

Fuck me, he tastes so good.

So fucking addictive.

I could swallow him up for the rest of my goddamn life.

Grabbing his cock with my hands, I lick around the sides and his balls, not allowing an ounce to go to waste.

I've swallowed cum more times than I could count, but I've *never* felt like this unsatiable.

Like a greedy little slut who just can't get enough.

I want more of Vaughn.

I want his *everything.*

I keep at it for so long, Vaughn's fingers around my waist loosen and he coughs. I realize I might be suffocating him with my cock, so I reluctantly pop his half-erect dick from my mouth, and it bobs against his partially-exposed stomach, on the smooth muscles of his abdomen.

Hesitantly, I push myself up, pulling out of his mouth, and he coughs a few more times as I fall beside him, carefully watching his face for any telltale signs.

That was hands down the best orgasm I've ever had, so if he says something hurtful right now, I don't know how I'll cope with it.

It's ridiculous that I allow his words to get to me this much, knowing exactly how much he disregards me.

Is it a curse?

Is there a way I can stop it?

I'll consider black magic, by the way.

Vaughn's breathing harshly, his face is red, and streaks of cum trickle down his chin, looking like my own messed-up masterpiece.

But while I'm watching him, his gaze is lost in the ceiling.

What is he thinking? Is he regretting it?

Did he not like it?

Is he going to leave again while I remain here and wait for…what?

Fuck.

Why am I so focused on his mood? It was for revenge, right?

I'm looking at him all marked with my cum, and yet I feel no…joy.

If anything, as I watch the lines of his handsome, expressionless face, I know that I'd probably do anything for this guy if he merely asked.

Cy is right. I'm clearly at a disadvantage.

I'm so attuned to him while he's just using and baiting me.

He'll be over his bi-curiosity at some point, and I'll be the one left behind.

The pleasure haze disappears, crashing into an abyss of dread and pressing self-preservation.

I jump up and head to the closet, then grab the first pair of shorts and T-shirt I can find.

Vaughn props himself on his elbows, and I can feel him watching me closely, but I refuse to look at him. That's not going to help my case.

"What's wrong…?" His question is cut off when I rush out of the room, putting on the shorts on the way.

"Yulian?" His unsure question trails behind me, but I'm already running out.

I do something I should've done four years ago.

I abandon him before he abandons me.

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19

VAUGHN

I’ve realized with staggering disappointment that I don’t have friends.

Well, I do. I’ve always confided in Jeremy and even Nikolai despite our being worlds apart personality-wise. Killian and Gareth have been close to me all my life as well. There’s also Lidya, who’s been my friend since I was born.

But what I realized is that I would never talk to them about Yulian.

Or what happens with Yulian.

Or anything fucking *Yulian*.

I’d never talk out loud about sucking his cock and coming in his mouth.

That type of talk.

It’s a *me* problem, not my friends’.

I just can’t bring myself to even voice the rampant thoughts running through my head.

It’s been a week, and I’m burning—fucking *suffocating* at the memory of that night. It’s so fresh in my mind, as if it only happened yesterday.

I can almost taste him on my lips, my tongue, and all the way to my goddamn insides.

But no, I can’t just pick up the phone and call Jeremy or interrupt Lidya’s vigorous training for some upcoming championship just to…what? Vent? Like a fucking teen?

I didn’t even have that teenage phase. I’ve been a full-blown grown-up ever since I was thirteen or so, and I refuse to roll back in time at this stage

of my life.

However, ever since I had lunch with Lidya the other day and felt the words get stuck in my throat, I've been wondering why I couldn't bring myself to tell her. We've been close our whole lives, and while she might be surprised, she wouldn't judge me.

Neither would Jeremy, and especially not Niko, Kill, and Gareth.

So as I was staring at my cousin, listening to all the progress she's made in training and the minor wrist injury she's dealing with, I thought maybe I was ashamed.

Maybe I'm embarrassed by my inexplicable fiery reaction to a man who could get me and himself killed. It's not a matter of if, but when. Yulian is too untamed and couldn't care less about the social code in our world, and that will get him in trouble sooner or later.

Maybe I'm self-conscious for not being able to control myself, or the impulse, or the actions I take when he's around.

I'm certainly appalled that I can't recognize myself when I'm with him, that I seem to transform into this entirely different person who matches that prick's unhinged energy.

And I don't like this new version of me or the incomprehensible chaos that comes with it or the damning reality that I can't prevent it from taking over.

So I don't understand why I've been traveling and showing up in his space, just so I can feel that way in his company, even if it's only for a short period of time.

Half a day—no, an hour.

Sometimes, a few minutes are enough.

But that doesn't eradicate the sense of shame.

It's not that I'm ashamed of my attraction to Yulian.

I think I've had it for longer than I can remember or admit. But I suppose I'm ashamed of *what* that means.

The twist in my sexuality. The deviation from the picture-perfect life I traced for myself.

The fucking *complication*.

The reality I refused to confront for such a long time is slithering from its dormant habitat and exploding in my face.

And I don't know how to deal with it—this new…sexual orientation.

The only person I know who's had a similar experience is Niko, but he's been out for such a long time, and I can't tell him shit, because he's bad with secrets, and my fragile sexuality might accidentally slip.

That would fucking end me. My parents. Everything they've worked for.

Yes, Nikolai also comes from the mafia, but it's different for him. His parents are leaders, but his dad isn't at the top, and he wasn't groomed to be the future Pakhan, so he has more leeway.

But even then, he can't act as flamboyant in front of the older members.

Aside from Niko, there's also my uncles, but I'm not sure how to broach the subject with them, and I seriously don't want them to find out and subsequently tell Mom.

So in a way, this sexual confusion comes with extreme limiting conditions, and it's been driving me fucking insane.

Add the fact that Yulian has gone radio silent since the day he stormed out of the hotel suite, and I'm on the edge.

I've been filling my days with distraction—shooting, joining operations, working out, studying, sitting through meetings—*anything* to make sure I don't have a second of free time. But when night comes, it all caves in. I lie awake, tossing and turning, then end up scrolling through his old texts, watching his stupid videos on repeat.

It's so unlike him to ghost me, not when he was the pushiest pushy of all fucking pushers.

He did say he only wanted to fuck once and that's it. But that wasn't fucking.

I *think.*

My experience in gay sex is limited to Google searches, some porn, and an unhealthy amount of Reddit threads. Let's say I went down a rabbit hole after that night.

Yes, the night I had an existential crisis and came to the conclusion I'm definitely not straight.

Which brings me to the only person I can actually talk to.

It's a guy who made a thread talking about his confusion about his sexual awakening after meeting his superior.

I messaged him on Reddit, and we've been kind of talking for the past week or so.

Even with that, I was apprehensive about letting anything slip. I'm extremely wary about a data breach or anything of the sort, which is why I have no form of social media.

Except, well, for phantom accounts I use to "look around" sometimes.

At any rate, I might have had someone hack into the guy's Reddit profile, just to know who he is. I can't be talking to him just to find out he'll sell my information or use anything I say to hurt my parents.

And color me surprised when I figured out it's none other than Gareth.

Yes, *the* Gareth Carson.

Turns out, that night at the Serpents' mansion, he was already tangled up in his new obsession—his criminal law professor, of all people. Gareth, the Heathens' golden boy. The fixer. The one forever patching up Killian's messes and dragging Niko out of trouble. Aside from Jeremy and me, he's the only one with a level head.

Or so I thought.

Because his Reddit version, or I should call it his *true self*, is, in fact, petty, narcissistic, and downright sociopathic.

I'm actually impressed by how he's managed to hide that from the public eye for so long.

Still, knowing his identity made me more comfortable speaking to him. I only created that account to lurk in subreddits and now to talk to Gareth.

We're basically going through the same thing, though he's much more resistant about admitting his sexuality.

I suppose it's not fun realizing in your twenties that you like dick as well as pussy, but I'm surprisingly not as worried about it as Gareth, who seems to be having existential crises on a daily basis.

I'm logical enough to admit I enjoyed sucking Yulian's cock and swallowing his cum.

More than *enjoyed.*

A part of me has been itching for another hit since that night, wondering how I survived without this for so long.

I stare out at Washington DC's luminous sidewalks as the car cruises the streets heading toward the event I'm attending with my parents and a few other leaders. They went ahead first because my father is always huge on security, so he needed to check that personally.

On the surface, this charity is all about medical innovation. In reality, it's a nest of vipers.

The Boston branch is hosting, having invited most of the Bratva in the States—our own, plus Seattle, Florida, and, of course, Chicago.

Uncle Adrian, Jeremy's father, and my own were reluctant to attend, and for good reason. With all the major branches under one roof, it's the perfect breeding ground for an attack.

Even with security supposedly locked down on all sides and Boston's leaders swearing they've taken every measure, the risk is written in blood.

But skipping wasn't an option. Not when every other branch is showing up. That would scream weakness, and we don't do weakness. So our side had to send my parents, Uncle Adrian, and Nikolai's parents—Aunt Rai and Uncle Kyle—backed by a wall of security.

I didn't have to come; Jeremy and Nikolai aren't here. But I've always shadowed my father, studying his every move. And since this is probably the biggest Bratva gathering I've ever seen, no way in hell was I missing it.

There's also that pesky thing where I don't want to give myself free time to overthink.

As the car takes me to my destination, I pull out my phone and frown when I find no new texts. I even scroll to the conversation with Yulian, double-checking just in case the notification got lost somewhere.

It didn't.

With a sigh, I switch to my exchanges with Gareth on Reddit. He named himself TooPrettyForThisMess like a true narcissist. I picked QuietRage because, really, I've been feeling a fire simmering at the surface without the right ammunition to explode.

QUIETRAGE

Any updates?

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS

Well… I let him fuck me and that might have been the best sex of my life. Kill me.

Wow, weren't you so adamant about never getting fucked? You folded fast.

Shut up. Don't judge me.

I'm not. Truly. I'm glad you gave in to your feelings.

There are NO FEELINGS.

You don't have to use caps. I TOTALLY believe you.

VERY funny. Anyway, what about you? Will you be moving to fucking anytime soon, or are you completely fine with pining?

I'm not pining.

Dude, you've been having dreams about him.

That's nothing. It's subconscious.

Sure is if you obsessively think about him before going to sleep.

😒 Will you stop now?

Nah. But seriously, what's stopping you?

It's complicated…

I'm a complicated specialist. Give it to me straight—or gay, whatever fits. 😜

I just can't be in a relationship with a man. It's simply impossible with my type of entourage.

Okay, but you don't have to be in a relationship. You're the one who told me to do what feels right, and there's no need to label myself, so maybe take your own advice, my dude. Unless you still have some hang-ups about preferring dick to pussy?

I don't prefer dick to pussy. I'm fine with both. And yes, I surprised myself by how easily I accept that fact. I guess I admitted that I truly loved the sexual experience, even if my brain is still fighting to fully fall into it.

The brain will always fight.

Even for someone who's been out as bi for a while?

You came out as bi?

Not me, him.

I don't know. What are you asking me for? I'm as new as you to this game.

Let me ask you. If he seemed to enjoy the oral, judging by how much he came down my throat, why do you think he stormed out, refusing to look at me, and then proceeded to ignore me? I mean, I'm a beginner, but I don't think I was that bad.

Maybe he didn't enjoy it as much as you thought. But it's better if you ask him. That is, if you still want to talk to the prick after he dared to ghost you.

My heart falls as I read and reread Gareth's words, specifically "Maybe he didn't enjoy it as much as you thought." That's the only thing that makes sense and the possibility I've been thinking about since that day.

Because why else would he disappear after invading my life for so long?

Was he disappointed? The reality was worse than his fantasy, and he didn't want to proceed?

All this time, I refused to text him, especially not first, but now, I type a few words. My finger hovers over the Send button before I hit it.

Are you done playing games?

He doesn't read the text.

Almost as if he's erased me from his life.

And the rage festering beneath my skin erupts, flooding to the surface, front, right, and center.

An hour later, I'm walking around the charity event. Washington DC isn't an arbitrary location; it's been carefully chosen to be a neutral ground for all the factions attending.

The mansion-turned-diplomatic-hall exudes elegance with a steel-lined spine. Columns of pale stone rise like sentinels beneath a ceiling dressed with painted clouds and golden trim, designed to impress the men gathered here.

Russians—mostly Russian Americans such as myself. Only a few were born in Russia and raised there like Mom, and they're mostly from an older generation.

I trail Dad, exchanging greetings with the people he presents me to, pride flickering in his gaze.

"Meet my son."

"Have you met my son?"

"This is my pride and joy, Vaughn."

My mother did the same a while ago, introducing me to business associates of the Ivanovs—her side of the family.

Both she and my dad keep praising me, my intellect, my achievements, how “lucky” they are to have me, and I have to physically stop myself from loosening my tuxedo’s bow tie.

I go through the motions, acting the part, being absorbed into our surroundings in order to ignore the discomfort bubbling within.

Crystal chandeliers drip warm light onto polished floors, catching on jeweled wrists and the sharp glint of cuff links. Classical music hums in the background—Prokofiev, I believe—but no one’s really listening. The melody floats above the room like tension waiting to snap.

Guests murmur in hushed, brittle tones, and while it sounds casual, it’s not. This place is nothing short of a minefield.

Men from every Bratva faction dot the space in their tailored suits, with their practiced smiles and hawk-like eyes that flick toward the exits too often.

As I listen to Dad’s acquaintance speak, I catch the guarded expressions, the subtle glances, and how some of the older men keep a hand near their jacket, even while sipping champagne.

It looks like diplomacy but smells like smoke before a fire.

It’s not only New York versus Chicago—it’s the whole thing.

All of a sudden, the room erupts in low murmurs when Yaroslav walks in, followed by what are supposed to be leaders in his Bratva. Security isn’t allowed inside the hall, but the bald-headed men with him look like bodyguards instead of other leaders.

“Here comes the snake.” Uncle Adrian slides to Dad’s side, speaking low. “Keep an eye on him. He’s up to something.”

Dad narrows his eyes. “I know.”

“I don’t like his secret dealings with powerful families close to our territory.”

“Then we need to make our own.”

“Not possible at the moment. Those families, such as the Davenports and Callahans, only deal with insiders.”

“Yaroslav was born a nobody in the streets of Moscow and lived like a rat for most of his youth.” Dad narrows his eyes in the Chicago leader’s direction. “He only got this far by using his father-in-law’s fortune like a parasite, so he’s definitely *not* an insider.”

“He might not be an insider, but he has a bargaining chip that allows him an in we currently don’t have.”

That can’t be good.

Dad and Uncle Adrian fall silent, but many others are whispering about Yaroslav. He’s not truly liked by any of the other factions, but he’s respected, or probably feared, because many of the other leaders fall in line to greet him.

No one from our side steps up, though, which is understandable, considering the bad blood.

It might have started a long time ago, but it was cemented after that attack on the camp. Yaroslav thinks our side did it, and Dad thinks Chicago is the one behind it.

But I’m not sure.

I’ve often found that incident strange, and I’ve done a lot of digging over the years, but I’ve never come up with anything different from my father’s findings. He believes Yaroslav hacked into our system and sent people to kill me, and it was only a stroke of luck that Yulian took the bullet instead.

While it does make sense from Dad’s perspective, in reality, it’s not convincing. Although there’s no love lost between father and son, Yaroslav wouldn’t put his heir in danger like that; he just wouldn’t risk it.

But again, it’s only speculation, and there’s no proof at this point.

“Morozov, Volkov.” A man with fully white hair and a strong build cuts through the small crowd surrounding us, though he doesn’t truly have to since they make room for him.

The leader of the Boston branch.

Uncle Adrian nods in acknowledgment, and my father says, “Markov.”

“What’s with the long face, gentlemen?” His words roll out in a thick Russian accent, followed by a booming laugh as he snaps his fingers at a waiter, who nearly trips rushing over. Markov plucks two flutes of champagne and hands them to my father and Uncle Adrian. “Let’s drink to new beginnings.”

Dad takes the glass but doesn’t lift it to his mouth. “Not if he’s here. I told you that.”

“Now, now.” Markov, our enthusiastic host, throws his hand around. “Don’t hold on to old grudges. It’s not like you. Besides, as a gesture of goodwill, Dimitriev brought his disabled child to show support for the

cause. Flew her all the way from Chicago, which is unheard of, considering how much he shelters her. The least you can do is be a little lenient. For my sake, yes?"

"I will *not* compromise," my father says with finality, but I'm not focused on him, my gaze square on Yaroslav.

My lips part when the last person I expected to see walks through the door.

Yulian.

He wasn't on the list of guests. I know because I checked it, *obsessively*, hoping for what, I don't know.

But he's actually here.

My heart squeezes, the air in my lungs constricting, and my ears ring, completely tuning out the conversation surrounding me.

Every morsel of my attention is directed at him.

He's in a black suit, stretched taut over muscle, no tie, the top buttons of his white shirt undone. His hair is slicked back, his expression flat—bored, almost—as he wheels a girl in a stunning pink dress in front of him.

The resemblance is uncanny, though she's softer, blue-eyed, copper waves framing her face. She glances back at him with a smile, says something, and he laughs.

A loud thud echoes in my chest.

Fuck.

I've seen Yulian laugh before, but *never* like that, with his mismatched eyes glittering and his whole body leaning forward.

That must be Alina, his baby sister that he mentioned before.

He said she was a ballerina, so did she become disabled during these last four years or…?

He lifts his head, and my hand balls into a fist in my pocket when our eyes meet. Even though it's across a room packed full of people, it's almost as if we're the only ones here.

His laughter dissipates, and something inside me shivers and dies.

What the actual fuck?

He used to always have this automatic grin whenever he saw me, but now…he's *scowling*?

Yulian turns his sister around, cutting off eye contact as he wheels her to the side opposite from me.

Is the motherfucker *avoiding* me?

The rage festering inside me ignites, bleeding red into my vision.

Fuck *this*.

If Yulian believes he can come and go as he wishes, then he's in for a rude fucking awakening.

Whatever this thing between us is will go according to my rules, and he has no say in it.

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20

YULIAN

“The tempo is too fast.” Alya’s disapproving voice trickles through the chaos, jarring me out of my head.

Seriously, I don’t do well when I think too much, kind of drive myself up a wall, actually.

So I focus on my sister’s scowl as she directs her gaze at the orchestra. She looks stunning tonight, even though this is the *last* place she wanted to be.

And it’s my fault.

My father wanted me to come with him, and I refused, so he decided to use Alya as a prop, to flaunt her for the world to see how “benevolent” he is in supporting medical research and all that nonsense. He knows shit about the advancements in the field, by the way.

I’ve been following them closely over the years, trying to find an adequate solution to give my sister her legs back, and we’ve tried a few, but they failed. So I’ve become selective in considering any doctor’s recommendations. Alya has accepted her disability, and I’ve become extremely careful about not getting her hopes up.

In short, my sister is the only reason I’m even at this event.

I had a huge fight with my dad, demanding she stay back in Chicago. A huge fight, as in he kicked the shit out of me, and my back and chest are full of so many bruises, it hurts to breathe.

Even though part of the reason I bulked up was so Dad's hits wouldn't hurt as much, he still finds a way to inflict pain.

"If you want to protect her, then tag along," is all he said after he kicked me one final time.

So here I am—playing the role of a chess piece in his game.

I'm mostly worried about Alya. Screw medical research. Yaroslav is anti-imperfection. For him, it's a weakness, and even though he spoils Alya, he actually hides her from public view, probably ashamed of her disability. So the fact that he's bringing her out in the open, with all the Bratva factions around, means he has an agenda.

And I'll be damned if I let him reach it.

"It's frustrating and hard to listen to," she says, still talking about the music no one but her is paying attention to. "I know it's a style choice, but it should be done with more care."

"Want me to punch them for you?" I ask with a grin, grabbing a rose-shaped pastry from the plate that's on her lap.

She scowls but throws a hand in the air. "Not everything has to be done through violence, Yulik. I'll talk to them when I go get ready to play."

I swallow the disgustingly sweet pastry and clear my throat. "You don't *have* to play."

"I told Papa I would."

"Fuck him," I whisper-yell. "You don't need to listen to him."

"But I do *want* to play. I know he brought me here as a prop to parade around, but screw that, I'm here to play the piano."

I stroke the top of her head and crouch down so that we're at eye level. "If that's what you want, then show those pricks what perfect pitch and tempo is."

She salutes. "I won't disappoint you."

"You never do."

"Thanks for coming." She kisses my cheek. "It means so much to me to have you around."

"I'll always be here for you, Alya."

"I know." Her wide smile is contagious, and I would do anything, give my life away if I had to, just to keep it safe.

After Mom's death, she's all I have.

"How very touching. Why weren't we invited into this lovely bond?"

I stand up, my shoulders squared at Lukas's voice. He smiles at me, but it's malicious, while my other half-brother, Mikailo, scowls.

They're from different mothers and were raised separately when young, but they formed a bond, mostly because Lukas keeps Mikailo like a guard dog.

Lukas is around twenty-seven, lean, and always impeccably dressed in tailored or designer suits. He swishes the glass of whiskey in his hand as he looks at us like we're a problem to be solved.

"Just go away." Alina scowls, glaring at them.

"The fuck you just say?" Mikailo growls, his voice booming and rumbling.

He's about twenty-six, broader than Lukas, his nose crooked from a break that was never reset. His accent is heavier, too, roughened by life on St. Petersburg's streets before being shipped off to the army. Both of them were. Forced into the harshest of special forces, all just to prove their worth to Yaroslav.

But where Mikailo is loyal to our father, like a fucking kid with unresolved daddy issues, Lukas would stab him in the back if it meant he got to be on top.

He'd stab *all* of us just to reign. That's why I've always been more wary of that motherfucker.

"Hey." I snap my fingers in Mikailo's face, then grin. "Talk to her in that tone again, and I'll cut your tongue out."

He snarls at me and takes a step closer, to hit me, no doubt. It won't be the first time he's done that, since our interactions usually end in a fistfight.

When I was younger, he always beat my ass, especially since he was older and more muscled than me back then. Right now, however, we're almost evenly matched.

"What's that?" I cup my ear. "Want me to break your nose again, brother dearest?"

"This motherfucker—"

Lukas cuts him off by pulling his hand down, then smiles in that fake-ass way. "Now, now. No need to quarrel between brothers. We're here to support Dad, not to humiliate him."

He motions at our father, who's talking with other leaders, but he throws glances at us—mostly glares, really—to remind us of his wrath.

“Move.” Alina drives her chair right between them, forcing them to break apart. “I’m gonna get ready, Yulik.”

“I’ll come along.”

“No, you’ll just steal my pastries.” She gives me a look. The look of “I want to do this on my own,” so I force myself to just nod.

“I’m sure you’ll kill it, Alya.”

She gives me two thumbs-up, grinning at me, then glares at Lukas and Mikailo before she leaves, navigating through the crowd with expert ease until she disappears behind the doors.

“Tell you what.” Lukas places an arm around my shoulders. “How about you go keep an eye on poor little Alyonushka, and we’ll take care of the grown-up issues around here?”

“I don’t think age matters, Lukas. You know…” I brush his hand off my shoulders. “Since Dad only ever introduced *me* as his heir to his acquaintances.”

Mikailo visibly tenses, his hands balling into fists.

“Careful there, brother,” Lukas says with a veiled threat. “He won’t protect you forever.”

“Bold of you to assume I want that old man around. I’d rather he be gone, if you know what I mean.”

Mikailo has grown red, more offended on our dear papa’s behalf than about any threats directed at him.

Lukas, however, raises a brow, a look of calculation passing behind his usually dead eyes. “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“Do you?”

I hold his gaze as Mikailo looks between us with a dumbfounded expression.

Not sure what Lukas is fishing for, but he’s definitely fishing for something. He seems to like my reaction to the possibility of Yaroslav’s erasure. I mean, surely, he didn’t think I’d want to be dear Papa’s punching bag for the rest of my life?

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go do the *grown-up* stuff.” I whistle, putting a hand in my pocket as I stroll away.

Fuck being Dad’s puppet.

He’s looking at me, expecting me to come over and put on a show of empty fucking pleasantries. These men would kill each other in their sleep

if given the chance, so I don’t get why I need to put on the hypocritical facade.

I join him for a few, only because Alya will be the one fucked over if I misbehave. So I bring out the entertainer in me, laugh at an old man’s distasteful joke, then fight sleep when some idiot goes on a long, rampaging political rant.

Fuck, these people are boring.

My gaze strays ahead, and I pause when I see Vaughn’s parents dancing and smiling at each other.

Now, don’t get me wrong, Vaughn looks more like his father—the same hair, jaw shape, and nose—but he has his mother’s eyes.

In a way, he’s a mixture of both, and they brought him up well, probably giving him all the emotional support he needs, which allows him the liberty to be…normal.

Well, as normal as it gets, because Vaughn has an unhinged side he keeps under lock and key.

As I watch them with a tilted head, I realize I never saw my parents smile like that at each other, appearing to be in blissful harmony as if they complete one another.

My father is the most distant motherfucker to ever spawn, treating his wife and kids like accessories to his empire, and my mother, well, she tried her best, but no matter what she did, she couldn’t exactly change the original sin—having Dad for a husband.

It wasn’t her fault. She was pushed into a political marriage, where a woman was once again used for powerful men’s egos.

My grandfather was Kabardian nobility with a shit ton of money that my father needed to get his hands on, and since Dedushka had no male heirs, it made sense to entrust the power-hungry, ruthless Yaroslav with it.

From what I know, Vaughn’s mom also comes from Russian aristocracy, but it doesn’t seem that his dad used her for that purpose or that he treats her like a convenience. If anything, he looks at her like she’s his world.

Fuck this feeling.

Now, I’m wondering what I would’ve grown up to be like if I’d had parents like that. Not that it’d matter.

I’m stuck with this clown called Yaroslav for…well, until either Lukas or I take his life.

I can’t kill him when Alya is in his grasp, so if Lukas can hurry the fuck up, that would be great.

With a sigh, I drag my gaze away from Vaughn’s parents.

Speaking of Vaughn, I swear he was around not too long ago, but now he’s nowhere to be seen.

Not that I *want* to see him. I left that day with the resolve that I wouldn’t get close to him again.

But did I fight all my goddamn demons not to walk over to him the moment our eyes met? Sure as fuck did.

He looked pissed off, and I eat that energy the fuck up when it comes to him.

But then I realized it was my bad habits rearing their ugly heads, and I had to snuff them out by walking away.

Then why are you looking for him?

Shut the fuck up, me. I’m just sizing up the enemy. You know, for research purposes.

When my father’s distracted, I slip into the hall and release a breath once I’m away from the constant overstimulation.

The wallpaper-covered walls extend before me as I walk down it. Maybe I should look for Alya. Yes, I know I said I’d let her get on with it, but I’m worried about her—

A hand wraps around my nape, and I swing around, reaching for my gun as I’m pulled in one swift movement.

My back hits a wall and I point the gun at the chin of my assaulter, my finger on the trigger, only to be greeted by disapproving pools of hazel and a furrowed brow.

Vaughn.

Well, fuck me sideways.

The place he dragged me into looks like a conference room whose biggest feature is a massive mahogany table lined with padded chairs.

He steps back, creating some distance, while I stand with my arm extended, the gun steady between us.

I try, you know. I really, *really* fucking try not to check him out. But listen, withdrawals are little sons of bitches, and I’ve been through at least three a day for the past week, opening the chat between us every few hours just to close it again.

Because, contrary to popular belief, aka Cy's, I actually do have pride, and I won't go crawling back to Vaughn just because he graced me with his presence.

Well, that resolve is almost impossible to maintain now.

Because fuck all things unholy, no man should be this mouthwatering in a tuxedo.

Vaughn has always looked so well put together, but it's tenfold worse tonight. Black tux, sharp lapels, that stiff collar hugging his neck where my hand should be—just saying, or suggesting, whatever fits the bill.

His hair's pushed back neatly, every strand in place. His jaw is carved and tight, and those eyes…hell, those eyes don't just look—they fucking burn.

His gaze lands on me, steady, unreadable, but there's a flicker of that tension that always hums in the air whenever we're in the same place.

God, I *hate* the bastard.

Doesn't make me want him any less, though.

This week's only made me long for him more, not less.

Sue me.

It pisses me off how good he looks. How collected he is. How effortless it is for him to just breathe normally around me. Meanwhile, I'm fighting for my life over here, pretending I'm not boiling with hunger.

His woodsy smell saturates my senses, bringing back memories of his body pressed against mine, his lips wrapped around my cock, his huge, beautiful dick down my throat—

Down, boy.

"I almost pulled the trigger." I try to sound casual as I lower the gun to my side but don't hide it. "Can't call my name like a normal human being?"

"Not sure you would've listened, considering you pretended not to see me earlier."

I narrow my eyes.

What's with the accusatory tone?

"Hurts like a motherfucker to be ignored, doesn't it? Welcome to the club." I start to leave, but he steps in front of me.

So I do it again. This time, he shoves me back against the wall with his forearm against my throat. I swallow a wince as the bruises on my back burst in pain.

Vaughn stares me down with unveiled rage. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going? I’m not done talking.”

“I don’t give a fuck.” I point the gun at his temple. “Move before I spill your goddamn brains.”

“Do it,” he speaks close to my mouth, and a rush of his minty breath licks my skin and spears itself beneath it. “Could you even *hurt* me, Yulian?”

My whole body’s vibrating with tension, and having his equally tense, taut body flush against mine doesn’t help. “You want to die, motherfucker? Step aside and stop provoking me.”

“Or what?” He tilts his head to the side. “Because we both know you won’t pull that trigger. You like me too much to inflict any harm.”

I draw my hand back and punch him in the chest, making him stumble. “Who the fuck do you think you are that I wouldn’t hurt you? Do I like you? Sure, I did. But I can unlike you just as fast. I change out guys like you in the blink of an eye. You’re not that special.”

Lies, lies, and more fucking lies.

But I’ll be damned if I allow myself to fall under Vaughn’s spell again. He’d devour me alive and leave no crumbs.

I’m about to step out when it happens so fast, I don’t even get the chance to blink.

Vaughn’s hand clamps around my throat as his mouth crashes against mine. The kiss is brutal, merciless, thick with rage and hunger.

No, it’s not a kiss—it’s war, a violent clash of lips and teeth, tongues battling as his fingers tangle in my hair, yanking my head back so he can devour me, suck the breath from my lungs, bite me, to consume me like he could drink the blood straight from my veins.

Fuck. He’s an absolute ravenous beast.

Just how I like him.

My fingers wrap around that neck I’ve been fantasizing about, all my resolve crumbling to smithereens as I kiss him with the same frenzy. My hand with the gun wraps around the back of his head, shoving him against me.

I need him closer, his hard muscles molded further into mine. Doesn’t matter if it hurts. I love the pain. It means he’s right here.

Kissing me.

It means I’m also here, alive, and this isn’t a dream.

His cock bulges against my thigh, his tongue dancing with mine to a fucked-up symphony.

Vaughn pulls his head back, a trail of saliva forming between us as we breathe harshly, the sound reverberating off the walls.

“Don’t you dare say I’m not that special again,” he growls against my lips, his voice low and raw. “I’m *nothing* like the guys you’ve known, Yulian. I’ll fuck you the hell up before you consider me a stop on your whorish path.”

Something in my chest lights up, which probably shouldn’t happen since he’s threatening me. But I don’t give a fuck, because he said something I can use to my advantage.

“If you don’t want to be a stop…” I trail off, feeling apprehensive all of a sudden. *Fuck it.* “Don’t run away.”

He frowns.

“Or I will just replace you,” I add with a shrug to hide my wounded pride.

Vaughn shoves his leg between my knees, and I groan when he puts pressure on my cock. “I told you to stop saying shit like that.”

“Then stop running away.”

“You’re the one who did after the last time, Yulian!” He raises his voice the slightest bit, which isn’t like him.

“Well, you were ignoring me and staring at the ceiling. I can take only so many hits to my ego before I’ve had enough.”

He looks stunned for a few seconds. “You…left because I was ignoring you?”

“That’s what I said.”

“I was just thinking. Jesus Christ, God forbid I have a mini existential crisis because of my first gay sex experience. I don’t suck guys’ cocks every day, you know.”

Oh.

“Ohhh. So you were thinking about *that*? Was it, like, a bad existential crisis or a *Holy shit, I love this. How can I get more?* crisis? Don’t tell me if it’s the former, and I can totally help if it’s the latter. I’ll consider you my charity project.”

“Fuck you,” he says, but he’s chuckling low, his shoulders vibrating as if a weight has been shoved off of them. “I thought…you were disappointed.”

“Disappointed in what?”

He clears his throat, looking almost bashful, if I’m not imagining things. “My performance or something.”

It takes everything in me not to burst into flames. He’s so fucking adorable when he’s not a grumpy little shit.

“Baby, I’d never be disappointed by anything you do. Besides, everyone starts somewhere—no one is born sucking cock. You had spectacular skills for a novice, but then again, you had a fucking VIP-level teacher, so it tracks. That’s me, by the way.”

“Shut it, Yulian.”

“Make me.” I lick his lower lip, then bite it, falling back into my bad habits headfirst.

He groans, kissing me with less urgency than earlier, but deeper.

“You’ll be the fucking death of me,” he whispers against my lips.

“Famous last words.” I grin. “Admit it, you always wanted to kiss me.”

“I said.” *Kiss*. “Shut.” *Lick*. “The fuck.” *Bite*. “Up.”

“Mmm, keep making me.” I reach between us, cupping him through his pants, and we grunt as he grows thicker in my palm. “You’re so fucking hard for me, baby.”

“Fuck…” He growls when I loop my leg around his and rub my cock against his thigh as I stroke his through the pants.

“You feel *so* good.” I kiss his lips, his chin, his jaw, his throat. “I’m always so fucking feral for your taste, the way you feel, I want to devour you whole.”

He bites my jaw, moving his thigh, pressing it until my cock hurts with both pent-up pleasure and pain. “Now, stop. We’re not doing this here, where anyone can walk in.”

“We can lock the door.” I chase his lips, rubbing his cock until it’s so hard, he’s struggling to speak.

“I said no.” He shoves me against the wall and steps back, his hand grabbing my arm. “This is about the last and most dangerous place we could be hooking up in. Seriously, stop thinking with your dick.”

I wince, pain exploding across my back, but I force a grin. “Tell that to your hard cock.”

Vaughn doesn’t get the joke, his brow furrowing. “What’s wrong?”

“Blue balls. Want to kiss it better?” I start to unbuckle my belt.

Vaughn steps toward me and I expect him to stop me, but he pulls my shirt up, and his eyes harden when he sees the purple bruises on my abdomen.

Well, fuck me sideways, I didn't actually want him to see those.

The last thing I want is for Vaughn to realize how insignificant I am or that I'm a complete fuckup in Dad's eyes. Maybe he'll see me differently—as a weakling.

I try to pull the shirt down, but he shoves my hand away and lifts it higher, his eyes further narrowing and darkening the more marks he sees.

"Who did this?"

"Doesn't matter." I push him away, tucking my shirt into my pants, all my libido kind of disappearing at the reminder of Yaroslav's heavy hand.

"No one would be able to hurt you like that, not even in your silly fights," Vaughn says calmly. "Your dad still hits you."

My fist tightens as I put my gun back in its holster. "How do you know that?"

"Know what?"

"How do you know my dad hit me, let alone still?"

He swallows. "It's not important."

"Don't fuck with me." I stand toe-to-toe with him, grabbing him by the hair. "Do you pity me, is that it? Am I one of your recent charity projects?"

"That's not—"

Whatever he has to say is cut off as the sound of gunshots blares from the event hall.

My heart surges as I grab my gun and run, only one thought filling my head.

Alina.

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21

VAUGHN

This is about the worst timing for an attack.

The worst place, too.

Who would even *dare* to get on the Bratva's bad side at such a meeting?

I don't know, and I don't have the time to find out right now.

Drawing my gun, I sprint behind Yulian and tap his shoulder. "I'll cover you."

His gaze shifts back toward me as he stops, his muscles bulging against the jacket as he breathes harshly, then forces out a grin. "No need. I have to find Alya. You should go to your parents."

"They'll be fine. They're both snipers, ex-spetsnaz, and shoot way better than I do, so they don't need me." *But you do.*

I stop myself before I say the last bit.

It doesn't matter whether or not my parents need me. Part of our protocol in case of emergency is to gather at emergency exit five, which is where I should be heading.

But I can't just walk away from Yulian.

Not now.

He had this terrified expression when the gunshots first echoed around us. I know for a fact that he's not afraid of attacks. I saw him being detached to the point of recklessness when he was bleeding on that mountain while shooting people left and right.

But now with his sister involved, his composure falters.

Yulian slows down and stares at me, pinching his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger, probably thinking about the best way to make me leave.

He releases his lip. “You should still go.”

“You don’t tell me what to do.” I hit my shoulder against his as I bypass him. “You do the covering.”

“Mishka…” He falls in step beside me. “You must have some sort of an emergency protocol. If you don’t go, your parents will be worried.”

I purse my lips, but I don’t acknowledge his words. “Follow me. I memorized the layout of this place. The musicians’ dressing room should be on the eastern side. We have to go through the event hall to access it.”

He releases a long sigh. “You’re so damn stubborn.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” I flash him a smile.

His lips part before he clears his throat and turns around so that he’s facing the other way, his gun pointed toward any threat that might appear behind us.

As we reach the main hall, the sharp cracks intensify, muffled by the heavy velvet drapes and the noises of chaos.

They get louder and louder, echoing off the high coffered ceiling, drawing a ripple through the crowd—gasps, scraping chairs, champagne flutes shattering against marble.

It’s full-blown chaos.

The choreographed elegance I left not long ago has unraveled into something primal. Screams pierce the orchestral silence, and bodies jolt into motion, scattering in every direction.

My instincts kick in before my mind does—my eyes sweeping the space, tracking exits, estimating shooter positions from sound, motion, and the direction of broken glass.

A strong hand wraps around my shoulder, and Yulian pulls me with him behind a towering marble sculpture.

I stare at his hand on my shoulder, feeling the weight and getting overwhelmed by his scent. It sears through me—his smell, his touch, the way he acts so familiar even when he was mad at me not long ago.

Another bullet whistles past, splintering a pillar inches to our right. He crouches beside me, his breathing rapid but his eyes sharp, his suit rumpled and damp with sweat. The edge of his sleeve is darkened—

I grab on to his arm, where the jacket is slashed, and a line of red appears. “You’re hit.”

He glances down, shrugs, and flashes me that maddening grin. “It’s just a scratch. You good?”

I nod, but the tension in my shoulders intensifies and my jaw clenches.

My chest is so tight, I’m not sure what the fuck is wrong with me.

But again, I don’t have time to think about it.

We move together, pressed shoulder to shoulder, ducking and weaving through the ballroom’s broken composure. It’s like slipping into muscle memory—he takes one side, I take the other, our movements too aligned to be anything but instinctive.

Almost as if we’re on that mountain again, having each other’s backs.

Yulian shoves me behind another statue just as the air saturates with a new spray of bullets. Plaster rains down, and I taste the dust and gunmetal on the back of my tongue.

The statue takes the hit that should’ve been mine. My breath hitches, my chest tight, not from fear but from the sick realization that he’s just… too *attuned* to me, almost more than he is to himself.

And I don’t like that.

“Watch your own back, Yulian,” I mutter in a firm tone.

He just laughs, the sound quiet, breathless, and a bit husky. “Is that my thank-you? In that case, you’re welcome.”

I shake my head as we peel away from the crowd and slip into the side corridor reserved for staff. The lights are dim, shadows crawling over splintered furniture and gaping holes in the walls.

Yulian’s shoulders tense, both of us realizing the carnage has bled into this space, too.

I cover his back as we jog toward the musicians’ dressing room. When we enter, the silence hits instantly. No shattered wood, no holes in the walls—the room is untouched, spared from the chaos seeping through the building.

And yet the stillness doesn’t ease us. Neither of us dares to breathe.

Something’s wrong.

Yulian freezes, his hand on the gun twitching.

I follow his gaze and pause upon seeing the discarded wheelchair, lying sideways, one wheel still turning.

Alina’s shawl, which she had around her shoulders, is on the floor next to the chair, but there’s no sign of her.

“Alya,” he breathes her name, then shouts, “Alina!”

No reply.

He rushes to the balcony, and when he finds nothing, he comes back inside, his face drained of color.

“I need to…” His hand shakes around the gun, rage and terror barely contained in the taut muscles as he looks at me, his lips trembling. “I *need* to find her.”

“We will,” I say in a steady voice, trying to calm him.

“You don’t understand, she…she’s like that because of me. I can’t…I can’t…”

“Hey.” I grab his shoulder, squeezing slightly as I bore my eyes into his. “We’ll find her. Trust me.”

He gives a sharp nod as he bolts again, his fury barely leashed. I follow without question, keeping my attention on our surroundings, having his back.

I never thought there’d be the day when Yulian and I would be in another dangerous situation and I’d be covering for him, but here we are.

The irony doesn’t escape me.

Doesn’t matter how long I’ve been separated from Yulian—one incident and I’m fully back in the mindset from four years ago.

The mansion’s corridors feel endless now—too wide, too gilded, too much of a maze.

Even though I told Yulian we would find Alina, my strongest theory is that a guard took her to safety. At least, I hope it’s that and she wasn’t abducted, because if she didn’t crawl to hide, she was clearly taken.

Hopefully, she was taken willingly, since there was no sign of struggle in the room.

We turn a corner and come to a halt.

At the far end of the hallway, a man walks toward us, cradling Alina in his arms. He’s tall and sharp-featured, with dark curly hair and the composed stillness of someone who’s accustomed to violence. His suit is spotless, his expression unreadable.

I swear I’ve seen him somewhere, but where?

“She was trapped on the balcony,” he says quietly. “Unconscious but alive.”

When Yulian sprints toward them, the man offers her over without hesitation. Yulian steps in and takes her, his hands trembling only slightly as he curls her protectively against his chest. The man nods once, offers nothing more, then disappears down a side passage like smoke.

Yulian doesn't seem to care about the identity of the man as he strokes her hair. "I'm here, Alyonushka, I'll keep you safe, I'll protect you."

I've never seen Yulian this distraught, almost as if his world would've crumbled if something had happened to her.

They must be so close; it certainly felt like it when they were together earlier. Besides, he mentioned she's like this because of him, so I can see the guilt crushing his usually proud shoulders.

For the first time, I don't see the reckless, impulsive, violence-driven Yulian who seems to be on a mission to die young. I just see a caring brother who'd gladly offer his life just to keep his sister safe.

Stepping close, I shrug off my jacket and place it over her body, then gently press two fingers against her wrist. Her pulse is faint but steady.

"She'll be fine," I whisper as I release her.

My hand brushes against Yulian's cold fingers, and our eyes meet.

Unsaid words filter between us—something raw and shaking, something that cuts through years of silence and deflection.

For a moment, I forget where we are, and I have the urge to thread my fingers through his, give him some form of comfort, even if it's just silent.

I've never been good with consoling words or offering a shoulder to lean on, but I want to do *something* for him.

Anything.

I truly hate that I can be so emotionally stilted right now and wish I had a smidge of Yulian's spontaneous energy.

At a loss for words, I remain motionless, sweeping my gaze over him. I can almost still see the bruises on his stomach and chest, and I don't need to see his back to know it's marked, too.

Just the thought of sending him and Alina back to their monster of a father makes my blood boil.

My phone vibrates, killing the moment.

Mom.

Fuck, they must be so worried.

I straighten, hesitating for a breath. "I have to…"

“Go, I know.” He doesn’t look at me as he gathers Alina closer, but I feel his silence like a tether I can’t cut.

I want to say something, but I’m apparently so bad at finding the right words that I just nod and turn around.

Carrying his unreadable expression with me.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE ATTACK HAS BEEN A BLUR.

It’s been a couple of days, and there’s still no answer as to who was behind it. All fingers are pointed at other enemy factions that aren’t Russian since no one would be foolish enough to attack their own.

Every Bratva suffered losses, but none as heavy as Boston’s—they lost two of their leaders. The attack was brutal, full-scale, and as the hosts, Boston bore the brunt of the backlash. Blame rained down on them, only deepening their wounds.

My father and the others on our side of the world have just been keeping an eye on the development of events. We mostly made it out of this unscathed, though we did lose two guards.

Let’s just say Mom and Dad were worried shitless looking for me. I couldn’t exactly admit I was with Yulian instead of heading to the meeting point, so I told them I’d been trapped. It was enough to deflect their suspicion.

They’re busier trying to figure out who had an interest in the destruction of the event. Uncle Kyle says it’s the Chicago branch, but that’s highly unlikely.

The head of Boston is possibly the only friend Yaroslav has within the Bratva, so he has no reason to ruin his event.

I’m sitting on my room’s balcony, staring down at my conversation with Yulian—or rather, the unread message I sent him before the event. My eyes drift to the horizon, soaking in the orange glow bleeding out behind the trees.

I’ve been stuck in my parents’ house ever since the incident, because whenever one of us gets caught in an attack, they tighten security until it feels like a prison.

My eyes stray to my phone again. I contemplated texting Yulian two days ago, right after the attack, but I wasn't sure he had the time.

Now, I'm overthinking whether or not he just doesn't want to talk to me.

It was much easier when he obsessively texted me and I compulsively ignored him.

Fuck it.

My hands move of their own accord as I type him a text.

ME

How is Alina doing?

Seems innocent enough.

He reads the text almost immediately, and I sit straighter in the chair, my leg bouncing as the dots appear and disappear.

Y

She's much better. Went back to playing piano and being a general pain in the ass, so a good sign, I guess.

Have you talked to her? Did she mention anything about what happened?

She said she heard the gunshots and tried to leave, but something hit her, and the next thing she remembers is seeing my face when she woke up.

At least she's safe. That's all that matters.

Yeah. I'm glad I found her before anything happened. She just keeps complaining that she didn't get to play the piano. A drama queen if I ever met one.

Seems like it runs in the family.

I'll have you know that I'm the milder version.

Highly unlikely.

Pfft. Your bias is showing, Mishka. By the way, I'm going back to the island next week. You know, in case you miss me.

I don't miss you.

Liar, liar. But just in case you DO miss me, want to join me there?

Kind of under unofficial house arrest for the moment. Mom and Dad can be overprotective.

They're just worried about you after trying to play superhero.

That's you, considering you were injured. How is that, by the way?

I'm dying. Want to come and nurse me back to health?

And you were saying you weren't dramatic?

Only sometimes and in small doses.

Nothing you do comes in small doses.

Guilty as charged. And I'm glad you noticed I'm packing, baby. So are you, by the way. Speaking of packing, when will you finally let me fuck you?

Like hell you will. It'll be the other way around.

I'm not a natural bottom, so this will be a tough competition.

How do you know?

How do I know what?

Whether or not you like to fuck or to be fucked. Have you tried both?

Nah. Told you, I've only ever been the one who fucks, not really into the concept of letting someone else take charge, but I might allow it with you if you talk REAL dirty to me and call me baby or, better yet, give me a Russian nickname. Actually, you have to do both. You also need to win against me in a fight—if I pin you beneath me, I'm fucking you, don't care. Also, no running away after sex, or I'll hunt you the fuck down.

Too many rules.

I'm not done.

No?

No. I'll prepare a list.

A whole list?

Uh-huh. And even that's not enough. You should be honored I even offered you my ass, Mishka. I only reserve the special treatment for you.

My lips twitch, but then I narrow my eyes at the phone.

What if he told others the exact same words?

Yulian is a flirt, an incorrigible one, but I'll eradicate that bad habit of his.

I'm about to type a threat when Mom walks out on the balcony, carrying a tray with two coffees.

"I made these myself." She smiles, placing the tray on the table and sitting across from me.

Her blond hair that brushes her shoulders shifts with the wind. She looks striking in black pants and a blue shirt, though the lines etched into her face since a couple of days ago haven't faded.

Mom has always been my biggest cheerleader—the one who urged me to chase my dreams, even hinted that I didn't have to stay tied to this world if I didn't want to. She once told me I could go live with my uncles in Russia, inherit her half of the empire, and carve out a life shielded from constant scrutiny and needless violence.

And while I love her care, there's no other option for me. I'd never leave her and Dad to fend for themselves like an ungrateful bastard.

I slide the phone into my pocket. "You didn't have to go to the trouble."

"It was no trouble at all. Also, you don't have to hide your conversation from me."

"It's not important."

"I haven't seen you smile like that while texting in…well, forever, so I think it might be a tiny bit important."

I was…smiling? Fuck, I didn't even notice it myself.

Clearing my throat, I take a sip of the coffee and stare out from the balcony. "It's really nothing, Mom."

"Well, if it turns into *something*, I'd like to meet the girl who's making my son smile like that."

My fingers tighten around the cup as I give a noncommittal nod. "By the way, is there anything new on the investigation?"

"Nothing really." She grabs her cup, a furrow appearing in her brow.

"Surely, you don't believe Dimitriev is behind this like Uncle Kyle is saying?"

“No, but he had an agenda that night.”

“How do you know?”

“He said it himself to your father, Markov, and the leader of the Seattle branch. If any of them were to offer an alliance with him via marriage, he’d offer shares in a prestigious medical empire he’s invested in.”

My heart thunders, and I place the cup down, so I don’t spill the coffee.

“Marriage?” I’m surprised I sound composed enough, considering the chaos brewing inside me.

“Yes, through his daughter.”

Oh. It’s Alina, not Yulian.

Fuck. It’s *Alina*.

I doubt Yulian knows anything about this or he’d go berserk.

The sad reality of political marriages in our world is probably something that will never go away, and I’m not sure how Yulian can stop his father from sending Alina down that path sooner or later.

“What did Dad say?” I ask.

“That Yaroslav can go fuck himself, and his son isn’t for sale.”

I smile. Sounds like Dad all right.

“Did either of the other two take Yaroslav up on his offer?” I ask.

“Not that I know of, no. I’d be worried about the poor girl if that were the case.”

Me, too, Mom. Me, too.

But I’d also be concerned about what the hell Yulian would do when the time comes, and Yaroslav does marry her off.

Knowing him, he’d clash with his father and come out with worse injuries and bruises. Maybe he’d do something radical that would get him seriously hurt…

My thoughts trail off when I realize I’m *worried* about Yulian.

I’m actually scared something will happen to him.

I’m royally fucked.

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22

YULIAN

Someone is still playing hard to get.

It's been about a week since I came back to the island, and he still hasn't graced me with his infuriating presence.

So I decided to pick the tatters of my pride off the ground and forget about him.

Vaughn who? Don't care about that guy. I have a dozen other people lined up for me.

Or, at least, that's what I told myself two days ago when I sent him the photo taken from a low angle—half my face in the frame, a girl's ass parked on my thigh, a guy's hand sliding beneath my shirt through the undone buttons.

What?

The only weapon I have to mess with Vaughn's head is me tangled up with other people. He fucking *hates* it. I know because almost every time he's gotten in my face, it's been when I was touching someone else or even mentioned it.

And maybe I resort to this method because I fucking enjoy the string of possessiveness he shows a bit too much. Would give my left nut just to see that rage consuming him.

Alas, no nut will be sacrificed, because his reply was anticlimactic as fuck.

MISHKA

These games don’t work on me. Grow up.

Then he proceeded to ignore me.

So I threw another party and sent him ten thousand pictures and videos. Okay, the actual number is maybe a hundred or so, but you get the idea.

I’m going to annoy the fuck out of him until he stops with the games, because he’s the one who’s playing them, not me.

I don’t even know *how* to play games. I’m direct to a fault—if I want something, I go for it. If I have something on my mind, I say it.

The only time I find myself counting my every breath, word, and step is when that guy is around.

I just don’t understand him half the time. He runs hot and cold in ways I can’t fathom.

He’s the one who cornered me at that event, kissed me senseless, and refused to leave until we found Alina. Then he was checking on me, texting almost daily.

But soon after he was no longer under house arrest, the attention fizzled out.

The mixed signals are giving me whiplash, but like someone suffering from a fucking chronic disease, I keep pathologically checking my conversation with him, searching for any sliver of his attention.

Pathetic.

I need to get a fucking grip and move on.

Now, if my brain can subscribe to that notion, that would be fantastic.

So here I am, sprawled out on the couch while the Serpents’ mansion thrums with EDM, bass shaking through the walls. The lights glow dim and red, just enough cover for everyone to lose themselves in the dark.

I let myself drift, floating in the hedonistic haze, hoping it’ll ease the pressure clawing at me.

It doesn’t.

Maybe I should’ve gone to the underground ring tonight instead.

What also sucks is Cy’s absence. He isn’t a huge fan of these parties, so he’s probably hiding in his room. That is, if he didn’t fuck out of the mansion to do whatever obscure rituals he doesn’t tell me about.

Kevin, Hannah, and Lyra, who’ve been draped all over me, drag me onto the dance floor. I take my beer with me as we shoulder through the

throngs of people.

They're kind of my favorite trio to fuck. Sometimes all at once. Hannah and Lyra are a couple but keep it open, which means I get invited in whenever they're in the mood. Kevin's usually there to get railed by me while they put on a show. Then I switch to Lyra, because Hannah gets off on watching her, and Lyra gets off on being fucked.

Now, it's been ages since I indulged in that harmless fun, mostly because my dick has grown addiction issues to a certain grouchy prick.

Lyra hooks her arms around my waist from behind, craning to make out with Hannah as Kevin grinds into me from the front. It passes for dancing, but really, it's just him rutting against my leg.

Does my cock notice? I stare down and sigh.

The answer is no.

I take a swig of my beer as I sway along, letting them do their thing, rubbing and grinding, and trying everything under the sun to elicit a reaction that doesn't quite manifest.

While the girls stay tangled with each other, Kevin catches my hand and tugs me toward the stairs. We stumble against bodies and walls before finally making it to my bedroom.

Not sure why I'm even following. I'm just not in the mood for him or anyone else. My dick is painfully uninterested.

He knows better than to kiss me in public, so once the door closes, he rises onto his toes, but I press a hand against his chest, starting to push him back. Before I can, he's wrenched away—so violently, he nearly topples.

It happens too fast. A hand slices through the narrow opening of the door, seizing Kevin by the nape. He gasps before being hurled out, his body hitting the opposite wall with a thud.

A grin tugs at my mouth as Vaughn steps in front of me, one fist clenched, flexing in sync with the muscle twitching in his jaw.

Dressed in a dark-green shirt, black slacks, and immaculate leather shoes, he looks devastating. Mouthwatering, even though his muscles are tight and he looks like he'll cut all hell loose.

Actually, he looks mouthwatering because of that.

I'd devour his rage the fuck up if I could.

"Well, hello, gorgeous." Kevin stands up and dusts off his clothes. "You're kind of interrupting, but I'll forgive you—"

“I see you around here again, and it’ll be the last time you’ll be seen anywhere.” Vaughn’s words are chillingly calm as he slams the door in Kevin’s ashen face, muffling the sounds from downstairs.

“Poor guy.” I sigh as I wrap an arm around Vaughn’s torso from behind, my chest pressed against the hard ridges of his back.

No, I couldn’t help it, and fuck me, he smells good.

The woodsy scent explodes in my nostrils and calms my senses, and I find myself closing my eyes as I inhale him.

“Kevin’s just a normal dude, so maybe don’t go terrorizing him with those harsh threats. Not everyone comes from our world.”

Vaughn spins, breaking my grip and slamming me to the floor. My skull thuds against the carpet, and in the next breath, he’s on top of me, his hand crushing my throat, his body braced above mine, caging me beneath him.

He’s not really choking me that hard, leaving me some room to breathe, but his grip is firm, his thumb and fingers pressing into the sides of my neck.

But that doesn’t matter, because I’m distracted as hell.

By *him.*

Just having him this close, his face inches from mine, electrifies me.

Steals the fucking air from my lungs.

And I’m totally fine with suffocating.

Loose strands of hair fall across his forehead, his features bathed in soft light, but his eyes blaze with barely contained rage.

“Then *Kevin* shouldn’t have had the liberty to touch you.” His voice rumbles like a growl, the words dripping with threat. “I told you, didn’t I? You need to quit your whorish fucking habits.”

“You’ll have to stop me yourself, Mishka. If I don’t see you often, I’ll just relapse. That’s who I am.”

“*Who you are*?” he snarls inches from my face, his breath ghosting over my heated skin. “And what are you? An animal who’s ruled by his dick?”

I shrug. “Sometimes.”

“You little—”

“Oh, shut the fuck up.” I punch him in the chest, because seriously, can’t hurt that gorgeous face—*ever*. “You can’t just disappear for weeks on end and then show up again, acting all possessive, and expect me to just take you. If you want me to stay loyal to you, you’ll have to do the same.”

“I haven’t touched another person, you goddamn motherfucker!” His punch knocks me sideways, and we crash into a roll. This time, I end up on top, straddling his thighs to pin him down before I slam his wrists into the floor on either side of his head.

He’s breathing hard, and so am I. Not from the fight, but from the blaze ripping through my chest. My entire body is lighting the fuck up with loud fireworks that drown out everything around me.

“No one?” I repeat, voice almost manic. “You haven’t let anyone but me touch you, Mishka?”

“Fuck off.” He tries to wiggle free, but I put more pressure on his hands and thighs.

“Answer me. Am I really the only one you’ve touched since Danika?”

“Yeah…” He trails off, then adds, “Not everyone is an animal like you, asshole.”

Oh, fuck.

Fuck *me*.

I’m so happy, so elated, so goddamn proud, I feel like I could burst out of my own fucking skin.

He and Danika ended a couple of months ago, and he’s only had *me* since.

I mean, I also haven’t fucked anything but his mouth and my hand since then, but still. The knowledge that he’s also had the same experience is so gratifying.

During my imaginary dance, I loosen my grip, and Vaughn punches me, then we roll on the ground until he’s once again on top, staring down at me, his lips parted, his gaze flashing.

“I’m telling you, Yulian, I find you flirting with someone else again, grinding against them, letting them put their fucking hands on you, I’ll skin them alive.”

“Violent. Just the way to my heart.”

“I’m fucking serious.” He grabs my throat and shoves my head into the floor. “I will hurt you if you don’t keep your dick in check.”

“Deal.” I grab his nape, yanking him down. “In return, you’ll stop pretending you don’t already belong to me.”

“You’re the one who belongs to *me*.” He bites my lower lip. “I *own* you, Volchonok. Are we clear?”

My lips part. “What did you just call me— Mmm.”

My words dissolve into a moan when he crashes his mouth to mine, slurping on my tongue, his hand fisting my hair.

A metallic taste explodes in my mouth, and I'm not sure whether it's his blood or mine. I don't care either, because Vaughn just gave me a nickname.

Volchonok.

Little wolf.

The kiss is chaos—clashing sounds, tangled limbs. It's a fight, a punishment, and a hunger that consumes us both.

I can't let go, and neither can he. His grip is everywhere—one hand locked at my throat, the other roaming relentlessly from my hair to my chest to my waist.

I reach between us and unbutton his pants, making us both groan when our hard dicks rub against each other's through the fabric.

Fuck me.

Seems like I'm not the only one who's turned on by the erotic wrestling. But then again, everything about Vaughn drips with sexual charm.

He can scowl, and I'll be ready to come in my pants.

I want him *that* much.

I don't think I've ever wanted anyone as much as I want Vaughn. Sue me.

My hand shakes a little as I unbutton my jeans. Our cocks touch through the thin layer of our boxers, and just like that, I'm embarrassingly leaking all over mine.

"You feel so fucking good, baby," I breathe out against his lips, pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it aside.

"How good?" His whisper falters a bit as he yanks my shirt off, nearly ripping it.

"So good, I'm going to burst."

"So good, you won't look at anyone else but me?"

"Mmm" is the only sound I can release, because now that my shirt is off, scattered somewhere beside us on the floor, I can clearly see his chest hovering close over me.

God fucking dammit.

I knew he was built, but I hadn't expected this. Every line of muscle is defined, his chest smooth, scarred in only a handful of places—unlike mine, marked like a battlefield.

His gaze locks on me, brow furrowing more with each second, no doubt because of what he sees carved into my skin.

Then his hands move over me, stroking every healed line with a slow, relentless caress of his fingers. He's not tentative like the first time he touched me, but there's still an edge of exploration, like he's learning me scar by scar.

I don't feel any form of humiliation, because I'm downright salivating at the view of his naked chest.

I lift myself on my elbows and lick his pectoral muscle, my tongue swiping over his light-brown nipple before I bite down. Hard.

He grunts, both hands gripping my waist. "Fuck."

"That feels good, baby?"

"Yeah."

"Let me try the other nipple. Can't have it feeling left out." I swipe my tongue, rubbing it all over his hard nipple, then bite, sucking on it.

Vaughn shudders against me, and when his gruff moan echoes around me, I think I come a little.

It doesn't help that he keeps stroking my cock with his, the maddening friction shooting straight to my head.

He rises just enough to strip his pants and briefs, kicking them and his shoes aside, before turning to me. My hips lift to help him tug mine off, my sneakers scattering across the floor. Still, I don't let go and keep sucking, biting, dragging my teeth over his perfect nipples, relishing his little sounds of pleasure.

I could stay here forever, please and fucking thank you.

I immediately change my mind when he tosses away my pants and boxer briefs.

Because now, our cocks are touching, and I'm leaking all over the fucking place.

"You're making a mess," he muses, his voice husky and low, tinged with wonder.

"You do that to me." I thrust against him, and he lets out a gruff rumble.

"Stay still."

"Can't." I do it again, rubbing my aching cock against his.

This time, he wraps both his hands around our lengths, pressing our cocks together. "I said. Stay still."

“Mmff,” I groan against his chest, stealing a look at his hands on our cocks.

I’m drenching him with my precum, but his is glistening at the top as well, both of them veiny and angry. I see glimpses of the tattoo on his inner thigh, but I don’t get to observe it properly as he rubs us roughly, using the precum as lube.

“Fuck, baby. You’re getting so hard.” I moan, wrapping my hand around his, guiding him to jerk us faster.

“That’s because you’re making a mess.” His words are hushed, heavy with want, and they’re undoing me.

Vaughn is so consumed with desire for me, he can’t even keep his eyes open.

I did that.

Me.

He watches with darkened eyes as I lift his hand to my face, not looking away as I spit in his palm. “That’s the real mess, baby. Use it to make us real nice and wet.”

I expect him to balk at that, considering how prim and proper he is, but his nostrils flare as he spits in his own palm, mixing it with mine as he jerks us rougher, harder.

All my blood rushes to my groin. “Ahh, fuck. Your hand feels so good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. So does your cock. It’s throbbing so much.”

“Can’t…help it.”

“I’m gonna come.”

“Not yet. You’ll only come when I’m buried deep inside you, Yulian.”

“Oh, fuck. Loving the dirty talk. Will you rearrange my insides, baby?”

“I’ll fuck you so hard, you’ll never think of anyone but me.” He squeezes my crown, and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

Forget about my need to fuck him. I’ll let this motherfucker do anything to me. I’ll even offer him my ass.

Everything is on the table if it’s Vaughn. He can ask me to jump, and I’ll be asking how high.

He can fuck me up in all senses of the word, and I’d still come back for more.

It’s an obsession.

A damnation.

Call it a calamity.

Vaughn releases our cocks, and I huff out a noise of objection.

“Why did you stop?”

“I’m not fucking you for the first time on the floor.”

And then this guy, leaner than me by every measure, wraps a hand around my waist and just lifts me.

Me—all bulk and muscle.

He throws me onto the bed like I weigh nothing, settles between my legs, and rummages through my side drawer. A moment later, he pulls out a handful of condoms and arches a brow.

I lift a hand in surrender. “I’m safe and negative. I always fuck with a condom on.”

He studies them for a bit, marveling at the variety. “Which one do you want me to use?”

I shake my head. “No condom. I want to feel your skin on mine.”

His lips part, a few condoms falling from his grip onto the bed.

“Unless you don’t trust I’m clean—”

“Shut up, Yulian.” He throws the condoms aside and rifles through the drawer again until he produces a tube of lube.

I just watch him hovering over me, mesmerized, kind of developing a fucking crush in the midst of the prospect of being fucked for the first time.

Probably should be having a sexual crisis about that part—you know, me losing my ass virginity tonight.

Maybe I should fight it.

Try to gaslight myself into thinking I don’t want this.

But then again, I’d let Vaughn do whatever the fuck he wants with my body.

That’s me, a Vaughn pleaser instead of a people pleaser.

Cy would call me pathetic, but Cy is an idiot with zero emotional intelligence, and he definitely hasn’t had this type of toxic connection with Vaughn.

The one guy I thought I’d never have.

But I do.

When Vaughn looks at me, I grin, wide.

He frowns. “Don’t smile like that in front of other people.”

“You’re *that* possessive of me, baby?”

“Shut up.” He squeezes a generous amount of lube on his hand, shifts back on his knees, and carefully rubs it over my hole.

The cold gel instantly heats when coupled with his touch. I open my legs wider, giving him more access.

“Tell me if I hurt you.” His voice is barely holding on to some semblance of normalcy, his cock hot and heavy between us.

“You won’t,” I whisper, my own desire rushing through.

Vaughn exhales a sharp breath as he eases his middle finger into me.

My body yields without hesitation.

I thought letting someone touch me this way would feel strange, uncomfortable, even—but it’s as natural, as dizzying, as that first kiss on his lips.

“Fuck, you’re so tight.” His eyes shine as he thrusts slowly. “Does it feel good?”

“Mmm. Anything you do feels good.”

“You say that to others, Yulian?” His voice darkens as he adds another finger and allows me to adjust. “You let them see this look on your face?”

What look?

I don’t get to ask that because he’s moving again, thrusting in a slow rhythm at first, then driving into me. I’m clamping around his fingers as blotches of pleasure tighten my abs.

My spine jerks upright as desire I’ve never experienced before spreads through me, and my cock gets so hard, it’s painful.

With shaky hands, I squirt lube in my palm and jerk Vaughn’s gorgeous cock from base to tip.

His chest muscles bunch and tighten as he pushes further into my hand.

“You’re clenching around my fingers.”

“You like it?”

“Like it?” He moans deep in his throat. “I’m barely holding on to my sanity here, Yuli.”

He picks up his pace again, scissoring his fingers in me, working and stretching me so good.

My heart thunders in my ears with every thrust, every choked breath he releases.

Fuck, I never would have thought being finger-fucked would elicit chills down my spine. My toes curl, a shudder rushing through my bloodstream.

“You’re taking my fingers so well.” He drops a soft, trembling kiss to my bicep, hugging me close. “Can’t wait to have my cock inside you, Volchonok. I think I’ll come at the thought.”

“Do it,” I breathe out.

“Not yet. I need to prep you properly—”

“Just do it.” I push back and meet his gaze as I guide his cock between my legs. “Fuck me, Vaughn. Ruin me.”

He bites the corner of his lip, sucking it inside. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

God, he’s so goddamn adorable.

“I can take you,” I croon. “Come on, you won’t break me, I promise.”

He pulls out his fingers, and I align his weeping cock with my hole.

“If it gets to be too much, tell me—”

“Shut up and fuck me, baby.” I wrap my legs around him, my heels digging into his ass cheeks.

He kisses one of my arms that is wrapped around his neck as he gives a shallow shove of his hips.

My breath stutters as the burn registers. It’s my first time being fucked and Vaughn is ridiculously huge, so it hurts like a mother, despite the lube and everything.

I breathe through it, the air scattered and chopped off.

Vaughn stops, propping himself up with his arms, the veins in his temples bulging and glistening with sweat. And I realize he’s holding back, because he’s also blowing air through his nose.

“You okay?” he heaves, the cords of his muscles stretching taut beneath his skin. Because he’s struggling to remain still, I realize.

Because he doesn’t want to hurt me.

Fuck, I think I’m melting.

“Yeah,” I breathe out.

“You sure?”

“Don’t you dare stop.”

“Oh, thank fuck. I think I’ll die if you ask me to stop.” He kisses my arm a few times, the touch reverent. “You’re so fucking tight and warm and…*perfect*. Your fuckhole feels so fucking good.”

“How good?”

He gives another shove of his hips, feeding me a few more inches, stretching me so painfully well. “Like the best fucking place I’ve ever

been.”

“Really?”

“Mmm.”

“I love the feel of your cock stretching me, baby.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’re the only one I’d let fuck me.”

“Oh, fuck.” That gets him all excited, because he’s moving in shallow thrusts now, his breaths weighing heavily, mingling with mine.

“Say that again,” he orders in a moan.

“Say what?” I struggle, my heart beating so loudly in my ears.

“That I’m the only one who fucks you.”

“You’re the only one who fucks me, baby.”

“Fuck. You’re so fucking beautiful, I feel like I’ll come inside you like a preteen.”

I chuckle, but it dies out, because he’s burying more of himself, almost all the way in, and I’m about to explode.

Really. I think I underestimated how huge this motherfucker is. He’s breaking my ass and molding it, so it fits him.

And I’ll totally let him.

“Don’t laugh. Don’t flirt. Don’t fucking smile at anyone other than me, Volchonok.” He grunts, panting as he forces himself to remain still.

He does that every time he pushes himself in, giving me enough time to adjust to him.

I thought I was considerate during sex—somewhat, don’t judge—but Vaughn’s giving me a run for my money.

A droplet of sweat falls from his chin on my lip and I dart my tongue out to lick it. “Only if you’re mine, Mishka.”

“And you’ll be mine?”

I nod, digging my heels into his ass further. “I’m yours if you’re mine.”

“Fuck.” His hips jerk as he bottoms out, and a needy groan slips from his gorgeous lips. “You…okay?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to fuck you now, Yuli. I feel like I’ll die if I don’t…” He thrusts into me with renewed intensity.

My ass stretches, accommodating his length, and my cock grows big and heavy, sparks lighting me the fuck up with each rub of his stomach against the sensitive skin.

“You’re driving me crazy,” he breathes out, hitting a sensitive spot inside me that makes me come a little.

“Am I?”

“You are…” His frame tightens, his veins swelling in his neck. “I wanted to take it easy, but I can’t fight the urge to claim you. Can’t go slow. Can’t even think.”

“Good. You shouldn’t be thinking when you’re fucking.”

He huffs out a chuckle, and I yank him farther into me.

“More.” I stare deep into his gorgeous eyes. “Fuck me up, baby.”

“Jesus Christ, you’ll be the death of me.”

I laugh, the sound ending in a moan, because he keeps hitting that spot again and again.

Goddamn it.

Fuck.

The bed creaks, hitting the wall with every powerful thrust. I’m so close, I think I’ll black out.

“You feel that?” he grunts. “Feel how your ass clenches around my cock?”

“Mmm.”

“You’re the best thing ever. I don’t ever want to leave your beautiful fuckhole.”

I drop my legs to his thighs and spit on my palm that’s still glistening with lube, then pull at his ass cheek with one hand and rim his hole with my other one, my fingers probing his entrance.

He tenses for a bit, breathing heavily, but he doesn’t stop fucking me deep and hard. “What are you doing?”

I press my middle finger inside him, humming when he clenches around me. “Do you hate it?”

He shakes his head, going into a frenzy as I thrust inside his tight little hole, curling my finger just the slightest.

“Oh, fuck.” He groans. “I’m gonna come, fuck!”

“Yes… Come for me, baby.”

He hits that spot again.

I’m so close, I don’t even need the friction against my cock.

As Vaughn shudders, his warmth filling my insides, I explode, spilling over his stomach as my back arches in violent jerks.

I’ve been fucked for the first time, marked for the first time, but all I can think about is Vaughn’s guttural moan filling my ears, and my whole being that’s in his hands.

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23

VAUGHN

For a moment, I'm paralyzed, wrapped in a haze I can't shake.

My face is buried in Yulian's neck, breathing him in, and my spent cock still twitches inside him—because fuck, why does he have to smell so good?

Also what *the fuck* was that?

The best sex of my life, apparently.

I mean, the only penetrative sex I've had was with Danika, but I've never felt like bursting out of my goddamn skin just because I was inside her pussy or ass.

Don't get me wrong, I liked it with her—most of the time, at least—but with Yulian…

I couldn't fuck him deep enough, touch him hard enough. I just couldn't get *enough.*

If anyone were to move me from his embrace right now, I might never be able to recover.

Fucking Yulian has changed my life. In every sense of the word.

Because I want to do it again.

And again.

He moves, damp skin dragging over my own, every touch sticky with sweat.

Fuck.

I'm a mess.

And I’ve collapsed on top of him, completely crushing him into the bed, one hand on his chest and the other in his hair. I can feel his spent cock trapped between our stomachs, his cum trickling onto the mattress.

Oh, and his finger’s still moving slowly in my ass.

I…don’t dislike it.

The feel of it or the way he thrusts inside me.

In fact, I think I’m lifting my ass a bit, letting him have more access.

Yulian shifts again, and this time, I start to pull out from inside him, even though I really, truly don’t want to.

His ass is the best place I’ve ever been, and my cock weeps some more cum as I attempt to slide out.

Yulian yanks me down with a hand on my back. “Where do you think you’re going?”

I shift my head on his shoulder, turning it to face him. My lips part when I find him staring at me. The blue and brown of his eyes are so bright, I swallow.

“Just thought I was crushing you,” I say, my voice more rough than usual.

“Do I seem like I mind?” He wiggles his hips, thrusting his cock against my stomach.

It twitches between us, and I groan as my own cock takes notice.

“I like the feel of you all over me.” He thrusts again, his erection growing harder by the second.

“Seriously?” I tap his chest, my fingers stroking over his nipple, and he moans.

“Mmm. I kind of *really* want you, Mishka.”

“You don’t say. I wouldn’t have guessed it.”

“The dry humor is killing me.” He chuckles, grabbing the tube of lube from next to him, then squeezes a copious amount where his finger is still thrusting in my ass.

It isn’t the cold gel that makes me jolt—it’s the second finger pushing in, stretching me open. His other hand grips my ass, pulling me wider as he works both fingers inside.

“Relax for me,” he speaks softly against my lips, his breath forming goosebumps over my damp skin.

“I…How do I do that?” I wiggle for a bit, just to register the bulge of his cock against my stomach.

“Instead of thinking, just feel.” He licks my lower lip as he stretches his fingers inside me. “That’s it. You’re doing so well, baby.”

My cock twitches inside him, growing harder as he scrapes his fingers against my walls, and I can feel my hole accommodating him, clenching around him, welcoming him in ways I never thought I was capable of.

Am I really letting him do this?

“Fuck yes, baby. You’re getting so deliciously hard.”

“It’s your fault.” I yank on his hair, my lips hovering close to his.

“Go ahead and kiss me. You know you want to.”

“I fucking despise you sometimes.”

“And the rest of the time?”

“I want to kill you.” My lips crash to his as he drives his fingers deep.

The slick sound of his thrusts with the lube is obscene, almost too intimate, unraveling me in ways I don’t understand. It drags out the feral side chained inside me, the one that only Yulian can summon.

I moan in his mouth, my fingers yanking him closer by his hair, my other hand wrapped around his throat, choking the fuck out of him as harshly as he’s destroying my world.

Yulian’s tongue wars against mine, meeting me stroke for stroke in the midst of a soaking wet, noisy kiss.

I can’t stop kissing him.

I think I’m addicted to it—his sweet, poisonous taste, the feel of his tongue, the hardness of his muscles.

Or maybe it’s the fact that this large bulk of muscles *melts* when I touch him.

As if, like me, the world comes to a standstill when we’re all over each other.

Yulian thrusts another finger, stretching me so full of him, I groan.

“Fuck,” I whisper against his glistening mouth. “That feels…”

“What?” he asks, licking my lips, going a bit slower. “What does it feel like, baby? Tell me.”

“I’m rock fucking hard. You know…”

“I won’t know until you tell me.” He smiles against my mouth. “Let me hear your deep, beautiful voice when you’re so turned on.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, this time, I’ll be the one who will fuck you.” He uses his grip on my ass, lifting me up, causing me to pull all the way out from inside him.

My aching cock bobs on his stomach, on the beautiful mess of cum coating our abs.

I push up, my gaze fixed on the space between us, watching, mesmerized, as my release spills from his hole onto the sheets.

Something in me fractures, unleashes. A growl tears through the air—and it's mine.

The sight of him wearing my mark turns me into a primal being.

Yulian shifts me forward, farther up his body, as he pulls out his fingers from inside me, and his rock-hard cock nudges against my hole.

My breathing turns harsher, more choppy as I lick my lips.

Okay, this is happening—I'm getting fucked by another man.

Accepting my attraction to Yulian is one thing, but letting him fuck me is completely different.

There will be no going back.

I probably should think about this further, consider the consequences.

But I don't seem to give a fuck.

"Hey." Gripping my ass with his lubed-up hand, Yulian cups my cheek with the other one, its fingers digging into the side of my skull. "Even though I'm dying to fuck you, I'll stop if you hate it that much."

I shake my head. "It's not that I hate it…"

His fingers nearly made me come, so I'm sure I'll love his cock as well.

It's just that this will drive the whole sexuality thing home, and I'll never be the same again.

Definitely not straight.

I don't think I ever was, to be honest.

"It's that you'll be so gay?" he asks, and even though he's smiling, it's forced.

I frown. As much as I used to think his grins were infuriating, the forced ones are my least favorite.

"Would it be the end of the world?" His voice drops a little as he lets his hand fall from my face.

Yulian shifts, but his cock stays put at my entrance, even though I know he's hanging on to his last goddamn thread not to ram himself inside me.

"Not the whole world, no, but it could be the end of mine," I say quietly, sitting up, planting one hand on his slick, muscular chest as I reach the other back and grab his cock, then shove my ass on it.

Yulian and I groan at the same time as his crown forces itself past my ring of muscles.

I breathe in and out heavily, willing myself to adjust.

Fucking hell.

He's so huge and thick. Not sure why I thought it'd be a good idea to let him fuck me.

It hurts so good.

My hand trembles on his chest as I struggle to remain upright.

Lean fingers wrap around my face, palming my cheek, stroking my lips, and I can't resist kissing his palm, sucking his middle finger inside my mouth.

"Mmm, fucking hell." He groans, thrusting his finger in and out of my mouth. "Your wet little mouth is making me so hard, baby. Can you feel it?"

A moan is all I can manage because he's growing bigger inside me, and I feed my hole more of his length, my breath hitching as he fills me in a way I hadn't thought possible.

"Easy." He's also breathing heavy, his chest vibrating beneath my hand. "I'm huge, and it's your first time."

"I'm huge, too, and it was your first time," I speak around his finger. "You won't break me, Volchonok."

He chuckles when I repeat his words, and the husky sound is music to my fucking ears. However, it's cut off when I shove my ass all the way down, bottoming out.

It burns like hell, my lungs nearly giving out, and I bite his finger in the process.

But the growl he releases is worth it.

My body accommodates him, and yes, he's big, too big to be somewhere so small, but my hole fits him like a glove.

And I like this feeling, the way he throbs inside me, how his veins pulse and shudder all the way in me. I feel every move and every jitter, and it makes my cock grow so stiff, precum spills down it, dripping onto his abs.

I don't know which one I like better, being inside his warm hole or being impaled by his cock.

Both, probably. I'll take both.

I'll take everything of Yulian's until he's wholly and fully mine.

Only *mine*.

So I start sliding back and forth in shallow movements.

“Fuuuuck!” he lets out in a long, raspy moan as his hand lands on my waist. “Fucking fuck, baby. I think I might come just watching you riding my cock. You’re so tight and perfect, I could stay inside this ass forever.”

A shiver rips down my spine as I lift myself slightly, then slam down. The friction is so good, more precum splashes on his abs.

Yulian’s hand slides down from my mouth to my aching nipple that’s surrounded by his teeth marks. I thrust myself on his cock once more, and this time, he meets me halfway down.

“Feel good?” I ask, breathless. “Tell me it feels good.”

He shakes his head, and my heart drops and spills on the mattress. “It’s more than good, baby. I can’t take this anymore.”

His hands clamp around my waist, and in one fluid motion, he flips us, never pulling out. My back thuds against the mattress, a groan tearing from me as he looms above, sweat darkening his hair and running down his temples.

“I have to fuck you properly, touch you properly, experience you properly.” His hips jerk as he moves with shallow thrusts. “You feel your tight little hole clenching around my cock as if it was made for me?”

“Mmmfuck, Yuli…shit, harder.”

“Harder?” He lets out a low grunt, pushing into me with more force. “Want me to break your ass, baby?”

“Thought you’ve wanted me for so long.” I wrap an arm around his back, my fingers digging into his muscles. “Show me how much.”

A growl slips from his lips as he thrusts so deep, my eyes roll to the back of my head.

I think I feel him in my stomach.

Why do I *love* feeling him in my stomach?

He does it again, burying himself so deep, the unhinged passionate violence hits me in a spot that electrifies me.

I’m kind of coming all over my abs, my cock bobbing and throbbing, hitting my abs with each of his thrusts.

“More…” I breathe out.

“More?”

“Please…more…”

“Fuck, baby, you can’t get enough of me?”

“No, I can’t…” I confess, my voice catching at the end.

And that drives him feral as he pounds me with so much intensity, it leaves me breathless.

“I’ve wanted to fuck you for so long,” he says between thrusts, one of his hands yanking at my hair. “I’ve wanted a taste of you so badly that I fucked your girlfriend just to feel you inside her, baby. Everything you watched on that video was me recreating you instead of her, just picturing you bending over for me and taking my cock made me come so many fucking times.”

“You’re sick,” I whisper even as I dig my fingers into him deeper, coming in increments as he fucks me the hell up.

Literally.

Figuratively.

I don’t tell Yulian this, but I’ve been fucking obsessing over him since I saw that video.

It’s only now that I realize my inexplicable rage was never because he slept with my girlfriend. It was because I couldn’t stand the idea of him with someone else.

Still can’t.

If anyone comes near him, I’ll burn them alive.

“If I’m sick and you’re still so fucking hard for me, what does that make you, Mishka?”

I open my mouth, but he places a hand under my back and lifts me up so that I’m sitting on his lap as he drives into me from beneath.

“Don’t answer that,” he blurts the words before crushing his mouth to mine, kissing me with the same brutal intensity as his thrusts, until sparks burst behind my eyelids.

My fingers claw into his back, my nails raking his skin, but he doesn’t flinch and keeps going with relentless fury.

“Fuck, I don’t want to come,” he whines against my lips. “I don’t want it to be over.”

It’s my turn to laugh, and his eyes widen, then he kisses me as he reaches between us, wrapping his hand around my cock.

My spine jerks. “Mff, yes, yes, shit…fuck *me*.”

“You’re driving me insane.”

“I am?”

“You know the effect you have on me, baby.”

“Maybe I don’t.”

“I’ve wanted you so much, I feel like this is a dream.” He groans, thrusting in rapid succession, striking that raw, sensitive spot inside me again and again.

I don’t last.

It’s impossible.

Groans and moans tear out of me, obscene sounds I can’t hold back, as pressure fills up my balls and I spill in long, hot spurts across his hand. The orgasm rips through me so hard, it feels endless, every wave stronger than the last.

As I collapse against it, Yulian snarls a string of curses as his release floods inside me.

It slips past my ass cheeks and drips onto the mattress, and I think I come a bit more at the sensation, my whole body shuddering in bliss as I sink my face into his neck, hugging him tight, digging my fingers deep.

I don’t think I’ll ever let him go. The thought spirals in my head.

I *won’t* let him go.

Not after tonight.

Yulian is fucked. He should’ve never pursued me. Now, he’s stuck with me, even if he changes his mind.

Our harsh breaths echo in the air, and the smell of him and sex fills my nostrils.

Hands down, the best sex I’ve ever had. I’m both disappointed and terrified.

Disappointed I didn’t experience this before.

Terrified I’ll never be satisfied with anything else. What will I do then—

“Fuck, I’m so screwed,” Yulian whispers, his husky words echoing in the silence.

Before I can ask, he lifts me up with both hands on my waist and I moan as he groans because his cock slips out and so does the cum—down the crack of my ass, onto the backs of my thighs and him.

Yulian pushes me and I try to hold on to him, pathetically, might I add. I think I love hugging him a bit too much after sex.

That’s so clingy.

I’m *not* clingy. Never have been and never will be.

So I release him, letting my back fall to the mattress. I expect him to let go of the rest of me, but Yulian grabs my thighs, yanking them open as he

dives between my legs.

At first, I frown, not sure what the hell he's doing. Is he going to give me a blowjob—

Before I can get excited at the idea, his tongue swipes the cum that's dripping down my thigh, and he licks his way down to my hole.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I breathe out, my head rolling back. "What the fuck are you doing, Yulian?"

"Eating my ass." He grins between my legs, a glint shining deep in his eyes. "Need to fuck my cum inside you."

And that's what he does as he sucks on the cum, then thrusts his tongue inside my ass.

I should be horrified, mortified, but the feel of his tongue leaves me delirious.

"Fuuuck… Yuli…"

An animalistic sound tears out of me, one I barely recognize, as his tongue plunges in and out, then seals over my entrance to suck before thrusting again, licking me open.

I'm becoming so hard so fast, it's terrifying.

"Mmm. You love having your ass eaten, baby?" he speaks in low growls against my sensitive skin. "That's it, ride my face."

I realize that's exactly what I'm doing, shoving myself into his mouth, chasing a high I can't resist.

"Your tongue feels so fucking good," I groan when he moves it side to side inside me. "Oh shit… I'm gonna come again… Oh, God… fuck!"

If I thought I was spent, my cock obviously has other ideas, because I'm spurting all over the place, and even though there isn't much cum, his wild hair drips with my mark.

"Sorry," I whisper, feeling slightly pathetic, because how the fuck can I come three damn times in a row? I don't do that. Once is usually all I can do.

Yulian drags his tongue out of me, licking his lips and the cum smeared there. "Don't be. You look and sound hot as fuck when you come."

My lips part because… *shit.* I think my heart skipped a beat or something equally ridiculous at his words.

He lets my legs fall to the mattress, and my ass clenches for some reason, feeling disappointed with the void.

I reach out a hand, touching his face, loving my mark all over him. I gather the cum and thrust it in his mouth. “Swallow it all.”

“Mmm,” he hums, licking the cum off my fingers, kissing them while looking at me with half-closed lids.

I could watch his gorgeous face all day, bonus points if he’s watching me like this.

Like I’m the only person in the world right now.

“I’m fucking you again,” he announces against my fingers. “You can fuck me, too. Whichever it is, I need to keep touching you. I can’t get enough.”

I chuckle, the sound tired. “We’re young, but even we need time to recover, Yulian.”

“Nah, I’ll be hard soon.” His cock nudges against my ass.

“Are you serious right now?”

“Told you, can’t get enough.”

“So greedy.”

He grins, pointing a finger at himself. “Greedy motherfucker. Yup, that’s me.”

I shake my head, sighing. “I’m a bit sore. Aren’t you?”

“A little, yeah. But it doesn’t matter. I’d rather fuck you again.”

“That unsatiable?”

“Yeah. Can’t get enough of you.”

My heart does that stupid skipping thing again and I swallow. “Fine. Let’s clean up first.”

“Copy that!” Yulian jumps up and I hate the feeling of emptiness that lodges itself beneath my bones when my hand falls from his face, and he’s no longer touching me.

“Will go run the water for a bath.”

“I’ll change the sheets.”

“They’ll be dry by the time we’re done.”

“That’s so unhygienic. Don’t be disgusting.”

He rolls his eyes but says nothing as he stops at the foot of the bed, then taps my inner thigh where the tattooed series of numbers is. “What does that mean?”

I have to stop myself from eyeing his half-erect cock standing at attention between his legs.

“Mishka?” He waves his hand in front of my face.

“It’s nothing,” I say quietly.

“No way in hell would you have a tattoo that means nothing.”

I shrug but don’t elaborate.

He narrows his eyes, obviously wanting to push, but he must think better of it, because he sighs. “Clean sheets are in the closet. I think.”

“You think?”

“I don’t change my own sheets, so no business being in the closet.” He waggles his eyebrows. “Though I’m technically still there. In the closet, I mean.”

I frown.

“You know, because I can never officially come out. It’s a sexuality joke. Forget it, it’s so boring when I have to explain it.”

“Gareth said you’re openly bi,” I say, sitting up.

He grins. “You’ve been asking your friends about me?”

Worse.

One of the reasons I even came here tonight was because Gareth sent me a picture of this motherfucker throwing his arms around a professor. He was acting so open and familiar, it sent bile to my throat.

“I mean, I am.” He lifts a shoulder. “On campus and behind closed doors, though. Can’t really do anything in public.”

Tension crowds his shoulders, and I want to reach out and smooth it. Yulian is usually happy-go-lucky. It’s alarming to see him so tense.

“When did you figure it out?” I ask. “Your sexuality, I mean.”

“Why are you asking?” His tone isn’t accusatory, more low and husky.

“It’s just…four years ago, you only mentioned girls, so I’m just curious.”

“You were in a relationship with a girl until not too long ago, but now you’re in my bed.”

“Are you trying to piss me off?”

“No, just saying that sometimes, sexuality is fluid. And it can change.”

“When did it change for you?”

He pulls his bottom lip between his fingers. “It’s a secret.”

What type of secret?

My blood boils at the thought of the first guy who made him realize he was also attracted to men.

He’s the first for me, so the fact that I’m not makes my skin crawl.

And why the fuck does he have that nostalgic look in his eyes? Is he thinking about that first guy?

“How about you?” He releases his lip. “Think you’re bi?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I don’t think I care about the gender in my sexual attraction.”

“You can just remain unlabeled. Your sexual orientation is none of anyone else’s business. You only live once, so just live it for yourself—that sounded so cool and smart. Aren’t you impressed?” He waggles his brows.

When I say nothing and just gawk at him like a goddamn idiot as his words sink in, he releases a sigh and pouts. “No need to look so bored. I’ll shut up and go run the water.”

He turns toward the bathroom with a huff.

I forget how to breathe.

Not just because of the carved muscles in his thighs or the lethal line of his spine—it’s the ink.

His back is a canvas of violence, chaos carved in black and crimson. I straighten, unable to tear my gaze away.

A half-coiled wolf stretches from his left shoulder blade down to his ribs, fangs bared, eyes hollow. Around it, barbed wire weaves in erratic patterns as if holding the creature in or maybe keeping something out. A raven’s wing cuts across the opposite side, its feathers fragmented into jagged shapes, like it tried to escape but got torn apart in the process.

In the center, a stark, angular mountain with a jagged peak stands tall. At first, I think it’s just a design, until I see the silhouette of a hole carved into it. Hidden, subtle, like a secret whispered under breath. A blood-red thread runs down from the mountain’s base, splitting through thorns etched in fine lines.

My heart thuds when I follow the line, and it leads me straight to the scar near his waist, pale and angry.

He has more of those—scars, marks, old and new—threading through the ink like ghosts.

Some of them fade into the designs, swallowed by shadow and color. Others slice through, unapologetically loud and unfiltered, just like the man wearing them.

My fingers itch to touch, to explore, but Yulian disappears into the bathroom before I can do that.

I focus on changing the sheets and the physical reaction I have to the prospect of fucking Yulian and being fucked by him. Otherwise, I'll start having nonsensical thoughts.

Impossible thoughts.

Like ways to kidnap Yulian and protect him from the world.

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24

VAUGHN

I should be working out.

Or running.

Or swimming.

That's what I do every day in the early morning.

Not today, though, because I'm apparently being used like a mattress.

Yulian lies sprawled all over me, his heavy body flattening me, his face buried in my neck. His arms are locked around my waist, and our legs are tangled, skin against skin.

He didn't let me put boxers on, which I'm still struggling with because I don't sleep naked.

Obviously, I did last night, and now I can feel his semi-hard cock pressing against mine, waking it up from slumber.

It should be blasphemous that I get these raging boners around Yulian on the regular. And while I can't find an explanation for it, I know for a fact what my body wants.

Yulian.

At all times.

Beneath me. On top of me. In all fucking positions available.

A rush of pleasure trickles down my spine at the memory of my cock ramming into him as I held him against the bathroom wall, his legs wrapped around my waist. I was rough, and he loved it, asking for more and kissing me senseless, demanding I go harder.

I’ve never fucked that rough, always vying for mild and acceptable. Truly, I don’t want to hurt others just because I have those deviant preferences. So the fact that Yulian embraced that side of me, even demanding more, turned me absolutely feral.

A sexual animal through and through who’s unable to detach from him.

I let him bend me over the tub and fuck me as hard as he wanted, and I moaned and groaned, and made all the wanton noises I didn’t think I was capable of.

Yulian was messing around the whole night, giving me oral and teaching me how to do certain things. It was extremely informative, more so than the amateur porn and Reddit threads I studied for educational purposes.

He said I’m a fast learner when, after he fucked me, I sucked the cum off his cock.

Pretty sure I have some sort of oral fixation for Yulian’s cum, because I wanted to suck him dry like he did to me, but I didn’t really get the chance.

We went at it until all the chaos in the house died down. I remember Yulian carrying me to bed as I half fell asleep in the tub.

Not sure why I even did that when I never fall asleep in bathtubs. Don’t actually like them either, to be honest, and prefer quick showers.

Falling asleep in one is dangerous, but I guess I trusted that Yulian was there for me. Not that I should correlate the word *trust* with Yulian, but still.

I was in that phase between sleep and wakefulness when I felt him drop a soft kiss to my lips and wrap himself all over me like an octopus.

His sigh reverberated against my chest as he whispered, “You can never escape me now, Mishka.”

Sometime in the middle of the night, he crawled on top of me, and now, I have a huge, heavy guy who’s made of muscle crushing me.

But I don’t mind.

I kind of like that I can take him on.

Problem is, I can’t move, or, more like, I don’t want to ruin his peace. He was shivering slightly a few hours ago, his brows drawn together, probably in the throes of a nightmare. I stroked his back through it, feeling the tension of whatever he was going through.

I wanted to reach into his subconscious and remove whatever was bothering him.

Yulian is extremely easygoing and can be so unserious that it drives me up the wall, but he also has scars and priorities and has to survive an abusive dad.

Not sure how I can make it better or if I should even be thinking about that just because he gave me the best sex of my life.

It's just sex.

Yulian and I will always be worlds apart in every other aspect. Not to mention, we have extremely different empires we're set to inherit.

And yet…

I turn my head, watching him sleep—his lips parted, his mouth grazing my throat, not quite kissing me but close enough, a trace of drool wetting my skin. And it pisses me off that I don't find it disgusting.

If anything, my cock stirs at the feel of his mouth, his body, his length pressed to mine.

I don't really care that I'm sore, and he must be, too. Not sure if we were supposed to go back-to-back like that for our first time, but I guess I couldn't have stopped it even if I'd wanted to.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand, pulling my attention away from ogling Yulian's sleepy face.

Trying my best not to move too much, I reach out for it, and I pause when I see Lidya's text reminding me to attend her boxing match today.

Right.

I need to go back to the States.

And yet a deep sense of reluctance spreads through me.

I've always used the inevitability of my flights back home as an opportunity to run away and, most importantly, to put some distance between me and this fatal attraction to Yulian, to think, and to come up with better solutions.

But now, I can't bear the thought of separating from this mass of muscles and warmth.

Though I probably should.

I got the sex out of my system, so this shouldn't be hard.

Actually, no, I didn't get it out of my system.

If anything, the first taste just made me hungry for more.

I feel like I've been missing out on the great pleasures of life that manifest in Yulian's beautiful body.

Despite the scars, he’s human perfection. Bulging abs, tapered waist, and long, muscular legs that go on for miles.

He’s what marble statues wish to achieve, and I hate—absolutely *despise*—the idea that others can see this side of him, too.

Maybe that irrational kidnapping idea I had last night wasn’t so bad after all…

The door clicks open, and I tense. Yulian said no one is allowed in his room if he doesn’t invite them over, so who the hell—

My jaw tightens the second Cyrus strolls in like he owns the room, his gaze locking with mine, flat and unmoving.

He’s always had a way of setting me off. Not sure if it’s about his appearance, his expression, or the way he carries himself. Maybe all three.

Actually, it’s because he’s always lurking beside Yulian like an annoying shadow.

I watch him closely for the first time since the camp.

His hair is a pale platinum blond, still damp from a shower, strands falling too neatly across his forehead. His face is sharp, all cut-glass cheekbones and a mouth that looks like it’s forgotten how to hold an honest expression. His eyes are the strangest part—East Asian in shape but a shade of gray so pale, they look drained of life, almost metallic. And then there’s this curious scar, a thin line dragging just above and below the corner of his lips, old but surgical, like someone wanted to mark him permanently.

I wonder what happened there.

No amount of digging from my part has produced anything about Cyrus’s past. He’s still a dangerous variable with unknown origins.

His gaze lingers on the tangle of limbs—Yulian draped over me like I’m his personal bed. My hand tightens around Yulian’s back, possessiveness flooding my veins as I glare at Cyrus, the silent warning clear—back off.

I’m glad Yulian is covered, because I’d blind Cyrus for seeing him naked—which he probably has over the years, so maybe I should blind him anyway.

He arches a brow but stays silent, studying the scene with the cool precision of a sniper gauging distance. His stare holds no malice, only cold calculation.

Cyrus has always known Yulian, been by his side forever, and I hate him for it.

I just *don’t like it*. Don’t care if that makes me sound irrational.

He motions outside with his thumb, probably wanting a word, then disappears, leaving the door ajar.

The last thing I want is a talk with Cyrus, and I certainly don't want to leave Yulian when I'm feeling slightly territorial and confrontational today.

But I have to go while it's still early.

I disengage Yulian's fingers from around me, and he releases a long whine, holding on to me tighter.

Fuck, he's adorably clingy.

I pull his hand away and slip out of the bed as silently as possible, already feeling a sense of emptiness without his weight on me.

My clothes are all over the floor—something else I'd never do except when Yulian is around—and I put them on in record time before I head to the exit.

I stop with my hand on the doorknob and take one final look at Yulian's sleeping body, a sense of unease settling in the bottom of my stomach as I walk out and silently close the door behind me.

Cyrus is standing next to the room, arms and ankles crossed, his expression calm and as unreadable as always. I suppose it mirrors mine, in a sense.

"You need to leave before the rest wake up," he says with no emotion whatsoever.

I nod. Yesterday, I managed to gain access by sneaking in with delivery people, so being found out today would be a disaster.

"Follow me. I'll get you through the back entrance." He starts walking, not waiting to see whether or not I take him up on the offer.

I fall in step beside him as we walk in silence through the wallpapered hallways and the general mess from last night.

"Did you know I was here?" I ask as we cut down a long hall, my voice low but firm.

He throws me a fleeting glance. "Why would you assume that?"

"You didn't look surprised when you walked in."

"I walk in on Yulian fucking all the time. It's no big deal."

My jaw grinds, but I keep my cool. "You said that on purpose."

"On purpose?"

"You want me to believe I'm one of Yulian's many conquests and that I shouldn't feel special."

He stares at me, raising a brow. "Do you *want* to feel special?"

“What happens between us is none of your business.”

“Considering that I’m the one protecting him from his father, who’ll cut his head off if he knows he’s sleeping with men, I’d say it’s very much my business.”

I swallow.

Yes, of course Yaroslav would be against Yulian’s sexuality. He seems to be against Yulian in the first place, so something like this would probably be much worse.

“I just don’t understand something.” Cyrus stops and faces me, making me do the same.

“Which is?”

“Yulian is impulsive, wears his heart on his sleeve, and goes after what he wants headfirst. He seldom thinks of consequences and has serious risk-aversion issues, but you’re not like him, so help me understand why the fuck you’re indulging him?”

I purse my lips, because, again, I despise how well Cyrus knows Yulian. The fact that someone out there is more familiar with him than I am makes me see red.

Wait a minute.

Is Cyrus perhaps the guy that awakened Yulian’s attraction to men…?

No, that can’t be right. Otherwise, they’d be together.

Besides, what are the chances of Cyrus also being gay or bi?

Slim to none.

Not *impossible*, though.

Now I’m recalling how Niko *insisted* that Cyrus is queer at the camp, and my eye twitches.

He stares at me harder when I don’t reply to his question.

“What I do to Yulian is up to me,” I say calmly. “Whether I indulge him, use him, or ruin him completely is not something that you or anyone else can stop.”

“You’re baiting him.” He narrows his eyes. “You might think it’s just harmless fun or mindless sex, but for him, it has an entirely different meaning, especially since…”

He trails off, and it’s my turn to frown. “Especially since what?”

“I know exactly what you’re doing.” He ignores my question. “You’re using him for your sexual awakening or experimental phase or whatever, but then you’ll leave, exactly like you’ve been doing all this time, and

maybe you think he's your booty call or sex doll, but have you thought of why he approached you again after four whole years?"

I can recognize a mental warfare tactic when I see one, and Cyrus is definitely indulging in that at the moment. Ever since he came into the room, he's been provoking me, hoping for what? A reaction?

Why?

I suppose he probably despises me as much as I do him, but still, there's no need for him to be this defensive.

"If you intended to tell me, you would've already." I raise a brow. "I suppose that was only meant to keep me guessing?"

"Do you believe it was a coincidence that Yulian was in that New York restaurant, at the same time you were, in a city he has absolutely no links to?"

My jaw clenches. "I suppose not."

"You suppose right. You see"—he slides a hand in his pocket and sounds detached—"Yulian only joined this university because Jeremy, Killian, and Gareth did, so he assumed you'd follow once it was time for college. Only, you didn't, probably because he was here."

I narrow my eyes.

"What? I know you were avoiding him as much as he was searching for the merest hint of you." He pauses, raising a brow. "At any rate, he planned the whole restaurant thing, including sleeping with your girlfriend, not only to get rid of her, fully aware of your aversion to disloyalty, but also to provoke you, so you'd have a grudge against him and come to this college to fix it."

"And?" I say, sounding unimpressed. "I'm conscious of his attempts. Is there a point you're trying to reach?"

"He had a reason for doing all of that."

"Which is…"

"Revenge."

"Revenge for what?"

"You betrayed him once, Vaughn, and he never forgot about it."

"*Betrayed* him?" I repeat incredulously. "*Me*?"

He says nothing.

"What the hell are you talking about, Cyrus? When on earth did I betray him?"

“You’ll have to figure that out yourself.” He points down the hall. “Exit’s that way. And for the love of God, don’t ever show up here again. That is, if you don’t want him to be killed by his father. Though I don’t believe you care about the prospect.”

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

Cyrus is baiting me, it seems, or just doing everything under the sun to piss me off.

And because he wants a reaction, I give him none as I start to walk.

“And, Vaughn?”

I stare back at him over my shoulder to be greeted with the gun he’s pointing at me. “You’re wrong. You can’t use or ruin him. If you hurt him this time…”

He pulls the trigger, the bullet hitting a painting a few inches away from my face.

“That bullet will be in your head,” he says as he turns around and leaves, gun in hand.

I glare at his back, not because of the threatening stunt, but what he said about betrayal and revenge.

If you hurt him this time?

When the fuck did I hurt Yulian the last time? If anything, it’s because of him that I—

No. I’m *not* thinking about that.

My jaw grinds as the most pertinent thought punctures the surface.

Revenge.

Cyrus said Yulian only approached me for revenge. It’s why he slept with Danika and has been pursuing me so closely and persistently.

Revenge.

Fucking *revenge*?

My chest squeezes as my whole body that’s been captured in bliss since last night tenses, all pleasure replaced with pain and dread.

But it’s fine because it was *only* sex.

And sex doesn’t mean anything.

At *all.*

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25

YULIAN

I reach out, expecting the press of warm flesh, only to brush against cold sheets.

My hand sweeps over the bed, desperate to find the lingering heat that wrapped around me last night, but there's nothing.

Light slashes in through the tall windows, burning against my eyes as they crack open. I turn, and sure enough, the bed is empty.

No Vaughn.

Even his scent, the one I clung to like a sedative last night—or early this morning, or whatever—is fading into nothing.

Maybe he's in the bathroom…

I sit up, fighting the disappointment that's weighing my shoulders down. Surely, he wouldn't have left after everything that happened?

As if he doesn't every fucking time.

I stand up, needing to check the bathroom and make sure he's still here.

He *has* to be.

My ass aches, and I suppress a groan, because fuck, even the soreness feels good. It's as if his huge, beautiful cock is still plowing inside me while he speaks entirely crude things to me.

Never knew Vaughn could speak dirty, since he's so put together, but he has the most delicious filthy mouth.

No one would look at his prim-and-proper face and guess that he loves to growl the most obscene words.

“He left.”

My head snaps toward the source of that cool voice. Cy sits by the far window, his eyes glued to his phone, the glow reflecting footage that looks like security feeds. He doesn’t glance my way, lost in whatever he’s watching. Normally, I’d be tempted to snoop.

Right now, however, I couldn’t care less, because my chest is kind of busy collapsing in on itself, tightening, and hurting like a mother.

“How do you know?” My quiet question lingers in the air as I snatch the first pair of shorts from the closet and pull them up my legs.

“I escorted him out myself,” Cy speaks while tilting his head, narrowing his eyes on the phone slightly. “You know, so no one would see him exiting your room, and the news wouldn’t get back to your dad.”

Fuck me sideways.

I wasn’t exactly thinking about that angle during the sex marathon, not that I was *thinking* at all.

My dick obviously took the wheel last night. Had the best adventures of his life and will be telling the story to his grim reaper, Satan, and all of his demon friends.

Besides, I couldn’t exactly turn Vaughn away or suggest a different location when he was being so adorably jealous and hot. Probably got a crush on him all over again when he threatened poor Kevin with death if he ever touched me again.

It means he cares.

Or that’s what I thought last night.

Today, though, he left as usual. I clearly told him not to fuck off after sex.

Those were the rules. I thought he was big on *rules*.

Maybe he thought ahead like Cy and figured out that his presence in the mansion wouldn’t be ideal for either of us.

Vaughn’s too smart. Makes sense that his intellect stayed in control while my dick launched a riot in my brain and started running the whole show.

I glare at Cy as I stalk toward him. “You didn’t run your mouth or tell him anything unnecessary, did you?”

“Define unnecessary.” He narrows his eyes further on the phone.

Okay, snooping wins, and it’s so anticlimactic. The video he’s watching only shows a basic empty room.

Well, not basic. There are lots of monitors lining the walls.

“The fact that you’re asking means you did!” My shoulders crowd with tension as I face him. “What the fuck did you say?”

“Just laying out the facts so he knows he can’t keep kicking you around, counting on you to crawl back every time.”

“Facts like what?” My whole body is vibrating with tension, my hands balled into fists.

He finally looks up from his phone, making the screen go black. “Like how he’d hurt you again, because you clearly lack self-respect when it comes to him, clinging tightly even when he breaks you. I didn’t say the last part, but we both know it’s true.”

“The fuck you being a busybody for, Cy?”

“For your safety, Yulian. You know, so you don’t make any more mistakes.”

My lips lift in a snarl, but I force myself to remain calm as I grit out from between clenched teeth, “What else did you say?”

“That you approached him for revenge.”

I grab him by the collar of his shirt, shaking him. “Why the *fuck* would you say that?”

“Because he straight-up told me he’d use you and ruin you completely, and there’d be nothing anyone could do about it. I figured I’d level out the glaring power imbalance so you wouldn’t look like some love-drunk idiot.” He shoves me back. “And guess what? He saw through every one of your tactics. Showing up at the restaurant, the cheap provocations, dragging him out here—none of it worked, because he never left New York for you. Even when you thought you had him cornered, he was just playing you.”

I raise my fist, my hand pausing in the air as my muscles coil with tension.

“You’ll punch me because of him?” He tilts his head. “Really, now?”

“Fuck you.” I kick him, releasing him with a shove. “Stay out of my and Vaughn’s business.”

“No.”

“Cyrus,” I growl his name.

“Yulian,” he says coolly, standing up. “You’re not seeing or thinking straight when he’s around, which can get you in trouble.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

He shakes his head, but he says nothing.

“What?” I snap. “Just spit it out, Cy. I know you hate Vaughn, but I really dislike it when you’re antagonizing like this. I know you must’ve provoked him. You do that all the time when you hate someone.”

“I don’t hate Vaughn, and I wouldn’t be antagonizing if I thought he cared about you as much as you care about him.” He squeezes my shoulder. “I don’t want you to pay for this again, Yuliy. You deserve to be *put first.* You deserve someone who doesn’t walk away when things get too difficult.”

Then he steps out the room, leaving me more tense than when he disclosed that he told Vaughn about the revenge.

Fuck Cy.

He can be noisy and annoying.

But his last words keep playing in my head on a loop.

Prick is always right, and I’m now having a mini existential crisis.

I flop back on the bed. The mattress bounces beneath me, and Vaughn’s woodsy scent fills my nostrils, expands my chest, and twitches my cock.

“The fuck is wrong with you?” I glare at my dick that’s half tenting my shorts. “You should listen to Cy and have some dignity, man.”

I shake my head because I’m literally talking to a dick.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand, and I retrieve it with another sigh. Probably Alina. She gets demanding when I don’t FaceTime her at least once a day. She’s been extra cheerful lately, her smile radiant. The incident in DC seems to have empowered her instead of the other way around. She’s always busy with “stuff” lately.

My heart does that small squeeze, and I sit straighter when I see Mishka’s name on the screen.

He’s calling me?

This is the first time he’s ever done that.

I swipe the screen, then put the phone to my ear, all sorts of emotions rushing through me. Uncertainty, chaos, but mostly pain.

I’m hurt that he chose to leave without talking to me, even if he had a good reason behind it.

“Morning,” he says as soon as I pick up, his deliciously deep voice, which whispered crude things to me, sounds raspy.

“Hey,” I reply, not sure what the fuck I’m supposed to say. I’ll never acknowledge the pain, like I was abandoned after a booty call or something.

“Sorry I left,” he says. “I was being impulsive by breaking into your place last night. I shouldn’t have done that, so I had to go.”

“You could’ve woken me up.”

“You looked so peaceful, I didn’t have the heart.”

Fuck. He’s so goddamn adorable. How the hell am I supposed to stay mad at that?

“I have to take a flight to attend my cousin’s boxing match,” he continues. “Also need to catch up on classes and have lunch with my mom, among other things.”

“Are you offering excuses right now?”

“No, just telling you what I’m doing today.” He pauses, and I can hear him swallowing, then he hesitates. “Unless you don’t want me to do that?”

I remain silent, not really sure what the fuck he means.

“Didn’t you use to send me all these updates?” he continues, his tone still careful. “I thought you’d want me to do the same.”

Oh.

“Oh!” I say out loud, grinning, as I fall back on the bed, sprawling out on it. “Yeah, that’s good. I want a full damn report.”

“I’ll try my best.”

He sounds serious. Fuck. He can be so fucking cute for a grumpy asshole.

“In return, you will not be putting your dick anywhere near other people, Yulian.”

“Love the jealousy.”

“I’m serious. You’re well aware that I don’t fuck people who fuck other people. If you’re mine, you’ll *only* be mine.”

“You’ll have to be around often to satisfy my raging libido, then, baby. Once every two weeks won’t cut it.”

“How about every weekend?”

Hmm. I’d rather every day, but I’ll take what I can get. And because of fucking Cy’s words, I’m conscious of not letting loose or sounding desperate, so I release an affirmative sound.

“I’ll send you the address and mail you the keys,” he says.

“What address and keys?”

“A small place I’m getting. Just be there this weekend.”

I flop onto my stomach. “You got us a place, baby?”

“Yes, and?”

“Nothing, just glad you’re always ten steps ahead.”

“One of us has to be.” He pauses. “I have to go. We’re taking off. Will text when I arrive.”

My shoulders drop. “Okay.”

“Don’t cause trouble.”

“Ha. I *am* trouble.”

“Yulian…” he warns, but I hear the suppressed laughter in his voice.

“Speaking of trouble, I’m sorry for whatever bullshit Cy told you. He spent years bailing my ass out of all sorts of shit, so he kind of feels responsible for me or something. He’s also my only friend, so I’m kind of stuck with the damn dude. So maybe, like, don’t get into a fight with him.”

“He’s your friend. I won’t hurt him,” he says in a calm tone, but his voice deepens, sounding guarded.

I roll over and sit up. “About the revenge he mentioned, it’s not that serious.”

“He said I hurt you.”

My hand tightens around the phone. “You did.”

“When did I do that, Yulian?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It *does* matter.” He blows out a sigh. “Will you talk to me about it?”

“Maybe one day.”

“All right. I really have to go,” he says, but he’s not hanging up.

“Go, then.”

“One last thing.” He pauses for several long beats, and I pull my lower lip with my fingers, waiting with bated breath.

“What?” I finally ask.

“Thank you for last night. I never thought sex could feel like a mind-blowing out-of-body experience that can shift perspective. You showed me that I’ve been missing out, apparently, and I’m genuinely grateful for that. Talk soon.”

The line goes dead, and I fall back, on the verge of kicking my damn feet as I hug the phone to my chest.

Oh *fuck.*

I can’t stop grinning.

And laughing and smiling.

I think I finally converted Vaughn.

Took me four years—off and on—but I’ve *finally* done it.

He’s so fucking mine, and nothing will change that.

Not even him.

I CAME TO THE REALIZATION THAT A WEEK IS A LONG FUCKING TIME.

Seven days. Okay, five, whatever. Then twenty-four hours every single day?

Kill me.

Actually, don’t. I still haven’t had my fill of my Mishka yet.

So how do I keep myself occupied? Punching the shit out of people, of course.

To which Cy shakes his head on the regular.

And Vaughn texts that I better *not* be fighting. But how the hell would he know if he’s not here?

I slam my fist in Nikolai’s face, making him stumble back in the midst of the roar from the spectators.

“Hit back, Niko!” someone shouts from ringside—Jeremy, acting like Nikolai’s sidekick.

“You’re so doomed, you little bitch.” Nikolai swings at me and I guard, but his punch is strong, and I fall back a few inches.

The crowd roars louder as we trade blows, time stretching into a blur. My vision tints red, and it takes me a second to realize it’s blood—mine.

Well, fuck me. Why the hell not?

Nikolai grins through a bloodied mouthguard, his fists battered, his bandaged knuckles smeared in red. We almost mirror each other, our blood dripping to the floor like some twisted art.

I wonder if I can add a few more strokes to it.

Listen, violence is the only way I can express myself, so the more of that the merrier.

Oh, and sex.

Violence and sex are the only way I can feel real.

Alive.

Something more than a mere incompetent tool in Dad’s life.

Since sex isn’t in the cards until tomorrow—no, the jerking-off sessions I indulge in after talking to Vaughn on the phone, picturing him whispering

in my ear, don’t count—violence is the only coping mechanism in my arsenal.

“That all you got, motherfucker?” Nikolai swings, and I duck, then hit him in the side.

He jumps up in an instant, and I notice movement behind him and kind of stop, because I think I’ve lost my mind.

Or else Vaughn is standing beside Jeremy, wearing all black—pants, shirt, shoes—with a hand in his pocket, his brows drawn, his eyes darkened.

Glaring at me.

That looks too real to be a hallucination.

I’m not even taking drugs lately. Maybe I need to check with a doctor to see if I swallowed a Vaughn-shaped pill somehow and can conjure up a fucking real-life depiction of him.

A fist cracks against my face, slamming me to the ground with a thud as the crowd erupts in a collective “Ahhh.” My vision spins, my ear buzzing with the chaos around me.

I blink, and Cy comes into focus beside the ref, his mouth moving—calling my name, I think. Asking if I can hear him. The referee lifts Nikolai’s hand, and I spit out the mouthguard with a cough of blood, forcing myself upright.

The side of my face throbs where that brute landed the hit, swelling fast and already bruised to hell. But that’s the least of my worries, because I’m pretty sure I saw Vaughn’s eyes widen right before I went down, and even if it was a hallucination, I need to confirm it.

Nikolai, who’s been reeling the crowd, jumps through the ropes, and sure enough, Jeremy pats him on the back, but the illusion of Vaughn is staring at me, his brows still drawn, and I think his hand is balled into a fist in the pocket of his prim pants.

I jump out of the ring as Cy calls my name, but I ignore him, heading toward the three of them. No—toward the illusion, because I think I’ve missed him so much, I’ve started to imagine him.

My hand reaches toward him, and he pulls back as my fingertips brush his arm.

Wait. I can *touch* him?

“Hey!” Nikolai steps between us and shoves me away. “The fuck you think you’re doing? Couldn’t handle me, so you’re trying to fight Vaughn or something? I’ll fuck you up.”

“You can see him, too,” I whisper more to myself than anyone else as I lean sideways to get a view of Vaughn, who’s frowning in that adorable grumpy way.

“See who?” Nikolai mirrors me, blocking my view again, and then we’re just dancing around each other. “Fuck off, Yulian.”

I grin as I shove at Nikolai’s face. “*You* piss off. Stop ruining it.”

“Ruining what?” he barks against my hand, but I couldn’t give a fuck about him.

I grin at Vaughn, and mouth, “Hi, Mishka.”

His scowl deepens, and he moves from behind Nikolai, who’s trying to grab me in a headlock, and shouting, “I’ll beat you up again.”

“What are you doing on this side anyway?” Jeremy narrows his eyes at me, and I have to physically force myself not to look at Vaughn, because he’s so fucking hot, I think I’m getting a hard-on just seeing him, and that’s really not a good thing in this situation.

“Just saying hi.” I grin at Jeremy, then wink as I throw a look at Vaughn.

“The last thing we want is your hi,” Jeremy says, completely unaffected by my gestures of goodwill.

“Don’t be cold. How about we turn a new page? I promise not to burn your mansion again.” I throw an arm around his and Vaughn’s shoulders, pretending to be cool as I stroke Vaughn’s muscles.

So this was *not* a good idea, because now, I’m bathing in his heady, masculine scent, and my dick takes that as a memo to fuck.

“Only a fool would believe you,” Jeremy says.

Vaughn steps away, and I feel the emptiness to my bones, then it transforms into rage when he yanks Jeremy from me as if I’m disgusting, and says coolly, “Don’t waste your breath, Jer.”

Jeremy.

His name is fucking *Jeremy.*

And did he say he’s wasting his breath on me?

This damn…

“Don’t make me do shit you’ll regret,” I say as Vaughn pulls Jeremy and Nikolai away.

The latter is struggling, still shouting for a second round.

Vaughn stops and throws me a condescending look over his shoulder. “Go ahead. Try me if you dare.”

And then he’s walking down the tunnel, basically dragging along Nikolai, who keeps shouting that he wasn’t done “beating that prick to a bloody pulp.”

I stand there for what feels like forever, staring at the spot where he vanished from, rage and blood surging hot through my veins.

But it doesn’t last long, because Cy finds me, bitches for a bit, then drags me to the changing room so I can get patched up.

As the doctor cleans the wound, I pull out my phone.

ME

Not that I’m saying I’m hurt with the way you treated me in front of your friends, but it’s on the table just in case you want to reflect.

MISHKA

Reflect? You’re the one who should reflect for not only fighting Niko, but also trying to act familiar.

But we are familiar.

Not in public.

Ouch.

That hurts.

I mean, I know we can’t be all lovey-dovey out in the open, but we can at least be friends. It’s blasphemy that I share more of a familiar relationship with Nikolai than with Vaughn in public.

But I guess, knowing Vaughn, he’s probably cautious about anyone catching a whiff of what we do behind closed doors. We don’t really interact, so his friends would ask questions if we were to start acting close.

Still sucks, though.

Even though I want to tell him he’s an inconsiderate prick, I choose to change the subject.

You didn’t tell me you were coming today.

How else would I get to see you being reckless?

It’s what I do. More importantly, will you come to our place later?

Not today. I’m staying with the guys.

You’ll have to change plans and come meet me.

I told you no, and that's that.

In that case, I'll go find Kevin and the others until you grace me with your presence.

Yulian. Don't make me act uncivil.

I never asked you to act civil. Be there in an hour.

I can't.

You can if you want to.

One thing Cy's right about is that I will *not* be Vaughn's second choice. I already see him sporadically as it is, and I won't allow him to put everyone else before me.

I said I have other engagements. You'll survive until tomorrow. Don't be a baby.

My fingers tighten around the phone, but I leave him on Read.

Don't do anything stupid, Yulian.

READ.

I mean it. You go to Kevin or anyone else, and I'll cut your goddamn dick off.

READ.

Are you sulking right now? What are you, a kid?

READ.

Fucking hell, Yulian. Say something.

READ.

In reality, I want to say lots of things, but I refrain from speaking my mind. For once, I don't yap endlessly.

This time, he's the one who needs to prove himself to me.

I've always been the one who's run after Vaughn.

From four years ago until now.

I got burned back then, and I don't want to be hurt again.

I'm not asking for much, am I?

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26

VAUGHN

“Hear me out, we go to round two, and I beat the shit out of Yulian again!” Nikolai punches the air, his nostrils flaring as he jumps up.

He’s still half naked, and dried blood trails from the corner of his mouth to where it splashes across his heavily tattooed torso. Nikolai is the biggest of all of us with muscles that he religiously built—like a certain someone.

Someone I don’t want to think about.

But I couldn’t exactly keep from thinking about him when Niko wouldn’t stop talking about attacking the Serpents’ mansion, pitching the idea to Killian and Gareth after telling them all about his victory.

“I’m just saying, we have the momentum.” Nikolai paces, his eyes too blown up and jittery, as if he’s on drugs. He’s not. It’s probably one of his manic episodes exploding in real time.

“You winning against Yulian is not momentum, Niko.” Jeremy types on his phone as he sits on the sofa next to me, looking too focused on whoever he’s texting.

“Of course it is. You saw me kick the shit out of him.” Niko wraps an arm around Killian’s shoulders. “I’m telling you, Satan’s heir, you missed out on watching me in what was possibly my best fight of the year. Don’t you feel sad?”

“Sad?” Kill raises a brow. “More like relieved. Hate to break it to you, but watching you fight isn’t exactly on my priority list.”

“You’re just jealous. Go die.” Niko shoves him away, then stalks toward Gareth, who’s lounging on a chair with a notebook in hand.

Killian and Gareth are brothers, but they couldn’t be more different. Kill has dark hair, blue eyes, and a personality that thrives on being threatening and provocative. Gareth, on the other hand, has always seemed like the prince of our group—blond, sleek hair, deep-green eyes, and a mild demeanor wrapped around sharp strategy.

At least, that’s what I believed until our Reddit conversation. Turns out, Gareth is unhinged, petty, and completely unfiltered. He’s also a total brat, especially when it comes to his professor.

It’s our secret, though. Although I doubt he knows who he’s messaging, judging by the updates he keeps sending me about Yulian as Gareth himself—mostly when he believed Yulian was messing with his beloved professor.

“My favorite nerd.” Nikolai slings an arm over Gareth’s shoulders. “Surely, you know this is our best shot at a surprise attack? We even have Vaughn today, so we’ll kick those Serpents’ asses so hard, they’ll never be able to recover.”

“It’s true that we have a good chance for a surprise. They wouldn’t suspect we’d attack them after Niko fought Yulian,” Gareth says with a little evil smile as he looks up at me. “And we *do* have Vaughn tonight, so the gang is complete.”

I narrow my eyes but say nothing. Why is everyone trying to get a reaction out of me tonight?

First, it was Yulian fighting and bleeding out in that ring as if he had no self-preservation, then he jumped out and tried to touch me—in fucking public.

I don’t think he was even aware of what he was doing, the idiot. Otherwise, why would he hold me and Jeremy by our shoulders?

I instinctively had the urge to break his hand that he put on Jeremy. I made myself believe it was because I was protecting Jeremy, but who am I kidding? I just didn’t like Yulian touching him.

I simply don’t.

He needs to stop throwing his hands around on people all the time.

“Exactly.” Nikolai hugs Gareth close. “I knew you were my favorite, Gaz. You’re the only one who gets my vision.”

“It’s not going to work,” Kill says. “They’ve strengthened their security, so it’s virtually impossible to attack, even with the element of surprise.”

“Shut up, Kill. Don’t ruin my fucking vibes.” Niko jumps up to a standing position. “The only one who can stop us is Yulian, and I beat him the fuck up, so we shouldn’t have much resistance.”

“There’s also Cyrus,” Gareth says. “Just because he barely talks doesn’t mean you can walk all over him.”

I remain still, looking relaxed, with my elbow on the armrest and my head leaning against my fist, but my eye twitches.

Throughout the week, I tried to ignore the obstacle that is Cyrus. But I just couldn’t, not when he’s by Yulian’s side while I’m not.

So I might have talked to Gareth—the Reddit alter ego—about it to vent.

I’ve had a dream where I just held his head underwater and watched him drown.

Not sure why.

I’m fully aware of how important Cyrus is to Yulian, and I meant it when I said I wouldn’t hurt his best friend. But I guess my subconscious still wants to kill him in cold blood.

“Heard he’s like Yulian’s watchdog,” Gareth continues.

“Nah, he’s not that strong.” Niko throws a dismissive hand in the air. “I say we go for it. What do you think, Jer?”

“No,” Jeremy says without lifting his head.

“Come oooon!” Niko kicks the foot of a chair. “I’m revoking friendship rights if you don’t have my back on this. I already did the hardest part by weakening Yulian.”

“You didn’t weaken anyone.” Jeremy finally pockets his phone. “You only knocked him out because he was distracted, and he jumped back from that as if nothing happened.”

“No, I won fair and square. Whose side are you on, motherfucker? I thought we were bros!” He swings his head in my direction. “You saw me knock him out, right?”

I release an affirmative sound, not really saying anything as I steal a look at Jeremy. He’s not Nikolai, who’s mostly oblivious to his surroundings, so it makes sense that he noticed Yulian got distracted, but does he know by what? Or *whom*?

That damn prick is too much…too in your face and readable. I’m wondering if Jeremy saw the way he looked at me when he came within touching distance and reached out for me. Did Jeremy notice the awe and

the joy and the brightening in Yulian's mismatched eyes? Because for a second, I could see my reflection in his brown one.

Even with his face bloodied, swollen, and bruised, the entirety of his attention was on me.

That used to be suffocating, unsettling, really, as I didn't know what to do with that ball of energy.

But earlier tonight, I was physically struggling not to walk to him or let him touch me.

For a moment, the world around us seemed to disappear and he was right in the middle of it, under the lights, hogging the spotlight and my attention.

It's strange to be this attuned to one person, to be so into them and focused on them that I forget about reality.

I only snapped out of it when the world crashed back in, so I moved out of his way at the last second.

Now, my muscles tighten at the thought that Jeremy saw all of that, including quite possibly the way I looked at Yulian. I have an impressive poker face, mostly by design. I'm not that expressive by nature, so I'm probably safe from Jeremy's scrutiny.

I *hope*.

"See?" Nikolai snaps his fingers in my direction. "Vaughn agrees that I was a total badass beating Yulian to a pulp and taking him off the map."

"You didn't beat him to a pulp," I say, half annoyed, then purse my lips.

Jesus Christ. Am I offended on Yulian's behalf right now?

"Yeah, he was completely fine," Jeremy says, apparently not picking up on my tone.

"You should've tried harder to pummel the prick," Gareth says, not looking up from his notebook.

Reminder to give him an identity crisis about his feelings for his professor when we speak later.

Yes. It seems, I am, in fact, not happy with all this violence talk directed at Yulian.

"I still inflicted damage," Niko argues. "I basically did all the work."

"How about we do more work on your ED situation?" Killian asks with a grin.

"You motherfucking Satan's heir, how many times have I told you it's not ED?" Niko grabs the waistband of his shorts and pulls them down,

terrorizing us with the view of his pierced cock.

“Nikolai!” Gareth jumps. “Put your fucking dick away, man.”

“I’m just proving a point to your stupid brother.”

“Point proven,” Jeremy says. “Just stop stripping, Niko.”

“I assure you that no one here wants to see that.” Gareth points in his general direction with a look of disgust.

“*That* is called Kolya.” Niko pulls his shorts up. “Put some respect on my dick’s name.”

“Still not convinced,” Killian says.

“Killian!” Jeremy says. “Stop it or we’ll be seeing him naked all night.”

“Good idea,” Niko says. “Clothes are overrated anyway.”

“Stop it, seriously,” Gareth says. “We don’t even get Vaughn to come around often, and you’re terrorizing him.”

“He doesn’t mind,” Niko says.

I just lift a shoulder.

It’s true. I don’t mind.

Mostly because I don’t really care.

I’ve seen many men naked. Women as well. I don’t really notice them much. When I was with Danika, I used to think it was because my entire attention and dedication were aimed at her, so I didn’t have time to think of others.

That’s true, in a sense. I’m probably pathologically monogamous, but still, even with Danika, I stopped noticing her body early on and just learned how to please her.

Even during the first few weeks we got together, after the first time I fucked her, I never fantasized about her.

Not at all like how I’ve been jerking off like a goddamn teen in the shower at thoughts of Yulian’s tongue, lips, and cock.

It’s a sickness at this point. A dangerous fucking obsession that’s eating me alive like acid.

And a part of me, the reckless part, doesn’t want this to stop.

That part is ravenous, coiling and demanding another taste of him.

I’ve had to stop myself countless times from hopping on a plane and seeking him out.

“See?” Niko laughs. “All you bitches can go die! Vaughn is my man and will totally join me to attack the Serpents.”

“No, Niko. It’s not a good idea,” I say. “It’s better we don’t clash with the Chicago mafia, especially after the DC incident. Too many things are still unknown, and the situation is volatile, so it’s best to let things cool down. You don’t want to get in the way of Aunt Rai and Uncle Kyle, do you?”

That makes him grimace before he blows out a breath and finally flops down on the armrest of Gareth’s chair.

“Any updates about that?” Jeremy asks me. “Dad says the general consensus is that an Italian faction from Seattle did it, but is it true?”

“Not sure. Anyone who attacks such a large Bratva gathering is an idiot, but then again, some smaller groups can only survive by going big. All the other branches are looking into it, so something is bound to come out of that.”

“Don’t you get bored keeping up with all of that?” Killian asks.

I lift a shoulder. “It’s what I’m born to do.”

“You can also choose to live your life like Jeremy and Niko,” Kill says. “Your dad is still young, and it’ll be decades before you take over, so might as well enjoy yourself a little.”

“He’s right.” Jeremy nudges my shoulder. “You’ve always been responsible to a fault. It’s okay to take a step back and have fun, especially after the whole thing with Danika.”

“Yeah, the whole *thing* with Danika,” Gareth says, sounding sympathetic. “I bet you’re still thinking about her.”

“Am not,” I say.

“Oh?” the prick says.

“It’s good you’ve come over outside the initiation.” Jeremy slams me on the shoulder. “It feels like we don’t see you that much.”

“I don’t think he’s here for us, though.” Gareth releases a sigh, and I glare at him.

He just laughs. The asshole.

“Question.” Niko jumps up. “How about we disguise ourselves, and the Serpents don’t know it’s us? Genius, right?”

“There’s no way we can disguise you, Niko,” Jeremy says.

“Listen, motherfucker—” Niko trips and falls near the coffee table, narrowly avoiding hitting his head.

I pull my leg back discreetly as he yells and bitches.

Childish, maybe.

But I don’t like that he beat Yulian up, especially that punch that knocked him down. He had to shake his head to get back on his feet.

Since I have a broad idea of the type of abuse Yulian has endured at his father’s hands, I don’t like anyone hitting him—Nikolai included.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out faster than I’ve ever done anything in my life.

I knew Yulian wouldn’t ghost me. The other times he attempted that, sulking and acting like a drama king, lasted an hour max.

Besides, it’s not really that I don’t want to go to the house. I want to touch him so badly, I’ve been having withdrawals.

But that’s exactly why I want to put some distance between us, train my brain to stop acting on instinct when he’s around and teach him—and myself—some impulse control, because fucking hell, he can be so reckless.

Y

You don’t get here in thirty minutes, I’m fucking him on your bed.

He sends a photo.

The picture shows Kevin on his knees, sucking on Yulian’s thumb. It’s a little blurred, but I’d know that hand anywhere—the veins, the tiny wing inked above the fang at the slope of his thumb, curling into the inside of his wrist. I kissed and held and touched that hand more times than I can count.

And now that fucking hand is on someone else.

My spine jerks upright as I type.

ME

You do that, and it’s over, Yulian.

Fine by me. Better that than playing your push-and-pull games. Goodbye, Vaughn.

Goodbye? You’re not the one saying goodbye, I am. You think you have any control over this relationship?

Apparently not. I can still end it, though. 😒

My jaw tightens. Is he seriously ending it? He thinks he *can* end it?

Or threaten me?

Or make me do something I don’t want to?

Fuck Yulian Dimitriev. No one dictates my actions.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I NEARLY SLAM MY CAR INTO THE WALL OF THE house.

The purchase itself didn't take long, but finding the right place took work. I practically made the realtor strong-arm a couple into giving up their dream beach house on a hill—secluded, overlooking the sea, far from anyone else. A discreet private gate, a long driveway, and a recent renovation in a clean, neoclassical style.

In short—exactly what I needed.

At first, it was the location that caught my eye. I spotted it on Google Earth, ran drone footage around the property to assess security risks, then dug into a background search to find out exactly who I'd be dealing with. The final step was hiring a realtor to push the sale—I couldn't risk handling it myself and exposing my anonymity.

The elderly couple resisted, of course. That changed when I offered them a mansion in Kent, close to their children and grandchildren. They'd still have their seaside dream. But this one is mine.

That's what I do. If I want something, I make it happen, by whatever means necessary.

And I accomplished all of that while overseas through representatives. Although the process took a bit longer than I'd like. Several weeks, to be exact.

I did all of this just so I'd have a discreet, secure place to meet the motherfucker who dared to *end* it.

Not sure what *it* is. Sex? Obsession? Whatever it is, he has no right to.

I shove the car door shut and step out into the storm. Rain pours down from a sky smothered in black, the night raging as waves slam against the cliff beneath the house, their roar nearly drowning out the downpour.

My shirt clings damp to my skin as I pull the key with the bullet key chain from my pocket—the same key I sent him yesterday, so he'd have it in time for the weekend.

The thought that he actually brought Kevin here nearly snaps my muscles as my vision turns red.

How dare he?

How fucking *dare* he?

A frown bunches my brows when I spot the bike parked on the side of the driveway, soaking with rain.

Don’t tell me the motherfucker had Kevin glued to him on that bike…?

My vision is entirely black as I unlock the door and step in.

Rain taps against the floor-to-ceiling windows, steady and unrelenting, the only sound against the weight of silence in the house.

I move through the entryway, my steps muffled by limestone tile, the soft glow of recessed lighting tracing clean lines along archways and wall paneling. Everything smells faintly of the woods and sea surrounding the place. The house is sharp, elegant, has symmetrical lines, and is decorated with dark walnut and marble.

My feet come to a halt.

Yulian stands halfway up the staircase, one hand locked around the banister, the other buried in the pocket of a battered leather jacket. His hair hangs damp in uneven strands across his forehead, his face mottled with mauve bruises from earlier. And still, the bastard grins widely when he sees me.

“Nice place,” he says, his voice thick with amusement.

I take the stairs two at a time, shoving past him and toward the bedroom, expecting to find a certain motherfucking Kevin lying in bed.

The main bedroom is empty, the sheets clean and untouched. I search the bathroom and the second room, then go back to the main bedroom, but there’s no blond-haired flirt I clearly threatened to kill the next time I see him touching Yulian.

Maybe he took that threat seriously and hid—

A chin drops on my shoulder from behind, and I swallow when Yulian’s head-turning scent bathes me in an extremely weird sensation.

Yes, it’s desire, but there’s something else in there.

Anger. Let’s call it anger, because I’d rather it be that than something else.

I’d actually prefer to do the more sensible thing of bashing my head against a wall until I bleed out, instead of facing what that *something* else is.

“What are we looking for?” The rough edge of his husky voice makes my mouth water.

Fuck. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Kevin,” I say coolly, at least sounding angry and not at all plagued by the feel of him against me.

“Do you *want* to see Kevin?”

I turn around, forcing him to release me, to put some distance between us since his touch obviously muddies my head, but then he smiles.

And I hate how he’s so fucking blasé about everything. How he has none of the fire that’s consuming me alive on the regular since he came back into my life.

My hand wraps around his throat and I back him up until he topples and falls on the bed and I’m on top of him, my legs straddling his waist. “You think you can bring some fucktoy to my place while ending it with me in the same breath, Yulian? You think you can do what you want? Hmm?”

He grunts and shoves at my chest, wrestling me so that he’s hovering on top of me. “You don’t get that privilege either. I’m not your toy.”

I kick him and shove him down, grabbing his hair. “You’re whatever the fuck I want you to be, Volchonok.”

“Fuck you.”

“We’ll get to that in a bit. But first, where’s Kevin?”

“There’s no Kevin.”

“You sent me the picture, asshole.”

“Old one. Had to go back into the chat to get it.” He flips us around while I’m momentarily stunned.

I’m staring up at him now as he wraps his hand around my throat. “Figured the only way to get you to come was by playing on your nonsensical possessiveness, but didn’t want to risk bringing the actual person, in case you’d kill him.”

Smart. He’s right, I probably would’ve committed serious bodily harm to Kevin if I saw him here.

“Block him,” I say instead.

“What?”

“Block Kevin. Don’t have any chat history with him.”

His laugh is low, edged with something unhinged. “You throw a fit over me asking you to show up, and now you want me to block Kevin? What’s next? Block everyone I know?”

“Preferably.”

“Would you do that if I asked?”

“I don’t have fuck buddies, Yulian.”

“Except for me.” His nostrils flare, and I’m shamelessly staring at his lips. Fuck. I think I missed kissing him.

He leans down, his nose touching mine, his lips hovering so close, I can almost taste them on my tongue.

“Say it, baby,” he whispers.

“Say what?” I lick my lip, hoping to close the distance.

“That I’m the only one you’ll ever have.”

“Get over yourself.” I’m nearly moaning the words because he’s breathing against me, my lips tingling at the rush of air, but he’s not kissing me yet.

“In that case…” Yulian licks my lip, then pulls away, but I grab him by the back of the neck.

“I fucking hate you,” I growl, then crash his lips to mine.

Operation Putting A Distance—an epic fail.

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27

YULIAN

Vaughn is mad.

And that gets my rocks off. I'm so fucking hard, it's not even a joke.

But who am I kidding? I'm always in a state of arousal around this guy. I've grown tired of questioning it, and I'm just embracing it now.

Been embracing it since the first time I saw him again in that restaurant, if I'm being completely honest.

And no, it's not too much in my humble opinion. I'm just apparently attracted to someone who's totally *not* my type.

Well, he was the first guy I had a crush on, so that could be the reason behind the madness.

Or the kissing.

God damn, I'm near bursting with lust, because how the fuck does he kiss this well?

A rush of unease spills through me at the thought of others who've experienced the feel of his hypnotizing mouth.

Where I'm always impatient, going for the power of it, Vaughn kisses like he walks, talks, and fucks—with control. He forces me to slow down, kissing me into enchantment, licking the inside of my mouth, tasting me.

Bleeding into me.

All I can do is follow his lead, allowing him to swallow me whole.

He flips us around so that my back hits the mattress and he's on top of me, his fingers in my hair, his knee jammed between my legs so close to my aching cock.

Listen, don't judge. A week is so long.

And I'm weirdly into the fight for power, surprising myself by how prepared I am to let him do whatever the fuck he wants to me.

"You need to learn how to stop provoking me," he whispers in hot, raspy words against my lips, his voice dripping with lust and anger.

My favorite combination.

Fuck, I love how grumpy he is. How that precious control of his bursts at the seams the moment he touches me.

"Do I?"

His gaze zeroes in on my mouth as I dart my tongue, licking my lower lip. When he speaks, his voice is rough. "You do."

"I'll consider it."

"This mouth." A growl rumbles from him before his lips seize mine again.

This time, the kiss is brutal and punishing. He sucks hard at my mouth, biting down on my tongue like he wants to eat me the fuck up.

"Why do you taste like the best thing I've ever had?" he grunts, sounding half in awe, half annoyed.

"It's a superpower," I'm gasping, my tongue dragging over his lips, while my fingers tear across him—slipping beneath his shirt, tracing the sculpt of his chest, the planes of his back. I touch him *everywhere* I can.

"Why does it have to be you?" His voice drops to a hushed murmur, more to himself than to me.

"That's what I'm asking myself as well," I whisper back.

His eyes flash to mine, plunging deep, so colorful and dark with lust, but the moment passes, and so does the strange look he had.

I'd give anything to be a fly in his brain and know what he thinks.

Vaughn yanks my shirt over my head and flings it away, and I do the same to his, unable to get enough of his body. It's all sharp lines and symmetry, lean abs tapering into a sculpted waist. Even the moles—one near his navel, another by his chest—only make him more maddeningly perfect.

Are moles even supposed to be beautiful, or am I just too far gone?

Both.

Let’s just go with both.

I get distracted in my watching session, only realizing after a bit that his fingers are hesitantly exploring me, running over my chest, flicking a nipple.

The innocence of it all drives me wild.

I keep forgetting that I’m Vaughn’s first guy—technically his first *anything*, and no, Danika doesn’t fucking count.

I love how focused he looks. His brows drawn, his lips parted, releasing shallow breaths, and I can feel his growing erection pressing against my thigh.

“Like what you see, baby?” I ask with a grin, then flex, and his eyes follow the movement, his nostrils flaring.

“You’re such an attention whore.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“Is that why you work out and fight? To flex and attract people’s attention?” He unbuttons my jeans, and I help with his, then we both kick our shoes away.

“Maybe,” I say only because I know he won’t like it, and I get off on his reactions a bit too much.

Mostly because he usually doesn’t have any reaction.

I’ve seen him with his friends, with Danika—*gag*—and even seen pictures of him at events and parties. Vaughn is the definition of mechanical.

Too precise.

Too proper.

His face is a mask devoid of expression.

So I feel a sort of superpower when I drag out his anger, lust, and possessiveness.

Oh, and petty jealousy. He has that in spades.

“What did you just say?” He narrows his eyes as we both slip out of our pants and boxers, kicking them on the ground.

We’re chest to chest, fully naked, only surrounded by the silky sheet that he’ll totally throw a fit about being covered with cum later.

My chest thuds, and my balls hum at the feeling of his erection rubbing against my thigh. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the sensation of his warm flesh pressed against mine.

Or the knowledge that he wants me as much as I want him.

Just kidding, I totally will. But I don't believe I'll ever view it as normal, because, fuck me all the way to hell, I never really liked just *holding* my fuck buddies.

With them, it was only physical. Wham, bam, and thank you very much, ma'am. But with Vaughn, the weight of his body flush against mine sends a thrill racing through me. It's addictive.

And intense.

I'm already mourning the fact that I can't have him like this every day.

Fuck distance. I don't believe in that shit.

"I said maybe." I feign innocence. "What can I say? I love the attention —mmmfuck!"

My words end on a moan because he's cupping me and his low, growly voice rushes close to my lips. "My attention is the *only* attention you'll crave, Volchonok. Are we fucking clear?"

Yes, sir.

I bite my tongue before I can say that, because what the fuck? Why do I love his possessive dominant streak a bit too much? The little fuck is a year younger than me, damn it. It should be insulting.

"From now on, I'm the only one who gets to touch you." He squeezes my cock, and I thrust my hips, chasing the burn, but he just shoves me back down with his grip. "Say yes."

"Mmm, I'll think about it."

"Yulian…"

"Yes, baby?"

"You're doing that on purpose, aren't you?"

"Maybe." I grin, and it ends up in a moan, because he's licking a trail down the center of my chest, and my mouth is watering, my dick throbbing like crazy in his hand.

"Or maybe you just love being used…" He trails off, his hazel eyes flashing toward me. "Your dick is surely performing a standing ovation for me, making a fucking mess as usual."

Yup, that tracks. Precum is already coating the tip and dripping into his hand as he jerks me, lubing me up with that delicious control.

"You like it." I thrust powerfully, pushing my hips forward.

"What was that?" His words are muffled because he's kissing and licking my chest, nipples, and abs, he's biting on the tattoo and sucking the

skin around it over and over, and I'm surprised I don't come from the sensation.

My balls draw up, strung tight, every nerve raw as his touch makes me feel worshiped. His lips are soft, his hands merciless—one grips my hip, the other rubs me with violent urgency, only to turn achingly gentle the next second, snapping my nerves like whiplash.

"You love that I'm so hot and bothered for you," I pant, yanking at his hair. "It makes you horny."

He huffs a chuckle that vibrates against my nipple. "*You* make me horny, you goddamn idiot."

"Me?"

"Yes, *you*. Why do you think I keep coming back? Something about you, Volchonok…"

I'm listening with bated breath, but he doesn't continue, just trails his lips lower, sucking on my abs, biting viciously, and I flex, which makes him bite harder.

Fuck. This violent asshole is my own brand of crazy. I love the tinge of pain, the way he squeezes me so roughly.

"Something about you…" he repeats, this time biting and sucking along the lines of my V, lingering there far too long.

"Are you giving me hickeys?" A chuckle escapes me, darkened by lust at the scrape of his teeth and the drag of his tongue.

"What if I am?"

"Mm, want to mark me, baby?"

"If anyone sees you, they'll know you're taken." His eyes rage a darker color, almost brown, as he releases my cock and grabs my hips.

"They'll go away in a few days…" My breath hitches on the last word because his lips are so close to my cock, glistening wet from all the marks he's left on my chest and abs.

"Then I'll leave new ones." A rough sound rumbles from his chest as he sucks the tip of my cock into his mouth.

Vaughn's lips are on my cock.

Not the first time, but it definitely feels like it. During the sixty-nine galore, I was also giving him head, and he was following my lead.

This time, he's taking the initiative to have my cock in his mouth.

The first cock he's ever had in his mouth.

The *only* cock he'll have in his mouth.

I nearly come to that thought. Fuck me all the way to hell, this feels otherworldly.

“Deeper,” I grunt, holding his head. “Take me deeper, and use your saliva as lube.”

He lets his mouth water down on my cock, following the instructions like a *very* good boy while watching me the whole time. Once he bathes my cock with his saliva, he licks the underside, then sucks on the crown again, rougher this time, nearly exorcising my soul from my body.

“Mm, fuck! Your mouth feels so fucking good, Mishka.”

“Yeah?” he whispers against my cock as it flops against his mouth, the purple veins throbbing, demanding access into that wet heat again. “How rough do you like it, Yulian?”

“As rough as you want, baby.”

“Mmm,” he hums, obviously liking that answer as he sucks harder, taking me halfway in, his eyes staying square on mine.

My fingers dig into the bedsheets. This is obviously torture.

“Holy fuck, more, baby… I need more.”

“Hands in my hair,” he says as he pulls me out. “Don’t touch the bed. Touch me.”

He doesn’t have to say it twice—my fingers are already tangled in his smooth hair, pushing him lower. His moan vibrates against my cock, sending a shock wave through me.

Vaughn takes me deeper, swallowing more than most can manage. I’m big, and usually even the experienced ones choke, but he handles it like a champ. He truly is a fast learner.

“You been training your gag reflex, baby?” I ask in rough words, and he looks at me with pride, taking even more.

“Want to take my cock down that throat?”

“Mmm.”

“Good fucking boy,” I grunt, thrusting into his mouth.

He digs his fingertips into my hips, forcing me back down when I get too frenzied, caught in the need to come down his throat as if my life depends on it.

He shakes his head at me, his eyes on mine the whole time. He’s watching me for affirmation, to see if I like what he’s doing, and if I seem like I do, he just does more of it.

And it makes me feel like I’m about to come apart at the seams.

This drop-dead gorgeous man, who's so out of my league, there needs to be another league to contain him, is burning so many of his precious brain cells just trying his best to please me.

He takes me all the way to the back of his throat and then pulls back, breathing harshly, his saliva coating my dick as he growls.

"You taste so good." He kisses my cock that's so ridiculously hard and engorged, it's fully purple. "Why do you taste so fucking good, Yulian?"

"Do you like it?"

He nods hesitantly, as if he doesn't want to admit it, and it's so goddamn cute.

"We could've been doing this for a long time, but you were playing hard to get," I whisper and then drag his head back on my cock.

A low hum vibrates out of him as he swallows me whole, bobbing along my cock until I'm buried deep in his throat. Saliva and precum slick me up, the sloppy wet sounds filling the room.

The sight alone—his lips wrapped around me, his mouth stretching wide, his head pumping up and down—is enough to break me.

I'm finished.

A complete fucking goner in his hands.

"I'm so close, baby." I groan. "Yes…yes…just like that. I'm going to fill your throat with my cum."

"Mmm," he growls around my cock, moving faster, harder, with the same violent force that always sparks whenever we collide.

And then I break. I burst inside his mouth, and he takes it all—sucking, licking, pulling my soul out through every spurt, draining me like he's exorcising the last of my soul.

"Fuck, baby, mmmfuck! Take my cum."

Vaughn doesn't need to be told that. He sucks me enthusiastically, his throat working with every swallow, even as a trail of cum trickles down his chin and onto his throat.

My cock twitches at the view even as my balls empty and I sag against the bed, the haze of the orgasm forming a blurry sheen over my eyes.

Vaughn's still sucking my deflating cock, slower this time, licking, almost kissing it, really, and I realize I'm stroking his hair, both of us…sort of stuck in a surreal experience.

He hesitantly pulls away, almost as if he doesn't want to but feels like he has to, forcing my hands to fall from his head.

“I’m the only one who gets to taste this.” He licks my crown one last time as if he can’t help it, and I just grin.

“Define the only one.”

“Yulian,” he growls in warning, and that voice does shit to me.

Like twitching my spent cock that obviously doesn’t seem to get enough.

Let’s just say I’m the greediest motherfucker to have ever been greedy.

He crawls on top of me, one hand gripping my hair, the other around my throat, and I release a hum because his nipples are brushing mine, and I can die happy now.

On second thought, not yet.

“Why the fuck do you keep antagonizing me? Hmm?” His hard cock is so heavy against my thighs, and I can barely focus on his words. “Why do you love driving me insane?”

Because it means he cares.

I smile instead of admitting that. “Gotta keep you working for it, baby. I’m not easy.”

He lifts a brow. “No?”

“Well…yes. But not anymore. I swear on my dick’s honor.”

He huffs out a chuckle, releasing my throat, but only after he drops a kiss to the slope of my collarbone.

This makes the fourth time he’s done that—those random kisses when I least expect them. First, on my arm while I was fucking him. Then my shoulder when he came inside me against the bathroom wall. Then on my back in the bath. And now this.

Yes, I counted. Take it up with the obsession police and ask for some form of moderation in my erratic behavior while you’re at it.

“I’m going to fuck you now.”

A moan slips out of me—not just from the way he declared it, but from the press of his cock against my thigh, swelling my balls with pressure.

He reaches over me toward the nightstand, snatching the lube and spilling it into his palm.

“Already stocked the place with lube, Mishka?”

“First thing I asked to be added to the house post cleaning,” he says coolly, like he truly thought about it.

I laugh as I grab his head with both hands. “You can be so damn cute.”

“I’m not cute.”

“You are to me.”

He tries to scowl, but really, he’s fighting a smile and watching me with a sort of awe that tickles my insides, and my cock. Can’t forget about that little insatiable whore.

“You’re so annoying,” he puffs out as he lifts himself on his knees, then shifts so he’s positioned between my thighs and reaches between us. I open my legs wider as he drives two lubed-up fingers inside me.

“You love that I’m annoying.” I pant, trying to relax as much as possible to allow him access when he adds the third, then I lather my hand with lube. “It makes you dripping wet, baby.”

I wrap my hands around him, squeezing him roughly, and he lets out a deep rumble. My nostrils flare when precum oozes from the tip and he throbs in my palm like crazy.

I do that to him.

I make the Vaughn Morozov so fucking needy.

“You act so standoffish and cool, but you become a weeping mess when I touch you, Mishka.”

“Fuck…Mmm…you goddamn asshole…” He moans, then pushes me back, forcing me to release him. “I’ve been fantasizing about fucking you for a whole week, I’m not coming in your hand, Volchonok.”

His words light me up like fireworks.

He’s been thinking about me for the entire week.

Five days.

In your fucking face, Cy. Go touch some grass.

He withdraws his fingers, only to press his cock against me, the thick crown breaching with one brutal shove of his hips.

A grunt rips from me as he growls low in his throat, driving deeper, both hands cradling my face, his eyes locked to mine as if his life depends on it.

It’s apparently a pattern. He loves to look at my eyes at all times. Whether I’m the one who’s fucking him or the other way around. Even when I fucked him from behind against the bathtub, he kept looking back the whole time.

Not sure what he sees in my freaky eyes, but apparently, he likes them a lot.

His chest glistens with sweat as he pushes further. “God fucking dammit, you feel perfect, do you know that?”

“Mff…”

“Why do you feel so good? *Fuck*.” He releases all sorts of delicious growly noises as he stretches me the fuck up.

I shift and adjust, opening my legs wider, giving him more access, letting him impale me.

I never thought I’d be craving being filled and claimed, but here we are.

“Your ass is the best hole my cock has ever been in.” He kisses my forehead, just a brush of his lips—a fleeting one. That, coupled with his words, and I’m getting hard in an instant.

Need to text Danika the news. Or not. Want her as far away from him as possible. The moon is my preferred location for her.

“You haven’t had many holes, so that’s stating the obvious,” I say, mostly because I need him to specifically say I’m better than her.

What? I’m extremely salty she was his first.

Like, dead offended.

In a perfect world, we should’ve been each other’s firsts.

“You never know when to shut up, do you?” He thrusts all the way in, bottoming out, the slap of his groin against my ass reverberating in the air.

“Mff…fuck!”

“That’s it, take my cock in your fuckhole and shut your mouth.”

“You’re huge. It kinda hurts.”

He pauses mid-thrust, and I can tell he’s struggling to remain still, because the veins in his neck nearly pop with tension. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Like fuck you will.” I grab his ass cheeks with both hands, slapping them, shoving him in. “I like the pain, Mishka.”

He frowns, but I think he’s too far gone in lust to let his head take over as he plows inside me, finding a rhythm. “Tell me you like being fucked by me, Yuli.”

“I do. You’re filling me up so good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I can feel your cock stretching me with each thrust.”

“Like this?” He gives a shove of his hips, and I grunt.

“Mmm…yeah, fuck yeah.”

“Lube me up.”

“Huh?”

“Like the other time. Put your fingers in my ass.”

“Oh fuck…” I think I’m going to explode as he reaches between us and strokes my now painfully hard cock.

My hand is slightly unsteady as I squeeze lube into my other one, and, pulling one ass cheek back, I thrust two fingers inside him in one go.

He moans, releasing delicious sounds as I work him real good, stretching and scissoring my fingers in him. My nails scrape against his sensitive spot as he hits the one inside me.

“Fucking hell,” he breathes out hard, his voice rough with pleasure. “I’m gonna come if you keep doing that.”

“That’s the whole point.”

“Mm…right there…fuck…”

“You like being fingered by me while you fuck me senseless, baby?”

“Yeah…I love the feel of you in me as much as the feeling of my cock in you.”

I grin. “Something we agree on. We’re made for each other, Mishka.”

His eyes droop, and he opens his mouth, but then he seals it shut again, killing his thoughts before they’re out in the open.

He pulls out, dragging my fingers out of him at the same time, and before I can protest, he’s climbing over me, his thighs caging my waist.

Vaughn grabs my cock and lowers himself in one smooth motion, taking me all the way in.

I come a little the second he bottoms out.

“F-fucking hell, baby, are you okay?” I groan, because the feel of his ass wrapped around my dick is making me delirious, but he took me all in. It must hurt.

“No,” he groans out, both of his sweaty palms planted on my chest.

“Fuck, shit… Let me see.” I start to get up. “You have to take it slow—”

He shoves me back down. “It’s not because of this that I’m not okay.”

“Then what…”

“Shut up and fuck me, Yulian.”

“You sure…?”

“I said. Fuck me.”

My head is muddied with lust as I thrust up, my cock chasing another orgasm. “Your ass feels so fucking good, baby.”

“Yeah?” He lifts himself and thrusts down as I meet him halfway.

“Yeah. I’m gonna come again.”

“Not yet.”

He lifts up, my cock slipping free before he slams into me, his thrusts quickening, striking my prostate until my thoughts dissolve.

Up again, down again—he rides me for a bit, then fucks me hard and fast.

He does it over and over until I'm unraveling, certain I'll combust from the relentless rhythm of him taking me and letting me take him in turn.

"I can't get enough of you," he speaks against my mouth, buried deep in me, his hands palming my face.

"Fuck, this is the best sex ever."

"Really?" He smiles with unconcealed pride as he pants, droplets of sweat falling on my forehead and trailing down my nose.

"I love feeling you inside me and seeing you ride me."

"Me, too. You're like a dream, Volchonok. How are you even real?" His voice breaks at the end as he thrusts deeper and harder.

He's shaking and groaning and gasping and moaning as he fucks me senseless. He's unhinged, violent, and so out of control as he kisses my lips, my chin, my jaw.

"Jesus Christ," he grunts. "Fucking hell, baby."

"You…called me baby?"

"You *are* my baby." He shudders, then spits on his hand and jerks my cock in that maddening rhythm. "Do you feel good?"

"I'm dying, Mishka…"

"Don't die," he orders, but his voice is laced with lust. "I'm not done with you."

"F-fuck…touch me, yes, fuckkk…"

My balls draw up as the sound of his thrusts echo in the air, the *slap, slap, slap* of flesh against flesh turns me delirious as he kisses me everywhere—my eyelids, my cheek, my mouth, my nose—almost as if he's worshiping me.

Me.

Vaughn's worshiping *me*.

"Come for me," he orders and pleads at the same time as he pulls back. "Let me see you break for me."

"Fuck…fuck fuck…" I shudder as I empty all over the place, splashing his face and chest and mouth with cum.

That throws him over the edge as well, because he vibrates on top of me, repeating my name as if it's a prayer. "I'm going to breed you, baby.

I’m coming inside you so deep, you’ll never get me out.”

Then he does just that. Vaughn fills me up to the brim with hot cum. My dick twitches a bit, coming more after I thought I was all dry.

“Fuck,” he breathes out. “Fucking hell, you’re my favorite thing ever.”

“You look hot covered with my cum.” I reach out to stroke it and make him gag on it, but he does that thing again.

The stupid thing that makes me want to spontaneously combust. He’s not supposed to make me feel this way.

I know he’s sort of just experimenting and will up and leave like he did four years ago.

But I can’t help but watch with bated breath as he grabs my hand, turns it over, and presses a soft kiss to the center of my palm, releasing a sated hum against my skin.

My heart expands and explodes in a thousand fireworks.

I’ve never been one for small gestures of affection. I’ve never loved anyone in that way, and it doesn’t come naturally to me. But Vaughn—raised in a family where love seems to be naturally expressed—wears it with ease. Even when he walls himself off, affection is still second nature to him.

And now, I’m thinking of all the little kisses he gave Danika, and my heart fucking plummets from its high.

My solution? I need to do something Danika would’ve never done.

Own him.

Possess him.

Keep him.

I lunge up. “Baby, I need to—”

“Fuck again. I know.” He chuckles as he falls on top of me, still buried inside me. “Give me a minute, yeah?”

“A whole minute?”

“Five, actually.” He strokes my hair and sighs in my neck. “Then you can come inside me.”

“Nope.” I grab him by the back of the neck and flip us over so I’m straddling him. “I’m in a hurry.”

His laughter echoes in my ear as I slam my lips to his, drinking his laughs, his joy, swallowing him fucking whole.

I guess it’s not normal to want to be all over him any chance I get.

But I’m scared that if I stop touching him, he’ll disappear.

Again.

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28

VAUGHN

This was a bad idea.

The *worst* idea ever.

I only suggested we go out to distract Yulian because the damn guy wouldn't stop fucking me.

It doesn't matter how many times we go, he'll be ready in minutes flat, demanding one more round.

And I'm sore and, frankly, tired. I haven't slept much since the flight, and the marathonic sex isn't helping in allowing me to recover.

Even when I tried to swim in the indoor pool, Yulian barged in—literally cannonballing, drenching the place. Then he was all over me, teasing, touching, trying to seduce me. Not that I have a ton of self-control around him, but at least I've got more than he does.

He's like a ball of energy that won't just sit down and do nothing.

And truthfully, I admire that about him—his boundless enthusiasm, the way he bulldozes through life without hesitation. He's everything I'm not, and where I once saw that as reckless weakness, I now see it as awe-inspiring.

But not right now.

Not when he lets go of the handlebars, his arms flung wide, embracing the air while the bike tears forward at a terrifying speed.

My arm wraps around his stomach tightly as I start to reach over, then remember I know nothing about motorcycles and sit back down, holding on

to him with both hands.

“Stop it, Yulian,” I shout over the wind.

“Come on, it’s fun!”

“It won’t be fun when we die.”

He laughs, the husky sound swallowed by the wind. “So dramatic.”

Thankfully, he grips the handlebars again. Not so thankfully, he guns the speed, weaving between the few cars on the highway, each near miss sending my pulse into overdrive.

“Slow down!” I shout, hitting his chest.

“Ow.” He pats my thigh, then grabs it, squeezing slightly, and a rush of apprehension cuts through me, soaking me through.

One thing I truly don’t hate about this is having my thighs pressed up to his, his back flush against my chest, my hands glued to his abs that I can still feel through the gloves and leather.

“Stop thinking and feel the wind, Mishka!” he shouts, his hand going back to the handlebars. I’m glad he’s not driving with one hand, but I can’t fight off the disappointment at the loss of it on me.

Honestly, what the hell?

I’m the one who suggested we go for a ride, so he’d get distracted and stop thinking about fucking. I meant a ride in my car, but Yulian, being Yulian, said, “That’s so boring, let’s go on this baby instead.”

It’s not a “baby,” it’s a motorcycle. An inert, unfeeling object.

But I didn’t say that, because Yulian was so excited about the prospect of showing me around. We suited up in leather—I insisted since he’d planned to ride half naked like the reckless bastard he is. Now I’m wondering if there’s more protection out there beyond the jacket, boots, and helmet, because Yulian rides like he’s begging for death.

The highway lights smear past in our periphery as he tears ahead, and I thank whatever’s holy that the road is nearly empty this late, almost early morning.

“Woo-hooo!” His cry rips through the night as the bike roars faster, the wind battering my face.

“Feel that?” he shouts, tapping my thigh once more.

“Our imminent deaths? Yeah, crystal clear!”

He laughs, the deep, husky sound carrying in the night. “The wind, Mishka. The wind. You have to let go to enjoy it.”

“And die? No, thank you!”

“We’re all gonna die anyway. Better enjoy what time we have! That sounded so wise and smart, right? Right?” He laughs again, seeming so proud of himself.

I squeeze my grip around his waist. “Slow down!”

“Hugging me close will only get me fired up!”

He speeds until I’m so sure we’re definitely crashing.

My eyes slam shut as I cling to him, my fingers digging in so hard, it must hurt, though he doesn’t notice, too busy ripping through the night at a speed meant for committing suicide.

He’s so fucking unhinged, irresponsible—I can’t believe he’d planned to go on this ride with no leather on—and entirely incompatible with my safe, thought-out lifestyle.

Yet the heat of his back bleeding into my chest, my palms spread over his abs, gives me a sense of belonging I’ve never known. As if this is the exact place where I should be—as illogical as that sounds.

And it *is* illogical. Yes, sex with Yulian is the best sex I’ve ever had, but that’s just sex.

Or is it?

Because I don’t think it’s only the physical contact that’s slowly but surely turning me into a sex addict.

Or more like a Yulian addict.

He finally slows down, but only because he’s driving toward a rest area. “Need some fuel.”

“Of course you do after you burned it all with the irresponsible speed.”

He slows to a halt in front of one of the slots, and I release a breath, sagging against him.

While I don’t think I minded the ride at the end, that was definitely too reckless for my liking.

“Uh, baby?” His voice filters in the empty silence. “I’d love to have you all pressed up to me all night long, but I kind of need to get some fuel. Just give me one minute flat, and I’ll be done.”

Fuck.

I shove away from him and swing off the bike, my legs not entirely steady. He catches my arm to keep me upright.

“Easy. Takes time to get used to it.”

“I’m fine.” I swat him off. “Just needed to catch my breath.”

Yulian strips off his helmet, his hair damp and wild, tossing it like he knows just how lethal the sight is. His leather jacket strains over cut muscle, his jeans riding low, his boots planted firm. He looks straight out of a damn commercial. Rugged, masculine, and devastatingly…stunning.

"Catching your breath from how hot I look?" He props his chin in the crook of his thumb and finger, grinning.

I remove my helmet and hit him with it across the chest. "From how irresponsibly you drive."

"Nah, come on, the whole point of having this baby is to drive her fast." He strokes the bike ever so lovingly.

I narrow my eyes. "It's a motorcycle."

"Duh." He clutches the helmet, but I don't release it.

"A motorcycle isn't a real person, Yulian."

"Yeah…and?"

"And you shouldn't call it *baby*."

He laughs so loud, he topples over with it. The sound is contagious, but I shove him again, this time yanking the helmet from him and placing it on the bike.

"It's not *that* funny," I say, trying to sound stern, but really, I could watch him laugh all day.

He wipes the corner of his eye with the glove. "It is funny to see you jealous of my bike."

"I'm *not* jealous."

"Might need to hide her before you set her on fire like poor Zver."

"It's an *it*, not a *her*."

"You're so jealous, you look like you'll burst into flames." He chuckles again, flicking me on the nose. "You're so fucking adorable."

I swat his hand away.

"Seriously, though, broke my heart when you killed Zveroushka."

"You actually gave a bike a diminutive form?"

"Hell yeah. Poor thing died so young." He sighs, then grins. "She probably would've agreed to sacrifice herself if it meant you'd end up right here with me."

"Again, the motorcycles are 'it,' Yulian."

"No, I name my beautiful ladies." He strokes the bike again, and I'm honestly so damn annoyed, it's insulting. "Didn't name her, though, so as not to taint Zver's memory…Hey! You can do it."

“I’m *not* naming your bike.”

“Then I’ll just continue to call her *baby*.”

“Chaos.” I hit him upside the head. “Just go with something that fits you.”

“Hear that, Chaos? Daddy number two is jealous, but Daddy number one will always love you,” he croons, rubbing his hand all over the bike, and I kick him in the shin.

“Ow! You’re a menace.”

“I’ll pay for the fuel and grab us something to drink.”

I’m already walking toward the store, doing my best to hide the ridiculous rush of feelings his sweet talk to a bike stirs in me. He doesn’t even talk to me like that.

Irrational.

Everything about him makes me fucking irrational.

The store is quiet aside from the buzzing of the fluorescent light and the sound of the fridge. I grab two bottles of kombucha and head to the register.

The guy looks up from his phone and beams at me from behind the glass. He can’t be older than his early twenties—bleached hair, chipped black nails, and silver rings crowding every finger.

“Heya,” he says when I pass him the bottles.

“Hi. I’ll also pay for the gas at pump four.”

“Gas? Oh, you mean petrol.” He laughs like he’s dealt with this countless times.

“Yes. That.”

“You got it.” He scans one bottle, then jerks his chin toward Yulian, who’s just slotting the gas pump back into place. “That your boyfriend?”

My throat goes dry, my wallet halfway out.

The guy—Harry, if his name tag is to be trusted—must catch the stiffness in me, because he raises both hands in mock surrender.

“No hate, man. I’m gay, and I love seeing attractive guys. We don’t get that many around here. You’re both so bloody hot—I mean that as a compliment. I swear.” He chews on his nails as he steals a look at Yulian again, and the prick uses that exact moment to shake his hair.

Why does he even need to do that right *now*?

Harry doesn’t say the obvious part out loud. He thinks we’re both hot, but *Yulian* is his type, because he’s got those heart eyes while checking him out, biting his lip and everything.

I glare at Yulian. Fucking attention whore.

No matter what I do to drive people away from him, they keep circling him like hawks.

I clear my throat, and *Harry* finally tells me my total, so I tap my card on the screen.

As he hands me the bottles, he pauses. “Listen, if he’s not your boyfriend or you guys are open, can I get his number—”

“He’s mine. *Back off*.” I yank the bottles from his hands and walk out before I punch him in the face.

Fucking hell, what’s this violent version of myself I can barely recognize?

I nearly snarled at the poor dude. Maybe I actually *did* snarl.

Honestly, what the hell?

As soon as I approach Yulian, I resist the urge to devour him so *Harry* can see and not have any funny ideas. Then, just in the last split second, I remember we’re in public and just punch Yulian with the bottle against his stomach.

I nearly *kissed* him in public.

For the world to see.

Yes, it’s early morning, and no one is around, but still.

What the hell was I thinking?

That’s the problem—I wasn’t. My thoughts short-circuit whenever I’m around him, his recklessness and *je ne sais quoi* behavior bleeding into me.

And it’s dangerous. For both of us.

“What’s with the tough love today, Mishka?” He grips the bottle, strips off his gloves, and tosses them on the bike.

Flipping the bottle in his hand, he leans casually against the seat beside me. “What is this anyway?”

I say nothing, just drink the kombucha, letting the bubbles fill my throat, still fuming about Harry wanting Yulian so openly like that. Some people have a lot of audacity. Even *I* can’t admit how much I burn for this bastard out loud, so why can everyone else?

It took me such a long time to even *touch* him without my brain getting in the way. Took me ages to just…be with him like this.

So how can someone who just saw him express interest in him so openly?

Not everyone is as uptight as you, the voice in my head whispers.

Yulian takes a sip of his drink, then spits it right out, coughing. “What the fuck is this? Fermented urine?”

“How on earth do you know what fermented urine tastes like? Actually, don’t answer that and drink. It’s good for your gut that you only feed alcohol or greasy food.”

“Have you been stalking me? ’Cause I don’t mind.” He grins, taking another taste, then grimacing, but this time, he doesn’t spit it out, probably because I’m staring at him. “Seriously, this is an abomination. They have no beer? Cheap whiskey will also do.”

“You’re not drinking while driving, Yulian. You’re already reckless as it is.”

“Love it when you say my name so uptight and serious.”

I glare.

His grin widens, then he hits my shoulder with his. “Why aren’t *you* drinking? You’re not driving.”

“I don’t like drinking much,” I say, staring at the label.

“What type of blasphemy is that?” He jumps up in front of me. “We’re Russians. We love drinking.”

“Don’t be stereotypical.”

“But it’s true. Alcohol is in our DNA.”

“Must’ve skipped mine.” I pause, then add, “I just don’t like the way it dulls my senses.”

“Hmm.” He plants himself beside me, watching me intently.

It’s overwhelming—his mismatched gaze, his focus, everything about him. I can’t look into those eyes for long; they’ve bewitched me, and now I’m here, drinking ginger kombucha in an empty gas station with the one man I should never be with.

So instead, I stare at the sky as it clears, dawn unraveling the cocoon of night we’d been hiding in. Pale blue and violet bleed across the horizon as the sun breaks through.

Maybe that’s what unsettles me—that the night, our sanctuary, is dissolving, and my body and mind are clinging to it, desperate to hold on just a little longer.

“You don’t like that you might lose control with alcohol,” he says more like a statement than a question. “That tracks.”

“And you like losing control, judging by all the drinking and partying and fighting and fucking.” I take a sip of my drink to stop talking.

“Hell yeah. It makes me feel alive.”

He grimaces after gulping his drink, and I smile, because he’s definitely not a quitter. He obviously doesn’t like it, but he keeps pushing himself to give it more chances.

“Speaking of fucking, let’s go home so I can bend you over and fuck you. I’ll ride you, too, make you feel so good, you won’t be able to move, baby.”

My spine jerks at that image, and I have to briefly close my eyes to chase it away. “Do you truly only think with your dick?”

“When I can, yeah, and right now, I *totally* can.” His hand that’s lying beside mine on the seat of the bike slides closer, and he interlinks his pinkie finger with mine.

The motion is so hesitant, it makes me swallow hard, because, as careless as he is, Yulian is fully aware of the outside world. Yeah, he thinks there are things he can get away with, probably with Cyrus having his back in the mansion, but he also knows we *can’t* get caught.

I should remove my hand, but I can’t.

I don’t *want* to.

There’s no one here anyway. I’ll just stay like this for a minute, that’s all.

“No, you can’t,” I say.

“See? Even fucking is being policed now. I’ll hit you up with my therapy bill when the stress gets to be too much due to the lack of one important part of my loosening-up routine.”

“Stop whining like a baby.”

“I thought I was your *baby*, baby. That’s what you called me when you were fucking my brains—”

“Shut up, Yulian,” I say, trying to sound stern, and he just sulks, so I add, “I don’t want to get hard in public.”

That makes him grin, completely forgetting what just happened. I wish I had the same sense of freedom he possesses in spades.

“Do you even attend classes in the midst of your busy curriculum?” I ask in an attempt to change the subject.

“I do, sometimes.” He shrugs. “I don’t really care about school. I’ll get my degree one way or another.”

“Then what do you care about?”

“Becoming as strong as possible to take over and protect my sister.”

I nod. He’s always had the same goal. Though four years ago, it was his mother and Alina. I know his mom passed away due to cancer, and I don’t want to ask about it in case it’s still a sore spot.

“Hey, Mishka?”

“Yeah?”

“If you weren’t in the Bratva, what would you be doing? For me, I’d be a tattoo artist or, like, a boxer.” His eyes flash, looking bright under the slowly erupting sun, a glow covering his features. “Maybe even join the army, but that would be my last resort, because I don’t like rigid discipline.”

“You’d be every commander’s nightmare.”

“I know, right? I’m uncontainable.” He looks at me for a breath, then stares out at the sky again. “What about you?”

My grip tightens around the bottle, but I say nothing.

“Come on.” He nudges me. “You can tell me. I can keep a secret.”

“It’s just… I’ve never really thought about it. My life is prewritten, so I haven’t considered any other options, to be frank.”

Yulian’s lips part, but then they curve in a smile. He’s always smiling around me. “You’d be the nerdy literature professor who wears glasses and breaks his students’ hearts.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re in love with the local tattoo artist, duh. As a result, all your students who have sneaky crushes on you would be so heartbroken.”

My lips twitch in a smile. “And how did I meet this tattoo artist?”

“You went on a hike to get inspired and fell, and he saved you, and you kind of hit it off since that night. He was your first guy.”

“Mm, and was *I* his first?”

“Nah, he’s a flirt, but like a reformed manwhore, and he’s very much only into you now. The professor, I mean.”

I chuckle.

It’s a made-up scenario, but a part of me yearns for it. For being… nobodies. The picture of holding hands in public, even with people around. For not tensing up the moment I hear the cars on the highway, thinking one of them will come over and see us.

I sigh as I stare at the hues of orange and magenta illuminating the sky. “I bet they’d be watching the sunrise together like this. The tattoo artist and professor, I mean.”

“Totally.” He pauses. “You like sunrises?”

“Mm. I never stop to watch them, though. I’m usually running or swimming or working out during this time of the day.”

“I prefer sunsets.”

“Why?”

“Because after it, there’ll be night.” He squeezes my finger. “I love the night. It’s where I can be myself.”

My chest constricts, my words slipping away before they can form, so I lace my fingers through his instead. His hand is warm, steady, so perfectly right, it makes me wonder why I’ve never held it before now.

“This sunrise is stunning, though.” He grins. “I swear, random gas stations have the best sunsets and sunrises. Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Mm,” I say, looking at his face glowing in the early morning light.

He’s so gorgeous, my chest hurts.

And I really don’t want to leave him later today.

Sure, I can change schools next semester, but then what? This is only a phase that will eventually come to an end.

Only, *eventually* is not today, and I’m going to be selfish. I’ll get my fill of this beautiful nightmare until I can’t.

“Yulian?”

“Yeah?”

“What would hurt you the most to lose?”

“Chaos, so don’t burn her.”

I stare, and he laughs but then it fades away. “Jokes aside, it’s Alya. I couldn’t protect her before, so I’d be destroyed if something happened to her.”

“When we were in DC, you mentioned she’s disabled because of you.”

He purses his lips, obviously not wanting to talk about it, but I stroke his hand with my thumb, slowly coaxing him.

Finally, he lets out a sigh. “It’s… Mom told me to look out for her and I…well, ran away from home.”

“*Ran* away?”

“Not permanently, just for a day. Mom got worse during that time, and she passed away while I wasn’t there.” His voice chokes on the last words, and I keep stroking his hand, squeezing a bit. “Alya was by her side until the very end. She was distraught and needed me, so she had the chauffeur drive her, but they had an accident, and well, the rest is history.”

“It’s not your fault she had an accident.”

“It is. She wouldn’t have had it if I’d been there.”

“She could’ve had it on her way to school or anywhere else. You can’t predict accidents.”

He remains silent, but his shoulders are crowded with tension. I contemplate hugging him, offering him support or just a shoulder to lean on.

Before I can do that, a car rolls in, killing any chance of that happening.

“We should go.” He slips his hand from mine and faces his bike, his grin gone, the light dimmed from his face. The conversation clipped his mood, soured it.

But I know how to make him feel better.

Sex. Lots of relentless, consuming sex.

We’ll fuck until the minute I have to go.

And I’ll convince myself it’s just a physical connection, even though the truth—the answer to what would destroy me most—is losing Yulian Dimitriev.

I know it, because I tasted a fragment of that pain four years ago. If it happens again now, I don’t think I’ll survive it.

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29

VAUGHN

“Are you serious right now?”

I push the sunglasses down my nose, staring at Yulian, who’s lining up empty cans by the far left side of the garden.

“Dead serious,” he says, bending down, and I get distracted because his ass looks really good in those shorts, his tattoos on full display, his tan skin gleaming under the rare British sun.

The breeze is chilling, but Yulian is pretending this is summer as he parades around shirtless, his bare feet sinking into the damp grass. Honestly, he must be doing it on purpose to seduce me.

It’s working, by the way, because I can’t take my gaze from him.

Not sure why I suggested we lounge in the garden after the disaster of a lunch Yulian tried to cook. He made such a mess of the kitchen that I had to clean—seriously, not sure how he could even bear to say that we should leave it to the housekeepers.

The food was not bad per se, but the mess was not worth it. Definitely won’t let him cook again.

But that’s what I said a couple of weeks ago when he nearly blew up the oven, but then he’d jump into the kitchen half naked and I sort of let him do whatever he wanted, even attempting to fix some failed recipes.

I know how to cook simple stuff, but Yulian is always going for new adventures just for the sake of it.

Honestly, every week is a journey with this guy.

It’s been about a month since I started coming here weekly, since the ride to the gas station that he repeats occasionally. Ever since that conversation we had in the middle of nowhere, something has shifted between us.

We still fuck the moment I walk in the door. Sometimes, Yulian will jump me before I’m fully in the house, but even when we’re not fighting to top, I love talking to him.

Yulian is actually very intelligent, street-smart, in a sense, and he has a high range of emotional IQ, which, honestly, can’t be said about me.

I can listen to his bold opinions about politics and the state of affairs for hours. His only downfall is that he believes a lot of conspiracy theories, and when I rightfully pointed out that they’re stupid, he says, “Those who believe all conspiracy theories are idiots, but those who believe none are also idiots.”

Other than that, he loves watching the most random shit on TV, from those fake wrestling matches to spy thrillers to mindless sitcoms. I’ve kind of grown used to his taste and lie there on the couch, allowing him to crawl on top of me as he flips through the channels.

I’ve grown used to a lot of stuff with Yulian. Such as his messiness, his reckless behavior, and the way he hugs me to sleep, crushing me beneath him every chance he gets.

But mostly, I’ve gotten used to how he makes me laugh. Honestly, I’ve never laughed as much as when I’m with him; sometimes, his expression itself is hilarious.

Even when I’m in New York, he manages to make me bust out laughing. Now, I only read his random texts when I’m alone, because Mom and Dad started giving me looks.

They can truly be random as fuck and entirely full of his conspiracy-theory nonsense. Such as:

> Ever notice pigeons don’t fly at night? Government drones gotta recharge. Don’t argue, Mishka, I know this one’s real.

> Cy just tried to explain probability theory to me. I told him I already know my odds of dying stupid are 100%. He didn’t laugh. You would’ve. Or maybe not, but come on, it is funny.

> Squirrel stole my Snickers bar today. Stared me in the eye the whole time. You think he’s also a spy?

Ever thought about how toothpaste companies invent cavities just so we'll keep buying their crap? Capitalism, baby.

Trees communicate through underground networks. Cy told me it's science. I say it's so they can gossip about us when we piss on them.

The Vatican has a giant telescope called Lucifer. Google it. They're watching aliens. I'm telling you, Mishka, Jesus had friends from space.

There's a stairway in the woods that leads nowhere. Saw it online. People who climb it don't come back. Wanna test it together?

Your Ivy League friends probably drink adrenochrome. Look it up. Actually, don't.

Octopuses have alien DNA. Don't roll your eyes. Scientists said that. Google it.

I don't really google the nonsense he sends, but he still insists it's backed by evidence and that I should broaden my horizons.

Usually, I'm half exasperated, half charmed by his random declarations. Sometimes, I find myself wondering if, maybe, some of them are true.

He's clearly muddying my mind. He's a bad influence.

Still, I find myself looking forward to his texts, to his random conversations at three in the morning while I'm lying in his arms or the other way around.

And I look forward to just…being here.

Every week, I leave New York as early as possible on Friday and leave the island as late as possible on Sunday—sometimes, early Monday morning—just so I'll have more time in Yulian's company.

It's been the happiest month of my life.

I've never looked forward to the weekends as much as I do now, practically counting the hours until Friday.

This secluded little house has become my lifeline and the one place where I feel like myself. No mask, no worries, and no thoughts about responsibilities.

I only exist.

Breathe.

Fuck until I can't move, then do it all over again.

I laugh and smile and shake my head at the messes Yulian makes on the regular.

But I don’t mind it. Really. I love that he’s also himself around me. That he tells me all his wild stories, which usually end up with him breaking a bone or the law or both.

He doesn’t tell me about the sexual adventures much, though. He probably senses that I turn murderous when he mentions his ex-fuck buddies, so he refrains from that. I know he has his past, and I have mine as well, but I simply don’t like thinking about it.

Imagining him with someone other than me is unbearable. I can’t help it.

And it’s all because of Yulian. He’s just so…unguarded.

Whenever we go on our nighttime rides and we make stops, he often has someone flirting with him. Yes, I threaten them either with my eyes or words to back off, but it’s not fun.

Yes, sometimes they flirt with me, too, but I don’t give them any reaction, and I certainly don’t smile in public as much as he does.

Even now, he’s flaunting himself while lining up the cans, looking absolutely gorgeous under the sun. The golden hues catch on his muscles, the ink, his hair, making both the blue and brown of his eyes glint.

“You’re really going to shoot cans?” I ask.

“Sure am.”

“It won’t kill you to stay still for a while.”

“Nah, I’d rather do something fun.”

“Have you always had that?”

He tilts his head in my direction. “Had what?”

“Restless energy?”

“I don’t think it’s restless per se. I just was never allowed to be still, I guess. My father always had some course or shit lined up for me, and laziness didn’t sit well with him.” He pauses, smiling without humor. “You once asked me if my life is worth so little to me. It actually isn’t, but from a young age, I was conditioned to never look weak, and my brain thinks the best way to showcase my strength is to dare death whenever I can.”

My heart squeezes, thinking about the absolute hell he’s been through with his dad. It takes me a moment to gather my thoughts. “You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone, Yuli. You’re the strongest guy I know.”

His eyes light up. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Stronger than Niko?”

“Yeah.

“Stronger than you?”

“Sometimes.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He’s grinning wide. “Come on, join me for shooting.”

“No, thanks.”

“Your loss, baby.” He grabs the gun from the table next to the lounge chair I’m lying on and winks, grinning.

Fucking hell.

I subtly adjust myself because my cock is begging for attention just at that wink, and if Yulian finds out, he’ll definitely tease me and restart the fuck fest.

Not that I mind, to be honest. We’ve had enough of a break.

Yulian lifts his arm, his shoulders relaxed but in the right stance as he fires. The can wobbles and falls.

“Bull’s-eye!” He cranes his head in my direction. “You saw that, Mishka.”

“It’s not that impressive.”

He raises his brow. “Show me what you got, then.”

“Not interested.”

“Because I’m totally a better shot than you?”

“You’re not.”

“Yes, I am. I beat your ass in the shooting range back at the camp.”

I jump up from the lounge chair and grab my own gun, then stand beside him, the damp grass swallowing my feet.

He smirks, thinking he’s won, but truly, I’ve willingly taken the bait. My shoulder brushes his as I aim and shoot. The can wobbles a bit but stays standing.

“That still counts,” I say.

“It didn’t fall.”

“It moved and I hit it.”

He steps behind me, close enough that I feel his soft exhales on my nape. His hand slides over my forearm, correcting the angle, nudging my stance firmer with his knee.

It’s so close to my inner thigh, my cock takes notice.

“Like this,” he murmurs near my ear.

I tip my head back, my eyes sliding to his. “What are you doing?”

“Correcting your stance.”

“It’s perfectly fine. You’re just searching for an excuse to touch me.” I keep staring at him as I shoot, hitting the can clean.

“That was hot, baby.” He squeezes my arm. “A man who can shoot has a special place in my heart.”

“Is that so?” I fire again, knocking another can over while looking at him.

“Careful, Mishka.” He wraps an arm around my waist, slamming me back against him. “You’re turning this into foreplay.”

“Isn’t that the whole point?” I wrap my hand with the gun around his neck, rubbing my ass on his growing erection. “Wrestle me for who gets to fuck the other first?”

“Always, baby.” He drops his lips to mine with a groan, then pulls away for a beat. “Can you not leave tomorrow?”

The pout in his voice nearly undoes me.

He’s been asking that for the last couple of weeks, and it’s becoming harder to tell him “You know I have to” or “Yes, I do.”

Because I don’t want to leave either.

The more time I spend with him, getting fully submerged in his chaos, the more I don’t want to go back to my monotonous life where he’s not there.

But I can’t say that, so I kiss him hard, fusing his body with mine.

This is the only way I can show him how much he means to me.

How much he’s changed my life.

Even if it’s temporary.

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30

YULIAN

Not to be dramatic, but the last two months have been the happiest time of my life since…well, ever, really.

It's like I'm back to being the giddy kid who bulldozed a wall at the park, fell down, then jumped right back up. Mama shook her head and wiped the mud off my face—and mouth. What? I was curious to see how it tasted, which isn't as bad as everyone makes it out to be, by the way.

It's similar now—that sense of freedom and happiness without limits.

I'm whistling and performing sort of a dance on my bike as the road flashes in the background. The reason for my uplifted mood is fairly simple.

It's Friday!

My favorite day of the week ever. I loathe Sunday to pieces while we're at it, since that's the day Vaughn leaves.

But no, nope, I'm not thinking about that unholy day—and yes, church, I called Sunday unholy, and no, I won't apologize. I won't be accepted in heaven anyway.

Usually, Vaughn leaves by midday Eastern time and reaches here very late in the evening, but it's always somewhere before midnight. Technically, Saturday should be my favorite day, but then again, the following day is Satan itself, Sunday, so the real MVP is Friday.

Which is why I'm kind of, sort of nearly bursting out of my skin with excitement.

I've even brought some extremely healthy dinner from the mansion's kitchen after having nagged the cook to make it.

I didn't use to care much about what I ate, but that was before the nagging machine that is Vaughn Morozov. He has something to say about everything I put in my mouth and gives me the side-eye when we shop for groceries and I fill the cart with chips. He also expels me to the balcony if I'm craving a smoke, so I'm not doing that often now.

Cruel bastard.

But really, the food is so we don't waste time cooking. Besides, he'd rather make something in the kitchen than have me try a new recipe or eat some harmless chicken wings.

I love watching him roam around the kitchen in shorts only—yes, it's a rule now. If I'm doing it and he checks me out all the time, he has to let me check him out, too—a demand he quickly gave in to.

The reason why I don't like him to cook, however, is because he'll be visibly tired from the flight and the long day he left behind but will still insist on fixing something at one or two in the morning just because I've ordered some greasy indulgence post sex against the wall.

Yup, I don't have the patience to take the first round to bed. I pin him against the door or the sofa or the floor—any surface—and we're fucking right there and then.

Vaughn tried to fight it the first few times, whining about going to the bedroom, but then he started to be the one who pins me the moment he's in the house, matching my impatience with his own, harsh breaths rushing out of his lungs as he kisses me while ripping my clothes off.

And I love seeing him lose control for me, whispering in growly words how much he missed fucking me and being fucked by me. I love his shuddering breaths when he says I'm driving him insane, probably due to all the nudes I send him on the regular and how I only fall asleep with his voice in my ear as we talk on the phone.

It started with me demanding phone sex late at night my time, which is around early evening his time, but then we started to talk until the early hours of the morning and I just…find his voice so soothing, so I began using that as my pre-sleep ritual.

But truly, nothing beats seeing him in person, touching him, pressing against the hard ridges of his body, plunging into his welcoming heat as his deep hazel eyes bore into mine. Nothing beats the choked breaths he

releases when he’s buried inside me as he plants tiny kisses on my arm or forehead or the corner of my mouth while whispering how beautiful I am.

How ethereal I feel.

How much he’s been thinking about this exact moment for days on end.

Does that drive me insane? Of course.

Vaughn used to whine about how I’m such a sexual animal who’s always ready to go again a few minutes after we’re done, but that’s not the norm for me. The only reason I’m insatiable is because our time together is limited, so I’d rather be fucking him the whole weekend.

Besides, he’s started to act the same, usually changing positions as soon as he comes, just so we can go again soon.

And even though sex plays a huge part in what we have in that beautiful beach house, as Vaughn calls it, that’s not all there is to it.

We’ve made it a habit to go on late-night rides on Chaos—that he’s still so jealous of but has learned to hide it so I don’t tease him. Vaughn has grown to like those rides because we’re incognito behind the helmets, so I can squeeze his ass in public, and he can wrap himself all around me without worrying about anyone finding out who we are.

Sometimes we’ll go to that gas station where we held hands for the first time about three months ago. We also rode to the cliff where I nearly killed myself just to prove my sincerity and he scowled at my lack of self-preservation.

Vaughn loves scowling at me, whether it’s because I fight and he finds me with a map of bruises or because I mess up his beautifully made-up sheets or because I splash water out of the pool.

But that’s his love language—alongside shaking his head at me and frowning.

Not that he *loves* me, but he definitely cares.

He was trying to tutor me so I could pass some tests, but really, I did that boring shit because I got to sit between his legs, my back pressed to his chest, his arms surrounding me while he talked so smart to me. He compromised with that position since I refused to cooperate otherwise.

And let’s just say he either ended up bending me over the table and fucking me senseless, or I fucked him on top of the precious books.

But I did pass the tests, and Vaughn was extremely proud and happy; he rewarded me big time that week. And by that, I mean he went down on me

for hours and let me fuck him all night long in every position I could come up with.

From now on, I'll be passing every test just for that reward, thank you very much.

It's not just the heat of his body against mine that undoes me—it's everything else as well. In the pool, where I clown around and he laughs, or at the gym, where I time my pull-ups to coincide with his, just to snatch a kiss—he lost his grip that first time and I devoured him where he fell.

Doesn't matter the place—a sitcom flickering on the screen, the grass of the garden beneath us—I'm always on him, crushing him into whatever surface is beneath us.

Vaughn doesn't mind when I collapse on top of him, whether after sex or even when watching TV. Last weekend, I sprawled out on the chair opposite him while he was lying on the sofa, and he frowned, then tapped his chest. "Come here."

You can bet I rushed over there and fell on top of him, to which he groaned, then released a rumble of contentment. The sofa was crowded with two fully grown, tall, and muscular men. The TV hummed in the background with some cooking show—not me, Vaughn loves that shit for some reason. Says he likes the methodical process of cooking, and it calms him.

As I was half naked, only wearing boxer briefs because he insists I don't walk around in the nude, he was tracing my back.

"What do the tattoos mean?" he asked, his voice soft.

Since I had my head lying on his chest, I couldn't see his face, but I felt his long fingers circling lines over my shoulder and rib cage, drawing a shudder from my spine.

"Will you tell me what the tattooed numbers on your inner thigh mean?" I asked back.

He didn't say no, but he remained silent, his fingers pausing their exploration.

"When you're ready to open up to me, I'll do the same," I said, barely camouflaging the frustration, to which he just continued his silence.

I really loathe it when he keeps that wall stubbornly erected between us. Yes, I know we're like fuck buddies in his mind, but that's not the case for me anymore.

Maybe it never was.

Vaughn is the only person who likes me when I'm being myself. He *gets* me.

Fully.

Sometimes, I don't have to say anything, and he'll understand what I want. I know I'm mostly easy to read, but no one has ever put in the effort to take care of me. Hell, even my father hates me, so why would a romantic partner care?

Sure, I wasn't looking for a relationship either, but those in my surroundings only ever used me for sex or companionship or social standing.

Considering my dad only tolerates me and is using me for his legacy, people using me for whatever reason puts a bad taste in my mouth.

Vaughn, however, seems to genuinely care. He's always buying me shit whenever he comes here. He got me several pairs of leather pants, so I won't ride wearing jeans, some riding boots, and a fancy new helmet that he put a lot of research into.

He's always stocking the house and my pockets with ointments for when I get hurt. Creams for different stages of scarring as well—didn't even know that shit was a thing.

I once complained about engine noise. The next time he was here, he brought me custom-molded earplugs designed for riding.

Then he noticed me being too rough with grooming, cutting myself once, so he got me a premium shaving set. Then he taught me how to use it by shaving me in the tub as he sat on my lap—you can bet I made him sit on my cock somewhere in the middle of his demonstration.

I sprained my wrist, so he dropped a medical-grade support set in the bike's storage compartment.

It's the little things that make me think he pays attention to everything I do, to the point where I wonder if he has someone following me around or something.

But a couple of weeks ago, when I asked him if he'd move here next semester, he just said, "It's not the time to talk about this."

Then when is the time?

Tonight. I'll have to make him say he'll move. While I'm fine with being in a secret relationship, I can't take these weekend rendezvous any longer.

Even Cy noticed I’m grumpiest on Sunday evenings. And yes, Cy knows about where I disappear to every weekend. He stopped nagging, though, seeming kind of busy lately, and that has everything to do with the “ghost” from his past that he’s been looking everywhere for.

And if I’m correct, that ghost is a nerdy-looking man in his early thirties who I caught Cy stalking in the local library. When I asked him about it, Cy just smiled maniacally, which is bad news for the dude. Great news for me, though, because Cy has little time to nag me, and he seems to have lost hope that I’ll give up on Vaughn. I could be ninety and knocking on Satan’s door and would probably not stop pursuing him.

Despite everything in my past, Vaughn is the only person who makes me like myself when I’m with him. He accepts me exactly as I am, and somehow, I make him laugh. The perpetual grump who once glared at me for sport now smiles and laughs more than anyone else around me.

I did that is all I can think when he bursts out laughing about some random thing I say or do.

I like to think he’s himself in my presence as well. Only difference is that he’ll always be more guarded around me.

When I arrive at the house’s front door, I’m humming while removing my helmet. The afternoon air blows through my hair as I check my phone since this is around the time he’ll text me that he’s taking off.

I grin when I find the text, but it soon drops when I read it.

MISHKA

Can’t make it this weekend. I have to attend the opening of a private art gallery with my parents. Sorry for the late notice.

ME

Are you serious right now? You already only come around on weekends, and now you can’t make it?

I come around EVERY weekend, Yulian. One won’t kill you. Besides, all the traveling is depleting my energy.

Will I be seeing you once a month now?

I didn’t say that. I’m just pointing out that I’m flying too much.

You wouldn’t have to fly too much if you’d just switched schools, but you won’t do that, because, even now, you’re still putting fucking distance between us.

It's just this weekend, okay?

Not okay. Come over, or I'll do something you won't like. Like calling my contacts who have the time for me.

Threaten me with other people again, and I'm ending this arrangement. Are we clear? Don't be childish.

Yulian…don't piss me off. Answer me.

You might have gotten the idea that I'll let you do whatever the fuck you want because I like you and want you and have an incurable crush on you, but I'm not a toy you can discard whenever you wish.

When the fuck did I say you were a toy? Are you picking a fight on purpose?

Yulian…don't shut me out like this. It's just a weekend. I promise. I'll make it up to you, okay, baby?

It's not just about a weekend.
It never was.

SINCE VAUGHN WASN'T ABLE TO MAKE IT, I CAUGHT A PLANE. A PRIVATE jet—Cy's, to be more specific—and that's how I found myself in New York City.

More accurately, at the gallery opening Vaughn talked about.

Listen, I don't know how Cy got the details or even procured me an invitation, but he's a bro's bro and a genius, which is all that matters.

It's how he got me an invitation to that restaurant opening where I saw Vaughn again, too. Cy is just a man of many talents. And hackers. Pretty sure he dabbles in that stuff occasionally as well. As he likes to say—technological information is power.

So to the opening I went, I guess.

Not sure who the hell decided canvases with random brush vomit deserve worship, but here I am, glass in hand, surrounded by silent nodders pretending this shit makes sense.

The gallery smells like old money and synthetic roses. The walls are white enough to bleach your soul, and the lighting's so dramatic, it

resembles one of Dad’s torture chambers. A red canvas splattered with what looks like mud gets a slow hum of appreciation from some silver-haired man beside me.

My gaze is searching the crowd, and that’s when I see him. While this isn’t my world and never will be, it’s definitely his.

Vaughn.

He stands before a massive painting I hadn’t even noticed, as if the oxygen itself bends toward him. One hand in his pocket, his jaw set in quiet disdain, his tux sculpted perfectly over his frame. His hair is neat, his eyes locked on the canvas with the same razor focus he gives people when deciding where they belong on his chessboard.

The painting shows two faceless figures on stark white—one slumped, bleeding, the other reaching out but never touching. Cold shadows. Violent reds.

I ignore whatever the man beside me says as I stride toward the reason I made this impulsive trip. Vaughn doesn’t hear me over the quiet hum of classical music and polite laughter.

My nostrils flare with his scent as I stand beside him and stare ahead. “This is what you abandoned me for? Shit art?”

His head whips in my direction, his eyes wide, but his jaw tics as he searches our surroundings, then speaks in a whisper-yell, “Why on earth are you here, Yulian?”

“Wanted to see the event that’s so important it prevented you from coming home, and I’m not impressed.”

“That place is *not* my home,” he says in a low tone, then stares at the painting. “This is.”

He might as well have shot me in the chest.

No, seriously, my heart is in so much pain, it hurts to breathe.

“You should go.” He speaks coldly, emotionlessly. He’s nothing like the smiley, warm Vaughn who grins lazily upon seeing me on the island.

It’s as if he’s had a personality transplant.

Fuck this asshole.

How dare he treat me like this?

“Vinyoshka?”

Vaughn tenses up at the careful feminine voice, and when we turn around, we’re faced by his parents, who are both watching me as if I’m a threat.

Did his dad just reach into his waistband?

Fuck me. This is the last thing I needed.

I grin. “Hi, I’m Yulian.”

“I know exactly who you are, Dimitriev,” Kirill says, his hand still in his waistband. “What I don’t know is what you’re doing here, in my city, next to my son. If your father has anything to say, he can talk to me.”

“No, no, it’s not about my father. I was just around and figured I’d say hi to Vaughn.” I’m speaking coolly, forcing myself to remain relaxed, which is a sharp contrast to Vaughn’s tense jaw and blanched expression.

His brain seems to have short-circuited since his parents showed up. Guess he’s probably panicking about the prospect of them finding out he really loves dick—more specifically, *my* dick.

Kirill frowns the same way Vaughn does on the regular, and Alexandra watches me intently as she asks, “How do you know Vaughn…?”

“Cursed summer camp four years ago, remember?” I laugh, but they’re not joining in. “We met on the island again when he came by to visit Jeremy and the others.”

“Right,” she says.

“Is that true, Vaughn?” Kirill asks, and only when his son gives a sharp nod does he remove his hand from his waistband.

I guess I’m not going to get killed tonight—for now.

Honestly, I wouldn’t risk anything with them. Not only do I know they’re badass ex-spetsnaz—since Vaughn sings their praises all the time—but they both look guarded.

I wouldn’t be surprised if Kirill decides to put a bullet in my head just for the fuck of it.

“Why haven’t you told us you reconnected with Yulian again, Vinyoshka?” Alexandra asks, watching her son closely.

“It’s not important,” he says assertively, cold-bloodedly twisting the knife in my chest.

The smile I’m forcing cracks at the edges.

Not important.

He said that *I* am not important.

The past few months that I considered the best time of my life were just *not* important.

Heat blossoms in my chest as if a fiery being is sitting right on top of my heart, and I need to move before I knock Vaughn’s teeth out in front of

his parents.

"If you'll excuse me," I murmur, then push through the crowd gathered around the painting and head straight for the exit.

Fuck this. I should've never come here.

The pain of not seeing him this weekend pales in comparison to the pain of being so coldly treated by him in public.

I rush to the parking lot, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. The smoke blows in the air, forming a cloud into the night, but it doesn't expel the pain that's lurking in my chest.

Fuck.

The lot is lit with dim lights that illuminate the cars lined up throughout. As soon as I reach the rental bike, I kick it. My foot explodes with pain, but I do it again, then again.

"Yulian, calm down."

My chest constricts at the sound of Vaughn's voice, and I push back my hair with one hand as I take a drag off the cigarette with the other.

"Calm down?" I spin around and face him. He's shrouded in the harsh glow of lights, his features guarded.

I release a cloud of smoke in his face, but he doesn't flinch. "All right, I'm calm. Does that mean I'm important now?"

"You know I didn't mean that," he says apologetically. "I only said that because my parents were there."

"I *don't* know!" My voice rises, and he flinches. "I don't know what the fuck you're thinking half of the time, Vaughn. You refuse to move to the island, you refuse to let me in completely, and I just don't know where we stand. You make me feel like the most important person in one breath, then act like a stranger in your home territory in the next. It's giving me fucking whiplash."

"Yulian—"

I grab him by the throat and swing him around, shoving him against the bike. "Tell me you love me."

"W-what?"

"Tell me you have feelings for me. Tell me you *feel* anything toward me. Just fucking say something."

His eyes widen, and a muscle flexes in his jaw. "What's with this all of a sudden?"

I snarl as I drive him against the bike, his elbows buckling under the force. My lips seize his, savage and consuming, teeth biting, tongues clashing in a war of fury. He pushes back, but my grip tightens around his throat, pinning him, dragging another groan from him as I kiss harder, deeper. Every ounce of rage, every scar of pain, every shard of resentment detonates between our mouths in a raw, uncontainable mess.

He mumbles something in my mouth, but I don't hear it, too lost in my own head to listen to whatever he has to say, biting and sucking and punishing him for not liking me as much as I like him.

It's been this way from the beginning, from when I smiled at him the first time we met and he glared at me.

We've had an unbalanced bond since then. He always stands tall, while I'm the one who takes the burn.

"I said stop!" He shoves me away with a hand to my chest, breathing harshly, his lips all red and bitten.

My own breaths fill the air as I sway in front of him.

He straightens, fixing his bow tie and jacket with jerky movements. "The fuck you think you're doing, Yulian? We're in public."

"Right. Public." I laugh, and he frowns.

Vaughn removes the cigarette from my hand and squashes it under his shiny shoe. As I watch the ember flicker and die, I don't know why it feels as if he just smashed my heart.

"What am I to you?" I ask in a low rumble, still looking at his shoes.

"What do you want me to say so you'll stop whatever you're going on about right now?"

My eyes slide to his cold ones. "Am I just a fuck buddy? Not even worthy of feelings, like Danika?"

"You and Danika are entirely different."

"I know. She was your girlfriend. I'm nothing."

"You're *not* nothing, Yulian."

"Then what the fuck am I?" I raise my voice.

"That's the second and last time you yell at me, are we fucking clear?" He squares up to me, jamming a finger against my chest. "You're not the only one who can yell. Know your goddamn place."

"And what is that, Vaughn?" I ask. "My place, I mean."

"What the hell do you want me to say?"

"Something. Anything."

“Well, here’s something.” He stands taller, his voice shrouded in cold control. “We can’t be in a relationship, because our circumstances don’t allow it. We both knew this arrangement was temporary and not going to last, so I’m not sure why you’re acting this way right now.”

“Temporary. Not going to last,” I repeat, releasing a humorless chuckle. “Are those the thoughts you had about us from the beginning? Did that pretty head of yours doom us to an end before we even started?”

“That’s what it is!” It’s his turn to lose his cool, pulling and loosening his bow tie before he releases a breath. “We have duties toward our families. We can’t be together in the long-term, Yulian. You *know* that.”

“If we can’t be together in the long-term, isn’t it better to stop wasting each other’s time now?”

“That’s not what I meant.” His eyes flash, then his voice softens. “That’s not what I *want*.”

“Well, tough shit. You don’t always get what you want.” I grab the helmet and shove it on as I hop on the bike and rev the engine.

Vaughn’s hands lock around the handlebars, blocking me in. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I get all of you, or I walk away. I’m done settling for half.”

His lips part to say something, but he seals them again and steps out of my way, like the coward he is.

Fuck *him.*

I speed out of the parking lot, feeling like I’m about to burst from my skin. I ride for a few hours, feeling the wind, then getting into a fight with a bunch of idiots at the gas station. I hate those places now. *He* ruined them for me.

My ride goes on and on until I feel like my head is about to explode. I only go back to the hotel around dawn, completely depleted. Need to fly back and let Cy say “I told you so.”

I knew he would be right—Cy is always right—but I let my stupid expectations take over.

When I step into the room, I sense movement. At first, I think it’s Vaughn, but then I register the different footsteps and pull out my gun.

But it’s too late.

Someone hits me upside the head, and as I fall, a thickly accented voice says, “Your father wants to see you, Yulian.”

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31

VAUGHN

Yulian, answer my calls.

Where are you staying? I'll come meet you.

Listen, I know you're upset by what I said, but it's the truth of where we are. We can't change our identities, and we can't live openly in the public eye. Even you must know that we have to be careful. But understand this—I love being with you. It's not only about sex, and you're not just a casual fling to me.

I care about you, Yulian, okay? I care about you a lot.

I want to go back to the house, where it's only the two of us. I'll take a few days off during the week and make up for my absence this weekend. How does that sound?

Is it so bad to just have each other without the outside world interfering in what we have?

He ignored me.

Didn't even read my texts.

It's the following day, and he still hasn't picked up my calls. His phone goes straight to voicemail, so maybe he's on a flight back to the island.

I pace the length of my childhood room after a sleepless, restless night. I'd rather be in my own place, but Mom insisted I stay.

Insisted, as in she and Dad barely took their eyes off me after that sudden meeting with Yulian. I tried to act composed, but undoing my bow tie and checking my phone every two minutes for his name didn't exactly help. Their suspicions only grew, which is why I'm here now—tucked under their watchful wings, where they think I'm safer.

And it's all because Yulian decided to crash the party.

Honestly, I should've suspected that he might show up, but then again, he's so unpredictable sometimes, I don't know what the hell to expect.

But I don't like the silence. It's not like him.

I'd rather he's upset with me while talking to me instead of this complete withdrawal.

Stopping in the middle of the room, I text Gareth, as himself. He called me for help the other time, shattering the illusion between real-life Gareth and the Reddit one. And now, we just talk normally, as friends, and I *need* a friend right now.

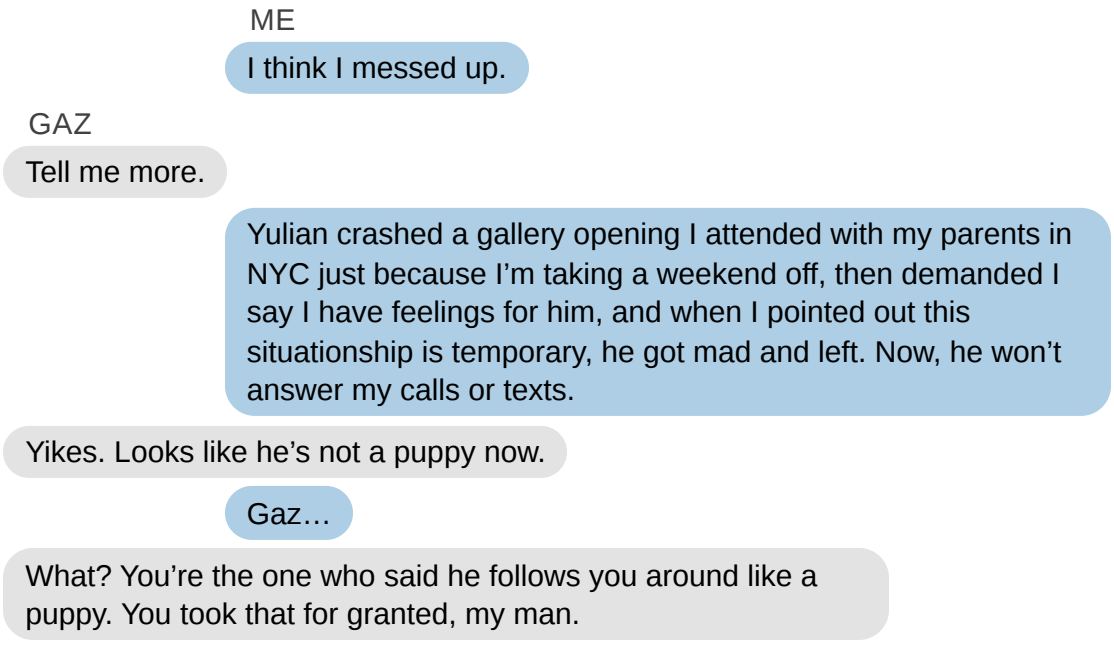
I complained to him once about how Yulian draws attention like a magnet. People hit on him even when he's in a damn helmet.

Gareth called him a fuckboy and said that I deserve better.

But that's not true. Yulian's been loyal since the moment this started. He never flirts back—though he does smile, and I hate that.

Those smiles are mine.

What? I don't share.



What do you mean?

It’s obvious he’s always liked you more. He chased more, let you get away with more, probably waiting for you to catch up, and when you didn’t, well, maybe he got fed up.

He can’t be fed up.

Totes can.

So what now? It’s over?

I don’t know. Do you want it to be over?

Of course not.

Then you have to compromise. He probably wants you to be all in.

How do you know that?

I’m smart. Besides, it’s kind of obvious. You always seemed to have a foot out the door, ready to bolt if things got too complicated.

It’s not that. I just don’t want to put either of us at a disadvantage or in danger.

Well, that ship has sailed. If you feel you’re at a disadvantage or in danger, walk away.

I can’t just walk away.

Aw, is our baby Vaughn in love?

I’m not in love.

Bro, you’ve been fixated on this guy for months. You bought a beach house just for privacy, fly out every weekend to see him, even picked up riding motorcycles—something so not you—just for the thrill of being with him. Not to mention that most of your conversations center around him. If that isn’t love, I don’t know what is. But hey, take your time. Took me forever to admit the heart palpitations I get around Kayden aren’t about wanting to strangle him—they’re about loving him, too much for my own good.

I’m staring at Gareth’s texts when a knock sounds on the door. “Come in,” I say, pocketing my phone.

Lidya’s shock of purple hair slips past the doorframe before she barges in. She’s smaller than me but built with muscles that make her presence impossible to ignore. Vest, pressed pants, restless energy. She’s always been like this—fun, reckless, a proud tomboy to the core.

She’s entirely different than me. Ever since we were kids, I’d be reading quietly while she’d be testing gravity. She definitely loves sparring and boxing more than I do.

“V, you have to run away!” She lunges at me, grabs my hand, and starts pulling me toward the door. “I’ll smuggle you out. Trust me, I have a plan.”

“Why do I need to run, Li?”

“I’ll explain later. We have to go now. Chop-chop.”

The door she left ajar opens, and she comes to a halt as my parents show up at my doorstep, wearing grave expressions.

“Uh-oh,” Lidya says under her breath. “Too late.”

“We need to talk, son,” Dad says without any inflection.

“Lidya, darling,” Mom says. “Do you mind stepping out for a bit?”

Lidya throws her arms around me in a hug. “I want you to know that I love you to bits, and I’ll totally start a war for you, V.”

“Love you, too, Li.” I pat her, not sure what the hell is going on.

Can’t be good, though, because she whispers, “Can totally still smuggle you out. You just say the word.”

“I’m fine.”

She steps back, salutes with two fingers, then walks out, closing the door behind her.

Mom and Dad settle on the sofa in the sitting area, and I drop into the chair across from them, my weight sinking into the cushions. “Is something wrong?”

“Depends.” Dad slides his glasses up his nose, his expression so guarded, it makes me sit up straighter.

“Just tell him, Kirill,” Mom says softly, but her face is slightly pale.

Dad exhales, slow and heavy, before passing me the phone. “This came from Yaroslav.”

The name alone makes my mouth press in a line. Then I see the photo.

It’s grainy, shot from a distance in last night’s parking lot, zoomed in to show Yulian and me. His hand is crushing me against the bike while his mouth devours mine.

It was both an angry and emotional kiss, and I briefly closed my eyes and gave in, because I can't just *not* kiss him.

By the time I remembered we were in public and tried to stop, the damage was done.

Someone obviously caught us.

"Is this what I think it is?" Mom asks softly.

I nod once, my mouth dry as I give Dad his phone. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. We're not judging you," Mom says. "We just want to understand the situation."

"You started taking frequent private jet trips to see him, is that it?" Dad asks, his tone not as gentle as Mom's, but it's not harsh either.

"Yes."

"The girl whom I assumed made you smile after Danika was, in fact, Yulian," Mom says with a smile, and even though it's not a question, I nod.

Fuck. I can't believe they're finding out this way. There's no use denying it anyway, not with that type of evidence available.

And maybe…I'm too tired of keeping such a huge part of my life a secret and just need to let it out.

"How long has this been going on?" Dad asks.

"A few months, but in reality, it's been…four years, Dad." My voice wavers, the words burning on their way out. A part of me can't believe I'm actually saying this for the first time, and to Mom and Dad, no less.

"Four years?" he repeats.

I nod. "I had strange feelings toward him four years ago at that summer camp, and they evolved after he took a bullet for me, and I just…panicked about having those feelings toward a guy, buried it all in that cave we were trapped in, and went out with Danika instead. I told myself it would just go away with time once I got back my control and my structured life."

"It didn't?" Mom asks sympathetically.

I shake my head. "I never experienced those strange feelings with Danika—no fire in my veins, no shivers under my skin, no instinct to guard her with my life. But with Yulian, four years ago, as he was bleeding out because of me, it felt like my entire purpose was to keep him safe. I smothered it, told myself it was adrenaline, trauma bonding, anything but what it truly was. And with the feud between us and Chicago, plus the fact that we're both men, I convinced myself it was impossible. So I buried it deep and locked it down.

“But the second he returned, the grave split open, and everything I’d killed inside me came back alive. I fought it, I swear I did, Mom…Dad. I tried so hard to stay away, but I kept running back to him. Every time. I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” Dad asks.

“Because this will destroy your hard work after all the time, money, and energy you put in me. I was born to be a leader, and this ruins everything.”

Mom stands up and then sits on the armrest of my chair and wraps an arm around my shoulders. “First of all, you weren’t born to be a leader, you were born to be yourself and our son. Before anything else, you’re our son, Vonnie, all right? Second of all, there’s no such thing as destroying our hard work, because you didn’t do anything wrong. You can’t choose who you love. I just wish you’d told us earlier.”

“I couldn’t even admit it to myself, Mom. I still struggle with the weight of responsibility and my feelings, and I’m just *stuck.*”

“Unstuck yourself, then. Fuck responsibilities.” Dad stands up and sits on the other side of me.

“But…” I look up at him. “I can’t be a leader if I’m with a guy.”

“Says who?”

“The codes of the Bratva.”

“Fuck those. We’ve evolved. The old men will die eventually, so fuck them. And, son, I’m still around. You don’t have to worry about leadership for decades—or forever if you don’t feel like it.”

“No. I do want to be like you, Dad.”

“Then you will.” He strokes my hair. “Whether a man or a woman stands by your side is none of anyone’s business. I’ll kill anyone who thinks it is.”

I let out the breath I’ve been holding for…*years,* actually, slumping into my chair from the force of it.

“Powerful men can be gay, Vonnie.” Mom strokes my shoulder. “Your uncle Anton and my best friend, Maks, are a clear sign of that, remember? They’re the most powerful men I know, and they’re living their best life in Russia, of all places.”

Dad raises a brow. “I thought *I* was the most powerful man you know, Solnyshko.”

She hits his shoulder teasingly. “You know what I mean.”

Dad looks at her the way he always does—like just being near her is enough. I grew up watching them, two halves locked together, partners in everything. I wanted that.

I still do.

The difference is, I thought it had to be with a girl. But the only person I can picture by my side is Yulian.

Fuck.

Is he my partner the way Mom is to Dad? He's reckless, rough around the edges, and has nothing of Mom's diplomacy—and yet he's the only one I can see standing with me.

Maybe Gareth was right?

"Point is," Mom says. "Don't let your sexuality shackle you. Being straight or gay doesn't matter as long as you're happy."

"I'm not straight or gay. Bi, maybe. I don't know, actually. I prefer to be unlabeled. I just…care about Yulian more than I thought possible. It started…forget it. I don't want to bore you."

"Nonsense. You're our only son," Dad says. "Why would you bore us?"

Mom strokes my shoulder. "Go on. Tell us more about Yulian."

"I hated him in the beginning, you know. He was so loud and violent and had blood on his hands when he came to say hi on the first day. I had to remain calm and remind myself that I was at the camp because I had to be there, and that was all. But over the weeks we spent together, I became secretly jealous of how free he looked all the time. He didn't carry any of the responsibilities I thought I had to wear at all times."

"Is that what you thought all along?" Dad asks.

"Yeah, I guess. It's not your fault, I just…think too much."

"We definitely don't want you to feel like you owe us anything, son."

"I know." I let out a breath. "Anyway, as I watched Yulian back then, doing and saying what he wanted, laughing obnoxiously, and sleeping in class, I envied him a little. Maybe I hated him a bit for being so carefree. But then I saw his dad hit him, and I wanted to protect him. He laughed at it, you know, as his dad hit him. He covers everything with a laugh, not wanting to show the world any weakness. After that, the attack happened, and he took a bullet for me, even though he didn't have to. He didn't even think twice before saving me, Dad. I couldn't comprehend it at the time, but now, I realize it's because he's just like that. If he cares, even a little, he'll

give his life in return, and I truly respect that about him. Even if he's nothing like me and drives me crazy with all his impulsive actions."

Mom strokes my cheek. "Looks like you found yourself a keeper."

My shoulders fall. "He's mad at me because of how coldly I treated him at the gallery in front of you guys."

"Mm. That was cold, actually," Mom says.

"He was just fine," Dad counters.

"No, he wasn't." She gives him a look. "Listen, Vonnie, not everyone is as coolheaded and rational as you and your papa. Some people need emotional reactions and affirmation. And if that person is Yulian, who I believe wears his heart on his sleeve, he'd be hurt by your lack of emotional response. Don't be like your father was a long time ago, where you plot everything in your head, discarding feelings in the process. It'll only hurt the people who love you."

Dad caresses her face over my head. "I'm sorry, Solnyshko."

She smiles and kisses him on the cheek.

And now I miss Yulian, because he had this completely awestruck expression whenever I dropped a soft kiss to his cheek or forehead or hand, as if he was mesmerized by those simple gestures.

I want to erase his burden but also make sure his dad doesn't hurt him again.

Yaroslav sent that picture to Dad, so he knows about us now. Does that mean he went after Yulian or something?

My pulse slams as a vibration rattles through my pocket. I snatch out my phone, my breath catching—only for my hope to crash when I don't find Yulian's name, just an unknown number.

"I need to take this," I tell Mom and Dad, then stand up. "Hello."

"It's Cyrus."

My jaw grinds, but I remain still. "Can I help you?"

"Yaroslav knows about you. There was a picture of you two kissing in public like suicidal idiots."

"Is there a point you'll be reaching soon, Cyrus?"

"I want you to listen to me carefully, Vaughn. Yaroslav found out about Yulian's sexual preferences a long time ago. When he was sixteen, to be precise. Caught him kissing a guy in his room. Do you know what happened then?"

I swallow, and my parents watch me with frowns. "What?"

“He killed that guy right in front of Yulian, then proceeded to break both of Yulian’s legs. He told him it was better for him to become a cripple rather than sullying his name. He clearly warned that if Yulian didn’t stay away from—and I quote—‘that sick, disgusting, depraved, abnormal shit,’ he’d not only marry Alina off to the highest bidder, but he’d also castrate and kill Yulian because no son of his would be less than a man.”

My grip on the phone is so tight, I’m shocked it doesn’t snap in half. My mouth is parched, every swallow as rough as sandpaper. I always knew Yaroslav was a monster, but not this kind. Now I understand what Yulian meant when he told me, *“You’re privileged to have your mom and dad, Mishka.”* He was right. The difference between how my parents reacted to my sexuality and how his did is stark and terrifying.

“You know, I’ve always known you’d be trouble since that summer camp,” Cyrus continues. “Yaroslav has him now, to torture or kill him, and it’s all because of you. You abandoned him in that cave and went on to live your merry life with Danika while he suffered the consequences, and it’s happening again now.” He takes a sharp breath. “Fix it, Vaughn. Prove me wrong for once in your life, and go the extra mile for him.”

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32

YULIAN

Cold hits me with a sharp, merciless impact.

I gasp, sputtering as icy water drenches my face, soaking through my clothes, trickling down my spine and into my bones.

For a moment, I don't know where I am.

Who am I?

Then the fragments of memories slide in. First, the pain of Vaughn's rejection, then the kidnapping, and finally, the physical ache sets in.

My neck is stiff, my jaw throbs, and my wrists burn from the way they're bound behind me. The pressure around my ankles tells me they're tied down, too, forced against the legs of the chair I'm strapped to. It creaks beneath me whenever I breathe too hard. Or maybe that's me creaking. Difficult to tell with the overload of bullshit.

I lift my head slowly, every movement sparking discomfort in new places—my ribs, my shoulders, my cheekbone. There's something metallic in my mouth. I spit. It's blood. Probably mine. But might not be. I think I chewed on someone's skin when I was transported like a rabid dog.

Oh, right. I bit his fucking ear off as he was carrying me to the plane, and he screamed like a pig. But I didn't get to witness his reaction in full before someone knocked me out again.

Good times.

The room comes into slow focus.

I’ve been here before, in the basement. The stone walls are stained with mold and splashes of dried blood that haven’t been cleaned off. A single bulb swings above me, flickering like it’s debating whether or not to stay on, casting fractured shadows across a rusted table lined with tools that my dear papa uses on his enemies—and his sons. Yes, plural. My brothers face his wrath as well when they don’t meet his grandiose expectations.

And…there he is.

Yaroslav Dimitriev is leaning against the wall, his arms crossed, his sleeves rolled up. His face is calm, as if this is just another business meeting.

He’s watching me like he’s waiting for something. Like *this* is the moment he’s been anticipating.

“Finally awake,” he says, his voice even. Almost casual.

My tongue feels like sandpaper, but I manage to smirk. It cracks my lower lip open, and warm blood trickles into my mouth. “Didn’t realize we were having father-son bonding time. Question. Did you bring cards?”

He doesn’t laugh. He never does. Not even when I was young. He’s never once shown me a soft side, or that he cares about me even a little.

My father picks up a pair of brown leather gloves and slides them on like he’s getting ready for a procedure.

There’s shuffling of feet outside, my father’s men waiting as backup, probably also scared I’ll chew the rest of their ears—and noses—off. I’ve done it before and will do it again in a heartbeat, including but not limited to, fighting the guards I know he likes the most, because they’re an extension of him.

My father grabs a tool out of the box, really large scissors, and I doubt it’s because he wants to cut my bindings.

“What’s the reason for the sudden kidnapping?” I joke as he walks toward me. “What happened to a phone call to summon me home?”

He pulls out his phone, then thrusts it in my face. I blink once so the blurry image gets clearer, and my chest squeezes because it’s a picture of me kissing Vaughn, hungrily, like a goddam madman, one hand around his throat and the other in his hair while he has a palm to my chest.

The screen goes black, shoving me back to the present and the bitter reality that my father has a picture of Vaughn and me.

He pockets his phone, his muscles bulging. My father has always taken care of his appearance, part of his “not a weak man” mantra.

“What did I say, Yulian?” He speaks slowly but with simmering rage.

“About? You say a lot of things about a lot of shit. You’d have to specify—”

His punch whips my head sideways, copper flooding my tongue. The next strike comes harder, a boot slamming into my chest, and the chair buckles beneath me, toppling, and I hit the ground with it.

“I told you I’d kill you if you did that disgusting business again, you useless bastard.”

“It’s not disgusting,” I murmur, blood dripping down either side of my mouth.

He grabs my collar with one hand, pulling me all the way up, his manic eyes staring down at me. “The fuck you just say?”

“Me liking another guy is *not* disgusting.” I glare at him. “Maybe you’re the disgusting one for thinking that.”

He snarls. “I bet you bend over like a pussy to be fucked by another man. What a fucking weakling.”

“What I do with my dick does not make me a weakling!” I yell, spit and blood splashing his face. “Beating your son for as long as he can remember, spawning illegitimate children and forcing them into the army, then proceeding to abuse them, and neglecting your terminally ill wife while dipping your dick into all available holes is what makes you a weak man, Dad!”

His fist slams into me again, followed by a brutal kick that topples me sideways. “I should’ve killed you years ago, you useless piece of shit. You should’ve gone with your worthless mother.”

I growl deep in my throat as I cough up a mouthful of blood and struggle against the binds. “My mother was not worthless.”

“Sure was for spawning a faggot like you.” His boot grinds into my chest, the pressure so sharp, I swear a rib snaps.

“Your whole life has been useless, Yulian, but I’ve been willing to give you chances. Seems I spoiled you for too long, but I can’t have you being a deranged, sick motherfucker who’s less than a man. I told you, didn’t I? No son of mine will be a cocksucker. Since breaking your legs didn’t fix you, I’ll break your whole fucking body this time.”

He slams his boot down again, a crack snapping through the air. Pain floods my chest, nausea surges up, and a raw, piercing roar tears from me.

The room spins, my vision fractures, and in the haze, I see my father's outline. He'll kill me, whether he means to or not.

And all I can think of is Alina.

And the last time I saw Vaughn.

If I'd known this would happen, I wouldn't have thrown a fit and demanded he must go all in. I don't like that the last memory he has of me is anger and ultimatums.

If I'd known this would happen, I would've kissed him one last time.

But then again, Vaughn and I always came from different worlds. They might have collided a few times, but all that's come out of it is pain.

FOUR YEARS AGO

SO YES, I TOTALLY SHOULDN'T BE HERE.

In New York City, hundreds of miles away from home and carrying a fake ID that Cy begrudgingly gave me.

I touch my abs, wincing as pain explodes where my injury is. It's been a week since I woke up in the hospital to my mom looking like a skeleton and me not being in the cave.

And that's fine, truly.

Or was, for a while, until that urge to see Vaughn one more time returned.

Just once.

For like ten minutes.

I know it's one of those reckless choices Dad will punish me for, Mom will ache over, and Alina will lose sleep about—but I *couldn't* stay away.

Not after the cave.

I stole a kiss from him, and I think he might have stolen my heart in return.

Dramatic, I know. I blame the teenage hormones. This is probably another crush, like all the crushes I've had.

But who am I kidding? It's not.

Vaughn is obviously not a girl, and this is new territory for me, but that doesn't stop me from jumping out of my skin with excitement at the

prospect of seeing him again.

And I don't know why I just can't forget the feeling of his lips against mine, or the way he frowns, or how his muscles looked when he worked out, or how they felt around me when he hugged me from behind.

All of it is etched deep in my soul.

Everything has been playing in my head nonstop over the past week, invading my dreams and my waking moments.

What did I do? Ran away from home, of course.

I mean, not really, as I plan to go back, but I didn't tell anyone about my trip. Dad would beat the shit out of me if he knew I went to New York after he announced war with Vaughn's dad, and Mom and Alina would be so worried. They've been fawning over me, but Mom is too frail and kind of needs someone to look after her instead.

So I sneaked out of the house, grabbed a taxi, and took a commercial flight. Maybe it's due to flying, but I don't feel so good, despite the multiple painkillers I pumped myself full of.

Nausea rises to my throat, and I stop to catch my breath as pain racks my body.

It's okay. I'll be fine. Dad always says if I stay strong enough through pain, it'll eventually go away.

Which is obviously ridiculous because the pain is *not* going away. If anything, it's getting sharper and more unbearable.

Goddamn it.

With a deep breath, I stop by the parking lot of Vaughn's school and pull out the bottle of acetaminophen from my denim jacket and swallow two dry. They better kick in fast, because Vaughn can't see me as a weakling.

Though he didn't look down on me when I was weak like Dad does. If anything, he took care of me in the cave. So maybe he'll do it again?

I smile through the pain, but it soon drops when I recall that he left me there.

Abandon is the word Dad used. *He abandoned you in the cave and saved himself while you were being an idiot by getting shot.*

No.

I lean against one of the cars to catch my breath. I saw how Vaughn was shaking while suturing my wound, heard the panic in his voice as he tried to stay strong while slapping my face and begging me not to fall asleep.

Someone like that wouldn't just *abandon* me.

It’s just not like him.

I watch students drift through the parking lot toward their sleek German cars. My school is just as polished, but there’s something easier in the air here—lighter than the tension that hangs in Chicago. Or maybe that tension is mine, a shadow that follows me because of who my father is.

It’s still August, but apparently, they do some form of a summer class or orientation or something that Vaughn joined last minute according to Cy. Which makes sense. Now that the camp is no more, Vaughn would still want to advance academically during the summer. He’s too studious for his own good.

Anyway, Cy was the one who found this school for me and even got me a visitor’s entrance badge. No clue how he does it, and I don’t ask. But in typical Cy fashion, he did demand to know the reason I want to be here.

He called me an idiot for even liking someone like Vaughn, who’d never like me back, and said that I’d only get hurt. But Cy is the idiot, because he wasn’t in that cave with Vaughn—

My lips curl in a grin when I spot him walking toward me, dressed in delicious-looking black pants and a shirt. Okay, fine, they’re just black clothes, but seriously, he wears them so well, looking all serious and grumpy and shit.

Not even kidding, but my heart lights the fuck up upon seeing him, and the pain that’s been pulsing into my abs recedes to the background.

There are so many things I’ve wanted to ask him and talk to him about. Like what happened between falling asleep, hugging, and waking up in Chicago, or why he didn’t check on me—though he doesn’t have my number, which can be fixed.

I want to thank him for taking care of me and just…maybe meet him sometime, if he can. It doesn’t have to be much, and I won’t push for anything out of his comfort zone since he’s straight.

My grin widens at the thought of introducing him to other possibilities. Maybe, like me, he’s only straight because he hasn’t tried anything else.

At any rate, I need something more. He’s like a maddening itch I can’t seem to reach.

I’m about to come out from behind the car when a girl rushes toward him and wraps her arm around his waist.

My smile drops instantly.

Who the fuck is that brunette, and how can I get rid of her?

She looks up at him, saying something I can't hear, and he smiles. My heart kind of crumbles, releasing this stupid sound that makes it hurt more than my gunshot wound.

Vaughn rarely smiles, if ever, so why is he smiling at that girl?

Then I recall that he has a crush on this one girl whom he wants to be his first, and my heart simply shatters, giving up on me and spilling out on the ground.

So this is his crush? A beautiful, put-together girl who he can't stop smiling at?

She gets on her tiptoes and kisses him.

Buzzing explodes in my ears as I watch her kiss the lips I claimed a week ago. Okay, claim is too strong a word. I brushed my mouth against his, and that's *nothing* compared to the kiss I'm currently watching in full HD.

The pain becomes so lethal, I drop against a car to catch my breath.

I know I tend to hope a lot, but I shouldn't have, because the reality is that Vaughn is straight. He's only ever been *straight* and with girls.

My phone vibrates and I pull it out of my pocket, distracted.

Cyrus.

Fuck. He'll just say, "I told you so."

I decline the call, my gaze fixed on Vaughn kissing the girl. She's lost in it, her eyes shut as she presses closer. His hand knots in her hair, but his own eyes are heavy-lidded—not fully closed, just…distant.

Or maybe that's what I hope.

My phone vibrates again, and I'm about to ignore it, but it's a text.

CYRUS

Come back, Yulian. Your mom passed away, and Alina's been in an accident.

My world crashes down around me as I read the text, then stare at Vaughn kissing his girl.

All my feelings of fondness shatter and transform into something more potent, deep, and dangerous.

My obsession with Vaughn has led me to more pain than I can afford, and I hate him for it.

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33

VAUGHN

Dad said he won’t be sending men to the Dimitriev estate in Chicago.

He clearly stated that he won’t allow me to start a war to save Yulian.

But *I am* starting that war. I don’t care how many wars I have to take part in just to get Yulian out of his father’s claws.

But Dad, as the Pakhan, told me that our resources won’t be used for war so as not to risk countless deaths on both sides.

Instead, he offered to go himself on a covert rescue mission. Mom said she’s going, too, despite my and Dad’s objections.

“Nonsense, you need a sniper.” She stroked Dad’s stubble. “I’m the best, remember?”

Dad grumbled some more, not wanting her in the middle of this, but then conceded, mostly because he didn’t have a choice.

So here we are, my parents and I, along with two enforcers who were apparently in the same unit as my parents in their army days, plus Viktor—Dad’s right hand and my aunt’s husband.

Despite our intel, accessing the Dimitriev mansion is impossible without raising some alarms. If we’re discovered, Yaroslav will have us killed in a heartbeat, which is why Cyrus came along.

He helped us with access, freezing security measures and allowing us to infiltrate the mansion unnoticed.

My dad asked if I could trust Cyrus with our lives—including Mom's, who's keeping guard outside. The truth is, I can't. Cyrus is a snake, his loyalties slippery at best. His ties to the Russian mafia are murky, even if he did help the Chicago Bratva expand. Every move he makes feels too smooth and calculated. And I can't stand that he's been Yulian's shadow for four years, filling the space that should've been mine.

Yes, my irrational jealousy doesn't help in making me warm up to the guy.

But there's one thing I trust Cyrus with—his friendship with Yulian. He's spent years protecting and shielding him from Yaroslav—no, I don't like it, I should've been the one to do that—spending exponential time and resources to make sure he doesn't end up killed.

Yulian said he's Cyrus's only friend. When everyone shunned and mocked and bullied Cyrus while growing up, Yulian was the only one who understood him.

So maybe that's why I took my chances. Or due to the fact that I never see Cyrus with anyone but Yulian.

The reality is, even if Cyrus hates me, doesn't approve of me, thinks I'm bad news for Yulian, he'd still want to rescue him.

So no, I don't particularly trust Cyrus, but I trust his friendship with Yulian.

Even with the access he gave us and the cameras looping, we still have to take out any threat without drawing security's attention.

I glance at Dad moving ahead, his gun raised, while Uncle Viktor and the others cover our backs. I signal toward the stairs, and Dad takes the lead.

Cyrus is positive Yaroslav would keep Yulian underground. My jaw tightens at the thought of what he might have done.

But I force myself to breathe, to focus. First, I get Yulian out. Then I'll think about Yaroslav.

A man shows up at the bottom of the stairs. He jumps back, his gun half drawn, but I shoot him in the head before he can blink.

My dad gives me a look of pride as we continue down the dimly lit hallway.

I tend to concentrate better when under stress or duress, which is why I'm hyperaware of the slightest movements.

Several men appear in the hallway, blocking the way to the room at the end of it—the one where Cyrus said Yulian would most likely be.

At first, the men don't notice us as they smoke and talk in Russian.

"Go." Dad shoves me. "I'll have your back."

I give a curt nod and then shoot my way through, injuring or killing anyone who blocks my way. I don't give a fuck about anyone other than Yulian right now.

Dad and Viktor cover for me as I shoot the metal lock off the cell and shove the door ajar, my gun raised. If I see Yaroslav doing anything to Yulian, I'll kill him right here and now.

The door groans open on rusted hinges as my senses go on high alert.

The scent of blood hits me first—a thick, metallic punch to the throat that coats my tongue and makes my hair stand on end.

My lips part when I see him.

Yulian.

He's crumpled on the stone floor, little more than a shadow slumped against the far wall. A chair lies toppled nearby, restraints scattered. His shirt hangs in tatters—ripped down the back, shredded across the front, dark with blood dried in patches and still wet in streaks.

Angry bruises mar the pale stretch of his ribs, one so dark and bloated, it's probably broken. Maybe more than one.

His face is so swollen and bloodied, one eye sealed shut, his lips split and crusted in red.

I almost don't recognize him.

It's *not* him.

My Yulian is chaos wrapped in flesh, a force of nature with thunder in his voice, fire in his veins, and an untamed surge of energy.

He can't possibly be like…like *this*.

I blink twice, but the scene doesn't disappear. I rush toward him with my heart in my throat.

The gun slips from my hand as my knees hit the floor, hard. I don't feel the impact. I *can't* feel anything but him.

"Yulian," I rasp, my voice choked. "Fuck. Yuli—"

I touch his face gently with trembling fingers, terrified he'll shatter in my palm. He doesn't move. His skin is cold. Too cold. I press my ear to his mouth, stilling everything inside me.

For a few seconds, I don’t breathe, holding it in, ignoring the chaos outside as I listen.

What if Yaroslav killed him? Why wasn’t I here earlier?

Why—

One unsteady breath fills my ear, then another.

It’s shallow and fragile, but it’s there.

He’s *alive*.

A sound tears from my throat. I don’t know what it is—relief, rage, grief—maybe all three. My lips are trembling as I gather him in my arms as carefully as I can. He lets out a barely audible moan, his head lolling against my shoulder. His blood seeps through my shirt, feeling hot and sticky.

But that means he’s here. He’s alive.

A crushing feeling of guilt and anguish tears through my skin. I shouldn’t have let him go last night. If I hadn’t, if I hadn’t been too stuck in my own head to listen to him, I wouldn’t be collecting his barely alive body.

“I’m sorry, baby,” I whisper against his hair, stroking it softly because he always loves it when I do that. “Stay with me, all right? I’ll get you out of here.”

I shift, hoisting him onto my back and grabbing his wrists. He’s heavier than usual, almost dead weight. My spine screams as I rise, but I don’t care. I’d carry the world if it meant getting him out of this place.

“I’ve got you,” I murmur even though he doesn’t hear me. “I’ll always get you.”

WE MANAGED TO ESCAPE WITHOUT SUSTAINING ANY INJURIES.

Then I flew Yulian all the way to Russia to my uncles’ private estate in Ust-Koksa, located deep in the Altai Mountains of Southern Siberia.

Keeping him in the States was simply not safe, neither for him nor for my parents. Taking him to New York was out of the question, as that’s where Yaroslav would look first. Russia, however, is ironically safer.

Especially at my uncles’ residence that’s tucked away from watchful eyes and isn’t marked on any map, swallowed entirely by pine forests with mountain air sharp enough to cut through bone.

Guess Yulian and I have come full circle—back to a mountain.

I smile as I hold Yulian's hand while he sleeps in the room my uncles provided for him.

It's been two days since we came here, and he still hasn't woken up.

Uncle Anton's private doctor said Yulian is fine, considering everything.

According to him and the doctor we had on board on the private jet, Yulian sustained serious trauma. Two fractured ribs—one clean, one hairline—along with severe bruising along the chest wall. They've stabilized the ribs, but he'll need to avoid any hard impact or strain for at least four to six weeks.

There are shallow lacerations across his back and torso, none deep enough to damage internal organs, but a few required sutures. He's got a mild concussion, a split lip, one swollen-shut eye, and dehydration from blood loss. His vitals are stable. They've rehydrated him and put him on antibiotics, saying that he'll recover from the physical damage with time and rest.

But what about the mental damage?

How about dealing with the reality that his own dad beat him half to death just because he didn't approve of his sexual preferences?

Why do we live in a world where that's a *thing*?

"I'm sorry I was late." I bring his hand to my face, laying his palm flat against my cheek. "And I don't mean just two days ago, but all of it, baby. I'm sorry it took me four years to save you from that man."

I should've taken him away after I saw him beating him up that first time. When I was kicked out of the hospital, I shouldn't have left alone.

Like now, I should've just kidnapped him and hid him away from the world.

Maybe then I wouldn't have felt as if my heart was being ripped out of my chest at seeing him so broken.

And in pain.

Maybe we would've been together if I weren't such a coward who watched from afar and kept myself squarely in denial.

If I didn't put distance when I should've gotten close. When I didn't reply to his videos even though I saved them to my phone and watched them religiously.

If I were just…there for him like he's always been there for me.

He stirs and I sit up straighter as his eyes blink open, unfocused, lost. His left blue eye is not as swollen now, but the bruise around it is dark blue, almost black.

“Yulian?” I stroke his hair gently. “Can you hear me?”

He blinks a few times and lies motionless for a few seconds, as if he’s not sure what’s going on. Is the concussion that bad—

He reaches a hand toward me, but the moment he touches my cheek, his good eye widens, and he drops his hand back down.

I don’t like it.

He usually won’t stop touching me, so why does he seem like he was caught making a mistake?

He rises up all of a sudden and then groans loudly, probably hurting his ribs, and I grab his shoulders and help him back down, gently but firmly. “Stay still, you have broken ribs and other injuries.”

I reach out to the nightstand and give him a glass of water, figuring he’s parched. He just keeps watching me as if I’m a ghost, so I hold the glass to his lips. “You have to drink some water.”

He does so mechanically, taking all the water I’m giving him until the glass is empty.

A droplet of it trickles down the corner of his lip, and I wipe it, my thumb lingering on his skin longer than needed.

Fuck, I missed him. Missed touching him. Being with him.

I can’t believe I almost lost him.

Yulian pulls away, forcing me to drop my hand, and my chest aches. That’s the first time he’s ever recoiled from my touch.

And it hurts more than I’d like to admit.

Pretending he didn’t just cut me in two, I sit beside him on the edge of the bed, holding the empty glass tight as I speak coolly. “How are you feeling?”

“Where am I?” he asks, his voice craggy and huskier than usual as he stares out the window.

It’s nighttime, so only a few garden lights are visible through the large baroque-style windows—definitely the work of Uncle Tosha’s sophisticated taste, as Uncle Maks is just along for the ride.

“Russia,” I say.

“Russia?”

“Ust-Koksa, to be precise. We’re staying with my uncles at their countryside estate.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you bring me to Russia?”

“Because it’s safer,” I say matter-of-factly.

“I need to go back.” He starts to move, groaning slightly.

“You’re not going anywhere until you’re better, Yulian.” I push him back firmly but without force. “You can probably barely breathe, let alone move.”

He pants, proving my point, a grimace painting his handsome features as beads of sweat appear at his temples. “You don’t understand. I have to get back to Alya. With me gone, he’ll hurt her…”

“She’s with Cyrus,” I say, still holding him down so he doesn’t do anything stupid. “Cyrus took her with him before I went to rescue you so that we could avoid Yaroslav using her against you. She’s safe, and you can call her and Cyrus to make sure. Maybe later, once you’ve recovered, so you don’t sound so out of breath and worry her.”

His shoulders relax, but his breathing is still too choppy, probably because of the pain. So I pass him one of his prescribed painkillers and help him with another glass of water.

This time, he takes the glass from my hand and drinks on his own.

Damn. His little gestures of rejection are slashing me open one cut at a time.

Death by a thousand cuts.

“You saved me?” he asks, watching me peculiarly.

I set the glass on the table. “I can’t do that?”

“You can, just not sure why you would.” He lifts his shoulder in a casual shrug, then coughs and winces.

“What do you mean why I would? Of course I’d save you, Yulian. You think I’d sit back and watch you be beaten to death by your piece-of-shit dad?”

“Yeah, because you were never really all in with me, so I’m surprised you went to these lengths, that’s all.”

My chest stutters. Fuck. He’s still hurt about that last meeting.

Maybe he’s been mad for a while.

“Yulian—”

“I still want to go back and be with Alya and Cy.”

“I said. You’re not going anywhere until you’re better.”

He raises a brow. “Are you kidnapping me right now?”

“Call it whatever you want.”

He releases a breath, then groans and closes his eyes. The fact that he’s in so much pain and I can’t do anything to lessen it makes me believe I’m useless.

I feel like I can’t even touch him for fear that he’ll pull away again. I don’t think I could handle that rejection anymore.

Yulian’s eyes meet mine, and there’s no color there, as if he’s just… given up. “You should let me leave. I’ll only bring disaster to you and your uncles.”

“No.”

“Vaughn…”

“Yulian,” I mimic him, and he just grunts, but I’m not sure if it’s in frustration or pain.

“Dad won’t let me go,” he whispers softly, running a hand over his face, then wincing and dropping it. “He’ll track me down eventually. He might beat me the hell up and drive me to death’s door, but he won’t kill me. He’s spent too much time, money, and energy on making me his heir, and giving up now would only mean he’s admitting defeat, which he never will. So… just let me go back now before you or your family are any further involved.”

“Go back to what? To be nearly killed?” My voice rises slightly. “I’ll *never* allow that, Yulian, do you hear me? So what if he tracks you down? He’ll never be able to find this place. It’s not on the map, and even if he does, I’ll kill him before he touches you again.”

His lips part as he watches me, unblinking, and then he purses his lips. “If you kill him, you’ll start a war between Chicago and New York. Don’t do that.”

“There will be no war if you become the de facto leader.” I smile. “You’ll be the one to decide everything.”

“They don’t respect me enough to let me lead. And I’m not sure I want that anyway. At least, not at this point.” He watches me silently for a long time. It’s disconcerting.

“What?”

“You said we were temporary and that we wouldn’t last, so why…” He swallows, then blows out a charged breath. “Why go through all the trouble to save me and bring me here?”

“Because I lied.” I take his hand in mine. “To myself as well as to you. Truth is, you were never temporary.”

His hand twitches in mine, and I hold it tighter, scared he’ll pull it away.

“But you put distance between us, Vaughn, doing everything under the sun to keep me at arm’s length. Every time I tried to get closer, you just slipped through my fingers like sand.”

“I was…scared.”

“Scared of what? Being found out? Well, it happened anyway, and I’m still alive.”

“No. I mean, yes, there’s that, too, but mostly, I was scared of the strength of my feelings for you.” I squeeze his hand, holding it in both of mine softly, reverently. “You make me a different person, someone I don’t recognize sometimes.”

“Is that so bad?” The pain in his words cuts me open.

“No, it’s actually the person I want to be. You…make me forget about everything, and I crave that feeling of being free whenever I’m with you.”

“But?”

“There’s no but.”

“Are you sure?” He eyes me suspiciously. “There’s always a but with you, Vaughn.”

I purse my lips, not liking how he keeps calling me by my name. “Not this time.”

“Then another time?”

“Why do you keep trying to find fault in everything I say or do?”

“Because I believed the illusion before, whether four years ago or during recent months, but I still ended up getting hurt.”

“Four years ago?”

He pulls his hand from mine, using my moment of bewilderment to slip free. “You left me to die in that cave, remember?”

“No, I didn’t. I would’ve *never* done that.” I frown. “Wait. Is that what you think happened?”

He stares out the window, and I grab his jaw, stroking the stubble growing there as I turn him to face me. “Do you believe I ever would have left you after you took a *bullet* for me?”

“But you did.”

“No.” I run a hand through my hair. “I thought I’d take this with me to the grave, but it seems you need to know what truly happened, Yulian.”

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34

VAUGHN

FOUR YEARS AGO

I ran away from home.

I know. Me? Running away from home? It’s a blasphemy I never expected to take part in.

And yet that’s exactly what I did.

Mostly because I doubted my parents would ever let me leave their sight after everything that happened at the camp.

I wasn’t hurt, not really—just a few lacerations from when I slid down a hill with Yulian unconscious on my shoulder yesterday morning. At the time, the pain didn’t register. The need to get him out alive burned through everything, numbing me to the rest.

All my focus narrowed to a single purpose—getting him to safety.

And I did.

After what felt like an endless trek down the mountain, my father’s men finally found us—they’d been searching all night. Not long after, Yulian’s people arrived and took his limp body from my arms.

I was trembling, though not from exhaustion, lack of sleep, or even the crushing stress. It was something deeper, rawer, and had everything to do with the guy in my arms.

When they tried to pull him away, I clung to him tighter, letting go only because he needed help. My fingers grazed his cold ones, and I felt the same wild urge I’d had last night in the cave—to warm him, to keep him alive.

With my body wrapped around his and his frame cocooned in my embrace.

But he was gone in an instant, and I refuse to let that be the last time I see him.

For the first time, I feel like a real teenager—defying my parents' orders to stay home and impulsively running off to Chicago. I've never even been to Chicago, and it took a fake ID just to get on the plane.

The escape from home was messy. Lidya said she'll cover for me and that she has my back, but despite her enthusiasm, there's only so much she can do once my parents realize I'm gone.

I'll think about the consequences later. The most important thing is that I made it.

My fingers are clammy around the bullet that I've been holding in my fist during the whole trip. It's probably weird that I kept the bullet I removed from inside Yulian, but it gave me peace of mind, in a sense. It reminded me that I saved him, that he's alive.

The bullet drags me back to the cave every time I touch it. The cold, the fear, the edge of death—but also him. Us. We had each other through it all.

It reminds me he took a bullet for me, and the least I can do is make sure he's recovering well.

That's what I told myself, the excuse I clung to when I gave in to the pull and came to Chicago.

As expected, hospital security is ironclad. No surprise given Yulian's father's status. I slip into the staff changing room, and pull on a doctor's coat, mask, and glasses to disguise myself. My build and height help, but appearance isn't everything. It's the walk and the way I carry myself, and I keep my head high as I stride toward Yulian's room.

Some guards stationed in front of the door watch me, but I continue putting on the facade as I slip into the room and close the door behind me.

I release a sigh, but it catches in the back of my throat when my eyes zero in on Yulian.

The hospital room is dim, wrapped in a sterile hush broken only by the steady pulse of the heart monitor as shadows from the blinds cut across the floor. I don't know what I expected—maybe Yulian awake, cracking jokes, swathed in bandages. Blood, wires, life. Instead, he's just…still.

It's unlike him.

That’s why I was screaming at him to wake up when morning came and he was motionless, breathing with effort. My heart cracked in my chest when he wouldn’t open his eyes. That’s why I carried him on my shoulder and took the dangerous trip down. I contemplated leaving him in the cave as I went to scout around, but his pulse was weak, and I just had to take him with me.

Risky, yes, and we could’ve both died if the attackers were still lurking around, but I had no other choice.

And to see him like this now sends a thump in my chest.

The charts at the foot of the bed show records from two days prior. He hasn’t woken up yet, but the notes say his vitals are stable and he should gain consciousness any time now.

I remove the mask as I approach him, my heartbeat thumping louder with every step I take.

Yulian lies motionless, swallowed by white sheets, his skin nearly blending into them—more pale than I’ve ever seen him.

The color’s gone from his lips, and a fresh bruise blooms across one cheek, half hidden by the chaos of dark hair spilled over the pillow. His lashes are long, feathery, casting soft shadows onto sharp cheekbones. Even now, he looks…pretty. Not like a girl. Not delicate. Just…*lethally* striking in a strange way that knots something deep in my stomach.

My knees bend of their own accord, landing me at his side. The bed dips beneath my weight, and every inch of me sparks to life.

I sit there for a moment, trying to understand why my throat feels tight. This should feel like visiting a classmate or a friend, but it’s more…intense.

Confusing.

More akin to a penance.

His thick, long fingers lie limp on the bed.

I stare at them.

For one second, ten, twenty…

I stare long enough that the silence starts to claw at my ribs.

Then I reach out.

I don’t know why I do it. I don’t even realize I’m doing it until my fingers brush his—slowly, uncertainly—before closing around his hand.

He’s warm.

That’s the first thing that startles me. The warmth. The proof that his fingers aren’t cold anymore, and he’s alive.

But then the second thing hits me.

I don't want to let go.

The realization crashes through me like a sucker punch to the ribs. My breath shudders and a tingle rushes down my spine.

I tighten my grip instinctively, and something sharp coils in my gut, expanding through my chest and flowing into my blood.

What the hell are these emotions?

I'm not supposed to feel this. Like I'm about to burst out of my skin just at the sensation of his hand in mine.

No. This isn't right.

Especially not with *him*.

My heart's hammering, though, too loud in the quiet, and completely uncaring about my logical thoughts.

I try to pull my hand back, but it won't obey. And I don't know if it's because I'm scared to let him go or because something in me has already decided I can't.

I *won't*.

So I sit there as the monitor beeps, holding his hand like a coward, hoping he doesn't wake up, *terrified* he might.

"What the hell have you done to me, Yulian?" I whisper, squeezing his hand tighter.

That's when I realize my lips are tingling. Not in an abstract, nervous way, no. It's a real, physical sense that makes my skin tingle and burn all at once.

A flood of memories bulldozes through me despite my resolve to bury it all.

The cave.

The silence.

The trembling breaths.

His mouth on mine.

I was about to fall asleep after wrapping my arms around him to stay warm like he said. I experienced a sort of discomfort as I did it, feeling his muscles beneath mine and being flooded by his scent.

Now that I'm holding his hand, I realize that wasn't discomfort but something more.

A curse.

A hunger.

A need for *something.*

In the cave, however, I tried to quiet those thoughts as I drifted off, but I was wide awake the second I felt the press of lips against mine.

I still remember it all. The brush of skin against skin.

The shattering breaths.

The heat.

The *hesitation*.

The kiss was so soft, I thought I'd imagined it, but the thud in my chest had been so violent, I was sure he could feel it reverberate through me and crash against his back. I didn't open my eyes. I couldn't. I didn't know how to react, or, worse, what face to wear.

But now…

Now, I'm staring at his mouth.

At the faint swell of his bottom lip and the softness, despite losing some color.

My own lips part without permission. My throat's gone dry, and yet my tongue feels thick and heavy, the air cloying in my lungs.

What am I doing?

This isn't the same kind of desire I've felt before, and it's scaring the shit out of me.

I'm straight. I've never looked at a guy and felt like…*this*. On edge, slightly nervous, crippled with fear and desire and recklessness.

Not to mention, I've only ever kissed and fooled around with girls, and so has he, considering all our sex and virginity talk that I, for some reason, disliked. I didn't particularly enjoy listening to him recount his sexcapades, which is odd because I listen to Niko and the others talk about that all the time.

His hand in mine is obviously not a girl's, thicker and masculine with protruding veins on the back, and yet it feels like the warmest, most beautiful hand I've ever held.

Not sure if it's because our hands are about the same size, or that I appreciate the feel of hard ridges, but I definitely like it a lot more than anyone else's.

And I *shouldn't.*

I think of Danika—her soft voice and pretty smile. But any flutter of emotion I feel toward her pales in comparison to the goddamn *tornado* roaring through me now.

It’s not logical or safe.

But it’s undeniably *real*.

And I want to test something, to know whether that thud in my chest when he kissed me was a fluke.

I lean forward, terrified and impulsive in equal measure, and brush my mouth over his.

One second.

Two.

No thud this time. No. Because everything just *stops*.

But it’s merely the calm before the storm.

Soon after, an explosion starts at the center of my chest, sharp and consuming and wrong but *so right* that I never want it to end.

My entire body reacts to the mere touch of our lips. My stomach flips, my chest tightens, and my heart—*fuck*, my heart nearly dislodges itself trying to reach him. Every nerve sparks. My mouth waters for more.

More.

More.

It’s *only* his mouth. *Only* a kiss, but it doesn’t feel like it. No.

I’ve kissed before, but it’s never been soul-crushing like this—and he’s not even kissing me back.

This kiss is different. It feels like everything I’ve ever wanted yet never allowed myself to want.

My eyes are burning, and I don’t know if it’s from confusion or adrenaline or the sheer panic at realizing that I like this.

That I *need* it again.

That I should have *more*.

I press my mouth deeper to his, nervous but hungry, my tongue tracing his bottom lip in a shaky sweep. My whole body quakes against his, my heart hammering so violently, it feels as if it might give out under the weight of wanting him.

More.

I need more—

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” A sharp voice slices through the silence like a scalpel.

I jerk away, my heart in my throat, my lips still tingling. The world that I forgot existed crashes back in as I stare at the owner of the voice.

A woman stands frozen against the closed door, her eyes wide with horror, her hand clutching her chest as if I've gutted her. A scarf wraps her head entirely, her face has drained to a ghostly white, and her frame is so thin, I fear she'll collapse.

And I just stare as if I've been caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

Which I have.

I *think.*

"Step away from him," she orders, and I realize I'm still perched over Yulian, holding his hand.

Fuck. I release him as gently as possible and stand, swaying slightly.

My throat constricts while I step back hesitantly.

The woman rushes to Yulian's side and falls in a heap on the bed, stroking his face lovingly.

Now that I'm not freaking the fuck out, I notice that she's trembling, her skin as pale as Yulian's, the kind that's sickly and off. Her cheekbones are protruding, barely covered by any flesh.

And yet I can see the resemblance, the brown eyes identical to Yulian's right one and the striking similarities. She must be his mother.

The one he said his mission is to protect.

Her gaze falls on me, and she sits taller, almost as if she can shield Yulian from me, her expression hard, even though her hand is shaking. "Who are you?"

"My name is Vaughn. Vaughn Morozov. I was at the summer camp with Yulian, and he saved my life, so I wanted to check on him and…" I trail off, rubbing a hand over my nape, not knowing what to say. She already looks like she hates me, and continuing to remind her that her son is in this state because he took a bullet for me will only make it worse.

"And what?" she asks. "You decided to come here and ruin his life as a thank-you? Get him killed?"

"No, that's not—"

"That's exactly what would've happened if it were his father who'd walked through that door instead of me." Her lips tremble, and I feel a sense of shame I've never experienced before.

What the hell am I doing?

I saw Yaroslav beat Yulian to shit. I know that if he were the one who saw us, an actual war might break out. Both he and Dad think the other did

it, and Yaroslav is probably even more pissed off because his son's life was barely saved.

So just my existence in Chicago could be the spark to ruin everything. My parents' legacy. Yulian's life.

And for what?

A *selfish* feeling?

I let my hand fall lifeless to my side and whisper, "I'm sorry."

"If you're sorry, please leave and never get in contact with my son again." She tries to sound firm, but her eyes are pleading with me. "You're both still young, still haven't experienced the world. Whatever happened when you were surviving, was just that—desperate measures for a desperate situation. It means nothing in the real world. I heard you're smart, so surely, you understand that?"

I nod, even though a ball has lodged itself at the back of my throat, making it hard to breathe.

"Yulik has always been reckless and impulsive." She strokes his hair, smiling softly. "Even when he was inside me, he was kicking all the time, couldn't wait to get out. He's an affectionate boy who wears his heart on his sleeve and goes all in when he cares, but that gets him in trouble with his dad, and it worries me to no end. You know…"

She looks at me, her eyes bright with an unnatural shine. "When he called me while he was at the camp, he wouldn't stop talking about you. Vaughn this and Vaughn that. He asked me if he was more like you, would his dad stop hating and hitting him, or would he still find fault in him anyway?"

My heart squeezes as my hands ball into fists. I hate Yaroslav with everything in me.

"I told him he's perfect the way he is, because he is to me. Everything that's happened in my life has been worth it because I've had him and Alina." She stares at me, the weight of her eyes sharp. "And I won't allow him to be hurt more than he already is."

"I don't want to hurt him either."

"You will by just existing near him." She lets out a sigh. "I'm not an idiot. I know he has some form of crush on you. He's never spoken about anyone the way he spoke about you."

My lips tremble and I purse them shut, because for another impulsive heartbeat, I contemplate begging her to let me be with him, even if just for

one more moment.

“But you know that’s impossible, right? You can’t be together. I don’t know about your side, but here, he’ll be killed for being with a man. Do you want him dead, Vaughn?”

My gaze strays to him, to his peaceful expression and the bruises, and I remember the protectiveness I felt when I watched his dad beating him up.

I guess it started from there—these dangerous, reckless feelings I can’t stop.

Or maybe they started when I first met him and just continued to grow.

But I *have* to stop this.

Because his mom is right. This will only end badly, not only for both of us, but also for our families.

With a choked breath, I shake my head as an answer to her question. “Never.”

“Then stay away.” A tear slides down her cheek. “Take that as a sick mother’s dying wish. I just want to protect my boy. You understand, right?”

I want to say so much more, to plead with her to let me be with him for ten more minutes.

No, five is enough.

But no words come out.

With one last look at him, I nod and leave, intent on completely erasing whatever feelings have started to blossom for Yulian.

Nip them in the bud.

Kill them before they’re born.

I just refused to admit I might have abandoned my heart in that hospital room when I left.

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35

YULIAN

PRESENT

I stare at Vaughn for long, endless moments after he finishes telling me what really happened four years ago.

The fact that he carried me down the mountain—definitely didn't leave me to die in the cave, and yes, I'd believe him over Yaroslav every time, thank you very much.

The fact that he came all the way to Chicago.

He…*kissed* me.

Now, I want to have a strong-worded conversation with my sixteen-year-old self and kick him in the ass for not waking up and witnessing the glorious moment when Vaughn kissed me.

It's just not fair that he was awake when I kissed him, but I wasn't when he kissed me.

Can I get a redo? Like right now, please.

I cough and it's like someone's jammed a knife under my skin. I'm panting for breath as my ribs throb. My hand rests on my messed-up left side, over the bandages covering the gashes—a constant reminder that I'm basically wrapped like a mummy.

"Lie down." Vaughn helps me onto my back, and he looks devastatingly radiant through my eyes—well, my right one, because the other one is half swollen shut, and the room tilts if I look at anything too fast. I move slowly, not because I want to, but because my body's in open rebellion and is being an uncooperative little shit.

“Better?” Vaughn’s watching me carefully, as if I’ll drop dead if I so much as sneeze wrong. Okay, fine, maybe he’s right.

“Mmm,” I say to preserve energy. Talking too much leaves me winded, which is deeply insulting—me, out of breath? Please. The audacity.

Also, my split lip makes every word taste faintly of iron, so I better not get too liberal with words.

Vaughn stands by my side, looking mouthwatering in simple black pants and a white shirt, its sleeves rolled, and the first few buttons undone, revealing the lines of his collarbone. But then again, he’s always looked so prettily put together. Although his hair is a bit haphazard, finger-raked, and pointing in different directions.

“What do you want to eat? I’ll go get it from the kitchen.”

I shake my head. “I’d rather you keep telling me about the past.”

“You have to eat first.”

I grumble, but Vaughn being Vaughn—completely inflexible about these sorts of things—leaves and comes back with a tray of food, mostly blended soups and oatmeal and a local type of broth.

He helps me eat, actually feeding me at one point. Vaughn has always been…a rock. No, a fortress.

A force of nature that somehow winds down and becomes surprisingly caring. I always knew he was responsible to a fault, but I never knew he was also caring to a fault.

The way he touches me carefully, how focused he is, how he wipes my mouth like I’m a toddler—they all make my chest hurt, and it’s not because of the fucked-up ribs.

I try to eat as much as possible because I’m hungry, but I’m so uncomfortable that every swallow and breath feels like a marathon.

Once I’m finished with the simple task of eating, nearly dying, Vaughn sets the tray to the side, gives me meds, and helps me lie down again. Then he sits beside me on the bed. “Want any dessert?”

“A cigarette?”

He narrows his eyes. “You’re *not* smoking when your ribs are injured, Yulian. Every inhale will make your lungs suffer.”

“I was just kidding.” *Not really. Could really use a smoke right now.*

“Good, because you’re not getting one.”

“Yes, Mom.” I try to salute, and that triggers pain in my side and I groan. Fuck this, seriously. I’m like a breathing corpse.

Vaughn takes my hand and slowly pulls it down under the duvet. “Stop moving.”

“If I do that, will you tell me more about your visit four years ago?” I ask, then pant. This shit is ridiculous.

He settles on the mattress after tucking me in, staring at me for a few seconds, then at the wall opposite him. “That was all. I left after the conversation with your mother, and that was it.”

“No wonder Mom was panicking when I woke up.” I stare at the ornate ceiling—seriously, this place looks like a museum. “She made me promise to marry a woman and father kids. Bless her, she was horrified at the thought of the trouble I’d most certainly cause.”

“She just loved you,” he whispers. “She was scared for your safety and wanted to protect you, and her fear was correct, considering your father’s reaction.”

“You…don’t hate her?”

“For what? She was just being a protective mother.” He drags his gaze to me, and it glows in the near darkness. “She was crying, you know. I don’t think she was against us being together per se; she just didn’t want us to be the targets of a homophobic institution.”

“Yeah, she apologized for not birthing me in a different reality.” I move my feet and wince. “I love my mom, but I don’t like that she got between us. You could’ve been mine all these years, but I had to watch you sucking Danika’s face in that godforsaken parking lot instead.”

He frowns. “What are you talking about?”

I tell him the condensed version of my infamous trip to New York, which happened about a week after his trip to Chicago.

Once I’m done, I let out a breath. “I had to drag my ass back home afterward because Mom died and Alina became paralyzed, all because of my idiotic inability to let go.”

“Hey.” He runs his fingers through my hair like he does when I’m lying on top of him. “Your mom was sick, and Alina had an accident. It’s *not* your fault. If you want to blame someone, blame me for being a coward all along, for making you see that with Danika, even if not intentionally.”

I raise a shoulder, then suck in a sharp breath because my motherfucking body is apparently in a state of pissing me off. “You just went back to your crush.”

He shakes his head once.

“No?” I say hopefully.

“No,” he repeats.

“You said you had a crush on a girl, and you wanted her to be your first. Wasn’t that Danika?”

“Well, yes, but I didn’t get together with her for that reason. I liked her a bit, so that helped, but truly, I only went out with her to repress whatever illogical, ludicrous feelings I had for you. I had to forget about you. There was no other option.”

A wide grin curves my mouth, but it falters because my split lip stings. “You used Danika to get over me?”

“I think I did. We used each other—me to get the structured life I pictured for myself, and she used me for power and status. Though it didn’t work.”

“What didn’t work?”

“I obviously couldn’t get over you.” His rough words are spoken low, so low that I can barely hear them. “I even kept this on me at all times.”

He reaches in his pocket and pulls out the bullet key chain I saw him carrying but he didn’t want to elaborate on.

“It’s the bullet I removed from you in the cave.” His voice is still faint. Bashful, even.

“You kept it all these years?” My own voice is choking.

“Yeah. I couldn’t throw it away. I couldn’t forget that time.” He pauses, his tone a bit shaky. “I tried to find out how you were doing over the years by making secret social media accounts to see what you’d post. Honestly, the signs were always there.”

I grin. “The closet is made of glass, huh?”

“Shut up.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I got with all the boys and girls just to recreate that spark I felt in the cave. I wasn’t really such a manwhore before, but after the summer camp, I slept with anyone interested.”

“Are you saying it’s *my* fault you’re a fuckboy?”

“Partially? I mean it’s not, but back then, I thought you abandoned me, and I was desperate to recreate the spark I felt, but it never returned… Wait. Hold on. Actually, it did.”

His eyes darken. “With who?”

“Jealous?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Yulian.” His fingers halt in my hair, holding the strands but not pulling. “Who did you feel that spark with? I’m already murderous at the thought of those who had you before me, but feeling the spark with someone else—”

“It was you. Chill, my dude.”

“Me?” His expression softens a little.

“Yeah. I felt the spark when we kissed properly for the first time, and by properly, I mean not the hesitant, stolen teenage kisses thing we did back then.”

His lips twitch in a smile, and I love that he always smiles around me, sometimes not meaning to, sometimes because he can’t help it.

Other times, like now, because he’s softening up to me.

“We were ridiculous,” he says, his fingers stroking my hair again, nearly lulling me to sleep.

“Mmm, most glamorous bi panic, though. Ten out of ten. Actually, six out of ten. Because we lost four years, see what I did there?”

“Maybe we needed those four years to get to where we are now. So there aren’t any what-ifs or veiled regrets.”

“Do you still have those? Regrets, I mean.”

“I don’t think I ever had them.”

“The last time I asked you to give me more, you called this temporary.”

He winces, his fingers pausing for a bit. “You’ll never let that go, will you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I’m sorry, baby. I never thought of you as temporary, I promise.”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you only saying that because I’m injured?”

“No.”

“How would I know?”

“My parents found out.” He lets out an exhale. “Your dad sent them the picture of us kissing.”

Oh, shit. He’s also on the run?

“I’m sorry,” I murmur.

“Don’t be. It was the best opening for me to come out. I mean, not as a labeling thing or anything, but I told Mom and Dad the truth.”

“The truth?”

He smiles and it’s the widest I’ve ever seen. “Yes, they know the whole truth about how I’ve cared about you for four years and that no matter how

much I tried to deny it, I don't think I'll ever be able to get over you."

My heart squeezes so tight, the throb in my ribs pales in comparison.

He came out to his parents for me.

I'm almost scared to ask, but I whisper, "How did they take it? At least it doesn't look like they beat you up, so that's a good sign, right?"

"They were pretty supportive, Mom even reminded me that being with you doesn't make me weak, and Dad said I don't have to worry about leadership for decades, and as long as he's alive, he'll shoot anyone who dares to say anything about my sexual preferences." He smiles with a sense of pride. "My cousin Lidya knows, too, and so do her parents, as well as my paternal aunt and her husband. The whole family back in New York is aware I went on a suicide mission to save you, and Aunt Karina called me a knight in shining armor. Lidya wants to meet you and personally test your fighting skills to see if you can protect me, but ignore her. Mom and Dad definitely want to get to know you better. They can come over here if you're open to that, but no pressure."

He sounds slightly winded, having blurted it out as if he's been waiting to say it all this time.

"One more thing," he continues, smiling, looking so liberated and happy, it's contagious. "I'll also be telling my friends, but I want to do that in person. Gareth already knows, but he's known for a long time now. We've been kind of giving each other advice about the whole being-into-men thing, and it went from there. He'll give you shit, just so you know, but I suppose that's only fair with everything Cyrus has said to me…"

He stops talking, probably because I'm watching him closely. His smile drops as he runs a hand through his hair. "No pressure, though. I realize that sounded like too much."

I shake my head. "It's not. I'm just surprised you'd do that."

His brows draw together in that infamous Vaughn frown, and I kind of hate that I ruined his mood, but then he sighs. "I understand why you'd feel that way."

"You do?"

"Yes. I've always tried to keep some distance between us, fought any of your advances or suggestions to bring us closer, and even called us temporary. It makes sense that you're wary about that, but I want you to know that I'd *never* do that again, baby. I'm sorry it took the thought of losing you to finally shake me out of it."

“I’d die a thousand times—”

He places a palm over my mouth, his hand trembling. “Don’t say that.”

I smile against his palm, but that makes him frown harder.

“The moment I saw you slumped unconscious, my life flashed before my eyes, and it was full of regrets, of everything I should’ve done for you so you wouldn’t have ended up there. I felt like I failed you when you needed me the most, and I’ll never, and I mean *never*, let anyone hurt you again.”

I slowly remove his hand from my mouth so as not to trigger the pain too much. “The only person who’s able to hurt me is you. This injury is just physical. It means nothing.”

“It means something to me. God, I want to kill your dad.”

“Kind of impossible.” I sigh. “I thought of that, killing him, point-blank, ridding myself and Alya of him, but that would make us a target of the loyalists in Chicago. Almost everyone is on his side, even if Lukas is trying to recruit them. But he could be a worse option since, well, he never liked me or Alya and would get rid of us to make sure no one would oppose him.”

“There must be something we can do,” he muses.

“Love it when you get all scheming, baby.”

His lips part, then he bites down on the corner of the bottom one. “You called me baby again.”

“Well, you are my baby, Mishka.” I touch his face, determined to at least get a kiss. Fuck my broken body. We should be fucking in the dirtiest way possible right now. Just saying.

A knock lands on the door, interrupting the moment. Vaughn clears his throat as he releases me, leaving me empty as fuck, but at least he doesn’t get up. “Come in.”

A tall, broad guy fills the doorway like he owns the damn building—and judging by the three-piece suit that fits him like it was sewn on him, he probably does. Everything about him is sharp, from his clean-shaven jaw to the way those frameless glasses sit perfectly straight on his nose. He’s got that whole polished, ruthless vibe, the type of man who could order someone’s execution while adjusting his cuff links. One look and I just know this is a man who doesn’t shout to get what he wants. He just exists, and the room falls in line.

And yet he smiles warmly at Vaughn and speaks in Russian. “Am I interrupting, Zolotoy?”

“No, not at all,” Vaughn says, then motions at me. “Uncle, this is Yulian. Yulian, this is my uncle, Anton.”

I’m suppressing a smile because Vaughn’s uncle calls him Zolotoy—the golden one—that’s so adorably fitting.

“Nice to meet you, sir. Thank you for hosting me.” I try to sit up, but Vaughn pins me back down.

“Don’t make your injuries worse, Yulian.”

“I just want to say hello to your uncle properly.”

“Stay still. He’ll understand.” He looks at Anton, who’s just smiling. “Right?”

“Right,” he says in accented English.

“I can speak Russian, so there’s no need to switch to English.” I say, “Kabardian, too. Though not so well. Haven’t spoken it in ages.”

“Kabardian?” Anton asks, and Vaughn raises his brows. Right, we didn’t discuss family ties much because I used all the time we had to fuck.

I mean, I told him about Mom’s origins and my dedushka, but I didn’t mention the language thing.

“Mom’s family comes from Kabardino-Balkaria, a pretty aristocratic family, actually, historically full of warrior nobility and lots of wealth. Beishev, if you’ve ever heard of them.”

“I have, indeed,” Anton says, sounding impressed. “Are any of them still around?”

“No. Dad, a complete nobody, by the way, took over the estate after Mom’s death.”

“There’s still you and Alina,” Vaughn reminds me softly.

He sure knows all the right things to say for a grumpy little shit.

There’s another knock before the door swings open, and in walks a guy who’s…massive. Bigger than me, if that’s even legal.

The man looks like a weapon. He’s all muscle, poured into combat cargos and a tight gray T-shirt that leaves zero mystery. He has a buzz cut sharp enough to slice through glass and a face that should be intimidating but isn’t—because unlike Anton’s carved-from-marble poker face, this one actually smiles, then hugs Anton from behind, dropping a kiss to his cheek.

“Miss me, Antosha?” he asks, and I feel like I’m intruding.

“Behave, Maks,” Anton says. “Say hello to Yulian.”

The guy finally notices me, because he's only been looking at Anton since he walked in.

He hits Vaughn on the shoulder affectionately. "Zolotoy."

"Uncle Maks."

"Hi, Yulian. I'm Maksim. Maks is fine." He watches me. "Get well soon and I'll take you on the best hike. Do you shoot?"

"Better than Vaughn."

"He's not *that* much better," Vaughn argues.

I laugh. "*Slightly* better."

"You kids won't win against me and Anton, just so you know. Ex-spetsnaz right in front of you. Antosha and I killed it back then." Maks laughs, wrapping an arm around Anton's shoulder. "Anyway, welcome to our home."

"Is it, though?" Anton asks with a raised brow. "Since you spent the whole day outside."

"I was babysitting for Mike."

"Is building a war zone for a two-year-old called babysitting now?"

"It'll make him stronger. You'll all thank me later." Maks hugs Anton from behind again, resting his chin on his shoulder. "Would've been much better if you'd joined me, though."

I stare between them, feeling a fuzzy kind of feeling. These two men, equally powerful in their own way, seem to be the happiest couple alive, right in the heart of Russia.

"Mike is their son," Vaughn tells me. "He's actually Mom and Uncle Anton's cousin, but my uncles adopted him when he was around eight. He got married a couple of years ago, and now Uncle Maks seems to think Mike's two-year-old son is his army project." He pauses, then raises his hand. "Those are Mom's words, not mine."

"Well, I told her he is," Maks says. "The boy has so much potential."

"He's two years old, Maks," Anton says. "I'll be joining from now on just to stop your ridiculous plans."

"As long as you join, I can change your mind," Maks says with a grin, then drops a kiss on Anton's mouth.

Vaughn holds my hand, smiling at me, and for a moment, just this moment, I can see our future in Anton and Maksim.

And just for this time, I believe everything will be fine.

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36

VAUGHN

“Uncle Maks! Be careful. He’s injured.”

My shout carries from where I’m sitting with Uncle Anton on the slope, dressed in outdoorsy gear.

I should’ve insisted on keeping Yulian indoors, but he was getting annoyed with simple walks around the estate. We’re over ten days out from when we came here, so Uncle Maks suggested fishing.

Nothing strenuous, right?

Wrong, as they’re wading now.

The lake looks like it’s been painted into the land, glass smooth except for the lazy shimmer of sunlight across its surface. Birch trees guard the far bank, their pale trunks catching the golden rays, and the snowcaps in the distance look close enough to touch.

Under different circumstances, I’d be admiring the view, but I’m more preoccupied with watching Yulian, who’s knee-deep in freezing water like a goddamn idiot.

His jeans are rolled haphazardly, the cuffs already soaked. Uncle Maks towers beside him, looking ready to wrestle a bear for breakfast, and hands Yulian a fishing rod like it’s a medal of honor.

“Uncle Maks!” I call again when he doesn’t reply.

He doesn’t even turn his head when he says, “He’s breathing. He can walk. That’s all the equipment he needs. Stop fussing, boy.”

“I’m not fussing. His ribs are broken and bruised.”

“It’s water and a stick. He’ll live.” He finally glances back, a slow grin pulling at his mouth. “Tell him to stop nagging, Antosha.”

“He’s right, though,” Uncle says. “It’s cold.”

“Thank you!” I say to Uncle Anton, who’s sitting beside me.

“Why do I even try?” Uncle Maks shakes his head. “The boy definitely takes after you with the nagging.”

“It’s after Kirill.”

“Nah, he’s not a nagger-in-chief like you…” Uncle Maks trails off when Uncle Anton gives him a look. “Still love that about you. Don’t be jealous of your own brother-in-law.”

My focus shifts back to Yulian, who winks at me and then goes back to focusing on his task. His hair’s catching the sunlight in sharp streaks, and the way he’s holding that rod makes it clear he has no idea what he’s doing.

But he follows Uncle Maks’s instructions with complete concentration. Every time he moves, I’m on the edge of my seat, contemplating how to get him to safety.

Yes, sure, I’ve been overly careful with him over the past ten days, but that’s because he needs to heal properly. The idiot even tried to have sex on the third day, then grumbled when I told him it’d be impossible. So now I don’t even kiss him that long in order to avoid awakening his monstrous libido.

That doesn’t seem to be working, though, because just sleeping in the same bed is enough to get him excited. Hell, sometimes I catch him getting hard just watching me do the most mundane shit.

It’s honestly a struggle because I’m barely keeping myself in check in the first place. Helping him shower, seeing him in his gorgeous naked glory without touching him the way I want to is sweet torture.

He felt my hardening cock against his ass the other day and said I was being cruel by not allowing sex.

But really, I’m apprehensive about hurting him in any way. Yesterday, the doctor came for a checkup and said he’s healing well, but he still needs rest.

As he was leaving, Yulian said, “I have a very important question, and you better think carefully before you reply.”

The doctor, a man in his sixties with a shock of white hair and a groomed beard, wore a serious expression. “I’ll reply to the best of my knowledge.”

“When can I have sex? And remember, think *carefully*.”

“Yulian,” I hissed under my breath.

The doctor didn’t seem fazed, probably used to these types of questions from Uncle Maks. “A week or two.”

“I said to think carefully, Doc.” Yulian stood up and even flexed. “Look, I’m feeling really good. You said I’m recovering well and that I’m young and killing it. Come on, give me a better number.”

The doctor remained silent.

Yulian pointed a thumb at me as he whispered, “We’ll both die of blue balls if you don’t give that guy the green light.”

“I heard that,” I said. “And stop pressuring him.”

“If you’re careful and not putting strain on your ribs, you can have slow sex, and I mean really slow,” the doctor said. “Nothing that makes you twist, lift, or breathe too hard. And if it hurts, you immediately stop.”

Needless to say, Yulian tried to fuck me as soon as the doctor left, which I didn’t allow, of course.

And now, he’s doing this in the lake, completely blasé about his health.

“He’ll be fine,” Uncle Anton says from beside me. “He looks happy. Let him be.”

“I’m just worried,” I whisper.

“I understand, but a guy like Yulian doesn’t seem to like being tied down. He’s a restless energy ball, and the best way to keep him happy is letting him have his way once in a while.”

I drag my gaze to Uncle. “Is that what you do with Uncle Maks?”

“Mm. I suppose.” Uncle Anton smiles warmly as Uncle Maks waves at us. “He looks his best when he’s out there, being active and wild.”

“Don’t you worry?”

“Of course I do, but I also know for a fact that he can protect himself and that I can protect him. Besides, no matter where he goes, he’ll always come back home to me.”

“I’m just…” I let my gaze flit to Yulian, who’s grinning as he pulls on the rod. “I’m not sure I can protect him from his dad. Alina is safe with Cyrus, and he’s safe with me, but I feel that as long as Yaroslav is alive, Yulian is in danger. I know you and Uncle Maks are extremely private, but did you ever worry about danger from society or the upper echelons?”

He shakes his head. “I *am* the upper echelon. When you have enough power, no one dares to touch you.”

That's similar to something Mom and Dad say. *With enough power, we become invincible.*

"Look, Mishka!" Yulian holds up a big fish.

"Beginner's luck," Uncle Maks grumbles.

And I just stand up and make my way to them, because I have an idea.

An entirely reckless one that makes complete sense, and I want to hug him, touch him, because this may be the moment our new lives start.

"THAT WAS THE BEST EVER," YULIAN SAYS AFTER WE STEP OUT OF THE shower with towels wrapped around our waists. "I always wanted to go fishing again. Reminds me of the times we used to go to Dedushka's estate when I was young."

"You said your mom took you and Alina there during summers?"

"Yeah, they were my happiest memories ever, probably because Dad wasn't there. Dedushka taught me how to do all sorts of things—horseback riding, fishing, shooting, hunting. You know, things Dad had no interest in teaching me because he doesn't like spending time with me."

"Your father is an asshole."

"I know, right?" He grins, but I still feel like a dick for nagging while he was probably taking the experience with Uncle Maks as a trip down memory lane.

He sits on the edge of the bed, and I help him with replacing some bandages; thankfully, he's healing properly. But it still stings to see all the slashes, the new scars covering old ones.

I sit behind him on the mattress, my legs on either side of him as I do his back. My fingers trace the glorious tattoos interrupted by the slashes.

"It's the mountain and the cave," he whispers as my fingers pause on the top of the mountain, trembling slightly against his skin.

"What?"

"The wolf's me," he says, his fingers brushing the ink on his shoulder. "Half charging, always ready to strike but never free. The barbed wire is Dad's cage. His way of trying to hold me down. It doesn't work."

My hand slides to the other shoulder, stopping over the raven's wing. "And this?"

“That one is the part of me that still thinks it can escape. The feathers are broken because…well, you’ve seen what happens when I try to escape.”

“I’m sorry.” I drop a kiss to the raven and the wolf, and he shudders.

He shifts, then clears his throat. “The mountain is ours. You must’ve guessed that.”

“I wouldn’t have dared hope.” I trace my finger over the thin thread of red that bleeds from the base of the mountain. “Is this blood?”

“No. That’s the day I saw you kiss Danika, after hoping you didn’t abandon me. I thought I’d lost you to her.” His mouth quirks, but it’s not from amusement. “Turns out, I didn’t.”

“You never did.” I take his hand and slip it beneath the towel to my inner thigh, then press it against where my lone tattoo is. “These are coordinates.”

“Coordinates?”

“Yes, to the cave we spent the night in.” I swallow. “I had this done because I couldn’t allow that time to just disappear. I wanted to remember it.”

“You wanted to remember me?”

“Mm.”

“That makes me happy.”

“Yuli?”

“Hmm?”

I trace the line of red in his tattoos as he strokes my thigh. “You can think about this red thread differently.”

“Differently?”

“Yeah. You know, in some Asian cultures, they say fated lovers are bound by an invisible red thread tied around their pinkie fingers. So this”—I kiss the tattoo—“could be our thread of fate. Because you were right all that time ago when you said we were meant to be together.”

“I love that. And wow. You’re actually saying I’m right for once?”

I chuckle. “Don’t get used to it.”

“I think I will.”

He strokes my thigh, and tingles erupt down my spine. I don’t say this out loud to not encourage his libido, but not having sex with him has been torture. I don’t know how I survived before him. I’ve honestly never been such a sexual being, but then this guy came along and now I can’t seem to have enough.

“Can I ask you something?” I say, to distract myself.

“Anything.”

“Back in the mountains, why did you take a bullet for me?”

He chuckles. “I wanted to impress you.”

“Be serious.”

“I *am* serious. It’s not that I wanted to die or something, but I really didn’t want you to get hurt.”

Fuck. My heart kind of thuds so loudly, it’s beating in my throat.

“Thank you,” I whisper in a choked voice. “I don’t think I ever thanked you properly for what you’ve done.”

“You have by saving my life in that cave.”

“It was the least I could do. I owe you my life.”

“I’ll hold you accountable to that.”

“By all means.”

His hand squeezes around my thigh, hotly possessive, and I know that if I don’t move, he’ll be trying to worm his way into sex. Which is a problem—I don’t think I’m strong enough to refuse him anymore.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand, saving me.

“Dry your hair with the towel.” I stand up and grab the phone. “It’s Dad.”

“Take your time. I’ll call Alya and Cy.”

“His name is Cyrus.”

He swats me on the ass as I pass him by. “Stop being jealous of my best friend.”

I grumble, and he just laughs as I walk to the hallway, closing the door behind me because I really don’t want to hear him joke around with his “best friend.”

Mom and Dad are checking in on me, and I consider telling them about my plan, but I’ll need Yulian to agree first, so I hold fire on that.

When I go back to the room, Yulian is still on the edge of the bed, drying his hair with a towel. I take it from him, stepping between his legs as I slowly move the towel on his hair. “Is everything all right?”

He blinks up at me, and I think I see fear—terror, actually—but then I blink once and it’s gone, replaced by a smile.

“Mm.” The rumble of his voice echoes in the air.

“Is Alina okay?”

“Yeah.”

I watch him closely, but he’s grinning up at me. Maybe I imagined it…

“What were you talking about with your uncle Maks after dinner?” he asks. “All secretive and stuff.”

“Uncle Maks says we can go to your dedushka’s estate if you want. He’s always wanted to go back to Kabardino and Mount Elbrus. I said it’s far and we should wait a bit longer. A six-hour flight might be too much, even if it’s in a private jet. Uncle Maks says we’ll be there before I finish a drink, but he’s just downplaying it…Baby, are you listening?”

He blinks, and I think I see a shine in his eyes. “Yeah. We can go. I’ll be fine.”

“But…”

He wraps his hands around my waist, laying his head on the center of my chest. “We can go wherever you want. Tonight, even.”

“Not a chance.” My fingers pause on his hair. “Maybe in a couple of days.”

“Okay.”

“Will you be okay if Mom and Dad join? They want to meet you officially.”

“Do you want me to meet them?”

“Of course.” I stroke my hand through his damp hair. “It’d make me so happy.”

“Then we’ll do that. We can all go to Kabardino. I know enough of the language to get by.”

“Really?”

“Mmm.” He leans in and kisses my nipple, his tongue peeking out to lick it before he bites down.

A spark of desire rushes to my cock as he does the same to the other one. My fingers pull on his hair as he licks his way down my abs, biting and sucking.

Fuck. It’s been too long, my balls are throbbing, and my cock is hard in an instant. Seems that I have Yulian’s libido now.

“Stop.” I gently push him back with my hold on his head. “You’re still hurt.”

“Fuck that.” His fingers sink into my hips, pulling me closer so he can bite on my V muscles, and I grunt.

Fuck, that feels as if my veins have been injected with an aphrodisiac. I’m so turned on, I can’t see straight, my fingers relaxing in his hair.

“Yulian…fucking hell…”

“Let me have you, hmm, baby, please?” He’s speaking against my groin as the towel slips from around my waist and falls to the floor by our feet.

Yulian groans as he tries to get down on the ground, but I push him back on the bed, so he’s lying on his back. “Don’t move.”

The disappointment in his face squeezes my chest.

“Mishka…”

“I’ll do everything, okay? If you move or I feel like you’re exerting yourself, we’ll stop.”

He nods eagerly, his cock tenting against the towel. I help position him so he’s lying on his back in the middle of the bed. The towel falls open, revealing his rock-hard, engorged cock.

I raise a brow. “Already?”

“I’ve been having withdrawals for weeks, can’t help it.”

I chuckle softly as I dig into the drawer, and I find lube and condoms. Uncle Maks is definitely the one who put them there.

“See?” Yulian grins, watching me. “Even your uncles manifested this.”

I grab the lube and position myself on top of him, my knees on either side of his thighs as I wrap my hand around his cock. He throbs like hell in my grip, the veins protruding more.

“You’re getting thicker, Volchonok.” My voice is slightly husky, thick with arousal as my own cock bobs against his thighs.

“It’s all your fault, Mishka.”

“Is that so?”

“Uh-huh. Your big hands make me want to come all over them.”

“How about my mouth, then?” I lower my head and take him all the way to the back of my throat, fighting any gag reflex. He loves when I do this, and I trained my throat to fit him.

I light up at the string of curses that spill out of him as precum fills my mouth, and I swallow, breathing slowly through my nose. “Fucking hell, baby, yes…fuck…your hot, wet mouth is made to take my cock.”

“Mmm.”

“Choke on it…let me feel your throat.” His voice gets huskier as he grabs my hair and starts to move.

I shove his hips down and pull him out. “No moving, Yulian.”

“Ugh…” He looks at me, his chest rising and falling deeply but steadily. “This is fucking torture.”

“Shh.” I kiss and lick the underside of his cock, then take it in my mouth again, letting saliva fill my mouth, and then suck him off slowly, sloppily, choking on his girth and length like he wanted.

The sounds are obscene, echoing around us like a mantra, and I’m so hard from the feel and taste of him, I think I’ll burst.

It’s really been too long.

“Holy fucking Jesus…” He gasps. “You’re taking my cock so well, baby.”

“Mmm.”

“Your mouth feels like heaven.” He strokes my hair as he speaks, and I know I need to take it slow, but I’m so fucking hungry.

For him.

For this.

Keeping my mouth wrapped around his cock, I bob up and down. He releases another string of curses, throbbing in my mouth, and I squeeze lube on my hand and reach to my ass, pushing a finger in and groaning around his cock.

That makes him grunt in a low, needy voice.

“You making your little hole wet for me, baby?” he speaks in rough words.

“Mmm.” I circle my rim with my lubed fingers.

“Put another finger in. Make it nice and wet for my cock, yeah?”

Fucking hell, his dirty mouth is going to be the death of me.

My fingers move of their own accord as I insert one more, and I rumble low in my chest. His cock in my mouth and my fingers in my ass are pushing me over the edge.

“Finger yourself for me.” He angles my head slightly so that I meet his eyes. “Let me see the way you want me.”

I add another finger, stuffing myself full, as I suck him off. It’s so sloppy now, saliva and precum sliding down his cock and onto his balls.

“Holy fuck…you’re so beautiful, baby. So ethereal and unreal. Sometimes, I can’t believe I’m with you.” He pulls on my hair. “Sit on my cock. I want to come buried deep inside you.”

A grunt pours from my lips as I make him sloppier, dragging the saliva and precum all over his length, using the mix to lube his cock, then pull out my fingers.

“Vaughn…” he croaks, a bit impatient. “I want to fill that beautiful ass with my cock.”

“Don’t call me that,” I say after pulling his cock out of my mouth, taking it in one hand as I maneuver myself so I’m squatting on top of him, careful not to touch him anywhere else.

“Don’t call you by your name?”

“No.” I squeeze his cock and guide him into my hole. My body relaxes, but it’s been a while, and I was so eager to feel his cock, I didn’t prep properly. His length pushes past the entrance, and it stings a bit, but I make it work, slowly taking him in.

“No?” He moans, his dick sliding deeper inside me.

“Not when you’re buried in me, no.” I grunt, my legs shaking as I fight the need to shove myself all the way down.

“Fuck, you’re too slow.”

“I have to be. Stay still.” I slope forward, holding my whole weight on my arms on either side of his face, and drop a soft kiss to his forehead before a droplet of sweat follows. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m not made of glass, baby.” He strokes my cheek, shoving my hair back. “Bottom out.”

I groan. “Volchonok…”

“Do it. Take my cock in *my* cumhole.”

“Mmmf.” I shove myself all the way down as slowly as possible, my eyes never leaving his. “*Fuck.*”

“Fuck *yes*…your tight little hole is made for my cock, isn’t it, baby?”

“Yeah…I love the feeling of you filling me. I missed this.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm. You’re perfect.” I kiss his forehead, his cheek, my lips barely ghosting them, so this doesn’t turn into a frenzy.

“This ass is *perfect*.” He squeezes my cheek, then slaps it, and I groan.

“It’s yours.” *I’m all yours.*

“I own your ass?”

“Yeah.”

“Then make this ass swallow my cock.” He squeezes again. “Ride me.”

I push back so that I’m upright, my hands on the mattress so I’m supporting myself and not putting any of my weight on him. My movements are slightly shaky as my muscles strain, but I slide up his cock,

then slowly sink down, making sure not to slam against his groin in any way.

We both groan in unison.

“You feel how your perfect little hole is clenching around my cock, baby?”

I nod, thrusting up and down slowly, taking my time. I chose this position so I wouldn’t hurt him, but really, this feels fucking amazing. My body registers every throb of his cock, every move, every stutter of his breath.

Fucking hell. I’ve missed him more than I initially thought.

“You’re stretching me so good.” I moan.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah…I love fucking myself on your cock.”

“Oh, fuck. Show me…show me how much you love it.”

I lift myself up and groan on my way down, matching his loud grunt. I ride his cock so good, he’s moaning and I’m coming a little with each thrust. Not only because of how his cock hits my prostate, but because of the way he’s looking at me right now. His eyes gleaming, his lips parted.

So I rotate my hips and move in the slowest, most passionate way I ever have. My chest aches as I watch his heartbreakingly beautiful face and the way he looks at me.

As if I’m the only thing that matters in the world.

As if, like me, he can’t get enough of this.

Of *us*.

He reaches a hand to my cheek. I take it, sealing his palm to my mouth, dropping soft kisses everywhere as my balls draw up and my chest heaves. The intensity of this moment nearly drives me insane, but I force myself to keep going at a steady pace.

Yulian touches my thigh where the tattoo is with his other hand. “Tell me you’ve loved me since the cave, Mishka.”

“I…fuck.” His cock shoves against my prostate again and mine spills precum on his lower abs, so I wrap my hands around it, jerking frantically. “I’m…I’m gonna come…”

“Tell me… Say it… I want to hear it.” He thrusts up and I gasp.

“Yuli…fuck…baby…I love you, I love you, I love you…” And then I’m exploding all over his stomach, messing the bandages up.

“Holy fuck, that’s it…glorious. The way you come is fucking addictive…”

“Baby…come with me…please…”

“You’ll take my cum in your ass?” He shifts, but I continue to thrust down, so he doesn’t move too much, even if my body is jelly.

“Yeah. Come…inside me…”

He doesn’t need to be told twice. Yulian’s body jerks, and hot spurts of his cum fill me up, trickling out of my hole even as I clench around him.

I fall forward, my hands on either side of his face to hold my shaky body as he pulls me to his mouth by a handful of my hair.

His lips suck on mine as if he’s relearning them, then he kisses me slowly, tenderly, almost as if he’s worshiping me. It’s nothing like Yulian’s ferocious kisses that often end up with fucking.

I moan softly as I lick the inside of his mouth, and we kiss and kiss until I think we’ll never stop kissing. Until I hear his shallow breathing and remember the state of his injuries.

It takes me some effort to pull myself off him. His cock slips out of me, bobbing against his abs, cum still coating it.

And I wrap my lips around it, sucking him clean.

“Fuuuck,” Yulian grunts as I pull his now half-erect cock out of my mouth. “Why did you stop?”

“I just wanted to clean you.”

“Rude.” He pouts, palming his cock. “I thought it was round two. Love that thing you do with your tongue when you go down on me.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh. So come and finish it.”

“No, this was enough exertion for one night.” I stroke his face, my cum-soaked finger pushing against his lip and he swallows it, sucking it dry.

I growl, then remove my hand, because at this rate, he’ll just make us fuck again.

“Tomorrow.” I step back. “We’ll do it tomorrow.”

“I don’t want tomorrow,” he whispers.

Yulian watches me with darkened eyes as I walk to the bathroom, probably seeing his cum sliding down my legs. If he were okay, he’d be licking that and shoving it right back into my ass.

I quickly clean myself, then get a wet towel and clean him up and change his bandages. The whole time, he keeps running his hands

everywhere—my back, my chest, but mostly my inner thigh, where the tattoo is.

And I'm trying not to freak out that I told him I love him in the throes of an orgasm. I want to think it's a fluke or that it was said in the heat of passion, but really, I've been in love with Yulian for longer than I care to admit.

Now, I'm feeling hurt that he didn't say it back. Honestly, Yulian says I'm coldhearted, but I'm not the one who responded to a love confession with silence.

When I'm done with the bandages, I lie beside him.

"Nope." He taps his chest on his good side. "Right here."

"That might hurt."

"Just come here."

I slowly place my head there, kind of missing when he crushes me into the bed.

Yulian hooks his leg with mine and smiles lazily, closing his eyes.

It's probably not the right time to broach the subject, but the sooner he knows about my plan, the better.

"Baby?" I ask.

"Mmm?"

"What do you think about living here—not here at my uncles' estate, but in a similar private one?"

He slowly opens his eyes. "Don't you have your family and responsibilities in New York?"

"We can do New York as well. As long as we're together, the place doesn't matter."

He says nothing, just closes his eyes again, then he whispers, "Whatever you wish, baby."

He says something else, but I don't hear him as I doze off with my head buried in the crook of his neck.

I feel like all my life, I've been waiting and biding my time. For years, I thought it was for leadership, but I realize it's my heart that's been waiting.

For him—the boy who awakened me, punctured my shield, and lay inside my chest.

I convinced myself that I hated him, even more after the cave than before. I hated him because he kissed me, and I couldn't get over it.

I hated him because I stole a kiss back, but he wasn't awake to reciprocate.

But mostly, I hated him because I wanted him so much, but I couldn't be with him.

For four years, he's been the forbidden fruit I only allow myself to think about late at night or follow from afar like a coward.

But the truth is, that hate was a way for me to conceal the depth of my feelings for this infuriating guy.

Now that I finally have him, I'll keep him right here.

Forever.

WHEN I WAKE UP THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I STRETCH, THEN QUICKLY STOP so I don't accidentally hit Yulian.

My eyes fly open, and I realize the bed is empty and cold.

I jump up to a sitting position, blinking the sleep out of my eyes. I swear, if Uncle Maks took him on one of his "character-building" adventures, I'll start a fight. I would rather he go bug Mike and his kid than use Yulian for his wild outdoorsy days.

After I pull on my boxer briefs, I pause with my jeans halfway up my legs when I notice a note on the nightstand. I'd recognize this mixture of cursive and print handwriting anywhere.

My mouth dries as I hold the letter in a shaky hand.

I'M GOING BACK TO CHICAGO.

By the time you read this, I'll almost be there. Thirteen hours in the air will be brutal—even with the private jet your uncle graciously lent me. And you won't be there to fuss over me. The horror.

Jokes aside, I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye face-to-face. I couldn't. Not after hearing you speak about our future.

My father has Alya. He plans to marry her off to some Boston brute who's ten years older, a man who will destroy her. The only bargaining chip he offered was me. If I marry the leader's daughter and seal their alliance, Alya will be freed. And I'll be safe, at least, as his heir.

Funny, isn’t it? I always thought you’d be the one trapped in a marriage of duty. Turns out, it’s me. I’m fulfilling my mother’s dying wish after all.

I’m sorry, Vaughn. I’ve never been worthy of you. From the start, you were composed, untouchable, while I’ve always been chaos. Thank you for saving me, for taking me to Russia, for giving me these last ten days. They were the happiest of my life. Watching your uncles together made me hope we could have that, too. But hope doesn’t change reality.

Maybe you were right all along. We were never meant to last.

Goodbye, my Vaughn.

My Mishka.

My baby.

You’ll always be the memory I carry closest.

YULIAN

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37

YULIAN

Today is my wedding day.

Fuck that right the fuck off if I had a say in it, but I didn't.

Probably fearing I'd have cold feet or start some shenanigans, Dad planned the wedding to take place the moment I landed in Chicago.

My chest throbs, and I'm so sleep-deprived, I'm barely standing.

I pace my room in the venue back and forth, the walls closing in on me.

It's all suffocating.

The smell of flowers.

The hum of hushed voices outside.

The burn of the collar against my throat.

I undo the first buttons of my shirt with agitated fingers as I try to breathe properly.

Cyrus insists I run away. He said he'll protect Alya and take her out of the country if necessary, but he lost her the first time, and there's no telling if he'll lose her again. Say we did escape Dad, but then what? We'll both live on the run, and while I'm fine with that, I won't put Alya in that position.

She loves stability and the idea of a home and would be miserable without her public recitals and the ability to move around as she wishes.

I pull out my phone, which I've kept turned off since the flight.

It's a cowardly act, knowing full well that if I open it, I'll find texts and missed calls from Vaughn.

Thing is, I don’t think I can handle that.

Every fiber of my being is already bursting at the seams with the urge to go back to him, to that safe haven tucked deep in the Altai Mountains.

It’s the same urge that made me go to New York four years ago, searching, trying to find a sliver of that peace I experienced in that cave.

I place a palm on my chest, on the sole tattoo I have there as a realization hits me. Whether it was in that cave, at the house on Brighton Island, at the Altai Mountains estate, the feeling was the same—peace.

Even if I was hurt, it didn’t matter, because Vaughn held me and stroked my hair and gave me those soft kisses that made me feel prized.

But now, I hurt him.

Pain blossoms in my chest, and it’s not because of my fucked-up ribs.

The last thing I want is to be the cause of his misery. He’s been so happy lately, lighter, freer—probably because his parents know about us. He even started planning for the future.

He told me he loves me.

I let out a tortured exhale. I shouldn’t have insisted he say that. It’s just a sure recipe for pain now.

Maybe I was selfish, but I wanted to hear it. Just once.

The first and last time.

Or maybe it’s not the last time.

See, I have a plan, even if it’ll hurt Vaughn anyway. I can’t get out of this marriage, but I will use it to my advantage. My not-so-dear dad needs this marriage for the alliance with Boston, so I’ll go through with it and build connections within Boston.

In a couple of months, I’ll be able to access my trust fund Dedushka left me that Yaroslav can’t touch. I’ll use that money to get Alya as far away from him as possible, then buy my way to the top and maybe see if I can help Lukas get rid of him.

I honestly don’t give a fuck if Lukas is at the top as long as he doesn’t hurt Alya and me, but dealing with him will be tricky. He’s always given off the vibes of someone who doesn’t trust anyone but Mikailo.

But he’ll have to help me, or I’ll find a way to kill him.

Tonight, I’ll ask my future wife to make this marriage for appearances only and to agree to get divorced in a couple of years, and then I’ll go back to Vaughn.

That is, if he’ll take me back.

What if he's married by that time as well?

That ominous thought makes my blood boil.

There's a knock on the door before Alya rolls her wheelchair in. She's dressed in an elegant robe, her hair held in a French twist.

I let my hand drop from my chest as I force a smile. "Looking beautiful, Alyonushka."

She purses her lips. "Do you want to get married, Yulik?"

"Of course not. But what the old man wants, the old man gets."

"You have someone you love, don't you? Cy mentioned a Vaughn?"

"It doesn't matter anymore." I force a grin. "It's only the two of us. I will protect us, okay?"

"Not okay. I don't want your protection anymore."

"Alya…" I step toward her.

She was crying when I got here, holding on to me with all her might, mostly because I was injured, but she's looked different lately in a way I can't pinpoint.

"I won't let you do this," she announces.

"We can't run away. Even with Cy's genius, we'll be Dad's targets."

"I'm not running away."

"Then what are you suggesting?"

"I'll marry into Boston."

My shoulders tense up. "Absolutely *not*."

"You know I love you to bits, but you don't get to tell me what to do."

"And you don't get to sacrifice yourself for me, Alya."

"You don't get to either!" Her lips tremble. "I know you've been feeling guilty since the accident, thinking it was your fault even though I've always told you it wasn't. You feel a responsibility toward me because of that and Mama's dying wishes, but I'm old enough, Yulik. I can make my own decisions, and I want to move out of your shadow."

"Alya…" I get on my haunches and take her hand in mine. "Marriage is not a joke."

"Tell that to yourself, jumping into a marriage with a girl you've barely met while your heart is elsewhere."

I narrow my eyes. "Smart-ass."

"Always have been."

"Listen, I have a plan, Alya. I can sacrifice a couple of years in this marriage and then—"

“No.”

“Hear me out.”

“You hear *me* out.” She lifts her chin, then smiles softly, looking more and more like Mama. “Actually, I’ve wanted to tell you this for a while but was hesitant to.”

“Tell me what?”

“Remember the attack in DC?”

“Yeah…?”

“The guy who saved me, his name is Levian Markov, the youngest brother of the leader of the Boston Bratva. He’s an illegitimate child and was hurt all his life there, so he grew up trying to exact revenge for himself and his mother. Then he rose in the ranks and now rivals his older brother.”

I narrow my eyes. “How do you know all that?”

“I…have been speaking to him, *meeting* him, actually. He comes to the center when I’m volunteering, and we’ve been sort of dating…”

“What?”

“Anyway, the most important part is that Levian was the one who planned that attack.”

“*What*?”

“Just listen to the very end.” She exhales a breath of frustration. “He planned that attack to get rid of the rotten opposition at the upper echelon of the Boston Bratva while making Markov look like a weak leader in front of everyone else. It’s working, and he’ll be voted in instead of his brother soon, considering everything he’s done to mend their image since then. It’ll all come together when he secures an alliance with us through marriage and a possible new alliance with New York once he tells Kirill that Markov was the one behind that attack at the summer camp.”

“Boston did that?”

She nods twice. “One of the mentors at the camp was Markov’s spy. He couldn’t bear the idea of Papa and Kirill becoming allies, as that would’ve pushed him out, so he staged that attack to put you and Vaughn in danger in order to make Chicago and New York point fingers at each other. Levian only found out about this recently and wants to make amends.”

“Is that what he told you to make you agree to this?”

“No, I’m saying this so you understand his position and also understand that I love him, and I trust him more than I trust Papa.”

“Alina…”

“I mean it. He might have experienced harsh circumstances, but he’s very warm and caring. We only talked at the reception for a bit, and even after that brief encounter, he didn’t want me to get hurt. Though he confessed that he knocked me out to get me out of there so that I wouldn’t resist or cause a ruckus, but the most important part is that he cares about me.”

I run a hand through my hair. “I don’t know about this.”

“This is my choice, Yulik. Not yours or Papa’s.”

“Have you told Papa this?”

“Yeah. But he wanted me to marry Levian’s older brother, to which I said hell no. I mentioned Levian, and he waved me off and dragged you here instead. Sorry about that.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Point is. I’m fighting for this. I want to be with Levian no matter what anyone says. Maybe you should be with the person you love instead of looking like a lamb to the slaughter.”

“Very funny.” I stand up, letting her go. “Is there any way I can talk you out of this?”

She shakes her head. “But can you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Meet Levy and don’t be a dick.”

“*Levy*?” I repeat incredulously. “And I’m a *dick*?”

She lifts a shoulder. “You can be sometimes.”

“Alina!”

“What? You can. If you’re on your best behavior, I promise not to tell Vaughn all your secrets when I meet him.”

“You…” I let out a sigh. “You don’t seem shocked that I’m with a guy.”

“I’ve known that you were attracted to both genders for a long time.”

“How long?”

“Since Dad broke your legs after finding a guy in your room.”

I scoff. “And you never said anything?”

“You never said anything either.” She pouts. “I thought I was special, but apparently not.”

“I just didn’t think it was worth it since I was hiding it from Dad and everything.”

She reaches out and takes my hand in hers. “You don’t have to hide who you are, Yulik.”

“I won’t. Not anymore.”

“That’s how it should be. I’m so excited to meet the guy who puts up with your shit.”

“Hey!”

She grins and releases me. “But first… Levy! Come in.”

My head whips to the side as *Levy* steps into the room, wearing a dark suit. He radiates calm and danger, and I don’t like that. *At all.*

His gaze slides to my sister, and when his stoic face breaks into a smile, she smiles up at him like an idiot.

He places his hand in hers as she says, “Levy, meet my brother, Yulian. Yulik, this is Levian.”

I step toward him and take his outstretched hand, squeezing hard enough to inflict pain. “You hurt her, and I’ll slice your throat open. Alina has a family, and most importantly, me—your grim reaper. If anything, and I mean *anything* happens to her, you’ll be held responsible.”

“Yulian,” she hisses.

“I’ll protect her with my life, not because you threatened me or for a deal.” He stares down at her, squeezing her shoulder. “But because she’s the woman I love and my future wife.”

Disgusting, I think as he drops a kiss to her forehead. I don’t want her to go to Boston, and I don’t want her marrying someone who seems at least eight years older than her, but as I watch them together, I know I don’t have a say in this.

And really, even if I do get married, Dad will find another bidder for Alina. So at least she’s choosing this.

And she does look happy in a way I’ve never seen her before.

He better protect that happiness, or I’ll castrate the motherfucker.

“I’ll go talk to Dad.” I start to leave, but Alina takes my hand.

“Talk to Lukas as well.”

“Why would I talk to Lukas?”

“He’s been up to something.”

“How is that new? That nuisance is *always* up to something.”

“This is different. He’s on the verge of breaking through.” Her expression softens. “We had a talk the other day, and I don’t think he hates us. He’s just…*jealous* of us because we lived well off, which can’t be said about him and Mikailo. Dad refuses the notion of a, quote, unquote, *bastard* inheriting from him, so it’s like they’re caught in limbo. We vaguely know

the hell they went through in Russia, but from the stories they told me, it was *really* bad. Like, it's a miracle they're alive, you know."

"Are you seriously sympathizing with Lukas and Mikailo, who want to kill us?"

"They don't. They just want to be given a chance, especially Lukas." She stares up at the man who's stroking her shoulder. "After knowing Levian, I see our half-brothers in a different light. Lukas spent his entire life surviving, which isn't that dissimilar to how you and I lived under Papa's dictatorship. Maybe we all just need to talk it out. We never did because Papa always said we were different than them, and he probably said something similar to Lukas and Mikailo to drive a wedge between us."

"Divide and conquer?"

"Yeah. Just think about it, okay? Lukas can be an asset." She places her hand on top of Levian's. "And Levy said he'll support you if you want to become leader."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Why would you do that?"

"Because you're Alina's brother, who she loves dearly and talks about all the time."

"Guilty as charged." She laughs.

I don't mean to, but a smile rips out of me as I feel a weight lifting off my shoulders.

I WAS THE ONE WHO WHEELED ALYA DOWN THE AISLE AMONGST EVERYONE'S whispers.

Their opinion didn't matter anyway, because Alya demanded I do it, and what Alya wants, Alya gets.

My father slapped me for being useless and said he'd deal with me for everything—running away from home and ditching the marriage. However, his top priority was to save face and his alliance with Boston. My bride-to-be wasn't keen on this marriage either, so Yaroslav and Markov hastily facilitated Alina and Levian's marriage.

He didn't care that I walked Alina down the aisle, mostly because I know that motherfucker is embarrassed by her disability. I'm glad I didn't see him since he was called out for an emergency during the reception.

Good fucking riddance.

After I gave Levian a lecture on how to take care of Alya and made sure she left for her new home safely, I drove back to the mansion from the airport with Cyrus.

Now, he's also disappeared, seeming preoccupied with a new "project," as he called it. Honestly, I feel sorry for whoever is the subject of his project. I feel more sorry if that subject is that nerdy dude who looked like he was peaceful and completely disconnected from our world.

No, seriously, Cy has changed lately. At the reception, I caught him sitting in a corner, wearing a manic expression, staring at a photo that had been ripped in half, then glued back together.

In it, there was a younger version of him, maybe thirteen, with his arm thrown over the shoulder of a guy in frameless glasses. And lo and behold, it was the nerdy-looking guy Cy's been stalking in the library. The guy looked almost the same, even though the picture is several years old.

Cy, however, seemed completely different. For one, he was smiling, so wide that his eyes were half closed. In all the years I've known him, I've never, and I mean *never*, seen Cy smile that wide.

He hid the picture as soon as he saw me snooping, then waved me off when I tried to ask questions about his past that he keeps under lock and key.

Anyway, Cy's current location doesn't matter, because all I want to do is go to Vaughn.

Sure enough, when I turned on my phone, I was bombarded with notifications. He called me fifty-seven times and sent me a string of texts. At first, they were angry, then pleading, then he threatened that I better not get married or he'd ruin it.

But before I could reply to him, or better yet, fly back to that peaceful nook in the mountains, Lukas asked me to come to the lower levels.

Now, I don't usually listen to Lukas's demands, but after that conversation with Alya, I do head to that godforsaken place. It's to my and Alya's benefit not to be targeted by Lukas. Dad is already a hassle as it is. Add a power-hungry brother to that, and it's chaos.

Well, at least Alya has a husband who seems to care about her, so we're safe in that regard, but I still wouldn't trust Lukas not to go after her in his quest for power.

The men stationed in front of the door look…different. They're not the usual goons my dad uses, though Vaughn did say he killed many of them.

For me.

That rule-stickler guy brought his parents and the elites in New York with him and broke into the Chicago mafia leader's residence just to get *me* out.

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat," he said when I asked if he'd thought of the consequences.

And now, my chest hurts because it was such a shitty idea to tell him goodbye in a letter. Hopefully, he doesn't hate me too much.

The new goons-in-chief bow upon seeing me and even open the door for me.

I raise a brow. "You guys get a personality transplant? Or maybe you don't want me to chew your body parts off?"

They say nothing, and I step into the dungeon, my muscles tightening and my ribs protesting at the memories of the last time I was here.

I place a hand in my pocket. My wedding tux doesn't feel so suffocating now, but I did throw the bow tie and jacket somewhere during the reception as I carried Alya in my arms and danced with her. She was giggling so hard, and I saw Mama's softness in her eyes.

My train of thought stops, and so do my feet. The smell of dampness and blood permeates the air, but it's not the onslaught of memories that overtake me. It's the view of the person tied to a chair in the middle of the room, just like I was not long ago.

Dad.

His massive body is completely bound, and his pale-blue shirt is soaked through with blood, his face bruised, swollen, and bloodied, almost unrecognizable.

"What the fuck you looking at?" Yaroslav shouts, blood dripping from his lips and into the puddle by his feet. "Free me, Yulian!"

"I don't recommend it." Lukas emerges from the shadows like a creep, his shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows, splatters of blood all over it.

That was the shirt of the suit he was wearing at Alya's wedding ceremony when he took Dad to the side during the reception for urgent business.

"So the emergency was…" I stare between him and Dad. "*This*?"

“Yes. Thought it would be poetic to give Alina an appropriate wedding gift,” Lukas says.

“Appropriate is a stretch.”

“Why the fuck are you talking to him? Yulian, unbind me, now—”

His words turn into a mumble when Lukas slaps duct tape over his mouth. “Shh. You’ve talked enough for a lifetime.”

“Where’s Mikailo?” I study my surroundings, searching for the big oaf. “I’m surprised he’s not shadowing you.”

“He’d never agree to hurting Yaroslav. Unfortunately, he can be emotional, caring, and loving toward a father who never gave two fucks about us. I spiked his drink during the wedding. That way, he’ll sleep peacefully instead of interfering.”

“And when he wakes up?”

“I’ll remind him about the man who left his mother to freeze to death in the slums.”

“And if that doesn’t convince him?”

“It will. Leave Mikailo to me as I know how to deal with him best. He’s my brother before he’s Yaroslav’s son.”

I can trust that. They were always close. As close as Alya and me.

“You’ve thought this through.”

“I have.”

I jut my chin in Dad’s direction, who’s still mumbling and swaying in his chair. “You do realize his loyalists will be at your throat like hyenas, right?”

“Not quite.” Lukas grabs a long rod from the table, running his fingers over the metal. “I swayed about half of the leaders to my side.”

“While I’m all for the coup d’état attempts, the other half still exists.”

“That’s where *you* come in.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. The other half will never fully follow me since a bastard will always be a bastard in their eyes, but with you as co-leader, we’ll have both legitimacy and fear on our side.” He stands taller. “I’m offering you a deal —rule together and cut the old man out for good.”

“That other half you talk about contains some traditionals like my father who’ll never accept me anyway, because I plan to spend the rest of my life with the man I love.”

He raises a brow.

“If you have objections to that, I’ll walk out right now and leave you fighting rebellions for the rest of your reign.”

“I have no particular objections. I was already aware of your extracurricular activities, and it changes nothing.”

“No?”

“No. You can just kill them, Yulian. Throw away the trash, do a house cleanup. We need that anyway when changing leadership.”

I smile. “I like the way you think.”

“Everyone does.” His lips twitch a bit, then he removes the duct tape from Dad’s mouth. “Any last words, Yaroslav?”

He spits blood on the ground at Lukas’s feet. “No one will accept the son of a whore and a faggot.”

Lukas snarls, but he smooths it into an evil smile. “Guess you won’t be around to see your legacy taken over by us.”

“You know.” I walk toward my father, pulling out my gun. “I used to think being beaten by you on the regular was *my* fault. That I was doing something wrong by just existing and being a disappointment to you. So I wanted to prove myself. I bled more, trained harder, broke my bones over and over, hoping you’d look at me as a son instead of a mistake. But you never did, and somewhere along the way, I stopped caring. And now, I realize it’s not me, it’s *you*. It’s always been you and your closed-up thinking and lack of paternal care. You fathered four children but were never a *father*, and I believe it’s time to end the nightmare for all of us.” I lift the gun, my hand surprisingly steady. “Goodbye, Yaroslav.”

And then I pull the trigger.

The bullet sinks into his forehead, the crack reverberating through the dungeon and rattling my ears.

I wait for anguish. Regret. Guilt. Instead, there’s nothing but relief.

The burden I’ve carried for years peels away as his dead eyes glaze into the void.

I’m finally…*free*.

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38

VAUGHN

I'm losing my mind.

My thoughts.

My control.

They all seem to have disappeared the moment I read Yulian's letter.

He *abandoned* me.

Those are the words that keep playing at the back of my mind—that Yulian left me, that I *lost* him to someone else.

I've had those same fleeting thoughts about him over the years, mostly around the anniversary of the time we spent in the cave. Or sometimes, when I was lying in bed awake beside Danika, just scrolling through the images he posted on social media. I imagined what it'd feel like if I heard Yulian was engaged or was getting married.

The thought of him walking down the aisle with someone else always left me in a sour mood.

But that was before I met him again, *touched* him again, had him so far under my skin and inside me—literally and figuratively—that I haven't been able to breathe properly.

Ever since I read that letter, I feel like a fireball has been sitting on my chest, suffocating me.

If he says his vows to someone else, I won't just lose him, I'll lose myself, too.

I tap my fingers on the phone as the car rolls through the streets of Chicago.

“Go faster,” I tell the driver, my heart caught in my throat.

Since my uncles gave Yulian their private jet, I had to fly commercial to Moscow, where Uncle Anton’s second private jet picked me up.

He gave me clear orders not to step into Chicago on my own and that we should meet up in New York and regroup.

But I *can’t* do that.

I already lost so much time in Russia’s airspace, not to mention the entire night I was blissfully sleeping while Yulian was flying to his wedding.

So no, I won’t wait. I had to be here now.

I don’t care if it’s a suicide mission. Yaroslav won’t be stupid enough to hurt me, knowing my father will skin him alive if he dares to so much as touch me.

Uncle Anton said Yulian left late that night, so he must’ve arrived in Chicago yesterday. He wouldn’t have been expected to get married so soon, right?

My fist clenches.

I was so mad at my uncles for letting him go without telling me, for facilitating it, for twisting the knife Yulian plunged into my heart.

“He said he had urgent business in Chicago, and he had to go alone to protect you,” Uncle Anton told me. “We couldn’t exactly refuse.”

They still should’ve.

They could’ve *at least* woken me up so I could stop him. Or go with him. I would’ve done *something* to relieve this pain that’s been plaguing me since he left.

I stare at the texts I sent him. There’s no reply. He did read them, though.

Fuck.

I run a frantic hand through my hair, my composure ripping at the seams.

He can ignore me all he wants, but this will not go as he wishes.

If he believes he can step all over my heart and walk away, he has another thing coming.

But even as I tell myself that, my fingers tremble around my phone as I refresh our text exchange, holding on to a sliver of hope that I’ll receive a

morsel of his attention.

Something.

Anything.

But nothing comes through, and my heart shatters for the hundredth time since he left me.

I've never been this distraught and broken. When Danika cheated on me and I wasn't hurt, I thought it was because I lacked emotions, but now I realize it was because I never loved her.

Not even close.

Not even a little.

Danika was a replacement for the actual man I was in love with.

And now that he deserted me, I feel like my heart will rip out of my chest.

It *hurts.*

So much, I can hardly breathe.

My dad's name flickers on the screen, and I wince as I pick up.

"You're in Chicago?" he asks with veiled concern.

"I have to be."

"It's dangerous! You have no guards to protect you in case things go south. Just wait for me, son, okay?"

"I can't."

"Vaughn…"

"I don't have time, Dad. If I must burn Chicago to the ground to get him back, I will."

"It's too late."

My fingers tighten on the phone as my body shakes. "W-what?"

"The marriage alliance between Chicago and Boston already happened. Just come home, okay? Let's think this through."

My hand with the phone falls to my side as his words slam into me like a bullet to the chest.

It's already happened.

Yulian said his vows to someone who isn't me.

I'm too late.

Just like four years ago, I missed the timeline.

I'm trapped in a parallel world that never crosses with his.

Again.

I lost him.

Again.

No. No.

Fuck *no.*

A universe where he belongs to someone else doesn't fucking exist.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I'M STANDING IN FRONT OF THE GRAND GATE OF THE Dimitriev mansion.

Yes, this is suicidal, but I don't give a fuck.

They can shoot me, bury me alive, but I'll still come for him.

I stand tall, my hand holding my gun at my side, waiting for the guards to come at me.

The gate creaks open, and suspicion twists in my gut, but I step through anyway, my heart hollow since Dad gave me the news.

No guards wait inside—strange. I move down the long driveway, my breath rough, edging toward a pant.

I still can't get proper air into my lungs.

Is this a panic attack?

A life crisis?

Otherwise, why would someone as healthy as I am struggle to breathe?

I always thought I'd be the one to hurt him, but he's the one who shattered my heart to pieces and stomped all over it.

My feet drag slowly on the concrete until they come to a halt.

For a heartbeat, I think it's a hallucination. But then the figure rushes nearer—hair wild, shirt untucked against dark suit pants, movement so achingly familiar.

Yulian.

I'm ready to tackle him to the ground, tie him the fuck up, and haul him over my shoulder. Kidnap him. Hide him somewhere no one will find him.

He stops in front of me, panting, and I notice the blood splattered on his shirt, soaking through the fabric and marring his neck.

It can't be—

"Not mine," he breathes out, his face brighter, looking happy, radiant even, because…he got married?

The thought drags me under, as if someone's cut the wire holding me together.

I grab the back of his head, pulling at his hair as I growl, "How dare you get married?"

"It's—"

"I don't care if you are married." My voice is harsh, brimming with rage, and pain courses through my veins. "You're already fucking mine. Do you hear me?"

He grins wide.

"You think I'm joking? I'll kidnap you and hold you captive for the rest of your life if I have to."

"Toxic. I love it."

"Shut the hell up." I search our surroundings, holding the gun up. "Where's your wife? Let me meet her real quick."

"Aw, you'll kill her?"

"If she doesn't divorce you, yes."

He laughs, and the rich sound stings deeper because now, he's not all mine anymore.

Someone else has him.

Temporarily.

Just for now.

I'll make sure to end this marriage even if it's the last thing I do.

"Stop laughing." I pull on his hair harder. "Where is she?"

"There's no wife." He shows me his empty ring finger. "Will be open to having a husband, though. Not now, but I'm putting it on the table, just in case."

"What?" My grip loosens a little.

"I didn't get married," he admits softly, then he tells me about the switch, that Alina got married instead, and how Levian Markov played a role in it. He recounts the story of how the Boston Bratva was behind the attack that both brought us closer and pulled us apart four years ago.

The alliance with Lukas.

Killing Yaroslav.

My head reels from the onslaught of information, but every word rewrites the last couple of days of hell in my head.

By the time he's done, my knees almost give out.

I’m now holding on to his shoulders tightly as sharp breaths puncture my lungs. It’s as if I’ve been drowning for years, and I’m finally coming up for air.

He’s here.

He’s not someone else’s.

Yulian is still fucking *mine*.

“I don’t think I would’ve been able to do it anyway.” He palms my cheek, stroking gently. “Marry someone else, I mean. Knowing me, I would’ve probably dramatically run back up the aisle or something.”

“I love you, Yulian,” I confess with my heart in my throat, my voice slightly choked. “I think I’ve been in love with you since we were teens. I fought it, ignored it, denied it, tried to replace you with someone else, but it never worked. The more I tried to strangle my feelings for you, snuff them out, and bury them, the stronger they became. I’m done fighting you, us, and everything we can be together. I’ll fight for you, *kill* for you, I’ll protect you from the world with my life, but you’re not allowed to leave me. You make me a better man, baby, and I don’t ever want to see the version of me without you again.”

He lets out a breath, his fingers trembling on my face. “Fuck.”

“Is that…all you have to say?”

“Give me a second. I need to process that and learn it by heart. Tattoo it on me, maybe.”

I smile, stroking his hair. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I always tattoo you on me, though.” He steps back, forcing me to release him.

Before I can complain about the lack of him, he undoes the top buttons of his shirt, then takes my hand and makes me trace the tattoo right over his heart.

The Cyrillic script disappears beneath my fingers as he says, “*Я с тобой (Ya s toboy).* You told me this in the cave when I thought I’d die. It was the first time someone other than my mother cared about me so deeply. I’ve been in love with you ever since, Mishka.”

My lips part. “Yulian…”

“I might have been desperate in chasing you, and sure, from the outside looking in, some would think I’m an idiot for always loving you when you could be emotionally stunted and aloof.” He tightens his grip on my fingers, then brings them to his mouth to drop a kiss on them one by one. “But I

always knew you cared about me. You might act cold and distant at times, but truly, you've always looked out for me, cared about me, spoiled me shitless. When I'm in a dangerous situation, you always show up for me, and that's what makes me love you more, baby. I don't want my life without you. I *refuse* to have it. And I'm never letting you go again. Not in this lifetime, not in the next."

"That's what I should be saying." I slide the gun into my waistband and palm his face. "You're mine, and I'm yours for the rest of our lives."

"You'll never get rid of me."

I smile. "I'm counting on it."

And then he kisses me, sensually, passionately, with every morsel of wildness that Yulian is.

And I know, I just know, that our new life starts now.

No more hiding.

No more fear.

Just him and me.

The villain I hunted only to fall in love with.

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EPILOGUE 1 — VAUGHN

ONE MONTH LATER

Maybe this was a mistake.

Not transferring to Brighton Island—that was perfect. I get to live with Yulian in our coastal house. But this…this meeting.

If you can even call it that.

"So let me get this straight," Niko says. "Or gay, see what I did there? Muahaha!"

"You're so lame," Killian says from where he's standing near the door as if he's looking for a chance to slip out.

"*You* are lame, Satan's heir," Niko shoots back.

We're at the Heathens' mansion. Technically, no one lives here anymore except for Kill and his girlfriend, Glyn. The rest of us just show up to strategize, which pisses Kill off because he'll have to spend time with us instead of his girlfriend—hence his stance by the door.

Jeremy is mostly with his girlfriend, Cecily, in a secluded renovated cottage on the island. Nikolai can be found in the penthouse with his boyfriend, Brandon, and Gareth in his own mansion with his ex-professor.

And I…well, I'm always in our home—the one I bought because I wanted to have Yulian all to myself, shielded from the world, where no one can see us or take him from me.

I still feel that urge sometimes, wanting to shield him, to hide him, especially when people start flirting with him in fucking public. Often while I'm standing right there.

Do I start shooting lasers from my eyes and actually contemplate shooting them? Sure. I blame Yulian for being irresistible.

Not that he encourages the behavior, but he does love seeing me get jealous just so I'll pull him possessively by the waist, so everyone knows I own him.

He's mine. Not theirs.

I figured it was about time I introduced him to the guys and come out while I'm at it.

I dislike being labeled as bi or gay or anything else.

All I know is that I love Yulian. And I always will.

I lace my fingers through Yulian's and settle our joined hands in my lap. I'm perched on the armrest of his chair instead of taking one of the empty seats by Gareth or Jeremy—or even by Niko, who shot to his feet the moment he noticed the gesture.

Doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. I'll never get tired of holding Yulian's hand in public, rubbing my thumb across the back of his hand, letting the whole world know that we're together.

I know it means so much to him as well. He waited so long for me to stop hiding, denying, and hurting him, whether unintentionally or not.

He grins up at me, squeezing my hand tighter, and my heart thuds in my chest.

Seriously, why does he keep becoming more…gorgeous? He's dressed in leather—we both are because we rode his motorcycle here. He looks fucking delicious in the open jacket that reveals a skin-tight white shirt, hair finger-raked by me just earlier when I kissed him senseless before we stepped into the mansion.

But it's mostly his eyes that seem to shoot an arrow to my chest. They've been brighter, the blue lighter, the brown shimmering. Since we vowed to spend the rest of our lives together, he's been getting more beautiful by the day.

Or maybe I'm falling in love with him a bit more every day.

"You know what this means?" Niko asks, grinning. "V is now part of the fun dick alliance as well. Woohoo! I was the blueprint, just saying."

"Get over yourself," Gareth says.

"Nah, you bitches are following in my footsteps. I feel like a proud papa."

"I'm *older* than you," Gareth protests.

"Details, details. Anyway, Jer." Nikolai pats his shoulder. "You're, like, the straight token friend of the group."

“Thanks?”

“Nah, that wasn’t a compliment.” He shakes his head. “My condolences.”

“I’m happily straight and even happier with Cecily, Niko. Stop making it into a drama.”

“I’m just saying.” Niko grins up at me. “So Yulian, huh? Knew you had a boner for him when you kept asking about his preferences at that camp.”

Yulian raises a brow as if he’s a dog with a bone. “You were asking about my preferences?”

“Niko was the one who brought it up,” I grumble. “And he said you were *totally* straight.”

“Tiny mishap in my gaydar. I was young at the time, so technically it doesn’t count,” Niko says. “Bet it broke your tiny queer heart back then, V.”

“Shut up, Niko.”

“No, tell me more,” Yulian says.

“Yeah, so, like, V was kind of *obsessed* with you, kept talking about you *all* the time.”

“Is that so?” Yulian grins, and I squeeze his hand so he’ll stop gloating, but then again, I love how he looks so happy, so I let it go.

For now.

I’ll be making Niko suffer for this later, though. Might mention his crush on Cyrus back then to Brandon just to make him pay.

Yes, I can be colossally petty.

“For the record,” Gareth says, holding up a hand and raising his eyebrows. “I still think you’re a fuckboy, Yulian.”

“I’m a *reformed* fuckboy.” Yulian places a hand on his now healed chest. “Mishka fixed me.”

“Aw, you call him Mishka.” Niko grins. “That’s fucking *adorable*, dude.”

“Disgusting,” Kill says at the same time.

“Cringe,” Gareth adds.

“No one asked for your opinions,” I say. “Only Niko’s matters.”

“See?” Nikolai grins. “Told you I was the blueprint. Now, the most important question: you top or bottom, V?”

“Please, no more bottoms.” Killian’s face pales as he gives his brother, Gareth, the side-eye. “I’m still traumatized.”

Gareth flips him off.

“None of your business,” I say.

“A bottom, then?” Niko asks.

“We don’t do that.” Yulian grabs my nape. “We don’t have fixed roles, and it works for us.”

“You don’t have to tell them shit,” I whisper, and he just grins.

“I don’t mind.”

“Hold up.” Nikolai scratches his chin. “I need to know who’s the little spoon and big spoon.”

I glare at him. “Shut up, Niko.”

“I mean, I’m little spoon to my lotus flower.”

“You’re a little *dog* to your lotus flower,” Killian says. “Who’s still Landon King’s identical twin, by the way.”

“Told you they’re completely fucking different, Satan’s heir. Don’t make me punch you.”

“Is anyone going to tell me what he’s doing here?” Jeremy juts his chin in the direction of Cyrus, who’s lurking in the shadows.

“I’m not sure.” I grind my jaw. Yes, still not a big fan of Cyrus. One day, I’ll stop being jealous.

But not today.

“I’m here to make sure no one abuses Yulian,” he says.

“I’m here to do that.” I glare at him, and Yulian laughs, dropping his hand from my nape to my waist.

He enjoys the lash of my irrational emotions toward Cyrus a bit too much.

“I don’t think that’s the case.” Gareth whistles as he stands up. “Want to join me for a ride back, Cyrus?”

Cyrus’s face pales a little, and it’s the first time I’ve seen him flustered, but it only lasts a minute before he goes back to his magnificent poker face. “Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know, maybe because of a certain nerd you’ve been—”

“*Gareth*,” he cuts him off as he strides toward him and pulls him by the arm. “I need a word.”

Gareth laughs maniacally as Cyrus drags him out of view.

Yulian smirks, and I just narrow my eyes. I think he knows whatever is going on with Cyrus, or maybe he’s suspecting it, but let’s say Gareth has also been highly entertained lately.

We have dinner together after Glyndon, Cecily, and Brandon join us. Gareth and Cyrus never make it back for some reason. Knowing Gareth, he's definitely back at Kayden's side by now. He has attachment issues.

Not that I'm any better.

I honestly don't know how I spent the past four years without Yulian or even had the control to only see him on weekends for a few months.

Now? I can't be separated from him for even a few hours. I even take classes at a similar time that he does so I can see him throughout the day. I was separated from him for so long, I now want to savor every moment I have with him.

Two weeks ago, he went to visit his sister after he met my parents—who love him, by the way, especially Mom. Dad is warming up to him, though he still doesn't like that he put me in danger, but he has deep respect for him for taking a bullet for me.

So that weekend, I had to stay home and he went to Alina's. Two days, it was only two days, but I couldn't sleep properly and kept tossing and turning all night.

He also sounded miserable on the phone, even though he was glad to see his sister happy and witnessing that her husband treats her well.

Did I end up flying to him in the middle of the night? Maybe.

I also wanted to officially meet Alina and was not surprised to find out she shares Yulian's sass. She hugged me tight when we were about to leave and asked me to take care of her brother because sometimes, he doesn't know how to take care of himself.

She's not wrong.

He still has that recklessness that drives me bonkers, but it's part of him. I never want to tame him or extinguish his fire when it's what I love about him in the first place.

I'm just making sure he doesn't take it too far.

That he's safe.

And here.

The second we make it home, Yulian turns off the engine of his bike, rips off his helmet, then mine, and rotates in his seat so he's facing me.

"What's wrong—"

My voice dies in a moan when his lips crush mine, his tongue dragging wet across them before plunging deep. He slams me into the bike, forcing

me back until I’m stretched out beneath him, kissing me with the hunger of our first time.

And it might have been—if our past were anything more than stolen, fractured kisses.

I’m panting when he rips his mouth from mine. “What was that for?”

“I’ve been wanting to do that all evening. Just wasn’t sure you’d be okay with me giving your friends a show.” He licks my bottom lip. “Thank you for introducing me to them.”

“I don’t mind you kissing me in public. I told you I’m done hiding.”

“Well, can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

He thrusts his hips into mine, and I feel his engorged cock against my thigh. “Because I’m going to bend you over Chaos and fuck you, then we go inside, and you can fuck me.”

“You’re insatiable.” I laugh, even though my own erection is rock-solid at the image he painted.

“Only for you, baby.”

“Only for me.” I drop a soft kiss on his nose. “I love that.”

“I love you.” He sucks in a deep breath, then grins. “I’ll fuck you like I hate you, though.”

“Just the way I love it.” I chuckle and then slam my lips to his.

I’ll never get enough of this.

Of him.

Of *us*.

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EPILOGUE 2 — YULIAN

TWO YEARS LATER

I’m late.

Fuck.

I’m *late*.

The reality of my tardiness slaps me in the face when applause reaches my ears.

A wave of cheers and laughter rolls out from the wedding attendees into the cool evening air.

I’m *gloriously* late.

Nikolai and Brandon step into the courtyard as Nikolai sucks Brandon’s face, then they grin as petals rain over their heads.

Family members and friends shout their approval and congratulations to the couple who tied the knot today in a ceremony I should’ve attended.

In theory, at least.

In reality, Lukas demanded that I was present during a stupid last-minute meeting in London with the higher-ups of the new corporation he acquired and dragged me into.

Well, I *had* to be there, considering I own most of the shares, since, obviously, my money was used to fund it, and, therefore, my vote was needed on the expansion strategy. I told Vaughn it’d just be a couple of hours, mostly because he seemed dejected when I had to leave the retreat Niko planned for his wedding.

Everyone and their uncle knows Niko insisted on this date mainly because his best friend, Jeremy, is getting married in a couple of months, and he refused to be left behind.

Obviously, my meeting took longer than a couple of hours, was extended to today, and I had to spend the night in London. I signed off, nodded, smiled while picturing the head of anyone who made the meeting longer with their unnecessary opinions on a stick, and bolted the moment I could.

The flight to Tuscany took longer than I wanted, and then some idiot nearly crashed into me as I was driving from the airport.

Now I'm here, weaving through the crowd as people pour out of the ceremony area, hugging the grooms, slapping their backs, showering them with blessings.

I catch Nikolai and pull him in for a quick hug. "Congrats, motherfucker. You're going to have your hands full, Brandon."

"I'm fine with that," Brandon says with a soft smile.

"We gonna fight later?" Nikolai grins, and Brandon gives him a look. "Okay, maybe, like, after the honeymoon."

"We'll see."

He whispers, "Let's hide it from my lotus flower and V, yeah?"

I laugh, and he makes a discreet "call me" gesture. "Oh, by the way. Your man didn't look pleased about your absence, just saying."

I groan. "Was he mad?"

"Hard to tell. He always looks mad."

I groan again and rush through the clusters of guests, leaving the courtyard for the reception area outside.

Nikolai—or most likely Brandon—wanted to go for a stunning Tuscany vineyard-château destination wedding.

The place looks like it was carved out of a dream filled with so much good wine. Rolling hills stretch in every direction, thick with vines so green, they look ethereal under the summer sun. The château rises behind the vineyard and all around us—its stone walls warm from centuries of heat—and ivy curls up toward its terracotta roof.

The ceremony was set in the courtyard that's emptying now, framed by old cypress trees and strung with linen banners that sway just enough to catch the scent of grapes and roses. Long rows of white chairs still hold the hum of voices from moments ago, petals scattered across the aisle.

And that's where I find him.

Vaughn's standing at the altar, his hands in his pockets, the golden streaks of the late-afternoon sun catching on the crisp lines of his tux. His

bow tie tied to perfection, his white shirt stretches over his muscular shoulders, and every inch of him is carved to make my heart ache.

He looks mouthwatering, but then again, he always has.

If he sees the state of my barely-put-together tux, he'll sigh and fix it—my bow tie, my cuff links, my shirt. And he'll look so adorably concentrated while doing it. That's why I put in as little effort as possible, encouraging his perfectionist tendencies.

Over the past couple of years, he's often insisted on taking me shopping for clothes, carefully picking things that suit me, especially leather. In the beginning, I thought it was because he enjoyed the task of clothes shopping for his lover and I was salty about him doing it with Danika, but he said he couldn't care less what Danika wore, yet he definitely does with me.

He especially wants us to ride safely on the bike, hence all the protective leather he splurges on.

Let's just say I've ripped that leather off him more times than I can count.

I lick my lips as I watch him.

I love how he looks calm to the outside world but turns into my beautiful, sexy Vaughn in private. Sometimes domineering, other times needy, but often times just wanting to hold me to him the moment he sees me.

It's why I didn't sleep well last night. Because he wasn't there to run his fingers through my hair. I'm so goddamn addicted to him and used to him and irrevocably in love with him, I won't be able to survive if I ever have to live without him.

Now that we're graduating—yes, Vaughn is graduating early—I'm moving to New York; I don't care about Chicago. Okay, I do, but truly, Lukas is doing an awesome job, and I've kind of gotten closer to him since Dad's death. Mikailo as well. Alya insists on inviting us over to Boston for family dinners all the time.

The other day, we went to meet our newborn niece. She has the cutest little face that I nearly devoured, and I'm so going to spoil her shitless in true uncle fashion.

As Lukas, Mikailo, and I were making faces at the little girl, Alya said, "Seems that we needed Dad to die so all of us could finally be free."

And she's right. I never tolerated Lukas and Mikailo like I do now. Though it might also have to do with the fact that they don't have opinions

on my sexuality like Dad did. In fact, Lukas and Vaughn get along well—too well for my liking.

Similar personalities and all that.

But yeah, Chicago doesn't really need me yet. Maybe it will in the future, but for now, I'm totally moving to New York so I can be with my Vaughn. I can say I'm going there to help out with our newly found alliance and all that.

I still haven't told Vaughn this yet, but I have to soon because, while being together on the island during college has been fine, I think he's also been stressing a bit about the future now that college is over. It's probably why he's been a bit secretive and withdrawn lately.

As I walk toward him now, with the area empty, a devilish thought hits me.

I could marry him here and now.

No audience, no rings, just me walking up that aisle and not stopping until I'm close enough to tell him exactly how many times I've already imagined it.

Just him being mine forever.

Though I'm not sure about bringing it up, because the other day, when I jokingly asked his dad for his hand, to which his dad replied that I still need to prove myself—Kirill is just playing hard to get; he loves me—Vaughn got flustered and said we were still young.

It kind of hurt. I mean, yeah, we're still young, but Niko is also young, and he's already tied the knot.

I feel like Vaughn will really make me work for it—the marriage proposal, I mean. I'm kind of worried about asking for his hand and having him tell me no.

Will probably make me depressed, no kidding.

While Vaughn has been all in with our relationship, he's been weird lately, and I just…well, it makes me uncomfortable. That's because of all the time he ignored me.

And yes, I'm still petty.

To test the waters, I called Gareth and asked what the best way would be to propose to Vaughn since he's basically his best friend. Gareth said, "The best way to propose is not to propose. I repeat. Do *not* do it, Yulian."

That kind of soured my mood. Cy didn't help either, and Alya said to just go for it since Vaughn loves me and will definitely say yes.

I consider her words as I watch him, then remember that she's some sort of hopeless romantic.

But really, he looks so good here, framed by flowers and fading sunlight, like my own fairy-tale prince. A dark one, because, really, he can be a freak in the sheets. His dirty mouth is no joke now.

No one would look at the put-together Vaughn and guess that he fucks like a sex god and has the filthiest mouth.

But I totally love that I'm the only one who gets to see that side of him.

The unhinged, out-of-control, and even needy side.

He's all mine.

Mine, mine, mine—

Vaughn tilts his head in my direction as if he feels me watching. Those stunning hazel eyes lock on mine, and for a moment, the noise of the crowd disappears.

There's something curious about the way he looks at me like I'm his world, even in the middle of everything else. His gaze would find mine anywhere, and just like now, his lips curl in a smile.

I let out a breath. If he's smiling, he can't be *that* mad.

"Sorry I'm late." I stride toward him and gather him in my arms, burying my head in his neck to inhale him.

His scent goes to my head in an instant, leaving me breathless.

God, I missed him, and it hasn't even been that long.

He strokes my hair in that way he does when I'm lying on top of him, drifting off to sleep. "It's not your fault you were held up."

"I know, but I wanted to spend the weekend here with you."

"Me, too."

I pull away, staying close enough to smell a whiff of his cologne. "You're mad I didn't make it."

"I'm not."

"Don't lie to me. You were looking forward to this, and I ruined it. I'll be making Lukas's life miserable."

"Leave him alone. He barely knows how to deal with you."

"You're taking my brother's side now?"

"No, I just like that you're finally getting along with your siblings."

"You're still mad at me."

"I'm not mad, baby."

"Vaughn…"

“It’s just that I had something planned and it obviously didn’t take place because you weren’t here.”

“Oh.” I grin. “We can do it later tonight! What is it? Some niche restaurant you found?”

His eyes widen. “Actually, you’re right. I can just do it anyway.”

“Want to go right after the reception…”

I trail off when Vaughn lowers himself to his knee in front of me and pulls out a black velvet box. “I wanted to do this last night, even thought of decorating the courtyard and planned a romantic dinner, but I don’t need all that to tell you how much you mean to me, Yulian. You’re the reason I know what love is, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, ruling side by side, leaning on one another and just loving each other as best we can. Will you marry me?”

He opens the box, showing the two rings, and I stare, dumbfounded, all sorts of emotions sparking through me as I blink the moisture from my eyes.

“Yuli?” he asks, seeming on edge. “Baby, say something.”

“When I brought up marriage the last time we went to your parents’ place, you said we were too young.”

“That’s because I didn’t want you to propose first.”

“Is that why Gareth insisted I didn’t propose?”

“Yeah. He knew I was planning it.”

“Baby…don’t play with me like that,” I grumble. “I thought you didn’t want to do that with me.”

“I want to do *everything* with you, Yulian.”

“Me, too.”

“So…is that a yes?”

“Of course it’s a yes.” I grab him by the elbow and pull him up. Vaughn grins like crazy as he puts the band on my finger.

Mine has *Volchonok* in Cyrillic engraved on the inside.

His has *Mishka*.

“You like your ring?” Vaughn asks with a note of hope.

“I’ll never take it off. Like never.”

He grins, wrapping his arm around my neck. “Me neither, future husband.”

“I have a question, future husband,” I speak close to his mouth. “Can you become my husband, like, tomorrow?”

He laughs, and I kiss him through it.

Vaughn and I began with blood, and we'll have blood throughout our lives, but we'll be together despite everything.

As leaders.

As husbands.

As soulmates.

THE END

The Villain series continues with *Crave the Villain*, featuring Cyrus and Jethro's story.

You can also explore the books for characters who appeared in this story:

Gareth & Kayden: *Kiss the Villain*

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For more discussion with other Rina Kent readers, you can join the Facebook group, *Rina Kent's Spoilers Room*.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rina Kent is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and #1 bestselling author of all things dark romance.

Better known for writing unapologetic anti-heroes and villains, Rina weaves tales of characters you shouldn't fall for but inevitably do. Her stories are laced with a touch of darkness, a splash of angst, and just the right amount of unhealthy intensity.

When she's not busy plotting mayhem for her ever-expanding *Rinaverse*, she leads a private life in London, travels, and pampers her cats in true Cat Lady fashion.

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CONTENTS

Also By Rina Kent
Author Note
Playlist

1. Vaughn
2. Vaughn
3. Vaughn
4. Yulian
5. Vaughn
6. Yulian
7. Vaughn
8. Yulian
9. Vaughn
10. Yulian
11. Vaughn
12. Yulian
13. Vaughn
14. Vaughn
15. Yulian
16. Yulian
17. Vaughn
18. Yulian
19. Vaughn
20. Yulian
21. Vaughn
22. Yulian
23. Vaughn
24. Vaughn
25. Yulian
26. Vaughn
27. Yulian
28. Vaughn
29. Vaughn

30. Yulian
31. Vaughn
32. Yulian
33. Vaughn
34. Vaughn
35. Yulian
36. Vaughn
37. Yulian
38. Vaughn

Epilogue 1 — Vaughn
Epilogue 2 — Yulian

What's Next?
Also By Rina Kent
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