

# K: THE AFTERMATH

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A TREY SEQUEL

SHANDI BOYES

Edited by  
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## BONUS SCENES

This book is a sequel of Trey: European Redemption. It is **not** intended to be read as a standalone! It was supplied for *free* from the author solely for your enjoyment, so please keep that in mind if you find any errors.



## ONE



## KRISTINA

**N**ine months ago, Achim Novak killed me. He siphoned my will to live with nothing but cruel, vindictive words full of hate and maliciousness.

Only hours later, Trey Corbyn revived me in the same manner. He breathed life back into my veins by draining the black, hate-filled blood the darkness filled my heart with.

I thought the dark was my safety net, that it would keep me safe during my bleakest days. Over the past nine months, I slowly learned that isn't the case. It sheltered me from the horrid things happening to me against my wishes, but it stopped me from using the fighting strength Trey swears he's seen in me since day one.

He sees something in me no one else ever has. He thinks I'm special, where in reality, I was once just a young girl from Czechia who dared to dream for a better life. There have been a handful of times Trey's attention has made me want to tiptoe back into the dark. It wasn't anything he said or did. When he isn't fulfilling his role in Nikolai's crew, he's charming in his own barbaric way. It's believing I don't deserve his attention that's my biggest struggle.

My family were treated as lesser valued members of society for longer than I've been born. We were devalued because our blood was neither royal nor tainted with evil.

Now I feel as if it has a touch of both. Trey's blood is royal in a way he doesn't need to balance a jeweled crown on his head to hold his chin high. His family's legacy, although not as well-known as it once was, is still respected across the globe, and the reverence it demands ensures I'll forever be safe.

Even now, while sitting in the passenger seat of Trey's car as it's being loaded with a body, I feel safe and protected. Lester hurt me. Not as bad as Vladimir, Achim, or Rory, but he still died because of it. As did Achim.

Achim's head was returned to the United States minus his body so he'd be denied a proper burial. Most of the Czech Republic's population are atheist, therefore funerals are more based on a person's accomplishments than their religious beliefs, but the Novak's had their own strong spiritual beliefs. To them, all the horrible things Achim did in his life would be excused during proceedings. They'd confess his sins on his behalf, which would give him a free pass to heaven.

Neither Trey nor Nikolai were ever going to allow that to happen. They wanted him to rot in hell along with Vladimir. Although his head is stored in below-freezing temperatures, I'm confident his soul is experiencing a starkly different set of circumstances.

I stop smirking like a vindictive witch when the crank of a door breaks through the silence that forever shrouds me, or should I say, used to shroud me. Although my English is still developing, I'm not close to being mute.

Trey jerks his chin up about something Eight says before he slides behind the steering wheel of his Shelby. Fond memories flash before my eyes when he says, "I need to make a quick stop at

Jim's before heading to the restaurant Nikolai's party is being held at. Since you're ready to go, you can travel with Eight if you want?" His smile when I grunt sends blood rushing through all extremities of my body. "Alright, don't get your knickers in a twist, Duchess. I was just asking."

After signaling for Eight to go, Trey kicks over the engine of his beloved car. Although I've been sitting in his passenger seat for the past forty minutes, I wait for him to request for me to put my seatbelt on before I do. I love that even though I'm no longer battered, bruised, and on the verge of death by starvation, he still doesn't want to see me get hurt. It's one of the things I love about him.

Yes, you heard me right. I love Trey Corbyn. I may have commenced falling for him before I knew his true identity, but unearthing who he really is hasn't weakened the intensity in the slightest.

There's nothing more beautiful in the world than a broken man doing everything in his power to fix a broken woman. He could have ended up more scarred than he is, but alas, a shattered heart will forever beat louder than an untouched one.

"K..." Trey pushes out in a gravelly tone when I unclick my seatbelt a few miles out of Vegas. "We're already running late without adding in a detour to Jim's. I won't have time to make sure your thighs are drenched before filling you with my seed, so don't fucking tempt me."

Ignoring the way his tone both worries and excites me, I continue with my mission. The scent of a rain-soaked ground is lingering in my nostrils, my dress is still damp to touch, and the blood of a man who hurt me is dotting the sleeves of Trey's shirt. This is inevitable.

Only months ago, the catastrophic range of emotions pumping into me would have caused me to shut down. I would have

blacked out long before I took the time to work out why they arrived out of nowhere. Now I hold on for the ride, knowing that every exchange we participate in adds fusions to the cracks nowhere near as unsightly as they once were.

Like a cat wanting attention from its owner, I rub my cheek along Trey's beard, breathing heavier when the thud of his pulse in his ears reaches mine.

I couldn't feel love before him.

I couldn't feel freedom.

I also couldn't hear my heart thump in any place, much less my ears.

Now I hear its beats as loudly as I do Trey's.

I should hate how unstable he makes me, how dependent, however, each beautiful pump of his heart triples mine. It beeps in my chest, my ears, and in a region of my body I swore would never be fixed.

Within weeks, the horror I felt when touched was replaced with fascination. I was mesmerized that a big brooding man who towers over me even when sitting could be so gentle. He took his time with me, showing me how even events I once hated could be enjoyable if the right person was doing it.

I won't lie. There were days I cried when the guilt of enjoying what he was doing to me became too much to bear. There were times I thought I got everything I deserved because only someone wickedly immoral could experience pleasure after being so brutally hurt. Then, there are days like today, where my hunger is so rampant, even if the nightmares of my past want to surface, they wouldn't be strong enough to stop me taking what I want.

Trey says I'm a fighter. What he doesn't realize is my biggest battle is fighting my addiction to him. I feel alive when I'm beneath him—cherished and unbroken. It's a strange but highly



welcomed feeling I crave as much as my stomach once begged for food.

“Please,” I whisper in Trey’s ear in Czech, knowing out of all the words in the world, he’ll understand that one the most. I’ve used it on him many times when he refused to touch me until I begged him to.

With his hand gripping my nape to hold my mouth hostage to his, Trey pulls his car down a deserted side street. His hold thrills me more than it scares me. He’s not holding me roughly because he wants to hurt me, it’s because he can’t kiss me like I’ve never been kissed if he wasn’t being him while doing it.

That’s how he broke through my defenses so quickly. Trey says he can’t be gentle, but he holds me in his arms for hours when the horrors of my past rear its ugly head. He brushed my hair to ensure the bristles of the brush didn’t irritate my tattoo its first few days, and even now, months after our first shared meal, he still tests my food to ensure it’s safe before allowing me to eat it.

He’s gentle when I need him to be, and rough when his once-jittery and scared woman tiptoes out of the dark so far, the light almost blinds us both.

“Ah, fuck, Duchess. You’re destroying me. Utterly and fuckin’ wholly,” Trey says after inching back his kiss swollen lips. His beard is thicker now than it was last year, but not even its inches of wiriness can take away from how plump his lips look. He looks thoroughly kissed, which makes me want to kiss him more.

Feeling daring, I lock our lips again.

This kiss is almost violent.

It goes above and beyond any of our previous ones.

It’s the most real we’ve had.

“Jesus, K. Fuck.” I love it when he calls me K. Duchess will always hold a special place in my heart, but he called me that when he didn’t know who I was. K ensures me he’s with me, in the

present, not in a dingy butler's pantry in a country far from here with a woman undeserving of him. "I have to have you now. I can't wait." Eager to move along with his plans, my hands shoot down to the buckle on his belt. "Nuh-uh," he growls under his breath, stopping the slither of my hands. "Duchesses don't get fucked in the driver's seat of a Shelby." His smile when I pout doubles the throb between my thighs. "But on the hood of a Shelby on a cloud-filled, rain-scented night sounds about right."

Not waiting to see the flare of excitement darting through my eyes, Trey cranks open his door then slides us out of his car. Considering his leg was broken in three places during Alexei's assault, it shouldn't be an easy task. He makes it look easy, though.

The droplets of rain on the hood of Trey's car sizzle when he splays me across the gleaming material. It's summer, so the temperature can't be blamed for the shiver that darts through my body when Trey steps back. It's the admired glint in his eyes when he drags them up my body causing my shuddering response. He stares at me like I'm not broken. Like I was never used and abused. He stares at me like all my dreams came true.

In a way, they did. I just took the long track instead of the short, uncomplicated one.

"Tell me, K. Tell me right fucking now before I do something I can't take back." Trey's voice is rough and crammed with need. It has my thighs squeezing together as well as the tugs he does to his cock through his jeans. He's most likely begging for it to calm down. He has done that a minimum once a week for the past nine months.

He locks his eyes with mine when I breathe out, "Touch me."

They're dark, dangerous, and the very reason the light inside of me shines brighter than the darkness. "Where? Spell it out. Tell me exactly what you want me to do, and exactly for how fucking long, Duchess." His eyes drop to the gap between my thighs when

I spread my legs wider. It's rare for me to answer him with words. Mercifully, he has no trouble reading my every desire without a word being shared. "Good pick."

After hitting me with a wink that pushes me within an inch of the finish line, he tugs my backside forward until it sits in front of the air vents in his hood before he slips his index finger into the waistband of my panties. As his finger traces the seam of my panties, he runs the barbell piercing in the middle of his tongue across his teeth. Even with his head inches from my pussy, I can feel the zap that roars through my body when our piercings collide. You'd swear they were wired with electricity for how potent their zaps are.

I immediately shake my head when Trey asks, "Is your tattoo still sore?" Jarmon finished the last of the phoenix's tail feathers earlier this week. The buzz of his gun usually frustrates my sensitive skin for a week or two at most, but it wasn't as long this time around since Trey was extra attentive with my tattoo wound care.

He had a good reason for his chivalry. The longer I'm out with an injury, the longer he goes without touching me. For some reason, not being able to have his hands on me is the equivalent of being tortured to Trey. For someone who never thought they'd feel desire again much less be desired, his frustration tears at my heart-strings even more than him forever gaining my permission before touching me.

"Tell me again, Duchess. Show me how much you want this."

"*Prosim,*" I repeat without pause for thought. "I need you."

## TWO



## TREY

I check K's eyes for any signs of distress before pulling her panties to the side to marvel at the feast I'm about to consume. With tonight being Nikolai's thirtieth birthday, she's been polished and gleamed as if she never endured the revolting world of the sex-trafficking industry. Her dress is designer, her heels cost more than what her parents made in a month, and her panties have me reasonably sure I'll kill someone before the end of the night, however, there are parts of her that'll never shine as brightly as they should. She's scarred, far too skinny, yet still so fucking perfect. She's messily beautiful. A duchess worthy of the most pricy crown, and the only thing better than that is the fact she's mine.

Seven years ago, she *gave* her virginity to me. She wasn't forced, coerced, or placing anyone's needs before her own. She gifted it to me via her own accord, preferring an unexplained immediate connection with a stranger than having it cruelly stripped from her as Achim and Vladimir tried to do to her self-worth.

This will make me sound cocky, but I don't give a fuck. This is straight-up honest, so do with it what you may. Our fuck in the butler's pantry of the Dvořák's estate is what kept K's spine as hard as a rod during six years of torment. For her entire life, she was told what to do, how to do it, and for precisely how fucking long she was expected to do it... until that night in the pantry. *She* pulled my cock out of my trousers. *She* lined it up with her fragrant smelling pussy, just like *she* drove our exchange home by impaling herself on my cock with one quick plunge.

Everything was taken away from her *except* that. She didn't know who was kissing her, she couldn't see in the dark any better than me, but *she* decided her fate that night.

As she will from here on out.

"Scoot up onto your elbows, Duchess. Let me see those eyes."

I slant my head to hide my smile at her eagerness when she jumps to my command. I'm a cruel fuck who usually wouldn't give a shit about the needs of the women I was getting myself off on. That shit doesn't fly with K. Her needs will forever come before mine.

"This is gonna be quick, we have a party to attend, but I'll make it up to you tonight, alright? I promise."

Just like my pledge I'll never come before her, she can accept this guarantee just as readily. I've never made her a promise I can't keep. Take the tilt of her chin, for example. Even though she's peering down at me, waiting for me to devour her, there's no shadow on her neck. Her chin is held high in the air to ensure her invisible crown has no chance of falling.

"Are you ready for me, Duchess?" I swish my tongue around my mouth while silently warning for my cock to calm down. The scent of her cunt alone has precum seeping into my pants, and I'm not going to mention the catastrophe it causes from being mingled with the fresh smell of rain.

The soft cotton of K's panties is no match for my hand when she bobs her chin for the quickest second, choosing light over the dark, happiness over dread, herself above anyone.

After dropping onto my knees, I peel open the slit in her dress, push it up her milky white thighs, then band it around her waist.

"Christ..." I have no other words to explain what I'm seeing. Her pussy lips are glistening in the moonlight. They're even brighter than the diamond stud hidden by delicate folds of flesh. "I want you so fucking bad, K. My tongue is dying to shred through you. To eat you. To fuck you. To claim every inch of you." For each word I speak, K's backside lifts off the hood of my Shelby more and more.

Once she's an inch or two from my face, I run the back of my knuckles down her clenching slit. "Always hungry." I lock my eyes with hers over her thrusting chest that's extra plump due to the three meals a day I ensure she eats without fail. Cockiness fills me when our eyes collide. She's still here, with me, not the least bit tempted by the frantic calls of the dark. "I'll happily accept your cunt's insatiable demands over your hungry stomach any day."

I wait for the fire in her eyes to shift to yearning before spearing my tongue through the folds of her glistening cunt. The beat of my pulse in my ears doubles when she clamps her thighs around my head, overwhelmed by the buzz of our piercings connecting. I stole a bit of ice out of Eight's drink before sliding in the driver's seat of my car, aware Lester's death would most likely led us down this path. K gets off on me protecting her as much as her rain-soaked hair makes me the hardest I've ever been.

After giving her clit the attention it deserves, I blow a cold breath across her swollen and wet pussy, ensuring her piercing gets a tinge of the iciness from mine. She shudders in an instant. Her shakes have nothing to do with the coolness of my breath. My woman is coming undone, both mentally and physically.

“That’s it, K, give me more of that sweetness to devour,” I mutter through a groan before returning my mouth to her shuddering cunt. I eat her like I’m starved. Like her pussy wasn’t on my mouth only hours ago. I can smell her arousal in my beard, taste it on my lips, however, it still isn’t enough. If I had it my way, I’d only let her cunt leave my mouth to suffocate my cock.

When K’s hands move for my hair, I poke my tongue inside of her, acting as if it’s my cock. She has a tight, little cunt that’s super responsive to touch. Just my beard scratching at the scarred skin between her drenched slit and her ass stretches her orgasm from one to two. She’s soaked front to back, and riding my face as if she’s yet to come.

For years, she placed herself last. She still does it now without even realizing it, but when my head or cock is between her legs, no one is placed before her. Not even me.

I fucking love that about her.

Yeah, you heard me right. I love K, and I’m not ashamed to admit it. I’ve fucked many women in my almost twenty-nine years, but not one of those exchanges came close to what I experience when K is shuddering beneath me. There was no love attached to those interactions, no feelings. I was there to get off. Plain and simple.

Now, I’d rather go to bed with a sack full of sperm than have a meaningless romp with the whores who keep my brothers entertained after a long day. My cock doesn’t even twitch at the thought of a drug-fueled gangbang I’d forget within an hour of it occurring.

The only thing that twitches when the guys give me shit about being a one-woman man is the itch to kill. For the most part, they’re stirring me, but I’ve seen the way some of the men eye K when they think I’m not looking. They want a taste of the magic, convinced I’ll eventually give them a slice of my pie.

There’s no fucking chance of that ever happening, and I have

no troubles expressing that with my fists when word of their hope reaches my ears.

Just them thinking they can get a taste of what's mine has me eating K faster and hungrier. I grip her hips to stop their sways before dragging my tongue up her slit to circulate it around her clit. As my beard soaks up the remnants of her two climaxes, I coerce a third one out of her. I rub at her clit faster with my tongue before notching a finger inside of her. She's still as tight as fuck, and her insides are all-types of messy, but my fucking god, the greedy sucks of her cunt have me wanting to fill her to the hilt for every second of every day.

"I want to fuck you, Duchess. I want to fuck you so bad it hurts, but I need you to come again first. I need your thighs drenched and for my name to tear from your mouth." The pumps of my finger are brutal, but they, along with the growly delivery of my words, sends her freefalling for the third time. She rips at my hair as my name shreds from her throat in a mangled groan. "Yes, Duchess. Give it to me."

She's barely shuddered through the brutality of her third climax when she slips off the hood of my car, falls to her knees in front of me like the gravel isn't cutting up her delicate skin, then yanks at my belt. "Please," she begs like she can't wait to taste my cum for a second longer.

I wait for her to free my cock from its tight confines before scooping her up off the ground and replanting her naked backside onto the hood of my Shelby. I'm a cruel, heartless fuck who loves her desperateness to suck me off so much, I can hold back my desires for hours just to force her lips to remain on me longer than necessary.

Just like her kisses cause the shards inside of me to shine brightly like a kaleidoscope, her blowjobs make me feel invincible. Like I can have both her and my kingdom.



I can, but regretfully, I don't have hours to spare to show you that right now. I told Justine we'd arrive at the restaurant hosting Nikolai's surprise party before Nikolai. I'm forty minutes out from breaking that promise. If my pledge were attached to any other man, I wouldn't give a shit how late we are, but since this is for Nikolai, I'll do my best to keep it.

"There's no time for cock sampling today." K almost whines, but the bracing of my cock's head at the entrance of her seeping pussy holds it back. She doesn't breathe while I coat myself in her juices. She doesn't move. She just stares straight at me, ensuring me she's with me, at my side and not tiptoeing toward the dark.

"Are you ready to see the fireworks, Duchess?"

When her chin tilts, I could blow my load right now. That's how fucking turned on I get by her strength. She's so fucking strong. So perfect. *So mine.*

My last two words release the beast from inside me. With my hand gripped on K's nape and our eyes locked, I thrust my hips forward, impaling her with one ardent pump. She's drenched front to back, but the clench of her jaw is undeniable. She's hurting. She just now knows the difference between a good hurt and a bad one.

"Stay with me, K." I lower my hand to her clit to stimulate it before slowly dragging my cock back out. "I can protect you better than the dark. You'll always be safe with me. You've just got to be brave enough to believe that."

Like a real-life monarch, the fire in her eyes roars to life. She adjusts the spread of her hips, widening herself for me, before digging the heels of her shoes into my ass, demanding for me to move with a regal-ness I'm going to ensure she has for real by the end of this year.

Nikolai is right. K is my queen, and together, we will build an empire.

## THREE



## KRISTINA

I giggle like a child playing a schoolyard game when Trey throws me over his shoulder before he continues our sprint for the restaurant Nikolai's surprise party is being held at. I've gained some much-needed pounds the past year, so my legs should be more than capable of pumping out the steps needed to beat Justine and Nikolai's race for the same entrance. They're just exhausted from the number of times Trey made me come.

Who knew something I once thought was hideous could fill me with so much euphoria, the weakness it arrives with seems inconsequential. Usually, I hate anything that makes me seem scrawny and pathetic. My small stature already has me putting in double the workload of those around me.

I don't face the same issues when it comes to sex.

When you think about it, orgasming is as intimate as kissing. They're full of passion, love, and devotion, and more times than not, I feel drunk after every one of them.

Perhaps that's why my legs don't work? I can barely stay

upright after a glass of wine, so imagine the controversy four back to back climaxes cause.

Once we break through the entrance door of a pricy restaurant, a mere ten seconds after Nikolai and Justine, Trey sets me back onto my feet. Nine months ago, I would have anticipated being punished for making him late. Now, I'm smiling as largely as him. He's not happy we're late. He loves my smile as much as me. There have been plenty of times for me to smile the past nine months, but it's taken almost this long for my fucked-up head to realize it's okay to show happiness. Trey won't hurt me because I'm happy. If anything, he'll probably spoil me more.

"Come on." He curls his tattoo hand over mine before guiding me through the restaurant brimming with men and women of all ages. "The quicker we get this done and dusted, the faster my head will be back between your legs."

See? Crude, yet undeniably cultured.

The sweet smell of heat-slicked skin streams into my nose when Trey stops us just in front of Nikolai and Justine. "Hey, sorry I'm late. I was a little tied up."

As heat creeps across my cheeks, Justine leans in to pop a kiss on my flaming skin. The brightness illuminating my cheeks pales when it dawns on me why the scent of sweat-slicked skin doubled when she leaned forward. It appears as if Trey and I weren't the only ones seeking solace in modes of transportation tonight.

After inching back, Justine says, "Kristina, hi. How are things? I hope Trey is treating you well?"

"About as well as Nikolai is you," I reply in Czech, my tone cheeky and somewhat apprehensive. I don't really know Justine. She doesn't come to Clarks often. I don't know if that's her choice or Nikolai's, but whatever the reason, we've only seen each other in passing the past few months. She's busy keeping Nikolai's men

out of jail, and my spare time not gobbled up by Trey is used for study. I don't know what degree I want to do yet, but I'm leaning toward nursing. Dok has his hands full, so I'm sure he'd welcome an additional team member. This way, I'll remain glued to Trey as long as my heart desires. We can even do that at Clarks if he wants.

Once I learned that the women who prance around Clarks half-naked despite the weather are there of their own accord, I grew to like the idea of Clarks. The women are free to come and go as they please, so I have no issues with how they choose to live their lives.

Like all groups of women, some are polite and friendly. Others are rude and bitchy. Then there are a handful like Ana. It won't matter how much I stick my neck out for them, they'll forever place themselves first.

Unfortunately, selfishness is ingrained in some people. Even being a sex-slave didn't have Ana believing she was my equal. She forever placed herself above me.

I don't know what happened to Ana, and in all honesty, I don't care. Trey tells me he'll find out for me when the time is right, but for now, he wants the focus to stay on me. It's comments like that that had me almost tiptoeing back toward the dark. The guilt is horrible, but haven't I been punished enough to let the focus be on me for a change? Nine months ago, I would have *never* agreed with that judgment. Now, I'm a little more open to the idea.

Justine's smile reveals I'm on the money about her pre-party entertainment with Nikolai, much less the faintest pink hue coloring of her neck. "Good," she mutters, only the slightest bit embarrassed. "I told you he was a keeper."

Happy to shift the focus off her, she greets Trey in a similar fashion she did me. My stomach gurgles when she scrubs away a blob of red from Trey's cheek, believing it's lipstick. I'm not

hungry. My stomach is upset I've become so focused on myself lately, I didn't notice Lester's blood was on Trey's face until now.

It dawns on me I must have missed something between Trey and Nikolai when Trey mumbles under his breath, "What? I didn't have time to shower."

The smugness in Trey's eyes grows when Nikolai's roll skyward. After giving Trey an inconspicuous nudge with his shoulder, Nikolai guides Justine to the other side of the room. I recognize the dark-haired man he's approaching. He was one of the men who freed the women from captivity, however, his wife seems new to this lifestyle. Her knees knock as obviously as mine when a middle-aged waiter suddenly stops in front of me with a platter full of funky looking bite-size snacks.

"What is it, K?" Trey asks, his voice almost a roar. "Do you recognize him?"

The waiter looks on the verge of pooping his pants when he spots Trey's murderous glare. I had wondered if Trey's quest to rid the world of the men who hurt me was circulating beyond his crew. The waiter's response reveals it is.

The waiter sucks in his first breath in almost thirty seconds when I shake my head. "I've never seen him before. It's just the food he's holding." I throw a hand up to clamp my mouth when my reply comes out with a gag. I don't know what that black beady stuff is on crusty clumps of bread, but it makes my stomach heave.

When he reads the rest of my reply in my eyes, Trey pushes the waiter away from us via a hand to his face before he guides me in the direction opposite the way Nikolai and Justine went. My stomach stops flipping shortly after the fishy-smelling dish is removed from under my nose, but the pounding of my pulse remains, even more so when Trey asks, "When was the last time you bled?"

I peer up at him in both shock and fear. He'd never physically

hurt me, but his response when I answer his question could shunt my mental stability back by months. I can't recall the last time I had my period. Due to inadequate nutrition and a body forced to age backwards, it was absent for months after I was freed from captivity, and it only returned once around four or five months ago, much to Trey's disgrace. He hated when I got my period even more than when I chose a tattoo that would cover my entire back and half my stomach. He loved the design I had chosen, and its location, he just hated that it took me days to heal between each tattoo session.

"You two good?" Eight asks when Trey races us toward the exit we only just bolted through.

Eight's brows stitch when Trey doesn't answer him, and my stomach violently flips. Silence isn't Trey's strong point. He was silenced for years, so he doesn't seek it often. He's generally only quiet when he's upset.

Now I wish more than ever that I could speak English. I want to tell him he has nothing to worry about. Even if my period is late, that doesn't mean I'm pregnant. Achim and Vladimir didn't just mess up my outsides. They fucked with my insides as well. I can't fix the damage they did with pretty tattoos and piercings.

My damaged insides are unfixable.

My heart breaks for Trey when he walks us to an all-night drug store two blocks up from the restaurant. He shakes like we're in the middle of winter as he scans the shelving for a test to confirm if his worst nightmare is coming true.

"I'm not pregnant," I say in Czech. He can't understand me, but I've got to try something. Every second his focus is on anything but me refractures cracks he worked hard to fix.

I hate that he won't look at me. One of the things I cherish about him the most is that he doesn't look at me like everyone does. He's never seen me as a sex slave, a sales docket number, or even

Kristina. He sees me as *K. His K.* And now stupid, out of whack hormones have gone and ruined that.

“Can we use your bathroom?” Trey asks the cashier as he throws a bundle of cash his way. He’s paying way more than the tests are worth because no matter how hard he tries, he can’t hand the pregnancy tests to the cashier. Shame could be behind his motive, but I’m genuinely unsure. I’m having a hard time reading him right now. He gets jittery when he’s both angry and scared, so perhaps tonight he’s being hit with a combination of them.

My heart launches into my throat when the cashier says in broken English, “No bathroom.” I’m not gasping about his lie. I’m stunned at Trey removing his gun from the back of his trousers to aim it at a wrinkle in the cashier’s head.

“Trey...” Although I don’t think he’ll kill the cashier for denying his request, I have to do something. The middle-aged Indian man doesn’t deserve Trey’s wrath because Trey is unhinged about something he has nothing to do with. “Please.”

When Trey’s eyes drop to mine, the world shifts beneath my feet. Something has changed in them. They’re as icy and cold as they are after he’s killed, but they don’t belong to the man who unclicks the safety on his gun and curls his finger around the trigger when it’s pointed at an innocent person. “Five... Four... Th—”

The cashier tosses a plank of wood across the counter. It has a single key attached to it. “Fourth door on the right out back,” he garbles through the panic clutching his throat.

After staring at me for what feels like two lifetimes, Trey lowers his gun, stuffs it back into his jeans, then uses the same hand to drag me out of the chemist. I really shouldn’t say drag considering how I’ve been treated in the past, but there’s definitely aggression in his guidance.

I don’t know why Trey bothered gathering the key when he

kicks out the lock on the bathroom before he gestures with his head for me to enter the dingy room before him. I gag again when I spot the stall Trey wants me to pee in. It's almost as bad as the bathroom in my room at Vladimir's compound.

"No." Even if Trey can't understand a word I speak, he'll have no trouble seeing my denial. I'm shaking my head so fiercely, I'm hit with a severe bout of dizziness.

"K..." He drags a hand over his hair that's almost back to its normal length when his one letter comes out super husky. Once he's confident he has a better hold of things, he tries again. "I need you to do this for me. I need to know." He strays his eyes to the filthy bathroom stall. "I'll hold you above the toilet. You won't get near the fucking lid, I swear."

His promise shocks me. He doesn't usually hand them out unless he intends to commit to them. It reveals how important this is to him, how he won't look at me again with the eyes I'm used to until I do this for him.

With my teeth gritted, I snatch-up one of the tests out of his hands and enter the first stall. Trey stops shadowing my walk when I close the stall door behind me and fix the latch into place. I've been humiliated in more ways than you can imagine, but I've never used the washroom with a witness before. I don't want tonight to change that.

Trey's forehead rests on the door a mere second before his tattoo hand clutches the top of it. "You need to take the test out of the packet. There's a cap on the end of the stick. Remove that, then when you're peeing, dip that part into the stream of your pee."

I don't know what upsets me more, his knowledge on how pregnancy tests works, or the fact he knows I'm so naïve I have no clue what I'm doing.

Men like Achim and Vladimir didn't worry about tests. They



just kicked you hard enough you bleed even when you weren't due for your period, and don't get me started on the women whose babies held on with everything they had. I can hear their screams now. They're as heartbreaking as Trey's breaths rattling the door separating us.

Doing my best not to get my backside anywhere near the grubby toilet seat, I pee on the stick as per Trey's instruction, recap it, wipe, then flush. The instant the water whizzes around the bowl, Trey knocks on the stall, demanding for me to open it. I don't understand his eagerness. Even someone with a life as deprived as mine knows these things aren't instant. They usually take a few minutes to show a response.

Well, so I thought. This one pops up two lines almost immediately.

*Jesus Christ. I'm pregnant.*

"K..." Trey pushes out in panic when he hears my sharp gasp. "Let me in." His third word scarcely leaves his mouth when he commences kicking down the door. His size is no match for the flimsy material, much less his strength. He has it hanging on its hinges in seconds, and even quicker than that, his eyes snap down to the positive test I dropped to the floor like it's capable of undoing all the good things we've achieved the past nine months.

"Holy shit," Trey mumbles under his breath after taking in the result. "Holy fucking shit!" he utters again, louder this time. "Now you've got to say yes, K. If you don't say yes, you'll fucking gut me. You'll kill me more than any bullet that's ripped through my body. Don't break my heart, Duchess. I like hearing it thud in my ears. It's only ever done that with you. I don't want to hear it from anyone else."

I'm lost to where he's going with this—even more so when he falls to his knees like he did earlier tonight. Although disgusted about the gunk he's kneeling on, I'd be lying if I said my heart

wasn't pounding in three distinct places. A violent and dirty world brought us together. No amount of sheen will ever have me forgetting that.

"Say yes, K. Please say yes," Trey begs as he digs his hand into his pocket to remove a pronged ring that's missing a diamond. "You can put any gem you want in there, Duchess. A ruby, a diamond, Achim's nuts." He smirks during his last comment. "I didn't want to assume what gem you wanted any more than I didn't want to assume you'd say yes." He lifts and locks his eyes with mine. They're back to the same icy blue pair I've adored the past nine months. "You can say no if you want. The choice is yours. I'll never do anything against your wishes. I just really fucking hope you don't say no, especially since my kid is in your gut."

Hearing nothing but unbridled hope in his voice, I dip my chin. Although it weakens the worry in Trey's eyes by a smidge, he's not willing to let me off that easy. "It's not enough, Duchess. I need more. You're stronger than that. You're going to give honor to the Corbyn name. Your veins are carrying my DNA. A dip of your chin isn't enough."

Smiling like a woman stupid enough to believe in fairytales, I join Trey in kneeling on the floor, cup his chin, then whisper a word I've said more often than 'no' the past nine months, "Yes."

## FOUR



## TREY

**M**y brothers rally around K and me when Eight screeches out, “Listen up, motherfuckers. The T-man got married!” He’s as high as a fucking kite, doped up both on the good shit the Popov’s have distributed by the truckloads the past year, and the testosterone pumping out of me when I made K my wife at the Chapels of Flowers thirty minutes ago.

She may have said yes only hours earlier, but I wasn’t taking any chances. I wanted her to be my wife more than my cock is dying for a hug of congratulations from her tight, wet cunt.

Nikolai was right, those pompous pricks in white coats don’t know how we operate. They said the odds of K getting pregnant were virtually nonexistent. The sick fucks who brutalized her didn’t stop at her head. They royally fucked her over. Yet, here she is, once again proving she’s stronger than anyone thought possible.

*Anyone but me.*

I’ve seen it in her from day one. I just needed the head on my shoulders to overrule the tattooed one between my legs. Thank

fuck not even a tire wrench to the skull stopped that from happening, otherwise, if Achim had it his way, K would have his ring on her finger, and his spawn in her gut.

The thought alone has me planning a trip to Jim's so I can piss on Achim's face. It'll be my third trip this month alone. What can I say? I'm an unforgiving prick who can't be as compassionate as K. You could fuck her over backward and she'd still find a way to forgive you if you said you were sorry.

You won't get the same response from me.

I'll watch you snivel like a bitch to my woman until she finds it in her heart to forgive you, then I'll knife you the instant she's out of earshot.

You don't fuck with my girl and live. Lester found that out the hard way. He's still in my trunk, dickless and nicked up. I'll take him out to Jim's in a few. Celebrating our nuptials with K is more important than worrying about the pigs being fed a rotting corpse. They'll take Lester anyway they can get him—kind of like me with K. Grubby, polished, or deliriously happy like she is now. I'll take her anyway I can get her.

After waiting for my brothers to stop humping my leg like a bunch of dogs on heat, Eight says, "Let's say a few words while we have a round of drinks to celebrate."

"Do you mean a toast, fuckface?" Mikhail ribs Eight, laughing. Their relationship is better now than it was nine months ago. They still get into the occasional fist-to-cuffs, but for the most part, they tolerate each other.

The platinum black metal circling the ring finger on my left hand clinks against a glass of God knows what Eight hands me. He's a shit mixer, but since I'm not planning to hang around long to celebrate, I'll stomach the injustice.

Before passing K a can of sprite, Eight takes a swig out of it to ensure her it's safe for her to drink. If it were anyone but him

taking up the role I was born to play, I would have smashed his teeth in by now. Alas, even someone as possessive as me knows there will eventually come a time I can't be at K's side twenty-four-seven. I'm just really fucking hoping it isn't any time soon.

I raise my glass of frothy pink shit into the air along with thirty or so of my brothers when Eight says, "To Trey and K. May they fuck like champion thoroughbreds, breed like rabbits, and get a less soundproof door so my brothers and I aren't squashed against each other every night while stroking one out."

He sprints to the other side of the living quarters during the last half of his sentence. It's for the best. If he was still standing across from me, he'd be dead by now. It took months for K to learn it's okay to moan when she comes. If Eight's rile causes her to backstep on that even a smidge, I'll fucking gut him where he stands.

"I'm joking, man. I swear on my Ma's grave." He crosses his heart like a punk ass moron before locking his eyes with K's wide pair. "You know I'd never let anyone hear you, Sis. You're like a sister to me. They'd be dead before they made it halfway down the corridor." The truth in his comment lowers my annoyance. Eight does treat K like his sister. It's why he's the only man I trust with her.

Noticing the untightening of my jaw, Nero says, "To Trey and K," before he clinks his glass against mine and throws down his drink. After swallowing Eight's idea of a cocktail, he screws up his face before pivoting toward the bar. "Anyone need a chaser after that rat-shit?"

I swear nearly everyone surrounding me puts up their hand. Only K remains quiet, happily sipping on her can of sprite as if it's a bottle of Dom Perignon. Real duchesses know crowns aren't just worn on your head. They're also imbedded in your soul.

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“What’s the matter?” I lean in closer to K to press my lips to her ear, ensuring my words are only for her. “Is your stomach playing up again?”

K stops pushing her food around her plate to lock her eyes with mine. Although she doesn’t say anything, I can see her answer in her expressive gaze. Her food is fine. She’s just lost her appetite, which is very unlike her. Once I’ve proved her food is safe, she usually polishes off her plate before anyone else. She isn’t upset I rushed her down the aisle within minutes of her saying yes, she’s smiled at her ring too many times for that to be considered. It could be the whores. They’re prancing around fully naked tonight with the hope they’ll nab their own husband-to-be from Nikolai’s crew. However, K is use to their antics. If they stay away from me, she barely gives them a once-over.

That can only mean one thing. One of the many men enjoying the feast the once-whores now-cooks made to celebrate our nuptials is pushing her buttons. Eight is seated on the opposite side of her, so I know it isn’t him. It must be coming from someone across from her.

When my eyes stray to the three men directly across from K, Eight, and me, my jaw gains a tick. One of the men I’ve known as long as Nikolai. He’d never say a bad word about neither K nor me, but the other two are from Vladimir’s debunked crew. They’re older than my brothers, and badly trained. Vladimir let them get away with far too much for way too long. Nikolai is in the process of shortening their leads, but I’m open to the idea of giving him a hand.

“Which one, K?” I only speak three words but the violence roaring through me is heard in my voice. I’m about to maim for my girl, I’m about to kill, and I’m not the least bit deterred its occur-

ring on my wedding night. I told K I'd eradicate the world of the scum who hurt her, so events worth celebrating won't factor into it. "Which one hurt you?"

The obvious sticks out like a sore thumb when the man directly across from K mutters, "*Držte ústa zavřená.*" His narrowed eyes aren't on me. They're on K. That infuriates me more than anything he could possibly say. "*Nebo odstraním váš potěr pomoci ramínka.*"

When a chair scraping across polished floorboards sounds through my ears, I assume Eight is responding to the menacing gleam in West's eyes, he's forever on point when it comes to protecting K, so you can imagine my surprise when K makes it halfway across the table before my brain registers the fact she's moving.

West howls like a motherfucking baby when K stabs her fork into his hand resting on the table. Before his free hand can do any of the murderous thoughts in his eyes, Nero pinches his temple with the barrel of his gun while Mikhail squashes his knife against his jugular.

Their quick thinking ensures West's hand gets nowhere near K's face. She's untouchable.

The same can't be said for West.

He's a dead man no matter what.

I've just got to decide if I should punish him or let my brothers take care of business on my behalf. If K wasn't screaming in West's face, calling him a pig and the many other derogative words she's taught me in Czech the past nine months, I'd blow his brains out where he stands.

Regretfully, I have issues killing when my cock is knocking at the zipper of my jeans, begging to be released. K is upset, but the light inside of her is roaring brightly. The Duchess is at her coronation service, ready for proceedings to begin.

Since I'm right there with her, I band my arm around K's waist, yank her away from West, then commence walking her down the corridor to my room.

K fights me all the way. She digs her nails into my arm, kicks out her legs, and tells me to let her go in more ways than one. Her fight loses some steam when the undeniable noise of a bullet cracking through a skull barrels down the corridor. Nero prefers quick, clean kills over gruesome ones. Eight and I give him hell about it all the time.

With K still struggling against me, I head for the bathroom instead of the bed I planned to subdue her in. The water that pumps out of the showerhead when I switch on the faucet is fucking freezing, however, it does little to weaken the hardness of my cock. I've never seen something so erotic in my life. K is half the size of West, and a shit ton shorter, yet she was up in his face, ruling her monarchy like a real-life motherfucking princess.

"You showed him, didn't you, K? You proved only real duchesses rule their kingdoms with dignified strength." I step deeper into the shower until the water flattening her golden locks removes the gunk on her face she only wears on special occasions. "Nuh-uh," I say on a growl when her hands shoot up to remove the smears of black mascara rolling down her cheeks. "I like you grubby. Messy. Real." I bite on her lips for each of my words, loving how the roughness of my nips switches the gleam in her eyes from murderous to needy in less than a nanosecond. "My duchess doesn't need gimmicks to be regal. She just needs to be strong." The fire in her eyes I've admired since day one shines brightly during the last half of my comment. Desire has surpassed her wish to kill. Just like me, there's only one addiction she's yet to overcome. Me.

It's proven without a doubt when her hands drop to the belt in my trousers. I'm not wearing jeans like the night I stole her virgin-



ity. With Nikolai willing to put on a monkey-suit for Justine, I backed up his campaign with a pair of slacks and a button-up shirt. He can keep the vest and tie, though. Not even the marriage celebrant telling me it's tradition to get married while wearing a bowtie got me over the line. K likes my crudeness, so who am I to take it away from her?

"Slow down, Duchess. You're with kid." My fucking God you have no idea how good that felt to say. I wasn't shitting my pants when I bought one of each pregnancy test at the drug store. I was doing everything in my power not to fall to my knees and pray like a soft cock.

Dok is a rare good one in this industry. He took care of K the best he could, but when certain issues extended outside his perimeter of knowledge, he hooked us up with another doctor—a female one. Although she was sympathetic for what K had been through, not all her news was good. I could fix K's self-worth and mental stability, but I couldn't do sweet fuck all for her insides. Dr. Laura was so convinced K would never get pregnant, she didn't rib us like Dok when K's contraceptive pill went untouched for months on end.

My focus returns to the present when the heat of K's cunt wraps around my cock's head. She's so impatient, she didn't bother removing her panties. She just pulled them to the side like a hungry little nymph.

"Nuh-uh," I say again when K wiggles in my arms, wordlessly requesting for me to loosen my grip so she can impale herself on my cock. "Tell me you want my cock first and for how fucking long you want it, 'cause your every wish is my command, Duchess."

"*Prosím,*" she replies in her sexy little accent as her eyes rise to mine, forever aware my dick will never be inside of her unless she proves she's not close to tiptoeing toward the dark. "Two."

"Two what, K? Two minutes, two hours, two orgasms..." My

words trail off when a flare darts through her eyes during my last two words. “Two orgasms it is.” After securing a better grip on her soggy dress with one hand, the other weaves through her long locks. I then swivel my hips to get her tight, little cunt to open up for me. “Are you ready to see the fireworks, Duchess?”

Her chin barely lowers an inch when I thrust my hips upward. Her moan is felt all the way to my balls. That’s how hearty it was, and I’ve barely given her the first four inches of my cock.

With Eight’s rile playing on my mind, I seal my mouth over K’s before pushing in another two inches. I can’t understand a word she speaks around the exploration on my tongue, but I’m reasonably sure it’s a Czech version of “Oh my God. More. Please. More.”

“You’re so fucking tight, Duchess. I can barely fit in,” I say on a moan as I stuff in another three inches. “This is why your thighs are supposed to be drenched before I fuck you. My cock wants to hurt you.”

“No,” she begs when I twist to face the shower stall exit.

“We’re not going anywhere. I just need you in a better position so you can take all of me.” I carefully push back on her shoulders until the weight of the top half of her body is taken up by the tiled wall my cum squirted up almost a year ago today, and the lower half of her body is distributed on my cock.

“Ohh...” K moans as she begins to shudder.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. A much better angle for you to take all of me.” I notch in the last bit of my cock before adding a roll to my hips. It doubles K’s moans in an instant, and has my chest swelling like the steamy air my lungs are sucking in is made out of helium.

People say possessiveness kills relationships.

I say they’re full of fucking shit.

Possessiveness shows love. If you don’t feel threatened another

man is going to swoop in and steal your woman, you don't love her. Point blank. I'd rather be a neurotic, possessive, jealous mother-fucker than have K ever believe I don't care about her.

When I defend her, she sees how much I love her.

When I kill a man because he hurt her, it assures her she'll never be hurt again.

Just like when I promised her crown would be the first thing on my agenda once she was fully healed, I meant it.

She has my ring on her finger, my heart in her chest, and my kid in her gut. Next she will have her throne.

I just need to work two orgasms out of her first.

## FIVE



## TREY

“Doesn’t count if I weren’t invited,” Nikolai grumbles under his breath when he takes in the black metal band wrapped around my wedding finger.

He’s acting pissed K and I got married with only Eight as our witness, but I know that isn’t the cause for the crinkle between his brows. He’s as uneasy about the news Justine was given last night as I am. The Popovs haven’t handled a takeover bid since Alexei and Achim joined forces to pulverize my brain with a tire wrench, however, that doesn’t mean we’re sitting pretty. Even Rico agrees with me about this.

Although Nikolai’s reputation is fierce it has no authority on the other side of the country. The Gottles have had a stronghold on the east coast for decades, not to mention the fact the town Nikolai is planning to take Justine is swarming with members of the Italian cartel. Even if he’s just visiting that side of the country, his stopover won’t go unnoticed. It’s as risky as fuck, and one of the reasons I’m here, hoping to talk him out of it.

After returning Nikolai's shoulder barge, I mutter, "Certainly feels fucking real." I scrub at my chin, exhausted. With West's interference still high in her thoughts, I had to work extra hard to keep my pledge to K last night. She climaxed twice as requested, but it took me fucking her to the point of exhaustion before she succumb to the sensation she strived to ignore her first couple of weeks out of captivity. "We'll do it again when all the shit dies down." I stray my eyes to the flight plan Nikolai was in the process of approving before I interrupted him to ensure he's aware of what I'm referencing. "This is risky, Nikolai. I don't like it."

"I'm going in heavier than we did at Prague. Only a fool would consider acting now."

Although I agree with him, my gut still has a niggler I can't ignore. "The men in this industry aren't known for their smarts. We've fed off their ignorance the past four years."

"And we will continue to feed off their ignorance now. You're not the only man capable of cutting out the tongues of insolent men, Trey. I've had my fair share the past twelve months." He smirks like he's aware I removed West's tongue before feeding him to the pigs at Jim's this morning. He probably does know. There isn't much that gets past him.

With that in mind, I take a moment to conjure up another way to get through to him. If I were honest, I'd admit this isn't solely about Nikolai. We've travelled the globe the past six months ridding the world of the men stupid enough to bid on Justine. We had a common interest. Most of the men who bid on Justine placed down deposits on a pretty blonde sex-slave who didn't speak a word of English. However, K travelled with us then. She was at my side as she has been the past nine months.

She can't do that this time around. Rumors are just that, rumors, but if any of the ones about the Vasilievs moving to the

east coast after their failed bid are true, I can't risk taking K there. Achim is dead, the drenching I gave his head with my piss this morning assures me of this, but he wasn't my only enemy. The Dvořáks were high on my list as well. If they're aware of Achim's one-off siding with Alexei, K's safety could be in jeopardy.

I swore I'd protect K. I can't do that by dangling her in the face of danger.

Seemingly aware of my inner workings, Nikolai says, "I sent a crew to Hopeton last night. They're mission is to solely sniff out any rumblings of a takeover bid. Rico's contacts have been updated about our visit, and we've made it clear my visit has nothing to do with business." After moving to the other side of his office, he takes a seat in his big leather chair. "I'm not stepping into this lightly, Trey. I've put measures in place to ensure my queen..." He stops before correcting himself, "...*Our* queens are safe. I'll slit the throats of a thousand men before I'd let anything happen to Justine. You have my word I'll do the same for K."

As air whizzes out of my nose, I slump into the chair across from him. I want to believe everything he's saying, and in all honesty, I do, but the niggle in my gut won't fucking quit. Something feels off.

Nikolai does his best to eradicate my worry. "I told Justine she'd have the world when she claimed her throne. I'm a man who keeps his word." When my brow pops up, he adds, "*Now* I keep my word. Things change." He returns my jeering smirk before he mumbles, "You know that better than anyone. We don't marry whores, Trey. We fuck them, spill our seed inside them, then go home...*alone*."

"*Fucked* whores. We don't fuck them anymore." After working my jaw side to side to weaken its grip, I say, "Besides, Kristina wasn't a whore." Usually, Nikolai's riles roll straight off my back. I must be feeling a little bit temperamental today. "Don't fucking

start, Nikolai. I'm taking enough shit from the guys. I'm not up for more crap."

My grumbled comment wipes the smirk right off his face. "What shit?"

I want to tell him my brothers are as wary of his plans as me, but since that'll most likely cause him more issues, I direct our conversation in another direction. Nikolai worked hard to gain the honor of his crew. I don't want him thinking he's lost it just when he needs it the most.

"Just the same shit we've been hearing the past twelve months. The whores are whispering in the men's ears, worried your relationship with Justine hasn't just seen their nail marks removed from your back."

He clues on to my remark rather quickly. "They're worried they're being replaced?" When I jerk up my chin, he growls out, "They're not going anywhere. Whores are a part of our industry. Justine understands this."

A chuckle rumbles in my chest. Justine may understand whores are a part of our lifestyle, but she is far from okay with it. There's only one time she's come to Clarks the past nine months. It was when we arrived back with K. If we didn't need someone to speak on K's behalf, I doubt she would have stepped foot in the place the past nine months.

"What?" Nikolai sneers, annoyed when he reads the truth from my eyes. "The main compound is off limits because it's our home. I want Justine to feel comfortable here. But there are no limits at Clarks. If they want to fuck a whore an hour, so be it." After pushing away a sheet of paper with more aggression than needed, Nikolai lives up to his namesake. "If any of my men have an issue with my rules, they can bring it directly to me. But be warned, they won't be breathing by the time I'm done with them. Everything they have—*whores included*—is because of me.

I also don't take kindly to assumptions that I'm being led by my cock."

I'm an ass for smiling, but I can't fucking help it. If anyone had any doubt Nikolai wasn't born for this lifestyle, they won't now. Hell is empty again because the devil is once-again walking amongst the living.

Upon spotting my grin, Nikolai warns, "You won't be smiling when I slit your throat for goading me."

With a laugh, I hold my hands out in front of myself. "I wasn't goading, just testing a theory. Your reply pocketed me two freshly printed Benjamin Franklins."

"Testing a theory? Whose theory?"

"Rico. He's so convinced you're under the thumb, he bet two hundred dollars that you'd have the whores extradited to Russia before sundown." I wish I was lying, but I'm not. I bumped into Rico on my way to Nikolai's office. He was peering around the parlor, lost as fuck on where all the whores had gone. Vladimir was a pompous prick who preferred to display women as trophies instead of actual accomplishments. "He seems to have forgotten he's the only one bedding a kitten too timid for our way of life."

My comment brings Nikolai's attitude down a notch. *Just*. "Speaking of playthings, where's Rico? I thought he and Blaire were traveling back to Ravenshoe this morning."

"They are." Rico said that exact thing to me only minutes ago. "He just had some old memories he wanted to recreate before his flight." I hit him with a frisky wink to ensure he gets the gist of what I'm saying. Rico wasn't on the hunt for a whore when I bumped into him. He needed a strip of condoms. Something about party balloon tricks? Fucked if I know. He didn't stick around for an interrogation when I handed him a three-strip of rubbers from my wallet.

After shaking his head to rid it of the horrid image I forced in



there, Nikolai gets back to business. “Have the men traveling with Justine and me ready to move by this evening. I want to touch down in Hopeton before sun-up because every man knows a devil has never seen the sun rise.”

Although wary he’s still moving forward with his plans, his comment reveals he isn’t taking this lightheartedly. My first thought when told of his plans was for him to move in the darkness of the night. Even a soft-cock like Achim knew about the benefits of a 3 AM raid.

“Who do you want at the helm while we’re gone? Zoran has shown great improvement since Andros gifted him to us. He still has a long way to go, but it might smarten him up a little.” Zoran is the nephew of Andros Smirnov, the richest man in Russia. He’s rich because he has sanctions like the Popovs and the Yurys protecting his assets. If he entrusted anyone else, he would have been broke by now.

Nikolai shakes his head. “Zoran is a good kid, but he doesn’t have the balls needed for our line of work.”

I twist my lips, wordlessly agreeing with him. Zoran can kill, but only if he has no other option. Nikolai’s crew works on a kill now ask questions later motto.

I arch a brow, telling Nikolai to get the fuck out of my head when he says, “I need a man who will kill without thought. One who’ll never second-guess any decisions I make. I need a man as ruthless and as brutal as me, while also understanding my greatest asset has blood running through her veins, not white powder, lead, or liquid gold.” He locks his eyes with mine. They’re all sentimental and shit. “I need you to cover me while I’m gone, Trey, to keep our ship on course.”

Although pleased as fuck he still considers me his equal, notoriety doesn’t count in this industry. My family’s legacy became as worthless as a piece of paper when Cole killed our father. He

broke the rules we lived by and dishonored a sanction once worth millions of dollars. Could I have turned it around when Nikolai found me? Possibly. But at the time, I didn't have the strength to do that. When you break the rules in this industry, you pay the highest price. Cole's was his life. Mine was knowing I'll forever be number two.

"I can't. That's not allowed." I cock my head and arch a brow. "I'm British not Russian."

Nikolai laughs as if he's not precariously placing a lifetime of injustices on the line for me. "I'm well aware of your heritage. It's one of the reasons I made you my number two guy."

I straighten my shirt all pompous like. "And here I was thinking it was because of my roguishly handsome face."

It isn't the time for jokes, however, I'm lost of a better reply. If shit hits the fan as I'm anticipating, this won't just place Nikolai's life on the line. It'll put his legacy in my hands. I did a shit job with my family name, so I have no fucking clue why Nikolai is being so trusting.

I get an inkling of an idea when Nikolai says matter-of-factly, "I need someone I can trust. We're still on unsolid ground since Alexei's death. If we're blindsided by a second takeover bid, I need someone at the helm who'll maintain control. I trust that man is you, Trey."

His words floor me. Jaw unhinged, air-free lungs, floored. He's my brother, my best friend, but still, this is a fucking shock. Just like K, Nikolai doesn't trust anyone, so this isn't just unexpected, it's making me feel all teary-eyed and shit. Even my pulse is thudding in my ears. It's nothing like the thump it hears when K is around, but enough to have me convinced we have some sort of bromance forming.

After rehinging my jaw, I ask, "Are you sure this is what you want, Nikolai?"

He makes light of the shock in my tone. “It’s only for a few days. I’m certain even a *vyperdusch* like you won’t fuck things up that quickly.”

“Ah, you make my heart tingle with your sweet words.” My words switch to laughter when he flings his letter opener to my side of his office. The fucker is blunt, yet it still manages to nick me.

Smirking about his ominous jab, he stands to his feet. “Offer for Rico to travel with Justine and me, but warn him I’m traveling heavy.” His smirk shifts to a genuine smile when he growls out, “His little kitty might faint when she sees how things truly operate in our industry.” When I give him a look as if to say *and Justine won’t?* he adds, “My *ahren* was born to lead. She doesn’t kneel for anyone.”

With his mind elsewhere, he leaves me to finalize his plans. After gesturing for K to join me, and instructing for Eight to get the men ready, that’s precisely what I do for the next three hours. I organize for a dozen men to go over Justine’s childhood home with a fine-toothed comb, organize a heavy presence at the private airstrips Nikolai’s jet will land and depart from, then forward my schedules to Roman. He’ll give them a once-over to ensure I haven’t missed anything while I take K to her first appointment with Dr. Laura. Because we still want to keep Clarks location on the downlow, we’ll go to her office in town instead of her coming to us like she did at Dok’s request months ago.

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“Jesus Christ,” I mumble under my breath when I crank open the passenger side door of my car for K. I dumped Lester and West at Jim’s this morning but my car still reeks of death and desecration.

After slipping in behind the steering wheel, I roll down the window then fire up the engine. K's eyes shoot to mine when I say, "West must have shit himself when you pierced your fork through his hand. Serves the fucker right. If he didn't want to die, he shouldn't have threatened a mamma bear with her cub." I smirk at K's shocked expression. It lowers my anger by a smidge. "That's what he did, wasn't it? He threatened our baby?"

When K dips her chin, I keep my cool—barely. I wring the steering wheel with my hands instead of pounding it with my fists like I really want to.

"How?" K could say more, but she doesn't need to. Her eyes speak the words she's yet to learn.

I hit the steering wheel with a handful of firm squeezes before sharing a story I've never shared before. "Your eyes had the same fighting gleam my mom's had when they dragged Cole away from her. She didn't want my father to pick her. She wanted him to save Cole." I lick my dry lips before continuing, "His decision drove her mad. She killed herself five months later. Our sister perished right along with her." When shock crosses K's features, I explain myself better. "She didn't kill her daughter. She was pregnant when they tried to take her. It's why my father wouldn't let her go. He thought Cole would fare better than them." My sigh exposes how that turned out. Just like K, our baby is the only direct descendant to my blood line. Doesn't mean I ever want to be in the position my father was placed in, though. "Don't ever make me pick, Duchess. I never want to be in that situation. If you put me through that, I'll have to hurt you. I promise I wouldn't do that, so don't force me to break my promise."

Fear is usually the first thing K expresses when threatened with pain. Today is pride. She knows I won't physically harm her. I'm referencing the hurt I'll put her through when I pick her over our baby.

For six years, her feelings always came last. That shit won't fly with me. Her needs come before anyone's, including those who share my blood.

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**K** stops fiddling with the flimsy paper gown she's wearing when I flatten my palms on each side of her teeny tiny thighs. "You good?" It takes me placing my hand under her chin for her eyes to lock with mine. "You've got nothing to worry about. I won't let anyone hurt you. You know that, right?" My heart thumps in my ears when she nods without the slightest pause for consideration. "Then what's got you so worked up? You weren't this jittery last night when you married a madman."

With her lips itching into a smile, her eyes stray to our right. When I follow the direction of her gaze, my heart beats out a funky tune. There's a heap of medical equipment you'd expect at any gynecologists office, but a box of condoms is unexpected—especially since it's sitting behind a dildo-looking instrument.

"What the fuck is that?"

Dr. Laura's eyes pop up from the report she's compiling on K. When she notices the direction of my gawk, her throat works hard to swallow. "That's an internal ultrasound wand."

"*Internal?* As in, it goes inside of her." I very ungentlemanly-like gesture what I mean with my hands. It whitens K's gills even more.

When Dr. Laura nods, I shake my head. "Nope. Nuh-uh. Not happening." I nudge my head to the coatrack holding K's clothing. "Get dressed, K. We're heading out."

Dr. Laura jumps up from her desk as quickly as K leaps off the fancy bed with stirrups tucked under the sides. "If my dates are correct, we won't need the internal wand." Both K and I freeze like

statues when she garbles out, “From what I felt during my examination of your stomach, I’m guessing you’re around four or five months along.”

“Months?” I double check, certain I heard her wrong. My pulse is thudding in my ears, so poor hearing can be excused, and I’m not going to mention the fact K’s stomach is as flat as a tack. There’s no way she’s hiding any kid in there, much less one that’ll grow to my size.

Dr. Laura nods again. “Months.” She shifts on her feet to face K. “Do you remember the scan we did to check your ovaries and uterus?” She waits for K to nod before adding, “That’s all we need to do. If you’re as far along as I’m thinking, the internal wand won’t be needed.”

When K’s eyes lift to mine, I shrug. “It’s up to you, Duchess. It’s your body.”

After a few seconds of deliberation, she returns to the bed and lays down as per Dr. Laura’s instructions. Once she has a cannister of warm lubricant in her hand, Dr. Laura opens the front of K’s hospital gown so she can squirt the liquid onto her stomach. Her aim is a little lower this time around than the examination she did months ago.

“If we can see the baby’s gender, do you want to know what it is?” Dr. Laura asks as her eyes bounce between K and me. She smiles when we nod at the same time.

It’s fucked I even need to say this, but I’m kind of hoping it’s a girl. If she’s small and petite like her mother, she’ll be less likely to damage K’s insides more than they already are. She’s been hurt enough. I don’t want her hurt more.

After clicking on the machine next to the bed for a good three or so minutes, Dr. Laura shifts her eyes to mine. They appear wiser than her thirty-five years. “I was right. She’s just shy of five months.”

“She? We’re having a girl?”

I both crap my pants and mentally give myself a pat on the back when Dr. Laura’s chin careens toward her chest. “Due on the last day of November.” Three black and white printouts shoot out of the machine K and I were staring at only minutes ago before she hands them to K. “We will need to organize a more in-depth ultrasound in the coming weeks, but I’m happy with how she’s progressing. Her length is above average and she weighs approximately half a pound.” After standing to her feet, she wipes the gunk off K’s stomach. “Do you have any questions?”

With K too in awe of the printout she’s holding, Dr. Laura drifts her eyes to me. Tiny creases wrinkle around her eyes when I wordlessly request for her to give us a minute. She’s not squinting, she’s smiling about me putting K’s wellbeing first. K is still here, in the light, but she’s a little unbalanced.

“I’ll meet you in the reception area once you’re ready.” Dr. Laura squeezes K’s hand in support before she exits her office.

I wait for her door to click shut before joining K near the monitor still displaying the outline of our daughter’s face. “You good?” It takes her longer to nod this time around than it did earlier. “She won’t be hurt, K. Not only will I protect her, so will you.” When the light in her eyes dims a little from my comment, I add, “And she’ll have Nikolai, and Eight, and Nero. Fuck, she’ll probably even have Mikhail wrapped around her little finger.” I push back hair that smells like rain even in the middle of a drought before returning the tilt her chin should never be without. “She’ll never be alone. I promise you that.”

Most people believe K’s life was screwed over after our fuck in the pantry. In reality, it was years before that. Achim may not have raped her until after she gave her virginity to me, but his mind-fucks started long before that. He knew she had no one to turn to, and he milked it for all it was worth.

Just the thought of what he put her through has me replotting ideas I've been working on the past few months. They'll end with more than the streets of Mikulov being littered with the bodies of the Dvořák's men.

A new monarch will be crowned.



SIX



TREY

**Six days later...**

“**A**nything yet?”  
When Eight shakes his head, I tug off my jacket and place it over K’s slumbering form. She’s resting on the sofa in Nikolai’s office. Our early rising is noticeable on her face, but I’m wary that isn’t the sole reason for her frozen state. She’s tiptoeing toward the dark, as haunted by her past as I am when news broke that Nikolai and Justine are missing.

If I were to believe any of the reports circulating throughout morning news broadcasts today, Nikolai and several members of his crew were caught unaware by a Petretti raid last night. Dimitri Petretti, now leader of the recently reformed Italian cartel, was found amongst the carnage. He was surrounded by numerous deceased members of the Popov crew, and sporting a set of nasty bullet wounds.

Although the rivalry between the Popovs and Petrettis is well-known, I'm still struggling to comprehend what the fuck happened. Dimitri helped Nikolai last year. If it weren't for him, Nikolai would have never located the warehouse Vladimir took Justine to in time. Dimitri's assistance netted him a pardon from Nikolai. That's practically a golden ticket in this industry, so why would Dimitri go against Nikolai now? It doesn't make any sense.

"Move." Once Eight moves out of Nikolai's seat, I seize control of a computer that could take down half the world's mafia entities with one strike if it were placed into the wrong hands. While I seek missing pieces of the puzzle, I nudge my head to the foyer of P's. "Get word to the Yurys about a possible takeover bid. Go light with details, but advise assistance may be required." The Yurys are a Russian based entity the Popovs were founded from when Anatoly Popov moved stateside many moons ago.

"If they want more details?" Eight asks, uneasy I'm calling in backup only hours after Nikolai failed to check in. I'm not jumping the gun. I'm being prepared. Even with Nikolai's first five days on the east coast occurring without incident, my gut hasn't quit niggling. Its only done that twice before. When my father arrived at Mikulov earlier than anticipated and when I held my gun at K's stomach and fired—the same stomach now holding our daughter. My past could be fucking with my head, but I'd rather be cautious than be seen as a fool.

I lift and lock my eyes with Eight's. "Tell them they'll have to come through me."

I wait for him to jerk up his chin before rummaging through the information he unearthed between advising me at two this morning about Nikolai failing to check in after having dinner with Rico and now, which is almost twenty-three hours later. The evidence is shit at best. It has murky FBI prints all over it. There may even be a handful of CIA smudges. I don't care how much

shit this gets me in, those rumors about the CIA colluding with members of the cartel are true. They don't care who they have to work with to get their man. Dimitri's sister, Ophelia, learned that the hard way two years ago.

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**T**wo hours into sorting through the steaming pile of shit the bureau logged into their mainframe earlier today, K suddenly jackknifes into a half-seated position. Although Dr. Laura proved without a doubt she's five months along, you wouldn't know it from the flatness of her stomach. My shirt she's wearing as a dress falls straight to her thighs when she stands to her feet.

After snatching up a printout off Nikolai's desk, she makes a beeline for the door. "Let her go," I say to Nero when he blocks her exit with his big, brooding frame. He thinks she's stuck in the throes of horrifying blackness. I know that isn't close to the truth. She's too strong for that. Too fucking brave. She hasn't been quiet all day because she's tempted by the dark. She's seeking answers in the only way she knows. With silence.

After logging out of Nikolai's computer to ensure his secrets remain that—secret, I follow K's trek through the Popov mansion. To anyone unable to see the fire of life in her eyes, they'd think she's snooping. Once again, I know that isn't true. She's hunting. For what? I have no fucking clue, but I trust her enough to know she wouldn't waste my time unless she thought it was important.

"You don't want to go in that room, K," I warn her when her hand circles the doorknob of Vladimir's private abode a few minutes later.

Nikolai all but vanished Vladimir's name from the Popov compound after his death, but his room remains untouched. I don't

know why. It could be a reminder of how far Nikolai has come, or the fact even with Vladimir having many whores, this room also belonged to Nikolai's mother. Her perfume bottle still sits on the top of a stack of drawers K stops in front of a few seconds later.

"That's Nikolai's mother, Oskana," I tell K when she lifts a photo off the bedside table. I don't need to tell her the identity of the man photographed with Oskana. She knows all too well who that piece of shit is.

My brows stitch when K runs her thumb over Vladimir's face. It isn't a nurturing gesture, she's more clearing away the dust coating the glass than anything, but the expression on her face is concerning.

"What is it, K?"

Frustration slicks her skin with sweat when she struggles to find the right wording to explain what angle she's working. She has no reason to fret. Even with a massive language barrier parting us, she forever finds a way to communicate with me.

After tracing her finger across Vladimir's eyes, she does the same thing to Oskana, and then to Dimitri's driver's license print-out. My brows draw close together when she does the same movements again, except this time, she does my eyes, her eyes, then runs her finger over her nonexistent baby bump.

I'm still fucking lost to where she's trying to take me, but I give it a shot to understand what she's saying. "Eyes? Is this about their eyes?"

K's face lights up like a motherfucking Christmas tree before she nods. After tapping the photo frame she's holding two times to return my attention back to Vladimir—*I lose focus anytime her face lights up*—she highlights Vladimir and Oskana's eyes again before saying in a thick accent, "No devil." After a quick swallow she drops her eyes to Dimitri's license printout. "Nikolai."

"That's not Nikolai. That's Dimitri. They look similar, but

they're not close to being related..." My words trail off when the truth smacks into me. Well, I assume it's the truth. It's farfetched, but if K's hunch is right, and Nikolai and Dimitri are somehow related, this could be more than a turf war. It could be a takeover bid.

"You're so fucking smart, K," I mutter over her lips before kissing her hard on the mouth. Eight, Nero, and I spent hours looking at this with the wrong set of eyes. Now I have a new direction to focus my attention on.

"Get out," I demand when I reenter Nikolai's office with K on my heel. When the group of six men ignore my direct order, I growl out, "If I'm forced to repeat myself, you'll be buried alongside the brothers we lost last night." My brow cocks when a bottom-dweller wannabe grips K's elbow to remove her from the room along with him and five of his brothers. "You better get your hands off her before I remove them with my knife."

The acne-faced punk has bigger balls than I realized. "If this is a business matter, she has no right to be here. Women have no place in this industry, *especially* one like her."

As my hand slips behind my back, I lock my eyes with K's. "K..." One letter, and she slants her chin enough her crown isn't close to toppling, but her face won't be hit with any of the blood of Fuckface's brain when I lodge a bullet between his eyes.

As Eight drags the unnamed foot soldier out of Nikolai's office by the scruff of his blood-soaked collar, grumbling about how he's lucky his death was quick, I demand K's eyes to mine.

It takes them longer to float up from the floor than I'm happy about but I'd rather a delay than no response at all. "I didn't have a choice. War or not, I couldn't allow him to speak to you like that. You are worth more than any apology he could have *ever* given you. Do you understand? I'd take a thousand bullets before I'd ever let anyone speak to you like that." Nothing I can say will erase

the guilt I feel knowing I fired at her all those years ago. Just like nothing I can say will undo the damage Achim and Vladimir did to her, but that doesn't mean I can't try to show her she's worthy.

I gave up seven years ago. I let Cole and Achim get the better of me. I'm not doing that this time around. This isn't my kingdom, but K is my woman, and she's more valuable than any castle.

"Come here." The funky beat of my heart rises to my ears when K immediately jumps to my command. I'm not a chauvinist pig who wants his wife to be a submissive doormat. I'm relishing the way her scent can settle the storm brewing in my gut in an instant. We're in the middle of a fucking war, yet, one sniff of her hair keeps my head in the present instead of my fucked-up past.

After propping K's backside onto Nikolai's desk next to his computer, and removing a handful of blood droplets from her cheeks her hair missed, I ask, "You good?"

Only once the fire in her eyes matches the bob of her head do I commence working out if her theory has any credit. For Nikolai's sake, I'm hoping his blue eyes are a recessive gene, but I'd be lying if I said part of me isn't hoping K's theory also holds merit. Women in this industry are seen as Sir-Now-Brainless said. They have no authority or respect whatsoever.

However, if K is right, her assistance today gives credit to my belief that this industry needs to change. Not just for the sake of our daughter, but for the kid in Justine's gut as well. Nikolai commenced making adjustments the instant Justine surprised him with news of their pregnancy on the way to Hopeton, and I've backed him all the way, except now, I'm drafting a new set of rules.

Nikolai won't be required to follow them, but the insolent men who believe my family's legacy ended when Cole killed our father won't have a choice. If they want to play on my field, they must abide by my rules.

I don't see that being an easy feat. They thought my father's

rulings were harsh. They'll learn otherwise when the new ruler of their kingdom is crowned. He has years of injustices to correct. That'll take more than a bloodbath.

Lucky I know more than a few men willing to get bloody with me.

## SEVEN



## TREY

I block out the groans of a man being tortured pumping out of the computer monitor's speakers with my hand before saying, "Again. Ram it down his throat like it's your cock, Eight, 'cause I swear to God, if he doesn't do what I'm asking this time around, I'm gonna order for you to blow a load of lead down his fucking throat."

As Eight follows my instruction to the T, I stray my eyes to K. She's resting on Nikolai's couch—again. Her third night in a row. She's not eating enough, sleeping enough, and the past three nights have been the longest I've gone without her quivering beneath me for months. I'm fucking pissed, but more than anything, I'm over disrespectful fuckfaces who think it's a free-for-all since neither Nikolai, Rico, or Justine have been sighted the past three days. Not even Dimitri knows where they are, and he was there when Nikolai's crew were blindsided by an unknown crew.

In case you're wondering, K's theory stacked up. Vladimir had a ton of kids, but not one of them were born with icy blue eyes.



Nikolai's eyes are icy blue. They're identical to Dimitri's in every way. Even their hair coloring is a match. As was their DNA.

My eyes snap back to the monitor when a muffled, "Seven," sounds through the speakers.

Aware the Popov's family lawyer won't be able to speak with a gun stuffed down his throat, Eight inches it back out.

"Seven..." I hit the old geezer with a threatening look, warning him what will happen if he denies my request again. He'll be a dead man, and Eight will take his time driving him to hell. He's a sadistic little fuck who likes messing with his victims' psyche as much as he loves fucking eight whores at once.

Mr. Schluter succumbs to peer-pressure rather quickly this time around. He wouldn't do that unless he believed Nikolai is dead. No one double crosses a Popov and survives. Not even me. "Seven, three, two, nine, A for apple, C for Charlie, a comma followed by an exclamation point, then the letter J."

If I needed any more proof Nikolai has Petretti blood running through his veins, I don't once I place in the final letter Mr. Schluter deciphered to me. The once-locked file on Nikolai's computer doesn't just contain the results of a paternity test Nikolai ordered over a decade ago, it has a court transcript from when Nikolai went against Vladimir and lost. Nikolai was only sixteen at the time. The shit he accused Vladimir of doing to him isn't just sick, it slots in the final piece of the puzzle. I'm shocked Nikolai held out as long as he did. I get this industry has rules we must abide by, but fuck, it would have taken him a ton of willpower not to slit Vladimir's throat when he caught him unaware not long after his sixteenth birthday. I don't know if I would have had the same gall, and my father wasn't a monster like Vladimir.

After swishing my tongue around my mouth to loosen up its dryness, I search the file for the document responsible for me

breaking Nikolai's trust. I find it a few minutes later at the very bottom of the screen. It's Nikolai's will.

I won't ever consider the prospect that Nikolai is dead, and I'll never stop searching for him, but I need to know who his assets will be distributed to if the coroner believes the pool of blood found in Rico's apartment is enough to rule Nikolai's disappearance as a homicide.

In this fucked up world, even with K having my ring on her finger, my kid in her gut, and my last name, she is still owned by Nikolai.

I refuse to accept that. I'd rather kill K with my own hands than ever see her back in the industry that stole the light from her eyes. Then I'd turn my gun on myself. That's how far I'll go to protect her, so hacking into Nikolai's private file should barely create a rippling of guilt, right?

Fucking wrong.

My guilt is horrendous, even more so when I notice Nikolai awarded me an equal share of his assets along with Rico in the event Justine is incapable of accepting the terms of his will.

Although I could own 50% of K, it isn't enough.

She's mine wholeheartedly.

I'm not willing to risk that for anything.

"I need you to execute a sale transfer receipt..." When the pin-dick weasel on the monitor in front of me immediately commences shaking his head, I talk faster. "I wasn't asking. I'm telling you what you're doing. You will execute a sale of an asset like you did many times for Vladimir before his long-winded demise."

While Eight works Mr. Schluter's face over with the butt of his gun. I log out of the file and into my personal banking app. Eight's beatdown splits open the old geezer's right brow, but not enough he can't see what he's doing.

Once I've transferred the one point two million dollar

payment men in my industry believe Nikolai paid for K from my account into Nikolai's personal account, I pull up the asset transfer software the Popovs use for all sales. My already woozy head gets thrust into a black void of my past when the transfer receipt number is eerily similar to the number Achim used when he gifted K to Vladimir. If you switched out the last two digits, it would be the same number I punched into the lock of K's cell.

With my head teetering between the past and present, I fill in the document as if it was done by Nikolai last month before forwarding it to Mr. Schluter's law firm's email address. "Execute it." When he shakes his head, I grip the screen of Nikolai's computer like it's Mr. Schluter's scrawny neck and scream, "Execute it... or I'll execute you! Five... Four... Three... Two..."

I suck in my first breath in what feels like days when the whoosh of an email landing into my inbox sounds through my ears. It's the executed sale document that proves without doubt that I purchased K from Nikolai weeks before he disappeared.

After slouching low in my chair, I lock my eyes with Eight's through the monitor. "Let him go."

"You sure?" He drags his teeth over the piercing in the corner of his lower lip to hide his smile. "This fucker made you count. I know that's not your strong point."

I'm about to hit Eight with a stern finger point, but before I can, Nero darts into Nikolai's office, out of breath and red-faced. "They found them... Her... On the freeway. In Vegas."

While he takes a moment to catch his breath, I drop my eyes to Eight. "Get back here now." My last word has barely left my mouth when he strikes Mr. Schluter across the temple, knocking him out, before our connection is lost.

After joining Nero in the doorway, I ask, "Who was found?"

"Justine. Courier spotted her coming back from a run. She's pretty nicked up—"

“But alive.” *Thank fuck.*

Nero bounces on my shoulder like he did when Eight announced K and I had married. “Yep! Now we just need her to lead us to Nikolai.”

“How far out is she?”

Nero checks his wrist like he’s a soft cock who wears a watch. “Guess would be ten, fifteen minutes. She was a fair way out. Nothing much out there but sticks and canyons.”

After calculating how long it will take Eight to get from Schluter & Fletcher Law Firm to here, I tell Nero to wake Justine’s brother before sending word to the men at Clarks to suit up. If Justine is alone, we’ll need to go in heavy, as there’s no way Nikolai would have let Justine leave his side unless it was vital. He’s as protective of her as I am K.

I grab Nero’s elbow before he hightails it out of Nikolai’s office. “Keep things simple with Maddox. Until we know whose team he’s on, treat him as you would Dimitri. He didn’t have a Petretti visiting him every month in prison for no reason.”

Nero jerks up his chin before he races for the stairwell that leads to the sleeping quarters. I wait for him to disappear down the landing before shifting on my feet to face K. She’s awake and peering at me through scrunched brows. She knows what I’m going to say before my head even formulates how to say it.

“I need you to go with Eight for a couple of days.” She immediately commences shaking her head. “I wasn’t asking, Duchess. It’s not safe for you here right now. I shouldn’t have kept you here as long as I have.”

Guilt for snooping into Nikolai’s private life is partly responsible for my decision, but I also know this is the right thing to do. Whether this is a turf war or a takeover bid, blood is about to be shed. Justine was found near Vegas. That means the carnage will occur here. That makes it unsafe for both K and our baby.

Just as I reach the sofa K is sitting on, still shaking her head, a pair of headlights beam into Nikolai's office from outside. Since they have the old retro curved design most classic cars have instead of the modern square shape of Nikolai's armored fleet, I scoop K into my arms. Although it would be safer for my nuts to carry her like a groom does a bride, I'd rather my family jewels be damaged with a knee than steal K's chance to stand up for herself. She's only just learned how to do that, so I'll avoid having it lost for anything.

As I walk K through P's, she kicks and thrashes against me like she did last week when I dragged her away from West, but this fight comes with a handful of tears and heavily-accented begs. "No. Trey. Please. I stay. We stay."

When Eight spots K's tearstained face a second after we burst through the back entrance of P's, he curses into the humid night air before he races around to the passenger side of his car to open the door for me. "Where do you want me to take her?"

"The last place Nikolai's enemies would think to look," I grunt through the brutal whacks of K's fists.

Her nails drag down my back when I peel her off me to place her into Eight's car. "No, Trey, *prosmi*."

It fucking guts me when her tears dampen my beard when I lean across her body to latch her seatbelt into place. The only reason I continue with my mission is because I'd rather my beard absorb the saltiness of her tears than be tinged with her blood.

After yanking on the seat belt hard enough to convince it it's been through an accident, I press my mouth to K's. For the first time in almost nine months, her lips fail to part at the request of my lashing tongue. She's angry. Rightfully so. I told her she'd never have to leave my side if she didn't want to. I'm not upholding my promise. But what she doesn't realize is that I have to break one

promise to keep another, and it comes before any promises I've made: to keep her safe no matter what.

I suck in a hearty whiff of her hair before pressing my lips to the shell of her ear. "Go into the dark, Duchess. I'll bring you back out when it's safe."

In an instant, she stiffens like a plank. She's not tiptoeing into the blackness she once thought was her safety net, she's being unwillingly swamped by it. I tugged on her seat belt too forcefully for it to loosen its grip when she attempts to follow my departure from Eight's car, then I leave her utterly defenseless to the nightmares of her past when I slam Eight's car door shut a mere second after he slides in behind the steering wheel.

She's still with me when Eight commences driving away, but I lose her to the dark long before her eyes are ripped from my visual. She's gone, wholly and without constraint, once again lost to a miserably bleak existence, and I'm one teeny tiny step behind her.

I stole my duchesses crown to hand it to another woman. If that doesn't expose how badly I'm being snowballed by my past, nothing will.

## EIGHT



## KRISTINA

**N**ine months ago, Trey pulled me out of the blackness. He made me feel safe and protected, cared for and cherished.

Now, I'm not feeling any of those things.

I feel alone, hollow, and empty.

*So very, very empty.*

It's an emptiness that grows to a point it may never be filled when Eight pulls his car down a long and windy road. The nightmare of my life began long before I arrived here, but this place made them ten times worse. I was beaten here. Starved and left for dead. I had my back whipped, my dignity stolen, and my self-worth squashed to within an inch of recognition.

This compound doesn't feature in my nightmares. It *is* my nightmare, and the last place I'd ever feel safe.

As Eight's car comes to a stop at the front of a set of stairs I raced up in fear for my life twelve months ago, his dilated-with-worry eyes stray to mine. "No one will think to look for you here, K. You'll be safe here."

*Safe from who?* I want to ask him.

My nightmares?

The demons of my past?

*Me.*

I'm not safe here.

Not mentally, anyway.

This place makes me so sad, I forget what happiness feels like. That's more damaging than any amount of torture could be, and it has me emerging into the dark as Trey suggested mere minutes ago.

The light makes things look easy.

The dark proves you have to work for everything you want.

I think they're both as evil as the other.



## NINE



## TREY

**I** stop seeking Eight's taillights in the dark when Nero calls my name. When he's awarded the attention of my hooded-gaze, he nudges his head in the direction the sleeping quarters are. "She's here." While striving to ignore the burn of K's nails down my back, I follow his climb up the stairwell. "The courier said she's pretty incoherent. I was going to call in a physician but wanted to get your thoughts first. Usually, Dok handled this type of stuff." His comment gives credit to my decision to send K away. Dok was the first causality positively identified by the FBI. He died on the operating table after enduring three bullet wounds to the chest.

When we reach the landing, I stray my eyes to a door two spots down while digging my wallet out of my pocket. "Request for Dr. Laura to do a house call. Tell her it's for me."

"Alright." Nero jerks up his chin before he finds a quiet spot to take his call. With most of P's quarters occupied by Vladimir's old crew, things got rowdy days ago. Anyone would swear they were

celebrating instead of commiserating. If I find out that is the case, Nikolai's crew will face a second slaughtering within hours of him being found.

After shaking off the funk coating my skin with sweat, I tap on the door of Nikolai's childhood before pushing down on the handle. I'm not surprised to find Maddox standing to the left of the couch Justine is resting on. He's presence has been noticeable the past three days even with him barely speaking a peep. His silence might have more to do with the fact he's failed to tell me why he's searching for his sister on this side of the country instead of the side she went missing from than an uncomfortableness for this life-style. He only got out of lockup a week ago, yet he's already knee-deep in shit. Not even a low-ranked bottom-feeder wannabee gets himself in that much trouble in a week.

"Has she said anything?"

After taking in Justine's sun-hardened skin and blood-tinged hair, Maddox shakes his head.

"Where's the blood coming from?"

Not speaking a word, Maddox pulls back a chunk of Justine's hair to reveal a large bump in the back of her head. Breathing out of my nose with the hope it will keep my head in the present, I crouch down in front of Justine to check her pulse. Her skin is as hot as fuck to touch, but her pulse is robust.

When Maddox snags a water bottle off the table next to him, Mikhail's advice from nine months ago smacks back into me. "Don't give her any water. You could fuck her over more. Nero is organizing a doctor to come check on her. She'll be here in a few..." My words trail off when Justine groans. When it's closely followed by a giggle, I crank my neck to Maddox. "Does she generally laugh in her sleep?"

"I wish." He gives his jaw a good workover before adding, "I

haven't heard her giggle like that since she got them." During the 'them' part of his comment, he nudges his head to the scars Nikolai's slowly convincing Justine to be proud of. They're bite marks from when she was mauled by a dog on the Petretti compound.

When Justine rolls over with a groan, I scoot closer to her. "Justine..." Her brows furrow as she stuffs a pillow between her legs. K has done similar the past three days, but I think it has more to do with Nikolai's hard couch than our daughter's demand for space. "Justine, can you open your eyes for me?" I get another groan but her eyes remain shut. "Justine..." My lips tug into a smirk when her eyes slowly flutter open this time around. "Hey."

I give her a couple of seconds to scan my face. When recognition flares through her eyes, I help her to sit up. "W-w-what happened?" Anyone would think she'd drunk a gallon of whiskey for how slurred her words are.

Concern for his sister is seen all over Maddox's face when he jumps into our conversation. "You don't remember?" His worry lowers my suspicions by a smidge. Not a lot, but enough to realize he isn't Justine's enemy. Nikolai, on the other hand, I'll save my verdict for a more appropriate time.

When Justine shakes her head, her eyes bulge out of her head as her throat works through a hard swallow. I'm about to catch her vomit in my hands, but Maddox saves the day by shoving a bucket between us.

While Justine brings up some funky smelling puke, Maddox asks me, "Where was she found again?"

I nudge my head to the left like the freeway can be seen from here. "By Interstate 95. One of our couriers thought he was seeing things."

After scrubbing the back of her hand over her vomit smeared lips, Justine garbles out, "Hold on. I was found along a highway?"

I nod. “You were a few miles from the private airstrip you used last week. We figured that was the location Nikolai told you to use in case of an emergency.”

My reply seems to confuse her more. “Why was I on Interstate 95? Blaire and Rico’s apartment is miles from there.”

Shock is heard in my tone when I ask, “Blair and Rico? What do they have to do with anything?”

Justine peers at me as if I’m slow. “We had dinner with them last night. You know this because Nikolai called you on our way.”

Before a single word can leave my lips, Maddox slots his ass into the spot next to Justine, then gathers her hands in his. “You had dinner with Rico and Blaire three nights ago. You’ve been missing ever since.” He waits for her to absorb that truth before hitting her with another. “You’re also in Vegas. Trey meant Interstate 95 on the California border, not the one in Florida.”

“That can’t be true.” Her wide and terrified eyes bounce between ours. “You don’t just lose three days of your life.” While straying her eyes over the room, she asks, “Where’s Nikolai? He’ll prove we were with Rico and Blaire last night.” When her hunt fails to find the man we’ve been searching for the past three days, she drops her eyes to the bucket of vomit. “That’s the rosemary chicken Blaire prepared for us. She used herbs that would help my queasy stomach...” Her words are stolen by the worry clutching her throat. With her breaths labored, she raises the hem of her shirt to peer down at her stomach. Although she’s not as far along as K, her stomach is more curved. Usually, most people would see that as a good thing. I don’t. Her stomach is covered with a massive bruise. It’s as mottled and damaged as K’s skin was when she was freed from hell twelve months ago.

When Justine jumps to her feet and races into the bathroom, I follow her retreat. She’s so confused by the disheveled redhead

peering back at her in the mirror, she doesn't notice I'm standing behind her until I say, "You truly don't remember, do you?"

Tears well in her eyes when she shakes her head. "All I remember is having dinner. The rest is blank."

When Maddox joins us in the bathroom, he has the audacity to wordlessly request for me to leave. I don't know who he thinks is running the show around here, but it sure as fuck isn't him. When I fold my arms in front of my chest and shake my head, air whizzes out of his nostrils.

After hitting me with a glare that's too weak to respond to, he moves to the shower. He switches the faucet on full pelt before shifting on his feet to face Justine. "Why don't you shower while I get you something to eat? Once you've filled your belly and taken a nap, your confusion may lift." When Justine nods, Maddox runs his hand down her arm. "We'll be just outside."

He waits for Justine to nod again before he moves back into the main section of Nikolai's room, closing the bathroom door on his way. "What the fuck do you think you're playing at? She doesn't have time to have a nap. If she's concussed, the worst fucking thing she could do right now is sleep. Furthermore, she may be the only person who can tell us where Nikolai is."

"That's my sister in there. Her wellbeing comes before anything and anyone."

The fact he's playing the sibling card already gets my guard up, much less his lack of worry for Nikolai. "If you truly give a fuck about your 'sister'" I air quote my last word like a soft cock. "You'd know that the *only* person she needs right now is Nikolai." My reply is the equivalent of jabbing a knife into my chest. I had no choice. I had to send K away. Doesn't make it any easier to swallow, though. "Are you here for Justine, Maddox, or to claw your way into a sanction you have no right to be a part of?" When he scoffs like I'm being ridiculous, I hit him with enough facts to

knock him on his ass. “Did you and Dimitri have conjugal visits during your four-year stint at Wallens Ridge State Prison? Or did he have you suck his cock in front of everyone so they knew whose bitch you were.”

I laugh in his face when he fists my shirt to bring me to within an inch of his face. “Shut your mouth before I shut it for you.”

“I’d like to see you try, Twat-face.”

After pushing him off me via a hand to his face, I straighten my shirt just as Justine enters the room in nothing but a towel. “We were attacked, bombarded without warning. Men came from all angles. They were wearing balaclavas and knew things about Nikolai not many know.”

“What type of stuff?” Maddox asks at the same time I encourage her to continue unlocking her memories. “Then what?”

Justine proves my earlier comment to Maddox was true. Her focus is dedicated to finding Nikolai. “A battle ensued. Nikolai and Rico were outnumbered, but they held their ground until...” I hiss along with her when her hand caresses the nasty bump in her head. “A man grabbed me. He was so large, he didn’t need to extend his arm to hoist me from the ground.”

“That’s good, Justine. Keep going,” I encourage after recalling my own tiptoe out of a foggy mist ten months ago.

“Nikolai threatened him, told him he’d kill his family if he didn’t let me go.” I nod, fully aware that is something Nikolai would say. “That’s when another man entered the equation.” Her eyes flicker as her memories slowly trickle back in. “Maxsim. Nikolai called him Maxsim.”

I jackknife back, shocked. “Maxsim?” I double check. “Are you sure?”

Justine nods. “If he’s Alexei’s son, then yes, I’m sure. They argued about Nikolai killing Alexei and how Maxsim was going to use Eli to take Nikolai’s place.”

“How did Nikolai respond?” I’m assuming violent if his blood pressure was anywhere close to the level mine is now.

“Umm... He said he had changed the rules, that Anatoly’s rulings were no longer relevant.” Wetness almost slides down her cheeks when she mutters, “His reply angered Maxim so much, he signaled for his goon to hit me.”

Anger steamrolls into me hard and fast. Although it is Nikolai’s queen standing in front of me, my fucked-up head is absorbing everything Justine is saying as if she is K. I know Eight will do everything in his power to protect K, and that he’d die before he’d ever let her be taken from me as she was nine months ago, but I’m so fucking angry I had to hand her protection to another man.

It isn’t Eight’s job to keep my wife safe.

It’s mine.

The fury making my blood hot chops up my words when I ask, “Do you know what happened to the men Nikolai and you traveled with? Roman? Rico?” Justine stops shaking her head when Maddox adds, “Dimitri?”

“Dimitri was shot.”

Wanting to test a theory, I give credit to Justine’s comment, “Dimitri is under watch at an undisclosed location. He was found by the feds surrounded by numerous deceased members of a Russian association. They’re seeking the death penalty.”

Just as suspected, Maddox’s pupils dilate to the size of saucers.

This fucker isn’t here for Nikolai.

He’s here for Dimitri.

Lucky for him, his sister keeps my head screwed on straight. “What aren’t you telling me, Trey?” She’s rising to the podium as K did only last week, except, she doesn’t want K’s crown. She wants the man who vowed to keep both our queens safe.

Mistaking my time of reflection as malice, Justine snickers out, “Don’t lie to me, Trey. You know the consequences if you do.”

Although amused by her gall, I do my best to double the flame flickering in her eyes. “Nikolai’s DNA was found on scene. A pool of his blood was located next to a man only known as a myth *Ubiytsa*.”

“Killer?”

When I nod, the color drains from Justine’s cheeks. “Rumors are his father was a Ukrainian weightlifter, and his mother an operative at the Russian soviet. With his childhood devoted to beating his mother’s lineage into him, his seven-foot-eight height never matched the maturity of his brain. His mental capacity only reached that of a young teen.” He was as brainfucked as I would have been if Nikolai didn’t find me.

My focus shifts back to the present when Justine asks, “Was he the man who held me hostage?”

I lift my chin. “We believe so.”

Although I’d prefer he didn’t, Maddox rejoins our conversation. “What are you saying? Nikolai killed a man, and in retaliation, he was killed?”

I hit him with a pompous glare instead of my fists like I really want to. “We don’t know. Dimitri was the only man found alive.”

Not hearing the snark in my tone, Justine asks, “Because he was too injured to flee?”

*Tsking*, I shake my head. “He was left as a warning. If this was a takeover bid, Maxim needs the word spread that he toppled the king. Dimitri is his equivalent of a town crier.”

“But Maxim didn’t topple the king. Nikolai isn’t dead.”

Uneased by the authority in Justine’s tone, Maddox tries to coerce her off the ledge. “J—”

“No!” she fires back, her eyes fully lit. “Nikolai isn’t dead! I’d know if he were dead. I would fucking know it.” As a queen rises to command her monarchy, her pauper of a brother falls into line.



“I somehow got from Florida to Vegas with my life intact. That wouldn’t have occurred without Nikolai’s help.”

With another theory at the ready to be confirmed, I say, “The Vasilievs used a subsidiary entity to bid on you last year. You’re only alive because they see you as an asset.”

Maddox doesn’t blink, move, or breathe. He does nothing. He either has no clue who I’m talking about or he’s a skilled actor.

I give it another attempt to poke the bear. “I’ll call a physician to check you over. He’s very discreet. I assure you, nothing you tell him will *ever* leave this room.”

This time Maddox’s facial expression alters from peeved to concerned. However, his response has nothing on Justine’s. “I don’t need a doctor. I wasn’t raped. Nikolai would never let that happen. He’d kill any man stupid enough to get within an inch of me.”

“He couldn’t protect you from the grave, J.”

I want to ram Maddox’s words back into his throat with my fists, but before I can, Justine takes him down in a way only a sibling can—with a disappointing stare. “Then I’m lucky he isn’t dead, aren’t I?”

As she races to a set of drawers in the corner of the room, her towel slips off her body. I instantly drop my eyes to my feet, not just out of respect for Nikolai, but for K as well. She trusts me because I’ve never given her any reason not to. Well, until tonight when I forced her into Eight’s car.

After yanking on a pair of sweatpants and one of Nikolai’s shirts, Justine pivots to face me. “Where are the men?” A mask I’ve never seen her wear slips over her face when Maddox steps toward her with his hands held out like she is a child. “Where are my men!”

Happy to remind Maddox about who runs the show here, I say, “They’re in the den.”

Justine is out the door before half of my reply leaves my mouth. After flashing Maddox a shit-eating grin, I chase his sister down. “What are you planning?”

The fogginess in my head lifts a little when Justine replies, “I’m going to fulfill the role I was born to live. I’m going to be Nikolai’s queen.”

*Then perhaps you can help me make K mine?*

TEN



KRISTINA

I blink through the grogginess coating my eyes when a familiar face pops into my peripheral vision. Although it isn't the bearded face I was hoping for, it's still comforting. "Hey there, baby Sis. Welcome back," Eight says with a smile before scooting back. "You hungry?"

Even though I shake my head, he digs through a backpack sitting on the corner of the blanket I'm waking up on. Although appreciative I didn't blackout forever, I would have preferred waking up anywhere but here. We're on the lower level of the compound Vladimir imprisoned his captives at. The concrete pillars holding up the second story protects us from the harsh Las Vegas weather, and the blanket saves my skin from being covered with the soot no amount of rainfall will clear.

Tears prick my eyes when Eight commences peeling an orange. I'm not tearing up because the citrus from the peel squirted my eyes. It's from what he says while peeling it. "Trey said if you won't eat for you, do it for bub. If she's anything like her daddy, she'll be hankering for a feed 24/7."

After splitting the peeled orange in half, he hands the bigger portion to me. “No,” he replies with a shake of his head when he reads the silent questions beaming from my eyes when I accept my share of our breakfast. “They’re close, though. They found Rico, Blaire, and Eli. Nikolai should be next.” When my eyes dilate more, he adds, “They’re a bit shaken up, but alive.” He runs the back of his index finger down my screwed nose like my dad used to before saying, “Kinda like you, eh? You scared me, sis. You were out a while.”

When I lean to the side so I can peer up at the gaping hole that was once enclosed by a wooden roof, my jaw drops. The sun is barely hanging in the sky. It’s well into the afternoon.

Spotting my shocked expression, Eight moves a chunk of orange to the side of his mouth so he can laugh. “I said you were out for a while.” He licks juice off his lips before asking, “What brought you back? I tried all Trey’s suggestions. Nothing worked.”

Shrugging, I pop a wedge of orange into my mouth.

“Oh well, at least you’re back now.” He stands to his feet to dust soot off his backside. “I better give Trey an update. He lost his shit when I told him our location. If he knows you’re back, I might not have to change my name to Seven.”

I’m a terrible person for smiling, but I can’t help it. I’m not just grinning about Eight’s lack of care for his safety, I’m smiling about discovering the reason for my return from the dark. It wasn’t the rain track on Dok’s iPod he gifted me months ago, nor the scent of Trey’s shirt Eight tucked under my head as a pillow. It was the teeny tiny flutters in my stomach.

Although my anxiety is still high, I’m confident the trembles in the lower half of my body have nothing to do with nerves or hesitation.

They’re excitement over dread.

Light instead of dark.

Life not death.

It's our baby. I'm certain of it.

When the faint flutters hit my stomach for the second time, I leap to my feet, shocked as hell something so weak could cause such a massive impact to my heart. Our baby would only be the size of the orange Eight and I just shared, but her feeble movements make it seem as if I can move mountains. It doubles my determination in an instant, and has me convinced I have what it takes to survive the ruthlessness of this lifestyle without any additional scars.

Mistaking the expression on my face as eagerness to steal his phone, Eight chuckles out, "Give me a sec to have my named scraped off his hit list, then I'll hand over my phone. It'll do Trey some good to hear your voice." When my expression switches from determined to worried, he adds, "He's alright. He's just struggling with guilt. He thinks he can't rule Nikolai's kingdom with honor without borrowing the crown he wants to put on your head." When shock blazes through me, confused to what he means, Eight's smile picks up. "He wasn't joking when he said you'll have your crown, Duchess. He wants to give you the world."

"I have the world." My English is terrible, but Eight looks at me as if I spoke it like a true queen. I blame the heavy undertone of sentiment in my voice for that. My life isn't close to ideal, but compared to what it was, I almost feel regal.

"Think of it this way," Eight says, stepping closer. "His entire life is wrapped up in you and his kid, so the knowledge he nearly took that away would be a hard pill to swallow. There are days I can't tell the difference between a bull and a cow, but even someone as stupid as me has no issues understanding how guilty he'd feel knowing he fired at his now-wife and soon-to-be mother of his children. It makes his protectiveness of you somewhat manic." Remorse fills his eyes when he murmurs, "Then he's got

all that other shit to wade through.” He doesn’t directly say it, but I know he’s referencing the abuse I endured under Achim and Vladimir’s watch.

I wish Trey wouldn’t feel guilty about that. He may have kissed me all those years ago in the pantry, but I instigated everything that occurred after that. *I undid his belt. I lined up his cock. I chose to give my virginity to a stranger just like I paid for the consequences for my actions.* Nothing that happened after our kiss was Trey’s fault. If anything, his family’s downfall should be on my shoulders. If I hadn’t done any of those things mentioned above, perhaps his father and brother would still be alive, and he wouldn’t feel the need to choose between Nikolai’s monarchy and his debunked one. He’d be the governor of his own realm, and free from his nightmares.

I smile like I can’t feel the darkness calling me when Eight mutters, “It’s probably best we keep our little chat between us, though. I didn’t tell you this because I want you to feel bad. I just want you to know why he sent you away. He didn’t do it to hurt you, Sis. He’s just trying to keep you safe. Aight?” When I dip my chin without pause for thought, he smiles. “Good girl. Now finish your orange so I can tell him you ate.”

I’m not hungry, but I swallow down the remainder of the citrusy clump coating my hands with sticky residue without chewing. Trey and I worked too hard on my recovery the past nine months to let *anything* undo our efforts. Although I would have preferred to stay by his side, Eight’s comments have flatten my annoyance to barely a blip.

Nikolai freed Trey from hell, he gave him shelter when he saw something in him no one else could, and reminded him that the sun still rises after the darkest nights. He was Trey’s beacon all those years ago as Trey has been mine the past twelve months. Those facts alone should assure Trey he doesn’t need to pick

between Nikolai and me. I'll happily hand him my crown if it assists him in honoring a man who respects him just as vehemently. I will never judge him on his decisions today. If anything, they will have me respecting him more. He fired at me years ago because he was raised believing blood came before anything. Today, along with many other times the past twelve months, proves he doesn't believe that anymore.

Blood makes you related, but loyalty makes you family. That's why Eight calls me his sister. We're family even with us being born in different countries. Justine said once you're *bratva*, you're *bratva* for life. She was right.

My focus shifts back to Eight when he holds his cell phone into the air, seeking a signal. "I swear the service is worse now than it was this morning."

While following his slow track through the lower half of the compound, I rub my juice-stained hands down Trey's shirt I'm wearing as a dress. A real duchess would use a washroom. It's lucky for me, Trey likes me grubby.

When Eight takes a right at the stairwell, I peer up at the grandeur I failed to notice twelve months ago. I was so eager to get out of this compound, I practically dragged Ana down the stairwell that's wide enough to fit an army tanker down it. The wooden balustrade was demolished by the inferno Trey and I lit, but the steps I galloped down remain since they're made out of concrete. Most of this warehouse-type building is built from the same durable material.

I slant my head when I notice a set of footprints in the ash coating the stairwell. They're not faded as you'd suspect. They almost look recent.

Curious, I cautiously climb the stairwell. Since I'm barefoot, Eight fails to notice I'm moving in the opposite direction to him until I reach the soot-covered landing. "Be careful up there K.

Some of the roof's beams held during the blaze, but they're not stable."

His acknowledgement that he's been through this part of the compound weakens the nervous knock of my knees. I explore more out of morbid curiosity than fear. I don't want to say I've overcome the damage this place slapped my mental stability with, but I'm most certainly on my way to reaching closure on that part of my life.

After taking in the room I was given my first night here, then the one I was freed from almost twelve months ago, I move to the room Vladimir entered and never exited. Although the walls and floors are badly smoke damaged, most of the roof remains intact. The soot and paint-licked walls add to the eeriness of a room that claimed more than the lives of innocent women. It also sent Satan back to hell.

Soot kicks up around me when I bend down to clear away the ash beneath the pulley I was chained to when whipped. A handful of the blood droplets hidden under the mess belong to me, but I don't believe it's responsible for the copper smell in the air. A larger pile of ash sits right of where I'm kneeling. Its long and slender stack almost conceals the smallest slither of a red thread stuck between warped floorboards.

As my heart thuds in my ears, I pull at the thread, prying it free from the blackness as I was freed. Horrid memories fill my head when I remove enough of the ash covering the ribbon to spot its bright red and white dot coloring. It's been a very long time since I saw it but I swear this piece of ribbon is a similar length, pattern, and width to the ribbon my mother placed in my hair before my interview with Mrs. Novak.

Achim wore it like a bracelet for years. Forever taunting me with it when I outwitted his chase by keeping someone with me at all times the first two years after my parents death. It grazed my



cheek the first time he forced his dick between my lips, and it was there when he slapped me after India told him what I had done with Trey in the butler's pantry.

With my mind trapped between the past and the present, it takes me a little longer to notice the faintest shimmer of a light peeking through the crack I dug the ribbon out of. It's coming through the floorboards. It's too bright to be a candle and too dim to be the rapidly setting sun.

Motivated by vile curiosity, I dig the steel end of a shackle into the gap in the warped wood before leaning on it with all my might. My breathing grows shallow when a section of the floorboard pops up a few seconds later. Although the wall behind it is burned away, the stairwell beneath the floor is in one piece. That isn't surprising considering it's made out of concrete.

When a flicker of light breaks through the blackness at the end of the hidden stairwell, I almost call for Eight. The only reason I don't is because I refuse to add another victim to the long tally I've amassed the past seven years.

Furthermore, Nikolai is missing and I've found a hidden bunker. Perhaps this time around, my placement in Trey's life will do him more good than harm.

After weaponing-up with the shard of metal I opened the trapdoor with, I gingerly make my way down the stairwell. A stable woman would call out. I'm nothing close to stable. In this life, sometimes silence is your only defense.

My heart batters my ribcage when I soundlessly slip off the last step of a long, spiraling staircase. Although the accent of the voice at the end of the corridor usually instigates horrid nightmares, they're not as bad as they once were since I've been surrounded by the same accent every day for the past nine months. I'll never find a Russian accent as comforting as Trey's British twang, but I won't fear it again any time soon, either.

*I'm stronger than I was twelve months ago, I remind myself when I almost chicken out partway through my mission. I am braver. I'm a duchess ready to rule her monarchy.*

I'm also a fool who walks straight into the blackness without remembering to blink.

"Hello, little girl," greets a thick Russian accent when I enter an opulent bedroom hidden in a bunker under Vladimir's compound. "Do you still taste my cum when eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?"

## ELEVEN



## TREY

“Come on, Eight, answer your fucking phone.” It’s late, the sun commenced setting hours ago, and I haven’t had an update from Eight since this morning. The last time I heard from him, K was as lifeless as a plank of wood, unblinking and unspeaking. She’d been that way since Eight carried her into the compound she was raped, beaten, and sodomized in.

I get why he chose that location, I understand it’s the one spot Nikolai’s enemies would never consider looking if Nikolai’s disappearance was about more than a turf war, but my fucking God am I fretting our actions today will set K’s recovery back by months.

You can’t teach someone to swim by throwing them into a pool and hoping they’ll stay afloat. The same can be said for the nightmares of your past. More times than not, forcing someone to relive the experience fuck’s them up even more. I’m living proof of this.

Nikolai’s disappearance was because a man wanted a monarchy that wasn’t his. He took the rules we lived by, bended them to suit himself, then stormed in with the aggression Cole used when he thought he was wronged by our father.

It got men killed, women and a kid victimized, and has put my head into such a dark and temperamental place, I'm worried not even K will be able to yank me off the ledge.

I was born for this live. I was raised by a killer to be a killer. I can end a life without the slightest flip to my stomach, and sit down for a meal only seconds later, but I wasn't taught how to handle any of the things I've been bombarded with today.

Love fucks everything up. It screws you over like you spent a thousand dollars on a whore only to discover she has a dick between her legs, and will have you wondering why you ever signed up for this shit in the first place. But, even in the darkest of moments, it will also convince you that you can't live without it. It'll have you craving it like it's a drug, and have you begging for another hit before you've even snorted the first line.

It'll even convince you that no matter how loud the dark calls for you, you don't have to walk into it. My past fucked with my head today. It screwed me over, and had me convinced I'm not cut out for this life, but instead of letting it get the better of me, I fed off it. I dared it to push me harder and to try and break me.

All it did was make me stronger.

What I said all those months ago was true. I didn't want to break K, I wanted K to break me.

Today broke me, yet here I am, still breathing and alive. That wouldn't have been the case if I hadn't seen the slightest flicker of life in the eyes of a grubby, malnourished sex-slave. K was forced to walk through the gates of hell unaccompanied, but instead of letting it consume her, she whizzed through the place like she owned it. That's why her crown will never slant even in the windiest conditions. She's a true duchess who knows even a pawn can become a queen if you play the game right.

After pulling my Shelby behind Eight's car, I throw open my

driver's side door and hot-foot it up the stairs K raced up when I separated her from the pack.

My brutal speed slows when I spot Eight's phone sitting at the foot of the internal stairwell. I know it's his phone. His screen is proof of his namesake. You can't see his eight fingers since they're occupying two of the eight whores surrounding him, but they're not the only part of his body my brothers referenced when considering his nickname.

When I bob down to gather up Eight's phone, the faint murmur of a set of voices hits my ears. I think one of them belongs to Eight, but I can't be sure. Although they sound like they're coming from below me, something steers me toward the stairwell. It could be intuition, or the fact my pulse thuds in my ears the more I approach the stairwell.

After removing my gun from the back of my jeans, I climb the soot-covered stairs two steps at a time. Unlike today's mission to find Nikolai, I go into this operation with complete silence. K taught me that silence can be your greatest strength when you live in a world with people who refuse to hear your words even when you speak the same language as them.

My gun enters the room Vladimir was killed in before me. Although the accented voices trickling into my ears still sound like they're coming from beneath me, this is the only room reflecting any light.

"What the fuck?" I murmur to myself when I discover the light is beaming out of a trapdoor in the corner of the room.

Most of the theories I ran with today were based on Vladimir escaping the inferno K and I lit twenty minutes after Nikolai took him down with a knife to his chest. Justine's representation of the noise Vladimir made when she removed Nikolai's knife wasn't close to the gargle that left Kliment's mouth when he stupidly touched Justine without permission earlier. Add that to the fact

the information Maxsim had on Nikolai was only known by a handful of people, and I was convinced we were dealing with a ghost.

It wouldn't be the first time a ghost has resurrected from hell. Now this adds credit to my theory. The trapdoor is mere feet from the spot Vladimir laid dead when Nero threw gasoline over the walls. He could have rolled to safety. He could still be alive.

I gallop down the stairwell at the speed of lightning. My heart is pounding in my ears, but for the first time in years, I'm not seeing it as a good thump. Vladimir kept K in the room across from his. He only ever did that with his favorite whores. If he's alive, and K is missing, that can only mean one thing...

*No!* I refuse to say it.

She's free from that life. I promised no one would ever touch her without her permission. I'm going to keep my fucking promise.

With my blood pressure sky high, and my finger curled around the trigger of my gun, I enter a bunker-type room at the end of a pitch black corridor. My stomach heaves in disgust about the skank smell streaming into my nose, but my wish to find K keeps my head screwed on straight.

The smell of a rotting corpse is not my brother.

He's buried thousands of miles away from here.

He can't come back from death for the second time.

I jackknife to the right when a thick Russian accent says, "Don't be shy, little one. I'm not going to hurt you... yet. If you behave, I can play nice too."

My chest rises and falls in rapid concession when I take in the wrinkled face of Vladimir Popov. It's grainier than I remembered, duller. That probably has more to do with the fact I'm peering at him through a bank of security monitors than seeing him in the flesh.

When he shifts to the right, my blood turns black. K is

covering in the corner of Vladimir's private suite. Her cheek is red like it was recently slapped and her eyes are brimming with wetness, although not a single drop flows down her cheeks.

I almost pivot on my heels to sprint back up the stairs. The only reason I don't is because I cleared Vladimir's room only minutes ago. It was as black and as lifeless as my heart now feels—as dark as death.

With a roar of a deranged man, I fire at the surveillance monitors like I wish I could have done to Achim and Vladimir. I gun them down before I discover the ending of Vladimir's stalk to K's side of the room. He has a gleam in his eyes I'm all too familiar with. The same savage glint that brightens my eyes anytime I look at K. The wolf is hunting his prey. He's going to hurt my duchess.

I continue firing at the now-mangled security system until the faintest snivel steals the devotion of my gun. I aim it in the direction the cry came from before stepping deeper into the dark. "You didn't listen. No matter what I said, no matter what I did, you never heard a word I spoke. You wanted the castle, I gave you the entire fucking kingdom, but it still wasn't enough for you, was it?" As I inch back the trigger, I hear someone call my name. Well, I assume they're saying my name. I can't hear anything through the pounding of my pulse in my ears. "Is this where you hid when he brutalized her? Did you sit back and watch the videos of the sick fucks raping her over and over again?" As the evil inside of me roars to life, I scream, "Did you ever feel one fucking day of guilt! She could have given you the world, but you were too fucking stupid to see it. Too fucking blind. Her head would have *never* worn your crown because it was too tainted for her level of royalty."

"And here I was thinking the Corbyn men cared about no one but themselves," says an unfamiliar but heavily accented female voice.

My eyes blink in rapid concession when a light is suddenly switched on. I blink and blink and blink but nothing takes away the image of my nightmare sitting directly in front of me. K is tied to a wooden chair. A hessian bag is pulled over her head, and my gun is pointed at her stomach. Eight is on her right. Although he doesn't have his head covered, he is gagged.

They shouldn't have bothered impacting his speech. His eyes tell me what he wants me to do. No matter what, he wants me to pick K.

Although I appreciate his loyalty, I'd rather gun down the bitch responsible for K's slumped form than play a second game of roulette.

India smiles with smugness when I direct the barrel of my gun at the crinkle between her brows. "What the fuck is your issue?" I'd take her down without any questions if I hadn't seen the pistol she has butted up against K's ribs. She could survive a bullet wound to the stomach, but our daughter most certainly wouldn't. "Did daddy spoil his little princess too much she'd rather run his legacy into the ground than see it thrive?"

I realize I hit the motherlode when India's eye twitches out. "Quite the opposite, actually. He'd rather betroth his only daughter to a monster than make her feel one-of-a-kind."

If anything she's saying is true, why is she taking her anger out on K? She's been Achim's victim for far longer than India. Hasn't she suffered enough?

When I say that to India, she replies, "Because she took what wasn't hers! First you, then Cole." When I balk in shock, India smiles like a vindictive cow. "Oh, you didn't know? You're not the only Corbyn man with a fascination for the help. *I* nursed him back to health. *I* showed him how he could re-seize his throne, then he tossed me aside the instant *she* was placed on his radar." K's whimper is silent when India pushes the muzzle on



her gun deep into her stomach but I feel every painful scream bubbling in her chest. “We were supposed to destroy our fathers as they had us before ruling together, but he was too obsessed with her.” Her eyes come up to mine. “Why do you think Achim killed him? It wasn’t for me. He couldn’t care less that I was sleeping with Cole. But he was never going to let another Corbyn man touch her.”

Hate makes my blood hot when her dig of K’s ribs this time around sends a pained sob rippling through my ears. India tilted her gun to ensure K’s stomach won’t be the only thing pierced by her bullet. So will her heart.

If I fire at her, she’ll kill my wife and daughter with one bullet.

“What do you want?” The fact I’m negotiating reveals how lost I am. As Nikolai said months ago, we don’t negotiate with whores. We tell them what to do, and they do it or die, but this is different. My entire world is strapped to that chair. I won’t risk them for anything.

My brows stitch when India replies, “I don’t want anything.” I realize just how vindictive she is when she adds, “From you. You’ve done enough, now you can leave the rest up to us.” With a smile as hideously ugly as her insides, she nudges her head to the right.

“You fucking piece of shit,” I growl out in a roar when Maddox steps out of a darkened nook in the corner of the almost pitch-black room. He’s holding an automatic weapon in his hands and has the sneer of a murderer stretched across his face. “Not even your sister will save you from this. Do you hear me? You’re a dead man walking.”

“Blood isn’t always thicker than water, Trey. Thought you’d know that better than anyone.” After dotting my chest with the scope of his rifle, he adds, “I heard lots of stories during my time in lock up. Failed takeover bids. Men being brought back from the

brink of death. Duchesses so desperate for a crown, they fucked with the wrong family over and over again.”

My brows draw together when he shifts the red dot on my chest to India’s. I’m not the only one shocked. India is just as taken aback. “Wraith...”

*Wraith? Who the fuck is Wraith?*

“I don’t know what shocks me more, the fact you think I didn’t scan the face of *every* person surrounding the cage my sister was mauled in, or that I didn’t hear your disappointed sigh when Col agreed with my barter of my life for Justine’s.” Maddox adjusts the perimeter of his scope from India’s thrusting chest to her head before he says, “You were so fucking desperate to be top dog, you didn’t consider who you were taking down in the process.” When he breathes out, “Dimitri says hello,” I growl K’s name in a mangled groan.

K’s chin has only just balanced on her chest when a bullet from Maddox’s assault rifle pierces through India’s skull. The impact is so direct, only the wall behind India’s head gets splattered with her brain matter.

When she slumps to the floor with a thump, in sync, Maddox and I take aim at each other. He may have just killed one of my enemies, but he did it while speaking the name of another. That puts him on the opposing side of my team.

Although Maddox’s rifle is aimed at my chest, he tries to weasel his way out of our confrontation. “I couldn’t lure India out of hiding without offering up an incentive.”

“Admitting you brutalized my woman won’t do you any favors.”

“What would you rather, Trey? Your girl tied up and safe, or lying lifeless in a ditch with her stomach barren of your child?” When white hot anger flares through my eyes, he spits out, “Yeah, that’s what I thought.” He works his jaw over three times before he

lowers his gun. "If it weren't for Dimitri and me, she'd be dead in four months." He nudges his head at K during the 'she'd' part of his reply. "Why do you think India wanted her brought in alive?"

My finger curls around the trigger of my gun when he digs his hand into the pocket of his jeans. Like an idiot not in fear for his life, he smiles. It would have been his last if the sale docket he tosses onto the table K and Eight are seated behind had any association with K.

"Who's Audrey?" I ask after taking in the name of the woman sold in a similar fashion to K. Her sale receipt is slightly different than K's, though. It mentions she's eight months pregnant.

My eyes snap back to Maddox when he replies, "Dimitri's wife. Well, she *was* his wife before that piece of shit tested your theory that blood isn't thicker than water." After glaring at India lying in a pool of her blood, he returns his eyes to mine. "Up until twenty minutes ago, Dimitri wasn't your enemy. I guess only time will tell where we go from here. Things get hostile when a mutual nemesis is eradicated."

After smirking like a smile will stop me from shooting him in the back, he pivots on his heels and stalks toward the alcove he was hiding out in. I should gun him down like he did India, then feed him to the pigs. I should remind him that he's on Popov turf and that nothing happens here without Nikolai's permission, but instead of doing either of those things, I suck in the scent of rain-soaked hair and dirt on sweat-slicked skin, aware Nikolai would most likely issue Maddox a pardon since he killed for Justine.

Within seconds, K's scent brings me out of the darkness. She reminds me that there's more to living than hate. This lifestyle is a part of who I am, but it isn't *all* I am.

I am a husband and a father-to-be.

A brother and a son.

I'm also a survivor who isn't ashamed to admit his past fucked with his head, but he's strong enough not to let it steer his future.

A king isn't born.

He's made.

And it's time for this king to return to his realm.



## PROLOGUE

TREY

### **Five years later...**

**S**tanding toward the back of the hall, I follow K as she weaves through the dozens of people separating us. Even with our son stretching her stomach beyond possibility, her steps are feeble and faint. She draws the eye of so many people, her endeavor to get where she is going is slowed by those so desperate to admire her, they approach her without permission.

If they weren't my brothers, I'd gut them where they stand. Alas, the grandeur I'm standing in wouldn't be here if it weren't for them. The battle was hard, but like all things in life, the reward far exceeded our efforts. The Corbyn name has been restored across Europe. Instead of it being slotted across from the Popovs as I was worried, it stands beside them as a joint unit.

My victory can be accredited to Nikolai's crew as much as it

can be mine. We fought side by side as we have the past nine years, and as we will continue doing until our children takeover the reins. If Elisa has it her way, it'll be a partnership by law instead of mutual respect. She has quite the fascination with Nikolai's son, Toby. Even with him currently residing in a country thousands of miles away, she talks to him every day. They're kinship is understandable. Even with K being due with Elisa a month before Justine, since Justine was carrying twins, K only delivered Elisa days before Justine in my room at Clarks.

I should have known K was so strong she wouldn't tell me she was in pain until it was hours too late. Elisa's head was already out before I got Dr. Laura on speaker phone. She talked me through the rest of the delivery. I'm a heartless, cruel man who can still kill without a smidge of remorse, but delivering our daughter rates highly on my list of accomplishments. It only just below a rain-sodden and grubby face.

My room in Clarks was my sanctuary, it was the only place I ran when I was feeling lost, so it's fitting our daughter was born there. Within minutes of her birth she was surrounded by murderous Russians who would die to keep her safe. She's been bounced on the knees of whores, burped by men who believe women are valueless, and promised herself to a mafia prince from another realm, yet she's not even five years old.

It'd be worried if K wasn't her mother.

She'll keep her head as well screwed on as she has mine the past six years.

Just as K breaks through the people surrounding us at our compound in Prague, I sink back behind a concrete pillar to conceal myself. With a drug shipment going wayward in the United Kingdom, I had to make an unexpected visit to my old stomping ground. K wanted to come with me, but with Elisa

having a dance recital tomorrow afternoon, she had no choice but to stay put. I was supposed to be gone for three days. My addiction couldn't hold out that long. I left at four this morning, it's now a little after ten at night.

Eight howls like a dog when I sock him in the stomach before I pull him into the darkness of my hidey hole. I'm glad he's following K's every move as instructed by me this morning, but he can fuck off now.

My duchess only needs one protector when her king is home.

"Aww, look at you home early. I won't have to find new stroking material tonight." I punch him for the second time, harder this time around. Doesn't stop his stirring, though. "I was joking. In all honesty, just thinking about you two getting it on makes me all types of queasy." He could have saved his life if he'd learn to keep his mouth shut. "You're too damn noisy. Can barely hear K's moans with all your grunting and shit."

Somehow, the little fucker gets out of my hold before I can strangle him.

While stepping backward, he smiles a blistering grin. "Go spoil your girl. Elisa has been out for hours and the men are so doped on the departing gifts Nikolai sent, they're not going to move from their spot for hours." When my jaw ticks, he adds, "They'll be good to go by Friday. Everyone is eager to leave this ice-box for a couple of weeks."

With Nikolai's second son due in days, my men and I are returning to Vegas. We will hold down the fort for a couple of weeks while Nikolai plays house. Our arrival will ensure Nikolai's enemies know that even when his guard is down he's not to be messed with.

Nikolai will return the favor when my son arrives in three months.

I wait until Eight disappears into the mass of men enjoying Nikolai's generosity before continuing my stalk of K. I'm not surprised to find her in the pantry at the back of the industrial-size kitchen. She went hungry for weeks on end, so even when our children are in her belly, she ensures they don't face the same injustice.

After taking a moment to relish the sound of my pulse in my ears, I gather an orange off the counter at my side, rip a large chunk out of it with my teeth, swallow down the citrusy clump, then roll the uneaten portion toward K.

I can tell the exact moment she spots it. Not only does she gasp in a sharp breath, the sound of rain hitting a tin roof jingles into my ears.

While removing a wireless ear pod from her left ear, K spins around to face me. Considering this part of Prague hasn't felt the heat of the sun in weeks, the scent of a summer storm in a desert shouldn't be lingering in my nose. It is, though. Very much so. And it's accompanied by the faintest smell of pig shit. Don't misconstrue. My wife has the most delectable scent I've ever sampled. I just can't help but recall fond memories of my past whenever she's close to me.

"Hello, Duchess," I greet her with a growl when her provocative smell doubles at the sight of me. "Did you come down here for a snack? Or to take down an entire fucking kingdom without firing a single bullet?"

When her smile matches mine, I read the answer from her eyes.

She came for both, and that's precisely what I'll give her —again.

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**The End!**

*I hope you enjoyed these bonus scenes from Trey and K's story.*

*Shandi xx*

