



Daddy's Angel

Age Gap Reverse Harem Dad's Best Friend Mafia Romance

BARBICOX

DADDY'S ANGEL

AGE GAP DAD'S BEST FRIEND REVERSE
HAREM MAFIA ROMANCE

THEIR FORBIDDEN FRUIT

BOOK 2

BARBI COX

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CONTENTS

1. Gio
2. Juliana
3. Max
4. Juliana
5. Konstantin
6. Juliana
7. Gio
8. Juliana
9. Max
10. Juliana
11. Konstantin
12. Juliana
13. Gio
14. Max
15. Juliana
16. Gio
17. Juliana
18. Max
19. Juliana
20. Konstantin
21. Juliana
22. Gio

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GIO

I clear my throat as I knock on Juliana's door. The new bodyguard, Sharon, opens the door. She shakes her head and puts a finger to her lips while looking me over hungrily. She hasn't been shy in the last few weeks. Ignoring Juliana and her depression for making eyes at me whenever our schedules overlap.

I'm hardly surprised she's been trying to flirt, but just because I've been keeping my eyes off Juliana doesn't mean I want someone else. She's upset and needs time. Even if it means I end up taking a shower every time I'm here because just being around her makes me hard and if I don't get some kind of relief, I might actually go insane.

Just thinking of Juliana kissing me, touching me, what we've done in bed and in the kitchen. Fuck, if we didn't have *very* important plans today, I might see if I could convince her to do a video chat while I'm in the shower.

"Mr. Giovanni is having a talk with his daughter right now," Sharon says.

I go to the kitchen to eavesdrop. Juliana and I used to play games to see who could get the most information without getting caught. I'm glad it's become a useful skill.

"Honey, is this really about Konstantin?"

"I liked him and you punished us both for me having emotions. Mom wouldn't have done that," Juliana whispers.

It's a low blow and we both know it. But I'm sure she means it. Her mom was her support for so long.

"Mom would have been happy that I found someone I liked so much. She told me I should let my heart run away with me while I'm young, to explore everything that excited me, and I ... I feel like I'm failing her all the time." Juliana sniffs.

My heart aches for her. Her tears extinguish the little spark of jealousy I feel. I know she'd cry if any of us had gotten kicked to the curb. And I know the date of her mom's death is coming up fast. I'm sure none of it is easy on her.

"Why don't you go shopping or something? Get something that does make you excited."

"You can't just replace a person with shopping, daddy." She sighs. "I have a counseling session. Am I allowed to go to that?"

"Yes. It'll be good for you. Get ready and let me talk to Gio."

She doesn't offer any sass either. She doesn't argue, doesn't comment, just lets her father close her bedroom door. I look at Sharon. "Go ahead, Sharon. Thank you for your diligence. Watch the lobby once we leave and make sure no one attempts to get into the penthouse."

"Of course."

Sharon adjusts her dress and gives me a thorough once-over before heading downstairs. Uncle Tony elbows me. "Now that's a good catch for you, Gio. Strong, smart, obviously interested. She might be just your speed."

"I don't let a coworker get in the way of a job," I say, ignoring the fact that I will absolutely let the person who is my job get in my head. "The appointment is in an hour. I believe she's scheduled for a full seventy minutes since it's a first-time appointment."

"I'm amazed you were able to find someone to meet with her this late in the day." He waves that away. "Keep track of her mood. I'm worried about her ... taking action."

“She’s worried something has happened to Konstantin,” I report dutifully. “Is terrified that the Volkovs hurt him since she can’t reach him. There’s an easy way to fix this, Uncle Tony.”

“If I let him come back, I know they’ll pick up right where they left off.”

“You also know he has twice the reason to protect her. Is it really the worst thing? Compared to the alternative you’re worried about?” I ask.

That jealous side kicks me in the dick. Why would I welcome him back when I could potentially have more time with Juliana? But the truth is obvious: I’m crazy about Juliana and I would do anything to keep her happy. Knowing how upset she is proves that none of us are a passing fad. She really does care.

Max has been working hard to make sure that she finds a way to get in touch with Kon and that she knows he’s on her side. And I’ve been trying in my own way, without revealing my intentions.

Uncle Tony sighs. “Just go. I have things to think about.”

Juliana comes out in leggings and a t-shirt. It’s so different from her normal fashion choice that her father does a double take. She barely has makeup on and her hair is tossed up in a messy bun. She nods to me.

“Gio.”

“Ready to go?”

“Sure.”

And more lack of sass. Uncle Tony shakes his head, tries no less than three times to start a conversation with Juliana, and fails each time. Once we’re in the car and I know that Uncle Tony is headed to the office, that Sharon is in the lobby and can’t see us, I turn Juliana’s chin and kiss her softly.

“It’ll be okay soon, babe.”

She rubs her nose over mine. “I thought you were done with me, Gio.”

“No.” I shake my head and kiss her again, slowly, licking over the valley of her lips. “That’s impossible.”

“You haven’t touched me since-”

“I couldn’t get fired and not be allowed to see you. After how he handled Konstantin, I’d take not being able to touch you over not being able to see you.”

She softens and I wipe under her eye. “Did you suddenly get good at fake crying?”

“No.” She sniffs. “I’ve been so worried I’m going to lose you and Max too. Losing Kon like that, when I thought I’d still be able to see him, then realizing how hard that would be ... to lose you like that again or Max would hurt. You three make me feel sane and with the anniversary coming up and ...”

“I know.” I squeeze her hand as I get us on the road. “You won’t be alone.”

“I want all this done by then, Gio. I can’t keep looking over my shoulder and I won’t postpone living. The second we solve this, I’m taking everything I’ve saved and I’m buying a house for myself. I’m going to find out what I’m meant to do in this life and I’m going to do it.”

“Leaving the company?”

“I don’t need to be CEO of *that* company to achieve my goals. I could start my own business. I could accomplish so much once I have some support and get to do things my way.”

I grin at her and keep rubbing her hand until we’re about two minutes from the clinic. “I have a surprise for you, by the way. Max said it would be impulsive and congratulated me for thinking of it.”

“Really?” She narrows her eyes. “You and Max are getting along?”

“We’re civil.” I hedge. “But if he approves ...”

“I’ll like it,” She says softly. “what is it?”

“Just do what you need to do in counseling and you’ll see at the end.”

“If it’s your dick”

I park at the clinic and arch an eyebrow. She smiles. “I’ll be delighted. We can drive to some off-road place and go at it like teenagers.” She laughs.

I kiss her softly again. “I’ll be in the lobby if you need anything, but considering who you’re meeting, I doubt anyone would be stupid enough to come here.”

“They fear the Volkovs that much?”

“Didn’t you know? Valerie’s gained ‘queen of the mafia’ title all on her own. She’s just as vicious as those men, if not more since so few people expect it from her.” I kiss Juliana. “You’ll be good friends.”

She moans and pulls me back against her, pressing her body against mine. I feel heat tease my nerves. It’s been too long since I’ve been able to touch her, kiss her, feel her. We keep devouring each other until my alarm goes off.

The car’s all steamy and Juliana’s lips are puffy. She scratches my jaw. “You need to shave, Gio.”

“I’m letting it grow a little. Might get Max to stop calling me ‘kid’.”

She giggles and whispers in my ear. “As long as your scruff doesn’t rub my thighs raw.”

I groan and watch her head for the door. I need to get my cock to stand down before I head inside. I text Konstantin quickly, from my personal phone, telling him he has an hour to get his ass here.

Juliana kisses my cheek when Valerie comes out. Her shoulder-length dark hair makes her seem younger, and she’s so friendly looking and approachable that I understand how people underestimate her. She’s not exactly tall or imposing, but her eyes flick to me after Juliana says something and in that second, I could picture her showing venomous fangs and slitting my throat without hesitation or regret.

But then a smile returns and she guides Juliana back to her office. I play with my thumbs, put together a puzzle for something to do, then see one of the Volkovs himself saunter in. I take in the curly hair and cocky smile given to the receptionist and peg him as Hunter.

“Audrey.” He croons.

She looks up at him and blushes immediately. “Hunter. You- you know the rules! You’re only a patient here.”

“So determined. It’s cute.” He chuckles. “It’s already five fifteen, where is my girlfriend? I’m picking her up today.”

“She didn’t ... She didn’t mention that. She’s going to be late today, she’s with a patient.”

Hunter groans then notices me. He narrows his eyes after removing his sunglasses, obviously trying to place me, but then he shrugs. “Once the patient comes out, do yourself a favor and leave before I have to have my friend ask.”

“I’ll be leaving with the patient,” I assure him.

“Good man.” He pulls out his phone and texts a little, then two more men walk in.

I recognize Konstantin immediately. He’s talking to a guy with long blonde hair and an expression so blank, that I’m not entirely sure he’s human. “I told you to wait, Lief. She’s in the office.”

Konstantin walks over to me, looks at the space left on the love seat, then makes himself sit in the chair, obviously uncomfortable with the size. He clears his throat. “Been a while, Gio.”

“You caused a stir,” I say evenly.

“Konstantin.” The blonde guy says before going off in what I think is Russian.

Konstantin answers and Hunter laughs. He shakes his head. “Poor thing. Didn’t even get to finish?”

I can’t help but smirk about that. If those were the stories I got to hear, I wouldn’t mind listening.

“Not important.” Konstantin waves away. “She did.”

As soon as that leaves his lips, Valerie and Juliana return. Valerie nods. “Of course. Whatever you need. I’d recommend safe house four. It will appease your father and you’ll get some space. You’ll at least know when he’s coming.”

“But he’ll be able to watch.”

“Oh no. That goes to Volkov security if we take you on.” Valerie corrects. “And one of our very lucky employees.”

“Taking over my job, dorogaya?” Hunter purrs.

Valerie winks at him. “Girl talk, Krolik. Calm down.”

Hunter’s eyes change and I recognize the lust I see. Juliana shakes Valerie’s hand. “Thank you.”

“She’s under our protection, follow her.” Lief orders Konstantin.

Kon turns his puppy-dog gaze away from Juliana to Lief, then me. He claps my back. “Good man.”

I roll my eyes, but follow Juliana with him. She can’t say I ever put myself before her since I’m giving her back the hulk she’s been crying over. As soon as we’re outside, she throws herself into Konstantin’s arms and kisses him hungrily.

“Still here,” I say.

Konstantin unwinds himself, making Juliana pout. He shakes his head. “We all made an agreement. I’m not breaking it.”

I give him a nod in thanks, then walk to the car to give them some time together. They don’t get a place to fuck, though. I have my limits.

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JULIANA

“I haven’t seen you for weeks and you tell me that you’re not breaking an agreement? You promised you wouldn’t just leave me,” I remind him angrily.

Konstantin gives me a pitiful look and plays with his fingers in front of him. “I just got a new phone number. I gave Max the number to slip to you, but you haven’t gone out. I even called Patricia and she hasn’t heard from you.”

“Yeah. I guess I’ve been sulking.” I admit, rubbing the back of my neck.

Konstantin pulls me into his thick arms before a little yip catches his attention. He looks down at my dogs, especially Charlie who’s struggling to get out of my purse and to Konstantin. His eyes light up.

“Charlie!” He pulls Charlie out of my purse and accepts every lick and pets him so happily that I melt.

This is what I’ve missed. This man, who absolutely adores me and my dogs and supports me, and ugh. I kiss Konstantin’s cheek as he keeps petting Charlie before he pulls Nolan into his arms too.

“You’re the sweetest,” I whisper to him.

“The fact that you can still say that after our last time means I didn’t achieve what I was after.” He grumbles.

He sets the dogs back in my purse and cups my face. “They got my attention, it’s your turn.”

Konstantin kisses me slowly, softly, like I need all his protection, his softness, his warmth. Please, not even him sticking to Victorian rules with a chaperone could hide the sex appeal or calm my lust for him.

I shove my tongue between his lips and devour his groan as his big hand strokes down my back and he grabs my ass, pulling me tightly against him. I breathe him in, memorize his delicious cologne, the way his body feels wrapped around mine, the way he tastes. I don't want to forget a thing.

"As soon as you're in that safe house ..." Konstantin trails off, leaving a million fantasies in my head.

"I never got to finish you." I pant. "I need to fix that."

He chuckles. "Soon, angel."

"Not soon enough, Kon." I pant. "I'm aching for you."

"Good." He nips my bottom lip.

"My dad put cameras in the apartment." I hint.

I see my words settle into him and he pouts. "Not getting any are you?"

I shake my head.

"Get creative." He winks. "Until I have control over surveillance."

Gio honks, telling me we're out of time. My dad monitors this shit. I rub Kon's sides. "I miss you."

He gives me his new number, then swats my ass lightly as I walk away. The sting ripples out and lust follows. It eats at me until Gio parks at my apartment. I unbuckle, glance at my dogs in the backseat, then kiss Gio hungrily. "I want you."

"Me or someone?"

"You." I decide. It's easy. I miss our fun sex, the adventure, and how many things we haven't gotten to do. I miss the way he gets flustered with dirty talk, how he can't help but show all his emotions, and how much fun we have. "I want you, Gio."

“The cameras.”

“There are ways, right?” I kiss him again and again. I feel him give an inch. I continue kissing down his neck. “Pulling over in some wooded area.”

“Juliana.”

“I happen to go into the shower and you come in because you’re worried I fell and you *have* to make sure I’m okay.” I pant against his collarbone. “You’re just so diligent.”

He lifts my chin and kisses me again. “You know cameras have issues all the time.”

“All the time! Maybe it’s an internet problem.” I continue.

“Fuck it. But behave in front of Sharon.”

I huff. “I hate the paid cockblock.”

Gio chuckles, but I put on my bitchiest, most upset face as we pass. Sharon arches her eyebrow. “Didn’t enjoy counseling?”

“Like you care.” I hiss.

“Be nice.” Gio orders as we get in the elevator.

I take a step closer, but he discretely points out another camera. I adjust my dogs as a way to move closer to Gio, rubbing my ass against his hip until he lets out a frustrated pant. The second the doors open, I kill the wi-fi by unplugging the router while “looking for something”.

As soon as I nod, Gio takes my hand, pulling me towards him. “Do you actually want this? I’m not pouting if you need time.”

“I. Want. You.” I say clearly. “I’ve been upset, I know, but I like you, Gio. I’m tired of not being able to kiss you or touch you or fuck you.”

He strokes down the nape of my neck. “I never want to force you.”

It’s so humbling, reminds me that I’m more than just a fuck buddy to him. Gio knows me so well, knows when I’m

fronting, knows that I can be moody and that he's never *just* wanted sex from me.

"Kiss me," I order.

He chuckles. "All about demands, huh?"

"Please, Gio? Before my dad demands to know why the cameras are off?"

He picks me up and carries me all the way to my room. He shuts the door with his foot and lays me down on the bed, kissing me as he comes down on top of me. I hear the dogs running around the living room, eating, playing, and doing whatever they want, just like I am.

I hook my leg around Gio's hip and kiss him back, lavishing him with every bit of affection I can give. He groans and takes it up a notch, rubbing himself against me as he cups the back of my head and really kisses me. His tongue works me into a frenzy as heat and lust burst in my belly and spread all through my body.

"You're so beautiful, so tempting, do you know how hard it is to keep my hands to myself?" Gio asks in my ear. "Especially today."

"Today?" He has to be full of shit. I'm a mess.

"So real, warm, comfortable." His hand slides up my shirt. "How can I resist?"

I groan as he pulls my shirt off me. Of course, who needs a bra with a shirt that big? Gio groans and kisses me again and again as he cups my breasts, stroking and enjoying every shiver that his stroking earns.

"Gio." I pant.

His mouth flows down my neck, nipping, licking, kissing me hungrily. When he gets to my breasts, he pushes them together and licks over my cleavage, licks between my breast, and drives me insane by staying just out of reach of my hard, sensitive nipples.

"I've missed you like this." He pants.

Before I can answer, he gives me what I've been waiting for, sucking my nipple into his mouth as he pinches and rolls the other one. I groan and arch my back. I'm so wet, my panties are uncomfortable. I try to wiggle out of my leggings and Gio, thankfully, takes the hint and strips me of both leggings and underwear in one go. No trouble at all.

"Magic." I pant. "Both off so easily."

"I'm that horny." He groans. "I almost asked to facetime you in the shower last time I was here."

I push him over and climb on top. "Do it next time."

He chuckles and I think I strip him in record time. I moan as I rub over his body. The lean muscle, his tan skin, everything that makes Gio, Gio. From the little scar I accidentally gave him when we were kids and were wrestling to the tattoo he's never explained on his hip. And that scruff on his face ... ugh. All man, and all mine.

His cock twitches against my thigh and he arches an eyebrow despite that bad-boy smile. "I think you missed me too."

"I'm dripping wet for you." I slide down his cock, enjoying the way I can feel that curve of his, even inside me. He rubs just right as I grind on him.

His lips part and his head falls back. His fingers dig into my ass as he has me move on him. I grip his shoulder and jerk him up, offering him my breasts. He buries his face between them, kissing and licking until he gets back to my nipple.

"Car sex is definitely something we need to try. It's so naughty. Taboo." I pant as I ride him.

He bounces me on his cock, his groan echoing through my body. I wrap my arms around his neck, knotting my fingers in his hair. I pant as he thrusts into me harder. "Fuck, Juls."

"You feel so good." I whimper. "So fucking good, Gio. You hit such good spots inside me."

I grind on him again so the head of his cock rubs my g-spot just right. I tighten my hold on him as my pussy squeezes

around him. He pants and jerks my head down to kiss him. He's not talkative, but Gio definitely isn't passive in bed.

He rolls us over while still inside me and pounds me hard into the mattress. My legs tighten around him and I feel every panting breath over my face. He's so damn good to me, so wonderful, and I still can't believe we waited so long to be like this.

He groans and presses his forehead to mine. "I'm already close, babe."

"Then it's a race. Bet you finish first." I tease.

Gio chuckles, but reaches between us and rubs my clit until my legs are shaking and slipping down to the bed. He pulls one leg over his shoulder and changes the angle just enough that I feel the orgasm welling up in me.

He grins. "Want to take it back?"

"Fuck!" I grit my teeth, trying to hold out, but when he pinches my nipple and kisses me while increasing the pace of his fingers on my clit and his thrusting, I can't. "Fuck! Fuck!"

I come apart, my eyes rolling back as my nails drag down his back. Gio jerks out just in time, coming on my belly as he gives a low growl that turns me on all over again. He flops onto his back next to me and exhales before looking at me with a smile.

It's the first time I've seen that kind of happiness on his face since Kon left. I grab something to wipe myself off with and curl against Gio. "I like your smile."

"I'll try to give it to you more often." He pets my hair. "Are you really okay, though, Juls?"

"I will be," I assure him. "you're so willing to take care of me and keep me spoiled."

Gio kisses me. "I know you felt guilty about Kon ... but I more meant, well the time of year."

I close my eyes a moment and exhale. "I want this hitman business solved by then. I want to be able to go to her grave

and tell her about this year happily, especially about you. She always said we'd end up together."

He beams and kisses me hungrily. "Bet she'd be stirring the pot constantly if she knew about the four of us."

"She'd start bets on so much," I say, my heart squeezing. "I miss her."

"She'd be proud of you." He whispers in my ear. "Especially with how you're handling this shit and finding ways to enjoy yourself. I think she lived vicariously through you."

"Then we shouldn't let that go to waste." I wink at him.

Gio's phone buzzes and he groans as he looks at it. "Your father has noticed."

"We'll live vicariously later," I promise, with every intention of seeing it through.

The safe house might just be exactly what I need to get some necessary freedom.

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MAX

I watch Juliana as she leaves the bathroom door open to change. She's daring me with that gaze, begging me to do something. When she steps out of her panties and bites her lip while looking at me, I have to pull a pillow over my lap. I turn up the T.V., but Juliana is impossible to ignore.

She cups her breast, circles her nipple. A little gasp leaves her lips as her other hand continues down her belly. She spreads her legs and teases me by fingering herself slowly. I groan and grip the pillow tighter.

"You're killing me, doll."

"Are you going to do something about that?" She gasps as she sinks a second finger into her pussy.

Either I'm crazy or I can actually hear how wet she is. God, she's driving me insane. I glance at the cameras as discretely as I can. "You know, Juliana ..."

I make the mistake of looking at her again and see her tasting her own pussy which is absolutely not allowed if I can't do the same. I walk over to the fuse box for her apartment and turn it off. Down go the cameras.

Juliana yips and I see her dogs look up in response, but they don't get up. I go into the bathroom and see Juliana looking around. "What happened?"

"I made sure I can touch you," I growl

Her eyes open wide. "What?"

I throw her over my shoulder, carry her to the guest room and drag her over my knees. She whimpers. “Max.”

I swat her ass. “Teasing me while thinking I can’t do anything.”

“I thought it would excite you.” She attempts. “Gio thought I didn’t want any of you and I don’t want you feeling that way.”

Grinning, I swat her ass again, then palm her pink cheek. I dig my nails in and groan. “I’ve missed you.”

“Show me how much,” She asks softly.

I swat her ass again, then set her on the bed, get on my knees and devour her pussy. Juliana moans and rolls her body against my mouth. I lick and devour her like I’ve wanted for these last two weeks. I’ve wanted her constantly.

Juliana holds onto my hair and the sheets at the same time and when I look up at her, seeing her in ecstasy, so lost to the world, it drives me wild. I draw back and she pouts. “I was almost there.”

I strip down and show her how hard I am. “You did this, so you get to take care of it, doll.”

She groans and gets on her belly to lick over the tip of my cock. I nod to her and rub my fingers through her hair before gripping it and jerking her further down my cock. She groans and sucks me harder.

I nod as she takes me over and over again while rolling her body against the bed. It’s such a damn perfect sight. How am I supposed to resist what I have right here? How could I want any other woman?

Juliana pops off my cock and kisses along my hips. She nips my abs and I groan, shoving her back and climbing on top of her. “You’re a naughty minx.”

“I’ve been craving you. I’m aching for you.” She pants.

I rub my cock against her and she whimpers. “Please, inside me. I need you inside me, Max.”

“How much, Juliana?”

“If you don’t put your cock in my pussy right now, I’m going to throw you down and do it myself.” She grabs my shoulders and slides her arms around my neck. Her lips brush mine. “Please take me.”

I kiss her hungrily, rolling my hips against her so she moans. “Please, Max. I’ll beg ... this time.”

Chuckling, I take her hands, guide them over her head, then thrust into her. Her lips part in a wordless moan before her head falls back. She rolls her body against mine, then wraps her legs around me, jerking me close.

I pant and kiss her again and again, just grinding deeper inside her until I draw back to take a breath. “You don’t have to beg ... this time, doll.”

She giggles and strokes over my face. “I missed you too.”

I thrust into her and she clutches me closer. “Yes, Max.”

“You want to get extra kinky?”

“With you, yes.”

“Then let’s go full vanillas.”

She giggles as we roll around on the bed, trying a few positions I have ignored over the years. I keep count of Juliana’s orgasms, but lose the number as I finish inside her. She nods as she rides me, rubbing my chest and slowly easing herself down to kiss me.

“Thank you, Max.”

“For what?”

She kisses my cheek. “I know you’ve been working on my dad bringing Konstantin back.”

“I have.” I agree.

“It means a lot to me. The lack of jealousy is refreshing.”

“You’re living your best life in your twenties, just like you should be.” I take her hand and lace my fingers between hers. “You should have plenty of fun.”

“Do you like being a part of my fun?” She asks.

“Is it just fun?”

“I mean, we’re more than friends.” She adjusts to my side.
“And I like you.”

“I like you too, doll.” I kiss her softly.

“Do Is it okay if I tell you something and ask you not to tell my father?”

“We’re naked in bed right now, of course I can keep things from your father.”

“I saw Konstantin yesterday and it was really nice. But um ... the point is, I talked to one of the Volkov plans and I agreed to one of their safe houses.”

“I thought you were against the safe house plan.” I hum.
“Because you didn’t want to be caged.”

“Look at me right now. I’m locked in this penthouse apartment with someone always downstairs, and we have to actually turn off the power to get the cameras to go off. Also, you should turn that back on before the end of the work day.”

I chuckle and wait for her to get in the shower to turn it back on. All dressed and ready. I call in a report to have the breaker checked and text Mr. Giovanni about power issues, showing him the text I sent to the building manager.

He thanks me for the diligence which makes me smirk. I order Indian food for Juliana and hack into the security feed. Of course, Mr. Giovanni doesn’t have any idea how the security feed works so turned it over to me. I say something and realize there’s no sound.

“So you’re okay with a safe house.”

“The way I see it, Konstantin will monitor the feeds and security, but I’ll have unlimited access to you guys. Plus, I can start putting together my own business model while on PTO and we can take out the threat.”

“So ambitious.”

“You wouldn’t like me if I wasn’t.”

“Very true. You’re a hell of a woman.” I say, keeping my eyes off her. “The cameras are back up.”

“Thanks for telling me.” She comes out in sweats and a crop top. How does she make everything look perfect to tear off her.

“You look too damn delicious.” I groan.

“Real conversation.” She says. “So I’ll get everything just by agreeing to the safe house and Daddy will get off my back and he won’t expect a thing. It’s kind of perfect.”

“Don’t forget the hitman.”

“What?”

I see something move outside her window in the building across the way. “The windows are bullet proof?”

“No. I told daddy that the guy did it, but then I wouldn’t be able to open them and.”

I grab her and jerk her off the couch before the window shatters. Rolling Juliana under the marble coffee table. I pin her there for a solid thirty seconds as she trembles. I pant with her and shake my head.

“I’ll talk to your father, we’re moving you to the safe house now.”

“Now?”

“Crawl to your room, as close to the window as you can get and pack a bag while staying out of the window line.”

“But.”

“Juliana, I know you can handle hand to hand. I’ve seen it. Snipers are something else. Now go.”

She blinks at me and does exactly as I say. I call her father. “I have a safe house to take Juliana to and I’m doing it now.”

“What?”

“The windows turned out not to be as bulletproof as believed. I’m making sure she’s safe. Update Gio and Sharon accordingly.”

Just like that, I manage to get Juliana to my vehicle, then take her to the Volkov mansion. She looks around in awe, but when someone asks if she has an appointment she mentions something about knowing Valerie.

The next thing I know, there's a guy only slightly smaller than Konstantin standing with us. His long blonde hair doesn't seem to pair correctly with him, but Juliana looks up at him. "The safe house. We need it. Immediately."

"Sniper." I explain.

He looks between us and says something in Russian. Konstantin walks out in a tank top and I can see the attraction written on Juliana's face. She swallows and leans into me. "God, I'm lucky."

I chuckle and rub down her back. "Seeing you this turned on ... be careful."

"Take them to the agreed upon safe house."

Juliana's dog growls in her purse and the stranger lifts an eyebrow. Nolan falls quiet and the man nods. "Valerie will be updated shortly. She's currently ... busy."

"Oh."

"I can take care of this, Lief." Konstantin assures.

He leads us back to the car and drives us to the designated place. He waves his hand as he opens the door. It's a beautiful home, small, but secluded. The fenced in back yard offers more security, and considering there is motion detection all around the house, I'll feel better.

I actually relax as Juliana walks around.

Konstantin clears his throat. "It's not as ... luxurious as the penthouse."

"It's better." She sighs. "It has personality. All cozy and sweet. Two bedrooms?"

"Yes." Konstantin reports.

I rub my jaw, then see Juliana shaking. She sits on the couch and both her dogs nudge at her. She pets them and tries

to calm her breathing. She puts on a brave front, but I can tell this has rattled. Of course it does. She was just shot at.

“What happened?” Konstantin asks me softly.

“Her windows aren’t bulletproof and we found that out.” I answer.

He looks from me to her, then takes a slow breath. “Any idea who?”

“I have a feeling she knows. But her father only told Gio anything, he was sure that he wouldn’t say a word.”

“Neither of you are being quiet.” Juliana hisses. “The guy who put the hit on me is Mr. Alister. I don’t have a first name.”

“I do.” Konstantin whispers. He looks at me. “What are you able to do?”

“I have a knack with stocks. I could tank his business, make sure he can’t pay a damn thing towards the hitman.”

“It might.” He agrees.

“I know you and Gio don’t think I’m serious about things, but I didn’t get to where I am by being ridiculous or outspoken. I’m going to do everything I can to make sure Juliana is safe. I know she’ll fight along our sides to do all this, but she will be safe.”

“We agree on that.” Konstantin says. “It doesn’t matter who’s my boss, I’d bend over backwards to protect Juliana.”

I pat his shoulder. “You and me both. Gio goes without saying.”

And it’s the truth. Even if I’m not buddies with Konstantin and Gio, there’s no one I trust more when it comes to Juliana’s safety and happiness. I know that they are going to do everything humanly possible to make sure she gets through this.

JULIANA

Max has to go, I watch him leave and a part of me worries about him. If the sniper saw his car, he could be going after Max. Konstantin sits with me, sees how unfocused I am, probably clocks how hard it is for me to breathe.

I feel like my heart is going to lurch out of my chest. Knowing and experiencing are two different things. Being shot at is something I never wanted to experience. It's something ...

“I'll make you a drink.”

I watch as he does just that. It's not a crazy alcohol beverage, but I can definitely taste the tequila. It warms and cools me at the same time. I nibble my bottom lip after drinking. “Are you waiting for me to fall apart?”

“I'm not sure.” He says. “Maybe I'm waiting for you to try to raid the fridge just to discover there's nothing at all there.”

“Then let's take care of that first. Is it safe for us to go to the grocery store?”

“With me, yes.”

I believe it. He gets dressed and we head to the grocery store. I get a little bit of everything, determined to be able to cook a decent meal. Once we get back to the house, I throw myself into cooking. It's something to do where I have total control.

Konstantin hugs me from behind when I yell at the meat. I take a slow breath, then turn and melt into his arms. He rubs my back and kisses the top of my head. “You’re okay, angel. I promise you’re going to be just fine.”

“How can you promise that?”

“Because I know what I’m capable of.” He says in my ear. “And I will take out anyone who threatens your life.”

I tremble. “Violence is only half-sexy on you.”

He helps me with dinner, taking every order and every suggestion to heart. We laugh and for a few precious minutes, I’m normal. I’m not some heiress or rich girl. I don’t have a hit on me. I’m just with my boyfriend cooking dinner.

But as soon as that thought rolls into my brain I come to a stop. I see Konstantin piling his plate high with a warm smile and my heart studders. I can’t think of him as my boyfriend. Not with everything going on, not with Gio and Max existing too. I mean, that’s crazy.

Because if I call Konstantin my boyfriend then I have to drop Gio and Max and how could I possibly do that. Max and I have so much fun and we match so well and then Gio, wonderful amazing Gio who I’ve connected with for years and am finally getting to enjoy without anything between us. Konstantin is amazing, sweet, determined, sexy, good with me and my dogs and a breath of fresh air, but ...

“No pouting.” Konstantin kisses me softly. “Just us tonight.”

“Almost feels like a date.”

“Good.” He beams.

We eat together and he distracts me by getting me talking about Charlie and Nolan, how long I’ve had them, how I trained them. Then he asks about what I want to do with my life.

“I’d really like to support artists. It sounds silly, but I remember in college I had friends that loved art, they wanted to make a career in it, but it’s so difficult to get into. If I could

create some kind of middle man to connect the artist to the businesses or charities that need someone, it could help. Plus, I could send their work to galleries so they could focus more on what they're doing instead of the process."

He rubs my knee. "That would make a lot more people happy."

"Of course, I'd have to charge something, but if I do a percentage of what the artist makes and charge the businesses, it would still be affordable."

"I have a feeling Patricia inspired this."

"She did." I nod. "My best friend is forced to work in a call center because she can't get her photography off the ground. She does weddings and stuff on the side, but even that's hard."

"What's stopping you?" He leans forward, giving me his full attention.

I open my mouth to tell him I have to make my own bills and remember my father gives me an allowance every month on top of my income. I've saved up more than enough to purchase a building and I could even get a business loan. I don't need to work for my father, he's said that constantly.

"I ... I don't know."

"Dive into it. If it's your passion, you're only hurting yourself by putting it off, Juliana."

"You're right." I decide right then and there. "As soon as this bullshit is over, I'm going to do it. Now if you tell me you're an artist too, I'll give you a discount as my first client."

"I'm not, but I know plenty of people who love showing off amazing pieces of art and at least three who want portraits done of themselves the old fashioned way." He says before kissing me. "You don't settle for your father's rules, make your own."

Konstantin cuddles me as we watch a movie. Neither of us talk. He pets the dogs while stroking my hair and we have an amazing night together. No sex needed, which is shocking. I

sit up at the end of the movie, ready for a serious discussion about what we're feeling, where he wants this relationship to go, but he's already asleep.

I sigh, tuck him in and call the dogs to go out. Gio stands there, looking at the back yard with a nod as Nolan and Charlie romp around. He exhales. "This is a good place for you, Julia. Far better than where you were."

"I think so too."

"I need to talk to Konstantin. I believe he has more information about the man running the hit." Gio says seriously.

"He's asleep." I murmur.

"We don't sleep on the job, Julia."

I feel myself get defensive, but Gio wraps an arm around me and pulls me tightly against him. I inhale his cologne, light and almost sweet. He hugs me tightly, cups the back of my head and I feel him shake.

"Your father told me that Max didn't give many details. He didn't even know if you were hurt. Do you have any idea how crazy I've been. The Volkovs wouldn't even tell me where you were until Hunter saw me and gave it up."

I clutch at his sides. "I'm sorry, Gio. I should have called."

"Yes." He pulls back and studies my face. "But I'm sure you were upset."

"I just can't ... I can't believe that I." I shake my head and take a slow breath, trying to calm down. "It was so fast. I was just sitting there, talking to Max about my plans for the safe house and the future and then he grabbed me and jerked me under the table and there was glass everywhere."

Gio looks at my hand. There are a few cuts on my arm that I didn't notice. Gio kisses each one softly. "And now your guard is sleeping on the job."

"We weren't ..." I shake my head. "Off limits."

"A movie night?" Gio guesses. "Kon wouldn't push for sex after something like this."

“You know him well.”

“And Max. How is he dealing with this?”

“He’s going to fuck with something to bankrupt Mr. Alister. And the Volkovs got more information so Dad won’t know you told me. I was careful about that, Gio.” I insist. “I don’t want you in trouble at all.”

He softens and holds my face between his hands. “I don’t give a fuck about your father. I care about you, Juliana. Haven’t I made that clear? All these years I’ve ignored his orders, but pretended to do exactly what he said so I could stay close to you.”

“Gio.” I breathe.

“Do you really think I would ever side with him?” He asks seriously. “It’s always been about you, Julia.”

I just hug him tightly, then kiss up his neck. Gio cups my face, guiding me to his mouth. I moan as I kiss him, stroking over his sides, needing to feel him against me, for this to be real. Gio kisses me again, his tongue gently stroking mine.

I can tell he’s not angling for more which just makes it even more special to me. As I cling to him, he slowly ends the kiss. My heart races in my chest. Gio strokes under my eyes. “I’ve never ridden the fence, babe.”

“I’m sorry. I just assumed.”

“I just do things a different way.” He says with a smile. “The smart way to balance out all your impulsiveness.”

I laugh and squeeze myself closer to him. “Insulting me now?”

“I like your impulsiveness. I like your passion and drive and how you let nothing stand in your way. So now, how about we wake up Konstantin and make this hitman regret his choice to try and take you out.”

“Promise I get to kick him in the dick?”

“Promise.” Gio says.

I welcome him inside and Kon jerks awake as Charlie pounces on him. He sees Gio and clears his throat. “I was just um ..”

“Falling asleep on a date is bad form, Konstantin.” Gio reprimands. “If Juliana wants to be disappointed, she can go after some college fuckboys.”

Kon glares at Gio, but says nothing. I sit between them and look at the file Konstantin brought. We go over it in detail, but there’s nothing about the hitman. There’s a note from Chase saying that it was done in cryptocurrency and can’t be traced.

Then Konstantin pulls out another list. “These are hitmen that have worked with the Volkov clan. Hunter got it off his father somehow. I don’t know if we can cross reference this with any kind of sniper hits, but I thought it would help to have.”

“Thorough.” Gio says, almost complimenting him.

“So, we have a starting point. What are we going to do with this?” I ask. “I don’t know what to do with a list of names other than check Facebook.”

Konstantin glances at me. “Let’s see what Max can do. If the hitman’s fee isn’t finished-”

“But it says they were ...” It clicks into place. “Half up front.”

“Exactly.” Gio agrees. “But we didn’t have any outward hits until Konstantin was removed from your detail and it was obvious it was for good. And even then, it was only after you’d gone out. I’m wondering ...”

“It couldn’t be an inside job. Not with how Mr. Giovani vets everyone.” Konstantin muses.

“And there haven’t been any recent hires.”

I can feel myself pale. There has been a recent hire. One who’s been either in the lobby or with me since she was hired until today. When Gio was in the lobby and Max was up with me. One person who knew that Konstantin was replaced and

no longer in the picture. One person who has the access and knew right where I was, where I'd be, and when.

But that's not possible is it? Daddy wouldn't just hire anyone to be my bodyguard. He went through the Volkovs for Kon and Kon had worked with us before. He's known Gio since he was born. And Max and him go way back. So he wouldn't just hire someone without a recommendation.

“Who vouched for the new chick.”

“Sharon?” Gio asks.

“She's the only new one. She had today off ... I don't know her.” I say softly.

Konstantin makes a frustrated sound and looks over the list. He circles two female names. “Names don't mean anything but faces do. I'll take this to Hunter tomorrow and see if he has any pictures.”

“Your father doesn't have this address yet, does he?”

I shake my head. “No. And let's hope Max doesn't give it up.”

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KONSTANTIN

This is my fault.

That's all I can think as I head to the mansion the next day. If I hadn't gotten caught with Juliana, if I had just been a little more careful, then the hitman - hitwoman in this case – wouldn't have gotten in closer.

All I had to do was lock both doors. If I had taken an extra five seconds before having my way with Juliana. If I had just controlled myself better ... I never would have been removed and she never would have been shot at.

I know I can't fix it, but seeing her look so lost and upset when I've only seen her strong, flirtatious, sure ... I take a slow breath and put myself together before walking into the Volkov mansion.

Valerie sees me and leaves Chase's side to walk over to me. There's hellfire in her footsteps and the smile doesn't do a damn thing to soften it. She narrows her eyes at me and puts out her hand. "What do you have?"

"It's about the girl."

"I assumed as much. She's our client, yes?"

"Yes." I agree. I hand her the two names I had circled. "I wanted to see if we had any pictures of these women."

Valerie talks to Chase quietly and he nods before heading up to his office. Valerie looks me over again. "You like her."

"I haven't hidden that."

“Affection isn’t always for the world to know, Konstantin. We’ll take care of this and update you. Go back to the girl. Two people should be at the safe house.”

“Can I request that her address is not given to anyone else? Gio and Max are trustworthy, but anyone else, including her father, need to be kept in the dark.”

“No worries there.” Valerie says before nodding to me and heading back to Chase.

I return to the safe house and see Gio working on something while Juliana types away on the computer. She notices me and flashes a smile. “I have done a quiet purchase of a building – under my mother’s maiden name. A place for the business.”

“I’m proud of you.” I pat her head, then have to give her dogs some attention. I can’t *not* pet them when they’re so happy to see me? I adore them. “Have you two helped?”

“They haven’t left my side once.” Juliana reports.

I want to kiss her when she gives me that warm smile, but Gio is here, and even if his eyes are focused on the screen, I’m sure he’s paying close attention. Juliana sets her computer to the side and stands awkwardly in front of me.

“So?”

“I gave them the list. They’re looking to see what they have on the names now. It’s all I can do at the moment when it comes to the mafia. Max is going to work on the business side of the person in question.”

“And it would be silly for me to just go and talk to the man himself right? To just barge into his office, or to put it out on the media that he’s put a hit on me because he failed at his attempt at insurance fraud? I mean, even if it wasn’t fraud – not paying out is way different from murder.”

“Let’s be patient.” Gio instructs.

“How patient? Until he hurts me.”

“Not what I said. Let him destroy himself. I’m helping with that. I sent an email through a strong VPN from a source

that won't trace back to me. Something cryptic that will heighten his paranoia."

"And what?" Juliana demands.

Gio stands and calmly approaches. He doesn't touch her, as we agreed upon, but I can tell how much he wants to. We exchange a look and I nod. She needs more than words right now. We both know that.

Gio pulls her into his arms and lowers his voice. "We let him dig his own hole. It's not doing nothing, it's assuring we can use our time for better things, like the business you're starting."

She grumbles, but gives in to his hug. When he releases her, she's obviously calmed. "I just want this done as soon as possible."

"That's what all of us are working for, you included, Juls." I say calmly. "You being here and not letting this get to you is important. Surviving a hit can still destroy a person and they'll win. Don't let them win."

Juliana hesitantly touches my chest and nods. "I don't just want to be a damsel in distress."

"You're not." I assure. "Keep working."

She hesitates and I gently kiss the top of her head.

"Just kiss her. God, I could cut the tension in here with a knife." Gio grumbles.

I kiss Juliana softly, gently rubbing her jaw. "We're going to need your help soon. You'll have plenty of work, but please don't stop being you."

She signs and nods. Gio ends up having to leave to take care of something with Max and to 'update Sharon' as he says sarcastically.

"Better you do it. She likes you." Juliana huffs.

Gio chuckles. "Are *you* getting jealous?"

"I know it's not fair, but yes. I don't like how she drools over you."

“Someone should, since you don’t drool.”

“You don’t know what I do when you’re not looking.”
Juliana sasses.

Gio chuckles and squeezes her hand. “Let’s keep it that way. Otherwise *my* jealousy might get the best of me.”

“Does that mean I’ll get to see you and Kon wrestle? I might like that. Especially if there are no shirts and it’s in a pool of jello.”

Gio shakes his head, but we both smile. He thanks me with a nod and heads out. I sit with Juliana. “I didn’t upset you last night by not taking the lead, right?”

“No. I wasn’t up for more than exactly what we did.” She shrugs. “I know that it makes me boring.”

“Human.” I correct.

“Well then I’m definitely failing. I should be a goddess.”

I pull her closer to me and kiss down her neck. “You taste like magic, Juls.”

She trembles. “You start that you better finish it, Kon. It’s been weeks.”

“Believe me. I know.” Because I never got to finish with her. I’ve masturbated anytime she’s come into my head, but it’s not the same. “We have plenty to finish.”

“And no one to interrupt us.”

I groan and follow her as she leads me to the master bedroom. She pulls off her dress and tugs on my shirt. “You’re overdressed.”

“What are you going to do about it?” I ask.

She grins and unbuttons my shirt slowly, placing a kiss each time a button is undone. I groan and watch her, happy for each reward of her lips on my skin. Juliana squats down and works on my pants, kissing and licking along my belly as she pulls my belt off and undoes my zipper.

“Fucking hell.”

“You’re so hard.” She strokes me through my boxers as my slacks fall to the floor. “I’ve missed you and your cock so much. Missed you filling me over and over again. Missed how I can barely fit you in my mouth because you’re so thick.”

“I don’t want to keep you waiting anymore.” I guide her head forward as she takes my cock down her throat. I groan. “My memories of you don’t compare to the real thing.”

She groans and digs her nails into my ass, moving forward and back to take me over and over again. The way that she just keeps going, no matter if she gags, no matter if she’s panting or drooling. It’s so fucking hot.

“You are a goddess.” I pant.

Juliana pops off my cock, but keeps stroking me with her fingers. Her hand tightens around my length, then softens over the head. “Do you want to come once or twice.”

“With you I could come endlessly.”

“Twice it is.” She decides before taking me all the way down her throat. Her tongue teases me the whole way and we moan together.

It’s only been two weeks, but I know I’m not going to last long, not when Juliana, the girl of my dreams, is right here blowing me like she needs me to live. I grip her hair tightly as I finish down her throat. We moan together and she trembles as she draws back, still swallowing.

“So good.” She hums.

I pick her up and put her in bed, undressing her and lavishing her with affection. I don’t move nearly as slowly as I did last time. It would be torture for both of us. She licks into my mouth as she hugs me close.

I manage to push a hand between our bodies so I can finger her. Her back arches. “Oh, Kon. Yes. Just like that, tiger. I’ve missed your fingers so much.”

“Just my fingers?” I ask against her neck. “Not my mouth?”

“All of you! Fuck, all of you.”

I lick over her nipple before I suck it and tease with my tongue. I continue kissing down her body as she comes apart for my fingers. Grinning up at her, I sigh. I've missed her moans, the way she gives herself over to passion and pleasure so completely.

"A good start for tonight." I purr against her inner thigh.

"Just a start?" Juliana whimpers.

"I promised you all night last time. I make good on my word."

She groans and I pull her thigh over my neck so I can lap at her clit while working my fingers deep. God, she tastes good, wonderful. Between her cooking and her pussy, I could feast happily for the rest of my life.

She bucks her hips against my face and I love it. I suck her clit hard while flicking my tongue over the sensitive bud and she screams as she gushes over my fingers. But I know I'm not nearly hard enough yet.

I make her come again and again. When she finishes for the third time, she pushes at my forehead. "Too much. Too sensitive."

That's fine with me. I can feel my cock tapping my belly. I lick up her belly, between her large breasts, then to her mouth. She sucks my tongue, wraps her arms around me and rubs her hips against me.

"I need you to fuck me. And I need you to finish this time."

I pull her onto my lap and thrust into her. Juliana groans and her head falls back. "I've missed you so much."

"Fucking me or me?"

"Both." She nips my jaw. "Fuck me like only you do, Kon. Deep and sure."

I hold her in place as we fuck each other. She rides me, never settling for staying still. Her breasts bounce against my chest and the sounds she makes drive me insane. I tangle my

fingers in her hair and kiss her until she lets out a moan and bites my shoulder.

Her pussy squeezes my cock so tightly, I can't help but finish with her. Heat rips through me, filling me up with ecstasy and love. I grunt and groan as I come inside her, then lay down with her at my side.

Every thought is pushed out of my head except that I love Juliana. I don't know if it's the serious kind of love, or the love that happens right after the infatuation point, but I know it's true. I push her messy hair from her face and kiss her forehead. I'll keep all my love to myself until we get through this problem. She doesn't need the extra stress and I don't want to take the chance of her kicking me out of her life.

"All night, huh?" She asks as she rubs my chest. "Then I should keep going, right?"

"I'm yours, angel."

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JULIANA

I hum as I kick at the blanket around my legs. I'm too hot and overheating. But then I'm on fire. With Sharon watching me burn, a gun trained on me, only giving me two options. Death by a bullet in the head, or death by the fire lapping at my back. The smoke chokes me, makes it impossible to breathe. I think my heart is actually dying in my chest. It hurts so badly, I'm regretting every single sweet thing I've ever eaten that could clog it up.

Gasping, I sit up, ready to fight, but all I find is Konstantin, now awake and very worried. But I still don't feel like I can breathe. Konstantin helps Charlie and Nolan to bed and has them cuddle against me. I pet them as Konstantin whispers in my ear.

"You're right with me, angel. Right here in the safe house. We're okay. Feel my heartbeat?" He pulls one of my hands to his chest.

I can feel the heavy, hard beating of his heart. I take a slower breath as Konstantin coaches me. Once I have a sense of where we are and Charlie lays on my lap, not letting me move, but calming, I lean back against Kon.

"You're hot."

"Thank you?" He asks.

"I mean body temp. You're warm. I had a nightmare that the room was on fire and Sharon was holding a gun and ..." I close my eyes. "I'm tired of nightmares."

“How long have you had nightmares, baby?”

“Long time.” I sigh, letting my eyes close a little. “Off and on. Some psychiatrist said they were stress related. It lines up pretty well.”

Konstantin kisses the top of my head and pets Charlie who’s relaxing on my lap just watching us. I can tell he has a question in the silence, but looking over my shoulder and seeing his blatant nervousness. “What is it, tiger?”

“Did I push you too hard? Three rounds and some fun in between could be too much and if I overdid it and gave you a nightmare-”

“No!” I insist, then kiss his cheek. “No, Kon.” I almost laugh because it’s so silly, but he’s so earnest. “I promise, it’s not because of the amazing sex. It’s the stress of being shot at and actually being in danger. I guess my attitude isn’t enough to handle this.”

Konstantin kisses my temple, my cheek, then right next to my ear. “I can try to fight your nightmares.”

I kiss him softly. “Just jack the A/C up a little more.”

I happily watch Kon’s ass as he goes to do just that. He’s gorgeous. Gorgeous and big, mildly terrifying when he puts on that intense face, but so sweet and loving behind that softer face. Generous, warm, and eager to make others comfortable.

I hear the A/C kick on and then Konstantin comes back. Even soft, he’s big. I lick my bottom lip and he points at me. “None of that. We’re going to bed.”

“Party pooper.”

Kon chuckles as he wraps himself around me. Charlie and Nolan curl up against my belly as Kon spoons me. It’s heaven as far as falling asleep. I feel spoiled and loved and *safe*. I didn’t realize how valuable that last one was until now.

In the morning, I pull on pajamas out of the bag I packed and realize Kon is already gone. I pout. I like catching him asleep, all cute and snoring. In the living room, I see all three

of my men. Instead of growling at each other and getting in cheap insults, it looks like they're working together.

It puts an extra little flutter in my heart. They're so determined to keep me safe (something I've been more than willing to do all on my own up until now), that they're willing to put aside any jealousy or frustration with each other.

"Good morning, doll." Max brings me a coffee. I'm kind of shocked that it's exactly what I normally make for myself. He winks. "I pay attention."

"So more than about fun, right?"

"Learning about you *is* fun."

"All of us are present. Save the pick-up lines," Gio growls.

"As if we didn't pull Konstantin here from a cuddle session with Juliana. I didn't hear any complaints about that, Gio," Max shoots back.

Okay, maybe they aren't above playground rules even with a hitman closing in.

"I never got a text warning me." Konstantin huffs. "And I was dressed by the time you two came in."

"Keep your phone off vibrate and you'll hear the warnings. The security feed was yours to watch anyway." Gio reminds him.

I shake my head at the guys but take another sip of coffee. "There's enough of me to go around."

"I'd like to keep it that way," Gio says.

When our eyes meet, he softens a little. Gio exhales. "I promise, I'll relax once—"

"Tomorrow, after a long night of 'guarding' Juliana?" Max teases. "It does all of us some good, and it obviously does her plenty good."

"Max," Kon warns this time.

"I'm just saying that she's still here, she's happy, and she has more freedom here than under her father." Max glances at

me. “You are happy right, doll?”

“I only have one complaint.” I join them at the table and see a picture of Sharon on the table. I point at her. “That would be it.”

“She’s gone through a few different names. We had her under Jane.” He shakes his head. “We don’t ask many questions when it comes to names as long as there is a way to pay them and keep it under the table.”

“Says good quality business,” Gio says while pinching the bridge of his nose. I know he’s frustrated. “She hasn’t reported in since the incident. So I’m sure she knows we’re on to her.”

“No report to the Volkov mansion despite being contacted,” Konstantin agrees. “No check-in, and based on the bounty they offered her, there’s no way she’d just walk away unless something else was in the way.”

“Max?” Gio asks.

“You’re good at taking the lead, aren’t you, kid?”

“Better than some, old man. What have you managed?” Gio insists.

I smile very slightly.

“I may have let a few people know that Mr. Wallis Alister isn’t the kind of guy who has a long-lasting business. People tend to listen to my projections so when I mentioned he may be investigated for potential insurance fraud based on some insider information ... well.”

“Isn’t trading information breaking a law?” I ask.

“No, doll.” He bumps my hip with a wicked glint in his eyes. “Just like any other questionable activity, it’s only illegal if you’re caught. I’ve made a profession out of not being caught.” He winks.

Is it just me or did the temperature go up in this room? I fan myself lightly and catch Max’s smirk. I almost wish he was staying with me today. I could use some fun. But once we wrap up and the guys divide up the jobs, I’m left with Gio.

Konstantin texts me saying he wished we had more time for a proper good morning, but it is what it is.

For now.

Gio keeps working until I put my head in his lap on the couch. He comes to a complete stop and looks down at me. “Yes?”

“Are you working all day? Isn’t it Saturday?”

“Friday.” He corrects me gently pulling hair from my face.

I groan and let my arm flop dramatically. Gio finishes whatever he was typing, then shuts his laptop to stroke through my hair. “I’ll have to chastise Konstantin.”

“Why?”

“Clearly, you haven’t gotten enough attention.”

“I haven’t gotten enough time with *you*.” I specify. “You’re working or you’re working.”

“Babe.”

“I know that it’s to keep me safe and keep your life on track, but all I want is to enjoy some time with you, Gio.” I sit up and rub his shoulders. “Maybe trade massages, have some fun, like old times. We could even break some rules.”

“I like rules.”

“When it suits you.”

He chuckles and kisses me softly. One kiss turns into another and another. He holds my face between his hands and works me backward until I’m on my back on the other side of the couch with Gio on top of me.

I moan and try to get his shirt off, but he catches my wrists. I see him glance around, but then he shakes his head and rests his forehead against mine. “I’m so worried about cameras even here.”

“Oh well. Let Dad be jealous that we’re getting action and he’s not.”

“Eww.” His nose wrinkles. “You know I see him as an uncle.”

“That’s eww! That would make me your cousin. And I don’t care what state we’re in, that’s a no so big, I can’t even explain it.”

He chuckles and lifts my chin. “You’re no cousin.”

“What am I?”

“Plenty but not that.” He kisses me again, our tongues teasing.

I’m lost in him as he continues touching me and kissing me, but he draws back and lays on my chest. I pause, suddenly surprised at the change. I pet his back and stare at the top of his head. “Gio?”

“I’m conflicted,” He says.

“About what?”

“Catching the hitman. Completing this mission.”

“It’s a good thing, isn’t it? Sure, I’m hoping I have a different career, but I’m still going to want you and Kon and Max around. I’ve gotten so used to the three of you.”

“So even when you’re life isn’t in danger, you’re going to want me right here? With you?”

“Right here, fucking me from behind, under me, kissing me, maybe wrapping my legs around you and having you fuck me on a table.”

“I’m serious, Juliana.” Gio lifts his head. “I have this feeling that once the thrill is gone, once there’s no reason for us to be around you ..”

“That I’ll get bored?” I can’t stop the angry undercurrent in my voice.

“It’s not a you thing.”

“It sounds like a me thing. It sounds like you’re saying I only want what I shouldn’t have. That I’m only interested in

you because I could die any time. Is that what you think of me?”

“No!”

“Then what? That I’m just in it for sex? Once the sex isn’t hot or entertaining, I’ll just dip out and replace you?”

“Julia.” Gio gently lays me back down but doesn’t tell me to calm down, which keeps me from going full ‘active volcano’ on him. “I’m just nervous. This is new. Everything between us has happened while the hit has been in place. I just need some ... reassurance.”

“Really?”

“Really. I know that I’ve liked you for ... too long to admit to without embarrassing myself and I’m not complaining about what we have going on, but with things coming to a close soon, I just want to know that we are still going to exist afterward.”

“I was a dumbass for not seeing what was right in front of me for so long, Gio,” I whisper, letting my finger follow his jaw. “I’m not going to be able to let you go now. I *like* you too much now. The sex is great and it helps, but I wouldn’t be having sex with you if I didn’t like you.”

He keeps watching me.

“I especially wouldn’t be laughing in bed with you, cuddling you, getting jealous over someone drooling over you if I didn’t like you,” I soothe him.

Gio takes a slow breath. “I feel ridiculous now.”

“It’s cute.”

Gio snorts and sits up. “You’ve called me back plenty.”

“And it’s true. Even when you’re a grown-up. You mean a lot to me, Gio, as a friend and more.” I follow him and pull him back to me. “We could fuck all these worries away.”

“Tempting.” He nods to me. “But I’d rather just be with you, listen to you, actually have a full conversation with words instead of ...”

“Instead of using our tongues for making out or oral or-”

He covers my mouth and chuckles. “Yes. Instead of that. Delightful as it is.”

“Shame. Closing off the option.”

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GIO

Juliana tells me all about her plans to be an art middleman. I love the plan, I love how excited and passionate she gets when she talks. She gets mildly vicious when she thinks of the buyers criticizing the artists, but says that's why she'd be very happy to be in the middle and protect them from that.

Once she finishes, she settles against me. "So ... yeah."

"Who will your first client be?"

"I know Patricia has some pieces of art already and Konstantin says he knows some people who would be interested in purchasing art." She hums.

"You know what we could do?"

"Other than you accepting that I can and will destroy you in a proper pillow fight?"

"I was thinking we could set up an obstacle course for Charlie and Nolan." I motion to the dogs. Although, Nolan is now between my feet which is something new.

They're both fast asleep and Juliana chuckles. "They'd be confused. I have wanted to get them a ball pit kind of thing. I think they'd love it."

"It would be a mess."

"Doesn't matter if they're happy. They work hard to help me, the least I can do is make sure they get to enjoy some moments."

I rub her arms and kiss her shoulder. “You’re shockingly sweet, Juls.”

“Shockingly?”

“You know what people say at events when you’re not paying attention?”

“That I’m a spoiled brat? A rich bitch that’s out of touch with reality? That I’m a money-hungry slut who fills her boredom with one-night stands.”

I blink at her. She shrugs. “I pay attention plenty. ‘Bitch’ is what I normally hear, but plenty of people say that about a woman who’s ambitious and doesn’t tolerate flirting or less than she deserves.”

“True.”

“What do you think, Gio?”

“I think that if I was given the wrong food at a restaurant, I’d trust you to tell the waitress or waiter that it’s wrong without being rude and ensuring it actually gets done.” I decide.

Juliana laughs. We spend most of the day talking, part of it kissing, then she insists on cooking while I pick out the movie for tonight. I go through my list of ‘must-see’ movies and find out she’s short on two of them.

I put a movie on and we eat together, cuddle up, and I answer her million questions through the first movie, before shaking my head within the first five minutes of the second one. I sigh. “You know, I may have to switch sides.”

“What?”

I grab a pillow and put it over her face. “I’m the hitman now. I can’t take you talking through another movie.”

She squeals against the pillow and Charlie runs to her rescue licking her face, but Nolan just looks up, huffs, and rests his little chin on my foot. It distracts me enough that Juliana is able to toss the pillow to the side.

Following my gaze, she ‘awes’. “Nolan’s so prickly too. You’re the chosen one.”

“Am I? I thought they loved Konstantin.”

“Charlie loves Kon. No question there. If he and I were both dying, I’m half convinced Charlie would save Kon. But Nolan is more reserved. Him laying on your foot is huge!”

“That’s huge?” I ask, wiggling a toe and seeing Nolan just tolerate it. In fact, he rubs his chin against my toe. “Huh.”

“To give you sass or to behave?”

“You know how to behave?” I gasp playfully.

She shoves me. “What’s gotten into you today?”

I grin and pull her closer, kissing her softly. “I’m not allowed to be happy?”

“Happy I like, but all this sass. You’re cutting into my market.”

I enjoy spending the night with Juliana. No talk about the problems. No talk about work. Just us, being together. I pet her dogs with her and I am impressed and horrified by the amount of hair that comes out of that. I point from Nolan to the giant ball of fluff.

“I could make another you with all this fluff.”

Nolan sneezes which makes Juliana laugh. Once we get in bed together, I rub her back, stroke her, and make sure she falls asleep peacefully. Once she’s out – and non-responsive to her name – I get up to do rounds.

I check the security feed, and verify that there’s no one there. I make sure that the alarm is set up and that there’s no chance of anyone getting into the house or even on the property without me knowing. I check a few more things and get a call from Uncle Tony.

“Gio, how are things?”

“Good. Juliana is actually getting some sleep. It’s progress,” I say simply.

“That’s wonderful. I would like to request her presence next Monday. I’ve cleared all my meetings.”

I hesitate and rub my forehead. Of course, he wants to see her on the anniversary of her mother’s death. I exhale slowly.

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“Of course not. I just know how ... raw I would be if someone wanted to see me on the anniversary and-”

“We are a family. We should be together, mourn together.”

“What if we haven’t closed in on the hitman by then?”

“Hiding her away on that date isn’t going to do anymore. She’ll be protected. Unless you don’t feel up to the task.”

“Of course we are.”

“Then it’s not an issue and we will proceed as expected. With a few moments in private for myself and Juliana.”

“Of course.

“I assume Konstantin is involved again,” He says darkly.

“Yes. He is the liaison to the Volkov ... clan.” I watch my mouth, remembering that some things can be known, but shouldn’t be said – like the mafia business.

“And I’m hoping that they aren’t left alone.”

“She’s a grown woman, Uncle Tony. Konstantin is a good man. You know that or you wouldn’t have hired him.”

“She forgets who she is. She is an heiress. If anyone saw or knew that she was with a *bodyguard* with no background the embarrassment. It’s not like if she was caught with you.”

“And Max.”

“Very funny. He’s nearly my age. He flirts, but Juliana has more than two brain cells. He could try every line in the book and she wouldn’t fall for him.”

I smirk to myself. At least I’m not the only one who sees through Max.

“We’re off topic,” He says. “keep Juliana under control. The rules should be the same as in her penthouse. No one goes into her room or the bathroom unless she’s dying. No touching. No flirting. All three of you, just do your job and rotate before she can sink her claws into you.”

I don’t bother to comment. I agree simply, then move on. Because what else is there to do? Nothing. If he’s going to keep his backward thinking, that’s fine for him. It just means that he’s going to lose his daughter a little more each day until she’s completely free of him.

After double-checking the monitor, I lie down in bed with Juliana. I’ll have to deliver the news tomorrow, but she deserves one full night where she doesn’t have to deal with the weight of the world on her shoulders.

She already has someone out to kill her, she doesn’t need to worry about her mother’s death too.

Juliana rolls over and snuggles closer. “You left me.”

“I am on the job.”

“Rude.” She sighs. “Stay right here.”

“Is that a demand or a request?”

“Please, Gio. Stay.”

The please and the soft tone gets to me. I wrap her up in my arms and kiss the top of her head. “I’ll stay right here, babe.”

Of course, I spend half the night fighting my eyelids until I just can’t anymore. I wake up when Juliana wiggles against me. My cock stands at attention, all ready to go. Juliana hums in her throat and rolls to face me.

“Good morning, handsome.”

“Mmm.”

“Every inch of you.” She strokes down my chest and stops just above my cock.

“I have to turn you over shortly.”

“I’m the hot potato.”

“Emphasis on hot.”

She laughs, then we brush our teeth together, shoving each other like when we were little kids. She actually manages to kick my butt as I spit. When we walk out to the kitchen after Juliana tortures me by insisting I watch her get dressed for ‘safety reasons’, we find Max there.

He grins at Juliana. “Hey there, beautiful.”

“We need to have a talk. Is Konstantin around?”

“No.” Max glances around. “I think he’s on some work keeping him away from the house.”

“Tracking down the would-be killer.” Juliana huffs. “Coffee?”

“Black,” Max says.

“Two-”

“Two sugars, one cream.” Julia winks at me.

I wait until she gets back after exchanging a look with Max. He sobers up – in terms of his humor. I can’t speak to his alcohol content today. When Juliana comes back, she definitely notices that something is wrong.

“Your father ...”

“Fantastic.” She groans. “Can’t this wait until after breakfast?”

“Can it?” I ask her.

She grumbles. “Well tell me while I’m feeding the dogs.”

She makes them food that some people would be envious of, but I wait, trying to collect the words. When she looks at me, she puts her hand on her hip. “Come on, Gio. You’re always straight with me.”

“Your father wants to see you next Monday. With the three of us ... and alone.”

She goes so pale I’m worried she’s going to faint. Max looks between us, but I see him move closer to Juliana. He

may not understand, but with her reaction, nobody needs to know the specifics.

“No.”

“Juliana, I can’t ...”

“*I* can’t. My father is terrible. He’s ... you know plenty about him Gio. Do you really think I want to mourn with him on the anniversary of my mother’s death? And if he wants to see me alone, we both know that’s not a good thing.”

“I know.”

“So I’m just going to be very sick. Worst period ever. Shark week with actual sharks in my uterus or whatever else it takes to get out of those plans.”

I open my mouth to say something but get a text that I am absolutely needed at the office today. I sigh. “I have to go, babe.”

“I’ve got this,” Max says seriously.

I look at him doubtfully. He swallows. “Look, I know how you see me, but this ... this is something I have too much experience with.”

Still, I watch Juliana. I don’t want to leave her alone after delivering this news. She sits on the couch and just takes slow breaths. I hesitate. “I’m sorry Julia. I will happily tell him when the time comes, that you’re having cramps and you’re nauseous, and any other list of things you want me to deliver, but we both know-”

“He will find a way to come and get me and put me where he wants me. Like a damned pinned butterfly. He pulls me out for photo ops and important events and I can’t even say no or fly away.”

“I can stay. Screw the job and-”

“No. You play the long game. Keep playing it. I know you want to take over the company Gio, and that’s important to you,” She says softly. “Just ... come check on me in the morning or tonight or whatever.”

I nod but hate myself a little as I walk out. I'm always delivering bad news and she doesn't even know that I played a role in getting the hit put on her to begin with. All I had to do was let one paper slip. It's not like Uncle Tony couldn't afford it. I'm just too eager to take over like my family used to talk about.

My priorities need some re-evaluating.

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JULIANA

Max sits next to me after tossing his blazer to the side. His arm wraps around me, then I'm against his hard chest. He gently strokes my back. "Don't go."

"What?"

"You heard me. You deserve to mourn how you want to. I lost my parents young, too young to understand and when I finally did understand, everyone wanted to tell me how to get over it or through it."

I slowly look up to meet his eyes. I had no idea. Then again, Max and I really haven't had many talks. I used to see him at Dad's parties. Sometimes at the horse track, but he'd always kept his distance. And since he stopped doing that, it's been flirting and sex. All fun all the time.

"People called me heartless when I lost my grandmother – the woman who raised me – because I didn't cry. But I was taught that I wasn't supposed to. I had to take care of things and take care of others who were crying and in pain."

"That's not fair to you, Max."

"Fair is like unicorns, doll – not real." He kisses my temple. "I will take the blame entirely. Gio can keep his position, but if you don't want to go, if you can't bare to get out of bed, I'm not going to make you and I'll be here to protect you from whatever, hitman, dad, I don't care."

I sniff. "You know, there are times when I think he doesn't miss her at all."

“Juliana.” He admonishes.

“I know that you know my Dad better than most, but he never even reacted to her death. He just kept working. He didn’t even go to the hospital until after the meeting was over and then ... he treated her death like an inconvenience, Max.”

“We aren’t built knowing how to deal with our feelings.”

“Did he even love her?”

“Of course he did.” Max smooths my hair back. “He loved your mother and he *loves* you. Mr. Giovanni is a man who doesn’t want to let anyone in. He never has from what I hear. His other friends say they thought he hated your mother at first, but then they were dating.”

“That’s messed up.”

“I know.” Max strokes my cheek. “He shows his emotions one way and you show them another, Juliana. Don’t let him take that from you.”

“I can’t even talk with him. I can’t be alone with him without being afraid. It’s not just his emotions he doesn’t know what to do with.” But I feel like I have to be careful what I talk about with Max.

He’s my father’s friend first. His most trusted, best friend. So I don’t want to run my mouth, have him let something slip, and be in twice as much trouble. Feelings are one thing, words and actions are another. My father might not recognize the damage words and impulsive punishments can do, but I do. I live it. I do my best to survive it.

“Let me in, Juliana.”

“We’re just fun. You’ve said that.”

“I don’t think I ever used the word ‘just’ with you.” He keeps staring deep into my eyes.

I tremble at the mere idea of spilling my soul to the man in front of me. Max’s face softens. “You never have to open up to me, but you can. I’m very good at secrets.” He winks.

“Yeah, that’s really comforting.”

“I will tell you almost anything, Juliana. Because I know what you’ll do with it. You’ll do the right thing with the information given, whether that’s keeping it quiet or sharing it in the right way.”

“Don’t you know, I’m just an impulsive party girl.”

“Bullshit,” Max whispers.

I sigh and shake my head. “Maybe another time. Show and tell is closed right now.”

Max pulls out his phone. “Well, on another subject, Patricia says she misses you. She knows you can’t call and give your location away, but she hopes that you’re ...” Max reaches into his pocket and pulls out reading glasses before focusing on his phone. “Yes, that you’re enjoying having three gorgeous men cater to you alone.”

I laugh and nod. “I am.”

He types it back, then puts his phone down. “Want to get out of here for a bit?”

“Doesn’t it defeat the whole ‘safe house’ idea if we leave?” I challenge.

“We could go to the lovely basement, I’m sure there’s a view of ... bricks there.”

“Actually, it’s a game room. I checked it out. There’s foosball, a game system, ping pong, and I think air hockey,” I say.

“What video games are we talking here? The classics or the new ones?” Max smiles.

“Want to find out?”

“I can’t think of anywhere safer than in a basement,” He says with a wink.

Max and I play through the different games. I end up having fun with ping pong, mostly because Charlie and Nolan eagerly wait to chase the ball when it bounces off the table. We end up including them in our game since it’s easier.

I teach him how to play Mario cart and he digs up an older game system and shows me Galaga. When we finish, I just kind of stare at the T.V. “Max ...”

“Yes, doll.”

“How can you say that we have more than ‘fun’ when we’re only just now starting to have serious conversations?”

“Because we do. I do. There’s a deeper connection there with me and you. Something that doesn’t even need to be said. And I know a treasure when I see one, Juliana. Flirting is easy for me, talking about my feelings, that’s not something I’ve ever been too good at.”

“Oh.”

“If I was good at that, do you think I’d be single at my age?” He asks.

“I figured you were on the rebound from a marriage or relationship,” I say.

“My longest relationship, honestly, has lasted six months. She wanted the ring, but there has just always been ...”

“A flag on the play?” I ask, remembering he’s active in fantasy football.

Max grins. “Something like that, doll. You just know when it’s right for forever. At least, I believe a person should know. And if you’re not certain, it’s not something to take lightly.”

“That makes sense.”

“I don’t want to be a guy who has three failed marriages behind him. Hope is a flimsy thing and once it’s gone, it’s a hell of a lot harder to get it back.”

“Hope is a thing with feathers,” I hum, remembering the poem.

Max pulls me close and kisses me. “Poetry on your tongue makes me want more.”

“I have some favorites.”

“Want to read to me?” He asks.

Using someone else's words to talk about how I feel might be better. Because I can still feel a rock in my stomach. Knowing that I'm missing my mom the way I am. That I want nothing more than her here to guide me and tell me I have to choose a man.

I can practically hear her now: "A girl should never take home the first dress she tries on and she should never stop the search at the first man either."

"But true love is real, right?" I'd asked at fourteen.

"It can be, but while you're young, you need to have fun. Explore every opportunity so you don't go crazy under a mountain of 'what if'. You should try on at least ten dresses before buying one. You should test drive a few cars before buying one."

"So I should date around before settling down with one man?"

"Exactly. And only settle down when you're sure. When you know this is the person you want forever. Don't let anyone bully you into it or make you question what you know."

"Okay."

"Doll?"

I open my eyes to look at Max. "Sorry. I got stuck in my head."

"You were talking about dresses, then cars, then men. I have to admit, I'm confused at how they're similar."

"It would be insulting if I told you."

"All the more reason to do it. Go ahead and try to take my ego down a peg. I'm confident it's big enough to survive it." He chuckles.

"Not tall enough, though," Gio says, saving me.

Konstantin comes down behind him. Max gives them a look that looks almost like frustration and Gio holds up his hands. "We're here for a check-in and nothing else."

“The woman has disappeared as far as we know. We can’t get a lead on her at all, but since you’re under Volkov’s protection, if anything were to happen to you, their reputation would take the hit. They have two people stationed outside.”

“Max, your plans with the stocks is working. So is my email. The combination has Alister running scared. He’s made a rather crazy comment on the news, sounding paranoid and unhinged, even though he’s right on the money.”

“Assuming people are out to get him?” Max asks.

“Exactly.”

The silence continues and I roll my eyes. “I’m fine, Gio. The news that my dad wants to see me comes at least once a year. I’m getting through it. Excuses are an option and who knows, maybe the hitman will strike and I’ll just have to stay inside.”

“Not exactly what I’m hoping for,” Kon replies.

“I know that I have you three to help me through it. I’m not alone.”

Saying it makes me feel powerful. Patricia has made sure I don’t feel alone in many ways, but she has limitations. She can’t exactly go toe-to-toe with my father, but these men can. They can make waves and problems and twist things up until I seem perfectly well-behaved.

Gio glances at the main floor of the house. “Konstantin and I will leave. Get some sleep tonight. Not you, Max.”

“Well, if I’m not sleeping, I know who I’m not sleeping with, kid.”

Gio narrows his eyes at the insinuation, but decides not to say anything. I wave to him as he leaves.

Konstantin points at me. “Make sure you eat. Take care of yourself, Juliana. Please.”

How can I turn him down with those damn puppy-dog eyes. So I nod, giving in easily. Max rubs my shoulder when we hear them leave. “I’m going to show you how the security feed works.”

“Even though you’re glued to my side?”

“You deserve to know how you’re being watched, doll. I’m trying to do more than flirt with you.”

“Oh, we’re bonding.” I smile.

“Oh yeah. Over security feeds, past trauma, and teasing Gio mercilessly we are doing just that, doll.”

“Max.”

“I enjoy sparing with him. I think he likes it too, even though he won’t admit it.”

We go over the security feeds and he shows me how to get police with a button, to share my location, to check and move the cameras. It’s all possible from an iPad which doesn’t seem secure, but Max assures me again and again until there’s really nothing for us to do but make dinner.

Instead, I scoot an inch closer to him, then another, and another, until I rest my hand on his knee. “Can we bond a little more in bed?”

“Which of us is lying down and which is playing therapist.”

“Very funny.” I slide onto his lap. “No domination or submitting or anything. Just us. Be vocal and tell me what you like and I’ll do the same.”

“As if I don’t already know what you love.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. He doesn’t know everything. I’m sure of that. Only Kon has pushed a certain button on me and he didn’t take it further. And I did ask Konstantin to bring something from the house.

When I take Max into the master room, I see my trunk there and smile. “Max, there’s so much you don’t know about me.”

“Oh yeah? Are you going to tell me you have Narnia in your trunk?”

“Nope. I’m going to show you all the flavors of kink I like and all the things we can try after dinner of course.”

“You love to make me-”

Before he can finish his sentence, I open the trunk and show him all the toys. Vibrators, rabbit vibrators, dildos, anal plugs. They’re all there. I even have a ball gag to keep me quiet. Max takes an unsteady breath.

“Oh, doll. You just get more and more perfect for me.”

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MAX

I'm already thinking about how to use each of these toys. I think I might be able to use two or three at one time. I have no idea, I have never seen so many different ones in the same place. I guess I'll have to be patient for that, and I'm not sure if I have that in me. I reach out for one of the things with ears on it, but Juliana grabs my hand.

"Uh-uh." She shakes her head with a teasing smile. "After dinner, remember?"

I eye her with blatant frustration. We've had a good day, she suggested spending it in bed and now, I'm all kinds of eager, especially with her excellent toybox.

"You're teasing me, Juliana."

"You love it too, Max."

"I love having you against me more, doll." And I prove it by jerking her in place. I stroke down her sides, then grab her ass, grinding her against me. "And I think you do too."

She lets out a panting breath and her eyes slowly move up from my chest to my eyes. She smirks. "Only think? I thought you were more confident than that."

"You're begging to be thrown over my knee, aren't you? Get a full and complete spanking, and have me ease one of those toys into you before I fuck you hard with that ball gag in your mouth and one of the vibrators against your clit."

She gapes. "That's that's a lot."

“Perhaps we should get you some nipple clamps. I remember how sensitive your nipples are.”

She lets out a soft groan and knots her fingers in my shirt. I arch an eyebrow. “Still wanting to wait until after dinner?”

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe we need to work up an appetite,” I purr in her ear before licking the lobe. At her tremble, I suck the same spot and slowly kiss down her throat. “It’s been a while since we’ve been together, doll.”

“It has.” She agrees in a low voice.

“We should fix that.” I nip her shoulder. “Let me help you forget about all the other issues.”

“Well three toys and you would definitely do that.” She considers.

“And then I’ll cook for you.”

She groans and turns my chin, surprising me by taking control so she can kiss me. I let her have her way, kissing and licking into my mouth. She makes a soft sound that goes right to my cock and then I wrap my hand around the front of her throat, digging my fingers in to give her that high feeling she likes.

Juliana stands on her toes and pants as I draw back. “You’re cute trying to take control.”

“Maybe I like control,” She says, despite lifting her chin to give me more access to her throat.

I grin and bite her bottom lip, tugging her towards me. “And I think you like submitting to me, once I earn it.”

She grins. “Let’s find out.”

Dragging her to the bed, I guide her down over my lap. She immediately tries to jump up, shoving and squirming, despite my arm on her lower back, keeping her in place. She laughs as she fails at getting away.

I shove her skirt up and bring my hand down on her ass. The sound of my palm on her ass makes me hard immediately.

Juliana gasps and I feel her eyes on me, but I palm her ass. She's gorgeous, sassy, strong, so many things. And on top of all that, we have chemistry. It's electric and new for me.

I swat her again and she rocks back into my hand. I layer swats on her as she squirms and wiggles until she's moaning and rolling her hips on my lap as I play with her see-through, now soaked underwear. Juliana pants and lifts her ass, like she's offering me more.

"I'm starting to think this isn't a punishment," I grumble.

She looks back at me, then smirks. "Oh no. I hate it. It's so terrible. Please don't spank me again, Max."

The sarcasm, the smile, ugh. It's beautiful. I chuckle and swat her ass harder, enjoying the jiggle. She groans as she lurches forward. I can feel her panting. I guide her underwear down to her thighs with one finger.

"Are you ready to be a good girl?"

"Maybe. You should find out." She bites her bottom lip.

I swat her again. "Go get me a plug and a vibrator for your clit."

She hesitates, so I layer four hard swats until she's trembling and panting. She obediently gets up and walks to the trunk. Her ass is a beautiful red. I grin as she returns with a silver butt plug and a thin, small silicone vibrator.

Juliana looks from them to me as I take them from her. I pat my lap. "Come on."

"Make me."

I jerk her over my lap and swat her again. She yips and pants. I slip my fingers between her legs and rub her clit slowly, lightly. She's already so soaked and ready. I grin. "I'll have to find a different punishment for you, doll."

"I like this punishment," She replies.

"Which is why you need a new one." I take the anal plug and slide it into her pussy.

Juliana jumps. "Cold."

“I’m sure you’re going to warm it up fast.” I tease her with it, easing the toy in and out as she writhes on my lap.

“Oh, Max.” She pants. “Fuck.”

“I know, it’s just a tease. You’ll have my whole cock soon. I know you’ll like that so much more.”

“Yes!” She pants, gripping my free hand.

I gently slide my hand free and spread her ass. I poise the tip of the toy against her ass and gently press. It slides in easier than I thought it would and Juliana groans, rocking back against the toy.

I smirk. “Hand me the vibrator if you want this all the way inside you.”

She drops it twice before giving it to me. I turn it on and rub it against her clit. I trade between the two toys until Juliana is dripping and moaning. She’s completely lost to the pleasure, or at least, I think she is.

Then she grabs my thigh. “Fuck! Please, Max. I need it deep inside me.”

“How much do you want it.”

“Almost as much as I want you fucking me.” She groans. “Please, I can take it. I *need* it.”

“I love listening to you beg,” I reply.

I push the plug in slowly instead of drawing back. Juliana moans as it slips deeper and deeper inside her while I keep rubbing the vibrator against her clit. She takes a sharp breath as the last bit of the plug dips inside her, leaving only the jewel on the base visible.

“Beautiful,” I hum.

“So good. So tight.” She groans.

I keep rubbing the vibrator against her as she bucks and pants and gets slicker and slicker. She’s so wet and so ... perfect. I can’t be patient. I push Juliana onto the bed, on her knees, then get on my knees behind her. She looks back.

“Are you going to fuck me?”

“I can’t wait another second to be inside you,” I grunt.

I toss my shirt, drop my pants, then thrust into her. She lets out a wild yell and I almost think she just came. I wrap an arm around her front so I can use the vibrator on her clit and grab her breast with my other one, squeezing and playing with her nipple as she moans.

We pant and grunt. It’s the most feral I’ve ever felt. I can’t stop thrusting, even when she comes. I bite and lick her shoulder, touching as much of Juliana as I can, tasting her skin, thrusting deeper and deeper into her.

Juliana groans. “Fuck yes. So hard, so good,” She groans. “so fucking good!”

“Yes. You feel perfect. So tight and wet.”

I play with the toy in her ass and she comes again, screaming as she soaks my cock. She trembles. “Yes, Max. You know just how to fuck me.”

“I know you’re not breakable.” I pant in her ear. “I know you love me pounding you hard.”

“Yes!” She squirms in my arms, then pushes me back, just to ride me reverse cowgirl. She bounces and rolls her hips. “You so rough ... so ...”

I throw her back down and grab a handful of her hair so I can lick and suck her earlobe. Her whole body trembles and I can feel her pussy pulsing around me.

“I’m in control. Enjoy it, doll,” I growl.

She moans and tries to press her face into the bed, but I want to hear every sound she makes right now. Julia whimpers. “Fuck, I can’t hold back.”

“Don’t. Come for me. Over and over again. Let me feel it, doll. Let me hear it.”

She still holds out, biting her bottom lip, obviously fighting the tremors that are ripping through her. I increase the pace and jerk her back against me to make it twice as intense.

She screams as she comes apart for me, howling in pleasure as she gushes over my cock.

I moan with her and keep going. I don't know where I've gotten all this energy from, but I just can't stop, don't want to stop. She's heaven itself, so perfect and wonderful. I make Juliana come two more times before I feel my own climax spreading through my body.

I jerk out and finish on her ass, but make sure she comes one more time with the vibrator pressed to her clit and my tongue licking her slit. Juliana's back arches, then she buries her face in the pillow before collapsing on the bed. I tap my softening cock against her ass, then lay with her after shoving her onto her side.

She laughs lightly and plays with my hand as we come down from our shared high. "We needed that."

After the weight of the conversations we shared, I agree completely. Juliana sighs, then jumps up, saying she has to clean up. I offer to help her, but she waves me away and tells me that I can join her soon enough.

She does come and get me to use the hot water. I wrap my arms from behind her and feel her stiffen. I kiss her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

She doesn't answer right away, but sighs. "You've been supportive about this whole sharing me thing."

"Of course."

"What if ... what if I don't want to give any of you up? What if I'm being really selfish because I appreciate all three of you and want all three of you in my life even after we take care of Sharon or Jane or whoever she is?"

I slowly turn Juliana around. "I'm waiting for the selfish part."

"One girl, holding onto three men that are more than good enough to have a woman they don't have to share? That sounds pretty selfish. Especially when you guys walk on eggshells around each other and don't want to give anything away and ..."

I kiss Juliana's forehead. "I'd rather share you and call it a relationship than settle for someone else simply because they'd only be mine."

I can tell she's still stuck in her head while I'm cooking, but she ends up in the kitchen with me. "Max ... there are so many issues with me having all three of you. You're nearly as old as my father."

"Nearly," I remind her.

"Konstantin knew me when I was sixteen and there's an age gap between us too. Not to mention, my dad fired him over catching us together. And Gio doesn't like to share. I mean ... maybe I'm just talking dizzy. Going stir crazy."

"Nothing has to be decided now. We're all happy to have even a bit of you, Julia. Let's get through one thing, then another."

She nods, but I already know that I don't want someone else. I don't know how to put the words together, but the connection I feel with Juliana, being able to talk to her and all this ... it's new and wonderful and I have no intention of giving it up.

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JULIANA

After Max and I eat, we play never have I ever. He thought it would be easy, I can tell, but we're both down to one hand already. I wiggle my four fingers at him. "Never have I ever ... slept with two women at the same time."

He grunts and takes a drink. "You should try it."

"Maybe I've been in a different kind of threesome." I tease.

Max chuckles, then stares at his fingers for a long moment. "Never have I ever introduced a partner to my parents."

Neither of us move. He leans his head to the side. "Really?"

"My dad just kind of finds out and then ends it. He's paid at least three of the guys I've dated to leave. Apparently, I'm not worth as much as my father can offer."

"Then Muscles, the kid, and me are lucky."

"How so?" I ask. "My dad would *kill* you for being with me. Look at how he nearly blacklisted Kon."

"Because we're getting paid to be *very close* to you."

We laugh and keep playing the game, getting on a lighter note. But once the game is over and I'm doing dishes, I feel paranoia creep in. Nolan keeps staring out the sliding glass door – probably because he hasn't had a view like this before, but it has me antsy.

Charlie stays close, occasionally licks my leg to remind me he's there and complains until I sit down to pet him. My foot bounces and I exhale sharply. "Max."

"What is it, doll?" He comes out from the guest room, the iPad in his hand.

"Anything on the monitor?"

"One of the cameras is ... strange."

"What kind of strange?"

"No change at all. Give me a second." Max grabs his phone and calls someone. "Hey, can you check zone three, please? I think there's an error with the camera ... You definitely take orders from me, young man. If you want to involve Konstantin in this by risking the life of the woman in the sa- that's what I thought."

Max hangs up and shakes his head. "There's a reason there are a minimum of two people watching at any time. One to keep you safe directly and one to watch for any other kind of attack."

"Makes sense." Even though I still don't understand why a hit was placed on me in the first place. It seems stupid to me. "More sense than the reasoning behind the hit."

"Mr. Alister is a proud man. Being accused of insurance fraud and losing money that he needs for shareholders – assuming he paid someone to do the arson – it's the ego that's involved. He wants to take your father down a peg. The only way he can think to do that is to prove he couldn't protect his wife."

I groan and get up, then go to my room. I can feel Max following, but I don't care. I grab the base of the trunk since it has a secret bottom. I jerk it out, not caring about the expensive sex toys skittering across the floor.

"Juliana." I can hear the disapproval rolling off Max.

I reach in and pull out two throwing knives and my favorite stabbing knife, along with a crowbar and a taser.

Sighing, I sit back on my heel and look over my shoulder at Max. “Do you have a preference?”

“What is ...” He gapes at my stash. “What is all this?!”

“More toys. A different kind.” I shrug. “The safety kind.”

Max reaches in and looks at the options. I flash my ‘stabbing knife’ which is a pearly pink and makes me happy because a person has a right to defend themselves and still be stylish at the same time. I grin at the knife. “My dad doesn’t have anything to do with any ability for me to be safe. Between Gio’s lessons and the lessons my father made me take growing up, I’m plenty capable of that.”

Max groans and rubs my hips as he kisses my neck. “Independent, vicious, ambitious. Your charm gets more intense every day.”

I laugh and lean into his touch. If he wants to go for another round, I’m more than happy to. But something beeps on the iPad, and Max sighs. “Make your choice and put this back together for me, doll.”

“Kay.”

I hear Max on the phone, and come out with Charlie and Nolan on my heels. Nolan growls while facing the sliding glass door. I don’t see anything but I nod to Max. He doesn’t see it. I take the iPad and click the buttons until the light in the backyard turns on. I see someone, dressed all in black, freeze, then dart over the fence.

Charlie and Nolan run at the door, barking angrily. Max looks at me. “What’s that?”

“Someone got in the yard,” I report. “They didn’t want to be seen, all in black.”

A sharp tone leaves Max’s throat as he chastises the other guards. He’s normally so light-hearted, so easygoing, but that commanding tone, the blatant anger, and threats he makes. Something about it, and knowing that it’s there to protect me, makes me a little dizzy with lust.

Max rubs my hip as he hangs up. “We’re going to have a full sleepover tonight.”

“Me, you, the dogs, and all my weapons?” I guess.

“Muscles and the kid will be joining.” He texts something quickly and sighs. “Shame too. There are more toys in there I wanted to use. “

“I’ll start the fire. We can make smores and braid each other’s hair,” I say simply.

Max chuckles. “If they try again tonight, we’ll be prepared.”

“How did they get the address?”

“Your phone has been off, and I know that there’s no way for us to check inside it, but is there anything else that could be tracked?”

I start to say no, then groan. “My laptop. I brought it to work on things. I was just on it recently and-”

Max goes to it, checks a few things, and sighs. “There’s a tracking program on it.” He clicks a few more buttons, moves the mouse around, and then sighs after about ten minutes. “I’ve deleted it completely and corrupted the chain, not that it will do anything now.”

“I bet I could sell three of my handbags and have enough to pay the person after me with more than Mr. Alister can.”

Max rubs my shoulder. “I think we passed that point, doll.”

Within an hour, all three of my men are in one place again. Gio and Max are tense, but Konstantin just pets Charlie. I’m starting to think I’m losing my therapy dog to the sexy hulk in the room. I glance over at Max and Gio.

“No fighting,” I warn them.

“I’ll play you rock, paper, scissors to deal with the two goons outside,” Max offers.

“They’re incompetent! If someone was able to get into the backyard, all it would have taken was one shot and-,” Gio starts.

“All the glass is bulletproof. I confirmed that,” Konstantin says.

“That doesn’t excuse the fact that the person was able to get into the backyard. That’s inexcusable,” Gio hisses.

“You and I have never been more on the same page, kid.” Max agrees.

Konstantin sets Charlie in my lap and strokes my head. He heads to the front door and Gio stands. “What are you doing?”

“Putting those two in their place. Fear is a powerful motivator.”

“And?” Gio demands.

“They’ve seen me kick ass and have both seen my temper.”

With that, he closes the door. I try to think if I’ve seen Konstantin show his temper. He showed me what happens when he gets jealous – amazing things for me, obviously. But I’ve never seen him truly angry. I know he drew a gun on my father.

“Him? He’s a teddy bear.” Max points at the door.

I hold my hand up. “Let him take care of this. They’re part of the Volkov clan, and so is Konstantin. Let him handle it.”

The guys soften and I go to the kitchen to clean the dishes. I need to do something. Gio comes up next to me and gently touches my lower back. “How are you, babe?”

“I have Gemma, so I’m good.”

Gio glances at the knife I’m holding and chuckles. “Gemma’s a classic. A present for college, right?”

“Yeah. Mom let me pick her out.” I stare at the knife for a long moment, then take a slow breath. Max comes over and doesn’t say a thing about Gio touching me, about him rubbing my lower back in slow circles. “She would know what to do right now. No one would have to die. It would just take one conversation.”

“She was a unique woman.” Max agrees. “I was convinced she could bring about world peace.”

“I missed those genes or lessons.” I shake my head and go back to washing the dishes.

“You have your own way of doing things, Juliana. That’s the point of being a person. Finding your own way.” Gio comforts.

I close my eyes. My emotions just keep bouncing around. It’s wild. From horny to happy to angry to upset. I’m kicking myself because I feel like I should be over this. It’s been years! I should be over losing my mom, but I just can’t deal with this stress without her.

“Excuse me,” I whisper to the guys.

I go to my room with Charlie and Nolan and sit behind my door so they can’t come in. It’s a habit I’ve had since I was little. I rub my dogs and pet them while trying to swallow my tears. I can’t mourn things I’ve never had, right? I never asked my mom for relationship advice. I never asked her how to deal with someone who was threatening my life.

But right now, I just keep thinking that she’d have the answer. She’d know just what to say to fix everything and make me feel better. She’d be glowing with pride knowing that things have happened between Gio and me. She always wanted that.

I think she’d be slyly excited for me to be with Konstantin too. She was the one who sat me down and told me that I was too young for Konstantin then. That it would hurt both of us and that it was wrong until I turned eighteen.

We’d argued about that. I’d stomped my foot and said I was an adult – terrible looking back considering I was only sixteen – and that I shouldn’t have to wait two years for the government to approve of who I was with.

But I could see that little sparkle in her eyes whenever Konstantin would blush and look away from me. It was like she knew that he had feelings for me before I did.

I grip my hair and try to control my breathing.

“How was she, Max?” Gio asks.

“It’s been a rough day. We talked for a while and played some games. A lot of talking, honestly.”

“That’s normal if you like someone,” Gio says.

“For you. I don’t know how to do this shit. She deserves more,” Max says. “But I’ll worry about that once we finish with this hitman shit.”

“You don’t need to worry. Just start small – say what you’re thinking and it gets easier to share the harder stuff,” Gio says.

I’m mildly surprised that they’re having a civil conversation, especially with me involved, but I look up as if my mom can see me. “Maybe we’ll all make each other better. And maybe I won’t have to choose.”

I cross my fingers and hear the door open and shut. Konstantin is back, all my men in one spot, and now time to start the world’s most tense sleepover.

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KONSTANTIN

Juliana comes out of her room after a bit of Gio and Max just talking. I can tell things are tense, but they're trying which is more than I would have expected with them. Juliana checks her options for where to sit. Max has his arm slung over the back of the couch, offering plenty of space. Gio sits on the loveseat.

And here I am in a recliner. She takes in each option, then sits on the coffee table. I smile slightly. She's so determined not to pick favorites. I wonder if she does have a favorite at this point.

Juliana's foot bounces. "So I know that we just had a close call, but it seems kind of crazy for them to try again. But, I don't think it was Sharon in the backyard."

"Did you get a clear view?" I ask.

She shuffles her feet. "No. I guess I didn't. But I want this to be done, guys. I have enough to deal with considering my father wants to see me."

I can tell that's getting under her skin. It might even be bothering her more than the hit that's placed on her. Gio looks at Juliana and clears his throat. "Let's have a different conversation right now."

"What kind of conversation?" Juliana asks.

"One about the four of us."

She crosses her arms before Charlie jumps into her lap. I know just what he feels. I just want to pull her into my arms

and comfort her. It's killing me that I can't do exactly that. I start to reach for her but hesitate due to that damn clause. Why can't we just keep the sexual stuff hidden?

"You and I already talked about what happens after the hit is gone. You said you're still going to want all of us," I say.

Juliana nods. "I will. I can't imagine not having the three of you around any longer. You're supportive, sweet, genuine, prickly, but not assholes ... usually." She smiles.

Gio's face softens. "I will be right here with you. I can't go back to just being friends with you now."

Juliana nods. Max clears his throat. "We kind of talked about this too. I want to figure things out with you, doll. I don't mind sharing your time. I can tolerate seeing Muscles and the kid kiss you and comfort you. Honestly, I could probably tolerate some dirty talk too. Might turn me on."

Gio shoots him a glare, but then they both laugh. Gio shakes his head. "What about you, Kon?"

In my early fantasies about Juliana, she was mine and mine alone. It was always the two of us. And that was good enough. That was everything I craved. But now, I can't imagine destroying her happiness by making her choose me and no one else. She said there's enough of her to go around. I have to trust that.

"I'm happy that you're happy, angel. I'm not willing to give you up. I can't. You're the only woman for me." I lay it out easily.

Juliana blinks at me and I see Gio do a double take while Max shifts. Gio sighs. "Well, if we're going to be doing this ..."

"Gio." Juliana reaches out for him.

"Don't interrupt me and it won't scare you," He says simply, like he can read her mind. "if we're going to be doing this, seriously, then there's no reason that we should be constantly restraining ourselves. Just keep it PG."

"PG-13," Juliana barbers.

“Let’s start at PG. I’m still easing into the idea of sharing. I’ve never been good at it.”

“Oh, I know.” She grins, but as soon as the grin is there, I see her eyes go blank.

“I’m going to check the perimeter,” Gio decides.

“Take Gemma!”

“Who is-” I start.

Juliana hands Gio a knife. He kisses her forehead and gives it to her. “I have my own weapon. Thank you, babe.”

He walks out and Max goes to the system. “I need to figure out how this was hacked.”

Of course, he doesn’t move. But I pat my leg and Juliana gets in my lap and hugs me. She rubs my chest. “Are you really okay with this, Kon?”

“I had to go without you for two weeks,” I remind her while stroking her back. “All I wanted to do was storm over there, but I remembered the rules and I didn’t want to get you in more trouble with your father.”

“Because you’re thoughtful like that.”

“I’ve never felt less than with the guys around, and the desire to be the best or your favorite ... I’ll deal with that. You’re worth being with, no matter the conditions.”

“Take that back,” Max says immediately.

Juliana looks at him, but I shrug. “I mean it.”

“I won’t abuse that.” She says to Max, then repeats it to me while holding my face between her hands.

She kisses me softly. “You humble me so much.”

Max sucks in a breath. “Doll, I think you need to see something. Something I received from your father.”

“Um, just me?” She asks.

“Gio is still doing the rounds, right?”

“It should take him another four minutes,” I report easily.
“Why?”

Max looks troubled, but he comes over to us and shows us a picture. It immediately grabs Juliana’s attention and I see that spark of fury in her eyes alongside an analytical approach I haven’t seen.

It takes me a second to catch up.

It’s the file for Mr. Alister. But at the bottom is Gio’s note. The suspicion that it’s arson based on a number of legitimate factors. He knew more than he was telling. The whole time, he knew that he had contributed to this.

The same way I contributed to the hitman or hitwoman getting closer to Juliana.

She takes a slow breath. Max sets the iPad down. “I don’t know what to tell you, Juliana.”

“He didn’t know it would lead to this,” She says softly. “There’s no way he could have known and Gio would never put me in danger. Hell, he stood between me and a rattlesnake when we were little and tried to speak to it in some snake language.”

I rub her back. “I can’t say anything. If I wouldn’t have gotten fired, Sharon never would have gotten so close to you. Who knows how many close calls you had with her.”

“That’s not your fault either it ...” Juliana puts her hands up. “Hold on. Sharon wouldn’t have just gotten to walk into the job. No way the Volkov clan approved her. You would have been spoken to, Kon.”

I nod in agreement.

My eyes flick to Max as I try to catch up to her train of thought. He nods. “She already knew exactly where to set up to take the shot at your apartment. That’s not something that can be done easily if it’s going to be done well. If she knew the spot, she may have seen you and Kon together and sent through an alert to your father.”

“But my dad doesn’t trust just anyone with information. And if someone was going to tell him something, it would have to be someone he trusts, which means someone he’s business friends with.”

Max nods and starts writing things down.

I rub Juliana’s sides until Charlie brings me a ball. I toss it for him and kiss Juliana’s cheek. “It wouldn’t be anyone with the Volkov clan. They don’t double cross and your father has never overstepped his bounds. The Italian mafia has been laying low for a while now as well.”

“Juliana!” Gio bursts into the house, slamming the door behind him. He pants and walks over to us. “Did you tell anyone else you were here?”

“No.”

“You didn’t tell anyone your dad works with?”

“I haven’t even spoken to him!” She defends, standing up. “Why?”

He hands something to her and I see fury build in her. “This lawsuit waiting to happen? Are you kidding me?!”

“Hey.” Gio takes her wrists and pulls her towards him. “Words. We need them right now.”

“This is the guy who kept sexually harassing people. John John Booker. I had people worry about his aggression level. But he’s one of dad’s cousin’s kids. So he kept getting leeway. I tried getting him fired over and over. How did ... where did you get this?”

“Outside, on the other side of the fence.”

Juliana swallows. “We only found one leak.”

“A leak?” I stand up and shield Gio and Juliana from the sliding glass doors. Bullet proof or not, we don’t need anyone knowing what we’re talking about. “Explain.”

“Max found some kind of encryption or program on my computer.” She looks back to him for help.

“Tracking,” He says with a grunt. He shows us John Booker. He’s a plain man. Even his brown mustache is plain, just fits his face. I’ve never seen someone so shockingly average. “I assumed it was Sharon since she had access to the penthouse.”

“It could be a two person job,” I murmur. I clear my throat. “if you want to do something like a kidnapping or hit correctly, you make sure there are two people. One to get close, one to hang back and make sure tracks are covered or is there just in case things go wrong.”

“You shouldn’t know that.” Juliana taps my chest.

I shrug.

“So if Sharon saw us” Juliana refocuses. “While trying to set up some kind of sniper hit, then called her partner, John Booker, he would have made up some excuse for my dad to come over, get you fired, and let Sharon get close?”

“That’s right.”

“And take out what they thought was the biggest threat,” Max agrees. “Congrats on the muscles.”

“Thank you?” I guess.

“We’re going to have to find Sharon,” Gio says softly. “Pretend that we know who the person is and tell her that we need her help. That’s going to be the way to catch her I think.”

“Really?” Juliana takes a step back toward me. “That seems extreme, Gio. That’s giving up our location and ... well I guess she already has that.”

“We have a limit to the number of safe houses available.” I remind him.

Juliana turns to look at Max. “So?”

“I can take care of that. I’ll send her an email and I’ll speak to your father, asking about his business, bringing up complaints of harassment and telling him how it’s affecting the market.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. Max winks. “No one wants to work with someone who can’t keep it in their pants. Means they fold quickly and don’t have patience.”

I roll my eyes.

“So we have a plan. Tomorrow, we’ll contact Sharon through Gio and Kon. You’ll take care of my dad ... and I’m going to cross my fingers that I somehow get hospitalized from some intense flu to avoid my father,” Juliana says.

Gio draws her back to him and makes her meet his eyes. “You do not have to go.”

She lowers her voice. “You’ve seen why I do, Gio. The horse races ... just, you know he has ways.”

I see Gio kiss her, then his eyes flick to me. “From what I heard, at least one man here is willing to pull a gun on your father while naked and hard. I’m pretty sure that your father doesn’t have a chance against the three of us.”

“What don’t we know?” Max asks.

Juliana touches the scars on her back. I know that’s enough for me to put the pieces together. Her father put those scars on her. Max’s jaw clicks into place. “Funny thing about being a bodyguard – we can only let you out of our sight for a total of ... what would you say Gio?”

“Two and a half minutes.”

“Less.” I decide.

Juliana looks between us and I think her shoulders drop and she relaxes for the first time since Gio gave her the news. She exhales. “I like plans.”

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JULIANA

After another nightmare, I walk out into the living room, wearing nothing more than my nightgown. Max is completely passed out on the couch. I smile and pull a blanket over him and he makes a pleased sound in his throat.

The T.V. has on some show or documentary about war. I shake my head. A recipe for nightmares. I change the channel to a home renovation show, planning to go to the guest room, but the show catches my attention. I stand there for a long moment.

Until an arm wraps around me and jerks me down. I gasp, my heart racing through me as I stare at the shadowy figure I didn't realize was creeping up on me. A whisper clarifies the level of danger pretty quickly.

"I didn't know it was you," Gio says.

I hug him tightly, squeezing him. He hesitates, then wraps his arms around me and leads me back to my room. Gio looks at the mess of my bed in the low light from the closet light. I may have tossed all my nightlights at thirteen, but that doesn't mean I can tolerate complete darkness.

"Nightmares?" Gio guesses.

"Yeah." I push my hair back, not wanting it in my face. "Why are you up?"

Gio doesn't answer right away. He walks over to me and takes my hand. "Don't worry about me, Julia."

“I do worry about you, dummy. I like you,” I remind him. “I like you a lot, Gio.”

“I know.” He nods.

“Which means I worry about you. Talk to me.”

“What I’m feeling isn’t important. Your safety is.”

I scoff. “Multiple things can matter at once. And you matter to me.” I scoot closer to him. “If I have to bribe you-”

“Don’t do that.”

“Talking to you is better than thinking about my nightmares,” I say instead, sucking it up and just laying it out there. “I’m tired of being afraid for myself or for you guys.”

Gio kisses my temple and takes an unsteady breath. “All of this ... excitement.”

I don’t rush him. Even though I’m about to jump out of my skin to eagerly find out everything he’s keeping inside. Gio needs time when it comes to what he’s feeling. He doesn’t jump into his emotions easily and he’s not fantastic about sharing them either, not the negative ones. Jealousy, anger, and affection are easy for him to display but hurt, sadness, loss, and disappointment are more challenging.

He shifts uncomfortably and clears his throat. “It’s making me question what’s important in life. My family has always been business-focused, but you know ... I haven’t seen my mother in nearly five years now?”

“That long?”

He nods slowly. “Seeing how much you miss your mom, really realizing how dangerous life can be in our world makes me wonder if I should stop waiting for her to reach out and do some reaching myself.”

“That would be a good thing, I think.”

He nods. “I’d want to introduce her to you, as you are now ... as we are now. But, I’m afraid of seeing her at all.”

“Oh, Gio.” I hug him.

He wraps an arm around me. “She was so happy to divorce my father and leave. The custody battle made things worse. You remember how I was.”

“Angry, all the time.”

“Not angry.” He turns to look at me, his confusion mimicking mine. “I was hurt, exhausted, overwhelmed.”

“With me you were just short tempered and always scowling.”

“Huh. No wonder you didn’t ask about things.” He snorts. “I thought you just didn’t care.”

“Of course I cared, Gio. I wanted to know everything but you were so angry that I thought you’d just tell me when you were ready. I think I’m less patient now.”

He chuckles, then kisses my forehead. But he’s dragged us off topic and I know it. “What are you afraid of?”

“That’s she’d be happy he’s gone. That she wouldn’t recognize how good he was to me and my brother. I don’t know if I could take that. I’d walk away, lose my temper, say something terrible.”

“Like you would.” I agree. “Don’t you see how far you’ve come? How much you’ve grown up.”

“I don’t think I’ve changed much.”

“You’re still very focused and I know efficiency is your system. At the same time, you’re so much more, Gio. You’re understanding. You take time to listen. You know how to grit your teeth and tolerate something.”

He nods.

“If you want to contact her, do it. Anything she says won’t be on you and I’m right here to help you through it. I’ll hold your hand the whole time.”

“You have a hit on you, babe.” He reminds me.

I shrug. “If I let every potential problem keep me from living, I’ll either have to live with a mountain of Pomeranians or I’ll be the most bitter woman in the world.”

Gio sighs and clutches me closer, his face buried in my neck. “When the hell did you get so wise?”

“Grief does things to us. It’s going to sound terrible, but I don’t think that it’s just bad that we get out of losing someone. We get perspective and do what we can to keep a little bit of that person alive. That’s what I try to do in small ways.”

Gio kisses my neck. He continues down to my shoulder and tugs on my dress. “This is cute.”

“Cute, really?” I huff.

He chuckles and continues stroking down to my hip. “Sexy might be a better word.”

“You’re distracting,” I point out.

“I don’t want to die like my father,” He whispers softly. “Alone, making a bad deal, thinking that no one will miss him or care that he’s gone. Dying for something meaningless and only leaving a business as a legacy. It ... it’s terrifying to think that’s my fate.”

“I would care,” I promise him. “I’d miss you. And you’re not the kind of man who would let death take him if he’s not ready.”

Gio trembles a little. I can see his eyes watering. “All I had to do was care a little more and actually check out the person he was meeting with and I could have stopped him, Juliana. If I just would have told him to wait one day ...”

“Hey.” I climb onto Gio’s lap and hold his face in my hands. “This isn’t your fault.”

“But I could have stopped it. If I would have picked up the phone. If I would have taken five minutes and talked to him instead of putting it off for something as silly as a god damn meeting ..”

A little part of my heart cracks for Gio. I pull his head to my chest as his arms wrap around me. He muffles his crying against my chest while I pet his hair. His shoulders shake as he lets out months of repressed emotions.

He continues telling me he could have stopped it. He could have just spoken to his father. He could have been there and the man would still be alive. The fact that he's so broken up about his father makes me feel guilty about the way things are with my father right now.

I'm making the old man suffer with radio silence. I'm not giving him a chance to change things. We haven't had a civil conversation in so long. Maybe I need to make a move to change that. To sit down and explain where we differ.

"I'm sorry." Gio draws back. "You don't need all this on your shoulders, especially not now."

I kiss Gio instead of answering. One kiss, another, and another. He takes a shuddering breath when we part. I wipe under his eyes and feel my chest squeeze. "You have nothing to apologize for. You're allowed to have feelings and regrets and everything else."

"Well, thanks for your permission." He chuckles, despite the edge to his voice.

"I like you for everything, Gio. Every part of you. Except when you give me non-sexy orders."

"It's necessary sometimes!"

"Give advice, not demands," I hint. "But that's for later. Right now, I'm going to make you something yummy and we can cuddle up and"

"And?" He asks.

"Sleep, maybe? It might be good for both of us."

"Someone should be awake to watch after you."

I shove him back. "Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Stop being my bodyguard for one night and just be Gio. Be my wonderful, sexy, amazing man."

He sighs and lays down. When I start to leave, he wraps his arms around my waist and jerks me into bed. "I don't need something yummy when I have you."

We play around a little, tickling and teasing each other until Gio settles with me. I pull the blanket over our heads like I did when we were kids and we lie facing each other and ignoring the heat that's trapped between us.

“Did you and your dad really get along that well?”

He considers it. “We weren't best friends, but we had good talks. We were repairing our relationship. Dinner once a week. We made pretty good drinking buddies, though he didn't want to be called that.”

Gio smiles slightly. “He was kind of broken up about a girl he'd been seeing. She'd left him and I helped him get through it. I used your 'heartbreak' methods on him.”

“Ice cream, movies, drinking, going out, and flirting?”

“Yup. I kept trying to point out women to him.” Gio chuckles, then I see his eyes water. “The last thing he said to me that night, after I asked him why he didn't go talk to any of the women was that ... He said spending a night like that with me made him happier than anything else in the world.”

I wiggle closer to Gio and hug him tightly. “Because you're an amazing man, Gio.”

He kisses me softly. “Thank you, babe.”

“I might be biased, but your dad knew it. My dad knows it. Even Kon and Max know you are capable, wonderful, a prince in shining armor.”

Gio smiles and strokes through my hair. “So how exactly did I manage to get your attention?”

“Even us dragons fall for the good guys every now and again.”

Gio pulls me closer. “Thank you, babe. I .. I feel lighter now.”

“That's good. I'm suffocating. How did we do this as kids?” I jerk the blanket off our heads as Gio chuckles and pushes my hair back into place.

We wrap around each other and I feel his breathing calm. I rub his side as my eyes get heavier. I sigh. “Mom would be happy right now.”

“Hmm?” Gio asks.

“Us being cuddled together, being honest ...” I yawn. “Real with each other.”

“I like us being real.” Gio’s fingers stroke my side.

I smile and kiss his neck. “In the morning we can make an excuse for Kon and Max to leave.”

“Why?” Gio adjusts with me. “You’re making me sweaty.”

I roll away only for him to close the space between us and spoon me. “Why do you want them to leave?”

“So we can have some intense time together.”

“This wasn’t intense enough?” He drops his leg over my hip.

“A different kind of intense.” I guide his hand to my breast. “You being so open is sexy as hell.”

He hums against my neck. “I feel better.”

Honestly, I do too. Knowing that Gio is going through something so similar as I am right now. Trying to put the pieces together, and trying to make things make sense is nice. I feel less alone, less ridiculous. And right now, I feel like I know Gio better than I ever have before.

Smiling, I let my boyfriend’s cuddles, his heartbeat, and even his slowed breathing sweep me off to a blissfully dreamless sleep.

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GIO

In the morning, I wake up in Juliana's arms. She's so deep in sleep, that even when I get up, she doesn't move. I find Konstantin walking out of the guest room. He looks at his phone and groans. "The Volkovs need me."

"Go on," I encourage him.

"I'll be back before the end of the day," He assures me. "And I'll take watch tonight."

I wave to him. Max rolls out of bed and sighs. "You okay, kid?"

"Yeah."

Max continues to watch me. "Don't make me ask in a dad voice."

I roll my eyes but feel a little pang of something along my nerves. Not anger or hurt. It's something I don't recognize. I kind of appreciate Max prying, even if I don't love it.

"Life doesn't get any easier as we get older, does it?"

"Is this another age joke?" Max goes to the kitchen and puts the coffee on. He finally faces me. "I thought I had everything figured out in the army. But getting back, I realized I didn't know a damn thing."

I nod.

"The only people who think life is easy are the people not paying attention, Gio. For the rest of us ... all we can do is

make each moment matter before it slips away. Don't live to work. Work to live."

"Wise advice, old man." I crack a smile. "Very dad-like."

"I've been practicing just for you." He pats my shoulder. "Unfortunately, I do have some business things to see to. Can you handle today with the goons outside?"

"Yeah."

"Have a beer by lunch. It makes the rest of the day better." He winks at me, grabs his coffee, then goes about his morning routine before heading out as well.

I start to get through a shower but hear the door open. I peek out and see Juliana brushing her teeth. I motion to the shower. "I believe the bathroom is taken, babe."

She looks at me, rinses her mouth, then strips, climbing into the shower with me. "So I should go?"

Fuck no. Just looking at her makes me hard. Last night helped clear my mind and now that she's right here, gorgeous curves on display, hopeful look in her eyes, water tracing down between her breasts, along her flat belly, and to her pussy ...

"I didn't say that."

She wraps her arms around me with a little bounce and kisses me as our bodies press together. I groan and slide my hands down to her ass. "Did you want to talk more? I think I did all the telling last night."

"Let's break up those conversations." She suggests.

"Do you want to get breakfast or ..."

Juliana slowly drops to her knees, taking the opportunity to kiss down my body. She bites my thigh and I gasp, spreading my legs and shooting her a glare. "That's a little too close to the goods, babe."

She apologizes with a gentle kiss before licking up my length to the tip. "Do you mind being my breakfast today, Gio?"

I shake my head slowly. “I think we’ll have to follow your breakfast with a thorough workout though.”

She grins and kisses the very tip of my cock. “I’m not going to complain about that.”

Before I can say another word, her lips part and she slides her mouth down my length. I hiss between my teeth as she takes me all the way to the base. Her throat tightens around me, but her eyes never leave mine.

Juliana lets out a soft moan that travels through my whole body. My abs tighten and I wrap my fingers in her hair. She slowly pulls her head back while sucking and I thrust forward, trying to draw out the moment. She does it again and again, finding a slow pace with her mouth and her wicked tongue that drives me insane.

I tighten my fingers in her damp hair and thrust into her mouth. Her eyes widen and her cheeks go red. The little grunting sound she makes while welcoming deeper is so sexy I think my cock twitches.

“You can keep this up until the water goes cold.”

She pops off my cock and uses her hand, spreading the wetness from her mouth all the way down my length. “Oh no, Gio. I want you to fill my throat.”

I groan. “Then you should wrap those sexy lips around me again.”

She grins. “Your dirty talk is getting better.”

As a reward, she ups the pace. She closes her eyes and uses her whole body to take me. I don’t want to interrupt her when every flick of her tongue and long suck feels so amazing, but her ass is just begging to be grabbed.

I pull her hair to get her attention and moan before I manage to get the words out. “Touch yourself too, babe. I want you to feel as good as I do.”

She takes me so deep she gags and her hand drops down her body and between her legs. She gasps around my cock and takes me faster. I nod. “Yes, just like that, baby.”

She pants as she continues to blow me. Even when she's trembling, on the edge, she doesn't stop. She just pleads with her eyes. She changes the angle, somehow takes me all the way in her mouth, and then sucks as her teeth skim my length.

It does me in. My whole body tightens as my jaw clenches and the orgasm surges through me. I try to find something to grab to stay standing as my legs shake and my mind goes blank. All that exists is pleasure, ecstasy, and so much affection I might just start believing in a Disney-style love.

Slowly, I come back to myself and find Juliana panting on the ground. Her hands support her as she leans back, showing off everything I still want. We get out of the shower and I pull Juliana to her room. Kissing her hungrily, I cup her breasts, grab her ass, and touch everywhere I need to touch.

Juliana melts against me, stroking my back. The fact that we're still wet, just makes everything more intense. I follow a bead of water down her neck and over her breast, licking it up before taking her hard nipple in my mouth.

She moans and pants. "Gio."

The hand I've had palming her ass pushes between her thighs in the back. I thrust two fingers into her wet pussy and she gasps. "Oh yes. So good, Gio."

I switch to her other breast as I work my fingers deeper into her and find a pace she likes. She whimpers and trembles, bracing herself on the foot of the bed. Her hips roll to take my fingers better as I tap her G-spot.

"Fuck. Yes. You know just what I like."

I lift my head and kiss her softly. "You're so damn important to me, Juliana."

She kisses me again, holding onto me instead of the bed. Her nails drag over my oversensitive skin and I shiver. Kissing her feels so much better than talking, but I want to get the words out too. They're important to her.

"You're more important than work," I whisper against her mouth. "Than approval from your father. More important than any other future I could have."

She wraps both arms around my neck as she lifts her leg onto the bed to give me better access to her pussy. “I like your brand of show and tell.”

Groaning, I pull my fingers free and turn her around. It’s a miracle that I’m already hard again. I thrust into her, jerking her ass against me. “You make me feel alive, babe.”

She whimpers and meets my next thrust eagerly. “Gio, you feel good.”

“Alive and right and ...” I don’t have all the words I need to describe how good she makes me feel.

“Show me.”

I get her onto the bed and flip her over. I like seeing her face when I’m inside her. I slowly ease back into Juliana and stroke her cheek as I kiss her softly. “I want you to come over and over again.”

She pants and I feel her legs wrap around me.

“I’ll fill my bedroom with candles. Put on your favorite music.” I cup the back of her head and kiss her hungrily. “And make sure that when we make love, I match the beat.”

Juliana rolls on top of me and takes control. “I like the sound of that. I like your plans.”

We groan together as she ups the pace, bouncing and rolling her hips as she rides me. Her nails claw at my chest and she leans forward. “I like you, Gio.”

“Fuck.” I groan as she continues to ride me. But it’s not enough.

Juliana’s close, so I help her come, lifting my hips when she comes down on me, holding her thighs hard, then, while she’s lost in her ecstasy, I roll her onto her side, pull her leg over my hip, and make sure she’s flush against me as I slow the pace again.

I want to last for her, to give her everything I can. She trembles as her eyes open. “Fuck yes.”

“Should we pull the blanket over us?”

“Hell no.” She giggles and kisses me hungrily. We trade between kissing and moaning as we try to hold out from coming again. I just want to memorize her, to freeze time at this moment exactly.

Where we’re happy despite everything going on, where Juliana and I are feeding on and adding to each other’s pleasure. A moment where nothing else matters but us. No rush, no limits, no thinking.

“Fuck, I’m so close, Gio. Please ... come with me,” She pants. “please.”

I feast on her mouth and increase the pace, holding her hips at just the right angle. She whimpers, hides her face in my neck, then grips my side as she comes apart again. Her pussy tightens around my cock so hard as she soaks me. Her trembling in my arms, moaning against my throat, gripping me tightly, pushes me over the edge.

“I’m-”

That’s all I get before I’m gone, lost in bliss again. I groan against her and ride out the tidal wave of pleasure. When I come down, I’m stroking Juliana’s hair, holding her against me, but I feel breathless, on the edge of crying for some reason, all kinds of raw and vulnerable.

Juliana kisses my chin. We stay like that for a while until Juliana goes to clean up and I change the now wet sheets. We meet again on the couch and Juliana curls against me. “Would your dad approve of me, do you think? In this situation?”

“He swore I’d never get your attention long enough to get a kiss.” I chuckle, then bite my lip. “He’d approve of you. Mom might not. She definitely wouldn’t be okay with me settling for sharing you.”

“You are settling, Gio.” She says seriously. “You, Kon, Max ... all of you could have anyone. You know that, right? None of you *have* to settle for me.”

“I’m smart enough to know when I have something real, Julia. I’m not settling for you.” I gently touch her back, remembering the scars there. “I’m choosing you.”

She sniffs and buries her face in my chest. I'm not exactly sure why she's crying, but I feel my own eyes water. I groan. "If you cry, I'm going to cry."

"It's good for us," She argues.

"I'd rather make you laugh." I kiss her gently. "So let me show you my attempt at cooking."

She agrees but watches me from the couch. I notice Charlie take my place, watching me too, while Nolan escorts me to the kitchen like he's my bodyguard. Juliana smiles and wipes at her tears.

Yeah. There's no better woman for me than this one right here.

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MAX

“Tony,” I say as I walk into his office. He’s pacing aggressively. It takes at least four attempts to get his attention until I refer to him by title. “Major Giovanni.”

He looks up and I see him put a photograph down. “Max.”

“I wanted to check in with you.”

“It would be easier if Juliana would answer her phone.”

“That’s not ideal. The signal can be tracked.” I realize I’m actually standing in an army pose and shake it off. Just to prove that part of my life is gone, since I don’t want to deal with that giant can of worms right now, I lounge in one of Tony’s chairs. “Juliana is doing well. She’s staying productive and safe. We are further investigating.”

“Investigating isn’t what I asked you to do.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. That tone may keep Muscles and the Kid in line, but it doesn’t do shit to me. He may have climbed rank in the military quickly, but we were both there, doing the same thing. He isn’t my boss, he’s my friend and I’m not going to let him pull any kind of rank here.

He sighs and rubs his hand through his thinning hair. “Sorry, Max.”

“You’re stressed.”

“Of course I’m stressed! There’s a hit on my daughter. She hates me more than ever. The anniversary of Rose’s death is

coming up.”

I rub my jaw. “It’s a lot to handle. I’m not pushing on that.”

“Juliana just doesn’t understand.”

“What doesn’t she understand?”

“What it’s like for me. Losing Rose ... it’s changed everything. I raised my daughter to be strong and I know that, but it’s not enough. I believed she could be as capable as any man, but then Rose ...”

“I thought she was sick?”

“That’s what I told Juliana. The doctors guessed poison. She was my partner here, Max. She was my rock and now that she’s gone, I’m out to sea. Juliana is sailing away on a boat towards all the worst things.”

“You have to trust how you raised her, Tony. You and Rose worked hard to make her capable and she is.”

“Capable women who don’t know how to play the game or *won’t* play the social and political games end up like Rose.”

He takes a slow breath. “I’m glad she’s safe. If you can stop the hit in some way, do it. I trust you.”

“Trust your daughter too,” I advise as I stand. “I’m not giving you orders, Tony. It’s just advice.”

He nods once. “Do me a favor, make sure she’s here Monday. It might be a battle, but she needs to get out of the house on that day. If she doesn’t ... it won’t be good for anyone. Least of all her.”

I have my own doubts about that, but I can’t show my hand. Not yet. I nod. “I’m working on it with the guys.”

He scoffs. “That Konstantin. Watch him.”

“He worships Juliana in the best way, but isn’t afraid to set boundaries. He’d be a good match for her.”

“We both know it would be a farce. She needs to marry well. A good man.”

I'm doubting his ability to recognize a good man, but Tony has been different since he lost Rose. So I just leave. Tony used to be understanding, balanced. He'd always question his thoughts and even play devil's advocate with himself.

It seems like that balancing voice died with his wife. It's a shame really. He gets tunnel vision with Juliana when he should be eager to make the most of what she offers. I shake my head of the thought and decide to bring back something for her.

As sappy as it is, I get her flowers. I never saw any in her apartment. I know Konstantin and Gio haven't brought her any. I get a decent size of roses, daisies, and some cute flowers that I don't know the names of. I'm more of an animal guy. Plants aren't really all that.

But I bring them back to the house and find Gio and Juliana eating. She laughs at something he says, then looks over at me. She sees the flowers and stands up. Gio pats her ass as she walks by and she rubs his shoulder before hugging me.

"You look tired, handsome. What's wrong?"

I consider telling her, but I hesitate. I hand her the flowers instead. She smells them and smiles. "They're beautiful. I love daisies and roses. Casual and formal all wrapped up together."

"Like you."

She laughs softly and kisses me. "Tell me about your day."

"Be careful how much you take on, babe," Gio advises. "I know you want to help, but if you overwhelm yourself ... Well there's a reason counselors exist."

"I know all about counselors." She waves, then pauses and actually looks at Gio. "I appreciate your concern, though."

Gio nods and takes their dishes to the sink. Juliana takes the flowers from me. "How was your day, Max?"

"Shockingly long," I admit. I feel heavy. It's not just the emotions rocking through me, it's the weight of the situation.

I sit on the couch and watch Juliana as she carefully gets the flowers set in a vase. She gently strokes a petal before coming over to me. “Let’s go. Let’s hear it.”

“You first. How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

Gio clears his throat. We both look over at him, but I catch Juliana’s blush, then the soft grin. “Very good, actually.”

Gio nods and goes back to loading the dishwasher. I rub her thigh where he can’t see and she takes my hand in hers. So soft and warm. I didn’t know hands could feel so silky.

“You’re okay with everything going on? Your mother and all that.”

“I’m dealing like I need to. What has that frustration on your face?”

“I talked to your father. And Mr. Alister’s P.R. guy. Rude asshole of a man. I think he’s from New York.”

“Don’t hold that against him. He can’t help it,” Juliana says.

“I just mean he’s from the sewers, like a rat. I think they get human-sized in New York.”

She laughs, but I feel her gaze on me still. Like she can see through my pretenses. Gio makes some excuse to leave and Juliana gets closer. She strokes my belly and kisses my shoulder before resting her forehead there.

“I’m trying to be useful, Max. You and Konstantin and Gio are working so hard to keep me safe, to eliminate the problem. I know that this is a huge amount of stress. Let me do my part and help with that.”

“This is a lot, you’re right. Not in a bad way. I like feeling useful.” It’s true.

And it’s been a long time since I’ve felt truly useful. Those at the top of companies make major decisions only once every two or three weeks. The rest of the time, I just sign papers. I

make smart stock recommendations, but what else do I really do that matters?

Call it a midlife crisis, but I've been feeling the itch to do more, to do something that matters. Sadly, because of Juliana's predicament, I have that option. Once we get this done, what else will I have to do.

"I'm just overthinking quite a few things." I brush it off.

Juliana keeps staring at me, waiting. Groaning, I lean towards her and kiss her. She kisses me back, rubbing my thigh as I tease her tongue with mine. When I draw back, Juliana licks her bottom lip and continues watching me.

"You want to feel useful and I do too. Right now, I have a purpose more than fancy, informed gambling. Once you're safe ..."

"You'll still have me." Juliana wiggles closer to me. "And you obviously want me, since we're so much fun when we're together."

I chuckle and stroke her hair. "I do enjoy your company. More than fun."

"More than fun." She repeats with a gentle smile. "And I could use some help with my business. Did you know, it's really hard to start your own company?"

"A lot of businesses fail, but I don't think you're running the risk of that. You're too determined." I assure her.

"Oh, I know that. But considering you know plenty, and I'm sure you know more than you let on, your expertise could make the difference between me scraping by or helping a lot of young artists achieve their dreams."

"I'm something of an artist myself." I admit.

She arches an eyebrow. I pull out my phone and take a slow breath. "This is a secret. No one gets to know but you."

"I'm honored."

"After I got out of the army, I needed a hobby. Something calming. Not a lot of people. No loud noises. Something where

I could really just enjoy what's in front of me without a threat."

"I'm glad you recognized it."

"I didn't." I snort. "A friend of mine did. So I started bird watching."

"Bird ... bird watching." Juliana digests that and nods slowly. "Okay. Not what I was prepared for."

"I liked being in nature, but didn't have the patience to wait for the birds. I don't know if you know this, but I'm talkative."

She giggles and kisses my jaw. "You are. I like it. You share a lot."

"But I did like birds, especially when I found them singing. So instead, I'd watch documentaries about birds, learn about them ... and then ..." I show her a photo of one of my paintings. "This is a limpkin. They're cute."

Juliana takes my phone and zooms in, zooms out and really takes her time looking over the painting. I showed a few people and they'd just nod and say it was good. Though I never told them I was the one who did it.

The fact that she really takes her time ... it makes me feel uncomfortably fuzzy. I clear my throat. "It became a habit. Just birds and leaves. I'm horrible at people. I learned that. Stick drawings are better than what I can do. But birds ... I don't know, it just works."

"You get so much detail," She murmurs. "I can tell you really loved doing this."

"I did."

She hands me my phone. "Could I commission you?"

"I would rather do it with you," I say it and almost regret it.

"I'd ruin the painting and you know it. That's what that face is for." She laughs. "But I'd be willing to try. We could do a mural in the office I bought."

“You’d trust me for that?”

She takes my hand. “Max, I trust you to protect me. I trust you to fuck me in rough ways. I trust you to ask you to work with me. Of course, I trust you with this.”

I kiss her hungrily. I pull her closer to me until she’s on my lap. We moan together as I pour all the things I’m feeling into her, all the things I don’t know how to name. When I draw back, Juliana lets out a panting breath.

“And you’re always useful to me. Not that I measure affection by usefulness.”

I smirk at her.

“You’re the first person to ever bring me flowers, Max. Other dates bring me expensive things, jewelry, things that show money. Flowers ... they’re a classic for a reason.”

I hug her tightly. “I appreciate you, Juliana.”

That word isn’t enough and I know it. Every moment we spend together just builds on the last one. A woman that knows her worth, knows what she wants, and still wants to lift other people up, even if it requires a push. Even while she’s experiencing hell.

Juliana’s the woman of my dreams and I might just find my best use, my best ambition, in proving that I adore her every single day.

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JULIANA

When I wake up, I feel like I haven't slept at all. With all three of my men here, it should have been the best night of sleep possible, but I tossed and turned, had nightmares, and had to fight the urge to go and join whoever was sleeping in the guest room twice.

I rub my face as I look in the mirror. The bags under my eyes, my messy hair, oh my god, I'm even pale. I groan as I stare at myself. This stress is definitely taking a toll. Next thing I know, I'll be losing my curves and my temper. I'll become some kind of wicked witch, warts and all.

So I take my time in the shower, lavishing myself in self care before putting on a face mask, some cucumber eye sheets, and laying in bed for another ten minutes. It does enough to help my face that makeup can cover the rest.

A knock on the door interrupts the very important mascara step. While trying to keep my place, I yell, "come in!"

Konstantin walks in and smiles gently as I finish with my last bit of makeup. I meet his eyes in the mirror. "Good morning, handsome."

"Good morning. Max left to speak with your father."

"Phase one is in motion," I say seriously.

Konstantin rubs my sides and kisses the top of my head, then my temple, and finally steals my lips for a soul-stealing kiss that reminds me exactly how much chemistry we have. I sigh as he draws back.

“Gio’s texting ‘Sharon’ now.”

“The air quotes are appreciated.” I crack a smile, then shake out my hands. How am I sweaty already? “Is it hot in here?”

“Is this flirting or a real question?”

“Real question. I feel sweaty and gross.”

Konstantin leads me to the living room and turns up the A/C. Gio glances at his phone, then kisses my cheek. I roll my eyes and turn his chin so I can kiss him full on the mouth. He draws back after a moment and adjusts his sleeves.

“Are you being shy?” Kon teases.

“This is new. I’m not really a P.D.A person,” Gio defends himself.

“I’ll close my eyes then.”

Gio sighs, but Konstantin actually turns around. Gio rewards me with a better kiss, sucking my bottom lip and pulling me tight against him. He rests his forehead against mine. “Good morning.”

“It is now.” I pat his chest. “You and Kon have made sure of that.”

Gio actually blushes. Konstantin stretches again. “The couch is not comfortable.”

“It is for someone who’s not a giant,” Gio jabs back.

I watch them play bicker and smile. They move around the kitchen, taking away all the stress of making breakfast. It’s hard to imagine them not in the same space when they make it look so natural.

Gio flirts with his eyes, making me feel desirable despite how I woke up. I nibble my bottom lip as I remember him saying he liked me best when I was all kinds of comfortable, makeup free, and in boring clothes.

I’m lucky to have all three of these men. They bring out different sides to me, support me in different ways, and make me feel like I’m good enough being who I am. I don’t have to

prove myself constantly or feel like I have to overcompensate for anything.

Gio serves all of us, then looks at his phone midbite.

A chill creeps up my spine, but I cool it. Supported or not, I'm not going to be a damsel in distress. "Is it her?"

"Of course. She thinks I'm flirting."

"She thinks it's a booty call?" I grip my fork tighter.

"Use that," Konstantin advises. "whatever it takes to get her here and cool her suspicions."

Gio looks between us, types something out, and goes back and forth with the woman while I slowly eat. I put the food away, just to show Gio I appreciate him cooking. Konstantin rubs my back and leans over to whisper in my ear.

"Don't worry, angel, you'll be able to pounce soon."

My hackles cool when I turn to face Kon and our noses brush. "There won't be anything for you to do, tiger."

"I'll get to watch, so I'll have to cook up some popcorn."

I laugh and shake my head. I feed the dogs and try to ignore the rolling in my stomach. Her coming is a good thing, no matter why she *thinks* she's been invited over. It means this will be over. That's all I've wanted since the start.

Even though this threat has given me three amazing men, I want them without any pressure or half of this excitement. The sexual excitement is just fine for me. I realize how anxious I am when Charlie abandons Kon and sits with me on the couch.

"I know, boy." I sigh.

"She's on her way." Gio reports. He sits next to me. "I let her assume. You can look at my phone."

"I trust you." It comes out of my mouth before my brain decides what to say. But it's true. "And since I trust you, I don't have to trust her."

Gio's face softens. "Thank you, babe." He kisses me softly while stroking through my hair. "That means a lot to me."

I nod, but end up pacing as my dogs try to follow. I'm half convinced Nolan thinks it's a game. But when he turns and growls at the front door. All eyes go there before Sharon or Jane or whoever she is knocks.

I get dressed in an unnecessarily sexy dress before making my appearance. Sharon wears a short black skirt with her white button up and black blazer. The click of her heels grate in my ears.

That red lip-sticked smile is a little smudged, like she put it on in the car. When she sees me, her smile falls a little. I can't even deny how good that makes me feel.

No sexy time for you, traitor.

"Sharon, we're honestly worried about Juliana." Konstantin has actually popped popcorn. He places one piece in his mouth while keeping the icy mask. "Someone was in the backyard last night."

"No one had given me the location. If they had, I could have prevented that." She puts a hand on her hip. "And I wouldn't be distracted by the client."

Konstantin doesn't react. Gio sighs. "There's so much going on right now, it's hard to keep everything straight."

Sharon moves closer to him and rubs his arm. "It seems like you need some stress relief, Gio. You deserve a break, you know that. It's Konstantin's day apparently and with the two guards outside, I can make sure you get some of those worries off your shoulders."

She's not even hiding the flirting. I grit my teeth and pet Charlie. Nolan growls again. Sharon looks over and forces a smile. "I'm half convinced those pups could protect you without a problem."

"They'd love the opportunity," I say.

I see her eyes go to the pink knife next to me and she arches an eyebrow. "Feeling a little paranoid, Juliana?"

"Sure ... paranoid." I keep waiting for Gio to drop the act and dive into the accusations.

“I’m tempted to take you up on that offer, Sharon. Can you recommend a spa?” Gio says instead.

I take a slow breath, not loving this encounter even a little bit. Sharon gives him a thorough eye-fucking before stroking over his shoulder. “I could get these knots out easily. I’m better than a number of spas and I have a more ... intimate touch. Satisfaction is guaranteed.”

I’m ready to burst. I’m ready to step in and mark my territory. This is going too far.

Konstantin stands and blocks my path to Sharon and her path to the exit. Gio is blocking her exit to the back door. Konstantin casually says something in Russian. Sharon turns around and answers him spitefully before going pale.

The tension ramps up to eleven and then Gio has her in cuffs and on the couch. She huffs and flicks her hair out of her eyes. “If you wanted to get kink, you just had to ask, sweetie. Cuffs and an audience is right up my alley.”

“You have the hit on Juliana.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” She runs her heel up Gio’s leg. “Convince me to be truthful.”

Konstantin steps up instead. His muscles flex in anticipation and he growls out something in Russian. I don’t understand a word, but the way his voice deepens, clings to the words, promises something dark and vicious all on my behalf is so sexy that I know I’m wet.

Sharon gasps. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me,” He hisses.

“I was one in a *line* of people eager to take the assignment. It was supposed to be easy. Just to spook her daddy. But then you three got involved and ... well, a girl like me can’t resist a challenge.” Her gaze goes back to Gio.

“And your helper?”

She laughs. “Oh please.”

“He’s clumsy.” Gio shows her the badge.

Her eyes darken. “Fucker couldn’t do even one thing. I should have known.”

“Explain.” Konstantin barks.

I make a mental note to work him up again. This level of intensity, the orders being barked, oh, I’m such a sucker for my men. I look at Gio, ready to kick her ass, shaking off every bit of flirting, impossible to distract.

Gorgeous, attentive, and dangerous. Apparently, I have a better type than I did in college.

“I bribed him. He doesn’t get a cent. With some wining, dining, and attention, he was more than happy to get involved with my plan. Apparently, you have a list of people who don’t like you princess.”

Oh no she doesn’t.

Gio tries to warn her, but before either of my men can stop me, I have my knife against her throat. I lean forward and exhale slowly, remembering control. “The thing is, *Jane*, I don’t give a fuck who likes me. I care about getting shit done the right way. I’m thinking the right way to deal with you is to eliminate you as a threat.”

She swallows and the knife moves against her skin. I nod once. “This is how things are going to go. You’re going to stop flirting with and eyeing my boyfriends and tell me everything I want to know. If you don’t, I might follow that childhood dream of being a doctor.”

“What?”

“But you’d need an injury for me to treat.” I press the sharp blade tighter against her skin, giving her a shallow cut. “One that requires more than band-aids to fix.”

She keeps watching me. “Money talks more than threats, honey.”

“You’re not the only one that loves a challenge.” I press harder until she gasps and whimpers. When she shakes her head, I stop. “I’m not fucking around, *Jane*. Answers or dealing with me.”

“Bitch.” She hisses.

“Pot calling the kettle black.” I wave it away.

“What do you want to know?”

“Are there any backups in place?”

“Only John. I work alone. I told the asshole I wouldn’t take the contract if he didn’t trust me.” She gets that sassy look in her eyes again. “I have a perfect record.”

“Had,” I correct her. “the pay agreement?”

“A million dollars. Half up front.”

“I’m almost flattered that my life is worth at least that.” I muse. “But I have more than that in my closet, so ...” I dig my knee into her thigh until she grunts.

“By the way, you should check what your employer is capable of,” Gio chimes in. He shows her something on the phone and Sharon gapes. Gio nods. “let that influence you however you wish.”

“This seems rather simple then. Get the homicidal barbie off me and I’m gone.”

I arch an eyebrow. “How can *I* be sure. I’m so paranoid after all.”

“I don’t kill people for less than I’m quoted. If he can’t pay, he doesn’t get what he wants. Let me go, attack the fall guy, live your privileged life to the fullest and we all get what we want.”

“Or?” I ask.

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GIO

Juliana's out for blood. I know that. A blow to her ego she can take, a threat on her life, she won't tolerate. She's broken skin already.

"Or kill me and go to jail for murder. Up to you." Jane hisses.

Nolan growls and almost bites Jane as she starts to move. Apparently the threat of little teeth on an ankle does plenty. Jane glances at the dogs. "Call them off."

"Convince *me*," Juliana repeats.

"You'll never see me again and trust me, I don't want to see you. I'll pull name from the Volkov list."

"Already done," Konstantin reports. "we don't work with traitors."

"I wasn't a traitor when I was hired," Jane spits out. "and if you have me labelled like that-"

"What will you do?" Juliana traces Jane's collarbone with the tip of the knife, reminding her of her position. "Hurt my boyfriend? Go after him?"

"I thought you were with Gio." She distracts.

"I have a whole lot of love to give." Juliana brushes off. "Answer or bleed, bitch."

"I'm gone. I won't be seen in this shitty state again. Too close to the Feds for me."

Juliana keeps eyeing Jane, then slowly gets off her. I can see the knife shaking behind her back, but her face doesn't give anything away. "Disappear. As far as I'm concerned, you don't exist. If that changes, I'll have to be more thorough."

"Understood," Jane says, glancing between us. "But that means you better give Johnny boy the message. He seemed uniquely motivated."

Before I can follow up on that, she's gone. Juliana exhales, sets the knife on the table, then sits right where Jane/ Sharon was. Rubbing her fingers through her hair, I can see exactly how intensely she's trembling.

"Since when is playing pretend hard?"

I immediately sit next to her and pull her into my arms. Juliana is a lot of things, but she's not a killer. She'll defend herself without problem, but there's no way she'd actually kill a person.

"It's over now. You did well," I say.

"You were nicer than I would be," Konstantin grumbles.

I shoot him a look. Juliana doesn't need to know all the dirty details of mafia life or what Konstantin has been taught. I kiss her forehead and Konstantin holds up his hands in surrender.

"I would have been afraid of you," Konstantin amends.

"I'm all talk. No follow through," She murmurs.

"That's not a bad thing, Juliana. It's a good thing to have control like you did. You spared us a mess, got answers, and took care of one half of the problem. Now we just have to see what Max is capable of."

She nods. "I need a bath."

I release her and watch her walk away. Water runs in the distance and I slump into the couch. Nolan hops up next to me while panting. I glance at him. "What, do you need water? Did *almost* biting someone take it out of you?" I chuckle.

“Probably. Did you know that Juliana was pretending?” Konstantin asks.

“Just like she pretends that she doesn’t want us when her father is around. She has a tell.” I admit.

“What is it?”

“Her toes curl when she lies. When she was little, she would crunch grass or pull at the carpet. I was shocked other people never noticed.”

Konstantin nods and rubs the back of his neck. “You know how that could have gone.”

“I know,” I agree. “it could have gotten much worse. We’re lucky that Juliana knew how to play the situation.”

“When she answered me in Russian she knew she was caught. I expected her to show a gun.”

“She didn’t have one on her or I wouldn’t have let Juliana get that close,” I say.

He nods. I glance at him, eager to get off this topic. “Are you really okay with sharing her?”

Okay, maybe not a better topic.

“I thought I’d hate it. But ... she’s happier than I’ve ever seen her. A girl given everything she doesn’t want finally getting something she does.”

I nod in agreement. Honestly, seeing her with Konstantin eases me. Knowing that she has more than one person supporting her is a relief. She deserves it. She deserves more people who recognize how wonderful she is.

“What do we do until Max gets back?” Konstantin asks. His gaze flicks to Juliana’s room again.

“I’m getting a nap. Do whatever you want. But do it quietly,” I advise.

He nods. “I just want to make sure she’s really okay. She hides things well.”

And she needs time to process things. Otherwise, I'd have tried to get into the bath with her. Only half for sex. But I've been pushed away in the throws of her emotions too many times to chance it.

I head to the guest room and attempt to get some sleep. Even an hour will help after the broken sleep of last night. I'd been counting the ways it could go wrong. I'd been afraid that this would go sideways and I'd end up like my father. Dying uselessly and losing the person most important to me.

But now that Juliana is safe – for now at least – I might be able to get some sleep.

I cross my fingers, then flop into bed. I'm out in seconds.

I wake up to high-pitched barking and look around. I've drooled on the pillow and can't remember even falling asleep. Groaning, I get up and find Konstantin and Juliana in better spirits on the couch. They give each other sly looks like teenagers that got away with being naughty.

“Your father is dense,” Max growls.

“You should know more than most.” She grumbles. “He didn't want to listen.”

“He said ‘boys will be boys’ and assured me that you wouldn't go public with what you know and neither would the women filing the reports.”

“An optimist in all the wrong ways,” I say.

“Enjoy your nap?” Juliana asks genuinely.

I nod. “I needed it.”

“Our plan fell through with that, so I'm not sure how to address John Booker. How did things go with the hitwoman?”

“Resolved.” Kon pats Juliana's thigh. “Juliana bluffed better than any poker player I've seen.”

She lights up under the compliment. I smile and rub her shoulder. “I'm pretty sure that the woman won't stop running until she hits Mexico.”

“That's good.” Max sits in the recliner.

As soon as he stretches out, Juliana gets up and sits on his lap. She rubs his chest. “Do you need a nap too?”

“Possibly. I’m not as young as I once was.” He admits. “And I feel useless compared to your success.”

“You’re not useless, Max,” Juliana reassures him. “I’m sure that my father heard you, even if he brushed it off.”

“We can hope. I don’t know why your word isn’t good enough. You have a good head on your shoulders,” He says.

He’s not flirting which means something is definitely wrong.

I arch an eyebrow. “Anything else?”

“I let him know that we were going to try and make Monday, but there was no guarantee. I tried to help, doll.”

“Oh?” She waits for the rest.

“I told him that you had the right to mourn however you saw fit. That if you wanted to meet with him, you’d reach out, but that grief is personal. He might have said that you got in my head and reminded me that I have no business with you.”

“Great.”

“And I may have helpfully reminded him that you’re old enough to make your own choices in your personal life and otherwise.”

“Max.” She sighs.

“He had security walk me out.”

“Well, one mess solved, another started.” I shrug. “Seems normal if Uncle Tony’s involved.”

“We talked about that.” Juliana points at me. “No more of that.”

I smirk. “Sorry, babe. It’s a habit.”

Max presses his face to Juliana’s hair. “Sorry I couldn’t do more. I had good intentions.”

“My dad is determined to see me as a little girl. That’s his fault.”

“His loss,” Max says. “if you worked for me, I’d make sure to give you every opportunity to make business better.”

She snuggles against him. I stretch. “Anything else on the list for today?”

“Stay alive,” Juliana murmurs. “All three of you.”

“Are we going to talk about your slip earlier?” Konstantin puts himself back in the conversation.

Juliana looks from me to Konstantin, realizes he means the ‘boyfriend’ comment, and blushes. “I um ... Well ...”

“I’m not hurt.” Konstantin smiles and I feel that golden-retriever energy rolling off him.

“I think it means I’m allowed to call you my girlfriend now.”

“Oh?” Max says. “Did you decide on one of us?”

“No!” Juliana rushes. “No. I kind of referred to Kon and Gio as my boyfriends and and that’s how I think of you three. We’ve all had date-like things. We’re definitely not just friends. We’re not professional and ...”

“You look flustered, doll,” Max smirks.

“I think this is the first time I’ve seen you this red.” I tease.

“Hey! No ganging up on me. You all just got upgraded to boyfriend. Bask in that while I start working on a business model and get Patricia onboard. Apparently, everyone knows the location, so you can’t stop me.”

She goes to her room and slams the door.

I chuckle and can’t stop the smile. Juliana could have picked worse guys. That’s for sure. Max may be an old man as far as I’m concerned and Kon isn’t exactly who I expected him to be, but we can find some common ground other than the girlfriend we share.

This might just work for longer than a month or two. Even with some of the boundaries erased. Now we just have two major hurdles before we can focus on our relationship and untangling all the complications so we can put them in line.

We need to get John Booker out of the picture – without Juliana involved. And we need to take care of Monday. Juliana has already been more on edge than normal and I’ve noticed she looks exhausted, even if she tries to cover it. She’s going to have a hard time, and that’s before her father’s involvement.

It’s going to be a mountain of a day and we still have to keep his hands off her. Considering he’s perfectly aware of her and Konstantin and I’m sure he has some suspicion about her and Max, I have a feeling he’s just waiting to punish her.

If I go off of past years, he’s going to be most raw and unreasonable on Monday too. He may not know how to grieve, but Aunt Rose’s death has been eating him up from the moment she was put into the hospital. He covers it with alcohol and orders, but at least once a year he breaks.

If he breaks while with Juliana, there’s no telling what he’s capable of.

But I know I’d be willing to risk everything to keep Juliana safe. Shaking my head, I try not to worry about that.

“Get some sleep,” Konstantin says, pulling me out of my thoughts. “I’ve watched you go from smiling to frowning to vicious in under a minute.”

“You’re right. We’re going to have to get on a solid rotation,” I murmur.

“Sure. But right now, get some sleep.” Max insists. “I might just nap too. Can you hold down the fort, Konstantin?”

Kon nods, waving us away. Max stretches on the couch after Konstantin gets up to do dishes and I head to the guest room. I pause just before going in. “Hey, Max.”

“Yeah, kid?”

“Have you ever applied for a job as a body pillow? You’re just the right height.”

“Is that an invitation?”

We both chuckle before I ease in for better sleep.

JULIANA

As the days pass, I enjoy my men. We get naughty frequently, despite having to be quiet, but even the sex, attention, stories, and bonding time with them can't keep my mind off my mind.

Somehow on Sunday, Konstantin and Max are called away. I would do anything to keep Max here since he's so good at distracting me with the stories he's suddenly eager to tell and all the ways he's opening up, but instead, it's just Gio and me. We both pretend to work, but I'm just staring at a blank email.

The blinking cursor mocks me until I shut my laptop and shove it to the side. Charlie takes advantage and Nolan follows. I curl around them as they nose my face and try to calm me down.

The panic attacks and anxiety have been creeping back in. I wouldn't say paranoia is a problem since someone is out to kill me, but the time of year alongside that problem is eating at me.

I take a few deep breaths and I try not to think of my mom. I love her, I will until the day I die, but since I can't stop thinking about all the things I want to do with her, the little things I've missed out on with her, the things she's missed, it's not exactly pleasant.

A hand strokes over my back, and I jump up, ready to meet a ghost, but it's Gio. I sit up and wrap my arms around his waist, burying my face in his chest. "This is hell."

“I imagine it is.”

“It’s been years, and I just find new things to be upset about. So much that I wish she’d be here to see or do or enjoy with me. I mean ...” I sniff, then groan. “I’m so tired of crying about the same thing. I feel like a ridiculous child.”

“You’re not ridiculous, Juliana.” He insists. “You loved her.”

“I still do. I just ... I want her to be here. It’s ridiculous, I know.”

He shakes his head.

He smiles and squats down to look up at me. “You are not ridiculous when it comes to this. I promise. I’ve missed my dad at least once a month. I’ll be a mess when the year mark hits.”

“I just want to go to her grave, close my eyes, and pray for a haunting of the good kind. To see her smile, to know that she *knows* that I still think about her, that I want to make her proud, that I haven’t forgotten her.”

“I’m sure she knows that, wherever she is.”

“She put up with my father for more than eighteen years. She did all her penance,” I grumble.

Gio chuckles and strokes my hair. “I’m not the best at comforting. Should I call Kon?”

“No, Gio.” I guide him closer to me. “You’re better than you think. Just ... don’t ... I don’t know. I don’t know what advice to give. I’m out of words.”

So he spends the day holding me. When I do find words, I just reminisce with him about Mom. He tells me stories I don’t even remember, like when we were playing a game and Mom told him we should play ‘wedding’ and be bride and groom.

I play with Gio’s hands. “She might have been on to something.”

“I think it was obvious even back then that I was crazy about you,” Gio whispers. “But your Mom made sure I

apologized whenever we fought. She taught me things my parents didn't. She was a good person, through and through."

I bite my lip as I think of a kind of terrible thought. It's not fair to my dad, my mom, or me. But I noticed that my father started pulling away from me, stopped encouraging me, and started trying to lock me away and pamper me when mom got sick. It's like he can preserve her by keeping me safe from the world – which means keeping me from actually living the life I have.

"What are you thinking about?" Gio asks.

"Gloomy things." I look back at him. He wraps his arms around me from behind and squeezes me. I close my eyes and bask in his warmth. "You make it more tolerable."

"We're going for better, so I'll just have to keep holding you."

Which results in me falling asleep. I dream of my mom. She's just coming over for dinner and fawning over Max, teasing Konstantin for every blush, and whispering to Gio until he hurries away to hide his discomfort.

Of course, she loves that I'm following my heart, even if it's stretching me between three men. The sly looks, her laugh, and the lavender and rose scent of her perfume make it a tragedy when I do wake up.

I just lay there. I feel Gio's chest move slowly and I know he's asleep. I know I should be happy to have him here with me, but a part of me feels empty. I lay there, trying to empty my mind until Max returns.

He takes one look at me and motions me to come to him.

It's easy to slip out of Gio's arms. He's not quite the light sleeper he used to be. Max hugs me and pets my hair. "We'll go to the grave yard tomorrow before going to your father."

"Do the cameras have sound?"

He shakes his head. "I just know."

Of course, he does. We sit in the basement together and I take a shot when he does. He sighs. "It's not easy, doll. I'd be

lying if I say it ever gets *easy*, but it gets better.”

“Really?”

“It does. You must have noticed that. From thinking about her daily to weekly, and then a week goes by and you don’t think about her.”

“Which made me feel guilty as hell,” I grumble.

“Of course, which starts the upset all over again.” He smiles slightly and shakes his head. “But then it’s once a month, once a year, and holidays. Finally, it gets to be once a year and on big events.”

“I’m sorry if I’m making you relive things,” I say.

“You’re not.” He pats my hand. “I’ll still bully your father as necessary. I have plenty of experience there. I can bring him alcohol tonight, get him so drunk he passes out and then he won’t be able to do anything but fight the hangover.”

It’s a weird offer, but sweet. Max seems to ride that line well. I can tell he means the best, but sometimes his words don’t match with the intentions. I play with my shot glass. “Do you remember your parents?”

“Not as well as I wish I did. I mostly remember my grandmother. She showed me pictures of my parents, and would tell me stories. She was plenty upset when she got sick before I graduated high school.”

“That early?” I gape.

He shrugs, but I see the pain in his eyes.

I get up, walk around the bar and hug Max. He pats my back. “Don’t go feeling sorry for me.”

“I’m sappy right now. Imagining seventeen year old you all alone.”

“I had a good inheritance.”

“That doesn’t make up for it,” I say.

He nods and we just hug each other for a long while. I know tomorrow is going to be hard on me. I’ve never had this

much support to get through the day. Patricia has always gone above and beyond this time of year. She's drank with me, distracted me, cried with me, let me cry, and rescued me from my father with emergencies.

But having these three men, all different, with different approaches and styles of affection ... not to mention their determination to protect me physically and emotionally from everything. Well, I'm a lucky woman.

"Patricia will probably want to see me. I feel terrible not seeing her."

"You haven't had the option," Max reminds me. "she'll forgive you."

"Have you two been texting?" I draw back and arch an eyebrow. "Do I need to be worried?"

"You can be jealous," Max smirks at me. "I don't mind knowing you're hot for me."

I narrow my eyes. "Well, no one knows that you're mine. Do I need to get a stick or a weapon to beat women away from you? "

"Let's say you did ... would I be allowed to watch?"

"If you encourage it, it's just as bad," I remind him. "and I'll be angry with you."

"We can't have that." He kisses my forehead then pauses. "Have I kissed you today?"

"No." I pout. "I thought you were punishing me for something."

He kisses me softly, then pulls me closer against him and kisses me deeper. I melt into him, happy for the distraction, overwhelmed by the way he shares his emotions so physically and completely even though he can't verbalize them all the time.

The love, appreciation, warmth, all of it is so welcome, so needed.

When he draws back, he smiles. “No pushing for fun today.”

“A special occasion then?”

“I’m hurt.”

We both laugh, but Max takes my face between his hands. “You’ll survive tomorrow. And if you want to see Patricia tonight, I’m willing to make it happen. No matter what the protective kid upstairs says.”

And that’s exactly what we do. I put on something sexy, throw my hair up in a sleek ponytail and am happy for something to do. Max convinces Gio this a good thing and Konstantin picks up Patricia so we can go out to a bar. Nothing huge, nothing too wild, just time together.

I hug my best friend and catch up. A taste of the real world is so sweet that I don’t want to let it go.

“It sucks you’re on house arrest,” She says, but her eyes flick to Max.

I know she has a thing for older guys, but she’s barking up the wrong tree if she’s after mine.

“It’s not house arrest, it’s like protective custody,” I correct her.

“Well it can’t be too bad with a view like this.” She doesn’t look away from Max. “You want to dance, handsome?”

“No thanks. I’m on the job.”

She pouts. “No fun. I’m getting another round.”

I nudge Max. Gio smirks. “A younger girl throwing herself at you. Aren’t you going to do something about that?”

“Yup.”

I arch an eyebrow and scoff before downing my frustration with alcohol. He already said we’re not having fun tonight and I’m okay with that because I’m not in the mood, but I’m not in the mood to see my best friend and one of my boyfriends flirt.

Patricia comes back and slides me a drink. She keeps scooting closer to Max. Konstantin distracts me before I can make a scene by kissing my neck. “Stop worrying. He hasn’t even glanced at her all night.”

But as Patricia gets drunker, she gets more handsy. Max gently takes her hands off him. “Patricia, I think you’ve had a bit too much to drink.”

“No such thing. I can trust a gentleman like you, can’t I?” She bats her eyelashes. “And if you ravish me, I’ll enjoy every second of it.” She chuckles.

“Let’s get you home,” Max says.

“But, it’s so early!” She complains.

“It’s last call,” Gio corrects her. “I’ve got this.”

He takes care of Patricia, who waves at me and promises to see me tomorrow to celebrate my mom, then Konstantin puts Max and me in the back seat to head back to the safe house.

I glance at Max. After Konstantin pointed it out, I noticed it too. Max didn’t give her any of his famous smiles or anything that could be misconstrued as flirting.

“I only have eyes for you, doll,” He says as if he can read my skepticism. “It’s not a younger girl thing. It’s a you thing.”

I swallow and scoot closer. “I’m glad. Not that she flirted, but that you said it.”

“You have me wrapped around your finger. I’ll keep proving it to you.” He kisses my temple. “Until you believe me.”

“And after?”

“I’m sure I’ll do it even more after you believe me.”

I hope my mom is watching this specific moment.

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MAX

Once we get home, Juliana heads to bed to change. I glance at Konstantin as I shed my jacket. “We need to be ready for anything tomorrow.”

He takes a step closer. “Her father isn’t stable when his emotions are involved. I’ll be bringing a gun.”

“A gun?” I’m surprised.

Konstantin nodded. “I may not need it loaded, but it gets him to back off quickly. I don’t want him touching Juliana.”

“Gio’s reaction to when she touched her back worries me,” I note. “I’m assuming her father put those scars on her back.”

“That’s fair,” Konstantin agrees.

I thought I knew the man so well. Apparently, I didn’t know shit. A whole lot of fucking nothing. I know Juliana better than I know him. Which is nearly impossible to believe. A man I consider a friend, a man I thought was upstanding, honest, straightforward, but was ruthless in business he’s a tyrant.

Strictness is one thing, but he’s something else with his daughter. Suffocating. Juliana treats her dogs better. She gives them more freedom even in her purse than she gets from her father.

“Sorry. I’m struggling to avoid overthinking this.” I hold up a hand.

“There’s nothing to overthink. We need to be prepared and we cannot leave her alone with him for more than two minutes, Max.”

“I’m not disagreeing, Muscles. I’m saying that this is a delicate situation. I’m sure you’ve been in plenty of those.”

“Of course.”

“Then you know. I’ve already fucked shit up by coming on so strong.” I hiss. “He may try to use that against the two of us.”

“Because we’ve been closer to Juliana?”

“Gio might have had the right idea,” I admit. “He knows how to play the game, that’s for sure.”

“This isn’t a game. It’s Juliana.”

“What’s Juliana?” The woman of the hour comes out wearing an oversized sweatshirt and nothing else.

I just stare at her. Without makeup or frills, she’s just as gorgeous. She hugs herself and then wipes her face. “Okay, don’t stare. I know I look different.”

“How can you look perfect with and without makeup?” My mouth runs away with me.

I’ve noticed that’s a constant trend with this woman. She drives me insane. Makes my brain all foggy and makes me impulsive. Not that I’m a stranger to doing and saying what I want when I want, but with Juliana, I can’t even *plan* to flirt. It just happens.

Juliana blushes but kisses my cheek. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

She kisses Konstantin’s cheek. “Are you past last call?”

“Nope.” He rubs her back. “I’ll get you a dessert cocktail.”

He goes right to the kitchen and Juliana watches from the couch. I see a smile pull at her lips as she looks at him, then at me. “You guys make me happy, you know that?”

“I’d hope so since you keep us around,” I say. “Not kicking us out or closing the door when you change.”

She points at me. “It stays in your pants tonight, Mister.”

“I prefer ‘sir’.”

She rolls her eyes but smiles anyway.

Juliana takes the cocktail Muscles gives her and he’s kind enough to give me one as well. I raise my glass to him. “Are you trying to liquor me up?”

“I wouldn’t have to do all that. Just some flirting and a wiggle of my eyebrows.”

I laugh. “You know me well.”

“Better every day.”

We chat about nothing but the night we’ve had and I see Juliana relax a bit. She needed to get out. I was sure of it. Some liveliness and faces she doesn’t see every day have done her good. I pat myself on the back mentally.

The door opens and I lean my head back. “Our missing sheep has come home.”

“Very funny,” Gio grumbles.

Juliana opens her arms. “Hug.”

“Are you drunk?” He asks.

“Topsy and easy to please.”

Gio chuckles then gives her the hug she wants. He kisses her cheek. He does a shot and shakes his head. “Patricia is a handful.”

“Of course. She’s my friend. I keep the *best* company.”

“Yeah, she doesn’t flirt with you.” Gio points out after wincing at the bourbon.

“Sure she does. It makes me feel all warm and special.”

“That’s my job, doll.”

She looks over the three of us and lights up. “I like you three in the same place. I feel so safe and loved and ...

suspicious.”

Charlie and Nolan both perk up and look around, like that one word has summoned their attack mode. I sigh. “Why suspicious?”

Juliana stands and starts pacing. “The last time we’ve had an issue with my life involved was when we dealt with Sharon/ Jane. Why hasn’t John done anything? He knows where I am.”

“All three of us have been here. That’s a lot for the average man wanting to become a hitman.” Konstantin points out. “It takes training, patience, being able to manipulate a moment.”

“All skills a man like him doesn’t have.” I guess with a snort.

“You’re not wrong, but I feel like he might be putting his patience to work.” Juliana keeps pacing.

I wrap my arms around her. She’s making me dizzy. “Listen, you are safe. We’re going to keep making sure of that, so how about you sit down, or get some sleep.”

“Like I can sleep tonight.” She pats my chest, then does it again.

Yeah, she’s more than tipsy if she’s distracted by feeling me up. I rub her back. “Don’t make me tell you again, doll.”

“Be my snuggle buddy?”

I narrow my eyes. She’s extra brazen right now. Gio rolls his eyes and takes another drink. “Go on.”

“Is there a reason you’re choosing me?”

“Because I want to. You gave me all your attention tonight when Patricia was right there, practically drooling over you. I didn’t start a fight or make a scene. You didn’t give an inch. Let’s snuggle as a reward.”

That’s impossible to argue with. “We’ll snuggle soon.”

“But-”

“I have to get ready for bed and take whatever the opposite of Viagra is.” I pat her arm. “Get in there and make the bed perfect.”

She hurries off and I shake my head. Gio smirks. “Don’t you need Viagra to do the job?”

“Do you want to know my secrets to getting our girlfriend eager and obedient?”

His face drops. “Fine line.”

“Old man jokes bring it out in me.” I wink. “But I can always teach you. Kon would probably fit over my lap with some maneuvering.”

“I’d pay to see it.” Gio chuckles. “I’d pay you both for pictures.”

“Not my place.” Konstantin keeps his blank face. “I like Gio’s rule about limited bedroom talk.”

“You don’t want me to flirt with you?” I wink at him.

Since they don’t want to be any fun, I go get changed for bed and slip into Juliana’s room. Both dogs are already on the bed with her. She rolls to face me and tugs on my shirt. “Really?”

“The more layers the better with you. Why do you think I have pants on?”

“To upset me.”

“Very funny.” I pull her against my side and wrap her arm around me. “You’re going to need some rest.”

“Can you make me a promise, Max?”

“I can ... but I’d like to know what I’m promising first,” I whisper.

“Promise me that you won’t leave me alone” She hums and adjusts against me, wrapping her thigh over my hip so our legs are tangled. “Not with my dad.”

“I’ll do my best, doll.”

“Even if you’re on the other side of a door, be on the phone or something with me. I don’t want to have to scream or something to get your attention.”

“I can promise that,” I assure her, kissing the top of her head. “Now you promise me you’re going to try to sleep.”

Instead, her finger traces circles on my chest. I can handle that, but as her finger slides down my belly, I have to catch her hand. I know she wants to be distracted. But I also know that if she lets go of her inhibitions now, she’s going to end up crying, or she’ll be so upset she can’t function tomorrow.

Even though my body is ready and more than willing – like it always is with her – my conscious is loud in my ears. Damn conscious. If I could just silence it ...

“You’re no fun tonight, Max.” She looks away in frustration.

I’m grasping at fucking straws!

“Doll.” I lift her chin gently. “I’m more than happy to fuck you endlessly. But I know that you have so much on your mind.”

“Yeah. And I don’t want it there. I don’t want to think. I just want you.” She grumbles.

I’m close to caving. I can feel it.

“But I know that we shouldn’t.” She keeps rubbing me. “Even if it would be amazing and satisfying.”

“It’s been two days since you had me,” I remind her.

“You three make me greedy, but I know it would bother me after. Or I’d just explode in tears. And right now I actually feel okay. The most okay I’ve felt this close to the anniversary of her death. You three have given me everything and if that means waiting for you ... I’ll do it.”

I exhale slowly, happy that she’s on my side. “You won’t have to wait long. I promise.”

“I guess this is what a real relationship is like. Even an unconventional one.”

“I think it’s called maturity, but what do I know?”

“You know,” She pauses to yawn. “plenty.”

After less than three minutes of silence, she’s completely out. I nod to myself. Bathed in her perfume and warmth, it doesn’t take me long to fall into a dreamless sleep either.

When I wake up, Juliana is already getting dressed. I watch over my morning wood as she pulls an appropriate dress over her bra and underwear. “You putting on clothes is the worst thing I could imagine.”

She jumps and looks at me. “Why? It’s a nice dress.”

“It shows off your curves in a shockingly professional way, but I prefer stripping you, doll.” She gives me a weak smile.

I can tell she’s done minimal makeup which means she’s preparing to cry.

“Get up, old man!” Gio yells. “We have places to go.”

“He’s right, handsome.” Juliana pulls me out of bed. “As much as I’d like to drown my sadness by losing myself in you, we have a date I can’t miss.”

“With your father?”

She shakes her head slowly and tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “With my mom.”

That’s all it takes to get me out of her room and into fresh clothes. I chug a cup of coffee and the four of us go to the cemetery. Juliana leads us up a hill under a gorgeous oak tree. Patricia stands there with sunglasses on. There are fresh flowers on Rose Giovani’s grave, but that doesn’t stop Juliana from adding to it.

Patricia takes her hand. “Are you going to tell her about the new business? The new men?”

Juliana shakes a little and swallows. “I think she already knows this year.”

“Of course, she does, honey.” Patricia hugs her. “And she’s proud of you. Can’t you feel it? How much she loves you? How happy she is for you?”

Juliana nods, then the tears start. I dab at my own eyes and take a few steps back. I'm not built for this. I'm not prepared for it. I'm no good at it. I clear my throat and glance at the guys. "Anyone a specialist in this relationship area?"

Gio swallows and I can see tears misting over his eyes. Konstantin pats his shoulder. We stand there together while Juliana mourns her mother with her best friend at her side. We have her back, as soon as she's ready.

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JULIANA

Patricia hugs me again after we both have a therapeutic cry with my mom. I touch her headstone. Despite the chill of the stone, I feel warm here. I feel good and complete. I couldn't ask for more. I feel at peace with Mom and lucky to have my best friend and all three of my men with me today.

Patricia squeezes me. "We can run away together. Didn't your mom have a bucket list of places for you to travel?"

"She did. We haven't done Key West yet," I murmur.

"You mean the one at Disney doesn't count?" Patricia gasps.

We both laugh through our tears and I wipe at my eyes. "Maybe tomorrow."

We say the same thing every year with a different destination. But something keeps me from going. Not something – a certain person missing. I sigh and bite my lip. I know I'm stalling. I don't normally last fifteen minutes here, but today I don't want to leave.

Something rolling in my stomach says not to go see my father, but I can't stop myself. It has to happen. I know that. If I don't go to him, he'll come to me and that will absolutely be worse. I take another unsteady breath as my heart tries to leap into my throat.

Charlie whimpers in my bag. I reach in and pet both my dogs. "My babies, you two are doing well. Thank you."

Patricia turns me to face her. “Turn off your phone and hide at my place.”

“I will ... after the world’s shortest meeting with my father.”

“Update me,” She says, then points at the men behind us. “Do your duty by your girlfriend. Update me on what happens.”

“Okay,” Gio says simply.

And that’s all it takes for us to go. I keep looking back, wanting any excuse to stay, but none come. I’m nauseous but alive which means I’m going to my father’s office. We climb to the elevator and I keep petting my dogs.

When we stand just outside my dad’s office, I turn to face the guys. I show them my phone and call Max. “If I say kiwi or you hear something intense, come in. I’m not locking the door behind me.”

“I don’t like this,” Konstantin says. “I’ve seen how afraid you are.”

“I have to face my demons and I have to do that alone.”

“Says who?” Max asks. “We’re a good team, Juliana. That’s why this relationship works.”

I smile and put my hand on the doorknob. “We are. But this is my family and my chance to grow. I can do this.”

I open the door, then shut it behind me. I hear something I don’t expect. No ticking. No foot tapping on the floor. It’s crying. I take another step into my father’s massive office and see him with a bottle of red wine – Mom’s favorite – as he cries.

“You should have fought,” He whispers.

I blink a few times and take another step forward. I’m worried I’m going to break whatever spell he’s under, but at the same time, I just can’t stop myself from moving toward him.

“I can’t do this alone. Why did you curse me to this?” He demands before bringing the wine glass down too hard on his desk so the stem shatters.

He gasps and starts openly sobbing.

I’ve seen my father in plenty of different moods and different personas, but this is new. It’s chilling honestly. Maybe I should feel connected to him in this grief, but it’s so wild, and that ‘danger’ siren in my chest is going off.

Charlie nudges my arm and Nolan licks my elbow, reminding me they’re right where I need them. But at that exact moment, my father notices me. He points at me. “Did you see your mother today?”

“Of course. I put flowers down. Patricia and I had a nice talk with her,” I whisper.

He nods. “Because she’s still here. I can feel it. She’s ...”

“Are you okay?”

“No.” He stands up and reaches into a drawer.

I take a step back. “Daddy, let’s go see Mom. We can go to her favorite restaurant after and-“

“You shame her. You know that?” He demands. “You spit on her memory and disgrace our family name and everything I’ve worked for.”

“What are you talking about? I do everything! I work in your business. I agreed to the bodyguards and have worked to take care of the problem with them. Mom would be proud and-“

Before I can do a thing, he hits me. Hard. The sting radiates from my cheek and I just gasp as I stare at the floor. Nolan snarls so much he sneezes, but I can feel him straining to get out of my purse.

I slowly stand back up, putting my hair in place. “That was uncalled for.”

“You *fucked* a bodyguard,” He hisses. “That’s something that a classless slut would do. Are you fucking all of them?”

I don't answer.

"You are, aren't you? That's why Max came in here and tried to tell me how to parent. That's why Gio hasn't been checking in. You think that would make your mother proud?"

"She would be," I argue. "Because I'm following my heart."

He comes at me again and I lose my temper. "I'm handing in my resignation."

That makes him pause for all of one second before he reveals his other hand. The horsewhip. I drop my purse. I haven't seen it since my freshman year of college. But it brings back every painful memory. I can feel the sting of each scar.

"You've forgotten your place, Juliana."

"No. Daddy, don't ..." I feel twelve all over again. Can picture my mom watching me crying begging him to stop and flinching with each whip.

"She watched as you apologized for embarrassing us. She'll have to watch again. She knew it was for the best."

"She knew that you were a bastard that didn't deserve her!" I yell. "You can't handle that I'm an adult and I don't need you. You can't handle not having control over every damn thing in the world."

He raises the whip just as the door bursts open. Max saunters in like there's no need to rush, and arches his eyebrow at what he's seeing. "Oh, no ... Tony. You know better than that."

"This doesn't concern you. Leave." My father orders.

"Can't do that."

The whip shakes in my dad's hand, but I can tell he's still planning on using it. Whether my back is exposed or not, he's going to follow through.

"Max, I can-"

“If you don’t drop that whip, I won’t have a choice, Tony. Get sober then deal with this.”

“I don’t need to be sober to know how to be a father.”

“Last chance,” Max warns.

My dad looks at me and brings the whip down. I cover my face, but nothing hurts. I hear a grunt and find Max on top of my father. Holding him down. My father watches the whip roll away and sobs.

“I can’t do this! I need her! I need her,” He wails.

Max sighs. “This isn’t the way to fix it.”

“I have to bring her back. Don’t you get it? If Juliana is perfect. If she ... If I ..” But he just doesn’t make any sense.

He says words, but the words don’t mean a thing. When he reaches for the whip, Max brings his fist down on my father’s face. I gasp. A part of me wants to help him, but a strong arm around my middle makes that impossible.

I find Konstantin behind me. “Come on. We’re leaving.”

“But-” I start.

I want to finish things with my father. I want to get my freedom the right way. I love that Max is this protective. I love that my men are determined to protect me no matter who is a threat, but this is wrong.

“I’m supposed to-”

“You can talk to him when he’s sober and thinking straight, doll. I’m half tempted to have him committed right now,” Max says as he sits up, still watching my father. “You need to go before he gets worked up again. I can handle this.”

I swallow. “Thank you, Max.”

He gives me a smile. “Can’t let the kids have all the fun.”

I want to kiss him. And kiss Konstantin, but I look to the entrance and don’t see Gio. “I’m missing one.”

“He’s looking for the hitman’s partner.”

“I had a partner once. She was glorious. The sun,” Dad mumbles.

“Go to sleep, Tony.” Max sighs.

“You let him go alone?!” It kicks in then.

Konstantin shrugs. “He’s a big boy.”

I notice he’s holding my purse like it’s his own and would normally laugh at the sight, but I’m worried about Gio. Two men accounted for, two men I know are fine and one in the wind.

“We have to get him. Then we can go, okay?” I press.

“You’re not going anywhere.” The unwelcome voice comes with a *very* unwelcome presence in the doorway.

John. He’s as average and slimy as I remember. Sure, he’s groomed, but no amount of moisturizer can hide a slimy personality. He waves a gun at me. “Over there. Let’s spare a mess. With any luck, I can make this my office soon.”

“My father will never give it to you,” I hiss.

“He won’t have much say if he’s dead. And I know a man who can do a thing or two with wills. Unfortunately, there might be some collateral damage, but don’t worry your pretty head about that.”

I grit my teeth at that response. I push Kon’s arm towards the ground. He sets down my purse obediently. I see him shove his hand into his pocket.

“Jane left,” I tell him. “She’s done with this. There’s no payday. Just walk away.”

“Money is a bonus. Putting you rich assholes in your place is enough for me. Looking down on me, the false accusations, all of this bullshit your family has put me through. I deserve this office. I deserve everything I have coming to me.”

Max is unusually quiet. I’m not sure if it’s the gun or his divided attention. Whatever it is, it’s not a good sign. John waves the gun again. “Let’s be civil. On your knees and I’ll make it fast. Bodyguards are up first.”

I take a step closer and he trains the gun on me. “Get on your knees. Should be a command you’re used to, rich bitch.”

“That’s almost a compliment. Try again,” I dare.

I just have to buy time. That’s all. My eyes flick to Nolan as the asshole of the hour processes that. I keep my voice to a whisper. “Sick ‘em.”

“Be cooperative for once in your-”

Nolan goes for the leg and it distracts John enough that he tears his eyes from us. He kicks Nolan hard and Konstantin rushes forward. At the same time, I see Gio attack from the back.

But I hear the gun go off and scream. I can’t help it. It’s an instinct.

John falls to the floor, obviously alive and very obviously *not* shot. I check Charlie, then hear a groan.

Looking over, I see Max clutching his side. I go to him as he gets off my father and put my hands on his side. “Max? Max, please are you-”

“I’m okay, doll. It just grazed me.” He rubs my cheek. “Lucky.”

My eyes go to my father and I just stare as red blooms on his chest. I don’t know how the angling works. I gape as a sound no human should make falls out of my throat. My dad gurgles – not breathes – fucking gurgles and I’m at his side.

I try to push the blood back into him. “Daddy!”

His eyes roll violently, then close as I feel his chest collapse under my hands.

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KONSTANTIN

I let Gio handle the hitman and hurry to Juliana's side. She's panting and definitely about to hyperventilate. I try to pull her from her father, but she pushes me away.

"Daddy, please!"

I put two fingers against his neck and wait. I check his wrist after a full minute without anything. Still no pulse. Juliana looks at me through teary eyes. "Kon! Fix him. Fix-"

"Juliana," Max tries. "He's not ..."

"He's passed," I whisper. "I can't-"

She beats against my chest. I flinch but grab her wrists. She fights me. "Fix it! I know you can! Fix him!"

"One out of two ain't bad," The hitman says.

Just like in a horror movie, Juliana's head turns to the side. The hatred, the hurt, everything in her eyes promises hell in a way that would make Satan himself tremble. An angel forged from vengeance. She's awe-inspiring.

"You stupid, selfish son of a *bitch*," She screams before sprinting to him.

Luckily I'm faster. I manage to get an arm around her waist and pull her back. She still manages to kick him in the head, making his neck jerk at a hard angle. Nolan goes for his ankle, tearing his suit and drawing blood. Charlie barks.

It's total chaos.

And the chaos only gets worse when the police arrive. I didn't dare contact Gio with a gunman staring us down. I went straight to 911. Police take care of the unconscious trash on the ground and take our stories.

Charlie and Nolan manage to calm down enough to deal with that. But it's an hour of talking and I can tell Juliana is over it. I get her outside as soon as she's done and she gulps in the air while shaking.

"This is wrong. All wrong. I can't Kon, tell me that this isn't happening. Tell me that this is a nightmare and I'm not ..." She keeps choking on the words.

I hug her. I'm not sure what else I can do. She dissolves in my arms, only standing because she's clinging to my shirt. I kiss her temple. "You are okay, Juliana."

"I am the *opposite* of okay." She sobs.

Of course, that's when Hunter Volkov and Valerie show up. Valerie gets an extra hop in her step, then pulls Juliana from my arms. "Come sit with me, honey."

Juliana doesn't resist. She just goes. Hunter looks from me to the police. "Really? Police?"

"Open and shut. No Volkov involvement," I say.

But Lief crosses his arms over the top of the car, watching me. My blood goes icy. I stand by my decision all the same. "Involving the family would only raise more questions."

Max and Gio come out. Bickering, as expected. Hunter turns to look at them.

"I don't need a doctor. I can handle a scratch." Max grunts. "Where's our girlfriend?"

"Coping. And she'll do a whole lot better if you get the all-clear from the very nice paramedics waiting for you." Gio points at the ambulance. "So go."

"Listen here, you don't give me orders, kid."

"Do it for Juliana." Gio puts his foot down. "Unless you want her having a total breakdown."

Max grumbles but walks over. Gio joins us. “Okay, plan?”

“There isn’t one for this,” I admit. “Juliana can go back to her penthouse. I’m sure the window is fixed by now, but ...”

“Give her some time with Valerie,” Hunter advises gently. “She can help with this like no one else.”

I trust him, but my eyes keep going to where Valerie is talking to Juliana. Hunter goes to talk to Lief and Gio nudges me. “You’re staring.”

“It could have been her, Gio. I’m glad it wasn’t, but it could have been.”

“Not with your reflexes. You were right there, Kon. You had her blocked,” Gio assures me, patting my shoulder gently. “We kept her safe, just like we were meant to do.”

“It doesn’t have a thing to do with the job. It was just ... it was too close.”

I feel that urge to lock her away sneaking up on me. She was safe with us. She was. Nothing bad happened to her when we were all there and the second she was alone ... I take a slow breath. “I think I understand her father a bit.”

“Not a great thing to say around her,” Gio says.

“That’s why I’m saying it to you.” I point at him. “He wanted to keep her safe at any cost. Sure, I can’t forgive the man for beating her, but he didn’t want to lose her like he lost his wife.”

“Slippery slope, Kon,” Gio warns.

“The urge to buy a mansion and hide her away in it will pass,” I assure him.

After Max gets a full check-up and is cleared and after another thirty minutes of Valerie talking to Juliana and handing her some kind of pill, we take her back to the safe house. Our girlfriend is half asleep when we get there.

I take Charlie and Nolan out while Gio gets Juliana in bed. I check Nolan’s teeth, making sure he didn’t break any while

using John Booker as a chew toy, and then feed them. Max hisses as he lays down.

I arch an eyebrow at him.

“I’m fine. I need some scars to prove I’m badass. I have you to compete with, little one,” He says while his eyes close.

“Get some rest.”

“It’s been a ridiculously wrong day, right?” Max asks.

“Yes, ” I assure him.

I go through the freezer for something easy and toss a frozen meal in the oven. When it beeps to a finish, Gio appears. He looks pale, exhausted, and fed up.

“She’s asleep. Whatever Valerie gave her was strong.”

Charlie looks up at me, but Juliana makes a sound and both dogs go running for her. I just stare at the food on the counter. “So she doesn’t need to eat?”

“Not yet.” Gio glances at the couch. “Max is out too.”

“She’s going to need us these next few weeks.”

“Planning a funeral, dealing with the business, getting the will in order. It’s a huge task.” Gio agrees. “I don’t know if we’re going to be enough.”

“Well, there’s no room in this relationship for a fourth man.”

“Or second woman.” Gio motions to the liquor bottles. “Anything for a day like this?”

“They don’t make alcohol that strong.” I sigh.

“A whole bottle of tequila might be strong enough,” Gio says.

But it’s a terrible night, alcohol or not. Juliana has nightmares, she’s inconsolable, then she just goes completely quiet. I lay with her while Gio tries to get something close to sleep. Charlie tries to work between Juliana and me, but can’t.

She stares at the ceiling as her tears dry on her cheeks. “He’s gone.”

“I’m sorry, angel,” I whisper.

“It’s terrible he’s just ... gone. That fast.” She sniffs. “But I’m terrible too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wanted to make peace with him. That’s why I finally went. I felt the peace at my mother’s grave and it was enough to give me hope. I was going to tell him all about the business plan. I was going to name it in my mother’s honor. He was going to recognize I’m an adult and support me. It was supposed to be good.”

I stroke through her hair, then kiss her forehead.

“And even after all that death and fighting and ...” She sighs. “It might be the drugs, but I feel free.”

“Free?”

“He can’t hurt me anymore. He can’t hold me down or hold me back. I can be myself. Unapologetically, completely, fully.” She faces me. Her deep blue eyes bore through mine. “Does that make me awful?”

“No.” I kiss her softly and feel her lips mold to mine. It’s progress. I draw back and cuddle her close to me. Charlie hops onto her lap to avoid being crushed. “No, Juls. It means you’re finding hope. That’s what I want for you.”

She nods once and buries her face in my neck. “I’m so tired.”

“Get some sleep. Gio will cook for you when you get up. I’ve already destroyed two meals.”

She sighs. “I’d still eat it.”

“Thank you, but you’ve been through enough hell. You deserve something good.”

She fights her eyelids. “I’m tired of crying and sleeping constantly. It feels like it’s been days.”

There’s no point in telling her it’s only been about thirty hours, so I just brush my fingers through her hair. I’ve learned it puts her to sleep. “Give yourself time. Sleep more for me.”

“Will you stay?”

“Yes.”

She snuggles closer to me, wrapping my arm around her.
“I love you, Kon.”

I blink a few times and get ready to push on that, but she’s already asleep. I shake my head. It doesn’t count. It doesn’t. It only counts if she’s awake and aware of what she’s saying. Max nods to me at the door.

“I think we’re going to hear that a lot in the next few days.”

I shake my head. “She’s asleep. It doesn’t mean-”

“It’s a real ‘I love you’ muscles,” Max assures me. “Being this close to death tends to make things clear. It can make people impulsive, or it makes them more eager to express themselves.”

“Where do you fall?” I ask.

He looks at her and sighs. “I don’t think anything would convince me to leave her other than her kicking my ass out of her life.”

I nod and stroke through her hair again. “It won’t be easy.”

“Easy is boring.” Max winks at me. “Plus, we’ll always have some encouragement to try harder while competing with each other.”

He moseys away, but I shake my head. I’m not competing with him or Gio. We all bring something different to the table. We love Juliana in different ways, we give her different bits of ourselves and she does the same. She has more than enough love to go around and there’s not some kind of shortage that means we have to compete.

It’s a nice thought.

Gio and Max are good friends too. I can trust them – with my life and Juliana’s. I can’t imagine a better arrangement.

A few days pass before Juliana is up to dealing with the will and funeral arrangements. She gets overwhelmed easily,

snaps at us, then apologizes just as quickly. I hear her talking with Gio one afternoon when I get up.

“It’s just too much, Gio. He has too much to go through. I can’t. I just ...”

“That’s what lawyers are for, babe. Let’s let them take care of the will. It should have everything for the funeral in there. They’ll let you know what you have to select.”

“Fine.”

She hasn’t had the same fighting spirit lately. I hear her sniff. “I ... I really appreciate you, Gio. You know that right?”

“I had a feeling.” I see him kiss her softly. “I *appreciate* you too.”

“Since we were kids.” She nudges him.

He chuckles. “That’s our secret.”

“And Kon’s.” She motions to me. “Someone’s been listening.”

I roll my eyes. Gio doesn’t seem hurt by it though. Then I notice Max in the kitchen. He takes a bite of a sandwich. “I’m the king of grilled cheese.”

Smirking, I sigh. This is definitely the kind of living I could get used to. Even in the hardest times, we make things work together. I don’t know if it would be possible otherwise. An alarm on Juliana’s phone goes off. “Oh! That’s my reminder. I have to get to counseling.”

“I’ll take you.” I offer myself.

She kisses my cheek softly. “Thank you, tiger.”

The drive is quiet, but when we get to the office, Juliana takes my hand. “Will you wait in the lobby for me? I still feel ... unsafe.”

I kiss her forehead and pet the dogs. “I’m right here, angel.”

A fact I hope doesn’t change anytime soon.

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JULIANA

Counseling with Valerie is helpful. I glance at the time and see fifteen minutes left. She watches me with a gentle expression. No pity, no frustration with me for dancing around the subject, just the occasional deep breath.

“I’m kind of ... at peace with my dad’s death,” I admit.

“From what you’d told me, he has been oppressive. No matter the reason behind that, having someone who has been keeping you in one place, squishing you into a shape is hard. When they’re gone, no matter the way, it feels like taking a breath for the first time.”

I nod in agreement. “But then I feel guilty. I’m an orphan now, but I’m happy about it. If people knew that ... what would they think of me?”

“Does it matter?”

“Somewhat. I mean, I’ve already had one hit on me.” I shrug. “Maybe if I don’t act right, another one will appear.”

Valerie nods. “A logical concern. I don’t think anyone could blame you for being stressed or feeling many different things. Grief is powerful.”

I digest that. Is this a kind of grief? Feeling freedom? I feel my face scrunch.

We go in circles about that, me trying to justify I’m not a great person and insisting I’m okay with it while Valerie tries to ensure me I’m a normal human. Then the timer goes off.

She turns off a few things, goes over planning our next session, and finally locks the door.

“There are ways to keep a hit from being put on you.”

I blink at her in surprise. It’s easy to forget who she’s attached to. Not to mention I’ve been in my own little world lately. Valerie writes something down. “Talk to Konstantin. He’ll be able to tell you more.”

“Okay.” I draw the word out as she hands me the reminder card for our next session.

“Also, I won’t be available next week. Personal reasons.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Early December. Going skiing with the guys?”

“Something like that.” I see her rub her ring finger.

“Well, I wish you luck with that.”

“And I wish you luck managing the three men that you have.”

“I know how to manage them,” I laugh a little.

But as much as I’ve learned about Max and Gio, what have I really learned about Konstantin? He’s open as hell and is happy to tell me what he thinks, what he feels, what he likes and doesn’t. But he’s never actually talked about his family or his life before we met.

Valerie rubs my shoulder. “The more you learn, the better things get. Take my word on that.”

“You sound certain.”

“I have some experience with it. If what you feel is honest and it’s the same for them, talking with them will only make things better.”

I thank her again and walk out to Konstantin. He rubs my hand and we get in the car. When he starts it, I catch his hand. “Kon ...”

Where to start.

He looks from me to the dogs and back. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I am.”

“Do they need to potty?”

It’s so damn cute that he thinks of them so much. I take his hand and put it in my lap. “Can we go somewhere before we go back to the house?”

“Sure. Do you have somewhere in mind?”

“Somewhere calm.”

Konstantin takes me to a scenic park. We walk for a while until we come to a bridge over a creek. I stop there and watch the water. Charlie and Nolan trot at my side and pace, eager to keep up the walk.

“Valerie says you’d be able to prevent any additional hits from being placed on me,” I whisper.

He wraps himself around me, has me repeat myself, then finally nods. “Yes. I can do that.”

His deep voice rumbles through me like an earthquake. Instead of making me feel fragile though, it’s like his assurance makes me stronger. It puts my pieces a little closer to where they should be.

“How?”

“The opposite of a hit, really. I put out a notice that if anyone gets notice of a hit, I’ll pay them. I’ll offer two million or more. Five if they see to the person in question.” He answers. “Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

I shrug.

He tightens his hold around my waist and kisses my neck. “Whatever you want to ask me, I’m listening.”

“You don’t talk about your family and I’m ... curious.”

He doesn’t say anything for a long while. We just watch the stream. Konstantin lets out a slow breath. “My older

brother worked for Mr. Volkov Senior. He was doing some ... work and died in the process.”

“Oh,” I whisper. Why did I think he had a happy home life?

“I was sixteen. At eighteen, my options were limited. I didn’t get the grades to be able to afford college. My mom’s on disability and we needed money. Mr. Volkov Senior offered to pay me more and help with medical costs for my mom if I’d start training under Lief.”

I rub his arms.

“My parents told me that if I took the offer, I’d be dead to them. They’d rather mourn me now than wait until I died like my brother.”

“Oh, Kon.” I kiss the inside of his shoulder.

“They refuse to see me, talk to me. Even if we come across each other, they treat me like a stranger. My sister only talks to me on my birthday every year. She has to make up an excuse to talk to me.”

I turn in his arms to look up at his face. The icy mask is back, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. He looks lost. I hug him tightly. “Konstantin, I had no idea.”

“I don’t like talking about it. There’s no reversing it. I’ve tried. Even with the changes Hunter and Chase are making, my parents say they have no sons. I’ve been trying to figure out who killed my brother, to get him the retribution he deserves, but ...”

I wait for him to finish. Charlie whimpers and Kon sighs. “It won’t bring him back. It won’t change anything. It will just destroy another family.”

“I shouldn’t have asked. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

Sniffing, I squeeze him harder. Konstantin lets me cry for a while, then lifts my chin. I see how eager he is to help. I wipe at my eyes and rub his shoulders. “You have to deal with all my family bullshit, with me talking bout my family and the

whole time, you just were keeping this to yourself. I feel like I've been insensitive."

"No, angel. I made peace with things a long time ago. It hurts occasionally, but ... but my life could be much worse than it is."

"I love you." It spills out of me. "I do, tiger."

Confusion crosses his face. "Because I told you that?"

"Because of how strong you are in all the right ways. Excluding the muscles. Strong, sweet, gentle when you need to be. Terrible in the kitchen or not, I don't want to lose you. I don't want to see you with anyone else. I want to be the one to know everything about you and to love you even more because of it."

He kisses me softly and holds my face in his big hands. "You told me in your sleep a while ago. I love you too."

I pepper him with questions, trying to think of everything I don't know about him. He tells me how long he's wanted to have a dog, how he really wants a stable job so he can have some of his own. He tells me he hasn't lived with a roommate or anyone around since he left his house. He volunteers a story for every answer.

By the time we get home, I've forgotten all about the plan to avoid hits because I'm lost in Konstantin. The second we're inside, he pats Charlie and Nolan, kisses me, and pulls Gio to the side. I sit with Max in the backyard. He adjusts his sunglasses and sighs.

"Ready for all the excitement of starting a business?"

"Does that mean you're going to help me?" I ask, excitement building in me. "Oh, I'm doing more than that. In about five minutes you're going to have your first artist show up."

I stare at Max. "What?"

"Don't tell me you don't want to see Patricia."

I hug him, nearly tackling him out of the lounge chair he's in. He catches me and gives me a long, decadent kiss. It feels

too sweet to be real. He strokes down my back. "I'm willing to do triple this for you, doll. Business, personal, I want to make sure you achieve all your goals."

My eyes go misty. I know I've been extra emotional lately, but these men are shining. I stroke Max's face. "You're going to spoil me rotten."

"Someone has to. We both know the kid won't."

I laugh and kiss him again. "You're one of a kind, Max."

"Yeah yeah. I love you too." He picks me up.

Two confessions in one day? I just blink at him. He winks at me. "I'm not afraid to say it. I beat up your father, was willing to kill a man for you, and I'd be happy to retire and lavish you with affection constantly and consider that being 'useful' if I get to see you smile."

I melt. The words don't roll off my tongue right away. I stumble over them twice. "I love you, Max."

He rubs my cheek. "I know you do. You show it plenty."

I check his wound right after that, make him clean it, then I'm distracted by my best friend. She eyes my three men hungrily. "Ugh, I'm so jealous, Juliana. Snapping up men and not leaving me with any leftovers."

"I know." I pet Charlie. "But this meeting is all about you."

She leans her head to the side, completely confused. "Me? I thought it was about *us*."

I lay out the plan, give her my offer, and let her know what she'd be in for. She bounces with joy. "I'd be able to leave the call center?"

"Absolutely. I want you out of that hell hole and living your best life."

She hugs me tightly. "There wasn't even any sarcasm there!"

"I guess these three men have helped me tame my tongue," I tease.

We have some drinks, she plays with Charlie and Nolan, and then starts sketching. I know I've lost her. Max comes out and actually asks her for some advice. They talk art and I excuse myself.

Max catches my skirt and kisses the back of my hand. I caress his cheek. I trust him and I trust Patricia. I know that neither one of them will flirt or take it further. It's a huge weight off my mind. I don't have to worry about any of my men leaving me to scratch an itch, being bought off by my father, or bullied into leaving me.

It's just the four of us in this relationship. Konstantin snares my waist and kisses my temple. "I think of more stories for you later. I'm taking care of the hit. Gio did it from his side, now I'm getting the muscle."

With that he heads out. Gio is left, standing in the kitchen, looking at something on his computer. His serious face is hot, but when he lifts his eyes to look at me, his whole face softens and warms.

Forever with these guys seems worth all the intensity, pain, and loss I've dealt with in these last few weeks. Gio offers me his hand and I don't hesitate before taking it. I'm convinced I'd do just about anything for them. Especially give them my heart.

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GIO

The next few days are a lot. Luckily, there's not much in terms of threats, but apparently, Juliana's life doesn't ever calm down. We move her back into her apartment and she lights up. She throws herself into setting up her business while Max, Konstantin, and I balance spending time with Juliana and our work.

But then the funeral happens. We all attend with Juliana. She shakes a little as we watch her father being lowered in the ground and she sniffs, but not one tear leaves her eyes. People give her their apologies and their sympathy.

I notice that Juliana accepts everything gracefully, but doesn't want to stay for the 'celebration'. When one of her father's friends tries to push her into it, it isn't Konstantin that steps in. It's not Max. It's me.

I glower at him. "I don't think Juliana needs a room full of people to help her cope with things. She's an adult and she can choose how to handle this on her own. Accept the no."

He opens his mouth to say something, but Juliana steps up with me, gently stroking down my arm. "I trust that everyone going will enjoy remembering the best in my father. He'd like that. Unfortunately, I have things to take care of to ensure his legacy is remembered."

He takes that and walks away. When I turn, I see Konstantin giving his scariest face. I'm sure it didn't hurt, even though he has Charlie in one arm. I chuckle. "That's a good look on you, Kon."

He glances down at Charlie and the little dog's tail wags noticeably. When we leave, I'm sure more than one person notices that the three of us head out with Juliana. I don't care. Let them gossip. It's Juliana that's important.

"I'll take care of the lawyer, doll," Max assures her. "You go home and rest."

"Thank you, handsome."

Konstantin reaches back from the front seat and rubs her knee. "I'll get your favorite Indian food and dessert from that chocolate shop you like."

She nods. "Thank you."

The guys drop us off at Juliana's apartment and I go up with her. She releases the dogs from their leashes and lies on the couch, just staring at the ceiling. I sit on the floor beside her. Pulling her hand to my heart, I just put her palm against my chest.

I'm not sure what to do for her. I can't take away the pain she's feeling. I would give anything to do exactly that, but it's just not possible. Juliana rolls towards me and sighs. "I can't be there with the others. I'm not mourning."

Surprised, I glance over at her.

She swallows. "It's awful. I know. But I'm not. I feel free. My dad will always be a source of regret. I could have done so much differently and we didn't have the relationship either of us wanted, but I'm here and alive. I can't forget that."

I nod to her. She kisses my cheek softly. "How are you doing?"

"It's weird that he's gone. I keep waiting for him to call me into his office or tell me to seduce you and get you to settle down. I'm afraid of taking over the company, even though that's what he wanted. I feel kind of lost."

Juliana sits up, then pats the couch. We end up spooning there, but she's the big spoon. She kisses my neck. "I'm in your corner, Gio. Max and Konstantin are too. We're in this together."

“Even now?”

“Hopefully for a long time. I love you and I don’t plan on leaving you. I hope you don’t leave me.”

I roll, nearly falling off the couch, and face her. “Say that again?”

“I’m the big bad dragon that fell for prince charming. I love you.” She says before biting her lip. “Not as a friend.”

I smile and draw her closer to me, kissing her softly, then her forehead, then all I can do is hug her. “I love you, babe.”

She sighs. “Nap with me?”

“Just try and pry me off you.”

Juliana falls asleep quickly, but I just lay there. I feel like I’m glowing like a lightning bug. Having the literal girl of my dreams tell me she loves me, it’s better than anything I’ve ever dreamed of.

I ride the high of that until Konstantin gets back with Max. They chat about business things until they see me wrapped around Juliana, half asleep.

Max shakes his head. “Look at them. All tuckered out.”

I flip him off and he chuckles. “Do you want to get her up so she can eat? She didn’t have dinner last night.”

I rub her back, then move against her. She groans. “Five more minutes.”

“Babe, time to eat.”

“But you’re comfy. Come back, love.”

“Kon and the old man are here,” I say.

She cracks her eyes, then stretches. Charlie yips at Konstantin, begging for attention as if Juliana doesn’t spoil him rotten. Juliana gets up as I do and groans. “The food smells so good.”

We all gather around the table to eat. Max tells us all about the lawyer’s office, using colorful language to describe the

man. Konstantin adds to the conversation and soon enough Juliana is smiling and laughing.

Her smile fuels me. Once we finish eating, she shakes her head and leans back in her chair. She looks us over and bites her bottom lip. “I really love you three. I can’t imagine better men for me.”

Max sets his fork down. “So. I’m retiring.”

“What?” I gape at him. “Now?”

“I’m tired of the business. I think I need to pursue my passion now before I get bitter and boring.”

“Impossible,” I say. “You’re the least bitter person I know.”

“That sounded like a compliment, Gio. Thanks.” Max says.

“What will you do?” Konstantin asks.

“I’m going to work with our lovely girlfriend.” Max leans towards Juliana. “First, painting the office, then seeing if anyone likes paintings of birds.”

“Lief might,” Konstantin muses.

We keep talking through dinner. Juliana is thrilled that she’s found someone to purchase art from Patricia and to deliver the news to her friend. After that, we watch a movie. It feels so normal that it throws me off a little. Konstantin conks out around the same time Charlie does. Max stretches his back.

“Can I take the guest room, doll?”

“Absolutely. Good night, handsome.” She gives him a soft goodnight kiss before he heads into the room. Juliana stretches and adjusts Kon, giving him a blanket, helping him lay down and making sure he has a pillow. “He’ll be sore tomorrow if I don’t.”

She knows us well, and takes care of us even when we don’t think about it. Sweet, sassy, successful. A good three-word description of her. I follow her to her room and notice

Charlie lingers with Konstantin until he hears Juliana sit on the bed.

Then both dogs curl up in one of the two pillow-sized dog beds on the floor. I sit with Juliana on her bed. She lays back and pulls me with her. “Are you happy like this, Gio?”

“Thrilled.” I kiss her softly. “Especially since we get to have another sleepover.”

Juliana gets changed and it hits me, as she takes off the black dress, that we were at a funeral today. A funeral. Shouldn’t that be a horrifically sad day? Not an amazing one like we’ve had.

Juliana comes back and pulls my shirt off, then goes for my pants. I catch her hands. “Hey.”

“Hi.” She tries again.

“Are you holding out?”

She pauses. “No. I was trying to make you comfortable for bed. I just want to sleep, promise.”

“I mean with your feelings. You buried your dad today.” I remind her.

She freezes, then runs her fingers through her hair as her leg bounces. “I’m just trying not to think about it, honestly.”

“Why?” I lean back, lounging on the bed.

“My emotions are all kinds of complicated. Counseling is helping me unravel them, but the truth is, other than being free, I don’t know how I feel. When something reminds me of the good side of my dad, I get upset, but all I have to do is catch a look at my back in the mirror and ...”

I pull her close to me. “It’s not easy.”

She nods.

“Remember what you told me about grief?”

Her gorgeous blue eyes turn up to me. “We process things, but we can take the good lessons we learned and gain something from the loss.”

She snuggles close. “I get you, Kon, and Max.”

“You said that before he was gone.”

“I have the courage to tell you all that I love you. I don’t have to hold back those emotions anymore because I’m afraid my dad will shove you away or buy you or bully you.”

“Anything else?”

“I’m twice as ambitious. I don’t have a fallback. I’m doing what I want to do and I’m going to take the business world by storm my way.”

I grin and kiss her passionately. “Now you can take my pants off.”

She laughs and we fool around a little, but don’t have sex until early in the morning. I’m convinced it’s the best way to wake up with Juliana. Once we finish, we tease each other in the shower, and then I have to go deal with my part of the will – taking over the company.

The whole thing feels surreal. I can’t believe I’m taking over a multimillion-dollar company, and getting millions in the shares of the company that Uncle Tony owned. It’s overwhelming.

But when I get back to Juliana’s, since I basically feel like I live there, I find a surprise. Konstantin, Max, and Juliana pop confetti guns and congratulate me on being the boss. The guys cheer me on, Max offers to show me the ropes if I need it, and Konstantin promises the support of the Volkovs.

Somehow, I’ve gone from someone who barely has any family to having more than I could want. I don’t know what to do with all this. Juliana kisses the corner of my mouth. “You deserve this, Gio. All your hard work is paying off.”

“I love you,” I say.

She hugs me tightly. “I love you too.”

As we eat cake, talk about the future, and don’t discuss hitmen, Juliana’s father, or anything of the past, I start to think about what else the future could hold for us. Could we really make this work?

But all it takes is Juliana laughing and flashing that loving smile at me that softens her whole face. I know that we'll find a way. None of this has been a coincidence. There's no way. Uncle Tony could have hired other people – professionals. Max could have been killed. Juliana could have taken a page from her father's book and bullied her way out of the situation.

All of the maybes and possibilities and yet we're here. Us three men in love with the most amazing person in the world and capable of being around each other without jealousy or competition. We're just happy.

This is fate. It has to be.

“What are you thinking about down there, love?” Julia asks me.

“You. Us.” I motion to Kon and Max. “The fact that we are going to make this work.”

“It's just going to get better with time,” Max agrees.

Konstantin raises his glass. “To a long and happy future for us.”

“Without half the danger.” Juliana raises hers.

We cheers and drink, but I have this feeling deep in my gut, that the only problems in our future are the petty kind. Normal fights and bickering. We've worked hard and our future together is our reward.

No more pretending. Just us living our best lives possible.

[Bonus Epilogue](#)

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