

Prologue
Katarina, Age 16

8 Years Ago

It's amazing how quickly a day can go from being damn-near perfect to something straight out of a horror movie, one that would give you nightmares for the rest of your life... If you survived it.

"Lil! Come on, do it! You're always worrying about getting hurt. Sometimes you just need to go for it!" I yell to my sister Liliana, who is positioned on the mat at our gymnastics studio with a panicked look on her face.

She smacks her hands on her bare legs and lets out a frustrated yell. "I hate you, Kat!" I snicker. "Yeah, yeah. Just throw it already!"

Sometimes I feel like more of a gymnastics coach than our actual coach is. And I feel like I'm the only one who can actually get Lili's body moving some days.

Today is a really important one, though. We have a big meet coming up this weekend, and Lilia is totally flaking out on her floor exercises. I get that she's recovering from an injury...one that she never would have had if our dipshit coach had been paying attention...but if Lilia doesn't get back on the horse now, he's going to gallop away forever.

"Maybe someone else should go while we wait for the Princess to decide she's ready," Tami snipes.

"Shut it, Tami. Give her a second." I let out a sigh and fold my arms across my chest, turning a glare toward Evie, our coach. She's staring at her phone, not that it would matter anyway. Tami is her spoiled brat daughter who pretty much gets away with saying and doing whatever she wants. "Let's go, Lil!" I clap my hands together loudly and stare up to the viewing window where my boyfriend Remy is watching. I shrug my shoulders and roll my eyes in his direction, and he winks back at me.

He knows I always have my twin sister's back.

I hold my breath as Lil takes a deep breath and starts running from the far corner of the mat. Her feet pound on the surface as she hurls her body into the air, her perfect form launching into a round-off, back handspring, back tuck, pausing only the slightest second before twirling into a double full before her feet hit the mat. A fabulous landing. She didn't stumble once.

She turns her wide smile to me. "Thank you," she mouths.

Coach Evie does a slow clap, and I turn away so she doesn't see me roll my eyes again. I could do her freaking job, for Pete's sake. I strut across the mat, give my sister a high five, and swivel around to cock an eyebrow at Tami. "Looks like she's got it. I'm thinking we're good for Saturday."

Evie's lips pull into a straight line. "That's for the *coach* to decide, Kat. Not you, even though you make it very clear you have no regard for my authority."

I flash a sweet smile. "Evie, that's not true at all. I just want us to win."

"You think I don't?"

I tap a finger to my cheek, knowing I'm going to get an earful from John, our head coach. I'm always the one who can't keep her mouth shut, the loud and obnoxious one who's

always getting into trouble for speaking her mind...the complete opposite of my dear sweet sister. I'm much more like my father. Much more like a lion than a lamb. At least that's what my mother always says.

And that's putting it mildly.

I lean in close so only Evie can hear me. "I just think it would be nice for you to coach the rest of us when Tami isn't on the mat. Last I checked, Lili is the one who's being scouted, not her. Just saying."

Oh my God, the look on her face is so worth the crap I'm going to get for shooting off my mouth like that. The color drains from her cheeks, and her mouth drops open a little bit.

Yeah, I said it. The question is, what is she going to do about it?

"I don't know what you're talking about," she hisses, her eyes narrowed like she is plotting my death.

I shrug. "I'm pretty observant. And I think Lili needs to be first string on Saturday. Coach John will be there, too. Don't you want to impress him with a big win, since you know we need Lili to take first place?"

Evie balls her fists, and if I look really hard, I bet I can see smoke coming out of her ears. "Fine. But if she gets another mental block before then—"

I hold up a hand. "Don't worry. I've got it. I can do your job better than you can."

Oops. I didn't mean for that last part to slip out.

"You're a real bitch, you know that, Kat?"

Um, I take that back. I meant it to come out. One-hundred-and-fifty percent.

My grin widens. "Yeah. I get that a lot." I pull Lili by the hand and wave at Evie with my free one. "See you on Saturday!" I say in a sing-song voice.

If looks could kill...wow, I'd be sliced up like a pizza right about now.

Speaking of pizza...

I squeeze Lili's hand. "I'm starving. Let's get pizza! It's time to celebrate!"

She giggles. "You're going to get into so much trouble with that mouth of yours."

"Whatever. Evie is such a bitch. And she's getting fat, too. Next time she picks on you, I'm going to tell her that her ass is way too big for those Spandex pants she can't seem to stop wearing."

Lili gasps. "Kat, you can't! That's so mean!"

"What's she going to do? Take me off the team?" I wave a hand in front of my face and pull open the door to the changing room. "We're the best gymnasts she has, and she knows it. I can say whatever I want to her!"

"You really need to work on your people skills." Lili snickers, pulling on her sweats.

"I think they're just fine."

"I'm not sure the rest of the world would agree with that."

"People just don't know how to take me, that's all." I giggle. "I tell it like it is, and they don't like that."

Remy is waiting for us outside of the changing room with a smirk on his handsome face. "So did you manage to get yourself kicked off the team yet, Kat?"

I snicker. "Not today! But I'll try again next time."

Tami sails past us and glares in my direction. "You think you're such hot shit," she mutters.

I wink at her. "Damn right I do."

A snicker slips out of Lili's mouth, and she claps a hand over it.

Tami glares at her next. "Lili, I hope you can get your crap together for Saturday. You have a lot riding on this meet, don't you? I'd hate to see you choke and fall flat on your pretty face."

I clench my fists and shrug off Remy's hand from my shoulder. He sees what's coming next even if Tami misses it. "Speaking of choking..."

"Are you threatening me, Kat?" Tami puffs out her chest, her face screwed into a grimace.

"Nope. It's not a threat." I step closer, eyes narrowed, and she cowers the slightest bit.

"Guys! Enough!" Lili pushes us apart. "We're supposed to be a team, remember? Can you please just quit it already?"

My sister, the peacemaker. She can't stand to see anyone at odds. Just one more way we are complete opposites. It always shocks me to think of how different we are on the inside and how eerily alike we are on the outside.

Tami snorts and flounces down the hall. She's never been swift enough to come up with a good comeback for me. And, trust me, I give her plenty of opportunities to that she never takes.

Lili groans. "Can we please go now?"

We leave the gym and walk toward Remy's Ford F-150. He opens the doors for us, and I hop into the passenger's seat, reclining against the soft leather. I turn my adoring eyes toward my tall boyfriend as he slides into the seat next to me. "I'm thinking pizza for dinner." My voice drops. "And maybe something yummy for dessert? A little birthday treat?"

Lili makes gagging noises in the backseat. "Oh my God, can you at least wait until I'm out of the car before you start making your disgusting plans? You're making my ears bleed!"

I laugh, lacing my fingers with Remy's as he drives toward our house. I turn up the volume on the radio, singing along with Britney Spears. Life is pretty darn awesome right now.

We pull around the back of our house nestled at the end of a quiet street. It's not a huge house, but it's the perfect size for the four of us and Stoli, our chocolate lab. Dad always says you don't ever want to have the biggest house on the block. You always want to fly under the radar. Too much attention is bad. Too much attention means people are watching you. And we don't like people watching us.

I'm not sure why that is, but he says it a lot.

I think it has something to do with his job, but he doesn't talk much about that. I ask plenty, but he doesn't give me answers. Neither does Mom. Sometimes I think she's as clueless as we are about what he does.

Remy is just happy that Dad spends a lot of time away for work. Dad is pretty overprotective and he doesn't like guys who like his girls. He definitely wouldn't like what said guys *do* with his girls.

Okay, I'm just talking about myself. Lili's legs are locked at the knee.

I hop out of the passenger's seat and smile when I hear Stoli's loud barks coming from the house. Remy stays put, though. I look over at him with a questioning stare. "You're not coming in?" The corners of my lips curl upward. "I can't tempt you with something *sweet*?"

Lili rushes past me into the house, but not before she sticks a finger down her throat and makes more gagging noises.

Remy shifts in his seat. "I can't today, Kat. But I'll pick you up from school tomorrow, okay? And we'll hang out then."

My brow furrows. He's acting weird. He was fine at the gym and on the ride home. "Are you okay? You seem a little off."

He shrugs. "Got a lot of work to do, that's all."

Work. Huh. He has a job at a construction site, and as far as I know, he was done at four o'clock.

"You're going back to the site?"

"Yeah." He averts his eyes and peeks into the rearview mirror. "Listen, I've gotta go. I'll call you later. Happy birthday." He drops a quick kiss onto my lips.

"Okay." I barely have enough time to shut the door before he peels out of my driveway.

Weird. I narrow my eyes.

It's my sixteenth birthday, for Pete's sake. I know our party isn't until tomorrow night, but really? He couldn't even make time to come inside for a soda? My lips press together as I stare at the back of his truck zooming down my street. He'd better not be cheating on me. He has no clue what I'm capable of, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to find out.

I'm only sixteen, but I'm also Viktor Ivanov's daughter.

Dipshit won't know what hit him if he's actually stupid enough to try.

I walk into the house and slam the door shut behind me. "Hey, Mom. How about pizza tonight for dinner? Dad won't be home until late, right? I'm tired of grilled chicken and vegetables. Save the rabbit food for him. Let's party! It's our birthday!"

I wander over to the stovetop where a giant chocolate layer cake is cooling. Yum. My absolute favorite. The rich scent makes my mouth water. Pizza and chocolate. Life just doesn't get any better.

Stoli yelps and leaps at me, ready to play after being stuck in the house all day.

"Hey, boy," I croon, kneeling to rub his belly when he flips onto his back. "How about pizza tonight, huh? Doesn't that sound good? Sausage and pepperoni...mmm!"

Stoli rolls back over, his tongue hanging out of his mouth, eyes open wide. I swear he can understand English.

Mom looks up from the desk where she's tapping away at her laptop keyboard. "Okay, Kat. Make the call!"

I rub my hands together. Pizza is the very best thing on the planet. My mouth waters as I imagine biting into the cheesy goodness. Lili warns me that my addiction to bread and cheese is going to catch up to me one day, but I'll worry about it then. Right now, I'll enjoy my crazy-fast metabolism. And my loaded pizza.

I grab the phone and dial the pizza place just as the doorbell rings. Stoli goes nuts, barking and galloping across the hardwood floor to greet whoever is waiting on the other side of the door. "Lil!" I call out over my shoulder, grabbing a menu from the top drawer. I don't know why I look. I always get the exact same thing every time I place an order. "Can you get that?"

Lili pads across the hardwood floor into the foyer and pulls open the door as I put the phone to my ear.

Huh.

No dial tone.

Just dead silence.

I click it off and on again.

Nothing.

Dead.

That was my last conscious thought before all hell broke loose and my life was turned upside down and inside out.

Ironic.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

I twist around when I hear a loud thud by the front door, feeling as though I'm trapped in some kind of alternate reality where my limbs have turned to rubber, and I can't move. Or speak. Or scream.

All I can do is stare in horror at my dog lying limp and bloody on the floor. High-pitched shrieks pierce the air as two hulking men dressed in some kind of maintenance uniforms come barreling into the house, one grabbing my sister and slamming her against a wall, the other lunging for my mother.

The phone drops from my hand, shattering on the granite countertop, but nobody notices the sound.

Or me.

"Mom!" I yell. But I can't hear myself say the word. It sounds fuzzy and muffled, like I'm screaming into a hand. My feet are anchored to the floor, immobile. No matter how hard I try, I can't get them to move.

Tears sting my eyes as I scour the kitchen counter. The butcher block is within reach. I grit my teeth and lunge for it, grabbing a large cutting knife from the wooden slot before either of the men can get to me.

I have to move, have to get help, have to save them!

I drop to the floor and crawl around the island, peering at the men assaulting my mother and sister. The sounds...I know at that moment if I survive this thing, I'll never forget their horrified and panicked cries for mercy. Fabric is torn from their writhing bodies as they twist out of the grip of the men. But they're strong...so damn strong. And they have guns. I clap a hand over my mouth, bile rising in my throat.

Help, help, help!

Daddy, where are you?

My breaths come fast and furious as I feel around on the floor for my backpack. A loud yelp makes me swallow a gasp. I peek around the center island to see one of the men grab a Ming vase...my mother's prized possession...raise it up and smash it.

Right onto my mother's head.

Shattering her skull.

Lili lets out a bloodcurdling scream, her body now covered in our mother's blood, as the man wrestling with her fumbles with his belt buckle and tears off her leggings. He forces her legs open and pushes into her. Hard. More screeches as he plunders her. My hand flies to my mouth and the knife clatters to the floor as he thrusts into her, over and over and over. Tears stream down her face and my gut clenches with each push into her. The searing pain of him tearing through her innocence, her terror and anguish...my God, I feel it all.

Every little bit.

It's torture of the worst kind.

My beautiful, talented sister.

My other half.

Our perfect life.

Destroyed.
Our hopes and dreams.
Shattered.
Our loving mother.
Murdered.

I grab the handle of the knife again and try to settle my breathing. I'm the only one who can help, the only one who can stop these monsters. I crawl out from the island and rise on wobbly knees.

"Where do you think you're going with that, sweet ass?" A low voice that I don't recognize hisses next to my ear. I double over, the stench of stale alcohol stings my nostrils. Strong fingertips close tight around my wrist, digging into my flesh. "I think you're gonna wanna let go of this right now. Otherwise, you'll end up just like them."

The knife clatters to the ceramic tile at my feet, and I choke on a loud sob as the hand now closes around my throat, squeezing tight, slowly crushing my windpipe.

I gasp for air, my hands flying to my neck, desperate to pry them away. But he's too strong...this person behind me. I never saw his face, only heard his threats. That voice...low, gravelly, almost demonic...it thrums against my ear as white spots flash across my eyes.

But they only blind me for a second...not long enough for me to miss the streaks of red that stain my blurred vision.

So much blood.
So much devastation.
So much loss.
My perfect life.
Over.

Chapter One ***Katarina***

I pucker my perfectly lined, deep red lips one last time before sliding a pair of Chanel sunglasses onto my nose. It's cloudy outside. There's not one sliver of sunshine peeking through the overcast sky, but they preserve my anonymity.

Temporarily, until I decide it's time for my identity to be known.

Nobody ever sees it coming.

Fucking idiots.

They think they can get away with not paying their debts. They think they can get away with the lying, cheating, and stealing.

They never remember that someone always comes to collect.

And it never ends well for the ones who violate the rules.

I step out of my gleaming black Maserati...well, it's not mine, but one of our fleet. It has no trace whatsoever to me or my father with its Pennsylvania plates. It's registered to one of our shell companies, and ownership of said company is in the sole paws of Stoli, my beloved and deceased chocolate lab.

I smooth down the hair of my blonde wig. The waves cascade down my back, over the ivory trench coat that covers my tight black dress. I adjust the sunglasses with one

manicured hand and my Jimmy Choo stilettos click and clack along the pavement outside of the nondescript building down in the Diamond District in lower Manhattan.

It's after hours, so the streets in the surrounding area are pretty much deserted. The city clears out once the workday ends, and this area is no exception.

Except if you have a private appointment, which I do. A smile plays at my lips when I ring the bell.

He's expecting me.

But I can guarantee he's not anticipating what's about to enter his domain.

A large security guard comes to the door and unlatches it to allow me entry.

Stupid motherfucker.

I could be anyone.

Literally.

I step inside, my heels sinking into the carpet. My red lips curl upward as I regard the beefy security guard. Ian Raines should have kept two guards on duty tonight, just for good measure.

He is such a cheap bastard.

Ironic that it's gonna cost him a hell of a lot more than the regular time and a half for his security detail.

The guard doesn't speak to me. He just stands there, trying to look menacing. I flash a smile in his direction, and he doesn't even blink in response.

He'll be sorry he wasn't nicer to me.

I step into the dimly lit space, eyeing the jewelry casings lining the walls. Raines doesn't keep much on display. He has most of the prized items safely locked up in a back viewing room.

A room reserved for his best customers.

He thinks he's going to make a killing back there.

He has no idea that it will be the other way around.

Raines appears a few moments later, a sly smile on his face when he sees me. "Ms. Blake. Such a pleasure to see you."

I offer him my hand, and he brushes his lips against it. I fight the urge to break his wrist and pummel him into the middle of next week.

Rage issues. They never really subsided over the past eight years. I think they've gotten worse, actually.

"Hello, Mr. Raines. Thank you for agreeing to open for me on such short notice. I'm boarding a flight back to Europe tonight, and I couldn't leave New York without seeing your new collection." I unbelt my trench and slowly slide it off of my shoulders, tossing it on a chair. I walk toward him, rubbing myself against him as I lean to look at a piece in one of the cases below.

His breath is hot against my ear. "Don't waste your time looking at those. I have many, many others that are much more worthy of a beautiful woman like you." He nods his head toward the viewing room, which my surveillance already told me was in the far-left corner of the storefront. "Let me show you." He turns toward the security guard. "Nick, you can go. I'll take it from here." He crosses the floor and locks the door behind Nick, his only source of security and protection.

Cheap bastard. He's really going to wish he hadn't done that.

I follow him into the viewing room. He bolts the door behind us and adjusts a set of cameras that cover multiple views of the storefront and the outside. He grins at me. "This is just a safety precaution. With the push of a button, I can have the cops here in seconds."

Raines doesn't need to worry about what is happening outside of his place.

Because I work alone.

In my experiences, men just fuck everything up anyway.

I'm better off by myself, collecting what people owe us and destroying the ones who take from us.

I always get the job done.

It's why my father trusts me as his number one.

What Raines should have been more focused on was the mysterious young woman who showed up at his door, instead of any crew she might be working with.

But that's what happens when you get sloppy, and when you're too money-hungry to think about the consequences of your actions.

"So the cameras serve as your security guard, hmm?" I ask, fluffing out my fake blonde hair with a black leather-gloved hand. "You're not scared of little old me? You're willing to put your trust in a complete stranger?" I keep my tone light and flirtatious. There's no hint of an accent, either. Another little trick I've perfected.

The corners of Raines's lips lift upward into a sinister smile. He reaches under the desk and places a gun on the table next to him. "Of course, Miss Blake. My complete trust is right here next to me."

I smile, running a finger over the semiautomatic pistol. Too bad he forgot to remove the safety. "Oohh, the scent of death and the sparkle of diamonds," I say in a breathy voice. "I love it."

"You can't be too careful in this business." Raines folds his arms across his chest. "Now what can I show you? I believe you said you wanted to wrap this up quickly to make your flight."

I never said anything like that. He's squirming. I think it might be time...

"Well..." I pretend to think for a second. "I'd love to see something that really pops, you know? Like maybe the shipment of cocaine your organization intercepted and stole from my father before it hit Miami?" I look around. "Did you save any of that? Or have you sold it already and buried the cash?"

The color all but drains from his face, and he grabs the gun, pointing it at me.

"Tsk-tsk, Raines," I say, pulling off my glasses and dropping them onto the table. "And after he gave you a massive loan to fund your new jewelry collection. You couldn't get that money from anyone else because you're a lying, manipulative scumbag who can't be trusted. My father saved your ass, and how do you thank him? By fucking him over. You used his money to fund your little plan. I bet you thought it was poetic justice, right?" I eye the gun he's pointing toward me and smirk.

"I took back what was rightfully mine. Your father crushed my business. He forced me out of the game. Well, fuck him. What I stole is nothing compared to what he's about to lose. He's got a lot of enemies, Ms. Ivanov. And rest assured, when they hear about this little stunt of yours, they will not be happy." He walks out from behind the desk, still holding the gun tight in his hand. He slides his free one down my torso and over my hips. I grit my teeth and let the asshole manhandle me for a second. I want him to feel comfortable that I have nothing to hide.

And regretful that he should've pulled the trigger when he had the chance.
Sucker.

I slip away from him in a blink, hooking an arm around his neck to cut off circulation. I bring my other hand down hard over the one he's clutching the gun in, slicing at it with all the strength I can muster. The gun clatters to the floor.

Shock and awe.

It's my trademark.

They never see me coming.

Raines gasps for air, writhing against me as I pull harder. "Never bite the hand that feeds you, Raines. Because if you do, it'll always come back and bite you back. *Hard.*"

I tighten my arms around his neck, yank, and pull, waiting for the satisfying crack before I drop Raines face-down on the floor.

I check the security footage and confirm that the immediate area is still desolate before opening the door a crack. I keep one eye on the store while I fumble around with his security system to delete the feeds for the past thirty minutes and empty the trash on his computer so that there is no trace of me or my car in this vicinity.

Miss Blake?

Erased from existence.

I finish hacking his system, shut it down, and smooth the front of my dress before stepping over Raines and leaving the viewing room. I grab my trench and slide it on before unlocking the front door and strutting out of the store.

Once I'm safely in my borrowed car, I let out a deep breath, tears stinging my eyes. I let it happen. I watched them die. I saw my life crumble right in the middle of our beautiful home, and I couldn't stop it.

That knowledge has haunted me every day since my sixteenth birthday.

Raines's last words ring out in my tortured mind.

What I stole is nothing compared to what he's about to lose.

No loss compares to the one we suffered eight years ago. No amount of money can bring my mother and sister back.

And no matter how many of our debts I collect, no matter how many enemies I destroy, I know none of it will make us whole again.

Chapter Two

Rocco

"Hick-fucking-ville." I hop out of my black Chevy Commander and look around at the green, grassy fields surrounding us. "I hope you brought your cowboy boots and spurs."

Nico Salesi, the head of the Salesi crime family and one of my best friends, snickers, following me over to the fence along the property. I climb on the bottom rung and lean over, breathing in the fresh air. I almost choke, I inhale so deeply.

"Easy, killer. This air is pure, not like the shit you've been inhaling back home for most of your life."

The wind whips through my hair, and I pull my baseball cap from the back pocket of my jeans, sticking it on my head. I turn around to face Nico and fold my hands across my chest.

“So why the hell are we here in Bumblefuck, New Jersey? I mean, I know you like the track, but I didn’t think you wanted to buy and race your own ponies.”

“I don’t.”

“Okay.” I nod and look at the large white house in the distance. Four stories high, red shutters, picket fence. “Are you so sick of us that you’re planning to move Shaye up here?” I chuckle. “Or are you so sick of *me* that you decided to ship me off to God’s country to live off the land?”

“You’re getting warmer.”

I roll my eyes. Nico doesn’t give a fucking inch when he doesn’t want to. But I’d really like to know why I’m about to be neck-deep in horse shit. Literally.

As if I don’t have enough other crap to deal with. Like my survival.

“Let’s go inside.”

“Why? Do you think the animals are gonna hear about whatever your plans are and run straight to the feds?”

“No, dipshit. I need to take a leak.”

“Aha, running water. Nice, so it’s at least somewhat civilized up here.”

“I told you you’d love it.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t tell me I’d be taking up residence.”

Nico nods his head toward the massive farmhouse. “Come on. Take a load off, partner.”

“Christ, you even sound like a cowboy now.”

We walk along the cobblestone pathway toward the house, and Nico pulls out a key, shoving it into the lock and twisting the knob. The bright red door creaks open, and a musty smell wafts over us. I wrinkle my nose. “Smells like my grandma’s old house.”

“Your grandma’s old house smelled like escarole and sauce, dude.”

“Yeah, when she was *cooking*. I’m talking about the rest of the time.”

Nico shakes his head and starts opening doors. I guess he’s looking for the bathroom. He opens a few down a hallway and disappears for a minute.

I peer into the rooms on the first floor. All of the furniture is covered in plastic...Jesus, I really feel like I’m in the Twilight Zone now. Grandma always had her shit covered in plastic. I remember hating to sit down in the living room in the summer time. My grandparents never used the air conditioner. When my Pop was sick, she’d keep it off so he wouldn’t get a chill. Then after he died, she just never bothered to turn it on again. I guess she got used to the sweltering heat. But damn, I remember how my legs would stick to the plastic and sear the skin any time I’d visit in the hot summer months.

I tried not to visit too often between the spring and fall for that reason.

Now she lives down in Florida, without the plastic, and I visit all year round because she turns on the air conditioner in the ninety-plus-degree temps.

Nico curses loudly and a loud banging sound vibrates the walls of the house. “Nico, what the hell did you do in there? It sounds like the pipes are revolting!”

He pops his head out of the bathroom. “Realtor never turned on the water.”

“Gross, man. I’ll hold it until we get back on the road.” I brush past him and walk into the kitchen. Sunlight streams into a solarium in the back of the house and the light bounces off of the shiny surfaces of the room. It’s quiet. Peaceful. And nothing at all like I’m used to.

Why the hell am I here again?

Still waiting for a fucking answer.

“Am I being whacked?” I turn toward Nico. “Is that why you brought me to the place where elephants go to die? Am I joining them?”

Nico lets out a frustrated sigh. “No, dick. If I wanted you dead, you’d already be in the ground.”

I pull out a chair at the kitchen table and drum my fingertips on the wood grain. “Okay, I’m out of guesses, bro.”

“So then just be patient and stop with the fucking Spanish Inquisition!”

I throw my hands in the air. “Fine! I’ll just sit here and wait for you to decide what you want to tell me and when.”

Nico pulls his cell phone from his pocket, catching it on the first ring. “Yeah.” Pause. “We’re both here. Waiting for you. Okay.”

Click.

A minute passes, and I keep drumming.

Nico cocks an eyebrow at me. “That phone call didn’t make you any bit curious?”

I slam a hand on the table. “Of course it did! But I know if I ask the question, you’ll give me some one-word bullshit answer. Why bother? I’d rather just save my breath.”

“I’m glad you’re learning some self-control.” Nico pulls out a chair and sits across from me. “That was Viktor on the phone, by the way.”

My ears perk up. Viktor Ivanov, as in head of one of the most powerful bosses of the Russian mafia. As in badass drug lord who lives on what appears to be an exclusively black cigarette and vodka-based diet.

He’s dangerous. And manipulative. And vicious.

Dark hair, ice-blue eyes that can pierce as deep as the knives he’s been rumored to wield like a butcher slicing up livestock.

Livestock. Funny, you know, because of where we are right now.

Viktor and Nico have worked together for the past few years. I don’t know much about him personally, only what I’ve heard. And none of it is good if you’re on his shit list.

He’s got a lot of enemies, nasty ass people who brutalize for shits and giggles. I’m talking, stick a fork in your fucking eye and yank it out kind of brutal. And for people who associate with Viktor? It’s like guilt by association.

And here I am, about to take a meeting with him.

But that’s nothing compared to what I’ve already done on his behalf.

Because of that, his enemies have become my enemies.

Fucking fabulous.

Five years ago, I was just trying to make some fast cash. I had no idea I’d have a target on my back because of it. I’ve done some pretty underhanded things back in the day, things other people might have gotten their dicks chopped off for. But I always landed on my feet.

I was an idiot for thinking this time would be different.

I always think I can escape. Maybe that’s because I’ve been lucky.

But luck is pretty damn fleeting.

And these enemies...they will always find what they’re looking for. You can’t hide, can’t protect yourself. Pretty much the only thing you can do is pray.

But even God can’t stop the inevitable.

I’ve seen it play out more times than I can count.

The first time they came, we conquered.

The next time?

I don't really know if Lady Luck is gonna stick around for that.

"Who's he bringing?" I ask the question, trying to keep my voice disinterested in the answer even though I'm silently willing him to say the name I want to hear.

A sly smile lifts his lips. "Sorry. She's not coming. He'll be alone."

Nico, that asshole. He's too damn perceptive for his own good.

I let out a snort, pretending not to care that Katarina, Viktor's daughter and chief assassin, won't be joining us for this meeting. The truth is, I really want to see her. Bitch is cold as ice but white hot at the same time. I haven't been able to think of much else since she wiggled her tight ass into Jersey and everyone knows it. I've been called out plenty of times by the guys for staring a little too long, making excuses to tag her in for a quick poker game or a necessary ass kicking. But she's got poison running through her veins. Poison and vodka. I think she likes knowing every man within a ten-mile radius wants to get her on her back. But she keeps her distance, especially from me. And it only makes me want her more. "I wasn't asking about Kat. I was just curious to see if anyone else was in on the reason for this secret meeting."

"Sure you were." Nico winks at me and scrolls through his phone.

I roll my eyes. "That's all I get? Viktor is coming?"

He shrugs. "Hey, you wanted information."

What I'd really like to know, and Nico will only tell me once he's good and ready, is how the hell I'm gonna survive the planned hit on my life, and how this goddamn horse farm is involved.

A car door slams out front, and a minute later, Viktor strides into the kitchen. He's wearing all black.

Always all black.

Ominous. Commanding.

Death.

Every time I look at him, I imagine it's what the devil would look like if he walked the Earth. No shit, he's that bad.

Nico nods at him but doesn't get out of his seat.

I do, though. I get up and take a few steps backward to lean against the counter. For some reason, I need distance. I feel like maybe it gives me back a tiny bit of control.

Not that it matters.

These guys have a plan. It's pretty obvious. And the plan is gonna put my head on the chopping block.

Again.

Fuck my life.

But this is what I signed up for years ago when Nico's grandfather saved my ass.

Sometimes I think it would have been easier if he'd have just had me capped. Then I wouldn't have to keep looking over my shoulder, wondering when, where, how...

Because I sure as hell already know the *who*.

It's the same *who* that wants Viktor.

Viktor looks at me, his blue eyes narrowed. "You might want to take a seat."

"Thanks, I'm good here." I try to keep my voice strong. Confident.

I'm bullshitting myself and everyone else in the room.

Viktor pulls out a chair and lowers himself into it. Everything the man does is calculated and deliberate. He's not rash and impulsive like his daughter, who will leap at the chance to put some poor sucker in a deadly chokehold because of the way he's talking to her friend.

Yeah, she's done that to me.

My lips stretch into a thin line.

Shit, I'm doing it again. I can't think about Katarina right now, not that she's ever far from my mind. I wonder at least a hundred times a day when she's gonna swoop in wearing obscenely tight jeans and a low-cut shirt to plug some dickhead who was stupid enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm not complaining. Watching someone get the shit kicked out of him by a girl who looks like a Victoria's Secret model is hot as fuck.

And since Nico and Viktor have formed this Italian-Russian mob boss partnership thing, she's been showing up on the scene more and more.

Looking hotter and hotter.

I grasp the countertop that I'm leaning against and swallow hard.

My fucking life is hanging in the balance right now, and all I can focus on is *her*.

It's not like I can't occupy myself with others. There are always others. I work at Nico's nightclub, Culaccino, and believe me, there's plenty of pussy on display in that sex den. But it's too easy. There's no challenge in getting laid there. Yeah, I can get off, but it's boring.

I didn't always feel that way, though. Not until Katarina Ivanov torpedoed her way into my life. She ruined it for every other female out there for me who was ready to drop her panties and spread her legs.

I have to stop these X-rated images from flying through my mind. If Viktor could see what's wallpapering my brain right now, I'm sure he'd happily take one of the knives in the butcher block to my left and stab me in the eye—and maybe even the dick, for good measure—with it.

"Thanks for coming, Viktor." Nico places his phone on the table and looks over at me. "Are you joining us?"

"No offense, but I feel like I need to be standing to hear what comes next."

A smirk plays at Viktor's lips. "What's the plan?"

Nico stares at me for a few seconds before speaking. My heart hammers. He's got a plan. That's a good thing. It doesn't guarantee I'll survive, but hearing that there actually is a 'plan?'

Promising.

Nico turns back to Viktor. "Everything is set up for the horse farm. Groundskeepers, on-staff veterinarians, trainers, insurance, stable hands...they all have business accounts set up where we'll wire their salaries, cushioned with our cut. We'll purchase horses under the new shell company and start paying salaries and insurance premiums to the crew to justify the care and maintenance of the animals and farm." He points a finger to me without stopping for a breath. "Rocco will oversee the operation from here."

"Who, whoa, whoa." I hold up my hands. "I thought this was a meeting to discuss how the fuck we're gonna handle the Cinque family and keep them from slicing me into carpaccio. I already have a job, remember? I was only kidding about you sending me out here to die."

"I'm sending you here to keep that from happening. That's what this meeting is about," Nico replies in a serious voice.

“Wait, so I’m just supposed to become a cowboy now? Leave the city to herd fucking cattle? What the hell is next? Are you gonna throw some flannel shirts and a Stetson at me, too? How exactly is this supposed to preserve my life?”

“Nobody said anything about cows, although...” Nico rubs the scruff on his chin. “That’s not a bad way to expand the business once things get going. Definitely keeps us off the radar if we become ranchers...”

“Oh, come the fuck on!” I slam my hands on the counter. “Is all this really necessary?”

Nico rises from his chair, the legs scraping against the floor. “I don’t know, Rocco. Do you like the idea of your mouth being pulled through your asshole? Is that a nice visual? Because I can guarantee that would be a picnic compared to what the Cinques will do once they find you.”

“They haven’t gotten to me yet,” I grumble, pulling off my baseball cap and shoving it on backwards. I do that a lot when I’m stressed. As if the position of the goddamn cap can change my suck-ass predicament.

“They’re coming,” Viktor says in a low voice.

“Look, I got what you needed when I was out in California. Now you know where their operations are. You know who’s running shit out there.” I pause for a second, struggling to keep my voice calm, but damn, it’s hard. “I did what Grandpa Vito asked me to do. I went to the Cinques, pretending that you guys kicked me out of Jersey, that I was pissed off, and wanted revenge. They bought it, and I got in deep enough to find out who put the hit on your family, Vik. Now they’re after both of us. So why are we sitting around holding our dicks waiting for them to show up on our doorstep? Why don’t we just take them the fuck out already?”

Nico lets out a deep sigh and rakes a hand through his hair. But he says nothing.

That means he doesn’t want to show his hand.

Well, screw that. My ass is on the line. I did what I had to do for the family. But is the family gonna do anything for me? That’s the big question.

“Nico,” I say, struggling to keep my voice even. “I don’t want to talk about horses. I want to know why I’m here.”

Viktor turns his penetrating gaze to me. “You’re here because you’re going to do a job for us.”

“No disrespect, Vik, but I think I’ve done plenty.”

Nico grits his teeth and glares at me. “Sit the fuck down, Rocco.”

I pull out a chair and flop into it. “Happy?”

“Here’s the deal.” Nico taps on the tabletop with his fingertips. “Our location isn’t hidden. Everyone in the organization knows we own Jersey and everything south of it. We don’t operate outside of those locations. It makes us easy to find. But this place, this farm, is outside of our regular territory.”

“Thanks for the geography lesson,” I quip.

Nobody cracks a smile.

Shocker.

Ironic that the primary target is the one trying to lighten this situation.

“The point is, there is no affiliation between the farm to our other businesses. This is separate. Buried. Off the radar.” He pauses. “Undetectable.”

“Who knows about it?”

“The three of us.” Nico and Viktor exchange glances.

“That’s all?” I furrow my brow.

“Yep. For now.”

“And I’m going to be stuck up here?”

“Think of it as a refuge from fucking mutilation of the worst imaginable kind.” Nico rolls his eyes. “Do you get what I’m doing here? I’m saving your ass from the Cinques.”

“For how long? I mean, this is like witness protection shit except it isn’t orchestrated by the government, yeah?”

Another secret, wordless look is exchanged.

“You guys wanna let me in on the timeline? Am I turning hick or what?”

“You’re going to have to stay up here for a while,” Nico says, avoiding my eyes.

“How are you gonna explain my disappearance to everyone? Where the fuck am I supposed to be? What am I telling my family? This is my fucking *life*, Nico!”

Nico shoots up from his chair and leans in real close. Close enough that I can see the fire in his eyes. He’s pissed, but fuck that. So am I. I’m in this shit storm because of him, his father, and his grandfather. And he’s basically telling me my life as I know it is over.

What I did wasn’t even that bad. I started taking sports bets without permission. Big goddamn deal. Max Oriani made it into a bigger thing than it needed to be. He’s the one who ratted me out in the first place. Jealous asshole. He knew I was making more than he ever could, so he ran to Nico’s Grandpa Vito, the big boss, and boom. I’m outta business.

But instead of getting beaten to death with a baseball bat, I got a punishment assignment that assured me death by baseball bat would be much more enjoyable.

I stand by what I did with the gambling. I had a good reason, not that anyone bothered to ask. They all just assumed I did it because I don’t give a damn about anyone but myself and that I’m a selfish asshole.

What they didn’t know was that I did it to help my grandmother pay off my Pop’s medical bills when he was sick. I knew my dad was strapped, so when I overheard them talking one night, the idea came to me. I knew I’d clear enough to help, and I also knew Grandma would never ask me. So I took it upon myself and decimated Max’s little betting business.

To this day, Max doesn’t know the truth, and that’s fine. It’s none of his business. None of anyone’s business. I never told Nico’s dad or grandfather why I did it. It wasn’t important. I did what I had to do for my family. The bills were paid, and my grandma was able to mourn my Pop without having to worry about his debts.

But what the Salesis made me do as punishment was way worse than taking those bets ever was. I went into the lion’s den, surrounded by hellfire and brimstone, and I didn’t think I’d make it out alive.

And now this.

“You’re lucky you still have a life, Rocco! So while you’re pissing and moaning about how shitty your existence will be while you hide out here, think about the fact that you’ll still be fucking breathing!”

“Forget it, Nico. This plan can’t work. Not with him. He’s too reckless and too many risks have already been taken,” Viktor says in a low, menacing voice. He stands up and walks toward me. His blue eyes are so light and so clear, they look soul-less. I can’t tear my own eyes away. His stare pins me to the spot and my throat constricts, my body fully unprepared for any assault he might launch. I’m trapped by his cold, hardened gaze with no hope of breaking away.

He gets right in my face, searching me for something...I'm not sure what and he doesn't bother to give me a clue, either. He's a man of few words. He doesn't need to use many. His expressions pretty much tell you everything you need to know.

And from the looks of it, I'm fucked.

Somehow or other.

Nico lets out a frustrated sigh. "Once he understands the situation, he'll—"

Viktor pulls away from me, his gaze unwavering, lips stretched into a tight line. His eyes never leave my face as he speaks the words in his signature harsh, Russian-accented tone.

"No. He is not the one."

Then he turns and walks out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

My hand flies to my throat. I've never been strangled by a look before, and it doesn't feel fabulous.

Not the one for *what*?

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