

SMOKE AND SHADOWS EXTENDED EPILOGUE

By Victoria Paige

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Cover Design by Victoria Paige

CHAPTER ONE

“Nice town.”

Viktor grunted a reply, so Marissa simply shrugged and stared out her window at the quaint rustic buildings that decked the little town of Stoneville in the California Central Valley. Viktor was driving a convertible rented from the Sacramento airport. Back from a two-week honeymoon, they were making a quick detour to visit Carl Eaton before flying back to the east coast.

On the last day of their vacation, Viktor had received a troubling phone call from his best friend. Marissa made all the necessary flight changes while her husband contacted Tim Burns—his analyst at AGS—to look up some information. Ever since then he had been brooding and curt on the flight back from Hawaii. From what little Viktor had told Marissa, the local motorcycle club that protected the town of Stoneville was in deep shit with a Mexican drug cartel. And someone got hurt. Bad.

The convertible pulled into the parking lot of Stoneville County hospital.

Marissa was about to exit the car when Viktor’s hand touched her arm. She turned and saw a tender look on Viktor’s face.

“I’m sorry, kitten.”

“For what?”

“For dragging you into this.”

“Viktor, we don’t know what *this* is,” Marissa replied gently. “It’s okay, big guy. Whatever your friend needs, we’re here to help.”

Her man looked like he was about to say something more, but he simply inclined his head, dropped his hand, and got out of the car.

They quickly made it past the reception area and mounted the stairs toward the second floor rooms. It wasn't hard to figure out which was room 205. Two men in leather cuts dotted with patches identifying their motorcycle club, were standing in the hallway. A dark-haired woman was talking with one of them and though she spoke in a hushed voice, her body language was agitated.

Lana. Carl's wife.

The woman's weary eyes turned to relief when she caught sight of the two of them approaching.

"Viktor, thank God!"

Lana rushed up to meet them. She hugged Viktor and then her. "Marissa. I'm so sorry, Viktor. We didn't know who else to call," Lana said, her voice hoarse as if she'd been crying for a while.

"You brought in an outsider, Lana?" the taller of the two men, who looked to be in his early forties, followed Carl's wife, spearing them with a fulminating stare. The man was about six-one, had dark-blond, almost brown hair, and wore a scruffy goatee. On his fingers were wide heavy rings. Marissa was sure those came in handy in a brawl.

"Viktor Baran. Nice to meet you, too." Marissa suppressed the urge to roll her eyes at her husband's caustic tone.

Lana sighed in irritation when the biker refused to acknowledge Viktor's proffered hand. Marissa's husband shrugged his shoulders and dropped his arm.

"This is Jude Decker, president of the Black Eagle Motorcycle Club," Lana said, nodding to her. "Marissa, here, is Viktor's wife."

Decker's eyes lingered on Marissa a bit too long, for she sensed her husband stiffen. The MC President's gaze shifted back to Viktor and turned into a smirk.

Viktor turned to Lana. "How's Don?"

Based on the intel Tim had sent him, Don Hardiman, Lana's brother, was the Black Eagle MC's sergeant at arms (SAA). Viktor had received a slew of information from his analyst. He

had not looked at the data in-depth but had enough to work with.

“He’s out of critical condition,” Lana said. “They were able to repair his colon, and there’s no sepsis complication so far. But he’s got a long road to recovery.”

“Gut shots usually are,” Viktor muttered.

They walked down the hall toward the room where another biker stood watching them. This one appeared to be younger than Decker. He stood about five-ten, but had more bulk. Not an immediate threat, but he was warily assessing Viktor. “Where’s Carl?”

“He had an emergency come up at the diner, but he just texted me that he’s on his way here.”

“So, is anyone going to tell me what happened?” Viktor looked pointedly at Decker.

The biker scowled at him. “You wasted a trip. This is club business.”

“Well your club nearly got my brother killed!” Lana snapped.

“Shut up, bitch, do you—”

Viktor was quick. He had Decker slammed up against the wall, his fingers squeezing tightly on pressure points on the other man’s throat with his forearm pressing across the biker’s chest.

No one calls Lana a bitch.

There was a scuffle behind him.

“What the fuck?” Decker’s biker buddy yelled in outrage. Viktor smiled inwardly. His woman had his back.

“Wanna re-think your last statement?” Viktor asked coldly.

Decker looked past his shoulder, eyes widening and then narrowing before returning his gaze to Viktor.

“Who exactly are you?” Jude demanded.

“He’s the guy you call when you’re in over your head,” a voice spoke beside them.

Carl.

Viktor let go of Decker. His brow shot up as he saw the other biker get up from his knees where Marissa had held him until she let go of the arm lock and knee to the back she had on him.

Carl grinned and embraced Viktor. “You don’t waste time taking charge do you?” He

glanced at Marissa and winked. “Hey, Mrs. Baran.”

“Carl,” Marissa stepped up and hugged her husband’s friend. Carl and Lana Eaton were Maia’s foster parents and Viktor’s longtime friends.

“He’s not in charge,” Decker growled. “We don’t know who he is. He might even get us into more trouble.”

“He’s right, Carl.” Viktor’s gaze cut to the MC President. “I work on the right side of the law.” He leaned in toward Decker, lowered his voice, and said, “And I know that you’re moving weed for Antonio Del Prado.”

Decker’s eyes hardened. “You know, you better watch what you say or you could end up on a kill roll.”

“Jude!” Lana exclaimed in horror.

The MC president exhaled deeply. “We can’t discuss this here. Clubhouse.”

Viktor grinned and handed him a piece of paper. “I don’t think so.”

He looked at Carl. “We’re staying with you?”

“You bet you are. Wanna follow me back to the house?”

“Later.” Viktor looked at Decker who nodded back at him. He gave a chin lift acknowledgement, grabbed Marissa’s hand, and tugged her toward the stairwell. “I’ve got some business to take care of.”

“You’re being reckless, Viktor.”

They were back in the convertible, heading toward the meet-up point at the address Viktor had provided Decker. Marissa was driving while Viktor was busy going through the intel Tim had sent him.

“No, I’m not. Reckless is meeting back at their clubhouse,” Viktor replied. “I haven’t gotten a clear read on Decker.” Marissa could tell that Viktor was annoyed because reading people was his specialty. He looked down at his tablet. “But it looks like the MC is a puppet of the Lobos Juarez cartel—specifically Antonio Del Prado. Black Eagle wants out of the illegal drug-trafficking trade, but they hold a convenient pipeline in Central Valley that Del Prado is not

willing to give up. He's the only holdup though; the other leaders of the cartel want less prominent routes, but Del Prado is greedy. He wants quick delivery. The MC tried to make a deal with the DEA two years ago. The DEA fucked up, Del Prado got away. Six members of the MC were slaughtered. Their heads were boxed and delivered to the club after three days."

"Oh, my God," Marissa whispered. "And the authorities couldn't do anything?"

"Most of them are deep in the pockets of the cartel."

"So how can you help?"

"Get rid of Del Prado."

"You think the MC has not tried?"

"Oh, they have, but Del Prado is a hard man to track."

Marissa sighed impatiently. "So what can you do differently?"

"Intel, Marissa. They don't have Tim," Viktor replied smugly.

The meet-up was at the parking lot of an abandoned hardware store. Viktor took all precautions and had Marissa in position at a parking deck that happened to be one of the buildings surrounding the area. Viktor was leaning nonchalantly against the graffiti-decked wall of the store. They each had one gun and one extra magazine between them. When going on a honeymoon, an assault on a deadly drug lord didn't exactly factor into their vacation planning. Marissa shook her head and snickered. She was amazed Viktor had completely switched off from work when they were in Maui. She had never seen him so relaxed, and she would admit she wasn't ready to see that face he put on for Decker at the hospital. Cold. Intimidating.

The roar of Harley pipes snapped her out of her reverie. Decker and Bo rolled in and parked their motorbikes in front of Viktor. Bo was the other biker at the hospital who Marissa surprised with a takedown and was the acting SAA of the MC while Lana's brother was out of commission.

She had her gun, cocked and ready.

Viktor pushed off from the wall and walked the few steps to where Jude and Bo waited on their bikes. Killing their engines, Decker took off his helmet while Bo carefully took stock of their surroundings.

“Where’s the wife?” Decker asked casually.

“Around.”

“I have to say, Baran, this whole meeting is getting weirder by the second.”

“How so?”

“Carl and Lana? Having friends like you. This is small game for you, isn’t it?”

“Cartels are always big game but are not my thing. They take too long to take down, too many resources.”

“So is Marissa really your wife?” Decker’s eyes bored into him. “Because Bo’s got quite a hard—”

“Careful, Decker,” Viktor growled. “I have very little tolerance for insults toward Marissa. I’ll tell you now, my services don’t come cheap, so consider yourself lucky that I’m doing this for free to give my friends some peace of mind. So. Let’s do this again. Do you want my help?”

The biker smirked. “Cool it, man. Just checking. She’s got some moves on her. So is she part of the help package?”

No, she isn’t.

“Are you saying you’re on board with outside involvement?”

Decker turned serious. “Carl and Lana vouched for you. Things are shaky with Del Prado. We’re not even sure if the alliance is intact any longer after the last run where we got ambushed by a rival motorcycle gang. We lost two new members . . . fuck . . . and Don nearly . . . fuck . . .”

“What happened to the shipment?”

“We still have it.”

“Have you heard from Del Prado?”

“That’s what’s making me uneasy. No. I tried calling him but he’s not picking up.”

“He’s planning a move on you.”

“No shit. That’s why the compound is on lockdown.”

“How many members do you have?”

“We’re down to fifteen.”

“You guys are outnumbered.”

“Again. No shit.”

Viktor smiled grimly. Del Prado’s minions could be as high as fifty. But when he moved around, about seven or ten men accompanied him. Luckily for the MC, only a few were well-trained. Viktor hoped to God that the bikers were better warriors. These men could do very well in a bar fight: question was, how good were they in a shoot-out?

A phone buzzed.

Decker answered his burner. The biker’s tanned features turned ashen as he gritted through his teeth, “When? . . . Okay, I’m heading back to the clubhouse. Keep sharp.”

When the call ended, Decker looked at Viktor. “Del Prado made his move.”

CHAPTER TWO

The clubhouse was in an uproar.

Three club members were abducted during a job run over to the next town. Their VP, Art Pace, was taken along with their information officer and a Prospect. Del Prado wanted his shipment and Jude Decker.

Viktor had not wanted Marissa with him, but she was insistent. No way was she leaving her new husband to his own devices. Club members—bikers, old ladies and club women—were eyeing them suspiciously right now. Decker and his remaining MC officers were ensconced in *church* having an emergency meeting. Viktor was sitting on a bar stool, hugging her close to him, his chin resting on her shoulder.

To all eyes, they seemed like a couple having a moment. In actuality, Viktor was giving her the scoop.

“Del Prado is sending his men here to escort us to where they’re holding the rest of the guys.”

“What do you mean *us*. Are you saying you’re going with them?”

“I’m driving the truck.”

“Viktor,” Marissa hissed while trying to keep a sweet smile on her face. “When was the last time you’ve driven a semi?”

“A while, but don’t worry. I can handle it.”

“I’m not talking about normal driving conditions—”

“Evasive maneuvers. I know. I got it.”

“And Decker is onboard with you tagging along?”

“He has no choice. Look around you, Marissa. The remaining club members are just

kids,” Viktor sighed. “I’m really sorry, kitten. What a shitty end to a honeymoon, huh? Regrets?”

“I’m thinking—”

His arms tightened around her. “You’re serious?” This came out as a growl.

“Just come back safely.”

He turned her around in his arms, his blue eyes seeking her green ones. They locked gazes. Viktor repeated, “Regrets?”

“No.” Her lips tipped up.

A shudder shook his body as he crushed her to him. “Were you messing with me?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t. Fuck, Marissa. Don’t. I’m feeling shitty as it is.”

Her heart twitched. She cupped his face. “I’m sorry. I was trying to lighten the mood but realize this isn’t the right time to fib about regrets. I’m just scared, Viktor. You’re so unprepared for this.”

“I’ve been through worst unknowns.”

“You’re outnumbered.”

Viktor’s voice was a whisper. “I just got intel from Tim. Del Prado is here in Central Valley.”

Marissa kept her face impassive.

“Decker has no idea what he looks like, but I do.” His voice continued to be low, so Marissa had a hard time understanding him.

“Are you telling him?” she whispered back.

“Hell, no. This place is bugged,” he informed her. “Three seats over, there’s a bug; not sure if it’s hostile or club planted.” He must have used the bug tracker functionality on his souped-up phone—one of Sophie’s latest inventions.

My man thinks of everything. Every possible freaking thing that can go wrong.

Just then, the door to the meeting room opened and the club officers stepped out. Decker walked directly to Viktor and handed him a leather cut.

“Hope it fits.”

Viktor pulled on the vest. It was a bit tight across the back, but not too much that it

limited his movements. “All good.”

This isn't all good.

A mild panic started to crawl up Viktor's spine. It wasn't a feeling he was used to, but he'd accepted this new reality for him when Marissa walked back into his life. Six cartel men arrived to escort them, but three remained to hold the clubhouse hostage to keep Decker in line during the trip. All were armed with assault rifles.

Decker was pissed by this turn of events and was on the phone with Del Prado. Viktor exchanged looks with Marissa, engaging in one of their silent conversations.

Don't do anything stupid, his eyes said.

Don't do anything foolishly heroic, Viktor.

Have I ever?

I can count a few times.

Stay under the radar.

I got this, Viktor.

Damn it, Marissa.

She sighed heavily, and he lost her eyes momentarily. He willed her to look back at him and she did.

I won't do anything unless I have to.

Viktor nodded. He could accept that.

Decker was off the phone and glared at one of the cartel men—the Latino guy with braids. “Your boss is a lying piece of shit.”

Braids smirked and poked the assault rifle at Jude. “Get moving, Decker.”

Ignoring Braids, Decker walked over to Bo, clasped the acting-SAA by his neck and drew him close. “You're in-charge, brother. If I don't make it back, take care of the club.”

Bo gripped Decker's neck, gave it a slight jerk, and nodded.

One of the cartel men was giving Viktor a strange look, as if he was trying to figure him out. Viktor dropped his shoulders to diminish his dominant air and addressed Decker, “We doing

this, boss?”

Decker’s eyes met his. “Yeah. Let’s do this.”

Decker was riding his bike in formation with Del Prado’s men. One bike was leading the way, and two were tailing the semi. Braids was riding with Viktor in the cab of the semi. They were heading north on Route 99 toward Sacramento. The sun was just beginning to set on this crisp day in December. Just as they passed Fresno and before they got to Merced, they took the exit to Bear Creek. Vast stretches of land inundated with dilapidated pre-fab homes led the way to their destination. They finally made a turn on an unpaved road toward a property surrounded by chain-linked fencing. There were two trailers and another prefab building in the makeshift compound. Dust swirls kicked up as the semi ground to a halt.

Viktor made to step down, but Braids stopped him. “Wait.”

Three men emerged out of the prefab house. Decker got off his bike and headed straight for the one in a business suit. A bald Latino man stepped in front of suit guy in a protective posture.

“Where are my men?” Decker snarled

“Honored to finally meet you face to face, Jude Decker,” suit guy replied. “Antonio Del Prado.”

Viktor raised a brow. *Interesting.*

Decker cursed off their tormentors. *Del Prado* instructed his men to do another search on Decker before cuffing his hands behind him.

“End of the road, man. Get out.” Braids informed Viktor.

He opened the driver’s side door and descended the truck. He was also patted down again and similarly secured.

Showtime.

The familiar scent of blood and burned flesh hit his nostrils the moment Viktor entered the house. They were led down a narrow corridor with partitioned rooms, the walls not quite flush with the ceiling. Cheap linoleum tiles provided convenient flooring for the type of activities

carried out in this place.

“Fuck!” Decker’s anguished cry heralded a horrific discovery.

Outcomes from torture were nothing new to Viktor, so he had to call on his acting skills to affect outrage, which wasn’t difficult given the state of Decker’s MC brothers who were lying broken and bleeding on the floor.

The three bikers were naked. One of them had his MC ink scorched away from his skin. The other one’s face was almost unrecognizable, and all of them had varying degrees of cuts, bruising, and burn marks.

“You sick fuck, you sick fuck!” Decker choked out. He was about to go to his men when he was yanked back and pushed further into the room. The muzzle of an assault rifle prodded Viktor’s back to move him forward as well. He deliberately positioned himself against a wall, turned, and faced the room. There were three men inside besides Del Prado, which meant one other man was standing guard outdoors unless they had not encountered all the cartel men.

“Prez . . .” one of the tortured bikers whispered.

“Pace . . . I’m going to get you out of this, brother.”

“Who . . . what?” Pace’s almost-shut eyes followed Viktor in confusion.

Shit.

“You’re going to be fine, brother,” Viktor said from across the room. *Play along, damn it.* Thankfully, most of the men were incoherent, and their captors were not paying much attention to them.

“You got your shipment, you got me. Let my brothers go home.” Decker’s voice was strong, but Viktor knew what he was feeling. Responsibility for his men was weighing heavily, and in the MC world, these guys were his brothers in every sense of the word.

“N-not with-out you, Prez,” another incapacitated biker murmured.

“Everything is so touching,” Del Prado sneered. “Unfortunately, the Black Eagle MC has ceased to be useful. I’ve been pressured by the other *capos* to shut down the Central Valley pipeline, but you see, a betrayal can never be forgotten.”

“So what? You’re just gonna wipe out me and my men?”

“No. The entire MC.”

“What?”

A chill permeated into Viktor’s blood when the bald goon brought in a laptop. Live footage of the clubhouse, with a gathering of the remaining club members, came on the screen. Viktor searched frantically for Marissa and spotted her in the back together with some of the women.

“Capo,” a Lobos goon who remained behind at the clubhouse appeared on the screen.

“What are your orders?”

Del Prado sneered. “Kill them all.”

Marissa was herded to the back with all the women and children by a Lobos thug. She’d have to say, biker old ladies were a tough lot and were not scared of mouthing-off to their captors. Still, it wasn’t such a good idea to do so when children were around to witness their mother receiving the butt end of a rifle.

“Wrong time to be here,” one of the club whores told her. “You and your man shouldn’t have gotten involved.” She stared sadly at the winking diamond ring on Marissa’s finger.

Marissa didn’t answer as she scanned the room for hostiles’ positions. All the male club members were grouped in front of a laptop. Marissa had seen this setup before. One side of the camera was going to witness an execution, and she had a deep sense of foreboding that the clubhouse was going to go first. What better retaliation against Decker than to have him witness all his members massacred. Del Prado would probably be sadistic enough to spare Jude Decker so he’d live out the rest of his days re-living the nightmare.

She had to act now.

Viktor better be ready on his end.

Her husband was right about Del Prado’s thugs. They existed to follow orders and were untrained in threat evaluation. They patted down the women, but were too busy feeling up Marissa’s more generous body parts to consider that she had a KA-Bar knife strapped inside her boots—her weapon of choice in close-quarters combat.

She had it now, gripped in her hand, upturned, flush between her forearm and side.

Del Prado's face filled the screen. "Kill them all."

Some of the women started screaming, while those with children folded over them protectively. The cartel goons were brandishing their assault rifles and leering at the male bikers.

Marissa pushed her way to the Lobos captor guarding the women.

"Stand back!" The man roared at her, keeping her at bay with the length of the assault rifle.

"Why? You're going to kill us anyway!" Marissa yelled.

The man cursed, shifted his rifle to his left hand, and lowered his right arm across his body in preparation to backhand her. Marissa ducked and came up in front of him, swinging her arm forcefully and stabbing the man right through his throat.

She yanked the rifle immediately from the man's hand, which had gone slack, and clicked the weapon to single shot. Surprise was on her side.

She already knew where her first target would be and fired right at one of the cartel men. Bo, with his hands still cuffed behind his back, tackled the other one.

Another gun shot.

Marissa felt a burn in her arm as she was knocked backward.

Pandemonium ensued.

As Del Prado and his men watched the events unfold on screen in disbelief, Viktor grabbed the pin embedded in the waistband of his jeans and undid his cuffs. He accomplished this in seconds.

"Bastardo!" Del Prado screamed and raised his gun against Pace. "I'll take your VP then."

"No!" Decker yelled, but with a gun pointed at him, he was helpless.

At gunpoint for him? It wasn't a problem and with his hands now free, it was the best scenario for lulling the enemy into false complacency.

He attacked.

Viktor unleashed a high vertical kick. And he did this quickly, dislodging the weapon

from the man pointing it at him, at the same time gaining its possession and knocking him unconscious with a hard swing to the temple using the butt end of the rifle. From his peripheral vision, he saw that Decker went after his guard who was momentarily stunned by Viktor's move. Otherwise that would have been his first priority since the muzzle of that rifle was closest to him. That left him, Del Prado, and the bald thug.

Baldie raised his weapon even as Del Prado told him to stand down. Viktor shot him in the leg and shifted his sights on Del Prado. The man held up his hands.

"Hey!" Viktor yelled, trying to catch the attention of the man beating down on Decker who still had his wrists cuffed yet was kicking out with everything he had. "Hey! Stop now or your boss gets it."

Finally, Decker's attacker rose reluctantly, glaring at him and then at Del Prado.

"Now is a good time to drop your weapons," Viktor said, addressing the remaining hostiles who were not injured. "Kick it over."

The men did as they were told.

Decker was about to check on his men when the sound of gunfire erupted outside, followed by shouting. Tension gripped the entire room. The door to the house crashed open, followed by a rush of footsteps that stopped when a warning to surrender was called out.

Viktor exhaled a breath of relief. "This is Viktor Baran! Hostiles are secured!"

A man appeared at the entry to their room.

"It's about time you guys got here," Viktor muttered.

CHAPTER THREE

“Who the hell is this guy?”

Rick Grayson glared at Viktor. Rick was a DEA agent who had worked with Maia on the Reznikov case back in Baltimore. When Viktor figured out that the Lobos Juarez cartel was involved, he immediately had Tim locate the DEA agent’s whereabouts. Viktor trusted Rick. It was fortuitous that Rick was currently working out of San Diego.

“This is your Del Prado.” Viktor shoved suit guy in front of Rick. “Give me your phone; I need to call Marissa.” All through the seconds it had taken to subdue Del Prado and his thugs, Viktor had to shove his concern for Marissa to the back of his consciousness. And now with the immediate threat over, Marissa was front and center on his mind. She had to be okay.

“Damn it, Viktor. This is not Antonio Del Prado.”

“I know,” he replied impatiently. He nodded to Baldie who was groaning on the floor. “He is.”

“Then, why . . .?”

“Retribution, Rick,” Viktor said as he glanced over to Decker who was shocked by the revelation.

Rick gave a mirthless laugh. “No. No. No, Viktor. No way are you pulling your jacked-up sense of justice on my watch.”

“Aren’t I?” Viktor said. “Look closely at what the asshole did to these men.” DEA agents were helping the mutilated bikers out of the house.

“You’re a damned hypocrite, Baran,” Rick muttered. *Yes*, Viktor agreed. But he was selective of the people he tortured, and they always deserved it.

“He beheaded six of the Black Eagle members when they wanted out of the illegal-drug

trade,” Viktor added. “DEA dropped the ball on that one. You owe them.”

“Damn you, Viktor.” Rick shoved his fingers through his hair. “You’ll have to convince my director.” *To switch files and fingerprints* was left unspoken. Viktor knew the drill. He was also sending some information on law-enforcement officials in the California Central valley that were in the pockets of Del Prado. That the drug lord would attempt to massacre an entire MC without fear of repercussion was appalling.

“I’ll have Tim confer with your agency,” Viktor said. “Now can I borrow your phone?”

The call went to voice mail. Their captors probably collected all the phones. Damn it. Viktor glanced at Decker. “Does the clubhouse have a landline?”

Decker gave him the number; someone answered after the fourth ring. Viktor could hardly hear the person as it sounded like everyone was talking in the background.

“Let me talk to Marissa.”

“Who’s this?”

“Viktor.”

“Who the fuck . . . look, dude—”

“I’m with Decker.”

“You’re that blond guy! Is Decker okay? How’s Pace?”

“They’re fine!” Viktor gritted through his teeth. Or they would be. “My wife, Marissa?”

“Oh, the dark-haired warrior princess? She kicked ass, man.”

Jesus Christ. He was about to lose it.

“Can I talk to her?” Viktor sucked in a calming breath.

“Sure, man, hold on.”

Thank Christ.

“Viktor?”

He closed his eyes. “God kitten, when I saw you fall—”

“I’m fine, Viktor. I guess everyone is okay?”

“Yes.”

“Are you on your way back?”

“Yeah.” Viktor turned away from Rick and Decker. He pushed through the lump in his

throat. "I love you, Iz."

"I love you, too, Viktor."

After the DEA left with the shipment of weed and most of Del Prado's thugs, Decker and Viktor hauled the real Del Prado, formerly known as Baldie, into the back of the white panel van.

"The leaders of my cartel will come after you," Del Prado said behind them. "If you release me now, we'll be even."

"Your word is shit, asshole," Decker said, starting the van and getting them on the road. "I'll take my chances."

"You're signing a death warrant on your entire MC," the drug lord continued. "You won't even give them a chance to live."

Decker's fingers tightened on the steering wheel. "They're not going to pass up the opportunity to retaliate against the person who mercilessly slaughtered six of our brothers."

"Is this what you want? An endless cycle of violence?" Del Prado asked.

Viktor rolled his eyes. He had been determined to stay out of their business since he'd been involved more than he should, but he lost patience.

"You know what, Del Prado? Shut up. Just fucking shut up," Viktor growled. "You're a murderous son of a bitch. You whacked your sister's boyfriend because he didn't follow your orders. You killed your former lieutenant and his entire family. I'm talking three generations. The Black Eagle MC is not the first club you tried to wipe out. Need I say more?"

Del Prado was quiet for a beat and then said, "How do you know about Carlos?"

Carlos Reyes was Del Prado's sister's boyfriend. No one really knew who assassinated Carlos except the CIA because Del Prado was doing business for the agency that was off the books with the Lobos Juarez cartel. The deal was: the CIA cleaned up the mess with Carlos's assassination and buried the evidence that pointed to Del Prado, and the drug lord would reveal some information about a cocaine source in Colombia.

Carlos's father was also a drug lord in the cartel. Del Prado knew Viktor had him by his nuts, because if the cartel found out about Carlos . . . the penalty that would be levied against him could be worse than what the Black Eagle MC would do.

“Who are you?” Del Prado asked finally.

“No one.” Viktor turned on his seat and just stared into the night.

Their van pulled into the courtyard of the MC and was met by club members, their faces etched in grim optimism. The three injured men had been taken by ambulance to Stoneville County hospital. He spotted Marissa craning her neck anxiously at their vehicle. She remained in the background, probably not wanting to draw attention to herself. God, he needed to feel her against him, around him.

Bo pulled open the door of the van and dragged Del Prado out. “Come here, you little piece of shit.”

That appeared to be the majority sentiment, all right.

When Viktor exited the vehicle, a crowd gathered around him and started thumping his back. Women hugged him and even tried to kiss him on the mouth. By the time he reached Marissa, he’d received three offers for a blow job.

Viktor had even-keeled adrenalin curves. He was always calm in the worst situations, and his ability to compartmentalize was exceptional. In the past year, all that was shot to hell whenever Marissa was concerned—his weakness and his strength—and he wouldn’t change a damned thing. And right now, as the adrenalin withdrew from his system, he was reduced to an elemental need. The need to fuck. He was going to whisk her away where he could fuck the ever-loving shit out of her.

They were definitely not staying at Carl and Lana’s house.

Marissa’s eyes widened in shock when Viktor yanked her against him and kissed her full on the mouth. It was a torrid display with tongue, his fingers digging into her hair to keep her head in place as his mouth ravaged hers. Physical intimacy in front of strangers was uncharacteristic of him, and he didn’t give a fuck.

When he pulled away, he was pleased that Marissa was breathing hard and in a daze.

“Whoa!” She laughed shakily. “I missed you too, Viktor.”

“Iz,” Viktor murmured against her lips. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Baran,” Decker spoke behind him.

His arms remained possessively around Marissa as he turned to face the MC President.

“My club owes you,” Decker said.

“No big deal.”

“Marker,” Decker pushed. “And I’m bringing it up in the next meeting, but you and Marissa are friends of the club. You need the help of the club, you’ve got it.”

The declaration piqued the interest of the tactician in him. *Yes, the MC can be useful.*

Decker held out his hand. The contrast from their first meeting was not lost on Viktor.

With a wry grin, he shook the club president’s hand which ended up being a badass handshake.

“You in town for long?”

“Not sure; probably spending a day or two at Carl and Lana’s.”

“Might try to catch you before you leave.”

Viktor nodded and pulled Marissa alongside him. Time to go.

Viktor pushed her naked body up against the tiled walls of the shower.

He had stripped her the minute they got past the threshold of their hotel room, his mouth never leaving hers as they rocked their way quickly into the bathroom. He inspected the bandage on her arm and asked to see her wound.

“Later,” Marissa said. “It didn’t even need stitches.”

Viktor gently lathered her hair and massaged her scalp. He did it so well, Marissa swore she could orgasm just from the sensation. Then he quickly washed his own hair. Viktor had shaved his head recently for a mission, so right now he had closely cropped locks. She liked his hair a bit longer, but this shorter style made him look more dominant. As if he wasn’t domineering enough.

“What are you smiling about?” Viktor said against her lips as his fingers sought the apex of her thighs.

“You and your domineering ways.”

“You like my domineering ways.”

He slipped a finger inside her as she arched toward him, the slickness of their wet bodies stimulating every pore of her skin. And then he was on his knees with her right leg slung over his shoulder. He pressed his hot mouth against her slit, opening her folds with the urgency of his tongue. Her hips surged against his mouth as if she was desperate to get closer. Her head was tilted up against the punishing spray of the shower, but all she could feel was the growing pressure of desire deep inside her pelvis. Pulsing pleasure washed over her as she peaked, and her knees grew weak.

But he caught her. He always did.

She was lifted and then he was there. His hard, thick, beautiful cock nudging, seeking, and stretching her wet walls. Since her moisture kept washing away, it wasn't an easy slide. Viktor was always too big in the beginning. It never hurt, but Marissa felt every inch of him, and it was exhilarating. Right now he was in the mood for hard and fast. And he gave it to her and she took it.

She took all of him.

Her limbs tightened, her inner muscles clamped further as she felt him grow even harder inside her.

"I'm close, kitten," he grunted against her. "I can't hold back. I can't." His fingers reached down between them and played with her clit. A second orgasm overwhelmed her. He shuddered against her and groaned his release. Viktor lowered her body but hugged her tight, burying his face in the curve of her shoulder. A large man like Viktor practically shielded her from the entire water spray. Marissa could feel the thudding of his heart, the rise and fall of his shoulders, a sign of his labored breathing.

"Viktor, we're going to turn into prunes," Marissa said with amusement.

When he lifted his head to look at her, she was alarmed at the vulnerability in his eyes.

"Viktor, what's wrong?"

"I loathe myself for putting you in harm's way."

He let her go to turn off the water. He opened the shower door and reached for the towel and started drying her body.

"I got this, Viktor." Marissa took the towel from him. "Are you going to elaborate?"

“Not right now. Carl and Lana are expecting us at the diner.”

“You can’t just drop a bomb like that on me and say nothing afterward.”

Viktor shook his head. “I shouldn’t have . . . fuck . . . Marissa. You make me lose all control.”

“Okay.” Marissa looked at him warily. “Is that a good or a bad thing?”

“It’s good for you, bad for me. I can’t keep anything from you. One look into your eyes, and you have me baring my soul.” Viktor stared at the floor, a crooked grin on his face. “Shit. See what I mean. That was almost poetic.”

Marissa linked his fingers with hers and pulled herself closer to him. “But you’re only poetic with me, though. I’ll keep your secret. I won’t tell.”

Viktor huffed impatiently. “You better not, or I’ll lose all my tough guy street cred.”

Marissa giggled.

Viktor glared at her. “Get dressed Marissa before I call and cancel on Carl and Lana and fuck you over this sink.”

Marissa was supremely satiated as she finished the last crumbs of apple pie.

Lana’s Diner was a popular family restaurant in the town of Stoneville. Well known for home-cooked favorites like pot roast, chicken and dumplings and meatloaf, they were particularly packed during the winter months, especially given their assortment of pies. It was already 8:30 p.m. when Viktor and Marissa walked in, which was just as well for the diner was winding down, so Lana and Carl would be able to spend time with them.

“Things never change with you, Viktor,” Carl said. “Can’t believe you took care of the problem in less than 24 hours. So the Black Eagles are clear from the cartel?”

“Yes, the DEA swept in and took Antonio Del Prado away.” That was the official story and no one else outside the club, Viktor, Marissa, Tim and certain people in the DEA knew the real score. “It’s just Del Prado’s luck to choose to settle the score today.”

“He picked the wrong day,” Carl snorted.

Viktor smiled, but Marissa could tell there wasn’t any humor in it. He had just turned

over Del Prado to the MC—the drug lord’s grim fate was not in question. And though she knew he’d deal with it, it was no trivial decision. But in Viktor’s world, it had to be done.

“How are Jack and Maia doing?” Lana inquired. “Are they trying to get pregnant yet?”

Viktor took a sip of his coffee. “I’m the wrong person to ask such questions.”

Carl and Lana looked at Marissa. She pursed her lips and shook her head. “Ah . . . Maia and I don’t talk about kids.”

Truthfully, with the work they do, kids didn’t factor in the equation.

“How about the two of you?”

This time, Viktor almost choked on his coffee. Marissa patted him on his back.

“No. We’re not having kids. I’m too old to even think about it,” Marissa stated firmly.

Viktor glanced sharply at her. “We never had a conversation about kids. What makes you think I don’t want any?”

“You’re forty-seven, Viktor.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Are you saying you want to have kids?”

“I don’t know, but it would be nice to be conferred with before you make a blanket statement that *we* don’t want kids. We’re goddamned man and wife after all.”

“Okaaay, I think you need to take a chill pill, big guy,” Marissa said in a controlled voice, but she was really pissed that Viktor would go off on her this way in front of their friends. Carl looked quietly amused, but Lana was looking uncomfortable.

“Now, let me get this straight,” Carl said. “Are you saying you two never discussed kids before you got married?”

The silence at the table was a solid enough answer. Carl started chuckling. “This is just so damned funny.”

Lana glared at Carl. “I don’t think this is funny.”

Carl stopped chuckling.

Marissa sighed in irritation. “I think it was just an assumption on both our parts. We’re both busy with our careers, and we’re both at an advanced age where kids—what?”

Viktor was scowling at her. “Why do I get a feeling that the advanced age is really about

me.”

“Will you stop being paranoid?”

“You’re only thirty-seven; I’m ten years older. What did you expect?”

“I haven’t seen Viktor insecure in a long time. Not since he was fourteen when he was a scrawny kid.” Carl winked at Marissa, but winced when Lana apparently kicked him under the table.

Marissa winced as well. She remembered the brief time when Viktor got a little bit touchy with her silver-spoon upbringing. Though it never became a problem again, her dad and Viktor would never be smoking cigars together any time soon. At least they were more than civil with each other.

“Viktor, how many times do I have to tell you that you look better than guys half your age?”

And that’s the whole truth. Marissa felt herself getting wet between her legs at the memory of all those hard muscles rippling under the shower earlier. That was hot.

He snorted. “You don’t have to remind me. And FYI, that wasn’t insecurity. You just keep bringing up my age and my advanced years. Are you challenging me on something?”

Jesus. Criminy. Can someone please shoot me? Marissa fumed.

Her husband obviously had a bone to pick. And Marissa didn’t really think it was insecurity, so what the freaking freak was it? It was time to change the subject.

“How is Don?”

Lana picked up on her cue and was more than willing to steer the conversation elsewhere. “The doctors said if they can keep the infections at bay, recovery will be on course.”

“That’s good. Did they say how long he’s going to be at the hospital?”

“Another three weeks, I think.”

“Wasn’t that how long Maia was at the hospital?” Marissa asked Viktor.

“She spent almost a month from what I remember.”

“Does Maia still travel a lot?” Lana asked.

“No. She rarely leaves DC nowadays.” Viktor took another sip of his coffee.

“How about you, Marissa?”

“I’m scaling back on foreign assignments.” Carl and Lana didn’t know Marissa worked for the CIA but knew she worked in some type of security business. She was preparing to resign her post at the CIA anyway to transition into helping her brother, Trent, start his security company. The enterprise would be at a lesser scale than AGS in terms of manpower and equipment and not as sophisticated. The plan would be to start out as contractors to learn the ropes from Viktor’s outfit. Viktor was very much amenable to that. Her control freak husband didn’t want her traveling, but was fine with her continuing in a similar career.

Viktor was a very complex man, and somehow they just fit. Not only because of their combustible chemistry in bed, but because they sparred intellectually and clashed wills. Both of them were versed in world politics and how it affected covert operations. Their late night arguments frequently ended up being foreplay.

Just then the diner door chimed.

A stone-faced Bo walked in and headed straight for their table.

“Bo, is everything okay?” Marissa asked before anyone could utter a word.

“I need a word with you, princess,” Bo said, eyeing Viktor with a challenge in his eyes.

“Anything you say to my wife, you can say in front of me,” Viktor announced scathingly.

Bo smiled briefly but looked down at his boots not saying anything. When he looked up, his eyes sought her green ones.

Marissa had a feeling the biker was infatuated with her, and her man was sensing that vibe and was not happy.

Time to diffuse the situation.

“Carl, didn’t you say you needed help to move the big mixer to a different location in the kitchen?” Marissa asked.

Carl looked tentatively between her and Viktor and said, “Uh, yeah ... want to do it now, man?”

“Not particularly.”

Unbelievable, Marissa thought. She looked pleadingly at Lana.

“Viktor, it would really help if we moved it tonight. I need to start the dough at 4:00 a.m. tomorrow morning,” Lana said.

Her husband grunted and got out of the booth. He stood eye-to-eye with Bo who really tried to hold Viktor's gaze but couldn't.

"Look, man, I just need to give her something."

Viktor's jaw tightened. "Whatever. Don't cross the line." Then he stalked off into the kitchen.

Marissa scooted out of the booth. "Come on. Let's head out back."

They exited the diner into the parking lot.

Marissa forgot how chilly it was, and she left her sweater inside so she hugged her arms around her.

"Cold? Want my jacket?"

She sighed. "What do you want, Bo?"

"I'm not looking for trouble," he said. "But I have to get this off my chest. I wanted you to know that you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Marissa resisted the urge to roll her eyes because he sounded so sincere. "You just haven't met a woman who can kick your ass."

Bo grinned. "That too. I can't stop thinking about you."

"Understandable. We've been involved in a life and death situation."

"You're brushing off what I feel."

Now that pissed her off. "Bo, your feelings are yours. And I'm flattered that you feel that way. What do you want me to say? I'm married. The feelings of my husband are my priority. So if you think I'll say something you want to hear so I can spare your feelings, you've got another thing coming."

"I thought we had a connection."

"We were happy to be alive." Marissa knew the moment Bo was referring to. After their three captors were incapacitated, the biker wrapped his arms around her, clenching her body tight against him and refused to leave her side. He held her hand while they patched up the flesh wound on her arm.

"I really don't want to cause trouble," Bo mumbled and held out a flash drive.

"What's this?"

“The footage of what happened at the clubhouse. What you did was so smoking hot, I made a copy. I argued with myself all fuckin’ night that it ain’t right. That I could get you into trouble if someone managed to get my copy and upload it to the cloud or whatever fuck they call it nowadays. You saved everyone at the club, Marissa.”

Marissa took the flash drive from Bo. Putting her life on the line had always been a part of her job, but she had always worked in the shadows and rarely got commended publicly, so Bo’s gratitude made her uncomfortable. “You guys would have figured something out. Is this the last copy?”

“Yes. Prez was pissed at me. Said you guys risked so much and the least we could do is protect your cover—whatever agency you may belong to.”

“Decker is right.”

“I’m sorry, princess.”

“Hey. No harm. No foul. Okay?”

The biker nodded.

“So, have you guys taken care of Del Prado?”

Bo was an attractive-looking guy with scruffy and boyish good looks, but at the mention of the drug lord, his face turned something fierce. “We’re having church in half an hour and deciding what we’ll do with him.”

“How’s your VP and the rest of the guys Viktor and Decker rescued?”

“They’ll be making a full recovery. They’ve got broken ribs, burns, and various cuts and lacerations that probably needed hundreds of stitches between them. They won’t be as pretty as they used to be,” Bo said and gave a short humorless laugh. “But fuck they’re lucky to be alive. Pace had some internal bleeding, but it’s under control.”

The backdoor of the diner opened and Viktor emerged. He just stood there with his arms folded across his chest, watching them.

Time was up.

“Listen, I need to turn in. Thanks for the flash drive.” Marissa made her voice loud enough for Viktor to hear.

Bo made to kiss her cheek; Marissa evaded. She leaned back, her body language obvious.

Shaking his head in resignation, the biker held out his hand. They shook hands and that was it.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the big scheme of things, Viktor didn't know what the fuck was wrong with him. He'd been petty and short with Marissa and for a grown-ass man like him that was laughable. But when it boiled down to it, he didn't know how to do normal shit. He'd managed to switch it off during their honeymoon. It wasn't a challenge. Sun, beach, naked woman, it wasn't any hardship.

The events of today were bizarre. He couldn't remember a time that he'd taken a relaxing vacation. His idea of taking time off was tinkering with his cars. And to come back from doing nothing straight into an unpredictable op, was not exactly how he would have wanted it to go down. That ate at him. How little control he had over the Del Prado takedown. And now, having to sit down in a diner in front of people he'd known for more than half of his life, he just felt jumpy because they *knew* him, and Carl was only one of the few men—okay the only man—who could take all his moods in stride. Carl and Lana knew him before he joined the Army, knew the boy who'd grown up in the projects, who blamed himself for Carl's sister's death. They knew him. And Marissa? The woman who turned him inside out? He was fucking vulnerable and he hated it.

So he retreated to what he did best—being a jackass.

And Carl called him on it, fuck him.

Right now, Marissa was walking back to him after sending Bo the dickhead biker away. He wasn't jealous. *Pfft*. Why should he be? That boy wouldn't be able to keep Marissa satisfied like he could. She was made for him—Viktor Baran—and no fucking inked schmuck in leather was going to steal her from him.

He'd kill him first.

Nope. Not jealous at all.

But if Viktor ever caught him looking at his woman the way he did at the diner again he was going to take his eye out.

Fuck. He was jealous. *Fuck me.*

Marissa took one of his hands folded into his chest, drew it down to her side, and moved closer to him. Her upturned face searched his questioningly. “What’s wrong with you tonight? You’ve been snapping at me.”

Viktor grunted, “Don’t know.”

“Still amped up?”

“Not sure.”

“It was a trying day, Viktor. It’s okay to feel unsettled.”

Viktor bit back a defensive retort. He wasn’t about to dig a deeper hole. For one thing, Marissa didn’t deserve it, and for another, he had a better idea.

“Wanna go for a drive?”

“Sure. But we need to pull the roof up.”

“Of course.”

They said their good-byes to Carl and Lana and made their way to their convertible.

“Any place in particular you want to go?” Viktor asked.

“Stoneville was an unexpected stop. So I haven’t researched anything. Just drive.”

“All right, sweetheart.”

Viktor drove in silence for a while. Marissa was watching the scenery pass by. The sky had been a brilliant blue earlier, and now it had been replaced by a blue-black canvass dotted with millions of stars. He tried to think back to a time when he looked at the sky and just admired its beauty. He couldn’t remember. Because every time he thought about the light from the moon or the stars was in terms of how much concealment or problem it would present for a mission. This paradigm shift felt profound. He was feeling human, appreciating surroundings for what they were, how normal people reacted around them.

It fucking scared him, but he had Marissa. She kept him sane, assuring him that being human didn’t mean he couldn’t do his job.

Except when it came to her.

“You’re quiet, Viktor.”

“Thinking.”

“About—”

“How I’ve changed.”

He felt her tense beside him.

“I’m not regretting it, Marissa,” he hurriedly added. Might as well tell her what was grating on him. “I was scared shitless today.”

“What?”

“When Del Prado brought in that laptop in the room, and I saw you on the screen, I had a flashback to that day when Rafiq held that gun against Maia’s head. I was forced to make a decision.”

“This time it wasn’t your decision to make.”

“I know. I hated that, and I couldn’t do a damn thing. I would have killed them all. If Del Prado told me to shoot Decker to save you I wouldn’t have hesitated.”

“You’d probably have shot Del Prado first.”

“Then I realized what I should have done. I shouldn’t have driven the truck. Fuck the MC. I shouldn’t have left you.”

“Viktor—”

“This wasn’t a fucking mission. Not my fight—”

“Viktor—”

“I. Shouldn’t. Have. Left. You.” Viktor bit off. “What happened with Rafiq should’ve have made me think that Del Prado would pull something like this on us.”

“Del Prado is a sick bastard. You couldn’t have—”

Marissa gasped as the convertible violently pulled to the side of the road, skidding and then halting abruptly.

He was pumped full of need, and he couldn’t shake off the feeling of failing her.

He released his seatbelt and then hers so he could turn in his seat and pull her against him. His fingers drew her face close to his.

“You are my wife!” he snarled. “My responsibility is to you. To keep you safe, to protect you. To hell with everyone else. I told you once before, Iz. I would damn the whole world for you, and I nearly ended us before we even started.”

“Viktor, I’m okay . . . you’re okay.”

“I fucking nearly lost you!” he roared into her face and then crushed her to him. “I nearly lost you . . .” he choked. He didn’t recognize his voice. Emotions flooded up inside him like a dam about to break, and he was helpless to stop the rupture. He knew he was acting irrationally because, like Marissa stated, everything ended up okay—that fucking Del Prado was probably getting his fingers chopped off right now. But, it wasn’t okay.

When he made the decision to help the MC, he thought Marissa would be protected from everything. He was putting only himself at risk, and he realized too late that he hadn’t considered what she would be feeling if he’d did this and the consequences if something happened to him. It was only when some of Del Prado’s men remained at the clubhouse that the ramifications hit him. He was damned glad he saved those men, but if he knew then what he knew now, he wouldn’t have gotten on that truck and left his wife to be murdered by the whims of a madman.

“Not my fight,” he whispered into her hair.

“Viktor—”

“I need to fuck you.”

“Seriously, big guy? It’s kinda cramped in here.”

Viktor lifted his head and his eyes dropped to her lips. He was already semi-hard and imagining her lips wrapped around him only made him harder.

“Not too cramped for a blow job.” Fuck, he was going to come in his pants. He liked talking dirty to her. Forceful, dirty talking. “I need some part of you around my dick.” He needed to feel her. Own her. Dominate her. Shoot his cum into her mouth.

He carefully pulled his zipper down. He went commando today.

“Iz?” He rested his forehead on hers. “Will you let me fuck your face?”

“Isn’t that the only option available?”

“I’m going to be rough.”

She stilled for a beat before relaxing then smiled, “Anything you need, Viktor.”

He needed control.

His hands fisted into her hair as he yanked her head back before guiding it down on his crotch. His cock pulsed in anticipation. He threw his head back against the back rest as Marissa's warm moist mouth wrapped around him, her hand gripping his cock and, in perfect unison, she proceeded to suck him off. She let him control the speed, and in his hunger to re-establish his rein on his emotions, he pumped his hips up at the same time he pushed her head against his crotch. The thought that he might be gagging her was a faint warning in the back of his mind. His spine was tensing, his balls were tightening, and all he could think about was his fingers gripping her hair, the perfect symphony of her mouth and hand strumming the nerve endings on his shaft like a maestro directing his release . . . no . . . no . . . he controlled this . . . he pushed her down. He felt her teeth scrape his cock in warning—she was at her limit—so he eased up.

He'd been quiet since they started, but now he was feeling vocal.

“Fuck . . . Fuck . . . I'm coming, Iz.” His feet jerked in front of him as his orgasm staggered him. “Holy shit . . . fuck damn it!”

His cum geysered into her mouth and she moaned, the vibration driving him mad. He flexed his hips, his right hand still buried in her hair while his left hand gripped the car door desperately. It felt like he was coming for an eternity.

All through this, Marissa took him, licked him, and swirled her tongue and when he finally released her, she pushed back primly into her seat and reached for her purse.

The visor light came on as Marissa checked her appearance and wiped her mouth.

Him? The restless energy that thrummed through his veins since his return from Bear Creek had left him. Calm and peace washed over him; it was almost cathartic.

“Feeling better?” Marissa's green eyes gleamed dark in the car.

“Yeah.” He was still breathing hard and his heart was still galloping.

“Worn out?”

He tucked in his dick and pulled the zipper up. “I'm not done.”

Marissa's panties were drenched. It wasn't the first time Viktor had been rough with blow

jobs. He used them to establish control whenever she was being a smart-ass just to piss him off, but tonight it wasn't to assert his dominance over her, but more to gain control over his emotions that, in his mind, he had lost. He'd been acting out of character since his return from Bear Creek and now she knew why.

What was very in-character for Viktor? His need for sex. And although he used physical intimacies to work through his issues, he'd been opening up more and more. His explanations were short, but they were raw and sincere. It was hard to believe that he was the man from a year ago.

He wasn't kidding when he said he wasn't done.

They hadn't even made it past the hallway leading to the bedroom when he lifted her up against the half-oval table against the wall. He kissed her, his hands going to the button of her jeans, her zipper, yanking them with her panties down her legs, and growling in frustration when he struggled to find the zipper of her boots. And when he finally stripped her of clothing from her lower body, he remained kneeling and without further hesitation, ate her. His tongue was an aggressive wet roughness against her core. It wasn't his regular rhythm and was something incredibly frenzied and feral.

She shot off like a rocket and screamed his name. She moaned louder, and he licked harder.

And then suddenly he was inside her, hitting her hard and deep.

"You drive me crazy," he growled in her ear. And that was it. He grunted like an animal as he took her to heights she was sure she had taken before. But with Viktor it was always new, always better than the last time. It was fucking yet making love.

He shifted her legs and rested them on his shoulders, pulled her to the very edge of the table, wrapped his arms around her legs and, gripping her ankles, he continued to slam into her—hard, fast thrusts that stoked the flaming sensation of her building orgasm.

"Marissa . . ." he said hoarsely, leaning in briefly to kiss her. "I love you, kitten." He continued pounding into her and when she fractured into her climax, she realized that her butt was dangling; her weight was supported by her arms with her hands gripping the table. Viktor followed her into her release, his fingers marginally tightening around her ankles as he poured

into her. Her ass hit the cold copper top, as he loosened his hold on her legs and partially collapsed into her. She lowered her legs and wrapped them around him, allowing him to be flush with her body. He was still moving inside her, and she was still pulsing around him. Viktor started nuzzling her neck and leaving kisses along the edge of her jaw. A sheen of sweat covered their faces, the heat between their bodies melding them together in an afterglow that was elementally satiating.

“You realize we’ve had sex in this room twice and never yet on the bed,” Marissa said, still breathless.

Viktor chuckled. “That can be remedied.”

She was scooped up in his arms and dropped on the bed in a blink of an eye. Or maybe after that mind-numbing bout of fucking, her brain was slow in catching up.

“Hold on! Give me a sec.” Marissa laughed as Viktor landed on top of her. He started pulling off her top. “Viktor, wait. I’m still trying to figure out if my limbs are out of whack. You’ve given my triceps quite a workout.”

“Shit. Did I hurt you?” He pushed up on his elbows and searched her face.

“No. You didn’t, but you have a way of testing my flexibility. Nothing but a little rest won’t cure.”

“I’ll run you a bath.”

“Relax, Viktor. I’m fine,” Marissa reached out and touch his face. “That was amazing, by the way.”

He grinned crookedly. “Yeah, I think we’ve ruined the wall though. That table was banging really hard against it.”

Marissa stifled a giggle. “I’m just glad we’re the corner suite or our neighbor might be banging down our door.”

“I’m running you a bath whether you like it or not.” Viktor made to pull away.

“My after-care can wait,” Marissa teased. “You haven’t worked me *that* hard. I’d prefer it if you just hold me for a bit.” She squinted her eyes at him. “And why aren’t you naked?”

“I like the way you think,” Viktor muttered as he stripped his clothes off. He crawled back into bed and gathered her into his arms. “You’re ten years younger than me; why can’t you

keep up?”

“I’m not a freak of nature,” Marissa retorted. That earned her a sharp squeeze. “Admit it. You’re some kind of super-human.”

Viktor kissed the top of her head. “Or, I simply can’t get enough of you.”

His words squeezed her heart. When had Viktor become so sweet?

“I love you so much,” Marissa whispered. “I don’t want you to have doubts of what you did today—”

“Iz—”

“Hear me out, Viktor.” He kept quiet so she continued. “You did what you did because that’s you. Am I making sense? And I fell in love with *you*—the take-no-prisoners tough guy. It’s hard for me to explain this, and I might fumble a little, but here goes. I was scared when you decided to go with Decker because you were unprepared. You take your time studying an op before heading in, and with this you only had a few hours. Was I mad? No. Did it occur to me that you should have put our relationship first . . . maybe . . . in the back of my head I did. But what was first and foremost in my mind was *God, I love this man . . . please bring him back to me safely.*” Marissa tilted her head up to take a peek at Viktor. His face was impassive right now. “What I’m saying is, you’ve got great gut instincts, Viktor. I’ll always stand by your decision because in the end, I trust you. If I argue with you, just hear me out, but whatever you decide, know that I will never blame you for anything when it goes wrong. That incident with the nerve gas made me look real hard into myself to accept the man you are, to be what you need.” Marissa shifted in his arms, propping her up on her elbows so she could look him in his eyes. “Because, Viktor. You. Are. What. I. Need.”

Viktor’s lips were twitching. Marissa’s brows pulled together. He better not burst out laughing because she’d never felt more emotionally vulnerable and exposed than now.

“I think,” Viktor drawled. “I have the perfect way to show you just how much I need you.”

He shot into a sitting position and flipped her right on her back, and before she could gasp, he had thrust inside her.

Viktor shut the faucet of the bathtub, testing the heat of the water with his fingers. He chucked another bath bomb into the water. Marissa had her own stash of bathing essentials in that huge case she called her vanity bag. She'd bought a couple of new ones to try when they were in Hawaii. He looked at the plastic covering he tore off from one . . . *Plumeria*. Imagining the scent of it on her skin was causing his cock to swell again.

Jesus, Baran, give your woman a break.

Though their last fuck on the bed started out gentle, he always ended up like a rutting brute in the end. He couldn't help it. Whenever he tried to go slow, she always spurred him to fuck her harder. And when Marissa did that it just set him off. And he loved it. Judging by the self-satisfied grin on her face after they had finished, he was pleased that she loved it too.

He prowled back to the bedroom where his wife was sprawled languidly on the mattress. Everything—the fucking, the talk, and more fucking—had brought him back into stasis. He loved Marissa to the very depth of his soul. What she said moved him, and the guilt from today was gone, because Viktor always dealt with the consequences of his actions. But he would fight until his last breath to keep her safe. It would be challenging, given the nature of their jobs, but he would always watch over her. Because if anything happened to Marissa, that would be it. His life would be over because she was his life.

“Come on, kitten,” Viktor lifted his sleepy wife from the bed. “Water is nice and hot.”

“Viktor,” she murmured lazily. “Love you, big guy.”

“I love you, too, Iz.”

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