

Sunshine and Blue Skies

by

Mina Guadalupe

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Assassins, Assignments, and Acrobatics:

How I juggled a character driven plot

- i. I stumbled face first into my senior project story. The project began as a short story for my Fiction 1 class. The deadline was looming over me and I needed to write something to hand in for critique. I decided to write a character study. I've always been interested in characters and how authors get readers to love them. I spent a lot of time trying to think of what kind of character I wanted to write about. I ended up settling on two ideas. I thought to myself 'What is something horrible a person can do?' The answer I reached was 'Kill someone'. So I started writing about an assassin. My next question turned Maxwell into the character he is now. The question was, 'What is a redeemable quality a person can have?' and, for some reason, the first answer that came to mind was, 'Being a good father'. It's an odd first thought but the idea of a brooding and cruel assassin coming home to a loving family is an interesting take on the edgy assassin idea that most assassin stories have. With those two ideas in mind, Maxwell's story was born.
- ii. The story was received much better than I thought it would be. I wrote three versions of it before I handed it in and I expected the class to hate it. Most of my classmates told me it was very cinematic and they'd want to watch it as a movie. I'd thought of the story as something to throw straight into the trash after it was done. I wasn't entirely proud of it but after the workshop, *Sunshine and Blue Skies* always stayed in the back of my mind. When I finally got to my senior project, Maxwell had spent so much time in my head that I couldn't picture writing anything else for a story.

- iii. As I've been writing the story over again for my senior project, I've found a lot of things that came into being without my knowing. The first being the juxtaposition between innocence and Maxwell's job. More often than not, many assassin stories are edgy and full of dark characters. I didn't want to write a general assassin story with an edgy plot line but rather a more fun story that was character driven. So, I started working on the other characters that would be around Maxwell. His husband, Dylan, was one of the hardest to make decisions about. I wanted Maxwell to be a more energetic man with a quirky and fun personality while Dylan was the more serious one to balance him out. The first drafts of his character didn't have him as an assassin at all but I didn't like the cliché of Maxwell keeping something from his husband. Having the two of them as assassins being chased by others made it easier to write the plot. A few scenes always seem to stick out to people and it's always the juxtaposition. Maxwell sticking Sunshine's bright sparkling sticker to his gun's magazine before killing a man, Dylan having a knife fight in a playroom, the main villain being introduced in a carnival where he's trying to win a stuffed animal, all of these are examples of how I tried to show the reader a brooding bloody world but put a fun twist on it through the idea of innocence that characters like Sunshine embody.
- iv. The character driven plot came alive as the story progressed. With each chapter, characters appeared and disappeared. Only specific characters were made from the very beginning with a direct idea about who they were. There was Maxwell, our protagonist, who is an assassin with a silly personality. There was Dylan, Maxwell's husband and a world renowned assassin with a mean streak. Their child, Sunshine, was a quick character

to create with a bright and bubbly personality. Of all the characters who came to life first, the most important was Peter, the villain. A story is nothing without a good villain and I had to work hard before I even started writing the first words of the more serious drafts to make sure that he was a good villain that worked with the rest of the story. Other characters such as Sonia, Peter's right hand, and Yegor, Maxwell and Dylan's previous lover, came after the story's wheels started turning. As I gained momentum in the plot, other characters came into play who I hadn't expected to appear. I found myself not in control of the story. I was an onlooker in their world who frantically wrote down what they were doing and saying. I believe the best stories are written this way - the story controls you, not the other way around.

- v. A set back came from this style of writing. New world building such as the bounty pledges, a way that their society keeps track of who has taken a bounty or not, came into play and then were never mentioned again. As I frantically wrote down what was happening, a lot of it got lost in translation. I'd forget about minor characters and then realize they were gone without context. I'd contradict previous chapters without knowing it. Most of my difficulties came from trying to keep the continuity of the story in line. But instead of letting it get me down, I juggled. I let it strengthen my editing skills. I began to keep little notes about the world itself and the characters that I could reference later. With later chapters written, it was easier to edit the beginning because I knew what I wanted now. The story had come easily and now I had to shape it into something that others could read and enjoy. The story fit into the action and comedy genre but as it progressed it began to move in different directions. Editing helped me grab hold of the reins of my

story and shape it into what I needed it to be to tell the most effective story while still keeping the same voice.

- vi. The story itself has been an idea in the making for years now and holding the first nine chapters in my hands is almost unbelievable. It isn't over but I can't wait to hold a finished novel in my hands. With each new workshop, I learn more and others tell me more about how to improve. Each draft improves in one way or another and the more I work on it, the closer to get to the best version that I can get. I want my story to be viewed by others as a fun novel with interesting characters and a deeper plot than they originally thought when they picked it up. But until I get there, I must keep writing new additions. Through action, comedy, and family, as a writer I try to craft a newer spin on the assassin genre and make this one more about family than about blood.

SUNSHINE AND BLUE SKIES

By Mina Guadalupe

CHAPTER ONE

Moscow, Russia

Rooftops were a second home to Maxwell. He'd spent the larger part of his life on top of old buildings waiting. Above him, the rolling Moscow clouds had been stretched and skinned to fit the expanse of the sky. They reminded him of his daughter, Sunshine, standing in front of her easel painting little mountain and sunsets. She liked puffy clouds better than the stringy ones he was staring at now.

Maxwell looked down at his chiming Mickey Mouse watch. His phone rang a second later. "Hey, Del. You're as punctual as ever. I guess some things never change."

DeLeon always talked as if someone were listening in. "Adults are supposed to be on time. You wouldn't understand."

Maxwell smiled to himself. His eyes followed a drifting cloud shaped like a flower. "I'm an adult. I pay a mortgage and everything."

"Are you in position?"

Maxwell flipped over onto his stomach, his legs kicked in the air behind him. "Yep," he said popping the 'p' at the end. "I'm a professional." He looked over the edge of the building. He was in perfect view of the hotel terrace two blocks away. The fancy hedges were cut into pristine squares. The lights were low enough that you'd never see how much you were spending on dinner. A small crowd of people was forming in blobs of color.

“I’ll never understand parties like this. Everyone’s ‘fashionably late’. Dressing up to impress people you hate. Listening to some douchebag talk about his new yacht while you try to decide if you should kill yourself with the fish knife or the salad fork.”

“Maxwell, this job is important. You have to focus.”

“I know, Del,” He was already picturing never having to hear his voice again. “And after this is done, I don’t owe you anything, got it?”

DeLeon sighed. “Yes.”

Maxwell nodded once to himself and turned to his bag. A small chirping sound came from it and he pulled out his other phone. He grinned to himself. “I’ll call you back. I’ve got a very important call to answer.” He didn’t wait for an answer before he hung up. He tossed the flip phone into his bag and opened the other. “And how is my favorite person in the whole wide world?”

“I’m good, Papa,” Sunshine’s little voice sounded far away. “Are you busy?”

“I’m never too busy for you,” Maxwell said leaning back against his bag. He checked his watch again. He had time. “Is your Daddy being good?”

“I’m always good,” Dylan said from somewhere in the back of the call. “You’re not causing too much trouble, are you?”

“Who? Me? Never.” Maxwell said. “I’m being an upstanding citizen.” He looked over the rooftop at the gathering again as the lights brightened. The opening announcements would be starting soon. “In fact, I’m taking out the trash right now.”

“Well, be careful,” Dylan said. “Sunshine and I want you home in one piece.”

Sunshine agreed. “Daddy burned breakfast.” She paused. “He told me not to tell you.”

She whispered.

“Sunshine, you promised.” Dylan said.

Maxwell snorted. “I’ll be coming home soon and I’ll make the biggest stack of pancakes ever. Okay, Pumpkin?”

His eyes darted over to the gathering again. The small platform by the furthest wall of the terrace was occupied now. Maxwell began rummaging through his bag. “Have you painted anything new since I left?”

“Yep,” Sunshine said, popping the ‘p’ at the end. “Daddy showed me pictures of M-Moscow.” The word fumbled out of her mouth and she repeated it a few times trying to get it right. “I painted snowy trees.”

“I can’t wait to see them.” He pictured Sunshine sitting on the little seat by the biggest window. Her light brown skin and thick inky hair always ended up covered in paint instead of getting it on the canvas. Dylan called it ‘living art’. He looked around. “The sky here is a pretty blue. I think you’d like it.”

“What kind of blue?”

He could hear her turning pages in her art book. “Zaffre or sapphire? Ooh! Is it cornflower blue?”

“I’ll say sapphire,” Maxwell made a mental note to look up zaffre later. The sky reminded him of the stones in the earrings Sunshine’s grandmother had given her for her birthday last year. She’d been in the middle of her ‘blue period’ when he’d left the house and he wished he could see her.

Dylan's voice called out to Sunshine. His Italian accent kicked at the back of his teeth. "Sunny, go get your shoes." There was a scuffle as the phone switched hands. "Are you almost done?" Dylan asked.

"Yep, keep the kettle on, *amore mio*, I'll be home by tomorrow." Maxwell pulled the parts of his rifle out of his bag and began to assemble them. "Don't worry so much."

Dylan sighed. "You never worry about anything. Someone has to be the anxious one in this relationship."

"Dylan, this is like riding a bike. You never really forget." Maxwell looked at his scope for any damage in his travels.

"I know but I can't help it. It's been a long time since you did a job on your own. What if you shoot yourself in the foot? Worse, what if you miss?"

"Why does no one have faith in me today?" Maxwell wondered aloud. "Is it me? Am I not scary anymore? I once hit a man from 200 yards away with no scope and everyone's treating me like I don't know the difference between a M14 and an AR-14." He looked up again. The man had switched out on the podium for another promotional speaker. Maxwell groaned.

"I know first hand what you're capable of," Dylan said. "I just worry. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you."

"You'd turn my ashes into a record and listen to me every day while weeping over the loss of the greatest man on earth." Maxwell said. Dylan made an angry sound. Maxwell winced. His husband didn't like it when he joked like that. Death was a real thing to them. It was true that one wrong move and Maxwell wouldn't come home but he'd become numb to the idea of death

a long time ago. Sometimes he forgot that there was a lot more waiting for him now than just an empty motel room and a microwave dinner.

He did a quick count of his bullets. "I'm not going to get hurt so stop jinxing me." He attached the parts of his gun with his hands and held the phone between his shoulder and cheek. Dylan didn't answer. Maxwell relaxed into the silence. Dylan needed a distraction. "You have more pressing issues. Like making sure Sunshine gets to school on time. You know Helen gives you dirty looks when you're late."

"I don't care what Helen thinks of me." Dylan said, the frown clear in his voice. "Her kids smell like ketchup and have dirty fingernails."

Maxwell grinned. Dylan adapted well enough to their lives in Cleveland. Taking out the trash, family dinners, fights at PTA meetings. He'd never say it because Dylan would knock him clear into next Tuesday but Dylan was about as close to a soccer mom as a person could get.

"You don't want to give her something to talk about at the next PTA meeting do you?"

"The only thing they'll be talking about is her store bought cookies that she tries to pass as home made. She had the nerve to comment on my blueberry muffins."

Maxwell listened to Dylan tell him about what the others said at the last meeting. He fit the last of the pieces into his gun. They snapped into place like puzzle pieces.

"I've killed for less," Dylan grumbled under his breath. He sighed and talked louder. "If she thinks I won't kick her ass in front of a bunch of preschoolers, she's wrong."

"Swear." Sunshine and Maxwell said.

Dylan sighed. "Sunny, your shoes are on the wrong feet."

"But I only have two feet." She said.

Maxwell smiled as he snapped the scope onto his rifle. The distant sound of applause caught his ear and he saw the final speaker come up. "I've got to call you back. Papa has an important meeting to go to."

They said their goodbyes and Maxwell's heart ached as Dylan hung up. Pushing away the feeling, he tossed his bag off to the side. He settled onto his stomach and checked the padding of his gloves for any holes before getting into position.

Just as he was about to look down the scope, something bright sparkled in his peripherals. A bright rainbow sticker was stuck to the corner of his bag. He peeled it off and looked it over. It was neon and sparkly with the words 'I love you' written in white. He smiled and stuck the sticker to the magazine of his gun.

Through the scope, he caught sight of Nathan Ivanov, petty embezzler. Nathan was way above his pay grade but Maxwell wasn't complaining. Easy job, easy out. He'd never have to set foot in Moscow again after this. He'd go home to Sunshine and Dylan and leave all this behind him again.

Nathan's hands were slammed against the brown podium in front of him. Sunshine's little voice came into the back of Maxwell's mind. 'No, it's carob.' He remembered shopping for paints and the very lengthy discussion Sunshine had had with him when he'd made the mistake of saying all the browns looked the same.

Down below, one of Nathan's security personnel stepped out of the way as he fanned his hand out to emphasize something. A small part of Maxwell wondered what he was talking about. His mouth opened and shut in rapid fire Russian. Maxwell couldn't make out most of it but he

didn't need to. No one could get that red in the face and be preaching peace. He waited for Nathan to stop flailing long enough for a clear line of sight.

Maxwell took a deep breath and released it. He squeezed the trigger. Red filled his scope. On instinct, the shell shot out of the chamber and Maxwell caught it in the air. It had taken him a few years to perfect the trick but now he could do it without looking. He felt the shell's warmth through his thick glove like he was holding an open flame in his palm. The shell lost most of its heat and Maxwell started taking apart his gun.

Removing his gloves and hoodie, he looked down at the suit he had on. He hated the suits but he'd fit in in an office space. He waited until the bullet had cooled and slipped it into his sock.

The latches of his bag snapped shut and he was off. There were twenty four floors between him and the exit. He gave the security personnel twenty minutes before they figured out where the bullet had come from and performed enough crowd control to call the police and get to his location. He only needed ten to get out of the building. He slipped his gun in his suit jacket.

He slid down the railing from the rooftop to the twenty fourth floor and opened the door. Walking out, he got into the elevator. A man walked in with him dressed in a dark brown suit. "Hallo," he said. He clicked on the third floor button. The button went out. The man sighed and clicked it again. This time it lit up and stayed lit. The lights flickered.

"Hallo," Maxwell said bopping to the elevator music.

The elevator stopped at the third floor and the other man got out.

The doors slid closed and the lights blinked again. Maxwell pulled out his cell phone and redialed the house phone. Talking on the phone helped him blend into the crowd. He was just another business man. Sunshine picked up.

“You’re not at school yet?” Maxwell said.

“Daddy’s late.”

“Daddy is exactly on time.” Dylan’s voice came from somewhere in the back. “She lost her sketchbook again. Sunny, where did you last see it?”

“I put it next to the door so we wouldn’t be late.” Sunshine whined.

Even distressed, it was nice to hear her voice again. Her little voice helped take his mind off of what he’d just done. The smell of death that clung to his skin wasn’t so pungent when she was around.

“I leave for three days and it’s pande-” Maxwell was cut off as the elevator lurched. He looked around. He clicked the button. He wasn’t moving anymore. He pursed his lips. “Pumpkin, put Daddy on the phone.”

A scuffle. “What is it?” Dylan said.

“I’m stuck in an elevator.”

Dylan was quiet for the longest second. “Why are you in an elevator?” he whisper-yelled. “You should have taken the stairs.”

“Dylan, who takes the stairs? No one. That would look so suspicious.”

Dylan sighed. “How long have you been in the building?”

Maxwell looked at his watch. “Seven minutes. I’ve got about thirteen left.” He looked around. “I could wait it out but it’ll attract attention if no one has noticed the elevators out already.”

Dylan whispered lower. “Maxwell, if you get arrested, I’m not flying all the way to Russia to break you out of jail.”

Maxwell clenched his chest. “I thought you loved me.”

“Pry the doors, you idiot.”

“Sure, I’ll just use the crowbar I have lying around.” Maxwell said.

“Maxwell, I need you to take something serious for once in your life. Pry the doors with your hands. Worse case scenario, you’re stuck in between floors and can’t get out.”

“Worse case scenario is if I get halfway out and the elevator starts again and I’m cut in half.” Maxwell said.

Dylan took a long, deep breath. “Maxwell. Pry the doors open.”

Maxwell sighed, hanging up the phone. He hit the stop button and mumbled as he tried to pry the doors open. It took more effort than he thought it would but he managed to get a little space above to the second floor. “This is ridiculous.” He hoisted himself up. The gun on his belt caught halfway through and he growled. He yanked his body hard and he slid further out. If only the others could see him now. Sonia would never stop laughing. Maxwell pushed the thought of the others away. He hadn’t spoken to his old associates in years, he didn’t want to be thinking about them now. He needed to focus.

With one last push, Maxwell was free and laid on the linoleum floor, panting. “I’m so out of shape.” He stood up, popping his back.

The doors to a nearby room opened. Maxwell froze. An older man with dark brown hair and a long straight nose came out. His eyes leveled with Maxwell's gun.

Maxwell reacted first. He tossed his bag at the man's chest. The man caught it, staggering back. Maxwell raised his gun and shot. The man's head snapped back as the bullet ripped through it. He didn't even had time to scream.

Maxwell opened the door to the room he'd been in and found it empty. He dragged the man inside and looked around. There was a small conference room. Maxwell settled him down in one of the chairs and arranged him to look like he was sleeping. He ran over to one of the windows in the room and looked out. The window lead into one of the alleyways. There was a dumpster across from the window.

"I hate my job." It was a fifteen foot drop minimum. He tossed his bag first. The splat as it landed left him grimacing. He groaned. The sounds of footsteps came from the hallways. The distinct sound of a walkie talkie checking in was all the motivation he needed. He groaned, knocked his head against the window frame, took a deep breath, and jumped. The garbage was just as wet as he'd thought it would be.

Maxwell concentrated hard on not throwing up as he got out of the dumpster. Climbing over the side, he looked himself over. The garbage juice was sinking into the fabrics of his suit. He gagged and started walking, his bag slung over his shoulder. He stood in the center of the crowd gathering near the building. The police were already starting to man all the doors and checking people as they left. Maxwell turned and started walking down the street.

He pulled out his phone and redialed.

"Oh, thank god," Dylan said.

“I told you I had it handled.” Maxwell said. “I need to find a bathroom to change in but I’m clear.”

“That’s one less thing to worry about,” Dylan said. “I found Sunshine’s sketchbook and someone’s been drawing mean things on the pages over her drawings. She didn’t want to tell us.”

Maxwell sighed rubbing his face. He pulled a small clump of something spongy and wet off his cheek. “Put her on the phone.” She didn’t say anything but he knew when she was there.

“Pumpkin, you’re not in trouble. We’re just worried. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I thought it would stop if I ignored it.”

“That’s not how bullies work,” He turned down another street to put more distance between himself and the scene. “You have to show them who’s boss. You can’t always be nice and let people step all over you.”

“I don’t like being mean,” Sunshine said.

“Well, the world’s a mean place,” Maxwell said. “Sometimes it’s necessary.”

The sound Sunshine made told him she disagreed. “Do you want me or Daddy to come down to the school?”

“I want you to go,” She said. “The teachers are afraid of Daddy.”

“And they should be,” Dylan said. “No one hurts my baby. I’ll go down today and talk to them.”

“Daddy,” Sunshine whined.

“Dylan, I’ll handle it when I get back.” Maxwell said.

“She’ll keep getting bullied until you get back. I can’t just let that happen. I knew her teacher was useless.”

“I’ll take her to school tomorrow and talk to the teacher. Sunshine, while I’m gone, stick up for yourself. You can’t just let people hurt you.”

“Okay,” Sunshine said after a long second.

There was a distinct sound of a door opening and closing. “I should march in there right now.” he said.

“Last time you did that, they almost called the police.” Maxwell reminded.

“Well, you need to get here soon because I’m fresh out of patience. The drawings were dated, Max. She’s been getting bullied for weeks.”

“And I’ll handle it. You know how you get when you’re angry,” Maxwell reminded him. “If you mess up, you could mess up Sunshine’s time at school.” He could hear the squeaky sound of hands clenching a steering wheel. He turned down another road.

Dylan took a deep breath. “Fine. Fine. But if they don’t listen to you and Sunshine gets hurt, I will set someone on fire.”

“I know, honey.” Maxwell said. “That’s why I love you. I’ll be home tomorrow and everything will be okay.”

“Good. Sunshine misses her bedtime stories. It’s hard to get to her sleep without you.”

“That’s because you don’t do the voices right.” Maxwell passed a few police officers on the street.

“I resent that,” Dylan’s bubbly laugh came from the other side.

A small beeping got Maxwell’s attention and he pulled his burner phone from his pocket. He sighed. “I’ve gotta go.”

“Alright, I miss you.”

“I miss you too.” he said and hung up. He picked up the burner. “This better be good.”

“I called to thank you. I was in a tight spot with a client and you’ve fixed it.”

Maxwell rubbed his face again. “I’d say ‘anytime’ DeLeon but don’t call me again.”

“I won’t. I wouldn’t have but the client specifically asked for you.”

“Most people still assume I’m dead.”

“Assumption isn’t the same thing as belief.” DeLeon said. “It takes more than a little explosion to kill someone like you. They were very specific about what they wanted so thank you for delivering.”

Maxwell shrugged and then realized DeLeon couldn’t see him. “I’m leaving now. Lose my number.”

“Of course. It’s been nice working with you again, Maxwell. I’d say I missed you but we both know how annoying you are.” Maxwell could hear the smile in his voice. “Take care of yourself.” he said and hung up without saying goodbye.

When the call finally ended, a weight on Maxwell’s shoulders lifted. Freedom was anticlimactic. He turned down another street to a busy intersection and walked three more blocks before he saw a taxi waiting.

He made it to the cab before a familiar smell caught his nose. Warm copper caught his nose over the smell of harsh snowfall and sharp winds. He looked over to his left down an alleyway and then back at the cab. Walking around it, he stopped at the taxi driver’s window. His eyes flickered over the door before he saw what he was looking for. A small faint red line just peeking out from the underside of the cab. He quickly turned and started walking down the street.

Maxwell stopped when he found a bus stop. The woman with a baby standing next to him didn't notice him but the baby did. Maxwell smiled at them, giving the baby a little wave. They waved back and rested their fat cheek against their mother's shoulder. The bus came and Maxwell got on with the woman.

It was crowded inside and Maxwell stood to let the woman take the seat by the door. She smiled in thanks and turned to her child. Maxwell stood and waited for the stop closest to the airport. He felt the presence behind him a second before he felt the gun.

"Are you asking to get caught?" he whispered.

The person behind him dug the barrel deeper into his back. "You're getting off on the next stop."

"Actually, I was thinking about getting off on Sheremetyevo. I don't suppose you want to come with me." The gun dug into him again. "It was just a suggestion."

The bus came to a stop and the man pushed him. Maxwell clenched his jaw. No one knew he was in Moscow. The goon behind him could have recognized him but it wasn't likely. He could fight him. Maxwell's eyes rested on the baby. He remembered when Sunshine was that small. She'd been so fragile. Maxwell let out a hard sigh and got off the bus. He didn't like following orders but the less casualties the better. He liked to tell himself it was because he didn't want to end up on the news but he knew better. He was soft in all the wrong places for his profession.

The bus rolled pass and the Moscow wind cut into Maxwell's cheek as he was forced down an alleyway. "So, what's the plan? Shoot me in the street like a dog?" The man didn't

answer. Silence wasn't Maxwell's favorite pastime. "You should know, my husband isn't a kind man. If I'm not back in 24 hours, he'll hunt you down and skin you like a deer."

"I'm not worried about the Malocchio. In 24 hours, I'll be out of the country and living in luxury."

Maxwell chanced a look back. He'd never seen the assassin before and he knew most of the top tiers. He hadn't been gone that long. He'd remember a guy with eyes that bright blue. This guy had to be new. The question was who would send a lower tier after him and expect them to win. Maxwell almost felt bad for the guy. He was dead on his feet and he didn't even know it yet. Maxwell stopped walking.

Blue Eyes shoved the gun into his back. "Move."

"No. I don't think I will." He sighed. "You've got a lot to learn. For one, you're too close." He dodged out of the way and grabbed Blue Eyes's wrist. The shot rang out - the idiot didn't have a silencer - and the hot bullet sliced over Maxwell's cheek. He wrestled for the gun and the two fell in a tangle of limbs and punches. Blue Eyes's fist connected with Maxwell's jaw. A hard pop came from the bones and Maxwell flew back. Maxwell blinked away stars and sat up.

Blue Eyes grabbed for his gun.

Maxwell grabbed for his. Two more shots rang out.

Blue Eyes slumped into the ground, a thick stream of blood coming from the hole where his eye had been.

Maxwell slumped forward, clenching the quickly spreading red spot in his white suit shirt. His vision blurred as he nearly bit through his tongue to keep from screaming. He took a

few deep breaths. He felt over his back. It was smooth and his undershirt was dry. There was no exit wound.

A spike of fear shot through him. The bullet was still inside. He registered the blood spreading and the bullet. Hot bile crawled up his throat but he refused to vomit. It would leave dna behind. He tried to get to his feet. Agony cut through his stomach and he covered the wound with his hands applying pressure.

His nose exploded like a firecracker as he fell forward and smashed his face against the ground. He shook violently. His fingers clenched over the bits of broken beer bottles and old trash in the alleyway. He wished he was Blue Eyes. At least he was dead. There wasn't any pain when you were dead.

Sunshine and Dylan came to mind. Dylan couldn't do it alone. He couldn't get Sunshine to school on time. He'd never survive as a single parent. Another part of Maxwell's brain told him he would. What Dylan lacked in experience, he made up for in determination. It was one of the reasons Maxwell fell in love with him. He would be okay without Maxwell but Maxwell didn't want to leave him.

Maxwell pulled his hand away from his wound and pushed himself up. He panted getting to his feet and braced against the wall as he walked. He stopped beside Blue Eyes and searched his body. A large coin was in his breast pocket. Maxwell recognized it immediately. He was screwed.

He buttoned his suit jacket and stepped out into the street. He hailed another cab and grumbled the address of the only person he knew still lived in Moscow. The ride was a blur and so was the payment but he managed to crawl to his destination.

Maxwell barely had the energy to ring the doorbell but he had the energy to groan when the most pretentious song ever played instead of the standard bell.

He leaned against the side of the wall and clenched his bleeding stomach. A part of him took pleasure in knowing he was bleeding on the yorkstone patio. Another part of him wished he would stop bleeding before his vision started failing him.

Another slap to the doorbell felt a trail of blood and the stupid piano music in his ears. Chopin was not going to be the last thing he heard before he died. The door finally opened after what felt like an hour and Maxwell turned his head to look up.

Yegor had always been a high maintenance man. The most expensive wines, the best tailored clothes, everything about him had to be perfection or he refused to leave the house. Maxwell had once watched him spend forty five minutes trimming his beard.

He looked no different now. The same chestnut hair finger-combed back and manicured beard. His eyes were just as calculating like he was staring at a science project instead of an old friend. A red silk robe draped over his broad body and a bright green face mask covered his frowning features. He held a teacup in both hands and took a sip as Maxwell continued bleeding out on his patio.

Maxwell rolled his head again, his movements becoming more sluggish by the second. "Surprise?"

Yegor raised a perfect brow. Several emotions crossed his face but Maxwell's vision was beginning to wane. "You're supposed to be dead." he heard Yegor say.

Lulling over to the side, Maxwell groaned. "I know."

Yegor hummed a reply, taking another sip of his tea. "You made me bury you."

“I know. I’m sorry. Help me anyway.” Maxwell said. “Please,” he said as an afterthought.

Yegor sighed. Maxwell felt a pair of strong hands come underneath his neck and legs as he was lifted. Yegor’s warm voice rumbled in his chest. “Tebe povezlo, chto ya lyublyu tebya.”

The Russian floated over Maxwell and he didn’t try to translate it in his head. “Call Dylan after I black out.” Maxwell said.

Yegor held him closer. Maxwell didn’t register what happened next. He focused on the warmth of Yegor’s arms and let the darkness take him.

CHAPTER TWO

Cleveland, Ohio

Dylan compared two color swatches and then looked at the vanity again. He wished Sunshine was home. Back before she started preschool, she often sat with him and compared colors. She had an eye for color coordination. He decided on seafoam green and looked around for the supply store number. He sighed. The number was on the pad by the phone in the living room. Getting up, he stretched and ran a hand through his short brown hair. His dark brown skin was covered in sawdust but the ache in his muscles from work was nice. He needed something to do with his hands these days or he got restless.

He walked into the house and snatched the notepad. He tucked the phone against his cheek and looked around the room. He'd need to start cooking dinner soon. Maxwell wasn't home to cook so they'd be having spaghetti again. It was one of the only things he could make without burning anything. The Italian side of his family thought it was blasphemous that he couldn't cook and the Hispanic side had stopped trying to teach him years ago. Sunshine liked meatballs so it all worked out in the end.

Dylan leaned against the fridge. A bright blue cloud magnet slipped and Dylan caught a photograph it had been holding. He smiled. It was the oldest picture he had of all his old associates. They hadn't been friends, not really, but in their line of work, any person that wasn't willing to kill you for a bounty was basically family. He'd left them all in Moscow, the living ones at least, and his heart still ached a little when he thought of them.

The picture was a warm one. He didn't remember the party they'd been at but he didn't remember much from back then. Yegor was pressed between Dylan and Maxwell grinning. Peter sat off to the side with Sonia in party hats. DeLeon was in the back of the picture on his phone. He saw the top of Antonia's wild curls in the corner of the picture. She didn't like having her picture taken.

Movement in the corner of Dylan's eye made him stop. He continued looking at the picture and put it back. He walked into the kitchen and grabbed a kitchen knife as he passed. The supply store finally connected and Dylan ordered in a chipper voice as he walked outside.

He hung up when he was done and tossed the knife into a bush. The bush shook and Dylan waited. "I've got plenty of knives." He said. He always kept the kitchen well stocked.

The figure stood. "Geez, you're still as violent as ever, Malocchio."

"Grim?" Dylan said. He smiled. "Wow, you look old." Grim did. The bags underneath his eyes were bigger. His pale skin had more wrinkles and his hairline was beginning to retreat.

"And you look like a housewife."

"That's house husband, thank you." He turned on his heels and walked into the house. He left the back door open and Grim followed after him.

He opened the fridge and handed Grim a beer. "How's everything?" Dylan asked.

Grim looked at the beer but didn't open it. "Work is work. I've been laying low."

"So that national leader in Africa they found strangled with piano wire? That wasn't you?" Dylan raised an eyebrow, a smile on his face.

Grim smiled back and said nothing. He opened his beer and took a sip. He looked around the room. "You're doing...well?"

Dylan raised an eyebrow.

Grim raised his hands in surrender. “I just mean I never thought you were the settling down type. Thought you were more like me. You’d die with a gun in your hand and take fifty people with you.”

Dylan sighed. “I thought so too.”

Grim turned the beer around in his hands. “And now you’ve got a daughter.”

Dylan paused. His eyebrow raised higher. “How’d you know that?”

“Word gets around, Dylan.” His eyes landed on Dylan.

Dylan had always hated when Grim looked at him. His eyes were shiny but blank like looking at a dead fish. He didn’t emote much better either. “Well, what do I owe the visit, Simon?”

Grim frowned at the name. He clenched his jaw. “You stab me and I’ll kill you.” He warned. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. He slid it across the table to Dylan..

Dylan’s caught it. He recognized it immediately. He owned a collection of them as trophies. “You took a bounty pledge on me?”

“No, I took one on your daughter.” Grim said taking another sip of his beer.

The room was silent. Grim swallowed hard. He could feel seething rage roll of Dylan in waves. He shook off his fear like an old coat. He stared at Dylan’s eyes.

“I should kill you.”

Grim shrugged. “You could but I came here for a reason. I know where your kid goes to school.” He saw Dylan bristle and kept talking. “Your little game of house is over, Malocchio. Go get your kid and run.”

Dylan looked at the code around the coins edges. 'F. Dark skin. Black hair. A-4. 44139. 213 BrickCove. AoA. 200B.' "Alive on arrival." Dylan mumbled feeling his blood boil. He looked up at Grim again. "Who put it out?"

"I don't know. It was anonymous." Grim said. "But everyone's got it. It's a worldwide proposition. I've been hearing rumors that even the lowest tiers got it. There isn't anyone on the scene who doesn't know about this one."

"And why aren't you taking the pledge?"

Grim looked him over. For a brief moment, his eyebrows furrowed and his expression softened. "I don't hate you, Dylan. And killing kids gives you nightmares." He swallowed the rest of his beer. He got up from his chair and sighed. "Keep the coin."

"Where are you going?"

Grim shrugged. "I've got other jobs to do and you've got packing to start. I suggest you go get your kid from daycare."

Dylan stared at Grim's back as he walked out of the house. "Thank you."

Grim looked back. His teeth shined brightly as he grinded. "No problem. Give 'em a good fight. At this point, the whole world is watching you. Be careful who you trust." He stepped out of the door and Dylan stared at the coin in his hands.

He grabbed his phone again. He dialed Maxwell. "Pick up. You better pick up or I'll kill you myself." He heard Maxwell's ridiculous voicemail. Dylan dialed again as he ran for his car. He slid into the front seat. He breathed in relief when it connected. "Honey, we've got a problem."

"Yes, your husband just bled all over my patio." Yegor said.

Dylan blew through a red light. “Yegor? Why do you have Maxwell’s phone?”

“I heard it ringing in his things.”

“Yegor, please tell me he’s alive?” Dylan said gripping the steering wheel. He picked at his thumb skin.

“He’s stable. He’ll be okay but I found a pledge on him, Dylan. Someone put a bounty on him for two hundred million.”

Dylan swallowed shaky at the next red light. He fumbled for the pledge. “Maxwell and Sunshine?” He blinked away the mist in his eyes. “Stand by.” He said and hung up. He dialed the second number on speed dial.

“Dylan?” Marisol’s sleepy voice came.

“Are you still in America?” He asked. He prayed for a yes.

“Yes, I am in Erie.” Her voice changed quickly. “What’s wrong?”

“I need you here now. I’ll explain more when you get here and I have more information. I have to go get Sunshine. Stand by.” He called Yegor back. “Tell me everything.”

Dylan drove thirty miles over the speed limit to get to Sunshine’s school. He wanted to drive faster after hearing Year's assessment. Dylan looked over his shoulder as he parked close to the window Sunshine’s room was in. He tucked his gun into his belt and covered it with his jacket.

Walking toward the building, he paused stopping to stare at one of the cars. Bullet proof tires and marks from a recently screwed in license plate. he walked inside as calmly as he could in his frantic state. He went to the front desk and smiled at the woman behind it. He held out his

license. "Hello, my name is Richard Springfield. There's a family emergency and I need to take my daughter home. Her name is Sunshine Springfield."

The woman nodded after looking it over. She spoke into the intercom. "She'll be here any minute."

Dylan nodded. "Could you tell me where the bathroom is?"

The woman gave him instructions and Dylan nodded turning down the hallway. He stopped for a moment and waited. After a full minute, he turned down the other hallway and looked into the rooms. A lot of them were full of teachers and students. He started counting. Twenty kids and two teachers per room. Five rooms between him and Sunshine's usual classroom. Too many possible hostages.

A scuffle in the room to his right caught his ear and he looked into the window. A man had come in through the window. He was quickly picking up the block set he'd knocked over. Dylan opened the door and closed it behind him. Dylan looked around quickly. They were in an empty playroom. Everything was bright and colorful around him. The wall of boxes full of toys caught his eye.

A man with dark skin and grey eyes reached for his gun.

Dylan threw himself against the man tossing them both to the ground. He crawled on top of him. "We. Are. In. A. School." he said, punctuating each word with a punch to the man's face.

The man caught one of Dylan's fists and bent it. Dylan went with the bend to avoid breaking his wrist. The man tossed his off.

The man pulled his gun. Dylan caught the barrel and jammed the gun backwards. The man's finger broke before he could pull the trigger. He head butted Dylan and Dylan stumbled

back. The man switched hands and Dylan kicked the gun from his other hand. The gun flew through the air and landed in a pile of teddy bears in the middle of the room.

The man's head snapped over to it. Dylan grabbed a plastic farm house and swung it at him while he wasn't looking. The toy connected with the man's jaw and he fell backward onto his back. The toy snapped in half and went flying. Dylan looked at the plastic handle in his hand before tossing it down.

The man shot to his feet and reached for his side. He pulled a knife and thrust at Dylan's face. Dylan leaned out of the way as the man came at him slashing and spitting. Dylan's back hit a cabinet and he dodged out of the way. The knife embedded into the cabinet door and Dylan elbowed the man in the nose. The man jumped back holding his bleeding nose. He looked over to the teddy bears before making a run for it. Dylan ran after him hopping on his back. The two landed in the pile, tumbling around.

The man threw a stuffed caterpillar at Dylan and it bounced off of Dylan's chest as he kicked him. The man fell back into the pile sending a stuffed squid flying. Dylan jumped at him. The man kicked him in the chest. Dylan coughed as they both staggered away from each other. The man recovered first. A long wire came around his throat and Dylan's hand shot up. He caught the wire as it came at his neck. Pain shot through his hand as the wire dug into his fingers. The man tugged hard and Dylan grunted as the wire cut in more. His other hand grabbed at his sleeve and he pulled out his switchblade. He slammed the blade into the man's left thigh and he screamed.

The wire loosened and Dylan bucked the man off of his back. Dylan reached around in the pile as the man sat up again. The man pulled the knife from his thigh and jumped at him.

Dylan batted away a sleepy looking stuffed elephant fingers. His hand curled around something metal and he pulled it out. The man froze as Dylan held his own gun to his forehead.

“Put down the knife, please,” Dylan said glaring.

The man hesitated. He looked from Dylan to the gun before putting the knife down in the pile. The blade disappeared beneath fluffy fabrics and out of sight.

“Who hired you?” Dylan said.

The man said nothing. Dylan looked him over. His dark hair and eyes flickered away from Dylan. Dylan clenched his jaw. He repeated the question in Italian. The man didn't react. “If you tell me what I want to know, I'll make this quick. If you don't, I have all of recess to make you talk.”

The man's eyes hardened. “There's a two hundred billion bounty on a little girl.” He held out his hands. “If you want her, take her. She's not worth dying for.”

Red hot anger flashed through Dylan and he lunged. The two fell over. The man's eyes widened as Dylan grabbed the switchblade he'd dropped and swiped it over his throat. Dylan came back to himself as the man continued to gurgle. He grimaced, gently setting a teddy bear over him and got up.

He looked around the room. The teddy bear pile was covered in blood. Biting his lip, he grabbed one of the small blankets from a cubby and covered it all.

Walking down the hall, he looked himself over. There was a sizable pain on his cheek that would later be a bruise. He took off his jacket and tied it around his waist to hide the blood stains. He knocked on another door before leaning in.

Sunshine sat at an easel in a room of children. Her face lit up when she saw him.

“Daddy,” she squealed and ran to him. Dylan pick her up clenching her to his chest.

Her caretaker, Ms. Betty, looked him up and down. “Everything alright?” she said with a smile.

“Everything’s fine.” He said when he caught the eye of the caretaker in the room. He turned back to Betty and grinned. “Maxwell’s having a bit of a situation so I have to take Sunshine home. I’m sorry to disturb you. *Sole mia*, go get your things.” Sunshine nodded and scampered off.

Sunshine waved to her and the other caretaker before leaving. He headed toward the front office again.

The woman behind the counter looked up to see them both leaving. She smiled. “Be safe out there.”

“Thank you.” Dylan called before finger gunning his way out of the room.

He opened the car from a distance before walking over to it and strapping Sunshine in. “Is Papa okay?”

“Papa’s silly and made a mistake while he was in Russia so now Daddy has to go and help him fix it.”

Sunshine’s face clouded. “So he’s not coming home?”

Dylan paused looking her over. He cupped her round cheeks and pressed a kiss into her forehead. “No, honey, not for a little while and Daddy has to go meet him.” Her hand reached up for his sleeve and clenched it. He tried to smile. “But zia Marisol will be here soon to take you on a road trip and keep you company while we’re gone.”

Sunshine brightened a little. “Okay but when will you be back?”

Dylan sighed. “I don’t know but we’ll try to be back as soon as we can. Until then, you’ll be staying with zia Marisol.” When Sunshine frowned, Dylan sighed. He didn’t know what to say so he got into the front and started the car.

The house looked the same when they pulled up to it. Dylan stopped her as she moved to get out. “Stay here, okay?” Her eyebrows furrowed but she nodded. Dylan approached the house.

There was movement behind the curtains and he paused. He took a deep breath and opened the door. Blood pooled into the carpets. Marisol threw a man into a wall and drove her knife down after him. The man dodged.

Dylan grabbed him and broke his neck. “Ciao, *Sorellona*.”

Marisol glared at him. “I had him.” she grumbled and tossed the body onto the pile. She tucked a thick coil of black bloody hair behind her ear. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Someone attacked Maxwell in Moscow. I need you to take Sunshine until I can get this settled. There’s a hit out on her.” He tossed her the pledge.

Marisol looked the pledge over. “Two million? Who puts a hit out on a four year old?” She rubbed her face. “I’ll take her as far as I can.”

Dylan let out a breath. “Thank you for this. I didn’t know who else to call.”

Marisol squeezed him tight. “No problem. As if I’d turn down my own niece. Go bring that idiot home so I can kill him myself.” She opened her bag and pulled out a paper one. Dylan peaked inside. There was a pack of gum, a pair of car keys, a passport, a wallet, and a 9-mm with a silencer screwed onto the front. He pulled out the gum and a passport. “Wintermint, nice,” He put a piece in his mouth and looked over the ID. “Derek Miller?” He gestured to himself.

“It was last minute, sue me, you didn’t exactly tell me what was going on” She looked around. “You clean the guest room. I’ll call Antonia and get Curly.” She walked outside.

Dylan looked around the house. “I liked living here.” He said to himself. He walked upstairs to the guest room. He flicked the second switch twelve times and pushed it in.

The walls flipped out to show his arsenal. He grabbed one of the duffle bags in the closet and started cleaning. After everything was away, he brought it downstairs.

Marisol was already there with Sunshine buckling her in and talking about their road trip.

Sunshine grinned at Dylan when he appeared. “Daddy, we’re going to the Niagara Falls.”

Dylan smiled. “I hope you have fun.” He hugged her tight.

“You’re crushing me.” she gasped.

“Crushing you with love,” He pressed a kiss into her forehead. “I love you so much.”

Sunshine smiled. “I love you too,” She kissed his cheek. “Say hi to Papa for me. I’ll paint lots of pictures to show you.”

Dylan promised and hugged Marisol. “Antonia said she’d bring your things through security. Just meet her people in the airport.”

With a nod, Dylan handed her Sunshine’s things. “Her inhalers in the front pouch and she doesn’t like broccoli so you’ll have to hide it in mashed potatoes. She won’t wear anything white because ‘whites not a color’ and don’t let her sleep before seven or she’ll wake up early and be tired.”

“Dylan,” Marisol rested a hand on his shoulder. “I’ve got this. Go help your husband.”

Dylan nodded and looked over to Sunshine. She waved from the back seat. Marisol got into the car and smirked at him. “Knock ‘em dead, fratellino.”

Dylan waved as they drove off. He looked back at their home. With a sigh, he tossed his bag into the back seat and walked back into the house. He grabbed the single photo album in the shelf, Sunshine's first painting, and left everything else. He closed every window and threw open every door he passed. He set the paint and album gently in the car and walked back around the house to grab two large red containers from underneath. He tossed the contents around the floors and then over the bodies. He paused in the kitchen. His eyes flickered over the picture on the fridge and he snatched it, tucking it into his pocket.

Stepping out of the house, he lit a single match, tossed it inside, and closed the door. Once inside the car, he didn't look up again until his old home was a small amber dot in his rearview mirror.

CHAPTER THREE

Moscow, Russia

When Maxwell woke up, it felt as if there was a massive pressure on his chest. He took a shaky breath like his bones were glass and breathing too quickly would shatter everything.

Maxwell stared at the cream colored crown molding. The ceiling was vaulted. The warm smell of familiar fancy cologne filled Maxwell's nose and he turned his head.

Yegor sat at his bed side looking down at him. There was a fondness in his eyes that disappeared the second they made eye contact. "You still snore like a bear."

Maxwell rolled his eyes. "At least I don't drool." He smiled to himself when Year's pale skin flushed red. Maxwell tried to sit up.

Yegor stopped him. "Don't be stubborn." His gentle hands settled Maxwell back into bed. He adjusted the pillow. "I called Dylan. He's on his way."

Maxwell shook his head. "He can't come here."

"Dylan doesn't listen to reason. You know that. He married you after all." The bitterness that Maxwell expected to hear wasn't there. He was surprised to hear resignation.

"Yep," Maxwell said popping the 'p'. He brushing off Yegor's hand. "He married me. You would still have us both if you were willing to compromise."

Yegor's jaw clenched. He said nothing for a long second before turning back to his tea. "Are you feeling better?" The words were stilted.

Maxwell looked down at his chest. "Yes."

Silence fell over the both of them. Maxwell began trying to guess how much money things in the room costed. He guessed the vase in the corner was the most expensive.

“Dylan will arrive in a few hours.” Yegor stood. His long silky robe billowed behind him.

Maxwell sighed. “I can’t sit here for hours waiting for him. I’ll get bored. I don’t know what’s happening and sitting around waiting isn’t helpful.”

Yegor looked into his cup at his tea leaves. “I’ve been working on it myself. My access to the city cameras is limited in the area where you were attacked but I was able to start tracing the bounty on you and your daughter.”

“Daughter?” Maxwell shot up. He groaned, wrapping his arms around his stitches.

“What’s wrong with Sunshine?”

“Maxwell, calm down.”

“Where is she?”

Yegor was at his side in seconds. He forced him back down. “Sunshine is fine. She is with Marisol. I spoke to Dylan while you were sleeping. Everyone is alive.”

Maxwell stopped struggling. “There’s a bounty on my baby girl.” He mumbled more to himself than Yegor. Warm tears threatened him. “I need to see her.”

“You can’t travel in your condition and any contact with her could tip off people who are looking for her. Marisol is a professional. I’ve never met a better bodyguard, have you?”

Maxwell shook his head. Marisol was the best at what she did. None of her clients had ever died while she was on the job. She’d been a cleaner for nearly a decade now but that kind of training didn’t go away overnight.

When he knew Maxwell wouldn't move again, he let him go. "Then trust her to do her job and trust me to do mine. I'll find who did this to you and you'll be able to go back to your picket fence in no time. Everything will be as it should."

Maxwell stared at Yegor's face. The lines of his cheeks weren't as defined as they should be in his age. It was probably all of the expensive creams he used. He was as handsome as Maxwell remembered, dark haired, freckled, and navy blue eyes. "Yegor?" He called when Yegor went for the door.

"Yes, Maxwell?" He gave Maxwell the same fond but exasperated look Dylan did when he was being annoying.

"For what it's worth, I've missed you."

The silence was deafening. Yegor's jaw clenched and he took a deep breath. "It's worth nothing but I've missed you too, *zaika*."

Maxwell smiled at the pet name. He hadn't hear it in so long, he was surprised how much he'd missed it. Yegor looked at Maxwell with an unreadable expression. A few years ago, Maxwell would have been able to read Yegor as easy as breathing but now, he felt different. He left without another word.

The sheets underneath Maxwell were soft and he settled back into them. He closed his eyes and hoped he'd sleep until Dylan came back to him.

When he opened his eyes, he heard the scuffle coming up the stairs. Dylan opened the door, Yegor walking behind him. Dylan fell onto the bed beside him and wrapped his arms around Maxwell.

Maxwell felt like he could finally breathe again. Dylan pressed a kiss to his lips. Maxwell leaned into the kiss with a happy noise.

Dylan pulled away first, pressing their foreheads together. He glared at him. “You’re never allowed to leave home again.”

“Yes, dear.” Maxwell said with a smile.

Dylan looked up at Yegor. He pulled away from Maxwell and wrapped his arms around him. “Thank you for helping him. I know he probably hasn’t thanked you yet.”

Yegor smiled. “I couldn’t leave him on my patio. He looked like a kicked puppy but you are welcome.” Yegor pulled away from the hug and left the room. He returned with tea and offered it to them. “Now that you’re both there.” He pulled a small phone out of his pocket. “I need all of the information you have. Maxwell hasn’t been able to give much in his comatose state.”

Dylan and Maxwell looked at each other. Maxwell sighed. “Del called me. I owed him a favor. You don’t go back on favors.”

Yegor typed into the phone. “The target?”

“Nathan Ivanov. Petty embezzler. Open terrace shot during a press event.” Maxwell thought it over. “I got in, got out.” Dylan snorted. Maxwell glared at him and continued. “I went to catch a taxi and realized something was wrong. The taxi had blood on the outside. I could smell the copper coming from the nearby alley. Afterward, I got jumped while on a bus and then got shot in an alleyway.” Dylan grabbed his hand and Maxwell squeezed it. “I got here before I passed out.”

Yegor continued to type on his phone. “Nathan Ivanov, born in Moscow, Vice President of a local law firm. Killed yesterday by an unknown assailant.” He looked further into the articles before switching browsers. Maxwell and Dylan let him work. Finding information is what he did best. “There wasn’t a bounty on him. It was a closed job specifically for you.” His eyes squinted in frustration as he tried to find more information. “The contact is nonexistent. You said DeLeon gave you the job.” Maxwell nodded and Yegor made a call. He sighed, annoyed, after a long minute. “He’s not answering.”

“I can try,” Maxwell said.

“No.” Yegor said. “You’re dead, again. DeLeon needs to think so.”

Maxwell’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why?”

“Because I believe that Ivanov’s murder was just a reason to get you to Moscow.” Yegor looked down at his phone again. “Nathan didn’t have a criminal presence outside of his embezzling and giving a top tier criminal like you such a small job doesn’t make sense. DeLeon had plenty of other people he could have given the job to. Why drag you back here to do it especially when you were supposed to be dead?” He opened another file on his phone. “Your bounty was placed at ten thirty four this morning, approximately two hours before Ivanov’s death.”

“It’s not only that,” Dylan said. “There’s a bounty on Sunshine too.”

“We know. Why aren’t you with her?” Maxwell said.

“She’s with Marisol. They’re heading for the safe house in Montreal. There’s nowhere safer for her. I can’t kill whoever’s doing this if I’m worried about protecting Sunshine.”

“You just left her?”

Dylan bristled. “You think that was easy for me? I wanted to stay but if I did, I’d have to keep running from possible threats. They’d eventually kill me and take her. Marisol has more experience in extraction jobs. She’ll get her somewhere safe while I focus on voiding the bounty.”

Before they could argue further, Yegor’s phone beeped and he opened the new file. “The bounty became active in Moscow. Whoever’s after you both is here. My question is why aren’t they after you too?” He looked at Dylan.

Dylan shrugged. “Can you pull up the Worldwide Pledge?”

Yegor nodded. He opened the program and the list appeared. He scrolled to the top for the largest bounties. There weren't many people who broke through the millions milestone. Dylan and Maxwell stared at their daughter’s name.

“It’s an open tier worldwide grab.” Dylan said covering his face.

Maxwell swallowed around the lump in his throat. Anyone anywhere could go for the bounty. Sunshine wasn’t safe anywhere.

Dylan shot out of his seat. “I can’t just sit here.” He got up grabbing his bag. “I have to do something.”

Yegor looked down at his phone. “What? Start breaking kneecaps until someone starts talking?”

“I can’t just sit here and wait for you to come up with something.”

“You can and you will.” Yegor said keeping a blank tone. He held the fiery look Dylan threw his way. “I understand that you’re upset but if you don’t keep your emotions in check. You’ll make a mistake. You’re not allowed to die anymore. You’ve got people who need you. If

you go out there alone, you'll do nothing but get yourself killed. The two of you are better when you're together. So," He stood up and pushed Dylan in the chest. Dylan fell back onto the bed. "You're going to sit here and wait until I give the signal or I'll be the one breaking kneecaps."

"I'm not exactly battle ready." Maxwell said.

Yegor nodded. "I've been working on something to put on the market. You two can test it." He rang a bell and a man in the waist coat appeared. The two exchanged hushed words and the man disappeared out the door.

"What are you planning, Yegor?" Dylan asked.

The man returned with a small bottle of pills. He handed them to Maxwell. "What are they?" Maxwell opened the bottle and turned out a pill into his hand. It was a clear capsule full of small red flicks.

"State of the art regenerative capabilities. They'll promote clotting, increase tissue growth, and dull pain receptors."

"Hell yeah," Maxwell said tried to swallowed one immediately.

Dylan took the pill and bottle with a withered glare. He turned to Yegor. "What are the side effects?"

"Fatigue," Yegor said. "They last about five hours and then it'll feel like you got hit by a car. On top of that, the dulling of your pain receptors makes the pain seem less than it actually is. Be careful. Don't take more than four in 48 hours."

Dylan nodded. He counted them quickly. There were seven pills in all. He put the pill back and pocketed them. He turned to Yegor. "Thank you,"

Yegor nodded. “You two need to rest for now. I will wake you when I have found relevant information.” He left the room quickly, typing away on his phone.

Maxwell leaned back on the bed. He stared at Dylan’s profile. “He still loves us.”

“I know.” Dylan slipped in next to him. He curled into Maxwell’s side. “It’s no one’s fault but his own.”

Maxwell hummed a reply. He stared at the ceiling. “What are we going to do, Dylan?”

Dylan curled further into him and closed his eyes. “I have no idea.”

Maxwell heard his breathing out soon after and laid in the room in silence. He looked down at his husband and then at the scabs on his hands. A ping of guilt rushed through him. He didn’t know what DeLeon had done but when he found him he’d kill him himself. Maxwell pressed a kiss into each of the knuckles and interlaced their fingers. Maxwell didn’t sleep immediately and when he finally dropped off, it was restless.

CHAPTER FOUR

DeLeon looked down at the unknown call and knew it could only be one person. Seeing the phone ring felt a little like looking through a peephole and spotting the barrel of a gun on the other side. DeLeon been dreading it all day. He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and blotted his forehead. How he was sweating in Russia of all places was baffling to him.

He looked down at the phone in his hand until it finally stopped ringing. The silence around him didn't last long before a screeching child passed him. He watched the little girl run off into the carnival behind him before her tired parents came into view. He glared at the back of their heads as they passed. Just because it was a carnival didn't mean they should let their kids run wild. If there was anything he hated more than children it was parents who didn't police their children.

With a bad taste in his mouth, DeLeon pocketed his phone and pulled out a cigarette. The smoke curled from his mouth in a small string of grey before fading into the milky blue sky. He frowned up at the thick green trees and blew his smoke into them. It was the middle of autumn and the temperature had already dropped too low for his liking. He pulled his jacket closer to his body and took another drag of his cigarette. Moscow had never been one of his favorite places. It was too cold. The hawkers were persistent. He daydreamed of Italy and the warm weather he was missing out on.

His phone rang again and DeLeon silenced it. A high pitched squeak made him stiffen. His free hand reached for his gun. He stopped when he saw the clown standing next to him. The face paint left him wary and he side eyed the man in polka dotted pants. "Do we have a problem here?"

The clown raised his hands in an x formation and made a nasty face. When DeLeon blinked at him, he pointed to a sign by the carnival entrance. It read, 'No Smoking'. The clown stared at the cigarette, waiting.

DeLeon rolled his eyes. He took one last puff of the cigarette before stomping it underneath his shoe. "Happy?"

The clown nodded and offered him a bright red balloon.

DeLeon glared at him.

The clown smiled, waiting.

DeLeon took the balloon and immediately let it go.

The clown frowned and suck his tongue out at DeLeon. Blowing a raspberry at him, he walked back inside.

DeLeon stood outside for another logn minute. He looked up and down the street. No one was a recurring face. When you spent long enough being hunted you noticed when patterns appeared. The street was mostly empty and he found himself relaxing his shoulder. He looked down at his watch. A quarter to two. With a deep breath, he walked into the carnival.

The carnival reminded him of the city's traffic. There were so many people between the rides standing in lines waiting to go on that they crowded the walkway. Screaming children with faces covered in cotton candy ran past him. Everything lit up and twinkled with old flashing bulbs. A few of the rides swayed a bit too much for his liking as people stepped on and DeLeon quickly walked past them.

He looked back at the entrance. He'd counted a forty five steps since walking through the gates but the amount of people was worrying. They all seemed to collect around the three

moving rides in the front. When he walked past them, he found the stands for prizes were ghost towns. The laughter of the children at the other side of the carnival floated through the air and felt unsettling in the empty lines of carnival booths. Having less people meant he'd be less likely to step in vomit but it also meant there wouldn't be a crowd to disappear into if things went wrong. He wasn't above letting someone else take a bullet for him if it meant he'd get away.

He stopped at the furthest run of the carnival, a hundred and eight steps in, and found the man he was looking for. He was leaned over a carnival booth shooting darts. DeLeon heard a balloon pop and the man grinned. He put down another five dollars.

“Peter,” DeLeon said as he approached.

Peter looked over. His smile warmed but his eyes didn't. “Patrick, I've been waiting for you.” he gestured with his dart toward the prizes. “Want anything?”

“I'm good.” he said adjusted his cuffs. Standing next to people, everything always felt a little more stuffy. DeLeon eyed him quickly as he threw his next dart. Peter had aged since the last time he'd seen him. Short white strands stuck out of his slicked black hair. The whiskers on his chin had all but frosted white. He hadn't wrinkled but his face had aged. The thick scars over his cheeks and nose had faded with time. “You look good for a dead man.” DeLeon said.

Peter snorted, the scar on his nose bridge wrinkled. “That's kind of you to say. I guess time wasn't as good to you as it was to me” He looked DeLeon up briefly before going to pick up his next dart.

DeLeon stiffened. He hadn't aged well but handlers often don't. DeLeon's own hair had completely greyed. His warm brown forehead had wrinkled into rolling tides of skin whenever he made a face. His knees ached from all his running in his youth. All that was holding him

together was his favorite pair of cufflinks, a nice suit, and the fear of breaking down in the wrong place. It wasn't much but it had gotten him this far.

DeLeon swallowed a curt reply. He wasn't one for making waves and Peter wasn't one for forgiving rude comments. "I want out."

Peter's eyes flickered to the man behind the counter. He was a greasy looking man with dark knuckles. He was reading a magazine barely paying attention to them. "So, you thought you'd demand your freedom in a crowded carnival and I wouldn't shoot you?"

That caught the greasy man's attention. He looked up, his eyes darting between the two of them.

Peter paid him no mind. His eyes stayed on DeLeon. "Do you remember what happened on the job in August ten years ago?"

DeLeon swallowed. "Yes, I remember."

"So, you know that I'm not afraid to kill people in broad daylight." He wagged the dart in DeLeon's face. "With whatever I have on hand." He threw the dart faster than his first. It hit a balloon and bounced off. Peter's brow furrowed. DeLeon watched Peter flex his fingers, something he only did when he was getting angry, and Peter picked up the last dart.

"Do you know why I like these games?" Peter said throwing his last dart. It fell between the two balloons. He didn't wait for DeLeon's response. "Because they're rigged." The greasy man shifted uncomfortably and Peter smiled. "In a way, they remind me of how life sometimes is. We try and we try to get the big prize but we always fall short because life is just unfair." He put down another five. The man handed him three more darts. "But when you're persistent. You

can make anything happen.” He tossed his first dart and it popped a balloon. He stared at the pointed end of the dart.

“You need to learn to let things go.” DeLeon said. “It was an accident.” He knew what this was about. He’d seen Peter in the days after his ‘death’. “Felicia wouldn’t want you to do this. You-” DeLeon cut off as a sharp dart stabbed into his windpipe. He tried to lean back but Peter’s other hand cupped the back of his throat.

Peter’s face was calm as he jabbed the dart into DeLeon’s neck. He hadn’t broken anything with it but DeLeon knew he would bruise. Peter’s breathing didn’t match his calm voice. Every word fell from his mouth as he struggled to keep composure. “I don’t ever want to hear you say her name again. Do you understand?”

The greasy man finally stood up. “Sir,” he said in English. He reached over the booth for Peter’s arm still holding DeLeon in place. “You can’t attack other people in the park.”

Peter released him, reached into his holster, and shot the greasy man three times in the stomach. The silencer muffled the noise enough that the sounds of the rides nearby covered them easily.

The greasy man stumbled back and fell through the flaps in the back of the ride.

Peter grimaced dusting off where the man had touched him. DeLeon didn’t move. He knew he probably looked more like a frightened rabbit than anything but his nature wouldn’t let him run quite yet. He was too afraid. Death was always so close and he could feel it again, knocking on his door demanding to be let in. It didn’t matter if he avoided phone calls or said the right thing to Peter, all he was doing was buying seconds. His fingers flexed to play with his cufflinks again but he was too shaken.

Peter jumped behind the carnival booth frame. He stepped through the flaps and DeLeon flinched as the next muffled shot rang out. Peter appeared again, his gun already hidden away. He looked at DeLeon. "I forgot. You don't like blood." He smiled. "Always having people do your dirty work." Peter grumbled more to himself than DeLeon. He grabbed one of the darts he'd bought and popped three of the balloons. "I win," He grabbed the biggest prize there, a massive brown monkey with soft looking fur.

He stepped up to DeLeon again. "Patrick, I suggest you stay in town. I might need you again." He snuggled the monkey into his side.

"I can't. Maxwell knows by now that I set him up." DeLeon said. "He'll kill me."

"I'll kill you slowly." Peter said.

DeLeon looked away from his violent eyes. "You're asking me to stay in town while two of the most dangerous assassins in the world are looking for me?"

"The game has changed since they left, Patty. You should know that much."

DeLeon did. While the others had left, he'd stayed behind. Connecting people was something he was good at and explaining his history as a handler for assassins wouldn't look good on a resume. The years hadn't been good to him and the talent had only gotten worse. Any brat with a gun thought they were as good as the great but they didn't have the guts. They didn't have the sadistic personality and ingenuity. Dylan once killed a man and had the man's family pay for his dry cleaning to get the blood out of his shirt. Maxwell once killed three people with one bullet. No one was as dangerous, not even Peter and DeLeon realized quickly he'd helped the wrong person get even.

Peter stared at him with uninterested eyes watching his internal struggle. “So, this is the hill you’re willing to die on.” He sighed. “*Sei Duro come il muro*,” he said tapping his fingers to his temple. “You don’t listen to reason.”

DeLeon swallowed. “So are you going to kill me here?”

Peter snorted. “No,” He looked past him. “I’m going to make sure they never find your body.”

DeLeon felt someone behind him before he felt two large hands on his shoulders. He stomped hard on the man’s shoe and stepped out from in front of him. He raised his gun. “I’m not going with you.”

“So you’ll run?” Peter said.

DeLeon thought about it. He could stand his ground. He could kill Peter right here and now. Even with shaky hands, he was bound to hit something vital eventually. His eyes flickered over to the man beside Peter. He wasn’t the only one Peter had here. He didn’t know where they were but they were nearby. Killing Peter meant he would die next. He hated himself.

“Don’t follow me.” DeLeon said.

“Don’t leave the city and I won’t.” Peter answered.

DeLeon took several steps back. He counted backwards until he’d reached the top of the hill and darted off toward the crowds. Peter’s men didn’t follow as DeLeon ran through the crowd, toward the exit, and onto the Moscow streets.

CHAPTER FIVE

A few hours later, DeLeon had disappeared and Dylan woke up in a warm bed with Maxwell by his side. He felt Maxwell's leg jerk in his sleep and his thick curly hair tickled Dylan's nose. He uncurled himself from Maxwell and tucked the blanket around him. He smiled seeing him moving in his sleep. It reminded him of Cleveland. Most mornings started exactly like this with a five year old asleep between them. Sunshine missing between them left the bed looking more empty.

Dylan walked down the long hallways of the mansion. The high ceilings were something he'd always wanted for his own home. He walked into the fire place room to find Yegor already sitting in the same large armchair.

Yegor looked up and smiled. "Hello, Dylan. Did you sleep well?"

Dylan settled down into the chair across from him. "I slept fine." Dylan said. He took a cup of tea that Yegor set in front of him. The warm taste of strawberry tea made him smile. It was his favorite. He looked up to find Yegor looking everywhere but at him. Dylan looked around the room. "You've been doing well."

Yegor looked around. "I suppose." He ran his hand over the softness of his chair. "But that is unimportant." He smiled. "I want to hear more about you. I have wondered what you and Maxwell were doing over the years."

Dylan looked down at his tea. "What do you want to know?"

Yegor pursed his lips. "May I see a picture of your daughter?"

Dylan nodded. He opened his phone and found a picture of Sunshine. She was covered in paint and her hair was wild and curly but she looked adorable. He handed the phone over.

Yegor took one look at her and melted. “She’s beautiful.”

Dylan smiled warm as the fire between them. “Thank you.” He looked around. “Have you ever thought about adopting? It’s quiet here.”

Yegor’s soft smile fell away. “I wouldn’t make a good father.” He handed the phone back.

The fire crackled in the fireplace. Dylan didn’t know what to say so he said nothing for a long time. “You could have come with us.”

Yegor swallowed hard. “I could have.”

“Do you regret it?” Dylan asked. He tried to meet Yegor’s eyes but Yegor refused to look at him.

“Tell me about Ohio.” Yegor said. “What’s it like on the other side?”

The subject change couldn’t have been more blatant but Yegor’s eyes begged for it. Dylan decided not to be cruel. He looked down at his knuckles. He’d bruised and scraped them open into dark angry scabs during his fighting in the daycare. They would heal with time. He took another sip to give himself a moment to think. “Ohio was fine. I refurbished furniture. Maxwell consulted for a security dealership. We had a nice house and a nice life.”

“Then why did you hate it?” Yegor said taking a sip of his tea.

Dylan’s eyes snapped up to meet his.

Yegor face was impassive. “You look upset when you talk about it.” He said nothing as he waited for Dylan to recover.

Dylan looked down at his knuckles again. He rubbed over them feeling the sharp sting and only pushed down harder. The pain was grounding. He looked over to the door.

“There’s no one but us here.” Yegor said keeping his eyes on Dylan.

Dylan pursed his lips. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I hated our house. There were too many windows. Honey bees always came in the summer and sting me while I gardened. I hated refurbishing. I just needed to do something with my hands because the longer I sat doing nothing the more paranoid I got. I hated Cleveland. I hated it so much and now it’s gone.”

When he finished talking, Yegor let the words hang in the air. He watched Dylan shake hard after he was done speaking before finally he relaxed. He could see the weight lift from his shoulders. Yegor sighed. “So, the other side is just as horrible as it is here. I suppose the grass only looks greener.” Yegor refilled his cup. “Do you feel better?”

Dylan thought about it as he stared into his cup. He could see himself in the dark red reflection of his tea. It hurt more than anything to say it but he did. He felt better. He hadn’t felt like he could talk about it to Maxwell. Disappointing him was worse than anything. He took a deep breath and drank his tea.

“There’s nothing wrong with being upset with your situation, Dylan. Your love for your family doesn’t change. You just have to find a compromise.” Yegor let him relax for a moment before he continued. “So what will you do?”

Dylan looked down into his own cup. “I don’t know.” He thought about his life with Maxwell. He loved him. He loved Sunshine more than life himself. He’d rather eat his gun than ever hurt them. But Moscow brought back memories. Dylan rubbed his knuckles again. “It feels

strange doing this again. It feels natural. Cleveland didn't." He rubbed harder into his knuckles. His chest clenched as he struggled to breathe. "I don't know what to do."

Yegor's hand shot out and grabbed Dylan's wrist. He turned it over showing him the blood he'd drawn from rubbing his knuckles. "You're a glutton for punishment, Dylan. It's something you and I have in common. But I also know that you and Maxwell have always been able to find a middle ground. I'm not worried about either of you in the slightest."

Dylan swallowed. His fingers curled and he took Yegor's hand. The two sat together in the single point of contact in companioned silence.

They heard the stumble down the stairs before they saw Maxwell.

"Why aren't you in bed?" Yegor and Dylan said. They looked at each other and then both glared at Maxwell.

Maxwell grinned at them and came over. He pressed a kiss into Dylan's lips and then to Yegor's forehead. "I can't stay away from you two for long." Dylan got up and slid a chair between Yegor and himself. Maxwell grinned as Yegor poured him a cup of tea. He leaned into Dylan's shoulder. "So, what have you found?"

Yegor looked over to Dylan over Maxwell's shoulder and Dylan nodded. Yegor opened his phone. "I can't trace the bounty. Whoever set it out didn't leave themselves vulnerable, they put up just enough blocks to keep me from finding them." He turned his phone. "But, I did find DeLeon."

Maxwell sat up and looked at the phone. DeLeon had been caught on a street camera. He was frozen mid-run down a street. "Where was he heading?"

“He left a carnival and was on his way to an apartment building. He nearly gave me the slip twice before I caught him here.” He opened a map on his phone and showed it to Maxwell.

Maxwell leaned over. “So he’s still there?”

“I haven’t seen him leave.” Yegor said.

Maxwell nodded. “He set me up. He knows who put out the bounty. He wouldn’t take a job without knowing that much. He’s too paranoid. He going to run. We need to get him before he disappears completely.”

Yegor looked between the two of them and his gaze dropped to their connected hands. He smiled between the two of them and nodded. “Then you know what to do.” He looked around the house. “My home is a neutral zone between tiers. You’re welcome to stay here between ventures.”

“Thank you, Yegor.” Maxwell said.

Yegor nodded. “Take a pill before you leave. Your weaponry is in the other room. Antonia brought it last night. You two owe her for smuggling them through customs.” He waved them away with a fond smile.

Dylan helps Maxwell up and they trudged out of the room. They stopped in the room adjacent to their bedroom and found their supplies inside.

Maxwell picked up his duffle bag. The inside of the bag was speckled with glitter and he found the sparkly sticker he’d put on his magazine had rubbed off inside. He smiled to himself as he held it. “I miss her.”

“So do I.” Dylan said. He wrapped his arms around Maxwell’s lean back.

Maxwell leaned heavily into the counter. His side was throbbing. He clamped his eyes shut and took a deep breath. He felt Dylan push something into his hand and opened his eyes to find a pill. He swallowed it quickly and the two waited to see what would happen.

It took several minutes before Maxwell could stand up straight without help but afterwards, he didn't have any problems. Dylan checked the wound. It was healing well but they'd have to wait to see just how much the pill could help.

Maxwell touched his side briefly and felt nothing. "Cool. I'm driving."

Dylan smiled. He grabbed his gun and a few extra casings. He took the heavier bag and slung it over his shoulder. "No you're not. I actually want to live long enough to skin DeLeon alive." He grabbed the keys from Yegor on the way out.

Yegor looked him up and down. "Be careful. You have a family now. You're not as expendable as you think. Don't lose yourself."

Dylan's smile slid off his face. He looked down at the hand cupping his around the keys. "Okay." he said in a soft voice. "Спасибо, Yegor."

"You're welcome. Now go." He pushed him toward the door. "Neither of you better come back and bleed on my carpet."

Dylan honked the car horn in reply on the way down the driveway and the two set off to find DeLeon.

CHAPTER SIX

It was the nail biting that gave him away. After being with someone for so long, it wasn't hard for Maxwell to notice that something was wrong with Dylan. Dylan always bit his nails where he was thinking too hard about something. The car ride was quiet as they followed the beacon Yegor had given them.

"Alright, out with it." Maxwell said drumming his fingers against the steering wheel.

"What?" Dylan said.

"Don't 'what' me? I know something's wrong." Maxwell chanced a glance over to him. Dylan was looking down at his fingers picking away at the skin around his thumb. "Just talk to me."

Dylan swallowed. He didn't know how to say it so he said nothing. He looked out the window into the Moscow streets and let his eyes jump from street vendor to street vendor as they passed them.

A light turned red and Maxwell brought the car to a stop. He grabbed Dylan's hand before he could continue picking at it. "Alright, I'll let you keep it to yourself for now but I want you to know that I'm here for you." The light turned green. Maxwell brought Dylan's hand up and kissed his knuckles before letting his hand go to continue driving.

Dylan rubbed his knuckles and smiled. Yegor's words still lingered in the back of his mind but he kept them at bay. He had more important things to worry about. Two of the most important people to him were being hunted. He couldn't spend time thinking about himself. He took a deep breath and looked through the duffle bag in the back seat. "So, what's the plan?"

“You break in through the back. I’ll take the front. We meet in the middle.” Maxwell stopped the car a block from the building. He grabbed the 9mm Dylan handed him and looked up and down the street. “Expensive housing. A gunshot won’t be normal. We’ll need to be more quiet.” He looked up into the windows. There wasn’t a decent perch as far as he could see but sometimes snipers made due. He wouldn’t put it past DeLeon to hire one or two.

Dylan grabbed a second gun and counted his bullets. He slid in his clip and pressed a kiss to Maxwell’s lips. “See you in a few minutes.” He smiled and got out of the car.

Maxwell waited two minutes before he exited the car. His eyes flickered around the streets. There weren’t a lot of people nearby but he counted two coffee shops within gunshot range. The roads would stall police for a minute or two if they were called but they’d be cutting it close. He looked over the intercom and searched the names. Most of them were scratched away but he found two that looked newer. He picked the cleanest looking one and hit the buzzer.

“Hello?” A soft male voice said. It was an American. He could hear it in the accent.

Maxwell smiled. “Hi, I’m sorry to bother you. I live down the hall and I locked myself out. Would you let me in?” Newer residence didn’t usually know their neighbors.

There was a brief pause before the voice came again. “Which apartment are you in?”

“Apartment 34.” Maxwell answered.

“Alright,” The voice said before he heard the buzzer and he let himself into the building.

The foyer was nicer than he expected but even on the run, he didn’t put it past DeLeon to stay somewhere comfortable. He walked over to the elevator, thought twice about it, and took the stairs to the third floor.

He searched for apartment 34 for a brief second before it caught his eye. He stepped closer to find the door was already open. Dylan would have come outside to wait for him if the apartment was empty. Maxwell pursed his lips looking from the door to his gun and then back to the door. "This is a bad idea." he said to himself before he moved closer anyway.

A large wet spot was bleeding out from underneath the door. Maxwell stepped into the room. There was a stillness in the air. The far window curtains had been closed and there were small weights holding them in place. He paused long enough to listen to the stillness before closing the door behind him.

A struggle had happened in the room. He mapped it out looking over the overturned chairs and tables. Gun in hand, he walked down the apartment hall to the first room. He counted his steps, never raising his feet as he waded through the water like a shark fin cutting through the current.

A small archway lead into a kitchen and he listened through the wall before going inside. Looking around, he found it empty with the water still running from the sink. An overturned pot laid by the stove on the floor with bits and pieces still clinging to it. The overflowing sink was full of murky water, bowls, and an oozing smell. Maxwell counted three bowls in the sink and three glasses.

A soft splash came from behind him and he ducked. A shot rang out. Chips of the kitchen backsplash flew away. Maxwell put two in the man's leg.

The man screamed and Maxwell grabbed the nearest dish towel. He jammed it into the man's mouth. "Do you want the whole neighborhood to hear you?" he said as the man struggled against him. He knocked the gun out of the man's hand and forced him back.

They landed in a heap on the ground. The man grabbed the front of Maxwell's shirt. He smashed their foreheads together hard enough to leave Maxwell seeing stars. Maxwell stumbled off of the man trying to get his bearings. The man pulled the towel out of his mouth and wrapped it around Maxwell's throat.

Burning pain wrapped around Maxwell's throat as he struggled to breathe. He flailed reaching for his gun and the man kicked it out of his hand. He grabbed around him. His foot caught the edge of the pot as black spots formed in the corners of his eyes. He jerked his foot and the pot slid up to his hand. The second his fingers gripped it, he swung it back and connected with the man's head as hard as he could.

A sharp cracking noise rang out. The man's grip loosened and Maxwell shot forward like a bullet pulling the towel with him. He turned back on the man and grabbed his head as he blinked away stars. Grabbing a fist full of his hair, he rammed the man's head into the front of the oven. The oven glass broke away and the man's guttural choking came as his body twitched. Maxwell coughed hard in the middle of a pool of blood and dirty water. He wiped tears from his eyes.

He didn't see the boot coming at him until it connected with his jaw. He snapped back falling against the lower sink cabinets and jumping to his feet. His hand reached out to catch himself and it landed in the murky sink. Through blurry vision, he saw a light skinned woman with brown hair. Her fist met his jaw and his head snapped back.

Maxwell tasted blood as he grabbed for his gun. He wiped at the water and blood on his face as he aimed. The brown haired woman moved out of the way. His bullet missed by a country mile. Pots scrapped as the woman grabbed the empty food pot off the ground. She swung

at him and he leaned back. His hand landed in the sink again. He grabbed a handful of something squishy and threw it at her.

The woman staggered back, disgusted.

Maxwell raised his gun. White hot pain flew through his fingers as the woman smacked the pot into his knuckles and the gun hit the wall. Maxwell caught the woman's hand as she swung again and bent it backward until it snapped. She punched him with her other hand.

Maxwell staggered.

The woman grabbed a fistful of his black curly hair and forced his head into the sink. Maxwell struggled as the woman leaned her entire weight into his back. He thrashed against her but her hand held him tight. His lungs burned the longer he tried to hold his breath. New black spots clouded his vision. He let go of the sink and his body fell further in. Reaching inside the sink, he grabbed for the nearest utensil and drove it into the meat under the woman's arm.

She flinched away and Maxwell threw her off. Old food and water splattered the ceiling as Maxwell tore his head from the water. "That's disgusting," he screamed kicking backward. She staggered away clenching her chest.

The side of her head blew out as a bullet ripped through. Her body spun once before hitting the ground. Dylan stepped into view holding his gun. He looked over to Maxwell, his nose wrinkled.

Maxwell retched. "Ew, ew, ew, ew, ew," he said as he pulled stringy food and paste from his hair and face.

Dylan looked over his husband's bruising throat and bleeding nose. He kicked the woman's body hard.

“Where were you?” Maxwell’s voice was scratchy after all the abuse. Something warm and wet dripped down his stomach. He lifted his shirt. He groaned in frustration. He’d ripped his stitches.

Dylan stopped kicking the woman’s body long enough to look at what was left of her face. “Does she look familiar to you?”

“I don’t think she looks familiar to anyone anymore.” Maxwell said. He pulled a thick clump of what he thought was congealed chicken from his hair.

“Maxwell.” Dylan said.

Maxwell walked over and looked. He hadn’t gotten a good look at her in their fighting but now that he did, her name came to mind. “That’s Olivia Brighton.” He’d done a job with her in the past. She was a retrieval specialist. He’d never been on the receiving end of her treatment before. He worked his jaw feeling it pop but not feeling enough pain to mean it was dislocated.

He walked over to the man in the oven and pulled him out. A fresh gash over his throat where the glass had dug in was still bleeding sluggishly.

“Markus Bueno?” Dylan said, looking over. “That makes five.”

“Five?”

“Yolanda Mueller, Scott Young, and Jeffrey Baker are all down the hall.”

Maxwell fell back against the fridge. “Why the hell are five top tier assassins coming after DeLeon?” He went further down the hall. Maxwell saw the others. Their faces were beaten and bloodied. Some had mangled limbs and others had puncture wounds from makeshift weapons Maxwell found on the floor. He looked from the bloody hammer by Yolanda to Dylan’s hands.

Dylan's knuckles were covered in blood and irritated skin. He quickly hid them in his pockets. "We need to keep searching. Maybe we'll find DeLeon's body further in." Dylan said out in one breath and left the room.

Maxwell nodded slowly and followed after his husband. He looked back at the bodies one last time before they left the room. They searched the rest of the house and DeLeon's body was nowhere to be found.

Dylan signed hard as he turned over the bedroom. "This is pointless. I'm calling Yegor and telling him to keep looking."

Maxwell nodded, looking around the room. He paused thinking everything over. "D?"

Dylan looked inside the room, his eyebrow raised as the phone rang.

"If you had to pick any of those five to be the leader on a tactical mission, who would you pick?"

"Yolanda," Dylan said. "Special ops training gives her the advantage. Why?"

Maxwell walked back down the hallway and searched Yolanda's body. He found the phone he was looking for in her hip pocket. It was a burner phone like all the others he'd seen and he dialed the only number on it.

The phone picked up after one ring. "I told you not to call until it was done."

"Oh, it's done. Your little crew isn't looking too good though," Maxwell said. "Wait, don't hang up." He leaned into the hall and flagged Dylan down. "We have to go," he mouthed. They'd already stayed long enough. The neighbors were going to have the police on them at any moment. They both made a break for the fire escape.

"Maxwell," DeLeon said. "I'm glad to see you're alright."

“Don’t pretend to be my friend, Patrick. It’ll only make me angrier.” He could hear DeLeon swallow over the phone.

“Look, it wasn’t my idea.”

“And I believe you,” Maxwell said shimmying down the fire escape. “So you’re going to be good and tell me who’s idea it was.”

“I can’t.”

Maxwell sighed. “Okay, as far as I can see, you have two options. Option one: you tell me who did this and you maybe get away while we’re killing them. Or, option two: you don’t tell me what I want to know, we find you, and I let Dylan do the interrogating.”

DeLeon didn’t answer. Maxwell checked to make sure the phone was still on.

Dylan stopped. He snatched the phone from Maxwell and took a deep breath. “Patrick, you’ve endangered my daughter. You got my husband shot. You made me sit on a twelve hour flight to get here.” His grip on the phone tightened. “You were always Max’s friend, you were never mine. I won’t have any problem making a Jackson Pollock of your brain matter. So, *I’ll* ask this time. Who put out the bounties?”

“Peter.” DeLeon said.

Maxwell leaned in, listening. “Peter?”

“Peter’s dead. Try again.” Dylan said.

DeLeon scoffed. “You two would know all about being dead, wouldn’t you?” DeLeon was quiet again before he found the words he was looking for. “He’s alive and he’s coming for you.”

“Why?” Maxwell said. He pulled Dylan’s arm and they ducked into a fast food restaurant. He pulled Dylan toward the bathroom. Dylan put the phone on speaker and locked the doors.

“I don’t know? I really don’t.” DeLeon said. “He wouldn’t tell me but it has something to do with Barcelona.”

“Barcelona?” Dylan said. He looked over to Maxwell.

Maxwell’s dark face paled.

“Barcelona wasn’t our fault.” Dylan snapped.

“We all know that isn’t true.” DeLeon snapped back.

“That’s why there isn’t a hit out on you.” Maxwell said, leaning into the sink. He breathed through the panic. “He’s after me. I think I’m going to throw up.”

Dylan reached out and rubbed Maxwell’s back. “That doesn’t explain the bounty on Sunshine?”

“I don’t know anything else.” DeLeon said. “I swear.”

Dylan glared at the phone. “I want you to know that I’m tracking you. When this is all over, I’ll decide whether or not to come looking for you. I suggest staying out of trouble.” He rubbed harder circles into Maxwell’s back and reached for the phone. “And if anything happens to my daughter, I want you to know I’m going to beat you to death with your own femur.” He said and hung up.

He set the phone aside and looked over to Maxwell. “Are you okay?”

“Are you?” Maxwell said. “Am I speaking to Dylan or Malocchio?”

Dylan blinked at him, shocked. The hand rubbing circles into Maxwell’s back snatched away like he’d burned him. He picked at his thumb. “I’m better now, Max.”

“Tell that to Yolanda or Scott or Jeffrey. They were a mess.” Maxwell leaned over the wink again. “And now Peter’s coming to kill me and hurt Sunshine.” He felt bitter tears stick in his throat. “This is so messed up.”

“We’ll figure it out, Honey.” Dylan said. He reached for Maxwell again and relaxed when Maxwell didn’t pull away. “We’ll look for Peter. We’ll straighten this out.”

“How?” Maxwell snapped.

“There’s nothing straighter than the path of a bullet.”

Maxwell stared at Dylan for a long second before he sighed. “I knew this was a mistake. You fit too easily back into all this. I’m taking you back to Yegor.”

Dylan caught Maxwell’s shoulder. “And what are you going to do? Try to find Peter alone while you bleed out on a floor that smells like french fries?” He gestured to the room around him.

Maxwell looked down at the wound in his stomach. “I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, you will be because I’m staying with you.” He lifted Maxwell’s shirt to look at the wound. “We need to get back to Yegor to get this looked at. I’ll work on some leads while you recover. I need to call Marisol on the way.”

Maxwell felt his husband’s gentle fingers touch his stomach. Malocchio never did anything gently. For now, he was speaking to Dylan. He didn’t know how long it would stay that way. “Okay,” he said softly. “We’ll go back. But we’re not done talking about this.”

Dylan looked up at Maxwell and Maxwell saw a look in his eyes he hadn’t seen in years. It made his words stick in his throat worse than his tears. He took the hand that Dylan offered

him and followed Dylan back to their parked car. The whole drive back to Yegor's he couldn't get the mangled bodies of people he'd once known out of his mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Marisol's eyes snapped open when her phone vibrated in her pocket. She lifted it to look at the caller ID. A private number was calling her. A foreboding feeling settled into her gut as she watched the phone vibrate. She didn't relax until the call ended. A small bubble appeared at the bottom of the screen. She had a new voicemail.

Marisol sat up in bed. She rolled out her shoulder feeling her muscles ache. She wasn't used to this anymore. She hadn't been on an actual job in a few years and jumping into bodyguarding was like jumping into a pool from forty feet up. Without proper knowledge, you'd do more harm than good.

But the feeling of her gun underneath her pillow was a comfort she'd never really been ever to shake. Some people had a special blanket. Sunshine had a dragon teddy bear. Marisol kept a 9mm by her side and slept like a baby.

With the wild little thing on her mind, Marisol looked over to the other side of the bed. Sunshine wasn't sleeping where she'd left her. A little thud against her leg caught her attention and Marisol raised the blanket.

Sunshine was kicking again in her sleep. She'd managed to wiggle her way down to the middle of the bed and submerge herself underneath the blankets. For the third night in a row, Marisol pulled her out from underneath the blankets so she would smother herself. Why kids were so determined to kill themselves in the most ridiculous ways was beyond her.

Marisol stared down at Sunshine's sleeping face. When she was asleep, Marisol could finally relax. She didn't need to pretend to be happy upbeat zia Marisol. In the darkness of the hotel room, Marisol rested her head in her hands.

She didn't know how much longer she could do this. She'd never been good with children. They weren't her style. Settling down didn't suit her despite her mother's contempt about the subject. She didn't like children. They were messy and loud. She loved Sunshine with all her heart but taking care of her and being on the run was starting to weigh down on her. She wondered how Dylan did it. Maybe having a partner helped. Maxwell was like a two year old, it must have been good practice for Dylan to take care of him first.

With a sigh, Marisol picked up her phone and looked over the voicemail. A series of beeps played and the message ended. Marisol got out of bed and walking into the bathroom. She didn't look at herself in the mirror. She liked to look presentable. Her mother had drilled it into her mind since she was a child that a presentable person held the world by its windpipe. She could only imagine how knotted her hair looked.

She played the message again and counted the beeps. She hadn't used the code in a long time but she still remembered it vaguely. The beeps told her to call back the number backwards. She typed the number in backwards and slumped against the sink.

"Marisol?" Yegor's voice came through the speaker.

Marisol hadn't heard from him in years. The last time the two had talked had been at Dylan's funeral. She'd stood in a cemetery for five hours with an empty casket and empty words from people who 'know' Dylan well. The real Dylan was flying to America but Marisol had had

to be the person to dig her nails into the meat of palm, look Yegor in the eyes, and cry like she'd just lost her brother.

“Hello, Yegor. You sound well.”

“I'm as good as I can be with three people I thought were dead suddenly showing up on my radar again.”

Marisol paused. “Three?”

“Yes, that's what I'm calling you about.” Yegor continued. “Dylan and Maxwell managed to locate DeLeon. His employer was Peter Dufresne.”

“But Peter's-”

“-Dead? That seems to be a running gag with you people.” The bitterness in Yegor's voice was almost corporeal.

Marisol knew she should apologize for lying but she wasn't sorry so she said nothing. She pushed off of the sink and walked back into the room. “If Peter's alive, I know exactly what he's after.”

She bolted around the room grabbing her bags and slinging them over her shoulder.

“Marisol, what do you mean?” Marisol distantly heard Yegor asking her questions. She reached into the bed and pulled Sunshine out. “Sunny, we have to go. Come on.”

Sunshine leaned in her arms and curled further against her. Marisol sighed hard but decided to carry her anyway. She left everything they didn't need and bolted out the door. She tucked the phone back against her cheek.

“Did DeLeon mention Barcelona?” Marisol threw money and the room key at The Clerk before bolting out the door toward the parking lot. Sunshine grunted in her arms but Marisol ignored the sound.

“Yes, how did you know?”

Marisol ran down the stairs to the motel. “I found Lucinda and Maddy’s dental records in the bombing.”

Yegor sharp intake cut in between the sound of her feet drumming against the concrete. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Marisol dug for the keys in her pocket as she crossed the parking lot. She adjusted Sunshine in her other arm. “It would have destroyed him. No one even knew Peter had a family.” She looked down at Sunshine tucked in her arm. “And now he wants Maxwell’s.”

Yegor's voice came out in a rush. “You need to get to Moscow. Peter knows about the safe house in Toronto.”

Marisol finally fished the keys out of her pocket. “I’m on my way.” She hit the unlock button.

The car exploded with a fiery blast. Marisol blinked into consciousness several feet away. She wiggled her feet. They moved when she raised her neck enough to look. Dizziness took over and she gagged. Her head dropped down again with a thud.

Her eyes settled on the sky. It was blue. Like the painting Sunshine was drawing for-

Marisol’s dizziness disappeared with a start. Her eyes snapped left and right until they landed on Sunshine. In her fuzzy vision, she could see a man carrying Sunshine to a car several feet away.

Marisol tried to stand. A rib in her chest burned. It was broken, she was sure of it. Her breathing struggled harder but it wasn't wet and wheezy enough to mean she'd punctured anything.

In her dazed vision, she saw the man fading into the distance. Her hands trembled as she reached for her holster. The idiot had left her gun on her. He should have made sure she was dead.

Raising the gun, Marisol aimed. She wouldn't be able to look her brother in the eye if she lost Sunshine. She knew Peter. He was dangerous enough to keep her fighting through a broken rib and blood collecting in her left eye. Peter would kill Sunshine and that wasn't acceptable. Romeros were only allowed to die one way and both she and Sunshine were too young to die from old age.

Marisol took a wheezy breath and pulled the trigger. Before she slipped unconscious, she heard the sound of a body dropping. She slipped unconscious, satisfied. Her mother's voice came to mind. "Romeros don't miss."

Marisol opened her eyes to see the deep purplish blues of the sky. It was nice color like a bruise slowly healing. She forced herself up to look around. The man's body was still several feet away. Marisol clenched her chest as she forced herself through the pain and onto her feet.

She staggered to the man's side and rolled him over. Sunshine was underneath him curled in on herself, unconscious. Marisol shook her shoulder. "Sunny, I need you to wake up right now."

Sunshine's eyes fluttered and Marisol pressed her hand over her eyes. "Sunshine, does anything hurt?"

“My knee hurts.” Sunshine said. A little hiccup came from her. “Zia, my knee hurts.”

Marisol felt tears collecting on her hand. “Sunny, I need you to be strong for me. Can you do that?”

She nodded.

“Okay, I need you to stand up and take my hand. We need to leave. But I need you to keep your eyes closed.”

“Zia, what’s happening?”

“I promise to explain later but right now we’re in a lot of trouble and I need you to trust me. You trust me, right?”

Sunshine nodded.

“Okay, I’m going to move my hand and you’re going to keep your eyes closed, okay?”

Sunshine nodded again.

Marisol moved her hands. Sunshine kept her eyes closed. Marisol reached for the man’s body and fumbled for his keys. She took Sunshine’s hand and started guiding her. Every step felt like agony but Marisol kept moving forward.

The walk to the car felt like hours and Marisol breathed in relief when she finally made it to the door. Sunshine felt around until she found the back door and got inside.

Marisol got into the car. She started the engine and reversed.

She was doing ninety five on the highway when she looked back at Sunshine.

Sunshine hadn’t buckled herself in. Her little hands were pressed over her eyes.

Marisol looked at herself. A large wound streamed blood down from her hairline. Her hands gripped the wheel harder. She took a shaky breath through her nose and let the anger wash over her. She couldn't afford to lose her cool yet. They needed to be in the next state over first.

“Zia?”

“Yes,” Marisol said. She looked back at Sunshine.

“Can I open my eyes now?”

“Okay but don't be scared. I hurt my head a bit while you were sleeping. I'm okay, I promise.”

Sunshine's eyes opened and she looked in the mirror. She sucked in a breath. “Zia, your head. You're bleeding. We need to get a doctor.”

“I'll be okay, Sunshine. Don't worry about me.”

“But daddy said that bad wounds needed to be looked after or they'll get gross and you have to chop them off.”

Marisol smiled. “I promise I won't let the wound get infected.” Her ribs were more important anyway. Head injuries bleed more but they weren't always serious. Marisol could only wonder how many germs were soaking into her skin now but she pushed the thought aside. She looked back at Sunshine freaking out in the back seat.

She was alive. If Marisol hadn't decided to carry her, they would have been next to the car when she opened it. Sunshine liked to buckle herself in. It made her feel independent. They would have been right next to the blast. Her carelessness would have gotten them both killed.

Marisol swallowed down all the 'what ifs' she was thinking. Reality told her that Sunshine was behind her in the back seat with only a scraped knee and Marisol herself would survive long enough to get to Moscow if they hurried.

She pursed her lips. With Peter in the picture, this was getting a lot more dangerous. She drove faster, not stopping until she was in the next state over and they were on the next flight out of the states.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Despite how focused he was on his plans, Peter still managed to boil over the pasta. His hand darted out for the pot's handle and he raised it in the air. Water trickled over the sides and sizzled into the hot metal of the burner. His hand heated up and Peter dropped the pot onto another cooler surface.

He rubbed his burning hand. He'd never been the best cook. Lucinda was better. He still remembered her risottos on the days when he couldn't do much more than boil water. Spaghetti had always been his speciality. It was hard to mess up. Even Madeline had been able to help him make something edible.

The saucepan bumbled with thick chunky tomatoes, meat, and fresh basil. Peter went back to the garlic on the cutting board. He rested the side of his blade against the garlic and pressed down. His knife skills had always been good and chopping the garlic was quick work. He slid it into the saucepan and gave it a gentle stir. Even now, he turned the handle of the saucepan inward in case wandering little hands came flying by.

By now, Maddy would be wandering in. She was tall enough to look into the oven without having to lean over. She liked to make grabs for the garlic bread before it was completely cooled.

Peter pulled the soaking onions out of a pot by the stove. He always left them in cool water before he chopped them. He didn't like having Maddy's eyes burn while she was sitting with him in the kitchen. He sliced through the sides of the onion and then down the top. The

onion fell away in small squares, spitting out onto the cutting board like loose teeth. Peter added them to the saucepan.

A sharp hissing came from the back burner. He grabbed the pasta pot again as it bumbled too high. He pulled out a noodle and tasted it. It was softer than he liked but Maddy liked them soft. He strained the noodles.

The hot steam coated his face and he shook the pot getting the stray noodles out that stuck to the bottom. Maddy liked to add the butter to the noodles. He'd put another step ladder in the house for her but it hadn't moved from the spot in the corner where he'd left it.

He made two large plates of spaghetti and a small bowl. He balanced the three dishes and turned off the oven on his way out of the kitchen. The garlic bread needed to cool.

Peter weaved through the hallway to the dining room. It looked identical to the one in his old house. He'd even added the small chip in the crown molding from a stray bullet he'd shot during New Years one year. Lucinda had been pissed. He could remember the way her pale face turned red.

He set the two plates down on one side of the table and pulled up the booster seat for Maddy.

The warm smell of garlic trickled in from the kitchen and he went back inside. He grabbed a bright yellow oven mitt and pulled out the garlic bread. Warm parmesan bubbled on the tops and he took a deep breath. He could still feel Maddy tugging at his apron if he tried to remember hard enough.

He grabbed two glasses and Maddy's spill-proof cup from the shelves. He could only settle when the plates were arranged, the chairs were pulled out, and the garlic bread sat on the

table between them all. Peter settled down in his chair, straight as an arrow. He rested his hands into his lap and looked from one seat to the other. He twirled his fork between his fingers. A heavy feeling settled in his stomach and he let out a shaky breath. His eyes strayed to the wall to his left. There was still a stain from the last time he'd lost his temper.

His eyes burned and he blinked away the feeling. The sound of his stuttered breathing and utensils darted through the room in sharp, rough sounds.

Halfway through his plate, he looked up at the other plates. His eyes strayed over to Maddy's. He froze.

He hadn't filled the spill proof cup.

Peter's anger spiked.

He slammed his fork down. Pain shot through his hand.

He pulled the fork free again with a shaky hand and looked down into the prong holes. He took the cup. "I'm sorry, honey." he mumbled and walked back to the kitchen. He grabbed a dish towel without looking and wrapped his hand in it. There was still apple juice in the fridge. Maddy had always liked weird flavor combinations. Some of them made Peter sick but he didn't want to stifle her creativity. He remembered all of this but he'd forgotten to get her something to drink. He'd forgotten about her.

The pristine white of the fridge hand blotted red as his sticky hand opened and closed the door. He filled the cup and put the juice back. He walked back to the dining room.

A woman with dark brown hair stood by the side of Maddy's chair like a shadow.

Peter didn't spare her a glance. "What do you want, Sonia?" He settled back into his chair and set the cup down beside the plate.

Sonia's dark eyes looked over the two full plates of food and empty chairs. "I came to check on you." Her Russian accent gripped her tongue.

"We're having dinner." Peter said, digging into his pasta.

Sonia nodded. She knew better than to question Peter when he got like this. "Have you been sleeping?"

"Yes, when they let me."

Sonia pursed her lips.

Peter could feel her eyes on him. He knew what he looked like but he couldn't help himself. He'd rather eat a bullet than sit at a table and eat alone. He could feel Lucinda's soft fingers curling around his clenched hands.

He jumped when Sonia touched him. "Give me your hand."

Peter glared at her. She glared back. He held out his hand.

Sonia reached for the chair next to him, thought better of it, and grabbed one of the further ones down. She set the chair down next to Peter and left the room in the direction of the bathroom.

Peter stared at the space where she'd been until she was standing there again.

She settled down into the chair and looked down at his hand. "You can't keep doing this, Peter." She grimaced as she cleaned the blood away. The wound was deeper than she'd thought. Thick red pulsed from a three prong wound. Her eyes strayed over to his fork before she went back to her work. She rummaged through the medicine kit she'd grabbed from the bathroom.

Peter watched her get to work. "You came here for a reason. What did you need to tell me."

“I came because I’m worried about you.”

Peter waved the sentiment away with his free hand. “Why are you here?”

Sonia sighed. “I increased the bounty like you asked.” she finished putting together bandages and pulled out her phone. “The top tiers are making it easier to track them. We followed them this far. I got this from a new station.”

Peter looked over the information. “A car bombing? Are they idiots?” He gripped Sonia’s phone hard. He couldn’t read the smaller text of the page because he was shaking so hard. A headache shot through his skull as he grinded his teeth. “Is she alive?”

Sonia nodded. “I think we need to close off the bounty to the lower tiers. They’ll end up killing her at this rate. That and there was this,” She directed her phone to a smaller passage in the article.

“There was a witness?” Peter felt lightheaded in his anger. His eyes flickered over the words. “She was with a woman?” He mumbled the words to himself. He scrolled down before Sonia could stop him. He stared down at a well drawn sketch of Marisol. She still had the same curly hair he remembered. He wondered how they could all stay the same when he felt so different. “That explains why no one’s caught them yet.”

“Do you want me to pay her a visit?” Sonia said, standing up.

Peter smiled up at her. Sonia had never liked Marisol. He’d always thought the animosity between them was funny. “As much as you’d enjoy that, I don’t think so. I want Sunshine alive. I know most of the hide outs she’d have access to.” He thought quickly. “With the direction she’s been heading, she’s probably heading for Toronto and she’d know that I know that. She’s smart. She’ll be heading here instead.”

“Why?” Sonia said. “I’d stay in America.”

“You’d be dead in America. All those lower tiers are like fodder for the top tiers. They wear her down and then she’s easier to kill. She’ll want to regroup with Dylan.” He closed the phone and set it on the table. “She’s coming to Moscow.” He adjusted Maddy’s cup, needing to do something with his twitchy hands.

Sonia nodded. She took the phone and began typing. Her coffin nails clicked against the screen. “I can have top tiers at every Moscow airport and train station in the next hour waiting for her.”

Peter nodded. “The bus stations too. I don’t want anyone in or out of Moscow without me knowing. She’ll have to walk into the city if she wants to get here undetected and she doesn’t have the *coglioni* to do it with a target on her back.”

Sonia nodded. “I’ll get it done.”

Peter settled back into his seat. His eyebrows furrowed. “Dylan called Marisol to take Sunshine. It’s a logical choice. Who else he’s been calling.” He got up from his chair. His hand stung and he pressed into the wound. The pain kept his mind sharp. “Who would Dylan trust with his life?”

Sonia thought about it. There weren’t many people loyal to Dylan. Most people who interacted with him did it for a paycheck or had no choice. Malocchio only made enemies. “What about Antoinette?” The mousy looking woman came to mind. She’d helped them all on occasion.

Peter nodded, slowly. His eyes raced as he thought. “She’s been out of the game for a while. She’s still moving things through customs but I haven’t seen a lot of activity from her in the last few months. Besides, she was terrified of Malocchio.” He paused. “But Yegor wasn’t.”

The minute he'd said it, Sonia kicked herself for not thinking of him first. Yegor was more of a shadow than an actual presence in the top tiers. He was an informant. He preferred to manipulate things from the background. She'd completely forgotten about him and that's exactly how he liked people to treat him. It made screwing them over easier.

Peter slammed his hand into the wall. "Sonia, grab a team. I want to see Yegor's mansion burning down on the evening news and I want it now. And when you find Marisol, put a bullet in her head and bring the kid here."

Sonia shot up. Peter had a wild look in his eyes. She backed away. "Yes, Peter."

Peter settled down after she left. He looked back at the meal on the table. Lucinda and Maddy's food had congealed into a red pasty mess. He scraped it into the trash and washed the dishes afterward. The chairs slid back into place underneath the table and Peter flipped off the lights. He had work to do.

CHAPTER NINE

Maxwell's own snoring woke him up. His eyes snapped open and he breathed hard. The fatigue from the last few days had hit him hard. The puddle of drool underneath Dylan's head showed he wasn't much better off. Dylan's eyebrows furrowed and his breathing jumbled.

Maxwell kissed his cheeks. He didn't want to wake Dylan up but he hated watching him have nightmares. Dylan didn't like to be touched when he woke from nightmares. It was dangerous to touch him when he wasn't sure of himself. It was a good thing Maxwell wasn't afraid of a little danger.

The furrow in Dylan's eyebrows smoothed out as Maxwell whispered soft loving words to him in his sleep. Maxwell smiled when Dylan relaxed again. He watched him for a few minutes more before getting out of bed.

Most mornings he had to get up before now. He worked in a small agency back in Cleveland. He'd miss his little office but it was worth protecting his family. There would be other agency who needed his help.

He stopped in the bathroom. The tiles were a cold shock against his warm feet. He stepped up to the mirror and undid his robe. His wound was healing nicely. It would leave a large scar but what was one more scar to add to the bunch?

The house was as silent as a mausoleum as he left the room. He weaved through the hallways trying to find a familiar face. Some of the security was starting to look familiar the longer they stayed. He recognized a few from the lower tiers when he'd been active in the system. They'd done something well to get employed by Yegor. He wondered how many people

from the lower tiers had raised in the rankings. He wondered how many of his old associates were dead now. Thieves and Assassins died every day.

He stopped in one of the furthest back rooms and peeked inside. He'd seen Yegor retreat into it more than once. "Yegor?"

Yegor looked up. "You should be resting."

Maxwell shrugged. "I can't sleep. Dylan's turning the bed into a pool."

Yegor rolled his eyes, a small smile on his face. He turned back to his computer.

Maxwell grabbed one of the chairs. It made a loud scoting sound as he slid it across the room to sit next to Yegor. Yegor gave him an unimpressed look before turning back to his computer.

The numbers over the screen didn't mean anything to Maxwell. "What are you doing?"

"Planning world domination." Yegor mumbled. He reached for his teacup without looking up.

Maxwell slid it closer to him. "Is that a flight tracker?"

Yegor nodded. "I need to know when Mariosl arrives." He typed in a few things on the keyboard and showed images from the three airports in Moscow. Facial recognition ran over everyone who passed them. "When she gets here, I'll know."

Maxwell stared at all the camera monitors and tried to make sense of all the programs open on the computer. "You have too much power."

Yegor grinned in a devilish way. He turned back to his computers. "Was there something you needed, Max?"

Maxwell took a sip of Yegor's tea. "Did you talk to Dylan about something?"

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, I did.” Yegor said. He made a move to grab his tea.

Maxwell kept it out of reach. “What did you talk about?”

“Doctor patient confidentiality.” Yegor said.

“You’re not a doctor.”

“I might as well get a psychology degree since you both like to use me to be your therapist.”

Maxwell drank more of the tea. “Is he upset with me?”

“No, Maxwell. He’s not mad at you. Now give me my tea.” He reached for it again.

Maxwell held the cup tighter. “Than what is he upset about?”

“Ask him yourself.”

“I did.” Maxwell said. “He doesn’t want to tell me.”

“So you think me telling you and him finding out that I told you will make him want to share with either of us more often?”

Maxwell couldn’t argue with him.

Yegor snatched the cup while Maxwell was lost in thought. He paused for a second looking at Maxwell’s downcast face. “He’ll come around. Don’t worry about it. He loves you.”

“I know he does. I love him too. But he’s been acting differently lately. Did he tell you about what happened when we went looking for DeLeon?” Yegor shook his head and Maxwell pressed his lips. “He beat three people to death with a hammer. He knew them, Yegor. He didn’t hesitate.”

“He’s still the man you love.”

“I know that.” Maxwell sighed. “But I feel like I’m losing him. Sometimes he looked different in Cleveland too. I’d see him in the back hammering a chair and it didn’t look like he was working on a chair. He’d look so upset when he thought I wasn’t looking.” He swallowed hard. “I feel like I make him miserable.”

Yegor stopped typing and turned to Maxwell. He reached over brushing Maxwell’s cheek. Maxwell hadn’t realized he was crying until Yegor had touched him. “You’re both tired.” Yegor said. “You have a lot to be stressed about and you both spend so much time together in Cleveland. Maybe you just need to give one another space to breathe. He’ll tell you wants wrong. Dylan’s not the type to keep his feelings in for too long.”

“Thank you, Yegor. You’re right.”

“I usually am.”

“Don’t ruin the moment.” Maxwell smiled at him.

Yegor smiled back.

Maxwell took one of his hands. “I never did say goodbye.”

“You don’t like saying goodbye.” Yegor tried to take his hand away.

Maxwell held on. “We left you in Moscow. We started a new life without you and I never said goodbye. You never forgave me.”

“I never forgave either of you for leaving me the way you did.” Yegor said. He stopped trying to take his hand away.

“You should have came with us.”

“And did what? Be an upstanding citizen? I can’t be an accountant, Max. I can’t be anything but this.” He gestured to his computer. “You two were willing to settle down to something more permanent and I wasn’t.”

“Are you now?”

“What?” Yegor said.

Maxwell’s face was open and soft. “Are you ready now?”

Yegor stared at him with wide eyes. He looked over to his computers. “Maxwell, be serious.”

“I am. You always complain that I’m never serious enough and the one time I’m absolutely serious, you complain anyway. I think you just like complaining.”

Yegor glared at him.

Maxwell squeezed his hand. “Think about it.” He stood up and stretched. “I’m going to get something for breakfast. I’ll let you work.” He left Yegor to his thoughts and walked downstairs to the kitchen.

The kitchen was quiet. He wasn’t used to a silence. Most days, Sunshine was trying to get into the snacks and Dylan was doing his damndest to keep her out. Standing in the house and not hearing Sunshine shifting around her room or making mischief left his fingers flinching, wanting to check on her. But she wasn’t there. He wasn’t sure where she was.

They knew they were alive but Maxwell would never forget the drop in his stomach when Yegor had showed them the news articles and footage of the burning wreckage in the motel parking lot.

Maxwell rummaged through the fridge. Yegor was on some kind of cleanse so he grabbed one of the stray yogurts in the back of the fridge. He stole a spoon and walked to the living room. The silence was starting to get to him. He needed some kind of sound to keep himself from thinking.

He stepped up to the sound system over the fireplace and looked for something, anything to listen to. Yegor didn't seem to be loyal to any genre. Maxwell hit a playlist and old jazz music began to play. He stood in the living room with a scrunched face as Ella Fitzgerald sung about love and happiness. The quartet playing behind her was just as peppy. Maxwell left it on and he opened his yogurt. He looked over to the window. He bobbed his head in time with the beat of the music.

The front yard was crawling with people. He'd seen them from his window up above more than once. The front yard was well manicured. Maxwell looked over one of the hedges. It shimmered in the sunlight darker than the other bushes around it. He stopped the spoon a few inches from his mouth. His eyes squinted. He got up quickly and power walked down the hall.

He stopped a man in the hallway. "You need to check the perimeter. We're about to be ambushed." he said in passing as he bolted for the stairs.

The man blinked before nodding and moving faster down the hallway.

Maxwell ran to his room. He threw open the door.

Dylan popped up in bed, gun raised. He relaxed when he saw Maxwell. "Max, that's how you get shot."

Maxwell grabbed the suitcase from under the bed. "Someone's outside?"

"Who?"

“I don’t know but the bushes in the front yard are covered in blood.” He grabbed the gun out and began clicking it together. “I’m finding a perch.”

Dylan was already out of bed. He stood in a set of plaid pajamas and slid open the night stand. He pulled out his ammo harness and slid it over his pajama shirt. “I’m going outside.”

“Not until I find a perch.” Maxwell stepped past Dylan and out the door.

Dylan caught his arm. He pressed a kiss to Maxwell’s lips. “Be careful.”

“That’s my line. You’re the reckless one.” Maxwell managed to smile. He was so tired of all of this. He pressed another kiss to Dylan’s lips. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

Dylan smiled. “I won’t. That’s your job.” He let Maxwell go.

Finding a perch was easy. Finding a perch another marksmen who’d been casing the place wouldn’t think of was harder. Maxwell had seen plenty of perches during his time in the house. He climbed up the to top floor of the house. The windows were narrowest up there and he found one to look out of. He set his rifle up and looked through.

There was a man’s body pressed behind the bush. It was just out of view from everything but the top floor. No one else would have noticed. But Maxwell had been waiting for the next shoe to drop. He took a deep breath and scanned around. There was someone near one of the hedges in the back. Maxwell was going to give the men below him as much time as possible before he started. He began to count.

The seconds dragged on and Maxwell’s finger flinched over the trigger. He waited until he’d gotten to two and a half minutes before he pulled the trigger.

The man hiding behind the hedges dropped and everything seemed to happen at one.

More figures appeared and Maxwell picked them off. He paused in between shootings. A decent sniper could find him if he shot too often. The seconds of waiting in between were agony.

The front doors opened below him and he heard the rapid footsteps on the front porch before he saw Dylan run out into the yard. Maxwell bit inside his cheek as the shooting started.

Dylan jumped from person to person shooting, beating, destroying everything in his path. This was normalcy. He pounced. The man staggered as Dylan threw his whole weight at him. Dylan leaned into the fall, his gun pressed against the man's head. He pulled the trigger. They fell into a heap and Dylan rolled over darting behind a bush and out of sight again.

Maxwell moved in between Dylan and the other security teams. They all moved like a unit. Yegor had spared no expense on them. Maxwell shot at a man trying to get the drop on Dylan.

Dylan looked over at the man that fell behind him and smiled to himself. He moved on, replacing his magazine and stepped back into the fray.

Maxwell scanned the crowd. There was someone in charge. The assault looked familiar. From above, he could see how both sides were moving like chess pieces. He just needed to find their Queen and take them out first. The rest would be easy after that.

Dylan sifted through the crowds with the same intentions. The shine of a pistol reflected from behind a bush. A man jumped at him. Dylan shot him without breaking stride. They were somewhere around here. He carved deeper and deeper into the forces. The security units were calling orders behind him but he couldn't hear much over the roaring of his blood. The itch in his trigger finger was only relieved for a brief moment between people before he felt the need to find something stronger, faster.

He turned a corner. The butt of a gun cracked against his forehead. Dylan stumbled back. A pair of hands grabbed him and pulled him back behind the hedge. A boot connected with the back of Dylan's knee and he buckled.

"You're losing your touch."

Dylan froze. "Sonia?" He fought against her hold. "I knew this was too coordinated." In all his fighting, he'd seen just how out matched the security units were. They were going to be overrun.

Sonia put her knee in Dylan's back. He grunted against it.

"Peter only needs Maxwell. I wish Marisol was here to see this." Sonia raised her gun and shot Dylan straight in the chest, his face in the dirt.

Another shot rang out. A bullet tore through Sonia's shoulder. She stumbled glaring at Yegor.

Yegor shot wildly running at her. She bolted out of view. Yegor shot after her retreating form. He bolted to Dylan. He turned him over. The blood hadn't been collecting on the front of his shirt. It hadn't gone through. Dylan groaned as Yegor picked him up.

"You're fine. You're fine." Yegor promised himself more than Dylan. He weaved through the bushes trying to stick to the edges and avoid the biggest areas of the carnage. He waved his hand wildly over his head when he got closer to the house.

Up above, Maxwell was picking off what people he could find in between pauses. He'd taken out most of the outer units but there were parts of the hedges that he couldn't see from his vantage point. A wild movement caught his eyes and he trained his gun on it. Yegor was stumbling toward the house.

Maxwell stopped breathing when he saw Yegor carrying Dylan to safety. White hot anger clawed up his throat. He cleared a path for them. He struggled to start breathing again. Tears pricked the inside of his chest but he didn't let them get any higher. He couldn't shoot if he was crying.

The second Yegor was out of view again, Maxwell left the perch. He bolted down the stairs. One of the assassins, a woman with brown hair, was climbing the stairs the top floor and he took a leap from the top of the steps and kicked her in the chest. She flew back and he grabbed her forcing her to break his fall. He stepped over her and ran for the next staircase.

The bottom floor was a bloodbath. Bodies leaned against the walls and out of doorways. He pulled his gun. He watched the bodies carefully. "Yegor?" He whispered into the halls.

The sharp sound of an exhaust caught his ear and he bolted for the garage. Yegor was getting Dylan into a car. He jumped as the door opened, his gun drawn.

A chip of wood from the wall beside Maxwell hit his cheek. He raised his hands. "It's me." He bolted for Dylan.

"The bullets still inside. He's breathing but I can't do anything."

Maxwell looked at how pale Dylan's dark skin had began to turn. He grabbed Dylan's hand and the fingers stayed limp around his. He'd just kissed him this morning and now he was barely breathing. "We need to go."

"You need to take him." Yegor tossed him the keys.

"Now isn't the time for heroic acts." Maxwell said. "Get in the car, Yegor."

"Do I look like a hero to you?" Yegor snapped. "Sonia's gonna take over the building. If she gets her hands on my tech, we're screwed. She'll know everything I've been looking for."

She'll have security footage of all of Moscow. We won't be able to hide anywhere." He pushed Maxwell to the car. "Get him to safety and, for the love of God, keep him alive."

Maxwell clenched his teeth. "You better not die on us." He said glaring at Yegor. Neither of them knew exactly who he was talking about.

"Go, Max. I'll be behind you."

Maxwell slid behind the wheel. Yegor bolted inside of the house. He slapped the garage opening button on the wall on his way inside. The garage door opened and Maxwell hit the gas.

The car jumped as they ran over the assassins trying to get inside. Maxwell ducked the bullets began to rain down on them. He didn't let go of the gas until he was halfway across Moscow, one hand gripping the wheel in a white knuckle grip and the others hold Dylan's hand for dear life.

Yegor darted from hallway to hallway. His main server was on the second floor and he cursed himself for having such a big house. He got to the second floor and to his server room. He reached inside and put in his codes.

He felt the gun against his head before he heard the person behind him. Yegor took a deep breath, his finger hovering over the keys. "Sonia."

"Yegor." She wagged the gun. "Peter'd like to talk to you."

Yegor backed away toward the keyboard and windows. "I'd prefer not to." He looked over to the windows.

"I could always blow out your kneecaps and drag you there." Sonia lowered the gun aiming for his knees.

Yegor backed away, his back hitting the desk. He reached back. “You don’t have to do that. I’ve always been an agreeable man. You know that. After some consideration, I’ve decided to come along.”

Sonia trolled her eyes. “You never shut up.”

Yegor felt the enter button on the keyboard. “Nope, it help relieve the tension.” He hit it. The computer screen didn’t change behind him but he didn’t need to see it to know the kill command had worked. The gentle hum of the computer on the desk stopped. Yegor raised his hands. “Let’s go. A reunion might be nice.”

Sonia rolled her eyes. “You’ll see him after you wake up.” Three other men came into the room, flanking her. She tucked her gun away. She walked up to Yegor. The last thing Yegor saw was the metal of Sonia’s wedding ring as she punched him and then darkness.