

A RUSSIAN
MAFIA
ROMANCE



Devoured
CROWN

SOLOVEV BRATVA BOOK ONE

NICOLE FOX

RAVAGED CROWN

A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE (BOOK ONE OF THE
SOLOVEV BRATVA DUET)

NICOLE FOX

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RAVAGED CROWN

BOOK ONE OF THE SOLOVEV BRATVA DUET

What would you do if you walked in on your husband cheating?

I'll tell you what I did:

Ran out the door with nothing but the clothes on my back.

A month later, I'm broke, jobless, almost homeless.

But then, while filling in as a waitress at a fancy restaurant, I trip and land in the lap of a gorgeous stranger.

One thing leads to another and we end up hooking up.

Afterwards, he leaves.

That's the end of that... right?

WRONG.

Because the next day, my temp agency sets me up for a job that seems too good to be true.

But when I arrive for the interview, my jaw drops.

It's the stranger.

Turns out he's rich. Like, *very* rich.

And powerful. Like, *very* powerful.

And here's his offer:

"Live in my house.

Be my wife.

Have my baby."

Needless to say, I start to freak out.

I stand up and stammer, "Um, I'll have to get back to you..."

And he replies:

"You're misunderstanding.

It wasn't a question.

You're not going anywhere."

RAVAGED CROWN is Book One of the Solovev Bratva duet. The story concludes in Book 2, RAVAGED THRONE.

WILLOW

I hate the mirrors in this house.

Six of them line the thin foyer like something out of a carnival, reflecting whatever passes between them to infinity. As I pass down the hall, a million Willows splay out into the shimmering distance.

I try not to look. I don't *want* to look. What's the point, when I know exactly what I'll see?

But I look anyway. And sure enough, I see it.

The misery in my eyes.

The defeated slump in my shoulders.

I see a broken woman.

So yes, I hate the mirrors in this house. Not just because they're too big, too grand, too ostentatious.

But because they show too much of the truth.

Of course, when I voiced my opinion on the topic, Casey told me to stop talking and stick to my job, which is cleaning mirrors, not picking them out. Every time I see myself in them now, that's what I hear: the sting of his voice in my head. Scowling. Belittling.

Every corner of this place and every little thing in it has a memory like that tied to it.

It's why I like leaving the house whenever I can. Grocery shopping, for instance, which is where I'm coming back from. For one hour, I'm my own woman. I can put what I want in the basket. Mint chocolate chip ice cream, not vanilla. The pink detergent, not the yellow one.

For one hour, I'm me.

Although, technically speaking, I wasn't even supposed to be at the grocery store. Casey scheduled a hair appointment for me this morning when we woke up. "It's too long," he said matter-of-factly. "You know I like it shorter. You're getting it cut."

But when the time came, all I wanted was that hour of freedom. So I blew off the appointment and went shopping instead.

I'll pay for that choice soon enough. That's okay, though. It was worth it.

I brace myself for his annoyance as I climb the stairs to our bedroom. He'll expect to see my hair shorter tonight, and I'm already dreaming up what to say to calm him down—when I realize something: the bedroom door is open.

Casey is in bed.

And so is someone else.

I stop in shocked silence at the threshold. But my husband is so absorbed in the leggy blonde he's fucking that he doesn't even notice me standing there.

The woman, whoever she is, is on all fours, her massive breasts bouncing happily as he fucks her from behind. She doesn't notice me, either. His body is slick with sweat and so is hers, which means they've been at it for a while.

It's an odd feeling, watching your husband have sex with another woman. It gives you a strange kind of objectivity.

Does he always get this sweaty? Does he always make that face? Do his ass cheeks clench like that when *I'm* the one on the bed with my legs spread?

Is she faking, like I do?

Is she praying it'll be over soon, like I do?

I want to back out of the room, but the thought of letting them finish while I wait quietly outside feels humiliating on a whole different level.

And I would know. I'm something of an expert in the subject of humiliation. A marriage to Casey Reeves does that to a person.

So I stand rooted in place, dumbstruck, and try to think about the best way to handle this situation, even as my mind circles aimlessly like an airplane trying to land in a storm.

In the end, it's the woman that sees me first. She turns her head to the side just enough and her eyes go wide with shock. She lets out a high-pitched scream and falls against the bed, scrambling to wrap the sheets around her.

I frown when she grabs my Laura Ashley bed linens and tugs them across her naked breasts. All I can think is, *She's going to get her sex sweat all over them.*

"Fucking hell, Willow!" Casey grunts, as though *I'm* the one who's been caught doing something wrong.

The blonde swings her legs off the bed and scurries towards the wing-backed armchair sitting by the window. Her clothes are folded on the seat in a neat pile.

"You're supposed to be at your hair appointment," he adds.

I raise my eyebrows. "Is this why you were so insistent I cut my hair today?"

His eyes dart towards the blonde, like he's trying to protect her. "Mabel, I think you should go."

Mabel? I almost bark out laughing. This woman can't be a Mabel. A Mabel is the old lady down the street who gives out toffees on Halloween. A Mabel is your mother's bridge partner. A Mabel was born sixty years old and never looked back.

This dauntingly attractive blonde? No, can't be. It doesn't suit her at all.

But no one else seems to be laughing. Mabel grabs her clothes and nearly sprints toward the bathroom, dragging my expensive linens with her. The moment the bathroom door clicks shut, Casey saunters over to me. He's got a carefully crafted expression of remorse on his face, but if that's what he's selling, I sure as hell ain't buying.

"Baby, listen, I'm sorry. That was... that was... a moment of weakness on my part."

"A moment of weakness?" I scoff. "How many 'moments of weakness' have you had with her?"

"It's not important," he croons, reaching out to touch me.

I cringe back. "Don't."

Casey drops his arm and his face sours. "You weren't supposed to be here," he says, as though somehow showing up early to my own home is my fault.

I suppose, in a way, it is.

"But look, it's fine. I forgive you. And I promise it'll never happen again."

"You realize you're still naked, right?"

He looks down, but seems unconcerned with his state of undress. "Willow, my Willow... you're my everything. You know that, right?"

I jut my chin at his stumpy little dick. "As a matter of fact, you're still hard."

"Jesus!" he snaps angrily. He throws his hands up as he walks back to the bed and snatches up his clothes from the floor. "I'm trying to talk to you, for fuck's sake."

He gets dressed in a huff. I stay in my spot. A second later, the bathroom door opens and Mabel walks out. She's wearing a white dress that hugs her curves and displays her ample cleavage.

She glances at Casey. "I'm, uh... gonna go now."

Casey doesn't say a word, so she circles around me and hurries out the door. I turn and watch her go. She trips on the staircase, which gives me a strange, petty sense of satisfaction.

“Baby,” Casey says for the billionth time, grabbing my hand and forcing me to look at him.

There was a time when I used to run my fingers through his blonde hair and marvel at the fact that this man was mine. A time when I would stare into his dark amber eyes and feel grateful that someone like Casey Reeves could ever be interested in a girl like me.

You wanna know the really sad part?

Even now, I still feel it.

It’s a much smaller feeling. Much less all-consuming than it used to be. But it’s still there. Along with the rest of my regrets.

I used to have friends.

I used to have dreams.

I used to have parents.

Now, I have a wardrobe full of pretty clothes and expensive shoes. I have a beautiful and lonely house. I have a husband who pets me like a dog in public and fucks other women when I’m not at home.

I gave my soul away—and in return, I got... *this*.

Casey’s sweat is melting into the shirt he just tugged on, turning the armpits into dark circles. I look down at the way he’s holding my hand. Possessive. Tight.

“Baby, let’s forget all about this, okay? You can make me dinner and later, I’ll show you just how much I love you.”

I raise my eyes to his face and stare at the sudden stranger in front of me. Is he really suggesting that we have sex the same day I walked in on him fucking some random woman? I don’t even want to go down the road of untangling that supremely fucked-up fantasy.

“Who is she?” I ask instead.

He sighs tiredly, as though he’s annoyed that I haven’t gotten over this already. “Does it matter?”

“Tell me.”

“Mabel Sheridan.”

“Was she named after her grandmother or something?”

“I understand you’re upset, but she means nothing to me. She’s just someone I work with.”

“So you’re going to see her tomorrow at work?”

“She’s heading the department in Chicago. She’s only here for a few more weeks.”

I notice how deftly he avoids answering the question. Which of course is all the answer I need. “How long has it been going on?”

“Baby,” he says, an edge of steel entering his tone. Usually, that would set off a warning bell: *red alert, go no further, Casey Explosion imminent!*

But I don’t care. I’m getting really fucking sick of that word.

“I’m leaving.”

He arches a brow. “And where’re you gonna go?” he scoffs. “You don’t have anyone else, Willow. You have only me.”

“I’ll find a motel or something.”

“And how’re you gonna pay for it?” he asks in sadistic amusement. “You don’t have a job. You haven’t worked a day in your life.”

Everything he’s saying is true, but it’s missing nuance. It’s missing context. Like the fact that the only reason I don’t have a job is because he insisted that he didn’t want me to work. Demanded it, really.

“*You’re my queen,*” he always told me. “*And I’m going to take care of you.*”

Now, I understand what he really meant: *You’re my property, and I want to control you.*

“I... I’ll get a job,” I stammer, fighting back angry tears. “I don’t need you.”

He laughs, and it makes me feel like throwing up on the fluffy white carpet he bought for me on our first wedding anniversary six years ago.

“Go ahead, baby,” he tells me. “It’ll be fun watching you try.”

Still laughing, he walks out of the room.

And I’m left to make the bed he was just fucking another woman on.



One Month Later

“Are you the temp?”

The maître d’ is a hook-nosed man with a permanently annoyed expression on his face. I passed by him earlier, on my way into the restaurant, and witnessed him yelling at another waitress like she was a stray dog.

“Yes, sir,” I nod, trying to adjust the small white apron around my tight-fitted black uniform. “Mr. Connelly punched me in.”

He looks over me with a critical eye. “You’re not wearing the right shoes,” he says, glancing down at my black flats.

“I know; I’m sorry. But it was a last-minute call and the agency informed me of this shift literally half an hour before I got here. I had to—”

He holds his hand up to silence me. “Not interested in your life story. There’s a group of VIPs in one of our private rooms. Can you handle pouring drinks?”

I swallow past the knot in my throat. “Oh, uh, yeah. Of course. Sure.”

He nods primly. “Let your hair down and drop a button on your blouse,” he instructs with a straight, dour face. “Those men in there expect a certain standard.”

I have no idea what that means, but I do as he says.

Every time I have any doubts about my quest to find a real job, I hear Casey’s laughter in the back of my head, and it makes me even more determined to stay the course.

Speaking of the literal devil, my phone starts to vibrate in my pocket.

I know it’s him. No one else calls me.

“Oh, and girl?”

I look over at the maître d’. “Yes, sir?”

“These are important fucking men you’ll be handling tonight. You’re only here because one of my waitresses decided to break some dishes and slice her hand open in the process. Don’t fuck it up.”

The knot in my throat doubles in size. I do my best to keep my voice steady as I say, “I won’t.”

He nods one more time, smug as ever, and leaves.

Then it’s go time. I turn and walk into the private room with my heart hammering hard against my chest.

I notice three things right off the bat, two of which are completely inconsequential.

One, the naked statue of a woman with absurdly huge breasts standing regally in the corner.

Two, the black-and white-checkered carpet under my feet that covers the entirety of the space.

And three—the only thing that matters, the only thing that will ever matter from this point forward—the man sitting in the middle of the plush white sofa with his hands sprawled along the back of the furniture like he owns it.

No, like he owns the whole room.

No, like he owns the whole restaurant. The whole city. The whole world.

His eyes land on me. Some alien feeling travels up my spine to my chest.

On the surface, the reason for my reaction to him is obvious: he’s the most handsome man I’ve ever laid eyes on in my entire life, and that’s no exaggeration.

There’s something else to it, though. Something deeper. Stranger.

Because I’ve never seen this man before.

But he’s looking at me like he knows exactly who I am.

WILLOW

Calm down. If the maître d' complains to the temp agency, you won't get paid.

I inch further into the private room, trying to ignore the vibration in my side pocket. The man I can't stop looking at is flanked by two others. All three men are looking at me, but none so intensely as the first.

His eyes are a soft hazel brown, his hair a rich autumn auburn. But despite his coloring, he doesn't exude an ounce of warmth. It's like staring at a statue carved from ice.

"Um, hi," I say, cringing internally at my fake bright tone. "I'll be your server tonight."

The hazel-eyed man doesn't respond. Doesn't so much as smile. Just keeps staring into my soul.

The two men on either side of him seem a little less intense. I decide to focus on them.

That's not to say that they're not terrifying in their own right. Just that, compared to the hazel-eyed one, they don't make my legs feel like jelly.

The one on the left has hair as black as mine and eyes so dark that you can barely see his irises. He's covered from head to toe in tattoos.

The man sitting on the right is the polar opposite. He's just as tall, but wiry instead of built. His blonde hair is scanty, bordering on overgrown. His blue

eyes snake over my face with naked interest.

One thing's for sure: the maître d' wasn't kidding when he'd told me these men were important. I wonder if what he really meant was *dangerous*.

"What can I get you gentlemen to drink tonight?" I ask, trying to remain unaffected by the way the hazel-eyed man is staring at me—even though my skin is burning and pricking up in goosebumps at the same time.

"You haven't told us your name yet," he remarks. His voice is rich and deep and dark. It matches his appearance perfectly.

"Oh. Yeah. I'm Willow."

"Willow," he repeats. "We'll get a bottle of the Absolut Crystal vodka."

"And a bottle of Glenlivet '67," the tattooed man adds.

"And lots of ice," the blonde one says.

I nod and back out of the room as fast as I can without another word. I give the bartender their order.

"They want the Absolut *and* the Glenlivet?" he asks, jaw wide open. "Full bottles of both? Are they aware that that's like thirty grand in liquor?"

"I don't think they give a shit," I say.

He whistles. "Must be nice being that rich. I gotta go get those out of the safe. Be right back."

"Roger. Hurry, please."

While I'm waiting, I check my phone. "Fuck," I whisper under my breath.

I've got five missed calls from Casey and a whole avalanche of texts. They get increasingly more irritable as they go.

Text one: ***Hey baby. I was thinking I'd take you out to dinner tonight. How does that sound?***

Text two: ***Willow? Baby? I tried calling and you didn't pick up. Where are you? Don't tell me you're at that stupid fucking temp agency again.***

Text three: ***Where the fuck are you and why aren't you answering your phone?***

Text four: ***I'm sick and goddamn tired of this independent kick you're on. It's fucking pointless. You know you're not going to be able to make any real money. You quit college, remember? You don't have a degree or any work experience! Get your ass home now. And fucking call me!***

“They wanted a whole bottle of whiskey?” the bartender asks.

I look up distractedly. “I, uh... yeah. Yeah. Whole bottle.”

He shrugs and turns to fetch it. I look back down at my phone. I know I'm not going to get away with not answering, so I pull up our text thread and type out a quick message.

I told you I was serious about getting a job. I'm working tonight at The Black Lotus. It's a late night shift so don't wait up for me.

I put my phone away and grab the loaded tray before heading back towards the private room.

As I go, I feel that now-familiar sensation creep up my spine again. Like I'm burning and freezing at the same time. Excitement? No, that's not the right word. Besides, I don't even know the man.

But my eyes travel straight to him the moment I enter the room. I walk forward and set the tray of alcohol on the circular table between the three of them.

“Would you like to order your food now or later?” I ask.

“You forgot the ice,” the blonde man tells me.

I look at the tray and pale instantly. “Fuck... oh, shit. I mean—I'm so sorry... Excuse me, I'll just run to the bar and get it for you.”

With my cheeks flaming, I make a beeline for the bar. If they complain to the maître d', I'm royally screwed.

It takes me only a minute or two to get back to the private room with the bucket of ice in hand. When I do, I realize that the two men on either side

have vanished.

Only one remains: the hazel-eyed god.

I try not to look too surprised or nervous when I set the bucket of ice down on the tray. “Where did your friends go?”

“They needed a cigarette break.”

I nod, trying to maintain an air of professionalism. “I’m really sorry about forgetting the ice.”

“Sit down.”

My head jerks up towards him. “Sorry?”

“Sit down,” he repeats again, with so much authority that I actually start to lower myself down into the chair just behind me before I even realize what I’m doing.

“Not there,” he says, making me freeze midway down. He gestures to the empty space beside him. “Here.”

Just do what they say; they’re very important men. That’s what the maître d’ told me. This is harmless anyway, right? I’m just sitting for a minute. No worries at all. Hakuna matata.

I walk around the table on shaky legs and sit down next to him, but I make sure to keep a good two feet between us. “Um, I’m really not sure I’m supposed to—”

“You’re new here.”

My cheeks color instantly. “Is it that obvious?”

“To me? Yes. I can feel your stress radiating.”

His hand rests on the back of the sofa, which means it’s inches away from my neck. A few strands of my hair are actually brushing against his fingers.

I take a deep breath. It feels good to just admit it. “I am a little stressed, yeah. I really need to do well at this job.”

“Why?”

“Because... well, if I don’t, then the temp agency I use is less likely to recommend me for other positions.”

“Temp agency,” he muses like it’s a foreign concept.

“It’s just for the moment,” I stammer to explain. “I tried other ways to get jobs, but as it turns out, not many people are excited to hire a twenty-seven-year-old college dropout with no work experience and no discernible skills.”

“Sounds like you’ve had a tough run.”

“In the last three weeks alone, I’ve cleaned out bedpans, scrubbed public bathrooms, washed dishes at a fast food restaurant, and cleaned half a dozen houses from top to bottom. The work sucks and the pay is complete shit, but what choice do I have?”

“Everyone has a choice.”

I look at him. Something about the way he says that suggests that there’s more happening than I’m clued into. You know how people say one thing when they mean another?

But he doesn’t give anything away. His hazel eyes are complex. Flecks of gold, gray, and green reveal themselves for brief flashes every time he shifts beneath the chandelier. A curved scar runs down his neck, thick and knotted. It makes my legs tingle without warning.

“I don’t,” I say. “I need to be financially independent. And I know that’s pathetic for a twenty-seven-year-old to admit, but yes, I am not currently financially independent.”

“Why is that?”

“I was stupid.”

He smiles, and that smile—Jesus Christ. It does something to my body.

I shake my head like I’ve had a few too many drinks and I’m trying to sort myself out. But I’m dead sober. What the hell is happening right now?

“How were you stupid?”

“I... well, I fell in love,” I hear myself saying—although it feels like someone else is using my body, operating my voice for me. I’m saying the things I’m supposed to say. But God only knows the last time I truly meant them. “I met my husband in college. I dropped out to marry him. And I haven’t studied or worked since.”

“Was that your decision?”

My chest tightens as I confront all the mistakes that have led me to this moment. “Actually, no. It was his. At the time, he made it seem like—”

“Like he was doing you a favor.”

“Yes, exactly.”

We stare at each other for a moment, and I realize that not only are our knees touching, but I have somehow slipped closer to him on the sofa.

Or maybe he’s moved closer to me.

And then I realize that I’ve pretty much shared my life story with a complete stranger. A complete stranger that I’m supposed to be serving tonight.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I just said all that—”

“Because I asked,” he says firmly.

“I... Er, right. You did.”

His fingers turn upwards and he folds them over a lock of my hair. I freeze, unsure of what’s happening right now.

“It sounds like you don’t have anyone to talk to,” he tells me.

Those words send a sharp pain straight through my heart. I look down. “I suppose I don’t.”

“What about your parents?”

I shake my head. “I cut them off years ago.”

I can’t believe my deepest secrets are rolling off my tongue at the slightest nudge from a stranger. He may be an intensely beautiful one, but still, how is

all this so easy for me to share with him?

“Why?”

“Because they didn’t want me to drop out of college and marry Casey. I told them I knew better.” I lift my eyes to his. “Turns out I didn’t.”

“Everyone makes mistakes,” he says, still teasing that lock of my hair between his fingers. “Well, except me.”

I smile. “Lucky you.”

“You have no idea.”

There it is again: saying one thing and meaning something different, something else, something far more. I shiver uncontrollably.

“What about friends?” he asks.

“All our friends are his friends. I have no one.”

“How lonely.”

I can’t look away from those hazel eyes of his. Why does it feel like he can see inside me? Like he can split open my head if he wants to and sift through my thoughts?

Do I even know his name?

“It is lonely...”

My eyes fall to his lips. I’ve never noticed lips on a man. But his are... they’re so...

“Willow Reeves?”

The door to the private room opens, and I jump to my feet. I turn to the door to find the maître d’ standing there with barely controlled rage on his face.

I’m guessing that control is for the guest’s benefit. It certainly is not for mine.

“Please excuse me, Mr. Solovev,” he grimaces. “I’m going to need your waitress for a moment.”

Solovev. The name has an Eastern European tang to it. Russian, maybe?

I don't wait for anyone to say another word. I mumble a hasty apology and walk straight for the door with my face on fire.

In some ways, I'm grateful for the distraction. I felt like I was being drugged in there. Tip-toeing closer and closer to—well, I'm not quite sure where I would have ended up.

But nowhere good.

That gratitude vanishes as soon as I step out into the hallway and someone steps forward out of the shadows. My body goes cold with dread.

It's Casey.

LEO

Willow is just outside the VIP room, so her voice carries through the crack in the door. I don't even have to get out of my seat to eavesdrop.

Not that it matters. I already know everything there is to know about Willow Reeves.

“What are you doing here?” Willow sounds scared.

“What the fuck do you mean?” he growls. “I called you like a dozen times.”

“And I texted you back. I'm working, Casey. You promised you'd give me space.”

“Fuck that. I'm sick of this phase of yours—”

“It's not a phase!”

I'm impressed she's fighting back. She didn't strike me as the type—but then, no one really fights back against me. No one who lives to tell about it, anyway.

“Listen,” the maître d' interjects, “I really don't need the drama here. If you can't leave your baggage at home, then you can turn in your apron right—”

“No, I can finish my shift. Please,” Willow begs. “Don't fire me.”

The man—Casey—snorts. “Jesus Christ. Getting fired would be the best thing for you right now.”

“You mean the best thing for *you*,” she snaps.

“If I can interrupt for a moment...” The maître d’s voice drips with acid.

“No, you may not,” the intrusive douche bag retorts. There’s haughtiness in his voice. Entitlement.

Perhaps someone ought to rid him of that.

Someone like me.

They shift, and through a sliver in the door, I see the asshole hand the maître d’ a crisp hundred dollar bill. “Give us a minute,” he says.

“Of course, sir.” The maître d’ slips out of sight.

Willow stiffens the moment they’re alone. As though the absence of a third party makes her feel far more vulnerable.

“Casey, please,” she says. “I need to do this.”

“Why?” he demands. “I’ve put a roof over your head. I’ve given you the clothes on your back. Everything you fucking need, I’ve given you.”

“And you love reminding me of that,” she cries out. “Well, I’m done being the doormat wife. I want my own life!”

So this is the husband. Interesting.

The purpling of rage on his face says he’s long past using his words. Instead, with a practiced motion, he grabs Willow’s wrists and shakes her like a ragdoll.

“Why?” he growls. “So you can leave me?”

“I’d like to have the option,” she spits right back.

There’s fire in her tone and in her face. It makes me wonder how a woman like her ever convinced herself to slum it with this repulsive son of a bitch.

She deserves better.

She deserves me.

“It doesn’t matter how much fucking money you have, you little bitch,” he snarls right in her face. “You’re never leaving me. I’m sick and tired of this Miss Independent bullshit. When I get home, I expect you to be there to greet me.”

“Should I greet you the same way you greeted me?” she asks. “By fucking someone else on our bed?”

That does the trick. He rears back and slaps the shit out of her.

Time for me to step in.

I kick the door of the VIP room open. It slams against the wall, sending shockwaves reverberating all around us.

The motherfucking wifebeater turns to me with wide eyes. Willow is staring at me, too, looking completely mortified.

“I... I’m so sorry, Mr. Solovev,” she stammers, grasping for the appropriate tone of voice. “We didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“You didn’t.” I turn my eyes on the asshole. “*He* did.”

Willow’s husband blinks in stupefied confusion. He’s not used to being talked down to. It’s clear from the greasy pomade of his raked-back hair to the unbuttoned top of his expensive shirt: he thinks he runs shit.

And hell, maybe in his world, he does. Maybe he has secretaries fawning all over him and rivals fuming every time he wins a business deal from right out under their noses.

But what he doesn’t know is that he’s not in his world anymore.

He’s in mine.

And here, he’s nothing more than a cockroach under my heel.

“Who the fuck are you?” he balks.

“Casey!” Willow exclaims. Her cheeks are red with shame. “I’m sorry, Mr. Solovev. We’ll take this conversation somewhere else.”

My cock hardens every time she says my name. I could get used to that. I *will* get used to that.

“I don’t think so,” I tell her. “I think your conversation is over.”

The fucker narrows his eyes at me and puffs himself up to his full height. He’s reasonably tall, at least six feet. But he’s still craning his neck upwards to meet my gaze.

“Over?” he repeats, trying to sound intimidating. “She is my goddamn wife, and you are—I don’t even know who the hell you are. *I’ll* decide when our conversation is over.”

I take a step forward. Casey retreats immediately, instinctively. His body knows what his brain is too slow to grasp just yet—this is not a fight he can win.

“I don’t give a fuck who she is to you, *mudak*,” I breathe. “I expect my waitress back in that room in two minutes.”

“Not gonna fucking happen, man.”

I move so fast that there’s nothing he can do to stop me. I grab the front of his shirt and throw him against the wall.

“Let me go!” he cries. “Are you fucking crazy? My lawyers will—”

“She’s not going anywhere with you tonight.”

“Motherfucker, I’m her husband!”

“So you keep saying,” I drawl in a bored voice. “Ask me if I give a fuck. Now, I think it’s time for you to leave.”

He’s still choking and spasming in my grasp. “I’m not leaving without Willow.”

I jerk him hard and the back of his head clacks against the cold wall. He cries out in pain.

“I’m going to give you one more warning,” I snarl in his face. “After that, I’m done being nice.”

I can feel Willow's eyes on me, watching my every move, drinking me in. She doesn't seem bothered. Like the violence of men is nothing new to her.

"Who the hell are you?" the fucker rasps.

Ah, there we go. He's finally starting to glom onto the fact that maybe he shouldn't be messing around with a guy like me.

My answer is simple: "The kind of man who can get away with anything."

I release him a second later and step back. Casey's expression is conflicted. He's clearly trying to decide if this is a battle worth fighting.

If he's smart, he'll run for the fucking hills. Something tells me he's not that smart, though.

His eyes flit to Willow. But when his shoulders hunch, I know I've won.

"You should go now," I say.

Just then, the staff door opens again and the sour-faced maître d' walks back out. He takes one look at me and stands up a little straighter.

"Mr. Solovev, I do hope this little scuffle didn't disturb you and your friends. Rest assured I'm taking care of it. The young woman will be removed and—"

"I expect her to be my waitress for the rest of the night," I interrupt. "Just her. Is that understood?"

He pales and swallows past the knot in his throat. "Oh, of course, sir. Of course."

I turn to Casey, who for some godforsaken reason is still standing in the mouth of the hallway. "Shouldn't you be on your way?"

I don't wait around to see him leave. I open the door for Willow. After some hesitation, she slips into the VIP room with a single, tentative backward glance. I take an inordinate amount of pleasure in slamming the door closed behind us.

I head back over to the sofa and take a sip of my vodka.

"Now," I say coolly, "where were we?"

Her cheeks flare with uncertainty. Before, I was just a rich customer. Now, I've transformed in her eyes. I've become something riskier, more dangerous.

She still isn't anywhere close to understanding the true scope of things.

She takes a few steps forward, but she makes no move to sit down. "Who are you?" she whispers in a timid voice that sends lightning bolts straight to my cock.

"Leo Solovev."

"Leo Solovev," she murmurs. "Should I recognize that name?"

"I don't see why you would."

"You're not some, like, prince from a foreign country or something, are you?"

I snort. "I'm the farthest thing on earth from a prince. Flattered you'd think so, though."

She blushes a little. She looks up at the ceiling, at the walls, at the floor between her feet. Like she's wondering how on earth she ended up here with me.

But I know.

I know exactly how.

I planned it.

"Willow."

Her head jerks towards me.

"Sit down."

She hesitates for one moment longer. Then, setting her jaw like she's preparing to jump out of an airplane, she bypasses the two single armchairs and sits on the plush white sofa next to me. As before, she keeps an unnecessary amount of distance between us.

“I... I’m really sorry about that,” she mumbles, gaze rooted down at her black ballet flats. “That was embarrassing.”

“For him.”

She looks up at me, cheeks aflame, but says nothing.

“You’re blushing,” I remark.

“I’m embarrassed.”

“Why?”

“I feel like I said too much earlier. I basically puked my sob story right into your lap. It’s... humiliating.”

“Having met your husband now, I’d say it’s understandable.” I take a sip of my vodka. “Charming guy.”

She sighs and closes her eyes. “You two really hit it off,” she drawls.

I laugh and cross my ankle over my knee. “Was I not on my best behavior?”

“Depends on your idea of manners, I guess.”

“Nonexistent.”

Her eyes blink open, and I’m struck by their vibrant shade of blue. In all my many months of planning, I certainly hadn’t expected her to be this striking.

Her raven black hair looks unnatural at first, but when you look closer, you realize how dark her roots really are. Midnight in a cave. Onyx dipped in oil. It’s mesmerizing.

There’s nothing fake about this woman.

“I want something of my own,” she says in the hushed tone of a confession. “I don’t want to have to rely on him my whole life.”

She shakes her head. Frustration presses down on her shoulders.

“I walked in on him sleeping with his coworker a month ago,” she continues. “That same night, I cooked him dinner while he sat there and told me all the ways I was lucky to have him.”

“Like I said, charming guy.”

A bubble of laughter escapes her lips, but it curdles almost immediately. “All I wanted to do that night was leave. But I knew I couldn’t. I have no friends. No money. I lost everything when I agreed to marry Casey. And I was so naïve and idealistic at the time that I actually thought *I* was the one winning the lottery.”

A lash of low, rumbling anger stirs in my chest. But I suppress it—for now.

“I had to sleep in that bed the same night I caught him cheating,” she continues. “It was the ultimate humiliation. You’d think by now I’d have gotten used to it.”

“How did that son of a bitch manage to convince you that you’re not good enough for him?”

She scoffs. “What makes you think I am?”

“Look at you.”

I reach out and stroke her face with one gentle thumb. She holds her breath, doesn’t move. Like one wrong twitch will send us both plummeting over the edge.

“The best revenge is living well,” I tell her.

“Unfortunately, I live with him.”

I lean in. “But you don’t have to.”

With desire coursing through my body, I press my lips to hers. She freezes for a second, her body tensing. Then she leans into the kiss.

Nothing takes me by surprise anymore. Nothing shocks me. I have been in control for years now. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.

I’ve planned this moment for a long fucking time.

And yet, this kiss... it takes me by surprise.

WILLOW

My first coherent thought is, *God, this feels good.*

Who knew it was even possible that a kiss can feel so wholly intense? That it can make you feel powerful? That it can put a broken person back together again?

My second thought is, *These aren't my husband's lips I'm kissing.* There's a moment of guilt, quickly followed by a wave of anger.

Casey cheated on me by fucking some stranger in our bed... and here I am, feeling guilty for one tiny, meaningless, innocent little kiss.

Except the purist in me is forced to acknowledge that no kiss is innocent.

Especially not this one.

The tingling in my lips has spread to my entire body now. For the first time in years, I feel my pussy throb back to life. I've spent so long thinking I was broken inside. Shattered beyond repair.

I'm only just now realizing that my loss of sexual desire the last few years has nothing to do with me—and everything to do with Casey.

The man's hand curls around my waist. I gasp as he pulls me onto his lap.

He feels *different*, somehow. So solid and strong.

It's a strange observation, considering Casey's a big man in his own right. But some nights while suffering under my husband's sweaty thrusts and grunts, I get the feeling he's insubstantial. Like sand in my arms. I try to hold on and he just seems to waste away.

But this man? He feels *alive*.

I breathe him in. Under the vodka, I smell oak, mint, leather. If confidence had a smell, this would be it.

When I sense his erection between my thighs, I pull back with another small gasp. My eyes find his. In a sudden moment of clarity, I take stock of the position I've found myself in.

I'm straddling a stranger. My arms clutch his shoulders for support. His hands grip my waist like he could break me in half if he cared to.

"I... what did you say your name was?" I stammer. I honestly can't remember.

"Leo."

"Leo," I repeat. "God, what am I doing?"

"Letting go."

His fingertip snakes beneath the untucked hem of my uniform. I hiss at the skin-on-skin contact and recoil. "No, no... We can't..."

"Why not?"

He doesn't seem in the least bit put off by my hesitancy. In fact, he looks a little intrigued by it. The type of man who likes a challenge.

"Because... because I'm married, for starters. Just because he cheated doesn't mean I have the right to."

"Doesn't it?" he asks.

His finger strokes over the bare skin of my hip and my eyes flutter with desire. Leo is not making this easy in the slightest. "He's still my husband."

“Don’t waste your time being faithful to people who don’t deserve it. You want something, Willow? Fucking take it.”

“What do you know about what I want?”

“I know you want me.”

I frown again, deeper. “You don’t know that. You don’t know me at all.”

His eyes glimmer. “I know everything there is to know about you, Willow Powers.”

I do a double take. There’s a sense of some huge roiling mystery under those words. It frightens me in an exhilarating sort of way. Like swimming in the deep ocean and shivering when you realize just what kinds of monsters are lurking beneath your feet.

“W... what do you mean?”

He ignores the question. “Tell me what you want, Willow.”

For a long time, I just stare at him.

But once the words sink in, so does the power.

It’s the first time in a long time I’ve felt powerful. So I do what Leo told me to do: I take what I want.

I lean in and kiss him. It’s hot and possessive. I feel like I’m melting into him. Like I’m leaving myself behind and letting Leo Solovev consume me in my entirety.

I lift my legs up so he can slide my panties from beneath my skirt. His fingers dance over my thigh and part my thighs. He brushes against my clit with a feather-light touch.

“That’s a good girl,” Leo murmurs. I burn with shame at how hot those four little words make me.

Casey usually prefers to call me his “whore” or his “slut” when we have sex. I’d probably be more offended if it was something I had to endure for more than two or three minutes at a time. But he’s a three-pumps-and-done guy if ever there was one, so it only hurts for a little bit.

Sex with Casey—scratch that, *life* with Casey—is about him. His greed. His selfishness. His inability to see me as anything other than a conduit for his pleasure.

But the way Leo is touching me right now is the polar fucking opposite.

He thumbs my center and stares into the depths of my soul. When he murmurs, “Do you want to come for me?” I know that that’s exactly what he wants me to do.

More importantly, it’s what I want to do *for him*.

So I do. I come, hard and guiltlessly.

And when he opens his zipper and his cock springs out, I straddle it, sink onto him, and start to ride. Just as hard. Just as guiltlessly.

Leo is far bigger than Casey, thicker and longer. But it’s not just the size of him. It’s the way he uses it.

He controls from the bottom. Never any doubt that he’s the one calling the shots. He fucks up into me, pinning me in place and leaving me with no choice but to cling to his shoulders and whimper with each savage thrust.

After fifty or a hundred or a million hard poundings—I lose the ability to count pretty early on—he flips me onto my back on the plush sofa. I’m sweating as he lays his body on top of mine.

The first grinding thrust lights up my clit. He licks and bites and kisses his way from my neck to my collarbone. All I can do is hook my heels behind his back and urge him deeper and deeper into me.

He rips my blouse open with one hand before burying his face between my breasts. When he nips my nipple between his teeth, I cry out.

Leo laughs. “Sensitive little *kukolka*, aren’t you?”

If I could talk, I’d tell him that it’s never been like this before. But since I can’t talk, I just moan and spread wider for him.

He lifts up, clenches my hips, and starts to pull me onto him. He’s as deep as it’s possible to go, and the light pressure of his thumb on my clit is the last

thing I need before I blast off again.

My eyes roll back in my head and my entire body dissolves into shivers and goosebumps.

I dig my nails into the backs of his thighs as he drives me to orgasm. He gives a few more brutal thrusts, and then I feel new warmth spread inside me, sticky and familiar.

After he empties himself in me, he sighs. He runs his tongue over my nipples and props himself up on the sofa.

Immediately, he's calm and collected, like nothing ever happened. It takes me a little more time to get my bearings. When I finally manage to sit up with him, my heart is still racing. My breathing is labored.

As I come down off the high, the shock of what I've just done settles over me.

I've fucked another man.

Not just another man, but a complete and total stranger.

What was I thinking?

He could be diseased! He could be crazy! He could be married or wanted by the police. He almost certainly is very, very dangerous. One look at his steely eyes is enough to confirm that much.

I'm going to have a panic attack if I keep thinking about it. So as I tug my clothes back into place, I try to just breathe. Stave off the freak-out.

The whole time, Leo is reclined on the sofa, watching me.

"I... I should go," I tell him. "I'm sorry..."

"Why are you apologizing?"

I glance towards him, cheeks burning. "We shouldn't have done that."

"Did you want to?"

I turn to him, taken back by his calm bluntness. "I don't know."

“That’s not an answer.”

“I... yes,” I admit. “I did.”

He nods. “Good. Never apologize for what you want. I don’t.”

“You’re a man,” I say automatically. “Men can get away with things women can’t.”

“That sounds like an excuse.”

“It’s how the world works.”

He shakes his head. “The world works however you make it work, Willow. Either you understand that and shape it how you like... or you remain ignorant and let others decide the rules. The choice is always yours.”

“Did you read that on a fortune cookie?” I snap bitterly. As soon as the words leave my mouth, I feel guilty. I didn’t mean to come off like a bitch.

I’m about to apologize, but then I remember what he just said: *Never apologize.*

It doesn’t really matter anyway. After tonight, I’m never going to see him again. I’m surprised when that realization comes with a zing of disappointment.

Once I’m dressed and looking half-way presentable, I notice that bucket of ice on the table. It’s half-melted.

“I... I haven’t even taken your order,” I say awkwardly.

He smiles and gets to his feet. He’s tall—really fucking tall. I didn’t quite process that while we were... occupied.

“There’s no need,” he tells me. “I got what I wanted out of tonight.”

“Oh. Right.”

Not that I understand at all what he means by that. Again, I feel like I’m floating in the deep ocean. There’s no land in sight and something huge is brushing against my foot. I shiver.

Something else occurs to me. “Leo?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. For... for what you did. With Casey.”

He nods solemnly. “Don’t thank me just yet.”

Then he leaves. When he walks out of the room, he doesn’t look back.



I sleepwalk through the rest of my shift. When I finally turn in my uniform, it’s with insurmountable relief. Only a few more obstacles between me and blissful unconsciousness.

The first of those obstacles is snoring up a storm on the living room couch when I get home. I sneak past Casey and into the master bathroom.

I splash some cold water on my face and stare at my reflection in the mirror. Can you see what happened on my face? Are there physical signs of infidelity etched into my skin?

It’s odd because I look the same, but inside, I feel wildly different. Like this is the first moment of the rest of my life. Surely I ought to look different in some way, if only to commemorate that. To mark the transition.

But I see nothing. Why do I feel disappointed?

“Willow!”

“Jesus!” I whip around as the bathroom door slams open.

Casey stands at the threshold, glowering at me like some beast right out of a horror movie. His lips are pulled back over his teeth and his eyes are bloodshot. I can smell the alcohol coming off his clothes. The whiskey stain on his shirt confirms it.

He stalks into the bathroom, backing me into a corner. “It’s fuckin’ late.”

“I told you it was—”

He slams his hand against the wall directly beside my head. I cringe and bite my cheek so I don't cry out.

I've heard stories about abused women, and of course I've sympathized. How could I not? But it's always from an outsider's perspective. Because I could never imagine how any woman would stay with a man who treated her like that.

Until now.

Standing here with my back pressed against the tiled wall and no way out, I realize something: it happens so slowly you barely recognize the warning signs. Like water in a pot getting hotter and hotter until, suddenly, it begins to boil.

You make excuses and justifications. You pretend you're different from all the women who've been broken down and used by bad men.

Then something happens. A slap across the face, the threatening clench of a fist. And all at once, you understand the truth: *I'm being abused.*

If another woman had told me this happened to her, my advice would have been immediate: run. But when it came to be my turn in the trenches, my objectivity flew out the window.

Along with my common sense.

Along with my bravery.

Along with all those pieces of my heart that I broke up and gave away to make myself fit into the person he wanted me to be.

"Casey," I beg. "Please..."

He locks me in between his arms. His eyes are dark with drunken anger, but I see desperation, too. Something more is going on here.

"Did you fuck him?!" he seethes.

I try not to let the terror show. "What are you talking about?"

"That big motherfucker in the suit. Did. You. Fuck. Him?"

“No.”

He stares at me. For one horrible moment, I’m certain he can see the lie in my eyes.

Then, out of nowhere, he starts to cry. Big, ugly sobs rip from his chest and he collapses onto me. I’m dragged down onto the cold bathroom floor while Casey clings to me like a huge baby.

“You can’t leave me, Willow, you just can’t. I love you... You promised to forgive me...”

I stare down at the giant man crying in my lap, and I feel...

Nothing.

“Casey...” I can’t bring myself to hold him like he wants. My hands hang limply underneath his elbows.

“I’m in trouble, baby. That’s why I needed you tonight. I’m in so much fucking trouble.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been accused of e-e-embezzling,” he chokes out. Snot drips from his nose onto my shirt. “The company is suing me. If I’m found g-guilty, I could go to prison for a long fuckin’ time.”

I feel oddly detached from his confession. It might as well be some true crime doc on TV. I wonder if I’ll still feel that way tomorrow.

“I need you, baby. I need your support,” he whimpers. “You’ll be there for me, won’t you? You won’t leave me?”

“I... No,” I say in a robotic voice. “No, I won’t leave you.”

“Thank you,” he blubbers. “Thank you, my God. Thank you.”

But all I can think is, *Don’t thank me just yet.*

LEO

TWO DAYS LATER

“We’re ready to expand,” I tell Jax, looking down at the dotted spreadsheet between us. “It’s long overdue.”

“I agree,” he says. “But this shit is risky, Leo. We won’t be able to fly under the radar anymore. The Mikhailovs will be a problem.”

“I can handle the fucking Mikhailovs,” I snarl.

Jax looks me over with a cautious expression. “We’ve been careful up until now. Why stoke the fire? We don’t need a fight, even if you’re confident we’d win.”

“This is my fucking city,” I snap at my lieutenant. “I’m done hiding in the shadows.”

He sighs. He knows better than to argue with me. “Are all the pieces in play?”

“Of course.”

Jax glances towards the papers that cover my desk. “This would be easier if you just told us what you were scheming, you know.”

I smirk. “Patience, Jax. You’ll know in time.”

“When?”

“When I’ve won.”

He shakes his head in irritation. “At least tell me about the girl.”

I think about my night with Willow. Two days have passed and it’s still at the forefront of my mind.

“She was... not what I expected.”

“Understatement of the year,” Jax chuckles.

I raise my eyebrows. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means she’s a fucking knockout. The pictures we got of her certainly don’t do her justice.”

My eyes flit automatically to the brown file sitting at the top of my stack. Willow’s name is printed across the front. I’ve flipped through that folder countless times in the past few months. I know every word it contains. Every angle of every photograph.

And Jax is right: seeing her in person was a different experience entirely.

“Where’s her tail?”

“On his way,” Jax says. “Apparently, there’s not much to report.”

“She’s still temping at the agency?”

“It seems so.”

“And the asshole husband?”

“Fucked. Just got word from our guy in the D.A.’s office that they’re launching a criminal investigation that involves him.”

I roll my eyes. “Fucking typical. I’m actually disappointed at what a cliché he is. What’s he being accused of? Wait, let me guess... embezzlement?”

“Ding ding. Nice guess.”

“Predictable bastard.”

“Speaking of predictable bastards,” Jax says, “are you ever going to tell me why the girl is so important?”

“Watch yourself, *priyatel*,” I say with a laugh. Jax is a friend, but some lines can’t be crossed.

“So is that a no, or...?”

I know he resents being kept out of the loop, but it’s not personal. I just know how easily plans can fall apart. Information is power. It’s also a liability.

“It’s enough for you to know that she is important.”

He grinds his teeth together. “Fine. The secrecy continues. And you’re sure this isn’t going to distract you?”

I narrow my eyes. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, unless fucking her was part of the master plan...”

“You were listening at the door?”

“I wasn’t trying to.” He gives me an unapologetic shrug.

“No, it wasn’t exactly part of the plan,” I admit through clenched teeth. “But some things just happen.”

“And it won’t compromise anything for us going forward?”

“Absolutely not. In fact, I think it might help.”

Jax looks uncertain, but he defers to me anyway. I turn my attention back to the map spread across my desk.

The Mikhailov hotspots have been pinned in blue, while the Solovev interests are marked with red. At first glance, someone who doesn’t know anything about this war would think the Mikhailovs are running rampant over my Bratva.

But they don’t know what I’ve spent years doing. Ever since the attack, I’ve been piling up assets on foreign shores. Hidden bank accounts, secret caches, armadas of men ready to bring the fucking fight to the Mikhailovs’ doorstep as soon as I give the word.

A red wave is coming.

They won't know what hit them.

"Spartak is in Russia at the moment," Jax informs me. "You think we should make use of his absence?"

"How long will he be gone for?"

"A week."

I shake my head. "It's not enough time to plan a cogent attack. We need to make sure that, after we hit him, he can't get back up again."

"In that case, the old man is here," Jax points out. "Taking out Semyon would eliminate half our problem."

"Semyon Mikhailov is not half our problem. He's not even one quarter of our problem," I explain. "He's a sick old dog now. It's Spartak Belov that's calling the shots."

"That's only a rumor—"

"It's the fucking truth," I interject.

"How do you even know?"

"Call it intuition," I reply. "The point is, killing the old man doesn't solve anything. Belov is the true leader of the Mikhailov Bratva. Semyon is just the figurehead. These days, he probably has to ask permission from Spartak to wipe his own ass."

"Thanks for the visual." Jax shudders in disgust. "What about the daughter? Anya Mikhailov is no shy wallflower. We haven't made any plans for her."

"Nor will we," I say. "She's to be left alone."

"Why?"

"Because she's not a significant player."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Jax balks. "She's Semyon's only living child."

"The two of them haven't been on good terms in years."

“What’s that got to do with it?” he protests. “She has Mikhailov blood in her veins, doesn’t she? And if the rumors are true, she’s killed every single husband she’s ever had. That doesn’t sound insignificant to me, Leo.”

“‘Rumors’ being the operative word there.”

“Leo—”

“Are you married to her?”

He rolls his eyes. “C’mon—”

“Didn’t think so. So I don’t see why you’re concerned.”

Jax opens the Mikhailov file and sifts through the pictures. He pulls out an image of Anya Mikhailov that was taken two years ago.

She’s wearing dark sunglasses so you can’t see her eyes, but there’s definitely something about the woman that prickles at my skin. Something razor sharp and deadly.

“C’mon, Leo,” Jax says again. “Rumors, my ass. She definitely fucking did it. Just look at her.”

I look at her image with new objectivity. I’ve had that picture on file for two long years, but it’s been some time since I really looked at it closely.

Anya Mikhailov.

Everyone expected big things from her. She has her father’s ruthlessness and superiority. The rare mafia princess actually deserving of the title. Deserving of the throne, perhaps.

“She looks permanently pissed,” Jax observes. “To be honest, it’s kinda hot.”

I roll my eyes. “Maybe you should be concerned about this black widow of a woman after all.”

“I’ve got a thing for mafia princesses. Sue me.”

“Too bad none of them will ever give you the time of day,” I laugh.

Jax snorts. “They will when they see my cock.”

Anya wouldn't be the first one to fall victim to my lieutenant in that regard. Jax is like crack for women who crave danger.

He is a beast of a man, and he was bred from the depths of the underworld. His mother was a prostitute and his father was a con artist who made his money swindling the rich and powerful. Like any con artist, his days were numbered from the start. When Jax was twelve, he found two bullets in the back of his father's head. He left home and never looked back.

Given that sordid beginning, it amazes me sometimes that Jax is the one with the never-ending sense of humor. By comparison, my other lieutenant Gaiman had an idyllic childhood. Yet, he's the grumpiest motherfucker alive.

"Yeah, I'm sure they'll admire it," I say with a smirk. "Right before they chop it off."

"Once they see it, they'll have no choice but to bow down."

I laugh in his face. "Is that your plan for Anya Mikhailov? Waggle your dick in her face until she swoons?"

"You say that like it won't work."

I shake my head in dismay. "You underestimate Bratva women."

"You Russians need to loosen up," he says. "And I'm just the man for the job."

"The man for what job, exactly?" Gaiman butts in, walking into my office.

"Jax thinks he can fuck a smile onto a couple of Russian mafia princesses."

"One particular mafia princess," Jax clarifies.

"Oh," Gaiman says, rolling his eyes. "Anya. I forgot about your fixation."

I snort. "Is this really a thing?"

Gaiman nods in irritation. "Unfortunately. This idiot thinks the Mikhailov bitch can be tamed."

"I like a challenge," Jax insists.

“She’s not our concern, Jax.” I make sure my tone conveys the order underneath the light-hearted conversation. “She’s not a problem at the moment. Let’s not make her one.”

“Don’t spoil my fun. Why include her in the file if she’s off-limits?”

“Because she’s still a part of her father’s legacy, no matter how small.”

Gaiman shakes his head, an ironic smile playing across his face. “Seems like her part is nonexistent. She doesn’t appear to want anything to do with her father’s legacy.”

“Can you blame her?” asks Jax. “The old fucker picked one of his loser *Vors* to succeed him. Passed her right over. I’d be pissed.”

“For fuck’s sake, *sobrat*,” I say, throwing him an amused smile, “do you have her blood type and Social Security number memorized, too? You’re awfully preoccupied with the woman.”

“Yeah,” he retorts. “Almost as preoccupied as you are with the black-haired broad from the other night.”

Gaiman looks alarmed. “Has he told you why she’s important?”

“No.” Jax makes no attempt to hide his annoyance. “Apparently, our security clearance doesn’t extend that far.”

Gaiman’s sour expression gets just a little bit more sour. “We’re supposed to be your right hand men, Leo.”

“Don’t be so goddamn insecure. It’s not your business to know everything. Your only job is to do as I command.”

Jax sighs. “Yes, Your Highness.”

“Your Majesty,” Gaiman chimes in with a bow at the same time.

I laugh and the mood lightens again. “Fuck you both.”

We’re all still chuckling when Gaiman’s phone pings. He gives it a cursory glance, but the moment he reads the text message, the smile drops off his face.

“What is it?” I ask. The room is silent and rippling with tension.

“Agent 23,” Gaiman says.

I stiffen at once. “Read it out loud.”

“*“The account has been discovered. It’s only a matter of time. Secure the key before he does.”*” Gaiman’s frown deepens as he raises his eyes to mine. “What key? What account? The fuck does any of this mean?”

I tighten my fist. “It means there’s no room for finesse. I have to accelerate my plan.”

“The plan we’re clueless about.”

I nod. “It’s better this way, my friend.”

“Meaning you’re going to handle this on your own?” Gaiman asks. “This has to do with the girl, then?”

I nod. “The time has come to show her just how far this rabbit hole goes.”

WILLOW

“I have some good news for you,” Marjorie says, sitting down in her swivel chair across from me.

She’s got a big red file in her hands, and for once, a smile on her face. Marjorie has been handing me temp jobs for almost three months now, and this is the first time she’s looked excited by the prospect. Usually, it’s more of a grimace as she slides the file to me.

“Is the pay decent this time?” I ask hopefully.

“Better than decent.” She tosses her dreads over one shoulder and opens the file. “In fact, this isn’t a temp job at all.”

My heart flips. “It’s not?”

“It’s a job interview. And if it goes well, you could have a permanent, full-time gig.”

My spirits soar, but I try to tamp them down immediately. Don’t count your chickens before they hatch and all that.

“What’s the job?”

“It’s for the position of a…” She trails off as she looks down at the paper in her red file. “Huh. Weird.”

My spirits plummet right back down. That didn’t take long. I’m already nauseous from this emotional roller coaster.

“Marjorie?” I prod. “What’s the job?”

“Hmm,” she murmurs without taking her eyes off the file.

“It’s not prostitution, is it?” I joke lamely. “You’re not pimping me out?”

She looks up only long enough to throw me an annoyed glare, then goes back to perusing the papers. I bite my tongue and try to be patient.

“Hm. Right. Okay then,” she says, looking up from her file. “It seems the position will be discussed on arrival.”

“Meaning I have no idea what I’m applying for?”

“It’s safe to assume the job is a live-in housekeeping assignment.”

I frown. “But you’re just guessing?”

“Well, it’s a live-in position at the Henley Estate. Up on South Gate.”

“South Gate,” I repeat. “Like, Rich People Central?”

“That’s the place,” she says. “I send people up there all the time. The houses are massive and employ a full staff. Maids, gardeners, the works.”

“Jesus,” I breathe. “More money than they know what to do with.”

She chuckles. “If you get this job, you’re golden. Best part is, the employee is not looking for someone with specific credentials. So the likelihood is that he won’t care that you’re not educated or experienced.”

My gut twists a little at her last few words. I know she didn’t mean anything by it. Nothing malicious, at least. And it says more about me than it does about her that just stating the facts of my life makes me feel so awful.

But *awful* is exactly what I’m feeling.

“When’s the interview?” I ask.

“An hour from now.”

“Today?” I gasp. “You’re joking.”

“I am not. In fact, you’d better get cracking.”

“South Gate is all the way over on the other side of town,” I protest. “I... I’m going to need a cab if I’m going to get there in time.”

Marjorie waves me towards the door. “Then what are you waiting for?”

I rifle around in my purse and try to figure out how much money I’ve got on me. “Shit. Shit.”

“Willow, stop panicking and get moving,” Marjorie tuts. “You want this job? Go get it.”

I’m on my feet when something else hits me. “Wait... did you say this was a live-in position?”

“Thought you might like that part.”

I take a deep breath. “I really need to get this job.”

She nods. “Good luck, dear. Charm the pants off that rich old bastard.”

I salute her with aplomb and dart out of the agency with renewed determination. This is the first big break I’ve had since I started job hunting.

I need to make this work.

I hail a taxi at the end of the street and give the cabbie the address. “South Gate at this time?” He whistles. “That’s gonna be a hefty fare.”

“Roughly how much, would you say?”

“Thirty, forty bucks at least.”

Gulping, I check my purse. All I’ve got is a fifty. But I decide not to let the cabbie know. If the meter goes over, I’ll handle it then.

“Okay, let’s go,” I tell him. “I’m in a hurry.”



Just shy of an hour later, I’m forty-six dollars poorer and standing at the gates of the Henley Estate. They’re bronze, ornate, and big enough for a cruise ship to pass through.

“Fuck me,” I mutter before heading to the glass security booth tucked amongst the hedges.

One glance at the uniformed guard inside the booth tells me he’s armed for some heavy-duty warfare. That’s strange. What have I gotten myself into?

I tap on the glass. “Hi, excuse me. This is the Henley Estate, yes?”

The guard glances up at me through his shades. He’s a short, bulky man with roughly chiseled features. It looks like his face might crack if he ever considered smiling.

“Yeah. Who’s asking?”

His English is slightly accented. It strikes me as familiar somehow, but I can’t place it.

“My name is Willow Powers,” I say, falling into my maiden name almost instinctively. “I have an appointment in five minutes with, uh... the, um, owner of the estate.”

I forgot to ask Marjorie for the owner’s name. Strike number one and I’m not even through the gates yet.

He regards me coolly, hiding all his thoughts behind those dark sunglasses. I don’t see him move or lift a finger, but suddenly, I hear a buzz and the side gate swings open.

“Head on through,” he orders. “Wait for me on the other side.”

I do as he says. When I meet him inside the grounds, he gestures to a golf cart parked out of sight. Like him, this thing is ready for war. Armor-plated, fully blacked-out, with several dozen ominous-looking compartments. I decide not to ask what they contain or why the owner finds all this necessary.

Swallowing back my nerves, I get into the passenger seat. He climbs behind the wheel and we accelerate out. The engine is dead silent. Must be electric.

We whisk across the grounds so fast the wind tugs tears out of my eyes. Before I know it, we’re in front of a broad cascade of marble steps at the front of the biggest mansion I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Guess this is my stop,” I joke as I climb down from the vehicle.

The guard doesn't laugh. He accelerates away and never once looks back. Nice guy.

There are only three steps in the staircase, but they're so big that I feel like I've walked three dozen by the time I ascend to the huge wooden door. It's like something from a medieval castle, all ancient, weathered wood reinforced with brass studs and buckles.

A huge black knocker in the shape of a lion's head leers out at me. Something about it makes my skin crawl. I ignore the knocker and opt for the quaint little doorbell button instead.

When the door swings open, it's with surprising ease. Especially considering the woman on the other side is a petite older woman with curling gray hair.

“Um, hi, I'm—”

“We've been expecting you, Miss Powers.”

“Oh. Okay. That's, uh... good.”

In theory, I guess it is. But in reality, my hair is standing on end and my gut is churning.

To be fair, that probably has at least something to do with the absurdly intimidating house I'm walking through. My attention oscillates from side to side, trying to take in every detail.

I thought that Casey and I lived well, in our big two-story house with an excess of creature comforts. But this is another level.

This is true luxury.

An image forms in my head of the man I'm supposed to win over in under an hour. A booming older man with a head full of dyed hair and dozens of gold rings on his fingers, no doubt. The kind of man who smokes cigars and buys expensive art for the hell of it.

As for what I'm doing here, that's pretty freaking obvious: this place is huge and spotless. It must take an army to clean it this thoroughly.

I follow the old woman through stone-paved corridor after corridor for ten minutes and we still haven't arrived at wherever it is we're going. Then at long last, the woman stops.

We're in front of a door made from handsome dark wood. I can see the vague contours of my own reflection in the deep crimson varnish.

"He's waiting for you," she informs me.

Just like the guard at the gate, she disappears without a goodbye. They could do with some work on their manners here, if you ask me.

I sigh and refocus. *You need this job, Willow.*

With a lurch, I push open the door and walk in, trying to slow my heart rate.

The room is as huge and luxurious as the rest of the house, but I don't have time to gawk. My eyes go immediately to the tall, broad-shouldered man standing by the windows.

His back is to me, but I can see enough to know I was wrong.

No dyed hair. No cigar. No gold rings on his fingers.

This isn't the old tycoon I was expecting.

"Excuse me?" I say, clearing my throat self-consciously. "Your, um, housekeeper just—"

"Hello, Willow."

I freeze at the sound of that voice. It can't be.

Leo Solovev has invaded my dreams and thoughts for days. Maybe my daydreams are finally starting to bleed into my reality. Maybe I'm losing it.

Because it can't be *him*.

But then he turns, and I see just how wrong I am.

"Oh my God," I gasp. "Leo?"

I'm floored. He, on the other hand, doesn't look surprised in the least. "Why don't you take a seat?" he suggests. "You look like you're about to faint."

My knees are a little wobbly. I manage to stumble forward to the leather wing-backed chairs facing his sprawling teak desk.

“I... I’m having a hard time processing this,” I blurt.

He joins me at the desk and reclines in his seat. “Why is that?”

“Well, this is—this is kind of a strange coincidence, isn’t it?”

He shrugs. “I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Fate, then?”

He doesn’t answer. Just looks at me with a brooding, curious expression.

I feel like I’m hallucinating. It’s been only a handful of days since this man was inside me. Since the night that rocked the foundations of my world.

He made me feel wanted, free. He made me feel powerful. And then he was gone, as fast as he’d come...

Taking all that power with him.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” I murmur.

“Have I disappointed you?”

He asks the question as though he has no vested interest in my answer. But he waits for me to reply.

I realize suddenly that my hands are trembling. “I... no,” I say awkwardly as I clamp them together. “I’m not disappointed.”

He smiles for the first time. It makes me squeeze my thighs against an onrush of tingling. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

One night of hot sex was revenge. It was fair, even justified. Anything else... and it becomes an affair. It becomes a *choice*.

“I went to the temp agency this morning,” I explain, trying to hide my blush. “They told me about a job here at the Henley Estate. I had no idea you owned it.”

“Why would you?”

“Right... right. I just... it’s a shock, that’s all.” I take a deep breath and try to get my bearings. I sit up straight. “I’m still eager to learn about the job.”

Being professional is the only way I can salvage this situation and ignore the heat blossoming low in my stomach.

“Job?”

He sounds confused. But there’s not an ounce of confusion in his hazel eyes.

My center throbs as he stands suddenly, walks around his desk, and leans against it. He’s still an arms’ length away from me, and yet the tension between us is as red-hot as it was the night we met. As hot as it was when he buried himself inside me.

“I—Marjorie, that is; she’s my temp agent—she told me the position wasn’t really specified, but it may have something to do with housekeeping?”

He shakes his head. “She misunderstood. The position is... quite unique.”

“Oh?” My stomach drops.

The old insecurities rear their ugly head. What if I’m not qualified? What if I can’t do the job? What if the only reason he hires me is because he wants to sleep with me again?

That last part doesn’t horrify me as much as it should.

And ironically enough, that’s what horrifies me most of all.

“What is it then? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“You’re going to be my wife,” he says coolly, his eyes never leaving my face.

I wait for the punchline. It doesn’t come. So I just stare dumbly at him, certain that I’ve misheard.

When Leo still doesn’t explain, I say, “I’m sorry. I think I must have heard you wrong.”

He doesn’t take his eyes off mine. “If you heard me say ‘wife,’ then you didn’t mishear anything.”

There's a strange something rising up my throat. It tastes like bile and panic. "Is this some sort of practical joke? Are there, like, hidden cameras or something?"

"Nothing about this is a joke, Willow."

I search his face for signs that he might be kidding, but there are none. Oh God. Oh God. Oh God...

He's serious.

This is serious.

I get to my feet slowly, wary like I'm in the presence of a wild predator. "Okay, well, clearly, I've come to the wrong job interview. If you'll excuse me, I'll just show myself out."

Without waiting for him to speak, I turn and head straight for the black door. But when I try to open it, it doesn't budge.

"Excuse me, Leo?" I say, turning back to glance at him. "The door's locked."

He pushes himself off the desk. "I understand your hesitation, Willow," he sighs. "But you'll come around."

I pull at the door handle. Nothing happens. "W-what do you mean?"

"Which part of 'You're going to be my wife' was confusing?"

I abandon the doorknob and turn to him in disbelief. "You're insane."

He gives me a smile that betrays my assumption immediately. This man is not insane—he's calculated. He's intelligent.

He's... planned this.

"You can't do this!" I cry out as the panic finally consumes me like dark waters.

He presses a button on the edge of his desk. A hidden door slides open and two stony-faced guards stomp in, gunning straight for me.

"I'm afraid I already have."

LEO

“Where is she?” Jax asks.

“In one of the south bedrooms.”

Jax gives me a suggestive smirk. “Right around the corner from yours. Convenient.”

“I’m not interested in fucking her,” I snap, despite the fact that my cock is still straining painfully in my pants. “I’ve already done that.”

“Don’t act like you never go back for seconds.”

“Not since I was old enough to know better.”

He chuckles. “I don’t know, there’s something to be said about the ol’ double dip. Once women open up, they let you do the freaky stuff.”

“That’s never been a problem for me,” I shoot back.

Gaiman walks in seconds later. He looks exhausted. It’s nothing new, but since we have a special guest in the house, I have to ask.

“Well?”

“She’s still screaming bloody murder,” he sighs. “Thankfully, your neighbors are too far off to hear.”

“Is a sedative necessary?”

“Wow,” Jax whistles. “You’re really trying to win her over, huh?”

“The time to play games is done,” I say. “I had to move up my plans. Hence the—”

“Abduction?” Jax offers innocently.

“It was necessary.”

“Why?”

I smirk. “I’ll tell you when you need to know. But at the moment, it’s enough that she’s here. In my control.”

“*In your control*’? Ha! Have you passed by her room lately?” Gaiman asks. “I thought she was the passive type.”

I wave my hand dismissively. “She’ll calm down in time.”

“Once you’ve... married her?” Jax asks.

“Precisely.”

I don’t look up, but I still see the glance that passes between Gaiman and Jax. Gaiman knows better than to ask, but Jax is much more stubborn. Great quality for a Vor, even if it is annoying as fuck.

“Is this wedding gonna be a black tie affair?” he asks. “I might need a little time to get my suit tailored.”

“Will you shut up, you talkative motherfucker?” I growl. “I’ve got real shit to discuss.”

“I dunno, *sobrat*—I’d say your wedding is pretty important.”

“It’s not a marriage. It’s a strategy,” I retort. “And that’s all I’m saying on the subject. Gaiman, pull up the plans.”

He does as I say while Jax pouts. Once the plans are stretched out in front of us, I take a pair of pins and drive them into two specific locations on the site map.

Jax's eyes go wide when he sees where I've targeted. "The Silver fucking Star and the Manhattan fucking Club?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Several fucking problems, Leo!" he says. "Bringing down business at either of those locations—let alone *both* of them—isn't gonna be easy. The Mikhailov security is tight."

"I'm aware. Which is why I'm not bringing down the businesses." I pause—partly for effect, partly just to piss him off. "I'm bringing down the *buildings*."

Stunned silence ensues.

Gaiman recovers first. "Let me get this straight: you're going to blow up two entire Mikhailov properties?"

"Your listening comprehension is as good as ever, my friend. Jax, try to keep up."

Jax gives me the finger. Gaiman has more questions, though. "How the hell are you planning on doing that?"

I put both my palms on the table and lean over the map. "Easy. Bombs. One in each building. When I say the word... *boom*."

"So... they're gonna be big bombs," Jax says.

I nod. "The biggest motherfuckers you've ever seen. All we have to do is plant them."

"Okay, but how do you plan to get everyone out of the building? We can't exactly ring the doorbell and warn them," Jax says.

"Semyon and Spartak didn't give us any warnings," I remind him coldly.

Jax winces. "Right, yeah. Of course not. I just meant—"

"Do you think they warned my brother before they put a bullet in his fucking brain during what was supposed to be a gentlemen's meeting?"

He shakes his head.

“No, they didn’t,” I bark. “So we won’t, either.”

Gaiman breaks the tension. “Okay, so basically, the plan is to kill them all?”

“More or less.”

Jax wrings his hands together. “There’s bound to be a few decent fights in between, right? ‘Cause I’ve been training real fucking hard lately.”

Gaiman eyes his muscles with distaste. “Doesn’t show.”

“Jealous fucker.”

“Jealous of what?” Gaiman asks. “Looking like a stuffed turkey?”

Jax bares his teeth like a feral animal. “You want to take on this stuffed turkey? I’m game.”

“Will both of you shut the hell up?” I snap. “Once we’ve taken down the Mikhailov Bratva and killed that motherfucker Spartak, I’ll be happy to kick both your asses.”

Jax mumbles something under his breath about being able to take me, but he sighs and fades into silence when I glower at him. We both know he can’t back it up.

“Set up two separate teams,” I instruct them. “Put one on each property and make sure we have around-the-clock shifts. I need to know every detail. Who comes, who goes, who takes a piss. If we’re going to pull this off, we can’t miss anything.”

“I don’t know about this numbskull, but I’ll get right on it, Don,” Gaiman says.

“Fuck you,” Jax snaps at him. “My team is gonna kick your team’s ass.”

Gaiman shakes his head. “You’re a child.”

“We’re done here. The two of you get moving.” I get to my feet and head for the door right as Jax’s wolf whistle pierces through the air.

“Heading off to propose to your blushing bride-to-be?” he jokes.

I glance at him over my shoulder. “Jealous?”

The big bastard gives a shrug. “Can you blame me? She’s fucking gorgeous.”

For some reason, I stiffen. “I didn’t pick her for her looks.”

Before either one of them can ask me another question, I leave.

And head straight for Willow’s room.



The room is quiet.

Piotr stands just outside it, slouched against the doorframe. The moment he sees me, he straightens.

“Sir.”

“How long has she been quiet for?”

“Only about fifteen minutes or so. Ran out of breath, I imagine.”

I suppress a chuckle. Apparently, Willow is even more of a fighter than I’ve given her credit for. I nod to Piotr. He unlocks the door and swings it open.

Willow is sitting on the edge of the bed, a tiny porcelain doll compared to the massive room.

Her eyes are watery, but I can tell she’s wrung dry. What’s left is fatigue, fear, and something new. Something that looks a hell of a lot like resilience.

“Leo,” she whispers. Her voice is hoarse.

“If I were a man whose plans could be foiled by screams, I’d never get anything done,” I tell her.

She gives an involuntary shudder. “Is this real?”

“Very.”

“You weren’t playing some sort of practical joke on me?”

“Do I look like the practical joking type?”

Her brow furrows. “You’re mafia.”

I darken immediately. “That’s not a blunder many other Bratva dons would tolerate.”

“Mafia, Bratva, whatever. Doesn’t it mean the same thing?”

“Not even remotely.”

She looks around the room in a daze. “Okay, well, semantics aside, it was interesting being introduced to your... um... life,” she says awkwardly. “But I think it’s about time I get on with my own.”

I raise my eyebrows. “What life is that? Temping and sleeping on the couch while your husband fucks whores in the bedroom?”

Her eyes swim with venom. “I do have a life, asshole. And you had no right to lure me here under false pretenses and lock me into your fucked-up deal.”

I scoff. “The Bratva doesn’t ask for permission. We take what we want.”

“Like you took me?”

“The way you lifted your skirt, you seemed willing enough to—”

“*Not what I meant.*”

I shrug. “If you insist.”

“I don’t understand why you would want me in the first place,” she muses. “Who am I to you?”

“You have something I want.”

Her eyes go wide. “What is it? Ask me and I’ll give it to you.”

“There’s no need to give me anything, *kukolka*,” I tell her calmly, knowing that the words are flying right over her head. “I take what I want, remember?”

Her face floods with panic. “This is ridiculous. You can’t keep me here! This is abduction.”

“Semantics aside, you’re here now,” I say. “If you run, you’ll be brought back. Kicking and screaming, if need be.”

“People will be looking for me, you know. Lots of people.”

I saunter closer and smirk. “Is that right? And what people are those, exactly? Your cheating husband is all you have.”

She cringes, realizing just how much I know about her life. Not just what I’ve researched in the years that preceded our meeting—though that is far more detail than she could ever realize—but simply the information she voluntarily offered me moments before I fucked her half to death.

I’m half-tempted to do exactly that again—more than half-tempted, actually. Just to hear those noises one more time...

She’s wearing bleached blue jeans and a long-sleeved white blouse that could do with another pass of the iron. Her black hair is tied back behind her head in a long ponytail. For a moment, I imagine using that ponytail to steer. To wrench her head back towards me and coax those moans from her throat.

But half-temptations will have to wait. No matter—I’ve been curbing my own desires since I was old enough to understand that some payoffs are worth the delay.

“Not just him,” she snaps. “I have other people in my life.”

“Not your parents,” I say softly. “You cut them off years ago, remember?”

“I... I have friends.”

“Yeah? Do they have names?”

“Simone,” she replies almost immediately. “Elsa and... Anna.”

“Are these friends or cartoon characters?”

Her glacier blue eyes narrow at me. “You are way more of an asshole than I remembered.”

“It’s good to see some fight in you,” I tell her. “Where was it when Casey came to pick you up like a runaway mutt?”

“I don’t think you can talk shit about him at this point. Pot calling the kettle black and all.”

I cock my head to the side and wait while her anger blows itself out.

Her frown falters. The longer the silence lasts, the more she writhes and wriggles. But I’m used to silence and screaming alike. I can endure it all to help her see the bigger picture.

That *I* call the shots now.

“Don’t just stand there like a fucking statue,” she snaps finally. “Say something.”

“I speak when I have something to say.”

“I don’t like long silences.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

She looks to the side as though she’s determined to avoid my eyes. “Please let me go,” she finally whispers.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

She clenches her fists. “I don’t understand why.”

“Maybe if you sit in the silence long enough, you’ll find out.”

Willow’s eyes flash to mine and away again. She’s trying to hold her fear at bay, but it’s obvious to anyone that she’s losing the battle.

“This doesn’t have to be so difficult, you know. We can help each other,” I say. “Form an alliance of sorts.”

“That’s an awfully nice word for the shit you’re doing here.”

“It’s the right one. You need a way out, and I need a way in.”

“You realize that makes no sense to me, right?” she snaps. “Like, none whatsoever?”

I smile. “I’m aware. The less you understand, the better. For both our sakes.”

She groans in frustration. “My head is starting to hurt.”

“Then let me simplify: you need me, Willow.”

She pushes herself off the bed and jabs a finger in my direction. “Let’s get one thing straight: I most certainly do *not* need you. I don’t need anyone.”

I sigh. Pity that it’s come to this. “You have an abusive husband you’re trying to leave, am I right?”

She stops short. “I... well...”

“And you’re still living with him, aren’t you?”

“Yes...”

“Then I think it’s about time you got yourself out of that house and into mine.”

She frowns, nose wrinkling. It’s honestly fucking adorable. “I’m already in your house.”

“Excellent. See how much time I’ve saved you?”

She regards me with a curious gaze. “Are you really a Bratva don?”

“I am.”

“I’ve heard about you. Like, stories and stuff. Rumors in the city,” she says. “But never in connection with the name Solovev.”

“No? What name have you heard?”

“I don’t pay attention to mafia st—”

“Bratva,” I correct harshly. “Don’t make that mistake again.”

She blushes and fidgets. “Right. Bratva. Anyway, the name was Michael something. Mikhail. I can’t quite remember.”

I grimace. “Mikhailov.”

“Right! Yes, that.”

“Forget it. The name Solovev is the only one that matters now,” I say

fiercely.

I can feel my pulse pounding in my forehead. For seven years, the name Mikhailov has made my blood boil.

For seven years, I've planned my return to the city's throne.

Finally, the time has come to take back what's always been mine.

"Is that a good thing?" Willow asks, snapping me out of my thoughts. She is still gripping the bedpost, using it to keep herself steady. Her face is drawn in uncertainty, but she is beginning to calm.

"It is so long as you align with the right people."

"Like you?" she asks.

I step towards the door. "You look hungry."

"I'm not."

"I'll have one of the maids bring up your dinner."

"I don't want your food," she snaps, even as her stomach roils audibly with hunger.

"Pride won't keep you from starving, you know."

All at once, her demeanor shifts. Her eyes widen. "This is insane. Totally freaking insane. You can't just snatch people off the street!"

We're back to that again. I hate talking in circles.

"But I didn't do anything of the sort, did I?" I point out. "You walked into my house of your own free will."

"Because I thought I was here to interview for a job!"

"And you got the job," I say with a smile. "Congratulations."

She arches a brow. "You seem to have forgotten one very important detail."

"The fact that you're already married?"

"That's the one," she says with a nod.

I wave away the problem with a swipe of my hand. “I didn’t forget. My lawyer is already on it. All you’ll have to do is sign.”

She stares at me in disbelief. “You want me to divorce my husband and marry *you*?”

“You were planning to leave him anyway.”

“Yeah, to gain back my freedom. Not to marry a control freak ten times as bad. Why would I ever marry you?”

“Because, Willow, I’m not giving you a choice.”

Her eyes bulge with all kinds of things—anger, fear, and perhaps a hint of curiosity.

Although curiosity, of course, is what killed the *kiska*. She ought to be careful in my world.

“It won’t be so bad,” I tell her. “Think of all the perks.”

“Perks?”

“For instance,” I say, relishing the reaction I’m about to get, “you enjoyed having my cock inside you the other night.”

She freezes instantly. I haven’t seen a blush that bright in my entire life. I like making her squirm. Making her gasp. Making her moan.

I plan to do a lot of it.

She’s stammering and spluttering as she tries to find words to combat me. “I... that was... you tricked me.”

“We already discussed your willingness,” I chide her.

“It was... a lapse in judgment. I was angry with my husband. It was about revenge...”

I purse my lips and nod like I’m sympathetic, like I’m understanding. And when my voice comes out, it’s sickly sweet. Again, mostly just to see those cheeks turn fiery red.

“Does revenge turn you on? Is that why you were so wet?”

She jerks away from me. “Fu—fucking *asshole*, you are a motherfucking—”

“Something wrong, Willow?” I ask innocently as I stalk closer. I shadow her movements, marching her backwards in tandem until the bed hits the back of her knees. She sits down on the mattress with a surprised *oof*. “Am I scaring you? Or are you worried you won’t be able to resist me if I get too close?”

Her cheeks are still scarlet, but her eyes are burning even brighter. “You manipulated me,” she accuses. “Were you planning this from the beginning? Since the moment we met?”

“No. I’ve been planning this for much, much longer.”

She shivers. “Why?”

“For revenge,” I tell her bluntly. “You should be familiar with the sentiment.”

She takes a deep breath. “Can you... can you please find someone else?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“The less you know, the better. Remember?”

“You’ve put me in a cell. You’re forcing me to marry you. And you won’t even tell me why?”

“Let’s not be dramatic. You’ve got windows.”

“You can’t get away with this,” she says for the dozenth time. I’m starting to grow bored.

“Oh, *kukolka*, you’d be surprised at how much I can get away with.”

“Casey’s gonna come after you,” she says desperately. “He’s going to alert the cops and then—”

“No, he’s not. He’s not going to alert anyone, because as far as he knows, you’ve left him. And the proof will be in the divorce papers that are on the way to him shortly.”

She stares at me, mouth hanging open. “You...”

“You need to leave him, Willow. I’m giving you a way out.”

“By trapping me in something worse!”

“You married for love once and look how that turned out,” I remind her. “Maybe if you approached marriage more practically, you’d have a better chance at success.”

“Dear God,” she breathes. “You’re serious. You’re really fucking serious about this.”

“My world is a complicated one, but you’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t *want* to get used to it, asshole.”

“Unfortunately for you, you don’t have a choice. And it has nothing to do with me.”

“What are you talking about?” Her nose wrinkles in confusion.

Things are unraveling. I should leave before the half-tempted part of me wins out. “Maybe one day, I’ll tell you,” I say as I turn for the door.

“Wait!”

I glance back at her over my shoulder. “Yes?”

“My friends,” she says desperately. “My friends will know something is wrong. They’ll tell the cops.”

I smile. “Fictional people can’t call the cops.”

“Fuck you, they’re real,” she stammers.

Fine. I’ll bite. “I’m curious. These friends—they’re close to you?”

“Very.”

“And you speak to them often?”

“Every day.”

I nod and pull her cell phone from my pocket.

Her eyes go wide. “I thought I dropped it.”

“You’re not the only thing I took.”

Under her anger, there’s a spark of amusement. I take note of that. There’s a lot brimming below Willow’s surface. Fortunately, I’ll have plenty of time to plumb the depths.

“It’s funny... All those names you mentioned, they’re not in your phone.”

“I... How... You got into my phone?”

“Yes.”

“It’s locked! Password protected. You need my fingerprint...”

“I don’t ask for what I want,” I remind her again. “I take it. How many times do you need me to explain that to you?”

“That’s my private information on there!” she yells.

“On the contrary, there’s a lot of nothing in here,” I tell her. “A bunch of boorish conversations with that repulsive *mudak* you married, a search history full of job searches and divorce lawyers, and not a single missed call from anyone who isn’t your husband.”

She doesn’t say a word. She knows just how right I am.

I tuck the phone in my pocket and walk to the door. It opens from the outside when I knock, but before I go, I turn back to her one more time.

“I’m doing you a favor, Willow. I’m giving you the chance to start over. If you’re smart... you’ll take it.”

WILLOW

Leo isn't giving me a chance. He's setting a trap.

I should know. I fell for one the day I met Casey.

The memory hurts like it's fresh. Casey smiling at me and flashing his money, his influence. I was stupid enough to still find those things attractive. He made me feel like I was the only girl in the world. The fact that he was so much older only made it all the more flattering. A guy like him, interested in a poor, orphaned nobody like me? Couldn't be happening.

But it was.

Just not the way I thought.

When he told me he would take care of me, that was a trap.

When he bought me a house in a faraway state, thousands of miles from everything and everyone I'd ever known, that was a trap.

And I jumped into it with both feet.

My regret has taught me one very important lesson: if something or someone seems too good to be true, it's because it is.

No one is going to look after you. Or save you. Or offer you a happily ever after.

There's no such thing.

Life isn't a fairytale. Prince Charming isn't real. And real damsels in distress stay in distress unless they learn to wizen up and save themselves.

So as I stand here, faced with another Prince Charming wannabe, I know better. This is a trap. *He's* the trap. And if I'm not careful, I'll fall right into it like I did with Casey.

"I'm doing you a favor, Willow. I'm giving you the chance to start over. If you're smart... you'll take it."

"I *am* smart," I say softly. Leo is about to leave, but he turns back to me when I add, "I just think that somewhere along the way... I forgot that I was."

His eyes flash. "I think that might have something to do with the stupid decisions you keep making."

"The biggest one was sleeping with you that night," I retort. "One night together doesn't give you some sort of twisted ownership over me."

"You know what gives me ownership of something?" he growls in my face. "*Taking it.*"

He takes a step towards me. All I see are broad shoulders and dark eyes. He's a massive man, the kind of beast who swallows up the air in the room with his all-consuming presence.

"You can pretend all you like, *kukolka*, but I see through you. You still don't regret that night. You'd let me fuck you again right now if I wanted to. It'd be easy. So fucking easy."

This time, when he closes the distance between us, I back up. It's dangerous to be too close. Last time he touched me, even just a brush of legs, I told him things I hadn't told another living soul in years.

"That's close enough," I say, holding my hand out.

He looks down at it with amusement. "Do you think you can stop me, little one?"

He steps forward again, just enough for my palm to meet the solid wall of his chest. I can feel his warmth, his pulse radiating through me like an electric

shock. "I said that's close enough."

He sighs. Like I'm still not getting it.

Then he grabs my wrist in one huge hand, twists it over my head, and shoves me backwards until I hit the wall.

He's on top of me now. His whole body is flush against mine. His breath is hot and heavy across my skin. His scent is intoxicating in a way I've never experienced before.

If touching him with one hand felt like a static shock, this is like double-fisting an electric fence. I'm on *fire* with him.

I try to blink through it, get a grip on myself. "Get off me!"

"Your eyes are dilated."

"Excuse me?"

"And your heart is pounding. You're sweating. You're flushed." His whispered words vibrate through me. "Your lips might say one thing, Willow... but your body gives you away. Just like it did the night we met."

I swallow and grit my teeth. "Fine. You want honesty? I was attracted to you. But that's only because I didn't know who you were back then."

"What's your excuse now?"

"Are you going to rape me?" Might as well come right out and say it. I want to know what to expect.

He raises his eyebrows, but he doesn't make any moves to give me more space. "You think I would?"

"You said it yourself: you take what you want."

"I don't want that."

"Coulda fooled me."

"I've fucked you once," he reminds me with vicious pleasure. "What would be the point of fucking you again?"

The way he says it is purposefully cruel, and it has the intended effect. The words sting. I shouldn't care, but I do.

Especially since I can feel his erection pressed against my thigh.

He thinks I'm some bitch in heat that he can manipulate to get what he wants. But I'm not the only one who feels the electricity when we touch.

I'm not the only one with dilated eyes and sweat beading at the nape of my neck.

He wants me, too. As much as he tries to deny it.

I can use that.

I force my hand down between us and rest my palm on his massive bulge. "Your body's giving you away, Leo Solovev."

His jaw clenches tight. For one moment, I feel as powerful as him.

It doesn't last long, of course. Instead of denying it, he grinds his cock deeper into my touch. "The difference between you and me is that I'm not a slave to it."

He's bluffing. He has to be. "You may be able to control a lot of things, but you can't control your feelings."

He thrusts his hips into me again. My pussy throbs. "You're assuming I have feelings to begin with."

"You're human, aren't you?"

"The farthest thing from it. I was born into the underworld," he rasps. "My heart was cut out a long time ago. It's the reason I can fuck you and walk away. It's the reason I can abduct you without an ounce of guilt. It's the reason I take what I want and never, ever look back."

I struggle underneath him, but that only arouses me more. "You don't scare me."

He grabs my face in his free hand and tightens his grip. "You're gonna have to learn to lie better than that."

I shake his hand off. “I’m not an easy mark, you know. That’s why you picked me, isn’t it? You thought I was some helpless, passive abusee. A damsel in fucking distress who would jump at the chance to be saved by a big, handsome brute like you.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Handsome, huh?”

I huff. The man has a way of knifing through all my defenses with just a word or two. He arouses me, he pisses me off, he terrifies me—all without any apparent effort.

“If I’m going to stay here,” I snap, “I think I have a right to know everything.”

He shakes his head. “*Right?* What right? This is my Bratva. I don’t give anything for free. Everything must be earned.”

“Including my freedom?”

“That remains to be seen.”

My eyes fall to his right pocket where he’s stashed my phone. Maybe if I can get it back, I can call someone. Someone who can help me get out of here.

Have I been going about this all wrong? Maybe I should have been playing the part he’s cast me in—docile, compliant, at his mercy—rather than pushing back every step of the way.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” he warns.

“Wouldn’t what?”

He fishes the phone out of his pocket and waves it in front of my face. “Try to take it from me. That won’t end well.”

“How did you—”

“I know everything.” He says it with such conviction that I actually find myself believing him. “I know you’re isolated, Willow. I know the only person you have to rely on in the world is the one man who hurts you the most. I know the police are closing in on him for stealing from his employers. And I’m pretty sure you’d like to be well clear of him before that happens.”

“I... You... How the hell do you know all that?”

“What did I just tell you?” he chides. “I know everything.”

I shake my head. “You’ve been watching me for a while, haven’t you?”

“Someone has.”

“Do you constantly talk in riddles, or is that just for my benefit?”

His thumb brushes roughly over my knuckles. “Settle in, Willow. You’re going to be here for a while.”

“You can’t force me to marry you.”

He laughs cruelly. “I think you’ll find that I can do anything I want.”

My heart thuds painfully against my chest. But the adrenaline is pumping, too. Between those two, I’m running awfully short on coherent, logical thought. So I act on blind, panicked instinct.

I lunge for the phone in his hand.

Seconds after I’ve made my move, I realize how stupid a decision it was.

Leo is so fast, no more than a blur. He pivots to the side and grabs me around the waist. Then he throws me over his shoulder and dumps me on top of the duvet like a sack of potatoes.

He’s on me before I can even start to process what happened. His bodyweight holds me captive, helpless. All I can see are his hazel eyes. And unlike the night at the restaurant, there’s no warmth in them now. Not a single trace of heat or humanity.

He was right: I’ll need to learn to lie better.

Because right now, I’m terrified.

Casey might have been scary, but this man? This man is flat-out dangerous. Lethal. And for some reason, he’s decided that I’m important.

“I gave you plenty of warnings,” he growls. “Too many, in fact.”

His erection is pressed between my legs. When I feel the rush of liquid heat that it provokes at my center, I cringe. I hate how my body is responding to him. I'm hoping he's too angry to notice that my nipples are hard.

"In case you haven't already noticed," I fire back, "I'm stubborn. Especially where my captors are involved."

For a moment, I think he might smile, but he doesn't. "I can be patient. But I prefer not to be."

"I can be a doormat," I snap back. "But I prefer not to be."

He grinds his cock against me. I let out an involuntary gasp that sounds an awfully lot like a moan.

"See?" he laughs as he pushes himself off me. "You want this more than you're willing to admit."

"Don't mistake desire for love," I hear myself say.

"Love?" he repeats. He sounds astounded by the word. "Love has no place in my world. Never has. So don't worry, *kukolka*: I don't expect or want love from you."

"Then what do you want?"

"Obedience."

"Obedience is for dogs. I'm a human fucking being."

I want to scream. I want to fight. I want to kick and kick and kick.

This is the very thing I'm trying to escape—men who think they have a God-given right to control me. And somehow, *somehow*, just when I thought I was getting free of it, I find myself back in the same position.

No, not the same.

Worse.

Casey has money. He has a certain amount of power, in the ordinary, petty kind of way. But not Bratva power. Not Bratva money.

“If you’re waiting on obedience from me, you’re going to be disappointed,” I hiss.

He raises his eyebrows. “Is that a challenge?”

“It’s a promise. I’m not going to leave one bad marriage for another. I’ll be the first one to admit to my poor choices. I’ve been naïve and foolish. But I am not so ignorant that I make the same damn mistakes over and over again.”

Even as I say it, I wonder if it’s true. This was a trap from the very start, wasn’t it?

Our night together wasn’t a serendipitous encounter; it was an elaborate hoax. Leo was charming, yes, but that was just the role he was playing. And I bought it.

Now I can see the man behind the false charm. I want to pretend like I don’t care, but it feels like I’ve lost something.

“You could probably get any woman you want,” I say in a broken voice, trying to ignore the pressure of his body and his rock-hard dick. “Why me?”

“Right question,” he murmurs. “Wrong time.”

His breath tickles my nose as he looks down at me. I have to bite my lip to keep from moaning.

Why does he make me feel this way? I know he wants to use me, but the way he touches me... I feel desired.

I need to remember he’s trying to extort me. To use me. My brain gets that. Why can’t my body be convinced?

“Are you going to behave?” asks Leo.

I laugh bitterly. “Not likely.”

He frowns. “That doesn’t make me very happy, Willow.”

“Get used to it. I’m never going to make you happy.”

He seems amused by that. “Why do people think marriage and happiness are mutually exclusive? In most cases, it’s the opposite.”

“I don’t understand you,” I say in bewilderment. One minute he’s threatening me; the next, he’s waxing poetic about the conundrum of marital bliss. It’s enough to make my head spin.

He smiles. “You’re not the first.”

He gets off me suddenly. It leaves me shivering. The ghost of his touch lingers like a cruel tease.

I sit up when he steps away from the bed. His eyes are on me, watching for God knows what. I stare right back.

He’s still got my phone, but it’s out of sight once more. His erection, however, is not. It pushes out against the thick fabric of his pants, demanding attention.

“I can almost feel that stare,” he remarks. “Some might say you’re asking for it.”

I look away immediately, caught in the act.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” he adds in a throaty tease. “Most women need time to process what I make them feel.”

That does the trick. I wrench my eyes off the floor and meet his gaze with mine. “I’m not most women.”

“No,” he agrees solemnly. “You’re not.”

Then he leaves the room.

I watch him go, my heart thundering in my chest. Even as the door shuts and the lock clicks, I know one thing for damn sure: he can’t keep me here.

I don’t care how hot he is, I don’t care how much I want him—I will not let myself play the victim. At some point during my life, I decided to just take things lying down. I became an abused woman.

And that admission does something to my soul: it clears the way for things to be different from now on.

I get to my feet. I won’t sit on this bed and cry. I’m going to fight him tooth and nail.

I walk around the room and survey everything carefully, trying to find a way out.

The door is locked and heavily reinforced, so that's a no-go.

The bathroom skylight is too high and too small to escape through.

But then I stop in front of the bedroom windows. I pull back the curtains and see sliding panels on both ends of the pane. My breath catches in my throat.

"No," I whisper to myself. "That's too easy..."

But when I try the sliding panels, they glide open as if they've been recently oiled. Fresh air hits me in the face. It smells like freedom.

I look around the room, trying to determine if this is a stupid move or a brave one.

I settle on the latter. Mostly because staying means making the same mistake twice.

And like I told the son of a bitch who brought me here...

I won't do that again.

LEO

I arrive back in my office just in time for the show.

Willow's black hair blows softly in the wind as she leans out of the window and looks to the left, then the right. Even in the fuzzy CCTV footage, I can see the determination in her eyes.

She's on the highest floor, so it's a steep drop to the ground below. Jumping is out of the question, unless she's interested in shattering her legs. She's so stubborn I wouldn't put it past her.

But a thicket of creeping ivy is wound along the trellis. If she can drop down low enough, she might be able to get some secure footing there.

"Uh, Leo?" Jax says, popping his head into my office. "I've got the team r—"

I hold up my hand and he quiets immediately. Instead of asking what's happening, he walks over and looks at the monitors. It only takes him a moment to realize which video feed I'm fixated on.

"Is she gonna make a run for it?"

"She's certainly going to try."

Jax doesn't look away from the monitors as he shakes his head. "She's never gonna make it."

I smirk. "Thousand dollars says she does."

“Cheap fucker.” Jax fights himself for a second. “Fine, you’re on.”

“We can add a zero if you prefer. Makes no difference to me.”

“No, no, can’t bankrupt you all at once. I’ll be kind.”

“You mean cowardly.”

He gives me the finger and peers closer. “She went back in. Cold feet?”

“No,” I say. “She’s just trying to muster up the courage to actually do it.”

He gives me a quizzical look. “What makes you think you know her that well?”

“Intuition.”

He snorts. “That might be the ego talking, *sobrat*.”

I smirk. “Watch and learn, my clueless friend.”

It takes another thirty seconds, but just as predicted, she eventually sticks her head back through the window. She’s still nervous. Terrified, really. I can see it in the way she chews on her bottom lip.

But there will be no going back for her, no matter how much Jax thinks otherwise. She’s made up her mind. She was in the process of making it when I left her.

All she needed was a little more time to brood.

“Damn...”

“What?” I ask, distracted by the inflection in Jax’s tone.

“Nothing. Just admiring the view.”

My hackles rise instantly. I shoot a violent glare at him.

“What?” he says, as innocently as a man like him can say anything. “She’s hot. That hair, those eyes—it’s a winning combo.”

Most men have the insight—or at least the sense of pure, dumb self-preservation—to know when to shut their mouths. But Jax has never had a

feel for that kind of thing. He speaks and acts without thinking. Useful sometimes, although Gaiman and I have had to bail him out of his fair share of sticky situations over the years.

“And that body? Killer,” he continues, oblivious to the dagger eyes I’m sending his way. “That ass is *tight* with a capital T. But it doesn’t look like a gym body, either, you know? *Au naturale*.”

“Fucking Christ,” I growl. “Are you still talking?”

He shoots me a lopsided grin. “Was she tight? You know... on the inside?”

“You’re two seconds away from getting your teeth knocked in.”

His eyes go wide. “Wait, are you pissed?”

That’s the thing about Jax: you can’t stay pissed at him for long. Because he actually is that obtuse. The motherfucker can’t take a hint to save his life. I’d have strangled him years ago if I didn’t understand that his intentions really are good.

So I just sigh. “You realize she’s going to be a Bratva wife, right?”

He looks back at the screen. “I mean, I guess I didn’t quite believe you when you said you were gonna marry her.”

“Why not?”

“Because, well... she’s a nobody, Leo. Don’t get me wrong, she’s gorgeous. But you need a woman who’s going to elevate your position. Not bring it down.”

“No one can bring me down,” I point out. “Let’s get that straight first. Secondly, I don’t give two shits about elevations or status or any of that appearance-based bullshit. I have my reasons for marrying the girl. And before you ask: no, I’m not going to fucking tell you.”

“Why the fuck not?” he snaps in exasperation.

“Because when you’re drunk and horny, you start talking.”

He glares at me. “That was one fucking time. And Kirill has already forgiven me for losing him the hand. He’s doing fine with just one. Plus, I get stuck

with the tab every time we go out drinking now. And *also*, that chick in particular was—”

“Fucking phenomenal in the sack,” I finish for him. “Yeah, I know. I’ve heard the story and the excuses before. Spare me the repeat performance.”

“Fine, for fuck’s sake. I’ll stop ogling your woman,” he says. “Someone got real possessive fucking fast.”

I smirk. He’s not always as thick-headed as he seems.

“There she is again,” I say as Willow emerges once more.

She stares straight down for a long time. So long, in fact, that Jax starts celebrating early. “Pay up, brother. You owe me ten large.”

“Don’t you mean one?”

He feigns ignorance. “You were the one talking about upping the ante. So it’s upped.”

“Fine,” I say with a shrug. “Ten thousand it is.”

“I accept only cash,” he says proudly, extending his hand out to me, palm up.

I swat it away. “Game’s not over yet.”

Perfect timing. Just as we direct our attention back to the screen, Willow throws one leg over the windowsill and starts to wriggle out.

What she’s doing is stupid. But brave. Even I have to admit that.

She squeezes through the gap in the sliding windowpane slowly and carefully. Her hands are trembling.

“She might fall,” Jax points out. “Aren’t you concerned, Mr. Possessive?”

“Sometimes you need to fall to learn.”

“Tough love, eh?”

“Something like that.”

Her chest rises and falls. Her cheeks are pink with exertion. She takes one more deep breath, digs the toes of her ballet flats into the grooves of the brick wall, and starts her descent.

She picks her way down the wall carefully. Another step down. And another. Then her shoe catches a vine. She yanks it free, taking the vine with her.

“Should we tell her those fucking vines are older than she is? It’s going to cost us a fortune to fix the landscaping.”

I throw him a quizzical glance. “Cost *us*?” I clarify. “Or cost me?”

“Fine,” he acquiesces grudgingly. “I was using the royal ‘we,’ but whatever. You’re not much of a team player.”

Chuckling, I keep my eyes trained on Willow. I’m impressed thus far. She’s incredibly limber... flexible. I can tell Jax is thinking the same thing, but he’s trying hard to keep the jokes and innuendos at bay for a change.

Then comes the moment of truth: the trellis.

She is just above it, clinging to the side of the house like a spider. Slowly, she stretches her foot down and finds the top edge of the trellis. It’s anyone’s guess if it will be strong enough to hold her weight.

One finger at a time, she releases her body weight onto one of the white wooden planks. A little more, a little more, it’s looking good...

It cracks.

But not all the way. Not enough to send her crashing to the ground. Just enough to terrify her. Her mouth opens in a scream that I can’t hear.

I force myself to hold my position and watch as she manages to get a firm grip again. The trellis groans but doesn’t give up just yet.

“Fucking hell,” Jax swears, realizing that he might just lose this bet. “She’s actually doing it.”

“Told you.”

“She doesn’t seem like the type.”

“Oh, she’s the type alright,” I say. “That fucked-up relationship of hers made her forget herself. But she’s a fighter, deep down.”

“And you’re the man who’s going to help her find her way, eh? What a good Samaritan you are. Selfless, really. Time’s Man of the Year. Mother Teresa ain’t got nothing on you.” Jax peeks over at me. “I can keep going, if you’d like.”

“Shut the hell up and empty your wallet, asshole,” I say impatiently. “It’s over.”

He wags his finger. “She’s not at the bottom yet.”

I roll my eyes and wait. I have no doubt in my mind that she’ll reach the bottom. It almost makes me regret what I’m about to do next.

Almost.

Her hands transfer from the windowsill to the trellis. She takes it slow, but her movements are considered. There are no more scares. Not yet.

When she’s a couple of feet from the bottom, I get to my feet. “I think I’ll go congratulate her.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No,” I say firmly. “You need to go get my fucking money. I can handle this on my own.”

“You’re a real gracious victor, Leo,” he drawls. He gives me the finger once more as I leave.

She’s almost at the bottom when I reach the bottom of the trellis. It’s nice to dispense with the monitors and view this live.

She’s got her back to me, so she has no idea I’m there. Not until she pushes herself off the trellis and lands on the soft, freshly mowed lawn.

She dusts her hands off and cranes her neck up to take a look at the height she’s just climbed down from. I can see just enough of her profile to note the proud grin.

“Screw you, asshole,” Willow whispers under her breath.

When she turns around, her grin curdles instantly.

“Jesus Christ!” she hisses. She places a hand over her chest. “How long have you been watching?”

“Do you think there’s anything that happens in this house I don’t know about, Willow?” I pace towards her, cornering her against the vine-covered bricks. “I’ve been watching from the moment you opened the window.”

She runs a hand through her disheveled hair. She’s trying to stay calm—and failing miserably. “No. No. I checked before I started down. You definitely weren’t there. Unless you were hiding in the bushes or something.”

I smirk. “Not quite.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I have a full security system. You can’t sneeze without me knowing about it.”

“You’re a fucking bastard,” she seethes.

“Now, now. Is that anyway to speak to your fiancé?”

“You’re not my fiancé! For fuck’s sake. I *have* a husband.”

“Not much of one. Can’t even be bothered to hunt for his missing wife.”

I study her expression for a clue of how she’s feeling. Does the news of Casey’s indifference disappoint her? Does she hate me enough that she actually wants that cowardly fuck to come rescue her?

Finally, her lip curls. “Well, fuck him.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I don’t need to be rescued,” she says. “I’ll get out of here and build a life of my own. Get a job. Find a small apartment. I’ll bust my ass every single day if it means I can be free of him forever. Not to mention being free of *you*.”

“Noble, but misguided, *kukolka*. Your way to freedom is *through* me. There are no other options.”

Her eyes narrow into slits. “Get out of my way.”

It would be cute that she thinks she can issue commands in my house... if it wasn't so infuriating. She can try that shit with the maids and the guards. Maybe some of them will even listen.

But it won't work with me.

“I think we need to get a few things straight.” I wrap a hand around her pretty throat and pin her against the wall. “I'm the only one who barks orders around here.”

Then, in one sweep, I hoist her onto my shoulder with her ass in the air and march inside the house.

“Put me down, motherfucker!” She claws at my back. When that doesn't work, she bites me hard on the shoulder.

I slap her ass. And not gently. “Don't make this harder on yourself, little one.”

“Let me go, asshole!”

“Not gonna happen.” I take the stairs two at a time. A difficult task since my cock is at full attention. Her body is thrashing against mine. Her whimpers are hot in my ear. It's making it difficult to focus. “Better luck next time. But I do give you props for a daring escape plan.”

She screams and struggles the whole journey up the stairs. I don't release her until we're back in her room. Then I deposit her onto her bed. She bounces with an *oof* before settling into the soft mattress.

I smooth my hair back into place. “I must say, that was entertaining to watch. And you made me ten thousand dollars richer. Jax underestimated you.”

She glares at me. “You placed a bet?”

“I *won* a bet.”

She grabs a pillow and flings it at me. I duck and she screams in frustration. “Why are you such a raging asshole?”

“Accept your fate and this will be much easier on you.”

“And I’m supposed to just *trust* you? Trust that this will all work out in my favor?”

“You trusted me the night we met.”

That stops her in her tracks. “I was... You caught me in a low moment.”

“I’m guessing most of your moments with that husband of yours have been low, though, haven’t they?”

She looks away, her anger softening just a little. Then she pushes herself off the bed. “You’re confusing me. You’re trying to get in my head. Just like you did that night. Well, I’m not falling for it this time. I told you already, I’m not exchanging one son of a bitch for another.”

“If I let you go, you’ll be in danger,” I say, interrupting her tirade.

She arches a dark brow. “Are you kidding me?”

I meet her stare. “Do I ever?”

“Well, care to explain?!”

“There are dangerous men after you.” She should be grateful for the information—it’s more than I’ve shared with Jax or Gaiman. “And I’m the only one who can keep them at bay.”

“You’re lying.”

“Do I ever?” I repeat.

She shakes her head. “You expect me to just... believe all this shit? What you’re saying is crazy.”

“Let’s be clear: I don’t give a fuck who or what you believe. I’m just saying that it will be easier on you if you at least act like you trust me.”

She frowns. “Fine. I’ll play along for now. Who’s after me?”

“You wouldn’t know them even if I wanted to give you names.”

“It would go a long way toward engendering trust.”

“True,” I agree. “But like I said, I’m not really interested in getting your trust.”

She looks like she wants to slap me. A part of me really wishes she would. It would give me plenty of justification to pin her down.

And my body likes the feel of her under me.

“Do you really expect me to believe that you forcing me into marriage is to keep me safe?”

“What’s my name?”

She looks confused. “What?”

“What. Is. My. Name?”

“Uh... Leo,” she mumbles.

“Leo what?”

“Leo Solovev.”

“Right,” I say. “That name holds power. You think anyone will come for you when you share my last name?”

She’s close enough for me to see the goosebumps racing across her skin. And for the first time, she has the wisdom to look properly frightened.

“There’s a lot more going on here, isn’t there?” she asks in a quiet voice.

“Far more than you’ve seen, yes.”

“And somehow I’m in the middle of it?”

“Yes.”

She sucks on her lower lip as she weighs my words. It’s an innocent, unconscious gesture. Yet it makes me want to push her down on the bed and stick my cock between those lips.

“And if this so-called ‘threat’ is taken care of...”

“I’ll release you,” I say immediately.

“How can I be sure of that?”

“You can’t.”

“...But we can get a divorce?”

“Perhaps eventually. If that’s what you want,” I tell her. That, contrary to what I just said, is a lie. I have no intention of ever letting her go.

But we’ll dole out the truth in small doses for now. Precious Willow can’t handle much more than that.

“Of course it’s what I want.”

I shrug. “Don’t be so sure.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Women have offered crazier things than marriage for a repeat night with me.” I lower my voice. “Pleasure can be addictive.”

Willow’s cheeks turn pink. “In your dreams, asshole,” she hisses.

Laughing, I walk out of her room. We’ve covered enough ground for one night, but the best is yet to come.

I may not keep her forever, but I sure as hell am going to enjoy myself while she’s here.

WILLOW

I doze off a few times through the night, only to jolt awake again, wondering if Leo is watching. If he's going to burst through the door.

So, as if being kidnapped didn't put me in a bad enough mood, now I'm exhausted.

My plan was to be cold to every single person who walked through the door. But I take one look at the sweet, older lady carrying in my breakfast tray and I just can't do it.

"Good morning, ma'am," she greets.

I get up to help her. "Let me, please. That thing looks heavy."

"It is," she sighs. "But I'm stronger than I look."

So am I, I think. The thought surprises me. I bank it away for later. I'm going to need reserves of confidence to survive this nightmare.

The tray is laden with bacon, eggs, sausages, and a breadbasket. It smells so good I immediately abandon my half-formed plans for a hunger strike. There's also freshly squeezed juice and a plate of fruits.

"I don't think I can eat all this."

"Don't worry—whatever you don't eat, the staff will," she says without skipping a beat. "But don't tell anyone you heard that from me."

A guffaw of laughter bursts out of me. So much for playing aloof. “What’s your name?”

“Carol,” she says. “And you’re Ms. Willow.”

“Just Willow is fine.”

“I’ve always liked those kinds of names,” she says. “Ash. Rain. Lily. Nature names.”

“Oh. Right. I never really thought of that,” I admit. “I’m not even sure if I’m an outdoorsy person.”

She raises her eyebrows. “How do you get to your mid-twenties and not know that?”

“Well... I don’t know, to be honest. I guess I’ve spent most of my life trying to figure out other people.”

“And you forgot to figure out yourself along the way, hm?”

This got real personal, real fast. Time to retreat. I glance towards my breakfast tray. “Thanks for bringing this up for me.”

She smiles sweetly, without seeming to take any offense at my subtle dismissal. “Of course, Ms. Willow. You must be hungry. I’ll leave you in peace.”

Peace—that’s a laughable concept. My head is spinning with a million different thoughts. Peace is far out of the question.

I sit by the window and grudgingly pick at a piece of toast. I ignore everything else on the tray. The sausages look delicious, but I’m not sure I can stomach them.

It’s clear that Leo is watching my every move. Which means escaping from this compound isn’t really an option.

But how do I convince him to take me somewhere else when I’ve already proven I’m a flight risk?

I chip at my fingernails and think about my parents. It’s been several years since I spoke to either one of them. “Spoke” being the operative word there.

I've heard them. My mother, to be specific.

I called her, maybe eleven months ago. She answered the phone, and I froze. I clutched the receiver and wondered how to start a conversation after years of silence.

I'm sorry.

You were right.

I should have listened.

Forgive me...

None of it seemed like enough.

I close my eyes and try to remember how she smells.

Like garlic and cloves and fresh rosemary.

Growing up, I had a swing set next to the garden where she raised fresh vegetables, hemmed in by a little brick wall. I used to pump the swing as high as I could, soaring through the air so I could look down at her while she toiled away in the earth, singing to herself the whole time.

She always wanted me to join her there, down in the dirt. Sometimes I did. But by the time I hit seventeen, I was more interested in parties and boys.

I used to be embarrassed every time she brought up the garden. It felt like the only thing she talked about sometimes. For some reason, it made me think less of her.

“They’re just fucking vegetables!” I yelled at her one day. I cursed even though I knew it would make her wince. Maybe even *because* I knew it would make her wince. “If you had a life, you wouldn’t be so obsessed with them.”

She stood there with hurt splashed across her face. But she was never one to raise her voice.

“I love my garden because it is how I feed my family. You and your father are the most important two people in my life. The meals I prepare are my way of saying how much you two mean to me.”

“Why even bother growing your own when you could just take someone else’s. After all, that’s what you like to do, isn’t it? Take stuff that doesn’t belong to you and pretend like it’s yours?”

She tried to respond. But tears choked the words away.

In the present, I cringe. The memory is so vivid and sharp-edged that even now, years later, my vision blurs behind a veil of tears.

I put down the toast and let that image of my mother framed in the kitchen doorway slice me open.

She didn’t deserve that. Both of my parents went through a lot before I came into their lives. And when I did arrive, they thought I was a blessing.

How did I repay their unconditional love?

Hostility. Aggression. Disrespect.

A knock on the door startles me. I scramble to wipe away my tears. Before I can fully compose myself, it opens.

I’m taken aback to see a well-dressed woman stride into the room in a pair of teal pumps that complement her off-white power suit perfectly. She’s got a dazzling tan and brilliant blonde hair tied back in a tight, no-nonsense ponytail.

But what I’m most focused on is the sleek black briefcase in her hand. She wields it like a weapon.

“Hello, Willow,” she says in a voice that matches her look—confident, powerful, in control.

I frown. “Uh, hi. Who are you?”

“My name is Jessica Armand. I sense you weren’t expecting me.”

“Are you a lawyer?”

She raises her eyebrows, but there’s a small smile on her face. “Is it that obvious?”

“The briefcase is a bit of a giveaway.”

“Damn,” she chuckles. “And I try so hard not to be predictable.”

She’s immediately likable, which doesn’t strike me as particularly fair. No one should get to be this charming and this put-together at the same time. There’s not one freaking hair out of place.

“May I?” She gestures to the seat opposite me.

“Uh, sure, okay.”

She’s already sitting down by the time I answer. It figures, really. It seems the people in this world ask only as a formality. Just like the master of the house, they all do what they want.

“Sorry to interrupt your breakfast,” she adds as an afterthought.

“Not interrupting anything,” I say. “I’m done. But help yourself if you’d like.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m off carbs for a few weeks.”

I take in her slim, toned physique and resist the urge to roll my eyes. Then I remember I’m in no position to judge anyone else’s life choices. That shuts down my sense of superiority real quick.

“If you’re done eating, can we move the tray, please?”

She’s unfailingly polite, but I can’t help but notice the clipped edge in her tone. She’s not rude. Just direct. The kind of woman you don’t want to mess with.

As soon as I move the tray, she sets her briefcase down on the table and unlocks it. I notice that her initials are monogrammed into the sides of the leather. It even smells expensive.

“It was a gift from my husband,” she says, noticing where my eyes have gone. “Now ex-husband, actually.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” she laughs. “I got a divorce, alimony, and an expensive, personalized briefcase. I won.”

I smile. “In that case, congratulations.”

“Thank you,” she says in her brusque, businesslike tone. “Now, maybe we can focus on a way to make sure you win, too.”

“Unless you’re here to help me sue Leo Solovev into oblivion, I can’t imagine you and I have much to talk about.”

She seems amused by that. “Has Mr. Solovev been irritating you?”

“‘Irritating’ is a generous word,” I snap. “What he’s done is illegal. I’m here against my will.”

She leans back in her seat and cocks her leg to reveal the sharp points of her heels. My admission that I’m basically a prisoner in this house hasn’t fazed her at all.

Which, of course, suggests that she answers directly to him.

“I understand that this is a bit of an ethical minefield...”

I snort. “Understatement of the year.”

“—But I’m here for a specific purpose, Willow,” she finishes forcefully. “And if we don’t stick to the topic, I’m afraid we’ll just be wasting time. I don’t know about you, but my time is valuable.”

My eyes flicker to the massive diamond studs hanging from her ears. Her lobes are actually drooping from their weight.

“I’m guessing your services aren’t cheap.”

She smiles. “I charge a quarter-million-dollar retaining fee and three thousand an hour for consultations. The more complicated the case, the higher my price goes. So no, not particularly cheap.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but I’m not the one who called you here.”

“I’m aware. Which is why you’re lucky. You get my skill set—without the price tag.”

“If you’re working for Leo, you should raise your fee. Call it an asshole tax.”

She smiles. "I'm not charging him, actually."

"How come?"

"We go way back."

The casual way she says it gives me a strange and unpleasant tingling feeling low in my stomach. I instantly find myself wondering how that relationship began. What the two of them look like together.

None of your business, Willow, I tell myself sternly. None of your damn business.

"Why are you here?" I ask, determined to end this conversation sooner rather than later.

"I'm here to help you get the divorce you need, cleanly and efficiently."

"I appreciate that," I say calmly. "But I don't need your help."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, it is."

"So you have no interest in getting divorced?"

"I have every interest in it, actually. But not when it's being used as bait. If I bite, I'm as good as dead."

Jessica regards me calmly. Then she takes a deep breath and closes her briefcase. "Willow, can we have an honest conversation, woman-to-woman?"

It sounds ghastly, but I swallow my hesitation and nod.

She crosses her legs. "I've done the research where your husband is concerned. To put it bluntly, the man's got money. Not the kind of money that Leo has, but enough to be able to retain a shark of a lawyer."

"I'm reasonably sure that he'll be too preoccupied with other things to worry about taking me to court," I say. I'm thinking about the embezzlement charges that brought him to tears in my lap the other night. "In any case, I have nothing worth fighting over. No money or assets. Everything I own was bought by him. As far as I'm concerned, he can have it all. Just let me go."

I'm so focused on the venom I feel whenever I think of Casey that I don't even hear the words I'm saying until after they've slipped off my tongue. My stomach twists with disgust.

But this time, it's directed at myself.

Somehow, when I wasn't paying attention, I became a kept woman. Just a leech suckling onto a powerful man. It's repulsive.

"Divorce isn't as simple as you may think," she says. "He can prolong the process. Painfully so. You could be married to him for years longer than necessary. And the whole time, you're going to be racking up a huge amount of debt. Because, as you just told me, you don't have any assets to your name. Is that right?"

I genuinely want the ground to open up and swallow me whole. "I... well... I..."

"You haven't thought this all the way through," she says with a nod. "I understand. But time is of the essence. If we push this through now, I can have you divorced in a matter of weeks."

"Weeks?"

"I'm expensive for a reason," she says. "Because I'm the very best at what I do."

I wonder what else she's good at.

She's got an amazing body, I realize, as my eyes sweep downwards. Model-esque, really. Right now, she looks smart and professional. Intimidating. But in the right dress, she'd be absolutely stunning.

The kind of woman who'd look perfect on the arm of a man like Leo Solovev.

I don't even know why I'm thinking about this. It's none of my business who he has slept with in the past. It's none of my business who he sleeps with now.

"I'm sure you're fantastic at what you do... but I'm not going to change my mind. I'm not accepting help from him."

“Leo’s not all bad, you know.”

“If you’d been abducted by the man, maybe you’d feel differently.”

She smiles. “You’ve got fire. I like that.”

“Thanks for the praise. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get back to my forced solitude.”

I expect her to put up a fight, but surprisingly, she gets to her feet and collects her monogrammed briefcase. “It was nice meeting you, Willow.”

I don’t say anything as she turns and strides right back out of the room.

I’m relieved to see the back of her, but it’s bittersweet. Is she heading to his bedroom? The thought of the two of them tangled together beneath the sheets, naked and sweaty, probably laughing at my expense, flits through my brain.

“Cut that shit out,” I hiss under my breath.

With a sigh, I slump back in my chair and try to figure out if I made the right move.

But my thinking time is short-lived. Ten minutes later, the door is wrenched open again. This time, there’s not even the courtesy of a knock—which is how I know it’s Leo before I even turn around.

“You refused Jessica’s help.”

Something about the way he says her name annoys the hell out of me. “Yes, I refused *Jessica*’s help. She’s not as impressive as you think.”

“You haven’t seen her in action.”

The sweaty, naked imagery floods my mind again. I swat it away.

“Nor do I want to. I’ll tell you exactly what I told her: I don’t want a lawyer. I want my freedom.”

“What do you think I’m trying to give you?”

“A nicer prison cell?” I gesture around at the four-poster bed and the lavish decor.

He scoffs. “Don’t be naïve. Freedom comes in degrees. This is where it starts.”

“Great, so after my divorce, can I use Jessica to sue your ass?”

He smirks. The twinkle of amusement outshines the irritation in his eyes. “Jessica’s a shark. But she’s *my* shark.”

My stomach twists with such jealousy I actually feel nauseous. “Well, the two of you can swim together. You deserve each other. I just want out.”

“You’re not going to get rid of that *mudak* husband of yours without my help,” he says.

“You know, I think I’ll find a way.”

“Tell me how,” he challenges. “You’re cut off from every single person who’s ever meant anything to you.”

“Plenty of lawyers work pro bono. Someone out there will help me.” It sounds silly even as I say it. But I have to say *something*. I can’t just take all this lying down.

Leo snorts. “Those ambulance-chasing motherfuckers won’t lift a goddamn finger for you. Especially not against the kind of attorney that your ex will hire.”

His logic is making a little too much sense right now, but I ignore it and stick to my guns. I will not allow myself to be indebted to him.

Not when I still don’t know what all he expects in return.

He may be a beautiful beast—but I can’t ever forget which of those two words is more important.

“That’s my problem, not yours.”

He sighs. “Very well.” He pulls something out of his pocket and, for one crazed moment, I think it’s a gun. I’m about to duck, when he turns his hand over to reveal...

My phone.

Then to my utter amazement, he hands it to me without a word.

As soon as I take the phone, he whips around on his heel and disappears back through the door. It slams shut so hard that the hung picture frames clack against the walls. Alone again, I stare down at the screen, wondering if it's rigged to blow up in my hand.

This has to be a test, right? Just another game for his twisted amusement?

But a few minutes pass and nothing happens. Once my shock has passed, I unlock the phone and go straight to my call log.

Ninety-eight missed calls. All from Casey.

My texts are even worse. The little red bubble reads "237." And every single one of those is from Casey, too.

Against my better judgment, I tap the text icon and open up the thread. Bad move. It's like getting repeatedly slapped in the face.

Baby, where are you? I tried calling and you're not answering?

Willow, seriously. Don't pull this shit on me again.

When are you going to stop this fucking nonsense and get your head out of the clouds? I'm a patient man and you're really getting on my last fucking nerve.

I scroll down for a while, stopping only when I find a message written in all caps.

THE FUCK ARE YOU, YOU LITTLE SLUT???

There's more repulsive filth following that message and then, twenty-three texts later, the remorse kicks in.

Baby, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have... but you're just making me so crazy. Worried. I'm so fucking worried...

I keep scrolling. As expected, the remorse doesn't last long.

When I find out where you are, you'll be sorry.

I'm going to beat your ass until the skin peels off.

You'll be sorry.

Remember who your fucking master is, you lazy slut.

Bitch.

Whore.

I close the thread and drop my phone to the floor. I don't want to touch it anymore.

I thought the phone would be my salvation, but there's none to be found.

I have no one. I have nothing.

All that's left to do is cry.

LEO

Jaime walks in with coffee. Her flirty little eyes dart to me like a mouse who wants to be caught.

“How are you doing, boss?” she purrs.

She gets off on calling me “boss.” The power dynamic of it all.

She’s cute and petite, and her tits are perky enough to warrant some attention under other circumstances. But I’m long past the point of fucking women just because I can.

I put those days behind me when I took up the mantle of don.

“Well?” I ask abruptly, cutting to the chase.

“I took up her tea like you asked me to.”

“And? What was she doing?”

Jaime puts down my coffee and leans over the desk. She’s dropped the front two buttons on her already low-cut maid’s uniform.

I like a woman who knows what she wants. But this is overkill.

“Crying, sir.”

My eyes sweep to Jaime’s face. She’s flashing a coy smile that annoys the fuck out of me. Especially in light of the information she’s just revealed.

“Willow is crying?”

“Mhmm. I walked in and she was curled up in a ball, sobbing into her pillow.”

She sounds unnecessarily happy to be making the report. Like a competitor has been taken out of the race for my attention.

“I set her tray down and asked if she wanted anything, but she didn’t answer. Didn’t even look up. I left and came directly here.”

I nod. “You’re dismissed.”

Her face drops. “Oh, um, well, okay... Do you need anything before I go?”

“Just some quiet.”

Her eyebrows furrow as she scrambles to find a way to stay a little longer. “You look tense. How about a massage?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

There was a time in my life when that offer would have been welcome. I’d have taken the massage and then fucked her over my desk. With a slap on the ass, I’d have sent her on her way. How’s that to relieve some tension?

But that was before.

Now, it is a very different world.

“No need,” I say. “I’m sure you have work to do.”

She puts her hands on my desk and leans in slowly, squashing her tits together between her arms.

“Nothing as important as tending to your needs, Mr. Solovev.”

You have to admire the girl’s persistence. But right now, I don’t have the patience for it.

“Jaime.”

“Yes, sir?” she says, her tone lifting immediately.

She's anticipating a proposition. Something that involves her pussy clenching around my cock. Her eyes never leave my face. It's perfect for the message I want received.

"You have exactly five fucking seconds to get out of this office."

Her eyes go wide and her cheeks flush. I don't actually start a countdown, but she leaves before I would have reached two.

Once she'd gone, I head straight to Willow's room.

I don't hesitate as I barge into her room and slam the door shut behind me for the second time today.

She's still on the bed like Jaime said, except she's no longer curled in a ball. Now, she's sitting up with her knees drawn to her chest and her arms wrapped around her legs. Her eyes go wide when she sees me, but she doesn't even bother wiping away her tears.

Even if she did, it'd do no good. They've left tracks down both her cheeks.

I move forward and lean against one of the pillars of her four-poster bed. "Is this your way of telling me you want my lawyer back?"

She glares at me in disbelief. "She was a spy, wasn't she?"

"Who? Jessica?"

"The little slut who just left. The one with tea and a *fuck-me* smile," Willow practically growls. "Tell me: do you fuck every woman in you employ? Is it part of the hiring process?"

Well, well. I didn't expect this. The little *kukolka* has a jealous streak.

"What makes you think I've fucked her?"

"It was obvious in the way she looked at me," Willow snaps. "Like I was the fucking competition."

"Does that bother you?"

"What?"

“Does it bother you that I may have fucked her?”

She tilts her head to the side. “Have you?”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“Why should I?” she demands. “You never answer mine.”

She slides off the bed and stands in front of me, hands on her hips and eyes fiery.

“I don’t want her coming up here anymore.” She speaks with such authority in her voice. It gives me an inkling of what she could be capable of if her personality were allowed to flourish. “I don’t want to see her fucking face ever again.”

“I can arrange that,” I say with a nonchalant shrug. “I’ll just give her extra shifts in my room.”

Her expression ripples with anger and hurt, but she’s forced my hand. If jealousy is the motivator that goads young Willow into action... so be it.

“Maybe you should force *her* into marrying you then.”

“Force?” I ask. “No, there won’t be any forcing required with Jaime. She gets wet every time she sees me.”

Her jaw clenches noticeably. She’s trying really hard to stay calm.

“Oh wait,” I say like an afterthought. “... So do you.”

“You fucking asshole,” Willow hisses.

She takes a step towards me. I expect her to stop short, to keep her distance and hurl more insults my way. But she surprises me. Rather than holding off, she storms right up and shoves me in the chest as hard as she can.

The girl gets physical when she loses it.

Interesting.

Not that it does much good, of course. I dwarf her in every way that matters. She couldn’t move me with a fucking bulldozer.

Her grimace darkens when she realizes that. Her fingers twitch before falling uselessly by her sides.

“You don’t know me,” she seethes. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know your body,” I remind her. “But you hate that, don’t you?”

“I would never have slept with you that night if I’d known.”

“If you’d known what?”

She doesn’t answer. Maybe she won’t. Maybe she simply can’t. Instead, she tries shoving me again. It’s just as ineffective as the first time around. Like hitting a brick wall.

“Why aren’t you hitting back?” she asks suddenly.

Of course she would wonder. She’s spent her life with a fucking coward. A coward whose only line of defense is to bully people weaker than him before his cowardice is exposed.

“I don’t fight unfair battles, Willow.”

“*Fair?*” she gapes at me. “Nothing about this situation is *fair*. That hasn’t stopped you so far.”

I shrug. “It’s all about perspective.”

“What does that mean?”

“Exactly what I said.”

“You’re infuriating.” Her words tremble with the heat of her frustration.

“So are you,” I say. “I’m offering you a way out, and you won’t take it.”

“A way out—into another abusive marriage. How fucking considerate of you.”

My muscles go rigid with black anger. How dare she compare me to that fucking worm? “Careful now,” I warn her. “You’re entering dangerous territory.”

Her eyes flash both fear and bravado. “Why? Because I’ve struck a nerve?”

“Because in the Bratva, it’s dangerous to fling around accusations without merit.”

“Oh, I think there’s a whole load of merit here,” she hisses.

I grab her arm and yank her against me. My words are hot in her ear. “I control the men who trust me with their lives. And I destroy anyone who poses a threat to my world. But I am not like your husband,” I growl. “I don’t hurt people without a purpose. Especially not defenseless women.”

It’s the code I’ve lived by ever since my brother repeated it to me when I was nine years old. *“We may be creatures of the underworld, Leo. But that doesn’t mean we can’t still have principles. Don’t let anyone take those away from you. Use it like a shield and eventually, it will turn into a weapon.”*

He was only sixteen years old when he hit me with that gem. In our world, you grow up fast.

Willow squirms against me, trying to get free. When I look down, I see a new emotion in her eyes. Beneath the fear. Beneath the bravado.

Lust.

In fact, she seems to get off on our proximity.

And she’s not the only one. My cock is so hard that it jerks painfully every time I breathe. The fact that I can feel her tits pressing into my chest doesn’t help matters.

So much for de-escalating the situation.

I release her arms, expecting her to back off. But she just launches her delicate fists at my chest. “I’m not like the whores you’re used to! I’m not going to take this lying down.”

“You prefer to take it bent over then?” I ask. “Fair enough. That can be arranged.”

She pauses just long enough for me to truly appreciate the shock on her face. Her lips are pink and her cheeks are flushed with color.

Then she starts battering her fists against me again. It's cute the way she thinks she can hurt me. So cute I actually smirk.

But that only invigorates her all the more.

I just stand there and take each hit. I could yawn, but I decide not to be an asshole about it. The poor thing needs to vent, right?

After a few more hits, her attempts get more and more feeble. Finally, she drops her hands. The fire in her eyes dims.

"You think I'm weak," she says quietly. "You think I'm pathetic."

"No. I just think you're looking for punishment in the wrong places."

That takes her off-guard. She jerks her gaze up to meet mine. It's never crossed her mind that maybe, just maybe, I know her better than she realizes.

"Why would I be doing that?" she asks, tentatively. "Are you my shrink now?"

"Sure," I say quietly. "Lay down on my sofa. Let me peel back your layers."

She blinks in surprise. Then she drops down onto the edge of the bed. A fat tear slips out of the corner of her eyes, and I feel the defeat in that single drop.

I know better, though. Better than she knows herself.

She has more fight left in her.

"I... I gave up so much for him," she admits without looking at me. Talking out loud to herself seems to be the only way she can justify opening up to me again. "When I think about everything I gave up to keep him happy..."

"Like your parents?"

She jerks at the mention. "I... I'd love to be able to blame Casey. But that one... that one's completely on me."

The shame and embarrassment, the remorse in her tone—it's gut-wrenching. I sit down next to her, but I don't speak.

I give her space. I give her silence.

That's all she needs.

"I was seventeen when I found out I was adopted," she begins softly. "That's probably when everything went to shit. But let me guess: you already knew that, didn't you?"

I don't hide the truth. "I make it my business to know things."

"You're despicable," she whispers, but the insult is feeble and faint.

It's funny how her insults are turning me on. "You were in the middle of a story."

"The detour was necessary."

I smirk. "Go on."

"In hindsight, it sounds like the stupidest possible reason to get mad. But back then, it felt like a betrayal."

"How did you find out?" I ask.

"I found my adoption papers in the attic. In a chest marked *Important*."

"At least it didn't say *Insignificant*."

She snorts the tiniest bit. "I was already well on my way to becoming a bratty teen. And then I found this and... it rocked my world."

"What did your parents say when you confronted them?"

"They said that they didn't think it was important enough to tell me. They said I was their child in all the ways that mattered. That those papers were just necessary to keep around for legal reasons."

"And you weren't satisfied with that answer?"

She sighs. "I was a bitch back then."

"As opposed to now?" She glares at me and I wave her on. "Continue."

“The bottom line is, I used that as an excuse to act out. I went to a lot of parties, chose boyfriends I knew would annoy or worry them. I was your typical cliché of a teenager, doing everything under the sun to piss off Mom and Dad. And as if that’s not cringey enough, I was actually naïve enough to believe I was unique. Special.”

“Maybe you are.”

She glances over at me. “Are you getting sentimental?”

“I’ve never been sentimental a day in my life. I’m just pointing out what may very well be a fact.”

“Based on what?”

“Insight.”

“I wish you’d stop saying cryptic shit like that all the time,” snaps Willow. “It’s starting to drive me insane.”

“There’s nothing cryptic about what I’ve proposed to you, Willow. I’ve told you exactly what I want,” I say. “What’s more, I’ve given you every tool to make what you want happen. But you’re turning your nose up at it every chance you get.”

She stares at me, the fight still burning in her eyes. I see the plan forming slowly.

Oh, kukolka, I sigh in my head. There’s so much you don’t understand about my world. You think you are learning how to navigate here. And you are very, very wrong about that.

“How about we make a deal?”

I pretend to be intrigued. “What do you have for me?”

“I’ll accept your help and get the divorce. In return, you let me walk around the house,” she says. “Just a little freedom. That’s all I’m asking for. Just a little room to breathe.”

“That’s a reasonable request.”

“Is that a yes?”

I nod. “It’s a yes.”

Triumph blazes in her eyes. We’ve made progress here today. But we have such a long way to go, Willow and I. Some things cannot be rushed.

I stand and take my leave without another word. Without looking back.

I feel her eyes burning into my back the whole way out.

I’m walking down the stairs when Jax catches up with me. “Hey,” he starts. “I got some shit I need to discuss with—wait, why are you smiling?”

“Willow has agreed to accept Jessica’s help in securing a divorce.”

“Leaving you free to marry her,” Jax surmises. “Nice. I’m guessing she wants something in return?”

I nod. “She wants freedom of movement.”

Jax stops short. “And you agreed?”

“Yes.”

“Because you trust her?”

I snort. “Fuck no. She’s going to use this to try and escape.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” he asks.

My smile stretches a little wider.

“I’m going to let her.”

WILLOW

Freedom to wander.

Freedom to escape.

I have opportunities now, and I don't plan on wasting them.

I'll meet with you to talk about the divorce. Maybe at a coffee shop?

If Leo's lawyer is confused by my text, she doesn't show it. Her responding text is just an address. Immediately, I check where exactly it is in relation to Casey's house, where the last of my meager possessions are still stashed.

Twenty minutes by foot. Eleven by car.

I can do this.

I just have to be smart and calm. And fast. Above all else, I have to be fast.

I've been combing through my contact list since Leo returned my phone. I need a friend who won't be bothered by the amount of time that has passed since we last spoke. Who won't mind that I'm now reaching out for a favor.

Jane was always sweet, but she and I were never particularly close in the first place.

Gillian is prickly as hell. She isn't likely to forgive the fact that we've talked maybe twice in the last four years.

Sue-Lin moved back to Hong Kong.

Cindy got married and had a kid. The last thing I need is to rope a child into this mess.

Madeline would be a good bet, but the last I heard from her was a mass text where she told everyone she was getting rid of her phone. She was on a Buddhism kick, and I have no idea if she's still on it.

I ignore Dustin's name at first, but by the third time I see it, things are bleak enough that I linger there.

He and I had a fling our freshman year. We stayed friends after we ended things, but it feels wrong somehow to call up an ex-boyfriend to ask for help.

If I rule him out, then I'm shit out of luck. But I just can't bring myself to do it.

It's hard to deny now how alone I am in this world. Marrying Casey was when I cut the last of my ties to other people, but I'd started doing it even before we met. Severing my relationships one by one.

There are only two names left: Mom and Dad.

I close my phone and sigh. That's not an option, either.

Which means I'm on my own.

Part of me doesn't believe Leo is really going to let me leave the grounds. But I tell the guard outside my room that I have a meeting with Jessica in an hour, and the next thing I know, I'm being escorted to the front doors.

A shiny Mercedes waits for me in front of the mansion. Through the tinted windows, I can see the driver is in a black suit and chauffeur's cap. I feel underdressed in comparison. My room had a wardrobe stocked with clothes—probably all perfectly sized for me, if Leo's other preparations are anything to go by—but I ignored them and opted for the jeans and blouse I wore for the “interview” that started this whole nightmare.

I sense the driver's eyes on me as I walk to the car, but when I get in the backseat, I realize that I can't see him at all through the tinted divider. Something about it creeps me out.

I take a deep breath and try to calm myself down. It's too early in the plan to be freaking out.

Keep it together, girl.

Failure is not an option. Neither is quitting. If I stay, I'm not just an abused woman—I'm an abused woman who's chosen to accept her lot in life. And I can't be that girl.

I *won't* be that girl.

Before I know it, we're pulling up at the destination. The car door swings open automatically—fancy—and I stride with my head held high into the chic café.

It's designed in the style of a French bistro, extremely elegant. More elegant than my jeans and t-shirt would suggest. I stiffen but try not to falter. It doesn't matter, really. I'll be out of here soon enough.

I spy Jessica seated at a primo table in the corner. "You're here already?" I ask as I walk up.

"I'm always on time with clients," she says. "And I have to take extra special care of you."

"Because of Leo?"

"Precisely." She smiles. "I would never want to disappoint him."

My stomach twists with jealousy. Honestly, I've got to get my body and my head in line. Both are trying to make me feel things I don't have the time to feel.

She's wearing a vibrant red dress today, but her makeup is subtle and classy. Unlike yesterday's severe up-do, her hair is ironed perfectly straight and falls over her shoulders like a waterfall. It's so glossy I swear I can see my own reflection.

I can't help imagining Leo running his hands through it...

"Willow?"

I blink away the uninvited image. "Sorry."

“Where’d you go?”

“Somewhere unpleasant,” I admit, leaving out the fact that she was very much a part of the unpleasantness.

“Listen, I’m very good at what I do. You won’t have to worry about this divorce. Not at all.”

She thinks I’m worried about divorcing Casey. Which in truth is what I should be focused on. More to the point, it’s what I need Jessica to think I’m focused on.

“What if he fights back?” I ask, making sure to inject a subtle tremor of fear into my voice. It’s not hard to fake. Despite how much he pales in comparison to Leo’s reign of terror in my life, Casey still frightens me. On some level, he always has.

“Oh, I have every reason to believe he will,” Jessica says with a confident smile. “In fact, I hope he does.”

“Why?”

She shrugs. “It’s no fun if he just rolls over and lets me have my way with him.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I bet there are quite a few men who wouldn’t mind you having your way with them.”

She laughs politely, but her face quickly smooths back to neutral. “Unfortunately, he won’t have the choice. I’m on your side, which makes you the lucky one. Now, I have a few questions I’d like to go over with you, if you don’t mind. Points of fact to confirm.”

“Sure. Fire away.”

“How long was the marriage?”

I think back to the moment when he got down on one knee and proposed. I certainly wasn’t expecting a proposal. I was nineteen. Still trying to figure out my life.

But it was easier to let him pull me into his orbit.

“Seven years,” I admit. “I was nineteen when he proposed. Twenty when we got married.”

“Any children?”

“No, thank God,” I say with obvious relief. She smiles and I feel the need to clarify. “It’s just that—”

“No need for explanations,” she says, holding up a hand. “It makes things much easier when there are no kids involved.”

“I always wanted them,” I blurt out before I can stop myself. “But I guess it was a good thing it never happened for us.”

I expect Jessica to breeze past that statement with her trademark cool professionalism, but she looks at me with sympathy in her eyes. “Did you ever try?”

“Not really,” I admit. “Casey always said he wanted to wait until he had established himself before we had children. And I was so young when we got married. It made sense to wait. But as I got older...”

“The problems between you two got worse?” Jessica infers.

I sigh. “Yeah. It happened so slowly, I barely noticed. Like boiling a frog or whatever that stupid expression is.”

“That’s usually the case.” She pauses, then asks, “I’m correct to assume he was abusive, yes?”

I tense a little, wondering if my explanations will satisfy her. But it feels disingenuous to lie. “He’s never actually hit me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She sets her pen down and folds her hands together. “Physical abuse is not the only form of abuse, Willow. To assume that a woman is okay simply because she doesn’t have bruises from head to toe is a misnomer. Mental and emotional abuse can be equally as crippling. Equally as damaging.”

She presses on into the awkward silence. “Did you ever report him?”

I laugh bitterly. “What would I have said? *He almost hit me?* I’m not sure that would have worked. Any cop would’ve laughed right in my face.”

She gives me a sympathetic nod. “I can see why you might feel that way, but the truth is there are hotlines you can call to report all kinds of abuse. And you say a cop wouldn’t care, but the police department in this city is actually pretty good at handling those kinds of complaints. Trust me, I don’t say that about every police department in this country. There are resources at your disposal, Willow. You just have to ask for help.”

I take a deep breath to keep this weird, turbulent emotion from rising up and strangling me. It feels strange to be sitting here in this idyllic little café, discussing something that feels so ugly. Distorted. Unnatural.

Not to mention the fact that this has morphed into a fully-fledged meeting, and I only intended for it to be a stopgap on the way to my great escape.

I repeat Jessica’s words back in my head. *There are resources at your disposal. You just have to ask for help.*

She’s wrong, though. I have no friends, no safe havens, no resources whatsoever. I have no place to go.

But that doesn’t matter.

All that matters is that I go.

I won’t sit around and be a victim anymore.

“Willow?”

I shake my head, embarrassed to have zoned out on Jessica twice now. “Uh, sorry,” I mumble awkwardly. “This is all just a little... overwhelming for me.”

“Of course,” she says. “I understand.”

“Can I have a moment?” I ask. “I just need to... use the bathroom.”

“It’s right past the flower display.” She points so I know where to go.

There’s not an ounce of suspicion in her face as I slide out of my seat and head towards the back hallway. Before I turn the corner, I glance back.

Jessica's not even looking at me. Her attention is locked on her phone.

I duck past the bathroom and into the staff's service passage.

A waiter walks past me, and then doubles back. "Uh, ma'am, this area is for employees only. Diners are not supposed to be back here."

"Sorry," I say quickly, thinking on my feet. "Just trying to skip out on a bad date. Is there an exit through here?"

The waiter's an older guy in his mid-thirties. He looks immediately sympathetic. "Oh shit, okay, sure. Just walk straight down past the kitchen and make a left. The exit is right there. Good luck."

"Bless you!" I gasp, already running off down the hall.

The back of the restaurant opens out into a narrow street instead of an alleyway, which isn't what I had in mind but actually works out perfectly. A cab pulls up to the curb right as I step outside. Complete accident, but the timing couldn't be more perfect.

I don't have a lot of money on me, but Casey's isn't far. I give the cabbie my address and tell him to step on it.

My heart is thundering against my ribs the entire drive. Every time I hear a honk or the sound of a siren, I assume it's for me. As if Leo could call the police on me. *Help, officers, my kidnapping victim escaped!*

The moment the taxi parks in front of the house, I fling the fare into the front and jump out. Casey's car isn't in the driveway, thank God. I have a window of opportunity to get my stuff and get the hell out again.

I hadn't even thought about the possibility of Casey catching me. I decided to table the worry unless I really needed to face it. He's the lesser of two evils right now, anyway.

The house is silent and still as I use my key to open the door and race inside. I have no doubt that Jessica will have informed Leo of my absence by now, so I have to be fast.

I take the stairs two at a time and snatch the duffel bag out of my wardrobe. I don't pay much attention to the state of the house, but a glance is all I need to

tell me that Casey hasn't been doing much housekeeping. The thought of him wielding a mop or a vacuum is ridiculous enough to make me laugh out loud.

I dump my jewelry box into the waiting bag. Not that I give a shit about starting my new life on the road looking glamorous, but I can pawn them for some quick cash. Odds are pretty good that if Casey hasn't already frozen all of my credit cards by now, he will soon. Or the FBI will. Whoever gets there first.

I'm dumping a few random armfuls of clothes into the bag when I hear the growl of an engine.

I freeze in place, my heart thumping. As I edge towards the window, my panic takes on a name.

Casey.

I assumed it would be Leo. It's the middle of the day; Casey should be at work. But he's here, and I'm not sure if I'm more terrified or relieved by who it isn't.

"Please, please, please." I whisper a prayer as I tip-toe through the house, hoping for an exit to materialize.

I'm on the landing of the staircase when I hear the front door slam. I've heard enough of his door slams to know he's not in a good mood.

I try to breathe through the strange red spots I'm seeing. Pinning my duffel against my hip—the last thing I need is for my clumsy ass to knock something over and alert him to my presence—I creep down the steps.

Halfway down, I stop and wait. If I hear him come this way, I'll retreat and duck into the guest bedroom.

But he doesn't move.

I stay right where I am. Three minutes tick by and he's still in the living room. I can practically hear the scowl in every breath, every rustle of his clothing.

If he stays in there, I can probably slip through the front door and be gone before he catches up. The only problem is the six feet of open space between

the staircase and the front door. At just the wrong angle, there's a chance he'll see me.

And if that happens...

No, I tell myself. *I have to be strong.*

I can't afford to waste any more time here. If Casey doesn't catch me, then Leo will. Somehow, the thought of Leo catching me scares me far less.

But that might be my body talking.

The errant thought almost pushes a laugh out through my teeth. Honestly, what's wrong with me? The panic is clearly making me giddy.

If Casey catches me, I'll just fight back. That thought gives me enough confidence to get moving. I grit my teeth and force my quivering feet to take the first step down.

Only a few more steps until I'm on the ground floor. I bend down low to peek through the banister and get the lay of the land.

Casey is nowhere in sight.

I strain my neck to try and see into the living room. It's clear, which means he's in the kitchen. Now's my chance. Time to move like my ass is on fire.

I feel like I'm Neil Armstrong landing on the moon when my foot hits the floor. Uncharted territory—one small step for Willow, one giant leap for Willow-kind.

The door is two long lunges away. Half a dozen yards, maybe less. I can do this. Almost home-free.

“What the fuck?”

The fear that snakes up my spine at those words is so acute that it turns my body cold.

I pivot in place to find Casey standing at the threshold of the kitchen. He looks frozen in place, too. There's shock on his face at the sight of me.

But just like always, I can see the anger slowly catching up.

“Casey,” I say, securing the duffel on my shoulder. “Listen, I don’t want any problems, okay? I just came for my stuff. I’m leaving now.”

“Leaving where?” he snarls. “You don’t have any place to go.”

“I’ll manage. I’m not your concern anymore.”

“You’re my fucking *wife*.”

I shake my head. “Not for long.” It’s hard not to sound proud when I add, “I’m divorcing you.”

His eyes narrow, which draws my attention to the dark circles around them. His skin is sagging and swollen. His nose is red.

He’s been drinking. A lot, by the looks of it.

“You’re divorcing me,” he repeats slowly, as though he’s trying to wrap his head around the concept.

“That’s right. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Oh, I can think of a few things,” he snaps. “Did you forget that I’m going through a little professional difficulty at the moment?”

I frown. “What does you stealing from your company have to do with me?”

“I have enough at my disposal to incriminate you right alongside of me. If I go down, you go down.”

My eyes go wide with shock. Of all the things I’d expected from Casey, this was not one of them. “Are you serious?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“I had nothing to do with any of that shit! I didn’t even know it was happening!”

“But I can make it seem like you did. That you encouraged me,” he slurs. “And let’s face it: you were reaping the benefits.”

I shake my head like maybe I can clear this mess up. “It won’t stick.”

“I think you’ll find that it will. In any case, I did it for you.”

“You’re insane.”

“I did what I did to give you the finer things in life,” he says. “I did what I did to keep you happy.”

“Is that why you fucked... what was her name—Mabel? Was that to keep me happy, too?”

“When are you going to forget about that and move on? For fuck’s sake, you’re always fixating on bullshit.”

“I already have moved on,” I snap. “Which is why I’m not buying any of your bullshit for a second.”

He blinks stupidly, confused by this sudden turn of events. I was never one for confrontation with him. Mostly because I knew I couldn’t win.

But this is different.

I’ve found my voice and my strength. And I’m not about to give either one up.

“I should have left you a long time ago, Casey. But you convinced me I was nothing. And I was stupid enough to believe you.”

“Someone’s been telling you different, huh?”

I don’t bother dignifying that with a response. “I’m leaving now. Do your worst.”

I spin towards the door to leave, but the strap of the duffel bag snags on the banister. I stumble back and Casey catches me in a tight grip.

He breathes toxic fumes in my face as he rasps, “You haven’t even seen my worst yet, bitch.”

Ripping the duffel off my shoulder, he drags me into the living room by my hair. Pain lances through my scalp. I’m thrashing, trying to free myself from him, but nothing is working.

“Let go of me!” I scream. “You can’t do this!”

He yanks me to him. “Fucking watch me.” Then he throws me against the coffee table.

My back collides with the sharp edge and knocks the air from my lungs. But I don’t have time to even scream in pain before Casey is looming over me.

And for all the determination inside me, all the fire encouraging me to push through and fight...

I don’t.

I just lie there helplessly, trying not to let the pain in my back bring tears to my eyes. Not that it really matters; there’s plenty more pain to come. I can see the promise of that in Casey’s face.

He raises his fist. I close my eyes. Maybe that’s cowardly, but I don’t want to see anything anymore.

Then I hear an explosion like the house is ripping apart.

What in God’s name...?

My eyes fly open. Casey is all I can see, but he’s not looking down at me anymore. The color has drained from his face. He’s staring open-mouthed at the remnants of his destroyed door.

And when I follow his line of sight, all I can think is...

Thank God.

He’s here.

LEO

It's been twelve minutes since Willow snuck in. Six minutes since Casey followed.

I'm getting fucking impatient. But I force myself to stay still.

Gaiman flashes a glance my way. "Are we just gonna sit here and wait?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"For her to realize she needs me."

It takes an inordinate amount of energy to keep my leg from bouncing up and down. As a don, I know how to be patient. But this is torture.

Then I hear the distant sound of a crash from the front room, and it's go time.

I'm out of the car in a flash. Gaiman stays behind in the driver's seat as I sprint across the driveway. I ignore the knob on the front door completely and slam my foot against the wood. The house looks nice enough on the outside, but the door splinters like a cheap toothpick.

I step over the wreckage and scan the room. My gun is at my hip if I need it.

I see Willow on the floor of the living room. She's lying on her back in the middle of what was once a coffee table and is now little more than a pile of broken matchsticks.

And her eyes: pure fear. Pure, unadulterated fear.

I turn to the man who caused it.

Which ignites my pure, unadulterated anger.

He looks at me, then her, then back to me. Before either one of them can react, I stride forward and grab the son of a bitch by the scruff of his neck.

“You!” he gasps.

“Me,” I agree, before hurling him down on the floor at my feet.

Right where he fucking belongs.

He tries to struggle upright, but before he can even get to his knees, I send my fist flying into his face. He smashes into the ground. His skull cracks hard against the wooden floor.

“I didn’t say you could get up,” I sigh in a bored voice. “Stay the fuck down.”

I’m not even sure he can really hear me at this point. There’s blood pouring from his nose. Based on the odd direction it’s pointing, I’m fairly sure I’ve broken it. If that’s the worst he suffers today, he’s getting off pretty goddamn easy, in my opinion.

He lets out a pained groan. Good enough for me. I smirk with satisfaction before turning to Willow.

“Hey,” I say softly. “You okay?”

She blinks at me and opens her mouth. Nothing comes out.

“You’re in shock,” I reassure her. “But you’re okay now. He can’t hurt you. I’m here.”

She looks as though she understands me, though her voice still won’t quite cooperate. Her fingers twitch like she wants to reach out for me but can’t figure out how to do that just yet, either.

The fear is swallowing her up. My fists curl. Casey ought to die for what he’s done here.

“Don’t look at what comes next,” I tell her.

That gets a reaction. Her eyebrows rise and, finally, she finds her words. “Are... are you gonna... kill him?”

I’d like to. But something tells me that witnessing that act of retribution might push her over the edge. She’s fragile right now. And she’s too important to my plans. I can’t let her shatter.

“I’m just going to teach him a lesson.”

I turn my back on her and grab Casey by his hair. I drag him out of the living room and out of her sight. The fucker moans and thrashes limply, but he’s not going anywhere.

I pull him up to his feet and shove him against the wall. He groans again, but I don’t give him enough time to catch his breath before I smash my fist into his stomach. Blood bubbles up between his lips.

“I think I’ve made myself plenty fucking clear,” I growl, looking him right in his bloodshot eyes. “She is going to divorce you. I’m going to help her do it. And you’re not going to fight back. Not the tiniest little bit.”

His eyes bulge slightly, and I’m honestly a bit impressed that he can still emote underneath all that blood. Speaking, however, is a bridge too far for him right now.

He mumbles something unintelligible. I take the opportunity to pull him from the wall, mostly so I can smash him back against it and drive the breath out of his lungs.

“Don’t waste my time. Speak the fuck up or shut the fuck up.”

“Are you... sleeping with her?” he manages to growl out.

I’m not expecting the question, but I’m glad he’s asked. Part of me can even sympathize. I’m not a man who likes when other people touch my stuff, either.

But there’s a notable difference: Willow isn’t his.

She’s mine.

“Sleeping with her?” I repeat. “No, of course not.”

Relief colors his bloody features instantly. “Thank... Thank God...”

But I’m not done.

“No,” I continue, “I’m not sleeping with her... I’m fucking her. Often and hard. She’s come so many times on my cock that it’s a miracle she can still walk on two legs.”

That does the trick.

Even through all the sweat and blood and fear, something sparks in him. I can see the anger, the possessiveness, the murky jealousy that gives him second wind.

He cries out and tries to swing at me, but I’m ready for him.

I unload my fist into his face, right on the button. He goes instantly limp. I let him fall.

BOOM—he falls to the ground with a resounding thud. The house shakes. I smirk, then I step over his body and walk back into the living room.

Willow is still sitting where I left her, looking completely shell-shocked. I squat down in front of her, searching for any sense of comprehension in those sky-blue eyes.

“Willow?”

Her lips twitch, but she doesn’t make a sound. I put my hand under her chin and coax it up so that she’s forced to meet my eyes.

“L... Leo...”

“Did you at least *try* and hit him back?” I tease. “Or do you save all your fight for me?”

That gets a reaction. She frowns.

I smile. Even though I’m still a live wire of rage at the sight of what he’s done to her, she makes me smile.

Wonders never fucking cease.

I scoop her up in my arms and carry her out of the house. She doesn't protest or struggle. She just lets me do it, lying limp in my arms.

She doesn't make a sound when I deposit her in the back seat of the waiting vehicle. I make sure she's buckled in before shutting the door and climbing into the passenger seat.

Gaiman throws me a cautious glance.

“What?”

“Nuzhno li mne otpravlyat' komandu po ochistke?”

Translation: Do I need to send in a clean-up team?

I reply in Russian, “No. He'll come to in a few hours.”

“You left the fucker alive?”

“A necessary inconvenience.”

“That's not like you.”

“Inogda veselo poigrat's yedoy pered yedoy,” I grimace.

Sometimes, it's fun to play with your food before you eat.



When we get to the house, I open the door for Willow, who's still staring off into space.

“Are you getting down on your own?” I ask. “Or would you rather I carry you?”

I make sure my tone is just mocking enough to get her attention.

“Don't bother,” she mutters.

I'm glad she's found her voice, but it still sounds shaky. Nothing like the spitfire hellion she was when she left here just a few hours ago. She pointedly

avoids taking my hand as she slips out of the car.

But she falters at the last moment, stumbles, and ends up in my arms anyway.

“Guess I’m carrying you then,” I say, scooping her up again.

She just sighs and doesn’t say a word. But her body seems to roil with discomfort. The aftermath of the shock. I’m tempted to take her to my bedroom to fuck it out of her, but I decide against it.

Best to draw lines in the sand now.

I bring her to her room and straight into the bathroom. I set her down on the edge of the bathtub. She looks up at me, blinking her eyes again and again like the world won’t quite fall into place the way it ought to.

“You knew where to find me?”

“Yes.”

She frowns, turns inward. “I thought he was going to kill me.”

“I wouldn’t have let that happen.”

“Really?”

I have to make sure she doesn’t get the wrong impression. “Yes. I still need you.”

Her frown deepens. “Did... did you kill him?”

I raise my eyebrows. “If I did, how would that make you feel?”

“I’ll know when you tell me.”

I ignore that. “I’m going to remove your clothes now.”

“Why?”

“Just stand up and follow instructions for once in your fucking life, Willow.”

Instead of biting back, she stands mutely. That’s all it takes to confirm that she’s not herself right now.

I undress her tenderly, peeling off each article of clothing with care and

attention. Not because I'm a particularly caring or attentive guy. Mostly because my cock is thoroughly appreciating the experience of undressing her.

I've undressed women in the past, of course. But I was barely concentrating on what I was doing. It was a means to an end.

This is different. The experience is sensual. My erection strains brutally against my pants.

I ignore it with effort as I unclasp her bra with a flick of my fingers. She shivers, but doesn't move or resist. As I slide the straps off her shoulders, her breasts bounce free. I expect her to cover herself up, but still, nothing. No reaction.

Her hands stay limp by her sides. I try not to focus, not to fixate, but my eyes are faster than my conscious brain. The image of her hard nipples sears itself into my retinas.

I make myself keep going. I slide her pants down her thighs and work them off one foot at a time.

Then all that's left is her panties. Those come down, too.

I hook my fingers in the sides and pull slowly, slowly, slowly. This time, I don't even try not to look. My eyes are focused on that ripe V between her legs. Her lower lips are swollen and I wonder what I'd find if I were to run my finger between them. Would she be wet?

I won't find out. I can't find out.

But fuck, I want to.

I freeze when I angle around and see the massive bruise on her back. It starts just under her spine and travels down towards her waist. An angry diagonal slash.

She senses the pause. Her shoulders go rigid.

"He... he pushed me," she explains before I can even ask. "Into the table. I'll survive."

"He might not."

Her hand leaps to my elbow. She's still weak, but she clings to me with thin little fingers. Her liquid eyes meet mine.

"Don't kill him," she pleads in a small voice.

The way she says it makes me want to kill him even more.

It's not jealousy exactly. More like furious indignation.

Why speak up for the man who hurt her like this? Who bruised her both inside and out, in ways that will take a long time to heal?

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't."

"Because I asked you not to."

"There's only one person I ever listened to. And he's gone."

The thought opens a well of rage inside of me. It's dark and bottomless, difficult to ignore. But then...

"Leo... I'm begging you. Please?" Her fingers squeeze my arm.

My rage twists, shifts. My erection gets even more difficult to ignore.

I grit my teeth and cast it out of my mind. "Get in the water," I command.

I expect her to protest, but again, she doesn't. She raises her leg as though she's on autopilot and climbs into the spacious white-marble tub.

When she sinks down into the water, a sigh bursts from her lips. Her eyes flutter closed with relief.

I stand beside the tub and watch her.

Her breasts poke out of the water. Her fingers tread the surface like she's stroking the keys of a piano. With every second that passes, the steam thaws away more of the shock iced around her.

A few minutes pass in relative silence except for the mingled sounds of our breathing and the trickle of water.

Only when she opens her eyes again do I remember the trauma of the past few hours.

“Thank you,” she murmurs.

I raise my eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“Are you going to make me say it again?”

“At least once.”

She almost smiles at that. Almost. “Thank you... for showing up when you did.”

“Thank Jessica. She’s the one who called.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You really expect me to believe that you didn’t know a thing until Jessica called you?”

I shrug. “It’s called trust.”

“I know what it’s called. I just don’t believe you have any when it comes to other people.”

“Considering you ran, do you blame me?”

She thinks about that for a second. “You do realize you haven’t exactly earned my trust?”

“I wasn’t trying to, *kukolka*.”

She rolls her eyes, but the hint of a grin starts to warm across her lips. Her fingers tense in the water, and I know immediately what she wants to do.

“I wouldn’t,” I warn her.

“Wouldn’t what?”

“Splash me.”

Her eyes go wide, betraying her true intention. “How did you know?”

“What have I told you already?”

“You know everything,” she repeats, lip drawn up in annoyance.

I nod with satisfaction. “You’re a quick learner.”

“Did you know I was going to run?”

I think about lying, but what would be the point? I’m not trying to win a popularity contest.

“Yes,” I say without missing a beat. “I knew.”

“And you decided to let me.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Hard experience is a good teacher. When logic and reason fail.”

She takes that in for a moment. “You were trying to teach me a lesson?”

“I was trying to show you that I’m your best chance at survival.”

She frowns, obviously confused by that answer. But I’m not about to explain it to her. She doesn’t understand even a fraction of the forces at play here.

“That’s a pretty arrogant statement, don’t you think?”

I smile inwardly. If only she knew. “No. Not really.”

“Right,” she scoffs, “I forgot who I’m talking to.”

“Then you’d be the first. No other woman ever has.”

Annoyance flashes across her eyes, hot and familiar. “Well, hip-hip-hooray for them. Did you abduct those ones, too?”

“They weren’t special enough for all that. Not like you.”

A barely-there blush snakes up her cheeks, and she tries to hide it under another roll of her eyes. “Am I supposed to be flattered now?”

“I wouldn’t be,” I admit. “Being special in my underworld doesn’t always make for happily-ever-afters.”

“I don’t believe in fairy tales.”

“That’s the first wise thing you’ve said since we met.”

She certainly has something, this woman. I just can't decide if it's a quality worth harnessing. Or one worth disposing of.

If push comes to shove, I know killing her will be my only option. But what a fucking waste that would be.

"I have one more question."

I let loose a tired sigh. "Alright."

"Who was the one person you listened to?" she asks. "The one who's gone now?"

"It doesn't matter."

"You abducted me," she retorts. "Twice, actually. The least you can do is give me a straight answer."

"You're bargaining?"

She shrugs, displacing some water. "You should be used to it. You're supposed to be Bratva."

I almost laugh. The woman might have more potential than I initially thought. If anyone else had asked, I wouldn't have said a word. But her...

"My brother," I concede.

"Oh," she says. Her face softens. "And he... died?"

"Seven years ago."

"What was his name?"

"Pavel."

"Pavel," she repeats. Her clumsy accent is cute. "You were close?"

I look to the door. "You should get some rest, Willow."

Her expression hardens with disappointment. "We're not finished talking."

"I am."

"That's not fair," she complains.

“No, it’s not,” I tell her. “Better get used to it.”

I turn to leave. As I’m heading out the door, she makes her rebuttal. “I’m never going to get used to it, Leo Solovev.”

Hearing my name on her lips does something to me. I pause.

“I may be grateful for what you did today,” she continues, “but that doesn’t mean I’m going to be your wife.”

I look back over my shoulder. “Challenge accepted.”

Then I slam the door shut.

WILLOW

My spine hurts.

I'm standing with my back to the mirror, twisting my neck around as far as it will go so I can see the spreading bruise.

He's never left a mark on me before. Not a significant one, at least.

Although there was that one time, a few years ago at his office Christmas party, when I spoke to one of his colleagues without his permission.

He did not like that.

As soon as he caught sight of me daring to enjoy human interaction with a non-Casey member of the male species, Casey interrupted the conversation and whisked me away into a storage closet. He asked me why I was behaving like a slut.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You're acting like a fucking slut, flaunting your tits in front of that old pervert."

"For fuck's sake, Casey, I was just asking him about Spain," I'd argued. "He said he just got back from—"

"Do you think I'm stupid? I know flirting when I see it."

"You're insane."

“And you’re a goddamn whore,” he’d hissed.

It wasn’t a physical blow, though it might as well have been.

Up until then, his insults had been measured, subtle. But this...

I’d burst into tears right there in that dingy little storage space. Casey had turned immediately apologetic.

“Baby, baby, don’t cry. Stop crying.”

“Why would you even say that to me? It was just a conversation,” I’d sobbed. “I was trying to make a good impression on your colleagues.”

“I know. I know, baby. I just... I got so jealous. Because you’re mine, and it made me crazy.” He’d grabbed me and pulled me close. “I couldn’t stand the way he was looking at you in that dress.”

“You wanted me to wear this dress! You bought it for me.”

“I know I did. And you look sexy as hell in it. That’s the problem. Every man who sees you wants you. Not that I can blame them...”

“But you can blame *me*?”

“Baby, I said I was sorry. You gonna make this a big thing?”

That’s how it always was with Casey. He started the fight, then he got upset if I had a reaction to it. I wasn’t allowed to feel anything.

He was the one with the temper and the jealousy and the accusations.

And I was the one who had to deal with them.

In the beginning, I cried. Towards the end, I just put my head down. I stayed quiet. I silently hoped things would get better, knowing they never would.

But those days are behind me now. Hiding behind denial is no longer an option. Neither is turning down help I desperately need.

Leo can help with my divorce. And one thing is clear: I need to be rid of Casey.

I pull my shirt down and pad gingerly into the bedroom. My entire body hurts. I just need sleep. But my brain doesn't stop spinning, even when I'm unconscious.

I dream of the last time I saw my parents.

I dream of Casey looming over me, a figure so large he blocks out the sun.

I dream of demons hanging off my back, digging their rusted nails into my spine and twisting, twisting, twisting...



I wake up screaming.

Light streams through the gaps between the billowing curtains. It silhouettes the tall figure standing beside my bed.

“No!” I wail, still half-asleep. “No! Stay away from me, Casey! Stay away from me!”

He lunges for me, his hands searching for my throat.

Or wait—maybe not.

Not my throat. He's not trying to strangle me.

He's trying to *calm* me.

“It's me,” he says. “Willow, calm down. It's me.”

Relief washes away the red-tinged panic. “Leo?” I whisper his name like a prayer.

Slowly, my eyes adjust to the darkness. His profile is a work of art. Chiseled and flawless. I reach out and touch his cheek as if I can't believe he's real.

“Leo...” I say again.

“You were screaming in your sleep,” he rumbles.

He sits down on the bed. One hand is on my arm now. The other rests on my thigh. His presence swallows up my dreams and renders them into nothingness.

I'm vulnerable right now, especially to a man like him. Physically, mentally, emotionally. But I'm too tired to care.

"I was having a bad dream," I admit.

"About Casey?"

I nod.

"I told you that you don't have to worry about him. Not anymore."

"He has friends, Leo," I whisper to him. "Powerful friends. He threatened to drag me down with the embezzlement shit."

"Let him try," Leo snarls. There's so much anger in his tone that I recoil.

"I'm married to him. It won't be so hard for him to make me look guilty."

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop worrying about that *mudak*?" Leo asks.

"Why shouldn't I worry?"

He leans forward. I can see him more clearly now. I can see the hazel of his eyes, the dark of his pupils. That green-flecked amber, molten and shifting. I'm not sure how I could have ever mistaken him for Casey. They couldn't be more different.

"Because of me," he says.

It's hard to concentrate on what he's saying with the way he's touching me, though. His fingers are trailing up and down my arm. Up and down. Up and down.

"Casey is a nobody," he continues. "He has contacts, but he has to because he needs help. He can't rely on himself alone. But me? I'm the friend everyone wishes they had."

I let that sink in for a moment. My instinct is to believe he's exaggerating. But from what I've seen so far, Leo doesn't need to exaggerate.

He's telling me the truth. And strangely, I feel safer because of it.

My back throbs suddenly because of the way I'm lying, and I wince at the pain both real and remembered. "He's come close to hitting me a few times," I hear myself saying. "But... this time it was different."

"Different how?"

"I believe he would have beat me to death."

"He never would've gotten the chance."

"Leo..."

I don't know why I say his name. But there's something about him, his solid presence, his undeniable charisma, his dark, seductive good looks, that pulls me in. He pulls things out of my lips I never thought I'd say out loud before.

I reach up and wrap my hands around his neck. And I climb onto his lap.

There's no surprise in his eyes as his palms settle down on my hips. Is it possible to surprise this man? Can anything rattle his composure?

Part of me recognizes what a colossally big mistake this might end up being. But it's a tiny part. A quiet part. An easily ignored part.

Because the rest of me is an ocean of need. For protection and for comfort and everything in between.

And no one embodies that more than the man in front of me.

When I lean in and kiss him, there's a desperation to it. I'm craving the warmth of his body and everything that it represents.

He doesn't instigate the kiss. Doesn't even encourage me, really. His hands stay on my hips, but his lips don't give me anything other than still heat.

I pull back slightly, so I can see his eyes. They betray nothing.

"You're asking for trouble, *kukolka*," he warns.

I nod, trembling. “So give it to me.”

The voice that comes out of me doesn't sound anything like my own. It's roughened by lust and fear.

I press myself against him. He's hard as a rock between my thighs and that just makes me want him even more.

“I want Jessica's help, Leo,” I whisper in his ear. “For real this time. I want the divorce.”

He waits patiently. “And?”

“... And I want you to fuck me.”

His eyes darken with desire. My pussy throbs hungrily.

“Say that again,” he commands.

“Fuck me, Leo. I want you.”

He plants a palm on my throat and pushes me back against the bed. Climbing on top, he traces his lips across my collarbone so faintly I can barely feel them. Just a tiny blazing trail of heat.

I want more. Far more.

But when I try to touch him, he grabs my hands and pins them down against the bed at either side.

“Now now,” he tuts. “You do as I say.”

He lowers his hips to mine and grinds into me. My nipples are hard and I'm soaking wet at this point, but he doesn't seem to be in a hurry to give me what I'm after.

I'm not surprised. He does everything in his own way. In his own time.

All I can do is wait.

I tremble as he rips apart the fabric of the thin nightshirt I'm wearing. Buttons pop and fly. The rush of cool air against my nipples tightens them harder and I can't help but groan.

“Leo,” I moan. “Please...”

“Please what?” he growls. He sounds almost angry. Why does that turn me on so damn much?

I can’t quite form the words he’s looking for. So instead, I push my hips up against him. He wants me—I can feel as much from the erection digging into my thigh. But he’s drawing out the moment. He’s torturing me.

Haven’t I been through enough?

“You want me to make you come again, huh?” he asks, whispering in my ear.

I arch my back and nod, desperate for him to bury his heat between my legs. “I can’t wait. I can’t wait any longer...”

“If you don’t stop talking now, I’m going to gag you with my cock.” A hot flash of desire scalds through my body at those words. He doesn’t miss it, either. “But that’s exactly what you want, isn’t it?”

I’m past the point of pride now. So I simply nod like the desperate woman I am, knowing he can see the eagerness in my eyes, in my body, in every cell of me.

He moves up my body and undoes his zipper until his cock is right at my face. He starts running his cock along my lips. My mouth parts willingly and he pushes in the tip.

There’s something carnal, almost barbaric about this. I’m a toy at his disposal. My hands are trapped. My mouth is open for him to use as he pleases.

And I fucking love it.

I groan around him and he pushes his shaft deeper into my mouth. Deeper, deeper, until he’s in my throat, making good on his threat to gag me.

He pushes me right to the edge before he pulls out just long enough to give me room to gulp in a breath of air.

Then he goes back in again.

The taste and size of him is overwhelming. He fucks my mouth until I'm scrambling for breath again—but every second of flailing just makes me wetter and wetter.

When I'm at my breaking point, he pulls out and slides back down my body. His chest falls against mine.

Then he lines himself up and thrusts inside me.

The connection is effortless. He spreads my legs and drives his hips forward with savage power. My body is desperate to pull him in as deep as he can go.

I keep my hands where he put them, though I take up fistfuls of the sheets to help ride out the sensations tearing through me. Every time my eyes threaten to flutter shut with sheer ecstasy, I force them to stay open.

I want to see him.

The hunger on his face. The brutality. The savagery. The power.

I never knew sex could be like this. Filled with this kind of nail-biting intensity, this overwhelming, earth-shattering, stomach-churning desire that makes you crave each thrust like you crave each breath.

Nothing else matters but this.

All I can think of, all I can focus on, is Leo, Leo, Leo.

I cry out when I peak. Instead of slowing down, he fucks me harder, faster and more aggressively. My second orgasm is even bigger than the first, and when it's done with me, I can barely move. I'm in a daze.

I'm only vaguely aware of Leo growling as he empties himself again and again. And when that last thrust finishes, when his body shudders into stillness, the safe warmth I've been chasing since the moment I woke up envelopes me like a dream.

He doesn't kiss me or hold me afterwards. I'd never expect something like that from someone like him.

I asked him to fuck me, and that's what he did. That's *all* he did.

Tomorrow, I might look back on this as a mistake. But for right now, I'm content. And when I fall back to sleep, I don't dream of a single thing.

LEO

“Are you sure?” Gaiman asks.

I give him a tired look. “If you ask me that question one more fucking time ___”

“I’m asking because it’s my job to ask,” Gaiman says firmly. “This is not some random, up-and-coming, little rag-tag crew we’re trying to stomp out. This is the fucking Mikhailov Bratva. Semyon has controlled the West Coast for decades now. He’s no slouch, Leo.”

“And it’s about fucking time the reins were seized by someone who can actually do the fucking job, wouldn’t you say?” I ask coolly.

The map laid out before us has only two pins in play. One for the Manhattan Club. One for the Silver Star.

“Jesus, Gaiman,” Jax says, rolling his eyes. “Don’t be such a fuckin’ killjoy.”

Gaiman throws Jax a condescending glare. “I have to think for two Vors since the second is lacking in brain power.”

“Second?” Jax quips, as usual focusing on the wrong part of the insult. “I’m the first Vor, motherfucker.”

Gaiman huffs in irritation and turns back to me. “This is a dangerous plan, Leo.”

“I’m aware of that,” I say, without taking my eyes off the map. “That’s exactly why it’ll work.”

“If we do this, we’re inviting the wrath of the Mikhailovs down on us.”

“And I say, bring it the fuck on,” Jax crows. “We can’t let those fuckers think that we’re scared.”

“It’s not fear,” Gaiman bristles. “It’s caution. We need to be careful. Semyon Mikhailov didn’t build one of the most powerful Bratvas in the country by playing nice.”

“And we’re not going to take back what’s ours if we play nice, either,” I snap. “In any case, we don’t need to worry about the old man. He’s ailing badly. Gout. Days are numbered.”

Jax’s eyes go wide with shock. “Gout?” he scoffs. “What is this, the Dark Ages? How do you know?”

“I have my sources.”

Jax glances at Gaiman. “Do you know who he’s talking about?”

“Most of the time,” Gaiman says, “I have no goddamn idea.”

I smirk at the sourness in their voices. I’m not secretive out of spite. But the fewer people involved in any plan, the better. I find it’s best that way.

Especially after what happened with Pavel.

But this particular bit of information is something I can share with them. They’re good lieutenants. They deserve to be involved in at least some of my plans.

“Agent 23,” I tell them.

Gaiman and Jax gawk at me. “You deployed Agent 23?”

I nod. “It was past time. Our spy’s been on the inside for months now.”

“Months,” Jax growls. “And you only tell us *now*?”

I shrug unapologetically. “It didn’t come up.”

“So Agent 23 is your source,” Gaiman says, sounding impressed. “Fuck me. Never thought I’d see the day.”

“The training was rough,” Jax agrees. “I just figured it wouldn’t pan out.”

I smirk. “Revenge is a powerful motivator.”

Gaiman’s eyes land on me. “You would know, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m not pretending as though this isn’t about revenge,” I say. “It absolutely is. But it’s about more than that, too. This is about getting back the power we held before that motherfucker stabbed us in the back.”

“Can you imagine where the three of us would be if that shit had never happened?” Jax ponders. “I’d be driving down the coast, fucking every woman who smiled at me.”

“Don’t you do that anyway?” Gaiman asks.

Jax’s smile gets toothy. “Well, yeah... but I might stop if I managed to find a girl who looked like Willow.” He shoots me a needling smile.

I roll my eyes and scoff. “Even if you did, you wouldn’t be able to hold her attention.”

“You manage.”

“Because I can hold a conversation.”

“And I can’t?” he growls defensively.

“Unless it’s about your abs or your sexual conquests, no, you can’t.”

He glowers at me as Gaiman laughs. “Case in point: we’re trying to bring down the Mikhailov Bratva and you’re rambling on about the women you want to bang.”

“What’s the point of life without women to bang?”

“Jesus, Jax, can you focus for two seconds?” I snap, pointing at the map. “We’ve got to get these buildings set up as soon as possible.”

“Do we have a date in mind?”

“Not yet. We’ll have to see how things play out. I’ve got too many moving pieces at the moment to make a firm call.”

“What else has Agent 23 uncovered?” Gaiman inquires.

Of course he’s intrigued by the secret. He’s more suited to spy work, anyway. But I need him at the helm to manage all the underlings who fight under the Solovev banner.

Gaiman may be overly cautious. Jax may be overly brash. But I can trust them both and that’s the bottom line. In this world—my world—trust is as rare as diamonds.

“That Spartak Belov is the one who’s really running the show.”

Spartak Belov. Vors to Semyon Mikhailov. Shadow king of the Mikhailov Bratva. Scourge of my fucking existence.

A dead man walking, if ever there was one.

Silence ensues as his name percolates through the tense air. “Fuck,” Gaiman breathes. “I’m surprised that the Mikhailov bitch hasn’t murdered him by now.”

It’s no surprise that Anya Mikhailov is a subject of much discussion in this room. Jax has a hard-on for her. Gaiman is captivated by the reclusiveness of the woman.

But I have my own reasons for being interested in her.

“She’s planning something,” Gaiman asserts with conviction. “A woman like that is not going to be content playing second fiddle.”

“She had the option of leading the whole damn Bratva,” Jax points out. “She didn’t take it.”

“She and the old man had a falling out years ago.”

Both Jax and Gaiman’s heads swivel to me at the revelation. “Agent 23 told you that?” Gaiman asks.

I nod. “Apparently, they haven’t been on speaking terms for years. A decade, at least.”

“Well, don’t be an asshole, give us all the dirt!” Jax insists, leaning in like an old bitty at the church carnival.

“I don’t have much in the way of details. It’s not easy dragging information from the old bastard. His illness has made him soft, but he’s still a sharp motherfucker.”

“A falling out, huh?” Gaiman muses. “I suppose we know why he chose Belov over his own daughter, then.”

“He’s a man without principle,” Jax scoffs. “But we know that already. He’s the one who gave the order that made you don of this Bratva.”

I remember the day so clearly. The day I went from the second son to don of the Solovev Bratva in one fell swoop. I can still smell the cigar smoke laced with gunpowder.

For most men, it would be a proud day. A day they work towards and prepare for. A day that comes with heavy responsibility, yes, but an incomparable honor.

For me, it was a day shrouded in darkness and anger.

It was a day of death.



Seven Years Ago

I destroy most of the house in the wake of the ceremony.

I lash out at men who were once his, but look to me now for answers I don't have.

I had no time to prepare, no time to process. The mantle of power was thrust upon me without my consent. I'm ready to hurl it off—until Gaiman and Jax walk in the room. They each grab me to calm me down.

“Stop.” Gaiman's voice reaches me from a great distance. “Breathe, Leo. You need to get in control of yourself. The men are waiting for you outside.”

“I'm not fucking speaking to them. They're not my goddamn men. They're his.”

“They *were* his men. Now, they're yours,” he says. “You have to go out there. And when you do, you're going to speak like he did.”

I shake my head. “Let go of me.”

“Will you promise not to destroy anything else?” Jax asks.

“Are you two included in that?”

Jax releases my arm and steps in front of me. “No. If you want to hit something, hit me.”

“Jax,” Gaiman warns. “Don't be stupid.”

“I'm serious,” Jax says, looking me in the eye. “You need to hit something. Something real, not plaster or brick or cement. You need flesh and blood under those knuckles. It'll make you feel sane again. Trust me—I know.”

I can see traces of the underworld from which he was belched glistening in those too-dark eyes.

“I can't hit you,” I grimace.

“Would it help if I hit you first?”

“We don’t have time for this,” Gaiman growls impatiently. “Don Leo, you —”

“Fuck that! I’m not meant to be the don,” I roar. “That was *him*. That was *his* path. Not mine.”

“Well, tough,” Jax retorts, shoving at my chest. “That’s what you are now. You are Don Solovev.”

My eyes burn with anger. “Don’t fucking call me that. That’s not my name.”

“Don Leo Solovev,” Jax enunciates slowly.

“Motherfucker!” I bellow, launching myself at him.

My fist slams into his face. Jax stumbles back, though he doesn’t fall. The fact that he’s still on his feet doesn’t sit right with me. My pain requires more.

It demands blood.

I hit him again. He almost loses his footing and his eyes pinwheel wildly in their sockets, but he manages to stay standing, that stubborn motherfucker. It pisses me off that he is upright, that he is whole—and most of all, that he was right about what I need.

Breaking shit isn’t going to help me.

I need flesh under my fists.

I need to feel bones break.

I need to smell blood.

“Enough!” Gaiman yells, stepping between us. “That’s fucking enough.”

“Look at him,” Jax laughs, coughing up specks of blood. “It’s not even close to enough. Hit me again, Don Solovev. Harder.”

This time, I don’t need the encouragement. I throw Gaiman aside and pummel Jax again.

He doesn't fight back or shield himself at all. He just swallows the blow and topples over. I hit him again and again, a slave to my anger and my agony, until I realize he's close to unconsciousness. That's the only reason I pull my last punch.

"Are you satisfied now?" Gaiman demands, looking at Jax. "You fucking idiots."

He turns to me. "Is this how you're going to convince everyone that you're fit to lead?"

"I don't want to lead. Never have."

"Then shall we just hand over the Bratva to Semyon Mikhailov?" Gaiman asks.

My body goes rigid with tension. Anger courses through me in waves and my fists clench again. "That old bastard is going to die. I don't know when and I don't know how. But he is going to fucking die at my hands."

Gaiman walks forward and puts his hand on my shoulder. "And we're going to be at your back the entire way," he tells me. "But first, you need to get strong enough to hit back. You need to become the don you were born to be."

I turn to Jax, who sits up slowly and spits blood on the carpets. Walking over to him, I offer my hand and tug him to his feet.

"You pulled that last punch," he accuses.

"Didn't want to kill you."

Jax snorts. "Not possible. I know when, how, and where I'm gonna die. And it's not by your hands, my friend." He clasps me on the shoulder and sighs.

I turn to the side and look between the two men who have been at my side for years. "I have no choice, do I?"

"Not if you want the legacy Pavel created to die."

"He didn't create it," I correct. "But he did continue it. And I will, too. But I'm doing it my own fucking way."

Gaiman nods. "We never had a doubt."

2

Present Day

Seven years. Seven fucking years since my brother was murdered.

Many things have changed, but Jax and Gaiman have not. And after so much blood, sweat, and tears, we're finally here—at the home stretch.

I can taste my revenge on the horizon. Soon enough, I'll grasp it.

“Our focus is going to be Belov,” I tell them.

Jax looks at me with incredulity. “You're serious?”

“Belov's the one calling the shots now. It has to be him first. When he's six feet under, then we can deal with the old man. Unless the gout deals with him first.”

“Shouldn't be too difficult,” Gaiman points out. “Unless, of course, Anya Mikhailov decides to challenge us.”

“I'll handle her,” Jax says with a smug smile.

I shake my head. “The woman is poison. Stay away from her.”

“Something you're not telling us?” he asks.

“You know the rumors. All of her husbands have died under mysterious circumstances. Care to join the list?”

“Why would she kill her husbands?”

“Because the marriages were arranged by Semyon,” I explain. “He wanted to make political alliances, and she shot each one to hell.”

Jax raises his eyebrows. “So much for rumors. Sounds like you've proven them true. But it doesn't have to be a bad thing. Might she be an ally?”

Gaiman stops short and frowns. “I must be losing it, because... that actually doesn't sound like a horrible idea.”

“Anya doesn't even live on the Mikhailov compound anymore,” I point out. “She hasn't for several years. She's removed from the life, which is why

she's not a factor."

"Wait—do we even know where she is?" Gaiman asks.

I shake my head. "Her location is a mystery. She resurfaces every now and then, only to disappear again."

"Maybe we need to be keeping better tabs on her," Gaiman muses out loud.

"If it becomes necessary, I'll let you know," I say firmly. "Until then, we focus on the main players: Spartak Belov and his Vors."

"I'll pull up the file," Gaiman says.

Jax turns to me. "What about the girl?"

"Jessica's handling her divorce," I say. "We'll make plans once that's taken care of. The wedding comes first. I want security getting ready for it."

Jax frowns. "I doubt the Mikhailovs are gonna care about your marriage to a nobody."

"Not now," I say. "But they will."

"I can smell a fight on the horizon." Jax is so giddy about the prospect that he forgets to gripe about the fact that he still doesn't know why Willow is part of the plan.

He's been patient over the years. Waiting for a fight that I delayed and delayed until I became the don that Pavel would no doubt have grown into.

I've learned from my brother's mistakes. And I've made some of my own along the way.

Which is how I knew which way to lay the board.

Now, though, the pieces are in place.

The only thing left to do is play.

WILLOW

What have I done?

That's my first thought when I wake up to messy sheets beside me and a soreness between my legs.

He's not here—not that I expected him to be. I'd be shocked if he was.

I get out of bed and stretch. Every muscle in my body aches. Some of it is the good kind of ache, the kind that makes you feel satisfied and rested. The other is the lingering pain of the bruises Casey gave me.

As I walk to the bathroom, I catch sight of the angry indigo splotches radiating up my back and thighs. Shivering, I turn away and start a bath.

Watching the water run brings back the memory of yesterday. Leo stood over me the entire time, his eyes snaking up and down my body. I should have felt threatened. But he never once made a move to touch me. Not sexually, at least. Even the way he had undressed me felt... well, not quite detached. But not expectant, either.

I soak in the water for a long time, wondering how I'm going to face him at all. Not only did we sleep together again, but worse: *I'm* the one who initiated it.

I climbed onto his lap.

I asked him—begged him—to fuck me.

Just reliving the memory has me cringing with embarrassment. He's going to hold this over me, I know he is. But it's too late to take it back now.

What's done is done.

After my bath, I realize I'm finally going to have to wear something from the wardrobe of clothes Leo left for me. Resigned, I wrap a towel around myself and go to examine the choices on display.

It's a cornucopia of exclusive designer brands. The kinds of names splashed on billboards around the world—Gucci, Prada, Fendi, Dolce & Gabbana. There are also obscure French labels I've never heard of before. Every single stitch of every single item is jaw-droppingly fabulous.

But if Leo thinks I'm going to get all dolled up for him, he can think again.

I pick out a pair of black Rag & Bone jeans that fit me like a glove and a light green sweater with a weave that shows off little slices of my skin. It's not what I'd call "modest," but it's not red carpet worthy, either.

When I'm dressed, I feel better. More like myself. Which also makes me realize how restless I am right now. I pace up and down a few dozen times before making up my mind and heading to the door.

I half-expect it to be locked, but it's not. The handle turns smoothly and silently.

Feeling more than a little uncertain, I step out into the hallway and peer around. There's no one in sight. No guards, no maids.

No Leo.

I leave my room and tiptoe downstairs to the second floor. This is the first time I've been able to really appreciate the house. I'm no expert in interior design or architecture. All I know is that this place looks *good*. It has a certain inviting charm—one that doesn't exactly match its owner.

Leo has charm, yes. But his charm has an edge. A dark bent that makes you wary. That warns you against getting too close.

I pop my head into the first room I see. Empty. The next one is empty, too. And the next.

Not a single one of the rooms I look into contains another human being.

One of the rooms grabs my attention, though. It's a study of sorts, but the desk is completely bare. I check to be sure I'm alone and then walk in for a proper look around.

My eyes are drawn to a large photograph hanging on the wall. It's black and white, professionally taken, with the grain and blur and angle of a film photographer who loves their craft.

The man in the picture has been shot from a bit of a distance. He's wearing a black sweater and a silver Rolex, looking off to the side and smiling at something I can't see. Handsome, certainly. And not just that, but handsome in a way I could swear I recognize.

He looks like Leo.

But not exactly like him. The man in the frame is skinnier—not scrawny, but not built the way Leo is—and his features run a little longer, a little more somber and sad. His eyes are deep-set and slanted downward. Even his mouth seems to have a downward tilt, though he's smiling. It all radiates melancholy.

I take a step towards it, peering closer, when—

“Found something interesting?”

I jump a foot in the air and let out a very unfortunate, very unladylike scream. It comes out sounding like a fifty-year-old truck driver who just stubbed his pinky toe.

Leo's face twists into an amused smile, but at least he doesn't laugh in my face. Not that that lessens the embarrassment at all.

“I, uh... Shoot, I don't know.”

He slouches against the doorframe of the study, watching me with unreadable eyes.

I swallow the fear down. “Is... is that your brother?”

“Pavel,” Leo confirms. “That's him.”

“It’s a beautiful picture.”

He nods, but he doesn’t really give it a real glance. “It was taken almost ten years ago now.”

“Did you take it?” I don’t know why, but it seems suddenly totally natural to me that Leo would be capable of taking something this beautiful. He strikes me as the kind of man who is effortlessly good at anything he tries.

He shakes his head. “His fiancée did.”

My heart contracts a little. “Where is she now?”

“He died before the wedding,” Leo says curtly. “She reinvented herself and got on with life.”

I nod. “I guess there’s nothing left to do but keep going.”

“Not everyone has that option,” Leo says, a hint of bitterness creeping into his voice.

“How did he die?”

His eyes lock on mine. The hazel in them seems to crystalize. “He was murdered at what was supposed to be a gentlemen’s meeting.”

“A what?” I ask.

“Where the dons of a particular territory come together to discuss business interests, grievances against one another, alliances. That kind of thing. The agreement is straightforward: you come unarmed. You leave intact. It’s a matter of honor.”

I understand even before he finishes the story. “Someone didn’t stick to the rules.”

Leo nods, turning towards his brother’s photograph. “He and his closest Vors were murdered during that meeting. And just like that, I became don.”

His expression is flat, but I can tell that his brother meant a lot to him. Why else would there be a framed photograph of the man hanging in his home?

I realize suddenly that this room isn’t a study.

It's a shrine.

"Did you want to be?" I ask. "Don, I mean. Did you want to be don?"

"Fuck no," he laughs immediately. "But then again, it was always understood that I never would have to be. I was content with being my brother's right hand man. He's the one who insisted I stay home that day. I wanted to attend the meeting with him. In fact, my name was on the list up until the very last moment."

"You think he suspected something?"

"No. If he had, he'd have been better prepared. He was just being overly cautious. He was meeting someone he considered dangerous. He didn't want to show his hand."

It's a foreign world he's explaining to me. I can't even begin to understand it. But losing someone you care about? That I get. That I can empathize with.

"Were you just snooping or were you looking for something in particular?" he asks bluntly. His harsh tone shatters the intimate moment into jagged shards.

I frown. "I wasn't snooping. I was just looking around."

"That doesn't bother me," he says with a shrug. "I'm just shocked you can walk straight after last night."

The color races into my cheeks immediately. He's cruel enough to keep looking me dead in the eye the whole time, too. No mercy.

"I... that was... last night was..."

"I've got you speechless. It must have been good."

"Jesus, will you stop?"

"Stop what?" he asks innocently.

"Last night was a mistake. I was vulnerable."

"You seemed fairly in command of things when you crawled into my lap and asked me to fuck you."

I cringe. Crude, but accurate. “You don’t have to remind me. I know what happened.”

“And you regret it this morning?”

He doesn’t sound hurt, obviously. I don’t think Leo could ever be “hurt” in that way. He’s just matter-of-fact. Detached from whatever answer I might give.

“Well, safe to say it was probably not the best idea.”

He doesn’t say a word, and as usual, the silence crowds down on me from all sides. I bite down on my lower lip, hoping that’ll prevent me from speaking, but I know it’s only a matter of seconds before I blurt out something regrettable.

Apparently, he knows that, too. He gives me only more silence to hang myself with.

“I was in shock after... after, you know,” I mutter. “After what happened with Casey.”

“And you wanted to fuck your troubles away?”

I cringe again. “I was just... vulnerable—”

“You’ve already said that.”

“Must you be an ass?”

He smiles. “I’m just trying to help you get this explanation out. You seem to be struggling.”

“Because it’s embarrassing!”

“Never be embarrassed about taking what you want, Willow. Haven’t we been through this before?”

“We have,” I snap. “And like I told you before, I don’t have the same benefits of gender that you do. I don’t have a big swinging dick to make this world fall into line.”

He laughs. “That’s a good thing. If you did, then I definitely wouldn’t have let you crawl into my lap last night.”

I narrow my eyes at him. Two can play at this game. “Are you trying to talk about last night so that we won’t have to talk about your brother?”

He blinks, totally unfazed. “I don’t have to deflect at all. When I’m done talking about something, I’ll say so. But I understand why you would think that’s what I was trying to do.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s what you’re trying to do right now,” he says. “You always assume of others what’s true of yourself.”

I frown, irritated at how transparent I am to him. But even though I know he can see right through me, all I can think to do is deny, deny, deny.

“I... that’s not...”

He smiles again. “Calm down, Willow. Just tell me what you want to say.”

“Last night was a mistake.” I shudder. “I was really low and I wanted to feel... *something*. Anything other than fear. It was a lapse in judgment on my part. And let me assure you, it won’t happen again.”

He regards me with a cool, disinterested expression. “If you say so.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Your expression says otherwise.”

He rolls his eyes. “Then you’re reading too much into it. I’m not interested in forcing a woman to fuck me. Not when I have so many ready to spread their legs the moment I glance their way. You don’t want to have sex again? I won’t miss your pussy. I’ve had my fill twice already.”

The words are harder, sharper, and more insulting than if he’d gone ahead and slapped me. I feel like I’m two inches tall in the heat of those withering hazel eyes.

Me begging him to fuck me doesn't make me special and it doesn't make our connection unique. It just lumps me in with all the other girls who'd jump at the chance for a night with the don.

I shake the image out of my head before it can take up permanent residence there.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"What makes you think anything's wrong?"

"Because your face is doing something weird."

I turn away from him in a huff. "I'm fine. Stop reading into things." I hear a chuckle from behind me, and I whirl back around immediately. "What is so fucking funny?"

"You are," he says without missing a beat. "Did I disappoint you just now? Was I supposed to fall to my knees and beg for the sweet delights of your pussy?"

My cheeks flare with embarrassment. How can he see through me so easily, when I can't even begin to penetrate the stone walls he keeps around himself?

"Fuck off, asshole."

I keep my head high as I try to brush past him out of the study. But just when I get within reach, he grabs me and shoves me up into the wall. I gasp as his weight presses against my chest.

"You want me to protest?" he breathes sarcastically in my face. "To plead for a second chance? Try and convince you to keep fucking me because I just need you so very, very badly?"

If he was being an asshole before, he's being a monster now. Flaunting his power over me, mocking my insecurities.

And the worst part?

I still want him.

I don't even want to lean away. Before I can stop myself, I inhale a lungful of his confident scent, all man and musk. Pure fucking power.

He's got me pinned against the wall, and instead of fear, all I feel is white-hot desire. It's concentrated between my legs, but my whole body is aglow with it. I feel like a star burning in the night sky.

"I... n-no, that's not what... I never said that..."

"You said it with your eyes, *kukolka*. With that angry, accusing look you just threw me. You said it with your body as you turned your back on me in a huff. Am I reading all that right?"

"You don't know me," I snap, trying to push back with my body.

I realize almost immediately that that's not a good idea. All that does is get my nipples really hard, really fast. And it makes the growing moistness between my legs that much more difficult to ignore.

"I *do* know you, Willow. I know far, far more than you think I do."

"Get. Off. Me."

"Say please."

"I think I'll say, 'Fuck you' instead."

"It's like you want me to punish you," he muses. "Your body gives you away, darling. It shows me everything I need to know."

I shove him hard again. The only reason that it works this time is because he allows it. He releases me and steps back into the study, regarding me with a self-satisfied smirk.

"Fuck you." I sound like a broken record, but I'm too angry and flustered to come up with anything better.

"Did I hurt your feelings, little one?"

"Don't flatter yourself," I retort, but my voice is weak. I sound breathless and pathetic.

"Allow me to make it up to you."

"Believe me, that's not necessary," I hiss. "If anything, you can make it up to me by staying the fuck away."

“If you mean that, it can be easily arranged.” He taps his chin thoughtfully. “But somehow, I don’t think you do.”

“Christ. Honestly, you have the biggest ego of any man I’ve ever met.”

“But do you know the difference?” he asks, taking a step towards me. “Between me and the other men you’ve met?”

How I crave his heat. The weight of him against me. I’m so wet I’m actually nervous he can smell it on me.

“What’s the difference?” I ask, taking the bait despite my better instincts.

He leans in close to me, so close his lips brush against my ear as he says, “I have the goods to back it up.”

Before meeting Leo Solovev, I thought the term “weak in the knees” was just an expression. But now? Now, I understand how real the phenomenon is.

Because when he spews that kind of arrogant confidence, I can barely stand upright.

And just like always, he senses it. Sees it in me without even having to look.

“Have dinner with me tonight,” he says, straightening up. “And we’ll put this little incident behind us.”

“I don’t eat dinner,” I mumble stupidly.

He raises his eyebrows and immediately I want the ground to open up and swallow me. Why do I have to be so damn clumsy and awkward around him? Why can’t I be some lithe and graceful creature whose every move is an education in seduction?

Not that I want to seduce him, I tell myself. I just want him to want me so badly that it fucks with his head like he’s fucking with mine right now.

“That is, uh, what I mean is... I’m not hungry.”

“Dinner is eight hours from now,” he says. “Things might change between now and then, I’d imagine.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to invite someone else.”

He says it so casually that at first, I don’t see the threat. But as it settles, I realize exactly what he’s promising.

“I’ll have dinner with you,” I say. “But I’m coming for the food. Not for you.”

His mouth tilts up in an arrogant smirk. “As long as you come, *kukolka*.”

Dear Lord...

What have I gotten myself into?

LEO

When Willow meets me downstairs at precisely six o'clock, she takes one look at my suit and her eyes go wide with horror.

"Are we going somewhere?"

"Dinner."

"I... I thought we were eating here."

"Not tonight."

She looks down at herself. She's in dark washed jeans and a casual white t-shirt that falls off one shoulder. "I'm guessing it's a fancy place we're going?"

"Depends on your definition of fancy," I say with a shrug.

"Leo."

"Don't worry about it," I tell her. "Let's go."

She shakes her head. "I can't go to a nice restaurant in these clothes."

"I know."

I head out of the house and she's forced to follow me outside. "Leo, what does that mean? I can run up and change."

"Don't bother. We're late for the appointment as it is."

I get in the car, but she pauses outside the door. “Don’t you mean reservation?”

“Just get in the car, Willow.”

She does as she’s told, but she’s huffy about it. “You could have mentioned we were going somewhere upscale.”

“Must’ve slipped my mind.”

It’s surprising how upset she seems to be about this. It was a deliberate omission, of course, but it’s gotten more of a reaction than even I anticipated. She’s radiating nervous energy and fidgeting every few seconds. Her eyes travel everywhere but land on nothing.

“Something bothering you?” I ask innocently.

“I just don’t want to get gawked at like I’m an idiot walking into some snooty restaurant dressed like a bum.”

“You’re with me.”

She sighs. “I never know what you mean.”

“It means no one will dare to treat you badly.”

She frowns. “But is it sincere? Or are they just afraid?”

“Do you care about the difference?”

She thinks about that for a moment. “A little, maybe.”

“Then that’s your first problem,” I say. “You give a fuck what other people think.”

She sighs. “I just don’t want to look stupid.”

I look at her while she stares out the window. Her skin is pale, except for the flushed color around her cheeks. Her blue eyes set a striking contrast to the darkness of her hair.

She could be a model if she was more confident in her own skin. She has the kind of face you can’t look away from.

God knows I can't.

“What makes you think you'll look stupid?”

“I just... Let's just say high society is not for me.”

“What makes you say that?”

She opens her mouth and then closes it. When she does speak, her voice is soft. “Well, actually, Casey used to say that to me a lot. I guess it stuck.”

“Any particular reason?”

She shrugs. “After a while, everything about me seemed to piss him off. He didn't like how I sat, how I ate, how I talked to the people he introduced me to.”

It's easy enough logic to follow. Casey wanted Willow to be self-conscious. If she was constantly seeking his praise and approval, she wouldn't have time to realize how shitty things really were. And she wouldn't have the confidence to leave him and find anyone better.

The tactics of a coward.

I should have just fucking killed him.

“Casey was trying to keep you all to himself.”

She raises her eyes to mine. “You think that's why he did it?”

“Think about it.”

She goes silent, brooding. We don't speak until the car comes to a stop. She frowns, looking out the window.

“Are we meant to stop here? It's a clothing store I think...”

“We're going to get you dressed for dinner.”

Her eyes go wide, but she doesn't protest as I help her out of the car. When we approach, the doors are opened for us from the inside. We're greeted by a well-dressed older woman who introduces herself as Lois.

“Please feel free to look around, ma’am,” Lois tells Willow. “Our associates will be more than happy to assist you. We carry Gucci, Prada, Versace, and Monique Lhuillier.”

Willow looks a little overwhelmed as she turns on the spot. “I... I’m not sure where I would even start.”

“If you prefer, I could pick a few pieces for you and bring them into your private dressing room.”

Willow glances at me and I give her a subtle nod. “Sure,” she says, giving Lois an awkward smile. “That would be nice.”

We’re shown into a large rectangular room with a curtained partition that acts as a dressing area. There are sofas sprawling around the lushly carpeted room, centered on a coffee table bearing an array of macarons, hors d’oeuvres, and flutes of bubbling gold champagne.

“Is this for real?” Willow asks me in disbelief.

I take a seat on the sofa and grab a finger sandwich off the plate. “Tastes real to me. Take a breath and relax, Willow.”

“Isn’t the store supposed to be closed now?”

“Everything is open for us.”

“For you, you mean.”

I shrug. “I’ll ask you again: do you care about the difference?”

As I suspected, she can’t bring herself to sit and wait patiently. Just like silence, stillness makes her skin crawl. She paces around the room, marveling at the decadent chandelier hanging over us and the expertly-crafted wainscoting on the edges of the walls.

“This is crazy,” she muses out loud. “Do people really live like this?”

The curtains open and Lois emerges with two other employees towing a silver clothes rack on wheels. They push it into the room and place it in front of the sofa.

“I took the liberty of choosing a few pieces for you from all our different collections. I’m sure you’ll find something to wear tonight.”

Willow steps up to the rack and runs her fingers through the clothes. “Oh my. These are... incredible.”

I glance towards Lois and give her a curt nod. Without a word, she and her entire staff back out of the room to give us some privacy.

When we’re alone again, I get up and walk around the rack to where Willow is standing.

“Where do I even start?” she breathes.

In response, I reach for the edges of her t-shirt and start to pull it up.

She grabs my hand. “What are you doing?”

“Showing you where to start,” I rasp.

“I can undress myself—in the *dressing room*.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Seems like a waste of all this beautiful space.”

She glances around, noticing that we’re truly alone. There’s no one else in this part of the store.

The knot in her throat rides up and down as she swallows. “I’d prefer some privacy,” she grits uncomfortably.

“You want me to turn around?”

“A gentleman would.”

I snort. “What on earth gave you the impression that I was a gentleman?”

“Will you just look somewhere else, please?”

“I have seen you naked before, Willow. In case you forgot.”

“And in case *you* forgot, I said that was a mistake.”

“Ah, I see,” I say with an all-knowing smile. “You’re nervous.”

Annoyance ripples across her face. “I—”

“You’re worried about me staring at you in the cold light of day. You’re worried about what I’ll think.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what you think.”

“Then what’s stopping you?”

She stares at me for one fiery moment. Then she takes the bait.

With her glare as staunch as ever, she rips off her t-shirt and undoes her belt. She shimmyes her jeans down her hips and steps out of them.

When she’s standing in her bra and panties, she seems to realize just where her pride and stubbornness has landed her: right where I wanted her.

“You’re infuriating, you know that?” she hisses.

I say nothing as she snatches a dress from the rack. I’m not even sure she knows what she’s picked out. She just grabs the first thing she sees in an effort to cover herself up.

Except the dress she chose has a deep back and a single string holding it all together.

She’s only able to pull it up around her waist before she realizes she’s not going to get the bodice up long enough to tie it properly.

I can see the problem. So can she.

But she clenches her teeth and keeps going, determined not to ask for my help.

I watch her patiently for another minute, the dress slipping down around her waist repeatedly. It’s a fine show, but her stubbornness is also too damn funny to look away from.

“Oh, you know what: forget it,” she snaps. “This dress is not for—”

“Stop struggling and turn around,” I order her firmly.

She goes still when my hand touches her arm. I coax her around so that her back is to me and grab the strings.

It takes me a whole minute to pull the material over her chest and wrap the strings around her neck—but only because I’m too busy staring at the smooth skin of her back.

“There,” I say finally.

She turns to the many mirrors flanking the room on all sides and looks at herself.

The dress is like moonlight. The silver silk hugs her body and slips over her curves. The neckline is risqué without giving away too much, but the hemline whispers against the tops of her thighs like a hushed promise of more.

She nibbles at her bottom lip while I resist the urge to bite it for her. “That’s a lot of skin,” she comments.

“I’m not complaining,” I say. “But if you’d rather try on something else, go right ahead.”

She quickly tries on three more dresses, getting slightly better at hiding her anxiety with each one. It’s the same ritual every time: she strips to her underwear defiantly and hurries to pull on the next item as she blushes beneath my burning gaze.

The final item is a formal skirt and crop top combo.

“Can’t wear a bra with that one,” I remark.

She grimaces. “Wouldn’t you like that?”

“Take a look at the top and tell me I’m wrong.”

Frowning deeper, she flips the shirt over and sees that there’s a built-in bra, just like I thought. It doesn’t exactly brighten her disposition.

Glowering at me, she pops the hook of her bra and turns around so that she can pull it off. I don’t see her pink nipples, but I do see the curve of her breast from the side.

My cock gets hard immediately.

I can’t help but think about all the things I want to do to her. How sweet she will taste. How soft and warm she will feel.

Most of all...

How easily she will break.

She manages to get into the crop top, emphasis on the “crop.” It cuts off high enough that a tantalizing hint of underboob is left on display. And the scoop neckline leaves acres of skin for me to salivate over. It shimmers like champagne encrusted with diamonds.

I watch her step into the skirt like she’s slipping into another skin. It’s high-waisted, so it covers her belly button but still leaves a good few inches exposed.

Luckily for Willow, she’s got the perfect figure to pull it off.

Lucky for me, too.

My eyes rake over her appreciatively. Then I watch her face as she stares at her reflection in the mirror for a moment. Her fingers land on her exposed stomach, but there’s an undeniable awe in her eyes.

She sees what I see: fucking perfection.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

“Nothing... I just... I’ve always wanted to wear something like this. That’s a stupid thing to say, I guess, but it’s true.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“Well...” She shakes her head and her blush darkens. “Never mind.”

She tries to walk past me, but I refuse to get out of her way. “Willow.”

She sighs and stops. “Casey didn’t like me wearing crop tops,” she admits. “Nothing too sexy or risqué. He didn’t like when other men looked at me.”

“Then he was a fool,” I growl.

“I should never have brought it up.” She wrings her hands in front of her. “It’s fine. Can we go?”

“No. Shoes first.”

Another word to Lois, out in the front of the store, and a full selection of shoes is brought in for Willow to choose from. She ends up in a pair of black stilettos with a thin strap just under her toes and another wrapping around her ankle.

When the look is complete, she throws only a cursory glance towards the mirror. Like she isn't sure she wants to see herself anymore.

I want to kill Casey all over again. For hurting her. For making her doubt the reflection in the mirror.

She deserves far better.

But I swallow down the anger and focus. "Ready to go?"

She nods silently.

On my way out, I tap my black credit card against the machine. Easy as that, the shopping is done.

When we get into the vehicle again, she looks at me with a troubled expression on her face. "I didn't check how much any of these things cost," she tells me. "It must have been a few thousand dollars at least, right?"

"You let me worry about that."

The frown deepens. "I can't afford these clothes."

"Good thing I bought them."

"I shouldn't have let you."

I raise a brow. "It wasn't a question of you letting me do anything. I did what I wanted, *kukolka*. I always do."

She sighs and starts fidgeting again. Her awkwardness looks strange in the outfit. "I don't like being indebted to you," she blurts a moment later.

I smirk. "I'm getting you your divorce. The ship's already sailed on that one."

She frowns and seems to curl into herself. "That's what I'm afraid of."



We arrive at the restaurant fifteen minutes later.

There's a line of hopefuls standing on the sidewalk outside, waiting for their own reservation or praying one opens up. Willow looks at them and then down at herself.

"Stay here." I get out of the car and walk around to her side. When I open the door, she glances down at herself again. No doubt worried she'll flash the world or faceplant as she tries to climb out of the car.

I offer her my hand. And, despite her hesitation, she takes it.

We walk in together, the crowd outside parting for us because they sense what would happen if they dared linger in my way. The maître d' jumps into action when we walk through the door and shows us to a table in the middle of the restaurant.

As we walk, the other diners glance at Willow. I see the look in their eyes: first, the gleam of thrill at seeing someone beautiful. Almost otherworldly.

Then their gazes find me and they shrink. Instinctively, they recognize power, even if they've never seen it before.

No one dares look at Willow a second time, though I can tell they want to. It takes me a minute to understand why that is. And when I do, I'm not sure what to make of it.

We look like we belong together.

She looks like the kind of woman a man like me would have on his arm.

If only she believed that herself.

The moment we're seated, she picks up the menu and hides her face behind it. When she realizes that the server and I are waiting on her, she jolts and knocks the water glass from the side of her table.

Quick as a snake, my hand lashes out to catch it before it can hit the ground. I set the glass back in place. Willow's face burns bright red.

“Oh God,” she gasps to the waiter. “I’m so sorry, I wasn’t concentrating...”

“That’s quite alright, ma’am,” he says. “Are you ready to order?”

“Um, I don’t know... everything looks great.” She gives me a glance. “Do you know what you’re ordering?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” she says, growing more and more anxious as the waiter hovers over us. “Maybe you should order for me?”

I nod and turn to the waiter. “Chef’s special, Alberto.”

“Very good, sir,” he says. “And we have a bottle of the Screaming Eagle chilled for you as well.”

“Bring it.”

He gives me a low bow and retreats. Willow couldn’t look any more relieved that he’s gone. She’s got her elbows on the table and her hands drawn up to her face, like she’s trying to hide behind them.

“Something wrong?” I ask.

She lets out a long exhale. “I feel like an idiot. Just like I said I would.”

“Why?”

“Because I clearly don’t belong here.”

“Says who?”

She tips her head to a table across the room. “Says that woman over there who’s looking at me like I just spit in her soup. And the man in the corner. And the server, and the maître d’, and everyone else here.”

“They’re just admiring your outfit. Wishing they could pull it off the way you are.”

“Which I will pay you back for, by the way,” she adds, a little snap in her tone.

I sigh. “If you insist.”

“How much did it cost, shoes and all?”

“Twelve thousand three hundred and forty-three dollars.”

Her jaw drops. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Well... fuck me.”

“Right here?”

She stares at me for a moment. Then her face breaks down into a smile. Finally, she lets herself laugh. It doesn't ease all of her tension, but some of it dissipates.

Progress. One small step at a time.

WILLOW

“Can I ask you a question, Leo?”

He nods. “You can ask anything. There’s no guarantee I’ll answer.”

“Believe me, I’m aware.” I roll my eyes. “I just wonder... Why did you bring me here?”

I’m not expecting a response. It’s the type of question he’s swatted away countless times since he crashed into my life.

But I’m sick of the pretenses, of the games, the secrets. Seeing myself in this tiny outfit—and perhaps more importantly, seeing the way Leo looked at me in it—gave me a much-needed boost in confidence.

But ever since we arrived at the restaurant, that glow has been ebbing away bit by bit. I want to talk to Leo before it disappears completely.

Leo, however, isn’t interested. “I needed to eat and restaurants make food,” he replies. “I figured you needed to eat, too.”

“But why is all of this necessary?” I ask, gesturing to the heavy tablecloths, the sleek modern chairs, the dim romantic lighting. “Everyone eats. Not everyone eats like *this*.”

“Tell me something, Willow: have you ever just gone out and enjoyed yourself?” he asks. “Without the shadow of your husband hanging over you?”

Instinctively, I look around. Maybe I'm looking for Casey. Maybe I'm just looking for the ghosts of my own insecurities lingering in the corners of my eyes. Whatever the case, I don't find either. Just a bunch of patrons who aren't paying me a single bit of attention.

Not so much as a glance in my direction—yet I feel as though I'm being judged and found wanting.

It has nothing to do with them.

It has everything to do with me.

It has to do with the fear that stole over me any time I stepped out of the house over the last few years. Because no matter what I did or where I went, Casey *knew*. He was always watching, and if he didn't like something, he never failed to let me know.

I may have felt like a hostage when Leo locked me away, but Casey has been holding me hostage for years. I'm only now starting to see it.

Idiot. Naïve fucking idiot.

"I... I'm not used to this," I admit.

"Not used to what, exactly?"

"To not being... criticized. Belittled at every turn.."

"He's not here to criticize you anymore."

The way he says that, through gritted teeth, makes me wonder if he wishes Casey wasn't anywhere anymore. I'd had to ask Leo not to kill him, after all. God only knows what would've happened if I hadn't begged for that mercy.

"*You're* here, though."

"Your point?"

"There's something about the way you look at me." I can feel my last scrap of confidence slipping away, as flimsy as the shirt I'm wearing. "It's like you're watching me all the time. Observing me."

He leans forward, eyes narrowed. "Does that make you nervous?"

“Wouldn’t it make you nervous?” I stop short. “Oh wait, that’s right: you don’t care what other people think about you.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Did you care what your brother thought of you?” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

The spark in Leo’s eyes snuffs out at once. He’s quiet for a long time, and I wonder if I’ve ruined dinner before our food could even be served.

“He was the exception,” Leo finally says in a near-whisper.

I say nothing at first. Guilt is clawing at my chest. It was a low blow, cruel and unnecessary, and the silence that follows is worse than any insult Leo could hurl at me. I find myself fumbling to fill the quiet with something less cringe-inducing than my own shitty behavior.

“I used to wish for a sibling,” I confess. “When I was younger. Up until I turned twelve and I realized it just wasn’t going to happen no matter how much I wished for it.” He doesn’t say anything, so I breeze on through. “Even then, my parents didn’t tell me that they couldn’t have a child. That conceiving a baby of their own just wasn’t in the cards for them. Which is how they got me in the first place, obviously.” I take a deep breath. “Maybe I should have seen it sooner. I don’t really look like either one of them.”

My dad is tall and gangly like clay stretched too far. Everything about him is pale, subdued—his pallor, his light brown beard. I always assumed I took after my mom. Blue eyes are the only trait we share, though hers are pale. Like a robin’s egg.

“They wanted you to feel like you truly belonged to them,” Leo says without looking at me.

I look down at my gold-plated cutlery. The image of my parents goes fuzzy and falls away like sand. “I bet they regret their decision.”

“Which decision is that?”

“To adopt me.”

The thought has been rattling around in my brain for years now. But it's the first time I've said it out loud.

"Do you really believe that?" Leo says. He's looking at me finally, dark eyes piercing and unwavering.

I shrug, trying to pass off emotion for nonchalance. "Well, I basically turned on them. And for what? My adoption was closed, anyhow. It's not like they had any information to give me about my birth parents. They did everything they could to give me the best life possible. Dad took a second job when I was ten because I said I wanted to learn piano. Each class was twenty dollars a pop—there was this specific instructor all my friends were going to, he had a music degree from Julliard and everything. I went for almost a year before I quit cold turkey. And Dad never said a thing about it. Just smiled, nodded, said, 'Whatever you want, dear.' Mom was upset, but he just said that I was busy finding my passion in life, and I shouldn't be scared to try new things. What is that if not love?"

Leo watches me silently, drinking in every word I'm saying. When he looks at me like that, I just keep talking. Like he's put some sort of spell on me to coax never-before-seen truths from my lips.

"I was always doing awful things like that, too. I tried new hobbies all the time, but none of them lasted more than a few months.. I was too disorganized, too careless, too focused on the wrong stuff."

I lean back, trying to stop the words from tumbling out. But he keeps sitting there silently, tugging stories out of me with God-only-knows what power.

"I really wanted a dog," I continue. "I had this dream of a Labrador puppy running around in the backyard with me. Usually, I could go to my dad and plead with him and I'd get my way. But this time, Mom put her foot down and he sided with her. She said that we didn't have a house big enough for a dog. Plus the expense. But what she really meant is that she knew I'd lose interest in the dog after a year or two. Then they'd be stuck with an animal to care for."

"You took that as a personal insult."

“Extremely personal,” I agree, frustrated with my younger self in every single one of those memories. “I didn’t talk to her for a month over that. God, I was such a brat.”

Even before I completely burned the bridge to the only people who ever cared about me, I was chipping away at it for years. Constantly fighting back against the only ones who ever truly loved me.

“It certainly seems that way,” Leo says.

I drop my hands and glare at him. “Seriously?”

He shrugs. “What did you want me to say? That you weren’t being a brat?”

“Something comforting, maybe,” I suggest.

He smirks. “You came to the wrong man for that.”

“Gee, lucky me.”

“I thought you were telling me a story, not looking for comfort.”

“I wasn’t looking for—it’s just what a normal person would do.”

He looks supremely unconcerned by that assessment. “Guess I’m not normal then.”

I almost smile. Leo Solovev is anything but normal. “You really mean it, don’t you?”

“What?”

“You genuinely don’t care what people think of you. I mean, tons of people say that. But you mean it.”

He nods once. “I mean it.”

I draw on my last reserves of confidence. “Not even me?”

His smile turns inscrutable. “Willow, you don’t know me well enough to form a real opinion either way. So, no. Your opinion doesn’t matter to me any more than anyone else’s.”

I'm not sure why, but his words sting. "Well, you seem to think you know me pretty well," I snap.

"Better than you could ever imagine."

"How is that possible?"

"I'm an observer."

"And you don't think I am?"

He shakes his head. "You talk too much to pay close attention."

Ouch. But even I can acknowledge he's right about that. I reach for my glass of water just to stop myself from talking.

"I doubt you can avoid talking all night by stuffing your mouth with something or the other," Leo remarks as I take a sip.

"I can always try," I mumble.

Thankfully, the waiter shows up with fresh bread rolls and the bottle of wine Leo ordered. Like everything else, it looks expensive.

When the waiter retreats, I grab a bread roll and stuff it in my mouth. Leo chuckles.

"Shut up," I scowl, taking a bite. When the taste and texture hit my tongue, I gasp, "Oh, holy shit."

"Good?"

"My mom used to make bread like this," I say after I've swallowed my first mouthful. "It was the most delicious thing in the world. I used to eat it plain for meals. Sorry—I'm talking a lot about my parents."

"All I'm really hearing is that you miss them."

Immediately, unshed tears burn the backs of my eyes. Because of course he's right. I miss them terribly.

But they warned me I was making a mistake, and I was cruel to their faces. Now their worst fears have come true, and I no longer deserve their help.

Change the topic, I tell myself. Change the topic before you lose it.

“Your childhood was probably very different than mine, huh?”

“You could say that.”

And that’s all he says. Why can’t he ramble on and on like me for once? Just give me *something*—some scrap of humanity. Something to let me know that he feels things the same as I do.

I roll my eyes. “You know, this whole ‘broody mystery man’ thing is severely overrated.”

He smirks. “You wouldn’t understand my childhood.”

“So then explain it to me. Make me understand.”

“Why do you care?”

“Well, for starters, because I’m currently living in your home and wearing clothes that you’ve bought for me.” I shrug. “It feels like I should know more about you.”

“Is that a yes to my proposal?” he asks.

I narrow my eyes at him. “‘Proposal’ is a funny choice of words. I don’t remember you proposing jack shit. Felt more like an order.”

“Would it make a difference if I got down on one knee and asked?” he drawls.

“No,” I snap. Though I can’t really imagine Leo getting on one knee for anybody, ever.

He laughs and leans back in his seat. “I didn’t think so.”

“You’re still serious about this whole marriage thing?”

“Deadly serious.”

“Why?”

I’d be okay with his avoidance and silence if he answered this one question. But he leans back comfortably in his chair and smirks at me instead. “I have

my reasons.”

I throw my hands up. “I don’t understand you.”

“Let me offer you a suggestion: stop trying.”

I’m about to really make a fool of myself in this fancy restaurant and throw a roll at his head when we’re interrupted by the entrée. Leo ordered me crab and shrimp roulade drenched in a sweet, spicy sauce that looks like liquid gold.

The first bite is like a slap of flavor to the face. “Ohmygod, that’s good.”

“Eat up,” he advises. “You’ve been neglecting your meals lately.”

I wrinkle my nose. “You keep tabs on my meals? Do the maids send you before-and-after pictures or something?”

“Don’t look so surprised, *kukolka*. I keep tabs on everything.”

“I don’t know whether to feel flattered or extremely creeped out.”

“Stop talking. Eat.”

Talking about neglecting meals, Leo neglects his. He doesn’t touch his place or say a word. He just sits there and watches me. The few times I dare to meet his gaze, I could swear I see pain underneath the impenetrable wall of his face.

At least, I think there is.

There has to be, right? No one loses a family member without experiencing some sense of trauma. And his brother was so young. The death was unexpected, tragic. It thrust Leo into a role he wasn’t expecting.

If he wasn’t holding me captive, I’d almost feel bad for him.

“I hope you’re not getting confused about what I want,” I blurt out, putting down my fork.

He raises his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“Just because I’m wearing the dress you bought me and accepting your help in my divorce and having a somewhat normal conversation with you... it doesn’t mean I don’t resent being kept in your home against my will.”

“You forgot about fucking me,” he says. “You’re wearing the dress I bought, accepting my help, having a normal conversation with me, and occasionally fucking me. So to clarify, was that against your will?”

I look down immediately, blushing like a fool and unable to meet his eyes. “Will you keep your voice down?” I hiss. “The waiter just passed by.”

He smiles, looking perfectly at ease. “And it upsets you that the waiter might know you’re fucking me?”

“Leo!”

He shrugs. “If you didn’t want me to get the wrong impression, maybe you shouldn’t have seduced me last night.”

I seduced him. For some reason, the phrasing makes me laugh. Probably because Leo seems uneducable. I can’t imagine anyone having that power.

I open my mouth and close it a couple of times before I figure out what I want to say. “First of all, I’m not the seducer in this equation.”

He looks mockingly innocent. “What do you mean?”

“Please! You know exactly what you’re doing with me.”

“Does that mean we’ll be going to bed again tonight?”

“I don’t make the same mistake twice.”

“So you’ve said. But you’re making a glaring oversight.”

“Which is?”

“I’m not Casey.”

“What’s the difference? You’re the same type of man.”

His eyes darken, but his smile doesn’t waver. It just grows cold and threatening.

I find myself shivering, missing the warmth of his genuine amusement. I want to apologize, to make things right for being casually cruel once again.

But something tells me if I back down now, I'll be backing down for the rest of my life with Leo. Or for however long I'm with him.

Hopefully, those aren't the same thing.

"Let's be clear about one thing, little girl: I'm nothing like Casey," he snarls venomously. He leans forward, looming over me. "No matter how bad, how terrible, how vile you think your ex-husband is... remember that I am much, much worse."

The silence that follows is frigid.

If another man had said those things, I might have laughed in his face. But this man is different. He's something otherworldly, unlike anything else I've ever encountered.

I look down at my plate, because really, what can I say back? *I don't believe you?* He'll see the lie in my eyes. He'll catch me out like he has in the past.

"Eat," he says.

"You know what? Suddenly, I'm not so hungry."

"Very well," he says with a shrug. "Then you can watch me eat."

He's not kidding. He eats without a care in the world, even as I sit there salivating over the amazing dinner. Five minutes pass and I bite my tongue to keep the words from spilling out.

"Just eat, Willow," he sighs at last.

"No."

"Are you trying to prove a point?"

"Maybe."

He rolls his eyes. "Then you're being childish."

"*I'm* being childish?"

“That’s what I said, yes.”

“I’m being childish for refusing to let you boss me around?”

“Maturity is knowing when to give up.”

“You’re an asshole,” I say with finality, leaping to my feet so fast that the chair topples from behind me. “How’s that for maturity?”

The entire restaurant turns to us. Heat scorches my cheeks when I realize the spectacle I’ve just made of myself.

“Do you want to sit back down again?” he asks patiently, ignoring all the gawking bystanders.

“No!”

He’s right: I am being childish. But I’m too far down this path to lose face now. So, because giving up is not an option anymore—and because I have to make him respect me if I’m ever going to get out of this shit alive—I turn and run.

I don’t really know where I’m going, but I see glass doors and I head straight for them. I almost collide with a waiter who looks alarmed as he lunges out of my way.

“Ma’am, can I—”

“Is this the exit?”

“It leads to the gardens, ma’am.”

“Good enough.” I rush outside.

The cold air hits me from every angle. It’s uncomfortable, but not enough to force me back inside to break bread with the sadistic asshole who turned my life on its head.

A little pond shimmers in the near distance, complete with koi fish lapping at the surface and an ornate bridge arching over the waters.

I step onto the bridge and look back in the direction I came from. From this side of the water, the restaurant looks like a jewel in the night. It’s a beautiful,

arcing building, lit up so bright that it hurts my eyes to look directly at it for too long.

I try to fight it, but a single tear snakes its way free and runs down my cheek. I look down at the shimmering reflection of the lights on the pond's surface. When the tear hits, it sends a subtle ripple through, making the lights dance.

How have I ended up here? At every turn in my life, I've made mistakes. Chosen wrong. I feel like it's cost me so much, time and time again.

But this is the worst cost yet.

"Feel better?"

"Ah!" I jump nearly out of my skin as Leo joins me on the bridge. "Where the hell did you come from?"

He shrugs. "I'm never far from you, Willow. You weren't paying attention. That's what happens when you're in your own head."

Is that what I'm doing? Is that what I've been doing for the last however-many years?

Maybe it's easier to hide in your dreams than it is to face an ugly reality.

I narrow my eyes. Even in the shadows, his silhouette is gorgeous and stark. "I want to be alone," I inform him.

"We don't all get what we want, do we?"

"Men like you usually do," I mutter.

"Not necessarily."

I catch the mysterious, far-off look in his eyes. "Are you thinking about your brother?"

"Actually, I was thinking that your tits look flawless in that top."

"Jesus," I grumble, turning from him as my cheeks flare red. "Some things never change."

He moves closer. His hand falls against my hip. His fingers are warm and I move into him instinctively. “My thoughts are not your concern, Willow,” he whispers in my ear. “All you need to know is that I’m powerful enough to protect you.”

“I don’t need protection.”

He leans in a little. “Don’t you?”

I hold my breath because I’m almost certain he’s going to kiss me. But at the last moment, he pulls away and the cold air rushes around me once more.

Hot and cold, fire and ice—it’s always one extreme or the other with Leo. There is no middle ground. No safe haven.

It’s heaven or hell. No purgatory in between.

“Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back inside, where do you think?” he asks. “We haven’t even gotten to the main course yet.”

WILLOW

“Where are we going?”

Instead of taking me back inside, Leo is leading me up a narrow staircase that wraps around the side of the restaurant.

“Stop asking questions.”

I bite my tongue and follow him up the stairs. The landing opens to a set of double glass doors, behind which is a private room. Its walls are made of glass and it overlooks the pond and the surrounding garden.

There’s a gorgeously laid table in the center of the room, as well as a trolley on the side with several silver cloches.

“We’re moving our dinner up here,” Leo informs me. “Since you can’t be counted on to behave in public.”

I’m slightly embarrassed, but more than anything, I’m relieved. I really didn’t want to have to go back into that restaurant and pretend like everyone wasn’t watching me, wondering what made me fly off the handle.

I sit down just as waiters appear out of the shadows to put our next course on the table.

It’s a medallion of lobster in a thick garlic butter sauce. There’s crostini on the side and a generous serving of caviar resting right on top of the lobster.

“Are you going to turn down this plate, too?” Leo asks with a glint in his eyes.

I pick up my knife and fork. “You’re lucky I’m hungry.”

“All the hysterics must have worked up an appetite.”

I ignore him and take a bite of the lobster. It disintegrates on my tongue and I moan so loudly that Leo raises an eyebrow.

“Careful—the waiters might think you’re starting to like me.”

“I thought you don’t care what people think?”

“I don’t. But you do.”

It feels like an insult the way he says it. I’m sure that’s not an accident.

The silence stretches on as we eat. Leo seems perfectly comfortable in it. What did he say earlier? *If you sit long enough in the silence, you might find answers.*

But the more I sit in it, the more I look at him, the more uncertain I become.

Leo is a contradiction wrapped inside of an enigma. He is hot and then cold. My abductor and protector. Still, I get the feeling there’s a piece of the puzzle I don’t have. A key that would make sense of everything.

But no matter how hard I try to figure him out, his personality just recedes further into the murky darkness.

I chew on the lobster as I ponder. The brine of the sauce reminds me of the trout Dad used to bring home after his fishing trips when I was little. I’d sit next to him while he cleaned the fish, squirming the entire time.

“Do you fish?” I ask suddenly.

“Do I look like the kind of man who fishes?”

The thought of Leo knee-deep in a river, fly-fishing with waders and a bib on, is ridiculous enough to make me laugh out loud.

“I guess not.”

He sets his fork down, crosses his arms, and leans forward. “My turn. Do you touch yourself, Willow?”

My cheeks heat instantly. “Excuse me?”

He blinks, completely unfazed. “I asked if you touch yourself. Or do you just wait for me to do it for you?”

I drop my silverware on the table with a clatter. “That’s a pretty rude fucking question to ask at dinner.”

“It’s not really a question. I already know the answer.”

“Oh yeah? What answer is that?”

“That you’ve been wet for me since the moment we met.”

“Fuck you,” I snap, jaw clenched tight. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“As I’ve told you before, Willow, I know *everything* about you. Tell me something: if I walked over to you and ran my hand up your skirt, what would I find between your legs?”

I squeeze my thighs together, realizing that the very promise of that threat has made his statement come true. “You wouldn’t—”

“You should know better by now.”

“Stay on your side of the table.” I force the words out through gritted teeth. My entire body is tense.

He shakes his head slowly, fluidly. “I don’t make promises I can’t keep.”

“Leo...” I say in a warning tone. But it just comes out sounding scared.

His voice deepens into a delicious, husky rasp. “Stand up.”

I tense, wondering how things would go if I refuse him. I decide to see for myself.

“No.”

He shakes his head sadly. “Do you really think I’m the type of man who’ll take no for an answer? Stand up, Willow. I won’t ask again.”

Before I realize what’s happening, I find myself getting to my feet.

He nods his approval. “Come and stand in front of me.”

I do as he says, distracted only by the way my insides are dancing around with anticipation. His eyes trail up and down my body.

“Remove your clothes.”

For the first time since we sat down, I remember our surroundings. I look around nervously at the glass walls. “People will see.”

“What people?” he asks.

“The waiters—”

“Won’t come until they’re called. They know their place.”

“Leo.”

“Take off the top first,” he says in a tone that suggests he’s about to rip it off.

Trembling, I reach to the side and undo the zip first. When my breasts spill loose, his eyes go straight for them. For a long time, he just watches me.

“Now turn around and take off your skirt.”

Numbly, slowly, I turn and unzip the skirt. It takes a bit of effort to get the clingy, unforgiving fabric around my hips. Then I have to bend to get the rest of it off me.

Nerves zip up and down my belly, as I realize how right he was: I *am* turned on. Standing naked in front of him in nothing but a pair of too-tall heels, I’m more alive than I’ve ever been. So much so that I can barely think straight.

“Face me.”

I reach nervously for my shoes. “The heels...?”

“Leave them.”

Without ever taking his eyes off mine, Leo reaches between his legs and frees his erection from his suit pants. It springs up into his hand, hard and thick and throbbing. I lick my lips and spread my stance unconsciously, automatically.

He short-circuits my brain. My thoughts melt, my skin tingles, and the only thing I can think about is how incomplete I am without him—without *that*—on top of me, inside of me, consuming me.

He starts to slowly stroke his own cock. “You never answered my question, *kukolka*,” he murmurs. “Do you touch yourself?”

His stare says that lying is not an option. I wet my lips again and croak in a hoarse voice, “Sometimes.”

“Show me.”

My fingers feel like they don’t belong to me as I slowly, slowly reach down to touch the wetness between my legs. Leo keeps stroking himself as he watches.

My eyes flutter closed when I brush a fingertip over my aching clit. I have to plant my other hand on the tabletop so I don’t fall down as a wave of hot weakness floods through me.

“You’re such a good girl when you listen, Willow,” Leo remarks.

I shiver, just like I always do when he says things like that. I can hate him by day. Despise him, loathe him, wish he’d never been born or at least never defiled my life the way that he has.

But when night falls and his voice deepens and he calls me his *kukolka*, his good girl?

I’m putty in his hands.

“Come here now,” he orders.

I step towards him and put one knee on each side of his lap. He lines himself up with my entrance.

Then, with one hand on my hip, he coaxes me down to fill myself with his massive cock.

The first few inches make me drool. My vision is hazy and indistinct. I'm stretching, opening, submitting all of me to him. All it does is increase my burning need, though. I want more, I want all of it, I want—

"I can stop."

He freezes halfway inside me. His eyes dance with that infuriating, arrogant smirk.

The bastard.

He's testing me.

A stronger woman might have flipped the tables and tested his resolve. But I'm too weak with need. Too eager for the feel of him inside me again.

"Don't stop," I gasp.

He reaches up pulls on my hair like he's tugging on reins. My back arches, baring my breasts to the ceiling.

"I can't hear you."

"Don't stop," I say again. "Please don't fucking stop."

Leo nods and smirks. "You're going to be a good little wife, Willow."

Then he pulls me down the rest of the way.

I splutter and gasp. Every nerve ending is on fire as he pushes into me in smooth, slow strokes. I bounce on him, grinding our hips together so every part of me can feel every part of him, and it's fucking glorious.

My riding gets faster and faster. I'm barely aware of what I'm doing, of my part in all this. All I can feel is *him*—and my body knows what to do with that even if my brain doesn't.

Leo's thumb swipes over my clit and that's all it takes to send me over the edge. I come hard, clawing at his shoulders and burying my forehead against his chest.

Before the orgasm is finished having its way with me, Leo stands and sweeps everything off the table with one arm, using the other to keep me pinned to

him. Plates and cutlery and cups all hit the floor and roll in every direction.

He sets me down and presses a hand into my chest so I lie back on the table. I hook my heels behind his low back as he starts to drive into me again. The table shakes with each savage thrust. The sound of squeaking screws punctures my never-ending moan.

I'm going to come apart at the seams. Sure enough, four or five strokes later, I'm crying out again. Leo keeps his hand tight on my throat as I choke out his name like a prayer.

But just like the first orgasm, he doesn't let me finish this one before he's moving again. He picks me up and shoves me to my knees. I gasp in shock, but I don't have time to process what's happening before his cock is in my mouth.

I taste myself on it. My body knows what to do, even now, so I find myself taking in all of him.

My pussy trembles, but it's satisfied now. The pleasure now will be watching Leo finish. Knowing I gave that to him.

I look up at Leo and watch his face as he fucks my mouth. His expression is tense, fraught. It's more emotion than he usually shows. When his eyes roll back in their sockets, I know he's about to come.

A second later, I feel his warm seed shoot down the back of my throat. And I take it all, swallowing every last drop.

The moment he finishes, he pulls out, shakes himself off, and zips up.

I stay right there on my knees. Naked and trembling, wondering who I am.

And what I want.

LEO

I'm immersed in my work when I hear her voice.

"Leo?" she calls from the opposite side of the door, followed by a tremulous knock.

My cock pricks up just a little. "Come in."

She walks in, dressed in a stunning black and white suit. I'm glad to see she's finally making use of the clothes I stocked in her wardrobe.

The pants are black, fitted at the top and lightly flared at the bottom. The coat she's wearing is perfectly tailored to her figure, and the skintight white shirt underneath accentuates her breasts without giving much away. Her hair is pulled into a sleek, sideswept bun.

She looks like she's ready for war.

But the moment my eyes land on her face, that commanding presence wanes. Beneath the subtle ferocity of her makeup, she looks pale. Nervous.

"Nice outfit."

"It doesn't suit me." She fidgets in the doorway.

"Something bothering you?"

"I just... this is all happening really fast," she says. "I discussed the divorce with Jessica only a few days ago. Then I find out that not only have papers

been served, but I'm going into some law firm today to hash out details with Casey and his lawyer."

"I did tell you she was good."

"Is that it?" she asks shrewdly, moving closer to me. "Is Jessica really that good? Or did you... make this happen?"

"Ask me what you want to ask me, Willow. Don't dance around it."

She swallows, straightens up tall, and says, "I'm asking if you threatened Casey into this."

"That's better." I shrug. "Our last encounter was fairly threatening, if you recall. I wouldn't blame him for changing his mind on the topic."

She bites her lower lip, a nervous habit she has that I find very dangerous. She's practically begging to be fucked.

"I... You... What do I even say to him?"

"Fuck you' seems like a good start."

"I'm being serious, Leo."

"So am I."

"After what happened at our—at *his* house... after the fight and what you did, he's going to think we're sleeping together."

I move in closer and she backs up. I take another step to make up the distance.

In this little dance, I'm the leader.

"We *are* sleeping together," I remind her.

Her expression twists. It's clear she's been grappling with the relationship limbo we're in.

She wants me. And that simple little fact terrifies her.

"He doesn't know that, though," she protests.

I push her against the wall. She gasps as I press my chest against hers. “Trust me: he knows.”

She stares up at me. “How would he know?”

I raise my eyebrows. “How do you think?”

“You didn’t!” she says. “You told him?”

I’m fully erect now. Fueled by her pouty face and sexy fucking suit. I’ve never appreciated women’s fashion so much. But every stitch of this one is designed to make Willow radiate an intensity that speaks to me.

“You look good in this.” I trace the curve of her hip, stroking the fabric.

“Nice subject change.” She pushes feebly at my chest. “I have to go. Jessica’s outside waiting for me.”

“Let her fucking wait. I need to make sure you’re presentable.”

“How am I not presentable?” She tries to look down at herself, but I grab her chin and lift her eyes to mine.

“You’ve forgotten perfume. But don’t worry, I’ll take care of it”

“Leo—”

I press my hips into hers. “You need to walk in there smelling like another man.”

Despite her weak protests, her eyes flutter. The desire in them sets me on fire. I don’t know what it is about this woman, but no matter how many times I fuck her, my hunger for more never fades.

Neither does hers, apparently.

I push the coat off her shoulders and gaze down at her skin-tight white blouse. Her tits are poking through the thin fabric.

I brush my fingers over her hard nipples and she tenses. “Still haven’t gotten enough, have you, *kukolka*?”

She tries to move past me, but I pin her against the wall and run my finger over her bottom lip. “I’ll try not to smudge your lipstick.”

I push her down onto her knees. She goes willingly.

She unzips me herself and pulls out my cock with trembling fingers. Her small hand wraps around me and starts pumping slowly. After a few pumps, she sticks my tip into her mouth and sucks slowly.

I let her control the pace. Even though I’m tempted to fuck her face like the last time, there’s a unique intensity in the waiting game. The anticipation is fucking intoxicating.

Willow has a practiced tongue, and after a few breaths of hesitation, she devours my cock like she’s starving for it.

I watch her head bob back and forth while I grit my teeth and fight back the desire to explode. When I can’t take it anymore, I grab her hair and pull her to her feet. I move her over to my desk, grab her hips and lift her onto the table.

Her ass lands right on top of the plan to take down the Mikhailov Bratva. There’s something almost poetic about that.

I unzip her pants and peel them off her. Shoving her lace panties aside, I push my finger inside her. Her hands flutter on my shoulders and her lip shakes.

When she’s trembling all over, on the verge of falling apart, I take my fingers out and push my cock inside.

I give her three slow, easy strokes to get used to the size of me.

Then I start to take what I want.

I fuck her furiously. She likes it hard—I knew that the night we met. She’s never more turned on than when I’m bossing her around. During sex, anyway. The rest of the time, she’s a pain in the ass about it.

I wrap my hand around her throat. Gentle enough not to strangle her, but still hard enough to give the fucking an added layer of intensity.

She cries out when she gets close to coming and claws at me. Her legs tighten around my back as her hair comes loose from its elegant bun and delicious little gasps pour from her lips.

She's falling apart both inside and out. Can't take much more of this—and neither can I. When she throws her head back in orgasm, I let myself go, too.

When I pull out, I see my mark dripping out of her. She reaches for a tissue, but I stop her.

“No.”

She freezes, her hand poised over the tissue box. “What?”

“I said don't. Put your pants back on.”

She looks shocked by the suggestion. “I... I'll make a mess...”

“I don't give a fuck.”

“The suit—”

“I'll buy you another one.”

Her fingers tremble over the tissue, but I hold her gaze.

“If you clean yourself up, we'll have to start all over.”

For a second, I can't tell if she wants that punishment or not. But then, with a resigned sigh, she drops her hand and pulls up her pants.

I smirk. She'll divorce her motherfucker of a husband while I'm dripping out of her.

Fucking beautiful.

“Are you two done in here?” Jessica asks, a hand held up in front of her eyes.

“Oh my God!” Willow gasps in horror. “Was that door open the whole time?”

“Why didn't you say anything?”

“Trust me, dear: I’ve seen far worse in my line of work.” She suppresses a laugh. “Anyway, now that you’ve had a proper send-off, let’s get going.”

With her cheeks lit up like a wildfire, Willow storms out of my office without looking at me.

Jessica lingers in the doorway and arches a perfectly shaped eyebrow at me.

“Had fun?”

I throw her a satisfied smile. “Go do your job.”

She turns to follow Willow.

“Oh, and Jessica?”

“Yes?”

“Failure is not an option.”

She gives me a curt nod. “Understood.”



A few minutes after Jessica is gone, Jax and Gaiman waltz into the office.

It’s clear that they heard most of what transpired, too. Gaiman looks stony-faced and uncomfortable. Jax, on the other hand, is wearing a dopey smile on his face.

“That was quite the show,” he says, slapping me on the back. “I’m proud of you, buddy.”

“You must not be used to a woman’s genuine pleasure in bed,” Gaiman says.

“Please—the women I fuck come twice as loudly,” Jax argues.

“That says more about the type of woman willing to go to bed with you than it does about the powers of your dick, *sobrat*.”

“Wanna bet?”

I narrow my eyes. “Sure. You still owe me five big ones from the last bet you lost. Or was it ten?”

His expression drops. “Damn it. You remembered.”

“I never forget.”

“You already have enough money,” he whines.

“Do I seem like the kind of man who settles for enough?” I laugh. “I’ll accept payment by tomorrow. Cash only.”

“You’re a ruthless bastard, Leo Solovev.”

“Now there’s something *you* should never forget.”

Gaiman allows himself a tiny smile before turning his attention to the plans laid out on my table. One corner of which is deliciously wrinkled. If Gaiman notices, he doesn’t say anything.

“Did you hear back from the teams?” he asks.

I swallow back my annoyance at the botched first attempt for the second site.

“I did. Team one was successful. The second one... not so much.”

“Silver Star isn’t ready yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Wait.” Jax points at the wrinkled plans. “Did you fuck her on the takedown plans?”

I send Jax a pointed glare. “Priorities.”

“Trust me, my priorities are in order,” he guffaws.

“Can we get to business, please?” Gaiman asks in a huff.

“Gaiman, *priorities*,” Jax scolds in a fumbled impersonation of my voice.

“Jesus,” Gaiman growls. “Some days, I swear I could put a bullet in your head and feel no remorse.”

Jax is about to make another quip when I silence both of them. “Enough. We

have shit to get done. The failure of the second team means I have to delay my plans.”

“Great! Fuck the bombs!” Jax crows, cracking his knuckles. “So we get to go in and break some skulls ourselves?”

“Not a chance, my friend. The plan remains the plan. It will just take a little longer than anticipated.”

“I hate fighting shadow wars,” he groans.

“Just wait, then,” I say. “When those bombs go off, we’ll have twin torches burning over the city. There won’t be any shadows left.”

He grins viciously and bounces on the balls of his feet. “I’m counting on it.”

Gaiman shoves him away from the desk. “Are you so daft that you think an all-out war with the Mikhailov Bratva is going to serve us well?”

“Of course I do. We need to stomp out those fucking rats once and for all.”

“They’re powerful,” Gaiman says. “Too powerful to be destroyed in one go.”

“Which is why Leo is hitting the Silver Star and the Manhattan Club.”

“It won’t be enough!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Jax demands.

“Gaiman’s right,” I say evenly.

“How is Gaiman right?” Jax asks defensively. “Are we or are we not blowing their shit sky high?”

“Taking down two Mikhailov hotspots will cripple their power base, but it won’t stop them. Semyon’s reach extends farther than we know.”

“We need to forget about the far-reaching arms and cut the head off this snake,” Gaiman underscores.

Jax nods in understanding. “Semyon Mikhailov.”

“No. Semyon is a minor problem. We can deal with him later,” I say. “Spartak Belov is the more immediate threat.”

Gaiman sighs. “He does seem to be calling all the shots. But do we know how involved Semyon still is in the running of the Mikhailov Bratva?”

“Who gives a fuck?” retorts Jax. “We kill them both—problem solved.”

Jax’s excitement burns away anger. I understand the feeling completely. He’s nothing if not loyal. Every slight to the Solovev Bratva is like a personal insult to him.

But I won’t let anger rule me like it rules him. No matter how much I appreciate the sentiment.

“I will have revenge for my brother,” I say confidently. “But doing it properly takes time. We’ve got enough food on our plate. It’s time to feast.”

Just as I finish talking, my phone rings. I recognize the untraceable number. It can only be one of two people.

I pick up instantly.

“He knows about the key,” the voice on the line says sharply. “You don’t have much time.”

Then the call goes dead.

Gaiman reads the change in my expression before I can even speak. “Leo? What’s wrong?”

“Get a team together,” I growl. “We have to get to her before he does.”

“Get to who?” Jax asks as he moves to the door to follow my order.

I grab a gun from my top desk drawer and shove it in my pocket. “Willow.”

WILLOW

I stop in front of the bronze-plated glass doors that separate me from my soon-to-be ex-husband. Jessica stops next to me.

“Are you ready?” she asks.

No? Yes? Maybe? I don’t know anymore.

I left whatever composure I had on Leo’s desk. Now, I’m simply going through the motions.

So I just nod, too mixed up to speak.

“Close enough.” Jessica pushes the door open and ushers me inside.

The building is at least fifty percent glass and mirror. I catch sight of the two of us in one of the many reflective surfaces.

Jessica’s red suit catches the light and makes her look like she’s on fire. Her heels hit the tile floor with a fierce *click-clack*.

I follow behind her, feeling like the ugly sister despite my designer suit. Thanks to Leo, my hair has come undone from the sleek updo that I spent almost an hour on this morning. Wisps of it hang around my face, which looks unusually pale.

“Willow?”

I glance up. Jessica is standing inside the elevator holding the doors open for me. I rush inside and they slide shut.

She presses the button for floor twenty-seven and the elevator shoots upward faster than I think should be possible. Pressure builds in my ears. I stare at my shoes the whole ride.

When the doors slide open again, I swallow hard. My ears pop, but the relief pales in comparison to the weight of my nerves.

Jessica leads me silently down the tiled hallway and takes a sharp left through a white push door. Only when I'm inside do I realize we're standing in a brightly lit bathroom.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

I'd expected to step into a room and see Casey sitting in front of me. Waiting. Scowling. But it's just me, Jessica, and our reflections.

"Now," Jessica says, turning to me, "let's get you sorted."

"Me?"

She raises her sculpted brows. "Look at the state of you, honey. You look petrified. A little disheveled, too. That's not the vibe we want to be giving off."

"Right," I breathe. "What vibe are we going for again?"

"Calm and confident," she answers. "You need to show him the middle finger without actually showing him your middle finger."

I force a smile. "You could pull that off, but I'm not sure I can manage it."

"It just takes practice. You think I was born confident?"

"Some people are."

"Are you referring to who I think you're referring to?"

I try really hard not to blush. "Well..."

She waves a hand. "Forget him. He's not human."

“What does that mean?”

“It means he’s Bratva. When you’re born to the life, it consumes you. Leo has to be stronger, more resilient, and more ruthless than the average person. Comparing yourself to him is only going to lead to disappointment.”

I frown, wondering if there’s hidden meaning in her words. Is she trying to tell me I’m not good enough for him?

“Go on then. Splash some cold water on your face.”

I have makeup on, but I’m not in any position to question Jessica. I’m not in any position to question anyone, really. The janitor could come in and tell me what to do and I’d probably listen.

So I lean forward and splash water across my face.

Sure enough, it does help. Immediately, I feel more alert. Refreshed.

As I wipe my face dry with a paper towel, Jessica retrieves a makeup bag from out of her purse.

“No wonder your bag’s so big,” I laugh nervously.

“Gotta have somewhere to hide the bodies, right? Not to mention the weapons of mass destruction.” I’m ninety-eight percent sure it’s a joke, but she doesn’t laugh as she pulls out foundation, blush, lipstick, and a case of makeup brushes. “Now, let’s fix your face.”

“Is it that bad?”

She smiles and pauses. “Of course not. You’re a beautiful woman, Willow. Honestly, you could go without a stitch of makeup. But we’re trying to create a narrative today that you are not a woman to be messed with. Think of the makeup as armor. I always do.”

“Right. Armor.”

I wish I had actual armor to wear. It would make standing in front of Casey easier. The last time I saw him, he was trying to kill me. He might have, too, if Leo hadn’t—

“I don’t even know who his lawyer is,” I say.

“Reed Courtney. He’s an asshole, but unfortunately, he’s a talented asshole.”

I tense. “How talented?”

“Don’t you worry: I’m more than a match for him.”

“So you’ve dealt with him before?” I ask.

“In a way.” I raise my eyebrows and she smiles. “He’s not as good in bed as he looks.”

That almost manages to make me laugh. “Have you... had any dealings with Casey?”

“Not personally,” she says. “But I don’t need to know the son of a bitch to scare him. He’s plenty scared already.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he’s agreed to give you the divorce,” she says.

I jerk back from the blush brush she’s dusting on my cheeks. “What? Why didn’t you tell me that already?”

“Hold still,” she snaps. “I’m not done yet.”

Cowed, I get back in position. “I just... I didn’t think he’d give up that easily,” I say. “He’s always been so possessive. I thought he’d put up more of a fight.”

Jessica looks at me pointedly. “Are you disappointed?”

“No. Definitely not. I’m glad. I’m just... shocked.”

“It pays to have powerful friends,” she remarks. “And it’s a nice bonus when they also know what they’re doing in the bedroom.”

I blush instantly. I barely spoke on the car ride over because I was so embarrassed about what she must have heard from the other side of Leo’s office door.

“I’m really sorry about that.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Well, because... it’s just embarrassing, I guess.”

She blinks, baffled. “You’re an attractive woman and he’s an attractive man. It makes sense that you two would be fucking like rabbits every chance you get.”

“That... that’s not what’s happening—”

She holds up both her hands. “It’s none of my business.”

She gives me one more appraising look, then nods, satisfied, and starts putting away her makeup tools.

“Can I ask you kind of a personal question?”

“Shoot,” she says.

“Were you and Leo ever... involved?”

She smiles. “Did we ever fuck, you mean? As far as I know, that’s as involved as Leo Solovev ever gets.”

I nod.

“I tried,” she admits without a shred of shame. “Oh, honey, how I tried. But Leo doesn’t like mixing business and pleasure. I made the mistake of being his lawyer, so he wouldn’t touch me.”

I expect to be relieved, but all I can think about is what would’ve happened between them if she had gotten her way.

When she finishes putting everything away, she pulls a comb out of her bag. “Turn around so I can fix your hair.”

“I’m surprised it didn’t work, you know. You’re every bit as dominant as Leo is.”

She chuckles and then turns serious. “Can I give you some advice?”

“You are my lawyer. I think it’s what I’m paying you for.”

“What Leo’s paying me for,” she corrects. “Which kind of brings me to my point. Where Leo is concerned, you should check your emotions at the door

and enjoy it while it lasts. He's not an easy man to satisfy."

I glance at her. "I thought you said you didn't sleep with him?"

"I was speaking in a more general sense," she says. "I've worked for him for a while now."

"Oh. Gotcha."

"He's intense and broody. Admittedly, that's part of the appeal. But where women are concerned, his interest wanes fast. I wouldn't get overly attached if I were you."

Jessica isn't saying anything I haven't told myself countless times before. And still, her words leave me with a sinking feeling in my gut.

"There," Jessica says with a satisfied nod. "You're ready."

She's smoothed my hair back into the sleek bun I was wearing before I tripped and fell onto Leo's dick, and my makeup looks better than it ever does when I apply it myself.

The effect is startling. And just like she promised, it does inject a little more confidence into my hunched posture.

"That's right, girl," she says. "You need to *wear* that suit; don't let it wear you. And remember: give Casey the invisible middle finger."

I nod and follow her out of the bathroom. She leads me into an arbitration room that boasts a brilliant view of the city. Skyscrapers stud the horizon in every direction.

I only have a second to admire the vista before I notice that Casey's already there. He's sitting on the opposite side of the table next to his lawyer, a broadly built man with an impressive head of auburn hair.

His face is hardened into a scowl, but the moment he sets eyes on Jessica, he breaks out into a flirty smile. His eyes, though, remain the same: cold and dead and flat, like a shark's.

"Reed," Jessica greets coolly, sitting down and gesturing for me to take the seat next to her.

“Jessica.”

The two of them start talking, but I block them out. Casey is staring at me. He doesn't even blink as his eyes run up and down my body.

I stare back. Because Casey doesn't look good.

He's thinner than he was the last time I saw him. Underneath what looks like makeup, I can see the bruise running along the side of his face.

Leo didn't pull his punch.

As affected as I am by his appearance, he seems as affected by mine. He's definitely never seen me like this before. Casey preferred me in modest but feminine outfits: high heels, tight fits, but minimal skin showing.

This outfit, on the other hand, is all about power and control.

I jut my chin out and try to manifest some of the kind of confidence that Leo and Jessica have. I let my glance slide away, back out the window, as if his presence doesn't bother me in the slightest. Inside, it's a totally different story: my veins are thrumming, my heart pounding, and sweat is starting to bead up on my forehead.

“Good morning, Mrs. Reeves—”

“Ms. Powers,” I interrupt immediately. “The name is Ms. Powers.”

He blinks, then nods. “Of course. Ms. Powers. I've gone through the settlement that your attorney sent over. The terms are agreeable to my client.”

I afford Casey only a cursory glance. “Wonderful.”

“Is there anything you need to discuss?” he asks.

“No. I just want a quick and clean divorce.”

“Well considering you haven't asked for any spousal support or assets, that's easy to agree to,” he says, sounding pretty happy about it.

Casey, however, looks a little less pleased. Like he's been forced into this at gunpoint.

In some ways, that's not so far off.

"Then all that's left to do is sign," Jessica says. "If you could hand over the papers—"

"Why are you in such a hurry, Jess?" Reed asks.

"I'm not, Reed. My client is. She's eager to get this jail sentence of a marriage over with."

Reed eyes her warily for a long breath. Then, with a sigh, he slides a stack of papers over towards me. I glance over the tiny print, reading none of it.

I catch my name and then Casey's. Jessica taps a manicured nail at the foot of the page. I take a deep breath and sign on the dotted line.

Then I slide the papers over to Casey. He doesn't take them right away. Just looks at me until the silence becomes uncomfortable.

"Mr. Reeves," Jessica interjects, "I appreciate that this must be a difficult moment for you, but we're on a clock here. And I promise you that both my services and Reed's are rather expensive."

He looks at Jessica and his expression twists in anger. It softens when his eyes turn back to me.

Without saying a word, he swallows the rest of his anger—that's a first—and snatches up the pen. He slashes a signature in his spot, clicks the pen, and throws it across the table carelessly.

Jessica gets to her feet. "Pleasure working together, gentlemen. Good day to you, Reed. Mr. Reeves. Willow, let's go."

Can it really be that easy? I think as I follow her out of the room. *Is it really done?*

We don't even make it halfway down the hall before I hear Reed call for Jessica.

"Hey, Jess," he says. "Can I have a word?"

Jessica throws me a pointed eye roll. "Give me a minute?"

“Of course,” I say. “I’ll wait for you by the elevators.”

I walk over to the bronze doors and wait there for Jessica. I still haven’t processed anything that happened in the last fifteen minutes. Or was it an hour? Time had no meaning in that room.

All I know is that I’m divorced.

Better than that: I’m *free*.

“Willow.”

I tense. I didn’t see him approach, but Casey has materialized like a ghost to stand about a foot away from me. It’s too close for comfort, but I don’t want to rub salt in the wound by cringing away from him.

He doesn’t deserve any sensitivity, but I can’t help taking pity on the man.

I raise my gaze slowly to meet his. From here, I can see what a poor job the makeup is doing of hiding the nasty bruise on his face.

“Listen, Casey,” I say. “It’s over now—”

“You know he’s the one who pushed this through, right?” he interrupts. “I didn’t—I wouldn’t have—”

I know exactly who he’s talking about, but I don’t confirm or deny.

Casey, however, takes my silence as complicity. He halves the distance between us, eyes glossing over with that blind rage of his.

My instinct is to retreat. But I realize suddenly that I don’t have to do that anymore.

Fear is behind me. Flight is behind me.

I’m a new woman now.

And Ms. Powers refuses to be cornered.

“Willow, he’s a dangerous man. I did some digging, and he’s some big time mob guy. He’s actually killed men. Literally. He has a ton of illegal businesses, too.”

“Anything like embezzlement?”

His eyes flicker with loathing. “I’m serious.”

“So am I,” I snap. I take a step forward so that we’re nose to nose now.

If this was Leo, there’d be irresistible heat crackling between our bodies. Of that much, I’m certain. But the heat coming off of Casey is sticky and uncomfortable.

As soon as I can, I’m going to turn my back on Casey forever.

But first, I’ve got to get my point across.

“It’s a bit rich for you to talk about Leo when you’ve committed crimes. Not only did you commit them, you threatened to incriminate me, as well.”

“This is different. The man’s dangerous,” he says, grabbing my arm.

I rip my wrist out of his grasp. “First of all, don’t touch me. Second of all, he may be dangerous to you. But not to me.”

He glowers at me. “Is that what you believe?”

“He’s never once hit me.”

“I... I never hit you, either.”

“You want me to show you the bruise on my back?” I demand. “Because it’s still there. Kinda like that bruise you’ve tried and failed to cover up. You wanna know the difference? I didn’t deserve mine.”

“He’s going to hurt you. You have to—”

“Willow.”

Jessica’s sharp voice breaks through our whispered conversation. Casey jumps back immediately. I smooth my hair back into place and try to settle my breathing back to normal.

“Everything alright?” Jessica asks, skewering Casey with a vicious glare.

“I was just... saying goodbye.” Casey looks down at his feet.

“And you’ve said it,” I reply. “Goodbye, Casey.”

“You can go now,” Jessica informs him acidly.

Slumping, he turns and leaves through the stairwell. When the door shuts, she turns to me. “You okay?”

I take a deep breath and try to swallow down the panicked adrenaline from our encounter. It tastes like battery acid in my mouth. “I think so.”

“If he was threatening you, I can get a restraining order.”

“No,” I say quickly. “It’s fine. He just wanted to... Whatever. It doesn’t matter. It’s over now. I got my divorce.”

Jessica nods. “You got your divorce.”

I force out a shaky smile. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Now, let’s get out of—”

She’s interrupted by her cell phone ringing.

“One sec, sorry,” she mumbles as she glances down at her screen. Her expression changes as she picks up the call. “Leo?”

She listens intently for maybe five seconds, eyebrows furrowing. Then she nods. She ends the call without a reply.

I start to say, “What was—”

But the words are wrenched out of my lips when she snatches up my hand and drags me through the stairwell where we just banished Casey.

Again, my first instinct is to submit. To go along.

But just like with Casey, I want to turn the page on a new chapter of my life.

After days of being dragged around, I’m tired of being pulled everywhere. I’m sick of being mute and helpless and feeble. I want to make my own choices now.

So I wrench my hand from her grip. “Jessica, what the hell is going on?”

“It’s not for me to explain.”

She swipes for my hand again, but I dodge her. “Explain or I’m not leaving.”

“All you need to know is you’re in danger. We need to get out of here before they descend.”

“Who?” I demand. “Before who descends?”

She grabs my arm once again and resumes towing me down the stairs at breakneck speed.

“Men you definitely don’t want to meet.”

WILLOW

I can't even process what that might mean before Jessica reaches into her coat and pulls out a gun.

I gape at her. "You weren't kidding about the weapons of mass destruction."

She smiles. "You never know when you might need some firepower."

She cocks the gun with an expert gesture and motions for me to follow her down the stairwell.

"You're gonna have to give me more of an explanation than that. Is this about Casey?"

"No. We've dealt with him."

"Then what is going on?" I demand.

She offers me a sympathetic glance. "I wish I could, hon. But I don't really have an explanation to give you. I do as the boss commands."

"And that would be Leo?"

"That would be Leo," she confirms.

Jessica slows at every stair landing, easing around the corner gun-first before we can move on. It's obvious from her practiced demeanor that this isn't her first rodeo.

She's shot before.

She's killed before.

"Why are we taking the stairs? We're like thirty floors up," I remind her.

"The elevators aren't safe. They'll be waiting for us there."

"I'd really like to know who 'they' is, please."

She doesn't answer. Instead, she holds her hand out to stop me. I'm about to complain again when I hear it.

Footsteps.

Jessica cranes over the railing, gun at the ready, to try and catch the source of the noise. It was strange to see her with a gun at first, but now she looks more like a trained assassin than a lawyer. I can't imagine her ever standing in a courtroom.

Her shoulders relax. "Let's keep moving. We have to be quick."

"Jessica, I—this can't be about me. Somebody is confused," I argue. "They think I'm someone else. Leo has me confused with someone else."

"Does he now?" she says, completely disinterested.

"I'm serious. I have no idea why Leo's interested in me, let alone a bunch of so-called 'dangerous men.'"

"It's not our place to know everything," she says. "We follow orders and trust that Leo knows what he's doing."

Trust. That's a joke. Much easier said than done where Leo is concerned.

Jessica shows no sign of slowing down, but spiraling down the staircase is making me wheezy and nauseous. I want to sit down and put my head between my knees, though I doubt Jessica would agree to a break. She's not even breathing hard.

But me? I haven't drawn a full breath since the day I met Leo. Like I'm chained to a ride I can't get off.

The further we descend down the stairs and the worse I feel, the more I'm certain the off-hand explanation I gave to Jessica is the truth.

Leo has me mixed up with someone else. That's gotta be it. It's the only possible explanation for how I've ended up here, running from bad guys like I'm in a cheap Hollywood action movie.

Jessica comes to an abrupt stop, and I bump into her back.

"Willow, can you stay in the *now*, please?" she asks with obvious irritation. "I need you here with me. Not off in La La Land."

I nod dumbly.

The normal hum of people and chatter rises up from the lower floors, but it still feels like we're miles above the ground.

Jessica hesitates at the stairwell door. "Wait right here. Let me check this level."

She's gone for no more than a minute, but it feels like an eternity. My senses go into overdrive. I'm suddenly keenly aware of every sound, every sight, every smell.

The lingering scent of cigarette smoke and floral cologne in the air. Graffiti carved into the concrete wall. The buzz of electricity and elevator cables behind the walls.

I'm so immersed in my momentary superpowers that I jump when the door flings open. I have to stifle a scream—it's just Jessica.

"This floor looks fine. We might be able to risk the elevators."

"I thought you said they'd be expecting that?"

"We won't ride all the way to the ground floor," she tells me. "We'll get off on the second and take it from there."

Since I'm in no position to argue, I follow her through the door.

This floor looks almost identical to the one we were on, albeit less well-lit. Every other overhead fluorescent is off. I stick close to Jessica as we make our way to the elevator bank.

We've gone down twelve floors, but we're still halfway in the sky. I thought this was what I wanted—Lord knows I was ready to get the hell out of the

stairwell—but when Jessica presses the call button and the whirr of the motor kicks into gear, my anxiety skyrockets right along with it.

Tension builds. The whirring gets louder.

Ding—the bell signals the arrival of the car.

Jessica's hold on the gun and on my wrist both tighten. The doors clank, clack, slide open, and the elevator is...

Empty.

“Thank God,” I breathe.

Jessica laughs bitterly. “Don't thank him yet.” She drags me inside and smashes the second floor button. The doors close and we begin the descent.

Floors tick past. Fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven... four, three, then two. We repeat the same nausea-inducing process from the other side. The brakes engage, slowing us to a stop. The doors prepare to open.

And once again, when they do, they reveal only empty space.

“Can I thank him now?” I rasp.

The only answer is the sound of Jessica checking the slide of the gun.

She steps off the elevator and checks to ensure the coast is clear in all directions before signaling for me to join her. We rush down the hall and find the stairwell door once again.

The smell of cigarettes and cologne is gone, replaced by powerful antiseptics that sting my nostrils. It's quiet, too. Just the sounds of our own footsteps echoing off the walls.

I'm starting to feel almost giddy. Leo and Jessica are paranoid, just jumping at shadows and seeing threats where there are none. There's nothing to thank God for—because there's nothing to be worried about at all. Certainly nothing that involves *me*.

We finally reach the bottom of the stairs, and Jessica pulls me to the side. “Take off your coat and leave it here.”

I blink at her. “This one?”

“Are you wearing another?” she asks impatiently.

“My shirt underneath is a little... revealing.

“I don’t give a fuck. Lose the jacket. It’s too ostentatious.”

“I’m ostentatious?” I repeat incredulously. “You’re wearing freaking red!”

I know it’s completely ridiculous to be arguing over a suit right now, but my sense of urgency is waning. We’ve made our way down twenty-seven stories and haven’t seen a soul. I’m starting to think this is some kind of practical joke.

Rolling her eyes, Jessica holsters the gun and reaches forward to rip the velvety material off my shoulders.

“Hey!”

She ignores me entirely and tosses the coat on the floor. A plume of dust rises up from the corner and settles on top of the white coat. I cross my arms over my sheer top and shiver at the sudden onrush of overly enthusiastic air conditioning.

Before I can complain, Jessica pulls off her jacket and throws it next to mine. I raise my eyebrows. “Is getting undressed supposed to make us invisible?”

She grabs my arm. Her nails dig into my flesh. “Willow, you’ve never been in this position before, so I’ve been patient. But I need you to understand the danger we’re in. You should be afraid. As a matter of fact, you should be very fucking afraid.”

If scaring me into silence was the goal, she’s succeeded.

I nod mutely in response.

“Good,” Jessica says. “When we get out there, act normal. Pretend as though you’re just going about your day. Don’t look at the pavement. Don’t walk too fast. We need to blend.”

“Where’s Leo?” I ask, the words tumbling out of my mouth without permission. It’s impossible to feel unsafe when he’s around.

“He’s coming,” she assures me. “But we need to be prepared if he doesn’t reach us in time.”

That makes me shudder, which doesn’t escape Jessica’s notice.

“Good, you’re finally scared. But I need to remind you that fear can be crippling, too. You can’t be overwhelmed by it.”

“Jesus, what do you want from me?” I glower at her. “Should I be scared or not scared?”

No answer. She tucks the gun in the waistband of her pants and pulls her blouse down over it, then shoves the door open and gestures for me to follow her through the lobby.

I do my best to mimic her easy stride. She glances around casually, pleasantly, seemingly carefree. Knowing nothing about her, I’d assume she was on her way to a meeting. Heading out for lunch. Going about her day.

I have no idea what I look like. Which is just as well, because if I look the way I think I look, I’m probably not going to survive whatever Jessica seems to think might happen next.

We cross through the skyscraper’s atrium uneventfully. No one pays us any attention.

When we step into the daylight, I blink against the light. It feels like twelve hours have passed since the meeting with Casey rather than twelve minutes. I squint into the sun.

The sun seems normal, right? It’s not shining any differently than usual? The cars look normal. The buildings look normal.

It’s a normal day. Nothing is going to happen. Nothing bad will—

“Okay, they’ve got eyes on us,” Jessica says in my ear. Her grip on my elbow is tight.

“What?” I balk. “Who?”

She walks us forward faster, weaving around pedestrians or glaring them out of our way. I barely manage to keep up in my heels.

“There’s at least two men trailing us. I’m willing to bet there’s a lot more.”

I glance around immediately, looking for hitmen in the alleys.

Jessica hisses at me, “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Sorry. Instinct.”

“Jesus,” she grumbles. “You’d better be worth all this trouble.”

The panic is building fast now. I know it’s probably not very feminist of me to want a man’s help the moment I’m in a spot of trouble, but I want Leo. I want him so badly that it hurts.

“Fuck,” Jessica mutters. “Okay, we’re going to have to get aggressive now.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, my eyes going wide.

In answer, she pulls out her gun. Before I can even see where she is aiming, she shoots twice.

I scream. Or maybe it’s the woman behind me who screams.

Whatever the case, chaos erupts around us.

The next thing I know, Jessica is dragging me into traffic. A small blue sedan honks and screeches to a stop barely a foot from my hip.

Considering Jessica has her gun pointed at his windshield, I can understand why. She keeps her gun clocked on the driver as she races around to the driver side and bangs on his door.

“Out,” she barks.

The older gentleman pales as he stumbles out of his car. “What are you— don’t shoot! I don’t have any money.”

Jessica ignores him and nods to me. “Get inside.”

I’m long past the point of arguing with her. I jump into the passenger seat as Jessica gets behind the wheel. Within seconds, we’re flying through the streets amidst the symphony of car horns.

“Jessica!” I scream as she narrowly misses another oncoming vehicle.

She seems completely unperturbed. “Don’t worry, I got this.”

“You’re a lawyer, a spy, and a racecar driver?” I can’t watch this. I shield my face behind my hands.

A car crash would be a horrible way to go. Then again, the alternative is death at the hands of the men chasing us for God only knows what reason. Maybe a car crash isn’t so bad in comparison.

Thank goodness Jessica seems to be as competent behind the wheel as she is with a briefcase, because I’m useless right now. There’s so much sensory information coming at me that I can barely keep up with it.

“The dog! The dog!” I scream.

Jessica swerves around a dog on a long leash, narrowly missing it. We take a hard right at an intersection. I scream again when something destroys the car mirror on my side.

“What the fuck was that?!”

“An arrow,” Jessica says sarcastically. “What do you think?”

I make the mistake of twisting around in my seat to see who’s tailing us. As it turns out, there are at least two black jeeps at our back.

A man leans out of the passenger side door of the jeep closer to us. He looks menacing in his own right, but I’m less concerned with his scowl than I am with the massive rifle he’s aiming straight at us.

I whip back around and drop my head, feeling the color drain from my face. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Please don’t make my job harder than it needs to be.”

Before I can respond, our car starts to skid, tires screaming. We twist wildly as Jessica tries to regain control. Her teeth are gritted, her knuckles white, but she can’t seem to get the steering wheel to comply.

And then I hear a whistling noise amidst the cacophony and I realize what caused the skid in the first place: a bullet hit our tire.

Jessica loses the fight with the car. We swerve off the road and straight into a fire hydrant. By some miracle, the airbags don't deploy and concuss us both.

But the car is wrecked. The fire hydrant held its ground, reducing the front hood to a smoking, mangled pile of machinery. We aren't going any farther in this thing.

“What do we—”

“Get out of the car and run!” Jessica yells.

We stumble out of the car together, but I can see them coming from my peripheral vision. Even if I run, they've got guns. Who's to say they're not going to shoot?

“STOP!”

The voice is deep and commanding. Almost as commanding as Leo's. I freeze instantly, just as multiple men in black pour out of the jeeps and point their guns at us.

Jessica's face twists in a scowl. I know she's not going to take orders.

She raises her gun. “Go fuck yourself,” she mutters.

I'm about ready to punch the air in celebration as a gunshot rings out.

But then she falls—and I realize it wasn't her bullet.

I stay rooted to the ground in horror as Jessica claps a hand over her bleeding thigh. It's so much blood, as red as her pantsuit, but she doesn't even cry out.

The bearded behemoth who fired the shot stalks over to us. *Run, run, run!* screams the voice in my head, but my body won't respond.

He goes to Jessica first. Grabbing her by the chin, he tilts her eyes up to look into his. She scowls and spits, but it's obvious that her strength is fading quickly.

“I told you to fucking stop,” he growls. “Stubborn bitches like you never listen.”

Then he puts the tip of his gun between her lips.

I want to scream. I want to plead with him. Beg him to spare her life. But my lips won't comply any more than my legs will.

Time stops. I can't speak. Can't breathe.

A single thought moves rapid-fire through my mind.

No.

No.

No.

But my thoughts won't stop him. The man pulls the trigger.

I think I scream. All I know for sure is that the gunshot reverberates inside me so loudly that it's painful. Almost like I was the one who was shot.

But I wasn't.

The only reason Jessica is still upright is because the man has a hold of her head.

What's left of it, anyway.

Jessica's hands go limp. Then the monster who just murdered her in cold blood drops her on the sidewalk and turns to me.

I should probably run. At least then he'll have to shoot me in the back of the head and I won't have to stare down the barrel of a gun.

The monster looks at me, regarding me with an interested expression. Then: "Take her."

Half a dozen men who've gathered at his back start to stride forward to do who-the-hell-knows-what to me.

But before they can take so much as a step in my direction, a new tide of chaos comes sweeping in.

There's the screech of tires. The explosion of more bullets.

Then the monster standing a few feet from me drops to the ground, a bullet buried in his forehead. His lifeless eyes stare up at me not even a foot away,

but I still can't move. My legs won't work.

Four more vehicles screech to a halt next to the black jeeps. The monster's crewmembers turn their backs on me to face the new threat.

I know I ought to be grateful. He's here. He came.

But all I can think is, *You're too late.*

Jessica's body is lying several feet away. I can't bring myself to look at her.

How is it possible that, only moments ago, she was a living, breathing action hero?

And now she's dead.

Because of *me.*

Because she was trying to protect *me.*

"Willow!"

I lift my eyes above the death in front of me, and I see him in the distance. Fighting his way towards me.

Leo's broad shoulders swing wildly as he punches a guy in the face before flipping him over his shoulder. A second later, he fires off two bullets and continues his advance.

Leo moves with confidence, with grace.

A man amongst boys. A wolf amongst sheep.

Two more enemies set their sights on him. Leo hasn't noticed, I don't think. I want to scream a warning to him, but then again, I should have realized: Leo notices everything.

He pivots, raises his arm, and fires. One bullet finds a bare throat; the other turns a stomach into mincemeat.

Both men drop dead.

Then, gun still hot and fist still bloody, he pulls me into his arms.

LEO

I put her in the back seat. The moment I release her, she curls into a fetal position. I don't bother strapping her in.

The last vestiges of the fight are still breaking around me, but my priority is getting Willow out of here. I handled these assholes well enough, but where there's one rat, there's many, and I don't want Willow to be here if reinforcements arrive.

I close the door on her shivering body and jump into the driver's seat.

As I pull out, I catch sight of Jax in the rearview mirror. He's reloading. *Again.* Trigger happy little shit. He's in his element and enjoying every fucking moment.

Gaiman notices me and gives me a solemn nod. We've been working and fighting together long enough to have developed a shorthand.

Go, he's telling me. We'll take it from here.

I set a course for one of the Bratva's safehouses an hour outside the city. Distance is exactly what we need right now.

I check on Willow in the rearview mirror from time to time, but she doesn't move from her position. Not even when I come to a stop outside the two-story house.

I climb out and open the back door. "Willow, come on. Get up."

She doesn't move or respond.

"I get that this is traumatic for you, but you have to keep moving," I say. "You're going to have to get a lot stronger, a lot faster. The people chasing you won't pause for a timeout while you catch your breath."

She flinches at those words. At least I know she can hear me.

I'm not going to be an easy target, she said to me not long ago. Well, what the fuck did she think this was?

Finally, she forces herself upright. I can see how much effort that one move takes her.

Physical exhaustion, I can train out of her. But mental exhaustion isn't as easy. And it can kill her faster than anything else.

A softer man would preach kindness. Patience. Would say that she's not from my world, she doesn't know how it works, how to carry herself and endure.

But I'm not a soft man, and I sure as fuck don't know how to be kind or patient. Not when there are guns at our back and the walls are closing in.

So we do it my way. The hard way.

"Fine. I'll carry you," I growl.

She barely reacts when I scoop her up into my arms. Nothing like the way she kicked and screamed when I threw her over my shoulder last time.

I glance down at her face. Her expression is lifeless and detached. The lights are on, but there's nobody home.

The security system at the front door scans my face and unlocks the house. The door swings inward and we step inside.

The interior of the house is a bland suburban nightmare, just like the outside. But that's the whole point of a safehouse. Hiding in plain sight.

Since Willow is basically catatonic, I carry her up the stairs towards the bedroom that overlooks the small, paltry backyard. A tiny garden of mostly weeds sits in one corner by the dilapidated fence.

I set her down on top of the bedspread. She sits exactly as I put her, hands limp in her lap, and stares down at the carpeted floor.

She's stopped trembling now, which I take as a good sign.

But she's barely moving at all. Perhaps not so good.

I pour her a glass of water from the bathroom tap. "Drink."

She raises her eyes to mine. I can see the pain in them.

This day is going to haunt her for the rest of her life. I'll admit, it's a cruel introduction to the underworld.

But it's an honest one.

It's best she understands what this life is like now. Especially since she won't be given a chance as to whether she wants to be a part of it or not.

She tries to push away the glass I'm offering her.

"Do it," I repeat. "Or I'll do it for you."

Sighing, she takes the glass and downs a tiny sip just to appease me.

Good enough for now, I suppose. I head for the door, but she makes a weak noise behind me.

Turning back, I ask, "Did you say something?"

Her eyes are huge. "W... where are you going?"

"Downstairs. I need to liaise with my men."

"Can't you... do that from here?"

I meet her eyes. The blue in them looks muted, washed out by pain and panic.

"No one's going to harm you while I'm around," I tell her. "No one in their right mind would fucking dare."

Then I leave and close the door behind me.

I can't baby her. Plus, I'd rather her be angry at me than trembling in fear. She needs to be prepared for what's to come. She might think I'm cruel, but

I'm helping her in the only way I know how.

I walk down the narrow corridor and call Gaiman. "Hey, boss," he answers.

"Report."

"We got them all. Twenty-five men in total. All dead."

"Not even one survivor?"

"There were two we managed to catch," he says, his tone turning dark. "But they'd each been given cyanide pills. They bit down the moment I started interrogating them."

"Fuck," I growl. "Belov doesn't pull his fucking punches. Where's Jax?"

"Dealing with the bodies," he says. "We delayed the cops until we could move everything off-site. No problems there."

I nod. "And... Jessica?"

I had caught only a glimpse of her body, but it was enough to know that there was no hope for survival. My only regret was not getting there in time to save her. Especially since she died saving Willow.

But Jessica knew the risks of this job. She'd been game for it. Excited, even. There never was enough excitement in the courtroom to satisfy her.

Now, all I can do is give her a proper burial. A warrior's sendoff.

"We've got her," Gaiman says. "I'll personally see that her body is taken care of."

"Good."

"What about the girl?" Gaiman asks.

"She's safe," I tell him. "I'm going to lie low for a bit before I bring her in."

"Does she know?" Gaiman asks.

He's smart. I knew he'd put the puzzle pieces together eventually.

"Fuck no. She has no idea."

“How is this possible?”

“It’s pretty fucking obvious,” I say, “if you just pay attention to certain people.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll keep you posted with any new developments.”

I hang up and head back to Willow’s room. She’s still on the bed in the same exact position that I left her in.

But she looks up at me this time. I see something other than blind panic in her expression.

Planting a hand on the mattress, she gets up slowly. Trembling, frail enough that a strong wind would topple her, but up. A step towards me. Another. Another.

Her hands tremble, and I think she might slap me, if she can find the strength.

But to my surprise... she wraps them around me instead.

Her trembling eases as I hold her back. She clings to me as though I’m her lifeline, and even though she tries hard to fight it, I hear the catch and crackle of a sob deep in her chest.

I take her to the bed and lay her down there. When I try to move away, though, she grabs me as though terrified I might disappear on her again.

“Leo,” she says. Her voice is shaky.

I don’t say anything as protectiveness washes through me. Possessiveness is an easier emotion to deal with. I own what’s mine. No man alive can take it from me. But this?

This is something else.

This is troubling.

“Jessica...”

She must have seen the gunshot that ended Jessica's life. They were mere feet apart. Close enough for the blood to splatter.

"Jessica knew what she was getting into."

Willow's eyes glaze over for a moment. Then they start to spark with that old, familiar fire. "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"She knew what she was getting into?" she echoes in disbelief. "That's all you have to say? Don't you even care that she died?"

"I didn't say that."

"She was just supposed to help me get divorced. But then we were in the middle of a gun fight... and you don't even care."

"That was her fucking job," I snap. "And there's nothing I can do to change the outcome. Reviving the dead is one of the few things that even I can't manage."

She shakes her head and leans away from me. She wants sympathy? Sorrow? Grief? She'll have to look elsewhere.

She won't find it in me.

"Who were those men following me?" she asks.

"Bratva."

"Bratva?" she repeats. "I thought you were Bratva."

"I am. So are they."

"May the better Bratva win? Is that it?" she says sarcastically.

"Something like that."

"So why do they think I'm important?"

"They've surmised that you're important to me," I tell her. "And they wanted to use you as leverage."

It's not the truth, but I have to give her something.

She frowns, clearly aware that there's much more to the story. More than she could ever imagine, in reality. But as I'd told her before, in the Bratva, everything is earned.

Even her own story.

"I'm important to you?" she asks.

"Don't get excited about that. You're important to the mission."

She looks perplexed rather than hurt. "What mission?"

"That's my business."

She gives a low groan and scoots away from me. "I think I deserve to know the whole story."

"Why?"

"Because... because I was nearly killed today! I was chased across the city and shot at. And my lawyer had her face blown off!"

"Bratva soldiers are not known for their mercy."

She shakes her head, tears starting to form at the corners of her eyes. The shock is starting to break. God only knows what torrents of emotion will follow it.

"Did she get you the divorce?" I ask.

Her eyes flash to my face. It seems like the combative energy between us is bringing her back to life. If that's what it takes, so be it.

"*That's* what you're worried about right now?"

"I'm not worried about anything. If Jessica didn't seal the deal, I'll find someone who can."

"She died, Leo."

"I'm aware."

“Don’t you feel... anything? Don’t you feel even the slightest bit guilty?”

“About what?”

She looks ready to tear her hair out. “The fact that someone who worked for you is dead? That she died carrying out your orders? That she died protecting me?”

“Listen to me, Willow,” I say, stalking closer to the foot of the bed. “Jessica may not have had the mark of the Solovev Bratva. She may not have been a Vor. But she was as good as such, and she will be honored as such. As for guilt? I have nothing to feel guilty about. She knew what the job involved. She didn’t flinch at the missions she was tasked with. We all have to make choices.”

“Except me, apparently.”

I roll my eyes. “I have my reasons for holding you here.”

“And I’m just supposed to trust that?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re only here because you’re useful,” I say unflinchingly. “You don’t want to see what happens to people who stop being useful for me.”

She draws her legs up onto the bed. She’s angry, of course, but there are other emotions bubbling under the surface, too.

She craves my presence as much as she wishes she didn’t.

“We’re going to stay here for a night or two,” I continue. “Make sure the situation is stable before I move you back to the mansion.”

“I... I can’t go back to my life, can I?”

I stop just short of laughing. “What life, Willow?”

“Don’t.”

“You need to face certain truths, difficult as they may be. Your life involved an abusive husband and little else. Maybe it’s a good thing you’re here.”

“Trapped in another controlling relationship with a man who’s taken away all my choices?” she asks. “How is that different? It’s just more of the same thing.”

“I’m done giving you explanations.”

“You haven’t given me any yet!”

“Don’t hold your breath for more.”

I turn for the door, but she stops me. “Leo.”

“What?”

“I... I’m scared.”

I nod. “Fear is necessary.”

“Jessica said that, too,” she says softly.

“Jessica was smart,” I say. “Fear reminds you that you want to survive. You need to accept fear. You need to get used to a fair amount of it.”

“You’re not going to stay with me?”

“I’ll be here when I need to be,” I tell her. “And not a moment before.”



I spend the next several hours coordinating with my men and making arrangements for Jessica’s funeral, as well as the funerals of eleven other men we lost in the attack.

All in all, our losses were far less than I’d expected. But every man who dies in the line of duty feels like a piece of my soul that gets carved away. I feel each and every one of them keenly. That is my role, my obligation, my promise to them.

By the time I get back up to the room to check on Willow, I think she's sleeping. But as I move closer, I realize she's not. Her eyes are wide open. Her body is tense.

I sit down on the bed next to her. Her eyes find mine.

"Leo," she whispers. "I feel numb. And... cold. So cold."

Her body is huddled around a pillow. Since I last saw her, she has showered and discarded the bloodstained remnants of the designer suit she was wearing.

Now, she's dressed in...

"Is that my t-shirt?"

"I opened one of the drawers over there. This was the only thing I could find."

The fabric is thin. Her nipple is firm and visible. My hand floats towards her like it has a mind of its own. Closer and closer and closer, until I feel the warmth of her hip, the solidity of her curve. The air between us is tense and crackling.

She doesn't push me away or protest in any way. But her eyes remain on my face. I think I'm being studied.

"You're numb, huh?" I ask.

She nods slowly.

"Let's see if I can make you feel something again."

I roll her onto her back and lay myself down on top of her. Her tits press into my chest as her bare thighs part for me instantly. Her blue eyes have turned dark in the shadows, but they stay fixed on me.

She's looking to me for comfort, for reassurance.

But the only thing I can give her now is distraction.

I free myself from my pants and push into her in one fierce, hungry thrust. She cries out, her hands digging into the mattress on either side.

It's late; I'm exhausted. I've been operating on three hours of sleep total over the last three days. But with my cock buried inside her wet, warm pussy, I can feel the adrenaline giving me the boost I need.

She moans desperately in my ears. The sound ignites the beast inside me.

I fuck her more aggressively, never stopping or slowing down long enough to ask if she can take it. I know she can. She was born to take it.

Her thighs clench around my hips, urging me farther inward. I push myself up on my hands so I can look down at her as I fuck her.

Shoving her shirt up over her chest, I snare one hard nipple between my lips.

"Oh God," she gasps. "Leo."

My name on her lips is enough to make me explode right there. But I hold back. A little longer. A little more.

I slide a hand down between us and start rubbing her clit in tender circles.

"Yeah," she groans as her eyes roll back in her head. "Yeah... like that... oh God..."

Vibrations course through her. She clenches around my cock. Her body wants more of me, as much as it can get.

I can't give her everything.

But I can give her enough.

With one more savage thrust, I release, grinding my teeth at the intensity of the orgasm that claws into me. My lips splutter, my fingers spasm, and beneath me, Willow mewls like an animal in heat.

When I'm finished, her eyes flutter closed. Her back is still arched a little, as though she's been frozen at the peak of coming.

I run my hand down her neck, between her breasts. I follow the thin line of cold sweat that leads to her belly button. She looks like a fucking work of art as the shadows play with the sensuous lines of her body.

When she finally opens her eyes, though, I force myself to let her go. I stand up, tuck myself away, and leave her in a bed that smells like the both of us.

I know she wants me to stay.

That's why I have to leave her.

WILLOW

I wake up with a weight in my stomach. Equal parts grief and physical pain.

I twist in bed, trying to find a spot that will let me go back to sleep, but nothing feels comfortable.

Not even the empty side of the bed where he should have been.

When Leo walked out last night, I hadn't expected him to return. He'd fucked me in a way I desperately needed, and that was the end of it. Once he was satisfied, I wasn't useful anymore. And Leo doesn't need me unless I'm useful.

He's made that much clear.

Memories of the previous day wash over me. I see Jessica's clenched jaw and narrowed eyes, her defiance never wavering. Even as the monster had gripped her head and pointed the gun in her mouth.

She was determined to the very last.

I close my eyes, trying to drive out the memory before it progresses too far. But closing my eyes is like pulling down a projector screen. A blank surface for vivid memories to play on, over and over.

I see the man's finger tense over the trigger.

I see bits of bone and brain explode out of the back of her head.

Her body crumpled on the ground...

I bolt upright. Nausea roils through me. The more I try not to think about her death, the more I see it.

“Oh God.” I dart out of the bed and sprint to the bathroom.

I make it to the toilet just as I begin to dry heave. Eventually, something that looks like murky bile comes up. My stomach twists painfully as I spew my guts out.

When I’m finished, I feel mildly better, but puking sapped all my strength. I can barely pull myself up off the bathroom floor. I have just enough energy to wash my mouth and flush before I sink down onto the cool tile again.

I wish I could hide behind a veil of denial like I used to, but my head is spinning with thoughts and images that I can’t seem to bury no matter how hard I try.

The relief that came from throwing up starts receding slowly, and I feel nauseous all over again. I don’t even have time to pull back my hair before I’m heaving all over again.

Oh God, make this stop, I think desperately as I cough up nothing more than spittle.

I don’t see Leo standing at the threshold until he speaks. “Are you sick?”

“Jesus!” I gasp, turning my face away from him. “Have you ever heard of knocking?”

“It’s my fucking house.”

“And it’s your fucking world,” I say irritably. “As you keep reminding me. Can you just leave?”

“You look like you need help.”

“So maybe send someone helpful up here then,” I suggest.

He ignores the sarcasm and moves forward. I cringe away from him. I hate that I’m shallow enough to care what I look like right now. But I can’t deny that I do care.

Before I can figure out a way to melt into the floor or flush myself away so Leo doesn't see me like this, another spell of nausea seizes me. I bend over the open toilet again as the spasm rack through my body.

I'm trying to do it as gracefully as possible, if there even is such a thing, when I feel my hair being pulled back.

The vicious, gorgeous don of the Solovev Bratva is holding my hair while I vomit.

Cute.

Truly the stuff dreams are made of.

I finish and crawl over to the sink. "Need some help?" He sounds more amused than concerned.

"No!" I grip the sink to pull myself upright, then wash my mouth and face.

The moment I finish, a towel lands on my head. I glare at Leo, who gives me a single raised eyebrow.

"Better now?"

I wipe my chin. "Not even close." I shove past him, back into the bedroom. The room swims in my vision and I have to plop down on the bed, feeling weaker than ever.

Leo, of course, either doesn't notice or doesn't give a shit. No prizes for guessing which of those two is more likely.

"We're leaving in a few minutes."

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the mansion. Where else?"

"Is it safe there?"

"I have a full security team outside the walls around the clock. You'll be safe." He walks to the door. "Be down in two minutes."

I mutter a string of curses to myself and look around the room. My suit from yesterday—what’s left of it—is shoved under the bed. I don’t want to look at it again, let alone wear it. Jessica’s blood is on that thing. It’s not a beautiful work of art anymore.

It’s a stomach-churning memorial.

Unfortunately for me, I don’t have any other pants. I pull them on, trying to fight back any more flashbacks from the day before, and keep Leo’s t-shirt on. Shrugging back into that jacket would just be too much.

When I go downstairs, he’s waiting by the door. “Hurry up.”

With a resigned sigh, I follow him to the vehicle. Now, there are two other vehicles parked behind Leo’s.

I recognize the big, muscly guy with the quick smile. He flashes me a smirk as I approach Leo’s vehicle.

I don’t bother returning the gesture. I don’t even think my face is capable of it today.

I get into the passenger seat and wait for Leo to finish talking to his men. They whisper back and forth with grim expressions for a minute or two before they all nod and part ways.

The moment he gets in the car, I turn to him. “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that a whole bunch of crazy fucking lunatics chased me through the city yesterday,” I spit in frustration. “Who are they and what do they want?”

He doesn’t answer the question as he pulls out into the road.

“Are you going to answer me?”

“No.”

I bite down on my tongue, but that doesn’t help at all. Mostly because I still have the aftertaste of vomit in my mouth.

“Stop the car.”

He doesn't reply to that, either.

"I'm going to be sick."

"No, you're not." He locks the doors.

I glare at him. "You know the reason there are a bunch of psycho murderers after me. I would really, really like to know that reason."

His eyes remain fixed on the road. Still no response.

"You!" I yell. "*You!* You pulled me into your crazy world and now I'm a target and I don't even know why. It's not fair."

"I have news for you, *kukolka*: life isn't fucking fair."

Hot tears prick in the corners of my eyes. I'm usually better at hiding my feelings. Casey trained that into me. He hated what he used to call my "long face."

But after yesterday, everything is bubbling up to the surface. I can't keep it all inside or I'll explode.

"Is it the Mikhail people?"

"Mikhailov."

"Right. Them. Is it them?"

"Yes."

I take a breath. Leo's brother died at their hands. If they want me, this must be serious.

And for Leo, it's personal.

"Is that what started the feud? The fact that they murdered your brother?"

"Tensions were rising before then," Leo tells me. "The Mikhailov had historically claimed the lion's share of power. But we were rising fast under my brother's leadership."

"They felt threatened."

Leo nods. “We were still growing. My brother was young. They took advantage.”

“So this isn’t likely to end anytime soon?”

“Not until one of us is dead,” he says bluntly.

I stare at him. He looks so solid. Too stubborn to die. But after seeing what those men did to Jessica yesterday, I’m scared.

And not just for myself.

Which in and of itself is pretty scary.

“So... the Mik... Mikhailov,” I say, still stumbling over the name. “Presumably, they have a leader who’s your counterpart? Some other big swinging dick with an ego the size of Jupiter?”

“They do.”

“What’s his name?”

He glances over at me. I wonder at what’s contained within that glance. He looks away immediately, though.

Not that I’d be able to decipher anything either way.

“Semyon Mikhailov,” he says at last. “He’s an old man now, but he’s let a rabid dog off the leash who’s running things for him.”

“Should I know this rabid dog’s name?”

“I don’t see why. He’s never going to get his hands on you.”

The way he says it is angry and possessive. One look at his face and a shiver creeps up my spine. If Semyon Mikhailov could see Leo right now, he might rethink going up against him.

It’s almost enough to deter me from asking more questions. But this is the most I’ve gotten out of him, so I decide to push my luck.

“Why would he want to get his hands on me in the first place?” I ask.

“He wants you, because I have you.”

“That’s all I am?” I ask. “Leverage?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“That still doesn’t explain why you decided to take me.”

“I need a wife and an heir one day,” Leo answers. “It makes things much less complicated if there are no feelings involved.”

His tone is light and calm, but they slash through the air like a whip. Is that why he picked me for this “job?” Because he knew he’d never develop real feelings for me?

I’m not special.

I’m not chosen.

I’m just the woman he can afford to lose.

Tears fill my eyes yet again. I try desperately to fight them off. What is wrong with me today? It’s like my self-control is nonexistent. I just pray that he doesn’t look my way and see how close I am to crumbling.

But my shitty luck persists.

“Why are you crying?” he asks.

I turn my face towards the window pointedly. Leo doesn’t ask again. We drive the rest of the way in silence.

The moment we clear the gates and stop in front of the mansion, I unbuckle myself and zip out of the car. I stride past his men and into the house. When I get to the room I was staying in before—I refuse to think of it as *my* room—I lock the door and head straight for my bed. I fall onto it and at long last, I let the tears fall freely.

Just yesterday, I’d been riding the high of a fresh divorce. The possibility of a new start.

But now, I’m being held captive by a man who wants to marry me. Not because of love or even basic desire. But because he needs an heir. Which makes me a breeding cow, essentially.

I suppose that way, if his enemies do manage to capture and kill me, at least he won't have to waste time being sad about it.

The door opens. I jerk upright as Leo walks in.

"I locked the door," I snap.

He raises his eyebrows. "Do you really think I don't have the keys for every room in this house?"

"Right," I mutter. "Because it's your fucking house. Your fucking rules. Your fucking world."

"You're learning," he says. "Now, tell me why you're crying."

"Do you even care?"

"Let's call it professional curiosity."

I slide off the bed and stand in front of him. "Tell me something: that night when we met at the restaurant... what were you thinking when you saw me?"

He's quiet for a long time.

"I'd tell you not to spare my feelings," I add, "but I already know you won't."

His eyes ripple with muted anger. Finally, he responds through gritted teeth. "I was thinking, *She's perfect.*"

"Perfect for what?" I ask.

"To help me get what I want."

I flinch, even though it's the answer I expected. "I'm only as good to you as I'm useful. Isn't that right?"

"What do you want me to say, Willow? Do you want me to say I love you? I crave you? You won't get that from me. You are under my protection now," he says. "That should be worth more to you than love."

"And what if it's not?"

“Then you’ll have to learn to live with disappointment. Because I have nothing to give you.”

The fact that it hurts so bad when he says that tells me everything I need to know. At some point when I wasn’t looking, there was a shift in the earth that Leo and I are standing on. Movement in the plates.

I feel something for him.

Fuck if I know what to call it or how to deal with it. But I can’t deny that it’s there. That hot spot of sensation deep in my chest. Aching and desperate. The one that flames up high every time he looks at me—and sears every nerve ending every time he says something that breaks my heart just a little bit more.

“You’re really going to make me marry you?” I whisper. “Even though you don’t care about me?”

His expression remains impassive. “The moment you become my wife, you become Bratva. You become mine. You’ll be entitled to all the privileges and protections due to a Bratva wife. I’m doing you a favor, Willow.”

“I don’t know how to be a Bratva wife.”

“You’ll learn.”

I don’t want to learn how to live without love. I don’t want to learn how to be useful to Leo Solovev without ever meaning anything to him.

I want so badly to tell him all of that.

But I settle for running into the bathroom to vomit yet again.

LEO

Her big blue eyes swim with broken dreams. They silently beg me for everything her pride keeps her from saying out loud.

She needs more than I can give her.

Marriage to that abusive fucker broke her. He made her feel worthless and unwanted. Now, she's grappling for affection in all the wrong places. She searches for validation from all the wrong people.

She's not her own woman yet.

"I'll have a doctor come look at you," I say when she emerges from the bathroom.

"Don't bother," she snaps back. "I'm fine."

"That's the third time today you've thrown up."

"What can I say?" she says in an off-hand tone that doesn't suit her. "You bring it out in me."

I snatch her hand and yank her into my body. She hits me hard, but the shock lasts only a second before she starts struggling against my hold.

"Let me go!"

I shove her against the wall and her eyes widen. "You need to start following orders."

“I’m not one of your little toy soldiers,” she hisses. “You can’t order me around like you do with them.”

“Fucking watch me.”

She tries to break out of my grip, but I press my body against hers, pinning her in place. “Careful, *kukolka*. I can protect you against the world. But who’s going to protect you from me?”

“You won’t hurt me,” she snarls. “My pussy is still useful to you. Isn’t that right?”

I’m surprised at the venom in her tone—and impressed. Apparently, my explanation for why I took her has landed badly. She’s taken it so personally that she’s acting out now.

A mistake on her part.

Her reaction is giving me too much information. She’s being obvious about her hurt, her disappointment.

She’s giving me all the power.

“That’s right,” I say with a nod, sliding my hand down between us until I reach her legs.

She tries to clench them together, but I push them apart with a flick of my fingers. “Don’t you fucking dare,” she hisses.

I smile. “You should know better by now.”

I shove two fingers inside her, and her eyes go wide as her lips part from the pressure. She’s trying to resist me, but her body can’t hide the lie. She’s wet for me. She always is.

“You claim to want freedom,” I tell her. “But what you really want is *me*. That’s why you’re angry.”

“Fuck yo—”

The swipe of my thumb over her throbbing clit kills the words on her lips. She tries to shove me away, but her attempt is feeble. She just wants to be able to tell herself later that she did everything in her power.

“Pathetic,” I say, meeting her eyes.

“Get off me.”

I increase the pressure and intensity as I start fucking her with both fingers. Her eyes roll back in her skull. She bites down on her bottom lip.

“You really want me to get off you, baby?” I hiss. “Then make me believe it.”

She doesn’t answer. Instead, she bucks against my fingers, riding my hand as hard as she can. Her juices are dripping down my palm. That’s how I know we’ve reached the point of no return. Any farther and this will erupt into more than it’s meant to be.

So—even though I have to fight every instinct in my body—I pull my fingers out all the same.

She gasps as her eyes fly open.

“I guess I’ll get off you then,” I say with an evil smirk.

I step back. Willow remains pasted to the wall, her nipples visible through her thin t-shirt.

I want to rip it off her body, but I also want to tease her.

I want to punish her.

I want Willow to suffer for me.

“This is what you want,” I snarl. “Isn’t it?”

She glares at me, hot emotions warring in her eyes. “Didn’t I tell you to fuck off already?”

I raise my fingers and show her the moisture dripping down them. “Well, would you look at that: proof of how much you don’t want me.”

“My body is one thing,” she says. “My mind is another.”

“Good thing I have no interest in your mind.”

Anger flashes across her delicate features. Her chest is rising and falling hard. She's riled up, both sexually and otherwise.

She's not alone in that. My cock wants her badly. But unlike her, I'm no slave to my body. I learned to control my desires a long time ago.

Death is always waiting for the don who doesn't.

"I know there's something you're not telling me," she says.

"Or maybe you don't like the truth."

She shakes her head. "No. You're keeping something from me."

I shrug. "True. Many things, as a matter of fact."

"Because I'm not Bratva?"

"Because you're not ready."

She crosses her arms. "Who are you to determine that?"

I take a step towards her and she shrinks against the wall. "I am the fucking don."

"Not my don," she says, trying to infuse as much force and confidence into her tone as I did.

She does a fair job at that—at first. But as always, it's the silence that follows that becomes her undoing.

I stare at her until she blinks. Until she winces and looks away.

"Maybe we should test that theory," I suggest acidly.

I move in closer. Fight blazes in her eyes. It says, *Not this time. Not again.*

But she doesn't truly know what's coming for her. I've never liked to be predictable.

I bend down in front of her and rip off her panties with one tug. She gasps as the fabric gives way.

Then, tossing the ruined fabric over my shoulder, I slide my tongue up her slit.

“G-God,” she shudders.

But the fight is gone. All that’s left in her, all she can do, is the one thing I’ve been driving her towards since the moment we met.

Surrender.

I tease her first, building the anticipation she claims she doesn’t feel. She still doesn’t push me away or clamp her thighs closed. And when I grab her leg and hoist it over my shoulder so I can taste all of her, her fingers twist into my hair to urge me closer.

She arches her back, displaying her pussy in all its glory. I lap up all of her greedily.

As always, she’s teetering on the edge almost instantly. It’s so easy to make the little *kukolka* come. It never gets old, either.

Her body tightens as I lick faster. I can feel her at the peak, ready to explode on my face. Right there on the lip of a cliff, with endless room to fall below, waiting for just the tiniest little push...

So that’s when I stop.

I drop her leg unceremoniously and rise to my feet. Willow slumps against the wall, only pure shock keeping her upright. She looks at me with hazy, sex-crazed eyes.

When I readjust my cock in my pants, realization hits. Her expression turns sour.

“Who’s your don, little one?” I ask.

She grits her teeth and stands up a little straighter. Her tits are staring me in the face, round and hard and begging to be sucked.

I lick my lips. The gesture doesn’t go unnoticed.

“I’m not saying it.”

“Then you’re not coming anytime soon.”

“I’m not that desperate for an orgasm. It’s not worth my dignity.”

“Maybe not right now,” I say. “But... you will be. It will be.”

Then I leave her standing there, seething and roiling with rage. I can feel the heat of her anger follow me across the room, through the door.

The satisfaction from putting her in her place keeps me going until I reach my office. But my erection doesn’t go down easy.

When Jax and Gaiman walk in, however, it subsides almost immediately. Apparently, the two of them are the cold shower I need.

“Hey, boss man,” Jax says with a shit-eating grin that makes me suspicious. “How was your little getaway?”

“Jax, don’t be a fucking pain in my ass. I’m not in the mood.”

“What?” he protests. “I’m just asking. It must have been nice, holed up in that safehouse with your raven-haired siren.”

I roll my eyes. “What did I just tell you?”

“I bet you had to comfort her, huh? In the best way you know how?”

“What I do with my cock should be the least of your concerns right now,” I growl. “We have a bigger problem.”

Jax waves his hand dismissively. “Belov is not a problem. We can destroy him like we did his men.”

“Maybe,” I agree. “But there are more of them than there are of us.”

“Good,” Jax growls. “Then we’ll be on even footing.”

I like his way of thinking. I’m eager for blood, eager to end the life that took my brother’s. But the don in me has to think of more than just the fight to come.

There’s more skin in the game than the life of just one man. Even a man as deadly as Spartak Belov.

“The fact that he knows about Willow makes things a little harder,” I say.

Jax turns to Gaiman and then to me. “So... it’s true?” he asks.

I nod.

“Jesus,” he whistles. “You could have told us, though. Would’ve been nice to know what you were up to.”

“All you need to know is I never do anything without a fucking reason,” I say. Then, sighing, I add, “She was only ever meant to be a backup plan. But... things changed. Now, she is the plan.”

I’d counted on Belov finding out about Willow only when the explosives were planted and ready for detonation. That way, I’d have been able to hit him hard with an actual bomb while he was still reeling from the aftershocks of the Willow explosion.

But it’s not enough to make plans. You have to be able to change course at any moment.

And I’m nothing if not adaptable.

I proved that when my brother died. I never wanted to be don. I sure as fuck wasn’t prepared for it. But I adapted.

And now, I’m poised to win the war my brother started. I have one bomb planted, another on the way. Once both buildings are ready to blow, there will be only one trigger left to pull.

Not including the one between Willow’s legs.

“So, don’t keep us all in suspense, Leo... When’s the happy day?” Jax asks.

“Soon.”

“Good. Then there’s only one more thing we need to settle,” Jax says—seriously, for a change.

“What?” Gaiman is fool enough to ask, but I know better.

“Who’s the best man?” Jax finishes, that shit-eating grin shining at full blast. “Because the decision is clearly a no-brainer.”

“Well, clearly,” Gaiman drawls. “The first thing I think of when I hear ‘no-brainer’ is you, dimwit.”

I snort with laughter as Jax punches Gaiman in the stomach. The two of them fall to the carpet, wrestling and snarling insults at each other.

Meanwhile, I stare down at the plans laid out on my table. So much hinges on the marriage license I’ve called for.

And still, I’m not sure Willow’s ready for any of this. Not only the marriage itself, but everything that will come after.

I remind myself that what she’s ready for is not my concern.

She’s the key.

LEO

We've been driving for an hour, and Willow hasn't even glanced at me. I'd admire her determination if it wasn't so annoying.

I throw the Jeep into park. "Get out."

Finally, she looks over, but it's just to glare at me.

I stalk over to her door and wrench it open. "Get out," I repeat.

"No." She stays stubbornly in the passenger seat.

"Do we have to do this dance every time?"

"You forced me out of the house despite my objections. You're not forcing me out of this vehicle."

I raise my eyebrows, and she stares back. She's challenging me.

Big fucking mistake.

I unbuckle her as she tries to slap my hands away. Then I grab hold of her and drag her out of the seat.

"Leo! Stop!" she screams.

"You had your chance." I heave her onto my shoulder.

Willow pounds her fists on my back, only giving up the fight when she becomes aware of the salty breeze that's hitting us from the north.

“Where the hell have you brought me?”

“What does it look like?”

I set her down on the dock right in front of *The Ariel*. She looks like a castle, rising a couple stories high out of the water. Blue lights flood the water around the yacht so it looks like the boat is floating on a cloud. The black and white paint job gleams in the moonlight.

Willow’s mouth falls open as she stares at the luxury vessel. “Who’s... going to drive it? Or, like, sail it, or whatever. You know what I mean.”

“I am.”

“You know how to—?”

“I know how to do everything.”

She rolls her eyes. “Except woo women, apparently.”

I laugh. “I know how to do that, too. You’ve just never seen me try.”

She flinches, but turns her face away quickly. She doesn’t want me to see all the emotion on her face.

Little late for that, though. She’s been wearing her feelings on her sleeve for the last couple of days. Even more than usual. A side effect of her run-in with the Mikhailov bastards, no doubt.

She stumbles down the gangplank and onto the yacht, but it’s mostly to put some distance between us. Also probably so I don’t throw her over my shoulder again.

Once onboard, she hesitates at the stairs. Below deck, there are two private rooms complete with en-suite bathrooms, a kitchen, a bar. The top deck boasts a glorious view of the ocean in all directions.

Maybe that’s all a little much for her, though. She falters, then settles for leaning against the railing and looking out at the city skyline beyond the docks.

So be it. She can stay right there for now.

I leave her behind and pilot *The Ariel* out on the water. It's another hour before I drop anchor and leave the captain's seat to join Willow.

She found her way to the top deck at some point in the voyage. She looks like a portrait in profile—lit up by the moon, the shadows across her face dramatic and smooth.

She stiffens as I approach. “Why did you bring me here?” she asks without looking at me. “You're not going to murder me and dump my body into the ocean, are you?”

“Why would I go through all the trouble of abducting you if I was just going to kill you?”

“So you're not done using me. Is that it?”

“This isn't as one-sided as you're making it sound. You're getting something out of it, too.”

“Like what?”

“Like how you've already gotten the divorce you wanted. You're welcome, by the way,” I drawl. “And now, you have my protection.”

“Protection I wouldn't need if it weren't for you.”

“That's debatable.”

She arches an eyebrow. “More secrets?”

“In this life, there are always more secrets.”

Her expression turns thoughtful. “I don't belong here.”

“A natural sentiment,” I tell her. “No one chooses the Bratva. You're either born into it or you're forced into it.”

“You're saying even the all-powerful Leo Solovev couldn't just walk away if he chose?”

I regard her with interest. It must be nice to see the world from her perspective. For Willow, there's black and white. There's right and wrong.

She doesn't have to muddy through all the gray in between.

I shake my head. "There's no walking away from the Bratva."

"But if you had the choice, would you?"

"You're not listening," I say. "There is no choice."

"I'm talking hypothetically."

I grimace. "That's a waste of time."

"Just answer the question. You said yourself you didn't want to be don. You don't dream of giving it all up?"

"I didn't want the shoes my brother left behind for me to fill," I clarify. "That was his role, his legacy. And he was robbed of it."

She nods slowly as she processes that. It's like, every time we broach this subject, she discovers another little fragment of me that she can piece together. She's nowhere near the full picture, of course. But the tiniest bit of progress is enough to placate her.

For now.

"I can understand why you'd want revenge," she muses. "But..."

"There is no 'but,'" I interrupt harshly. "There is only revenge."

"Life might be simpler if—"

"You're still not fucking listening?" I take a step towards her. "Being Bratva is not about simplicity. We're not normal citizens living normal lives. We're not people like *you*."

There's an obvious insult in my tone, and to her credit, she recognizes it immediately. She flinches, but doesn't back away.

"There's nothing wrong with people like me," she says in a soft voice.

"Except weakness," I say. "And self-doubt. And insecurities strong enough to choke you to death."

Her eyes flash with anger. “Normal people are complicated, and nuanced, and... not like you. You’re just a two-dimensional villain who avoids real love because he sees it as a weakness. And you know what? At the end of the day, I just feel sorry for you.”

I cock my head to the side, but she doubles down.

“That’s right. I feel *sorry* for you. Because you’ll never experience the power and the strength that can come from loving someone wholly and completely. And having that person love you in return.”

I roll my eyes. I don’t even bother hiding it. “Jesus, spare me the speech.”

“The joke’s on you, Leo.”

“How’s that?”

“You think you can control everything. Maybe ninety-nine percent of the time you can. But you can’t control who you fall for.”

I think about Ariel. I think about Pavel.

And my insides flare with rage at what they both had to endure. Maybe they’d have claimed it was worth it. But as the outside observer, I have to disagree.

“You’re forgetting: I *can* control everything.”

She shakes her head. “You know something else?”

“Probably.”

She rolls her eyes, and leans over like she wants to touch the water. “I think you’re full of shit. You’re lying.”

“About what?”

“About never having been in love before.”

I wait, amused, to hear why she thinks I’m lying about that of all things.

“No man names a freaking boat after a woman unless he was in love with her,” she adds triumphantly.

I snort. “Well, you’re right about that.”

Her eyes go wide, and it’s clear she wasn’t expecting me to cop to that so readily. “I... I am?”

I clap for her mockingly. “As far as observations go, that was a surprisingly good one.”

“Oh. Right. So... Ariel, huh?” she fumbles. “Who was she?”

I wonder how far I should push this. I’m a predator playing with my food, I know that. But when it comes to Willow, I just can’t resist.

“A girl I knew, a long, long time ago.”

“And she was important to you?”

“Very.”

Her lower lip puckers just a little. She’s trying to fight the jealousy, but it’s coming up anyway.

“Was she beautiful?” she asks.

The second she asks the question, I know she regrets it. “Extraordinarily so.”

She looks out towards the ocean, making sure to keep her hair on the right side of her face so that it’s hidden from view. Her jaw is clenched so tight I can see the striations of muscle, tense with the effort. And maybe even the sparkle of a tear on her cheek?

Perhaps this has gone far enough.

“She was my brother’s fiancé,” I explain. “This was my brother’s yacht.”

She turns to me immediately. “Oh. He must have really loved her.”

“I think he did.”

“Where is she now?”

“Gone,” I say. “Pavel’s death ruined her. A part of her never recovered. She decided to make a different life for herself elsewhere.”

“Oh. That’s so... sad.”

“Life often is.”

“Do you keep in touch with her?”

“Sometimes.”

“How’s she doing now?”

I study her face. “Please don’t tell me you’re a romantic.”

Her expression flattens. “Don’t say it like it’s a bad word.”

“Isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is—for a man without a soul.”

“I don’t have a soul now?”

She shrugs. “I haven’t seen any proof to the contrary.”

I smirk. “Fair enough. Better a man without a soul than a man without power.”

“Yeah, okay. I hope your power keeps you warm at night.”

“I have you for that.”

Her eyes flash to mine and she takes a step back. “You don’t have me at all.”

I love when she gets feisty. I stalk another step closer. “Oh yes, I do, *kukolka*. Whatever I want, I get.”

She puts her hand out and places it squarely on my chest. “That’s close enough. I’m not interested in being another name on your list.”

I snort with cold laughter. “I think it’s a little late for that.”

She opens her mouth to retort, then thinks better of it. Her lips close again, pursed in thought, as she turns away and looks out across the ocean.

I follow her gaze. The moon is low and bright in the sky. Its reflection floats on top of the rippling water, silver, ethereal. We left the coast behind half an hour ago. Nothing but water surrounds us, black and endless.

Willow takes a step back from the railing and in one swift move, she pulls her dress over her head. It puddles on the wooden deck next to her.

Beneath it, she's wearing a black bra and matching thong. My cock hardens instantly.

I'm still wondering what she's doing as she unclasps her bra and pulls it off with a confidence that I've only glimpsed from her before. Then she slips off her panties and tosses them on top of her dress.

For the first time, I'm not entirely sure what Willow has planned. And I can't help but be impressed. It's like I've been poking and prodding at this dormant potential in her for so long, and finally, it's coming to life.

The little lioness is waking up.

She still doesn't look at me as she walks over to the railing and climbs up. I frown and start towards her.

"What are you doing?" I ask. "Willow, what the hell are you—"

Her face is smooth and peaceful. She takes a deep breath and then...

She jumps.

I run to the railing and look down, just in time to see her body slice into the water soundlessly. The water froths like white foam where she entered. That fades, as do the ripples, and the waves swallow up any evidence that she ever dove there.

I hold my breath. "Come up," I growl to myself. "Come the fuck up."

Then, at long last, she pierces the surface again. Her raven hair glitters midnight blue. She wipes the saltwater off her face and looks up at me with the faintest glimmer of a wry smirk on the corners of her lips.

"You coming in?"

I pull off my clothes and discard them next to hers. I don't bother standing on the outer railing like she did. I just launch myself over the side and into the water.

The cold water stabs at me from all sides and it feels fucking amazing. Clarifying. Fortifying.

Men like me burn hot by nature.

But molten metal must be chilled to become useful.

When I come up for air, Willow is floating a few feet away from me. I stroke over toward her and stop just a few inches shy. Her feet graze against mine beneath the wave caps.

“This marriage doesn’t have to be a prison, Willow,” I tell her. “You can go back and finish school, if you choose. You can work if you want. Though you won’t have any real reason to. I will provide.”

“I relied on a man to provide for me once before,” she says.

“He wasn’t a man. He was a fucking snake,” I snarl. “And I’ve cut off his head.”

She raises her eyebrows. “That’s... that’s just a metaphor, right?”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Her expression softens. I can’t tell if she is relieved or not. “We’ll table that for now.”

“Your choice.”

She takes a deep breath. “I don’t have a choice in this, though, do I? I’m marrying you whether I like it or not?”

“Correct,” I say. “But something tells me you like it.”

Willow tilts her chin up towards the moon. “What was it you told me: be smart enough to know when you’ve lost?”

“Did I say that?” I ask. “Wise. Sounds like something you should consider.”

She sighs wordlessly. Without even realizing it, she’s slipped closer to me. Her breasts brush against my chest, and I grip her hips.

Her gaze falls to mine. I see the desire reflected there, molten and silver just like the moon.

“Don’t take this to mean I want to get married to you,” she whispers weakly.

“Noted.”

She looks down, gnawing at her lip in disappointment. “I should be putting up more of a fight.”

“Because you want to, or because you think you should?”

“Is there a difference?”

I grip her thigh in my hand. “One is a lie. One is not. All you have to do is admit which is which.”

She whistles out a sad breath. “I... I can’t.” Her fingers trail down my chest, chasing water droplets as they slide down my skin.

“You will, little one,” I rasp to her. “You will.”

WILLOW

I stare at the phone and take a deep breath. “Just do it,” I tell myself firmly. “Just fucking do it. Like a Band-Aid.”

I grab the phone and dial the number. I still have it memorized.

But the moment I hear my mother’s voice, I lose all my nerve and hang up.

“Goddammit.” I throw my phone into the pillows and bury my face in my hands. “What is wrong with me?”

“You want the short list or the long one?”

I gasp and spin around to find Leo standing in my doorway. “Am I going to get privacy when we’re married at least?”

“Not likely.”

I fall back onto my bed. Leo’s shadow looms over me. “Tried calling your parents?”

“How’d you know?”

He shrugs. “You’re easy to read.”

I sit up. “She... She picked up. My mother did. And I—”

“Hung up,” he says. “Yeah, I was here for that part.”

I hang my head in embarrassment. “I just don’t know what I should say to them after all this time.”

“Tell them the truth.”

“What? That they were right? That I should never have dropped out of college or married Casey?” I ask. “Or that I’m about to marry a Bratva don?”

“All of the above, if you’re up for it.”

I sigh. “Easier said than done. I know I should let go of my pride, but admitting you’re wrong is never easy.”

He arches a perfect eyebrow. “I wouldn’t know.”

I roll my eyes. “Right, of course. You’re the perfect specimen and we all tremble in your presence.”

“Fear is a waste of time, Willow.” He turns towards the door.

“You never get scared, do you?”

“No.”

The answer comes so easily, so readily, that I actually believe him.

With Leo, it’s easy to believe that he’s some other worldly breed of human who has evolved past petty little emotions like fear and weakness.

When he leaves, I take a deep breath and repeat his words again. *Fear is a waste of time.*

I can do this.

I dial in the number again and this time, when mum picks up, I don’t hang up. “Hello?” she says.

I clench the phone tight and draw in a breath. It still takes me a moment to actually speak. “Hello?” she says again. “Is someone there?”

“M... Mom?”

I’m met with silence for what feels like eternity. Then I hear an inhale so sharp I almost get sucked into the receiver.

“Willow?” Her voice is soft like she’s worried she might frighten me away.

“It’s me, Mom.”

Another breath. “Darling…”

And that one word. That one word lifts the weight off my chest.

I can breathe again.

“Mom,” I say, the words coming easier and easier. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Oh, darling, I am, too.”

“Don’t apologize to me. You didn’t do anything wrong. You and Daddy were nothing but amazing parents. It was all me. I was the ungrateful bitch. I was the stubborn one.”

“We shouldn’t have tried to interfere,” she says. “You were—*are*—an adult. You can make your own choices.”

I hear my own words echoed in her voice. Our last conversation is so vivid, even now. I can only imagine she remembers every word, too.



We sat in the living room. The same room where we used to watch movies together and open Christmas presents. The family place, the happy place.

Until this moment.

“I’m an adult now,” I snapped. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“I understand what you are, darling, but we still want to help,” Mom said. “We’re family.”

“You know better than anyone that family is about who you choose.” I leaned forward and spat the next few words at them like poison darts. “And I choose Casey.”

My mother’s chin wobbles—and then the tears break loose.

“Honey, he’s—he’s not right for you,” she stammered, trying to hold back the tide of her crying.

“You’re an adult in the eyes of the law. It’s not the age,” my father said quickly. “The problem is the man.”

“He’s a good man.”

“He looks at you like a prize, Willow,” Mom exploded. “He looks at you like a prize and not like a person.”

“What’s so wrong with that? Aren’t I a prize?”

“A prize is a possession,” Mom asserted. “A person is so much more than that. *You* are so much more than that. And if he can’t see it...”

I rolled my eyes. “You don’t even know him.”

“We know enough.”

“I can’t believe you two. I would have thought you’d be happy,” I seethed. “He’s handsome and successful. He just got another promotion. He wants to be able to provide for me. I won’t have to lift a finger.”

“Don’t you want more for yourself than to be a kept woman?” Dad asked.

“That’s rich coming from you. From *both* of you. Aren’t *you* a kept woman?” I demanded, turning to my mother.

“I chose to be a stay-at-home mom,” she said defensively. “Your father never made demands of me. He let me make my own decisions.”

“Well, maybe Casey knows what’s best for me.”

“Oh, honey...”

I turned from both of them. “You’re wrong about him.”

“Love...” Dad’s voice carried over mom’s quiet sobs. “Don’t marry him. Don’t drop out of college.”

“I’m dropping out of college, and I’m dropping out of this family,” I snapped. “I wasn’t ever really a part of it, anyway.”

Dad shook his head. “What are you saying? Of course you were. You’re our daughter, Willow. We’re your parents. We love—”

“Actually, you’re not,” I interrupted. “You aren’t my parents at all. You’re just two people who tried to fill the hole in their lives with someone else’s child.”

Then I turned and left. I never once looked back.



The memory of that conversation sits like a stone in my stomach. I want to turn back time, take it all back. How could I have been so cruel, so stubborn, so stupid?

I cling to the phone, begging the tears burning my eyes to stay put. I don’t want to turn into a blubbering mess.

“I made you feel like you weren’t really my parents, and I’m... I’m so sorry,” I say. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Where are you now?” she asks.

“I... I’m back home.”

“Really? I thought you moved to Colorado?” she asks in shock.

“For the first few years. Then Casey’s job brought him back here.”

She goes silent for a moment. I feel the tension even from the other side of the phone.

“Mom?”

“Are you happy?” she asks. “Are the two of you happy together?”

Now comes the hard part. I take a deep breath. “Is Daddy around?”

“Oh, of course. Hold on... Ben! Pick up the extension!” she says in the background. “Yes, now!”

A second later, I hear a click. “Nat?” he says to my mother. “What’s this about?”

I’m so nervous that my voice comes out in a pipsqueak. “Hi, Daddy.”

“Dear Lord!” he gasps. “Is that my Willow Tree?”

Tears jump to my eyes immediately. He hasn’t called me that since I was seven years old—when I begged him to stop using it.

But now, I revel in the sound of it.

“Hi, Daddy,” I whisper. “It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Oh, honey.” I can tell he’s choked up and trying to hide it. “You have no idea... *no* idea how good it is to hear from you.”

“I know this call is long overdue. I should have—”

“You called now,” my mother cuts in. “That’s what matters.”

I don’t deserve the easy acceptance, the ready forgiveness they lay at my feet. But I can’t help lapping it up like a street dog starving for nourishment.

“Tell us everything, dear,” my dad says. “What’s been happening in your life?”

Suddenly, I wish I’d found the courage to have this conversation in person rather than on the phone. I want to be able to see them, hug them. And I want them to see me, too. See that I’m okay.

“I divorced Casey.”

Stunned silence follows.

“You and Daddy were right about him from the start,” I say. “He wasn’t a good man. He was a controlling monster. You both saw right through him after one dinner. It took me years...”

“You were in love,” Mom says gently. “People make silly decisions when they’re in love.”

I think about my current situation. As much as I've been telling Leo he's the same as Casey, I know it's not true. I was so sure of Casey's perfection that I refused to see his flaws.

But I see Leo. All of him. He shows it to me without an ounce of shame.

And what I feel for him, that unsolvable tangle of emotions and urges that don't have a name? It's intense in a way I've never felt before. It isn't born from naivete and blindness. It's a raw, animal magnetism I can't shake.

Even if I could shake it... would I?

"I was too young to understand what love really meant," I say. "I thought Casey was everything, but in the end... he hurt me."

"Willow," my dad whispers, "why didn't you come to us?"

"I was ashamed."

"Ashamed?"

"Of the way I treated both of you. Of the things I said to you the day I left the house. You were right about everything and I just... I didn't feel like I had the right to call you and ask for help when I'd basically spit in your faces."

I don't need to see Mom to know she's crying.

"Mom, don't cry. Please. This wasn't your fault. None of it was. You warned me."

"Are you happy now, my darling?" my dad asks.

The moment she asks the question, I see Leo, bobbing in the endless ocean with saltwater beading in his hair like diamonds. I see the curve of his collarbone, feel the heat of his fingertips on my hips. I taste his tongue, sense his warmth, fall over and over again into the caramel of his eyes.

"I'm much happier than I used to be," I tell them.

It's not a lie.

"That's all we ever wanted, Willow," my dad says. "That's the only thing that matters."

“I love you both,” I say fiercely.

“We love you so much, honey,” Mom says tearfully.

My dad adds, “Never doubt that.”

I promise to call again soon, we say our goodbyes, and then we hang up. When the call is over, I just sit on my bed with my phone clasped in my hand.

My heart feels lighter and it makes me realize the weight I’ve spent years carrying around. The guilt and shame are still there, but they aren’t dragging me down like before. I can lift them now. I can start to move on.

I get to my feet and go to find Leo. To... thank him, I guess. After all, he was the one who encouraged me to call them when I didn’t think I could do it.

The door to his office is closed, but I can hear him talking on the other side. I lift my hand to knock but stop short when I hear my name.

“It doesn’t fucking matter,” he says, his tone clipped. “I have Willow. She’s the secret weapon that will deliver me every single one of those motherfuckers’ skulls.”

My blood runs cold. What is he talking about? How am I a secret weapon?

“Why the fuck do you think I recruited her in the first place?”

A sob almost tears out of me, but I manage to hold it in by biting down on my knuckles. The sound of his footsteps recede and the conversation fades.

It doesn’t matter anyway, because I don’t think I could concentrate on another word.

I turn and retreat back to the bedroom. Back to the cage where Leo has me stashed. Because that’s what I am, right—a possession to be locked up? A trinket to be guarded?

It was easy to convince myself otherwise last night, with the city and everything it contains reduced to nothing more than a glimmer on the horizon. Out there, Leo was the only thing keeping me safe, keeping me above water.

I craved him in that moment. Wanted him so badly that every cell of my body burned with the need.

And I could swear I saw it in his eyes, too. That he wanted me like I want him. You don't look at a possession like that. You just don't.

You only look at that at something that makes you glad to be alive.

But the words he just spoke and the way he spoke them cut in the exact opposite direction. Those say that I am to him what I've always been to the men in my life...

Useful until discarded.

LEO

When I get downstairs for dinner, the table is set for two with cloth napkins and shining silverware.

But Willow is nowhere to be seen.

Mariska walks in carrying a fruit tray and avoids eye contact. I'd never be cruel to my help, but that doesn't stop some of the maids from being terrified of me anyway.

"Where's Willow?" I ask.

The woman blinks up at me, feigning ignorance, but I know she knows. Very little happens in this house that the maids don't know about, whether they should or not.

"She isn't feeling well and won't be down for dinner," Mariska says diplomatically.

I frown. She looked fine when I left her in her room a few hours ago.

I give Mariska a dismissive nod, and she scurries back to the kitchen. Meanwhile, I head to Willow's room.

When I grab the handle, it's locked. She should fucking know better by now. I briefly consider kicking it down, just to make a point. But instead, I use my key to enter her room.

She's lying on the bed. Her face is turned towards the open window. She's obviously aware that I'm here—I note how her breath quickens, then stills, like she's forcing herself to act normal—but she doesn't move in my direction or acknowledge my presence.

Not until I sit down on the edge of her bed. Then, finally, she sits up slowly and affords me a small glance.

“Mariska told me you were sick. You don't look sick.”

“I... I was feeling a little weird before,” she says. “But I feel better now.”

Something's not right. She's not meeting my eyes, and her body language is stiff and nervous.

“How was the call with your parents?” I ask.

“It was... hard. Emotional.”

She's wearing a tight black tank that accentuates her breasts. Her cleavage is inviting, but I keep my eyes on her face. It's never a good idea to appear too preoccupied. Even if I am.

“But they were wonderful,” she says with a regretful sigh. “They didn't even say ‘I told you so.’”

“Is that what you were expecting?”

“It's what I deserved.” She blinks, then starts to fiddle with the split ends at the end of her hair. “They tried so hard to warn me off him. I refused to listen. What was it you told me once: lived experience something, something...?”

“Lived experience is the only way to convince someone where logic and reason fail.”

She sighs again. “I hate it when you're right.”

“I assumed you'd be used to it by now.”

“I think we've already established that I never learn.”

I regard her carefully. Willow has never been the most confident person, but she's worn her false bravado like a suit of armor since the moment we met. To see her like this, so self-deprecating, so self-loathing? It's strange. Unsettling.

"I want to see them," she says.

"That's not a good idea right now."

"Why not?"

"Because the Mikhailovs are closing in. We shouldn't make any unnecessary trips out of this compound."

She nods stiffly, like she was anticipating the refusal.

"You can meet up with them after things settle down," I add.

"After?" she asks. "How long will that be?"

"We'll see."

She's quiet for a moment, gnawing at her bottom lip. It's what she does when she isn't sure if she should say something or not.

I just wait. The silence will coax it out of her sooner or later.

Sure enough, after a minute or two has passed, she whispers, "Will you just... hold me, for a little bit?"

That surprises me. "Why?"

"I just want to feel something real."

She turns and lies down on her side, one hand tucked under her pillow, both legs curled up to her chest.

I consider walking away. This is a silly request, after all—she's a weapon in my arsenal, and I'm not in the business of providing emotional support to the people who work for me.

More than that, though, it's a dangerous request.

Because if I lie down next to her, there's no telling what I might do next.

Without looking up at me, I hear Willow say, “Please, Leo?”

That seals it.

I sigh and tuck myself along her back. With one hand on her hip, I pull her into me. We lie like that for I don’t even fucking know how long. Minutes? An hour? Just the span of a few breaths?

I’m working as hard as fucking possible to keep myself in check. But the smell of the vanilla in her hair and the warmth of her ass on my dick is unraveling me.

And—for fuck’s sake, is she grinding back on me? It’s so subtle at first that I don’t even notice it. Not consciously, at least.

My cock is on it immediately, though, springing to hard, throbbing attention. And as the clock ticks away seconds overhead, the pace of her grinding increases, intensifies.

She’s turned away from me so I can’t see her face to know if this is on purpose. If she’s asleep. If *I’m* asleep.

But when my fingers slide automatically to the V between her legs and she lets loose the tiniest whimper, I know that it isn’t a dream.

Willow rolls onto her back, one hand still below the pillow, the other finding the curls at the back of my head. Her eyes are half-lidded and flush with desire.

“Touch me,” she whispers, so quiet I almost miss it. Then she pulls my head down until my mouth meets hers.

Our tongues lash together as Willow rubs her thigh against my erection. I growl into her mouth and unbutton her jeans. My hand slides inside of her panties and finds her wetness. She whimpers again, right into our kiss, while I stroke her delicately.

She bucks up into my palm. Another rush of blood to my cock doubles the ache. I’m about to bust in my pants like a horny fucking teenager dry humping in their parents’ basement just from touching Willow between her legs.

“*Kukolka*, I—”

Then she does something I’m not expecting.

The hand she’s had trapped under the pillow comes whisking out. And with it...

A knife.

She presses the blade against my bare throat. The steel is bright, but it’s no match for the glimmer in her eyes. They’re flush with fear. She’s never used a knife as a weapon before. I doubt she’s ever used *anything* as a weapon before.

It almost makes me proud that she would try something so bold—and so stupid.

I stop everything, though my hand is still trapped inside her pants. “What’s the plan, Willow?” I growl. “Are you going to cut my throat with my fingers inside you?”

I can feel the blade trembling against my throat.

“I... I can do it. If you so much as move, I’ll fucking kill you.”

Oddly, this turn of events has only made me harder. I’m actually fit to burst right now, but I’m fighting it. Who knew that being threatened with a knife during foreplay could be such a fucking turn-on?

“How long have you been planning this?”

“Thirty-seven minutes.”

“Interesting. What happened thirty-seven minutes ago?”

She blinks hard, forcing the tears back. “I came down to tell you about the call from my parents, and... and... I heard you. I don’t know who you were talking to. But—”

“You heard me say that you were the key.”

“I heard you say a lot more than that.”

Her tone is surprisingly steady, but her expression is twisting and turning like the wind. She looks like she wants to break down, but she's scared that if she does, there'll be no one there to pick up the pieces.

"I told you from the start that this was about revenge, Willow. It's about power. If you want love, look somewhere else. You won't find it here."

"How am I the key?"

"Is that really what you're upset about?"

She pushes the knife a little harder against my throat. "I'm the one in control now. I'll ask the questions."

"You're in control?" I ask with amusement. "It doesn't feel that way to me."

She opens her mouth to reply, but before she can get the words out, I stroke my thumb over her clit. She gasps and splutters and the blade loosens against my throat.

"Stop!" she cries out hoarsely.

"Somehow, little one, I don't think you mean that."

"I have a weapon pressed to your throat. You should be scared."

"Why?"

"One swipe and you'll be dead."

I shrug. "Then I'll be dead. If I were afraid of dying, I wouldn't have survived very long in this world."

She frowns. I can see her determination slipping. She thought she had all the cards.

Wrong, as per usual.

"You're taking a long time to kill me," I point out. "What are you waiting for?"

"I..."

"Go ahead if you're going to," I say. "I told you, I'm not a patient man."

“You’re playing with me.”

“That was your doing. I’d rather be fucking you. But you’ve got a knife at my throat.”

“How could you?” she asks.

The words burst from her lips and I know that she’s spoken despite herself. She wanted to remain detached and aloof. She wanted to maintain her semblance of control. But no matter how badly she doesn’t want to care, she does.

I’ll admit, having her know about this is inconvenient. It would have been so much easier if she’d stayed in the dark until after the wedding.

Now, it will be even more of a struggle to get her down the aisle.

Not that I mind a struggle. I just don’t have the time or the patience to deal with her insecurities when the walls are closing in.

Belov knows I’m moving against him now. The clock is ticking. The guns have been drawn.

“I did what I had to do.”

“For you.”

“For my Bratva.”

She rolls her eyes. “Same thing.”

“If only you knew how wrong you were.”

She blinks again, swallows, and redoubles her grip on the knife. “Let me leave. Promise me that you’ll let me walk out of here, and I swear I won’t kill you.”

“I’d rather you just kill me now. There are far worse ways to go than dying with my hands inside such a beautiful creature. So,” I say with finality, “let’s do what you came here to do. I’ll help.”

I move my other hand to her wrist and press the knife harder into my throat, drawing it slowly from one side to the other. Skin breaks. Blood trickles

down into the hollow at my collarbone.

We're hurtling toward the point of no return. A little harder, a little faster, and my life's blood will spill out all over her. She'll wear the stain of my death for as long as she survives. Can she bear that?

I already know the answer.

Which is why I'm not surprised when she closes her eyes, opens her hand, and lets the knife fall to the bed.

"I... I can't..." she breathes.

I smile cruelly. "I know."

Willow stares at the ceiling. The tears she was holding back all this time roll silently down her face.

I get off the bed and rearrange my stiff dick, though it still aches.

"You knew from the moment I pulled the knife I couldn't do it," she says quietly. It's not quite a question, but close enough.

"Yes."

"How?"

The answer is obvious. To both of us.

But I tell her anyway.

"I knew you wouldn't kill me because you made the mistake of falling in love with me, Willow."

Then I turn and leave her to grapple with what those words might mean for both of us.

WILLOW

“You’re being summoned.”

The man standing in the threshold of my doorway is not anyone I recognize. He has dark, heavy features and small black eyes. He radiates violence, which I’m assuming is why he was sent to fetch me in the first place.

I raise my eyebrows with incredulity. “Excuse me?”

But there’s no point in asking who sent this errand boy here. In this house, there’s only one man who does the summoning.

I haven’t seen Leo in two whole days. It shouldn’t feel like a long time, but it does.

Matter of fact, it feels like a lifetime.

Ever since he told me that I was in love with him, I’ve been trying to talk myself off the ledge. Two days is a long time to be on a ledge, I’m realizing.

In love? That’s a bold assumption to make. And yet, the fact that it’s all I can think about forty-eight hours later makes it seem less bold.

“You can tell Don Solovev to go fuck himself.” I try to infuse as much strength into my voice as possible.

The man’s expression doesn’t change, but he does take a step forward, crossing the threshold and coming to stand with his boots on the pristine cream-colored carpet. It feels like a violation.

“Get out of my room.”

“This is not your room. This is Don Leo’s house. Which means this is Don Leo’s room.”

“I don’t give a shit. I’m staying here now, which makes it mine. You can’t force me out of here.”

“This will be much easier if you comply.”

Comply—what a pleasant sounding word for an ugly act of submission. That’s what he actually wants, right? My submission.

Fuck that. If I give Leo an inch, he’ll take a mile. A light year.

It will never stop.

So I grit my teeth together and spit, “I’m not going anywhere.”

The dark-eyed man sighs. Then, lightning fast, he lunges forward. It’s uncanny how much ground he covers, and how quickly, especially given the fact that he has to be close to seven feet tall and three hundred pounds of brawn and tattoo.

Come to think of it, his size is probably why Leo sent him here. He knew it would come to this.

The bastard really does know everything.

“No!” I scream as he hoists me onto his shoulder and walks me out of my room. “You fucking brute! Let me go! NOW!”

It doesn’t do any good. He ignores me and walks down the staircase while I scream bloody murder. At the bottom of the steps, he sets me back on my feet. I shove him, which does about as much good as shoving a mountain. I’m about to slap the shit out of him when I notice that we’re not alone.

There’s a line of men on either side of me. All of them are dressed in suits.

I twist around. “What the hell is going on?”

The line on my right parts and two men walk towards me. I’ve seen them both before. I even know their names.

The sulky one is Gaiman. The big, muscly one has a gritty sounding name that somehow clashes with his charm-your-pants-off smile. Jay, Jason... *Jax*. That was it.

He flashes me that signature smirk. “Never seen a bride look so sweaty and pissed off before. Usually, it’s all, *Look at me, I’m glowing with joy. Take a picture and post it.*”

The sulky one rolls his eyes. “Shut the fuck up, man.”

A second later, Jax’s words compute. “Bride? What the fuck are you talking about?”

He looks down and gestures to his outfit. “You think I’d wear this monkey suit without a damn good reason? We got all dressed up for the big day, princess.”

I look over Jax’s shoulder, through the glass-paned patio doors, and out into the garden beyond. No flowers or chairs in sight. Nothing to indicate that a wedding is about to take place.

Wait—there is a desk at the far side of the lawn. Behind it sits a man with a thick file in front of him.

So it is real.

It’s happening.

I shake my head. “I am not marrying that son of a bitch.”

Jax turns to Gaiman. “A thousand bucks says she’ll put up a fight but Leo will get his way in the end.”

Gaiman looks deeply unimpressed. “It’s Leo,” he says. “He always gets his way. No deal.”

“Pussy.”

“Where is he?” I demand, interrupting their banter.

“He’ll be out in a minute,” Gaiman replies.

“Everyone here is fucking delusional if they think there’s going to be a wedding.” I’m yelling to the line of men in suits, but they don’t so much as blink. I start to wonder if they’re real or if this floor was converted to a wax museum when I wasn’t looking. “This is ridiculous!”

“I agree,” Jax grimaces with a nod. “I mean, look at this place. He couldn’t have put in some effort at least? The money has more money than God, but he won’t spring for a single fuckin’ flower arrangement. All he did was get Artie ordained online.”

“No. Hell to the motherfucking no!” I shout. “You two can go find Leo and tell him that if he wants to use a woman for whatever nefarious plot he’s cooking up, then he’s barking up the wrong tree. I do not consent.”

Jax frowns. “Being used doesn’t usually require permission.”

“He’s got it all wrong,” I say—half angry, half pleading. “I’m not the key to anything. He needs to find the right one and go and marry her instead. Ruin her life, not mine.”

Jax gives me another toothy smile. “Have you ever tried telling Leo he’s wrong?”

“I can be stubborn, too.”

He arches a brow. “Is that what makes the sex so hot?”

I stare at him, mouth hanging open.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he shrugs. “If I have to hear your loud sex, then I think that gives me the right to make lewd jokes.”

“Jax…” Gaiman warns. “Leave the girl alone.”

“Thanks,” I tell him. “Now, maybe you can—”

“Don’t fight this,” he says, cutting me off abruptly. “He’s in a bad enough mood today.”

I sag. I won’t find any allies amongst Leo’s friends, it seems.

“Great. Just what every girl wants to hear on her wedding day.”

Jax chuckles. "Call me crazy, but I think this marriage is gonna be a good one. I think you two reckless kids can make it work."

Gaiman mutters another warning to Jax, but I don't hear it. All my attention is on the tall, dark figure who's just emerged from a side door.

He's dressed in a suit like everyone else. But all these other little sycophants look like altar boys compared to him. He strides forward, dark hair tousled and gleaming with hidden depth as the light catches his curls. His chin is clenched tight, cut sharp.

He looks like a god.

You only think that because you're in love with him.

I silence the unwanted devil on my shoulder, but my heart beats a little faster regardless. I tell myself that it's because of the circumstances, not the man who's arranged them. But even the voice in my head laughs at how pitiful of a lie it really is.

"Leo." I plant myself in front of him.

Is it my imagination or do his eyes seem a little extra hazel today? They definitely seem brighter. And cold. Incredibly cold.

"I'm not doing this. I won't let you use me."

His eyes meet mine. When he looks at me, though, it's like he's looking past me. Through me. Skewering me with his indifference and his effortless cruelty.

"Jax," he barks without breaking eye contact. "Gaiman."

The two men move forward simultaneously.

"She says she won't be joining us. Care to help?"

Before I understand what's happening, each one grabs an arm and start to drag me in the direction of the garden.

"No!" I dig my feet into the marble flooring, not that it does anything to slow us down. "No, you can't do this!"

“Um, Leo?” Jax says. “Your bride is wearing jeans and a t-shirt.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” he snarls. “I need her signature. That’s all.”

Jax and Gaiman march me onto the grass and towards the desk with the dour man seated behind it. Leo follows in our footsteps.

We make quite the wedding procession.

The man sitting behind the table gets to his feet as we approach.

“You realize I’m being forced into this marriage, right?” I bark at him.

“I’m afraid that’s not my concern,” he says.

“Of course. Because you’re just like all these other brainless dolts: a puppet.”

If the insult lands, he offers no sign of it. He just gives Leo a glance and a reverential nod of his head.

Leo comes to stand next to our ungainly little threesome. “Let go of me,” I snap to Jax and Gaiman.

“If you imagine they do anything without my say so, then you’re even more delusional than I thought,” Leo sighs.

“Then tell them to let go of me.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Ask nicely.”

My face flushes with anger. It’s bad enough when he does this shit when we’re alone. But in front of all his men, it feels even more demeaning.

“I’m not a fucking child, Leo.”

He shrugs. “Then stop acting like one. Stop making a spectacle of yourself.”

“I’m making the spectacle?” I look around at the suited-up men who’ve trooped out of the house to gather in neat rows behind us. “You’re kidding, right?”

He ignores me and turns to the man behind the table. “Let’s get this over with.”

The man pulls out the document. It's printed on crisp white paper. A formality.

I remember signing on a similar dotted line once before with Casey. I was excited and happy then. It never crossed my mind that I was signing my name on my own imprisonment.

But this time, I'm very aware of it.

I stare at Leo as he signs with a graceful slash of his wrist. He's so orderly, so calm. Nothing about this feels like a marriage. It's like a... business deal.

Which, come to think of it, is exactly what this is.

There are no vows. No tears shed. Not the happy kind, anyway. It's all curt and straightforward and dry as hell.

"It's your turn to sign, Ms. Powers."

The words bring me back to my body. Back to the moment at hand.

I stare at the man behind the table. His eyes are blue like mine. I want to find something familiar there. Some kind of human connection. Maybe if I find it, the man will back out. Maybe he'll save me.

But then he glances at Leo. Nervous. Scared.

He isn't going to save me. No one is.

I shake my head. "I can't," I whisper.

Leo rubs at his eyes. "Jax."

From behind, my right hand is shoved forward and the pen planted between my fingers. Jax puts a hand between my shoulder blades and forces me to bend over the table.

I struggle, but it's weak now. I know there's no fighting it. The damage has already been done.

Taking up a stance behind me, Jax grabs my wrist and wiggles it in a crude facsimile of a signature. Something that looks sort of like my name appears.

And then it's done.

“There we go,” the man says. “I now pronounce you man and wife. Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Solovev.”

I look towards Leo in stunned disbelief. He doesn't so much as pay me the courtesy of a glance. He just turns and walks back into the house.

Over his shoulder, he barks, “Get her up to the suite.”

WILLOW

“The suite” might feel luxurious if I hadn’t just been dragged here against my will.

It takes up most of the third floor and opens onto a sprawling living room with a bar in the corner, which is great, because Lord knows I need a drink.

I stumble over, uncork a bottle of vodka, and take a long pull straight. All I hear is the glug in my ears. All I feel is the burn in my throat.

But mercifully, it does take the sharp edge off my emotions. And Lord knows I need that, too.

I set the bottle down and breathe quietly for a moment. That’s why I don’t hear him enter. It’s not until he clears his throat that I whirl around in momentary panic.

“Normal people pour it into a glass first,” he remarks casually.

“What would you know about normal people?” I snap back.

He chuckles and saunters over to the bar, where he pours himself a whiskey into an ornate tumbler.

I feel a slow crawl of dread creep up in my gut. I’ve learned to be nervous when men drink. Casey always got loud and sloppy when he drank. When he was really sloshed, he got downright cruel.

Stone cold sober, I’m more terrified of Leo than I ever was of Casey.

I'm not sure I want to know what he's like when he's drunk.

He turns and surveys me as he sips his drink. His eyes snake up down my body, up and down, up and down. The silence stretches on, weighs down on me until I can't take the heaviness in the room.

"I don't know what your plan is, but it's not gonna work," I tell him.

"And you know this... how?"

"Because you've got the wrong girl."

He gives me an appraising glance. "Have I?"

"Whoever you think I am, I'm not. I'm no key. I'm no weapon. I'm just... me."

He nods. "All true."

"Then why am I being kept here?"

"It's all about perception, Willow," he says. "You may not be important, but if people think you are, that's all that matters."

"I... I don't understand. Are you saying that the Mikhailovs think I'm someone I'm not?"

"Something like that."

"Who do they think I am?"

"Someone they want far away from me."

It's not an answer, really, but it's more than I've ever gotten from him before. "Which is why you took me?"

He shakes his head. "I would have taken you regardless."

"You're not making sense."

"I always make sense." He takes another sip of his drink. "You just don't understand."

"Is there any point in asking you to explain it to me?"

“None at all.”

I sigh and walk over to the bar. Leo is slouched against it, shirt unbuttoned at the collar to show off the tanned cliff of his collarbone. It’s the most reposed I’ve ever seen him.

And yet, everything about him still screams *intensity*.

“Casey used to drink a lot,” I say to fill the silence.

He answers by taking another sip.

“He drank because he was an angry man who didn’t like when things didn’t go his way,” I say. “Is that why you drink?”

“No. I drink to forget the things I’ve done.”

I study Leo’s profile. The slope of his nose, the squared edge of his chin. He looks like a statue. Like a man cast in marble, caught in the midst of a nightmare he can’t escape. Hard as stone even as *something* brews under the surface.

“What have you done, Leo?” I whisper.

“I’ve stuck to the plan,” he says. “I always stick to the fucking plan.”

He finishes the last of his second drink.

Usually, around this stage, Casey would get crass. He’d start touching me and make lewd jokes at my expense. Even then, I knew it stemmed from his own insecurity.

But I don’t see that same insecurity in Leo.

He always has one hand on the steering wheel. The other, he uses to control everyone around him.

Leo doesn’t look tired, doesn’t look anything short of gorgeous, but it must be exhausting, always pulling the strings. Never relaxing for a single second. Never letting your guard down for fear of waking up with a knife in your back.

I sit down, making sure to keep one barstool between us.

“Is it real?” I ask.

“The marriage?”

I nod.

“Yes. It’s real.”

“I’m guessing divorce isn’t an option.”

He looks over and studies my face for an instant. “No.”

I take a deep breath. “You know why I decided to call my parents in the first place?”

He doesn’t say anything. Just looks straight ahead, as though he’s got other things on his mind. Like he didn’t hear me at all.

I continue anyway. “I called them because I actually believed that I was in a better place in my life. I wanted to show them that I was doing alright. *‘Hey, look at me, Mom and Dad. I divorced the manipulative, emotionally abusive asshole that you warned me about, and I’m taking control of my future.’*” I chuckle darkly. “But like you said: it’s all about perception, isn’t it? I saw things differently a few days ago. Now, my perception has shifted.”

“What did you think would happen, Willow?”

“I just thought—well, I guess I thought—”

“You thought that I’d shed the mask of a monster and become a prince?” The disdain in his voice is pure acid.

“No, not quite—”

“You were looking for a happy ending where there is none,” he interrupts harshly. “Well, stop. Happiness is the biggest con of them all.”

I frown. “Does that mean you’re not happy?”

A man like Leo—powerful, feared, in control—should have every reason to be happy. No one can hurt him.

“The only ones happy are the dead. Everyone else is content at best. It’s a better way to live.”

I consider that for a moment. It’s morbid, to say the least, but not totally out of character, I suppose. He’s a hard man, born into a hard world, carving a hard path through it all. I shouldn’t expect sunshine and rainbows in his philosophy of life.

Then, before I can think better of it, I blurt out a question that’s been circling in my head for a long time: “What was your brother like?”

That gets his attention. When he turns to me, it feels like he’s seeing me for the first time since he walked into the suite. His eyes drag over my face, searching for—something, I guess. I wonder if he finds what he’s looking for.

If so, he gives no sign of it. His jaw clenches tight.

“He was the better man.”

And that’s it. That’s all he gives me.

But it’s a peek. A tiny glimpse behind the stone-faced curtain of Leo Solovev. And it shows me something: he may be the cockiest bastard I’ve ever met... but he doesn’t truly think he’s perfect.

“Pavel had love in his life and a woman who loved him back,” I say. “Maybe that made him stronger. He had the capacity to love. Which, anecdotally, is a quality you seem incapable of.”

“I’m capable. I’m just not interested.” His eyes narrow. “Don’t make the mistake of expecting more than I’m willing to give, Willow.”

“I never asked you for anything.”

His eyes bore into mine and suddenly, I wish he were avoiding my gaze instead. “You don’t have to say it out loud to ask for it. Your eyes, your body language... your wet pussy. That all speaks louder than words.”

My cheeks flush, my fists ball—and, right on cue, my thighs tingle with that familiar buzz of attraction. Even after everything he’s done to me, I still want him.

How sick is that?

“You’re wrong, you know,” I snap, leaping to my feet. “I don’t love you.”

He stands up and shoves the stool between us out of the way. It clatters to the ground, but my eyes stay locked on him. I’m tense from head to toe—until the moment he touches me.

As soon as his fingers graze my hip, I melt.

Leo senses it. He presses my knees apart gently with his, then stands close enough to me that our breath mingles in the air.

“Look at me.”

If I do it, I’m submitting. If I don’t, I’m proving his point. Either way, I lose. So I just gaze into his eyes and try to remove any and all emotion from my own.

He studies me curiously. There’s no softness on his face today. On its own, the color of his irises are gorgeous and vibrant. They remind me of autumn—amber and burnt orange and almost melancholy, in the strangest way.

But they’re filled with inner depths that I can’t seem to reach.

When his hand strokes up my bare arm, I gasp. The electricity pulsing through me from just his touch alone takes me by surprise.

“You need to master your reactions if you’re going to lie like that.”

I rip away from him and stride out into the middle of the suite.

“This is so, so... *wrong*. Do you even realize, are you even aware how fucked-up all this shit is? You found me at my weakest, most vulnerable point and then you manipulated me into... into...”

He waits for me to find the words.

I don’t, though. Instead, I skewer him with the harshest glare I can and say, “I deserve to know the real reason I’m here. I want to know why you think I’m some sort of secret weapon.”

He nods—proudly, almost, as if I’ve finally passed a test he’s been waiting for me to finish with. “Okay. I’ll tell you.”

I blink at him, not sure if I heard him correctly. “You will?”

“I will.” He moves towards me slowly. “But first... we need to consummate this marriage.”

And there’s the catch. He dangled the carrot in front of me, but with him, it’s never as easy as reaching out and taking it. I have to work for it.

“Are you serious?”

“I’m always serious.” He smiles. “Spread your legs for me, *kukolka*. Show me how far you’re willing to go to get what you want.”

It’s a challenge. This is not about sex; it’s about control.

And yet, my pussy screams to life. My entire body feels like it’s on fire.

The only thing that can put it out is him.

“If I do this, you’ll tell me?”

“Yes.”

I take in a deep breath. “So be it.”

He cocks his head to the side. Then he walks over to the leather couch and sits down. He keeps his legs spread, and I understand what to do next.

I move forward, but he holds up his hand to stop me.

“Take off your clothes.”

He can give me orders, he can twist and poke and prod me into this—but he can’t make me do *everything* exactly how he wants. So fuck a striptease, fuck sexual tension, fuck it all. This is a transaction. Nothing more, nothing less.

I hurry out of my clothes like they’re on fire, leaving them in a pile on the floor.

Leo doesn’t seem to mind. When I’m naked, I drop to my knees between his legs and unzip him roughly. He doesn’t seem bothered by my aggression,

either. In fact, he looks amused.

That only makes me angrier. When I whip out his cock, I squeeze his shaft harder than necessary.

He doesn't so much as flinch.

"If you're trying to make me feel pain, that's not the way to do it," he says. "Now, swallow my cock, Willow."

The words ignite anger—*How dare you?* I want to scream—but also... desire. I lean forward and take him into my mouth.

I suck him hard, swirling my tongue around as I slurp and slide up and down his shaft. Then suddenly, he bends forward, forcing himself deeper into my throat.

A second later, I feel his fingers at my pussy.

He pushes inside me, and I cry out, although the sound is just a muffled moan with his cock in my mouth.

He rocks his hips slowly, fucking my mouth while he explores my pussy. I'm so wet that I can feel my juices running down his hand.

I try to reclaim control and pull back, but Leo twists his fingers into my hair and holds me against him. With his fingers inside my pussy and his cock in my mouth, he owns all of me.

My hands find his thighs while I hold on for dear life. He's pushing me past limits I didn't know I had. At one point, I think I might choke on his cock and pass out.

But just when my vision starts to twist, he pulls out. With a gasp, I fall back against the soft carpet, spit hanging from my lips.

He remains in his chair, looking down at me with satisfaction. "You've been wet long before I touched you tonight."

I can't deny it. He just felt the proof of it.

"Are we talking or fucking?"

Smiling darkly, he stands up. I'm about to pay for that comment.

Leo slips out of his pants and pulls his shirt over his head. He has the most defined, most gorgeous set of abs I've ever seen on a man. I have the sudden urge to sit up and lick them like a bar of chocolate.

Before I can act on that desire however, he's on top of me, pushing me back against the carpet. He grabs both my wrists and pins them to the floor, forcing my back to arch.

I feel his cock at my slit for a second before he thrusts inside me. It's easy—my traitorous body is more than ready for him. He slides in without resistance, filling me completely.

But there's no preparing my body for the way he fucks me after that.

He pulls out and slams into me again and again. He never slows and he never gives me a moment of respite. I genuinely feel like he's trying to fuck me to death.

All I can do is scream and writhe underneath him, enduring the pleasure he forces through me. Far too soon, he wrenches an orgasm from my core. It leaves me gasping and spluttering for air.

But he's still far from done with me.

I twist and buck against him, the sensations overwhelming me to the point of blacking out, but Leo never slows. My breasts bounce wildly and start to ache from the force of his pounding. I can see sweat dripping down his chest.

After the first orgasm, I grow delirious. But the second orgasm brings me back. The pleasure heightens everything, and I feel every inch of him inside of me, like reality has been cranked up to an eleven out of ten.

It's a sweet kind of torture as he takes me to the third and final orgasm. This one is silent and all-consuming.

After it relinquishes its hold on me, I'm completely and utterly spent. All I can do is lie limp on the carpet as Leo takes himself to the finish and explodes inside me.

As soon as he's done, he rolls away and gets to his feet. I'm panting, but Leo doesn't seem out of breath. Just sweaty.

I want to admire the artful lines of his body, but my mind is preoccupied by the prize I just spread my legs to win.

"Now tell me," I say firmly. "We had a bargain."

"Did we?"

I glare at him. "Don't play with me."

"I just finished playing with you."

I reach for my shirt and pull it over my body. "We had a deal, Leo. You promised."

My legs are still trembling from my orgasms. I'd stand up, but I'm not sure I wouldn't fall on my face. The sex nearly incapacitated me.

Leo looks stable, though. He stares down at me for a moment and then lifts one muscled shoulder in a shrug.

"I lied."

Without another word, he walks away, leaving me naked on the carpet.

LEO

“It’s done?” I ask.

The voice on the phone is confident. “Yes, boss. We finished the job this morning.”

“Undetected?”

I hope that’s the case. I’m not in the mood to kill anyone for incompetence tonight.

“It’s been two hours and no one has come sniffing.”

I smile. Seven fucking years and it’s all finally starting to come together.

“Well done,” I tell him. “Take the team out tonight. Any club they want.”

“They’d like to go to The Rouge.”

Of course they would. It’s the best strip club in the state. And for the right price, you can get some private time with the lady—or ladies, plural—of your choice.

I’ll be hit with a gargantuan tab tomorrow, but I’m not about to begrudge my men their right to celebrate. I’m happy to reward them for a job well done.

“Tell them to celebrate,” I say. “But tomorrow, they better be ready to get back to work.”

I hang up just as Jax walks in the room, Gaiman close behind him.

“Talking to yourself again?” Jax asks. “Oh sweet Jesus, is that a *smile* on your face? Does that mean Willow’s given up on the silent treatment?”

I ignore him. “Both bombs have been successfully planted.”

Gaiman doesn’t look surprised, but Jax’s mouth drops open. “Hell fucking yes! This is what we’ve been waiting for!”

“Does that mean it’s time to move?” Gaiman asks.

“Not quite yet.”

“What the hell are you waiting for?” Jax asks impatiently.

“Agent Thirty-One.”

“Agent Thirty-One,” Jax mutters with a roll of his eyes. “Twenty-Three, Thirty-One, Sixty-Nine—how’s a man supposed to keep up with all these numbers?”

“Some of us have more than one brain cell to help out,” Gaiman drawls. He turns his attention back on me. “The agent will communicate the timing for the strike?”

“Correct,” I say. “I want to make sure we take as many high-ranking members of the Mikhailovs down as we can during the detonation. If we cut the head off the snake, the rest of those cowardly fucks will fall right at our feet.”

“Are you sure you aren’t delaying because you’re too busy with your blushing bride?” Jax asks with a suggestive smile. “Or is there trouble in paradise? She looks down in the dumps today.”

I grimace and finally acknowledge him. “She’s pouting.”

“Is your cock not big enough for her?”

I smirk. “Your preoccupation with penis size is telling, my friend.”

“Yeah, it’s *telling* that I have a giant cock,” he quips.

“The word you’re looking for is ‘overcompensating.’ There’s a dictionary on the shelf over there to help you out.”

“I’ll whip it out right now and show you. You can decide if I’m overcompensating.”

I roll my eyes. “Stop acting like a horny frat boy. We have business to discuss. Do we have a man on Belov?”

Gaiman nods. “He’s in the country. His movements have been limited to Mikhailov haunts and the main estate.”

“He’s living there now?” I ask.

“Apparently, he moved in a year ago,” Jax chimes in.

“Interesting. Anything else?”

Gaiman shakes his head. “Nothing insightful. The man has a huge security detail that follows him around everywhere. It’s only increased since finding out about Willow.”

“He knows about the marriage?”

“I don’t think so,” Gaiman says. “Not yet, at least. But it’s only a matter of time. Knowing you, though, you’re already three steps ahead. Am I right?”

“Right as ever, *sobrat*.”

“Care to share those steps with us?” Jax asks in an irritated tone.

Before I answer, there’s a sharp knock at the door, accompanied by a voice. “Boss?”

Jax moves forward and opens the door. “Chezny. What do you want?”

Chezny is a lesser Vor. He’s only been around for a few years, but he’s eager to please. He rubs some of the other men the wrong way, like an overly excited young pup. But I only care that he’s a skilled fighter and that he’s loyal. In a few years, he might even earn the mark.

“I need to hand this letter to Don Leo.”

“I’ll give it to him.” Jax reaches for it, but Chezny pulls his hand back.

“I was told to put the letter directly into his hands,” Chezny says.

“Jax,” I snap, “let the boy through.”

With a resigned growl, Jax pulls the door open a little wider and Chezny squeezes past. He’s twenty-three, but he looks younger. Baby-faced. Bright blue eyes, too, always wide and wondering.

“I was the one at the gate when this came,” he explains. “It was personally delivered. This big fucker walked up and handed it to me.”

I inspect the letter. Normal envelope, normal thickness, nothing out of the ordinary. “Did you have it checked?”

He looks a little dumbfounded. “I... it’s a... letter?”

“Never mind. Just give it to me,” I say impatiently.

“If we die, it’s on you, pipsqueak,” Jax growls, overshadowing the boy from behind.

The letter is addressed to me. There’s no return address. Tearing it open, something occurs to me. I bring the letter to my nose and sniff it.

“It’s perfumed.”

“Perfumed?” Gaiman says, moving forward. “Should we have it checked first?”

“We’ve lived this long. What’s life without a little risk?” I rip the envelope open. But before I pull it out, I give Chezny a deadly glare. “Is there a reason you’re still here?”

He scurries out of the room fast. Jax slams the door on him. “Why do we keep him around?” he growls.

“Because I see potential in the kid.”

“You’re not always right,” he mutters.

“What was that?” I ask pointedly.

“Nothing,” he says quickly. “Nothing at all.”

He's got a smart mouth, but he's not actually an idiot. Not all the time, anyway.

Suppressing a smirk, I pull out the letter and open it up. My eyes go automatically to the name at the bottom of the piece of paper.

"Fucking hell. She wrote."

"Who?" asks Jax.

I look up. "Anya."

Gaiman looks as shocked as Jax this time. "Did you say *Anya*? As in *Anya* fucking *Mikhailov*?"

I nod. "The one and only."

"*Blyat*!" Jax throws Gaiman an off-hand punch. "The she-devil herself. What does it say?"

"Shut the fuck up and maybe I'll tell you."

The two of them lapse into silence while I read her letter. It's typed, so there's no way of deciphering the handwriting and confirming the authenticity.

Don Solovev,

You should know that I'm writing to you today without the knowledge of my father or his rabid dog, Spartak Belov. They would not approve of me reaching out to you. But I think you know why I had to.

There is a request I would ask of you and it is the kind of request that merits a face-to-face conversation. I'm asking for a meeting. Just you and me. I will be at the below address at the appointed time. I hope you will come so that we can talk.

Your reputation is only now coming to light, Don Solovev. And I must say... I'm impressed. I don't say that lightly.

Anya Mikhailov

“Anya fucking Mikhailov,” Jax mutters to himself, like he still can’t quite believe it. Or maybe he’s just still fixated on bedding her. I never know with him.

I toss the letter to the side. Gaiman picks it up immediately and scans through it himself. “You know what she wants.”

“We all know what she wants,” I say with a nod. “But she’s not going to get it.”

“Does that mean you’re not meeting her?” Jax asks. “Because a meeting could be helpful.”

I narrow my eyes. “She wants to meet alone, Jax. I wouldn’t take you with me.”

“Fuck that. You’ll need security.”

“I’m my own security.”

“The woman’s murdered at least two husbands. You’re gonna need security,” he repeats.

I roll my eyes. “You’re the one who wants to be her third husband. *You* need the security, not me.”

“Leo, I think it’s better to avoid this one,” Gaiman says cautiously.

“In this case, caution is cowardice,” Jax asserts. “You’re scared.”

If it was anyone but Jax who said that, Gaiman would have knocked them out cold. As it is, he glares at Jax, fists tightening at his sides. “Caution is a sign of intelligence. Not that you’d be able to understand that.”

“She’s Semyon’s only child!” Jax persists. “She’s the Bratva princess of Bratva princesses. How can we pass up a chance to meet her? She could help us!”

“Help us do what?” I ask.

“Take down the Mikhailovs from the inside!”

I snort. “That woman hasn’t been inside the Mikhailov Bratva for a long while now. She and her father are barely on speaking terms. He handed his Bratva over to another man, remember?”

“All the more reason to meet her. She clearly wants to bring down her shitstain of a daddy, just like we do.”

“You’re mistaking anger for disloyalty,” I say coldly. “Just because she’s pissed at her father doesn’t mean she’ll move against him.”

“She contacted you, didn’t she?” Jax points out.

“She has a specific purpose for this meeting. It has nothing to do with bringing down her father.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Here’s what I do know,” I say. “The woman’s a viper. She may have let the Bratva be passed to someone else without a fight, but she has a loyal base of men who follow her. She is not the innocent exiled princess she’s portraying herself as.”

Jax’s eyes go wide. Gaiman’s expression doesn’t change, but I notice his shoulders tense. “She has men?”

“Many. More than just a standard security detail. She’s nowhere near strong enough to challenge her father yet, but the woman is a leader. She’s all alpha.”

Gaiman nods. “Trusting that she’s on our side is a mistake. Allying with her is an even bigger one.”

“For fuck’s sake, neither of you are getting this,” I bark. “I don’t need to make an alliance with anyone. I did all this on my own, and I’ll finish it on my own, too.”

Jax frowns. “So you’re not meeting her?”

I ignore him and get to my feet.

“Leo, where are you going?”

I ignore that, too. “Check in with intel. I want to make sure all my moving pieces are still moving.”

“Which one of us?”

“I don’t fucking care.”

With that, I leave them in the office and head upstairs to the suite. A tray of untouched food sits outside of the door, with only a single bite taken out of the toast. It seems the little one thinks a hunger strike will get her what she wants.

As with everything else that’s happening, she has no idea how wrong she is.

I pause with my key in the door. I haven’t been up here since the wedding night. I’ve kept my distance on purpose. She needs to understand who I am first.

This isn’t a fairytale, and I’m no fucking prince charming.

I’m the black knight who kills the motherfucker on the white horse.

As cold certainty flows through my veins the way it’s supposed to, I let myself inside. I find her on the sofa, dressed in a long, flowing kimono. It does not escape my attention that she’s braless. As soon as she sees me, she jumps to her feet.

She must have washed her hair recently, because it falls around her shoulders in luscious waves.

“You haven’t been eating,” I remark.

Her face twists in dark amusement. “What do you care?”

“I need you alive if my plan is going to work.”

“Well, sorry if I don’t really give a shit about your nefarious master plan.”

“If you don’t eat, I’ll force-feed you. Is that your preference, Willow?”

Her eyes go wide and she swallows hard. “I... I haven’t been feeling too good recently.”

I stare at her, searching for signs. Her complexion is rosy and she looks strong. Vital. Tempting as ever.

The only notable difference I can see is that she seems to have lost a little weight. Her collarbones were always prominent, but now they push out of her body in sharp points. Concerningly sharp.

“If you eat a little more, you’ll feel better.”

“I’m too nauseous to eat.”

“Maybe you should take a walk around the compound.”

“I’m not leaving this room.”

“Not even if I let you try and escape? Could be a fun game.”

She shoots me a dirty glare. “You know what? I’m done talking to you.”

She slumps back on the sofa and picks up the book she had in her hand when I entered, pretending to read. But her eyes aren’t moving. They stay fixed on the page, waiting for me to say something.

I smirk and walk towards her. Her body stiffens.

“You’re fighting a losing battle here, Willow,” I rasp. “I can end your silence if I want to.”

She bites down on her lip. She refuses to give up on her new tactic, which only makes me more determined.

I grab her feet and pull hard, causing her to slide down on the couch so that she’s facing the ceiling. Before she can right herself, I rip open her robe. It shreds in my hands like tissue paper.

She gasps as I stare down at her nakedness. One look tells me she’s ready for me. Her nipples are hard as diamonds. I want to suck them until she moans.

Instead, I drop down between her legs. She lets out a ragged sound and tries to push me away, but I shove her hands aside and press my tongue against her slit.

“F-f-fuuuck,” she groans.

“What was that?” I tease.

She bites down on her lip and stares at me with new determination.

“That’s fine. We have so much farther to go, you and I.”

I lean back down and run my tongue over her lips. She doesn’t make a sound, but I can feel her quivering. Her body responds to me even when she won’t.

With every lap of my tongue, she trembles. I can feel her wetness growing. Her face is wound with a desire she desperately wants to get rid of. But instead of pushing me away, she digs her fingernails into the sofa cushion. She struggles for purchase because she knows I’ll keep going. She’s prepared for it.

“You must have been lonely sitting in this room all by yourself,” I say against her center. “Did you think about how hard I fucked you?”

She squirms under my mouth, but I pin her in place with a flick of my tongue. Her entire body tenses, on the verge of shattering.

“How many times did you touch yourself thinking of me?” I ask. “Did you fantasize about what I’m doing right now?”

I shove my tongue inside of her and she bucks upright with another involuntary gasp. But a gasp isn’t enough. It’s not what I came for.

So I do what I do best: I set my mind to the task at hand. And like everything in my world...

I don’t stop until I get exactly what I want.

WILLOW

Sex with Casey was always a chore. Something to be endured, not enjoyed.

Sex with Leo?

It's something else entirely.

It reduces me down to my animal brain and in that state, all I want is him. His body, his cock, the delicious high that he gives me every time he fucks an orgasm out of me.

The way I burn for him is not normal. It can't be, especially given the emotional rollercoaster we've been on the past several months.

He's my captor. I should hate him. I should fight him and shove him off of me.

Instead, I'm on my back and his head is between my legs. And I hope it never ever ends.

No man has ever gone down on me like this before. It's like he actually *wants* to be there. This isn't just the necessary first step before we get to something better.

But I can't say a word.

Don't speak. Don't moan. Don't scream.

I repeat it like a mantra. But the way he's eating me out, I know I've only got a few more minutes left before I come all over his face.

His tongue slides up my slit and finds my clit. I bite down to avoid moaning, but it comes out anyway, a trickle giving away all the tension that's raging inside of me.

"Come on, Willow," he coaxes. "Tell me how much you love my tongue."

No. I refuse to give him the same satisfaction he's giving me.

"No?" he asks. "Pity."

Two fingers slide inside of me just as he runs his tongue across my aching clit.

A moan, louder than the first, bursts from my lips before I can trap it. What's wrong with me? Am I really so weak? Am I giving in so easily?

My thighs start to tremble uncontrollably as he pistons his fingers in and out of me. That familiar clenching in my belly builds, hotter and higher and denser.

I try to clench my legs, to fight it off, but that does no good. If anything, it makes it worse. The sensations are taking over and he has complete control.

I bite down, hoping to keep the sounds in, but it's no use—the orgasm breaks loose and I can't help but cry out.

Leo laughs darkly, like he's won with pitiful ease. I can feel him smiling against my center as I float down, tingling from head to toe with the remnants of what he's done to me.

I thought that would be the end of it.

I was wrong.

He rises up, huge and tattooed and haunting, and traps me between his hands. His cock hovers between my legs. Even now, even after everything he's done, I can't help admiring how truly beautiful he is. All of him, from the dark waves of hair on his head to the throbbing spear of his cock, makes my mouth water.

He pushes in a little, just enough so that his tip enters me. My whole body clenches in anticipation.

Then he pulls back again.

I shrink in disappointment.

“Tell me how much you want my cock, Willow.”

I shake my head, but he only smiles and repeats the torture.

He spits in his hand, wets the tip of his cock, then gives me another half-inch, maybe less, before pulling out again. I gasp in frustration but he only laughs.

“I guess you’re not interested then,” he says with a cold smile. “Perhaps I’ll go find someone else. Jaime, maybe?”

My eyes go wide before I think to control my facial expressions.

“You remember Jaime, don’t you? The maid you were so fond of?”

I glare at him, feeling my heart rate increase against my will. I want to pretend that I don’t care, but I’m terrified that if I do a convincing job, he’ll make good on his threat and find her. I’m not sure which outcome would be worse.

“I can have her screaming my name in five fucking minutes. Is that what you want?”

As he speaks, he pushes his cock into me just a little bit more. Even to make me hiss before he withdraws once again.

“I asked if that’s what you want, Willow,” he rumbles. “You want Jaime’s tight little pussy wrapped around my cock instead of yours?”

Hating him, hating myself... I shake my head in a silent *No*.

“I can’t hear you, *kukolka*.”

Now, he’s asking too much. I grit my teeth and glare up at him, at that sadistic smirk, that beautiful jaw, those gleaming white teeth.

He arches an eyebrow. “No? Very well then.”

He pushes off me and walks away. I sit up as he picks up his discarded clothes in one hand, fishes out his cell phone, then types out a quick message.

My pulse doubles. What has he done?

He doesn't look at me as he sets his phone down on the table by the window. He doesn't put his clothes back on or move to leave. He waits.

A minute later, there's a knock on the door. My heart aches.

Leo's gaze swivels to me. "Answer it."

I can't do this. "Stop," I whisper.

Leo cocks his head towards me. "Did you say something?" he taunts. "I couldn't hear you."

"Please stop," I say again. My voice is hoarse from holding back endless moans while Leo went down on me.

"Say it again."

I clear my throat and say for the third time, "Please stop torturing me."

That does the trick. He stands, nodding and smiling with his eyes gleaming like honey. "That's much better, *kukolka*. You're learning."

He steps into his pants, not bothering to zip them up, and saunters over to the door. When he opens it, I have enough of an angle to see a mass of blond hair cascading down over perky tits pushed up high in a low-cut shirt.

"You summoned me, sir?" the maid says in a seductress croon.

"You are no longer needed," Leo says mildly. "You can leave."

Her eyes go wide. "Are... are you sure?"

"I'm sure," he says.

"B-but, I was thinking we could—"

Leo starts to say, "I said you can—" but before he can finish his thought, I'm jumping off the bed and hissing, "Are you deaf? He said you can leave."

All eyes turn to me. My chest is heaving against the sheets I have held to cover up my nakedness and my hair is sticking to the sweat at the back of my neck. I feel slightly unhinged, and only when I see the slow smirk on Leo's face do I realize that that's probably exactly what he was after.

Endless fucking mind games. I hate it. I hate him.

But I'm in far too deep to turn back now.

Jaime looks back and forth between Leo and me for a while. Then, with a clench of her jaw, she turns to leave.

Before she can disappear from sight, though, I hear her mutter under her breath, "Fucking bitch."

My jaw drops. This time, Leo is the one who cuts in before I can formulate a response.

"Jaime," he growls.

She stops, turns on her heel, and looks up at him balefully.

"If you ever call my wife a bitch again, I'll cut out your tongue myself."

The threat is delivered calmly, but unflinchingly. There's no doubt he means it.

Her eyes go round with fear. She gives him a meek nod and turns to me. "I... I'm sorry ma'am." Then she disappears down the hall as fast as she can go.

I turn to Leo as he shuts the door. He's leaning against the doorframe, one arm propped up, fixing me with a curious gaze.

"You're full of surprises, little one," he murmurs.

I'm still heated with rage, with jealousy, with hunger—with all the million and one emotions that Leo Solovev ignites in me.

And there's only one way to get the fire out.

I walk up to him, palm his still-hard cock, and look him dead in the eyes as I say, "Shut up and come fuck me, husband."

LEO

“You’re not eating,” I say impatiently.

She stares off into the gardens. “Not hungry.”

Something has shifted in the last two days. Willow has been quiet. For her, that means something is definitely wrong.

But short of splitting her head open and prying the secret from her, I can only watch and observe. Waiting for the moment when she’s vulnerable enough to reveal her hand.

It’s not about Jaime. The maid was dismissed the next day. No one talks like that to my wife while they’re in my employ.

I get a text on my phone from Jax. *They’re here.*

I don’t change my expression as I look back up at Willow. “Have you spoken to your parents lately?”

That question takes her off guard. She sighs and then nods. “Twice. I call them every day now. I want—”

“‘Wanting’ is a dangerous game, Willow.”

She grits her teeth and powers through. “I want to visit them.”

“No. I don’t want you leaving the mansion.”

“I haven’t seen my parents in years, Leo.”

“That is not my problem.”

“You’re right. Nothing about me is your problem. I’m my own problem.” She gets to her feet. “You know why? Because I go and get involved with the wrong fucking men.”

“It’s cute how you think you had any say in this.”

“What?”

“I chose you, Willow,” I remind her. “Not the other way around. You assume that because you slept with me that first night, it opened Pandora’s box. It didn’t. All of this was coming for you no matter what you did.”

Her eyes gleam with defiance, but she knows damn well that what I’m saying is true. It can’t be denied.

I turn away and head for the door.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“I’ve got things to do,” I growl. “In case you’ve forgotten, I’m the don of a fucking Bratva.”

“I can’t spend another day walking around this place. I’ve seen it all and I’m done.”

“Go for a swim.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

I exhale sharply. “Fine. Then follow me.”

She frowns, clearly not expecting that. But, with a shrug, she decides not to look a gift horse in the mouth and follows along behind me quietly.

I lead her into one of the downstairs living rooms that opens out into the gardens. On the patio beyond the French doors, two people stand with their backs to us, admiring the mood.

“Oh my God,” Willow gasps. “Is that... Are those... ?”

“Your parents,” I say coolly.

She turns to me, utterly shell-shocked. “How did you even do this?”

“I called them up and introduced myself. Then I invited them here for lunch. I told them to come early so they could spend some quality time with you.”

She stares at me for a long time. “I... I don’t know what to say, Leo.”

“Then don’t say anything.”

She blushes—in shock or appreciation or some other nameless emotion, I’m not completely sure. But it’s endearing. Cute, really, to see surprise in her eyes.

I feel the need to kiss her. I kill it immediately. Too intimate.

Sex is different. There’s something primal about it that toes the line between all the big things surging back and forth between Willow and me.

But a kiss for no other reason than the kiss itself?

It’s like I said to her upstairs: “want” is a dangerous game. One I don’t intend to play.

I haven’t gotten this far by making emotional decisions. I won’t start now.

“Leo... this means a lot to me.”

“Don’t tell me. Tell them.”

She gives a shy nod and starts walking towards him. Then she stops suddenly and turns to me. “Wait. How did you introduce yourself?”

I know exactly what she’s asking. “I told them the truth. I told them I was your husband.”

It’s a little jarring how that word comes out of my lips. Feral, like a predator marking his territory. But also... *proud*. Like a king who is honored to share his throne.

She doesn’t say anything. Just nods and walks through the sliding doors.

I don’t hang around to watch. I head to my office where Jax and Gaiman are waiting for me.

“There he is,” Jax crows as I enter. “So tell us, we’re all dying to know: do the in-laws approve of their new son-in-law?”

“Shut the fuck up, Jax,” I say impatiently. “Give me the intel.”

He sighs. “No fun. But fine. Belov’s been holed up in one of his compounds for the past two days.”

I nod. “Planning something. Which is probably why I haven’t heard from Agent Thirty-One yet.”

“Do we really need to wait for the go-ahead?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Why? Bomb goes *boom*, so who cares exactly how many of those repulsive motherfuckers go up in smoke with it?”

“Because this thing needs to be timed perfectly. And because the more of Belov’s loyalists we take down, the better. His inner circle is deadly—and they’re the ones who’re gonna put up a fight after.”

Gaiman frowns. “The Mikhailovs won’t be won over that easily, Leo. You’re placing a lot of your faith in a marriage that might mean nothing in the end.”

“Anya’s letter proves that’s not true,” I say. “Have we received any other communication from her?”

“Not so far,” Gaiman says. “Have you decided what to do about the meeting?”

“I’m leaning one way, but we’ll see. I’d hoped to hear from Agent Thirty-One by now, but considering Belov’s movements, it makes sense that there’s been no contact.”

“You think Belov knows?” Gaiman asks.

“Never underestimate me, *sobrat*.”

“Not you. But people are fallible.”

“Agent thirty-one was prepared.”

“You might be letting personal ties cloud your judgment,” Jax warns.

“This whole thing is fucking personal,” I snap. “So let’s not go there.”

Jax and Gaiman both shut up immediately. They’ve known me now long enough to know when to stop pushing back.

“Pour me a drink,” I say to no one in particular.

It’s Jax who heads for the small alcohol trolley that’s been set up next to the sitting area. He pours all three of us drinks and walks them over.

I take a glass and sip, pondering all the pieces that are in play.

“Midday drink is unlike you,” Jax remarks. “You worried about your spy? Or are you worried about impressing the in-laws?”

I smirk and the tension breaks immediately. “They’re already eating of my hand,” I chuckle.

“You’re basing that on the one phone call you had with them?”

“All it takes is a taste, my friend.”

Jax scoffs. “You’re severely overestimating your charm.”

“You invented overestimating your charm, Jax.” I knock back my drink and get to my feet. “I’m going to plan the next move. If Agent Thirty-One doesn’t contact me in the next three days, we’ll figure out how to proceed without the intel.”

I leave Gaiman and Jax to their individual tasks and wander aimlessly into the gardens as I brood. My thoughts are everywhere, so I shouldn’t be surprised when I end up at Pavel’s grave. Aimless wandering always leads here.

The headstone is made of blasted sandstone. It cost a fortune to ship from Europe, but it was worth it.

Pavel Solovev. Brother. Husband. Don.

Ariel had given the order for the inscription herself. “I want it to read ‘husband,’” she had told me. “Not fiancé. I don’t care if we weren’t actually

married yet. He was mine and I was his. That's what matters."

I remember the haunted distance in her eyes in those early days, when we were all nursing our wounds and wondering where to go from there.

"Okay," I'd sighed. "Whatever you want."

Ariel shook her head. "I just... I can't believe he's gone. What do I do now?"

"What we all have to do: get on with it."

"Move on?" she repeated. "How can you say that?"

"What's the alternative?"

She looked down. "I loved him so much, Leo. And he loved me."

"I know that."

"I can't move on. I'd rather die."

"He wouldn't want that for you."

"He doesn't get a fucking say anymore," she snapped. "He's gone. He left me."

My anger reared up and got the best of me. "He didn't leave you, Ariel. He was taken. He was killed."

She just shook her head again. "It doesn't matter. He's gone all the same. And I have no idea what's next."

"You want to know what's next, Ariel?" I asked. "*Revenge*. I'm going to kill the man that killed my brother. Semyon Mikhailov is a dead man walking. Spartak Belov, all of them. Every last Mikhailov man will burn in hell by the time I'm done."

"Revenge won't bring Pavel back to us."

"I know that. But justice helps me sleep better at night."

She shook her head for the third time, and this time, there was something different in it. A fresh kind of sadness—directed at me.

“After this funeral, I... I need to leave,” she said, her voice shaky with emotion. “I have to go somewhere.”

I understood that much, at least. She had so many memories here. Too many, waiting like bear traps to snare her if she wasn't careful about where she let herself walk. She had to let go of the life she thought she could have—and that meant turning her back on all of it.

I didn't have that choice.

“Wherever you go, know that you and I will always be family. You can come to me for anything.”

She walked forward and hugged me tightly. “Be the don that he didn't get to be, Leo. I know you can.”

Then she turned and left.

I'd always admired the relationship that Pavel and Ariel shared. But now, I see it for the liability it is. Pavel's death destroyed Ariel. And I can't afford to be destroyed like that.

If I'm going to be the don my brother was meant to be...

I'll have to do it alone.

WILLOW

“I’m so sorry.”

“Honey,” Mom says, taking my hand and squeezing it hard. “You’ve apologized over and over again. You don’t have to. Everyone makes mistakes.”

“There’s mistakes, and there’s what I did. I should never have said those things to you guys.”

“You were young and in love,” she says with a sigh. “You were loyal to the man you loved and that’s not a bad thing. It was just the wrong man.”

I nod slowly, marveling at their easy kindness, their gift for forgiveness.

No one has ever given me anything quite so beautiful.

We’re sitting in a small alcove in the back of the garden. We started on a patio by the house, but I needed to put some space between myself and the mansion. Now, we have a beautiful view and privacy.

“Are you happy, darling?” my dad asks.

“So happy,” I say. “I’ve missed you both. You have no idea how many times over the last few years I wanted to see you both. I missed talking to Mom while she was cooking breakfast on Saturday mornings. And Dad, I missed your hugs.”

“We missed you, too, dear. But I was talking about your new husband,” Dad chuckles. “Your new house is... really something. And your husband is certainly impressive. But that doesn’t always equal happiness. Which is why I’m asking.”

I tense inwardly, but try to remain neutral. I don’t owe Leo anything. And yet, I feel the need to protect his image in the eyes of my parents.

I also don’t want my parents thinking I’m stupid enough to have fallen into a second bad marriage. Sure, the circumstances are different. But the argument can be made that, this time... it’s much, much worse.

“I *am* happy, Dad,” I say. “I know it must all seem very sudden to you. I just told you I got divorced and now, here I am: already married.”

“We don’t care about timelines, Willow,” Mom says quickly. “We only care that he treats you well.”

I smile and nod. It feels robotic, but my parents seem convinced. “He’s good to me,” I say shortly. I’m afraid that saying anything more complex than that will give away a lot of things I’m not ready or able to voice just yet.

“Will we get to meet him soon?” she asks enthusiastically.

I’m not sure what to say. I’d prefer to keep them apart for eternity, but I can’t exactly say that. So I settle for, “Hopefully. He’s really busy, but I’m sure it will happen at some point.”

Whenever Leo decides it’s prudent, I’m sure.

Mom nods and then grows serious all of a sudden. “While we have you all to ourselves, your dad and I have something we need to tell you.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Oh... this sounds serious.”

“Well,” she says, glancing towards Dad, “you could say that.”

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

My thoughts turn dark immediately. Cancer. Bankruptcy. Alzheimer’s.

I can’t handle any other bad news. Maybe it makes me selfish, but I want to run away before they can say anything. To bury my head in the sand like an

ostrich and wait for the storm to blow over.

But I've spent years being selfish when it came to my parents. I need to grow up.

So I suck in a deep, shuddering breath and force myself to ask, "What is it?"

"Now, don't panic," he says, seeing right through my facade of calm. "It's not bad news."

"Okay. Then what is it?"

"Well, we were always going to tell you about this one day," he begins. "But we wanted to wait until you were older. Until you were an adult. Then you... well, you left, and... you know how that went."

I frown. "Sorry."

Mom reaches out and takes my hand. "Love, you know your adoption was closed."

"Right..."

"It was closed," she repeats, "but there was also a caveat."

"What kind of caveat?"

Dad takes over again. "They wanted a closed adoption, but they also wanted to take care of you. They set you up with an account. Every month since the day you were placed with us, money has been coming into that account without fail."

"I... You're... Seriously?"

Mom nods. "The account can't be accessed by anyone but you. It matured when you were twenty-one years old."

"Which is why we chose not to tell you until you were of age," Dad says. "We didn't want to keep a secret from you, but telling you about something that you could do nothing about seemed almost like we'd be putting a burden on you."

“That makes sense,” I say slowly. I don’t want them to worry about me being upset. I’m not upset, per se—just... shocked. “You did what you thought was best.”

“You were only eighteen when you told us about Casey. Then you dropped out of college and moved out of state with him,” mom says. “We had many different discussions about it, but in the end, we didn’t want Casey having access to the money that was rightfully yours.”

“We... we thought he was the type of man who’d expect to manage your finances,” Dad says cautiously.

“Well, you were right,” I say bitterly. “He wouldn’t have let me keep that money. He would have sucked me dry as soon as he found out about it.”

Dad nods. “After you reached out to us the other day, your mother and I decided that it was time. You’re an adult now, and we trust that you know what you’re doing.”

Do I, though? I gulp. “Well, I’m shocked, to say the least. But I appreciate you guys telling me about this.”

Mom pulls out a file folder brimming with documents and hands it over to me. “This is everything you need to know about the account.”

I take the file from her and stare at it. I’m afraid to ask, but...

“Is there... Are there names in here? Anything that says who’s sending me this money?” I ask.

Dad shakes my head, and my heart cracks a little bit.

Maybe that’s for the best. I’m just now developing a healthy relationship with my adoptive parents. If the people who birthed me came barging back into my life...

There’s no telling what might happen.

“Nothing, sweetheart,” he says. “We’ve searched. All we get is the sum of money that enters the account every month. No details.”

“Wait. It’s still coming?”

“It is. Whoever this is, they apparently wanted you to be well provided for.”

“So... giving me up wasn’t a question of money then,” I say slowly.

Mom and Dad exchange a meaningful glance.

“I know it’s all very confusing for you,” she says. “It’s a little confusing for us, too. And this is a lot to process, but... at least now you can have some financial freedom, Willow.”

I look down at the file, but I can’t bring myself to open it. “How much is in the account?” I whisper.

Again, they look at each other, and again, I’m not sure what it means. Ten thousand? twenty?

“The same amount came in most months,” Mom said. “Occasionally, it was a little more. But usually it was around sixty-seven thousand dollars”

My mouth falls open. “There’s *sixty-seven thousand dollars* in here?”

“No,” Dad chuckles. “No, honey.”

“Oh.” I feel silly. “Yeah, that makes sense. That would have been so much ___”

“They put in sixty-seven thousand per month,” he clarifies. “Altogether, it holds a little more than twenty-one million.”

Silence. What can I say? What could I possibly say to something like that? Twenty-one million isn’t a real number. It’s like what a little kid says when he’s trying to guess how many jellybeans are in a jar. It’s how many grains of sand are on the beach or how many stars are in the sky.

It sure as hell is not how much money I own.

Mom smiles and strokes the back of my hand. “Use it wisely, honey. Money is a blessing, but it can also be a curse. It just depends on what you do with it.”

I nod silently, still trying and failing to process the enormity of that number. *Twenty-one million*. That’s a fortune.

And it means so much more than just financial freedom. It means that there is someone out there who cares about me.

They're alive.

They're somewhere.

They know I exist.

"I... I wouldn't even know what to do with that amount of money," I whisper.

"I know it's a boring answer, but invest it," Dad says.

I move to sit between them. "Mom, what would you do?"

"Oh, well, I don't know. I suppose I'd probably buy a nicer home. Somewhere with a big lot where my garden could really flourish."

"That's it, huh? No fancy cars for the two of you? No beachfront mansions?"

"What on earth would we do in a place like that?" Dad asks. "No, it's the simple life for us. Though I must say, the mansion life does seem to suit you."

I glance back at the house and realize Leo's mansion is my house now. If only they knew this life of luxury comes with a cost.

"You look brighter," Mom agrees. "You're practically glowing."

I try to make my smile match the description. "It's been a hectic few months. I'm honestly just glad to have Casey out of my life."

"It's surprising that he didn't put up that much of a fight about the divorce," Dad says. "He always seemed like the stubborn type to me."

"I don't suppose he's so good at handling rejection, either," Mom adds.

"Well, you're right on both accounts. He might've fought more, but Leo, uh... helped. He's... influential. Thank God, too, because without him, I'd probably be homeless."

The moment I say it, I regret it. Dad's face falls. Mom sits up straighter like she's been electrocuted.

She reaches out and grabs my hand. "Honey, you always have us to come to."

I try to backtrack. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I knew you guys would be there for me. I just didn't think I deserved your help."

"Love—"

"No, let me get this out," I cut in. "I felt so ashamed for how I treated the two of you before I left. When everything went to shit, I knew you'd been right all along. But I wanted to be in a better place when I contacted you both. That way, you'd know I was contacting you because I love you. And not because I was desperate."

Mom gives me a sad smile. "We wouldn't have cared either way."

"I know, and I love you for it," I say. "You two are the best parents. I'm just sorry I didn't recognize that sooner."

Dad wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me a little closer. "We're so glad you're back, kiddo. You have no idea how much better life is now that we know we can pick up the phone and you'll answer."

"Call me anytime."

Mom laughs. "You might regret that sentiment."

"Never."

I like having my parents in my life. It's good to be reminded that there are people who care about me for no other reason than because I'm me.

We walk around the garden. I love watching Mom admire all of the landscaping. She falls in love with every nook and cranny, which is a point in Leo's favor. He gets another point from Dad when we get back to the patio and a table is being arranged with a brunch fit for kings.

"Compliments of Mr. Solovev," one of the maids explains. "He regrets he can't join you to eat, but he hopes you'll enjoy yourselves."

A small part of me is disappointed by his absence. But I'm happy to have my parents to myself for a little while longer.

The lunch is of course delicious. It's Russian cuisine, which is new to my parents. Mom and Dad try every dish on the table, and I tell them what everything is. I've learned a lot from the meals delivered to my rooms the last two weeks.

There's beef stroganoff and pelmeni, which are the stars of the show. Shashlik, too. "Like Russian Kebabs," Dad says approvingly. "Honey, we'll have to make these at home."

"I'm still trying to figure out what this cold soup is!" Mom giggles.

"Okroshka," I say. "It's good."

Dad uncovers a tray of pirozhki and groans. "These rolls smell amazing."

"That's because they're stuffed with meat, you old carnivore."

His eyes light up. "Even better!"

Once we've done serious damage to all the serving platters, my dad leans back with his hands on his stomach. "I can't say I've ever had Russian food before, but I'm certainly looking forward to more meals spent with you if this is what we get to gorge ourselves on."

"That's your father's way of saying 'Thank you,' dear," my mom says with a laugh and a roll of the eyes.

"Don't thank me," I say. "This was all Leo's doing. I had no idea you guys were even coming today. But I'm so glad you're here."

"It's lovely that he's the kind of man who surprises you," Mom remarks. "He wants to make you happy."

I almost laugh out loud. Nothing in my experience suggests that's true. Although... ?

I shove the thought aside for now. I'm not sure I'll ever have enough time to figure out Leo's motives for anything. Better not to even try.

Dad excuses himself to go use the bathroom before dessert. The moment he's gone, my mom sidles a little closer to me.

"Sweetheart," she says. "I don't mean to pry..."

I raise my eyebrows with amusement. "But?"

"I was just wondering: are you pregnant?"

I stop short, taken back by the question. "How did you know?"

Her face blossoms with excitement. "Oh, honey!"

"Shh," I say, shushing her quickly. "No, sorry. I'm, uh... not sure yet."

She frowns. "You suspect, but you haven't been to the doctor?"

"It's only been a few days."

"Pregnancy test?"

I shake my head.

"Why not? I'd be dying to know!"

"I just started to suspect," I explain. "I haven't really had the chance to figure out what to do about it."

"Well, are you happy about the possibility?" Mom asks guardedly.

"I guess I just wasn't prepared for it," I admit. "Leo and I... this marriage happened fast. I thought I'd have more time."

Mum nods sympathetically. "Does he know anything?"

"No."

And thank God for that. I don't know how I feel about the possibility yet, but I know how Leo would feel. He refuses to tell me why I'm "the key" to his feud with the Mikhailov Bratva, but he said he needed an heir. If I'm pregnant, then Leo—yet again—gets exactly what he wants.

Any excitement I could have about a baby is tangled up in that. It's confusing, to say the least.

“How did you guess?” I ask.

“Just a mother’s intuition,” she says. “And you keep touching your stomach.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I do?”

“It’s very sweet.”

“Oh God.”

Mum laughs. “You’re excited, even if you don’t know it yet.”

I take a deep breath. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Of course.”

“The next time you come to visit, would you mind bringing me a pregnancy test?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says. If she thinks it’s odd that I’m not buying the test myself, she doesn’t say so. She just seems thrilled to be included in this moment at all.

“Thanks, Mom.”

She leans in and hugs me tight. “My baby’s having a baby. I’m just so glad I get to be a part of it.”

WILLOW

The first time the topic of children came up, I was twenty-one. Casey and I had already been married for two years.

“Don’t you think it’s time?” he asked. “We’re young. I have money. Why not?”

“Because... well, because I’m twenty-one,” I countered. “There’s more I want to do in life before I start popping out kids.”

He frowned. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking that maybe I should go back to college. Finish my degree.”

His face turned to stone. “You quit on that once already.”

“It wasn’t that so much as that I met you,” I said. “You wanted to move. I wanted to come with you. I think I gave up on it a little prematurely.”

“Oh, so now it’s my fault?”

“No! I don’t regret anything,” I said. “I just wish I’d handled things a little differently.”

“That’s the definition of regret. If you don’t know that much, I don’t know about college for you, honey.”

I stared at him. “Are you calling me stupid?”

“If the shoe fits.”

“Casey!”

Usually, he'd grumble something and end the conversation there. But that day, he stared at me. “You going back to school is stupid. There's no reason for it.”

“Getting a degree is important.”

“I have one. That's enough.”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

His expression sharpened. “I'm not being fucking ridiculous. You've got everything you could want or need right here.”

“Says who?”

“Says me!” he yelled. “I provide for you, don't I? I buy you pretty clothes and take you out to fancy restaurants.”

“And I appreciate all that,” I said as calmly as I could. I didn't want to fight. “But I want to do this for me.”

“What's the point? It's not like you'll ever have a job.”

“Maybe I will.”

He rolled his eyes. “It's a waste of time.”

“Actually, this conversation is a waste of time.”

He moved so fast that I didn't see him coming. He grabbed my wrist tight enough to hurt and yanked me against him.

“Casey, stop it! Let go. You're hurting me.”

He held my wrist hard for another long moment, his furious eyes searching mine like beacons.

Then he dropped it and stepped back. Throwing up his hands, he said, “Fine, go back to college. See if I fucking care.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” he said, still stringing me along. “Go ahead. Have fun. Get your silly degree. But I’m not paying for a dime of it.”

I froze. “But... you know I don’t have any money.”

He shrugged. “You can always ask your parents for help.”

It was a cruel twist of the knife. He knew I had nowhere else to go. No one to turn to. Least of all them.

Tears burned the backs of my eyes, and I furiously blinked them away. I didn’t want him to see.

But he saw. Of course he did. Casey saw everything.

“Cheer up,” he cooed, hot and cold as ever. He reached out and stroked my cheek. “It’s not worth being upset about. You know why? Once we have our first baby, you’re going to forget all about college. And your parents. We’re going to be a happy little family. Nothing else will matter.”

When I didn’t say anything, he grabbed my chin and forced my eyes up to his. “Did you hear me? I said don’t sulk. You know how I hate it when you sulk. You don’t want our baby to think you didn’t want it, right?”

I shook my head, mostly just because I couldn’t think of anything else to do.

Casey smiled, pleased. “See? We’re going to be so happy, baby. Just you wait.”

Back in the present, I shudder. I haven’t thought about that memory in a long time.

Somewhere along the way, Casey got busy making money, doing shady deals, and climbing the ladder. He was more interested in chasing those dreams than having a family.

And I didn’t remind him. I knew I wanted children someday, but... not like that. Not with him.

I look down at myself, at my hand pressed against my still-flat stomach. Mom was right: I do touch my belly a lot. It’s a habit I need to break.

Leo can't know.

At least, not until I figure out what my plan is.

Getting married is one thing. But having a child together is a whole 'nother ball game. As soon as I have the heir to the Solovev Bratva growing inside me, there will be no escape for me or my baby.

My baby. The words send a shiver of happiness and dread coursing through me. I'm one part excited, ten parts terrified.

I want a child. I feel that deeply. But is this the right place? Is this the right time?

Is this the right man?

I'm walking through the garden, hoping fresh air will clear my head, when I spot Leo standing under one of the more magnificent trees in the area. It's tall, thick, with a spider web of girthy, gnarled branches that cast the whole corner of the garden in shade. Fallen leaves carpet the ground.

Leo is standing near the trunk, his head bent.

I walk forward, curious to what he's doing, but I stop short. I don't want the leaves to crunch underfoot and give me away.

Not that it does me much good.

"Are you going to come here, or stand in the shadows and stalk me from a distance?"

I jump when he speaks. "How did you know I was even here? I didn't make a sound."

"That's what you think."

Resigning myself to the fact that he might in fact know everything, I cross over to him. That's when I see what Leo was looking at.

A gravestone.

Before I even read the etchings, I know who is buried here. His brother. Pavel Solovev.

The only person Leo ever loved.

The gravestone is gorgeous. Smooth and polished to a shine. The engraving on it is clean and simple.

“Pavel Solovev. Brother. Husband. Don,” I read aloud. “It’s a beautiful headstone.”

Leo shrugs. “That was all Ariel’s doing.”

I’m not sure if I believe him, but I don’t want to argue. If he wants me to think he’s an emotionless monster, then fine, I’ll think it.

“My parents just left,” I say instead of answering him directly. “Thank you for inviting them here. I... I really didn’t expect that.”

He doesn’t respond. Just continues to stare at Pavel’s grave, as if hoping his brother will rise from the earth and make things the way they were always meant to be.

“What was it like?” I ask suddenly. “Growing up Bratva?”

Finally, he spares me a glance. “It was different.”

“Is this like a whole ‘if you tell me you’ll have to kill me’ kind of situation?”

“You watch too many movies.”

“It’s all I have, since you won’t tell me anything,” I say bitterly.

Leo doesn’t respond.

“What was he like?” I try again.

He sighs. “He was a man. Then he was dead.”

“Where did that leave you?”

“Fighting to avenge what they took from my family. What they took from him. What they took from me.”

“I don’t want to tell anyone how to mourn, but... is that healthy?”

“I don’t fucking give a shit,” he growls. “Revenge has gotten me this far. It will see me through to the end.”

“And after?” I ponder. “After you get your revenge, then what?”

“I’ll be plenty busy.”

I don’t know what I expected him to say, but the answer is disappointing. And kind of sad. “That’s it? Just a life of warring with enemies and trying to hold on to what you’ve gained? It sounds exhausting. Not to mention bleak.”

“It is the only life for me.”

I know Leo believes what he is saying—but I have to hope there’s something else for him. That there is a side of himself he is keeping hidden away.

I want to ask him about it, but I don’t want to out myself before I’m ready. Leo seems to know when I’m lying. Still, I have to risk it.

There may not be another moment like this.

“What if you have children one day?”

“They will be Bratva,” he says firmly.

I wait for him to say more, but he doesn’t. “Okay, well, what does that mean?”

“It means that they will be raised to understand this world. They’ll understand why I am the way that I am. And they’ll be prepared and trained to carry on the legacy I have created.”

I frown. “What if that’s not what they want?”

He looks back at the grave. “They won’t be given a choice. I wasn’t.”

My heart beats a little faster. My hand floats towards my stomach, but I pin it to my side. Even now, the urge to protect the life inside of me is strong.

“Isn’t there an alternative to all this? Isn’t it more important for your children to be happy than powerful?”

“If they’re powerful, they will be happy.”

“Are *you* happy?”

“I’m powerful,” he says.

“That doesn’t mean you’re happy.”

“Except it does,” he retorts. “As I just explained.”

“That’s circular reasoning! You aren’t always right.”

“Yes, I am.”

“According to you,” I argue.

“Exactly. And I’m always right.”

I grit my teeth. There’s just no arguing with this man. There’s no winning with him. No matter what I say, he’s going to counter with his own biased arguments.

“What if you have daughters?” I ask suddenly. “Will they be expected to be Bratva?”

“All my children will be Bratva, regardless of their sex. It is not about being a man or a woman. It is about strength.”

I shrug. “You can’t blame me for assuming that women are just pawns and objects in your world. It’s not like I was given a choice.”

“You have many choices, Willow,” he says. “You’re just too narrow-minded to see them.”

This was a mistake. I’m too tired for this conversation, for his cryptic bullshit, for his unwillingness to ever give a single goddamn inch. I’m about to storm off the way I came—until Leo starts talking again.

“You probably won’t remember the name, but Anya Mikhailov has quite the reputation in Bratva circles. She’s a woman, but she’s feared and revered in the underworld.”

“Anya Mikhailov?” I repeat. “She’s the old don’s daughter, right?”

Leo nods. He looks impressed that I was paying attention. “She’s killed a few husbands and commands a contingent of her own men, though completely independent from her father and the Bratva to which she owes her name. It takes a strong woman to earn the respect of men in this world, but it’s possible. Anya did it.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed?” I ask.

“If you were smart, you would be.”

“If I were smart,” I grimace, “I’d take a page out of her book and kill a few husbands of my own.”

“You did try,” he chuckles darkly. “Didn’t work out for you too well.”

My cheeks redden. I ignore that. “Why should I be impressed by some woman I’ve never met?” I ask.

“Because she took control of her own fate. She refused to be a victim.”

“Do you admire her?”

“I don’t admire anyone in this world but my fucking self, Willow. I thought you would realize that by now. But…” he adds, “we can always learn from others.”

“Fine, call it what you want. But aren’t the Mikhailovs supposed to be your enemies?”

“They are. But Anya Mikhailov has had nothing to do with her father’s decisions for a few decades now. She was not involved in the attack on my brother,” Leo says. “Make no mistake: she is still a Mikhailov. I wouldn’t trust her for anything. The woman’s deadly and she is still an enemy. But you can respect your enemies.”

“I’ll take your word for it. I’ve never had enemies before.”

“That’ll change.”

I turn to him with alarm. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll figure it out soon enough.”

Before I can press him for an answer, his phone rings. He turns away and answers. "Are we ready to detonate?" he asks and then waits for the answer. "Can he get out?"

Whoever is on the other line says something hurriedly, just a tinny buzz I can't decipher.

Leo suddenly goes rigid. "Then hold off."

His words are brutally sharp and cold. He isn't talking to me, but I take a step back. It's human instinct. Self-preservation.

More talking from the caller. Then:

"I don't give a fuck!" he roars. "My orders are simple: I will not detonate as long as even one of my men is in there. Fucking hold. Wait until I give the word."

He hangs up and turns around. I don't bother to pretend as though I'm not listening.

"Something went wrong with one of your master plans?" I ask.

"It's nothing I can't handle," he snarls. "I think you should get back up to your room."

Instead, defiant, I move towards him. "I'm not a child. You can't dismiss me to get me out of your way."

He takes a step forward, too. "Fucking watch me."

"Scared I'll listen to your plans and rat you out to the bad guys?" I'm angry enough that I want to provoke him. If only to force a response out of him.

And I get it.

Leo grabs me and pulls me against his body. We are so close that I can feel his individual abs through his shirt. The pulse of his heart matches mine.

"Are you threatening me, *kukolka*?" he asks in a rough whisper. "Because I don't take kindly to threats, sweetheart. Even if they come from lips as sweet as yours."

I struggle against him, but the friction between our bodies makes me wish he'd pull me tighter.

“Get off me!”

“Not if you keep moving like that,” he growls.

I can feel his erection against my thigh. And like clockwork, my knees go weak at the thought of having him inside me.

But that wave of desire feels like a betrayal of myself.

I shouldn't feel this way about the man who abducted me, forcibly married me, and trapped me into a life I never asked for. And now our child—our *maybe* child—is facing the same fate.

Still, his body is warm against mine, and I want to curl against his broad chest.

It's like he said: “want” is a dangerous game.

“Leo—”

He smashes his lips down on mine, stealing whatever I was going to say from my lips. I should fight, but I don't.

Because every time he kisses me, I feel safe and whole.

His tongue moves against mine, and I dive into it easy as breathing. I drink him in and try to cling to this feeling, to the comfort that buzzes through me like an electrical pulse. When this happens, the world falls into place. The universe makes sense. Things are as they are supposed to be.

Just as quickly as the kiss began, it ends. I stumble forward from the loss of him, aching in a way that only he can make me ache.

“Go,” he says without looking at me as the sun sets behind him. “I have work to do.”

I nod without argument. Because one thing is becoming increasingly clear: it's time I figure out what I truly want...

And how to get it.

LEO

I wake up the next morning with a raging hard-on and a blue-eyed fantasy on my mind.

It pisses me off. Awake or asleep, I can't shake her from my thoughts.

I still haven't gone to the suite. I've stayed out of her bed. The last thing I need in the final stage of my plan is to let Willow get in my head.

But my cock is swollen just thinking about her.

I imagine her spread out in her bed, her silk nightie riding up her slim thighs. I could push it all the way up and feast on the wetness between her legs. All it would take is a few strokes of my tongue to have her begging me for more.

I could fuck her mouth, her tight pussy. I could push her to the edge and pull her back again and again until she'd come, screaming.

I masturbate furiously to the image, but even when I erupt, the release is unsatisfying.

It's not the same as being inside her.

Barely awake and already on edge, I get out of bed and pull on my pants. I'm reaching for my shirt when there's a knock on my door. I already know who it is.

"I'm up, Jax."

He walks in with a goofy grin on his face. “Ready for action?”

“I am,” I say. “But I don’t know why you’re so pumped. You’re not coming with me.”

“The hell are you talking about? You’re taking two vehicles of men. Last I checked, you plus me equals two.”

“Right. And your point?”

His face falls. “Are you serious?”

“This is not open for discussion, Jax.”

His jaw clamps shut as he recognizes the tone. He knows not to push the issue when I go down on him.

I button up my shirt and reach for my coat.

“Can I ask why I’m not included in this meeting?” he asks between gritted teeth.

He thinks this is a punishment, but it’s not. If I wanted to punish him, I’d do a whole lot more than hurt his feelings.

“Because you and Gaiman are my seconds. Next to me, you’re the two most important men in the Bratva. My brother chose to leave me behind the last time. It was the right decision.”

“I can handle myself in a firefight, Leo.”

“I know you can, but that’s not the point. I need you here to oversee the rest of my plans. And most importantly, I need you here to look after Willow.”

Jax straightens up a little.

“You’re the only one I would ever trust with her,” I finish.

Jax nods slowly, some of his disappointment ebbing. He follows me out of the room and down the hall. Just before we reach the staircase, I catch sight of Willow.

She's standing in front of a window at the end of the hall. She turns towards us, her body stiff, her eyes curious. "Where are you going?"

"I have a meeting."

"With who?" she asks.

"Anya Mikhailov."

I can tell she didn't expect me to answer. Usually, I wouldn't have. But there's a certain symmetry in telling her. She won't get it, but I will. I'll know.

She raises her brows. "You're meeting her?" She knows enough about the woman now to react appropriately.

"That's what I just said, yes."

"Why?"

I shrug. "She asked for the meeting. I'm feeling nice."

"Are you going in prepared?" she asks.

If I'm not wrong—and I never am—there's a hint of worry in her voice. Willow didn't grow up in this world, but I told her what happened to Pavel. She knows the risks.

As do I.

"I'm always prepared."

"Especially when it comes to the Mikhailov bastards," Jax adds.

She blinks and looks at Jax, almost like she forgot he was standing there at all.

"Wait downstairs for me," I tell him. "Make sure the men are ready. We're leaving in five."

Jax nods and heads off. When he's gone, I close the distance between myself and Willow. After weeks of looking thin and sallow, she finally has some color in her cheeks. Still, she looks tired.

She wilts under my gaze. “My mother is coming to see me today. Is that alright?”

I nod. “Whatever suits you.”

She doesn’t even smile, but her blue eyes put me right back into my dream. Blood rushes downward. I turn towards the staircase so she doesn’t notice.

“Is she beautiful?” Willow asks before I can take a step. “Anya, I mean. Is she beautiful?”

It’s clear she lost the fight to keep that question buried.

Sighing, I turn back to meet Willow’s eyes. “Yes. She’s very beautiful.”

Her mouth opens, but she shuts it almost immediately. She walks past me to her door, but at the last minute, she looks back. “Be careful, Leo.”

Then she closes the door.

Part of me wants to break it down and follow her. I want to do every dirty thing I fantasized about this morning. I want to do things I don’t even dare to fantasize about, too. Things like kissing away the tears on her cheeks. Pulling her into my embrace not to fuck her but just to feel her warmth, her softness, her aura.

But there’s no time for any of that shit.

There is only time for war.

I head downstairs. My men are readying themselves in the courtyard. I head straight for the Jeep. Gaiman and Jax fall in line behind me.

“Careful,” Gaiman cautions. “You may have the upper hand right now, but this bitch has teeth. She might bite.”

I smile. “I look forward to seeing her try.”

The meeting is to be held at a small upscale hotel in the middle of nowhere, an hour and a half away from civilization. For both our benefits—anyone who doesn’t belong here will stick out like a sore thumb.

The hotel manager greets me and my men at the door.

“Mr. Solovev.” He bows deeply. I wonder how much he knows about who I am. My guess is enough to be afraid, because the man is trembling.

He leads me in. The lobby is small, but the carpet is plush and a large chandelier hangs from the ceiling, casting glittering reflections on the walls. It’s a romantic little spot. Willow would like it.

There’s an open lounge with guests milling around, but the manager leads us past that and to a set of closed double doors. A sign on the wall indicates this is a private lounge.

“Your party is waiting on the other side,” the manager explains. He bows again and backs away, leaving me to open the door myself.

I chose Aleksandr and Oleg to accompany me into the meeting. They flank me on either side as I push the door open.

As soon as I do, I know the letter I received was a forgery.

Because it isn’t Anya Mikhailov waiting for me.

It’s Spartak Belov and Semyon Mikhailov.

They are each sitting in one of the cushy armchairs set up around a wide table. Two bodyguards stand at their backs.

The final person in the room is a woman dressed in a nurse’s uniform. Her hair is so completely gray that it’s silver. Her eyes are filmy, but they miss nothing as they land on me. She spares me one hard glance and then she looks down.

Her job is not to draw attention. It’s to blend into the background until you forget she’s there at all. Which isn’t really a problem at all, because the man she’s clearly here to look after is the one who draws all the attention.

Or at least, he once did. But Semyon Mikhailov does not look like the strong and capable don he was a decade ago.

The gout has progressed so severely that he looks like a stuffed toad. His skin is pale and sallow. Even his breathing sounds like shit, shallow and raspy and rattling in his lungs. The breath of a man on the brink of death.

And yet his eyes are sharp. As resilient and deadly as ever.

Belov is the man to watch here, though. He's the man pulling the strings. Looking at him, though, you'd never know it. His hair is dark, shot through with silver. His limbs are spindly like a praying mantis.

It takes me only seconds to understand I've been lured here and take stock of who is before me. Then I get down to business.

"Who wrote the letter?" I demand.

Belov turns to Semyon, seeming to defer to the old man's authority. It would be very convincing—if I didn't know any better.

"I did," Semyon replies, his tone gravelly.

His irises are the same dark blue I remember, but the whites of his eyes have soured to yellow. They are flecked with dots of crimson that look like blood clots. The man inspires fear, but in a different way now. He looks like every child's worst nightmare come to life.

I walk forward confidently and take the empty chair at the table. My men stand behind me, eyeing their counterparts standing behind Spartak and Semyon.

Two drinks sweat condensation onto the table. I smell the oaky strength of whiskey wafting out of each crystal glass.

"A drink?" Belov offers me, as though we're in his personal sitting room.

"None for me."

"We haven't poisoned it," he chuckles.

I smirk. "It's not a question of safety. It's a question of pride. I'm just not going to share a drink with the motherfuckers who murdered my brother. Especially when I was brought here under false pretenses."

Belov glances towards Semyon. "Come on now, Leo. Don't be so uptight. It was the only way to get you here. Would you have come if either of us wrote you ourselves?"

I don't like the familiar way in which he addresses me. Like we're old friends, not enemies.

I breathe slowly and examine him more. His sharp, aristocratic features clash with his attire. He wears a thin white vest with a thick gold chain around his neck.

This man is no Bratva leader. He's a common gangster playing pretend.

The letter was a cheap trick. One I should have seen through immediately. It's just another way that Willow has distracted me—when I can least afford to be distracted.

“What do you want, Belov?” I ask bluntly.

His eyes flash with anger at my tone. He's grown too accustomed to instant respect during the Solovev Bratva's time in the wilderness.

He will not like what I have planned for him next.

“It's not about what I want. It's about what my don wants.” He nods towards Semyon—still keeping up the facade of deference—and then back to me. “Don Mikhailov regrets what happened with your brother. It was a... mistake.”

I lean back in my armchair and turn my gaze to the gouty old bastard. “Is that true, old man?”

Belov sits forward, his eyes flashing. “He may be an old man, but he is still the don of this Bratva. He is owed respect.”

I meet Belov's stare with one of my own. “He's not my don.”

“Enough,” Semyon scowls. “I'm not going to demand respect from him. Especially in light of our... history.”

Semyon twitches as he talks, his weak muscles spasming. His face only settles when he lapses back into silence.

“But Belov is right,” he continues. “I regret that a meeting between our Bratvas devolved into violence. It was a cowardly move at what was meant to be a gentleman's meeting. It should not have happened.”

His breath hitches and a cough escapes his gray lips. One cough leads to another and suddenly, he's hacking so violently it feels like the room is shaking.

The nurse rushes forward to tend to him. She pulls him upright and supports his chest so his coughs become easier to manage.

When he settles, she offers him warm water and a handful of colorless pills. He takes them all without complaint, then she melts into the background once again.

“What Don Mikhailov was trying to say,” Belov sighs, “is that the time has come to mend fences between our organizations. As such, we're here to make a peace offering.”

I would say this is coming out of left field—but that would only be if I believed them.

There's a catch. I'm certain of it. The Mikhailov don't make peace offerings. They make war.

“I won't be bought so easily,” I snarl. “Nor will my brother's death be forgotten so quickly.”

Belov gives me a smile that suggests all apparent sincerity in his quest for peace. He offers Semyon yet another deferential glance before continuing.

“We respect and appreciate the way you've built your Bratva. In fact, for a long time we assumed you weren't interested in running it at all after your brother's passing—”

“Murder,” I snap. “It was a murder. Call it what it was.”

Belov's eyes flare with whiplash hatred, but he quickly restores the placid look on his face.

“The point is, we acknowledge the mistake that was made, and we're moving to correct it now.”

In other words, they've underestimated me. Now that they know I've got a few aces up my sleeve, they want to make amends.

I raise a brow and say nothing. I'd rather Belov do the talking. I can gather more information that way.

"We admire you, Leo. And we want to offer you an alliance."

I laugh. "This, I want to hear."

"As you know, Don Semyon has offered me the great privilege of being his successor." Belov sits straighter. "As such, after his death I will become don."

"I'm aware."

I glance to Semyon. The man's sallow, puckering skin hangs at the edges. He's covered in liver spots.

I repress a shudder of revulsion. Before they pass the torch, they should cremate him with it.

"I need a strong second to help me shape the Mikhailov Bratva in my vision," he says. "And I believe you're just the man for the job."

I stare at him in disbelief. Until he grows uncomfortable, his bug-like limbs shifting nervously.

Without looking away, I lean in. "Is that a serious offer?"

"It is."

"You expect me to give up the title of don to play second fiddle to the man who had a hand in murdering my brother?"

A slap in the face would be less insulting. If I didn't mind being a hypocrite, I'd kill Belov where he sits.

"This is the Mikhailov Bratva we are discussing, Leo," Belov says. "We are the strongest, best-connected organization in the country. No one has or will ever get an offer like this again. Imagine the strength of the Solovevs combined with the strength of the Mikhailovs. It's a very generous offer, I must say.."

"It's a fucking joke," I snap bluntly. "You can't have imagined I'd take it seriously."

His eyes grow cold. “I assumed you were smart enough to see the opportunity here.”

“There’s no opportunity,” I tell him. “There’s only the promise of blood.”

“But—”

“I am second to no man. There will be no alliance, Belov.” I start to leave but stop. “And when you address me in the future, the name is Don Solovev.”

Then I turn and put my back on my brother’s killers.

The next time I see them, only one of us will walk out alive.

WILLOW

“Where’s your husband today?” Mom is sipping on the juice one of the maids brought up to my room with breakfast. I didn’t touch it; the citrus smell made me sick.

“Out,” I say. “Important business meeting.”

It’s humiliating to admit that I don’t know where he goes when he leaves the mansion. Or what he does when he’s out. Or whom. His parting words from earlier are still echoing in my head.

Yes, she’s very beautiful.

Oblivious, my mom smiles and pushes a plastic pharmacy bag into my hands. “I brought seven different tests,” she says. “They’re all high quality. You should have a definitive answer in a few minutes.”

The bag feels heavy in my hands. Like it’s weighed down with what a positive result would mean. For me. For the baby...

“Take a seat, Mom,” I tell her. “I’ll be right back.”

In the bathroom, I take out all seven pregnancy tests and line them up in a neat row. I fill a glass with water from the sink and then dump it out. I’m already fit to bursting. I haven’t been to the bathroom in hours.

I’ve been waiting for my mom to arrive. Waiting to find out.

My stomach flips with nerves. I stare at my reflection in the mirror. “It’s okay,” I tell myself. “You already know...”

But that’s the thing: feeling it in your gut is not the same as staring at the evidence. A baby is big. It’ll change everything.

If I stay right here, though—gazing into this mirror, not moving, not testing anything—then maybe time will just freeze and nothing at all will change and there will be no baby and the marriage—both of them—will turn out to be a figment of my imagination and I’ll wake up in my bed at eighteen years old, ready to do my life over the right way.

It’s worth a shot, right?

It doesn’t last long. Not for lack of trying, though. The only reason I can move away from the mirror is because I’m genuinely going to pee my pants if I delay any longer.

I use three of the sticks in quick succession and balance them on the edge of the bathtub upside down.

I pull my pants back up and wash my hands without looking in the mirror. Without looking over to the tub. For a few more seconds, I pretend the tests aren’t three feet away processing my future.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

The clock in the corner is relentless, no matter how much telepathy power I pretend to direct its way. Seconds come and go, dragging me closer and closer to the moment I can’t put off much longer.

I try to walk towards the tub, but I turn away at the last minute. I repeat that a few times, pacing up then spinning away from the tests every time I get too close.

“Come on, Willow,” I mutter. “Don’t be a coward. Just look.”

Finally, I take a deep breath and walk to the tub. I flip over the nearest test before I can lose my nerve. Immediately, I have my answer. Instead of a little plus or minus, digital letters spell out my fate in the testing window.

PREGNANT.

It's so definitive that I don't bother looking at the other two tests right away. I just stare at the word, reading it to myself over and over again, letting the truth sink in.

I'm carrying Leo Solovev's baby.

When shock begins to give way to a flurry of other emotions I'm not yet ready to process, I turn over the other two tests. One has two pink lines. The other has a blue plus sign.

I'm pregnant in three different testing languages.

"Willow, honey?" Mom's voice carries through the door. "Is everything okay?" I open the door suddenly. She gives a start and stumbles back. "Well, sweetheart?"

I nod. "I... I'm pregnant."

Mom claps her hands together and pulls me in for a hug. "Congratulations! I'm so happy for you."

I manage a distracted pat on her back before she takes my hand and leads me to the bed. I sink into the mattress gladly. My legs feel like jello.

"Love, are you okay? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," I say, forcing a smile onto my face. "It's just a bit of a surprise, that's all."

I can't let Mom know how... *complicated*, for lack of a better word, things are with me and Leo. I need to preserve the image of a happy marriage. At least until I figure out what this baby means.

It feels like *déjà vu*. I refused to call my parents until I was free of Casey and out of trouble.

But this is different. With Casey, it was about my pride and shame. Now, it's about my parent's safety. The less they know about Leo's world, the better for them.

Plus, my feelings for Leo are literally indescribable. Words don't exist to describe how frustrated, how alive, how terrified, how strong he makes me

feel, all at once.

“But you’re happy?” Mom asks.

I nod as convincingly as I can. “Of course.”

She takes my hand and squeezes it. “Motherhood was the best thing that ever happened to me. I have no doubt it’ll be the same for you.”

I hear her, but I can’t find the words to respond. My mind is on overdrive. Confirming the pregnancy has made me realize one thing: I can’t stay here.

No matter how much I care about Leo. No matter how much I want a fairytale ending with him. It’s just not realistic.

I’ve been naïve for long enough. It’s time to grow up and put my child’s best interests first. The first step is moving on.

But how? My husband is a Bratva don. You don’t run from a man like that without a plan.

At least I have the account my parents told me about. The money from my birth parents or has given me the financial means to leave, to cover my tracks, to build back up from scratch. I can support myself and my child. If I’m smart—although twenty-one million dollars is such a mind-boggling amount that I don’t see how I could ever burn through it all—I can live on it forever. I won’t ever fall into the trap I was in with Casey again.

“Willow?” Mom’s voice breaks through my planning.

“Sorry. I’m just... processing.”

“Will Leo be happy?” I see the beginnings of concern in the creases around her eyes.

“Of course,” I say quickly. “Of course he will be. I guess I just... I had this idea of going back to college. Finishing my degree.”

“Oh honey,” she croons. “You can still do that with a baby.”

“Maybe.” I sigh and glance up at her. “What was it like for you, becoming a mom for the first time?”

She gives me a sad smile. “My journey into motherhood was very different, sweetheart,” she says. “Your father and I tried for years before we consulted a doctor. We were told that conceiving naturally would be very difficult for us. So we decided to adopt.”

“You didn’t want to try other ways of having a baby?” I ask. “IVF or surrogacy or something like that?”

Mum smiles. “They were all so expensive, and to be honest, for your dad and I, it wasn’t about having a biological child. That was never the important thing for either one of us. Family is about who you choose. And we chose you. We like to think you chose us, too.”

I can hear myself screaming at my parents years earlier, telling them I chose Casey. But the harsh words are little more than an echo now. Like a night terror scream that’s long since faded away in the light of the day.

I lean in and put my head on her shoulder. “I’m so glad you’re here, Mom.”

“Oh honey, you have no idea. I must say, I’m excited to be a grandma.”

“Would you mind doing me a favor then, Grandma?” I ask, sitting up again.

“Of course.”

“Don’t tell anyone about my pregnancy yet. I mean, you can tell Dad. But no one else, okay?”

“Who else would I tell, honey?”

I smile. “Thanks.”

“Of course.” She stands up and jabs a finger in my direction. “Now, first things first, you need to eat three healthy meals a day. You’ve already lost too much weight. And you also need to schedule a meeting with a doctor—”

“No.” Mom stops short in surprise, so I hurry to amend my statement before her mother’s intuition kicks in. “Sorry, I just... I want to put off going to a doctor until I tell Leo.”

“Oh. Of course,” she says. “And I’d like to meet him soon. I should know my son-in-law, especially if you’re carrying his child.”

“I’ll try and arrange it.”

But my heart sinks at the very thought. I don’t want them falling in love with a man that I’m already planning on leaving. I have no doubt that Leo can be incredibly charming when he wants to be.

I can’t think about that now, though. God knows I have enough to worry about.

I tell my mom I’m tired, and she nods at once. “Get some rest. And,” she lowers her voice to a whisper, “take care of my grandbaby.”

I walk her to the front door and wave as she drives away. On my way back up the stairs, I hear the door open.

It’s Leo.

And he looks mad as hell.

His black expression lands on me, and I think it softens a little before hardening right back up again.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Fine.”

Then he turns and storms into his office.

I’d have to be stupid to go after him when he’s in a mood like that. Leo’s wrath is unpleasant, to say the least. But I guess that makes me stupid, because for some unknown reason, I follow after him.

He left the door open. I walk in without knocking, but stop short just inside the doorway. Across the room, Leo is pouring himself a drink from the bar cart.

Without turning, he says, “Want one?”

I fight the urge to press a hand to my stomach. “No thanks.”

He doesn’t ask again. Just knocks back his drink in one gulp. He immediately pours himself another glass.

“Did something go wrong at the meeting?” I ask. “Did Anya do something?”

Jealousy twists inside of me. I don’t know this woman, but he said she was beautiful. What happened at their meeting? I hate that this stranger knows something about Leo that I don’t.

His answer is merely another sip.

Grimacing, he moves to the sofa in front of the fireplace and sits down. After a moment of hesitation, I sit down next to him.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“You wouldn’t even begin to understand.” He says it like a reprimand, and it makes me instantly defensive.

“Might I remind you that you’re the one who chose me?” I say harshly. “If you don’t like that I ask questions, you should have picked a stupider woman to marry. As it is, I want to know what’s going on. I think you owe me that.”

“I don’t owe you a single goddamn thing.”

I shake my head and stand up. “Fine. I’ll leave you then.”

“Stop.”

Leo was born to be a leader. The single word stops me in my tracks. I bite my lip and turn to look back at him. His legs are spread and his glass is on the armrest. He drums his fingers on the side.

“Come here.”

I’m a body divided. I want to resist him—well, truthfully, I want to tell him to go fuck himself for talking to the mother of his child like that—but I can’t stop myself. I walk forward until I’m standing right between his spread legs.

“Sit,” he tells me.

I hesitate for only a second, but it’s enough time for him to grab my hand and pull me down onto his lap.

His arm snakes around my waist, and he looks at me with an intensity that sends a hot shiver coursing down my spine. The spotlight of his attention is

harsh, focused, unrelenting.

I swallow nervously. “What are you doing?”

“Looking at you.”

“Can you not?”

“Why?” he asks. “Does this make you uncomfortable?”

He reaches out and fingers a lock of my hair, winding it around his fingers. The gesture sends my stomach into nervous flutters.

The emotional whiplash is doing a number on me. One moment, I’m planning on leaving with his unborn child to escape the bloody world of the Bratva. The next, I see him upset and run after him to... comfort him?

What good would that do? What good can I do for him? Leo doesn’t need anyone for anything. Least of all for comfort. Least of all me.

“Answer me, Willow.”

I nod. “Yes, I’m uncomfortable.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Then why are you here?”

That’s the million-dollar question. Why am I here? I turn away from him to hide my blush, but I know I’m fighting a losing battle. The man sees everything. The man knows everything.

“I thought I could help,” I say honestly in a small voice. “You looked upset, and I wanted to...”

“You’ve picked a funny time to choose to become a Bratva wife,” he remarks with wry amusement.

I take that amusement personally. He says it like it’s impossible. Like, how could I ever be an asset to him? I’ll never be more than some helpless key. A burden he chained himself to out of necessity, nothing more.

I get off his lap. He doesn’t stop me.

I take that personally, too.

“No man is an island, Leo,” I tell him. “We all need other people. Even you.”

“True,” he says. “And I take what I need.”

“I know,” I say, gnawing at the inside of my cheek to hold back to the flood of emotions. “I know that better than anyone.”

We stare at each other for a moment longer. Then I can't take it anymore. I turn and flee the room as fast as my feet will carry me. And yet, even as I run, even as I'm fully and completely aware that I'm just setting myself up for heartbreak, I can't hide that a desperate part of me wants nothing more than to crawl back into his lap.

Apparently, I'm a masochist.

And Leo Solovev is my torture of choice.

LEO

I try to fight it—fight her—but I can't.

Truthfully, I don't even want to.

It's late, but I walk down the hall to the suite that we're meant to be sharing. Willow's lying in the bed, wrapped up in sheets and dreams. Her eyelashes flutter softly and one leg pokes out from underneath the blankets, revealing the entire length of her leg, right up to her thigh.

I move closer to her, realizing that she's done away with her night slip entirely. There's nothing between her and me but the sheet draped across her body.

I remove my clothes until I'm as naked as she is. Then I slip into the bed next to her.

She stirs. The sheet falls away to reveal the curve of her right breast. My cock, which is already hard, jumps with desire at the sight.

I reach out and cup her breast, circling my thumb over her nipple until it hardens for me. She moans and opens up towards me.

In her sleep, she can't deny what she tries so hard to fight against when she's awake: that she wants me in a way words can't capture.

I lean in and run the tip of my tongue down along her neck. She lets out a little gasp. I can feel her waking up, so I gently pull the sheet from her body and replace its warmth with my own.

Her eyes blink open as I settle my chest over hers. The confusion is palpable. But it takes her only a second to get her bearings.

And when she does, the anger I expect?

It never comes.

Desire burns in her eyes instead. She slides her hand down my back to my ass and pulls my hips into her. Her legs open a little wider, inviting me in.

I hover over her, my lips a mere inch from hers. I know what she wants, but I'm reluctant to give it to her. The fact that I'm here at all irks me.

But tonight, I decided to put logic on the back burner. I let instinct and desire take over.

I can feel the points of her nipples against my chest. If I push inside her now, I know I'll find her wet and wanting.

Her thighs tremble around my hips and she bucks up toward me slightly, but I don't give her what she wants just yet. I keep teasing her.

I press my cock against her slit, give her just enough pressure to make her moan, and then pull back out again. Never allowing her any relief.

"Leo..." she moans.

Fucking hell. I don't expect my own reaction as she utters my name. My body stiffens instantly. One word and I feel like I'm ready to explode all over her before I've even slid inside.

My hand tightens on her side, ready to roll her over so I can fuck her from behind. But then her lips pucker around an exhale, her lids blinking closed slowly. It's mesmerizing.

I realize something: I want to watch her as she comes.

I press against her opening again, but this time, I fulfill the promise. I slide my head inside her, and her swollen lips stretch to accommodate me. Her hips rise to meet me and she swallows my cock whole.

"Someone's eager," I growl in her ear.

Her response is nothing but a shivering moan.

I grab both her hands and pin them down to the mattress. Then I grind my hips into her tight little pussy.

Out, and then back in, harder this time. Repeat. Repeat. Her breasts bounce with every thrust, which only encourages me to fuck her faster. Until my hips are a sweat-slicked blur, my muscles burn, and I'm vibrating from head to toe with an orgasm that's about to hit me like a runaway train.

She is, too. But just when she's at the brink, I pull her upright.

Her legs tighten around my waist and her arms wrap around my neck. She bounces on my cock, feet flat on the bed, as her moans grow increasingly more fervent.

Then, when she's primed to ignite, I fall onto my back. She's saddled on top of me. Her eyes spark with fresh desire. She starts riding me hard.

Her breasts bounce in my face, and I reach out and fondle each one while she drops herself onto me again and again. A slap on her ass has her clenching, crying out, and riding even faster.

Little beads of sweat start to form along her collarbone. Her hands plant on my chest, she throws her head back, and then it's all over, she's coming with soft little splutters from her lips, spine arched as far as it will go so she can moan up to the ceiling.

"Look at me when you come," I snarl. I reach up and grab her chin to force her face back down. Her eyes are rolling in their sockets, not seeing anything, just awash in sensation that doesn't make any sense. Her fingertips tremble on my pecs.

Then, once it's finished tearing through her, she sighs and collapses forward, forehead on the backs of her hands.

I gaze at her, admiring the way her black hair flows over her shoulders and contrasts with her milky skin.

She's a fucking vision. Aphrodite incarnate.

Her fingers trace slow circles on my chest. I lay there, still inside her. She seems in no hurry to change that anytime soon. I'm not, either.

Then something changes.

The calm in the air rips apart. Her blue eyes widen. In an instant, she lifts her hips and jumps off me. Before I can even sit up, she's in the bathroom. A few seconds later, I hear her throw up.

I follow Willow and find her kneeling on the floor, hugging the toilet for dear life. She pushes back her wild, sweaty hair and heaves again and again until nothing is left to come out.

"Are you okay?" I ask when she's done.

Her face is pale, but the color is quickly returning. Embarrassment paints her cheeks. She reaches for some toilet paper and wipes her mouth. Slowly, she lifts herself to standing and edges towards the sink so she can wash out the aftertaste.

"Willow."

She gargles and spits out the water. "I'm fine. I just... caught a bug or something."

I watch as she moves gingerly around the bathroom. She grabs her toothbrush and scrubs at her tongue. She doesn't seem shaken up like I'd expect. Almost like... she isn't surprised.

Her naked body is on full display. She looks fine. Healthy, even. Vibrant.

The last time I saw her look anything but fine was when Jessica was killed. She threw up that day, too. At the time, I chalked it up to shock, but...

Absent-mindedly, she runs a hand over her stomach. It's quick, just a brush of fingers over her abdomen. But as soon as she realizes what she's done, Willow clenches her hand into a fist and drops it to her side.

And in that moment, I know everything there is to know.

"Are you pregnant?"

In the mirror, her eyes go wide. She chokes on her toothpaste as she hurries to answer me. “No.” She spits and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “No, I’m not. I’m not.”

Deception is my art. My craft. I know when people are lying to me. And I can see the lies written all over her.

Not only is my wife pregnant... she’s known for a while.

“How long have you known?”

She shakes her head in a pathetic attempt to keep the lie going. “I’m not... not pregnant... I’m just sick. I caught a bug and that’s—”

I grab her arm and twist her to face me. She falls against my body. We’re both still naked, and Willow seems to realize that all at once. Her cheeks redden. She wraps her other arm around her midsection and tries to pull away from me.

“Let me go, Leo.”

“When were you going to tell me?” I demand. “How long were you going to keep this secret?”

She opens her mouth to keep up the charade. But one look at the fire in my eyes convinces her otherwise. I can see her decide to drop the act all at once.

There’s no point lying.

I know the truth.

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “I wasn’t sure I was going to tell you at all.”

Wrong fucking answer.

“This is the part where you tell me you’re joking,” I snarl. “Or else things are about to get very, very ugly for you.”

“Can you blame me for wanting to keep it hidden?” she asks adamantly. “You’ve made it clear you’re using me. If I told you about this baby, you’d never let me leave.”

“What makes you think I’d let you leave either way?”

She presses her shoulders back and stands tall in front of me. The fact she's naked makes her seem all the more fierce.

Or maybe it's my child growing inside her that's changing everything.

I take a step forward, but she stands her ground. I appreciate the fight in her, but it doesn't matter. No matter how strong she thinks she is, I'm stronger.

She will bend.

She will break.

She will yield.

"You are mine now, Willow."

"I will never be yours. You can't just take something like that from me. I have to give it to you."

"I think you just did that," I say salaciously, glancing towards the tousled bedsheets.

"Sex is not the same as love."

"I don't want your fucking love," I hiss. "What I expect is obedience. What I expect is fucking *loyalty*."

"Fuck you," she barks at me. "You want those things? Pick another woman."

"Believe me: some days, I wish I had. You're almost more trouble than you're worth. But it's too late now. You're carrying my baby. My heir. So you're mine, Willow Solovev. For better or worse, remember?"

She shivers. "What makes you think I even want your baby?"

I glide my fingers along her arm. Goosebumps erupt in the trail of my touch. "Because you're telling me you do in every way you can."

"You think entirely too much of yourself."

"You realize that my seed is dripping down your legs as we speak, don't you?"

She tries to push me away, but I might as well be a brick wall. I don't budge and she finds herself trapped between me and the wall.

"Let me through."

"No."

She drags her gaze up to meet mine. "I want more for my child than the Bratva life, Leo."

My eyes grow cold. *If only she knew.*

"What you want is irrelevant." Then I turn and head for the door. "I'll have a doctor come and check on you tomorrow. Until then, go to sleep. You're carrying my baby now. I expect you to take care of yourself."

WILLOW

I have to get out.

From the moment Leo walks out on me and slams the door in his wake, it's all I can think.

I have to flee. I have to run. I have to get the hell out of here.

Every time I blink, I see his naked back, muscles tensed as he walks away from me. I see him hurling the door shut behind him, fists clenched, jaw tight.

It sounded more like a cell clanging closed.

There was a time in the past when I would have taken all this lying down. I would have stayed in bed and cried. I would have accepted my fate as impossible to change.

But I'm a different woman than I was when I first walked into this mansion.

That girl was naïve. A victim.

I have to be more than that now—for myself and the baby growing inside me.

I have to protect my child.

But how?

The compound is Fort Knox levels of secure. Even if I were to somehow get past the CCTV cameras and motion sensor alarm systems, there are armed

men stationed at every major exit. It's a fortress in all but name.

I think about calling my parents, but how can I possibly explain all this to them over the phone? And what would they do even if they did understand? Not to mention, if my phone is tapped and that call is intercepted, I'd be outing them before I take a single step outside of this room.

If I want to escape, I have to think outside the box. I can't have another failed attempt like when I tried to scale down the trellis. I have to be smart about this.

I glance at the time. In a couple of hours, a doctor will be in to check me out and make sure the baby is healthy.

That's when it hits me. The doctor can be the plan.

The doctor doesn't have to go to me. I can go to him.

My scheme is only half-formed when I start running around the room looking for something sharp. I zero in on the butter knife on my breakfast tray. It's fairly blunt, but with enough pressure, it'll do the job.

I pull my dress up to expose my thigh. My hand is shaking so hard I almost drop the knife.

"Come on, Willow. You can do this," I mutter. "You *have* to do this... for your child."

As hard as I can, I slash the knife across my skin.

I make the cut high up on my thigh, high enough that it will look like the blood is coming from between my legs.

I'm able to make three cuts before the pain hits me. I stifle a cry into my elbow and then cut once more—if only to prove that I'm not a coward.

I check the wound. It's bleeding freely now. I press my legs together so there is blood on both sides. It definitely looks like I'm miscarrying.

There's no going back now. I've come too far. Before I can overthink it, I stash the knife under the mattress.

If I screw up this performance, not only will I be trapped here forever, but my every move will be monitored. I have to sell this.

I take a deep breath...

And then I scream.

Footsteps thunder toward me immediately. One of the maids is the first one into the room. She's older—middle-aged at least, with dark hair graying at the roots. As soon as she walks in, she sees the blood and her jaw drops.

"I think I'm—I think—" I stumble over the words, my voice shaking, not even in an act but with genuine fear. "I think I'm miscarrying."

She darts out of the room without a word.

Biting my lip to stop from crying out again, I reach between my legs and jab a finger into the cuts to make the blood keep running.

When I hear more footsteps out in the hallway—heavier this time, angrier, almost certainly male—I go rigid. This is it. This is the moment. This is my only chance.

Leo bursts into the room, his eyes searching. When he sees me, he strides over at once. Controlled. Calm. Certain.

"What happened?"

"I... I don't know... I just started bleeding." I inhale sharply, almost like a sob. "I might be losing the baby." He moves towards me, but I step back. "Don't touch me! I... I need to get to a hospital."

He doesn't argue. Just grabs my hand and pulls me through the door into the hallway. Jax is already at the top of the staircase. For once, there's no smile on his face.

When there's trouble, Leo's men move fast.

"Bring the car around," Leo barks. "We need to get her to a hospital. Now!"

Leo grabs my hand, smearing the blood on my fingers. He glances down at it and for a second, I think I've been caught. He's going to know I did this to myself. He's going to figure me out.

I start trembling uncontrollably, which ironically makes for an even more convincing performance.

Leo looks at me with dark eyes. “Don’t worry. You’re not going to lose this baby, Willow.”

He sounds so sure of himself. I don’t sense any doubt in his tone. Leo Solovev is so confident he thinks he can control death.

And I’m so broken that I almost believe him.

We move downstairs slowly. Leo helps me into the backseat of the Wrangler, then follows in afterward. Jax takes the driver’s seat and hits the gas as soon as we’re situated.

So far, so good.

But anything can happen between now and when we get to the hospital. I need to find just the right moment to make a run for it.

“How are you feeling?” Leo asks.

“Like I’m miscarrying,” I say robotically.

His fingers twitch. For a moment, I think he’s going to reach over and hold my hand. To give me comfort in what seems like a moment of desperate need. To hold me close, to tell me everything is going to be okay—not because he can control the outcome, but simply because he cares enough to weather the storm alongside me.

But when I look at his hand again, it’s completely still.

I try not to look as crushed by that as I feel. Even now, as I’m enacting my escape, I keep expecting Leo to change. Hoping for it, actually. I want him to give me things he has sworn to me again and again that he cannot and will not give.

That’s why I have to go.

I have to figure out my own way, separate from men like him. It’s time I learned what it is like to be truly independent.

We come to a stop in front of a sprawling private hospital. It gleams white in the sun. A wheelchair is brought out for me, and I'm helped into it by an older nurse with a kind face. Jax and Leo flank me as I'm wheeled inside.

"You'll need to register, sir," the nurse informs Leo.

Jax peels off to do it without even being asked. Leo moves closer to me. Is he ever going to leave my side? How can I find a chance to slip away if he never gives me a moment to myself?

"Get her into a private room," he orders the nurse. "I want care around the clock. Whatever you have to do to protect the baby, do it."

"Of course, sir."

Before he can bark another order at her, he gets a phone call. I'm worried that he won't answer it. But to my relief, he does.

He only says a few words in harsh Russian—then his expression turns black. He gives me a quick glance and then paces away, head dipped low as he growls into the phone.

We are still in the lobby. The doors are only a few feet away. But I can't see Jax anymore and Leo is fully preoccupied with his call.

This is the window of opportunity.

I look up at the nurse. "Can I have some water, please?"

"Maybe when we get to the room—"

"Please," I rasp. "I need something to drink."

She looks to Leo's back, and I know she remembers his command. It's not hard to imagine what a man like Leo would do if she disobeys. She relents.

"Of course, dear. I'll be right back."

She walks through a door to the left and disappears. I glance back to Leo. He's still got his back to me, and he's moved even further down the corridor now.

This is it.

Slow, at first. I stand up and walk purposefully towards the door, moving as fast as possible without causing a scene. Eyes pass over me and then away, none the wiser.

And the moment I clear the doors, I run.

Out in the parking lot, I dart to the side and take a detour around the massive main building. Through a small parking lot, weaving between cars, until I make it to the sidewalk.

The moment I get onto the main road, I hail a cab. It pulls up just in time like this was all designed to happen like this. I don't question it; I just get in.

The driver doesn't so much as look at me as I climb in and give him my parents' address. He just nods and takes off down the road.

The meter ticks up slowly as we churn up miles of highway. I keep turning around in my seat, expecting to see a caravan of blacked-out SUVs tailing me. Leo has to know I'm gone by now.

What does he think happened? Is he coming for me?

I try to keep myself calm with deep breaths, but the ride seems to last forever.

As soon as the car stops in front of my parents' house, I open the door and put one foot on the curb.

"Hey, lady!" The driver drapes an arm over the passenger seat and raises a brow. "You owe me \$12.60."

I don't even need to look down at my lack of pockets to know I don't have any cash.

"Sorry, I don't have change. Let me run inside and ask my parents."

He shrugs. "I'll keep the meter running."

I nod gratefully and rush towards the front door. I don't get to take in my childhood home the way I would have liked to, the way I always thought I would if I ever mended things with my parents. I can only spare a quick glance as I rush up the walk.

But it doesn't seem like much has changed. A tidy, well-maintained garden with a few bigger plants fanning their leaves merrily on the porch. When I bang on the front door, I notice the color of the paint is ever-so-slightly different than I remember. More cream than white. For some reason, that makes my heart ache.

"Mom!" I call desperately. "Dad!"

I hate doing this to them. I hate showing up at their doorstep with blood running down my legs and yet another failed marriage in my rearview mirror.

But I've learned my lesson. There's no time for pride. I have to do this for my child.

I keep knocking.

No one answers.

I glance over my shoulder, and the cabbie is leaning out his window staring at me.

"Mom! Dad!"

I see their car parked in the driveway. It's too late for them to still be in bed and too early for a nap.

Desperately, I try the knob and, to my relief, it's unlocked. The door swings open. I rush inside. As soon as I'm in, though, I grind to a halt.

Something feels off.

Then I hear the sound of an engine revving and the screech of wheels. I turn to the open door only to see the cabbie drive away.

Why would he leave without his fare?

Goosebumps spread over my arms as I pirouette slowly in place.

Is it possible that Leo got here before I did? That he predicted my moves and laid a trap for me?

"Mom?" I call. My voice is incredibly shaky now. With every passing second, I can feel my determination slipping.

Then I turn the corner and walk into the living room.

Over the back of the pastel green sofa, I see the top of my dad's balding head. He's slumped back at an odd angle.

And not moving.

"Dad!" I rush forward, but as I come around the couch, I see my mom lying next to him. She's slouched down so far that I didn't see her from the other side. I drop to my knees. "Mom!"

One look at them, and I know that they're not sleeping.

"Please don't be dead. Please don't be dead," I plead. I grab at their wrists to feel for a pulse.

Before I can feel anything, a voice comes from the kitchen. "Don't worry. They're not dead."

It's calm and controlled... and distinctly female.

I look up to see a woman stepping through into the living room. She's gorgeous. Despite everything, that's the first thought I have.

She's tall and slender, wearing sleek black pants, knee-high leather boots and a long-sleeved black sweater that accentuates her figure. Her blonde hair falls in graceful waves down her shoulders and her green eyes bore into mine. The smile on her face is vicious.

"They've been tranquilized," she says without a shred of concern. "Just like you're about to be."

I hear a heavy footstep behind me, and turn just as something sharp punctures my neck. I open my mouth to cry out, but no sound comes out.

The last thing I remember is falling. The world turns sideways.

Then everything fades to black.

LEO

I can't ignore this call, no matter how badly I want to. Not from Agent Thirty-One.

"This better be good," I hiss into the phone.

"Isn't it always?"

"I don't have time for coy today. Spit it out."

"The time is now," she says. "He'll be at the Manhattan Club in an hour."

"What about my man?"

"He's no longer in the building. The only deaths will be Mikhailov deaths."

I grit my teeth with satisfaction as the promise of victory starts to become tangible.

"There's one more thing," she says.

The growing excitement in my chest drops instantly. "What?"

But before another word can be uttered, the line goes dead.

"Fuck!" I yell so loudly that I get looks from passersby. I eye them until they look away.

Jax hustles over to me. "What's going on?"

"Agent Thirty-One," I say gruffly. "The line dropped."

“We know why.”

“Doesn’t mean I like it.”

Jax looks around. “I got her registered. Did they already take Willow up to her room?”

I swing around. I look for Willow and the nurse that was with her. A second later, I see the nurse striding towards me with a glass of water in her hand. She looks behind me and I follow her gaze to see what she’s seeing.

An empty wheelchair.

Instantly, it all comes together. Why Willow wanted to come to the hospital. Why she didn’t want me touching her.

This isn’t a medical emergency.

It’s an escape.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I growl. “She made a run for it.”

I’m pissed. Absolutely livid. But goddammit, I admire her guts. The woman has grit.

“Leo—”

“Don’t bother,” I say, already darting out of the hospital. “I know where she went. Meet me there as soon as possible with a team.”

“Where?” he calls after me.

“Where else?” I shout. “Her parents’ house.”

I race to the Wrangler, jump inside, and start high-tailing it through the streets. I cut corners and run lights, but in the end, I’m still too fucking late.

The front door isn’t fully latched. It swings open easily. And the moment I’m inside, I know it’s too damn quiet.

I pull out my gun and scope the place out, but I can feel it: she’s already gone.

“Fucking hell, Willow,” I say under my breath.

I want to throttle her for this. Did she really think she could be safe without me? After everything she's seen? After what happened to Jessica?

I walk into the living room and find both her parents slumped down against the sofa. Dropping to one knee, I check their pulses.

Both are alive and breathing. They've been tranq'd, not killed. And they're both coming to now. I put my gun away and sit down on the coffee table directly in front of them.

Willow's mother wakes up first. Her eyes blink open sluggishly, but as soon as they land on me, she's wide awake. Instinctively, she reaches over, searching for her husband. When she sees him next to her, slouched against the sofa, she screams his name. "Benjamin!"

She grabs the front of his shirt and gives him a shake. Her eyes, rife with worry, find mine.

"W-what is—is he okay? What have you done to him?"

Silly woman. Panic doesn't solve anything. Neither does anger, though I have a good deal of it bristling under my skin.

"I didn't do anything," I say. "This is how I found you both."

Willow's dad begins to stir.

"Your husband is fine, see? He's waking up."

She looks at his face and relief colors her soft features.

"N... Natalie?" he slurs.

There's something to be said for a couple whose first thought after unconsciousness is one another.

Benjamin sits up. They tangle their hands together.

"Nat, what happened?" he asks again. Then he notices me sitting there in front of them. "Who are you?"

"I'm Leo," I tell them. "Leo Solovev."

I can tell they recognize the name. Natalie eyes me curiously. Benjamin does, too, but I have the feeling he's sizing me up more than anything.

I understand the impulse. He's trying to protect his family.

It won't help. But I admire the instinct.

"You're our... son-in-law?" Natalie asks hesitantly.

"I am. Can you tell me what you remember before you passed out?"

They exchange a glance, then Ben shakes his head. "There was a man here. In the house. I saw only a flash of him before I... well, I can't remember. I just passed out."

"I heard a sound, and I ran in here," Natalie chimes in. "I saw Ben lying face down on the couch and there was a man with him. That's all that I... Leo, what's going on?"

"I'm going to give you the short version because I don't have time for anything else," I say. "There are people out there who want to hurt me. The quickest way to do that is to get to the people closest to me. Which, at the moment, includes the two of you."

"Why?" Benjamin asks immediately. "We don't even know you."

"You are my wife's parents."

Natalie is struck with the realization all at once. "Willow! Where is Willow?"

"My belief is that she came here to see you," I tell them. I omit the fact that she was running away from me at the time.

"Oh God," Benjamin groans. "Are you saying that whoever came here and knocked us out might have our daughter?"

Despair turns to rage in Benjamin's face. The prim-looking man doesn't seem like he should be capable of that emotion, but I see the devotion for Willow burning deep in his eyes.

He'd do anything to save her.

I admire that instinct, too.

I nod. "I'm almost certain of it."

Almost. There's that word again. I hate not being certain.

Natalie's eyes narrow as she studies me. "Who are you, Leo? Who are you *really*?"

"I'm not a liar," I tell her. "You can trust what I'm saying. But there's only so much I can tell you."

"Then tell us what you can."

"I'm a powerful man," I explain simply. "And as a result, I have enemies. It's the whole reason I had you both come to Willow instead of the other way around. She resented me for it, but my house is protected. Guarded. Safe."

"She left one controlling husband," Natalie points out. "She doesn't want another."

"Casey was trying to keep her prisoner. I'm trying to keep her safe. There's a difference."

She hesitates, bites her lip, then nods. "I believe you."

Her husband looks between both of us. "Quite frankly, I don't care what your intentions were. Dangerous men have our daughter right now. Because of *you*."

"Not for long," I growl. "I'm going to get her back. And when I do, I'll make sure no one touches her again."

That seems to get through to Benjamin. "Are you powerful enough to make that happen?"

"Without a fucking doubt."

He breathes out shakily and nods. "Good."

"She's pregnant," Natalie bursts out.

"What?" Benjamin gapes at her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

“Because she wasn’t ready for anyone else to know until she told...” She turns to me and finishes, “you.”

“I already know.”

She nods, and her eyes grow conflicted. “Did she tell you about the bank account, too? The one that—”

“No, she didn’t,” I admit. “But I knew about that account long before she did.”

“How?” Benjamin asks.

I shake my head. “That’s something I can’t tell you.”

Natalie and Benjamin exchange a glance. They’re teetering on the brink of panic, but they’re trying to rein in their emotions. It’s a lot to process, certainly. My world is not for the faint of heart.

I hear the screech of tires outside their house. Natalie and Benjamin stiffen, but I wave them off. “Those are my men. They’re going to move you to a safe location.”

“You want us to leave our home?” Natalie asks, white knuckling the armrest of the sofa in fear.

“Not forever,” I assure her. “Just until I have control of the situation. As soon as this is handled, I’ll bring you back here.”

“I don’t care about my home, Leo,” she says. “I care about my daughter.”

“That makes two of us.”

“You’ll get her back?” she asks.

“I will.”

“And you won’t stop trying until you do?”

I understand her need for reassurance. She’s putting all her trust in a complete stranger. Son-in-law or not, I am still the man who broke into her living room with a gun in hand to offer her a vague, patchy explanation.

I look my mother-in-law dead in the eyes and say as solemnly as I can: “Never. I’ll go to the ends of the earth for her.”

She nods, but tears glisten in her eyes.

The front door opens and Jax walks in. He stops short when he sees the three of us in the living room. “Am I invited to the pity party?”

I have to fight not to roll my eyes. “This is Jax,” I explain. “You can trust him, pathetic sense of humor notwithstanding. He’s going to take you to a secure safehouse.”

“And then what?” Benjamin asks.

“Then I go get your daughter back.”

The two of them nod. Benjamin stands up on unsteady legs and starts towards Jax, but Natalie stops to plant herself in front of me. “This kind of life isn’t what I wanted for my daughter. To say the least. But from what I’ve seen, from what Willow has said... I think she loves you.”

I stop myself from asking for her exact words. It doesn’t matter what Willow said. My plans won’t change either way.

“I just—” Natalie chokes back a sob. “Whatever you have to do to get her back... do it.”

“I will.” I turn to Jax. “Let them get a few things together and then take them.”

“Got it, boss.”

Jax gestures for Benjamin and Natalie to lead the way, then accompanies them upstairs to pack hurriedly.

I scan the living room, searching for clues, anything that might help me uncover what else happened here. Nothing appears out of place. By every indication, it’s a perfectly normal living room. Not bugged, not surveilled.

Gaiman walks into the room through the open front door. As soon as I see him, I know it’s bad news.

“This was left on the kitchen table.” He hands me a white envelope. “It’s addressed to you.”

It looks similar to the letter I received from “Anya Mikhailov” not long ago. I rip it open.

The writing is messy and crudely scrawled.

I made you a generous offer of peace, and you refused. You disrespected me and gave me no choice but to respond.

Meet me at the Studio Warehouse at midnight tonight or else I’ll return your bride in pieces.

Don Mikhailov

The letter is signed Don Mikhailov, but I know it’s from Spartak.

I throw the letter and envelope to the floor. When I do, I realize the letter wasn’t the only thing Spartak left for me.

Sticking out of the opening is a small bundle of something dark and shiny. I pick it up and instantly recognize what it is.

I’ve run my hands through this same raven black hair before. I’ve watched it splay over her bare skin, watched it catch the moonlight, watched it drip warm water in the bath as she moaned my name.

It’s hers.

“Well?” Gaiman asks.

I tuck the lock of hair back in the envelope and shove it in my back pocket. “We have a meeting tonight. Get the men ready.”

“Is it Semyon?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Semyon, Spartak, it doesn’t fucking matter. Either way, they’re dead.”

WILLOW

My body is aware of the trouble I'm in before my mind can make sense of it.

My heart is pounding hard enough to ache. I reach out for... something, I guess. Anything I can touch to tell me where I am and why I can't seem to open my eyes.

But my limbs are heavy and sluggish and my hand barely moves before it plops back at my side.

I remember a jab in my neck.

I remember a beautiful blonde with a cruel smile.

I remember the open, vacant eyes of my parents, slumped on the couch...

My eyes fly open. Where are my parents? As my vision clears, I try to sit up. But my body feels disconnected, nonresponsive.

I look around and see that I'm on a large, pillowy bed in a big room, similar to the one I woke up in when I first arrived at Leo's mansion.

Except I'm very obviously not in Leo's mansion.

For one, the walls are a dark jade green, made even darker by the heavy shades pulled over the large windows. The floors, too, are dark ebony and the furniture has been painted to match. Even the door is so dark it takes me a second to find it along the wall, like whoever designed the space wanted to keep the inhabitant from easily finding their way out.

I feel like I'm at the bottom of a well. The only points of brightness in the entire room come from the white lampshades.

Where am I?

My hand drifts towards my stomach. I don't feel any different. Aside from the dull ache of the cuts on my inner thigh, I don't think I'm hurt.

I sit up a little straighter and turn to the back half of the room. When I do...

I see a pair of dark eyes looking right at me.

I scream. A loud, blood-curdling scream that wrenches from the very depths of me.

The man sitting in the chair doesn't react beyond a tight smile. His hair is a silvery white that matches the white vest he's wearing. Gold chains hang from around his pencil-thin neck. I can see every vein in his wiry arms.

He's a caricature of a boogeyman, like if the Slenderman were a gangster, so ridiculously exaggerated I want to laugh out loud.

But his expression tells another story.

It says he needs to be taken seriously.

"You were out for a long time," he tells me quietly. "I was about to wake you."

I'm glad he didn't. The only thing worse than waking up in a strange room would have been being woken by a stranger in a strange room.

"Who are you?"

"A man who's come a long way," he says simply.

I study his features. He's older than Leo, I can tell that much. He looks like he's in his forties, maybe fifties, but he has the kind of silver in his hair that could belong to a man far older or far younger.

"I can see the wheels in your head spinning," he remarks in a sing-song voice. "Don't make me break the wheel, honey."

Break the wheel? Is he threatening to smash my head in? I shudder and his smile grows wider.

“My name is Spartak Belov. Do you know who I am?”

I shake my head. Leo mentioned the name. I know he’s in the Bratva world. I know I’m in deep shit.

But acting ignorant seems like a safe bet. The less I know, the better—that’s what Leo told me.

But the moment I play stupid, I realize I’ve made a mistake. These are not the kind of men who like to fly under the radar. They want to be feared. Revered.

I’ve insulted him without even realizing it.

“No matter,” he says, shaking his annoyance off. “You’ll know my name soon enough.”

“I... I’m not from—I’m not part of this world,” I stammer. “Whatever or whoever you think I am, it’s not true. I’m not that person.”

He strokes his chin and surveys me for a long moment. Then he pushes himself off the chair and meanders to my bedside. I want to pull away from him as he gets within arm’s reach, but I stop myself at the last moment.

I can’t let him know how scared I am. I can’t let him know he’s getting to me.

I won’t give him the satisfaction.

He stops inches away and reaches towards me. I exhale through my nose and keep still as he winds a lock of my hair around his fingers. It takes nearly every ounce of my self-control not to slap his hand away.

Spartak’s eyes flutter closed as he inhales deeply, like a sommelier sniffing wine. “You smell fresh,” he sighs.

It takes every *other* ounce of my self-control not to vomit. Something about the way he looks, the way he says that, makes my stomach churn.

I also know that I smell like sweat and fear. So unless he likes that or the scent of dried blood between my legs, then he—

Oh. Oh.

Blood is *exactly* what he likes.

“If that’s what gets you off, I can stab you in the stomach?” I snap before I can stop myself.

Spartak freezes. His eyes narrow and he lets my hair fall from between his fingers. “Hmm. You’re more than I expected.”

I don’t know what that means, and I decide not to ask. It’s not like he’s looking for a conversation, anyway. Men like him don’t want to share the stage. They just want a captive audience.

He bends down, and this time I can’t help cringing away from him, trying to avoid the way his hot, sour breath sticks to my skin.

But he’s having none of it. He yanks me closer and brings his face right up against my cheek, then sticks out his tongue and licks a wet trail from my cheek down to my chin.

I’m so shocked I can’t scream.

Not even when he clambers on top of me. I try to push him off, but I can’t. My muscles are still sluggish and weak, and as skinny as he is, there’s strength in those wiry arms.

He pins me down. I can feel his cock between my legs, digging in, pressing against the fabric of my panties.

Panic floods my body and there’s only one thing I can think of.

Leo.

I’ve never wanted him more than right at this moment.

It strikes me that Leo has been there to save me in the nick of time every time before. It’s not unrealistic to expect the same thing to happen right now.

But as Belov’s lips scale up and down my neck, as his teeth bite at my flesh, I realize Leo’s not coming this time.

I’m on my own.

“Am I interrupting?”

My hopes crest. It’s not Leo, but I recognize the woman’s voice.

Spartak pulls back just a little, but he’s smiling. He gets off me and only then am I able to see the woman who’s just walked through the door.

It’s the same gorgeous blonde from my parent’s house.

“Hello, *kiska*,” Belov says, looking very unconcerned and more than a little amused.

The blonde turns her gaze to mine. When she does, it feels like I’ve been shot. She’s gorgeous, but her eyes are terrifying. They look lifeless. Flat. As though any real emotion, any softness and light, was ruthlessly stomped out a long time ago.

Belov reaches out and strokes my hair again. “Look how beautiful she is, Brittany,” he says, as though I’m nothing more than a doll that he wants to play with. “Look at her hair.”

The woman has changed outfits since I saw her last. Now, she’s wearing blue jeans and a tight white tank top that shows off her perfect breasts. And the fact that she’s not wearing a bra.

She walks over to the bed, her long legs closing the distance in only three strides. “I didn’t think brunettes were your type.”

With his fingers still wound around my hair, he reaches out and grabs the blonde. Brittany, he called her. He pulls her to him and pushes his tongue down her throat.

I expect her to slap him. She looks like she wants to. But instead, she puts one hand on his shoulder and kisses him back passionately. A little moan escapes her lips.

I try to sidle away from both of them, but his claws tighten around my hair.

“Stay, you little bitch,” Belov hisses at me with a deadly smile on his face. “You’ll move only when I say you can.”

Then he turns back to Brittany. “Even if I fuck her, you’ll still be my queen. That will never change, my beauty.”

She smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “I better be.”

Her gaze lands on me. Fear twists in my stomach. She’s as insane as he is. Or, if not insane, then just unfathomably cruel.

Leo’s world may be full of monsters.

But these two are the worst of them all.

“She has a passably attractive face,” Brittany says, with a sneer. “But I don’t understand what all the fuss is about.”

Belov looks between the two of us with amusement. “Maybe we should strip her naked. You might be able to judge her appeal better then.”

She turns bored eyes onto him. “I’m not here to fulfill your fucking fantasies, darling.”

She pivots to leave, but before she can even take a step, Spartak’s hand lashes out and snatches up a fistful of her hair. He drags her back to him, yanks down to expose her neck, and hisses in her ear loud enough for me to hear, “You’ll fulfill whatever the fuck I want you to fulfill, *darling*.”

Then he lets her go and his face smooths over as if nothing ever happened.

Brittany seems unperturbed. Apparently, this is a normal thing for them. A routine that lost its shock value a long time ago.

Is that my fate? If I get out of here and become part of Leo’s life, will I be nothing more than a pet to play with, to kick, to torment?

Looking at the stunning blonde before me, I can’t imagine that’s the role she plays. She’s vicious, powerful. I can tell just by looking at her. If anything, she’s *allowed* him to place her beneath him. She’s playing this part because she wants to.

“Don’t worry,” he tells her. “She’s a pretty thing, but I prefer women who bite back.”

Brittany licks her lips. “And you have the marks to prove it.”

He runs his thumb over her cheek. The gesture is almost sweet.

When he turns to me, though, the sweetness is gone. “How do you like it?” he asks. “Slow and passionate or do you like a little blood in the mix?”

I flinch away from him. My teeth are chattering, not with cold but with fear.

“Look at her,” Brittany sneers. “Mute fucking doormat. She’s got nothing you want, darling. You’ll be bored of her after one fuck. If she even survives that much.”

“Solovev doesn’t seem bored of her, though.”

He doesn’t take his eyes off me. Like I’m a riddle he wants to solve.

“And we all know why,” Brittany scoffs with a cold laugh.

“Why?” I croak before I can stop myself.

Brittany cackles. “You hear that, baby? She’s as clueless as she is boring. She doesn’t have a clue.”

Belov’s eyebrows dance with glee. “This has turned out to be much more fun than I anticipated.”

Why does everyone talk about life like it’s a game? I can’t wrap my head around the way this world works. I can’t imagine having anything to do with the people who thrive in these shadows.

But they sure as hell seem interested in having something to do with me.

“Don’t worry, lovely,” he says, reaching out to touch my hair again. “You’ll get all your answers soon enough. But I think it’s only fitting that Leo tells you himself.”

He gets to his feet with a sigh and makes for the door. “Get her ready, Brittany,” he barks over his shoulder. “It’s showtime.”

LEO

The meeting point is the same as every other warehouse that always plays host to these kinds of events. Scarred cement floors, rusted iron rafter beams, brick walls that have seen blood spilled and heard men scream their dying breaths. Most of the windows have been boarded up, but the few that haven't let in thin shafts of grimy light.

Jax and Gaiman flank me on either side as we approach the building. The other forty men at my back are stone-faced. They're ready for this fight. They've had seven years to prepare.

Most of my men today used to follow my brother. They mourned his death alongside me. And once he was dead and buried, they pledged their loyalty to me.

Ours is a brotherhood born from blood, and this fight has been a decade in the making.

I wonder if Belov and Semyon can claim the same of the men fighting under their banner.

We stride through the open doors of the warehouse. The entrance on the other side is clogged with blacked-out trucks and Mikhailov troops pacing back and forth. Fifty or so, if I've counted right.

Belov is not among them.

"Where the hell is he?" Jax growls from my left shoulder.

“He’s going to make a big, splashy entrance,” I say with distaste. “That’s a fucking certainty.”

“What if this is a trap?” Gaiman asks, taking a step closer.

“He’s definitely hiding something up his sleeve.” I glance around the space, eyes narrowed. “But it’s not going to be obvious.”

“You’re the one who always knows everything,” Jax says. “Like a goddamn fortune teller. Tell us what you think he’s going to do.”

I have my theories, but something about Belov makes me second-guess them. He is not Bratva, not truly. He was not raised with the same rules we were. He doesn’t have the same respect for honor, for tradition.

Even in the Bratva, even among violent men like myself and those who follow me, we live by a code.

But with Belov... it’s different.

For him, the violence *is* the code.

“He’s going to use Willow,” I say. “I know that much.”

“He wouldn’t kill her, would he?” Jax asks.

I’m certain he won’t. Her very identity is going to be what protects her in this. But there’s no telling what the next hour will hold.

“Hold up,” Jax says urgently. “Incoming.”

I notice a shadow fall across the doorway. Then a lone figure walks through the ranks of Mikhailov men.

“Willow,” I whisper.

She stops just inside the door. The unfamiliar black coat she’s wearing is for a person twice her size.

She’s waiting for something, but I’m not sure what. She’s not bound or gagged. She could run over to me if she chose, but she doesn’t.

Has he told her?

“What’s going on?” Gaiman hisses.

“Maybe you should go to her,” Jax suggests.

If there was a trap, this would be it. *She* would be it. “No,” I say firmly. “That’s what he wants. Hold your ground. All of you.”

My men don’t flinch at the command, but Jax and Gaiman look to me, concern in their eyes. I ignore them and keep my eyes trained on Willow.

She’s too exposed, too vulnerable. My child is growing inside of her as we speak. If anything happens to either of them...

But I will not compromise everything I’ve worked for.

We all must make sacrifices.

I hear him before I see him. “Don’t you want your wife back, Leo?” His voice seems to echo off the warehouse walls.

Spartak appears in the same door Willow walked through. More of his men file in behind him, along with a tall blonde whose eyes find mine immediately.

Then the doors close slowly behind them, blocking out the light.

Belov saunters forward. None of his men come with him. The only person that does accompany him is the blonde with the thousand-yard stare—until she hooks her hand in Willow’s elbow and drags my wife forward with them.

“Come on,” I growl to Jax and Gaiman. “We’re meeting them in the middle.”

Leaving our respective armies behind, Belov and I come to a stop in the middle of the warehouse floor just a few feet shy of one another.

“How kind of you to join us, Leo,” Belov sneers at me. “Don Mikhailov sends his regards, but he couldn’t make it today.”

“Cut the bullshit, Belov,” I snap. “Semyon had nothing to do with this meeting.”

“You flatter me. But I am only his humble servant.”

I roll my eyes and try hard not to look at Willow. But there's a fear in her that resonates from her body. I don't need to look at her to see it. I can feel it on my skin like a frigid breeze.

"Allow me to introduce you to Brittany." Belov gestures to the blonde whose nails are digging into Willow's arm. "She's my special girl."

He steps back and idly grabs a lock of Willow's hair. "And no introductions are necessary where this little one is concerned."

He brings the hair to his nose and inhales deeply. I want to fucking kill him for touching her. But I'm not about to betray my emotions.

"She's a pretty one, Leo. You got very, very lucky."

Jax isn't as composed. He takes a half-step forward, but I hold up my hand to stop him. He grinds to a halt, fury radiating off of him in hot waves.

Belov gives Jax a wide smile. "My my, the dog knows how to heel! Nice that you've got them so housebroken, Leo."

Jax ripples with rage next to me, but doesn't move. Even a man with his temper knows Belov is goading him.

Belov's eyes shine with amusement. Next to him, Brittany is studying everyone thoroughly, missing nothing.

"It was a mistake to turn down my offer," Belov remarks.

I raise my eyebrows. "I thought you were just Semyon's faithful servant?" I ask. "When did it become *your* offer?"

He shrugs. "I am his messenger. I stand here speaking with his voice."

"Convenient."

He gives me a toothy grin. "What would you give to have your precious little wife back?"

"I'm not prepared to give anything," I say bluntly. "I take what I want."

Belov's smile only gets wider. We both know I could overpower him easily. But there's a catch here.

Belov wouldn't have orchestrated this meeting if he didn't have an ace up his sleeve. If I act rashly, I could play right into his hand.

"Take what you want?" he repeats with amusement. "I suppose you could certainly try."

He reaches into his coat and my men stiffen. Gaiman's hand goes to his weapon. Same for the forty men at our backs.

But Belov doesn't pull a gun.

He pulls out a little black box.

"Make one move I don't like, and..." Belov mimes pressing the red button in the center of the box. "*Boom*. It's not too powerful. But strapped to her chest like that? It will do some damage."

I look to her. The oversized coat makes sense now. Belov strapped a bomb to Willow's chest.

She's trembling, but her chin is set and her hands are clenched into fists at her side. She won't meet my gaze.

She's trying to be strong. Brave.

I've never loved her more.

"What do you think, baby?" Belov asks, turning to the blonde. "Should I be magnanimous?"

She looks at him with irritation. "I don't see the point, but sure."

He laughs as though she's just said something heartwarming. "That's why you're my number one doll." He turns to me and hitches a thumb towards Brittany. "Completely devoid of sentimentality, this one. She handles death without batting an eye. But she fucks like it's her job. I just love that in a woman, don't you?"

"I couldn't say," I tell him. "I've never loved any woman."

"So you won't mind me blowing this one's head off, then?" He looks to Willow and frowns. "I actually think it would be a shame. Because it is such a pretty little head, don't you think?"

My expression doesn't change. I don't even move.

Willow is standing there with my child in her belly. My only instinct is to protect her.

But sometimes, protecting her means staying away.

"You're the one with more to lose," I point out.

Belov's eyes pinch together for a second. He's annoyed that I'm not playing into his hands. That I'm refusing to dance to his tune. He's grown accustomed to being the puppeteer, it seems, and for a moment, I wonder if we're going to see that violence finally come to the surface.

But he wipes the irritation off his face and chooses a simpering smile instead.

"I hate to come between a husband and his wife. Go on then," he says to Willow. "Go to him."

She looks towards Brittany, as though for permission. In response, the bitch pushes her stumbling forward into my arms.

I catch her to steady her, and for that one brief instant, it feels so fucking right to have her in reach. To feel her warmth and the beat of her heart. To know that she's with me, no matter what kind of storm is raging around us.

Then I force myself to let go.

"Leo," she sobs. "Please get me out of here. Get me out of this thing."

I stare at her with cold eyes. I can't give her the comfort she's craving. Not now, not when her entire life hinges on my strength. She might hate me for it... but it's the right thing to do.

"Why did you run?" I rasp.

She flinches back at my tone. "I... I had to protect my child."

"And how did that work out for you?"

Hurt fills her eyes. She's desperate and vulnerable. She needs me. But I stand apart from her, refusing to make it seem like she's anything more to me than a weapon.

“He’s insane,” she whispers. “They both are. They’re going to kill me if—”

“They won’t kill you,” I interrupt.

“How do you know that?”

“Because—”

“Time’s up,” Belov interrupts, appearing between us. “So much to do, so little time. Shame, really. Back to where you were, you poor little thing.”

Belov snaps his fingers and Willow follows him back to their side of the warehouse like a trained dog.

He watches her, nods, then turns back to me. His smile looks a little more manic now. “Touching moment. It brings a tear to your eye, doesn’t it?”

“What do you want, Belov?” I demand impatiently.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asks. “I want the Solovev Bratva under my command.”

“That will never happen.”

“I think it is,” Belov says, waggling the detonator in front of his face.

I look at him with a bored expression, defying every single instinct in me that’s screaming *Kill him—save her—kill them all*. “You’re not going to press that button, Belov.”

“Aren’t I?”

I shake my head and pull out a detonator of my own. “No, you aren’t.”

Belov’s eyes narrow. “Am I missing something?”

“I’m willing to bet you miss a great many things,” I tell him. “You’d certainly miss The Silver Star and The Manhattan Club. If I push this button, both buildings go down along, with all the men inside.”

His jaw tightens. “You’re lying.”

“It would be so much better for you if I was.”

The smile he’s been wearing falls away. He looks murderously angry now.

“He’s bluffing,” Brittany snarls from behind Belov’s shoulder.

“I can press this little button right now and prove that I’m not,” I say calmly. “Or you can make the smart move and take me at my word. Because unlike this rabid dog, my word means something.”

Belov stares at me like he’s trying to see into my mind. “You...”

“Give me the girl and I won’t detonate,” I say.

After another second, he shrugs. “It’s just concrete and brick. I can rebuild.”

“Can you rebuild all the men who will go down with them?”

He’s silent for a long time, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “And it’s her you want? That’s all?”

“I want your head on a fucking platter, Belov. But I’ll settle for her.”

That’s a lie, and we both know it. But I wonder if he’s willing to take the out, to acknowledge that he’s bitten off far more than he can chew and escape with his life still intact.

I don’t have to wonder for long.

His sneer twists and every trace of civility vanishes from his face. “Do you really imagine I would hand over Viktoria Mikhailov for anything?” he scoffs. “Every man in my Bratva will burn in hell before I give her to you.”

Willow’s chin jerks up. Her eyes fall on me first as the truth sinks in. Then she looks to Belov.

“Viktoria Mikhailov?” she repeats, confusion flickering over her features. “I... That’s not my name. I told you, I told both of you: you’ve got the wrong girl...”

Belov throws back his head and laughs, the kind of laugh that makes your blood run cold. I can sense his desperation now.

He walked in here believing he had the upper hand. But the fight is evening out, and he’s growing more and more erratic.

I've underestimated his pride, though. The man is not going to give me what I want easily.

"She really doesn't fucking know," he says in amazement. "Well, then I'll tell you what your dear husband should have told you from the beginning."

Willow looks to me as Belov carries on, enjoying the reveal.

"You are Viktoria Mikhailov," Belov hisses. "The only child of Anya Mikhailov. The granddaughter of Semyon Mikhailov."

Willow shakes her head and opens her mouth to respond, but Belov continues.

"You are a Bratva princess. A Mikhailov by blood. Born enemy of the Solovev Bratva."

Willow is silent for a long time. "Is this true?" she whispers.

Not to him, but to me.

I meet her eyes and nod. "Every word."

"That's why you took me?"

"Yes."

She bites down on her lower lip. I can see all the hurt she is trying to keep inside. There are a million questions burning in her eyes, but she doesn't trust either one of us enough to ask them.

After everything she's suffered, I can't even blame her.

Belov turns back to me with a snarl. "I'm keeping the princess." He grabs her arm and twists her towards the exit.

I pull my weapon in an instant. "Don't fucking move, Belov."

The sound of every person in the warehouse drawing their own weapons echoes off the metal walls. Jax and Gaiman move up to stand on either side of me. Brittany moves in next to Belov.

The only two people unarmed are Spartak and Willow.

But he glares at me and then glances down at the button still in his hand. “One move, Leo. One move and the girl dies.”

My finger flexes over the trigger. I’ve never wanted to watch someone die more in my entire life. But a second later, I drop my gun. My men follow suit, though they growl with unhappiness.

“That’s right,” Belov says. “We both have triggers , Leo. But mine’s worth a little more. Don’t worry: once we’re back on Mikhailov turf, I’ll remove the bomb.” He looks away from me to drag his eyes over Willow. “I’ll take it off her myself.”

The threat is clear. Willow shudders at the implication.

Brittany looks at me with dark eyes. Before I can make out the promise in them, she turns and follows Belov and Willow out of the warehouse.

The Mikhailovs file out after their puppet master. Once they're gone, Jax and Gaiman surround me in an instant.

“Are we just gonna let him fucking walk out of here?” Jax asks urgently.

“We have no choice,” Gaiman answers. “He’ll kill Willow. And the heir.”

“No, but Belov had a choice.” I raise the detonator and press the button. “And he chose wrong.”

TO BE CONTINUED



Willow and Leo’s story will conclude in Book 2 of the Solovev Bratva duet, RAVAGED THRONE.

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