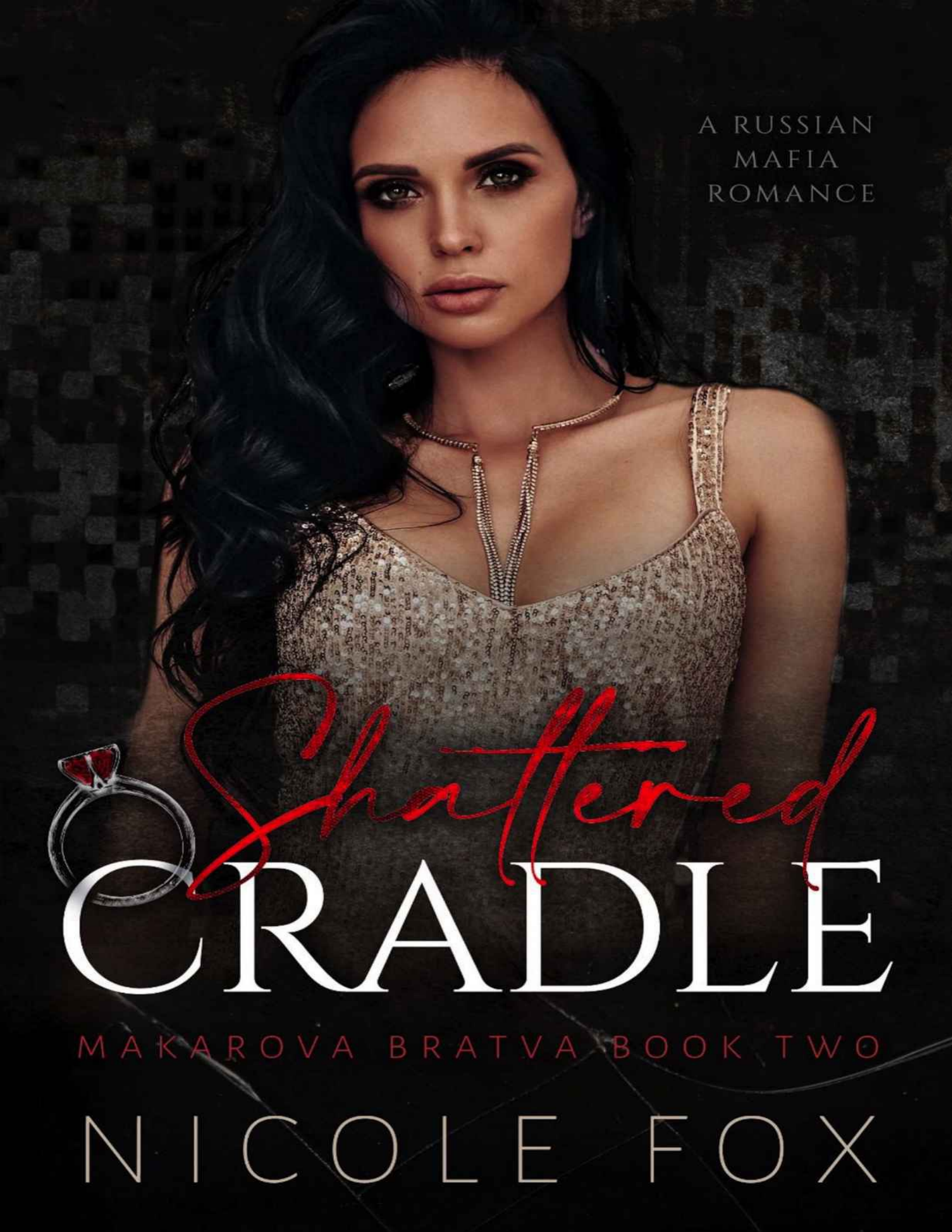


A RUSSIAN
MAFIA
ROMANCE



Shattered
CRADLE

MAKAROVA BRATVA BOOK TWO

NICOLE FOX

SHATTERED CRADLE

A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE (MAKAROVA BRATVA
BOOK TWO)

NICOLE FOX

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SHATTERED CRADLE

A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE (MAKAROVA BRATVA
BOOK TWO)

I joined the Mile High Club and ended up pregnant.

If only the story stopped there.

But no—it gets worse.

It gets so much worse.

Because the man who swept me off my feet thirty thousand feet in the air didn't pick me at random.

He chose me for a purpose.

A very specific purpose.

And when Aleksandr Makarova decides he wants something...

He gets it.

No matter what—or *who*—he has to break in the process.

Shattered Cradle is Book Two of the Makarova Bratva duet. Aleks and Olivia's story begins in Book One, Shattered Altar.

OLIVIA

Things are close to breaking.

Rob is on edge. Emotionally, of course, but somehow, it feels almost literal. Like he's teetering on the precipice of some huge, dark canyon and wondering whether he should just jump.

I'm terrified that anything I say or do could push him. It's why I've stayed silent since we got in the car, even as his knuckles whiten from the death grip he has on the steering wheel.

In the before time—before Isabella, before Aleks, before the plane ride that changed my life—I would've backed away and let him simmer down on his own time. Even now, I'm considering doing just that. Rob is a pressure cooker, and with every new betrayal he learns about, the temperature ticks one degree hotter.

But we don't have the luxury of time.

Not anymore.

And I'm not the same girl who was wrenched from her family three months ago. Being away from them, having to take care of myself, has made me stronger than I ever knew I could be.

"You need to listen to me, Rob," I say. "I lived with Aleks. I spoke to Jennifer. I'm telling you the truth about what happened."

"Stop calling her that," he snaps.

“It’s her name. I know you don’t want to hear it. Believe me, I understand that denial is easier—”

“You think I’m in denial?” He wrenches the wheel in such a sharp turn that I smack up against my window.

“What would you call it?” I snap. “She’s not who you thought she was. Jennifer came into your life pretending to be Isabella because you were the agent assigned to the Makarova case. He sent her to get—”

“I can’t believe you, of all people, believe that motherfucker’s lies,” he says.

I almost want to laugh. Rob’s philosophy is as simple as it gets. For years, he has divided the world into two kinds of people: “good guys” and “motherfuckers.”

Good guys follow the rules; motherfuckers break them.

Good guys love their families and their friends and their country; motherfuckers hate everyone and everything.

Good guys rescue kittens from trees and help old ladies cross the street; motherfuckers steal candy from babies and push old ladies into traffic.

He’s branded lots of people as motherfuckers. But now, he doesn’t have to specify which one in particular he’s talking about.

There’s only one who matters anymore.

“We need gas,” Rob mutters under his breath. His face is set with determination. I’ve seen that face before, right before every game he ever played. Football, basketball, swimming—if he tried it, he was good at it, and if he made that face, he won.

The trophies are still sitting up on the mantel in the house, front and center so every guest can see it. They’re testaments to the man he was always meant to become. Early proof that he was going to be somebody.

Robert Lawrence: smart, capable, handsome young man.

And he delivered on his promise. Decorated FBI agent. Devoted servant of the law. A man who had his shit together and the world at his fingertips.

Except right now, I don't see any of that. All I see is a desperate, haunted lone wolf who's been chasing the same demon for so long that he's unwilling to accept that it's the wrong one.

"I haven't been brainwashed, if that's what you think," I say calmly.

I wince as Rob whips us off at the next exit and squeals into position at the first gas station pump. He gets out of the car without a word.

I take a deep breath before I climb out of my own door.

"Where are you going?" Rob demands over the hood of the car.

"I need to pee."

"Wait until we get to the safehouse."

"Tell that to my bladder."

He gives me a long-suffering sigh. "Wait until I've finished pumping at least. I'll come in with you."

I wrinkle my nose. "Rob, I think I know how to pee by myself."

"I'll just stand outside the door."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'll be in and out in two seconds. Just chill."

I walk away. Rob calls after me, but I ignore him.

The moment I'm inside, I fly to the back of the store where the medical supplies are. I grab the first pregnancy test I see and head straight to the counter.

"Just the one?" the pot-bellied man behind the counter asks.

"Yes, please."

He rings it up for me. As soon as he sets it back down, I grab it and shove it out of sight in my pocket. Outside the window, Rob is setting the pump back in place.

"Uh, do you have a bathroom?" I ask.

The cashier gestures to the back of the store. “Back thataway.”

“Thanks. Oh, and—” I point through the window to Rob. “If that man comes in here... please don’t tell him what I bought.”

I don’t give him any other explanation before I rush towards the dingy little bathroom and shut the door.

I try not to think as I go through the motions. I just focus on the action steps. Open the package, sit on the toilet, position it between my legs.

This is perfectly normal, I say again and again.

But as I sit the test down on the rusting sink, goosebumps brush over my skin.

I clean up and wash my hands slowly. I try not to look at the test as I count aloud.

“One. Two. Three...”

It’s the longest three minutes of my life.

But just as I say, “One hundred and eighty,” I look down and see something starting to take shape in the test window.

It’s slow, though. Agonizingly slow. Like the universe is teasing me or punishing me, I’m not sure which.

The instructions on the back of the box tells me how to read the results.

One line—negative.

Two lines—*it’s his*.

Three loud knocks on the door make me jolt so hard I almost knock the test off the sink.

“Liv! You in there?”

“Jesus!” I gasp, turning towards the door before I’ve got a chance to read my test. “Yes, I’m in here, Rob. Can I have a freaking minute?”

He doesn't say anything, so I turn back to the test, flustered. I forget to mentally prepare myself before I do, so when I see it, it hits me like a runaway train.

Two lines.

Two very definitive, very bright pink lines.

I knew I was pregnant. Instinctively, I knew. And yet, having confirmation makes a difference.

Before, I was scared of what it meant. Terrified to have my life turned upside down. For everything to be different.

But now, knowing it's a reality? I'm excited.

And that alone confirms something else for me.

I want this baby.

Even though I know it'll be complicated and messy, I want this baby.

Rob knocks again. "What's taking so long?"

I grit my teeth, bury the test in the trash can under a few wads of paper towels, and walk outside.

"Can't a girl pee in peace?" I ask irritably.

"Not when some very bad men are trying to find you." He doesn't even wait for me to follow him out to the car. He grabs my hand and pulls me along behind him.

"Let go, Rob. That hurts."

I tear my arm from his and throw him a glare. He has the presence of mind to look slightly ashamed of himself, but he doesn't offer me an apology.

"I want to see Mom and Mia," I add as we get back in the car.

"You will. They're at the safehouse. Donald wants to protect them, too."

"Why?"

Rob looks puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, why has he been so generous? What does any of this have to do with him?”

“He’s a good guy. I was looking for a lead and someone gave me his name. They said that if I were to contact him, he might be able to help me.”

“Who tipped you off?” I ask suspiciously.

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it does. What if the guy was a plant?”

He gives me a condescending look. “A few months with Makarova and you think you know how these games are played.”

“Maybe I do.”

He sighs. “You’re in over your head with this stuff, Liv.” His tone is gentle, but it stings all the same. “Hargrove has a personal stake in this, too. He lost his goddaughter the same way I lost Isabella—with all signs pointing to Aleksandr Makarova.”

My first instinct is to defend Aleks, but I know that nothing good can come of that right now. I’m not even sure I understand the instinct myself.

So I sit there and stew. With every passing second, it’s like I can feel myself reverting back to the meek, doormat girl I was before Aleks came into my life.

“Here we are,” Rob announces after a few minutes have passed.

I peer through my window at a legion of tall buildings clustered down the block. All gleaming glass and black metal, with the kind of distinctly regal, unfriendly vibes I associate with the rich and infamous. A sign just above us reads ***THE IMPERIAL*** in swirling ivory font.

“Mom and Mia have been staying at The Imperial?” I exclaim.

He nods. “In side-by-side suites.”

“Jesus,” I breathe.

When we enter the hotel's grand lobby, I'm hit with the scent of fresh flowers. Roses, lilies, and orchids cluster in arrangements on every ledge.

The hotel staff wave to Rob as he drags us through the lobby toward the elevators. We bypass the regular ones and step up to a pair of special, shining brass doors twice as tall as me.

"Are you sure we can use this one?"

He pulls out a keypass and presses it against a scanner I didn't even notice. "Very sure. After you."

"Wow, secret elevator," I say as we step in and he presses a rapid combination of buttons. "You must be important."

He doesn't so much as smirk. His easy humor has slowly disintegrated over the last year and a half. My heart breaks a little bit the longer I look at him.

The feeling in my gut is the same one I had the day of Dad's funeral. That inexplicable sense that someone I knew and loved and trusted is gone forever.

"Did you tell Mom or Mia that I called you?" I ask. The elevator glides upwards smoothly.

"No, but Donald knows."

"You're on a first name basis with the millionaire?"

He throws me a glance. "He's a billionaire, actually. And yes."

"How friendly of him."

"He's thrown a lot of resources into protecting us, Liv," Rob says. He sounds like a parent, sternly reminding me to say "please" and "thank you" to nice strangers. "Maybe be polite when you meet him."

We're both saved from further conversation when the elevator doors whisk open.

The room beyond is large with plush carpets and gilded ceilings, but I barely get a chance to admire it before Rob is cutting a hard right and heading for another door. I hurry after him.

The first door he opens leads to an even larger, more opulent space. Tasteful furniture fills the room and floral arrangements like the ones in the lobby top every surface—side tables, the bar, the coffee table.

But the view is what catches my eye. We're sixty-plus stories up and the city is laid out before us like a toy set, glimmering in the sunlight.

“Olivia!”

I turn in the direction of the deep, friendly voice.

The man walking towards me is every bit as charming as he appears on TV. He radiates calm charisma. The camera hides some of his grays, but honestly, that does him a disservice. Donald Hargrove is attractive, plain and simple.

“I'm Donnie,” he says by way of greeting. “I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you from your brother.”

I glance at Rob. “That's surprising,” I remark. “He's not really the type to open up much to strangers, especially about his family.”

“Well, I like to think we're more than strangers, Olivia! But have no fear—nothing has changed in your absence,” Hargrove says with a wink. “It was actually your sister who can't stop talking about you. She may be your number one fan.”

That warms me. But it raises a few questions, too. None of which I feel comfortable asking in Hargrove's presence.

I notice two men standing to the side of the room. They're dressed in black suits and, despite the fact that we're indoors, they both have wraparound shades on.

“My bodyguards,” Hargrove says, noticing where my gaze is placed.

“The uniforms are a little on the nose, don't you think?”

He laughs. “Conspicuous is kind of my style.”

I'm still not sure why Rob completely trusts the man, but I can at least understand why he likes him. Despite his larger-than-life persona, Hargrove has this way of talking that makes you forget the fact that he's worth billions

of dollars.

“Would you like something to eat or drink, Olivia?”

I shake my head, despite the ravenous growling in my belly. “I’m good. I think I just need to rest.”

“Of course,” he croons. “You’ll have everything you need in your private suite.”

“My private suite?” I repeat stupidly. “Um... I really don’t think that will be necessary. I mean, it’s generous of you. But we have a home.”

“I understand your hesitation, Olivia,” he says, addressing me like we’re old friends. “But the Bratva knows where that house is located. It would be too risky to go back there. It’s the reason your family has been living here for the last six weeks.”

“Six weeks?” I ask, turning to Rob.

He nods, confirming it. I’m not quite sure how I feel about it at first, but then I realize I don’t really have the right to have an opinion.

Being taken hostage by Aleks must have absolutely shattered their sense of security. Living in this beautiful building, sixty stories above the city and surrounded by scary-looking security, had to have been a godsend.

“That... that’s very kind of you, Mr. Hargrove.”

“None of that, now!” he chuckles. “Call me Donnie, please. Or Donald, if you must.”

“Donald it is,” I mumble.

He smiles, but I can tell he’s searching my face for something. It takes me a second to put my finger on it.

Trauma. That’s what he’s looking for. Signs of scarring. The damage left behind from being abducted by a dangerous man.

But clearly, I’m disappointing him. Not nearly as broken as he hoped for, I guess.

“Before I let you go, however, would you mind if I asked you something?”

I tense. “Um... sure. Go ahead.”

“Are you *okay*?” he asks, emphasizing the word. He blinks slowly, sincerely, with a look in his eyes like he truly cares. His hand is warm and heavy on my shoulder and the faint scent of a pleasant cologne wafts into my nostrils.

It would be so easy to tell him no. To admit the truth of what’s happened to me.

But I’ve spent three months denying it, hiding it, running from it. It’s become second nature.

I’m not sure I know how to stop.

“Oh, yeah. Yes, I’m okay.”

He straightens and frowns for a moment. He didn’t expect me to say that, I think. Just like he didn’t expect me to seem undamaged. “If I may ask, how did you manage to get away?”

Realizing that I don’t want to give Yulia away—God knows why, but I don’t—I give him a vague answer. “I had some inside help.”

Donald nods. “It’s good to know that his people aren’t completely loyal to him.”

“No, they are,” I correct. “But it’s just... it’s complicated.”

Rob steps forward. “We’re going to need information from you, Liv. We need to know anything you can tell us about Makarova and his—”

“Robbie,” Donald interrupts gently, “the poor girl’s just gotten her freedom back. Maybe we should let her enjoy that for a minute before we inundate her with questions.”

Rob looks annoyed by that, but I’m grateful. On the other hand, I’m slightly weirded out by how Donald is using a nickname that Rob has hated with a burning passion for as long as I can remember, and yet Rob is just taking it in stride.

“For now, it’s enough to know that she’s here and she’s safe,” Donald continues with satisfaction. Then he turns to me with a curious glance. “He... he didn’t hurt you, did he?”

This time, I refuse to be vague about my answer. “He didn’t hurt me,” I say fiercely. “He was... he *is* a difficult man to be alone with. But he never once hurt me.”

Not physically, at least.

Rob frowns doubtfully. “But you do look kind of pale.”

Nausea has been creeping its way up my throat over the last few minutes. The flowers and cologne that were pleasant when I first entered the room are repulsive now.

Sheer willpower is all that has kept the contents of my stomach down. But I can feel my control slipping.

“I’m fine,” I snap, even as my belly growls. “But is there a bathroom I can— oh, God...”

I dry heave and clap a hand over my mouth as Rob steers me towards the bathroom. But it’s too far. I’m three steps into my sprint when I realize I’m not going to make it.

So I crumble to my knees at the foot of the grand piano and empty everything I have on the floor. It’s painful and violent as it comes up.

And when there’s nothing left to give, I feel suddenly exhausted. I could fall asleep right here.

Someone hands me a tissue as Rob starts barking orders. “We need a doctor,” he says. “Immediately. Donnie, call—”

“No,” I say firmly. “I said I’m fine.”

“Liv, you’re clearly sick. You’re white as a ghost and you just threw up all over Donald’s carpet.”

“I’m sorry about that, Donald,” I say sincerely. “Or would you prefer I go back to calling you Mr. Hargrove now that I’ve ruined your carpet?”

He smiles. “My feelings would be hurt if you did.”

“Liv!” Rob interrupts angrily. “Stop trying to downplay this.”

“I’m not downplaying anything!”

I close my eyes. My head is pounding, my throat is burning, and I just want him to shut up, to leave me alone in some peace and quiet so I can sort through the wreckage of my life.

Shut up.

Shut up.

Shut up.

“Yes, you are,” he presses. “You’re sick. You’re—”

That does it. “For God’s sake, I’m not sick—I’m pregnant!”

Rob’s jaw drops. I guess that’ll shut him up.

OLIVIA

As I look at Rob's horrified face, there's only one thing running through my mind: *God-fucking-shit-dammit.*

Why did you go and blurt that out, you dumbass?

"Pregnant?"

It's not Rob who breaks the stagnating silence; it's Hargrove. Unlike my brother, Donald's expression is devoid of judgment, so I focus on him and nod.

"Oh, my dear... I'm sorry."

I wince. That sentiment lands wrong, feels wrong, doesn't fit. But Donald is looking at me like I'm a victim of some unspeakable sin.

Rob, meanwhile, is quivering with rage. I've seen this only once before—when he learned Isabella was gone. It's as bad now as it was then.

It starts at his fists, knotting and unknotting.

Rises up to his flushed throat, his reddening cheeks.

His eyes tighten into thin slits. His jaw trembles like steel cables under massive tension.

"Rob," I say, planting myself right in front of him and grabbing his shoulders, "I need you to calm down and listen to me. I—"

But it's too little, too late. He explodes.

"He fucking *raped* you!" Rob roars. He's looking at me, but he's not actually seeing me. "I'm going to fucking kill him! I'm going to find him and tear his fucking head right off his fucking shoulders and—"

I stand on my tiptoes and scream into his face, "It was consensual!"

That gets through. Something in Rob's eyes splinters. I'm not sure if he wants to protect me... or if I'm the one who should be afraid of him now.

The only person who seems remotely level-headed at this moment is the billionaire media mogul who's somehow gotten himself mixed up in the middle of all this.

"Robbie," Hargrove says calmly, "take a breath, son. Flying off the handle is not going to help any of us bring this man to justice."

Rob rips himself away from me and turns his back on both of us. His shoulders rise and fall with labored breathing.

"It happened before I knew who he was," I stammer.

He's silent, so I continue.

"Remember the day I was supposed to fly home? My flight got delayed. Aleks was on the same flight. We were delayed together and we... we..."

"Hit it off," Hargrove offers modestly, though still with a curious glint in his eye.

"Yeah, that." I nod. "He was nice and funny and—"

"A fucking rapist," Rob snarls.

"No. He was just playing a role, but he really was those things. We had a... moment," I say. "Then I fell asleep on the flight, and when I woke up, he was gone. The next time I saw him was at the house when I walked in with all you tied up."

"That evil bastard," Rob growls. "That fucking monster. How dare he touch you. *How dare he.*"

“We’ll find a way to make this work, Robbie,” Donald says.

I frown. “Isn’t the FBI doing everything they can?”

“The Bureau is dragging their feet,” Rob explains impatiently. “But there’s a free press in this country for a reason. Donald here has more than enough resources at his disposal to get us the attention we need.”

Hargrove gives me a smile. “It’s the one thing I refuse to be modest about.”

I shake my head. “Are the two of you saying what I think you’re saying? You want me to—”

“Do an interview,” Donald confirms. “An expose on what you suffered being abducted by Aleksandr Makarova, notorious Bratva don. Once the nation understands, the FBI will have all the justification they need to prioritize the case and take him down for good.”

“I’m not getting in front of a camera,” I say immediately.

“Olivia—”

“No!” I snap. “I’m serious. I’m not going on national TV and talking about this. To anyone!”

Rob is getting ready to throw another argument at me when the doors fly open and I see Mia running right at me.

“Liv!” she screams, launching herself into my arms.

I grab hold of her and too many emotions well up inside me. It’s been too damn long since I saw her face. I cling to my big sister. “Mimi.”

“Darling,” Mom says, running in just behind Mia.

The two of them surround me, and for a moment, everything else fades away. I squeeze them and hold them tight, so grateful they’re here and safe.

Then I look over and see Rob watching us.

There was a time when he would have joined in. He would have wrapped his arms around all three of us and tried to make us all laugh by shaking us around.

Now, he stands apart, removed from our little nucleus in more ways than I can even begin to comprehend.

“There’s much to discuss,” Hargrove says. “But for now, maybe we should let Olivia have this moment to breathe.”

Rob nods and sits down on the sofa, but I can tell he has no intention of giving me a moment of any kind.

“If you’ll excuse me, ladies, I have business to attend to. We’ll talk later. And Olivia,” he adds with a smile, “it’s good to have you here.”

Then he leaves, taking his two stoic bodyguards with him. The moment the door shuts on him, Mom and Mia pull away and stare at me.

“You look good,” Mia says.

“I *am* good,” I assure them. “I’m great.”

Rob snorts and I want to smack him. Thankfully, everyone decides to ignore him, and I can stave off breaking the news to my mom and sister for a little bit longer.

“Oh, darling, we’re so happy you’re here with us,” Mom says with a tired smile.

I touch the locks of her snow-white hair, realizing that she’s got new lines on her face. The last three months have aged her a decade.

“I’m sorry that you guys had to worry about me.”

“It’s my job,” Mom says simply.

“You’re the baby,” Mia says. “We have to worry about you.”

“Well, you can stop for now. I’m alright.”

This time, Rob’s snort is impossible to ignore.

“Robert,” my mom chides, “what’s wrong with you?”

His voice is acid. “You wanna tell them, Liv? Or should I?”

I glare at him, but he looks back at me without any sense of compassion. When it becomes clear I'm not going to say anything, he turns to Mia and Mom.

"Rob—" I start.

"She's fucking pregnant."

My body goes cold. Instinctively, I raise my hand to my belly. Mia's eyes follow the movement.

I wait for their reactions, but for three endless seconds, there's nothing.

And then... there's too much.

"Pregnant?" Mom says, gaping at me. A second later, she bursts into tears.

Mia is torn between attending to me and attending to Mom. She lands on wrapping her arm around Mom's shoulders and grabbing my hand at the same time.

"Oh, munchkin," she says. "I can't imagine what you must have been through. That fucking monster—"

"He didn't rape me."

Mom looks at me through her tears. Mia's grip on my hand loosens.

"What?" they both breathe at once.

I take a deep breath, but it doesn't help in the slightest. "He didn't rape me. It was consensual."

"You *chose* to sleep with that bastard?" Mia asks, disbelief in her eyes.

Monster. Bastard. Criminal. Enemy.

I look around at my family, and I realize that, in their eyes, Aleks is the pure, uncut villain of this story.

"We met when my flight was delayed," I explain for the second time in as many minutes. "It was before I knew who he was."

I feel cowardly omitting the part where I slept with him again long after knowing who he was and what he'd done.

But I can't bear to take on any more of their judgment. It's just too much.

My own judgment is bad enough.

"Oh," is all Mom can say.

Mia still looks furious. "It doesn't matter, Liv. It may not have been rape in the traditional sense. But he took advantage of you. He knew what he was doing. He slept with you knowing what he was going to do. It's the same thing."

"I think that may be overstating things," I venture.

Mia's jaw drops. "Tell me you're joking."

"I... I know what it seems like. But I found out things when I was there," I say. "I discovered the truth about what happened."

Mia frowns. "What kind of truth?"

"He didn't commit the crimes that you think he did. He hasn't abducted anyone."

"Are you forgetting what he did to *you*?!"

I shake my head. "That's different."

Mom looks like she's close to tears again. She's silent, barely able to breathe.

Mia exchanges a glance with Rob that makes me feel small and stupid. When she turns to me, her expression is soft, almost tender.

"Honey, you've always wanted to see the best in people. It's admirable, but... maybe a little naive."

I feel a lash of sudden anger. I expected this from Rob, but not from Mia. In an instant, she reduces me down to the shy, uncertain little girl I used to be.

And just like that, I let her.

All the fight whisks out of my body. I become what she sees when she looks at me.

I look down at my shoes, forcing back the tears in my eyes.

“I’m sorry, munchkin,” Mia adds. “I love you dearly, but you’ve always fallen for a good story.”

“But... it’s not—”

“Liv,” she says so sharply that I fall silent immediately, “I can’t imagine what these last three months have been like for you. You’ve suffered so much. I think we should give you a while to recover from that before we hash anything else out.”

I know what she’s doing—trying to placate me. She’s hoping that a reset will make this conversation easier because I’ll be able to see things from their perspective. It’s like being put in timeout until my temper tantrum is over.

“Okay,” I whisper. “I do feel tired.”

“Of course you are, honey,” Mom says gently. “You’ve been through hell.”

“Come on,” Rob says brusquely. “I’ll show you to your suite.”

“Why can’t we just go home?” I ask.

“This is our home now,” he growls.

The heavy feeling in my chest just keeps getting heavier. Try as I might, I can’t seem to get Aleks’s face out of my head.

Rob leads me to a set of bronzed double doors. “Pretty great, isn’t it?” Mia asks with far too much fake cheer as he throws them open.

I don’t have the heart to disagree. It’s all grand, all luxurious, all dripping with the pungent scent of wealth. But there’s nothing personal or lived in about the space. It’s a hotel room in looks and in spirit. No trace of humanity to it.

“It’s nice,” I say, failing to bolster up my enthusiasm. “But... it’s not home.”

“Home is compromised,” Rob snaps. “How many times do I have to say that?”

“And even if it wasn’t, how can we feel safe there again after what that bastard did to us in it?” Mia asks. “None of us could sleep there after you were taken.”

My stomach is churning with more nausea, with fear, with guilt, with conflict. Do I have the right to defend the man who did such a thing to my family? Why do I even feel the need to?

“Anyway, Mom and I have suites just next to yours,” Mia says. “So we’re right next door if you need anything at all.”

“We should let Liv get some rest,” Rob says firmly.

Mom and Mia nod and reluctantly slink out of the room. But Rob lingers.

When we’re alone, he turns to me, his eyes dark with determination. “I don’t know what he said or did to you these last three months,” he says. “But he won’t get away with it.”

“Rob—”

“He may have gotten to Isabella, but how can you explain what happened to Donald’s goddaughter?” he demands. “She was fourteen years old when Aleks Makarova took her, Liv. She went back to her parents a few months ago. And when she did, there was only one name on her lips. *His.*”

“Rob—”

“Those are the only words she’s spoken since. *Aleks Makarova.* They can’t press charges or take her story to the cops because the girl refuses to talk. She just sits in her room, day in and day out, staring at the ceiling and refusing to talk. ‘Unreliable witness,’ that’s what they’ll say. That’s what Aleks Makarova did to her with his brutality.”

I bite my tongue. What can I say to that?

“That’s why Donald is helping us,” Rob explains. “Because he wants to save other innocent girls from the same fate that his goddaughter was forced to go through. Donald is a good man, Liv. I know that it’s easy to be seduced by

the dark side, but it'll destroy you in the process."

"That's not what happened," I whisper so quietly that I'm not sure he can even hear me.

He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Get some rest," he sighs. "We'll talk more later."

When the door clicks shut on Rob, I stand there for a moment, trying to get my bearings. But no matter how long I stand still or how slowly I breathe, the world just keeps spinning faster and faster. I just keep getting dizzier and dizzier.

Nothing is where it's supposed to be.

I climb onto the bed and bury myself under the duvet, pulling it all the way over my head. The warm darkness is welcoming—but it smells wrong in here.

That doesn't make sense. Everything is clean. Pristine. Perfect.

But then I realize: I miss *my* bed. Not the one at Mom's house, but the one in Aleks's.

I miss his carpets and his furniture. I miss the view of the garden and the lake. I miss the walls brimming with sketches and doodles and the scent of the man who stole me infused into every square inch of the place.

I miss something else, too.

But I can't say his name.

I've betrayed my family enough already.

ALEKS

The view from Room 5302 of The Imperial Hotel is nice. But I've seen better.

I turn away from the window when the door behind me opens. I've been expecting her, but I'm still not prepared for the way the sight of her makes my chest clench.

Olivia walks in wearing jeans and a white sleeveless blouse. Her hair is twisted into a loose braid that falls over one shoulder.

She looks beautiful, but worn. Exhausted all the way down to the core.

Until she sees me, at least.

As soon as that happens, her eyes go wide with shock. She glances in horror at the woman who escorted her to me, but Natalie just gives her a parting smile and closes the door on us. She'll stand guard to make sure we are undisturbed.

"Aleks," she breathes, turning back towards me. "What—When—How did you even get in here?"

I stalk toward her. "Do you think that a few cameras and some goons with guns can keep me out? Do you think there's anywhere in this city—in *my* city—that I can't go if I choose? I must say, I'm a little disappointed in that. You know who I am, Olivia May Lawrence. You should know better."

She twists at the rings on her fingers anxiously. But she doesn't seem nervous to find me here.

It's more like she's nervous *for* me.

"You can't be here," she hisses. "They're going to come after you."

"Your brother and Hargrove?" I snort. "Let them."

It hasn't been that long. Less than forty-eight hours since I last saw her. And yet, so many doubts and questions sit between us, reminding me of all the rules I've broken since meeting her.

I thought I'd be able to focus on that. On the things that need doing, the problems that need solving.

But even now, she's clouding my mind. I'm looking at the curve of her lips, the contour of her throat. I find beauty everywhere I look.

No matter how hard she tries to hide it from me.

"Who helped you escape?" I ask her.

A veil falls across her face. "No one helped me."

"Don't play coy, Olivia. I'll find out anyway. You might as well tell me now."

She shakes her head, abandoning the weak lie at the first push of resistance. "I'll never tell."

"So be it. I can respect that."

She looks nervous for the person who helped her. As she fucking should be.

"Rob has joined forces with Donald Hargrove," she blurts unexpectedly.

I arch a brow. "Lying down with the dogs. That means the fleas are coming, Olivia. You ought to run from them."

"He stepped up for my family," she says defensively. "After what you did to them, my mother couldn't stand to be in that house. Donald gave them security and protection. Peace of mind that *you* stole away."

“You really think he’s some benevolent guardian angel, sent from the heavens to make the Lawrence family feel nice and safe?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

I look down at her. “Have you stopped to wonder why the motherfucker is involved in this at all?”

Doubt flickers across her face. She *has* wondered—and come up empty. “Apparently, his goddaughter was one of your victims.”

I wince. *Jesus Christ*. The blatant lie doesn’t surprise me.

But Olivia believing it does.

“Is that really what you think?”

“Rob told me,” she says. It’s not a true answer to my question. It’s a deflection, a way to avoid thinking about all the implications of what it means to believe me and accuse her family of the lies.

“Rob’s been fucking conned,” I say with a scowl. “Not surprising, really. He’s not very bright.”

“Don’t even start with that,” she snaps. “They have proof, Aleks.”

“Then why haven’t they gone to the police with it?”

She hesitates for a moment. “Well...”

“Well? Why not, Olivia?” I press closer to her, crowding her in with my body and with all the loose ends she’s desperately pretending not to see.

“The girl is traumatized,” she stammers. “She hasn’t said a word since she went back to her parents. And they can’t bring her to court because she’d be deemed an... an unreliable witness.”

The phrase sounds clunky in her mouth. Because it’s not her thought, not her understanding. She’s parroting her brother’s words.

“And yet, somehow, she managed to give the police my name? How convenient.”

I can see reason start to pierce through the sickening smog they've choked her with. "It does seem a little—"

"Ridiculous?" I press. "Because it is. It's a fucking fantasy, Olivia."

"Why would he make up a story like that?" she demands.

"Excellent question, little lamb. Why would he?"

She stares up at me with those huge, glistening eyes, and I have to physically hold myself back. The need to touch her is strong.

But I'm stronger.

She thinks about it for a moment. "Because he needs a... a justification to come after you?"

"And why would he do that?"

Her eyes go wide. The truth is clicking into place, slowly but surely. She wasn't far from it already. She just needed a tiny little push.

"Are you saying that he's the one trying to frame you?"

"Clever girl." I smile.

She stares at me, but I can see the gears turning in her mind. She shakes her head like that'll change what's happening. "It doesn't add up, Aleks."

"Because the media says he's some magnanimous superhero? He *is* the media, Olivia. He writes the stories. He shows you only what he wants you to see. If you believe the shit he feeds you, then you're more of a fool than I ever thought you were."

"He has... charities!"

She's floundering in her defense. It won't last much longer. Her voice is cracking, her resolve weakening.

"So do I," I scoff. "That doesn't mean I haven't murdered men with my bare hands. If the contradiction surprises you, then you're still not understanding how stories are built."

“It... You... You’re bad. He’s good.”

I smile. The little *kiska* is trying desperately to keep her worldview from crumbling. A kinder man would let her keep it, if only to serve as a pacifier.

Too bad I’m not a kinder man.

“You are only half-right, Olivia,” I rasp. “We both have darkness and lightness in us. Hargrove can help a child with one hand and kill its mother with the other. I can run a Bratva and a charity at the same time. But do you know what the difference is between us?”

“What?”

“At the end of the day, I have a code. He has none. Whatever serves him is what he does. But I don’t hurt women who haven’t earned it. I certainly don’t snatch them up and reduce them to mute, horrified dolls I can fuck.”

The silence that follows is rife with tension. I can practically hear the frenetic thumping of her heart.

The truth is a hard pill to swallow—but it’s the only thing that cures.

“Why should I believe you?” she whispers.

“The better question is, why should you believe *him*?”

“He’s my brother,” she says.

“And Hargrove?”

She hesitates. “Rob trusts him.”

“We’ve already established that your brother is not the sharpest knife in the drawer. He believed Jennifer’s lies.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “He’s been hurt. By *you*.”

“Every single person on this planet has been hurt,” I retort. “Sometimes, you’ve got to take that hurt and harness it. You have to use it to make yourself stronger.”

“Is that what you do?”

“Every. Fucking. Time.”

She lowers her eyes. “I can’t imagine you ever hurting, to be honest.”

She whispers it more to herself than to me. But I feel the words as a throb in my chest.

She doesn’t see the depths of the pain. How it hurts me to hurt her, but how necessary it’s been. She doesn’t see what she means to me.

But I can hardly blame her.

I’ve tried so hard not to see it myself.

I take a step forward. “Olivia,” I whisper, tilting her chin upwards to face me. “Did he give you a name?”

“What?”

“A name,” I repeat. “His so-called goddaughter. Did your brother mention the girl’s name?”

Her forehead wrinkles as she tries to remember. But I can already tell what the answer will be. “No... No, I don’t think he did.”

“Because there is no such girl,” I say as gently as I can. “It’s a sick lie to make you believe that Hargrove has a personal stake in this vendetta. He does—but not in the way he’s telling you.”

“Why would he choose to frame you?”

“You said it yourself—he’s good, I’m bad. It’s easier for the world to accept me as the villain than him.”

She looks out the window and sighs. “I don’t know. I don’t fucking know.”

“You know I’m telling you the truth.”

Her eyes snap to mine. “How do you figure that?”

“Because when you opened the door and saw me waiting for you, you didn’t run. You didn’t scream. You walked straight to me. Almost like you were already waiting for me to show up.”

A blush creeps up her cheeks, but she's trying hard to fight it. "Don't read too much into it."

She turns away to hide her face from me and reintroduce some distance between our heated bodies.

I don't blame her. The proximity was getting dangerous.

"What are you doing here?" she asks. "What are you *really* doing here, I mean. Because convincing me you're the good guy doesn't seem worth all this trouble. You made it clear you don't give a shit about me."

"I thought you should know who you ran away to."

"I was trying to run to my family," she snaps. "They brought me here."

"Cozy new place for the whole gang, eh?"

She throws me an annoyed glance. "It's not my first choice, either. But you've ruined that house for them. They don't want to go back to it. They all think you're a monster!"

"And that bothers you?"

She stops short. "I—that's not what—"

"You think I'm a monster, too. Or at least, you did. Has something changed?"

She chews at her bottom lip. "I... It's hard to explain. I'm not defending you, it's just... Shit, maybe I have. But every time I try, I sound insane! Delusional. They look at me and they don't see their sister or their daughter; they see some naive, brainwashed idiot with a bad case of Stockholm syndrome."

Her chest rises and falls with labored breathing. I can't help but follow the movement. She looks so fucking good, despite the fact that her cheeks have hollowed a little.

"Do you like me now, Olivia? Do you *love* me?"

"It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?" I ask, inching closer to her.

She grits her teeth but stands her ground. “Do you just enjoy antagonizing me?”

I smile as her body trembles. It’s slight. But I’m paying attention.

With her, I’ve always paid attention.

Which makes the fact that she chose to leave me even more intriguing. I didn’t think she had it in her. And I rarely underestimate anyone.

“What’s wrong, Olivia?” I ask. “Scared that you’ll have to choose sides?”

She shakes her head. “There are no sides. There’s just me and my family.”

“Oh? Then why are you standing here upset about the fact that your family hates me?”

She doesn’t know how to answer that question. “I told Rob about Jennifer,” she blurts out, pivoting hard so that she doesn’t have to confront her feelings for me.

I decide to allow it this time, if only to prolong this meeting. I’m not ready to let her go again so soon.

“Let me guess: he refused to believe you?”

“He thinks you’ve brainwashed her. Actually, correction: he thinks you’ve brainwashed me and you’ve threatened her.” She rolls her eyes at the distinction. “Apparently, he doesn’t believe she’s as naïve or impressionable as I am.”

The resentment is obvious. In just two days, her siblings have eroded a lifetime of bonding between them. Sowed the seeds of distrust.

Now, it’s up to me to reap them.

But fuck, it infuriates me. What they’re doing to her. The foundation of her life is built on the love of her family, and even if I think it’s a useless concept, *she* does not agree. It means something to her.

And they’re ripping it to pieces.

“I suppose he thinks I threatened to kill Jennifer if she didn’t tell you the story I forced her to?”

She frowns. “You don’t even need me. You have all the answers.”

“Because I know how men like Robert and Donald work. It’s what allows me to be two steps ahead.”

“Except you didn’t see me escaping,” she jabs. “Did you?”

“What does it matter?” I reply. “You’ll come back.”

She looks flabbergasted for a moment. “You think I’ll come back to you?”

“I know it.”

“Fine, I’ll bite. How did you come to that unsurprisingly narcissistic conclusion?”

“Because despite what you think, there *are* sides in this war, Olivia. You chose the wrong one when you ran. And I think you’re already regretting it.”

I can see the truth of my words in her eyes. She’s still not skilled enough to hide her innermost thoughts from me. I watch her, the way she wrings her fingers together as though she doesn’t know what to do with them.

“You’re a good liar, you know,” she says, trying to justify her choice. “You and Jennifer. Both of you.”

“Truer than you will ever know. But we’re not lying about this.”

“And I’m supposed to trust that?”

I nod. “Unless you want to help a bad man cover up his sins.”

“I’m not so sure who is the bad man in this case.”

I move closer still. She’s inches away. Close enough to touch, to kiss, to smell.

“What is your gut telling you, Olivia?” I whisper.

She looks up at me and swallows. Her eyes are wide, full of fear and hope at the same time. When she blinks, her lashes brush slowly across her

cheekbones, light as a breath.

“I don’t trust my instincts anymore,” she says in the tiniest voice imaginable. “All they do is break my heart.”

I’m silent for a beat. That could mean so many different things. I can feel that throb in my chest urging me to pick the interpretation I’m craving. To confirm what I see in her eyes, in her face, in the space between her fearful breaths.

But I resist that temptation.

Instead, I lift my hand and push back a lock of her hair. Indulging the smaller urge to stave off the bigger one.

“Why did you come here, Aleks?” she murmurs.

“Why did you leave?” I counter.

“How could I have stayed?” she asks. “After everything that happened...”

“You’re not safe here,” I tell her. “Regardless of what your brother thinks, Hargrove is not the savior you think he is. He’s capable of anything.”

“I don’t know what you want from me,” she says in frustration. “You want me to convince my family that you’re not the villain so we can run away with you instead? Because they’ve already made up their minds about that. You’re also capable of anything.”

“I’m no hero, and I’ve never pretended to be. Sometimes, there’s more than one villain in a story,” I say gently. “There isn’t always a choice between good and evil. Maybe you have to choose between bad and worse.”

OLIVIA

Bad and worse.

Those are my only choices.

Choosing Aleks means going against my family. It means standing up to my brother, my sister, my mother. Telling them to ignore what they've seen and experienced with their own eyes.

But then there's *his* eyes.

I can't seem to get away from them. So blue, an empty sky on a frosty winter's morning and the hottest part of a fire at the same time. How is anyone supposed to focus when those eyes are locked on yours?

Every argument Aleks has handed me so far has made sense. But then again, those blue eyes could convince the angels to march straight into hell and stay there.

"I can't betray my family. Not again. Not after..." I swallow down my nerves and stand tall. "What happened between us was a mistake."

"What *did* happen between us, Olivia?" he asks, as though he needs reminding.

Maybe he does. That hurts all the more.

"You know damn well what happened."

“Humor me.”

I grit my teeth and back away from his intimidating height. Looking up at him is making me dizzy.

“It was one thing sleeping with you before I knew who you were,” I say softly. “But the... the second time...”

“You slept with me the second time because you *believed* me, Olivia,” he points out. “You believed that I had nothing to do with what your brother was accusing me of. That I was not the villain you thought I was.”

“I don’t know that I gave it that much thought,” I admit.

He smiles. “I’m flattered.”

It’s nothing he didn’t already know about the effect he has on me, the effect he has on every woman he meets. There’s no point in being embarrassed, but I am. Falling for a trap that has already ensnared others doesn’t make it hurt any less.

Talking about this ad nauseum doesn’t make it hurt any less, either. We need to talk about something else, anything else.

“Where’s Jennifer?” I ask.

“Back underground,” he answers, to my surprise. “We had some work that needed doing.”

“I think it would help Rob if she could talk to him.”

“Funnily enough, I don’t care what your brother wants or needs, Olivia. And neither should you. You spend entirely too much time worrying about what your family will think.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

He snorts. “If I stopped for a single second to worry about what my family thought, I wouldn’t be where I am.”

“Of course not,” I scoff. “Because you don’t give a shit about your family. Not your mother or your father or anyone but yourself.”

“There are plenty of other things I give a shit about,” he says, closing the distance between us as his voice dips low.

As always, his words are laced with implication. A message beneath the message. A tease just out of sight.

But I can’t let myself get wrapped up in the enigma of the man in front of me. I refuse to make assumptions anymore.

It just gets me hurt every time.

“Aleks—”

“You’re not safe here,” he says, cutting me off. “You never should have left.”

My heartbeat races. I have to resist the urge to touch my stomach, where our baby is hiding in plain sight. “Are you going to make me come back to you?”

He tilts his head to the side and looks at me for a long time.

“No,” he says at last. “I’m not. I could, but I won’t.” Then he tightens his fists at his sides and adds, “But I’m keeping an eye on you, Olivia. I’m gonna make sure that motherfucker doesn’t touch you.”

The way he says it makes my entire body quiver. There’s possessiveness in his tone. A ferocity that could turn the bravest man into a coward.

My eyes go wide with fear. “What are you planning?”

“You want to know my plans?” he asks. “So you can run back to Donald and tell him everything?”

I stop short. “You really think I would do that?”

“You ran from me willingly enough, didn’t you?”

“Because you cut me off at the knees. You humiliated me. What did you expect after that—gratitude?”

“Jesus Christ,” he growls as his patience wears thin. “Don’t you get it, Olivia? I was trying to keep you out of this. I was trying to keep you safe.”

“Why do you even care that I’m safe?” I yell back at him.

He walks forward so fast that I find myself pressed up against the window overlooking the city.

The glass is so clear that my head spins, irrationally terrified of the height and the possibility of falling fifty stories down.

“Because you are my *wife*,” he snarls, forcing my attention back to his face.

“I thought marrying me was nothing more than a strategy.”

“It was precisely that,” he says unapologetically. “But that doesn’t change the fact of what you are. And when I said my vows, I meant them. I will do anything to make sure you’re safe.”

I stare at him, waiting for what I know is coming next—the cruel backhanded remark, the vicious reminder that I mean nothing to him.

But it doesn’t come.

He just breathes and stares at me with those impossible words floating in the air.

“Why are you making this so hard?” I whisper, my voice cracking with the strain of a thousand heavy emotions. “This would be so much easier if you were the monster they think you are.”

“Oh, don’t you worry—I’m still a monster.”

I smile at that one, and I feel a twinge in my stomach. My hand moves instinctively between our bodies.

And then I freeze.

Aleks registers my alarm. “What is it?” he asks urgently. “Are you okay?”

I shake my head, but make the mistake of looking into his eyes. We’re close, and his proximity is making it harder for me to stick to my loyalties.

I have a family who think he’s the enemy. But the child inside of me—the child he still doesn’t know about—is his as much as mine.

“Olivia,” he says, concern warping his features, “what the hell is wrong?”

He steps away, allowing me some breathing room. But he shadows me as I pace across the room.

I could tell him. I could let him know what we've made. What it might mean for us. I could take that one beautiful little sentence—*When I said my vows, I meant them*—and let it light the way into a future I never saw coming but that I can't bring myself to look away from now.

Or I could hide it. I could go back to the family I love and the life that I know. I could find a way to raise this baby and recede once again into the quiet shell of a person I was before one little flight got delayed and a handsome man in an airport café asked if the seat next to me was taken.

The choices here are clear. And the moment to decide is now. There's no more delaying what's coming.

So with one last long, shuddering breath, I turn to him and say what I've chosen to say.

"I'm pregnant."

Aleks blinks. "What did you say?"

"I'm... pregnant."

His eyes dip to my stomach and then back to my face, looking for answers that aren't there. "How do you know?"

"I suspected for a few days when I was still with you," I admit. "And then the day I left, I took a test. It was positive."

"You haven't seen a doctor?"

I frown. "I feel fine. I'll see a doctor when I'm ready to."

He's given no indication that he's happy or sad. He's just... in control. Making decisions. As per usual.

Finally, he lets loose a sigh. "How the hell did this happen?"

"I think it happened on the plane," I say as my cheeks heat up. "You remember that day, don't you, Aleks? Or maybe you don't. Maybe you do that kind of thing with so many women that you don't remember the—"

“Stop it,” he snaps, so firmly that I fall silent.

He moves forward and reaches out. Places his hand over my belly. Five points of heat, like a constellation of stars pressed against me.

“You’re pregnant,” he murmurs.

“Almost three months in, give or take.” I stare at his face, trying to figure out what he’s thinking. “Are you... happy?”

He drags his eyes up from my belly to meet my gaze. The blue of his irises has softened. It’s not fire or ice anymore. It’s the blue of the first spring violet pushing up through the ground after the snow has thawed.

“*Kiska*, it’s the happiest moment of my life.”

Relief. That’s all I feel.

The pure simplicity of standing here, connected by something we’ve created together.

It’s the deepest form of intimacy there is.

And I realize that I don’t hate being tied to Aleks like this. If I’m brainwashed, then fuck it, I’m brainwashed. If I’m stupid, then I’m stupid.

I choose this.

I choose him.

“I’m scared,” I admit.

“You have nothing to be scared of,” he tells me. “I’ll protect you.”

He says it with such fierce, proud conviction that I actually believe him. No man should be able to promise things like that and mean it.

But Aleks can.

Aleks does.

“Will you?” I ask, my voice trembling.

“With my dying breath. I won’t let anything hurt you.”

Tears spring up in my eyes. His hand on my belly is the gentle heat I never knew I needed.

“What’s wrong, little lamb?” he asks softly.

I swipe at my cheeks. “It’s nothing.”

“Olivia.”

I look down. “You’re the first person who seems truly happy about this news.”

His eyes darken instantly. “They know?”

“Yes.”

“Even Hargrove?”

I nod. “Yes, even him.”

He rips his hand away from me. “Fuck.”

“Aleks, he won’t hurt—”

“He absolutely fucking would,” he snarls viciously, whirling to face me again. “If he thought it would make me lose so much as a minute of sleep, he would gut you in front of me.”

“I won’t let anything happen to our baby,” I protest.

“No,” Aleks growls, “I won’t let anything happen to our baby.”

He reaches up to stroke my cheek with a kind of feral possessiveness that makes me quiver.

“This changes everything. I can’t take you now, but I won’t go far. You may not always see me,” he whispers. “But I’ll always be watching.”

He dips his head down and touches his lips to mine in a feather-light kiss. Then he pulls away and starts striding for the door.

“And,” he adds, “I’ll be back soon to reclaim what’s mine.”

I desperately want to tell him to stay. To wait with me. Not forever—just for ten more minutes. I think I'll be strong enough to say goodbye to him in ten minutes.

But the thought of making such a vulnerable request is the only reason my mouth stays shut. Because at the end of the day, I'm still a coward. Still a romantic looking for love in all the wrong places.

But as my hand settles over my stomach, I decide it doesn't matter. If this precious life inside of me is the prize for all my suffering...

I'll take it.

OLIVIA

OLIVIA'S SUITE AT THE IMPERIAL

“Where have you been?”

I jerk to a standstill just before Mia walks into my line of vision.

“Sorry, munchkin. Didn’t mean to scare you.” She seems more curious than apologetic.

“No, it’s...” I brush my hair out of my face. “It’s fine. I just didn’t expect to find anyone in my room.”

“So where were you?”

“Nowhere,” I say, a little too quickly.

She raises an eyebrow. “Are you up to something, Livvy?”

I’m not a great liar under the best of circumstances, and Mia especially has always been able to see right through me.

But the stakes are too high to show all my cards. Even to her.

It’s not all about Aleks, either. If he is right, my baby could be in danger. Especially if Hargrove finds out Aleks was on the premises.

“I just needed to get out of this room,” I tell her, trying to laugh off my weirdness. “Get some fresh air.”

“There’s a sky garden a level up from here,” Mia tells me.

“I prefer my gardens on the ground.”

She smiles, but I can tell she’s not totally buying my excuse. “You were gone a long time.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Well, it’s a big building. And I just got here. It’s confusing. What’s the big deal? Are you the walking police?”

Her own eyebrows arch in surprise. I get it—I’m not usually so sharp. But I’m not about to apologize, either.

Things have changed. For all of us.

“No big deal,” she says smoothly. “I was just worried about you.”

“Worried about what, exactly?”

“Everything,” she says. “You’re my baby sister. My first instinct is always to protect you.”

I take a deep breath and remind myself that Mia is not the enemy. None of them are—for crying out loud, they’re my *family*. They love me. They care for me.

They just have a different perspective on the strange situation we’re in.

And who knows? Maybe their perspective is right. My heart is still too fragile to decide.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. I guess I’m just a little on edge recently.”

“Oh, honey,” she says, moving towards me and taking my hands. “Come and sit down. I feel like we haven’t talked properly in ages. Things have been... well, let’s just say weird.”

The way she says the word gives me pause. It seems to point at more than just the crazy circumstances—abductions and threats and two powerful men locking horns.

It points at *us*. At me and her. Is she feeling this new distance, this festering uncertainty? I’ve always been able to tell Mia anything. But now, I’m not sure who to trust. It’s unsettling.

“I feel like I’m on a reality TV show. I didn’t know people actually live in hotels.”

She chuckles. “It takes some getting used to. But honestly, you’ll adjust. I did.”

“What if I don’t want to?” I ask quietly.

“Liv—”

“No, I’m serious. Why can’t we just stay at the house? Someone needs to take care of it, right?”

“That will be the first place he looks for you, Liv.” She doesn’t even mention him by name, but it’s obvious who she’s talking about. “And we can’t risk losing you to him again.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” I say softly.

“It’s not forever, okay?” she assures me. “This is just until the threat of this crazy Russian asshole is eliminated.”

“Eliminated,” I repeat with a frown. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean? He has to go, Liv. He’s a bad man.” She must see the horror on my face, because she pats my knee and gives me a comforting smile. “Don’t you worry. You know Rob—he’s a force to be reckoned with. Same goes for Donnie. They’ll take care of everything.”

A shiver races down my spine. “You don’t know Aleks.”

She shrugs. “He may be a powerful mafia king or whatever, but—”

“Bratva don.”

“Excuse me?”

I shake my head. As if the distinction matters. “Never mind.”

Mia shrugs and continues. “My point is, they know he’s powerful, but Donald has endless resources at his disposal. He can expose Aleks without even involving the cops. Let’s see any woman fall for that bastard’s trap once his smug face is plastered all over the television.”

My heart clenches. “Would Hargrove actually do that?”

“Donnie, darling,” she chides. “He wants everyone to call him Donnie.”

“What a pal,” I mutter. I shiver again. A deep sense of unease has taken up root in my stomach and it’s not showing any signs of leaving.

Mia nods, blissfully unaware of how uncomfortable I am. “At this point, he’s practically family. Even Mom loves him.”

“Mom loves everyone.”

She gives me a serious look. “She doesn’t love Makarova.”

It feels like Mia lobbed a grenade and is waiting for the explosion. I meet her gaze, but she doesn’t look away. Doesn’t say anything.

I can tell there’s something else going on. Something she wants to bring up, but is too scared to.

“Mia, what is it?”

She exhales and wrinkles her nose like she always does when she’s trying to find a diplomatic way to phrase something. “Mom and Rob seem to think you’re... sympathetic to him. To Makarova.”

She uses his last name the same way I just used Donald’s. The longer we talk, the more it seems like we’re talking to each other from opposite sides of the field. Like we’ve chosen teams.

Aleks's words echo in my ears. *There isn't always a choice between good and evil. Maybe you have to choose between bad and worse.*

“Liv.”

I blink and look up at my sister. “Yeah?”

“Are you?” she presses.

“Am I what?”

She exhales again, more irritated this time. “Are you sympathetic to Makarova? Do you feel for him?”

“What else did Rob tell you?” I ask.

“Don’t be mad at Rob. He loves you. He wants to protect you. And whatever he told me, he told me out of concern.”

“Just answer the question, Mia.”

She sighs and twiddles her thumbs in her lap. “Rob told me he’s worried that Aleks... brainwashed you. He thinks that...” Her eyes drop down to my stomach. “He said you really seem you to believe you weren’t raped.”

I stand up quickly and back away. It’s a new feeling, wanting to be far away from my sister. So alien that I wonder for a moment if I slipped and fell into a different universe.

She’s my big sister. The one I’ve always run to for everything.

And now?

Now, I feel like I can’t even look at her. It hurts too much.

“Liv, don’t go,” Mia coaxes. “Just breathe. Calm down.”

My fists are knotted at my sides. “Look at me. I am calm.”

“Okay, then why don’t you sit back down?”

“I’d rather stand, thanks.”

She tips her head to the side. Disappointment is written all over her face. “You’re angry.”

“You wanna know why?” I snap. “It’s because you all have been dismissive of me since the moment I walked through the door.”

“I haven’t been—”

“Yes,” I cut in firmly, “you have. I understand that I slept with the man who threatened our family. I’m pregnant and maybe that could make me irrational, I don’t know. But in the same way Rob is protecting our family, Aleks was protecting his.”

Mia stills where she's sitting. "Are you really defending Makarova? Are you trying to say Rob is the one in the wrong? For God's sake, Liv, he's your *brother*."

"Does that mean he can't make mistakes?"

"It means you should trust him!" she cries, leaping to her feet. "Besides, let's face it—when it comes to men, you're not exactly the best judge of character."

"Gullibility must be a family trait," I snort. "We were all taken for a ride."

Mia pauses, stops short. "What do you mean?"

"Jennifer," I say, thinking that's all the explanation I'll need.

But her eyebrows furrow downward in confusion.

"Jennifer," I say again. "We knew her as Isabella?"

Still nothing. Total blank face. That's when I realize—she doesn't know this bit.

And just like that, the acid of my anger burns worse.

"Apparently, Rob left that part out, huh?" I scoff. "Convenient."

She takes a step toward me, but I back away in time. "Liv, what are you saying?"

"Isabella was a Bratva spy. Her real name is Jennifer, and she's very much alive," I explain. "I met her at Aleks's mansion. She was a plant sent in by Aleks to find out what she could about Rob's investigation into the Bratva. She didn't disappear because Aleks took her; she disappeared in order to preserve her identity."

Mia sinks back to a seat on the couch like she might fall over without something solid to rely on. Her gaze unfocuses, going hazy as she tries to puzzle through what is suddenly so clear and obvious to me.

Maybe she'll see the light. She'll understand what I understand. She'll be on my team, the way sisters are supposed to be.

“You’re... serious?”

“Yes,” I say excitedly. “Do you get it now?”

Then I see it. The moment it happens. Mia is standing at a crossroads, and the sign pointing to the left says *BELIEVE OLIVIA* in flashing neon lights.

And as I watch, she sets her shoulders and heads in the other direction. The one that says *NO*.

That’s the choice that breaks my heart.

“No,” she says suddenly, causing me to jerk violently. “It has to be Aleks. Donald’s goddaughter was taken by Aleks Makarova just like Isabella was, and he used her until he’d had his fill, then discarded her like a piece of human waste on the side of the road. She mentioned Makarova’s name herself! It’s all she can say! He broke her. He is the bad one.”

“So a mute girl managed to name her rapist before she went silent? The conveniences are piling up, Mia! You have to open your eyes!”

“I’m not the blind one,” she hisses coldly.

“Are you kidding? A young kidnapping victim says only one word, and it happens to be the name of the man who took her? Doesn’t that story seem a little farfetched to you?”

“Honey, look around! That ship has already left the port. We’re living a real-life thriller right now. Nothing is farfetched anymore.”

She moves towards me, her eyes imploring. But she’s no longer trying to convince me, per se. Not in the same way she was a moment ago.

It’s more like she’s approaching me the same way you’d approach a wild, terrified animal. Calming it, not convincing it. Luring it forward—so you can lock it in a cage.

“We’ve been here under Donald’s protection,” Mia says softly. “I’ve gotten to know him, Liv. He’s a good man. A kind man. He loves his goddaughter and wants justice for her. Like I want it for you. Like Rob wants it for you.”

“For me?” I ask. “I don’t need justice.”

“He abducted you, Liv! He forced you to marry him and then he knocked you up with his child! If you don’t need justice, then who the hell does?”

I wince at the way she says it. As though the baby inside me is a curse, a burden that I’m being forced to bear.

I put my hand over my belly protectively.

“It wasn’t quite in that order,” I murmur.

“Liv,” Mia interrupts, “I get it, okay? He treated you well while you were there. He must have been nice sometimes. Maybe even charming. Am I right?”

I can’t bring myself to do anything but look at her feet on the carpet.

She presses forward and continues. “And you liked it, right? Honey, no one could possibly blame you for that. He’s a manipulator. He knew how to push your buttons. He had money and power and every ounce of control in the whole situation. It’s not your fault, boo. He pulled the wool over your eyes before you even knew what was happening.”

That’s the thing with siblings. They know so much about you. Too much. They see the guilt and shame in your eyes before you even feel it yourself.

And they know where all your scars are hidden.

I sit down slowly and close my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Mia murmurs, sitting beside me and putting one hand on my back.

I nod without opening my eyes again. “I think I just need to rest.”

I’m all alone here, trapped by myself inside the one place I never thought I’d have to be alone—my own family. I just need a second to breathe. Maybe, if she thinks she got to me, she’ll give me a little space.

“Of course,” she says, squeezing my shoulder. “You must be tired.”

I just nod again, meek with exhaustion both real and faked.

“Get some sleep. I’ll come check on you in a few hours.”

The moment she's gone, I grab a pillow and hug it to my chest. I collapse onto the soft cushions of the sofa I'm sitting on and lie there in a fetal position until my heartbeat has slowed to a dull, aching throb.

The whole time, I think about that soft kiss Aleks gave me just before we parted. A man who kisses like that can't be all bad.

Can he?

ALEKS

We're ten minutes from the city when the car phone rings.

Demyan is behind the wheel, so of course the drive has been jerky and impatient. He swerves around a delivery guy on a motorcycle, overtakes two school buses, and then whips back into the right lane.

I answer the phone. "Yeah?"

"Boss, the target has landed," reports Connor, my man assigned to tailing Hargrove.

"Where?"

"The High Tail," he says. "He's making his way over to the VIP section as we speak. Private table, smack dab in the middle."

"Who's he meeting with?"

"Couple of old fucks in suits. I don't recognize any of them."

"Keep an eye on him. Demy and I will be there in ten."

"Roger, boss."

"Demy and I?" Demyan repeats once I hang up. "I think you meant, 'Just Demy.' Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I can stay under the radar."

“You’re a little noticeable,” he points out. “Most dudes who are six-five aren’t billionaires, and most billionaires aren’t six-five. Doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks for that scintillating bit of logic. I’m still coming. Like I said, if I don’t want to be seen, I won’t be. Now, shut up and drive faster.”

He presses on the accelerator and the enhanced engine of the Range Rover takes us roaring down the streets.

It doesn’t take long before the High Tail is looming before us. “Go around there,” I point to an alley. “Park in the shadows.”

He puts it where I instruct, then we get out and make our way to a subtle little side entrance.

The bouncer watching the door is what you’d expect—big and slow in every direction, and not so agile between the ears, either.

“Oi,” he grunts as we approach, “front door’s that—”

I whip out my gun and press it under his throat with one hand. With the other, I withdraw a stack of hundred-dollar bills from my jacket pocket and press them into his sweaty paw.

“You have two choices here, my friend,” I breathe in his face. His piggy eyes tremble in their sockets. “You can either take this money, open the door, and forget you ever saw me. Or I can let my trigger finger slip and we’ll see what the inside of your thick skull looks like.”

He may be stupid, but he’s not stupid enough to make the wrong choice. He leaps off his stool, wrenches open the door, and bows to look at the ground.

“Smart man.”

The club is crowded well beyond capacity—on the gen pop level, at least. Up on the VIP terrace, there is space to breathe. The moment we clear the main dance floor, the smell of sweat and heat gives way to expensive alcohol and excessive perfume.

I catch sight of Connor at the same time he sees us. He jerks his chin subtly to the rounded table in the center of the terrace, then melts into the crowd.

It's surrounded on all sides by red leather sofas and wing-backed chairs. The surface is crowded with drinks and ashtrays. A handful of bottle girls circle like vultures on the perimeter, though they're keeping their distance while the business meeting is still in progress.

It takes me one quick scan to find Hargrove. He's in the king's position, all eyes on him.

"Hell of a suit," Demyan mutters when he notices Hargrove's gaudy, bright blue jacket. His wing-tipped shoes catch the passing strobe lights. "Fucker dresses well, I'll give him that."

"Tell you what," I drawl. "Once we kill him, you can steal the outfit."

I inch closer, finding a seat in a shadowy alcove off to the left of Hargrove's meeting. Demyan sits down opposite me. Connor sidles up to us a moment later.

"He brought a full security detail with him, but they're in plainclothes," Connor informs me.

"Not surprised," I say. "He doesn't want to look scared, but he's terrified. Go do a lap and see what else there is to see. Report back in half an hour."

"Got it, boss," he says, before vaulting over the VIP barriers and wading into the thick of the crowd.

"Hey, boys," a flirty voice asks, breaking my focus on the back of Hargrove's head. "What can I get you?"

The VIP section doesn't just have a better selection of booze; it has a better selection of women, too. The girls dancing in cages down below for the civilians embody the idea of cheap thrills. Their skirts are hitched up so high you can see their sequined thongs, their bras cut so low that they barely cover the nipple. Dye jobs and plastic surgery abound, each set of tits looking faker than the ones before.

But the girls up here are a different breed.

Like the curvy brunette standing between Demyan and me. She's wearing a black bodysuit with a deep V neckline that highlights her ample cleavage without giving too much away. Her skirt is short enough to tantalize with the promise of more.

I bet men would die for a single taste of her.

She puckers her ruby red lips at me. "I can get you a menu," she suggests when neither of us answers her question.

Demyan brightens with the smile he uses when he's ready to play. "A menu, hm? Are you on it?"

The girl's lashes flutter low. "If you know where to look," she murmurs, tracing a hand over Demyan's collar. "I'm expensive, though. Top shelf."

He smirks. "I have the money."

"But not the time," I interrupt.

Demyan gives me a glare, but then he sighs and relents. "Maybe later in the night, doll," he says. "Until then, bring us a bottle of whiskey."

She gives him a smile and saunters away. Her hips switch as she goes—she knows we're watching.

When she's turned the corner and disappeared, Demyan looks at me and whistles. "Now, *that's* a woman."

"She's also a whore."

"You and your standards," he says, rolling his eyes at me. "There's nothing wrong with paying for it. Hookers gotta eat, too, you know. I'm just helping these girls through college."

"That's not the kind of sex that interests me."

"That's right. You like your sex within the holy bonds of matrimony now, don't you?" he says with a wicked grin.

"If you like your brain within your skull, then I'd shut the fuck up."

He cackles. I ignore him and watch the meeting carefully.

While Hargrove's business associates leer at the women who flock past, sometimes even reaching out to slap a waitress on her ass when they venture too close, Hargrove remains disengaged from all of it.

He talks, sips his drink, talks some more. But his eyes never wander. His focus never shifts.

"He's here for the meeting," I say, thinking out loud. "He's not interested in this scene."

"Something you two have in common, huh?"

"But then again, why would he be interested?" I say. "His tastes run much... younger."

"Yeah, but doesn't he look the very image of respectability?" Demyan says with disgust.

"It's what his plan hinges on," I say. "He's hoping his image will protect him."

A waitress approaches their table and leans in to speak to Hargrove. He listens, nods, and she walks away.

"What do you think that was about?" Demyan asks. "Up to no good?"

I shake my head. "A man like him didn't get to where he is now by taking unnecessary risks. This place is too exposed for him to indulge."

"Maybe that's why it's perfect. Hiding in plain sight and all that jazz."

I shake my head, unconvinced. "I think there is someone running girls for the motherfucker. But it's someone less obvious. Someone he trusts implicitly. Someone who has as much to lose as he does."

"Ever thought about just killing him? One knife to the throat and it'll all be over. Plus, I'd get the suit."

"It won't be over. Not for us," I remind him. "We'll have gotten rid of a monster, but the FBI will still be on our asses. And Agent Lawrence will have even more reason to suspect us."

“Like he needs anything else. The fire under his ass is burning hot enough as it is.”

“You’re not wrong,” I agree. “Fucker’s not seeing straight. He’s blinded with loss.”

“Jen should be flattered.”

I grit my teeth, knowing the toll this mission has taken on her. She’s underground right now, but I worry about her mental state.

And she’s not the only one who’s fragile. Somewhere high in a hotel tower not far from here, Olivia is waiting with my child inside of her. One wrong touch and she might crumble to pieces.

I can’t let that happen.

As the music crescendos, Demyan gets up and walks away to explore a different vantage point. I stay put and continue my observation of Hargrove.

The man has his public image down to an art form. No chinks in the armor. Just a friendly, wholesome man, the kind of guy who’d pull over on the highway to help you change your tire.

I can see why people love him. How he fools them.

I won’t let it last for much longer.

OLIVIA

I wake up to a text from Mia. ***Breakfast in Mom's suite. Be there! xo***

I collapse back into my sheets with a groan. I'd rather just stay in bed. It's strange to feel that way about Mia and Mom. Never in my life have I bemoaned spending time with them, especially not after Dad passed and it hit me just how precious every second is.

Eventually, that guilt forces me up.

We're family, I repeat to myself over and over again. This is a weird period for all of us. Avoiding them is not going to fix anything.

Mia left me some of her clothes to borrow since mine are still back at Aleks's house. I decide on a white sundress. My stomach is still perfectly flat, but I see my pregnancy in the luscious layers of my suddenly voluminous hair and my flushed cheeks.

"You're glowing," I whisper in quiet awe to my reflection. Then I make my way out of my own suite and into my mother's.

All three suites are identical, but my mother brought some personal touches from home. When I walk through the door, I see her favorite red woven carpet on the floor and the row of family pictures perched on the mantel over the bar. *Mug shots*, Dad always used to call them. No one ever laughed but he said the joke so many times that eventually, it became funny.

"Good morning," I chirp as brightly as I can muster.

The table by the balcony has been set with two large trays of food looking fit to burst. I smell bacon and eggs and the sweetness of syrupy French toast, but my stomach churns reluctantly.

“Hungry?” Mia asks brightly. “Donnie sent up quite the spread.”

“What’s the occasion?” I ask, noticing a pot of peanut butter fondue nestled amongst all the other goodies.

“No occasion,” Mia bristles. “He’s just a really nice man.”

Mom smiles and nods. “He’s been a godsend. Such a lovely man. And so handsome.”

I frown, realizing that this is the first time I’ve ever heard my mother refer to any man as handsome. Apart from Dad, of course.

It strikes me that they’re not so far apart in age. Hargrove must be a few years younger, but it’s clear he takes care of himself.

Which is not to say that Mom hasn’t. She’s a beautiful woman and always has been. But she was never conscious or very concerned about how she looked.

When she hit forty, she gave up on dieting and stopped looking at the scale altogether. She ate what she wanted when she wanted and never apologized for it. When her hair started to go gray, she let it. The only times she ever wears makeup is for weddings, and you could set a calendar to her rotation of oversized cotton blouses and khaki capris.

Or at least, that’s how it used to be.

This morning, though, she’s wearing a patterned prairie dress, and I could swear I see mascara on her eyelashes.

“Handsome, huh?” I ask, unable to let that one go.

She looks at me innocently. “Of course. Though I suppose he might be a little too old for you to notice.”

Mia shakes her head. “Even Liv concedes that George Clooney is hot. And George would kill for Donnie’s bone structure.”

They both titter with laughter. I join in, reluctantly at first, but by the time our giggles fade, I'm starting to feel better.

This is fine. Everything is fine.

"You look nice," I tell Mia as I slip into the chair between her and Mom.

"Thanks, munchkin," she says, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

She really does look good with her mocha hair straightened to a sheen and the subtlest bit of foundation on her face. It's all neutrals and skin tones, and she looks effortless.

She's also in a dress, which is rare. Mia has a standing rule: *Dresses are for the farmer's market, because that's where the eligible bachelors are.* I never quite saw the logic there, since last I checked, bachelors don't tend to prowl the city early on Sunday mornings in search of fresh local produce, but she was adamant.

Of course, that was back when she had time to go to the farmer's market. Once she became a surgical resident, it became harder and harder for her to have a life outside of the hospital.

And that's when it strikes me.

"Mia, shouldn't you be at work?"

"Oh," she says, her cheeks flushing. "I'm actually taking an extended leave of absence from the hospital."

"But... why?"

She takes a deep breath. "I guess the pressure got to be too much for me."

She glances at Mom and unspoken meaning zaps between them. I frown. There's something they aren't telling me.

"Could you show me where the bathroom is?" I ask Mia pointedly.

Mom pretends to ignore us. She's humming and cutting into a grapefruit as the two of us leave her in the dining annex.

The moment we're alone, I turn to Mia. "You love being a doctor," I whisper.

She shrugs like she's unaffected. "Sometimes, you have to make sacrifices for the people you love."

"Mom?"

She nods. "She was so worried about you that she was barely eating during the day. And she couldn't sleep at night unless I was there. She was wasting away, and I knew I couldn't just ignore it. So I took some time off work to be with her."

"Shit," I breathe. "Mimi, I'm so sorry. I know how much work meant to you."

"I was able to wrap up all my big surgeries," she says. "And the rest of my patients were referred to excellent doctors. It's all good."

"How are you so... calm about this?"

"I guess maybe I really did need a little time off," she says. "I've been working and studying nonstop for almost two decades. When it all stopped, I got to live a little."

That word choice strikes me as odd, but before I can ask her to explain, Rob walks into the suite and spies the two of us in the corner.

"What are you two gossiping about?" he asks.

Three months ago, he would've smiled and joked. *Old hens chirping back and forth in secret*, he'd say, maybe squawking and flapping fake chicken wings for effect.

Now, there isn't a trace of a smile on his face. No warmth in his voice. He's just anger incarnate.

Mia doesn't seem to notice. Or maybe she just pretends not to. "We'll tell you our secrets if you tell us yours."

"No thanks."

I can't tell if he's joking or not. My bet is no.

"You joining us for breakfast?" I ask my brother as we follow Mia back to the table.

“No. I just came to say hi. I have work to do.”

“What work?”

He doesn't even make eye contact with me. “Can't really talk about it.” He grabs a piece of toast from the breadbasket and takes a bite out of it. “I also have a message from the big man.”

“Big man?”

“He's organized dinner for all of us,” he says. “Tonight.”

I'm not careful enough just then—I let a flash of emotion pass over my face. Rob catches it, because of course he does, and frowns.

“Give him a chance, Liv,” he scolds. “He's a good man. You'll see for yourself tonight.”

I suppress a sigh and nod. “Looking forward to it.”

Rob grabs a glass of fresh orange juice. He downs it in a few gulps and then stomps for the door.

“Are you sure you can't stay and eat?” I call after him.

“Positive.”

I dart out of my chair and follow him out of the suite door. “What's the rush, though? You're not on the case anymore, right?”

“I still have a job, Liv.”

Realization dawns quickly. He still has access to the FBI's resources.

“If anyone finds out you're still working this case,” I say, “especially with Hargrove... won't you get in trouble?”

He grimaces. “By the time they find out, we'll have enough proof to put this son of a bitch away for life, and nothing else will matter.”

My stomach flips. I don't think it's the morning sickness.

“What's her name?” I ask suddenly.

“Sorry?”

“Hargrove’s goddaughter,” I ask. “What’s her name?”

“Don is really concerned with her privacy. She’s been through enough already.”

“So you don’t know?”

He scowls. “The only name I’m concerned about is the one she gave us.”

I want to scream inside. Maybe I’m not the only one seeing what I want to see.

Rob is about to turn towards the elevators when he stops short. “I meant to ask, how are you feeling?”

“A little bit like I’ve entered the Twilight Zone, if I’m being honest.”

“I meant physically.” He tilts his chin at my stomach.

“Oh. I’m feeling good,” I tell him. “Strong.”

He nods, but I’m not sure that’s the answer he was looking for. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Right. Tonight.”

He steps into an elevator. I duck back inside to join Mia and Mom. They’re tucking into breakfast with enthusiasm, but I can’t seem to muster up an appetite.

“What would you like, darling?” Mom asks. “We have everything. Eggs, bacon, bread, cereal.”

“I’m feeling a little queasy, actually.”

Mom’s smile falters and Mia looks at me sharply. “Morning sickness?”

“I dunno, maybe.”

“That must suck.”

In another life, my mom and Mia would have fawned over me. They'd be excited about morning sickness because it meant there would be a baby soon. They would have catered to my every need so incessantly that I would've had to beat them off of me like mosquitoes.

But the frosty distance in their eyes says that this isn't another life. This is *this* one, and in this one, my pregnancy is not a source of joy for them.

It's a nightmare.

"I think I'm just going to lie down for a bit, if you guys don't mind," I say, standing up again.

"And miss breakfast?" Mom asks. "Are you sure?"

"Just for a bit."

Mom points to her bedroom door. "You can sleep here, if you like."

"Thanks, Mom, but I'm right next door."

Neither one of them protests too much as I make my way out of the suite. I know them well enough to know that the minute I'm gone they're going to start talking. So when I'm in the hallway, I lean back and press my ear to the door.

I hear the murmurs of their conversation, but I can't make out much.

"... so sad..." Mom says.

"... hate seeing her like this. It's wrong. It's so damn wrong."

I pull my head back and stare at the door as though it's personally offended me. It's strange to know that I'm the topic of discussion now. And suddenly, I'm not so sure I want to hear it.

I back away and walk down the hall, but when I get to my bedroom, I keep on going. A set of emergency stairs takes me to the greenhouse atrium on the twelfth floor. I step out from the stairwell and into the greenhouse, hoping for nature to take the edge off my anxiety.

But it feels off, somehow. It's nothing like the gardens at Aleks's mansion.

Walking through the garden there felt like escaping to another world. Like slipping into a magical forest.

The gardens at The Imperial remind me more of an amusement park. It's all beautiful, but the grandeur makes everything feel artificial.

A stone swan perches on top of a gurgling stone fountain. Fish swim in the too-blue water below, but there are so many people gathered around the edge that I can't get a good look.

"Not exactly the Trevi Fountain," I mutter under my breath as a woman elbows past me in her haste to get a prime position.

I glide around the herd of people and through the garden, searching for a quiet corner to avoid the tourists. Before long, I find myself in a back area that looks like it's under construction. Cones block off the pathway and the shrubs are overgrown, hanging past the edge of the sidewalk.

I step into the shade and tilt my head to look up. From here, I can see through the greenhouse ceiling to the hotel stretching above. The mammoth building nearly blots out the blue sky. It's a cold pillar of glass and metal with no personality.

Nothing like the home I grew up in.

"Ugly, isn't it?"

I gasp and spin towards the familiar voice.

Aleks is leaning against a low hanging tree only a few feet away from me.

"What are you doing here?"

He shrugs. "I wanted to check out the garden."

I frown. "Have you been watching me?"

"Yes," he says unapologetically. He pushes himself off the tree and walks over to me. "I know what kind of man Hargrove is, Olivia. I'm not about to leave you at his property without making sure I can keep an eye on you at all times."

Warmth spreads through me. I fear my blush is going to betray how that sentiment makes me feel.

If only to distract myself from that, I say, “He’s not going to hurt me.”

“He doesn’t need to hurt you. He just needs to keep you under his thumb for the time being.”

I turn back to the goliath of a building above us. “You think that’s why he’s insisting we all stay here?”

“Masking control as generosity.” Aleks shrugs. “It’s a smart move.”

“My family loves him.”

“And they hate me,” he points out, though he doesn’t seem to care in the slightest. “So, clearly, their judgment is impaired.”

I almost smile. “Hard to say who’s right or wrong.” But the half-grin fades quickly. I shuffle uncomfortably and glance down at the cracked path beneath my feet.

“Feeling stifled here, aren’t you?” he observes.

I frown. “How did you know?”

“Your face isn’t exactly a mystery to me,” he says. “How about a drive?”

“Now?”

He nods.

“With you?”

He makes a pretend show of glancing over his shoulders. “Is someone else offering?”

“But... they’ll miss me.” I look back up at the building, wondering which windows belong to my family and which belong to Donald.

“I’ll have you back before anyone knows you’re gone.”

I frown. “Is this a trick to get me back on your compound?”

He shrugs and holds out a hand. “There are no tricks, Olivia. Just leaps of faith. Are you willing to jump?”

ALEKS

ALEKS'S CAR

I can't stop gawking. Her body hasn't changed in any noticeable way yet, but the simple knowledge that she's carrying my baby makes her infinitely more beautiful.

"You're staring," Olivia remarks as she straps her seatbelt across her body.

"Observing."

She arches a wry eyebrow. "Observing what, exactly? Answer carefully."

"The way you're glowing."

Pink rises in her cheeks. "Please," she snorts derisively. "That's just something people say to pregnant women so they feel better about getting huge and throwing up all the time."

"Are you having morning sickness?"

"Sometimes," she admits. "It comes and goes. I think my nausea has more to do with that stupid building than anything else. I hate heights."

I don't think the height is the part of that building causing her discomfort, but I don't press back on the lie. The farther we get from the hotel, the more she seems to relax.

"Where do you want to go?"

"You're asking me?"

“I don’t see any other passengers,” I drawl.

Olivia cocks her head to the side and squints in thought, like it had never occurred to her before to have an opinion.

“Take me to the moon,” she announces finally.

I chuckle. “It’ll take me longer than an afternoon to organize a trip like that. But if you want it, it’s yours.”

She shudders. “Somehow, I think you actually mean it. You know what? I think I’d just like to drive for now. I want to see the city pass by.”

“Alright then,” I say. I take a turn to steer us away from the city onto lonelier roads.

She keeps her gaze fixed out her window, but her hands are a tight knot in her lap. Every so often, she glances towards me like she’s surprised that I’m here at all.

“Have you painted the walls in my room?” she asks suddenly.

“No. I decided to leave them.”

“Really?”

“Is that surprising?”

“They weren’t exactly flattering.”

I grin. “Art is supposed to draw a reaction, isn’t it? I’d say you did that in spades.”

“I guess,” she mumbles, though her cheeks flush with subtle pride.

“Have you been drawing?”

She stiffens. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Not exactly inspired at the moment,” she mutters. “I’ve lost my muse, I guess.”

“Interesting. You drew constantly when you were with me.”

“Yeah, well, don’t read too much into it.”

“Too late.”

She sighs, but I can tell she’s trying to suppress her smile. Her hand strokes across her flat stomach. I don’t even think she realizes she’s doing it.

“I talk to the baby,” she blurts out suddenly. “I know it’s probably too early, but I feel as though she can hear me. Or he. I can’t decide what we’re having.”

The words rush through me like a drug. “What *we’re* having,” I whisper to myself.

A flush of protectiveness surges through my body. It’s the first indicator that this baby is going to change everything for me.

I haven’t told Demyan. I haven’t told anyone yet.

I’m still trying to accept it myself.

“Aleks?”

“Yes, *kiska*?”

“What’s going to happen?” She looks to me as though I have all the answers.

I take a deep breath and choose my words carefully. “What’s going to happen is that I’m going to expose Hargrove for the monster he is. I’m going to remove his stain from our lives. And then everything will be as it should be.”

“*As it should be*,” she echoes. “What does that even mean? What is normal?”

“For whom?”

“For any of us. Like Jennifer, maybe. What will she do once Hargrove is gone?”

I shrug. “There will always be another mission.”

Olivia nods sadly. “I thought you might say that.”

“Something wrong with it?”

“‘Normal’ for you is what you’ve always done. Same goes for her. But none of this is normal for me and my family, Aleks. ‘Normal’ for Rob was being engaged to a woman he thought he loved. He can’t go back to that, can he? And he can’t move forward, either, because he’s still in love with her.”

“I don’t blame him. The girl is easy to love.”

Her brow creases, a frown pulling down on the corners of her mouth. “Is that your experience?”

“She is an impressive woman.”

“Because she is loyal?” she asks, clearly fishing for more details.

“Because she’s strong and savvy and fearless,” I say. “Because she can walk into a room and blend into the background or become the center of attention at will. It’s what you want in a spy.”

“Is it what you want in a woman, too?”

I glance at her with an amused smile. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous, Olivia.”

“I’m not. The two of you make a beautiful couple. It makes sense, really. You’re a liar and so is she. Of course you’d be the perfect match.”

I suppress a chuckle.

She rounds on me. “Don’t you dare laugh at me.”

“Then stop being so transparent.”

“I’m being honest.”

“Then maybe you should get better at lying.”

“Why?” she scoffs. “Are you recruiting another spy?”

“If I was, I’d look elsewhere. You would make a terrible spy.”

She crosses her arms like a petulant child. “I could learn.”

“There are things you can’t learn. Gifts you can’t acquire.”

“What does that mean?”

“Look at your life. Good childhood, loving parents, protective older siblings. You went to a good college, had a good job.”

“Why does all that feel like an insult?”

“It’s not. I’m just pointing out that this lifestyle, the Bratva way, is not for everyone. You’ve never had to morph who you are and what you want to survive. Your life has never depended—truly depended, life or death—on you saying the right thing at the right time. Assimilating to that way of thinking is harder than you can possibly imagine.”

Her expression sours and she turns away from me for a moment. “What kind of life did Jennifer have before this?”

“That’s not my story to tell,” I say firmly. “But she chose the Bratva because it was better than what she already had.”

“The two of you are close.” It’s part question, part statement.

“You could say that.”

“How close?”

“What do you really want to know, Olivia?” I turn to her. “Just ask me and I’ll tell you.”

“I know we’re not really married,” she murmurs quietly. “Not in any way that matters to you, at least. But... I still don’t like the idea that you might be with other women.”

It takes a lot of guts to admit that out loud. I’m impressed that she does it at all.

Perhaps that’s why I decide to give her the truth.

“Olivia.”

“Yes?”

I don’t speak until she finally lifts her face and looks over at me. When she does, I gaze deep into her eyes. “I haven’t been with anyone else since I

married you.”

She bites her lip and tries not to look too relieved. “Okay,” she mumbles, turning her gaze back out the window. “Thanks for that.”

“For my honesty? Or my faithfulness?”

“Both, I guess,” she says. “Can I ask you another question? And keep in mind this has nothing to do with us.”

“Go ahead.”

“Have you ever been in a committed, long-term relationship?”

“No.”

“Never?”

I shake my head. “Never.”

“How is that possible?”

“I’ve never wanted one.”

Her face falls and her hand drifts to her stomach again.

“Are you feeling queasy? Do I need to stop the car?”

“I wouldn’t mind,” she says.

I find a quiet part of the road that overlooks the Californian hills and a broad swathe of the city. She sighs as the car settles to a stop. “It’s really beautiful out here. So much space.”

“You don’t want to be there, do you?” I ask. “In his hotel.”

“No,” she admits. “I don’t.”

“Because you know, deep down, that I’m right.”

“So deep down that it’s a secret even from myself.” She laughs bitterly. “I have your words in my head all the time. But I don’t know if I believe them because you’re the one who said them or because they actually make sense.”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“Because you want me to believe you’re innocent. But, I mean, let’s face it, Aleks: Donald is the one with the spotless record and the stellar reputation.”

“And?”

She frowns. “And my family trusts him. They like him.”

“Careful or you’ll make me jealous.”

She glares at me. “This is serious.”

“I am being serious.”

“My family doesn’t understand why I can’t trust him the way they do. He’s been nothing but good to them,” she says. “To all of us. But you’re feeding me this other story, and... I don’t know what’s real anymore.”

I look at her without blinking. “I’m telling you what’s real.”

When she glances up, her eyes are glassy and red. A sob escapes her lips. “My family has always been the most important thing to me, Aleks. We’ve always had each other’s backs. We used to trust each other. But now... now, everything’s different.”

“Because of me,” I suggest.

“You and the baby both,” she agrees. “When they look at me, I can see the pity in their eyes. They look at me like I’ve been tainted somehow, and they wish they could reverse it.”

“Have they said anything to you?”

“Nothing at all,” I say. “They asked about morning sickness, but after I told them you didn’t rape me, they won’t talk about it. They haven’t even asked how I feel about being pregnant.”

“How do *you* feel about it?” I ask. As the words escape me, I realize that I need to know. I need to know with a burning intensity what all this means to her.

She looks up at me. Tears cling to her eyelashes like morning dew. She looks so sad and so beautiful, and I want to destroy anything that could ever make

her cry.

Then she smiles, those unshed tears still in her eyes. “I’m... happy. I’m so happy that I’m pregnant. I already love this baby so much. And I can’t believe my family won’t accept it, won’t accept me...”

“That part is not about you, Olivia. It’s about me.”

She shakes her head. “That shouldn’t matter. This baby is mine, too. It’s both of us. And they should want to know him or her regardless.”

“Maybe they will. Give it time.”

She looks unconvinced. “We promised each other a long time ago, right after Dad died, that no matter what happened in life, we would always be in each other’s corner. He told us all the time about how we needed to look after each other. But now, they look at me and it’s so mean, the way they do it. Like I’m a weak, pathetic little girl who can’t tell right from wrong.”

“I don’t see that. I don’t see weakness,” I tell her gently. “When I look at you, I don’t see any trace of weakness at all.”

A single tear falls from her eyes. “Are you just saying that because I’m crying?”

I smile. “I’ve made a lot of people cry, and tears have never once changed my opinion.”

“What makes you think I’m brave?”

“What makes you think you aren’t?”

The silence extends and in the thick atmosphere of unsaid words, Olivia leans towards me. She puts her hand on my neck and pulls me forward, right into her waiting lips.

The kiss is clumsy at first, but the moment I touch her, she relaxes. She sinks into it, and I do the same.

I lean my seat back at the same time she lifts her leg and climbs over the console into my lap. She straddles me, sitting right on my erection. Her hands graze down my chest.

I reach out and slip a strap of her dress off her shoulder. She shivers, but doesn't try to hide away or shrink away. For once, she's living outside of her head.

Free of self-consciousness.

Free of self-doubt.

I run my fingertips over her delicate collarbone and watch as goosebumps erupt in their wake. When I peel down the other strap, her breasts spill free, bigger than ever.

And when I brush over her nipples, she tilts her head back and moans up into the roof of the car.

"If someone drives past us, they'll see," I warn.

Olivia arches her back, pressing her breast more firmly into my palm. "Let them see," she whispers. "Let them all fucking see."

OLIVIA

Something inside me has snapped.

My family wants to see my pregnancy as a bad thing, a shame. And no matter how hard I try, I can't get on board.

Nor do I want to.

Because this child means something to me. She may still be a peanut inside my belly, but I can already see them. I can see blue eyes and dark brown curls. I can see an easy smile and a musical laugh. I can see my precious little angel reach for me with a wail or a happy little gurgle.

Rob, Mia, Mom? They all want her to disappear. The only person who sees her the same way I do...

Is *him*.

His hands run over my breasts, flushing my body with pleasure. It's been so long since I felt good.

A car whizzes past us, just like Aleks warned it would, but I don't give a damn. The whole world has melted into the background. All that matters is *this*.

Aleks peels the top of my dress down my body as his other hand lifts up the skirt until it's bunched at my waist. I'm tingly all over. Utterly at his mercy—and he knows it.

He can see through me and see me all at the same time.

And that's the biggest turn-on of all.

Rain drops pepper the roof of the jeep. A trickle at first, then it grows in intensity until it's a downpour swallowing us up. It drowns out the world. Rinses away everything that doesn't matter.

I lean down and kiss him desperately. The need for him is burning through me as I press myself harder against him.

Will I regret this tomorrow? Maybe, but I can't bring myself to care. I've never needed comfort more than I do right now.

And I've never craved a man like I crave this one.

His cock presses against my thighs, making me moan with want. I lift my hips up so that he can pull my panties down. It's a tight fit in the car, arms and legs tangled everywhere, but Aleks needs no encouragement or direction.

With one vicious tug, he tears my underwear off of me. I gasp as he throws the scrap of fabric on the seat next to us.

"Was that really necessary?" I scowl.

"I wasn't about to wait a single goddamn second longer," he snarls.

He strokes the head of his dick against my opening. Naked skin on naked skin. I sigh with the thrum of pleasure surging through me.

His gaze is fixed on my mouth. "That lip," he rumbles, reaching out to run a thumb over my bottom lip. "I've fantasized about biting it a thousand times."

"Then what are you waiting for?" I whisper.

He squeezes my ass, but he doesn't let me slide down on his shaft yet. I'm practically mewling with how badly I want it.

"I'm waiting for you to tell me what you want," he says.

I roll against him, but he stays maddeningly out of reach. All I get is the barest brush of skin, and I hiss in frustration.

“Aleks,” I moan.

“Tell me what you want,” he orders again. “I want to hear you say the words with those pretty little lips.”

“I want you,” I breathe, eyes fluttering closed. “I want you inside me now.”

He nods, satisfied.

And then he rewards my honesty.

In one hot thrust, he sheathes himself inside me. He sinks deep, filling me completely, and my eyes roll back in my head.

“Ahh, fuck, fuck, fuck...”

He doesn't ask me if I'm okay. He doesn't take it slow, either.

Aleks knows I'm not fragile.

I won't break.

He thrusts into me hard from below, filling me again and again. I claw at his neck and shoulder, I grip the seat, I do anything I can to find purchase and not completely shatter.

The orgasm hurtles towards me far too soon. My pussy clenches around him as I try to stave off the end, try to prolong this connection as long as I can. Aleks grits his teeth and keeps fucking up into me.

But eventually, there's no more waiting. When I come, I tip my head back and cry out. The sound is drowned out by the rain.

Two more thrusts and Aleks bursts inside of me. His hips spasm and his forehead presses against my throat. Both of us ride out the waves together until it's all calm again.

I lean forward and rest my head against his shoulder. “Fuck,” I gasp, trying to get a handle on my breathing.

Outside, the rain is still torrential. I should feel calm with that sound in my ears, that light vibration coursing through the metal of the car and down into my bones, his warmth swaddling me like a blanket.

But with every passing second, my heart beats faster instead. I feel like I'm tumbling into something dangerous. Something I might never find my way out of.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I whisper.

"Stop thinking," he tells me. "Just breathe."

I shake my head. "We shouldn't have done this."

I know I'm right, but that doesn't change what I wanted. What I want. Right now, I want Aleks to grab my face and tell me it was worth it. I want him to tell me that he wants me, that the two of us together could never be a mistake.

Instead, he leans back and fixes me with a hard glare. "If that's how you feel, then we won't do it again."

I meet his eyes and study him. It's as useless as ever. His face is like marble. Cold, emotionless, beautiful marble.

And as I look at him, I feel something in my chest. A tiny fissure, a bolt of pain.

It's my heart cracking. Just a little bit more.

He can't be what I want him to be. Or maybe he can and he just refuses to be it. I'm not sure which one is worse.

Whatever the case, I can't keep doing this to myself. I've tried again and again to convince myself that he can love me or that he can't, because if I could just settle on one of those, I'd be able to move on with my life. I could go back to my family or I could go with him, and there'd be certainty. There'd be safety.

He gives me none of that.

So what forces me off of him is not what I thought it would be. It's not fear or hatred.

It's just disappointment.

I cannot change Aleks Makarova—and he will not change for me.

“What are you doing?” Aleks asks as I fumble with the handle of the door and push it open.

I stumble into the rain and realize I’m still half-naked. I wriggle my now-soaking clothes back into place as I walk away from the car. Tears run down my cheeks, indistinguishable from the raindrops.

I hear the jeep door slam and footsteps approach. I know he’s behind me, but I keep walking, anyway. I don’t want him to see what he does to me. He suspects it, of course, but suspecting and seeing are two different things.

I just want to preserve the last scrap of dignity I have left.

“Olivia!”

“Leave me alone.”

He grabs my elbow and whips me around like a spinning top. “Never.”

I want to scream in his face, but my rage dwindles the moment I see him. The rain is washing over him, turning his white shirt transparent. His hard muscles are on full display. My body does what it always does at the sight of him—flutters, flips, soars.

I ignore it. I have to focus on what matters.

“I thought you wanted what was best for me,” I snap.

“Maybe what’s best for you is being away from your controlling, judgmental family.”

“You have them pegged wrong.”

“They think I’m a rapist, so I’m just returning the favor.”

“You know what?” I say. “This was my mistake. I ruined everything by thinking I could actually talk to you.”

He nods. “Sounds good to me. Next time we fuck, you can save the chatter for someone who cares.”

“Asshole!” I say, slapping my hand against his giant chest. It hurts me more than it does him.

He sighs. “Get in the car, Olivia.”

“No.”

He rolls his eyes. “Will you stop being so dramatic? You’re soaked through.”

“I’m fine.”

“Olivia, you’re pregnant with my baby,” he growls at me. “I’m giving you two seconds to get your ass in that car, and if you don’t, I’m going to carry you myself.”

“I don’t have to listen to—”

The words are ripped out of my mouth as he makes good on his promise and lifts me into his arms. He strides back to the vehicle and plops me into the passenger’s seat, right on top of my torn panties, then straps me in like a child.

I’d climb back out of the car and run for it if I wasn’t so cold. My teeth are chattering. Without the anger and heartbreak to heat me from the inside, I’m borderline hypothermic.

Aleks gets behind the wheel, slams his door, and starts the engine. We pull out. I press the heels of my hands into my eyes, close them, and shudder as the cold wracks me all the way down to the core.

“Wake me up when you’re gone from my life,” I mutter.

Aleks doesn’t say a word.



When we come to a stop, I glance outward reluctantly. I’m expecting to see the heights of The Imperial. But this is anything but that.

We’re parked in front of a quaint little house with a lush garden and a deep front porch. The rain has vanished and a few fragile sunbeams poke through the gray morass of clouds above.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“Wait until I come around for you,” he replies, ignoring my question.

He walks over and opens my door. Before I can unbuckle myself, he’s already done it. I protest as he scoops me back into his arms.

“I can walk,” I snarl, but again, it’s like he can’t even hear me.

I’m assuming he’ll set me down once we’re inside, but he doesn’t. He keeps walking. We pass through a bedroom and into the adjoining bathroom.

“You’re not very good at listening, so I figured I’d help,” he murmurs, finally setting me on my feet. “Now, take off your dress.”

“Excuse me?”

“The dress,” he says, gesturing towards my body. “Remove it.”

“If you think I’m going to have sex with you again—”

“Oh, grow up,” he spits. “I want you to get in the tub and take a hot shower.”

“I... what?”

“You need to take a hot shower. I don’t want you catching cold.”

Of all the things I thought he would say, that was definitely not one of them. “You don’t want me catching cold?”

“Why are you repeating everything I’m saying?”

I scowl and start to peel off my wet clothes. “Are you going to stand there and watch?”

“Don’t tell me you’re suddenly modest. Fifteen minutes ago, you were begging me to fuck you harder.”

I flush self-consciously, but I decide not to fight him. He’s not wrong. Maybe I’m the crazy one.

The dress is wet and sticking to my skin. Taking it off feels like trying to slide out of my skin. I struggle for a few seconds before Aleks steps up.

“Here,” he rasps softly. “Let me.”

He walks behind me and takes over. The buttons fall apart easily under his capable fingers. When he pushes the dress down around my hips, I shiver again.

But this time, it has nothing to do with the cold.

He keeps his eyes on my face as he gestures for me to step into the shower. “Go on.”

“I can do this part myself.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.”

Reaching around me, he turns the shower on. Hot water gushes around me. Steam rises from my freezing skin. “Oh God,” I breathe as relief floods through my system.

Aleks nods in grim satisfaction. Then he turns, pulls a thick white towel out of a cabinet, and sets it on the vanity.

“Take your time. I’ll wait outside for you.”

He leaves a moment later. I watch as the door snaps shut and silence takes over. I should be grateful, but instead, I feel... empty. As though he’s taken all the warmth in the room with him.

I spend another ten minutes in the shower, trying vainly to feel as warm as when he holds me. It never quite gets there.

When the water starts to cool off, I twist the knob closed and step out onto the rug. I half-expect Aleks to appear to help me comb my hair or dry off, but the bathroom door stays resolutely closed.

I wipe the fog off the circular mirror above the sink and study the girl staring back at me. I can’t put my finger on any specific part of me, but I look different, somehow.

I’m changing... and it’s not just because of the child growing inside of me.

It’s because of him.

ALEKS

She steps into the room with the towel wrapped tight around her chest. She's dried her hair a little, but the ends are still wet and sticking to her neck and shoulders.

Her eyes flit to the bed where I've laid out some clothes for her. She frowns. "Those are my jeans."

"And your sweatshirt," I point out. "You left a bunch of things at the compound. I didn't think you'd want to live in your sister's clothes forever."

She seems mildly surprised that I would even think of something like that. To be honest, I'm surprised myself. It's out of character.

She walks forward and examines the clothes. "These are my *favorite* jeans."

"I noticed."

One corner of her mouth goes up in a reluctant half-smile. "Thank you."

I walk over to the duffel bag in the corner and carry it back to the bed. "Here you go. I packed a bit of everything so you could take it to the hotel with you."

"Oh. Thanks."

She opens the duffel bag and pulls out the rest of what she needs to get dressed. A pair of black panties trimmed in lace and the simple bra to match. She starts to unfold her towel, but then hesitates and looks up at me.

“I’ve already seen everything there is to see, Olivia,” I remind her gently.

It’s true enough.

And yet I still can’t take my eyes away from her.

Her cheeks blush as she lets the towel fall around her feet. She doesn’t look at me while she slips on her panties and clasps the bra around her breasts.

I look away so I can maintain some semblance of control. Through the window, the clouds are gone and the sky is a soft blue like it’s just been scrubbed clean.

I hear the zipper of Olivia’s jeans and look back at her. Her forehead is creased as she looks around the room. “Do you by any chance have my phone? I had it on me in the jeep.”

“I put your bag over there,” I say, pointing to her sling bag sitting on the chair in front of the antique desk.

She walks over and rummages through it. “You still haven’t told me where we are.”

“It’s one of my safehouses,” I explain. “I have properties all over the city. Some are in use and others aren’t. This one is currently inactive.”

“Oh. I see. It’s nice.” She finds her phone and pulls it out. But when she glances down at the screen, her eyes go wide. “*God-fucking-shit-dammit.*”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got, like, a hundred missed calls from Mia and Rob.”

“Heaven forbid.”

She throws me a dirty look and holds the phone up to her ear. “Hello, Mia? Yeah... Is Rob with you? He called me a bunch of times, too. No... everything’s fine. I just... I needed to get out for a bit.”

Her expression is harrowed. I can tell she doesn’t like lying to her siblings. “Just a drive. I wanted to... to... shop,” she says, glancing towards the duffel stuffed with clothes.

She hasn't noticed what else is waiting for her in there.

"Jesus Christ, no, I don't need security, Mia. Don't be ridiculous... No, I do understand all that. I just... I was feeling a little claustrophobic, that's all. I'm fine, I already told you. I just got caught in the downpour and decided to wait it out in a restaurant in town."

Her lies are getting better, smoother and more seamless. I wonder if she sees how my world is clawing her into its depths, little by little.

"I'll be back soon, okay? Don't panic... That really won't be necessary. I'll get a cab back. You guys are overreacting... I'm hanging up now."

She drops the phone onto the bed with a sigh and slumps down right next to it.

"Fun chat?"

She glowers in my direction. "They panicked when they couldn't find me."

"That's new," I say sarcastically.

"It's my fault," she retorts. "I should have left a note or something. I just... I didn't mean to be gone for so long. What time is it, by the way?"

"Almost four."

"Fuck me," she breathes. "I've been gone most of the day."

"We drove for a long time."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't realize I was supposed to. You don't have to check with your siblings before you leave the house, you do know?"

"No, of course not. But they're on edge."

"Worried I'm going to get my villainous hands on you?" I chuckle.

"Worried you're going to fuck with my head is more like it."

"Don't they trust you to be your own woman?"

Olivia laughs bitterly. "I'm the baby sister. They think they know better."

I stroke my chin and lean against the doorframe. "And do you agree?"

"Maybe I used to." She bites at her lower lip. "Not anymore."

"Then you need to show them that. Stand up. Make yourself heard."

"I'm not very good at that."

I shrug. "I disagree. You do fine with me. I'd say it has more to do with you constantly underestimating yourself."

"What a joke," she mutters. "As if you don't underestimate me all the time."

"I used to," I admit. "Not anymore."

She blinks in surprise. I can tell she's touched, though she's trying to hide it. She pushes off the bed and clears her throat. "I should get back, though."

"As you wish."

She frowns. "Will you take me, please?"

"I suppose so," I say. "Should I walk you in? Say hello to the family?"

Olivia flashes me a middle finger. "Don't be an ass."

Smiling to myself, I grab the duffel and follow her out of the room. The rain is long gone, but the gutter over the staircase down from the porch is leaking, casting a curtain of water across the steps.

"Stay here."

"Why?"

"I'll get you an umbrella."

"It's a trickle of water, Aleks. I won't melt. I'm not the Wicked Witch of the West."

I don't bother answering. Just duck back inside and retrieve an umbrella from the closet by the door.

"I think you're taking this a little too far," she tells me as I open it up and

usher her down the steps beneath it. “I mean, I’m pregnant, not helpless.”

“Just get in the damn car.”

I don’t miss the smile on her face when I help her into her seat and buckle her in.

She’s quiet for a while as I start up the car and head back towards Hargrove’s hotel. “Mia’s going to be a nightmare,” she mumbles when the skyscraper emerges in the distance.

“So ignore her.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s my sister,” Olivia scoffs, as if that’s a self-evident explanation.

“I fail to see the relevance.”

“Of course you do.” She narrows her eyes at me. “What would you know about family, Aleks?”

I clench my teeth. “You don’t know the first thing about my family.”

“No? I know that your father lives in your compound, but you never once mentioned him to me. I thought he was dead until boom, whaddayaknow, he’s *right fucking there*. I know that you barely spend time with him despite the fact that he spends his days trapped in his room, being cared for by strangers.”

“What did you expect?” I ask. “That I would stop my life to take care of him?”

“I figured you would show some concern for him, at the very least. Act like a goddamn human being.”

“Because that’s what you would do?”

She nods. “I would, yes. That’s what you do for family.”

“We have very different ideas of what makes a family,” I drawl.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“But there’s another difference, too,” I say. “I don’t use my family as an excuse. I don’t apologize for living the life I want. I don’t let their opinions interfere with mine. I don’t live for their approval. So why should you?”

“Because I love them,” she says. “I love them, Aleks. But of course you can’t understand that. You don’t love anyone or anything.”

I don’t say a word back to that. I don’t feel any need to defend myself to her. Which is one of the ways we are different. But I can feel her eyes on the side of my face, waiting for me to fight fire with fire.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” she snaps finally.

“What do you want me to say?”

“Are you even capable of love?”

“Love is a liability I don’t need in my life,” I say gruffly.

Her jaw drops. She fumbles for her words for a second as a thunderstorm of emotions passes over her face.

“What about this baby?” she asks. “You’re telling me that you can’t love your own child?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You just said—”

“It’s different,” I snap. “It’s instinctual. Biological. I won’t have a choice but to love my child.”

I watch as her eyes go wide with realization. “I get it,” she says softly. “What you’re saying is that you can’t love *me*.”

I spare her a glance as I make a left turn. We’re only minutes away from The Imperial now, and I don’t have the words to articulate to her how she’s managed to get under my skin.

“Don’t park right in front of the building,” she says in a small voice. “I don’t want anyone seeing us together.”

I don’t argue. It’s stopped raining, anyway. Nothing to shield her from anymore.

I stop about a block from the massive building and get out of the car. I grab the duffel and, while Olivia is getting down, I double check to make sure the items I planted inside it are still there.

Then I zip the bag shut and carry it to her. “Careful. It’s heavy.”

“I can manage,” she retorts. “It’s not a long walk.”

“If you say so. Give me your phone.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to put my number on it. If there’s anything you need—”

“That’s unnecessary.”

“Don’t be a child, Olivia,” I sigh. “Just give me your phone.”

She grumbles, but hands it over.

I save my number and hand it back to her. “I’ve saved the contact under *Mile High Club*.”

“Very funny,” she says dryly.

“I meant what I said, Olivia,” I tell her fiercely. “If there’s anything at all you need, you call me.”

She nods. And then, without looking me in the eye, she makes off towards the hotel.

I watch her walk away from me.

But goddamn... everything about it feels wrong.

OLIVIA

As I push open the door to my suite, I expect to be bombarded with questions and accusations from every member of my family.

But the room is empty.

Maybe they're finally learning I can take care of myself, I think. Of course, about three milliseconds after that thought crosses my mind, the doorbell rings.

I quickly tuck the duffel Aleks gave me out of sight. Before I can answer, I hear a click and the door opens.

"I was just coming," I complain as Rob and Mia come striding into the room. "You didn't need to break in."

"Sorry," Rob says, not sounding all that apologetic. "We were anxious to see you."

But I notice that Mia doesn't offer any apology. In fact, she doesn't seem very sorry in the least. She fixes me with a contemplative stare.

"Where have you been?"

"I already told you, I wanted some fresh air."

"There's fresh air right here in this building," she says. "I don't understand why you're acting as though we're stuck in some prison. It's a five-star hotel, not Azkaban."

“Have you ever thought that it just might be?” I ask, matching her tone fire for fire.

“Alright, let’s all just calm down,” Rob says quickly, putting himself between the two of us.

His face is taut with anxiety. He’s not used to being in the middle. Usually, Mia and I are on one side, teasing him about something or the other.

But this time, the atmosphere is not light or jokey. It’s prickly with tension, heated close to boiling with all the things we’re desperately trying not to say to one another.

“Calm down?” Mia rounds on Rob. “She’s the one who is acting like a child!”

“Me?” I say incredulously. “All I did was go out for a walk! Was I supposed to have you sign a permission slip?”

“You’re acting like you want to get away from us.”

“Not you,” I clarify. “I wanted to get away from this damn building!”

“What’s wrong with it?” Mia demands.

“It’s not home!” I snap. “That’s what.”

“Stop it,” Rob barks. “Both of you. Mia, she’s not a child. She’s been through a lot and you need to be sensitive to that.”

“Thank you, R—”

But before I can get my thanks out, he interrupts, “And Liv, considering everything we’ve been through lately, you should understand why we might be anxious when you suddenly disappear. Tonight was important to Mia. And you blew it off.”

That’s when it hits me. “Wait, are you talking about dinner? With Hargrove?”

My sister’s eyes flash when she turns to me. “Donnie,” she hisses. “How many times do I have to tell you his name is Donnie?”

“I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal. Why on earth is this dinner so important to you?”

“Because we were going to make an announcement tonight,” she says.

“We?” I ask, looking between her and Rob. “Who’s we?”

Rob looks away from me immediately. I have a bad feeling snaking up my spine. It makes me feel foolish for ever leaving Aleks. The last six or seven hours might not have been perfect, but at least I felt a level of comfort with him that I no longer feel with my own siblings.

I’m too nervous to talk to Mia, so I look my brother in the eye. “What’s going on?”

Mia jumps between us anyway. “I’m engaged!” she cries, throwing her hands up in frustration. “There! Are you happy now?”

I stare at her in shock. “You... you’re engaged?”

“That’s right.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t even realize you were dating someone.”

“It’s new. Very new, in fact. But it’s right for me, Liv,” she says. Her voice softens, wavers. “I’m happy about this. And I’ve been waiting to share this news with my little sister.”

Instantly, I feel horrible. Guilt churns in my stomach. “Oh Mia, I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I guess I was just waiting for the right time. You’ve been through a lot, and I was trying to be sensitive to that. I didn’t want to suffocate you with my news like I didn’t care about you and what you’ve been through. I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t worried about you.”

I reach forward and grab her hands. “How could you even think that?” I ask. “You’re my big sister. And if you’re happy, that’s all I care about. I wish you’d told me sooner.”

“Well, I’m telling you now.”

I nod, a smile falling across my face. “Do I get to meet him soon?”

“Actually, you’ve already met him.”

I frown, trying to run down a list of the people I’ve met since arriving here. The only people I’ve really met are the hotel staff, a few security guards who do their best to blend into the wallpaper, and...

I stop short, staring at Mia. “Wait—you don’t mean... not Hargrove, Mia.”

“Donnie,” she corrects. “And yes, that’s exactly who I mean.”

The smile melts off my face. I drop Mia’s hands as though they’re on fire. Disappointment and hurt pool in her eyes, but I can’t find the energy to hide how I feel.

“Mia...”

“You have got to be kidding me, Liv,” she says icily. “Can’t you even pretend to be happy for me?”

“I... I just...” I swallow down the panic that’s creeping up my throat. “I’m processing.”

“What’s to process?” she asks. “I met a man, and we fell in love.”

The little pieces of this puzzle are starting to fit together. Why else would this man offer up three hotel suites to a family he owes nothing to? Why else would Mia be his staunchest defender?

I got it all wrong. After Mom made that comment about Hargrove being handsome, I assumed that maybe there was something brewing there. That maybe my mother was starting to move on after Dad.

But Mia? That hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“He’s... he’s so much older than you, Mimi. He’s Mom’s age. Dad’s age.”

She shrugs. “Age is just a number. And anyway, I tried dating men my own age. It never worked out. Donnie and I have a real connection. It transcends silly stuff like that.”

I glance towards Rob, but his expression remains stubbornly passive.

“Yeah but... I mean, you just met the man, right? Isn't it a little soon to be engaged?”

“Two seconds ago, you were happy for me. Now, you think I'm rushing into things?”

“I just...” I struggle to put my reservations into words. But I know instinctively that no matter how diplomatic I am, it's going to come out wrong. “I can't see the two of you together.”

“Have you even tried?” she asks. “For God-knows-what reason, you haven't liked him since the moment you stepped foot on this property.”

“That's not true. I just don't know the man.”

“Why do you have to know him?” she demands. “I'm telling you he's a good man. So is Rob. So is Mom, for that matter. But you seem to be convinced that he's not.”

“I never—”

“I can't help but think that it has something to do with *him*.” She spits the accusation like acid. She doesn't have to clarify who *him* is, either. We all know. Rob, Mia, me, the birds outside the window.

But Aleks Makarova's name has become a filthy word in this family.

I cringe immediately, hoping that reaction doesn't give me away. What can I say? I'm at a complete and total loss for words. Trapped between my family and the hardest place I've ever been in my life.

“Where were you today, Liv?” Mia whispers. “Where were you *really*?”

I narrow my eyes at her. “I already told you.”

“I think you're lying.”

“Mia,” Rob says cautiously, “let's not do this.”

“Why wouldn't she tell us before she went out, huh?” Mia asks, turning on Rob. “Why is she being so secretive about everything?”

“Maybe it’s because the only thing I’ve got since coming back here is judgment!” I explode. “I don’t know how I spent twenty-five years not noticing the fact that no one in this family trusts that I know my own mind!”

Mia’s pitch rises to match mine. “It’s difficult to trust you when you clearly have feelings for that... that... *predator!*”

“He says he didn’t do any of the things you’re accusing him of!”

“Of course he’d say that, Olivia! Come on, you can’t really be that naïve.”

“Why can’t you just trust me?”

“Because you’ve clearly been blinded by your feelings for him. Stockholm Syndrome is real,” she says.

“You’re one to talk.”

It’s her turn to squint suspiciously. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

I feel insane, like an Eighties movie detective pointing at a wall of thumbtacked evidence about the trail of a serial killer no one else believes in.

How can she not see? How can none of them see?

“From where I’m standing,” I say, “our situations are not all that different. You’re living here in Hargrove’s hotel, under his constant surveillance.”

“Because of what *your* freaking husband did to us!”

She stops short and so do I. The way she throws out the word “husband” feels strangely confrontational. It draws a line in the sand.

Her and my family on one side, with Donald Hargrove grinning viciously at their backs.

And me on the other side, with only Aleks Makarova to keep me safe.

“Both of you need to take a breath,” Rob interjects. “Makarova is not Olivia’s husband. She’s a victim.”

Mia takes a deep breath. “I know, I’m... Shit, I’m sorry, Liv. I shouldn’t have said that. This situation... It’s unprecedented for all of us. Difficult for all of

us. We can't let it tear us apart."

That much I can agree with.

I nod slowly, but I can't seem to get the shouting match out of my head. The anger is still churning inside me, trying to find an outlet.

"I know you think he is innocent," she continues. "But we have proof that he's not, Olivia."

She glances towards Rob and he comes forward to join her. The two of them united against me. They've practiced this, I think. Rehearsed what they'd say, how'd they'd say it.

The realization makes me nauseous.

"She's telling the truth, Liv," my brother says. "I know the story he's fed you: that Donnie is the one trying to frame him. But it's the other way around. Makarova is the one trying to frame him."

I shake my head and open my mouth to argue, but Mia refuses to let me speak. "Look, munchkin, I understand what a difficult position you're in. He was obviously charming to you while you were caged in with him. And you're carrying his child."

She's holding my hand tightly now. I can't help but cling to it, hoping—or maybe "wondering" is the better word—if there's enough history between us to survive this fight.

"It must be hard for you," she continues, "to reconcile what he's being accused of with the knowledge that you're pregnant with his baby."

I nod. That much is true, too.

"Look at me, Livvy," she pleads.

I drag my eyes up to meet hers. She gives me a reassuring smile.

"We've got your back. Remember what Dad used to tell us all the time?"

"*Look out for each other. No matter what,*" I mumble.

She nods. “Exactly. Rob and I are here for you. Even though it might not seem that way sometimes, it’s true.”

This doesn’t solve all of our problems, but the words warm me nonetheless. She pulls me into a hug, and even though I want this—she’s my sister, after all, my own blood, my best friend since birth—there’s part of me that still shies away from her touch.

“Now, come on,” she says when we separate. “Let’s go for a drive.”

“A drive?” I glance at Rob, but he’s already turned away from me, towards the door.

“Yes,” she says. “The three of us.”

“Where are we going?” I ask.

But Mia is so focused on Rob she doesn’t even seem to hear my question. “Rob, call for the valet to bring your car around to the entrance, will you?”

He nods and disappears, but as he goes, something about the clouds in his eyes makes my insides quiver a little.

I push down the feeling. This is Rob and Mia. They have always protected me. I have to believe that that’s what they’re doing now.

And if there’s a way to salvage our relationship, I owe it to all of us to take it. To myself, to them, to Mom, to Dad.

So when Mia leaves my suite, I follow her out.

We head downstairs. The valet is waiting for us with Rob’s car. The same beat-to-hell, copper-colored Camry he’s had all these years.

Climbing in feels like getting into a time machine. Mia and I take up our usual positions—her in the passenger seat, me in the back. But it’s the smell that’s the real trigger for me. The leather seats are worn, but they smell the exact same.

It reminds me of Rob, back when he still knew how to laugh.

It reminds me of our father, of days where all of this would’ve seemed like a strange, incomprehensible dream.

“Are you ever going to get rid of this car, Rob?” I ask, even though I already know the answer. In a way, I just want to be reassured.

“Never,” he says. “I’ll keep this old girl alive as long as I can. And once she conks on me, I’m gonna put her in the shed and visit her at night.”

He grins wildly, the way he used to, and if I look at that smile and let it warm me and let the smell of his car fill me, then I can pretend this is okay.

That everything is going to be okay.

I twirl my phone in my hand and bop along to a song I don’t know on the radio. For the first time in far too long, life feels like something approaching normal.

It’s only when Rob pulls into the lot of Cedar Crest Memorial Hospital that I jerk upright, my body tightening with tension.

“Why are we at the hospital?” I ask in alarm.

Mia turns around in her seat and gives me a practiced, comforting smile. “It’s time we get you checked out, Liv. The pregnancy... I’m not sure it’s helping things.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“It’s clouding your judgment, splitting your loyalties. I think, once you don’t have that distraction anymore, you’ll understand why Makarova needs to be put away for good.”

My eyes go wide as panic paralyzes me. I feel a fluttering in my stomach. It’s too early to feel actual movement, but in that moment, I swear I feel the child inside me, fighting to stay alive.

“You... you want me to...” I can’t even say the words.

“You trust us, don’t you?” Mia asks. “We love you, munchkin. We want to help you. This baby... it’s only going to tie you to him. And once he’s exposed, you’ll understand it for the burden it is.”

“Rob,” I breathe, turning to my brother. “Rob, please—”

“It’s still early days, Liv,” he says, though he refuses to meet my eyes. “It’s better to do this sooner than later. But don’t worry—we’ll be with you every step of the way. We’re your family.”

ALEKS

“They want us to agree to an equal split,” Demyan mutters.

I roll my eyes. “The Greeks are high if they think they’re getting that.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“Drop the meeting,” I tell him. “No explanation, no rescheduling, just drop it. They’ll get the message.”

“They’ll be expecting negotiations.”

“Except you don’t negotiate with a king,” I growl. “You take what he gives you and then you thank him for not chopping your balls off instead. These fuckwits are small-time and they were lucky they had a good idea. But if they think I’m going fifty-fifty on a deal like this, they don’t know the Bratva all that well.”

“Sixty-forty?”

I think for a second. “Tell them that we were going to offer seventy-thirty. But after this irritating little display of insolence, they’re lucky I’m giving eighty-twenty.”

“They are super-duper not gonna like that, chief.”

“They can either learn to like it or disappear from my city. Their choice.”

Demyan nods. “Got it, boss.” He knows how I get when I’m in these kinds of moods. No mercy for anyone. “Your phone is ringing.”

I glance towards my cell vibrating on the edge of the table and pick it up without checking the caller ID.

“Yeah?”

“Aleks?”

I go stiff immediately, urgency flooding through my body as I register Olivia’s tone. Desperate and terrified. An edge of panic.

“What’s wrong?” I ask calmly, though my fist is tight on my desk.

Demyan was on his way out, but he turns around and lingers in the doorway.

“I need your help,” she whispers.

She wouldn’t call unless it was truly urgent. Too much pride, too damn stubborn. My chest clenches in anticipation of who the fuck knows what’s going to happen next.

“Talk to me.”

“I’m at Cedar Crest Memorial,” she says, her tone shaking. “I’m alone right now, but Rob and Mia are right outside. Mom’s here, too, and—”

“Olivia,” I interrupt, “I don’t care who else is there. Why the fuck are *you* there?”

“I think... I think they want me to get...”

“Get what?”

“An abortion,” she breathes. She says the word like it’s the nastiest thing ever put to language.

Fury flows through my like fire, lapping at my limbs like tinder, consuming me instantly. All I can do is growl in silent rage. Words are beyond me right now. I just want to burn up in it.

She suppresses a sob. “Th-they’re not listening to me. They think that getting r-rid of the baby will help me. They think I’m... They’re worried about my... Fuck. Can you come get me?”

“I’ll be there in ten.”

I hang up without saying goodbye and start for the door.

“What the hell is going on?” Demyan asks urgently. He falls in step beside me.

“Those motherfuckers,” I snarl, trying to keep a lid on my anger. I need to stay focused so that I can get to Olivia on time, even though all I want to do is break everything I can get my hands on. “They’ve got her at Cedar Crest Memorial.”

“The hospital?”

“The hospital for which Donald fucking Hargrove is a benefactor,” I spit. “They’re trying to force an abortion on her.”

Demyan grinds to a stop, and that’s when I realize that I maybe forgot to tell him a few things. “Did you just say what I think you said?”

“She’s pregnant,” I tell him. “We don’t have much time. We need to put a team together.”

Demyan is stunned, but he knows when I mean business. He just absorbs the news and carries on. “How big?”

“Four crews. At least forty strong. I’m not taking any chances.”

Demyan nods and follows me out.

We separate at the main foyer. I use my cell to coordinate with some of my men while Demyan rallies the others out back.

Within two minutes, half a dozen jeeps roar up the driveway, packed to the gills. The rest of them join me in the foyer alongside Demyan.

“Get into the jeeps,” I order Demyan and his crew as they come stomping up from the guardhouses. “We’re heading out now. The protocol is to surround and contain. Wait for my instructions.”

“*Da, Don Makarova!*” every single Bratva man choruses in unison. Their voices boom like thunder.

Demyan jumps into the passenger seat while I get behind the wheel of the lead car. I lead the caravan down the driveway and out through the black steel gates.

He turns to me as we hurtle toward the highway. “How did you forget to mention that she was pregnant?”

“I only found out once she was already on Hargrove’s property.”

“And you chose to leave her there?” he asks.

“I knew she would pick me in the end.”

“How?”

I shrug. “Call it intuition.”

I fly down streets and blow through stop signs. I don’t give a fuck about anything except getting to Olivia. I dare any cop in this city to try pulling me over now. I’ll do whatever it takes to get to my woman.

My woman. The thought is so natural, so instinctive that I barely register it. I’m not even sure when the switch flipped.

Was it the moment I knew she was carrying my child? Before then?

“Do you have a strategy in mind?” Demyan asks.

“Wing it.”

He grins. “My favorite kind of strategy.”

I park just outside the hospital on double lines that suggest I shouldn’t park there at all. As with everything else in this world, they can go to hell.

I leap out of the jeep, then charge into the hospital through a back entrance. Demyan follows behind me a few moments later with a contingent of Bratva men fanned out at all sides.

He jogs to catch up to me. I wipe my expression clean of tension and then step up to the help desk. A few casual questions later, I have the floor that Olivia is being held on.

I walk away and gesture for Demyan. “Get the men to the eighth floor. There’s an adjoining room next to Olivia’s. It’s currently empty. I’m going to slip in there while the men spread out. Tell them to be ready if this thing blows up.”

“You’re going to open fire in a hospital?” Demyan asks.

“I’m going to do whatever I need to do to get my wife and my child out of here alive.”

Demyan nods and falls back.

I make my way up to the eighth floor. The signs mark this as the private wing of the hospital. Donald Hargrove’s name beams on every plaque and placard.

It doesn’t take much to deduce that Olivia is in Room 814. It’s one of only two rooms with a closed door, and the only one with people buzzing in and out.

I slip into the next room over, #813, just as a tall, dour-faced doctor walks out of Olivia’s.

This unit is connected to Olivia’s with a door in between. I press my ear to it and, when I hear nothing on the other side, I push it open gently.

The bed is visible through the narrow crack. Olivia is sitting up in it, wearing a gray hospital gown and a haunted expression.

Her face is pale and her eyes are wide. She keeps looking around the room as though she’s waiting for someone to run in and save her.

As though she’s waiting for *me* to run in and save her.

I fight back the desire to throw the door open and mow down any person who dares to get in my way. It will be better to wait. To watch.

Someone steps into view. I recognize Olivia’s mother from that day at her house all those months ago.

“Sweetheart, don’t worry,” her mom says, smoothing her hair back. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Olivia was right—her family is pushing her towards this. Even her own mother. If they show a united front, if they show that they’re all on the same page, they think they can manipulate Olivia into believing they know what’s best for her.

But I can see the newfound determination in her eyes.

Olivia is not going to just let them extinguish our child.

More importantly, neither am I.

“How will I ever be okay if you make me do this? Mom, this is an abortion. You don’t even believe in them.”

“I do in cases of rape, honey.”

“I did not get raped!” Olivia practically screams.

“You were with him so long. It’s natural that you grew... sympathetic. It doesn’t change the sin of what he did to you.”

“Not you, too,” Olivia whimpers. “Mom, I’m not a child and I’m not so naïve that I can be brainwashed. I don’t want to do this.”

“Your brother and sister think—”

“Fuck them,” she says, shoving back the white sheets thrown over her legs. “Fuck them both.”

“Olivia!”

“I mean it, Mom. If they make me do this, I will never forgive them. And I’ll never forgive you, either.”

I can’t see her mother’s face, but I notice the way her shoulders sag. Defeat. It’s written all over the woman.

“Honey—”

“Olivia.” The sister’s voice slices through the air. She strides into the room, all confidence and control.

I can see her face in profile from my vantage point. Her expression is grim, determined. “The doctor will have the room ready in a few minutes,” she says. “They’ll apply anesthesia and—”

“Mia, look at me,” Olivia interjects. This time, her voice doesn’t shake. “What are you doing to me?”

“I’m trying to protect you, honey,” she says. “You can’t have this baby. You cannot have his child.”

“I don’t believe he’s guilty.”

“That’s just the lie you’re telling yourself because you don’t want to believe he did it,” Mia scoffs. Her tone is convincing. Of course it is—she believes every filthy lie she’s spewing. “Donnie is going to blow this case wide open. It’s bad enough that you’re legally married to that monster, but at least a marriage can be covered up. We won’t be able to hide a baby. And trust me, love, you don’t want the publicity.”

“Fuck you,” Olivia hisses, and I feel pride surging up inside me. “Fuck you for thinking you know better than I do.”

Mia flinches but stiffens and smooths her face back out into iron. “In this case, I do.”

“Where’s Rob?”

“He’s out in the hallway talking to Donnie.”

“You brought Donnie?!”

“He’s a benefactor to this hospital, Liv. He cleared out the entire floor so that you would have privacy while—”

“While my own family ruins my life.”

“We’re trying to save you, Olivia,” Mia repeats with mounting frustration. “I just never suspected you were in so deep with him.”

“I want this baby.”

“You only think you do,” she says. It’s so patronizing that I have to stop myself from growling in anger on Olivia’s behalf. “I know it doesn’t seem like it now, but I’m trying to protect you, Liv. I love you too much to let you ruin your life.”

I’m on the verge of intervening when the mother speaks again.

“Mia...”

Both of them turn towards the woman.

“She’s saying she can’t do this.”

“Mom, c’mon,” Mia sighs impatiently. “Rob and I explained why this is necessary. You know the consequences, both political and otherwise—”

“I know everything perfectly well, dear,” she says with a nod before her eyes flit to Olivia’s. “But look at her. She’s in her right mind. She knows what she’s saying and what she wants. She doesn’t want this. I don’t think we should make her.”

“Then you’re not thinking straight, either.”

Olivia laughs bitterly. “Anyone who doesn’t see things your way is not thinking straight? Listen to yourself, Mia!”

Mia ignores Olivia and focuses her attention on her mother. “Your grandchild’s father is a rapist and a pedophile. Is that what you want for this baby? For your daughter?”

“I don’t—”

“He’s not a rapist and he’s not a fucking pedophile!” Olivia cries. Her volume surprises me.

And I’m not the only one who notices.

The main door to the room swings open again and Rob and Hargrove walk in.

“What’s going on?” Rob asks in alarm.

“Mom doesn’t think this is a good idea anymore,” Mia says, turning towards her brother.

Olivia turns to her brother. “Rob, don’t make me do this.”

“Darling,” Donald croons, “I know you’re scared...”

His voice is tender, sympathetic. But it turns my fury into concrete. If I could kill him with my bare hands right now, I would relish every fucking moment.

He glides towards her bedside. If he tries to touch her, I’m not going to be able to rein myself in. His hand flits towards her, but she flinches back just before he makes contact and he tucks it smoothly into his pocket instead.

“But you must trust me, Olivia. I have overwhelming evidence against Makarova. Evidence that will put him away for a long time.”

“He’s not the kind of man you can catch,” she snarls.

I smile despite everything. *My woman. My lioness. My queen.*

“Even if he runs, he won’t ever be allowed back in the country. I’ll see to that.”

“If you think you can run him out of here, you’re even more delusional than you think I am,” she says. “I refuse to go along with any of this.”

“You’ll thank us for this later, Olivia,” he says in that same too-kind, too-tender voice. But the intent is clear—this is non-negotiable.

“Donald, please,” Olivia’s mom says, stepping forward and taking her daughter’s hand. “She doesn’t want to do this. In good conscience, I can’t support it, either.”

“I’m done with this shit,” Olivia says abruptly, swinging her legs off the bed. “I’m out of here.”

But before she’s walked more than two steps, Hargrove inserts himself between her and the door. “Please don’t do this, Olivia. We’re just trying to help you.”

“Let. Me. Pass,” Olivia growls, staring up at him with violence in her eyes as though she isn’t half his size.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.”

I've had about enough of this shit. I shove the door open and stride through it, revealing my presence. I don't even bother to draw a weapon.

But the moment he sees me, Rob has his gun pointed right at my head.

I see a flash of panic in Hargrove's eyes before he manages to replace it with his signature calm. "Guards!" he calls through the door.

Two bodyguards bolt clumsily into the space with their weapons drawn, too. Hargrove seems significantly more relaxed now.

"Mr. Makarova," he greets cordially. "I don't believe you were invited here today."

Everyone's expressions are masks of horror and panic.

All except Olivia's.

She's looking at me like I'm the fucking Second Coming.

"Actually, that's not true," Olivia says. Her eyes never leave mine as she crosses the room to stand directly next to me. "I invited him."

OLIVIA

Mia's mouth drops open as she turns to me. "What have you done?"

"Me?" I balk, looking at my big sister with new eyes. "You did this, Mia. You refused to listen. You didn't give me a choice."

"So you called *him*?"

"He's the only one who listens to me."

"Honey," Mom says, looking at me with tears in her eyes. "Oh, honey... I'm so sorry. I should... I never should've gone along with this to begin with."

Mia frowns at Mom, but she doesn't say anything. Instead, she looks at Hargrove, waiting for his instruction.

When did my sister become this person? The kind of woman who looks to a man to tell her what to do, how to feel?

But then, when I look at her face, I realize: *she's thinking the same thing about me.*

"Why can't we just talk?" I rasp. "Openly and honestly? Why did you have to trick me?"

"Are you trying to tell me that you were being transparent this whole time, Olivia?" Mia scoffs nastily, her own sense of betrayal shining through. "You were in contact with him the entire time and you lied about it. To our faces!"

“Because you would have judged me for it. Like you’re doing now!”

“Why do you think that is?” she erupts. “He came into our home and beat up Rob. He duct-taped me and our sixty-three-year-old mother! He fucking *abducted* you, Olivia! And you’re standing there next to him as though he’s your savior and we’re the enemy.”

“You tried to abort my child!” I scream right back. “How can you claim to have the moral high ground?”

“He’s a monster!” Mia says, her voice shaking furiously.

Aleks holds up his hands. “I’m not the one who’s armed right now.”

I have to admit, in the face of so many weapons pointed at his face, he seems inordinately relaxed. It’s a little unnerving to see just how unaffected he is by the tension circulating in the room.

Then, amazingly, Rob lowers his gun.

“Rob!” Mia says in alarm. “What are you doing?”

He ignores her. “Donald, tell your men to put down their guns.”

“Pardon?” Hargrove says. For a moment, his mask of calm slips and I see something behind his eyes. I don’t know what I’d call it—fear, anger, some alien combination of the two—but it’s gone as soon as it appeared. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Robbie. He’s got a gun on his hip.”

“I’m aware, but he hasn’t reached for it once.”

“Robert—”

“Tell your men to drop their weapons. My sister is standing there next to him,” he growls, through gritted teeth. “What do you think happens if anyone opens fire?”

I can tell Hargrove doesn’t want to listen. His eyes darken, but he jerks his head towards his guards.

They hesitate for a moment longer. Then they drop their weapons back to their sides.

“As you wish, my friend. But they’re not leaving,” Hargrove sighs.

Aleks just smirks. “Wouldn’t be as much fun without the threat of gunfire.”

“Look at who you’re choosing, Olivia,” Mia hisses, pulling my focus back to her. “Violence is second nature to him. He’s a beast who talks with his fists.”

I shake my head at her. “I’m not choosing him, Mia. I’m choosing my child. And you’re the one who forced my hand. All of you.”

Mom is the only one who has the grace to look ashamed of herself.

“If you choose him, you’ll regret it, Olivia,” Mia says, advancing toward me.

Aleks curls himself around me as though Mia is the threat in the room. Everyone notices.

Mia shakes her head at him. “Oh, you’re gonna play the hero now, huh, tough guy? You’re gonna pretend to be her knight in shining armor?”

“I don’t need armor to handle an old man and his deluded sidekicks,” Aleks replies.

Hargrove’s expression doesn’t change, but I notice the scowl for a millisecond before it vanishes. That same flash of skin-crawling inhumanity. “You can sling insults at me all you like, Makarova. It doesn’t change what you’ve done.”

“Excellent point. What have I done, Hargrove?” Aleks ask casually. “Tell me. You have so much evidence piled up. Why don’t you lay it all out for the whole room to hear?”

It’s a challenge. Rob looks curious to see it play out. His eyes bounce from Hargrove to Aleks and back again.

But I know it will take more than one conversation to convince my family of the truth.

“I could give you the names of the girls whose lives you destroyed,” Hargrove says. “But you wouldn’t remember them anyway.”

“Yet another thing you’ve gotten all wrong, you sick fuck,” Aleks says. “I never forget a face.”

“Perhaps, but let’s face it: you don’t exactly consider these women to be human beings, do you?” he ponders. “You don’t see them as worthy of respect or kindness. You just use them to exorcize all your depraved lusts.”

Hargrove’s disdain is convincing. If he really did do all the things that he’s accusing Aleks of, would he be so brutally honest about them? Would he be so blunt? Is it possible that a psychopath knows how psychotic he is?

“And you know all this because...?”

“My goddaughter—”

“Ah the goddaughter,” Aleks interrupts. “Tell me, Hargrove: what’s her name?”

He scoffs. “As if I’m going to tell you. So you can track her down and kill her for outing you? I’m not as dumb as you seem to think I am, my friend.”

“Just leave my sister out of your schemes, Makarova,” Rob cuts in. “This has always been between you and me.”

Aleks turns to Rob. “And here I thought it was all about Jennifer for you. Olivia did tell you about Jennifer, didn’t she?”

“Her name is Isabella,” he growls. “And just because my sister believed your story doesn’t mean I will.”

“Rob,” I protest, “I talked to her, and—”

My brother holds up a hand to silence me. “No! I know her. I know Isabella.”

“You knew the version of herself she portrayed. She was never real, Rob,” I whisper, trying to soften my tone so that it’ll hurt less, if such a thing is even possible. “She was a make-believe character. She was always going to leave.”

“I don’t believe you,” Rob says. “Either of you.”

“Is it any wonder you drove her to me?” Aleks snaps. “You treat your own sister like some brainless child who can’t tell wrong from right.”

“She’s always been gullible,” Mia interjects. “We know that because we’ve known her longer than you have. She is our baby fucking sister.”

My jaw clenches with fresh hurt. “But I didn’t grow up with you, did I? I grew up alone. The two of you were off, busy being teenagers. The person who really knew me was Dad. And he’d be ashamed of the way the two of you are trying to lock me in a cage.”

“A *cage*?” Mia blurts, gaping at me. “We’re trying to protect you, Liv!”

“I can protect myself, thanks.”

“Stop, please!” Mom cries out. Her eyes are filled with sadness, but she’s not focused on either Aleks or Hargrove. She’s looking between Mia, Rob, and me.

I wonder if she can see the fissures between us growing deeper and wider. Becoming uncrossable. She must. It’s the only explanation I can think of for why her skin is pale and her fingers are starting to tremble.

But I charge ahead anyway. There’s no turning back now.

“I know I’m the youngest. I know I’m the baby of the family. But I’m not a kid anymore. I’m an adult, and I know my own mind. I can form my own opinions, and I know what I want.”

“Oh yeah? Since when?” Mia scowls coldly.

“Since I got some distance from this family,” I say. “Since I stopped hearing your voices and started hearing my own.”

“Oh, for the love of God...” she mutters with a vicious roll of her eyes.

Everything she says and does right now feels like a knife to the back. But I’m not willing to compromise anymore. I’m not willing to back down. After Dad passed, she became the voice in my head.

And it has finally hit me...

I’m fucking sick of it.

“Please, girls,” Mom says, “don’t fight. Remember what your dad always said? Look out for one another—”

“That’s what I’m *trying* to do!” Mia erupts. “Except that your idiot daughter went and fell in love with the man who snatched her out of our home!”

The room goes deathly silent. I can hear my own heartbeat thundering furiously against my chest. I feel so fragile right now that I think I might splinter off into a million different pieces and float away in the sunlight streaming in through the half-drawn blinds.

Aleks is tense beside me. I'm not sure if that's a good sign or not. I'm too scared to look at his face. Terrified of what I'll see there.

Contempt?

Disinterest?

Irritation?

"This has gone far enough," Hargrove says at last. "It's time to end this." He turns his gaze to me. "Your family loves you, Olivia. They only want you to be safe. I can keep you safe. I can keep you *all* safe."

He tries to move closer, but Aleks grabs my arm and hauls me back behind him. "You take one more step towards her and I will end your miserable fucking life."

Everything ruptures into chaos at once. Mia is screaming, Rob is roaring, Aleks is snarling, Hargrove and his men are bristling, as the scent of impending violence builds and builds and I wonder if we're hurtling unstoppably towards some kind of horrifying ending...

And then, amongst it all, I see my mother.

I'm the only one looking at her. The only one who notices the way her face has gone pale and ashen.

"Mom?" My voice is small. It gets lost in the shuffle.

But Mom hears me.

Her eyes meet mine and immediately, I know I was right: something bad is coming.

But not in the way I thought it was.

Her left side stiffens like it's been turned to stone. Her face slumps, her shoulder slumps, her leg seizes up hard.

The shouting of the others rises to such a din that their voices ring in my ears, indecipherable from one another, just a churning mélange of rage that can't ever be bottled up again.

“Mom!” I cry, darting out of Aleks's grasp and running for her.

She crumples to the floor, but I manage to get to her just in time to keep her from hitting her head.

Rob is the next to realize something is wrong. When he does, he sprints to her other side. Together, we help ease her down onto the cold tile floor.

Her eyes flutter, but they never leave mine.

“Mom,” I breathe, shaking her. “Mom, Mom, listen to me—”

She tries to raise her hand, but it's too heavy. So I lift it for her and place it against my cheek like she was trying to do.

In the background, I hear someone call for a doctor. But just like I knew something was wrong, I know the doctor won't get here in time.

I know it will be too late.

Her mouth opens and she forms words. I bend my head down to try and catch them.

“Sorry...”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “You have nothing to feel sorry about. Mom, just stay with me. Please.”

She gives me a half smile. “Your... father...”

“Not yet,” I tell her. “It's too early for you to meet him.”

“Remember what he...”

She gasps a little, as though the pain is too much to wade through. Then her hand goes limp and I let it fall from my cheek.

Her eyes remain open.

But my mother is gone.

ALEKS

Olivia looks up at me as her siblings crowd around her mother's body.

The look in her eyes is unlike anything I've ever seen. The kind of grief that runs so deep you can't possibly let it out for fear it will destroy you.

Her siblings stay beside their mother's body, but she rises slowly and walks towards me.

Her decision is made.

I take her hand and we walk out of the room together.

I know Hargrove will follow. So when he screams after us, I'm prepared.

"Wait!" he bellows. His men rally around him with their weapons drawn. A bristling forest of guns aimed at my face.

I push Olivia behind me. I'll take every last fucking bullet they have before I let him so much as lay a finger on her.

"Do you really think I'm just going to let you walk out of here with her?" Hargrove snarls.

I glance towards the hospital room he had Olivia confined to. Her family is still inside, clustered around their dead mother like all this isn't their goddamn fault.

“It’s just us now, Hargrove,” I say. “You can drop the pretense. There’s no need to act like the Good Samaritan the people think you are.”

“You’re the one who’s pretending. Olivia, darling,” he says, changing his tactic, “come back over here. I can protect you from him.”

She doesn’t respond. She just stays behind me, doing her best not to fall apart.

“You can’t manipulate her like you did the others, Hargrove.”

“Why is that?” he snaps. “Because you got to her first?”

“Because she’s smarter and stronger than you by a mile.”

“How touching,” he spits.

“You’re going to let us leave this hospital,” I tell him calmly. “And in return, I’ll spare your life. For today.”

He glowers at me. “Do you really imagine you’re in any position to be making an offer like that?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” I ask. “I’m the one with the upper hand.”

“Is that a fact?” he laughs condescendingly. “What, are you planning on throwing her in front of you like a human shield?”

“No,” I reply. “I’m planning on this.”

I make a subtle cue with my fingers and immediately, my men appear from behind doors, hallways, and elevator shafts. They converge around Olivia and me, a wall of Bratva soldiers so thick that there’s no chance Hargrove can delude himself into thinking he has any chance of reaching us.

His eyes go wide when he realizes how badly he’s underestimated the situation.

“If you want to fight, we can fight,” I tell him. “But I’m not sure that’s very respectful to the woman in there who just died. Your future mother-in-law, I believe.”

I feel Olivia flinch behind me.

He narrows his eyes in anger. “You bastard.”

I chuckle. “I’ve been called worse. You know, this little meeting has been illuminating. But the next time we meet, I doubt I’ll have much interest in conversation.”

“Careful, Makarova,” he fumes. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

“Actually, you’ve got that backwards. If you’d done your research, you never would have tried to frame me in the first place. Men have died for less.”

I turn my back on him and take Olivia by the hand. I lead her towards the elevator while my men cover our backs.

Demyan is waiting for us in a car idling in front of the hospital. I help Olivia into the back seat and then climb in after her.

She stares unseeingly out the window. Her hands are limp, pale spiders in her lap. Demyan twists in his seat and frowns.

“Is she alright?” he mouths at me.

“I’ll explain later,” I murmur to him in Russian. “For now, we’re going home.”

Olivia looks over at me for a moment. Her eyes spark with the faintest flash of light before it’s snuffed out again. A shooting star in an endless night sky.

The drive is silent, but by the time we reach the compound, Olivia is showing more signs of life. She gets out of the car on her own and walks into the house without needing to be led there.

She doesn’t even wait for me before she starts climbing the stairs, clearly heading for her bedroom. I watch her go and wait for Demyan to join me in the foyer.

“Is it true what the boys told me?” Demyan asks. “Her mother...?”

I nod grimly. “It looked like a heart attack. Brought on by... the situation.”

“Fuck.”

I glance towards the staircase. But Olivia has already disappeared.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” Demyan asks.

“Fuck if I know,” I admit. “They were close.”

“What went down in that hospital room?”

“Her family fucked her over,” I growl, trying and failing to keep my anger in check. “At least the mother had the grace to realize her mistake before she passed.”

“She still chose to come with you, though. That’s gotta be a good sign, right?”

“They didn’t give her much of a choice,” I say. “Picking me was the same as picking her child.”

Demyan nods, but a tentative smile spreads across his face. “I never congratulated you properly. You’re going to be a dad. How are you feeling about it?”

“Neutral.”

That’s mostly a lie, but not entirely. With everything else going on, I haven’t been able to really think it all through. To play out what it really means to have a baby. An heir.

“Well, jeez, you don’t have to ramble on and on about it,” he jokes. “Save some emotion for the lady of the house.”

I slug him in the arm, and he stumbles away, cackling to himself. “For real, though, congrats again.”

I ignore him and head up the stairs. At the threshold of her room, though, I pause, knuckles hovering over the door.

I want to go to her. I want to see my wife, the mother of my child.

But I have no idea what to say.

Footsteps draw my attention. I glance down the hall and see Jennifer walking towards me. “What the hell are you doing here?” I ask.

“I heard something was brewing,” she explains. “I came to see what was going on.”

I frown. “What did you hear?”

“Well, I was casing one of Hargrove’s hangouts. He was in the middle of one of his meetings, but he ended it to take a call.”

“Do you know who called him?”

She gets very quiet for a moment. “Well...”

“Jennifer.”

“Rob,” she grits, as though it takes monumental effort to say his name at all. “Rob called him. I heard Hargrove mention a hospital and your name. Then he got the hell out of there. I figured I’d come here and get the lowdown from you.”

She’s trying to make it sound casual, but Jennifer doesn’t drop by for just anything. She doesn’t want me to see how worried she is.

No matter what she says, she cares about this family. They’ve managed to wheedle their way past her barriers.

“We just came from the hospital,” I inform her.

“We?”

“Olivia and I.”

Her eyes widen. “She’s back here?”

“She’s back here,” I confirm.

“Not sure that will be a check in the ‘Innocent’ column for you,” Jennifer remarks, pursing her lips up.

I shake my head. “She chose to come this time.”

Jennifer’s eyes bulge. “Damn. Something big must have gone down for her to have picked you over them.”

“Is it really so crazy to believe?”

She smiles. “You’re a very handsome man. Charming, sexy, rich, the works,” she acknowledges. “But I know Liv. And I know her family. It’s ride-or-die with them.”

“People change.”

“Not these people,” she says firmly. “Rob has always been fiercely protective of his sisters.”

“Apparently, that doesn’t extend to his sister’s children.”

She stops short. “Excuse me? What are you talking about?”

“You might as well know,” I grimace. “Olivia is pregnant.”

“With a baby?”

“No, with a crocodile,” I snap irritably.

“And you’re the father?”

“Christ, you’re slow today.”

“Jesus, Aleks!” She slaps my arm. “Congratulations. I mean, I should congratulate you, right?”

“Not many people have. Her family was at the hospital trying to force her to abort.”

Jennifer looks immediately horrified. “Are you serious? Rob wouldn’t do that... would he?”

I roll my eyes. “He’s not the saint you think he is, Jennifer. He and that bitch sister of his dragged Olivia into Hargrove’s hospital so that they could force her into an abortion she didn’t want.”

“Jesus.” She shudders.

“They nearly succeeded, too. But Olivia had the forethought to call me for help.”

“Of course,” she breathes. “Of course she’d choose you after that. They practically pushed her into your arms.”

“I’d like to think I had something to do with her choice. But they certainly sped up the process,” I admit. “She and I left together. Hargrove had no choice but to let us go. I had him surrounded.”

“And everyone was fine?”

“Rob wasn’t hurt, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She breathes a sigh of relief that she tries to hide behind an unconvincing cough.

“But, Jennifer?” I add.

She looks up at me, brows drawn together.

“The story isn’t over yet.”

She frowns. “Oh God. Do I want to hear this?”

“You might as well hear it from me,” I say. “Things got a little tense once I showed up. Mia and Olivia really got into it. And Hargrove wasn’t really helping things either. It was all too much for Bethany.”

Jennifer’s jaw drops. “Don’t say it. Don’t you dare—”

“She didn’t make it. Heart attack. Took her quick.”

For once, Jennifer’s veneer of indifference cracks, and I see beneath it. To the raw, beating heart of her that’s taken lash after lash, no matter how hard she’s tried to protect it.

I see suffering.

I see torment.

She buries her face in her hands for a moment. But when she pulls them away, her eyes are dry and her persona is back in place.

“He must be an absolute wreck,” she whispers.

“They all are,” I say. “Olivia is the only one who’s guilt-free.”

Her eyes snap to mine. “You know, Rob is only doing what he thinks is right, Aleks,” she says. “He doesn’t deserve this any more than Olivia does.”

“If you care so damn much about Robert Lawrence, how about you grow a fucking pair and face him?”

It’s not exactly a fair suggestion to make at the moment. But I’m pissed. Certainly not in the mood to be lectured about the virtues of that asshole. Olivia’s brother or not, he started this whole thing by refusing to let the case go. The blood is on his hands.

“I’m still undercover,” she says weakly.

“Somehow, I doubt he’d care.”

“And he’s working with Hargrove now,” she says. “He won’t care what I have to say.”

“He thinks you’ve been taken hostage and brainwashed. Maybe you can convince him otherwise. Convince him to change sides.”

She snorts derisively. “He’s stubborn.”

“You two have that in common.”

She falls into silence for a moment, still trying to process this barrage of news. “Bethany was a good woman,” she says softly. “The kind of woman who welcomes everyone into her home. We used to just sit and talk for hours. Good woman. She was a good, good woman.”

“You made things worse for yourself by caring, Jen.”

“I know that.” She drags her eyes up to mine. “But you know what? I still wouldn’t take any of it back.”

I nod. “You can’t stay here long.”

“I know,” she says. “I’ll go back soon. I haven’t forgotten that I have a job to complete. Where is Olivia now?”

I jerk my head to the door across the hall. “In her room.”

“You need to go to her.”

“And do what?”

“Be there for her,” she says emphatically. “She’s going to need you.”

I shake my head. “Have you forgotten who you’re talking to? I’m not that man, Jennifer.”

“What man?” she asks. “A man with compassion? With empathy?”

“Any of it.”

“That’s bullshit,” she replies. “That poor girl needs you. She’s carrying your child and she’s just chosen you over her family. If she doesn’t have you, she has no one. You need to be with her.”

“Do I have to remind you that I’m the one who gives the orders around here?”

“Fine!” she says, throwing her hands up in defeat. “Fine. I tried. I’m heading back.”

“You can’t put it off forever, Jennifer,” I call after her as she descends the staircase. “You’ll have to face him eventually.”

She pauses for a moment halfway down the steps, but she doesn’t turn back around. I watch as her shoulders rise and fall, rippling with unspoken tension.

Then she keeps walking and disappears from sight.

I stand on the landing for another minute. To the left is my office. Work beckons. I need to do my duty as the don of this Bratva.

But to my right is the door to Olivia’s room.

I know which way I’ll choose.

When I open the door and slip through, I see her blinds have been drawn tight. There’s no sunlight coming in. She’s curled up on the bed, a mass of shadows amongst a mountain range of pillows. She rocks back and forth. Each sob sends her twitching.

I sit on the edge of the mattress. Olivia looks up at me, tears running in a continuous stream down her cheeks.

That sight breaks something in me.

I slip off my shoes and slide into the bed next to her. Engulfing her tight in my embrace, we lie there silently for a long few moments. Her sobs intensify, peak, and then glide down until she's just snuffling quietly.

"I feel like I can't breathe," she whispers.

Her cheek is pressed hard against my chest, her eyes searching mine. She's looking at me as though I might have the magic fix to take her pain away.

"Breathe through the pain," I tell her. "Stop trying to erase it. It's not going anyway, Olivia. Not today. Maybe not ever."

Another sob escapes her. "Oh God..."

I hold her as a fresh wave of tears rips through her. My shirt is soaked through with them, not that I give a damn.

"Please stay," she whispers in a panic. "Please don't leave me."

"Don't worry, *kiska*," I tell her. "I'm not going anywhere."

OLIVIA

I thought I experienced guilt when my dad died.

I thought I understood the sharp, piercing relentlessness of the emotion.

But even seven years later, it can still come and slice me open when I least expect it. Every time I think I've cried myself out, new tears come.

Some tears are for Mom. Some are for Dad. Some are for my siblings and myself and the bond that was severed in the last several hours.

Aleks hasn't left my side, not even for a moment.

I know he must have more important places to be. Business and war and schemes to attend to.

But he stays next to me, silent and emotionless as always. Resolute. Unbreakable, at a time when my whole world feels like it's been smashed into a million broken shards.

I feel him watching me. I know he's waiting for the next outburst. I am, too, honestly. But after hours of crying and sobbing and shaking, I finally feel spent.

I'm not better. Not even close.

But I'm too tired to shed another tear.

"You need to eat something," Aleks says.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Olivia.”

It’s amazing how much he manages to convey with just my name and that pointed inflection. *The baby*, he reminds me without saying it. *Think about the baby.*

But the moment I even think about food, I want to throw up.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I just... I feel so... I don’t even know how I feel.”

He nods. “It’s okay. You don’t have to.”

“She was my mother.”

“She doesn’t stop being your mother just because she’s gone,” he says gently.

“Doesn’t she?”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

My eyes snap to his. The fact that he even thinks to say that makes me feel like it must be my fault. He knows the truth and he’s just sparing me from it.

“Yes, it was,” I whisper. “I’m two for two.”

“What?”

“Two for two,” I say again. “I’ve killed both my parents.”

“You can’t cause heart attacks, Olivia.”

“I should have been there with my dad, instead of at a party trying to catch a stupid boy’s attention.”

“You were just a teenager. A kid.”

“A kid who knew better.”

“Nothing could have stopped your father dying that day, Olivia. Not even you. If willpower alone was enough to shift reality, I’d be ruling the world right now.”

“I’m pretty sure you already do.”

He smirks. “Not all of it yet.”

I almost smile. And then I feel doubly guilty for almost smiling. What kind of daughter almost smiles mere hours after her mother’s death?

A death that never would have happened if it hadn't been for—

“Stop that.”

I look away from Aleks, pick nervously at my fingernail. “Stop what?”

“Stop trying to convince yourself that you’re responsible for this.”

“But she wouldn’t have been there at all if it hadn’t been for me.”

“And what about your siblings?” Aleks asks. “What about their part in this? Or are you the family martyr? Are you happy to take the blame while your siblings tell you all the ways in which your opinions don’t count?”

“Don’t go there,” I croak.

“Why?” he demands, refusing to back down. “Because it hurts to hear the truth? Or because you’re still trying to defend them even after what they tried to do to you?”

“They believe *him*.”

“And *you* believe *me*,” he replies. “What of it?”

I shake my head. “They don’t have all the information I do.”

"None of that matters. They shouldn't have forced you to do anything you didn't want to do. They are the reason you were in that hospital at all. They were trying to murder our baby, Olivia. You remember that part?"

I drop my head low.

“It wasn’t a rhetorical question, Olivia. Answer me. Do you remember?”

My voice is a thin, tiny whisper. “I remember.”

“Tell me again,” he says forcefully.

“They wanted me to abort our baby,” I say. A shiver races through me. It’s

taking physical effort to get the words out, to let them sink in.

He nods, satisfied. “Maybe they regret it now. Or maybe they don’t. But at least you can be assured of one thing: your mother regretted it. She knew she was on the wrong side of things and she tried to change it. At least you have that.”

I nod, realizing that Aleks is right.

Mom tried to apologize to me, She looked in my eyes and I saw her guilt staring back at me. She said more to me in those final moments—tried to, at least—but for the life of me, I can’t remember what it was now.

“I don’t know how to go on,” I whisper.

“Surviving is never easy.”

“Not even for you?”

He smiles. “I was built for survival.”

“Then I wish I were more like you.”

“You’re already on your way.”

At that, I feel the weight on my chest alleviate just a little. I place my hand over my stomach.

Maybe he’s right. Maybe this baby and how hard I’ve had to fight for it has already begun to change me.

“I don’t want you to judge them harshly,” I say, knowing even as I say it that I’m going to be met with resistance. “I know what they tried to do. A part of me hates them for it. But a part of me will always love them. They’re my siblings, and they did what they did because they thought it was what was best for me.”

“If only I could be convinced of the same.”

“Can’t you just trust me?”

He stares at me. I know it’s not in his nature to trust. It’s in his nature to hate, to fight, to demand what he feels is rightfully his. He hasn’t yielded a single

day in his whole damn life.

And yet, he does what my siblings couldn't do—he nods.

I wonder if he knows how much that means to me.

“Rob is still heartbroken over losing Isabella,” I continue, wanting to make Aleks understand. “And Mia, well... now that she's engaged to Hargrove—”

“She's what?”

I stop short. Only when I see Aleks's knitted brows do I realize that he didn't know about the latest development.

“I forgot to tell you, they're engaged. She told me right before they took me to the hospital. Mia claims their connection was ‘instant.’”

“That, or he's just covering all his bases.”

I watch Aleks sift through this new information. But somewhere along the way, I stop scrutinizing him and, instead, I admire him. His lips are beautiful, elegantly shaped, sensual. But the rest of him is so masculine. All hard edges and stubble and muscle.

“This changes things,” he says finally. “You realize what this means, don't you?”

I nod. “He's pitting us against each other.”

“I doubt that was his original intention,” Aleks surmises. “He wanted you both on his team. It would have made the story all the more convincing. But the fact that you chose to come with me has thrown a spanner in the works.”

“He can't claim that you abducted or raped me if I've chosen to stay with you.”

“Not just that. We're married. You're carrying my child,” Aleks says. “On the face of it, it will look like he's trying to attack a picture-perfect family.”

Family. For my entire life, that word has meant Mom, Dad, Mia, Rob.

Now, my parents are dead and my siblings are as good as gone.

But I still have a family. I have the family I chose. The family I *made*.

I have Aleks and our baby.

That's good enough for me.

ALEKS

TWO DAYS LATER

“How’s she doing?” Demyan asks.

I glance towards the closed door of Olivia’s room. Despite the fact that I can’t see her, I know exactly what she’s doing. She’s sitting by the window, eerily silent, ignoring the breakfast tray I left for her.

“Quiet,” I tell him.

He nods. He looks uncomfortable in his dark suit and tie, but I’m not about to send my men to a funeral in tactical gear. “Don’t worry about anything, okay? I’m gonna make sure she’s safe.”

“You better,” I say. “Otherwise—”

“Off with my head?”

“Something like that.” I clap him on the shoulder. “I’ll bring her down to meet you in half an hour.”

He nods again and steps down the stairs, fidgeting with his tie the whole time. As soon as he’s gone, a maid rounds the corner with a selection of dresses thrown over her arm.

“Give them to me,” I say. “I’ll take care of it.”

When I walk into her room, Olivia doesn’t so much as glance my way. I drop the dresses down on the bed and walk over to her. She jerks when I touch her shoulder.

“You’ll need to get ready soon. The funeral starts in an hour. I brought you clothes.”

She follows where I’m pointing towards the bed and sees the dresses lying there, preserved like jeweled specimens in clear plastic wrap.

She stares at me for a moment and then rises to her feet. She picks up the dresses one by one, fingers tentative, breath slow.

I watch her from behind. She’s wearing a silk robe with cherry blossom details all over the delicate fabric. It clings to her body, highlighting just how thin she is. You’d never be able to guess she’s carrying a baby inside her.

She pulls at the knot at the front of her robe and it slides off her shoulders.

She’s wearing only white cotton panties underneath. I try not to be distracted as she turns to me. Her breasts stand high, the nipples pointed.

“Will you choose one for me?” she mumbles. “Any one of them will do.”

I decide on the Valentino. It has a modest neckline and a black leather belt cinched at the waist. She’ll look appropriate, but tough.

I strip it out of the plastic covering and offer up the open neckline for Olivia to slip her feet into. When she steps inside, I pull it up her smooth body. I slip the straps over her fragile shoulders and she turns in my arms automatically.

I take a moment to admire the perfect curvature of her spine. The way her skin seems to prickle with heat wherever I touch her.

Then I pull the zipper up and clip the belt in place.

“How do I look?”

I step back and give her a critical survey. “Perfect,” I rasp. “You look perfect.”

She nods and disappears into the walk-in closet. She picks a pair of black pumps with a modest heel and then walks back to me with them dangling from her fingers.

“I guess I’m ready to go,” she says.

“Not yet,” I say. I take the veil from on top of the bedspread and settle it over Olivia’s head. Her eyelashes flutter behind the sheer fabric. “There. Now, you’re ready. Battle armor in place.”

She offers me a sad smile. “I wish you were coming with me.”

“I’m never far, Olivia.”

We saw the notice of the funeral posted in the newspaper the day after the chaos at the hospital. I assigned Demyan and a security detail to escort Olivia there, so she could watch her mother laid to rest at her father’s side. It goes without saying that my presence is unwelcome.

I lead her out of the room and down the stairs. The whole time, she clutches my arm as though she’s afraid she’ll fall or float away or both. When we get to the bottom of the stairs, Demyan is standing by the front door waiting for her.

“Damn, girl,” he says. “You look like a movie star.”

She looks alarmed for a moment. “Is it too much? I want to look like myself.” Her gaze flits to me, worried.

“Do you feel like yourself?” I ask.

She thinks, then nods.

“Then you’re ready. If you need me for anything, call.”

I guide her down the stairs, her fingers clutching my elbow, then put her into the backseat of the tinted Mercedes SUV out front. Demyan comes up to me.

“Take care of her, Dem,” I murmur. It’s a question as much as an order.

“Aye-aye, boss.” His words are joking, but his tone is as somber as it’s ever been. He knows what’s at stake now.

I watch as they drive off. I stand in place, even once the gates have closed on them. Until I feel her materialize behind me.

“Another visit?” I ask without turning around. “Do you miss me that much?”

Jennifer gives me a half-hearted smile. “This time, I have a reason to visit.”

I pivot slowly to look at her. She's wearing dark jeans and a black fitted t-shirt with long sleeves. Her hair is tied back, her makeup minimal.

"I take it you're not going to the funeral."

"I'll pay tribute another way," she says. "With my work."

"You found something?" I ask. My body pings with the thrill of closing in on the kill.

She nods. "I have a name and an address. The girl's father works in a bar downtown. I have to warn you, though—they don't want to talk."

"I can be persuasive."

I flex my hands in anticipation of what is to come. "Gavin!" I call over my shoulder. My guard's head appears from the security booth at the entrance.

"Yes, Don Makarova?"

"Get me a car. Nothing flashy."

"Yes, sir."

Thirty seconds later, a nondescript sedan screeches to a halt in front of me. Gavin hops out and holds open the door for me to climb into the driver's seat. Jennifer walks around to get in on the other side.

She punches the address into the navigator while I drive. "Her name is Lana Peregó," she explains as I rip through the gates and down the road. "Thirteen years old."

"Have you seen her?"

"No," she says. "Her mother slammed the door on my face and told me never to come back."

"Guess your charm is exclusively for men, huh?"

She rolls her eyes and jabs her middle finger at me. I chuckle and we lapse into silence.

We drive like that for a while. Jennifer is sitting back in her seat, elbow resting on the window, but I can tell she's nervous. Her fingers drum against the center console like she's trying to tap out a message in Morse code.

"Are you nervous about this meeting?" I finally ask. "Or about the funeral?"

She stiffens. "I'm never nervous."

"Don't lie to me, Jennifer."

She rolls her eyes again, but an uncharacteristic blush heats her cheeks. "Okay, fine. The latter. Is it completely ridiculous that I feel as though I should be there?"

"Yes."

"Gee, don't sugar coat it for me."

"He was nothing more than a job, Jennifer."

"Olivia was supposed to be a job, too, *Aleks*," she snaps right back at me. "And now what is she? The mother of your child? A pawn in your games? A way to get back at Rob? Your wife? Which is it?"

"It's different."

"How?"

"I never lied to her about who I was."

She looks aghast for a moment. "I was on the job. On *your* job."

"And I gave you the option of getting out. I gave you the chance to turn it into something real. You're the one who chose to go back undercover. You're the one who chose your work over Robert Lawrence."

"If I'd chosen him, I would have had to tell him the truth," she whispers. "And he would never have forgiven me."

"I think you might be underestimating him."

"Careful, or you might accidentally give out a compliment," she drawls. "But it doesn't matter. He's not the type of man who forgives betrayal."

“I suppose now you’ll never know.”

“What would you do in my position?” she asks, somewhat desperately.

“In your position, I would want nothing to do with him in the first place.”

“You can’t really afford that point of view,” she says. “He is your brother-in-law, after all.”

“One of two, it seems.”

“Meaning?”

I turn to gauge her reaction as I say, “Mia is engaged to Hargrove.”

“Jesus! What?” Jennifer exclaims. “Are you serious?”

“Apparently. Olivia found out just before they took her to the hospital.”

“Fuck,” she groans. “She’s going to marry a sadistic sexual predator.”

“If you ask Mia, Olivia already did that.”

Jennifer scowls. “Make a left here.”

I turn the corner and we drive down a quiet suburban street. It’s not the best neighborhood, to put it charitably. A broken swing dangles forlornly from the set by a single rusted chain. The paint on the houses is faded and cracked, windows covered up with decrepit bars.

“The one with the yellow fence,” Jennifer points out.

I park on the curb and step out. As I do, I see a pale face in the corner window. It disappears instantly and the curtain snaps closed.

I grimace. Gavin brought me the simplest car in my garage, and it still sticks out like a sore thumb. We won’t stay under the radar here for much longer.

Jennifer walks up to the front door and knocks hard. Nobody answers.

She gives it a minute and then knocks again. Still nothing.

Another minute, another round of knocking, more silence.

“They’re not going to answer. Time for a different approach.”

I gesture for her to follow me around. I scan the street to make sure we don't have any neighbors' eyes on us and then follow a narrow path to the back garden.

It's a small, claustrophobic space. A clothesline zig-zags through it, burdened with damp laundry. I duck underneath a white sheet and walk up to the back door.

The door is set with a window that looks in on the kitchen. I don't see anyone when I peer inside. It takes me all of twenty seconds to pick the lock.

"I'm not sure breaking in is the right way to gain their trust."

"Your way didn't work," I tell her. "So we're doing things my way now."

We step into the kitchen. I hear movement in the next room. They definitely know we're here.

"Mrs. Perego?" I call. "We just want to talk."

"Get out of my house or I'll call the police!" a woman's voice lashes out.

It's an empty threat. If she was going to call the police, she would have done it already.

"Mrs. Perego," I try again, "we know what happened to your daughter. We just want to help."

Her head pokes through the doorway opposite. Large brown eyes in a heart-shaped face. Timid, fearful. Much too young to be the mother of a teenager.

"Help?" she snaps viciously. "Am I supposed to buy that again?" Her words are slightly accented. The child of immigrants, if I had to guess.

"Yes," I say, with as much calm as I can muster. "Help."

"You don't look like the kind of people who help."

"Not usually," I concede. "So this is your lucky day."

After a moment's hesitation, she comes out from around the corner and steps over the threshold. Her eyes land on Jennifer and narrow into suspicious slits.

“I told you not to come back.”

“I’m stubborn when it’s a good cause, Mrs. Perego,” Jennifer says, standing at my right shoulder. “We just want to help catch the asshole who hurt your daughter.”

Her eyes go wide with pure, animalistic fear. “My husband drinks,” she says at once. “And when he drinks, he makes things up. Whatever he told you—whatever you think he told you—it’s not true.”

“Is Lana here?” I ask.

She flinches. That’s all the answer I need.

“Can we speak to her?”

“She’s shy.”

I take a step forward. Mrs. Perego stiffens. She’s half my size. Can’t be older than thirty, but she’s lived hard enough to be twice that.

“What’s your name?” I ask quietly.

She stares at me for a long moment before deciding to answer. “Salma.”

“Salma,” I murmur. “I know why you’re scared. I know why your daughter is scared. But we’re trying to get the motherfucker that hurt her so that he can’t hurt any more little girls.”

Just then, I notice another little face poke out from around the corner. She has Salma's eyes in a young, thin frame. There’s no denying that she’s a child.

My blood churns hot. *That fucking asshole.*

“Hello, Lana.”

Salma twists around and starts hissing at her daughter in Spanish. “¡Vuelve a tu cuarto! No es seguro aquí—”

“We can protect you,” I interrupt. “He won’t ever hurt you again.”

Salma whips back to fix me with an alarmed look. “We really can’t say anything,” she says vehemently. “If we do and they find out, we’ll lose

everything. We're already in debt. We can't... we can't afford to lose—"

"She said I'd be safe," the girl says, stepping forward against her mother's wishes. Her eyes flit between Jennifer and me.

"Who did?"

"The woman who brought me to him."

I glance towards Jennifer, then back to Lana. "Can you tell us her name?"

Lana shakes her head. "She was... she was nice to me."

"She was nice to you for a reason, Lana," Salma cuts in. Her tone is harsh, but it's only because she's terrified. "She wanted you to trust her. Now, *callaté, mija*."

"We don't work for him, if that's what you're worried about," Jennifer says. "Trust me, Salma. We're trying to stop him."

"Stop him first," she retorts. "Until then, get off my property."

"Please—" Jennifer starts, but I cut her off.

"It's okay. We're done here." I give Salma a nod. "If you ever need anything, you can call this number."

I hand her a little black card with a number on it. She takes it with a frown and stares at it for a moment. "There's no name."

"Just call the number, say your name, and you'll get to me. Only your name. If you say anything else, the line goes dead."

She looks even more terrified now, but she pockets the card and nods. Jennifer and I walk through the house and exit through the front door.

"She's spooked," Jennifer mutters as we go. "Both of them. They're never going to feel safe again, no matter what we do."

I nod in grim agreement. My fists tighten at my sides. "Hargrove will pay for that."

OLIVIA

I stare at my siblings over our mother's coffin.

Mia looked at me once when I arrived, but she turned away so fast I'm surprised her neck didn't snap from whiplash. She hasn't met my eyes again.

To my surprise, I'm grateful for Demyan. He hasn't left my side since we arrived, despite how hard I tried to convince him to stay at the perimeter with the rest of the security detail.

"Do you want my blood on your hands?" he'd asked casually. "No? Then I'm staying with you. That husband of yours is a mean son of a bitch. I'm not about to disobey him."

Husband.

Aleks Makarova is my husband. I'm actually getting used to the idea. I may not have chosen him, but despite everything, I don't regret him.

Not now, anyway.

Aunt Agatha moves towards me, her sharp blue eyes taking me in. "Darling, how are you holding up?"

"As well as can be expected," I say shortly.

"Well, I have to say, you look wonderful in mourning." She gives me a very pointed once-over. "Is that Valentino?"

“Uh... maybe. I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure? That dress must have run you a couple grand, at least. How does a cartoonist afford a dress like that?”

I turn away from her, not even bothering with a polite smile. “You’ll have to excuse me, Aunt Agatha. I just want a moment to myself before they lower her down.”

She flushes. “Of course. Pardon me.”

She scuttles off to the opposite side of the coffin where Mia is standing beside Hargrove. I haven’t seen Rob yet. Every few seconds, I scan the group of mourners, trying to catch a glimpse of him.

“She your aunt?” Demyan asks, sidling a little closer to me.

“Great aunt,” I say. “On my dad’s side.”

“She’s the family gossip, I take it.”

“Among other things.”

Demyan smirks. “She’s been eyeing me this whole time. You cut her off at the knees before she could ask who I am.”

I sigh. “Another reason I wanted you to stay behind.”

“Tell them that I’m your bodyguard.”

“For God’s sake, Demyan, no. This is the real world. Normal people don’t have or need bodyguards.”

He wrinkles his nose. “Sounds boring.”

“How I long for boring days,” I sigh.

My eyes flit to Mia. She looks nice. She’s wearing a new dress, too. Nicer than anything I’ve ever seen her in. A gift from her fiancé, I’m sure.

“Just FYI, I’m telling people you’re my... colleague.”

“Colleague.”

“Yeah. So if anybody asks, you’re a cartoonist, too.”

“Can I tell them I draw naughty cartoons for nudie magazines?”

I glare at him. “Not the time, Dem.”

He swallows down his smile and looks away. I turn away to scan the cemetery once again.

And then I see him.

Rob is walking through the trees towards our group. He’s dressed passably well, but there’s already a five o’clock shadow clustered around his jaw, with the heavy bags under his eyes to match. It’s clear he hasn’t slept since I last saw him.

If he sees me, he shows no sign of it. Instead, he cuts through the crowd and moves straight to Mia, pulling her into a quick hug.

She whispers something in his ear and then moves to Hargrove, who raises his arm for her to slip under. The way he holds her, I can almost believe he really loves her.

But I’m still too angry to even consider the possibility that it might be real.

“You okay?” Demyan asks.

“I’m burying my mother,” I respond. “What do you think?”

“I’ve buried four grandparents, two parents, a brother, three cousins, and about a hundred men who worked for me,” he says grimly. “I know what you’re feeling right now. I get it. But don’t let it master you.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Breathe through the pain.”

I roll my eyes. “Aleks told me the same thing. Do they give you a handbook or something?”

He smiles. “Yeah. On the first day of orientation, right before recess.”

I almost smile, but I bite it back. Mom wouldn't mind if I did; she'd understand the need to find some kind of levity.

But I know Rob, Mia, and Hargrove are watching me.

"You don't need them, you know," Demyan offers suddenly.

"Of course I do," I scoff. "They're my siblings."

"They're just what you're used to. The people whose shadows you've hidden in your whole life."

"Everyone needs family."

"You have family," he says. "The Bratva is your family now."

I turn to him in shock. "A Bratva isn't a family."

He looks bewildered. "Of course it is. I would die for my brothers. And they would die for me. What is that if not family?"

I frown. I'm in no state to argue with a man as stubborn as him right now. At least, I tell myself that's why I don't answer.

But maybe a more honest explanation would be that what he's saying makes an uncomfortable amount of sense.

"I'd die for you, too," he continues. "Just so you know."

I look up at him in alarm, but his face is calm and impassive. It's not a romantic proclamation or even an especially emotive one. It's simply a fact. A statement like any other.

The sky is gray.

It's eleven o'clock.

I'd die for you.

"Why?" I ask finally.

"Because you're part of our family now."

Our conversation is cut short when the pastor steps forward. He starts reading one of Mom's favorite psalms from her old leather bible.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down...”

Somewhere in the middle, the words fade to the background and my attention wanders. I start watching my siblings, both of whom seem to be wrapped up in their own grief.

Rob is looking down at his shoes, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. He looks the way he did in the weeks after Isabella's disappearance.

Hopeless. Desperate. Coming apart at the seams.

We held him together then. It took everything Mia and I had, and I'm still not sure we succeeded.

But now? Who's going to hold him together now?

The support system we built has collapsed. Dad is gone. Mom is gone. Mia and I are... well, I'm not even sure what we are anymore.

It feels like the world I knew has vanished. Like I've come untethered from gravity, unmoored from the surface of the planet.

Nothing I knew is as it was.

Nothing I love will ever be the way I loved it again.

The pastor finishes the recitation and turns towards Mia. She gives him a stoic nod and moves forward to grab a fistful of dirt.

The coffin descends faster than I expected. She throws her handful of dirt on top of it and steps back into place beside Hargrove. Then Rob takes his turn to do the same.

I wait for them to call on me, but neither one says a word.

“Go on,” Demyan tells me. “Don't wait for permission.”

His words spur me forward. The pastor is about to talk when he sees me and stops short. I ignore everyone gawking at me as I grab a fistful of dirt and throw it down onto Mom's coffin.

“Bye, Mom,” I say softly to myself. “I love you. I forgive you. I’m sorry.”

When I turn away from my mother for the last time, I walk back to where I was standing. But I don’t stop there; I keep going. Tears are pressing against the backs of my eyes, and the last thing I want is an audience to watch them fall.

I weave between gravestones until I find a willow tree looming over the cemetery. The foliage hangs down around me like a veil. Like tears frozen in time and space.

But as soon as I step beneath the canopy, my own tears come, and they keep coming. For two or five or ten minutes, I let them.

Part of me expects Mia and Rob to materialize on either side of me, offering comfort and love and apologies. But no one appears.

Until Demyan does.

He’s awkward and quiet for a moment, lingering in the periphery of my vision. Hands in his pockets, eyes downcast. Just sharing the space and breathing with me.

Slowly, the onslaught of tears eases and disappears. Only then does he speak.

“You okay?” he asks.

I sniffle. “That feels like a trick question.”

“Only if you think that saying ‘no’ makes you weak.” He shrugs. “Aleks might say it does. Me? I’m not so sure. There’s room in this world for all kinds of feelings. Not all of them are particularly enjoyable.”

I blink, not quite in confusion, but not totally understanding, either. Demyan shrugs again and opens his mouth to say something else.

But before he can, I hear the rustle of leaves. We both turn to see someone parting the curtain of the tree’s flowers and stepping into the quiet space.

Mia.

Demyan slips away without a word. I take a deep, shuddering breath and turn to face her.

Her makeup is carved with tear tracks, just like mine. She pulls out a handkerchief and dabs at her eyes again. It's classic Mia, fidgeting with this and that so she can avoid dealing with the tough issue at hand.

She tucks the handkerchief back into her black clutch, sighs, and finally, raises her eyes to look at me.

"You look nice," she says.

"Thanks. You—"

"Did Makarova buy that dress for you?"

I stop short, feeling a disappointed heat spread through my body. "Mia, I don't want to fight."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have come."

"She was my mother, too. She *is* my mother," I correct.

"She was my mother first."

"Don't give me that shit," I snap. "I'm trying here. I came alone, didn't I? You brought your fiancé, but I came alone."

"My fiancé is not a rapist."

"Neither is Aleks."

She scoffs. "If he's not a rapist, then he's certainly a murderer. He killed our mother."

I go cold. "That's not fair."

"You're right," Mia says with an angry nod. She's staring daggers through me, so cold and distant that I suddenly can't remember how it ever felt for her to look at me with genuine love in her eyes. "It's not totally accurate. You *helped* him kill our mother. Good thing, too, since you've had the practice with Dad."

The words don't hit all at once. Maybe it's a self-preservation thing. Hearing your own worst fears said out loud is too much for anyone to take. Especially on a day like today.

For now, there's only shock. And the urge to leave.

Right fucking now.

I back shakily away. Mia looks at me the whole time. Until I retreat through the veil of willow flowers and she disappears from sight.

I tried. *I tried*. Isn't that what I wanted to do? Isn't that what Aleks would have done?

But as I meander between the headstones, I wish I hadn't tried at all.

"Olivia?"

Demyan is standing a few yards off, watching me with narrowed eyes. "You okay?"

"No," I say with a shake of my head. "Take me home, please."

There's no denying it anymore. These people are no longer my home. These strangers are no longer my family.

ALEKS

“You called for me?”

I have to admit: even when she looks like she’s expecting an ambush at any moment, my mother is as elegant as they come.

It’s not just the fact that she’s petite with exotic features. She also has sophisticated taste. She’s wearing a red silk blouse and a white skirt so pristine it’s almost blinding.

“You look nice.”

She raises her eyebrows in surprise. “Do I?”

“You already know you do.”

She smiles and her rigid posture relaxes. It reminds me to try harder with her. Our relationship has been strained for a long time. Maybe it’d be more productive if we learned to trust one another.

“You stopped all contact with Hargrove,” I say.

It’s a statement, not a question. I know she has.

“You told me to, didn’t you?”

I nod. “And I know that was hard for you to do. Especially because you didn’t believe he was guilty.”

“I still don’t,” she admits.

I grit my teeth, but choose to ignore that. “I’m going to ask you for another favor now.”

She looks immediately wary. “What is it?”

“I need you to get back in touch with him.”

Shock washes across her face. “What?”

“You heard me,” I say. “Now that we’re fully embroiled in this, it makes sense to have someone on the inside.”

“So you want me to *spy* for you?”

“Yes.”

“Aleksandr.”

“Mother,” I answer in kind. “You wanted to be part of the Bratva, correct? Truly part of it? Well, this is what that means.”

“This is different. He’s my friend.”

“And if it turns out he’s innocent, you can be the one to prove it.”

She frowns, considering that for a moment. “What exactly do you want me to do?”

“Insert yourself back into his life. Ask him leading questions. Try and earn his trust so that he’ll start confiding in you.”

“He’s going to be suspicious of the timing,” she points out. “You are the husband of his soon-to-be sister-in-law.”

“I think he’ll overlook that in order to gain information about me.”

Her eyes widen. “You want me to play double agent?”

“Give him just enough about me to keep him on the hook. But really, I need you to find out more about the evidence he has on these girls he claims I raped.”

“He would never let me near that kind of information,” she says.

“So convince him.” I lean forward. “Look, Mother: I don’t need you to be his lover. I need you to be his friend. His—what did you call it? His *confidante*.”

“And if he doesn’t buy it?” she asks.

“We’ll find another way in.”

“What about your wife? She has a way in.”

I shake my head. “I’m not using her.”

“Oh, I get it,” she scoffs. “She’s not expendable, but I am. Is that right?”

“She’s pregnant,” I tell her.

Her eyes go wide with shock. “She’s... she’s pregnant? You mean I’m going to be a grandmother?”

I smile inwardly. I never imagined Yulia Makarova to be the kind of woman who would look forward to becoming a grandmother.

“That’s usually how that goes, yes.”

She puts her hand over her heart for a moment. “This is wonderful news, Aleksandr. How does Olivia feel about it?”

“She’d feel better if Hargrove was out of the picture.”

She sighs. Her hand falls back to her side. “I’m no spy, my son. And in this case... He’s a good man. He is.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Do you really believe that? Donald Hargrove, *a good man*. We should all be so lucky as to know him.”

“You’re saying it sarcastically, but he is.”

“You can’t be that naïve,” I growl, failing to keep my impatience in check any longer. “Not all monsters look like monsters. Some of them hide behind the guise of honor.”

She doesn’t look swayed. I didn’t really expect her to be. Still, it’s disappointing.

“I won’t force you to do this,” I say at last. “If you can’t—”

“I’ll do it,” she says abruptly.

“You will?”

She takes a deep breath. “My loyalties were never in question, Aleksandr. Donald may be my friend. But you are my son.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I’m touched.”

“I ask for only one thing in return.”

“Which is?”

“I would like us to do better,” she says softly. “With each other, I mean. I want a relationship with you. A real one. I want us to be better than we have been.”

“I can agree to that.”

She smiles and gives me a nod. “Okay then. I’ll do what I can.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

She gets up, the smile still on her face, and walks out the door with a new bounce in her step.

Once she’s gone, I pick up my phone and give Demyan a ring, wondering how things are going with Olivia.

“Yo, brother,” Demyan says.

“How’s she doing?”

“Held it together pretty much until the ceremony was over. Then she didn’t stop crying ‘til we got back here.”

I swallow the nasty feeling that that stirs up in my chest. A thought rips across my head like a comet, apropos of nothing: *No one makes my wife cry.*

“Anything else to report?” I rasp hoarsely.

“Tell ya in a sec.”

He hangs up, and half a beat later, the door swings inward.

“The fucker was there,” Demyan growls as he slumps into the seat across from me and tucks his phone into his pocket. “A wolf in sheep’s clothing if I ever saw one. It was disgusting how everyone at that wake was fawning all over him.”

“They think he’s an upstanding citizen. A pillar of the community,” I say, remembering my own mother’s opinion of him. “He plays the part well.”

“Maybe you should take notes,” he says. I flip him the bird, and he just grins wider. “Your wife, though... she was a fucking triumph.”

“Oh?” I ask, feeling a nebulous sense of pride.

“She was strong and proud. Even when her siblings ignored her, she kept her chin up.”

“They ignored her?” My hands clench into fists.

“Her sister wouldn’t even look at her for most of it,” he says. “The brother was dazed. He barely paid attention to anyone, to be fair. Showed up late, too. Didn’t even shave. Poor fuck.”

“No need to feel sorry for the asshole. He asked for this shit.” I rub away the headache tightening at my temples.

“You look like shit, *sobrat*,” Demyan remarks.

“Thanks. You look the same as you always do.”

“Fountain of youth, baby,” he says, patting himself on the chest.

I lean back in my chair. “I haven’t asked how you are in a while.”

“Yeah, well, you can be amazingly self-involved most of the time.”

I roll my eyes. “I won’t ask twice.”

“I wasn’t aware that you asked once.”

“That was me asking.”

He sighs. The ever-present nonchalance on his face wavers and his shoulders droop. “The move is happening,” he admits quietly. “Miranda isn’t staying

here.”

“You can ask for joint custody.”

“I can, but I’m not gonna.”

I frown. “Why? You love that kid.”

“Exactly, which is why I’m gonna do what’s best for her. She needs her mother. She belongs with Miranda. I’m just gonna have to get down there as often as possible so I can see her.”

“That sucks, but... it sounds like the right decision.”

He raises his brows. “I didn’t expect you to say that.”

“Well, I get it now.”

“Now that you’re gonna be a father?” Demyan asks. “It consumes your entire life. I’d have told you not to touch it, but I suppose it’s too late for that.”

I nod. “It’s not the way I imagined it would happen.”

“But you don’t regret it, do you?”

I don’t even need to think about that. “Not even for a second.”

“Didn’t think so. It’s weird, isn’t it?” Demyan asks. “How you can love someone you’ve never even met.”

“Still doesn’t feel real, to be honest.”

“Wait until her belly pops. It’ll sure as hell be real then.”

I nod. “I’m going to go see how she’s doing,” I say, rising to my feet.

“Of course,” Demyan says with a nod of understanding. “Go take care of your woman.”

OLIVIA

I wander the halls of the compound for far too long before I realize what I'm searching for. Or rather, *who* I'm searching for.

My hand comes down over my belly again. I look down as though I can see someone in there.

"How did this happen, little one?" I whisper. "How did I become so dependent on him?"

I wish there was an answer, but there's only silence. Except, as I pass by the double doors of the wine cellar and deeper into a part of the compound I've never been in before, I hear another voice.

The voice is deep, similar to Aleks's. I barely think before I turn the knob and push the door open.

A man turns around abruptly, looking startled until he realizes who it is. When he sees me, his face smooths out into a pleased smile. "Olivia! It's been a minute."

I smile at Mike. The last time I saw him was next to the lake with Aleks's father. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Not at all," Mike says. "I think Vlad here is a little tired of my company."

Vlad's answer is to push a button that twists his wheelchair to the side, knocking the glass of water on the table to the floor and directly onto Mike's shoes.

Mike blinks at the puddle of water around his feet and then looks at me calmly. “See?”

I smile. “Then I guess I’m just in time.”

“Definitely,” he says. “I’m gonna go change out of these shoes. Would you mind?”

“Not a problem,” I say. “Vlad, would you mind if I hang out with you while Mike takes a break?”

He blinks his eyes, and I know that was precisely what he was hoping for.

“You look great, by the way,” Mike says kindly before he leaves the room, squelching with each step.

“Thanks, Mike. Take your time.”

When he’s gone, I sit down next to Aleks’s father and remove the black veil from my head. “It’s been a day,” I tell him with a deep sigh. “I just buried my mother.”

His eyes never leave my face. For a second, I feel self-conscious talking to him, but it’s clear from the puddle on that floor that Vlad has no trouble making his feelings known. If he wants me to shut up, he’ll tell me.

Until then, I continue. “I’m an orphan now,” I say. “It feels like an outdated word, doesn’t it? Like, very *Oliver Twist* of me. But that’s what I am. An orphan.”

“S... sorry...” he rasps.

“Thank you. It was sudden.” I exhale. “It was a beautiful service, though. But then, Mia has always been good at that sort of thing.”

Vlad doesn’t respond, but talking to someone about this feels better than stewing in silence.

“Mia is my older sister. She and my brother have about a decade on me. They were supposed to be my protectors after our dad passed away. And for a long time, that’s exactly what they were. I know what you’re probably thinking: ‘*You’re a grown woman, Olivia. Why do you need a protector at all?*’ And

the answer is that I don't need them. Not anymore. But... still, it was nice to know they were there for me. That they had my back. I relied on that for so, so long."

I blink back the tears that have been threatening all day. If Vlad notices, he doesn't show any sign. He just watches, somehow convincing me to keep talking with nothing but the open look in his eyes.

"Today, though, neither one of them even looked at me. To be fair, I don't think Rob looked at anyone. But Mia? She just..." I shake my head. "She said something to me today that was just..."

My throat closes. Talking feels nice, but I'm not ready to talk about that part quite yet. I can still barely comprehend it.

"I just never imagined that there would be a day when we would look at each other like... like strangers," I say. "Or even worse: enemies."

Vlad says something, but I can't quite make it out. I lean closer. "I'm sorry?"

He clears his throat and tries again. "Why?" he rasps.

"Why?" I repeat. "Why are we enemies now?"

He tilts his head forward. It barely moves, but I understand it as a nod. "Well, I guess the short version is because of your son. I chose him. Or, I chose my baby, I guess," I say, putting my hand over my abdomen. "But they're one and the same, I think."

When I look up, he's staring at me with wide eyes. *Oh, shit.*

"Oh. You didn't know about the baby, huh?" I stammer. "I'm sorry. I just assumed that Aleks would have told you. Then again, now that I think about it, he's not really the sharing type, is he?" I wince. "Sorry. I'm such an idiot. I should have thought. I just..."

When I realize I'm rambling incoherently, I force myself to stop so that I can take a breath. "Well, I'm pregnant," I say with a self-conscious smile. "You're going to be a grandfather."

He doesn't really react to that, but I figure he's still processing the news.

“I don’t actually know if Yulia knows either,” I say, thinking out loud. “I haven’t seen her since I came back here. It hasn’t been that long, but still, she was always around before... Sorry, I’m rambling again. I have a tendency to do that when I’m nervous.”

I sit in silence for a moment, waiting for him to bark out some pearl of wisdom that will magically make me feel better.

But this isn’t a fairy tale and he isn’t some wise old wizard ready to point me down the right path towards my destination. This is the real world, and in this one, he just sits there and stares at me. He doesn’t make a sound.

“Have you ever lost someone you loved?”

A discernible shake of the head.

“Wow,” I breathe. “How do you get to your age and not experience a loss?”

“Loss, yes... Love, no...”

I raise my eyebrows. “I don’t believe that.”

“It’s... true.”

I smile. “So Aleks takes after you then?”

He can’t really smile, but his eyes twinkle.

I pat the back of his hand fondly. “My siblings are convinced that Aleks did something he didn’t. And they think he brainwashed me into taking his side of things. They think I’ve chosen Aleks over them, but I’m the one who spent months here. I know him better than they do. And besides, it’s hypocritical—they picked sides, too. They chose Hargrove over me.”

I cover my face with my hands and try to rein in my feelings. But nothing really helps right now except for getting these thoughts out of my hand and into the universe. So I keep talking.

“They wanted me to abort the baby,” I tell Vlad in a quiet voice. The word still hurts to say.

I feel a pang of minor guilt. I don’t really know if I can or should trust him with this information, but I’ve come too far to turn back now.

“They actually tricked me into the car to drive me to the hospital. That made it a hell of a lot easier to choose Aleks, I’ll tell you that much.”

I twist my fingers together, trying to figure out what else I want to get out in the open. The catharsis is working, because somehow, despite the day I’ve had, I feel better than I did an hour ago.

“Maybe this is naïve,” I say, trying to push through my fear, “but right now, I have to believe this is temporary. This rift between Mia and Rob and me, it has to be temporary. They’ll find out the truth and then they’ll understand why I stood my ground. And everything will go back to the way it was. Because I can’t imagine...”

My voice breaks and I look up at Vlad, remembering that I’m actually talking to another human being right now.

This feels a little like an open confessional, though. Maybe it’s appropriate, considering I buried my mother today. She was always a fan of confessionals. Although I have no idea what she ever had to confess to in the first place.

“I wonder if choosing Aleks now means sacrificing my family for good.” I force out the words. They taste as bitter as the rest. “What if that’s the choice I made? Losing them forever?”

He stares at me, his deep eyes taking in my every expression, my every movement, and giving up nothing in return.

“I think I’m in love with your son,” I say, before I really even have a chance to decide whether I should say it or not. I lean in. “Just in case it’s not clear, that’s classified information. I guess I just wanted to say it out loud to see how it sounded. Does that make sense?”

He doesn’t even blink this time. Guess I’m not making much sense to him after all. I take a deep breath.

“But I’m terrified of what that will mean for me. For my future and for my child’s future. This life doesn’t exactly allow a lot of space for women, does it? And you know what I realized through this whole thing?” I ask. “I realized that I’ve let other people’s opinions matter to me more than my own. I’ve been bullied my whole life and didn’t even recognize it. You know why? Because I loved the people who were bullying me. And I’m worried it will

happen again... with Aleks.”

I let that sit for a moment. It’s a churning kind of silence, the sort that seems like there’s all kinds of things simmering just below the surface.

Then I snort with laughter. “You know, it’s funny... he’s never actually said he wants to be with me. I’m in his home again because I’m carrying his baby, but let’s face it—if I wasn’t, would he even want me here?”

A single tear breaks free and races down my cheek. It falls onto the back of Vlad’s hand with a quiet plop. He looks down at it, then back to me.

We sit there for a long time, but I’m all talked out. There’s nothing else left for me to say.

Then the door opens. I assume that Mike has come back in, but then a looming shadow falls over both of us. I bolt upright.

“Aleks.”

I catch sight of his cruelly sharp jaw and I feel that trickle of nervous energy fill me up inside, same as it always does. He’s so damn beautiful. It’s not fair.

It feels like my thoughts should be exclusively devoted to my mother. Instead, I’m ogling my husband and the way his stubble lightly dusts his jaw. The way his lips are so full, his hair so thick, his shoulders so broad.

“*S’ toboy vse v’ poryadke?*” he asks as he leans towards his father.

The old man says something in his son’s ear that I don’t quite catch. Aleks nods and pulls back. “He needs to rest,” he informs me.

“Oh, right. I probably tired him out with all the talking I just did.”

Aleks doesn’t comment on that. He just bends down and lifts his father into his arms. Then he carries him over to the large couch in the center of the room and sets him down on it.

“Will that be comfortable for him?” I ask.

“He likes this room,” Aleks says. “He likes taking his nap here.”

I watch how Aleks handles his father. I'm not sure the man is capable of true tenderness, but he is gentle with him, slow and careful and courteous.

Once Vlad is settled on the sofa, his head propped up on the pillows so that there's no danger of choking, Aleks turns to me.

"Come with me."

"Should we leave him here alone?"

"Mike will be here soon."

We're just leaving when Mike rounds the corner in fresh sneakers. He gives Aleks a respectful nod that goes ignored and then slips silently back into the room.

Aleks starts striding down the hall, but suddenly, he veers right into another room I've never been in.

"This house is huge," I mutter as I follow Aleks.

"All the better to hide my secrets."

I decide it's best not to follow that up with a response.

We step through the door. I see French doors, a balcony, a lake in the distance. I walk over to the railing and gaze down at the lawn below. A team of people is tending to the garden, but the noise of their work barely reaches us up here.

Aleks comes to stand beside me. I wonder what he's spent the last few hours doing. I wonder if he'd even tell me if I asked point blank.

"Is it hard?" I ask. "Seeing him that way?"

"I've gotten used to it. But in the beginning, yes, it was hard."

"What was he like when he was... before?" I ask, stumbling over my words.

"He was a bully," Aleks says bluntly.

I raise my eyebrows. "To you?"

"To everyone. But then again, being the don of a Bratva, you have to be."

“Does that mean you’re a bully?”

“What do you think?”

I look back at the lake. “Seems like I’ve been surrounded by bullies my entire life.”

“You know the only language bullies understand or respect?”

“Thousand bucks says you’re gonna say, ‘Strength.’”

He nods. “Precisely.”

“What makes you think I have any of that?” I say bitterly.

“You survived the funeral, didn’t you?”

I feel my sense of calm start to vaporize. “Did I?” I ask. “There are moments when I feel like I did and there are moments, like right now, when I feel like I’m barely holding on.”

“Death is inevitable, Olivia. It just comes sooner for some than for others.”

I glance at him, trying to imagine an end to the man standing before me. “So you’re not actually invincible?”

He smirks and then looks out over the water. “When my father had the stroke, they called me in Russia. They told me to come back home. I said no.”

“Why?”

“I had business to finish and leaving wasn’t an option. I had to keep going.”

“Is that the lesson you’re trying to impart to me?” I ask. “That I have to keep going?”

He turns to regard me. “What other choice do you have?”

I sigh, putting my hand on my belly. “None at all.”

ALEKS

She places her hand on her stomach as though she can sense the child inside her.

I wonder just how real it feels to her. If she can imagine what the future holds.

Because I sure as hell can't.

“What are you thinking?”

“Nothing important,” I demure. “How was the ceremony?”

“Beautiful. Mom got a great turnout. She would have been thrilled.”

“Let me guess: she was the kind of woman who had her entire funeral planned out?”

She smiles. “They both did. They had their wills written up in their early forties, ‘just in case.’ They rewrote it a couple of times, but nothing much changed.” Then she takes a deep breath and the smile falls off her face. “My brother and sister probably want to sell the house.”

“Who gets to decide that?”

“Mom and Dad wanted all three of us to have it. So we either sell and split the profit three ways, or figure out who's gonna buy out who.”

“What do you want to do?”

She shrugs. "I'll let Mia and Rob decide."

"Because that's easier than talking to them?"

She scrunches her eyebrows together. "I just... Things are hard enough as it is. If I go in there and ask for something different, it will get complicated."

"You want the house you grew up in. You don't want it sold to strangers. What's complicated about that?"

"I guess I don't want to cause trouble."

"You know, if you make it easy for people to bully you, they will," I tell her.

She looks at me thoughtfully. "I guess you have a point."

"If you want something, fight for it."

"Fighting is not my forte."

"Then practice," I say. "Why should you lie down and let them take the reins?"

"I'm just too tired to fight. And honestly, I don't really want to see Mia just yet."

I catch a note in her voice. "What happened?"

She shudders at the memory. "She said something awful to me today. Several somethings, actually. I know she was just trying to hurt me, but that doesn't make me feel better."

"She blamed you for your mother's death, didn't she?"

Olivia's eyes go wide, confirming it. "How did you know?"

"I pay attention," I say. "Your sister is blaming you because it's easier than blaming herself."

"I doubt she feels guilty."

"Oh, she does," I say confidently. "Your sister is being eaten alive by grief, and she has a sick bastard whispering filthy lies in her ear. Rationality isn't possible for her."

“Well, whatever he’s saying, she believes it. And maybe...”

“Maybe what?” I growl. “Don’t tell me you’re believing them, too.”

“I’m just saying, maybe there’s a third option here.” She worries at the rings on her fingers, eyes flitting everywhere except for at mine.

“Which is?”

“Maybe he really is innocent.”

I start to snarl, “Olivia—”

But she interrupts. “Listen to me, please, Aleks. I’m just saying, maybe there’s someone else out there. Someone trying to get you two to go at each other’s throats. You’ve said yourself you have a lot of enemies. It could be one of them. That’s all I’m suggesting.”

I shake my head. “Not a fucking chance.”

Her jaw tightens. “Why are you so sure I’m wrong?”

“Because I know you are. You don’t think Jennifer and I have done our digging?”

She frowns. “Jennifer is still on this case?”

“Of course. She never stopped.”

“So she knows more about this than I do?”

I nod. “She has earned that right.”

It comes out harsher than I intended. Hurt ripples across Olivia’s face and she takes a step back from me. “And I haven’t? I turned my back on my family for you, in case you forgot.”

“For me?” I ask. “Or did you choose me because I was your best bet?”

“I’m carrying your baby. You tell me.”

“I think I’ve made myself very clear already.”

“Yeah,” she spits, “you’ve made it clear that you think I’m a brainless idiot just like everyone else does. You’re questioning my judgment. Just like Rob, just like Mia, just like Hargrove.”

“This doesn’t concern you.”

“If it doesn’t concern me,” she retorts, “then how the hell does it concern Jennifer?”

“She’s good at what she does.”

“Right, exactly.” Olivia nods emphatically. “She’s a good actor. You are, too, aren’t you, Aleks? That’s what you’re doing right now: acting. That’s what you’ve done since the very moment you tracked me down.”

“There’s no reason to work yourself up. Think about the baby.”

She puts her hands on my chest and shoves hard. It doesn’t do anything, but I imagine it makes her feel good.

“*You’re* the one who told me not to make it so easy for other people to bully me,” she reminds me. “And I won’t do it anymore. Not even with you.”

I sigh. “I’m not trying to bully you.”

“Aren’t you?” she presses. “Because all I hear is you telling me to calm down, sit down, and shut up whenever I ask questions you don’t like.”

“You’re too emotional to be given information, Olivia.”

Her eyes flash. “Excuse me?”

I don’t back down, though perhaps I should. “You’re a wild card. Today, you’re upset with your siblings. But what happens tomorrow, when you reconcile with them? Are you going to tell them everything I’ve told you?”

“You really believe I would do that?”

“I wouldn’t put it past Hargrove or your siblings to try talking you into it.”

A sob bursts from her lips. “Do you really think I can be manipulated that easily? Why will no one give me a single fucking ounce of credit?”

“Listen to me,” I growl, reaching forward to grab her. She tries to slap my hand away, but I persist until I have her pressed against my body. “It’s not about being manipulated, Olivia. But you *want* to believe that everyone you love is innocent. That there’s a way forward, where all of us end up one big, happy family. That’s the good in you speaking.”

She struggles, baring her teeth at me. I just wrap my arm more firmly around her waist.

“But it is not going to happen, Olivia. It’s always going to be us versus them. It cannot be any other way.”

“Not everything is a war, Aleks.”

“That’s what worries me,” I tell her sadly. “The fact that you believe that. Maybe in your world, it’s different. But in this world, *my* world, it all ends in bloodshed, one way or another.”

“If I’m such a liability, maybe you should have married someone else!” She’s all fire right now. Fire and passion. “You tell Jennifer everything. Maybe you should have married her.”

“No,” I snarl right back in her face. “There was only ever you.”

She leans back and attempts to slap me, but I snatch her hand out of the air and pin her against the balcony railing.

Then I press my lips against hers.

She gasps against me, and seconds later, she starts to give in to the kiss despite herself. Her lips part for me.

And fuck, she tastes good.

I grab the hem of her Valentino dress, pulling up the silky fabric that doesn’t even come close to the smoothness of her skin.

I want to bury myself in her until she’s screaming my name in pleasure instead of anger. Wouldn’t that be a great fucking change?

I slide my lips over her skin, down her neck. She grabs handfuls of my shirt. Her chest is heaving against mine.

“No,” she blurts suddenly. “Stop.”

She doesn't sound remotely convincing. But a beat later, she pushes me off her. I step back immediately. Because, despite what her *duratskiy* siblings think, I have never nor will I ever force myself on a woman.

Even if the woman in question wants me so bad she can barely breathe.

“This is just more of you manipulating me,” she accuses through labored inhales.

Her lips are swollen and her eyes are dilated. She wants this, but she doesn't trust me.

Not completely. Not enough.

I shake my head. “Why are you so afraid of this?”

“Because I can't lose myself again,” she says, trembling against the balcony railing. “If I wasn't willing to do it for my siblings, then I'm certainly not going to do it for a man. Even a man like you.”

“I think *you're* the one you don't trust, Olivia,” I say in a low voice. “You don't trust yourself around me. Because I show you what you could be if you just stopped locking the best of you inside.”

She skirts around me, giving me a wide berth as she goes for the French doors. “I'm going to my room now. It's not like you have anything to discuss with me. All you really need is Jen—”

She stops short when she realizes that Jennifer has just entered the room. She's clearly heard part of the argument because she stands there awkwardly, glancing between us.

“Jennifer,” I greet coolly, leaving the balcony.

“Sorry,” she says. “Didn't mean to interrupt.”

“There's nothing to interrupt,” Olivia snaps. “You're the one he wants, anyway.”

She glances back over her shoulder at me. Her eyes are wild. It's clear she's hurt. It's been a hard day for her with the funeral and everything else.

I could solve it all for her, if she'd just let me. But she's stubborn, so goddamn stubborn. Too stubborn to take medicine for the pain even when it's right here in the palm of my hand, outstretched towards her.

"I'll leave him to you," she hisses as she maneuvers past Jennifer and stalks out of the room.

Jennifer watches her go with wide eyes. "Damn. I've never seen her like that before."

"What can I say?" I shrug. "I have a talent for riling women up."

"In more ways than one, apparently," Jennifer says, shutting the door. "You realize she's pregnant, right?"

"Thanks, I'm aware."

"She doesn't need to be stressed out."

"Tell that to her siblings. They're the ones inducing the stress." She's about to open her mouth when I stop her. "And if you say one more fucking thing about Saint Rob, I'm not paying you this month."

She frowns and mutters something under her breath I don't catch. I decide to ignore it.

"Why are you here, Jen?"

"I have something to tell you."

I frown. "It isn't going to be good, is it?"

"That's what I thought when I walked into a private room at the club last night and my new lead introduced himself. I was wrong, though."

"New lead? Who is he?"

She smiles. "I think he's what we call a 'game changer.'"

OLIVIA

The kitchen is dark. I walk around the island and reach for the refrigerator door, only to realize someone is already standing there.

“Jesus!” I cry out as I yank my hand back.

“Sorry,” Jennifer says, sounding not sorry in the least. “I needed to grab a quick bite before I got back to it.”

I don’t bother asking what “it” is. She and Aleks are cut from the same cloth. They’re both secretive, cagey. Addicted to their power games. And equally unlikely to share so much as a crumb of information with me.

“I should be used to it by now, I guess. You seem to turn up everywhere these days,” I say resentfully. I want to walk away because there’s no way this ends well, but I’m too hungry to retreat to my room.

“I wasn’t trying to interrupt your conversation with Aleks earlier, I swear.”

I roll my eyes and eye the ham and cheese sandwich she’s got between her fingers. She notices what I’m looking at, so she pulls out another one wrapped in plastic and slides it onto the center island.

“They’re really good. There are some chicken sandwiches in there, too, if you’re interested.”

I nod reluctantly and she pulls out another sandwich. Then she walks over to a second, smaller fridge set underneath the cabinets and pulls out a couple of bottles of juice.

“Still a fan of lemonade?” she asks with a conspiratorial smile, as if to say, *I know you, Liv. You know me.*

“Yeah,” I mutter. “What about you? Are you still obsessed with orange juice or was that just part of the whole Isabella cover?”

She gives me a tight smile and offers me the bottle of lemonade while she pops the top of her orange juice. “That part was me.”

“I guess you only lie about the important stuff.”

“Would you believe me if I told you that I was more myself when I was with you guys than I’ve ever been outside of it?”

“No,” I snort. “I would not.”

“I didn’t think so.” She sighs and takes a bite of her sandwich. “But it is true. You know what never made sense? I actually wanted you guys to like me. I mean, of course, part of the job was getting you to like me. But I shouldn’t have cared about that on a personal level. I don’t know. It’s hard to understand, even for me.”

“I understand that you’re a sociopath. Seems pretty cut-and-dry.”

She chews her food slowly and watches me with a hopeless kind of gaze.

I don’t have any sympathy to offer her, but as the silence stretches out, I grow too uncomfortable to stay quiet. “Finished your top secret meeting with Aleks, then?”

“Yes.”

“I assume it went well?”

She shrugs. “One never knows with these things.”

“What does that mean?” When she hesitates to answer, I wave off my own question. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. I haven’t earned the truth, right? I’m not part of the ‘in’ group.”

“We’re not in high school,” Jennifer replies. “This isn’t about being in the ‘in’ group. Maybe Aleks just wants to protect you.”

“Ha!” I cackle. “Yeah, ‘cause I’m clearly his top priority.”

“Would that be so hard to believe?”

I stare at her to try and see if she’s messing with me, but her expression is open and genuinely curious.

“Well, if I am his priority, it’s only because I’m carrying his baby. Men like him want a lineage. A son to carry on his legacy or whatever the fuck. It’s not about being a father; it’s about his own immortality.”

“Is that truly what you think of him, Liv?”

“I think a lot of things about Aleks Makarova.”

She sighs. “I’ve known him a long time.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“You know, he and I... There’s nothing going on between us.”

I frown, feeling the color flush into my cheeks, giving me away. Stupid, traitorous circulatory system. Even if I could tell a good lie, my blush would undermine it every single time.

“I didn’t ask.”

“But you’re thinking it, aren’t you?” she presses. “You’re worried about it?”

“I’m not worried about a damn thing. We’re not actually together in any way that matters, so he’s free to fuck whoever he wants. You, the maids, the guard dogs, whoever.”

She gives me a tight little smile and says nothing.

I glare back at her. “What?”

“Come on, Liv. You can’t bullshit me on this one. I’ve dealt with enough angry wives and girlfriends to recognize the signs.”

“Ruined a lot of couples, have you?” I snap. “Not that I’m surprised. I know you’re in the heart-breaking business.”

“You feel insecure about my relationship with him,” she says, ignoring the jab. “But I’m telling you, you have nothing to feel insecure about. He and I knew a long time ago that we’d never make it as a couple.”

“Too much Borderline Personality Disorder to overcome?”

“Too much commitment to succeed,” she corrects.

I frown. “You seemed committed enough when you were with Rob.”

“Rob was... different,” she murmurs. She’s suddenly very interested in playing with the ends of her hair. “He was the job. I was never supposed to drop my guard with him.”

“But you did?”

She smiles sadly. “Rookie mistake. I just... I never expected to like him so much. Or his family.”

“Stop making shit up just to soothe me.”

“I am not doing anything of the sort,” she says with so much sincere force that I actually believe her. “Trust me on this one, Olivia. You guys... you are such a beautiful family. It really did make me want to be a part of it all.”

I feel that familiar lump begin to form in my throat. Twice as big as it used to be, now that Mom is gone. Actually, make that four times as big.

Because I’ve lost Rob and Mia just as surely as I’ve lost my mother.

“We’re not that family anymore.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true,” I say harshly. “Our parents are both gone, and instead of banding together like they would have wanted us to, we’ve let this... this *nightmare* splinter us apart.”

“Okay, so change it.”

“I tried!” I snap. “I tried with Mia. She... she basically told me I was responsible for Mom’s death.”

Jennifer sighs. “That was a cruel thing to say to you.”

“Maybe she’s not wrong.”

“She *is* wrong,” Jennifer says firmly. “And deep down, you know that, too. Listen, Liv, I’m not trying to defend Mia here. But people say the most awful things to each other when they’re hurt.”

“This is Mia!” I protest. “She’s my big sister.”

“I know.”

“She was supposed to have my back no matter what.”

“I know.”

“And she chose a man over me,” I say, choking out the last few words. “I know that might sound hypocritical, but it’s different. They were trying to abort my baby!”

Jennifer leans forward and puts her hand over mine. The contact is so unexpected that I go completely still. I stare down at her fingers—so petite, so fragile, so innocent-seeming if I didn’t know better.

“Liv, look at me.”

Reluctantly, I raise my eyes to meet hers.

“You were protecting your family,” she reminds me softly. “You did what I would have done. You have nothing to feel guilty for.”

I nod slowly, letting those words sink in.

She gives me a soft smile and then she pulls her hand back. “If you can’t talk to Mia, then try talking to Rob,” she suggests. “He seems like the harder nut to crack, but he has a big heart.”

“Dad always said that about Rob. Used to call him Tootsie Pop, just to piss him off. *‘He’s a tough guy with a soft center.’*”

Jennifer chuckles. “We can all agree on that. Tootsie Pop—that’s funny. I wish I’d met your dad. He seems like he was a gem.”

She gives me a parting smile and heads for the door. The silence that follows her is foreboding, in the sort of way that only late-night silence can be when your thoughts are racing and sleep won't come to the rescue.

I stare at my phone where I set it on the counter. *Try talking to Rob*, Jennifer said. He's right there, one call away. I could do it. Speed dial number 4, two rings and he'll pick up like he always does. And then we could just talk and wash all this away.

I close my eyes and take a breath. Jennifer says to call. What would Aleks say?

Don't be a fool, probably. Or he'll just manipulate you.

There's merit to both sides, I think. But I can only choose one. Either do it or don't. I can't eenie-meenie-miney-moe my way out of this one.

I listen for footsteps, for the telltale creaking of the bones of the house that says someone is up and moving. But there's nothing. Just me and my breathing and my anxiety and my fear.

Before I can second-guess myself any further, I swipe open my phone and dial my brother.

Please, please, please, please, please.

I can't really explain the refrain in my head. *Please what?* I'm not sure. But please something.

Brrring.

Brrring.

Click—"Liv."

"Rob," I breathe. It feels like two tons have been lifted on my shoulders just to hear him say my name without the tinge of hatred.

We're quiet for a moment, just breathing together, coexisting. "It doesn't feel real, does it?" I ask eventually.

He sighs. "No, it doesn't."

“Is that why you left the funeral so fast?”

“Not the only reason,” he says. “I wasn’t really in the mood to deal with a lot of stupid questions from a bunch of nosy relatives.”

“And what about your sisters? Were you in the mood to deal with us?”

With me, I want to clarify. But Rob knows what I mean.

“You had your security detail with you. I didn’t figure you needed me.”

“Okay, so you did see me there. I wasn’t sure.”

There’s a beat of silence. I swallow my resentment. I’m not interested in fighting. That’s not why I called.

“It’s okay, Rob,” I say before he can speak. “Honestly, I get why neither one of you wanted to be near me.”

“I’m sorry, Liv,” he says abruptly. “I... It wasn’t really about you. I just couldn’t be there for long. I should have stood by you, though.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I mean it. Mia had Donald. But you... you were standing all by yourself and ___”

“I wasn’t all by myself,” I say quickly. “I was with Demyan.”

“He isn’t family.”

He’s my family now. The thought jumps into my head all at once. When Demyan said it at the cemetery, I didn’t really believe him.

But I’m beginning to.

I decide not to say that out loud, though. Baby steps. “I was fine.”

“I didn’t really think, you know?” he says softly. “I just wanted to be there when they lowered her down.”

“Her body,” I correct instinctively.

“What?”

“She wasn’t really in that casket, Rob,” I say, reminding myself of what Dad and Mom believed. “Her soul left her body long before the funeral.”

“Our bodies are just vessels,” he murmurs, remembering.

“Exactly. We put her body to rest, but honestly, I think she was at rest long before then. She’s having new adventures now.”

“She hated when you used to say that,” he snorts. I can hear his smile. “*Heaven isn’t about adventures, honey.*”

“Seems boring, don’t you think?”

“I’m still surprised you feel that way.”

“Why? Because I’m so boring in real life?” I ask.

“No,” he says quietly. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It is,” I push back. “It’s okay. I’ll concede I’m pretty boring.”

“Maybe you were once upon a time,” he says. “But not anymore.”

He sounds sincere. No backhanded anything, no underlying meaning. He’s just saying what I’ve feared about myself for a while now: that I’m not the same scared, sheltered, awkward Liv I used to be.

“Is that a bad thing?” I ask honestly. “Because for the first time in my life, I feel like I’m actually being myself.”

“That... that makes me sad to hear.”

“I’m not trying to accuse you of anything. Or blame you,” I say.

“I know. But I know I have a part to play in it.”

We let that sit for a moment. I listen to the sound of his breathing on the line, and he does the same with me. Neither one of us ends the call and neither one of us breaks the silence, either.

For once, I’m okay with that.

“Are you okay, Liv?” Rob finally asks. “Like, truly okay?”

“Yeah, I think I am.”

“I just... I was worried. In your condition...” He stops short and takes a deep breath. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Are you alone right now?”

“In my apartment,” he says. “Mia said she was going to spend the night in the house. She asked me to come, too, but I don’t think I can deal with that today.”

“Oh,” I say. “I guess my invitation got lost in the mail.”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“About spending the night at the house?” I ask. “No. She wasn’t very happy about me being at the funeral in the first place.”

“That’s not true.”

“You weren’t there, Rob. You don’t know what she said to me.”

“Oh God,” he mutters. “What did she say?”

I shake my head, even though he obviously can’t see me. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Liv.”

“Seriously, forget I said anything. Bottom line, I wasn’t invited to the slumber party tonight. And that’s okay. I don’t mind being left out.”

“It’ll probably be just Mia there tonight then.”

“And Hargrove?” I ask, feeling my skin prickle with anger when I think about it.

Mia spending the night at the house is one thing. She has a right to that. But Hargrove? I don’t want him walking around those sacred spaces as though he has a right to be there.

“I don’t know. I didn’t really ask.”

I nod. My bitterness tastes... well, bitter. “Well, maybe it’s what she needs for closure.”

“I don’t think getting closure is that simple.”

I nod. He’s definitely got that right.

“Rob?” I say after another handful of quiet breaths passes. “I don’t want to sell the house.”

“Hm. I see.”

“I’m just saying... I know it’ll be discussed at some point, and I want my voice heard. I don’t want to sell it. That’s where I stand.”

“We’ll have to see what Mia thinks,” he warns.

“What about you?”

“Well, what are we supposed to do with it?” he asks. “Mia isn’t going to live there and neither am I. If you’re planning to, you could buy both our stakes in the house.”

I bite my lip, knowing that there’s no way I can afford that. I’m pretty sure Rob knows it, too.

“I’m happy to write over my share of the house to you for nothing,” he assures me. “But Mia...”

“She’s never going to do it,” I finish. “And I wouldn’t take your charity, anyway. It’s as much yours as it is mine.”

“I’ve never needed much, Liv,” he murmurs. “Just a good job with purpose, a little place I can call my own, and a woman I love to share it with. Not long ago, I had all three.”

“And now?”

“Now, I’m not sure I have anything at all.”

“You have purpose.”

“Do I?” he asks. “Because lately, I’ve had a tough time staying motivated. Even on this case... I mean, I know I put the ball in motion, but look at what it’s cost me.”

Hearing the heaviness in his voice, I realize that he's carrying around the same guilt I've been carrying around. Dad used to say that Rob and I were a lot alike, and I never fully understood that until right now.

I always assumed I had more in common with Mia. But we were just closer, not necessarily more similar.

"What happened to Mom was not your fault," I say, speaking the words I need to hear.

"Of course you'd say that."

"I mean it."

He sighs. "Listen, Liv, I should get going."

"No, Rob, wait," I say. "Can we... can we just talk? A proper conversation? Face to face?"

He hesitates for a long time. So long in fact that I start thinking he might turn me down.

"Okay," he says finally. "We can do lunch. Tomorrow at one?"

"Perfect. Where do you wanna meet?"

"How about Giovanni's?" he asks.

"Giovanni's it is. See you tomorrow, big head."

He chuckles at the old nickname. "See you tomorrow, chicken feet."

I thought I'd lost all hope for a reconciliation with my siblings. But now, I feel that hope flicker.

Maybe it's not dead yet.

ALEKS

“Miss me already?” Jennifer asks when she answers on the third ring.

I roll my eyes. “I’ve got new marching orders for you.”

She sighs. “Typical man. You’re calling because you want something. Well, give it to me. Should I be scared?”

“Since when have you ever been scared?”

“Flattery will get you everywhere, Aleks. What do you want?”

“Olivia has a lunch tomorrow. I want you to accompany her.”

“You have Demyan and an army of goons who are good at breaking shit at your disposal. Why me?”

“I have my reasons.”

The pause is loaded with tension—until she figures it out. It was never going to take her very long, but even I’m impressed by how quickly she gets to the bottom of it.

“Oh God. Who is she having lunch with?”

“Jen—”

“I can’t see him, Aleks,” she says before I can even explain. “I can’t. You know that.”

“I’m not asking.”

“You’re being cruel,” she hisses with an undercurrent of desperation I’ve never heard from her before.

“Maybe so, but I’m not changing my mind, either. You need to see him. More importantly, he needs to see you.”

“He’s already made up his mind about me.”

“Actually, he’s only made his mind up about *me*,” I retort. “The man still thinks I’ve managed to hoodwink you. It’s time to disabuse him of that notion.”

“Aleks, please—”

“Begging doesn't work with me.”

“I’m not begging; I’m asking.”

“And I’m saying no. There’s no way out of this.”

She goes quiet, but I can hear her grinding her teeth together, trying to find a legitimate excuse out of this. “I would have thought you’d be more grateful to me after the asset I handed over to you.”

“He was trying to make contact. He would have found a way to do that with or without you.”

“She doesn’t even really need security,” she says, changing tack. “This is her brother we’re talking about. Rob would never hurt her.”

“But Hargrove might. And as long as Robert is in his pocket, I need to play it safe.”

There's a long pause. Once Jennifer realizes there is no way out, she sighs. “What do you want me to say to him?”

“Nothing, if you don’t want to. That’s entirely up to you.”

“Great. Very helpful. This is going to be a fucking nightmare.”

“Be here at twelve tomorrow. The car will take you both to the restaurant together.”

“Which restaurant?”

“Some Italian place in the city.”

“Giovanni's,” she breathes. “It was their parents’ favorite restaurant. I think it’s where they got engaged.”

It strikes me how much family history she’s been privy to. How much she’s still emotionally invested in the Lawrence tribe.

“You should have taken me up on my offer,” I say. “I gave you an out so you could be with him.”

“And I appreciate it. But we were doomed from the moment I accepted the job.”

“There’s no such thing as doom, Jennifer. Or fate, or predestination, or any of that bullshit. The world is what we make it. If you don’t like it, remake it.”

“Did you read that on a fortune cookie?” she snaps. “Forget it. If he kills me tomorrow... well, I’ll probably deserve it.”

“He’s not going to lift a finger against you or Olivia. That’s why I’m sending you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” she grumbles. “How is Olivia, anyway?”

“Sad about her mother. Pissed at me.”

“Is that my fault?”

“It’s not not your fault.”

“So maybe you should send someone else tomorrow,” Jennifer says. “She probably doesn’t want to see me.”

“Nice try,” I laugh. “But she’s only acting out of insecurity. She feels threatened by our relationship. She has no idea I want to strangle you half the time.”

“The feeling is mutual. Particularly right now.”

I ignore her petulance. “She thinks we’re on the inside of something. And she’s right—we’re inside the Bratva, and there is no room for her here.”

“Isn’t there? Surely we can find space. The girl picked you over her family, for Christ’s sake.”

“A fact everyone seems fond of reminding me. She chose the baby, not me.”

“*Your* baby,” Jennifer points out. “Blood is thicker than water, Aleks. Remember? You told me that.”

“No, the Bible told you that. Everyone and their fucking mother says it.”

“I know, but when you say it, it’s different. You’re not talking about the blood in your veins, but the blood you spill alongside each other, the pain you share—that’s what makes family. Not what your DNA tests say. That resonated with me.”

“Then you’re welcome. I’ll send along an invoice for my services.”

“Asshole.”

I sigh and switch the phone to the other ear. “Get some sleep, Jennifer. Tomorrow will be tiring.”

“Every day is tiring, Aleks. Every day has been tiring for a really long time now.”

I hang up without replying and go upstairs to Olivia’s room. I don’t bother with knocking. I just push my way inside

At first glance, the room seems to be empty. Then I realize the bathroom door is ajar. I creep up to it and poke my head around the door frame. She’s standing in front of the mirror, studying her reflection.

She’s wearing nothing but black lace underwear and a matching bra that highlights how swollen her breasts have become. And when she turns to the side, I can see a slight swelling of her stomach. She cradles herself delicately as though she’s doubled in size.

“Hey, baby,” she coos. “I don’t know what you’re going to be yet. A boy, a girl, it doesn’t really matter to me. I’ll love you no matter what. And you won’t have to do anything but exist.” Her face is stretched in a dreamy smile. “You don’t need to do anything but that. I don’t care if you’re the best at anything you try, ever. If you’re completely ordinary, completely average, completely boring, it won’t change a thing. I’ll love you unconditionally, little one.”

When she turns back to the door, she catches sight of me and gasps. She presses her hands to her chest. “Jesus, Aleks! How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to have heard the promise you just made to our child.”

“Good. Because I meant it,” she sniffs, reaching for her silk robe and slipping it onto her shoulders.

“I don’t doubt you do.”

She looks up at me once the robe is cinched tight at her waist. “I know what you want for this child, especially if it’s a boy. And I’m telling you now, I won’t let you bully him into becoming a carbon copy of you.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You think you know what I intend?”

“I do know you,” she snaps, pushing past me and leaving the bathroom. “You’re an alpha, the kind of man who wants to have lots of sons so that they can carry on the family name. Continue the legacy. Am I right?”

“No,” I say firmly. “You’re not.”

She laughs out loud. “You’re telling me that if your boy comes to you and says he wants to be a lawyer, or an accountant, or a damn FBI agent—you wouldn’t throw a fit?”

“I wouldn’t stand in his way. Or hers, for that matter.”

“Bullshit.”

“I have no interest in forcing my child into anything they don’t want to do.”

“Are you speaking from personal experience?”

“I knew from a young age that I had no choice in this. I was always going to be the don of the Makarova Bratva.”

“And you resented it?”

I shake my head. “On the contrary, I felt important. It was something to work towards. A way for me to prove myself. I have no regrets about how my life has turned out,” I say. “But I wouldn’t do it to my child.”

She takes that in for a moment, studying my face. “Gotta say, you’re almost convincing.”

“There’s nothing to convince you of. I’m not lying.”

“What if I have a girl?” she asks in a small voice. “Would you be disappointed?”

I frown. “Do you really think so little of me?”

“It’s a legitimate question.”

“Is it?” I ask. “Because it sounds to me like you’re working off some stereotype of what you think a don is.”

“You haven’t exactly veered too far from type thus far.”

“Then look a little closer,” I growl, striding forward so I’m right in her face.

Olivia doesn’t flinch. We’re so close that I can feel heat rolling off of her. It doesn’t really help me to know that she’s right there for the taking underneath that silk robe, her body just begging to be worshiped.

“If you think I want a child just to preserve my last name... If you think I’ll banish them to boarding school, to training, to anywhere out of my sight... If you think I will break this little person just to reshape them in my image... Then you haven’t been paying attention.”

Olivia is quiet for a moment. Then she tilts her head to the side like a confused puppy. “Did I just hurt your feelings?” she asks, sounding shocked.

“You pissed me off.”

A bubble of laughter escapes her lips. “Same thing.”

I cock my head to the side. “You’re asking for trouble now.”

“Are you going to punish me?” she asks, her lips tipping into a tantalizing smile.

My cock throbs. I sidle closer to her. “Is that what you think a don would do?”

She nods tentatively. “Maybe.”

“Then I would hate to disappoint.”

I raise one hand and wrap it around her throat. Soft at first, then harder and harder. She jolts in surprise, but doesn't try to run. There is no fear in her eyes. Even as I increase the pressure and her breathing starts to struggle.

I scoop her up in my other arm and set her on her ass on the bathroom counter. When she’s seated, I rip open the knot of her robe. It parts, revealing the creamy smoothness of her thighs and the lacy V of her underwear.

I take my cock out of my pants, pull aside, and step up. Olivia stares back at me with pure lust in her eyes. I strip her panties off, then lean in and twist the front-closing clasp on her bra. It snaps apart, revealing her heaving breasts.

She’s gasping softly, her hand on the wrist holding her throat, but it’s just resting there, not pulling me away.

She likes feeling this—the danger. The threat.

The possibility that I could break her.

The knowledge that I’d murder anyone else who tries to do the same.

And so the thrill that ripples through her face as I rub the tip of my dick against her clit is enough to make me come right then and there. The only urge greater is the need to bury myself deep inside her.

Her heels lock behind my back, drawing me closer. She shudders as my cock finds the warmth of her slit.

I tease her a little. Half an inch in, an inch in, then back out. She groans desperately, arching her hips towards me, begging for more, but I press her by the throat back into the mirror.

Her eyelids are fluttering, eyes rolling in their sockets, a hot flush already creeping up her collarbone.

“F... fuck me...” she splutters.

Instead, I pull out completely.

Olivia’s eyes fly open. She moans in frustration until I drag her ass towards me, throw her legs over my shoulders, and start kissing my way down her thighs towards her pussy.

“I want to taste you first.”

“Ale—”

But her voice strangles to silence when I tongue her clit. She clamps onto the back of my head and holds on for dear life as I eat her out furiously.

I would usually take my time, but all the heat that’s been building between us in the last few weeks has finally reached a head.

I need this.

And she needs it, too.

The way she’s moaning and writhing around before me is proof enough of that.

As my tongue delves even deeper inside her, she groans loudly. Her fingers curl into my hair. She pulls hard, but it doesn’t change my rhythm.

She asked for a punishment. I intend to deliver.

The more she struggles, the more I make her wait. I reach up and grab one of her juicy breasts. I play with her hard nipple as I swirl my tongue over her clit in ruthless circles.

“Mmm...” she whimpers. “Aleks... Aleks... I can’t...”

She’s laid wide open, completely at my mercy. A light lick and she trembles. A good suck and she’s moaning.

And when I go beyond that, she explodes. Her hips grind hard into my face, but I keep her trapped on the counter as her sweetness erupts on my tongue.

“Oh God,” she whimpers. “Fuck... Aleks!”

I bear down until the orgasm has had its way with her. She goes limp, but we aren't done. I get back up to my feet and position my cock at her entrance.

Then I drive myself home.

“Fuck,” Olivia moans low. Sweat is starting to bead along her body like jewels.

I plan on licking her dry afterwards. But first things first. I pull all the way out and thrust into her again.

Her hands curl on my shoulders as her moans work up to a scream. Her legs tremble from the fresh orgasm already growing.

“That’s right, *kiska*,” I growl. “I want to hear you come for me.”

Watching her like this is a miracle. A metamorphosis. Like I’m releasing the shy little girl from her shell and letting the brave woman take hold.

When her eyes open again, they lock on mine. Unable to rein myself in anymore, I start fucking her furiously, wresting another greedy orgasm from her.

She cries out, lost in the music of her body. I watch her face twist with pleasure. She writhes like a woman possessed, trying to expel her demons.

And in that moment, I know she’s mine.

There’s no denying it anymore. She can try if she has the courage. Her siblings can, too.

But I’ll break down their arguments just like I’m breaking hers right now.

Olivia Lawrence—no, Olivia Makarova... is mine.

OLIVIA

“You look like you’re headed to face the firing squad,” I remark.

Jennifer hasn’t made eye contact with me even once since we got in the backseat together. The presence of the armed driver and bodyguard up front doesn’t exactly ease the mood, either.

Of course, that’s just this car. There are two more trailing us.

Overkill if you ask me, but it’s the only way Aleks would agree to let me meet Rob today.

“It kinda feels that way,” Jennifer mutters. “Don’t judge me.”

I suppress a smile. Aside from looking terrified, she looks good. She usually does, but she’s dialed it up a notch today. She has on dark jeans underneath a white wraparound silk blouse that shows just enough cleavage to be seductive without being too obvious.

It’s kind of business chic, in a strange sort of way. Her blonde hair is loose in big, styled waves that flow over her shoulders.

“You look really nice,” I say.

She barely glances at me. “Thanks.”

“Don’t you think that’s kind of... cruel, though?”

That makes her turn to me, one eyebrow raised. “I didn’t get ready today with him in mind. This is to help me feel more confident.”

“Sorry.” I blush. “I was judging.”

She sighs. “It’s okay. I’d be doing the same in your position.”

“If you’re so nervous, why not just refuse to come?”

“Your husband is a tyrant sometimes.”

“Only sometimes?”

She chuckles before the smile slides off her face. “Aleks is probably right, though. Per freaking usual. It’s about time I faced this. Faced Rob. There’s too much at stake to keep avoiding him. I can’t be a coward forever.”

“I would describe you as many things,” I say. “‘Cowardly’ is not one.”

“You’re being nice because you feel sorry for me.”

“Please,” I snort. “I don’t feel sorry for you at all.”

“Fair enough.” She smiles. “I’m gonna let you go in first. It will give you some time together and then I’ll come in and—”

“Blow up my peacemaking lunch?”

She scrunches up her nose. “Can we agree beforehand that whatever happens in there, this is Aleks’s fault?”

“Sure, I’m okay with that.”

We laugh together. For a moment, I’m transported back to two years ago. When “Isabella” was going to be part of our family and everything felt... if not complete, then at least well on its way to being complete.

I know I’m not the only one who felt that.

“Is he bringing his gun?” Jennifer asks. “Maybe I should have worn my vest.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much.”

“Oh no?” Jennifer scoffs. “A bullet through my heart seems fair. After all, I broke his.”

“And you could only do that because he loved you. Still does, in fact,” I point out. “He wouldn’t hurt you.”

She sighs. “I know that. I’m just nervous.”

It is odd to see her like this. Even as Isabella, the woman was nothing if not confident. And yet, faced with the prospect of meeting my brother for the first time since her disappearance, she seems downright terrified.

“This is karma if I ever saw it,” she complains. “The universe is paying me back for all the shit I’ve done.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I’ve never actually asked you: what do you do?”

“The simple answer? I break men and scoop what I came for out of the remains.”

I shudder from head to toe. “Jesus. That’s... morbid.”

“It’s true. Some men take longer than others, but they all crack in the end. Except for one.”

“Rob?”

“Your brother never spilled a single FBI secret.”

I laugh at that. “He takes his job seriously.”

“Sometimes, I think if I’d just had more time...”

“But you took yourself out of the game.”

“Aleks took me out,” she corrects. “But I agreed. I was getting too deep.”

“At least Rob can be proud of that.”

She snorts. “I doubt he’ll take it as the compliment you see it as.”

“I don’t know. My brother is pretty good at separating out his emotions when he needs to.”

“It’s just the kind of man he is,” Jennifer says. “But he has a sensitive side, too. He used to sing me to sleep most nights.”

“Shut up,” I say in disbelief. “Are we talking about the same guy? My brother Rob?”

She nods. “I have... nightmares. Sometimes, I used to wake up in a sweat, screaming, and he’d be there to calm me down. He has a lovely voice.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never heard it.”

“Sounds a little like Bubl ,” she muses.

“This is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.”

She laughs. “You’re acting like I just told you he could sprout wings and fly.”

“Honestly, that would be less surprising. I just never imagined he could be so romantic.”

Jennifer smiles softly. “He was loving to a fault.”

“I guess it kinda makes sense,” I say. “He just wasn’t super touchy-feely in public, you know.”

“Oh, I know. But when we were alone, he wouldn’t stop touching me.”

I hold up a hand to stop her. “I really don’t need to know the details.”

She chuckles and then turns to look out the window. We’re almost there, and I think we both need some silence to get in the right headspace.

I have no idea how this is going to go down, but I actually do agree with Aleks’s plan. Maybe if Jennifer can make Rob understand what really happened, it’ll be a step towards making him understand that he’s chasing the wrong man.

The driver parks right outside the restaurant. I turn to Jennifer.

“I’ll see you inside.”

She gives me a tight smile, but she still looks like she is about to puke in her lap.

I get out and walk into the restaurant, leaving Jennifer waiting in the car.

Two of the Bratva bodyguards shadow me into the restaurant. They stand on either side of me like surly shadows. I give the maître d' my name and then turn to the lurking duo. "Do you guys have to be so obvious?"

"Don Makarova said—"

"I know what he said. But I'm telling the two of you to give me some space. Stand here," I say, pointing to a small bench in the lobby. "You can see me just fine."

They look at one another warily.

I roll my eyes. "Stay," I say firmly, like I'm talking to two badly trained dogs. Then, without bothering to wait for a reply, I stride into the restaurant towards the booths.

Rob is in the back corner. "Hey," he says when he sees me approach.

He stands up and we hug. I'm thrilled that it doesn't feel awkward or unfamiliar. I can almost forget the giant elephant sitting between us, resembling the sibling that's not here.

"I ordered drinks," he says. "Lemonade for you?"

I smile. "Thanks."

The moment I sit down, the waitress shows up with our drinks and pulls out her order pad. "What can I get you two started with?"

"Um, give us a minute?" Rob asks.

She nods. "Sure thing. Just give me a wave when you're ready to order."

She walks off and Rob and I turn to each other.

"You look good," he tells me.

“You look like a wolf man,” I say, noting the longer than usual scruff on his jaw.

He laughs. “Thought I’d grow out the beard.”

“I like it. Does Mia know you’re meeting me today?”

“No,” he says. “I decided not to tell her.”

“Why?”

“Because she feels if we give you enough time, you’ll realize your mistake and come to us.”

I frown. “By which you mean, she thinks that freezing me out will force me back to you guys.”

Rob rubs a tired hand over his face. “Look, Liv, I know things are weird now, but she loves—”

“Don’t!” I snap before he can finish his sentence. “I’m so sick of hearing that. *Mia loves me and wants to protect me. She’s only looking out for me. The way she treated me is...* No. Screw that. That’s not how you show love.”

He sighs again. “I tried to tell her as much.”

“But...?”

He gives me a cautious glance that suggests he doesn’t want to be caught in the middle.

“It’s Hargrove, isn’t it?” I surmise. “He’s controlling her.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Then what would you say, Rob?”

“She’s in love.”

“And?”

“And she believes him. She trusts him. I do, too, for the record.”

I flinch, even though I was expecting as much. “You really believe him?”

“Yes.”

“And you still believe Aleks is responsible for hurting those girls?”

He hesitates, but I know it’s only because he doesn’t want to hurt me. “Olivia, he’s duped you.”

“And you’re not even willing to consider the possibility that you might be after the wrong man?”

“Hargrove is a good man. He wouldn’t—”

“I’m not even saying Hargrove is responsible for hurting those girls,” I interject quickly. “I’m not accusing him. All I’m saying is that I believe Aleks when he says he had nothing to do with those crimes.”

Rob sits back in his seat and fingers his beer with disinterest. “You... you really care about him, don’t you?”

“If you’re implying that my feelings for him are what’s clouding my judgment, you’re wrong. I know you and Mia think I’m this brainless dolt who can’t think for herself, but that’s not true. Nor is it fair.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Forgive me for not believing you.”

I can feel my hackles rising the longer we talk. I shouldn’t be dealing with so much stress while I’m pregnant. My hand flutters to my stomach and Rob notices immediately.

“Mom was right,” he says in a low voice. “We should never have done that to you.”

I hold my breath. “Done what?”

“You know what.”

“I need to hear you say it, Rob,” I grit. “Tell me what you’re sorry for.”

He closes his eyes. “I’m sorry for trying to force you to abort your baby. It was wrong, and I regret it now. But at the time, we really thought we were doing the right thing.”

“Thank you.” My throat feels clamped down tight. “Can you answer one thing for me?”

“Anything.”

“Was Hargrove involved?”

Rob goes quiet. I suppose that’s answer enough for me.

“What makes you think I’m the one being brainwashed and manipulated, Rob?” I seethe viciously. “I could argue the same thing about you and Mia.”

I take my lemonade and drain half the glass. I’m not sure how I’m going to eat at all, though. I’ve completely lost my appetite.

“Maybe it’s time for you to hear another perspective.”

He snorts. “I will not fucking listen to that motherfu—”

“What about me, then?” a third voice cuts in.

We both turn at the same time. Jennifer is standing a few feet away from our table, looking at Rob with a carefully composed expression on her face.

“Will you listen to me, Rob?” she continues.

He pales instantly. As he does, I feel almost guilty for ambushing him like this. Jennifer, however, looks remarkably calm as she approaches our booth.

She pulls an empty chair from a vacant table and places it at the end of the table.

“Fuck,” Rob says at last, breaking the strangling silence. “Isabella.”

She shakes her head apologetically. “I’m not Isabella, Rob. I never was. My name is Jennifer Hartley.”

He shakes his head. “No—”

“Yes,” she says firmly, cutting him off. “I’ve known Aleks Makarova for over fifteen years. And I’ve been working for him for almost all of that time.”

He stares at her, trying to gauge the sincerity in her tone. In just a couple of sentences, she’s managed to crush all the lies he was telling himself.

“Remember that day we met at that farmer’s market, Rob?” she asks. “I’d been following you for almost six months by that time. I knew your routine, your favorite haunts, your work schedule. I knew you worked out Monday through Saturday from five to seven in the morning. You grabbed a coffee from the corner café before heading to work. Sometimes, you picked up a newspaper, but mostly, you just kept walking.”

Rob shakes his head. “That doesn’t prove anything.”

“In the six months I watched you, you had a total of two dates,” Jennifer continues. “The first one you met through a dating app. It lasted an hour and forty minutes. You walked her to her car afterwards and sighed with relief when she walked away.”

Rob shifts nervously in the booth, but his eyes are locked on Jennifer.

“The second was a woman you met in a bar. You went back to her place and emerged an hour later looking extremely dissatisfied for a man who’d just had a one-night-stand.”

He just stares at her as she rattles off all this information. If it wasn’t for him blinking every so often, I’d think he was frozen.

“I watched you, Rob. For months before I entered your life, I watched you. That farmer’s market was a fluke. You didn’t usually have the time for that kind of thing, but you passed it and you decided to give it a shot. That was when I decided to ‘run into you,’” she says. “My job was to get your attention, start a relationship with you, and eventually convince you to divulge information from the case.”

Jennifer swallows, her undercurrent of heartbreak suddenly cutting through her cool exterior.

“I knew it would take time, and I was prepared for that. I’ve had jobs last years before, but this one had to be expedited. It seemed to be going that way, too. And then... you proposed.”

On the word “proposed,” Rob snaps out of his trance. He blinks away the fog and glances over at me like he’s just remembering I’m sitting here, too.

“Aleks never tricked me or lied to me. He didn’t abduct me or threaten me, Rob. He assigned me to you. You were always meant to be a job.” Her voice hitches on the last word. “Please... say something.”

My heart bleeds for my brother right now. No matter how many unresolved issues we may have, I don’t want him hurt.

And right now, his pain is approaching unbearable.

“So it was never real?” he asks hoarsely.

“It wasn’t meant to be,” she replies softly. “But I got... emotionally involved. That was why Aleks and I decided it was better that we end the mission prematurely.”

“Mission,” he repeats, as though he’s trying to wrap his mind around the idea.

“You were more than I bargained for, Rob.”

He shakes his head. “The story you told me about your parents dying when you were young—”

“The dying part was true,” she says. “The other details of the story, not so much.”

“It was all a lie.”

She opens her mouth to argue, but then changes her mind at the last second. “I’m sorry,” she says instead. “But this is my job. It always was. I was supposed to learn who the informant was. We needed to find out who was trying to frame Aleks.”

He flinches. “So you both are buying into what Makarova says? That he has nothing to do with the disappearances?”

“None of them disappeared, Rob,” she says softly. “You just have to look for them in the right places.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that, all the girls you’re looking for? They’re alive. Some are working in brothels now, some at strip clubs. Some were sold to other bad

men. But they're all alive. Most of them, at least," she says. "Once they were chosen, they were vetted, used, and then discarded. They were left in places where they wouldn't be discovered."

He frowns. "Why wouldn't they come forward if—?"

"They were threatened into silence. Them, their families, everyone who knew enough—all of them were coerced into keeping their mouths shut. All the girls came from poor families, hopeless situations. The police have never served people like that. You know that, Rob. You know that as well as anyone."

"How do you know all this?" he asks.

"Because Aleks and I have been trying to locate them for years. We finally did manage to find a girl who would talk—"

"What's her name?" Rob asks immediately.

"I can't tell you that."

"Why?"

"She's terrified for her life, Rob. If I tell you, you'll bring your guns and your badges and descend on her family. And if you do, she and her family will be destroyed by the man who ruined her life once already."

"You expect me to believe this?"

She shrugs. "I can't decide that for you. All I'm giving you is the truth."

"Except you're not so good with the truth, are you, Isabella?" he growls abruptly. "You've lied to me the entire time you've known me. So forgive me for not trusting a single fucking word that's coming out of your mouth right now."

He gets up abruptly, his eyes boring into hers like he has more to say.

Then he turns and leaves.

ALEKS

I feel cautiously optimistic as I walk back into the house after my meeting.

“How’d it go?” Demyan asks, appearing out of nowhere.

“For God’s sake, what are you doing skulking in that corner?”

“Waiting for you,” he says bluntly. “Answer the question. How’d it go?”

“It went... surprisingly well.”

He raises his eyebrows. “So not a trap?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Fuck, this really is a game-changer, huh?”

I nod. “I think so. He came alone, just like he said he would.”

“A man of his word—who’d have thought there were any of those left in this world?” Demyan chuckles. “What’s the plan now?”

“Still being decided,” I say. “We have more to discuss before I figure out how I want to play this. Now, where are Olivia and Jennifer? Are they back yet?”

“No word from either one of them yet. Been on standby for the last two hours.”

“You think she’ll be able to get through to him?” I ask.

Truth be told, I'm only mildly curious. It doesn't matter to the plan ultimately. I'm not hinging my actions on the whims of Robert Lawrence anymore.

"Maybe. The girl's got a gift. Several, actually." I throw him a suspicious look and he raises his hands immediately. "I haven't fucked her, if that's what you're thinking."

"I know that."

He frowns. "How could you possibly know that?"

"I think she'd set herself on fire first."

He growls something unflattering under his breath as we enter one of the sitting rooms that adjoins the gardens. Demyan goes to the sliding glass doors and opens them to let the breeze in.

I sit down just as my mother walks into the room.

"What have you got for me?" I ask her.

"I spoke to Donald," she says, sitting in the seat next to me. Her eyes drift up and notice Demyan for the first time. "Oh. I haven't seen you in a while, Demyan."

He looks confused. "I'm always around."

"Like a loyal little puppy," she remarks.

His face turns dark. I have to bite back a laugh. My mother doesn't notice a thing, of course. She just looks back at me.

"Is this not a good time to talk?" she asks.

"Of course it is," I tell her. "Anything you want to say, you can say in front of Demyan. He is my little sidekick, after all. The Robin to my Batman."

Demyan flips me the bird behind Yulia's shoulder, and I have to swallow another laugh. "Go on. You spoke to Donald?"

"He was very surprised to hear from me at all. He figured I wouldn't want to have anything to do with him once I found out about his mission against

you.”

“How did you play it off?”

“Conflicting loyalties. I defended you a little, but also made it obvious to him that I was afraid.”

“Afraid of...?”

“You, of course,” she says. “He needed to believe that I could be manipulated into giving him information about you. Once he knew that I was afraid of what you might do to me, he thought he had an in.”

“Very smart.”

Her expression turns smug. “I can be of use to you, Aleksandr. I told you there’s no need to shut me out.”

“You’ll have to keep proving that point until I believe it,” I say. “What else did you tell him?”

“That you told me he was the one responsible for the crimes he was trying to palm off on you. But I told him that I didn’t believe that for a second. That I knew him and I knew he would never do something like that.”

“You didn’t have to lie about that part, did you?”

She sighs. “It’s complicated.”

I snort. “Name something that isn’t.”

“We’re going to be meeting soon,” she adds. “Donald and I.”

I sit upright. “When?”

“Two days from now. For lunch.”

I nod, mind whirling with possibilities already. “That’s a good first step.”

“Actually,” she says, hedging a little, “it could be the last step.”

Frowning, I glance at Demyan. He looks just as curious as I am. Turning back to my mother, I ask, “What do you mean?”

She tenses and glances at Demyan. “Maybe we should talk in private now?”

“Answer the question, Mother.”

She hesitates for another second before pushing on. “What if we ambush him at this meeting?”

“Ambush him?”

She nods. “Set a trap. We can pick a quiet restaurant where we can set the scene and then surround him while we’re at lunch and take him down.”

“Take him down?” I repeat. “As in, kill him?”

“Why not?” she asks. “It would put an end to the whole ordeal. He would be dead and there would be no one else to push the case against you.”

“Except the FBI,” I point out.

“They’ll lose interest soon enough,” she says. “They would have lost interest already if it weren’t for Robert Lawrence and Donald.”

“And do you imagine Lawrence would simply give up after I murdered his brother-in-law?”

“It would send a strong message to him.”

“That it would,” I muse to myself, stroking my chin. “Kill or be killed.”

“You are married to his sister,” she reminds me. “He’s not going to move against you. Especially now. She’s carrying your baby.”

“A baby he tried to abort.”

“And she fought for the child,” Yulia insists. “She chose you over them because of what they tried to make her do. Do you imagine he would try to force her hand again?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“He’s not that stupid.”

“Never underestimate the enemy,” I tell her. “People do stupid things when they’re desperate. And Robert Lawrence is nothing if not desperate.”

“So you’re not on board with the plan?”

“There are too many what-ifs,” I say. “Too many loose ends to tie up after the fact.”

“Like what?” she asks.

“Like the fact that Donald Hargrove is no ordinary citizen whose death will go unnoticed. He’s a media mogul who runs half this country. His death will be headline news.”

“We can control the narrative.”

“How?” I ask her. “The media lives in his pocket.”

She hesitates for a moment. “Well...”

“I have pull, too. But not enough to convince my victim’s own empire to dance to my tune. I’m not stupid enough to try. There is a difference between ambition and recklessness.”

My patience is wearing thin at this point. Not just because she’s wasting my time by trying to assume she knows better, but because this is history repeating itself.

The last time she decided to run things, she cost me my operation in Russia.

I won’t make that mistake twice.

“It’s bold,” she says, doubling down. “He’s not going to expect it.”

“Because he knows I’m not a fucking fool,” I snap back. “And he’d be right. Killing him only makes me look guilty.”

“Since when are you concerned with how you look?”

“Since it’ll bring me unwanted media attention. We’re a fucking Bratva, not an entertainment story. Do you really think I’m looking for publicity here?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. As usual, her head is filled with impulsive thoughts that pay no mind to reason.

I'm assuming her silence is defeat, but the moment she opens her mouth, I realize I'm wrong. "Does this have something to do with Olivia?"

Instantly, I'm angry. My fists curl tight. "Why would it have anything to do with Olivia?"

"You don't want to upset her by killing her sister's fiancé."

"Jesus," I growl. "Even for you, that's an idiotic suggestion."

"It's the only reason I can think of for why you're so averse to my plan."

"Don't make this personal," I sigh. "It's not. If you want me to treat you like you're part of the team, then you'll have to take criticism the same way everyone else does."

She glances away, but when she looks back at me, all I can see is disappointment. "It's your call at the end of the day, my son."

Sniffling, she stands to leave.

"What if I'd said yes?" I ask before she can depart.

My mother lingers in place. "What do you mean?"

"He's supposed to be your friend," I explain. "Not long ago, you reluctantly agreed to help me. You said you believed he's an innocent man."

"I did," she acknowledges.

"And now, you propose a plan that involves killing the very same friend. Rather ruthless, don't you think?"

She sighs. "I gave you my loyalty and my word. When I do something like that, I commit. I hold nothing back."

I cock my head to the side, waiting for the whole truth.

"I'm also the kind of woman who knows that, sometimes in life, you have to do what needs to be done. No matter how... unpleasant," she finishes.

I nod. Good enough for me. "Regardless, I still expect you to be at that lunch with Hargrove. Not as bait, though. I want you to go and gather information."

“As you wish, Aleksandr.”

I dismiss her with a nod. Demyan follows her to the door and shuts it as she leaves, making sure she has cleared the area before he turns to me.

“That was... something.”

“Something stupid.”

“Sure, of course,” Demyan agrees. “But I was referring more to the way the two of you interacted.”

I frown. “How do we interact?”

“Like you’re always trying to one up each other. Not like any mother and son I’ve ever seen. You were like... sharks at a poker game,” he says.

“Well, what did you think of her plan, then?”

“Same as you,” he says. “Her plan is too risky. It leaves us open at every angle and it’s only going to make the FBI double down on us.”

“Agreed,” I say. “So why do you think she suggested it?”

Demyan frowns. “Because she doesn’t have a head for strategy.”

I nod. “Which is exactly why I’m beginning to regret involving her in this.”

He waves away my concerns. “She’s not your only card to play. You’ve got me. You’ve got Jen.”

“That’s true. But she’s my strongest asset at the moment.”

“Okay, I’m gonna ignore that insult because I realize you’re stressed at the moment.”

I smirk. “I’m just seeing things clearly.”

“Yeah, well, see this clearly, asshole,” he says, flashing a middle finger at me yet again. I’ll have to cut that thing off if he keeps overusing it like he’s been doing.

I glance out towards the garden, resisting the urge to check the time. It’s been a few hours since Olivia left with Jennifer. Surely they should have finished

by now?

Right on cue, I get a message on my phone.

“Who is it?” Demyan asks when he hears the vibration.

I open up the text. It’s succinct.

JENNIFER: Didn’t go well. Just dropped Olivia off. I need a day.

“Fuck,” I snarl, getting to my feet.

Demyan moves closer. “What? What happened? Are they okay?”

“Jennifer just dropped Olivia off,” I say, leaving the sitting room and heading up the stairs to meet her.

“What else did she say?” Demyan asks, calling out after me.

“It went as we expected it would.”

“Shit,” he mutters.

I turn the corner at the landing and head straight for Olivia’s room. But when I open the door, it’s empty.

I turn around and walk further down the hall towards my bedroom. As soon as I step inside, I know Olivia is here. The smell of her perfume, subtle and seductive, tickles my nostrils.

Then I see her. She’s lying on my bed, her legs dangling over the side.

She looks hauntingly beautiful, but sadness radiates off her in waves. When she sees me, she pushes herself off the edge of the bed. Her toes dig into the plush carpet.

“Aleks...”

“Olivia.”

I move to stand right in front of her. She stands up, slowly lifting her face to look at me.

Her hair is coming apart from the messy bun she put it in this morning. Her eyes are puffy from crying.

“I don’t know why I’m here,” she says softly.

The vulnerability in her voice is what gets me. What makes me crack.

I take a step forward, pressing my chest against hers, and whisper, “I do.”

OLIVIA

As Aleks's lips crush against mine, it feels like this is exactly what I came for.

All the brokenness inside me is a little less painful when he's touching me. All I'm capable of feeling when we're together is him, and that's precisely the distraction I'm craving.

Both of my parents are gone. I'm losing my brother and sister a little more every day. All I have left is the little stranger growing inside me.

The only thing I know is that Aleks is here with me right now. Nothing else between us is simple. Nothing but this.

So when he kisses me, I let him.

My fingers fumble on the buttons of his shirt. After a minute of struggling with them, Aleks takes control. He rips his shirt open, sending buttons flying.

I run my hands over him hungrily, feeling soothed already. He draws me closer as his lips carve their way down my neck. I moan when he thrusts his erection between my legs.

We fall back onto the bed together and Aleks starts tearing away my clothes. In a matter of seconds, he has me naked beneath him.

He stops suddenly and looks down at me, his eyes roving over my body. It's a testament to how far gone I am that I don't even mind the scrutiny for once.

Besides, he isn't looking at me with a critical eye.

He's looking at me like he'd swallow me whole if he could.

"There's no part of you I wouldn't devour, *kiska*," he rumbles. "Every inch of you is exquisite perfection."

His fingers run over my breasts, teasing my nipples a little before he follows the line between my breasts down to my stomach.

I shudder as his fingers twirl over my belly. There's a slight protrusion now, but still nothing too obvious. He frowns, his own thoughts dragging his face down. I reach up with my hand and run my fingers along the side of his cheek.

When his eyes meet mine again, they're warm. Molten, with heat and love and lust all burning together. He leans down and kisses me again, but this one is a far cry from the first.

That was a claiming, a sharp break from my grief.

This one? It's so gentle and tender that it makes me want to burst out in tears.

I swallow the sadness and surrender myself to the taste of him. I groan only when I feel his cock at my naked pussy. He runs his head along my slit once, twice, again and again, until I'm twitching like a live wire with the need to feel all of him.

Then he pushes into me slowly, making sure I feel every inch. It makes the experience all the more intense.

He takes his time, filling me completely and then pulling out only to do it all over again. I count his breaths and keep my hand on the side of his face. I don't think I could blink if I tried to. A team of wild horses couldn't rip my eyes from his.

Who would have thought slow fucking could be just as intense and passionate as the brutal way he's always taken me until now?

He moves in and out of me with measured control. Then his face falls into the crook of my neck. I feel his hot breath against my collarbone.

He starts ramping up the intensity. The tempo is still slow, but he thrusts into me harder and harder each time. I cry out with pleasure.

He does that until my toes are curling, and I'm moments away from grabbing hold of him and riding him to orgasm.

I'm not really a dominant person, in bed or otherwise. Aleks is so obviously the one in charge all the time.

But right now, it feels like taking control is exactly what I need to do.

So I push at his chest, forcing him back from me. Our eyes connect for a moment, and I give him another shove. He seems to understand, because he rolls right off me.

But he takes me with him. He stays inside me the entire time.

And then I'm on top of him, gripping his hips with my thighs.

I buck against him and he watches me as I start to experiment. I go slow, getting my bearings first as I ride him.

He's so deep inside me that I feel as though he's in my stomach, pressing all the way up into my heart.

Words rip out of me from someplace deep inside. "I want to give you everything," I whisper.

I start riding him harder, more intensely. His face tenses in restrained pleasure. His breathing is labored. The sight of him writhing beneath me spurs me on.

Aleks slides his hand between us and finds my clit. He teases me until I'm squirming on top of him. Until I'm shivering with need and anticipation. All it takes is the slightest change of pressure for me to see stars.

I close my eyes and arch my back. A long, drawn-out moan escapes my lips as the orgasm rolls through me like a riptide.

Aleks sits up and wraps his arms around me. Our heat melds together. I stare into his eyes and grind my hips into him until I feel him fill me up inside as he growls through slightly parted lips.

“Kiska...”

“F-f-fuck,” I moan.

Again and again, he fills me until he has nothing left. When we’re both finished coming, he pulls me back down with him. My forehead comes to rest on his chest. He doesn’t hold me, but he lets me lie there until I feel steady enough to dismount.

When I finally do, my whole body tingles. I find the sheets and slip under them, still not ready to reach for my clothes.

Aleks doesn’t mind being on display. He stands up and walks over to the refrigerator hidden behind a cupboard door. He pulls out two glass bottles and walks back to the bed.

I see a beer in his hand and start to remind him I can’t drink before he holds the second bottle out for me. My eyes go wide when I realize it’s lemonade. Not just any lemonade, but my favorite brand.

“How did you know?”

He shrugs. “I pay attention.”

He gets into bed with me and takes a swig of his beer. We sit there in silence for a few minutes, enjoying our drinks and reveling in the aftermath of our respective orgasms.

“Do you want to talk about what happened today?” he asks without looking over at me.

“There’s nothing to talk about really,” I mumble. “It went badly.”

“Robert didn’t take Jennifer’s appearance well, I take it.”

“He did not.”

“Did he at least hear her out?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I think that just made it worse.”

“Only because he couldn’t still cling to the narrative he’d built in his head.”

“He’s still in love with her.”

He rolls his eyes. “That was his mistake. Hers, too, now that I think about it.”

“You can’t control who you love,” I snap back.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he says, taking another sip of his beer. “Love isn’t just something that happens to a person. You have a choice.”

I stiffen. “Is that why you’ve never been in love?”

“Love is a liability in my world.”

I don’t know what I hoped he’d say—or maybe I do, and that hurts all the more—but it wasn’t that.

“It’s the be-all and end-all in mine,” I say quietly.

“Which is why your world has never held any attraction for me,” he replies. “A person’s biggest achievement shouldn’t be meeting the right person by sheer stupid luck.”

I look down at the lemonade sitting between my hands. Little drops of condensation run down the glass and coat my clammy fingers. I cling to the bottle like my life depends on it.

“No wonder you married me.”

“Huh?”

“No wonder you married me,” I repeat, turning to him. “You weren’t risking anything or losing anything.” When he doesn’t say anything, I continue. “What about your child? Will you love your child?”

“Yes,” he says without hesitation.

“And that’s different?”

“For me, it is.” His brow furrows and he stares at the opposite wall. He’s right next to me, living and breathing and existing just inches apart, but he seems so impossibly far away.

“What’s on your mind?” I ask when curiosity gets the better of me.

“Nothing.”

“Would it be so terrible to share something with me?”

He glances at me. “There are a lot of pieces in play at the moment. And you have enough to deal with without taking on my burdens, too.”

I sigh. I know that note in his voice—he’s not going to tell me a damn thing. I can’t even be mad right now. I was the one who came to his room. I was the one waiting for him. How much more can I ask from a man so unwilling to give?

I can’t change Aleksandr Makarova. No matter how hard I try.

“Not that you care what I think,” I sigh, “but I do think Rob might come around.”

“Why do you believe that?”

“Seeing Jennifer... It was hard on him. But he’s not going to be able to lie to himself anymore.”

He nods.

“That’s what you were hoping for, wasn’t it?” I ask.

“Something along those lines.”

“I think Jennifer still has feelings for my brother, too, for what it’s worth.”

“I suspected as much.”

“And you’re okay with that?” I ask. “I thought love was a liability.”

“That’s my choice. I’ve never told Jen how to live her life. Who she chooses to love is her business.”

“Even though Rob is your mortal enemy?”

He smirks. “Enemies have become friends in the past. It just depends on the circumstances.”

I wrinkle my nose. “You and Rob as friends? That seems unlikely.”

“Stranger things have happened.” He glances at me. “And I don’t want to be at odds with my son’s uncle. If Rob drops this insane witch hunt, then maybe I won’t have to be.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

His jaw clenches. “Then I’ll do what I must.”

I frown. “That sounds like a threat.”

“Not to you.”

“He’s my brother, Aleks,” I breathe. “You can’t hurt him. You can’t hurt any of them.”

“That, I can’t promise. I’ll try to preserve them. But if they come at me and my Bratva, I will answer back in kind.”

Suddenly, my nakedness feels wrong. The vulnerability snakes back into my body and my heart races. “Aleks, if I asked you—begged you—not to hurt them... would you listen?”

He reaches out and cups the side of my face, staring straight into my eyes. “I’ve offered them enough grace.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, ripping my cheek from his grasp.

“I’ve already gone easy on them for your sake,” he says. “I can’t do anything more for them now. They made their choice, Olivia. They chose Hargrove and his lies.”

“They need more time to figure things out. You have to give them time.”

“I will not gun for them yet,” he says. “But if they get in my way—”

“I can’t deal with losing anyone else, Aleks.”

He looks at me calmly. “You almost lost our child because of them.”

“Aleks,” I plead, reaching out and grabbing his face between both my hands, “don’t do something that will make me leave.”

His eyes narrow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“There are some things we won’t be able to come back from. And if you hurt my family, I will take my child and I will run forever.”

Something flashes across his eyes. Dangerous and dark. Like the shadow of a monster beneath the surface of the ocean. “You won’t have the option.”

I drop my hands. “You can’t make me stay.”

“I can make you do anything I want.”

“Are we back to that again, Aleks?” I demand. “The same old power games? Debating who holds the keys?”

“There is no debate, Olivia. There is only the truth. And the truth is that I am the one who decides what happens next. I always have been. I always will be.”

He gets out of the bed, still naked, and storms into the bathroom. I sit there, shivering, wondering how things can go from euphoric to horrific in a matter of minutes. Fast enough to give me whiplash.

I get dressed and leave his room before he returns.

As soon as I step into the hallway, I see Yulia walking up the stairs. She stops short when she sees me, realization coloring her face.

I flush with embarrassment, but there’s no avoiding her now. “I... I was just... I had to tell Aleks about how the meeting went.”

“Of course,” she says, graciously pretending to believe my obvious lie. “Are you okay?”

I try to push back my new sadness. “Fine. I’m fine. It’s just been a long day.”

“Olivia,” Yulia says, moving closer and putting her hand on my arm, “if you need to talk to someone, I’m here. Always.”

I smile. “I appreciate that.”

“I mean it. You’re going to have a baby. That’s when a girl needs her mother most.”

She says the words simply, thoughtlessly, with no ill intentions. But as she does, I feel something snap inside my chest.

She's right. Of course she is.

I'm terrified about being a mother. Doing it alone. *Being* alone.

And the one person who could have helped me through it is gone.

"I'm not your mother," Yulia adds. "But I've had a child, too. I'd like to think I can help."

My bottom lip starts to tremble, but I stop it in its tracks. "I'd love that, Yulia," I mumble. "Really."

She gives me a warm smile. When she folds me into her arms, I let her. "It's okay," she murmurs into my hair. "It's all going to be okay."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've been where you are right now," she says. "Wife to a current don. Mother to the next. Feeling alone and scared and hopeless. I have hit rock bottom too many times to count. And every time, I thought I wouldn't make it back to the light. But I did."

We pull apart and I stare at her desperately. "I'm not sure I'm strong enough to do that."

"Oh, trust me, honey," she says gently. "You are. I'll show you."

ALEKS

I stare out my window, watching Olivia walk by the lake with my father, and thinking one thought over and over again.

She drives me fucking crazy.

At first glance, she doesn't look like she should even be capable of such a thing. She's pushing his wheelchair and talking animatedly. About what, I have no clue, but the old man seems to enjoy her company. At this point, he probably enjoys the company of anyone who isn't Mike.

Still, it's grating to see how close she's getting to the people in my life. Where my father is concerned, I know she's not at risk. But I'm wary about her connection with my mother.

Yulia is capable of far more than the little *kiska* realizes.

"Blink," Demyan says behind me.

"What?"

"You've been staring out that window for fifteen minutes," he explains.
"Blink."

I force myself from the window and turn to Demyan. "They're walking by the lake again."

"It's some classic father-in-law and daughter-in-law bonding time. Hallmark would love to option the movie rights."

I roll my eyes and plop into my seat. “Spare me.”

Demyan just smiles. “It’s kinda heartwarming. I would have thought you’d be happy about that.”

“Why would I be?”

“Well, she needs something to distract herself. And so does he. Waiting for death can be hard. Also, it lets you off the hook.”

“What hook?”

“Meaning you’re not obligated to spend a whole lot of time with the old man.”

I scoff. “Please. You think that fucker spent any time with me when I was a boy? He was only interested in molding me in his image. I was a business investment. I don’t have to be let off any hook, because I don’t feel any guilt. I got him the best care and that’s where my obligations end.”

Demyan raises his eyebrows. “Right. Okay then. Case closed.”

“How are things on your end?” I ask, changing the subject.

“You mean with my ex and my kid?”

“The big move was this past weekend, wasn’t it?”

“You remembered.” He gives me a grateful smile. “I went over with chocolates and said goodbye to her.”

“How’d it feel?”

“Like my heart was being ripped from my chest,” he says quietly. “It’s unnatural to watch your child drive off and know you’ll only see her once every couple of months.”

“I’ll fly you out there whenever you want.”

“I know that,” he says. “But it’s a different experience when you’re not with your kid’s mother anymore. People talk about always remaining a team, co-parenting or whatever, but it’s shit. You’re not really a family anymore. You’re the outsider, the unwanted visitor who pops in and interrupts their life

every so often.”

“You’re not a visitor; you’re her father. That little girl loves you.”

“Only because she doesn’t know any better yet.” He takes a big sigh and runs his hand through his hair. “Miranda is dating someone.”

I can see the disappointment in Demyan’s eyes. He wants to act like it doesn’t bother him, but it does. He didn’t just break up with his partner; now, he has to watch another man step into his role.

“Who’s the guy?”

“Lang Britton. Thirty-six years old. His mother is Chinese. Father is American. Never been married, but he was engaged for a year in his twenties. He’s got a younger brother and a Labrador named Bentley.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You did a background check?”

“Of course I did a damn background check. Guy is clean as a whistle. Am I an asshole for being disappointed about that?”

I smile. “No.”

“He’s a good-looking son of a bitch, too.”

“That wouldn’t have been in a background check.”

“Miranda told me,” he says. “She pulled me aside and said she wanted me to hear it from her. She’s been involved with this guy for the last year. It’s pretty serious between them. She thinks they’ll end up together.”

“Is that the real reason behind the move?”

“She says no,” Demyan sighs bitterly. He runs his hand through his hair again, a sure sign he’s agitated. “Of course she would handle this in the classiest way possible. She even asked me if I wanted to meet him.”

“Did you?”

“Fuck no! I don’t wanna be friends with the asshole. I just want to know that he’s going to treat my girls well.”

“Girls?”

He reddens, embarrassment washing over his face for a second before he bats it away. “Miranda will always be my girl, too. Even if I fucked that up royally.”

“You’ve never admitted as much before.”

“Because I let my arrogance and pride take over,” he says. “But if I’d been smart about shit, I would have gone back, groveled at her feet, and given her whatever she wanted.”

“That would have involved leaving the Bratva,” I point out.

“Yes.”

“You’d really have done that?” I ask incredulously.

“I still would,” he says. “In a heartbeat.”

“Well, fuck.”

He smiles. “Doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say dismissively. “Whatever you say. So much for loyalty.”

“I see the way you look at Olivia, brother,” he says gently. “It’s the same way I used to look at Miranda.”

“Dem—”

“Just hear me out. The girl is special to you—you just don’t want to admit it. But don’t let pride get in the way like it did for me. You need to tell her how you feel.”

“Jesus, what happened to you?” I ask. “Since when do we talk about our feelings?”

“Since we got too old to fuck around with important shit,” he says somberly. “I’ve lost a child now. I don’t want the same thing to happen to you.”

“It won’t.”

“No?”

“She’s in love with me,” I say. “She’ll stay. She may fight me, but she’ll stay.”

“I used to think the same thing about Miranda. And it was true at the time... Until one day, it wasn’t. Love isn’t a permanent state of being, Aleks. It’s a process. Like growing a flower. And if you neglect it, it can abandon you. Once she decides she’s had enough, forcing her to stay won’t be an option. She’d wither on the vine.”

“Her alternative would be leaving without her child,” I argue. “She’ll never do that.”

“Do you really want her to feel forced to stay?” Demyan asks.

“This conversation requires alcohol,” I growl. “It’s too early in the day, Demyan.”

He smirks. “Sorry. I’m getting sentimental in my old age.”

“Well, put a lid on it,” I say. “My first priority right now is to take down that motherfucker Hargrove. My second priority is to find you a new woman.”

He smiles at that one. “I’ll find my own woman. How about you concentrate on yours?”

I glance back at the window. They’re still by the lake, but now, Olivia is sitting beside my father. It looks like she’s reading to him.

“How are things otherwise?” Demyan asks.

“I’m still working on finding more leads,” I tell him. “We need to find a victim who’s willing to talk.”

“That’s a long shot.”

“Don’t I fucking know it,” I grumble.

“And our new... asset?” Demyan asks cautiously, like he’s still not sure.

“Proving to be a pain in my ass. As expected.”

“At least he’s on board.”

I grit my teeth. “Reluctantly. But I’ve never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“I never understood that expression, but we’ll circle back on it. Jennifer is still under cover?”

“She’s got another lead,” I tell him. “Another girl who’s terrified to say a damn word.”

“Who’s to say this won’t turn out the same as the rest?” he asks skeptically.

“Approaching them directly hasn’t been working, so I made her take a different approach.”

“Which is...?”

“Befriend them. Earn their trust and then get them to confide in her unknowingly.”

“Old school.”

“Effective, but time-consuming.”

“You’re worried?”

“Not worried. Just impatient,” I say. “I want this shit dealt with. It’s taken up far too much of my attention from the start.”

“It’s only a matter of time. But have you thought about the fallout of an operation like this?” Demyan asks.

“Are you referring to my beloved brother- and sister-in law?”

He nods. “Bingo.”

I exhale with frustration. “It can’t be helped.”

“Not sure that explanation is going to fly with your wife.”

“She’s searching for something from me,” I say in a low voice. “Something I can’t give her.”

“You mean affection? Dignity? A shred of human decency?” I throw him a glare, but he just laughs. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that the girl

has feelings for you, *sobrat*. But like most women, she wants assurances. She wants to know where she stands with you.”

“I’m not that kind of man.”

“What kind of man are you?” Demyan press. “Because I’ll tell you this much: I don’t think you can handle disappointment.”

“I’ve never had to deal with disappointment. I get what I want.”

“Exactly,” he says. “Which is precisely why you’re going to take it badly.”

When I glance back towards the window, I can no longer see my father or Olivia. That doesn’t stop me from scouring every corner of the garden. Nor does it stop the tremor of doubt in my chest that comes whenever she leaves my sight.

“You need to compromise a little,” Demyan continues. “The way I refused to when I was with Miranda.”

“*Compromise*,” I scoff. “That’s not a word in my vocabulary.”

“Then are you prepared to lose her?”

I tense, thinking about the possibility of a future that doesn’t include Olivia. Trying to think about a future at all.

My own future is not something I spend a whole lot of time considering. I focus on the here and now. The only future I consider pertains to the Bratva and its interests.

Before I can wrap my head around any of it, my phone starts to ring.

I pick up. “Jennifer.”

“Where are you?”

“In my office.”

“Alone?” she asks.

“Dem is here.”

Her breathing is low and shallow. But there's an urgency in her tone. "The girl I've befriended, her real name is Edith Mulroney. Her alias is Star."

"Okay?"

"She told me she was groomed for Hargrove for almost a year. I have the name of the person who had her."

"Tell me," I order.

"It's—"

The line goes dead before Jennifer can say another word.

I check my phone and attempt to call back. She doesn't pick up.

"Fuck!" I growl, slamming my phone onto the desktop.

"What's going on?" Demyan asks, getting to his feet.

"I need you to get down to the Medusa," I tell him. "Jennifer is working undercover there. I need you to make sure she's alright."

"Has she been compromised?"

"I don't know," I snarl. "Just go."

Demyan nods and rushes out the door.

"Take backup!" I call after him. He waves in acknowledgement and disappears around the corner.

I turn back to the window, furious at the missed opportunity.

But I'm also worried about Jennifer. If Hargrove is onto the fact that she's closing in on him, then that makes her a target.

This is one of those times when I wish my face weren't so recognizable. Otherwise, I'd be down there making sure Jennifer is alright.

Unable to sit still, I leave my office and head into the garden. My mood is black, and I know whoever I run into is going to pay the price for it.

I turn the corner and run into Olivia.

She's holding a couple of books in her arms. They tumble to the ground at my feet when we collide.

I just stand there as she scrambles to pick them up. When she straightens up again, she looks annoyed, but the expression falters when she notices my scowl.

"Is everything alright?" she asks.

I give her a curt nod and move past her.

"Hey," she says, calling after me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She jerks back. "Oh, wow. That was extremely convincing. You don't have to shut me out, you know."

"Shutting you out implies you were inside in the first place," I tell her harshly. "Which you most assuredly are not."

Her face turns cold, but she doesn't turn away from me like I expect. "What is your problem? Why do you have to be this way?"

"This is who I am."

"If that were true, I would have never called you when I needed help."

I scoff. "You called me because you had no one else. Because you focused on your codependent relationship with your judgmental siblings and forgot to cultivate a life of your own."

"That's... that's not fair," she stammers, blindsided by my tirade of bluntness.

"It's the truth. Look at you," I continue, wishing I could stop myself, but knowing I'm not going to. "You're clinging to my family because you're so afraid to be alone without yours."

She looks shocked for a moment. And then the hurt washes over her face.

It's exactly what I was going for, and yet it leaves me feeling hollow. Regretful.

And I never regret a thing.

“You’re such an asshole,” she hisses through tear-filled eyes.

“Olivia?” It’s my mother’s voice. A second later, she follows, walking into the room. She sees Olivia first and then her gaze finds me. “Oh. Aleksandr.”

Before I can order her to get out, my phone starts ringing. Ignoring the both of them, I answer the call. “Yeah?”

“I got her,” Demyan says. “Jen is okay. She couldn’t blow her cover, so she hung up on you instead.”

“She hasn’t been compromised?”

“No, she’s right here. Hold on.”

I wait as Demyan passes the phone over to Jennifer. “Aleks?”

“You okay?” I ask, aware that there’s a fat tear rolling down Olivia’s face.

My mother leans in and wipes it tenderly from her cheek. She whispers something to her, but my concentration is split and I miss it.

“I’m fine,” Jennifer says on the phone. “The guy who runs this place walked in. We’re not meant to take personal calls when we’re on the job.”

“Where are you now?”

“In a private room with Demyan. He hired me out for an hour.”

I nod. “You had something you wanted to tell me?”

“The name of the groomer,” she says in a heavy voice.

I close my eyes. I have a feeling this is not going to land well. “Say it.”

She whispers the name so low I almost can’t hear it, but it’s impossible to miss. I feel my heart plummet. And yet, somewhere in the back of my head, it makes sense.

“Thank you, Jennifer.”

She doesn’t bother replying before she hangs up.

I put my phone away and look down at Olivia. Her eyes are big and bright, still full of hurt. There's anger there, too, but it's weak. Tired.

She's not looking at me. Gave up that struggle, I guess. Instead, she's looking at my mother as though Yulia Makarova is her saving grace.

"It's okay, honey," Yulia says. "I've got you."

"I need to get out of this house," Olivia says. "It feels like a prison."

"I know," my mother says. "Don't worry. We'll go somewhere nice tomorrow."

"What's happening tomorrow?" I interject.

Both women flinch. "Uh... Olivia and I thought we'd go have dinner tomorrow."

I turn to Olivia. I can see my earlier words still swimming in her face. Despite all that, there's still hope. Hope that she can change me. Hope that she can find the good man she thinks is buried somewhere inside.

Hope I need to extinguish.

"There will be no dinner tomorrow," I snarl.

"But—"

"That's my final word on the matter."

"That's not fair!" Olivia says, her voice rising.

"Neither is life. You will keep to yourself while you're here. You will stay away from my parents."

"Why?" she protests.

"Because I said so."

More tears stream down Olivia's face, but this time, I don't feel any guilt. Because this time, my cruelty has a purpose.

It's the only way to protect her.

OLIVIA

I stare dumbly at the blank piece of paper in front of me.

Apparently, it's been so long since I've seen another person that I can't even draw them anymore.

I haven't heard from my siblings in days. I expected that, but their silence is much louder thanks to my newfound isolation. More specifically, thanks to Aleks.

He wouldn't let me have dinner with Yulia, and I haven't seen his father around the house since our confrontation in the hallway, which I suspect Aleks also has something to do with.

He's punishing me.

But I don't know why.

So when the door opens, I assume it's one of the maids. And I still turn around immediately, desperate for human contact of any kind.

It's not a maid, though.

"Yulia?" I breathe. I'm half-convinced she's a hallucination.

She gives me a tired smile. "Hello, darling. How're you holding up?"

"That's a trick question, right?"

She glides forward in her champagne-colored silk pants and an ivory blouse that drapes over her slight shoulders. She looks like a Renaissance painting come to life.

“I’m sorry I’ve had to keep my distance.”

“Does he know you’re here right now?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “What Aleksandr doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“He’s probably got spies checking on me. Or you. Or both of us.”

“He’s busy at the moment,” she demurs. “He’s not going to notice.”

“Has he really forbidden you from even speaking to me?” I ask.

“Not in as many words,” she says. “But he was so... rattled the other day. I thought that keeping my distance would help calm him down a little.”

“Yeah, not sure that’ll work on your son. He’s... what’s the word? Oh, yeah: an asshole.”

She gives me a half-hearted smile, but I can’t bring myself to apologize. She knows it’s true.

“He’s being unfair to you.”

“He’s being unfair to both of us.”

She nods serenely. I’ve always been impressed by how Yulia composes herself. It’s like nothing can affect her.

But I want her to get riled up about this. I want her to reach my level of outrage. At least then I wouldn’t be alone in my anger.

From the looks of it, though, I’m out here on this limb alone.

“He is living according to the example he was taught,” she explains in a soft voice. “Like father, like son.”

I frown, trying to imagine Vlad as even half as monstrous as Aleks. I don’t doubt he was; I just can’t picture it. Right now, he’s a quiet, peaceful old man.

“Men like Vlad...” Yulia shakes her head. “Life has to really destroy them before you can see any scrap of their humanity.”

“Wow, that’s uplifting,” I mumble sarcastically.

She sighs. Disappointment stains her expression. I imagine that’s how I look every time I think of my pretend husband.

“You may make excuses for him, but I’m not about to,” I say firmly. “He’s your son; you’re being a good mother. I’m just not sure he deserves it.”

She exhales deeply. “I suppose I feel an obligation to justify his actions. It feels like making excuses for myself. After all, I’m part of the reason he is the way he is.”

I listen to her attentively, waiting for her to get the courage to continue.

“I didn’t shield him the way I should have when he was a boy. He was at his father’s mercy. And Vlad... well, he wasn’t exactly what you would call a doting father. He was harsh. Cruel. He loved Aleksandr in his own way, of course. But he didn’t know how to be a father without riding his son. Without bending and breaking him into the image of the man he thought he should be.”

“That must have been difficult to watch.”

“Which is exactly why I didn’t,” she says. “I couldn’t bear it, but I knew I had no power to stop it. So I stayed away. I kept to myself. I suppose, in the mind of a five-year-old, that might have felt like abandonment.”

It’s hard not to feel a grudging sympathy towards Aleks now. Tortured by his father, abandoned by his mother, set on a brutal path that offered no alternatives from the day he was born.

“He’s always resented me for it,” Yulia continues. “Not that he would ever admit as much. He’s too strong now. Too much like his father. In a sense, I suppose that’s a good thing.”

“Care to elaborate? ‘Cause from where I’m standing, there isn’t anything good about it.”

“You cannot survive in this world without being ruthless,” she says. “A don who doesn’t inspire fear is not an effective leader. Vlad’s men respected him, but fear was just as crucial. Perhaps more so. The same is true of Aleksandr.”

“I’m not scared of him.”

“Maybe that’s why he’s so hard on you,” she suggests. “He can’t force you into a box the way he’s done with everyone else.”

“Are you including yourself in that?”

She nods sadly. “I have to, if I’m being at all honest.”

“You don’t have to stay, though,” I point out. “You could leave. Start over somewhere else, do what you want, when you want it.”

Yulia is silent for a moment. Pensive. Her eyes flicker down to my belly. “Do you love the child inside of you, Olivia?”

I don’t have to think to answer. “Yes, I do.”

She nods. “It was the same for me. I loved him the moment I knew of his existence. Everything I endured after was worth it—because it meant I got to be his mother. When you feel that way about a child, it doesn’t matter what they grow into or how they treat you. You can’t ever leave them. You can’t ever just remove yourself from their lives.”

Her eyes swim with unshed tears. She blinks a few times until they disappear altogether. She’s spent a lifetime keeping herself from crying. By this point, she’s pretty damn good at it.

“I can’t abandon him again,” she finishes. “It would be like cutting my heart out of my chest.”

I reach out and rest my hand on her arm. “You’re a good mother, Yulia. Aleks may not know that, but I do.”

She gives me a grateful smile. “Thank you, darling. That’s kind of you to say.”

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

She chuckles. “At this point, why not?”

“Is that the reason you chose Aleks over Hargrove? Is it because he’s your son?” I ask. “Or is it because you believe Aleks’s story?”

She raises her eyebrows and sighs. “The truth? I don’t believe that Donald could have done it. But Aleks is convinced, and at the end of the day, I’m going to back my son. There is nothing more important than family.”

I can’t help but laugh bitterly. “I used to believe that, too.”

Yulia gives me a sad smile. “I know things are hard with your brother and sister right now. This rift between you all can’t be easy, especially given everything else you’re going through.”

“I used to think it was temporary. But now...”

“Have faith,” she advises. “Maybe there’s a world in which you can live here and still maintain a relationship with them. Stranger things have happened.”

I frown at the almost secretive way in which she says that last part. Like she knows something I don’t.

“Fat chance of that. I’m leaving as soon as I can, Yulia.”

She nods sympathetically. “Darling,” she begins—and this time, she’s the one who reaches for my hand—“if you choose to leave, I doubt he’ll stop you. It would be a matter of pride for him. But...”

“But what?”

“You wouldn’t be allowed to bring the child.”

My body reacts to that simple sentence like he’s already ripped my baby away from me. My pulse quickens, my skin chills, hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

I palm my abdomen protectively. “He can’t take my child from me.”

“He will do what he pleases, Olivia. It’s all he knows how to do.”

I shiver again, a head-to-toe, full-body shiver that rips all the way through me like a lightning bolt. “He’s a monster.”

“And yet you love him. Which suggests that perhaps there are parts of him that can be redeemed.”

I jerk my eyes up to meet hers. “I *what* him?”

Yulia sighs patiently. “Can I give you some advice, Olivia? Advice from a woman who’s been in your exact position once upon a time?”

I nod reluctantly. “I’m all ears.”

“Love has no place in the Bratva,” she says. “Falling in love with your husband is ideal in the outside world. But in here, it can hurt you. It’s much better not to give him your heart. That way, it won’t hurt so much when he casts you aside.”

My heart is already hurting, thudding painfully against my chest. My future here looks like a prison sentence, and I don’t get a trial. No chance to escape. Life without parole.

I feel worse than I did before this conversation began.

Yulia pats my back. “Don’t you worry, darling. I will always be here for you.”

I give her a smile, but I can’t make it sincere. “I think... I think I need to rest a little.”

“Of course,” she says, standing up. “Forgive me. I’m talking your ear off.”

“No, I appreciate all the advice.”

“You know, I always wanted a daughter,” she muses, smiling down at me. “For the first time, it feels like I have one.”

I’m already extremely emotional. Those words nearly push me over the edge. But I swallow my tears and give her a smile.

As soon as she leaves, I walk over to my bed and fall back onto the mattress.

I appreciate Yulia’s friendship and kindness. But at the end of the day, she’s still Aleks’s mom. And she’s made it clear that she’s going to choose his corner no matter what.

It's what parents do. Time and time again, they choose their families.

Well, good parents, at least. God only knows what kind of things are hiding behind Vlad's rheumy eyes. What horrors Yulia turned her gaze to avoid seeing.

But my dad, my mom? They were pure love, love incarnate, love for all three of us like no one has ever been loved before or since.

I never had to earn their love. They gave it freely.

I'm only just starting to learn what a blessing that was.

It strikes me as I'm lying there that my baby will never know them. Not my mother, not my father. They'll just be faces in a photograph, characters in a story. Might as well be fictional.

And the two other people who know them best—the only ones who will be able to help me keep their memories alive—are Mia and Rob.

Maybe that's what prompts me to pick up the phone.

I know Rob won't answer my call after what happened at the restaurant with Jen, so I scroll past **BIG HEAD BROTHER** in my phone and call Mia instead.

A part of me is actually hoping she doesn't answer. But then—

“Hello?” Her voice is tight and restrained.

“Hi, Mimi,” I say.

When she doesn't say anything, I decide to power through. “I just called because... well, it's been almost a week since we buried Mom. And I guess I wanted to talk to someone who knew her. Someone who knew them both.”

There's silence on the phone for a long time, but I don't hang up. As long as Mia is still there listening, there's a chance.

Finally, she sighs. “I was thinking about that exact thing yesterday.”

It feels so good to hear her voice. “Do you remember that trip we took to the Grand Canyon?” I ask.

“Of course I do,” Mia says. I can hear her smile. “Mom and Dad were insistent that we do a family trip together. We planned that trip for months. Rob had just started working and he wasn’t really interested in taking time off.”

“And you were cramming for exams,” I recall. “How did Mom convince you to come?”

“It was Dad who convinced me, actually,” she says. “He called and told me that I’d been studying too much. That I’d burn out and forget everything I crammed for. I needed a break.”

I laugh. “So he guilted you into coming.”

“He knew that I wouldn’t respond to pleading,” she says. “And he was right, as usual. That trip did wonders for my concentration when I got back to the books.”

“He credited himself with your 4.0 GPA.”

“I’ll bet he did,” she laughs. “But I’ll let him have it.”

“You know the weird thing about that trip?” I ask. “I don’t actually remember much about the Grand Canyon. What I remember is the drive there.”

“The stupid Winnebago that Dad rented,” Mia chuckles. “That thing was giant.”

“Mom nearly had a conniption when he pulled it into the driveway.”

“I’m pretty sure he was planning on buying it.”

“Oh, he definitely was. He told me. Made me swear not to tell Mom, though. I think he had this grand old retirement dream of the two of them puttering around the national parks in their golden years.”

“I can picture it already. Mom forcing them to find a local church to visit every Sunday. Dad buying the tackiest souvenir he could find from every state in the country.” She lets out a long sigh. “That should have been what happened. They deserved that.”

“It wouldn’t have lasted long, though,” I say. “Mom hated traveling and Dad would have wanted to be around for the grandchildren.”

Another silence, and I realize that this is potentially treacherous territory as well. But Mia doesn’t ask about my pregnancy. She doesn’t say anything at all.

“Have you spoken to Rob recently?” I ask, unable to hold the question in any longer.

“He’s been... distant lately,” she says.

Her tone suggests that she has no idea what happened at our lunch the other day. I decide not to be the one to tell her.

“But to be honest, that’s my fault, too,” she says. “I’ve been so busy with wedding planning.”

“Oh.”

I want to be able to ask about her wedding and feel happy for her. But I can’t muster up the feelings. I avoid it the same way she is avoiding talking about my pregnancy.

It’s strange to navigate so many explosive conversation topics when talking to Mia. We used to be able to talk about anything, no holds barred. Now, our relationship is a minefield.

“I should call him,” Mia continues. “See how he’s doing. I’ve had this wedding to distract me, but Rob hasn’t had anything.”

“Right.”

“I actually have to go,” she says suddenly. “I have to meet the florist at noon and then I have another appointment with the caterer.”

I hide the disappointment in my tone. “Of course. I get it. You’re busy.”

I expect her to hang up, but strangely, she hesitates. “Um... Liv?”

“Yeah?”

“The wedding is next week,” she says.

I take a deep breath. “Oh.”

“I know things between us have been, well... you know.”

“I know.”

“I’ve been thinking about what Dad used to tell us. About looking after one another,” she says. “I think about it a lot lately.”

“I do, too.”

“At the end of the day, we’re still sisters. And that will never change.”

I smile. “I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“Good, because... I want you to come.”

My heart stops. For a moment, I’m conflicted. I don’t support this relationship. I can’t.

But then I think about our parents. About how broken they’d both be if they knew what had become of the three of us.

And I think about Yulia, putting her family first no matter what. Even when it was torture to her to do so.

So I put aside every ill feeling I’ve had towards both Mia and Rob in the last several months. I set aside all of our drama and conflicts.

I choose my family.

I choose love.

“Of course I’ll be there, Mimi,” I say finally. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

ALEKS

“Turn on the television,” Demyan says, striding into my office.

I flip the switch on the remote and the black panels that hide the TV slide apart. As the screen flickers on, Demyan plucks the remote from my hand and changes the channel.

It’s one of the entertainment news shows. Hargrove’s network, to be specific.

Michelle Caputo, the blonde supermodel turned entertainment news anchor, is twirling her hair. “Wedding bells are in the air, everyone,” she proclaims, batting her eyes at the camera. The shimmering green shadow around her eyes sparkles in the studio lights. “Our very own Donald Hargrove is said to be engaged to a Ms. Mia Lawrence.”

A paparazzi image appears next to her, a grainy picture of Donald in a dark suit with his arm wrapped around Olivia’s sister. Mia is trying to shield her face from the flashbulbs going off around them.

“Now, there’s not much out there about Mr. Hargrove’s lucky lady,” Michelle continues. “She’s not in the entertainment industry, like many have speculated. In fact, she’s just a doctor.”

Demyan rolls his eyes. “And you’re ‘just a moron,’” he growls at the screen.

“She’s certainly beautiful, though,” Michelle continues, turning to her co-host. “What do you think, Manny?”

“Would you expect anything less from Mr. Hargrove?” Manny adds. “I’m focused on the age difference. Mia is quite young, isn’t she?”

“According to the wedding announcement in the paper this morning, she’s a couple of decades his junior,” Michelle says. “But age is just a number, right?”

“Mr. Hargrove sure seems to subscribe to that theory, if his dating history post-divorce is anything to go by!”

They both chuckle good-naturedly. Then Michelle turns to the camera with purpose and says, “Want to know more about the silver fox’s new lady? Stay tuned. We’ve done some digging and we’ll be back shortly with the juicy details.”

“It’s going to be a fucking spectacle,” I say as they cut to commercial break.

Demyan mutes the TV and nods. “Oh, definitely. The whole world will be watching.”

“There’s a play here.”

Demyan smiles. “I figured you’d say that. What do you have in mind?”

“Something that will annoy him,” I muse. “I need him rattled. I need him compromised.”

“Do you have to be so obnoxiously cryptic all the time?”

“It keeps things interesting.”

“Yeah, for *you*,” he mutters just as someone knocks on my office door.

“That’ll be Jen,” I say. “Let her in.”

He heads over to open the door. Meanwhile, Michelle and Manny return onscreen, exposing expensive white veneers as blinding as the sun when they smile.

Jennifer bowls through as soon as Demyan opens up. “Have you spoken to Olivia?” she blurts immediately.

“Good to see you, too.”

“Have you talked to her or not?”

“About what?”

“Don’t play dumb; it doesn’t suit you. The wedding,” she says pointedly. “Does she know?”

“Of course she does. She’s attending.”

“No way.” Jennifer’s eyebrow flies up on her forehead. “You’re allowing that?”

“I’m not going to stop her, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Demyan frowns. “Is this part of your plan?”

“I have some thoughts,” I admit. “But I need to have a chat with our new friend first.”

“Why?” Jennifer asks. “You don’t strike me as the kind of guy who believes in quid pro quo.”

“I’m not. Which is why I only tell him shit I don’t care about. I have to make it look like I’m playing by the rules.”

Demyan scoffs. “You’ve never met a rule you liked.”

“Sure I have: all the ones I’ve made.”

He rolls his eyes, but I focus on the worried look on Jennifer’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“I know he’s supposedly our ally and all now,” she says cautiously. “But can we really trust him? Especially when we have other options.”

“This is the fastest one,” I point out.

“But he’s—”

“I know what he is,” I interrupt. “I’m willing to take the risk.”

“Can’t believe we’re in bed with the fucker,” Demyan growls, looking like he just swallowed something foul. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Calm down, the both of you. Demyan, you agreed early on that this was a good thing. And Jennifer, you brought him in.”

“I did no such thing. He cornered me,” she retorts. “He’s been tailing me long enough to know who I worked for. I was just the messenger.”

“Regardless, I have a handle on the situation. I just need you two to have my back.”

“Always,” Jennifer says.

“Dem?”

Demyan nods his agreement.

“Good,” I say. “That settles that, then.”

“Then, changing gears,” Jennifer says without missing a beat, “I’m assuming that you’re sending Olivia to the wedding with a full security detail?”

“Four cars on-site, plus remote backup on-call.”

“Will she agree to that?” Jen asks.

I stand, adjust my cuffs, and laugh. “She won’t have a choice.”



I walk into Olivia’s room without knocking and immediately come to a stop.

My wife is standing in front of a gilded, full-length mirror wearing a dress that looks like it was made for her.

It’s a flowy tulle gown with blush and silver embroidery nestled amongst the layers. There’s a fairy tale quality about it. Like it’s not quite real, shimmering in and out of time and space.

The straps are thin across her shoulders and the back plunges low. I stare, taking note of the perfect line of her spine, the contours of her hips, the dimples at her lower back.

A thought crosses my mind, one I barely understand. *When did she become everything to me?*

She turns. Her eyes narrow when she sees me, but it's only because she's trying to stop the blush from creeping up her cheeks.

"It's a bit early to be getting ready for the wedding," I rasp.

She turns back to the mirror abruptly. "I just wanted to make sure I had something to wear that I could actually fit into."

"The dress suits you. A little risky, though."

She looks alarmed. "Why?"

"Because you have a good chance of upstaging the bride."

She almost smiles at that one. But she manages to turn it into an eye roll at the last second. "Please, Mia will be... She'll make a beautiful bride."

"I hope that thought keeps her warm at night after her husband is locked away in jail."

She glares at me. "We don't know that that will happen. I still think this could all just be a big misunderstanding."

"Wouldn't that be convenient?" I scoff. "A fairy tale story to go with your fairy tale dress."

I know I'm being cruel. I can see how it affects her, how every single word wounds her like a tiny little cut across her flawless skin.

But I can't tell her everything I'm really thinking.

How I can't stop gazing at the swoop of her throat, the peak of her breasts.

How her smell dances on my nose like a dream I can only just barely remember.

How she looks like a fucking angel in that dress, and yet all I want to do is rip it off of her and devour her sweetness.

No, those things will stay locked away forever. Nothing good can come of it.

“Why are you here?” she demands, breaking my train of thought.

“To tell you I’m letting you go to this wedding.”

“I wasn’t aware I needed your permission to go to my own sister’s wedding.”

“You need my permission for everything,” I say firmly. “And the only way I’m giving it to you is if you’re properly guarded.”

Her eyes go wide with horror. “Aleks, I—”

“Four cars, five men each. It’s non-negotiable.”

She looks like she wants to argue, but she bites it back. She knows it’s useless—I’ve made up my mind.

“Why all the damn fuss?” she spits at me instead. “It’s not like you genuinely care about me. Why this big show of protection?”

That simple little question puts me at a crossroads.

I could tell her the truth.

I could tell her that her safety is the only thing that matters to me anymore.

I could tell her that if anything happens to her or that baby in her womb, it will shatter me in a way I didn’t think I could be shattered.

She’d want to hear that. As much as she rages and spits and claws back, she’d want it. She is still, deep in her heart, just a pure-hearted girl desperate for love.

But instead, I look her in the eye and keep up the charade I’ve maintained since the moment we met—that she means nothing to me.

“The protection is for my child, not you. Don’t confuse the two.”

I don’t stay long enough to see her reaction. I turn and leave her alone.

A sad princess trapped in a world that’s anything but a fairy tale.

OLIVIA

“Are we getting close?” I ask the driver for the fifth time.

The streets are clogged and we’ve been sitting in standstill traffic for fifteen minutes. I’m under no illusions as to why.

Everyone wants to catch a glimpse of the bride and groom leaving the hotel today after the ceremony. There’s a red carpet set up on the front steps and hordes of security bustling around everywhere.

“Almost, ma’am,” he responds. “Another ten minutes at most.”

I can see the hotel from here, but there’s just so much damn traffic. I would just get out and walk, but I don’t think that’s a smart move with the three-inch platforms I’ve got on.

Plus, with all these strangers and potential dangers, Aleks would have me snatched off the streets and dropped back in my ivory tower before I could even reach the sidewalk.

I’d expected to see him before I left, but he was nowhere in sight when I got into the car and drove off.

He must’ve known I was going, of course. Aleks always knows.

Which means that he chose to keep his distance.

As for my choices, I’m controlling what I can. I’m wearing my hair down and did my own makeup, even though Yulia offered to hire a makeup artist.

Under different circumstances, I'd feel like a million bucks. But as it stands, all I feel is nervous. Not just for myself and the ordeal ahead.

But for my sister.

Finally, the driver is able to pull up in front of the hotel and the red carpet. A Bratva soldier from the advance car opens my door and helps me out.

The moment I'm on my feet, my bodyguards surround me. Beyond the ring of their protection, flashing lights and overlapping voices from reporters compete for my attention. I ignore them all.

I start the trek up the stairs, hoping to God I don't trip and make a fool of myself just to get the moment captured for posterity or the front page news.

"Looks like you could use a hand."

I look up and see who spoke. "Rob!"

My brother gives me a tight smile and offers his arm. I take it gratefully and we continue up the stairs together. He's dressed smartly in a black tux and white shirt. He's even shaved for the occasion.

"You finally got rid of the fuzz."

"Mia's orders," he laughs.

"I'm not surprised. Bridezilla, I bet."

Once we get inside the hotel, the noise and lights die down considerably. I can finally hear myself think again.

"Wow," I breathe. "That was a three-ring circus if I've ever seen one."

I can tell Rob isn't happy with all the fanfare either, but he keeps his thoughts to himself as he avoids my gaze.

"Rob," I say gently, reaching out and putting my hand on his arm.

He raises his eyes to mine. "Liv."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"Yes," he says shortly. My heart sinks. "But... I'm trying not to be."

“I hated ambushing you like that,” I admit.

“But he convinced you it was the right thing to do, I suppose?”

I purse my lips up, feeling caught out. “I... I thought it was the right thing, too. You just wouldn’t listen to me, Rob. I had to make you see.”

“Whether I liked it or not.”

I sigh. “Denial can be comforting. But it’s fleeting. The truth would have come out eventually.”

He stares at me curiously for a moment. Then he smiles.

“What?”

He shakes his head. “It’s just... for a moment there, I saw Dad. You reminded me of him.”

I smile. “Can you try to forgive me?”

“If you forgive me,” he exhales. “We’ve both made mistakes.”

I grab his hands in both of mine. “Of course I forgive you, Rob. You’re my big brother. The only one I have.”

I see the emotion bubbling up in his eyes for a second before he pushes it back down. “I want to go and check in with security before the ceremony begins.”

I have no doubt that’s true, but I also know that it’s a justified excuse for walking away from me. Avoiding having the conversation that sits silent between us, being willfully ignored.

The question of choosing sides that’s haunted our family since the moment Aleks entered our lives.

“Not that I have to worry about *your* safety,” he adds, glancing towards the bodyguards who have fanned out over the room.

“He’s... protective of the baby,” I explain in an embarrassed mumble.

“I suppose, in this case, I can’t blame him,” Rob says. “Anyway, I’ll see you during the ceremony.”

“Save me a seat?”

He nods. “I will.”

As he walks off, I wonder if confronting him with Jen was a mistake. I hoped it would help him see the truth, but I worry it’s done more damage than good.

The hotel staff are busy ushering wedding guests into the grand hall where the ceremony will take place. But I go in the opposite direction, towards the back rooms.

“Ma’am?” I turn to find one of the hotel managers giving me a polite smile. “You’re here for the Hargrove wedding, I presume?”

I resist the urge to correct her. *Hargrove-Lawrence wedding*. My sister deserves equal billing.

“I want to see the bride before the ceremony,” I tell her.

“Oh, I’m afraid that won’t be possible—”

“I’m her sister.”

“Oh,” the manager says, her brown eyes going wide. “Olivia Lawrence?”

I nod. “That’s me.”

She smiles politely. “Well, then, please follow me.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. I’d half-expected to be informed that Mia had no desire to meet with anyone while she was getting ready.

As we ride the massive, golden elevator up to the seventieth floor of the hotel, I feel a stab of sadness.

I should have been with Mia from the moment she opened her eyes today. I should have been the one organizing things for her, helping her get dressed, telling her that nerves were just par for the course. We should’ve been sharing champagne and giggles and tears and hope, and then I should’ve been right at her side while she said “I do” to the love of her life.

Instead, I'm arriving an hour before the wedding, ensconced at the very bottom of the guest list, worried that Mia might order me to get the hell out the moment she sets eyes on me.

The manager holds the door open. I step through.

The room beyond is massive and luxurious, which I expected. What I'm not expecting is to see so many other women flitting around.

Mia is sitting on a round, white-cushioned settee that's almost completely hidden underneath the layers of her lace wedding dress. A flock of assistants scurry around her, fussing with her hair and her dress and her makeup.

There's so much going on that Mia doesn't see me at first. But I don't mind that. I want to be able to look at her—admire her—before I have to figure out what to say.

The dress is elaborate. The lace runs up her hands and snakes up her neck, revealing only little flecks of skin here and there. The bodice is tight-fitting at the torso before flowing out into a perfect A-line skirt that's worked through with more of the fine, shimmering lace. Her hair is an intricate weave of silky tresses, held in place with pearly clips.

As I move forward, the women part naturally. Mia's eyes lock onto mine. She looks surprised to see me here, but she hides it behind a smile.

"Livvy."

"Mimi," I say with a genuine smile. "You look absolutely beautiful."

She glances down at herself. "You don't think it's too much?"

"Is there such a thing on your wedding day?" I ask.

She gives a little giggle. It strikes me that I've never actually seen her like this—so completely and utterly happy. It betrays the fact that she's been waiting for this day for a long time, despite the whole "independent woman who don't need no man" spiel she used to give me when I was younger.

"Can I get you anything, dear?" an older lady asks.

She's a big woman, but she's sheathed herself in a gorgeous dress that glistens when she moves. Her hair is shot through with a fashionable gray.

"I'm good. Thanks, Aunt Marisol," Mia says before turning to me. "Marisol, this is my sister, Olivia. Liv, this is Donald's aunt."

"By marriage," Marisol adds with a wink. "It's why I'm clearly so young."

"Of course," I say with a polite smile.

"You are certainly a stunner," she says, giving me a critical once-over. She turns back to Mia. "I didn't even realize you had a sister."

I try to let the comment roll off my back. Especially since Marisol is looking at me once again with a teasing little twinkle in her eye.

"How old are you, darling?" she asks. "Twenty, twenty-one?"

"Twenty-five," I say self-consciously, aware that more and more of the women milling around are paying attention to this conversation.

"Mm," she says with a conspiratorial nod. "I know at least three very eligible young men who are going to be in attendance at the wedding. I can introduce you to them afterwards."

My answer is immediate and instinctive: "I'm married."

Mia's eyes go wide. I see the ripple of displeasure scathe across her features. She looks away from me immediately when I try to meet her gaze.

"Married?" Marisol exclaims. "Really? So young?"

"It's... new," I say, blushing.

"Well," she hums, "he's a lucky man."

Thankfully, someone calls to Marisol just then and she walks away, clucking impatiently. I, for one, am intensely relieved.

I wait for some snide jab from Mia, but she surprises me by patting the empty space next to her. She has to move her dress to make room for me, but I manage to sit down without stepping on her hemline.

“The dress has a train,” she tells me. “It’s ten feet long.”

“Whoa.”

She laughs again. “I know. But the plans were so elaborate. I just felt like the dress needed to suit the occasion.”

“Good call.”

A couple of little girls run past. They’re all wearing blush pink dresses with full skirts. Each one has a little flower crown resting on their heads.

“It’s going to be a big entourage,” she explains, following my eyes. “I have ten flower girls and eleven bridesmaids.”

I cringe at the mention of bridesmaids. She notices immediately because she turns to me with a sad little sigh. “I would have asked you obviously,” she says. “But with everything going on—”

“Say no more,” I say quickly, mostly to keep myself from breaking down. “I understand.”

She nods. “The two little ones over there are twins. Maxine and Caroline. They’re the youngest of the flower girls.”

“They’re all Donald’s relatives?” I ask.

“It was my idea,” she says, sounding slightly defensive. “There was no one from my side of the family that I wanted in the wedding party.”

I wince again, though I do my best to hide it. Mia is looking elsewhere and doesn’t notice this time.

“Most of them are Donald’s nieces or grandnieces. A couple of cousins, godchildren, that kind of thing.”

I nod. “You’ll make a beautiful group walking down that aisle.”

“I’m nervous.”

For good reason. It’s not a very gracious thought, but I can’t stop it, and I feel instantly guilty for thinking it.

At the end of the day, I want Mia to be happy. Safe and happy.

But if it comes down to one of the two, I think I'd prefer her to be safe.

I scan the room again. The flower girls are clustered in the corner, all of them twittering with excitement and giggles.

All but one.

The one in question is older than the others, but not quite old enough to fit in with the bridesmaids. She has a somber expression on her face. A kind of distance in her eyes, a weariness way beyond her years.

She looks up and meets my gaze, then glances away again just as quickly. She's a beautiful young woman. Fourteen, maybe. Her eyes are light, either blue or green, I can't quite tell. She gazes forlornly out of the window while the rest of the wedding party circulates around her.

She looks as though she'd rather be anywhere else.

One of the other girls comes up to her. "Sophie," she cries out happily, "come —"

"Liv?"

My sister's voice slices through my eavesdropping. I turn back to her.

"It's almost time," she explains.

I stand up and give her an appreciative nod. "You really are beautiful, you know."

She smiles demurely. "Thank you."

A second later, her smile disintegrates. Without having to ask, I know exactly why.

I take a step closer to her and block out all the noise that surrounds us. "I wish they were here, too," I whisper to her. "But you know what? I think Mom and Dad would both agree with me. You are the most beautiful bride I've seen in... well, ever."

She laughs softly and some of the loss recedes. “Thank you, Livvy. I’m glad you came.”

“Ah, here he is!” I recognize Marisol’s voice as it cuts through the throng of chatter. “Everyone! Make room for the brother of the bride.”

Rob moves through the herd of women and joins us. For a moment, it’s just the three of us. Three siblings who have been through hell and back.

And for a moment, I can almost forget about all the scars we’ve given each other.

“Wow, Mia,” Rob says, though the smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Mom and Dad would have been so proud.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

He offers her his arm. As they turn for the door, Rob throws me a little nod over his shoulder. I give him a smile and watch as the entourage follows them out the door.

I stand there, watching them file out, marooned apart from the celebration in a way that hurts more than I know how to explain.

The room empties, but I stay where I am, until a smartly dressed woman with a clipboard and a headset sticks her head in the room and sees me there.

“Ma’am, the ceremony is about to start. You might want to get to your seat.”

“Right,” I mumble. “I’ll head down now.”

When I walk out of the bridal suite, I come to a stop when I’m faced with five of my bodyguards.

“Jesus,” I breathe. “I almost forgot you guys were with me.”

“Are you ready to head down, Mrs. Makarova?” the head guard asks politely.

“I guess.” I look towards the elevator doors and sigh. “It’s too late to turn back now.”

ALEKS

“Where are you?” Demyan asks on the phone.

“Walking in now,” I say just as I spot Olivia stepping out of one of the elevators.

She looks phenomenal in her dress. But the smile on her face is definitely forced. As I watch, she hangs back, observing the last remaining guests shuffling through the grand golden doors that lead to the main ceremony hall.

“Gotta go,” I tell Demyan. “My wife is looking a little lonely.”

“You’re sure about this?” Demyan asks one more time. “Your face is going to be plastered on the front of every magazine for miles around.”

“Trying to scare me?”

“A little, yeah. Is it working?”

“In this case, I’m willing to deal with the publicity,” I say. “Just so long as it pisses Hargrove off, it’ll be worth it.”

“Good luck then, you crazy bastard.”

“A man makes his own luck in this world, Demyan.”

I hang up and walk towards Olivia. She doesn’t see me until the last minute. Her eyes go wide with shock as she takes in my sharp black suit. Tom Ford tends to do that to women.

“I... I...”

“If I’d known dressing up would render you speechless, I’d have done it a long time ago.”

She swallows back her shock and finds her words. “What the hell are you doing here, Aleks?”

I give her a wounded look. “I’m your plus-one, of course. I didn’t want my wife to have to sit by herself during her own sister’s wedding.”

She grabs my hand and pulls me close. “Aleks, please... this is not the time for games.”

I shake my head at her. “Actually, it’s the perfect time for games. This whole wedding is a fraud. If you think that asshole in there is marrying your sister for any other reason than to cover his tracks, you’re deluding yourself.”

“It takes one to know one, I suppose,” she snaps.

I smile. “Careful now, darling. We’ve got eyes on us.”

She turns around just in time to see one of the wedding planners walking up. “Sorry, Ms. Lawrence. I had no idea you were the bride’s sister. We’ve got a place for you up front.”

She waves her away. “Oh, that won’t be necessary. I’m late as it is, so I’ll just grab a seat in the back.”

“Nonsense,” I butt in. “You don’t want Mia to misunderstand, do you?”

I grab Olivia’s hand in mine. She struggles as subtly as she can, but she can’t quite shake me off without making our disagreement obvious.

The wedding planner’s eyes flit to me with a mixture of intimidation and awe.

“I’m Aleksandr Makarova, by the way,” I explain to her as pleasantly as possible. “Olivia’s husband.”

“Oh my,” the woman mumbles. “You two must have made quite the couple on your wedding day.”

“It was more like a hostage situation,” Olivia sasses angrily.

The wedding planner assumes it’s a joke and giggles. “Please follow me, Mr. and Mrs. Makarova.”

I maintain a firm grip on Olivia’s hand and tow her along after the wedding planner. She keeps her head down the entire way to our seats.

As promised, we’ve got two seats in the second row. The moment we’re seated, the music starts to swell and an orchestra plays Hargrove down the aisle alongside an armada of groomsmen.

I roll my eyes at the pomp and circumstance of the whole thing, well aware that there are cameras roving everywhere, capturing every facial expression to serve up on a tasty platter later for an adoring public hooked up to the IV of a breathless, 24/7 news cycle. I’m sure they see what I’m doing.

Hargrove, on the other hand, doesn’t catch sight of me until he’s standing up on the raised dais.

He scans the crowd. I notice how calculated his gaze is. Weighing, assessing, seeing who is where and what that implies. He looks pleased at first—*Everything according to plan*, I’m sure he’s thinking.

Then he finds me.

And that thought goes right out the window.

His eyes barely narrow, but that’s all I needed to see. Olivia seems to shrink beside me.

“Oh, God,” she mutters.

“Calm down, *moya zhena*,” I say. I still have her hand trapped in mine. “It’s a wedding. Just enjoy yourself.”

“I didn’t enjoy my own wedding,” she hisses. “Why should this be any different?”

I ignore the comment as the bridal march starts to play. Fabric rustles throughout the ballroom as all eyes turn to the back.

The bride's procession is even grander than the groom's. It starts off with flower girls scampering down the aisle, casting petals everywhere they can reach. After them comes a fleet of bridesmaids decked out in varying shades of pastel purple.

Finally, at the burgeoning crescendo of the music, the bride arrives on the arm of her stoic brother.

"You think he'd muster up a smile for this," I drawl.

"He's got a lot on his mind," Olivia snaps. "Leave him alone."

Mia doesn't notice either one of us as they pass, but Rob sure as hell does. He almost comes to a standstill. It's Mia who urges him forward without bothering to check what snagged his attention.

I lean back in my seat, smugly pleased. Hargrove was right about one thing: everything is going according to plan.

The problem for him is, the plan is mine.

The ceremony proceeds smoothly after that, though it goes on for-fucking-ever. The priest gives a sermon and then there are vows and promises to be made. I have to resist the urge to yawn numerous times.

When Donald starts in on his vows, I groan audibly. Olivia elbows me in the side.

"That was a little aggressive."

"Good," she hisses. "It was meant to be. Have some respect."

"For that son of a bitch?" I scoff. "Not likely."

"For the sanctity of marriage, if nothing else."

A burst of laughter almost escapes my lips, but I manage to hold it back just in time.

Olivia glares daggers at me. "Marriage *is* sacred. And thanks to you, I was robbed of it."

“Well, this isn’t exactly the event to turn things around for you. That man’s vows mean nothing,” I whisper to her. “He’s a liar. Whatever he promises now, he’ll break later.”

“For my sister’s sake, I hope not.”

The ceremony finally ends. Mia and Hargrove are declared husband and wife. They kiss like they mean it and cheers fill up the massive hall.

Everything happens in reverse. The couple are led through doors at the back of the room and out into the reception hall. The wedding party follows. Then, row by row, the attendees proceed after them.

“Let’s get out of here,” Olivia says, grabbing my arm and trying to pull me in the opposite direction of the crowd.

“Get out of here?” I ask. “We haven’t congratulated the bride and groom yet.”

“We don’t need to. I already spoke to Mia before the ceremony. There’s no need to stay.”

“Embarrassed to be seen with me, wife?” I ask.

She glares, but I ignore her and pull her into the reception hall. She nearly trips over her heels, but she comes with me, trying and failing to control the discontent on her face.

There are lots of famous, important people at the ceremony. Like a gossip magazine come to life. But if Olivia is impressed, she gives no impression of it. She looks like she’d rather be anywhere else on the entire fucking planet.

“Ah, there they are.”

She spins around and plants herself in front of me. “What are you playing at, Aleks?”

Before I can speak, she adds, “Stop smiling at me like that.”

“I can’t help it, *kiska*. You make me smile.”

Her nose wrinkles in confusion. “I don’t know if you’re just screwing with me or if you’ve suffered blunt force trauma to the head, and honestly, I don’t

care. I don't want you pretending like we're some happy couple."

"If Mr. and Mrs. Hargrove can do it, why not us?"

"Aleks, for the love of God, please just tell me why."

I sigh. Fine. If she wants answers, I'll give them to her. But she is certainly not going to like them.

"Isn't it obvious? There's going to be major publicity when we leave this reception."

Her face screws up in concentration. "And?"

"And once it becomes common knowledge that Aleksandr Makarova is brother-in-law to Donald Hargrove, anything that hits me negatively will affect him, too."

She frowns, trying to follow my line of thought. "But—"

"The shit he's trying to pin on me is big, Olivia. Guilty by association is a thing, you know. Especially since powerful men tend to protect each other's secrets. He wants to take me down? Well, it's not going to be that simple."

"Have you even thought about my sister?"

I raise my eyebrows. "She didn't really think about you, did she?"

"As if *you* care about my feelings."

I lean in until my lips brush against her ear. "Maybe I do, Olivia. Maybe I care more than you've ever even begun to realize. Maybe I—"

I glance up at that moment and make eye contact with none other than Hargrove.

So be it. The sweet nothings will have to wait for another time.

"Come on," I say, taking advantage of her temporary state of shock. "Time to say hello to the stars of the show."

I stride forward swiftly. "Congratulations!" I announce loudly so that all the people around us are sure to hear.

Then I lean in and hug the bride. Mia is so stunned she hasn't wiped the smile off her face yet.

Olivia has turned an attractive shade of pink, but she doesn't apologize for my bombast like I expect her to. She just stands next to me, looking as awkward as ever.

Hargrove gives me a seemingly sincere smile. He even adds a little laugh at the end to make it convincing for everyone watching on.

The photographers hover around, taking candids at every possible moment. Hargrove's fake smile stays plastered to his face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Makarova?" he growls through gritted teeth, making sure his mask doesn't falter. Up close, it makes him look deranged. But then again, that suits him.

"Just came to wish my sister-in-law and her husband a happy wedding day," I explain lightly. "We are family, after all."

"You are *not* our fucking family."

"Breathe, darling," Mia hisses, gripping his arm tightly. "This is not the time nor the place."

I sense Olivia stiffen beside me. Her hand falls across my arm, but it's gentle. More like she's pleading with me, rather than angry at the situation.

"Aleks, let's go."

"I wonder how the world will feel about your brother-in-law being a pedophile? Outing me now is going to make life extremely difficult for you, I'd imagine."

I can see the effort it's taking him to keep the smile in place. Any minute now and he'll start breaking out in sweat. "I'm not concerned about that. I can handle the fallout of exposing what you've done."

"I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

"I have no problem dragging your name through the dirt," he says threateningly. "I'll make sure the world knows that I'm the one who worked

with the cops to expose you. They'll give me medals while they dance on your grave."

He glances at Olivia. "You backed the wrong horse, Olivia. But don't worry: when this is all over and he's behind bars, I'll still protect you. For no other reason than you're my wife's sister."

"I don't want your protection," Olivia snaps back. Her grip on my arm tightens. It's almost... protective, in a strange sense.

"You may not want it," he says with cold eyes. "But you will need it."

"Why would you even bring him, Olivia?" Mia asks, breathless.

Her poker face isn't as good as her husband's. Her brows knit together with distress. I can tell that Hargrove notices because he takes her hand and tugs on it. A reminder of where they are, of all the people watching on, of everything at stake.

"I didn't bring him," she answers. "He came because I needed him. Because he didn't want me to suffer alone like I did when we buried Mom."

The pride in her voice is unmistakable. The feeling it stirs up in my chest, however... I'm not quite sure how to put my finger on that.

Mia quivers with pent-up anger. Then she says primly, "We have more guests to meet."

The dismissal is obvious.

Fine by me. I've accomplished what I came here to do.

I take Olivia's hand and walk her away from the couple. I don't stop walking until we've stepped out onto one of the huge balconies dotting the facade of the hotel.

There's no one outside with us. Just hundreds of bouquets of red and white roses and their scent floating through the air.

I pluck the reddest flower I can find and hand it to Olivia. She looks down at it as though this is the first time she's ever seen a rose.

"What are you doing?" she demands.

I ignore her question, cupping her face in one hand. “You held your own in there. You were brave. I’m proud of you.”

She takes a deep breath and accepts the rose I’m still holding out to her.

“Thank you,” she murmurs. Then she sighs heavily. “I can’t believe you came.”

“Aren’t you glad, though?” I ask. “I livened up this boring party.”

“I want to go home now,” she says, staring down at her rose.

I nod. “As do I. Let’s go.”

As we’re moving back through the crowd, I feel eyes on me. When I glance to the side, I catch sight of Rob in close, muttered conversation with a lanky man in an ill-fitting suit.

“Who’s that with Rob?” Olivia asks when she sees where I’m looking.

“That,” I say grimly, “is the man who replaced Rob in the investigation against me. And it looks like he wants to talk.”

OLIVIA

My heart is thundering in my chest as the detective struts over to us with Rob in tow.

The man is an FBI agent like my brother, but that's where the similarities end. He's a good ten years older than Rob at least, and he moves with an easy, lithe confidence, nothing like Rob's intense whirlwind of focus.

When he stops in front of us, he smiles pleasantly at Aleks. "Mr. Makarova, I've heard so much about you."

Rob is stiff and anxious, his gaze flitting between Aleks and his colleague, but everyone else appears to be perfectly at ease.

"I'm sure you have," Aleks replies. "My brother-in-law must have talked your ear off about me. Isn't that right, Robert?"

Rob narrows his eyes, but looks away from Aleks. "They're opening the buffet soon."

The detective turns to me. That smile is plastered so tightly on his face that I'm starting to wonder if it'll crack under the strain. "Is this your sister, Rob?"

"Olivia," I say, offering my hand because no one else seems keen to make introductions.

He returns my shake, his grip warm and callused. "Lovely to meet you, Olivia. I'm Steven Kennedy. Your brother and I work very closely together."

“Is that so?” Aleks asks. “Working on anything interesting right now?”

I stare at my husband in disbelief. Is he really goading the man who’s in charge of the investigation into him?

“Always,” Kennedy says with a pleasant nod. “Very exciting case.”

“You think you’ll catch the bad guy?”

I swallow hard. *What the hell is he doing?*

Kennedy is unfazed. “I always catch the bad guy.”

Aleks nods. “Good to know. The world is safer with you in the mix, surely.”

“I’ll be seeing you around, Mr. Makarova,” Kennedy says. There’s the twist of a gruesome promise in his tone.

Aleks seems amused by that. He nods to both men. “I look forward to it.” Then he turns to me. “We really should be going, *moya zhena.*”

I give Rob and the detective a courtesy wave and follow Aleks out of the grand hall. The moment we clear the ballroom, I grab his hand and he twists to face me.

“What the hell was that?”

He blinks. “What?”

“Don’t *what* me,” I snap. “You know exactly what. That man is working with Hargrove to frame you!”

“I’m keenly aware of that, Olivia. But thank you ever so much for the reminder.”

“Why would you even engage with him?”

He shrugs. “I’m not scared of the poor bastard.”

“Right,” I say, throwing my hands up in irritation. “Because you’re Aleksandr Makarova. You’re not afraid of anyone.”

“Precisely. Glad we got that straight.”

I grit my teeth and restrain myself—barely—from pulling my hair out by the root. “He was threatening you, you know.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Aleks says sarcastically. “In fact, I think he likes me.”

“Aleks—”

He just laughs, cutting me off. “Don’t worry, Olivia. I’ve got a handle on this situation.”

“He’s a detective for the FBI, Aleks.”

“As I keep telling you, I’m aware.”

“And he’s here, at Hargrove’s wedding.”

“Why are you telling me things I already know?”

“They’re in cahoots!” I hiss, trying and failing to keep my voice low.

“I always liked that word,” Aleks muses. “*Cahoots*. A little archaic, but really gets the point across.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re impossible.”

“Is that what you like about me?” he asks, wrapping an arm around my waist. That one simple touch scatters my thoughts.

Before I can gather them back up, someone calls my name. I turn to see Rob standing by the imposing golden doors that lead to the grand hall.

“Go speak to your brother,” Aleks tells me. “I’ll be waiting for you outside.” His hand lingers on my hip for a moment, enough to give me full-body shivers, before he slips away.

I head over to Rob. “What’s going on?” I ask.

“Why don’t you stay, Liv?”

“Stay? Like... at the wedding?”

“Stay here,” he explains. “Spend the night at the hotel so that we can talk tomorrow.”

I frown. “I don’t think Mia or Hargrove will like that. They were pretty pissed about the fact that Aleks was here in the first place.”

He runs a hand over his face and sighs. “Can you blame them?”

“I’m sorry, okay?” I say. “I didn’t know he was going to be here. I came down after speaking to Mia, and he was just... here, waiting for me.”

“Of course,” Rob says with a resigned nod. “I’m sure he had some ornate, masterful plan to oversee.”

“You’d know better than me.”

His brow wrinkles. “What does that mean?”

“All of you have ulterior motives. Aleks, Hargrove, you.” When he gives me an incredulous look, I continue. “Come on, Rob. You just wanted to ‘introduce’ us to Steven Kennedy? Thought maybe we’d be good friends?”

He purses up his lips but doesn’t say anything. So I push on. “He’s the detective that replaced you on Aleks’s case, right?”

“He’s an old friend of Hargrove’s.”

“I’m not stupid.”

Rob sighs. “I may not be on the case, Liv, but I know that they’re closing in. It’s only a matter of time now.”

“Is that a fact?” I ask coldly.

“You shouldn’t have brought him.”

“I told you already: I didn’t bring him. He showed up.”

He looks torn for a moment. Then he steps towards me and takes my arm. “Just stay with us, Liv. We’re your family. It’s where you belong.”

“And my child?” I ask, pulling myself free from his grasp. “Does my child belong? Or am I still expected to get rid of it like you expect me to get rid of him?”

“I know you think you care about him—”

“He’s the father of my child,” I snap. “That makes him my family now. It makes him your family, too.”

Rob falls silent.

“You saw Jennifer,” I point out. “You spoke to her, Rob. Didn’t that make you question this witch hunt even a little?”

He shakes his head like he’s trying to convince himself of something. “Isabel—fuck, Jennifer is no longer a factor,” he says. “The girls he hurt are my only concern now.”

“You were wrong about Jennifer,” I point out. “Isn’t it possible you’re wrong about Aleks, too?”

“I know you need to believe that in order to get through this shit, but—”

“No, I do actually believe he is innocent,” I say. “I’m not lying to myself. I am capable of making up my own mind about things, Rob. None of you seem to be able to appreciate that.”

“You’re not safe with him, Olivia.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, Robert,” I fire back just as formally as he said my name. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

Before he can say another word, I turn around and march for the exit. At first, I can’t see Aleks, but the moment I step through the gigantic hotel doors, I catch sight of him.

He’s standing by the steps, facing a throng of reporters who’ve got their microphones and their cameras pointed directly at him. I freeze, realizing what he’s doing.

“... Of course,” I hear him say, in a smooth, polished voice very unlike his own feral growl. “I wish nothing but the best for them. Donald and I are very close. Friends first, and now... brothers.”

I head down the steps, ignoring the flashing lights around me. I grab Aleks's hand and steer him gently away from the cameras and down the steps. He lets me take him, smiling and calling a friendly goodbye to the reporters as we go.

My security is gathered around a stretch limo that Aleks must have brought. They part as we pass and hold the door open so I can get in.

Everything inside the limousine is plush and leather and gilded. Just absurd wealth stitched into every inch of the fabric. A mini-bar holds glistening bottles of champagne stamped with some unpronounceable French name that I assume translates as “*Not for the Pooors.*”

I wonder if Aleks even notices that the world he lives in and the world everyone else lives in are not the same.

He gets in after me and settles into the seat at my side. The moment the door closes, it shuts out all the noise and lights from beyond. Silence ensues, cool and comforting.

I close my eyes and let loose a deep breath, but I can't quite stave off the fear in my gut.

“Did you have to do that?” I ask, keeping my eyes closed.

“It's always nice to have a little insurance.”

“Was that what that was?” I crack open an eyelid to glare at him.

He smiles and fingers a lock of my hair. “You look beautiful, you know.”

“Stop it.”

His smile only gets wider. “What did your brother want to talk to you about?”

“None of your business.”

He chuckles. “Ah, right. He wanted you to leave me and stay with them.”

I recoil. “Jesus, do you have me bugged or something?”

“I just know all the players in this game,” he explains. “And I know your brother better than he knows himself. He's worried that you're going to get caught in the middle.”

“A little too late for that, don't you think?”

He laughs again, completely carefree. “True enough.”

I sigh. “Yeah, he asked me to stay there with them. He says they can protect me. They’re worried about how this will come out in the press if they manage to expose you.”

“Of course. Appearances are everything.”

“That might be Hargrove’s primary concern. But I doubt it is Rob’s,” I say. “As for Mia... well, she’s becoming more and more of a stranger to me.”

Aleks stares at me, perfectly content not to say anything. But as the silence stretches on, I squirm in my seat.

“What?” I snap.

“You chose to come with me,” he says, as if I need the reminder.

“Don’t flatter yourself. It was a practical decision.”

“How so?”

“My baby,” I say, laying a hand over my stomach. “I have to make sure he’s safe at any cost. They betrayed my trust once before. I’m not about to trust them a second time. Not where he’s concerned.”

“He? You think it’s a boy now?”

My cheeks flush. “Well, no, not really. I just... when I imagine the baby, I see a boy. That’s all.”

“What does he look like?”

Aleks’s gaze is burning, intense, unblinking. Solely focused on me.

Does he know what that look does?

Is he even aware of its power?

I bite my lip. “He... well, I imagine he looks like you,” I mumble awkwardly.

We’re quiet for a moment after I say that. Just breathing in sync as the car thrums all around us like white noise.

“It’s funny,” Aleks says eventually. He puts his finger under my chin and tilts up so I can’t avoid his eyes. “When I imagine the baby, I see a girl.”

“Hilarious,” I scoff. “I’m sure that would be your worst nightmare.”

“No,” he says solemnly—so solemnly I almost believe him. “Nothing of the sort.”

“Why not?”

He smiles. “Because in my mind’s eye, she looks like you.”

Leaning in to kiss him then is an instinct. I don’t have time to be scared or nervous. My lips come down over his and I’m consumed by the feeling of me against him.

His hand snakes around my neck, pulling me closer. He wants this, too. It’s obvious—in the heat of his fingertips, the strain in each breath.

Maybe that’s why I find the confidence to hike up my dress and straddle him.

He holds me close, his hands exploring my body so softly that I’m not even aware of him unzipping me. At least, not until my bodice comes loose and my breasts spill free.

Aleks growls deep in his throat and pushes me back against the limousine’s broad seat. He works the dress down over my hips, and I watch him, mesmerized by the way his muscles ripple even through the fabric of his shirt.

Then he pulls his own pants down, his cock springing free.

I lick my lips at the sight of him. I can’t help it. I’ve never been one of those girls who’s enjoyed giving head. For me, it was a necessary part of foreplay. One that I could never usually avoid.

But for the first time in my life, I actually want to do it. More than want—I need to.

I either have to taste him or die.

So before he can settle down over me, I sit up and grab his dick. Aleks slides up and over me, resting his knees on the seat on either side of me.

I stroke him a few times with both hands. He groans impatiently. When I finally bend down to drag my tongue over his tip, he shudders. That tiny

motion makes me feel so powerful.

I lap up and down him from base to head and head to base. He's so thick that it takes me a long couple minutes to graze over all of his cock.

Then, when I'm done exploring, I slip the head of him into my mouth. I mean to go slow, but I can't restrain myself. I suck him deep into my throat almost instantly.

He splutters and growls again as I choke on his length. There's something about having his cock down my throat. It's not demeaning, not at all. It feels more liberating than anything else.

Power. Him giving it to me. Me taking it. I'm not sure which part is most intoxicating.

He curls his fingers in my hair, guiding me along his length as I pick up speed. I can feel that he's holding back his orgasm. Part of me wants to push him over the edge with just my mouth.

But I want him inside me first. My pussy is aching, my body desperate to be filled.

I give him one last suck, pushing him down my throat as far as he can go. Then, with a mournful sigh, I let him fall from my lips.

Aleks is breathing hard. He pulls me back gently by my hair and tilts my face up to his.

"Fuck, *kiska*," he growls. "You're the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my life."

His eyes are wild with lust and desire.

And it's all for me.

I tremble with anticipation as he slides down my body and rips off my panties in one swift tug.

When he pushes my legs apart, he snarls wordlessly. His exhale chills the wetness between my legs, but then the warm friction of Aleks's tongue smooths over my clit.

I do the only thing I can do: close my eyes and moan.

He explores me the same way I explored him, licking and sucking and nipping at me until I'm writhing under his touch. When he pushes his tongue inside me, I gasp, stiffening from head to toe.

Aleks presses a hand to my chest and eases me back down. He works his tongue inside of me, alternating between shallow thrusts and flickering across my clit.

When I come, it's so sudden and so violent that I can't help but scream.

It's fast and brutal, and when it's gone, my body is still pulsing. Aleks crawls over me, dropping kisses along my body as he goes. I feel him at my stomach, my breasts, my neck.

He is everywhere.

He is everything.

"You smell incredible," he whispers—just before he thrusts his cock inside me.

I moan again and take his entire length. I bury my nails into his arms and shoulder. I cling to any part of him I can.

When I open my eyes, Aleks is looking down at me. He's watching me. And when our eyes connect, he doesn't look away like I might've expected. He just thrusts harder.

It's simple now, the meeting of our bodies. The way he slides in and out of me.

But looking up into his eyes as he fills me, it's the hottest moment of my life.

When I come again, my body gripping his hard length, I don't look away. One heartbeat after that, Aleks falls over the edge with me, never once looking away.

Only after the fire inside my belly finally subsides do I let myself close my eyes. I feel more satisfied and at ease than I have in ages. I expect Aleks to roll off me immediately, but he lingers, burying his face in my neck.

When he finally does get off of me, it's with obvious reluctance. And when I reach for my gown, Aleks grabs my hand.

"Leave it there for now," he orders. He settles back into his seat with a glimmer in his eye.

I frown. "Why?"

"I want to look at you. To savor you, for just a little while longer."

ALEKS

“You look way too cheerful,” Jennifer tells me as she walks into the room. “I thought this was a strategy meeting, not a celebration.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Is that bitterness I’m hearing?”

She rolls her eyes and Demyan smiles, elbowing her in the arm. “He just had a great time at the wedding. Or maybe it’s fair to say he had a better time *after* the wedding.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter.

Jennifer smirks. “You and the missus are getting along well, then?”

I glare at Demyan. “You’re such an old gossip.”

He laughs. “This is a good thing, man. Who would have thought that you and Olivia would actually be something?”

“The word ‘something’ is doing a lot of work in that sentence, my friend.”

Demyan rolls his eyes. “Don’t play coy. I see the way you look at her.”

“She’s carrying my child.”

“Don’t give me that shit, either!” He waves his hand in front of my face like I can’t see. “You’re the only one blind to the truth.”

“Actually, *sobrat*, you’re the—”

Jennifer jumps in between us to ward off the incoming spat. “Have you given any thought to what you’re going to do once the baby comes?”

I sigh and let my fist fall by my side. “Hargrove will be dealt with long before then.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Well, it’s what I answered. As long as I’m done, we’re not meeting up to have a fucking tea party and gab about each other’s personal lives.”

“I like tea,” Jennifer retorts. “And my life doesn’t allow for girlfriends. You two are the next best thing I can get.”

“If that’s the case,” I say, “let’s talk about the two of you then. Demyan, when is your ex getting remarried?”

“Low blow, asshole,” he grumbles.

“And you,” I turn to Jennifer, “given any thought to when you’ll see Robert again? Time to mend fences, don’t you think?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “I’m done with Rob.”

I shrug. “I don’t know about that. He might pop in to see the baby from time to time. He is the uncle, after all. And you’re something of an aunt, aren’t you? You two might just bump into each other. Very serendipitously, I’m sure.”

Her glare heats up. “If you’re trying to play matchmaker…”

I snort. “Trust me, the last thing I want to do is set you up with that idiot.”

“He’s not an idiot!” she snaps defensively.

I raise my brows at that. I don’t even need to say anything.

Jennifer sighs and crumples forward. “Okay, fine. You’ve made your point. This is no fun. We’ll leave you alone about Olivia.”

Demyan seems less eager to agree to that, but he nods along as well.

“Let’s get down to business, then.” I open up the file in my hand and spread its contents across the table. “I have Hargrove’s schedule for the next few days. Galas, benefits, a few appearances at charities around town. But no honeymoon.”

“He’s probably scared to leave the city,” Demyan suggests. “He knows that things with the case are at a sensitive point.”

“Wouldn’t want to be out of the country when shit hits the fan,” Jennifer adds. “Has *he* contacted you recently?”

I know from the inflection in her voice that she isn’t talking about Hargrove.

“He did,” I say. “He remains entirely too cautious for my liking.”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course he is. They have protocols. They can’t make any decision without getting approval first.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” Demyan suggests. “It gives us time to fine-tune our strategies.”

Before I can reply, there’s a sharp knock at the door. Jennifer gets up and goes to answer it. She looks back over her shoulder. “Aleks, it’s your mother.”

I tense but nod. Jennifer waves Yulia inside.

“I’m sorry,” she says as soon as she sees us gathered around the war table. “I’m clearly interrupting.”

“I wouldn’t have let you in if you were,” I answer. “Sit down, Mother.”

She sits down between Demyan and me. Her eyes fall to the empty whiskey glasses on the table, but she doesn’t comment or ask for a drink herself.

“I’m here because Hargrove just called me,” she says.

Jennifer and Demyan both perk up.

I’m more cautious. “And?”

“He’s pissed,” she says bluntly. “Extremely pissed that you crashed his wedding.”

I smile. “Good.”

“He seems to think I was aware of your plan and didn’t warn him in advance.”

“He’s upset with you?”

“He’s more than just upset with me,” she sighs. “He claims he doesn’t trust me anymore. He claims that I’m working with you against him.”

I shrug. “Which is the truth.”

“Of course it is, but he shouldn’t know that,” she snaps. “Why didn’t you tell me about your plan?”

“It was spontaneous.”

“You still could have informed me when it was happening. I could have fired him off a cursory warning at the last minute. It’s not like he would have been able to stop you either way,” she says. “But it would’ve preserved the work I’ve put into mending things with him.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I admit.

“I have many good ideas,” she says icily. “But you insist on keeping me out of things.”

I lean back in my chair and sigh. “I’ve never been one to put all my eggs in one basket.”

Under his breath, I hear Demyan snort, “I can think of one basket you put all your eggs in...”

Jennifer elbows him. I ignore him pointedly. “Did Hargrove say anything else?” I ask my mother.

“Aleksandr...” Her voice cracks. She takes a breath and attempts to calm herself enough to speak properly. “He claims he has enough evidence to take you down.”

“He needs to come up with a new line.” I roll my eyes. “He’s claimed that for quite a while now.”

“You need to take him out before he tries anything,” she pleads.

“I’m way ahead of you.”

She stops short, blinking. “What?”

Her eyes are wide and I can tell she’s nervous that I might not tell her what I have planned. I glance towards Demyan. His gaze is trained on my mother.

“I’ve prepared my trap,” I say. “By the end of the week, everything will be settled.”

“Oh.”

“You look surprised?”

“I just... I know nothing of this plan,” she says.

“And I suppose you want to know?”

“I would like that very much,” she murmurs.

I stroke my chin. “I see. The thing is... you already do.”

My mother frowns. “What do you mean?”

“It was your plan to begin with,” I explain. “You were the one that suggested a meeting between Hargrove and me to iron out our little dispute.”

Her mouth falls open. “You’re going to ambush him? Take him out?”

“Precisely.”

She looks stunned. “Has the meeting been set yet?”

“No,” I reply. “I leave that up to you. See, Mother? Is there better proof that I trust you than relying on you to make this happen?”

She gives me a tentative smile. “I’ll have my work cut out for me.”

“I know he’s not very happy with you at the moment, but you’re nothing if not persuasive.”

She smiles. “I’ll make sure he agrees.”

“See that you do.”

She stands up and smooths down her blouse. In theory, it’s a delicate, feminine gesture. But she moves more like a soldier readying their armor for battle. I admire the tenacity.

Without another word, she whisks out of the room, bristling with purpose.

As soon as she’s gone, Jennifer locks the door and turns back to Demyan and me. “Are we sure this is going to work?”

“The first part worked out perfectly,” I point out.

“We don’t know what his next move will be,” Jennifer says. “He could do anything now.”

I shrug. “I can handle it. All we have to do is watch.”

“Aleks—”

“Don’t,” I say, cutting her off. “We needed to get the ball rolling. With my mother on the job, that’s exactly what’s going to happen.”

She sits down next to Demyan looking uneasy. “I’m just saying, Hargrove shouldn’t be underestimated.”

“I’m not underestimating anyone. We’re in the home stretch, Jennifer. Don’t look so grim.”

She crosses and uncrosses her legs. I can see the growing restlessness in her. Apparently, Demyan can, too. We exchange a glance before he reaches out and puts his hand on her arm.

“Hey,” he says. “We’ve got you, you know?”

She knocks his hand off and glares at him. “You think I’m worried about myself?”

“No,” he says. “But I do think, after this mission, you need to take a break.”

“A break? I don’t—You don’t—” She turns to me. “Aleks, do you feel that way, too?”

All I do is nod once.

Jennifer jerks up to her feet, incensed. “Shut up. You’re pulling me out after this? You’re actually gonna—”

“You’ve done your service and then some, Jennifer,” I say gently. “It’s time to retire.”

“*Retire?*” she exclaims, getting even more worked up. “Retiring isn’t a ‘break.’ You want me to hang up my hat for good?”

“I—”

“I’ve never let you down. I’ve never blown cover, I’ve never fumbled a case. I’m the best you have.”

I silently meet her eyes. She seems to buckle a little, sensing what I’m saying without saying it. She lowers herself back on the sofa, keeping her eyes on me.

“Rob was a different situation. And he isn’t a factor anymore.”

“So you’ve been saying,” I say. “But the fact is that you haven’t been the same since then. Tell me the truth: do you honestly love this job as much as you used to?”

“I... I don’t know,” she says, sagging forward.

“If you don’t know, then that’s your answer,” I say. “I’m not doing this to be cruel, Jennifer. I’m doing it out of mercy.”

She takes a deep breath. “I don’t know what I would even do, Aleks. This is who I am.”

“You’ll still be in the game. Just not as a spy.”

She looks up sharply. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t want you in the shadows anymore, Jennifer. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want you at my side.”

She frowns and glances at Demyan. “You mean...?”

“I’m going to be traveling back and forth from the Midwest,” Demyan explains softly. “My daughter’s there now, and I want to be able to spend time with her.”

“And,” I chime in, “while Demyan is away, I need someone to rely on.”

“Like... a Vor?” she asks tentatively.

“Exactly like that.”

“The rules say women can’t be inner circle.”

“Fuck the rules,” I snort. “I’m the don. I’m gonna make my own rules.”

She stares at me as though I’m speaking a foreign language. “You’re serious about this. You’re actually serious.”

“Are you up for the challenge?”

“What challenge? Using my own name instead of a fake one?” she ponders in amazement. “Sleeping with men because I want to, not just because I’m trying to manipulate them? Not taking my clothes off just to cause a distraction? Yeah, I think I am ready for all that.”

I can see Jennifer coming alive at the idea. Being my spy is all she’s ever known, but actually being part of the world, living her own life... it’s clearly something she’s more than ready to consider.

“Thank you,” she says softly. “This... It means a lot to me.” She shakes her head in disbelief. “I’m gonna start over.”

“We have to finish this job first,” I point out.

She smiles. “End of the week, remember, Aleks? That was your boast.”

“I don’t boast. I promise.”

“You understand what this means though, don’t you?” Demyan asks. “You’ll have to decide what you’re going to do about her.”

“I’ve already decided what I’m going to do about her.”

Both Jennifer and Demyan look shocked. He speaks up first. “Aleks, brother... are you sure?”

I nod. “This is the Bratva. Only blood can answer for blood.”

OLIVIA

When I look down at my phone and see Mia's name, I almost drop the piece of toast in my hand. After the confrontation at her wedding, I didn't expect to hear from her any time soon.

I wipe the crumbs off my fingers and fumble to answer the call. I'm so nervous that I nearly drop it right into the dish of butter.

"Hi—hello?"

"Hey, Liv," Mia greets. Unlike me, she sounds calm. Almost casual.

"Hi, Mimi."

I wince as soon as I say it. For the first time in my life, her nickname feels awkward on my lips.

The silence stretches, so I barrel clumsily ahead. "I have to admit, I'm surprised you're calling."

She sighs. "I know you had nothing to do with Aleks being at the wedding. He crashed and you didn't know about it."

"Okay, then I have to admit, I'm surprised you believe that."

"Men like him don't usually ask before they do what they want, do they?"

I frown. Her tone is beginning to worry me. I'm pretty dang sure she didn't call just to chit-chat about the nature of alpha males.

She's leading up to something.

But she's taking her sweet time getting to it.

"How are you?" she asks.

"How are you?" I fire back. "You're the one who just got married."

"Good," she says. "Still in the city, though. We haven't gone on our honeymoon yet."

"I heard that."

"How?"

"I saw it on TV. You know that most entertainment shows do at least five minutes on you and Hargrove every day, right?"

"Oh. Right." She sounds rattled by the prospect.

I can relate. Seeing my sister on the news is a trip, and not in a good way. Actually, this whole damn year has been a trip, and not in a good way.

But her vulnerability is gone when she speaks again. "Do you know why I can't go on a honeymoon, Liv?"

"By your tone, I'm thinking it has something to do with my husband?" I guess.

"Another girl went missing over the weekend."

My body goes cold. "I haven't heard anything."

"Of course not. Because when Aleksandr Makarova takes a girl, no one ever hears anything about it."

"Mia, he didn't—"

"I know you believe him, Liv." Her voice cracks like a whip. "I know you think he's above all this, but he's not. He's just fucking not. It's about time you disabused yourself of the notion that the man is some Prince Charming cursed with a shitty PR team."

“First of all, I never claimed he was anything of the sort,” I insist. “But I do know he’s not capable of abducting or raping women. Especially not underage—”

“Olivia, please, just listen,” Mia sighs. It’s obvious how hard she’s trying to remain calm. I wonder if Hargrove is there with her now, sitting beside her, feeding her the words that she’s regurgitating to me.

I grit my teeth. “I don’t think—”

“If you don’t want to believe me, then fine,” she says curtly. “But will you at least believe the evidence that’s sitting in front of you? You can trust your own eyes, can’t you?”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“You know the cops are onto Makarova, right? Well, they might’ve replaced Rob with Steven Kennedy, but the entire Bureau answers to Donnie.”

She says it so pridefully that my stomach churns with disgust. Like that’s a noble attribute for her new husband to have. *Puppetmaster Hargrove*.

“What are you trying to say, Mia?”

“We’ve received a tip.”

“Okay, and...?”

“The girl that went missing over the weekend? The intel suggests that she’s... right there.”

“Right where?” I ask.

“In the same house you’re staying in,” Mia says, lowering her voice. “He took her and he’s keeping her there.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. All that matters is that this is the slip-up we’ve been waiting for. The cops need to justify a search warrant to get into his compound. And as of yet, they haven’t been able to.”

“Because Aleks is more powerful than they bargained for?” I ask. “Or because there really is nothing to justify that kind of bullshit overreach?”

She steamrolls right over my sarcasm. “I told Donnie that it didn’t matter. Because we have someone on the inside.”

I tense immediately. “Mia, I’m not—”

“Actually, I told Donnie the only reason you’re with that bastard at all is because you genuinely believe he’s not guilty. But if you knew he was, if there was proof... then you would help us save that poor girl. Am I right, Liv?”

Her voice cracks with desperation. She wants us to be on the same side again more than anything in the world.

I thought that’s what I wanted, too. But would I want the same if it meant losing Aleks in the process?

My feelings for him are suddenly achingly clear.

I love him.

I’m in love with Aleksandr Makarova.

And it’s the worst possible realization to have at this moment. Right when I’m on the cusp of finding out if I’ve fallen for a beautiful lie. A gorgeous fantasy made up of smoke and mirrors.

“Am I right, Liv?” Mia asks again.

My eyes are swimming with tears. I blink them back. “Yes. Of course. If there was a girl trapped in this house, then of course I would help get her out. But there isn’t anyone. Aleks wouldn’t do that.”

“Will you just search for me?” Mia asks softly. “Please?”

I’m gripping the phone so tightly that my hand is actually starting to hurt. I close my eyes. My head throbs. “Okay. For you, I’ll search.”

There’s a long pause before Mia answers. Her voice is soft. Barely a whisper. “Thank you, Liv.”

Then she hangs up.

And I walk into the bathroom and throw up my breakfast.

When I'm done, I don't feel any better. I go to the sink to wash out my mouth and splash water on my face, but it doesn't help with the new sallowness clinging to my cheeks or the unease in my stomach.

I slump out of the bathroom and almost bump right into Aleks. His eyes pass over my face shrewdly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I mumble too quickly. "You just caught me by surprise."

"I was just coming to tell you that I'm stepping out for a bit."

"Now?" I ask.

I'm filtering everything through the conversation I just had with Mia. Is him leaving a good sign or a bad one? Guilty or innocent, innocent or guilty?

"Now," he confirms.

He cups my cheek. I have to fight off a shiver. He tilts my face up to his and I stare up at this gorgeous man and pray to God that my sister is wrong.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Aleks asks, frowning.

I nod. "Just morning sickness."

His frown deepens. "You better get some rest."

"I've been in my room all morning," I say. "I was heading out for a walk."

"I think it's best if you rest."

I wonder if his insistence has anything to do with a potential secret he has hidden somewhere in this labyrinth of a house.

No, I tell myself, shoving away the thought. *Don't go there. Not until you have to.*

"Okay," I relent. "I'll rest."

He smiles and then bends down. I don't expect the kiss he delivers. Maybe that's why it tastes so much sweeter.

I lean into his body instinctively. He holds me as though I matter to him.

But it's over all too soon. When he lets me go, I step back reluctantly.

"When will you be back?" I ask, trying not to sound too needy.

"A couple of hours," he says. "Demyan is coming with me. But Markus and Yani are around. They'll help you if you need anything."

"I'm sure I won't."

"Call them if you do."

Then he turns for the staircase. I move to the window and wait for him to appear in the driveway below. When he does, I watch him climb into a contingent of three armored vehicles before they all drive away.

I have no idea where he's going, and at the moment, I don't really care.

The only thing I'm concerned with is proving Mia and Hargrove wrong.

I start my search on the first floor. Probably because, subconsciously, I know that it's the least likely option. But if I'm going to make good on my promise to my sister, I need to be thorough.

It takes me almost an hour to work my way through the house and get up to the fourth and final floor. It's an attic space, so I've never been up here before. But there are still four rooms branching off of the small hallway.

The first three I check appear abandoned. No furniture. No carpet. No decorations.

But when I try the fourth door, my heart clenches.

It's locked.

"Oh, God," I whisper.

I step back from the door, terrified of what I'm going to find on the other side. There's no reason for this door to be locked when all the rest are open.

But when I think about it, if I were to hide something, I would make sure to hide it in plain sight without all the fanfare. There are no guards stationed at the doors. Nothing to suggest that anything is hidden up here.

If it hadn't been for Mia's intel, I would never have come up here. And even if I had, I'd never have suspected there was anything important to be found here. I would've looked right past it without thinking twice.

I move towards the door and press my ear to the wood. I don't hear anything.

"Hello?" I whisper. But even the whisper feels loud. "Is anyone there?"

When I get no answer, I try again. This time, louder. "Hello?"

"Olivia."

I gasp and whirl around. Yulia's delicate silhouette is at the end of the broad hallway, backlit by the light from the stairwell.

I clutch at my stampeding heart. "I... I didn't hear you come up."

"What are you doing, dear?" she asks urgently, moving swiftly towards me. "You shouldn't be up here."

"What's behind this door?" I ask.

"Olivia—"

"Please," I ask, grabbing her hand. "Yulia, I trust you. Just tell me... what's behind this door."

She sighs. "I wish I could tell you, honey," she murmurs. "But I don't know either. My son doesn't tell me everything."

It's blindingly obvious from the look on her face that she suspects what I suspect. "What do you think, though?"

She glances away from me. "I don't like to speculate."

"Make an exception. Just this one time."

She looks up. The conflict in her eyes is heart-wrenching. She wants to be loyal to her son, but she's battling with her own conscience.

“Yulia...”

“All I can say is that, whatever is behind this door, he doesn’t want anyone knowing about it.”

“All the more reason we should find out what’s behind it, right?”

Yulia shuffles on her feet uncomfortably and then pulls out a jangling ring of keys from the pocket of her oversized coat.

“I made copies of every single key to every single door in this house,” she explains softly. “Back when I was in charge of things. Some might call it paranoia, but I like to think of it as foresight.”

“Does Aleks know?”

She shakes her head. Hope and fear kindle in my chest.

“Open the door, Yulia. We have to find out what’s on the other side.”

“What if it’s bad?” she asks tentatively. “Are you prepared for what we might find?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” I say as confidently as I can. “First, the door.”

I pray for strength as Yulia fumbles with the keys on the ring. Flicking past one after another after another.

My heartbeat quickens until it hurts. I can hardly breathe.

“Here we are,” she says, finally producing a small silver key. “I think this is it.”

She moves towards the door. Surely there will be nothing behind it, right? I trust him. I gave him my heart. So we’ll open this door and the room will be empty and everything will be absolved.

It has to happen like that.

I watch in silent terror as Yulia turns the key in the door. Her hands are trembling wildly. I feel a stab of pity for her. She’s enslaved by the ties she has to her son, but she desperately wants to do the right thing, if only she can

figure out what that thing is.

We're both trapped in our own kind of cage.

She pushes open the door and steps aside. I walk in with my breath trapped in my lungs.

My eyes go straight to her.

The young girl lying on the bed.

Dear God. It's true.

OLIVIA

Mia knew.

Rob knew.

Hargrove knew.

Everyone knew, and they warned me. And I still didn't listen.

"No," I whisper to myself as I approach the little girl's bedside. "No, no, no."

She's so damn young. No older than thirteen or fourteen. Asleep like this, she looks even younger.

Her hair is a glossy blonde and her cheeks still have that rosy plumpness of pre-adolescence. She's definitely breathing. That, at least, is a relief.

I push my feelings for Aleks to the side. I don't have time to walk that minefield right now. I need to use the adrenaline pumping through my veins to figure out how to get this little girl out of here and away from the beautiful monster I'm married to.

I turn to Yulia, who is standing by the foot of the bed looking pale-faced and teetering on the edge of panic. I grab her hands and force her to look at me.

"Yulia, we need to get her out of here."

She turns to me slowly, but it's like she's looking through me, not at me. "How did you know she was in here?"

“It doesn’t matter now. What matters is that we get her out as fast as possible. Aleks is gone. He said he’d be gone for a while, but that was over an hour ago now. We need to get moving.”

“He’ll know what we did,” she whispers. “When he comes back and finds her gone, he’ll know.”

“We’ll be gone by then, too.”

Her eyes connect with mine. “Gone?”

“Yulia, you can’t possibly want to continue to live in this house after this.”

“He’s... my son.”

“Yulia!”

“Maybe... maybe there’s some sort of mistake,” she gasps, tears brimming in her eyes. “Maybe we’re misunderstanding what’s happening here.”

“There’s no misunderstanding, Yulia!”

I turn around to see if my shout has woken the girl, but she doesn’t stir. Another horrifying possibility washes over me.

“Oh, God.”

I rush to the edge of the bed and put my hand on her shoulders. “Hey. Hey, wake up.”

“Olivia, what are you doing?” Yulia hisses.

I ignore her and keep shaking. “Please wake up.”

When the girl still doesn’t rouse, I give her a light slap across the cheek. That doesn’t wake her up, either.

I turn back to Yulia. “She’s been drugged.”

A tear slips down Yulia’s cheek. “Oh, God...”

“Listen to me: you won’t be able to live with yourself if you just turn a blind eye to this. And I can’t do anything without your help.”

She absorbs that for a moment. Then she nods, making up her mind in an instant. “Okay. Okay. I’ll help.”

“How do we get her out?”

“The two of us might be able to carry her,” Yulia says haltingly. “But I doubt we can do it without being noticed. We’ll need some muscle.”

“How are we supposed to do that? Every man here is loyal to Aleks.”

She shakes her head. “Not every man. Wait here.”

She leaves me in the room with the girl and disappears. For a moment, I’m worried. What if this is just a ruse to sound the alarm?

But I take a deep breath and try not to panic. I know Yulia. Deep down, she’s a good woman.

She’s going to help me.

She’s going to save this girl.

She’s gone for five minutes, but it feels like hours. With every passing second, I can feel Aleks getting closer.

When the door finally opens, Yulia isn’t alone. Behind her is a burly man I’ve seen in her security detail before.

“Moritz,” she instructs, “carry the girl. I’ll lead us out of here, but we have to be careful not to be seen. All the maids answer directly to my son.”

I stare at the man’s face. It’s devoid of expression, like a robot. I find myself thinking about capturing his likeness on paper before I catch myself.

Not the time.

Definitely not the freaking time.

I’m vaguely aware that I might be verging on an anxiety attack, but I don’t have the luxury of time to indulge in that right now. So I draw in a deep, shuddering breath and force myself to focus.

The big guy, Moritz, moves forward and scoops the girl up in his arms as though she weighs nothing at all. He turns around to face Yulia.

“Where to, ma’am?”

His voice is deep and surprisingly melodic. It’s weird, the little observations I’m making now. Like I’ve slipped out of my body and I’m watching all this unfold before me as if on a movie theater screen.

“Olivia.”

Yulia’s hand comes down across mine. Only then do I realize that I’m shaking. I try to take another deep breath, but this time, it doesn’t help. The shaking continues.

“Wait a moment, Moritz,” she tells him before turning back to me.

“We don’t have time to wait,” I protest feebly.

She raises her eyebrows. “Olivia, look at me.”

I do. She gives me a nod and smiles sadly. “You’re having a panic attack. If we try and do this in your current state, we’ll be found out for sure. If we’re going to get the girl out of here safely, you need to get a hold of yourself.”

She’s still clutching me. The weight of her touch is comforting, grounding.

“I know this is new to you,” she continues. “You’re not used to this kind of thing.”

“It’s not that.”

“You’re worried Aleks will come back early?”

I shake my head. “I guess I still... I still can’t believe it’s... true.”

The last word comes out in a sob. Yulia looks at me sympathetically. Now, she’s so calm that I can’t believe I was the one calming her down only a few moments ago.

She looks so steady. So in control. Can a person really veer between those two extremes so fast? Or is she just relying on survival instinct, a fight-or-flight response that hasn’t triggered inside me yet?

“I know, darling. Neither can I.”

I feel moisture on my cheeks and realize that I’m crying. “You must think I’m an idiot,” I mumble, self-consciously batting the tears away.

“No, not at all. I just think you’re in love with a man you know you can’t be with anymore.”

Another sob escapes me.

“*Lyubimaya*,” she croons, “it’s okay. I am with you.”

“My baby...”

“One thing at a time, honey,” she says. “If we leave here, we need somewhere to go. Is there anyone you trust?”

“My brother and sister,” I tell her.

She nods. “I suppose that will have to work. They’re staying at The Imperial, aren’t they?”

“Mia is. I don’t know about Rob.”

“Let’s take her there then. There will be security and Hargrove has the means to protect you all.” She grips me tightly, her eyes boring into mine. “Olivia, are you ready for this? We don’t have much time.”

“I know. I just...”

“You want to save this girl. You convinced me to save her. Now that we’re taking the risk, we have to do our damndest to make sure we get it right.”

“I know,” I say, swallowing my sadness. “Let’s go.”

She gives me a nod and turns to her man. “Follow me and listen to my instructions exactly.”

Yulia leaves the room first. Moritz follows behind her, the girl in his arms. As I trail them out into the hallway, I notice a camera perched high in the corner. My body goes cold.

“Yulia,” I hiss, running past Moritz to whisper in her ear. “The cameras. They’re all over the house.”

She gives me a reassuring smile. “I already disabled them when I went to get Moritz,” she tells me. “I had to wipe some of the memory, too. If Aleksandr checks the tapes, he won’t see you coming up here. He won’t even see you leaving your room.”

“He’ll put two and two together eventually.”

“But not before we’re both out of harm’s way.”

I frown. “Do you really think he would hurt you? Us?”

She looks uncertain for a moment. “I don’t know. I didn’t think he was capable of...” She fades off, her eyes flitting to the young girl in Moritz’s arms. “Well, I don’t know what he’s capable of anymore.”

My shattered heart sinks in my chest. I’ve never felt so crushed.

Moritz and I hang back until Yulia gives us the all-clear to head down to the third floor. We do the same thing to get to the second. Tiptoe down, wait for the signal, descend quickly and quietly.

But as we’re moving down to the first, I hear Yulia’s voice cut through the silence.

“Tasha,” she says, addressing one of the maids. “What are you doing on this floor?”

“Cleaning the common rooms, ma’am,” the girl replies, sounding surprised by the question. “It’s on my task list for today.”

“Is it?” Yulia asks absent-mindedly. “Oh, goodness, I must have made a mistake. I’m going to need you down in the basement. The carpets need a steam.”

“Oh. Yes, ma’am.”

“And take Christa with you. That space is large. You’ll need some help.”

“Of course, ma’am. Should I finish cleaning in here first?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Basement, now, please.”

The girl scurries off and Yulia gives us the signal to move forward.

The first floor is perhaps the most complicated area of all. Most of the men pass through the common rooms here when they change posts or leave for their lunch. It’s a beehive of activity most of the time.

But Yulia is an adept guide. She looks calm and confident. It’s helping me feel more in control.

Until she freezes and turns back to look at us, panic in her eyes.

She doesn’t even need to say anything. I can hear the engines roar and the crunch of gravel just outside.

Aleks.

He’s back.

I grab a hold of Yulia and pull her back. “We have to distract him.”

“But how?”

I glance around the room, but the answer is obvious to me. “I’ll do it,” I say. “I’ll distract him while you get the girl out of here.”

“Olivia—”

“Listen to me,” I plead. “You know this compound better than anyone. And if you’re sitting up front with the driver, no one will question you when you leave. But if I’m seen, all hell will break loose.”

Yulia wants to argue with my logic, but we both know she can’t.

“You need to get her out,” I say.

“But—”

I shake my head as car doors slam outside. “We don’t have time, Yulia. This is the only way.”

I’m about to walk out when she grabs my hand. “Olivia, you have to be convincing.”

I can tell that she's worried about my ability to keep up pretenses. I can't exactly blame her. I almost had a fully-fledged meltdown upstairs just a few short minutes ago.

"I know. Don't worry. I will be."

"Are you certain?"

I nod in response. And then, before I lose my nerve, I walk out into the main foyer.

Yulia, Moritz, and the girl duck into the second common room to the right, one of the few that doesn't open out into the garden. But it does have windows that overlook the front façade of the house on the opposite side.

If I can get Aleks into the rear den where the grand piano is sitting, then they'll be able to climb out and leave using one of the cars. Most of the vehicles Aleks owns have tinted windows, so it'll be easy enough to conceal the sleeping girl once she's inside.

"Olivia?"

Aleks walks into the house, surprised to see me.

"Hi." I smile. "You're back already?"

"Disappointed?"

"Of c-course not," I say. I curse myself internally for the awkward stumble and try to regroup. "I just... I was just walking."

He raises his eyebrows. I wonder if he's already on to me. That would truly be pathetic, to blow the game so quickly.

But then I remember what's at stake here: a young girl with her whole life ahead of her.

I need to get my shit together.

"Can we... talk?" I ask, gesturing for him to follow me into the den. Once the door closes, we'll be afforded some privacy, which should give Yulia enough time to get the girl out of here.

“If you want,” he says, following me into the room. He looks amused when I close the door behind him. “Something bothering you?”

I turn to him, trying to figure out what my pretense is for wanting to talk to him in the first place. I’m coming up hatefully blank.

“Um...”

He waits patiently, but I can’t read his expression and I have no idea what he’s thinking right now.

“What’s going on between us?” I blurt. It’s the first thing that pops into my head.

As mortifying as it is to talk about this, it’s not faked. The question has been festering in the back of my mind for ages. I’m not in the right headspace to keep track of a lie. The stakes are high and the best deceptions contain at least a shred of truth.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, we’re married, legally speaking,” I say. “We’re having this baby and... we have been known to engage in... in...”

“Carnal relations?” he jokes, though his face remains impassive.

I blush. “Yes,” I say with an embarrassed nod. “That. So what are we, Aleks? Because despite all that, I still don’t know where I stand with you.”

“Where would you like to stand with me?” he asks.

The truest answer I can give, the one that comes instinctively to my lips, is that I want to be with him. I want us to be a family, like the one I grew up in. I want us to love each other and support each other and fight for each other and maybe sometimes fight *with* each other, but that’s okay, because the love will see us through and make it all alright in the end.

But how can I even so much as entertain the dream after what I just discovered?

How, even now, could I pretend to cling to the fading hope that there’s a future here?

There's not.

There's just more and lower levels to this hell.

Aleks scans me up and down. I clutch my hands together behind my back, as if he'd be able to read through my lies if he saw them trembling.

I can feel the goosebumps forming on my spine. As much as I would like to claim disgust, it's not that.

It's desire I'm feeling, even now.

What does that say about me? That I can still feel this for him even when I know now he's spent all these months lying to me? That beneath the mask of the monster is... a worse monster, and yet I love him anyway?

"Olivia, is something wrong?" he asks.

He doesn't sound overly concerned. More like... amused. Like he's waiting for something to happen.

"Everything is wrong," I whisper. My chin falls to my chest.

He's close to me now. So close that if I look up, I'll be confronted with his haunting eyes.

And I don't want to be haunted anymore. I have enough demons running around inside my head as it is.

"What if I wanted to leave?" I ask. "After the baby is born?"

"Then you would be free to," he says. "So long as the threat of Hargrove is taken care of."

"And my child?"

He seems even more amused now. "Your child would stay here with me."

"A baby should be with its mother."

"I don't subscribe to that belief."

"So if I want to be with my baby, I have to stay here?"

He nods. “We all have to make choices in this life.”

“If you think that’s a choice, then you’re delusional,” I snap up at him.

“What do you want from me, Olivia?” he asks calmly. “You want some bold declaration of love? You want me to tell you I can’t live without you? That I want you to stay, not for the baby, but for me?”

I’m aware of the fact that I’m holding my breath. But I remind myself that his promises, no matter how sincere they may seem, are all lies.

“Answer the question. Is that what you want, Olivia?”

“You know what I want, Aleks? What I really want?”

“Tell me.”

“The truth,” I say, releasing the painful breath I’ve been holding. “I want the truth.”

ALEKS

The truth.

People think it's a simple thing. Or that it's even a thing at all.

But it's not—or if it is, it's not just one thing. It's a thousand things melted together.

Everyone has a different truth. They carve off the portions they don't like, mold it and twist it to shape their own needs. They deal in half-truths so they can keep themselves as the hero of their own story, the center of their own universe.

But the truth is ugly.

And sometimes, the only way to truly understand the beating heart of it is with a lie.

“Have you been talking to the wrong people again, Olivia?”

“Who are the wrong people, Aleks?” she challenges. “Anyone who claims you're the villain?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Ah, so I'm the villain again?”

“You were always the villain. I was just too blind and foolish to see it.”

“Blinded by what exactly?”

She turns so I can't see her face. “It doesn't matter.”

I grab her hand and twist her back around. I won't let her avoid me—avoid this—any longer. “I'll be the judge of that.”

I can see the betrayal in her eyes. She's trying to play her part, trying to keep control of her emotions, but she's not practiced at it. Deception is utterly alien to her.

Maybe that's why she's managed to sink beneath my skin and stay there like a cancer I can't get rid of. Her innocence and naivete helped her slip past all my defenses.

It was an unwelcome intrusion at first. But now?

Now, I can't bear to cut her out of me.

“Aleks,” she says. “Please...”

“I can't know what you're talking about unless you tell me, Olivia.”

“If you don't know by now, then what's the freaking point?” she cries out.

I sigh and go for the door. She grabs hold of my arm in a panic and forces me to turn around. Her chest nearly bumps into mine, but she stiffens like a board to keep from touching me as much as possible.

“You're giving me some mixed signals here, Olivia,” I remark. “But I take it you're angry about something.”

“I'm angry about *everything*.”

I nod. “And I'm guessing most of that anger has to do with me?”

She shakes her head, searching for a satisfying answer to all her questions. “Why couldn't things have been different? Why couldn't you have been different?” She's talking to herself as much as to me. “I can't help thinking how easy things would have been if you'd just been... a normal guy.”

I snort. “That sounds like a nightmare.”

“Does it?” she asks. “It sounds kind of... wonderful to me.”

“Does it?” I retort. “Something tells me you wouldn't be satisfied if I wasn't who I am. You've been down that road, Olivia. You know where it leads.

You stayed on *this* path for a reason.”

She blinks slowly. “I didn’t seek out danger, you know? You’re the one who came after me.”

“And you’re the one who ran right back the first chance you got.”

“Because I thought I could trust you!” she explodes suddenly. “I believed you!”

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. She’s no longer trying to hide how she’s feeling. In fact, I’m amazed she lasted this long.

But I don’t belittle her for her vulnerability the way I once did. We’re long past that.

Instead, I take a step forward and surprise her by resting the palm of my hand against her cheek. “You should trust your instincts.”

“Apparently, I don’t have any,” she snaps, trying to jerk her head away from me.

I don’t let her escape. “Look at me, Olivia.”

“No.”

She sets her jaw stubbornly and pointedly looks away.

So I run my fingers, light as a dreamer’s breath, across her throat. Gooseflesh pimples her skin immediately. I feel the shudder just underneath her skin.

“Your body gives you away every time, *kiska*.”

“Stop...” she breathes.

“Stop what?”

“Stop manipulating me.”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

She blinks at me and nods slowly.

“Then what would you say *you’re* doing?”

She frowns. “What do you mean?”

I tip my head to the side, watching her. “Are you not here to distract me?”

She freezes in slow, creeping horror when it hits her—*I know what she’s doing.*

Her eyes go wide. She twists around and rips open the door. She’s expecting to see Yulia and the girl, no doubt, but they’re long gone.

Everything that happens from this point forward will happen very, very quickly.

Demyan and Jennifer round the corner and join us.

“They left,” Demyan informs me.

Jennifer’s eyes are focused on Olivia. “Liv, are you okay?”

She lunges at her former sister-in-law with new fire in her eyes. “What the hell are you playing at? What are you all playing at?”

“We’re not the ones playing games, Olivia,” I interject coolly. “We’re simply caught in someone else’s. And it’s time for it to end.”

“How much of a head start are we giving them?” Demyan asks impatiently.

“You knew the whole time?” Olivia interrupts with a gasp.

“I know everything that goes on in this house,” I growl. “Including the fact that my mother turned off the security cameras. She made it look like a malfunction, but I know when my shit has been tampered with.”

Her chest rises and falls. “Are you going to stop her? Force her back here?”

I don’t answer her. I just give Demyan a nod. “Get the cars ready.”

Demyan nods back and heads out. Jennifer hesitates a moment longer as she turns towards Olivia. “Liv—”

“Don’t you dare speak to me,” she spits. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re as bad as he is.”

“It’s not what you—”

“Don’t tell me what I think!” Olivia hisses. “For fuck’s sake, all of you need to stop telling me what I think. Maybe you’re the one who hasn’t been thinking this entire time.”

“Jennifer,” I say firmly, “go get ready. It’s time to finish this.”

She gives Olivia a sad parting glance and then she leaves.

When we’re alone again, Olivia looks up at me, her eyes rippling with worry. “Let her go,” she pleads. “She’s so young, Aleks. She’s... she’s only a child...”

I already know what she’s assumed, what she thinks she saw. But hearing her say it, I get so angry so fast that I fear I might do something to scare her.

But I control the urge. Because, despite what she thinks, her well-being and the well-being of my child is my only priority now.

Nothing else matters.

Still, a part of me wants her to hit rock bottom before things are cleared up. I want her to see how they played her for a fool and she danced to their fucking tune.

The difference between the old me and the new me is that I want to do it *for* her. Not *to* her.

I want her to become invincible, so that no one can ever fuck with her again.

“Come on,” I growl as she backs away from my heated gaze.

“Where are we going?”

“You wanted to be a part of this,” I remind her. “You joined forces with my mother against me. You should be there for the big finale.”

When she doesn’t move, I grab her hand and steer her towards the front door. She struggles, but only marginally.

I drag her outside and towards the line of armored jeeps parked in front of the house. Demyan is standing in front of the third one, so I move towards it and push her inside.

“Get in.”

The moment I get into the passenger seat next to Demyan, the engine fires up and our little entourage starts down the long driveway towards the gate.

“Are you seriously going to stop Yulia?” she asks from the back seat.

No one answers her. Demyan shifts in his seat uncomfortably. Living in this lie is uncomfortable for him.

But I don't mind it at all.

I was born into a world of lies. Living in one now is no different than the rest of my life has been.

“Demyan?” Olivia asks, looking towards him.

He glances at me for permission to speak to her. I shake my head.

“Are you sure about bringing her?” he asks me in a low voice, even though Olivia can hear everything he's saying.

“I'm sure,” I say dismissively. “Are the teams ready?”

“Yes.”

“Stationed outside the hotel?”

“All ten of them,” he confirms.

“And our ally?”

“Has been informed. He's waiting in the wings.”

“He is to move on my signal only.”

“I made that abundantly clear,” Demyan mutters. “He wasn't happy about it.”

“He doesn't have to be. He just has to follow my orders.”

Demyan snorts. I can't help but smirk. It does feel intensely satisfying to issue orders to this unexpected asset. Feels almost karmic, in a sense.

“Are we going to The Imperial?” Olivia asks.

“Yes,” I answer. “It’s time for a little family reunion, don’t you think?”

“It’s disgusting how calm you are right now,” she snaps. “I caught you red-handed being a fucking *predator* and you’re still looking down at the world from your high horse like you’re untouchable.”

I chuckle. “I expected you to be smarter than this.”

“You’re an asshole,” she hisses.

“I never pretended to be otherwise.”

“Demyan!” Olivia says, her tone turning imploring. “You have a kid. A daughter, right?”

He nods once reluctantly, white-knuckling the armrest.

“How can you be involved in something like this?” she demands. “The girls Aleks takes, they’re only children.”

“Olivia...” Demyan starts softly.

I can feel the explanation coming, but I stop him in his tracks. “She’s already made up her mind, Demyan,” I snarl. “What’s the point in trying to change it now? She wants to cast me as the villain, so let her.”

“I *want* to cast you as the villain?” she asks, sounding hurt. “Do you even hear what you’re saying? You have no idea how hard I defended you. I believed you, Aleks. I believed *in* you. But now, you’re asking me not to trust my own eyes. It’s too much.”

The monolith of The Imperial appears just ahead, blotting out the sun and casting shadows over the street below.

“Jesus,” Demyan mutters, leaning forward to look through the windshield. “That is one ugly building.”

I laugh viciously. “One would think the man who owns it has something to prove.”

We come to a stop. I get out of the car, open Olivia’s door, and unclasp her seat belt. “Get out.”

“You can’t just walk in there,” she says, looking uncertain.

“As a matter of fact, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“Aleks—”

“Come on,” I urge. “They’re expecting us.”

“Hargrove?”

I nod. “Among others.”

Before she can try to figure out what I mean, I grab her hand and pull her from the car.

“Demyan,” I call. He appears next to me and pushes the bulletproof vest into my hands.

I start to strap it on Olivia, who surprisingly lets me do it without a fuss. “What is this?” she asks, blinking in confusion.

“I would have thought it was obvious,” I drawl.

“Okay, but why do I even need it?” she asks, panic edging into her tone.

“If this gets ugly—”

Her face twists. “Oh, I see. You want to protect your child,” she finishes. “I’m just a vessel for the cargo.”

I stop what I’m doing for a moment and look at her.

I could argue back. I could tell her how she’s so much more to me than a vessel, a means to an end. That the child she’s carrying isn’t just beautiful in its own right; it’s beautiful because there are parts of *her* in our baby, parts of both of us, and we made that baby together, and my world is so bloodstained and ugly that these rare snatches of beauty are worth sacrificing everything for.

But I don’t bother.

She wouldn’t believe a word coming out of my mouth.

“Stay behind me at all times,” I say instead.

Then I grab her hand and march her into the hotel for the final curtain call.

OLIVIA

Aleks is walking next to me, his hand wrapped around mine. I expected him to charge into the meeting with Hargrove with guns blazing, the full strength of his men at his back.

But we left them all behind. Now, we're navigating through the hotel alone.

"What are you doing?" I ask. "Why are we here?"

He ignores me outright.

I stare at my feet marching one in front of the other, no longer struggling or resisting. I let myself be pulled along, finding strange comfort in the warmth of his hand.

I'm not certain of anything anymore. But Aleks... Aleks has never been anything *but* certain.

Maybe I should feel guilty for taking comfort in the touch of a monster, and part of me does. Mostly, though, I'm overwhelmed by all the competing emotions surging through me. Sadness and fear and betrayal and denial.

Above all, there's a sense of finality. That whatever happens next will be the end of it all. Win or lose, live or die—this ends today.

But as for what "this" is or who should be the one to end it...

As for what is right and what is wrong and who is lying and who is telling the truth...

As for those things, I have no earthly idea.

Jennifer appears from nowhere. She's dressed like some femme fatale from a spy movie in a thin, form-fitting black turtleneck and thick-heeled boots that look like they could do some real damage. Her hair is tied back, one Viking braid tucked behind her ear.

"They're in the North Tower," she reports.

"How many?" Aleks asks.

"Hargrove, his men... Rob," she says. Her gaze flits to me for a moment when she says my brother's name. "Twenty in total, maybe twenty-five."

Aleks doesn't seem in the least bit concerned. He just nods and continues walking me towards one of the elevators. The three of us climb aboard and stand in an awkward circle.

The whole ride is silent. I stare at my reflection in the polished brass, wondering what the hell awaits us above. The whole thing feels like a bad dream.

When the elevator doors open, Demyan is standing on the other side.

"Took you long enough," he grumbles.

I have no idea how he got up here so fast, but there's no time to ask before Aleks is pulling me out of the elevator. He hasn't dropped my hand once since we walked through the front doors of the hotel.

"Olivia?" Demyan asks, looking at me with concern. "Are you okay?"

I don't answer. I have no idea how to answer a question like that. I haven't known for a very long time now.

He exchanges a wary look with Aleks, but it's Jennifer who steps forward. "Come with me," she says gently.

"What are you doing?" Aleks barks.

"Look at her, Aleks," Jennifer says firmly. "She looks like she's going to pass out. And she's pregnant. Or have you forgotten that?"

Her tone reminds me of Mia. Protective and authoritative at the same time.

“I don’t forget anything,” Aleks growls. His eyes are as sharp as daggers. If I stare too long, I’m going to be pierced through. Then he sighs and waves us on. “Go on. Take a minute.”

Jennifer grabs my hand and steers me down a large corridor lined with windows that overlook part of the city.

At the end of the hall is a sky bar. As we make for a table in the corner, Jennifer grabs the attention of a waiter.

“Two glasses of water, please,” she says. “Add a twist of lemon in one.”

He nods and hurries off towards the bar. Jennifer forces me to sit down, but instead of taking the seat next to mine, she sits on the wooden table in front of me. She rests her elbows on her knees and takes my hand.

“Liv, you need to breathe.”

“I am breathing.”

“Not enough,” she insists. “Shit. He never should have brought you.”

“I’m fine,” I say, even as my head swims and my vision blurs at the edges.

“This might get dangerous,” she says. “And you’re pregnant.”

“Why do you even care?” I spit.

Her eyes fill with sadness. “I do care about you, Liv. I care about your entire family.”

“Is that why you chose Aleks over my brother?” I ask. “Even though Aleks... Aleks is... is a...”

She grips my hands tightly and forces me to meet her eyes. “Is that what you believe, Olivia?”

“What am I supposed to believe?” I ask. “I found the girl, Jennifer. She was locked up in a room, drugged out. God knows what he’s done to her.”

She sighs deeply and looks down. Then she raises her head back up. “I suppose I do understand why he brought you then.”

I frown. “So he can tie up loose ends and kill me along with Hargrove and my siblings?”

“You really think he would kill you?” Jennifer scoffs. “And his unborn child along with you?”

“I don’t mean anything to him,” I say. “And as for the baby, well... he can always make another with someone else. It’s not like he has a shortage of girls, right?”

She nods as though my reasoning makes sense. But I can see the worried way her eyebrows knit together.

It’s the look of someone who knows something vital that I don’t.

The kind of knowledge that might break me when I learn it.

The waiter appears with the waters. She takes them both and dismisses him with a tight smile and a nod. Then she hands me the glass with the lemon in it.

“Drink.”

“I’m not thirsty.”

“Drink anyway.”

I’m too tired to fight, so I take the glass and drink a sip. The water soothes my burning throat and it does help calm me down a little. Reluctantly, I drink more. When I set the glass down, it’s almost empty.

“Feel better?” she asks.

“Marginally.”

“Good.” She glances past me. “Come on then. We’ve got to go.”

She doesn’t grab my hand or try to guide me this time. She just lets me follow behind her at my own pace. When we walk out of the sky bar, both Demyan and Aleks are waiting for us at the door.

“Ready?” Aleks asks Jennifer, ignoring me altogether.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure you want to be there?”

She nods. “Positive. Might as well go out with a bang, right?”

I have no idea what that means. Does she think this is a doomed cause and that they’re all going to die? I glance at Aleks, but nothing on his face suggests that defeat is part of his future.

In fact, I tremble a little in fear for the men who are about to face him. My brother included.

From the moment we met, Aleks has been one thing: undeniable. An irresistible force of nature, a catastrophe consuming everything in his path.

What could possibly stop that? Nothing, as far as I’m concerned.

Then again, I suppose Mia would insist the same about Hargrove.

Aleks turns and walks down the hall. We all follow along behind him. As we walk, he glances back at Jennifer.

“Make the call,” he commands. “Now.”

She nods and pulls out her phone. I watch her with bated breath. Things are happening so fast that I can barely keep up anymore.

Well, that’s not quite accurate. I was barely keeping up in the first place. But now, even little things—breathing, walking, blinking—feel like more than I can manage.

“We’re here,” she says into the phone.

The response is brief, but the muffled voice sounds like it could be male, maybe? It’s over too soon to be sure.

Jennifer listens and nods. “Affirmative.” Then she hangs up.

I want to ask what the plan is or where we’re going, but before I can, Aleks turns to a set of gilded double doors and shoves them wide open.

In the split second before the doors open, I realize he's wearing gloves. Black leather driving gloves.

He wasn't wearing them before when he was holding my hand. So he must have just put them on. But why?

I don't have much time to ponder the question. Because the next thing I know, we're walking through the doors and facing off with quite the welcome party.

OLIVIA

Hargrove stands on the opposite end of the room, surrounded by armed men with deadly purpose in their eyes. My brother stands to the left, separate from everyone else.

But my eyes go straight to the person on Hargrove's right-hand side.

"Yulia," I whisper.

Her expression is melancholy. She's the only one sitting when we walk in, but she stands the moment she sees me. A flicker of worry passes over her face before she lifts her chin and stiffens into the same old mask of imperious confidence.

"Aleksandr!" Hargrove booms, raising both his hands as though he's welcoming us to his home. "How nice of you to pay us a visit."

"I wanted it to be a surprise," Aleks says calmly. "But I see my mother ruined the plan."

He glances at Yulia, waiting for a reaction. She isn't looking at him, though.

She's looking at *me*.

"Olivia, darling, are you hurt?"

Aleks steps in front of me, blocking Yulia from view. I have to step out from behind him to see her again.

I try to speak, but my throat closes. The words are trapped behind fear, behind confusion, behind the jagged shards of my broken heart.

I bite down on my tongue until I draw blood. *Snap out of it, Liv.* I can't afford to shut down now. This may not be what I'm used to, but it's what's in front of me. And I might as well fight for what's right.

For myself.

For my child.

For the girl I found in that bedroom.

It's the only way to absolve myself of the sin of believing in the lies of a wicked man just because he was beautiful. Just because he made me feel special.

"Where's the girl?" I croak.

"She's safe," Yulia assures me.

"Thank you, Olivia," Hargrove says grandly. "Thank you for helping us. Mia always knew that you would make the right choice once you discovered the truth."

"The truth?" Aleks asks mockingly. "What truth is that, Hargrove? Yours or mine?"

He glowers at Aleks. "There's no point running your mouth now, Aleksandr. She knows who you are. She knows *what* you are."

Aleks laughs. "She knows only what you've fooled her into believing is true. But truth is a stubborn thing. Some truths refuse to be caged."

Hargrove just chuckles under his breath as though he's amused. Like this is all some big joke.

I try to catch my brother's eye across the room, but Rob is fixed on the person standing just behind me—Jennifer.

He's got one hand on his holster, ready to pull out his weapon at a moment's notice.

The realization has me taking a step back, trying to shield my body. Not for my sake, but for the sake of my child.

No matter what happens, I have to survive this.

“It’s over,” Hargrove intones. “We have concrete proof now.”

“Do you?” Aleks asks. “Where is the girl?”

“What?”

“The girl you ‘saved’ from my home. Where is she now?”

“Like we said,” Hargrove says impatiently, “she’s safe.”

“Aleksandr,” Yulia says, moving forward, “I... I’m sorry... I just couldn’t do it anymore. Not after learning what you—”

“Oh, cut the shit, mother,” Aleks snarls. “The whole martyr act doesn’t suit you.”

“You can hate me, but—”

“I’ve never needed your permission to do that.”

She blanches, but regroups quickly. “But don’t take your anger out on Olivia. Let her come here, to her family. Leave her out of this.”

“Liv.”

I look at my brother. It’s the first time he’s spoken. His voice rings out too loud in the unnaturally quiet room.

“You chose him once before. You walked over to him and away from us,” Rob continues. “Don’t make that mistake again. Come to me.”

He stretches his hand out. I want more than anything to close the gap between us.

But I can’t make my legs move.

“Liv,” Rob says again. “Come.”

Why can't I move? Why won't I go? Everything I've needed to see has been shown to me. The evidence that was promised, hidden behind a locked door. Undeniable.

I found it. I saw it. I know.

So why can't I cross the room?

"Before you ask her to make a choice, maybe we should give her all the information, Robert," Aleks suggests, delaying my decision. "That's fair, wouldn't you say?"

"You're wasting our time, Makarova."

"On the contrary, I'm just making sure there's no room for doubt," Aleks says. "The girl who you say you found in my house... I'd like to see her."

Hargrove scowls. "Olivia, do you hear this? He wants to meet the girl he abducted, raped and drugged? She's seen enough of him, I think."

"She deserves to tell her story," Aleks replies calmly. "And if I am indeed her captor, then I'm sure she'll have no problem saying so if it means putting me away for life. Wouldn't you say, Hargrove?"

"I'm not traumatizing the girl by bringing her out here," he retorts. "I'm not putting her within your reach just so you can kill her to keep her silent."

Aleks shakes his head. "I came here to kill only one person today, Hargrove. Just one."

Hargrove's eyes narrow as he grins. The effect is unsettling, and for some reason, it makes me want to move closer to Aleks. There's an uncomfortable feeling stirring in my gut. I'm trying to ignore it, but I can't seem to concentrate on anything else.

"In case you haven't noticed, you're sorely outnumbered, Makarova," Hargrove points out. "There's three of you and there's, well... a lot more of us."

Aleks shrugs. "I'm not worried."

Hargrove tenses. I can see the unease creep into his demeanor. It makes Aleks's arrogant stance all the more impressive. Down ten to one and there's not an ounce of fear anywhere to be found in him.

"You're planning something," Hargrove accuses.

"The only thing I'm planning on is revealing the truth. The *real* truth. Not just to Olivia, but to her entire family."

For the first time since we came in here, Aleks turns to look at me. "You've been taken in by a story, Olivia. Except in this story, there are no heroes. Just villains."

"So you admit you're a villain?" Hargrove asks with a smug "gotcha" smirk on his face.

"Without question," Aleks answers, never taking his eyes off mine. "And if you had half a brain in that thick skull of yours, you'd have known not to fuck with me."

ALEKS

“Tell me about this girl,” I say. “The one I supposedly abducted.”

“Aleksandr,” Yulia says, taking a step forward, strangled tears brimming in the corners of her eyes.

Her performance is flawless. I ought to clap.

“It’s over, son,” she continues. “The evidence against you is overwhelming. Donald has the resources to make sure this story travels world-wide. It would ruin the Bratva. Cut your losses now before you plunge your men into the same ruin that’s awaiting you.”

“That was very poetic, Mother. Truly,” I tell her. “If I’d known you were this good, I’d have used you more often.”

She sighs, her eyes flickering to Olivia. “The girl is innocent in all this. Please... let her go.”

Her voice breaks a little like she’s overwhelmed with emotion. Olivia almost takes a step forward to console her, but I stop her with a jerk of my head.

“She’s staying with me,” I growl. “Need I remind you all, Olivia Makarova is my wife.”

“Olivia Lawrence was my sister long before she was forced into marrying you,” Rob snarls, his hand tightening on his holster. “She will be my sister long after you’ve been buried.”

“Rob,” I sigh, “I understand why you hate me. But your hatred is misplaced. I’m not the enemy.”

“I beg to differ.”

“And if you do manage to bury me, what will become of your sister’s child? Are you going to force my wife to abort like you tried to do once before?”

He flinches, and his eyes find mine for a moment. “That was a... mistake. We never should have forced her hand.”

I can tell by Hargrove’s scowl that he doesn’t agree for a moment, but he keeps his mouth shut for now. *Priorities*, I’m sure he’s thinking. *Snuff out one Makarova life at a time.*

“Liv,” Rob says, looking imploringly at his sister, “I am sorry for what we tried to make you do. I assure you, we won’t ever make that mistake again. We were so busy concentrating on who the father of the child was, we never stopped to consider that you are as much a part of that child’s DNA as he is. And that’s what matters. Mia and I will love your kid. We’ll help you raise them. Just please don’t choose *him* again.”

“She won’t,” Yulia cuts in. “She realized the truth this morning. She was the one who found the girl. She’s the one who convinced me to do the right thing for once in my life.”

Her earnest face is turned towards Olivia. So heartbroken, so very maternal.

So utterly full of shit.

I can see why that was such an effective strategy with Olivia. Her life now is defined by the spaces where her parents once were. Where her siblings once were.

“Olivia, come here,” Yulia says. “He won’t stop you.”

I laugh. “Won’t I?”

“Aleksandr, please!” my mother begs. “I know that, deep down, you care about Olivia. Don’t put her in the middle of this.”

“You did that,” I correct. “You did that when you decided to use her against me.”

Olivia frowns, her eyes flitting between Yulia and me.

“The girl you found in my home. How old is she?” I ask.

“As if you don’t fucking know,” Rob spits.

“I’ll tell you about her,” Jennifer says, striding to the no-man’s-land between my crew and Hargrove’s.

She positions herself right in front of me. Rob tenses immediately, his jaw hardening and his eyes going cold. But I can see past the strong reaction. He’s trying to conceal his still hurt pride, the sense of loss that he’s yet to deal with.

“The girl’s name is Alana Petty. She turned thirteen years old last Tuesday, two days before she was taken.”

Hargrove rolls his eyes. “Your whore certainly knows a lot about—”

“I’m still talking, motherfucker,” Jennifer seethes, so fiercely that Hargrove shuts up immediately. She takes a moment and then continues. “I know all this because it’s my business to see things, hear things, and know things that no one wants me to know.”

Jennifer turns back to Donald. “I’m a spy, Mr. Hargrove. I’ve been a spy for more than a decade and I’ve spent all that time honing my craft. I’ve been a thousand different women with a thousand different stories. I can uncover truths that are hidden behind generations of lies.”

Rob’s eyes are fixed on Jennifer. But his fingers twitch on his holster. He’s volatile, and I know it won’t take much to push him over the edge.

“I’ve spent the last three years following your movements, and I’ll admit breaking into your inner circle was hard at first,” Jennifer says. “But the longer I worked the right places and met with the right men—sometimes even the right women—I discovered the truths you didn’t want the world to know.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” Hargrove growls. “You’re a cheap spy, no better than a slut peddling her body for fake, dirty secrets.”

“You can insult me all you want. Your words don’t have the power to hurt me. I know your game, Hargrove. You’re trying to deflect from the truth I’m about to reveal. The fact that Alana Petty was taken from her home in the early hours of the morning by a team of men that answer... to you.”

He laughs. “Really? And after I abducted the girl, she miraculously ended up on Aleks Makarov’s property, did she?”

Jennifer nods. “That’s exactly what happened.”

Olivia glances towards Jennifer. “Jen, you’re not making sense.”

“They needed you to believe Hargrove is innocent, Olivia,” Jennifer tells her gently. “They needed you to find the girl on Aleks’s property. They needed hard evidence that he was guilty. And since they didn’t have real proof, they had to fabricate it.”

Olivia frowns. She shakes her head. “No. Wait. You’re saying... you’re saying the girl was planted in his house?”

“Precisely.”

“Jesus Christ, Liv!” Rob bellows. “This is ridiculous! Don’t let them manipulate you. Aleks's compound is a fortress. No one can get in or out of it without his knowledge. So how could Hargrove have done it without Aleks being aware? It’s madness. Just a pathetic attempt to confuse you! And you’re smarter than this, Liv. I know you are. Mia knows, too. It’s why she trusted you with this information—”

“Sophie,” Olivia says abruptly.

“I... what?” Rob looks dumbfounded.

Olivia raises her eyes. They land on Yulia for a moment before they flicker back to her brother. Then to me.

Something passes between us. A look, an energy, a vibration.

And I know at that moment that I haven’t yet lost her.

“Why the fuck are we standing around talking?” Hargrove roars. “When I can finish this in—”

He raises his hand. His army of men reach for their weapons.

But I’m faster than all of them put together. I grip my weapon and bring it right to Olivia’s head.

“No!” Rob roars.

And just like that, everyone freezes.

Olivia gasps as the cold metal hits her temple. I lean in and whisper in her ear so that only she can hear me. “Do you trust me?”

For a few long breaths, she does nothing.

Then...

She nods.

“See?” Hargrove yells, his eyes practically bulging from his head. “Do you need any more proof that this fucking sack of shit is guilty? Do you believe me now, Olivia?”

“What are you doing?” Rob interrupts. “That is my sister! Tell your men to drop their weapons.”

“Are you serious?” Donald seethes. His expression is contorted into blue-faced rage.

Rob looks equally murderous. “I will not compromise her safety. Tell your men to drop their weapons—*now*.”

Hargrove’s response is to pull out his own pistol and level it right at me. But since Olivia’s back is pressed to my chest, it looks an awful lot more like he’s threatening her.

“That fucking scum needs to be put away for life. We agreed, remember? He needs to be buried, one way or another.”

“And we’re still in agreement,” Rob growls, through gritted teeth. “But my only condition was that my sister get out of this unharmed. I’ll ask you one

more time: drop the guns.”

As the two of them stare each other down, I inch forward, pushing Olivia as I go.

“What are you doing?” she hisses.

“Trust me,” I whisper back.

“Are you insane?” Hargrove is growling at Rob. “She’s carrying his baby. He’s not seriously going to kill her.”

“And if he does?” Rob counters. “I can’t take that risk. He can always make another baby. I won’t be able to get my sister back.”

“Rob—”

“Listen to me,” Rob says furiously. “If you do anything at all to jeopardize Liv’s life, then Mia will never forgive you for it. I will make sure of that.”

“You overestimate your sister’s love for her,” Hargrove says cruelly.

I can feel Olivia flinch against the comment, but I hold her steady and inch a little closer.

“I know my sisters,” Rob says fiercely. “Both of them. We have all failed these last months. We’ve been fighting each other when we should have been united. Our parents taught us better.”

He turns and looks at Olivia. He gives her a reassuring nod. “I’m their older brother and I failed them both. But I will not—I do not—repeat my mistakes. You cannot take Makarova down without me.”

“This is insanity, Robbie. Don’t let him slip through our fingers.”

“Are you going to look your wife in the eyes and tell her you didn’t do everything in your power to protect Olivia?” Rob asks.

“He’s not going to hurt her!” Hargrove insists.

“He’s right, Robert,” I say slowly, putting my gun down. “There’s only one person I want to hurt.”

Hargrove watches me holster my gun. I know exactly what he's about to do. I know the man better than he probably knows himself.

He brandishes his weapon right in my face. He thinks he has the advantage now that my own gun is holstered.

But I never do anything without a reason.

Before he can even blink, I shove Olivia to the side, clutch Hargrove's wrist, and twist it backwards before forcibly wrenching the gun out of his grasp. He stumbles right into my arm. I grab the scruff of his neck and shove his own pistol right into his spine.

"That was easy," I breathe in his ear.

"You bastard," Hargrove growls. "Let me go."

"In due time. Let's clear the room first," I tell him. "Now."

"Not a damn chance!"

"Would you rather I pull the trigger?" I ask pleasantly.

He caves almost instantly. "Get out, the lot of you," he snaps to his men.

They hesitate. That just pisses him off. "I said get the fuck out!" His lips are flecked with spit, his eyes bulging from their sockets. The smooth, polished veneer of the charming billionaire has long since dissolved into a million ragged pieces.

The soldiers dissipate through a side door, leaving only seven of us in the room: Jennifer, Demyan, Rob, Olivia, Yulia, Hargrove, and me.

My baby makes eight.

"Much more intimate," I say, pressing the gun harder against his spine. "Much better."

When Rob is sure that I'm not going to shoot him, he rushes forward and collects his sister. She takes his hand, but her eyes remain fixed on me.

She's waiting for me to prove myself. Hoping against hope that she's not wrong in trusting me yet again.

“Killing me will only cement your guilt,” Hargrove sputters. “It’ll prove—”

“Killing you?” I laugh. “I have no intention of killing you. Death is such a painless and unfulfilling end for a monster of your stature. No, I’m going to make sure you live. Live a nice, long life just so you can suffer.”

Donald turns his face up to Olivia. “Liv... Liv, I’m your brother-in-law. I’m Mia’s husband. You have the power to stop him.”

“No one has that power,” she says without taking her eyes off me.

“You know what he’s done. What he’s capable of now,” Hargrove continues. “You can’t deny his guilt. You can’t honestly believe the bullshit lies they’re trying to spin.”

“It’s no story,” Jennifer says quietly.

“Sophie,” Olivia says, silencing everyone. “Sophie Gonzales. I heard Yulia say that name on the phone a long time ago. I want to know who she is.”

“My goddaughter,” Hargrove says after a moment’s pause. “Sophie... is my goddaughter.”

“You must be very close to her parents then?” I ask. “Am I right? So tell me something: what are their names?”

Hargrove tenses. His mouth opens and closes like a fish gasping on dry land. A man like him breathes lies, and there’s none in here left for him to feast on.

“Aleksandr,” my mother says, looking at me imploringly. “Son, what’s going on?”

She can feel the tide shifting. Everyone can at this point. But I don’t have much time, which is why the explanation will have to wait until after everything is said and done. Otherwise, these ridiculous leather gloves will be a waste.

I grip Hargrove’s gun a little tighter and shove him stumbling away from me. I aim the gun pointed at his face while everyone watches me, bracing for the gunshot coming to end his disgusting life.

No one says a word.

No one speaks for him.

But it's not him that needs speaking for.

Because at the last second, I change my aim.

Her eyes go wide as realization hits her. She knows it's over. I'm glad I get to see the awareness on her face. I'm glad she knows just how poorly she played her hand. Just how badly she underestimated me.

Then I shoot my mother in the fucking chest.

OLIVIA

Yulia is dead before she hits the ground.

He killed her.

He killed his own mother in cold blood.

I feel a scream coming, but it never even has the chance to escape my lips. My brother inserts himself in front of me and I grip his arm for dear life. Not because I'm scared, but because I feel as though I'm going to buckle to the floor if I don't hold onto something.

Aleks lowers the gun to his side. Hargrove stares at him with shock.

Nobody, it seems, understands what's going on.

Well, that's not quite true. Because when I turn to Demyan and Jennifer, I see they're wearing matching expressions of calm resignation. *They* understand. This must've been the plan all along.

But for the love of God... *why?*

"Thanks for the gun, Donnie," Aleks says, tossing it back to his enemy.

I watch the exchange in disbelief. Why on earth would Aleks return Hargrove's gun?

Hargrove seems to be thinking the same thing.

Then he decides that it doesn't really matter.

The only thing that does matter is the fact that he's armed once more. He's about to raise the gun to Aleks, when the double doors through which we entered burst open.

And the game changes completely.

I recognize the sour-faced man that walks in, but his name doesn't immediately come to mind. Not until Rob sighs with relief.

"Steve," he breathes. "Thank God."

Steven Kennedy. That's who he is. The FBI agent who was chosen to replace Rob in the investigation into the Makarova Bratva.

My head reels. More of Kennedy's men pile into the room with their weapons drawn, "FBI" blazoned in crisp white font across the chest of their bulletproof vests.

Hargrove lowers his gun and visibly relaxes, the thrill of victory etched in his smug grin.

"Well done, Robbie," he says, casting my brother a smile. "I had no idea you managed to get a message across."

Rob glances at me for a moment. "I didn't."

Hargrove's grin plummets.

Kennedy marches into the center of the room. "Everyone okay?" he asks before he spots the dead body on the floor. "Ah. Not everybody."

"I-I-I don't understand," Hargrove stammers. "If Robbie didn't call you, then...?"

Kennedy gives him a tight smile as if to say, *You poor idiot.* Then he turns to Aleks and arches an eyebrow.

"I did," Aleks says.

"You?" Hargrove balks. His jaw is hanging open, dumbstruck and blindsided.

Rob stiffens next to me, white as a ghost. "Why on earth would you..."

Aleks rests his hand on Kennedy's shoulder. "I've said before that enemies can become allies when the circumstances dictate. And in this case, they did. Your colleague here contacted me a few weeks ago."

"Weeks?" Hargrove exclaims, his eyes bulging. "Kennedy, what the fuck is going on?"

"We're not all in your damn pocket, Hargrove," Kennedy says with a scowl. "We aren't all willing to turn a blind eye to atrocities."

"Can someone please explain to me what the hell is going on?" Rob cuts in, raising his voice above the crosstalk.

"We have testimony from dozens of women, Hargrove," Kennedy sighs. "Though I use the term 'women' lightly. We both know that they're just girls. Children, really."

Hargrove flinches. "He's somehow managed to hoodwink—"

"Don't insult me," Kennedy snaps. "It's over, you son of a bitch. We have sworn statements from Sophie Gonzales, Lucy Carter, Lana Perego, Alana Petty—the list is repulsively endless. All their stories match the profile."

"What profile?" Rob asks, eyes darting around the room. "Are you seriously accusing Hargrove of—"

"Exactly. Rob, talk some sense into this fuck," Hargrove snaps, glaring at Kennedy. "He's clearly been bought by the Russian bastard."

"I cannot be bought," Kennedy hisses. I can tell from the disgust in his face that he means it. He's as straight-laced a cop as Rob is. He just wasn't quite so blinded by emotion.

"Sophie Gonzales is my goddaughter!" Hargrove insists. "Just talk to her parents. She was a bridesmaid at my goddamn wedding!"

"Oh, I know," Aleks says, stepping forward. "I saw the girl at the wedding. So young. So sad. I had Jennifer approach her after the ceremony. It's strange, but she seemed to be under the impression she wasn't allowed to leave or she'd be hurt. Do you happen to know anything about that, Donnie boy?"

Hargrove's eyes narrowed into slits. "You... you took her..."

"We didn't have to abduct anyone," Jennifer chimes in. "She was more than willing to come with me. Her parents, as well. They've all been placed in Witness Protection now, so you won't ever be able to find them again."

"Once Sophie finally started talking," Aleks continues, "Lucy Carter was convinced to share her story. From what I understand, it was very similar to Sophie's. It was a snowball rolling downhill from there. One, after another, after another, after another."

"You... you can't be serious!" Rob splutters. "Donnie... he's not... he's not the one—"

"Rob," Jennifer says, walking over to him, "listen to me. The tips that the Bureau received were from Hargrove. He was trying to set Aleks up. It was insurance. A way to ensure he would never get caught."

"Don't listen to her, Rob," Hargrove fumes. "You know you can't trust this bitch. She lied to you the entire time she knew you."

Not a single person in the room misses the crackle of desperation in his voice.

Jennifer ignores him. "We have page after page filled with the stories of the girls he's hurt. The damage he's caused. His groomer plucked these girls from vulnerable, impoverished families and built trust with them. Then Hargrove had them delivered to his private residences so he could rape them. Repeatedly. Eventually, he would release them, but only after they'd been bent and broken into keeping their mouths shut forever. If anyone tried to speak up, he destroyed them and everyone they loved. No trace left behind."

Kennedy stares on, watching everything and everyone with a keen eye. His men are cordoning off the area and demarcating a forensic barrier around Yulia's corpse.

It feels strange to watch them treat her like some broken object on the floor. I'm still not over her death. The shocking, heartbreaking nature of it. So swift and brutal.

Even if everything that Jennifer and Aleks are claiming is true, what does it say about a man who can kill his mother in cold blood for simply believing

the ruse that Hargrove concocted?

She may have betrayed her son, but it was a question of morality. She truly believed Aleks was guilty. We'd found the girl in his house—what we were supposed to think?

What was *I* supposed to think?

“Kennedy,” Hargrove says, turning to the detective imploringly, “this is... this is absurd. I am Donald Hargrove. I have... a reputation.”

“And you relied entirely too much on that,” Aleks says bitinglly. “In a way, I’m glad you decided to come after me. I’m the only one who had the resources and the balls to fight back. A weaker man might have rolled over.”

Hargrove’s eyes spark, but he’s still standing. He still believes he can weasel his way out of this situation.

And why wouldn’t he? He’s spent his whole life escaping consequences.

“Drop the gun, Hargrove,” Kennedy sighs.

Before Hargrove can protest, one of Kennedy’s agents cocks a gun right behind him. Realizing he’s well and truly cornered, Hargrove finally drops his pistol. It hits the carpeted floor with a sad little thud.

Kennedy nods to the cops clustered around the perimeter. At his signal, they descend on Hargrove, reciting his Miranda rights as they cuff his hands together behind his back.

“You can arrest me,” Hargrove growls. “But I’ll get out. I have more money than God. You think I won’t make bail?”

“I’ll make sure you won’t have a bail to make,” Kennedy replies with a grimace.

Hargrove turns to Rob and me, trying yet another tactic. “Your sister... I’m her husband. I’m your brother-in-law. You have to know I wouldn’t do something like this, Robbie.”

I take a deep breath, but I can no longer believe the man. Deep in my heart, I never believed him to begin with.

It's just like Aleks said: some truths refuse to be caged.

"Is any of it true?" Rob asks him somberly.

"Of course not, Robbie. Of course not!"

"I don't believe you." Rob shakes his head, disappointed by whatever he sees in Hargrove's eyes. "You will never see my sister again. I will make sure the marriage is annulled."

"Seriously?" he says, his eyes popping out from their sockets. "This marriage is the one you're going to annul? What about *that* one?"

He jerks his head towards me. "Aleksandr Makarova forced Olivia Lawrence into marriage against her will. She was under duress. She was his prisoner at the time. Is that not a criminal offense?"

Kennedy turns to me. "If there are charges you would like to file, Ms. Lawrence... now would be the time to bring it up."

I turn to Aleks. Our eyes meet. He doesn't say anything, but his expression says everything that needs saying.

The only question left worth asking.

Do you trust me?

I take a deep breath before I speak.

But I already know my answer.

"No, Mr. Kennedy, no charges," I say confidently. "Aleks never abducted me. I went with him willingly. I was—I *am* in love with him."

Hargrove ruins the moment. "That's fucking bullshit!" he spews.

Kennedy turns to Hargrove with a disgusted expression. "Don't make a fool of yourself, Donald. It's time to get you down to the station."

"He murdered her!" Hargrove screams as he's being towed away by a pair of federal agents. "Makarova just killed his own mother in cold blood. How can you not believe he's the real villain in this?"

Aleks's brows come together. "You're really trying to pin this crime on me, too, Hargrove?" he asks. "I'm not the one who killed my mother. You did."

Hargrove looks momentarily dumbfounded. "What the—"

Aleks turns to Kennedy. "Check the bullet that killed her. It was fired from Hargrove's gun."

Hargrove's eyes bulge, and as they do, I finally realize the reason for the leather gloves that Aleks is wear—

I stop short, realizing that he's no longer wearing the gloves. His hands are bare again.

I look up at him and he winks at me. It takes everything I have to keep my mouth from falling wide open.

"You son of a bitch!" Hargrove screeches before turning to Kennedy. "He took my gun and killed her with it!"

"And then... handed it back to you?" Kennedy asks skeptically.

"Why would I kill Yulia?" Hargrove demands. "She was on my side!"

"Really?" Demyan says, speaking up for the first time in a while. "Because from where I was standing, it looked like she was about to confess to her part in all this and you didn't want her to give away your game."

I frown, my heart beating hard against my rib cage. *Her part in all this*. It's right there on the tip of my tongue, dancing just out of sight in the shadows.

And then it hits me.

The truth I've been trying not to see.

Yulia didn't believe Hargrove's lies.

She helped him dream them up in the first place.

"Yulia was the groomer," I whisper.

ALEKS

I watch both Olivia and Rob connect the dots.

Rob pales visibly like he might puke on his shoes at any moment. But Olivia? She stands there. She's the pillar of support now. She's the bedrock of the Lawrence family.

"You want the truth?" I ask Kennedy. "There were plenty of witnesses in this room. These two," I point at Jennifer and Demyan, "work for me, and they're both filthy liars, so I wouldn't advise trusting a word they say."

Both of them smile.

"But that one," I continue, jerking my head at Rob, "is a federal agent. Plus, he hates my fucking guts. I think you can count on him for the truth."

I make eye contact with Rob. He stares back at me in disbelief that all this is happening, but I already know what he's going to do.

He glances towards his colleague. Then he clears his throat, stands up tall, and says in a rasping baritone, "It was Hargrove who pulled the trigger. He killed Yulia Makarova."

Kennedy doesn't ask any more questions. He just nods once and Hargrove is dragged off, kicking and screaming and frothing at the mouth.

Jennifer and Demyan close ranks around me, but I have eyes only for Olivia.

She's visibly shaken, barely keeping it together. All I want to do is get her out of this room as quickly as possible. I start to make for the exits, but Kennedy blocks my path.

He gives me a bemused smile. "That went better than I expected, actually."

"It went exactly as I'd planned."

"As for your mother's death," he says. "You're sticking with the story that Hargrove killed her?"

I raise my eyebrows. "The witnesses just told you what happened. That's the only story to tell."

"I'm not interested in stories, you know," he says. "Only the truth."

"Is this a truth you're planning on pursuing?"

He hesitates for a second, weighing the consequences of picking at a lie he suspects but can't wholly prove. Then he sighs and slumps his shoulders.

"No," he says. "She had it coming, no matter who killed her."

I smile. "We're in agreement on that."

Kennedy rubs his face in pure exhaustion. His conscience has taken a beating over the last few weeks. "I never expected to work with a son of a bitch like you, Makarova," he muses.

"Nor I with a sanctimonious prick like you, Kennedy."

"But we caught the bastard."

"We caught the bastard," I agree.

"This doesn't make us friends."

I chuckle at that. "No, it does not."

Kennedy nods once more, as if signing off on the end of our deal, and then he offers me his hand. We shake.

As soon as his hand drops, his expression goes sour again. Ah, well. An alliance between the Bureau and the Bratva was never going to last very long.

It has served its purpose.

“We’ll need to clear the room,” he intones.

“Not a problem. I’m leaving anyway.”

As Kennedy rejoins his men to coordinate whatever bullshit they have to do next, I head over to Olivia.

But I stop short a few yards away. She’s still standing with Rob by the window. They’re clinging to each other, both giving support and taking it, both trying to come to terms with the new truths slapping them harshly across the face. The ugly, sharp-edged new realities.

“How could I have been so blind?” Rob mumbles. “He was right in front of me...”

“This is not your fault, Rob,” Olivia says, always ready to forgive. “He fooled you. He fooled Mia—”

“Mia,” Rob groans. “Fuck. This is going to devastate her.”

“We can tell her together.”

“No,” he says, taking Olivia’s hand and kissing it gently. “No, I should be the one to tell her.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ll head over there now.”

A voice interrupts. “Before you do, can we talk?”

Both Olivia and Rob turn to Jennifer. For the first time, Rob looks at her with an expression that isn’t bristling with a year’s worth of tortured hate.

He nods awkwardly and lets go of Olivia. “Let’s go somewhere quiet,” he suggests.

“After you,” Jennifer murmurs. The two of them leave the room.

I notice Demyan has already disappeared. That just leaves Olivia and me in a room full of feds.

She meets my eyes for a moment, and then I take her hand and lead her out through the doors, putting our backs on the bloody nightmare that has consumed the last year of my life.

The sky bar is deserted. I find a corner table that overlooks the city and pull a chair out for her to sit in.

We breathe in silence for a long time. I wait for her to speak first. It's not like her to let the quiet persist.

When she finally turns to me, her liquid honey eyes are filled with relief and the last vestiges of sadness.

"All that... it really happened?" she asks. There's a heartbreaking tremor in her voice.

I reach out and take her hand gently. She closes her eyes for a moment and then leans into me, settling into the crook of my arm.

Right where she belongs.

"It really happened," I tell her softly.

"You killed your mother."

"I know it's a lot to accept," I say. "Especially for a woman who holds family in such high esteem. Especially for a woman who loved her parents completely."

She nods. "Yulia wasn't a mother. She was... She was..."

"A monster," I finish firmly. "Every bit as bad as Hargrove in her own way."

A new realization makes her stiffen. "She groomed me, too, didn't she?"

I hate the wince that follows. Like she's lashing herself internally for falling victim to so many liars at once.

"Yes. That is what proved it to me. The last nail in her coffin."

Olivia shakes her head. "She was just so... kind. So..."

"Maternal."

“Yes, exactly.” Olivia nods. “She made you believe that she would never do anything to hurt you. She made me believe that she was the long-suffering mother and you were the...”

“Asshole son?”

She laughs, then cringes like laughing hurts her. “Yes. Your words, not mine. Well, actually, I might’ve said them at one point or another.”

“Not undeserved.” I sigh and add, “I don’t blame you, you know. The woman was a gifted con artist.”

“But you saw through her.”

“Because I’ve had a lifetime of practice,” I say. “And my trust in her was already compromised.”

“How long did you know about her involvement with Hargrove?”

“A few weeks now.”

“And you pretended like you didn’t know?”

I toy with the ring on her finger. The ring that marks her as mine, flashing under the fluorescent lights. “If I’d cornered her, she would have tipped him off. Even if she hadn’t been able to, her silence would have been tip enough for Hargrove. I needed to keep her in the game to make sure I could take them both down together.”

“And Kennedy?” Olivia asks. “How did that come about?”

“That was unexpected,” I explain. “He’s the one who made contact with me. Through Jennifer, actually.”

“And the two of you came up with this plan together?”

“Not exactly,” I say, remembering that contentious first meeting with him that changed everything. “It’s not exactly easy for a man like me to be working with the cops. We clashed a lot. The only thing we could agree on was catching Hargrove.”

“You said you think he likes you, and honestly, I kinda see it,” Olivia says with a sheepish, teasing grin. “Maybe it’s the start of a beautiful friendship.”

I suppress a laugh and shrug. “I have no use for friendships. Alliances are the only connections that are useful. Our alliance served its purpose. Now, it’s time to put it to rest.”

She nods and rests her head against my shoulder once more. “Can I ask you a question, Aleks?”

“Of course.”

“Why did you kill her like that?” Olivia asks. “Kennedy knew as much as you did, right? Or at the very least, he suspected what was going on. He would have arrested Yulia as well as Hargrove. So why kill her?”

“Because the case against Hargrove is going to be a disgusting spectacle. His name, along with everyone connected to him, is going to be dragged through the mud. If I’d let Kennedy arrest her, she’d have had a trial of her own. And the Bratva would have been roped into it. I’m not interested in fame, Olivia. Notoriety has its place in the underworld. But in the larger scheme of things, it’s inconvenient.”

She nods, taking that in, but she doesn’t seem wholly satisfied with the answer. “It’s more than that though, isn’t it? It’s the Bratva. Only blood can pay for blood. Haven’t you said that to me before?”

I smile down at her, marveling at how far she’s come in such a short time. “You’ve been paying attention.”

“I’m an artist,” she laughs. “Paying attention is what I’m supposed to do.”

I take her hand and our fingers wind together. “You need something to eat.”

“I couldn’t eat if you forced it down my throat,” she scoffs. “I just watched you shoot your mother dead. And as much as she may have deserved it, it still doesn’t really lend itself to hunger.”

“The baby—”

She places her hand over her belly. “The baby is fine. I’ll let you know when I’m hungry.”

I decide not to push it just now. I have to learn to trust her like she’s learned to trust me.

“I still can’t quite believe it,” she admits after a moment. “How could she do it? She was poaching vulnerable children from their homes so she could feed them to a shark.”

“Why is it so hard to believe?” I ask. “She was a shark herself.”

“But what was the goal?” Olivia counters. “What did she have to gain?”

“The Bratva.”

Olivia raises her eyebrows in shock. “Are you serious?”

He nods. “She fancied herself a great leader. She resented the power she lost when I came back from Russia. She wanted that control back.”

“And she figured, if you were in jail, she could take over?”

“What other choice would the Bratva have had?” I say. “She thought she had it all lined up.”

“But... you’re her son. She’s your mother.”

I shrug. “She could play pretend all day long. But when it came to being a mother for real, she was sadly lacking. She could never love anyone more than she loved herself. Funny enough, I almost fell victim to the same mistake.”

“Aleks,” Olivia says with a strained voice, “I’m... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me, Olivia. Don’t you ever apologize. You did the best you could with what you were given. That’s all anyone can ever ask of you. It’s all I can ever ask of you.”

She nods like she wants so badly to believe me, to take solace in the comfort I’m giving her. “Those girls,” she says softly. “What’s going to happen to them now?”

“They’re all being taken care of. I’m seeing to it myself.”

“That’s good,” she breathes. “That’s really good.” She strokes my hand resting on top of hers.

Then, suddenly, she stiffens. One thought after another clawing her back from finding peace in the aftermath.

“What about Mia?”

“What about her?”

“I mean, she’s still married to him.”

I wave my hand in the air. “I can take care of that, too. If she chooses to accept my help, that is.”

Olivia nods again and gnaws at her lip. “Do you think she’ll hate me?”

“For being right?” I ask. “For choosing the right side?”

“Emotions aren’t always rational.”

“All the more reason they’ll pass. And anyway, Rob will speak for you.”

“Yeah, I guess he will now.” She turns a shrewd eye up to me. “You took a huge risk, trusting that he would have your back in there with Kennedy. What if he’d decided to just tell the truth?”

I shrug. “After what he knew? No. Your brother may be a lot of things, but he’s honorable at heart. He’d never defend a beast like that.”

“And I suppose he was trying to make amends.”

“He’s not the only one trying to do that.” She looks towards the door. The cops are out of sight now. It’s just the two of us. “You think Jennifer and Rob will work it out?”

I frown. “I have no idea.”

“Would you hate it if they did?”

“Why would I hate it?”

“Well, you don’t really like my brother.”

I can see the earnestness in her eyes. The hope. Nothing—not blood, not horrors, not secrets and lies and betrayals—can snuff that out of her.

It's why I can love her the way I do.

And it's why I can give her something I never thought I'd be able to give: a happily-ever-after with everyone she loves included.

"He's your brother," I say. "I'll learn to deal with it."

She gives me a tentative smile. "Aleks?"

"Yes, *kiska*?"

She sits up and moves back a little so that she can look me in the eye. She holds herself differently now than she once did. Royally, almost. There's determination in her face, in her voice, in the steady clasp of her hands.

"I've wanted to ask you something for a very long time. But I've never dared to because, well... I've been afraid to come across as weak or needy or desperate or whatever. But now that this thing with Hargrove is more or less behind us, I need to know."

"Then all you have to do is ask."

She takes a deep breath and says, "What are we going to do next?"

There's a long pause. I take my time in answering. I smile, pull her hand up to my lips and kiss each knuckle slowly. Savoring it. Worshiping her.

When I raise my eyes to hers, I can tell she's holding her breath.

It's amazing to me: Can she still not know? Can she still not see?

"What we're going to do is go home," I tell her in a low rasp. "We're going to take a long, hot shower, and then we're going to go to bed together. And after that, tomorrow, we'll wake up together and start."

"Start what?"

"Living life."

Her eyes go wide. "You want me to stay with you? Be your wife?"

"That's exactly what I want."

"Why?"

My smile gets wider. “Do you really not know?”

She trembles a little, but a gentle grin flickers across her lips. “I suppose I do,” she says at last. “But it’d be nice to hear you say it.”

I grin back. The little *kiska* has finally learned to ask for what she wants.

“Because I love you, Olivia Makarova. I have from the moment you spilled coffee on yourself in that airport. I always will.”

Then I lean in to kiss her.

And at long last, there’s nothing between us but desire and hope.

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