

A RUSSIAN  
MAFIA  
ROMANCE



*Shattered*  
ALTAR

MAKAROVA BRATVA BOOK ONE

NICOLE FOX

# **SHATTERED ALTAR**

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A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE (MAKAROVA BRATVA  
BOOK ONE)

NICOLE FOX

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# **SHATTERED ALTAR**

A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE (MAKAROVA BRATVA  
BOOK ONE)

**It started with the mile high club.**

**It ended with a fake marriage and his baby in my belly.**

I thought it was just a hookup on an airplane.

Let's be cute and call it a "one-flight-stand."

Or we could be more accurate and call it what it really was:

The day that ruined my life.

Aleksandr Makarova sure looked the part of the knight in shining armor.

Tall, rich, with eyes that promised all kinds of delicious things.

Not to mention, a body that delivered on those promises.

It was the craziest moment of my life.

But when the flight landed, Aleks disappeared.

I tried to pretend it didn't hurt my feelings.

Back to my boring old reality, right?

The problem was, Aleks wasn't really gone.

And when I stepped one toe in my house and saw what he'd done to my family, I realized...

He wasn't going away anytime soon.

***SHATTERED ALTAR is Book One of the Makarova Bratva duet. The story concludes in Book 2, SHATTERED CRADLE.***

## OLIVIA

“Delayed?” I blurt. “Oh, you gotta be kidding me.”

The airline agent blinks back at me with a painted-on smile. “I’m sorry, ma’am. Domino effect. The previous flight was late.”

I swallow my disappointment. “How long will it be?”

“A few hours. I’ll make an announcement as soon as we know more. In the meantime, why don’t you take a seat?”

She might as well have said, *Sit your annoying ass down*—the dismissal is that obvious. I have no choice but to nod back. “Okay. Thank you.”

I slink away to the furthest row of seats facing the main terminal and check the time. We should have been boarding now. Instead, I’m settling into a hard plastic seat in a crowded airport and avoiding a stain on the armrest that looks suspiciously like vomit.

Needless to say, I’ve had better vacations.

My phone pings five times in a row, but I know who it is without having to check. Mom is technically the owner of a functioning cell phone, pays the bill and everything, but hell will freeze over before she figures out how to turn the dang thing on.

My brother Rob isn’t really the texting type. If he has anything to say, he just picks up his phone and calls.

Which means my dearest sister is the one blowing me up. I pull up her texts.

All I can see at first are a bunch of exuberant emojis. Smiling, I scroll down until I see actual words, written in actual English. Mia is ten years older than me, but she still types sometimes like she's a twelve-year-old girl stuck in an early 2000s AOL chatroom version of purgatory. Lots of *omgz* and *lulz* and *rolfcopters*.

One thing hasn't changed, however: in typical Mia fashion, her thoughts are split across half a dozen different messages. It's a little peek into how her brain works. A hundred miles an hour in every direction.

***MIA: hav u boarded yet?***

***MIA: ill be there to pick u up.***

***MIA: Tht way we can tlk abt Mom and Rob b4 we r all trapped in 1 house 2gether.***

***MIA: so excited to see you, munchkin!!!***

***MIA: cant wait to smush ur face.***

Punctuation is a rare treat. She must be giddy. I can't help laughing and feeling instantly better. I'd sit through a hundred delays if it meant I got to see my family at the end of it. Lord knows I need it.

Since moving to New York two years ago, I haven't seen them as often as I'd like. Mia visited twice; Mom came once. Rob hasn't made the trip yet.

His job keeps him busy, which is understandable. And then there's the other thing...

I take a deep breath, worried about my headstrong brother and how he's going to handle his first Christmas without Isabella.

I send Mia back a bunch of hearts and smiley faces before I start typing out an actual text.

***OLIVIA: I'm excited to see you guys too!!! But my flight has been delayed. Don't know for how long yet.***

She texts back almost immediately. ***Nooooooooooooo!***

I see that she's typing something else, but then the three dots icon disappears. A second later, my phone starts ringing. I pick it up with a smile.

"Hey, hey, hey!" I say in a deep, albeit squeaky, but mostly just terrible impression of Fat Albert. It's been our inside joke for years. Mia used to chase me around the house saying it over and over again, tickling me half to death whenever she caught up.

"Delayed?" she groans, not even bothering to do the return line. "What a load of crap. Well, you should have a snack and drink some water if you're gonna be waiting a while."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "I have one mother already, thank you very much. I don't need another."

Given how close we are, you'd think there was a smaller age difference. But Mia's a full decade older than I am. When we were younger, she was like my second mother. Now, we're friends first, sisters second. Unless Mia is tipsy, then she likes to tell everyone we're "ballers first." I'm honestly not even sure what that means.

"Okay, rude!" she scoffs.

"Anyway—yes, I'm hoping it's not a huge delay."

"It always is," Mia says immediately.

"Don't jinx it."

She laughs. "You superstitious little weirdo."

"Yeah, well, sue me. I am what I am. I'll let you know when I know more. I don't want you camped out at SFO waiting for me."

"Honestly," she says, lowering her voice, "I don't mind..."

I cringe. "Oh no. Is it Rob?"

"No, but... well, it is his first Christmas without her," she says. She doesn't have to explain much more.

"Is he doing any better?" I ask tentatively. "Every time I call him, he seems so distracted."



“Well, that might not be about Isabella. I think there’s something big going down at work,” she says.

“Ooh, drama at the Bureau,” I giggle. “Did he say what? Is it a serial killer? I bet it’s a serial killer. It’s always a serial killer.”

“No, you clown,” Mia says with an exasperated laugh. “He never talks about work. It’s freaking annoying. Especially because he’s the one with the cool job. It’s rude to work for the FBI and never talk about it!”

“Guess he’s burying himself in work then. Is that healthy?”

“I don’t blame him, honestly. I’d probably do the same.”

I nod, feeling that sharp pain in my chest whenever I think about Rob and everything he’s gone through in the last year. It’s changed him. There are moments when he feels like a different man altogether. Like the brother I loved is gone and he isn’t ever coming back.

“Wait—so if you weren’t talking about Rob, what did you mean?”

“Nothing,” she says, a little too quickly. “It’s just... Christmas is always hard on Mom.”

Immediately, the lump forms in my throat. Well, “forms” isn’t the right word, because it’s been there for so long now that it’s starting to feel like a part of me. More like it throbs with a pain I’ve tried so, so hard to forget.

Dad loved Christmas an unreasonable amount. We were the only house on the street that had their decorations up at the beginning of November, and the last house to take them down on the final day of January. If it weren’t for Mom, he would’ve left them up until summertime, probably.

“I can’t believe he’s been gone seven years,” I whisper.

“I know,” she says. “It’s weird. Feels like he’s been gone forever, honestly.”

“Really?” I ask. “For me, it feels like it happened just yesterday.”

We sit with our shared grief for a moment. There was a time when I avoided talking about Dad altogether. It was just too painful. But over the years, I’ve learned to open up to Mia. She is still the only one I feel comfortable crying

around.

“You were so much younger,” she says.

“I was eighteen,” I point out. “I was old enough. Old enough to know better.”

“Oh, honey, let’s not go there, okay?” she says. “I thought you were done with the guilt.”

“I’m never done with it, Mimi. It just comes and goes.”

She pauses and breathes for a moment. Then: “Liv, maybe you should talk to someone?”

“I tried that,” I snap, a little more harshly than she deserves. “Twice, actually. But both shrinks I saw spoke in Bumper Sticker.”

“What does that mean?”

“Like, *Coexist. Make peace with your demons. When life gives you lemons, throw them back and ask for tacos instead.* That kind of eyeroll-worthy nonsense you see on the back of some soccer mom’s minivan.”

Mia bursts out laughing. “Okay, point taken. But finding a therapist is like dating. Plenty of fish in the sea; you just gotta find the right one. You know, I do have a friend who’s a therapist. I could refer—”

“No,” I say, cutting her off.

“Again, rude. Why not?”

“Because it’s too personal. The two of you are friends.”

“We’re not that close,” Mia protests. “We slept together twice and that was it. We were both young and busy. It was just about sex.”

“Lovely. Already way more than I need to know about my therapist.”

“Okay, fine. Point also taken.”

“Speaking of fish in the sea,” I say, changing the subject, “what’ve you hooked lately? Dating anyone noteworthy?”

She exhales dramatically. “I’m a surgeon, love. The men I meet are usually sprawled across my table with their insides staring me in the face.”

“Uh, ew.”

“Hard to find a man attractive after that,” she follows up.

“You haven’t dated anyone since William,” I tell her, as if she needs reminding.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been busy.”

“For three years?”

“Again, I’m a surgeon. I’m always busy.”

I laugh. “What about your fellow doctors? I’m sure there are a few hot nurses around, too.”

“Do you think I work in an episode of *Grey’s Anatomy*?”

“I mean, maybe? Are there really no McSteamys in sight?”

“None whatsoever,” she says. “Which is fine. You know I’m more of a McDreamy kinda gal.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Right. I forgot about your weird taste in the male gender.”

“Me?” she scoffs. “Says the lady who dates men as boring as unbuttered toast!”

“Now who’s being rude?”

“Don’t argue,” she replies. “I remember your dating history. You claim you’re into bad boys, but every single one of your previous boyfriends has been as vanilla as a cupcake.”

“Okay, okay,” I concede. “So maybe none of them have been—”

“Exciting? Sexy? Even remotely interesting?” she offers.

“Lionel wasn’t so bad!”

She barks out a laugh. “His name was *Lionel*. Beginning and end of story.”

Before I can start in on bashing all her ex-boyfriends, an announcement begins playing over the sound system.

“Oh, hold on,” I tell her. “This one’s for me.”

The voice is crisp and professional. “The following announcement is for passengers on flight UA523: your new boarding time is 1:15. We apologize for any inconvenience.”

“Oh, fuck me,” I groan.

“What’d they say?” Mia asks. “I didn’t quite catch it.”

“It’s a five-hour delay.”

“Nooo!” she says with more than her fair share of melodrama. “What are you going to do?”

“It’s okay,” I say hastily, trying to find the silver lining. “I’ll just hang around in the airport until I have to board.”

“For five hours?”

“It doesn’t make sense to go back home,” I say. “With traffic, it’s going to take me at least an hour and a half both ways. I might as well wait it out here.”

“Okay, fine. But at least make use of your damn delay and flirt with some cute stranger.”

I roll my eyes. “Right, I’ll be sure to do exactly that. You know me so well.”

“Stop rolling your eyes and live it up, Olivia,” Mia says.

“How did you—”

“I’m your big sister. I know everything,” she says. “Just like I know that you only pick men you’re not actually attracted to and can’t possibly fall in love with because it means you’re in no danger of having your heart broken.”

I reel like she just slapped me in the face. Not because she's wrong. The exact opposite, actually.

"Well... shit."

"See?" Mia deadpans. "I know you."

"Maybe you should be my shrink."

"You couldn't afford me."

"There's no family discount?" I gasp in mock horror.

"A girl's gotta eat. And my loft ain't cheap."

"I can't wait to see you," I say with a laugh.

"Same, kiddo. Same."

We say goodbye with a promise for me to update her if the flight time changes again. Once I hang up, I take an aimless walk through the airport. Amongst the grab-and-dash options, I find a cute little bakery that overlooks the tarmac. The black-and-white tiled floors and metal cafe chairs lend an air of elegance—so long as I ignore the bedraggled woman in a dirty muumuu and no shoes huddled in the corner.

I turn away from her and choose a stool at the bar. The waiter brings me a coffee, and I sip on it as I watch every plane except for mine get ready to take off.

Everywhere I look outside is a beehive of activity. Men waving those glowsticks in every direction, chucking luggage into the underbelly of the planes with no regard for "Handle Carefully," speeding around the grounds on those little motorized carts. It's kind of Zen, in a weird sort of way.

I'm so involved in people watching that I jerk violently when someone takes the barstool next to me.

"Are you okay?" a deep voice asks in amusement. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh, no—I mean yeah, I'm—"

I stop short as I look at the man who has just sat down next to me.

He's massive. A colossus of a man, at least six and a half feet tall and broad in the shoulders with an athlete's narrow waist. He's dressed casually in a long-sleeved henley and dark jeans, but the fit and fabric ooze wealth and importance. The watch on his wrist is probably worth more than Mom's mortgage. And despite being in an airport where everyone looks unshowered and exhausted, this man is photoshoot ready. His hair is perfectly windblown, the natural light is doing wonders for the emerald flecks in his sea-blue eyes, and his jawline looks like it's been carved with a laser ruler.

A bizarre non sequitur comes to mind: last year, I'd gotten my first big commission as an honest-to-goodness cartoonist, a freelance assignment for the New York Times. Part of the job was drawing—and I quote—"the most handsome man you can imagine."

Being a hopeless *Titanic* fangirl, I modeled my piece off Leonardo DiCaprio. Can't go wrong there, right? And sure, I'd been happy with the result at the time.

But, now, looking into the face of this man, I realize that I drew the wrong Adonis.

He's still standing there, at least three feet away from me, and yet the heat coming off my body is mortifying. So is the fact that I've been staring at him silently for almost six seconds now without saying a word.

"You sure you're okay?" he asks.

I blink once. Twice. *Speak, goddammit. What's wrong with you, Olivia?*

"Sorry," I manage to choke out. "I... I'm fine. I just... I was..."

"Somewhere else?" he says, helping me out.

I smile. "Right. Yeah. Somewhere else."

"You don't mind if I sit here, do you?" It's a question that answers itself, said with ease and years of obvious practice.

Something tells me this man knows how to get what he wants.

“No, it would be my pleasure. I mean, not that you’re asking to sit with me. What I mean is, it’s a free country, right? Uh...”

He smiles and heat pools low. Between my legs, to be more precise.

“I promise you: the pleasure is all mine.”

---

**ALEKS**

She looks better than I imagined.

Her cheeks are beet red, almost the same color as her deep auburn hair. The blush spreads when I pull out the stool next to her and sit.

“Long layover?” I ask.

“Yeah. Well, no,” she corrects. “My flight was canceled. I mean, not canceled, but...” She chooses that moment to look at me and promptly loses her train of thought.

“Delayed,” I offer, helping her out with an inward smirk.

“Right, that’s what I meant.” She waves her hand in an attempt at being nonchalant. It almost works, but then her finger catches the handle of her coffee mug. It tips to the side and she gasps, lunging out and saving it just before it tips over.

But it doesn’t save her fingers. A steaming splash of coffee spills over the side, dousing her hand and the table.

“God-fucking-shit-dammit!” she cries out.

I stare at her for a moment before I snort with laughter. The color floods back onto her face as she looks around for something to wipe her hands with. I produce a few napkins from the container to my left and wrap them around her coffee-soaked fingers.



The moment I touch her, she stills. She looks up at my face, watching as I dab the coffee away. She must assume I'm too busy helping her to notice the blatant thirst in her eyes.

But I notice.

I notice everything.

"There," I say, once her hand is relatively dry. "You're good. Just a little wet."

"Thank you for—wait, what did you just say?"

"Your fingers," I say, just innocently enough that she can't accuse me of straying too far over the line. "They're still a little wet. And probably sticky. Until you can take care of the issue."

"Oh." She turns towards the taxiing planes so she doesn't have to meet my eyes. "Yeah. Right."

Her mortification is palpable. Nuclear radiation levels of embarrassment. It's making this little run-in so much more entertaining than I had anticipated.

She takes the remaining napkins on the table and tries to sop up the coffee puddled around her mug. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually this clumsy."

"Somehow, I don't believe you."

She turns to me, eyes wide in surprise. Then she catches the obvious amusement on my face. She smiles, and I realize her brown eyes are actually hazel. Shards of green in them catch the light from the window.

She's prettier than I anticipated, too. But that's neither here nor there.

Yet.

"I'm not usually this awkward, either," she adds.

"I don't think I believe that, either." I pause, then throw her a lifeline. "Delayed flights are the worst. I'm delayed, too."

"Oh, yeah? Where are you headed?"

“San Francisco.”

“No way! Are you flying UA523, too?”

“Yes, I am.” I nod. “Looks like we’re going to be stuck here together for a while.”

She sits up straighter, gaining a little confidence as we talk. “I guess so. And of course, this would be the one flight where I forget to pack my sketchbook in my carry-on.”

“Sketchbook? Are you an artist?”

I already know all of this about her, of course, but I feign interest.

“‘Cartoonist’ is my official title,” she says, dipping her head self-consciously. “I freelance, mostly.”

“Interesting line of work.”

“It can be,” she says brightly. “What do you do?”

“A little bit of everything.”

She raises her eyebrows. “That’s an evasive answer.”

“Don’t women like mysterious men?”

Her blush returns. “I don’t know. Depends on the woman, I suppose.”

She bites her lip to hold back from blurting anything else, but she shouldn’t even bother. Because I already know everything there is to know about Ms. Olivia May Lawrence, twenty-five years old, owner of a Bachelor’s degree in fine arts, half a dozen mostly dead house plants, and an addiction to Hot Cheetos. I know where she shops and where she eats. I know when she leaves her home and when she returns. I know when she sleeps and when she wakes, and hell, I’m pretty damn sure I know exactly what she dreams.

So no, the little *kiska* doesn’t have to say this particular truth for me to know it, too: that she is exactly the kind of woman who likes mysterious men.

Maybe even dangerous ones.

“I’m Aleksandr, by the way,” I tell her, bailing her out.

“Alexander,” she repeats clunkily.

“Try saying it like you’re not so painfully American,” I laugh. “Or we can just go with ‘Aleks.’”

She winces. “Was it that bad? I take it you’re not American.”

“Not by a long shot.”

“You don’t really have an accent, though.”

“I learned long ago to leave that behind.”

“Hm, also very mysterious. You’re really leaning into the whole persona.”

I tilt my head towards her. “Pot, kettle. You still haven’t told me your name.”

“Oh, right,” she laughs. “Liv. Short for Olivia. Not nearly as interesting as your name. But I suppose it fits. I’m not too interesting, either.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

I didn’t expect to be so drawn in by her. She’s an attractive woman. Beautiful, even.

She’s just so focused on making herself disappear that her beauty is not immediately apparent.

Her jeans are high-waisted and well-fitted, but they’re covered by a long, baggy white blouse and a wool sweater that feels better suited to a seventy-year-old man than a twenty-five-year-old vixen.

“I’m going to call you Olivia,” I decide.

*Liv* is the awkward, insecure girl with an ugly sweater and hot coffee all over her fingers.

*Olivia* is the woman underneath all the layers. The one I came to find.

“Oh. Uh, okay, yeah, sure. Totally.” She smiles politely, but beneath it is a layer of confusion, like static electricity interrupting the TV show of her life.

She isn't used to men like me. Enigmas.

I look down at the cup in my hand. "This coffee tastes like cat piss."

She snorts with laughter, hiding it behind her coffee-stained hand. "It wouldn't be high on my list of memorable cups, no. But it's airport coffee, what did you expect?"

"If you know where you're going, you can always find what you're looking for," I tell her. "Even in an airport."

She narrows her eyes. "Where is this magical coffee utopia you speak of?"

"Do you want to come with me and find out?"

She raises her eyebrows. "Wait, really?"

"Why not?" I ask. "You've got a five-hour delay, same as me. That's going to be hard to do without a proper caffeine hit."

She hesitates. Her thoughts are written in her eyes, clear as day. She finds me attractive, but I'm a stranger. She wants to come, but she isn't the kind of girl who takes risks.

Olivia is an open book.

And I want to rip her apart—page, by page, by page.

I see the moment she makes up her mind. She squares her shoulders and sets her jaw. "Okay. Let's go."

When I stand up, her eyes trail up slowly, growing wider with every inch. She's not the first woman to ogle me like that. But she is the first one in a while that I've given a fuck about.

Just not for the reasons she suspects.

She blinks and looks away the moment she realizes I'm watching her watch me. Straightening her spine, she stands. "Lead the way," she announces.

I smirk. "I always do."

I shepherd her through the crowds towards the airport's private lounge. It's not the one for frequent flyers or harried businessmen. This one is tucked away behind a nondescript, pockmarked door with no obvious signage.

You have to know people to get in here.

I open the door and gesture for her to go first. She stops at the threshold and wrinkles her nose. "I didn't know the best coffee in the airport was to be found in the janitor's closet—oh."

The words die on her lips when she sees what's inside. I watch her, mesmerized, as the subtle glow of the lights reflecting off the bronze plaque light up her face like a constellation.

"Um, Aleks? I... don't think I belong here."

"What makes you say that?"

"I think you need, like, some kinda exclusive membership to get in. They're gonna take one look at me and call in the Peasant Removal SWAT team."

"It's a good thing you're with me, then." I reach into my pocket and retrieve my platinum membership card. "Come on."

I usher her inward and pull the door closed behind us. The hubbub of the airport fades away at once. It's quiet and still in here.

We round the corner and come into view of a burnished steel front desk, stretching in a smooth arc. Behind it, a clerk jumps to attention. I show him my card and he bows, then presses his thumb to a scanner just out of sight. There's a pleasant hum, followed by a door to the left swinging open on silent hinges.

Olivia's eyes go round as we step further inside.

The lounge is a cavernous, free-flowing space broken into open pods that mimic cozy living rooms. Deep, lush sofas bask in the sunlight, fresh-cut flowers gleam on each table, and mahogany desks bear cups of golden pens.

Off to one side is a sprawling buffet counter. I spy crab and lobster, jambalaya, omelets, half a dozen different soups bubbling in elegant pots. The smell is heavenly.

One of the hostesses notices us and strides over. I've seen her before—tall, curvy, with a blouse about three sizes too small and a very conspicuous lack of bra. I can't recall if I've fucked her or not.

“Good morning, sir,” she says, ignoring Olivia completely. “Can I get you anything?”

“Two cups of coffee,” I tell her. “We'll take it in one of the private lounges.”

The moment she disappears, Olivia sidles up next to me. She's taller than I realized when I first sat down next to her in the cafe. I'd guess around five-nine or five-ten. The slight hunch in her shoulders tells me that she's spent most of her life trying to make herself smaller.

“There's a private lounge *inside* the private lounge?”

“Follow me.”

The private lounges are smaller rooms situated at the back of the greater hall. The furniture in here is darker, more sumptuous, more refined. A private space for doing private things.

Perfect for my purposes.

I escort Olivia inside one of the rooms. We've just sat down when the hostess buzzes in with a trolley of coffee and pastries. Among them are small squares of chocolate cake and multicolored macarons.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“Privacy.”

The hostess hovers, glancing at me anxiously. There's an invitation in her smile, but to her credit, she takes the hint and leaves, closing the pod door behind her. Smart woman.

Olivia looks at me with an awed expression. “So... you're important.”

I shrug. “Or maybe I'm just a rich kid who is using his father's membership.”

She wrinkles her nose. “No. No, I don't think so.”

“No?”

We're sitting on the same sofa, but she's chosen to position herself a good three feet away from me. I'm surprised at how much that annoys me.

I've never been one to put up with anything I don't like. So I move closer to her. She tenses as I slide in range.

"Um, well, no," she repeats, struggling to pick up her line of thought. "You... you seem like the kind of man... who, um—"

"What kind of man do I seem like?" I press.

She gnaws at her bottom lip, looking distinctly frustrated with herself. "The kind of man who has made it on his own. Am I right?"

I smile. "Very good. You're observant."

"It's because of my job," she says. "I watch people. I like to see how they act when they don't know anyone is watching."

"Oh, but I am aware you're watching," I say softly. "Very aware."

She flushes and jerks forward to pick up her coffee mug so that she doesn't have to respond to that last statement. But she grabs it so quickly that more hot coffee splashes over the rim onto her fingers.

"God-fucking-shit-dammit!" she says for the second time.

I pluck the cup from her hands. "Interesting phrase," I remark, trying to contain my laughter. "Haven't really heard anyone swear like that before."

She's bright red with embarrassment. "My brother used to teach me stuff like that all the time when we were little. Mostly to get me in trouble with our parents, I now suspect. But my sister and I caught the habit and can't let it go. Very unbecoming of a lady, I know."

Setting the cup down, I unfold a thick cloth napkin and offer it for her to rest her hand in. She does so reluctantly, looking at me the whole time with a nervous tremor in her cheeks. I fold her hand between mine and dab away coffee yet again.

I move slower than I did before. Savoring the moment.

So much has gone into this that it would be a shame to rush through the moment.

“Oh, God,” she groans. “I’m sorry about this. You must think I’m the klutziest girl alive.” She looks up and gets trapped in my gaze.

“Actually,” I murmur, “I think maybe you’re doing this on purpose.”

“Why would I purposefully spill hot coffee on myself twice in a row?”

I look at her pointedly. “So I’ll clean it up for you.”

She freezes, but her eyes flash from our hands to my face and back again. It’s undeniable. Even if her brain isn’t choosing these actions consciously, her body is the one at the controls now.

I tighten my grip on her sticky hand and pull her against me. She hits my chest with a little gasp, but doesn’t pull away.

I press my lips to hers. Gently, at first. But as we kiss, *Liv* recedes into the background and *Olivia* takes over. Her plump lips soften and fall open. Her tongue darts out, exploring my mouth, confident and eager.

This wasn’t part of the plan.

But plans change.



**OLIVIA**

*God-fucking-shit-dammit.* This cannot be happening.

I may be awkward, but I've kissed. I've kissed plenty!

Or at least, I thought I had. I thought I knew what a kiss felt like. What it tasted like. I assumed I knew what passion was.

But Aleks kisses like he means it. And with every passing second, I understand more and more just how short-changed I've been my whole life.

I lean into him, greedily demanding more. Something is happening between my legs and my heart is thundering and my hands are needy. I'm not in control of myself anymore.

Which is why, when his lips leave mine in favor of tracing my neck, I'm shocked to realize I've somehow climbed into his lap. *I'm straddling him.*

My hands are roaming on his bare chest. Somehow, his shirt came unbuttoned. Not completely, but open to his stomach so that I have a partial view of abs that look like the goddamn Himalayas. I count two, four, six, eight.

He nips at my neck, which is apparently a direct connection to the heat between my legs, judging by how viscerally I react. I moan and reach for the waistband of his pants. My fingertips rub against the massive bulge in his crotch.

I'm not even remotely surprised to see that he's packing. A man with that amount of self-assurance has to have a big dick, right? Or so Mia tells me. She'd know way better than I would.

If I stopped to analyze what I'm doing, maybe I'd be disappointed in myself. But right now, I can't imagine regretting this. Not when he feels this good.

I jump as his hand slides underneath my shirt. His fingers are cool against my bare skin, but then again, at the rate my body is heating up, I suppose everything's going to feel cool relative to me.

My lips are a millisecond away from his when, of all the godforsaken things that have happened to me already since Aleks swept into my life, the motherfucking *Macarena* starts blaring from my phone.

"Shit!" I blanch, swinging off his lap and landing quite ungracefully on the cushion next to him. "Sorry..."

I snatch up my phone, meaning to put it on mute, but then I see Mom's number on the screen.

"Fuck," I mumble, resolutely avoiding Aleks's face before getting to my feet and accepting the call. I tug my sweater down to cover myself, as if she can see me. "Hey, Mom."

"Hi, honey! Mia told me your flight was delayed. That's terrible!"

"Hi, uh, yeah," I stutter. I can feel Aleks's gaze smoldering on the back of my head but I steadfastly ignore it. "Terrible."

She tuts. "Are you going back home?"

"No, it takes too long to get there and back. I'm just going to hang out here."

*And do dirty things with a handsome stranger in a private lounge.*

"Oh, no. Sounds boring," she sighs.

I glance over at Aleks. He's sitting on the sofa with his arms extended across the back of it, utterly and completely at ease. He hasn't even bothered to button up his shirt. His erection is glaringly noticeable, but by the way he's sitting there, calm and collected, you wouldn't know it.

“... Honey?”

“Sorry, Mom,” I say quickly. “I’ll keep myself... occupied. See you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?!” she says in alarm.

“Ah, no, uh, today. I meant today,” I say, feeling all kinds of flustered. “I meant today.”

“You sure everything’s alright, darling? You sound awfully frazzled.”

“Of course, Mom. Just—it’s just, um... crowded. I’m waiting in line for cake,” I say, catching sight of the tray of cake and macarons on the table that we’ve completely ignored.

“Oh, how nice. A little sweet treat. Glad you’re enjoying yourself, honey.”

“Doing my best. See you soon, okay?”

“Okay. Safe flight. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” I hang up.

My heated skin feels suddenly cold, and I shiver. Just when I thought I could be someone else for an hour, the real world had to barge in and remind me who I really am. Shy cartoonists who hide out in their bedrooms don’t get to join the Mile High Club. Except we aren’t in a plane, but whatever, close enough.

Aleks’s stare is still hot and insistent. Knowing I can’t delay the moment any longer, I slip my phone into my pocket and turn to him.

“Am I the treat?” he muses innocently.

“I... sorry, what?”

He smiles. It’s effortless—smooth and cocky and so fucking perfect that I want to scream about how unfair it is for someone to have it all. “Am I the ‘sweet treat’ you’re waiting in line for?”

I’ve never wanted the ground to open up so badly before. Or spontaneous combustion. That would be fine, too.

Seeing as how both of those are off the table, I give him a frantic, cringey laugh. “Um, I think I should wash my hands. You’re right: they are sticky.”

“Bathroom’s right behind you.”

“Thanks.”

I turn and walk at a very calm, very measured, not-at-all-hysterical pace straight for the tall beige door behind me.

As soon as I’m inside, I move right for the sink and grip the cool porcelain sides. “Jesus Christ, Liv!” I hiss to myself. “Get a fucking grip!”

I look up at my reflection in the mirror. There’s so much color on my cheeks that it actually looks like I’m wearing blush.

“It’s not like you’re going to see him again,” I whisper to my mirror self. “He’s just a handsome stranger looking to kill some time and you... well, you’re the girl who plays it safe.”

*Living is for the brave.* I hear the words as though Dad is right here with me, saying them to my face.

I turn on the water and wash my hands properly. Then I splash some of the cold water onto my face. Once I’ve dried myself off, I feel a little calmer.

“Come on, Liv. You can do this.”

I take one more breath and slip back out into the lounge. Aleks is still sitting on the same position on the sofa, erection still going strong.

I keep my gaze above the belt, as hard as that is—no pun intended—while I round the table and sit down next to him on the sofa. My choice of seat is a little awkward, though. Too far, as if I’m scared to get close.

Who knows? Maybe I am.

“Sorry about that,” I mumble when he doesn’t break the silence. “It was my mom. My sister told her about the flight being delayed and she just wanted to check on me.”

“You have a close family?”

“Very,” I confirm. “Moving to New York was the hardest decision I’ve ever made in my life.”

He cocks his head to the side as his gaze bores into mine. It’s hard for me to maintain eye contact when everything about this man is turning me on in ways I didn’t know were possible.

“Why did you?”

“I... I guess I was *trying* to be brave,” I admit.

“Why do you say that like you didn’t succeed?”

I raise my eyebrows. He’s perceptive. Which makes me even more uncomfortable with the fact that I’m sitting next to him soaking through my underwear.

“Because I used all my bravery just to make the move,” I admit. “Once I got here, I never left my apartment. I just sat at home and patted myself on the back for being here at all. But the only reason I did it is because I got a job. Without that, I definitely never would have come.”

He nods, non-judgmental but not letting me off the hook, either. “I see. And how did your family deal with the move?”

“Supportive, of course, but they miss me. Well, my mom and sister do, anyway. I don’t know about Rob.”

“Rob?”

“My brother,” I explain. “The one with the sailor mouth. We’re close, but he keeps his emotions close to the vest. He’s a tough guy.” I feel a little bit like my description of Rob is coming out all wrong. It’s not exactly painting him in a flattering light—not that Aleks cares, most likely, seeing as how the two of them are never in a million years going to cross paths. “What I mean is, he’s in the FBI. He has to be a certain way for his job. You know?”

“It’s clear how much you love them,” he says. “And how much they love you.”

I give him a grateful smile. “Yeah, well, we have our fair share of dysfunction beneath the surface, believe me.”

“Doesn’t every family?”

I laugh, feeling immediately at ease. It’s strange how easy it is to talk to him. Is it possible to have both great chemistry and great conversation with the same man?

I thought so once. When I was a kid. But around eighteen, I ditched the rose-colored glasses. The world isn’t nearly that kind.

“Forgive me for pointing this out,” Aleks says. “But it does feel a bit like you’re worried about this family reunion.”

Wow. “Perceptive” might be an understatement. “How did you guess that?”

He shrugs. “I’m a people watcher, too.”

“Well, you’re not wrong. Christmas is a hard time, anyway. It was my dad’s favorite holiday. Since he passed, it’s harder to get into the spirit,” I say. “And then, this year, Isabella won’t be with us, either. She was Rob’s fiancé.”

“Was?” Aleks inquires, picking up on the key word.

“She... disappeared,” I admit. “There was a small segment in the news when it happened. But the story faded away pretty quickly. Just not enough evidence to give us any leads.”

“That must have been hard on your family.”

“I’ve never seen Rob that way,” I admit. “It was the first time I was actually scared around him.” I take a deep breath. “He’s obsessed with finding her now. And sometimes, I actually believe he will. When Rob sets his mind on something, he won’t stop until he gets what he wants.”

“We have that in common,” Aleks murmurs.

I want him to move closer, but he remains stubbornly on the far side of the sofa. Might as well be the far side of the moon, if my libido has anything to say about it. His arms are sprawled across the cushions on either side, his biceps doing delicious things to the thin material of his shirt.

Then, suddenly, there's a buzzing sound. It's not until Aleks speaks that I realize it's a doorbell to the room we're in.

"Enter."

"I do apologize, sir," the hostess says with a sickly sweet smile as she sticks her head in. "But I just wanted to inform you that your flight is ready to board."

"Already?" I ask, glancing around for the time. "But we still have—" I stop short when I catch a glimpse of the clock hanging against the back wall. "Oh my God. I didn't even realize so much time had passed."

The hostess doesn't even glance at me. She only has eyes for Aleks. It probably happens all the time. Women flirting with him, propositioning him, offering him things that I don't even have the capacity to dream up.

*It doesn't matter,* goes a little voice in my head. *He's not yours to keep.*

But the moment I hear the thought, I feel a piercing sense of disappointment. This is the end of the road for our little rendezvous. After we get on that plane, we'll be back to being strangers.

I should have put my fucking phone on silent.

We gather our things in silence and head to the gate. Aleks and I are the last two there. We're hurried onto the jetway and into the plane, and I realize that I have to move past first class and leave Aleks behind.

Both literally and otherwise.

"Thanks for keeping me company, Aleks."

He inclines his head once—and that's it. That's the big goodbye.

Which just proves that our encounter meant far more to me than it did to him.

I'm settling into the middle seat on the left hand side of the plane when a young flight attendant approaches me. "Good afternoon, ma'am. Are you Ms. Olivia Lawrence?"

"Um... I am, yeah. Why? Is something wrong? Did I—"

She beams from ear to ear. "Please follow me, ma'am."

I stare at her in confusion. "I don't get it. Where are we going?"

"First class, ma'am."

"First class?" I say, gaping at her in confusion. "I don't think so. There's been some sort of a mistake."

"No mistake, ma'am," she says. "Mr. Makarova has requested your presence."



**ALEKS**

“Here’s your seat.” The flight attendant gestures to the seat next to mine as Olivia lingers behind her, glancing around nervously.

“Can I get you anything?” the attendant asks. “A drink, perhaps? We have an assortment of wines, beers, spirits, champagne...?”

“Oh, um... no, thank you.” Olivia shuffles around and stares down at her own feet.

The flight attendant is persistent, though. “Something to eat, then? Mixed nuts? Fruit? Perhaps a cheese platter?”

“Uh, maybe later, I think.”

“Certainly, madam,” the attendant says. “If you need anything, just press the ‘Help’ sign next to your seat. It would be my pleasure to assist you.”

Olivia mumbles something incoherent in response. Once the attendant returns to the crew area, she eyes the seat next to me like it’s going to swallow her up the second she sits down.

“Is there a reason you requested my presence?” she asks. She doesn’t sound annoyed. More like... *awed*. She’s speaking to me like I might be royalty.

She’s not completely wrong.

“Sit down,” I say, gesturing to the empty seat beside me.

“Aleks, I... I don’t think I can stay up here the entire flight,” she whispers with a glance over her shoulder like the Peasant Removal SWAT team she joked about earlier has been tailing her, ready to pounce as soon as she steps one toe out of line.

“Sit,” I say again. “You’re blocking the path.”

Olivia mumbles another apology to nobody in particular and squeezes close to my armrest, letting a cranky old woman waddle through to the bathroom. Across the aisle, another first-class passenger wearing a mink coat and a nasty expression eyes Olivia venomously over the rim of her glass of champagne like a cheap Cruella de Ville impersonator.

If it were me she was glaring at, I’d tell her to redirect her gaze elsewhere or I’d rip her eyes right out of their sockets.

Olivia, on the other hand, is ever-so-slightly less confrontational. Instead of standing up for herself, she ducks into the seat next to mine.

“I don’t belong here,” she says, still in that cowed whisper.

“That’s the second time today you’ve said that,” I remind her icily. “I don’t want to hear it a third.”

She gulps and stares at me, wondering if I’m serious. I am. She’ll soon learn just how serious. “I just... I mean, I can’t accept this, Aleks. First class is expensive. I can’t afford it.”

“I can. In any case, it didn’t cost me a thing,” I say. “There was an empty seat. I called in a favor.”

“A favor?”

I nod. “The pilot’s an old friend of mine.”

She sits back in her seat and stares at me with unfiltered bewilderment. “Who are you?”

Smiling, I pick up my glass of whiskey and take a sip. “I’ll let you decide.”

Before she can figure out how to respond to that, the *Fasten Seatbelts* light dings on and the pilot launches into his spiel over the intercom. Beneath us,

the engines roar to life.

We taxi towards the runway. The attendants move through the aisles and seal off the first class from the rest of the seating. Olivia takes note of all this with pursed lips, but she doesn't say anything.

Until something occurs to her. She curses and grabs for her phone. "Shit! I forgot to let Mia know that we're about to take off."

She types out a quick message and hits send. It doesn't escape my notice that her hands are trembling hard enough that she can barely type. Her breath comes in shuddering gasps.

"Nervous flyer?" I ask.

"Not usually." She tosses me a glance that tells me I might be the cause of her sudden anxiety.

I smile and take another sip of my whiskey. "You ought to get yourself a drink. Calm your nerves."

"I don't..." she starts to mumble, then corrects herself. "Okay. One drink. But it's medicine. For my nerves, like you said."

She's about to reach for the help button when I stop her. "No need," I say. "The stewardess has her eyes on us."

I signal to her to bring us a bottle, and she disappears immediately to do as instructed. Olivia watches the exchange with mild fascination.

When the bright blond woman returns, she puts a sparkling clean wine glass down in front of Olivia, uncorks the bottle, and leaves it for us. The moment she walks away, Olivia looks at me with raised eyebrows.

"The whole bottle?"

I shrug. "Why not?"

She examines the label and her eyes widen. "This wine has to be a thousand dollars, at least."

"You're off by a couple zeroes," I say with a pleasant chuckle. "But don't think about that. Just relax and enjoy it."

“What makes you think I’m not relaxed?”

I gesture to her stiff posture and her clenched fist. “You mean, aside from everything about you?”

She makes a forceful effort to unclench and melt back into her seat. “I’m just... I’m not used to this kind of thing. First class, expensive wine...” She glances at me out of the corner of her eye. “Handsome strangers who clearly don’t want to tell me too much about themselves.”

“Oh, so you think I’m handsome?”

She tries to cover her blush behind an eye roll. “Please. You know you are.”

I shrug. “I don’t think about it.”

“Riiight,” she scoffs. “You probably assume women are at your beck and call because of your great fashion sense.”

“I always assumed it was my charming personality,” I sigh, feigning disappointment.

“That doesn’t hurt,” she mutters.

I glance over and take the time to really look at her. Her eyes are a deep, rich brown. Warm chocolate, melted amber, shot through with those bolts of green. When she smiles, dimples appear in both cheeks.

I understand the appeal of the girl-next-door quality, in an intellectual sense if nothing else. I just never thought it was a quality *I* would find appealing.

“How long will you be staying with your family?” I ask. She looks like she needs a few softball questions to relax while the wine does its magic on her.

“Just over the holidays,” she says. “Christmas and New Years’, then I’m flying back on the 2nd.”

“Why the hustle back to the city? I thought you made your own hours.”

“Well, typically, I do,” she admits. “But there is this job I want to start prepping for.”

“Do tell.”

“It’s not really a job yet,” she corrects hastily. “More like I’m trying to prepare a portfolio to submit in the hopes it’ll get me an interview.”

“Sounds like a lot of work for a maybe.”

She shrugs. “It’s not easy being a cartoonist these days.”

“How did you find yourself on that path in the first place?”

“By accident,” she admits. “I was a quiet kid. Mom called me shy; Dad was nice and went with ‘introspective.’ My siblings preferred ‘hermit.’” She chuckles. “The truth is probably all of the above. But either way, I wasn’t great at expressing myself. I thought I was gonna go crazy for a little while. All these thoughts and feelings and no way to channel them. Then I found art. I started drawing, sketching, painting. I did it all. But caricatures came naturally to me. Just observing people. Memorializing them. Showing themselves to them as the world sees them. It felt like an accomplishment. Like... the kind of thing that could be important, maybe. If I put my mind to it.”

“Hence the people watching,” I say, remembering her earlier comment that she was an observer.

“Exactly.” She nods enthusiastically. “I guess, as I got older, that never really changed. Kids my own age never interested me. I think it was because I had siblings who were so much older.”

“It must have been hard when they moved out.”

Her eyes brighten just a little. It’s that feeling she’s describing—being seen by another. Recognized. Understood.

For her, capturing that feeling is art.

For me, it’s nothing but business.

“You have no idea. I was six when Rob went off to college. Eight when it was Mia’s turn. I turned to drawing even more then. Pretty sure I kept the art supply store in business for, like, a decade.”

“But you’re close to them still.”

“Yeah,” she says, but I note a subtle downshift in her tone. “Really close.”

I narrow my eyes. “You okay?”

She looks at me with a start, surprised that I picked up on the change in mood. “I’m fine,” she deflects. “Totally fine.”

It’s not even remotely convincing, but I let it go. There’s no point in pushing her for information I already know.

“Goodness,” she says, looking out my window. “I didn’t even realize we were in the air already.”

“Guess my company is effectively distracting.”

Our eyes meet, and she flushes again. I’ve never seen someone whose emotions play out so clearly on their face. Olivia turns her gaze to the bottom of her glass, avoiding mine as much as she can.

A shiver works through her. I can see goosebumps along her wrist. I pull out the soft silk blanket from the seat pocket and toss it over her lap.

“Thank you,” she says, sounding unnecessarily flattered for so simple a gesture.

“You’re not used to this, are you?” I ask.

“Used to what?”

“Having a man pay attention to you.”

She rears back, equal parts surprised and offended. “You don’t know me,” she snaps, more aggressively than she’s said anything else.

“Okay, when’s the last time a man took you by surprise?” I ask bluntly.

“My ex-boyfriend,” she replies. “Tons of times.”

“Name one.”

She gives it some thought, but before she can speak, I interrupt. “If you have to think so hard, then it didn’t happen.”

Her face falls. “They were just little things. Small gestures. I don’t remember them all.”

“A woman like you deserves the world to be handed to her on a silver platter,” I murmur.

She wrinkles her nose. “I don’t think I’m the type to inspire that kind of devotion.”

I lean in close, my lips brushing across the shell of her ear. “Oh, *kiska*, I disagree.”

My fingers dance along her thigh. She turns to look at me, wide-eyed. But all that does is put our lips within kissing distance.

It would be so easy to reach out and take her. Like plucking a ripe fruit off the vine. She’s practically begging me to do it. To devour her. To show her the ecstasy that comes from consuming something so flawless.

But I don’t. Not yet.

First, I want to watch the way she reacts when I tease her.

I slip my hand under the blanket and brush up towards where her thighs meet. Her eyelashes flutter. “What are you doing?” she says in a husky voice very unlike her own.

“I’m finishing what we started,” I reply. As I say it, I’m undoing the button with a flick of my fingers before dragging the zipper of her jeans down slowly.

She swallows. “We can’t. Not here. There are—”

I dip into her panties and press my fingers against her warm lips.

She chokes on her wine, eyes wide in panic. “Aleks, there are people everywhere...!”

“I fucking dare them to stop me.”

She stares at me, lips trembling, searching my face to see if I’m serious. Her body is rigid with tension. Her thighs are squeezed so tightly together I can barely reach her.

But she doesn't push me away. She wants to be the kind of girl who allows herself to be wild.

I intend to give her that opportunity. She deserves it.

After all, it won't be long before I'm ripping everything else away.

I glide my fingers down her slit. Her lips part and the panic begins to give way to reckless pleasure. Her legs open ever-so-slightly.

"Is this really happening?" she whispers, more to herself than to me.

I answer her by sliding a finger inside her, revealing how soaking wet she is. I slip in a second, move my fingers in and out, letting her adjust to me slowly. The blanket mimics my movements, rippling like the surface of the ocean and betraying what I'm doing to her underneath it.

She seems to be aware of the same thing, because she glances over her shoulder every few minutes. But no one looks. No one cares. No one knows.

No one but us.

I slide deeper inside her and add my thumb in slow circles over her clit. She braces herself against the seat as her eyes flutter shut. Her body rolls with new waves of sensation and she bites down on her bottom lip to keep the moan from escaping into the sterile hum of the air around us.

I drink in the look on her face. Her jaw is clenched and her eyelashes tremor violently as she tries to maintain control of herself. It's beautiful to watch: a woman truly coming undone for the first time.

I circle her clit with my fingers and another tortured moan escapes her lips. Her eyes fly open and she looks at me with horror. "Oh God, that was loud..."

"Do it again," I urge her with a wicked grin. "Louder."

"Aleks..." she whispers, but I prevent her from saying anything more by pressing my lips against hers.

I only pull away when she's limp and breathless in her seat. She's melted already. Pliable. Moldable.



I pull my fingers out from inside her and withdraw my hand. “Go to the bathroom,” I order. “And wait for me.”

She looks terrified, but I have no doubt she’ll do exactly as I say.

She’s hooked now.

Soon enough, I’ll reel her in.

**OLIVIA**

I close the door to the first class bathroom and practically collapse against the sink.

I'm surprised the attendants didn't stop me on my way here. My entire body is buzzing. There's got to be some outward physical evidence of what Aleks and I just did. A giant neon sign hanging above my head, advertising what we're about to do next.

Because there's only one thing he could want to do with me in this bathroom.

But when I turn towards the mirror, I look mostly the same. A little more animated than usual, perhaps. More color on my cheeks. But otherwise, the same.

"What are you doing, Olivia?" I ask my reflection.

I'm not naive; I'm a realist. It's abundantly clear to me that all Aleks wants is the thrill of a quick hookup with a girl he never has to see again.

I try to tell myself that's what I want, too. Or at least, I try to tell myself that it's possible for me to plausibly be the kind of person who wants something like that.

But I can already see Future Olivia, twirling her hair and staring into the distance as she entertains daydreams of the handsome stranger she met at the airport.

That's okay. That's fine. Everyone needs a wild story from their youth that they can live off of for the rest of their life, right?

The thought is comforting for approximately zero point two seconds before it falls flat.

Do I really want to be the type of woman who spends her golden years reminiscing about "that one time way back when...?" Have I already resigned myself to a life of mundane boredom at the ripe old age of twenty-five?

I'm still trying to talk myself down when the bathroom door opens and he steps inside.

He consumes the entire space instantly. And it isn't just about his size—which is, to put it mildly, a lot. It's his presence. His confidence. His aura.

Aleks locks the door and turns to me. I'm already backed up in the furthest corner of the bathroom with my hands clutching the edges of the sink.

One step—that's all it takes for him to be right in front of me.

His hands find my hips while his eyes explore my body. Despite the big shirt and the oversized woolen sweater I'm wearing, he still manages to make me feel... *desired*. Craved. Like there isn't enough money or violence in the world to make him tear his gaze off of me.

When was the last time I felt like that?

Have I ever?

Just like the rest of my scattered thoughts, those questions vanish when he grabs the hem of the sweater and pulls it off. He discards it on what is probably a not-so-clean bathroom floor. Even though it's my favorite sweater, I let him.

I'm pretty sure I'd let him do whatever he wanted right now. God knows I have so far.

He peels the clothes off me, layer by layer. We don't speak. I don't think I could make my mouth form words, anyway. But when he approaches my bra, I tense up. My hands fall over my breasts self-consciously.

“I... I can do this part,” I mumble through awkward lips.

His eyes flash. “Why?”

“I dunno. I guess I’ve always done it myself.”

He runs a hand through his hair, completely bewildered. “How could any man let you deny him that pleasure?”

My body floods with heat the moment he says it. That feeling of being *wanted* again, so hot and insistent and all-consuming. And just like that, I drop my hands. He undoes my bra so fast that I don’t have any time to feel self-conscious.

My breasts spill free. Aleks’s eyes glow.

He leans in, cupping my right breast while his lips trail my face and neck, leaving a hot singe everywhere they go. Then he pulls my panties halfway down my thighs, finds my wetness, and plunges two fingers into me.

“Oh, God,” I gasp.

It feels like he’s touching me everywhere. Every inch of me is sparking, coming alive. And yet I’m frozen. I stand there, pressed against the cold sink, incapable of doing anything except taking the pleasure he’s giving me.

His fingers piston in and out of me until I’m dripping down his knuckles. I know that only because he raises his hand so I can see.

Then he brings his fingers to his mouth and sucks them clean.

My hands itch to touch him. To peel his clothes off the way he undressed me. But I can’t summon the confidence.

Aleks has plenty of that to spare, fortunately. Seeming to know what I want, he unbuttons his shirt and strips out of it.

I inhale sharply. I was right before: he has the most glorious body I’ve ever seen. And definitely the first I’ve seen up close and personal like this.

You could wash clothes on his abs. You could grate cheese on his abs. You could hurt yourself on his abs—which, coincidentally, is exactly what I’m about to do.

My fingers twitch towards him, but I'm still not ready to make a move. Then he starts unbuttoning his pants, and my heart rate speeds up.

I might as well be getting ready to parachute off this plane for the amount of adrenaline crashing through my body right now. I've never been more alive, more present, more unconcerned with the past or the future or anything but what's happening right-in-fucking-front-of-me.

He drops his pants, and I suck in another breath. His cock is like a hammer, thick as my forearm and nearly as long.

He inches closer. Drops his lips to my neck and kisses me there until my nipples are poking his chest.

I can feel his dick pressing between my thighs. Hot. Powerful. I'm suddenly desperate to feel what it's like to have him inside me.

I open my legs and gently tip my hips forward, inviting him in. But just when I think he's about to enter me, he twists me around so that I'm facing the mirror.

"Look at me," he commands.

I glance at the mirror, hating the thought of watching myself like this. Sex, for me, has always meant lying down horizontally, always in a bed, always with the lights off, and sure as hell never with any mirrors in sight.

I'm not sure how to be *this* person. This reckless. This carefree. I blink at my reflection, trying to summon up the courage to do what he wants...

But I can't. My head falls. That's just not me.

Except Aleks doesn't like that reaction.

"No," he growls ferally. "I said, *Look* at me."

He reaches around and grabs my chin. It's not gentle, either. It's aggressive, to put it kindly. Night and day different from the suave, charming man I've seen so far.

But if I'm being honest, I suspected from the beginning that there was another side to him.

If I'm being *really* honest, I was dying to see it all along.

With his strong fingers squeezing my jaw, I meet his gaze. It's intense, dark. Dangerous. Aleks nods, satisfied.

Then he thrusts inside of me.

My body is ready for him, but my mind isn't. I cry out in surprise, forgetting we're in a public bathroom surrounded by other passengers, hurtling through the sky at five hundred miles per hour.

I bite my lip hard enough to draw blood when he pulls out slightly, only to thrust right back in.

I've never been filled like this before. So fully. Stretched to my absolute limit.

Aleks has one arm wrapped around my chest and his other hand around my throat, a reminder that he asked something of me and he expects me to obey. When he starts ramming into me, it feels like he's trying to split me apart at the seams.

No man has ever touched me like this.

No man has ever possessed me like this.

No man has ever made me feel more alive.

His hand curves down my spine as I arch my back instinctively, giving him more access to me, asking for more with my body.

The entire time, I obey him: I keep my eyes fixed on the mirror. On *him*. His jaw flexes with each thrust. One line of tension thrums in his cheek like a steel wire. His whole body strains with exertion.

My breasts bounce wildly, but any embarrassment is long gone. The unfamiliarity of it takes a back seat to the new range of sensations ripping through me.

When he slaps my ass, I cry out.

When he licks the back of my shoulder, I moan.

When he grips my hips and spears me onto him with every thrust, I wonder if there's not some fated reason he came into my life.

Maybe this isn't just some random hookup. Maybe this is meant to be much more than that.

The orgasm builds quickly and there's no chance I can delay it or deny it. My body is at his mercy, and there's nothing merciful about the way he is fucking me. We left all those niceties on the ground.

"Oh, God," I groan desperately, gripping the sink so hard that my knuckles turn white. "*Fuck.*"

He's still fucking me hard when I come, moisture breaking over his cock, writhing like he electrocuted me.

And just like that, I turn into an idealist. Realism is for the birds, anyway. This doesn't have to start and end as a simple in-flight hookup. Maybe I'll see Aleks again after we land.

You don't share something as intense as this and just walk away from it...

Right?

Before I can come all the way down from my high, Aleks grips the back of my neck and bends me further over the sink. My breasts press against the cool countertop, in stark contrast to the heat building between us.

He grabs my waist and slams our bodies together. My still-sensitive center clenches hard, and I cry out. I can't even hear the engines over the sound of our bodies slapping together.

Aleks angles my body ever so slightly, and suddenly, he's hitting me in a new way, touching something inside of me I didn't even know existed. I gasp, but before I can even exhale, a second orgasm is washing over me.

I'm so wrapped up in my own pleasure that I don't even realize he's finished until he pulls out of me. I feel him dripping down the insides of my thighs.

Aleks steps away and puts his clothes on, but I stay bent over the sink, too stunned to move. All I can do is stand on trembling Bambi legs and watch him dress again in the mirror.

When he's done, he glances at me with a smirk. "You alive?"

*More alive than ever*, I want to say. Instead, I just nod meekly.

"I'll meet you out there," he says.

He slips out of the bathroom. The moment the door clicks shut, I exhale deeply. "Oh God... oh God..."

With the absence of his intoxicating presence, I can breathe a little easier. I can think a little more clearly. Although his musk lingers in this cramped space like a foreign spice.

Weirdly, all I want to do right now is call my sister and tell her what just happened. "*You'd be so proud of me, Mia. I stopped thinking and followed my instincts for the first time in my life!*"

"*Atta girl, Livvy!*" she'd say.

I smile at the imagined conversation in my head. But I'm jolted out of the fantasy when someone knocks hard against the door.

"Occupied," I cry back, grabbing my clothes in a hurry. "Give me a minute."

I dress in record time, shrug into my discarded sweater, and wrench open the bathroom door. The woman with the fur coat who was scowling at me earlier is now standing in front of me. The moment she sees me, her lips turn up in a knowing smile.

"I'm sorry for the, uh, delay," I say in what is quite possibly history's worst lie.

"Oh, honey," she croons, her eyes flitting towards Aleks. "I don't blame you. If I were twenty years younger..."

*Welp, that escalated quickly.* I have precisely nothing to say back. Flushing with embarrassment, I lower my eyes and head towards my seat next to Aleks.

"I poured you a drink," he says as I sit, pushing a fresh glass of wine towards me.



“Thanks,” I say, reaching for it immediately. I knock back one sip that tastes good, so numbers two and three go down just as quick. A few more of those and I’m feeling drowsy enough to conk out.

Wine always makes me sleepy. But it doesn’t help that my body feels so sated already. Every muscle has the kind of comforting ache that accompanies a really good workout.

“You look tired,” Aleks observes.

“Maybe a little bit.”

He leans over, voice low, and rumbles, “Two orgasms will do that to a girl.”

My entire body floods with heat again. I drop my face in my hands. “Lord have mercy.”

“Careful,” he warns me. “You blush anymore and you might stay that color forever.”

My only response is to groan in shame again.

Aleks smirks. “Why don’t you sleep?” he suggests. “There’s a couple more hours until we land.”

No part of me actually wants to waste an hour next to him by drooling in La La Land. But in the end, that’s exactly what I do. I succumb to a dream-filled sleep.

Every dream is of him.



I wake up with a start when someone touches my arm.

“Pardon, ma’am—”

I squint up at the woman bending towards me. Her face looks familiar, but it takes me another few seconds to recognize her as the flight attendant who showed me to first class.

“We’ve landed,” she explains. “It’s time to disembark.”

“Oh.” I jerk upright and discover that the plane is empty. I’m the last one aboard.

I turn to find Aleks, but he’s gone. I do a double-take, but sure enough, he’s nowhere to be found. Men like him can’t exactly hide in an airplane.

Which means he just... got up and left? Without so much as a goodbye?

“Did you, uh... did you happen to see the gentleman who was sitting next to me?” I ask.

“Yes, ma’am,” she confirms. “He was the first one off the plane.”

“Oh. Right.”

She raises her eyebrows, clearly wondering why I’m still buckled into my seat. I unlock the clasp, step into the aisle, and get ready to go—but I can’t let it end like that. Not with a bang but with a whimper.

Biting my lip, I turn to her again. I hate myself for asking the question even before I say it aloud.

“By any chance, did he leave a message for me?”

She smiles again. This one is laced with pure pity. “No, ma’am. He didn’t.”

And just like that, I’m a realist again.

## OLIVIA

“Excuse you!” someone bleats at me.

I veer to the left as the woman I’ve just walked into throws me a dirty look. “I’m really sorry,” I say, dragging my suitcase out of the woman’s way.

She’s the second person I’ve now accidentally assaulted at baggage claim. For some reason, I can’t get my head on straight.

Logic tells me it’s rejection. Plain and simple. But I’ve been rejected before. And this feels different.

The woman doesn’t seem appeased by the apology. Instead, she flicks her hair over her shoulder, huffs, and stomps off in the opposite direction.

I wheel my luggage to the side of the baggage claim lobby and try to get myself together. If I walk out of here now, Mia is going to immediately know something is wrong. I’m a bad liar under normal circumstances, and this isn’t exactly the kind of thing I know how to sweep under the rug.

I don’t want to taint this trip with my sad story. Especially when it was just supposed to be an interesting airport fling.

Why the hell did I get my hopes up? What made me foolish enough to think there was something more there? Aleks certainly didn’t think that.

If that was even his name.

“Goddammit,” I mutter to myself. “Here comes the ‘conspiracy theory’ stage of grief.”

I stand there for another ten minutes before it dawns on me that I’m not going to start to feel better anytime soon. I might as well bite the bullet and head outside.

If Mia notices something, I’ll just tell her the truth. After all, her shoulder has always been my go-to crying place whenever something goes wrong in my life. I’ve used it plenty before.

I pull off my sweater and throw it over the handle of my luggage. Then I carefully tug my suitcase through the sliding doors, doing my best not to hit anyone else.

I expect to see Mia immediately. She’s usually center stage, waving like a maniac and screaming my name.

But today, she’s nowhere in sight.

Frowning, I turn to the left. Nothing. Then the right. Nothing.

The crowd is thin enough that I can pick out each individual person easily. Mia is definitely not here.

I move to the side and pull out my phone. No missed calls and no messages.

I find a bench to sit on and dial Mia’s number. It rings forever—ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty times—before I give up and cut the line.

My frown deepens. It’s not like Mia to be late. It’s even stranger that she hasn’t even left me a message.

I decide to call Rob. Same story. Two dozen rings of nothing.

When Mom doesn’t answer, I start worrying. What could have happened that all three of them would go silent on me?

Maybe they mixed up my arrival time. Given my first flight was delayed, it’s possible. But that still doesn’t explain why none of them are answering their phones.

I fire off three texts in quick succession.

***Mimi, helloooo? I've just arrived and can't seem to find you anywhere. Let me know if I should take a cab home.***

***Hey broski, are you around? Mia's supposed to pick me up at the airport but she's a no show. Any ideas where she might be?***

***Mom? Everything okay? I just landed. Is Mia running late?***

I feel better once I send the texts. They probably just had their phones on silent or something. They'll see it in just a sec and come hustling to scoop me up.

But ten minutes later, when all three texts have gone unanswered, the panic starts setting in once more, this time with fangs.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask myself. I can't shake the feeling that something terrible has happened.

I wait another ten minutes, and when my phone still remains stubbornly mute, I decide I'm done waiting. I veer out from under the awning and towards the taxi queue.

Of course, just my luck, that's when the universe decides to start raining. Grudgingly, I pull my woolen sweater back on and stand in line behind a gaggle of surly businessmen.

When it's my turn, the driver who steps up is a portly older gentleman with a thick mustache and the wispiest beard I've ever seen. I might have found it amusing if I wasn't so preoccupied with where my family is.

Was there a fire or a gas leak? Did a truck run them off the road? Did all three of them suffer a case of simultaneous amnesia and forget that they have a sister and daughter who's supposed to be spending the holidays with them?

“Home for the holidays?” the driver asks.

I jerk upright and stifle a scream the moment he speaks.

He throws me a concerned glance through his mirror. “Sorry, miss. Didn't mean to startle ya.”

“No, it's okay. I was just... Yes, home for the holidays.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but you don’t look so happy.”

I was when I left home this morning. I still was when I arrived at the airport an hour later.

But a lot has changed between then and now. The world has shifted beneath my feet.

“Well... it’s our first Christmas without my dad,” I say before I can think. “Or, wait, actually, that’s not true. I don’t know why I said that. This is year seven.”

“Oh, dear,” the cab driver says with a sympathetic nod. “I’ve been there. Not with my pops—he was a mean old drunk and the world is better off without him. But my wife. She passed on a while back. The first everything without them is hard. But then again, so’s the rest of things. Pain feels fresh every year, if I’m being honest.”

I focus on his voice, which has a deep, soothing timbre. It feels good to sit here in the back of a cab and have a conversation with a kind stranger. A little stretch of normalcy amidst too many unexpected turns.

“Does it get easier?” I ask.

“Hm. I don’t know about *easier*,” he says after some thought. “You just get used to it, you know? You get used to missing them. Familiar kind of ache.”

He gives me a kindly smile through the rearview mirror and goes back to looking at the road. On any other day, I would be committing every detail of his face to memory so that I could draw it later. The bulbous nose, the paper-thin skin around his eyes that crinkles when he smiles.

But my head is too full of unanswered questions to appreciate what I usually appreciate—the simple humanity of another living, breathing person in this universe.

I’m too worried about my own people. About Mia, about Rob, about Mom.

Worried about Aleks as well, of course, albeit in a completely different way. And I will not be entertaining thoughts on that subject, thank you very much.

“Who are you spending the holidays with?” I ask—anything to distract from the too-fresh memories that keep threatening to suck me into them like a black hole.

“I’ve got a son about your age,” he says. “We’re going to do what we do every year: watch old football games, eat store-bought turkey and fruitcake, and drink lots of beer.”

I smile. “That sounds sorta perfect.”

“I sure think so,” he chuckles. “Damien—that’s my boy—he’s a good kid. He was devastated when Mary died, but he didn’t really allow himself time to grieve. It’s all that male bravado we force onto our boys. It ain’t healthy.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I say.

I’m thinking of my own brother. He processed Dad’s death differently than the rest of us. Became quieter, more withdrawn. It was another reason we were grateful to Isabella: she entered his life and gave him something to smile about.

But when she disappeared, everything got worse than ever before.

Even though I wasn’t around this past year, Mia filled me in on the lows. It was easy to pick up on the changes anytime when we talked on the phone.

“I’m Liv, by the way,” I say.

The cab driver waves and laughs. “My name’s Kevin. Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

He turns the corner, and I realize we’re only a minute away from the street I grew up on. It’s a neat little cul-de-sac with broad sidewalks and bright lawns. The neighborhood kids ride their bikes to each other’s houses and leave them laying in the grass. Little girls set up lemonade stands in the summer.

“What’s the house number again, Ms. Liv?”

“Further down on the right,” I instruct him. “112.”

Mom and Dad moved into the house when Mom was pregnant with Mia. They'd had Rob in an apartment in the city, but once they knew there was a second baby on the way, they made the move to the 'burbs. So when I came along, we were well-ensconced in Suburbia. I was born and raised right here.

Until I moved out on my own, this was the only home I'd ever known.

"This is it," I say, pointing out the house to him. It's straight out of middle-class America Central Casting: white shutters, dark gray roof tiles, a tidy sidewalk dividing the front yard into two symmetrical rectangles.

"Nice place. Cute."

"Thanks, Kevin," I grab two twenties out of my wallet and hand them over. "Keep the change. And happy holidays."

It's an abrupt end to our conversation, but now that I'm outside the house, I can't wait another second. I want to get inside and find out why my family dropped off the face of the planet.

The cab trundles off as I make my way up the paved path to the front door. Usually, Mom greets me at the door, opening it before I can even reach the steps.

But today, there's no movement anywhere. Quiet as the grave.

I knock and ring the doorbell repeatedly. "Mom!" I call out. "Mia!"

When still no one answers, I try the door handle. To my surprise, it swings open immediately.

Our neighborhood is as safe as it gets. Always has been. But Mom always, *always* keeps her door locked. "Can't be too safe," she said whenever anyone asked for as long as I can remember. She'd drive twenty minutes back home if she thought she might've forgotten to throw the deadbolt.

I step inside as foreboding fills my veins like acid.

Everything looks right: picture frames in their place on the entryway table, keys hanging from the silver hooks on the wall.

But nothing *feels* right.



The house is too quiet. Something acrid like burnt sugar fills the air. Mom's love language is baked goods in every shape and form, but the woman is religious about her kitchen timers. She never burns anything.

"Mom?" I call again, quieter this time. "Mia?"

I hear a chair in the other room scrape slowly across the hardwood floor. The hair on the back of my neck stands up.

No one in our house is a chair scraper. Dad ranted and raved about us scratching the hardwood floors to the point that we all learned to lift our chairs when we moved them. It's ingrained. An unconscious habit that even him passing couldn't extinguish.

I move towards the living room, and the thought idly crosses my mind that I should look for a weapon. But disbelief keeps my arms pinned to my sides, keeps my feet moving forward.

When I turn right into the sitting room, I stop short. A gasp lodges in my throat.

They're all there.

Mom.

Mia.

Rob.

But tape covers their mouths, and their hands and legs are tied with thick rope to the dining room chairs.

Mia and Mom look terrified, though otherwise unharmed. But Rob... there's a trickle of blood running down the side of his face from his forehead. His eyes are dazed, but behind that daze is fury.

I stay rooted in place and blink and blink and blink like it'll change what I'm seeing. It doesn't. Finally, I let out a ragged cry and take one step towards the last loved ones I have left.

Only to be stopped in my tracks by a deep, commanding voice.

"Hello again, Olivia," the voice rumbles. "Nice of you to join us."

I recognize that voice, but I don't want to believe it.

It can't be.

It simply cannot fucking be.

I catch his shadow first, thrown long across the floor because of the light from the kitchen. Then his smell, rich and seductive.

Then he turns the corner and I nearly drop to my knees.

“Aleks...”

**ALEKS**

“What the hell is going on?” Olivia blurts. Behind her, her family struggles feebly against their restraints.

I ignore both them and her question. “I’m glad you ditched the sweater,” I remark. “It was hideous.”

She doesn’t immediately answer. She’s still trying to process the scene before her. Her eyes keep flitting between her mother and siblings.

She’s terrified, of course, but none of that fear is for herself. She’s only concerned about *them*. It’s admirable, quite honestly. Misplaced, but admirable.

“A sweat—what? No. Hell no. Tell me who you are and what the *fuck* you are doing in my house?!” Her voice rises to a keening screech.

“You’re getting worked up,” I inform her. “That’s counterproductive.”

“I’m not particularly interested in being ‘productive’ right now!”

I move forward and she backs up immediately. She’s tense, anticipating an attack. What she doesn’t know is that the attack is already over. Everything that happens next has been in the works for a long time now. It cannot be changed.

I lean back against the kitchen counter to help put her at ease. We have so much left to do here. I can’t have her getting hysterical on me just yet.

I glance at the others just to be sure everything is as it should be. Her mother is sagging in the chair. Fatigue has begun to replace her fear. A body can only run on adrenaline for so long, particularly in a woman of her age.

The other two still look furious and ready to fight. I'm impressed by their determination. It's hard to muster up that kind of attitude when you're bound and gagged. I expected it from Rob, but not from the sister.

"Why don't you take a seat, Olivia?" I suggest.

"I'd rather stand, thanks. Why don't you stop bossing me around my own goddamn house and tell me what's happening?"

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "Very well." I pull the gun from the back of my pants and set it on the kitchen counter, then sink into a seat on one of the barstools. Her eyes bulge at the sight of the weapon.

Never looking away from her, I raise my hand and beckon. My men step in from the shadows.

Olivia turns on the spot, eyes going wide as she counts the number of strangers in her house. It doesn't take a genius to see she doesn't have a chance.

She does a full, stunned three-sixty and then stares at me. "Who *are* you?" she whispers.

"Sit down," I say, "and maybe I'll tell you."

She looks at her family. Her lower lip trembles. "Please let them go."

"If you want me to listen to you, you have to listen to me first."

Left with no choice, she pulls up a chair and sits down. I give a subtle signal to my men and they melt once again into the background.

Olivia releases a shaky breath. "Is your name even Aleks?"

I notice Rob flinch, clearly rattled by the fact that I seem to have an established rapport with his sister. But then, that was all part of my plan.

"It is," I confirm. "But my last name is the one you need to remember. I'm Aleksandr Makarova."

“What do you want with me?” she asks desperately, unable to stop herself from looking over at her family.

“Oh, Olivia,” I say with a menacing smile, “you misunderstand me. I’m not here for you. I’m here for *him*.”

She follows my gaze to her brother. “What do you want with Rob?”

“Would you like to tell her, Robert?” I ask coldly. “Or should I?”

The man growls, but the sound is muffled by the duct tape over his mouth. I stand and walk over to him.

“Here, let me help you with that.” I rip it off in one vicious tug.

“You motherfucker!” he screams as soon as he can. “You cocksucking fucking piece of—”

I sit back down and eye him wearily. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“Let them go!” he snarls. “They don’t have fuck-all to do with this!”

“Rob!” Olivia cries. “What’s going on? What’s happening?”

He ignores her questions entirely. “How do you know this motherfucker, Liv?”

Olivia gets quiet. Guilt washes over her face.

“Liv!” Rob presses.

“He... he was on my flight,” she stammers. “We were on the same flight and it got delayed. We got to talking—”

“He’s a fucking criminal, Liv!” Rob practically yells. “He’s a mobster and a murderer.”

The color drains from her face. Olivia turns to me, her eyes begging me to deny it. Pleading, hoping that surely there must be some mistake, some mix-up, that this cannot possibly be right...

I give her a dismissive shrug. “I think the term he’s looking for is ‘Don.’”

“*Don?*” Olivia repeats, looking between me and Rob. “Like... the mafia?”

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

“Bratva,” she whispers. “Of course. You’re Russian.”

I nod. “That’s right. And your brother here made the mistake of getting on my bad side.”

“I think you have that the wrong way around,” Rob growls through gritted teeth. “Olivia, this is the bastard that took Isabella. Abducted her. Shit, he probably raped her before doing God knows what else.”

“Don’t look to God, Robert,” I chide. “Not even God knows what I get up to. And even if he did, he couldn’t stop me.”

“Jesus Christ,” Olivia moans to herself, bending forward so that her forehead touches her knees. “What is happening...?”

“Did he hurt you, Liv?” Rob demands.

Olivia doesn’t reply. She keeps her head between her legs and takes deep breaths, trying to stave off her panic.

“Liv!”

She jerks upright, looking like she might be about to vomit in her own lap. “No. No, he... he didn’t.”

“See, Robert?” I say, turning to him. “I’m not the monster you’ve made me out to be. And I certainly had nothing to do with your fiancée’s disappearance.”

“I have a lead that says you do.”

“Your lead is wrong,” I snap. “I don’t abduct women. And I don’t keep them against their will.”

I get up and walk towards Olivia. She stiffens as I move around her chair to stand behind her, but she knows better than to try to escape. There’s nowhere for her to go.

I take a fistful of her hair and let it run like silk between my fingers. “That is, unless I’m given a reason to.”

“Don’t you fucking touch her!”

“Call off the investigation on my Bratva,” I say. “Call it off now, and I won’t have to hurt your family.”

Olivia flinches, but I ignore her, maintaining my loose grip on her hair.

“Where is Isabella?” Rob’s eyes narrow as my fingers drift down Olivia’s shoulder to graze her bare skin.

“I don’t know any Isabellas,” I tell him.

“You’re fuckin’ lying.”

“It’s not in your best interests to fight me on this, Robert,” I say. “You’re the lead agent on the investigation monitoring me and my men. End it.”

“I don’t have the authority to do that.”

“Then find a way to make it happen. I’ve followed your career—very impressive, I might add. You’ve built a reputation of trust and loyalty around the Bureau. If you claim that the case on me is a dead end, they’ll listen.”

“You really think I would sell out like that? Betray everything I promised to protect?”

I shrug. “You will if you want your family to survive this war you’ve started.”

Suddenly, I yank hard on Olivia’s hair, bending her neck back at a vicious angle. Her mother’s eyes go wide, but she doesn’t make a sound. Her mouth just opens in a silent scream.

The sister, however, goes wild. She grunts and struggles against her ties, nearly toppling her chair—until one of my men presses a gun to the back of her head.

“No!” Olivia screams, finding her voice.

She tries to run towards her sister, but I reel her back against me. Her hands claw at me as she thrashes and looks desperately at her sister. Tears streak her cheeks. They catch the dying evening light like diamonds.

“Please,” she begs. “Please, Aleks, tell him to drop the gun.”

“Should I listen to her, Robert?” I muse. “Should I tell my man to drop the gun?”

His eyes dart wildly between both his sisters and his mother. I want to see the sigh of him admitting he’s been beaten. That telltale slump of the shoulders.

I want to watch the light go out in his eyes when he sees that he cannot win.

And for a moment, it seems as if I might get exactly that. Exactly what I came for.

But then, right at the precipice of conceding, he changes course. The resolve hardens in his jaw, in his fists. The tendons of his neck thrum with tension.

He takes his job too seriously. He has the unfortunate shackle of believing in the work he’s doing at the Bureau.

But it’s more than that, too.

This is personal. He truly believes I am the one who abducted his fiancée. And he’s not one to be moved by threats. Which means I have to do more than just threaten him.

“You’re not going to fucking win, Makarova,” he growls. “We’re onto you now.”

I shrug. “You’ve already investigated all my businesses. If you’d found anything to charge me with, there’d be a warrant issued already.”

“That doesn’t prove shit. All it proves is that you’re clever enough to cover your tracks.”

“That’s right,” I nod as Olivia shivers against me. “I *am* clever. More importantly, I have infinite resources at my disposal. You don’t want to start something with me, Agent Lawrence, I assure you.”



“I think it’s a little too late for that. This is the second time you’ve come after my family.”

“There wasn’t a first time.”

“Isabella,” he growls sharply. “That was the first time.”

“Your ego is blinding. Your fiancée left you,” I growl. “Accept it.”

He shakes his head. “She didn’t leave shit; she disappeared without a fucking trace. That’s not something she would do. It’s something men like *you* would do.”

I laugh and tilt my head to the side. “You don’t know the first fucking thing about what men like me do, my friend.” Then I straighten up. “But I know what men like *you* do. And, more importantly, I know what women like this one do. They do what they want. What they crave, even if they won’t admit it out loud.” I pull Olivia a little closer to me. “Just ask your sister. I think she’s seen how right I am.”

She tries to struggle, but I’m holding her too tightly. “Please,” she whispers. “Please stop... Just let me go. Let them all go.”

“That power lies with your brother,” I tell her. “All he has to do is stop the witch hunt.”

“Rob,” Olivia says desperately, “think of Mia. Of Mom. They don’t deserve this. Is your job worth it?”

His eyes go wide with anger. “You think this is about my job?”

“Rob—”

“This is about Isabella!” he yells. “This is about my *life*, my *woman*, my *future*! This bastard stole it all from me. I want it back!”

Olivia shakes her head. “What makes you think she’s even alive?”

“She’s out there, Liv. My fiancée is out there. And *he* knows where she is.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s hopeful thinking. But me? I’ve always been more interested in facts. And the facts are that I have the upper hand here. You have five seconds to make your choice before I make mine.”

I give a nod and my men move in once again. Pike and Lipkin point their guns at the mother and sister while I pick up my weapon and press it tenderly to the side of Olivia's head. She trembles, but the moment the cold metal touches her skin, she goes deathly still.

"What's it going to be?" I ask.

Rob stares at his mother and then his sisters. I can see the fury building inside him. The guilt. The war between the two.

How can he sacrifice the living, breathing women before him for the phantom of a woman who disappeared a year ago?

"Please, Rob," Olivia whispers. "Just give him what he wants."

"Listen to your sister, Robert," I suggest. "She's very smart."

His eyes meet mine. They're filled with vengeance, with the promise of more violence.

And then, finally, with the acknowledgement I came for: he cannot win this battle.

His jaw clenches. "Fuck! Fine."

"Fine what?" I ask.

"Fine, I'll back off."

With a satisfied smile, I drop the gun. My men follow suit. "You made the right choice, Agent Lawrence."

"Don't say my fucking name," he mutters. "Just let us go."

"In a minute," I say. "Before I leave, I'm going to need some insurance."

Rob narrows his eyes. "What the fuck do you want? A note attesting that I'll back off you? Not sure an illegal deal made under duress will hold up in court."

"Court?" I laugh. "I handle my business myself, thanks. And I wasn't asking you for anything. When I want something, I take it."

I release Olivia and step back. She sags with visible relief.

But as she is about to find out, this is far from over.

“Pyotr,” I order. “Take her.”

“No!” Her mouth falls open in shock. She turns to me as my soldier moves to take custody of her.

“You can’t do this!” Rob roars.

I smile at him. “Watch me.”

“No!” he yells. “You can’t take her. *Makarova!*”

I bound forward and grab Rob’s bloodied face in my hand. “Did you really think I would walk out of here with nothing more than a threat?” I hiss at him. “I am not the small fish you’re used to dealing with, Lawrence. I am the devil and this is the lowest level of hell. This is the fucking Bratva. We pay our debts in blood.”

“I said I would back off!” he protests.

“I know you did.” I tip my head towards Pyotr. “Take her.”

She tries to fight Pyotr, but it’s no use. He just takes advantage of the momentum to hoist her onto his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and strolls out of the house. Her sister’s eyes are wide with panic as she screams through her gag.

“You want someone to blame?” I say, looking directly into her eyes. “Blame your brother.”

“What are you going to do to her?” Rob asks, real fear creeping into his voice for the first time.

“That depends on you,” I tell him. “I have a Bratva to run. And I don’t need you cockroaches scurrying around my feet while I do it. This is your last warning. Your sister’s fate rests in your hands.”

With that, I’m done here. I turn on my heel and exit the house to the soundtrack of Rob’s screams.

As I approach the armored SUV waiting for me outside, I trade Rob's screams for Olivia's. She's thrashing around the backseat, banging on the bulletproof glass.

I get into the driver's seat and slam the door shut. "There's no point in crying or pleading, Olivia. It won't change anything."

"My mother, my sister..." she says desperately. "Are they okay? What are you going to do to them?"

"They'll be fine," I say. "I came here to give your brother a message. And now that you're here, I've done that. They'll be released the moment we've turned the corner."

"And me?" she asks, finally thinking about herself now that she's reasonably sure her family will be left unharmed. "What about me?"

I glance at her in the rearview mirror. "That remains to be seen."

## OLIVIA

He drives with one hand on the steering wheel, the other thrown casually over the empty passenger seat.

And for some reason, I can't stop staring.

Is it possible that, just a few hours ago, those hands were all over me?

I sit here feeling like I've entered some strange alternate reality. A reality in which having sex with a stranger on an airplane morphs into a nightmare that threatens my entire family.

The massive man who carried me into the jeep is sitting right next to me. He doesn't so much as glance my way, but I can't escape the feeling that he registers every blink of my eyes, every breath I take, every thought that crosses my mind.

We drive through the city. I can't help but gawk at people going about their normal lives. It's bizarre—don't they know what's happening? Inside this car, inside a house not so far away?

But, of course, the entire world hasn't come crashing down.

Just mine.

We turn a corner. I drag my eyes along the sidewalk to the end of the block and see a familiar little pizza shop I used to go to with my dad.

After Mia left for college, I cried for days. When the tears finally dried up, Dad insisted we go out for pizza, just the two of us. I ate garlic knots and greasy slices of pepperoni until I was too full to sense my feelings. And for the first time since my sister left me home alone, I felt like maybe my life wasn't over.

That one night turned into a weekly routine. A tradition. Even when I got older, I turned down plans with my friends just so I could walk down to the pizzeria with Dad.

So many memories tied up in that simple little storefront. So many things I can't ever get back.

There are other things I can't hold onto, either, no matter how hard I try. Even now, I'm starting to forget what my father's voice sounded like. What his hug smelled like. How his love felt.

I don't even realize I'm crying until the first tear rolls down my cheek.

God only knows what might've happened if he had lived. Maybe Mia would've chosen love over her career. Maybe I would've left for college instead of cowering at home. Maybe Rob would've gone down a path that didn't cost him his soul and his sanity at the same time.

And if all that had happened, maybe we wouldn't be in this position.

Kidnapped by the devil himself.

The truly scary part is that I barely know Aleks—yet I know exactly what he is capable of. He smiled at me in the airport and made me feel seen. Special.

Stupid me, I basked in his attention. I lost myself to the fantasy.

But there was no fantasy, was there? There was just a *plan*. A calculated, devious plan, set to ensnare a silly little girl like me. It worked flawlessly.

I blink and find myself staring at his profile. I should look away. Part of me still wants to. But I'm trapped by his aura. A helpless animal caught in a predator's claws.

“Do I scare you, Olivia?” he murmurs.

I wish I had Mia's courage. She got her strength from Dad. But I've always been like my mother: quiet, soft-spoken, and scared of the world.

"Yes."

He smiles. "Good."

The city disappears behind us. I force myself not to look back. Back to where my family is, where my home is, where everything good in my life is.

Ahead of me is only pain.

I have to be ready for it.



I don't even realize I've fallen asleep until the car comes to a stop and I jerk awake. My jaw drops as soon as I look out of the window to see where we are.

It's the Wikipedia definition of "mansion"—or at least, it should be, if it isn't already. A stone fountain big enough to swim laps in sits in the middle of the circular paved courtyard. The columns of the house are fluted with carved ivy and gargoyles leering out of the granite. It looks like you'd need a team of horses just to open one of the huge front doors.

The burly man who carried me to the car opens my door. He offers me his hand, but I jerk away from him and shake my head fiercely.

"If you don't cooperate, he will use force," Aleks tells me in a bored voice.

I refuse his hand anyway and get out of the jeep on my own. But my legs are still waking up from the long ride, so I lose my footing and pitch forward. The only reason I don't hit the spotted cobblestones below is because the big guy catches me.

"If she decides to be rude again, let her fall," Aleks says offhandedly. Then he strides away towards the studded doors.

Such a charmer.

Once I'm on solid ground again, I follow him inside with the big guy at my back. The doors lead into an entryway that branches off in three directions. A huge wall of glass sits straight ahead and showcases a square of tidy grass with a magnificent willow tree in the center. One of the windowpanes has been pushed open to reveal a doorway.

Behind the tree, I see another wall of glass and what appears to be a living room. The mansion was clearly designed with nature in mind, green spaces integrating seamlessly with the rest of the house, each flowing into the next like it has always been that way, like the whole thing grew up from the earth on its own.

"Take her up," Aleks orders his goon. He doesn't even bother to glance at me.

It's hard not to take his cold rejection personally. The big guy comes towards me, but I back away from him and speak to Aleks.

"How long are you going to keep me here?"

Reluctantly, he turns to me. It's shocking that the same gaze that made me feel special and seen this morning can now make me feel so utterly, pathetically insignificant.

"As long as it takes."

"You realize this is abduction, right? You can't just keep me here."

"You'll find that the Bratva works under different rules," he says.

"What about *laws*?" I demand. "The ones that govern this country?"

He smirks. "Those laws don't apply to me."

"Says who?"

He moves forward at lightning speed. I stumble back against an ornate oval table in the center of the foyer.

"*I* say," he hisses. "As far as you're concerned, my word is law. Forget everything else." He glances over his shoulder at the gorilla man. "Never mind. I'll take her myself."



With that, Aleks grabs my arm hard and drags me forward. We move up a floating staircase to the second floor. Then he veers down a hallway and pulls me through a nondescript doorway.

The whole way here, I expected him to drop me in a rat-infested dungeon under the house. But the room is... nice. Lovely, actually.

A king-sized bed sits in the center, covered in an off-white duvet that looks light as a cloud. The bed frame is simple but stately, with cascading vines and flowers etched into the wooden posts. Natural light pours through the windows and the French doors that open onto a small balcony. A wrought iron table and two matching chairs bask outside in the sunshine.

I look for something intimidating or insidious about the space, but I find nothing. I could almost imagine I'm a guest in this house, rather than what I really am.

A prisoner.

Or rather, I could almost imagine that—if it weren't for the surly Russian asshole blocking the way out of here.

I shake my head as the panic starts to swell again despite my best efforts to tamp it down. "I... I can't just disappear," I stutter. "I have rent to pay. I have a job to get back to."

"You're a freelance cartoonist," he reminds me with unnecessary cruelty. "No one will be looking for you."

Our conversation earlier flashes in my mind. I told him too much about my life, convinced he actually cared. But of course he didn't. It was a reconnaissance mission. He was getting to know his target so he could use it all against me later. Embarrassment heats my cheeks.

I push my hand deep into my pockets, looking for my phone, but I can't find it. Did I drop it somewhere in the midst of all the chaos?

"Looking for this?" Aleks has my phone pinched between his fingers. He waves it at me casually.

"You stole my phone?" I balk.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get it back.”

“What assurance do I have of that?”

“None at all.”

He turns to leave, but I jump forward desperately. “Wait...!”

He shoots me an impatient glare, though he stops at the threshold and waits for me to continue.

But all that comes out is the same limp protest I’ve been repeating ad nauseum. “I... I can’t stay here...”

“And yet that’s exactly what you’ll do,” he growls. “For as long as it takes. Your brother should have known better than to fuck with the Bratva.”

“Just tell me they’re going to be okay,” I whisper desperately. “Tell me my family is going to be okay.”

He narrows his eyes. The blue seems to be gone now, eaten up by the vicious black of his pupils. “As long as I’m in your life, none of you will be okay.”

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**ALEKS**

“He shit himself.”

I chuckle at Demyan, my right-hand man. “I knew it. Under all the bravado, that Albanian fuck is just a scared little boy. What was the outcome?”

“As expected. He returned all the money he siphoned off on the side,” Demyan tells me with obvious satisfaction.

I lean back in my seat and nod. “Did you take interest?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” he retorts. “Of course I did. Twelve percent.”

I raise my eyebrows. “We usually only take ten.”

“He was dressed like a fucking pimp,” Demyan explains. “Lime green zoot suit, paid for with *our* money. It pissed me off, so I took an extra two percent.”

“Does he know that?”

“I made sure he did.”

I smirk. “Is that all you did, *sobrat*?”

Demyan sits down in the chair opposite me. We’re in the garden, looking out over the Boston ivy and bougainvillea that frame the western expanse of the lawn.

“I also made him remove the suit.”

“And then?”

“... And then I set it on fire.”

The laugh bursts from my lips. “Well, all things considered, he got off easily. How long did you give him to pay off the interest?”

“Two weeks.”

I frown. “He has to pay back one point four million in two weeks? He’s going to run for the hills, Demyan.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it.” Demyan licks his lips like a hyena about to pounce on his prey.

The comparison suits him well. Demyan may be almost two heads shorter than me, but what he lacks in height, he makes up in presence. His deadly blue eyes are sharp and merciless. His body is lean and wiry, but it’s covered head to toe in tattoos. The only part of him that’s left untouched is his face. Well, almost untouched—just a tiny dagger inked underneath his left eye. He had it done after our first big fight. Right after I took over the reins and became don of the Makarova Bratva.

“Enough about my errands,” he says dismissively. “What about yours?”

“I have the girl.”

“Which one?” Demyan asks.

“The younger sister. Olivia.”

Demyan glances towards me, his shrewd eyes picking up on my body language. “It went smoothly, I take it?”

“It went perfectly,” I confirm.

“But...?”

There’s no sense lying to Demyan. The man knows me well. “She’s more... attractive than I expected.”

He chuckles. “So fuck her and be done with it.”

I hoist my leg up and rest it on the table sitting between us. “Already did.”

“You gotta be kidding me,” Demyan laughs. “Multi-tasker of the year. You delayed an entire flight *and* got laid? When did you have the time?”

“I delayed the plane so I’d have time to build a rapport—to learn more about her. And it worked flawlessly.” I smirk. “I fucked her in the plane bathroom.”

“Lucky you,” he says. “You must have picked the fun sister.”

I cock my head to the side thoughtfully. “Actually, I don’t think so. She’s as boring as the reports indicated. Dresses like she’s forty and barely has a social circle back in New York. The people she does know are all work colleagues.”

“What’s your point?”

“She’s not the type of woman who fucks a stranger in an airplane bathroom,” I explain. “I think I was a rare exception.”

“Of course you were,” Demyan says. “Having you by my side for half of my life has been the bane of my fucking existence. Women take one look at you and suddenly, I disappear.”

I shrug. “You’ve eaten well on my leftovers.”

“Yeah, but being a bottom feeder sucks ass.”

Chuckling, I reach for the unopened beers that are sweating condensation onto the tabletop. “Want one?”

“Does a bear shit in the—”

“Here,” I interrupt with a scowl. “Take the goddamn beer and shut up.”

I pop the cap and hand him a fresh beer. I grab one for myself, too.

“I was an exception,” I continue to muse, “but I could tell she was trying to talk herself out of it. The entire time I was undressing her, I couldn’t tell if she was going to fuck me or bolt. She’s not confident. Not about her body or her life.”

“Methinks I sense a little fascination,” Demyan suggests in an obnoxiously twee voice.

I roll my eyes. “I just haven’t come across a woman like her before.”

“That’s because you’ve never taken the time to venture out and find them. And they aren’t exactly the type to come looking for you.”

“Fair point.”

He takes a swig of his beer and gives me a curious glance. “Just how attractive are we talking?”

“She’s beautiful,” I say honestly. “But she tries hard to hide it. Seems like she’s been fairly successful in that regard.”

“Beautiful, huh?” Demyan says. “Be careful with that shit, amigo. The last time I used that word to describe a woman, I married her. And we all know how that turned out.”

I smile. “Speaking of which, how is Miranda?”

Demyan leans back into his seat again and sighs. “She’s talking about moving to Nebraska.”

“Jesus Christ. Nebraska? Why?”

“Her family lives there,” Demyan explains. “Her parents and both brothers. The older one got married and popped out a couple of kids and now, she’s talking about moving Callie there so she can be with her cousins.”

I raise my eyebrows. “And what did you say to that?”

“I told her if she wants to move to Nebraska, she’s more than welcome to. But she’s not taking my kid with her.”

I snort. “I bet she took that well.”

“Does she ever take anything I say well?” he growls. He takes another swig of beer. “Trust me, man, it’s not fucking worth it. Marriage is... Suffice it to say it’s not for men like us.”

“Whoever said anything about marriage?”

“Finding a woman beautiful is one thing,” he says. “Finding a woman fascinating is another. When they go hand-in-hand... that’s trouble.”

“This girl is nothing more than a conduit, Demyan. I took her for a purpose. Once that purpose is served, she’ll go right back to her mundane little life. And I’ll get on with mine.”

Demyan purses up his lips. “You sure about that?”

“Just because you married the woman you thought was beautiful doesn’t mean I will.”

“Okay. But just remember I also divorced her,” he says. “You know why? Beauty doesn’t get you very far when you’re living together day-to-day and trying to mesh together two lives that just don’t fit.”

“You married outside the Bratva,” I point out.

“Good point. So remind me: is this chick Bratva?”

I give him the finger. “She is a means to an end,” I growl. “I sought her out to carry out a mission. You married a girl you met in a club because she got your dick hard. The two things are worlds apart.”

He narrows his eyes. “Does that mean you’re done fucking her?”

“I can fuck her without getting attached. Believe me.”

“That’s dangerous territory, brother.”

“You think too much.”

“Doesn’t make me wrong. Women like them... they’re not suited for this lifestyle, man. She’ll crack under the stress of it. She’ll fall to pieces every time you have work to do.” He shakes his head. “They want quiet and calm. They want stability. And the Bratva feeds on chaos.”

“I’m not going to marry the woman, Demyan. And as for fucking her, I’ve already done that. Why would I need to do it again?”

Demyan doesn’t look fully convinced, but he nods regardless. It’s been three years since his divorce, but it still wears on him. He tries to hide it, but I know the toll it takes. He is a good man at heart.

Me, on the other hand?

Not so much.

“Do you think she’s serious?” I ask. “About Nebraska?”

“Her argument is that I’m barely around anyway,” Demyan says through gritted teeth. “The fact that I missed her birthday doesn’t help.”

“When was that?”

“Three weeks ago, when we were dealing with the Boskovic scum.”

“We were out for three days.”

“Exactly. Which is all it took for it to slip my mind that Callie’s birthday was right around the corner.”

“Fuck. How old is she now?”

“She turned eight.”

“Eight?” I say in disbelief. “*Blyat*’. Feels like just yesterday she was born.”

He sighs and passes a hand over his face. “Sometimes, I think that Miranda is right. I’m not around as much as I should be.”

“So change it.”

He fidgets in his seat. “I don’t know how to talk to her.”

“You’re her father. Just be there.”

Demyan looks at me with haunted eyes. “I can’t let her take my kid, Aleks.”

“Then don’t let her.”

“She’ll hate me.”

“She does already.”

He snorts darkly. “Fuck, ain’t that the truth? To this day, that’s the part that floors me the most.”

“People change.”



“That’s the thing: *I* didn’t change,” he says. “I told her who I was from the beginning. She told me she loved me and she would deal with the rest. But it doesn’t matter how many promises are made. When it comes to living this lifestyle, it gets to be too much. We’re better off being lone wolves. We need to fuck faceless women and leave when we’re done.”

“I get the point, Demyan,” I say.

He smiles and holds his hands up in surrender. “Lecture over, then. You think that FBI bastard will back off now that you have his sister?”

“He has no choice,” I say. “The Bureau would have dropped the investigation a long time ago if it weren’t for his irritating persistence.”

“Still hung up on his missing woman, eh?”

“Precisely.”

“See?” Demyan says. “No good can come of loving a woman. Look what kind of hot water it’s gotten that poor son of a bitch into.”

I finish off the last of my beer. Demyan does the same and gets to his feet. “Come on,” he says, “we should celebrate the successful conclusion of our mission.”

I know what’s coming before he makes the suggestion. He’s set things up perfectly. If I say no, he’s going to assume it’s because my interests lie elsewhere. So with a grimace, I stand up and nod.

“Fine. Roxy’s it is.”

With a self-satisfied grin, he leads me out into the courtyard where several of my vehicles are waiting for me to choose from. I select the midnight blue Aston Martin.

Demyan hops into the passenger seat and I take the wheel. The car purrs to life beneath us, lethal and gorgeous.

As I peel out with squealing tires, I can’t help but glance up towards the upstairs windows. She’s been locked inside for a few hours now, but there hasn’t been so much as a single peep from her room.

*Not my concern, I tell myself as the gates close behind us. She is only a means to an end.*

For the most part, I even believe it.



Roxy's is only a fifteen-minute drive away. It's the mecca of strip clubs. A fucking cornucopia of ass and tits. It runs a cool grand to get you into the main area, with two dozen girls at any given time swinging from the poles and rafters and another fifteen or twenty wandering the floor in search of a client. For a normal man, it's heaven on earth.

We walk straight past it.

Because the second part of the club is hidden away behind black gilded doors. If you have to ask the entry fee, you can't afford it.

Demyan and I glide towards the entrance. Two bouncers open them without so much as a single question as we approach, their heads bowed in reverence.

It's quieter in here, classier, although certainly not short on women. They've mostly dispensed with clothes altogether in this section. The red lights pirouette throughout the darkness, highlighting curves and temptations everywhere you look.

Demyan and I slide into one of the leather booths. We've barely taken a breath before a gaggle of girls descends on us like vultures.

My lieutenant spreads his legs and lets one of his favorite girls plop down not-so-accidentally on his crotch. "Evening, Jemma," he greets, cupping her ass. "You look delicious tonight."

"I taste delicious, too," she says with a demure giggle. She's wearing a tiny pink bikini top that covers only her nipples and a matching pink skirt that barely covers her ass. It's a fairly chaste ensemble, compared to the rest of her colleagues.

"Tell me more," he rumbles.

“Hm, I think I’d rather show you.”

Jemma’s hands disappear inside Demyan’s pants. I turn my attention to the two women who’ve been running their hands all over me and murmuring in my ear.

Weirdly, it’s doing nothing for me. Surrounded by the sexiest women the human race has ever made, offering me any kind of pleasure I can name, and my dick doesn’t even stiffen.

“Shoo, ladies,” a confident feminine voice says. “This man needs a real woman.”

I glance up to see Allaynah strutting towards me. She’s a flawless silhouette emerging from the shadows in sky-high heels and nothing else. Her nipples point upwards from perky tits and the tiny, manicured strip of hair between her legs promises much more.

“We’ve got this, Ally,” one of the girls says with a pout.

“Did I ask if you had it?” she snaps harshly. “Get the fuck off him, both of you.”

They both look up at me pitifully, hoping for mercy. “You heard her,” I say with a laughing shrug. “Fuck off.”

The moment I speak, both girls are off me. Allaynah moves forward with a satisfied smile and sits down next to me.

She’s confidence incarnate. Her blonde hair hangs down her left shoulder in soft waves. With a practiced little sigh, she reaches forward and runs her fingers over my arm. “You look like you need a little cheering up, handsome.”

“We’re actually here to celebrate,” I say.

She glances towards Demyan and Jemma. They’ve now sprawled across the black leather sofa. Demyan is sucking on one of her nipples while he finger-fucks her.

“Well, *he* certainly is. I’m not sure about you, though,” she remarks. “Why don’t I fix that?”

I try to pay attention as she talks. Allaynah usually does a good job of distracting me. She isn't like the other girls; she can actually hold a conversation. And she pours shots of tequila like it's going out of style.

But for some reason, it's not working for me today. Not for lack of her trying, though.

"Why don't we find ourselves a private room?" she asks, extending a hand to me.

I consider it. On one hand, it would be easy to say no. I'm not in the mood in the slightest, and even Allaynah's perfect ass isn't changing that.

But on the other hand, if I stay on that couch and brood, my thoughts will drift to a scared woman locked up in a room in my house.

And that way lies danger.

I take Allaynah's hand. She leads me to a studded red leather door at the rear of the room. We step inside to the soft thump of hip-hop. More red leather gleams in here—the walls, a couch, a trunk that I know from experience contains a variety of fun toys.

Allaynah prances to the pole in the center of the room and twirls around it slowly. She expects me to follow her, to touch the way I always do.

Instead, I brush right past her and drop onto the couch. It's soft and comfortable, making me aware that I'd rather sleep right now than fuck. Allaynah frowns, abandons the pole, and sashays over to straddle my lap.

"What's the matter, gorgeous?" she whispers. "You wanna cut right to the chase?"

I look over her shoulder at nothing in particular. "I just want a moment's peace."

"You know there's no special charge for you, right?" she presses. "I'd fuck you for free any day."

"I'm flattered."

"You should be. No one else is so lucky."

Her nails glide down my chest, down my abs. The moment she grazes my crotch, though, I pluck them off of me.

“Oh. Are we going rough tonight, baby?” she asks with a wry, arched eyebrow.

“No. We’re not going anywhere tonight,” I say, shoving her off me.

She squeals as her butt hits the soft leather sofa. She straightens up and looks at me with a bewildered expression on her face.

It’s the first time I’ve ever refused her. Usually, she’s halfway to orgasm by now. I know that’s why she homes in on me the moment I walk through the doors. It’s why they all do.

I’m the only man who can actually make these women come.

I get to my feet and pull out my wallet. “Here’s a few hundred for your time. But it’s not happening tonight.”

Her mouth goes slack with disappointment. “But... I... it’s free...”

“Nothing in life is free,” I tell her. “If Demyan asks, tell him I fucked you ten ways to Sunday. Got it? I’ll never hear the end of it otherwise.”

She stares at the stack of crisp hundred dollar bills I’ve discarded on the table. Her disappointment turns into confusion, but she can’t find the words to convey it.

Fine by me. I’ve had enough talking to confused women for today.

I nod and turn for the door.

“Aleks,” she calls, “don’t you want me?”

I frown, stop, and pivot back to face her. “Let’s be clear, Molly,” I say, using her real name. “I never wanted you.”

She’s still slack-jawed on the couch when I turn and leave.

## OLIVIA

I've been trapped in here for twenty-four hours. I'm starting to go crazy.

It's strange, because I'm notorious for hiding out in my apartment for days on end. When I was first living in the city and building my portfolio to apply for freelancing jobs, I once spent eight straight days without setting so much as a toe outside. I survived on Cheetos and Diet Coke like a rat trapped in a gas station.

I might have continued longer in that fashion, if it weren't for the fact that Mia decided to visit unexpectedly. When she realized I hadn't been out of my apartment in more than a week, she threw a hissy fit.

She said something Dad used to say to me all the time when he thought I was being too timid or too meek: *Living is for the brave.*

"I *am* living," I'd argued back to her.

She'd just shaken her head. "No. You're hiding from the world because you're scared of rejection. That's not living; it's surviving. And the difference between those two things is the most important difference there is."

She dragged me all the way out to Central Park, and little by little, I re-entered society as a functioning adult, with vegetables and sunshine and human interaction, et cetera.

But those words kept ringing in my head. They still do.

*Living is for the brave.*

“I’m not brave, though,” I whisper. I’m not sure whether I’m talking to Dad or Mia or myself. “That was the problem from the start: I was never brave. And trying to be has only landed me in one mess after another.”

The gardens below seem to stretch out for miles. Moss and creeping vines climb up the red brick walls and wrap around the banisters of my balcony. When I take a deep breath, I can almost imagine I’m at some exclusive luxury resort.

Something knocks around behind me. I spin towards it, heart in my throat.

The room is empty and the door to the hallway is closed. The other two doors—one that leads to a walk-in closet and another that leads to a bathroom bigger than my entire apartment—are also closed.

Nothing moves. I’m still alone.

And then I hear another distant thump. This time, I can tell it’s coming from the hallway.

Another thump. Another.

Footsteps, coming towards the room.

I back up just as the door unlocks. I’m braced against the wall, expecting Aleks, but the person that walks in is a small woman with rust-red hair. She’s carrying a small tray and wearing a soft expression.

“Hello.” She smiles. “You must be Olivia.”

I frown. “Who are you?”

“I’m Yulia,” she says, as though that’s explanation enough.

She’s dressed impeccably. The skirt is ivory white. Cashmere, by the looks of it. Stark black buttons run down the front. Her blouse is black silk. It drapes around her petite figure, highlighting just how small and fine-boned she really is. She must be in her sixties, but at first glance, she looks much younger.

“Are you here to let me go?” I ask.

“Unfortunately, that’s not my call to make.” She gives me another sympathetic smile and glides past me. “Oh, good, you have the balcony doors open. The view of the garden is wonderful from this room.”

She steps out onto the balcony and puts the tray down on the table. “I thought you might appreciate some tea.”

I stare at the plates on the tray. One with finger sandwiches, one with pastries oozing chocolate, and a third bearing an assortment of sugar-dusted cookies.

“Why don’t you sit down?” she suggests. She doesn’t say it rudely, but it isn’t really a question. Or, if it is, it’s the kind of question to which only one answer is allowed: compliance.

I join her on the balcony and sit down stiffly. “I’m not really hungry.”

“Hm. I noticed that your trays from lunch and dinner came back mostly full.”

“I guess being abducted has ruined my appetite.”

She doesn’t react to my sarcasm at all. But she does take the empty seat next to mine.

“Starving yourself isn’t going to get you free any faster,” she says, offering me the tray of cookies. “Try one; they’re delicious. I had the chef bake a batch this morning. They’re best when they’re eaten fresh.”

Even in the midst of my captivity, I can’t bring myself to be rude. I want to refuse her, but I grab a cookie anyway.

She hums in satisfaction, sets the plate down, and gazes out over the garden. “The hydrangeas on the east side are looking a little shabby, don’t you think? I’ll have to get the gardeners to come in an extra day next week.”

“Does that make you the housekeeper?” I ask.

“You could say that.” She takes a bite of the cookie in her hand and sighs. “So lovely. I love the taste of coconut.”

“I’m sorry, but do you really expect to sit here and make small talk with me?”



She chuckles pleasantly, but again, I detect a measure of steel just below the veneer of her manners. She is a tough woman; that much is certain.

“Everyone hates small talk,” she remarks. “But how else do you start a conversation with a new friend?”

“Where is he?” I ask, cutting to the chase.

“Working,” she says, still unfazed. “He’s always working.”

“I want to speak to him.”

“I’m sure you do.”

I grit my teeth, but I force back the resentment that’s building up inside me. “I *need* to speak to him. Please?”

“My dear, Aleksandr is not the type of man to do anything just because you ask nicely.”

My heart sinks. If I can’t even talk to him, then how can I convince him to let me go? Or at the very least, ask him for proof that my family is alright?

I’m not sure this woman, Yulia, will have the information I want. But I give it a shot anyway.

“Do you know why I’m here?”

She nods. “I have a vague idea.”

I frown. “And you don’t have a problem with the fact that I’m being kept here against my will?”

“You’d be surprised what a person can ignore if the stakes are high enough. You’d be surprised what a person will tolerate. It’s all about familiarity.”

“Meaning what?” I ask. “You can get used to committing crimes if you do it long enough?”

“Something like that.”

I stare at her, realizing just how little I relate to this alien stranger. She probably feels the same way about me. I watch her nibbling at her cookie.

Even the way she eats is dainty, graceful, composed.

My stomach rumbles. She notices.

“You’re hungry,” she says. “Just eat. As I said, depriving yourself of food is not going to get you out of this room.”

“What will?”

“You’d have to discuss that with Aleksandr.”

“I’m trying,” I snap. “But how can I if he won’t see me?” I set the untouched cookie back on the plate and lean towards her imploringly. “Please, please, just talk to him. Tell him I need to speak to him. He owes me that much.”

“Owes you?” Yulia scoffs. “Honey, you really are new to this world, aren’t you?”

I decide that’s not a question worth answering. “He can’t keep me here forever.”

“Actually, he can.”

She says it with a confidence that speaks to experience. How many other women have spent time isolated in this room?

Was one of them Isabella?

“I know you work for him, but do you know everything he’s done?” I ask. “Do you know the full extent of his crimes?”

To my disappointment, she just shrugs. “I have an idea.”

I shake my head. “My brother’s fiancée disappeared over a year ago. No note, no warning signs, no explanation. Just *poof*, gone. And that just doesn’t make any sense. I mean, my brother’s an FBI agent. He has access to resources other people don’t have. He’s certain that Aleks is the one that took her.”

She stares at me with an unreadable expression. “Do you believe that she’s dead?”

“My brother doesn’t think so, but... it’s been too long for her to still be alive,” I say. “Listen, Yulia: the FBI is closing in on Aleks. They’ll find out what really happened. And when they do, he’s going to be put away for his sins. Do you really want to go down with him?”

“What are you trying to say, dear?”

“I’m trying to say that, if you help me, I can help you when they come for him.”

She looks at me levelly for a long time. Then she sighs. “That’s quite the offer. And I do appreciate it. But I’m afraid I’m too deeply entrenched in this Bratva to remove myself from it now.”

“Is that the only reason?” I ask tentatively.

She smiles. “I understand that, to you, the FBI is a formidable organization. But they are not the Bratva. They are not Aleksandr Makarova.”

“He’s still just a man,” I point out. “He’s not invincible.”

She shrugs. “He was raised to be exactly that.”

“You can’t honestly believe that. My brother is—”

“Your brother cannot win, Olivia,” she says firmly, cutting me off. “If he tries, he’s going to end up dead. I’m not saying this to scare you—I’m saying this to help you. Or at the very least, to prepare you.”

“You’re wrong. Rob is smart and capable and—”

She raises a hand to interrupt me again. “I’m sure he’s all those things. But that still won’t make him a match for Aleksandr. You want to know the best way to survive this? Keep your head down and do as you’re told. Then, maybe, you’ll see your family again.”

I feel a sob of frustration and fear clenching in my chest, squeezing so tight it’s hard to breathe. But I have to keep focused.

“Do you know if they’re okay?” I choke out. “He... he left them all bound and gagged... My mom is not as strong as she used to be. I need to know if they’re okay.”

“That I can’t tell you, my dear.”

A traitorous tear slips down my cheek. “Can you please ask him if he’ll see me?”

She considers my request for a moment and then gives me a curt nod. “Very well. I’ll do my best.”

Then she gets up, dusts off her hands, and walks back into the room. I stand up and follow her to the door. I didn’t want to talk to her to begin with, but now that she’s leaving, I find myself wishing she’d stay. I’m not sure when I’ll see another human being again.

“You really don’t ever regret getting involved in all this?” I blurt.

She gives me a slight shrug. “There are some circumstances in which we’re not given choices.”

“But... he’s a monster,” I say. “He might be responsible for the abduction and murder of an innocent woman. You really don’t care about that?”

“I can’t afford to care.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t walk away from this,” she says. “I am eternally loyal to him.”

“Why?” My hope for an ally dies a quick but painful death. “*Why?*”

She exhales tiredly and gives me a sad smile. “Because he’s my son.”

ALEKS

The door opens a crack, enough for me to see the swish of her long white skirt.

“Aleksandr?”

I recognize my mother’s voice. But even if I didn’t, no one else would dare walk into my office without knocking.

“Come in,” I tell her. “I’m alone.”

She walks in, her lips pursed, expression carefully composed. She made the same face when I was a child and I did anything she disapproved of. It had no effect then. It still does not—under normal circumstances.

But today, it irritates me.

She sweeps the room with her eyes, just like she does every time she walks into my office.

And it is *my* office. She was once the one who sat behind the desk, but that was a long time ago. Still, my mother looks at me as if I’m in the wrong seat.

I lean back in the chair and fold my arms behind my head. “Is there a reason you’re here?”

She lowers herself into the chair opposite my desk. “The girl you have locked in the upstairs bedroom...”

“What about her?”

“I just paid her a visit.”

I sit upright, eyes narrowed in annoyance. “Why?”

“Because I think you’re making a mistake.”

“I don’t remember asking for your advice.”

“It’s not advice,” she corrects. “It’s a warning. Taking the sister is not going to get the FBI off your back.”

“This is not about the FBI,” I say. “This is about him. The brother.”

“Then take him. What does this have to do with her?”

“I don’t owe you an explanation,” I snap. “But taking that pompous fuck would only bring about more questions. The investigation he’s leading would take on a new priority. If I take his sister instead, he can close this little investigation as easily as he opened it.”

She doesn’t look convinced. “You think it can be that simple?”

“I know it can be. The case has no teeth, anyway. He’s under the false impression I have something to do with his fiancée’s disappearance.”

“Don’t you?” she asks, raising her eyebrows.

I snort. “It’s the story I’m sticking with.”

“Holding her here is risky.”

“It’s riskier holding her somewhere else,” I counter. “I want her where I can keep an eye on her.”

“Is that so?” she asks, her tone dripping with far too much understanding.

I wrinkle my nose in distaste. I despise these little games my mother plays. “If there’s something you need to say, just say it.”

She lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “She’s rather attractive.”

“*Chert voz’mi*,” I curse in Russian. *For fuck’s sake*. I roll my eyes for good measure.

“I know how men think, Aleksandr,” she says, unbothered by my irritation. “I know how men are. I don’t think keeping her close to you is the best idea.”

I lean forward and drop my voice to a low timbre. The kind that promises I mean business—or violence. “You think I can’t fucking handle myself, Mother? You really think I’m going to get distracted?”

“Men are weak that way,” she says, doubling down. Her eyes are iron. Unflinching.

“I’m not just any man.”

“I just don’t want your manhood to distract you.” She exhales deeply. “Throw the girl back to her brother and let him fumble on with the investigation. Unless you were careless, he’s not going to find anything. So why go through all this trouble?”

I narrow my eyes, wondering if I should even share this part with her. It’s not about trust in this case—it’s about the balance of power. More specifically, the power she lost when I took over as don of the Makarova Bratva.

“Do you know when the FBI started sniffing around?” I ask casually.

“No,” she says. “Should I?”

“Three years ago.”

Her brow creases. “How do you know that?”

“I have my sources. Reliable ones.”

“How can you be sure?” she asks.

I push myself to standing and walk around the desk. She’s a small woman, but with an audacity that far outweighs her. From time to time, she needs to be reminded of the order of things.

I sit on the edge of my desk and lean in towards her. “Because I’m the best there fucking is, Mother.”

She flushes, falling back against her chair.

I nod, satisfied. “Now, are you properly convinced or is this disappointment I’m seeing?”

She looks at me with wide eyes. “How can you ask me that question? I’m your mother.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I have always been proud of you,” she snaps. “I raised you to be the don you are now.”

“Then why won’t you let me do my goddamn job?” I ask. “I don’t need you second-guessing my decisions. I know what I’m doing.”

“It just doesn’t make sense—”

“Because you’re not privy to the same information I am,” I tell her. “Of course it doesn’t make sense to you.”

Her jaw snaps shut. I know I’ve hurt her. There’s a twinge of guilt, but it’s buried almost immediately by a cascade of justifications.

This was always my Bratva to take.

She was simply the placeholder.

“I see,” she says with a curt nod. “So none of my years behind that desk mean anything to you. After your father suffered his stroke, *I* was the one who picked up the pieces. *I* kept this Bratva floating for years—*years!*—before you were ready to take the reins.”

“You don’t need to repeat the story, Mother. I remember.”

“Do you?” she presses. “Because all I see is a boy who’s trying to shut out the woman who built the empire he’s now running.”

That does it. Ignites the fire.

“Let me make myself crystal fucking clear.” I lean forward further, trapping her between my forearms as I grip the sides of her chair. “You are my mother. My blood. And that is the *only* reason I’m not currently ripping your



tongue out with my bare hands for talking to me like that.”

Her eyes grow wide, but for the first time, I see an inkling of fear in them.

“That was your first warning,” I tell her. “Mother or not, there won’t be a second.”

I step away and sit back on the edge of my desk. She looks up at me with new caution. “You’re right,” she says with a repressed shudder. “You are good at this.”

“You’d do well not to forget it.”

She exhales slowly. “I know... and I’m sorry, son. It’s just...” She raises her eyes to mine. The resentment ebbs and something else takes the forefront. “It’s hard for a woman to find her place in this landscape. I thought I’d found mine.”

I know what she means. I observed it first-hand. My father’s stroke had come out of nowhere. But in the wake of that shock, my mother had found herself in a position that rarely comes around for a woman in the Bratva: she was in charge.

She took the wheel of my father’s legacy willingly, and she thrived. He may have laid the groundwork, but she built a fucking palace on top of it. An empire worthy of the name.

Unfortunately, the position was never hers to keep.

“You did well,” I tell her, knowing she needs to hear it. “But you aren’t made for this. Not like I was.”

“I know. I was just keeping the seat warm until you could get here.” She twines her hands together, lost in thought for a moment. “It’s not easy, you know? Once you’ve sat in that seat for long enough, you forget the fact that it was never yours to begin with.”

I nod. “I understand.”

“I don’t know that you do,” she says. “You came back from Russia and... I always understood that I would have to step down eventually, but it was more than that. You didn’t just dismiss me from your throne; you slammed the

door in my face. I was left in the darkness, in the cold, in ignorance.”

“Because you would have questioned me,” I say unapologetically. “I needed to establish myself as the leader.”

She sighs. “I would have liked to be included. I still would.”

I observe her carefully, trying to see things from her perspective. It’s not a gesture I’ve attempted very often. “There are still duties that are required of you.”

“Yes,” she says bitterly. “That of a glorified housekeeper. How could I forget? Tend the gardens, oversee the staff, dust the bookshelves.” Her expression twists into disgust, mixed with anger. “I led this Bratva through war, through expansion, through everything. You think I’ll be satisfied folding laundry?”

“There is a life for you outside this Bratva, Mother,” I say. “You just have to find it.”

“Is this your way of asking me to get out more?”

“It wouldn’t hurt.”

She presses her lips together tightly. “I’ll work on it.”

“Good.” I walk back around to the seat behind my desk.

She nods and stands, hands folded in front of her lap. “I stand by what I said before: I think you’ve made this thing bigger than it needs to be by taking the girl.”

I don’t even bother looking at her. “I can handle it.”

“Which one: the girl or her brother?”

“Both. All of them. Anything.”

“Then why such drastic measures to ensure he backs off?”

Finally, I meet her gaze and give her the crumb of information she’s so desperate to feast on. “Because I’m trying to catch a bigger fish.”

Her eyes go wide with excitement. “What do you mean?”

“The FBI didn’t come across my name by accident,” I inform her. “It was planted. Someone decided to frame us for something they did.”

She frowns. “I don’t understand.”

“That’s okay. I do. This thing started long before Robert Lawrence was ever involved.”

“Do you have any leads?” she asks.

“Not yet,” I lie, keeping the other details of my discoveries to myself for now.

My trust in my mother has always been somewhat fluid, to put a word on it. Ever since the moment I walked in on her fucking one of the men who came in to take care of the gardens.

I was ten at the time. She gave me explanations. Tried to convince me I didn’t understand what I saw.

I never said a word about it to anyone, including my father. I knew he fucked other women, too. So why shouldn’t she?

The cheating isn’t what bothered me. It was that she tried to sell me a different story. She tried to convince me she was eternally loyal to my father when I’d seen evidence to the contrary with my own two eyes.

I’m no saint. I have crimes and sins under my belt, and I own them both. Which is why I’m immediately wary of anyone who pretends they are above such things.

“I have to be delicate where the law is involved,” I explain. “And since Lawrence is the one who gave this case momentum with his personal vendetta—”

“You targeted him,” she finished.

“He’s nothing more than a cockroach beneath my heel,” I say. “But the FBI’s monitoring is making it difficult to operate the way I want. And I don’t like being restrained. Regardless, I’m not worried. Lawrence isn’t going to risk

his sister's life for the memory of a missing woman, fiancée or not.”

“You'd really kill the girl to make your point?”

“I think I've made it clear that I'll do anything to make my point,” I snarl.

My mother nods and glances downwards as if thinking. But I know her. She had a plan for this conversation before she ever set foot in my office.

So I bide my time and wait for her to say what she came here to say.

“She wants to talk to you,” she says at last.

I snort. “I'll bet she does.”

“She's young and pliable,” she points out. “She'll be easy to manipulate.”

“Is that what you saw in her?”

“You didn't?”

“She's scared,” I acknowledge. “But she's smart. She's not going to be as easy to crack as you might think.”

I don't say it aloud—God knows my mother doesn't need the fucking suggestion—but there are many ways to crack a person, no matter how difficult they may be. And the image in my head of a naked Olivia begging to do as I say is enough to get me very excited about a particular course of action.

“You know the reason we butt heads so much, don't you?” she asks, interrupting my thoughts. “It's because you're too much like me.”

I don't dignify that with an answer. I just wave a hand to dismiss her. “You can close the door on your way out.”

She nods and grabs the door handle. But she freezes as I give her one last order.

“Oh, and... send the girl to my office.”

## OLIVIA

I sit back on the carpeted floor and stare at the face I've scraped into the pristine white wall next to the bed.

*Pyotr.* That was his name.

The jerk who shoved me into that jeep. The same jerk who carried me into this house.

Even as he manhandled me, his features caught my eye. His broad, flat nose that accentuated the sharpness of his jaw. It's a half-assed sketch crudely scratched into the paint, but I know I nailed his appearance. The eyes are just as dead and devoid of original thought as they were in person.

He's merely a robot, following the instructions of a monster.

I take the blunt point of the pencil I found earlier and move on to the mural of his master. He's standing behind the dumb robot goon, but he's still bigger, his presence suffocating and intoxicating and impossible to ignore.

I get so lost in my world that I don't even notice the door open. Not until I see a shadow fall over my drawing do I realize that I'm no longer alone.

"Jesus!" I yelp, jerking back.

Yulia looks at me with an amused expression as she takes in my drawing. "Well, well... that's an interesting way to deface my walls."

My heart starts beating a little faster, but I try hard to shove down the fear. They've abducted me and trapped me in this room for almost two days. Why shouldn't I deface whatever the hell I want? Tit for extremely-not-equal tat, right?

"There was a pencil in the desk drawer," I explain. "But no paper."

"So you decided to go for the walls?"

I blink. "Sure looks that way."

She smiles. "Fair enough." She moves to sit down on the edge of the bed just next to me and examines my drawing. "Is that... Pyotr?"

"I prefer to think of him as *Pyotr 3000, Cyborg Extraordinaire*."

"The likeness is brilliant. And who is the figure behind him?"

The drawing is incomplete. I haven't figured out how I want to capture the harsh lines and shadows of him just yet. For now, he's only a silhouette.

"The master," I say. "Or maybe I'll call him 'The Monster.'"

Yulia raises her eyebrows. "Also known as my son?"

"The fact that you made that connection speaks volumes."

She gives me an amused glance. "Is that a speech bubble over Pyotr's head?"

"Yes. But I haven't decided what he's going to say yet."

"I imagine it won't be flattering."

"Probably not."

"Maybe he was right about you," she mutters under her breath.

I roll my eyes. "What did His Highness say about me now?"

She pushes herself off the bed and heads for the door. "You can ask him yourself. He's granting you an audience."

I drop my pencil and get to my feet. "What? He is? When?"

"Now," Yulia says. "Come with me."

I abandon my vandalism immediately and follow her out of the room. On the walk there, I try to compose myself. I compile a list in my head of all the things I want to bring up with him. As it turns out, it's a very long list.

I'm so distracted I forget to pick up my feet. I trip on the bottom step of the grand staircase and again on the edge of a carpet that runs the length of the absurdly long hallway.

"Calm down, girl," Yulia scolds lightly just before she opens the door. "Showing fear will get you nowhere."

"Fear is all I have right now."

She grabs my hand so suddenly that I don't even gasp. It's not a cruel gesture, anyway. When she looks at me, her blue eyes are comforting and protective. So completely unlike her son's.

"Listen to me, Olivia: the only way to get him to listen to you is if you have his respect."

I pull back, uncomfortable with the way she's gripping me. "I obviously don't have that. Nor do I know how to get it."

"Hold your own," she tells me. "Stand your ground."

"Against *him*?" I balk. "He's... he's..."

*An Adonis. A beast. An angel of death.* I'm not short on synonyms, but I'm certainly not going to share any of my first choices with his mother.

But she gets the general gist of things. "He's a titan," she says, which also seems like a pretty fitting description. "And do you know the kind of person who stands up to a titan?"

"Someone suicidal?"

She smiles. "Someone *brave*."

I don't have time to tell her that I'm not brave before she opens the door and shoves me into the room.

It's a cavernous space. A sitting area with couches clustered together off to one side. A large display case full of what appear to be weapons lurks in the opposite corner. Between the two sits the biggest desk I've ever seen, like it was carved from the bones of the earth itself.

Two arched windows set in the wall offer an uninterrupted view of the garden. They've been pushed open a crack. I can feel the cool breeze washing in from outside.

I find my eyes straying back to the glass display case. I'm no weapons expert, but some of these things look like they got their first use back when people still lived in castles and launched catapults at each other. I see bows and arrows, spears and harpoons, shields and armor scarred with the marks of war.

What kind of man collects such vicious-looking things?

A little voice in the back of my head gives me the obvious answer: the kind of man to whom violence is second nature.

The same man is now looking at me with festering impatience. The sunlight catches his face from the side, casting half in light and half in shadow. He looks unspeakably beautiful.

"You wanted to speak to me," Aleks intones. "So, speak."

"A crossbow?" I blurt, stalling for time. "You're a walking cliché."

He sighs. "I'm a collector."

"So you don't use it? Hunting peasants for sport, or something along those lines?"

"I can use it if the need arises."

All the charm he exuded at the airport is gone. I wonder how I ever saw it to begin with. All I see now is menace. Aggression. A saw-toothed edge of a man.

And whatever meager confidence I came in here with is wilting on the vine. Yulia's words keep echoing in my head, but I hear them in my father's voice.



*Hold your own.*

*Stand your ground.*

*Living is for the brave.*

Simple words. The kind you'd find in a fortune cookie at some strip mall Chinese restaurant. They seem wildly out of place in this room, with this threat staring me down.

"Did you come here to waste my time?" he asks when I keep fidgeting in the silence.

"I didn't come here at all, remember?" I remind him acidly. "You *took* me."

"I'm assuming you have a point to make. Do us all a favor and get to it."

I square my shoulders and look him right in the eye, ignoring every instinct in my body. "I want to know that my family is okay."

"They were released the moment we cleared the street," he says.

I frown. "How do I even know that's true? What's the proof?"

"My word."

I snort. "I hope you can understand why that means nothing to me."

"I'm not interested in understanding much about you, Olivia," he says. "I think that puts us at an impasse."

"An impasse implies that both parties have tried to compromise. But in our case, you're the one holding all the cards. *You* have all the power."

Aleks cocks his head to the side and gives me a smile that makes my insides tremble.

The attraction I felt for him still exists. Seeing him tie up my family, threaten my brother, and abduct me didn't kill those feelings. It just made the tingling concentrated between my legs a thousand times more shameful.

"That's right," Aleks says with a nod. "I do have all the power. Your brother would do well to remember that."

“He’s just doing his job.”

“And I’m doing mine.”

I shake my head. “This is not a job.”

“No?” he drawls. “Then tell me what it is. Tell me who I am. I’m simply dying to know.”

“You’re just some low life thug! A criminal whose mistakes are catching up to him.”

“Let’s suspend reality for a moment and assume that’s true,” he says casually, leaning back in his chair. “If I go down, I’m bringing everyone down with me. That includes your brother, Olivia. And now, it includes you.”

“My brother can take you.”

“You’re overestimating him.”

“I’m not. I know him.”

He springs forward so fast that I don’t even have time to back up. He stops right in front of me, and I’m glad I didn’t back away.

*Stand your ground.* If nothing else, maybe I can take the advice literally.

“But you don’t know me,” he hisses. “And trust me, little girl: you don’t want to.”

I draw in a shuddering breath. “You’re right about that. I already know enough.”

Aleks’s eyes glisten with the promise of violence. “If that were true, you’d know not to push me.”

“I’ve been confined to that room for almost two days. You’d probably keep me there forever if I hadn’t pushed for this meeting.”

He doesn’t respond. I’m not naive enough to believe I’ve made any leeway, but I’ll take any opening I can get.

“I want proof that my family is okay,” I insist. “I want a phone call.”

He looks at me with an amused expression. “You must be joking.”

“No,” I say, ironing the tremble out of my voice. “It’s a reasonable request. Just one call to make sure they’re all okay.”

“And what will you give me in return?”

That stumps me. I realize that that is exactly what he’s hoped to achieve. “I... I don’t have anything to give you.”

“Exactly. You have nothing to bargain with. So why would I even bother negotiating?”

My jaw goes slack. He gives me a condescending smile and an arrogant nod before turning away from me.

“I’ll have someone escort you back to your room.”

“No! Wait.”

He turns again, his eyes grazing up my body before settling on my face. “So you do have something I might want? Information, perhaps?”

I realize almost instantly what he means. “You really think I’d tell you anything about my brother? Even if I knew it?”

“It’s the only card you have to play,” he points out. “So why not play it?”

“Because blood is thicker than water.”

He smiles. “You’d be surprised.”

I decide not to analyze that right now. My mind is pivoting wildly, trying to think of some way I can get through to this man. But it feels more than a little like I’m just banging my head against a brick wall.

“I’m not going back into that room,” I say, trying to infuse my voice with the kind of confidence that Dad always promised I had deep inside me. “I won’t do it.”

“If you would prefer different accommodations, I have a cell in the basement that you might prefer.”

So much for subtlety. The threat is so direct that it makes the hair on my neck stand on end.

I know I should keep my mouth shut unless I want rats for cellmates. But something about the way he's looking at me now makes me reckless.

Correction: something about the way he's looked at me from the very start makes me reckless.

"Is that where you kept her?" I snap.

I expected a violent backlash. Instead, Aleks chuckles darkly. "Is this the part where I'm meant to confess to taking your brother's woman?"

"She was his *fiancée*. Not his possession."

"I don't see the difference."

"Tell me something I don't know," I say angrily. "In my world, taking a woman against her will is definitely not the same as cherishing her. One is love. The other is a crime."

"There are worse sins."

"And I'm sure you've committed them all," I say.

"Many times over." He inches closer to me again. "A smarter woman might watch her tone, if she believed I've done what you seem to think I've done."

I frown. He has a point, as much as I hate to admit it. But something else hits me at the same time: if this was just about me, it would be so much easier to keep my mouth shut and wait for this to play out.

But this isn't just about me. It isn't even about me at all.

This son of a bitch threatened my family and injured my brother. He's probably monitoring their movements as we speak, waiting for a chance to slaughter them all if Rob doesn't bend to his will.

That's not something I can just ignore. I'm brave enough to know that.

I take a step towards him, ignoring the way he drenches me in his shadow, his scent.

“As long as my family is in danger, I can’t and won’t keep my mouth shut. I will do whatever it takes to make sure they’re safe.”

“And would your brother do the same for you?” he asks coldly. “Or does he care more for the woman he lost than the women he has?”

“Let me talk to him,” I say, trying a different method. “Maybe I can convince him to drop the investigation.”

He gives me an amused smile. “It takes a devious mind to manipulate, Olivia. It also takes skill. You have neither.”

“Don’t try to bullshit a bullshitter, eh?” I bite back.

“Something like that.”

“A call won’t cost you a thing.”

“Not the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

“I want your brother to sweat,” he says viciously. “I want him to lose sleep wondering what I’m doing with you. I want him to be so plagued by guilt and worry that he simply does what I ask him to do. *Whatever* I ask him to do.”

I shake my head in dismay. “You’ve got the wrong man for that then,” I say. “Rob has principles. You might be able to get him to back off, but if you expect anything more than that, you’ll be disappointed.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you.” He looks at me confidently. “I have a way of getting exactly what I want.”

The predatory glint snakes back into his eyes. I feel my skin flush with heat. I drop my gaze just as Aleks takes another step toward me.

Our bodies are maybe half a foot apart. His presence is as claustrophobic as it is titillating.

I hate myself for still feeling this way, knowing everything I know now. It makes no sense. But the animal part of my brain has been awakened by the beast in him.

That's all this is, I tell myself. Carnal attraction. It'll fade.

*God, please let it fade.*

"What's wrong, Olivia?" Aleks murmurs. "Can't look me in the eye?"

He takes another little step towards me.

"No," I say, wishing my voice was stronger, wishing my tone was more commanding, more assertive. "Stay back..."

"What are you so afraid of?"

I shake my head while still managing to avoid his eyes. It's like he's getting bigger, his smell getting stronger. He dwarfs me in every possible way. "Just... don't. Stop."

"Is that guilt I'm seeing on your face?" Aleks muses. "Or shame?"

I gasp as my back hits the wall. I hadn't even realized I was moving.

The door is just a few feet away, but even if I tried to make a run for it, I know my legs would never carry me that far.

"Please leave me alone," I whisper, still trying and failing to muster up some authority in my tone.

"A little too late for that now, darling."

He stops maybe an inch from me. If I dared to lift my eyes, I'd be staring at his chest. He's so big that I feel breakable in comparison.

In some ways, it feels like he's already broken me. The small, fragile part of me that felt like I was good enough when he deigned to look my way in the airport has crumbled into dust.

Of course he had an ulterior motive. I should have seen it from the beginning. But I was lost in the fairytale of it all.

"You're scared your brother will find out about us, aren't you?" he asks.

I pretend not to know what he's talking about. "There's nothing to discover."

"How about the way you came on my cock?"

I cringe, angry tears jumping to my eyes. “You lied to me. You manipulated me,” I say, defending myself. “I didn’t know who you were then.”

He shakes his head, leaning towards me so that his breath kisses my nose. “That’s not what I’m talking about,” he whispers. “I’m talking about the fact that, despite everything you know now, despite everything I’ve done... you *still* want me.”

**ALEKS**

Her eyes flare with admission, but I can already see her lips forming the lie. “That... that’s not true...”

“No?” I ask, stroking the back of my fingers against her cheek.

She trembles. Behind all the fear, her pupils are dilated. Her nipples are hard. I know beyond the shred of a doubt that, if I dip my hand into her panties, I’ll find she’s wet for me.

“Your body gives you away, Olivia.”

“I don’t want you.”

“Say it again,” I taunt her. “Say it like you mean it.”

Her eyes go wide, desperate. She tries to push me off her, but I’ve got my chest pressed tight against hers. I can feel the soft peaks of her breasts. My cock stiffens.

I imagine the way she looked pressed up against that bathroom sink, her nipples bare, her pussy exposed. That intense, ravenous expression in her eyes.

She was scared then, just like she is now, but this time, the stakes are higher. This time, there’s shame attached to every dirty thought she’s had about me since the moment I ruined her life.

I’m perfectly fine with that. Shame never bothered me much.



“Do you make a habit of seducing unsuspecting women?” she asks.

“Only when I have a reason to.”

“What reason did you have for seducing Isabella?”

“Now I’ve seduced her *and* kidnapped her?” I shake my head, exhaling impatiently. “For fuck’s sake, the Lawrence family does not know how to listen. Your brother has it all wrong.”

“He wouldn’t have started the investigation without a lead.”

“Facts can be manipulated, Olivia. Lies presented as truth. Not everything you hear is valid.”

“In this case, I think it’s pretty damn valid,” she hisses. “You took me, after all. You wouldn’t have done that without good reason. I want to know why you did it to her.”

“Why don’t you tell me?” I suggest. “Let’s hear your conspiracy theories.”

“Maybe she saw something she shouldn’t have,” she says, guessing wildly. “Maybe she was important to an enemy of yours and you wanted revenge. Maybe she was just beautiful and you decided you wanted her, even if she said no.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You think I’m a rapist?”

“You said you’d committed heinous crimes. Am I supposed to know that you have favorites?”

I tighten my grip on her and her breathing hitches. “If there’s only one thing you choose to believe about me, believe this: I am no fucking rapist. I don’t have to take what isn’t given to me. By the time I’m done with a woman, she comes willingly. God knows you did. Several times.”

Her expression twists into darkness. “You bastard.”

I press my nose to the nape of her neck and trace a line up to her cheek. She smells like cotton and butter. Homely, warm scents that bring to mind fireplaces in winter, blue oceans in summer. Nothing like the women I’m used to.

“You like that about me, don’t you?” I murmur in her ear.

I release her, but I make sure to keep my hands on either side of the wall, trapping her between them. I’m not touching her anymore and my cock is already irritated with me for that sad little fact.

“Like what?”

“You like that I’m a bastard,” I say. “You like that I’m dangerous. You like that you have so, so much to lose with me.”

“That’s—”

“The truth,” I say, cutting her off. “Women are all the same. They say they want dependable, they want safe. But it doesn’t hold their attention for long.”

“That’s not true.”

“No?” I ask, giving her a knowing smile. “Let’s see: your last relationship lasted scarcely nine months. He designed software for gaming companies. Enjoyed brewing craft beer in his free time. How deliciously exciting.”

She gapes at me in shock. “You’ve been digging around in my past?”

“I make it my business to know things. Especially things I own.”

She shakes her head, not taking that bait. “What did you do to him?”

“Do to him?” I scoff. “As if your boring fucking ex-boyfriend was worth a fraction of my time. He wasn’t worth yours, either.”

“I’d rather have him than you,” she spits.

I smile and push myself off the wall, then take a few steps back, putting some space between us. My cock is definitely not happy, but I ignore that and focus on the larger point.

“Would you, Olivia?”

Her eyes glide down my body. She tries to control the instinct, but she fails miserably. And by the time she’s averted her gaze, I’ve already noticed.

I tilt my head to the side. “How was he in bed?”

She looks instantly mortified. “I am not answering that question.”

“Let me take a wild guess: he probably didn’t fuck you until the fifth or sixth date, am I right?” I ask. “And even when he did, he probably didn’t fuck you at all. I bet he tried to *make love* to you. Tell me—was that satisfying? Did it make your toes curl? Did it make your eyes roll back in your head? Did you moan his name?”

She looks down, her cheeks flushing with color. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

I feel like a kid with a new toy. There’s something about this woman—I want to push all her buttons and watch her explode. She’s so reserved, so turned in on herself, that I want to see what happens when I rip her wide open.

“Because you’re embarrassed about what you settled for?”

“Lionel was a good guy,” she says defensively. “He... he treated me well.”

“Pity it ended so quickly, then.”

She narrows her eyes at me. She knows I see right through her bullshit. “So he was a little boring. Who cares? It doesn’t mean I want a man who treats me like crap.”

“What about a man who is your equal?”

“Are you implying that’s you?”

“Not at all. I have no interest in being anything to you. I’m simply curious.”

The fact that I’m curious at all is unprecedented, but that is lost on Olivia. It doesn’t matter. I can have my fun with her and deal with her brother at the same time.

Two birds. One stone.

“He was twice the man you are,” she snarls.

“He was half the man on his best day that I am on my worst. And besides—if he was so impressive, why aren’t you with him anymore?”

“I... decided to focus on my career,” she stammers in the most transparent lie that’s ever been told. “Anyway, what about you? What happened to your last relationship? Did she just decide she doesn’t like murderers?”

I laugh at that one. “What makes you think I want a relationship?” I saunter a little closer to her again. “I can have any woman I want, Olivia. What would I do with a commitment I don’t intend to keep?”

“See,” she says, “that’s one thing Lionel has over you. You may be bigger and stronger and richer. But he’s kind. Honest. Loyal. He’s capable of commitment.”

“Yet you broke up with him,” I point out. “And then you fucked me in an airplane bathroom.”

She goes bright red once more and looks away from me. She’s so self-conscious all the time. All it would take is for me to bend her over now and fuck her until she realizes that there’s no point to self-doubt. No purpose for awkwardness.

The only thing to do is give in.

“I... I was trying to do something... something...”

“That made you feel alive,” I fill in. “You wanted to know how it felt to come undone. And I showed you, didn’t I?”

I can see it written on her face: her emotion is getting the best of her. She’s regretting asking to talk to me. She just wants to be alone now, to reflect on her life, her choices. The ones that led her here and the ones she never got the chance to make.

“My family means the world to me, Aleks,” she says softly. “They’re the ones that make me feel alive. I... wouldn’t know what to do if something were to happen to them. Just, please... promise me they’ll be okay.”

I touch my fingers to her jaw and push her chin up so she’s forced to meet my eyes. “I don’t make promises I can’t keep, Olivia.”

She whimpers. “My brother’s a good man. He’s spent his whole life doing the right thing. Following the rules, upholding the law.”

“The law?” I repeat. “The laws are made by the very men who break them, Olivia. He’s wasted his life following a bunch of rules that were never intended to help anyone in the first place.”

“Fine,” she says in defeat. “Let’s say that’s true. What about kindness? Isn’t that worth something?”

“You expect me to go easy on your brother because you believe he’s a good man?” I laugh. “A good person?”

“He is.”

“And I suppose in your world, the hero always wins and the villain gets his just desserts?”

She shakes her head. “No, not that. I stopped believing in fairytales when my father died. There’s no happy ending without him.”

That takes me by surprise. I raise my eyebrows, staring at the loss etched across her face.

I have a thick file on the Lawrence family sitting in my desk drawer as we speak. That file told me that Bradley Lawrence died more than seven years ago. Olivia would’ve been a teen then. So much time has passed.

And yet the loss is still fresh. The raw pain boils in Olivia’s eyes, scalding.

“Your father is dead, Olivia. What’s the point in acting like you are, too?”

“He... he was our rock,” she murmurs without looking up. “And when he passed, Rob became that rock for us.”

I nod. “Exactly. Then you wouldn’t want to lose him, too, would you?”

She recognizes the threat in my voice. Her jaw trembles. She raises her gaze up at me, her hazel eyes going round with fear. “Would you really kill him?”

“I think we’ve already established that I will do whatever I need to do to protect my interests. And what’s more, I will get away with it.”

“Let me talk to Rob,” she tries again. “I’ll tell him to recuse himself from the investigation. I... I can solve this.”

I shake my head. “That won’t be enough. He has to *end* the investigation. Otherwise, some other agent will be assigned to it, and this cycle will begin anew.”

“But... but... but...”

I turn away from her and head back to my desk. “You’ll get a phone call with your brother when I feel it’s necessary. For right now, it’s not.”

“But—”

“You can go back to your room now.”

She breaks off mid-sentence, her expression twisting with failure. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

She lunges towards me and seizes my arm. “You can’t do this.”

I look down at her grip. It’s not remotely strong, but at least it’s determined. Her fingers tremble the longer I keep my gaze on her hand.

“Actually,” I say slowly, “I can do anything I fucking want.”

“Well, I’m not leaving.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Did you come here for your brother, Olivia? Or did you come here for me?”

She frowns. “I... what?”

“You crave danger, Olivia, even if you refuse to admit it. You’ve suppressed your instincts for so long that you’ve forgotten you have them at all. But I see you. I see *all* of you.”

I can see my words hitting her. She twists them around in her head, trying to deny them.

I take the moment to grab her suddenly. She gasps, her arms coming instinctively around my shoulders. I pick her up and set her down on my desk, wedging myself between her legs. I don’t even have to push them open. They part for me willingly.

“No,” she whispers, pushing me away so weakly that I laugh in her face.  
“This is not what I want...”

I ignore her words. They’re meaningless. Her body tells me the true story.

I unzip her pants and shove my hand inside. She gasps in shock, but she makes no real effort to stop me. That’s all the confirmation I need.

The moment my fingers find her pussy, she cries out.

“I was right: you’re soaking wet.”

She bites down on her bottom lip, unable to deny or justify her body’s betrayal.

“I wonder what your brother will think of that?” I ponder.

She shakes her head. “No! Please... don’t tell him.”

The innocence with which she utters that fervent plea almost makes me smile. “That depends on your behavior over the next few weeks.”

“Weeks?” she gasps.

I move my fingers inside her, and she gasps again, her knuckles going white as she clings to the edges of my desk.

In the airplane bathroom, I didn’t get to see the war on her face quite like this. But now, I can see it clearly...

She wants me so bad she can hardly breathe.

And she doesn’t trust herself not to give into that impulse again and again and again.

So I make the choice for her.

“Go up to your room, Olivia,” I tell her in a sigh. “Get in bed, pull down your panties, and make yourself come.”

I pull my fingers out of her. A low whimper escapes her lips.

“I don’t have to tell you to think of me when you do,” I say. “I already know you will.”

## OLIVIA

LATER THAT AFTERNOON

“What would you do, Mia?” I mutter to myself.

I try to channel my sister as I pace between the door to the hallway and the doors to my balcony. Mia has always been the confident one; I was the shy wallflower.

It’s what everyone always said about us. So often that Mia had a ready response for them.

*“We’re a team. I have enough confidence to help Liv through her awkward days. And Liv has the imagination to help me solve my hard days.”*

“I need you, Mimi,” I whisper to the empty room. “I need some of your confidence. I need *you*.”

I stop in front of the bed and collapse down onto it, face-first. The mattress is so soft I feel like I’m being consumed by a cloud. But whatever relief it gives me is short-lived.

The door opens and Yulia walks in with two maids pushing a trolley between them. It’s filled with packages neatly wrapped in brown butcher paper that gives no indication of what’s inside.

“What’s this?” I ask, rising up onto my elbows.

“Looks like you’ve had a productive day.” Yulia glances around at the strewn pillowcases and the messy bed.



“If you’re waiting for me to turn into a gracious prisoner, you can just keep right on waiting,” I snap. “I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”

Yulia smiles before turning to the maids. “Wheel that into the walk-in and then leave us.”

“Clothes?” I ask. “He sent me clothes?”

“No, this is the kind of chore my son saves for me. I purchased the clothes for you.”

“Good. If they were his choice, I’d tell him to cram a stiletto up his ass.”

Yulia chuckles. “I take it the meeting didn’t go so well.”

“Understatement of the year.” I shake my head. “No offense, but your son is an asshole.”

The maids throw me anxious glances as they scurry out of the bedroom. The last one out snaps the door closed behind her, leaving Yulia and me alone.

“He is a Bratva don,” she says.

“I don’t think those things are mutually exclusive.”

“It means there is always a reason for his actions. You’ll get used to him.”

I look at her with alarm. “I don’t want to get *used* to him. I want to get out of here.”

“He’s not going to hurt you if you don’t give him a reason to.”

“Is that supposed to be comforting?”

“No, dear,” she says quietly. “It has never been my job to comfort.”

She sobers and stands still for a long moment while some memory or another works itself out of the recesses of her mind. It’s almost humanizing, in a strange way, to watch her suffer at the hands of the past like I do all the time.

Then she straightens up. The vulnerability disappears and fixes me with the same imperious gaze she’s worn from the start.

“Anyway, you must have done something right this morning,” she says. “Because you have an invitation to dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“I believe you’ll find it’s the meal after lunch,” she chides sarcastically.

“I know what dinner is,” I snap back. “Is this dinner with him?”

“Of course,” Yulia says with a tolerant smile. “Who else?”

“But why?”

“That is a question you’ll have to ask him,” she says. “I’m just here to deliver some clothes.”

I glance towards the newly laden racks in the closet. I don’t want to look too interested, but I literally cannot remember the last time I bought new clothes for myself and the thought alone has me giddy.

*Focus, Liv.*

“Do you really think you can make me excited for this dinner just by bringing me new clothes? Are you his spin doctor or something?”

“I’m not trying to spin anything. I just...” Her smile falls slightly. For a millisecond, I can peek once again behind the perfectly crafted façade. “I do feel bad that you’re forced to be here. And I... I don’t want you to think you don’t have a friend in this house.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Is that what you are to me? My friend?”

“I can be a shoulder to lean on. Someone to confide in. Whatever you need.”

“Does Aleks know you’re making this offer?”

She sighs. “No. He wouldn’t approve.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“So maybe we should... keep it just between us?” she asks hopefully.

Yulia is the only one in this entire house who’s shown me the slightest bit of kindness. I’d be a fool to alienate the one person who might have a

conscience in this place.

So I force a smile to my face. “Of course.”

“Thank you,” she says, relief flooding her features. “Now, how about you come take a look at the clothes I picked out for you?”

Despite our tentative truce, I feel a twinge of discomfort as I follow her into the walk-in closet.

She hits a hidden switch on the wall and an embedded lighting system comes to life along every shelf and rack. It’s a rainbow of colors and cuts. Dresses—evening, cocktail, casual—along with pants, blouses, skirts, coats. Jeans and tees, camis and leggings. A whole separate annex is devoted entirely to shoes, each pair lit by a soft spotlight from above. I’m amazed by how quickly and neatly the maids were able to arrange everything.

I run my fingers over the fabric. Silk, cashmere, chiffon, brocade. But the more I examine the outfits she’s brought for me, I can’t help noticing that none of them feel like me.

“Well, what do you think?”

I plaster a smile onto my face before I turn to look at her. “Everything here is gorgeous, Yulia. And I don’t want to sound ungrateful. But... well, um... none of them will suit me.”

“You are a size eight, aren’t you?”

“I... yeah, I am—”

“Then what do you mean?”

“I mean, look at me,” I say, gesturing to my body. I’m currently wearing jeans and a hoodie that’s entirely too big for me. “This is my style.”

“Style?” Yulia repeats, looking positively mortified. “That’s not a style at all, Olivia.”

“Jeans and hoodies are too a style.”

“Maybe if you’re a fourteen-year-old boy.”

“Hey!”

“You are a beautiful woman, Olivia. And you have a beautiful figure. So why are you trying so hard to hide it?”

I frown. “Because I have no interest in being objectified.”

“Is that the real reason?”

“Are you my friend or a therapist?” I ask. “I have no interest in being analyzed, either.”

Yulia strokes thoughtfully at her chin. “I don’t know, dear. Changing your style might do you some good.”

“That’s rich,” I scoff. “As if you care about what’s good for me.”

She sighs. “I wish I could do something to help.”

“You can!” I say, lunging toward her desperately. “Forget the clothes, Yulia. Convince your son to let me go.”

She takes both my hands in hers. “Darling, believe me when I tell you this: I have no voice in this Bratva. Not anymore. My son rules with an iron fist. If anyone questions or crosses him, he will come down on them. That includes me.”

“But... but you’re his mother. You brought him into this world.”

“What did I tell you about him when we first met?”

“He is ruthless,” I recite.

If “*your son is an asshole*” was the understatement of the year, then that is surely the runner-up.

She nods. “He didn’t earn that reputation without cause. I’ll do what I can for you—but I have to work within the system to do so. I can make sure you’re comfortable. I can make sure you’re not hurt. Not hurt badly, at least.”

“Gee, thanks, how comforting,” I drop my hands and sink down to the tufted settee in the middle of the walk-in. “You do know what he’s doing is wrong, don’t you?”

“He’s doing what he thinks is right,” she counters.

“That wasn’t my question.”

She steps over to me and strokes the back of my head tenderly. “I’m an old woman now, Olivia. This is my life, whether I like it or not. I can’t convince Aleksandr to let you go. But I can help you navigate this world for as long as you’re in it. I can give you the advice that I was never given.”

“What’s the advice on this occasion?” I mutter sarcastically. “I’m hoping it’s something like ‘sharpen your toothbrush into a prison shiv and stick it right in his eyeball.’”

She smiles sadly. “Not quite. Put on a pretty dress, go down to dinner, and charm him.”

“Charm him?” I balk. “How the hell do I do that?”

“Have you never tried to impress a man before?”

“Not on purpose.”

“Let’s start with the dress, then.” She gets to her feet and rifles through the rows of dresses. “Ah-ha. Here we go.” She plucks one off the rack, peels aside the plastic wrap, and shows it to me with a flourish. “Isn’t she a beauty?”

“Jesus,” I breathe.

It’s a short, strapless dress, but every inch of it is covered in tiny beads. Blues and greens woven between swirls of silver. It’s magical, shimmering, like a mermaid’s tail.

Then I notice the tag dangling from the hem. “Holy hell! This dress is six thousand dollars.”

“It’s Elie Saab, Olivia,” Yulia says with amusement.

“I… I can’t wear that.”

“Why?”

“It won’t fit.”

“You haven’t tried it on yet.”

“Not the point. I know it won’t fit. I’m... I’m too tall, too clumsy to pull it off.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” she says, her tone turning stern. “Go on. Take off your clothes.”

“Pardon?”

“Dinner is in half an hour,” she explains impatiently. “I don’t think I have to tell you that Aleksandr doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Backed into a corner, I find myself standing and stripping. The moment I’m down to my bra and panties, I start skirting around Yulia, hoping she’s not looking too closely. All that does is make her pay closer attention.

“For goodness’s sake, Olivia,” she sighs. “There’s nothing so unattractive as insecurity.”

“I’m not trying to attract him,” I retort.

“Aren’t you, though?” she asks. “You want to charm him. Attraction is an important part of that.”

“I thought we established that I don’t actually want to charm him.”

“If you want to live, then yes, you do.”

My jaw drops open. “You mean... He wouldn’t... Is that a possibility?”

“This is the Bratva, my dear,” she says mildly. “Everything is a possibility. Now, come on. Put the dress on and don’t dawdle.”

She unzips the back of the dress and helps me slip into it. Then she zips me back up and twists me around to face the floor-length mirror.

“Oh...” I say, staring at my reflection.

I finger the soft, floaty fabric of the dress. The dress cinches in slightly at the waist, highlighting my figure, and then flounces out around my thighs.

“It’s beautiful,” I say. “But...”

“Now what?” Yulia asks impatiently.

I gesture at the neckline. “Look at this.”

The bodice of the dress is tight. It pushes my breasts up, making them appear twice as big.

“I fail to see the issue.”

I sigh, but don’t argue. There’s no point. She’s as stubborn as her son.

Yulia looks smugly pleased as she pulls out a pair of black Louboutin heels and places them at my feet. “Go on. They’ll match the dress perfectly.”

“Did you buy a wheelchair, too? Because I’m not going to be able to walk in those, Yulia.”

“Just try them on. Jesus, I’ve never met a woman so determined *not* to play dress-up.”

“I was more of a tomboy growing up,” I admit. “I guess nothing has changed.”

“Well, it’s going to have to. Sit there and wait.”

She bustles into the annex to grab supplies from the vanity, then returns to comb out my hair and apply some light makeup. I suffer through it all silently.

But when she breaks out the jewelry, I put my foot down. “No way. I’m not wearing that.”

“They’re pearls.”

“I don’t care. I’m not wearing them. I’m not walking into dinner wearing jewelry paid for with Aleks’s blood money.”

“He paid for everything you’re wearing.”

“It’s... different.”

I don’t know how to explain it to her. Wearing a necklace he bought is like wearing a collar. I’m not going to give him the satisfaction.

Yulia shakes her head, but she relents. And when she steps back, she seems satisfied with my appearance. “You really are beautiful. And I say that objectively.”

I turn back towards my reflection and my heart starts beating a little faster.

I never would have guessed I could pull something like this off, but there’s no denying that’s exactly what I’m doing. It’s not that I don’t look like me—it’s just a level of me that I’ve never achieved before. The best of me.

“Thank you, Yulia,” I mumble. I’ve never felt this... feminine before.”

What I really want to say is, *Mia would be so proud right now.*

That thought is enough to curdle my good mood. My stomach clenches as I remember where I am. Why I’m here. When I remember that I don’t even know if Mia is okay, or my mother, or Rob...

“Something wrong, my dear?”

I shake my head. “No,” I mumble. “Nothing. What next?”

“This way.” She turns and leaves.

I follow, but I’m focused on putting one stiletto’d heel in front of the other and remaining upright while doing so. Harder than it looks. I’m so absorbed that I don’t notice Yulia has come to a halt, so I slam into her back with a very unladylike grunt.

She’s standing next to my bed, staring up at the wall. At the sketch I finished earlier.

It shows Aleks standing behind Pyotr. The speech bubble next to Aleks’s head reads, “*Clip her wings so she cannot fly.*”

Pyotr holds a bird cage in his hands. I’m sitting inside of it, gripping the rungs of the cage desperately.

Pyotr’s speech bubble reads, “*Yes, Master.*”

I’m happy with the sketch, for the most part. Aleks’s angles are mostly right. Sharp and cruel, to go with the savage glint in his eyes and the jaw clenched tight with icy control.



“It’s very good, Olivia,” Yulia murmurs. “You’re a talented artist.” Then she turns around and faces me. “Time to go down.”

I swallow and take her elbow. She guides me to the door. I only trip twice en route.

“There’s no way I can walk in there wearing flip flops, is there?” I ask hopefully.

“Over my dead body.”

Suppressing a grimace, I follow her downstairs and to the back of the house where one of the sitting rooms flows into the garden.

“You’ll be dining on the terrace,” she says. “Make sure those heels stay on the paved paths. You’ll sink in the mud.”

She leads me down a stone path that curves around flower beds and under twisting trees. At the end is a wooden terrace nestled against a glistening pond. A fountain glows blue in the center and vibrant green lily pads float on the surface. It matches my dress flawlessly.

“Wow, this is…”

I trail off when I notice Aleks sitting at the table, waiting for me. Seeing him now, I realize I was wrong: the sketch I etched into the wall of my bedroom looks nothing like him. Superficially, it does, but what’s missing is what’s beneath.

The arrogance.

The brutality.

I’m not so sure I can ever put those things down on paper quite right.

“Enjoy dinner,” Yulia says.

“Wait!” I grab for her hand. “You’re not joining us?”

“You’ll be fine,” she says, lowering her voice. “You look amazing. He can’t take his eyes off you.”

I'm not sure that does anything to help my nerves. But I'm left with no choice but to turn to him as Yulia disappears back into the garden.

I walk carefully to the table. Aleks doesn't stand to greet me. He stays seated and fixes me with a hard, intimidating expression.

Immediately, I feel like an idiot. Did I really think a pretty dress might change things? Like he'd turn into a blubbering Mr. Nice Guy at the snap of my fingers?

"Sit," he orders quietly.

I sink into the seat opposite him and study the beautifully laid table to avoid meeting his eyes.

"Why go through all this trouble for me?" I mumble.

"I was having dinner anyway," he says. "It wasn't a problem to include you. But I appreciate you going through all that trouble for me."

The glow in his eyes makes it clear that he's checking me out unabashedly. I flush with color, but I still keep my eyes averted. "I didn't really have a choice in the matter. Your mother forced me into this dress. Pretty much literally."

"Are you often forced into doing things you don't want to do?"

I grit my teeth. "You should know better than anyone that some people won't take no for an answer."

He raises his eyebrows. "I don't remember you ever saying no to me."

He smiles. It's laced with bad intention.

Despite that, my body hums. I felt it in the airport, too, when he sat next to me at the bar. It's the animal part of me, drawn to him even though I know better.

"Did you feel bad?" I blurt out so suddenly that I surprise even myself.

"For?"

“For deceiving me like you did,” I say, powering ahead despite my increased heart rate. “For pretending like you were interested in me? For sleeping with me under false pretenses?”

His expression doesn't change. But there's a glint in his eye that drives the air from my lungs.

“If I let pitiful feelings hold me back like that, I'd be a very different man, Olivia.”

## ALEKS

She looks fucking phenomenal.

The dress is tight around her bust, pressing her cleavage higher. The neckline swoops low, revealing acres of flawless skin.

That all suits me just fine. But I can tell Olivia is self-conscious. She's nervous to lean in and her movements are stiff. I don't understand why. The dress simply wisps over her curves, accentuating and highlighting her curves without cheapening them.

The women in my world would cut off a finger to have half of her innocence. But her? She wears it without regard for just how precious it is.

I steeple my fingers and lean in towards her. "If you only learn one thing about me, Olivia, learn this: I take what I want. I don't waste time thinking about petty consequences. So I took you, and if I left damage in my wake, so be it. The women I fuck disappear from my life soon after. We certainly don't end up having a conversation over dinner."

She frowns in dismay. "They disappear from your life? Like, they leave., or...?"

I laugh, but her frown only deepens. "Do you really believe I'd fuck a woman just to kill her after?"

"Am I supposed to know what gets you off?"

This night is supposed to be about extracting whatever information I can about her brother. But for some reason, that feels like an unwanted inconvenience I have to get through.

The questions I'm more interested in asking have a much different purpose.

"You've never fucked a stranger before, have you?" I guess.

She blushes, which confirms my suspicions immediately. "I like to have a connection with someone before I sleep with them."

"Ah, yes. We were rather connected."

She narrows her eyes at me. "You were a glaring exception."

"I'm flattered."

"You shouldn't be."

"You had a rule that you broke for me. Surely that makes me special?"

"It wasn't a rule, I just—" she sighs. "I didn't do it for you."

"Oh, it was for you, then?" I suggest with amusement. "Like a treat?"

She glares at me. "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Stop twisting my words. Stop trying to confuse me."

"I'm just talking here. Don't be afraid of a little conversation, Olivia."

"I should have known not to trust you from the beginning," she hisses. "You were too..."

She trails off. We both know there's no ending to that sentence that doesn't bury her further in her own words. That doesn't betray her own deepest desires that much more.

"Too what?" I press.

"Smooth," she finishes. "Polished. Practiced."

"I wasn't aware that was a bad thing."

*“Never trust a man who always knows exactly what to say,”* she murmurs as though she’s talking to herself.

“Who gave you that pearl of wisdom?”

“My dad.” She raises her eyes to mine for the first time all night.

The way she mentions him tells me everything I need to know. They were close. The loss of him still weighs heavily on her. More heavily than I ever suspected.

“In this case, your father was right.”

“He usually was,” she says softly.

I let her soak in the silence. It seems as though she needs the space to breathe, to unclench.

She’s quiet for a while. Then she turns her eyes to the pond and starts talking.

“He had this amazing laugh. Like, booming, you know? The kind of laugh that scared little kids. Even though he loved kids. And he made a mean apple crumble, but he couldn’t cook anything else.”

She smiles to herself at memories only she can see.

“In the evenings, he used to sit at the counter and whittle while I did my homework at the kitchen table. If I asked him for help, he dropped his tools and came over right away. Even though he didn’t know any of the answers. He was the same with Mia and Rob, too. He taught us to love each other fiercely. He told us to have each other’s backs. And we always have. We always will.”

She turns her eyes to mine, and I see it then: the strength that’s been on reserve. The resilience that she’s not sure she possesses. It’s all there in spades.

It just needed a little coaxing to emerge.

“I get it,” I say. “You’ll protect your brother like he’ll protect you.”

She nods.

“It’s a beautiful sentiment to live by,” I tell her, leaning forward. “But there’s one problem.”

“Which is?”

“None of you were prepared for me. I am not your run-of-the-mill family drama, your little bump in the road. I am not some problem that can simply be overcome with a little strength and perseverance and elbow grease, Olivia.”

“What are you then?”

“A fucking hurricane,” I growl. “And I will destroy everything in my path if you make me.”

“He’s my brother,” she whispers.

“And why should I care? You aren’t anyone to me.”

She flinches violently. Her face floods with hurt. It’s the only moment in my life that I can remember coming close to feeling regret.

“Why did you pick *me*?” she asks suddenly, once the silence has festered into something distinctly heavy. “Mia was an option, too.”

“I think you already know the answer to that.”

“I want to hear you say it.”

“You were the better target,” I explain bluntly. “Young. Naïve. Easy to manipulate.”

She knew exactly what I was going to say, and yet she cringes at each word. She lets me see just how much my opinion scalds her.

*Mistake after mistake, kiska.*

“Did you always intend on sleeping with me?”

“Is there an answer that will make you feel better?” I ask.

“No.”

“Then why ask?”

“Maybe it will help me... to know.”

I smirk. “Help you resist me? Or help you feel okay succumbing?”

She stares at me with a desperate look in her eye. Then she turns away fast to stop me deciphering it.

I just want to grab her and shake her. I want her to unravel right in front of my eyes so I can see all the broken pieces she’s trying to hold together.

“Please don’t tell my brother. He won’t understand.”

“Don’t force my hand, Olivia,” I say. “It’s that simple.”

“Have you always gotten your way?”

The question is asked without judgment. She’s just curious about me. How I operate, how I’m put together on the inside. Much the same way I’m curious about her.

“I don’t *get* my way. I make it.”

“How can you maintain any relationship like that?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly that. Relationships, romantic or otherwise, require compromise. Give and take. If you’re always getting your way, surely that means everyone else gets the short end of the stick.”

“I’m the don.”

“So?” she scoffs. “That means that everyone just yields to you?”

“When they don’t, I fight. Unfortunately for everyone else, I’m very, very good at it.”

She takes a deep breath. “I don’t think your mother is happy, you know.”

I’m already uncomfortable with the liking that my mother has taken towards Olivia. Her statement only makes me more so. “Oh? Did she tell you that?”

“Of course not,” Olivia covers up quickly. “But I can tell.”



I nod. “Interesting.”

She leans forward on her elbows, her eyes searching my face. “Don’t you care?”

“If I can’t do anything about it, caring is a waste of time.”

“But she’s your mother.”

“And?”

She blinks at me before shaking her head. “I don’t understand you.”

“I’d advise you not to try.”

“Do they beat it out of you young?” she asks, her tone flickering with ice. “The humanity? The compassion?”

I smile. “More like they train the cruelty into you. But they didn’t have to do much work with me.”

“And that makes you proud?”

“It doesn’t make me anything. I am what I am.”

“And you’re happy with that? With who you are?”

“I am what I am,” I repeat with a grimace. “This is my life. This is who I was born to be. If you’re upset with the turn of events, turn your disapproving look to your brother. His need for vengeance made my life more difficult. I can’t just ignore that. More to the point, I *won’t* ignore that.”

“Has he tried to contact you?”

“Constantly. My phone is practically ringing off the hook. Your brother wants you back badly.”

She blinks in alarm, processing this tidbit. Interesting—did she truly fear she’d been abandoned already? Perhaps I’m working on her faster than I expected.

“What have you said to him?”

“Nothing. I haven’t answered yet.”

“But—”

“He has to know I mean business. Otherwise, he won’t play ball. And I’ve wasted enough time on the cockroach.”

She leans forward and grips the sides of the table. “Aleks, please, let me speak to him. Just to let him know I’m okay. Just to let me know they’re okay.”

A refusal is on the tip of my tongue. But then she leans forward. The string lights above our heads turn the scene golden and gauzy. Her skin practically glows.

And another idea hits me.

“Maybe we could do more than a phone call,” I say.

She inhales. “What do you mean?”

“I could orchestrate a neutral meeting ground. A face-to-face meeting.”

Her eyes are as big as the lily pads floating nearby. “Are you serious?”

“I’m always serious.”

“And you’d take me with you?”

“That remains to be seen.”

Her knuckles turn white as she stares at me, muscles knotted tight from head to toe with fervent hope. “Please, Aleks, take me with you. I’ll... I’ll do anything.”

I smile. This is just too fucking easy.

I lean back in my seat and regard her with a cool gaze. “Prove it.”

Her chest is rising and falling hard now. I imagine running my tongue between her breasts. Sucking each nipple into my mouth and savoring the soft moan it would coax from her lips.

She’ll tremble like she did in that plane bathroom. Her body desperate for the release only I can give her.

She knows what to do, even if she hates to admit it. And she knows what she *wants* to do. She hates that twice as much.

Slowly, Olivia rises from her chair. She smooths out the edges of her dress with trembling fingers. Then, steeling herself, she rounds the table toward me.

She pauses a foot short and meets my eyes for a moment. I see so many things in that look. Fear. Uncertainty.

But also determination. Fire.

She traces a hesitant finger along the rim of the table. I watch it, transfixed. The sensual swoop of her thin wrist. The soft rustle of the tablecloth.

Every other sound around us seems to mute itself.

There is only this.

There is only her.

There is only us.

She takes a deep breath and advances one more step toward me. It's spellbinding. Utterly captivating. I couldn't tear my eyes off her if I tried.

Until her ankle twists in the unfamiliar high heels and her finger accidentally catches the stem of a wine glass.

All the concentrated sexiness dissipates at once. In the blink of an eye, she's Awkward Liv again, fumbling to catch a spilled drink, just like the very first time I ever laid eyes on her.

She nearly busts her ass as she lunges forward just in time to cradle the wine glass against smashing into the ground. I shoot my hand out to save her from tumbling head over heels.

“God-fucking-shit-dammit!” she hisses as purple wine drips from her fingers.

“At least it's not hot coffee.”

“Very funny, asshole. Now, can you hand me a napkin so I can clean myself off?”

“No.”

I look her dead in the eye. She starts to retort, but then she sees something in my gaze that silences her.

Slowly, I rise, never breaking eye contact. I tower over her. She is so small, so fragile. So utterly at my mercy.

Olivia fidgets the whole time. She doesn't know what to do in the white-hot glare of my full attention. It's too much for her. Like she's staring into the sun.

Only this time, the sun is staring back at her.

I still have her elbow in my grasp from where I caught her. Moving with aching slowness, I let my hand glide down her forearm until I encircle her wrist in my fingers.

I raise it to my lips and take one wine-soaked finger in my mouth. I still don't look away. I stay locked on her, like something as little as a blink will ruin this forever.

I suck the wine off one finger. Then the next. Then the next.

Then I place her hand gently back by her side.

“If you're going to try to seduce me to get what you want, Olivia, you should take your heels off first.”

She shudders like a cold wind only she can feel just blasted through the garden. “I should've stayed far away from a man like you,” she murmurs.

“Scared of living, Olivia?”

“If this is living,” she says, gesturing to me and our surroundings, “then I don't want it.”

“On the contrary, *kiska*, I think you want it more than you've ever wanted anything in your whole fucking life. You just don't know how to ask for it.”

## OLIVIA

I have no idea what I'm doing.

Aleks just sucked wine off my fingers in the strangest, hottest display of tenderness and ownership I've ever seen. I'm still trembling head to toe from the after-effects of the intimate gesture.

But he's looking at me like we're not quite finished here.

My mistake since the moment we met has always been looking directly into his eyes. That's my weakness, my undoing, every single time. It's what landed me in this mess.

So I try to avoid it now. I stop myself from doing more than glancing, although I still catch a glimpse of blue with slices of green around the iris before I change course.

*Danger.* That's what those eyes tell me.

They aren't lying.

"I don't want to be part of your world," I snap defensively. "Don't want to be part of your life."

"Why not?"

"Why do you care? Don't you have other women waiting eagerly at your beck and call?"

“More than you could possibly imagine.”

“Great. Then go beck-and-call one of them. I’ll happily slip away and you’ll never see me again.”

He just smirks, that same arrogant, infuriating smirk that draws and repels me at the same time. God, he’s a frustrating enigma.

I take a deep breath and try to remind myself of Yulia’s advice. I need to earn his respect. But the task is daunting. Impossible.

I push aside my reservations and focus on him. I don’t look at his face because I know that will only inhibit the process, so I concentrate on his shoulders.

His broad, muscular, infinite shoulders. I can’t help looking at him and feeling weak in comparison. Fragile, whereas he is so solid and undeniable.

The top three buttons of his shirt have been left open. I can see his collarbones, smoothing out into the tattooed planes of his chest.

He gives me a knowing smile. “Something wrong, Olivia?” he asks. “You look a little lost.”

“I... I...”

That’s when I do it—I make the mistake of looking at him.

And just like that, I’m lost.

His eyes are indisputably beautiful, but the fire that burns there gives them a feral kind of quality. It takes the beauty and twists it into something more. Something different. A severity that exudes power.

And so I find myself saying words I shouldn’t even be thinking.

“I don’t know what to do now. You’ve ruined me.”

He nods, unsurprised. “My advice? Stop thinking about my opinion of you. Just concentrate on yourself. Your desires. Feel it authentically, truly, from deep in your soul. Convince yourself that what you want will want you in return—all you have to do is send that desire radiating outward. So answer one question for me, *kiska*... what do you want to do now?”

My lips feel numb. “I want...”

My hand curls around the opening of his shirt. I lean in and press my lips against his. Aleks wraps his arms around me, holding me against him.

But he isn't kissing me back. Not really.

He's waiting to see how far I'll take this on my own.

I run my tongue over his lips and then slide it into his mouth, deepening the kiss. Even with him barely moving, I feel the connection all the way down to my toes.

*This.* This is what I want.

But he's right—I don't know how to say that out loud.

When I pull back, he looks at me with one raised eyebrow. “Is that all you've got?”

I've never been a very competitive person, but Aleks knows how to press all of my buttons, apparently. Those five little words light a fire in me. Or rather, they throw gasoline onto a fire that's been raging in me since the moment a hot man at the airport watched me spill coffee on myself.

I take the final step forward and stand between his legs. We're both extremely aware of how insistently his cock is bulging against his zipper.

I turn around. “Unzip me.”

His warm fingers slide my zipper down to my lower back. I let it slip down my body, pooling at my feet. My bra and panties are conservative enough that I don't feel completely exposed when the dress hits the ground.

At least, not yet. Not until I feel his hand on my ass. “Turn around and remove your bra,” he growls.

I take a deep breath and turn in place. His hand drags around my hip, settling high on my thigh. Aleks is relaxed, legs spread, forehead unlined. His gaze flits across my face before dipping down to my breasts.

He grabs the band of my panties and pulls me forward so that my thighs are at his crotch, rubbing against his erection.

I lean forward, ready to free him from his pants, but he grabs my wrists and shoves me backward.

“No,” he says firmly. “You first.”

I frown, wondering how the hell he’s managed to take control when I’m the one who’s supposed to be driving this interaction. But I really don’t mind one bit. In fact, I’m so wet that it’s getting uncomfortable.

I unclasp my bra and pull it off. My breasts spill free.

Aleks looks at me like he’ll die if he can’t have me.

“Now, your panties.”

I don’t delay with those. I shimmy them off my hips and they slide down my legs. Desire burns hot in his eyes for a moment before he nods. “That’s a good little girl. Come here and kneel.”

I bend down in front of him until I’m eye level with his erection. Then I unzip him and pull his dick free. He watches, impassive on the surface, but I can feel the heat of his lust scorching just beneath his skin.

I run my hand up his massive length, savoring the feel of him in my palm. I could just stay here forever, marveling at him.

But there’s more to come in this fucked-up dance of ours.

I drag my eyes up and unbutton his shirt to reveal his impressive abs. Russian words are tattooed across his left side. I have no idea what they mean, but I admire them nonetheless, running my fingertips over the flowing script.

Just more mysteries I can’t unlock in this man. More things hidden from the light.

He has a few other tattoos, none of which make any more sense than the first. An axe just above his right nipple, the silhouette of a tree on his chest.

I smooth my hands over the ink, admiring both them and the body beneath. Then I look up and see that Aleks is looking down at me.

And every thought in my head grinds to a halt, except for one.



I need to kiss him. *Now*.

I stand, wrap my hand around his neck, and pull his face to mine. I meld our mouths together, swirling my tongue in to taste him and tipping my head to the side to deepen our connection. I kiss Aleks until he moves against me, until his hands slide over my skin, until his cock is pressing against my stomach.

I gasp into his mouth as he sinks into his seat and pulls me onto his lap.

I raise my hips, desperate to feel him inside me. But before his cock touches my entrance, his fingers do.

I moan as he teases his fingers up and down my slit, spreading my wetness until I'm writhing around on top of him, pleading for more than just this faint temptation.

Then, when he's done torturing me, he grabs my hips and sheaths himself inside.

"Oh, fucking fuck!" I cry out.

It only hurts for a moment. Pleasure soon washes away the pain. My body knows what to do from here. Truth is, I left my mind a long time ago, so I do the only thing I can do.

I submit.

I start riding him, bucking my hips against his until the sound of our bodies coming together drowns out everything else. Aleks alternates grabbing my hips and slapping my ass hard as I bounce on his cock.

When my legs begin to cramp, he grabs my hips and stands. His cock never comes out of me as he carries me to the table.

With a sweep of his hand, he clears half the place settings before setting my naked ass down on the edge of it. Then he pummels into me hard, his jaw rigid with concentration.

"Oh God!" I whimper. "Oh God... Aleks... Aleks..."

I don't mean to say his name. In fact, I try to bite down on my cries.

But I can't help myself. My world has narrowed until he's all that exists. His eyes flash with lust as he shoves his cock into me so hard it feels like he's in my stomach. Breaking me. Owning me so fully and completely that I know even in this moment that no one else will ever match it.

My arms flail around the table, searching for something to grip. I hear more things fall and break, but he doesn't stop.

The orgasm that courses through my body then is so intense that I scream. Loudly. I've never done that before. Not like this.

My thighs clench around his hips. I lean backward, trying to lay down, but Aleks's arms around my back hold me up. He bends down and sucks my nipple in his mouth, adding pleasure even though I'm already maxed out. My body is oversensitized and spent.

But he keeps fucking me relentlessly, pushing me towards another orgasm that I don't think I'm ready for yet.

He doesn't give a shit about that, though. No mercy in anything. Not even this.

"Please," I gasp, as the pleasure twists in my nerves and turns me limp and lifeless. "Aleks, fuck..."

I jerk upright when the second orgasm takes hold against my will. My fingernails dig into his shoulder blades, and I know how unforgiving my grip is. I feel the heat of his blood when I break the skin. But he doesn't so much as flinch.

I doubt he can even register the pain. He's singularly focused on where our bodies are connected. Every ounce of his attention on *me*. I feel like a goddess and a ragdoll at the same time.

After the second orgasm, I can barely hold onto him. My limbs are heavy, and I'm not sure how much more I can take.

Then, suddenly, he pulls out and pumps at his cock. I watch with fascination as his hand rocks back and forth along his thick shaft.

With a guttural roar, he erupts. The first spray of his seed lands on my neck, just above my breasts. But I catch a few drops on my face. I can only gawk at him as he pumps his load onto me.

I've never had a man come on me before. And certainly not on my face.

I don't know why it's so exciting. Shouldn't it be demeaning? Insulting? But it's the farthest thing from it. The moment he drenches me, I feel awash with adrenaline. Alive. Owned and thus freed, in the strangest way possible.

When he finishes, he releases his hands from my body. I almost fall back against the table, knocking over another glass in the process. It clatters to the floor, but thankfully, it doesn't break.

While I struggle to gain control of my extremities, Aleks tucks his still-hard cock away and zips himself up. It makes me more aware of the fact that I'm still as naked as the day I was born.

Not just that, but we're out in the open, in the middle of the garden. The terrace has some foliage that separates it from the greater expanse of the garden, but still... anyone could have walked in on us.

Someone still could.

"My clothes," I say, panic creeping in now that the high of my orgasms has receded somewhat and the cold logic of reality has come rushing back in.

"Go on," Aleks says. "They're right over there."

My legs are shaky and the ground is littered with everything that was upended when Aleks swept them off the table to make room for me.

He stands to the side and observes me as I pick my way barefoot between broken pottery to the pile of my discarded clothes.

"You could help me," I say, glaring back at him.

He shrugs. "And miss the show?"

My annoyance blots away some of the self-consciousness, which is good, because he never takes his eyes off me. Now that I think about it, maybe that's part of why I stay so damn mad at him all the time—because it's a

better alternative than acknowledging what he's doing to me deep down inside.

I pull my dress up over my breasts, although I know there's no way I can zip myself up without his help. But he doesn't offer and I'm not going to ask.

He grabs a glass of wine from the table and sits back down as if the area isn't a complete disaster of spilled cutlery and broken glasses.

"Well?" I ask, turning to him.

He looks at me with amusement. "Well, what?"

"I did what you wanted me to do."

He frowns before taking a sip. "I don't follow."

"You need to take me to see my brother." I still sound confident for now, but uncertainty is starting to creep into my limbs with each passing second.

He raises his eyebrows. "You don't strike me as the type of woman who trades sex for favors."

I know if I concentrate on that insult, I'll get side-tracked. So I stick to the point instead. "I told you I would do anything—"

"And I asked you to prove it," he says.

"So I..."

I trail off when I realize the point he's trying to make. I start to pale as he regards me with his gaze.

"You fucked me of your own accord," he says. "I didn't ask you to."

I shake my head, but his chuckle makes me freeze. "You gave me your body before I even asked for it, Olivia. You showed me everything I needed to know. You want it. You want this. You want me."

I rear back and twist around so that I don't have to look at his face.

Oh God, what have I done? I walked right into the trap he set for me.

But even that isn't totally true. I set the trap myself. I told him I'd do anything. Because I was blinded by my attraction to him.

“All I want is to be reunited with my family.”

His devil-may-care eyes see right through my lies. “If only that were true.”

## ALEKS

### THE NEXT DAY

She sits silently in the back seat, but I still can't ignore her. She does that to me—demands my attention, consumes it without even meaning to. It's very fucking irritating.

“Will you stop?” I growl, glancing back at her over my shoulder.

“I'm nervous,” she hisses. Her leg keeps bouncing up and down like a piston as she picks at her fingernails.

“I noticed that. Try being nervous on the inside instead.”

She throws me a dirty look and glances towards the six men piled into the back of the jeep. There's no one sitting beside her, but only because I ordered it.

“Why are there so many men?” she whispers.

“Are there?”

“I saw at least five other jeeps when we pulled out of the compound. How many men are you bringing to this meeting?”

“A few,” I say casually.

“Why?” she demands. “This is supposed to be a neutral face-to-face, right? It's supposed to be about opening a dialogue. Having a conversation.”

Demyan throws me a glance from the front seat that's half-amused and half-disbelieving.

"Yeah," I chuckle. "I'm well-known for my conversational skills."

Olivia blanches. "Are you planning on hurting him?"

"I'm planning on doing whatever I have to do."

She unbuckles her seatbelt and climbs over the center to sit between me and Demyan up front.

"What are you doing?" Demyan asks.

"I'm trying to convince your evil boss that this is not the right way to go about things. If you walk in with an army at your back, Rob's going to think you're not serious about working through this."

"*Working through this?*" I repeat. "Jesus, we're not lovers trying to solve our relationship issues. He's the thorn in my side. I just need to remove him."

"That's why I'm here," she insists. "I'll convince him to leave you alone."

"Is that right?" Demyan and I exchange a knowing look. She definitely doesn't miss it, but she chooses to ignore it.

"Listen, Aleks, my brother is a man of his word. If he promises not to come after you, he won't," she says earnestly.

Demyan shakes his head. He's gone from half-disbelieving to full-on incredulous. "Must be nice living in a fantasy world."

She turns towards him so that all I can see is a head of silky, dark brown hair. "Who are you, the resident cynic? Did someone piss in your cornflakes this morning? Or were you just not hugged enough as a child?"

Demyan and I lock eyes. I know exactly what he's thinking: *She is more than I was expecting.*

*You and me both*, I think.

"Well, funny you should mention not getting hugged," Demyan replies casually. "The cynicism actually started with my dad. He killed my mother

when I was seven and then abandoned my brother and me. Then my brother overdosed when he was fifteen. Then it was my wife, who left me for a 'normal' life and took my daughter with her. So I'd say the cynicism is pretty well-earned, actually. As for the cornflakes, I'm not really big on breakfast."

Olivia is silent for a long moment. Then she turns to me.

"Was all that true?"

I shrug. "He forgot the part where he tracked down his old man and killed him in retribution. But otherwise, extremely factual."

"Didn't forget," Demyan says irritably. "I was just building up to it. Proudest fucking moment of my life. Now, you've robbed me of the joy of dropping that bomb. Bastard."

"I'm sure you'll find it in your heart to forgive me."

"Jesus Christ," Olivia mutters. "You guys are serious."

"Why would we joke about shit like that?" Demyan asks.

"You really killed your father?"

"He had it coming."

"But... he was your *father*."

"He killed my mother," Demyan says. "What was I supposed to do, put him in timeout?"

"You should... shit, I don't know, get the cops involved!" Olivia exclaims, flummoxed. "Have him arrested and put on trial. He would have gone to jail."

"Jail?" Demyan scoffs. "Fuck that. I've done time. It ain't no punishment if you know how the inside works."

Olivia sits back against the seat and turns to me. "Have *you* done time?"

I snort with laughter. "I was born the son of the most powerful fucking don on the West coast."



“Which means...?”

“Which means there isn’t a cop, attorney, or judge alive who would dare try to put me behind bars.”

“So you think you’re above the law?”

“Miles above.”

She shrugs. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Is that a challenge?”

“It’s a promise. If you kill me, my brother will make sure you pay for it.”

“I wouldn’t kill you,” I say.

She looks at me with a curious expression, probably thinking I’ve softened towards her after last night.

I decide to disabuse her of that notion immediately.

“Mostly because you’re not important enough to kill.”

She frowns. “Gee, thanks. I feel so safe now.”

She skulks back to her seat and buckles in. Seconds later, her knee starts bouncing again.

“You’ll have to look a little more like the terrified prisoner when we get there,” I tell her. “I don’t want your brother thinking I’ve been nice to you.”

She snorts. “No one would ever accuse you of being nice.”

“I’m glad my reputation is intact.”

I don’t turn around, but I can feel her eyes attempting to bore a hole in the back of my head. “You’re an asshole. Are you aware of that part of your reputation?”

“You didn’t think so last night.”

She stiffens instantly, and I know she doesn’t want to have this conversation in front of Demyan or the silent soldiers in the back. But she doesn’t want to

lose face, either.

“I did what I thought you wanted,” she murmurs, cheeks flaming.

“No, you were just looking for an excuse to do what *you* wanted,” I retort. “As I keep telling you. But if we need a third party to settle this argument, I could always bring it up to your brother. See what he thinks.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Don’t fucking try me,” I growl.

And for a change, she follows orders.

The rest of the ride is quiet until we arrive. The meeting site is an old storage building, but the surrounding trees provide cover should it become necessary.

I’m not worried, though. I live for the chaos of battle. That’s one of the perks of being don. You get to lead the charge. You get to be right in the fucking thick of it. It’s not just a duty—it’s a privilege.

“Where is he?” Olivia asks, craning her neck to try and catch a glimpse of her brother.

“He’ll show.”

“You came with a whole entourage! He takes one look at that and he’s not going to come.”

“I came with an entourage because he most definitely will do the same.”

She frowns. “He said he wouldn’t. He said it would be just him.”

I glance at her. “He was lying.”

“My brother doesn’t lie,” she says, with so much confidence that I feel bad for the disappointment that’s inevitably coming. “He’ll keep his word. If he said he’d be here without backup, he’ll be here without backup.”

Demyan rolls his eyes. “You think far too highly of him.”

Then the car comes to a halt. Demyan and the soldiers climb out, leaving Olivia and me behind in the jeep.

She raises her eyes to meet mine. “Please don’t hurt him, Aleks.”

She’s terrified of what’s about to happen. Unfortunately for her, I’m not the reassuring type.

“I’ll send someone for you when I need you,” I say, opening my door.

“What?!” she gasps. “You’re going to leave me here?”

In response, I slam the door closed. She reaches for the handle, but nothing happens.

“Child locks?” she rages, yanking uselessly on the handle. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“You’re not leaving this vehicle until I give the say-so,” I tell her through the glass. “So until then, sit tight. It could be a while.”

“No! You can’t just leave me in here! Aleks! Aleks!”

I suppress a smile. Apparently, she doesn’t have to moan my name for me to like the sound of it on her lips.

I turn to find Demyan right in my face.

“Well, I certainly see the appeal,” he remarks.

I shove him out of my way and start walking towards the building. It’s still in use, but it’s been neglected. Demyan came down early this morning and bribed the security on duty to disappear for the day.

“We’re not gonna talk about it?”

“Talk about what?” I ask impatiently as he falls into step beside me.

“The fact that you apparently fucked her a second time last night.”

Maybe it wasn’t the best idea to bring that up in front of Demyan. I give him a careless shrug. “I was horny. She was around.”

Demyan cackles. “Who are you trying to bullshit? You forget I’ve known you for a long time, brother. You’ve never buried your cock in any woman you didn’t like just because you were horny. Discerning to a fault, in my

experience.”

“She’s not unattractive.”

“She’s fucking beautiful,” he corrects. “Just the type you like.”

I frown. “She’s nothing like the type of woman I go for.”

“That’s because you go for the type of woman that you can discard like a used napkin. This one has staying power.”

“Will you stop?” I snap as I push through the open doors. “Aren’t you supposed to be running communications? Fuck off and do your job.”

There are boxes stacked everywhere. Nothing is organized. I turn and gesture to the six men trailing behind us. “Push the boxes aside and open up those windows. Clear some space in the middle for our little tête-à-tête.”

They set to work immediately after chorusing, “Yes, sir” in unison.

I turn back to Demyan. “What’s his ETA?”

“Approximately thirteen minutes,” he says. “He’s early.”

“I wouldn’t have expected any less.”

My men labor to do as I instructed while I walk around the space, giving the location a quick scan. In the corner of my eye, I can see Demyan watching me. He’s not done with this conversation. Stubborn son of a bitch.

“Jesus,” I say, rolling my eyes at him. “Drop it. You’re reading too much into this.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think so. When’s the last time you fucked the same woman twice?”

“Allaynah.”

He scoffs. “She doesn’t count.”

“Why?”

“Because I—you know damn well why, you bastard.”

I laugh. “Stop trying to create a narrative that doesn’t exist.”

“Okay, I’m gonna pretend I believe you, if only because arguing with you is like arguing with a brick wall on both emotional and intellectual levels. But just for the record, I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“You were on board this morning,” I point out.

“Sure, but that’s before I knew you fucked her again! And before I saw her,” he says. “This girl will complicate things if you go through with the backup plan.”

“Maybe I won’t need to.”

Demyan shakes his head in dismay like I’m stupid. “You and I both know you will.”

“It’s too late now. I’ve made my decision. Everything’s been set in motion.”

He sighs. “I’m guessing she doesn’t know what she’s in for today if things go south.”

“Of course not.”

“She’ll fight you.”

“Good,” I smirk. “I like her fight. It’s very entertaining.”

“See?” Demyan says. “*Dangerous.*”

“Miranda really did a number on you.”

The smile drops dead on his face. “This has nothing to do with Miranda.”

“The fuck it doesn’t. You loved the woman and she left you,” I snap. I know I’m being hard on him, but he can take it. “So you decide to be down on all women because you anticipate the heartbreak they’re going to leave in their wake.”

“Way to make me sound like a pussy. Have you been watching Dr. Phil again?”

I smile. “Am I wrong?”

“Fine, maybe I’m bitter. But it’s only because I changed who I was for her. I was loyal to her the entire time, and it still wasn’t enough.” He grimaces. “My point is, that girl in there? She’s no different from Miranda. She’s a normal girl who is used to a normal life. She’s never going to be content with our world.”

“I hear you, *sobrat*. But I have no intention of having her be part of our world. Like I’ve said before, she’s nothing more than a means to an end.”

Demyan holds his hand up to his earpiece as new intel comes in. “He’s almost here.”

“Got it,” I nod, putting on my own earpiece. “Disappear, all of you.”

My men leave immediately. Demyan is the last one to go. “We’ll survey the perimeter, make sure they can’t close in on us.”

I nod. “No one gets near that jeep, understood? I’m not done with her yet.”

“Yeah,” he sighs, “that’s what I’m worried about.” Then he disappears through the back door.

Half a minute later, I hear an engine stop right outside.

Showtime.

Olivia’s brother walks in with a menacing swagger that makes an impression, even if it doesn’t wholly impress. The wound I left on his forehead has now turned into a faint scar.

“Robert,” I say, greeting him like an old friend. “Nice of you to join me.”

“You’re early,” he mutters with a scowl.

“As are you.”

“Where is my sister?”

“Safe,” I tell him. “For now.”

“I want to speak to her.”

“If you play your cards right, I’ll do you one better: I’ll let you see her.”

He moves into the room, but stops several feet in front of me. I can tell he has a gun on him. Which is fine. I've got two on me.

But even if I wasn't armed, I've won bigger battles with a lot less.

"Have you hurt her?"

"Define 'hurt.'"

His fists tighten at his sides. "If you've laid one hand on her, I'm going to—"

"You're going to do what? You're the whole reason she's with me in the first place."

He narrows his eyes at me. "You abducted her."

"Because you refused to see sense. And according to my sources, that's still very much the case."

He tenses. "I did what you asked. I dropped the case. No one at the FBI is investigating your Bratva anymore."

I arch my eyebrows. "Is that right?"

He raises his arms. "I'm here alone, aren't I? I wouldn't do that unless I'd done what you asked. I just want my sister back."

"You're like your sister," I scoff. "Neither one of you knows how to lie. You still believe I killed your woman."

"My *fiancée*," he spits. "And I don't think you killed her, as a matter of fact. I believe you still have her held captive."

I exhale wearily. "Tell me why I would go to all that trouble."

"I don't know what sick plans you have in the works," he continues. "But you did take my sister, so—"

"Because you offended me."

"And maybe some family member of Isabella's offended you, too," he counters.

“Not many people are stupid enough to offend me. You’re the rare exception.”

The mistrust and loathing are etched into every line of his face. It makes playing this game all the more entertaining.

Trouble is, he’s too far gone to be easily intimidated. I’m starting to realize that my backup plan isn’t a backup at all.

It’s the only option I have left.



## OLIVIA

I bang on the windows until my hands are red and throbbing. But the men standing guard around my jeep are completely unmoved by my pleas. When I yell that I'll bribe them to set me free, I get a big, fat group laugh. Otherwise, nothing.

Assholes, the lot of them.

The back windows of the jeep are tinted, so I see everything through a dark sheen. But I do notice my brother drive up. I'm too far away and too well-hidden for him to notice, but I scream his name all the same.

All I can do is sit and wait.

That is, until the side door flies open and I find myself staring at the sour-faced righthand that Aleks seems to rely on.

"You," I hiss.

Demyan smiles sympathetically. "You've got some lungs on you."

I move towards the door, but he throws his arm out and forces me to a stop. "Hold on. I just opened the door to give you a breather. We haven't been called yet."

"Do you always wait until you're called?" I ask.

"Where Aleks is concerned, yeah. Do I look stupid to you?"

“My brother is in there.”

“I’m aware.”

“He came alone,” I point out. “Just like he said he would.”

“Sure thing, princess.”

“Fuck you. Don’t call me that.”

He just laughs. “Huh, would ya look at that? The princess swears. It’s actually kinda hot.”

Compared to Aleks, this man is a wisp in the wind. He’s my height, give or take an inch or two, and far too skinny.

But there’s something intimidating about him all the same, and it’s got nothing to do with the tattoos that cover both his arms and most of his neck.

Maybe it’s that dark calculation in his blue eyes. Or the way they seem too light—eerily light—compared to his raven-black hair.

“I have to see my brother.”

“You will see him when Aleks says you will.”

“Jesus!” I cry in frustration. “Does he have all your balls in a vise?”

Demyan chuckles. “Pretty much. It comes with the title.”

I study him curiously. “And you’re okay with that? Doing his bidding like some trained dog?”

He turns those scary blue eyes on me. “You trying to manipulate me, honey?”

“Depends. Is it working?”

He laughs under his breath. “Not even a little bit. Manipulation never works on the confident.”

“Who taught you that?” I ask, rolling my eyes.

“Who do you think?”

I roll my eyes even harder, then turn towards where my brother’s car is

parked in front of the building.

I remember when he bought that car. He was twenty and he paid for it entirely with his own money. It's a piece of shit now, but I know he's going to keep driving it until it breaks down completely and nothing on earth will revive it.

I asked him once why he still hung onto it when the cost to maintain it was more expensive than buying something new.

*"It was the first thing I ever did all on my own,"* he told me.

Whenever he came home to visit for a few days, he and Dad would spend most of the weekend in the garage tinkering around with it. That's probably another reason Rob has kept it so long past its expiration date. There are memories of our father baked into the metal.

Demyan raises his hand to his ear, and I realize he's wearing a barely visible earpiece. He listens for a moment and nods. "On it."

He turns to me. "We're up. Let's—"

"Coming." I jump out before Demyan can even finish the command—and immediately fall flat on the ground with a yelp.

Demyan snorts as he gazes down at me. "That was graceful."

"Shut up," I snap. "My legs are asleep."

He offers me a hand, but I bat it away and get to my feet on my own. My thighs are on pins and needles, but I shake them out to get the blood flowing again.

"This way," he says, shepherding me forward. "And no funny business, got it?"

He adjusts his shirt, making sure I catch a glimpse of the gun in the waistband of his pants. I'm so used to being threatened at this point that it doesn't really register.

"Yeah, yeah. Lead the way, cowboy."

We set off trudging in the direction of the building. But as we approach, Demyan suddenly grabs my arm and pulls me around the back.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“We’re taking the back entrance in.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s Aleks’s side.”

“Sides? I thought this was a neutral meeting place.”

He chuckles again. “This world is going to be very cruel to you if you insist on being so damn naïve.”

I puff a stray lock of hair out of my face. “Excuse me for thinking we can all be rational adults about this.”

“The rules are different here, princess,” he says. “You need to learn that if you plan to survive it.”

“I don’t plan on staying in this world for long.”

There is something akin to pity in his expression, if a man like him is even capable of such an emotion. He sighs. “Like I said: cruel awakening in your future.”

I can’t ask him to explain because we walk through the back door just then and I catch a glimpse of Aleks’s back. Jesus, the man has broad shoulders. Like Superman, if Superman abandoned all sense of morality and decided to start wearing Brioni suits.

Then Aleks moves to the side and I see my brother.

“Rob!”

He looks tired. Dark circles burn around his eyes and he’s lost weight since I last saw him.

I move forward, ready to run to him, but Demyan grabs my arms to hold me back. “What did I tell you?” he growls in my ear. “No funny business.”

I stand there, wedged between Demyan and Aleks, but my eyes stay fixed on my brother. I'm hoping he'll see that I haven't been hurt. That I'm okay.

All I want is the same assurance from him.

"Rob," I gasp desperately. "Are Mom and Mia okay?"

He doesn't budge from where he's standing, but he looks me over for damage. Then he nods. "They're fine. Both being looked after."

Relief floods through me. "Oh, thank God."

"But they're worried about you," he adds. "We all are."

I glance towards Aleks, realizing that I'm up. Next on the docket. I have to make good on my part of the bargain.

"Rob," I begin, "he'll let me go. He'll let me leave with you if you just drop the investigation."

"The case is dropped," he says. "You can release her to me, Makarova."

Aleks hasn't said a word since I got here, and now, I'm scared of what's going to come out of his mouth. From the calculating glint in his eye, I already know it can't be good.

"You keep saying that, Agent Lawrence," he sighs. "You keep saying you dropped the investigation, that I have nothing left to be concerned about. Just like you insist you came alone."

"Because I *did* drop it. And I did come alone," he says.

But I don't miss the way his eyes go wide. It's slight, but it's there. And a strange feeling spreads through my chest, like a cold breeze only I can feel.

Aleks exchanges a glance with Demyan and then shakes his head. "Then why are there ten unmarked FBI vans in a quarter-mile radius? Why have they formed a circle around us? Why are you using private government radio channels to communicate with them?"

I turn white as a ghost. "Rob, you... you brought backup?"

I can see the truth on his face: he's not here alone like I thought he was. Like he swore he would be.

In this, at least, it seems Aleks was right. My valiant defense of my brother has proved to be hollow.

He takes an uncertain half-step forward, hand stretched out to me in silent apology. "I'm sorry, Liv," he says sincerely. "But I couldn't risk coming here alone. This man... he's dangerous. More than you know."

"Compliments aren't going to help you now, Robert," Aleks remarks. "We had a bargain and you broke it. I told you when you last left that the only way you'd get your sister back is by ending the investigation and following my instructions. You chose to ignore me. There are consequences for that."

"This is a whole lot bigger than my sister, Makarova," he barks. "There are more lives at stake."

I blink at him, not fully understanding. Or maybe just not wanting to understand. "Rob, what do you mean?"

Rob looks over, his eyes pleading for me to understand. "He has taken multiple women, Liv. I don't know what he does with them. But they disappear without a fucking trace."

Frowning, I glance at Aleks to see how this accusation is sitting with him.

He looks almost bored.

"You're starting to imagine things now, Robert. Delusions aren't very becoming of a federal agent."

Rob shakes his head. "It's not my imagination," he insists. "I have evidence placing at least three different women who are now missing persons in and around your properties. They all have ties to your people."

Aleks narrows his eyes. I feel Demyan stiffen behind me. I have no idea how to read their body language. It could be denial or anger. But it could just as easily be read as acknowledgement.

That probably shouldn't shock me, but it does.

Because somehow, I've allowed myself to be convinced over the course of the last few days that Aleks couldn't possibly be guilty of doing what Rob thinks he's done.

Ironic, I know, considering he abducted me.

Am I really so weak that my opinions can be so easily changed? That my perspective can be so easily manipulated?

Maybe it's true what Demyan said earlier—that confidence makes it more difficult to be manipulated. Which would explain why it's taken no effort at all for Aleks to mold me to his liking.

All it took was a little bit of attention, and I found myself making excuses for him. Bending over backwards, both literally and figuratively.

"Is that true?" I ask, turning to Aleks.

He doesn't even look at me. Instead, he keeps his gaze fixed on my brother. "You have evidence?"

"I do."

"In what form?"

Rob narrows his eyes. "What does that matter?"

"It matters because whatever evidence you've been given is a fucking lie," Aleks snarls. "It's planted. I'm being framed."

"And who would want to do that?" Rob scoffs.

Aleks throws Rob an incredulous look. "Do you know who I am? I have a lot of enemies. Many of whom fight like cowards."

I study Aleks's features, trying to determine how much of this is just an elaborate ruse and how much is true. He looks sincere. But then again, I'm sure he's a brilliant liar when he needs to be.

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't expect anything from you," Aleks says. "Especially not after today."

“My sister’s done nothing—”

“No,” Aleks interrupts, “she hasn’t. But *you* have. And she’s going to pay the price for that. I did tell you her safety depended on you, didn’t I?”

Fear flashes across Rob’s face as he realizes the vulnerable position he’s placed me in.

“It’s okay, Rob,” I tell him, making sure to meet his gaze. “It’s okay. I’ll be fine. Do what you have to do. I’m not the only one who matters.”

“I won’t abandon you, Liv,” he says. His jaw sets with determination as his gaze flicks back to Aleks. “You don’t want to make this a full-blown battle, Makarova. I work for the goddamn FBI. The house always wins.”

Aleks smiles. Menace rolls off him in waves. “You forget, Robert: chaos is where I’m most comfortable.”

Suddenly, I notice movement outside the open windows. At the same time, I register the click of a dozen different weapons being pointed in our direction.

“FBI! Drop your weapons now!”

I look around, realizing the entire building is surrounded by agents who are dressed in full riot gear. Rob looks triumphant as he takes another step forward.

“You’re surrounded,” he announces to Aleks. “If you want to walk out of here alive, you’ll let my sister go right now.”

I search Aleks’s face for any sign of fear or nerves, but I find none. He just smiles at Rob. “Why would I do that when I have the upper hand?”

Before Rob can say a word, I notice *more* movement.

More men.

More guns.

And behind each of the FBI men, I see a Bratva soldier—masked and clad head to toe in riot gear—step up and press a pistol into their throats.



“I didn’t think you’d stick to our bargain,” Aleks tells Rob, who looks suddenly seasick. “So I didn’t, either. Tell your men to drop their weapons or I’ll tell mine to blow their fucking heads off.”

Rob looks around and the color drains from his face. His eyes are desperate and searching, but there’s no changing the reality. No way to spin this as a victory for him.

Aleks Makarova holds all the cards.

His shoulders slump. “Drop your weapons!” he barks into an invisible microphone in his shirt cuff. “Now.”

None of his agents listen. They keep their weapons up despite the Bratva guns jammed into their jaws.

“Do it!” Rob bellows.

Finally, after some hesitation, the agents drop their weapons, one by one.

Looking amused, Aleks moves closer to me, angling his body just behind mine. I see Rob’s eyes bulge. He makes a fumbling grab for his gun, and I don’t understand why—until I feel cold metal press to the side of my head.

The stench and weight of Aleks’s gun sends shivers of fear racing through me. Oil and metal and blood. Heavy with death.

Would he really shoot me? Something inside of me is saying no. But I don’t think I can trust my own intuition anymore.

Truth be told, I haven’t been able to trust myself since I first met Aleks. Since I learned who he really was. I should hate him, but I don’t. I can’t.

And that’s all I need to know to know that I cannot be trusted.

“This is what you did, Robert,” Aleks says calmly. “She is at my mercy now because you decided to overplay your hand.”

“Drop your weapon, motherfucker!” Rob screams.

“You first.”

Rob's hand is white-knuckling on the butt of his holstered service pistol. But every single soul in the room but him knows he can't draw it. Or rather, won't draw it, for fear of what would happen to me if he does.

And eventually, he realizes the truth, too: that he's lost. I can see the defeat splattered across his face.

*I'm sorry*, he mouths to me.

I close my eyes and crinkle my nose, the same way Dad used to do when we were kids. I wish I could say something to him. Something that will convince him I'll be okay, no matter what.

But my throat is locked down tight. I can't even seem to get a sound out. Breathing itself is hard.

"Order your men to leave," Aleks says. "Now."

"L-leave?" Rob stammers.

Aleks nods. "I want them out of here in two minutes or I will blow her pretty little head off. What are you going to tell your mother, Robert? What are you going to tell Mia? That your baby sister is dead because you refused to sacrifice your pride?"

"Keep my family's names out of your mouth, you fucking snake."

"Ninety seconds left, Agent Lawrence."

Rob raises his hidden microphone once again and gives the command in a mumbled growl. There's scattered talk, but a minute later, I see motion through the windows. The agents set their weapons down and retreat to their vehicles, with Aleks's men shadowing close at their backs.

Rob looks at Aleks with uncertainty. "My men—"

"As long as they cooperate, none of them will be hurt," he says.

We all watch in strangled silence as the FBI agents load up into their vans and disappear.

Rob stays where he is, mired in loneliness and despair a few feet away. He's still got his gun in his holster, but his hand hangs next to it, limp and useless.

He might as well be unarmed.

Aleks raises his hand to the side of his face as someone gives him a report through the earpiece. He nods once and turns his gaze on Rob. “Looks like you’re alone, Robert. The way it should have been from the beginning.”

Panic starts snaking its way up my spine. My brother is standing opposite me all alone, surrounded by Aleks’s men. He’s the most vulnerable he’s ever been and there’s nothing stopping Aleks from killing him.

“I did what you asked,” Rob whispers hoarsely. “Now, can you please stop pointing the gun at her?”

Aleks smirks and pops open the clip, revealing that it was unloaded the entire time. Rob’s eyes bulge.

“Just needed to make a point,” he says mildly. “But it’s good to know how far you’ll go to protect your sister. She is quite something, isn’t she?”

I twist around and grab the front of Aleks’s shirt. “Please don’t hurt him. Let him go. I’ll stay with you if you let him go. I won’t put up a fight.”

“Liv, no!” Rob cries.

I ignore him and focus only on Aleks’s deep blue eyes. “*Please.*”

He looks down at me with an unreadable emotion on his face. Almost tenderly, he peels my hands off his shirt, although he keeps them enveloped in his as he gazes at me.

“It would be easy, wouldn’t it?” he murmurs. “To just walk away from here and call it a day?”

*Oh, God. Oh, God.*

“But then Robert won’t learn his lesson,” Aleks continues calmly. “We had a deal, Rob. You drop the investigation and bury it. You come alone and we work out terms to make sure I get what I want and you get your sister back. But you thought you could outsmart me. And now? Well, now there need to be consequences. So that you understand exactly who the fuck you’re dealing with.”

“No!” I scream, terrified now. “No, please, Aleks! Please don’t hurt him!”

“Don’t worry, Olivia,” he tuts. “I’m not going to kill him. I’m just going to make him suffer.”

My thoughts run amok. Will I have to stand here and watch while Aleks mutilates my brother? While he breaks an arm or severs a leg?

I mean, that’s what Bratvas do, don’t they? They torture. They deal out pain like Halloween candy.

I wriggle free of Aleks and try to sprint to my brother, but Demyan intercepts me. He wraps his arms around my waist and hauls me into the air. All I can do is kick and scream.

It only serves to exhaust me.

“No! No! No! Let her fucking go!” Rob yells. He tries to close the distance to us, but Aleks holds out his hand and my brother halts dead in his tracks.

“Not another move,” Aleks says firmly. Then he touches his earpiece and orders, “Bring out the priest.”

**ALEKS**

Three of my men surround Rob while Olivia rounds on me. Her eyes are wide, but there are no tears in sight.

Even now, she tries to be brave. It's admirable.

Foolish, but admirable.

"What are you going to do to him?" she demands.

"I'm going to make sure he understands that I am not the man to fuck with."

"He needs all his limbs, Aleks!"

"Not what I had in mind. But thanks for the inspiration."

She grabs my arm. "You can't do this."

I use her hand to pull her towards me. She hits my body, and I can't help glancing towards her brother to see what he thinks of our intimate proximity.

That snarl seems to suggest he isn't such a fan.

"I can do whatever the hell I want, princess," I growl into her face. "You know why? Because I'm the fucking don."

"Tell me what I can do to save him," she pleads. "I'll do anything."

"We've been down this road before, Olivia. Unless you want me to fuck you in front of him for the sheer sport of it, you're not much use to me."

She flushes with both embarrassment and anger. But then her jaw clenches and her eyes burn. “If that’s what it takes, so be it.”

I sigh as if I’m disappointed. “You’re the same thing you’ve been from the start, Olivia: a horny little girl in over her head. Just step back and do as you’re told.”

She jerks her face out of my grip, looking like she wants to take a shot at me. I almost wish she would. It would make this day so much more interesting.

But while her hand trembles, she doesn’t try to touch me again.

“Don’t do this,” she says instead.

“There’s no saving your brother from himself,” I tell her. “But at the end of it, you might wish that I’d just taken a limb instead.”

Her expression clouds over with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” I say. Just then, a side door opens and a man in a priest’s collar shuffles in. He keeps his head down—the less he sees, the better, as per my instructions to him. Nice of someone to do as they’re told for a change.

“What is this?” Olivia asks in a rising panic. “Who is he?”

“The officiant.”

“The officiant? Like...” She frowns. “Huh?”

“Who else would you have marry us?”

Over his sister’s shoulder, Rob is purpling with silent rage. How he’s holding it back is beyond me. He looks like he might pop a vein in his forehead if he doesn’t scream and kill something right now.

Poor bastard. I know the feeling.

But he should’ve known better than to fuck with the Bratva.

“I’m sorry,” Olivia splutters. “I think I heard you wrong.”

“No,” I retort, “you didn’t. We’re getting married today, Olivia. And your brother was thoughtful enough to be here to watch it happen.”

“You... you can’t be serious, Makarova,” Rob stammers.

I tap my chin thoughtfully. “Why would I joke about the holy bonds of matrimony?”

Another door opens and four of my men come hustling in with a table, which they set up in the middle of the space. A fifth sets a thin stack of paperwork on top of it.

“You can’t force me to do this,” Olivia finally blurts.

I laugh in her face. As if saying something so pitiful will stave off the inevitable.

“Force you?” I ask in mock surprise. “Of course not. You *want* to marry me, Olivia. You just don’t know it yet.”

“You son of a bitch!” Rob yells as he suddenly lunges forward.

My men are quick to grab hold of him. There’s no way he’s getting through that human wall. All he can do is strain, hurl insults at me, and keep growing redder and redder.

I round on him. “I warned you, Lawrence,” I snarl. “I gave you very specific instructions and you ignored them all. So now? Now, we’re about to become family.”

“Aleks,” Olivia says, grabbing my arm again feebly. “This... this isn’t happening...”

She sounds so helpless. So fragile. Poor little thing doesn’t know what to do.

But I know.

I always know.

"It's unfortunate that you've been caught in the middle of this, Olivia," I sigh. "But I gave your brother multiple warnings."

“He’ll listen this time,” she says, close to tears. “He will, I swear. Right, Rob? Right?”

“No, he won’t. Look at him.” She doesn’t move, so I grab her face and wrench it around until she’s staring her brother in the eye. “He won’t ever stop, Olivia. He’s a bulldog with the scent in his nose. Or at least, what he thinks is the scent, even if he’s wrong. He’s not that much different from me, come to think of it. Rob just chose his path and I was born to mine.”

“He will listen,” she protests again. Her voice is growing weaker and weaker. “I’ll... I’ll make him. I’ll convince him.”

I shake my head like a disappointed parent. “There are consequences to every action. And he’s going to meet his now.”

A sob escapes her lips with no words attached.

I turn from her towards the priest. “Are we ready?”

He nods without raising his eyes to meet mine. He’s really taking this “see no evil, hear no evil” thing to heart. “Yes, sir,” he mumbles. “Bring the bride forward.”

“Bride?” Olivia gasps, as if that one simple word is finally making this real to her. “I’m not a bride. No... no, you can’t make me marry him.”

“Olivia!” Rob tries to force himself between my men. All that does is earn him a punch to the gut.

Olivia screams as he falls to his knees and groans.

“You can make this easier on him,” I whisper in her ear as two of my men grab him and haul him back to his feet and a third rears back to punch him again.

Fearing the worst, Olivia throws her hand out and grazes the Bratva soldier’s elbow. “No, stop! I... I’ll do whatever you want.”

I hold up a hand and my soldiers freeze in place. “What was that?” I ask her mildly.



She wrenches her eyes to mine and blinks back her tears. “I’ll... I’ll marry you.”

I nod. “Smart choice.”

“Jesus Christ, Liv!” Rob explodes. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m trying to save your life!” she yells back at him.

“And I’m trying to save yours!”

I look between them both with amusement. “It’s cute that you think either of you have the power to save one another. The only one who has any power here is me.”

“I’ll recuse myself from the fucking investigation, okay?” Rob gasps desperately. “I’ll leave you alone. Just... just don’t do this. Let her go. Let her leave with me.”

“I’m doing you a favor by letting you leave at all. Now,” I say to my men, “bring him over here. I want dear Agent Lawrence to have a good view of the ceremony.”

He struggles as they pull him forward, a bull raring to get out of his cage. I’m not worried even if he does. He’s a big guy in his own right, but I dwarf him all the same.

And even if I didn’t, I was built by the Bratva. He was built by the system. We are not the same.

“Olivia,” I say, holding out my hand for her. “Come.”

“Don’t do it, Liv!”

She takes a deep breath and slips her fingers into mine, ignoring her brother. I curl my hand around hers with satisfaction and coax her forward to the table.

She’s trembling, trying to process the fact that this is really happening. It’ll hit her later. When she’s alone in her room and she’s got nothing but the voices in her head to keep her company.

We make an odd party standing around the table. The priest takes the center position in front of the paperwork. I stand with Olivia on the opposite side. Demyan is on the left and Rob, held captive between two of my men, is on the right.

“No photographer at this wedding, huh?” Demyan chimes in with a wicked gleam in his eye.

“Unfortunately not,” I say, glancing towards Rob. “You’ll just have to remember the details, Robert. That way, you can describe them later to your mother and sister.”

“You bastard,” he growls. “This is illegal.”

“On the contrary, I’d say it’s all quite above board. Olivia is an adult and she’s voluntarily consenting to marry me. Aren’t you, Olivia?”

I glance towards her, but even the brush of my gaze is intense enough that she understands the part she has to play to satisfy me.

“Yes.” Her voice comes out raspy and strange. “I am.”

“She’s under duress.”

“Life is never-ending duress, Robert.” I smirk. “The only thing you have to decide is how you let it break you.”

“No one is above the law, you son of a bitch. No one is untouchable.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

I nod to the priest, whose eyes have stayed steadfastly pinned to the floor. “Continue.”

He juts his chin at the paperwork. “Witnesses must sign,” he mumbles.

Demyan steps forward. “With pleasure.” He takes the pen lying on the table and signs his name at the bottom with flourish. Regular John fucking Hancock over here.

When he’s done, I give him a nod and turn towards Rob. “Your turn, Agent Lawrence.”

He laughs out loud. “You really are insane if you expect me to sign my name to that shit.”

“That’s exactly what I expect.”

Rob shakes his head. “No. No goddamn way.”

I glance towards Olivia and let out a long-suffering exhale. “Is he always this difficult?”

“Takes one to know one,” she hisses. Then she softens and glances over to her brother. “Rob, it’s okay. Just sign.”

He swallows. “Liv, this is not a game. After you sign on that dotted line, you’re going to be married to him. Legally, religiously, or whatever the fuck. In every way that matters.”

“I’m aware,” she croaks in a near-whisper.

“I don’t think you understand what that means.”

She frowns and that’s when I see the first fracture in her calm exterior. “Don’t talk to me like I’m a child,” she snaps. “I know exactly what’s happening. You do, too. You knew the risks involved with going against him.”

Even I’m surprised by the accusation. I suspect a part of her is just as taken aback.

“He’s a fucking kidnapper, Liv,” Rob says. “A human trafficker. I couldn’t just let him off scot-free.”

We’ve done this song and dance before, so I don’t bother denying it this time. He’s already made up his mind about that, so why go to the trouble? His opinion means nothing to me. In a few short moments, he’ll be taken out of the game.

She sighs. “I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“Liv—”

“I want you to do me a favor, okay?” she asks. When he doesn’t answer, she adds, “Rob, please.”

He nods reluctantly. “Anything.”

“I want you to tell Mom and Mia that I’m okay. I’m not hurt and I’m not in any danger. At least the first part of that is true. But sell it all so they buy it, do you understand?”

“They’ll never believe me, Liv.”

“Make them,” she growls in a tone that’s not dissimilar to mine.

“I’m gonna get you out of this,” he tells her as if I’m not standing right here watching the proceedings. “I promise you that.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Rob,” she says mournfully. “It’s okay. I’ll be okay.”

“Listen to your sister,” I suggest. “She clearly got the brains in the family.”

“Fuck you, Makar—”

One of my men kicks out his back legs. He falls to the ground again, hard. Olivia cries out and tries to move towards him, but I grab her and pull her back to my side.

“Stop this!” she screams, turning her burning brown eyes on me. “I’m giving you what you want. I’m marrying you.”

“If you think that’s enough,” I say, getting in her face, “then you still don’t understand me.”

I release her and look to my men. “Get him on his feet and bring him here. If he won’t walk himself, then break his legs and drag him.”

Rob stands stock-still, eyes brimming over with emotion. Rage, sadness, fear, helplessness. At his sides, my men flex their hands, ready to do what they must.

I arch an eyebrow. “What part of ‘break his legs’ sounded appealing to you, Robert?”

He falters. It’s pitiful to watch such a proud man brought to his knees. “I…”

“Look at your sister, Robert,” I growl. “Look at her face and decide what your next move is going to be.”

A clock ticks somewhere out of sight. Seconds pass. I prepare to give the order to inflict pain.

Then he sighs and slumps forward. “Okay,” he whispers hoarsely. “Okay.”

“Excellent,” I say. “Sign.”

Demyan moves forward and presses the pen into his limp hand. My crew stays close as Rob limps to the table.

He looks at the paper for a long time before he brings his pen down on the dotted line. His signature is lackluster and half-hearted. But it’s recognizable, and that’s all I need.

“Don Makarova,” the priest says. “Your turn.”

I take the pen and scribble across the space set out for the groom, then drop it with a clatter back to the tabletop.

“Now, the bride.”

“Stop calling me that,” Olivia snaps. She steps up with gusto—but when she’s at the precipice, she hesitates.

She gazes at the pen like it’s a snake. Three, four, five times, she reaches out to pick it up but pulls back at the last moment.

“Tick tock,” I say softly.

She glances over her shoulder towards me. Breathes me in like she’s taking in her future.

Then, steeling her posture, she turns and scrawls hurriedly across the space marked out for her.

“Is it done?” she asks. Her eyes are closed, as if that will change anything. Like not seeing will mean none of this is real.

“I will file the papers,” the priest says, barely audible. “Then, yes, it is legally binding.”

She winces, then turns to me. “Can I have a moment alone with my brother?”

“No.”

I’ve already turned away from her when she grabs my arm and tries to rip me back around. When she doesn’t succeed, she runs around and blocks my path.

“You got everything you wanted,” she points out. “He’s unarmed and surrounded by your men. All I’m asking for is a minute.”

“Try crying,” I suggest. “See how much that moves me.”

She shakes her head in dismay. “Does it make you feel good to be so cruel?”

“No. It makes me feel powerful.” I glance towards Demyan. “Take her.”

He grabs Olivia. She kicks and screams as he drags her out the front. A minute later, her screams are cut in half when he tosses her in a jeep and slams the door closed.

I turn back to her brother. After one look from me, my men release him, though they don’t go far.

He falls to one knee without their support, one palm flat on the floor the only difference between staying upright and collapsing completely.

His weakness, his pain, his fear—I can see and smell it all on him. Another mistake I’d have never made.

*Never allow your enemies to see just how much they’ve got to you.*

“We’re family now, Lawrence,” I tell him quietly. “You go after me, you go after your sister. We’re one and the same.”

His eyes flash with ferocity as he turns his face up toward me. “You are not the fucking same. She is better than you in every way.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Is that so?”

“She’s kind, and loving, and patient,” he breathes. “She is the best of us. If you hurt one hair on her head, I’m going to take your life one day. And by God, I will make it hurt.”

I smile. Like recognizes like, and I sense a kindred spirit here, albeit a misguided one. “I look forward to that day, Agent Lawrence.”

Then I turn and head for the door.

“Makarova!”

I glance back towards him.

“Just don’t... don’t hurt her.”

There’s no anger or threat in his tone when he makes his appeal. He’s acting with nothing but pure fear for his sister.

I meet his eyes for a moment. Then I turn and resume my walk out. Just before I go, I call over my shoulder, “Unfortunately for my new bride, I’m not in the habit of making promises I can’t keep.”

## OLIVIA

THREE DAYS LATER

I stare at my father's face.

His eyes are sad, his posture stoic. He gazes down on me with sympathy like I haven't seen since the day he died.

But there's something lacking from the likeness I've scrawled on the wall opposite my bed. I let loose a deep sigh of frustration.

It's been three days since I was forced into this marriage.

Three days since I last saw my pretend husband.

Three days since I lost my future to the monster who held my family hostage and threatened to kill my brother.

Just three days and three nights, and yet it has felt like a lifetime. I've cried until I didn't have tears to cry. I've teetered on the brink of madness.

The only thing that brought me back from the edge is drawing.

My fingers are pretty much raw, bloody stumps, since I've been using my nails to keep the point of my charcoal pen sharp without any other tools available for the job.

The fresh air might have helped stave off my depression. But when I was shoved into this room by an unfeeling Pyotr, I discovered that the balcony door was sealed shut.



I attempted to break the windows, but everything I hurled at them bounced off like they were rubber. I guess unbreakable glass comes standard in the houses of men who make women disappear.

“I’m next, Dad,” I whisper to the sketched picture of my dad. “I’m pretty sure I’m next.”

I wait for him to answer back, but he stares at me with his lifeless eyes and says nothing. I close my eyes and slump back on the mattress.

When the door opens, I don’t even look up. I’m used to the maids and guards moving in and out at will with meals or fresh linens. I leave the trays of food mostly untouched, but I haven’t been able to stop myself eating altogether. Apparently, my willpower is just not strong enough to withstand the bite of hunger.

“Love what you’ve done with the place.”

I open my eyes in alarm to find Yulia standing on the threshold with a tray of food.

“What are you doing here?” I ask bitterly.

She steps in, kicks the door closed behind her, and sets the tray down on the table by the window. Then she surveys the once-blank walls of my room.

I’ve managed to cover the bottom half of the walls with my cartoons and sketches. Some of them make sense. Some of them don’t. Some are accompanied by speech bubbles and coherent narratives, but most of them are just doodles. The manic scratchings of a girl slowly going insane.

“You really are talented,” she remarks.

I laugh. It’s an ugly, broken sound. “What does it matter anymore?”

She sighs and takes a seat at the table. “Care to join me?”

“I’m good.”

“Really, Olivia, I’m not the enemy.”

“Aren’t you?” I scoff. “You’re enabling his behavior. In my book, that makes you complicit.”

She sniffs as if maybe there's a shred of remorse lurking somewhere in there, but her composure never breaks. She's immaculately dressed, even now, in cream silk pants and a thin beige wrap sweater.

"For what it's worth, I am sorry. I understand what you must think of me. But I have lived in this world for decades now."

"And that means you can't change?"

"He's my son," she says again. "What I can do for you is limited."

"Bring me food and give me useless advice, you mean? How noble. Truly a resistance fighter."

I know I should take it easy on her. She's only trying to help me. But my anger hasn't had an outlet in three days. Plus, I'm starving and the smell of fresh croissants wafting from the tray she brought in is making my head spin.

"You need to eat," she tells me, as if reading my mind.

"I'm fine."

"It's only been three days and you've already lost weight."

"Really? I hadn't noticed the time. Feels like I've just been on a little mini-vacation."

The corner of her mouth twitches in what might be a smile before she quickly extinguishes it. "All expenses paid, too."

I roll my eyes. I don't particularly feel like bantering with the woman who birthed a psychopath, but the only alternative is staring at the ceiling and cursing my fate.

"Where were you all this time?" I ask. "I was surprised not to see you front and center at the ceremony. It was really a lovely affair."

"I was out of town," she explains. "I came back this morning to learn about what had happened."

"Guess that makes me your daughter-in-law. Should I start calling you Mom now?"

“You are at liberty to call me whatever it is you want. Even if it’s not flattering.”

I almost smile at that. I can’t deny that having someone here talking to me does help quell the mania I can feel creeping in around the edges.

I exhale, but it doesn’t help. Not in the slightest. “Did you find out what happened to my brother?”

“He wasn’t harmed, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Okay. Okay then.” Lie or not, it makes me feel some relief. At least I can pretend, until proven otherwise.

“*Lyubimaya*,” she says gently, “starving yourself is not going to help anything.”

“Says you. I think it might.”

“Try a croissant,” Yulia insists. “They’re fresh from the oven.”

I can tell. The smell is teasing my nose and making my stomach growl. I dig what’s left of my nails into the wooden bedpost, but it doesn’t distract me from the hunger.

So, with a frustrated growl, I force myself to my feet and shuffle towards her. The tray is laden with croissants, butter, assorted jams, and a plate with scrambled eggs, fat sausages, crispy potatoes, still-sizzling bacon.

“You went all out, huh?”

“I had to convince you to eat somehow.”

“How do you know if I’m eating or not?” I ask. “You’ve been out of town.”

She raises her eyebrows. “I run this household, Olivia. Who do you think the maids report to?”

“I would have thought they reported to the Head Asshole in Charge.”

“He doesn’t concern himself with the less-important work,” she says. I notice a little twinge of humiliation in her tone. “He delegated those jobs to me when he took over as don.”

“Where is his father?”

“He had a stroke many years ago,” she tells me. “At the time, Aleksandr was in Russia dealing with our business interests there. It was a sensitive period and he couldn’t return right away. So I took over for my husband.”

“How enthralling.” But I can’t help the tiny bit of genuine interest that seeps into my voice. This woman has seen things, done things. She knows how this world works. Maybe I can learn enough from her to find my way out of it.

“It was the most exciting four years of my life.”

“Aleks was in Russia for four whole years?”

“He moved back and forth. But there was another Bratva that was threatening our territory. He needed to make sure our business interests were stable before coming back here.”

“And he did what he set out to do?”

She smiles. “I think you already know the answer to that.”

I stare at the croissants as though I’m having the conversation with them, but I still don’t make a move to pick one up. *Resist*, says the stubborn little asshole inside of my head. *Don’t give up the fight*.

But it’s getting harder and harder to stay strong. They look like buttery little pillows.

“It must have been hard for you to step down after having that kind of power,” I mumble just to keep my lips moving.

She shrugs. “It was never meant for me. I was just holding the throne for my son.”

“Still...” I can see something like regret in her eyes. “You never hoped he would just stay in Russia?”

“That would certainly have made your life easier. Mine, too, in a manner of speaking. But no, I knew he’d never stay. We are Russian, but he was born and raised here. He was always going to come back.”

“Not exactly what I asked.”

“I didn’t want to be the one solely in charge, Olivia. But I did—I *do*—want a seat at the table. I think I deserve that much after everything I did to keep this ship above water while he was gone.”

I nod. “It’s a reasonable ask.”

“Maybe to you. But in this world, it’s ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?” I blink. “You did the job already.”

“The men weren’t aware that I was acting on my own,” she explains. “They believed Aleksandr was relaying instructions from abroad.”

“And Aleks didn’t mind that?”

“He was young and he had a lot to deal with in Russia. He nearly died while he was over there.”

“How?”

“A battle with the enemy,” she says. “He took a bullet to the chest mid-fight.”

“And someone got him out of there?”

She shakes her head. “No one got him out, Olivia. He just kept fighting.”

“Is this supposed to scare me?”

She looks almost hurt by that. “I’m not trying to scare you, Olivia. I’m only trying to help.”

I try to tell myself I have nothing to feel bad for, considering the position I’m in. But I do feel like a bitch. It’s not in my nature to turn away from kindness.

I blame Aleks. He’s not even in the room and he’s bringing out the worst in me.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I know your hands are tied. I’m just—”

“Frustrated,” she says. “I know you are. But, if I may be so bold as to suggest it, eating might help.”

She gives me an apologetic smile, and with that, I can no longer resist the temptation. So I reach out and grab a croissant. I can’t be bothered to fuss

with the butter, so I just bite right into it.

“Holy fuck,” I breathe.

She laughs. “Good, aren’t they?”

“Orgasmic.”

We sit in silence as I demolish five of the seven croissants sitting in their dainty little breadbasket. I wash them down with a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice.

“Feel better?” Yulia asks when I’m finished.

“Much.”

She nods. “Good. You know, darling, this doesn’t have to be horrible for you.”

I push myself off the chair and take two steps back. So much for the good vibes provided by the croissants.

“If you’re actually trying to suggest that I accept this marriage, then you’re delusional.”

“He can be cruel,” she continues. “But he can also be fair.”

“He abducted me because my brother was doing his job, then he forced me to marry him because my brother didn’t do what he wanted. Which part of that is ‘fair’ in your eyes?”

“It’s the way the Bratva works.”

“Well, it’s not how my world works. Or anyone else’s. So you can understand why I don’t want to give up on it just yet.”

“You are married to him now, dear.”

“So then we’ll be the first people in history to get divorced,” I seethe sarcastically.

“But think of the opportunity that this marriage could give you. You’d have real power. The ability to control your fate.”

I snort. “As if he’d give me that kind of freedom.”

“He can be reasoned with. He’s not all monster.”

“No, just part monster,” I say. “That’s so much better.”

“What I’m trying to say is that he will not hurt you if you don’t give him a reason to.”

“So I’m expected to be the obedient little doormat, am I?”

She shrugs. “There are worse things in life.”

“Worse than being turned into a glorified housekeeper?”

It’s a cruel barb, and unnecessary. As misguided as she is, she does think she’s trying to help. I shouldn’t attack her so viciously. Not like it’s gonna do anything positive for me, anyway.

Yulia freezes for a moment before she regains her composure. “I found my place in this world. It was more than I ever expected from my life.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you.”

She nods sadly. “I was born poor. I grew up poor. When I caught Aleksandr’s father’s eye, everything changed for me. I got to experience a different kind of life. The kind of life that gave me more than just the gnawing futility of uncertainty.”

“Very poetic,” I say. “But can you honestly sit there and tell me you were free?”

“Freedom is overrated when you don’t have options, Olivia.”

“Maybe it was for you,” I say. “But I do have options. I have a life in New York. I have a career and friends and family. But my career is crumbling because I’m trapped here, my friends are probably wondering why I disappeared, and my family is worried shitless about me. Aleks is ripping every single option away from me.”

She nods in sympathy. “You’ll have your friends and your family back one day.”

“You really think he’ll let me see them?”

“He will,” she says. “When he can be sure of your loyalty.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “How could I ever be loyal to someone like him?”

She cocks her head to the side. “Sometimes, it’s just about appearances, Olivia. Do you understand what I’m trying to tell you?”

I stop short as understanding hits me sideways. “Are you telling me to fake it?”

“Like I said, I will try and help you any way I can, in the ways I’m able.”

“Does he know you’re up here with me?”

“Yes. I was sent to tell you the rules. About what it takes to be a Bratva wife.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh goody, I was hoping to hear the do’s and don’ts. This should be fun.”

“Loyalty and obedience,” she says, ignoring my sarcasm.

My eyes haven’t even finished rolling before I’m rolling them again. “Shocking.”

“You will be expected to maintain decorum in front of his men and his business associates.”

“When would I even meet them?”

“There are dinners and events to go to. As his wife, you will accompany him.”

I frown. “I’ll opt out, then.”

“I doubt you’ll be given the choice.”

“This just keeps getting better and better,” I snap. “Is there anything else I need to know?”

“He is don,” Yulia says, her expression ironing out into deadly seriousness. “In this house, his power is absolute. Don’t cross him, Olivia. He’s not the



merciful type.”

“Now, you are trying to scare me, aren’t you?”

“Maybe a little,” she admits. “But you’d do well to heed my advice. Whatever he does, you cannot and should not question it. It is expected that he will most likely have other women—”

“Whoa, hold up,” I blurt. “It’s *expected*?”

“It’s common, at least. Many dons partake in... extramarital affairs.”

“And their wives are fine with it?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” she says with a tired sigh. “More that they have to accept it.”

“Did you?” She stops short, and I instantly feel bad for asking. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she says quickly. “I did accept it. Whenever I was relegated to my bedroom in the opposite wing of the house, I told myself that it was for the best.”

I stare at her in horror. “He would bring other women here? He would sleep with them in your bed?”

“*His* bed,” she corrects. “Everything was his. Still is, in many ways.”

“So you’re telling me that if Aleks decides to sleep with a bunch of different women right in front of my face, I’m supposed to just pretend like I don’t see it?”

“Precisely.”

I snort. “Yeah, that’s never gonna happen.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Oh?”

“Why on earth would I be okay with that?”

“Expecting loyalty and commitment from a partner only comes when feelings are involved,” she says. “I didn’t think that was the case for you and Aleksandr.”

At those words, my skin starts tingling with warning.

“It isn’t the case,” I say firmly, despite the fact that my cheeks are raging with color.

“Then why should any of this matter? I am simply giving you the instruction manual for a peaceful life.”

I open my mouth and shut it again. I have no answer, no defense. No way of getting myself out of this other than to feign indifference.

“It... it doesn’t matter,” I say. “But... if I have to suffer in this sham of a marriage, then so does he.”

“You weren’t listening, were you? He is don. He has all the power, Olivia.” Yulia smiles sympathetically. “The way you get ahead is to think smart and behave smarter. But if you take any one piece of advice from me, take this one: a woman can’t get anywhere in the Bratva life without a strong man to back her.”

I snort. “Noted. Very progressive of you all.”

“And in the absence of a strong man,” she continues, “you have to be shrewd and sly and devious. You have to make him think he’s in control.”

“I’d like a third option,” I grumble.

“Then run,” she says simply. “But be prepared to keep running. Because if you leave, he will look for you. And he will never stop looking.”

A part of me wonders if she’s playing reverse psychology on me. If she’s here trying to earn my trust and manipulate me on behalf of her son.

But there’s a desperate look in her eyes that I believe is sincere. She’s just as trapped, just as stuck as I am.

Besides, I have to trust her. There’s power in numbers, right? There has to be.

I can’t afford to do this alone.

**ALEKS**

“Anything?” I ask, glancing towards Demyan.

“Radio silence,” he reports. “It looks like Rob finally took you seriously.”

“What about the plants in my clubs?”

“They’ve been removed. The FBI seems to have backed off us.”

I snort. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

Demyan sighs. “Can’t you just accept the fact that you won?”

“No. It was too easy.”

“Most people would celebrate, you sourpuss.”

“I saw the look in that motherfucker’s eyes,” I tell Demyan. “I know the man. He’s not going to just disappear. Especially since I have his sister.”

“Great point. Remind me, why do you still have his sister?” Demyan asks.

“Because I need to make sure he is taking me seriously.”

I’m growing impatient. I shouldn’t have to explain any of this. Especially to Demyan. He’s trying to draw something else out of me. I despise playing these games with him, but the bastard loves it.

“Is that why?” Demyan probes. “Or did it have something to do with her dimples and that sweet ass?”

I give him a warning glare. “Keep your eyes to yourself or I’ll pluck them out.”

“Hmm,” Demyan remarks. “Possessive. Interesting.”

“You’re like a fucking dog with a bone,” I snap. “Are you focusing on this to distract from your own shit?”

His face sours instantly. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“It was your weekend with Callie, wasn’t it?” I ask.

“Don’t think I don’t know that you’re deflecting, asshole,” he warns.

I smile. “Two can play at this game. Answer the damn question.”

“Yeah,” he says irritably. “It was my fucking weekend.”

“And?”

“Miranda’s serious about this move. We talked after I dropped Callie off.”

“You want me to talk to her?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Maybe. She has always had the hots for you. You might be more convincing than me.”

“I know; it’s the only reason she looked twice at you. Because you were sitting right next to me that day.”

“Ah, go fuck yourself, you smug bastard.” He flashes his middle finger at me.

My smile fades. “The offer is a serious one, though,” I tell him. “I’ll do what must be done.”

“I know,” he says gratefully. “But it’s not necessary. I can handle this on my own.”

Something in his tone sounds dangerous, feral. “Don’t go Bratva on her,” I advise. “Bad move.”

“Why the hell not?”

I shake my head. “Because that’s the fastest way to make her double down on this decision. She left you because you were *too* Bratva, Demyan. You need to prove to her that you can be more than that.”

“Blasphemous words, coming from you.”

“I’m a realist,” I say. “And I know women.”

“Apparently, not *all* women.” Demyan throws me a smile. I ignore it completely. But of course he pushes on. “Have you spoken to her since the big day?”

“Don’t ask me questions you already know the answers to.”

He smirks. “Well, there might have been a conjugal visit or two that I wasn’t around for.”

“I didn’t marry her for the sex.”

“That’s just a delightful bonus, huh?”

“We haven’t fucked since we got married.”

“You’re subscribing to the traditional Bratva formula, then? Sexless marriages and unhappy wives. A tale as old as time.”

“Doing it the other way didn’t work out for you, did it?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

There’s a knock on the door. I glance at the clock and sigh. As late as it is, the days are never over when you’re don.

“Come in,” I call.

The door opens. Pyotr is standing there. His imposing figure takes up most of the threshold. He has a habit of lurking in doorways that I’ve spent years trying to break, to no avail.

“Come *in*, Pyotr,” I emphasize impatiently.

He trudges in and stops a few feet away from us with his head bowed. It’s his way of showing me respect, but I don’t need the formalities that my father

insisted on. I know I have the respect of my men without all the damn melodrama.

“Sir,” he says to the floor beneath his feet, “I just thought I should let you know that the madam is on her way out.”

I frown, glancing at the Rolex on my wrist. “At this time?”

“She, um... well—”

“Spit it out, man,” Demyan growls.

“She’s dressed to kill,” Pyotr says, sounding supremely uncomfortable.

I exchange a glance with Demyan and then give Pyotr a nod. “Tell her to stop in before she leaves.”

The discomfort on his face only gets more pronounced, but he bows stiffly and backs out of the room.

The moment the door snaps shut, Demyan turns to me with curiosity. “Your mother leaving the house is newsworthy enough to report to the boss?”

“I asked Pyotr to keep tabs on her.”

Demyan raises his eyebrows. “Why in God’s name would you do that?”

“She’s been restless lately,” I explain. “And she’s been known to make poor decisions in the past. I don’t want her running amok when the FBI is still watching me.”

“You think they’ll try to get to you through her?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them,” I muse. “She’s the only one who moves in society outside of Bratva circles.”

“Good point.”

“You better get a move on before she shows,” I tell him. “It won’t be pretty.”

“Right,” he says, grabbing his glass and downing the last of the tequila we’ve been sipping. “Fuck, that’s strong.” He stops at the door and turns to me again. “She’s not going to be happy to know you’re spying on her.”

“It’s a good thing I don’t give a shit.”

He smirks. “Some things never change.”

A few minutes after he shuts the door, it swings open again and my mother walks in. Pyotr was right—she is dressed to the nines in a black cashmere dress wrapped tight around her body. There’s a shimmer to the fabric that gives it an extra lift and her heels are black and sequined.

She’s also wearing a lot of makeup. Too much. She looks like a woman desperate to reverse the aging process.

“Nice dress,” I comment.

She flinches slightly, sensing the subtle reprimand in my tone. “Thank you.”

“It’s maybe a little young for you, though.”

A brief flash of hurt flickers across her face before she controls it. “Is there a reason I was summoned, Aleksandr?”

“Where are you going?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Why does anyone ask a question? Because I’d like to know.”

“It’s not any of your business.”

She’s like a petulant teenager trying to assert her independence. I am aware of the ironic role reversal, but I don’t have the time to handle her with care. I’ve got shit to do and I don’t need to be worried about who my mother is fraternizing with in the meantime.

“Everything is my business,” I point out. “Especially since you live in my house.”

Her jaw goes rigid. I know she hates when I point that out. “Is this your way of asking me to leave?”

“Not at all. You’re welcome here, but that means you have a rulebook to follow.”

“Ah,” she says. “So your wife is not the only one under your thumb, then. It extends to all the women in your life.”

“Funny you should bring up my wife. I was told you visited her this morning.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t have my permission.”

“I didn’t think I needed it.”

“You need my permission for everything,” I growl. “I thought that was understood.”

She takes a deep breath and sets her jaw stubbornly. “I have no place in your Bratva, Aleksandr. My opinion no longer matters and I have accepted that. So I’m trying to live a life outside of it.”

“That’s precisely what I’m afraid of.”

“Why?” she demands. “What do you take me for?”

“A woman desperate for attention.”

She rears back as though I’ve slapped her. “For God’s sake, my son, what have I done to deserve this kind of treatment?”

“I am not singling you out,” I tell her. “This is not personal. I have a Bratva to protect. I know you know a lot about that.”

“Not recently.”

“You know enough,” I hiss. “I don’t want you fraternizing with people who can use the information you give them against me.”

“I am not some doe-eyed idiot,” she hisses right back. “I know what to say and what not to. And it might shock you to know that I don’t talk about you at all.”

I smirk in obvious disbelief. “Is that a fact?”

“Are you really going to begrudge me a personal life?”



“Is there someone special I should know about?” I ask innocently.

“Perhaps,” she says after a moment’s hesitation. “But it’s too early to tell.”

“Does he know who you are? Who you really are?”

“He knows only that I come from a rich family,” she says.

“That’s an understatement.”

“I could correct that notion, but you don’t want me to talk about the family or the Bratva. I thought we just covered that ground.”

“The family and the Bratva are one and the same,” I remind her.

“Of course,” she sighs. “But I am not really a part of either one, am I?”

“That depends on you.”

“No,” she says. “That depends on *you*.”

I leave that alone. Mostly because I can’t in good faith deny it. It’s been easier having my mother out of things.

“I won’t stand in the way of your social life,” I say. “I just expect you to be careful about who you associate with. The FBI may be quiet now, but it’s only been a few days. We can’t know for sure if they’ve really dropped the investigation yet.”

“I understand.”

“Good,” I say. “Just out of curiosity, does this new man know about your... situation?”

She purses her lips. She hates when I bring it up, and despite my usual irreverence, I try not to for that reason.

But this time, it merits asking.

“He knows,” she answers softly. “And he doesn’t care.”

I smile. “Of course not. Does his wife know about you, though?”

Her eyes go cold instantly. “Goodnight, son.”

She bustles out. The door snaps shut. I grab my drink and down it in one gulp. When I'm done, I wait only long enough to make sure I won't bump into my mother again.

Then I head upstairs to see my wife.

When I walk in, I find her lying on her belly on the floor. She's sketching something into the foot of the wall with a stub of a pencil that looks like it's on its last leg.

Then I glance around and understand why.

The white walls have been transformed.

“Jesus Christ.”

Olivia gasps, twisting around so fast she hits her head against the same wall she's defacing with her drawings. When she sees me, she stumbles to her feet, holding her pathetic little pencil like a weapon.

“What have you done to my walls?”

She stares at me for a moment. Then her jaw loosens and that familiar bratty fire flares in her eyes. “I improved them.”

“Is that what you call it?”

My eyes latch on to the drawing of myself next to the bed. She's drawn me behind an uncanny image of Pyotr. The expression on my face is less than flattering.

I make a quick scan of the room, noticing other images, other characters. Some of them I recognize; most of them I don't. I ignore the speech bubbles—no good can come of getting riled up about her juvenile jabs—and turn back to face Olivia.

“You've been keeping busy during our little détente, it seems.”

She cocks her hip to the side and glares at me. “What do you want?”

She's lost weight. I notice the way her collarbones stick out, the way her cheeks have hollowed in. It makes me wonder if I'll still see those dimples of hers if she smiles or if I've stolen those from her, too.

Though with the way things are going, I doubt a smile is very likely.

“I wanted to reassure you,” I tell her. “This marriage is legal, but it doesn’t have to be forever.”

She frowns. “Why does that sound like a promise you have no intention of keeping?”

“Once your brother backs off, and once I have certain assurances from him, you will be able to get back to your life.”

Her eyes flash with nebulous hope. “Great. Grand. Fabulous. When will that be?”

“I have to make sure he’s serious,” I tell her. “Let’s call it one year from now.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s a generous estimate. I will hold onto you for a year to make sure your brother stays good on his word.”

“You expect me to stay here for an *entire fucking year*?”

“Did I stutter, *kiska*?”

“That’s... I... I can’t.”

“Why ever not?” I ask with saccharine fake sweetness. “It’s not like you had much of a life to go back to. In case you’ve forgotten, you were a freelancer who was between jobs. Your friends were mostly colleagues who never bothered phoning after the work day ended. You have no boyfriend, no lovers, not even a pet to miss you. So tell me: who exactly is waiting for you back in New York?”

Her skin is flushed with anger. “Who are you to decide my life was worthless?” she rages. “It was lonely, but it was *mine*. I liked it.”

I shrug. “You can just as easily be lonely here.”

“My family—”

“Your family will be safe from me,” I tell her. “Just as long as you play the part of my wife for the year you live in this house.”

“Convenient,” she spits. “How beautifully this worked out for you. Not only can you control my brother using me, you can control me using my family.”

“Isn’t it lovely how things work out sometimes?”

“Was this your plan from the beginning?”

“Not in so many words. But I’m adaptable.”

She breathes deeply. Her eyes are locked on me, but I can see the gears turning in her mind. Searching for a loophole she won’t find.

Finally, she sighs. “Fine. I’ll stay here for a year. I won’t fight. I’ll be the obedient wife. But my family is off-limits.”

I nod. “Agreed.”

“Happy now?” she asks bitterly.

“Not quite,” I say. “There’s something else I want from you.”

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**OLIVIA**

Aleks's eyes roam the walls of my room.

He lingers on the image I've drawn of him, and I find myself waiting for him to say something about it. A comment on the likeness, an insult on the crudeness.

Instead, he says nothing.

I can't stand the silence. "What else could you possibly want from me?" I finally ask.

"Your cooperation."

"I am being cooperative. That's what this is."

"Not quite," he says. "I need information from you."

I frown. "Why on earth would you think I'd agree to that?"

He gives me that tilted smile of his that makes my heart ache and beat faster at the same time. "Because you'll get something out of it, too."

"Which is...?"

"The chance to see your family again."

My eyes go wide. I don't even have the forethought to manage my expressions; I just give him exactly the reaction he's looking for. I know that's not wise, but I can't bring myself to care.

He sees it right away, of course. “Is that a yes?”

“I... I’m not sure yet,” I say. Too little, too late, but I have to start getting my shit together or I’ll never win a single one of these head games with him. “I need to know what you expect from me.”

“Simple. Your brother has been leading an investigation into my Bratva—”

“You want me to get information on an FBI investigation?” I interrupt incredulously.

“That is the gist.”

“Rob is never going to tell me a thing. Especially not now.”

“There’s only one real piece of information I want to know.”

“Which is what?”

“The tip he received,” he says. “The one that tied the abductions to my Bratva. I need to know his source.”

“He might not even know his source,” I point out. “People report stuff anonymously all the time.”

“Then it will cost you nothing to ask.”

The conversation between us, like always, pings back and forth so fast that my head spins. I find myself staring into his blue-green eyes, wondering how he managed to close the distance without even realizing it.

“You’re asking me to betray my brother.”

He shrugs. “I wouldn’t say it like that.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. Tell me, then: how would you say it?”

“You’re helping me find out who is really responsible for these disappearances,” he snarls. “Because there is a predator out there, Olivia. And it’s not me.”

“Wow. You’re very convincing.” I clap my hands softly. “I almost believe you.”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“Because you’re trying to manipulate me,” I suggest. “Or maybe just because you’re a huge asshole.”

He smiles savagely. “If I were trying to manipulate you, I’d fuck you again. That’s when you really let your guard down.”

My cheeks flush with embarrassment. I back away from him.

It’s ridiculous for me to assume Aleks doesn’t sense the connection between us. He notices everything, and the sexual tension crackles venomously at all times. I’ve never experienced anything like it.

But I can’t be the only one it affects so profoundly. Not with the way he looks at me, eyes both feral and filled with lust. Like he wants to own me and destroy me in the same breath.

That should terrify me. But all it does is make my breath come faster and my body tingle harder. Even now, I’m trembling. And it has nothing to do with the conversation we’re having.

It should. But it doesn’t.

And I hate myself for it.

That in and of itself is a betrayal to my brother and my family. My only solace is in resisting it. I have to if I’m going to come out of this in one piece on the other side.

*One year.*

God, it sounds like a lifetime.

“And if we both do what you want?” I ask. “I ask the question, my brother gives the answer, I report back to you. Then what?”

“You’ll get back your freedom and your brother will continue being a dedicated servant of the law.”

I shake my head at his caustic sarcasm. “You don’t know him at all, do you?”

“No, and I don’t care to.”

“His job means everything to him,” I explain, even though I wasn’t asked. “He does it because he genuinely wants to make a difference.”

Aleks rolls his eyes. “Is this supposed to impress me?”

“It’s supposed to make you understand that my brother will never be able to look at his job or himself the same way again. If you get what you want and he drops the investigation, he’ll feel like he betrayed his badge and his country. It will eat him alive.”

His face remains impassive, completely unmoved. Then again, I never expected anything else.

“You may do exactly what you promise and let us both go,” I continue, “but don’t think for one second you’re giving us back our lives.”

He turns and walks slowly across the room, moving at a casual pace. He’s so relaxed I can’t even tell if he’s heard me.

Then he speaks. “Do you think I’m not a man of my word, Olivia? Do you think I’m lying about letting you go when a year has passed?”

“I have no reason to trust you or your word.”

He walks over to the table by the balcony and sits down in the same chair his mother chose the last time she was here. Eerie how similarly they move.

“Sit,” he says, gesturing to the seat across from him.

Even at this distance, I’m painfully aware of his presence. I don’t need to get any closer.

“Thanks, but I’ll stay where I am.”

He raises his eyebrows and then shrugs. “Your doubt wounds me,” he says. “But ask yourself this: why would I keep you once you’ve served your purpose?”

This time, I’m proud of how little my face moves when he flings the insult at me.

“I have no desire to keep your family, Olivia,” he continues. “But your brother started something here. And I have to stop it.”



“Even if he’s right?”

“He isn’t,” he says firmly, eyes flashing.

I squint at him, trying to figure out if his sincerity is imagined or not. I hate the fact that I want to believe him, especially because it means that my brother might be mistaken. That all of this might be for nothing.

“Of course you’d say that.”

“Don’t mistake me for a saint,” he says. “I’ve murdered and stolen. I’ve tortured and lied. I’ve destroyed businesses and men, I’ve brought my enemies to their knees, and I’ve never apologized for any of it. I still don’t regret a single thing I’ve done. I doubt I ever will. Because whatever I’ve done, I’ve done for a reason. Taking these women, though... what reason could I possibly have had for that?”

I blink in confusion. “Maybe you like to be in control. Maybe you get off on it.”

“Oh, I do,” he admits freely. “But I don’t need to kidnap women to get them to do what I want. I know an airplane bathroom that can attest to that.”

Embarrassment and shame and something far too close to arousal rolls down my back in hot waves. I groan in frustration. “For God’s sake, would you stop bringing that up?”

He tilts his head to the side. “Why? Does the memory bother you?”

“Obviously.”

What I don’t add is, *It’s only my greatest shame and the single sexiest moment of my life wrapped into one.*

“It complicates things, doesn’t it?” He leans forward, eyes locked on mine. “Because you wanted to believe in the fairytale I spun that day. But now, I’ve given you too much evidence against it.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“I never do. I’m only telling you what I can see.”

My jaw clenches, but I refuse to drop my gaze. “Oh yeah? Go on, then: what else can you see?”

“A woman who would do anything for her family. Including bargaining away her life for a year to make sure they’re safe.”

The change in subject is jarring, but I roll with it. Anything to avoid talking more about the airplane bathroom. “I don’t recall doing much bargaining. Besides, they would do the same for me.”

He nods. “Believe it or not, I admire that about you all. You, your mother, your sister. Even your irritating fucking brother. In my world, loyalty is the most important thing.”

“My father used to say that,” I whisper. “Well, some version of that. He used to tell us that we needed to look out for each other no matter what. Especially when he wasn’t around anymore.”

“How long has it been since his death?” Aleks asks somberly.

“Seven years. Feels like a lifetime ago and like yesterday at the same time.”

It’s easy to speak the truth as long as I don’t look at him. Even though I still feel those eyes burning on me like spotlights.

“You see yourself as living in the past,” he remarks. It’s not really a question. Just a statement of fact as he sees it. “That makes sense.”

I frown. “What makes sense?”

“People who live in the past find it difficult to live at all.”

I glare at him. “You know nothing about my life.”

“I know enough, *kiska*.”

“No, you don’t,” I argue. “You may know the broad strokes, but you don’t know details. You can’t know someone based on a fucking file folder. People have nuances. *I* have nuances. At least, I did. Before you stole everything from me.”

“Nuances, hm?” he asks, calling my bluff. “Say more. Paint the picture of your life for me, Olivia.”

I shake my head, trying to pull together a scrapbook of my life in a matter of seconds. Not because he told me to—because fuck him, after all—but because if I don't take the time to remember it, it'll start to feel less and less real, more and more distant, until New York is nothing but a fever dream and all that's left is the cold, hard reality of this nightmare.

The words fall from my lips like snowflakes. “Walks through Central Park beneath the trees. Sketching on my balcony while the sun set behind the skyscrapers. Strolling through museums that never seemed to end, in a city full of people who looked at beautiful art and felt the same way I did about it. Awed by the genius. Proud to be artists in their own right.”

“Sounds lonely.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Just because I was alone doesn't mean I was lonely.”

“I think you're lying about that, Olivia. That's all I saw when I first set eyes on you. How badly you wanted someone to make you feel seen.”

I flinch, thinking about my father's words. Words he repeated to me countless times in the last year of his life.

*Living is for the brave*, he said again and again. I'm starting to think he was wrong.

“Living boldly didn't bring me anything but heartache,” I say aloud. “So now, I live carefully.”

“What is your definition of living boldly?” he asks.

I frown. “It's not important.”

He smirks. “That's what I thought.”

That rankles me. “You know what? Spare me your judgment, okay? You're a freaking Bratva don. Our definitions of 'bold' are probably very different. Our perspectives on life are different, too. You live only for yourself. But when you live together as a family, things change.”

“I live for my Bratva,” he corrects.

“That’s not a person,” I counter. “It’s a lifeless fucking *thing*. I’m not talking about a legacy, Aleks. I’m talking about *family*. But I wouldn’t expect you to know anything about that.”

He exhales quietly. “You’ve been talking to my mother.”

“You don’t treat her with respect.”

“I don’t tolerate being questioned. Especially not by her.”

“Why? She can’t have opinions, or you just don’t want to have to hear them? Women can know things, too, Aleks. Your mother can know what’s best for you. What’s best for the Bratva. After all, she ran this thing for four years while you were off doing who-the-fuck-knows-what in Russia.”

He goes silent for a moment, his eyes scouring my face. “What else did she tell you?”

Instantly, I know I’ve made a mistake. I shouldn’t have let on that Yulia opened up to me so much. If he starts limiting her visits to me, then I won’t have a single soul in this house left to vent to.

“Nothing,” I mumble. “That’s all.”

“She wasn’t the leader she claims to be,” Aleks says. “She made mistakes.”

“She was learning on the job. Mistakes are part of that.”

“Well, isn’t someone Mommy’s little champion?”

I hate his condescending tone. “She’s the only one here who is kind to me.”

He glances towards the window. “I’ve been hard on her, but it’s because that’s the only way to make her listen. She’s... stubborn.”

“So that’s where you get it from.”

He smiles. “Not every parent-child relationship can be a love story like yours.”

“Mine is a love story without a happy ending,” I tell him. “An ending that I could have prevented.”

He raises an eyebrow curiously. Despite my reservations, I find myself speaking. Saying things I haven't said since my father died.

"He was diagnosed with a heart condition. Three blocked arteries. The doctor said that his heart was running on fumes. He had a bypass scheduled two days after he was diagnosed. The doctor told all of us to watch him," I say. "He wasn't to be left alone. His condition was fragile and we needed to look out for signs of deterioration. But Mom was at church. Mia and Rob didn't live at home anymore."

"You were left alone with him?"

I sigh. "I had a party that Dad had known about for weeks. The boy I liked was supposed to be there. Most girls go to their mothers when they have crushes; I went to him. But after the diagnosis, I told him I'd skip the party, obviously."

Aleks nods, already seeing how this story ends. "He made you go."

"Yeah. Wouldn't take no for an answer. You think your mother is stubborn? You never met him. He wanted me to have fun, be young, all that. *Living is for the brave*—that's what he used to tell me."

"He's not wrong."

"He was in this case," I say bitterly. "Because he had a massive heart attack about an hour after I left the house. Mom came home from church to find him lying in the middle of the living room floor with his hand over his heart. The coroner said he'd been dead for at least ten minutes by the time she found him."

When I look up, I realize three things at the same time.

First, Aleks is looking at me with the softest expression I've ever seen on him. It's by no means sympathetic. But it's the least severe he's ever looked.

Second, I've somehow ended up sitting in the chair opposite him.

And third, I've got tears running down my cheeks.

Crying over my dad has never felt weak or embarrassing. I'm happy to cry for him and I don't care who sees those tears. Each one is a testament to how

much I loved him. How much I still love him.

“His death broke you.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. “It did. There was a time when I didn’t think I would ever be whole again.”

“Maybe you were right,” he says. “Because all I see is a woman made of pieces.”

“It’s the price you pay when you love someone.”

“I’ve loved, too,” he says to my surprise. “But no death will ever break me. I take the pain and use it to make me stronger.”

“Who have you loved?” I scoff. “The man in the mirror?”

“It’s irrelevant.”

I look down, wondering why my stomach is flipping nervously. “Right. Why should you open up to me?” I seethe. “I’m only going to be around for a year, right?”

“Unless you decide you want to stay longer.”

“In your dreams, asshole.”

“You’re right about that.” He gets to his feet.

“I won’t stay with you, you know,” I snap up at him. “There’s nothing you can say or do to make me change my mind about that. The minute I’m free, I’m going back to my family.”

He shrugs as though it doesn’t matter to him either way. Then he glances over his now-defaced walls. “I was coming in here to give you freedom of the house, you know. But now, I’m not so sure.”

I jerk to my feet. “Freedom of the house?”

“Only if you promise to keep your doodles confined to the walls of this one room.”

I nod fervently, desperate to get out of this jail cell. “I will.”

“Then you have the freedom to move around the compound as you like.”

“Thank you,” I say—even though he doesn’t deserve it. But it comes out before I can stop it. An instinct from another life.

“And eat more,” he tells me as he heads for the door. “I’m not interested in having a skeleton for a bride.”

“I’m not your bride!”

He laughs darkly. “You are whatever I want you to be.”

Then, just like that, he’s gone. I sigh into the silence.

Three days down as Aleksandr Makarova’s wife.

Only three hundred sixty-two to go.

## ALEKS

“Have you seen this shit?”

Demyan storms into my office with a newspaper in hand. He shakes it before slamming it down on the table in front of me.

“The society section?” I scoff. “You really do have too much time on your hands, Dem.”

He isn’t in a joking mood, though. “Look at the third page. Bottom left.”

Frowning, I glance down and see what Demyan is talking about, and instantly, my mood gets as foul as his.

My mother takes up one entire picture all by herself. She’s looking straight at the camera with a high-society sneer on her face. There’s no doubt that she knew she was being photographed. She owns the spotlight in a way I’m not quite expecting.

My eyes slide to the next photo in the array. This one includes my mother again.

But this time, she’s not alone.

Her gaze is focused on a tall, silver-haired man at her side. He’s laughing, his head thrown back with ease. Her hand rests casually on his arm.

“Who is this fucker?” I grit out.



“You’re joking, right?” Demyan asks. “You don’t recognize him?”

I peer closer at the man. He’s tall. Distinguished. Older, but he’s aged well, in the kind of way that only lots of money can buy.

Then it hits me.

“Donald Hargrove.”

Demyan smiles and nods. “The one and only. Son of a bitch looks like he just stepped out of a fuckin’ Brooks Brothers ad.”

“Remind me—some kind of media enterprise, right?”

“Television mogul,” Demyan corrects. “Owns the news network you see in every goddamn waiting room in the whole goddamn country.”

“What do we know about him?” I ask. “Apart from the obvious.”

Demyan rattles off the facts on his fingers. “He’s been married once before. Divorced now, for a couple of years, I believe. Apparently, the ex-wife still speaks highly of him.”

“How big was her settlement?”

“Big enough to buy France.”

“That explains that, then,” I say dismissively. “Kids?”

“Two,” Demyan says. “A pair of pretty boys in their twenties who are both modeling for European luxury brands. Social media follower counts like you wouldn’t believe.”

I roll my eyes. “Jesus. Stop before I puke.”

“You wanna read the article?”

“*Blyat*’. I suppose I should.”

I skim through the article until I stumble across my mother’s name. “Julia Makarova” is what they wrote, not “Yulia.” Leave it to Americans to make everything about their way of doing things. Somehow, that makes me feel slightly better about the whole debacle.

A quick passthrough of the first paragraph makes me turn up my nose. The piece reeks of cheap gossip and shallow humor.

*The Svenson-Met Gala is the crown jewel of the city's social calendar. In attendance was a who's who of comedy legends, full-blown rock stars, and Oscar-nominated actors. (Apparently, the actual Oscar winners had a fancier charity to attend. Cancer is so last season.)*

*But there was no disappointment, because anyone who purchased the ten-thousand-dollar ticket to last night's event was able to rub shoulders with the media mogul of media moguls: none other than the dashing debonair Donald Hargrove.*

*This particular reporter came within a hair's breadth of the man, and let me tell you, he smells as good as he looks.*

*Which is probably why it shocked quite a few to see him spend most of his evening with philanthropist and activist, Julia Makarova. As a woman of a certain age, one would think she would fly under Mr. Hargrove's notoriously particular radar. But apparently, the man values personality as much as youth.*

*When pressed for information about his personal life, the silver fox played coy while Ms. Makarova just laughed me off. According to both, they're just friends. Easier to believe than you might think. Especially with the legion of models and young actresses following the man around most of the night.*

*It's true what they say: sometimes, God gives with both hands.*

I glance up from the article. "This is trash."

"A flaming dumpster fire," Demyan agrees. "I can never understand why people lap this shit up."

I scoff and fold the newspaper back over so I don't have to look at Hargrove's smug, polished smirk anymore. "My mother is an activist and philanthropist? Since when?"

"It's not the craziest embellishment that's ever been printed. We've donated to charities before."

“*The Bratva* has donated to charities,” I point out. “I have donated to charities. It’s not her fucking money; it’s mine. For fuck’s sake, who is she even an activist on behalf of?”

“Women?” Demyan guesses. “The future is female and all that jazz.”

“I guess that does sound like her.”

“The ticket to go to this thing was ten grand,” he points out. “But I’m sure you already noticed that part.”

“Oh, I did. I’ll have words with her.”

“Don’t you keep a tight hold on her allowance?”

“I didn’t think it was necessary,” I mutter. “She had a hard enough time transferring everything back over to me when I returned from Russia. I didn’t want to monitor her spending on top of the rest of it. It seemed... degrading.”

“Look at you being a good son. Warms the heart.”

“Apparently, I’m going to have to stop now,” I growl, “if the woman is spending ten thousand dollars on a charity gala and drawing eyeballs we don’t need.”

“Hargrove approved,” Demyan says with a mocking waggle of the eyebrows. “Isn’t that enough for you?”

I flip the page back over and study the man in the picture once more. He is handsome, charismatic. But there’s a kind of remoteness behind his eyes. A blankness where a soul should be.

I don’t fucking like it.

“This has the potential to be dangerous,” I say.

“Oh, yeah,” Demyan answers firmly. “The man is big-time. He’s fine-tuned for gossip, always looking for the next big story. Even if the author of this article doesn’t know exactly who Yulia Makarova is, he certainly does.”

“You think she talked about me?”

“I’m sure she gushed about how handsome you are. Her precious baby Awweks.”

“Say that again and I’ll rip your tongue out,” I growl as Demyan cackles and scampers out of reach. “Any dirt on the bastard?”

“I only had time for a quick check,” Demyan says. He settles back into his seat. “But it came up clean as a whistle. Either he’s never done a dirty deed in his life, or they’re all hidden way out of sight. I mean, not that I’m speaking from experience or anything, but what kind of guy has an ex-wife who sings his praises to national media every chance she gets?”

“So he’s a saint, eh?”

“On paper, yeah. Sure looks that way.”

“*Fignya*,” I pronounce. *Bullshit*. “No one gets to be as rich and powerful as he is without collecting a few skeletons in his closet. I want to find them.”

Demyan frowns. “Is there a reason we need to poke around? Seems... risky.”

“If he learns more about me and the Bratva than I’m comfortable with, I need to have some sort of leverage over the man.”

He shrugs. “Aye-aye, captain. Fair enough. I’ll keep digging.” He leans back in his seat and strokes his chin, humming out loud the way he always does when he’s thinking and wants to get on my nerves. “You know, if Yulia’s spending habits are bothering you, you could always cut her off.”

“Feels harsh.”

Demyan laughs in my face. “You’ve done worse.”

I wave him away. “I can handle her. She just needs to be reminded that I’m don now and she has to listen.”

“Hardcore, man. I can’t imagine giving my mother orders.”

“That’s why you’re in that seat and I’m in this one.” I fold up the paper and toss it in the trash. “Why couldn’t she have made friends with some boring civilian fuck, huh? A middle manager, an accountant. Someone with a mortgage and a home in the suburbs and a dog to walk in the evenings.”

“Because she’d be bored to death,” Demyan answers. “She’s chasing excitement. That’s the only reason she chooses to be around these egotistical, pretentious fuckers.”

“Or maybe she’s found kindred spirits.”

He whistles. “That’s a low opinion you have of your own mother.”

I sigh and relent. “She held her own when she was left in charge. She made mistakes, but considering she had no training and no experience, she did what she could. It’s just her belief that she has a God-given right to certain things that frustrates me.”

“Or maybe the two of you are so alike that you just can’t get along with one another?”

“Is this a session for strategy or for therapy?” I snarl. “Spare me the psychoanalysis.”

Demyan only chuckles. Then he fixes me with a careful expression. “You been by to see the old man recently?” he asks—even though he knows exactly how I feel about it.

“No.”

“I did,” he admits.

I roll my eyes. “You’re a fucking prince.”

He shrugs. “One day, we’re going to be that old. Maybe even that helpless, too.”

“I will *never* be like that,” I say fiercely. “And if that somehow becomes a possibility, I’ll put a bullet in my brain long before my body turns on me.”

Demyan looks unconvinced. “Not sure you can get away with that anymore.”

I frown. “And why is that?”

“Well, you’ve got a wife now,” Demyan points out, fixing me with a teasing smile.

“She’s not a wife,” I snap back. “She’s a tool. A prop.”

“A very pretty prop, though, you gotta admit.”

I shrug. “Hadn’t noticed.”

“Oh, please,” Demyan scoffs. “Don’t lie. Don’t pretend like you don’t see it.”

“I don’t see anything I don’t need to see.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what *I*’ve seen: I’ve seen the way you look at her, *sobrat*. And you don’t look at your screwdriver like that. So, tool or no tool, she’s different.”

That pisses me off and he knows it. I turn my steely gaze on him, but he only shrugs. After a lifetime at my side, my anger no longer fazes him. It never truly did.

“I’m just saying, man,” he adds. “You can bullshit everyone else. But I’ve been with you a long time. I know when something interests you. Olivia fits the bill.”

“I don’t pay you to be my shrink.”

“No, you pay me to be your friend,” he corrects. “Which is way more pathetic.”

I give him the finger, then push myself up from the desk and head towards the door. “Follow up on the FBI investigation. I need to know if Lawrence has kept to his bargain or if he’s still trying to fuck with me.”

“What if he is?”

“Then I’ll send him his sister in pieces and he’ll have no one but himself to blame,” I snarl. “But honestly, I don’t believe he’s going to risk her life. He loves her too much.”

“Love, huh?” Demyan muses. “It’s been the death of many a man’s ambitions.”

“Yeah,” I growl. “I’m counting on it.”

**OLIVIA**

Freedom never tasted so sweet.

It's ridiculous that I'm even calling it that. But after three days trapped in one room, even stepping out into the hallway feels like my first day in heaven.

I'm walking towards the stairs when I see a shadow growing on the wall, coming from around the corner of the hallway. I freeze, wondering if whoever I run into is just going to drag me back into my room and lock me inside again.

Then a maid appears. She is cute, petite, in a demure gray dress with her hair pulled into a neat bun.

"Ma'am." She sounds respectful. I've almost forgotten what that feels like to be talked to like a human being.

"I'm allowed to be out," I blurt. "Aleks, he... That is, the man—" I stumble desperately, hating myself already, but unable to stop the words from flowing out. "He said I was allowed to go anywhere I wanted within the house. Compound! I meant compound. That includes the garden, right?"

The maid is looking at me as though I've gone completely nuts. I can't really blame her. I'm wondering the same thing myself.

"Of course, ma'am," she says slowly. "It includes the gardens."

"Right. Good. So then I'm just... walking."

She gives me a sympathetic smile. “Can I get you anything?”

“Like what?”

She raises her eyebrows. “Can I offer you something to eat or drink? The kitchen is always fully stocked. The cook went out a little while ago to get provisions for dinner, but there’s always food available if you’re hungry.”

“Oh. I’ll just help myself, thanks.”

“Shall I show you the way?”

“I can manage it myself,” I say. “Thanks for your help.”

I dance around her and reach the staircase. When I glance over my shoulder, I realize she’s watching me. She looks positively confounded.

Like she’s trying to figure out why a man like Aleks would choose to marry someone like me. It almost makes me want to regale her with the entire tale.

*Oh, don’t worry, you sweet summer child—he wasn’t really interested in me. It was a power play between my brother and him. I’m just the useless pawn caught between two men with egos the size of Texas.*

Instead of making me feel important—*look at me, I’m the centerpiece of a clash of titans!*— it makes me feel sad, depressed, inferior. As though I’ve been reduced down to a shiny bauble for powerful men to paw over. A scrap of meat for the alligators.

Shuddering, I turn away from the maid and go down the stairs.

I’m wandering aimlessly down endless halls when I accidentally happen upon the kitchen.

It’s as beautiful as the rest of the house. A tall wall of glass looks down onto an open-concept living area on the floor below. Next to an open pair of lovely French windows sits a wrought-iron table set for tea for two.

Just like the maid said, I don’t see a cook—or anyone else, for that matter. I hold my breath and listen to be sure.

As soon as I confirm I’m alone, I sprint to the massive double door fridge and pull it open.



“Oh, sweet baby Jesus,” I breathe, taking in the containers of food stuffed into the first three shelves. Has anything ever looked so beautiful?

I pluck out an armful of containers, line them up on the marble-topped island, and open them up one by one.

Lasagna.

Ceviche.

A bunch of little pastries like sugar-coated clouds from heaven.

It takes some looking to find the drawer with all the cutlery and another few minutes for me to locate the microwave. I scrounge up a fork, but when I finally stumble across the microwave, I realize that there isn't a button in sight. It looks like it was stolen off the set of *The Jetsons*, all black glass and smooth titanium.

Hm. I'm too hungry to crack this code right now. So I abort the microwave mission, pop myself up on one of the barstools, grab a fork, and start shoveling cold lasagna into my mouth like a hungover Garfield.

“So freaking good,” I moan with my mouth stuffed.

I power through half the lasagna before I start craving something to drink. I swivel around on my stool, but like everything else in this kitchen, the glasses are probably hidden somewhere out of sight.

“If I were a glass, where would I be?” I muse out loud. My words come out muffled because there's still so much food in my mouth.

“Top cabinet.”

I nearly choke on my lasagna as I turn to see the one person I was really, really trying not to see.

“Aleks,” I try to say, but that just makes the choking worse. It's taking full effort not to spray chunks of cheese and tomato across the room.

Smirking with amusement, he glides into the kitchen and pulls out a glass from a cabinet so high up that I'd never have been able to reach it on my own. After filling it with water from a pitcher in the refrigerator, he slides it

across the counter towards me. It's a thoughtless, effortless flick, but I guess I shouldn't be surprised that it cruises to a dead stop right in front of me.

Everything always works out perfectly for Aleksandr Makarova.

Rolling my eyes, I reach for the glass—and promptly knock it over.

*Jesus Christ, not this again.* The man must think I don't understand the concept of cups.

I pick up the glass hurriedly as I swallow the massive meteor of food in my mouth and dab up the spilled water with a nearby dish towel.

Aleks, meanwhile, is snorting with laughter at the far end of the island. "I forgot who I was dealing with."

"Shut up," I mumble. "It's your fault. You can't just sneak up on people like that."

"I wasn't sneaking up on anyone; I was walking into the kitchen in my own home," he says, still amused. "You were just so deep throating your food that you failed to notice me."

I flush with color. "Imprisonment makes a girl hungry, I guess."

"That's no one's fault but your own."

"Right, of course," I snap, rolling my eyes. "You had absolutely nothing to do with it."

"As I've told you before, Olivia, we all have choices. But don't let me stop you. You and that lasagna seem to be getting along really well."

I pick up the fork like a hatchet, even though I have no real interest in continuing to eat. But I also don't want him to think that I'm so self-conscious that I'm going to stop eating just because he walked in here. It's a *Catch-22*, as always with him.

"You have maids and a personal chef," I say, mostly to fill the silence. "Spoiled much?"

His gaze is always so much more intense when it's quiet. "You think I have the time to cook and clean?"

“You wouldn’t do it even if you did have the time.”

“No, probably not.”

“What’s it like?” I ask. “To have other people manage your life for you?”

He scoffs. “They manage my house. I manage my life. There’s a difference.”

“Feels like you’re splitting hairs, but I digress. Do all your slaves live here?”

“My *employees*,” he enunciates, “have quarters in the back.” He points through the open window to an elegant longhouse-type structure past the pool. “There’s room enough for twenty, though only twelve are occupied at the moment.”

I gulp, realizing how far out of my league I am right now. One housekeeper is an unfathomable luxury. Twelve is... I don’t even know the word for it. *A lot*, to say the least.

“Is this where you grew up?”

“More or less. We moved here when I was young. I shot my first gun at that tree back there.”

“I should’ve known that would be a fond memory for you,” I mutter. “We had very different childhoods.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

He gives me a subtle glance there that suggests there’s more to those words than he’s letting on. It wouldn’t be right to call it *sorrowful*, but it’s something along those lines. Somber, maybe. Melancholy.

“You didn’t mind it?” I ask in a quieter, less bitchy voice. “Being trained like a soldier instead of being allowed to be a child?”

“Why would I have minded?”

I raise my eyebrows. “You never missed, shoot, I don’t know... kicking around a ball in the garden with your dad?”

“What good would that do me now?”

“Never mind,” I say with a shudder. “Question retracted.”

He leans against the refrigerator and folds his arms across his chest. “Not all of us have cookie-cutter upbringings, Olivia. Some of us are built for different things.”

“That sounds like something you should address with a therapist, not with me,” I retort. “But surely you did *something* normal. College?”

“No.”

“A job?”

“The Bratva is my job.”

“Yes, God, you say that enough, I get it. But did you ever work at, like, a Burger King?”

He snorts. “Absolutely not.”

“What about a normal dating life?” I ask, encouraged by the fact that he’s actually answering my questions. “How did you meet girls?”

“In clubs and bars like everyone else.” He leans forward and adds, “And they were *women*. Not girls. The kind of women who knew exactly who they were and what they wanted from life.”

Playing the comparison game doesn’t end with any winners, but I can’t stop myself. I find myself wondering about his first time, his first love. Did he even have a first love? Is he even capable of such a thing?

“I can see all those questions filtering through your head, you know,” he remarks, breaking my concentration.

“Oh, so you’re a mind reader now?”

“It’s my job to know things that people don’t want to tell me,” he says simply. “But with you, I can’t exactly take the credit.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not very good at hiding how you feel.”

I flinch back defensively and put down the fork in my hand. “I hate that you think you know me.”

“But I do, *kiska*. I know you better than you know yourself.”

“One day,” I say, looking him in the eye, “one day, I’m going to do something unpredictable. I’m going to prove you wrong.”

He smiles that deadly, sexy smile of his. “I look forward to it.”

When he pushes himself upright, I actually feel the disappointment swell in my gut like something physical. Why on earth does he make me feel like I’m losing something every time he walks away from me?

“Where are you going?” I ask, trying to sound unconcerned.

“I have a few things I need to discuss with my mother.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He eyes the half-empty container in front of me. “Don’t let me stop you from picking up where you left off.”

The moment he leaves, I end up opening the container and taking another huge mouthful. I’m not hungry anymore, but I have a tendency to eat my feelings when the mood catches hold of me.

Apparently, today’s one of those days.

I’m washing my dishes in the sink when it strikes me that Aleks and I had an entire conversation without my brother coming up once.

Somehow, that feels like a betrayal.

This is not some vacation home I’ve come to so I can unwind and relax. I have a family on the outside who is no doubt scared shitless on my behalf. I have a brother who might be sacrificing his career to save me.

I should not be having comfortable little chats in the kitchen with the man who is responsible for everything that’s gone wrong in my life since the moment my flight was delayed.

I drop the dirty fork and Tupperware in the sink. Aleks can pay someone else to clean his shit.

I'm stalking towards the gardens, fed up with someone—myself? Aleks? God? Fuck if I know the answer—when I hear a voice. Definitely a woman's.

And she sounds upset.

I follow the sound of the voice to a room in the far corner of the house. I position myself between the staircase and the wall in front so there's no chance of me being seen.

From here, I can see Aleks's broad shoulders. I'm silently grateful that he has his back to me. The man is too perceptive not to notice me standing here if he was facing the other direction.

He leans slightly to the side and Yulia comes into view. She's wearing pale jeans and a cashmere sweater. She doesn't have any makeup on today, and for the first time, I can really see her age.

"Calm the fuck down," Aleks growls.

"I will not calm down," she stammers, clearly rattled. "Now, you're telling me who I'm allowed to associate with?"

My first thought is that she might be talking about me. But the fact that she's so worked up makes me think otherwise. What would she care if he said she couldn't see me anymore? I'm nothing to her. Just her son's helpless little toy.

"I'm not telling you anything of the sort," he says. "I'm telling you to be careful. The man is the king of network television."

*King of network television*—that rings a bell. A name is right on the tip of my tongue, but I can't quite place it. The fight happening before me is too distracting, anyway.

"So? He's accomplished and entertaining. And he enjoys my company."

"Are you dating him?"

"No, we're just friends."

I wouldn't trust anything she's saying right now. Apparently, Aleks doesn't either.

"You are not to discuss Bratva matters with the man," he says firmly.

"What makes you think I will?"

"Because you're lonely and you have been known to make poor choices in the past."

"Don't," she hisses, twisting away from him. "Donald and I are just friends. We share a lot of the same interests. Besides, it's good for me to get out of this godforsaken house."

"If that's the case, then why didn't you accept the mansion I bought for you in Paris last year?"

I nearly laugh out loud in disbelief. A mansion in Paris? And she said *no*? Rich people are a whole different kind of crazy.

"Because this is my home!" she cries out. "This place is my home and I'm not leaving it. I deserve to have a life outside of this Bratva without having to sacrifice everything else in the process."

"That's fine. Leave the house, don't leave the house, I don't give a fuck. But family business stays under this roof."

"What do you take me for?"

"A woman who wants attention," he retorts sharply.

*Ouch.* Even I wince at that. Their relationship is obviously a lot more complicated than I first realized. There's bitterness between them. A rotting, festering kind of resentment.

Aleks sighs and puts his head in his hands. "This isn't a lecture, Mother. I'm not trying to micromanage your life. I'm just saying—"

"Saying what, precisely, Aleksandr?"

He wrenches his head upright. "That spineless motherfucker will be on the prowl for newsworthy stories. If he gets wind of the investigation or—"

“Or what?” Yulia taunts. “The fact that you have a young woman here against her will?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he lies coldly. “Olivia is my wife.”

“You haven’t spent one night with her since you got married. On second thought, sounds like the marriage I had with your father.”

“As you’ve said so often, I learned from the best.”

I cringe at the vicious barbs flying back and forth between them. Yulia is getting in some damage of her own, but she’s much too worked-up and emotional to retain the upper hand. Her son, by contrast, is perfectly calm.

“What else are you scared of, Aleks?” she asks, her voice getting lower and lower until I can barely hear it. “Worried that he’ll find out your dirty little secrets? The women...”

I freeze on the spot. Are they talking about Isabella?

But Yulia said “*women*.” Plural. Are those the same women Rob was referring to?

“Enough!” Aleks roars. “Don’t say another fucking word, Mother.”

I take that as my cue to leave. If he storms out unexpectedly, he’ll catch me eavesdropping, and then there will be hell to pay.

My heart is beating so hard that it’s all I can hear as I slip out of sight and climb the staircase up towards the second floor.

I avoid the maid cleaning one of the sitting rooms and slip into the next room instead. I don’t know what exactly I’m looking for.

But I know something: if I look long enough, I’m certain I’ll find it.



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**ALEKS**

“You’re forgetting who you’re talking to,” I growl as my mother turns her back on me. “As long as you choose to remain a part of this house, I am your don.”

She turns slowly, her severe features twisted with hurt. “I wasn’t aware that I was even a part of this Bratva.”

“What do you want from me?” I ask. “A certificate? We don’t do membership badges.”

“Some recognition for my hard work, perhaps. For my sacrifices. Would that be so hard?”

“Every deal you made while I was in Russia turned out to be a dud. You chose Sarkozy over Minkoff because you liked his dick better. You think that was a smart decision?”

She goes deathly still.

“That’s right.” I nod savagely. “I know about that. I know about everything that happened while I was away.”

“You had someone spy on me?” she whispers.

“I did what I had to do,” I reply. “I needed to make sure my interests were being taken care of here. And you were simply not capable.”

“Sarkozy offered better returns—”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” I snap, refusing to let her finish the lie. “He had nothing to offer apart from his loyalty and a handful of ill-trained men. But Minkoff had manpower and territory that he was willing to share out of respect for Otets and the Makarova family. You turned him down because you were fucking that sleazy Sarkozy son of a bitch.”

“I... he... that was...”

“What, Mother?” I press. Her jaw snaps shut. “What excuses are you going to give me next? What justifications are you going to make? You want to know why I don’t trust you to keep your mouth shut about this Bratva? It’s because you’ve never been able to do it before. You’ve given away your secrets to men who shower you with nothing more than a little attention. And this time, I can’t be bothered to deal with the fallout.”

“What fallout?” she protests weakly. “There was no—”

I take a step forward, getting in her face until she cringes back from me. But there’s nowhere for her to go.

“My mistake was in shielding you from the consequences of your decisions,” I tell her. “I chose to recuse you from your duties and take over without telling you exactly how badly you fucked up.”

“You’re exaggerating. You would have told me—”

“I had two options: crush you or protect you. Luckily for you, I chose the latter.”

Years of pent-up anger comes flowing out of me like lava. I’ve held back for so long, out of respect for her. But I don’t have the patience to go easy on her today. Her naïvete is more than I can take.

She shakes her head, unable to accept what I know to be the truth. “I thrived while you were gone,” she whispers. More like she’s trying to convince herself than convince me.

“Ask me about Russia,” I challenge. “Ask me how it went there.”

“You dealt with our enemies and brought our business interests back home,” she says, reciting the old party line. “Because you didn’t want to stay in

Russia forever.”

“Wrong,” I breathe in her face. “It was either save everything there, or save everything here. I couldn’t do both. So I burned every last resource we had abroad just to keep it out of our enemies’ hands. Then I came back here, to keep the Bratva out of *yours*.”

She looks dumbfounded by the onslaught of new information. What I’m saying is true: it’s been a mistake to keep her in the dark, to let her think she could play-act as don without consequence.

This is not a game.

“What happened to my son?” she whispers in a daze. “What happened to the sweet little boy who loved me?”

“You think I don’t care for you?” I grimace. “You think I have no regard for you as my mother? Love is the only thing that’s kept my mouth shut.”

“Because you were waiting for the perfect moment to humiliate me,” she says, a sob escaping her lips.

“That was never my intention,” I sigh. “But I will not let you blow up what I have built because you feel lonely and unappreciated. Hargrove is a dangerous friend to have. Especially right now.”

She bites down on her lip. “He’s not interested. He understands how things work.”

“Tell me: did his interest in you increase once you told him who I am? Who we are?”

Her eyes go wide. “That’s a cruel thing for you to say.”

“I haven’t said anything yet,” I seethe. “Answer the question.”

She looks like a trapped animal as the predator is closing in. “Our friendship is real,” she insists. “I swear it is. I won’t—I haven’t spoken about you.”

I lean in and pin her against the wall with one hand planted on either side of her face. “I forgave you for your mistakes once. I won’t do it a second time, mother or not.”

“What are you saying?”

“I expect you to end your relationship with him,” I order. “I will not allow pillow talk to be my undoing.”

“Pillow talk?” she balks. “I’ve already told you, we’re not romantically involved. I’m not his type.”

The way she says it catches my attention. As though she’s privy to some insight about Hargrove that isn’t common knowledge.

*I fucking knew it.* Everyone has skeletons in their closet.

“Not his type, huh?”

She gives me a noncommittal shrug, trying frantically to backpedal from her slip of the tongue. “It’s just a thing people say.”

“How did you meet him?”

“It might surprise you to know that Donald and I have been friends for a while now. We were first introduced when you were in Russia.”

“You’ve known him for years?”

“Many,” she says. “He’s been my friend and confidant for a long time.”

“Confidant,” I echo. “I don’t like that. What do you confide in him about?”

“For starters, he knows what it means to have a fraught relationship with your child,” she says.

“Oh, spare me the bullshit. We have—”

“What we have is hostility,” she interrupts. “Arguments. Rage. How long has it been since we sat down and had a conversation, Aleksandr? Just a pleasant, comfortable conversation?”

I shake my head. “What would be the point?”

“I’m your mother,” she says. “You should be able to talk to me.” She runs her hands over her face as though she’s trying to see clearly. “Honestly, I sometimes think that the biggest reason I want to be included in Makarova

business is because it's the only way I can connect with you."

I frown. She sounds sincere, but it seems so unlike her.

"I'm not sure that's the smartest plan."

She sighs and touches my face with a tender hand. "You live and breathe this life, Aleks. It doesn't leave much room for anything else. Or *anyone* else."

"This is what I was meant to do."

"I'm not disputing that. I'm just saying, there's more to life. You could have everything, and yet you're settling for this one little part. And you don't even see what it's costing you."

"No price I'm not willing to pay," I growl defensively.

"What about a family?" she presses. "One day, you might want one."

"There's time for that later. When I'm old enough to start worrying about preserving my legacy. For now, the only important thing is building that legacy in the first place."

Her eyes look almost damp with tears. I've never seen her cry and I don't think I ever will, but this veers dangerously close to it.

"What about love?" she whispers.

"Jesus Christ," I spit, turning away from her. "Where did all this sentimentality come from?"

She walks around to plant herself in my line of sight again. "Does it offend you?" she asks pointedly.

"It's unnecessary," I say. "And coming from you, it's hypocritical."

"Why would you say that?"

"I don't remember you piping after the perfect family when I was growing up," I point out. "You were busy hiding your affairs from Otets."

She doesn't look embarrassed when I bring that up. In fact, her chin jerks up and she looks at me with steel in her eyes. "I took my happiness where I

could find it. Believe it or not, I tried my best with your father. For a very long time. When we were first married, I was only nineteen years old. Just a girl, whereas he was a man who knew the world. But he didn't ease me into anything. I was expected to know my role without ever asking a question. When I didn't, he treated me like I was defective."

She's fiery now, and expansive, like she's growing taller and more intense as she speaks.

"Do you know the kind of impact that has on a nineteen-year-old? I was not prepared for it. So I learned the hard way. My husband wasn't just powerful because he was the don of a strong Bratva; he was powerful by virtue of the fact that he was a man. And let's face it—it's a man's world, isn't it, Aleks?"

I know damn well she's not looking for an answer. I don't give her one.

"I had to learn to survive within this nightmare. I tried very hard to please him," she continues, her voice cracking. "I wanted so much to love him, and I wanted him to love me. But we hadn't even been married a year before he started bringing women home with him. He never made a secret of it. It was out in the open for everyone to see. I was humiliated in my own home and I was expected to just swallow it."

My chest clenches tight. This is all so fucked-up. So goddamn wrong.

But she's not done yet.

"After the first few years, when it became clear that your father was not going to stop what he was doing with these other women, I decided that I had to try something else. Perhaps if I gave him a child, he would be faithful to me. So I threw away my birth control pills and did everything in my power to get pregnant. It still took me years before I conceived you," she says. "I was twenty-nine years old and we had already been married a decade. And the pregnancy... The pregnancy was hard. I was on bed rest for the last two months. And while I was confined to my bed, trying to keep his baby safe, he was in the room down the hall, back to fucking his whores. He didn't change. Not for me. Not even for you."

She takes a moment to compose herself. When she looks up at me again, her unshed tears have disappeared. Swallowed back into the black hole where she

buries all the other things she's never been able to forget.

"I did want the happy family, Aleks. I tried very hard to achieve it. But there are some things you can't do alone. So I gave birth to you and mothered you as best as I could. But I'm not ashamed to say that it wasn't enough for me. I wanted more. So yes, I had affairs. But why should I have been held to a different standard when my husband spat on our vows first? I will not apologize for my infidelities. And if you ask him, I'm sure he'll say the same thing about his."

I nod slowly, processing everything she just said. "That was quite the speech."

"It wasn't a speech," she says. "It was me baring my soul to my son."

"Well, you did want to have a conversation with me," I remind her with a gentle smile.

She smiles back—almost. "I have sacrificed a lot to this Bratva. I have had to make a life for myself outside of it. And Donald is a part of that life."

She waits for my reaction to that, her eyes wide with uncertainty. History suggests I'll turn her down.

But despite what she and Olivia might think, I'm not without feeling.

"You can continue your association with him," I say.

Clear relief shows on her face.

"But—"

Her relief curdles immediately.

"—if anything happens that threatens the security of this Bratva," I continue, "then I will end it myself. Is that understood?"

"You can trust me, my son," she says softly. She lays a hand on my forearm. "I promise you can."

I have enough regard for our relationship that I don't answer immediately. I take a moment to really consider it.

“I trust you enough,” I say at last.

She sighs. “I suppose that’s something.”

I turn and walk away with my real answer. The one that popped into my head the moment she asked the question.

*You can't trust someone you don't really know.*



## OLIVIA

I've never been on the third floor before.

There are fewer doors along the hallway, but the rooms are bigger. I open them up one by one, but each is the same as the next. Simple, tasteful furniture, a few paintings on the wall. It's like walking through an abandoned hotel in purgatory.

Until I step through one doorway into a room that doesn't look anything like the others.

This room belongs to someone. It has personality. Presence.

I shut the door behind me as silently as possible and venture into the room. "Hello?" I call, so quietly that my voice comes out in a squeak. I try again, this time with more confidence. "Hello? Is anyone here?"

The room is silent, thankfully. I wander towards a huge bureau with a tall, ornate mirror set in front. The surface is clean. But when I open the cupboards, they reveal a collection of gorgeous jewelry. It's all statement pieces: large, gaudy gems and thick chains, dazzling in the light.

The exact kind of jewelry Isabella used to wear.

I pick up a bracelet dotted with turquoise stones. She had something similar to this. Except the stones were much smaller and it had cost ten dollars from a street market. I'm assuming this one had several more zeroes attached.

I feel a beat of sadness for the girl who had come so close to being my sister-in-law.

She had found her place in our family seamlessly from the day Rob first brought her home. She was pretty and open and laughed unreservedly. We loved her for all those things.

But more than anything, we loved Isabella because of how happy she made Rob. He was by far the surliest of the three of us, especially after we lost Dad, and she managed to make him soften his hard edges. He smiled and laughed more when he was with her.

I blink away the flood of memories and set the bracelet carefully back onto its velvet bed.

“You were pure,” I whisper to myself as I think of Isabella. “It’s why we liked you so much.”

I know I should get out of this room before someone catches me snooping, but somehow, I can’t bring myself to leave. There’s an air here that feels familiar. Comfortable.

When I realize I’m standing on shag carpeting, I take my flip-flops off and run my toes through the softness.

“Who are you?” I murmur. “Who do you belong to?”

I look around the room, waiting for the answer to present itself.

Nothing does. So I keep searching.

I wander into the walk-in closet. The space smells musty, and I don’t think anyone has been in here for a long time. But the clothes themselves look pristine. I trail my fingers over the fabrics and they all feel luxurious. Thick cottons, buttery suedes, smooth silks. Most of them still have their tags.

I’ve never been the type of girl who enjoys playing dress-up. But if anything was going to make a convert of me, this place would be it.

I pick out a navy blue power suit and, without thinking, disrobe and pull on the pants.

They're well-fitted at the waist and thighs, but they flare out at the knees just enough to give me added height. They're long, though, so I pick a pair of black Jimmy Choo heels from the built-in shelves to keep the hems from dragging on the floor.

Then I put on the flowing white blouse that goes underneath the blue jacket. It fastens up the side with a black zipper.

When I put the jacket on to complete the look and turn to the mirror, I can't help but stare.

I look... good.

I'm not accustomed to seeing myself this way, and I find that I like it more than I expected to. I strut up and down, enjoying the confidence the outfit gives me.

At least, until I trip several times and am forced to abandon the heels completely.

More drawers demand my attention. I riffle through in search of a name or a piece of handwriting or an ID. Something, anything, to tell me who this stuff belongs to.

"Who are you?" I whisper again to myself as I open each drawer in turn.

I find drawers of sunglasses, drawers of gleaming wristwatches. The third one holds a bunch of scarves. I'm about to close it... when I notice a little flash of red that catches my eye.

"Wait."

I pull out the red scarf. It's not nearly as fancy as any of the other items in this whole room, but it makes my heart stutter in my chest.

I know even before I unfold it that I'll find small strawberries embroidered around the edge.

Because I was with my brother when he bought it.

*"It's a little kitschy, ya know," I warned.*

*“She’s going to love it,” he replied, grinning madly. “Isabella loves strawberries.”*

He gave it to her that same day, a week before he proposed. She wore the scarf on her head every day for a month like a bandana.

That’s all well and good. But what is it doing *here*?

My heart hammers hard against my ribs. Aleks told me again and again that he had nothing to do with her disappearance.

But I’m holding in my hand proof that he lied.

Proof that I was as gullible as they come... because I believed him.

The scarf starts shaking in my hand and it takes me too long to realize it’s because my entire body is trembling.

Suddenly, the clothes I’m wearing feel too tight. It feels like they’ll strangle me to death if I keep them on much longer. So I rip the outfit off until I’m standing there in my underwear.

I put my own clothes back on and return the suit to the walk-in closet, though God only knows if it’s in the proper place.

“I... I have to get out of this room...” I stammer under my breath.

I want to take the scarf with me, but I don’t dare. While I’m under this roof, I need to play it safe. No unnecessary risks.

So I tuck it in the bureau drawer and lurch out, leaving the door cracked behind me.

I’m full-tilt panicking, I know that, but I can’t get it to stop. Maybe it’s the overwhelming feeling that that isn’t a room—it’s a tomb. A macabre time capsule of sorts.

Does this mean Isabella is still alive?

Or was she buried a long time ago?

I’m hurrying down the staircase when I hear footsteps coming from the landing below. I quickly assess whether I have time to hurry back up to the

third floor and wait out whoever is approaching. But before I can settle on a decision, Aleks steps into view.

Even after what I just discovered, I'm no less aware of his beauty. He is physically perfect.

But the nervousness that jolts through me isn't just from intimidation or awe—it's raw fear.

"Olivia?"

*Be cool. Be normal. Don't let him know anything's wrong.*

"I... I was just exploring."

My tone is stilted and wooden. My body language probably reflects the same. He walks up the staircase and meets me halfway. I clutch the banister, trying to suppress the image that pops into my head of him hurling me over the edge to the granite floors three storeys below.

"Exploring?" he repeats.

I nod, trying to smile. It doesn't quite work. I pivot in a different direction. "Um... yeah, or at least, I was trying to. But then I started to feel a little... lost?"

He frowns.

"Sick," I correct quickly. "I meant sick."

He eyes me. "You do look a little pale."

"Yeah, totally. I think something is up with my stomach."

"Too much lasagna?"

I try to muster up a smile for that one. I barely manage it. "Probably. I'm heading to my room now."

"Safe travels," he mocks.

He moves to the side, allowing me to pass by him. As I step down, our arms brush against each other, and I feel a static zip between us.

“Oh, Olivia?”

I turn slowly, dread clawing at my chest, feeling certain he’s figured out what I stumbled upon. That he knows what I’ve seen and that being his wife isn’t enough to keep me safe from him anymore.

“Yes?” I say, swallowing past a suddenly dry throat.

“You’ll be having dinner with me tonight,” he says.

My eyes go wide. That was certainly not what I was expecting. “Oh. Um, tonight? I—”

“It wasn’t a question.”

I take a steadying breath. “Okay. Dinner. Got it.”

He nods. “See you tonight.”

He disappears upstairs. I go straight to my room, shut the door, and press myself against it, as if that’ll be enough to keep the danger outside.

“Oh God,” I gasp as tears jump to my eyes. “What is happening? What is happening?”

It takes me several minutes of hyperventilating to calm down. Even then, I’m not very calm. I do laps around the room as I mutter under my breath. It takes me ten circuits before I realize there’s something sitting on the table by the balcony.

A brown-wrapped package. Tall and sort of square, tied with a knot of twine. My name is printed neatly in charcoal pen on top.

Frowning, I undo the knot and peel away the wrapping paper. When I see what’s inside, I freeze.

Half a dozen art books, a case of pristine new colored pencils, a set of pen-and-ink tools.

There’s no note, no explanation, nothing besides my name.

But I know who sent them for me.

I close my eyes and remind myself what I just discovered. When that doesn't work, I drop down to a seat at the table, feeling drained and helpless.

I don't know how I'm going to get through this, but I know I have to. For my brother. For Mia. For my mom.

For the girl in the strawberry scarf.

**OLIVIA**

I pick out long black pants and a white, one-shouldered blouse. I keep my hair loose and my makeup minimal.

I don't really care what he thinks of me—that's what I tell myself, at least, and for the most part, I believe it—but I figure I have a better chance of getting information out of Aleks if I look like I'm trying.

And information is exactly what I need.

Finding Isabella's scarf in that dusty bedroom has changed everything. I have to play my part just right. He can't know that I know.

The problem is that Aleks is the most perceptive man I've ever met. More to the point, he does this kind of stuff all the time. The power games, the lies and deceptions.

Me? I'm a cartoonist, for God's sake. Cloak-and-dagger spy movie shit isn't exactly my specialty.

The longer I sit in my room, though, the slower the clock moves. I'm going to go crazy if I watch the second hand keep dragging its way through mud.

So I head to the dining room five minutes early.

The table is fully set, wine already decanted, but Aleks isn't there when I walk in. I take a seat and try to settle my growing nerves. *You can do this. You have to do this. You will do this.*



I'm reaching for the glass of water in front of me when I notice his shadow fall across the table. True to form, I promptly knock the glass over and drench the thick tablecloth.

"God-fucking-shit-dammit!" I stammer, lunging for a napkin and upending my chair in the process. It's becoming a problem.

"Maybe I should wear a collar with bells," he suggests as I scramble in every direction at once. "Like a cat."

I bite down on my lip. "Sorry."

He waves away my apology. "I already warned the staff they'd have a little extra clean-up after tonight's dinner. You do have a track record."

"Shut up. Did you really tell them that?"

He smiles. "You can always ask one of them and find out."

I decide that he's kidding and take my seat. He sits opposite me and fills up his wine glass from the decanter, then swirls it and brings it to his nose. His eyes remain fixed on me as he takes a sip.

"Beautiful. Full-bodied. Delicate." He smirks. "I'm talking about the wine, of course."

I roll my eyes. "Of course you are."

"Would you like to try it?" He holds the decanter out towards me.

I shake my head. "Not much of a booze aficionado."

"No? What is your poison of choice?"

"On the rare occasions that I do drink, probably beer."

He raises an eyebrow. "Let me guess: your father drank beer?"

"Uh, yeah." I wrinkle my nose in confusion. "What's that got to do with anything?"

He just nods as though, yet again, I've proved how predictable I am. "Mhmm."

“What?” I snap.

“You don’t actually like the taste of beer,” he sighs. “You just drink it because it reminds you of him.”

“Thanks, Dr. Phil. Is this you proving how easily you can read me?”

“No. I proved that a long time ago.”

Acting impulsively, I snatch Aleks’s glass of wine from in front of him and steal a sip. The taste is bitter at first, but the longer it sits on my tongue, the smoother and sweeter it gets.

“Wow,” I murmur when I set it back down.

“Good, isn’t it?”

“Yeah!” I say over-enthusiastically. “Amazing. So subtle. Did you pick up on the notes of grape?”

Aleks rolls his eyes at my bratty act of sarcasm and lets loose a long-suffering sigh. “You don’t drink because you’re afraid of what might happen if you let go. But you can’t live in fear, Olivia,” he says. “Venturing beyond the safe and comfortable is how you learn what you’re truly made of. Risks make life worth living.”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. “Again, very philosophical. But I’m not quite sure I get the point you’re trying to make.”

“Imagine my surprise.”

He’s watching me with careful eyes. I wish I could read him as easily as he seems to be able to read me.

But so far, I feel... good? At least, I think I do. For the most part, I feel like I’m doing a solid job keeping my nerves at bay. The clumsiness from earlier... well, that’s par for the course in OliviaLand, so it works.

Our conversation lulls for a moment while the waiters bring out the food. The first course is a tomato chili soup infused with a creamy garlic oil. Beside it, they place a fennel and crab salad garnished with lemon juice and thin slices of sweet orange. The smell alone is borderline erotic.

The servers bow and disappear back into the kitchen. Aleks folds his hands and looks at me. “Did you get the supplies I sent up?”

“I did,” I say, spooning some soup into my mouth. *Holy shit, this is amazing.* I school my face into a neutral expression. *Give nothing away. Keep your guard up.* “Thank you. I didn’t expect a gift.”

He smiles pleasantly. “Had to save my walls.”

“I would apologize,” I reply, “but you deserve it, and honestly, it’s an improvement. This place is decorated like a morgue. You do know that there are colors in the universe besides black and gray, right?”

He chuckles but makes no move to reply as he tastes the soup for himself. I’m over here struggling to control the orgasm in my mouth, but Aleks takes it all in completely stone-faced, like having Michelin-starred food at a spur-of-the-moment dinner is no big deal.

The crab is as delicious as the soup. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy every bite. *Prisoners don’t normally eat this good.*

But that thought brings nothing but guilt. I’m here, getting literally wined-and-dined. As for my family...

Where are they? What are they doing? Are they okay, safe, afraid?

I don’t have any of the answers.

“You okay?”

I blink. “Sorry?”

“You were just talking to yourself,” Aleks explains. “Muttering.”

I know he’s not lying. After Mia left for college, I’d talk to myself, pretending I was talking to her instead. Somehow, the habit stuck.

“Nope, I was not. You must have misheard.”

“You were. Sounded like a serious discussion.”

“Are you feeling alright?” I ask. “I think you’re starting to imagine things.”

He hums, a low, rumbling sound that reverberates through me. His eyes never leave my face. “As you wish. I’ll play along.”

He smiles again. Pleasant, beautiful, no chinks in his armor. This whole dinner feels almost... normal. Like a date.

Not that I have the most experience in that department. I meet his eyes and my stomach flutters. *Damn you, butterflies.*

“Why are you doing this?” I ask suddenly.

“Doing what?”

“This,” I say, gesturing to my now-empty bowl. “The fancy dinner, the amazing food, the... the... ‘full-bodied’ wine. Why go through all the trouble for a prisoner?”

“Because you’re not my prisoner anymore, remember?” he tells me. “You’re my wife.”

“Does that mean I can leave whenever I want?”

“No.”

“Case in point.”

He shakes his head. “You are not allowed to leave because your safety is my top priority. With the FBI sniffing around, I can’t exactly let my wife run around on her own, can I?”

I frown at the reasonable way he packages that little narrative. “The FBI are a threat to *you*, not me.”

“What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is yours,” he smiles. “What threatens me, threatens you. We’re one now, *kiska*. You’d do well to remember that.”

Suddenly, I’m not hungry anymore. The waiters round the corner with the next course, but Aleks senses something and waves them away.

“You did promise me you would be cooperative,” he chides when we’re alone again.

“That depends on what I need to cooperate on,” I point out. “If you expect me to do anything illegal or—”

“Calm down,” he says. “Have you always had such an overactive imagination?”

“Actually, yes.”

He smiles. “I suppose you’d have to, living the life you do.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“I think you know.”

“How many times do I have to tell you: I like my life. *Liked* it, at least.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m sure worms like the rocks they live under, too.”

“You’re an asshole.”

He chuckles. “I’m not all bad. Would an asshole let you call your family?”

I jerk upright. “What?”

He nods, pleased with my reaction. “I figure it’s been long enough. We’ve been married for a week now. I’m sure you’ll want to tell them just how happy you are. Brimming over with marital bliss.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” he says. “I just want to show you that I’m willing to give you certain concessions. So long as you do the same for me when the time comes.”

I have no idea what the hell that means, but I’m not about to pass up a chance to speak to my family. “When can I call them?”

“The phone line in your room has been cleared. You can use it tonight whenever you’re ready.”

“And this isn’t a trick?”

“Now, why would I do that?”

I don't bother dignifying that with a response. "Guess I have to wait until the end of this dinner to make the call, huh?"

He looks like he's trying very hard not to laugh. "It would be rude not to."

"Great. Then bring the boys back in and let's get this thing over with."

Aleks snaps his fingers and, like magic, the army of servers reappears with our entrées.

When they slide the plate in front of me, I gawk down at a beautifully seared steak, buttery mashed potatoes, artfully charred broccolini, and a red wine *jus* that looks dangerously rich.

"You know, when most people say, 'I could eat a whole cow,' they don't mean it literally," I advise him. "This is an absurdly huge plate of food."

He shrugs without looking up. "You'll manage."

We start eating, but I barely taste anything anymore. All I can think of is getting up to my room so that I can see if he's made good on his promise and opened up my phone line.

I'm halfway through my steak when I notice Aleks staring at me. "What?"

He shakes his head. "Just thinking how docile you are. A braver soul would have dashed out of the meal altogether."

I blush. "I didn't think you were giving me the option."

"We give ourselves options in this life, Olivia. Wait for someone else to give them to you and you'll be waiting forever."

I take a deep breath. The food that was so appetizing a moment ago is now repulsive. I want away from it, away from him, away from everything that keeps trying to make me into something I'm not.

"I... I'm going to go to my room now," I say, pushing myself away from the table.

"That sounds like a question. Is it?"

I square my shoulders and infuse as much confidence into my voice as possible. “I’m going to go to my room.”

He shrugs. “Not very convincing, but it’s a start.”

I grit my teeth. “I stand by what I said earlier: you are an asshole.”

He chuckles as I turn around and storm away from him. The moment he’s out of sight, I run up the stairs and to my bedroom. I need to get this call in quickly in case he changes his mind.

I dial in Mia’s cell number first and hold my breath. It rings four times before she answers.

“Hello?”

“Mia!”

“Jesus!” she gasps. “Liv?”

I laugh, but it sounds more like a sob. “It’s me. It’s me, Mia. How are you? Is Mom alright? Have you seen Rob?”

“Jesus Christ, why are you asking about us?” she demands. “How are *you*? Is it true what Rob told us? Are you *married*?”

“It’s a long story... but everything Rob told you is true.”

“Fucking hell, Liv. I don’t know why we can’t just go to the police.”

“Our brother *is* the police, remember?”

“Right, but he’s still our brother. We should get more people involved. He can’t just—”

“Mia!” I interrupt. “Calm down. I know there’s a lot to discuss, but we both need to take a breath.”

I hear movement on the other line. I know she’s walking around. I check the time and try to remember what day it is.

Tuesday. Shouldn’t she be at work right now? She always has shifts on Tuesdays.

“Where are you?”

“At home with Mom. Actually, I’m always here now,” she says. “I gave up my apartment and moved in here. She... she needs me.”

“Seriously?”

“The attack really rattled her, Liv,” Mia explains. “She wasn’t comfortable living alone after everything that happened. Honestly, I can’t say I blame her.”

I don’t know why I feel so guilty. It’s not as though I was responsible in any way. But somehow, the fact that I’m now Aleks's wife makes everything seem a little more complicated.

“Of course. I understand.”

“Rob’s saying that he needs to cooperate with the motherfucker who took you,” Mia says. “He doesn’t talk to me a whole lot about his plans... but I do think he is planning something.”

“Sounds like Rob.”

“He’s more determined than ever,” she says. “It reminds me of how he was after Isabella disappeared. I’m worried.”

“Try not to be,” I say. “I don’t want any of you to worry. I’m actually okay. Really.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I know he abducted me and all that. But it’s not like I’m a prisoner here.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Of course you are!”

“What I mean is, I’m not treated like one,” I rush to explain. “Seriously, Mia, I have a massive room with a balcony and a private bathroom. And a walk-in closet. And I get all these gourmet meals and stuff.”

“Are you trying to tell me you *like* being his prisoner?” Mia asks incredulously.



“No! No, of course not. That would be crazy. It’s just—”

“Oh, God.”

“What?” I ask.

“I didn’t think I needed to worry about this, given how things went down.”

I frown. “What exactly are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that you have a thing for bad boys—”

“Are you serious?” I snap defensively.

The fact that she’s right on the nose about this makes me all the more defensive. Whatever happens, I can never admit to my feelings for Aleks.

What kind of woman develops feelings for the man that threatened her family, beat her brother, and forced her into marriage?

Not me, that’s for damn sure. This is just lust. That’s all this is.

And lust is shallow. Temporary. It’ll pass.

*I hope.*

“I know you, boo,” she sighs.

“Which one of the guys I’ve ever dated qualifies as a ‘bad boy’?”

“You chose safe because you didn’t want to get hurt,” she points out. “So you picked men who didn’t have a chance of hurting you. But that doesn’t mean it’s what you *craved*. This guy is different. He’s your wet dream come to life.”

I shudder. “Stop that.”

“I’ve seen him, Liv, remember?” she reminds me. “I saw the man clearly. I may have been bound and gagged, but I wasn’t blindfolded. He’s hot.”

“Mia—”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that he’s a freaking Bratva don, honey. He’s dangerous. So believe me, I get that that’s part of the appeal—”

“Stop,” I say forcefully. “Just stop. I don’t... I’m not attracted to him, and I’m not okay with this situation, either. All I was trying to do is reassure you that I’m okay. I’m not being tied up or tortured or anything crazy like that. That’s all.”

She sits with that for a moment, but I know she’s not totally satisfied. “Has he... Have you... He hasn’t forced himself on you, has he?” she asks tentatively.

“Jesus, no,” I say firmly. “He hasn’t forced himself on me.”

“Okay, good. Glad he’s keeping his hands to himself at the least.”

I keep my mouth shut. It’s not totally a lie, and besides, she doesn’t need to know about what happened. Nobody does. If I had it my way, I’d wipe it from my own memory, too.

I hear shuffling on the other end of the line, and then Mia’s voice gets fuzzy in the background. She’s talking to someone else.

“It’s Liv... I know... She called me... Wait, Rob! I haven’t finished talking to her yet! Rob! Don’t—”

“Olivia?” Rob says, his deep voice filled with concern.

“What’s up, big head?” I say as cheerfully as I can, using the nickname I’ve had for him since I was a little girl.

He’s supposed to respond with *Nothing much, chicken feet*. But instead, all he does is growl, “Are you okay?”

I sigh. So much for faking happiness.

“Yeah, I am. I told Mia everything already. I can’t leave the house or anything, but I have freedom of the compound now. I’m treated decently.”

“Has he tried to force himself on you?”

“God, why does everyone keep asking me that?” I say. “No, he hasn’t. He’s been... fine. Distant. Aloof.”

“But has he tried to threaten you? Has he hurt you in any way?”

“He hasn’t hurt me at all,” I assure him. “It feels a little bit like living in a hotel, to be honest. There’s a maid that comes in to clean my room. There’s a chef in-house that’ll cook me whatever I want...”

“Fuck me,” Rob breathes.

“What?”

“You understand what he’s doing, don’t you?”

I frown. “Holding me hostage?”

“No. He’s luring you into his world. Trying to bring you into the fold. Soon enough, you’ll be his little puppet, parroting anything he wants you to say.”

“Rob,” I say, “listen to me. I’m not so simple-minded that I can be won over by a nice meal and clean sheets. I don’t intend to remain his wife for long. He’s told me that if you keep your word and drop the investigation, then he’ll release me.”

“Release you?”

“Give me a divorce and let me go,” I explain.

“He said that?”

“He did. And I think he means it, too.”

“Why the hell would you think that?” he snaps.

“He’s not going to want to be saddled with me for life,” I point out. “I’m just baggage. Be realistic: I’m not the right kind of woman for a man like Aleks Makarova. He’ll want to be rid of me as soon as he gets what he wants. Which will be in a year, if you do what he asks.”

“Fuck,” Rob mutters. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Okay, so... he wins.”

“What?”

“He wins,” Rob repeats with emphasis. “We’re all worried about you, Liv. Mom and Mia have been beside themselves since he took you. It’s not worth what this is doing to our family.”

“Rob—”

“I’ll drop the investigation. I will.”

Yesterday, that’s all I wanted to hear. But now? After what I found?

“No,” I say firmly. “You can’t.”

I hear nothing but his breathing for a long time. Then: “What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’m so sorry, Rob,” I say slowly. I hope this devastating morsel of information doesn’t send him into a vicious downward spiral. But he deserves to know that he was right all along. “I... I found something.”

“What is it?”

“A scarf,” I say in a hushed voice. “A red scarf with strawberries all over it.”

It’s only silence that follows, but there’s so much dread in it that I shiver. I can just imagine Rob standing in the kitchen with Mia’s cell phone pressed to his ear.

Deathly still.

Deathly pale.

Cold as the grave.

“Are... are you sure it’s the same one?”

“Positive. I remember the day you bought it for her.”

“I do, too,” he murmurs. “I can still picture the look on her face when I gave it to her. She was so damn happy over that stupid little gift.”

“I’m so sorry, Rob,” I whisper. My voice is choked and tight.

“So he took her,” he says evenly. Just stating facts—even though I know he’s dying inside. “Does he know you found it?”

“No one does. Just you.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way. I’m guessing he allowed you to make this phone call?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good, too. He probably thinks you’ve been cooperating with him. Let’s keep that going. He has to trust you.”

“I don’t think he’s the kind of man who trusts anyone.”

“You’re not just anyone. If any person on earth can inspire trust, it’s you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I mumble.

“I’m serious. You’re so much more capable than you give yourself credit for, Liv. Just trust your instincts and keep your head down. I’m going to get you out of there. A year be damned.”

“Just as long as you’re careful, too, Rob,” I tell him. “We lost Dad. We can’t afford to lose you too.”

“Backatcha, kid.”

I smile, though it’s tinged with sadness. “Rob, I really am sorry. This is—”

“She’s not dead, Liv,” he cuts in. “I know everyone thinks she is, but I can feel it in my bones. She’s not dead.”

I nod. “Okay, Rob, sure,” I say, though I’m really just telling him what he wants to hear right now. “I’m gonna help you find out what happened to her. And then we’ll bring her home.”

“Damn right. Don’t take unnecessary risks, Liv.”

“I never do.”

But as we say our goodbyes and hang up the phone, five little words play in my mind over and over again. Aleks’s words.

*Risks make life worth living.*

**ALEKS**

A FEW DAYS LATER

“You opened up her phone line?” Demyan asks.

“I did.”

“And you tapped it, I assume?”

I smirk and give him a pointed look. “What do you think?”

He laughs. “Well, out with it. What’s the hot goss?”

I exhale slowly. I understood the risks of giving Olivia freedom of the house, but I hadn’t expected it to escalate so damn quickly.

Especially since I assumed the maids knew how to follow orders.

“She found the scarf.”

Demyan’s eyes go wide and he sits bolt upright. “How?”

“How else? She went snooping.”

“That door is supposed to be locked.”

“I know,” I growl. “The maid on duty forgot to lock it.”

“Fire the woman. No, execute her. Better yet, jettison her into space.”

“It’s Tina,” I tell him, knowing that he’s always had a soft spot for the petite blonde.

He groans. “No, not Tina!”

“Should I prepare the rocket?”

“The poor girl was probably day-dreaming about me,” he muses with fake devastation. “She shouldn’t be punished for that. We can’t really blame her, can we? Curse my roguish charm!”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“Okay... so the wifey knows then?” he asks.

“Hardly,” I scoff. “She doesn’t know anything for certain. But she has assumed a lot.”

“And she told her brother?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t change anything. I made it clear to both of them where I stand. Rob knows what he’s risking if he pushes me.”

“Does that mean you’ll keep her for more than a year?” Demyan asks shrewdly.

“I’ll keep her as long as I have to.”

“I see, I see.” He strokes at his nonexistent facial hair. “How convenient.”

“Don’t be an asshole, Dem,” I warn.

“You might as well tell me to stop breathing,” he retorts. “My point still stands.”

“Since when have you ever made a valid point?”

“Since your world got flip-turned upside down by the cute brunette with the dimples.”

I feel a prickle of annoyance when he says that, but I hide it. Demyan already thinks he’s right about everything. No need to let him know he might be onto something where Olivia is concerned.

“I appreciate a beautiful woman as much as the next guy, don’t get me wrong,” he says. “But this one is more trouble than she’s worth.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you have the potential to actually fall for this girl,” Demyan explains. “That makes her more dangerous than the rest.”

I laugh scornfully. “You’ve confused me for someone with a heart.”

“Aleks—”

“Demyan,” I snap back. “Stop pushing this. Marriage doesn’t always have to be a disaster. That only happens when you marry for the wrong reason.”

“What’s the wrong reason?”

“Love,” I snap. “You decided to chase a foolish fairytale. To play make-believe.”

“I never—”

“Yes, you did,” I interrupt. “You thought you could have it all. Be the family man and the Bratva man. But you can’t be both. That’s why I’m not trying to be.”

“So you’re smarter than me, is that what you’re saying?”

I smirk. “I mean, I don’t think I need to say it at this point.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Christ, you’re an asshole. I’m just being the voice of reason here.”

“I don’t have any illusions about my purpose. Nor hers. She’s not meant to be my loving wife or steadfast partner. She’s here because I need to put an end to a problem. Once that problem is solved, she’ll go right back to where she came from and I’ll forget she ever existed.”

He sighs in frustration. “When are you going to let her on to the fact that you’re listening in on all her conversations?”

“I’m sure she’ll figure it out eventually. Until then, I’ll take my information where I get it.”

“How chivalrous. Discover anything else?”



“They’re really close.”

“Her family?”

I nod. “‘Die for each other’ kind of close.”

“So like us?” he asks, batting his lashes at me.

I laugh. “I’d never die for your dumb ass.”

“And I wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire. Glad we got that settled.”

We both grin. It’s nice to have a moment of levity every now and again. Sometimes, I forget that, before everything else, Demyan was just my best friend. It wasn’t always all about work.

But things change.

“Have you ever thought about going through with more than just passive threats?” he asks.

“Like?”

“Like, you know... exterminating the problem.” He gestures vaguely.

“You mean killing the brother?” I shake my head. “No. That would defeat the purpose of taking his sister. And he’d only be replaced by some other do-gooder Bureau rat who won’t care about Olivia enough to listen, which puts me right back where I started without a trace of leverage. No, I need Rob Lawrence in play. That’s the course I’ve taken.”

“And that course didn’t come with any additional, sexy little perks or anything...”

I roll my eyes. “Agent Lawrence has the power to end this investigation because he started it. It didn’t have any traction before he took the reins. The buck stops with him and I have his balls in a noose at present. Killing him would serve no purpose.”

“And just to be clear, it has nothing to do with the fact that it would upset your pretty little wife?”

“Are we back to this shit?”

He smirks. “Okay, okay. I’ll drop it.”

“Thank God.”

“I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Don’t I always?”

It’s a rhetorical question. Demyan doesn’t bother answering. He just stretches out and looks longingly towards the bar. “Too early for a drink?”

“Do what you like.”

“Such a good boss,” he says, walking over to the bar to pour himself a whiskey. “Very hospitable working environment.”

“While you’re over there, pour me one, too.”

He rolls his eyes. “Knew there was a catch.”

He pours out two glasses of whiskey and brings them over to where I’m sitting at the table. He’s only just sat down when there’s a sharp knock on the door.

“What now?” he mutters impatiently, as though we’ve had to suffer interruptions all morning.

“Enter,” I call out. The door opens and Pyotr walks in. “What is it, Pyotr?”

“Ms. Jennifer is here, sir.”

Demyan gives me a wicked grin. “Ooh, this is gonna get real interesting.”

“Send her in.”

Pyotr nods and disappears.

“Did you expect a visit from Jen today?”

“No,” I say, teeth clenched. “Which means she’s come to tell me something, and it’s not good.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s a big believer in delivering bad news in person.”

“Classy chick.”

I narrow my eyes. “Easy.”

“What? A man can admire.”

“Not this one,” I say firmly. “Not Jen.”

“Dude, chill out. You already have a wife.”

“She’s my best girl on the inside. The woman can charm the stripes off a fucking tiger. She’s an asset I don’t want messed with or distracted.”

He gives me puppy-dog eyes. “Don’t you have any faith in me?”

“Faith that you could keep her happy? That’s a definitive no. But if I want her to quit and run screaming for the hills, I’ll cut your ‘roguish charms’ loose on her.”

“You boys arguing about me?” Jen pushes the door open and walks in, all confidence and easy charm. “Well, well, if it isn’t Demyan Nikitin. What have you been up to, sugar?”

“Suffering a deep depression until I laid eyes on you, gorgeous.”

She laughs pleasantly. “If I were ten years younger and twice as stupid, that line might even work on me.” She bats her eyelids in his direction and blows him a kiss.

“Jennifer,” I greet. “Take a seat.”

“Preferably on my lap,” Demyan suggests.

Her blonde hair is darker than I remember. She’s let it grow out. It sits past her shoulders now.

She’s wearing dark trousers that flare at the knees and a skintight black blouse underneath her pristine white jacket. The woman has always had taste, but she very rarely gets to indulge in it. Work demands she blend into her roles.

“On second thought, let’s move to the sofa,” I say. “We can talk properly there.”

Demyan makes sure to stand up right when she’s walking past just so that she gets a full face of him.

“Have you been working out, handsome?” she purrs, tapping his chest delicately with her long, red nails. In her heels, she’s slightly taller than he is, not that Demyan seems to mind.

“For you and you alone,” he replies with a wink.

“Demyan,” I bark. “Move your ass.”

“All work and no play,” Jen tuts, shaking her head. “Makes Aleks a... well, you know how the saying goes.”

“No, finish it,” Demyan encourages her. “Maybe he’ll listen to you.”

She snorts. “Aleks doesn’t listen to anyone.”

“Are the two of you done?” I cock my head to the side. “You have news, don’t you?”

She eyes the drinks that Demyan and I have brought over to the seating area with us. “You’ll get your news—but first, I need a drink. You don’t want to be accused of being a boy’s club, do you?”

I give Demyan a nod and he goes to get her a drink. While he’s pouring, Jennifer looks me up and down, making her ogling blindingly obvious.

“You look good, boss.”

She’s always had a habit of making my title sound seriously dirty. I’d have fucked her a long time ago if I didn’t value her contribution to my Bratva so much. She’s too good of a spy to lose to heartbreak.

“You look different,” I remark. “Why’d you go darker?”

“The man I was trying to seduce prefers brunettes,” she says. “I couldn’t bear going all the way, though.”

“You could do whatever you want with me, baby,” Demyan suggests salaciously. “Blond, brunette, shave it all off, I don’t care.”

“You and every other man on the planet,” she laughs. Then she eyes me. “Well, every man but one.”

She takes the drink that he offers her, then raises it in a toast. “To the Bratva.”

We all raise our glasses to that. But while Demyan and I only take a sip, Jennifer drains all of her whiskey in one go.

A tiny little red flag goes off in my head. The woman’s never been much of a drinker. The only time she really throws it back is when she’s anxious or nervous about something.

And I have a feeling this time that I know what.

“I needed that,” she says, thumping her now-empty glass down on the table.

“You okay?” I ask carefully.

She exhales slowly, but forces a smile on her face. “I’m always okay.”

“Jennifer.”

“What?”

“You look like you might need a break.”

Her eyes flash with menace. “I do not need a break from anything. I can handle this job. I’ve handled it for five fucking years.”

“Really? Because you seem pretty rattled right now.”

“You’re the one who’s rattled!” she snaps. I give her an all-knowing look—*Don’t try to pull that bullshit on me*—and she sighs. “Okay, fine. It’s just... it’s not always easy, you know? Moving back and forth between worlds.”

Demyan and I exchange a glance. Of course, she catches it.

“Oh, don’t do that,” she says. “Don’t look at each other like I’m a problem that needs to be fixed.”

“Like I said, you’ve been in it too long.”

“You have a lot of enemies, Mr. Makarova.”

I snort. “I’m aware.”

“If I don’t do what I do, who’s going to have your back when shit blows up?”

“You’re not my only spy, Jen.”

“But I am your favorite,” she points out cockily. “I’m the only one you trust.”

“Wrong. I don’t trust anyone.”

She smiles. “I’ve been in the underworld long enough to suss out a lie. You’re good, don’t get me wrong. But I can sense it all the same.”

“Or maybe your ego is just getting in the way of your judgment.”

She scoffs. “That hasn’t been the case in a long time. Not since—well, we don’t need to go there.”

I smile. “It’s good to see you, Jennifer.”

Her smile turns soft and sincere. “I know. It’s good to see you, too. Both of you.”

“Thanks for saying that. I was starting to feel left out,” Demyan pouts.

“Oh! Speaking of which, I heard you’ve got a pretty wife locked up here somewhere,” Jen says.

Her tone is nonchalant, but I don’t miss the way her fingers clench tight until the whites of her knuckles show through.

“She’s not locked up anymore,” I say. “I gave her freedom of the house, which of course she’s already abusing.”

“Freedom of the house?” Jennifer gasps in alarm. “You mean, I could have run into her out there?”

“It’s not impossible.”

“Christ. I didn’t expect her to be roaming the halls so soon.”

“What’s the matter?” I prod. “Not interested in a reunion?”

She glares at me. “I’m not staying long. I just wanted a chance to get dressed up.”

“I’m flattered,” I say. “Does this bring us to the reason you’re here in the first place?”

She nods and her smirk flattens out. “You’re not going to like it.”

“I assumed as much.”

“There is a reason the cops zeroed in on you,” she tells me. “Someone gave them an anonymous tip.”

“We knew that already.”

“But what we didn’t know was who gave them the tip.”

“Don’t drag it out. You have a name?”

She nods. “I do. You’re *really* not going to like it.”

## OLIVIA

“Mom, I already told you, I’m fine.”

Her voice comes through hazily. I know it’s because she’s not holding the receiver to her mouth properly. She’s always been this way, buzzing around the house, cell phone held to her cheek with her shoulder while she tidies up or folds laundry. It drives all of us nuts.

“Mom,” I chide for the billionth time, “you have to speak into the receiver. I can’t hear you.”

“What?” Her voice is still soft before she readjusts the phone. “How’s this?”

“Jesus, Mom. Not so loud.”

“I thought you couldn’t hear?”

“I couldn’t hear when you weren’t holding the phone right. Now, you are, and I’m deaf.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because I can hear you,” I say, trying hard to hide my laughter.

“Oh, okay... so I can talk normal?”

“Phones are not a new technology, you know.”

“This phone is,” she complains. “I don’t know why your sister insisted on getting me a new one. My old phone was working just fine.”



“You had a Nokia flip the size of a brick.”

“Mhmm, and I miss the flip,” she retorts. “I miss the keyboard, too. I hate all this tap-tap-tapping.”

I snort with laughter. “Welcome to the twenty-first century, Mom. You’re only a little late.”

It feels nice to chat with her like old times. At least for a minute, I can forget how messed up everything is.

“Oh, stop that. I’m not old. I just like what I like,” she says. “And besides—your father gave me that phone.”

“Oh.”

And there it is again. The reminder bringing me back down to Earth.

“You keep asking me if I’m okay,” I say, “but... are you?”

“If my children are fine, so am I. Except my children are all in danger right now,” she says testily. “So no, I’d say not.”

“I’m not in danger, Mom,” I reassure, wincing at how forced and rehearsed it sounds. “I promise. I’m being treated well.”

“Where do you sleep?”

“In my own room,” I tell her. “He hasn’t tried anything, if that’s what you’re worried about. It’s the only question everyone else cares to ask.”

“Nor should he! I don’t understand why we can’t just get you back. Your brother’s an FBI agent, for crying out loud.”

“His hands are tied, Mom. And anyway...” I trail off before I can finish my sentence. Mom doesn’t need to know about the strawberry scarf or what that means to Rob. “Anyway, it’ll all work out. Trust me.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I am.”

She sighs. "I have to admit, talking to you helps. You do sound like you're doing well."

"I am doing well." *As well as can be expected under the circumstances, at least.*

"But what about your job?"

"He let me contact the agency yesterday. I spoke to Chadwick to let him know I'm taking a leave of absence, and I'll contact him when I want to start work again."

"Won't that hurt your career? You've worked so hard to get to where you are."

"I can't concentrate on anything right now as it is, so it all works out fine," I tell her. Mostly true, although Aleks's walls would beg to differ.

"I suppose he wouldn't let you work anyway."

"I actually think he would. I'm the one who made the choice to stop."

I frown, wondering why I feel the need to defend Aleks, even though he's the reason I have to make all these hard choices in the first place.

"If you say so, dear."

I decide to change the subject. "Have you been going to your book club meetings?"

"Not since... all of this," she says rather vaguely.

It was the same way after Dad died. Mom still talks around it to this day. *Well, when your dad... you know.* As if it won't be real if she doesn't say the words aloud.

"You should go back."

"I can't just continue on with life as if nothing has happened."

"That is exactly what you should do," I fire back. "I told you, I'm living well here and there's no reason why you shouldn't do the same. Go to book club. Please. For me?"

She lets that sit for a moment. “I suppose I can think about it.”

“Good.”

“Are you still talking to her?” I smile when I hear Mia’s voice from the other side.

“Hold on, honey. Mia wants to talk.”

“Okay. Take care of yourself, Mom. And don’t worry about me.”

“I’m your mother, dear. I always worry about you.”

She passes the phone over. I can hear Mia panting slightly as she walks through the house. “Hey, you,” she says, between labored breaths. “How ya holding up?”

“Good enough, I guess. A little better.”

“Forced isolation has left you with plenty of time. I hear people in jail get really good at push-ups.”

“So we’re onto jokes now?” I roll my eyes. “I wouldn’t say I’m totally isolated. I see people.”

“Like who?” she scoffs.

“Um, well, the maids. Some of his men. And, uh...”

“Him?”

“Not often,” I say quickly. “Not if I can help it.”

“What’s it like?” she asks curiously. “Being around him?”

“It’s fine,” I say, careful to choose my words so she doesn’t revert to Big Sister Who Knows Best mode. “I mean, I really don’t see him much.”

“And he hasn’t tried to slip into your bed at night?”

“Mia!”

“What? It’s a valid question.”

“It’s a repetitive one. He’s not that type.”

“For someone who claims not to spend a lot of time with the man, you seem to have a pretty good handle of his character.”

“It’s just a feeling.”

“Mhmm.”

“Don’t do that,” I snap. “I’m not—”

“Stockholm Syndrome is a thing, you know?” she cuts in. “Especially when the guy who kidnaps you looks like Paris.”

“Paris?”

“You know, Paris, from *Troy*? Orlando Bloom?”

I snort. “I think you mean from *The Iliad*, you uncultured swine. And no, not like Paris. Aleks is more of an Achilles if anything.”

“Wasn’t Achilles gay?”

“Not in the movie, he wasn’t.”

“But that was the Brad Pitt one, right?”

“Yeah.”

I’ve watched that dumb movie like a thousand times. And it wasn’t for Paris.

“Well, obviously because they cast the wrong man. Orlando Bloom is not my type. Paris was supposed to be beautiful.”

“So you think Aleks is beautiful?” I tease, turning it around on her.

“Objectively speaking, yes,” she says. “But he kind of ruined the effect when he took me and my family hostage.”

I cringe. “Ah. Yeah, that’ll do it.”

She’s quiet for a moment. Then she says, “Liv,” in a tone I don’t like.

“Yeah?”

“I feel like you’re not telling me something.”

I frown. “Not true. I’ve told you everything.”

“Really? Because whenever we start talking about Aleks, you sound... different.”

“Different how?”

“Like you’re guilty about something.”

*Jesus.* Talking to my siblings is dangerous. They know me way too well. Mia can’t even see my face and she still picked up on my guilt.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“C’mon, honey. You’re running with the big dogs now. You’ve got to learn to lie better.”

I move towards the window and look past the garden towards the lake. I learned only yesterday that the lake is situated inside the compound, which means I can walk down there if I want.

“Tell me what it is,” she urges.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Olivia May.”

Uh-oh. She pulled out the middle name. Now, I know she means business.

I bite my lip, thinking about how to answer, but I get distracted when I see Aleks’s broad silhouette moving down the paved pathway that cuts through the garden. Demyan is right next to him.

Even from this distance I can’t help but admire the physical perfection of his body. The easy, arrogant walk. You can spot his confidence from space.

They bypass the garden and head down to the lake.

“... Hello? Earth to Liv. Where’d you go?”

“Uh, nowhere.”

Like I could tell her the truth. She’d skin me alive.

“Hey, munchkin,” Mia says, her tone growing softer. “You remember who I am, right? I’m not some random friend or colleague. I’m your big sister. You used to be able to tell me everything.”

I sigh. “Guilting me is usually Mom’s job.”

“Mom retired early. Now, it’s my turn.”

It’d be so easy to tell her. *I’m feeling something and it terrifies me.* But for whatever reason, I can’t bring myself to admit it. Maybe I’m more like Mom than I’m willing to admit: too afraid of the truth to say it out loud.

“You need to get out of the house more,” I tell her instead. “You need to meet someone.”

“Men my age are so damn boring. They don’t interest me.”

“You haven’t dated in a long time,” I point out.

“What’s happening here?” she asks in a teasing tone. “You’re married now, so you want to marry me off, too?”

We both laugh as I watch Demyan walk back up towards the house. Aleks stays by the lake, cutting a brooding figure against the metallic sheen of the sunlit water.

It feels like the perfect moment to go down there and start up a conversation. I have no idea what I’m going to say, but I have to earn his trust. I have to make him think I’m on his side so that he feels comfortable enough to tell me what he’s hiding.

“Listen, Mia, I have to go.”

“Go?” she asks incredulously. “Where? Is it time for your daily walk around the prison yard?”

“Umm, downstairs. I want to stretch my legs.”

“Oh, wow, you weren’t kidding. Well, walk after we’re done talking.”

“We are done, aren’t we?” I ask.

“Wow. My feelings are hurt. I really didn’t expect to be playing second fiddle to your damn kidnapper.”

“Will you stop?” I scold. “I just... I have to go.”

“So you and Rob are up to something,” she says shrewdly. “I guessed as much but he refused to tell me what.”

“We’re not up to anything.”

“It’s a little insulting to be kept out of the loop, you know.”

“We just want to protect you, Mia.”

“Is that it?” she ponders.

“Come on, what other reason would there be?”

She sighs. “Just be careful, Liv. He may look like Paris or Achilles or whatever, but the man can and will burn you. He already has.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

“Call me later, okay? I love you.” She sounds like she isn’t sure I’ll actually do it. Like this might be the last time we talk.

“I promise. Love you, too.”

I hang up and race to my walk-in. I stare at myself in the mirror, entirely unimpressed with what I’m seeing. I strip off my clothes and scan for the perfect outfit.

Too dressy and it’ll be obvious I’m up to something. Too casual and he’ll think I’m the same person I was when I walked in here.

I finally settle on a baby blue cotton halter dress. I pair it with flip-flops and keep my hair loose. Hopefully, it will strike the right balance. Breezy. Innocent. The kind of person you tell secrets to regarding your various kidnapping adventures.

I hurry through the house and head straight for the lake. But he isn’t there when I walk out.

I move to the edge of the lake, trying not to look too obviously like I'm searching for him. Still nothing, though.

Disappointment pools in my stomach, and it's not just because my plan has been botched.

I try to take solace in the beauty. Failed plan or not, the water looks amazing. It's a deep turquoise blue with emerald green moss growing along the fringes of the bank. I slide out of my flip-flops and step into it.

It's warmer than I expected. I'm half-tempted to jump in and soak.

Maybe more than half-tempted, actually. My mission was a bust. I might as well enjoy myself, right?

I glance around surreptitiously, making sure I'm still alone. I could go for a quick dip and have my clothes back on before anyone noticed.

I reach back and start to unzip my dress—when I hear movement just behind me. I glance to the side without actually turning my neck and I see what I missed before, standing amongst the trees.

It's definitely Aleks. Nobody else has shoulders that freaking broad.

I freeze, wondering if I should let on that I know he's watching and zip myself back up. Or...

*Seduce him.*

The voice in my head is growing louder, more confident.

*Seduce him. That's how men like him operate. If he thinks you want him, then maybe he'll give you something in return.*

I feel the adrenaline pump through my body as the voice in my head gets louder. Resisting it is probably in my best interests.

Instead, I do the opposite.

I close my eyes and pull the zip down further.

It's not a conscious decision. I follow my body's urges. Instincts that I didn't even know I had. And once I've made the decision, I commit fully.



I pull my dress down and strip until I'm standing at the edge of the water naked. I know he's still watching, but I pretend to be unaware.

I step into the lake quickly and immerse myself in the water, basking in its silky touch. The sun is warm and the air is soft, quiet, expectant.

When I pop up again, I feel more adrenaline lance down my spine. I didn't expect to feel so... empowered. I've never done anything this brave before, and I'm finding the high to be more than a little addicting.

Maybe that's why, when Aleks steps into the light, I meet his eyes without the slightest bit of self-consciousness.

He moves forward, his eyes locked on mine, and leans against the big ash tree crooked over the edge of the lake.

"I couldn't help myself," I explain in a sultry voice like a 1960s detective movie dame. "The water looked irresistible."

"I don't blame you," he says. "I've done the same in the past."

"Well, sorry to encroach on your sacred space," I say sarcastically. "I'm sure you have fond memories of all the girls you've brought to skinny dip."

"Apology accepted. I like this view the best of them all."

I wince as an uncomfortably intense rush of exhilaration powers through me. The way he's looking, the way he's licking his lips... he's twenty yards away and it's still the most erotic thing he's ever done.

But I can't show him that. *Keep up the act. Play your role.*

So I look around at the water and crinkle my nose. "Well, then maybe I'm not so sure I should be in here. I bet there's unspeakable things floating around in these waters."

"I wish I could deny that."

I narrow my eyes at him. "You're disgusting."

"Don't worry, *moya zhena*," he says. "I haven't brought anyone around since I married you."

He's teasing me. I can't take anything he says seriously. But for some reason, those words comfort me.

"I'm sure that'll change."

I wait for more reassurance, but he gives me none. I shouldn't care. We're not really married. This isn't real.

But my heart beats angrily even as I think about the possibility of another woman.

"Got you worried there, darling?"

He's looking at me with his crooked smile and one wickedly arched eyebrow. That smirk conveys his intentions perfectly: he's toying with me. He's having some fun at my expense.

Well, fine. He wants to play?

Let's play.

## ALEKS

I can see her collarbones and the vague shape of her breasts through the rippling water, but nothing else. Her dark hair is smoothed back and floating along in the water behind her.

She looks phenomenal. Like a wet dream come true.

But I'm not about to push this little experiment she's trying. She wants something from me? Then she's going to have to work for it.

I wasn't lying about the women I used to bring here. More than once, I had multiple women in the water with me. This lake has some stories to tell.

So why do I feel like I'd trade every single one of those repetitive memories just to watch Olivia swim around in some ill-advised seduction play? Perhaps it's for the best for both of us that Olivia's own personality keeps getting in the way of her efforts.

She thrashes suddenly and screams. "What the hell was that?"

I snort with laughter. "Probably just the eels saying hello."

"*Eels?* Are you serious?"

"You tell me."

She takes a deep breath, but keeps her eyes on the water. It's distracting from her flirting, but I don't mind that her attention is elsewhere.

Olivia is sexiest when she isn't trying.

But I doubt many men have told her so. A shame, really—to have a woman like Olivia and no idea what to do with her. How to mold her. How to bend her. How to break her.

Satisfied that no other creatures from below are lurking just out of sight, Olivia turns her gaze back to me. “So as I was saying—uh... wait, what was I saying?”

“You were making a point,” I tell her. “Poorly.”

She glares at me. “We both know I'm just the placeholder wife. You'll divorce me in a year and replace me with some blonde bimbo with big tits and no gag reflex.”

I smile. “Sounds like my kind of woman.”

But a voice inside my head begs to disagree. *Your kind of woman is swimming naked in the lake right in front of you*, it says.

I ruthlessly snuff it out.

Although that gets slightly harder when Olivia drifts a few yards closer to the shore. Up here, I can see the dark circles of her nipples, the curve of her hip beneath the surface.

My cock strains in my pants.

“Have you ever been in love?” she blurts suddenly.

I chuckle. “Have you?”

She wrinkles her nose. “Of course.”

“Why didn't it work out?”

She stops short and sinks back below the water, like it's easier to lie to me if I can't see all of her. “It... it just wasn't right.”

“Then how could it have been love?”

“What are you, some sort of relationship expert?”

“You’re the one who asked.”

“Love doesn’t always have to be hot and passionate and explosive, you know?” she says. “Sometimes, love feels different. It’s more... stable. Safe. Comforting.”

“Boring, you mean.”

“No! Not boring. Just—”

“Monotonous?”

“I’d say dependable.”

“By which you mean tedious.”

She narrows her eyes into slits. “What’s wrong with a relationship you can trust? The whole ‘passionate love affair’ thing—it’s so overrated. Cliché, really.”

“What you’re describing is not love, Olivia. You’re talking about a safety net. If you loved someone, you’d do anything for them. Live for them. Kill for them. Die for them.”

She looks taken aback. “I cared about the men I dated.”

“Not enough to stay, though.”

She frowns, thinking about it. “I just... I guess I wanted something different for myself.”

“Excitement, perhaps?” I suggest. “Passion? Lust? Desire?”

“Those things will only get you into trouble,” she says with a subtle tremor in her voice.

“The way they got you into trouble with me?”

“What makes you think I felt any of that for you?”

“Because you’re a social recluse who managed to convince herself to have sex with a stranger in the bathroom of an airplane,” I tell her. “You wouldn’t have risked stepping out of your comfort zone if you didn’t truly want it.”

I can see that she's not happy with my logic. Because she knows she can't argue with it.

But this conversation is working in my favor. She's so involved now that she's forgotten to be modest. She's walked herself out of the lake so far that I can see her breasts and the flat plane of her stomach.

"Okay, fine, congratulations," she snaps. "You successfully seduced me. Are you proud? Want a medal?"

"If you're offering."

She rolls her eyes. "Right. Stupid question."

When my eyes dip down to her breasts, I see that her nipples are hard points now. "Getting cold?" I ask wickedly.

She darts back beneath the water and scowls at me. "Don't you have someplace to be?"

"Why would I leave now?" I ask. "When you so thoughtfully stripped naked and got into that lake just for me?"

"I did *not* do anything for you."

"Oh, please, Olivia. Choose something better to lie about. You knew I was here."

"I... I did not."

I stare at her, my smile spreading as her frustration builds. "Somehow, I don't believe you."

"You think you know everything!"

I shrug. "I *know* I know everything."

She's shivering now, though the lake and the day are both warm. Maybe it's my presence that does it to her.

"You are cold," I comment. "You shouldn't linger in there or you'll get sick."

"Are you going to turn around while I get out?" she asks.

“Not a chance in hell, *kiska*.”

“Asshole.”

I smile. “I’ve seen you naked before, Olivia. This won’t be new or spectacular for me.”

The voice in my head tolls again: *Liar. Liar. Liar.*

I know my words are harsh, but they have a purpose. She needs to learn the rules if she wants to play the game.

She’s getting better, though. Little by little. Her face falls the way it always has when I treat her cruelly, but she schools her expression quickly into indifference.

Then she wades through the water towards me. I push myself off the tree and take a few steps closer. The moment I see her breasts come out of the water, rivulets pouring around her chest and dripping down her flat stomach, electric desire tears through me.

Then I see the perfect V between her legs. Her slim thighs wobble a little as she steps out of the lake and tiptoes across the bank.

She moves quickly, reaching for the dress that she discarded on the grass and holding it over herself.

“Let me know if you need a hand,” I drawl.

She ignores me and pulls on her panties. They’re simple white cotton, but somehow she manages to make them the sexiest lingerie I’ve ever seen.

She shrugs into the dress afterwards, though the water on her skin immediately starts to turn it see-through. I wonder how long it’ll take her to realize.

“What are you smirking about?” she demands.

I shrug. “Just appreciating the show.”

She blushes, but tries to hide it behind a scowl. “Like I said—asshole.”

“I am curious as to what brought it on, though. Is there something you want from me, Olivia?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Okay then. Since you’ve gone gun shy on me, I’ll tell you what I want.”

She tenses immediately. “What do you want?”

“I want you to make a call to your brother,” I say. “A casual call, so that he doesn’t suspect I’m the one who put you up to it.”

She frowns. “Why?”

“I need information on the investigation.”

“How many times do we have to go over this? He’s not going to disclose that kind of stuff to me.”

“I think he will,” I demur. “Especially because you’ve been calling him regularly, haven’t you?”

Her eyes go wide with realization. “That’s why you allowed the calls,” she gasps. “So that Rob wouldn’t suspect anything when I called him up and started asking questions about the FBI.”

“I never do anything without a good reason.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not doing that.”

“As a matter of fact, you will do it,” I snarl, pulling out my phone and handing it to her. “And you’ll do it right fucking now.”

She stares at me, her nipples hard as rock and poking through her soaked dress. But I don’t think she’s even registering the cold anymore. She’s wondering how she can talk to her brother and alert him to the fact that I’m listening in on their entire conversation.

“You’re really going to make me do this?” she asks finally.

“Put it on speakerphone.”



She takes a deep breath and dials Rob's number. I can see the anxiety on her face the moment it rings. On the second unanswered ring, she cuts the line.

"He must be busy."

"Try again."

"But—"

"Now."

She meets my gaze for an endless few seconds before she caves and re-dials. Three rings and he picks up, his tone cold and business-like.

"Agent Lawrence."

"Rob?"

"Liv," he says, dropping the formal tone. "Is everything alright?"

"Of course, of course, everything's fine," she says, eyeing me warily. "I... I just... wanted to talk. Are you free?"

She's hoping he'll say he isn't, but he disappoints her instantly. "Of course."

I take a step towards her and grab her arm, a gentle reminder that she needs to keep to her end of the bargain. Goosebumps prickle her skin, but she doesn't try to get out from under me.

"How are things, uh... going?" she asks. "Like, with work."

"Slowly," he sighs. "The Bureau is losing interest in pursuing this investigation."

"Are you serious?" she blurts out, before remembering who she's with.

"But I'm not going to give up that easily, Liv. Especially after what you—"

"It's fine," she blurts. "I'm fine."

I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes. Does she really think I don't know about the scarf? Does she really think anything happens in this fucking house without me knowing about it?

“Where are you now?” Rob asks.

“In the garden.”

“By yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” he says, his tone flatlining for a moment, before it picks up again. “I am a little busy at the moment, Liv.”

“Okay, no worries. I’ll call later.”

“Goodb—” The word is cut off by her hanging up too quickly.

She passes the phone back to me, trying to look as innocent as possible. “There,” she says. “I did what you asked.”

“Did you?” I ask. “Because all I heard was you giving your brother the tip-off.”

“Listen, I—”

Before she can go on, I reach out, grab her arm, and yank her towards me. She slams against my chest with a wet slap and a cry.

“What do you take me for?” I demand. “What kind of idiot do you think I am?”

“I did what you asked!”

“Careful, *kiska*. You don’t want to piss me off.”

“Ow,” she winces as my grip on her arm tightens. “You’re hurting me.”

It’s distracting, the way her nipples are rubbing up against me. But I suppress my desire for her and instead let her see the don I must be.

“Your phone line will be disconnected starting today,” I tell her. “No more family chats for you.”

Her eyes go wide with shock. “What? No! You can’t do that!”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

I push her hand away and she stumbles backwards. As much as I want to stay and undress her with my eyes, then my hands, I turn and start walking away.

“Aleks! You can’t do this.”

“I already have.”

“Please!” she cries, forcing me to a standstill. “Please, I have to be able to talk to them.”

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you pissed me off.”

“I did what you asked me to do!”

“Bullshit. You want me to hold up my end of the bargain? Then you’ve got to hold up your end, too. Otherwise, get used to being Mrs. Makarova.”

Her eyes go wide with alarm, but I’m not about to take back the threat. I turn and walk away, and as I go, I realize that, deep down...

Part of me is hoping she’ll fail.

## OLIVIA

The phone has been disconnected for twenty-four hours now.

I've spent most of that time staring at it, checking it incessantly, hoping that he'll have a change of heart and restore the connection.

Once my hope well and truly dies, however, I decide to take my art supplies and head down to the edge of the lake to draw.

I haven't seen Aleks since he left me standing, wet and shivering, by the water.

He saw right through my seduction attempts. And the humiliation was only made worse by the fact that he wasn't affected in the slightest.

Sure, he looked. Maybe he even admired my body. But he didn't lose his mind with lust. Seeing me naked was no different than any of the hundreds of other naked women that have waltzed across his path.

At least he didn't rescind my freedom. I can still move about the compound as I choose. But yesterday was a lesson in the limits of his tolerance.

The more I continue to defy him, the more difficult he can make my life. This time, it was the phone connection. Next time, I could end up locked in my room for good.

The water ripples with the light breeze in the air. I sit under the ash tree, right where he stood yesterday, watching me.

Most artists sitting in front of a view like this would sketch the landscape, but that's never been how I work best. For me, it's instinctive. I do my best work when I shut my brain off and stop thinking so damn hard.

I start sketching without thought, allowing my pencil to move across the paper on its own. And eventually, images begin to form.

I'm so involved in my drawing that it takes a few seconds for the strange scraping sound coming from behind me to catch my attention.

I glance up and see a young man pushing a wheelchair down the path. An older man is sitting in it. He's hunched to one side, so it's difficult to see his face in the shadows.

*Who could that possibly be?*

The caretaker catches sight of me as he pulls up to the lake. He's dressed in a nurse's white uniform, with a strong jaw and an easy smile.

"Oh, hello," he says, turning that smile on me. "Didn't even see you there. We're not disturbing you, are we?"

I put my drawing aside and get to my feet. I notice the old man's eyes veer towards me. It's obvious he can't move his neck. I move into his line of vision so that he doesn't have to strain.

"No, you're not," I reassure him. "I was just doodling."

"You're an artist?"

"Cartoonist," I correct.

"Isn't that the same thing?"

I smile. "I think so, but it depends on who you ask. Not everyone regards cartoonists as real artists."

"Well, I'd call you an artist," he says.

"You haven't seen my work yet."

He smiles. "I'd sure love to."

I grin back, warming to him immediately. Shocking how three seconds of genuine human affection can be so moving when I've been starved of it since Aleks took me.

"That's really sweet of you...?"

"Oh, shoot! Sorry." He juts out a hand to shake. "I'm Mike," he says. "And this here is Don Makarova."

"Don Makarova?" I repeat. "I think you've got your wires crossed. Don Makarova is the surly asshole who owns this compound."

Mike raises his eyebrows, but I can see that he's fighting a smile. "You're talking about Mr. Aleksandr," he says. "This is..."

"Oh my God," I gasp when it finally clicks. "Aleks's father."

Mike nods. "Bingo."

And I just called his son an asshole. Right to his face, no less. I study the man's features, searching for annoyance, anger, or insult.

But there's not much expression there at all. His face is a desert, totally devoid of emotion.

His eyes, though? Those are bright, sharp, and searching.

And they're fixed right on me.

"I'm sorry about the asshole comment. I didn't mean it." I frown the moment I start stumbling over my words. "You know what, scratch that. He is an asshole. Just... maybe don't tell him that. I'm already in deep shit with him as it is, and—I mean, not that I care, but he... dammit."

"Don't worry." Mike laughs and pats the old man's shoulder. "Your secret's safe with us. Right, boss?"

The old man blinks twice and mumbles something that I don't catch. His speech is slurred, near-silent.

Whatever he says, though, Mike seems to understand. He chuckles and nods. "Right."

“What did he say?” I ask, moving closer.

“He said that Mr. Aleksandr didn’t inherit any of his charm.”

I can’t help laughing, even though this man’s spawn is the cause of my worst nightmares. “It’s very nice to meet you, Don Makarova.”

He slurs out something else and Mike translates for him. “He wants you to call him Vlad.”

“Vlad?”

“It’s a nickname,” Mike explains. “I think that means he likes you.”

I nod, taking note of the state-of-the-art wheelchair. “Would it be rude to ask what happened?”

“A stroke,” Mike explains with crisp professionalism. “Years ago. It left him paralyzed on one side of his body. He can still move the other half, though. And he’s as sharp as ever.” He wheels Vlad forward so that he’s sitting right in front of the lake. “He likes coming here in the evenings. It’s peaceful. Better than staring at the damn ceiling day in and day out.”

“It is,” I agree. I move a little closer to Mike and lower my voice. “Um... do you guys live on the grounds?”

“We do,” Mike says. “Well, he does. Me, too, most of the time, but I have a few days off every month. Vlad has a second caretaker come in on those days.”

Vlad says something else. Mike leans in to hear him out. He chuckles again when he straightens. “He’s not a fan of his second caretaker.”

“No?”

“She doesn’t have the same laidback vibe with him that I do. Isn’t that right, boss?”

Vince mumbles something else, and this time, I catch most of it. “*You were the best out of the worst bunch of morons I ever saw.*”

Mike just looks at me and shrugs, totally unfazed. “You can guess where his son got the asshole gene.”

I'm a little surprised that Mike can get away with that kind of comment, but Vlad doesn't seem to mind. Or maybe it's more about the fact that he can't afford to mind.

"So you're the new bride, then?" Mike asks conversationally as he takes a seat on the grass next to Vlad.

I wince as I join him. "You heard."

"Everyone who lives in this house has heard."

"Great," I mumble. "Just so you know, it's not a real marriage. I'm definitely not a bride. I'm here under duress."

"Ah."

I look at him, wondering if maybe I've found the ally I need.

He dispels that notion quickly. "Uh-oh, stop looking at me like that."

I frown. "Like what?"

"Like I might be able to help you," he says. "I can't. And what's more, I won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not about to cross the big guy," he says. "No one crosses the Bratva and lives to tell the tale. I'm smart enough not to try."

I sigh and look back towards the lake. "Guess this place is full of assholes."

He smiles sympathetically. "Harsh but fair. Sorry to disappoint."

"I'm used to it by now. Men always disappoint."

He chuckles a little, but takes my anger in stride. "I may not be able to be your way out," he says. "But I can be your friend. We both can."

"Guess I can't afford to turn down a friend," I say. "They're running in short supply these days."

He throws me a guilty smile. "Great. So now that we're friends, would you mind doing me a favor?"



“Seriously?” I say. “You’re gonna say no to helping me and then ask for a favor?”

He gives me a sheepish grin. “It’s a very small favor.”

“Fine. Let me hear it.”

“I need to pee,” he says. “Could you stay here with him until I get back?”

“I suppose so,” I sigh melodramatically. “If I must.”

“Great, thanks. Back in a flash.”

He jogs back up the path and I’m left looking over at the don. Or rather, the ex-don. Don emeritus? Not sure how the titles work around here.

It blows my mind that Aleks never once mentioned to me the fact that his father was alive and well. Okay, not exactly well. But he’s still alive.

Not all of us are so lucky.

“I thought you were dead,” I tell him. “I mean, no offense or anything—it’s just that nobody mentioned that you were alive. I figured that, since Aleks was don, that would automatically mean you were... well, you know.”

He looks at me with pale eyes that are neither blue nor gray. Just a strange, in-between color that leaves me feeling unsettled. Skewered, in the strangest way. I can imagine how intimidating he would have been in the prime of his life.

He mumbles something, but I don’t quite catch it. I move a little closer. “Can you repeat that again?” I ask. “Slowly.”

I don’t hear much else the second time either, but I do catch the word “brunette” and “son.”

“Your son likes brunettes?” I parrot back to him.

He jerks his head forward half an inch. I take that as a nod.

“Well, trust me,” I mutter, “that’s not why he married me. It’s all part of his evil mastermind plan to thwart my brother’s attempt at catching him for his crimes. Not to get too dramatic or whatever.”

I notice an edge of surprise work its way up one half of his face.

“So I’m stuck here until your son gets what he wants,” I continue. “Which I’m sure happens all the damn time. Was it like that for you, too? When you were in charge?”

He jerks his head forward again.

I nod. “Thought so. Must be nice.”

“It... was,” he croaks.

“Hey!” I say. “I understood that.”

One arm rises slightly and drops. “Used... to... me.”

I grin. “Well, I’m a fast learner.”

It looks for a moment like he’s smiling. The simple gesture tugs on my heart strings. I wonder if this is what my father would have been relegated to if he had survived his heart attack.

He would’ve hated it, but having him in a wheelchair would be better than not having him at all. It’s probably a selfish thought on my part. And yet I can’t deny that it feels true.

“My father died about seven years ago now,” I tell him softly.

His eyes are on me, so I know he’s listening. Perceptive. Awake.

“We were really close,” I continue. “I mean, we all were, my whole family. But my dad and I, we had a special relationship. Everyone always assumed I was an accident because I was born ten years after my sister, but Dad never let me believe that. He’d sit with me in the garden and we’d do some project or the other and he’d tell me about how I came to be born.”

I haven’t thought about the story since he died. It hurt too much to remember those sun-soaked days with him. The familiar rasp of his voice. The way he’d laugh in all the same spots during the telling.

But sitting here with Vlad at the edge of a lake that never seems to end, it feels okay to go back to that memory. It feels safe.

“Dad was the one who wanted another child. Mom felt like she was done, but he told her that they had more parenting left in them. So she finally caved after a year of nagging. He used to call me his bonus child. He said he’d never had a best friend growing up, so he figured he’d just make one.”

I swipe at my watery eyes.

“He was the best dad in the world,” I whisper. “I never had any doubt that I was the most important part of his life.”

I look at Vlad, whose expression is hard to read, and not just because of his half-paralyzed face. He has Aleks's reservedness. His ability to hide any and all emotion so that the other person has no idea where they stand.

“What was Aleks like?” I ask on a whim. “As a child?”

Vince breathes raggedly. “He was... never... much... of a... ch-child...”

“Yeah, I get that,” I say. “I can’t imagine him running around in this garden, doing kid stuff. He told me you taught him to fight and shoot as soon as he could walk.”

“Life... skills...”

I snort. “Maybe if you’re in the Bratva. Did he even have a choice?”

His head jerks again, but in the opposite direction.

That’s a no.

“Do you regret not giving him one?”

“Regret... is... a... waste...”

“Normal people live with it all the time, though. I know I do.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I repeat. “Because, well... I could have chosen differently. I could have—I dunno, saved my dad, maybe. Instead, I went to a party so I could pine after a boy who ended up making out with my best friend just to hurt my feelings. Reminds me of someone else I know, actually.”

“You have... a type...”

I frown. “I do not!”

Then I catch his tone and realize: he’s teasing me.

I shake my head. “Mike’s right: I do see where Aleks gets it from.”

Vince makes a sound that alarms me at first. Like a blender grinding up concrete. It takes me a moment before I see it for what it is: laughter.

My worry melts and I feel warmth spread through my chest instead.

I’m not quite sure, because of course, you can’t be sure of anything in any life, especially not mine.

But this may be the start of a beautiful friendship.

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**ALEKS**

“It doesn’t look like he’s stopping the investigation after all,” Demyan informs me. “Our back channels say everyone is scoping us out—local PD, feds, everyone in between. The fucking Fish and Wildlife service probably has some agents detailed to our case. Two Bratva locations in particular have been flagged.”

“Not surprised,” I say. “She told him about the fucking scarf.”

“Question is, why didn’t you tell the owner of the scarf?” Demyan asks.

I roll my eyes. “She’s got enough on her plate.”

“In another world, the two of you would be the perfect couple, wouldn’t you?”

For the second time in as many seconds, I roll my eyes. “Moving on. Which spots got flagged?”

“Don’t duck the question. The warehouses on Daley Street and Scottswick.”

“They think I’m going to be hiding kidnapped women *there*?” I snort. “I’d have to be the world’s biggest idiot.”

“Are you surprised? You are the big, bad woman stealer.”

“Apparently, that’s a popular opinion.”

“Good thing you don’t care about other people’s opinions,” he says.

“True. But I care about the consequences that come from their opinions.”

“The ol’ Catch-22 in action. How are you going to deal with this?”

I lean back in my seat. “Put pressure on Lawrence. He’s going to have to cave at some point or else he’s compromising his sister’s safety.”

“Are you sure you can bring yourself to hurt her?” Demyan asks.

“I can bring myself to do anything,” I snap. Then I relent. “But I don’t need to hurt her. No, this is a psychological game. One I’m going to win.”

“She’s not the shrinking violet she seems to be though,” Demyan warns. “Girl’s got some spunk.”

“You noticed, have you?”

“Nothing gets past me, brother,” he says, tapping his forehead. “I’ve also noticed something else.”

I frown. “Do I even want to know?”

He gestures past me towards the lake. I can only see a sliver of it from our vantage point, but the wheels of my father’s wheelchair are shining bright under the slanted sunlight.

The person sitting next to him is not Mike, however. I can see her long brown hair flowing down her back. She’s on the grass beside him, her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them.

They’re cute, I must admit. Charmingly wholesome.

As if to complete the picture, Olivia tips her head back and laughs.

“Look at that,” Demyan says with a wry smirk. “Your wife and your father are getting along. It’s enough to make a guy tear up.”

“Where the fuck is Mark?”

“You mean Mike? That handsome devil is probably hitting on Melissa.”

“Come again?” I growl.

Demyan cackles. “You really don’t pay attention to your staff, do you?”

“That’s what I pay you for.”

“Apparently, he and Melissa are having a little... thing.”

“Jesus,” I grimace. “That is not what I pay him for.”

“So then fire the horny devil.”

“I would love to. Except he’s the only one that gets along with my father,” I say. “So he’s staying.”

“Fire Melissa, then?”

I throw my hands up in the air. “It’s not worth the breath it would take to do it. What they do is their business, anyway. I don’t give a shit—as long as their drama doesn’t bleed into the work. Which it is right now.”

“Technically, your father’s being taken care of at the moment.”

“I don’t need the two of them talking.”

“Why not?” Demyan asks, genuinely curious.

I glare at him. “It’s too close. She doesn’t need to ingratiate herself into my household. She’s not really my wife, after all.”

“Not until you fuck her within the sanctity of your marriage vows, she’s not.”

“Vows?” I snort. “Those vows are worthless. My vows are written in fucking blood.”

“Oh, how romantic!” Demyan claps his hands with sarcastic fake glee like a schoolgirl. “Tell Olivia that—she’ll love it.”

I shove him away from me and start down the stone steps towards the lake edge. I’ve had more than my dose of Demyan for the day.

“Hey, what are you gonna do?” he shouts out after me.

I don’t bother to answer. I just keep going until I reach the lake.

Neither one of them notices me until I’m right on top of them. Of course, Father doesn’t move, but his eyes land on me instantly.

Olivia tenses, but she stays in her spot.

“Where the fuck is Mike?” I snarl.

“He... he went to the bathroom,” she stammers. “But, um... that was a while ago now.”

“Go get him,” I order her. “Now.”

Her eyes narrow immediately as she slowly gets to her feet. “I’m busy, actually. And also, you don’t have the right to boss me around. I’m not your servant.”

I’ve learned to read my father’s expressions over the years since his stroke. I’ve learned to read his body language, too. It may be subtle—practically nonexistent to the untrained eye—but when you spend enough time with someone, you start to develop other languages.

And right now, he’s amused.

“You’re right about that. You’re not my servant. You’re my property.”

“Excuse me?” she spits. Her eyes are aflame, fists clenched, cheeks scarlet with anger.

“You will—”

Before I can finish my sentence, I hear Mike running down the path towards us. He’s nervous, but he’s trying to be casual about it, slowing to a walk and sticking his hands in his pocket as he approaches.

“Hey, everyone—wow, it turned into a party out here! Sorry, I—”

“Where were you?” I demand.

He comes to a stop, but he refuses to meet me in the eyes. “I... I was just... using the restroom.”

“Here’s a tip: next time, try doing it without shoving your cock in a maid first. It might go a little faster.”

His eyes go wide with guilt and he drops his gaze immediately. “I’m sorry, sir. I... it won’t happen again.”



“Get out of my sight,” I snap. “And take him with you. It’s cold out and he needs another blanket.”

Mike jumps into action, leaving little time for Father to say his goodbyes. He mumbles something that Mike doesn’t bother translating. The nurse just gives Olivia an awkward nod and embarks back up the path.

“Was that necessary?” she explodes the minute they’re out of earshot.

“I’d say so.”

“What even was that about?” she demands. “We were enjoying a peaceful chat by the lake and—”

“There’s no need for ‘peaceful chats’ about anything with my father, Olivia,” I say. “I expect you to keep to yourself and not involve yourself in my affairs.”

“You’re kidding. I know you’re kidding. Tell me you’re kidding.”

I don’t answer immediately. She takes a step towards me and pushes her finger into my chest. “It’s because I’m getting too close to your life, isn’t it? You’re scared that I’ll find out things you don’t want me to know. You’re terrified that I’ll learn what’s behind that big, scary mask you wear all the time.”

I scowl down at her. “The last man who poked me in the chest lost his finger. Then his head.”

She doesn’t back off, though she trembles from head to toe. She just stands her ground and stares up at me. “Go ahead then. Take my finger, take my head, I don’t give a shit. You’ve taken everything else already.”

I can tell by the way her chest is rising and falling that she’s not used to this kind of anger. No one has ever pushed her this far.

But now that she’s unlocked this part of herself, she’s having trouble reining it in.

“Is that what you want, little lamb?” I murmur. “You want me to start taking body parts?”

She nods fiercely. “Like I said, go right ahead.”

I’ve seen that expression before. It’s false bravado. And it’s going to start wearing off soon. She’s high on adrenaline right now and the anger is clouding her judgment. But the moment it starts to fade, so will all her courage.

I take another step forward. Despite her best efforts, she finds herself caught between me and the trunk of the ash. I put one hand on the tree and lean in.

“Don’t you see, Olivia? I’ve already taken what I need from you. I took your body the first time I ever saw you. Actually, that’s not quite true. You gave it to me before I ever even needed to ask.”

Her hand lashes out in a slap aiming for my face, but I stop her before she has a chance to strike me. I twist her hand back just as lightning zig-zags through the sky. A storm rolled in when I wasn’t paying attention. An ugly, violent storm.

How fitting.

“Nothing to say now?” I press. “Have you run out of arguments, Olivia?”

She grits her teeth and tries to rip free from my grip, but I’m not about to let her go anytime soon.

Resisting her has been more difficult than I anticipated. Every time I’ve ever wanted a woman, I’ve had her. Then the desire fades.

But with Olivia, it’s different. My craving for her has only increased with proximity. There’s something about those soft brown eyes and the innocence that still clings to her.

She’s begging to be ruined.

And I’m just the man to do it to her.

“I have no one here,” she whispers. Her voice quivers, but it’s shot through with steel at the same time. “The only people who have been kind to me are your parents.”

I lean in a little, forcing her back against the trunk. “Do you think about the day we met, Olivia?”

She’s silent for a long time. More lightning cracks through the sky, followed by the low rumbling of encroaching thunder. She doesn’t even seem to register when the first few drops of rain fall on us through the leaves.

“Yes,” she whispers.

“What do you think about?”

I can practically hear her heartbeat thudding frantically against her chest. I press my palm against it to feel it. It reverberates through me like the steady thrum of drums.

“I think about the kiss. The first one, when we were in the lounge in the airport. I wanted it so bad. I’ve never felt that before. I’ve never wanted something that much.”

“And how did it feel when you got it?”

She shakes her head, trying to break eye contact.

But I grab her chin and force her eyes to mine. “No,” I growl. “You will look at me. Now, answer the question. How did you feel?”

“I felt... strange. Like I was floating out of my body.”

Rain patters against the leaves above us, but neither one of us moves.

“You still want me,” I tell her softly. “But you’re afraid.”

She nods slowly, not even bothering to fight back anymore. “Men like you... you’ll just use me and discard me. You’ve said as much yourself. For a year, I’m the most valuable thing in your world. And the day that year ends, I’m worthless.”

“Why worry about the future when you have now?”

She shakes her head and reaches up to push my hand away from her face. But instead, her fingers become entangled with mine.

“Because I’m not like you,” she whispers.

“No,” I agree. “You’re not like me.”

*Maybe that’s why I can’t get you out of my head.*

Her fingers are still entwined in mine. When she shivers, I feel it run through her entire body and then mine in turn.

“You’re going to destroy me,” she murmurs.

“Only if you let me.”

Confusion passes over her face. She has no idea what I mean. She doesn’t have the tools or the experience to understand.

Which means she’ll have to learn the hard way.

I push off the tree and leave her huddled against the tree trunk. When I take one slow step backwards, the curtain of rain swallows me up.

Olivia watches me the whole time, her eyes hungry and desperate. If I were the kind of man who wore my heart on my sleeve, she’d see that I feel the same. That this game we’re playing has grown far more tense than I ever anticipated.

That I am addicted to the woman I swore to break.

But despite the aching need pounding through me right now, I refuse to give in. I refuse to yield. I refuse to bend.

If she wants this, she’ll have to come to me.

And when I take one last look into her heartbroken eyes, I see my answer.

*She will.*

## OLIVIA

I will not betray my family.

But the devil in front of me has eyes that beckon.

It's more than just Aleks's masculine beauty. It's his confidence, his strength, his power. It's everything that I've dreamed of while lying in bed next to the quiet, boring men I thought were all I was allowed to ask for.

I denied it to Mia before, but of course I chose safe men. Because safe is easy. Safe is safe.

Rain batters against him, soaking through his shirt. The contours of his chest become more visible through the wet fabric. His broad shoulders. His chiseled chest.

But it's hard to focus on anything with his predatory eyes on me.

"Don't flatter yourself that I want you," I say, trying to infuse strength into my tone. "It doesn't mean anything. It won't last long."

"That's what I thought, too," he rasps somberly. "But I can't stop fucking wanting you."

My jaw almost drops. It might be the first time he's ever said anything of the sort. Ever admitted that the thoughts in my head aren't crazy.

*This* might be crazy, yes—this mad passion, this unreasonable obsession, this stupid fake marriage—but I'm not crazy for thinking it exists. It's real.

But I would be crazy if I let it continue.

I should leave. Run, don't walk. The rain is cold and I'm starting to shiver. But I don't want to turn my back on him.

I step out from under the shelter of the tree. "Jesus," I gasp, shivering. "The rain is freezing. Aren't you cold?"

He shakes his head. "They train it out of you."

"The cold?"

"The feeling."

I frown. "What does that mean?"

"It means you should go inside," he sighs. "Before you get sick."

"And I suppose you don't catch colds, do you?" I ask. "That'd be too human for you."

"They train that out of you, too."

I shake my head in disbelief. "Sometimes, you don't seem real to me."

"I feel the exact same about you."

"Like that!" I exclaim. "What the hell does that mean? Who says cryptic things like that every second of every goddamn day?"

Aleks just sighs again. "Come," he says. "Let's go back."

We walk up the path towards the house in silence. I try to act like the chill isn't bothering me. I try to be immune, just like Aleks. But my teeth are chattering by the time we get inside.

The moment the door is shut, Aleks starts stripping down. He removes his shirt first, discarding it on his tiled floors. Then he starts unbuttoning his pants.

"What are you doing?" I ask in alarm.

"What does it look like I'm doing? You better get out of those clothes, too."

“I’ll wait,” I say. “You do realize the maids are around, don’t you?”

He raises his eyebrows. “It’s nothing they haven’t seen before.”

I frown despite myself.

He notices. “Something wrong, Olivia?”

“Of course not,” I snap. “I don’t care who’s seen you naked. It’s none of my business anyway.”

“Then why do you look like a jealous wife?”

My eyes fall to his boxer briefs, but I pull them up almost immediately. He’s well-endowed to begin with, but with soaking wet briefs... well, it makes concentrating on the task at hand really hard. No pun intended.

“I am not jealous. Nor am I your wife, remember? Not in any way that matters.”

He pauses, still dripping rain, and fixes me with a somber, dark-eyed look. “You’re mine in every way that matters, Olivia Makarova.”

I recoil, as if from the words themselves—right in time to get whacked in the back of the head with the as a maid comes bustling through. She screams, not expecting us.

“Oh! I am so sorry, sir—”

“Don’t worry, Megan,” he says with a familiarity that makes my skin crawl. “Just got caught in the downpour.”

“I’ll get you something to dry off with, sir.”

She heads out without so much as acknowledging me. We stand in awkward silence—awkward for me, at least—until she reappears with a single fluffy white towel. I’m the one who needs it more, seeing as how I’m still dressed in this wet rag, but she hands it over to Aleks.

“Thank you, Megan,” he says as he takes it. “You can go.”

“Oh. Are you sure? Can I get you anything else?”

“No, thank you. Mrs. Makarova and I will be just fine.”

Megan bites seductively at her lip for an unnecessarily long time before finally curtsying—*people still do that?*—and going back out the way she came without ever bothering to spare a glance in my direction.

Aleks dabs at himself, then offers the towel to me. I cross my arms and refuse it. Stubborn, I know, but I don’t want his pity or his condescension.

He just shrugs and slings it on the back of a nearby chair.

I open my mouth to tell him not to call me “Mrs. Makarova” ever again. What comes out instead is, “Have you fucked her?”

Aleks laughs as if I said something funny. “Would it matter to you if I had?”

“No,” I lie. “Just curious. Answer the question.”

I hate that I care. I hate that I’m pushing this stupid topic when he’s obviously not interested in giving me a straight answer.

But something about the girl’s body language gives up the goose. I know the answer before he says anything.

“Never mind,” I snap. “I don’t give a shit who you’ve fucked in the past.” I hesitate, then add, “But...”

Aleks arches a brow. “But what?”

“But it is my business who you fuck now,” I blurt out.

He must think I’m a damn comedian, because he laughs again. “Is that so, little lamb?”

“You stole me away from my life and locked me up here in the midst of yours. I don’t have a career anymore because of you. I don’t have a shot at a love life, either. Because of *you*. So if I have to suffer through this year from hell, then you have to make sacrifices, too. I want compensation.”

“Name your price.”

“If I don’t get to have sex... then neither do you.”



He considers that for a moment. “Is fucking a big priority for you, *kiska*? Because I can fix that. Simply say the word.”

“That’s not what I want,” I say with a shudder—not because I don’t want that, but because of just how badly I do. “I just want this to be... fair.”

“You’re not in much of a position to enforce any demands,” he drawls.

“Argh!” I shriek, wanting to tear my hair out. He makes me feel like I’m short-circuiting. Every emotion at once, anger and frustration and lust and hatred and safety and lo—no, not love. Definitely not love. “You... you are just...”

He waits for me to find the right word, but when I come up blank, he just offers me a sympathetic smile. “There’s only one way I’ll agree to your terms, Olivia.”

I go still, waiting for him to tell me what it’ll cost.

“You have to admit that you want me. Despite everything you know about me,” he says. “I want to hear you tell me the truth.”

I shake my head. “I don’t.”

He looks not mad, but disappointed. “Then I think you need to go back up to your room.”

The way he says it catches my attention. I feel my body shake as I glance to the door that Megan disappeared through. “Why? What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” he says with a shrug. “I think I might just go and see where Megan is.”

My chest rises up and down, up and down. I’m flushed with anger, but I will not sacrifice my pride for his benefit. He’ll probably only laugh in my face, anyway.

And when I feel my bottom lip start to quiver, I know he’s right: it’s time for me to go.

I leave the towel sitting on the armchair and turn my back on him. As I walk away, I wait for him to stop me.

But he doesn't.

**ALEKS**

A FEW DAYS LATER

“Two visits back-to-back,” I remark. “Should I be worried?”

Jennifer winks. “Always. Where’s Demyan?”

“I sent him off to see to some business interests elsewhere.” I pour myself another helping of my strongest whiskey. It was a sleepless night and I need something to take the edge off. “I didn’t want to deal with the two of you again.”

She laughs. “Are you jealous that I’m not flirting with you instead?”

“No, I just have a vested interest in not puking up my breakfast every time Demy tries to be smooth.” I take a sip and sigh as the whiskey burns down my throat.

“I think he’s cute. But agree to disagree. What have you done with the information I gave you the last time I was here?”

“Nothing.”

Her eyes go wide. “Nothing?”

“That’s right.”

“But... why?”

“Because there’s more at play here, and I need to know what before I decide how to respond.”

Jennifer frowns, looking skeptical. But she's smart enough not to push. She leans back on the sofa and curls her bare feet underneath her.

She's wearing cashmere sweats and a matching crop top that reveals her flat, toned belly. Her hair hangs loose around her shoulders. And even though it's midday and she's not planning on going anywhere, she's wearing a little bit of make-up. It's subtle, but I notice.

Probably more so because Olivia doesn't wear anything at all.

"You don't mind me spending a few days here?" she asks.

"This is your home as much as mine."

"Do you say the same to all your other assets?"

"Just you."

"Well, then consider me flattered."

She fidgets with the hem of her sweats. I can tell she wants to bring up the topic, but she's nervous about where it'll lead. She's been careful to avoid it whenever we speak. So far, I've respected her boundaries.

I've never been a spy. I've got too high a profile to be effective at it. Spies have to come from nowhere. They have to disappear once they've gotten what they set out to achieve, bide their time, and resurface as another person entirely. You kill yourself again and again and are then reborn.

It's a brutal line of work.

Jennifer has been in the game for years now. She's successful because she commits. She changes her personality as easily as she changes her hair color.

But she's never forgotten who she is or where she came from.

"How is she?" she asks, losing the battle.

"She's been sick the last few days."

Jennifer raises her eyebrows. "Is she okay?"

“She refused to get out of her wet clothes and caught a cold. Just like I told her she would. She’s confined to her room now.”

“So you haven’t actually seen her?”

“Not for almost a week. It’s been peaceful.”

She gives me a pointed smile. “I’ve heard that you two fight like an old married couple.”

I roll my eyes. “Christ. For all his macho masculinity, Demyan is a gossipy old crone.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “Cut him some slack. He loves you.”

“It’s the only reason I don’t kick his ass on a regular basis.”

“He thinks there’s something going on between the two of you.”

“Jesus,” I groan. “Not you, too.”

She raises her hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m not saying I agree with him. I haven’t actually seen the two of you together. So until then, I’m going to reserve judgment.”

“Consider me flattered,” I drawl, throwing her own words back at her.

“But since that might not happen anytime soon,” she says, “I’m asking you directly: is there something there?”

“No,” I say firmly.

That irritating voice in my head is roaring in protest again. It only knows one word, it seems: *Liar. Liar. Liar.*

I drink more whiskey to drown it out.

Jennifer nods, but I can see she isn’t convinced. “You married her.”

“It was a strategic play.”

She arches her brow. “Indeed. How is that working out for you?”

“These things take time,” I say. “And her brother is a lot more stubborn than I gave him credit for.”

She tenses. “He’s a lot like you in that way, you know.”

I glare at her. “Unfortunately for him, he’s on the wrong damn side.”

“It’s all relative.”

“Is it? Whose side are you on, Jen?”

She glares at me. “Don’t you dare disrespect my loyalty like that, Aleks. You know that I’m on your side. Always have been, always will be.”

I nod. It’s true enough. “It might be time to stop hiding.”

“And blow my cover?” she asks. “No shot. I’ve got too many irons in the fire. I’m not willing to compromise all the work I’ve done in the last year.”

“Forget him, then,” I say. “But Olivia might need to find out the truth.”

“Why?” Jennifer asks. “So that you can prove you’re not the villain she thinks you are?”

“You forget, Jennifer: I know you.”

“And...?”

“And I know why you want to maintain your identity. You don’t want to deal with explanations.”

She wrinkles her nose, but doesn’t deny it.

“You know they call you the blonde vixen,” I remark. “Can’t say that I see it.”

“That’s because I’m not playing the part of the blonde vixen right now,” she says. “I’m just... Jennifer.”

“And what about Isabella?”

She stops short. A muscle in her jaw twitches with tension. “Isabella is dead,” she snarls. “Let’s leave it at that, got it?”

I've kept silent on this for long enough. She's had more than enough time to reconcile with her past.

"You loved her."

She looks down like she doesn't want to be having this conversation. But she wants to argue, too. She wants to fight about it—because she never really put the loss behind her. She never mourned.

"She was... special," Jennifer says quietly. "She was everything I wanted to be. And losing her..."

"It was necessary."

"I know that," she snaps. "But it still hurts."

"Is that why you never talk about her? Is that why you kept the scarf?"

She gets off the sofa and starts pacing in front of me. I sip my whiskey and watch as she tries to work out the pain that she's been carrying around ever since I told her to pull the trigger on Isabella.

At last, she grinds to a halt and turns to me, her eyes wild but sad at the same time. "I know I shouldn't have," she says with a sigh. "You told me to get rid of any trace of her. And I did... mostly. But that scarf was so much a part of her."

"I know."

"Do you know?" she asks. "Do you really?"

"Jennifer," I say slowly, "what are you trying to tell me?"

She meets my eyes for a moment before she looks away. Her body sags with fatigue.

"Nothing," she murmurs. "I'm not saying anything at all."

"You have to move on," I tell her.

"I know," she says. "I've spent the last year trying."

"Any progress?"

“Some,” she admits. “Mostly, it depends on the day. There’s good and there’s bad.”

“Today’s a bad day, huh?”

She nods.

I pick up my glass of whiskey and offer it to her. “Then drink.”

She takes the glass and knocks it back, emptying it one gulp. Her nose scrunches. “Fuck! That’s strong.”

“You’re supposed to sip it, you know. That’s three grand you just chugged.”

“I think we just established I’m having a bad day. You don’t sip on a bad day.” She shivers. “But sweet Jesus, that burns.”

She gets up, taking my glass with her. Then she walks over to the bar and pours herself another.

“You’re not getting this back, just so you know,” she informs me. She sinks onto the couch, takes a sip—slightly smaller this time—and sighs. “Do you ever feel guilty about the men you’ve killed? The families you’ve broken up?”

“No,” I say immediately.

“I wish I could say the same.”

“It’s my fault. I should have pulled you out sooner.”

“You tried,” she points out. “I’m the one who told you I had things under control. It was one year. Who knew it would go that far?”

“You were too good at your job.”

She takes another sip, her eyes softening with memories that I know she hasn’t shared with me. She probably never will, either.

And that’s okay. The games we play in this life are lethal. If they don’t kill us entirely, they at least kill a piece of our souls.

I’m starting to see all the pieces Jennifer has lost.



She's not going to be able to do this for much longer. I know that now. Another few years, tops. It'll be a knives-out fight to get her to see that reality—but then again, I've always loved a good fight.

"I just need a few days here," she tells me. "Then I'll be back in the field."

"I know."

"I'll make sure to avoid her."

I shrug. "That's up to you."

She fixes me with a haunted gaze. "I'll have to explain, Aleks. If I meet her, I'll have to explain. I'll have to tell her what I did... to Isabella. And I can't do that."

"You can. You just don't want to."

She closes her eyes for a moment. "Who would have thought, huh? All the shit I've been through, and *this* is what fucking breaks me. I thought I was immune to emotion."

"All of us succumb to it."

She lifts her head and raises her eyebrows at me. "Even you?"

I scoff. "I'm the exception."

Once again, the voice in my head tolls out ominously.

*Liar.*

*Liar.*

*Liar.*

Jennifer arches her brow once more, as if she can hear that damn voice ringing in my head like a bell. "Yeah, we'll see about that."

The silence stretches on for a few minutes. I watch her carefully. I see the way her jaw stays locked tight like a steel trap. The way her knee bounces frenetically. The way she adjusts the rings on one finger again and again and again.

She is suffering.

Maybe she doesn't have a few years left in this world after all.

"Do you love what you do, Jennifer?" I ask suddenly. She opens her mouth to reply right away, but I hold up a finger to make her pause. "Think about it before you answer."

Her frown deepens and she is quiet for a long moment. Then: "It... it's all I've ever known."

"We'll find something else for you to do."

"Like what?" she asks defensively.

"Live, Jen," I tell her softly. "You'll finally get to live."

She tilts the glass to her lips, drains it once more, and then unwinds off the couch to head for the bar again.

"How about this?" she says over her shoulder. "I'll start living my life when you do."

**OLIVIA**

I look out across the lake from my perch in the garden. I've stayed well clear of it since the confrontation with Aleks three days ago.

But it winks at me from a distance, sunlight glinting off the surface, beckoning me forward.

I ignore it and stare down at my notebook.

The maids don't just bring in food on trays anymore—they bring fresh paper and sharpened pencils, too. And for all that, I've only managed to create a handful of half-assed sketches I'd never in a million years consider submitting to any employer I cared about.

I put my pencil down and study my latest piece. My brain decided to become the space where ideas go to die, so I opted for a landscape. Stupid, boring, obvious. And the art reflects that.

When the gardeners arrived to trim the hedges, I thought I'd take their likenesses. But they're coming out strangely misshapen, and the hedges they're trimming look like hunks of unformed clay.

"Where did my talent go?" I whine.

I'm feeling repulsively sorry for myself. The cold doesn't help matters. My nose is a snot faucet and I have to stop drawing every thirty seconds to hack up a lung.

Talk about kicking a woman while she's down.

I put my sketchbook down and kick my feet up on the table in the middle of the sitting area. The balcony overhead offers shade.

And, when someone's hands drape over the railing to alert me to their presence, it offers the perfect hiding place.

I tuck my legs back into the shadows and listen. I expect it to be Aleks, but I hear a woman's voice instead. Yulia.

"Yes, of course... This is not my first time, darling..."

She's on the phone with someone. Her tone is friendly, almost flirtatious. But there's a serious bent to it at the same time. She's talking business, but trying to keep it light.

"She's perfect. Pretty and innocent," she says.

*Is she talking about me?* I think for a moment in a very uncharacteristic bout of self-centeredness.

"Yes," she continues. "Sophie Gonzales, that's right."

Ah. Apparently not.

The conversation continues for a few more minutes, nothing but some casual chatter and laughter before she wraps it up.

"Of course, darling. I'll see you there. *Ciao.*"

A few moments later, Yulia comes down the staircase next to the balcony. When she steps onto the patio below and sees me, she startles.

"Dear Lord, Olivia! How long have you been there?"

"Most of the evening," I tell her. "Getting some drawing in."

Her eyes flicker distractedly over my paper. "Oh, that's nice. How are you recovering from your cold?"

"The maids keep you informed, I see."

She smiles and takes the vacant seat next to me. "It is my job. I am the head housekeeper, after all."

“I’d say you’re a little more than that, no?”

“That’s sweet of you to say, darling. Really, though, I don’t mind so much. Especially now that I’ve found some friends outside of this oppressive realm.”

“Wow,” I say. Simple as it may seem, I’m kind of happy that she feels she can be so open and honest with me. “Well, then I’m glad for you.”

“Thank you, dear.”

She gives me a maternal smile and I feel slightly comforted. These past few days of isolation have been harder on me than I’m willing to admit. It’s nice to sit here with a woman who’s kind, who’s warm, who’s willing to listen.

Her son shares none of those qualities.

“The cold has passed,” I tell her belatedly. “I’m all good now.”

“I can see that. Wonderful news.”

“And you?” I ask. “You’ve been well?”

“Very.”

She doesn’t offer much more than that, so I decide not to pry. I look out towards the lake. I don’t realize I’ve sighed out loud until Yulia mentions it.

“Something wrong, dear?”

“Oh, uh, no. It’s nothing.”

Her eyes twinkle. “Feeling a little lonely?”

“I’m feeling all kinds of things, to be honest,” I admit. “Lonely is definitely high on the list. It seems that everyone who wants to talk to me is off-limits.”

Yulia nods in understanding. “Is my son being difficult with you?”

“As far as I can tell, he’s been difficult with everyone since the day he was born.”

“You’re right about that,” she chuckles. “He’s always been hot-headed. When he gets angry, he often gets irrational.”

“Makes sense. But still, I don’t understand why he’d have such a problem with me talking to either one of you.”

“Either one of us?” Yulia asks curiously.

I realize she doesn’t know about my run-in with Vlad. “I met your husband a few days ago.”

“Oh, I see.” She looks mildly surprised, but she takes it in her stride. “He’s a charmer, isn’t he?”

“He is.”

She gives a soft smile. “You can only imagine what he was like in his youth, when he was healthy. When he chose to be, he was the most charming man I’ve ever met.”

“I guess the apple fell extremely far from the tree then,” I mutter.

Yulia laughs. “The world throws itself at the feet of beautiful people. Aleksandr has always been handsome. Vladimir wasn’t blessed with quite the same fortune. He learned to use his charisma instead.”

“So you’re saying if Aleks were ugly, he’d be more pleasant to be around?”

She laughs again—but this time, far out of proportion to the level of humor I’m bringing to the table. It builds and builds until she’s doubled over, wheezing and crying, slapping her knee again and again.

At first, I laugh with her, but when it keeps going, I fade off nervously and watch.

Eventually, she recovers. She dabs away the tears on her cheeks and says, “Pardon me. I... haven’t been myself lately.”

“Oh?” I ask, wringing my hands together. “In what way?”

“I suppose finding your way is always hard,” she muses. “But trying to find your way in your sixties is an altogether different challenge.”

“At least you’re trying,” I point out. “That’s brave. Braver than anything I’ve ever tried.”

She looks at me with a sympathetic nod. “You are much too young to be playing it safe, Olivia.”

I laugh bitterly. “The last time I decided to live on the edge, I ended up trapped in this house with a sick man who forced me to marry him. As soon as I get out of here, no one in history will ever play it safer.”

“Those are all things he would have done regardless,” she replies. “He had his sights set on your brother long before he ever set eyes on you. This had nothing to do with your choices.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t make me feel better,” I mutter. “Possibly even worse, actually. The only reason he even looked my way that day is because he was planning this diabolical scheme to get even with my brother. I could have been anyone.”

“Is that what you’re worried about?” Yulia asks. “The fact that he was only feigning interest in you?”

“I... no, of course not. We don’t have to talk about this,” I say awkwardly, even though I’ve already blurted out the embarrassing truth.

“Don’t worry, Olivia,” Yulia says kindly. “He has that effect on women.”

“Oh God. Kill me now.” I bury my face in my hands.

She chuckles next to me. “Don’t be embarrassed. You have nothing to be ashamed of. All women want to be seen. That’s no crime.”

“Would you mind not...”

“Not telling him?” she asks. “Of course. Our little secret.”

“Thank you,” I say, even though I’m not a hundred percent certain I can trust her word.

“But a word of advice from an old woman who’s been through it all,” she says, turning to me with solemn eyes. “Don’t lose yourself to him completely, Olivia. It will destroy you before it makes you stronger.”

“I know.”

She nods. “Of course you do. You’re a smart woman. Smarter than I was at your age.”

“Is that what happened to you?”

She sighs and is quiet for a moment while she thinks. “Do you know, I was actually relieved when my husband had his stroke? It’s a horrible thing to admit, I’m aware of that. But it’s the truth. I finally had some measure of freedom. I was finally able to live the life I wanted.”

“And did you? Have you?”

“Some days, yes. Some days, no,” she admits. “I still have a son to answer to.”

I shake my head. “I couldn’t do what you do.”

“You might have to, unless you are ready for war,” she warns. “Or you can be like me and take the hard route. I did the latter; I rebelled. Sometimes, if I was secretive enough, my affairs went unnoticed. But other times, we were caught.”

“What happened then?”

“I would be punished. The men would disappear. I knew better than to ask questions.”

A shiver runs down my spine. I think about the kindly old man I shared a few laughs with by the lake. Suddenly, I feel guilty about that.

Just another thing I have to add to the list.

“What a bullshit double standard,” I spit. “He can bring women home whenever he likes, but you step one toe over the line he dictates for you and people die? It’s fucked up.”

My thoughts are beginning to spiral as I stare at the woman who’s been through it all and still manages to present herself with grace and dignity.

I admire Yulia.

But I refuse to follow in her footsteps.



“If I’m not free, then neither is he,” I conclude.

I hear a snap and look down to realize I’ve tightened my fist so hard that the pencil broke apart in my hand.

Yulia raises her eyebrows and reaches out to place her hand over mine. “I tell you this because I do actually care about you: submit. It’ll be easier that way.”

I tear my hand out from under hers. “Easier?” I scoff. “Easier for whom?”

“For everyone involved,” she says with a defeated sigh.

I shake my head and get to my feet. “I already told him I won’t stand for him screwing around while I’m his captive. I just won’t.”

Yulia’s eyes go wide. She looks guilty.

“What?” I press. “What is it?”

She shakes her head quickly. “Nothing.”

“Yulia, if you really are on my side, you’ll tell me.”

She looks so conflicted. If Aleks were in my position, he would demand she tell him everything. He’d threaten her, do whatever it took.

But I’m not him.

And as much as I don’t want to be like Yulia—bending under the pressure of powerful men, living always in a terrified survival mode—I don’t want to be like him, either.

She sighs. “He has a woman in his office right now.”

My body goes cold. I don’t even realize I’m up and striding away until I hear Yulia cry out my name.

“Olivia, what are you doing?” she calls.

I don’t reply—mostly because I don’t have an answer for her. I’m not quite sure myself.

I keep walking until I reach his office. There's no one around, so I move closer to his door. I press my ear against the cool wood.

Nothing. No sound comes through. I take a step back and weigh my options.

Luckily, a maid rounds the corner just then. "Hey!" I call out.

"Yes, ma'am?" she asks, her eyes downcast. "How can I help you?"

"Aleks... ah, Don Makarova wanted some ice in his office. Immediately."

"There's ice in a silver bucket under the bar."

"Um, he... ran out."

"Oh! I'll get some right away," she says. She scurries off and she's back in less than a minute with a small bucket of ice.

We stand awkwardly outside the door for a moment, each of us waiting for the other to open it.

"Why don't you knock?" I suggest.

Her brow creases, but she doesn't disobey the order. A second later, I hear Aleks's voice. "What is it?"

"It's Lydia, sir," she says. "I have your ice."

"Ice?"

I hold my breath, waiting for my plan to dissolve right in front of my eyes.

But then, the door opens.

Aleks is standing there, looking annoyed. I don't have time to see if he looks disheveled or mussed or guilty. I just shove past him and Lydia, pushing my way into the office.

I swivel towards the fourth person in the room. Yulia was right. There is a woman in his office.

But unlike what I feared, she's not naked.

It's so much worse.

## OLIVIA

“Isabella?”

She looks different than I remember. Her hair is a little longer, a little more styled. She’s more toned, too. Hardened. Her cheekbones are sharper, her jaw more angled.

But it’s definitely her.

“Am I hallucinating?” I whisper out loud.

Isabella stares at me as though she’s taking me in, too. For a moment, she doesn’t look like she knows how to react. Then she shakes it off.

“No, Liv, you’re not hallucinating,” she whispers back.

I’m shocked, but the undeniable feeling rushing through me is, of all things, relief. Pure, unadulterated relief.

“Oh my God.” I dash forward, wrap Isabella up in a hug, and squeeze her as tight as I can. “Rob was right. You’re alive.”

She hugs me back, but she’s also the first to let go. “Hey, kid. Yeah, I am. Alive and well.”

“You’re okay?”

She nods. “Yes.”

I drop my arms and back away a little, just to get some perspective. She's wearing loungy knitted sweatpants and a matching crop top. She's got a belly button piercing. That's new.

Slowly, as the relief wears off, other questions start rattling around in my head. Especially once Aleks walks over to stand beside Isabella.

They're not even touching, but there's a familiarity between them. Comfort. Rapport.

"Wait... what's going on here?" I ask, looking between them.

"I told you," he says. "I had nothing to do with Isabella's disappearance."

"That's not totally true," Isabella points out.

He throws her an impatient glare. "It was for your own good."

"I know," she sighs. "I know."

"Well, I don't!" I say, furiously trying to control the burgeoning panic inside me. "What the hell is going on? And why am I getting the feeling the two of you know each other way too fucking well?"

"Because we do," Isabella tells me gently. "We have known each other for years."

"Almost a decade, in fact," Aleks says.

A decade? So the two of them knew each other long before Isabella ever met Rob.

"Isabella...?"

She winces. "That's not my name, Liv. I'm sorry."

I shake my head like that'll make everything fall into place. Shockingly, it doesn't work. "Who are you?"

"She was mine from the beginning," Aleks says. "A Bratva spy."

"Spy?" I repeat, as if the word is brand new to me. "I... I don't understand..."

“The FBI received a tip about the Makarova Bratva,” the woman who isn’t Isabella says, sending my brain spinning in a hundred different directions at once. “About two and a half years ago. No one paid any attention to it. But the tips kept coming, and coming, and coming. And finally, an ambitious young agent decided to make it his mission.”

I know who it is immediately. “My brother.”

She nods, confirming my guess. “He didn’t have much to go on. But he was smart. Persistent. Righteous.”

“So I found out everything I needed to know about him,” Aleks explains, taking over the narrative. “And then sent my best asset in: Jennifer.”

“Jennifer,” I say, repeating her name. “You don’t look like a Jennifer.”

She gives me a sad smile. “That’s who I am, Liv. You only ever knew me as Isabella. But Isabella died the minute I walked away from my role.”

Anger is starting to take root in my chest. “Oh, you mean when you disappeared and broke my brother’s heart?”

“I never meant to hurt him.”

“That’s bullshit!” I say as my fury finally explodes outward. “That’s complete bullshit! You came crashing into our lives and made sure everyone fell in love with you. What did you think would happen when you disappeared?”

“I had to deceive him. All of you, actually. I had to play my part.”

“All for a fucking inside scoop.”

“That was the goal,” she admits. “But no matter how close we got, no matter how deeply he fell for me, he refused to talk about his work in detail. It became apparent that being with him was not getting me anywhere.”

“So you just said, *Fuck this* and got yourself ‘kidnapped.’”

“It was more complicated than that.”

“Uncomplicate it for me then,” I demand. “I’m all ears.”

She takes my anger in stride, like she knows she deserves it. She glances towards Aleks, who nods in approval. I hate the shorthand they have with each other. It makes me feel like the black sheep in the room, whining and bleating for attention.

“My job isn’t easy,” she begins, “but it is simple. I become who I’m meant to be. Who I need to be. My identities don’t overlap, and when the work is done, I sever ties completely and move on. I kill who I was and become someone new. But I was involved in another mission years ago, and the man I spied on... he was looking for me.”

I frown. “Okay, and...?”

“I knew that if I stayed, he would find me. I didn’t want him connecting me with Rob or any of you.”

“So you were playing the hero then?” I ask sarcastically. “How noble. I guess I should be throwing myself at your feet in gratitude.”

“I would never claim to be anything of the sort,” she says calmly. “But I knew that my time with your family was coming to a close.”

“One way or another,” Aleks adds.

I turn to him. “What does that mean?”

He glances towards the spy who I thought would one day be my sister-in-law. His look says, *This isn’t my story to tell.*

“I’m good at my job, Liv,” Jennifer says. “I seduce men and convince them I love them. It’s easier than you would imagine. But this was the first time that I got emotionally involved.”

My frown deepens. This is sounding more and more like bullshit. “Are you telling me that you fell in love with Rob?”

“Falling in love,” she whispers as if tasting it. “I don’t know what that means. I just know that I didn’t want to hurt him.”

“Well, you did a bang-up job of that,” I snap. “Your disappearance nearly destroyed him.”

“She had no choice,” Aleks cuts in smoothly. “It was my call to make. I pulled her out.”

She gives him a grateful smile. “He’s being generous. I was the one who made the ultimate choice, Liv. I knew I was in over my head. Leaving was the only way to guarantee my safety as well as his. And yours by association.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you?” I ask coldly.

“That’s up to you. What I’m telling you, though? It’s the truth.”

“Do you even recognize the truth?” I scoff. “I mean, Jesus! What kind of person comes home to meet her boyfriend’s mother and his sisters, knowing it’s all a lie? We spent Christmas together, Isabella—Jennifer—whatever the fuck your name is. We were still hurting from losing our dad, and we welcomed you into our family. Rob proposed to you and thought it was going to be forever. You know why? Because you fucking said yes.”

Tears are pooling in her eyes as she nods. “I know. I did say yes. It was the one thing I did for me... because in the moment, it felt like the right answer.”

“In the moment,” I scowl. “And what about afterwards?”

“Afterwards, I knew I’d made a mistake. Rob is a federal agent, Liv. And me? The farthest thing from it. We’re just too damned different. He fell in love with the version of me that I gave him. But if he knew the real me, he’d never have looked twice.”

“Am I supposed to feel bad for you? You’re not the victim here.”

“I’m not claiming to be a victim, just like I’m not claiming to be a hero. To be honest, I don’t believe in either one of those things. But I do want you to understand why I did what I did. He was a job at first. Then, as the months slipped by, I lost myself in the dream of him. For a moment, it even seemed... possible.”

I glance towards Aleks to see what he thinks of this. His expression is impassive. His body language gives nothing away. But he stays close to Jennifer, like he’s ready to catch her if she falls.

Jealousy rages through me. It's burning hot. And no matter what I do to push it back, it keeps coming up.

I turn away from both of them.

"Liv—"

"Don't!" I yell. "Don't talk to me like you know me. You're an imposter and a fraud."

"I'm all those things and worse," she says gently. "But that doesn't mean I'm lying now. Your brother may have started out as a job, but he became something more to me."

"What does it even matter?" I ask. "You broke his heart all the same. Ripped it right out of his damn chest."

"I—"

"If it weren't for you, he might have dropped the case. But after you disappeared, that's when his obsession with the Bratva really doubled down."

"Because the FBI's anonymous tipper told him that my disappearance had something to do with Aleks," she explains patiently. "The case was dying, and he was desperate to jumpstart it again. And desperate to find me. It gave him a second wind."

"Rob," I whisper. "He... he has to know about this. I have to tell him."

She looks frightened suddenly for maybe the first time. "Liv, please... I don't know if I'm ready for that."

"Why not?"

"For one, I'm still undercover on a mission. For another, it just wouldn't be the closure you think it would be. Some things are better left buried."

"We all wrote you off as dead, you know?" I seethe. "All except Rob. He kept saying it over and over again, even when no one else believed him. *She's alive. She's out there somewhere. If she were dead, I would feel it in my bones.* That's how much he loved you. He still does."



A tear slips down her cheek. My heart tugs, but I shush it. It's just an act. Pure fiction. Another facet of her role. Another part of her miserable, life-ruining job.

"He loves Isabella," she corrects. "But Isabella was only ever a creation. She never really existed, not in any way that matters. And she's gone now."

"No! No. *You* exist. You have a name and likes and dislikes and a home. You have to take up space somewhere! Where do you live?"

"Between missions, Jennifer lives here," Aleks tells me. "In the room you found upstairs."

My jaw drops. "You knew I found the room?"

"The room, the scarf, all of it."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"I didn't need to. I knew you'd find out about Jennifer eventually."

I want to storm out of here so I don't have to look at either one of them, but I still have more questions. "I thought you were kidnapping women and murdering them. Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I did tell you," he reminds me. "I told you again and again. You just weren't listening."

I roll my eyes. "Forgive me for not taking you at your word. It's a little hard to build a trusting relationship, seeing as how you abducted me from my home."

"And you know why," he counters. "Plus, you've been treated well. Taken care of."

"Yeah, I feel really fucking loved," I spit. "If this is your love, Aleks, I don't want a single goddamn drop of it. That goes for you, too," I add, jerking my chin towards Jennifer.

Aleks sighs. "I think it's time for you to get to your room," he says. "You're looking a little pale."

I shake my head. “I’m not a child. You can’t just send me away when it’s convenient for you.”

“No, *moya zhená*, you are not a child anymore. But neither are you Bratva. Jennifer and I have things we need to discuss. Business things.”

I glance between them and feel my stomach turn sour.

Jennifer is the epitome of everything I’m not. She’s more experienced, more calculating. She’s stronger and more confident. She knows how to manipulate men and women alike. She’s the kind of woman who doesn’t look out of place standing next to Aleks.

Not the way I do.

And God, that enrages me.

I don’t think about what I’m doing before I do it—I just close my hand around the first thing I touch. In this case, it’s an ornate vase sitting on the circular desk next to me.

I grab it and fling it forward. I don’t know if I’m trying to hit her or him or both of them. Whatever the case, I scream and hurl the vase forward.

I just want to hear something crash.

I want to see it break.

I want to see the beautiful, broken pieces on the floor and have the satisfaction of knowing that for once in my life, *I’m* the one who did the damage.

Aleks throws himself in front of Jennifer and turns a shoulder. The vase shatters against his broad back and erupts everywhere.

And then he rises amongst the carnage, tall and terrifying.

“Aleks, leave her alone!” Jennifer is yelling.

But he ignores her. He scoops me up and throws me over his shoulder, carrying me out of the room.

I want to yell for him to put me down. To let me go.

But at this point, I know better than to ask for things I know I won't get.

**ALEKS**

She's a wreck.

Her hair is a tangled mess like a halo around her head, but it's more than that. Everything she's feeling is emblazoned in those dusky brown eyes.

Every ounce of pain. Every drop of jealousy.

"Get a hold of yourself," I order after I dump her on the bed.

"You get a hold of yourself!" she snaps back childishly. She puts her hand on my chest and tries to shove me away from her.

I don't budge, not even an inch. She has to crane her neck up to look at me. She's sitting on the edge of the bed so close that I can feel the heat coming off her body.

My cock is ramrod straight.

"How could you do this?" she asks, her voice rasping with sobs.

"I did what I had to do to protect my Bratva," I tell her. "And I'd do it all over again."

"My brother..."

"Is a man. And he'll have to move on."

"She cares about him, too."

“She’s put that part of her life behind her,” I say firmly. “She’s not going back, Olivia. Not now. Not ever.”

“But—”

“Isabella was a part she was playing. The real woman is a fuck ton more complicated. I’m not sure your brother would want that, anyway.”

Her eyes narrow to angry slits. “Don’t pretend like you know my brother.”

“But I do know your brother, Olivia,” I tell her. “I know him better than he knows himself. You don’t think that I was in contact with Jennifer every step of the way while she was playing Isabella?”

She cringes back at that. “You’ve been watching me that long?”

I shake my head. “You? No. She gave me reports on Robert and that was all. I never needed to get more involved until shit went to hell a year after I pulled her out. The first time I laid eyes on you was in that airport.”

She blinks up at me. “Rob deserves to know. She owes him an explanation.”

“She doesn’t have time for explanations. She’s out there risking her life every day.”

“For you.”

“Not for me. For the Bratva.”

She shakes her head. “Why would any sane woman sacrifice her life and her happiness for *that*?”

“Because there’s someone out there who’s trying to take me down. Trying to pin their own crimes on me. They’re counting on your brother to come after me, and if he hesitates or pulls back... that stops. Abruptly and violently.”

“He’ll go after Rob, too?” she says, her eyes going wide with panic. “Fuck. Fuck. My family...”

“Your family is under my protection,” I tell her. “They’re safe so long as I’m around.”

She frowns, as though she's genuinely confused by that statement. "Why would you protect them?"

"Because they're your family. And you are my wife."

I see her gulp as nerves and uncertainty drive out the anger from her body. "I'm not really, though, am I?"

"You certainly do a good job of acting like it," I point out with a wry smirk. "Nagging, jealousy, the works."

"I... I don't..."

"Jennifer and I are not together," I tell her, cutting through to the heart of the question she can't bring herself to ask. "We never have been. We're too much alike."

"But she... suits you."

I shrug. "Lately, I've been partial to brunettes."

She's not expecting that, either. Her cheeks flush with color, but she tries to control her expression. "Have you been with other women since I've been in the house?"

The way she says the question—like it hurts her, like it's been festering inside for God knows how long—tells me everything I need to know about what the little *kiska* is feeling.

And the way I answer tells me everything I've been unwilling to see about what *I'm* feeling.

"I haven't so much as looked at another woman in that way since I saw you in that airport," I rasp. "Not a single one."

"Oh."

She blinks as she tries to absorb that. It's torturous to watch—mostly because my cock is screaming for attention.

I take the time to drink in the sight of her. Her lips are full and swollen from constant gnawing. I remember her taste. That sweetness, that ripeness. Youth, innocence, and beneath it all, the heady scent of desire.

The mark of a woman who's spent her whole life being careful and is finally ready to throw caution to the wind.

"I didn't fuck other women because I didn't want to, Olivia," I tell her, running my thumb over her lips. They part slowly, and I can see her lust glistening through. "Because I couldn't. Because the thought of a single other soul besides you made me sick to my fucking stomach."

Her throat rides up and down with the force of her swallow. Like she's tasting this truth. It's raw, it's sharp-edged—but it's honest.

"And you... you didn't actually abduct anyone? Or kill anyone?"

"I have killed people in the past. Many, in fact," I tell her unapologetically. "But never a woman. Never an innocent. And never without a reason."

She seems to accept that. Or at least, the answer doesn't frighten her the way it might have at the beginning of this forced cohabitation.

I see hope in her eyes when she meets mine. Then—and I don't even think she's aware she's doing this—she runs a tongue along her lip where I just touched her.

Tasting *me*, this time.

Saying with her body what she's too afraid to say with her words.

"You're playing with fire now, Olivia," I growl.

"Everyone's always telling me I'm playing it too safe," she whispers in a rasping voice that doesn't sound like it belongs to her. "Maybe it's about time to get burned."

She reaches out. One pale, fragile little hand crossing all that space to graze against the buckle of my belt.

The fact that *she* does it?

That *she* takes the risk, the action, the impulse, instead of retreating to the safe world of her fantasies?

That's what unleashes the storm.

I'm on her in an instant, devouring her lips with mine, pressing my whole body up against hers and grinding my aching hard cock into the space between her thighs. I haven't been this out of control since I was a horny teen.

She mewls beneath me like the little kitten she is. Claws at my back, nips at my ear whenever I release her from the kiss to lick down the curve of her throat.

I rip her pants and shirt off quickly, leaving her in just her underwear. She's already dripping wet, absolutely soaked right through her panties.

And me? I'm quivering like I could erupt right fucking now.

One day, I'll bury my cock past those sweet lips and give her all of me to feed on.

But right now, I need to be inside her the same way I need to breathe.

I reach down, take a fistful of her panties, and rip them away like a scrap of paper.

"Why do you hide beneath all these layers?" I pant down to her from above as I hold them fluttering in my fist. "Don't you know how beautiful you are? Don't you know what the sight of you does to me?"

Her nipples are fat and juicy when I tear off her bra. I fall forward and settle my weight on top of her, length to length, eye to eye.

She's shaking, but I can see that it isn't with fear. Her nerves are overpowered by pure carnal need now.

She's not about to stop me. I could do anything to her.

And more to the point...

That's exactly what she wants.

I grind the head of my cock against her wet slit as I suck a nipple into my mouth. She cries out, her hand twisting into the knots of my hair.

"Oh, Aleks," she moans.



And then I can't hold off any longer. No one says my name like she does. I push myself inside her.

She stretches, her warmth enveloping me. "Fuck," she cries. "Fuck, you're so big..."

"Take it, little lamb," I growl. "You can take all of it."

I grab her wrists and hold them down as I start pounding into her. She whimpers every time my hips meet hers. Her mouth forms a silent O and tension strains across her face.

Then she closes her eyes and surrenders to it.

The crash of our bodies feels like a new experience. Different than the first time, different than any other time I've ever had in my whole damn life.

She's giving herself to me because she's finally seen what I've been hiding from her.

What she does to me.

What she *undoes* to me.

And I can see clearly what I do to her, as if I didn't already know it in explicit detail. It's written everywhere: in the lost, frantic way she tries to cling to me.

In the way she still struggles with her desire, biting back her cries and going silent, only for her pent-up passion to be unleashed in high, desperate screams.

In the way she arches her back towards me, as though she's trying to bridge the distance between our bodies. As though even an inch of separation is as painful as death.

I push back my orgasm two, three, four times. Only when her walls begin to seize greedily around me do I know I can no longer resist the release I've been craving.

I thrust into her hard. So hard that she jerks up towards me.

Her arms wrap around my neck as my lips find hers. For one wild moment, we're melted into each other. One single sphere of the most intense clench

imaginable.

Then the tide breaks and we both collapse beneath it. I destroy her the way I always swore to, unloading again and again with my cock buried to the hilt. Her moans cascade down until there's no more breath left to give.

When it's finished, I fall at her side. She curls into me at once. The thought of distance is still painful, even now.

And not just for her.

I wrap my arm and tuck her against my side with her head on my chest.

"If that's what it feels like to get burned," she whispers, "I'll jump right into hell."

I smile. "Careful what you wish for, little hellraiser. Fire is exciting. But it's also unpredictable."

## ALEKS

I wake up feeling like something is off.

My mattress feels different. The light is all wrong. I normally sleep in pitch darkness, but there's sunlight streaming in.

That's when I sit up and realize that I'm not in my room at all.

*"Blyat'."*

When was the last time I spent the night after fucking? I try to remember, but it's getting harder and harder to remember any night with a woman at all.

As if none of them existed before her.

Olivia sighs in her sleep. I turn to look at her.

It's nice seeing her like this. When her eyes are open, her guard is up. She's trying to control everything around her. Always checking over her shoulder for monsters in the shadows.

But in sleep, there's an abandonment that's endearing. A vulnerability.

Her eyelashes flutter and her hair is strewn all around her pillow, curtaining her face. I barely restrain myself from reaching over to sweep it from her eyes.

I can't stop looking at her, though. Even though I know I ought to.

I am not this kind of man, the one who sits awake and stares at the woman in the bed next to him and writes sonnets about the shape of her fucking nostrils or whatever.

My cock is rising slowly, but I halt that desire in its tracks. It's one thing to fall asleep with a woman; it's another thing to wake up with her.

Some lines cannot be crossed.

So I slip out of bed, making sure not to jostle the mattress too much. She tosses and moans slightly, but it's clear she's not going to wake up anytime soon.

The sheet slips down a little and I catch the curve of her breast and a tiny peek of her nipple. She looks delicious. It's all I can do not to wake her up by sticking my cock between those luscious pink lips.

"*Blyat*," I curse again.

I grab my shit off the floor, including my phone. I've got two missed calls from Demyan and a bunch of text messages.

***Hey bro, where are you? We need to talk.***

***Aleks? Seriously... where are you?***

***If you don't call me back in five fucking minutes I can't be held responsible for my actions.***

I check the time on the last message—twenty-five minutes ago. "Fuck me," I growl under my breath as I step into the bathroom quickly and push the door shut.

I dial Demyan's number. He answers immediately.

"Yo," he says, his tone devoid of any real concern.

"What's happening?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing. Just got worried when I didn't hear from you this morning. You're usually up at the crack of dawn."

"What time is it?"

“Let’s see... 9:40.”

Fucking hell. I can’t remember the last time I slept so late. Or so soundly.

I decide that it means nothing. I was just tired.

Demyan laughs. “You alright there, Sleeping Beauty?”

“I had a late night,” I mutter.

“Yeah, I heard a little something about that,” he says, sounding far too pleased.

“Who did you talk to?” I demand.

He cackles. “I was getting ready to throw out a full-fledged search party when you didn’t reply to my last text. Had your picture ready for the side of the milk cartons and everything. But then I ran into Jen.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic.”

“She told me you were holed up in Olivia’s bedroom. Not just that—she did a walk-by about an hour after you two went gallivanting off, and it seems as if there were some pretty telling sounds coming from the room.”

“What the hell is she doing spying on me?”

“Well, for starters, that’s literally her job title, so if you’re surprised she’s good at it, that’s your own damn fault. But in this one instance at least, she wasn’t actually spying; she was just checking to make sure Olivia was doing okay. No need to worry, it seems. Apparently, you were taking very good care of her.”

“Fuck you.”

Demyan just laughs again. Fucking hyena. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” he warns.

“She knows how this works,” I say. “She wants me. I’m not going to deprive her of that privilege.”

But my bravado rings false, even in my own ears. Just yesterday, I could have said it confidently. *She means nothing to me. Just a means to an end.*

It would have been a lie back then, but a bearable one.

Now, though?

It's a fucking fiction and everyone knows it. Demyan included.

"If you're sure that's all she wants from you," he says cheerily.

"Where's Jennifer?" I ask, changing the subject.

"Not sure now. She was looking for you again this morning," he informs me. "I think something's come up."

"Did she tell you anything?"

"Fuck no. That girl saves the best information for your ears alone, no matter how hard I try to coax it out of her."

"It's why she's my favorite," I say. "And why you're at the bottom of the list. Although the spying last night certainly knocked her down a peg or two."

"Heaven forbid. Although I do appreciate her giving me some room to move up the rankings."

"You are stuck in dead last for as long as you live, *sobrat*," I drawl. "Where are you?"

"In your office. I'm going over a few plans for the warehouse projects."

"Stay there," I tell him. "I'll be down soon."

I hang up, dress fast, and head back into the bedroom.

Olivia is still wrapped up in the sheets, but now, they only come up to her waist. Her breasts are bare and exposed. Her nipples are perfect pink points, begging to be sucked and pulled until she yields like putty beneath my hands.

I wrench myself away from her and storm out the door. I've just managed to shut it when I feel her presence behind me.

I have to give it to her—the woman's good.

"Is there a reason you gave Demyan a full-blown report on me this morning?" I ask with irritation as I turn to face Jennifer.

She makes no apologies as she leans against the wall and crosses her arms over her chest. There are dark circles around her eyes, though she's tried to hide them under a thick coating of foundation.

Jennifer's always been an emotional dresser. She chooses her clothes based on how she's feeling. When she's happy, she goes with bright colors—yellows, pinks, oranges. When she's feeling down, it's blues and grays. Anger is reds and blacks.

Today, she's wearing deep navy trousers and a soft gray sweater that comes high up her throat. She's tied her blonde hair back, leaving only a few strands floating around her heart-shaped face.

Depression it is, then. I'm only a little surprised.

"He was worried," she retorts. "And I wasn't about to lie."

"Right, because you're so bad at that."

She narrows her eyes at me. "Don't be an asshole."

"We all stick to what we're good at, don't we?"

She goes quiet for a moment, clearly not expecting my antagonistic attitude. The truth is, my anger has nothing to do with her. I'm pissed off at myself.

"You're falling into the same trap that I did."

I lean against the opposite wall and stare down at her. "Which trap is that?"

"I made the mistake of thinking I could have a future with someone I had no business being involved with."

"Your business is what I tell you it is," I growl.

She is unfazed by my irritation. "What makes you think you're so different from me?" she asks. "You spent the night with her, Aleks. I remember you telling me not so long ago that you never spend the night with any woman. It's your most absolute rule."

"Rules are meant to be broken."

“Really? Is that how you’re writing this off?” she snaps. “I never took you for a hypocrite.”

“For fuck’s sake, I didn’t mean to spend the damn night, okay?”

She presses forward and catches my forearm in her grasp. “If you’re catching feelings for her—”

“Stop,” I say, cutting her off. “I am not catching anything for her. She was brought in because I needed something strong enough to control that irritating brother of hers. She is nothing more than a weapon I will use to cow him. This marriage was not about emotion; it was about convenience. And when her purpose is served, she will get to go back to her pathetic little life, and I can move on with mine.”

“That’s harsh,” Jennifer says. “She—”

But before she can finish, the door flies open and Olivia stands there, framed against the darkness. The sheet is wrapped around her chest. Her eyes are fixed on me.

She stares at me, waiting for me to tell her that what she’s just heard is a lie, a farce, an act of pride.

I don’t say anything.

“That’s all I am to you, is it?” she whispers.

“Olivia,” Jennifer begins, releasing me and stepping towards her.

“No!” Olivia answers, holding up her hand forcefully. “Don’t come any closer. I don’t want either one of you near me. You realize I’m a person, right? Not a tool or a weapon or... or... collateral damage.”

She looks at Jennifer with tears in her eyes, ready to fall.

“I trusted you. We all did. My mom, she still refers to you as her daughter. Because that’s how our family is. We loved you by virtue of the fact that you made Rob happy. You could have crawled in from the gutter and we would have loved you regardless. You didn’t just hurt him, Jennifer—you hurt all of us. And now, I have to deal with the knowledge that my brother will find out that, despite how deeply he loved you, you never truly loved him back.”



“Olivia—”

“No!” she screams again.

And as she does, for the first time, I see the fight come alive in her. She transforms into a lioness, someone who would go to any lengths to defend and protect her family.

It’s fucking erotic.

“You don’t get to talk. The two of you never fucking quit, always thinking you know what’s best for me. But you’re wrong and you don’t. It’s *my* turn. *I’m* speaking now, and both of you can shut the hell up and listen.”

Well, damn.

It’s much more than I expected from her, and I find my hard-on coming back to life.

“As for *you*,” she seethes, turning her anger on me. “You invaded my life, seduced me, and made me believe you weren’t a complete monster, only to find out that you’re exactly that. No wonder you don’t respect anyone else’s feelings—you don’t even know what the hell they are.”

I want to push back. I want to meet her fire with my own, the way I always have. But there’s something about her strength right now that I don’t want to dampen.

She’s fighting her own battle... and she looks damn good doing it.

“It’s not personal, Olivia,” I tell her.

“Not personal?” She cackles in my face. “It’s *all* personal, Aleks. This is my family. You’re threatening them and you’re playing with me. Did it ever occur to you that I might actually have feelings for you?”

The words seem to surprise her, too, because her eyes widen for a moment. She goes still. Then they narrow back to furious slits.

“You know what? Forget it. To hell with both of you.”

She steps back into the sanctum of her room and slams the door. Jennifer and I turn to one another.

“Wow,” she remarks. “Didn’t know she had it in her.”

I smirk. “I did.”

“You need to go in there and apologize.”

I frown. “Do I look like the kind of man who apologizes for anything?”

“Maybe it’s time to start,” Jennifer says. “She’s hurt.”

“You had a hand in that, too.”

“That’s different,” she says. “She’s not in love with me.” I raise my eyebrows, and she gives me a sharp glare. “Oh, come the fuck on. Like you didn’t know.”

Before I can answer, Demyan rounds the corner looking flustered. “There you are, Jesus.”

My frown deepens. “What’s going on?”

He sighs. “Shit you’re not gonna like.”

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**OLIVIA**

I slam the door on Aleks and Jennifer and barely make it to the toilet in time.

As soon as I hit my knees, last night's dinner comes up in a torrent. The heavy stink makes me retch again.

I heave until my insides roil with painful emptiness. I flush it all away and then lean against the cold tile, trying to stop the ache in my head and my heart from spreading elsewhere.

I know it's a lost cause, though. His words are like splinters, burrowing inside of me, tearing from the inside out.

*"She is nothing more than a weapon."*

*"This marriage was not about emotion; it was about convenience."*

*"Once her purpose is served, she'll go back to her pathetic little life, and I can move on with mine."*

I lean back against the tiled wall of the bathroom and stare up at the ceiling. That's what he's waiting for—the moment when he can bury me in his past and forget I ever existed.

But if that really is true, then what was last night about?

He didn't have to sleep with me. He didn't have to touch me the way he did. But I could see it in his eyes: he wanted to be there with me.

In that moment, I was the only woman in the world.

I'm still feeling queasy, but I force myself off the bathroom floor and up to the sink. I wash out my mouth and face and head back into the bedroom.

I stop short when I realize it isn't empty.

I shake my head. "Not now, Yulia."

"Are you okay?" she asks.

Because I have no words to articulate the truth of how I'm feeling, I choose instead to collapse onto my bed face-first. A few seconds later, I feel the mattress shift.

I support myself on my elbows and look at Yulia. She's sitting next to me. "I heard you throwing up in there," she tells me.

"That was because of your son," I say accusingly, even though I know it's not fair to blame her.

She raises her eyebrows. "You're pregnant?"

My brow creases immediately. "Of course not! I just... No, Jesus. He made me sick. Literally and figuratively."

"What happened?"

"I heard a conversation he was having with Isab—with Jennifer," I say. "I suppose it's stuff I should already know. But I guess I'm still a little naïve."

"You've developed feelings for him." She sounds disappointed, but not surprised.

"I wouldn't say that."

"What would you say?"

I sigh. "I don't know. Ideally, nothing. Silence is golden and all that."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Olivia. Sometimes, the universe has its way with us. And sometimes, people do."

I press the heels of my hands to my eyes to try easing the throbbing. It doesn't work. "The first day we met, he was different," I murmur.

"He was playing a part."

"Right," I say. "Just like Jennifer was playing a part with Rob. With all of us. Guess the Lawrence clan makes for easy targets, eh?"

"You want to see the best in people. That's not a bad thing."

"It sure feels like shit." I crack open one eye and give her a sad smile. "Thank you for that, though."

She pats my hand. "You deserve to be treated better than this. You're a good girl."

My thoughts are racing. If I'm such a "good girl," like everyone keeps telling me, then why did I have to go and fall for a monster? Maybe this is why I stayed clear of bad boys and risky choices, even when my heart was pulling me in that direction—because somewhere, deep down inside of me, I knew that I wasn't capable of surviving this kind of heartbreak.

I can already feel the fissures he's made inside me.

And it's only going to get worse.

"I need to get away from him," I whisper to myself.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," I say quickly.

I like Yulia. A little part of me even trusts her. But at the end of the day, she's still Aleks's mother. And she's made it clear on numerous occasions that, like it or not, she has to take his side.

Who's to say I wouldn't do the same for my own child?

"You miss them, don't you?" she asks suddenly. "Your family."

I nod. "All day, every day. I'm not used to not talking to them. I get on the phone with my mom and brother at least once or twice a week. And my sister and I text all day long." I glance up at her. "Is it pathetic to need that kind of

safety net?”

*Pathetic.* The word feels all the more painful because I heard it from his lips only moments ago. Only Aleksandr Makarova can make an already-cruel word sound so much crueler.

But Yulia just looks at me with a sympathetic expression. “It’s not pathetic at all, Olivia. I’ve always admired the people who can be alone but not feel lonely. For me, it’s always been the other way around.”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “There are moments when I’ve felt lonely.”

“And what have you done about it?”

“Absolutely nothing,” I admit.

She raises her eyebrows. “That’s where you and I differ. I did everything in my power to reverse that feeling.”

“And did it work?”

“Sometimes yes, sometimes no,” she says. “But I’ll tell you this: even if it didn’t work, I never regretted the attempt.”

“Well, then, you’re a braver woman than me.”

“You keep saying that, but how do you know if you’re brave or not, darling?” Yulia asks me seriously. “You’ve never tried to be.”

Those words hit me sideways. I stare at her, but I’m not seeing Yulia—I’m seeing all the ways in which I failed to live the life that my father always encouraged me to live.

“Thank you, Yulia,” I say at last. “I never expected to find a friend here.”

“A friend, hm?” she says, repeating the word as though it’s foreign to her. “A friend...”

“Is it so hard to believe?”

“Harder than you could possibly know. But thank you. That means... well, you have no idea how much it means to me.”

A few minutes ago, I didn't think there was any way to feel better. The ache still isn't entirely gone.

But, little by little, it's easing.

Then, just as I'm finding a little bit of light, my door opens and Aleks is standing there. His shadow arrows across the floor towards us like a silent threat.

Yulia and I both jump to standing at the same time. She looks alarmed by the incensed look on his face.

"Aleksandr, darl—"

"I need a word with Olivia. Alone."

She glances towards me. "She's not feeling very well. Maybe this isn't the best time."

I give her a grateful look, but she isn't looking at me anymore. I don't blame her. There's something terrifying about him right now. His dark eyes burn, despite his outward calm. I can't wrench my gaze away.

"Leave us," he snaps.

Yulia turns to me apologetically. "Rest up, Olivia."

She's heading to the door, but as she passes by her son, he leans towards her and adds, "Wait for me in my office. I'll be there shortly."

"What's wrong?" Yulia asks.

"I have something I need to tell you."

She looks like she wants to request more of an explanation, but he dismisses her with a jerk of his head. She throws me one last backward glance and then she leaves, shutting the door behind her.

"Was that necessary?" I demand. "You don't have to be so cold with her."

"Best friends now, are you?"

I wonder where he gets off turning the tables on me. I'm the one who should be staring at him with that enraged look in my eye. He should be the one cowering in the shadows.

But I can't even picture it. This man was not made to cower. This man was meant to control, dominate, lead. Nothing that happens will ever change his nature.

"What do you want?"

"What's this about you being sick?" he asks.

"Why do you even care?"

Something flits across his face. Something alien that I'm not meant to see. Like the flash of a shooting star in the middle of an empty black sky.

"I don't want you puking all over my tiles," he mutters.

He says it with his usual disdain. But for the first time since I've met him, I don't believe him. It sounds... brittle. At risk of crumbling altogether and revealing something living and breathing beneath it.

"Your tiles are fine."

He strides forward and presses one huge hand to my forehead with a frown on his face.

I slap him away. "What are you doing?"

"Checking for fever."

"I'm fine."

"You look pale."

"Funny you should point that out—I had a rough morning."

He grimaces and passes a hand over his face. "I didn't know you were listening," he sighs.

I can't help scoffing at that. "Would you have said something different if you knew?"



“Maybe. Fuck, I don’t know.”

I raise my eyebrows, waiting for him to offer me something else. But he stays quiet. I take a deep breath, trying to find common ground where there’s none. Where there’s never been any.

“So the question is... did I hear the lie this morning?” I wonder out loud. “Or did Jennifer? Which side of the door saw the truth, Aleks?”

His anger doesn’t look quite so frightening anymore. He’s not sure of it himself.

He reaches for me again, but this time, it’s tender. He cups the side of my face. The gesture is so alarmingly sincere that tears spring to my eyes.

I don’t even care that he can see them, because under no circumstances am I breaking away from his touch. There’s magic in this wordless moment. I’m not too proud to admit that, despite everything, I’m falling into it.

“You are beautiful, you know that?” he says softly.

“Another lie?”

“No, *kiska*. I’ll never tell you another.”

Our bodies gravitate closer to one another. Magnetic. Chemical. Every bond on every level that says this is right.

But inside, something is screaming at me to tear away.

Didn’t I just make up my mind that I was going to try and be brave? I was going to try and escape? Because—despite my attraction to Aleks, despite the fact that my feelings for him are slowly evolving into something indisputably dangerous—I know we have no real future together.

How can I have a future with the man who threatened my family? Abducted me and forced me into marriage? Held me at ransom so that he could control my brother?

Sure, he may be innocent of the crimes my brother is accusing him of. But he’s still guilty of other crimes. Do I really want to be tainted by association? Do I really want...

My endless, scampering thoughts taper off when I look into his eyes. My heart thuds violently against my chest and all I want to do is kiss him.

Maybe, if we maintain this intoxicating eye contact long enough, he'll kiss me the way he kissed me last night. With that all-consuming desire that made me feel like a queen.

Like *his* queen.

I'm about to throw caution to the wind. And so is he. I can see it in his eyes, in his quickening breath, in the heat emanating from his body.

Which is why, when he drops his hand and steps back away from me, I'm so surprised I almost tip forward. I catch myself just in time to stop from falling.

"I wouldn't encourage a relationship with my mother," Aleks warns me. His voice is gruff and cold once more.

"What?" I blink in confusion. "Why not?"

"She's a lost soul. And she's not in any position to be giving advice."

"What makes you think she's giving me advice at all?"

He just shrugs, as though that heated moment we shared only seconds ago never happened at all. He's back to his normal self, all business and no emotion. "It's in her nature."

It makes me want to scream. But it's a good reminder: the fairytale is only in my head. The reality will always be a disappointment in comparison.

"Is it in your nature to be so cold?" I demand. "So heartless?"

"Yes," he says without batting an eye. "It's how I was molded."

"Then I feel sorry for the woman that ends up with you."

"Careful," he warns. "You might be that woman."

"You promised to let me go eventually," I remind him.

"If I am to live up to the low opinion you have of me," he says, "then I may just have to break that promise."

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**ALEKS**

I should have kissed her.

Maybe I would have—if it weren't for the nightmare unspooling its way into my life. A nightmare only I can deal with.

A nightmare that now involves my mother and her poor choices.

She's waiting for me in my office just like I told her to. Her expression is calm, but her frame quivers with unspoken tension. She looks longingly towards the bar.

“If you want a drink,” I say, “I can pour you one.”

“Do I need it?” she asks shrewdly.

“Yes.”

“Aleksandr,” she says, paling visibly, “what's going on?”

I look her in the eye, ready to decipher every expression that passes across her face. That's where the answers will be. God knows her words can no longer be trusted. “Donald fucking Hargrove is what's going on.”

She looks genuinely confused for a moment. “Donald?” she repeats, as though she's worried she's misheard me. “I don't understand. What about him?”

“Why don't you tell me?”

“I... he’s my friend.”

“So you’ve said. What else?”

Her confusion shifts to fear. “What have you found out about him?”

“Answer the question, Mother.”

“I know that he’s a powerful man with a lot of connections,” she says. “We’re friends and we have been for a while now, but he’s been very successful for a very long time. I doubt I know everything about him and his past.”

I cock my head to the side. “Do you know why the Makarova name started floating around the FBI?”

Her eyes go wide as realization dawns. “Donald? No. You’re saying that Donald is the one that tipped them off?”

I nod slowly. “He didn’t just offer one tip. He made it his fucking job. Anytime the case looked like it was stagnating, he came in with another scoop, another hint, another suggestion about where to look and when.”

“It can’t be.”

“Why?” I demand. “Why this loyalty? Why the need to defend the man?”

“Doesn’t friendship mean anything to you?” she asks. “Wouldn’t you defend Demyan if someone accused him of such horrible things?”

“I would forgive him many things. But betraying the Bratva? Not even Demyan would survive that.”

“Are you suggesting that I’ve betrayed this family?” she asks in outrage. “That I’ve concealed who was trying to hurt us?”

“It depends. Did you?”

“How dare you! I would never. *He* would never.”

I look at her in disbelief. “You are not that fucking naïve.”

“Aleksandr, you don’t know the man. He is what he seems: an honest, good-hearted, hard-working businessman. He built his empire from scratch. He donates to charity.”

“And I’m sure he rescues kittens out of trees in his free time,” I snap. “Open your fucking eyes, Mother. A man like that doesn’t get to the top without stepping on more than a few necks.”

“Aleks—”

“The answer is right there for you to see. You’re just blinded. And don’t give me that spiel about ‘friendship,’ either. Because there’s more to this. Denying it won’t make me believe you.”

“What do you want me to say, my son?” she whispers. “That I have feelings for him?”

“Do you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she says tearfully. “He doesn’t feel the same way.”

“So you’ve had a conversation about this?”

“Of course not,” she says. “But it became clear early on in our friendship that he wasn’t interested in a romantic relationship with me.”

“And you decided to stay involved with him regardless?”

She twists the ring on her finger uncomfortably and says nothing.

“I told you. For fuck’s sake, how many times did I tell you? I should have put my foot down once and for all.”

“You must have gotten the wrong information, Aleks,” she says desperately. “It can’t be him.”

“It absolutely can be,” I snarl in her face.

I stride around my desk and rip open the packet Demyan and Jennifer prepared for me. I thrust the first page into my mother’s hands, then the next, and the next.

“Do you know what these pages say?” I demand. “These are sworn testimonies and physical evidence confirming that Donald Jeremy Hargrove raped a pair of fifteen-year-old prostitutes, then threatened them into signing non-disclosure agreements so they wouldn’t dare say a word to anyone. Does that sound like the kind of thing a ‘good-hearted man’ would do, Mother?”

“There... there must be some sort of misunderstanding...”

“Look at the bruises,” I order. “Look at them! Right fucking there.” I smack the photograph in her hand of a poor young girl’s mottled throat and my mother jumps in her seat. “The only misunderstanding here is yours. The man isn’t interested in fucking you, but it isn’t because he doesn’t like you. It’s because you’re fifty years too old for his depraved fucking tastes.”

She drops her head in defeat. Her shoulders sag under the weight of the revelation.

“He befriended you for a reason.”

Her head snaps up again. “What are you saying?”

“I would have thought it was obvious,” I tell her. “He knew who you were from the beginning. And he knew who your son was. He’s found out enough about me and the Bratva to justify pinning his crimes on me.”

“But—”

“The FBI was closing in on the sick son of a bitch. So he re-routed them in *my* direction. And you helped him do it.”

Her eyes go wide. “I would never ever help him hurt you or the Bratva. How can you even say something like that?”

“You sacrificed a lot to this Bratva. It took a lot from you and gave little in return. Perhaps you’re bitter.”

“That doesn’t matter. None of it matters. I may have resentment in me, but nothing could ever justify turning on my family.”

I look at her, and I see an old woman. One who’s lonely and desperate and sad. Who saw what she thought was a light at the end of the tunnel and reached for it with hope that maybe things could be different.

But there was never a light.

There was just a devil waving a torch amidst the darkness.

I breathe and close my eyes. “Starting now,” I tell her, “you will sever any connection you still have with Donald Hargrove. You will see no one without my explicit permission. You will do your goddamn part to keep this Bratva alive. Do you understand me?”

She nods fearfully. “I understand.”

“Good. You’re dismissed.”

She stands and heads to the door, but just before leaving, she pauses on the threshold. Her gaze is distant, foggy, like the truth of what I’m saying is written somewhere beyond these walls.

“What are you going to do now?” she asks finally.

“That’s for me to know.”

“You have Olivia. You married her. Surely the brother’s thrown out the case and closed the book on us by now.”

“If only it were that easy.”

“What do you mean?”

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. “Robert Lawrence has been replaced.”

Her eyes go wide. “What?”

“The Bureau felt he was getting too erratic. They called into question his personal stake in this case and they pulled him out of it. So now, there’s a new detective leading the investigation. And from what I know of him, this thing is going to get much worse before it gets better.”

She blinks and shudders. “What about Olivia?”

“What about her?”

“She’s no longer of use to you anymore, is she?”

I look towards my desk and rearrange some of the files sitting there. I need to work, to burn off this excess anger and the lingering flame of what almost happened between me and Olivia just before I came in here.

“You never know.”

She wrinkles her brow. “Wait—you’re not letting her go?”

“Why would I do that?”

“I don’t understand. Why keep her here?”

“Because she’s my wife. And I’m assuming Hargrove knows about it, doesn’t he?”

She has the grace to look ashamed. “I might have mentioned it in passing.”

“The man is going to come at me with everything he’s got. If this route doesn’t work, he’ll try another. Here, she has my protection. Out in the world? She’s a sitting duck.”

She’s silent for a long time.

“You’re trying to protect her?” she asks at last.

I exhale wearily. “Get out of my office, Mother. I have work to do.”



**OLIVIA**

I've done the math again and again.

Almost three months to the day since I was brought here.

Three months of confinement.

Three months without my family.

Three months of Aleks's cruelty, laced through with just enough moments of the lightness inside of him to keep me from giving up hope altogether.

And also... three months since my period.

I try telling myself I'm stressed, I'm scared, my body's in no mood for reproduction, so of course it makes sense to miss a few cycles.

But in my bones, in my soul, I see that for what it is: bullshit.

I'm pregnant.

I've spent the last hour standing in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at my body for evidence. But there are no immediate signs that it's true. My belly is still flat, my hips still slightly curved. There's been no bloating or strange acne. Perhaps the only thing to note is that my breasts are sore.

For a little while, I can keep up the lies to myself. But I don't know how much longer they'll survive.

When I hear my bedroom door open, I dress quickly in black sweats and a white crop top. I step back into the bedroom, expecting to find Yulia there.

Maybe I'll tell her. Maybe she'll reassure me, help me figure out what to do.

Aleks told me not to trust her, but if I don't trust her, then who the hell else in this house do I have? No one. Nothing.

But it's not her at all.

It's him, staring at me with those piercing eyes.

And all I can think is, *He knows*.

He fucking knows.

"How are you feeling today?" he asks.

I frown. "Did you really come up here to ask me that?"

"You looked sick yesterday."

"I'm fine."

He narrows his eyes. "Your color is off."

I narrow my eyes back at him. "Gee, thanks. Very flattering."

"Have you thrown up again?"

*Lie*, screams my inner voice. *Lie to him*.

"No."

"One of the maids said she heard noises from the bathroom this morning when she came with breakfast," he says.

"The maids need to mind their own damn business."

"Actually, they're paid to mind *my* business," he retorts. "And you are currently *my* business."

"You're an asshole."

He rolls his eyes. "You'll get used to it."

“I want to speak to my brother,” I say, changing the subject. “I haven’t talked to my family in weeks.”

“You know why that is.”

I feel my head spin as another bout of nausea creeps up my throat. My knees buckle, but before I hit the floor, Aleks scoops me up into his arms.

He carries me to the bed and sets me down gently. I expect him to back away immediately and put the distance between us that he seems to crave.

But instead, he kneels down in front of me. He runs his hand over my forehead and frowns.

“You’re clammy.”

I jerk away from his touch. “I’m fine.”

“Stop fighting me all the damn time. I’m trying to take care of you, for fuck’s sake.”

“I won’t ever stop fighting. Not until you realize you don’t own me.”

“Then you’re going to be really tired.”

I glare at him, but I’m still too dizzy to come up with a proper comeback.

Aleks stares back and then, to my surprise, something in his expression cracks. “Believe it or not,” he murmurs, “I’m not the enemy.”

In spite of myself, my hands twitch with the urge to reach out and touch him. It wouldn’t take much. Just a few inches to cup his face. I could press a kiss to his cheek. He looks so exhausted suddenly. Like he’s been waging a vicious battle for decades and it’s cost him everything he ever had.

“You may not have done what my brother thinks you did,” I say. “But you’re still keeping me here. Why not just tell him the truth?”

“Because he won’t listen.”

“He’s my brother,” I protest. “He’ll listen to me.”

“Even if that were true, you’re in no fit state for any kind of intense conversation. We can revisit this idea when you’re better.”

His eyes are so hypnotizing that I find myself leaning in. “And... and you’ll let me speak to my family?”

“Maybe.”

“Will I be able to see them, too?” I ask hopefully.

He looks skeptical, but he doesn’t say no, either.

“If I can just sit with him and explain,” I add, barreling through before he can reject the idea outright, “I know I can make him understand. He’ll drop the case, Aleks. I know he will.”

“He doesn’t have the power anymore,” he informs me. “He was reassigned.”

I stare at him. At his unsettling good looks and his raw power. It feels strange, these opposing feelings taking up equal space inside me. I want to run from him, but at the same time, I want to stay.

I want to be with him, but I also want to hide away in my old life.

I want to be brave, but I’m scared.

“Then why am I still here?” I ask. “You don’t need me anymore.”

“It’s... complicated,” he says vaguely. “But I need you to trust that I’m doing this to protect you.”

“Protect me from what? From who?”

“From the person who’s trying to frame me for his crimes. If he wants to hurt me, that means he could try to hurt you, too.”

“But we’re not really married. I’m not your real wife. I’m nothing to you.”

“He doesn’t know that.”

*Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.* My heart is pounding hard. I thought Aleks was what I had to fear.

Looks like my nightmares are only just getting started.

“How long will this take, Aleks? When will I have my freedom back?”

He meets my eyes. “When he’s taken care of. When I’m sure you’ll be safe.”

That’s no timeline. None at all.

But somehow, I’m not focused on that. I’m focused on his last few words. Words that suggest I’m more to him than just a tool he was planning on discarding once he was done with me.

“Does it matter to you that I’m safe?”

I don’t expect him to answer, but he does. “Yes,” he whispers. “More than I know how to say.”

My heart is thudding hard. I can feel it over every inch of my body, in my scalp, in the soles of my feet.

“Aleks?” I whisper. My voice shakes with nerves.

“Yes, *kiska*?”

“What do you feel for me?”

There’s one fraction of a second where it seems like he might actually answer the question. His eyes soften and his lips part and the words are right on his lips. *I feel everything* or *I don’t feel a damn thing*, I’m not sure. I’m also not sure which of those two I’d rather hear.

But at least it would be something. At least it would put an end to this infinite torture.

Then his jaw slams shut and the moment disappears. Swallowed up by the anger and trauma that fuels him.

And I feel like a fool for ever thinking it could be different.

His gaze steels over again, then flickers away from me. Aleks gets to his feet.

“Rest up,” he says softly. “I’m leaving on business now. I’ll send the doctor around in a few hours to check on you.”

“Aleks, wait—”

He doesn't stop. He marches out of the room and shuts the door hard, leaving me with nothing but the silence pounding in my ears.

I still don't know what to feel or what to do about any of it.

The man who just left.

The life in my womb.

The future that awaits us all.

**OLIVIA**

I'm still staring at the ceiling trying to figure anything out when the door opens again. I don't know how long I've been laying here, but I know instinctively it's not Aleks.

Yulia walks over to the bed and sits down beside me. "You look pale."

"So I've been told," I mutter.

She surprises me by taking my hand. Only then do I realize that her expression is stark and urgent. Her eyes hold an edge of panic that I haven't seen before.

I sit up immediately. "Yulia, what's wrong?"

"I have a way out for you," she whispers. She glances over her shoulder at the shadowy corner like someone might be lurking and listening.

"A what?"

"He's not going to let you go, Olivia. I'm not sure if you know, but your brother's no longer a part of the investigation into the Bratva."

"Yeah, I know. He told me."

"Then you know that there's no reason for him to keep you here anymore. But I think he's planning to do it all the same."

I bite my lip, recalling Aleks's words. "He... he seems to think I'm in danger."

"In danger from whom?" she asks, pulling her eyebrows together.

"From the man who tried to frame him."

Yulia's expression twists. I can tell she doesn't buy it, and her doubt makes me question his sincerity. I'd convinced myself it made sense when Aleks was sitting in front of me, but now I'm starting to wonder whether I was just being naive.

"He's just trying to control me, isn't he?" I ask.

"If you don't want to do this—"

"No," I say, clinging to her hand. "No, I do. If you have a way out, I'll take it."

She nods, but her face is still somber. It speaks to the kind of danger we'll be in if we're caught.

"Are you sure you can do this?" I ask.

"Aleks just stepped out with a contingent of men," Yulia informs me. "There are guards on duty, but I know their movements. I'm the one who arranged their shifts. I can have you out of here in the next ten minutes."

Ten minutes?

Is that all that remains between me and freedom?

After three months under lock and key, I didn't think it would be over so soon.

I swallow my nerves and give her a curt nod. "Let's go."

As I get to my feet, I have to push back another wave of nausea. My head feels like it's about to burst. My heart does, too. I expect it's the adrenaline of escape.

But the sadness that weighs me down like an anchor? That's something else entirely. It's a deep sense of loss that I can't quite justify.



And since I can't explain it, I ignore it and follow Yulia out the door with nothing but the clothes on my back.

We move through the house quickly and quietly. Amazingly, we don't run into a soul.

I haven't been out in the front of the house since I first arrived here. I barely recognize the facade.

"There's a car waiting for you just outside the gates," Yulia tells me. "Keep to the far left of the road, near the trees. The cameras won't pick you up there. I've made sure to angle them just right."

"A car?"

"There's a driver waiting for you. Ask him to take you to the city. Then you can contact your family."

"Who does he work for?" I ask. "What if he reports back to Aleks?"

"He won't," she says confidently. "He works for me. Now, go! There's a new shift starting in four minutes and those men will pass right through here."

I grab her elbow before she can turn away. "What if he finds out you helped me?"

"I can handle myself."

"Yulia!"

She takes up both of my hands and pulls me toward her in a motherly embrace. "I'm sorry I didn't help you sooner," she whispers in my ear. "Better late than never, though, right?"

I give her a sad smile as tears stud my eyes. "I can't thank you enough."

"Then don't thank me. Just run."

I nod quickly and give her one last parting smile. Then I turn and sprint towards the gates.

I keep to the far left just like she instructed me to, through the woods and a gap in the gates. And the car's waiting for me, just like she said it would be. I

get in the back seat.

“Where to?” he asks curtly.

“The city. Downtown.”

He’s got a bad combover and the car reeks of cigarettes. He reminds me of all the cabbies in New York City, which makes me feel more comfortable. Like all this might truly be happening.

*I’m going home.*



A half-hour passes in silence. It gives me too much time to think.

What will Aleks do when he finds me gone?

What will he do to Yulia if he finds out she helped me?

Will he come after me? And if he does, why, when, how?

“Where exactly do you want me to drop you off?” the driver asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I look up and realize we’re in the business district. Hip shops and restaurants with lofts and apartments above. People mill around on the sidewalk, enjoying their normal lives. It’s a bizarre sight. Don’t they know what’s happening just out of sight? Don’t they know what I’ve been through?

“Right here,” I tell him. “Thank you.”

I’m about to get out of the car when he hands me an envelope.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Not my place to know or care. Madam Yulia told me to give it to you.”

I open the envelope and see a flash of green. Not only has she rescued me, she’s also left me money. Honestly, I don’t know why I ever doubted the woman.

She's a freaking saint.

"Will you thank her for me?"

He looks annoyed by the request. "That's not my place, either."

I swallow back my final words and get out of the car. I take it there won't be a warm goodbye with this guy. Sure enough, as soon as the door is shut behind me, he's taking off like a rocket down the road. He turns the corner and disappears from my life forever.

I walk down the street, past cafes and clothing stores. Past dozens and hundreds and thousands of people who do not give a flying fuck about who I am or what purpose I might be able to serve for them.

The freedom is mind-boggling.

I end up in a little restaurant with fairy lights strung across the ceiling. The bartender is busy cleaning out his glasses for the night shift.

"Excuse me?" I ask.

"Yeah?"

"Is there a phone I can use?" I ask. "I can pay for the call."

He gives me an amused glance and hands me his cell phone. "Here you go. No need to pay."

I return a grateful smile and quickly dial in Rob's number. I get three unanswered rings, then the call drops.

Cursing under my breath, I try him again. I don't want to call Mia. She'll panic, and what I need right now is someone rational.

"Hello?" Rob's voice is music to my ears.

"Oh, thank God. Rob?"

"Liv, where are you?" he asks. "Are you okay? Why haven't I heard from you? Did he realize what you did during our last call?"

He shoots off question after question, but I don't answer any of them. "I'm in a restaurant in town. It's called...um..."

"Corino's," the bartender says, helping me out.

"Corino's," I repeat.

"I'll be there in ten minutes," he says. "Don't move."

He hangs up before I can say anything else, so I pass the phone back to the bartender. "Thanks for that. I owe you one."

"Yeah?" he says. "How about a drink sometime, then? On the house."

I look him over and realize he's not bad-looking, actually. He's got a full beard, which is not normally my style, but it suits him. His eyes are bright and kind, his hair is a messy man bun, but it works with the whole "masculine bartender" vibe.

But my stomach turns.

And not because I'm pregnant.

It's because I see another man's face in my mind.

With that roiling nausea comes guilt. Like I'm cheating.

Except that, to cheat, you have to actually be involved with someone. And I'm not. Never was, really. What Aleks and I have—*had*—is an illusion.

It's time it came to an end.

"I'm sorry, I can't. My situation right now is... complicated."

The bartender chuckles. "Aren't they all?"

"I'm not making an excuse," I tell him. "Seriously. You're cute. It's not you."

He raises one eyebrow. "I'll pretend to believe that. For my ego's sake, if nothing else."

"Really, I promise. I'm... I'm pregnant," I blurt out before I can stop myself.

He stops short and sets down the glass he's holding. "Well, shit. Guess it is complicated. Is the father in the picture?"

I shake my head. I don't trust myself to do any more than that.

He winces. "I'm sorry. It's cowardly when men pull that shit."

"Well, he doesn't know," I hear myself say.

I don't know why I'm telling anyone this, let alone a stranger. I don't even know for sure if I'm pregnant yet.

But somehow, it feels cathartic to say all these things out loud. To play with the possibility that, in a few months, I'll have a baby in my arms and that baby will be mine.

Not Aleks's.

*Mine.*

"Oh," he says. "Hm. The mystery deepens. Are you gonna tell him?"

"I don't know," I admit.

"Bad relationship?"

I bite my lip and fall back on the only word that makes sense to me right now: "Complicated."

He chuckles again, though his eyes flash once more with sympathy. I hear the bell over the door ring and I turn to see a tall, broad-shouldered figure. My heartbeat quickens for a moment—*Can he really have tracked me down already...?*

But it's not Aleks.

It's Rob.

I do my best to ignore the bitter tang of disappointment as I weave between the tables and throw myself into his arms.

"Rob!" I cry out. I bury my face in his shoulder.

He pulls away almost immediately. "Let's go. Get in the car."

He steers me towards the door with a painfully tight grip on my upper arm. I have only time for a backhanded glance at the bartender before I'm rushed back into daylight.

"Rob...?"

"Get in the car," he growls again. "It's not safe to be out in the open like this."

Rob has always been calm, cool, collected. A picture of perfect control at all times—though not without his fair share of anger bubbling beneath the surface, especially since Isabella vanished.

But now? Now, that anger is raging for all to see. Along with paranoia and a kind of panicked franticness that sets my own heartbeat thumping along with it.

Something has changed for the worse.

He pushes me into the car and looks furtively up and down the street.

"I wasn't followed," I hiss at him.

"That you know of," he corrects without looking down. "What about the blue sedan right over there? Could be Bratva."

He waits for a moment until the car in question pulls away and disappears from sight. Only then does he hustle around the front of the car and climb into the driver's seat.

The moment he is situated in the car, I turn to him. "Rob, is everything alright?"

He glares at me as though offended by the question. "Jesus, did you really just ask me that, Liv? Nothing is alright. You were held hostage for three fucking months. It's not like you were on a goddamn vacation."

"Listen to me," I say, grabbing his hand. "There's something you need to know."

He starts the engine and pulls out of his parking spot. "Later."

"Rob, I'm trying to tell you something important."

“You can tell me once we get to safety,” he says.

I can’t explain it, but something isn’t right. A vague sense of foreboding is working its way up my spine.

“Rob, can you please pull over?”

“Liv, we don’t have the time for—”

“Make the damn time,” I snap. “Pull over now!”

He looks at me with alarm. He’s not used to me asserting myself this way. In fact, I’m not used to it, either. It feels wrong to be demanding, especially since Rob showed up to save me.

But he makes a turn and then, at the first available opportunity, he pulls over to the curb.

“Pretty sure this is a bus stand, so talk fast.”

It’s not the way I want to tell him, but I’m hoping this news will make a difference to him. Maybe it’ll pull him back from the ledge he seems to be on right now.

“You were right, Rob,” I say. “She’s alive.”

He doesn’t even have to ask who I’m talking about. His eyes go wide. I see relief and hope flood his features. In that moment, I see a flicker of the man he used to be.

“I knew it,” he breathes.

“But it’s not what you think,” I tell him urgently. “Isabella... that’s not even her real name.”

He goes still and fixes me with a strange expression. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, she was—*is* a spy.” I hate the clumsy way this explanation is coming out. “She works for Aleks. She was planted by him in the first place to try and suss out how deep the investigation into his Bratva went. They were trying to find the person who tipped the FBI off in the first place. She was meant to extract that information from you.”

He stares at me without saying a word.

“Her name is Jennifer,” I continue. “She disappeared because one of her former targets recognized her and threatened to blow her cover. It wasn’t a murder—it was an escape plan.”

Still nothing.

“Rob?”

He blinks once. Twice. Three times.

“Rob, this is all true. I spoke to her.”

That forces him to snap out of it. “You actually saw her?”

“Yes.”

“And she told you this?”

“Yes.”

“Under what circumstances?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“She could have been forced to feed you this story,” he suggests. “He would have forced her.”

“No... I... No, Rob. That’s not it. She and Aleks are friends, I think.”

Fury flits across his eyes. “They are not fucking *friends*.”

“Rob—”

“He took her, and now, he’s forcing her to tell you some bullshit fairy tale to make it seem like he’s innocent.”

“I don’t think—”

“I don’t buy this shit and neither should you, Olivia. He’s a monster and he’s got her. Just like I always knew he did.”

“Rob, please. You’re not listening to me.”



“I got kicked off the case,” he snarls with single-minded passion.

“I know.”

“But it’s not even close to over, Liv. I’m going to end the bastard.”

Fear nearly chokes me as I see the determination in his eyes. I’m not just scared for him, though. I’m scared for Aleks, too. “Rob, you’re off the case. What can you do?”

“I have an ally.”

“An ally?”

He nods. “He’ll help me in a way that the FBI can’t or won’t. Honestly, I’m glad they kicked me off the damn case. This way, I don’t have to do shit by the book.”

“Rob, you’re starting to scare me.”

“Don’t be scared, Liv,” he says, but he’s not even looking at me. “The only one who should be scared is Aleksandr fucking Makarova.”

He wrenches the car back onto the road and mashes the accelerator. It feels like I’m talking to a brick wall. Nothing I say seems to pierce through.

When we reach our turn, Rob makes a left when he’s supposed to be making a right.

“Hey,” I say softly. “The house is that way.”

“We’re not going there. It’s the first place he’ll look for you.”

“But then where are you taking me?”

“Somewhere safe,” Rob mutters.

That dread that’s been seeping into every cell finally reaches my throat. I feel like I’m drowning in it, like I can’t breathe. It’s an acrid taste on my tongue that sets my heart throbbing painfully with every beat.

“Who is your friend, Rob?” I whisper hoarsely. “Who is helping us?”

He grips the wheel, his knuckles going white. “His name is Donald Hargrove.”

**TO BE CONTINUED**



*Aleks and Olivia’s story will conclude in Book 2 of the Makarova Bratva duet, **SHATTERED CRADLE**.*

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