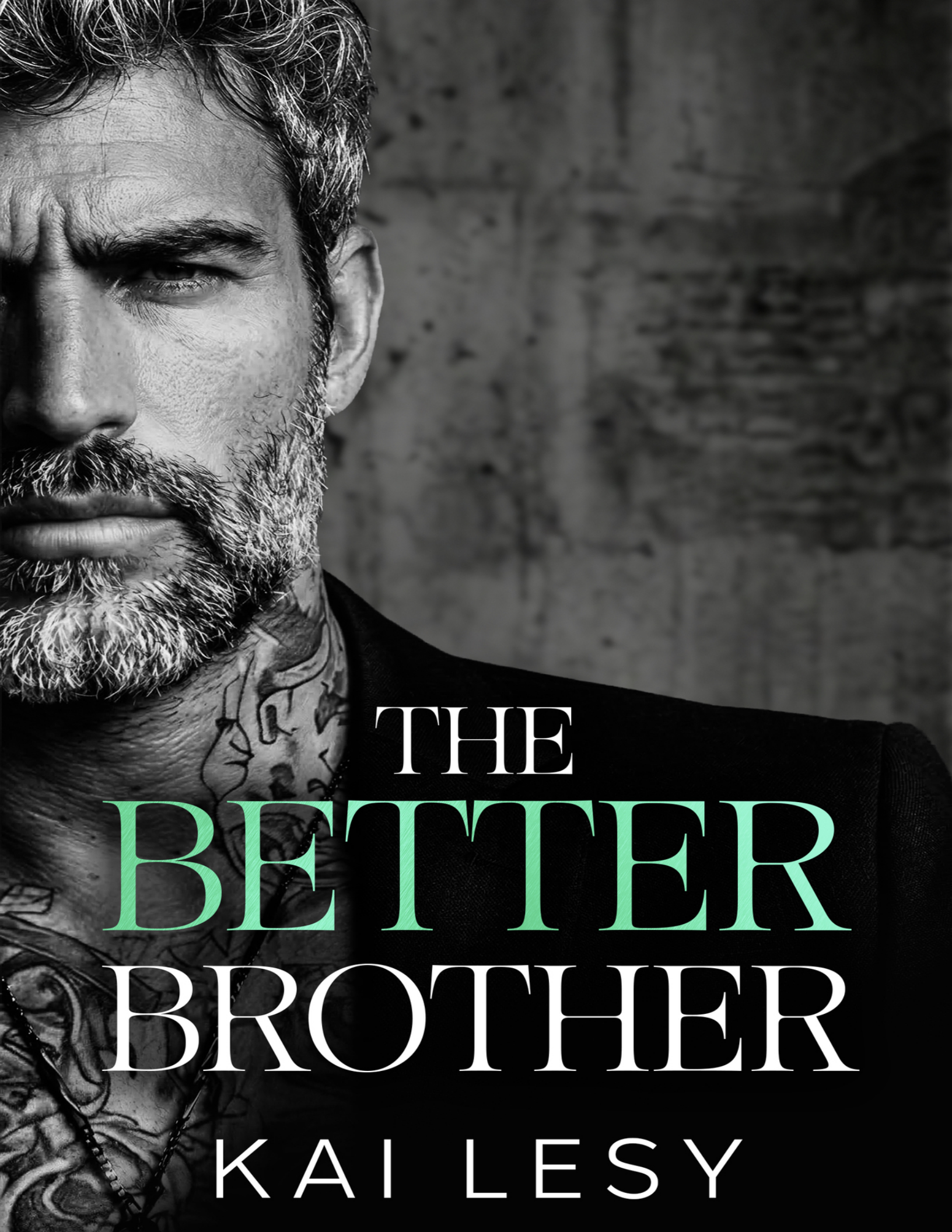




THE
BETTER
BROTHER

KAI LESY

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THE BETTER BROTHER

AN AGE GAP, BRATVA ROMANCE

KAI LESY

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DESCRIPTION

“My brother lost you. Be my Queen at his wedding... and let him watch while I ruin you for anyone else.”

My ex dumped me for a stick-thin socialite.
So I made a promise: The next man who touched me would earn the
privilege.

Then HE happened.

A stranger with cold eyes.
Filthy mouth. And lethal hands.

He dragged me into the bathroom of my Prague flight.
Fisted my hair.
Bit my throat.
Burned filthy Russian promises straight into my soul.

Then I learned his name.

Matvei Volkov.
Bratva kingpin.
Chicago's deadliest shadow.
And my ex-fiancé's estranged half-brother.

His offer?
Stand on his arm at my ex's wedding.
Wear his diamonds.
Help him get revenge.
Walk away with enough money to build the life I've always wanted.

It should have been easy.

**Until blood spills.
Enemies close in.
And two pink lines change everything. Twins.**

**And Matvei's done pretending.
Now he says I'm his.
And God help anyone who tries to take me from him.**

For readers who love: silver fox mafia bosses, a fierce heroine, and forbidden romance with the ex's older brother. A curvy heroine finally worshipped the way she deserves. A dangerously possessive Bratva alpha who doesn't know how to let go. Explosive family betrayal, high-stakes drama, and a man who would burn the world down to keep what's his.

SONYA

You're too much woman for me. In my line of work, I can't be seen with you. Gen is different—the kind of woman who suits me better. If only you had dropped the weight like I asked you to.

I stare at the text on my phone, the chaos of the airport fading into background noise as I read it over and over.

My heart hammers in my chest while icicles run up and down my spine.

If only you had dropped the weight.

Shame follows the recitation of those words—a shame suddenly engulfed by white-hot anger.

“That fucking son of a bitch!” I mutter to myself. I’m breathing heavily, and I’m pretty sure my cheeks are bright red. My hand clenches so hard around my phone it starts shaking. “What the fuck? What the ever-loving fuck?”

The words are a cascade of livid fury that pours out as I contemplate throwing my phone through the plate-glass window at the gate and then turning around and punching whoever I see next.

Except the person I see next is a giant of a man waiting to board just behind me. I’m not exactly short, but I have to look up—and up—to see his face. He’s almost half as broad as he is tall. He’s built like a linebacker, and I wouldn’t be surprised if as soon as he sits down in a seat, the seams of his suit rip. I don’t even know how he squeezed himself into it in the first place.

He's handsome in a way that makes it hard to think, with dark wavy hair tinged gray in a way that reminds me of George Clooney. Though I think this guy is even hotter than George Clooney, and I'm certainly no Amal.

I drag my gaze from the silver fox behind me, focusing on my breathing instead. I will not let my asshole ex ruin my vacation, especially since I spent all the money I'd saved up for the wedding he called off on treating myself to it, first-class seats included.

I power down my phone and stuff it into my carry-on, nearly ripping the zipper in the process.

"That phone must have really pissed you off."

The voice is a baritone rumble that echoes and ripples down my spine. I can feel the vibration to my core, and it does funny things to me. I turn to find the big man watching me with a slight curl to one corner of his mouth and a glimmer in his startlingly clear blue eyes. I get a whiff of patchouli, cardamom, and lots of money. I have to swallow because my mouth has suddenly gone dry as a desert.

"I, uh, I was imagining stuffing my ex into a body bag. The imagery makes me feel better."

"Ah." The man nods sagely. "I'm glad I'm not the one on your bad side, then."

"I don't think you'd fit into a traditional body bag," I reply dumbly. "I imagine they'd have to custom make one for a man of your size."

What the hell are you saying, Sonya? I expect the man to stop talking to me immediately since he probably thinks I'm an idiot. But instead, a ghost of a smile grows into something incredibly sexy and disarming. Add a flash of white teeth and the smile lines at the corners of his mouth and he's so much sexier. He chuckles, a deep, stimulating sound, and I swallow hard before I make some weird noise I know I'll regret.

"You're probably right about needing a special order body bag for me."

I take a breath to say something—anything at all, brain, *please*—when I'm cut off by a loud announcement: "Flight 1386 to Prague is now boarding

first-class passengers.”

For the first time in my life, I get to walk past all the other people waiting. I'm a little embarrassed and a little exhilarated at the same time because I've never flown first-class before. I don't even like flying. I love traveling, but I hate flying, which always seemed kind of ridiculous to me. It's hard to have one without the other.

The gate agent checks my ticket then offers me a warm welcome and a smile.

I deserve it, I deserve it, I deserve it. I keep repeating the phrase to myself as I walk down the bridge to the airplane where I'm kindly shown into first-class. I'm guided to a spacious, lavish seat where a tray of olives, a pouch of amenities, and bottled water, and a blanket are waiting for me.

I stow my suitcase and sit down. The flight attendant hands me a glass of champagne while the rest of the plane boards and settles in. All of my anger and second thoughts about spending so much money disappear when the sweet bubbly hits my tongue. I let out a little squeal and do a small dance in my seat because I can't believe I'm actually here, flying first-class to Prague.

Another one of those deep chuckles freezes me in place. I look over to see the silver fox who was standing behind me in line is in the seat across from mine.

“First time in first-class?” he asks.

My cheeks heat with a deep blush. “Is it painfully obvious?”

“Maybe not.” He shrugs and places his small leather bag onto the seat “I normally don't pay much attention to whether people dance on a flight.”

He looks directly at me. His eyes are a luminous blue that makes me catch my breath. His gaze is so intense it feels like he's looking right through me to my core. The feeling is disarming but also exciting. Does he look at everyone this way?

I'm still wondering if his suit is going to split open when he sits down, but upon closer inspection it's clearly tailored to him. Cufflinks on his crisp

white shirt glimmer subtly in the cabin's dim light. His watch appears outrageously expensive even without a close look. His hair is perfectly tousled, his suit perfectly pressed and creased.

I spent a lot of money for this seat. This guy clearly belongs here.

"I'm Sonya," I say, switching the champagne to my other hand as I reach out in greeting.

"Matvei," he says, his hand enveloping mine, enormous and warm, his grip surprisingly gentle for his size.

The name jolts me in its familiarity, though I cannot for the life of me remember where I've heard it before. I'm also distracted by the spark of electricity that ignites between us. It's probably just static in the close-quarters cabin.

"This is my first time in first-class," I confess. "I spent all the money I'd saved for my wedding on it because I hate flying, and I thought this might make it better. This, and a nice hotel in Prague, plus some sightseeing adventures so I can forget my ex," I babble as he settles himself across the aisle.

"I assume he was the person texting you." At my expression, he ducks his head in apology and sips his own glass of champagne. "I couldn't help but see part of your screen over your shoulder. Part of the curse of being too tall."

I flush and bite my lip, taking a bigger sip of the champagne than intended, coughing from the bubbles. "I was planning the wedding and saving up, and then he just disappeared. The next time I heard from him, he told me he was breaking up with me. No explanation. Today I finally got one."

He clucks his tongue and takes another sip. "Well." His eyes catch mine over his glass in a way that makes me gulp again. "There are many other men in the world. I'd hope the opinion of one asshole doesn't start making you doubt yourself and your beauty."

"Maybe I can find someone in Prague. I wonder what kind of body type men prefer in the Czech Republic?"

What was meant as an attempt at humor clearly falls flat as he stares at me with that same unsettling gaze. “I would hope you find someone who appreciates the entire package, not just the wrapping, as appealing as it is in itself.”

Another of his smoldering looks before he downs the rest of his bubbly, handing the glass to the flight attendant coming around to collect them before takeoff.

I spend the acceleration down the runway and the entire ascent gripping the arms of my chair, my eyes squeezed shut, breathing deeply in and out before I start to panic.

“I didn't think you'd survive takeoff.”

I open one eye to see him peering at me. His smile is small, his eyes warm with amusement. “I told you I hated flying. The takeoff is the worst part.” I squeeze my eyes shut again, but his voice is like a siren song, pulling me back from the edge of my panic.

“I'm a good distraction,” he says, his voice a low rumble. When I open my eyes again seconds later, he's still looking at me, his chin resting on one hand as he leans forward.

“A little too good, I think. You're not helping me focus on my imminent doom.”

“I'm trying to prevent it. I don't think they special order body bags for two.” His eyes crinkle at the corners as he teases me.

And from that moment on, I'm lost. I find talking to this enormous enigma of a stranger easy. Matvei seems content enough to listen.

We talk until my eyes start to grow heavy, aided by the hum of the engine and the extra glass of champagne I ordered. The last thing I hear is a chuckle as I drift off in the middle of a sentence, unable to stay awake any longer.

I'm roused by a sudden jolt, followed a heartbeat later by another one, the second even more violent. “Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.”

I grip the seat so hard my nails dig into the soft leather. Another jolt, and I feel like I'm flying out of my seat, my stomach in free-fall.

“Ladies and gentlemen. We're flying through a storm as we cross the Atlantic, so we can expect some turbulence for the next half hour or so. I'm turning on the fasten seat belt sign to keep everyone safe. Please bear with us until we get through the storm.”

The captain sounds calm and disinterested. I should take heart in that, but I don't. All I heard were the words “storm” and “turbulence.”

“Oh my God,” I groan, then squeal at another massive jolt. The plane rises and descends, then rises again before dropping once more. “This was a terrible idea.”

I'm going to die because that asshole broke up with me and I had some wild idea about washing off his touch, his betrayal, and my misery with a random trip to Prague.

“Sonya?”

I hear Matvei's voice, but I can't open my eyes, because if I do, we're going to crash. The plane takes a steep dive before leveling out, but not in time to stop my cry of fear.

“Sonya? Are you all right?”

“Sir, you have to remain in your seat.”

“Sonya, please say something.”

“Sir, please sit down.”

I don't understand the commotion until Matvei is sitting in the seat beside me. I can smell his cologne and feel his warmth as he leans close, one of his hands covering mine as I clutch the armrest.

“We're going to die.”

I've already made a perfect idiot out of myself in front of one of the hottest men I've ever seen, and now I'm putting the cherry on top by completely losing it in front of him.

Except he's leaning closer, his thumb stroking mine in a slow, steady rhythm. "We're not going to die. This is just turbulence."

I screech again as the plane drops for what feels like minutes, though logically I know it's not. Before I can register what's happening, his hands are on my seat belt. I feel it unclick before I finally open my eyes.

"What are you doing?"

Matvei pulls me out of my seat and takes my hand, leading me down the aisle.

"Sir! Sir, you need to sit down! You're not supposed to get up when the fasten seatbelt sign is on."

The flight attendant follows us, her face flushed with flustered anger as she hangs on to the seatbacks through another jolt. But the red turns to ghostly white at the look Matvei sends her over his shoulder. Even I try to pull away from the terrifying mask his face becomes; he's even more frightening than the turbulence. The look has its desired effect because the flight attendant stops chasing us. Matvei pulls me into the bathroom suite.

"Holy shit," I say, looking around at an airplane bathroom that's larger than the one in my apartment. "What are you—"

When Matvei pulls me around and pins me against the back of the door, I entirely forget what I was going to say.

SONYA

I don't even have time to take a breath before Matvei is on me, his mouth hard on mine, his tongue pushing for an entrance I give him without a second's thought.

When he's pressed against me, surrounding me, consuming me, it's incredibly apparent just how massive he is.

Keeping up with him feels impossible. He's everywhere, taking me in entirely, his lips moving from my mouth to my jaw to my neck and back. One hand is braced against the door above my head, the other cupping an ass cheek and massaging it through my leggings.

"What are you doing?" I manage between frantic kisses.

Matvei draws back, his blue eyes so intense I can't look anywhere else. "I'm going to fuck you until you forget everything but me. Unless you want to go back to panicking in your seat?"

I don't even have to think about the answer. "Fuck no."

He's on me again, a primal growl escaping his throat as he lifts me with seemingly no effort and deposits me in the shower—the *shower!* On a *plane!* —before pulling my sweater off and throwing it who-knows-where. My shirt follows.

All thoughts of the luxurious bathroom are forgotten as Matvei pins me against the shower wall, his thigh moving between my legs in a way that makes heat pool in my stomach and swirl downward. His fingers hook into

the waistband of my leggings, and he tugs them down, an amazing feat for someone who hasn't stopped ravaging my mouth for even a second.

The feel of his leg between mine is driving me wild, and I rub against him to satisfy the throbbing need between my thighs.

His deep chuckle adds a rumble to the hum of the engines, and seconds later, his large hand replaces his thigh. "Mmm. Enjoying this, are you?" he asks, his tone that of a predator that could mean either satisfaction or imminent danger. I'm not sure which it is, especially given the wicked smile on Matvei's face that inspires a twinge of fear as much as a deep, growing desire for him.

His eyes blaze as he cups the soft mound at the apex of my thighs, and I can't help but moan. *Shit*. He's hardly doing anything, and I feel like I'm coming undone.

Our mouths crash together again, causing desire to rage through my bloodstream, making my head spin and my heart spiral out of control. I forget about the turbulence, about the panic. I forget we're even on an airplane, far above the frigid waters of the Atlantic. All I can feel is the warmth of this man's body pressed against mine, the way his hands feel grasping my curves, the way his mouth feels as it claims my own—tasting, teasing, plunging—this man who makes it easy to forget that the only thing I know about him is his name.

I'm going to go wild for once. Being a good girl only got me dumped by an asshole. This beast of a man wants me in this moment, and I'm going to *carpe* the hell out of this *diem* right here and now.

I let my tempestuous side come out, the one that stays deeply hidden, emerging only to protect my clients. Right now, though, it wants more of what this man is giving. I curl my fingers into his hair and tug as I rake my nails against his skin. Our inner beasts answer one another, driving each other to higher heights of desperation. Before I know it, my panties join my leggings around my ankles, and without any prelude, Matvei slides a finger into me.

I cry out and hope no one in the cabin can hear me, a worry that's forgotten in the next moment as a second finger joins the first. Matvei drives in and

out, causing me to whimper like a girl who's having sex for the first time.

I claw at him, frantically seeking his mouth, his skin, hanging on to him as he drives my body to heights that make every muscle tense and flush with heat.

One rub of his thumb against my clit and I come undone—muffling my cry in his shoulder as I shiver and shake around his fingers, his heady, masculine scent of patchouli and cardamom enveloping me.

Without warning, Matvei withdraws his fingers and flips me around. The sound of his belt hitting the floor is followed by a zipper being pulled down. Suddenly, hard warmth is pressed against my ass.

I groan at how good he feels against me, teasing me until I wiggle and push back against him, desperate to feel him inside me.

“Fuuuck,” I groan, biting my lower lip and dragging my teeth along it.

“Is that what you want?” Matvei hums against the back of my neck before nipping the skin there. “For me to fuck you until you forget?”

“Yes please,” I gasp. “Fuck me until I forget *everything*.”

Did those words really just come out of my mouth?

“Your wish is my command.”

Matvei slides into me. He's big, bigger than anyone I've ever been with, and it takes me a moment of exquisite agony to adjust to him. Every movement, every thrust, makes me want to cry out as it rakes against the nerves going haywire.

Nothing in the way this man takes me is gentle, but it isn't like it's romantic lovemaking. This is a stranger, screwing my brains out in an airplane bathroom. He slams into me again and again, making me forget my terror. His hand is fisted in my hair, his teeth at the back of my neck, and he's whispering something in Russian in my ear. I don't know what it is, but I can only assume it's absolutely filthy.

The heat within me grows, my breath hitching as I try to muffle the noises I'm making. He fills me, blotting out everything else in the world except his

breath on the back of my neck and the feel of him moving inside me.

He jerks my head around as one of the most powerful orgasms I've ever had dots my vision with white, his mouth clamping on mine to absorb my scream, his tongue raking the inside as he continues to pump into me with ever wilder strokes. I can feel his muscles strain against me as he comes, his head dropping to my shoulder as he swallows his own groans of pleasure.

We stand there for a few moments more, still connected, still breathing hard, the hum of the plane's engines all around us. When Matvei pulls out, I bite back a whimper as his warmth leaves me. My ears are ringing and I feel entirely disheveled, even as the afterglow of the orgasm he gave me continues in waves.

Matvei nips my ear, and I gasp when he says, "I want you to come with me to my hotel. I want more of you." He pulls back just enough so when his blue eyes meet mine, I'm entirely lost in their cerulean depths. "Will you?"

"Yes," I breathe, taking not even a moment to reply; only then does Matvei let me go.

I want more of this. God, I want so much more of this.

We both clean up and dress. Matvei leads me back to my seat, and he takes the second seat. He orders a meal for two from the flight attendant, who looks at us with pursed lips.

"She's fine now," he says pleasantly, and I swear she rolls her eyes as she turns away.

I should be mortified, but instead, I giggle. Matvei's smile is playful and enigmatic, and I feel my stomach tighten as I think about what we just did.

When the flight attendant brings us more champagne and the food Matvei ordered, I'm still floating. Everything tastes better. Is it because world-class chefs prepared the food? Or is it because this incredibly sexy man just gave me the best orgasm of my life in an airplane shower?

I have no idea, but I'm going with it. I wanted a trip to forget my ex, and it looks like I'm getting exactly that.

SONYA

Not only did I just become a member of the Mile High Club, but I did it with the guy everyone is staring at. I think some are more afraid of Matvei than drawn to him—he is intimidating. However, I see more than a few covetous looks from men and women alike.

I've agreed to accompany him back to his hotel. My best friend would tell me what an incredibly stupid idea it is. She would say getting involved with someone I don't even know, someone who just screwed me silly in an airplane bathroom, is reckless.

But being a good girl got me a guy who called me fat and broke up with me over text. Maybe it's time to try something new.

The Prague airport is beautiful, and with Matvei at my side, I feel like I'm being escorted by a bodyguard—a bodyguard I can't wait to get into bed with. If what I experienced on the plane is only a taste of what I'm going to get in that hotel room...

“Should we get a cab?” I know I sound eager, but I'm already desperate for another round.

“I have a car service waiting for me.”

“How fancy. I've never used a car service before.”

Matvei cracks a smile. “It makes it easier to tend to business when someone else is doing the driving.”

That makes sense even though I have no idea what kind of business this guy is in. Hell, I don't even know his last name.

As if the universe heard my wandering thoughts, Matvei's attention focuses on a man in a suit holding up a piece of paper with the name *Matvei Volkov*.

"I told them not to do that," he says, clearly agitated. "They should know better."

I look at the sign, his surname catching my attention. Now I know why his name sounded familiar. The only time I heard it, it was said with a snarl, with undisguised hatred. My ex didn't have to tell me how much he hated the man—I heard it every time he talked about his older half-brother.

Oh, shit.

"Is that you?"

"Yes." The word comes out with an annoyance that tells me the driver is going to get an ass chewing. I should be wondering why the sign is a problem, but I don't have to, because I know exactly who this man is now.

I also now know I need to be terrified.

This man is my ex's estranged, older half-brother. Matvei is the man my ex had an unusual obsession with. He talked about him often, especially when he was drunk, going on and on about how he deserved so much more than the man who had helped ruin his life.

My feet stop. I watch Matvei as he speaks to the driver with the sign, suddenly wondering if I need to run and hide because the driver's life is likely about to end. I'm not sure I'm being overly dramatic either, because Matvei Volkov is the monster in my ex's stories. He's a cold-blooded killer.

I feel like I'm on the airplane again as my heart starts pounding, tingles running from my fingers up my arms to the center of my chest, making it difficult to draw in a full breath. I'm frozen in place, staring at the back of Matvei's head as a sea of travelers breaks around me.

Someone mutters something in a different language, but it's not difficult to translate the tone and realize people are starting to get annoyed that I'm standing still and blocking their way. I start moving. I'm not sure where I'm going, so I let the crowd take me along until I'm outside at the curb where taxis wait. I don't care if they overcharge me as a tourist. I would pay anything just to get away from the man I just spent a flight with, the man I just had amazing sex with.

I keep glancing over my shoulder, expecting to see him as I slip into the back of a taxi and shut the door, giving the driver the address of my hotel. I don't breathe a sigh of relief until we're a good distance away from the airport, away from the unexpected danger I nearly fell into.

I'm just happy I didn't give him any more information beyond my first name, no matter how good the sex was.

* * *

"I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU DID THAT."

My best friend glares at me from the computer screen. The sun is just setting in Chicago, jet lag preventing me from being able to get to sleep, even though it's early morning here in Prague. Originally, I had planned to go sightseeing as soon as I reached the hotel, but instead, I've been holed up in my room because I'm so unnerved about my encounter with my ex's dangerous half-brother.

"I know, I know," I sigh. "It figures the one time I decide to go a little crazy it blows up in my face."

"A little crazy? I'm fairly certain you've gone officially insane. You had sex in the bathroom of an airplane with some random stranger who ended up being part of the Russian mob."

I watch Kelly's animated expression, her dark eyes narrowing as she brushes long, dark hair from her face.

"I had no idea. My Spidey senses were thwarted by how sexy he is. I don't have your cop instincts."

“You’re a lawyer who works domestic abuse cases,” she shoots back. “I’m sure you’ve heard enough of these stories from your clients to learn to be very careful.”

She’s right. I’ve represented enough women fleeing the underground world of Chicago to have a decent handle on the mob scene in our city. From the Irish mob to the Russian mob to the Chechens and the Italians, the glimpses I’ve had are more than enough to warn me away.

“I’m not getting involved with that.” I take another long sip from a glass of wine.

“Fine,” Kelly flaps a hand at me across the screen. “I’m just worried about you, okay?” Her green eyes find mine, and I can see the worry in them. “I’m not in organized crime, but names like Volkov, Mancini, and Genovese are bad news. Promise me you’ll be careful. I know your heart is broken, but don’t lose your good sense. You’ve worked with too many women in horrible situations not to know where this path can lead.”

“I know. I just thought it might be fun to have a vacation fling.”

“Well, it kinda sounds like you did.” I see a twinkle in Kelly’s eye, causing me to giggle. “Just don’t bring him home for Sunday dinner. Mom and Dad will seriously start questioning their choice of adopting you as a kid if you bring a Russian mobster home after almost marrying his ass-hat brother.”

“I’m not going to bring him home.” I roll my eyes, then giggle again as an image pops into my head. “Can you imagine Dad trying to stare down a Russian mobster? And let me tell you, this guy is huge—built like a linebacker and at least six-foot-four. He shut down one of the flight attendants with a single look.”

“Dad will do it, though,” Kelly laughs. “Or try to, anyway.”

“Look who’s talking. You’d bring your gun and badge to dinner and grill him like he’s in an interrogation room all night.”

We both laugh because we know it’s true.

MATVEI

“E vgeny?”

The woman from room service pours coffee from a silver pot into the China cup sitting in front of me while I speak on the phone. As soon as I nod my thanks, she scurries from the room.

“She’s a lawyer who works for a nonprofit that helps women in domestic abuse cases,” he says, his voice deep and gravelly, stereotypical of a mob villain, which he is.

“Fancies herself a protector?”

“I don’t know if ‘fancies’ is the right word, Matvei. She is damn good at her job, from what I understand. She’s gone up against some powerful syndicates a few times and won. Seems to be pretty fearless.”

Except when it comes to turbulence on an airplane, I think to myself as I sip of my coffee.

“Her parents were killed when she was young. A family adopted her who already had a daughter about her age. She’s a cop now.”

“Interesting.”

“You don’t think this is some sort of sting operation, do you?”

“On a first-class flight to Prague? I highly doubt the Chicago PD would pay that kind of money.”

“To get info on you? I’m pretty sure they’d do anything, including paying out the nose.” Evgeny, as my second-in-command, always looks at every angle.

“So would any of the other syndicates in the city. The Irish, the Italians.” I don’t need to go on.

“Well, that brings up an interesting point. Sonya Wallace is Samson’s fiancée. At least she was, until three weeks ago.”

I sit up straight. “Samson’s fiancée?”

Evgeny chuckles. “Thought that would get your attention.”

He was the one texting her those horrible things? I read more of the text conversation than I let on to Sonya. I saw the way her face fell, the way her head dropped. I saw the way those words affected her before she stuffed the phone into her bag, as if she could stuff the words away and forget all about them.

“Well, that figures. My asshole little brother being an absolute dick to someone who doesn’t deserve it.”

“I hate to say it, Matvei, but do you think she’s working with him? It could be an orchestrated plot by your brother, another attempt to bring you down.”

Evgeny doesn’t couch his words. Most people would hesitate to bring up an idea that suggests I may have made a mistake, but not Evgeny. Not after we’ve been together so long. Not after he’s laid down his life more than once to protect mine. Not when he’s just as determined as I am to keep my worthless, younger half-brother Samson from the Volkov throne to which he thinks he’s entitled.

Is it possible? Absolutely. Evgeny is well aware of the many plots against me. In the last few years alone, we’ve hunted several down, exacting our painful revenge and leaving the message that you do not fuck with the Volkov Bratva—or me.

The fact that Samson and I share a father does not mean I’m above doing the same to him. But he is still blood. Even as reviled as he is within our

community, in order for my people to remain behind me, there has to be a well-defined cause before I take him down for good.

This new information could open up new possibilities.

“I may have an idea of how to draw Samson out into the open. To get him to make his move so we can finish this, once and for all.”

Evgeny is quiet. I can't tell whether it's because he's thinking or because he disagrees and is waiting to hear more.

“Based on what I know, Samson seems to have hurt Sonya pretty badly,” I say.

“Being his old charming self, is he?” Evgeny makes a disgusted sound.

“Yes, but I think it will work in our favor this time.” I take another sip of my coffee. “I think we can use Sonya to lure him out.”

“I see,” my second says quietly, and I know he's already caught on.

“In the meantime, see what else you can dig up about Sonya Wallace. Find out if she still has regular contact with my brother or any of the Italians he's been seen with lately. Just to be safe.”

Once we end the call, I stare out the window at the rooftops of Prague and the green trees of late summer, the Vltava River reflecting the sun's rays in shimmering ripples.

As I stare out at the beauty of the cityscape, my thoughts drift to Sonya. To her smile, her laughter, even to her show of fear when the plane began pitching through the turbulence. All night long I thought about the feeling of her under me, around me, the image of her face as it moved through pleasure, how it brightened and creased with the ecstasy of her orgasm as she clenched around me, coming entirely undone, raw and real.

But then she ran away at the airport.

Did she have second thoughts about returning to my hotel with me? Or was it because she'd already gotten what she wanted?

I finish my coffee, slamming the China cup down with too much force. I try to focus. I have a meeting to attend, then I will see my plan into action.

I will see Sonya again.

SONYA

O bnoxious pounding at the door wakes me from a deep, wine-induced sleep. I'm drooling, my hair is everywhere, and for a long moment, I have no idea where I am. Then I remember I'm in Prague in a hotel room that costs way more than I want to think about.

Knock, knock, knock. I swear I put the "Do Not Disturb" sign out last night. *Bang, bang, bang.* It's getting louder and more insistent. Whoever it is isn't going away.

When I sit up, the world tilts, the pounding taking up space inside my head as a pulse of pain. "I'll be there in a second," I call out. My voice croaks halfway through the sentence.

I manage to get myself out of bed, standing still as the world spins around me for a moment. I down the glass of water and the aspirin I miraculously remembered to put on the nightstand before I fell asleep. I run my fingers through my wild hair and scrub the drool residue from my cheek with the back of my hand.

"I'm coming," I call out again. "Just hold on a second."

I open the door with the chain still attached. Anything I was about to say is completely forgotten at the sight of Matvei Volkov, stealing any breath I had in my lungs.

Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit. He found me. Of course he found me. Why did I think a notorious mob boss wouldn't be able to find me? How could I be so

stupid?

I stare at him as the seconds tick by, my brain still fuzzy with wine, jet lag, and a break up. I try to think of something to say.

"Matvei," I gulp. "What can I do for you?"

"You disappeared on me yesterday at the airport."

"I lost you in the crowd and couldn't find you again. So I left and came to my hotel."

As far as lies go, it's not a terrible one, but I can tell Matvei doesn't believe me.

Instead of anger, a predatory grin curls his full lips, a grin I can still feel on the back of my neck like a physical tattoo, flirting with the memory of his electric touch. He leans forward, resting his forearm above his head against the frame, trying to get as close as he can with the chain still on the door.

"Come now, Sonya. We both know that's a lie."

His voice is like a purr, his blue eyes hypnotic. For a moment, I swear I can see the dangerous predator hiding behind that personable mask. It sends shivers down my spine, but it also wakes up an entirely different part of me, one that's drawn to danger.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know who I am. I'm aware that my asshole half-brother can't stop talking about how much he hates me." His eyes wander my frame. A flush grows on my cheeks as I realize I'm dressed in a tank and baggy sweats. "And apparently, he also has an inability to appreciate beauty when he sees it."

I swallow hard, nearly choking. "How did you know?"

It's a ridiculous question. We both know damn well how he found me. I may not know a lot about the Russian mob, but I know enough to understand that the law doesn't mean anything to men like Matvei and his organization. Based on the expense of his suits and his choice of travel

accommodations, I'm certain he has many resources at his fingertips—many more than I can even imagine.

My shoulders slump. “Look, I honestly didn’t know who you were when we met yesterday. I was trying to get over my break up with your asshole brother. I’m just here to enjoy myself for a little bit instead of chopping my hair off and dying it bright pink. I don’t want anything from you; we just happened to be in the same place at the same time. Can we be okay with that? Please? I don’t want any trouble.”

I swallow the horrible thought that springs up—trouble has found me, no matter how much I don’t want it.

Matvei watches me for a moment more, his blue eyes gleaming like a tiger’s might as he decides whether he wants to eat his prey or play with it.

“I have a proposal for you, one that would benefit both of us,” he says.

I’m both intrigued and terrified. “I don’t want your money. I don’t want anything from you. The last thing I want to do is get tied up with a Russian crime syndicate.”

“This isn’t about money, Sonya. This is about getting even with Samson for dumping you for someone he deemed better, for the way he treated you.”

“Getting back at Samson?” My voice catches. I have to swallow my surprise before I can speak again. “I don’t understand.”

“Let me take you out. It looks like you haven’t had breakfast yet.”

Matvei’s eyes land on my sweats and the wine stains on them. I flush again, busted.

“Let me take you out to eat, to experience the best of what Prague has to offer. Give me a chance to explain my proposal in further detail. If you don’t want to do it, I won’t be angry, I swear. You can walk away, and I will never bother you again. But promise me you’ll at least listen.”

It takes me a shorter amount of time to consider what the man in front of me is proposing than I wish it would. No matter what I know about his background, I’m still drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

“Okay, fine. But I need to shower first. I feel like death.”

“A shower?” Matvei perks up, his interest piqued. “I could use a shower.”

“I—what?” It takes my brain a moment to catch up to what he just implied. I don’t miss the way his eyes darken and his nostrils flare, as if he’s scenting his prey.

I am his prey.

Damn, if that doesn’t turn me on immediately. There’s no warming up, no gradual play, no way for me to stop it. Matvei must see it, too, because he’s pressed to the opening in the door, his scent enveloping me yet again and making my knees wobble.

“Let me in.” It’s half question, half order, and I don’t need to think about it. I do exactly as he says.

Matvei steps inside, towering over me. I have to close my mouth to keep from drooling—I can’t stop ogling him.

“I, uh, need to brush my teeth,” I manage, running to the bathroom before he can stop me.

I’m spitting out toothpaste when he comes in. He’s removed his suit jacket and vest. He takes off his big, silver watch and lays it on the counter before reaching into the shower to turn on the water. Steam billows against the glass door as he begins unbuttoning his shirt, one slow button at a time.

Oh, *holy* shit.

We didn’t fully undress yesterday. I can’t make my eyes look away as the starched button-up opens to reveal a chest and stomach dreams are made of—rows of muscles that lead straight down to the sexy V of his hips. Tattoos cover his chiseled chest and run down his arms in full sleeves. Too many for my addled brain to comprehend at the moment.

When his eyes meet mine, I realize I’ve just been standing in place, staring at Matvei’s reflection in the mirror. His eyes crinkle with the return of his enigmatic smile, and he nods his head toward the shower. “I think it’s ready.”

“Okay,” I reply, realizing I’ve barely taken a breath since he entered the bathroom.

As I start peeling off my sweatpants he stops me. “I’ll do that.”

I don’t argue, and I’m not even sure I could if I wanted to, as Matvei gently pulls my tank over my head, then bends to take one rock-hard nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue and making me groan before doing the same to the other.

He takes one of my breasts into his hand and squeezes before brushing the nipple with his thumb. A shiver runs through my body, his answering grin feral as he tugs my sweatpants down around my hips. I step out of them and find Matvei staring at me with what I can only call admiration, fire smoldering in the blue of his eyes.

He steps toward me again, more like *into* me, his hands sliding over my skin, leaving a trail of sparks as his palms map my every curve.

“Fucking gorgeous.” His words skitter across my skin and dig themselves deep. I want to believe they’re real, but I know they’re probably just words in the heat of the moment. I feel desired. Wanted. Appreciated. I can’t remember the last time I felt such things. Certainly not with Samson.

My focus turns to raging need as Matvei unzips his pants, letting them and his silk boxers fall to the floor. He’s enormous and standing at stiff attention, causing me to wonder how he fit into me so smoothly yesterday.

“In,” he orders, nodding to the shower, and I nearly trip over myself to oblige.

I’m so wet, so hungry for him, I can barely breathe. The steam billows around us as Matvei steps in behind me.

Then he’s on me. He takes me into his arms, kissing me so deeply I’m breathless by the time we come up for air. He gives me no time to recover, kissing down my neck, my shoulders, his hands in my hair as the water sluices over my skin. The scent of him, the size of him, the sensations he stirs in me, overwhelm my senses until I’m lightheaded.

I dig my fingers into his enormous biceps as he pushes me back against the wall, the water cascading over both our bodies, the steam swirling around us only adding to the passion.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan as he massages my breast with one hand and strokes my soft folds with the other.

“That’s what I want to hear more of. Again.” His voice is deep and resonant, commanding.

“Fuck!” I cry as he brushes my entrance, teasing me. I’m so desperate to feel him inside me again I can barely stand it, and I whimper. “Fuck me, please!”

“*Moya khoroshaya*,” he rumbles in my ear. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

Without warning he plunges in, giving the phrase “hurts so good” new meaning, because it does, and I nearly finish right then and there. But I’m not about to let the experience end so quickly.

It doesn’t take long before I’ve acclimated to his size, to the feeling of him stretching me as he plunges in and out again and again.

I arch into him, my hips grinding with his. I wrap my arms around his neck, holding on for dear life as the world fades to nothing but the heat between us and the waves of pleasure crashing over me, pulling me under. I don’t want to come up for air—all I want is Matvei and this feeling. Forever.

He tightens his grip around me, pulling me closer as he plunges deeper and deeper, driving me higher and higher until I’m writhing and moaning with unspeakable pleasure. When his free hand moves between us to play with my clit, it’s more than I can take.

White takes over my vision as my orgasm smashes into me, wrenching a scream from my core. I claw at his massive back, at the muscles flexing and moving beneath my palms.

Russian streams from his lips, forced through gritted teeth as he jackhammers into me. He roars as he comes, pulsing and jerking, his warmth filling me.

After, the only sound is the pounding hiss of the shower and our gasping breath. Liquid heat runs down my legs, washed away by the water. We hold onto each other, several minutes passing before we both let go.

“I’ll let you finish your shower,” he finally says, leaving me with a deep, thorough kiss.

“I swear I’ll be quick. Wait for me downstairs?”

I have a sudden fear that, having gotten what he came for, Matvei will disappear and I won’t see him again. Which, if I’m being honest, is probably for the better. But I don’t want to be honest with myself. Not yet anyway.

“I will wait for you downstairs. Don’t try to escape out a window. Your room is too high up.”

Despite myself, I smile. “The window is way too small, believe me. I would get stuck, and you’d have to rescue me again.”

Matvei raises an eyebrow. “Again?”

“Well, yeah,” I flush. “You kept me from having a panic attack yesterday and attempting to jump out of a plane window. So that’s two windows you’ve saved me from so far.”

The predatory grin spreads, and I shiver again. “Well, let’s hope there’s not a third.”

After a quick scrub, he steps out of the shower. I can’t help but watch as he towels off his incredible body, his muscles flexing and moving beneath glistening, still-wet skin in a way that is utterly hypnotizing.

When he leaves, he shuts the door quietly behind him. It isn’t until I hear the door to my hotel room open and close before I finally snap out of my daze.

SONYA

I shower, towel dry my hair, apply a dash of makeup, and get dressed. I'm down in the lobby thirty minutes later, which is a personal best for me.

Matvei is reading a newspaper—in Czech, no less—in one of the plush chairs near the fireplace. There is a bubble of space around him; everyone appears to be going out of their way to stay as far away as they can.

He looks up when I'm halfway across the lobby, his gaze nearly pinning me to the spot.

"You look—" He pauses as I stop feet from his chair, and I wonder what kind of word he's looking for.

For a moment, I have a flash of anxiety—what if he hates the way I look? I'm wearing the one sundress I brought, an oversized sweater over it to ward off the surprising summer chill. It definitely shows off my curves, and I wonder if it's too much.

Samson's words ring in my head, and I'm already coming up with an excuse to change when a flick of a smile flashes on Matvei's lips.

"Beautiful," he finally finishes.

"Oh. Thank you." My cheeks warm again as I wonder why Samson has gotten into my head. I haven't always been so self-conscious.

I watch as Matvei folds the newspaper and places it on the low table beside him before standing to his full height. I thought Samson was tall, at least six

feet, but his half-brother towers over him, which I like. Actually, I like a lot of things about Matvei more than I liked about Samson.

“Come on,” Matvei says, putting his hand lightly on the small of my back to guide me out. “Let me buy you breakfast,” he glances down at his watch, “or maybe lunch.”

“You were probably up at five a.m.,” I mutter, hyper-aware that people are staring at us. Do they know a notorious Chicago Russian mob boss is escorting me out? A Russian mob boss I had sex with twice in the last twenty-four hours?

“I allowed myself the luxury of sleeping in until eight.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes. “Oh, well then. Eight. You practically wasted the whole day.”

Matvei’s deep chuckle sends a vibration under my skin that rumbles through me like an aftershock of what happened upstairs. At this rate, I can expect several more earthquakes here in Prague.

As we step outside, a black sedan with dark tinted windows pulls to the curb as if waiting for us. The driver, wearing a black suit and sunglasses, completely silent as he opens the door for us, looks like he guards a head of state. Maybe he does.

“So,” I ask, uncomfortable with the silence as we settle in the car’s plush interior, “did you go sightseeing this morning?”

Yet another one of Matvei’s enigmatic smiles is the initial answer to my teasing question. “I had several meetings this morning,” he answers curtly.

I nearly make the mistake of asking what the meetings were about but quickly shut that down. I’m relatively certain I don’t want to know. In fact, I’m one-hundred-percent sure I don’t want to know.

We end up at the Four Seasons—elegant, refined—and exactly where I would imagine Matvei would stay. We eat outside on the terrace, our view of the Vltava River and Prague Castle, which probably rivals any tourist attraction.

I didn't realize how ravenous I was, and my first taste of Czech food is incredibly impressive.

Halfway through the meal, Matvei leans across the table, his eyes boring holes into mine, and asks, "Ready to hear my proposal?"

I nearly choke on a potato and follow it with a long sip of coffee. I then put my knife and fork down with great care before looking up at this incredible man who makes my heart—and other things—flutter every time I'm near him.

"Okay. I'm listening. But no guarantees I'm going to say yes."

Matvei dips his head. "As I said, you have every right to say no, and I will not bother you again if you do. You have my word."

Oddly enough, I trust this man's word. From what little I understand, one's word is the only certainty in his world where you can't trust anything else.

"I want you to be my date to Samson's wedding."

I'm glad I put down my knife and fork earlier because I would've dropped them, alerting the entire terrace to my shock. "Excuse me? What did you say?"

"I want you to be my date for my worthless half-brother's wedding."

I gape at him before finally finding words. "You do remember he's my ex-fiance, right? That he dumped me for this woman? Besides, they just got engaged. How have they sent out wedding invitations already? That has to be at least a year away."

Matvei's frown looks more like pity than disappointment, pity for me as he pulls up an article from the *Sun-Times* and hands me his phone. On the screen is an engagement announcement for Samson's wedding to one Genevieve Mancini. The two of them are standing in a picture-perfect pose at the Art Institute's South Garden, looking entirely gorgeous. I feel like they're smirking directly at me, gloating about the enormous ring on her finger.

"Oh."

I can only stare at the article, the words blurring in and out of focus as I read all about the happy couple's engagement and wedding, which is only two months away because "they're too in love to wait!" They may be too in love to wait, but the timeline makes no sense unless Samson and this Genevieve Mancini were already planning before the jerk broke up with me. I doubt they're sending out evites, which means they must have ordered the invitations several months ago, when Samson and I were still together. When I was planning *my* wedding.

"What better way to get back at the man who unceremoniously dumped you than showing up on the arm of the brother he hates so much?" Matvei asks quietly.

"I don't know," I mutter, handing his phone back and wiping at the dampness on my cheeks with the back of my hand.

Matvei stares at me for a moment, frowning. "For what it's worth, in my opinion, he's an idiot who let a good thing go."

Oddly enough, his comment does make me feel better. It also makes me blush a little bit, dammit. "Thanks."

Matvei leans closer, his eyes capturing mine again. "Think about it. You know what Samson is like. How do you think it's going to affect him when you show up on my arm? You know he hates me; it will drive him insane when he sees you've chosen me, more or less. Play my queen at his wedding. Let him watch while I touch you in ways he never dared. Help me burn down everything he's built up."

It's not difficult to imagine.

The guy whose charisma got past my defenses is nothing if not full of himself. He may not want me, but I know he wouldn't want anyone else to have me, either, especially the half-brother he despises so much. I can see it now—the anger on Samson's face when he sees me as his brother's guest, Matvei affectionate and treating me like his queen.

I've never been the revenge type. But Samson is awful and he deserves it. Hell, I deserve it. I know Kelly would enthusiastically agree, even if she wouldn't entirely agree with the means by which I'm going about it.

“How much danger would I be in?”

“None whatsoever. You have my word.”

Now it’s my turn to raise a brow at the mob boss.

Matvei nods in acknowledgment at my unvoiced question. “I suppose there is always a slight chance of danger when you are with me. However, the security will be far better than whatever rent-a-cop your boss pays for.”

“I suppose so—” I start to say, then realize I never told Matvei where I work or what I do. “You did a background check on me,” I accuse.

Matvei shrugs, clearly not at all repentant. “As you said, I invite danger. I can never be too careful with those I come across.”

“And what did you find out about me? I deserve at least that much if you’re going to go behind my back.”

He grins at my glare. “I learned enough to wonder why you’re so afraid of being with me when you’ve had to fend off abusive partners of clients who represent far more danger to you than I do.”

I highly doubt that. I think it but don’t say it. I don’t want to poke the bear sitting across the table from me, no matter how genteel he looks in a three-piece suit with diamond cufflinks.

Matvei has one final card up his sleeve. “I know you want to open your own law firm so you can help more people. Do this, and I’ll invest in a practice of your own.”

That does it.

“Okay.” I’m not sure why I’m agreeing to this stupid scheme, except that I’m in Prague and still furious with Samson for dumping me like he did. “I’ll do it, but it’s just one night. Nothing else. You have to promise me. Just one single night and then you invest in my practice. No loans, no money from the mob, no silent partners. Money I don’t have to pay back in dollars or favors for you.”

I draw on the woman inside me I use to confront abusers, not the one who’s been a hot mess on vacation. I don’t back down from Matvei’s tiger-like

stare.

“Just one night,” he agrees solemnly. A small curve pulls at a corner of his mouth. “Although I’d like to have you for a few more nights while we’re still here.”

“I want a contract,” I tell him, ignoring the comment for the moment. “Ironclad.”

“My computer is upstairs. What do you say to coming up and authoring the contract?”

I know I should say no, but my traitor body is two steps ahead. I nod once and say, “Okay.”

Matvei’s room is exactly what I expected it to be—an enormous suite—much nicer than my own. I make short work of the contract, stipulating everything I can think of to ensure a single night and nothing more. I refuse to be in debt to the Russian mob. I hand Matvei the document, still warm from the printer.

“Do you want to have your lawyers look it over first? I’m fine if you want to wait to sign it.”

He takes the papers from my hand. “No need.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I trust you.”

I’m pretty sure the only reason he trusts me is because he knows he can make me disappear and thus render the contract null and void.

As he sits to sign it, I drift to the windows taking up one side of the suite. The view is even better than on the terrace. Below the hotel, the dark waters of the Vltava flow under the Charles Bridge, and I watch as people cross its Gothic surface. The red-tiled roofs of Malá Strana spread out below the enormity of the palace on the hill and all its spires.

Darkness rises behind me as Matvei’s looming figure approaches. I can see the reflection of his eyes in the glass, causing a shiver to run the entire length of my body. I watch as he leans down and kisses my neck, shifting

my hair to get better access. My breath catches, electrical currents running under my skin.

“Your hair is so soft.” Matvei’s fingers tangle in the golden strands as he continues kissing my neck. Using his other hand, he slips the strap of my sundress off my shoulder and follows the line down.

I can’t help the sigh that escapes, raw, pent-up desire growing from spark to fire.

“Your skin is so soft.” The words are a vibration against my collarbone, and I watch, fascinated, as this frightening enigma of a man engulfs me. One hand moves to cup my breast, a thumb brushing over the hard nipple pushing through the thin fabric of my dress and bra.

A gasp ends in a drawn-out moan as my body melts into the man behind me, opening up entirely in preparation for what I know is to come.

How am I so entirely powerless in the arms of this man? How does he drive me to new heights of pleasure I didn’t think were possible? I’m in danger of becoming obsessed, addicted to him. And that’s one thing I know I can’t do. What happens here must stay here.

But at least I know I’ll get my fill, especially as I press back against him and feel how hard he already is.

He nips my neck, his hand sliding down and under my sundress, gripping the outside of one of my thighs. I turn my head, his mouth claiming mine before his kisses trail ice and fire across my skin again.

“My brother is an idiot for giving you up.” His words are a dark whisper in my ear. “And by the time I’m done with you, you won’t even remember his name.”

SONYA

“What about the Marcus case?”

I rifle through the folders in front of me until I find the tab with the correct name. “We filed the emergency injunction for the restraining order. Given the evidence we have, I believe the judge will approve it.”

“Good.” My boss’s voice is tight. “The sooner we can do that, the sooner she can get out of town until the trial.”

“I’m just glad the judge set the bail so high and didn’t believe any of his bullshit.”

A sweet sense of satisfaction runs through me. It’s a terrible case, and my boss and I both know my client will have to ultimately move across the country to get away from the man, and even then there’s no guarantee. As it stands, we’ve established a small security detail, comprised of off-duty police officers who donate their time to keep her and her son safe.

“I think her sister lives in California,” my boss says. “She’s got somewhere to go for a while, at least.”

“Good. I don’t want her or Anthony to have to suffer until the trial. I can’t imagine the kid going to school and having to hear about how his father tried to kill his mother.”

“Okay, what about the Marston case?”

I try to focus on the next case, but my mind is still on Sylvia Marcus. I met her in the hospital, recovering from being beaten so badly she nearly died. Her son had been placed in temporary foster care while she was recovering because her in-laws, powerful and wealthy, had been implicated as well. I'd seen the bruises on her neck, the contusions on her head. I'd read about the number of stitches she had to get, the rod in her leg, and other things I didn't want to think about anymore until the trial.

It's always the same story and always horrible. But to me, each client is like my first all over again, and I feel their pain just as deeply as I did the first time.

I find that in my line of work, people often blame the victim. Why don't they just walk away? Didn't they know who the guy was before they married him? But they've never walked in her shoes. They've never been a woman who has nothing and is suddenly offered comfort, money, and shelter by someone who pretends to be Superman but ends up being Lex Luthor, or worse. They've never found themselves with their self-esteem being chipped away, their sense of self degraded until they don't know who they are anymore. They've never been completely powerless, having to choose between violence and being out on the streets because they no longer have anything that belongs to them.

Even knowing all this, I still fell for Samson's charisma and good looks. Somehow, he got past my armor and managed to keep his authentic self from me. I'm just glad I dodged that bullet.

Never mind the questionable choice I made to sleep multiple times with his mobster brother—a literal killer and a man whose name sends shivers down the spines of not just police officers, but the criminals they arrest.

Still, my body betrays me. As I think about Matvei, a blush spreads all the way up from my toes to the top of my head, matching the heat rising with the memories.

“Sonya?”

I'm shaken from my reverie, realizing my boss is staring at me. “Sorry.” I clear my throat and give him the file he requested.

The outside door to our small office opens and closes. I hear the receptionist greet whoever just walked in.

“So this one is kind of a special case. We’re going to have to proceed carefully because even though we have evidence of assault, he’s called the cops on her before, too. It’s a power move, but it’s still on record, and you know some people will look for any excuse to—”

There’s a brief knock before the door opens and our receptionist leans in. “Sorry to bother you, but there’s someone here to see you, Sonya.”

“Me? I don’t have any appointments today.”

“I don’t think this is a client.”

My boss and I look at each other, then at the receptionist.

“Does he look—” I drop my voice— “dangerous?”

Our unflappable receptionist has faced down her fair share of angry, vengeful, and abusive husbands, as well as the occasional wife. When she bites her lip, I know something’s up.

“He’s very calm and courteous,” she replies, which means he does indeed look dangerous.

My boss reaches under his desk for his baseball bat before he nods and follows me to the door. An enormous bull of a man looks up as I approach.

“Can I help you?”

“You are Sonya Wallace.” It’s a statement spoken in a thick Russian accent, not a question.

“I am. And you are?”

Instead of answering, the man rises. “Mr. Volkov sent me for you. You have a dress fitting appointment for the wedding.”

My head whips around to my boss and the receptionist, both of whom are looking at me with wide eyes. I wave my hand at them, feeling myself flush. “I’m just someone’s date for a wedding,” I tell them. “It’s not my wedding.”

The two relax slightly.

“I don’t have an appointment with him,” I tell the big man. “Mr. Volkov might be able to take off in the middle of the day, but I have clients who rely on me. I can’t just leave.”

“Do you eat lunch?”

“What does that have to do with anything—”

“Do you take a lunch break?” He cuts me off.

“I usually work through—”

“Then this counts as your lunch break.” Again, it’s a statement, not a question. “You can say no now, but Mr. Volkov will not be happy if he has to come here himself.”

It’s obvious this guy is not taking no for an answer, and neither will Matvei—not that I’m surprised. I sigh and look at my boss, who shrugs as if to say it’s up to you.

“Fine. But it’s only a lunch break. You bring me right back here after we’re done.”

“I will,” the man promises solemnly.

“What did you say your name was again? And can I see some ID?”

Annoyance flashes across the big man’s face, but I’m not about to get into a random car with a random stranger just because he says Matvei sent him. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out his ID, and hands it to me.

Evgeny Fedorov, State of Illinois. It looks legit, and Matvei mentioned this man’s name more than once in Prague, enough for me to understand he’s important.

I hand back his ID and turn to my boss. “If I don’t text you or if I’m not back in an hour, call the police.”

I’m only half joking, and everyone in the room knows it. Even Evgeny, who, as he holds the door open for me to step out into the late summer

warmth, murmurs, “You don’t have to worry. Mr. Volkov will have more than my head if I let anything happen to you.”

“I’m not sure that makes me feel any better,” I admit.

Evgeny doesn’t say anything more as he leads me to a late-model luxury sedan with the windows blacked out and opens the door for me. He remains silent the entire time we drive to wherever we’re going.

The mystery is solved when we glide to a stop in front of a famous and famously expensive boutique. I’m immediately ill at ease when Evgeny ushers me in.

The space is way too luxurious, and the saleswoman is unable to hide the judgment and disdain on her face as she takes in my figure. I forget about the saleswoman and her judgment the moment Matvei steps into view, rising out of the shadows like a vengeful vampire from a romance novel. His scent envelopes me as he comes close, his lips warm when they brush my cheek.

“Hi,” I say, then groan internally because it sounds so inane.

“Hello there.” God, is his voice deeper than I remember? It rumbles to the very marrow of my bones.

“I was at work, you know. It would’ve been nice to receive a request for an appointment so I could’ve planned around this.”

“Evgeny told me you are on your lunch break. It’s not a problem, is it?” He turns and strides toward a room at the back of the boutique.

I trot to keep up. “You didn’t know that when you sent your bodyguard for me.”

“He is not my bodyguard; he is my most trusted lieutenant.”

I catch up. “I have no idea what the hell that means, exactly, but that’s beside the point. Next time, just ask. Better yet, let me get my own dress. I’m perfectly capable of shopping for myself.”

“Not for this wedding, you’re not,” Matvei replies.

I stop and glare at his back for a few seconds before following him into a private dressing room where a woman waits with flutes of champagne.

“Thanks, but I have to get back to work soon. I can’t drink.”

Matvei and Evgeny enjoy the champagne, swapping a few words in Russian.

“Do you always send your second in command to run errands for you?” I ask.

“Only when it’s important.” Matvei makes himself comfortable in a chair that’s too small for his frame. Somehow, he still manages to look at ease.

The saleswoman who was glaring at me when I walked in enters from a separate door on the other side of the room, pushing a rack with multiple gowns on it.

“Here are a few of the dresses you requested, Mr. Volkov. I have the others in the back, and they’ll be brought up shortly.”

The woman is entirely professional, but I can’t tell whether she’s nervous or trying to flirt as she keeps flashing looks at him under her long, dark eyelashes.

“You don’t even know what I like to wear,” I say to Matvei. My excitement from seeing him in person again is quickly overcome by annoyance at his high-handedness. “That’s not how any of this works.”

“Today it is.” The comment brooks no argument, but the lawyer in me takes over.

“Fine. I’ll try your choices, but if I don’t like any of them, I’m choosing my own.”

Matvei shrugs as if he’s indifferent to the idea, which I’m guessing is completely untrue.

The saleswoman pulls a dress off the rack and leads me into the small, curtained alcove where she helps me put it on.

“It doesn’t fit,” I tell him as I step out of the dressing room. The woman’s slight smirk tells me she’s thinking the same thing. It’s tight in all the wrong places, highlighting the fact that I don’t look like a model or Samson’s fiancée.

“These will be made to your sizing and your liking once you choose one.”

“It still isn’t going to work,” I mutter. Our eyes meet in the mirror, and for a moment, it looks like he’s going to argue. Instead, he sits back, champagne in hand, waiting like a king for me to try the next one. I grit my teeth while the saleswoman and I go back to the dressing room.

The next two are a bust as well. One isn’t my color, and the other doesn’t cover enough.

I glance at my watch. “I told my boss I’d be back soon. You know, lunch *hour*.”

“You’ll be back in time for work,” Matvei says, relaxing in the chair, one leg resting over the other. I’m not sure he has any genuine concept of a normal workday.

The next gown, if it can be called that, has a virtually see-through bodice with an absurd skirt made to look like swan feathers. I can’t help but burst into giggles as soon as I see myself in the mirror. “I cannot go out in public in this. I’ll definitely get attention, but probably not the kind either of us is looking for.”

“I have to agree.” Something in Matvei’s voice combined with the hungry look in his eyes makes me feel warm all over. “That one would be for my eyes only, no one else.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I don’t say anything. I return to the dressing room and switch it out for the next gown which isn’t any better—a pearl pink number with an enormous flower over the front of the bodice.

“At least I can blend in with the flower arrangements in case I need to hide.” I can’t help myself; humor is my go-to.

“I’m trying to make you stand out, not blend in,” Matvei mumbles, though I don’t miss the way one side of his mouth curls up in appreciation of my

quip. “Samson has to notice you for our plan to work. Next dress, please.”

He dismisses the next three gowns, and I have to clamp down on my annoyance even though I secretly agree. The man might be controlling, but he seems to have impeccable taste.

“Don’t you have anything else?” Matvei asks the sales associate.

“Your... friend doesn’t exactly fit our usual client base, Mr. Volkov.” The woman huffs and flicks her dark hair behind her shoulder.

The meaning behind the comment hits me at the same time Matvei’s champagne glass lands with a hard *clink* on the table. Both the sales associate and I jump. The amusement is gone from his face, replaced by a hard look that causes me to take a step back.

He addresses the saleswoman. “I would remember her face if I were you, because if I hear you insult this woman again, it will be the last beautiful thing you see.” The words are delivered with an icy calm making them sound even more ominous.

“What if we design a dress for her?” the sales associate suggests with a tremor in her voice. Her eyes are wide with alarm and her hands tremble. She begins edging toward the door. “I’ll go get our head seamstress. I know she’ll be able to come up with something perfect.”

After the sales associate slips out and firmly closes the door, I continue to stare after her, ruminating on her underhanded dig. Usually, I would let those kinds of things slide off my back, but the wound Samson caused is still too fresh, my defenses still cracked.

“None of those dresses suited you because they didn’t properly show off your beauty.”

I jump again when Matvei speaks, realizing he’s right behind me. His whole *looming* thing is getting old. How does someone that big move so quietly?

He places his hands on my waist, his palms sliding over my curves. Heat swirls at his touch. I swallow a whimper when his hand dips lower, right as the door opens again, and who I assume is the head seamstress walks in.

She's tall and thin and dressed in shades of black and gray, her silver-streaked hair pulled into a bun so tight it seems to pull her mouth into a constant frown. Her hard, dark eyes find me first, but when she sees Matvei, she releases a torrent of Russian. He replies, and the two of them have a conversation in a language I don't understand.

"Excuse me." I push myself in between them in frustration. "I'm the one wearing the dress—what are you two talking about?"

"We're going to try something," Matvei says.

"Gee, thanks. I thought you were talking about yesterday's weather," I reply with an eyeroll, but my annoyance seems to go unnoticed.

The seamstress's lips thin even more, her gaze raking me up and down, taking in my figure. I don't see dislike or judgment—she's thinking, the wheels turning behind those dark eyes. She goes over to a cabinet, digs through it, and pulls out an extended length of powder-blue fabric. Without saying a word, she drapes the fabric around my waist and begins to pin it with pins from the cushion on her wrist. She tucks, gathers, and folds, muttering to herself in Russian the entire time, then does the same around my chest.

I stand there until my legs itch from holding still for so long, gritting my teeth while watching Matvei in the mirror as he "oversees" the process, adding comments in Russian every so often. I'm about to snap at him, my patience wearing thin, when the seamstress steps away to survey her work.

"What do you think?" she asks in heavily accented English. She's asking me, but she's seeking Matvei's approval, as well.

My annoyance melts as I stare at my reflection, speechless at what I see. The woman has worked some kind of magic. I'm swathed in a soft blue gown of perfect folds and drapes, a strapless bodice folded like origami for a sharp, elegant silhouette.

The seamstress is looking at me with a frown when she crosses the room to the cabinet again and pulls out a long, wide, deep navy ribbon. She ties it around my waist with a sharp bow, the ends trailing nearly to the bottom of the full skirt. Finally, she smiles.

“*Dah*,” Matvei approves, his gaze fixed on my reflection.

I have to admit, I can’t take my eyes away from myself either. “I guess this is the dress,” I state with a small smile.

“Samson won’t know what hit him,” Matvei says, the fire in his eyes echoing the confidence in his voice.

My smile widens. “No, he won’t.”

MATVEI

The city is on the verge of twilight when I step out of the car, the sky streaked with blushes, oranges, and yellows. Samson's high-rise looms over the street, a sharp-edged monolith of glass and steel. For a moment, I stand on the sidewalk, watching my reflection blur in the tinted windows. Inside, the lights burn cold and bright. Every detail of this building screams control—a fortress designed to keep the world away from the wealthy residents. I square my shoulders, tension coiling in my gut, and push through the revolving door.

The lobby is quiet. When the elevator opens with a soft chime, I step in, the tension building with each floor. As I ascend, I remind myself this is not enemy territory. But it isn't exactly safe, either.

On the twenty-third floor, the doors slide open, and I walk into the silence of a long hallway with large windows on either end. The view of glowing skyscrapers emerges in the growing darkness, the waters of the lake deep blue below.

A single man in a tailored suit, his face expressionless, guards the door to Samson's penthouse. I offer a single nod, and he steps aside. I let myself in, his domain all angles and glass. The city sprawls below, the last of a late summer's golden sunset making its descent.

My half-brother sits behind his desk in his office, a slab of oak that gives off an air of strength, elegance, and old-world sensibility. His gaze is fixed

on the view, his arms folded across his chest. He looks up as I enter, the air thickening with palpable hostility.

I stand in the doorway for a moment, letting him have his silence before closing the door with a click that echoes too loudly.

“Matvei,” he finally speaks. His gaze is narrow, cold, as if he’s trying to decide why I’ve come. “What dishonor brings you here?”

“Samson,” I say, my voice flat. I take the seat across from him, every movement deliberate. He watches me like a predator sizing up its competition. I return the favor. He’s no match for me, no matter how much he wishes it were otherwise.

We begin with fake pleasantries. He asks about my trip, the weather, business. I answer in clipped sentences, watching his hands as his fingers drum against the wood. He offers me a drink. I decline. There’s no warmth in this exchange, just the careful weighing of power.

“What have you been up to lately?” I ask, feigning casual interest. His reaction is immediate, a flash of annoyance buried beneath calm. I notice how his jaw clenches, how his eyes—the same blue as mine—flicker away from me.

He covers his immediate reaction with a sharp, edgy smirk. “You mean you haven’t received the invitation? Genevieve keeps me occupied.” The way he says her name is like a challenge, an assertion. His marriage to Genevieve Mancini is a coup, or so he wants everyone to believe.

I grin. “Actually, I came to deliver my RSVP in person.” I take the envelope out of the inside pocket of my jacket and slide it across the top of the desk. “I will be bringing a plus one.”

“Evgeny in a ball gown?”

I let the silence stretch, watching him. “Genevieve Mancini,” I finally say, slow and deliberate, ignoring his quip. “Quite an achievement.”

Samson leans back, a glint of triumph in his eyes. “Some people spend their lives chasing the Mancinis only to get nowhere. I’m marrying into them.” He laughs a hollow laugh, but there’s something desperate underneath, a

need to convince both of us he's won, that he somehow deserves the power this marriage will give him.

I stare at my brother, taking in the man he's become. This manchild who tries too hard to be someone he's not, with his expensive rings, watches, and suits that are gaudy, even if he doesn't realize it. This kid, who was born when I was sixteen, who unceremoniously dumped Sonya and broke her heart. This bastard of my father's, who feels like he's owed something because of the circumstances of his birth, sits with a smirk on his face as though he knows something I don't.

"Your mother tried, didn't she?" The words come out too sharp, almost as if by accident. Almost. "She wanted in, but the door stayed closed."

The temperature in the room drops. Samson sits up, his smile vanishing, eyes narrowing to slits. "Did you come here just to insult me? You're in my territory right now—I would watch what you say," he snarls, his voice like a blade.

I don't flinch. "History tends to repeat itself. Sometimes the doors open for the next generation, and sometimes they don't."

He stands abruptly, fists planted on the desk, the veins in his forearms standing out. For a moment, I wonder if he'll leap across at me. Instead, he reaches into his jacket, slow and deliberate. The animosity is raw, electric. My hand instinctively slips closer to my own side.

Samson stops just shy of drawing the gun I know is there. Our eyes lock, and the room suddenly feels too small to contain us both. I can see the calculation in his gaze, the weighing of risk and reward, hatred simmering just beneath the surface.

"Think very carefully about what you want to start here, little brother," I warn.

For a heartbeat, we stare at one another. He's trembling, just enough to show he's human, not invincible. The fantasy of control slips, and I see the resentment for what it is—a mask, a wound, and cold fury.

He lets his hand drop, face twisting into something ugly. "Things will change, Matvei. Sooner than you think." The words are a threat, a promise,

an invocation.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” My voice is calm, but my heart pounds, adrenaline humming in my veins. I rise and move toward the door, not turning my back until I’m safely in the hallway.

Outside, the city glimmers, indifferent to our war. I don’t really know why I came. I could have had my assistant mail my RSVP. Maybe I’m enjoying this game and the new player I’ve brought to the board a little too much.

As I step into the elevator, I catch my reflection in the polished metal—eyes hard, mouth set. The battle lines have been drawn, but neither of us knows how the next move will unfold. I think of Sonya, the Mancinis, the doors of history opening and closing. I think of power, of the cost of winning, of what Samson has promised.

The city falls away as the elevator descends, and I steel myself for what comes next.

In the quiet hum of descent, I realize in this game, trust is a myth and history is a weapon. And tonight, nothing has changed—except the certainty that it soon will.

SONYA

The cab pulls up to the curb just as the streetlamps flicker on, spilling their golden glow across the pavement. My fingers tap a nervous rhythm as I pay the driver, and I have to take a deep breath before I step out. Sunday dinners are my anchor, my little escape from the chaos of my own life, but tonight, I'm jittery, expecting Kelly's third degree and the warmth of Mom's hugs in equal measure.

I brace myself as I walk up the path to the front door, the light from the windows casting a warm glow over the front porch decorated with flowerpots and the porch swing Dad hand carved. The grass Kelly and I spent so much time playing on still smells sweet, even as summer is on the verge of turning into fall. The old basketball hoop still has a torn net, and Mom's favorite rose bushes still line the house's facade. It's all familiar, comfortable.

It's home.

The door swings open before my hand finds the knob. Kelly stands there, arms folded, eyebrows perfectly arched. "You're late," she says, but I hear the affection in her voice.

Once inside, the house envelops me in a rush of warmth and noise. The kitchen smells like garlic and basil, something sweet baking while laughter spills in from the dining room. For a beat, I let myself relax.

Mom appears holding a salad in the old, chipped salad bowl she inherited from her grandmother, planting a kiss on my cheek. "Sit, sit! You're just in

time, though I was about to send Kelly out to handcuff you and drag you here.”

Kelly snorts. “I would’ve, too. Someone has to keep her in line.” She leads me to the dining room, where Dad sits behind a spread newspaper, glasses perched low.

He looks up and grins. “There’s our favorite troublemaker.”

I kick off my shoes and smile. “I try my best.”

“Danny, can you please help me bring the chicken in?” Mom calls from the kitchen. Dad gives me a face that makes me giggle before pushing to his feet.

“So,” Kelly says, waiting until he’s out of the room. “What’s going on with Mr. Mob Boss?”

I laugh, but my heart speeds up, because this is what I was waiting for. Dreading, actually. “Don’t interrogate me, Kells. I told you what’s going on with Matvei. It’s a contract so we can get back at Samson. That’s it.”

Kelly’s eyes narrow. “Last time you were this cagey, you were dating that jazz drummer with the man bun.”

I groan. “You’ll never let that go, will you?”

“I just want you to be careful, that’s all. I don’t want you to get hurt again.”

“I am being careful. Like I said, this isn’t anything more than a business arrangement.”

“With the head of a Russian mafia syndicate, Sonya.”

“Will you keep it down?” I hush her, glancing towards the kitchen.

“Keep it down about what?” Mom walks into the room with a tray of roasted vegetables and a basket of rolls. Dad follows with the roasted chicken.

“Sonya’s dating someone.”

“I am not,” I protest. Suddenly, it feels like we’re in high school again. “I’m not dating anyone. I’m someone’s date to a wedding. That’s it. Nothing else. One night, and nothing beyond.”

Dad puts the chicken on the table, then begins to carve it. “As long as he’s not a stockbroker or—God forbid—a tech bro.”

I laugh. “No stockbrokers. No man buns. He’s... different.”

Kelly purses her lips. “Different, Sonya? Mysterious? Dangerous?”

The look I give her speaks volumes, but unfortunately, my adopted sister ignores it.

“Sonya? What is Kelly talking about?” Mom asks.

“It’s just a date for a wedding, okay? Kelly’s upset because I’m going with a guy who could be involved in some shady business deals. But my being his date has nothing to do with any of that.”

Kelly narrows her eyes at me. She brushes her long, dark ponytail behind her shoulder before uncorking the bottle of wine with such force some of it splashes onto the table.

Mom sighs. “Let’s give Sonya some credit.”

“I’m just saying,” Kelly says, pouring a healthy amount of red wine into her glass, then mine. “You attract chaos. And I don’t like it.”

“Can we talk about something else? It’s not a big deal. I’m just his date for the evening. Nothing more.”

Kelly’s belligerent glare says she’s not done just yet, but at least she lets it go—for now. For a while, we drift to safer topics—work, weather, a neighbor’s new puppy. But Kelly, ever relentless, circles back as she and I are cleaning the dishes after dinner.

“I really can’t believe you’re going through with this plan, Sonya. Even one night is one too many with a guy you know is connected to the mob.” Kelly flicks soapy bubbles onto me as she gestures with her hand.

Having the same drive as a dog with a bone is what makes her such a great officer and someday will help her make a damn good detective. But it's also what drives me absolutely insane sometimes.

"Samson was connected to the mob."

"But you didn't know that until later," Kelly points out. "You didn't go into that relationship knowing he was connected."

"I didn't go into it knowing he was an asshole, either," I counter and roll my eyes, focusing on drying the plate in my hand instead of my sister.

Kelly's green eyes narrow again. "Oh, so you're saying you know for sure the Volkov *pakhan* isn't an asshole?"

I nearly slam the plate down but stop myself at the last second, placing it carefully on the counter. "Seriously, Kelly? You don't give me any credit at all, do you?"

"It's not you that I don't trust Sonya. I mean seriously, the man's a killer."

There's a crash behind us. Kelly and I turn to find Mom standing at the entrance to the kitchen while Dad picks up the trash can he just knocked over.

"Who's a killer?"

Kelly and I look at each other, suddenly back in high school with the knowledge that we're about to get into huge trouble.

"Sonya, what is Kelly talking about?" Dad asks carefully, his usual playful demeanor gone.

I tell them, but only to explain what's really going on, that this is a single night, a single date, a single moment before it's over for good. I didn't expect Mom and Dad to love it, but I also didn't expect their faces to pale or the look they exchanged to cause a prickle of warning up my back. They had a whole conversation without saying a word. Mom purses her lips as Dad sighs, rubbing his hands together like he does when he's nervous.

"What's going on?"

“Come on. Let’s go to the living room.”

Dad turns, and Kelly and I follow. We sit facing them, just like we did when we got into trouble as kids and teenagers. Something about this time, though, causes a chill to settle in me.

Mom finally draws a deep breath, her shoulders rising and falling with the effort, and meets my gaze. “Sonya, there’s something you need to know,” she says softly.

The air around me gets colder, and I bite back a shiver. “What do you mean?”

“It’s about your parents.”

The room seems to shrink around us, everything else fading away.

“What about them?” I whisper.

When Mom reaches across the space between us, I nearly jerk my hand back. “Sonya, sweetheart, your parents worked for the Irish Mob.”

The words hit me like a punch in the gut. Kelly gasps, and I can barely manage to squeak, “The Irish Mob?”

Dad takes Mom’s other hand in his, and she seems grateful for the support. “You know I’ve told you that your mom and I were best friends growing up, but we lost that closeness once she met and married your dad, going down a path I didn’t like. We never wanted you to know, but you’re an adult now, and, well, I guess it’s time.”

My hands tremble as flashes of my earliest years light up in my brain—a late-night phone call, my mother’s nervous glances, my father’s mysterious absences. I don’t remember very much, and what I do remember is vague. But the circumstances around my birth parents’ deaths had always rubbed me the wrong way. They didn’t quite match my own memory of that night.

Could this be the reason why?

“I know we’ve told you about your adoption. But what we didn’t tell you is we were contacted out of the blue, that your mom, who I hadn’t heard from for several years, put me as your guardian if something happened to her.”

Yes, I remember that story. The story of how the Prestons had been trying to have another child without success, and I'd come along out of the blue. A beautiful miracle who became part of the family.

But finding out that my birth parents may have died at the hands of the mob changes the entire story.

Kelly breaks the silence, her voice softer. "See? You're drawn to trouble. First Samson, now Matvei—"

I try to smile but my lips are numb. "This doesn't prove anything. Just because my parents—" I have to swallow past the thickness in my throat and abandon that line of thought because I can't go there right now. "One night doesn't mean anything."

Kelly shakes her head. "I've heard stories about Matvei Volkov at work. Let's just say he's about as far from a choir boy as you can get. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Mom's eyes are gentle. "We just want you to be careful. Sometimes, we're drawn to things that aren't good for us."

I shrug, hiding behind false bravado. "The only reason I'm doing this is because it will get me that much closer to opening my own practice. If being Matvei's guest at one wedding gets me closer to my goal, I'll do it. I'm not looking to settle down with the next mafia prince who walks through the door."

Dad chuckles, though it sounds strained. "Just keep your wits about you. And if you need backup, Kelly's got a mean right hook."

Kelly grins, flexing her bicep. "You know it."

Mom leaves to get dessert and we drift to lighter topics, laughing at Kelly's stories, groaning at Dad's complaints about the Bears. But as the night wears on, all of us dance around each other, tension and dark secrets slithering around like shadows. On the outside, I'm laughing, but inside, I'm reeling, my head still buzzing with tonight's revelation. It's like I'm watching myself from above as I try to make sense of what my adoptive parents just told me.

I use a thunderstorm rolling in as an excuse to make my escape as soon as I possibly can, because I have to get away.

Later that night, in the quiet of my apartment, I stare at my reflection in the mirror, tracing the line of my jaw, noting the shadows under my eyes. My parents were part of a world I never knew, but, deep down, maybe I always felt its pull. Maybe that's why Matvei fascinates me, why his gaze makes me feel alive and reckless.

I press my palms to the cool glass. "What am I doing?" I whisper.

The thrill of danger, the rush of the forbidden—it beckons, even as logic warns me off.

Matvei is dangerous and unpredictable, the kind of man who could unravel everything I've built, and I'm terrified of the darkness of his world. But he also makes me feel seen, as if he's drawn out a part of me I never dared to acknowledge, that no one dared to accept.

Lying in my bed, I listen to the rain tapping softly against the window and the occasional deep rumble of thunder. I think about the Prestons' worry, Kelly's disapproval, and my birth parents' secrets. And then come the fuzzy images and memories I try not to think about, feelings of terror, yelling, shouting, screaming, something hitting the wall, someone telling me to run and hide. Loud *bangs* still echo in my dreams on nights when I'm too tired to keep them away.

Now it all makes sense. The realization that my birth parents probably weren't killed in a random robbery like I'd always been told hits me hard.

What if Kelly is right? What if that kind of darkness is in me, in my blood?

From what Mom said, my birth mother wasn't always involved with the mob. It wasn't until she met my birth father that things went off the rails for her. What if that's in me, too? What if there's some genetic proclivity for trouble and darkness? Am I doomed to go down the same path and repeat their choices?

Sleep eludes me until the early hours of the morning, when my dreams tangle with images of blue gowns and deep blue eyes, of laughter and violence, and the possibility of something frightening and new.

SONYA

“Y ou’re going to be okay.”

As I walk home, dodging people on the busy sidewalk, all I can hear on the other end of the line is quiet sobbing.

“I need you to go to the address I gave you, taking only what you need and can pack in ten minutes. It’s a shelter; they know you’re coming and they also know you’re my client. There will be a debit card and a burner phone waiting for you so you have some money and you can contact me.”

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

“I know you can,” I tell the woman on the other end of the phone. “This is going to be the hardest thing you do in your life, but I know you can do it. I’m here to support you. Call my number whenever you need to. But you have to get out—now. You will be okay.”

I hear a choked sob then a sharp exhale as my client tries to pull herself together while facing terrible odds. I’ve heard and seen it all many times before, but I have yet to detach myself from it. I hope I never do—no matter how much it hurts to know what my clients have been through, what I feel for them is what drives me forward, what gives me my motivation.

“Okay.” It’s a single word, but it’s the one I’m waiting to hear.

“Tell me where he is right now.”

“At the bar.”

“Okay. Grab whatever you can and get out. Go to that address. As I said, they know you’re coming. Call me when you get there.”

The call disconnects and I take a deep breath, adjusting the bag of groceries biting into my arm and praying her husband doesn’t come home early.

I send the woman at the shelter a text to let her know my client is coming. I’ve already forwarded her the information to fast-track her intake.

It’s true I want to get back at Samson, but this is the real reason I’m taking money from Matvei. Because if I can open my own law firm, one that doesn’t exist on charity, I can hire a full-time staff to protect my clients. The Russian bear that is Evgeny comes to mind, and I wonder if I’ll be able to entice any of Matvei’s men into my service. All above board, of course. I’m not taking charity from the Russian mob that will come back to bite me in the ass someday.

But I can’t think of anyone better to protect my clients.

I vet the people who volunteer with us as best I can, but I don’t have the kind of connections Matvei does.

I text my boss to let him know my client is on her way to the shelter, nearly dropping my groceries when a sharp crack splits the air, shattering the window next to where I’m standing.

My feet are in motion before my mind catches up.

Screams erupt all around—mine included—as people scramble to get out of the way. Another shot rings out, and more glass shatters behind me. Someone runs into me and I go flying, landing hard and skinning my knees, probably shredding my skirt along with my skin. Apples and a bottle of salad dressing scatter across the pavement.

Get up! I scream at myself internally. *Get up, get up, get up.* My purse is on the ground, but I leave it as I struggle to get up, the grocery bag knocking painfully into my thigh. I spot a nearby trashcan and duck behind it for cover.

Another shot rings out and hits the brick above my head, sending debris flying.

Suddenly, arms wrap around my waist and pull me up. I scream, thrash, and claw, but I am no match for the man who's grabbed me.

"Knock it off!" a voice snaps in my ear. "I'm trying to save you."

The voice is familiar enough that I stop struggling for a moment. I glance back to find myself in Evgeny's grasp.

The big man shields me and rushes me down the sidewalk to a waiting car. Matvei is standing next to it, his expression so cold it could've been carved from ice. I'm not sure what I'm more terrified of—the fact that someone is shooting or the implacable expression devoid of humanity on Matvei's face.

Everyone has disappeared from the sidewalk, and the police sirens grow closer by the second. All three of us turn at the sound of running feet as someone dressed all in black darts out from the shadows of an alley, running full tilt in the opposite direction.

I watch in horror as Matvei raises his arm, aiming a gun with a silencer, and pulls the trigger. I hear a small sound before a spray of blood and brain matter explodes from the back of the man's head. He drops to the cold concrete, dead instantly.

I can't scream. I can't move, I can't even breathe. I can only stand there staring at the blood and gore on the sidewalk, at the way the back of the man's skull was blown away by Matvei's unerring aim and direct hit.

Matvei curls his hand around my arm, pulling me toward the car. "Get in," he snarls as he shoves me inside. He gets in after me and slams the door shut.

Evgeny slides into the front seat, gunning the engine and speeding away so fast I fall against the door and bang my forehead. The wheels squeal as he turns a wild corner, causing me to fall the other way, right against Matvei. His arm automatically goes around me, holding me steady, as he talks in rapid Russian to Evgeny.

There's too much going on, the dark streets passing by the window in a blur, and I can still hear the shots ringing through my head. But all I can think about is my phone.

“Wait! I need my phone! Where’s my phone?”

The Russian stops instantly. Matvei turns to me, an incredulous expression on his face. “Your phone?”

“My client has to be able to get a hold of me! I have to find my phone!” I say in a panic-stricken state, near tears.

His eyes are enormous, the pupils dilated so much they’re almost black. “You’re worrying about a client when someone is trying to kill you?”

“Kill me?” I choke.

“Don’t you get it? *You* were the target.” Matvei’s snarl is as savage as the look in his eyes.

Bile suddenly rises, and I grab for my bag of groceries, heaving up everything I’ve eaten all day until my throat is raw.

Evgeny mutters something in Russian from the front seat.

“He says he has your phone and your purse.” Though the words are clipped with frustration, Matvei is oddly gentle as he takes my handbag and purse from Evgeny before reaching around and buckling me in. I’m grateful for the gesture, no longer pitching back and forth as the sedan flies down the street. The rest of the drive is silent.

Evgeny pulls through a gate that closes behind us and up to what looks like an exclusive apartment building in Lincoln Park. There’s a garage off to the side, and he slowly drives into it. I grip my bag and phone tightly, as though they’re the only things keeping me grounded.

All I can do is sit there as the garage door closes. Matvei and Evgeny get out of the car and begin speaking in Russian again. I look around to see we’re surrounded by several vehicles, each one costing more than I make in a year, possibly two.

The men are almost to the door before Matvei stops and turns, finally realizing I’m not following them. He says something to Evgeny and strides back to the car, opening the door and bending down to peer inside.

“What’s wrong?” His eyes are still dark, his expression forbidding and terrifying. Every time I look at him, all I can see and hear is him aiming and pulling the trigger on the gun that destroyed the guy’s head.

Instead of expressing that, all I can say is, “I can’t stop shaking.”

He remains silent for a minute as I shake so hard the soiled shopping bag rustles on the floor board. He reaches down and extends his hand, but he doesn’t touch me.

“It’s difficult seeing someone killed.”

My gaze flicks up to his face and all I can do is stare. *You are the one who killed him! I watched you shoot him!* I want to scream.

“It’s never easy,” he continues, “but he was trying to kill you. And I promised I would protect you. It’s in the contract.” His voice softens, and some of the darkness has fled from his eyes.

“The contract?” I question, my thoughts moving like molasses.

He leans closer. “I promised you wouldn’t be in danger when you were around me. I keep my promises.”

I can’t look away from his eyes, deep and blue. They pull me in and lock me there until I finally put my hand in his, surprised by its warmth after seeing his frozen detachment earlier, his inhuman indifference to what he’d just done.

But I knew this about him going in, didn’t I?

I knew, yet I still agreed to his plan. I still said yes of my own volition and drew up a contract. I knew exactly who he was and still allowed him into my hotel room to have wild sex.

I let Matvei pull me out of the car. He tells me to leave the bag, that someone else will take care of it. He guides me into the apartment complex with an arm around my waist, as though he’s afraid I’m going to collapse at any moment. I’m still so shaky, I just might.

“Well, you’ve seen me have a panic attack, and now you’ve seen me in shock and throwing up into a bag. Lucky you.”

Matvei only chuckles and leads me down a long hall until we reach a grand entryway and an even grander staircase. Only then do I realize this is not an apartment building but a single home. A single, enormous home. I stop and stare at the marble flooring, the dark, polished wood, the staircases on either side of the entry.

“Is this your house?” I ask, although once the words are out of my mouth, I realize house doesn’t do justice to the mansion I’m standing in.

“I think you already know the answer to that,” Matvei says. He leads me up the stairs to a full suite that has no right being called just a bedroom.

The room is the size of my entire apartment. I’m too busy gawking to realize my tremors and shock have dissipated. At least, until Matvei gently presses me down onto one of the couches by the fireplace and pushes a glass of something amber into my hand, swapping it out for my purse and phone, which he lays on a nearby table.

“Sip that.” It’s an order. A soft order, but an order nonetheless. I do as he says because I need something to settle my nerves, and this seems as good an answer as any right now.

“Thank you,” I murmur after sipping, the whiskey taking the edge off.

Matvei reclines in a plush, wing-back chair, his arms posed like he’s a king sitting on a throne. “Let me know if you need another.”

“No, I mean for today. Thank you for saving me. That was... terrifying.” I put down the glass and clasp my hands in my lap. “Why were you even there?”

“I got a tip. One of my men heard that something was going down. It made its way to Evgeny, who looked into it further.”

“There was talk about me? My—” I start shaking again, unable to process that someone was trying to kill me. My job has always been dangerous, but no one has actually made an attempt on my life before. “Do you know who it was?” I ask. “I have a few cases right now with dangerous ex-husbands and boyfriends.”

Matvei's mouth forms a straight line. He shakes his head. "Evgeny got the man's ID, so we have a lead. We will look into it for you."

"Can't the police—"

The implacable and inhuman look on Matvei's face stops me cold and I snap my mouth shut.

"I already told you. I gave you my word that I would keep you safe, that you wouldn't be in danger. And I always keep my word."

I may not know Matvei very well, but I know there's no sense in arguing with him. Instead, I wrap my arms around myself and rub, trying to warm up extremities that are suddenly frigid. He settles on the couch beside me and wraps his arms around me.

Part of me wants to pull away because I just saw him gun a man down. But the other half of me melts into his arms, into the warmth and safety his embrace offers, into the feel of him against me.

Everything feels better when I'm with him. I feel like I can finally breathe in a quiet and safe place. My mouth finds his, wanting the comfort and oblivion only he can give me.

Matvei leads me to his bed, laying me down and kissing his way down my body, dragging my ruined skirt and underwear off.

I gasp as his kisses trail over my inner thigh, seeking the wet warmth at the apex. I arch as his tongue enters my folds, flitting, flicking, lapping. One hand grasps the quilt until I can feel my nails digging into my palm, while the other reaches down to curl within his hair.

I lose myself in the pleasure Matvei is giving me, letting the waves wash over and erase the fear. The sounds of my moans and cries and Matvei's rumbles of enjoyment block the gunfire still echoing in my head.

The waves crest higher and higher as Matvei's tongue finds all the right places. I cry out, twist, claw at the blanket, at his skin, as his thumb strokes my clit. When I come, it's as if I'm releasing everything. I fall apart, shaking, crying out, grateful for the way my thoughts disappear momentarily so I can feel relief.

But the memories return soon enough. I reach for Matvei and he doesn't hesitate. He bends me over the bed, my knees on the padded bench at the foot, and sinks in to the hilt.

We both cry out. I push back into him, taking in everything I feel at each and every stroke. Matvei wraps one arm around my waist and pulls me to him as close as he can. The other he uses to peel a bra cup from one of my breasts, squeezing and massaging until stars dance in front of my eyes.

I know I'm done for when his hand moves down between my legs and starts playing with me again, pinching, stroking, and circling until I can barely breathe from the onslaught to my senses.

I feel the wave coming again, my entire body clenching tightly. For a moment, I feel as if I'm floating, caught between soaring and falling, between the old and the new, between then and now.

A scream rips from my throat as my orgasm crests and slams into me. For a moment, I pretend everything is okay. That someone didn't shoot at me today. That I wouldn't have lost my life had Matvei and Evgeny not been there. I can pretend Matvei didn't kill someone right in front of my eyes.

That I'm with a man who exhilarates me as much as he terrifies me.

SONYA

Damn it, why does he have to look so good?

Matvei has looked amazing every time I've seen him. Right now, he looks like a beefed-up James Bond in his tailored tuxedo, all smooth lines and sophistication, oozing sexiness and power as he moves through the crowd waiting to enter the reception hall after cocktail hour.

I can't believe I'm the woman on his arm.

"People are staring at us," I whisper as he hands me a glass of champagne. He's moved on to whiskey in a crystal tumbler.

"They're staring at you," he whispers back.

I flush. "No, *you're* staring at me."

"You don't give your beauty enough credit." Matvei slips his free arm around my waist and pulls me close. I have to crane my neck to look up into his face.

He's doing an admirable job pretending to be crazy about me. Fire burns in his blue eyes, and anytime someone looks our way, he pulls me closer. I'm waiting for him to growl in order to warn others away from his property.

I'm not sure I'm doing as great a job. I'm anxious, even though I look as incredible as I've ever seen myself. Matvei sent over a team of makeup artists and a hair stylist, as well as some amazing jewelry. I didn't ask him

how much it cost because I didn't want to worry about someone ripping it off my neck, wrist, and ears all night. I'm worried enough as it is.

Everyone here is so beautiful and thin, floating around in a world that isn't mine. We watch the sun go down over the lake from the top of the building, Chicago's glittering and wealthy people moving about as the city lights turn on like a carpet of galaxies.

I'm trying to keep to the letter of our agreement. I put my hand on his chest, my heart fluttering at the solidness beneath my palm, at the thought of what's beneath the tux jacket, vest, and starched white shirt.

Truth is, I don't have to pretend that hard. I'm pulled to this man, caught in his orbit and moving ever closer, unable to escape entirely. My heart speeds up at the simple thought of him and the memories of what he does to me in private that makes my mouth water and my knees weak.

"You're just trying to butter me up."

A slight hint of a smile curls at one corner of his mouth. "I don't think at this point I have to butter you up." His mouth and his words brush against my ear, making me shiver. "I'm sure you're already slick enough as it is."

My mouth goes dry at his words and I drain my glass of champagne. His arm is still around my waist as he grins down at me, mischief glinting in his eyes.

"I like making you blush. Among other things."

"Might I remind you, we're here for a reason, and if you keep this up, none of that is going to happen tonight."

Other things will undoubtedly happen, but that damn contract ends everything tonight. Maybe we should just find a bathroom somewhere so we can get one last round in before this is all over. Then again, I'm not sure any amount of sex would be enough. I think Matvei has ruined me for anyone else. I'm so tempted to stay, but I can't. Anything more, and I risk getting tangled up in a world I want to avoid at all costs. At some point, whatever part of that danger I find so alluring, so enticing, will turn into something frightening and sinister.

I'm saved from having to think anymore on the subject by the announcement that dinner is being served.

We follow the mouth-watering scent of food into a ballroom that makes people gasp—me included. The entire place is decorated like the gardens at Versailles—complete with topiaries, statues, and fountains. The ceiling has been painted to resemble a blush sky at sunset, with the first stars actually twinkling in the twilight.

“Holy crap,” I mutter. I don't know where to look first.

“This certainly cost quite a bit.” Matvei's tone is full of antipathy, his expression mirroring his tone when I look up at him.

“You don't like it?”

“Samson has always been about showing off what he has, even if he doesn't actually have it.”

I think about those words as we take our places, servers dressed in Louis XIV style beginning to circulate with the first course. Samson was always about appearance, it's true. I used to take pride in being at his side, but as I get to know his brother, I can see the difference.

Where Samson flaunts his wealth, Matvei wears it subtly. Yes, he dresses in bespoke suits, wears an obnoxiously expensive watch, and has a personal driver, but even at The Four Seasons in Prague, he didn't flash his money around.

In contrast, Samson always looked gaudy with his rings, suits, and branded workout gear, as well as his flashy cars. He spoke down to everyone except those he deemed worthy of his time.

My eyes wander the ballroom, at the incredible display of what's possible when you have a lot of money. But would I have wanted this for my wedding? No. I was planning something far simpler and more classic. I didn't care about showing off Samson's money.

Dinner passes slowly, with numerous courses and entertainment in between each one. Samson and his new wife, Genevieve Mancini, hold court at the head table.

The closer the wedding day got, the more I'd worried that attending was a terrible idea, and my healing heart would break all over again. But I was surprised that I felt no sadness during the ceremony, not even when Samson and Genevieve said their vows and the priest exclaimed they were married. Oddly enough, I was thrilled it wasn't me up there; the relief was unexpected but welcome.

My gaze moves from Samson and his new wife to around the room. I see celebrities, both local and other, as well as several heads of local mob families. A man in an extraordinary gold and blue filigree costume comes to announce that the dancing will start. Again, we all move to another room.

I don't know if Matvei is going to ask me to dance. We mingle, staying around the edges of the ballroom as couples begin to take to the center. No one talks to us—if anything, they're avoiding us—which suits me just fine. I'm not sure what to say, or if I should say anything at all. He isn't treating me like a decoration by any means, which is what I originally expected.

Matvei startles me out of my thoughts when he pulls me close, wrapping his arm around my waist in a possessive gesture. I don't understand why until I see Samson and his new wife walking toward us. They're both smiling brightly, putting on a show, Samson's cold eyes finding mine before flicking to his brother then away. His wife is looking at us, judgment in her eyes.

Matvei dips his head, his lips brushing my ear. "Let us pretend I'm saying something wildly funny, and then you laugh."

I twist to look at his face, wondering if I look half as hungry as I feel for him. "Why don't you just say something funny?"

"Funny is not my forte."

My smile is sincere. "That was pretty funny."

From the corner of my eye, I can see they're almost to us. Matvei dips his head again, nuzzles my neck in a way that makes me shiver, and whispers, "I've got your back."

The words of support are entirely unexpected. I'm grateful for them and for the firm hand around my waist as we're confronted by my ex-fiancé and the

woman with whom he replaced me.

“I didn’t believe you when you told me you had a date, Matvei.” Samson’s smile is a fragile veneer over the anger in his eyes.

“Was my word and RSVP not enough?” Matvei asks pleasantly. Samson’s eyes narrow, as it doesn’t take a genius to know Matvei is enjoying this.

“What’d you do, scoop her up as soon as I left her on the sidewalk with the rest of the trash?”

The comment is so mean, it nearly takes my breath away. Matvei’s arm around my waist tightens before it relaxes. The pleasant facade is gone, along with his smile.

“Actually, I happened across her at the airport. I was on business, and she was trying to get over the fact that someone had broken her heart. It was a happy coincidence.”

“You’re just trying to get back at me,” Samson hisses. “But it’s not going to work. I’ve already found the one.”

“From what I understand, you found the one a long time ago.” Menace laces Matvei’s voice, and we all hear it. Samson, however, doesn’t seem to be afraid.

His bride, Genevieve, looks us up and down, taking in everything from my dress to my makeup to my hair. “Beautiful dress,” she says. “Who’s the designer?”

“It was made specifically for me by a Russian seamstress,” I reply. I can barely breathe, but I force out the words.

“She’s also wearing my mother’s jewels,” Matvei says smugly. “The ones my father gave her for their twenty-fifth anniversary.”

Samson’s expression is frigid, and he and Matvei stare each other down. Animosity crackles between the two siblings, and for a moment, I wonder if I need to call for help. But then Samson mutters something under his breath, something I don’t catch. Whatever it is, Genevieve’s eyes widen before he turns and pushes his way through the crowd, leaving his new bride behind.

She picks up her skirts and hurries after him, leaving us with one final look over her shoulder.

“What was that about?” I ask, looking at Matvei.

“The necklace and earrings you’re wearing are heirlooms. My father received them from his mother, who received them from her mother. And Samson’s mother expected my father to give them to her.”

My breath catches. I know the story. Samson had recounted it when he got drunk and started cursing the names of his mother, their father, and Matvei. He spoke about how his mother had an affair with Matvei’s father. How she thought the Russian crime lord would leave his wife for her and make her his queen, especially when she ended up pregnant. Instead, she fell from his grace and everyone else’s, and so did her family.

“You knew that would be a huge insult.”

Everything Matvei does is deliberate, but for some reason, I’m not sure how to feel about the fact that he didn’t tell me I was a part of this plot. I don’t mind getting back at Samson for all the hurt he’s caused me, but the jewelry is kind of ruthless, and I was his unwitting accomplice.

Matvei pulls me closer, and when I look up at him, I see he’s holding his brother’s gaze steadily from across the room.

“Come. Dance with me.”

Before I know it, he’s whisking me away toward the middle of the room and into his arms as we start moving across the dance floor in time to the other couples around us.

“Show everyone you’re mine.”

The words startle me, and I flick my gaze up to his. His attention is so intense, it’s as if he’s looking into my very soul. I know it’s just for show, but something about his statement feels real. Especially when I know no one else heard it. Especially when his attention is on no one else in the room but me.

SONYA

Matvei can dance. He leads me around the dance floor, every movement confident with the same predator-like grace he exhibits in everything else.

We dance until I'm too tired to continue.

"I shouldn't have worked so late last night," I confess, sheepish as I smother yet another yawn.

"Not a creature of the night?" he asks playfully.

"Yes, just not on three hours of sleep in a twenty-four-hour-plus period. I left that behind in law school," I reply as we weave through the half-drunk crowd and down a grand staircase.

"I find that hard to believe." Matvei glances at me, an odd warmth in his eyes. "You can't tell me you don't pull all-nighters for cases. I don't see you as the kind of lawyer who clocks out at five and leaves everything behind."

"Well, okay, that's true." I can't deny it, and from the way his lips quirk into a small smile, he already knew it too.

"Wait here, and I'll get Evgeny to pull the car around."

"Sonya!"

I jerk around at the sound of feet pounding down the staircase, invading the hush of the lobby.

“What do you want, Samson?”

I don’t know how I was ever attracted to him, especially now that I see who he really is behind the good-looking mask.

“Hey—” He stops just before he gets to me to take a long breath. “Look, I know why you’re here.”

“You do?”

“Of course I do. I’m not an idiot.” There isn’t any trace of the earlier anger in his eyes. He’s replaced it with his mask of easy-going friendliness, the kind that made me think he was the guy next-door when we first met. “I know you wanted to try to win me back.”

“I—” The words drop off as if from a cliff. I have no idea how to respond to the suggestion that just came out of my ex’s mouth.

“But you don’t have to do it through Matvei. Didn’t you hear me talk about him enough? He’s bad news, Sonya. Terrible news.” Samson moves to grip my arm, but I jerk away before he can touch me.

“What I do and don’t do is none of your business anymore, Samson.”

My words come out sharper than I intended, but I realize I’m still angry at him. Not for breaking up with me—I’m actually glad that happened and I wasn’t stuck with him as a husband. I’m angry at the way Samson treated me, for humiliating me, for treating me like trash, for telling me I wasn’t good enough or beautiful enough for him, for cheating on me and discarding me when he didn’t find me useful anymore.

That still hurts.

“Look, I’m sorry for what I did.” He doesn’t sound sorry at all. “But you have to stay away from Matvei. Seriously. He’s dangerous.”

That one word draws me up short, my mind going back to the moment on the sidewalk, when I watched Matvei take aim and shoot, the guy hitting the pavement, instantly dead with part of his skull missing.

Samson’s look is knowing, and I hate it. I hate how right he is. I hate that the moment is still playing in my head and even in my dreams, the vision of

the guy in the hoodie being replaced with my face.

The teenager behind the coat check desk has one earbud out and is trying not to appear as though she's listening to our conversation. I drop my voice as I turn my back to her. "Leave me alone, Samson. I'm done with you and you're done with me. You made that very clear."

"Come on, Sonya. Promise me you'll be careful. Promise you won't continue hanging around Matvei." Samson reaches for my wrist again and I jerk it away.

From the corner of my eye, I see the teenager has given up all pretense of not listening and is now actively eavesdropping. I almost snap at her to stop but turn my anger to Samson instead.

"Mind your own business, Samson," I hiss.

My ex reaches for me a third time and wraps his fingers around my wrist, his brows furrowed in visible frustration. "Did you miss the part where he's the *pakhan* of the most powerful Russian Bratva in Chicago? Do you really want to get mixed up in all that?"

"Oh, so now you care about me?" My short bark of laughter is derisive and lacking humor. "Just walk away, Samson. You obviously know how to do that."

"Sonya, this is ridiculous. You don't need to put yourself in danger just to get my attention—"

Movement out of the corner of my eye becomes a rush of darkness. Samson's hand disappears from my wrist with a painful wrench. I don't even have time to understand what's happening before Matvei has his brother up against the wall, one hand fisted in Samson's shirt, the other tightly gripping his neck.

Fear banishes any other expression on Samson's face as he struggles to get back the breath that was knocked out of him when he hit the wall. Then a wash of rage replaces the fear.

"Get the fuck off of me, you fucking bastard!" he manages to say, struggling as he tries to pry his brother's hand from around his throat.

“I think you know that out of the two of us, I’m not the bastard.”

There is such cold menace in Matvei’s words, I swear ice spiders across the floor and engulfs my feet, because I can’t move. This man, no, this *hunter* in genteel clothing, killed a man the other day. He’s the ruthless, cold, deadly *pakhan* of the Volkov Bratva.

This is the killer Samson warned me about. And I hate that he’s right.

“Do you know who’s upstairs?” The tone of Samson’s voice is obstructed by Matvei’s hands around his throat. “Do you know who my father-in-law is now?”

“You think I’m afraid of the Mancinis?” Matvei’s voice drops half an octave, venom dripping from every word. “They’re afraid of *me*, just like you should be.”

“Fuck you,” Samson spits. His fingers dig into his brother’s wrist, but it doesn’t loosen his grip.

“You never were good at learning lessons. Maybe I should finally teach you to mind your own business before you get yourself into more trouble than you can handle, *bratishka*.”

Everything about Matvei screams violence, and I suddenly feel like I can’t breathe.

“Don’t use that word with me.” Samson squirms, but it’s no use. “We might share the same blood, but we were never brothers.”

Matvei leans close to Samson, his hand tightening so much that Samson’s breath is shallow and grating. “Your words, not mine.”

I’m afraid he’s going to kill Samson right here. At his own wedding.

I finally find my voice and step in, my hand hovering over the *pakhan*’s arm. “Matvei, don’t.”

Time slows, the world around us grinding to a halt. I hold my breath as I wait to see what Matvei will do next.

Samson nearly collapses as Matvei releases him. His hand goes instinctively to his neck, where the red, angry outline of fingers will no doubt leave a bruise.

“Fuck you, Matvei,” he growls, his voice hoarse.

“Stay away from what’s mine.” It’s Matvei’s last warning, the growl of a predator, before his arm wraps around my waist again to lead me out.

The last image I see is of Samson leaning on the wall for support, gasping for breath, his face red with anger. The coat check girl is crouched behind the counter, trembling, her face white as a sheet.

The cool night air, the hum of the city, and the sound of traffic are jarring after the last few minutes. Evgeny is waiting at the curb by the black sedan’s open door, his expression tense.

“Everything is fine,” Matvei calls out, his voice tight and controlled as he leads me down the steps.

Evgeny asks something in Russian to which Matvei replies coolly. An odd expression crosses the big bear’s face, and he says something else I don’t understand. I wait by the high wall at the bottom of the staircase, waiting for the two men to finish their conversation.

I need to learn Russian.

I don’t want to think about what’s circling my brain, that I didn’t stop Matvei because I wanted to save Samson. I stopped Matvei because I wanted to save *him*. No matter how violent, or how frightening, I don’t want this man to suffer. Even if our contract does end tonight and he’s out of my life once he drops me off at my apartment, I cared more about him than anything else in that moment.

A car with its high beams on moves down the street, causing me to squint and cover my eyes with my hand.

I barely see the bright flash before I hear the explosion coming from the car.

And then, everything is darkness and pain.

SONYA

Gunshots.

It's the only thought echoing through my mind as everything else stops, my head and back exploding with pain. My vision goes dark for a heartbeat.

More gunshots, closer this time, echoing back and forth between buildings. A scream wrenches from my throat, and I curl in on myself.

Then, it all goes quiet, except for the buzz in my ears from the noise and the blood rushing along with it. My heart is pounding so fast, I'm afraid it's going to jump right out of my chest.

"Are you okay?"

I look up to see Matvei leaning over me, shielding me. All I can do is blink up at him, wondering how the hell he got there. I realize the pain I felt was Matvei slamming me back into the wall to protect me, the darkness his black tuxedo as he saved me.

He places his hands on either side of my face, forcing me to look him in the eye. "Sonya, are you okay?" His eyes are wide as he frantically searches my face along with the rest of me.

"I'm okay," I manage, though I don't know if it's true. My gown suddenly feels too tight, like a vise, and I can't draw enough air into my lungs.

I'm not okay. I'm shaking so hard my teeth are chattering, and I can't get myself to stop. I can't breathe. Sweat is pouring down my back. Tears cloud

my vision.

“I can’t breathe, Matvei. I can’t breathe!”

His hands press on either side of my cheeks and he bows his head, his forehead touching mine. His warmth, his presence, his patchouli-cardamom scent envelop me.

“You’re okay, Sonya. Focus on me. Focus on my voice. Breathe.”

I do as he says, focusing on the warmth of his hands, the rumble in his voice, the protection I feel with him. Eventually, my heartbeat slows, the vice around my chest loosens, and I stop shaking.

“Are you okay?” Matvei asks again, blue eyes as intense as I’ve ever seen them. He’s still cupping my face but pulls back to examine me.

“I’m okay. I’m not hurt,” I tell him, and I mean it this time.

“There’s blood on your dress.” Matvei snarls, a tinge of panic in his tone.

I look to where he’s frantically pulling the fabric at my waist, where uneven circles of red stain the blue gown. For a moment, I think I might have been shot, but a search of the area comes up clean.

“It’s not mine.” I look up and realize there’s a stain spreading along the sleeve of Matvei’s tuxedo jacket. “Shit! You’re the one who’s hurt!”

I paw frantically until Matvei jerks back with a hiss of pain, clamping his hand down on his arm. He pulls off his jacket and peers at the sleeve of his shirt, stained bright red. “It’s just a graze. It will stop bleeding soon.”

I see the moment his mind discards any concern for his own wound and returns to my well-being. I stare up at his face, at the forbidding expression of anger tinged with concern for me, not himself.

“You saved me. You protected me.”

His face creases into a scowl. “I told you I would. I gave you my word. The contract doesn’t end until I get you home.”

“No.” I put my hand on his good arm. “You protected me with your life. You could have been seriously hurt... or worse.” I don’t want to think about

the ‘or worse’ part.

Matvei didn’t have to risk his own life to protect mine. There is nothing in our contract about him dying for me, and besides, I doubt his word extends that far, no matter what he said in the hotel room in Prague.

His life was never part of our bargain.

I’m still staring at him when the sidewalk around us fills with people running and crying. Evgeny is shouting orders at men in dark suits who have seemingly come from nowhere. Sirens echo in the distance, getting closer with every heartbeat that pounds in my ears.

I wrap my arms around Matvei. There’s a second’s hesitation, or maybe surprise, before he pulls me to him, his arms strong and protective around me. And no matter what just happened, no matter that someone was trying to kill me or that I’ve seen this dangerous man kill someone else, I still feel the safest in his arms.

“Matvei!”

Samson and Genevieve are running down the steps, along with her father, who’s shouting. “What the fuck happened?”

“You’re asking *me* what the fuck happened?” Matvei snarls as he pulls away to confront his brother, but not without tucking me safely under his arm, putting his bulk in between me and everyone else. “Are you trying to tell me you’re not behind this fucking attack?”

“I had nothing to do with it!” Samson snaps. “Or I wouldn’t be asking you, you fucking asshole. Why would I have someone killed at my own wedding?”

The sirens become lights dancing across the buildings around us as police cars come to a squealing stop at the curb. Evgeny, Samson, and Genevieve’s father, Rodolfo Mancini, move to greet, or rather intercept, the police.

“Stay here,” Matvei tells me quietly. As soon as he leaves, I feel cold, his absence causing a chill to my bones.

Movement to my left becomes a police officer running toward me. Kelly crashes into me, her embrace so tight I can barely breathe.

“Oh my God, are you okay? What happened? When I heard there was a shooting at the Mancini wedding, I freaked the hell out. Where were you when it happened? Oh my God, you’re hurt!”

I’m glad I know Kelly-speak, because the rush of words would probably be unintelligible to anyone else.

“I’m fine, Kelly, I promise! It’s not my blood.”

My sister stops reaching for her radio, most likely to call for an ambulance, but she doesn’t look convinced. I return the embrace, hugging her tight.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I tell her.

“You know, I didn’t join the CPD just to keep you out of trouble, Sonya. This isn’t going to be a thing, is it?” I hear Kelly’s question for what it is—concern.

“I sure as hell hope not,” I sigh. “I don’t even know what happened.”

Someone clears their throat—pointedly—and we both turn at the sound to see Matvei watching us closely.

“You’re him, aren’t you?” Kelly asks, marching up to the Bratva boss and into his personal bubble. Closer than I’ve seen anyone else get, besides myself.

“Excuse me?” Matvei replies. I can’t tell whether it’s amusement or warning in his tone.

Kelly doesn’t care and glares up at him. “You heard me. You’re the reason my sister is here. You’re the reason she’s in danger.”

Now I can see its amusement glimmering in the dark blue of his eyes. “You must be Kelly.”

My sister, however, is not amused. “Yes, I must be,” she answers flatly.

“Sonya talks about you often, and fondly. I can see how close you two are.”

Matvei's reply isn't what Kelly expects, and for once, my sister is brought up short without a word spilling from her mouth.

Matvei's eyes find mine as Kelly scoffs and continues to glare at the Russian crime boss.

"Well, anyway, I need to get your statement. Yours and that giant bear over there. And Sonya, I'll need yours, too. Do you want to come down to the station? I can take you home afterward."

I shake my head, feeling cold again without adrenaline running through my veins or Matvei beside me. "No, I just want to get it over with. I don't want to sit in any room."

Kelly nods and weaves her arm through mine, giving Matvei a warning look. He offers a bemused smile as he follows us.

"Damn it. Does he really have to be so good-looking? It would make hating him on your behalf a whole lot easier."

I have to bite back a giggle at my sister's comment. "You don't have to hate him, Kelly. I don't even know what happened." Kelly gives me a look that tells me I'm not getting it, and I drop my voice to a near-whisper. "There are a million mob guys here. There's no way this was about me."

Not with the heads of a bunch of Italian mob families in the building behind us. Not during the bratty princess's wedding. Not when my escort is the head of the most powerful Russian crime syndicate in Chicago.

Kelly stays glued to my side throughout the process of taking my statement, and so does Matvei, with Evgeny not too far off, hovering around us like a shadow.

"They're still processing the scene, but I've got permission to take you home," Kelly announces.

"She'll come with me," Matvei steps in.

Kelly's green eyes snap to his face, her chin raised in defiance. "Like hell she will. My sister just went through a drive-by shooting. I'm not leaving her side."

Matvei meets her gaze, just as determined. His voice is low and deliberate as he says, “Out of the two of us, which one do you think is the safer bet? I believe you know very well who I am and what I can provide.” It’s not exactly a threat, but it isn’t a friendly reminder, either. It’s more like an assertion.

The standoff is interrupted by voices coming from behind us, one particularly loud and full of bravado.

Rodolfo Mancini’s hands are balled into fists at his side. He turns to the men in dark suits who surround him. “Find out who did this,” he orders, spitting with anger. “I want their names. I want their families’ names. I want their heads on a platter in front of me by tomorrow morning. I want to know who tried to ruin my daughter’s wedding!”

Evgeny happens to be standing behind the old man, and I wonder if I’m the only one who sees him roll his eyes.

“Sonya, I’m so sorry.” Genevieve draws out the “o” as she takes my hands in hers, suddenly all concern and kindness, ignoring the look Matvei flashes at her. “I can’t believe someone would do this! And I can’t believe they used my wedding as a cover. This is absolutely terrible, and I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

I offer a small smile I don’t feel and squeeze her hands before pulling mine back. I find one of Matvei’s instead to banish the feel of her touch from my skin.

“Who knows what this was about. I’m just glad no one was seriously hurt.” I look around to double check my words are valid and see no one lying on the sidewalk in a puddle of blood.

“Oh, that would have been so terrible,” Genevieve moans, swooning like she’s about to faint. Samson puts his arm around her shoulders to steady her, something he never did for me. “Someone dying on our wedding day would be a horrible way to start a life together.”

“Do you need her anymore? Or can I take her home?” Matvei cuts in.

“Excuse me?” Kelly sets her jaw and folds her arms over her chest in a move that tells me she’s gearing up for a fight. “I’ve already said I’m taking

her home.”

Matvei sets his jaw, too, his eyes narrowing.

“Kelly, I’m fine. I promise,” I tell her, trying to ease the tension. “You know where I am, and you have my number. I promise I’m safe.”

“Safer with me than with you,” Matvei mutters. I throw him a warning glare that, amazingly, he heeds and shuts up.

“I swear I’m safe and I’m okay. Matvei got me here, he protected me, and he can get me home in one piece.”

Kelly glares at me for a long moment before moving her glare over to Matvei. “Okay,” she finally concedes. “But I’m registering my complaints to you now. You know I don’t like this. You’d better call me when you get home to let me know you’re safe.”

“I will. I promise.”

As I give Kelly a quick hug, I can feel my adopted sister’s fear for me in the strength of her return embrace. Never mind the way her eyes follow us as Matvei guides me to the car waiting on the curb and helps me inside. I wave at her just before the door closes, giving her what I hope is an encouraging smile.

“I thought you were taking me home?” I say as Evgeny stops the car, waiting for the gate in front of Matvei’s mansion to open.

“You’re staying with me where I can keep you safe.”

Matvei says it like it’s a foregone conclusion and there will be no arguments. I’ll have to burst his bubble because there will be arguments.

“Excuse me? You didn’t even ask if that’s what I wanted. And what I want is to go home. It’s been a long, difficult night, and all I want is my bed.”

Evgeny rolls down the driveway and into the garage.

“Absolutely not. You’re staying here.”

I follow him as he gets out of the car, thinking that’s the end of it. But it’s not.

“I don’t recall the part of our contract that states I gave you the right to make decisions for me. I know it doesn’t exist, because, if you remember, I’m the one who wrote it. It’s been a long night, and I want to go home.”

Matvei whirls on me in the hallway. “Did you not just see what happened? Do you not realize that’s the second time someone has tried to take your life?”

“‘My life’ being the operative words. It’s my life, not yours. You have absolutely no right to keep me here.”

“I’m trying to keep you safe. Stop being so stubborn. There are guards everywhere around this house, as well as a state-of-the-art security system. What does your apartment building have? A broken security camera that hasn’t worked in thirty years?”

I had no idea about the guards, and yes, the security camera by the door at my apartment hasn’t worked since before I moved in. But I’m not going to give in now. “You didn’t even ask.”

Matvei clamps his jaw. A full minute goes by before he says, “Will you please stay so I can keep you safe?” It seems to take every ounce of his self-control to force those words between clenched teeth.

I shake my head. “No good. I was very clear about the fact that this was it. One night, that’s what the contract states. You promised me it was just a date for the wedding, then you would be out of my life.”

“This isn’t about the contract anymore. It’s about the fact that someone is trying to kill you.”

“Have you forgotten what I do for a living? That I work with women in abusive relationships? This is how it starts—men who think they can control what a woman does.”

“I cannot keep you safe when you aren’t under my roof, Sonya. I gave you my word that I would.”

“You also gave me your word that as soon as the wedding was over, that would be it. I would be done, and none of your world would leak over into mine. Are you going to go back on your word?”

“You’re being stubborn,” Matvei growls, but I can see my words affected him as he takes a step away.

I soften a bit. “I’m not being stubborn. I just refuse to get caught up in your world. I will not be consumed by who and what you are, or ordered around like I’m some medieval princess.”

Matvei’s expression relents, his eyes narrowing. “Fine. If you’re so intent on getting yourself killed, then so be it.”

“I’m not trying to get myself killed. I’m maintaining my independence. I refuse to be ordered around by anyone, period. I know the road to which that leads, and I’m not going there.”

Matvei continues to glare at me in seething silence.

“Besides, my clients need me. I have to be available to them, not locked in some damn tower like a damsel in distress.”

“You can’t help your clients if you’re dead,” he says bluntly.

“Then I guess we’re at an impasse.”

We glare at each other for what seems like hours. I’m not sure which of us will be the first to break.

“I can station myself outside of your apartment, and I can escort you to work,” Evgeny offers.

We both glance at him, and I swear, if looks could kill, Matvei’s would have ended the big man. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, as if counting back from ten to keep his temper in check.

“Does that suit you?” he mumbles as soon as he opens his eyes.

“Yes.”

“Fine. Wait here.”

Matvei snaps an order in Russian at Evgeny, who follows his boss.

The foyer falls quiet, save for the distant hum of a car going past. I take a seat on the edge of an ornate bench beneath the staircase. My posture is

rigid, and I realize my hands are still trembling slightly. I clasp them tightly in my lap, my gaze following the hallway down which Matvei and Evgeny disappeared.

I hate to admit it, especially after what I said to Matvei, but I'm still shaken. Badly. My pulse skips every time a floorboard creaks or a shadow moves behind the frosted glass on either side of the door.

Yet somehow, I am comforted by Matvei's voice, low and full of fury, echoing from somewhere in the mansion. He's like a storm barely contained. Evgeny's rumbling bass follows, although more measured, the anchor to his boss's rage.

I have to admit I'm glad Matvei is forcing me to take Evgeny's protection. I already feel better knowing the big bull of a man is going to be watching over me.

Despite the fear, I'm still steaming mad at Matvei's high-handedness, and the way my body is urging me to drag him upstairs so we can do unspeakable things to each other.

I want his presence, the safety I feel in his arms.

I want *him*.

What the hell is wrong with me?

MATVEI

“**Y**ou’re going to wear out the floor if you keep pacing like that.”

Evgeny leans against the door frame of my study, his massive stature taking up the entire space. His dark eyes follow me as I pace the knotty pine hardwood, my fists so tightly balled my knuckles burn.

So does the place where the bullet grazed me, but at least it stopped bleeding.

“Who the fuck thinks they can come for us like this?” I slam my fist onto the desk, scattering papers across the floor.

Evgeny remains silent, watching me absorb the rage.

I turn, pinning my right-hand man with a glare. “She should never have been a part of this. Damn it, Evgeny. I gave her my word she would be safe.”

“And your word is all you care about right now?”

Evgeny’s expression has softened, a rare flicker of empathy igniting my anger further. He’s waiting, letting me burn through the fury. He knows rage is sometimes just fear in disguise.

I rub my face, take a shaky breath, and look to the darkness outside the window. *As soon as the wedding was finished, that would be it. I would be done.* Her words echo in my head. I felt an odd pang when she said them

and I don't know why. This was never a relationship; it was a deal with some sex on the side. What about this is bothering me?

"She stays alive," I growl to the darkness and Evgeny's reflection in the glass. "You hear me? Guard her like you would guard me. No mistakes. No lapses. Until we figure this out, until it's finished, she's to be treated as family—no less."

"She's strong, you know," he replies. "Not many could have held it together after all that, but she recovered well."

He's right, she did. To panic when you're shot at is customary, especially for those who live outside my world. But she bounced back quickly, at least on the surface. The fear faded from her eyes, and she pulled herself together enough to argue with me about staying here, where she knows she's safest.

Sonya has seen many sides of me. I saw the look in her eyes when she realized who I was in Prague. I saw the fear tonight when she saw the monster come out with Samson. She witnessed me kill someone. At many points in the short time I've known her, I expected her to run.

Though Sonya has shown fear, she has always returned, even dared to approach me, to stop me. No one but Evgeny does that and gets away with it.

My life has always consisted of constant action, forward movement toward my goals. Until I met a woman on an airplane who slipped beneath my skin and now I cannot get her out.

I don't know where this feeling is coming from, but she is not dying on my account.

"The contract ends tonight," Evgeny points out.

"Do you think I care about that damn contract? Whatever's going on is no doubt because of me, whether she was their original target or not."

"You know she was," Evgeny says quietly. If only he weren't so good at calling me out on my bullshit.

I know I should end our association tonight as the contract states, but I can't seem to let her go. Sonya doesn't deserve to be dragged down into the darkness that is my world. She deserves to live free and without worry. She deserves to be protected.

I've done terrible things. I'm the villain in this story. But that doesn't mean I want innocent blood spilled. Certainly not Sonya's.

Evgeny watches me with the patience that comes from years spent witnessing men unravel from the inside out. He sees how my hands shake, how my eyes linger on the doorway, checking for Sonya's silhouette.

"She'll never see me any other way," I mutter, my voice dropping to a near whisper. "I'm the monster in her fairy tale. She deserves better than this world."

Evgeny takes a slow breath. "Maybe she does. But that doesn't mean she sees you the way you think she does. Not anymore."

I bristle and turn away. "Enough. She's a tool, Evgeny. Nothing more. Once this is over, she'll be free to go. I won't keep her in the dark."

He watches me closely, the subtle cracks in my words revealing truths I won't admit. "Whatever you say, Matvei," he replies flatly.

I know he doesn't believe me. I'm lying to myself, and I'm definitely not fooling my oldest friend.

I roll my shoulders, straighten my jacket, and stride past him, my face a mask of cold professionalism. He follows silently, his presence intimidating and reassuring all at once.

Sonya looks up as we enter the foyer. Her eyes flicker between the two of us. "Can I go home now?"

I cross the marble floor and stand over her with an air of command. "Yes," I reply, my voice brusque, hiding the concern gnawing at my insides.

Sonya's shoulders sag in relief.

I hesitate, wanting to reach for her, to offer comfort, or maybe just to reassure myself that she's still alive and breathing. Instead, I step back,

motioning for Evgeny to take my place.

“Evgeny will escort you home and stay with you.” Sonya opens her mouth to argue but stops when I hold up a hand. “That’s my condition for letting you go home. We cannot know if there will be another attempt on your life, therefore, I will have someone with you who can protect you.”

I expect Sonya to attempt to argue again, but she takes a deep breath and nods. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“And I’ll be stopping by your apartment every chance I get. This goes beyond the contract now. I gave you my word I would keep you safe, and I’m seeing it through. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Sonya doesn’t look away from my gaze even though I know it’s intense. “As long as you let me get my work done.”

“I promise.”

“I’m holding you to it.”

We gaze at one another for a long moment, and I nearly ask her to stay. Not only for her safety, but because I want her with me.

“Thank you again for protecting me,” she says. She stands on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek before turning to leave, Evgeny her protective dark shadow.

I stand in the doorway until the headlights from the car arc across the entryway and fade, leaving me alone in the dark and quiet of the house. I know my guards are around, patrolling the property. But for a brief moment, I feel completely alone.

I’ve always been alone in my world, and for all that I’ve done, I always will be.

Sonya’s light doesn’t deserve to be snuffed out by my darkness.

SONYA

I step into the living room and extend my hand, holding a steaming mug of coffee. Evgeny looks at it like I'm offering him poison.

"We go through this dance every morning. You've been sleeping on my couch every night for weeks. Just take the damn coffee."

Evgeny begrudgingly accepts the cup and grunts that he will wait in the hallway for me.

He has been my constant shadow for two weeks. He's the first man I've had in my apartment for an embarrassingly long time, and he barely even speaks to me. He sleeps on my couch, which I know from experience is not comfortable, and it must be worse for someone his size. He's a constant presence outside my office door, and comes with me to all of my appointments as well as the courthouse.

My neighbors are starting to talk, which is only exacerbated by the fact that Matvei is often stopping by unannounced to check on me.

I'm pouring myself a cup of coffee when I hear a noise out in the hallway, a high voice I recognize instantly. I can't make out any actual words, but I hear Evgeny's deep bass reply.

"Oh, shit," I groan.

I glance at my phone and see multiple missed messages from Kelly. I was working on a case and must have forgotten my phone was on silent mode for court yesterday. "Shit, shit, shit!" I rush to the door and throw it open.

“I’m going to ask you one more time. What the hell are you doing at my sister’s door? If you don’t answer me right now, I’m going to handcuff you and take you in.”

“Kelly, stop!”

She and I peer at each other around the wall that is Evgeny. I meet her wide-eyed gaze that quickly narrows to a glare. “Sonya, you want to tell me what the hell is going on? You disappear for two weeks after someone takes a shot at you and you haven’t answered my messages. I’ve been texting all morning. We had plans for brunch, remember?”

I slap my forehead and drag my hand down my face. “Damn it, I forgot. I’m so sorry. Things have been crazy at work, and I have this case—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kelly brushes off my excuses. “Save it. I know you’re busy saving the world, but I’m not going anywhere until you tell me why Matvei’s bodyguard is standing outside your door.”

She points at the big Russian, actually poking him in the chest. I have to bite back a laugh when her eyes open wide in surprise, knowing her finger poked what must’ve felt like chiseled stone.

“His name is Evgeny. He’s now *my* temporary bodyguard. He’s keeping me safe after what happened at the wedding.” I squeeze under Evgeny’s arm to meet Kelly out in the hallway.

“Your bodyguard?” Kelly looks the enormous man up and down. He does the same to her.

“Here.” I shove my cup of coffee into her hands. “Drink this. It has that Irish cream stuff you like so much. Maybe it’ll make up just a little bit for forgetting about our brunch.”

She takes a sip, which is followed by a hum of satisfaction. Her green eyes slide to mine over the rim, creased slightly with what I know is a frown. “It helps a little bit. But you still owe me. I swear I’ll handcuff you and drag you in with me. This is the second month in a row, Sonya.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. I feel horrible. I really do.”

My sister gently punches me on the shoulder and gives me a small smile. “Hey, you know I’m the last one who’s going to get between you and your clients.”

I smile and rub my neck. “Thanks, Kelly.”

“But seriously, you do owe me. I’m not going to forget.”

“I know.”

“And it’ll be on your dime.”

“Of course,” I sigh. “Anyway, like I said, Evgeny is my bodyguard until, well, I don’t really know.” I look up at Evgeny. “You remember my adoptive sister Kelly from the wedding.”

Evgeny nods. Kelly looks him up and down again, but this time, praise and an approval spark in her eyes, which makes me a little nervous.

Kelly drains the coffee and shoves the mug back into my hands. “Seriously, Sonya. I need some girl time.”

“I know, and I promise I’ll make some time soon.”

I hug her close. She returns the embrace so tightly it’s hard to breathe.

When she pulls away, she gives Evgeny one more appraising glance up and down, pausing on the expanse of chest beneath the black T-shirt.

“I’ve got my eye on you,” she says, pointing to her eyes and then to him before turning and leaving. We watch her go until her long, dark ponytail disappears around the corner.

“So, your sister, the cop.” He sounds curious. “How attached is she to playing by the law?”

I roll my eyes, take my empty cup from him, and shut the door in his face.

* * *

“I THOUGHT I told you if you’re going to come here, you couldn’t get in the way of my work.”

“I’m not getting in the way of your work. You’re very capable of doing that all on your own. I seem to remember *you* coming on to *me*.”

“Only because you kept trailing your hand up and down my thigh,” I accuse.

Matvei and I are in my bed, both entirely naked, clothes thrown everywhere, my hair a mess, our bodies drenched in sweat.

I might not be getting any work done, but I am deeply satisfied and relaxed. Matvei seems to be too. It’s not his natural state, and I take a little bit of pride in that fact. He’s not the only one who can work magic.

He just grins.

“I really do have to get back to work. The deadline to file is eight a.m. tomorrow.”

I try to brush my hair back with my fingers, then give up and snag a hairband from my nightstand, tying it all into a knot at the nape of my neck. I start to get out of bed when Matvei grabs my hand, his long, confident fingers weaving between mine. He pulls me back to him, and our mouths crush together like we didn’t just spend the last hour ravaging one another in every way we possibly could.

This man drives me wild in ways I’ve never experienced or imagined. It’s like he has a map of my body and reads it like an expert navigator. The man knows exactly what will drive me to new heights of pleasure, and make dirty, filthy things and screams tumble from my mouth that I don’t remember afterward.

I don’t know what to think of the past two months.

Months.

I can’t believe it’s been that long since that fateful meeting at the airport.

Matvei has been at my apartment nearly every day. At first, he would only pop in, saying he was there to make sure I was still safe and alive. I didn’t buy it because he was in constant contact with Evgeny and he knew damn well I was fine.

Popping in became pastries from a cafe I now know he owns and take out from an expensive restaurant. Our getting closer has felt as easy as the long autumn days slipping into crisp nights, the sky that bright, brilliant shade of blue you only get in late October and early November. And when night comes, it's not just the radiator that warms me, it's him.

Even if we haven't actually defined anything.

We kiss until I'm out of breath again, and I finally have to push him away.

"Seriously. Unless I get this done, her bastard of an ex will win."

"You know," Matvei pushes himself up on one elbow, "there is another way to deal with people like that."

I stare at him for one heartbeat, then two. "Are you seriously suggesting I put a hit on him?"

Matvei shrugs like he's made a joke, but we both know he's serious. Doing my best to ignore what I can only assume is a discrete offer, I clean myself up and get dressed.

Matvei is already back in his three-piece suit by the time I'm done, perched on the couch with a takeaway cup of coffee, as if we hadn't just been doing scandalous things to each other twenty minutes ago.

I turn to the kitchen to make myself some tea to wake up my brain when I notice the gigantic bouquet on my side table by the door. It's the biggest I've ever seen, much less ever received, and I gasp.

"Did you get these for me?"

Ignoring the fact that this takes whatever is between us to another level—something I don't want to think about right now—I move toward the flowers. I start to reach out, but Matvei blocks my way.

"Don't touch it."

Every inch of me prickles with the danger in those three icy words. "What? What's wrong?"

Instead of answering me, Matvei throws open the door and addresses Evgeny in Russian. He points to the bouquet. “Where did these flowers come from?”

“You didn’t send them?” Evgeny sounds genuinely surprised. “I brought them in because I thought they were from you.”

“Why would I send them?” Matvei hisses.

I try to ignore that his anger is in reply to the fact that his second-in-command thought he would send me flowers.

Tension fills the room, and I realize both men are looking at me, waiting for an explanation I can’t give. I look at the flowers again, their petals soft and innocent, belying the friction they’ve created. My heart thumps heavily in my chest as I reach for the card among the bright blooms. Evgeny snatches it up before my fingers can close on the white paper.

The big Russian’s lips move as he silently reads the writing on the card before handing it to Matvei. Matvei takes a second to read the words before balling the card up in a white-knuckled fist.

“What?”

“Samson.”

Matvei says the name with a vicious snarl, his eyes burning with anger so intense I back away several steps, adrenaline pulsing through my limbs in case I need to run. A string of angry words explodes from him. As he paces my apartment, I reach down for the crumpled card and read the cramped, messy writing that looks uncomfortably familiar:

Think of this as just the start of my apology for what you went through. — Samson

“Oh no.”

I whip my head around to find Matvei standing at the window looking down at the street. He doesn’t move, but every inch of him radiates tension, from his shoulders to the white-knuckled fists at his sides. Glancing at

Evgeny gives me no encouragement, and I approach with caution. I have no idea how to deal with a dangerous mob boss when he's in killer mode.

"Look, we both know he's an asshole. Isn't this what you wanted? You wanted him to be jealous that I chose you over him. I can see exactly who he is now, and there's no way I would ever find him attractive again, much less go back to him. You don't have to do anything, not on my account."

After the words leave my mouth, I realize that's what I was afraid of—that Matvei might pursue Samson on my behalf. I don't want that kind of blood on my hands. Samson is a grandiose jerk, but I don't want him to die because of me.

It takes Matvei another minute before he replies, and I can hear the strain in his voice as he does his best to control himself. The venom dripping from his words, the anger I know is there, is frightening.

"I'm not going to go after him now. I'm saving my energy for something far more complex. Something he won't see coming."

I'm unsure what to make of the enigmatic statement, but I know it's taking a lot of restraint for Matvei not to take action immediately. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure why. Is he really that angry about the way Samson treated me, unceremoniously dumping me for someone else? I don't buy it.

Matvei turns without warning and grasps my shoulders so hard, I wince. "Watch out for him, Sonya. I want you to promise me you'll be careful."

"I promise."

I'm not sure why I'm promising. What can Samson do to me now? He's already turned me out and married someone else.

I suddenly wonder what the hell I'm still doing keeping company with one of the most powerful mob bosses in the city. Sure, he promised he would protect me and he's keeping his word. But that doesn't need to involve seeing him every day and having bouts of wild sex.

Needing some space, I excuse myself, grab my things, and head out of my apartment. Evgeny follows, but I ignore him. I'm at my favorite coffee shop working when someone sits down at my table.

“I’m sorry, I’m not looking for—” I stop mid-sentence when I realize Samson is sitting across from me.

My eyes dart outside the window to where Evgeny is leaning back against the car. I can’t see his face, but it looks like his eyes are closed as he tilts his head back to take in the autumn sunshine.

“If you’re wondering, he can’t see me from this line of sight.” Samson grins.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I hiss. I wish Evgeny could hear me through the window.

“Did you like the flowers?” Samson ignores my question, as always. Why did I ever write that off as harmless?

“Yeah, I got your flowers,” I say coldly. “They’re in the trash. I don’t want flowers from you, Samson. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

The smallest flash of anger lights in his eyes, but it’s replaced with his charming smile as quickly as it arrived. “Come on, Sonya. What you did worked. I noticed you. I noticed you big time. Where the hell were you hiding that dress?”

“What worked?” I blink at him, wondering what the hell he’s talking about.

“Crashing my wedding to get me back, making me jealous. Don’t feel bad—it was a good strategy.”

“I don’t feel bad,” I snap. “I wasn’t there to try and win you back, and I sure as hell don’t miss you. I don’t miss the lies, I don’t miss the narcissism, and I sure as fuck don’t miss the way you always put me down.”

“I never touched you.” Samson says it as if the fact that he wasn’t physically abusive makes him entirely innocent.

“No, you were just an asshole in every other way. Abuse involves more than physical aggression. Genevieve is welcome to you. I hope you’re both happy together.”

I realize I’m gripping my pen so tightly I’m afraid it might snap. I want to stab him with it. “You should really get out of here.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Big brother’s never going to find out I was here. I came in the back to avoid his attack dog, so he never has to know. Matvei’s not nearly as powerful as he thinks he is.”

Something about that phrase raises the hair on the back of my neck. It came out of Samson’s mouth with a sneer mixed with hatred and triumph.

“You’re sitting here a month after your wedding, a ring on your left hand. I watched you exchange vows with another woman after dumping me.”

“All optics, Sonya. I thought you’d understand. Genevieve Mancini is a good girl, and we’re going places. You know I’ve always been ambitious, and she can help me get there. And I would really like you to come and join me when I do. We can start where we left off. You won’t have to work. You can live in an expensive apartment, have your own car, all the clothes you want. You’ll live a life women dream about.”

“And your new wife is okay with this plan of yours?” I emphasize the word wife.

“It’s a great deal, Sonya,” Samson murmurs, again ignoring my question, his voice dropping to a sexy timbre. Except now, it makes me feel queasy.

I stare at him. “I cannot believe you. Who the hell do you think you are? If you believe I would be your little side piece, you’ve seriously lost your damn mind. Get out of my face and don’t come back.”

Samson’s mask drops. The anger in his blue eyes is a reflection of my own. “Are you really attaching yourself to my brother? I told you he’s dangerous. Don’t say I didn’t try to warn you.”

“This isn’t about Matvei. This is about me and my life. I don’t want you in it anymore, regardless of who I’m with.”

I knock on the window. Evgeny is immediately alert and moving toward the door.

“You stupid bitch,” Samson snarls. “You could have had everything. Now you’ll have nothing. I’m going to destroy my brother, and you’re going down with him.”

Samson stands up and begins backing away toward the back door just as Evgeny enters the coffee shop.

“You’re going to regret this, Sonya,” he hisses, and then he’s gone.

SONYA

“S onya?”

My boss is looking at me. My brain is so foggy today, and I have a hard time pulling the words together.

“It’s possible,” I say, looking down at the brief on the table in front of me. “But we have to be really careful with this one.”

“We have a few resources,” my coworker adds. “Maybe I can call in a few favors with some judges. There’s no guarantee, though.”

“We have to do something,” another coworker insists, as if we all don’t know that already.

“We all agree on that,” I sigh, staring at the paper I’ve notated on within an inch of its life as though that will somehow make it give me all the answers.

Annoyed, I absently take another bite of my sandwich. I usually like these team meetings, working with others who have different ideas or see things from an angle I haven’t considered. But today, I’m not feeling it. I just want to be holed up in my office, get my work done, and go home.

For several days, I’ve felt like I’m coming down with something. Maybe it’s just the change in weather. Whatever it is, it’s making me miserable.

On top of that, Matvei has been gone for a couple of weeks, and I’ve been feeling his absence. He told me he was going away on business, his

message vague and short. Since then, I've heard nothing. Evgeny won't tell me anything more than that, either.

I've been ignoring the nagging feeling in the back of my mind, stopping myself from looking at my phone every five minutes like I'm a moonstruck teenager. But in the darkness of night, when everything is quiet and still and I'm the only one in my bed, a little voice whispers, *He's grown tired of you. He had his fun, got what he wanted, and now he's moved on.*

I tell myself I should be happy if that's the case, that I should be pleased the Russian mob boss has moved on and I can go back to my everyday life and forget all about him. I no longer have to worry about being dragged down by his darkness.

Except I feel sick at the thought of never seeing Matvei again.

Truly sick.

My stomach twists, and bile rises in my throat. I barely manage to bolt out of the room and make it to the bathroom before I'm sick, heaving into the toilet. The door bursts open as I'm slumped against the wall, gasping and shivering. Evgeny looms over me, concern on his face.

"What happened?" he demands.

I don't have to tell him because I end up showing him. I'm sick several more times until the only thing coming up is bitter bile.

"Are you ill?" Evgeny hands me a damp paper towel. I rub it against my face and the back of my neck before wiping my mouth off.

"It certainly looks that way," I mutter, annoyed by the question.

"When did you start feeling sick?"

I shake my head but don't answer. I breathe through my nose, trying to hold off another round of vomiting.

"Is she okay?" I realize my coworkers are all hovering beyond the door, their faces anxious.

“What did she eat?” Evgeny demands, stalking toward my boss, who backs away until his back hits the wall. “Is anyone else feeling sick?”

“Everyone’s fine. She was fine until she got up and ran to the bathroom.”

“Where did you get the food?”

“From our usual spot.”

“What do you mean by ‘usual?’ Could someone have messed with the food because they know your routine?”

“I suppose so,” my boss says. “But I know these guys. I’ve been ordering from them for years. They wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“We’ll see,” Evgeny growls as he stalks into our conference room. I’m standing up now, feeling a little better, though still shaky and sweaty.

“They wouldn’t do anything!” my boss calls again.

Evgeny stalks back toward us, the small crowd scattering. “The food smells fine,” he says. “But I’m still taking you to the hospital.”

“The hospital? All I did was throw up. People do that.” I protest as his enormous paw of a hand clamps around my wrist. “I have work to do.”

Just as he ignored my boss, Evgeny is ignoring me. As he pulls me out of the office, I look back at my coworkers. My boss calls after me. “Maybe it’s better if you get looked at. I’ll cover what I can.”

I realize no help will be coming from them.

At the hospital, I’m whisked into a private room. Obviously this isn’t the first time Evgeny has brought someone to them. I don’t want to know the details.

The doctors check my vitals and take some blood, then leave me to rest until the results come in. I hear Evgeny in the hallway not so subtly telling the staff the results should be rushed. About thirty minutes later, I hear a commotion outside my door.

The Volkov *pakhan* storms in like a vengeful angel ready to murder the first person who keeps him from my side. His expression is so forbidding that it

does little to calm my nerves. A security guard trails along to ensure Matvei isn't actually here to harm anyone, though I'm unsure what the guard thinks he'll do if the Bratva boss attempts anything.

When I see Matvei's face closer, I realize he's not angry. Pure, unadulterated panic shines in those deep blue eyes.

"Sonya." He locks onto me like a missile seeking its target, crossing the room in two long strides. "Are you okay? How are you feeling?" He stands next to my bed, his hands opening and closing as he tries to center himself.

"I'm fine. I wasn't feeling good earlier and I threw up. Evgeny overreacted and practically dragged me here kicking and screaming."

"He said you might have been poisoned."

I roll my eyes. "I was not poisoned. I just wasn't feeling well."

A doctor raps on the door as he enters the room. "You're looking a little better after those fluids," he states.

"Yes, I feel better, thank you."

"Do you know what's wrong with her yet?" Matvei asks bluntly.

The doctor looks between us before returning his gaze to me. "I do, but I'd like to speak to my patient in private."

I shake my head. "Just go ahead and say whatever you have to say so he knows I'm okay and he can stop hovering."

"Are you sure?" the doctor asks. I nod.

"Well, there is absolutely nothing wrong with you. Your blood work all looks good except for your vitamin levels. I'd like to see them a little higher in a pregnant woman."

I feel like all the air has been sucked out of the room. "A what?" I ask, my voice nearly a whisper.

The doctor levels his gaze at me. "You're pregnant. You didn't know?"

I shake my head, then suddenly realize I haven't had my period in two months. "Oh my God."

The doctor looks from Matvei to me, realizing he's just dropped a huge bomb. "I'll step out and give you two some privacy." The door closes behind him with a soft click.

Matvei sits on the edge of my bed. "You really didn't know?"

"No! Though looking back, a few things make more sense now." Tears suddenly start streaming down my face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen. You don't have to stay. I can do this on my own."

Matvei pulls me to him, quieting my spiral. "Why the hell would you think I would abandon you and our baby?" His voice is strained as he pulls me closer.

"I haven't seen you in almost two weeks. I haven't even heard from you and I thought maybe you got tired of me. It's not like there was anything more between us other than sex anyway—"

Matvei pulls away quickly and cups either side of my face. He stares into my eyes with such startling intensity I have to force myself not to look away.

"I would never just leave you like that," he says softly, intently, and I believe him. "Never. And I sure as hell am not going to abandon you to raise our child alone. I'll be part of this child's life in whatever way you'll have me."

Instead of answering, I ask a question. "So you didn't disappear because you were done with me?"

Matvei's brows furrow. "Why would you think that? I told you I had business to attend to."

His annoyance irritates me. "Yes, you did, but if I had a dollar for every time I've heard that from some guy who ended up ghosting me I'd have enough for a nice coffee. You didn't call, you didn't text. Nothing but radio silence. What was I supposed to think?"

“I don’t ‘ghost’ anyone.” Matvei sounds offended that I even suggested it. “You’re supposed to take me for my word. I was in Moscow and then New York when Evgeny called me. I chartered a plane back here to get to you.”

The father of my baby kills people. He is a crime lord. That’s what he does for a living.

My mom might have gotten herself involved with the Irish mob, but I’m pretty sure getting pregnant by the top Russian mob boss in the city—one even the cops are afraid of—beats her mistake by a mile. I’m so lost in my racing thoughts I don’t hear Matvei speaking.

“Sonya.”

“What?”

“You’re coming to stay with me. No more staying in your apartment. I want you where you’ll have twenty-four-seven security beyond Evgeny. *My* security.”

“No. Nope. No way.” I shake my head. “We’ve already been through this. I’m not going to be forced into whatever domestic situation you think this is —” yet another thing we have to talk about, because we’re definitely not in an actual relationship “—especially now that I’m having a baby. I’m not just a vessel, you know.”

“No one said you were.” Matvei’s lips thin, a line forming between his eyes because he’s... perplexed?

“Look, I’ve seen this happen over and over again. Women lose themselves in being a mother. I don’t want to be treated like glass because I’m having a baby. I have work to do. Important work. I’m not going to wander around your giant mansion after giving up my independence.”

“I need you to stay with me so I can keep you safe, Sonya,” he says again, though not quite as commanding as before. “The place where I can do that best is at my house, under the watch of my men.”

“Your number two has been on my couch or outside my door for weeks,” I remind him.

“I know, yet somehow those damned flowers still made it to your door,” he says. “No, I want you where I know nothing and no one can get to you. I’m not trying to cage you, Sonya, I’m trying to keep you and our child safe.”

I want to argue. I should argue. I hate how imperious Matvei is being, that he thinks he can order me around like this. But I know this isn’t just about me anymore. I have to care for someone else, my job from now until forever. I also know this child’s well-being will be best protected within their father’s sphere of influence and power.

“Okay, fine.”

I can tell by the look on Matvei’s face that he expected more of a fight from me. It takes him a moment to reply. “Okay.”

He’s clearly surprised by my response, and I wonder if he’s as blown away by the news of the baby as I am. Does he even want to be a father? Or does he see this as a duty, like protecting me?

I hope these glimpses of the human being behind the monster are real and not just a figment of my imagination. Because otherwise, I’m not sure what I’m going to do, especially because I’m starting to realize I really like this man, even if what lies underneath still terrifies me.

MATVEI

The neon lights coming from the diner on the south side look cheerful against the damp night. There aren't many people here at this hour. The air is thick with the scent of frying oil. A few teenagers sit in a corner booth, there's an older couple at the table next to them, and a guy with a beanie pulled over his long, stringy hair occupies the other corner. He's drumming on the table while he watches something on his laptop, his eggs and hash browns long forgotten.

And there's the police officer, raising an arm and waves when he sees me.

"Are you ever not in a suit?" he asks. "Relax. It's midnight, for Christ's sake."

"Frank," I greet him, slipping into the booth across from him, making sure I'm facing the door where I can see everyone coming and going.

The waitress sets my coffee down abruptly on the Formica table, the dark brown liquid spilling over the sides. I wipe away the spots, neatly folding my napkin and taking a sip. It's bitter and watery, as always. I push the coffee away and adjust my cuff.

"Where did you get those?" Frank asks, pointing to the cufflinks I'm wearing—a tiger outlined in gold and diamonds that glint subtly in the yellow fluorescent lights.

"They're an heirloom."

"No kidding. Something from the old country?"

“Something like that.”

Frank’s small talk is getting annoying. All humor leaves his face when he says, “That was a nasty blaze. We heard about it over the radio. Your warehouse?”

“Yes.” I swallow the anger that burned as hot and heavy as the fire. I watched my warehouse collapse in on itself while the flames appeared high enough to turn the low clouds a hazy orange. “It and everything inside of it has been destroyed.”

Frank’s eyes narrow as he tilts his head slightly. “Anyone going to find anything they shouldn’t in the cleanup?”

“No.” I meet Frank’s gaze dead-on. “Everything in there was entirely legitimate. It was full of product that was supposed to ship out to the buyer tomorrow. It was important.”

What the hell is going on? That’s the question pounding in my head since the warehouse foreman called me in a panic and told me everything was on fire. The worst part is, the product in that warehouse was truly and entirely legal—an enormous shipment that was supposed to be the cornerstone of my bid to turn more and more of our business dealings legal.

I’m so angry I can barely see straight. Whoever did this knew exactly what they were doing. You don’t hit a fully legal shipment without expecting to make a statement. You don’t hit me at all without expecting deadly retaliation, and there are very few who would want to risk that.

“You have the tip I sent you?” I ask Frank.

The only thing one of my men remembered was seeing a dark green sedan he didn’t recognize. He managed to fire at it and get half the license plate as it was speeding off, which I’d sent to Frank.

“Here’s what I found.” Frank slaps down a piece of paper and slides it over to me. It’s the full license plate of a car that matches the description of an old, green Buick.

“That mean anything to you?” he asks.

I study the information. “Nothing.” Even the name the car is registered to doesn’t ring a bell.

“Okay, well, one of my guys spotted it a couple of blocks down from here. Feel like taking a drive?”

I follow Frank’s cruiser to a block of faded brick apartments. The street is quiet, our breath coming out in thick clouds as we walk around to find the car.

When we come upon it, Frank leans down to check the license plate. “This is it.”

I feel the hood. The engine is still slightly warm, despite the frost creeping up the windshield. Even more damning is the bullet hole in one of the doors.

“This is from one of my men. He managed to get a few shots in as they were driving off.”

That’s all the information I have. I’ve never seen this car in my life, and I’ve never heard the name it’s registered to.

“Did someone report it stolen?”

“Nope.” Frank scratches under his hat, perplexed. “This is the address it’s registered to. The owner has no priors or history other than a drunk and disorderly and a minor theft a few years back. Nothing since. I don’t know if he’s cleaned up his act or just managed to hide it.”

Or gone deeper into something that kept him out of the view of law enforcement.

This is all too clean. Why would some random guy in a random car come after me? Not that I haven’t made enemies—I have far more enemies than friends—but something about this particular one feels off. Why now? Why that warehouse? Nobody knows the business is legit except for Evgeny, myself, and the lawyer who helped me draw up the deal.

“Which of your officers found the car?” I ask.

“Preston.”

I can't quite stifle the groan, which causes Frank to raise his eyebrows in question. "She responded to the shooting outside of the Mancini wedding," I tell him.

Frank's eyes study me for a moment. "Did she actually approach you? She's got more balls than I thought."

I crouch beside the bullet hole to inspect it. "She did more than approach me. She lectured me."

Frank laughs. "No shit? That mouth of hers might get her into trouble someday, but she's got more guts than half the guys on the force."

I'm about to reply when something hits the car to my left. I duck instinctively. We're being shot at.

Frank drops down as another bullet hits the car and reaches for the radio on his shoulder. "Shots fired at the police!" he yells, adding our location.

More bullets rain around us. I pull my gun from its holster as I stare into the frozen darkness, waiting to see a flash from a muzzle.

"There." I point to a window with the curtains drawn back.

"See if you can get closer," he says. "I'll cover you. Do not fire unless fired upon, understand?"

I nod, swinging around wide and keeping to the shadows as I get closer to the window. I'm nearly there when a searing pain steals my breath. I duck behind a low wall, knowing without looking that I've been shot. I let out a string of curses and check my shoulder. Even in the darkness, I see the first hints of a stain against the white of my shirt.

I have to take a deep breath to steel myself. I hear Frank fire a few rounds and sirens in the distance. I stand and fire at the window until I'm almost out of bullets.

The curtains wave in the breeze and a sudden silence falls. I creep up to the window. There is no movement, and when I cautiously peer in, I find the room empty.

"Is he in there?" Frank calls out.

“I doubt it,” I respond, clamping a hand to my wounded shoulder.

He runs up beside me, breathless. “I’m waiting for backup to go in.”

I shake my head. “I’m guessing he’s long gone.”

As Frank talks into his radio, I look at my wound under the streetlights. A red stain is rapidly spreading across my shoulder.

“Fuck,” Frank says, his eyes wide. “Don’t you guys wear bulletproof vests?”

“I’m fine,” I tell him.

“Don’t give me that bullshit. I’m calling for a bus.”

“I’m fine,” I bite out the words. “It’s a through-and-through. It’ll stop bleeding soon enough.”

“Yeah, when you bleed out.”

I have to bite back a groan of pain as I strip my jacket off and tear the sleeve off my shirt, tying it around my shoulder as a temporary tourniquet. The police sirens are getting closer.

“I’ll be fine, Frank. Let me know what else you find.”

His expression turns to defeat. He knows there’s no use arguing with me. “If you’re still alive, I’ll let you know.”

I give a nod and slip carefully into my car, letting out the groan I’ve been keeping in only when the door is closed. The force of it makes my throat raw.

I drive home, avoiding the cops and angry the shooter, whoever he is, got away, along with my only lead.

* * *

SONYA WANDERS into the bathroom while I’m digging out my first aid supplies. She’s sleepy, her eyes are half-closed, and her hair is a mess in a way I would find adorable if I weren’t in such pain.

“Matvei?” she says, confused and frowning at me in the mirror. “Did you just get home?”

Having someone waiting for me is an entirely new experience. I realize I never told Sonya where I was going or when I would be back. I’m not used to anyone caring outside of Evgeny, who always knows where I am.

“I’m fine,” I tell her, glad my suit coat hides the blood. “Go back to sleep, Sonya. You need your rest.”

“So do you. Since I’ve been here, I’ve barely seen you sleep at all.” She narrows her eyes at me. “Are you okay? You look pale.”

“It’s just the lighting. Go back to sleep.”

Sonya stares at me. For a moment, I think she really is going to go back to bed and leave me to patch myself up in peace. But she’s looking at my face, where I can’t hide the creases of pain. It’s been a long time since I’ve been shot, and it’s easy to forget exactly how much it hurts. The wound at the wedding was only a graze.

“Alright,” she says, her tone suspicious, and I know she’s not going back to bed. “What’s going on? Something’s off about you.”

Leaning against the counter and trying to breathe through the pain, I dip my head. “I’m fine. I’m just tired. It’s been a long day. Please, just go back to bed.”

The words come out harsh and impatient, sounding like an order. Her eyes widen, and she takes a step back before noticing something on the floor. She gasps.

“You’re bleeding.”

It takes every ounce of self-control I have not to snarl at her to go away, especially as she tries to grab for the hand I have clamped to the wound.

“What the hell, Matvei, you’re hurt. My God, look at all this blood! Why aren’t you at the hospital?”

“I’m not going to the hospital. I’ll be fine, I just need to patch myself up.”

Sonya's eyes dart to my face, then back to the wound and the bloodstain on my shirt. "Are you kidding me? This is not something you patch up by yourself. Can you let me freaking see it?"

"I didn't know you had a medical degree as well as a law degree. This is not the first time this has happened, and it will not be the last. I know what to do. Now leave me alone."

"I may not be a doctor," Sonya glares at me, her jaw set, her eyes alight, "but I know how to help. Have you forgotten what I do for a living? The women I help don't always have the luxury of going to the emergency room either. Now, take off your damn shirt."

Sonya and I glare at one another for more than a moment before I concede and start unbuttoning my shirt. I bite back a groan of pain as the fabric pulls away from the sticky wound, causing fresh blood to run down my side in a warm, wet trickle.

"You said you've stitched yourself up before?" She looks determined and focused as she motions for me to sit on the vanity stool.

"Usually Evgeny does it, but he's not here."

"Then I guess you're stuck with me."

She patches me up with surprising skill. Halfway through, I hear her mutter under her breath, "Thank God for YouTube." She double checks there's no shrapnel in the wound and cleans it out.

I have to grit my teeth against the wave of pain-induced nausea when she applies the dressing.

"You're very lucky the bullet went all the way through."

I attempt to move my arm after she finishes and almost pass out.

"Stop that," she snaps. "I'm already impressed with how tough you are. You don't have to keep trying."

The nausea and waves of pain are too intense even if I wanted to try to impress her further. I keep my mouth shut as I dig through the medicine

stash. When I find the bottle of pills I'm looking for, I pop two in my mouth and swallow without water.

Sonya watches me with a slight frown. "I'm afraid to ask if you got that legally or not."

"Then don't ask."

I lean back against the vanity and close my eyes, willing the morphine to work fast against the waves of pain creating a new pounding behind my eyes.

I can still feel Sonya's attention on me, and after a minute, she finally speaks. "You surprise me."

"Why? Because I have access to morphine?" If that surprises her, she hasn't been paying attention.

"No. You, yourself. You're different than what I imagined a mob boss to be."

"You watch too many movies," I sigh. "It's all fantasy."

"Yeah, but—" She pauses as though she's thinking, and when I finally open my eyes, she's chewing on her bottom lip. "I'd like to know what it's really like."

"Why?"

She shrugs, but I'm too tired and low on blood to ask her more about it. It will have to rest for now.

"You're the *pakhan* of the Volkov Bratva, a man who comes home with a bullet wound at two in the morning and has a lot of scary-looking guys keeping watch on his house. But then there's the other side of you, the man I met at an airport who kept me calm on a plane, who showed me Prague, and can dance like Fred Astaire."

"My mother taught me. She loved to dance, but my father didn't have time."

Sonya smiles at the revelation. She cups my face with a gentle touch, her thumb brushing against my cheek.

I pull away, uncomfortable. Uncomfortable with the complete attention of this woman in the prime of her life—her skin radiant and glowing with pregnancy, her glorious hair, shining eyes, a face I could gaze at forever and never grow tired of. This woman is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in her ratty old t-shirt and sleep shorts, her hair mussed with sleep, a woman who fights for those who can’t fight for themselves.

Sonya doesn’t need me nor should she want me. I’m nearly twice her age, a man who’s seen and done far too much, who has stained his soul blood red with all the killing and illegality. A darkness surrounds me like a death shroud that will never be clean. Sometimes I feel guilty, touching her with hands so dirty.

I don’t want to put out her light with my darkness. Darkness that will remain, no matter how legitimate I make the Volkov empire and its name.

But I don’t want to live without her, either. I’ve tried to make it be just about sex between us, but no matter how many walls I put up, no matter how detached I’ve tried to be, somehow, she’s slipped through.

I glance to her stomach, where our child sleeps.

Our child. A child I never thought I would have.

I reach up and push back the hair from her cheek, then smooth it behind her ear so I can stare at the face of the woman who makes my heart tremble whenever she’s near, something no one has ever been able to do before.

“I’m too old for you.” The words come out suddenly.

Sonya raises a brow as she crosses her arms. Her lips, those incredible, soft, perfectly pink lips, curl into a wry, one-sided smile. “You sure don’t act like it in bed.”

I scowl at her. “I’m serious, Sonya.”

“So am I.”

She places her hand on my face again, touching the silver starting to show at my temples before trailing her fingertips along the lines at the corners of my eyes and mouth before brushing them over my lips, causing an electric jolt to run straight through me.

“Age is just a number.” Sonya shrugs and gives me that crooked smile I can’t seem to get enough of.

I should let go of Sonya, release her from the danger and darkness a life with me entails. But I can’t seem to do it. She’s too far under my skin, and the morphine is suppressing my iron will.

When I cup the back of her neck and bring her lips to meet mine, it’s the sweetest kiss yet. “I need you,” I murmur against her mouth, feeling her smile on my lips.

“I know, but I don’t think you’re up to it,” she jokes with another sweet smile.

I should correct her, tell her it’s more than desire, more than just her body. I want her entirely—heart, mind, body and soul—from now until forever.

But I don’t.

SONYA

Morning seeps in slow and gray through the curtains, doing nothing to warm the chill in my bones. It had been fully dark when I'd woken from the clutches of a dream. Now, I watch Matvei sleep.

If only I could sleep, too. But every time I close my eyes, I see blood blooming through his shirt, and I recall the way his body tensed against a pain he didn't want me to see.

I gently touch his forehead, checking for fever. None. His breathing is even while he sleeps, but maybe I should have demanded he go to the hospital.

Matvei stirs before his eyes open. He looks confused when he realizes I'm watching him. I let the silence linger, unsure what to say. There's a fragile truth between us now, stitched together by last night's fear and this morning's uneasy peace.

My fingers tighten around the quilt as uncertainty gnaws at me, each second stretching like a thread ready to snap. I reach out and brush a stray lock of hair from his forehead, trying to anchor us both in the present before the world intrudes again.

Matvei's hand reaches out, calloused fingers grazing my wrist before intertwining with mine. There's a gentleness in the way he squeezes my hand, something new. The quiet stretches as dawn slowly raises its head outside the window.

"You really scared me last night." The words slip out quietly.

Matvei's brow furrows. I'm instantly annoyed, and not sure whether it's the hormones or the circumstances. I sit up, glaring at him. "You came home from who-knows-where, at two in the morning, with a freaking bullet hole in your shoulder. Was I not supposed to be frightened?"

He sits up slowly, carefully, the quilt falling away from his bare chest, making it difficult to focus on his face.

"You may be used to this, Matvei, but I'm not. If I'm going to stay here, I'm not going to spend every night unable to sleep because I'm worried about where you are and if you're okay. If you're going to come home at all—"

As the words tumble out, I recognize that this is all something a person in a relationship has every right to ask, but I'm not Matvei's girlfriend or his wife.

"I'm not going to stay here and worry about you," I finish, aware of the subject I'm dancing around.

"You have quite a lot of demands," Matvei replies, his voice thick with sleep. He rubs his hand over his face, the stubble causing a rasping noise. His blue eyes find mine, and one corner of his mouth curls up. "You worry about me?"

My cheeks grow warm and I look away. "I have to use the restroom. Then I'm going to make the one cup of coffee I'm allowed because I have work to do, and someone woke me up at two this morning."

I'm watching the coffee drip when a hand on my shoulder makes me jump. I turn around and notice Matvei's face is still a bit pale, but his eyes are clear and focused. He's wearing a fresh shirt and dark joggers, his face freshly shaven. I faintly smell the scent of his cologne.

One of the oddest things about staying with Matvei has been seeing him in casual clothes. I'd gotten used to him in a suit and it's bizarre to see him looking so... normal.

"What are you doing?"

I shrug. "Making coffee."

"I can see that." He moves around me and leans against the counter, wincing slightly. I have to bite back the urge to ask if he's okay. "The better question is, what are you thinking about?"

We sit in silence for a moment, the only sounds the gentle hum of the refrigerator and the percolating coffee. I know he's waiting for me to answer, but I don't know where to start.

"Do you think Samson has something to do with you getting shot?" I finally manage to say.

Matvei looks at me. "Don't you?"

My sigh is the only answer he needs. I cross the kitchen to the table and pick up my phone. I unlock it, and hand it to Matvei.

"What is this?" he asks, peering at the image on the screen.

"I was looking for something in Samson's office a while back. Probably a pen, I don't remember exactly what. Anyway, I found a false bottom under one of the drawers, and I was too curious not to look inside. That's what I found."

"Why did you take a picture?" he asks without looking up, still puzzling out the image.

"I'm a lawyer. I know the secrets kept in the false bottom of a drawer are never anything good. Plus, I guess a part of me was starting to realize Samson was bad news, even if I wanted to ignore it." My gaze drops to my toe and the invisible pattern I'm tracing over the decorative tile in a repeated, nervous pattern.

"If there's one thing Samson's good at, it's pretending to be everything he isn't."

When I look up, I'm surprised to find Matvei watching me with something akin to empathy or at least understanding. He and I haven't talked about the past much. Our conversations have been about ensuring our baby and I stay safe. I haven't told him much beyond what I shared about Samson in Prague.

Matvei stands up straight, wincing again. I bite my tongue and pour two cups of coffee, following him as he pads out of the room.

"My brother has spent many years perfecting the mask he wears to cover his anger and dangerous cunning. He's clever, but the thing he truly lacks is the actual intelligence to become what he mimics."

"Yeah, I get that now." I sigh. "He's become really good at it. He certainly seems to have Genevieve Mancini fooled."

"Maybe so, but I have no doubt she's using him as much as he's using her."

I'm not so sure. Genevieve seems simple to me, but that opinion is quickly abolished with Matvei's next words.

"Genevieve Mancini isn't nearly as innocent or ditzy as she would have others believe." The grin Matvei flashes me over his shoulder as he opens the door to his office is knowing.

"What do you mean?"

"Genevieve and I casually dated for a short time," he says as he sets my phone on his desk and sinks into the chair, gesturing for me to pull one over as he opens his laptop.

When were you going to tell me? I nearly demand, but again, realize I have no leg to stand on when it comes to his romantic past.

"Oh?" I reply instead, trying to sound as disinterested as possible even though my heart has picked up its pace in the last few seconds.

"It was nothing," Matvei says as he types away at his computer. "A few social events, nothing more. We never went out to dinner or spent time alone. It was a fleeting thought of mine to try to get to the Mancini's through her, but I soon realized she was far too greedy and power-hungry for my taste."

What is your taste in women? Another question that is unasked. I watch as he continues to type and click. Finally, something pops up that causes him to smile in triumph.

"What's all that?"

"His suppliers, where he keeps his materials, the people he's blackmailed, and his offshore accounts."

I lean over his shoulder, trying to figure out what I'm looking at. It appears to be some sort of spreadsheet with multiple tabs. "You got all of this from that one picture I showed you? All I saw were a bunch of random numbers and letters."

"The one thing Samson learned from our father—his own, personal code. Even I don't use it."

"Shit," I breathe. "I knew it had to be something important."

"This changes everything," he says. I've never seen Matvei so animated, moving from tab to tab, his eyes glued to the screen. "I'll have to redesign my strategy because this makes it clear he's after both of us."

Matvei's words ricochet in my head for a moment before I manage a reply. "Both of us?"

"Of course."

"I know Samson's a jerk, but he can't be the one coming after me. He's been trying to get me back."

The moment the words are out of my mouth I know I shouldn't have said them. Matvei freezes, then slowly turns to look at me. "He's *what*?" The words drip with venom.

I flush. "It's no big deal. Really. He's been sending me messages about wanting me back. He says he misses me, he needs me. I've ignored them. He's a married man now, and even if he wasn't, I want nothing to do with him ever again."

The words tumble over each other, my voice rising an octave. It's not enough to calm him. Matvei's eyes spark with fire and rage, a stark contrast to the quiet, focused anger I've seen before. This is different. This is personal.

He's on his feet in a heartbeat, storming out of his office with strides so long, I have to jog to keep up with him.

"Matvei, don't." I have no idea what he's going to do, but I know I have to stop him. "I promise, it's not a big deal. I haven't answered him once."

"He crossed the line," he snarls as we climb the stairs to the second landing. He pauses to catch his breath before pushing himself off the banister. He's in pain, but he's ignoring it, his mind racing, planning. "He's tried to kill you twice. I'm not letting him get away with this, Sonya. I'm not letting him get to you."

"You're hurt, Matvei," I say, trailing him to his room. "It hasn't even been twelve hours since you got shot. You're in no condition to be running around and going after Samson. I'm not some princess whose honor you have to defend."

Matvei turns, his face a mask of fury, hands clenched into fists at his side. "You're carrying my child. That is enough of a reason right there."

It's clear the conversation is over and there is no stopping him. He disappears into the closet, emerging in dark jeans and a black henley. He sits on the bed to put on his boots, grabs a jacket, and heads back downstairs with me in tow.

"Evgeny."

I greet him as he comes out of the kitchen, a steaming mug of coffee in his hand. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, dark circles shadowing his eyes.

"Please tell Matvei whatever he's planning to do to Samson is not worth it. He's still hurt."

The big man's eyes widen as I approach him. If anyone is able to stop Matvei, it's Evgeny. But he seems to have only registered one word.

"Hurt?" His gaze snaps to his boss, looking him up and down.

"I'll tell you in the car," Matvei snarls as he stalks past me. "Samson's been after Sonya."

Evgeny's eyes swing back to me. I return his look with a pleading one of my own, but he responds by downing the rest of his coffee and leaving his mug on the entryway table before following his boss.

“Damn it.” I charge after them to the garage.

Matvei yanks the door open with his good arm, rattling the frame so hard I half expect the plaster to crack. His pounding footsteps echo in the big, concrete space. The beast that rules the Bratva with an iron fist has taken over. He pulls open a car door, but Evgeny slams it shut again.

"You're not going," Evgeny says without hesitation.

Matvei whirls toward him, teeth bared. "You don't order me around, *mudak*."

Evgeny's eyes are sharp, calculating. He's built like a boulder, all muscle and quiet patience, and I know if it comes to blows, he'll win. But there's something gentle in his gaze as well as a flicker of concern as he places a hand on Matvei's good shoulder. "If you go after Samson now, you won't come back. You're hurt, and he's expecting you. He wants you angry and distracted. You're compromised. You think I can't see it?"

Compromised? By what?

Something passes between the two men. Something I don't understand, something I'm not supposed to see.

Matvei shoves his hand off, nearly stumbling. "Sonya's in danger. You know what he's capable of."

"Which is exactly why you need to keep your head." Evgeny blocks the door, arms folded. "I'm not letting you walk out there half-cocked, bleeding, and emotional. We need intel. Samson's got partners, and he managed to burn down an entire warehouse last night. And now he has the Mancinis behind him. If we misstep, they'll finish what he started. We can't go after him without all the details."

After Evgeny's warning, an uneasy silence fills the garage. Matvei glares at Evgeny, his bulk still blocking the car door. For a moment, both men just stand there. Then, without a word, Evgeny hands Matvei the keys and his weapon.

“Matvei, wait—”

Both men turn, surprised I'm still there. I wrap my hand around his good arm as Evgeny rounds the car to the driver's side and Matvei prepares to get in. I plant my heels and pull until he stops and turns to me, anger and determination darkening the blue of his eyes. "Please—"

I'm not sure what to ask for and I search frantically, afraid he's going to grow annoyed and leave before I can think of anything.

"Promise me you'll come home in one piece, okay? Our baby needs you."

For a moment, I think he's going to turn around and leave without saying anything. His eyes close briefly. When he opens them, he puts his hand to my cheek.

"I will be back."

I watch as both men get into the car and drive off, left to wonder if this is the way things will always be between us. Though I don't know exactly what "this" is.

My hands find my middle, pressing there instinctively.

If I'm going to be the kind of mother this child needs, I'm going to have to figure out exactly how I fit into their father's life.

If I do at all.

MATVEI

The room has no windows. That's the way we designed it.

I sit at the head of the long, cherry-wood table, polished to a high finish. Instead of heading the proceedings today, I am the focus of them.

Evgeny and I trailed Samson around the city, my rage simmering, my desire to simply kill the bastard and return home to Sonya instead of watching, waiting, and collecting information consuming me.

This inquiry pushes my anger to another level entirely. I could have failed to show up, my absence standing as my simple answer to the other syndicates. I could have threatened reprisal if they dared question me.

But the fact that they're calling this tribunal means my power is in danger of slipping. Which makes me angry, and I'm already in a foul mood from the constant ache in my shoulder and being called here at all.

Somehow, the other syndicates have learned of my recent business deals. They can't know too much because no one besides Evgeny knows the whole of it. I created a web too complicated, even key people knowing only what they need to.

My gut is telling me this has to do with the torching of my warehouse. No way the two aren't connected. I'm almost positive I know who's behind it. But I need proof first.

If I had refused to join instead of clearing things up now, there's a good chance suspicion would land on my relationship with Sonya. She is

carrying my child, the heir to my empire.

I can't let Sonya and the baby become targets.

The other heads of the Chicago Bratva watch me, their expressions ranging from anger to disturbance to anxiety, especially among the heads of the smaller families—those who owe quite a lot to me.

In fact, everyone in this room owes quite a lot to me.

Finally, Vasily, his scarred face frightening, clears his throat. "Matvei, I think you know why we called you here."

I lean back in my chair, cross one leg over the other, and study each face, especially those who won't look me in the eye. "Do I?"

"We're here because of the disturbing rumors that have been circulating. Rumors claiming that you're trying to make your businesses legitimate, betraying the *vory v zakone*."

My laugh is derisive. "Is that really all you have, Vasiliy? Rumors?"

"They're not just rumors," Grigoriy snaps. He's tall, thin, and gaunt, his cheeks and eyes sunken in, making him look like an animated corpse.

"I've managed to substantiate the fact that several of your dealings lately have been moving into other markets. Legitimate markets."

I stare him down. "And why does that bother you, Grigoriy? Because it's legitimate? Or because I've discovered yet another revenue stream that you're too dense to come up with yourself?"

Finally, some color appears on his face, his cheeks turning a pale pink. "You know you won the vote for *pakhan* of the Volkov's by very slim margins, Matvei. There are those of us who wanted your brother instead, even though he was young, because he would have deepened the Bratva's hold on the city. He would have shown the Italians and the Irish where they belong in the hierarchy."

"My brother? You mean the bastard who comes from a disgraced Italian mob family?"

"No matter where he comes from and despite the fact that Piotr barely acknowledged him, Samson has still been able to build strong alliances on his own." A nasty sneer appears on Grigoriy's face as he finishes the sentence.

"Samson has illegal dealings and a slippery tongue. Don't tell me his fast-talking nonsense has won you over. Have you really fallen for his bullshit?" I taunt. "My father chose me for a reason. Did you truly respect my father, as you say? Or were you merely cozying up to his power and influence?"

"Your father earned our respect," he sputters.

"And Matvei hasn't?" One of the younger *pakhan* stands and plants both hands on the tabletop. He looks to the walking corpse, his eyes lit with anger. "I cannot fathom that you believed that asshole enough to have convened a tribunal. We all know this is ridiculous, a farce. It's nothing more than a show because you're betting on a horse that has promised you everything and will give you nothing. Have you forgotten Samson has always been a part of the Italian mob? You do realize he's just married into the Mancini family, right? And he's made no secret of the fact that not only does he want to take his mother's family back to their golden years on our backs, but he also wants to destroy Matvei."

"What would you know about any of this?" Grigoriy hisses.

Arms crossed over his chest, the younger *pakhan* glares across the table. "Enough not to fall for Samson's bullshit and some random whispers."

"They're not random," another voice speaks up. "They're very specific."

"Oh, yes, that makes it all better," says another of my staunch allies, this one older and with more clout. "And that doesn't make you suspicious? We all have legitimate businesses in one way or another."

The young *pakhan* pushes to his feet to back up the older man. "Perhaps you're getting senile, Grigoriy, and it's time for you to step down."

His comment fires up the table, and for a moment, shouts and threats get tossed around the room.

"Enough!" My order cuts through the commotion, and the men fall silent.

I take in each face around the table. Evgeny looms behind me, the brawn to my might, the threat to my words. His presence is a silent warning to anyone considering open defiance, and I know even those who appear steadfast may be weighing their options. Trust runs thin in this room, and every word spoken feels like a test of loyalty. Many of these men wish to take my place, to make my power and fortune their own. I keep my posture relaxed, but my mind races through possible alliances and betrayals, knowing that tonight could tip the balance of command.

"It seems as though there are some of you who think I should be removed from my position. Should we take a vote?"

"Are you ready to lose your place tonight?" Vasiliy speaks up, the scar above his eyebrow twisting with his glare.

"I suppose that's one option. Is that your vote, Vasiliy?"

His dark eyes narrow into a hostile glare as he grunts out, "yes," but he looks away, unable to hold my gaze.

There are, as I expected, several more "yesses" around the table. But there are also several "no's" from my supporters.

When Evgeny and I are in the car, I let out a string of curses. "That was far too close for comfort."

"Vasiliy has always coveted what you have, and Grigoriy hated your father and the fact that he had to bow to him." Evgeny slows the car to a stop at a red light, the windshield wipers swabbing away the rain that started while we were inside. "And Denis is just a weasel."

"Grigoriy looks more and more like a corpse every year. When the hell is he actually going to die?" I take a deep breath in an attempt to tamp down my simmering anger.

"Most of the syndicates still support you." The light turns green, the color reflecting off the wet concrete, ice forming on the puddles as the temperature drops.

"Fewer than before," I reply. "The sharks are beginning to circle; they smell blood in the water."

"There's no blood in the water. Samson's just poured a bunch of chum in to stir things up like he always does. Nothing will come of it."

Evgeny is usually right, though this time, I'm not so sure. Several *pakhan* dislike me so much that they're willing to ally themselves with the known Italian mafia dons.

Never mind the attack on my warehouse and the slowly healing bullet hole in my shoulder, which is currently aching due to the damp cold. Just like all my other wounds and breaks, it's a reminder of the life I've led and the dangers I face every day I'm alive.

The dangers I don't want my child or Sonya to have to deal with.

"Whether or not we think Samson can succeed, we need to shut him down. Quickly."

My thoughts once again turn to Sonya and the baby we have yet to meet.

I have to keep them safe, no matter what it takes—there is no other option. Even if it means I have to restrict her movements even more. Even if I have to pull away from her so nothing will cloud my head and judgment.

She won't like it, but in the end, it might just save her life.

SONYA

The office air is thick with the scent of stale coffee, a familiarity that clings to me as I pack away the last file. The sun has already dipped behind the city skyline, leaving only a bruise-colored ribbon of light through the frosted glass. I double-check the lock on my file drawer—old habit but a necessary one.

Just as I place the last folder into my bag, my phone vibrates then goes silent. I ignore it. Tonight, everything feels brittle, as though any careless movement might shatter the fragile routine I've built to contain my pregnancy; that, and all the oversized sweaters I own.

I know who it is. It's Evgeny, probably telling me Matvei is wondering where I am and to let me know where he's parked, ready to take me to the strange new place I've been calling home lately.

Here among the filing cabinets and dusty window shades, old light fixtures and beat-up desks, work is the only spot I feel some normalcy.

Everyone else has left for the day except for my boss, his hand tangled in his hair as he stares at the pile of paper in front of him. I know he'll be here for several more hours after I leave. He waves without looking up as I peek my head in and say good night.

The front door opens just as I'm texting Evgeny that I'm on my way.

"We're closed for the day," I say, without glancing up.

"Sonya, can you help me?"

The voice makes me stop short, and I nearly drop the phone when I come face-to-face with Genevieve Mancini. She's dressed in a puffer vest, leggings, and boots that probably cost what I make in a month. Her hair is pulled back into a messy bun and her lipstick is slightly smudged, as if she's been worrying at her lips. My stomach tenses and all my instincts bristle. I'm not in the mood for theatrics.

"Sonya," she says, her voice wavering with what sounds like vulnerability. She straightens and pushes her shoulders back, but her eyes dart away. "Can I talk to you? Please?"

I hesitate, caught between the professional composure I'm supposed to maintain and a very private loathing for her. Never mind what Matvei would do if he knew Genevieve was here.

She steps closer, clutching her purse as though it might anchor her. "I—God, this is embarrassing." She laughs nervously. "I owe you an apology. Actually, I owe you a few. I know I haven't been nice. Or even tolerable, really."

I wait, letting the silence stretch. Genevieve fiddles with a diamond tennis bracelet, the stones catching the harsh fluorescent light.

"I know what Samson did," she says suddenly, the words tumbling out. "How he asked you to be his mistress. Like you're some kind of trophy or revenge or whatever twisted thing he's thinking." Her voice shudders, and she flashes me a desperate smile, the kind asking for forgiveness before the truth is even laid bare.

Anger flares in my chest. I don't want to relive that conversation, where Samson made his offer sound like it was a favor to me and expected me to be grateful. As though he hadn't made it entirely clear I was of no use to him anymore.

Genevieve was part of the problem. She knew about me, knew I was engaged to Samson yet still started planning her own wedding before I was even kicked to the curb.

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask, my tone neutral. If she wants to confess, let her. I'm not going to make it easier.

She glances over her shoulder as if checking to make sure no one is listening. "Because I want out," she whispers. "I want a divorce. I want to be free of Samson, of all of it. And I need your help."

She says "help" like it's a magic word, and I wonder if she thinks lawyers just wave wands and solve things. I do see the desperation—her nails bitten to the quick instead of perfectly painted, the tremor in her voice, the way she leans close and speaks quietly. I want to refuse, to tell her I'm not a miracle worker, that her problems are bigger than I can help her solve.

But I can't.

I dislike this woman so much that being close to her makes me feel nauseous. But for all her drama, privilege, and mean-girl energy, Genevieve doesn't deserve what Samson is doing to her. I know what it's like and that's why I hesitate. Not because I want to be her friend, but because I can't watch another woman fall prey to Samson's games.

"Divorce is ugly," I tell her. "Especially with families like yours. Are you sure you want to fight this battle?"

She nods as tears well in her eyes. "I know what he is now. I know what he's capable of. I don't want to end up like my mother. Or worse."

Her words settle like a stone in my chest. I think about my own mother and the life that led to her death. I think about the cases I've worked—the bruises that never fully fade, the silence women carry when no one is willing to listen. I swallow hard, pushing down the ache that rises when I remember what I'm hiding from everyone.

Genevieve watches me, her expression desperate and hopeful. I see beneath the makeup and drama to the sharp edges of fear that mirror my own. A part of me wants to turn my back and tell her to get lost. However, another part, the one built in courtrooms and on late-night crisis calls, knows I won't.

"Fine," I concede. "I'll help you. But we do this my way. And it won't be easy."

She nods eagerly, relief flooding her features. "Anything. Please. I just want it over."

I pull out my phone and open my notes app, the lawyer in me already building strategies. "We need to talk. Tomorrow. My office, noon. No drama, no entourage. Just you, and the truth."

She agrees and promises she'll come alone, thanking me with too many words, her hands fluttering. I let her ramble, half-listening, half-tallying risks.

Samson will not take this quietly. His pride is a weapon, and Genevieve is about to become collateral. But I know how to fight men like him. I know how to make the system bleed for the right cause, and I really, really want to take Samson down.

Genevieve turns at the door before she leaves, throwing me a dazzling smile. "Thank you, Sonya. You're saving me. I know that and I'm sorry."

Once she's gone, I realize how shallow my breathing had become. I lean against the receptionist's desk and close my eyes for a moment, letting the weight of the conversation settle into my bones.

I think of Matvei—his hands, his voice, the way he looks at me as if I'm the answer to a question he's afraid to ask. I think of the child I'm carrying, small and secret, untouched by the chaos swirling around us. I think of what it means to build a future in a space between danger and hope.

My phone buzzes again with a text from Matvei.

Safe?

I smile despite myself. He worries too much, or maybe not enough. I text back.

I'm fine. Late night. Going to the car now.

I pause, finger hovering over the send button. There's so much I want to say, but the words are heavy, tangled in the fear that what I'm feeling might be more dangerous than anything Samson can conjure up. Never mind the idea of Matvei's reaction when he learns I'm representing Genevieve Mancini against his brother.

I press send then gather my things and walk out into the night. The streets are dark and slick.

I'm not sure who I'm more afraid of—Samson, with his violence and greed, or Matvei, with his gentleness edged in iron. Or maybe I'm just afraid of myself, of the decisions I'm making, the secrets I'm carrying. I think of Genevieve. I think of all the women who come to me with stories they're too afraid to tell, wondering how many times I'll be able to help before the tide turns against me.

Evgeny checks me head-to-toe as I approach. I climb into the back seat of the SUV, suddenly exhausted. Only when he's satisfied I'm fine and has accepted my explanation for the delay that "my boss had to talk to me" does he pull away from the curb.

As we make our way to the mansion, I kick off my shoes and let my head fall back against the headrest, closing my eyes and letting the silence fill me. The baby is a whisper of possibility, a reminder that some battles are worth choosing, no matter the risk.

I wonder how my mother felt when she was pregnant with me. If she regretted her choices and if she still loved my father, though by then she must have seen the darkness in him. I wonder if she tried to get away with me or resolved to stay.

But most of all, I wonder what she would think of the decisions I'm making now.

SONYA

“I need to talk to you.”

Matvei looks up from his coffee and newspaper. He doesn't say anything, but his eyebrows rise slightly, encouraging me to continue. I have to take a deep breath before I do. I've been rehearsing this all morning.

“Look,” I swallow past the dryness in my mouth, “you promised me that if I moved in with you during my pregnancy, you wouldn't be controlling, that you would let me live my life. I just want to know why that's not happening.”

He blinks. “It's not?”

I'm a lawyer, and I'm good at arguing. I know that isn't a question but an invitation to drop the subject, accompanied by the fact that I won't like the response if I continue. But I don't care.

“This is getting ridiculous, Matvei. Evgeny told me I can't go to court today after my doctor's appointment. I have to, otherwise, another asshole gets out and will probably go after his ex-wife again. You don't want that to happen, do you?”

He sets the newspaper down slowly. “Again, my goal is to keep you safe, to keep the baby safe. What's happening in another woman's life is not my concern.”

“I don't care if it's not your concern. It is mine,” I reply. “This is my job and I took an oath to do it to the best of my ability. I'm going to court after my

doctor's appointment and you're not going to stop me."

"I'm not trying to interfere with your life, Sonya, but I am trying to keep you safe."

"You can keep me safe without ruining my career and other people's lives. If you don't back off, I will walk, Matvei. I will walk and you'll never see me again or this baby ever."

"I don't have a say in what happens to my child?" he asks, his voice tight.

"What happened to the man who promised he would be in my child's life in whatever way I would have him?" I shoot back.

Matvei's expression flattens, his eyes narrowing. He rises slowly, his gaze never leaving mine, like a predator rising out of the grass to hunt me down. "You don't seem to mind me telling you what to do in bed. In fact, you like it so much you beg me for it."

"That's entirely different and you know it." I'm impressed with the way I keep the tremble out of my voice, even though inside I feel like Jell-O.

We glare at each other across the desk.

"You promised me this wouldn't happen."

"I'm trying to make sure you remain unharmed, Sonya. What part of that don't you understand?"

"What don't you understand about the slippery slope? What happens when the baby arrives and there's a little human who also needs protection? Will you keep us both locked up like prisoners?"

Matvei's jaw tightens.

"You can't keep us locked up forever," I tell him. "Whatever your feelings are for me, whatever is going on between us—whether you actually care for me or I'm just the mother of your child—that's not reality. You can't protect us from everything, no matter how badly you want to."

"I may not be able to protect you from everything, but you have no idea how dangerous the outside world is to you right now. No one knows about

your pregnancy. But as soon as the word gets out, that's it. You will be a target even more than you are now."

"I am always a target, even before you came into my life, and I will be forevermore because of my association with you. If I let that fact and that fear control me, I would never leave the house. Do you really want that for me? Sure, you say it's just for now, during the pregnancy. But then it becomes just while he or she is a baby, then just until they're grown. It will never end." I pause and suck in a breath, maintaining eye contact. "Think very carefully on how you want to go about this because I will leave if I have to. I will not become a prisoner."

I can see the rage in his blue eyes. I make the conscious choice to turn my back on him and leave.

* * *

"HMM," the OB's face is a mask of seriousness. My heart starts pounding.

"Hmm, what? Is there something wrong?" I ask, trying to crane my neck to see the ultrasound screen facing away from me at the moment.

"So—" The doctor doesn't get to finish her thought because suddenly the door opens and Matvei is standing there.

"Sorry I'm late," he says. He comes in and sits beside me as though everything is fine and we didn't just have an enormous argument two hours ago. He's calm, cool, and collected, but that doesn't give me any insight into what he's thinking.

"Please continue, Doctor," I say, eager to hear what she was about to tell me.

She returns the wand to my belly and makes slow circles until she finds what she's looking for. "You're having twins."

My brain turns the words over several times before I can comprehend what she just said.

"Twins?" Matvei says it like he's never heard the term before.

“Yep. Look here.” When she turns the screen around we can clearly see two little images with flickering heartbeats.

“But... I’ve already had an ultrasound,” I say dumbly.

“It’s not uncommon for one to hide behind the other until they get a little bigger,” the doctor explains.

Matvei and I both stare in wonder at the screen revealing not one, but two babies.

“Do you have any questions for me?” the doctor asks.

“Honestly, I’m blank right now,” I mumble.

“That’s completely normal,” she says with a smile. “I’m sure you’ll have many once the shock wears off.” She cleans the gel off my belly, then pushes herself off her stool. “I’m going to get you some literature on twins, the possible complications, and nutrition information. That should answer most of your questions, but if you have any others, you can message me or call the nurses’ line.” She smiles and walks out the door, leaving me alone with Matvei and my shock.

“Twins?” I simply stare at him across the small space.

Surprisingly, Matvei smiles. “Twins.” I can hear the wonder in his voice.

“Bet you never thought you’d have one, much less two.”

“No, I did not,” he says quietly, as though he’s still trying to get over the shock himself.

“Well, this is a whole new ballgame. My adoptive parents are going to be thrilled. A grandchild for each of them. They won’t have to fight over who gets to hold the baby.” I don’t know a lot about twins except they’re more work.

“You’re right.” Matvei’s face darkens, and I feel my stomach drop. “This is a whole new ballgame. This is even more serious than I thought.”

I’m hoping he’s talking about the pregnancy, but I have a sinking feeling he’s not.

“Remember what I said this morning? This is not the direction you're supposed to be going in. I told you—”

“You have no idea how much danger you're in,” he grinds out, his eyes flickering with anger and concern. “And now you’re having twins. Twins can mean complications, high blood pressure, the babies arriving too early—”

“How do you know all of this?” I cut him off.

“My grandmother told me. My father was a twin, but his sibling died before birth.”

“Great, thanks for the encouraging words,” I mutter.

“Sonya, you have to understand. This is no joke.” Matvei's eyes are piercing, pleading.

“No one is taking this as a joke, Matvei. Least of all me. I'm the one who has to carry them and deal with the consequences.”

“If you'd only try to understand how much danger—”

“Yes, that's all you've been telling me about—danger, danger, danger. But you're not listening to me. I'm not going to become someone I don't recognize because I slept with the wrong guy and got pregnant with his twins.”

He stares at me as I stand up and pull my sweater over my slight baby bump.

“You know what? I'm tired of this. I'm going back to my apartment. Send whoever you want after me, but that's where I'm staying. And if you want me to stay where you can find me, you'd better respect that.”

I leave before he can say anything else, pushing past the nurse with the pamphlets about twins in her hand, so furious I can barely see straight.

SONYA

Two weeks later

The dim late afternoon light slants through the blinds, painting Kelly's kitchen in stripes of gold and shadow. I sit at her small table, my hands wrapped around a mug of tea that's gone cold.

Outside is the dull hum of traffic, but inside, it's quiet, Kelly's steady presence pressing down the chaos that's taken root inside me. I feel hollow and raw, like everything I thought I had figured out has been stripped away. I keep glancing at my phone, half-hoping, half-dreading that Matvei will call.

He won't. Not right now.

Kelly steps away from the counter, sits across from me, and sets her own mug down with a deliberate *clink*. Her brows knit together as she studies me, and I know she's searching for the right words to say, or at least ones sharp enough to cut through the mess I'm in.

"You look like you haven't slept in days." Her voice is oddly quiet for my outspoken sister. Her touch is gentle when she puts her hand over mine, but her gaze is piercing. "Sonya, you need a plan. Hiding out isn't going to change anything."

I manage a weak laugh. "I'm not hiding. I'm staying at my own apartment. How is that hiding?"

Kelly leans forward. "You have options, you know. You don't have to do this alone." She hesitates, searching my face, then continues, "Have you thought about talking to Organized Crime? They could get you protection. You could be a witness for the prosecution. They'd take down Samson, Matvei, all of them."

I shake my head and stare down at my trembling hands. "I know, Kelly. I just—"

"You just what? You know it's the right thing to do and I know precisely what Matvei is—I've seen it with my own eyes."

But wasn't that to save my life? I haven't seen his books or his accounts. I don't know anything about his illegal dealings or what his shipments contain. Arms? Drugs? Not people, I know that much down to my bones. Never people.

"I don't have that kind of information on him." My voice is barely a whisper. I know that's not the only reason I can't be a witness against the biggest Russian crime lord in Chicago, the one whose bed I've shared, the one whose children I carry. "I know it might be wrong, Kelly, but I just can't do that to him."

My sister's green eyes flash, and I know I'm putting her in a bad situation as an officer of the law. But I'm one too, and if I don't know anything, she doesn't, either. Nothing we're doing is illegal.

"Maybe I'm being selfish, but there is no way I can go back and pretend to have feelings for him just to get dirt on him. Hell, I do have feelings for him. It's... complicated."

Kelly sighs, her expression softening. "It's not selfish to want to protect someone you care about. But you have to decide what you're willing to risk. Staying silent isn't going to make this go away."

"I'm not in love with him," I mumble, Kelly's expression telling me just how much she believes me.

I stare into my mug, watching the tea leaves drift, wishing for answers in their tangled swirls. I want to believe there's a right choice here, a clean way out, but nothing about this is simple. The ache in my chest flares with every possibility—turning on Samson is one thing, but betraying Matvei is entirely another. I lift my eyes to Kelly, searching her face for the certainty I know she can't give me.

Silence stretches between us, heavy as thunderclouds, and I wonder if there's any right way through this storm. My heart stutters with guilt and longing, tangling together until I can't tell one from the other.

“What if I mess everything up?” I whisper. “What if trying to protect him only makes it worse?”

Kelly reaches across the table, her hand warm over mine. “You won't. Whatever happens, we'll figure it out. But you have to decide what you want. Not just for him, but for you, too, and for the twins. You deserve that. *They* deserve that.”

I nod, the corners of my mouth twitching with the beginnings of a smile that never fully forms. The quiet between us is a kind of comfort, wrapping around the sharp edges of my worry. Kelly's words linger, settling into the space between my fear and my hope. I know she's right—doing nothing is its own kind of choice and I can't hide forever.

Kelly pushes herself up, suddenly, decisively. “Come on. Let's go for a walk.”

“It's literally freezing outside,” I groan, pointing to the cold, gray, threatening weather.

“Oh, come on. Don't be a baby. It'll be fine.” She pulls me out of the chair with an exaggerated gesture. “You're supposed to be getting light exercise, right? Plus, this will give you a chance to think.”

Kelly keeps a running commentary as we crunch through the thickly wooded trail that runs by her house. A few people wind their way on bicycles while others pass by on a walk. A guy with bright orange sneakers runs by, in the zone as he passes us effortlessly. Talking is what she's good

at, and she doesn't mind if I'm not exactly answering. It's like a chant that lets me sink into my own thoughts, and she knows it.

Suddenly, I'm startled out of my reverie. I don't know why, but my heart rate picks up and the back of my neck prickles. It's suddenly very quiet—no other walkers, no runners, no bikers. Not even a song from a winter bird.

“Kells?” My voice is hushed, just like the path around us.

My sister doesn't reply immediately, but she has stopped walking.

“What's going on?”

Kelly shakes her head and takes my hand, leading me into the thick of bare, gray trees lining the path. I hunch behind my sister, trusting her instincts. Her eyes sweep the area, her hand instinctively moving toward her hip where her gun would be if she were in uniform.

Now I'm really freaked out. I slip my phone out of my pocket and type a quick text to Evgeny. Even if I haven't seen him since I stormed out of the doctor's office, I know he's been around.

“Come on, Sonya,” Kelly beckons. “Let's go. Quickly.” She pulls me deeper into the trees, wincing as the dead leaves crunch loudly under our feet.

“Did you see someone?” I ask in a hushed voice.

“Not yet,” she replies. “But something is definitely off.”

I reach into my pocket for my phone again, fumbling it as I share my location with Evgeny. I know he probably already has it, but right now, I don't want to leave anything to chance.

Through the trees, I see the man with the bright orange shoes coming back up the path, but he disappears as quickly as he appeared.

“Kelly,” I hiss.

“I saw it,” she whispers. She starts walking faster, and I struggle to keep up.

A moment later, I hear pounding feet over the leaves just before someone grabs me from behind. I scream and start thrashing.

For a moment, everything is chaos. I'm screaming and flailing. Kelly is screaming and punching at the guy, yelling threats and warnings. The guy grunts as my elbow connects with his ribs.

“Fuck!” he yells and releases me.

I turn in time to see Kelly smash her fist into the side of his head. He goes down but quickly rolls and comes back up, launching himself at her in the next breath. Kelly's ready for it. She ducks and uses his momentum to flip him over her back. Then she falls on him, raining angry blows to his face.

But the guy is bigger, stronger, and clearly used to fighting. He moves almost too fast for me to register, scissoring his legs up and catching Kelly on the side of the head.

I scream her name as she goes down and the guy jumps on her. I look around frantically for something to use as a weapon while Kelly grapples with him. He manages to land a few punches and slams the back of her head against the ground. Kelly lies there, dazed and breathing hard, as the guy starts to get up.

I smash him with the big branch I found. I was aiming for his head, but I hit his shoulder instead. He trips forward, cursing in a language I don't understand.

“Kelly!” I scramble over to my sister as she tries to get up, still dazed but knowing we have to get out of here.

“Are you okay?” we ask each other at the same time. I help Kelly to her feet, only to scream again as hands grab me from behind, an arm winding around my neck and shutting off my air. But it's not the guy in the orange shoes, because he's going after Kelly again. She throws a punch and he dodges. She's still not at full strength, still wobbly. He takes advantage and manages to land several more punches, one to her cheek and another to her stomach, causing her to double over. She drops to the ground and twists, taking the man's legs out from under him. He falls, and once again, they're grappling on the ground.

I can't tell who's getting the upper hand because I'm still trying to pry the arm away from my windpipe. I'm gasping for air, trying to do anything to

keep myself from losing consciousness. I have to protect the twins.

A crack rings out. The guy kneeling over Kelly slumps to the side and doesn't get up. The arm around my throat disappears, and I can breathe. I stumble forward, straight into Evgeny. He holds me steady as I gasp and cough, sucking air back into my lungs.

"Kelly," I gasp. I stumble around Evgeny to see my sister staring at the dead jogger with wide eyes, blood spattered across her cheek. There are bruises and cuts on her face, and her arm is curled around her stomach.

"Are you okay?" I ask, my voice hoarse, breathless. I'm still gasping, trying to replace the oxygen that was being squeezed out of me.

"Are *you* okay?" she asks instead of answering.

"I'm okay," I manage.

I hear the sound of bone cracking and turn to see Matvei with a bloody fist as he punches my attacker over and over again, like he's in a frenzy.

He's going to kill him.

My line of sight is broken when Evgeny steps in, blocking my view. He takes both Kelly and me by the arms and starts moving forward, away from Matvei and the attacker.

"Let's go," he says roughly, supporting Kelly more firmly when it's clear she's limping and hurt.

He's going to kill him.

The thought keeps going through my mind, the image of Matvei in a frenzied blur.

I soon realize I don't care what happens to either attacker. In fact, I scare myself when I realize I *want* him to do whatever he's going to do. The darkness in me battles with my brain and how I should feel.

They tried to kill my sister. They tried to kill me. They tried to kill my babies.

They deserve it, a voice whispers in the back of my mind, and I hate that I agree with it. I hate that even though I flinch when I hear a gunshot go off behind us, a part of me thinks, *Good. Now we're safe.*

SONYA

“I'm sorry you had to see that,” Matvei says. He's trying to scrub the blood from his hands, the motion a blur. He's already cleaned it from his face, but he's going to have to burn his clothes. I don't think there's a dry cleaner out there that could restore them.

“Thank you for saving me. For saving us,” I whisper.

The water swirls down the sink, draining away the last traces of blood before it disappears. I look at his knuckles, bruised and split from the fight, but Matvei doesn't seem to care.

He turns the water off and dries his hands on a towel. Then he turns to me, looking me up and down to make sure I'm okay. “Evgeny says you've been well.”

It's only been two weeks since I've seen him, but he makes it sound like forever.

To be honest, it's felt like forever.

“I'm fine.”

“Do you understand now why I wanted you to stay with me?” His voice is exhausted.

I can tell by his tone that his plan to investigate and follow Samson, to defend his empire, has been wearing on him. I wonder if Samson has made any more moves.

“Matvei, I'm really grateful you were there today. I'm grateful you saved Kelly, too. But that doesn't mean I've changed my mind. It doesn't mean I'm okay being locked up like a prisoner.”

His brows draw together, forming the familiar angry line, but I rush ahead before he can start arguing.

“Do you know what happens to women who are forced to live like that? Do you realize what happens when their partners try to control them? They become a shadow of themselves. They lose all contact with the outside world and become living shells because they don't know who they are anymore, other than who their partner has convinced them they are. They become a reflection of every nasty, terrible thing he says to her.”

“Are you saying I am as bad as they are?”

“Of course not. But keeping me against my will, restricting what I can do, where I can go and when because you're afraid something will happen to me, doesn't make you much better.”

At first, Matvei doesn't reply. I'm not sure he knows what to say.

“Is it the darkness in me?” he finally asks. “Is it the monster I have to become that keeps you from staying?”

“Of course not,” I say, feeling vulnerable, “because the darkness is in me, too.”

“There is no—”

“Yes, there is,” I interrupt him. “I knew you were going to kill that guy today, and I didn't do anything to stop it. In fact, I was glad he was going to die because of what he did.” Matvei's eyes widen slightly. “There are things you don't know about me, things I didn't even know about myself until recently. My birth parents were Irish mobsters.”

A flicker of a smile ghosts across Matvei's face. “It isn't something in your DNA, Sonya. You don't inherit this kind of darkness.”

“Between you and Samson and my inability to stay away from trouble, I'm not so sure. My dark thoughts scared me today, but not enough to leave this

life behind. Not enough to leave you. You don't scare me. All I want is you because—”

The words appear on my tongue, pushing to get out. I try to restrain them only to give in because I don't want to hold back anymore.

“I love you,” I say.

Matvei's eyes widen even more as he raises his eyebrows into the dark hair that falls over his forehead. I can't help but laugh softly.

“Did I finally take the great Matvei Volkov by surprise? I bet every one of your men would pay to see this moment, the moment their fearless *pakhan* was rendered speechless.”

I reach up and brush back the lock of hair, my hand lingering as I gaze at his face, from his full lips to the scar at the corner of one eye that reaches his eyebrow, the neat beard and mustache that rasp against my skin when we kiss. I brush my fingertips to the lines at the corners of his eyes. Matvei leans into the touch, his eyes closing, and I'm startled by the intimacy of the moment.

A heavy silence falls between us, with all the things we've said and all the things we haven't. Matvei's hand finds mine, his thumb tracing slow circles over my knuckles—a gentle reassurance that feels familiar and genuine. Our defenses are stripped away, leaving behind something fragile and fiercely honest, and I realize we're both a little scared of how much we need each other.

The silence lingers, charged and vulnerable, until Matvei finally speaks, his voice rougher than I've ever heard it. “You don't have to fear what's inside you, Sonya. Whatever darkness you think you carry, I see it, and I want it. I want all of you, not just the parts that are easy to love.” His admission settles around us, making my heart thud painfully in my chest.

He draws me against him, our bodies molding together in the hush of the room. For once, there's no rush, no frantic edge to his touch—just a slow, aching tenderness that leaves me trembling with anticipation. His lips find mine, soft but unyielding, claiming and coaxing in equal measure. The

walls we've both built crumble a little further, and I let myself be held, cherished, even as the hunger between us simmers beneath the surface.

Tonight, there is no need to hide. I let my hands wander, mapping the scars, the muscles, the tattoos, the secrets that make Matvei who he is. His mouth finds the hollow of my throat, his breath hot and possessive.

“You're mine,” he whispers. It isn't threatening but a fierce promise, one I believe is a vow meant for both of us.

I'm still trembling when he kisses his way down my neck, slipping the strap of my camisole off one shoulder.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, then follows that up with something in Russian I don't understand but feel in the marrow of my bones. It makes the fire in me flare to life, and I push his coat off his frame.

It's not long before our clothes are scattered across the floor and Matvei has me up against the wall, his fingers dancing within me as I writhe in pleasure, gasping and moaning.

“I only want you,” I pant, barely able to speak a coherent sentence. I cry out as his thumb circles my clit. “Please promise me you'll be who we need you to be.”

“Hush,” he whispers and covers my lips with his, his tongue raking mine, claiming my mouth as readily as the rest of me. In one thrust, he's inside me. I bite my lip so hard I draw blood, but I don't care. All I want is more of him, more of the pleasure making every nerve ending explode, more of being held by this man who makes me feel so safe, so treasured, so desired as he ravages me in every way possible.

I'm not so far gone that I'm unaware of what Matvei is trying to do; he's trying to fuck the issue away.

“Matvei...” His name is barely a whisper on my lips. “Promise me.”

I push against him as much as I pull him closer, shifting my hips, both of us crying out as he plunges in deeper.

“I said hush.” His thumb is relentless on my clit, and I nearly lose myself, but still I push back against him.

“Matvei—”

With a growl, he releases me from the wall, turns me around, and presses me up against the window before thrusting into me again, ripping a scream of pleasure from my throat.

“Tell me what you want,” he says, his hand on my waist, the other fondling my growing breasts before gripping my ass.

“More,” I cry. “I want more!”

He obliges, thrusting into me over and over, alighting every nerve ending until all I can do is cry out.

“I want you. All of you.” My entire body is clenched, stars dancing in front of my eyes as blood rushes through my ears. I'm so close to the edge, I can barely breathe. “Promise me, Matvei.”

“I promise, *moya lyubov*.” His voice is rough, full of desire, dominance, and darkness that calls to me, revealing parts of myself I never knew existed, that scare me as much as thrill me. “I promise.”

One more powerful stroke, and the world explodes. For a moment, I'm nowhere and everywhere all at once, floating in a space between light and dark where I could stay forever. When I come back down, I'm shaking, gasping for breath, one hand pressed against the glass, the other digging nails into Matvei's hand as he plunges in, swelling within me and finishing with a groan of pleasure.

Later, as holiday lights from the surrounding houses fill the bedroom with ambient light, we find ourselves entwined on the sheets, the echoes of our confessions and lovemaking still humming in the air. I try to meet Matvei halfway, my words tentative but honest as I lay out the tangled hopes and fears that have always kept us at a distance.

“We don't know what's coming, but I want to face it together. I want us to be more than what the world sees and believes. If this is going to work, I

need to be your partner, not just the mother of your children or the woman on your arm. Definitely not a prisoner in your castle.”

The blue of his eyes seems to glow in the darkness as he stares at me, watches me, memorizes me. His hand comes up to cup my cheek, his eyes never leaving mine. As though taking a solemn vow, he murmurs, “My partner, Sonya. I promise.”

He gently pushes me down on the pile of pillows I’m lying on and kisses down my body, lingering where the twins sleep within.

“I promise.”

SONYA

Matvei leaves before I wake, leaving only a note in a neat but hurried scrawl:

I'll be back soon.

I stretch and check my phone.

Be ready at ten. I want to show you something.

The words thrum through me as I shower and dress, anticipation and uncertainty winding tighter with every tick of the clock. I wonder if this is another test or something closer to trust—a look behind the curtain I've always been too afraid to tug aside.

I linger over my decaf tea and glance out the window, searching the puffy clouds drifting through the winter blue sky for I don't know what. I look at the bare trees, the cardinals and finches flitting from branch to branch.

When ten finally arrives, I'm dressed in a new pair of maternity jeans that already feel too tight and a soft blue sweater, nerves prickling under my skin when Evgeny tells me Matvei is waiting for me outside.

He leans casually against one of the low-slung sports cars from the garage, wearing dark gray slacks and a black sweater. He looks relaxed, but the set of his mouth betrays a current of nerves I rarely see. When I approach, he opens the door for me, his fingers grazing my elbow, warm and reassuring. I slide into the seat, inhaling the familiar scent of leather and cedar, which grounds me.

He gets in, turns the key, and the engine purrs to life. For a moment, we just sit there, engine idling, silence suspended between us.

“You trust me?” he asks, his voice low and careful.

I meet his gaze. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

He smiles, the brief, dimpled grin that always softens the sharp angles of his face. “That’s enough.”

The city slides past as we drive—the river glinting with the morning sun, old factories reworked into glossy condos, little corner cafes with customers enjoying their morning brew on the other side of large windows.

I watch the world pass by, but I’m more aware of Matvei beside me—the way his hand drifts to rest on my knee at stoplights, the way he hums along to old Russian rock songs I’ve never heard before. He’s different away from the mansion and the shadowed borders of his empire. More open. Or maybe I’m simply seeing him differently now that I’m choosing to look.

We pull up to a brick building with cheerful flower boxes under the windows and a line of customers stretching down the block despite the frosty air. The sign says *Medovik* above the door, painted in looping script. The air outside smells like cinnamon and sugar, the kind of comfort that seeps into your bones.

Matvei walks me inside, past the line, greeting the older woman behind the counter in Russian before leaning down to kiss her on the cheek. She beams at him, her eyes crinkling with affection, then gives me a friendly nod before rejoining the cheerful chaos behind the busy counter.

“Who’s that?” I ask as we settle at a tiny table with steaming mugs of coffee and sweet buns, each with fruit and some kind of cheese in the middle. “Are these Danishes?”

“Not quite. *Vatrushka*,” Matvei says as he takes a large bite out of the little cheesecake studded with blueberries. “And she is the owner of the bakery. One of many I’ve invested in that were struggling but are now poised to make a positive impact in the area. I helped them buy the building. Now they have three locations. All legitimate.” He nudges my hand with his, inviting me to taste.

I take a bite, the warmth melting the sweetened cheese, a wonderful contrast against the tart blueberries and the pillowy-soft bread.

“This is so good,” I groan, closing my eyes to focus on the taste. When I open them again, Matvei is smiling at me.

Families laugh at nearby tables. A little boy drags his mother to the pastry case to point at a cake. The air is filled with the warmth of people and the hum of conversation, sweetened with baked goods and coffee.

I search Matvei's face. “Why show me this?”

He looks at me like he’s seeing me for the first time, weighing what to share. “I want you to see what we're building. Not just what we're running from.”

After we finish the delectable treat, we drive deeper into the city, to a neighborhood where the paint peels from houses and children play on cracked asphalt. He pulls up to a large building that doesn’t appear to belong. It’s newer, with fresh white walls and a mural of hands reaching toward the sun. As we walk in, a woman at the desk greets Matvei with a handshake.

He introduces me as his partner. The word sends a ripple through me—unexpected but not unwelcome.

Inside, teenagers shoot hoops in a gym, a classroom buzzes with creative training, and a group of elders play chess in the sunlit rec room. Matvei leads me through, pointing out the library and the kitchen where families pick up free meal kits.

“We started funding this two years ago,” he says. “Before that, this block had nothing. Now kids have somewhere safe to go and food to eat.”

I pause to watch a girl help a younger boy with his drawing. “This...” I trail off, emotion rising in my chest. “This is yours?”

“Ours,” he corrects quietly. “My father left a mess. I want better. For them. For our family.”

I turn to him, eyes searching. “Why?”

Matvei leans against the wall watching the kids, his face shadowed by memory. “When I was a boy, I thought power meant control. Fear. Money. But all that... it's nothing more than a cage. You can't sleep. Can't trust anyone. It grew too heavy, and I realized I wanted something clean. And then you came into my life.” He pauses and tilts his head to catch my gaze. He holds it, emotion in his voice. “You, and now the twins. I want a life I don't have to hide from. For you. For our children. I want them to grow up feeling safe. Proud of their name, not ashamed of it.”

His words hang between us, raw and honest. I reach for his hand, my fingers trembling. “Matvei, I've been so scared of what loving you means. But this, this matters. It matters a lot.”

He squeezes my hand, his thumb tracing slow circles on my skin. “I know I can't erase the past, but I can choose the future. We can choose it together.”

I let the truth settle inside me—the weight and warmth of it, the terror and the hope. I think of the long nights I've lain awake, fearing the shadow that follows Matvei, fearing that loving him would drag me under in the darkness that is his world.

I remember the promise of his arms around me, the way he whispers *zlotse* against my hair, the fragile dreams we've only just begun to shape.

For the first time, I see the man behind the myth—not a villain, not a savior, just a man trying to build something that lasts. For us. For our children. My heart aches with the complexity of loving him, but I realize love isn't about safety or certainty—it's about choosing, every day, to believe in the possibility of more.

I stand in the sunlight slanting through the front doors and turn to face him. He's watching me, wary but hopeful.

“I want this,” I say. My voice shakes, but I hold his gaze. “Not just the safety or the future—I want you. Even if it's hard. Even if I'm scared sometimes. I want to try.”

For a heartbeat, he doesn't move. Then he steps closer, folding me into his arms. He presses a kiss to my temple, his breath shaky against my skin. “We'll build it. I promise.”

We drive home in a peaceful silence, our hands intertwined on the console. As the city lights blur past, the world feels different—brighter, edged with hope.

At the house, he helps me out of the car, his touch lingering, gentle.

Inside, he makes tea, pouring each of us a cup, the warmth grounding. We sit together, side by side, not needing words. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady thrum of his heart while the fire crackles in the fireplace.

I know there are battles ahead—old enemies, old fears—but today, I let hope settle in my bones. I choose Matvei, with all his shadows and his surprising light. I choose our future, fragile as it may be but bright as a sunrise.

As I close my eyes, I promise myself I won't run. Not from him, not from what we could become. I'm ready to build something real—together.

SONYA

I wake before sunrise. Frost is etched onto the corner of the windows, the birds singing their songs in the crisp air. I sit with my notebook, scribbling thoughts that scatter like restless bugs. Gen's message glows on my phone—a cryptic, hurried request for advice.

I need to talk. Can you meet?

She's been unraveling for weeks, her life stitched together by fragile threads: the looming divorce, the secrets that haunt the Mancini family, the sharp edges of Samson's temper.

I dress carefully, choosing an oversized sweater and slacks. Something neutral, non-threatening, and comfortable enough to hide my baby bump, which is getting harder and harder to conceal.

I tell Matvei I have an early client meeting and leave. Evgeny drives me and I instruct him to drop me off at a café around the corner from the Mancini townhouse, hoping he doesn't question the area. He and Matvei are well aware where the Mancinis live.

I go inside the café and choose a table near the back. After a few moments, I exit out the rear entrance and make my way to the Mancini home. It's imposing, all stone and cold elegance, perched on a quiet street where old money whispers through manicured hedges and perfect lawns.

Surprisingly, Rodolfo opens the door himself. His expression is stern, his salt-and-pepper hair swept back.

Genevieve stands behind him and greets me with a brittle smile. Her eyes nervously dart to Rodolfo before she speaks. “Thank you for coming, Sonya.” She leads me to a sitting room, sunlight filtering through leaded glass. The walls are lined with art, some of them famous pieces, and I wonder how much illegal money paid for all of it.

The tension is palpable as the sun slants through the tall windows, a static charge waiting for release. Rodolfo sits beside Genevieve, his legs crossed, hands folded in his lap. Her gaze finds mine, searching, and I see the question she doesn’t know how to voice aloud.

“Let’s talk about the divorce,” I say gently, meeting Rodolfo’s eyes as well as hers. “We should be clear about what Genevieve wants so Samson can’t come after her.”

Rodolfo’s mouth tightens. “Samson won’t come after her if he knows what’s good for him.” His voice is clipped, measured—a man used to his word being law.

Genevieve shakes her head. “I just want peace. I should have listened to all the stories before I—” Her voice wavers, but she doesn’t look away. “Before I said yes.”

I lean forward, hoping my words will help. “You have the right to ask for what you need. It’s not just about money; it’s about safeguarding yourself for the future.”

For a moment, Rodolfo seems to soften as he glances at his daughter. “Our family has always done what’s necessary to protect our own. We will continue to do so.”

I nod, choosing my words with care. “Sometimes what’s necessary is letting go. Gen, you aren’t alone in this. You have options.”

A man comes in with a silver cart and passes out mugs of freshly-poured coffee. It’s strong and bitter and smells like heaven. Rodolfo adds a single sugar cube to his before waiting for the employee to leave.

“Do you know what Samson is called in our circles?” he asks after taking a swallow from his coffee cup.

I shake my head.

“He's known as The Coin, because everyone knows he's a two-faced cheat who extorted, lied, and killed his way to where he is now. I warned Genevieve about him, but she wouldn't listen.”

Gen's cheeks color with embarrassment, but Rodolfo ignores it and continues.

“What can you tell me about Samson?”

“Only what he told me when he was drunk and angry.” I sigh and sip at the coffee slowly as I gather my memories, savoring the taste. “His mother, Laura, was from the Genovese family and was supposed to marry into yours. Piotr Volkov ruined her, promised he would divorce his wife and marry her, then left her in disgrace and poverty. Piotr refused to formally acknowledge Samson, but he still ensured they had a home, money, and Samson received a good education. I guess that wasn't enough for Samson, though.”

I stop just short of rolling my eyes and adding, *Nothing ever is.* I'm so glad I dodged that bullet. But Gen did not, and now she's dealing with the consequences.

“Laura chose her own path,” Rodolfo grumbles, still angry after all these years, apparently. “She could have had the world with me, but she chose to betray me, to betray our alliance, and to shame my family name. She got what she deserved. I took over the Genovese as retribution.”

The head of the Mancini syndicate says it all as though he didn't just admit to ruining a woman's life because she made a mistake. A mistake he could have simply moved on from.

“I told Genevieve this was only a plot by Samson to get back at me,” Rodolfo adds.

Gen's eyes narrow. “No, Dad. What you said was that he was finally realizing who has the real power in this city and allying himself with those who can give him legitimacy.”

I realize the woman's earlier flush wasn't embarrassment—it was anger. Her eyes glint with it as she glares at her father, and suddenly the room feels several degrees colder despite how cozy it was when I entered.

“Genevieve, if you want to leave Samson, you can. You don't owe anyone an explanation. I'm not saying it's going to be easy, but I've dealt with worse. It's a benefit that I know Samson, so I can handle him more easily.”

Genevieve presses her lips together, her anger turning to tears that shimmer in her eyes. “I just want to be free of him. I don't want anything from him. I just want him out of my life.”

The conversation thins as the tension winds tighter. Rodolfo's face pales, and beads of sweat gather at his temples. He lifts his cup with a shaky hand. The room seems to close in around him, every sound suddenly sharper—the tick of the old clock, the distant rumble of a car outside.

Genevieve notices. “Dad? Are you all right?”

He shakes his head, frowning. “Just tired. Too much coffee, I think.”

I note a flicker of fear in his eyes as he tries to stand, his knees buckling. The cup crashes to the floor, porcelain shards and coffee scattering across the rug.

“Dad!” Gen leaps to her feet. “Dad? What's wrong?”

Rodolfo collapses, his breath rattling in his chest.

“Dad!” Genevieve is screaming now, pushing at her father and patting his cheek, while he chokes on the white foam bubbling from his lips. “Someone help! Dad! Help!”

The room explodes in chaos as Genevieve screams for help, sobbing, her hands trembling as she tries to rouse her father. Rodolfo's bodyguards rush into the room, shouting, as Rodolfo gasps and seizes.

I dial 911. “I need an ambulance,” I tell the dispatcher as I watch the man take what is probably his last breaths. “Hurry.”

SONYA

The sound of shrieking sirens still bounce around in my head as if I'm back at the Mancini home, the image of red and blue lights bleeding through the windows, painting patterns on the ceiling. I can still see Rodolfo dead on the floor, his eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling, foam dribbling down his chin.

Now I sit in a police precinct in a windowless interview room, trying to steady my breathing while my heart thumps loudly in my chest. Thoughts race through my head—am I in danger, or just tangled in someone else's disaster? My knuckles are white against my thighs as I rub them back and forth, wondering how much of myself I can keep hidden tonight.

The door opens without preamble, and a tall detective strides in, his suit clean and pressed, his expression neutral as his gaze moves over me. I allow myself to breathe when I see Kelly slip in behind him. They both sit opposite the table from me.

"Are you okay?" Kelly asks.

The detective's lips are pressed into a thin line, but he doesn't say anything.

"I'm okay."

I start to reach for my sister's hand over the table, then think better of it as I look at her uniform and badge. She's family, but right now, she has to be a cop.

The detective clears his throat, his mouth still tight, and I automatically don't like the guy. "Ms. Wallace."

"Detective."

"Can you tell me what you were doing at the home of Rodolfo Mancini today?"

"I was consulting with a client. You must know I'm a lawyer."

His pupils constrict—he doesn't like the answer or my tone. Kelly shifts in her seat, flashing me a look that silently says, "cool it."

"You make house calls for clients? Or just this particular client?"

"I deal with domestic abuse cases. Terrible ones where women are beaten half to death or have to run away in the middle of the night with nothing but the clothes on their backs. I consult wherever my client needs me—the hospital, the bus station or airport, women's shelters, the car they're living in—"

"But that is not the case with Genevieve Mancini," the detective points out, cutting me off. "She also has her father's protection."

"Had," I correct.

"*Had*," the detective agrees through clenched teeth.

I clasp my hands over my bump and meet the man's gaze. "My clients are my clients."

"Yes, but how many of your clients have been part of your boyfriend's rival crime syndicate?"

It takes all my willpower to remain stone-faced. "What boyfriend?"

"You're telling me that Matvei Volkov is just an acquaintance?" The detective flips open a folder and slides a picture across the table. It shows Matvei and me on the sidewalk after the shooting at Genevieve's and Samson's wedding.

I laugh sharply. "What Matvei Volkov was that night was a tool to help me get back at an ex. That's all. In return, he gave me money for the law firm

I'm planning to start. It's all documented in a signed contract. I can provide that for you if you'd like."

I don't look at Kelly, because she and I have too many secrets to keep a straight face.

"You expect me to believe that?" The detective arches a dark brow.

"Do you have any proof to the contrary?" I counter.

His gaze slips down to my bump.

Damn it.

"Do you want to get a warrant for a DNA sample? Or maybe just grill me about my personal sex life?" It's a dare, but I'm tired.

"We'll keep that in our back pocket for now," the detective says smoothly. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kelly trying not to roll her eyes.

"Can you tell us what happened?"

I tell them exactly what happened, for Kelly's sake but also for mine, because I have nothing to hide. No matter what this asshole cop is trying to suggest.

My mind spirals, caught between dread and disbelief as I'm taken back to the horrifying day I've been through. The edges of reality blur—every sound is amplified, every movement suspicious. In the span of minutes, my world has narrowed to the pulse beneath my skin and the weighted glances that seem to measure my guilt.

The room grows smaller as the detective continues to ask question after question, the boundaries closing in with every passing second. Genevieve's tear-streaked face flashes in my head, her grief raw and unfiltered. My brain scrambles for meaning as I recount every single detail, wondering if there was something I missed, something else I should have noticed.

The uncertainty gnaws at me, feeding the fear that maybe, in some way, I'm already implicated just by being here.

Finally, the detective decides he's finished. Either that, or he's grown tired of questioning me. He pushes to his feet, gives me a stern look as he tells me not to leave the city, then strides out, leaving Kelly and me alone.

"Thank God," I groan, trying to stretch the kinks out of my back. "This chair is possibly the most uncomfortable thing I've ever sat on."

"It's not supposed to be comfortable," Kelly points out and smiles a rough smile, one that's missing her usual warmth. "What the hell is going on, Sonya? What the fuck happened?"

"Exactly what I told you. And that's all I know. It was horrifying, Kells. He just fell and started seizing, making these horrible noises like he was trying to escape his own body and whatever was happening within it. I don't think it was a heart attack." I shiver at the memory.

Kelly's mouth presses together, and I know she wants to say something but can't.

"I'm sorry to put you in this bad spot. But I'm glad you're here."

"Where the hell else would I be but pulling your ass out of trouble yet again? Seriously, is it your perfume or something?" I'm glad to see her being herself, to see the spark back in her green eyes.

"I wish I knew," I sigh.

The chair scrapes against the floor with a cringe-inducing *screech* as Kelly stands up and motions for me to follow. "I called you-know-who to come get you."

"Just don't let Detective Nixon know." I nudge her shoulder with mine as she leads me out of the interrogation room.

Every shadow seems stretched and unfamiliar, as if each one is complicit in what took place today. There's a hollow ringing in my ears, and for a moment, I can't tell if it's the echo of sirens or the pounding rush of my own blood. The officers' voices fade into a distant hum, and all I can do is clutch the thin hope that the truth, whatever it is, won't shatter me.

The fluorescent hallway lights flicker overhead as Kelly ushers me to a different room, our shoes squeaking against the floor. Somewhere down the corridor, voices murmur, the thud of boots mingling with the faint, metallic scent of fear. I grip the cuffs of my sweater sleeves, fighting the tremor in my fingers, trying desperately to hold on to reality as the walls seem to narrow around me.

My pulse is a drumbeat in my ears as we walk. The detective's questions along with my own linger, swirling in my mind like smoke, impossible to grasp or ignore. I wonder if the world outside will ever feel safe again, or if some shadow of this moment will follow me wherever I go.

MATVEI

The first thing I see when Evgeny and I pull up is Kelly, waiting in front of the police precinct's doors. She has her arms wrapped around herself, her breath coming out as white clouds in the dark, cold night. As we get closer, I notice her hair is disheveled and there are dark circles under her red-rimmed eyes.

“What happened?” I ask, feeling a flash of anger when I see her state.

“What happened was my sister was helping a client whose father was poisoned in front of her,” she says.

“Poisoned?” Evgeny and I ask in unison.

“I thought Rodolfo had a heart attack,” Evgeny adds.

“We weren’t sure at first, but it's official from the ME. He was definitely poisoned.”

My heart, already pounding with anger, speeds up with a flash of adrenaline. “Did Sonya—”

“No.” Kelly shakes her head. “It wasn't in any of the other cups. Just Rodolfo’s. And if you tell anyone I told you that, I will throw your ass in jail so fast you won't know what hit you.”

For some reason, her defiance throws gasoline on the fire of my anger, and I take a step toward her. “Instead of threatening me, I would suggest telling me where the fuck Sonya is right now.”

Kelly's eyes widen, but she holds her position, her eyes narrowing. "You want to ask me that again in a kinder tone?" Her hands clench into fists at her sides, and she glares up at me. "I've had a shit-tastic night. I've been on since eight a.m., and I'm been doing my best to make sure *my sister* doesn't end up in jail tonight."

The girl has balls, I'll give her that, but I'm not in the mood. To say I'm angry would be a gross understatement. I'm furious, seeing red, and ready to kill the next person who gets in my way. Right now, that just happens to be Kelly.

Evgeny steps in front of her, his enormous frame blocking my view. "Enough," he says. "Kelly is helping us, Matvei. Don't shoot the messenger." There's an edge of warning in his voice not for the police officer but for me. "Just go get Sonya. I'll deal with the release details."

A volcano is brewing in the middle of my chest, and I'm about to blow up on both of them. Evgeny knows it and plays his trump card. "It's not good for Sonya or the twins for her to be stressed and in a police precinct. Take her home, Matvei."

"Don't fucking manage me," I snap, then sweep past them both.

The officer at the front desk can't take me to see Sonya fast enough. He also can't get out of my presence fast enough. He points to the room where she waits then very nearly runs the opposite way.

I stare at the doorknob, my anger threatening to boil over and erupt. My brain refuses to acknowledge that Sonya has been helping the Mancinis without my knowledge. My fists clench when I think of her getting up this morning and telling me she had a client, kissing me goodbye, then going to Rudolpho Mancini's home. She outsmarted me and Evgeny.

I was already seeing red, but now my vision tunnels as I grasp the knob and push the door open so hard the shades on the small inset window shake.

Sonya looks up from where she's sitting, sensing the coming storm. She looks small and shaken. Her hair is no longer in a ponytail and looks messy, like she's been running her hands through it. The overhead yellow light makes her look washed out.

“Matvei,” she says, relief in her voice. She reaches out to me as though I’m the knight on the white horse she has been waiting for. She drops her arms when I stop halfway across the small room, letting the silence tick until I can all but see it physically straining to explode.

“When were you going to tell me?” I ask.

Sonya's eyes widen at my tone, and she lowers her head. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“Couldn't or wouldn't?”

Sonya's eyes narrow, and she glares at me before she speaks again. “Are you asking me if I'm somehow colluding with the Mancinis?”

My silence says enough, and a flush blossoms on her cheeks. “Are you fucking serious, Matvei? I didn't tell you because it's covered by client-attorney privilege. I can't discuss clients with anyone.”

“You were helping the Mancini family!” I practically spit, my voice low and dangerous. “You knew it was wrong! You had Evgeny drop you off around the corner at a café. Now look at the mess you're in.”

Sonya gets to her feet to stare me down, though it's difficult since I'm so much taller. “You think I got myself into this mess?” She stops herself abruptly and pulls her shoulders back, her eyes never leaving mine. She's thinking like the lawyer she is. “You know what? I'm done talking to them, and I'm done talking to you. Get me out of here. I just want to go home.”

“Maybe I should just leave you here.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, and though I know I've said the wrong thing, I don't let her see it.

“I'm not one of your lackeys cooling my heels in a jail cell, Matvei,” she hisses. “Can I remind you that I don't need you to take me home? I'm perfectly capable of getting myself out of here. Either you can do it, or I'll wait for Kelly. Maybe I'll just call a cab.”

It's a dare, and we both know it. She's daring me to let her out of my sight, to go against what she knows I feel deep down, what I've promised her over and over again.

“Fine.” I let the word escape because if I don't, I'll unleash the torrent waiting its turn.

I turn on my heel, leaving her to hurry after me. It should be satisfying, but instead, I just feel cruel, especially since Sonya's pregnant. After only a few strides, I slow down.

Evgeny and Kelly are waiting for us in the bullpen. Kelly says something to Sonya about how she has to stick around town, but I can barely hear because of the blood pulsing and rushing angrily through my ears. I watch, waiting for the official okay to take her home. When it comes, I leave Evgeny with Kelly to finish the paperwork.

I march Sonya out to the parking lot in total silence, the frost between us matching the frozen, icy ground. Sonya finally speaks once we're driving away.

“Maybe it's time you apologize.” Every word is tinged with anger and hurt.

“Apologize?” I bark a scornful laugh. “Apologize for expecting you not to lie about working with the Mancini crime family?”

“Client-attorney privilege still matters, even when the great, mighty Matvei Volkov is involved. That's how it works.”

“You shouldn't be working with one of my enemies, Sonya. That's the problem and you know it.” The words are a raw confession.

Sonya is quiet, both of us seething as we pass through the dark, quiet streets, downtown Chicago rising tall on either side to block out all but a strip of late evening sky.

After several minutes of silence, Sonya finally speaks. “You need to accept that I am who I am, too. I'm not going to stop being a lawyer just because we're together. And by the way, the first thing you should have done when you got there was ask me if I was okay. You couldn't even do that.”

It's all I can do not to shout at her that she's not grasping the point of my anger. I am trying to change. I'm trying to learn to be the man Sonya and my twins need me to be, the man I need to be for the success of our future.

“Are you alright?” I grind out from between clenched teeth, the leather creaking as my hands tighten around the steering wheel.

“That sounds genuine,” Sonya huffs.

“I'm trying, Sonya. What the fuck do you want? I'm *trying*, damn it!” I pound the steering wheel with my fist, bringing the car to a jolting stop at a red light. I whip toward her, and she presses herself back against the window, her tight-lipped expression dropping from her face immediately.

“What you don't seem to understand is that you knowingly went to my enemy's home, by yourself, without anyone aware of where you were. You put yourself in an incredible amount of danger. Genevieve Mancini can have any lawyer she wants, lawyers who would bury Samson so far underground he would never recover. She has the money and the resources, and so did Rodolfo. You don't think it's odd she hired you? The closest person to me besides Evgeny? And now you're being looked at for murder!”

She doesn't answer me, just opens and closes her mouth like a fish out of water. For some reason, that pisses me off more than if she'd screamed at me.

We can't get home fast enough. I need a gym session to work out this anger. I gun the engine when the light turns green, my fury following the odometer numbers as they rapidly go higher and higher.

“I told you to keep your head down. I told you to stay under the radar so we could keep you and your pregnancy a secret for as long as possible. Now everyone will know, and they're all going to be coming for us. And if you think the police won't come hard at you just because Kelly is on your side, you are wrong.”

The sound of squealing brakes is the only thing I hear before metal crashing into metal jolts me. Glass shatters and rakes across my skin as a sharp metallic scent fills my nose. I'm jerked one way, then another, and the world spins. Sonya is screaming. I reach for her, but my brain can't even comprehend where she is.

I'm jerked to the side again, then forward. My head hits the steering wheel, and then there is nothing.

MATVEI

In my dream, voices are speaking—too many voices, talking too quickly with words my brain can't understand. Lights flash painfully through my closed eyelids, a headache pounding in time to the pulses of light.

When I crack open my eyes and shut them again quickly, I realize this isn't a dream. Memories seep back in, fuzzy and fragmented—the crash, the sound of glass breaking, iron squealing and crunching, screaming and darkness.

Sonya—

I try to form words, to say her name, but nothing comes out. I try to reach for her, but everything hurts.

Now someone is shouting, but I still can't understand the words. Another, deeper voice is shouting too, in Russian. I try to respond, but again, all I can manage is a groan as I try to pull myself out of the blackness threatening to pull me under again.

There is more yelling, the flashing lights are getting brighter, the sound of sirens closer. Someone's pounding on the car door, yanking at it.

“Don't touch him,” the other voice hisses. “His neck could be broken.”

“Boss, is your neck broken?”

It takes me a moment to understand the question, and another to get my body to move at all. It hurts, but I can at least move my neck, followed by

my hands.

“No,” I croak.

“He says he's fine.”

“He was just in a car accident, and it looks like he's hit his head, look at all the blood. You really think he's coherent enough to know how he feels?”

“If he says he's fine, I believe him.”

As the bickering continues, I'm finally able to blink open my eyes. My vision is blurry, but I manage to clear it enough to look around at the ruined interior of what was once one of my cars. Glass and blood are everywhere.

The passenger side seat is empty.

“Sonya. Where's Sonya?” My voice is a rough whisper.

“What do you mean?” It's a female voice—Kelly's voice—her face peering in through the broken driver-side window.

“Where's Sonya?” I ask again, my voice rising with my adrenaline.

“What do you mean, ‘where's Sonya?’” Kelly demands again. “Are you telling me she was with you? I thought she found her own way home.” Her voice rises with panic before her face disappears from the window. I hear her calling her sister's name, each time higher-pitched, louder, and filled with more terror.

My adrenaline cancels out any pain I feel, save for the throbbing in my head that makes it difficult to think. “Help me get out of here,” I tell Evgeny, trying to get my fingers to work enough to unbuckle the seat belt that won't seem to budge. “Help me get out!” I shout Sonya's name several times, but there's still no answer.

“Maybe Kelly's right, Matvei,” Evgeny's voice comes from beside me. “You hit your head pretty badly. Maybe you should—”

“Get me the fuck out of here. I need to find Sonya!”

I'm fumbling at the seat belt clip, tugging frantically as I try to push away the airbag in my way, panic filling my veins, hot, wild, and raw.

“Will you stop fucking thrashing?” Evgeny grunts. He reaches through the shattered window, the glass scraping and catching on his jacket. He saws through the seat belt with a knife. I can instantly breathe better when the restriction eases.

“Get me out of here!”

“Calm the fuck down,” Evgeny says as he pulls and pushes, all while cursing under his breath in Russian. With a horrible scraping and the squeal of metal on metal, he pries the door open enough so he can reach in and pull me out.

“No, no, no! Don't touch him!” Paramedics and police officers, dark shapes outlined by flashing lights, are running toward us. But I'm already out. My body is screaming in pain, and the agony in my head threatens to make me black out again. I hang on to the car and my consciousness, willing myself to stay present.

“Sir, let me check you. You've been in a serious accident and I need to—”

I wave away the paramedic's concern as Kelly returns, panting and out of breath, her eyes wild.

“Where is she?” The question comes with a fear unlike I've ever known before as images of Sonya lying in a puddle of blood on the pavement, her body broken, assault my mind. “Kelly, where is she?”

She shakes her head, bewildered, and grabs for Evgeny as though she needs something to help keep her upright. “I don't know. I don't know where she is. There's no sign that she was ejected from the car, but she's not here. She's not anywhere around here.”

It's a fast tumble of words that tells me nothing, and I bat away the paramedic who's still trying to get me to go to the ambulance.

“It looks like someone pried her door open and cut her seat belt,” I hear one of the officers say.

My head snaps toward the car, a choice I regret immediately as a lightning bolt lances through my skull. I place my hands on either side of my face and bend down.

“Sir, you have to let me check you. You could have an intracranial hemorrhage or other serious damage—”

I ignore the paramedic, because in the second before the explosion of pain, I saw the crumpled car that hit us, and I distinctly remember that out of all the sounds I heard, the squealing of brakes was not one of them.

It's an old green Buick with bullet holes in the side.

This crash was intentional.

“Kelly,” I grumble through the pain. “Get Captain Quinn on the phone. He knows the car that hit us.”

“On it.” Her eyes widen as she pulls out her phone and calls her superior.

“Is the guy still in there?”

Evgeny frowns. “No. He's gone.”

Evgeny and I exchange a look because we both know exactly what happened.

“We have to go. Now.” I straighten, ignoring the screaming pain in my side.

“Sir,” the paramedic tries one more time, gesturing to her partner for help. “I have to look at you. It isn't safe for you—”

I ignore her and her partner yet again, as well as the police swarming the scene, managing a slow, painful walk to Evgeny's SUV.

“Tell the other officers to talk with your captain. He'll have the answers they're looking for,” I tell Kelly as Evgeny opens the door for me.

“What the ever-loving fuck is going on?” Kelly demands. “Don't you dare leave without me. I'm coming with you.”

Evgeny and I exchange another look. “No. You don't want to be a part of any of this.”

“Like hell I don't.” Kelly's eyes burn with anger, her face set with determination. It's a look that reminds me too much of Sonya—both women have indomitable spirits. “Don't you two assholes dare leave without me. I'll

be right back.” Kelly addresses us both, throwing a second look at Evgeny before jogging off to speak with an officer who appears to be in charge.

I get into the car, gripping the handhold as I ease myself down into the seat. I taste blood as I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from groaning in pain.

Evgeny shuts my door, then walks around and slides into the driver's seat. “Where are we going?”

I lean back against the headrest, closing my eyes against the way the world is spinning while trying to organize my thoughts through the pain and panic.

I'm about to tell Evgeny to find Kelly when she yanks open the door and jumps into the back seat. “Captain Quinn is going to call me with more information, but he said to start at the place you last saw the car. Let's go.”

“Are you sure you want to do this? I think you know what we're going to do and what's about to happen. And nothing about it is going to be legal.”

Kelly's response is a statement. “I'm going to do whatever I have to do to get my sister back.”

“Okay.” I have to accept her decision; there's no more time to argue. “Evgeny, go.”

I look back as Evgeny peels out from the accident scene. The twisted metal, the shattered glass, the sounds of the accident, and Sonya's screams still ringing in my ears.

Like Kelly, I'm also going to do whatever it takes to get Sonya and our children home safely. I don't care if I have to wade through a sea of blood and bodies.

I *will* bring them all home.

SONYA

“I told you to be careful, Dylan.” The coldness in her voice is just as frightening as the dead look in her eyes before she turned away from me.

A man stands across the room, shoulders folded in as though he’s trying to make himself smaller. He rammed his car into Matvei and me. On purpose. On Genevieve’s orders. I know this because he told me on the drive here. Wherever ‘here’ is, some place hours from Chicago.

I’m restrained in a bed in a room that is outrageously opulent for the circumstances.

“I did my best,” he whines. He’s thin and wiry, pale and dark-haired, with a scraggly mustache. He’s wearing a faded t-shirt and jeans. A ragged baseball cap is being twisted between his hands. “It wouldn’t have done any good if he were still conscious. And there was ice—”

Matvei.

Matvei was unconscious, slumped and unmoving over the airbag, when the men in black balaclavas and black tactical gear pulled me from the car. I can still see the blood trickling from his head and down the white nylon, turning the black leather and shards of broken glass shiny and wet.

I tried to wake him, calling for help once the car came to a rest from its deadly spin. It took me a few moments to realize we weren’t dead. Well, I knew *I* wasn’t dead. The car had been struck on the left, just behind

the driver's seat. I'd tried desperately to reach Matvei, to check to see if he was still alive.

Then the men had come and wrenched the door open, cutting me out of my seat. I'd screamed for Matvei, but he hadn't responded. He was still unconscious—that was the last glimpse I had of him before the masked men shoved me into the windowless van and shut the doors.

"I told you not to worry if he was unconscious," Genevieve hisses. "I told you we would take care of that."

The man backs up a step and shifts from foot to foot, turning and crumpling the hat in fingers that move faster and faster. "I was afraid he would shoot me if he was awake. I know he's been looking for me since I set fire to his warehouse. You don't fuck with that guy, Ms. Mancini."

"You will address me as *Boss*, Mr. Jones, because I am now the don of the Mancini family." Genevieve's voice is as cold as ice, and from the way the man's face drains of color, I'm glad I can't see her expression.

"Boss," the man mutters as he takes another step back, edging toward the door only to come up against one of the big goons who dragged me out of the car and into this room. He looks more like a statue than a human, as do the four others in the room, and it's very clear who's in charge now.

The gun comes up, her thumb pushing off the safety. "Who are you more afraid of?"

Stuttering is the only answer she gets—the guy is too afraid to get any words out.

"Tell me!" I jump at Genevieve's screech.

"You! I'm sorry, Boss. I did my best." The man is babbling, his words rushing and tripping over each other like his feet would be if he could run. But he's trapped like a rat. "Matvei Volkov would have recognized me. He would have recognized my car and known I was the one who set fire to his warehouse and shot him. I should have been—"

I muffle a scream with a hand clapped to my mouth as the sound of a gunshot blasts through the room. Two more follow before there's a

heavy *thump* that makes my stomach heave. The guy's body hits the floor, leaving a growing crimson stain on the carpet.

"Yuck, what a mess." Genevieve wrinkles her nose as she glances at me. "So annoying. Don't worry—we'll give you another room to stay in while you're here so you don't have to stare at the blood stain. I don't want the babies to be in an unclean environment."

I only nod because I'm not sure what the hell is going on.

"You know I have to assert my dominance now that I'm the don," Genevieve continues. "Nobody wanted me, you know. None of the made men or other dons. But after I orchestrated a few mutinies and a few 'accidents,' suddenly everyone decided it was in their best interest."

The woman's smile is glowing with happiness, and I'm wondering how I missed the glint of insanity in her eyes.

Who else has she killed besides this guy to make her point? Suddenly, a sickening thought comes to mind.

"Did you—" I swallow, willing my voice to sound normal instead of betraying my accusation. "Did you poison your father?"

"Of course I did." She says it with a shrug, as if it should be clear. "He was getting too old and making bad decisions. He didn't see my vision for the family. He also didn't like my plan for the twins."

"Your plan for the twins?" I echo faintly.

"Of course." Again, she says it like I should know what she's talking about, and I'm horribly afraid as I am beginning to see when I notice a man in scrubs pressing himself against the wall, his eyes darting around the room nervously.

"Gross."

We all look toward the new voice as Samson wanders into the room, making a face at the body on the floor and the pool of blood soaking into the carpet around it. "Can someone get this shit out of here? I don't want to have to look at it."

He wanders across the room, calm, cool, and all smiles in his chinos and polo as though he just came in from playing golf. He kisses Genevieve affectionately, and she cuddles into him as he winds his arm around her waist.

“Everything okay with the twins?” he asks the man in scrubs. He pays no attention to me, the one who’s carrying them.

“Yes,” the doctor answers hastily. “Yes, everything’s just fine.”

“You’re not dead.” I say it flatly, hating the man in front of me more than ever.

“Of course I’m not dead. Wishful thinking, huh?” Samson winks at me and grins brightly, and I wish I could claw his eyes out.

I watch the two of them, the same “happy” couple I saw on the day of their wedding, and I realize it’s not happiness, at least, not in the sense of most newly-married couples. They’ve each found their own monster.

“You never wanted to divorce him.” I don’t know why I say it—I already know the answer.

“No, but you believed me, didn’t you?” She looks at Samson, beaming. “I told you she would believe me. I’m such a good actress.”

Samson smiles at her with what I swear is pride, then looks at me. “She’s right. I actually gave you the benefit of the doubt. I thought you were too smart to fall for it, but you and your bleeding heart believed every sob story Genny sold you. I guess I gave you too much credit.”

“Or you took advantage of my good heart and good will, you asshole,” I say now that I’ve finally found my voice.

Samson only laughs. “Yeah, well, look where that good heart and good will got you.” His grin can only be described as malicious, the manipulative bastard. “And look what it’s gotten me. I’m close to destroying Matvei, I have his woman, his men are defecting to me in droves, and soon I’ll have his children, too.”

His grin grows even more cruel and terrifyingly bright, like he's possessed by some kind of demon. "I'm going to take every fucking thing my brother has, and I'm going to make him watch before I kill him."

Genny giggles and claps with glee, but I'm still stuck on something Samson said.

"You're going to what?" I finally manage, sounding half-strangled because all the air has left my lungs as if I've been punched in the gut.

"We're going to raise your twins." Genny glows with happiness as though I'm a willing participant in the plan. "You'll stay here until the babies are born. We'll treat you like the mother goddess you are, of course, then once they're born, we'll take them. You're going to be our surrogate, Sonya! Oh, I'm so happy!" She claps with glee again, then flings her arms around Samson.

"Genny can't have kids, so I promised her yours." He says it like he's expecting congratulations for the upcoming bundles of joy.

"You promised her my—" I croak, but that's all I can manage, my hand going to my bump as though that will somehow protect my little ones within from this horrible fate.

Anger the likes of which I've never felt rises in me. I would go after the two like a jackal in a second, clawing and screaming, if I wasn't tied up.

"You fucking bastard! Let me out of here, or I swear I'll kill you. These are *my* children, not yours!"

Samson just laughs. "Hey, hey, you've just been in a car accident. Ease up, will you? We want those kids to be healthy when they're born. They will be healthy, right?" He turns again to the doctor, still pressed against the wall, his gaze flicking between the bloody body print on the floor and the psychotic couple.

"Y-yes," he quietly replies.

"Good. Keep it that way." Samson takes a very thick envelope out of his jacket pocket and holds it out. The doctor takes the money with shaking hands.

When he comes close to gather his ultrasound machine and various implements, I whisper desperately, “Please, help me. Tell someone I’m here. They’re going to take my children.”

The man won’t even make eye contact with me. He pushes the cart with his stuff out the door, the squeaky wheel the only sound until he shuts the door behind him with a final *click* that seems to seal my fate.

“Samson, please. You can’t do this. You can’t keep me here. You know Matvei will come after—”

He’s in my face before I can say another word, his expression a mask of rage. He snarls, “Do *not* say his name in this house. Do you understand me? You can spend your entire pregnancy in a dark room, all alone, tied to a bed. Is that what you want?”

I shake my head vehemently and shut my mouth.

“Good.”

As he straightens and steps back from the bed, Samson rolls his neck and shrugs his shoulders as though casting off the outward signs of whatever demon has possessed him. I’ve never believed in the supernatural, but his behavior is chilling, and I’m not entirely sure anymore.

“Dad tried to tell me the same thing.” Genevieve stares at the swell of my stomach beneath my sweater as she speaks. “That’s why he had to go. I knew he was going to try to stop me once he became aware of our plan, and I couldn’t have that. He was talking about all-out war, but I think he was just too afraid of—” her eyes flick to her husband and back to me “—you-know-who.”

“So you’re saying you had to kill your father?” I ask, my voice flat.

“Yep.” She shrugs. “I’ll have to kill you, too, of course. But you don’t have to worry about that for now. Just focus on growing our perfect twins, okay?”

She smiles sweetly, then places a baby monitor beside me. “If you need anything, just call. We’ll have someone checking on you, allowing you to get up and use the bathroom and all that. But don’t try anything. We don’t

want to have to make your stay unpleasant, but we will if you don't do your part."

Samson gives me a look that promises she's not exaggerating and I shiver. Then they leave, and I'm alone in a lavishly decorated room, in a mansion somewhere outside of Chicago, pregnant, and tied to a bed. I'm never going to get out of here. Not alive, anyway.

I knew Samson was a terrible person, but I was not aware of the insanity behind the narcissism and anger. I see now that Samson and Genevieve are a match made not in heaven, but in hell.

And I've never been so terrified.

MATVEI

“I really think you should go to the hospital. Evgeny and I will track down whoever's at this address and let you know the details.”

“I’m fine,” I grunt as I scrub the blood from the side of my face and various gashes with something Kelly got from one of the paramedics. I can’t get it all off, but it’s the best I can do for now.

“And tell me again how you know my captain?” Kelly gasps and adds, “Is he on your payroll? Is he dirty?”

“Not at all.” I pull my gun from its holster and check the magazine, ensuring it’s fully loaded. “I don’t pay him a dime. He helps me with things—legal things—every once in a while. In return, I find people who may be of help to his cases.”

Kelly’s expression twists at the gray area Captain Quinn is skirting, but her phone rings before she can keep the conversation going.

“Speak of the devil,” she mutters under her breath before answering. I only hear one side of the conversation, and I’m not surprised when she hands her phone to me.

“Matvei, what the hell is going on? My officers are calling me frantically in the middle of the night, giving me some crazy story about a bad accident, someone missing, and that the guy in the accident took off from the scene. Shouldn’t you be in the fucking hospital?”

“I’m fine,” I reply bluntly. “The less you know, the better. I need you to look into the guy who owns the old green Buick. That’s the car that hit mine.”

“Interesting you say that.”

“Interesting isn’t the word I’d use.” My tone is sharper than intended, but I’m running on adrenaline and a pain and fear so intense it’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.

“Look, something didn’t sit right with me after that.” His voice is gravelly, like he’s still fighting sleep. “I looked deeper, and the owner of the car is a Dylan Jones. He’s in the wind.”

“Was anyone else involved?”

“Some guy named Anthony Demetrio.”

“Demetrio has ties to a disgraced faction of the Genovese family,” I tell him. “Mudak.”

I wave away Evgeny’s questioning look.

“You know the guy?”

“Unfortunately, I know him well.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!

“Okay, well, that’s all I have.”

“That’s all I need. Thank you,”

“It’s Samson,” I tell Evgeny as soon as I’m off the phone. “Tony Demetrio is in on this.”

“That fucker?” Evgeny’s mood, already dangerous, sours further, the lines on his forehead growing deeper with his frown. “I’ll make the call.”

It only takes a few minutes to learn where Anthony Demetrio is hiding out.

“Where are we going?”

I take the backup pieces from the glove compartment, checking the magazines before handing one to Evgeny and tucking the other into the waistband of my pants, which I realize are stained with blood. I have to stifle a groan, as I'm one entire mass of pain that I need to stuff down as far as possible so I can do what needs to be done.

"A mechanic shop," Evgeny replies. "On the South Side."

Kelly takes off as much as she can that identifies her as a cop, leaving on her bulletproof vest over her undershirt.

The mechanic's shop is located down a one-way street in a seedy block of businesses and apartments. It's dark and quiet, and at first, I think no one is there.

Evgeny takes the lead, moving like a shadow against the high chain-link fence, his gun held low. Kelly is on my right. I know the look on her face; she's operating entirely on adrenaline and the singular, terrifying thought that Sonya and the twins are in danger.

Both wait for my nod to move, and I watch as they slip around their respective corners. I stand with my back against the wall and turn the knob. I ease the door open as slowly as possible, testing each inch for a *creak* that, thankfully, doesn't come.

I creep through the dark garage and the bulk of machines, carts, and tools situated beneath shadowy behemoths of half-finished cars on raised lifts like giant, spectral trees in a misshapen forest. I see a blue glow off to the side. The sound of a pneumatic drill punctuates the loud hum of an air compressor, and I follow the high-pitched rumble to a bay tucked away from the main area.

A man in oil- and grease-stained gray coveralls is bent under the hood of a new-model Porsche. The license plate has been removed, the tires stripped, and various parts lay on the floor beside it. I raise my gun and aim it at the guy, finger beside the trigger should he make any sudden moves.

"Is my brother promising you a good price for those parts? I can promise you more."

The man jumps as though he's been physically hit, yelps as he smashes his head on the car's hood, then steps away from the vehicle. We stare at each other across the dimly lit space for a heartbeat.

"You." It's a snarl that starts in the back of my throat and ends in a shout.

"Oh, shit!"

The man's eyes grow wide and panicked, and I have to duck as he hurls a wrench at me and dashes behind the car. The wrench flies by, hitting a metal pipe on the wall before skittering across the floor just as the man darts out from behind the car.

I take off after him, following his pounding footsteps through the shop. Pain sears through my body with every movement. I can see him just ahead of me, or at least his shadow, when Evgeny comes in from the other side. I call out in Russian to follow the guy, and Evgeny turns on a dime after Tony.

In the darkness, the unfamiliar mechanic's shop seems cavernous and threatening, lit only by the few dim emergency lights and an ambient yellow glow from the windows we pass. It's a graveyard of half-dismantled cars, exposed engines hanging from chains, and greasy equipment.

Both Evgeny and I duck as the *crack* of a shotgun goes off, followed by an explosion of concrete and brick. I dive behind a half wall, the air still vibrating with the shockwave.

Simultaneously, Evgeny opens fire from his side. Three quick shots that thud into the shell of a truck. A muffled exclamation is followed by more shotgun explosions, each a bright flash in the darkness.

"Fucker is going to get us all blown up," Evgeny snarls, then ducks back out to fire two more rounds. More shotgun fire follows before everything falls silent.

"He's out of rounds," Evgeny mutters with satisfaction.

The crash of the shotgun being thrown onto the floor in frustration echoes through the darkness, and I tap Evgeny on the arm, a signal, before we both take off in the direction of the shots.

We hear pounding feet; the fucker is running again. We follow the sound of his boots pounding on the floor back through the shop.

“He’s heading for the back door, damn it.” I ignore the pain pulsating throughout my body and speed up, knowing if this asshole escapes, that will be it, and he’s my one link to Sonya and the twins.

I sprint through another room, weapon raised, moving too fast for him to track, and I manage to cut him off. He sees me, pivots, and somehow slips between Evgeny and me toward the workstation where I first found him.

Evgeny fires a distraction round, hitting a toolbox behind Tony and sending wrenches scattering with a clamor. Tony flinches, stumbling back into an open space under the skeleton of a car engine hanging from chains from the ceiling.

With a great squeal of iron, one of the chains breaks free, causing one side of the engine to crash to the floor. Tony dives at the last second, but he’s not fast enough to dodge the enormous piece of machinery entirely, and it comes down on his leg.

His scream is terrible, the sound of snapping and crushed bone worse. When I look back, Kelly is standing over him with her gun drawn. She’s breathing hard, the dangling end of the chain swinging by her hand.

“Tell me where the fuck my sister is,” Kelly shouts, her chest and shoulders heaving with adrenaline.

“Please,” he begs. “Please get this off me. It’s killing me.”

“You’re not going to die. Yet. It will take a while for you to bleed out.” I walk up to him and stare down at the face I know. “Anthony Demetrio.”

“Who is he?” Kelly asks without looking away from her suspect.

“My brother’s lackey. He’s been following Samson around since they were kids, like a little puppy dog just wanting to be loved. Samson uses him and his connections any time he doesn’t want to get his hands dirty. It’s pathetic.”

“Okay,” Kelly says. “You two get this engine off of him, and we’ll take him to the station. I’ll make sure he tells us exactly where Sonya is.”

“We’re not taking him anywhere.”

Even in the dim light, I can see the fear in Tony’s eyes. He knows exactly what I’m capable of. We’ve had enough run-ins that he knows he’s pissed off his own personal grim reaper.

“We have plenty to take him in and question him,” Kelly insists. “Don’t you want to know where Sonya is?”

“I can get answers without a police station. In fact, I can get them faster and more accurately. Evgeny.”

I gesture with my chin to the engine, and with Kelly’s gun still on the guy, he and I manage to move the heavy block enough so his leg is freed.

Kelly gasps and looks away from the wound that’s revealed, a mass of bone and muscle exposed where a leg used to be.

“He needs an ambulance,” she whispers.

“What Mr. Demetrio needs is to tell me exactly where my brother has taken Sonya.”

With another gesture from me, Evgeny hauls the kid up and into a nearby chair, ignoring his screeches of pain.

“He needs an ambulance, Matvei. Do you want him to bleed out before he can tell us anything?”

“Oh, he’s going to tell us what we need to know long before he bleeds out. Believe me.”

I see Kelly swallow before she opens her mouth to argue again. I cut her off, turning sharply to her.

“How badly do you want to find your sister? Because there’s a ninety percent chance this guy knows where she is. And this is the fastest way to do this. Do you really want to waste time taking him in, questioning him, and doing all the paperwork that will hinder you in finding Sonya? You

wanted to come with us knowing who and what we are. I am doing what I need to. You can leave and pretend you never saw any of this.”

“Listen to her, man. I need an ambulance. I don’t feel so good,” Tony whines.

“Choose now, Kelly. I’m not going to wait any longer. We’re wasting time.”

Kelly looks to Evgeny, who is stone-faced. She takes a step back, her face constricted with her conflicting emotions. I turn my attention to Tony.

“I want to know what Samson is doing with my woman. I want to know where he took her, and I want to know why.”

“I don’t know anything, man.” Sweat is breaking out on his face from the pain and the shock. “I stole that car you see over there, and I’ve been working on it all night. I have someone coming tomorrow morning for the parts.”

“I told you, I want to know right now where Samson took my woman.”

Tony tries to glare at me, but I can see the fear behind it. “And I told you, I don’t know.”

“You’re not going to talk your way out of this one, Tony. I’ll do what I have to in order to get the information I need. Do you really want me to go after your family? What about your Aunt Rosemary—how long do you think she’ll last?”

The pulse point on Tony’s neck jumps and he glares at me, genuinely this time. “Fuck you, Matvei. You can’t prove anything, and I’m not telling you shit.”

“Very brave for someone who understands that I don’t need evidence, probable cause, or a warrant. Do you think I spoke with a judge before I came here? In this world, I am judge, jury, and executioner. And you will tell me what I want to know.”

As though he can read my mind, Evgeny drags Tony’s chair closer to the air compressor he was using when I found him. I hear Kelly gasp behind me but ignore it. She chose her path.

Tony's screams compete with the whine of the drill and the hiss of the air compressor as I work on him, one hole at a time. I stop just before he passes out. He's panting and shivering, his face pale and sweaty.

I step behind him and bend down. He flinches and whimpers when I place my hands on his shoulders. "I'm surprised, Anthony," I say in my most congenially dangerous tone. "I didn't give you enough credit. I didn't think you would last this long."

"Fuck you, Volkov." Tony can barely get the words out.

I dig my fingers into a wound, hot, red, sticky blood oozing over my skin, and Tony screams. "Tell me what I want to know."

I can tell when Tony gives up because his entire body slumps.

Wiping my hand off on one of the oil cloths, I move around to face him, crouching down to his eye level. Sweat pours down his face, and his skin is white with blood loss and pain. "This is your one chance to do something with your miserable life. You've followed my brother around like his little monkey your whole life, his little dog just waiting for praise and a bone he's never given you. Make your life matter, Tony. Make this one choice by yourself and make this last act count."

"Why would I fucking tell you anything when you're just going to kill me anyway, you crazy son of a bitch?"

I place my hand on his injured leg. It's a light touch, but Tony flinches, immediately getting my message. "Everyone always said you would die young, and that Samson would get you there, Tony. Even your mother knows it. You're an idiot with a reckless side, my brother's minion. You're going to die here tonight, regardless of whether you tell me or not. But whether you die slowly or quickly is up to you."

I tighten my hold on his crushed leg just a bit, but it's enough. Tony howls, and a tear tracks down his cheek with the sweat. From the corner of my eye, I see Kelly turn her face into Evgeny. He pulls her closer, shielding her.

"Which one, Tony? Choose now." I tighten my hand, and among the screams comes what I came here to find out.

“They’re in Lake Geneva!”

“Lake Geneva? Why?” Kelly has pulled away from Evgeny, the police officer worried for her sister taking over.

“They have a house up there on the lake. Samson took it from some guy in a poker game.”

“What’s his end game?”

“Samson’s coming after you, you arrogant son of a bitch.” Tony manages a chuckle. Blood oozes from a corner of his mouth, and he has to spit out. “But that fucking crazy bitch Genevieve can’t have kids, so they’re going to wait until your woman has the kids, then take them and kill her. I told Samson she’s fucking crazy, but man, he’s crazy too. That’s when I left—he’s gone off the fucking deep end.”

“And you told no one?”

I’ve felt anger before, rage that threatened to burn me from the inside out. But I’ve never felt anything like this type of wrath before. It’s a darkness that wraps around me, around my very soul, threatening to destroy everything that’s not vengeance and shadow, fury and death.

I cannot become that soulless person I have seen others become. I have to get Sonya back. I want to be the man I promised her. However, I am still *pakhan* of the Volkov Bratva, and I have to make an example. I won’t let this pass.

“Matvei, don’t.” Kelly starts toward me, understanding what I’m planning to do. She holds up one hand in a placating gesture, the other at her hip where her gun is. I don’t feel threatened; I know it’s a knee-jerk reaction. She’s a good cop, a well-trained cop. And I know what it will do to her to witness this.

“Evgeny, take her out of here.”

“What? No. No way.” Kelly starts toward me again, but Evgeny’s hand clamps around her wrist and pulls her back. “I can’t let you do this, Matvei. He told you what you wanted to know, and now we can go.”

There is an edge of desperation to her pleas.

“He also helped orchestrate her kidnapping when he knew exactly what Samson and Genevieve were planning. He’s an accessory to her future murder, and I cannot let that stand.”

“Please, man, listen to what she’s saying,” Tony wheezes. “I’m fucking done with Samson. That guy can have his fucking psycho woman. I’m done. I’m out. For good.”

I ignore Tony. Kelly’s eyes flick back and forth between him and me.

“You’re good at what you do, Kelly. Too good to ruin your career over this. I’m giving you the chance to walk away so you can say you don’t know and have it be the truth. This is what I do, this is my life. Whatever you may think about it, your sister is in danger. And I want to make sure everyone knows what happens when they put my woman in danger.”

Kelly and I stare at each other for a long time, the only sound the passing of a freight train a block over and Tony’s wheezing breath. Finally, Kelly stops straining against Evgeny and allows him to pull her away. She doesn’t look back, even when Tony screams after them, begging her to save him.

I wait until I hear a door close in the distance before I look to my brother’s friend out of the corner of my eye. He’s sniffing, snot and tears running down his face, leg still oozing crimson that trails across the floor. Even if I don’t kill him, the blood loss will very soon.

In one swift motion, I bring my gun up, turn, and fire. Tony sags, his body slumping against the bonds still holding him in the chair, dead instantly.

I stare at the still and silent body, at the blood from his leg becoming a trickle that would soon stop altogether.

This is who I am. This is who I will always be, no matter how legitimate my businesses become. This is the *pakhan*’s way. Hopefully my children won’t have to learn about this life; perhaps they will escape the violence and darkness that has plagued my family for so many generations. I can only hope they will never have to let a part of themselves die, they’ll never know what it is to kill someone and feel almost nothing.

I know very well that is almost my saving grace. Because whatever happens next might take what little soul I have left. But I would give it all up to save Sonya and our children.

When I join them by the car, Evgeny's face is stoic as always. Kelly tries—but fails—to look me in the eye, even as she hurries toward me.

“What do we do now?”

“We go after her. Tonight, under the cover of darkness. Take them by surprise.”

Kelly watches me suspiciously, like she expects me to go off at any moment, run like a madman, and storm the proverbial castle, killing everyone in my path.

I stride to the car and stiffly get into the passenger seat, stifling the roar of pain begging to be unleashed.

What she doesn't know is that inside, I'm screaming. With every fiber of my being, I want to drive there, guns blazing, and take Sonya away from that place.

But I know my brother, and I know it won't be easy. Samson can't possibly think he'll be able to keep Sonya hidden without me moving Heaven and Earth to find and rescue her.

We must act fast if we're going to have any chance of taking Samson and Genevieve by surprise. But we also can't go in half-cocked and entirely out of our heads with panic—that will only end in failure.

I must overcome. I cannot feel as weak and in pain as I do now.

Not when I go to rescue the woman with whom I cannot see living the rest of my life without.

SONYA

Sudden light wakes me out of my doze. I'm exhausted after hours of constant fear and barely any sleep. I finally forced myself to get some rest because I know the twins need me at my best. And if I'm going to get us out of here, I'm going to need some strength to do it.

I blink at Genevieve as she hurries over to the bed, wondering if this is some sort of torture or psychological punishment, keeping me up at all hours.

"Come on," she says conversationally, as though she didn't just burst into my room in the middle of the night. "We have to go."

"Go where?" I struggle to sit up, my brain still fuzzy.

"Something's up. It's time to move you. I don't want anyone taking my babies away from me."

I nearly snap but hold my tongue. I hate to admit how scared I am of this woman's psychotic side. I don't know how she'd react if I talked back to her, and I don't want to find out.

Genevieve unties the bindings holding me to the bed. I sit up slowly to prevent a rush of blood draining from my head and making me dizzy, rubbing my wrists where the rough material abraded my skin.

"Hurry up." There's urgency in Genevieve's request, but I just glare at her.

“You're going to have to give me a minute. If you want the twins to be healthy, you'll let me do what I need to. Do you know what happens if I get stressed?”

Genevieve peers at me as if to decide whether I'm telling the truth or not. “What?” she finally asks.

“Stress affects babies in any number of ways, including low birth weight and other issues. If I get too stressed, I could go into preterm labor, and these babies are way too young to survive outside the womb, just like the doctor told you yesterday. So I suggest you let me do what I need to do if you want them to be healthy.”

Her lips thin. She's not happy to comply, but she will anyway, because she doesn't want to risk the children.

I wonder why Genevieve Mancini even wants children. She can't possibly need something to love—in fact, I'm pretty positive she's incapable of loving anyone but herself, just like Samson. So why does she want children so badly that she's willing to kidnap me, hold me hostage, and steal them from me, killing me afterward?

I hear noises. Faint but sharp, confusing and worrying. Genevieve shifts from foot to foot, her gaze darting between the door and me. The way she's trying to rush me tells me something else is going on.

When I glance out the door, I see no sign of the men who have guarded me nonstop since they brought me here.

“Help me up.” I hold my hand out to Genevieve, hoping she doesn't realize I can move fine on my own.

My gamble pays off, because she comes closer, her mouth still a thin line of annoyance. When she grabs my hand, I lock hers in both of mine and pull as hard as I can. With a shout of surprise, she goes down as I come up, and I hit the ground running.

I'm almost to the door when she grabs the back of my sweater, nearly knocking me off my feet as she jerks me back.

“No, you don't, bitch. You aren't going anywhere with my children.”

She spins me around and attempts to slap me, but I step in instead of away. The movement surprises her enough that I'm able to jab a palm up under her chin, snapping her head back before bringing my knee up between her legs. She goes down with a wheezing cry as I look around for something I can use to defend myself.

Her leg snakes out, and I tumble over it, falling to my hands and knees. I'm running entirely on adrenaline now, desperate not to lose this one chance of getting out of here alive with my children. I crawl toward the side table with the lamp. My fingers just brush the porcelain when, with a screech, Genevieve grabs my legs and hauls me back.

"I'm going to put you in a fucking coma so you'll stay quiet for the rest of this pregnancy," she shrieks.

My hand misses the lamp, but I'm able to close my fingers around the power cord, and I use the momentum of being dragged backward to pull it from the wall. The lamp follows the cord with a crash, and I reel it in frantically, flopping over just as Genevieve straddles me, a frightening, triumphant smile on her face.

"You're not gonna be trouble any—"

The sound of the porcelain lamp shattering against her head interrupts whatever she was about to say, and she slumps forward.

It takes me a moment to scramble out from under her dead weight, and I'm breathing hard when I look back to make sure she's actually unconscious. She isn't moving, blood oozing slowly from a nasty gash at her temple rapidly turning purple.

"They're *my* children, you crazy bitch," I say, even though I know she can't hear me.

I'm about to head toward the door when I hear shouting and running feet. The only other way out is the window, which looks out on another roof. It's not exactly safe, but I don't have any other choice.

The window casing is old, and it takes a few tries before I'm able to open it. I'm halfway through, straddling the sill and ready to duck out when a hand grabs my hair and arm and pulls me back inside with such force, it feels like

my hair is going to rip from my scalp and my shoulder is going to pop out of its socket.

I'm slammed against the wall so hard, stars explode in front of my eyes from the pain in the back of my skull. Samson's furious face hovers mere inches from mine.

“Think you're going to escape, bitch?”

Every word drips with venom and frenzied anger. The look of homicidal rage in his eyes is so terrifying it brings instant tears to my eyes.

My sweater balled up in his fists, Samson flings me toward the bed. I can't keep my balance and fall to my hands and knees again. It's all I can do to scramble up as he stalks after me, each footstep like a death chime. He hauls me up again and pushes me back against another wall, but this time, he wraps his hands around my throat.

“Samson, don't,” I manage as he cuts off part of my air. “If you kill me, you kill the twins.”

“Like I give a fuck. Genny's the one who wants kids, not me. I wanted to see the look on Matvei's face as I forced him to watch me kill you and take everything away from him. Just like he and that fucking bastard of a father we share took everything from me.”

“Samson, don't—” I try again, but I can't speak anymore as his hands tighten, tighter and tighter, threatening to crush my windpipe. I fight against his hold, thrashing and scratching at his hands, trying desperately to pull them away. My lungs begin to burn and my ability to fight grows weaker until my vision tunnels. Everything inside me is focused on getting the air Samson is starving me of.

“I knew I should have done this from the start. You've always been too much trouble. I'll find Genny some kids somewhere else. Kids that don't look like my asshole brother, so I won't have to stare at his face for the rest of my life after I kill him.”

My heartbeat is so loud in my ears, I can barely hear what Samson is saying.

Suddenly, Samson howls, his hands falling away from my throat. I begin to fall but someone catches me, and all I can do is lean on them, coughing and gasping air back into my starved lungs.

“Are you okay? Sonya! Talk to me!”

Kelly is there, pushing my hair back from my face and stroking my head as she holds me close.

All I can do is nod and stare at the fire poker she used to spear Samson in his shoulder. He's bleeding, but it's not severe enough to take him down for long. He straightens with a snarl, his palms red with blood, and starts toward us, reaching for the gun in his waistband. Before he gets to us, a figure in black crashes into him, and they both fall in a tangle of flying limbs and thrashing bodies. Two guns skitter away across the floor.

They grapple, rolling until Matvei comes out on top, channeling all his rage at his brother into the blows he rains down on his head and face.

Samson is no slouch, though. I remember when he told me he was proud of the fact that he learned to fight dirty. He grabs a shard of the porcelain lamp lying on the floor and strikes out with it, slashing his brother across the arm. Matvei hisses, and his blows stop long enough for Samson to flip him off and go on the offense, crashing back into his brother with a rebel yell.

“We have to get out of here.” Kelly pulls me to my feet, but I don’t budge.

“I'm not leaving him.”

“He's here to get you out. *Out*, Sonya. Let's go.”

A sudden shriek pierces the air. None of us noticed Genevieve had woken up, and she launches herself at Matvei like a rabid animal, screaming, biting, and clawing until it's all he can do to fend her off.

Kelly makes a noise low in her throat, and I see something in her eyes I've never seen before as she throws herself at Genevieve. She grabs her by the shirt, swings her around, and lands two quick punches—one to her jaw and one to her stomach that doubles Genevieve over.

It's just enough of a distraction that Samson sweeps Matvei's leg, then falls on him, a knife in his hand. As strong as Matvei is, he's injured, and Samson is putting his entire body weight behind the weapon, the blade growing closer and closer.

I know Matvei wants me to run, to escape while Samson and Genevieve are occupied, but I can't. I can't let Matvei die here; I need him in my life. I need him in *our* lives. I grab my own shard of broken porcelain and stab it down with all my might into Samson's back.

He bellows, arching and grabbing frantically for the thing between his shoulder blades. Matvei grabs Samson's hand holding the knife, and with a swift scissor kick, knocks his brother off him.

There's a loud *thump* as Genevieve crumples again and doesn't get up. Kelly is holding her weapon, which she used to smash the side of Genevieve's head.

"Matvei!"

Kelly throws the gun to Matvei, which he snatches out of the air just as Samson gets to his feet and launches himself at his brother with a roar of blind rage and pain.

Matvei fires at point-blank range, the *bang* so loud I scream. The impact of the bullet slams Samson backward. He's still as soon as he hits the floor, and I jerk my head away from the fact that half his face is missing.

And then there's silence.

Nobody moves. My breath rasps in my throat. The sounds outside have stopped, replaced by the distant wail of police sirens.

Kelly steps up to Matvei and holds out her hand for the weapon. "Give me the gun. Let's all get out of here alive and free."

Matvei hands her the weapon without argument, and something passes between the two of them as their eyes meet. My sister wipes it clean before impressing Samson's hand and then her own on it, erasing any sign that Matvei used it.

They're both composed, but I'm shaking so hard my teeth are chattering.

Matvei engulfs me, and I'm crying. He kisses me desperately, checking to make sure I'm okay, murmuring things in Russian I don't understand but want to.

"I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm okay." I repeat the words over and over, as much for him as for myself.

Because I am okay and so is Kelly, Matvei and the twins. It's over, and I'm in Matvei's arms, and that's the only thing that matters.

SONYA

The air is like a frozen, choking entity, smelling of wood smoke, gunpowder, and the metallic scent of blood.

We're in a temporary command post set up by the police in the mansion's vast, pristine garage. It's warm in here with the giant fireplace blazing, but the heat can't penetrate the arctic grip of terror still locked around my lungs. The harsh fluorescent lights are blinding, making my already pounding headache worse.

I sit on a stool, bundled in a blanket the EMTs wrapped around me after checking me out. I press a hand to my belly in a silent prayer of protection. *You are safe. We are safe. Our family saved us.*

Kelly isn't too far away, giving her statement. She looks worse for wear; her hair is coming loose from the severe bun she always wears and there is still blood on her face and hands. The tone of her voice is a steady, unwavering monotone, reciting a lie.

Kelly, the good cop, is committing professional suicide for Matvei. For us.

The lead detective, a man named Sterling from the Lake Geneva PD, sits opposite her. He's tall and thin, with tired, shrewd eyes and a face that gives nothing away. His partner is Detective Vance. She's younger and sharper and she takes notes, her gaze flicking between Kelly and me as she assesses the authenticity of the trauma.

I focus on the rhythm of Kelly's words, cementing the fiction in my own mind. *A confidential source warned her that Samson was holding me against my will and was planning to harm me and the unborn twins. She came alone; it's only coincidence that Matvei and Evgeny showed up when they did to rescue me. She had already breached the residence and had subdued the guards non-lethally. Mostly. She found Samson and Genevieve about to harm me and she took action, a police officer saving civilians as Samson tried to kill us all.*

My gaze slips to Matvei. He is leaning against the wall near the garage's entrance, a statue of composure carved from granite. His expression is one of calm and patient cooperation, the picture of a concerned civilian who arrived just in time to witness a tragedy.

All I can see are the cuts on his face from shattered glass and the big gash and purple bruise on the right side of his forehead from the accident, along with the other bruises and cuts from Samson's attack. I don't miss the way he moves with a cautiousness that speaks of pain, now that his adrenaline is waning.

Evgeny has already given his statement, all of us providing the same synchronized, bulletproof list of events. He is being treated in the back of an ambulance for the deep gash one of Samson's men gave him on the way in.

We are a choir singing a deadly hymn.

Kelly finishes. She doesn't look at me as she passes, but I feel the weight of her choice, a line drawn in blood across her career, her integrity, her very life. She has just given Matvei a clear path, potentially sacrificing everything she's built to keep him out of prison and in my life.

Sterling pushes his chair back, the sound scraping against the concrete. His eyes finally meet mine. They hold a deep, uncomfortable skepticism that makes my stomach clench.

"We'll circle back with you, Officer Preston," Sterling says to Kelly, the use of her rank a perceptible sneer. She walks out of the garage. He then turns his attention entirely to Matvei. "Mr. Volkov. Your turn."

Matvei pushes off the wall and walks toward the table. He moves with an effortless grace that belies the brutal, deadly monster he'd been just an hour ago. The pain he must be in. I can see it because I know him so well now, because he has become a part of me.

He sits down, folds his hands on the table, and looks directly at Detective Sterling, projecting absolute control. He is not Matvei Volkov, head of the feared and powerful Volkov Bratva. He is Matvei Volkov, distressed father-to-be and businessman from Chicago.

"I will tell you everything you need to know, Detective," Matvei says, his voice low, clear, and perfectly modulated with just the right amount of controlled anger and relief.

Sterling's tired eyes narrow. "Officer Preston states that she acted in defense of a civilian, finding Mr. Genovese and his wife in the act of threatening her sister."

"And I confirm that statement," Matvei replies smoothly. "I arrived on the scene with my friend, Evgeny, alerted by a source who overheard Samson's intentions. I found Officer Preston standing over my brother. She saved my girlfriend's life and the lives of my children. A tragedy, yes. But a clear case."

He weaves his truth into Kelly's lie, making the tapestry seamless. He doesn't deny his presence, he integrates it. He makes himself a witness, not the perpetrator. I know his genius comes from decades of operating one step ahead of the law, creating a bulletproof screen around himself and his syndicate.

Detective Sterling taps his pen against his pad. "Let's go over the details of your arrival again, Mr. Volkov. Officer Preston claims she broke in alone and subdued at least half a dozen armed guards *by herself*, even though witnesses at the precinct tell me she left with—" he glances down at his writing pad "—Mr. Evgeny Fedorov. You state you and your men arrived mere minutes later. Who was your source, exactly, that gave you such timely, explicit information?"

Matvei doesn't pause. "The source is confidential, Detective. As you are aware, in my line of legitimate business—real estate development and

international logistics—I frequently deal with individuals who prefer anonymity. This source, a disgruntled associate of Samson’s, approached me in fear for his own life and mentioned Samson’s plans regarding Sonya. My priority was to protect my family. I contacted Officer Preston—Sonya’s sister—for advice, and she moved immediately. She’s very good at her job, Detective.”

Another crucial thread of the lie—Matvei contacted Kelly. It explains why a plain clothes officer was on the scene. It makes Kelly the initiator and Matvei the concerned civilian who sought legal help. The way Matvei uses the phrase “my line of legitimate business” is so practiced, so dismissive of any implication of the Bratva, it’s chilling.

The hard line of Detective Sterling’s mouth says he doesn’t believe any of it, but Matvei meets his eyes and doesn’t look away; they both know there is no evidence to the contrary.

My turn comes next. I feel the exhaustion like a physical weight, pressing me down into the chair. Sterling looks at me, searching my face for the break, the flicker of doubt.

“Ms. Wallace, can you walk us through the moment your sister entered the room? Take your time.”

My heart is drumming a frantic, painful rhythm. I have to sound convincing, terrified, and profoundly grateful to Kelly. Which I am—that’s not a lie.

I close my eyes for a moment, letting the absolute terror of what happened fuel my performance—Genevieve’s terrifyingly psychotic smiling face, Samson’s chilling lack of compassion, their plot to steal my twins and kill me, Samson almost killing me. I cling to the image of Matvei wrestling with Samson, his eyes wild with fury, and twist it in my mind.

“He—Samson—was furious,” I begin, my voice a shaky whisper, and it’s not an act. “He had a gun. He kept talking about the twins, about how they belonged to him and Genevieve. He told me how he would make Matvei watch me die, that he’s always hated his brother. He had me up against the wall, choking me, the gun in his hand. I was begging him to stop, to let me go. And then Kelly was there, shouting at him to drop the weapon.”

I let the tears fall. They're real, a delayed response to the psychological torment I just went through, and Sterling seems to soften just a fraction.

"And what did Mr. Volkov do when he arrived?"

"He wasn't there yet," I insist, adhering strictly to the timeline. "It was just Kelly and Samson—she'd already knocked out Genevieve. They were struggling, and Samson went for her gun. She was able to get it back and had no choice but to shoot him. Then Matvei and Evgeny ran in. They helped us."

Sterling leans forward. "Ms. Wallace, do you realize what an extraordinary coincidence it is that she was the one, the *only* one, who saw fit to risk her life and career to be here? That not only did she subdue and take down six armed and very dangerous men, but also your kidnappers, all on her own? I have to tell you, she might have saved your life, but now she is potentially facing a disciplinary board and, frankly, a homicide investigation."

His gaze is pointed, dissecting. He knows the threads are too neat. He is holding up the white one, showing me how clearly it stands out against the dark, bloody fabric of reality.

"I know what I saw, Detective," I state, my voice gaining strength from the protective fury I feel for Kelly. "My sister saved us from two psychopaths who wanted my children for themselves. Who were going to hold me here until I gave birth and then kill me. I don't know about the investigation, but I know she's a hero."

An hour later, Kelly returns, her face pale. She meets Matvei's eyes, and I see the silent exchange—Matvei accepting a debt he can never truly repay, and Kelly confirming the irreversible step she just took. They break contact as Sterling approaches us for the final confrontation.

"Mr. Volkov, Officer Preston," he says, his voice flat with professional resentment. "Every statement matches. However, the physical evidence is murky. Ballistics will likely confirm the round came from Officer Preston's weapon and that the fingerprints on it are both hers and Mr. Genovese's. Given the history of the deceased, the woman in custody, and the clear self-defense claim, we are drawing a line under this—for now."

He pauses, a deliberate, heavy silence. “But I want you all to understand something. You and your associates, Mr. Volkov, are to remain available for questioning. You are not to leave the country. We can, and we will, reopen this case the moment one piece unravels.”

Matvei offers a faint, polite smile. “Of course, Detective. You have my word. However, as Ms. Wallace has just survived a kidnapping and requires medical attention and rest, we will be leaving Lake Geneva. I need to get her home safe.”

The authority in Matvei’s voice is subtle but absolute. He doesn’t ask; he informs. He takes back the power Sterling tried to assert.

Sterling looks at each of us in turn. He sees a terrified pregnant woman, a police officer with a perfect record who has jeopardized everything, and an expectant father who is also an established, legitimate businessman. He has no real leverage. The narrative is too solid, and the source of the truth—Matvei—is untouchable.

“Fine,” Sterling finally concedes. “But I meant what I said, Mr. Volkov. Don’t make me come looking for you.”

Matvei simply nods. Evgeny moves toward us as we prepare to leave. Kelly steps forward and wraps me in a tight, silent hug, whispering in my ear, “I’m proud of you, Sonya. You held it together. You did the right thing.”

I pull back, seeing the grief and fear in her eyes, mixed with pride. “Kelly—”

But she cuts me off with a sharp shake of her head. “My job is to protect my family, Sonya. You and the babies are my family. That’s all that matters now. Go home. I’ll handle the paperwork.” She presses her hand to my belly, then turns, walking back toward the detectives and putting on the mask of a professional officer dealing with a crisis.

Evgeny helps me into the SUV. The inside is a warm welcome from the cold brutality of the crime scene, where I was threatened and held hostage. Soft, plush leather, the scent of Matvei’s cologne, and a silence that feels safe. Matvei slides in beside me, pulling me against his chest.

“It’s over, *dorogaya*,” he murmurs, his lips pressing against the top of my head. “It’s done. You are safe.”

“Is Kelly going to be okay?” My fingers clutch at the hem of my sweater, tangling in the soft weave until I see irreparably stretched holes as Evgeny gets into the driver’s seat.

“I will make sure she’s okay, and so will her captain.”

The SUV pulls away, leaving the chaos and the flashing blue and red lights behind. I finally allow myself to lean into the relief, which causes the dam to break. Silent tears stream down my face, not of fear, but of profound exhaustion and the realization of what it cost us. Samson is dead and Genevieve will hopefully be put away for a very long time. My sister may have just imploded her entire career to save me, and I’m sitting next to a man who will forever be a killer, but who is also my shield, the man I wish to spend the rest of my life with.

Matvei holds me tighter, his strength a steady, unbreakable promise. He isn’t a good man, not by the world’s measure, but he is my man, and he saved me and our children. That’s the only measure that holds weight now.

We drive toward the dawn, toward home. I close my eyes, feeling the first gentle fluttering of the twins, warm and safe in their haven within me.

The future, however bloody its foundation, is secure.

MATVEI

I sit, not in the cold silence of the office I usually occupy, but in the soft stillness of the nighttime nursery. The air smells faintly of powder and warm milk, a scent utterly foreign before yet is now warm and familiar. I watch the twins, my son and daughter, asleep in their matching cribs, as I have often done since their birth four months before. Their chests rise and fall in perfect, tiny rhythm.

This is the new architecture of my life, the empire I risked everything to protect.

The blood that stained my hands when I ended Samson's twisted life has long been washed away, but the memory is a permanent, corrosive discoloration beneath the skin. It's the cost of entry to this room, the toll I paid to keep these two safe, to keep Sonya whole. I look at my hand—the one that held the gun, the one that pulled the trigger and ended my own brother's life—and I feel nothing but a stark finality. He made his choice. He chose the rot.

Since his death, I've had my most trusted people picking apart the mess Samson left behind. We've traced the payments, the coded messages, the shifts in territorial aggression. We followed the tendrils of Samson's ambition that lead not just to a power grab, but to treason. The betrayal was deeper than fraternal jealousy; it was a strategic, calculated act of sabotage against the Volkov Bratva.

The answer that came back was a cold spike of recognition: the Abramovich Bratva.

It wasn't just a simple alliance; it was a complete co-opting. Samson had been playing a long game, preparing to deliver the entire Volkov operation—our legitimate fronts, our cash flow, and our territories—to the Abramovich family on a silver platter. They had promised him the full title and a seat at the table once I was out of the way.

Samson, in his psychopathy and lifelong hatred, believed killing me would not only satisfy his rage but solidify his claim as a mafia don, a perverse echo of the old-world succession laws my father kept from him.

Genevieve Mancini was a loose end I tied up with less ceremony than a discarded receipt. She wasn't worth the cost of a bullet. Weeks after her arrest, she wooed a guard and somehow escaped. My people found her trying to flee to Mexico with forged papers and Samson's emergency cash fund. She's now locked away somewhere in the frozen North in a facility that requires no signature for entry and offers no signature for release. She will live the rest of her life in silent, forgotten isolation, the ultimate punishment for a narcissist: being rendered utterly invisible. The Mancini family has been notified—their disgrace is complete, their influence now a smear in the dirt. They are neutralized.

But the Abramovich heads—Dmitri and his son, Roman—are still breathing, still scheming, still operating under the assumption that Samson's failure was merely a setback, not a death blow to their plot. They believe the Volkov Bratva is now vulnerable, distracted by internal conflict. They think they can swoop in, claim the spoils, and rewrite the narrative.

They are wrong.

I rise from the nursery rocking chair. Every detail of the room has been calibrated for silence and protection. Sonya, asleep in our bed, murmurs sleepily as I kiss her softly, then head downstairs.

It is time to leave our sanctuary and perform the last necessary surgery for my organization. For our future.

Downstairs, Evgeny waits for me by the steel-backed front door. His face is a road map of concern, but his posture is all business.

“Everything is in place,” he says, his voice a low rumble. “Dmitri and Roman are at the old warehouse down on South Walcott. They believe they’re meeting with our neutral peace broker to discuss a temporary truce. They are alone, save for two drivers.”

I nod. “Good. The other families?”

“The Kalnikovs have publicly sworn fidelity. The Stepanovs are withdrawing from the city, consolidating their operations in Miami. They know better than to challenge stability. Your swift action against Samson proved that the strength of the center still holds. The rest will fall in line once the Abramovich are taken care of.”

This is the key. The real challenge is not the criminal enterprise, but the obstacle to legitimacy. For years, I’ve been guiding the Volkov Bratva toward a future where our assets are diversified across real estate, tech ventures, and green energy. In this future, my children will never have to worry about a midnight knock. However, that future requires undisputed and unquestioned stability. The Abramovich family, with their old-world vendettas and reckless, violent methods, represents the past I’m trying to bury. They’re too volatile, too visible, and their ties to Samson make them a perpetual point of weakness. If they live, they talk. If they live, they plot revenge. If they live, the city remains a contested zone, and my business cannot fully transition into the light.

We slip into the armored sedan.

“How long?” I ask Evgeny.

“Thirty minutes, allowing for traffic.”

I close my eyes and review the facts one last time. Samson, dead by my hand, a traitor. Genevieve, permanently silenced. The Volkov internal structure has been purged save for the remaining loyal. The surrounding families are either subservient or in retreat. All that remains is the head of the serpent. I must sever it now, cleanly and completely, so the body of the Volkov organization can heal and mutate into something new.

The warehouse is dark when we pull up, save for the lights on in the main area where Dmitri and Roman Abramovich wait, two silhouettes in the gloom. Their drivers stand about twenty feet away, hands visible, wary.

Dmitri, a man whose face is a road map of bad decisions and old scars, manages a false, greasy smile. “Matvei. Thank you for agreeing to this. A sensible man knows when to talk peace.”

His son, Roman, is younger and sharper, his eyes darting constantly, the eyes of a predator always looking for a way to gain the upper hand. He looks at me with pure, undiluted dislike, a man who sees my current distress as an opportunity.

I stroll toward them, the tap of the soles of my shoes loud in the silent warehouse.

“There is no peace to discuss, Dmitri,” I state, my voice calm with a lack of inflection.

Dmitri’s smile falters as Roman tenses, his hand moving slightly toward his jacket pocket.

“Samson was a fool,” I continue. “He thought I would mourn him instead of cleaning up his mess.”

Dmitri tries to bluff. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Samson was your brother. It’s a tragedy—”

“Don’t insult my intelligence,” I cut him off, the air temperature dropping ten degrees. “I know about the payments. I know about the coded communication from your cell to his private burner. I am aware of the promise of the Volkov territories. You were going to try to legitimize your claim through my death.”

Roman’s eyes flash with fear, realizing I know everything. He starts to move, but he’s too slow. Before he can clear his weapon, Evgeny unleashes two shots, silenced and accurate, dropping the two drivers instantly. The sound of the bodies hitting the floor is flat, swallowed by the shadows and the emptiness of the warehouse.

Dmitri freezes, his face pale and slack. He's an animal caught in a trap, realizing too late that the hunter is already inside the cage.

"You tried to use the oldest trick in the book, Dmitri." I wander a few steps closer and look down at him, a man I have tolerated for years because he was useful, but now he's simply an obstruction. "You tried to replace my family with your own ambition, and you failed. You backed the wrong horse. You signed your own death warrant when you allied yourself with Samson."

"Matvei, please," Dmitri pleads, his voice thin and pathetic. "I had to try, didn't I? That's what we do. That's our game. That's our world. You can't hold it against me."

I feel no pity, because pity is a weakness I cannot afford, not when the lives of my children and Sonya, the continuation of my empire, depend on this absolute finality. I reach into my coat and pull out the weapon I favor, the one I will put away for good once this is done.

"The spoils are not for dividing, Dmitri," I tell him. "The Volkov Bratva is done with division. We're done with the underground. You and Roman represent the last of the old rot that holds us to the shadows. As long as you breathe, the old scores are still pending, and the path to the future remains closed."

I raise the weapon. Roman, finally understanding there is no escape, lunges toward me with a guttural cry in an attempt to save his son. I shoot him first. The bullet takes him high in the chest, and he collapses without a sound, a puppet whose strings have been suddenly cut.

Dmitri screams, a high-pitched sound of terror and grief that echoes off the warehouse walls. I turn the gun on him and look him straight in the eyes, seeing the realization of a wasted, criminal life in the last instant before he closes them.

"This is for the future," I whisper.

I pull the trigger once. Clean. Final.

The silenced gunshot is soft in the vast space, yet it is the loudest statement I have ever made.

I stand there, the weapon heavy in my hand, looking at the two fallen figures. The last two heads of the Abramovich Bratva. The final, necessary sacrifice for the new empire. The smell of gun smoke mingles with the warehouse, a brutal cleansing agent.

“It’s done,” I say to Evgeny, holstering the weapon. “Clean the mess. Make sure the message is unmistakable—they died fighting each other over a botched deal. Let the rest of the families assume the Abramovich empire is now up for grabs. They will descend on the scraps and destroy themselves. The Volkov Bratva is officially out of that game.”

As we drive away, the fog seems to lift, the lights of the city appearing sharper, cleaner. The threat is gone. The Volkov Bratva is now an uncontested power. The other minor families will fall in line, not through force, but through economic necessity. They have no choice but to operate within the lines I have drawn, lines that lead away from the violence and toward the vast, protected wealth of the legal world. I am now free to sign contracts, to shake hands with politicians, to build.

I open my phone and look at the last photo Sonya sent me: the twins, together in one crib, smiling toothless smiles up at the camera. I did this for them. I killed my brother, I neutralized his psychopathic accomplice, and I destroyed the last enemy standing in the way of a new, secure dynasty.

I arrive home just before dawn. I take off my coat and remove the gun from its holster, storing it away far back in my cache of weapons. I wash my face until the cold water stings.

I am Matvei Volkov, King of the Chicago Bratva, and now, a new kind of father. I walk back up to the nursery. The twins are stirring, hungry.

I lift my son, holding his small, warm, squirming body against my shoulder. His life, my daughter’s life, Sonya’s life... those are the only lives that matter now.

The ghosts of Samson and the Abramovich family are just collateral damage, dust motes settling in the wake of the necessary bloodshed.

As the city begins to wake, when the twins are fed and back in their cribs, I seek the warmth of my bed. Sonya is still asleep, and I kiss her precious

face once, twice, until her eyes flutter open and she smiles sleepily up at me.

“Where were you?” she asks, yawning.

“Couldn’t sleep,” I answer, which is the truth, even if it’s not the whole truth. From the way her mouth quirks, Sonya knows it, too, but she doesn’t ask. And even if she wanted to, I cut off any further conversation with a kiss that swiftly ignites the fire always simmering between us.

The rhythm between us is as simple as it is explosive. I know her body and she knows mine, every spot that makes her cry out, shiver, and arch her back, every move that has me entirely at her mercy.

Our bodies, hearts, and souls entwine in a way I never thought was possible, in a way I never thought I’d experience. I worship Sonya with my body and my words, with my kisses and my attention. I make sure she knows just how much she means to me, just how much she has changed my life, just how desperately I need her.

Afterward, when Sonya is lying in my arms, I reach over and take the ring box from my bedside table drawer. I ask the woman who is the love of my life, the unexpected force of nature who has owned my heart since the moment I stood behind her in line to board the plane, to be my wife. She has healed me on the deepest level, given me the life I always strove for but never believed I deserved.

There is a great deal of squealing, kissing, and laughter, and even a few tears. Sonya says yes, beaming as I slide the ring onto her finger.

As the sun rises over the city, I finally feel everything slip into place. My city is secured for my bloodline. The path is clean. My family is safe. The knot is tied.

And I am finally free.

EPILOGUE I

SONYA

“**Y**ou can bring them down when they wake up. Just take them to the kitchen to eat first,” I whisper. Our wonderful nanny nods, then sits in the chair by the window as the twins nap.

I watch them for a moment longer, sunlight pouring through the curtains and painting golden halos around their sweet faces. I trace their small bodies, amazed at how much they've grown in just a year. Their breathing is shallow, peaceful—a stark contrast to the nervous rhythm of my own.

Today is our wedding day, and it feels so much bigger than just vows and rings. It's the culmination of everything Matvei and I have survived, every secret we've kept, every battle we've fought. The knowledge simmers beneath my skin, fizzing like champagne in my veins.

I am Mrs. Sonya Volkova, wife to the commanding *pakhan* of the Volkov Bratva and one of Chicago's most powerful billionaires.

Music drifts up from the ballroom—a blend of Russian folk and something jazzy, the kind of sound only a wedding like ours can produce. The house is alive, bustling with cousins, uncles, and aunts I've never met, their laughter mixing with the aroma of food and the clink of glasses. The Volkovs know how to throw a party. This one is fit for a king—the *pakhan* and his bride.

I glance at myself one more time in the mirror before I head down, running my hands over the simple white silk of my dress. I descend the grand staircase. Every step echoes with hope and the ghosts of the past.

Matvei waits at the bottom, his suit perfectly tailored, hands folded behind his back. When our eyes meet, he smiles—a small, private smile—just for me. “Ready?” he asks, and I nod. I feel ready for anything with him by my side.

The ballroom is overflowing. People fill every corner, crystal glasses glinting in the light. Tables are dressed in gold and emerald, the centerpieces exploding with white peonies and ivy. My family is in attendance, my aunt still dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. My adoptive mother and father, the Prestons, are all laughter and smiles as they glide around the dance floor.

And so are Kelly, and shockingly, Evgeny. It’s perhaps the first genuine smile I’ve seen on his face since the twins were born, as he leads my sister around the other couples.

They consist of Matvei’s lieutenants and their wives, old friends from the neighborhood, my friends from college, and my colleagues. But there are so many more I don’t know, men and women who speak in low voices and glance at us as if we’re the center of gravity. And in a way, we are.

I move through the crowd, greeting guests, feeling the eyes of Chicago’s light and shadow on me. The atmosphere is both celebration and negotiation, love and loyalty tangled with alliances that stretch back generations. I see Italians, Russians, and a few faces that look fierce in a way I can’t put my finger on.

The band starts playing a waltz, and Matvei takes my hand. We dance, surrounded by a circle of family and friends.

As the night deepens, the guest count swells. People arrive in waves, old families from every corner of the city. I watch them size each other up, old grudges simmering beneath polite smiles. But at least for tonight, they are civil. There will be no conflict at our wedding. For now, the alliances hold, stitched together by ritual and respect.

I’m sipping champagne on the balcony when I hear it: a burst of laughter and loud voices, unmistakably south side Irish.

A man approaches me. He's tall with white hair and a face marked with scars. He walks with the easy command of someone used to giving orders and being obeyed. He stops a few feet from me, eyes locked on mine. There's an uncanny recognition in his gaze, and I feel my breath catch.

"You must be Sonya," he says, his voice gentle. "I'm Patrick O'Shea. Your grandfather."

For a moment, I hear only silence. Matvei wraps a steadying arm around my waist as my knees weaken. "My—my grandfather?"

"Your father was my son. Meant to be my heir, but, well, car accidents don't care who they take, now do they?"

I shake my head, my vision blurring with tears. "Why now?" I ask. "Why come forward now?"

Patrick's smile is sad but kind. "You were happy with the friends of your mother's, and she wanted it that way. However, I always kept a watchful eye on you, making sure you never wanted for anything. Safer that way, we thought. But it's time now. You're family. O'Shea blood runs strong."

His sad smile transforms into a radiant grin as he extends his hand to me. I take it, but then pull him into a fierce hug. Matvei settles for a handshake.

"You take good care of each other. You will, Volkov, will you not?"

"With all the power I have," Matvei swears.

The rest of the night blurs into a tapestry of laughter, music, and shared memories. I talk with my grandfather, learning about the O'Shea legacy—stories of courage, heartbreak, and sacrifice, of family feuds and secret alliances—painting a picture of a heritage that was always mine, even when I didn't know it.

The Italians keep their distance, but I catch sight of their matriarch watching me with what looks like respect. I realize I am no longer an outsider. I am a bridge—a link between worlds that have been at odds for decades. The twins, sleeping soundly upstairs, carry both legacies. They are the future, and for the first time, I feel hope outweighing fear.

Matvei finds me near midnight, when the guests are deep into their third round of toasting. He pulls me aside, his eyes shining. “Come with me,” he says, weaving me through the crowd until we reach a quiet alcove by the staircase.

“I wanted to wait for the right moment.” He pulls me close before revealing a small velvet box from an inside pocket. “You’ve given me everything, Sonya. Strength, love, our children. I want you to have something that’s yours, something that stands apart from all this.”

He opens the box, revealing a set of gleaming silver keys. “These are for you, for the new law practice. It’s yours, Sonya. Your name is above the door. Now is your chance to fight for justice, for the people who need it most.”

I stare at the keys, unable to speak. Tears sting at my eyes—tears of gratitude, disbelief, and overwhelming love.

“You did this for me?” I whisper.

He nods, brushing a thumb across my cheek. “You deserve it. You fought for our life, our family, our future. Keep fighting for others. I’ll be right beside you.”

All the grief, fear, and loss fades into the background. In their place, the future blooms. I see the law office in my mind’s eye, the cases I’ll take on, the lives I’ll touch. I see our twins growing up strong, loved by two families who once warred but now stand in peace. I see Matvei, my partner in every sense, holding my hand as we step into the unknown.

We return to the ballroom, the keys clutched tightly in my fist. My grandfather catches my eye, raising his glass in silent approval.

In the early hours of the morning, when the last guests are finding their way out, Matvei and I go to our twins, asleep in their beds, and press kisses to their foreheads.

“You are the start of everything good,” I whisper to them. “And I promise your daddy and I will make this world a beautiful place for you.”

I realize I'm in the center of it all—wife, mother, lawyer, heir to two legacies. Our happiness is not perfect, but it is ours.

I believe in pure joy. I believe in second chances. And as Matvei wraps me in his arms, I know we've finally found our way home.

EPILOGUE II

SONYA

Three Years Later

The clock on my office wall ticks softly, a gentle rhythm against the hush of late morning. I sit across from Lindsey, her hands trembling as she cradles a mug of tea. She's staring out the window, but her gaze isn't focused on anything in particular. She's somewhere far away. The room is warm as the sunlight fills the space, touching every corner. I make sure Lindsey feels that warmth and knows she's in a place where the light can't help but find you, even when you try to hide.

"I know it's hard," I say softly, watching her shoulders curl in. "But you did the bravest thing by coming here." I mean it, and Lindsey knows that. When I take her hand in mine and squeeze, she squeezes back like she's holding on for dear life.

She lets out a slow breath. Her voice is barely above a whisper when she says, "He said nobody would believe me. That I was making it up."

The familiar ache settles in my chest, an ache for this woman who has gone through so much. "I believe you, Lindsey, and I'm going to help you. I promise."

A flicker of hope crosses her face. Her fingers clutch the mug tighter, as if she can hold onto my words and let them fill the cracks.

We go through safety plans and various imperative questions. Lindsey's voice steadies as she talks about her dog, her sister, and her favorite coffee shop. Slowly, the woman in front of me becomes more than her fear—she becomes herself again. I listen, careful not to rush her, careful not to prod at wounds too deep.

As the appointment winds down, Lindsey's eyes look brighter than when she arrived. She offers a shy smile as she stands. I smile back.

"Thank you," she says. Her gratitude is quiet, but it echoes inside me.

"You're not alone," I remind her. "You'll get through this, and I'll be there with you every step of the way." Lindsey nods, then leaves, closing the door softly behind her.

I lean back in my chair and let out a breath. I think about all the women and men who've come through this office, all the stories I've heard, all the hope I've tried to plant like seeds. There's still darkness in the world, always will be, but I hope I'm able to be a bridge for some, from pain to something close to peace.

A familiar rap on the frosted glass snaps me from my thoughts. The door swings wide, and two small bodies tumble in ahead of Matvei, their coats askew, hair wild, eyes shining. The twins—Nadya and Luka—are a whirlwind of laughter, gloves, and snow boots. Matvei follows, beaming, his arms full with a large, brown paper bag and a bouquet of white tulips. He looks at me like I'm the sunrise.

When I stand, Nadya barrels into my legs while Luka insists on showing me the dinosaur he's brought, its tail broken, held on by tape. It's messy, this family of ours. Messy, loud, and impossibly beautiful.

Matvei sets the bag on the desk and the twins rifle through it, hoping for the chocolate croissants he always brings. Matvei leans in close, brushing a strand of hair away from my cheek.

"You look tired," he says, his voice low so the kids can't hear. "Long morning?"

I nod, and he kisses my forehead. The stress unspools inside me, replaced by his soft touch.

We settle around the small table in my office. Nadya wants to draw, so I find her colored pencils and sketch book, placing them in front of her. Luka asks a thousand questions about the city outside the windows, and Matvei answers him with the patience of a saint.

Lunch is a jumble of crumbs and laughter. Nadya drops her juice box, and Luka tries to convince us his dinosaur can fly. Matvei laughs, a sound I hear more often these days, and I feel the shimmer of gratitude ripple through my bones. There were days when I never thought I'd see this, never thought I'd be here, surrounded by love, family, and a bright future.

When the twins finish, they tumble onto the couch, giggling and poking at each other. Matvei stands and stretches his arms out, pulling me gently into his embrace. We stand there for a long moment, taking in the chaotic rush of the city outside and the happy peace surrounding us inside. I always find such comfort in Matvei's arms; he is my safe place, my warmth, my rock, and my love for him grows with every beat of my heart.

"I have something to tell you," I whisper as I pull back, letting my hands rest on his chest. He searches my face, worry flickering there. "It's good news," I add quickly, smiling.

He waits, patient. My heart is pounding, but it's a sweet kind of fear—a leap, not a fall. "I'm pregnant," I say, the words floating between us like sunlight. It takes him a moment to process, but then his face fills with genuine joy. He laughs—a sound bright and untamed.

He sweeps me into his arms, spinning me once. Nadya and Luka rush over, demanding to know why we're hugging. Matvei crouches down, arms open wide.

"You're going to have a brother or sister," he says.

The twins just stare, wide-eyed, before exploding in shrieks and laughter.

I watch them, my heart full to bursting. Matvei draws me close, pressing his forehead to mine. "You're my light," he murmurs. "You saved me."

I smile, my eyes clouding with tears of happiness. "We saved each other."

The outside world is still complicated—a mess of old alliances and new beginnings. Inside, though, we are safe. We are whole. Our children embrace our legs, their giddy laughter infectious and bright. I hold Matvei's hand, feeling the pulse of life and love we fought for, that we earned.

Later, when the sun begins to set and the office grows dim, I think about Lindsey, about every client who walks through my door. I think about what it means to be the bridge between families, to stand in the middle and hold both sides together.

I'm not alone anymore. I never was. I press my hand to my stomach, feeling the promise of tomorrow.

After I get home, after the dinner dishes are put away, baths are finished, and night has fallen, Matvei wraps his arm around me, the twins curled up between us.

We are together. We are a family. And finally, I can breathe.

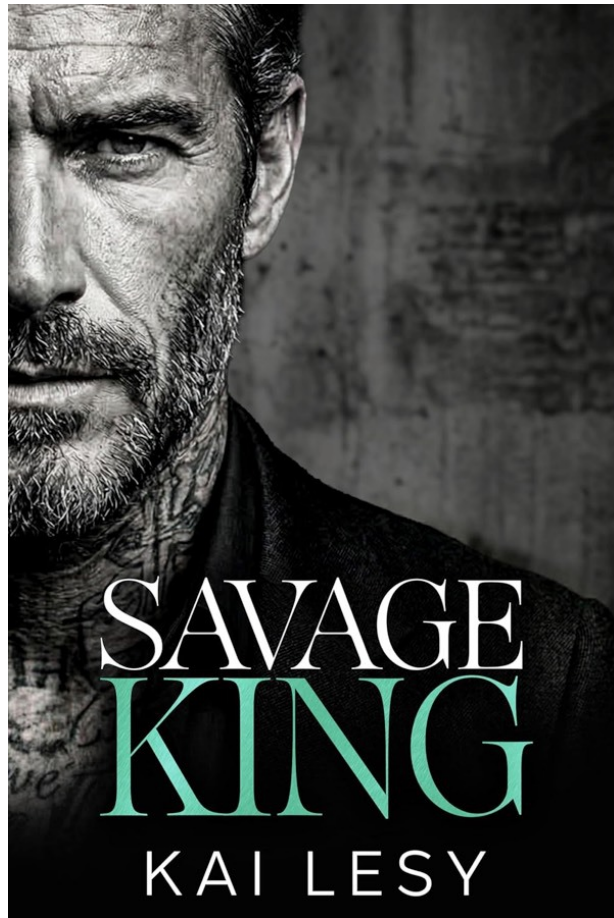
❤️ Loved Sonya and **Matvei's story?**

I have a feeling you're going to fall even harder for what comes next.

I wrote another **bestselling bratva romance** called the **Savage King!**

🔥 **Keep reading for your exclusive sneak peek on the next page.**

SAVAGE KING (PREVIEW)



I met my ex-fiancé's father... *in my panties.*

One minute, I'm walking my best friend's colossal Great Dane.
The next? He bolts. The leash snags my jeans.

Panic hits me as strangers openly stare at my lace panties.
Phones rise like a sea of tiny cameras.

Then *HE* storms in.

A towering statue of a man.
I can't look away.
His massive body steps in front of me,
shielding my curves from the crowd's hungry stares.

"Eyes. Off. Her."

The impossibly handsome silver fox rescues the dog.
Buys me coffee.
And ridiculously expensive new jeans.

The attraction between us is instant.
And wildly inappropriate.

Not exactly how a single mom with a sassy second-grader expects to meet a
guy.

But when his hands trace my curves,
they claim every inch my ex tried to convince me was unlovable.

One night with him ruins me for anyone else.

Then I discover who he really is.

Viktor Antonov.
Billionaire Bratva Kingpin.
And my ex-fiancé's FATHER.

In a glittering Bratva ballroom, his bitter ex-wife sneers at my curves before
the entire syndicate.

Viktor's arm slides around my waist.

Hard. Possessive. Claiming.

“Careful,” he says softly.

“That’s the mother of my heir you’re insulting.”

The ballroom goes silent.

And suddenly I understand something terrifying about Viktor Antonov.

To the world, he’s a monster.

To his enemies, he’s a death sentence.

And to me...

I’m the one thing he’ll *never* let go.

For readers who love: silver fox mafia bosses, a fierce single-mom heroine, forbidden romance with the ex-fiancé’s father, curvy women who finally get worshipped the way they deserve, dangerously possessive Bratva alphas, surprise pregnancy, explosive family drama, and a ruthless hero who will burn the world down to protect what’s his. HEA guaranteed. No cheating.

LEAH

"Benjamin Maximus James, drag me again, and you're kibble!"

Yelling a dog's full name on a Brooklyn sidewalk at eight in the morning is not exactly my most dignified moment.

The massive, glossy black Great Dane has approximately two hundred pounds on me, and he knows it. I dig my heels into the pavement and grip the leash with both hands like my life depends on it.

Which would be easier if I didn't have hips designed for dramatic entrances instead of emergency dog braking.

He drags me anyway.

I end up skipping after him in a graceless, desperate little shuffle, praying I don't bite the concrete while he hauls me toward his destination with the focus of a true predator.

My hips bounce with every step. Benji plants himself in front of one very ordinary sidewalk bush, and sniffs it with the devotion of a man who has finally returned home after years at sea.

I know this bush. I know what this is about.

"Okay," I tell him, catching my breath. "Was it worth it? Was the bush worth humiliating me in front of the entire block?"

He ignores me. Obviously.

"Are you upset because your mom left with her suitcase? Is that what this is?" I tug his leash gently. "I promise she's coming back, buddy. She wouldn't leave you. Ever."

He lifts his enormous head and gives me a long, soulful look.

I sigh. "I know. It's scary when people you love leave with luggage. Trust me, I get it."

The irony is not lost on me that I say the exact same thing to my daughter, Eliza, every time I have a work trip. She's gotten better about it as she's gotten older. Seven is a lot more reasonable than four. But there are still mornings she clings to me like a barnacle and cries, and I have to peel her off and remind her that I always, always come back.

Same energy, different species.

I finally manage to coax Benjamin away from the bush and aim us both toward the coffee cart parked at the corner. That had been the entire point of this walk. Coffee. Simple. Achievable. A small, beautiful reward for being a good friend and a functional adult before nine a.m.

"Good morning," I say to the barista, a young woman with a blue handkerchief tied over her hair and an expression that shifts from politely professional to slightly alarmed as she clocks the animal at my side.

To Benji's credit, he sits when I tell him to. He also immediately stretches his giant head over the counter to inspect the menu.

"He's just looking," I tell her.

She seems to decide this is fine. "What can I get you?"

"Iced Americano with the whipped coffee on top? The amaretto one?" I do a small, inexplicable swirling gesture with my finger, as if that helps. "You know the one."

"Got it." She doesn't blink. God bless New York service industry professionals. "Anything else?"

"One of those dog cupcakes, if you have them." I nod at Benji. "For the gentleman."

"One doggy cupcake for the giant gentleman, coming right up."

She turns to the espresso machine, and I start wrestling with the zipper on my belt bag so I can actually pay for things like a person who has her life together. Benji's leash goes through my belt loop. Simple system. I've done it a thousand times.

"Where's your daughter today?" the barista asks over the grind of the machine, the rich, dark smell of espresso filling the air.

"Zoo trip with a school friend." I finally win the zipper battle. "She didn't want me to come."

"Getting to that age?"

"Apparently." I hand over my card and try not to look as gutted as I feel. "I thought it would happen at like, sixteen. Not seven."

The barista gives me a sympathetic smile. I watch the espresso pull into the little cup, that gorgeous caramel ribbon, and feel my soul start to return to my body. Benji's nose goes up. His nostrils flare. He looks at the coffee cart with the kind of reverence he usually reserves for the pizza bush.

"I was going to say—"

The leash goes taut.

Then the world tilts.

What happens next is one of those terrible, slow-motion sequences that my brain records in excruciating detail for future 3 a.m. replay. I hear the barista shout. I hear myself shout louder. I hear the very distinctive, very final sound of denim giving up the ghost.

The rip is spectacular.

Benji has spotted something. Another dog, specifically, a massive brindle beast emerging from the boutique hotel next door, and every single one of his two hundred pounds launches toward it simultaneously. The leash, which I had helpfully threaded through my belt loop, catches.

Physics does the rest.

I've always hated physics.

I spin.

I go down.

My knees hit the sidewalk hard enough that I see stars.

For a second I just stay there, on my hands and knees, trying to figure out what just happened.

Then I see the crowd.

And I feel the breeze on my exposed hips and pray I'm just imagining things.

Then I see the phones.

Shit. Definitely not imagining.

FML.

Phones go up everywhere, screens tilted toward me, strangers recording with the casual efficiency of people who have been conditioned by years of internet content to document first and feel second.

My underwear, as it happens, is very much on display.

Cute underwear, at least. Small mercies.

Also lace. Also bright red. Also currently stretched across the most generous hips in Brooklyn.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" The barista is leaning over the counter, eyes huge.

I am not okay. My knees are bleeding, my dignity is in tatters on the pavement next to me, my best friend's dog is somewhere I can't see, and approximately half of Brooklyn is currently filming my lace underwear for posterity.

Then something happens.

A shadow falls over me.

Wide.

Solid.

Immovable.

A man steps directly between me and the crowd.

From the knees down I'm half naked on a Brooklyn sidewalk, and somehow the most embarrassing part is that my brain immediately registers one extremely inappropriate thought:

Who is he?

He doesn't rush.

He doesn't scramble.

He just moves, with the kind of unhurried, absolute authority that makes everyone around him instinctively go still.

He's huge. Not just tall, though he is extremely tall. He's built like something architectural. His suit, dark and clearly expensive, does absolutely nothing to hide the fact that underneath it there is a body that that makes responsible women lose their minds.

Not young-guy attractive either.

Dangerous older-man attractive.

He stands with his back to me, facing the crowd, and he says nothing for a moment.

Just looks at them.

One by one, the phones come down.

Not reluctantly. Instantly.

Like he didn't ask.

Like he ordered.

"Eyes." His voice is quiet. Low. The kind of low that doesn't need volume to carry weight. There is an accent underneath it, something European that I can't quite place, and something else I absolutely can place, which is authority so complete it borders on frightening. "Off. Her."

That's it. That's all he says.

The crowd doesn't just look away. They actually drift back. A little shuffle of collective retreat, like a tide going out.

I stare at the broad expanse of his back, at the way his shoulders fill that jacket, and I think: who is this man, and why does my heart feel like it's trying to escape my chest?

And why does my brain keep noticing his shoulders while I'm half naked on the sidewalk?

He turns around, and I get my first real look at his face.

Oh no.

Oh, this is not fair.

Salt-and-pepper hair, thick and slightly tousled, like he ran a hand through it on his way out the door and it only got more attractive for it. A jaw that could cut glass, circled by a neat, short beard that is somehow both polished and rugged at once. And eyes.

Blue. Not a soft blue. Not a gentle, friendly blue. Steel blue, sharp and clear, with the kind of intelligence behind them that you feel more than see.

A full, undeniable silver fox.

Possibly early fifties. The kind of age where men stop pretending and start owning every room they walk into.

And it works for him in the way that some things just work, the way red wine works, the way old leather works, the way a voice that sounds like it was poured over gravel and dark wood just works.

The kind of man who probably remembers a time before Instagram and still somehow looks better than every man currently on it.

In one hand, he holds Benji's leash.

In his other hand, the leash of the brindle beast, who I now recognize as a Cane Corso. A massive, beautiful one, with bright bronze eyes and a panting grin.

He looks down at me with those steel-blue eyes, and there is humor there. But not cruelty. Not even a hint of it.

"I believe this belongs to you," he says.

My brain is currently operating at about forty percent capacity.

The other sixty percent is busy processing the fact that a devastating silver fox just rescued me while I was flashing Brooklyn.

"I, uh." I blink. "Yes. I. Thank you."

Eloquent. Stunning. Truly one of my best moments.

Something shifts in his expression. Not quite a smile, but close. He looks at the barista.

"Do you happen to have an extra apron?"

She blinks, then vanishes, then reappears with a balled-up black apron. He takes it from her with a quiet thank you and turns back to me.

"Can you work with this?" He holds it out.

"Yes." I take it. "Good idea."

He extends his free hand to help me up. I take it, and his grip is warm and steady and I have to actively stop myself from cataloguing the way his hand feels wrapped around mine, which is large and firm and I need to stop that line of thinking immediately.

He looks away as I shake out the apron, fold it in half, and tie it around my waist like a makeshift skirt. It barely covers what needs covering, and the logo reads Bean There, Done That across the back, which I will think about later and be mortified by, but right now, it is a gift.

"It's my fault," he says, when I've got myself reasonably sorted. "I saw you both on the street and I should have had better control of Athos."

I look up at him. He's watching me with those eyes, and there is still that not-quite-smile, that warmth underneath the cool.

"It's fine," I manage. "Really. Benji is a menace. He does this."

"He's young."

"He's also two hundred pounds of chaos."

That gets him. Not a full laugh, but a real one, a low, genuine sound that I feel somewhere in the vicinity of my sternum, and I have to look away.

I take Benji's leash back. I turn to the barista, who has silently placed my iced Americano on the counter and is watching this whole exchange with barely concealed fascination. My eyes sting a little from the humiliation still hot in my chest.

"I'm so sorry," I tell her. "I'll bring the apron back. I promise. Clean."

"Forget it," she says warmly. "It's on the house." She pushes the coffee toward me. "You deserve it."

I take the coffee. I take Benji. I walk away.

I don't have a destination. I just need to move, to get some distance between me and this moment, to get my heartbeat back under something resembling control.

I hear footsteps behind me.

Not hurried. Not aggressive. Just steady, keeping pace.

I turn at the middle of the block, ready to confront whoever it is.

I nearly walk directly into the man again.

Up close, even more than before, he is a lot. He smells expensive, something dark and clean that goes straight to my head, and I take a small step back purely for self-preservation.

"Why are you following me?"

"I always walk in this direction," he says. A beat. "And I'd like to replace your jeans."

I stare at him.

"The ones my dog's interference ruined," he adds, as if I might need clarification.

"That's not necessary."

"I'd like to do it anyway."

There's something in the way he says it. Not pushy. Not performative. Just calm, and certain, and like this is simply what's going to happen because it's the right thing and he's decided.

I should say no. I should thank him politely and take my coffee and my mortified Great Dane and go home.

"Okay," I hear myself say. "Sure."

"Great come with me."

* * *

MOMENTS LATER, I end up in the dressing room of a boutique three blocks over, staring at myself in a mirror while wearing a Bean There, Done That apron as a skirt, with shredded jeans balled up in the corner.

I'm ready for this day to be over and force myself to find a pair of jeans.

The first pair of won't go over my hips. Ofcourse.

The second pair makes it halfway up my thighs and stops like it has suddenly reconsidered its life choices.

The third pair is a miracle. They fit like they were made for me, smooth in all the right places, fitted without being cruel about it. I look at the price tag and make a small, involuntary sound.

These are not normal jeans.

I'm buying a second pair the moment I have a good reason to justify it.

When I come out of the dressing room, the man has his back to me. He's looking at a display near the window, both dogs sitting at his feet with unnatural calmness, like they've called a truce in honor of the occasion.

I take the moment just to look at him.

He is, objectively, devastating. It's not just the face or the body, though those are doing a lot of work.

It's the way he holds himself. Like he's never once in his life questioned whether he belonged somewhere. Like every room he's ever walked into simply reorganized itself around him.

Every woman in the boutique is pretending not to stare.

I am also pretending not to stare.

He turns, and catches me at it, and I shut my mouth with an audible click.

His smile is slow. Appreciative. Knowing.

My face goes hot.

"Those work," he says simply, nodding at the jeans.

"They do." I clear my throat. "You really don't have to pay for them."

"I told you I would."

He says it with that same quiet certainty, and I decide it's not worth arguing. He pays with a black credit card, the kind that people don't question, while I stand slightly behind him and focus very hard on not thinking about his hands.

We walk out into the morning together.

I unclip Benji's leash from the stand outside and take a breath, ready to say thank you and goodbye and walk briskly out of this man's life before I do something embarrassing like ask for his number.

Then his hand lands on my elbow.

Warm. Steady. Large.

"Let me take you for coffee," he says.

I already have coffee. The words are right there, sitting in my mouth, ready to go.

"Okay," I say instead.

He smiles. It's the first real, full smile I've seen from him, and it rearranges something in my chest that I'll need to examine later when I'm alone and can be dramatic about it in private.

"I'm Viktor," he says.

"Leah," I tell him.

He takes my hand.

His grip is warm and deliberate, like he already knows exactly how much space he intends to take up in my life.

"Leah," he repeats. "It's a pleasure."

I believe him. That's the terrifying part.

I tell myself it's just coffee. I tell myself I'm a grown woman, a single mother with a seven-year-old and a pile of work waiting at home, and I do not have the bandwidth to lose my head over a silver-haired, blue-eyed stranger who says my name like it means something.

I tell myself all of that.

Then I walk into the coffee shop beside him, and the moment the door closes behind us, I think: I'm in trouble.

LEAH

"I have coffee," I say, holding up my cup like evidence.

He looks at it. Then at me.

"It's watered down."

He holds out his hand.

I look at it. Just sitting there, open and patient, waiting.

I know he's not just offering to throw away a lukewarm Americano. I'm not naive. He's offering something else, something that starts with coffee and ends somewhere I probably shouldn't follow. I know this the way you know things in your gut before your brain catches up to them.

My gut is also, currently, doing something it hasn't done in a very long time. A kind of low, fluttery awareness that is inconvenient and warm and absolutely not helping me think clearly.

I've read the articles. The ones that tell women to trust their instincts, to pay attention to the way a situation makes them feel, to notice the alarm bells.

The alarm bells are there. Distant, but present.

The problem is that something else is louder right now.

I hand him the cup.

He drops it in a nearby trash can without ceremony and starts walking, tilting his head for me to fall into step beside him.

"You think carefully before you act," he says, not unkindly.

"I'm cautious." My cheeks are warm. I resist the urge to touch them. "Is that a problem?"

"Not at all." He pauses to let Athos sniff at a stoop decorated with bright clay flowerpots, completely at ease, no apparent hurry. "Caution is smart. The trick is knowing when it's protecting you and when it's keeping you from good things."

I look at him sideways. "That sounds like something a man says when he wants a woman to stop being cautious."

He laughs. Low and real. "Fair."

The cafe he takes me to is more normal than I expected. All mint-green subway tile and mismatched chairs and plants hanging in every window, the kind of Brooklyn spot that's been there long enough to be genuinely beloved rather than aggressively curated. The espresso smells perfect. The ambient noise is exactly right, that warm hum of conversations not quite loud enough to follow.

I order a cappuccino and a chocolate croissant. He orders a triple espresso and absolutely nothing else, because apparently he runs on spite and iron will.

We settle at a small table on the back patio, shaded and quiet. Athos and Benji arrange themselves on either side of us with the diplomacy of two countries that have signed a temporary ceasefire. I slip Benji a bit of my croissant and, after a glance at Viktor that he meets with the faintest nod, I give Athos one too.

I drag the foam off my cappuccino with a spoon. Viktor wraps both hands around his tiny espresso cup, which looks approximately the size of a thimble in his grip.

"Athos," I say, watching the Cane Corso. "Like The Three Musketeers?"

Viktor's expression shifts. Something like approval. "Yes."

"So do you have a Porthos and an Aramis somewhere?"

He laughs again, and I feel it again, that warm reverb in my chest. I need to get a handle on that.

"Not yet. Athos doesn't share well."

"No all for one and one for all for him?"

"Not in the slightest."

I smile into my cup. "What made you choose a Cane Corso?"

"I've always liked a dog that looks more dangerous than it is."

I glance at Athos, who is resting his enormous head on his paws and staring at a sparrow with profound disinterest. "He's a softie?"

"He has moments." Viktor watches him with something close to fondness. "Don't tell anyone."

"I like big dogs," I say honestly. "Cane Corsos especially. Those bronze eyes are something."

"Yes," Viktor agrees, and then he looks at me. "They are."

I feel my face heat and quickly focus on the croissant.

"I've seen the Great Dane before," Viktor says after a moment, settling back in his chair. "But not you."

"Benji belongs to my best friend. She's out of town for a couple of days, and I promised I'd cover mornings until her dog sitter arrives." I glance at Benjamin, who is watching a pigeon with elaborate hope. "He gets destructive if he misses his walk."

"He needs the outlet."

"He needs a job. Something that tires him out." I pause. "Maybe a career in demolition."

Viktor's mouth curves. "He's done good work already today."

"Please don't remind me."

"For what it's worth," he says, "I should have paid better attention when I saw you both on the street. I was distracted."

I look up. "By what?"

He looks right at me, like it's a completely obvious answer, and says nothing.

Oh.

Right.

I clear my throat and go back to the croissant.

"I'm sorry," he says, and I hear the amusement underneath the sincerity. "I don't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You're not." A small lie. Not entirely. "I just don't usually have strangers buy me things."

"I didn't do it to make you uncomfortable. I did it because it was the right thing to do."

He says that plainly, without any performance behind it. Like right and wrong are just coordinates he moves between without any drama about it.

I wonder, briefly, what that's like.

"The full name," he says then, tilting his head toward Benji. "Benjamin Maximus Jellybean James. I have to ask."

I groan. "You heard that?"

"From half a block away."

"It was a collaborative effort," I say. "My best friend named him Benjamin. Her daughter named him Maximus after a cartoon horse. Her nephew contributed Jellybean at a birthday party. James is the last name because he needed one." I pause. "It suits him. Don't you think?"

Viktor considers the dog seriously, as if he's actually weighing the question. "I do," he says finally. "Although Athos has a more distinguished ring to it."

"It does. But Benjamin Maximus Jellybean James has character."

"It has something," he agrees.

I laugh, and it comes out easier than I expect, loose and real, and Viktor's expression shifts when he hears it. Something moves in his eyes, gone before I can name it.

I realize I'm enjoying myself. Actually, genuinely enjoying myself, in a way I haven't in longer than I want to admit. Not just the company, though the company is doing things to my nervous system that I'll deal with later. But the feeling of sitting in the sun on a Wednesday morning with coffee and a croissant, talking to someone who listens like the conversation matters.

That part might actually be the most dangerous thing about him.

I check my phone and do a double take.

"Oh no." I sit up straighter. "I'm sorry, I lost track of time. I have work I really need to get to."

"Of course." He stands as I do, one smooth motion, and gestures for me to go ahead. No fuss. No protest.

We walk back toward Suzie's, and I tell myself the whole way that I'm not going to ask to see him again. That's not how I operate. I have Eliza, I have work, I have exactly zero margin in my life for whatever this man would be.

I make Benji sit on the stoop.

I turn to Viktor.

"Thank you. For everything." I mean the jeans, and the apron idea, and the crowd. I mean all of it. "You didn't have to do any of that."

"I wanted to."

"Even considering the circumstances?"

Those blue eyes warm. "Especially considering the circumstances."

I look at him for one second too long.

Then I go inside, get Benji settled with water and his favorite toy, give him approximately forty goodbye kisses, and talk myself down off the ceiling the entire time. By the time I lock the front door, I have almost convinced myself that this was a funny story, a very good one, and nothing more.

I head down the stoop.

I nearly crash directly into him.

Viktor is still there, standing at the bottom with both hands in his pockets, Athos at his side, perfectly calm, like he had every reason in the world to wait.

I catch myself on the last step. His hand comes up fast, steadying me at the elbow.

"I want to see you tonight," he says.

Not a question.

"My daughter is home tonight."

"I'll cover whatever extra is needed for a babysitter."

I blink. "That's not necessary. I have a neighbor she loves."

"Good."

He's watching me with those eyes, and I can see every shade in them up close. The dark ring at the outside. The gray threading through the blue. The black at the center.

I should say no.

Every sensible part of me is lining up to say no.

"Where do I meet you?" I ask.

Something shifts in his expression. Satisfaction, maybe, but warmer than that.

"I'll send a car at 7:15. There's a reservation at 8." He pauses. "Wear something you feel good in."

He doesn't say dress up. He doesn't give me a dress code. He says wear something you feel good in, and somehow that lands differently than anything else he's said today.

"Okay," I say.

I give him my address. He puts it into his phone. He gives me one more look, the kind that says I'll be thinking about you until then, and walks away with Athos at his heel, unhurried, certain, like a man who has never once doubted that he'll get what he wants.

I stand on the stoop for a moment after he's gone.

Then I go inside and call my neighbor.

Then I go to my closet and stare at it for twenty minutes.

I am so far out of my depth it isn't funny.

But for the first time in a long time, I don't care.

LEAH

“**W**hy didn't you tell me you'd met someone?”

I am not going to tell my early-twenties, pierced and tatted neighbor in front of my seven-year-old daughter that I'm going out on a date with someone I met only that morning and under shocking circumstances.

“He's a client at the firm, so we've been talking for a while.”

Jade cocks her head. “It's not against the rules?”

Damn it.

“It's a grey area. That's why I didn't tell you about him. But he's not a client anymore, so there's nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, cool.” My neighbor drops onto the bed and bounces on the mattress a few times before throwing herself back, arms spread as she stares up at the ceiling, green-streaked hair splayed around her. “Is the story romantic? I bet it's something like he walked in and saw you making coffee and fell madly in love.”

“Well—” I stall for time as I try to think up an answer that isn't a complete lie. I hate lying, but this is messy territory. “It was something like that. It definitely had to do with coffee.”

Among other things.

From the look Jade gives me as she sits up, she knows that's not the whole story. But for once, she doesn't pry. Instead, she moves on to the real story.

“What's he like? Is he handsome? I bet he's good-looking? Is he rich?”

“All of the above, yes.” I turn around from scrutinizing myself in the mirror. “But that's not what's important. The important thing is I enjoyed talking with him, he's good company, and he's been respectful so far.”

“Unlike your last jerk of an ex?”

“Okay.” Time to change the subject. “I don't like this dress. Let's try another one.”

Eliza darts into my closet before I can make a move, and I hear her rummaging around, pushing hangers over one way and then back another. She emerges a minute later, dragging a dress I'd completely forgotten about—a jeweled green wrap dress I'd splurged on at a Barney's sale with Mom.

She'd been the one to find it on the rack, and she'd encouraged me to try it on when I was still struggling with my self-image after Eliza's birth. I hadn't been able to take my eyes off myself in the fitting room mirror, and it was the first time I felt like myself again, like maybe I could be desirable again.

And it's still just as beautiful on the hanger it's been on since the last time I wore it. It was too hard to wear it again after Mom died.

“What about this one, Mom? You're wearing it in the picture with Grandma.”

Am I ready to wear it again? Is tonight the right kind of night to bring it back out of retirement?

“I don't know, sweetheart,” I say. “That's a lot for a first date.”

Jade breathes out another sigh and rolls her eyes. “Oh, come on, Leah. I'm sure your mom would want you to wear this tonight. Didn't the guy say to dress up? Besides, green is the color to wear when you're trying to make a good impression.”

“Is it?”

I don't tell her I've already made a first impression on Viktor, and it was not a good one.

"Mama, please?" Eliza says, giving me her infamous puppy dog eyes that rival Benji's. "You know Grandma would want you to. Suzie, too."

"And you and Benji?" I ask, trying but not succeeding to smother my smile.

"Yep."

I sigh and gesture for her to give me the dress, which I slip on while Jade goes to the closet to root around in my jewelry.

When I turn to look at myself in the mirror, I suddenly wonder why it took me so long to wear this dress again. Even if it was just for myself, even if it was just to run errands. I immediately feel closer to Mom when I wear it; it almost feels like a hug. And it does look fantastic on me, showcasing my every curve and asset, while hiding those things I'd rather not let others see.

"Here." Jade reemerges with a pair of diamond drop earrings, delicate and shimmering as the light hits them. And in her other hand are a pair of sky-high heels that have been unworn for so long, they have actual dust on them.

"No way." I shake my head and poke the earrings through the holes in my lobes. "There is no way I'm wearing heels like that. I haven't worn them in forever, and the last thing I need is to fall flat on my face in front of this guy."

Eliza gives me the look she inherited from me, and my mother before that, and parks her hands on her hips. I sigh. Is this the hill I want to die on? Then again, if I wear the heels, I might just die on it anyway.

"I'm willing to negotiate." I swear, she's going to follow right in my mother's footsteps. "I promise I will wear heels if they're slightly lower."

The clock on my phone tells me it's getting late and I need to hurry.

I haven't been this nervous in a long time. Everything happened in such a rush today, and I still can't quite believe the guy who saw me in nothing but

a T-shirt and ripped jeans, underwear and thigh on display this morning, actually asked me out on a date. Even just the memory sends a thrill through me, makes my heart beat a little faster, and my fingers tingle with nerves and excitement.

My alarm goes off as I'm putting the finishing touches on my makeup. I do one more swipe of lipstick and check myself in the mirror a final time before I run out the door, slipping my feet into the *slightly* lower heels Eliza left for me near my bed.

“Time to go!”

My daughter bounces out of her room holding Jade’s hand. “Have fun, Mom,” Eliza says, and Jade gives me a wink that has me rolling my eyes.

I hurry downstairs before I can spiral.

A black car is waiting by the curb outside my apartment building. The driver's side door opens, and I expect Viktor to step out. But instead, a hulking guy in a black suit and sunglasses walks around the car. The suit strains over his muscles, and tattoos are scattered across his knuckles and on the backs of his hands.

“Are you Leah?” he asks in heavily accented English.

“That's me,” I respond nervously, wondering what exactly this is.

“Mr. Antonov sent me for you. I'm to drive you to the restaurant.”

“Viktor? Is that Mr. Antonov?”

I realize we only exchanged our first names earlier. The man nods and opens the back door for me. With a deep breath, I slip into the sumptuous interior, all leather and wood accents.

It's evident Viktor is loaded. But between the car and the restaurant at which we arrive promptly at 7:45, I can tell he isn't just rich, but *wealthy*. Even the partners at the firm can't get into this restaurant, although their clients often hold lunch meetings here. It has a waiting list several months long, and costs close to my monthly rent for just one meal.

I'm already overwhelmed when Viktor meets me at the door. If I thought his suit this morning was nice, this one is spectacular. The deep blue brings out his eyes, the tailoring shows the length and breadth of his shoulders and chest, and his hair is rakish, a few locks hanging over his forehead.

"I'm so glad you could come tonight." Viktor leans down and presses a kiss to my cheek, one that lingers slightly too long and that I feel down to the tips of my toes. "I couldn't wait to see you again."

"Thank you for inviting me," I reply, giving him a shy smile.

"Come on, then." He puts his hand on the small of my back to guide me forward, and I feel a flutter in my chest. And lower—much lower.

"So," I laugh nervously at the opulence around us, "do you have a reservation here tonight that you made years ago, and we just happened to meet?"

"No, no." Viktor nods to the hostess, who doesn't even ask his name before leading us to a table. "I've invested heavily in this place. There is always a table for me when I want it."

What I want to say is "Holy shit, are you kidding me?" But instead, I just turn wide-eyed to him.

He chuckles. "I'm trying to make a good first impression on you. Is it working?"

"You mean, like the first impression I made on you this morning? That I'm a complete klutz who can't control her friend's dog and made a huge idiot out of herself?" I respond as he pulls out the chair for me gallantly, and I sit.

"I don't remember it that way," Viktor says as he takes his seat.

"You don't remember me flashing everyone on the sidewalk as the giant Great Dane ran away with half my jeans?"

"Oh, I remember that very clearly. What I don't remember is the bad first take. In fact, you made quite an impression on me."

The way Viktor is looking at me, the silk in his voice, sends a shiver down my spine that's about anything but danger. No, this is an awareness of every

inch of him, the way he fills out his suit, the way his mouth moves when he goes to take a sip of the wine the server is pouring, the way humor flits across his full lips.

How I wish I were that wineglass, that I could feel those lips on me—*everywhere* on me.

There's no menu tonight—it's a *prix fixe* menu, and the dishes are served one after the other. They're tiny, one bite each, and they're good, but it feels like something is missing. I don't say that out loud, of course. You don't come to a restaurant like this and complain about any part of the meal.

We're on the third tiny dish, which is the foam of something and little pearls of something else over *foie gras*, magically shaped into a shell. It's briny and creamy, with a slight bite that's all wrong on my tongue. But I chew thoughtfully and swallow as Viktor watches me before I smile.

“This is amazing. Thank you so much.”

Viktor doesn't respond right away. Instead, he watches me before placing his fork back down onto the table. “You don't have to lie for my sake.”

I choke on my small sip of wine. “I'm not—” I start hurriedly while trying to stifle my coughing fit.

Viktor waves away my concern. “Not to worry, you're not hurting my feelings.”

Before I can say anything else, Viktor stands and offers me his hand to pull me up. And in only a few more minutes, we're back in the car with the driver, headed elsewhere.

Had I said something wrong? Offended Viktor somehow by pretending to like the food at the restaurant he invested in? Is he already taking me home, the date over?

My question is answered when we pull up outside what looks like a small hole-in-the-wall with a scrawled sign over it that reads “Bambino.” Viktor whisks me out of the car again and takes me inside what turns out to be a small Italian restaurant with an open kitchen, only ten tables, and a Michelin star. The air is redolent with the scent of garlic, herbs, and olive

oil. The freshly baked bread that comes to the table is a masterpiece, as is the first course: littleneck clams in a white wine stock.

“Better?” Viktor asks, a smile on his face after watching me savor clams, one right after the other.

“To be fair,” I tell him, “I was perfectly happy at the other restaurant. That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience very few people get to have.”

“I want you to enjoy tonight,” Viktor says, his eyes intently focused on mine. “Just because something is an experience doesn’t mean you’ll like it.”

I nod appreciatively and continue to enjoy the meal.

I HOPE you enjoyed the sneak peek, [Grab the full story HERE.](#)



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